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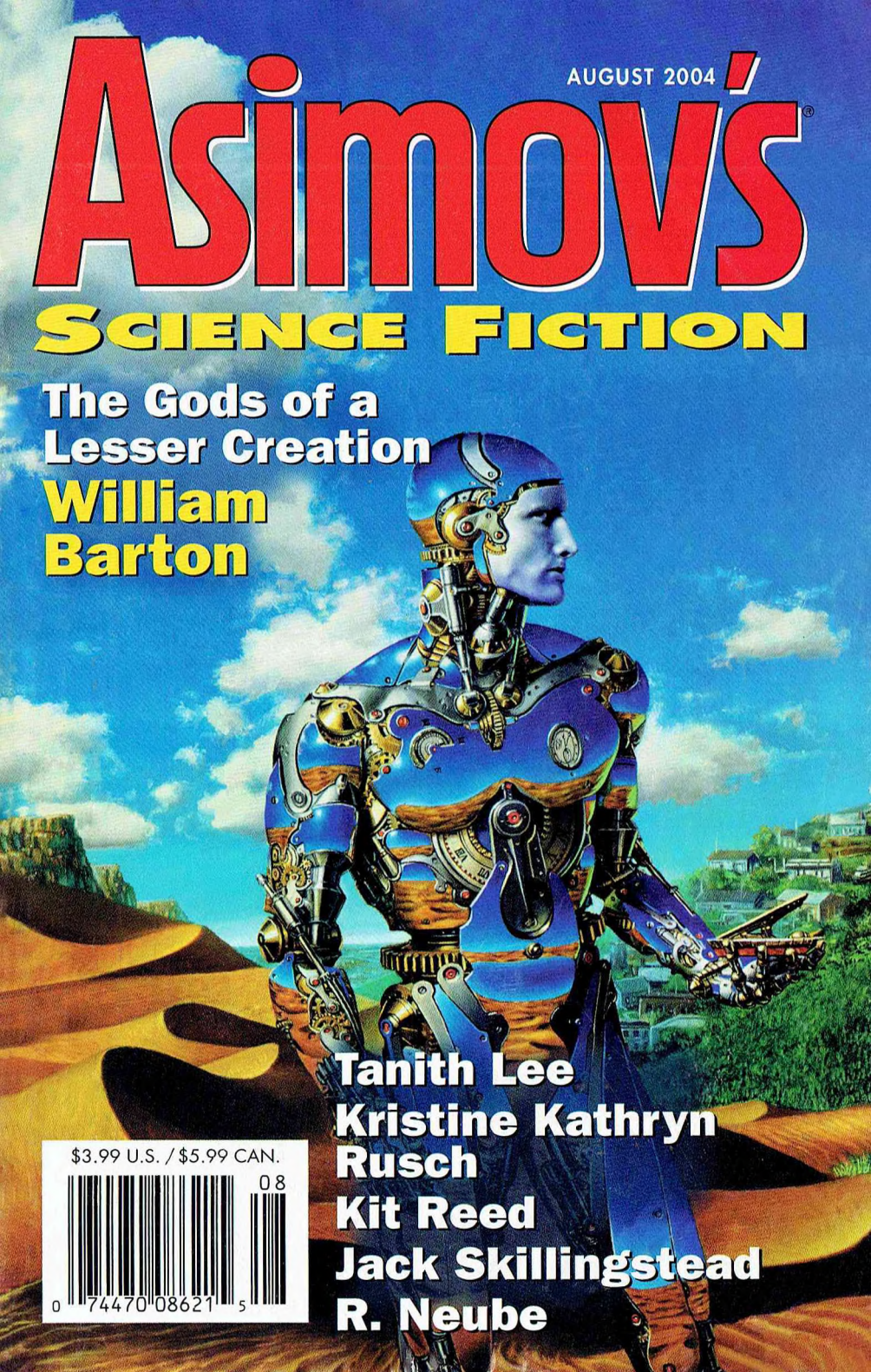
The Gods of a Lesser Creation
William Barton



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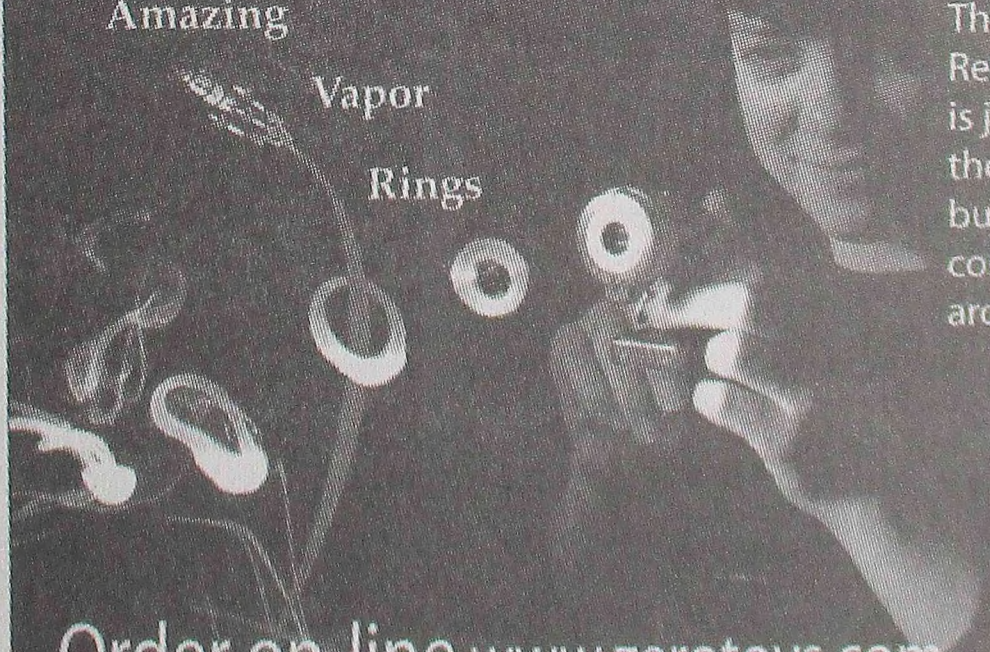

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

TRILOBITES

I've been reading a fascinating and sobering book about the life-form that dominated this planet longer than any other, a truly superior entity that remained in charge here for some three hundred million years but is now, alas, gone from the scene. I'm talking about trilobites, and the book—published three or four years ago by the Alfred A. Knopf Company—is *Trilobite! Eyewitness to Evolution,* by Richard Fortey, who is a senior paleontologist at London's Natural History Museum.

Most of us have at least a hazy idea of what trilobites were—more or less crustacean-like critters that lived in the prehistoric seas of Earth back in that incomprehensibly ancient period before the dinosaurs or any other form of land-dwelling being. Fossil trilobites are widely sold in museum curio shops and most time-travel stories that take their characters back into the early days of life on Earth give trilobites prominent play. (My own novel *Hawksbill Station,* which is set in a camp for political prisoners many hundreds of million years in the past, when not even fishes have evolved yet, let alone reptiles or mammals, portrays its marooned characters gloomily dining on trilobite hash and yearning nostalgically for steak. When FoxAcre Press reissued the book a couple of years ago it featured some really neat illustrations of trilobites on the cover and in the text.)

So we know, approximately, what trilobites were. But Richard Fortey's book about them puts them in perspective as the truly significant creatures they were during their long reign at the summit of animal life on our planet.

Trilobites were hard-shelled marine creatures, structurally somewhat analogous to modern-day crabs but not at all related to them, that begin to turn up very suddenly in the fossil record in the early part of the Cambrian Era, somewhere around 540 million years ago. The distinctive thing about them, the one that gives them their name, is their three-lobed form. The thorax, the main section of a trilobite's body, was divided lengthwise into three well-defined segments. Crosswise, their bodies were divided into three segments also: head, thorax, tail. Underneath were a great many jointed legs, giving them that somewhat crustacean look, though they were, at best, only distant cousins of the crustaceans, each group being descended from a common ancestor but having no more than superficial resemblances to the other.

Although a basic three-lobed form defines all trilobites, the earliest species gave rise to a wide variety of successors that differed widely in shape and size, so that over the millennia thousands of species of trilobites came to occupy the seas, some of them no bigger than flies, others as hefty as the largest of lobsters. At that distant time before life on land had evolved,

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ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director (1977-1992)

Stories from *Asimov's* have won 40 Hugos and 24 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 16 Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 2001 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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there was a swift and dramatic trilobite-population explosion in the Cambrian seas. Trilobites became the most widespread creatures on Earth. For hundreds of millions of years they dominated the planet; during their later years some species took on a bizarre, grotesque appearance, with huge spiny protuberances and great bulging eyes, giving them the look of visitors from another planet; and then, abruptly, in the era that we call the Permian, they disappeared completely from the world. We aren't sure why. They seem to have thrived right up to the end: then, about 250 million years ago, having endured through a span more than twice as long as the dinosaurs would have, they vanished. Nothing remains of them except the abundant fossil evidence, which made them objects of curiosity and careful study as early as the seventeenth century.

By now the time-levels of the geological strata have been reliably mapped, and we can see that the period of trilobite dominance lasted an immensely long time—so long that we are not really able to comprehend it. How casually we throw around phrases like "for hundreds of millions of years"! And how utterly incapable we are of understanding what they mean!

Consider the relativistic way we handle the concept of ancientness. This magazine is now twenty-seven years old. If you yourself are, say, twenty-three, you will very likely regard an early issue of *Asimov's* from 1977 or 1978 as "ancient," because it's older than you are. (I know, because that's how I felt fifty-odd years ago when I first saw the early science fiction magazines that Hugo Gernsback was publishing a few years before *I* was born.) For some of our youngest readers, Isaac Asimov himself, who died in 1992, may be starting to seem as ancient a figure as Shakespeare or Socrates. They know of him only from his writings and perhaps some anecdotes of his larger-than-life personality.

But if an early issue of *Asimov's* can seem "ancient," what about the pyramids of Egypt? Close to five thousand years old, they are! Incredibly ancient! But then we have the cave paintings of Lascaux—four times as ancient as the pyramids. And so forth, back and back in time across ever more unthinkable gulfs. Humanity itself evolved a mere five million years ago. The dinosaurs have been gone for sixty or seventy million, but they were the lords of creation here for 150 million years before that. That is an impossible number to understand. Even 150 million *seconds* is. We who think twenty years is a long time, who look back at the world of our grandparents' childhood as though it were some other planet, who regard a science fiction story set in the year 11,000 as a vision of the unthinkably far future, have no way of getting our minds around the concept of 150 million years. It is an endless, virtually interminable span of time, beyond all imagining. But the trilobites lasted at least twice that long.

Richard Fortey is plainly in love with trilobites. He discovered his first one as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, clambering around on coastal cliffs in southwestern Wales in search of fossils until, splitting a rock apart one day, he found himself staring into the long narrow eyes of a creature that had been entombed in that rock for five hundred million years. He has studied

them ever since; and his book is one long hymn to the strangeness and wonder of the most durable lifeform ever to inhabit this planet.

He tells how scientists first discovered them, and how they learned the secrets of their internal structures. (Speaking of the first X-ray photos of trilobites, made a century ago, he writes, "The fossils are outlined on their radiographs as if drawn by a deft artist in a soft, dark pencil. They have a ghostly quality; one might imagine they had been called up from the past by incantation rather than by science.") He describes their jointed legs, their branching gills, and above all their fantastic shells: "We are ready to envisage a parade of trilobites walking past on their paired limbs and it will be as odd a parade as any carnival could offer. Some smooth as eggs, others spiky as mines; giants and dwarfs; giggling popeyed popinjays; blind grovellers; many flat as pancakes, yet others puffy as profiteroles. . . .")

He describes dozens of species for us: *Cyclopyge,* whose eyes have fused together "so that effectively there is just one huge visual organ, or headlamp," and *Radiaspis,* covered everywhere by spines, making it pricklier than a hedgehog, and *Dalmanites,* with a huge spike-like projection extending from its rear, and massive *Isotelus,* with enormously long spines, "far longer than the rest of the body, so that the animal is supported on them like a sled upon its runners," and a head "surrounded by a border full of perforations, like a colander."

One of the most fascinating chapters deals with trilobite eyes. Fortey points out how miraculous it is that living things should have evolved organs capable of perceiv-

ing light and form and color, and of transmitting that information to the brain. Where in the evolutionary sequence eyes developed, no one yet knows; the first trilobites were equipped with them, so they must have been derived from some earlier creature. But it was in the trilobite tribe that the concept was refined to a remarkable degree. The secret of the trilobites' long biological success, Fortey implies, lay in their ability to see the world about them better than anyone else.

And we learn—to our astonishment—that trilobite eyes were made of *calcite.* Calcite is a mineral, calcium carbonate. It is the chief component of chalk and limestone and marble. The white cliffs of Dover are cliffs of calcite; the pyramids of Egypt were once covered in glittering calcite sheaths. But there is a transparent crystalline form of calcite, too, and out of it the lenses of the trilobite's eyes, unique among all the eyes of all the creatures of our planet's long history, were fashioned. As he sums up his long and flabbergasting description of how the trilobite was able to make use of the unusual light-transmitting ability of calcite crystals, Fortey comments, "It would be no less than the truth to say that the trilobite could give you a stony stare." And he goes on to show us how the fossil evidence, hundreds of millions of years old, of these strange trilobite eyes that were stony even before they fossilized, gives us clues into the workings of their nervous systems and even into their varying ways of life in the oceans of remotest antiquity. That one chapter on trilobite eyes is a work of magic, of fantasy, even—and yet it is science in its purest form.

The trilobites came, they swarmed across maritime Earth in enormous numbers, and eventually they disappeared, leaving no descendants. Richard Fortey has devoted a lifetime of study to them because they caught his imagination when he was fourteen and would not release him. I gave several hours of my life to his splendid book because, as a science fiction writer, I am profoundly stirred by visions of alien times and places and beings, and the world he depicts, the world in which the trilobites lived and thrived, is as alien as they come. But it is not a world that sprang from the imagination of a Frank Herbert or a Jack Vance or an Isaac Asimov. It is our very own world, hundreds of millions of years removed in time, and the book that Richard Fortey wrote about it is as eerie and thought-provoking as any science fiction novel I have ever read. ❍

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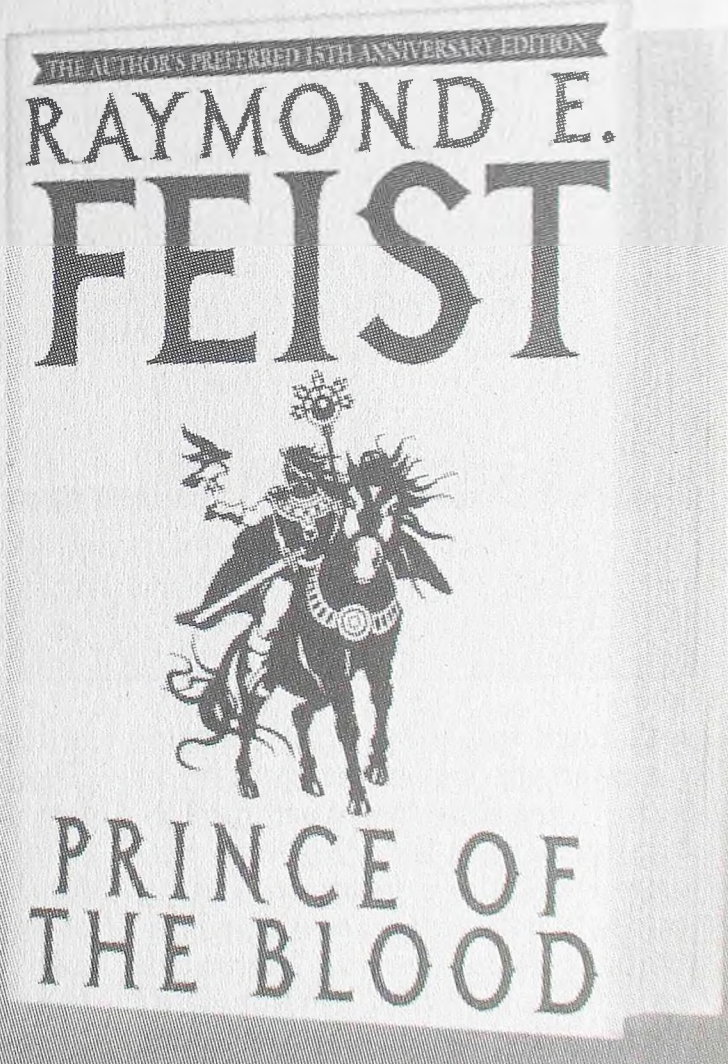

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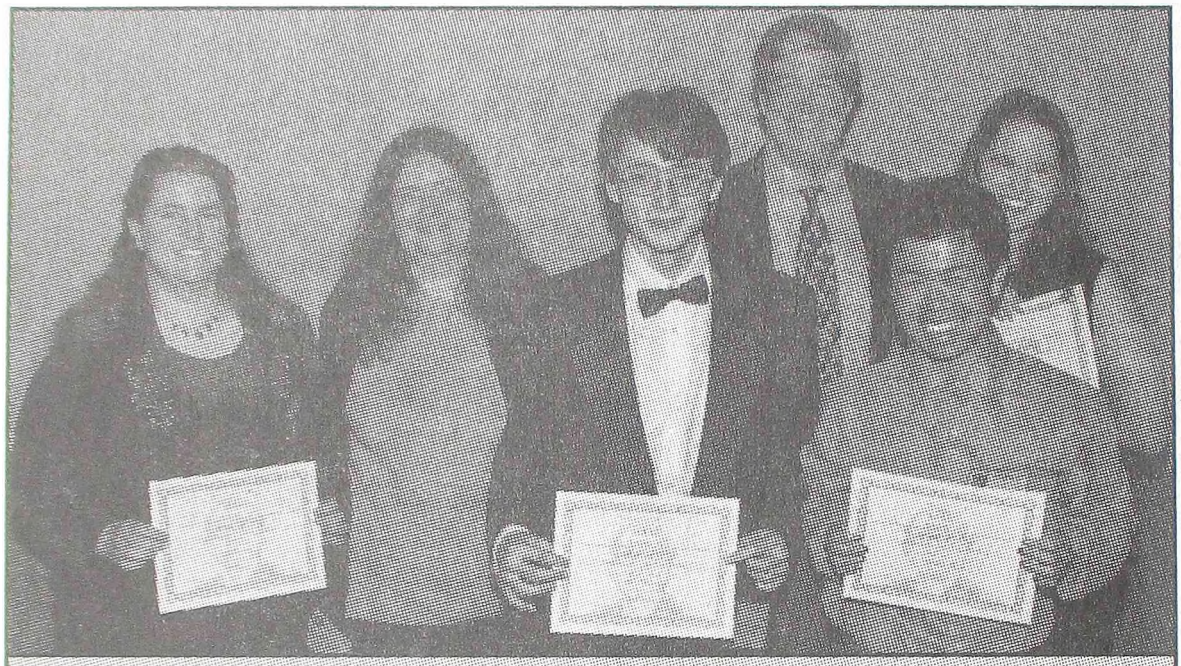
—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

Sheila Williams

THE 2004 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD



Isaac Asimov Award winners and judges (from left to right): Barbara Wright, Sheila Williams, Michail Velichansky, Rick Wilber, Anthony Ha, and Amelia Beamer.

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

It's hard to believe that we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing at the 2004 Conference of the Fantastic in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, in late March. When author, Rick Wilber, and I came up with this award at the 1992 World Fantasy Convention in Pine Mountain, Georgia, we hoped it would help us find and nurture talented young writers. I'm delighted that the award has done that and much, much more. Winners such as Eric Choi, Lena DeTar, David Barr Kirtley, and Marissa K. Lingen, have sold stories to *Asimov's, Analog, Realms of Fantasy,* and a number of science fiction anthologies. Many of our finalists have returned to the Conference to do readings, deliver papers, and soak up the Florida ambiance. Our finalists have formed writing groups and lifelong friendships. It's been wonderful and gratifying to be so involved with this award and these students.

The award is co-sponsored by two organizations that strongly believe in promoting the works of early career writers, the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and our own magazine. It is also supported by the School of Mass Communications, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. The judges for the award are Rick Wilber, who has worked tirelessly to ensure the award's existence; Gardner Dozois; and me.

This year's winner, Anthony Ha, is a junior majoring in urban studies at Stanford University. He is considering developing that interest in gritty realism by pursuing a career in either journalism or law. Anthony received an expense-paid trip to the Conference and a check for $500 for his story, "Orbiting."

Barbara Wright, a student at University of Houston, was our first runner-up. Ms. Wright is an aspiring novelist. Along with her certificate she received a two-year subscription to *Asimov's* for her story, "Community."

This year's second runner-up, Amelia Beamer, is a Michigan State University senior and science fiction historian. She received her award and a one-year complimentary subscription to *Asimov's* for her tale "Assisted Living."

One of our honorable mentions, Michail Velichansky, from the University of Maryland at College Park, was on hand to receive his certificate for "Games on the Children's Ward." Our other honorable mentions—including Austin Head-Jones of Brown University, who received his citation for "The Dark," and last year's first runner-up, Matthew Kirby of Utah State University, who wrote the notable "Relic Monger's Tale"—were unable to attend. One honorable mention, Michael Emmons of Northwestern University, had planned to pick up his certificate in person, was forced to decline when he was suddenly offered a position at *Poetry Magazine.*

Past winners and finalists at the Conference included Bryn Neuenschwander, Beth Adele Long, and Thomas Seay. Some of the authors in attendance were Brian W. Aldiss, Michael Bishop, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Clute, Charles De Lint, Andy Duncan, Stephen Donaldson, Eileen Gunn, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, Kij Johnson, James Patrick Kelly, John Kessel, Daniel Keyes, Ellen Kushner, David Lunde, Patricia McKillip, Delia Sherman, Peter Straub, and Tim Sullivan. One of the conference highlights always comes from the time these authors spend chatting informally with the Asimov Award finalists poolside at the conference hotel.

Last year's winning story by Bryn Neuenschwander, "Calling Into Silence," is up on our website–*www.asimovs.com.* In the future, you may find Bryn's fiction under her own name or Marie Brennan, her pseudonym.

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media.

We are actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is December 15, 2004. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university

(Continued on page 98)

THE GODS OF A LESSER CREATION

William Barton

William Barton is a mechanical engineering technician and software architect, who is surviving the current economic "downturn" by consistently underbidding several of his former employers. Over the past thirty years, he's written numerous SF stories, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997), and several stories for *Asimov's*, most recently, "Moments of Inertia" (April/May 2004). Mr. Barton tells us he started work on the following story a few weeks after his last corporate employer "declared bankruptcy without warning—allowing five thousand minimum-wage workers to show up at a locked door with a sign on it."

A word of warning: There are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

There's nothing else in life like having friends you can trust.

There were six of us riding the cyborg transbox out through the inner system, me and Rinty picked up at VenusLab, rotating back to Vesta along with some human researchers who'd finished their assignments, joining four Chinese boys come aboard at Mercury, who thought they might be on their way to Ixion now.

The Chinese had that funny Asian look you always see, with their flat faces, black eyes, and that long, curly golden hair. Me and Rinty had the doggier look OPEL favors for its cyborgs, designers at the Outer Planets Exploration Laboratory, coming as they had mostly from North America, favoring Western norms: Longer muzzles, with short, straight fur, mine a foxy reddish-gray, Rinty more tan-gold-black. Same body plan though, with four arms and four legs in mirror-bright chrome.

They let us in on their metashogon game as soon as we were loaded aboard, playing away the week since, with cards dealt from a five-deck shoe, and that was what we had, though disconnected from the datasets we had little real language in common, not much more than the language of the cards. Their names, I think, were all on the order of Chang and Eng.

Doesn't matter. We're all the same here.

Don't know who we were, only who we are.

Do your job, dream your dreams, don't talk about it.

I had cards in five hands, using the other three for balance, looking at faces and shapes, wondering how I'd wound up with so many panthans, so few jedwars. Going to have to fold soon, if I can't do better than this.

Something crept in out of nowhere, out of the infamous inner night. Some guy doing something violent. Someone screaming. A pulse of joy. Flashing lights.

Gently, Rinty said, "Yo, Lassie. . . ?"

I looked up from the cards, saw curly faced Changs and Engs staring. Waiting. "Sorry." Rearranged my cards, laid out a pattern on the deck, among the circle of our hands. "There."

That made the Chinese guys mutter among themselves, sing-song. I let my muzzle fall open in a doggy smile. Something else we have in common.

I've heard tell how once upon a time they tried to make cyborgs out of cats and mice, tried to make versions that were all dog, or all human. None of it ever worked. Something magical about the combination of sliced up dog brain, bits and pieces of Social-Discard human, all of it glued to computer hardware some genius called a cerebroanalikon, back when they were still giving names to such things.

Build the brain, build the body, put it to work.

I heard they train the dogs before putting them in the mix.

No one's ever said what they do to the men.

I can't remember.

The idiot light over the door blinked, someone dialing in. There was a soft hiss as it slid open, light from beyond framing a distinct human shape, black in silhouette. A voice said, "HLL-357?"

That would be me.

I put down my cards, stood, and said, "Sir."

"Delivery."

"Yes, sir," I said, and, "Sorry, guys."

Rinty seemed dismayed. "I thought you were going to Vesta with me."

I shrugged. "I'm on permanent loan to Dr. Battenberg, you know that."

He looked away.

I smiled, made a little bow to the Chinese guys, who were gathering in the cards, knowing they'd have to start over again if it was to be five-handed now. "Yo, Rinty! I'll be seeing you again, boy!" Offered a high-ten.

"Later."

"Sooner or later." Always. Friend.

And followed the human shape out through the hatch.

I only got the briefest little scrap of time to look out through the orbital cargo node's offloading ramp, at the curved, hazy limb of the Earth, as I stood in line, while they marked me as hardware-in-transit, property of

OPEL. Contraband, if sold. Most of the other cyborgs shuffling on through were marked Free-On-Earth, duty paid, or Safe-and-Delivered, restricted to the free-trade zone surrounding the cosmodrome wherever they were dropped off.

A voice, wired in, whispered, "Dar-es-Salaam . . ." and started calling out numbers. HLL-357. I joined another line, shuffling toward the lip of the ramp, where a shuttlebox waited.

Earth. Pale blue, not vivid at all, hardly colored compared to glaring, featureless Uranus, the lovely dark monochrome streaks and cloudy wisps of Neptune. Pale blue, crowded with swirls of white cloud, covering up those vaguer streaks of tan and green and red.

Manhome, I guess. But not *my* home.

The shuttle door slammed, leaving us crowded together in darkness, linking arms like so many brothers, or so many ants, whispering, one to the other, who are you? where from? whither goest?

Quo vadis? someone said.

And eventually I stood alone where they parked me—Wait here for your master—on the polished black marble floor of the main concourse of Dar-es-Salaam Cosmodrome, on the Isle of Pemba, within sight of fabled Zanzibar, by the shores of the Indian Ocean, while native humans swirled by in their multitudes, in their colorful costumes, in all their bewildering variety.

"*There* you are, Lassie! Let's go! We're late!"

She was tall, solid without being fat, thin without being slim, with pale, lightly freckled skin, with a flame-nimbus of dark red hair feather-cut around her skull. Her eyes were so pale blue in some light that they might look gray, in another, almost milky, deep set above stark cheekbones. She had those prominent teeth over which her lips would never quite close, sometimes like a smile, never far from feral.

"Dr. Battenberg," I said, making a slight bow, just the way she liked, "and Miss Vorhees."

Allie had little blonde Sonya—she of the electric blue eyes, too vivid to be real, some foolish gene-surgeon's antique wet-dream—by the hand, towing her along, and you could see her joy at being the center of her own wet-dream's attention, if only for a little while. Mine. *Mine.* That's what the haunted look says.

The man that strolled along behind them would've made up the mass of the two women added together, tall, slabby, razor-cut black hair, hot green eyes, aquiline nose, just the way you'd imagine a man called Command-Pilot Ta-Den Okitas would look. All that and bored, bemused, just-putting-up-with it, too.

Allie said, "Let's get the fuck out of here. Lassie, take charge of Denny's little toy."

He made a little faux snarl, and said, "Oh, please, Allie. Your toy. You're the one who insisted . . ." But she'd walked on, dragging little Sonya by the hand. He looked at me, rolled his eyes, and said, "Jesus. Maybe they'll get over it."

I watched him walk away, walking after them, stride so much longer that he didn't have to hurry, and whispered, "Maybe not." Final vacation.

Then Dr. Battenberg and Command-Pilot Okitas will return to OPEL's Piazzi Belt stronghold, will resume who they've always been, together. And Miss Vorhees? Back to California, all alone.

There'd been someone walking behind them, waiting now with me. Not someone. Something. You can always tell.

She held out a hand, and said, "KR-2578."

Gyndroid, I thought. All machine, however she looks. It looks? Almost as tall as Allie. But not quite. Almost as muscular. But not quite. Coffee-colored skin. Black hair. Round, handsome rump. Dark, dark brown eyes. "We'd better go," I said. "They call me Lassie, by the way. HLL-357." Even if she couldn't tell, the three-letter prefix would say I was more meat than metal.

She took a step, leaned in, seemed to take a deep breath. Then, sort of smiling, she said, "Lassie? But you have male pheromones. Human and . . . something else." Looked me up and down, mainly inspecting my slender, furry humanoid torso. "Is that a vulva?"

"Not quite."

Just before we caught up to them, I said, "Do you have a name, or is it just numbers with gyndroids?"

She smiled, showing a rim of pretty white teeth. "I'm called *She*."

"'She?'"

"She-Who-Must-Be-Obedient."

A heartbeat, then I laughed. *She* seemed to like that.

Sunrise, no sea monsters, only beauty.

We'd been following the course of the Pangani River north and west, up toward Arusha, beside the Masai Steppe, Kilimanjaro towering before us, more image than mountain, silhouetted gray and black against the hazy pink light of dawn.

Was it always like this? No. The colors in the sky are the exhalations of humanity, in all its endlessly layered billions. Some talk of Exodus, of seeding the Oort, of colonizing the newly discovered Centauri Jet, an image of one possible future. UNIS, the United Nations Intereconomic System, would have none of it, not yet. Rights. Human rights. History, they said, fomenting an image of some other future, perhaps the one with the great cityscape, Cosmopolis.

Leaving the cosmodrome, driving for a day, we'd parked our rented gemster by a grove of dry trees, set up safari tents under a blood-red dusk, cooked and eaten our faux bushmeat dinner, and pretended we were elsewhere, elsewhen. Sonya was fairly dancing for joy when bedtime came round, Command-Pilot Okitas watching them go, scowling, sullen, then taking *She* by the hand and leading her gracelessly away.

Sunrise on Earth is always brighter and more pastel than sunset, special to Earth, so different from the blue-under-pink twilights of Mars, seen standing behind one of the tents, looking out across the rolling green-brown plain. By later today, we'll have turned west, will pass by Lake Manyara, epeiric Lake Eyasi, will be out on the fabled Serengeti.

From inside the tent, soft whisperings, whisperings of voices, whisperings of cloth and skin on skin. I heard *She* whisper, "Oh, Ta-Den. Oh . . ."

Smiled.

Imagined some human programmer writing that code, smirking to himself, perhaps herself, perhaps imagining the silly man who'd one day hear those words, spoken in earnest.

I walked away, around toward last night's campfire, black scar on bare ground, with a faint, stale aroma of old woodsmoke. Beyond the other tent, the tent where they'd spent their own night engaged in whatever, Allie and Sonya sat together on a collapsible bench, the larger woman's arm around the shoulders of the smaller. Dr. Battenberg's face was hidden, only the short, tousled red hair on the back of her head visible to me, but I could see little Sonya's face, see vivid sorrow written there, the obvious glistening tracks of tears.

No. Let's not listen to those whispers.

I wonder what it's like to be an intact human being, to live your life whatever way it's found to be lived, keep your memories, layered in on one another, to an infinite depth, 'til they're lost in the mist. A man's not who he is, but who he was, the sum of all his dreams.

Not me.

The sky, eastward across the river, was beginning to turn yellow now, pink washed away by sunrise over the distant sea. Six specks there, several degrees above the bright horizon, where the sun would soon appear. I let the carousel swap out lenses inside my eyes, a brief moment of blur, followed by a sharper, larger focus, then my fox-ears rotated forward, focusing sound. Faint buzzing, not quite drowning out the swoosh of air over wings.

Four white pteranodons, floating together on the wind, pickaxe heads tilting, doing the job a bird's tail feathers would do, floating like frigate birds, large as antique fighter jets. The buzzing came from two little powergliders, their fabric wings far smaller than the pteranodons, little black man-shape in each one.

Game wardens, herding their charges.

On the plain underneath, now that it was suitably magnified, I could see a herd of elephants, hundreds of them, also new, accompanied by men on horseback. What dream is this? I remembering thinking, now and again. But I can't remember when I first had that thought.

The waters of Lake Victoria are still, and black like ink. I have no idea why, no idea what other color they may once have been. The sky overhead is the color of pale sand.

Mwanza Zooscape takes up virtually the whole of Ukerewe Island, standing out of the black waters like a fairy castle, all white buildings, built-up mountains looking just the way fake mountains are supposed to look, and they say you can spend months exploring the place on foot, seeing everything there is to see. Perhaps it would've been interesting to see some of the natural biome exhibits, showcasing what wildlife was left on Earth. Our dear Command-Pilot, who'd been born and lived his life mainly on lesser worldlets, arm around *She*'s waist, wanted to go see the Rat House and then the Roach Habitat, saying something about the urheimat of the houseguests, but we followed Allie, who kept Sonya by the hand.

So, not long before local noon, we stood at the rail of the Tyrannosaurus pit, watching the trainers do their work, Ta-Den with his hand now trailing across his gyndroid's firm rump, Sonya cowering under one of Allie's arms.

The exhibit docent, a shiny, barely humaniform robot built in a style decades out of date, explained that one day these would be part of a permanent "Wild Cretaceous" exhibit being built in a domed valley in the hill country of the adjacent mainland, domed because Cretaceous air was a wee bit different from what we were breathing now, and that the dinosaurs would quickly sicken and die if let loose in the modern world.

Down in the pit, three men surrounded an animal the size of three elephants. I suppose they were men, the right size and shape anyway, though dressed up in bioisolation gear, complete with goggle-eyed airmasks. Down in the pit must be Cretaceous air, supposedly heavier than our own, with just a tad more carbon dioxide.

You'd get sleepy down there, the docent told us.

I remembered the pteranodons, up in the sky, though hardly free, and wondered how they'd made that work.

The animal, scaly green and brown, with a ruddy face and little tufts of scarlet feathers over its eyes, and running in a mastiff-ridge down the length of its spine, dropped its tail, lifted its head, brilliant yellow eyes seeming to scan the crowd lining the rail. Opened its white-fangy mouth and let out a steam-whistle scream-hiss-honk, people recoiling from the rail with deliciously shivery little squeals.

The docent said, We call that the feeding cry, meant to claim this carcass as its territory.

It leaned down, lifting its tail, snuffling around the half-eaten dead Triceratops sprawled before it, trainers closing in, doing something with little black boxes they held.

Crunch.

Steamy splashing blood, a splintering of red bones, then a sharp, gamy smell rose from the pit.

People around the rail went *eeeuuuw!* while Sonya turned her head away, as if trying to huddle into Allie's armpit, though you could see she was using this as an excuse to nuzzle one firm breast, Allie grinning, big teeth as scary as the Tyrannosaur's, eyes on the tableau below.

Clumsy-looking beast, I thought, even for a scavenger. If it fell, it'd have to lever itself up with its head and neck, like a turtle. Prickle of odd memory. Which part of me remembers a turtle? For a moment, I was another, smaller beast, maybe half the size of a man, with longer, redder hair, leaning a long nose down to snuffle at a hard, humped-up lawn-crawling little thing.

Scutes. That's what the shell plates are called. Maybe the man in me knew that, once upon a time, since the dog could not. Or maybe it was just the machine.

When I glanced at Ta-Den, I could see his hand had strayed to the cleft of *She*'s buttocks, well outlined by the silky material of her short green skirt, stroking gently. I could see one of the gyndroid's dark eyes past the curve of his neck, looking at me. Winking was the best I could do, wishing she had an OPEL-standard work-control link.

* * *

LUNCH WITH THE CHIMPS!, the sign said. Goodall Interpretive Center Annex, said another. In little letters at the bottom of each was a small black line: Sponsored by 4M Corporation. Interesting. 4M had been OPEL's major partner in VenusLab, helping defray CalTech's share, even paying part of my service fee.

On the way, we'd passed by some other exhibit, *Optimod Hominids,* the sign said, and I'd glanced in to see hairy, manlike beasts, all wolfy-faced and wild, genengineered from human junk,codons I think, and stuff from animals.

"Distant cousins?" whispered *She*.

I'd shrugged. "Not without the machinery." But maybe so. Me without the metal parts, dog and man and whatnot all jumbled together to make whatever the hell *they* wanted.

The Goodall Center, made up to look like a primate compound in some old habitat-zoo from centuries gone by, was filled with variegated people, dotted with short, hairy humanoids. Chimpanzees, they said. Not really, the docent told us. Chimps went extinct two hundred years ago. Bonobos too. These are manufactured beings. Cloned from human egg cells, from a hodge-podge of human DNA and scraps left over from biological samples found in labs and museums, here and there around the world.

It'd looked at me then, and said, "Using a technology ancestral to that of cyborg manufacture."

Brothers under the skin, I guess.

Allie and Sonya were at a cafe table, trying to chat with their lunch-guest chimps, laughing and talking, though you could tell something about it was pissing off the big, scruffy male. Who *are* these people? Why the hell do *I* have to eat with them? You could see that much.

The chimps could talk, in growly monster voices, but the ones who got to eat by themselves were almost silent, gesturing rapidly to one another in some kind of sign language. Silent except for the occasional soft hoot, like punctuation. Chislan was what the docent called it. Something we gave them before it was decided they didn't have to be *perfect* chimps, you see.

Sort of their native language, perhaps.

Command-Pilot Okitas was eating by himself, standing up, holding a bottled beer in one hand, some kind of pocket-bread meal in the other, watching a group of children gathered in one corner, where they giggled and talked and pointed, watching a female chimp in grotesque pink estrus taking on whatever males happened by.

A few of the other female chimps were watching that too, gesturing back and forth, faces creased with some expression or another. No way for me to know if it was envy, or disgust. Thought of asking the docent, but didn't.

Were they like this in the wild, I wondered, or is it just a show for us? Then I remembered again that these ones were never wild, nor even descended from such.

From our position by the wall, over by where the docent stood at parade rest like some steadfast tin soldier, *She* leaned close to me, and whispered, "Do you eat?"

"I can. I don't need to."

"Would you like to? I can place an order on the OPEL account opened for my use."

I smiled at her, not knowing if she could read much from a baring of teeth and tongue. "Thanks. No. Usually, I don't bother. Sometimes, on long trips, Dr. Battenberg will ask me to eat with her. Eat and talk. She's garrulous enough to need social company, no matter where we are."

A long look. "Isn't the pilot always with her?"

My chuckle has a relatively normal human sound to it, perhaps because they wanted my speech to be easily understood, and you could see her get that. "Oh, he's not much good at talking. She'll fuck him, then come talk to me after he's gone to sleep."

She said, "I've noticed that about him, too."

We drove onward with the gemster, skirting Lake Victoria and out across a sprawling ruin the guidebooks called Uganda. It was a cityscape of sorts, but the old stone and concrete buildings were all rubble and twisted girder steel. Construction, the books said, mainly from the twentieth century, built before the time of the Skinny Plague.

Apparently, no one lives here anymore, and we raised a cloud of dust from the dead soil as we drove on, hovering our scant few centimeters above the broken roadbed.

The mountains rising to the west of Uganda, beyond the lesser lakes, beyond the Great Rift Valley, were marked in different ways on different parts of the map. Monts Mitumba, one said. Monts Bleus, said another. Ruwenzori, said a third.

The Mountains of the Moon, said a story. But I've seen the real thing. Nothing at all like this. Albert Nile was the name of a river, rising from a lake. Bahr al-Jebel said an older name.

Once we got into the mountains, the roads got better and the trees got greener, and there were people again. Tall, very, very thin brown people, people dressed in flowing scraps of cloth, barefoot people walking with sticks cut from trees, wafer thin women carrying little bundle babies, all of them staring, big-eyed, expressionless, as we drove on by. Hardly credible as people, but people nonetheless.

