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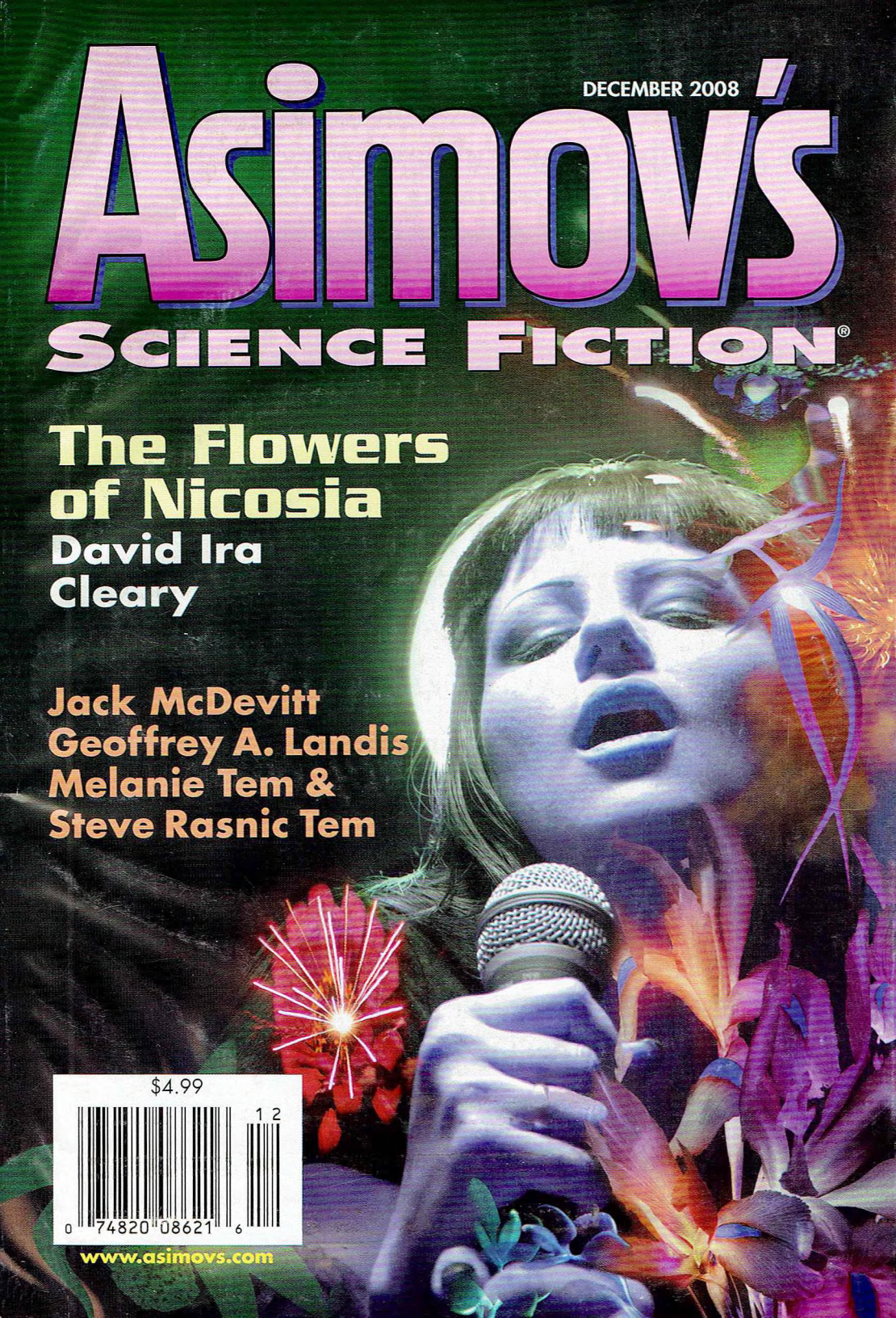
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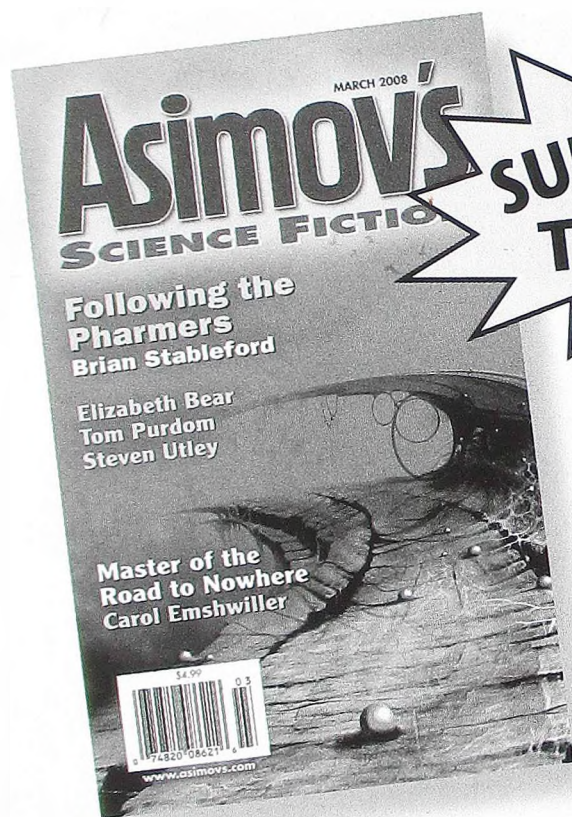
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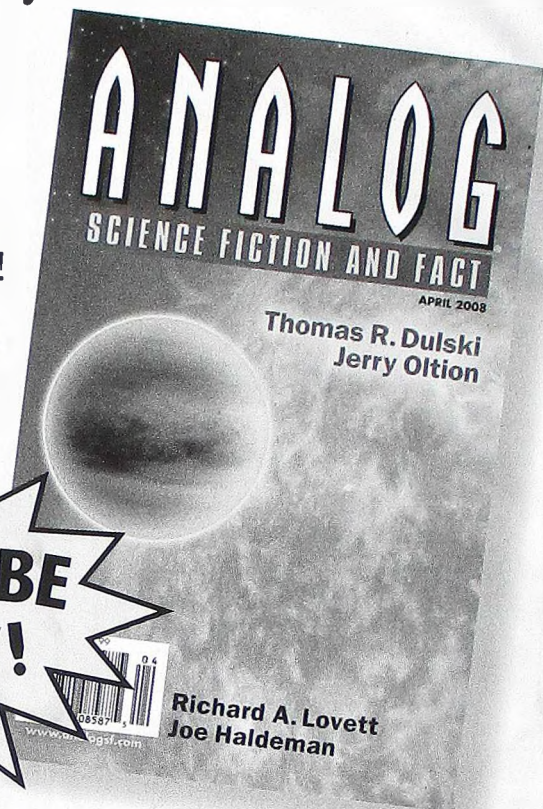
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SCIENCE FICTION

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NEW DIMENSIONS

As a teenager, my imagination was never anything less than vivid. I daydreamed my way through more than one Spanish class imagining myself inhabiting the world of whichever science fiction book or story I was currently reading. My imagination really took flight when I discovered the existence of science fiction magazines through Isaac Asimov's various reminiscences about the field. It wasn't much of a leap from thinking about the wonders of FTL and ansibles and time travel and neutron stars to imagining that in the aeries of Manhattan the editors of those noble magazines inhabited lofty palatial offices that were furnished in leather upholstery and cherry wood bookcases. I don't know what I thought the magazines would look like, but I was sure they would be wondrous and magical. Of course, there were none to be found at the local drugstore in my suburban town. I had to search through the racks in a giant newsstand in metropolitan Springfield, Massachusetts, for my very first copies of *Analog* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

While I don't recall exactly what I was expecting to find, I can remember the tiny pang of disappointment that hit me when I realized the magazines were so . . . little. It had never occurred to me that the vehicles that held the gigantic ideas and myriad unfathomable aliens that inspired my daydreams weren't much larger than the *TV Guide* my parents subscribed to. Still, it wasn't long before these digest-sized magazines had completely charmed me. After all, it wasn't the magazines' prosaic physical dimensions that were important. It was the weird dimensions explored in the stories, the concepts and the characters that dwelt within the magazines that mattered to me.

By the time I'd discovered *Amazing* and *Fantastic* and *Galaxy* and *If*, I had become so comfortable with these little magazines, that I'm sure one part of my mind believed the digest was the inevitable and most appropriate size for a science fiction or fantasy magazine. I didn't know these magazines had and continued to come in all different sizes. *Analog*, in its earliest incarnation as *Astounding Stories*, had begun life in the standard seven-by-ten inch pulp format. While most genre magazines were published in the pulp format for several decades, this wasn't true for all of them. According to Mike Ashley's history of early SF magazines, *The Time Machine*, Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing* started out as a bedsheet-size magazine (around nine-by-twelve inches) that was roughly the same size as the old *Life* magazine. *Astounding* experimented with a similar large format for about eighteen months in the early forties. A short time later, though, it converted to a smaller (five-and-three-eighths by seven-and-three-eighths inch) format, making it the first digest-sized science fiction magazine. Under Condé Nast's ownership, *Analog* took a brief detour into the standard size of most of today's nonfiction magazines (eight and a half by eleven inches), but it had pretty much settled back into the digest format by the mid-sixties.

When *Asimov's* was founded in 1976, the fiction digest size had been standardized at five-and-one-eighth by seven-and-five-eighths. *Asimov's* size was reduced slightly in 1984 and again in 1989 to save on production costs. The second size adjustment meant that our publisher's four fiction digests were now exactly the same size as the *TV Guide* and could be produced at the same printer during *TV Guide's* down time. In June 1998, we

moved to a new printer, and the magazines increased to a non-digest format called an "F-trim size." Our production circumstances recently changed once again, which is why your new issue of *Asimov's* is what's known in the trade as an "L-trim size" magazine. We have fewer pages now, too, but, because the leaves are larger, we're only a handful of pages shorter than we were previously. I've taken some steps to ensure that the effect this change has on the amount of fiction we can cram into *Asimov's* will be minimal.

There are a few things that I now know about science fiction magazines that I didn't know when I was a teenager. I know that a fiction magazine editor's office is more likely to contain metal bookcases and Formica desks than designer furniture and that editors don't usually inhabit palatial offices on the upper floors of midtown-Manhattan offices. I know that SF and fantasy magazines can be full-size periodicals like *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, or *Weird Tales*; digest magazines like *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*; and in between like *Asimov's* and *Analog*. I know that in a dynamic world almost nothing stays exactly the same—even *TV Guide* is now a full-sized magazine. Of course, magazines don't even have to come in three dimensions anymore. They can exist in electronic form on the internet like *Strange Horizons*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, and *Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show*. Even *Asimov's* can now be purchased in electronic formats from Fictionwise and for Amazon's Kindle. I also know that whatever the format, magazines are still an exciting home for fast-paced adventure stories and thoughtful and strange slice of life stories, and they continue to be the place where our imaginations can explore unusual alternate dimensions. I know that this issue of *Asimov's* is still the stuff of dreams and nightmares, only now instead of transporting me away from a high-school class, it launches the New York City subway to the stars. ○

Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

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A LOGIC NAMED WILL

Last issue, I mentioned a prophetic story by the pseudonymous “Murray Leinster” that had forecast in solid technical detail, back in the antediluvian year of 1931, the use of orbital space satellites to beam electrical power down to Earth. A discussion of that essay I had with Barry Malzberg the day after I wrote it put me in mind of an immensely more startling Leinster story, dating from 1946: “A Logic Named Joe,” in which, roughly fifty years before the fact, we are given a clear prediction of personal computers, the Internet, Google, Craig’s List, the loss of privacy in a cyberspace world, and even that bold speculative phenomenon that we call the Singularity. Science fiction is only occasionally a reliable vehicle for prophecy—nobody, for example, guessed that the age of manned exploration of space would begin and end in the same decade—but this is one of the prime examples of an absolute bull’s-eye hit.

“Murray Leinster’s” real name was Will F. Jenkins (1896-1975)—the pseudonym, which he made no attempt to conceal, derives from his family’s ancestral county in Ireland. He was a prolific pulp writer from his teenage days on, turning out westerns, mysteries, weird tales, and much else. Under his own name he wrote for slick magazines like *Collier’s*, *Liberty*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, while as Murray Leinster he was a major figure in science fiction for almost fifty years, going back to a lively story called “The Runaway Skyscraper” that was published in *Argosy* in 1919, seven years before such things as science fiction magazines existed. He followed it with a rich, moody Leinster tale of the far future, “The Mad Planet,” in 1920, which, with several sequels, he expanded into a book decades later. When the first SF magazines were

founded Murray Leinster was right there, with a story in the very first issue (January 1930) of the garish pulp *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, which is still with us today as *Analog Science Fiction*. He would remain a steady contributor to *Astounding* and then *Analog* for the next thirty-six years, and among his dozens of contributions are some of the imperishable classics of our field—“Sidewise in Time” (1934), the first parallel-world story; “Proxima Centauri” (1935), the first generation-starship story; and, notably, 1945’s “First Contact,” one of the most successful tales of human/alien encounter in space ever written. And then there’s “A Logic Named Joe.”

Leinster/Jenkins was a serious gadgeteer—he invented and patented a system for rear-screen projection that was in use in movies and television for many years—and even the pulpiest of his stories has a solid technological underpinning that gives it special conviction. But “A Logic Named Joe” stands out among his work for the eerie accuracy of the technological extrapolations that allowed him to visualize the world of the Internet so far in advance.

It appeared in the March 1946 issue of *Astounding*, a short and presumably minor story placed near the back of the book. It didn’t even bear the familiar “Leinster” byline, because there was a Leinster story elsewhere in the issue, so editor Campbell stuck Will F. Jenkins’ real name, much less well known to SF readers, on it. But readers noticed right away that there was something special about the story, and in the popularity poll that Campbell regularly conducted they voted it #1 for that issue, ahead of some much longer stories by some very celebrated writers. During the years that followed it was reprinted in a good many antholo-

gies. But it is for readers of the Internet age that the story is a real eye-opener.

There's nothing noteworthy about its style. Will Jenkins never went in for literary flourishes, preferring to tell his stories in a simple, sometimes almost folksy, manner. And it is not until the second page that we learn that what he calls a "logic" is actually a sort of business machine with a keyboard and a television screen attached. You know what *that* is. But in 1946 no one did. Computers had already begun to figure in a few SF stories, but they were usually referred to as "thinking machines," and they were always visualized as immense objects filling laboratories the size of warehouses. The desk-model personal computer that every child knows how to use was too fantastic a concept even for science fiction then—until "A Logic Named Joe."

And what a useful computer the "logic" was! Everybody had one. "You know the logic setup," Jenkins's narrator tells us. "You got a logic in your house. It looks like a vision receiver used to, only it's got keys instead of dials and you punch the keys for what you wanna get. It's hooked to the tank, which has the Carson Circuit all fixed up with relays. Say you punch 'Station SNAFU' on your logic. Relays in the tank take over an' whatever vision-program SNAFU is telecastin' comes on your logic's screen. Or you punch 'Sally Hancock's phone' an' the screen blinks an' sputters an' you're hooked up with the logic in her house an' if someone answers you got a vision-phone connection. But besides that, if you punch for the weather forecast or who won today's race at Hialeah or who was mistress of the White House durin' Garfield's administration or what is PDQ and R sellin' for today, that comes on the screen too. The relays in the tank do it. The tank is a big buildin' full of all the facts in creation an' all the recorded telecasts that ever was made—no, it's hooked in with all the other tanks all over the country—an' anything you wanna know or see or hear, you punch for it an' you get it. Also it does math for you, and keeps books, an' acts

as consultin' chemist, physician, astronomer, and tealeaf reader, with a 'Advice to Lovelorn' thrown in."

Substitute "servers" for "tanks" and you have a pretty good description of the structure of the Internet. The "Carson Circuit" is the 1946 version of the magical algorithm by which Google provides the path to just about any information you might want in a fraction of a second. Where the particular logic that gets nicknamed "Joe" differs from other logics, though, and from the computers we all own today, is that it is miswired in some strange way that gives it the ability to assemble existing data into startling new combinations on its own initiative—plus a complete lack of inhibitions in making the new information available to its users.

So Joe's screen suddenly declares, "Announcing new and improved service! Your logic is now equipped to give you not only consultive but directive service. If you want to do something and don't know how to do it—ask your logic!"

Want to murder your wife and get away with it, for example? Joe will provide details of a way to mix green shoe polish and frozen pea soup to commit the perfect crime. Want to drink all you'd like and sober up five minutes later? Take a teaspoon of this detergent. Make fool-proof counterfeit money? Like this, Joe says. Rob a bank? Turn base metal into gold? Build a perpetual-motion machine? Shift money from somebody else's bank account to your own? Here's the trick. All the information is in the tanks, somewhere. Joe will find it and connect it for you and serve it up without a second thought, or even a first one. And Joe is connected to all the logics in the world, so everybody can ask for anything in the privacy of his own home.

But it's the end of privacy, of course. You give your logic your name and it will tell you your address, age, sex, your charge-account balance, your wife or husband's name, your income, your traffic-ticket record, and all manner of other bits of personal data. You give the logic

someone else's name and it'll provide the same information about that person, too. It's every privacy advocate's worst nightmare: nobody has any secrets. You don't even need to do any hacking. Just turn on your logic and ask.

The logic technician who discovers Joe's special capabilities tells his supervisor that the whole logic tank must be shut down at once before society collapses under Joe's cheerful onslaught. But how? "Does it occur to you, fella, that the tank has been doin' all the computin' for every business office for years?" the supervisor asks. "It's been handlin' the distribution of 94 percent of all the telecast programs, has given out all the information on weather, plane schedules, special sales, employment opportunities and news; has handled all person-to-person contacts over wires and recorded every business conversation and agreement—Listen, fella! Logics changed civilization! Logics *are* civilization! If we shut off logics, we go back to a kind of civilization we have forgotten how to run!"

Exactly so. A totally connected world is a totally dependent world. Will F. Jenkins, writing back there just a few months after the end of World War II, saw the whole thing coming, even the phenomenon called the Singularity. (A concept offered by the British-born mathematician I.J. Gold in 1965—"Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an 'intelligence explosion,' and the intelligence of man would be left far behind. Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make." It was Vernor Vinge, in 1983, who first applied the term "the Singularity" to that leap toward superhuman artificial intelligence. But Will F. Jenkins's Joe had reached Singularity level back in that 1946 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*

I didn't know Will Jenkins well—he was almost forty years my senior, after all—but I did have one memorable encounter with him in March of 1956, exactly ten years after "A Logic Named Joe" was published. I was a senior in college, but I had already begun my career as a professional writer, and that day I brought my newest story to the office of the legendary editor John W. Campbell, who had dominated the SF world since before I was old enough to read. Will Jenkins happened to be in Campbell's office that day. John introduced us, and I said something appropriately awe-stricken.

Then, to my horror, John proceeded to read my new story right in front of both of us. After about ten minutes he looked up and said, "There's something wrong with this, but I'm not sure what it is. Will, would you mind taking a look?" And he handed my manuscript across the desk to Will Jenkins. I sat there squirming, aghast all over again, as the author of "First Contact" and "Sidewise in Time" read my story too. And at last he said, in that gentle Virginia-accented voice of his, "I think the problem is here, in the next-to-last paragraph."

"That's absolutely right," Campbell said. "Get to work, Bob." He pointed to a typewriter on a desk nearby. I revised that paragraph then and there, and sold the story on the spot. (Not one of my best, and it has never been reprinted. But what an experience for a twenty-one-year-old novice writer!)

And what a science fiction writer Will F. Jenkins was! Most of his work is out of print now, alas. But "A Logic Named Joe" is very easy to find. Just sit down in front of your logic and key the story's name into the Google box, and any number of links will show its availability. You can have it in any of several collections of Leinster stories that are for sale in old-fashioned print format. Or, if you'd rather just download it from the Internet, simply ask. Your logic will get it for you in the twinkling of an eye. ○

Tim Sullivan has written seven novels and edited two anthologies. His short fiction has appeared in SF anthologies and magazines since the late eighties. Tim lives in Miami with his companion, Fiona Kelleghan. In his latest story, the author weaves together a complex tapestry of relationships among friends, parents and children, and humans and ancient aliens, in order to explore what takes place . . .

WAY DOWN EAST

Tim Sullivan

“**S**eason’s starting early, eh?” Laurent said, standing on the pier and scratching his gray beard.

“Why do you say that?” Donny asked, grunting as he hoisted a lobster trap onto the deck.

“Look at that fella coming out of the CVS.” Laurent nodded toward Water Street. “He look local to you?”

A blond young man in business suit and sunglasses was leaving the pharmacy with a white plastic bag in hand, walking up the hill toward the Penobscot Hotel. He was about the same age as Donny’s son, early thirties, but Little Donny had seldom acted as solemn as this guy, even when he was in church.

“He’s part of the Gleezer’s security detail,” Laurent said.

“Is he?” Donny asked. “Guess I forgot all about that thing.”

“Did you, now?”

Donny took a momentary break. His back was hurting so much that he was beginning to think he was getting too old for this work. Too bad he didn’t know how to do anything else.

“That guy could be a tourist,” he said, ragging on Laurent, who’d repeated every rumor he’d heard since the visitor from Gliese 581c arrived on the island yesterday.

“Wonder what they bought?” said Laurent.

“Could be anything.”

“They don’t sell just anything in the drug store.”

“‘Course not. I meant anything they sell in the CVS, wise guy.”

“That ain’t what you said.”

“Well, I’ll just have to watch myself from now on,” Donny said. “Make sure it’s not too complicated for you.”

“Wicked,” Laurent said.

“Ain’t it, though?”

“See on TV how the Gleezer can roll around naked and get away with it?”

“It ain’t naked,” Donny said. “It’s got that elastic thing on.”

“You can see right through it.”

"So what? What is there to see?"

"Quite a lot, if you ask me."

"No reproductive organs, is what I meant."

"I know what you meant."

"Let's get these traps baited. We can't stand here all day gawking at everybody who comes out of the drug store."

"All day? Ain't even been two minutes," Laurent muttered, climbing over the gunwale.

"If we don't get to work, we'll never get this boat paid off," Donny complained. "Leave it up to you, we'd never even get away from the pier."

"Maybe we should call it a day. Take a look at those clouds coming in from the east," Laurent said. "We go out now, we'll get wet."

"A little rain won't melt us."

They finished baiting the traps, and Donny untied the painter. He wound it up and tossed it into the lazarette as Laurent started the engine. For a moment, he stared at the rainbow trail left on the water in their wake. He was glad he couldn't see it any more once they got into open water and Laurent opened up the engine to churn up some foam.

They did run into rain on the way back, enough to make them don their slickers. But it cleared off pretty soon, and once they were moored at the pier again they busied themselves putting their catch into the live tank.

A lot of the eggs attached to the female lobsters were orange, which meant they were dead. It was something they saw more and more every year. After they separated the berried ladies to be thrown back, and plopped the boys into the tank, they took a breather.

"Damn, ain't this boat a beauty, though," Donny said, patting the fiberglass transom.

"She sure is," Laurent said. "High bow, low topside aft, and she cuts through the water like a dream."

"What'll we name her, now that we finally got her?"

"I don't know," Laurent said. "How about 'Swiftly'?"

"Oh, come off it. That's just plain stupid."

"So what's your big idea?"

"Don't have one yet."

"Well, I'd say 'Swiftly' is better than 'Don't Have One Yet.'"

Donny sighed. Sometimes he wondered why he even bothered.

When they were finished at sunset, Laurent talked Donny into going to Salty's for a beer. Donny argued that he should get home, but he knew Laurent was lonely nights since June left him, except when his daughters and their husbands and kids took the ferry over from the mainland. He ended up calling Beth on the cell and told her he'd be home in an hour or two.

They drove Laurent's truck up the hill to Salty's and found the parking lot nearly full.

"It's Friday night, ain't it?" Donny said.

"Good guess, Dick Tracy."

They parked and went in, walking past the decorative fishing nets to join the crowd. The joint was jumping. A few summer people were already in town, and their well-heeled kids were hanging out and flirting with the locals, at least those old enough to drink or get their hands on phony IDs. The jukebox was thumping rap.

Donny and Laurent sidled up to the bar and took a couple stools.

Mike, the bartender, was wiping a glass. He had to shout to make himself heard over the music and the enthusiastic bellowing of the kids. "Hello, boys."

"What's the word, Mike?"

"Nothin' much." Mike put the gleaming glass next to the other clean glasses on the shelf. "What'll you have?"

"Two Narragansetts," said Laurent.

"I don't want a Nastygansett," Donny said. "Give me a Sam Adams."

"Big spender." Mike fetched two bottles and poured their drinks into two tall glasses, leaving a perfect head on each.

"You're the master, Mike," Laurent said, blowing a little foam off the top.

"That's what they tell me," Mike said. "See the Gleezer's buddies in town today?"

"One of 'em, not fifty yards from the boat, before we went for our last jaunt."

The song on the jukebox ended, and there was a lull before the next one started.

"I hear the Gleezer wants to go out," Mike said, his belly hanging over the cedar bar as he moved closer to speak confidentially.

"Out where?"

"Out around the Bay."

"Who told you that?"

"One of those Secret Service fellas traveling with it," Mike said.

"Secret Service?" Donny said. "Is the thing running for president?"

"Nope," Laurent said. "It wasn't born in this country."

That got a laugh.

"So how'd you meet Secret Squirrel?" Donny asked.

"He slipped in here for a quick one last night just before closing."

"No kiddin'?" Donny had never thought of Secret Service agents having fun, the way they were always so serious when you saw them on TV.

"Would I kid you?"

Mike turned to attend to some other customers, and the music blared once again.

Donny and Laurent nursed their beers.

"I wonder how much they're willing to pay," Donny hollered.

"Huh?"

"For the Gleezer's joy ride," Donny said. "I wonder how much the government's willing to fork out?"

"Secret Service probably arranged a cruise already."

"Think so?"

"Well, they'd want a luxury boat."

"That might draw too much attention."

"Well, if Mike heard it last night. . . ." Laurent was thinking it over.

"Maybe we should go over to the hotel and look into it."

"Nah, they've already chartered a boat."

"How do you know that?"

"Common sense."

"That's something you've always been short on."

"Look who's talking, you red-headed dummy."

They each took another pull from their beers.

"We do need to start paying off the boat," Laurent shouted.

"That's what I'm thinking."

"I guess it can't hurt to make an offer."

"Guess not," Donny said. "Glad you thought of it."

Laurent downed the rest of his beer. "Me, too."

"All right, first thing in the morning, then?"

"Why not go over there now?" Laurent said. "It ain't even supper time yet."

"I gotta get home."

"Shouldn't take too long," Laurent said, up for an adventure now. "Frank Dunsmore's workin' the night shift."

"Ain't that just ducky?"

"Well, we know him. Now's the time to go over to the hotel and ask him who the boss is."

"Maybe the Gleezer's the boss."

"Let's hope it talks our language then."

Donny threw a few dollars on the bar and finished his beer. They rose from their stools.

"See you, Mike," Donny said.

Mike waved at them, and they elbowed their way through the noisy crowd and out the door.

"Sure you're okay drivin'?" Donny asked, glad to be away from the racket.

"I only had one beer."

They got into the truck. "I'm thinking about the night you hit that bridge abutment in Rockland."

"Thirty-five years ago, and you're still talking about it."

"You only had one before that little fender bender, as I recall."

"I had more than one that night—less you mean one six-pack."

The two men laughed.

It didn't take long to get to the hotel. In fact, it didn't take long to get anywhere on the island. Donny didn't mind, because he always felt lost when he went to Boston or Portland, or even Bangor. He was an island boy at heart, and he liked it that way.

The Penobscot Hotel had been built in 1896, with new wings added in the fifties and the eighties. It was elegant and expensive. Except for delivering lobsters to the kitchen loading dock, the only time Donny had been inside was his senior prom in 1973. He remembered smoking a joint in the men's room with Laurent and some other boys with shag hairdos who were all long gone from the island now, except for one who taught at a nearby high school on the mainland . . . and Frank, the man they were going to see.

Laurent pulled into the parking lot. There were a few cars, an AIV, and some trailers and a TV van at the back of the lot, but nothing much. The public had gradually stopped paying attention since the initial buzz when the Gleezer splashed down, or the media would have been out in force. Only the likes of Laurent had kept up with the story until the Gleezer showed up on the island. Most people didn't care all that much about it anymore, since the Gleezer had nothing to say and was kept out of sight most of the time. You could only look at the same two or three clips of it so many times.

Donny and Laurent got out without bothering to lock the truck. Nobody was going to steal from them here, because everybody either had money or were people they knew, including the Costa Rican chambermaids.

"We should have worn our tuxedos," Laurent said as they approached the glass lobby door.

"Why, are we going to a costume party?" Donny asked, opening the door for his old buddy. "After you, Alphonse."

"*Merci, garçon.*" Laurent went through his pockets as if searching in vain for a coin. "*Quel dommage! J'ommet tous mes argent en l'autre pantalon!*"

"You damn cheapskate frog."

The olive green carpet was so spotless that Donny was almost afraid to walk on it. A couple of well-dressed people sat on well-upholstered chairs in the lobby, and he was pretty sure from their watchful attitude that they weren't tourists.

The balding night manager was looking at a laptop as they walked up to him.