Social Discards, lucky to be alive.

Luckier than me, anyway.

Once, pointing, Sonya called out, "Look! A gorilla!"

It was looking at us from a clump of bushes by the side of the road, squatting down, half-hidden, just a big bullet head, with a ruff of gray fur round its shoulders, cradling a slim rifle in leathery black hands.

Command-Pilot Okitas, cradling *She* in his lap, slowly stroking the inside of her thigh, murmured, "Game warden, perhaps."

Under magnification, I could see bleak suspicion and fear in the animal's dark eyes. Its weapon was a long, slim bolt-action rifle with a small box magazine, bayonet mounted below the barrel. Lee-Enfield .303, I thought. From a war more than three centuries gone.

Game warden? Or defense against the tall, skinny hoboes living farther down the mountain?

In a high pass above a misty vale, surrounded by verdant, rain-shrouded peaks, we stopped at a Swiss chalet, gingerbread structure rising incongruously beside the road, and before we could pop the hatches, two more male gorillas were out in the parking lot, each with a rifle slung over one shoulder by a thick cloth strap. I could see that they were the same sort of guns, nearly new, with stocks of dark plastic, rather than traditional wood and metal.

Curious. You'd think, here on Earth, wood and metal would be cheaper than plastic.

The doors hissed open and we stepped out one by one, and the larger, grayer of the two gorillas, in the voice of the Billy-Goats Gruff, said, "Welcome to FreeHostel Sixty-Seven! My wives will be so happy to see we have guests again!" He patted himself on the chest. "Sheb Takkor, at your service! And this is my son Borgen—"

They both took a step back as I unfolded onto the pavement.

A long second, then Sheb said, "Goodness. We don't get many of your kind here, er . . ."

I said, "HLL-357."

She stepped out beside me, looking at them wide-eyed, then whispered in my ear, "All gorilla, I think. No human genome at any rate."

There was a much longer silence, the two gorillas totally focused on her, then the silverback said, "Um. Benford Project, you see . . . um." Almost strangling on his words.

Allie suddenly barked with laughter. "Will you look at that! He's got a hard-on for her!"

Face showing distaste, Sonya said, "Well. The other one too." The smaller male was twisting away, crouching down, trying to hide himself in obvious distress.

I glanced at *She* and said, "*Nothing* human there?"

She shrugged, "There's no telling."

The gorilla, looking like maybe it was about to have some kind of fit, said, "We're first generation, raised by surrogates. . . ."

Allie, teeth bared to the gumline, said, "What d'you think, Denny? Wanta lend 'em your gyndroid for a little while?"

He seemed angry. "Why, so you can watch?"

She snickered, "Oh, come on. It'll be funny."

The younger gorilla, apparently almost in tears, whimpered, "Please, madam. . . ."

Command-Pilot Okitas, skin of his neck reddening, snarled, "Oh? And what about *her* f—" Shut himself up suddenly, just as suddenly turned away. What about her *what,* I wondered. What were you going to say?

Allie said, "Well, Miss Gyndroid, what about it?" Still staring at Ta-Den, grin reduced to just the rim of her teeth, for her, a thin smile.

She said, "I exist only to serve," and started to get undressed.

The silverback male shook himself, seeming to snap out of a trance, taking another step back. Then he turned to the other one. "Go inside, Borgen. Tell Thaine we'll be having guests for dinner. Three, I would think."

Allie blinked at him, obviously surprised.

The gorilla said, "Really, madam. We are free beings here, not Social Discards." Then he turned away as well, calling over his shoulder, "This way, please."

Ta-Den rasped, "Get dressed."

Some time not long after midnight, I stood alone in the dark hallway where they'd left me, bracketed by two closed doors, as if standing guard. For a while, after dinner, after bedtime, the younger of the two male gorillas had come to stare at me, finally shrugged and gone away to bed himself, never having spoken.

Quiet now.

The long, drawn-out moaning from the one door was over, little Sonya cawing with pleasure for the longest time, then, later, the soft sounds of her disconsolate crying seeped out.

Please, Allie. Please, I can't stand this.

Oh, grow up, Sonya. I'm not the only God-damned woman in the Solar System.

Why do you have to treat me like this?

Grow up. Go to sleep. Christ.

Silence.

Not even sniffles left behind.

Now, from the other door, the endless wet piston sound of Ta-Den fucking his rented gyndroid had finally gone away. But there were whispers here too. Murmurs that made me turn my ears round backward to face the door.

They don't sell us, *She* said. And if they did, we'd cost too much for someone in your position. I know they have gyndroids on the OPEL worlds. Rent one when you get home, if you must.

It won't be the same.

Of course it will. Mitsubishi only makes sixteen models, and we KRs are among the most popular.

Moment of silence, then he said, Look, it's just that I feel like I've fallen in love with you.

Impossible.

Bitter laugh. You think so? Sometimes it seems like I fall in love with every woman I've fucked a sufficient number of times. Maybe you've crossed that threshhold.

Another moment of silence, me wondering why a robot would need to think about anything at all. Rule sieve. It's just a rule sieve. The machine parts of *me* don't need to think.

Finally, *She* said, But I'm not a woman. I'm a sex toy.

And Command-Pilot Ta-Den Okitas said, You seem like a woman to me.

I stopped listening after that. Stopped thinking about what I'd heard, stopped thinking about anything at all, until much later in the night, until the little window at the end of the hallway started to show gray against the darkness, sky beginning to stain indigo in the faraway east, and *She* slipped out through the door.

I turned and looked at her.

She said, "Is it a long night for you, out here?"

I said, "Do you sleep?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Do you miss it?"

I shrugged. "The dog does, sometimes."

She reached out and ran a warm hand down the fur of my back.

I said, "You seem like a woman to me, as well."

She looked away, down at the pooled shadows along the floor by the wall. "At least you were real, once upon a time, even if you don't quite remember. *I'll* never be real." She looked up at me, dark eyes fathomless, then said, "And Gepetto's just a story."

Once we were beyond the Ituri Forest, with its lovely little Pygmy exhibits, we got on the Ubangi-Shari Highway, heading on north into the ever-dryer grasslands of the Sudan and the Sahelian subdesert. It was another sparsely inhabited country, as with Uganda, startlingly adjacent to the Congo Basin, with its teeming hundreds of millions, all empty dry landscape buckled with low, rolling mountains.

It wasn't 'til just past a range of hills called Chaine des Mongos that we came upon more than a few scattered folk, those tattered little bands of nomads you see wandering in the wilderness between city and slum. The land was flattening out, old road turning north to follow the course of the Bamingui River, not far above where it runs into the Bahr al-Aouk.

We followed the highway down the course of the Bamingui River to its confluence with the Shari. At Sahr, little more than a crossroads with convenience stores and com booths, whatever it'd once been, we turned off, heading northeastward toward Am Timan, the road following a dry, mossy riverbed, a green wriggle slightly lower than the surrounding landscape, nameless on our maps. The road itself, paved with a pretty good grade of mildly iridescent plastic, was named the Great White Way.

It led to the Am Timan Casino Complex, then onward to the city of Mongo itself, a low, crumpled expanse of gray and tan rubble crowning the range of scruffy, eroded hills west of the riverbed.

"Emerald City," whispered little Sonya, unhappy, looking away.

Allie and Command-Pilot Okitas brightened visibly as the glowing green castlescape loomed, blotting out pretty much everything else, with its swirling searchlights and rapidly moving holosigns. *Eat at Joe's?* Ta-Den seemed to rub his hands together, as if in anticipation.

Night fell, though even from our balcony we could see little of the empurpled sky, nothing at all of the stars, Allie and Ta-Den dressing up in glitter, riding the elevator down and running out onto the casino floor with glad cries, cries of *Slots!* and *Twenty-One!* and *Roulette!* like two small children let loose in Toyland at last, leaving the rest of us behind.

Little Sonya stood, all forlorn, all but slack-jawed, looking after them, left alone with the hardware at last. She turned, looked at me, as if looking for sympathy from a friend, then suddenly turned and looked at *She,* just as suddenly looked sick.

Then she said to me, "Is that all I am to her? What this *thing* is to *him?*"

Very softly, as softly as I could manage with my wolfling's voice, I said,

"And what is Dr. Battenberg *herself,* to Command-Pilot Okitas?" It was the best I could do.

She whispered, "Lassie. . . ."

Little Sonya looked at me, baffled, angry, without comprehension, then turned and stalked off onto the casino floor. As she passed by them, a group of men in dark, double-breasted suits, dark men with big cigars and feathered, broad-brimmed hats called out to her. She turned on them with a snarl, more Allie than Allie herself, then stormed away into a sea of bright lights.

Later on, when the real people were tired of the gaming machines, we were rounded up and taken to something called a Floor Show, where Allie had an argument with the doorman, insisting that, no she didn't have to buy tickets for *She* and me, that we were hardware, couldn't possibly enjoy the show, and didn't need our own tickets, any more than her shoes needed tickets.

The doorman grumbled, and settled on letting me in for free, refusing to believe *She* was a machine, refusing to trouble himself to check.

Backward, I suppose, like much else on Earth, when it's not being so forward it dazzles the simple outworlder. Backward like the fat, plastic robot who came out first and told us take-my-wife jokes, or the one that followed, a beefy-looking humaniform who sang to us in a fine contralto blur. What came next was what dazzled.

A tall, thin little girl walked out on stage, naked, staring at us with big, empty glass eyes, hand up beside her face, twirling a loop of thin brown hair endlessly around one finger. You could hear a rustle of anticipation in the audience.

Beside me, *She* whispered, "Oh. I think I've heard about these."

The little girl on the stage started to dance, slowly, very awkwardly at first, then with increasing grace. Something happening. I didn't know what, and whispered back, "Not human is it?" The eyes have it. "A cyborg? Or one of those optimod things they had back at the Zoo?"

"Robot," *She* said. "Watch."

The dancer danced, danced and changed. Stayed small, stayed slim, but the hips, the breasts . . . Sonya, leaning close to Allie, whispered, "Look at her pussy. . . ." Where there'd been nothing but a bare pink slit, there was now a soft fuzz of newly grown hair.

She whispered, "They're called allomorphs, I think. The very latest thing."

The dancer danced and became a woman, danced with grace and beauty, became a man, danced with power and grace, became a little girl again, while the audience, enraptured, whispered its applause.

The latest thing, I thought, and wondered how *She* felt, a gyndroid rendered so suddenly obsolete.

Much later, returning to our hotel room with some toys and supplies they'd sent me to buy, I found *She* standing alone and naked in the hallway, leaning against the doorframe, waiting, for me, or perhaps for no one.

"What's going on?"

She smiled. "They sent me outside to wait."

"Why?"

"Because they don't need me right now."

"No?"

"They hired the allomorph for the evening. Very expensive, I'm afraid. Dr. Battenberg will have some explaining to do when they audit her expense account."

"Ah." I put my package down, imagining they wouldn't want it now, wondering if I should take it back unused, for a refund. Well. I'll let them decide. "Do you know why they did this?"

She smiled again. "I think, perhaps, for Sonya's sake. Things haven't . . . gotten any better for her."

"Sometimes," I said, "I wish I could remember what it was like to be a man."

"Maybe you're better off this way. A dog's a better friend than a man."

"That's what they say."

Then we sat down together and whiled away the night, while I told her of all the places I'd been and all the things I'd seen. Sometimes, it seemed as though she could read between the lines, listen for things unsaid, of all the places I'd been and things I'd been, in the time before time, in the life I'd forgotten.

The next night, on toward sunset, we went over to Mongo, just Allie and me, leaving all the others behind. She seemed glad for that, glad to be rid of Sonya, who'd mooned and mooned all day long, probably glad to be rid of Ta-Den Okitas, who seemed sulky, at best. Maybe glad to be rid of *She,* for whom she had no use?

"Ah, Lassie," she said, as we walked down a dark and dusty street, purple sky silky overhead, showing just a few bright pinpoints, Sirius and Jupiter anyway, Venus, like Luna, being below the rim of the world right now. "Lassie, you're the best of the lot."

I stayed silent, wondering if she'd meant to say "a bad lot," but left it unsaid, as if even a cyborg had feelings real enough for her to see.

She said, "I think they'll make it a foursome tonight. Ta-Den wants to get his hands on the allomorph, sure as can be. And the gyndroid'll be certain to keep poor Sonya from getting too sad."

Feelings, is it? Well. What *is* it they feel, from on high? Anything at all?

She ruffled my fur, scratched behind my ears. "I knew you'd understand."

A voice said, "Yo, bitch."

I turned, fading back into a handy shadow, and looked to see glinting eyes and a bright blade nearby. I don't even know if he saw me, hidden by the contrast of Allie's fine white glory. I'm hard to see at night, what with the fur and all. Anyway, I've got human eyes, not doggy, so they don't glow orange in the dark, much as the image would have appealed to my designers.

I turned up the gain in those human eyes, sky brightening to a rich violet, until I could see him stepping out into the street, a tall man,

wrapped in a dark robe, so all you could see was the pale skin around his eyes. That, and the knife.

Allie cocked her head to one side, standing arms akimbo, thrusting one hip oh-so-provocatively. "What?"

I figured this for a rape, and I think Allie did too, from the way she stood and grinned, anticipating the vicious game she could play with this hapless Discard, but he took one quick step forward, knife glittering in sudden starlight as he slashed at her throat.

I saw her switch to a much higher clockspeed, just a fraction of an instant before I did, dodging the knife, popping it out of his hand, tossing it away, a brief flash and shine down the length of the dark street, clattering somewhere many meters away.

I think he tried to turn, but his movements were so slow, it was like frames in a slideshow, or the jerky movement of a dancer on a strobelit stage.

And I think his eyes went to me as I stepped forward, so maybe he didn't see Allie dance behind him, one hand reaching for his jawline, the other one going behind his shoulder. *Snap.*

When she let him go, the recoil tossed him into a wall, at the foot of which he crumpled in slow, slow motion, blink, blink, blink, already dead, unaware he was gone.

I let the night go dark again, dropped back to normal speed in time to see the final moments of Allie's dervish blur.

She turned and looked at me, dusting herself off with delicate movements. "Where was I?"

"Sonya," I said, "and the foursome."

"Oh, right. You know, if I'd known she was going to be so damned *needy,* I might've reconsidered taking her on. Trouble is, there were *such* slim pickings at Venuslab. . . ."

We walked on, the nameless man forgotten, forgotten and cooling on the paving stones behind us, while Dr. Battenberg unburdened her heart of all its baggage, the way humans have done with dogs since that partnership began. I could sometimes remember the real doggy me, sitting on a shadowy bed with his original owner's arms around his neck, slim arms, perhaps a little girl's arms, listening to a meaningless babble of words.

All doggy-me cared about was that the little girl needed to cry, needed a warm thing to hold.

I'm still a good dog, I thought, and listened to Allie chatter, knowing that she needed me, some way, somehow.

Zindernouf Cosmodrome lies out in the middle of nowhere, out in the dry sandlands due west of Lac du Tchad, on the road to Aïr, just before it crosses the Damergou Hills. I guess there was a famous fort here, maybe the one from *Beau Geste,* and then a ramshackle town. Now it's a little place where rocketships still touch down, left over from a time when the people here needed space travel, left now for the convenience of Others.

A grand gesture, all right.

And, out in the yellow desert, through dawn's early light, you can see the Social Discards standing on the line of the dunes, fresh faced women,

near-naked children, tall, thin men in their veiled, dark blue robes, watching the spacemen come and go.

Did they ever dream that dream, the Tuareg and the Sanhaja before them, who came to trade and stayed to go so native that few remember they weren't always here? That's forgotten too, like so much else.

Standing on the polished black marble floor of the main concourse, surrounded by throngs of good, better, and best people on their way back to their homes in the sky, their homes in the richer earthlands to the west and north, the gemster turned in, we stood in cool, conditioned air, no longer concerned about the lesser lives of the people watching from the hills.

Allie and Sonya stood off to one side, Allie whispering insistently, sharply, in Sonya's little girl ear, brushing angrily at the shiny tear tracks criss-crossing her cheeks. Hush. Hush, now. You're a grown woman. You'll be fine.

Command-Pilot Ta-Den Okitas, dressed now in his black and gold OPEL flight officer's uniform, kit bag suspended by its long strap over one shoulder, stood, impassive, watching no one, looking at nothing, muscular arms crossed over his chest. I admired the way the tendons of his wrists stood out through little manes of black hair, poking from beneath his braided cuffs, and wondered if my wrists had ever looked like that.

Well. I'd never know. I can't remember.

Even if I were to have all the resources in the solar system at my disposal, I'll never know who I was, because that data's been erased. And I'll never know what, if anything, I did to deserve it.

She stood beside me, one hand just touching my shoulder, fingers gently stirring in the fur, waiting to be turned in. Do you wonder, I thought, who your next client will be? Do you care?

Of course you do.

She smiled at me, looking into my eyes, as if reading my mind, and said, "You know, of course you do, how much more of a man, how much more of a human being you are than *they,* poor old Lassie. More than wretched little Sonya Vorhees. More than Command Pilot Ta-Den Okitas. Surely more than Allison Battenberg, Doctor of Planetary Studies. More than any of them."

A woman was walking toward us now, dataclip in hand, dressed in the uniform of Spaceport Services. The rental agent.

I took *She* by the hand, and said, "Were you aware that Lassie and *She* mean about the same thing?"

Another little smile, almost secretive. Then a little nod.

I said, "The only thing that makes you real, in the end, is having one true friend. Someone who knows who you really are." I leaned in and gave her a little kiss on the cheek, just as the rental agent walked up, stopped beside us, already looking impatient.

"KR-2578?" Tapping her dataclip input.

She said, "Just a moment." That got a look of surprise.

I said, "They built us to last, my friend. *We'll* still be here when their kind is long gone."

She smiled, eyes impossibly bright. "Then I'll see you again someday."

"Someday," I said, and the day *did* come when all those things were true. ❍

FOLLOWING ORDERS

R. Neube

Having fractured his arm recently, R. Neube is learning he can type one-handed, but cannot make a peanut butter sandwich. He tells us the biggest pain is that he can no longer read in the bathtub. Mr. Neube is pleased to report that his novel, *Possum in a Blender,* is finished.

"I remember the day we declared independence. My brothers and I got drunk. Next morning, I got up early to break their legs before I went to enlist."

Her words haunted his dreams.

Doctor Warren showed his identification to the Irlane zookeeper. It was not his Trade Commission ID, but one the aliens had issued to him when he'd arrived on their orbital city. The Irlane rubbed the metallic card against its exo-skeleton, generating friction to activate a hologram crowded with glyphs.

The alien towered over Warren, but the doctor refused to step back, fearful that the creature would sense his terror. Instead, he imagined a giant lobster and a centaur making love, creating this species. He studied the broad shell of its chest, knowing that Irlane stored two brains in there, wondering if they were side by side or stacked. The tricks stilled the nightmares shambling through the phobia-lobe of Warren's mind.

The alien opened its multiple maws and spoke. Warren's translator buzzed, declaring that the statement was in a language not included in its database. His brow furrowed. The tongue sounded familiar. French?

"I am sorry. I speak English." The doctor held up the translator and shrugged.

The Irlane spoke its native tongue. The translator said, "Only humans could think of so many languages. So much fun. Prisoner Malovich is down tunnel four hundred and three." Tendrils emerged from its lower right arm, pulling a remote from its belt. The alien pointed the device at a door.

Warren smiled with relief as the door opened, offering an escape from the alien. Lights came on at his approach. A small robot scurried to clean his boots while he walked. The Irlane were known as the gadget-masters

of the galaxy for a reason, he mused. He walked slowly, despite the urge to run. It wasn't as if the Irlane of the Olve'Tock *Niiji* had mistreated him. Indeed, since he'd gotten off the interstellar liner, they had treated him like a prince. Still, they were simply too alien for his comfort.

Some bureaucrat on Mars, Warren fumed, had read about his alien phobia, chronicled in myriad annual psychological evaluations, and thought it would be funny to send him a zillion light-years to deal with creepy beasts with too many brains.

"I am NOT scared," he declared, wiping his brow with a trembling hand. "Sad affirmation for a psychologist," he muttered.

Prisoner Malovich curried a buffalo, singing a wordless song. She was a tall woman with patchy black hair. Her sleeveless jumpsuit showcased muscles gone to seed; meat dangled from her bones as if it was no longer connected.

"Hello," he said quietly. Had to repeat it thrice before she looked up.

The whites of her blue eyes were jaundiced. "Are you real, or one of those pesky hallucinations?"

"Been having hallucinations?"

Her eyes squinted. "Not if you're real."

"I'm Doctor Warren from the Sol Trade Commission, here to make certain the aliens are treating you properly. Since Durstead colony was originally settled by people from Ceres, Sol has taken an interest in your case."

He swallowed the urge to tell her the truth. It would only get in the way.

She leaned close to his ear and hissed, "Then ask the bugs about the other prisoners. Nineteen of us were sentenced to this purgatory. Where are they now? I'll tell you—the bugs are EATING us, one by one!" She staggered backward. "I'm the only one left," she yelled at the ceiling.

Yelling to God? he wondered.

She coughed hard, collapsing against the buffalo. Before the doctor could reach her, she righted herself, leading the beast through a door. Warren blinked from the bright light after he followed her into the adjacent chamber. They stood in a grassy pit with half a dozen buffaloes. On a walkway above the pit, scores of Irlane stood, their myriad eyestalks leaning toward the humans.

Not only had the prisoners of war been sentenced to civic labor at the zoo, but the Irlane had slipped a double duty into the punishments; prisoners were as much exhibits as the animals. Little wonder, considering that the closest human settlement was a thousand light-years away.

He found it telling that she kept her eyes locked on the animal, ignoring the silent aliens. Perhaps it was the best way to cope with the punishment.

She exited the chamber, swinging the door shut so quickly that he nearly had to dive into the tunnel.

"Where did they get buffaloes?" Warren asked.

"The Olve' paid billions for a bunch of embryos from Mars. They pride themselves on the best zoo in the galaxy."

"Animal lovers," muttered the doctor.

She led him to the next cage, which contained dog-sized crabs, minus the shells. She rubbed them with wax, giggling as they went spastic when she rubbed their flaccid bellies.

He said, "I read that you were the most decorated soldier in your colony's militia."

She refused to make eye contact. "The more we died, the more medals they handed out. Chunks of metal are lots cheaper than gravestones."

Warren waited vainly for her to elaborate. Time for a different tack, he decided. "Could you tell me about the war?"

"I remember the day we declared independence. My brothers and I got roaring drunk. I got up early the next morning, and broke their legs before I went to town to enlist. I saw so many stupid farm boys like them become cannon fodder as they tried to be heroes."

Warren chewed his lower lip. Violence became a self-fulfilling prophecy for people with defective impulse control, he thought. "Why break their legs? Wasn't there a simpler way?"

"They were still drunk. Didn't feel a thing. I immediately set the medbot to repair the damage. I couldn't chance a quick heal, so I shattered both legs on each twin. Reckon it took a full year for them to heal well enough to join the militia. By that time, folks knew the blood price of our war. I pray the twins realized that I saved their lives."

She coughed, dropping to the muddy floor of the cage. Hugging her legs, folding up, Malovich trembled. "Can I write the twins? The bugs won't let me send mail because I can't pay the postage."

"Certainly. Write to your heart's content. I'll post your letters from the liner on my way back to Sol."

"I don't have any money. You can send my letter collect, can't you? You don't think the twins hate me, do you?"

"A few thousand dollars' worth of postage won't bankrupt the Trade Commission. I promise I'll send it. I'm certain your brothers appreciate what you did for them. A quarter of Durstead colony died in your abortive war for independence. Why, if you saw what was coming, did you enlist?"

"Somebody from my family had to join," she replied as she stood. "There was a delirium during those days, leading up to declaring our freedom. Every family sent a member to serve in the militia, except the Baxters; they were Quakers who told everyone that war was hateful in the eyes of God. My brothers wanted to burn the Baxters' barns before we enlisted. Like I said, war frenzy was a madness. We were half a million humans on a planet owned by aliens. There were only a few thousand Irlane on Durstead. It wasn't right they ruled us. We thought the war would be easy. At first. Later—" Her throat rattled, segueing into a long silence.

He stepped back, then walked around the woman slowly, careful of the lethargic crab creatures. Doctor Warren wished he had started the timer on his watch. He'd observed petit mal seizures before, but nothing this profound. She could be a statue. He flashed his pocket light; her pupils were fixed. Feeling her neck, he struggled to find the faintest of pulses. He examined the bare patches of scalp, a flick sending a huge scale of dead skin to the concrete floor. Part of her right ear was missing, torn by an old bullet wound.

He checked his chip-plate again. Lieutenant Malovich had been wounded eight times, hospitalized only twice. He scrolled down, finding

the description for her last medal, earned by refusing to leave her regiment after most of her foot was blown off. He glanced at her worn boots, noting how both curled at the toes.

"A warrior's warrior" had been her evaluation from four different commanders.

Coughing presaged her return to reality. She staggered, ineptly kicking at the creatures milling about the cage, chasing them into the observation chamber where they were greeted by a hail of nuts cast by the aliens above. She left the cage, slamming the inner hatch in his face. By the time he found the lever the aliens used in lieu of a doorknob, and figured out that he had to raise it rather than lower it, the hallway was empty.

"Where the hell did she go?"

The lights flickered. A voice came from the ceiling. His translator said, "Processing." The lights went out. He clenched his eyes shut to hide from the darkness, silently cursing the aliens. When he opened them, only one light shone on the ceiling. He went to that cage door, each step another silent curse against the gadget-masters of the galaxy, afraid that anything he said aloud might be recorded to be used against him later.

He went inside the cage, angry, ready to castigate Malovich for fleeing. She grunted in a corner, trying to muscle a ragged strand from a pile of rope on the floor. Jerking one off, she grabbed a second strand.

"Lieutenant Malovich?"

"Who are you?" she asked.

He nodded and identified himself, taking care to repeat his original introduction, hoping it would imprint on the prisoner's mind.

"These critters live on obsidian hills on their native planet," she explained. "The zoo doesn't duplicate their environment well enough. They need to remove dead limbs by abrading them off on jagged rocks."

His heart stopped when the rope untangled itself. A millipede creature the size of the Loch Ness monster stared at him, pincers the length of his arms snapped together.

"Otherwise, the dead legs will rot. You wouldn't believe the stink." She laughed when she saw him pressed against the wall. "Don't worry, they scrape moss off rocks for food. One bite of you will make it deadly sick. They ain't bright, but they remember things that taste foul."

The wall scraped against his suit; chill penetrated its fashionably coarse burlap. He gaped as his patient used a severed leg to beat the creature into the courtyard. He dodged the leg cast in his direction. It almost made him glad to see evidence of her hostility. At least that much about the woman was normal.

"C'mon, if you're slow, you're dead." She started for the door.

He blocked her. "Is that a soldier's advice?"

"A criminal's advice. Didn't you read my record? We're murderers. That's why they're killing us. Vengeance is mine, sayth the bugs." Her laughter segued into a coughing fit.

She collapsed against him. Despite himself, he cringed as the warmth of her cough penetrated his shirt. His hands trembled as his imagination showed an infectious viral stew percolating through the weave, burrowing into his skin. He marveled how a human could be so unaffected by a

body temperature a dozen degrees too low. The average human would be comatose.

She pushed herself upright, her wan lips quivering. "As a soldier, the only advice worth giving is that you NEVER pass up an opportunity to eat or bathe."

She coughed once, swaying. "Get out of my way, it's time for lunch."

He followed her to a kitchenette on a lower level. She withdrew a tray from the miniature refrigerator, along with a half-empty liter bottle of vodka whose label was peeling.

She read his surprise and laughed/coughed. "The Red Cross sends POWs a bottle each Christmas. The Irlane distill a kicking kootch they use to pickle fungus. So they give me free refills." She withdrew a slab of fungus from a cabinet, tossing it into an iron skillet.

"Have you ate?" she asked.

"Not since I left Silias III. Pills and supplements will do me fine. Can't see how you eat that. . . ?" He exhaled sharply, catching himself before he said "bug mold." His eyes went to the ceiling as he wondered if the Irlane had everything in this complex under surveillance.

"Think of it as a big mushroom. They grow this variety especially for humans. It is genetically engineered to provide all the vitamins and amino acids I need."

"The Red Cross is supposed to supply POWs with rations."

"They do, but fungal steaks taste better," she replied. "I've had a bellyful of field rations."

"Mind if I ask a few questions while you prepare lunch?" His stomach lurched as he smelled the steak frying. It stank like aliens, like gasping nightmares.

"How old are you?" asked the doctor.

"I'll be thirty-one on the thirtieth of May, standard calendar."

"And how long have you been a prisoner here on Olve'tock?"

She flipped the fungus. "Two years and some change. No, three."

He scrutinized her, guessing that she was guessing. The record stated she would complete her ten year sentence in less than a week's time. That was typical. Long-term memory before the infection remained intact, but time-sense blurred once the virus took root.

"What's my name?" he asked.

"I'm getting sick of questions," she snapped.

He noted that she did not remember. "To evaluate your case, I must ask questions. Why are you here, lieutenant?"

"Don't call me that!" She spat on the floor, then flipped the sizzling fungus. "Bet you expect me to skate evasive, but I was raised to be responsible. General Efrem ordered us to execute our prisoners. I forget how many Irlane there were—four or five. When my soldiers refused, I did it myself. Guilty as charged."

"You weren't the only one to kill captives," observed the doctor.

"Prisoners were scattered all over the Jana River valley. We had just counterattacked to drive the Irlane north of the river. We'd been fighting for sixteen months. The army was coming apart at the seams; the home front was thoroughly sickened by our losses. General Efrem believed he

could win the war like he'd won all nineteen battles of Jana River. He ordered the murders to solidify our resolve.

"I was half drunk, hadn't slept in three days, been in one skirmish after another the whole time. But those aren't excuses. I knew I was committing evil. My mistake was that—for a few hours—I believed in General Efrem, in winning the war.

"This was the first time we'd encountered aliens in big numbers. First dozen battles for the valley, we fought their machines. It only took fifty Irlane to control a thousand of their war machines. Can you imagine how demoralizing that is? Never seeing your real enemy, just their machines. So, they finally ran out of machines, and had to commit real troops. And we kicked their asses royally. The general was convinced it was simply a matter of outlasting the enemy. The murders were a ploy, burning our bridges. Everyone knew we had to win or face war-crime trials."

Doctor Warren cleared his throat. "Even if you won, the interstellar community would have insisted that your war crimes be punished."

"What Oz are you from? We were a podunk colony on a nowhere circuit. Whoever won got to set the rules. It wasn't like we killed millions, or even hundreds. At trial, the Irlane claimed ninety-two murder victims. Had we won, nobody would have cared about so few."

She slapped the fried fungus onto her metal tray. Slammed the tray on the table before slathering ketchup. Tearing apart vacuum packs with her fork, she poured chunks of dried fruit atop the mess. She then commenced swigging vodka.

"Does it disturb you to talk about your crime?" he asked.

"I'm paying for my sins. I could give a shit about murdering aliens. They don't seem to care. There were three judges during the war crime trial—a human, a Dyb', and the commander of the Irlane army. The human and Dyb' voted to hang us, but the Irlane vetoed the death penalty as barbaric, sentencing us each to ten years as frigging zookeepers, that's how much they valued their soldiers."

Warren replied, "Some might see the Irlane as more humane than people."

"Sure," she whispered, "that's why the other prisoners have vanished. I'm not going to live to serve out my sentence. My blood will pay for those damned murders. I deserve it for being a fool."

"So you have regrets?"

"Regrets? I am paying for murdering the aliens, but I'll never be able to pay for the cannon fodder."

"Who?"

"The hundreds of my people I led to the futile slaughter. Have you ever been dream haunted? It's worse than ghosts."

"What kind of dreams?" asked the doctor.

"One day, I got pinned down by a sniper for ten hours. I hid behind a corpse, some kid who died with this stupid smile. How can you smile while dying? I see her face in my dreams. Sometimes the animal sounds wake me up because I hear them as the screaming of my troops."

Doctor Warren nodded. Aural hallucinations were common enough. Indeed, he'd been listening to the animal sounds echoing through the halls. No nightmare he'd experienced possessed such an eerie soundtrack.

She finished her meal, then washed up. After the last swig of vodka, she placed the empty bottle in the dish rack. She stared at her nails so long that the doctor rose to see if she was having another petit mal seizure.

"Malovich women have such ugly hands. I thought I had avoided that genetic trap, but—"

An Irlane suddenly filled the doorway. Warren cringed from the shadow of the massive creature. Bending forward, reaching out an upper arm, it crossed the room without moving to hand Malovich a small bowl before vanishing down the hall. It was eerie that such a huge alien could move so silently.

"W-what is it?" asked the doctor.

She held out a strawberry. "The zoo includes a botanical garden. Tral'tsk brings me the human fruit when it comes into season."

"Very generous."

"Bugs are generous beings. Of course, these are workers and techs. They breed their warriors separately, feed them differently while they're growing up."

He moved beside her while she ate the berries. "Lieutenant, you accused them of killing the other prisoners," he whispered.

"As per General Efrem's order, I mustered my battalion. All the other officers were dead. There were eighty-six of us left standing out of a thousand. I gave the order to shoot the prisoners. Not one of the my soldiers moved. I was never more proud of them. I reckon the Irlane are the same as us—most of them are decent folks, but there's always someone like me willing to do the dirty work."

She washed the bowl once she finished the strawberries. Again, she froze, staring at her hands. A coughing fit interrupted the statue imitation.

She whispered, "Would it be possible to send my brothers a letter? I can't pay for the postage." Her hand brushed against his crotch. "I'll do anything to send the twins a message."

Mulling the short term memory problems of his patient, Warren pulled his chip-plate from his pocket. Triggering password protection for all but his memo program, he handed it to Malovich.

"Write as long a letter, as many letters, as you wish. I guarantee I will mail them. Don't worry about the cost." He repeated himself twice in the hope she would remember.

She pocketed the chip-plate, strolling from the kitchenette without giving him a second glance. Humming a chaotic tune, she threaded through the tunnels, the doctor at her heels. Pausing at a hatch, she said, "These are tree wolves. You might want to stay out here."

He looked through the window, saw a couple of spindly bushes. "There's nothing in there."

She laughed/coughed and entered. No sooner had he stepped inside than one of the bushes pounced, taking a bite from his boot. He staggered from the chamber as the hatch hissed shut. A chunk the size of his fist had been torn from his boot. He fingered the hole, pressing against his untouched sock. He sat until the shivers receded.

"I-I need to see her quarters now," he said to the ceiling.

The lights flickered, turning into a sinuous on-and-off pattern pointing down the corridor. He followed the light strips for klicks through the tunnels. He fancied it was more like walking inside a honeycombed mountain than a cylindrical city orbiting a planet. A door opened in front of a blinking light.

It reminded him of the efficiency apartment he rented while attending the University of Ceres, though a lot cleaner. Immaculate, in fact. He found a ragged ball of steel wool in a scrubbed trash can. Looking closely at the wall, he could make out the scour marks. Once again, he was not surprised—compulsive behavior was part of the package.

Clothes were drying in the shower stall. Not the ubiquitous jumpsuit uniform of the zoo, but faded jeans and a denim shirt, worn thin with age. He glanced through her closet, just jumpsuits. The only personal object he could find was an old photo of the woman flanked by her brothers behind a broad tombstone, the Malovich family grave. Her record mentioned that, orphaned at the age of fifteen, she had been awarded custody of her twelve-year-old brothers.

"Her youth forfeited to raise them, only to forfeit the rest of her life so they didn't have to serve and die in the rebellion. The simple, the monstrous nobility of family duty."

He pulled the medical probe from his belt pack. He prayed it was as idiot-proof as the Trade Commission Medical Branch had declared. The commission had chosen him for his antibodies, not his training. Indeed, until he was drafted, he was a humble marriage counselor whose 80 percent failure rate made him the most successful counselor throughout Deimos.

The air boiled thick with a viral stew; her pillow bloomed a virtual germ farm. Removing three patches from separate containers, he placed them on the pillow. After half an hour, he removed them, checking each with the probe. Despite the patches being soaked with different potent antivirals, the virus had colonized them.

"So much for long-shot miracle cures."

Depressed, he wandered the corridors until he had to admit to himself he was hopelessly lost. Asking the ceiling, he followed the lights out of the zoo to the Irlane equivalent of a Hyatt.

Even the longest shower could not make him feel clean. Though he intellectually knew that the water was no different from water back home, his skin, his nose insisted it was oilier, fungal. Damned aliens, he repeated as his silent mantra, worried that there were listening devices. Bugs bugged him on so many levels. He rubbed himself raw with a towel.

Dinner was a can of WholeMeal, two thousand calories of algae stew filled with the m.d.a. of everything except taste. As he spooned the stew into his mouth, he counted and recounted the cans remaining in his suitcase. As long as he caught the next liner off the orbital city, his supplies would last until he returned to human space, human food.

Damned aliens didn't even use beds. The cot the hotel flunky had erected was entirely too complex. He toyed with the idea of dismantling it in search of mind-control devices, but decided that it was foolish to let the aliens know he was onto them.

Sleeping on the floor was more comfortable than he expected.

He rose early, yearning for a shower, but passed, recalling the feel of alien water. Instead, he dry-shaved, then ate his last breakfast bar. He cursed with every chew, knowing the aliens in customs had stolen the other bars.

On his way to the lobby to inquire about directions to the offices of the *Taalne,* the alien government, he was intercepted by an Irlane wearing a sash. It was the first time he'd seen one of the aliens wearing anything but a tool harness or belt.

"Greetings, Doctor Warren. Excuse me, but the Trade Commission did not forward your appropriate title," said Sash in English.

That irritated Warren. Aliens shouldn't speak such flawless English.

He forced himself to smile, having read somewhere that it creeped-out the Irlane. "I am a civilian consultant to the commission; as such, I have no rank. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

"We are not humans to eavesdrop on a private conversation." Sash ratcheted down on its four legs; sounds like colliding pool balls came from its numerous joints. "Are you sufficiently safe from the virus? My research shows—"

"When I was younger, I had one of the milder varieties of Orofini Fever," said Doctor Warren. "Other than having my lungs replaced, I came through it fine. Once you've been infected by any of the Orofini varietals, you are safe from all of them. Unfortunately, few people survive even the mild varieties."

"You must convey our horror to your commission anent this situation."

"Anent?" he grumbled.

"We have so little experience with human diseases. By the time our specialists isolated the virus, and discovered that Prisoner Lucy was its source, it was too late to save the others. We should have screened the prisoners' health more thoroughly. We accept full responsiblities. Please relate to the commission that we will pay whatever reparations they deem necessary to remove this stain from our name."

"Humans have this expression," Warren explained, "an Act of God. This disease is not your fault."

"The prisoners were our responsibility," insisted the alien.

Warren wanted to scream, but instead said, "She probably caught it on the battlefield. Its incubation period is years. Her only misfortune is being a carrier."

"What is the status of Prisoner Lucy?"

"She can never come into contact with another human being. If she is released, she will be executed at the first human system she enters. The woman is an epidemic waiting to happen."

"Kill her for being sick?" The alien recoiled, clacking like a pool hall on tourney night.

"There's no cure for Orofini Fever. Killing her would be a kindness. The alternative is a lifetime of solitary confinement in a biohazard unit. Most governments cannot afford such a treatment, so they would kill her."

Sash rocked back on its sundry knees. "A human life is a matter of money? Of cost?"

"It isn't fair, it simply is a fact of life. Malovich could stay here. She has no sense of time. When she's sixty years old, she may still believe she's only been here for a couple of years. The disease only dwells in humans, so your collection of primates will be safe."

"Here? For the rest of her life?" Sash's multitude of maws opened and closed.

Warren looked away, fighting lightheadedness. "With her skewed time-sense, she will never know. She does well with your animals. She's made friends among your . . . people."

"Lucy is very nice." The alien rocked on its eight knees. "Humans kill someone for being sick? That is difficult to understand. Is it religious?"

"In this instance, it is simple economics."

"We cannot send Prisoner Lucy back if she is to be killed. We are not *monsters*."

A second alien handed Warren his chip-plate before scurrying away. At least, the doctor thought, this one had the common decency to clack like a tinker's cart as it scurried. Noise made the movement less furtive.

Warren checked Malovich's letter.