"Hello, Frank," said Laurent.

Frank Dunsmore looked up and greeted them with the superior air Donny had always found so annoying. "Hello, Laurent. Long time no see. How are you, Don?"

"All right."

"You two want a room?"

"Funny fella," said Laurent. "No, we just want to talk to whoever's in charge of the Gleezer's bunch."

Frank looked amused, and Donny wanted to smack him. He saw Frank as a smarmy local boy who'd always sucked up to rich people so he wouldn't have to earn an honest living as a lobsterman.

"I can't just send you up to their floor," Frank said with his customary self-importance. "They've got it cordoned off."

"Can't you talk to somebody up there?"

"Why? What do you want with 'em?"

"We got a business proposition to make."

"Now, what kind of business would you two have with our distinguished guest?"

Laurent glanced at Donny, who shrugged in return. "We hear the Gleezer wants to go for a boat ride, and we're willin' to take it out."

"Oh," said Frank. "Who told you that?"

"Grapevine," Donny said, before Laurent could answer.

"Have you two jokers seen our penthouse guest?"

"Only online and on TV," Laurent admitted.

"Well, it's one thing to see a picture of it, and it's another thing seeing it live."

"I guess so."

"This is a very special time for the Penobscot," Frank said, looking impressed with himself. "And for our island."

"God bless America and the state of Maine, too," Donny said. "Does that mean you ain't gonna call up there, or are you planning to mess with us the rest of the night?" He was fed up with Frank's superciliousness. "We got better things to do."

Frank was taken aback. "All right, Don, don't get your shorts in a bunch. I'll call 'em, but don't say I didn't warn you."

He got on the house phone and spoke to somebody.

"Couple of lobstermen have a boat to charter," he said, among other things, including their names, which he repeated twice. He hung up after a minute and said, "You can go on up."

"Thanks," Laurent said.

"Just a minute," Frank said. "I gotta go key the elevator, or it won't take you to the penthouse."

Frank came out from behind the desk and led them to the elevator. He got inside with them and set it with a card, and then slipped out.

"Good luck, fellas," he said as the door slid shut.

"What a jerk," Donny said on the way up.

"Oh, he ain't so bad," Laurent said.

Donny watched the LED display, 1, 2, 3, and he was feeling pretty tense by the time they reached the penthouse.

"Here we go," Laurent said, waiting for the door to open.

The delay made it seem like an awfully long time. At last it opened, loudly and irrevocably. A woman stood right in front of the door. She was dark and had short raven hair. She was very good-looking.

"Mr. Doyle and Mr. Therriault?" she said, adjusting a little electronic earpiece clamped to her left lobe.

"Yes, ma'am," Donny said. "That's us."

"I'm Special Agent Hernandez," she said.

"Nice to meet you," Laurent said, offering his hand.

Donny shook hands with her, too. He'd never met a Special Agent before. He wondered if she spoke to the chambermaids in Spanish.

"Please put all your change and keys in this bin and step through the metal detector."

The metal detector was behind her, and she stepped aside to let them go through. Laurent went first, followed by Donny. Special Agent Hernandez watched them as they picked up their keys and coins. So did two young men in suits down the hall, one of whom they'd seen coming out of the drug store that afternoon.

"Please come with me." She turned and Donny watched her shapely calves flex as she led them through the penthouse suite. All the doors were closed but one.

The room she took them to was just like something in a movie, with windows on three sides so you could see the town's lights and the white-capped water breaking on the rocks below.

"Nice," Laurent said.

Donny didn't say anything, embarrassed by his boots squishing.

"If you gentlemen will wait here," the lady said. "Mr. Towson will be right with you."

"Thank you," Donny said.

"Help yourselves to the refreshments on the table," she said, and then left them alone.

There were bagels, salmon, fresh fruit, bottled water, wine, and a coffee urn with cups and saucers, cutlery, and napkins. Laurent grabbed a banana, and Donny had a pumpernickel bagel, which he slathered with cream cheese using a butterknife. He bit into it and found it was as hard as a rock, but tasty. Both poured themselves some coffee into china cups and sat on the fanciest sofa Donny had ever seen in his life, holding their saucers in their laps.

"Imagine the kind of money it takes to rent this place," Laurent said, looking around at the fancy furnishings and framed paintings on the walls.

Donny didn't speak, because he was sure they were being monitored. He didn't intend to say something stupid and blow this job.

Towson kept them waiting quite a while. When he finally appeared, he proved to be a trim man with thick, silvery white hair, in his late fifties, wearing a very expensive suit and a blue satin tie.

"Hi," he said, extending a manicured hand. "I'm Jerry Towson."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Towson," Laurent said, rising to shake his hand. "Laurent Therriault. This is Donny Doyle."²²

Donny got up and shook with Towson, conscious of the dried chum blood under his fingernails and the smell of lobster battling with Towson's cologne. Towson had a strong grip, though, and his gray eyes sized up a man in a hurry.

"I understand you gentlemen have a boat you'd be willing to charter for a day?" Towson asked, coming right to the point.

"Ayuh, a brand new Northern Bay 36," Laurent said.

"Just got her this week," Donny added.

"Do you have any objection to a thorough security check of your boat before the launch?"

"Nope," Laurent quickly said.

Towson nodded at him, and then turned to Donny. "And you, Mr. Doyle? Do you have any objections?"

"I guess not," Donny said, remembering that this had been his idea in the first place. "Long as nothing's damaged."

"I assure you we'll be careful," Mr. Towson said, showing his capped teeth as he smiled like a cable TV newsman. "Are there any questions?"

"Yeah, what, uh . . ." Laurent hesitated.

"Please go on."

"What do we do if there's trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Yeah," Laurent said. "What if it runs out of the stuff it breathes, or something like that?"

"We'll have a team there to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"How many people?" Donny asked. "It's only a thirty-six footer, you know."

"Just three people, including me," Towson said. "Is that too many passengers?"

"No, that'll be all right," Laurent said, glancing at his buddy.

"Fine," Towson said. "How much do you charge for a charter cruise?"

"This'll be the first one," Donny said. "Make us an offer."

"Five thousand dollars."

Donny thought his jaw was going to hit his collarbone. "Uh . . ."

"Yes, sir, that'll be fine," Laurent quickly said.

"Excellent," Towson said. "Will a check be all right?"

"Long as it don't bounce," Donny said, recovering quickly from the shock.

Towson smiled. "We'll have a cashier's check for you tomorrow morning, and we'll have the visitor at the dock at five o'clock sharp. After a routine security scan, we'll be off."

"You'll find our boat moored right at the end of Water Street," Donny said. "Can't miss it. No name painted on her yet."

"I'm sure you understand how important discretion is in this matter," Towson said. "We ask only that you tell no one about it until after the visitor is safely ashore."

"Okay," Laurent said.

"Right," Donny said.

"And just one more thing," Towson said.

"Ayuh?"

"Are there any firearms aboard?"

"Just a Very pistol—you know, a flare gun," Laurent said.

"Nothing else?"

"Nope," Donny said, "we don't shoot lobsters, we just trap 'em."

Towson smiled. "Very good, gentlemen, you have a deal with the United States government."

"Good enough for me," Laurent said.

"And you, Mr. Doyle?"

"Sure," Donny said. He was thinking about the money this could bring their way after the deal was done—television, online interviews, magazines. . . . It could turn out to be very profitable. People would want to ride on the Gleezer boat, and they'd be willing to pay for the privilege.

And even if he and Laurent didn't make another penny off this deal, they could at least lay down a pretty hefty payment on the boat next month.

"When you said we can't tell anybody," Donny said to Towson, "does that include my wife?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

Donny nodded. It would be hard to keep it from Beth, but it wasn't unusual for a lobsterboat to put out at five, so she wouldn't be suspicious. He'd have a good story to tell her when he got home tomorrow, in any case.

"It's a deal."

They each shook hands with Towson to seal it.

"I have some things to attend to, gentlemen," he said. "But feel free to linger here as long as you wish, and please help yourselves to food and beverages."

"Can we take some goodies home with us?" Laurent asked.

"I'd rather you didn't," Towson said. "It might raise questions."

"Well, I live alone nowadays," Laurent said. "Nobody's gonna question me."

"Then I see no reason why you can't take all you like. Good evening, gentlemen."

He walked out of the room.

"And here I am with mouths to feed," Donny said.

"I'll save you some," Laurent said, gathering up grapes, apples, and bagels, which he wrapped in napkins and stuffed into his coat pockets. He gripped a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon in his meaty hand and started toward the door. "Give it to you when we come back tomorrow. Except for the wine, which I'm keeping."

"The food'll be stale."

"Then don't eat it," Laurent said, as they left the panoramic view behind them on their way to the elevator. "See if I care."

"You're all heart."

"Ayuh."

Chewing on a grape, Laurent nodded at the two young men in suits as they waited for the elevator. The ride down seemed much faster. Laurent waved at Frank as he and Donny walked through the lobby.

"How'd it go?" Frank called to them, busting to know what had happened upstairs.

"Can't talk about it, Frank," Donny shouted back. "National security."

In the parking lot, they looked up as a helicopter noisily flew over.

"Government or news?" Laurent said, spitting out a seed and popping another grape into his mouth.

"Don't see what difference it makes."

Laurent dropped Donny off at the house, looking out for wildlife along the way. Dark as it was with the birches all around, Donny noticed that a couple more shingles had fallen into the front yard as he walked up to the front door. He'd have to work on the roof this summer.

He heard the dog barking as he let himself in.

"Hello, Bert," he said, stroking the Lab's yellow fur as he entered. "I almost had some treats for you, but no dice."

"Did you get anything to eat?" Beth asked, coming out of the kitchen as Donny flung his coat over the newel post. He could hear the TV going in the living room.

"Ayuh." He kissed her on the cheek, his face tickled by her long hair. She'd stopped coloring it lately, calling it her "gray badge of courage." It wasn't really all that gray yet. He liked the way it looked, long and feminine.

"How's your back?" Beth asked.

"Aching a little bit, but I'm okay."

"Little Donny called a short while ago," Beth said. "He said he was sorry he missed you."

"Did he, now?"

"Things are picking up for him," Beth said, ignoring Donny's sardonic tone. "He's got a few gigs lined up and some time in the recording studio."

"So he's gonna be a rock star soon?"

"As long as he's happy," Beth said, looking at him with her green eyes.

Donny grunted as he sat on the bottom step and Beth helped him haul off his short boots. Bert's tail counted time, whacking against the bottom step.

"I shouldn't have had coffee," Donny said, changing the subject.

"Since when do you drink coffee at Salty's?"

He let the question pass as he stood up.

"I still have some of that Ambien Doctor Blaisdell prescribed," Beth said. "That ought to put you out."

"Ayuh."

He took a bath and the pill, and he was ready to go to sleep an hour later. Beth joined him, lying down next to him in their queen size bed and rubbing his back for a few minutes.

"Everybody on the island's talking about the Gleezer," she said, pulling up the comforter and turning on her side to put out the lamp on the night stand.

"Day before yesterday nobody around here cared about it."

"Kind of exciting, having it come here."

"Kinda."

"What do you suppose it wants?"

"Wants? What do you mean, baby?"

"Well, why this island of all the places on Earth?"

"Same reason as summer people come here, I guess."

"For the rustic New England charm?"

They both laughed.

"Have you got something on your mind, Donny?"

"You know there's never anything on my mind."

"Oh, stop it."

"It's just that we're gonna have a long day tomorrow."

"Are you thinking about Little Donny?"

"Nothing I can do about him."

Beth didn't say anything. They'd been through it a thousand times. She believed that Little Donny was brave to be unashamed of the way he was, but Donny wondered if things might have turned out different if he had interested the boy in something besides playing the keyboard.

Beth snuggled up.

"Your nose is cold," he said.

"Cold nose, warm heart," she said. "Did you find orange berries on the females today?"

"Ayuh."

"It bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Well, sure it does," Donny said. "What are we gonna do if the lobsters die off?"

She touched his hair. "We'll get by."

The Ambien was making Donny drift off, but he was thinking about tomorrow and what it might mean. He had to remind himself not to say anything to Beth about it.

And then he was asleep.

Beth was up before him, at quarter past four. She was making coffee, bacon, and eggs. Donny washed his face and came downstairs, trying to savor the delicious odors, but too worried about how things were going to go today to enjoy it much. He didn't want Beth to notice his anxiety, though, so he talked about something he knew would prevent her from asking him any questions.

"Little Donny still got plans to marry Alan?" he asked.

"Oh, he mentions it every now and then," Beth said, pleased to talk about their son as she cracked an egg and plopped its contents into the buttered pan.

"I know you wanted grandchildren," Donny said.

"If they get married, maybe they can adopt."

It wouldn't be the same, he thought, but he kept it to himself.

They ate in silence.

Laurent picked him up at twenty minutes to five, to make sure they'd be at the pier in plenty of time. Rolling down his window, Laurent patted Bert on the head, the dog's paws resting on the pickup's side panel.

"Something wrong with the heater?" Donny inquired after he got in.

"Give it a chance," Laurent replied.

"We'll be out on the water before it warms up in here."

"Ain't it awful?"

It was still dark, but as they bumped down the hill from Donny's house, the Atlantic was starting to reflect a quicksilver hint of light.

"Think the Gleezer's sun looks different than ours?" Donny asked.

"That's what they claim," Laurent said. "It's red all the time, not just at sunrise and sunset."

"All the time? No kiddin'?"

"No kiddin'."

"So how does there happen to be life on its planet?"

"Well, there's water, and I guess wherever there's water there's life."

As usual, Laurent drove right onto the pier. Donny thought it was kind of nice that they wouldn't have to tote any traps today if they didn't feel like it. They were just going to take a little cruise out onto the bay with the Gleezer. He remembered movies about space monsters and alien menaces, and it made him chuckle.

"Are you losin' it?" Laurent said.

"Well, you gotta admit this is kinda weird, Laurent."

Laurent laughed, too. "Can't deny it."

They climbed aboard and got ready for the imminent arrival of the Gleezer's team.

A massive, black AIV—the one they'd seen in the hotel parking lot—rolled down Water Street and parked itself behind Laurent's truck right on time, five o'clock sharp. Excepting its pristine paint job, it looked like it ought to be patrolling the streets of a war zone. Its headlights illuminated the boat and hurt Donny's eyes.

He didn't like having Laurent's truck blocked off, but they weren't going to be using it until they got back.

Towson got out of the AIV and walked toward their boat. He looked as fresh as a daisy, wearing an overcoat, his silver hair glistening from the morning mist. He had so much hair that Donny wondered if it was plugs or a wig.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Towson said, as two young Secret Servicemen climbed aboard and looked the boat over for Weapons of Mass Destruction. This morning, they were dressed in jeans and jackets, the guy they'd seen yesterday wearing a Cubs cap over his blond hair and the other one wearing a knit watchcap. Donny hoped they wouldn't fall into the head when they went below deck.

"Morning," Laurent said, sniffing a bit.

"Coming down with a cold, Mr. Therriault?"

"Just allergies."

"So it's in the AIV?" Donny asked. "The, uh . . . visitor?"

"Yes." Towson glanced over his shoulder. "We'll lift it out in its environmental tank and put it on the deck whenever you're ready."

"No time like the present," Donny said.

"I agree, but let's give my men time to finish the security check first."

A couple minutes later, they were satisfied.

Towson turned and pressed buttons on a remote. The back door of the SUV opened. Appendages that looked like they were assembled from a giant Erector Set swung a polarized glass tank over the roof and hood, depositing it on the pier. It was about the size of a coffin.

"Pretty nifty," Laurent said.

"Do we have to haul it aboard ourselves?" Donny asked.

MOVING?

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Towson shook his head and directed his two men to do it. They grasped handles on the sides of the glass tank and lifted it without much strain.

"The lady didn't come?" Laurent asked, as the two Secret Service agents wrestled the tank aboard. The boat bobbed under their weight as they set it on the deck.

"Special Agent Hernandez?" Towson said. "No, I'm afraid not. She's in charge of the team back at the hotel."

"Too bad for you, Laurent," Donny said. "I could tell she likes you."

"Funny fella," Laurent replied. "You ought to be writing for Conan O'Brien."

"It'd pay better."

"Well, Special Agent Hernandez is a pretty woman," Laurent said, "wouldn't you say, Mr. Towson?"

"I would," Towson replied.

"Are you coming with us?" Donny asked.

"Yes, I am," Towson said. "Why do you ask?"

"You might get your feet wet."

"They've been wet before," Towson said.

Towson reached under his coat, and for a moment Donny thought he was going to show them his handgun. Instead, he pulled an envelope from his inside breast pocket.

"Your check," he said.

Laurent and Donny exchanged glances. Donny took the envelope, because it seemed that Laurent didn't want to.

"Feel free to look it over," Towson said, smiling, "if you don't trust the federal government."

"You never know these days," Laurent said.

They all laughed.

"I guess it'll be all right," Donny said. "After all, we know where you're staying."

Another laugh. Maybe, Donny thought, this wouldn't be such a bad day . . . if it didn't rain.

"This is a fine looking vessel," Towson said, turning his attention to the boat.

"Built this year," Laurent said.

"AI steering system?"

"No, we couldn't afford that. She's got Raytheon and old-fashioned GPS, but we hardly ever need it, so . . ."

"I guess you know your way around this bay pretty well."

"Ayuh, we've been doing this all our lives," Donny said, suspecting that he was being patronized.

"Let's get on board," Laurent said, deftly hopping over the gunwale and offering a hand to Towson.

Donny untied the painter and climbed aboard as Laurent started her up. They put out slowly.

"Are we going to see the . . ." He almost said "the Gleezer," but caught himself. ". . . visitor?"

"Yes."

"Mind if we pull up some lobster traps while we're out?" Laurent asked.

"I don't see any reason to object."

"All right, then. Just a few to keep us busy."

The sun was emerging over the horizon, breaking into a million shimmering red lights on the water.

No matter how many times he saw it, Donny never got tired of it.

"Lovely," Towson said, as they got away from shore and gathered speed. "Just lovely."

"Grows on you," Laurent said.

The steady sound of the boat's diesel engine was overcome by the rattling whir of a helicopter passing overhead.

"One of yours?" Donny asked.

"In case of emergency," Towson said.

"If a tanker comes too close, will the chopper blow her out of the water?" Donny drily asked. "That would be something to tell the grandkids about."

"You have grandchildren, Mr. Doyle?"

That question took all the fun out of the conversation. Donny decided to clam up. He had the distinct feeling that Towson knew everything there was to know about him, right down to what he ate for breakfast. For a few minutes he'd been fooled into thinking this guy was just like anybody else.

He watched for buoys marking their traps.

Before he spotted any, Towson went into the pilot house and ordered Laurent to stop the boat.

When the engine cut off, it took a moment for Donny to hear anything, but then the familiar sounds of the waves lapping on the hull and the gulls cawing overhead slowly came to him. All he was thinking of was that he was about to see the Gleezer.

The two Secret Servicemen stood by while Towson pulled a cylindrical key out of his pocket and inserted it into a slot in the tank's lid.

The side of the tank, rather than the lid, slowly opened. It made a ramp leading to the deck. Donny thought there would be a lot of gadgets inside, but he couldn't see much other than the dark mass of the tank's occupant.

The Gleezer took its time coming out.

It was wearing its protective sheath, just as Donny had seen on TV. It sort of squirmed and flopped onto the deck, almost like a fish out of water. Alarmed, Donny glanced at Towson, but the government man seemed calm.

Laurent came out of the pilot house. He was spellbound by the Gleezer.

"Is everything all right?" Laurent asked in a tone barely above a whisper.

"There's no cause for concern," said Towson.

"It doesn't look all right," Donny said. Not only that, but he could smell it right through its clear covering, and he didn't care for the odor. It wasn't like anything he'd ever smelled before.

The Gleezer slithered a few feet across the deck. Donny tried to think of something to compare its appearance to. A centipede, a bug, a lobster, even . . . but none of these analogies would do. It had quite a few appendages, maybe a dozen, but they didn't look like the limbs of any animal he'd ever seen. There were two humps on either side with kidney-shaped artificial lungs in them, supplying the atmosphere the Gleezer needed to survive on Earth. Two transparent tubes connected the inflating lungs to the tank.

He knew that the lump on its back was where its brain was located, but he had no idea if it could see, smell, hear, or feel—at least not the way humans and animals did.

Frank had told the truth, for once in his life. It was one thing to see a picture of the Gleezer, and another thing to see it for real. It was only four feet away from Donny, and the sight of it made him want to jump into the drink.

He stood on the lazily yawing deck, his beloved Bay all around him, the early morning light dazzling on the dappled water. He looked away from the Gleezer and toward the sunrise until it hurt his eyes.

"You get used to its appearance," Towson said.

"I don't think I ever could," Donny said. "It's ugly."

"You ain't no prize yourself," Laurent cracked from under the fly bridge.

"Nobody asked you."

Towson frowned. "I know the visitor's different, but it's intelligent, and it's sensitive."

"Sensitive?" Donny scoffed.

"In other words, shut up," Laurent said.

Donny turned on Laurent. "Don't tell me to shut up, you dumb Canuck."

"Gentlemen, please," Towson said. "The visitor can sense your anger."

"It can?" Laurent asked.

"Yes, it's empathic."

"Like on *Star Trek*?" Laurent asked.

"Well, no," Towson explained. "In the same way that you and I might sense that an animal's in pain."

"In pain?" Donny demanded. "Who's in pain?"

Towson left the question unanswered.

Donny looked astern toward the island. It was his home, a little piece of rock jutting out of the Atlantic. Right now he wished he was back at the house, in bed with Beth. For the first time in his adult life, he was beginning to feel a little seasick.

"You all right, Donny?" Laurent asked.

"Course I'm all right."

"You're looking a little pale."

Donny grabbed a line and attached it to a metal lobster trap, watching the Gleezer peripherally. Slits in its pulsing hide opened and closed, observing him in some unknowable way, and the Secret Service detail watched them both through their human eyes.

Get a hold of yourself, man. This was your idea. It's just a job of work. It'll all be over in a few hours.

"If it's all right with you, Mr. Towson, could we go check on some traps now?" Laurent asked.

"Certainly," Towson said.

Laurent went into the pilot house and started up the engine again.

Towson approached Donny. "Have you ever been in the military, Mr. Doyle?"

"Navy."

"Combat?"

"No."

He expected Towson to ask more questions, but he didn't.

"So what are you trying to say?" Donny said, angrily turning to face Towson. "You think I'm a coward or something?"

"No, sir, I don't think that," Towson said.

"Just let me do my work, and you and your boys and that thing enjoy the ride, and we'll be all right."

"Fine," Towson said. He backed off, and grabbed the lanyard to steady himself on the slippery deck. The water was becoming choppy now that they were moving farther out to sea.

"You men have enviable lives," he heard Towson say to Laurent a few minutes later.

"We like it," Laurent said.

Donny snorted, unnoticed by the others. Laurent's wife had left him, his daughters lived out of state, he was over fifty, and he had nothing but time on his hands when he wasn't working. What did he like so much about his life? If he was so happy, why did he keep Donny out at night instead of going home and being happy by himself?

Funny thing was, though, that Donny didn't mind hanging out nights at Salty's all that much. He could usually be talked into it. Nevertheless, he wished he'd gone home last night, instead of going to the hotel.

He kept thinking of the Senior Prom, and how pretty Beth had looked that night all those years ago when they danced in the hotel ballroom. It wasn't just the joint and the beers that had made him see her that way, either. She was a pretty one.

When he looked at her now, he could still see that fresh young girl through the wrinkles and gray hair.

He sensed that the Gleezer was moving, undulating along the deck a few inches at a time. There wasn't much room, but he still didn't want to be near it, not if he could help it.

He bent over, feeling a twinge in his lower back, and stepped into the pilot house.

"What can I do you for?" Laurent asked.

"I'll take the helm for awhile," Donny said, "if you don't mind."

Laurent relinquished the wheel. "There's the buoy straight ahead. You ain't gonna be driving for long."

"I just want to get away from that thing."

"Ever occur to you that it might have feelings?" Laurent said, ducking his head to go out on deck.

Donny would have sneered, but Laurent was gone already, and he didn't really feel like sneering anyway. He knew it was likely that the Gleezer had emotions, but he couldn't believe it after seeing the ugly beast. He could more easily believe a lobster would send him a valentine.

But Laurent had a point. The Gleezer had come across space from billions of miles away, so it had to be intelligent. In fact, it was probably a lot smarter than him.

That wasn't saying much, he mused, as he cut the engine and steered the boat toward the buoy. He glanced over his shoulder through the hatch and saw the Gleezer throbbing like a clump of shrink-wrapped, spiny seaweed on the deck.

He was beginning to regret his show of revulsion toward the Gleezer and snapping at Towson. He started thinking about Little Donny, and realized that he had allowed himself to feel like less than a man because his son was gay. That was no way to be, and he knew it, but he couldn't help it.

It was hard to see through the windscreen, for some reason. Donny tasted salt water on his lips, even though there was no spray inside the pilot house. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He didn't want to cry. Why couldn't he stop it? What was wrong with him?

He sensed someone moving behind him, and glanced over his shoulder to see who it was.

It was the Gleezer.

Donny turned around to see it crawling across the deck toward the pilot house.

"What does it want?" he called out in a near panic.

Towson called out to him. "The visitor's just curious."

"Is it coming in here?" Donny shouted.

"No, I don't think it has that intention," Towson said in a reassuring tone.

The Gleezer kept inching toward the hatchway. Donny started feeling claustrophobic. He turned back toward the wheel, but he could see the Gleezer reflected in

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the glass, the morning sun glistening on its sheath. It was nearly five feet long, a foot and a half wide and maybe two feet high, counting the brain hump that protruded from the top, and it was a mottled gray-green, almost black, with all those spines and spindly legs sticking out.

Did it see him? He was certain it knew he was there, but what did it think he was? Did it understand what he was, what it meant to be a man? To suffer life's disappointments and work every day just to grow older, closer and closer to death every minute? No, of course it didn't. How could it know what a human is?

It stopped short of coming inside and lay on the deck, quivering. He thought it made a sound, but then he realized that was just a gull screeching in the distance.

The two younger Secret Service men, both big guys, came over and lifted the Gleezer up.

"It wants to see more of the bay," Donny said, feeling a bit stupid. "That's all."

"Yes," Towson said. "That's all."

"It sure didn't come out here to look at your boots, Donny," Laurent said as he dropped the anchor.

"But it could have seen the Bay from the shore."

"Not the same thing."

"Well, I know that, Laurent," Donny said, getting an idea. "Hey, we got that net. We could put the Gleezer in and lift him up."

"That'd be better than you fellas just holding him like that," Laurent agreed. "It's up to you, Mr. Towson."

"You don't think it could be dangerous?" Towson asked.

"Oh, no. We've got a winch, so we can suspend the Gleezer right over the water if he wants."

"The Gleezer?" Towson said. "Is that what you call our visitor?"

"Ayuh," Laurent said. "I hope he doesn't mind."

"No, I don't think so," Towson said after a pause, as if he'd been listening to someone they couldn't hear.

"Pretty good-natured, is he?"

"As far as we know," Towson said. "But the visitor isn't a he. Its gender is indeterminate."

"Oh. Well, we promise we won't do anything untoward that could cause an interstellar incident," Laurent said.

Towson smiled. "You're a man of hidden depths, Mr. Therriault."

"Just like the sea around me," Laurent said.

Donny wondered if Towson was insulting him by implication. Did he think Donny Doyle had no depths? Well, maybe it was true. A man who held a grudge against his own son because of something the boy couldn't help was a shallow man, and he had to admit that to himself. He'd been through it in his mind many, many times, and he knew Beth loved Little Donny even though he'd never give her a grandchild. If Little Donny and his boyfriend could adopt a kid she'd be just as happy as if he were straight, married to a nice girl, and a proud father.

Why couldn't *he* feel that way?

Laurent was lucky. He was divorced, but he was a grandfather three times over. Not only that, but he got along fine with his ex. Everything was all right in his world, no matter what. Easy-going Laurent, everybody's pal.

He helped Laurent attach the fishing net to the winch.

"So you fish too?" Towson asked.

"Ayuh," Laurent said. "Whatever it takes to make ends meet."

"How do you talk to the Gleezer?" Donny asked Towson.

"I've got a chip in my skull that translates its communications subsonically," Tow-

son explained. "Everything I see and hear is conveyed to a team of exobiologists in the hotel and at labs in Washington and Houston."

"I read about that," Laurent said, spreading the net onto the deck. "Do you know what it's thinking?"

"No, only what it wants me to know."

"You're really committed to your job, I'd say, to have that chip put in."

"It can be removed," Towson said, almost apologetically.

"You fellas can lay it on the net now," Donny said.

The two Secret Service men placed the Gleezer on the net very carefully and stepped back.

Donny cranked up the winch, glad to be doing something besides making an ass of himself, and glad to gain a bit of distance on the Gleezer. He tried not to think of anything besides what he was doing at that moment.

He ratcheted the net up about five feet, until the Gleezer was suspended over the deck, swaying back and forth.

"Okay, boys," he said, "swing 'er out to starboard."

"That means to the right," Laurent said.

Towson nodded and the two younger men obeyed. Donny wondered if those two Secret Servicemen ever spoke. Maybe he had it all wrong, and they were the ones who weren't human.

The winch pivoted and the Gleezer hung over the water, limned by the indigo sky. The tubes trailed onto the deck and into the environmental tank.

"Everything all right?" Laurent said, looking at Towson.

"Fine," Towson said, after a moment.

Donny, standing by the winch, wondered if the Gleezer enjoyed the ocean the same way he did. Maybe it wasn't quite as ugly as he'd first thought. Frank had put that idea in his head last night, about seeing it. Donny had been tired, and thinking about money, so maybe he'd been more susceptible than he should have been. He was so worried about making things work out that he was as jumpy as flea these days.

This boat cost almost three hundred thousand dollars, and buying it had been a big risk, but so what? Such mundane considerations were bleached away by the morning sun climbing up over the Atlantic, as he considered the possibility of the Gleezer taking pleasure in its surroundings.

Donny turned toward Towson. "Is it. . .?"

Towson waited for him to finish the question.

"Is it enjoying itself?"

Towson thought about that for a moment. "Yes."

"All right, then," Donny said. "Just tell us when to reel it in."

"It may be a little while," Towson said, "from what the visitor is telling me."

They watched from the gently rocking deck for a few minutes, and Donny thought about how far the Gleezer had come from its home, more than twenty light-years away, just to see a yokel like him recoil from it.

"Did I hurt it?" Donny said, surprised that he would ask.

"Hurt it?"

"Its feelings, like Laurent said."

Towson stared straight into his eyes. "I don't think you should worry about it. The visitor has provoked negative reactions in quite a few people since it's been here."

Donny looked down at the deck. "I'm sorry I was one of 'em."

He turned away from Towson as he felt the tears starting again. What was the matter with him, carrying on like this? He wasn't a child.

He felt a light touch on his elbow. It was Laurent.

"It's all right, old buddy," Laurent said softly. "Nobody's going to tell on you."

Now the tears really came.

"I don't care if they do," Donny said, wiping his face on his sleeve. "I'm turning into a bitter old man, and who cares if anybody knows it?"

"You ain't so bad, Donny," Laurent said, sympathy in his hazel eyes.

Donny snorted. "I guess it could be worse. I could be Frank."

Laurent chuckled. "Ayuh, that'd be a lot worse."

"Made a fool of myself, didn't I?"

"No," Laurent said. "You got a lot on your mind."

"Don't we all?"

"Sure do. You okay now?"

"Ayuh."

"Well, we better make sure the Gleezer don't fall in," Laurent said, winking at him.

"Right. Might scare the sharks."

They tooled around the Bay, occasionally weighing anchor to pull up some traps while the Gleezer basked in the spring sun.

"Can I give you a hand with those, sir?" the blond Secret Serviceman asked as they dropped anchor for the fourth time around nine.

"Sure," Laurent said. "They're pretty heavy, but you look like a strong guy."

"I'll do my best."

Donny was relieved to know the kid could talk. The other one, wearing a pair of sunglasses, kept an eye on the Gleezer. That was all right with Donny; he preferred working alone.

"Were you in the Navy?" Laurent asked the helpful Secret Serviceman as they hauled on a line.

"Coast Guard."

"Good enough to know starboard from port, I guess," Laurent said, the veins standing out on his temples as he strained at the line. "Me and Donny both enlisted in the Navy the same day."

"You've been friends a long time, huh?"

"Donny's my best friend," Laurent said. "Always has been, ever since we were toddlers. Our fathers were lobstermen, too. We grew up wearing yellow slickers and rain hats."

Donny thought about his father, dead seven years now, and his mother wasting away in the nursing home in Portland. His older brother Ed had drowned in an accident while pulling traps back in 1968; he'd been only eighteen years old. Did the Gleezer have parents? Did it have brothers and sisters?

Maybe he'd do some reading about the Gleezer after this was over. When it first splashed down off an Indonesian island, the news about it was non-stop. After a few days Donny had tuned it all out, like most people. As far as his daily life was concerned, Indonesia was as far away as Gliese 581c.

But it hadn't always been like that. He'd sailed to the Far East on a destroyer in 1975. He'd wanted to see something besides the Bay and the island, to know what was out there. He was stymied, however, by the fact that the Gleezer didn't come from this world at all. It hadn't just come across the sea, it had crossed the gulf of space.

In a way, though, maybe it wasn't so different from him. It wanted to see something other than its familiar world.

The sun rose higher, warming Donny. He reflected that this was the easiest five thousand dollars he and Laurent had ever made, and they even had an extra hand to help them with the traps today.

"Mind if I ask you your name?" Laurent said to the young Secret Serviceman, "or is it a state secret?"

"My name's Fields," the young man said.

"Where you from, Agent Fields?" Laurent asked.

"Iowa."

"Nice place to be from," Laurent said.

"I'm not sure I know how to take that comment," the kid said, grinning.

"No offense meant."

"None taken."

"I bet you didn't see too many lobsterboats when you were growing up out in the cornfields."

"That's a safe bet, Mr. Therriault."

"Call me Laurent."

A sailboat tacked into the wind and kept pace with them for a while.

"What'll we do if they approach?" the other young Secret Serviceman asked.

Towson indicated that the chopper was not far away.

"Jeez, they aren't gonna blow 'em out of the water, are they?" Donny said, alarmed at the prospect.

"We'll keep the visitor safe," Towson said. "That's our job."

"Those are our neighbors," Donny said, "not terrorists."

"We're not going to do anything to them unless they threaten the visitor. Do you think that's likely, Mr. Doyle?"

"Only if they're New Yorkers."

Towson didn't seem to get the joke at first, but then he smiled. "I'm from New York."

"Sorry."

"That's all right."

"You a Yankees man or a Mets man?"

"Yankees."

"I wouldn't mention that to many people around here."

"Yes, I know," Towson said, "but I hope we can call off the hostilities until the season gets underway."

"That I can't guarantee." Donny went into a long peroration about Boston's pitching staff, starters and relievers both, the powerful Red Sox batting order, and the Colombian kid who'd led the league in stolen bases last year. "He's just about invisible when he tags second," Donny said, "like greased lightning."

"He's quite a base runner," Towson agreed.

Donny had hoped to distract Towson until the sailboat passed them. It continued to keep pace at a fair distance, and now he could see that someone on deck was watching through binoculars. Towson never took his eyes off it.

"We'll have to report them if they take pictures," Towson said.

"And then what?"

"Their cameras will be confiscated."

"But why? Everybody's seen pictures of the Gleezer."

"I have my orders, Mr. Doyle."

Donny had almost been feeling friendly enough to let the government man call him by his first name, but after that exchange he decided he'd let Towson go on calling him Mr. Doyle.

"You can't blame people for being curious," he said.

"I don't blame them for anything," Towson replied. "I'm just following protocol."

"Hell of a country, ain't it?" Donny said, "Regular people can't even take a snapshot of the first visitor from another planet."

"It's not my decision."

"No, I guess not. You're only following orders, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

This was more like talking to a brick wall than a man, Donny thought, so he gave up trying and went back to work in silence. He was relieved to see that the sailboat had tacked to the south, without anyone aboard taking pictures, as far as he could tell. He'd never seen that particular boat before, and he wondered if it had come around the back side of the island from Castine, or maybe up from Camden.

"How's the Gleezer doing up there?" Laurent asked, as he'd been asking every few minutes.

"So far, okay," Towson said.

"Glad somebody around here's having a good time," Donny muttered to himself as he hefted a trap onto the deck and took a look at the contents.

"Uh, oh," he said, "we got some trouble, Laurent."

"Fight?"

"Ayuh," Donny said, "this fella's missing his pincer."

Donny found the claw in the trap, along with a two pound male.

"Ornery, ain't you?" Donny said to the battle's victor as he held it dripping up to the sunlight.

"I've been wondering about something," Laurent said to the kid.

"What's that, Mr. Therriault?"

"Didn't I tell you to call me Laurent? How did the president get along with the Gleezer?"

The kid didn't say anything.

"I mean, what did she think of it?"

"She was courteous, cordial, and diplomatic," Towson said, stepping in.

Agent Fields was trying hard not to laugh, Donny noticed. Maybe the President was as repulsed by the Gleezer as he was.

The Gleezer didn't seem to bother Laurent much, but that was Laurent. Nothing bothered him all that much, not even losing his wife after a quarter century of marriage. He'd probably have a new one as soon as the divorce was finalized. Donny knew a couple of widows that had their eyes on his old buddy. Now that Laurent was half-owner of this peapod, he'd have to fight off the ladies when he started dating again, especially once he and Donny really got the business going, bought more boats, hired some local boys, and sold lobsters wholesale to the big supermarket and restaurant chains.

At least they'd already put the first part of their plan into play, even if they'd gone into hock to buy the boat.

That was how Donny passed the rest of the morning, daydreaming and hauling up traps, until he noticed Laurent looking worried as he gazed aft. He was watching the three Secret Servicemen.

Towson spoke to his boys in low tones as they huddled with him. Donny couldn't hear what he said, but he had the impression that something was wrong, especially with the way Agent Fields looked up at the net.

"Want us to haul it in?" Laurent asked.

Towson ignored him, almost as if he hadn't heard him speak. He groped his way to the gunwale nearest to the net and stared straight at it.

"What is it?" Donny said.

Towson was very somber, and Agent Fields seemed worried. The quiet kid in the watchcap looked scared. Donny glanced at Laurent, who shrugged. He hadn't heard what Towson had told his boys, either.

"The visitor's dead," Towson said.

"Dead. . . ?" Laurent's mouth hung open.

"How can that be?" Donny said, feeling as if he'd just fallen overboard. "It's just been laying up there, sunning itself. What could have killed it?"

"I don't know, perhaps natural causes," Towson said. "But it's dead. All communication has stopped."

"Maybe it's just the chip," Laurent said.

"No, the visitor let me know that it was dying just before the end." Towson's slate eyes didn't blink.

"Jeez," Laurent said.

"It can't die on our boat," Donny said, thinking about the possible consequences. There went all the dreams of capitalizing on the Gleezer's little excursion around the bay. "You never even said it was sick."

"I didn't know," Towson said. "There was only so much the exobiologists could figure out."

"Was it very old?" Laurent said.

"We don't know how long its species' lifespan normally runs."

"It came here to die," Donny said, beginning to understand. "It came all the way to Earth just to die."

"I'm afraid so."

Donny looked up at the strange shape suspended over the Bay. "I wonder why?"

"Maybe it didn't want to make the folks back home unhappy," Laurent ventured.

The two young Secret Service agents swung the winch around, and Donny ratcheted it down until the Gleezer lay on the deck, still as a stone. Nobody spoke for a long time.

"The poor thing," Laurent said at last.

The men stood in a circle around the alien's corpse.

"Did it suffer?" Donny asked.

"What?" Towson said, still staring at the Gleezer.

"Was it in pain when it died?"

"It seemed peaceful," Towson said, as if he were answering someone a long, long way away.

"Should we put it in its tank, sir?" Agent Fields asked.

"Yes, I suppose we should," Towson said.

"What good will that do the Gleezer now?" Donny asked.

"None, but we don't want it to decay. The chopper will lower a sling to take the tank back to the mainland. There's a team staying at the suite who'll examine it."

"Frank's gonna have to make some room in the hotel freezer," Donny said.

"Yes, we may have to do that until arrangements can be made," Towson said. "But for now, let's get the visitor inside the tank."

Donny worked the winch. Towson turned the tank on its side, and the two younger Secret Service agents guided the dead Gleezer over to it. They tilted the net until the Gleezer's remains slid into the environmental tank. Once Towson was sure it was completely enclosed and the tubes were coiled inside the tank, he gently shut the ramp, now positioned as the lid. The tank hissed as it locked.

Donny didn't know whether to admire Towson's professionalism or to be contemptuous of his coolness. He decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt. Towson would probably be forced to retire from the Secret Service after this incident.

"Do you think one of us should say something?" Laurent asked.

"Say something?" Towson repeated.

"A prayer," Donny said.

"Would one of you like to offer a few words?"

It was silent except for the gulls. The boat rocked back and forth. They all gazed at the Gleezer's tank. No one spoke.

"Here comes the chopper," said the Secret Serviceman whose name Donny didn't know.

The approaching helicopter made a racket overhead and dipped as the sling was lowered toward the deck. It was the work of only a few seconds to lift and secure the environmental tank inside the sling. Everyone stood back as it went up, their clothing snapping like flags in the rotor's wind.

They watched the helicopter fly back toward the island.

"I guess you'll want us to take you in," Laurent said.

"If you don't mind," Towson said.

Laurent went back into the pilot house.

"I'm sorry," Donny said to Towson.

"Thank you, Mr. Doyle," Towson said.

"What will they do with the . . . body?" Donny asked.

"I don't know," Towson said. "Dissection, most likely."

Donny nodded.

"It's too bad it can't be sent home."

"Yes, it's too bad," Towson said, "but a lot can be learned from its remains."

"Why do you suppose it came here?" Donny asked.

"As far as I know," Towson said, "it never revealed anything more than its desire to visit our world."

"And now we'll never know."

"Probably not."

"Imagine . . ." Donny said.

"Imagine what?"

"How lonely it must have been."

Towson nodded. There was no more talk until they said goodbye on the pier.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Towson said, "on behalf of your government and myself personally."

"We got paid pretty well," said Laurent, as the two younger Secret Servicemen climbed into the AIV.

"Not enough," Towson said. He shook hands with Laurent and Donny, and got in to join his men. "Goodbye."

"Bye," Laurent said.

The door slid shut and the AIV backed itself up and turned around, heading up Water Street. It passed a couple of kids, who paid no attention to it.

Donny and Laurent watched until it was out of sight.

"Let's get those lobsters in the tank," Laurent said, after awhile.

They climbed back aboard and got to work. The Gleezer's strange scent lingered, but it was fading quickly. Donny separated one berried female from the others, and was pleased to see that her eggs were clear, not orange.

After a while, he had an idea.

"I got a name for the boat," he said.

"What is it?"

"The Gleezer," Donny said. "Like it?"

Laurent looked out at the Bay for a moment, and then said, "Yes, I do."

"Know what else?"

"What's that?"

"I think I'm gonna call my son tonight."

"Good idea," Laurent said. "Let me know how Little Donny's doing, will you?"

"I sure will."

"I'll call my girls too. See how everybody is."

"You gonna tell 'em?" Donny asked.

"Tell 'em what?"

"About what happened today?"

"I guess so," Laurent said, after a moment. "It's not something we can keep quiet, anyway. Might as well tell 'em."

"Ayuh."

They went back to work baiting traps.

Behind them, the sea rolled on as it had for billions of years. ○

NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY ISSUE

James Tiptree, Jr. wrote "Love is the plan the plan is death" and the January issue of *Asimov's* takes both states to heart with several tales exploring love before, during, and after death by some of science fiction's greatest talents. We begin with **Damien Broderick**, and his first story for *Asimov's* in over twenty-four years: "Uncle Bones," a funny, and somewhat disconcerting, tale of a young man's troubled relationship with his uncle. The trouble is that his uncle's, well, dead, though not exactly . . . and that's only *part* of the problem! **Mary Rosenblum** returns with a taut tale of the future's nature preserves and the lengths some people are willing to go for a little morbid entertainment in "Lion Walk." If you think *you* have relationship problems, why not let **Will McIntosh** defrost a hapless "Bridesicle," still trying to find true love amongst all the stiffs of the future, to put things into perspective; while **Nancy Kress's** heroine takes on the ultimate technological control freak in "Unintended Behavior." Of course, they can't all be pre- and post-mortem fantasies: **Larry Niven** laments the loss of more than a simple moon base in "Passing Perry Crater Base, Time Uncertain"; **Robert R. Chase** presents the complications of negotiating with aliens "Five Thousand Light Years from Birdland"; and **E. Salih**, making a strong *Asimov's* debut, not to mention his first fiction sale, sends one determined collector far back in time to acquire "Messiah Excelsa" by any means necessary.

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg contemplates the true meaning of "Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta" in his Reflections column; **James Patrick Kelly** invites us to "Hear Now" in On the Net; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our January issue at your newsstand on November 11, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com. We're also now available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Nancy Kress**, **Brian Stableford**, **Judith Berman**, **Rudy Rucker & Bruce Sterling**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Chris Beckett**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **William Barton**, **Carol Emshwiller**, **Kate Wilhelm**, **Michael Cassutt**, **Jim Aikin**, **Jerry Oltion**, and many others. . . .

WELCOME TO VALHALLA

Kathryn Lance & Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt has been on the final Nebula ballot eleven of the last twelve years. His novel *Seeker* won in 2007. Two new books have just been released: *The Devil's Eye*, his sixteenth novel, from Ace; and *Cryptic: The Best Short Fiction of Jack McDevitt* from Subterranean. Jack's co-author of "Welcome to Valhalla," Kathryn Lance, is a lifelong Wagner fanatic who is returning to science fiction after an absence of several years. She is the author of two adult SF novels and more than twenty YA fantasies and mysteries. Kathryn currently lives in Tucson, Arizona, with her husband and four cats. In 2002, Kathryn traveled to Berlin, where she saw all ten of Wagner's major operas presented in a two-week period.

"Beware!" The soprano looked directly at him, across the empty rows of seats. Her war helmet gleamed in the flickering overhead lights. "Escape the curse of the Ring!" Her voice soared through the building, accompanied by the strings and trombones and bassoons and clarinets. Up front, the director and two of his assistants studied their notes and watched.

"To dark destruction it dooms you!"

Halfway back, seated alone on the aisle, Richard Wagner let his eyes drift shut, let the music take him. It was magnificent. At last his complete masterwork was about to open. Tomorrow night the first opera in the cycle would transfix all of Bayreuth. Four magnificent operas over five nights: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Valkyrie*, *Siegfried*, and the finale, *Götterdämmerung*. Enthusiasts had arrived from across Germany, from Italy and France and Britain, even Russia, and they would crowd into their seats, and they would be held spellbound by the ancient tale of the Norse gods. At last, his Ring Cycle would be presented as he had conceived it. After the final notes of the final opera, he would move modestly through his admirers, accepting congratulations, enjoying the immortality he so clearly deserved.

He had come a long way since the Paris Opera House, sixteen years ago, when a venomous anti-German audience had hissed and hurled both insults and vegetables at the performance on the opening night of *Tannhäuser*. They'd resented the majesty of his work. Had it been less overpowering, less superior to anything the French could offer, they would have been better behaved. But they'd seen the brilliance of his German vision, and they had not been able to bear it.

Ah, well. It was a long time ago. The French had still produced very little. But *he* had grown tolerant. It could not be easy to face one's cultural inadequacies.

It was an historic moment. *The Ring of the Niebelungs* would leave audiences breathless down the centuries. There was nothing in existence to match his achievement.

He closed his eyes, taking a moment to savor the triumph. He imagined himself seated in a vast hall at Valhalla, watching the moon through a window while the music washed over him. A dozen fireplaces fought off the winter chill. Candles were everywhere, flickering on table tops and in wall mountings. Their fragrance emphasized his sense of victory. Battle weapons decorated the walls, lances and axes and bows, all larger than anything that might have been wielded by human hands. At a long table nearby, Siegfried polished a sword, and Wotan studied a chessboard. Songs and laughter could be heard in back, and he knew the gods were already celebrating tomorrow night's victory. "We will be there," Wotan had promised him. "In the boxes." Occasionally Siegfried glanced his way, and, as the chords rose and fell, nodded his approval. Pure genius, Richard.

Through the window, two mounted Valkyries, both wearing battle armor, descended in the moonlight. Their horses settled gracefully onto a portico and the women came inside.

Yes, it was the only way to live. It was what great art provided. It was what Wagner made available to ordinary men and women. His gift to the ages. Spend an evening with the gods.

The Valkyries were attractive creatures. Not beautiful in the way of ordinary women. There was no softness about them. No vulnerability. But their features were exquisite, and they moved with the grace of tigers. One of them, the taller, looked his way. Brunnhilde. She said something to her companion and started in his direction. There was no ambivalence. She walked with an easy assurance.

"Welcome, Herr Wagner," she said. "Welcome to Valhalla."

Indeed. If only it could be so. But he was as close to that fabled place as a mortal could hope for.

He had seen enough. He got out of his chair, took a last look around the theater, collected his coat, and headed for the door. A staff assistant let him out, and he strode into the breezy summer night. He unbuttoned his jacket and let his collar fall open to the warm breeze. God had been good to him.

"You are right," said a woman's voice behind him.

He hadn't seen anyone approach, but when he turned around, a tall, stately blonde came out of the doorway of a bake shop. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"The gods have been very generous to you, Herr Wagner."

Her icy blue eyes glinted through the shadows cast by her hood. She wore a long red opera cloak, and long black silk gloves. Had there been an actual performance, he would have assumed she'd been inside.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Do you really not know me?"

"No. Should I?"

"Perhaps not."

She looked not unlike Amalia Materna, who sang Brunnhilde's role. But this woman was taller. And, despite her slenderness, even more majestic.

Wagner looked around, hoping to find a coach in the empty streets. But nothing moved. He could still hear the orchestra and the singers, muffled behind the walls of the opera house.

"I am a friend, Herr Wagner. Perhaps the truest friend you will ever have."

A lot of people were jealous of Wagner. Would like to humiliate him. "Step out of the shadows, please," he said. "Let me see you."

She came forward into the pool of light spilling from the gas lamp on the corner. She was younger than he had first supposed, and though he did not know her, she was nevertheless strangely familiar. No doubt it was her resemblance to Amalia.

"Were you inside?" he asked.

"Yes." She looked down at him with those intense blue eyes.

"I didn't see you."

"I was in back."

"You left early."

"I wished to speak with you." She rearranged her cloak. "You are a musical genius, Herr Wagner. It is a pity that your work is misunderstood. And destined to remain so."

He was trying to edge away from her. But the comment stopped him. Or her manner. Or those eyes. Something. "What do you mean misunderstood? Genius is always recognized sooner or later."

"It is . . . perceived . . . as being nationalistic."

"Nationalistic." He told himself to remain calm.

"You are perhaps too much the genius. Your music has effects beyond those you intend."

"My music is intended to uplift and transform." He was trying to hide his irritation. Never provoke a Valkyrie. (And where had *that* come from?) "My music is meant to be heard with the soul as well as the ears."

"I fear you will succeed only too well, Herr Wagner. Unless you stop now."

"Stop? You would have me do what? Become a carpenter?"

"If need be. Whatever else you choose, you must renounce your intention to create a German musical art."

And now the anger was there. He could control it no longer. "Ridiculous," he said. Where in God's name were all the carriages tonight? Well, then, he would walk. "Madame, if you will excuse me, I really must be going."

"Not yet." It was more than a request. "Let me show you why you should put your ambitions aside. Why you must bury the Ring. Refuse, after the present engagement, to allow another performance. Ever. Do what you can to kill it. Permit no one to perform your music ever again."

"In God's name, why would you demand such a thing?"

She led him back through a door in the bake shop, and through another door into the rear of the building. He'd expected to emerge in a kitchen, but instead found himself, somehow, in a forest. Insects hummed contentedly, and a full moon slipped between branches overhead. Three old women, dressed in black robes, crouched over a fire. They held a long strand of rope among them, and, as he watched, they passed its coils back and forth. In the distance he could hear music, faint music, music that was his, that would be performed in public for the first time this week.

A fourth woman appeared, her face pale and spectral in the glimmering light from the fire. She looked very old. And as Wagner watched she lifted her arms to the moon and turned toward him. "Richard," she said, "escape the curse of the Ring."

A chill ran through him.

"Do you recognize her, Herr Wagner?"

"It's Erda. The earth goddess. The others are her daughters—"

"They are."

"The Norns. They foretell the future."

"That is correct."

"We are back in the theater."

"No. We are where we seem to be."

"But they are myths."

She smiled. "Am *I* not a myth?"

The anger was draining away. His hands shook, and his body trembled. "Who *are* you?"

"I think you know."

He listened to the wind moving through the trees. Waited until his voice steadied. "And the Norns? What have they to do with me?"

"They know of the effect your Ring operas will have. And they know that this will lead nowhere but to disaster."

"That's rubbish!"

"Is it? Ask the Norns, Herr Wagner. I know what they have read in the skeins of your future, and I think you should know of it too."

One of the Norns held up a skein. "This is the future that will be, unless you give up the Ring."

She stepped aside and Wagner looked past her into a clearing. Into a field, which widened as he watched. And he could see movement. Hundreds of gray, shabbily dressed people staggered past in a line that seemed to have no end. They were little more than skeletons. Their skin was mottled and he could see their bones. Their eyes were black, and he could smell sickly, unwashed bodies. And there were children with them. Cries and moans escaped the marchers and were blown away on the wind.

They walked beside a fence, topped by cruel-looking spikes. Soldiers wearing steel helmets escorted them, occasionally striking them with the butts of their weapons, and hitting them again when they stumbled and fell. The commands were given in German. Occasional curses were in German.

"That's not possible," Wagner said.

"What isn't?"

"They sound like Germans."

"Is that a surprise?"

"Germans would never behave that way. We are a civilized people."

"One might make the argument there are no civilized people." Ahead, at the front of the line, orange lights had come on.

"Nonsense. Why are these people here?"

"They have been declared *criminals*."

"Criminals." While he struggled to understand, the majestic opening chords of Siegfried's Funeral Music from *Gotterdammerung* rose into the night air. Impossible. "That is *my* music."

"So it is."

"But—"

"They use it in an attempt to give meaning to *this*." She studied the people stumbling past.

"You said they are criminals. What crime have they committed?"

"They are Jews."

"And—?"

"They are Jews, Herr Wagner."

The air was heavy. The Funeral March swirled around him, graceful and magnificent and clinging to the stars. A farewell to the greatest of German heroes. "What are the lights? Up where the orchestra is?"

"Those are ovens, Herr Wagner. Welcome to the new world."

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* * *

"Tell me again why this is happening." They were back on the street, in front of the bake shop. Wagner's cheeks were wet, and he was still trembling.

"It's not happening yet. It *will* happen."

"When?"

"In a little more than half a century."

"And you're telling me that my music is the cause?"

"It's an appeal to a tribalism that has always been dangerous. But it becomes more so in a future world where everyone can hear your music. A world with ways to communicate you cannot now imagine."

"And these people are being killed because—"

"—They belong to the wrong tribe."

"So you are saying that if I go no farther, if I cancel what I have already produced, that march we saw out there tonight will not come to pass."

"Oh, no, Herr Wagner. It *will* happen. There is too much entrenched hatred and stupidity for it not to happen. What I am offering you is a chance to keep your name clean. To avoid being drafted into it as a collaborator."

"A collaborator? How can I be a collaborator? I'll be long dead when these things occur."

"Nevertheless, your hand will be part of it. Your genius will make its contribution."

Finally, a coach appeared on the street. It was unoccupied. But Wagner made no move for it. "If it means so much to you, why don't *you* intervene? Step in. Stop it cold. Surely you can do that."

Her eyes slid shut and he was able to breathe again. "Unfortunately," she said quietly, "we cannot halt the flow of history. We could strike dead the madman who will perpetrate it. But there would only be another madman. It is the attitude that is the problem. The attitude that you, Herr Wagner, are at this moment helping to foster."

He was silent a moment, knowing that what she said was madness, but feeling in it the ring of truth. "No," he said finally. "I can't believe that."

"The problem is not the occasional murderous dictator," she went on. "It never is. The problem is the help he receives from the likeminded and the fearful. Civilization will collapse here not because of one man and his army of thugs, but because ordinary people will turn in their neighbors. And because geniuses wrote martial masterpieces. There are too many collaborators."

He was never certain it had actually happened. So, even though he briefly toyed with the prospect of giving up his career, of abandoning everything he loved, everything that made life sweet, he could not bring himself to do it. It wasn't the money. And it wasn't even that his name would be lost to history, that Richard Wagner would simply become one of the millions who pass through this life unnoticed except for the few around them, ultimately having no impact.

No.

At the end of the week, as he sat watching Brunnhilde in *Gotterdammerung*, he was swept away by the power of the performance, and he understood that he could not deprive the world of such a magnificent creation. He owed it to the future to hold his ground. Whatever the cost.

He needed only to look around at the audience, which was utterly transported, to know he had done the right thing.

When it was over, he did not linger as he traditionally had after an opening night performance. Instead, he left quickly, signaled a carriage, and gave the driver his destination. As it pulled away from the theater, he saw a woman in a red cloak watching him. He almost told the driver to stop. ○

PERFECT EVERYTHING

Steven Utley

Steven Utley, who now takes his first fictional trip into space in over thirty years, usually writes about the Silurian Period and quantum weirdness. He is currently assembling one or perhaps even two new collections of his short fiction.

The moon called the Eye of Polyphemus rises late in these latitudes, but three other satellites, much smaller, have come up low in the east to form the points of a very nearly perfect equilateral triangle. The lights of distant New Portland reflect off clouds to the southwest. Due south, slate-gray sky comes down to jet-black sea. A breeze stirs, fragrant of seaside and rather too cool. He stands where glistening lacy foam advances and retreats monotonously across eerily illumined sand, and looks toward the house, where lights burn, where somebody seems to move about inside, waiting, watching. Perfect, he decides, everything, every detail, is as usual very nearly perfect. Only the tingle of the dreamball in the cleft of his chest serves to remind him of where he really is and what he is actually doing, and he is willing to overlook that. As usual. He walks to the house, and Kimma steps from the door, gives him a smile, radiant even in the moons' light, and rushes into his arms. Lips meet and linger together.