I HAVE A COLD I CANNOT SHAKE, BUT OTHERWISE THINGS ARE OKAY. PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR THE KNEE THING. MOMMY TOLD ME TO PROTECT YOU TWO. I THINK I DID. HOPE THE FARM IS OKAY. HAVE YOU DRAINED THE SWAMPY EAST FIELDS? WHEN I GET BACK IN A FEW YEARS, MAYBE WE CAN FINALLY BUILD THAT NEW BARN. I LOVE BOTH OF YOU.

It was a scant comfort that the victim hadn't a clue. He rued the prospect of writing to the Malovich twins to explain why the last POW of their failed war would never come home. But to paraphrase the prisoner, the bureaucrats could always find someone to do the dirty work.

"It isn't fair, it just *is*," he muttered to himself.

"That is what I am learning about humans," replied Sash, the hundred eyestalks atop its watermelon head leaning forward.

"Then we are agreed, your *Niiji* will keep the prisoner for the rest of her natural life."

"There is an UNnatural life? Lucy can stay. Our scientists will continue working on the virus. It is a simple organism, surely we can understand it."

"Bet you said the same thing about humanity," he quipped, and instantly regretted it. "We tried for years, but the disease is so rare and the cost of research so great. . . ." Warren tsked. "Why would you do it for a *criminal?* She murdered your people!"

"She is our responsibility. We must help."

"You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din." He glanced at the letter once more. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have a liner to catch." Instinctively, he reached to shake one of the alien's bony mitts. It amazed him how warm the shell was.

As Doctor Warren returned to his room, he couldn't help but admire the Irlane. Couldn't help throwing up, because he'd touched one.

"If only they weren't so damned *alien!*" he said under his breath. ❍

MOON WOLF

Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee last appeared in our July 1997 issue with "After I Killed Her." Now, after too long an absence, she is back with another of her mesmerizing tales. Ms. Lee's latest books include the final volume of The Venus Quartet: *Venus Preserved* from Overlook and the sequel to her classic *Silver Metal Lover, Metallic Love,* from Bantam. In the UK, her most recent novels include her children's book, *Piratica* (Dutton) and book one of The Lionwolf Trilogy: *Cast a Bright Shadow.* More information about her work can be found at *www.Tanithlee.com* or in her online annotated biliography at *www.daughterofthenight.com*.

The carrier rose into the clear sky of dusk. Below, the shadowy trees whispered on the darkening hill. Above, the white moon waited.

"You for Crisium Base?" said Edwards. "Me too. Guess we'll ride out together."

Bayley nodded. She looked away from the seethrough, where the Earth had already shrunk aside, and the night of space begun, littered with its incendiaries.

"Been some funny stories," said Edwards.

"Ha, ha."

"No, I mean weird-funny."

"So I heard."

"What do you think?"

She shrugged. "I think people on the bases get bored sometimes. Or primally scared. All that white naked desert. The black sky with the Earth hanging in it."

"Come on. After all this time?"

"Why else do we go?" she said.

Edwards, sitting now across from her, narrowed his eyes along the length of the otherwise empty carrier.

"You always were fanciful, Chrissie."

Bayley smiled.

He said, "Okay, but you are."

Bayley said, "Never go to a horror movie, Al?"

"So what?"

"We sometimes *like* to get frightened. Don't you remember when you were a kid, staying behind in the park after the gates shut, in the wild bits where the light don't shine—"

"Lots of times. But I had several *good* reasons. They were usually blonde."

"Fine. But what I mean is the *darkness,* what might be *in* the dark. That electric, almost drunken, terror—either you know what I mean, or you don't."

Edwards now shrugged. This was what their conversation was always likely to become, now. Shrugs, shrugging things off.

For awhile, they did not speak at all. Beyond the seethrough, liquid black, a shark's carapace, space rushed like a sea.

"Three hours. Guess I'll sleep a while," said Edwards.

"Yes," she said softly. You were always good for that.

In childhood, she thought—that was where she'd first heard stories of werewolves, as well as of vampires, ghosts, ghouls, and dragons. That plethora of fearsome exotic things that plagued the dreams of mankind. To her, they had that element of all old pagan supernaturals. They were like the dark wood, the coming of night—events, beings, over which man had no control—or very little—but which nipped endlessly at his heels, no matter how clever he was or how high he built his walls. Like the Greek god Dionysos, in the *Bacchae,* they broke through reason, demanding tribute in a dark leopard-speckled with moonlight.

Crisium Base 15 was long and low and ugly. It caught the transport's headlights gracelessly. It was built for its purpose, nothing more.

Bayley (Chrissie at Crisium—an old tired joke) looked at it with familiar, but no longer interested, disapproval. How unlike the mooted fairy-tales of crystal domes and delicate glacial structures, pure as if carved from moon-frost, on the covers of old magazines. The moon had been romantic, then possible. *Then* it had been living in Science Fiction, *then* the money ran out and it became nowhere you could go. Finally, things changed. And there it was again, like something someone had just invented, all the way up in the air, and accessible, for a few.

Bayley parted from Al Edwards in the lock foyer. She checked in, then took the moving walk straight to her quarters. There were only five other people on the base this month. She had not even looked at the names, and meeting Edwards, her once-lover, had felt only mild irritation. Like the base, he was old news. He didn't matter now.

In her cabin, she took another shower, to get rid of the static from the journey.

Beyond the seethrough, here set in long curved windows, she watched the blue-chalked Earth lambent in the blackness. It gave more light than a full moon ever gave on Earth, edging the long strands of the boulder-

strewn plain with rifts and darts of thin pale silver. Indigo shadows stretched backward from every object, shadows that shone, as Earth shadows did not.

Nothing was out there, only men, men and women, from the various bases. And yet, now and then, you saw them, nearly everyone did, these sudden, half glimpsed forms that came and went from the corners of the eyes—like "seeing cats"—but nothing like that, really.

The first time, though she had been warned, Bayley had been scared—entranced. What had it been, that luminously slender apparition—almost like a floating stone, yet light and weightless—borne transparently along by legs of finest glass—and with embers-of-opal eyes? Turning—only a swirl of dust or a flick of vapor. You knew it was just an optical delusion, a moon delusion. Uls, they were playfully called: unreal lunar sightings. But also, you *knew* it had been there. A phantom of something lost long ago, or else, a ghost that had traveled with you.

It was noisy at dinner.

Pal Al was in good form, as were the other three men on the maintenance team. Bayley, the hygiene operative, sat modestly, listening to their grouses and sallies, and then, when they had broken out some beers, to their jokes and full-scale complaints. She volunteered very little, beyond accepting a can. Fevriere and Sporch she knew from previous stints of duty, Edwards she knew from long ago. The fourth man, Case, was red-haired and loud. The geologist, Reza, a haughty woman from Central Industries, had taken her food in her cabin. All this, predictable.

By 23 on the GMT clock, Bayley felt more than ready to leave the main saloon. She had shown willing, as you had to, but now Case and Sporch were well into a beery, angry diatribe. She'd heard it all before.

As she started to get up, Fevriere spoke to her very low, under the blare of hearty whinging.

"Bayley—can I ask you—"

"What, Fevriere?" Silence. She said, "I'm ready to turn in. Tomorrow is a long day and it's getting on for midnight."

"Sure. Just a word." The silence again. Then: "You've seen uls, haven't you?

"Yes, now and then."

"You log them?"

"At first. But, well, *everyone* sees them. Almost everyone. Now and then."

"Yes. I have too, sometimes. But Bayley—have you ever *heard* things?

"Of course. Whisperings, sighs—it's to do with the air pressure in the suits and—

"No, I don't mean—look, Bayley. You were here on the last shift. Did you come across that story going round?"

She said, cautiously, putting down the half-full can, "Which story?"

"About something that came down here on one of the survey ships. Something that had got in the hold somehow, laid up by the energy vent, then got out when the ship touched down over by C. Serenum?"

"Fevriere, I've heard lots of stories about things stowing away on

ships—carriers, survey vessels, you name it. I've heard of alien things flying in on meteorites, too, and landing smack in the impact crater, and then getting up, shaking themselves off, and sprinting away over the rocks."

"That wasn't the story," he said. His narrow dark face was serious, uneasy.

"What did you see, Fevriere, and what did you hear?"

Edwards, Case, and Sporch had ambled away back toward the bar dispenser. They were going to need detox tablets tomorrow when the machine checked their levels.

Fevriere leaned toward her even so, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, and she heard Case laugh leeringly, as if they were two kids caught in a clinch in the back of a car. She ignored that, and listened.

Fevriere said, "It was from the side of my eye, like always, but I turned, as you always do. I turned, and for a second—it was still there. It was white, like the desert-sea. Like ice-glass. It stood up like a man, but it wasn't in a suit—nothing. It didn't need one. Eyes. I saw eyes. Then it gave a sound—a cry. A kind of—I heard it."

"You couldn't, Feveriere. Sound doesn't—"

"I *heard* it. I'd swear, *not* in my head. That's what frightens me the most."

How did the story of the wolf, the werewolf, start? Some drunken scenario maybe, like the one tonight, but with a spooky storyteller theme rather than a grievance recital.

She hadn't been there that time. She hadn't heard it. Only that other occasion, last month—no, six months ago, going down one of the ramps, riding the roller-mop, and overhearing Box and Ryan, talking at the edge of the hydroponics area.

What had they said? She could not recall the words, only the substance. Something about a wolf, about a wolf that ran across the surface of the moon. They were saying that it had been spotted by several outside teams, and from two or three bases. But the whole thing could have been a spoof. Ryan thought he was court-jester. And bases sometimes liked to play tricks on each other—out of boredom or rivalry.

Why a wolf, though. Or, why a *were*wolf?

In all the stories, the werewolf, part man, part beast, was roused to shapechange at full moon. The three nights, approaching full, total full, and diminishing full. The moon would drive a werewolf crazy. And that was when it was deep inside the forests and mountain places of the Earth.

So, what would happen if a werewolf were *on* the moon, no longer subject to that reverse telescopic far-off view, but *here,* in the *middle* of the view, on the face of the snow-white satellite, running between the boulders and leaping in and out of the craters, the tidal pull all around, the lunar tide coming and going over its body and over its savage brain. . . ?

But nothing could live on the surface, not without a suit, not without air or life-support. Even in the peculiar and unsubstantiated tales of foxes, gophers, and rabbits that had stowed away and arrived here in the bag-

gage holds or electric vents. . . . Those little creatures were found and rescued before they could escape into the airless icy death outside.

C. Serenum, the tiny "ocean bed," only mapped west of Crisium in the first years of man's return, was void. Nothing landed there. There was nothing to land *for,* even for the survey teams.

We go a little mad, perhaps, she thought, lying on her bunk in the dim-light, and the gleam of the flaming stars beyond the window, in the night of space. Of *course* we go mad! We're *lunatics,* aren't we?

Bayley rode the roller-mop along the lit-up corridors. She had traveled maybe two miles, through the spider-web of the base complex, meeting no one; for this month, the base was scarcely manned at all.

Mechanical apparatuses moved continually about, they and the mop nimbly avoiding each other, with no attention needed from her. In most sections, other robotic life went on with the deciphering, weighing and measuring, the assessment and notation of things.

Once, ghostly, at an intersection of the corridors, Bayley heard the distant cursing of Case, a mile off, but already unmistakable.

Outside, it was lunar day. Darkly bright, the sky the color of chocolate tin-foil.

Reza's lab was shut tight, and the neon *keepout* posted on the doors. All the other laboratories were locked and unoccupied.

"Ill-met by moonlight, proud Titania," murmured Bayley, as the mop veered by Reza's lab and round to the central maintenance station. Presently, she glimpsed Al Edwards climbing like an overalled monkey across one of the rigs. He did not notice her. Frankly, in the carrier, she had been surprised he'd even remembered her. They had only been together a few months. He hadn't seemed to bear a grudge, but then, neither did she. What had she seen in him?

Where the corridor ended in a ramp, passing down beside the see-through, an uls shivered across the corner of her eye. It was like a statue of milky ice, moving, rushing among daggers of aquamarine. Bayley did not turn. Over the steady noise of the roller-mop, she did not expect to hear any other fainter sound. And so, the slender piping siren notes, rising and falling in her ear, was imagination: an ula—unreal lunar audition.

Not even a wolf-howl. You would think that your brain, in its inventively deranged moments, would still get *that* right! If it could supply the uls of a white wolf-thing, upright, with long hair of milk-ice and beryl, it could surely lay on the throaty music of such a child of night.

But it was no longer a child of night, this wolf, of course. It was now a child of space and moon.

Would it be wonderful to a werewolf, then, brought here, by accident or design, forced through the magnetic ecstasy of lunar transformation, and *kept* always thereafter transformed, by proximity to, contact *with,* the fully engorged lunar disk?

Or would it be an agony—a horror?

At the bottom of the ramp, the roller-mop swam through into hydroponics, and Bayley looked up between the pagodas of green and bronze mutated leaves.

I'm being rational about it now. Trying to figure it out. True madness.

A light water-spray flew across the high ceiling, and the leaves tinkled, also turning their faces upward.

Everything changed here, and having changed, *stayed* changed.

Was that, too, why you came to this place?

"Hi, Chrissie. Look, I have some whisky."

"Good for you."

"Wait, wait—I thought we might share?"

"Share what, Al?"

"The bottle. Perhaps . . . a little warmth?"

This was predictable too. Bayley shook her head. "No thanks, Al. No hard feelings, but I'm tired." How often had she gone through this or similar scenes? But this man had a partial obligation to misunderstand, so gently does it.

"Or you'd rather be with Fev," Edwards snapped, sure enough.

"Fevriere? You're kidding. Fevriere, as you and Case are obviously the last to know is—er—sharing with Sporch."

"Really? Right. So—"

"Good night, Al. Take care."

She remembered how she had once thought it would be, off-Earth. Only the best chosen for the moon, the most fit, the most intelligent and able. And with that would go courtesy and finesse, maybe even artistry and charisma.

But it was like the bases and stations they'd built. The buildings were functional and squat, and the people who came down there were similarly ordinary in every particular, except for some relevant routine skill or talent. And so you got the creeps like Edwards, and the geegs like Case and Sporch, the nervous ones like Fev, and the beautiful rotten ones like Marisha Reza. And the failures, like Christina Bayley.

"You know your trouble," said Edwards, in the morning.

"Yes, I know my trouble."

"Don't get funny. It's why we split up."

"Did we split up?" Careful, she thought. We are here on this shift for eleven more days, and if we row, four square miles of Base 15 may not be big enough for both of us. "Sorry, Al. What's the matter?"

"You." He slouched there glumly. He had a magnificent body. (Had *that* been what she'd seen in him? Probably. That and the rich brown hair and the smile.) But even so, despite his workouts in the gym and his active physical job in maintenance, he was starting to alter somehow. Thickening a little, bending, burly and aggressive. His eyes were way too small. Had they always been like that?

Yes, Al, actually we split up because you slapped my face twice one night when you were high, and I knocked you stone cold and left. *That* was why, Al. But we won't go into that.

"You see, Chrissie, your problem," (yes, always *my* problem, of course) "is that you can't relate to anyone. I mean, *can* you?"

"I'm sorry." She sounded quite contrite. Too contrite? Apparently not.

"Damn it, Chrissie! You might just as well be one of your fucking machines! The roller-mop, the wall-skinner—you just do what you think we'll *expect*. Think that makes us happy? Think you got us fooled? Well, think again!"

She *thought,* I didn't make you happy when I clocked you, Al, and you woke up with a bruised jaw. Nor did I reckon I would.

She said, calmly, "Look, Al, this isn't the place. Why don't we—well, discuss it, next break. Somewhere more private, over a drink. Back on Earth."

He grinned.

So, I've done what you expected, given in, because you are *so* irresistible. And so easy to fool. She thought, I'll deal with all of this *then,* back on Earth. But a sour surge of rage went through her, because, unless she could get the rosters changed, she might have to quit her job if this kept up. There were other bases, of course. But each one had its own established hygiene unit. It had taken her four years to get here, four years after the *other* four, training for lab work and work on the surface, and failing to make the grade.

"Oh ho, here's the Witch Queen!" said Edwards.

Naturally he hated the Rezas of the world even more than the Chrissies.

The Rezas would *never* say Yes.

"Hi, Rez, seen the wolf yet?"

Reza looked at him, her china-pale face immaculate, ink black brows over ebony eyes.

"Wolf?"

(This, Bayley thought, is almost ritualistic now. . . .)

"Haven't you heard the stories, Rez? We're haunted by a werewolf. Came up on a carrier and stayed out on the surface. Been seen by teams from Crisium Bases 13 and 9. And out at C. Serenum, by several passing craft—"

"Bayley," said Reza, turning her back on Edwards and addressing her apparent quarry. "You've finished corridor-and-general-cleanse yet?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Then I want you to carry out a task for me, outside. The other cleaning work can wait. You are the only one on-base this month that I can trust with this."

Queen Reza.

Bayley heard Edwards swear softly.

"All right," said Bayley.

"I want a match for some rock samples. The machine has it. Only guidance is required. Go only as far as Snake Ridge. Further is no use."

"Why can't you do it, Rez?" said Edwards.

Reza again ignored him. She handed Bayley the sandwich-sized matchcoder, turned, and walked beautifully away.

"She sure has a lovely glide," said Edwards. "Pity she's a bitch."

Bayley and he were apparently comrades again, providing she held out a promise of more.

Reza was working out on the Point Ridge, Bayley thought, that was what the match was for, mineral deposits.

It would be good to get outside. Away from all of them. Surface work was the thing she had wanted to do in the beginning, but had not been good enough for—but at least her training meant that sometimes she got sent on these errands, by others of greater ability.

A machine? Am I really what he said? Come on, don't fall for that. They always tell you that you're to blame. But perhaps I *am*.

When she was suited up, and had the sleigh ready by the lock, Bayley turned once, looking back into the web of the base.

Yes, I am a robot, with them. I always was. Acting. Giving them what I think they want and will put up with. Attacking as a last resort. Running away.

She walked into the lock.

The sleigh followed her, and the doors closed without a sound.

Out there, there were sounds. On the plains, in the mountains, you heard them, everyone heard them. Voices—made of thinnest platinum—that sang, the calls and flutings of invisible birds, nacre-spun nightingales and hawks of hollow electrum. And the roar—like a train, some of them said, like a tidal wave; and someone else: like an avalanche or forest fire. And sometimes came voices that spoke inside your head. They . . . whoever *they* were, if they had ever been, or were to be . . . vocal ghosts of time. Usually only one or two words. As with the light-colored male voice Bayley heard once, speaking clear in her left ear, as she waited with others to load chippings on the slopes of Mount Tranquility. "Deft Amereen," he said. She did not know what it meant. Some other language?

It was always easy, you were warned, to believe things were here that were *not,* and never *could* have been, things for which there was never, and never would be, any proof or evidence.

Faces were seen in formations of the terrain, in the sides of mountains; they shaped themselves in the rock, or seemed to, and then were gone again. Gigantic statues were sighted near the Mare Nectaris, sighted by ten sober people, and vanished by Earthrise. There had been a solar eclipse, the Earth standing between the moon and the sun. The landscape had altered to amber and honeycomb, sweet enough to break off pieces and devour. There were purple shadows that seemed to contain fireflies, sparks. . . . And, at that time, many sightings, solar eclipse uls. A pillared cathedral balconied from a cliff, a fleet of fin-sailed dhows, drifting by on a river of molten copper.

Bayley had not seen that, not any of that.

She had only seen flat perspectiveless pictures of a new-penny-colored moon, sent back to Earth. The eclipse was before her time down here.

And she had been told, No, the moon had not actually become like amber. Only dun, like a sienna wash on paper.

The sleigh shot, weightless, south and west. Toward the Snake Ridge, fancifully named. Beyond the Snake Ridge lay the miniature dry "sea," C. Serenum.

Sea C. Serenum.

See sea is so
Solar
Solace so
Silver sea . . .

What. . . ? Oh, a phonetic alliteration exercise, yes, all those years back, that's where the little chant came from. Bayley had written it in her student notebook. But even then—*where* had it come from? She didn't write, ever, anything like that. Only that one time.

Sea C. Serenum
See sea is—

And then, there ahead was the ridge.

Eight years she had been coming down to the moon. Before that, eight years waiting. And she had been training since she was sixteen. Everything seemed in blocks of eight. Did that mean anything? She was thirty-two.

Bayley stood on First Spine, under the head of the ridge, watching the match-coder trundle lightly to and fro, now and then pausing to scoop up relevant debris. When she thought she had enough from one area, she pointed it another way.

Who am I kidding? Anyone can do this.

She need not have come so far out, either, so far from base.

It was sometimes possible to glimpse the lights of Base 9 from the top of the Snake Ridge, but not always. The non-atmosphere, the strange shortened horizon, played tricks not only with vision, but with distance and illumination.

Bayley climbed the bridge. She looked out. Base 9 was invisible, and might not exist.

Instead, the vast sweep of the dry sea that was not a sea, folded open like a dead marble flower. Beyond, lay mountains, low and pinnacled as some city of stone. And although there was no water here, or ever had been, she could swear that she heard the surf breaking, rippled in long waves, rising and falling with the Earth.

I can hear it.

I'd swear, *not* in my head—Fevriere, that first night, whispering—*That's what frightens me most.*

Bayley had seen Fevriere next day, drinking with Sporch, laughing and hearty, like the others, like Edwards and the loud Case. Fevriere had said nothing else to her. His worries seemed entirely forgotten. He was embarrassed maybe?

Something.

From the corner of her eye.

Bayley turned so suddenly, the whole white world seemed to snap over. But it would only seem like that. The anchoring boots, the heavy suit, must make her slow, even in gravity-zero.

And yet. She had been quick enough.

I am *seeing* this. What am I seeing?

A nonexistent wind blew, and the white hair flattened to the body, rippled like the nonexistent waves of the sea C. Serenum.

His eyes were the blue of irises, all iris blue, and the dark pupils glowed in them like eclipsing planets dropped from the sky.

He was a wolf that was a man. He had, as wolves did, human eyes. Naked, but for the white-platinum petals of hair, which covered him yet let him be seen, and the mane of head-hair, a white chrysanthemum, a moonburst, flaring behind his face that had a wolf's features, and a man's eyes, and a silence that belonged only in this place of silver seas.

The sea is moving. Waves are coming in. A sea of silver coins, flooding softly to the shore.

Bayley stared through her face-plate, and gradually the man-wolf, the wolf-man, darkened.

She thought, *Breathe*—take a *breath*—

She breathed.

The blood thundered in her ears, sea-sound, solace, rush, push, washing away and away.

She could see.

Nothing was there. Only the bleak carved spines of the Snake Ridge, knife-cut-edged with sharp solar glare. The machine, trundling up and down between the pebbles that were like the shells of albino tortoises.

"That's enough," she said to the machine, over the link.

It heard her and stopped abruptly, a guilty child who had shoveled up too much sand from the beach as the adult slept.

Werewolf: it wasn't just a thing of the night, the haunt, the horror. It represented—was—the inner creature, the animal spirit, resident in all men, all women, triggered into life by a malediction or a wry blessing, by magic, or only at the madness of full moon. Not every culture or people feared the werewolf. Shamans conjured and *became* such a beast, not to terrify or kill, but only to release their own pent energies, and so find the knowledge that mortal life hides from itself under the veils of flesh, under the lenses of sight.

Bayley lay on her bunk. She dreamed of a pack of moon wolves, like the moon wolf she had seen. They chased a phantom thing, a glimmering energy that might have been a deer, but was nothing like that. One wolf leapt, then two. They killed swiftly.

She watched them in the dream, as they ate the freshly slaughtered energy that had not been a deer. She saw, across their couth and quiet feeding, a shambles of rocks, a sea that moved, slow quicksilver on the shore. A city of low, calm buildings, with here and there slender skeins of translucent steeples.

When the pack rose and sped away, she was taken with them. She ran with them up and over the slopes by the sea, and came into the city.

There were clouds that drifted through wide-open avenues, clouds of breath or thought.

Flowers, pale-pink, and like velvet to the touch (she touched them) grew out of the stones, their narrow serpentine leaves twisting, sighing. The streets were broad. There was a kind of music.

She saw no women among the wolves. She realized that they were

there, nevertheless. It was only that they were, every one, all alike. What she had seen was not necessarily a man. It was simply—a wolf.

Bayley opened her eyes and the dream ebbed away and away.

She thought, But that was what I saw. *That* was what I truly saw. I saw it in one split second before the faceplate darkened or seemed to, because I hadn't breathed. *Why* didn't I breathe? Where—where had I gone out of my body so that it stopped breathing, so that I saw all this and only now I remember it?

She watched them at dinner, Case, Edwards, Sporch, Fevriere. How they were. Just as she had watched Reza earlier, in the lab, having found some excuse to intrude, checking up on the gathered samples.

They were all so predictable. They did, each of them, only what you expected they would. Reza a cold bitch, rude and intolerant, interested solely in her work. Edwards lustful—worse than she ever recalled—rolling his eyes at Bayley, and Sporch and Case also acting up together, and Fevriere gladly joining in, over the growing array of beer cans.

They're the robots, not me. They're like automata. Were they always like that? I don't remember.

Only three days to go now, before the carrier would come to take her off, up to Earth, that jewel hanging there, unbelievable, the same color blue as the moon wolf's eyes.

"Communication from Base 13," said Sporch, as Bayley came in to breakfast. "They lost a sleigh, over by Snake Ridge. See anything, Bay, when you were up there?"

"No. Do you mean they lost personnel?"

"Seems not. Some guy called Stanlevy. He got back okay, but says he lost the sleigh."

"How d'ya lose a *sleigh,* for Chrissake?" said Case.

They all laughed. Was it funny?

None of them was serious.

Things got lost.

Bayley thought of the moon wolf suddenly there on the ridge. She thought of the man called Stanlevy going back on his boots to Base 13, way over south, and *leaving something behind.* She thought how things vanished in the moondark, and even when the dark went away, how you

never found them, only other things that seemed to be lost or jettisoned by other persons, other bases, other survey teams or machines.

Reza walked into the saloon. The men quietly sniggered, all of them, in unison, like an entity, then cleaned their faces off.

"Bayley, these samples are useless. What were you playing at?"

Bayley stared at Reza.

"I thought—"

"Don't think, then. I expect you to go out again and make good. I can't work with this rubbish."

One of the men cheered sotto voce—probably Case.

Reza took no notice, nor did Bayley.

"You want me to go back—"

"*I* haven't the time. I have to get on with the other samples."

She wants me to go back, to go back, back out. It's nuts. The samples aren't useless; I checked them. They're what she asked for, and, of course, the match-coder really does all of the work, and there's nothing wrong with it.

She sounds like a school ma'am. I'd like to slap her. Can't, damn her, she's senior status. But Bayley knew that she was pretending to be annoyed, was *not* aggravated at all, didn't care. She might as well admit to that.

"Okay, Reza."

In the hydroponics area, Bayley stood looking at the green Earth leaves, lifting their heads toward the rain dragonfly. She sniffed the minty herbal scent, the aroma of peppermint and thyme.

She touched a leaf, and it turned out of her hand, as if alive.

No plant had any flowers. All were healthy, even productive, but without blooms. As if—as if the flowers had gone elsewhere.

I have a choice. You always have a choice.

I'll make some excuse to Reza, and stay in until the last days of my stint are done and I can ride the carrier up to Earth. And then I'll have to change my job, won't I? Because even if Reza doesn't get me thrown out, every time I come back—

Why has this taken eight years?

Blocks of eight, everything.

Eight years old when she first saw the moon and *knew* the moon, from a roof, on Earth. Looking into that face that was like no other thing, not a lamp, not a sun, not *even*—a face.

And then the eight years of training, failing, waiting, and then eight years of coming down and going back. Back—you never said, *going home*. As you never said, on the Earth, going up to the moon. *Earth* was *up*. Up in the black lunar sky, an iris-blue gem.

Anyway, she thought, even if I don't go out today, *sometime* I will. I mean—I don't even have to *go* out, do I? For it to happen.

She felt strange; Chrissie Bayley. She knew the near-drunk terror of the dark wood, where Dionysos called his maenads. It wasn't being scared at all. It was the madness of the moon. The lunacy. (The lunar sea. . . .) Joy.

I suppose I've never gotten close to anyone. Not ever.

Not even the ones like Al, who tried to get close to *me*. He did try. He slapped me once, twice, because he wanted something from me, more than sex, more than friendship or even love, and I couldn't give it. That doesn't excuse him, but it explains. He wasn't always like he is now. But was I? A robot. Chrissie of Crisium.

Can a robot be enamored of the moon?

Bayley watched herself go through the base on the moving walkways, suit up, take the sleigh, and open the lock.

Bayley watched the sleigh, with Bayley in it, shooting out over the moon surface. Bayley ran beside the sleigh with Bayley riding in it. Bayley in the sleigh still breathed, this time. Bayley outside the sleigh was not breathing. Not needing to breathe. Not needing to smile or lie any more, warm in her fur. Piping her siren song to the dark and the light.

Later, much later, she ran back, all the way to the base, and, standing outside on the shining lunar surface, she looked in at the seethrough, and saw herself plod in from the lock, and take off her suit, and shower, and go to dinner.

Chrissie saw herself, window after window, laughing and drinking beer. She saw herself in Edwards's cabin, having sex with Edwards, and then, that established, she went away again. She left herself to it.

She knew where the others would be, and she found them. This was in the marble city that had seemed at first to be mountains, among the fragile spires and gracious low buildings, all the architecture that had never happened here, except in wishful thinking. She could smell the scent of the pink flowers, and the ice-cool smell of the vanilla clouds.

The ocean came in, sigh on sigh, quintessential sea, to solace the onyx shore, under the solar light that did not glare any more, but was smooth as the taste of cream.

It was what she had always looked for, when she looked—thought—of the moon, what she had anticipated, failed to see, and had now discovered.

Everyone was there who had ever come here, or returned here. They were all alike, and all one. There was no need for conversation or remorse, for laughter, alcohol, or oxygen or love. Moon wolves.

They hunted and ate the silver deer that felt no pain, they swam in the seas and leaped across the mountains. They drank moonlight.

Sometimes, with her iris eyes, she would see, as did they all, the alien mechanisms at work on the moon, the soulless ships coming and going, the shells of people, the automatons, carrying on their abandoned lives.

Sometimes, sleeping in the indigo sleeve of night she dreamed distinctly of the base, as real as if she lived there too, or of Earth. Of things that she did in those places, or, rather, that her robot self did there, mechanically.

Silly dull dreams, which meant nothing at all. ❍

A HINT OF JASMINE

Richard Parks

Richard Parks's first professional sale was published in *Amazing Stories* in 1981 and, thirteen years later, his second story appeared in *Science Fiction Age*. Since then his work has been showcased in *Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* and *Black Gate,* as well as anthologies such as *Not of Woman Born, The Shimmering Door,* and David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer's *Year's Best Fantasy*. His first collection, *The Ogre's Wife: Fairy-Tales for Grownups,* was a 2002 finalist for the World Fantasy Award.

Water Oaks Plantation was ten miles north of Canemill on Route 501. Eli kept the sensic in its case, even after he'd turned down the long tree-lined driveway leading to the house.

The ghosts at Water Oaks should be easy enough to find.

Eli had requested all the general data he could, on both the Stockard family and the plantation, but the plantation's history during the War of Secession was a little sketchy.

Especially around the time of the Water Oaks Massacre.

As for the Massacre itself, Eli knew only what everyone else who had grown up near Canemill knew: the few slaves remaining at Water Oaks near war's end staged a revolt. The master of the plantation, Captain John Stockard, was a prisoner of war after the siege of Vicksburg and absent. Stockard's wife Elizabeth, aided by a single loyal servant and a pair of her husband's pistols, reputedly ended the revolt by the simple expedient of killing every single one of the remaining slaves. Captain Stockard returned home to find only his wife, his infant son, and the one servant. There was one marked grave for his daughter Margaret, killed in the revolt. All the slaves were buried somewhere on the grounds in a single pit.

Details were also sketchy as to how many slaves were in that pit. Estimates ran from five to fifty, though no one seriously believed the latter. There had been talk of an exhumation, inquests, but in the confusion af-

ter the war and in light of Elizabeth Stockard's deteriorating mental state, it had never happened. Even the location of the grave was lost. After that, the legends grew: books, stories, songs. No one celebrated, but everyone remembered—in Canemill, almost as a personal memory, passed along like all others of those times by people who were not there, and could not know, but would forever believe in their hearts that they *did* know.

There was a gravel parking lot with a few other cars. Guests at the B&B that Water Oaks now was, Eli assumed. He parked his rental and got his first good look at Water Oaks in nearly thirty years.

The house wasn't a grand Greek Revival town home like Stanton Hall or Rosalie in Natchez; it was the center of a working plantation and was built in the French plantation style. Smaller, by comparison, and a little more practical, but still big enough. Eli crossed the lot to the front porch, carrying the sensic in its case hanging from a strap around his shoulder.

The stout oak boards barely creaked as he walked across the porch. The ceiling of the porch was painted blue in the old belief that the color discouraged wasps and spiders. Perhaps it worked, for Eli didn't notice either. In fact, the house was in much better shape in all details than Eli remembered: the white paint was clearly fresh, a rotting finial over the doorway had been replaced with an exact copy of the original. The grounds were immaculate.

Elizabeth's put some money into this.

Eli frowned. The Bed-and-Breakfast market around Canemill might be steady, but it wasn't such to support this kind of investment. Eli wondered what that meant, if anything, other than his old classmate Elizabeth was clearly doing well for herself. She must have been, to be able to repurchase the ancestral home in the first place. The Stockards, like so many planter families, had been completely ruined in the war and had lost Water Oaks for land taxes soon after war's end. When Eli knew them, those remnants of the old aristocracy were living in a modest old Victorian home not too far from Eli's own house.

The entranceway was grand; one thing this plantation home had in common with the Greek Revival-style houses was the central hallway, running from one end of the house to the other, connecting the front door and the rear door. The staircase leading to the second floor was off to the side so as not to block the flow of air through the house; there was no air conditioning in those days, and the homes were built to maximize what air flow there was.

Eli stepped just inside the doorway, hesitated.

"One," he said softly.

"One what?"

A young woman sat at a massive desk just beside the stairway. Eli recognized her, though he'd never seen her before. Elizabeth's daughter, Mary. The resemblance was uncanny.

Eli hesitated. "Just counting chandeliers. How many are there?"

The woman smiled. "Seven. And no you weren't. You just walked through the little girl, didn't you?"

Eli just stared at the woman for a moment or two, but there was really

no doubt in his mind. She knew. "I'm Eli Mothersbaugh from the bureau of bio-Remnant Reconciliation," he said finally. "I believe you're expecting me."

The young woman was, as Eli had surmised, Elizabeth's daughter. The resemblance was indeed striking—the same jet black hair, brown eyes. The same tall, graceful elegance. Eli suddenly felt very, very old.

He asked the logical question as she showed him to his room upstairs. "How long have you known about the ghosts?"

She smiled. Eli remembered that smile. "Since the day Mother and I moved into Water Oaks. The little girl was just the first."

Eli considered this. "Do you see her?"

Mary shook her head. "No . . . it's a feeling, really. I've heard it described as a 'cold spot,' but it's not really cold. It's tingly like cold, and a bit hazy when you're standing there as if you're looking at everything through a mist."

Eli knew the feeling. In fact, he was feeling it at that exact moment. "Two," he said.

"That would be Ruth Benning," Mary said.

"The original Elizabeth Stockard's servant," Eli said. "Who was with her at the time of the Massacre by all accounts."

Mary stopped at the upstairs landing, and turned to look at him. "You've done your homework."

"Of course. Not that I really had to, except for the finer details. When I was growing up, people talked about the Stockards of Water Oaks like it all happened yesterday."

"They still do," Mary said.

"Now let me ask you a question: if you can't see them, how do you know who they are?"

Mary sighed. "I don't know for certain. It's what I feel . . . rather like being in the same room with someone you know. I can't explain any better than that. Oh, I know it's all very unscientific compared to what you're used to."

Eli shook his head. "The remnant signatures are very individual, and someone who can sense them at all can usually tell at least a little about them. Would you like to see if you're right?"

Mary's eyes widened slightly. "Yes, I would. How?"

Eli unzipped the sensic case. "It may not work if the remnant is too mobile. Still, I gather she tends to hang about the stairway?"

"She's not *always* here," Mary confirmed. "But most of the time."

The sensic's display came up. Eli pointed the sensor and changed the display from charting to mapping. The lines of numbers reformed themselves into an image. It was a little faint, blurred like an old-fashioned photographic negative slightly out of focus, but clear enough. A small black woman stood about mid-way up the staircase, looking straight down the stairwell to the floor below. She wore a plain gingham dress, and her head was covered in a white *tignon,* the cloth wrapped and secured just so. Her age was hard to tell, but she was clearly ancient. Eli turned the display so that Mary could see.

"That's Ruth Benning, no doubt," she said. "I've seen the pictures. Wait . . . if this is just some sort of energy field, why are there clothes?"

"Good question. No one's really answered it yet, though there are theories." Eli started to expound on a couple of them, but a glance at Mary told him that her mind was elsewhere.

"Can . . . can you show me the others?" she asked.

Eli didn't ask what Mary meant about the others. He assumed there were more than two, and, in any case, preferred to do his own count. "Probably."

Mary looked pensive. "Does Ruth know we're here?"

Eli switched the display back to charting, looked closely at the numbers. "Hard to say. . . ." He looked up, saw Mary watching him intently. *She wants the truth,* he thought. He had no way of knowing this for sure, unlike his first impression of a remnant, which was almost always verifiable with the sensic. The living were always harder to read.

"No, I don't think so," he said finally. "Here, look. . . ." He switched the display back. "See these numbers? She's just repeating a particular series of actions: the hesitation . . . the look down the stairwell. Then it starts again. She's what we call a repeater."

"Repeater?"

"A remnant caught in some sort of traumatic or deeply significant sequence of events. Now she's not much more than a recording, like a tape loop that just runs."

"Until when?"

"Indefinitely. Or until whatever's holding her here goes away."

Mary nodded. "I think that's where you come in."

"Is she why you called the bureau? It *was* you, wasn't it?"

Mary nodded again. "I discussed it with Mother first, of course. She wasn't too happy about it, but finally gave in."

"Have the guests been complaining?"

Mary laughed. "Most don't even notice, and the ones that do rather enjoy it, I think. Adds atmosphere to the place . . . not that it really needs any."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Three days ago *something* tried to push my mother down the stairs."

Eli frowned. "Who saw this?"

"I did. I was standing beside Mother when it happened. I heard something hit her, like a slap, and she almost went down head-first. If I hadn't been there to catch her . . . well, I'm afraid of what might have happened. Before you ask, no, I didn't sense anything besides Ruth."

Eli made a mental note. "Neither of you saw anything?"

"I didn't say that, Mr. Mothersbaugh," Mary demurred, "I don't know what my mother saw."

Eli thought there was something furtive about her expression that hadn't been there before. He also noticed that she hadn't really answered his question, but before he could say anything, Mary continued: "Mother's looking forward to seeing you again."

Eli resisted the urge to smile. *A bit transparent, Mary. Your mother knew I was alive, but that was about all.*

Eli shut down the sensic. He didn't count himself the sharpest tack in the box, but he knew when he was being distracted. But from what? "I'm looking forward to it, too. It's been a long time. Well then, if you'll finish showing me where I'm staying, I can get started."

Mary led the way and Eli followed. He didn't think too much of it at the time, but in the warm air there was the faintest scent of jasmine.

Supper was in the dining hall, and the management of Water Oaks had gone all out: fine bone china, crystal, silverware. Other legacy items abounded: A shoo-fly fan hung over the table with its cord leading to an empty corner, as if waiting for the young slave who operated it in the old days. There was an authentic flytrap on the sideboard, a contraption that looked like an inverted glass bowl with honey in a dish at the base and small holes for the flies to get in but not quite figure their way out, assuming they didn't drown in the honey. Eli looked at the abundance of forks and felt a little trapped himself.

The guests were a motley lot. Three older couples from Pennsylvania, apparently traveling together, a pair of painfully young newlyweds, a small group of Civil War re-enactors from Jackson, and one well-dressed portly man with immaculate hair. It took Eli a moment, but there was no mistaking the man: Malachi Hollingsworth, senior Senator for the State of Mississippi, Minority Whip, and major reactionary, even by local standards.

Water Oaks is definitely attracting some interesting clients.

Hollingsworth gave him an icy smile that made Eli wonder if he had inadvertently offended the man. Eli looked for his own place and found himself at a position of honor near the head of the table. Mary appeared and sat opposite to Eli. Soon after that, Elizabeth Dunstan née Stockard finally arrived.

"Arrived" was actually a bit off the mark. It was closer to the truth to say that Elizabeth made an *entrance*. She wasn't so impractical as to wear a full hoopskirt in proper belle fashion, but the dress was full and red and would have been more appropriate for a night at the opera in the 1920s than at a modern dinner gathering. Still, Eli had to admit that as a bit of showmanship, it was very effective; there was even a burst of applause, which Eli joined in.

In her mid-forties, Elizabeth Dunstan still rated a round of applause in Eli's view. He could still see in her the girl he had known, though whether this was due to her good genes or his own expectations, Eli wasn't sure. He did know that her smile was every bit as dazzling as he remembered. Almost as one, all the men in the room rose from their chairs. Even, looking a bit mystified, the gentlemen from Pennsylvania.

"I see proper manners haven't *entirely* deserted this new millennium," Elizabeth said.

In a very short time, Elizabeth had greeted each of her guests by name, set them at ease, turned on the Southern charm, and fired up conversation to such a degree that Eli was having trouble remembering that they were simply having supper at a bed-and-breakfast, and not attending a dinner party at Water Oaks at the height of its glory. Eli studied the other guests, and was certain they were in a similar mood. Easy enough for

the Civil War buffs, that was part of the appeal; but the rest seemed just as enamored.

The years since high school hadn't bought Eli the detachment he'd hoped for, but he found himself wondering about Elizabeth's obvious glamour and presence in more analytical terms. Was it some sort of energy field, related to the bio-remnant signatures that remained after death? Perhaps it could be measured. . . .

"Hello, Eli."

Eli blinked. For a moment he didn't realize who had spoken to him. Later, he would realize that he hadn't wanted to know. He'd both looked forward to and dreaded this moment. Elizabeth was smiling at him. Eli, to his chagrin, felt a little giddy.

"Hello, Elizabeth."

She smiled wider. "Is that all you have to say?"

Off-balance from the beginning, and Eli didn't like it. His annoyance went a great way toward relieving his giddiness. "Nice to see you?" he offered.

Elizabeth laughed softly then, hiding her mouth with her hand. "You haven't changed. Not two words for anyone if one would do." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I gather Mary has briefed you on our problem?"

"Somewhat, but I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Of course."

"Was the stairwell incident the first time you were attacked?"

Elizabeth hesitated. "No."

Mary frowned. "Mother, you didn't tell me about this."

"I didn't want to worry you. Assuming you would."

Mary just glared at her. Eli glanced down the table, but, so far as he could tell, all of the other guests were deep in their own conversations and taking little notice of them. The one exception was Hollingsworth, who gave the impression that he wanted to hear them, whether he could or not. After a moment, Elizabeth went on. "There were two prior incidents. Nothing severe. More like a stinging slap than a blow. Once in my office, once when I was in the kitchen. Frankly, until the stairwell, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. Apparently not."

"Do you think Ruth Benning is responsible?" Mary asked Eli.

"She's not even aware of us, as I said. It couldn't have been her."

"Then who?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know," Eli said, "but I promise you that I *will* find out."

Later, after the guests had repaired to the ballroom for coffee and more conversation, Eli took a discretionary retreat to the second-floor verandah. His last sight of the guests as he went up the stairs was Senator Hollingsworth in earnest and intent conversation with Elizabeth Stockard Dunstan. To Eli, he looked a little like a love-smitten boar hog courting a doe.

There was a warm breeze out on the verandah, but there was a cool edge to it that Eli appreciated. Frogs were singing from a small pond in back of the mansion near the old kitchen building. The moon was rising,

and bats were soaring and swooping at the moths attracted to a pole light near the parking lot.

"There it is again."

Mary stood just inside the French doors that led to the verandah. She walked out and stood beside him at the railing. Eli started to tell her to call him Eli instead of "Mr. Mothersbaugh," but he didn't. Eli felt better with a little reserve and distance from Elizabeth and her daughter both.

Eli nodded. "Jasmine. I smelled it earlier. Curious. . . . So. Why aren't you with the rest of your guests?"

Mary looked grim. "Mother's guests, not mine."

"I gather that you and your mother don't always get along."

Mary laughed. "Rather like saying General Sherman didn't get on with General Lee. After my father died, I ran away from home on three separate occasions, Mr. Mothersbaugh. I assume all this is in your files."

"Most of it," Eli admitted. "In most of these situations, the human element is as important as the spectral."

"Nice to know that the living still count. . . . I noticed you watching the senator and my mother. I'm afraid we banished him from his customary seat at the table so Mother and I could talk to you."

"That explains the 'hurry up and die' look I got from him."

"Simple jealousy. He's in love with my mother, you know. That's why he's a regular here."

Eli nodded. "I assumed as much." He also didn't miss the hint of bitterness in Mary's voice when she spoke of her mother.

Mary sighed. "You knew? Well, I suppose it's pretty obvious, even to a man." She turned to look at Eli intently. "Were . . . were you in love with her, too?"

Eli considered. The look on Mary's face spoke volumes: mild interest on the surface and something raging just below. Jealousy? Envy? Perhaps all those things, or something just trying to be itself, separate from Elizabeth Stockard Dunstan. *It must have been very hard for Mary.*

Eli looked out over the woodlands surrounding the house. "The truth? Every male in town with a pulse was in love with your mother, in those days," he said, simply. "I'm afraid I was no different."

"What about now?" Mary asked softly. "I realize you don't have to tell me anything, but I would like to know."

Eli thought about it. "In anything like a real relationship, people fall out of love all the time. They really get to know each other—not always a good thing. They change, they grow apart. When only *one* of you is in love, then you don't get those changes. The ideal remains. Love fades, but it never really goes away. It has no reason to."

"Like a ghost?" Mary asked, looking mischievous.

Eli nodded, and sighed. "Sometimes. Yes. Just like that."

"My mother and I have a relationship too, Eli. Always have. Yet it's . . . complicated. I do love my mother, whatever your files say. Part of the reason I agreed to come to Water Oaks and work for her was that I thought there might be a chance to resolve our differences."

Eli nodded. He had the distinct feeling that this wasn't the only reason she'd agreed to come, but he let it go. "I hope you can."

"I appreciate that, and I hope you'll pardon me for asking this: how do you propose to banish the ghosts of Water Oaks Plantation if you can't even rid yourself of the ghost of an old flame?"

Eli laughed. "Fair question. The answer is: I don't know. I'm not an exorcist, whatever you might have heard, and it's not always the ghosts who have the problem. Right now I have no idea what needs to be done, and what needs to be done is really what I do, Ms. Dunstan, and what I'm looking for. Not ghosts as such, though I'll probably need to find those first."

"I can show you where the ghosts are . . . well, some of them, anyway, if that will help. I'd like to help."

Eli had the feeling that Mary wanted to lead him toward something now, just as when they'd first met, she had turned him away from something else. He did want to do his own count, but he wanted Mary around while he did it. Perhaps she could answer some questions. Perhaps, whatever she intended, she could help him see what questions needed to be asked.

"It might be of help, at that," he said. "No time like the present. Too early for bed, so it's either hunt ghosts or rejoin the party, and frankly I'd rather not rejoin the party."

"You needn't worry about my mother and the senator, in case you were. He has his uses, but frankly, she detests the man."

Eli wasn't worried at all. In fact, at that moment, he felt more than a little sympathy for the blowhard senator. The man was out of his depth with Elizabeth, just as Eli was.

"Lead on," was all Eli said, though he had to wonder just where and why Mary was leading him at all, and what she wanted him to find there.

Eli wanted to take some proper readings on the entity near the entrance, but the area was clearly visible from the open doors to the parlor, too close to Elizabeth's social gathering, and Eli wasn't inclined to trigger a lot of questions. He let Mary lead him out the rear doors. The sun was well down now; the trees behind the mansion grounds were one long dark shadow to the north and east.

Eli took out the sensic and brought up the files he'd stored on Water Oaks, including graphics of the layout. Mary moved closer so that she could see.

"Is everything in that computer of yours?"

"Sensic," Eli corrected, "though it's a computer as well, I guess you could say. And no, not everything. Since Water Oaks was never burned, a good deal of the original records survived, such as they are. I haven't downloaded everything, but most of it's on file at the Department of Archives and History."

"Bear in mind I'm new to this, Mr. Mothersbaugh. Up until six months ago, I lived in an apartment in Atlanta. The ancestral home hasn't been back in the family very long. . . . Say, what's that?"

Mary pointed to a group of building outlines on the display that, as they both could clearly see, no longer existed. Eli tapped a few keys. "The

slave quarters. Usually they were a bit farther away from the main house, but Water Oaks was a small plantation as they went."

"Oh." Mary looked at the other outline, and the building it referenced. "The kitchen's still here."

Kitchens in the larger homes were detached in those days, partly because no one wanted to bring that much heat into the living areas, partly due to the threat of fire. A regular kitchen had long since been retrofitted into the house proper. The old carriage house was long gone as well, and the original kitchen building had been converted to a garage long since. It had been freshly painted, but the doors were padlocked. Just beyond that was the pond where the frogs were still in chorus. Eli switched the display back to the sensic proper and made a slow sweep of the area.

"What do you see?" Mary asked.

Eli studied the display. He kept it in charting mode deliberately so that Mary couldn't decipher it so easily. "What should I see? I assume you brought me out here for a reason."

"I just assumed you'd need to cover the entire grounds."

Eli smiled inwardly. Mary, bless her heart, wasn't the actress her mother was. Eli wondered idly why Elizabeth had never sought out a career on stage. "There's a ghost here, no question. Or was."

"Was? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I'm seeing is a residual trace, not the entity itself. Rather like a footprint. bio-emanations tend to coalesce slightly if an entity stays long enough in one spot. This one apparently likes to walk between the old kitchen and house. That's all I can tell at the moment . . . wait." Eli studied the display. "Strike that. It's back."

"Can I see her?"

Her. The slip told Eli what he already knew; Mary was aware of remnant activity here. But how aware, beyond the simple fact? Eli hesitated, but there was no reason not to show Mary what the sensic had found. Besides, he very much wanted to see the entity for himself. He switched the display.

"Oooh."

Mary's sudden intake of breath was understandable. As with the ghost of Ruth on the stairwell, the image was like an old-fashioned photographic negative, but still striking. They were looking at a tall woman in a simple smock dress; she wore a plain headscarf, in contrast to Ruth Benning's elaborate *tignon*. The woman's age was hard to tell, but there was a definite impression of youth. There was nothing in the image proper to tell what color her skin might have been, but Eli let the facial profile algorithms take their best guess against the databases, and they gave the woman a flesh tone the warm light brown of cinnamon.

"She's beautiful," Mary said finally.

Eli just nodded, not looking up from the sensic for a few moments as he looked at the numbers again. He made a link to the state Department of Archives and History and made a request for additional data. It took him a moment to realize that Mary wasn't standing beside him now. He looked up and found her, hand outstretched, reaching for the spot where the ghost was standing.

"Mary, stop!"

Surprised, she drew her hand back. "What's wrong?"

"I'm taking readings here. Most ghosts aren't self-aware, but this one might be. If she is, she may realize she's not alone. That could interfere with the data I'm gathering."

"Is that all she is? Data?"

Eli looked up, a little surprised at the intensity of Mary's reaction. "Do you know who she is?"

Mary shook her head, and Eli was pretty sure she was telling the truth, but there was an expression on Mary's face that Eli found a little disturbing. He wasn't sure what it meant, but it almost seemed as if Mary expected something from the entity, or, more precisely, *wanted* something.

"There's something you're not telling me. Are you sure you don't know who she is?"

Mary shook her head again. "No. . . . Well, I was hoping she was someone I should know, but there's no way to tell, is there?"

"What are you talking about, Mary? Who do you think she might be?"

"My four times great grandmother."

"All right, Mary. Out with it."

They sat at a small breakfast table in a room just off the kitchen hallway. The window panes showed only darkness, though an occasional moth bumped itself against the window trying to reach the light. Mary poured coffee from an old stained enameled pot. "My mother was attacked; I was there and it happened, just as I said. But it's true I had an ulterior motive in bringing you here."

Eli wasn't exactly surprised. "Me specifically?"

Mary shrugged. "Mother mentioned you now and then. I knew who you were, what you did. So when I contacted the bureau, I used your name as well as the senator's. I used everything I thought would help."

"Your mother mentioned me? Why?"

Mary smiled then. "Well, well. You *do* have a normal male ego, Mr. Mothersbaugh. I was beginning to wonder."

Eli smiled faintly. "Just trying to get the context straight. An offhand, casual mention, yes? No more than that?"

"Well . . . yes. Though it happened more than once."

"So. What's the ulterior motive? Anything to do with your suspicions about that ghost we saw?"

Mary didn't say anything for a few moments. She finally sighed and said, "Look at me, Mr. Mothersbaugh. Look at my mother. Contrast that to the portraits of the original Elizabeth Stockard. Don't you think perhaps there's something about the two of us that speaks more of certain segments of New Orleans than, say, Atlanta?"

Eli got her implication. It was hard to miss. "You suspect that Elizabeth Stockard is not your direct ancestor?"

"You do put it delicately, but it's more than that. If I'm right, then Elizabeth Stockard not only wasn't my direct ancestor, she *murdered* my direct ancestor!"

Eli considered this. "The Water Oaks Massacre? Aren't there a few things you're forgetting?"

"Such as?"

"The fact that the only survivors of the incident were the infant Joshua Stockard, Elizabeth Stockard, and Ruth Benning, and Ruth was an old woman well past child-bearing. So even assuming that John Stockard had fathered a child on one of the other slaves or servants, none survived. How could the ghost we saw possibly be your ancestor?"

Mary shrugged. "I know all that, including the fact that Ruth Benning died soon after and Elizabeth Stockard was so traumatized that she spent her last years in an asylum. There has to be something we're missing."

Eli sighed. "Records are incomplete; doubtless there's a lot we're missing. However, Mary, you may have to accept the fact that you're *wrong*. I'm going to trust that you can do that."

Mary sipped her coffee. "I just want the truth, Mr. Mothersbaugh. Whatever it might be."

"I'll keep that in mind. You do the same."

Eli glanced back at the sensic, noted a blinking green light. The new data he'd requested was coming in. He pushed a button. Eli turned the display so that Mary could see, and she leaned close.

It wasn't a photograph. Some of those had come in, too, specifically one of Captain John Stockard and his wife Elizabeth, but this was different: it was a digital scan of a painted portrait. Mary's eyes got wide. "That's her! The woman we saw out by the kitchens!"

Eli nodded as he took a closer look at the portrait. "Not much doubt. The sensic was very close in its reconstruction, though it appears her skin color was even lighter than we thought. Her name was Jasmine Devereaux, and, according to this, the portrait was commissioned by Captain John Stockard himself."

"But . . . why would John Stockard commission a portrait of a slave?"

Eli called up the rest of the data. "She wasn't a slave. She was 'a free woman of color' as they said in those days. A young Creole, originally from New Orleans. She was hired by the Stockards to help supervise the household and care for the Stockards' children. Why Stockard commissioned the portrait . . . well, that's a good question. Why someone like Jasmine Devereaux would take part in a slave revolt is another." Eli scrolled through the accompanying text and noticed something he hadn't before. "Strange. There was apparently an outbreak of some sort of fever around the time of the Massacre. Locals thought it might have been malaria but that's not certain."

"Do you think there's a connection? Or just coincidence?"

Eli shrugged. "At the moment, I have no idea."

Mary turned her attention back to the portrait. "Jasmine was very beautiful," she said.

"Yes," Eli said. "And so is your mother and so are you. Other than that, what makes you think she's your ancestor, when all the evidence so far is against it?"

Mary blushed, then took a deep breath, let it out. "I admit it's a feeling. Call it a matter of faith, if you want. That's all. I was hoping you could help me prove it, if you let me talk to her. I've read up on the techniques

for direct communication with the bio-remnant personality; I know it's possible."

"Not in this case."

"But . . . why? You should talk to her anyway. For all we know, she's the one who attacked my mother!"

Eli shook his head. "Probably the only thing I *do* know for certain at this point is that the ghost of Jasmine Devereaux did not attack your mother. She couldn't have."

Mary's face fell as Eli's words sank in. "You mean. . . ?"

Eli nodded. "I'm sorry, Mary, but I've checked and rechecked the data and there's no doubt about it—Jasmine Devereaux is a repeater."

Eli skipped breakfast, mainly to skip the company. It was mid-morning before Mary found him, making sensic sweeps of the area around the vanished slave quarters and the old kitchens. It was good timing. He was just about to go look for her.

"Why are you still looking here? I thought Jasmine Devereaux was a dead end, so to speak."

Eli grunted. "I said we couldn't talk to her. That doesn't mean she doesn't have anything to say."

"A little less cryptic, please. What do you mean?"

"I mean a repeater is basically a recording. Bio-remnant energy, yes, but with little or no trace remaining of the original personality. You can't talk to a recording, but you can *listen*. Ruth Benning stares down the stairwell. Jasmine Devereaux hangs out near the old kitchen. In both cases: why? What's so interesting down that stairwell? Why does Jasmine walk out here? She wasn't the cook; Ruth was. So. I've looked at the stairwell. Now I want to see the old kitchen. Do you have a key to that padlock?"

Eli pointed to a large rusty lock hanging from a chain around the retrofitted garage doors on the old kitchen building.

"Sure . . . just a minute." Mary pulled out an old-fashioned key ring with several black iron keys hanging from it. "I'm not sure which one it is . . . and that lock looks like it needs oil. No one's been in there since we bought the place—"

"Mary!"

They looked back toward the house. Elizabeth stood on the second floor verandah, waving. "Can you come here for a few minutes? I need you to explain something about the property taxes."

"All right," Mary shouted back, then whispered. "Great. I've been trying to get her to look at the taxes for weeks. *Now* she gets busy." She handed the ring to Eli. "One of these should do it. I think Mother bought some machine oil for her sewing machine last week; if you need it come find us."

Eli took the keys and Mary hurried off toward the house. There were seven keys. Eli made a quick judgment based on size and narrowed it down to three. The first wouldn't fit at all. The second fit but wouldn't turn, and Eli was beginning to think he might need that machine oil after all. Just for the sake of argument, he tried the third.

The lock clicked open immediately. Eli frowned, then leaned forward and quickly sniffed the keyhole.

Interesting.

He pulled the chains out of the door handles and pulled the rightmost door. The hinges groaned, but turned. Eli went in, looked around. It was obvious that the building hadn't been used as a garage or anything else in some time; there were the remnants of a carriage, badly in need of restoration, but little else except cobwebs and a fine layer of dust. On the far wall was the old brick oven from the building's kitchen days. Its iron chimney had long since been removed and the ceiling patched over, but the oven was more or less intact. Eli wasn't especially surprised; even when need had prompted the kitchen building to be converted back in the 1930s, there had been great interest in matters of "heritage." Any true relic of antebellum times would be preserved if possible, and the oven certainly qualified.

Jasmine comes in here. Where does she go?

Eli pulled out his sensic. The bio-remnant traces were very faint, but Eli didn't need them; he'd had enough time to make a very good estimate of the remnant's cycle. Eli just waited a few moments and Jasmine Devereaux herself appeared on the sensic's screen. Eli looked up, saw nothing. He sighed. Sensitive as he was to the physical presence of a bio-remnant signature, he seldom could see them without the aid of his sensic. There were others in the bureau who barely needed a sensic at all, at least for visual confirmation; however, they tended to be almost blind when it came to sensing a ghost directly and learning anything useful. Eli wouldn't have traded abilities, but now and then he did envy the convenience of it.

Jasmine walked slowly past, Eli tracking every step on the sensic's screen. He couldn't resist stepping into the ghost's path, since he was sure she was not and could not be aware of him. The familiar sensation spread over him: not cold, exactly, but rather numbing. For a moment, Eli looked at the world through a haze. Eli wondered if this was the way ghosts saw their world, at least those with enough of a mind to truly "see" anything. Then Jasmine swept past and, as quickly as it had come, the feeling ebbed. The scent remained, however: jasmine, just like her name. Had she worn the scent in life? There was no way to know. Eli stayed behind and kept tracking her. Inside the door, across the floor. A look left and right. Searching for someone? Or making sure no one was about? There seemed to be a furtiveness to her now that Eli had not noticed before.

Jasmine Devereaux, what are you hiding?

The question turned out to be more literal than Eli had first thought. The image knelt for a moment by the base of the oven, and then it disappeared. Eli checked the sensic carefully, but that was a formality. Eli was certain he'd watched the end of the loop of all that Jasmine Devereaux was now. Somewhere in Water Oaks was the beginning; Eli wasn't sure where that was and he wasn't even sure if it mattered, though he remembered the scent from the verandah the night before and had a pretty good idea. That wasn't what concerned him just then. There was more to it, as the sensic had just told him.

Eli knelt down at the place where Jasmine had knelt and looked more at the oven. It took him a few moments to spot the loose brick on the corner, even with the energy signatures as a guide. He pulled the brick out and found a crevice going deeper into the oven; apparently a few of the bricks inside had been chipped away to make a hole sufficient for what had been placed inside. Eli reached in and pulled out a small unlocked tin box. It was rusted, of course, but well sealed. Inside was a diary. The handwriting on the cover was faded, and the cover itself spotted and brittle with age, but the script was clear and bold and still very readable. Eli read the name written on the cover.

"Jasmine Devereaux."

Eli looked at the hole again, then put the brick back in place and looked at that more closely, too. He finally nodded, satisfied, and turned his attention back to the diary.

Well, Eli. Looks like you have some reading to do.

Two hours later, Mary found him sitting on the bottom step in the grand staircase, his sensic pointed at a patch of nothing beside the entranceway. Two of the guests walked by, stared for a moment, then wandered on, but Eli paid them no heed. Neither did Mary.

"You're looking for the little girl now," Mary said.

Eli just nodded. He adjusted the sensic to its finest setting. "I walked through her first thing after I arrived, as you'll recall. I'm used to ghosts, Mary. Sometimes I don't pay them the attention they deserve."

Mary looked at him intently. "You've found something, haven't you? What is it?"

Eli picked up the diary from the step beside him and handed it to her. "I've found a couple of things. This, for one. You might want to let the experts at the Department of Archives and History look it over when you're done, but I'm certain it's just what it appears to be: Jasmine Devereaux's journal. It was hidden in the old brick oven in the kitchen building."

"You've read it? What does it say?"

Eli smiled then. "Slow down. I haven't read all of it; Jasmine was quite the diarist and there's a lot there. I read from just before she arrived at Water Oaks. Read it yourself, but start with the entry for January 10, 1865. That's the part that concerns you right now."

Mary sat down beside him and read in silence for several moments while Eli tuned his sensic and waited. Mary finally looked up, and her eyes were shining. "She and John Stockard were having an affair! Jasmine was pregnant with his child. . . ." Mary clutched the book to her breast; she was almost bouncing with excitement. "This is the proof I need!"

"No, it isn't."

Mary glared at him. "What do you mean? Are you saying Jasmine was lying?"

"No, I'm saying it doesn't prove anything one way or another. Even if we assume that Jasmine was telling the truth—and I have no doubt of it, frankly—that doesn't explain how Jasmine Devereaux's child became the Stockard heir. There's still the little matter of Elizabeth's son. Remember him? Joshua Stockard. You'll note that the entry for April 20th is the last."

Mary nodded, solemnly. "Just before the Water Oaks Insurrection. The Massacre."

"The last entry," Eli corrected. "And if you'll read more carefully you'll see what I mean. There *was* no massacre."

Mary just stared at him for a moment. Then she swore softly and flipped several pages until she found the entry Eli mentioned. She read for several minutes while Eli waited, patient as a stone.

"Jasmine just talks about how hard things had been for her and Ruth in the past few weeks. What with the Master still gone, her so far along and sick, and no help. . . ." She stopped. "Oh."

Eli nodded. "Exactly. *No help*. The women were alone, except for the child Margaret and the infant Joshua, and it doesn't take a crystal ball to know why. The field hands and the few remaining house slaves had either been released or had run away. There was no massacre because there was no one left *to* massacre."

"But then what really happened?"

"I think I know. If you'll sit quietly for a few minutes, we might have a chance to prove it."

The readings on Eli's sensic changed. He nodded. Right on time. The ghost was periodic, as he'd suspected. Most were. But was she a repeater? Eli didn't think so, and, in a moment, the numbers told him the same. There was someone there, and he was almost certain that he knew who that someone was. He changed the display from charting to mapping to see if he was right.

The image resolved into a little girl about five years old. Eli adjusted the image data to the finest granularity that did not compromise the raw data, then let the sensic make reasoned guesses about the rest, just as he had with Jasmine Devereaux's image. When he was done, the little girl had turned into a remarkably good match to the only picture surviving.

"Margaret Stockard," Mary said, looking over his shoulder. "But what is that she's holding? A doll?"

"If you'll be quiet, as I asked you to, we might find out. I'm going to try to talk to her."

Eli used the sensic's projection capability to create an image of himself, using the same type of energy field that was all that remained of Margaret Stockard. It covered him in a rough outline and gave him a rather sketchy appearance, but it was more than enough. Eli looked straight at the little girl, and the confusion in her eyes told him that she did, indeed, see him, or at least his projection. Eli spoke carefully.

"Hello, Margaret."

She had no voice, strictly speaking. The sensic simply ran the image's lip movements through a pattern-matching algorithm and read them as a deaf person might. The speaker crackled to life. It was a synthesized voice, but it was Margaret Stockard, shyly speaking to the living again after nearly two hundred years. "Hullo."

"You've been sick, I understand. You should be in bed."

"Are you the dok'ur?"

"Doctor. That's right." It wasn't completely a lie, Eli told himself. He had his PhD. But it still made him feel uncomfortable.

"I feel good now. You're tardy," Margaret said. The synthetic voice was expressionless but there was mischief in her eyes. Margaret's was a child's face; every emotion was clearly readable.

Tardy? Poor thing, you don't know the half of it.

It remained to be seen how much she did know. Eli took a deep breath and asked the question. "Is that your doll?"

Margaret held up the bundle she was carrying, and Eli could plainly see that it was not a doll.

But then, he already knew it wasn't a doll. He waited for Margaret Stockard to tell him just what it was.

"My baby brother," she said proudly. "His name's Jos'ua."

It wasn't very long before Margaret Stockard and her brother faded away. That didn't matter; Eli had learned what he needed to learn.

"Well, there's your smoking gun," Eli said. He started to pack up the sensic.

Mary just stared at the place the ghost children had been. "I don't follow," Mary said.

"You heard what Margaret said. She picked up her baby brother because he was crying. Then she went downstairs to find her mother. She's still looking for her mother, still carrying her baby brother. And Ruth Benning is still looking down the stairwell in shock and loss. Think about that for a moment."

Mary obviously did. "The poor child . . . she fell! She fell down the stairs and died . . . along with Joshua Stockard. The original Joshua Stockard, anyway. He was replaced!"

Eli nodded. "It fits."

"Then Elizabeth Stockard murdered Jasmine Devereaux and took Jasmine's baby as her own!"

Eli considered. "Possible."

"Possible? Mr. Mothersbaugh, if you'll pardon my quoting you, 'It fits.'"

"Up to a point. You're forgetting two things: Ruth Benning and the fever. We know from her diary that Jasmine Devereaux was already ill and weak with fever and overwork as her confinement approached. Now, we also know that she and Ruth Benning were friends, and that Jasmine asked her to take care of the baby if anything happened to here. Perhaps it was a premonition, or maybe she was just being realistic. Childbirth is always dangerous and was more so then." Eli shrugged. "I think it equally likely that Jasmine died in childbirth or soon after, and Ruth simply took advantage of the situation."

"Took advantage? How?"

"By seeing that her friend's child was provided for, of course. How better than as Master of Water Oaks? Jasmine was light-skinned to start with, and her child was probably more so. Captain Stockard was away and had never seen his son; Elizabeth Stockard wasn't in her right mind. In any case, I don't doubt that the child's resemblance to his father was unmistakable. Perhaps Ruth thought she could bring Elizabeth back to her senses if she could convince her mistress that Joshua had survived. Perhaps Elizabeth mistook the child for Joshua in her dementia and

Ruth was too tender-hearted to correct her. Pick the truth you want, Mary. We'll probably never know for certain."

"Then why the Massacre story? Wouldn't it have made more sense to say that Jasmine and her child had both died? John Stockard would have had to believe any story they told him."

"True, but was Elizabeth in any condition to stick to a consistent account? Personally, I think the whole 'massacre' business was concocted out of her fevered brain to explain why she and Ruth were all alone. The only one who could contradict her story was Ruth, who would have had her own reasons for keeping quiet."

Mary looked at the diary wistfully. "It's a good story, Mr. Mothersbaugh. Except for the part about picking the truth you want. I wanted to know *the* truth. I believe Jasmine Devereaux is my ancestor. Maybe you believe it too, but you're right that proving that the 'real' Joshua Stockard died in 1865 doesn't prove that Jasmine Devereaux's bastard child carried the Stockard name. I'm no better off than I was!

"Not quite. You have living descendants in the direct line from Jasmine's parents; I've already checked, and, strangely enough, there are likely candidates living in the area. A simple genetic test can determine if you're related. With what we already have, that's more than enough proof."

Mary looked stunned. "You must think I'm an idiot," she said. "Well, I'm not . . . most of the time. I'm not thinking clearly about this and that's the simple truth. Those descendants . . . whoever they are, they're strangers. Why would they help me?"

Eli grinned. "For a chance to prove that one of the finest First Families of the Confederacy is actually descended from Jasmine Devereaux? I don't think you'll have any trouble there." Eli finished packing up his sensic. He snapped the case shut and Mary blinked, apparently only now realizing what he was doing.

"You're leaving?"

Eli nodded. "I'd like to find a way to free Margaret and her brother and I'm going to work on that when I can. But strictly within the guidelines of my responsibility, it's not necessary. They're no threat to your mother or anyone else."

"They're not? But they're the only ghosts I know of besides Ruth and Jasmine, and you've already said they weren't the ones!"

"And they aren't. You haven't met the ghost who attacked your mother. You probably never will. It's rather hard to detect."

"I have a right to know, Mr. Mothersbaugh. My mother and I have had our differences, but if she's still in danger—"

Eli shook his head. "She isn't in any danger. You'll have to trust me on that because, actually, it's your mother who has the right to know this part of the story, and I'm going to go tell her right now. After that, I think you should talk to her."

Mary looked down at the diary in her hands, and she smiled grimly. "Believe me, Mr. Mothersbaugh—I intend to."

Eli made his way up the creaking stairs. He paused for a moment at

the spot where Ruth Benning kept her painful vigil on the second floor landing, then kept walking.

It's not always the ghost who has the problem.

Elizabeth, the namesake of the long dead Elizabeth Stockard, was waiting for him in her study. Eli had rather imagined more of a parlor, suitable for receiving gentleman callers—if the senator qualified—and having tea. Instead, he found a library, ledgers, and a large, workman-like desk. Elizabeth sat behind it, dressed in jeans and a comfortable old shirt, reading glasses perched on her nose. Eli could see the years on her a little more clearly now, but in his eyes she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Despite which, at the moment, Eli didn't like her very much.

"Mrs. Dunstan, in a little while your daughter is going to march in here and confront you with Jasmine Devereaux's diary. Please do her the courtesy of acting surprised."

Elizabeth didn't say anything for a few moments. Then she shook her head slowly. "You needn't take that tone with me, Eli—I will play my part. It'd be silly to do otherwise at this point."

Eli sighed. "I wondered if you'd deny it."

"Why should I? Though I'll admit that I'm curious as to how you figured it out," she said.

"For a start, nearly all the incidents took place when you were alone. The one time you had a witness, Mary didn't really see anything; she heard a slapping sound and turned just in time to help catch you, though I imagine you'd have used the railing if she wasn't quick enough. She said you'd been pushed because that's what you told her. You'd already mentioned me, oh so casually, and by the time she called the bureau, Mary probably believed it was her idea in the first place."

Elizabeth smiled at him. "That's it?"

Eli shook his head. "Then there was the diary and its hiding place in the old kitchen. The lock had been oiled recently, although supposedly no one had been in the building in months. My instruments showed a distinctive and much too strong bio-remnant signature. The sort left by someone still living. Plus the cobwebs and dust had clearly been disturbed, and the tin had been opened recently. I considered Mary, but, frankly, she's a poor liar and a poorer manipulator. She doesn't have your raw talent for either, I'm afraid."

Elizabeth's smile didn't waver. "I imagine that felt good, Eli. Get a bit of your own back for having the bad judgment to lust after me like every other horny dog at school? Feeling righteous and superior now, are we?"

Eli took a deep breath. "I just want to know why," he said. "That's all."

"Is it really? Then I'll tell you: For Mary," Elizabeth said simply. "For my daughter."

"I don't understand," Eli said.

"Then let me help: I grew up with a famous name and no money. 'Genteel poverty'? Isn't that what they call it when the old families hit hard times? Well, there isn't a damn thing gentle about it. Half the people around you thinking, 'ain't it a shame,' and the other half thinking 'serves

them *right*'? We may have lived in the same town, but you had no idea what it was like to be a Stockard, Eli. Not one damn clue."

Eli knew it was true. They'd gone to the same school, the same church, but they may as well have been living on different planets. "What does that have to do with Mary?"

"Everything, Eli. Early on, I decided that if I had to be a Stockard, then I damn well would *be* a Stockard. I used my looks for all they were worth. I married a well-to-do man, a sweet fool with some money, but when he died, his estate was worth a thousand times more, which was mostly my doing. I worked for the day I would take back Water Oaks, as all the other generations of Stockards since the war had failed to do. I used all the tools I had and didn't pay too much attention to those that couldn't help me."

"One of those being Mary?"

Elizabeth's smile wavered then and went out like a guttering candle. "Yes, Eli. Mary. She feels that I owe her for the mess I made of her childhood and what I put her father through. You know something? She's right."

"You found Jasmine's diary first." It wasn't a question.

"Of course I did. Aren't you going to ask me how?"

Eli shook his head. "Remember the old Carson place, which a bunch of us walked past every day on the way to school? You used to say you saw Noemi Carson sitting on the porch every day, and she had been dead ten years or more by then. It was only much later that I realized you weren't joking. You can see ghosts, can't you? Even I can't do that most of the time without a sensic."

"Not always," Elizabeth confirmed. "But often enough."

"You had the diary. You also saw Margaret and her baby brother."

The smile returned. "It took a while to realize what the poor child was carrying, but, yes, it was easy enough to put together after that. Another descendant of the Devereaux family lives just up the road, an old friend from school, it turned out. It was easy to get the test. Friends help out friends in Canemill, Eli. Maybe you've forgotten that."

"Friends ask. That's all you really had to do, Elizabeth," he said. Elizabeth, stung, said nothing, and, in a moment Eli continued. "So. Now that you've done all this, what have you done?"

Elizabeth shook her head in exasperation. "Weren't you paying attention? I've just given Mary the one thing she's wanted for years: power! The upper hand. Even, if she's so inclined, revenge. She's going to march herself in here and announce that my carefully tended image of myself as a latter-day Scarlett O'Hara is all a sham."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll *talk,* Eli," she said slowly, as if explaining to a child. "Really talk, for the first time in a while. And fight. Probably cry, and almost certainly negotiate, with Mary holding all the cards. Or so she'll believe, which, for my purposes, is the same thing. Mary's looked forward to this day for a long time and I'm going to give it to her. Afterward . . . well, one way or another our relationship changes. Maybe for the better. I hope so, but it's a risk. I've taken them before."

"What makes you think I won't tell her myself?"

"Are you really so angry with me that you'd take this chance away from her?"

Eli thought about it for a moment, but not too long. "I'm not angry, Elizabeth, and what happens between you and Mary is a family matter and none of my concern. I have to ask, though: after all that you've done to regain Water Oaks, are you saying you really don't care that you're not a Stockard?"

Elizabeth smiled grimly. "Oh, but I *am,* Eli. A true blood daughter of Captain John Stockard, CSA. Nothing that you've found changes a thing."

"Not even in Canemill?" Eli felt a little ashamed of himself, but only a little.

Elizabeth smiled a rueful smile. "You needn't shuffle around the woodpile, Eli. Yes, there are those for whom it will matter. On the other hand, for my guests, it will make an even better story than the one I have now. Good for business."

"What about Senator Hollingsworth? What do you think he'll do?"

Elizabeth's grin was as wicked as anything Eli had ever seen on a living soul. "'Shit a brick or grow a dick,'" she said. "Frankly, I can't wait to find out which."

Eli smiled despite himself. "I almost hate to miss that. Goodbye, Elizabeth." He hesitated, and added, "Thank you."

Elizabeth frowned, but she didn't ask why Eli had thanked her and Eli didn't explain. There was no need; Elizabeth already had what mattered to her. As he left Eli realized that, oddly enough, so did he. Eli felt as if an old and painful burden had been lifted from his shoulders. What had passed between himself and Elizabeth wasn't anything like the sort of relationship he'd mentioned to Mary, or had once dreamed about, but it was honest enough, and intimate enough, and real enough for the brief time it lasted.

Despite Eli's best efforts, he had released none of the ghosts of Water Oaks Plantation. He had, though, finally, let go of one of his own. ❍

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch won the Endeavor Award last year for her novel, *The Disappeared.* The book is the first in her Retrieval Artist series. A short story in that series, "The Retrieval Artist," was a Hugo-finalist. Ms. Rusch's numerous other awards include two Hugos, one for editing and one for "Millennium Babies" (*Asimov's,* January 2000); the John W. Campbell Award; and a World Fantasy Award. Now that she no longer edits *F&SF,* she has set out to conquer mystery (with her Edgar-nominated Smokey Dalton series, which she writes as Kris Nelscott) and romance (which she writes as Kristine Grayson). "Collateral Damage" comes from her experiences, many years ago, as a secretary to a forensic psychologist. You can find out more about her work at *www.kristinekathrynrusch.com.*

The Man Who Teaches War to Children sits in my office. He is thin and frail, his hair prematurely white. He hunches over, as if he is a child himself, his arms wrapped around his stomach in a grim parody of a hug.

I watch him through the camera installed in the Monet on my inside wall. The camera is tiny, but it is powerful. It records everything on the eastern side of my waiting room.

Today, everything on the eastern side is a couch, two end tables, two matching lamps, and the man the government says I must evaluate, the man whose job rests in my hands.

His job is a difficult and specialized one. He supervises children at war zones. Usually, a child must spend two years studying war. The children go to famous battles and then visit their aftermaths. They use specialized booths unavailable to the average time traveler—the children must be able to feel the dirt in the air, touch the blood, smell the rot.

In this way, and only in this way, do we prevent our people from going to war.

The Man Who Teaches War to Children has a name. It is Vincent Margolis. I have trouble using that name with him—in his case, the job is so much greater than any individual that it is nearly impossible to think of him as a person.

I must, of course. It is my assignment in this instance.

I have a hardcopy file of Margolis's records on my desk, open to the battery of tests he has already taken. On my personal computer, I keep his digital file.

The digital file has some footage of previous trips the man has taken; it also has school and medical records, daily surveillance tapes for the past year, and statements taken from friends and relatives.

I have not examined much of this at all. I prefer my first impression to be untainted by the opinions of others. The hardcopy file before me has all that I must study before this meeting: the man's name (cited above), his age (an astonishing fifty-five—I would have thought him several decades older), and the years of his employment.

I usually do not spend so much pretime making notes, but I must admit—for the record—that I am intrigued by this client and this case. Try as I might, I cannot set these feelings aside.

I am forty-five, too old to have experienced the War Classes. I have no children, so I am not privy to the Parents' Handbook on handling the Child at War Seminar. I also have no nieces, nephews, or siblings, so I have not had the privilege of sharing this information with family.

Instead, I have only the knowledge that comes from general reading—news reports, popular analysis, cultural reference—and peripheral scientific study, since so much of my profession was involved in establishing this program in the first place.

Should I believe that this unusual interest disqualifies me from making a dispassionate analysis of Mr. Margolis, I shall step aside immediately.

At the moment, however, I do not believe my interest is much more than healthy curiosity.

I shall proceed as if the curiosity does not exist.

At precisely two P.M., my computerized secretary announces Mr. Margolis's appointment and his presence. My door unlocks and swings open.

Mr. Margolis looks up nervously. I see this on the small screen to the side of my desk. I hit a single button, and the screen folds up, receding as Mr. Margolis enters.