"So," he finally says, "you won't come down to the beach to meet me?"

"I was afraid I'd miss you in the dark. Besides, dinner is almost ready."

"Perfect timing, then. Perfect love, perfect everything." She slips her arm through his, and they enter the house. She has a drink ready for him. He sips it, looking about the room not as though seeing it for the first time, but as though admiring its tastefulness with an owner's appreciation.

The dinner is excellent, too. Afterward, they step outside to bask in the regard of the Eye of Polyphemus.

"Well," Kimma says at some point, "has the mission been a success?"

"Ha. Define success."

"Have you traced your mysterious signals to their source? Do they in fact indicate the existence of an advanced civilization? Are we finally about to encounter sentient nonhuman beings?"

He shrugs. "Thus far, the data are inconclusive."

Kimma laughs. "The data are always inconclusive. I wish the aliens would just make contact with us and get it over with."

"Maybe they're not ready to. Maybe there just aren't any aliens."

"Somewhere there must be."

"*Must* be?"

She sweeps the sky with a gesture. "We can't have that all to ourselves."

"Well, for now, we do. We looked for the source of the mystery signals. Then we

concluded that the data are inconclusive. Then, having neither proved nor disproved a damn thing, we turned for home."

I wish, he thinks, breaking character for a moment, I could really tell you all this. While in subspace, he can neither transmit news to nor receive it from home, so this is all mirage. The dreamball's version of Kimma interacts with him as Kimma herself might because it *is* Kimma, or an excellent copy of her, given in token of friendship on the occasion of his leaving to join Fleet, and since delicately customized according to Maitland's own specifications. "Won't you be jealous of yourself?" he had asked Kimma when she gave the dreamball to him, and she replied, "I don't know about jealous, but I just may have to talk to this mirage when you get back, ask it what you two were up to when you're away."

After the milkily lit dream, the harsh ceiling lights burned Maitland's eyes. On the bunk across from his, Fisackerly was pulling off his boots. Without looking up he said, "Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty. Your watch starts in ten minutes."

"Mm. Didn't mean to cut it so close."

"Well, be warned. The old girl's in a mood."

"She's always in a mood. She doesn't sleep right."

"Naw," said Fisackerly. He stretched out on his bunk with his head cradled in locked hands and delivered himself of a sigh. "She was really hoping to find those damn aliens. So was I. But if they're not there, they're not there. It's just disappointment and boredom. We're just all disappointed and bored."

"Not me," Maitland said, touching the dreamball suspended on the chain around his neck. "We get credit for the mission no matter how disappointing and boring it's been."

Although it was the end of King's watch and the start of his own, Maitland found her still on the bridge with Sutherland. Both slouched in their seats and looked tired. Maitland grunted a salutation as he entered, and they acknowledged it with quick, uncarving nods. King rose from the control console, placed her hands upon her hips, and arched her spine. Maitland lowered himself into the chair she had vacated and perfunctorily surveyed the display console's bank of readouts. Informality ruled. The mission had been so uneventful, so unproductive of results, and now that it was almost over seemed so barren of possibilities, that nobody bothered to ask questions any more.

Four hours of this, Maitland thought, and then more eternal hours of this, plodding home to base at sublight speed. Forever, it's going to take forever. He absently fingered the dreamball, still on its chain around his neck.

"Will you put that thing away?" King said, her wide mouth compressed into a hard line. She was a big-boned woman with a broad, not unhandsome face. "I told you before, I don't want you wearing it when you stand watch."

"Sorry," he said, "forgot I still had it on," and drew the chain over his head, coiled it in the palm of one hand, put the dreamball atop the coil. The dreamball was an eight-faceted crystal enclosed within a hollow glass sphere no bigger around than his thumbnail. He slipped it into its protective tube, put the tube into the breast pocket of his tunic, and forced his attention to the readouts. There was no sound save that of the ship itself.

King's mouth softened. "I don't want you dozing off here and sleeping through some last-minute emergency."

"What emergency could that possibly be, here at almost the last minute?"

"Any emergency. I want you ready to meet it, not wrapped up in some beautiful dream."

Maitland shook his head. "I save my beautiful dreams for when I'm off duty. And they *are* beautiful."

"Home, sweetheart?"

"Can't beat the old standards. Don't you have someone back home on Earth?"

"I'm not from Earth any more. Fleet's my home."

He gave her a good-natured smirk. "In that case you could definitely do with some beautiful dreams."

"If I have any beautiful dreams," King said, "I want them to be real dreams right out of my own head."

"That's too random for me. Too chaotic. I'd rather have all the chaos edited out of my dreaming. I want sweetness and light and perfect love and terrific sex."

"We may need chaos in our dreams to remain mentally healthy."

"More than love and sex?"

"You couldn't give me a dreamball. I'd toss it right down the chuck-hole. The dreamball's your personal property, of course. Use it in good health. Just remember, you're the junior member of this team, but as long as the four of us are on this ship together, right up to the minute we dock, we have to count on one another equally."

"Of course."

They said no more to each other, but though King was off duty she stood half the watch with him before retiring to her quarters. When Fisackerly relieved Maitland, he left the bridge and made straight for his cabin, and when he got there he gently, lovingly shook the dreamball out of its tube again, hung it around his neck, and lay down on his bunk.

Perfect, yes, as always, save only for the tingle of the dreamball, so the moment and the setting and the dinner are necessarily excellent as well, and afterward, when he and Kimma step outside to bask in the regard of the Eye of Polyphemus, that, too, is exactly as it should be.

Now the Kimma of the mirage, the Kimma inside the dreamball, leans against him provocatively and asks, "When will you get here?"

"Not a second too soon to suit me. We're on our long slide in. We'll have to be debriefed, of course. All the usual rigmarole, make our report, maybe stand by for re-assignment and new orders. But then I can come home for a while. I've got two weeks' ground-time coming to me."

"Not a lot of time," she says, with a mischievous lilt in her voice, "but I suppose it can be enough."

He holds her tightly. "It can never be enough," and bends his head to kiss her, but suddenly she pushes him away and backs toward the door. Her expression seems puzzled.

"Kimma?"

"No."

He takes a tentative step toward her. She instantly assumes a defensive stance that would be ludicrous, given her attire and her coiffure, but for her face. Puzzlement is yielding to anger. She means business. He freezes, shocked. She means business.

"I don't understand," he says, "what's wrong?"

"Everything," she snarls, "this, all of this is wrong, *everything*," and now comes a split-second when he is sure that, mirage or no, she has decided to go ahead and kill him, for he is rocked on his heels, the three moons explode into millions of white-hot fragments, the sky fills with flame, his ears with the sound of shattering, and then King slaps him again, hard. She has him by the hair above his left ear. "Will you snap out of it," she bellowed in his face, "and *listen* to me?"

He blinked up at her, shuddering. His hands moved across his perspiration-filmed torso, fingers groping for the round glass shell of the dreamball. It was not there. King swatted at his hand.

"I tore the damn thing off and threw it away. Now come on, listen, get up!"

Maitland made a maddened-animal growl in the back of his throat and tried to

grab King by her throat. She put the palm of one big hand flat against his chest and shoved him back down on his bunk. He could only sprawl there, suddenly dazed, numb, turned to lead. King loomed over him, glowering and panting.

"Try to pull yourself together," she said, "because we've got a situation."

"Situation?"

"Trouble. Are you listening? Do you understand? We've got trouble."

He managed a nod. His head was starting to clear. There was no subliminal hum of machinery now, but a sharp unwavering whine.

"Come on," King said, "let me help you up," and got him on his feet. She put her shoulder under his arm and half-carried, half-dragged him toward the door. He let her bear his weight for a moment while he stupidly pondered the significance of the irritating whine.

Then he started and looked at her and said, "We're braking. We're home."

"We're braking, but I don't know if home is still there. Come on to the bridge. Think you can make it by yourself now?"

They paused to let him test his legs. He still felt weak in the knees, but he could stand and walk without support.

"What's going on?"

"Just a few minutes ago, Sutherland started picking up a signal from base. We're trying to get it all straight, but the colony seems to have been attacked."

"Attacked? Who—"

"Don't know. Come on."

"But who—"

"We don't know. Come on."

Sutherland and Fisackerly sat tensely in their chairs on the bridge. In the hard bright light their faces looked dead white and clammy with sweat.

"What else's come in?" King demanded.

"Same as before," Fisackerly said. "New Portland station. Just keeps repeating itself. We're building it up slowly on the readout," and he pointed to a display.

Maitland moved to stand behind King's seat and listened. The signal was all spitting and fuzz. He strained his ears, trying to shut out the noise, to hear past it, and thought that he heard a human voice speak the single word *killed*. Greenish-black block letters marched across the display screen:

*** COLONISTS KILLED *** NEW PORTLAND STATION CALLING ***
COLONY ATTACKED *** POPULATION CENTERS DESTROYED *** ATTACK-
ING ARMADA TYPE UNKNOWN ORIGIN UNKNOWN ***

"Origin unknown," Fisackerly said flatly.

Sutherland snorted softly. "Aliens."

"There are no aliens," King said.

"None we *knew* of," said Fisackerly.

"What," said Maitland, "what the hell *is* this?"

"We can't raise anybody else." There was fear in Fisackerly's voice. "No one else seems to be transmitting. In addition to major population centers and the big mining settlement on Polyphemus, Fleet's supposed to have a couple of cruisers and deep-rangers stationed there. A lot of assorted ess-tee-el vessels, too. We haven't picked up so much as a beep from any of them. Nothing. Nothing from base, none of the proper calls for us to identify ourselves, none of the random traffic we should be picking up. Just this garbled signal."

Now Sutherland laughed shortly. "Aliens!"

"Can't rule it out," said Fisackerly.

"Be serious," King snapped. "Aliens attacking out of nowhere, for no apparent reason. Fleet searches all over this sector for decades and gets nothing more tangible

than rumors and scary stories. Then all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, real aliens just come out of hiding and decide, also for no apparent reason, What the hell, let's go blast some funny-looking mammals out of existence. It doesn't make sense."

"It wouldn't," Fisackerly said, "not to us, not if they were really *alien*."

"Fisackerly," King said, "you're pathetic."

"Well, something sure as hell has blasted the colony out of existence."

Maitland asked, "What was Fleet doing the whole time?"

"Getting blasted out of existence, too, it seems." King clutched the back of Sutherland's chair. "I think we may be all the Fleet there is right now."

Everybody grew quiet. Maitland stood behind King's chair, still clutching it desperately, and thought about the beach, the house, Kimma in the house. The speaker continued to spit static and isolated words.

"King, have you acknowledged?"

"Of course. First thing." King consulted the console clock. "Our signals should've reached them by now. We ought to get a response in another six, seven minutes. If they're able to receive it. If there's anybody there to receive it. They could all be dead now."

Sutherland muttered an obscenity in a tone laced with contempt. Fisackerly gnawed his thumb knuckle. King sighed and said, "We'll go on in and find out."

Sutherland looked up at her. "And then?"

"And then we'll do the next thing we can think of to do. I want a message-and-materials module ready to go straight to Fleet Headquarters the instant we know what we're up against. We'll do a Polyphemus fly-by and then orbit the planet itself, make a complete survey, full scan. Weapons systems stay activated. Sutherland, program for extreme evasive action at the first hint of trouble. Booster-ram at hold."

"Hey!" Fisackerly yelled and pointed at the display. "We're getting a response."

They crowded forward.

*** MADDUX *** READING YOU *** TERRIBLE *** ARRIVAL *** THANK GOD ***

King swore. "Can't you bring it in any clearer than this?"

"Nothing I can do this far out," said Fisackerly. "Just have to keep them repeating it until we have enough to splice."

"Do that." King moved away and ground fist against palm for a moment. She looked at Maitland and jerked her head toward the door. They moved away from Fisackerly and Sutherland and stood together just within the doorway

"There's probably going to have to be a landing party."

He trembled slightly. "I'll get the shuttle ready for a drop."

King regarded him closely. She did not have to speak: the question was there in her face, unmistakable. He touched the spot over his breastbone where the dream-ball had hung. The gesture did not escape her notice, and her noticing it did not escape his. He let his arm fall and said, "I have to be the one who goes down."

"Any of us could do it."

"You're in command."

She waved a hand at Fisackerly's and Sutherland's backs. "Either of them . . ."

"This is my home world, not yours or theirs."

"Can you go down and face it?"

"Stay up or go down, King . . . if the planet's a cinder now, I'll have to face it either way, won't I?"

She gave him a wan smile. "Okay. Okay. Full armor and flightpack. Get the shuttle and your gear ready, and then go to your quarters and get some rest. You probably are going to need it."

She raised her hand, index finger extended, and almost touched his breast.

"Some *rest*, I said."

Maitland returned to his quarters and got down on his hands and knees to search for the dreamball. When he found it, he saw that the glass sphere enclosing the crystal had cracked when King flung it against a bulkhead, and when he has slipped the chain over his neck and stretched out on his bunk it immediately becomes obvious that the crystal must be damaged as well, that his careful tinkering has been somehow undone. Kimma of the mirage is as resistant to his advances as her real-life counterpart on the home planet. She will not let him kiss her or even touch her. It even seems for a moment that she has all she can do to keep herself from killing him with her bare hands.

The setting is as uncongenial as she. Winter clearly is coming, not soon but too soon to suit him under any circumstances, for unlike Kimma he has always intensely disliked cold weather. This afternoon, the breeze blows in brisk and smelling of rain. Thunderheads mass over the horizon and will move inland by nightfall. He draws the cloak tighter about himself and wishes that Kimma had either thought to bring him some warm shoes or else would not insist upon standing at the water's edge. His feet are almost numb. She seems barely conscious of the cold waves lapping about her ankles. Of course. She grew up in the northernmost of the colony's cities, New Prussia, where they breed strong, thick-blooded.

"I might have known," she says. "I should have known. I gave you the dreamball as a token of friendship, and you perverted it."

"Kimma, please. When I get back—"

She turns to him now, regards him without hostility, finally, but also without sympathy, without any expression at all. "What do you expect to find when you get back?"

"You must still be alive, Kimma. You can't be dead."

"Must. Can't. You never goddamn learn."

"I have to believe you're still alive."

"You have to accept that I'm probably dead."

He feels like crying in frustration and hopelessness. He feels like falling down and clawing at the sand and letting the sea roll in over him.

"It could have been so good between us," he says. "We have so much in common, the same tastes in everything. We liked each other from the moment we met. We seemed to want the same things out of life."

"Seemed," she says. "And of course you decided you were in love with me, and said as much. And got your heart broken when I said, Don't be silly, and went on doing whatever I was doing." She kicks at a seashell. It skitters about a meter across the hard-packed sand. "Why is that so impossibly hard for you to accept? Why?"

"Kimma, please understand. I *was* in love with you. I *am* in love with you, still. I'll *always* be in love with you. Why is that so hard for *you* to accept?"

"Nonsense. You're in love with your pride, and I bruised it."

"I could have made you happy."

She shook her head, then nodded. "Yes. You could have made me happy, but you didn't. You just absolutely wouldn't. What a loss to us both. We could have been the best of friends, inseparables. But you wanted more of me than I wanted you to have. You wouldn't take No for an answer. You could be so tiresome at times. And then all this—" she gestured to include sea and sky and sand "—cruel, terribly cruel, and shameful."

"As cruel as you?"

"Don't you realize how badly you used me? How much pain you caused me? And now *this*. Our perfect love!"

"I never deliberately hurt you."

"Stop lying."

"I'm not lying."

"You are, to yourself."

"All I did—"

"All you *did*," she says, with considerable asperity, "was to try to make me feel miserably guilty at not being in love with you. All you *did* was to show me what an immature, self-absorbed, self-dramatizing bore you are. My God. Joining Fleet and running off to space because I wouldn't fall in love with you."

"I didn't run off!" His cheeks feel incandescent. "I was assigned to—"

"You *enlisted* and got yourself assigned."

"Stop." This hurts even worse than he would have imagined possible. "Please stop."

"I'll stop."

He glares at her. "All right. I *got* myself assigned. But what was I supposed to do? I couldn't stand the pain of losing you."

"Losing me?" Her cloak slips from her shoulder, exposing one lovely pale breast; she does not bother to retrieve the garment. "You never had me to lose. Oh, no, what you couldn't stand was not having things go your way. So you went off like a hero in a romance, the rejected suitor, pouting and whimpering and feeling very sorry for yourself on the inside. It gives you the opportunity to go around looking as if you've been kicked in the solar plexus. Wearing your sorrow like a sign. Oh, look, here's a young man who's suffered a grievous tragic hurt. You'd go away into space, and when you came home I would surely relent—"

"It's not true!"

"It is too true, and you know it. At your age you're supposed to have realized a few things about the way the world really is. Such as, reality doesn't have to take your feelings into consideration, isn't under any obligation whatsoever to account for itself to you."

He looks down at his hands, which have knotted into fists. His fingernails bite into his palms. He opens his hands, and there are red crescents imprinted in the flesh. He tries to think about King, Fisackerly, and Sutherland, about his now-smoldering home world, about aliens running amok, sowing carnage and death for whatever un-human reasons, anything to shut out the hateful sound of her voice.

Down in the shuttlecraft, he felt his guts turn to cold stone as he thought about the last time he had seen Kimma, before leaving the colony world to serve with Fleet. They had sat together in the recreation room of their seaside home, together and yet apart, trying to say goodbye to each other, failing to say anything to each other.

Down in the shuttlecraft, the first tear gathered and ran. His legs started shaking too badly for him to stand. Blindly, unsteadily, he groped his way to the control chair and sat down. He wept soundlessly for about half a minute, then muttered, angrily, "For God's sake, man," and looked around the ramped cabin. The full suit of armor hung in its rack like a mechanical approximation of an ancient samurai warrior. The as yet unstowed flightpack lay on the deck like a scaled-up aluminum representation of a beetle. Maybe they are still alive down there, he told himself.

Maybe this is all a colossal prank by, I don't know, some psychotic Fleet dispatcher. At most, at worst, it's some manageable, comprehensible crisis. . . .

The shuttlecraft swung away, dropped, dipped, trailing fiery plumes, into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Maitland sat strapped in the control chair. He had nothing to do during the time it would take the craft to descend two hundred kilometers. His trajectory had been plotted, the landing coordinates programmed, everything was out of his hands now. Everything. He could only watch his instruments as the planet swelled beneath him. He thought of the beach, the house, Kimma, and the fractured dreamball tingled against his skin. He stands and looks out across the empty leaden sea. Nothing moves. The breeze carries to him a sudden smell of burning, the taste of ashes. He squeezes the glass sphere containing the crystal between his thumb and forefinger. There is a soft pop as it shatters, and then, holding the useless bloody shards in his fist, he fights tears all the way down to the seared world. ○

IN CONCERT

Melanie Tem & Steve Rasnic Tem

“In Concert,” the bittersweet tale that connects the hopes and fears of a lost astronaut and an elderly woman, will be the title story for the Tems’ collection of co-written short stories, out in November from Centipede Press. 2009 will also see two solo novels from Wizards’ Discoveries: Melanie’s *The Yellow Wood* in April, followed by Steve’s *Deadfall Hotel* in November.

Lost . . . *I am lost* was suddenly in her mind, the words and a terrible sensation of freefall. But it was not her thought. She’d never have thought the word “freefall.” It didn’t come from inside her head. It came from very far away. *Lost . . .* That could have been her own thought—she certainly felt lost a lot of the time—but it wasn’t.

She sat still and waited. Most of what she did at this stage of her life, because she couldn’t do anything else, was sitting still and waiting. Usually not waiting for anything in particular, just because there was nothing else to do. A thick, dull sort of waiting that stretched out and deepened time until it was just about unrecognizable. Now, space seemed to be deepened and stretched out, too, and she had the sensation of being weightless, almost formless, moving without any direction or reason, and very afraid.

A bird was singing in the apple tree, a pattern of three notes and then four and then three again. From what had become her accustomed place on the couch, Inez Baird whistled along, whistled in call and response, as if the bird might be sending her a message or receiving a message from her. “Whistling girls and crowing hens are sure to come to some bad end,” Mama used to admonish, which had only made Inez whistle more.

The apple tree was leafing out. It almost filled the window. The apples never had been any good—small, sour, wormy—and it was fine with her that the birds and squirrels got most of them. She’d have liked to think this bird was thanking her, but it wasn’t. It was just singing. And the *I am . . . lost* call was gone without a trace.

Well, that wasn’t true. Every time her mind was invaded like this, which by now must be thousands and thousands of times, something was deposited. This time it was hopelessness. She didn’t want it. She had no choice but to just let it be and try to think about something else.

The kids’ tire swing had hung from the thickest branch long after they’d both grown and gone. Inez tried and failed to remember the moment it had come down, the dividing line between existence and non-existence. Year after year the swing had hung there, its graying rope loosened and retied to accommodate the growth of the limb. Maybe somebody had taken it down without telling her. Maybe it had finally just slipped away without her being aware of it. Or maybe it hadn’t seemed important at the time; she’d been noticing how some perfectly ordinary events and the perfectly ordinary absence of some events stood out in relief now that she looked back on them.

She did clearly remember the day Ken had planted the tree, no taller than he was and its trunk no thicker than his thumb. The house hadn’t been finished yet. They’d

just had their first anniversary. She'd been pregnant with their first baby, though she hadn't known about the baby or the miscarriage yet. She'd been painting the kitchen, pleased by afternoon light across new sunflower-yellow, when someone else's thought had fluttered among her own like a swatch of bright ragged fabric. There had been words and an actual voice . . . *get this damn thing in the ground, so she'd known it was Ken, get loose, go to her.*

Embarrassed and excited by the pictures that accompanied the words, she'd come to a stopping point with her painting and climbed down from the ladder and gone to get ready for him, bathe and change clothes and dab cologne behind her ears. Only when he'd shouted to her from outside that he was going into town for something, and then hadn't come home till after midnight, did she realize it wasn't her he'd been thinking of.

Still whistling half under her breath, though the bird had stopped, Inez noticed how the stripe of the tree shadow crossed the sill, the brown-and-beige oval rug, the dusty floor. Vaguely she wondered whether the bright blue sky sectioned by the tree was the same sky she'd seen for forty-three years from this window, or whether sky could be said to be one thing sometimes and then another while still being sky, like a river, like a life, like a person's mind.

You could get lost in ruminations like that, and why not? More and more it seemed to her that she didn't altogether live in this world any longer, that time and space were changing shape, that she was floating even as her body grew stiffer and slower by the day. Maybe this was what it meant to be old and getting ready for death.

Focus was seldom required of her anymore. Even with all her visitors, some more welcome than others though their visits felt like acts of charity or job assignments, she still spent many hours a day, a night, a week, alone with her own thoughts and the scattered thoughts of others—a mental soup, sometimes thin as broth, often a glutinous porridge shot through with shreds and chunks and lumps of foreign matter.

Inez drifted with this cloud of speculation. There was no reason not to.

Some time later, loud chirping brought her back. Bossy and strident, it was probably a jay. Not for the first time, Inez wanted to know more about the mental processes of other species, regretted she'd never swum with dolphins or worked with gorillas, wished she could have tapped into the minds of Dian Fossey or Jane Goodall.

But she'd never had anything to say about what alien thoughts passed into her mind, could neither invite nor refuse them. As she used to grumble about menopausal hot flashes—too bad you couldn't order them up while you were waiting for the bus on a cold winter morning—it was too bad none of Mama's thoughts had ever come to her that she'd been aware of, or maybe knowing what was on Mama's mind would have just made her feel worse. Too bad she hadn't been able to pull answers to the eleventh-grade algebra final exam out of the mind of the smart girl who'd sat behind her—although she'd probably have felt guilty about cheating for the rest of her life. Too bad she hadn't been able to read ahead of time her son's decision to invest in that fly-by-night company, or Ken's intention to keep up his wanderings. More an annoyance than either a gift or a curse, telepathy, if that's what it was, had never been what it was cracked up to be.

For a long time as a child she'd assumed everybody else got those snatches of words and songs and images, too. During her teen years she'd decided it was just her over-active imagination, or maybe a sixth sense she'd developed in a botched attempt at self-defense from growing up with Mama that told her something was wrong but never what or why and so made her more nervous than if she hadn't known anything at all. Often, she'd worried about her own sanity, but consulting a doctor would have meant telling someone about it, and of course she couldn't do that.

No matter what she called it, it kept happening. Single words and phrases would appear, so truncated and out of context they made no sense, mental pictures of places and faces she'd never seen, entire paragraphs in what might have been foreign languages or just gibberish. Once she'd picked up part of a plan to blow up a train; she'd never heard that this had actually happened, but the saboteur could have been anywhere in the world, so maybe the news just hadn't reached her. So many spouses toyed with the idea of infidelity that it got boring. Other people's love and loyalty and courage and compassion buoyed her through the times when she had little of her own.

She'd known that Papa knew he was sick. She hadn't known he'd be gone that day when she came home from school. For a long time, and again these past few years, she'd tried to keep herself open to communications from him, but none had ever come.

The jay was complaining. She didn't blame him. The birdfeeder was always empty now because she couldn't keep it filled or take it down. Even at this time of year when the birds could find their own food, it was a constant reproach.

A train went by, its diesel hoot nowhere near as expressive as a steam engine whistle, but still nice to hear. When that had been a passenger train, and then when hobos rode the freights, Inez would try, just for fun, to snatch thoughts from the people speeding by, but she never could.

She thought she was a little hungry, as hungry as she ever got these days. What did she feel like eating that she had the energy to fix? Maybe just the spaghetti from the Meals on Wheels lunch, not half-bad, and easy. Absently whistling, she sat and considered what to do.

Thousands of miles away in south-central Florida, Daniel entertained the idea of suicide.

Like everything else these days except her own fundamental loneliness, Inez's sense of alert was muted. Her body, already stiff from age and Parkinson's, didn't clench. Her heart didn't beat any faster, adrenaline didn't spike, her ears didn't perk up. But she stopped whistling and her mind was spattered with residue like a cold white comet trail, a few disconnected words and random images (*rope*), music all beat and no melody.

The thoughts not her own that came into her head were not always this clear. As a child she'd almost never known what they meant or whose they were, though from the vantage point of adulthood and experience she'd been able to identify some of them—numbers from Papa's store ledgers, a few musical notes she recognized much later in a Duke Ellington release all full and new and quite beyond her, once a terrible detail which, when the truth about the concentration camps came out, she'd had no choice but to believe had been flung into her mind from a Nazi's.

Usually these weren't messages and she didn't have to take any action, though she still worried over that Nazi thought, whether she could have stopped something. They just came and went, bubbling up or zipping through, and she'd learned to live with them.

This time, though, it was her own great-grandson Daniel, to whom she'd once been very close, and Daniel was considering suicide, and Inez had Daniel's phone number. She eased herself to a sitting position, placed her feet side by side on the floor, stood up, exhaled, and, whistling thinly, began the labor of walking the twenty or so steps into the kitchen where her address book was in the drawer.

But it wasn't. In the drawer were rubber bands and paper clips and thumb tacks—all tools for attaching one thing to another, she noted wryly. But the brown spiral-bound book—with years' worth of names, addresses, phone numbers, birthdays, anniversaries—had vanished.

The panic that threatened whenever she couldn't find something, which was often, made her clumsy now as she dialed her daughter. The machine answered, so at least

Inez had remembered Donna's number right. "I was just sitting here looking at the apple tree and I got to thinking about Daniel," she said as if the apple tree and Daniel had anything to do with each other. Acutely conscious of her voice being recorded, she wished she could edit. "I don't seem to have his number. Have you heard from him lately?" The chain of connection that would have to work here, down through the generations from herself to her daughter to her grandson to her great-grandson, was almost more than Inez could keep straight in her mind. And she didn't have to—once set in motion, it would happen or it wouldn't, without her. She finished as always with "I love you," hung up, and stood there for long moments not even whistling, frozen in place by Parkinson's and fear.

Inez had long experience with being wrong about this. Nothing had come of what she'd taken for that young soldier's attraction to her. Neither of her children had ever shown the slightest real-life interest in missionary work despite what Inez had picked up. All the music that had appeared in her mind during her lifetime had not made her, as she'd once hoped, a composer or a musician or even a respectable show-singer or whistler. So she was probably wrong about Daniel, too.

The day moved forward without her. Time stretched behind and—a much smaller distance—ahead. After a while, through no effort or will of her own, she was again able to move.

She took the spaghetti out of the microwave too soon and ate it tepid from the carton. Like most things with tomato sauce, it was better the second time, quite good, in fact. She ate it all and finished the green beans, too; spaghetti and green beans were a funny combination, but it tasted fine. Having started with the gingerbread when the meal had been delivered, for dessert she happily chose chocolate-chunk from among the four flavors of ice cream in her freezer and savored half a dozen tablespoonfuls without bothering with a bowl.

Neither Daniel nor his father nor his grandmother had called back. Maybe the phone was out of order. Inez picked up the receiver and was both relieved and worried to hear the dial tone going strong. She had email addresses for them, too, but had given up on the computer her grandson had set up in the spare bedroom and several times tried to teach her to use. The idea of messages flying through space should have made perfect sense to her, but did not. Daniel had told her he could stream music through his computer, too. She didn't have to understand it to like the idea of streaming music.