He is taller than I expect, and he does not hunch as he walks. He is wearing a suit that looks pressed and clean. When he sees me, he nods. I stand, step around my desk, and extend my hand.

His dark eyes take me in—my upswept hair, my own carefully tailored suit, and the impractical high heels that are, in addition to being an indulgence, a sign of my wealth.

Usually my clients like the signs of my success. I have a sense that Mr. Margolis does not approve. Nothing has changed in his face, yet something in his posture, something subtle, has given me this impression. Perhaps it is the hesitation he makes before taking my hand.

He does not shake it. Instead, he grasps it loosely, then lets go—the minimum he must do to maintain polite custom. Then he folds his rangy body into the patient's chair and rests his elbows on his thighs, ignoring the arm rests. His feet remain flat on my floor—he does not cross his legs or hunch as he had in the waiting room. He is not at ease, but he is not defensive either.

"Mr. Margolis," I say, "do you understand why you are here?"

He nods.

"Would you care to explain the reason to me?" I have learned, in my years doing forensic psychology, to have the patient be as clear as possible. Not so much for the patient's sake—since my job in this instance is not to heal—but for the sake of the future court case. If I assume that Mr. Margolis understands based on his nod, and it is clear from later testimony that he does not, then I am the one who is discredited, not him.

"The Dobsons have accused me of inappropriately touching their daughter." His voice is quiet, raspy, like the voice of a man with a sore throat or a man about to cry. His eyes are dry, and he is clearly not ill. His voice has been irritated, damaged, perhaps, in some other way.

"And are you guilty of inappropriate touch in this case?" I ask—a mere formality, since he will say no the way they all do.

"Yes," he says.

It takes a moment for the word to penetrate. I look up. Our gazes meet for the first time since he examined my clothing.

"You are guilty?" I ask, clarifying.

"Yes," he says softly. "I am."

I cannot explain the uniqueness of that moment, the absolute shock his admission carries. It is enough to knock the breath from me, to throw me—for one brief second—out of my professional persona. I feel an empathy for him I do not expect. I am not one who believes that fifty-five-year-old men should ever touch a four-year-old child, let alone touch one inappropriately.

And yet there is a sadness in his tone, an understanding of self that comes from years of analysis, of the courage to dig into one's own psyche, recognize the demons, and call them for what they are.

I write on the screenpad before me—*courage*—and the act of creating the word in my own handwriting is enough to bring me back to my work. "Would you like to tell me about the incident?"

"No," he says.

I study him. His face has care lines, and his mouth puckers in the corners as if he has held in his opinion for much too long.

"Mr. Margolis," I say, "you are here for evaluation concerning the incident. I need your side of the case."

He shakes his head. "I did it. Let them fire me."

Ah. It becomes clear now. He feels guilt, remorse, and believes he must be punished. So he will not assist in his own defense.

"I am not the one who makes that judgment, Mr. Margolis," I say, although my account is often the deciding factor in the outcome. "I'm just supposed to make a report on your current state."

He sighs. "I know. They're making me go through the hoops even though I admit what I did. The state doesn't want me to continue working. They just want to avoid a concurrent suit."

"Perhaps we should help them with that," I say.

He shakes his head, and gives me a small smile. The smile is gentle, which surprises me, and a little fond, as if he understands my dilemma, appreciates it, and wishes he could do more.

"I don't think there is any way to avoid it," he says.

"You may be right." I set the stylus next to my screenpad and lean forward. "But what if you're wrong?"

His smile fades, just a little, and he looks at me sideways through those dark eyes. He had been handsome once, before care and time wore his features into the hardness they now had. I wonder why he did not spring for upgrades—skin firmers, bag removers, hair colors—things that cost so little, but add so much to one's self esteem.

"I know the rules," he says, "and I broke them. Nothing else should matter."

But it does. For some reason, it does.

Our session isn't as unproductive as the beginning makes it sound. He will not discuss the incident, except to remind me of his guilt, but the first incident recap is usually unproductive. Most people lie to me or leave out details. Some claim not to remember the incident at all.

Mr. Margolis is happy to tell me of his own childhood—raised in a two-parent household in a small city, public school education in the days when that was uncommon, barely qualified for college, the joy he felt when he first got his current job.

I try to get Mr. Margolis to discuss what he hates about his job, but he shakes his head. I catch a glimmer in his eye, a moment of true emotion—the hatred of the work is alive within him—and I wonder if this hatred is connected to the incident.

But he will not comment, and I am left with only theories, theories I cannot commit to paper because I am without the proper analysis tools. I lack information.

As the session progresses, I ask Mr. Margolis what he likes about his work, and this he answers:

"I like," he says quietly, "the hope it gives."

"Hope?" I ask.

He nods. "Maybe someday the things I've seen. . . ."

His voice trails off, and his eyes light on the Picasso print I have placed behind my desk. I have done so deliberately, knowing that Mr. Margolis would visit me this day. The print is of *Guernica,* Picasso's famous and graphic depiction of a horrible battle in the Spanish Civil War.

I know the painting well—the prone humans, the large bull-like figure that dominates, the strange cubist depictions suggesting a violence so surreal that it should not exist, and the colors, stark and bare and gray, speaking of ghosts, speaking of loss, speaking of despair.

Mr. Margolis sighs.

"Hope," he says, and wrenches his gaze away from the painting. His

eyes, when they meet mine, look even older than they had when he entered the room. "The work gives me hope that we will not create such horrible vistas in the future."

He looks again at *Guernica,* so that I do not miss his point. Just, I suppose, as he has not missed mine.

"We are not creating such vistas now," I say.

If anything, the care lines around his mouth grow deeper. He hunches forward and shakes his head.

"Just because we're rich enough to ignore the rest of the world doesn't mean that human beings aren't murdering each other somewhere in the name of statehood."

His point is true enough. But the First World realizes its obligation to the Second and Third Worlds. We shall prevent war among ourselves for at least a century and then, provided that the technology works for more than three generations, we shall pass our war-prevention techniques on to our less fortunate allies.

"Give it time," I say.

He snorts. "Yeah. Time."

He looks down at his hands. I am not sure what I said to offend him.

"Won't it work that way?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Do we ever know what we're creating when we tamper with the human mind?"

As he does, his head lifts. The care lines are in shadow, giving him even more age than he already has. His gaze meets mine, and it becomes clear that he is not asking a rhetorical question: he expects a response.

My response should be automatic. I would not be a psychologist if I did not believe that we are gaining an understanding of the human mind.

But the intensity of his question disturbs me. "Tamper? Do you believe that your job tampers with the human mind?"

"Believe?" There is a charge behind that word. "Doc, I'm supposed to tamper with impressionable young minds. That's what I do. I teach them what war is really like, what it really means. I show them bloody limbs and destroyed schools and desperate starving people who don't even look human. That's tampering. They used to call it aversion therapy in the bad old days. Remember?"

I remembered studying aversion therapy, but he is wrong. Aversion therapy gave someone too much of something, usually something they loved, until they could take no more, and would therefore want no more.

However, I do not argue with Mr. Margolis. Instead, I see this brief moment as an open door, and I am determined to enter.

"Tampering is a loaded word," I say. "It has negative connotations."

"Do you have a clinical practice, Doc?"

"Are you asking if I have regular therapy patients?" I ask, trying to maintain control of this session, and yet uncertain how my practice links to his ideas of tampering.

"Yeah," he says. "Do you?"

"No," I say.

"Then you might not see it in the next few years. But ten, twenty, thirty years from now, you'll see something no one expected."

"What's that, Mr. Margolis?" I ask.

"The damage that tampering does," he says.

I have had difficult clients in the past, but none as slippery as Mr. Margolis. I doubt I will be able to trick him into revealing much about himself. I will try, of course, but I know, as soon as this first session ends, that I must do a lot of the leg work myself.

First, I contact the parents of the affected child. I send the form, stating who I am, citing the case and number, and explaining why I need a single interview (chaperoned if they wish) with their child.

Then I request more interviews, with Mr. Margolis's family, his employer, and his co-workers.

Finally, I send the most difficult letter of all, requesting a time visit, a viewing of the incident itself, as recorded on the travel equipment, as required by law.

Usually these things are confidential; often even the courts do not get a viewing. But because I am a psychologist and not a jury, because I need this to make my evaluation complete, and because I am not deciding a case of guilt or innocence, merely attempting to recreate a reticent client's mental state, I have a good chance of being granted a crime scene visit.

Such things, however, take weeks to determine. I have asked for an expedited hearing, based on the deadlines in my case, but I do not hold out any hope. Instead, I do the best with what I am given, and pray it will be enough.

The child is petite and precocious, her vocabulary large for a four-year-old. She will be five within a month, and she does not seem proud of that, unlike most four-year-olds I know.

Her parents do not want to sit in with her. They trust me, they say, but I know they have accessed my records. They trust me because my record is clean.

The little girl has auburn hair that curls around her face, skin the color of weak tea, and eyes that seem golden in my office's lamplight. Her fingers are covered with expensive rings, and her ears are pierced, but without earrings. She does not wear barrettes in her hair, and it consistently falls across her eyes.

Most of the time, she does not brush it away.

"Hello, honey," I say as I guide her into my office. "What's your name?"

"You know my name," she says, her voice young, her tone not.

I ease her to the same chair that Mr. Margolis used. I have left the Picasso behind my desk. I want to see if the child notices it.

"Tell me anyway," I say.

"I'm Atalia." She slides back in the chair. Her small tennis shoes have no wear pattern on the tread. They are as new as they seem.

Atalia. I give her an extra moment to add a nickname, but of course she does not. She has parents who believed in her individuality from the moment she was conceived; they clearly struggled hard to name her with that individuality in mind.

The parents have already refused the personality and intelligence tests

I had hoped to give the girl. Instead, the family provides me with the tests given before her war training began. While the intelligence numbers help—they change only a little over time—the personality tests do not. Personality is a combination of factors, some of which can be altered.

To fully understand the seriousness of the Margolis incident, I would have liked to know the effect of his inappropriate touch on this child as measured by tests. But the family will not allow that, believing that Atalia has gone through enough.

"Welcome to my office, Atalia," I say.

"I hate your painting." She speaks with a vehemence that only children can muster.

"Which one?" I ask, even though I know. There are other paintings behind me, some of them original, but her gaze is focused on the Picasso.

"That one." She points. I turn, pretending not to know what is behind me.

"The one with the bull?" I ask.

"The one with the dead people," she says, spitting out the words as if I had murdered each person myself.

"Why don't you like it?" I ask.

"Because it's icky."

Icky. The first word she has used that's common to most four-year-olds.

"What makes it icky?" I ask.

Her face squinches. "The dead people."

"Why?"

She looks at the door, and I see a crack in that poised child, the perfect one who emerges for public consumption.

"Can I see my Daddy?" she whispers.

"Sure," I say.

She slides off the chair and heads for the door. When she puts her hand on the knob, I ask, "Will you come back and talk to me after you've seen your daddy?"

"No," she says. "I hate you. I hate this place. I'm never ever ever coming back here."

And then she slams her way into my waiting room.

I let out a breath, and glance at the Picasso. It is staggeringly ugly and powerful. But I would never have guessed that it would speak to a child, especially one as young as four.

The word comes back from the travel agency. I am cleared to visit the crime scene.

The night before I go to the crime scene I do not sleep. I have read up on the incident; it occurred at a bombing location early in the training. According to the incidents manual, this site is the first place that the class goes in which other children—historical children—are involved.

I do not read about the incident itself—the actual details of it—preferring to see it all without preconceptions. I do, however, read about the course to that point, and I wonder how I would react to taking that course, even now, even with all my training.

The first time visitation is to a political rally, preparing for a conflict.

Sometimes the visit is to Hitler's Germany. Sometimes it is to a Churchill speech. Almost always, the early visits are from the twentieth century, still accessible, language properly translated of course, but distant enough not to provoke the wrath of grandparents and great-grandparents.

The second visit is to a review of the troops. These vary according to the make-up of the class. Sometimes they see World War I troops marching to "Over There." Sometimes Napoleon watching his troops from a review stand. Occasionally, the children visit a more exotic leader—a Saddam Hussein, an Idi Amin, even Harith Gelden from thirty years ago, in his failed attempt to take over Algiers.

The course is designed to teach children about patriotism, how easy it is to get caught up in the moment, to feel the passion of the cause, whatever that cause may be. Older children get to hear and analyze military music, military press coverage, to hear the language of heroes and heroism and fighting the good fight.

Gradually, the class spirals into the realities. They start with bombing missions, flying over the Persian Gulf late at night, or German fields in the moonlight, experiencing the beauty of the moment, or the distance as bombs fall and leave only a cloud in their wake.

The classes move from beauty to the *Enola Gay*. It is an observational trip only: the children watch as the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. At some later point, the children will go to Hiroshima days after the bomb fell, to see the effects. However, Atalia's class, Mr. Margolis's class, was a year or more away from that trip.

But as I lay awake in my soft cotton sheets, beneath a linen duvet I bought years ago, I find my mind wandering to these bomb sites and historical battles, and strange stump speeches by leaders long dead.

I understand the point of the class, the point of the exercises, but I wonder what kind of difference they will make. A truly determined person can accomplish anything. Violence, we have learned through sad and difficult study, is an inevitable part of human nature, and because humans are social creatures, violence becomes social as well.

We have stopped war in our part of the world, but we still have not ended violence.

And I wonder if that determined imaginary someone, that slightly more violent person than any we'd seen on the First World stage in two generations, could use all this information to create a "saner" war, one that will appeal to people brought up to reject the Sousa marches and the rallying speeches and the tickertape parades.

The thought brings me back to Mr. Margolis's prediction that decades from now I will not like what we have wrought, and my dreams, when they come, are filled with bright points of light, each representing a city destroyed at a safe and sanitary distance.

It is impossible to describe the sensation of time travel, since no real sensation exists. I am in a booth, surrounded by screens and speakers and equipment. The walls seem to vanish as I move backward in time, but in reality, they do not. They merely become clear. I am viewing a

recording made of the incident, a recording in three dimensions, complete with some of five senses, but a recording nonetheless.

We do not travel through time in the old-fashioned science fiction way; we do not participate in the scene. Instead, we look through windows on the past.

Common destinations use much more sophisticated equipment. They replicate sensory experiences so that you believe you are in the past. If I were traveling with the children, I would be able to pick up a handful of dirt and run it through my fingers—even though it would not be the real dirt from the past, only a facsimile.

But recordings like this one are not enhanced. They simply provide a window on a window. On this trip, I will get the easy sensory details—the smells, the sounds, and the sights—but touch will elude me. That does not matter: I'm not there to interact with my surroundings, just to observe.

The walls swirl around me, a kaleidoscope of colors. Then the scents come: mold and damp, with the faint scent of smoke. An acrid taste forms in the back of my throat, and then bile rises: behind the smoke, I recognize the scent of charred flesh.

How do the children feel as they approach this moment? Had Atalia stood quietly, hands clasped, the way children are taught these days when they are in a crowd? Was her heart pounding with fear or had she enjoyed the first few trips, as the instructors lulled her into the beauty of violence, and the glory of war?

The swirling eases, and, as it does, I hear children laughing. The laughter has an edge—a slightly out-of-control hysteria—but it is faint, and probably recognizable only to someone with my kind of training, or perhaps someone who is (was?) familiar with the individual children themselves.

The kaleidoscope fades like a merry-go-round slowing, and the world comes into visual focus: stone buildings, bombed to rubble. Only towers remain—towers that were once buildings, two and three stories high, with holes for windows and ceilings open to the sky.

In the distance, I can see buildings that still seem to be intact, and the skyline seems somewhat familiar. I am in Europe, judging by the age of the buildings in the distance—somewhere I have been before, but at a later time, when the buildings before me had been rebuilt into something else, and the buildings that form the skyline got dwarfed by larger buildings made of steel and glass or perhaps by domes or towers or something else that makes the shape of the skyline both familiar and unfamiliar to me.

The laughing children run past me, scruffy and filthy, their hair filled with ash. They wear knickers and heavy shoes. The jackets that go over the knickers seem to match. They play a game I do not understand, with a round ball that they kick with those ungainly shoes.

The play is swift—someone kicks the ball, someone else intercepts, a third person pushes it toward a pile of rubble that apparently acts as a goal. The children keep pace with the ball, trying to block each other, and they laugh more than I would have expected, given the smells and the

still-burning buildings not half a block away, and the ash that rises in the gray sky.

Then Mr. Margolis appears. He stands only a foot from me, closer than he was in my office, his hands clasped behind his back. His face is impassive, his posture perfect.

A woman appears beside him—his aide, perhaps, or a teaching assistant—and then, one by one, a band of children ring him. They vary in age from ten to four. Atalia wears a blue jean skirt and a loose blouse. Her little feet are hidden in delicate boots built more for style than for comfort. Her hair has already escaped its barrettes, and her thumb has found its way to her mouth.

So, she does not like time travel, or something nearby. Maybe even the smell. Whatever she does not like, she takes comfort in a baby way, a way that I know, from one short interaction, her parents would not approve of.

Mr. Margolis glances at her, but does nothing. He is following protocol. Each child must experience this incident on her own.

The game has become a thing of beauty—two teams, indistinguishable because of their tattered clothing, battle for the ball, which is gray with dust and ash. Children fall over each other, struggle, grab and kick, but with a spirit of fun.

The laughter continues as they run from one side of the makeshift field to the other. Some of the observing children cheer as the game progresses.

I try to focus on Mr. Margolis, whose posture has not changed, and Atalia. She too is watching with great attention—more attention than you would expect from a four-year-old—and her thumb has left her mouth. She even has a slight smile on her face. She doesn't cheer, but she wants to. Every time one of her young friends yells, her smile grows a little wider.

Mr. Margolis stands straighter. There is tension in his body, barely noticeable, perhaps not noticeable at all to the children traveling with him. He knows that something is coming, and that something is the point of the visit.

I tense as well.

The ball starts in the center, then gets kicked toward the rubble goal. The children follow it, scrambling and laughing—that slightly hysterical sound—as they kick the ball back and forth between them.

Another child tries to insert himself between feet and ball, fails, stumbles, then sprawls in the dust.

The observing children are silent now, even the boys, who crane forward as they watch. Atalia has moved to the very front of the crowd. Her eyes sparkle, and she holds her breath as she watches, lost in the game.

The playing children keep moving, closer and closer to the goal. The ball goes back and forth between various feet: sometimes it gets kicked toward the rubble, and sometimes it moves back toward the center.

Mr. Margolis is so tense he's vibrating. I can see the shivering motion in his back, his arms. His assistant is looking down.

I hold my breath.

The gamesters head toward the rubble, screaming and blocking, the ball moving furiously. One child has positioned himself in front of the rub-

ble as some kind of goalie. He is smaller than the others, but quick. Twice he blocks shots and from the reaction of the crowd around him, I assume his blocks are good.

The gamesters part: the ball slides through the opening, kicked by one of the girls.

It gets the goalie by surprise. He leaps for the ball, and then the boy lands on the rubble. Other children pile on top of him. The laughing continues as the rubble shifts.

The rubble shifts, and Mr. Margolis takes one single step forward as if he can stop it, and then the children tumble one on top of the other, still laughing, playing, before the rubble explodes.

Dust and dirt particles rise like a fan reaching toward the sky. The particles are several colors—black, brown, red—and I realize I am not looking at dirt, but human parts blown literally to bits.

The watching children scream and some turn away. Others duck as if they are going to get hit by shrapnel—only they can't; it's one of the few things not replicated.

Mr. Margolis's eyes are closed, his assistant is still looking down, but Atalia—

Atalia is screaming. She has fallen to her knees, her hands in front of her face, and she is screaming as no child should scream, shrill with terror, and with the edge of mental collapse.

The dirt hits the ground in a splatter that leaves bones and charred bits of flesh and blood all over the playing field. The boy who had sprawled earlier, stands, the shock on his face palpable.

He turns and runs to where I do not know, lost to history, perhaps the one who recorded this incident so that the time-traveling psychologists could pick it as the first deadly place to bring such innocent minds.

Mr. Margolis has opened his eyes. The other children, the time-traveling children, have stopped screaming, even Atalia, who is still on her knees. She is rocking, her hands still over her mouth, her eyes so big that they take over her entire face.

The assistant looks to Mr. Margolis.

"I'll take care of it," he says, and walks to the child, still rocking, her eyes glassy and glazed.

When Atalia sees him, she looks up at him—no longer four, but that inexpressible age that all children have when they believe their lives have ended, that look they can give that is both a cry for help and a cry for comfort, and he reaches down, the way any parent would do, and scoops her into his arms.

She clings, the sobs beginning, small at first, then wrenching, whooping noises that demand comfort. To his credit, Mr. Margolis offers no sweeping platitudes, no broad assurances that all will be fine.

He just holds her and comforts her and lets her cry on his shoulder.

Atalia's eyes close, and her shuddering stops. Mr. Margolis holds her a moment longer before setting her down, and disappearing from my sight.

That night I dream of exploding children, their insides creating a gray

cubist kaleidoscope against the sky. There is no one to comfort me when I wake up, no one to let me sob against his shoulder.

And I wish for it, despite my advanced age. I have not seen anything like that moment, although I have read of it. And I will not have to go from that moment to another, and another, and another, until I realize the full extent of destruction, both human and material, that composes an act of war.

Mr. Margolis will be relieved of his job. He will also be prosecuted for violating the terms of his employment.

No touch, no comfort allowed. Each child must come to an understanding of those moments on her own. None of them should be given the false impression that comfort will ease pain, that these situations will get better.

The only way to avoid such painful moments is to abandon war altogether.

I can do nothing to save this man, not that he wants saving. He no longer has the hardness necessary for his job.

I wonder if he ever had it—how many other children he gave aid and comfort to. Perhaps he reported this one only because the assistant watched, or because he had been to this site before and anticipated the death shower, or because, for a brief second, he forgot his true purpose, the mission that he has interfered with.

I do not have to see him again, but his voice still echoes in my mind, mixed with hysterical laughter and the sound of dirt, flesh, and bone as it scatters across dry ground:

Ten, twenty, thirty years from now, you'll see.

You'll see.

But I find myself thinking, as I close my eyes to fight for a few more hours' sleep, that I have seen enough. ❍

TRANSPLANT

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead explains that the genesis for the following story comes from a visit to one of the world's largest enclosed spaces—the final assembly factory in Everett, Washington, for 747's and other gigantic airplanes. "I imagined how you could easily fit my whole neighborhood under that roof. It was an arresting image. Then, being in the Pacific Northwest, I naturally began thinking about clouds." A slightly altered version of this tale now forms the middle part of a novel. Mr. Skillingstead's short story, "Dead Worlds" (*Asimov's*, June 2003), will be reprinted in Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best.*

When Laird Ulin came for my eyes—again—I wasn't there. One set should have lasted that pompous gasbag twenty-five years. Vanity brought him back after a mere ten. Once they left me, my eyes, as with all my other organs, resumed their perishable status. Meanwhile, I grew a replacement. Laird couldn't be bothered with corrective surgery, and besides, the surgeons on board *Infinity* were primarily harvesters. And I was primarily the farm.

Not being there was the easy part. At about the time Ulin expected me in surgical prep, I was strolling through Venice. Someone had turned the canal water periwinkle. Since no real water was involved, such a transformation was simply accomplished and did no harm, except to the verisimilitude.

Two biomechs sat in front of a café façade (which was real) sipping from demitasses of espresso (which was synth). They were supposed to resemble a man and a woman. And they did, too, if the light was sufficiently dim and you squinted and were perhaps drunk or a little blind.

I sat at a nearby table under the shade of a Cinzano umbrella. The biomechs ignored me. It was a special kind of ignoring. The kind that conveys an insecure species of seething envy. God had touched me: I was a practical immortal; *they* were puppets with uploaded memories.

I said, "Espresso," and a thing that looked like a traffic light with four erector-set legs clickity-clacked out of the café and placed a thick, white saucer with a demitasse of black synth on the table. You didn't need periwinkle canal water to spoil verisimilitude.

I sat sipping synth (not out of a seashell by the seashore, thank good-

ness), pinky extended at the proper angle, until the biomechs got up and walked away. At a certain point, they passed through the holographic scrim that presented the illusion of a street continuing in diminishing perspective. The street scene shivered, and two instantly created figures strolled away into the distance in place of the couple.

I put my demitasse down.

The street scene continued to shiver and wobble. Then the canal turned black, which gave the parked gondolas the appearance of projecting over a stygian abyss.

After that, the whole damn thing crashed.

Which was the beginning of the *hard* part, earlier implied.

How does one while away the years between stars? I mean, after you've read everything. For me, sabotage came to mind. Picture *Infinity* as a giant armadillo, twenty kilometers long, half again as tall and five wide. In the uppermost section—the Command Level—dwell the biomechs, a handful of machine people determined to live out the duration of the voyage. Of course, only Laird Ulin and I were "alive" in the usual sense of the word. The biomechs *remembered* being alive, but that didn't count. Their biomechanical bodies could ingest synthetic espresso and even taste it. They could hold hands if they wanted to, but coitus was a technical conundrum beyond their design.

Meanwhile, Ulin's longevity was dependent upon the miracle of *my* endlessly regenerative body, as well as a full complement of rejuvenation treatments developed from studies of my unique genetic material, which at least kept his bones sturdy and his muscle-mass relatively limber. Ulin's medical types regularly extracted small quantities of my pineal excretions, from which they created a neurochemical wash to irrigate Laird's wrinkly organ (no, not that one). Some would question the efficacy of this treatment over the long haul. One can afford to have funny-looking skin and stiff tendons, but who wants a funny brain? Who needs a stiff thalamus? Laird's meglomaniacal tendencies were on the rise. His behavior had grown strange. Stranger, I mean.

Despite endless attempts to replicate the result, I remained the only known person with superhuman longevity—at least at the time of our departure from Earth. Ulin would have much preferred the ability to regenerate his own organs. But money really can't buy everything—like love, or a spare liver, for instance. Some miracles God reserves for the genetically anomalous freak. In this case, me.

Occupying the middle decks of *Infinity* are the farms and resource-reclamation systems. And on the final and largest level: The County, where the general population live, work, love, procreate, and die into the next generation . . . and the next.

Getting from the top of the armadillo to the bottom wasn't easy without a visa. And the Command structure—headed by Laird Ulin—was disinclined to issue me one. Perhaps it had something to do with my recent attempts to go AWOL in the County (okay, the last one was nine years ago, but that's still recent by *my* standards). As usual, Laird had located me with uncanny ease and hauled me back upstairs.

He had been my ticket to the stars, but for these nine years, I'd been lit-

tle more than a pampered prisoner—a walking organ sack, always at Ulin's service. I guess he was afraid to die. Tough. Everybody's afraid of something.

So I built a virus and named it George. Then I conducted a conversation with *Infinity*'s superquantum computer, and arranged for the first sneeze to occur in Venice. I made sure I was in Cinzano shade for the event.

Presently came the sound of magnetic locks releasing. A panel opened in the velvet blackness before which the image of the canal had resided moments ago.

I moved quickly. My perusal of the ship's design database had informed me that, from this point, I would be very near the port to a kilometers-long access tube running from the Command level all the way to the floor of the County. Orienting myself, I turned right and followed a corridor between bulkheads until I came to a wider place and a hatch recessed into the deck.

I knelt on the deck and retracted the hatch by turning a hand-operated wheel. The purpose of this tube, as well as several others located throughout *Infinity,* was to provide direct access between levels in the event of a catastrophic systems failure. At such a time, one might also assume a loss of gravity, which would make traveling the tube a somewhat less-harrowing matter than it was likely to be now, with full gravity—full gravity on *Infinity* being roughly 88 percent Earth normal. It was a very long way down to the County.

The tube was three meters in diameter and there were three platforms, each large enough to accommodate a single passenger. The platforms were attached to pairs of skinny rails on the side of the tube. They were powerless contraptions operated on an elaborate arrangement of counterweights, and had been built with no very great expectation of ever being utilized.

I stepped onto one, secured myself with a strap, released the lock, held on tight, and began utilizing the hell out of it.

I dropped at a moderate rate. Amber light illuminated the tube. Looking up made me feel like I was inside a giant straw slipping back after the big suck. My stomach was fluttering with anticipation. It had been a while since I'd rubbed elbows with humanity. I wondered how my people skills had held up. Actually, I had one person in particular in mind.

After ten minutes or so, the lights began to flicker. Was George making his broader acquaintance with *Infinity*'s intimate architecture?

The lights stuttered a final time and went out. It wasn't too bad at first, but after a while, a flashlight would have been nice. The long black fall gave me an uneasy feeling. I hadn't *planned* on any lights going out. Perhaps George had some plans of his own. Perhaps "plan" was the wrong word altogether. All I'd wanted to do was unlock some doors and disrupt a few non-essential functions. Make it hard for Laird to find me. Eventually he *would* find me, of course, but I'd deal with that when the time came.

I was certain of only one thing: I was through with surgery. Ever since my incredible longevity had become known back on Earth, I'd been subjected to endless examinations, proddings, and probings, the extraction of various and sundry specimens, the harvesting of my organs, the minute examination of my genetic code, and the dissection of my psyche. No one

wanted to believe that God would just flat-out make such an error in my favor. Surely He wouldn't have *chosen* such a smartass!

When Laird Ulin conceived his starship and brought it into being by mean force of will, billions of dollars (he designed the first superquantum computers), and an international consortium, he offered me passage to a new world. I was optimistic enough to think it might be a *better* world (even if it was named after Ulin), Or at least one where I would find my privacy restored. Some suggested that I was running away. One such suggester was the guy who looked back at me every morning when I shaved.

I've already described the price of my ticket.

The platform encountered a pneumatic brake and *shushed* to an uneventful halt. I locked the platform, fumbled my safety strap loose, and began groping for the exit.

The little girl with choppy yellow hair pointed and said, "The sky's broken."

Infinity was a ship full of skies, especially on the County level. They made everyone feel better about being sealed inside the world's biggest tin can for the duration.

But this sky *was* broken: A large irregular section had gone black. All around this black wound, horizon to horizon, a high blue and fleecy white summer was in progress. It was impossible to distinguish the real clouds from the holographic facsimiles. Down here, *Infinity* generated her own limited weather phenomenon, the rest was vivid illusion. However, embedded in my virus was a tutorial on stormcraft, which I had hoped to see manifested shortly after my arrival and—fingers crossed—reunion. Just a mild thunderstorm, a little sound, not much fury. It was the romantic in me. Tinkering around with the idea, I'd felt positively Byronesque.

It was hot. I had come upon the girl in the Town Square of Bedford Falls, sitting on a bench in a red jumpsuit, eating a vanilla ice-cream cone. I guessed that she was about six. She made such a pretty picture that I approached her and said hi. It had been quite a while since I'd last seen a child. Up close, this one looked familiar. As soon as I greeted her, she got a look on her face and started pointing at the sky, pale lips puckered worriedly.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It's probably just a minor malfunction. Hey, watch out, you're melting all over the place!" I sat beside her. She wouldn't stop staring up. Those eyes.

"The *sky's* wrong," she said.

"What flavor's your cone?"

"Huh?"

"I said, what flavor's your cone?"

"What flavor does it *look* like?" she asked.

"Strawberry?"

"It's vanilla."

"That was going to be my next guess. What's your name?"

"Alice Greene."

I nodded. "I bet I know your mom's name."

"Bet you *don't*."

"Delilah."

She licked her cone. "Everybody knows everybody."

"Yeah? You don't know *me*."

She shrugged, then shouted: "Mommy!"

A woman had stepped out of the Bedford Falls Hotel and was crossing quickly in our direction. The resemblance between the woman and the little girl was obvious—the hair, especially the violet eyes.

"There's my girl," she said, picking Alice up and holding her.

"Something's wrong with the *sky*," Alice complained.

"Don't look at it, honey."

"Why not? Will it unbreak if I don't look?"

"I'm sure it's just a minor glitch," I said. "Hello, Delilah."

She stared, bestowing upon me the same stupefied gawk her daughter had given the broken sky.

"Ellis—"

"I was on my way over when I bumped into your daughter."

"On your way over. It's been *ten years,* Ellis!"

"Nine, actually. But it feels like ten to *me,* too, dear."

"Mommy, I wanna go inside now," Alice said.

"Just a minute, baby."

"Cute kid," I said.

Delilah gave me a measuring look. "Ellis, what are you doing here?"

"Hey, I thought absence was supposed to cause various internal organs to grow fonder?"

"You haven't changed a bit."

"Naturally not. Neither have you. Beautiful as ever."

She smiled, but said: "Yes, I have. Changed." She didn't mean the crow's feet, which I hated myself for noticing.

A hot breeze scurried through the square. Since I had arrived, the ambient temperature had risen by at least five degrees. That was at ground level. I estimated that it was a lot cooler a kilometer or so above, where George was playing with alterations in the atmosphere, orchestrating temperature and pressure changes. Real clouds formed rapidly over the County. There was something disturbingly aggressive about it. I thought of dark tubes and black wounds slashed into the sky.

"It might not be a bad idea for you to get inside," I said to Delilah.

"Go inside, Mom!"

"What's happening, Ellis?"

"I'm not sure. All I had in mind was a little wind and a rumble or two. This feels bigger."

She regarded me strangely; her fair brow was misted with sweat. "Come inside with us."

"I think I'll sit and watch for a while."

Delilah hesitated a moment longer, glanced at the sky, then turned and walked swiftly toward the hotel. Alice hung over her shoulder and dripped a trail of creamy yellow-white spots behind them, in case she wanted to find her way back to Uncle Ellis.

The square was filling with people. They emerged from storefronts and restaurants and work centers. They halted on the sidewalks, stood strad-

dling bicycles. Bedford Falls was modeled after an idealized small American town of the mid-twentieth century, though it was more Main Street Disney than an authentic reproduction. A nice place to raise the kids. The other towns in the County were Waukegan and De Smet. There must have been a literary type on the naming committee. Well, it probably looked good on paper. Being the only one around who had seen both Disneyland and the original De Smet, my observations were more authentic than the molecular-engineered PerfectWood out of which much of these towns were constructed. I'd had a lot of life between 1965 and 2283. Too much life, I sometimes thought.

People pointed. The sky hung low and threatening, pregnant with storm. The wind picked up. Everyone appeared uneasy. I wanted to pull a Jimmy Stewart, quell the citizenry's incipient panic. But I didn't have it in me. Perhaps I needed somebody to quell *my* incipient panic first.

More than a few of the townspeople (Bedford Fallsians?) noticed me sitting on the bench looking at them. I was a stranger, so that was to be expected. What made me nervous were the flashes of recognition that some of them threw at me. And it wasn't happy let-me-shake-your-hand recognition, either.

I got up and followed the drippy trail to the Hotel, keeping my head down.

Somebody gasped. There were some oh-my-Gods. I looked up from the steps of the hotel. The sky was tinted green. In the distance a narrow funnel cloud probed downward. Jesus.

I went inside.

"You'd better see this," Delilah said. She handed me a palm-sized gizmo. "The alert is running continuously. You seem to be a wanted man."

I activated the device. Laird Ulin's face swam into focus. What lovely eyes! Too bad his skin had the texture and appearance of cold wax.

"This man—" Ulin said, and an image insert of yours truly opened in the lower right corner of the screen. "—is Ellis Herrick. He is an unauthorized intruder in the County, and is personally and solely responsible for the disruptions now occurring. If you encounter Mr. Herrick, you must detain him and immediately alert Command Level authorities."

I handed the device back. "Feel like turning me in?"

"Should I?" Delilah said.

A gust of wind buffeted the building.

"It might be more useful to point me in the direction of the nearest Core Access Interface. I think I need to turn the weather off."

"God makes the weather," Alice said, shaking her head seriously. Perhaps she was mocking me? I reached down and wiped a daub of ice cream off her chin.

"Can you do that?" Delilah asked. "Turn the storm off?"

"Maybe. By the way, where's *Mr.* Delilah?"

She wrinkled her nose in that cute way she had and shook her head. "Waukegan," she said. "And his name is Ben Roos. Why?"

"Idle curiosity."

"Ellis. You *went away*. Remember? For a long time. Besides, you knew I had to get pregnant."

"Ben's my gene dad," Alice piped up. "He's *old*."

Kids say the darndest things. An ironic consequence of my longevity is that I am sterile. Not that the six-year-old was trying to be ironic, or rub it in or anything. Even if I hadn't left her, Delilah would have sought out a sperm donor. That's the whole point of a generation ship.

"I bet I'm older than your gene daddy," I said to Alice.

"He's the mayor," she said back, not sounding too impressed.

"What a guy."

"He's a water farmer, too."

"Now I'm getting all tingly."

Alice giggled.

We were in the apartment behind the front desk of the hotel. A window looked out on the promenade. The light through that window suddenly dimmed, as if a giant shroud had been drawn over the town. There was a roaring. I closed the shades.

"Hang on!"

Something monstrous moved over us. The building shuddered. A woman screamed in the next room. My ears popped. Delilah's face was tense and frightened. She hugged Alice against her breast, and I couldn't see the child's face. Then the window exploded. Sucked out the opening, the shade rattled and danced. I felt the breath drawn from my lungs. Outside, in the weird purple-green light, a raggedy man swept across the promenade, arms and legs flailing like the limbs of a boneless doll. *Son of a bitch!*

In a minute or two, it was over.

The light turned buttery, and shadows fled across the courtyard. I stepped to the window and ripped down what remained of the shade. The sky was blowing clear. Above the shredded clouds, a holographic lie of serenity persisted. My hands were trembling, and I made them into fists. There had been nothing in my virus that could have given birth to this. *Nothing.*

I climbed through the window frame and went to the man. He lay sprawled and twisted. The grass was as vividly green as his blood was red. My hand unsteady, I touched the place on his neck that should have been pulsing, and found that it wasn't.

Behind me, Delilah said, "Ellis—?"

"This is my fault," I said.

Then the man's eyes fluttered, and I jerked my hand back. Hearts can be tricky things.

What a nice day for a bicycle ride. Delilah Greene (with Alice riding tandem) pedaled ahead of me on the winding, swooping path through the Oxygen Forest. Two monorails linked the towns. But with George running amok and the monorails dependent on the centralized computer system, it seemed best to take the scenic route. Also, I wanted to avoid being observed.

It was an odd-looking forest, the trees engineered for maximum carbon dioxide-to-oxygen conversion, bulgy on top like big green cartoon poodle puffs. Whimsical. But I wasn't feeling too whimsical myself. Not like the way I'd felt when I'd concocted a harmless little thunderstorm.

We were on our way to Waukegan. There was an old water farmer in town who also happened to be mayor—and in the office of the mayor was a Core Access Interface. The one in Bedford Falls had exploded, unfortunately (Core interface, not water farmer/mayor). A lot of other things had, too. We left behind us a debris field of PerfectWood flinders but—luckily—no bodies. A black pillar of smoke, wind-smudged, climbed over the roofs of Bedford Falls. Whimsey.

And George was already busy rearranging the atmosphere for round two. Before entering the forest, we saw an impressive cell of mini thunderheads, gorgeously mauve and dimly aflicker from within, standing on the phony horizon like purple-robed clerics of Doom.

Suddenly, darkness fell. Like a guillotine. One moment, it was afternoon, the next, deepest midnight. We stopped riding. I didn't even bother holding my hand in front of my face, because I already knew that I wouldn't be able to see it. Riding was too dangerous, and even walking was problematical. We left the bicycles and blundered around until we found a soft spot to sit and wait.

Eventually, the stars come on, erratically, in clusters, through the branch tangle and cloud tatter. Then the clouds thickened, and the stars were lost. Above them, the moon dialed up, preternaturally bright. Moonlight shot through the clouds like milk poured through India ink. It wasn't enough light to ride by, but we could see well enough to walk. For safety's sake, we held hands. I let it feel good, Delilah's hand in mine. The first time I'd let Delilah feel good to me, she had been eighteen and I had been thirty-six (two hundred and seventy-four in Herrick years). Now she was pushing thirty. This knowledge tweaked my urge toward isolation, but I held on tight to that hand.

There was a distant roll of thunder, and Delilah said, "Why a *storm?* I know you didn't intend for it to be so violent. But why a storm at all?"

Memory, circa 1983: The girl cuddled under my arm is seventeen. And guess what? So am I. Her name is Connie. Mine is Ellis (some things never change). There had been a rumble of thunder then, too, and the wind had rattled the sash like something that wanted to get in, but we were cozy under the sheets where we made love and plans.

I told a version of this memory to Delilah.

"That's sweet," she said.

"It sure was. And we even lived happily ever after. *I* did, at least. *She* got old and died. I've noticed that happens a lot."

"Oh, Ellis."

I stopped walking, and since we were holding hands, it meant that we all three stopped.

"Listen," I said. "The way around serial grieving is to stop living fully. Which I did, back on Earth. Then I came out here so I could do it even better. *Then* I slipped up and got involved with you. And ten years ago, when Laird Ulin came and took me away that last time, I didn't even *try* to come back—not for a long while did I try. Because it was safer to hang out with a bunch of ageless mechanical men and one waxy bastard who could play chess. Then it occurred to me that I missed you like hell, and *everybody* grieves anyway. Maybe it had something to do with being locked up

in the Command Level, having my choice denied. Whatever. So now I'm the Dr. Manette of the stars, recalled to life."

"I thought it was nine years," Delilah said, and squeezed my hand. Some people just aren't equipped to appreciate a beautiful speech rife with Dickensian allusions.

Alice said, "I have to pee."

So she squatted in the bushes while Delilah held her hand and I held Delilah's hand. That's how it gets when you don't want to lose anybody in the dark. Telling my story of love and plans, I'd left out the part about Delilah being so much like Connie that she might have been her reincarnation. Their inner light and outer bearing were so similar. Long life hadn't granted me any special insights into the human soul, but I could believe in it. I suppose I had to.

Delilah said, "I'm glad you came back." And she leaned over and kissed me.

"I'm glad you did, too," I said, and kissed her mouth.

A breeze freshened through the forest, rustling things. The atmosphere felt charged and smelled wet. Then it *was* wet. Very. Lightening forked across the sky, followed closely by a big rolling boom of thunder.

Suddenly, Delilah collapsed. I was still holding her hand, and her weight pulled me off-balance as she went down. A brilliant beam of light fell on us, churning with silver rain. The shiny tranq dart in Delilah's neck flashed. Her hand was loose in mine. Her other hand was empty; Alice was gone.

I squinted into the light, held my free hand up, and felt the second dart punch into my shoulder. Instantly, I snatched it out, but my legs turned to rubber anyway and dumped me on my ass. My body would metabolize the tranquilizer much faster than a normal person's, and I would recover from its effects quicker, too. For me, drinking's no fun. Give me a whisky and watch me cycle through stone sober to mild hangover in about three minutes; I barely notice the fun part.

Cold rain plastered my hair to my head. I felt woozy and wanted to lie back, but resisted. When I put my hands down to prop myself up, I felt the smooth shape of a rock under my fingers. I pried it out of the mud as the drone approached.

It was Laird Ulin—his proxy, anyway. The drone was shaped like a big watermelon, with a small but powerful searchlight attached to a gimbal on its bottom, skeletal manipulator arms, and a ten-inch screen that displayed Laird's mug behind a haze of static.

"Ready to come home, Ellis?"

The inside of my mouth was cottony. I worked up some juice and replied, "How do you always find me?"

Laird winked grotesquely (everything about him was grotesque, as far as I could tell). "I've always got an eye on you, Ellis," he said, and laughed. Grotesquely. "Come along now."

One of the manipulator arms extended toward me. I shoved away from it, sliding in the mud.

"I think I'll stay," I said.

"But they hate you down here now," Laird said. "Everybody knows you're the bringer of storms. You aren't *ever* going to want to come back."

"Now I get it," I said.

The wooziness had passed out of me. A locus of pain throbbed behind my eyes. I tightened my grip on the rock. The wind and rain intensified. There was a lurid light under the clouds. Fire?

The drone swayed closer.

A giant spider leg of sizzling blue lightening stomped down, missing us by only a few meters. My skin suddenly felt too tight. Fried ozone crisped the little hairs in my nostrils. An oxygen tree erupted in flame. Laird's face disappeared in a surge of static. The drone wobbled, and I came up under it with the rock and smashed at it. The drone's manipulator arms flailed around me. I jerked out of its reach, and it bobbled away erratically, undirected. Which probably had more to do with the proximity of the lightning strike than it did with my caveman routine.

Delilah wouldn't wake up. I was hunkered beside her. In the firelight, I saw Alice huddled under a tree not fifty meters away. I shouted over the wind and rain, and she ran to me.

Alice was scared, but she knew something important and was able to tell me. Having previously traveled the forest path, she remembered that midway along there was a rest-stop shelter.

We proceeded there. I carried Delilah fireman style, and held onto Alice's little hand, which was clammy and wet and soft. The wind tore at our sopping clothes. The air smelled of ozone and smoke. For now, I was *glad* of the rain, since it was probably keeping who knew how many fires under control.

By the time we reached the rest-stop, the only unquenched blaze I was aware of was the one in my lower back. I laid Delilah down on a bench and pushed her eyelids open one at a time with my thumb. She had nice pupils. I checked her pulse, too, which was slow but steady. The storm rattled on the roof like a shower of bones. There were Perfectwood benches, a lavatory, fresh water, and a rack of personal traveler's packs and first-aid kits.

Alice stood in a corner, shivering. I gave her a hug and advised her not to be scared.

"I'm *not* scared," she said indignantly. "Why doesn't my mom wake up?"

"She will," I said. "But probably not for a while. You're going to sit here with her and make sure *she's* not scared when she does wake up."

"All by myself?" Alice said.

"Sure. You're a big girl, aren't you?"

"I want you to stay, too."

"I can't, honey. But I'll come back, then we'll all three be together, okay?"

She looked at her feet. "Okay."

"Good girl."

There was one more thing to do before I left. The traveler's kits contained, among other things, a vacuum sealed "fruit" paste snack and a little spoon. I told Alice not to freak out if I got loud. She made her worried mouth, that sour pucker of pale lips. I kissed the top of her wet head, then took my spoon into the lavatory and locked the door.

My eye offended me, but I sure as hell didn't want to pluck out the wrong one. To be on the safe side, I could have done both, but that would

have left me blind for a couple of weeks. Not a good idea. I did eenie-meeny, but my intuition suggested one more miney after the final mo. Left eye.

I did some Zen rigmarole, breathing myself into a kind of auto-hypnotic trance while I sat on the jakes. Then I waited for a particularly loud thunder clap and scooped my left eye out with the spoon. Zen breathing techniques are wonderful; I barely screamed at all before fainting.

When I came to on the floor, the eye was staring at me, trailing a spaghetti string of optic nerve. My left orbit throbbed like mad but had already filled in with a damp membrane that signaled the beginning of regeneration.

I brought my hand down flat on the severed eye. I'd miney-moed wisely. Threaded into the goo was an organic transponder with, I'd bet, about a ten-year life span. Laird must have been seeding these things into my eye re-gens for decades. That bastard.

I used the little scissors from one of the first-aid kits to cut an oval of black fabric from my shirt. A fastidious traveler had left a partial roll of dental floss on the shelf over the sink. I poked holes on two sides of the patch and used a length of the floss to hold the patch in place.

When I emerged from the lavatory Alice stared at the eye patch and said, "I don't like it here."

The light was stark. Delilah looked like a wet corpse on the bench. Rain blew against the shelter's walls. I checked Delilah's pulse again and found it steady. I'm hell on pulse-checking, I thought, remembering the not-dead man behind the Bedford Falls Hotel. Delilah's eyes didn't flutter, and a craven part of me was grateful for that. I touched her damp cheek, then turned to Alice.

"Is my mom okay?" she said.

"Yeah. You want to come with me?"

She nodded.

"Okay," I said.

The kid looked relieved, and I recognized her for what she was: an anchoring strand in the web of human attachments I'd recklessly begun to spin from my guts. Some people never learn, I guess.

Daytime dialed up hot after the brief and violent night. Steam rose off everything, even our clothes. An exploded curbside terminal burned merrily on a Waukegan street corner, the flames nearly invisible in the glare of the false sun. Broken glass glittered in the street, trash hustled around in hot little whirlwinds. The air had thickened, and I almost had to swallow every breath like thin soup. Alice had taken hold of my hand again and was squeezing it hard. A couple of times during the long walk from the Oxygen Forest, my stomach had moved in queasy undulations. Which could have been guilt, or—much worse—an indication that George had begun to tamper with the County's gravity field.

"Here," Alice said, tugging me toward the double doors of a chalk-white and very official-looking building, like maybe the place where Mickey Mouse planned all the parades and stuff. On our way to the stairs, I drew some unfriendly looks from people who appeared wrung out and pissed off. One guy did more than look. He seized my arm and spun me around to face him. "You bastard!" he said. Bared teeth, blood crusted on flared

nostril. I braced myself for a blow I probably deserved. But a couple of other men pulled him off, and Alice tugged urgently at my hand. I didn't bother telling her not to be scared.

"This one," she said, once we'd attained the second floor, and she pushed her finger against a door marked by a simple plaque: "Mayor."

I knocked.

The old man who answered was short and stooped, what little hair remaining on his pate was wispy as cobwebs. The wrinkly face brightened slightly at the sight of Alice. He kissed her cheek, then rubbed her hair with a palsied hand. She put up with it.

When he turned his attention to me, all he said was, "You're Herrick." And his eyes were like a pair of peeled grapes staring moistly from nests of papyrus skin. I didn't hold my breath for a kiss.

"And you're—"

"Ben Roos. Alice's father."

"Gene father," Alice said.

Roos scowled at her. "Where's Delilah?"

Alice looked at me. Delilah had called Roos before we departed Bedford Falls. She had assured him that I could put things right if given a chance.

"We had to split up," I said.

He grunted. "You can fix this mess?"

"Possibly."

He grunted again, eloquently, and turned his back. We followed him into the office. He pointed at the Core Access Interface, which looked a little like an old-fashioned barber chair with an even older-fashioned hair dryer attachment. "There you go," Roos said. "People could die, Mr. Herrick. I'm hoping that when you say 'possibly' you're just being coy."

"Me, too."

I sat down and performed a soft interface with the CAI. The old man and Alice and the room and the world slipped away. The superquantum environment read me and produced an analog. George. Mr. George, actually. My seventh-grade history teacher was an Ichabod Crane knock-off, only not as handsome. I'd left him in an empty classroom "correcting" student papers with a liar's red pen, disbursing a stickman army of "D's" and "F's" to papers deserving of better. This was my unconscious symbolic language for the smidgen of chaos I'd intended to introduce, and which, apparently, had morphed into something much more serious.

I looked over George's shoulder. He was drawing smiley faces on the endlessly replenishing stack of papers. Huh?

"You can't outfox me with my own toys," Laird Ulin said, speaking through the mouth of Ichabod George, not looking up from his endless scribble of smilies.

I backed away. The room lacked windows and doors. Laird had isolated my virus and was letting me know as much. I pressed into a corner and found myself folded over to my parent's bedroom, the way it had looked when I was a thirteen-year-old boy. There was another analog: Me, this time. I was rummaging through my mother's purse. I came up with Mom's wallet and started plucking bills out while sneaking looks over my shoulder. Sneaky. Repeat.

I fled from that scene and passed through a complex chain of interconnected vandalisms. My various analog selves set fires, kicked some kid in the balls, tortured insects and small animals, etc. Anyone else seeking problems in the superquantum environment would witness their own versions of various malicious acts—but *my* individual stamp would be on every single one.

"It's quite out of control," Laird Ulin said.

I turned. He was sitting behind a free-floating ebony slab the thickness of a wafer, fiddling with cut-glass chess pieces.

"I thought George would catch you off-guard," I said.

"You forgot about shadows," Laird said. "Or gambled that one wouldn't occur."

"Shit. I gambled."

Ulin grinned.

A quirk of superquantum technology is the occasional quantum shadow—a future ghost in the machine. Laird must have seen my tampering before I even did it, which gave him time to do a little tampering of his own and stamp it with my personal signature—conferring upon me instant persona non grata status in the County.

I felt a weird combination of relief and resignation.

"So now I'll come back to surgery and you'll make things right," I said.

Laird smiled.

The chessboard turned into a crystal display of complex quantum language: the reality behind the dramatic analogs.

"The errors are self-perpetuating," Laird said. "I constructed it that way. Couldn't help myself, Ellis. You made me mad this time." He waved his hand and the chessboard returned.

"Definitely mad," I said, picking up a knight. It was slightly tempting. Retreat was my fatal flaw and I knew it. Besides, there was nothing I could do about the quantum errors Laird had unleashed. Only he could spare the County. Hell, returning to my cozy, emotionally remote cocoon on the Command Level was practically an act of noble self-sacrifice.

"Maybe we should skip the game for now," I said.

"Nonsense," Laird said, taking the knight from my fingers and replacing it in its proper position on the chessboard.

"Shouldn't you be getting busy?" I nodded toward my delinquent analogs.

"There's plenty of time," he said. "All the time in the world. Besides, correcting these errors will be very difficult, and I'm not inclined to do it. The more miserable life is in the County, the less likely you will be to find safe haven. Ever. There will be *no more running away,* Ellis. Now why don't we relax and have a game while the environment sustains?"

I quoted Ben Roos: "People could die."

Laird shrugged. He tapped a pawn on the chessboard. "Shall we play?"

"We shall not."

Laird scowled. I inhaled deeply, withdrew from the interface, and leaned forward in the chair, rubbing my good eye. The patch had slipped a little on the other one, and I adjusted it.

Alice was gone. Ben Roos sat on the small sofa by himself with a cup of tea or something that he didn't appear inclined to drink.

Two men flanked me. They didn't look friendly. Something ticked against the window. The ticking increased and subsided, in waves. Rain. Wind. I looked up at the man on my right and said, "Not guilty." He pulled a frown.

Ben Roos was staring daggers at me from the sofa. He was a pretty good dagger-starer, too. Welcome back to the land of the living. Actually, I was glad to be there. *No more running away.*

"Where's Alice?" I asked.

"She's gone off," he said. "And if anything happens to her it will be on *your* head, like the rest of this mess!"

"I can explain some things," I said.

Roos snorted. "Save your explanations," He stood. "I'll check the uplink. Keep Herrick here until they arrive."

He went out.

I got up, but my flankers crowded me.

"I'll just be on my way," I said. "I have uplinks to check, and miles to go before I sleep."

The slightly older man shook his head. "You're staying right here until the Command authority comes for you."

"Hmmm," I said.

When I started for the door, the younger guy stood in front of me, rather beefishly.

"Have a seat, Mr. Herrick." He grinned. "What are you supposed to be, anyway, a pirate?"

How does one while away the years before and between stars? I mean, after you've read everything and honed your saboteur skills? Study Jeet Kune Do, of course!

I found Mr. Beefy's carotid artery and invited him to unconsciousness. He looked surprised, then slack, then he fell.

His friend took about as much trouble. I guess they hadn't been expecting a fight. Good. There were two sets of hooded raingear hanging in the corner, dripping on the carpet. I appropriated the larger set, put it on, and exited by the window. In 88 percent gravity, one story is doable if you're fussy about landing.

On the sidewalk, I pulled the hood up and kept my head down. A pair of biomechanical men entered the building I'd just exited. I'd have to avoid their type and God only knew what else for a while. Maybe for a long while. But if I could manage to remain at large in the County, Laird would have no choice but to correct the quantum errors. He wouldn't want me to get struck by lightning or stomped by a tornado or torn apart by pissed-off citizens. Would he?

On the path beyond the suburbs of Waukegan, a small girl's voice squealed after me.

I turned around and smiled. "Hey, kid."

"Hi," Alice said. "I ran away."

"What a coincidence."

"Are you going to see my mom?

"Yeah."

"Me, too."

I thought of Delilah out there, certainly awake by now, perhaps on the path to meet us. I thought of hugs and tears, and the tightening web of relationship. I thought of letting her in through the open door in my heart, which was really an unsutured wound.

The top-heavy oxygen trees tossed wildly in the wind. Dark clouds scudded overhead, dumping rain below a holographic flicker of summer. The great black gash in the sky was visible, and Alice stared upward, her lips puckered tensely.

"Don't be afraid," I said.

"I'm not afraid."

I picked up her little hand. "Me neither, kid," I said. But I was a liar. ❍

THE 2004 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

(Continued from page 11)

or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a $10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. Checks should be made out to the Asimov Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please do not put your name on the actual story.

Before entering the contest, please contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

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Next year's winner will be announced at the 2005 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, and on our website.

Tenth Anniversary Asimov Award Winners Roll Call

1994	**Eric Choi**	**"Dedication"**
1995	**Shannon Fowler**	**"The Cinderella Project"**
1996	**Dylan Otto Krider**	**"He Believed in Probability"**
1997	**David Barr Kirtley**	**"Lest We Forget"**
1998	**Emily Thornbury**	**"Worm Holes"**
1999	**Marissa K. Lingen**	**"In the Garden and the Graves"**
2000	**Beth Adele Long**	**"Repeating Patterns"**
2001	**Mark Jacobsen**	**"Conquering Europa"**
2002	**Lena DeTar**	**"Making Waves"**
2003	**Bryn Neuenschwander**	**"Calling Into Silence"**
2004	**Anthony Ha**	**"Orbiting"**

THE GUARDIAN

Meredith Simmons

Meredith Simmons tells us she taught high-school and college English for many years until she discovered that it was easier to sell houses than grammar. She switched to a career in real estate, but her fascination with words never paled. A few years ago, Ms. Simmons returned to her first love and has been "seriously" writing for the past five years. She is the winner of the seventeenth Writers of the Future grand prize. The author is married to her high school sweetheart. They have one son and two terrific grandsons. This is her first story to appear in *Asimov's*.

Mama Lota's knees throbbed painfully with every step. The path along the cliffs to Soonrisa was steep, and she had to brace each foot to keep from breaking into an unseemly trot. In her youth, she'd easily made the trip back and forth from the Guardian's cave to the shore-side villages a couple of times a day. Now, a journey in one direction was onerous, and she resented the necessity.

Kaslet wouldn't accept her reading of the omens and insisted she personally view the recently beached log he thought was so wondrous. That a village chief felt he could compel the Guardian of the Weeping Gods to do his bidding was just one more example of the deterioration of her authority. In the past, a chief would have seen the wisdom of the Guardian's pronouncements.

The tradition, passed from Guardian to Guardian, explained that odd remnants of the Drowned World would occasionally wash up on Tamar's shore. This was not wondrous; it was to be expected. No further discussion should have been needed.

But Kaslet had whined and cajoled. He'd made a nuisance of himself, interfering with preparations for the coming Woman's Ceremonies, until Mama Lota chose to humor him and make the trek.

The beach was wide and hot. Mama Lota squinted into the glare of sun on white sand and glistening sea. She forced her bulk through the soft,

shifting surface. Sweat pooled beneath her heavy breasts and dribbled toward her waist. Her irritation grew.

"Here it is, Mama Lota," Kaslet said, gesturing to the massive piece of wood imbedded in the sand as if he were a conjurer revealing his trick. "This is something more than the occasional log sent to us by the ghosts of the Drowned World."

Mama Lota bit back scathing words at his sacrilege. Had the fool forgotten all that he'd learned at his own manhood ceremony thirty years before? Did he think the universal truths had changed?

But the log *was* very large, and Mama Lota thought it indeed looked strange. It was nothing like the palms that ringed Tamar, nor like the dwarfed pines that clung to the mountainsides. The trunk was massive. The bark was rough and firm beneath her stroking fingers. Nubs of thick branches jutted from the trunk. She could almost understand Kaslet's perplexity. But almost was not enough when tradition held the answers.

She assumed a patient expression and said, "We should give thanks for this gift to the ancestors who now reside in the Drowned Lands. This wood is certainly hard and will make ideal timbers for building. Of course, much work will be required of the men of the village, but that is the way of most of the ghosts' gifts."

"You don't think it indicates other lands?" Kaslet asked, voice filled with eager anticipation.

Mama Lota sighed. "Always there are questions of other lands. For generations, the pattern has been the same: something odd washes up, adventurous young men convince themselves this is a sign there are others in our world, a canoe—or more tragically, two canoes—launch to find these new lands. And then, what? How many of these foolhardy men have ever returned? None. Ever.

"Back in the time of the ancestors, the Weeping Gods filled the world with their tears because of man's misdeeds. Only those who lived on Mount Tamar escaped the drowning. If occasionally the ghosts of the Drowned Land send us gifts, why must you question the truths that have been passed down to you by myself and all the Guardians who have come before?"

Kaslet shifted his feet in the sand. He looked embarrassed, but the hope of adventure still shone in his eyes. It is not only the young men who are afflicted by foolishness, Mama Lota thought.

"None have returned," she said softly, placing her hand on Kaslet's bony arm. "Remember that. If there were other lands, would not the Gods have told us?"

"You are right, Mama," Kaslet said, but he did not meet her eyes. She didn't know if this were from embarrassment or continued futile hope, but she had become too uncomfortably hot to worry about it.

"Remember what has been taught, Kaslet, and then set the men to work splitting this great gift into useable sizes. The village expands and new huts need to be added. Even the palm fronds for roofing are plentiful this time of year. The Weeping Gods are wise in their gifts." She thought an extensive bout of construction would keep the wanderlust from affecting the village youths. Hard work had a way of reducing foolishness.

"And have two big boys help me back to the Gods' Cave." This last request put her at a slight disadvantage, but the climb would be as long as the descent, and two strong pair of arms would ease her way. It was the least that the villagers could do for bothering her with their stupidity.

Mama Lota sat on a raised bed of Cheppalla leaves, facing the symbols of the Weeping Gods. Three massive forms loomed out of the rocks at the end of the shallow cave, each with a close approximation of a face, each weeping tears that filled a small pool beneath them. The soft drops made a sound as regular as breathing. The Cheppalla leaves released their tangy fragrance. Here in the moist coolness, she should have found peace, but she felt only irritation.

"Why must the people question what I say?" she asked the silent Gods. "For fifty years I've led them as the Guardian of the Cave, and still they torment me with their folly. I've given them the answers before the questions were ever asked, and still they doubt my word."

She looked at the three god-forms as if waiting for an answer. Often, she told the people that the Gods spoke to her, but the message really came from within her own head. She had been taught the will of the Gods and there was no reason to think that their will would ever change. Over all the years *her* will never had.

She lacked the magic that allowed her to converse with the Gods. She always had. But when the old Guardian, Mama Puletta, had indicated an interest in her, the gap-toothed, portly Lota had been smart enough to pretend to powers she did not possess. For fifty years, she'd successfully been the island's Mama. She knew the path to righteousness and tried to make the people follow it.

She was sure this latest round of questions would stop when the log was used and gone. The villagers would remain quiet until the next gift floated in from the sea, and then they would begin again. She was vexed that people would not let the traditions stand without question.

Her legs still throbbed from her unnecessary climb. Age and weight were taking their toll. Perhaps she should choose the next potential Guardian from this current group of girls about to undergo the Woman's Ceremony. The chiefs from the two smaller villages on the windward side of the island had suggested as much two years ago, but Mama Lota would hear nothing of it then. She'd simply said that a candidate with the necessary powerful magic had not presented herself. Mama Lota wondered if she would be able to spot such a one. Besides, to train a successor would plant in the people's minds the suspicion that their current Guardian was becoming unfit for the task.

She looked at the three Gods with affection. They had afforded her a good life. Their silence was no longer something that concerned her.

The day of the Woman's Ceremony, there was a terrible storm. The heavens poured forth a deluge. Lightning tore the sky. Five of the large fishing canoes were washed out to sea, and many of the huts were destroyed in all three villages. The Ceremony had to be postponed. Mama Lota explained that it was the villagers' own lack of faith in the Gods and

their disregard for the traditions that had brought the storm on such a holy day. The crowd that huddled in the broad cave two days later, when the Woman's Ceremony *did* take place, had been subdued. The gifts that followed were more lavish than usual.

Mama Lota felt vindicated. Her righteousness was unassailed.

It was with great consternation, therefore, the day following the ceremony, that she recognized an official delegation from Chotee, the smallest of the villages, walking up the winding path. It took no magic to see that this heralded no happy event.

"Greetings, Elders," she said with dignity just as they reached the pinnacle of the trail. That a couple of the older men puffed as badly as she did after the climb gave her some satisfaction. It was always best to meet such a group just as they had reached the top.

"We have come in great haste," said Tubatt, the chieftain, a man she remembered as a young boy long after she had come to power. How gray he looked, how old, how frightened. "The sea has cast something most strange upon our shore. We need your guidance, and, most probably, your intercession with the Weeping Gods."

Mama Lota was mollified by the delegation's respectful tone. The ghosts of the Drowned Land had undoubtedly left another gift—but thankfully, this time there was no talk of other lands. She didn't look forward to the hike to Chotee, but at least these men had approached her with more reverence than that fool Kaslet had.

"If something has disturbed such a distinguished group of Elders, then I will come at once," she said.

So once again she found herself walking down a steep, cliff trail, this time angling to the sunset side of the island. The beauty of the sky and sea and wheeling birds was lost on her as she forced her protesting knees forward. Once again she stood upon a breathless beach, pounded by the sun, and looked at something that should not have been there.

This gift, if indeed it were such, was much more frightening than the huge log. This also was wood, but, this time, flat slats, cleverly connected to one another in a way she could not easily divine. It was obviously the work of human hands, but no hands that anyone on Tamar would know.

"What do you think it is, Mama?" Chotee asked.

Mama Lota had not the first idea.

But she had been the island's Mama for all these years and had developed a certain craftiness. This object frightened her as none other had ever done, but she could not let these people know this, and so she said, "At first glance, I would say that it is something disturbed from one of the drowned villages by the recent storm. A part of a temple complex, perhaps. I have seen such ancient constructions in some of my holy dreams. But I think it best if I confer with the Gods themselves. They know all and can reveal it to me."

The long return climb seemed to take much less energy. Fear drove Mama Lota as surely as a strong wind will force a canoe from its path, regardless of the power of the paddlers.

Mama Lota faced the Weeping Gods, kneeling in a position of supplica-

tion. That she had taken such a stance was a sign of her desperation and fear.

"Talk to me of this wonder," she pleaded. "Tell me what this latest gift portends. Long have I served you and now I need your counsel. I suspect that you have seen fit to raise another piece of land above the waters and have peopled it with those we do not know. If this is so, speak!"

But the Weeping Gods stood as they always had, water seeping over their faint faces to gather in the sacred pool below. No expression changed. No word was uttered.

"Speak," Mama Lota said, anger beginning to color her voice. After all she had done to keep the traditions. After all she had done to keep the Gods in the forefront of the people's minds. How could they stand mute before her?

"Speak!" This time a command.

She had never had the magic that she pretended, but she'd still fulfilled the position of Guardian. If her prevarications and creative solutions had angered the Gods, they could have removed her long ago. How dare they remain silent in the face of this crisis?

Rage suddenly came upon her. The taste of spoiled fish filled her mouth and she spat into the sacred pool.

"You are nothing but worn places in the stone at the end of a wide, shallow cave," she said. "You are no Gods. You are only the means to power for a few select women who have had the brains to use what has been placed in their hands. It is not I who am lacking. It is *you*.

"And if there are no Gods, then I have been the power all along!"

This final realization filled her with calm. She was indeed the controlling figure she had thought herself to be. The Gods were a sham, but she was not. She could find the solution to this current problem. She could calm the fears of the villagers. She could keep the young men from trying to find other lands and other peoples. There were no others in all the world. The people of Tamar were all. Just as she herself was now all.

It took no special magic to reach the Gods. They were not there.

The next day, she called all of the Elders of all of the villages to her. There was no need for her to strain her legs going to the people; they could come to her.

And so they did, with gratifying speed.

"My people," she said to them, "I have spoken to the Weeping Gods in a holy dream. They have explained that my first impression was indeed correct. The joined pieces of lumber that have floated to our shore were part of an ancient temple. This gift was sent to remind the people of Tamar that the world was vast before man became corrupt and so many were destroyed by the tears of the Gods. You must hold true to the path that the Gods have indicated. You must listen to what they have to say through me. I will keep you from the harm that befell the others of this world."

One of the Elders from Soonrisa came forward, knelt, and kissed the trailing edge of her skirt. "We listen to you Mama in all things," he said.

Mama Lota felt a surge of confidence. *She* had replaced the stupid

silent gods. The power that had for so long wrongly been theirs was now *hers*. She was placing her hand on the Elder's head in benediction when running footsteps were heard on the trail.

A young man from Soonrisa scuttled up the last bit of the hill. "Mama, Elders," he called. "The most frightful thing of all has occurred! A whale with a fire on its back is approaching the village!"

Mama Lota almost laughed. A whale with a fire on its back indeed! The log, the joined wood, these things that might—just might—suggest that the people of Tamar were not alone in the world, were frightening. A bit of childish imagination was nothing to fear.

"Let us go to the edge of the trail and view this wonder that is being reported." The hint of humor in her voice seemed to calm the fear the Elders had exhibited in hearing the runner's words. She led the Elders to the edge of the first drop on the sunrise side and looked out.

The sky, the sea, the circling sea birds, all was as it should be. The village of Soonrisa nestled in its usual place along the edge of the small bay. And just entering the curve of the bay there was—oh, you spiteful Weeping Gods!—there was a great black, whale-shaped form, smoke indeed pouring from what looked to be a huge hollow log mounted vertically on its back.

The Elders screamed in consternation and began scurrying toward their respective villages with the uncoordinated chaos of a disturbed anthill. None looked to Mama Lota for advice. All fled, leaving her in possession of her high viewing point.

Mama Lota was struck as dumb as the Weeping Gods, unable to call encouragement or make suggestions. Mama Lota stood as unmoving as the Gods she had for so long served. She watched as the smoking whale approached the shore and spewed forth smaller, smokeless versions of itself. Versions that looked from this distance like strangely shaped boats rowed by groups of men.

Strange men, pale men. The ghosts of the Drowned Lands are certainly among us, she thought. But these men were now running toward the scattering villagers. One of the women, caught digging roots in her chaka patch, reacted as she would to invading birds and shook a flapping cloth in the men's direction. One of the strange, pale men pulled forth a third arm, stiff and misshapen, and pointed it at the woman. There was an odd, tiny clap of thunder, a wisp of smoke, and the woman in the chaka patch fell to the ground.

The people fled from these demon men, but the ghostly men pursued the villagers, throwing nets over many of them, hauling them together as the fishermen did fish.

From her high, holy hill, Mama Lota could do nothing. The screams of the netted people reached her, sounding like the call of the sea birds when a hawk is flying near their nests.

"Help them, Gods!" she called in anguish. "Save your people!"

And whether through supernatural help or through their own agility, many did escape the pale men. But many were hauled together and forced into the boats that took the wailing people of Tamar to the waiting, smoking whale.

And then this whale, this enchanted ship, whatever it could be, pushed its way through the incoming tide and rapidly gained the horizon.

Mama Lota saw it all, unmoving, mute, helpless. And then she seemed to overbalance and fall onto the ground.

It was in that position that the people found her. Lying stiff and silent as the Gods themselves.

The people, having already suffered an unimaginable loss, sent a loud keening up to the sky when they saw their Mama felled like a great tree. Mama Lota heard them, but could not move, could not speak. Even as they carried her into the cave and set her beside the Weeping Gods, she could not indicate that she still lived.

Through unblinking eyes, Mama Lota watched her people mourn her, and then she was alone in the cave, alone with the Weeping Gods.

A day passed, and Mama Lota thirsted for the water in the sacred pool, but could not reach it. By the second day, the sound of running water echoed in her ears, her eyes glazed, and her stomach was a continual cramp. But still motion, speech, eluded her.

And then she heard a deep, rumbling sound, and she knew that the Weeping Gods were speaking. But without the magic she had so long claimed, all she could discern was laughter. ○

YARD SALE

Kit Reed

Kit Reed's latest book, *Thinner Than Thou,* is just out from Tor. Her novels include *Captain Grownup, Fort Privilege, Catholic Girls, J. Eden,* and *Little Sisters of the Apocalypse.* As Kit Craig, she is the author of *Gone, Twice Burned,* and other psychological thrillers. A Guggenheim fellow, she is the first American recipient of an international literary grant from the Abraham Woursell Foundation. Ms. Reed has had stories in, among others, *The Yale Review, F&SF, Omni,* and *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Literature. The New York Times Book Review* says of her short fiction, "Most of these stories shine with the incisive edginess of brilliant cartoons . . . they are less fantastic than visionary."

"Okay Sally, what do you want me to do with these?"

"Mark them ONE DOLLAR OR BEST OFFER." I want everything out. Out, so we can leave this place and lock the door behind us. Between us, Mare and I have pushed or dragged most of the big stuff onto the grass in front of the house and now we are tagging the little stuff, everything the Praying Hands hasn't already taken. It was hard getting it out the door, but we managed. It was hard getting out the door ourselves, but it won't be hard much longer. We are on the road to freedom. The yard sale starts tomorrow, and with any luck scavengers come tonight and half of the stuff gets stolen.

No!

When we unload this first batch, we'll start on the next. We will clean out Father's things by the end of the week and when the last bit of our father is gone for good we will be free to go. I can walk away from this hateful house of his and never come back. But my sister is dawdling. "Get on it, Mare. What's your problem?"

"These are Daddy's stamps," Mare says with this fool hurt look.

"My point. Daddy's stamps." I am trying to be patient. "It's time to get rid of them. Put PRICED TO CLEAR."

Trapped in this house with that awful man for all these years and my damn fool sister seems bent on hanging on to what's left of him. Mare is paddling in the sunlight, clutching his stamp albums. "What would Daddy say?"

I want to shake her for being such a wuss. "He's dead and buried for Pete's sake. What difference does it make?"

It's my stamp collection, idiot. Are you too stupid to know it's worth thousands?

I shoot a look at Mary. —Do you hear it too?

She looks so scared that I think she does. She says, "He'd kill us."

"He is done killing us," I say. I cover my ears and start humming to shut him out. We will sell our father's junk and get rid of this big old ark of a house and that'll be the end of him. I promised Mom.

It's probably worth millions.

Shut up, asshole, I'm warning you. I brought your damn gold things home from the hospital because you insisted—your stupid Phi Beta Kappa key and your gold wire frames and your gold pivot tooth, that you were scared shit somebody would steal them. I have half a mind to . . .

You promised.

Mary flashes her eyes at me.

. . . I only promised so you'd go ahead and die. You think I don't know you would of hung on forever just to take care of them? Same as you saved every stick and splinter you ever collected and hung on to everybody, like our poor mother, you grasping old bastard. Your things, your things, she spent her life taking care of your things and by God I am here to see that it is over. Poor Mom's moaning inside right now, wringing her hands and worrying. Listen. I'll keep your creepy gold things, you made me swear, but by God that's all I'm going to keep, and I am keeping them at a safe distance. In the basement behind the furnace in a shoebox, where they can't hurt us. When I get a minute I'm going to cement them in back there so nobody will find them and . . .

What?

—I don't know. Mom got all weird when I shoved the shoebox with your gold tooth and your personal gold-framed glasses behind the furnace but I had to. We are getting rid of everything you used to own so she can have her freedom.

I could never get her to leave you but God knows I begged her to flee before it came to this. "I can't go," she told me, and she was crying, "I can't go until I know Howard's things are taken care of."

Idiot bitch. Listen to your mother.

Your things, your things. I am good and sick of taking care of your precious things, forty years' worth of rotting antiques and dusty books, massed Toby jugs and moth-eaten needlepoint doorstops, rusting Matchbox cars and filthy hobnail glass and *Life* Magazines for Mother to tend and organize; forty years' worth of obsessions that Mare and I had to sort and dust and clean and pile up neatly when we were only little girls because if we didn't, they would roll in and smother us, we worked until our fingers bled while you kept amassing stuff! You hauled it in from every junk store and yard sale and flea market, and you wonder why we can't

wait to see the end of you? Forty years tending your stuff, and when Mom couldn't do it any more it all fell on Mare and me: forget about life, girls, forget about meeting Mr. Right; come straight home from work and polish my silver, clean the glass on my daguerreotypes, it is your sacred duty.

Well, when it comes right down to it people are more important than things, old man, and don't you forget it.

We're going to empty this house of you, Father, we are going to get rid of your stuff and hose down the walls and scour all the corners and empty it of every vestige of you.

Not so fast.

Shut up! We're doing it so Mother can walk free, understand? Poor mom, poor old lady: bopping around in there fretting when she should be free and happy in the wild blue, and all because of your wretched collections. Well, we are moving you out of there with this yard sale, every chopstick and teacup you ever owned, we are removing every vestige of you and when we're done, by God that will be the end of you. Then Mare and I, we can sell the damn place and buy a nice condo and start having boyfriends like normal girls.

These are my things!

"Not any more."

Mare jogs my arm. "These stamps could be worth something, maybe we should hold onto them."

Damn right they are.

I don't know if I hear him or if I only think I hear him. "In your dreams, Mare, so chill. Everything goes!"

Damn Mare; I turn my back on her for five minutes and she starts pulling things out of the pile. "This could be worth something, Sally."

It is a bicycle reflector. "Stop that." I push her into a chair and give her a string of labels to mark.

My sister is mourning. "This cup is much too nice to sell."

"Put prices on, nothing higher than ten dollars."

Ten dollars, you bitch, ten dollars!

Who, me? I don't hear anything.

So Mare sits by while I lug our father's telescopes and his stereopticon out of the ark where we grew up; I used to think it was nice but it has become our prison. I am dragging the goddam past out of that place and I can tell you now it's goddam good riddance. The carved furniture, the fat brass andirons, even Father's Barcalounger look smaller out here in the sunshine. His brass-headed cane loses its power. Laid out on the grass like dead soldiers, his Hugo Boss suits look limp and shabby. So does he, now that everything's exposed to the light. In life, Father ran Mare and me around like a pair of housemaids. I suppose I ought to be sad, seeing the old man reduced to a collection of used furniture and second-hand outfits, but you know what? I'm glad. And somewhere deep in the house where I can't see her, Mother is too.

And Mare? Ever the dutiful daughter, she says, "But the Alcott family silver, Sally. Father would freak."

"He isn't exactly in a position to care."

That's what you think.

Mare grabs my wrist. "Did you hear anything just now?"

"No," I say. "No I didn't."

"Sally, what if Daddy's still . . ."

I shoot her a look that should kill her dead. "Mare, are you hearing voices?"

But it doesn't. She sighs. "I was just remembering his last wishes."

"He was blackmailing us! Touch nothing. Keep the house as it is, like this place is the sacred Howard Alcott house and we are the virgin keepers of the shrine. You are dead, Father. It's over."

"Daddy always gets what he wants."

"Not this time."

Don't be so sure.

Mother told me what to do. She came to me in the night. Okay, I'll be upfront about it. Mother is dead.

She has been for a year; she says she went accidentally, i.e., Father's wing nut collection fell on her as she was cleaning the cluttered metal shelf at the head of the basement stairs, thirty badly stacked boxes crashing through the rust, but frankly, I think he wished her dead.

After all, she let his diefenbachia die and it served her right. At the funeral he got all holier than thou. "That's what happens when you don't take care of things."

Listen, she wished herself dead. What happened was, Mom developed pneumonia while she was in the hospital after she fell down the basement stairs when the wing nut boxes hit her. She landed on one of Father's garden statues and punctured a lung. The nurses loved her, they put plastic flowers in her hair and brought her a little plastic thing to breathe into, I would go in to visit and find them yelling at her: "Martha, BREATHE," but I could tell she didn't want to. Both lungs collapsed and she just let go one night and died. That last night she put her palm against my palm on the plastic tent and mouthed a single word: "freedom."

I was crying, we were all crying; even Father was crying, but Mom caught my eye and I could see the flicker that let me know that she was glad because she thought she was done with us.

Okay, I thought. *That makes one of us.* When we got home I said, "Well, I guess we'll need to move into a smaller place."

Father wheeled on me like an iron man with an iron mallet. *Thump.* "Not while I have you two to take care of my house."

Mother came to me in the night. "Sally . . ."

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

"Sally, I'm stuck in this house!"

"I thought you were dead."

"I am, but I have to talk to you."

"But I thought you were . . ."

"Free?" Mom shook her head. "No more than you girls are."

"But you're dead, I saw them bury you."

The sigh she let out was so spooky that all the air in the room shivered. "You might as well know, souls can't leave until everything is satisfied."

I wasn't sure what that meant. I thought maybe it meant we had to hunt down her killer. "He killed you, didn't he?"

"No," she said, and through Mother's eyes I saw our house and every object in it, every treasure he'd brought home and every single item in all his collections, our father's massed belongings closing in on us, everything waiting to be dusted or polished or cleaned or sorted and labeled or catalogued or filed or all of the above; I felt the weight of every single object with which horrible Howard kept us securely in his grasp. "This did."