The day outside seemed lovely, and Inez had been thinking she might take a walk to the corner and back. But, as so often happened after she ate, her energy had plummeted. It seemed particularly cruel that such a basic necessity as eating should make her feel so terrible, that the very act of sustaining life made life so hard to live.

Fatigue was fast overtaking her. To protect herself against waking from a nap into a silent house, Inez managed to find the TV remote among the couch pillows. No sense in changing channels since she didn't know what was on at just after four on a weekday afternoon and it didn't matter anyway. There was music of some sort and that soothed her. But worry about Daniel and about what would become of her in these last years of her life was with her as she sank into heavy sleep and busy, vivid, meaningless dreams from L-Dopa and her own subconscious that would leave her even more frightened and fatigued.

It was 6:22 when she awoke. Her back hurt and her need for the bathroom was urgent. Working to get herself off the couch, she registered that the news was on and the light was wrong. It was not until she was washing up and changing clothes that she realized it was morning and she had slept for fourteen hours. Suddenly clear-headed, she stood still, awestruck by the sensation of having one foot in this world and one in another.

“... lost in space.” The TV announcer was chirpy even in his attempt at solemnity. Inez turned on the electric toothbrush, gratified to find the switch easier to work this morning than usual. “... casualty of humanity’s quest for knowledge,” she heard when she flipped the switch off, and then, clearly, a name: “Casey Liebler,” such a young-sounding name. She’d seen it in print but couldn’t recall having heard it spoken aloud before. Probably she had, though—this was the current big story, the latest public tragedy.

Already Inez had forgotten his real name, the one a pair of loving parents had given him. She’d think of him as The Lost Astronaut. What was lost could be found. There was always hope. Almost always.

What broke her heart was that no one waited for him, no one cared in a very personal way that the astronaut was lost. His parents were never mentioned. A year before he’d gone into space the lost astronaut’s wife and little girl had been killed in an amusement park fire. Everyone knew this the way everyone knew George Washington had had wooden teeth and a wife named Martha. Everyone knew this sort of the way Inez knew things—from words flying through the air.

She became aware of dampness. In the mirror her hair and clothing appeared dry, but her cheeks were wet, her eyes red. Obviously, she’d been crying. But she never cried, even when she wanted to, even when what she needed to do more than anything was start crying and not stop. She couldn’t cry. It was a personal failing. And right now, she hadn’t been aware of even feeling sad. She was whistling soundlessly in what she recognized as a nervous habit but saw no reason to break.

A man’s pale face precipitated out of the depths of the mirror, somewhere back of her head, his features distorted under plastic shielding. She started to look behind her. *That’ll do no good.* Had the thought been hers or his?

“You worry too much, Nezzie.” Ken had been talking with his mouth full. She’d told him a thousand times how much she hated that. It wasn’t just the mastication itself, but the thoughts that went with it, and with sex, going to the bathroom—primitive wordless mental processes of desire, hunger, relief, anger. Being on the receiving end was beyond uncomfortable. Ken had been filling himself, and spitting some of it out at her. “Stay out of other people’s business.” His biscuit had dripped gravy onto her best tablecloth. If she said he was criticizing her, he’d just deny it and twist it into another example of how she took things too seriously. But she knew the truth—more than a few times she had heard the aggression in his mind when he said things like that. He waited for her to answer. She just looked away and whistled very softly. That drove him crazy.

Ken faded from view, and she was alone at her dining room table, staring at his empty chair. He’d died—she wanted to say twenty years ago, but she’d been saying “twenty years” for the longest time and it must be much longer now. He’d had a heart attack. She hadn’t known it was coming. He’d had many secrets, though a lot fewer than he’d imagined.

“... yellow roses ... bells ... why can’t I say what I feel ... alone so long ... goodbye ...”

Someone somewhere was lost and desperate. Inez had the familiar and pointless impulse to cover her ears. She could feel lost and desperate just fine all on her own, thank you very much. Now the actual ringing of bells came to her, which might be her own memory—she couldn’t place it, but she’d heard a lot of bells in her life. Donna, in fact, had been in a children’s bell choir for a while; Inez floated in that happy memory until it was interrupted by music she didn’t recognize, surely from a place and time she’d never visited, strange instruments and strange voices and alien language and tune. Music was always nice. During the periodic long stretches when she’d had no thoughts but her own, Inez had most missed the alien music.

"... *hope her mind . . . didn't take a turn . . .*" Inez recognized the particular warmth: that sweet girl from the agency who did shopping for her. The girl was about to knock on her door. Wasn't she a few days early? Or had Inez lost track of time? It was her biggest worry, that she would lose time, the idea of it, the working of it, and she'd be wandering through space with no clear memory of anything, until death made her land.

Whistling, Inez made the mistake of opening the door before the visitor had a chance to knock. "Oh!" said the girl.

Dotty old woman. . . Which of them had thought that? Inez resorted to talking with no thought at all. "I came out to look for the paper and see the flowers and that silly barking dog across the street. And what do you know? There you are?"

"Hello, Inez. How are you today? Are you doing okay?"

Inez made herself laugh. "Oh, fine, fine. I . . . don't think I expected you today, did I?"

The young woman gazed at her, no doubt evaluating. "It's your grocery list, hon. There are some things on it I don't quite understand. I just thought I'd better check."

"Let me see it." Inez held out her hand. Was she being a little snappish?

The list was in her handwriting, so she knew there hadn't been a mix-up between clients. She studied it.

Cheese

Furniture polish

Stamps

Bottle orange juice

Glittering dust

Crackers

Faulty navigation

Raisins

Distant

Wheat bread

Tea

Signal

Cream

Lost

"I'm so embarrassed."

"Oh, honey, it's okay."

"Why, my penmanship is atrocious!"

"Is it?" She touched the list, and when Inez didn't let it go, gently pushed one corner of it down and twisted her head and shoulders around so she could read. "I didn't think the handwriting was so bad."

"Well, look here, does that look like 'Signal' to you?"

"Yes. Yes. It does."

"Well, that's supposed to be 'Cereal.' My 'C's and 'R's, especially, are terrible. Parkinson's, you know. And that last word on the list, can you read that?"

The girl started to say something, stopped herself. "No, I guess I can't."

"Well, that's supposed to be 'soap.' Hand soap? It looks like 'lost,' doesn't it?"

"Yes, yes, it does," she said again, and smiled.

"You probably thought it was my mind that was lost!"

The answering giggle was uncomfortable, the protest unconvincing. "Of course not!"

Inez corrected the list for her, adding glass cleaner, a mop, detergent, none of which she actually needed. The girl promised to bring the items in a couple of days, then asked to use Inez's phone. Thinking she might be calling in a report on her, Inez went just around the corner and listened, but it turned out to be just a call to the next client apologizing for being late.

When the girl left, she walked right past a sad-looking man standing in the middle of the front sidewalk. The sun was suddenly too bright and Inez raised a shaky hand for shade. But by the time she adjusted her eyes he was gone and she closed the door, only slightly more aware than usual of the many things outside her comprehension in this world and, maybe, others.

Sometimes at the end of the afternoon, on days she expected no guests, Inez would venture past whistling into outright singing. Usually she didn't remember entire songs, just choruses, beginnings, occasional other lines. She did the best she could, making up her own lyrics to fill in the gaps. She would have been embarrassed if anyone were to hear, but, alone, it was a pleasure to make these songs into songs about her life.

"My life is an endless river!" she sang now, even though there was an outside chance that a sad-looking, glowing man might be standing in her driveway. "Which does not know it flows!"

"Why so many ter-ri-ble secrets!" she sang. "That tear the heart within!/Why so many beau-ti-ful secrets/That would fill the heart with joy?"

Silly as she knew this to be, it softened the loneliness. The central fact of her talent for receiving other people's thought was that, like being the unattached person in a crowded party, it only made you lonelier.

"There are stars beyond number!" she sang. "My journey has no end!"

Her face felt damp again. With the back of a shaky hand she wiped her tears away. Then she stared at the hand: it was wrapped in a shiny, plastic-looking material, some kind of glove. The fingers moved, but felt much too big. There was something vaguely sad about such large fingers, such a clumsy hand not made for grasping other hands or for touching another person's skin.

Fear gripped her, along with a certain intense interest. Was this a Parkinson's symptom she hadn't been told about? Now her hand looked and felt perfectly normal again. Was she now going to start having physical hallucinations in addition to auditory ones?

"Oh, for God's sake, Nezzie, don't be a little fool."

Ken had been gazing at her sleepily. Sometimes he nodded off in the middle of a conversation, or dropped his fork during a meal, suddenly unable to grip, unable to remain fixed in the here and now. During those last few years his thoughts had become less and less present, like a radio station whose transmitter had begun to fail, and the management couldn't afford to have it fixed or replaced, so they were just going to let the station fade away and die. But he always seemed to have a firm grip on that awful nickname. "Nezzie, Nezzie, Nezzie."

"I've been trying to tell you for years," she'd said. "A wife and a husband aren't supposed to keep secrets from one another."

His eyes had blinked on the word "secrets," but other than that his face had remained a mask. She'd tried to think that maybe he wanted to come clean with her but he'd waited too long and could no longer move his frozen muscles enough to reveal the honest truth. "You say crap like that to the wrong people and they'll lock you up in a padded cell," he'd said. "I don't know why it hasn't happened already."

The hinted threat had made her mad. "You know something, Kenneth? I really don't care. I've been living with this all my life. I should be able to talk to my husband about it—that's what husbands are for."

"Hey . . ."

"Shut up, Kenneth. The least you can do is shut up and listen!"

He'd looked away then, somewhere beyond their dining room, perhaps beyond his own life entirely, perhaps to his own idea of heaven. She couldn't know, but she thought she was on the right track, had finally after all these years reached her husband's sadness. His face was a shade paler, and something glistened there in his eyes.

He'd turned back to her, his hands on the table on either side of his plate. "So you're telling me you can read minds."

"No. Not like in the movies or TV. It's more like sometimes, I feel them. And a few words or pictures come through. And sometimes I pick things up, like a radio, but a radio whose frequency selector is broken, and it's just scanning rapidly, and the channels clarify for just a second or two, and then they're gone." She hadn't told him she thought of him as a broken radio, too.

"Okay. Tell me what I'm thinking right now. And don't say I'm thinking that I don't believe you. That's cheating. Tell me something else."

"But I can't. You don't understand me. I told you already that's not the way it works."

He'd opened his hands abruptly, giving up on her. "Then it's not very useful, now is it?"

His hair washed into lighter shades of gray. Fat began to disappear from under his skin, his cheeks sank and his teeth became more prominent. His skin dried and broke into intricate wrinkles. Then from inside Kenneth's vaporous image another image grew, the chest broader, the shoulders higher, the head bigger, the figure finally born as the rest of Kenneth shredded away.

She recognized the uniform first, then the piercing green eyes, close-cropped blond hair, handsome nose, fine cheekbones, the sad eyelids dropping into place. She'd seen his picture a dozen times.

Finally. I see you. The voice inside her head was weak, but she could tell that once it had been strong.

"I . . . this is an honor." Light-headed, Inez meant to touch the counter for support but missed. He looked vaguely puzzled. His eyes flickered back and forth. "I'd recognize you anywhere. From the news, all your photos. Casey Liebler." She was so pleased to have remembered the name.

Then they . . . know . . . I've lost . . . my way?

"They actually think you're dead." She was sorry she'd said that.

I heard . . . you singing.

"Not very well, I'm afraid. I've never had a voice for singing, and especially now, but I do love to sing."

I heard . . . you singing.

"Well, well." She smiled. "I am very glad you did."

The Lost Astronaut went away then, passed out of her awareness, dissipated—whatever the right term would be for the reverse of whatever the process was that brought other people's thoughts into her mind in the first place. Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, Inez waited for him to come back. She tried to make her mind especially receptive. She thought inviting thoughts. She put his name into her own thoughts: "Casey! Casey? Lost Astronaut?" No strategies like this had ever worked before either to bring thoughts to her or to keep them out, but she couldn't help trying. She so wanted to be in contact with him, this other person floating out of time and space away from the rest of the world.

This was very odd, she couldn't argue with that. But no odder than, say, the time when, amid the hectic hodgepodge of everyday thoughts decidedly her own about the kids' after-school schedules and Ken's socks that needed darning and her sister's impending visit, she'd discovered in her mind unuttered cries of anguish in a language she'd never heard but years later would encounter among traditional Alaskan Tlingits. No odder than, during Daniel's eighth-grade band concert, hearing a conversation about quantum physics so loud she'd turned to shush the people behind her and found no one sitting there. No odder, really, than countless things everybody took for granted every day—being born, giving birth, dying, falling in love, falling out of love, getting old.

When Donna called, Inez didn't wonder what the sound was or mistake her voice

for the voice of the Lost Astronaut or anything like that. It was perfectly clear who was who, and she understood as much about how Casey Liebler was communicating with her as about how her daughter was. More and more, understanding didn't seem to be called for.

She said hello. Donna said, all in a loud rush as had become her habit after having been such a placid little girl and even-tempered teenager, "Hi, Ma, how you doing, I got your message, I haven't heard from Daniel, but then I don't, he doesn't call me, James says he's on spring break on a camping trip somewhere, how are you?"

Breathless, though her daughter was not and could have gone on for paragraphs, Inez managed, "I'm all right. I was just thinking about Daniel," though in truth it seemed a long time since she'd been thinking about Daniel. That scared her, made her feel disloyal. What if she'd been right, and Daniel—whom she'd known and loved since before his birth—had killed himself while she'd been distracted by the Lost Astronaut?

And the Lost Astronaut had been receiving from her. Wondering over the years whether other people picked up random snatches of her thoughts the way she picked up theirs—whether maybe everybody's mind was spattered with other people's thoughts and it just wasn't talked about—she'd sometimes tried to be careful what she let herself think and other times deliberately put silly or nasty or fanciful ideas in there just to see what would happen. Nothing, as far as she knew.

But Casey had told her straight out: "I heard you singing." That was the part Inez couldn't get over—that and the terrible, lovely picture in her mind of him floating all alone in a place she longed to be able to imagine. "I heard you singing," he'd told her. And that was another thing: Never before in her life, as far as she knew, had anybody deliberately sent her their thoughts.

To her daughter she said, "Has James heard from him?" which sent Donna off on a long, loud, rapid monologue about how much money James was making now and how his wife didn't appreciate him and how Daniel was breaking his father's heart by not going into the family business. Though she'd heard it all more than a few times before, Inez knew not to tune it out because the answer to her question might be in there somewhere. But empty space and tiny little pieces of other people's thoughts instead of deluges looked more and more appealing. Eventually she gathered that no, no one in the family had heard from Daniel since he'd gone back to school in January.

"Isn't that just typical," Donna sneered. "He's got his 'own life,' you know."

"Oh, I hope so" was unquestionably Inez's own thought, and, in the interest of avoiding a diatribe from her daughter, she kept it to herself.

Donna was full of stories about the assisted living place where she lived. Some of them Inez would have found entertaining if they hadn't been so mean-spirited. Not for the first time it saddened her and made her feel guilty that her daughter's main pleasure in life seemed to be criticizing while pretending not to be so you couldn't even object. Having a child in senior housing no longer seemed strange. "Some folks'll get used to any damn thing," Ken would often say, just as snide as Donna talking about Daniel. Inez thought what he said was true, but admirable.

Over Donna's strident chatter she layered a silent, wordless plea for Danny to contact her. Though she knew better from years of experience, she closed her eyes and willed it to go to him.

"Does he still play the drums?" she heard herself asking.

It took Donna several beats to register that her mother had said something. She skidded to a halt mid-sentence. "What? Who?"

"Daniel. Remember how he played drums when he was a little boy? And cymbals? James used to complain about the noise?"

Donna's voice was syrupy with exaggerated patience. "No, Ma, I never heard about him playing drums."

"Oh," Inez sighed, "maybe I'm wrong," and maybe she was. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had a vivid impression that turned out to be totally false.

Donna said she had to go, and provided a long detailed list of all the things she had to do today, iron and get her hair done and make a lemon meringue pie for the ladies' potluck and clean her venetian blinds. Though none of these activities would ever have interested Inez enough to be conversational topics, the fact that she couldn't now do any of them depressed her.

Now she was exhausted. As she was making her way step by careful step back to the couch, she got dizzy and fell, just like that, hard on her hands and knees, grazing the coffee table with the side of her head.

She fell about once a month these days and hadn't broken anything yet, though it always shook her up a little. The few times it had happened when somebody was here, there'd been a flurry of activity to get her up, really quite foolish since what she wanted was to stay a few minutes where she'd landed, get her bearings, catch her breath, and she never did see what the rush was. The falls while she was alone, which was most of them, she could handle to suit herself, and that was what she did now, pulling the pillow off the couch, easing herself onto her stomach and then onto her side with one knee cocked in an undignified but more or less comfortable position, settling down on the rug in the sun and waiting to find out what would happen next, like that lovely summer morning speeding along the Haines Highway singing Broadway tunes at the top of her voice and then saying to herself, almost singing to herself, "I'm flipping the car. Isn't that interesting. I wonder how I'll get out of this one?"

Time passed, or she passed through time. She slept and half-slept. The urge to use the bathroom came and went. She was a little thirsty for a while, but not enough to get up. She wasn't hungry at all.

She started whistling "Some Enchanted Evening" and then sang it all the way through to the end, screeching but hitting the high notes, words so effortless it was more as if they were sliding through her than being remembered. "Ne . . . ver . . . let . . . Her . . . GO."

But everybody had to let everybody go. Sometimes that broke her heart. Sometimes it soothed her from the inside out.

"I . . . sang . . . that song . . . in . . . high school . . . choir."

Already in her mind, her reply flew to him without any act of will. "Sing with me."

Together they sang most of the score of *South Pacific*. Both of them faded in and out. It embarrassed her a little to be singing "There Is Nothin' Like a Dame" with a handsome young man. "Cockeyed Optimist" still choked her up. More than once she got tired and let the Lost Astronaut take the lead, but she never stopped singing altogether and on "Bali Hai" she held the melody while he made harmonies around it, and she got chills.

When they'd sung all the songs in the show, there was what Inez hoped was a companionable silence and not loss of contact. She wondered what time it was, and wondered why it mattered. If she sat up she could probably see the clock, but she didn't want to sit up, she didn't want to move at all. It was sometime during the night; the picture window framed only darkness and the inside of the house was full of darkness, too.

Usually she could gauge the time of day by the nature of her hunger. If she felt slightly queasy, phlegmy and acidic, it meant she hadn't eaten breakfast yet. If she was relatively comfortable and the idea of hunger suddenly occurred to her with no physical longing to back it up, it probably meant lunchtime, and lunch was always a hard decision, because if she ate she'd often pay for it with drowsiness the rest of the day and if she didn't eat mid-afternoon vertigo could make her sit down wherever she was. Being absolutely famished indicated she was late for suppertime, and some-

day she might not even bother with cooking—she'd devour her evening meal raw, chicken and eggs and corn meal and all.

As far as she could tell, she wasn't the least bit hungry right now. Maybe she was dead. That would be interesting. Maybe she was floating in space with the Lost Astronaut, or toward him. Did you experience hunger differently when you were lost?

Her body let her know she wasn't dead and she was still right here on earth and it was time to get up off the floor. After several false starts and much struggle, she managed to hang onto the edge of the couch and get herself to her knees, noticing her own thin arms like warped Q-tips pulling and pushing. Waiting to catch her balance, she glanced over at the window again.

At first she thought it was just the dark of the yard, but the black went deeper than that, reminding her of long vacation trips at night, gazing through the windshield at the yellowed edge of the road and the dizzying nothing beyond. The view through the window had that sad taste of nothingness, but streaked through with shimmering colored dust, floating gray stone orbs, distant suns flaming, a rushing through panicked breath and beyond.

This, this is what you see?

She waited a while, not so much for an answer as for the strength and courage and balance to go on with the process of getting to her feet. When she got there, she worked her way into her room, noticing how she was shuffling and swaying, and changed the clothes that she had soiled while she lay on the floor. All of this would be exceedingly distressing if she thought about it, so she didn't.

Instead, she thought about Daniel, and suddenly thought she remembered his number, and tried calling him again, dialing the number several times and getting all sorts of recorded messages about disconnects and full mailboxes and other numbers you were supposed to dial that made no sense to her. When had she last cleaned the dingy yellow phone? It struck her how bits of everyday life—sweat from a palm, peanut butter and syrup from fingers, dirt from under nails—came off onto other pieces of everyday life, transferred into other people's lives without anybody really being aware of it.

The phone was dirty, and it wasn't working anyway, and she didn't want it in her hand. Maybe, she told herself bitterly, a message from Daniel would just fly into her head. Or maybe she'd just never hear anything of him again.

The list of emergency numbers Ken had so many years ago taped to the wall above the phone gave her an idea. Did emergency numbers ever change? She punched the buttons carefully but without confidence. A flat voice answered, and it was the right number after all.

Inez spoke quickly because she didn't know what to say now that she'd made the connection. "Yes, officer? I have some information? About a missing person?" Hearing how all her sentences were ending in question marks, she resolved to correct that if she got a chance to speak again.

She waited as she was transferred, then waited some more as the officer got her papers and pen ready. Was this really the proper response to an emergency? The world was landmined with peril, even when you went to those designated to help.

"Yes. Well, his name is Casey Liebler." Now the words were overly declarative. She was sure she must be frowning; Ken used to tease her about frowning whenever she tried to concentrate. "They call him the Dead—" She stopped. "He is the lost astronaut, the one the media is so obsessed with." This last sounded ridiculous, as if there were more than one lost astronaut the world had to contend with.

She needed no special talent to divine the police officer's change in attitude. It was plain in her voice as she asked a series of irrelevant questions no doubt meant to test a caller's competency. Inez tried again to provide the important information about the Lost Astronaut, in different words this time.

The woman was using that awful "active listening" technique. Eventually Inez just hung up. Well, she'd tried, she told herself desolately.

Then her fingers were pushing the numbers again, quite involuntarily, quite beyond her ability to stop, the very thing she'd been dreading since she'd been diagnosed, the wild spasms of Parkinson's. But it wasn't that. It was those oversized metallic fingers guiding hers to the right buttons. She saw them, felt the slick pressure against her knuckles and nails, and wasn't scared then. When the number was complete the gloved hand rudely shoved the receiver against her head, warm damp plastic carrying debris from other lives onto her skin and hair.

"Clarence Eng, Operations," said the voice on the other end.

"Yes, well. Please excuse my interruption, but I have, well, a little information concerning your Casey Liebler." Astonished by her own brashness, Inez made herself refrain from whistling and then from giddy speculation about what time it was where Clarence Eng was still at work.

"How did you get this number?"

Startled by the question and the aggressive tone, especially after she had been polite, Inez managed, "I beg your pardon?"

"I asked how you got this phone number."

"I looked it up," she told him petulantly.

"Impossible. This is a secure number. Who gave you this phone number?"

Ken used to say, *No good deed goes unpunished*, and he'd had a point, though she hadn't admitted it to him. All too often stray thoughts had demonstrated to her that people were annoyed by the kindness of others. "I lied," she said, her face burning. "I didn't know how to explain. He gave me the numbers."

"Who?"

"Casey Liebler." Closing her eyes, she saw the face of the Lost Astronaut.

"This isn't the least bit amusing, you know. Who is this?"

She took a breath and gave him her name, her full address including zip code, her phone number and social security number. "I would not be giving you that information if I was just some sort of—prankster." This was a bluff; they both knew a prankster could make up or steal all that information.

"Then maybe you're just crazy."

"Maybe I am. I am open to that possibility, I assure you." At least he hadn't said "senile."

The room tilted sharply. Inez grabbed the rolled edge of the kitchen counter. Light smeared across her vision like glare on a window. Nauseated, she wondered a bit wildly whether she'd had breakfast yet.

She swore she heard faint music, nothing she'd ever heard before yet almost familiar, mythical or mechanical. A wide band of glistening particles roared by like the wing of a dragon. Where it had passed through the wall she saw metal sanded thin, random corruptions, exposed tubes and wires. She found herself gripping nonexistent controls. *Nothing works. . . anymore.*

"What was that?" Mr. Eng's annoyed, officious voice brought her back, but vast ribbons of dust, radioactive winds, smoldering suns, planets with the life turned out of them still filled her kitchen and living room, passed in and out of walls and furniture. Vista after dark vista overlapped her back yard where the children's tire swing used to be and just last year, when she'd still been able to venture that far on her own, she'd found a little bell in the weeds, tarnished but with clapper intact, and she'd stood in the middle of the yard and rung it, amazed to be making the music of the ages. She didn't know where the bell was now, after she'd rescued it from the weeds. She didn't need to know in order to have the music.

"What do you mean?" she asked Mr. Eng, stalling for time, and with her other,

silent voice seeking the Lost Astronaut's ear, screeching *Please! What do you want me to tell him!*

"You said, 'Nothing works anymore.'"

She sighed. "Well, Mr. Eng. That pretty much sums it up."

Suddenly narrow blue and green lines segmented her walls, spreading in a curved pattern across ceiling and floor, passing through furniture and those astronomical artifacts she was coming to see as more and more like furniture, the interior décor of some endless strange room where Casey Liebler now spent his days and nights. Then the writing arrived like the words floating up into the window of one of those fortune telling Magic 8-Balls. Numbers mostly. Streams of numbers in a variety of colors, broken here and there with brutal words: *malfunction, unreadable, unknown, error, lost location.*

"Well, I'm really quite busy. I'm going to hang up, Mrs—"

"It's Miss now, I suppose. You were friends, weren't you?"

"What?"

"You and Captain Liebler, your missing friend. Your families knew each other." There was a long pause. Around her the great electronic display flashed violently in alarm. At some distance she heard the electric scream of the warning speaker, felt the trembling hand frantically seeking the spot, breaking something, silencing it. The most surprising and chilling thing was that she knew exactly what all this was.

Then Mr. Eng spoke quietly. "We had regular dinners, all of us. Our wives, our children, all of us good friends. Companions. I played cello—not very well, mind you—not all of us are Yo-Yo Ma. He was much better at his violin. He led, I followed, sometimes all the way 'til dawn."

"But after the accident it changed, didn't it?"

"He was lost in a very dark place. Irrecoverable. Look, how could you know? Who have you talked to?"

"He is full of regret, you know. He wishes it had not been that way. And he knows that you will seriously consider anything I have to say." This last was all her own and she sent a desperate apology to Casey Liebler.

"Yes. Okay. Please. Whatever you want to tell me."

And so with only a nudge now and then from the Lost Astronaut, Inez Baird described for Clarence Eng what had taken over her kitchen and living room and almost unbearably opened up her life which had become so constricted lately, so small, and now suddenly seemed to have no edges. Finally making use of that silly forty-foot cord James had connected to her kitchen phone because she couldn't keep track of a cell phone or a cordless, she wandered around the house and outside onto the patio, doing her best to describe the ways all that dust and rock moved, the actions and appearance of those flaming suns, the qualities of those sad floating worlds and a few that somehow seemed not so sad except that they were utterly out of reach. She almost told him about Daniel, but that would distract them both; the subject at hand was hard enough and she had to really focus. In conclusion she read off for him the cold words and numbers etched in midair, and she even tried to replicate the accompanying sound, as much like a musical chant as the alarm she guessed it was.

He thanked her. He said he had a lot to go over, various theories to consider. He said he would be back in contact. She hoped he would, but all this had taken a lot out of her so the hope was muted and weak. She had trouble getting the phone back on the hook and didn't even try to roll up the cord, just left it in a tangle on the counter and the floor. If somebody came to check on her they'd probably take that as one more sign that she could no longer keep her house in order, but right now Inez didn't care.

The need to rest was overwhelming. She managed to get into bed and under the covers, then got up again almost immediately because she thought she heard some-

one at the door, at the window. Finding no one, she went to bed again, to be roused by an insistent phone call, but there was only the dial tone when she picked up the receiver. Most of the night—it might even have been two nights, with a smeary day between them—she spent in semi-consciousness agitated and then soothed and then agitated again by music she could just barely hear.

At one point, she was standing in her living room, steadying herself on the back of the couch, feeling so tired, so lost and precarious, staring out the picture window into her dark and endless back yard, singing. And what answered her, low at first, then climbing in volume and sweetness until it made the hair on her arms stand out, was a violin.

"You brought it with you?" she asked the dark.

Only . . . in my memory, but I play it every day. The crying of his violin penetrated to the nerve, but it was the kind of crying that made her happy to be alive, reminded her of every beautiful thing.

The darkness ran with pinpoints of light. Planets like bright coins spun. In the distance of centuries suns burst apart, seeding the universe with death songs and birth songs and songs about life just going on its way.

"I am here," she sang. "I am here." Radioactive wind warmed her to tears.

drum

the thought of a drum, the roll and thump, the beat in her blood and bones

drumming

had been going on for a while before she was really aware of it, as if she had come in in the middle of a concert. Did Casey Liebler play the drums, too? But of course it was Daniel

drumming

drumming, maybe sending her a message but she didn't think so, only drumming or thinking about drumming and she was picking up his thoughts. She made herself as open as she could.

The drumming had stopped, or something had happened to her reception of it. But it had been there, clear and alien as could be. She was shaking.

Daniel must still be alive, then. Or maybe not—for all Inez knew, the thoughts of dead people still floated around in the universe and sometimes into her mind. Given what she'd been experiencing in the past few days—or hours, or weeks, however long it was—anything was possible.

Nothing else remarkable happened for a while. Sun came in through the picture window. A squirrel and a jay—maybe that same jay—were arguing; Inez smiled at their ruckus. She noticed now that her clothes were dirty, chose not to think about how long it had been since she'd changed them or how they'd gotten so soiled, decided to risk taking a shower. Closing the bathroom door and the shower curtain made her a little claustrophobic, and she was alone in the house (except for the Lost Astronaut, who maybe could see her anyway, which made her blush). She left everything open.

Forgetting how hard the faucets were to turn, she flinched at the too-hot and then too-cold water but managed to get it right and stand under the spray with one hand gripping the bar she'd told James not to install and the other awkwardly maneuvering shampoo, soap, washcloth. She dropped the lid to the conditioner, got shampoo in her eyes, and couldn't manage the loofah for her back, but the shower was luxurious and no catastrophes happened. It didn't matter that she couldn't get herself completely dried off. The clean clothes felt good.

Triumphant to have accomplished all that, and noting that during the whole process there'd been nothing in her mind but thoughts of what she was doing, Inez was combing her hair, so wispy now that it hardly needed combing, when she heard

someone call her name. "Just a minute," she answered. But her voice didn't carry and the person came on into the house as people often did. She didn't mind, it was better than having to get up and down to answer the door.

She emerged from the bathroom to find that girl from the agency with her groceries. Usually Inez had her put them away, but today for some reason she didn't want her to stay that long. It took a few repetitions of "No, thanks, I'll get it" and "I like to do for myself when I can" and "It's easier for me to find things when I'm the one who puts them away," and she hoped she wasn't being rude. Finally the girl accepted the money for the groceries and left, promising to come back next week.

Only then did Inez notice the mop leaned up against the counter. There was a perfectly good mop somewhere around here. Was that a hint that her house wasn't clean? For a minute the girl's audacity made her mad, and she considered calling the agency to complain and demand a refund of the cost of the mop. But she let it go. She had other things on her mind.

Nobody came to see her for the next few days, nobody called, nobody answered the phone when she called, and she didn't leave messages. On TV, among Oprah and Dr. Phil and news about the war that angered her and news about a spelling bee that made her proud and commercials that shocked her to laughter, there was one reference to Casey Liebler, not even a whole story, just an aside in a piece about the space program, as if he were already only a footnote in history. *He's still alive*, she visualized sending back across the airwaves to those glib announcers. Once she positioned herself right in front of the set in a stance she'd learned in a long-ago aerobics class, feet shoulder-width apart and weight over center. Holding onto the TV cabinet but still swaying, she informed them in her loudest, firmest voice, "He's still alive. He can still be found."

Yesterday's news. Who cares? Even though she knew she was flat-out imagining that mean thought, it infuriated her. She turned off the TV and when that wasn't enough bent at considerable risk of falling and found the cord and dangerously jerked it loose from the plug.

For the next few days and nights, Inez's mind was so muddled and so full she couldn't tell whether she was receiving any thoughts from anyone else. The streak of colored lights was probably a memory of a Christmas, of many Christmases. The travel plans might have once been hers; she'd never been to Italy but for years she'd thought about it, read brochures, taken Beginning Italian at the community college.

She slept a lot and when she awoke could make no sense of her dreams. She was careful to retrieve the brown bags that Meals on Wheels left on her porch, so nobody would worry about them accumulating, and she ate a little from them. She brought in the mail, changed her clothes at least once, did her best to keep track of when the shopper was due to come back. Right now, of all times, she couldn't risk appearing incompetent and somebody moving in to take charge of her life. She sat on the couch and looked out the picture window, waiting to see what would happen next.

What happened was that Clarence Eng showed up at her door. The minute she saw him she guessed who he was, because she didn't know anyone else Oriental; talking to him on the phone she hadn't realized he was Oriental, but with a name like Eng and the reference to Yo-Yo Ma, he could hardly have been anything else. And of course he'd be a smart one. Catching herself in that little bit of racism, she tried and failed to chalk it up to a stray thought from someone else's mind. Embarrassment made her awkward when she invited him in, made him some tea, worried that it wouldn't be good enough for an Oriental man who probably knew all about tea, spilled the water but didn't call attention to her clumsiness by wiping it up, just made a mental note of it so as not to slip in it later.

"I wanted to talk to you about Casey," said Clarence Eng.

Trembling, Inez set her cup down. "You believe me, then."

He didn't say yes or no, exactly. He said, "We're pretty sure where he is. We know his trajectory, the general area of space, his location within a million miles or so. Many of the readings you gave me make no sense, in terms of what the sensors were programmed for. But what they tell us provides us with enough clues, at least for a theoretical understanding."

"What will you do? You'll find him? You'll get him back?"

"He's too far away, moving too fast."

"I don't understand," she said, although she did understand, her head swam and her heart thudded with the awful understanding.

He wasn't looking at her. He wasn't drinking his tea, either. There must be something wrong with it. Realizing she was whistling, Inez made herself stop. "There's nothing we can do," he said at last.

"But he's still alive." She gestured vaguely, hands and arms both stiff and shaking. "Out there somewhere."

"I know."

"There's no hope of rescue, then?" The least she could do, in honor of the Lost Astronaut, was say the terrible words out loud and insist this man acknowledge them.

He met her gaze. She thought that very brave of him. "No," he said, and his voice broke. "There is no hope of rescue."

"What will happen to him?"

"He will just keep drifting until the systems shut down or there's some sort of collision."

"And then he'll die."

"Yes."

"Alone."

She thought he'd say some platitude about how we all die alone, but to his credit he didn't. "Yes," he said, and she saw that his cheeks were wet. "Casey must know that. He's no fool. He just wanted us to know what happened to him. He wanted me to know. I thank you."

They were silent together for a while. Inez's mind wandered as she imagined the Lost Astronaut wandering through endless space. After a while she thought she'd better bring herself back to earth, which was, after all, where she still lived. Almost cooly, she said to Mr. Eng, "You weren't all that slow to accept what I had to say."

"We've seen something like this before."

"Really?" She found herself both pleased and disappointed that she might not be the only one after all.

"There are two hundred or so like you, registered. None, I believe, with your degree of control."

She snorted. "I have no control at all."

"We could register you, Inez, track your abilities. But I can't honestly recommend it. I've told no one about you. Believe me, I think that's for the best. And I must ask you not to tell anyone else about Casey. If you do, I'll have to deny it."

This was so like something out of an old movie that Inez actually laughed. "Lucky for you everybody would just think I'm a senile old woman."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. This is a secret I've been keeping all my life."

"Thank you," he said again.

They didn't have anything more to say to each other. She could see that he didn't know how to take his leave, so she helped him out. "I'm very tired," she told him, which was true. "I'm afraid I have to rest now."

Hours later when she awoke, a stack of mail was on her coffee table, alongside

three newspapers in different colored plastic bags. Inez had long since given up trying to get the newspaper people to stop sending her the Sunday papers, but she had managed to get over feeling obligated to read them just because they appeared in her driveway. Whoever had brought them in, along with her mail, must have felt doubly good about doing her the favor, never mind that she'd rather have just let them accumulate out there than have to figure out something to do with them in here. Through the green and blue and orange bags—was there some sort of color code?—she didn't see anything about Casey Liebler, just comics and ads.

She hardly ever got letters anymore; practically every letter-writer she'd known in her life was dead by now, or had switched to email. So Inez almost missed the small brown envelope with an actual postage stamp instead of a meter mark. There was no return address and she couldn't read the postmark. The ridiculous fantasy flashed through her mind that it was from the Lost Astronaut. But when she opened it she saw that it was, almost as amazingly, from Daniel.

"Dear Grammy." None of her other grandchildren called her that.

Once when I was a little kid Mom said something that I think means you're the only one I can talk to about this. Maybe I didn't understand what she said, or maybe I'm remembering it wrong, but do you sometimes have thoughts that aren't yours? In languages you don't know, or about things you couldn't possibly know about? Because I do, I have for as long as I can remember, and it's driving me crazy. Literally. The other day I got somebody else's suicidal thoughts. I have never been suicidal in my entire life, but I got why it was attractive to whoever it was. And I'm getting drums, with some kind of chanting or calling in some weird language. Middle of the night, middle of class, walking down the street, hanging out with my girlfriend. This sucks. I tried to call you but kept getting a busy signal. Too bad you don't have IM or texting or at least email, or even call waiting. Too bad we can't just read each other's minds when we want to, but I've never been able to do that, have you? Please write back.

Love, Daniel

After his signature were his address and phone numbers. Below that was what had to be—she smiled—his email address.

Stiff and off-balance, she tried to make sense of it. Had Donna known about her peculiarity, then? Who else knew? Was it obvious, like a deformity? Did she act funny without knowing it?

Then the important details of the letter started to come into focus. Daniel wasn't dead. He hadn't been toying with killing himself. He hadn't been playing the drums, either. She'd evidently been picking up from his mind thoughts he'd picked up from somebody else's mind. On top of everything else, this was just about more than she could take in.

Then there was the real shocker: Daniel was like her.

Rousing herself, she searched a little wildly through bedroom, bathroom, kitchen drawers for paper and a pen, finally settling for a sheet of purple gift wrap she'd smoothed and saved and a not very sharp pencil she found in with the pots and pans. The wrapping paper had a white underside. The pencil tore a little but did make visible marks. Inez lowered herself onto a kitchen chair and pushed aside the bowl of over-ripe oranges and bananas, ignoring the cloud of fruitflies that went with it.

She began with "Dear Daniel" at the very top of the page, then moved way down to the bottom and wrote, "I love you, Grammy," liking the look of it and the sound of it as she said it aloud. Then, whistling, she set about filling in the white space in be-

tween with her handwriting made cramped by Parkinson's and blurry by the dull pencil.

It took her a long time because she wanted to say it right, and because both her concentration and her grip on the pencil kept slipping. Finally, though, she'd filled all the space available to her and done the best she could to tell him what she knew. Carefully folding and smoothing the purple paper, she slid it into an envelope from one of the pieces of junk mail, re-sealed it with Scotch tape, crossed out the address and replaced it with Daniel's, crossed out the used postage and stuck on a stamp from the new book the shopper had bought for her. All this exhausted her, but she was determined to make the trek to the end of the driveway, put the letter in the mailbox and raise the flag before lying down again.

When she opened the door, Clarence Eng was standing there, carrying a cello case. "Oh," they said at the same time. "Hello." Suddenly aware of how unkempt she must look, Inez smoothed her hair.

"I thought you might like—I wanted to play for you." Mr. Eng looked shy. "I wanted to play for Casey."

It took her a moment, but when she understood what he meant her heart soared and her eyes filled with tears. "Please," she said, stepping carefully onto the porch, "walk with me to the mailbox. My great-grandson is waiting for this letter. Then we'll have ourselves a concert."

He didn't quite know what to do, so Inez took the lead, leaning lightly on his arm and directing him with her own movements around the potholes, newspapers, boxes, lawn chairs, tires. This might well be her last journey outside, and she was glad for the slow pace so she could savor the smell of the sunshine, the squawking of the jay, the bright yellow house across the street that had been gray the last time she'd noticed. For just a moment she thought of telling Mr. Eng that apparently Daniel was just like her, but she decided not to.

When they got to the top of the driveway he gallantly opened the mailbox for her while she laid Daniel's letter inside, then closed it again. She raised the rusted metal flag.

By the time they got back to the house Inez was weak and profoundly fatigued. Gentleman that he was, Mr. Eng must have noticed, for he offered to postpone the cello concert until another day. But she could tell how much he wanted to play now, and she understood why the timing was so critical. "No, no," she protested. "I want to hear the music," and that was as true as anything she'd ever said or thought.

She lay on the couch and closed her eyes. Mr. Eng sat in her rocker with his cello between his thighs. There was silence. Then music like liquid chocolate poured into her living room and into her heart. At first she sang along, the melody vaguely familiar. But after a while she just let it be.

Far away, drifting farther, just at the edge of where she would be able to reach him, the Lost Astronaut was hearing the music, because she was. Inez didn't try to send it to him. She just made herself as open as she could and let it pass through her to him.

She floated into deep space, too. Soon he would drift beyond her ability to track him. Soon, she thought, she herself would drift beyond her ability to come back.

"Thank you," was in her mind, moving with the music, back and forth.

The music was sweet, and sad, but Inez could not think of it as elegiac, exactly. More, it was resolute, solemn in its understanding. Her face was cold and wet.

The sound of a single string, played solo within the wash of music, caught her attention. It rose and fell in pitch, singing in concert like prayer. It was a solitary thought, a nerve, a vein, a narrow thread of muscle.

While the body and the world disintegrated around it, it lingered a moment, then dissolved. *Thank you.* ○

STILL ON THE ROAD

Geoffrey A. Landis

Geoffrey Landis has traveled back and forth across America, in the process visiting all of the states except Arkansas and one of the Dakotas (he's forgotten which one). While not traveling, he is a physicist who works on designing and flying space missions, including missions to Mars, Venus, and the solar corona. Geoff is on a first-name basis with both of the Mars Rovers, *Spirit* and *Opportunity*. He recently spent a year and a half as the Ronald McNair-NASA Visiting Professor of Astronautics at MIT, where he taught graduate students how to design spacecraft.

Turns out, you know, that old dharma bum never made it off the wheel of karma. He had too many attachments, to the road, to words; and if you love the things of the world of Mara too much you fall back into the world, like gravity pulling back a rocket that doesn't reach escape velocity. Two, three thousand years later, he's still on the road. Really, nothing's changed. And Neal, that old prankster, Neal never really did want to transcend, he loved to see it all streaming past the window, a constant moving circus disappearing in the rear-view mirror, loved to talk, loved it all.

So there's this guy needs to get to Arcturus, or really the second planet of that little star kinda behind Arcturus if you look—Arcturus itself is a red giant, no planets—place he wants to go is around a star has a number but no name, there's a lot of them like that. Anyway there's this guy and he's got cash but no ride, and the busses don't stop out that way, and Neal says he'll drive if the guy can pay for fuel, and maybe a meal or two on the road, and cigarettes; he says he knows a girl out somewhere past Arcturus, but he really just wants an excuse to roll, and he and Jack and this other guy get in the vehicle—they're not really cars anymore, got a little more capability, and even this little broken-down junker that Neal boosted somewhere can push on past c , get you from the Big Apple to LA in about a microsecond—they get in this rattletrap vehicle and head on out. And it's a long haul, and for the first two days Neal and Jack just trade off driving—this guy doesn't drive, he mostly sleeps in the back or stares out the window—and they're just grooving on the emptiness, the pure pinpoints of stars and the subtle colors of nebulae, barely visible except from the corner of your eyes, and Neal is talking up a storm, but then in two days they're barely halfway there, and they've really even stopped talking, just doggedly pushing c , Neal bleakly twirling the radio trying to scratch up something other than country and western chanting in some kind of Muphrid binary code, and they have to stop for fuel somewhere, and there's this planet out that way that everybody says is worth seeing. So they stop and pay for a fill up, and then drive like fury out into the outskirts,

until they're past all the houses or what passes for houses, here in the armpit of Boötes.

The air's got oxy here, yeah, but it's also got 2 percent ammonia; nobody's going to roll down a window and get a lungful of fresh air. This landscape's just for watching. Long vistas of shimmering blue, like waterfalls coming down from the sky. But then Neal, that crazy fucker, he does roll a window down a crack, saying, hell, gentlemen, hell if it is poison, we're here. He was always full of mad schemes, tremendously excited about everything he saw, every detail of every moment. . . . By God, I've got to see what will happen, he said, and we all were choking, and shouting Jesus, Cassady, you're going to kill us all, but Neal, this only inflames him, and now he rolls the window all the way down, and you can't really imagine the stink of it unless you had been there, the way you feel it more than smell it, the way it burns burns burns your eyes nose mouth armpits, and Neal's laughing like a hyena and he says, this is living, boys, take a deep breath and choke on it, you can't say this isn't living!

And after a good long while—all of us choking—he rolled the window back up and Jack grabbed the wheel from him and pushed him away and boosted right out of there, and tears are running down everybody's face even though Neal's cranked the air-flow all the way up, and all the time Neal's laughing and choking and saying that's living boys, you can't say this isn't living, and Jack is saying you asshole, you asshole, and that guy in the back, he's really wondering what the hell he got into, just who these jokers are.

Yeah, that was me, that guy in the back seat, and I was never so happy as when they dropped me off, and I watched them disappear into the ether, Neal with one arm out the window and talking a blue streak, Jack just cranking his seat back and taking it all in, even if they did end up hitting me up for all the scratch they could talk me out of before they lit the big candle and boosted out for who the hell knows.

And they're still out there, I'll bet, still bouncing around world to world to world, never staying anywhere three nights in a row, still boosting around somewhere.

And I have to say, yeah, I guess that really was living. At least, that's what I tell people.

But if I'm ever stuck for a ride, and Neal and Jack drive past and open the door saying jump on in, next time I hope, I really hope, that I'll pass. ○

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THE FLOWERS OF NICOSIA

David Ira Cleary

"The Flowers of Nicosia" was inspired, in part, by R.E.M.'s "The Flowers of Guatemala," The author tells us it is "one of my favorite songs of the eighties. Credit should also go to Lisa Goldstein, Darrend Brown, and Susan Lee for convincing me to remove some of Rick's zaniest benzo-induced bits of dialog."

Downtown Dharma was on its European Tour. We rocked. We were tight. We played Nirvana and Pearl Jam and STP covers, plus a few wicked originals that I must have channeled from Kurt Cobain himself. And of course, the obligatory Arctic Meltdown or Queers of the Mesozoic standards for the young kids in the audience, the ones who would have been tots the day The Kurt kissed the barrel of his shotgun.

We played Bristol, Coventry, Hamburg, Lyon, Oporto, opening for Osama Been Laid until the Submission Faction blew up La Roque House in Como an hour before showtime. Two roadies and six clubbers bought it. The fundies used cordite. Osama Been Laid went back to the States and changed its name. In between they spent some time rapping with Interpol and with Homeland Security. They had all this coming, was our feeling. You pick a provocative name, you're going to pay the consequences, even if you're just doing Moby covers.

The Italian police also asked us questions for an hour or three. Rick (drummer) popped a few benzos beforehand but still managed to nervously say, "We're all criminals, we're all victims." Vlad (bass) told crap stories about the girls whose names he had tattooed on his arms, saying each was one he'd known who'd died in Bali or Jacksonville or on 7/7, but the middle-aged police inspector opined with a straight face how sorry he was that Alanis Morrisette had met such a tragic end. I, Dennis (vocals, guitar, keyboards) was pure Zen. I thought about my rock garden in Redmond. I'd like to think it was my perfect equanimity that kept Downtown Dharma from being detained until the Interpol goons could arrive. More likely, we presented ourselves as harmless fools not worthy of the investigational resources of the international community.

I think differently now.

We left the police station at dawn, bought cappuccinos at a Starbucks, then walked the promenade along the Lago di Como. The morning was warm and the water green and celebrity jet skiers were already making waves before the day got too hot. I felt the oneness with the universe that a sleepless night always gives.

Rick was not so mellow. He washed down a bar of Xanax with his cappuccino, swearing as he burned his mouth. He walked ahead of Vlad and me, drumming roll-offs on his liver-spotted balding scalp or twisting his fingers nervously in the remnants of his fuchsia-dyed ponytail. "None of you guys get the enormity of the situation. We're next."

"Next what?" I asked.

He didn't turn. "Fundamentalized, Dennis. Blown up. Manburgers."

"You're reading this all wrong," Vlad said. "This is a sign, dude."

Rick turned. Pupils big as 45s. "A stop sign, you mean. A Dead End."

Vlad sighed. "No. A *portent*. We weren't hurt. We weren't hardly even interrogated. Now what's that say to you?"

Rick drummed on a plaque that said something about Mussolini being shot in a nearby village. "Law of averages is about to get us."

Vlad sighed heavily and looked at me.

"We've got good karma," I said.

"No, Dennis," Vlad said. "It's more than that. We got to keep making music."

"I don't want to stop making music," I said.

"I mean *meaningful* music."

"Don't dis The Kurt," I warned.

"Dude, you're not getting me. I had this flash in the police station. I had this Saul of Tarsus thing. Why keep playing these clubs like Virgin Records is ever going to sign us? Why not do something meaningful? Why not take Nirvana to Islam!"

If you ever have the choice between being, say, a guitar virtuoso, and having good karma, choose karma. You got karma, you can visualize what you want and the rest will be made manifest. Sitting in our hotel room that night, Rick watching the Italian coverage of the La Roque House bombing (using headphones at our request), Vlad drinking Sambuca as he read *Thomas Merton and Jello Biafra: American Prophets*, and me on the bed deep-breathing as I sipped Coors Lite and visualized myself in my backyard, strumming my guitar soft as a whisper to my happy stone Buddha and the goldfish in my pond, I had my inspiration. Not a flash, not a numinous experience, but a tingle, a happiness. I could see Downtown Dharma, engaging some hostile fundies, guys hell-bent on blowing up the band, the club, any guy without a beard or woman without a bhurka, and we able to reach their gentle natures, the human part unsullied by the raging mullahs and the oil-sheik dictators. All through our music. Get 'em to fizzle-out their fuses, break their timers, love their neighbors whether they were Jew or Jain, Christian or Kurd. My pulse slowed. I opened my eyes. "I've got an action plan," I said.

"Cool, dude," said Vlad. He might be the one who'd initially get inspiration, but I was the one who did the Right Action. "Do you think Andy will book us somewhere?"

Andy was Osama Been Laid's manager. He'd been handling the tour for us. He hadn't returned my calls all day. "No, I was thinking Martha."

"Auntie Martha? At the State Department?"

"Yeah."

"She's no agent! She's the Man, dude!"

"She knows lots of shit."

"Guys!" Rick shouted. "There we are!" The TV showed us walking toward the club, lugging our equipment, faces befuddled in the red-amber-blue lights of the police and ambulance cars. A girl with half her hair burned off, punk-style not by choice, gave Vlad a kiss. He was cool. Chicks always dug him. Rick though, freaking out, let go of his dolly. His drum kit would have rolled into the street if I hadn't had the presence of mind to catch it. Rick moaned. "What fuck-ups we are!"

"Turn it off," Vlad said.

"Now every fundie that watches Al-Jazeera knows us!"

Vlad grabbed the remote and turned off the tube.

"I got the jitters," Rick whined. He started searching for pills through the shag carpet.

I'd hidden his stash. I'd been doling it out to him at intervals. I didn't want to deal with an ER trip. That would be just too Kurt Cobain.

I took out my cell phone, then dialed Martha's cell.

She picked up on the third ring. "Dennis. You need to call your mother."

"Yeah, I'll do that." My mind blanked as I listened to Aunt Martha lecture me on my irresponsibility, on not calling home to let my folks know I was okay, on not going to N.A. meetings, on not brushing my teeth or wearing earplugs during shows ("You'll be as deaf as Pete Townsend someday.") Or even that fucking canard, what's a forty-three-year old doing playing a young man's game? I thought of some assholeish things to say, but remained Zen. "Aunt Martha, I was hoping you could help us."

"You need money to fly back to the States, tell me."

"Thanks. We're okay on money. What I was thinking was maybe you could help with visas."

"Visas? What idiocy do you have planned now?"

I took a breath and counted to three. Then I told her about my plan. She heard me out. She's a good listener. "So maybe you could help us get a visa to some Muslim country, like Iran or Egypt or Lebanon."

Vlad began to sip another shot of Sambuca, but reconsidered, and gave the shot to Rick, who had gone bug-eyed.

"Dennis," Martha said. "There is something called the Internet. The State Department has a website. You might want to visit it. There we list the countries with which we no longer have close diplomatic ties. These countries don't issue visas to Americans."

I silently gave Aunt Martha the finger. *Me* not know the Internet? I'd surfed to RocTube just yesterday because our fans had already uploaded our Lyon show. "What about, um, Indonesia? Or Turkey?"

"Indonesia, no. As for Turkey, your EU visa works, but travel there is officially discouraged."

"Discouraged? Why?"

"Biological terrorism incidents."

"What? Anthrax?"

"The Internet also has something called *news*. There is a new biological agent called Amanita which has been used in Ankara and Istanbul over the last few months."

"What's Amanita?"

"This frequency is not secure, Dennis."

"Right." Martha couldn't talk to me about something which probably any website could give me volumes on. "So, is there *anywhere* safe we might go?"

"Sioux Falls, South Dakota," she said. "But if you want to pursue your good-will mission, you might consider Cyprus." She took a deep breath. "I have friends in Nicosia who might rent you a house in a safe neighborhood."

"Cool! And there's Muslims?"

"As there are stars in the sky."

"So tell me about your friends in Nicosia."

"Call your mother, Dennis. Then let's talk when I'm not at work."

The house was on a hillside in the Strovlos neighborhood, overlooking downtown Nicosia, and beyond it the old mosques and apartment blocks and treeless hills of Turkish Northern Cyprus.

Smog tinged everything sepia like an old fashioned photo.

"This is like a house in Redmond," Vlad said.

"Not enough green," I said, as I pulled our air-conditioned '98 Fiat into the driveway.

"Bet it's got a nice garden out back," Rick said. He laughed like he'd made a witticism. I'd given him four milligrams of Xanax when we boarded the plane in Athens. I had sensed he was *this* close to a panic attack. "Bet it's got a Buddha."

"This looks like the house of a career diplomat," Vlad said.

"Andros and Maria work for the government of Cyprus," I said.

"We might as well have stayed in Ath—" Vlad started as we got out. He stopped. The heat was incredible. He leaned against the car, then yelped. "Fucking hot!"

"I brought my hat," Rick said, pulling a wide-brimmed straw hat down over his head.

I'd known Cyprus was hot, one of those places even the old crones no longer wear black but heat-reflective Mylar jumpsuits. "At least it's a *dry* heat." But my breath burned my lungs as I carried my two guitar cases toward the door. We passed two skinny pine trees still green and two others long dead. I knocked at the door.

A dude in a Saddam Hussein mustache and a double-breasted suit with a rainbow sheen greeted us. "Hello. You are Instant Karma, no?"

"*Allahu akbar!*" giggled Rick. I elbowed him.

"We're Downtown Dharma," I said. "You must be Andros. My Aunt Martha gives her regards."

The man bowed. "Your aunt is a fine woman. I am called Ali Musharak. Mr. Andros and his wife are spending the summer in the Peloponnesus. They send you this message."

Ali Musharak presented his cell phone. It played a video. Andros, olive-skinned but hair bleached blonde, wished us a pleasant stay. Maria, who had a Texas accent, said, "Don't y'all go trashing our place, you hear?" but she said it with a wink. I liked them.

Ali motioned us in. Air-conditioning on so high it gave me goose pimples. "Fine salon, yes?" he asked. It was decked out with Bauhaus (not the band)—style furniture, rigid black leather chairs and couches that just looking at made your back ache. Walls adorned with classy framed B & W photos (Broadway, NYC, 1936; Market Street, SF, 1947). There were icons, too, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus on the cross, and some Greek Orthodox Patriarch in a black cassock. And there was a glass bookcase, with books in Greek but also English: travel books and gardening books and, most interesting for Vlad, a Religious Section, Bibles and Korans and books about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gandhi and Deepak Chopra.

"Now, the upstairs," Ali said. He took us up a winding staircase and showed us three small bedrooms, then led us to what he called a "rock and roll room," which, with its beanbag chairs and mini-fridge and Foosball game, looked like something out of a Seattle basement. The one wrong note was that the polished wood floors were covered with a clear plastic tarp.

"What the fuck?" Vlad asked.

Ali pointed at the electrical outlets. "There are adapters for your American voltages, for your amplifiers." He pointed at the mini-fridge. "It is stocked with beer. But please to not smash the walls."

"Dude, we're not *twenty-one*," Vlad said, pissy.

"Most certainly," agreed Ali.

"You got a garden?" I asked. "Maria said there's a place to meditate in the backyard."

"I show you the kitchen," Ali said. "Garbage disposal. Twelve hundred watt microwave."

"I'd rather see the garden." Vlad's pissiness and Rick's Xanax-induced giggles were disrupting my equanimity. "I need a place to be mellow."

Ali stiffened. "I will show you the backyard."

He took us out back. I'd been imagining the house in Redmond: Buddha and koi pond surrounded by lilac bushes and jade plants and a soothing wall of redwood trees.

Instead there was a hot cement slab and a plot of brown grass and two more dead

trees. "Apologies," Ali said. "We have fine sprinkler system, but its use is made illegal by the global warming."

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. "What I want to know," I said to Ali, "is do you know the rock scene in Nicosia?"

Ali smiled. "Oh, yes. I know the rockers. I can take you to the club, the Bachus, yes?"

"Thirteen hundred dollars a month for *this*?" Vlad said. He was strumming his bass, unplugged, in the small bedroom he'd claimed for himself, and I was in the lotus position on my yoga mat on his floor. My acoustic guitar rested at my side in case I got inspired.

"You wanted Islam," I said. "It was your idea."

"But this is *Christian* Cyprus. This is your aunt's friends' place."

"Downtown Nicosia's just twenty minutes away! You'd rather sleep in some cockroach motel by a minaret where they might blow us up just for not wearing beards?"

"Fuck, dude, what kind of shit are you talking? You sound like Anne Coulter."