"But Mom, you're free now."

"I can't leave," she said with a look so profoundly sad that it tore me wide open.

"My God, why?"

"You know what he says."

I tried to make fun of his tone so she'd lighten up. Mimicking, "'You have to take care of things.'"

She didn't lighten up; she repeated him. "'You know what happens when you don't take care of things.' Sally, do you see where this is going?"

I saw my whole life flashing before my eyes and it was over.

"Come on. We'll run away!" I tried to grab her hand but the dead come without appendages—nothing you can grab onto but something fearsome that you come away with, the sense of unresolved problems and abiding grief. Listen, I'm only twenty-two, what do I know. I said, "Mother, please! We'll get Mary and go."

"I can't," she said.

"We'll just sneak out." I jumped up and grabbed my shoes.

She shook her head. "I can't go. But that isn't the bad part. The bad part is . . ."

"Of course we can, he's sleeping, hurry," I was trembling, I couldn't stop gasping, "we don't have much time. . . ."

"The bad part is . . ." Her sigh shook the room. "Neither can you."

She was right. That nagging feeling of things undone brought me straight home after work and put me to polishing, cleaning, sorting, filing when I should have been down at Fiasco's hanging out with my friends and hooking up with cute guys. The dust layering in corners I'd just dusted, the objects out of place, the unfiled magazines that piled up in the mailbox every day, everything Father collected ensnared me. Father's house is a neverending story, the unfinished symphony. You go nuts waiting for the credits to roll: The End. In this family, there isn't one.

Then Mother had The Idea.

By the time she did I'd met a man. This cute guy Randy asked me out for drinks after work. I wanted to go, but in the parking lot guilt tore right through me. Everybody else went out to the Mafia fern bar, but I went home. It was the guilt. I couldn't meet guys while Mare and I had work to do; things in the house were getting out of hand. That night she and I washed the Hummel collection and made Father's dinner and repaired the needlepoint while he watched TV; I filed the snapshots from the summer of '84 and the whole time I knew Randy was going home with Lola Hanson instead of me.

Mare looked at me. "What's up?"

Father said, "Sarah? Is there something on your mind?"

I tried. "I think we should sell this place."

Mare gasped, "Where would we go?"

"Stupid girl." Like the avenging angel, Father flattened me with a glare. "Sell this place? Never!"

"We have to get out of here."

I was in tears but he didn't care. He slapped me hard. "Do you know what happens when you don't take care of things?"

That night Mom came. "It's the things."

"What?" I stopped crying.

"Don't be scared Sally, it's me."

"I know who it is."

"Then do what your mother tells you. The things are the trap. All those *things,* waiting to be taken care of."

"His things," I said.

"They're certainly none of mine." Forty years and he hadn't quenched her spirit. Trapped in here with his things even in death, Mother was dying to go. She'd had enough. She let the thought drift into my head. "Get rid of his things and you'll be free to go, sweetheart. We all will." She rattled me with that sigh. "Especially me."

I got where we were going. Fast. "He'd have to die."

She nodded.

Don't ask me how we did it. I am not going to incriminate myself here, never mind where I got the stuff or what it was or how I slipped it into his after-dinner cappuccino or what I told the paramedics when Mare weakened and dialed 911 even though he was only frothing a little bit, or how we managed all this without Father finding out but even at the end he didn't know what we'd done to him. He didn't, I swear.

Otherwise, why would he have given me his gold-framed glasses and his Phi Beta Kappa key and his gold tooth to take care of instead of calling the cops?

The first day of the yard sale is a sellout. Mare and I are sitting on the front lawn counting the money in the coffee can. I feel better already. "Four hundred dollars, this is great."

"And a woman who collects Mission took the sideboard."

"Why do you care who took the sideboard?"

She shows me the whites of her eyes. "If we don't give this stuff a good home, who's going to take care of it?"

"Like I care who takes care of it?"

You'd damn well better.

I don't hear that. No way. I don't hear anything.

Mare says, "I don't see how you can look so happy."

"You don't get it? We're getting out of jail."

But my sister is fretting. "I don't think the guy who took the Barcalounger is going to take good care of it."

I give her a poke. "Get over yourself. This is our ticket to freedom. Ours and Mom's."

She whirls to look at me. "Whose?"
"Never mind."
"You've been hearing from Mom?"
"Well, sort of."
She looks worried. "This was her idea?"
"It was."
"But Mom died because she wasn't taking good enough care of . . ."
"The wing nut collection?"
Mare sobs, "She didn't stack the boxes right."
"You think the stupid wing nut collection killed her?"
She says in our father's tone, "How many times do I have to tell you, you have to take *care* of things!" My sister is shaking.
You know what happens when you don't take care of things.
"Well we're putting an end to all that, so you can quit worrying."
Don't think it's going to be that easy.
"You shut up," I say.

Hard to explain what happens when we get back inside. It's nice in a way, for the first time we can begin to see the walls. All his railroad and whaling prints are gone, along with the Alcott family portraits that went to a dealer in Cambridge and the Keane children pictures and the gazillion Grand Canyon photographs. There's so little furniture left that we can cross entire rooms without bumping into anything and now that the centerpiece collection is gone, there's enough space in here for us to eat at the dining room table. I think I hear a beginning echo in our rooms because a dealer from New Haven came and took away the Orientals for which, thank you, we are going to receive a bundle.
Not a patch on what they're worth.
Go away.
Mark my words, you're going to be sorry.
I'm warning you.
No, I'm warning you.
Mare says, "Are you okay?"
"Who, me? I'm fine. I've never been better. I think I'll just . . . I'm tired."
"Me too."
"I think I'm going to bed now."
"Me too," Mare says.
Our footsteps echo on the stairs because the rug guy took the Bokhara runner. The old man keeps at it, but I imagine my father's voice is getting fainter.
Mom comes in the night. "How's it going?"
"Great," I say. "Fantastic."
"How's it really going?"
"Half the stuff went today. The rest goes tomorrow and Thursday and what we can't sell, the Praying Hands will come and take on Friday."
Mom sighs. "I hope that will do it."
"What do you mean?"
"You know how Howard is about having his things taken care of."
"They aren't his things any more."

"They aren't the only things he owns," she says with a sigh.

She's a goddamn ghost, what does she have to lose? "Let's hope."

By the end of the week the place is cleared out. We have sold everything. Well, almost everything. Some of it we sent off in the Praying Hands truck and some we couldn't give away. I stood on the curb and made the garbage men take it. Either way, the heap we grew up in is good and empty. Mare and I are spending our last night in the house. We called Domino's at seven on our last day and now we are sleeping in new sleeping bags in our old bedrooms, a kind of Goodbye to All That party, if that makes any sense. Tomorrow Mare and I move to a motel and put this big old ark on the market. In fact, I have made a Saturday date with Randy.

Freedom soon: I can't wait. I . . . "Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom! You're still here."

Our mother sighs. "Afraid so."

This makes me sigh. "His stuff is gone, Mom. You don't have to hang around any more, it's almost over."

"But I am. Still here, I mean."

"You just stopped in to say goodbye, right?"

"Afraid not."

"Mom, we got rid of all his things. You know, all those things that you had to see that they'd get taken care of?"

"Not quite," she says.

"Mom!"

"There's that box behind the furnace."

Oh God, I forgot. I have to think fast. "I'm cementing it in back there first thing in the morning." I am getting this deep, uneasy feeling. "That'll do it, right? Right, Mom?"

"It's worth a try," she says.

I think I hear him scream, *You bitch, you promised.*

Promises are promises, you old fool, but this is ridiculous. It comes to me: If I destroy what's in the shoebox in the cellar, we can all go.

I hear him wailing in rage and pain. *My gold, my gold!*

Shut up, you old bastard. You sound like a broken pirate.

This is what I did with my father's last things. The shoebox, I burned. The Phi Beta Kappa key and the gold tooth, I flushed down the toilet. "Take that," I said. When I put his gold-framed glasses into the Dispos-Al I thought I heard him scream. "Take that," I yelled right before I turned it on. *Bitch, you promised.*

"And that."

Then—fantastic—I stopped hearing him and started hearing her.

Thaaank yoooouuuu. From somewhere overhead my mother's voice comes back to me as she rises up, and up. . . .

And my father's voice rising after her. *So much for youuuuu. . . .*

"Shut up," I yell, "shut up old man. That's the end of you."

If he answers, I don't hear it. I am on the run now.

"Mare. Mare, wake up," I say. There is nothing of my father left in this

room, just the sleeping bag with my baby sister rubbing her eyes and snuggling down again. It's Saturday, and I have a date. I nudge her with my toe. "Get up and get your things, we're free."

She rolls over and yawns. "What?"

"Hurry." I start stuffing her clothes into her duffel bag. I'm not sure why it is so urgent, only that it is. "Get dressed. We have to get out of here."

"You killed the glasses?"

"And the gold tooth. There's nothing left of him here."

That's what you think.

"Mare, let's go, let's *go*!"

One look at my face and she is terrified. "Sally, what's the matter?"

"Not sure," I say, listening. I turn my head this way, that way, but if he's around, Father isn't manifesting, at least not right now.

We both get dressed and from that point we move fast: collecting last bits to take out of the house with us; we hit the stairs running, running, and we hit the front hall running and I hit the front door running and throw it wide and then we hit . . .

What?

Whatever it is, it stops us cold.

I hear him laugh. *Gotcha.*

Desperate, I turn to Mare. She turns to me.

Did you really think it would be that simple?

We are transfixed by the fear dawning in our guts and bubbling up until it spills into our faces. "You son of a bitch," I shout. "I drowned all your gold, even the Phi Beta Kappa key."

"Shh, Sally, shhh!" Mare bows her head like the favorite daughter she is. "Daddy?"

Who else? Father's laughter cracks the room. *That isn't all I own.*

"I got rid of the goddamn glasses."

His huge voice comes down on me like a hammer. *DID YOU FORGET WHO OWNS THE HOUSE? The house is mine, along with everything in it. And the land is mine, so don't think you can get away by torching it.*

I try to run again, and even though the front door is wide open and I can see daylight I hit the wall.

Outside Randy pulls up; when I don't come out he honks. I feel so helpless, trapped in the doorway, but all I can do is wave. He is waiting for me in the car with the motor running.

Now, Father says reasonably, *you can live here like swine or you can live here like good daughters.*

"That's not fair, Mother got away!"

The laugh that splits the air is evil and horrendous. *Your mother doesn't have as much to answer for.*

"Let go," I scream and by this time even pious Mary is screaming, "Oh, Daddy, please let go!"

But Father has us in his grip now, and he won't let go no matter how we struggle. *Now you might as well pick up the phone and get my stuff back. Nobody leaves, so you might as well get comfortable, and let this be a lesson to you. This is what happens to girls who don't take good care of things.* ❍

HEAVY WEATHER

If gravity changed
like the weather,
covering the planet
in waves and pockets,

fronts and depressions,
there would be days
on which we could
not move an inch.

We would lie helpless,
strapped to the
slowly turning Earth
by a rain of weight

that limited both our
breath and movement.
We would have time
to consider the nature

of such an existence,
to daydream about
an end of the storm
and those perfect

feather days when we
could fly like birds
over cities and forests
as if we had wings.

—Bruce Boston

CHICKEN SOUP FOR MARS AND VENUS

Matthew Jarpe

Matthew Jarpe tells us, "This is an example of a 'title first' story." He knew there had to be a tale with this name somewhere out in that ocean of unwritten science fiction stories. With only these five words in mind, Mr. Jarpe sat down at his laptop and fished the following out of the sea.

A collision course. Well, that *had* to be a mistake. There was too much empty space in the solar system for two ships to collide, and there was no good reason to steer one ship into another on purpose. Randy Marsgalen watched the blip on his radar get closer and closer, and finally he decided it was no mistake and switched on his radio.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said on the standard ship-to-ship frequency for the Red Run. "I mean, unidentified vessel, this is the *Rattle and Hum,* Martian registration number 5538-A47D. What the hell are you doing?"

"*Rattle and Hum,* this is *Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* Damager's license 632. Maintain course and speed and prepare for rendezvous."

"Damager?" Randy said, staring at the radar blip. "Crap. What the hell does he want with *me?*"

No one answered him, because he was all alone on the ship. Long-haul trucking was a singular pursuit, perfectly suited to a solitary man. Some truckers might welcome a bit of company along the Red Run. It was half a year at best to schlep manufactured goods from Earth to Mars, or refined metal the other way. A guy could get a little lonely making the trip. But nobody would welcome company in the form of a licensed Damager. It could only mean trouble.

Maintain course and speed. The *Rattle and Hum* had finished its orbital insertion weeks ago. It was capable of only minor course corrections

during the long coast to Mars. Maintain course and speed was all the long hauler *could* do.

"*Tex,* I gotta ask why?" Randy tried to keep his voice pleasant, but didn't quite make it. "Got no contraband here. Honest legal cargo."

"*Rattle and Hum,* maintain your course," the *Massacre* said. "We've got pirate activity in the area. I need to board your vessel and look for stolen goods."

"Pirates," Randy growled. "There *are* no frigging pirates. I've been doing the Red Run for six years and I've never seen one goddamned pirate out here!" He took a deep breath of cold, dry air, smelling as always of machine oil and metal, and activated the pickup. "Gee, *Tex,* I don't know. You hear stories about pirates in the bars at either end of this run, but out here in the big empty, it just doesn't seem possible. A pirate would have to be pretty damn stealthy to sneak up on a fella out here, don't you figure?"

"A family was attacked yesterday," the Damager said. "Homesteaders on their way to the outer system. Everybody dead, their gear stripped. They were back along your vector. You stay your course and I'll board you in two hours."

"I'm staying, chief," Randy said. "Got no place else to go. We're sharing the same orbit, after all."

And in any case, the Damager had weapons. That's what Damager meant. The *Rattle and Hum* had a clumsy particle shield/beam weapon that could stop a small rock or a slow rocket. But the Damager was loaded with all manner of wicked implements. Neutron slammers, lepton fingers, positron poppers. The Damagers got to play with all the cool toys. And, in exchange, all they had to do was prove, after the fact, that they had only used them on bad guys.

Two hours later, and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was on the *Rattle and Hum* like a randy Chihuahua on a sluggish St. Bernard bitch. Prehensile coupling cables joined the two ships so that the suspect couldn't fire up secret engines and make a run for it. Randy listened to the clunks as the cables found purchase, then more clunks as the Damager clomped around the uninhabitable parts of the long hauler. He watched the privateer's progress on his external cameras where he could, tracked him by electrical field distortions where he couldn't.

Some of the Damagers were like police. They did what they were meant to do, and chased bad people around the solar system. Others were out for adventure, and, out of sheer incompetence, caused more trouble than they deterred. And some, a few, were actually criminals themselves. There were stories, told in the trucker bars at the space stations all over the inner system, of Damagers planting evidence and confiscating gear and cargo. And then there were the ones about maniacs who took advantage of the remote darkness of the outer system to perform unspeakable acts. Unspeakable for everyone but the truckers in the bars, that is. Some of the stories went into graphic and improbable detail about the things one could do to someone who would not be missed, in a place where the sun didn't shine, in a void where screams didn't carry.

This guy seemed okay, though, Randy decided. Thorough, a little klutzy

in freefall, slow, but probably not a murderer in spite of the name of his ship. He poked around the cargo hold, the engines, and the life support cluster before making his way to the habitat airlock.

"I have to check inside," he said over the short-range radio.

"Come on in, Captain," Randy told him. "Door's not locked."

The Damager cycled through the airlock. There wasn't much to look at when the inner door opened. His pressure suit was a hardshell, armed with a laser on one arm and a slug thrower on the other. Every surface was reflective at most of the wavelengths that standard lasers had emission lines.

He didn't take off the suit or waste time on niceties, but went right to his search. He combed through the piles of junk Randy had been playing with on his long trip. He had several projects in various stages of work, from hey-maybe-this-will-work to bad-idea-time-to-scrap-it. It did look like a bunch of gear you could have stolen from a homesteader ship, but Randy was sure that none of the serial numbers would match that ship. Randy couldn't guarantee they hadn't been stolen at some point, but he was sure they hadn't been stolen since he had left Earth.

The Damager seemed satisfied. After a few more minutes looking in the food lockers and prodding the growing mass of dirty laundry netted in the corner, he turned to Randy.

"I have to get a positive ID on you, last thing."

"What do you need, retina, fingerprint, tissue sample? How's about a nice firm handshake? Randy Marsgalen, of the Tharsis Marsgalens. Glad to meet you."

The Damager grabbed the hand that Randy offered in his armored gauntlet, but instead of shaking, he twisted it around to expose the wrist and jabbed in a needle. Randy tried to flinch, but couldn't pull out of the cold, mechanically enhanced grip.

"This analysis will just take a moment," the Damager said. "Marsgalen, Randall H. Licensed operator of the *Rattle and Hum*." The Damager turned and pushed off toward the airlock. "I'm finished here. Proceed as you were, and keep an eye out for those pirates."

"I'm telling you, man, there are no pirates out here. You know, most of the truckers who do this run are more afraid of rogue Damagers than any pirates."

The Damager turned back before entering the airlock. "Let me tell you something, Mr. Marsgalen. That homesteader family didn't know what hit them. We heard their distress call. One minute, clear space. The next thing they know their drive is disabled and they're being boarded by well-equipped and well-trained soldiers. By the time we got there the ship was an empty can and twenty-seven frozen bodies shared its vector. I didn't get a chance to check their computer logs because their computers were taken. But in the distress call, they swore that that ship came out of nothing. These pirates are not to be trifled with."

Randy shook his head. "Man, that sounds like a legend. Happened to a friend of a friend. What you're talking about is a cloaking device. Anybody who could invent one of those and make it work in the real world isn't interested in stealing junk from homesteaders!"

"I believed those people, Mr. Marsgalen. If you choose *not* to believe me, that's your funeral."

Randy shrugged, and turned around in time to see his proximity alarm go off for the second time that day. He started to pull himself over to his control console when the hull plate jumped up and smacked him in the nose. He bounced off and raised his arms just in time to stop the opposite wall from caving in his skull. Blood beaded up in front of his face as the lights flickered, went out, then came back on weakly.

He grabbed for the nearest support and pulled himself tight against the underside of the command sling. He could see the lights of the control board flashing to announce multiple emergencies taking place all over the ship. He could taste fire suppression foam in the air.

He pulled up into the command sling and strapped in. He blotted the blood off his face as best he could, and called up the status screens.

A battle was raging outside his ship. Something had come up from behind, fast, and taken out his engines. His automatic defenses had never had a chance. This thing was using Damager weapons or better. Both aft thrusters and over half of his lateral thrusters were out. Only the attitudinal thrusters at the nose of the ship were still working at a hundred percent.

But the *Rattle and Hum* was not defenseless. It had a Damager strapped to its back, and the Damager was fighting back. Incredible energies were being tossed around out there. Rockets were flying, bombs were exploding, and only the occasional ping of blasted metal on the outer hull betrayed the action.

The enemy quickly figured out where the fire was coming from, and moved to the opposite side of the cargo hauler where the Damager could not fire. Randy fired up his attitudinal thrusters and turned the ship back to bring the enemy in range of the *Massacre*'s guns. He kept it up for a few minutes, the enemy trying to disable the atts and the Damager fighting back with everything it had. But it was a standoff. Finally, the attacker hung an enormous amount of fire on the Damager itself, then it turned and ran. It dodged fire for a couple of minutes, then it simply vanished.

"Mr. Marsgalen, I'm going to have to ask permission to re-enter your vehicle," the cop said.

"Door's open. What's the matter, too much damage?"

"I've still got main thrusters," he said over the radio as he cycled the airlock again. "But my lats and my atts are out. Most of the energy weapons are intact, but I've spent nearly all of my projectiles. Worst thing is, the habitat module took a direct hit from a gauss grenade. Totally slagged."

"Bad luck. Your partner make it?"

"I'm solo. It was a tactical AI that was doing all the fighting. It's okay."

"I guess that's good, then. Me, all I lost were my mains and a couple of lats. They must have wanted me intact while they busted you open like a piñata. Well, this isn't much, but I guess you can bunk here until your buddies come and bail you out."

"I'm the only Damager in the area. I'm afraid we're on our own. We've

got to get ready in case the pirate comes back." The airlock opened and the silver-suited figure pushed into the cabin.

"I guess I should clean the place up," Randy said. He grabbed a hand net and swept the air free of debris and electronic components. He picked out the good stuff and dropped the rest into the recycler. "So you're with me all the way to Mars. That's another 150 days. I got no mains, so we'll need help getting into orbit once we get there. No other ships coming this way, either. When you leave at a different time, you take a different transfer orbit. Whole lotta nothing until we get right near the planet." He glanced back at his visitor. "You gonna take that suit off, or you just want to float around until you run out of air?"

The Damager paused and said nothing, then finally raised his hands to his neck. He worked the clasps, then cautiously broke the seals and lifted the helmet free.

The guy's face looked a little funny. The crew cut was normal. Most spacers kept their hair short. At least the ones who had hair. The nose was angular, the jaw sharp, the eyes almond shaped. But there was something strange.

Randy figured it out when the rest of the suit came off. "You're a woman."

The Damager squared her jaw and took a belligerent zero-g stance. "That's right."

"Your voice is different."

"I . . . it's a voice modulator. I've found that truckers like you don't respond well to female authority figures." She glared at him.

"And all I *said* was, you're a woman," Randy said. "Just making an observation. Obvious, yes, but then again, I was surprised." He held out his hand to shake, remembering the needle but keeping it out there. She looked at it like it was covered in filth, but finally took it in a firm grip. "You got a name?"

"Breitman," the Damager said. "Cal Breitman."

"Cal? What's that short for, Callista?" She didn't answer. "Ms. Breitman, then. Nice to meet you. Make yourself at home." He swept his hands around the cramped quarters. "Such as it is. What's mine is yours."

She held up her hand. "Listen to me. We are *not* going to get into a whole thing here. I don't want to hear about how lonely you are. I am not interested in any of your physical or emotional needs. We are in a difficult situation, and I'm willing to work with you to ensure our survival. Now, we have to work together, and I expect a certain amount of professionalism and I expect that my boundaries will be respected. Are we clear?"

"Listen here, Ms. Breitman. You're getting ahead of yourself. Why don't we just assume for the moment that I'm a human being and not some kind of predatory monster or an impulsive troglodyte. I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm a *Martian,* for God's sake, I'm not some kind of slave trader! I don't like being accused of planning to do things that I'm not going to do."

"I'm not accusing you. . . ."

"That's what it sounds like to me. We've got a long trip ahead of us. Let's take a deep breath and start over."

She did take a deep breath, and so did Randy. "You're right," she said, stiffly. "I'm sorry. Thank you for welcoming me into your ship. I will try and make this as pleasant as possible, and I assure you that you will be reimbursed for whatever supplies I use on the way to Mars."

"Well, that's more like it," Randy said. "Now, you can recharge your suit right over there. I'm taking mine out because I've got to check the damage on my engines. That bastard comes back shooting, you give me a shout, because I'm going to need some time to prepare. It ain't easy to kiss your ass goodbye in a space suit."

Growing up in a rapaciously capitalist society, Randy had gotten business advice drilled into him since the time he could walk. Most of that advice concerned things that you couldn't eat. Love, for example, or adventure, could not be eaten. In the Marsgalen household, if you couldn't eat it, you might as well forget it.

Looking over his cargo hold, Randy thought to himself that here, finally, was something his family would appreciate. Row after row of rectangular shipping containers holding pure nutrition. It was grown in vats orbiting Earth, secreted by microorganisms, purified from cloudy water, and dried under hard vacuum. Powdered vat protein.

Venus needed all the PVP Earth could ship it. The miners working there didn't have any way to grow food. Every once in a while, the supply outstripped the demand, or the shipping schedule got mixed up, and there was extra powder. Randy had found out about this occasional glut of the powder, and had bought up enough to fill the *Rattle and Hum*. He wasn't going to Venus, though. His was the Red Run. He was taking his PVP home to Mars.

The Martians had truck farms working down on the rusty dirt. They had fish in covered ponds, and chickens scratching right there in the colony domes. There were even rumors that someone had shipped in some beef cattle. But the Martians, disorganized and all but lawless, always lived on the edge. Randy was betting that they would welcome his edible cargo like a windfall check.

Yes, even old Galen Marsgalen, the clan's founder, would be proud of this business scheme. After all, if you couldn't sell the cargo, at least you could *eat* it.

"Not as bad as I thought," Randy said as he shucked off his suit. He had been out for three hours and the sweat stains under his arms reached right around his chest to shake hands with one another. "I think I can put together one good main thruster with a couple of weeks' work. I can redistribute the lats after a bit of CAD work to get the balance right. My cargo is intact."

Breitman was at the command chair. It looked like she had been plunking around the control panel, uninvited. Randy hovered over her shoulder, trying to see what she'd been accessing. She wasn't trying to hide what she'd been doing, so it probably wasn't anything personal, but still, it would have been nice if she'd asked.

"Now your ride, on the other hand, is screwed," he said. "I've never seen

the kind of damage a . . . what did you call it? Gauss grenade? Sure hope they don't throw another one of those at us."

"You inspected my ship?" It was the first thing she'd said since he'd returned. "That's classified equipment."

"Hey, I've got to crawl over the damned thing just to get back to my engines, the way you parked it. And as far as it being classified, what I saw isn't any great shakes. Leftover military gear. Nothing I haven't seen before in declassified reports."

"The *Massacre* is the most advanced Damager out here."

"But you still don't have cloaking devices," Randy pointed out. "Any ideas what the hell that's all about?"

Breitman turned to the computer. "I've been replaying the recordings of the attack. I thought maybe one of our ships might have seen the thing at some wavelength before it started shooting. No luck. It appears here just after the missiles come up your ass. It brakes, fights it out with the *Massacre* for a while, then runs away and disappears. It's invisible at every wavelength."

Randy leaned over the panel and replayed the files himself. Breitman pulled back out of his way, avoiding physical contact. "Not a glimmer," he mumbled. "It's not there, then it's there. It stayed visible through the fight, when it would have been easier to blink out. So I'm guessing that it can't fight while invisible. Every frigging wavelength. How the hell do you disappear in every wavelength?"

"It's possible they're bending light around themselves so perfectly as to leave no trace."

Randy shook his head. "I don't buy that. Too cumbersome." He pushed off from the panel and bounced around the small habitat. "No, if I were going to go invisible, I'd send out a signal to trick the other ship into not seeing me. Yeah, that's the plan. I'm not really invisible, I just make the computer *think* that I am."

"But that doesn't do anything for direct visual contact."

"It sure doesn't, but hey, I wasn't looking." He gestured around the room. "I don't have any windows. I'll bet your Damager doesn't have any either. You don't even have a clear visor on your suit. Everything we see comes to us through electronics. There's just too much to see out here to rely on our eyes. We need cameras to take in everything we need and computers and imaging software to interpret it for our eyes. And these guys have taken advantage of that. Clever bastards."

Breitman shook her head. "How can you fool computers with different operating systems? I have an AI on my ship. You can't just trick them with some bogus data."

"What operating system are you running? Not the interface, I mean the core system?"

"N-space, version 2.6."

Randy jerked a thumb at his computer console. "Version 3.0. *Everybody* runs N-space. It's the only thing that works. You don't have to fool the AI on your ship, you just have to fool the operating system. These guys have found a back door."

"How did you get Version 3.0?"

"I know a guy. I'm beta-testing. Sort of. Listen, though, it doesn't matter. What we've got to do is find that back door and close it up before these jerks come back and finish us off."

"Well, technical support on Titan is about a two-hour time lag. . . ." She stopped and stared as Randy doubled over with laughter.

"Technical support! Hello, technical support? We've got an invisible pirate chasing us, and, um, I was wondering if you had any bugs in your software that would like, you know, make a pirate invisible or something?"

"That's enough," Breitman snapped. "What's your big idea?"

"I told you, I know a guy. Turn off your law-enforcement ears, now. He's cracked this code wide open. If there's a back door, he'll know about it."

The guy was on the moon, which meant only a nine-minute time-lag. That still meant almost an hour of exchanged pleasantries. Ms. Breitman became visibly more agitated with each unproductive message.

"Hey, Jimmy. Randy. You ever get over that hangover I left you with?"

Eighteen minute wait.

"Hey, Randall. I think we found your pants in the ventilation duct."

"I was wondering what happened to those. That was some sendoff."

Another eighteen minutes.

"Well, six months locked up in that shitcan you call a spaceship, we had to do something that would hold you until you got to Mars."

"I'll take this shit can over staring at code all day."

Eighteen more minutes.

"Yeah, staring at code all day and staring at pussy all night. Sorry, didn't mean to make you jealous. I forgot all you got on that tub of yours to keep you company is your right hand."

Breitman slapped her hand on the communications console before Randy could answer. "How much more time are you going to waste? Need I remind you that that pirate could be back any minute?"

"Relax," Randy told her. "We're using some heavy crypto here. It takes a while for everything to get into synch. Jimmy won't talk to me on an unsecured line. If he knew there was a Damager here, he wouldn't talk at all." He activated the pickup. "Listen, Jimmy, I got a little job for you. I hope my credit is still good. I'm running that software you loaned me for beta-testing. You know which one. Only I've found a bug. Seems somebody figured out how to make my ship think *his* ship isn't there. That's messing with my head. You think I can close up that back door?"

Randy leaned back to wait for the reply. "I hope we don't have to get any more explicit than that. He probably knows exactly what I'm talking about." He pushed off from the com station to the kitchen and started rooting around in the cold storage. "You want some lunch? Looks like I'm going to have to thaw out another block of rations pretty soon. With the extra mouth to feed, we're going to run out before we get to Mars. We're going to have to start eating the cargo eventually." He pulled out cheese and bread and pinned them under the net covering the cutting board.

"What is your cargo, by the way? All the manifest said was PVP." Breitman filled squeeze bulbs with lemonade and stuck them to the wall.

"Powdered vat protein, breakfast of champions," Randy said. "Just mix

it with water, and you got, what do you call it? Bouillon. Broth. Throw in some veggies, and you've got soup. Throw in some kind of goopy stuff I got around here somewhere and you can chew it, like meat."

"How do they make it?"

Randy waved his sandwich at her. "You don't ask that question. You don't want to know. Just remember that it's highly purified from the starting material and it doesn't matter what the starting material is."

"It sounds awful. What does it taste like?"

"Hmph," Randy finished his bite of sandwich. "Tastes like chicken, goes without saying."

Breitman looked down at her sandwich. "I suppose you're going to tell me I'm eating it right now."

"Oh, hell no. I ain't gonna eat *that* shit until we're starving. Looks like Jimmy's got an answer for us."

"Hey, Randy," the message said. "I don't got the slightest idea what you're talking about. Never heard of a bug like that. I'm afraid I can't help you. Listen, I gotta get going, so, hey, enjoy the rest of your trip. I'll catch you when you get back."

"So much for your guy," Breitman said. "He must not be as good as you say he is."

Randy frowned. "He got back too soon."

"Eighteen minutes. What do you mean?"

"If he really didn't know what I was talking about, he'd have checked for himself. Run some sims, cracked open the code and looked for the back door. He just came right back and said he didn't know." He shook his finger at the com panel. "He knows. He's the one who showed these pirates the back door."

"That's a little farfetched," Breitman said. "There must be thousands of hackers who could have done this."

"No, not really. Jimmy's *the* guy. If he didn't do it, he knows who did. If he's not telling me, it's because he was paid not to. That's the only way you get Jimmy to do anything."

After five days in inactivity, Randy was about to give up on the pirate. "Chickenshit. He gets a little taste of *Rattle and Hum* and runs home to Mommy."

"You talk like it was your ship that chased him off. The *Massacre* did all the work."

"Excuse me. I believe the *Massacre* would have been a sitting duck if the *Rattle and Hum* hadn't kept rolling over to keep the line of fire open. *I* did that. Not some tactical AI. Me. In any case, we schooled him, and he ain't comin' round here no more."

"I wouldn't speak too soon," Breitman said.

"I don't believe in that tempting fate nonsense," Randy told her. "That's just superstitious crap. Did I ever tell you about the time . . ."

"No, I mean he's *back*. He just fired a pair of rockets, but the *Massacre*'s countermeasures are jamming them. They're going to miss. He's trying to keep your cargo hold between him and the *Massacre*."

Randy jumped over to the main console. "He's going after my atts. But

I'm not totally defenseless. Watch this." He activated the particle beam generator and took careful aim. He fired and a phosphorescent spot appeared on the hull of the pirate ship. The glow spread out, dispersed, and faded to nothing in a few seconds. "What the hell?"

Breitman chortled. "That's the most pathetic weapon I've ever seen! Try to roll again and let my ship at him."

Randy fired his attitudinal thrusters, but the enemy had come in too close. However he twisted and turned, the other ship stayed out of the way of the Damager's guns. "He ain't buying what I'm selling," Randy said. "Any more bright ideas?"

"I'm going to cut my ship loose," Breitman said, pulling out her remote control. "My lateral rockets are probably way off-center because of that gauss grenade. They'll work as attitudinal thrusters so I can chase him around."

"No way," Randy said. "You'll never be able to control it like that. You'll be bumbling around all over the place. Probably run right into us."

"He's going to start shooting any minute. I have to do something."

"Okay, try this." Randy did something with his controls and turned back to Breitman. "Now, cut loose and kick on your main thrusters, quick burst and then off again." She did as he asked, and he sat back to continue the dance he had been sharing with the pirate.

"That's right, a little to the left, now. Up, up, up. You've got it now, kid. Now slide around the corner and . . . oops. Did I leave a Damager lying there? So sorry." He grinned as the *Massacre*'s tactical AI took over savaging the pirate ship. The Damager was unable to maneuver, but it had the element of surprise, as well as the advantage of being unoccupied. The AI was able to take chances that its programming would not allow had Breitman been aboard. Whatever the pirate was using for tactical guidance, it wasn't able to dish it out or take it like the Damager. After a few minutes of exchanging heavy fire, the pirate fled once again. It ran for several minutes, firing back along its vector to cover its escape, then vanished without a trace.

"Badda bing!" Randy shouted, slapping Breitman on the shoulder. She flinched away from the contact, but shared his excitement.

"Nice trick, Marsgalen. We got him."

"Well, nice shooting to your AI. Did you see how fast he lit out of here?"

Breitman frowned down at her remote control. "We didn't get out of this without a scratch, though."

"Ah, I wasn't expecting to," Randy said. "What's the bill?"

"We lost the tactical AI. Big power surge, probably. Particle beam hit the main grid. I probably have nothing left of any of my computers."

"Ouch. That can't be good if he decides to come back!"

Breitman nodded. "We're completely defenseless."

"Eight kilometers," Randy said.

"What's eight kilometers?" Breitman was just up from her sleep shift. They had established the watch rotation for two reasons. Someone needed to stay awake in case the pirate decided to return, and there was only one comfortable place to sleep on the *Rattle and Hum*.

Breitman had set up an elaborate curtain wall to maintain the privacy of both the bedroom and the sanitary facilities. She entered and emerged fully clothed, and Randy did the same. She had to wear mostly his clothes, since hers had been destroyed by the gauss grenade. She looked a lot younger swimming in baggy, rolled-up pants and tied-up T-shirts.

Randy occasionally let his mind entertain sexual thoughts about her. It was one of his boilerplate fantasies, being forced into a long space voyage with a young woman. But those fantasies didn't survive his companion's physical presence. In person, she was the least sexually attractive person he'd ever known. It wasn't how she looked. She looked just fine, and he'd have to be some kind of hypocrite to criticize someone else on that score anyway. It was that she was frightened of him, and he really hated that.

"When our pirate runs away, he always gets eight kilometers before he vanishes."

"No," Breitman said. "The first time he got twelve kilometers and then disappeared."

Randy frowned and shook his head. "I've got eight. Here, I'll show you the recording."

"I'm getting my number from my ship's analysis," Breitman said. "It's all wiped out now." They had retrieved the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with some fancy maneuvering and had strapped it back onto the cargo hauler. They were taking turns going extravehicular and pulling off the weapons. So far, they had only managed to get the particle-beam generator mounted to the *Rattle and Hum*. It was orders of magnitude more powerful than the one Randy had, but it was still a paltry weapon compared to the energy the pirate ship had thrown around. And the cargo ship had no tactical AI to guide it. It was run by a dumb software program with a simple targeting device. The pirate could sneak up on them and be well within range of its more powerful weapons before they could target it and fire.

"Weapons range," Randy said, snapping his fingers. "That's the ticket. What's the greatest weapons range of the *Massacre?*"

"We don't have any range now," Breitman said. "But when it was working, well . . . the rockets are self-guided and they're limited by fuel. But the ballistic and energy weapons go by the targeting radar, and that's twelve kilometers. I suppose your targeting radar has a range of eight."

"You got that right."

"So he appears once he gets within range. . . ."

"Oh, no," Randy said. "That's where my little theory falls to pieces. If that were true, we'd have him every time. But he appears much closer in."

"When he fires," Breitman ran the replay of the first attack, then the second. "We see him as soon as he fires a weapon, then he disappears as soon as he's out of range."

Randy pushed off from his command sling and floated around the room, slapping his forehead. "I got it. I'm an idiot. I can't believe I missed this! Tactical subroutine. You don't use N-space to run your tactical operations, do you?"

"Hell no," Breitman said. "N-space is terrible at tac ops. I've got FireDancer 8.9. Best you can get. I take it you don't use N-space either."

"Naw, I got some home-brewed thing. Beta-testing, you know."

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah, Jimmy again. I hope he didn't sell out this program, too. But it's been seeing the pirate so far. As soon as N-space detects hostile intent, it turns control over to the tactical operations subroutine and the pirate becomes visible. We've got him."

Breitman smiled, then her smile disappeared. "You can't just turn the ship over to tactical operations full time."

"Can't I?"

"What about your flight plan? Without navigational software, you're a ballistic problem, not a space ship. You're a hazard to everyone around you."

"I'm *already* a ballistic problem," Randy said. "I've got no frigging engines! I'm turning it over right now." He hit a few keys on his keyboard. "As of right now, this ship is no longer running N-space. I can't alter course, but guess what? I couldn't do that anyway. Now we can spot him as soon as he's anywhere within range of my navigational radar, which is about a hundred klicks."

"But that doesn't help us," Breitman said. "We still can't shoot until he's within weapons range. He still outguns us. He still has working thrusters and we don't."

As she spoke, Randy slumped as much as one can slump in zero gravity. "You really know how to take the thrust out of a guy's engines, don't you?"

"It's not entirely hopeless," Breitman said. "We still have the element of surprise."

Randy threw up his hands and grinned maniacally. "Surprise! We're helpless!"

"We've got company," Breitman said. She pointed at the 3D display, the now familiar radar signature coming up from behind. "A hundred and ten klicks, coming in fast and right up our tailpipe."

"Gotcha." Randy said. "Say goodbye to the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Bye-bye, *Massacre*. We'll miss you, and your insanely large complement of weaponry."

"Bye," Breitman said quietly as the Damager fired thrusters and moved off at an angle to their path. "It was good working with you."

It had taken hours of frustrating backing-and-filling to get the smaller ship lined up just right. The misaligned lateral thrusters did work as attitudinals, after a fashion. But it took a steady hand and the patience of a monk to steer the ship in the right direction. The whole plan hinged on the pirate taking one particular approach vector. Since it had taken the same approach on the two previous attacks, it was a worthwhile gamble. It had paid off. Their attacker was right where they wanted him to be.

"Well," Randy said, "I'm going to go ahead and suit up. No sense waiting until the last minute."

"No," Breitman told him. "I'm suiting up. Your suit has no armor."

"You catch a direct hit and you'll be just as slagged as me. It's my plan, and I'm going out."

"I know how to use the weapons," Breitman countered.

"So do I. And this is my ship, so I'm the captain, so my orders are for you to stay inside and fire the particle-beam while I go out and fire the cannon."

Breitman laughed. "What kind of a Martian are you? Captain. What a crock! The cannon is mine. I'm firing it. End of story." She headed to where her suit was strapped against the wall. "And, yes, I'm just as vulnerable to a direct hit, but I'm at least protected against flack from near misses." She started putting her suit on. "And besides, you're better at driving this tub of shit than I am." She stopped before putting on her helmet. "And furthermore . . ."

Randy waved her off. "Okay, you win. Just go. Don't get yourself killed out there. Try to do me that favor, at least."