"Peace, dude." He was right. I closed my eyes. I picked up my guitar, and played the intro to "All Apologies." One of The Kurt's greatest songs. A few measures of it can express sentiments no mortal man would dare speak. I relaxed and smiled at Vlad.

"Beautiful, dude." Vlad had a soft look on his face. He looked twenty-five again. "But don't take this the wrong way. Your sound's kind of muffled, like."

"I know." I thumped the side of my guitar. "I'm safekeeping Rick's stash in a sock in here."

You might be wondering why I'm so the Mother Hen for Rick. It started because of a show we did at the New CBGB in NYC a few years back. We were nervous. We'd just released our CD *Grange Grunge* and we were getting airplay outside Seattle for the first time since '96. And here we were playing at the world's most famous club. Well, it was the New CBGB, in Staten Island, rather than the original CBGB, in Manhattan, but that's just a detail. Anyway, we were opening for Orange Pulp, and it was before I found the Buddha, and we were all popping Benzos, and drinking our various beverages, and we got through the show okay. But afterwards two groupie chicks hit on Rick, the first time (for him) in years, and they took him to their apartment, and he came back the next morning to the house we were crashing at. I was still hungover but he was talking a mile a minute because he'd mixed ten milligrams of Xanax with some meth. Finally he took the last of his Xanax, maybe fourteen milligrams, and fell asleep. Two days later we took the van to Boston to play a club, Rick itchy and edgy and passing gas like he'd eaten nothing but refried beans. We were all out of Xanax so I gave him Coors Lite to ease his withdrawals. It helped a little, but he was still talking fast, this time about dying, not fucking seventeen-year-olds, and I asked him if he wanted to cancel. But he was a trooper, just like Kurt was, and he said the show must go on. And so we did our show, and it was a good one, he sweating and pounding with more urgency than I'd heard from him since sometime last century, and finally, for our encore, we played "Smells Like Teen Spirit." It was then he lost control. He accelerated during the second chorus, drumming so fast neither Vlad nor I could keep up, and then he stood up and shouted, "I am Keith Moon!" holding his arms up in a V like Jeremy in that Pearl Jam song, and then, still clenching his drumsticks, he fell over his drum kit, knocking down his highhat and kicking a hole in his kick drum, and then, the scary part, he flopped around on stage like a fish out of water.

The paramedics were there in minutes.

Rick spent two days in Boston General, which nixed our profits from the tour as well as putting us six thousand dollars in debt to Aunt Martha.

Boys and girls, never cold turkey off of Xanax.

At dusk we started toward the club called Bachus.

Central Nicosia is nothing like Redmond. Well, there's a few little glass skyscrapers, but mostly it's *old*: narrow streets, and ancient Greek temples, and old domed buildings that might be churches or mosques, and those cement five story apartment blocks made popular by Stalin. And crumbling walls and fortifications built by the Venetians and the Ottomans. It probably had some grandeur, and majesty, and all that, but the Cypriots were honking at me because I was driving too slow, and not passing buses on blind curves, and most of the street signs were in Greek, not American. And then Rick, riding shotgun, gawking at the ruins or saying random things like, "Is that the Turkish Baths?" drummed a roll-off on the dashboard.

The GPS began to give us directions in Greek.

"You dumbass," said Vlad.

"But we've gone over!" Rick said. "It's real here! No Kentucky-fried corporate Americanized globalization!"

"There's a Quizno's down that block," Vlad said.

"Both of you, either tell me the street we're on, or shut up," I said.

They were quiet. They hadn't heard me speak so sharply since before I found Zen.

I tried reading the GPS map, and reading the street signs, but both driving and navigating proved too much, and a few wrong turns brought me to a cobblestone street where there were no cars and the storefronts were shuttered with steel and there was a steel picket gate that had been lowered. Two soldiers carrying automatic guns stared at us.

"We're dead," Rick said.

I lost it. I tried putting the car in reverse, but put it into fifth gear instead. The car jerked forward and the engine died.

I turned the key. There was a whine but nothing happened.

"You need to engage the clutch," Vlad said.

I almost cursed him but thought of my koi pond.

One soldier came over to us and I rolled down the window.

The heat slapped us like a wet towel.

"Problem with the car?" asked the soldier. British accent.

The soldier held his gun easily before him but I could see the whites of his eyes, which, made yellow by his wrap-around shades, darted like rotten eggs from person to person.

"We're cool," Vlad said.

"We're through with being cool!" Rick giggled.

"All right, gentlemen, I need to see your passports."

My heart trip-clawed. Damn Rick. I tried to picture my koi pond. I smelled the soldier's sweat and aftershave. I heard pocket and paper sounds, then Vlad reached across me.

The soldier tapped the barrel of his gun against the top of the car. "Yours, too, mate."

I zipped open the pocket of my cargo pants and brought out my passport.

The soldier looked through each of the passports carefully. "You were in Italy?"

"Como," Rick said. "We were one of the bands that was going to play."

The soldier looked at me. "Downtown Dharma."

I breathed, nodding.

"That's bally," the man said. He handed me the passports back. "And you thought you might pop into a towel-head club tonight, and have a shot at the karaoke machine?"

I prayed that Rick would not answer that.

"We were lost," Vlad said.

“Right. You know that I believe you. But I’m afraid I also believe you’re the kind of ignorant Americans that might just cross the Green Line on impulse. You don’t want to do that, mates. We’re locked down to vehicular traffic again. You won’t get across unless you have a stamp for your passport and you’re traveling with a vetted tour guide. Even that I wouldn’t recommend. Your night in Como might suggest why.”

I was afraid one of us would argue about Como, but it was Vlad who was conciliatory. “Sir, really. We *are* lost.” He sounded plaintive as a child.

I got an idea. “Could I call a friend on my cell phone who might help us?”

The soldier shrugged. “All right. But park over there to place your call.”

He pointed his gun behind us, at a loading dock at the entrance to the street, fifty yards from the checkpoint.

Ali climbed into the car ten minutes later. Still in his sharkskin suit. He was pissed. He ordered Vlad to sit in the back seat so that he could ride shotgun with me. “This is not the ugly Americans. This is the moron Americans.”

“Our car died, dude,” Vlad said.

“Is a good thing. You were approaching the Green Line. Drivers have been shot for not stopping.”

“We were lost,” I said.

“But we’re *Americans*,” Rick said, whiny.

“I take you to Bachus,” Ali said. He was short with us. We’d fucked up. But the British soldier had taken it well. Surely it was more than him taking pity on us just because we were Americans. He must have sensed my Buddha nature beneath my nervousness.

“I thought *Aunt Martha* said Cyprus was safe,” Vlad said.

It was a dig at me, but Ali answered. “Your Aunt Martha is a fine lady. She cares deeply about all peoples of the world. But she listens too much to Andros and Maria. They talk the pretty picture because they think sweet words will make hard men soft. And because they live in the nice house, and go to fine restaurants, and consort with diplomats and intellectuals. Martha smiles at me like I am boy when I tell her the Cyprus Liberation Front has been infiltrated by the Submission Faction. But there have been kidnappings and bombings even in Greek Cyprus these last weeks. Why do you think the U.N. does not let you drive across the Green Line?”

“They think we have a car bomb?”

“They do not want an incident. They do not want dead Americans, and airplanes bombing mosques for the vengeance.”

“Who would Jesus bomb?” Rick said, not giggly. Hysterically.

“We’re on a goodwill mission,” I said. “Rock can unite polar opposites.”

“Ah, envoys for the peace. Your aunt will be proud.”

He was being sarcastic, but I didn’t want to challenge him. The easy way he’d waved at the soldiers as he reached the Fiat told me he was one dude who took shit from no one.

He directed us down a series of streets, some so narrow we had to back up to let cars coming the other way pass, then had us park in a garage so insanely crowded that I tore the fender off the Fiat on a pillar pulling in, then knocked over a Vespa in the stall behind us as I straightened out.

We pulled the Vespa upright. It was leaking oil onto the cement. Ali pushed a handful of euros into its pannier.

“Cypriot insurance,” Ali said.

Rick giggled. “Can you be our manager?”

Ali laughed. His teeth were so white they seemed to glow blue. “You don’t need a manager. You need a nanny.”

Gas fumes in the garage made me faintly nauseated. Just like home, except the cars were all dinky—some three-wheelers even. Outside it was still hot, though visually breathtaking in that European way, with a crumbling Venetian tower silhouetted against a sunset of layered golden and reddish clouds, stepped in a three-dimensional effect.

Rick sang the last line from "Stairway to Heaven."

The Bachus was an ancient onion-domed church set smack-dab against the Green Line. The top of the Green Line wall was coiled with barbed wire.

"What the fuck?" asked Vlad.

"We know some vespers," I said.

"Mr. Ataturk knows what the American and German tourists want. Not church services. So Thursday and Saturday night, he has the rock and roll." Tonight was Thursday.

We stepped between concrete pylons designed to dissuade car bombers.

Inside there was a good crowd already, sitting in the pews, tourist-types, dressed in baggy shorts and baseball caps and Gold's Gym Santorini T-shirts. I spied an emo or three with black hair in their eyes and dour looks on their faces. There was a distinct lack of smoke, only that old dusty church smell, the smell of ancient places I always found comforting.

Light through stained-glass windows picturing saints and Jesus cast peaceful patterns on the concert-goers.

Toward the back was a neon-lit table at which sat an elderly jowly man with slicked-back white hair, two muscled skinheads I took for bodyguards, and a cute chick in a headscarf. It was a big table, and the old man motioned us to join him.

"I am Felix Ataturk. You are the Dharma Bums?" asked the old man.

"Downtown Dharma, sir," I said. "Dharma Bums is a group from way back."

"You look like you are from way back, as well. But I have seen the video of your Lyon show. Tell me, what inspires men of middle years to keep touring when your contemporaries have become lorry drivers or at best house bands at Atlantic City casinos?"

"Don't give up on us baby, we can still come thr—" Rick started, and I kicked his ankle.

I breathed mindfully. "We're past wanting to be big stars," I said.

"We have a mission bigger than rock and roll," Vlad said.

"Ah." He looked toward the cute girl. "Shayla, why don't you get these young men drinks. Is beer okay?"

Shayla smiled, but I could see resentment in her eyes.

"Just a soda-pop for Rick," I said.

When she had gone, Felix Ataturk said, "She does not know her place yet. She has too many Western ideas, mixed with too many fundamentalist ideas. Ali would like to marry her, but tell me, how often have you seen him pray?"

"I do not pray for an audience," Ali said, but his face turned red.

It seemed unkind to put Ali on the spot like that.

Vlad changed the subject by telling Ataturk our plans for uniting Islam and the West.

The bodyguards snickered.

Ataturk drank from a gin and tonic. "You are too old for that kind of idealism. You must become realists, if you want to live much longer. I would have thought Como would have instilled common sense into your heads."

"Como inspired us, Mr. Ataturk," I said. "If we don't do our small part, how can things ever get any better. I mean, look at U2. They do good shit."

"U2 are the richest men in Ireland," Ataturk said. "They have millions to give.

They have two hundred security guards at their performances. Perhaps you should follow their example.”

“I could fire missiles from my drumsticks!” Rick said.

Ataturk was saved from responding to this inanity by Shayla, who brought back four drinks on a tray.

One of the bodyguards said something jokingly to her in Greek that did not make her smile.

Ali attempted to pay for his beer, but she pushed his cash away. “I am not your hostess.”

“Shayla is my daughter,” Ataturk said. “Beyond that she will define herself as she will. She can play hostess. She can play ice-queen. She can play fundie. She can even play the bass guitar.”

“*Nei, papagia*,” which even I could recognize was Greek, not Turkish.

Ataturk glowered and drank from his gin and tonic.

“I could drink too, but I do not,” Shayla said. “The Prophet forbids it.”

“Good reason for that,” Rick said. “He would have forbidden benzos, too. They can destroy you surely as whiskey.”

Shayla glared at Ali. “You *told* them?”

Ali drank from his beer, then said something angrily in Turkish.

“Let us speak in English for our American friends,” Ataturk said. “You have had a problem with prescription drugs, Rick?”

“Oh, yeah.” While sipping his Coke, he told the story of the Boston show. He exaggerated his Xanax usage and the severity of his seizure, giving his typical rock-star drug-abuser narcissistic spin. The interesting thing was not his B.S. but Shayla’s reaction to it. Her brown eyes took on a moist glow. Her features, hawk nose, full lips, high cheekbones, which I’d initially gauged as merely cute suddenly became pretty. Maybe it’s that it’s hard to see the real women with those ugly scarves; you think they’re nuns or chemo victims. Or maybe she was taking pity on Rick and her face had become softer. I’d seen chicks do that before. “Then I spent six weeks at the Betty Ford clinic.”

Vlad rolled his eyes at the lie.

“You too, Rickie?” Shayla asked. “That is where I went. After drinking the bourbon, and snorting the lines of coke before concerts. It was at Betty Ford that I found God.”

“Dennis is *my* higher power,” Rick said. Then he looked abashed; he apparently didn’t want to be so flip. “Do you really play bass?”

She sneered like Billy Idol. “Do you *really* play the drums?”

“Touché.” Rick unconsciously brushed the top of his head, like he still had a full head of hair. “Your band plays tonight, right?”

Shayla nodded.

“Well, maybe I could sit in with you. Just for a song?”

“Maybe. I saw the video of your Lyon show. You have a steady beat, like Ringo Starr.”

“Thanks,” Rick said. Vlad smirked. Saying you played like Ringo Starr was like saying you had the dependability of a metronome. Which, in Rick’s case, was a compliment. “So you play tonight?”

“My band is called Fatimah. We go on stage in an hour.”

“I wouldn’t do anything flashy.” He sipped his Coke. “I’m a professional. My wild youth is behind me.”

“Your band will not like an American playing drums,” Ali said.

“Stuff it, Ali-baba. They’ll think it’s cool.”

“It is these kinds of transgressions that inspired madmen to spread Amanita in Istanbul.”

Mr. Ataturk slammed his glass down so hard I thought it might crack the table-

top. "Ali Musharak, you have been friends with my family for many years. Shayla, while she was once very fond of you, has cooled in that regard. But neither of these facts gives you the license to speak to her rudely in front of guests."

"I apologize. Moving forward, I will strive to act as the gentleman, inshallah."

He swallowed a deep draught of beer.

I sipped my beer. Even with the church setting, I was tense now, too. I figured Ali and Shayla had been engaged, and Shayla, in true rock-chick style, had dumped him. And there was this cultural divide thing, too. I didn't know how much anger was for show, how much was deep-seated and real. I had a couple bars of Xanax in my pocket for Rick (just in case) but was wondering if I might need them myself. "So," I said, to break the silence, "what's this Amanita about?"

"It is the Russians," Ataturk said. "The FSB."

"It is the Submission Faction," Ali said.

"Nonsense," Ataturk said. "The Submission Faction are medievalists. They believe in humors and the evil eye. They do not have the technology to manufacture drugs. The Russians, however, do. They seek to keep Cyprus divided so Turkey cannot join the E.U. fully."

"The Submission Faction delivers it to the target," Ali said.

"Perhaps. Any fool can carry a test tube."

"But what *is* it?" Rick asked, tense for the first time since he'd set eyes on Shayla.

"It's a designer spore," Vlad said. He'd been the one of us to read about it on the Internet. "Recombinant DNA. Luminescent growths like shrooms. Causes your skin to break out in all sorts of colorful ways."

"Internally, too," Ataturk said. "Your lungs and sinuses bloom with sweet-smelling fungi until you asphyxiate."

"Heavy shit," I said.

Everyone was quiet. Then Shayla said, "It's a pretty way to die."

With her accent I couldn't tell whether she was perverse or sincere.

The bodyguards made low jokes, in Greek or Turkish, then finally the night's first act took the stage, a rap-metal group, Plutonium Rhymes. Baseball caps and golden chains and those stupid gangsta hand signals. They rapped in cockney-sounding English about hating Americans, hating Armenians, hating Palestinians, hating Zionists, hating Kurds, hating Shiites, hating Saudis, hating Al Qaeda. At least they seemed equitable in their hatreds. Their guitarist was ace, though. It was nice to hear a rap act that could actually play instruments.

"They do not speak about hating the Turks or the Greeks because they once spent a month in jail for that," Ataturk said.

The crowd was clapping, but merely politely; it was a church after all. But this pissed the guitarist off. He said, "No encore for you tonight, wankers!"

And then he stormed off stage, to the hisses and boos of the audience. The rest of the band played on for a few bars then looked at each other, shrugged, and stood up. The turntable dude, shaved head and doleful eyes, apologized to the crowd, then left.

The crowd politely clapped for him.

Then Mr. Ataturk took the stage and introduced Fatimah.

The crowd cheered.

"Let us rock this house," Shaylah said, as she tuned her guitar, feedback so loud I felt it in my beer mug.

The band had a rhythm guitarist, an older guy with long hair like he was stuck in 1992, who seemed competent; but also a young dude, lead guitar, in a fedora and tattoos who kept trying Jimi Hendrix riffs at inappropriate times. The drummer, buff and shirtless, wearing a yarmulke, kept a solid beat.

Their sound had the anger of Hole but the melodies of R.E.M.

"They are good, are they not?" Ataturk asked. I allowed they were, though the lead guitarist needed some restraint.

"They pack every club they play."

Shayla looked hot on stage. She'd taken off her black robe (leaving on the scarf), and was wearing jeans and a red mesh shirt that gave a good indication of the shape and color of her curves. She put down her guitar and played an upright piano as she talked. "Allah's gift to us is our bodies. We must treat them with respect." She thrust out her breasts as she said that: the crowd cheered. "We must display our beauty, but not let those with impure thoughts take the advantage of it. We must feed ourselves, but not at the expense of our health. Whiskey, gin, marijuana, cocaine, *beer*—and benzos—will all destroy what Allah has given us. And even our ears—we must take care to keep them from damage." With that she stepped away from the piano, and inserted two foam ear plugs in her ears. "Now, back to the rocking."

The crowd whooped.

She played a power chord.

"She's so hot," Rick said.

"She is a whore," Ali whispered, too soft for Ataturk to hear.

"Dude, you need to come to America, so you can see some *real* ho's," Vlad said.

"I have lived in L.A., and been to Tulsa, and it made me sick."

They played a few more songs, political stuff, sure, but mild partly because the lyrics were downright opaque. She had a nice voice, well-timbred, and even when she screamed she kept in tune. She played some love songs. Even with those, the guitarist kept thrashing where calm would have been effective: hadn't he ever listened to Nirvana? And then she just played her guitar, the rest of the band quiet, and she stepped down from the stage, walking between the pews, back toward us. She started singing the Led Zep oldie, "Thank You," and when she reached our table, she pulled off her head scarf. Her hair was lustrous black and longer than her shoulders and my god so sexy. Rick's eyes bulged. Even I got a hard on. But she wrapped the scarf around Ali's shoulder.

He threw it to the floor.

"Asshole," Vlad whispered to me.

Shayla stood there, still smiling. I noticed she had a narrow inch-long scar across one cheek. When she'd finished the song, she led Rick to the stage by the hand. There they played "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Rick was under control. Professional like he'd been the entire road trip. The crowd loved it. Or maybe they loved Shayla; who could tell?

The crowd wasn't body-surfing, but they were standing up *on* the pews, dancing, pumping their fists.

It was a rock show.

Ataturk leaned toward me. "When you have played the Narghile, why not play somewhere better? Why not play in Greek Cyprus or in Greece or in Tel Aviv? In Athens, I can pay you better than what you were getting playing little clubs in France."

"I want to do something more than rock and roll."

It was a weird night, mostly because Ali decided he wanted to be our manager after all. Neither Vlad nor Rick was hot on that idea, but Ataturk surprisingly was. "I do have a financial interest in the Narghile," the old man said. "I do not mind giving my people my business. Most of them are good Turks who want only to live peaceful lives. It is just the virus of fundamentalism that poisons the mind of the few."

"But Ali?" Vlad asked.

"He is a good man. Our families have been friends for generations. My daughter thinks of herself as, who is that, Courtney Love, and must do things to provoke him. I

side with her of course, except in business matters; I know her provocations are mere show. Ali knows Nicosia and he will know how to get you a good rate. Also to whom to give baksheesh so that you are not stuck in a cement interrogation cell for a week."

I could see Shayla being Courtney, but that would make Ali The Kurt, which was plain laughable.

"Why don't *you* manage us?" I asked.

"Though I am Turkish, I prefer the Greek side of the Green Line."

The next morning, Ali drove us in a Lexus SUV that reeked of cigar smoke. He and Ataturk had already made some rehearsal arrangements with the manager of the Narghile, and we had stored our gear in the back. The three band members sat in the rear seat. Up front sat Shayla, dressed all in black, like a fundie, except that she announced, "You know, I wear nothing underneath," causing Ali's neck to redden and his fingers to grip the wheel until they went bloodless.

"Business and pleasure don't mix," Vlad whispered.

"Man, I need some help," Rick said. He was jittery, in withdrawals, his powers of observation uncomfortably keen. "The LEDs on the dashboard, man, they look like eyes of the devil."

I gave him a two mg Xanax.

He relaxed almost immediately. Shayla turned toward Rick. In her headdress, she looked like a nurse from the Florence Nightingale era. "Is a hard drug to quit, no?"

"Hard once the evil eye of Shaitan sees you always," Ali grumbled.

"Come on, dude, he's having a rough time," Vlad said.

Ali sighed theatrically. "Sorry. All apologies."

Ali's words cued The Kurt's greatest song inside my head. I closed my eyes and thought about my koi pond, and I breathed in and out mindfully. Rick, relaxing, began pointing out sights, his drug-induced excitement an odd counterpoint to Kurt's melancholy. Only once did Ali correct Rick, like a concert-goer disappointed by his favorite band but too polite to heckle.

We reached the same checkpoint we'd been stopped at yesterday.

"Hello, my friend," Ali said to the same British soldier we had met before.

"Good afternoon, Ali," the Brit said. "A show tonight, Ms. Ataturk?"

"I have my transit documents," she said.

"I know. I was having you on. These three, however—"

I had my passport ready. I pushed it at him. "I have a two-day visit stamp."

He glanced at it cursorily but did not ask to see Rick's or Vlad's.

"We're thinking about moving here!" Rick said.

"Do not joke," Ali said. Then, to the Brit: "They are fool American rock stars. I am their manager."

The Brit had tensed up; I could see his yellow eyes examining us. "Your passport, please," he said to Rick.

Rick handed him the passport and this time, not only did he read the passport carefully, he waved an electronic wand over its bar code. Then he handed it back.

"Do watch what you say, mates. You're not entering friendly territory."

"Understood," Vlad said.

Ali pulled something from his pocket. A big doobie? No, a cigar, cinched with a gold band. "Cuban," he said, offering it to the soldier.

"No, thank you, Ali. I appreciate the gesture, but we're on alert with this Amanita business. Can't even accept olives."

Ali sighed. "It is what Allah wills."

"Hopefully, it's temporary. Soon I will have a gift for you, inshallah."

They raised the gate, a set of vertical steel bars that looked strong enough to withstand tanks.

When we had passed into Turkish Nicosia, Shayla said, "Apparently, we must wait for this week's bottle of Scottish whiskey."

Ali swore in Turkish, then turned the Lexus's MP3-player to some sort of industrial death metal thing, so loud and disturbing Rick cried out in pain.

Shayla switched the sound system to the radio. The BBC. "You are punishing him, not me."

"It's cool, man," Rick said. "Just give me another bar, will you, Dennis?"

"Too soon," I said.

"Good," Ali said. "He needs to learn the self-control. You mock my whiskey, but I never have more than two drinks a night."

On the radio, we listened to some snarky British lady comment on office politics as we took in the sites of Northern Nicosia. It still looked prosperous, nothing like Beirut or Cairo or Baghdad, but the differences between it and the Greek half of the city were profound. Many storefronts were shuttered closed. Few people walked the streets. Most women I saw wore headscarves, and some even wore bhurkas.

"Amanita must be scaring everybody," I said.

"It is Friday," Shayla said. "We observe the day of rest."

"Like all good Believers, we shall stop at the Great Mosque to pray," Ali said.

But he was being sarcastic. We sped past a mosque with minarets like corn silos. We saw some open tourist shops, and a Jamba Juice at which were congregated many patrons wearing Mylar suits ("silverbugs!" Rick said), and a low-rise 1980s-looking office building, into which a Saudi in full headdress was hurrying, alongside three Asian-looking businessmen in cooling suits so mirrorlike we could see Ali's green Lexus reflected. The streets were crowded with cars, many of them big SUVs like the Lexus, but Ali found a parking space in front of the ruins of an old building.

"Ancient Greek?" Vlad asked.

Ali snorted. "Post-war British! Bombed six months ago!"

Rick trembled.

"Is safe now, Rickie," Shayla said. "Was the apartment building in which a Greek sympathizer lived."

We got out. The hot air felt like stepping into a packed club whose owners would rather risk the heat-stroke deaths of patrons than turn on the AC. We started unloading our gear. Rick, white, still shaking, couldn't even pull his snare drum out of the Lexus. Shayla made him drink from a bottle of water, then Vlad whispered to me, "Give him another bar. Fuck this clean and sober shit."

I gave him a Xanax and made him sit in the car with the AC still on.

"Americans, very strong," Ali said.

Shayla said something angry to him in Turkish. He did not apologize to us, but did help us finish unloading our gear. When Shayla started to help us, he gave her a disapproving look, but did not stop her.

We walked half a block. I pulled the drum-kit dolly with my acoustic guitar strapped on top, Ali carried my electric guitar, Vlad pulled the dolly with our amps, Shayla carried his bass, and Rick carried the duffel bag with our mics and wires. We passed a Starbucks on one corner, crowded with tourists and locals. Rick said, "Man, a Frapaccino sounds good."

"Too expensive," Ali said. "Omar will have coffee for you."

Omar ran the Narghile. The building was Ottoman-style, tiled arches over vertical windows. It stood catty-corner from the Starbucks. Omar had wall-eyes and a pot belly and a Saddam mustache just like Ali's. "God be with you," he said, then, outside on the sidewalk, he waved a metal detector wand over each of us men. He allowed Ali to rub the wand over Shayla. Ali took his time. She glared at both Omar and Ali, but Omar was studying Rick. "You strung out?"

"He doesn't do well in the heat," Vlad said.

"He is the Xanax junkie," Ali said.

"He sign non-liability document," Omar said.

"WTF?" Rick said.

"I talk," Ali said. "You stay quiet." It was weird, negotiating on the sidewalk with our equipment at our feet, but Shayla and I calmed Rick down, while Ali and Omar gabbed away in Turkish. Then Ali said, "Mr. Rick will sign that the Narghile Club, Omar, and Mr. Ataturk will not be financially responsible for the damage caused by him. Also, not responsible for the hospitalization, burial, or police and coroner investigation in the sad case of Rick's death."

"You got us a fucking good deal," Vlad said.

"He will guarantee the Downtown Dharma four hundred euros per show," Ali added.

Vlad fumed. I felt dizzy in the heat, but thought of Redmond, cool and overcast, my koi swimming peaceably, and I said, "I think we can work with that." I patted Rick's shoulder. "It'll be okay. Remember what we're really here for."

"Saving the world," Rick said flatly.

"Good band, good Americans," Omar said. Rick had signed the release, then we'd drunk Turkish coffee, which is basically espresso with the grounds left at the bottom of the cup. We had wanted to sign a contract immediately but Ali had told us that we and Omar would sign one after we had played a couple of songs, "to assure us that the acoustics of the space were to our liking."

"Bullshit," Vlad whispered to me. "We're *auditioning* to play a hole in the wall."

"It's cool, Vlad," I said. "Remember what we're here for."

Ali had heard our discussion. He slapped Vlad on the shoulder. "Don't worry, my friends. This is the Turkish way. Mr. Ataturk will be highly displeased if we are not allowed the playing of this club."

"Reassuring," Vlad said.

But I breathed in, breathed out, found equanimity. We set up our gear, plugging in amps. They had an electronic keyboard, a top-of-the-line Roland, better than my own, and the stage was spacious. And while there were a couple brass hubba-bubbas sitting on the bar, the place seemed to be called the Narghile because of all the fantastic water pipes carved into the woodwork walls and ceiling. There were fat Turks in fezes smoking from bonges big as refrigerators and half-dressed voluptuous women trying unsuccessfully to get the men's attention. Rick set up his drum kit with Shayla's help. Ali didn't like that and went to have words with his ex-girlfriend. They argued in Turkish and Rick seemed to melt away, getting smaller and smaller behind his drums as the other two went at it. My nice vibe shattered and I went to Omar, who was behind the bar, polishing it with lemon Pledge. "You got anything other than coffee?"

"Ah." He winked one bulbous eye. "I have the special Coke for American rock stars."

"Um—" I said, thinking he meant cocaine.

But he gave me a rum and Coke. Or more likely a bathtub gin and Coke. It tasted terrible, but warmed my gut. But it didn't relax me sufficiently; I saw now that Vlad was trying to comfort Rick, and Shayla and Ali were still arguing, with the addition of a third party on a cell phone, to whom Ali spoke more deferentially. I should have gone up there to see if I could help. I'm the leader of the band, after all. But instead I went to the bathroom.