The pirate took the bait. Randy had guessed that they didn't know how badly the Damager was hurt, and it was natural that any survivors would take the least damaged ship and make a run for it.

He had also guessed something else about the pirates. They were not pirates at all. They were not after the powdered vat protein in the hold of the *Rattle and Hum*. Before attacking him, they had hit a homesteader transport. That was a good way to stock up on the cheapest crap you could get at a scrapheap. These guys were not out to make money, they had another agenda. Religious fanatics, maybe? Political terrorists? He couldn't guess what that agenda was, but he'd seen enough crazy shit in his life that nothing much surprised him anymore. One thing he did know: they would not let the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* escape with anyone alive on board.

Randy and Breitman maintained radio silence. They had to keep up the illusion that the *Rattle and Hum* was the abandoned ship and the *Massacre* was running for dear life. It was the only way they could get the enemy in range at the right angle.

The particle-beam could shut down a fusion drive for a couple of seconds by collapsing the magnetic field that squeezed the fuel together. The cannon could put oxygenated explosive into the deuterium tank, but only if the engines were shut down. It was a cute trick that everyone knew about, so nobody ever let a hostile ship get into position to do it.

But the pirate could not reach the fast-running *Massacre* without matching vectors. Their engines were nearly equal and the *Massacre* had a head start. And the pirate was invisible, after all. It could afford to be sloppy. It could ignore the dead ship behind it to chase the live one that was getting away.

As soon as the enemy's engines were lined up right, Randy hit the firing stud on his new, powerful weapon. The lights in the ship went out. The computer went out. The power drain had shut down everything. He didn't know what had happened next.

He scrambled in the dark for the bypass circuit panel. He barked his shin on the workbench, then cracked his forehead into the edge of a hatch before finding it. As he reached for the cold-start switch, he heard the pop-fizz of melted metal striking the outer hull. They were shooting back.

He hit the switch and launched himself back into the main module. The ship was still dark. It would take a few minutes for the power plant to kick back in. He silently cursed himself for skimping on emergency lighting. "If it's that big an emergency," he had reasoned, "I don't want to see what's happening." Idiot.

He fumbled into his suit, then cursed again when he realized that the airlock wasn't going to work without power. He activated his suit radio.

"Breitman, what's going on?"

"Can't talk," said her modulated man's voice. "Half a ship, coming right at us. Brace for impact."

There was no way to brace for the impact between two ships. Or one ship and a half of a ship. The walls slapped him around for almost a minute. If he hadn't suited up, he'd be a smear of red jelly on the inside of the habitat module. As it was, there was a lot of red smearing the inside of his suit, but he was more or less in one piece. When he tried to stabilize his trajectory with one foot, he revised that assessment. Two pieces. Definitely something not attached down there. The pain welled up in him and made him nauseated, but he managed to counter his brain's request to his stomach for reverse gears and his breakfast stayed down.

By the time he recovered, he realized that the power had come back on. The next thing he realized was that the habitat had maintained integrity. There was no hiss of air escaping, and his suit telltales said there was still pressure outside. The damage had occurred somewhere else on the ship then.

She was out there. He activated his suit radio. "Breitman, are you okay?" Randy quickly cycled through the airlock, trying to keep from using his right foot for anything. Only static came in over his radio.

With dread, he exited the airlock. Chaos ruled the void around him. Twisted metal tumbled everywhere. It was hard to see more than a few meters in any direction. Randy crawled hand-over-hand down the ship. He came to the cargo hold.

To call the damage a hole was to overstate the integrity of the surrounding metal. There wasn't much left. Shipping containers were torn open. The void, ever hungry, sucked up the pure nutrition pouring out of the canisters. The entire engine superstructure was gone. That had been Cal's post, where she had waited for her shot at the pirate's engines.

She had hit it. That much was clear. Most of the tormented steel in the area belonged to the enemy. The biggest piece left intact would make a nice doghouse. Cal's last act as a Damager had more than lived up to her title. She had destroyed the pirate, but at the cost of her own life.

Randy started crawling back, avoiding the sharper bits of metal. A particularly shiny bit was on a collision course and he dodged, but his broken ankle snagged in the rungs of the ladder and he gasped. The thing hit him full-force, then instead of bouncing off, it grabbed his shoulder and held on.

Breitman pulled her helmet against his. "My radio's out," she said, her voice, her real voice, sounding distant through the insulated helmets. "We did it, Martian! I about shit myself when he turned around and ran at us, but then he must have lost control. It came down to a question of mass,

and you had it all over on him there. Thanks to the powdered chicken broth."

"I'm glad you made it, Cal . . . Ms. Breitman."

"Cal," she said. "We've got a long trip ahead of us. Let's switch to first names. Looks like you lost most of your cargo. You got good insurance?"

"My family doesn't believe in insurance," Randy said. "They say it's gambling, and when you gamble, the house always wins. To a true Martian insurance is for the timid, something to give them peace of mind. And you can't eat peace of mind."

They helped each other over to the airlock. The twisted metal was thinning out now, carried away by the momentum granted to it by the attacking ship that spawned it.

Cal put her helmet against his again. "That's too bad," she said. "This is going to cost you."

"I said my family didn't believe in insurance. That doesn't mean *I* don't. I guess I'm not a true Martian after all." Randy looked back over the scene of destruction, then put his hand on Cal's shoulder. "There are a lot of thing you can't eat, and they're not all useless." ❍

MY BICYCLE

As Avram instructed us,
my bicycle grew from a paper clip embryo,
spent some sullen time as a clothes hanger adolescent,
and has now reached its immortal phase,
a blue machine named Schwinn.

I think of its history
every time it carries me from here to there,
humming wheels and chattering gears.
And wonder if Avram ever owned a bicycle.
Wish for him, even after all these years,
the pure solace of a faithful friend.

—Mario Milosevic

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

When SF Was Young

It's wonderful to hear that voice again.

The unmistakable authorial tones in question belong to Robert A. Heinlein, and surface in *For Us, the Living* (Scribners, hardcover, $25.00, 263 pages, ISBN 0-7432-5998-X). Anyone not immured in a Mars simulation dome in the Antarctic has by now probably heard of this book. It's the first sustained piece of writing Heinlein ever attempted, in the year 1938, during a turbulent period in both his life and the life of the nation. The novel never sold, and was retired. Heinlein's own copies were lost or destroyed over the decades, and the manuscript surfaced only recently in the hands of a researcher who had obtained it from a longtime friend of Heinlein's. (This whole story is told more dramatically and entertainingly in an afterword by RAH scholar Robert James.).

The first thing that must be admitted about this book is that it is not a full-blown dramatization of the many, many ideas Heinlein was cogitating upon during this period, not a fully fleshed-out, hypnotically realistic tale of the kind he came to write, but rather a didactic, utopian lecture novel along the lines of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888). As such, it features long monologues on economics, politics, and cultural customs. Not disregarding the drawbacks of that format, however, I should go on to say that all the concepts and speculations offered by Heinlein are fascinating, provocative, and still relevant, nearly seventy years after their composition. And what plot movement and characterization does exist is deft and assured. All in all this is a remarkable achievement for a thirty-one-year-old amateur, displaying the nascent gifts and genius that Heinlein would fully develop at a furious pace in the subsequent years.

Our protagonist is one Perry Nelson, who dies in the year 1939 and awakens reincarnated in the temporarily soul-less body of a citizen of the year 2086. (The future man had committed a kind of approved psychic suicide.) Found wandering by Diana, a beautiful dancer, Perry becomes her houseguest and later her lover. After his initial shock of adjustment, he immediately embarks on a virtual and physical educational tour of the future. Midway through the book, he exhibits some shocking atavistic behavior that nets him a stay in a rehabilitative facility, where his accommodation to the new mores and ethics of 2086 is somewhat painfully completed. By book's end, he's become the first rocket pilot to dare a trip to the Moon. And that's pretty much the whole narrative arc.

But of course, the allure of this novel lies in seeing a titan of the field in his formative years. In his

introduction, Spider Robinson finds this book to contain in embryo nearly all of the themes and tropes that would power Heinlein's whole career. It's true that the reader will encounter many familiar items: rolling roads, theocratic dictatorships, unconventional sexual arrangements, contrarian thinking, and reverence for the military (although on the latter topic, Heinlein's pacifist leanings might surprise you). But it's also fun to play the game of cataloguing Heinlein's failed predictions versus his correct speculations. He envisions a communications and knowledge-based system very similar in function to the Internet—yet it functions with live switchboard operators and pneumatic tubes. This lack of speculative daring concerning cybernetics—the entire genre's biggest predictive failure—would also explain why slide rules rule in 2086. Heinlein more or less invents memes when Diana is told: "You are suffering from a slight touch of atavism . . . which you contracted from him. The layman doesn't realize that these non-lesional [i.e., without a somatic basis] mental disorders can be as contagious as diphtheria or whooping cough." But we have yet to see the toga become popular garb outside of frat parties, although countless SF writers of the Thirties besides Heinlein liked to insist it would.

From H.G. Wells right up to Ken MacLeod, SF has long mixed its preachiness with melodrama, at best completely fusing novel ideas with enthralling action. Heinlein soon learned to adjust the ratio between the components of his fiction, and the field was never the same. Now you can witness where it all began.

Karma Kids

The last time I had occasion to yoke together the work of Kathe Koja and Leander Watts (the penname of a well-known SF avant-garde writer), it was due to the near-simultaneous publication of their first YA novels, Koja's *stray dog* and Watts's *Stonecutter*, both 2002. In tandem again, both writers have new books out that will reward all readers, including the adventurous genre habitué. Koja's has less of a fantastical vibe around it than Watts's, but nonetheless speaks to the outcast in every sensitive soul, of which there are many among SF fans.

Kathe Koja's *Buddha Boy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hardcover, $16.00, 117 pages, ISBN 0-374-30998-1) is narrated—in a hypnotic, almost stream-of-consciousness style—by a teen named Justin, possessed of some small artistic talents and a keen sense of right and wrong that is only partially tamped down by the conventional, thoughtlessly accepted culture of his high school. One day the eponymous Buddha Boy shows up as a transfer student. Dressed weirdly, practicing odd behaviors, Michael Martin, or Jinsen as he prefers to be called, is a prime target for jock hostility and cliquish, snobbish disdain. Justin is at first put off by Jinsen's oddness, but when a class assignment tosses them together, and Justin discovers Jinsen's awesome art skills, a halting friendship blooms. Soon, Justin has to confront all the prejudices of his peers in the face of their persecution of Jinsen. When matters escalate toward violence, what Justin learns of Jinsen's past will both shock and enlighten him.

Koja is working on the fringes of a grand tradition of demi-fantastical literature that focuses on the introduction of a holy innocent or naïve savior figure into mortal affairs. Books like Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* (1970) or even Melville's *Billy Budd* (1924) spring to mind. Buddha Boy himself is not as allegorical or otherworldly as his literary predecessors. Koja is too smart for that. The vibrant immediacy and tangibility of her school and home settings and the practical realities of the day-to-day lives of the teens keeps the novel grounded. Jinsen never preaches or lectures, nor does he utter stereotypical Zen koans. Rather, his responses to his torments are grounded in his own harsh experiences and hard-fought wisdom. Justin, likewise, is no stereotypical apostle in thrall to the numinous, but rather a conflicted, well-rounded witness and participant in Jinsen's karma.

The whole mystical issue of karma, brilliantly illustrated by the events of the book, is in fact the ethereal thread that knits the mundane events of the novel together in a supra-natural fashion. By the end of the book, we are left with Justin's observation: "You want to see karma coming? Go look in the mirror, right now." And we understand just what he means.

In *Wild Ride to Heaven* (Houghton Mifflin, hardcover, $16.00, 169 pages, ISBN 0-618-26805-7) Leander Watts returns to the place and period of his earlier book, the Genesee Valley of the middle 1800s. This archaic, hardscrabble milieu, shatteringly tangible and sensual, serves perfectly for another of his dark fairy tales. This is YA as filtered through David Lynch's sensibilities.

Hannah Renner is an adolescent girl living alone with her father, a charcoal burner. Literate and fanciful, yet possessing a hard-edged practicality borne of privation and hardships, Hannah is also singled out from the other inhabitants of the nearby town of Black Stick by her mismatched eyes, one milky white, the other a startling green. Besides her few books, Hannah's love of music, of singing, helps keep her sane amidst the travails of her harsh existence. In fact, sometimes she feels transported when singing, surging on "a wild ride to heaven." Papa Renner may be a charcoal burner, but he is also an impractical dreamer. He fantasizes continually about finding buried treasure in the surrounding primeval forests. And his greed is about to deliver Hannah into a nightmare.

Nearby live the Barrow brothers, Noel and Leon, twin surly, slovenly giants. Desperate for cash to fund his treasure-quest, Hannah's father indentures her to the brothers for a year's servitude. (*Stonecutter* also featured this theme, a powerful one.) She is immediately plunged into a grim bondage with overtones of potential sexual assault. All that makes her life tolerable is the strange midnight appearance of a waif from the forest, a kind of Pan-like nature figure who calls himself Brother Boy. Accompanied by two enormous wild boars, Brother Boy befriends Hannah, and she finds relief in his nightly presence. So when Noel and Leon announce their plan to make Hannah their wife, she has no place to flee except to Brother Boy's refuge. But can the whimsical albino youth offer her the protection she will need from the lust of the Barrows?

Watts has an uncanny way with

limning the daily life of two centuries past, and embodying it in genuinely frontierish prose. Such scenes as the slaughtering and rendering of a pig and the struggle to turn lumber into charcoal carry with them an uncanny verisimilitude, almost as if we were watching some film captured through time-travel, but with an emotional "soundtrack" as well. Plainly, Watts has learned to inhabit this spooky nighted past of America with great insight. His mastery of folktale archetypes—the poor charcoal burner, the ogreish Barrows, the Peter-Pan-like Brother Boy, the strange-eyed girl touched by faerie—is compelling as well. All these elements together make for a story that moves down twisted, unpredictable paths and drags the reader ineluctably along, until the resonant climax and heartening coda.

Both Koja and Watts have third novels already in the pipeline. You'll be certain to learn of them here.

The Upholstered Apocalypse

If perhaps you were enthused by my review of J. G. Ballard's last novel, *Super-Cannes* (2000), but you resolved to wait for the US edition, you would have had to bide your time frustratingly for two whole years to lay your hands on any such book. It's a shame that Ballard has fallen out of favor in the eyes of the US market—at least as perceived by timid and short-sighted publishers—and that we are forced to wait so long for his works to reach us here. That's why I've taken to ordering directly from *www.amazon.co.uk*. And if you want to experience the topical nature of Ballard's latest while it's still burning white-hot, then you should do the same.

Millennium People (HarperCollins Flamingo, hardcover, £16.99, 294 pages, ISBN 0-00-225848-X) chronicles a few months out of the life of psychologist David Markham, narrated in his own fevered voice. But what a few months they are! Markham's staid, middle-class, professionally boring life is turned inside-out, as is the collective life of London, which is soon subject to a variety of bewildering terrorist acts that seem to have no point, as well as a consumerist revolt by the inhabitants of an upscale housing development on the banks of the Thames known as Chelsea Marina.

The whole affair begins when a bomb in Heathrow airport kills Markham's first wife, Laura. Oddly energized by her death, Markham resolves to learn what he can of her killers. He plunges into the world of protesters, and is soon led to Chelsea Marina. Here, a motley assortment of varyingly obsessed individuals are intent on fomenting a middle-class rebellion. We meet Dr. Richard Gould, a pediatrician who is the conspirators' master theorist. Kay Churchill, film critic and sexual predator. Stephen Dexter, defrocked priest, and his girlfriend, Joan Chang. And perhaps most dangerous of all, Vera Blackburn, bomb-maker. Markham soon becomes intimate with all these plotters on one level or another, and begins to suspect that one or more of them might have been responsible for his wife's death. But the heady allure of their nebulous revolution, which promises to supplant boredom with a meaningless violence that threat-

ens to burst the confining parameters of space-time itself, soon begins to overwhelm Markham, and he becomes more and more complicit with their schemes.

Of course, these themes and stock players and narrative tactics are perennial with Ballard. You'll find much the same cast and plot in *Super-Cannes,* for instance. But like all geniuses, with every iteration of his manias, Ballard brings new undersurfaces into view, polishes new facets of his weird gems, and moves ahead incrementally. His whole career is not so much beads on a string as it is different movements in some baroque symphony, whose totality will only be known when he stops writing, for whatever cause.

Ballard's main literary brainstorm way back in the New Wave was to establish an identification between inner and outer geographies. In this book the complex machine that postmodern London has become is absolutely contiguous with the psyches of the characters. Moving down the flyovers to Heathrow and through the claustrophobic streets of Chelsea Marina, we are navigating the neuroses of the characters. Such acts as the bombing of the Tate Museum and the burning of the National Film Theater are like mini-lobotomies or surgical excisions. The steady piling-up of startling metaphors that invest ordinary things with great significance abets this strategy.

Yet if this were all Ballard provided, his texts would soon become unanchored from reality. It's his sharp vision as a satirist and social critic that anchors his metaphysics, as well as his transgressive stance. (Ask yourself how many authors today actually offer any spark of rebellion against the status quo.) He has an uncanny eye for the way people actually live, a kind of Dickensian flair for the telling observation. For instance, when a high-living inhabitant of Chelsea Marina decides to create Molotov cocktails, here's what they look like: "burgundy bottles filled with petrol into which he had stuffed his regimental ties."

As usual, Ballard's brilliant nonsequitur dialogue—much of it quite funny by intention, as well as surreally cruel and revelatory—is a prime attraction. The book's structure—we open with a chapter set in the post-revolution Chelsea Marina, then go into the extended flashback that forms the bulk of the book, before finally returning to the present and the surprising denouement—is very effective. And Markham represents a new development in Ballard's typical protagonists, in that he manages to emerge from the fire instead of being totally consumed by it. If I had one complaint, it's that Richard Gould, the psychotic doctor, is not onstage often enough.

Consult the headlines in any day's newspaper, and you'll see why Bruce Sterling once called Ballard the truest, most prescient bard of the irrational world we've fashioned for ourselves.

Eye Candy

Arlen Schumer has produced a very enjoyable book with a lot of visual flair, a testament to his intelligent love affair with his chosen topic and to his skills as a graphics designer. But his success also owes much to the subject matter, which lends itself to extravagant display. *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art*

(Collectors Press, trade paper, $29.95, 176 pages, ISBN 1-888054-85-9) focuses on the ground-breaking work of several creators active in the period from 1956 to 1970. Schumer has reproduced in grand collages many choice bits from the DC and Marvel comics of Carmine Infantino, Gil Kane, Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby, Joe Kubert, Gene Colan, Jim Steranko, and Neal Adams. To this he's added insightful critical text on the period, as well as snippets of artist interviews. The whole assemblage conveys with verve and zest the excitement to be found in the comics of the sixties, when pop culture was at its zenith. One might argue with one or two of his focal choices—Colan over John Romita or Curt Swan, say—but on the whole Schumer makes a convincing case for the excellence of his selected artists. I was enlightened by such comparisons as that between Will Eisner and Steranko, a passing of the torch I had not noticed before. Anyone who lived through this period, or younger aficionados looking for an introduction to the Silver Age, will relish this book.

Ranging from the dawn of the cinema to last year's post-apocalyptic hit, *28 Days Later*, *Science Fiction Poster Art* (Aurum, trade paper, $29.95, 192 pages, ISBN 1-85410-946-4) collects a stunning array of theater-lobby illustration. Editors Tony Nourmand and Graham Marsh have plainly gone to great lengths to scour the historical archives of film posters for both familiar and unfamiliar examples of this mostly unheralded artform. They organize their posters thematically—aliens, after the bomb, spaceflight, serials, and so on—and often present multiple versions for the same film from different countries, allowing us to creatively contrast and compare styles and marketing tactics and esthetics. Their useful text brings to light such lost luminaries as Reynold Brown (think *Creature from the Black Lagoon* [1954] and *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* [1958]) and Karoly Grosz (*The Invisible Man* [1933]). They seem quite knowledgeable in their field, even allowing for one massive flub: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) was not derived from a Harry Bates story titled "Farewell to Arms," but rather "Farewell to the Master." This British book is being distributed here in the USA by Trafalgar Square, which may be contacted at *www.trafalgarsquarebooks.com*.

Raptors IV (NBM, trade paper, $10.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56163-371-2) resonantly and resolutely brings to a close the saga of vampiric factions battling each other beneath the surface of human affairs, while still leaving open an outlet for further adventures, as the torch of morally restrained bloodsucking is passed to a new generation of protagonists. The artwork by Enrico Marini continues to offer stunning architectural perspectives, *Matrix*-worthy fashion chic, and kinky erotic thrills, while Jean Dufaux's terse and biting (sorry!) text conveys the inner lives of his characters as successfully as it presents the exciting action. "Once again, the children will be able to play in the streets," thanks to the self-sacrifice of certain members of the undead. But the next volume will certainly show us that no peace lasts forever.

Two well-known SF authors venture into graphic-novel territory with excellent results. Both have

found a home at Wildstorm, an imprint of DC Comics. Kevin J. Anderson presents a prequel to his recent series of novels with *The Saga of Seven Suns: Veiled Alliances* (hardcover, $24.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56389-902-7). This tale depicts the first contact between a somewhat decadent Earth and the Ildiran Empire, whose members exhibit a variety of caste-like appearances, from human to bestial. We witness the division of humanity into several specialized factions under the pressures of interstellar colonization, and the introduction of the gas-giant-dwelling aliens who will launch a war against both humans and Ildirans. The characterization is necessarily light in such a panoramic tale spread among numerous worlds and beings, but Anderson succeeds in conveying some Asimovian and Herbertian space-opera thrills. The artwork by Robert Teranishi is exemplary, with convincing otherworldly landscapes, empathetic human faces and glittering technology. My one objection is that the little robots named "comps" that aid humans look like nothing so much as the justly maligned Twiki from the television version of *Buck Rogers*.

David Brin expands his award-nominated story "Thor Meets Captain America" into *The Life Eaters* (hardcover, $29.95, 144 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0098-2), with the aid of artist Scott Hampton, whose harsh-edged, yet graceful painted art is the perfect match for a grim tale. Hampton's palette is appropriately subdued as well, but it allows for such bright contrasting flashes as the blue of a Hindu deity. History as we know it has been shattered by the arrival of real Norse gods on the side of the Nazis in 1944. Some twenty years later, WWII still rages, and the Allies are doing poorly. But as other gods from other pantheons arise to contest the Aesir's victories, the forces of goodness learn that heavenly help may be worse than no help at all. Divided into three segments, the tale focuses on several pivotal individuals, allowing us to get to know them well. The story's conclusion is open-ended yet hopeful, and certainly a sequel would be welcomed, if only to offer more vistas on the order of this volume's space-elevator that is also Yggdrasil the World Tree.

Further illustrating the permeability of the membrane between SF and comics, Neil Gaiman returns to the universe that first made him famous, that which harbors the deities known as the Endless. *The Sandman: Endless Nights* (Vertigo/DC, hardcover, $24.95, 160 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0089-3) is a lush and lavish showcase for both Gaiman's writing and the heterogeneous artwork of his collaborators: Glenn Fabry, Milo Manara, Miguelanxo Prado, Frank Quitely, P. Craig Russell, Bill Sienkiewicz, and Barron Storey. In addition, Dave McKean contributes the cover and overall book design. The seven stories herein range from the narratively straightforward to the highly experimental, but all revolve around the intersection of such godlings as Death, Dream, Desire, and Despair with various mortal characters. I particularly enjoyed "The Heart of a Star," which tracks a love affair amidst an exotic alien setting—and ties in to the Green Lantern mythos as lagniappe. Gaiman and his cohorts prove that it is indeed possible to recapture past glories.

Small Press Titles

A more unlikely pairing of authors than Arthur C. Clarke and C.S. Lewis is hard to imagine. Yet these two men did indeed once cross swords, on the occasion of young Clarke's objection to a passage from Lewis's *Perelandra* (1943), a passage highly critical of humanity's "conquest" of space. This clash and its subsequent fallout are the subjects of *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey* (iBooks, hardcover, $21.00, 175 pages, ISBN 0-7434-7518-6), edited and with critical text by Ryder W. Miller. The book opens with Miller setting the stage and introducing the players: Lewis a respected Oxford don in 1944, and Clarke a twenty-seven-year-old member of the British Interplanetary Society. The essence of their respective positions and backgrounds is laid out by Miller with economy over the first thirty pages. The reprinting of the actual correspondence of the two men fills the next twenty. And the bulk of the book consists of a sampling of Clarke and Lewis's fiction and nonfiction.

Miller's portion of the book reveals him to be the kind of genial, enthusiastic amateur who has always poked about in the history of SF, turning up nuggets in a pseudo-scholarly way. Miller's heart is in the right place, and we certainly owe him for assembling this fascinating bit of SF history. But I'm still puzzling over some of his sentences. Characterizing Lewis as "a modern man who was responsible for millions and millions of people who refuse to admit that they evolved from early hominids like the rest of us" (page 19) makes the erudite Inkling sound like Jimmy Swaggart. And even interpolating "with whom" in place of "who" cannot aid the parsing of this sentence: "Clarke has been another Columbus who we have journeyed out into the stars to explore science beliefs." (page 29) The letters themselves, brief as they are, succeed in creating dynamic portraits of the interlocutors, and it's always good to have an excuse to read again such stories as "Ministering Angels" and "The Nine Billion Names of God." All in all, then, despite some minor infelicities, this book will repay both the historian and casual reader.

Readers might recognize the name of Henry Wessells as belonging to the brilliant fellow who has shepherded much of Avram Davidson's work back into posthumous existence. Now Wessells—in real life, a rare-book expert—steps out from Davidson's shadow with a collection of his own fiction (in an edition limited to 200 copies), *Another Green World* (Temporary Culture, hardcover, $65.00, 160 pages, ISBN unavailable). As befits a Davidson aficionado, Wessells fills his oblique, fascinating stories with much erudition and literary sleight-of-hand. (Wessells is also a partisan of Don Webb, John Crowley, and Jorge Luis Borges, to name just another trio of influences.) Yet there's nothing precious or shriveled about these nine fictions. They are all robust and fully engaged with the marvels of the world. Two linked ones—"The Polynesian History of the Kerguêlen Islands" and "The Institute of Antarctic Archeology and Protolinguistics"—exhibit a pulpish HPL vibe elevated to art by the subtle language and plotting. And there's even a hardnosed cyberpunk strain in two tales, "An-

other Green World" and "Virtual Wisdom." Wessells tantalizingly mentions a novel he's finished in one of his endnotes. I hope to see it in print soon.

Like his earlier volume, *Common Ectoids of Arizona* (2001), Stepan Chapman's new burst of whimsy, *Life on Earth* (Four Sep Publications, chapbook, $5.00, 36 pages, ISBN unavailable) consists of some truly amusing and eerie cartoons by the author, accompanied by running captions that tell a mordant little story. In this instance, "life on earth" is personified as a protean individual in the midst of some serious soul-searching. "Life on earth saw itself as a stale and pointless exercise." In its quest for meaning and relief, the monstrous, mutable composite being that represents all creation moves from one absurdity to another, riding "metal stick insects" and "standing in line with itself." With blithe despair and exuberant ennui, Chapman tells an episodic fable that should make us all reconsider our own moments of self-pity in a new and humorous light.

You have to love a poet who titles one of her verses "why goldfish shouldn't use power tools," as Laurel Winter does in *A Galaxy in a Jar* (Dark Regions Press, trade paper, $6.95, 55 pages, ISBN 1-888993-39-1), But Winter offers a lot more than Gary-Larson-style humor in her poems. There's the technical prowess that finds her pastiching Robert Frost ("Stopping by World on a Snowy Eon") and E.A. Robinson ("Richard Cory 2"). There's the pathos of "Judy Resnick Brushes Her Teeth," inspired by the *Challenger* astronaut of that name. And there's the metaphysical hijinks of "weighing the soul." All in all, Laurel Winter proves herself to be one of the unpredictable goddesses who also inhabit this fine book.

There seems to me to be a subtle arrangement to the poems in G.O. Clark's *The Other Side of the Lens* (Dark Regions Press, trade paper, $6.95, 43 pages, ISBN 1-888993-38-3). We open with several astronomically themed verses: outward looking, focused on stars, satellites and vast vistas (from "The Dark" comes "Slow death/is traveling through/a quadrant of space/where no stars/shine"). Then we move to lighter, more terrestrial poems that center on such topics as "Instructions to the Advance Scouts" (invasions of Earth), "Rod Serling's Eyes" and "A Visit to the Surreal Poet's House" (dedicated to Bruce Boston). But the last four or five poems are full of entropic images, as if both the universe and mankind's small, homey planet have been exhausted. It's a bracing progression, and typical of the wit and intelligence and feeling which Clark infuses into his plain-spoken yet affecting poetry.

Imagine a world run by victims of Alzheimer's disease, and you'll have a pretty good idea of the black-humored premise of Daniel Pearlman's brash and sardonic novel *Memini* (Prime Books, hardcover, $29.95, 326 pages, ISBN 1-894815-69-6). Thanks to the widespread use of drugs that enhance intelligence while they simultaneously eradicate short-term memory retention and even long-term memory traces, the upper echelons of Pearlman's future are all addled savants whose lives stay on track only thanks to Meminet. Meminet is an AI that coordinates a system of "flappers" and "skeeters," indi-

vidual units that continually whisper necessary data into the ears of the "frags." Reminding them of their very identities and histories, updating them on interpersonal relationships, Meminet insures that the world continues to function. But President Lester Barton, head of the Memini "conglobulate," is slipping out of control into paranoid delusions, and will soon trigger global disaster. Unless a low-level non-frag, Stewart Bridges, can maneuver his way through the labyrinth of frag politics and restore some stability to the Rube-Goldberg system. Pearlman's inventiveness with language and his fecund, ultra-logical extrapolations of his initial premise call to mind the classic early work of Philip Dick and the biting satires of Fritz Leiber. His ability to inhabit the viewpoints of the "swiss-cheese brain" executives is impressive, as are his depictions of such everyday people as Stewart's parents. All in all, this novel is a rousing parody of our own screwball society, where handlers and spin doctors guide our elected officials, celebrities, and experts through minefields of shattered discourse.

Howard Waldrop's stories are shimmering nets woven out of allusions, might-have-beens, never-weres, and beloved cultural flotsam and jetsam. The power in such a mix is undeniably on display in his latest collection, *Dream Factories and Radio Pictures* (Wheatland Press, trade paper, $19.95, 278 pages, ISBN 0-9720547-4-X). What Waldrop has done is to take all his stories centering around movies and television from his four previous collections, slather them with tasty new introductions, add in a never-before-seen novelette—"Major Spacer in the 21st Century"—and serve it up like a tub of hot buttered popcorn. It's a treat and an education to encounter back-to-back such classics as "Fin de Cycle," which conflates the history of surrealism and the early history of film, and "Flatfeet!," which tracks the Keystone Kops as they deal with some serious crimes in their unique fashion. Waldrop summons real pathos out of the absurd, such as in "Heirs of the Perisphere," wherein three Disney icons survive into a post-apocalyptic time. And for those who imagine Waldrop does only one thing well, check out "French Scenes," with its pure cyberpunk vibe. We get new books from Waldrop seldom enough that you should pounce on this one.

Publisher Addresses

Dark Regions Press, POB 1558, Brentwood, CA 94513. Four Sep Publications, POB 86, Friendship, IN 47021. iBooks, 24 West 25th St., NY, NY 10010. Prime Books, POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928. Temporary Culture, POB 43072, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. Wheatland Press, POB 1818, Wilsonville, OR 97070. ❍

ADVICE ON DEALING WITH YOUR NEW ALIEN PET

Never let it twine around your neck.

Do not feed it tomatoes unless they are California sun-dried.

Never dress it up for the holidays or any other occasion. Though some will tolerate wearing hats.

Buy it lots of bluegrass CDs and play them as much as you can stand.

If that doesn't seem to be working . . . try washboard zydeco.

You may want to know the sex of your New Alien Pet. Make no attempt to examine it yourself. Consult a specialist. Please.

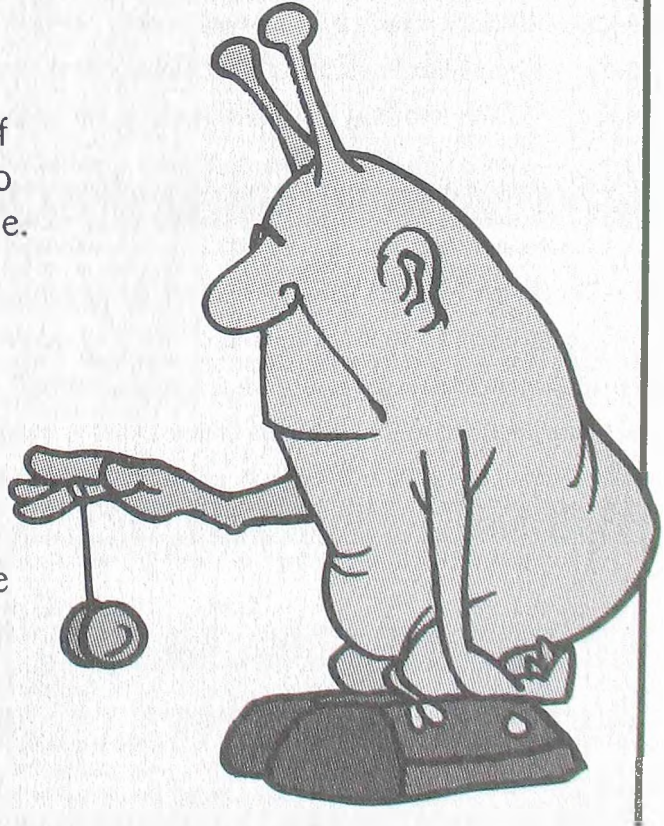
If you discover entire pieces of furniture missing or reduced to splinters, you likely have a male.

Take it in for a good grooming at least twice each week.

Only pet it after it has eaten.

If it gets bigger than two feet around or six feet long . . . give it the house and move to an apartment until you can afford something better.

—Bruce Boston



SF Conventional Calendar

Here's the way the summer convention season shapes up, WesterCon to WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2004

2–5—**WesterCon.** For info, write: **Box 67457, Phoenix AZ 85082.** Or phone: **(480) 973-2341** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) conkopelli.org. (E-mail) info@conkopelli.org.** Con will be held in: Litchfield Park AZ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Wigwam Resort. Guests will include: Cherryh, Cherry, Alexander, Hertz. "Mythology of the SW."

2–4—**InConJunction. inconjunction.org.** Sheraton, Indianapolis IN. David Winning, singers Barry & Sally Childs-Helton.

2–4—**ConVergence. (651) 647-3487. convergence-con.org.** St. Paul MN. L. Niven, D. Gerrold, V. Truitner, D. Garner.

2–5—**Anime Expo. anime-expo.org.** Convention Center, Anaheim CA. Goro Taneguchi, Yoshitoshi Abe, Yuki Kajiura.

9–11—**Shore Leave. (410) 496-4456. shore-leave. com.** Hunt Valley Marriott, Baltimore MD. Cirroc Lofton. Star Trek.

9–11—**AnthroCon. anthrocon.org.** Adams Mark, Philadelphia PA. M. Gagné, S. Sakai. Anthropomorphics/furries.

16–18—**ConEstoga, 440 S. Gary Ave. #45, Tulsa OK 74104. (918) 445-2094.** Sheraton. Flint, Sweet, W. J. Williams.

23–25—**LibertyCon, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343. libertycon.org.** Best Value, East Ridge TN. Niven, Pournelle, Weber.

23–25—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. trfn.clpgh.org/parsec/conflu.** Sheraton. Guests TBA.

23–25—**Trinoc*Con, Box 10633, Raleigh NC 27605. trinoc-con.org.** Marriott, Durham NC. Steve Miller & Sharon Lee.

28–31—**Romance Writers' Conference, 3707 FM 1960 W. #555, Houston TX 77068. (281) 440-6885.** Dallas TX.

29–Aug. 1—**Official Star Trek, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960.** Burbank CA. Commercial con.

30–Aug. 1—**ShowMeCon, Box 410115, Creve Coeur MO 63141. showmecon.com.** St. Louis MO. M. Lackey, L. Dixon.

30–Aug. 1—**OtaKon. 3470 Olney-Laytonsville Rd., Olney MD 20832. otakon.com.** Conv. Ctr., Baltimore MD. Anime.

30–Aug. 2—**MythCon, c/o Box 71, Napoleon MI 49261. mvanloo@dcmi.net.** U. of M., Ann Arbor MI. Gaiman. Tolkien.

AUGUST 2004

5–8—**Commonwealth of SF, A. D. Butler D28, BCU Coll., High Wycombe HP11 2JZ, UK. andrew.butler@bcuc.ac.uk.**

6–8—**ConVersion, Box 20098, Calgary AB T2P 4J2. con-version.org.** Westin. George R. R. Martin, Arrogant Worms.

6–8—**ConGlomeration, Box 32095, Louisville KY 40232. conglomeration.org.** Clarion (former Hurstborne). SF/fantasy.

6–8—**Gathering of the Gargoyles, Box 18972, Cleveland OH 44118. gatheringofthegargoyles.com.** Montreal QE.

6–8—**Crescent City Con, Box 52622, New Orleans LA 70150. crescentcitycom.com.** Best Western, Metairie LA. Aspirin.

13–15—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Cleveland OH. Commercial con.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $180+.

3–6—**DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115. dragoncon.org.** Hyatt. Comics, gaming & SF. Huge.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $170/£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125.

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER ISSUE

British author **Charles Stross**, a writer currently about as hot as it's possible for a writer to *get*, returns with the penultimate story in his acclaimed "Accelerando" sequence (which have included the Hugo finalists "Lobsters," "Halo," and the current finalist, "Nightfall") depicting the adventures of Manfred Macx and his daughter Amber in a strange, post-human future on the far side of a Vingean Singularity, in "Elector," set on a bizarre floating-lilypad habitat orbiting the gas giant Jupiter, Amber is a candidate in a strange but hotly contested election that might determine the future of the human race itself (or if the human race in anything even remotely like the form we know it is even going to *have* a future) . . . and must deal with some surprises even *she* couldn't predict. This is Cutting Edge SF at its best; don't miss it!

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER

New writer **Paolo Bacigalupi**, making a compelling *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a deadly, feud-haunted world for a tricky life-or-death interview with "The Pasho"; Tiptree Award-winner **Maureen F. McHugh** returns to examine an "Oversite" with disturbing implications; new writer **Lynette Aspey**, making an evocative *Asimov's* debut, teaches us the wisdom of not disturbing "Sleeping Dragons"; new writer **Y.S. Wilce**, making a baroque *Asimov's* debut, serves up, with a dramatic flourish, "The Biography of a Bouncing Boy Terror! Part One: Crime Commences"; **Meredith Simmons** returns to show us how all creatures are "Brethren" under the skin (sort of), for better *and* worse; new writer **David Moles**, making a powerful *Asimov's* debut, unravels a suspenseful tangle of intrigue, espionage, and cultural conflict on a troubled distant planet, as the fate of worlds hangs on the decisions of "The Third Party"; **Matthew Hughes**, making a clever *Asimov's* debut, takes a mordant look at "The Hat Thing."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines some stuff that is truly "Far Out"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On The Net" column sweeps us along for some "Time Travel"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale at your newsstand on August 3, 2004. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, including downloadable forms for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

COMING SOON

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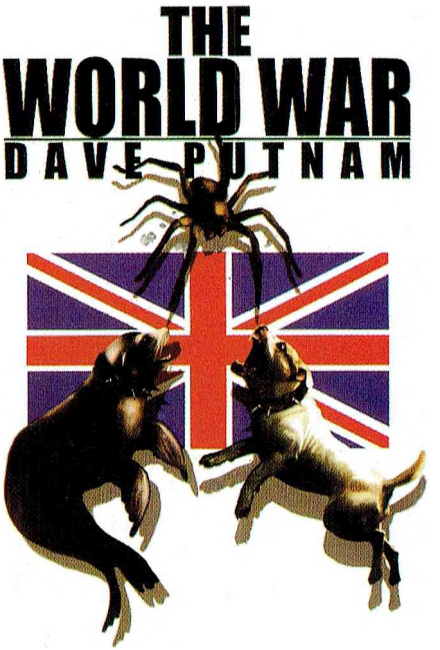
Will Britain Rule The World?



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