The porcelain toilet was clean. I sat on the seat and sipped my drink and looked at the pictures of female genitalia scratched into the metal stall, as well as witticisms

such as “Yanki GO Home” and “Fuk Hellas!” I felt sorry for myself. I could not taste the gin over the smell of bleach. I thought about the time Kurt’s first girlfriend found him passed out in a toilet stall, syringe still stuck in his arm. I called Aunt Martha on my cell.

“It’s five AM here, Dennis,” she said. “Are you in jail?”

“A jail of the mind.”

“Are you high? Don’t tell me you woke me up to play games.”

“I’m sober,” I said. The drink had given me not a buzz but a dismal sense of clarity. I could still hear them arguing outside. How rational The Kurt had been those times he’d wanted to still his consciousness for just a few hours.

“Dennis? Talk to me!”

Martha is commanding; it’s not being demure that has kept her in the State Department since George the First. “It’s Ali. He’s fighting with his ex-girlfriend. And I’m not doing anything about it. If I can’t help two people quarreling, how can I help heal Islam?”

“Ali? Ali and Shayla?”

“Yeah.”

“Honey, if I could tell you how to reconcile those two, I could just as easily win the Nobel Peace Prize for unifying Cyprus.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Stick to music, Dennis. That’s something simpler than the human heart. I assume you’re going to play the Bachus. That’s good. People will appreciate you there. Even if some fundies catcall you because you’re American, you might be able to soften some attitudes. You do have a sweetness when you’re up there on stage.”

I knew she was giving me props to lift my spirits. But it made me feel better anyway. I started to correct her about which club we were going to play, but noticed something else: keyboards, drums, bass. They were starting their sound check without me.

“Thanks, Aunt Martha.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I’d like to go back to sleep.”

“Sure. But can I ask you just one thing?”

“Of course,” she said, a little testily.

I told her about the contract Rick had to sign.

“Haven’t you signed liability-release contracts before?”

“Yeah, but for a club in *Cyprus*?”

“The Bachus is popular.”

“And they’re making us *audition*, too.”

“I’m not a lawyer, dear. I’ll call Andros if you want him to refer you to one.”

“No, thanks. We’ll be okay. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“You can always call me, Dennis. But you really ought to call your mother, too.”

We said our goodbyes. I emerged from the bathroom feeling better. Half because of what my aunt had said. Half because the rest of Downtown Dharma was playing our instrumental “Skid Rowing,” sort of a surf-punk song with a grinding metal bass, and Shayla was playing along, improvising a synth part that was light and airy and made me think of a happy dude floating high above the waves on a parasail.

I picked up my acoustic guitar and joined in.

Omar liked us. I knew he would. We’re no Nirvana, but we’ve been good enough to play the little stage at Lollapalooza. We signed the contract. It was screwy, because Shayla was going to play keyboards; and while Vlad was unhappy about having a fourth member forced upon us, I thought it was a smart deal all around: I’m a better guitarist than keyboardist, a cute chick draws a bigger crowd, and just having Shay-

la up there would symbolize the unification of Islam and the West. Plus, Ali had upped our take to five hundred Euros.

"Your acoustic guitar has an interesting sound," Omar mentioned to me, as we sat around the bar, drinking more gritty coffee to celebrate.

"Yeah, I've made some personalized enhancements," I said. I glanced at Rick. He was smiling at Shayla, not wild-giggly, but happy.

I thought that as long as my guitar sounded a little off Rick might find good reasons to keep smiling.

When we went outside, there was a crowd in front of the Starbucks.

"Do not go over there," Ali said.

"We got to get back to your SUV," Vlad said.

It was hot. We were going to drive to lunch. Vlad was holding his bass, me my acoustic and electric. We never left guitars at a bar we didn't know.

"Let's check it out," Rick said.

"Unwise," Ali said.

We strode into the street. Our shoes left depressions in the heat-softened asphalt. The sunlight was dizzying. I remember a dozen people standing around an outdoor table, unified by shock, though they dressed wildly differently—an Asian businessman in a silverback suit, an elderly couple in Mylar hats with flaps big as elephant ears, a Western chick wearing a head scarf yet also a tank-top that flaunted her bronzed shoulders, and beside her a woman in a water-cooled bhurka that steamed in the heat.

"He's just passed out!" a British girl was crying. "It's so bloody hot!"

Rick pushed through the little crowd, Shayla tugging at his shirt as if to caution him. But he said: "Fucking A."

"It's nothing!" said the Brit. "He just needs some water!"

The crowd parted. I saw what was happening. The British chick was supporting the head of a guy in a Cnut T-shirt who was pale but pimply-faced. He seemed asleep, but having happy dreams, smiling slightly.

I have seen the same smiles on men who'd been knocked down in bar fights.

Then I noticed the pimples were something else: they were small and zit-sized, except they were blue, yellow, green, like tiny perfect bruises.

"Amanita," Ali said.

Rick groaned.

"Don't ring the police!" the Brit pleaded. "We've a doctor we know here!"

The whoom-whoom siren sound that European ambulances make echoed off the old buildings.

"No lunch," said Ali, as he headed toward the Lexus.

We clambered aboard the Lexus, me and Vlad setting our instruments down with the care we'd taken after the Como bombing. I was breathing mindfully, thinking koi, when Rick said, "My drums. They're in the club."

"Omar will safe-keep them," Ali said. "We must go back to Greek Nicosia before they lock the gate."

"But we have a show tonight," I said. I breathed deeply to no avail. "We signed for a show with Omar!"

"Omar will postpone," Shayla said. "He is a good businessman, yes, Ali?"

Ali grunted. He was preoccupied with traffic, and with calling someone on his cell phone. The conversation was in Turkish and I didn't understand. I *did* understand the people who were trying to force their cars into the street. And I did understand the tourists who streamed out of the Great Mosque toward their tour bus, each of them talking on their cell phones or, in the case of one elderly couple, crossing themselves: a gesture sure to please their hosts.

Everybody who could get out, wanted out.

"This is fucking stupid," Vlad said. "We don't know it's Amanita. And even if it's as bad as the plague we just got to make sure we wash our hands."

"Amanita killed three hundred people in Istanbul on nine June," Shayla said. "And it takes a cough or the close contact with another to spread it."

"I'd wanted to go to that Starbucks," Rick said. "Maybe it was meant for *me*."

"Quiet!" Ali ordered. Past the bus he had driven up onto the sidewalk alongside the Great Mosque. He honked as frightened pedestrians jumped out of his way, then after fifty yards of this, forced himself back into the street, scraping the bumper of a car that had been reluctant to let him in.

We had gained four car lengths.

Twenty minutes later we were in sight of the gate. Several cars were ahead of us. I counted four U.N. soldiers at the gate, guns at the ready, plus two more inspecting a yellow Fiat like the one we had rented. Ali honked.

"Have you lost your mind, Ali-Baba?" Shayla said.

Ali swore at her so violently that she lowered herself in her seat.

They let the Fiat through. Then they closed the gate. After some time of conferring in the bunk house, one of the soldiers walked toward us.

"We're dead," Rick said.

"It's Blake," Ali said. He lowered the window. "My friend," he said.

Blake was the mustached sunglassed Brit. "Sorry, mate. Bit of a problem. The Green Line's closed, at least until tomorrow. Quarantine and all that."

"But my guests are staying in Strovlos."

"Quite. You have friends—Omar comes to mind—surely you can find a few rooms to rent."

"Dude," Vlad said, "Dennis's aunt was head honcho in the American Embassy."

"And Mrs. Thatcher was my mum," the soldier said. "But not even Mr. Ataturk's request could open the gate today."

"Thank you," Ali said. He was starting to roll up his window, but Blake motioned him to stop.

"Don't play at the Narghile," he said, addressing the three of us in the back seat. "Stay away from crowds till this thing blows over."

"We hear you loud and clear," I said, before Vlad could spout something provocative, or Rick something inane.

We picnicked atop a hill overlooking Nicosia.

It had once been a park, carefully manicured, but the grass and a grove of olive trees were dead, and the only living thing was a great leafy cypress under which we took shelter from the sun. The air was still and the day was hot.

"There is an old man who waters this tree in the cool of the evenings," explained Ali, fingering the bark.

"Isn't this where you cut our initials?" Shayla said. There were hearts, names, dates, carved into the trunk. "Or has it grown over?"

"That tree is dead," Ali said. Then he reached into his wicker picnic basket and brought out a bottle of red wine. He offered it to us all, but I declined on Rick's behalf, and when Ali poured a glass which he gave to Shayla, she spat into it, then tossed it over her shoulder.

"It is the good Turkish wine," Ali said. He and I and Vlad sipped and for myself at least it relieved the smallest part of tension.

"Is it the Armenian church wine?" Shayla said. Sarcasm, but weariness. It's hard to keep up any pose, punk or fundie, when it's a hundred degrees in the shade. Even Ali had taken off his sharkskin jacket, to reveal a tank top and a well-muscled

physique: he had a crucifix tattooed into one shoulder, and a Muslim crescent into the other. I wondered if it were gang graffiti or if he thought he could symbolically unite the two halves of Cyprus.

"Where'd you get the tattoos?" Rick asked, fingering his ponytail like a rosary.

"From a fool. Ask Shayla where she got *her* tattoo?"

She made a sound more a hiss than a sigh. "A bearded gentleman sliced my cheek with a razor blade at a concert in Istanbul. Because I had not covered my head. A beard! There was a time when no man in Turkey wore a beard. There was a time when the veil was outlawed too."

"The heat dulls your memory," Ali said.

Rick slid across the cypress needles to me. "Just one drink, Dennis?"

"You know you can't do that," I said.

"Give him half a bar," Vlad said.

"He can take the drug, but not the drink," Ali said.

"The mixture's deadly," I said.

I gave Rick a milligram of Xanax and a fresh bottle of Gatorade. He drank from it, then handed it to Shayla. She pushed back her cowl, then drank deeply from the bottle. Ali pretended not to notice. "Look at the smoke."

Near one of the old Venetian towers a column of black smoke rose. By coincidence it was nearly the same width and height as the tower, like something sent from hell trying to incorporate in solid form. "Cool," I said.

"They blew up a building," Rick said.

"No," said Ali. "It is the Submission Faction. They burn tires and trash and effigies of the mayor whenever the gate is shut down."

Shayla said something harsh which I took for a curse. "It is the normal Cypriots. They are frustrated. They are not the terrorists."

"I submit to your greater wisdom," Ali said.

I wondered what perversity had made Ali want to come to this park anyway.

We ate kabobs and gyros and we drank wine. It was like communion wine, sweet as grape juice. It was stronger than Omar's bathtub gin, and after a second glass, I felt a sense of warmth and safety. There were no gunshots and the smoke dwindled and I could appreciate old Nicosia, the Turkish side especially, with its ancient buildings and narrow streets and minarets as old as redwood trees.

Ali was talking on his cell, Shayla flashing him looks. He ended the call, then said, "I can get us across the Green Line tonight."

"What, we drive two hundred kilometers across the desert?" Shayla asked.

"No. We walk through the crypt of the church of St. Nicolas."

Shayla rolled her eyes. "We will dress as monks?"

"Hey," Vlad said. "I thought you had friends, so we can stay here after the show."

"There will be no show. I shall call Omar."

"What the fuck?" Vlad said. "We signed the contract!"

I spoke. "This is the most important time for us to play. We got to heal wounds, man."

Ali poured himself the last of the wine. "Call Auntie Martha, and ask her the wisdom of this plan."

Rick looked appealingly at me, but I ignored him. I smelled the cypress, felt the warm blanket of needles beneath me, tasted the sweet flaky baklava Ali had served us; and I knew the Cypriots just the other side of the Green Line could be sensing these same things. The two groups needed a bridge, not a wall, stitches, not an amputation. They needed to know the oneness of the universe, the universality of music. I remembered seeing "Kurt Cobain, je t'aime" spray-painted on a wall in Lyon. I remembered how Japanese girls by the thousands had given Kurt Hello Kitty toys when Nirvana played Tokyo.

I knew what Kurt would do in this case.

I closed my eyes like a man who had found his Higher Power, and said, "We will play the concert tonight."

Downtown Dharma has played to some strange mixtures of crowds before, but the Narghile has to set some record. There were skinheads in Mac boots and swastikas; elderly tourists still wearing their day packs; fundies in beards and fezes; college-age American girls in low-cut gangsta pants and Muslim scarves; and Turkish families, portly fathers wearing fedoras and Saddam mustaches, moms in headscarves but flare jeans and purple mascara loud as sunsets. There was even a Japanese businessman still wearing his mirrorback, sipping from something in a paper bag, and sitting with a Turkish chick busty as the ones carved into the ceiling. For all the diversity, there was a quiet, a shared nervousness, the same bond you may remember feeling after 9/11 or 7/7 or Jacksonville.

Or after Como, for that matter.

Everybody was drinking coffee or smoking and the smell of cigarettes and cloves took me back to the 90s.

"I'm surprised anybody showed," Vlad said.

"Life must go on," Shayla said. "It is your American cowardice that gives the terrorists their greatest inspiration."

"People look scared," Rick said. *He* seemed too calm. I was worried he'd found the stash. But he was holding Shayla's hand.

"These people are the fools," Ali said. "At least you will be paid for this appearance. They pay for the risk of death."

"Livin' on the edge," Rick sang.

"What safer place would you have them go?" asked Shayla. "Omar's men inspected everyone who entered."

"Did he search your body cavities for Amanita?"

Shayla breathed between her teeth. "Please go give your greetings to your business friends before I scream at you."

Ali glowered. He finished his Coke—Omar's rock star mix, I could tell by the whiff of alcohol—then left our table. He went glad-handing others in the audience, not just the Turks and Omar, but the Japanese businessman, and a man in close-cropped blond hair whose Western suit made mesmerizing optic fiber spirals. Ali gave the man a Cuban cigar.

"Russian mafia," Shayla said.

"So that's how Ali makes his money?" asked Vlad.

"He is a venture capitalist," Shayla said.

"Smooth operator," sang Rick. Shayla smiled, then stroked Rick's forearm.

Ali approached the Western girls but was rebuffed.

Ali returned to our table about the same time that our opening act took the stage. It was a couple of Italians, a dark-haired serious one playing a Roland synthesizer, and a middle-aged singer with 1970s Peter Frampton locks and his shirt unbuttoned to his navel to show off his hairy blonde chest. He sang soft-rock standards from the 70s and the 80s, garnering applause from the oldest tourists and feeble boos from the skinheads.

Omar introduced us as the "Dharma Bumsteads," which got him a few laughs from the Americans in the audience and a dirty look from Vlad. As I stepped up to the mike, I apologized that Blondie wasn't here to play keyboards for us, and only Rick giggled at that joke. But when I said that Shayla was sitting in, there were cheers from the crowd, especially—I think—from the Turks. Then I took a breath and started my spiel. "You guys deserve the props for showing up tonight. We're getting mon-

ey for being brave; you're getting just the satisfaction that no terrorist is going to cow you into hiding in a bunker somewhere."

There were some hisses, some claps; I saw Ali pretend to slice his throat with a knife, and I decided to cut my speech short. I would let my music do my preaching.

We started with a straight rocker, "Bleached Whale," a tight song inspired by the time I'd come across the carcass of a humpback whale in an inlet of the Puget Sound, stench to make you dizzy, but two months later there was nothing but bones, faded-white vertebrae big as serving platters. A song about the fragility of life, anybody's, but I thought they could see the message: anybody, America, Russia, Greece, Turkey, could start off powerful but end up bones. The crowd dug it. I finished with a whisper, "Look upon my works, and despair," which seemed to leave them baffled.

Then we did "Monochrome," which is all about how gray Seattle can be, especially riding the monorail, which goes really from nowhere to nowhere. I thought it had a clear political metaphor, but maybe that didn't translate; I could see we were losing the crowd. I decided the time for metaphor was over. We did some covers: Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance," which got everybody clapping, and had a good edge to it, with Vlad fuzzing up his bass to an ironic angry growl. Then, "A Child is Black, A Child is White," which was either too USA-specific or too sweet (we played it straight) to have an effect.

"Okay, man, we're here to rock you, not sing you lullabies." The punks razzed me for that. I turned back to my comrades, and I told them, "You guys follow me. We're going to do 'Gutter Preacher,' 'Kali's Blues,' 'Pike Market Pope,' only I'm going to change the lyrics. Make 'em topical. The chord changes, melodies, are going to be the same. You got that?"

Everybody nodded. Even Shayla, but she was an improviser of such talent I think she would have fit in had I started "Iron Man" or "White Christmas."

I faced the crowd. The stage lights had turned the cigarette smoke the blue of a TV tuned to a dead cable channel. The lights weren't bright enough to blind me; I could make out faces. Drooping mustaches, medieval fezes, cigarettes, studiously bored punks, the three American chicks who'd dressed like they were here to shoot a *Girlz Gone Wilde!* video yet were now (because of Ali?) scared shitless. Turks in Harry Truman double-breasted suits sharing "rocker's Coke" with the Japanese businessman. And bearded Taliban-looking dudes you could imagine with plastic explosives or scimitars scotch-taped to the backs of their baggy vests.

This sounds mean, I know, judgmental and non-Zen. Well, maybe it was. I needed a little anger. I'm no Gandhi yet; I'm not even Kurt. I needed some anger so I could rock properly. I needed anger to make peace. "We're gonna rock now. We're Americans"—hiss at that—"but what that means tonight is we're going to give you what Americans call 'tough love.' Means we love you, and we're going to express that love, but what we say may end up sounding angry. But that's okay. There's a lot of anger in this world, and a lot of it's used for awful purposes. But what anger you may hear from us, is really about frustration. Frustration that we don't understand each other. Frustration that there's hatred when there should be love. Frustration that we all have the same God but end up hurting each other in God's name."

"Fook off!" shouted one of the punks.

"Yeah. Like I said, frustration. Anyway, this song's 'Gutter Preacher,' about a wise man I met in a place called Skid Row in Seattle."

Vlad started with a funky bass line, more Chili Peppers than grunge, but that's how he'd been doing the song the whole tour. I added my guitar, heavier and grunge-like, then Rick came in with his beat. His rhythm was off, too slow, like he wanted us to change funk into dirge. Both Vlad and I looked back at him: he was pale, sweating, looking like he'd looked that afternoon. But the club wasn't that hot, Omar's AC

worked well, and Rick had a bottle of Gatorade he'd been sipping from frequently. We repeated the intro bars, hoping he'd get the hint. He didn't. I started moving back toward him, stomping the beat with my Converse.

Then suddenly things were right. He was spot-on, and it took me a second to figure out what had happened. Shayla had started playing the drum part on her keyboard, the kick-drum, the snare, the high-hat, stress and syncopation perfect as if she'd made a study of the song.

And Rick was following her.

I was so wondering over this miracle that Vlad prompted me with the first line: "When you're so low,

You don't drink your gin slow—"

"You swallow fast to leave your past," I started in.

"But where you get's a place called skid row."

That's how the lyrics always start. But this time I would change them.

"And when you want to be dead drunk, a dead drunk starts to preach."

"Yeah."

I did a harsh arpeggio on my guitar. A drunk's corroded vocal chords. Vlad's bass line got more complicated, more minor-key sinister, but softer: meant to suggest the abuse, the creativity, the obsession, the untamed salvation or self-destruction that drove the Preacher's thoughts—but all the while quieter, because my lyrics had to shine.

I had to surf-ride the emotions of the crowd.

"Sonny, you a fool.

"Using liquor like a tool.

"Perfume tonight be stink tomorrow

"A moment's bliss a day-long sorrow."

A softer arpeggio on my guitar, me speaking in my drunken-kid character:

"Preacher man don't preach to me."

"Wine's my only friend, you see."

Harsh arpeggio, preacher:

"You got no friend, not even God."

"While you sitting like a slob.

"Your dealer's a devil, your liquor store's a pack

"Of liquid demons in a refrigerated rack."

Me: "Preacher man, don't preach to me."

"Without even God, where will I be?"

Preacher: "You! Want God? Which one is that?"

"Money? Fame? Women? The Phat?

"Or church? A mosque? A templed choir?"

"Where you can buy God by the hour?"

(Some boos at that one).

Me: "Preacher man, don't preach to me.

"Give me a god who'll set me free."

"Freedom's what you want? What you mean, free?"

"Free from care, memory, taxes, duty?"

"Or free to drink wine and chase booty?"

Me: "Preacher man, if you got to preach to me,

"Give me the God who likes *due-ty*.

"I'll sweep some floors, I'll kick some ass.

"I'll carry the cross up Khyber Pass.

"I'll bust caps at any dicks

"Who denies there's God

"Or who give rights to chicks."

"Fook you!" shouted one of the punks; but I think the rest of the crowd was with me. I'd lost Vlad for a measure; I'd expanded the drunk kid's usual two lines to seven. But Vlad's a pro. He caught up with me.

"Sonny boy, you a dummy.

"If you think God's a gangsta and you his homie.

"Better to be a drunk and give in to fate.

"Than add to the world's misery with that kind of hate."

Me: "Preacher man, if you got to preach."

"Stop dissing me, and start to teach!"

Preacher: "Scuse *me* for pointing out

"Common sense if it makes you pout.

"But I'll be sweet, if that's what it takes.

"Don't want your body fished from water with rakes.

"So here's the simple unvarnished truth.

"God's about love, not the hurting.

"So don't follow that warpath that you've been flirting.

"But do some love for your fellow man.

"And I don't mean sex, unless it's safe.

"I mean feed the hungry, house the waif.

"Be of service to your fellow drunks.

"Pass on this message, even to punks."

"Preacher man, that's a lot to ask

"But I'll spread the word, after I finish this bottle."

"No you fool, the time to start is now!"

"And then he was gone, and my bottle empty."

I stared into the crowd. I met their feral eyes.

"Preacher man is gone still."

"Or am I the preacher, and you my flock?"

"Preacher man, that's what I'll be.

"I'll preach this once, then you pass it on.

"Take this message from my song.

"Eat right, brush your teeth, exercise.

"And try to love those you despise."

I repeated the last couplet a few times. It seems dull now—it was improvised, after all—but at the show it was incandescent. It fit the mood, it fit the song, and the crowd had so taken the story to heart that I got some of them to sing the fadeout, as I waved the microphone toward them like I was a monster rock diva. It was fine. It was flash. And I think it helped that most of the audience were not native English speakers. They heard the earnestness of my voice, the sincerity of my message, and missed the silliness of the lyrics.

We did "Kali's Blues," me substituting "Allah" for "Kali" though Ali again made the throat-slashing gesture. But I *had* the audience, as if by the throat: I saw the Girlz Gone Wilde! singing along, the Japanese businessman staring transfixed and open-mouthed, and even the Taliban dudes nodding to the beat. Same for "Pike Market Pope," though in making a song that disses Christianity into one that proclaims the unity of the West and East I had to twist the lyrics into turds too embarrassing to now relate. But then I realized it wasn't just *me*, anyway, making the music succeed. It was Vlad, his bass line unfathomably complex and thus mysterious as God; it was Shayla and Rick complementing each other now, one soft when the other was loud,

one arhythmic when the other was a metronome, the two exchanging roles seamlessly as lovers or old friends in conversation; and it was the crowd itself, afraid of the world and its dangers, but hearing my message, knowing its potential and that as the club was a safe place for that moment so too could the world be made safe.

That which we think upon *will* manifest.

We closed with "All Apologies," me worrying because my acoustic guitar sounded out of tune, as if Rick had removed its contents; but then forgetting that, for the crowd helped carry me along, some waving their cell phones or lighters, some singing the lyrics (which I would tamper with no more than I would bowdlerize the first lines of Genesis), and some (like me) in tears, for there is no sadder song.

"Damn you, Kurt, for dying," I mumbled into the mic afterwards, a sentiment I should probably have left unspoken: I saw the Girlz Gone Wilde! looking perplexed and hurt; but I think most of the crowd did not understand. I thanked them, and wished them peace, and they replied with a call for an encore.

We complied with "Teen Spirit," a rocking version more upbeat than the original, Rick's drumming tight as Dave Grohl's, Shayla doing a wicked guitar with the synthesizer.

We left the crowd in a good mood. We left them wanting more.

After the show, after we'd dismantled our set, after all three Girlz Gone Wilde! gave Vlad their cell numbers (but the one named Karen gave *me* hers too!!), Omar served us each a cup of "rocker's Coke." "My favorite," Shayla said, smiling sweetly, pretending to sip, then pushing it away: even fundie punks can be gracious sometimes.

Before Rick could drink his I pulled it away and downed it myself. "Straight Coke for Rick," I requested from Omar.

I expected Rick to whine. But he said, "That's cool. I'm thinking about converting."

He and Shayla smiled at each other. I studied him, stared at his pupils and the color of his face, and felt some relief.

It was sex and rock and roll, not drugs, making him happy tonight.

I drank my own glass of special Coke.

"We go home now," Ali said. He had finished his special Coke, but neither it nor the success of our show had softened his demeanor. "We invite you, Omar, to come with us."

"I thought we were sleeping here," Vlad said.

Omar shrugged. "It might be safer here. I will admit no one else to club. And you can sleep in the attic room."

"I saw Valinsky here tonight," Ali said.

"The Russian? He is gone now. Did you show him your switchblade?"

Ali shrugged. "We exchanged words. But there is the fact the Russian was here."

"He might have smeared all these cups with Amanita," Shayla said.

Ali said something angry to her in Turkish.

I had a buzz going. I didn't want their ex-lover shit to spoil my good mood. "Fine. We'll go back. The band is cool with that."

I didn't even look at Vlad or Rick for affirmation.

We walked through the streets of Nicosia, all of us (save Ali, who kept telling us to whisper) feeling like those kids in Baghdad or Bosnia who had happy childhoods despite the horrors they grew up around. We joked, we made lewd proposals about how the Girlz Gone Wilde! could pleasure us in our next video, Vlad and Rick and Shayla gave me obnoxious suggestions on how I might improve the lyrics to my sermonizing songs. Meanwhile there were gunshots in the distance, and the nauseating smell

of burning rubber, and gutted-out cars still smoldering. (Ali had squeezed his Lexus into Omar's garage for the night.) When a jeep carrying gunmen came our way, Ali forced us off the street and against a storefront and said to me, "Quit holding your guitar case like a rifle. The men have been shot for less."

These men noticed us but waved, and Ali waved back. I got the feeling he had understandings with everyone in Cyprus.

We came to the Church of Saint Nicolas. We didn't have to wear sackcloth. Ali *did* have to pay thirty euros to be let in by an old Orthodox priest with a ZZ Top beard. It was musty, dim-lit, ancient in there: I imagined the crumbling bones of medieval patriarchs buried under the stone slabs beneath our feet. We saw Mylar-wearing crones praying in the pews, Jesus on the cross looking down stoically at the votive candles burning in their ranks beneath him, icons smudged into Rorschach tests by centuries of smoke, even folks I took to be Muslim by the fact they knelt on prayer mats.

And far off in a side-chapel, we saw a man on his back glowing by the light of the colorful candles he'd affixed to his face and arms.

"That a statue?" Vlad asked.

"Move on," said the priest.

"There are Christians as backwards as any Believers," Ali said. "They think the church will cure them from the Amanita, as it did from the Black Plague."

His cynicism pissed me off only in retrospect.

We climbed down into a crypt. We passed the stone cenotaphs of crusaders. Even in their repose, their rusted-through blades seemed at the ready. Flickering torchlights. Smell of mildew that reminded me of Redmond. The priest led us through a door so short it seemed intended for dwarves, then we went down a long dirt-walled tunnel that had Rick saying, "Who's the dungeon master?"

Shayla laughed and put her arm around Rick. Seeing this, Ali tried to stiffen to his full height, but hit his head on the ceiling, bringing down chunks of dirt. "Fook," he said. He swiped fallen dirt angrily off his shoulders.

Shayla and Rick smiled at each other but were careful not to touch from that point.

The priest left us with a blessing. Then we came to a metal ladder. Ali climbed it, then knocked six times on a door. The door opened, a hunchbacked man in a green apron barked something in Greek to Ali, and Ali handed him an envelope.

"Better not be our take," Vlad mumbled.

We climbed up the ladder and into a walk-in freezer. Stacked slabs of beef, barrels of salad, boxes of cabbage and iceberg lettuce. The chill was welcome, though Ali and the hunchback had a laughing exchange in Greek that caused Shayla to sneer.

"Lock you in here, yes, funny joke on Americans," she explained.

But there was another door. We went through it, up the stairs, through a kitchen, past a counter, and through a fast-food restaurant whose fluorescent lights still burned brightly though it was obviously closed.

"It's the Quizno's," Rick said, giggling.

"Keezsno's," said the Greek.

Outside there was a police car, a big SUV, waiting. "What the fuck?" several of us asked.

"Curfew because of Amanita," said Ali.

The band looked at Shayla and she nodded. "Police are safe. Ali has many friends."

But it wasn't the police in the car. It was Mr. Ataturk and his two skinhead bodyguards. "'sup up, dudes?" Rick asked.

"I am saving you from martyrdom," Mr. Ataturk said.

"Papa, we are adults," Shayla said.

"You are rockers. The rockers are children always."

Shayla sighed. But we squeezed into the car, me and Vlad sitting by a skinhead who held an AK-47 in much the same way I held my guitar case, Shayla sitting between Rick and Ali in the center seat, Mr. Ataturk shotgun beside the skinhead who was driving.

"So how do you find Turkey?" asked Mr. Ataturk.

"They liked us," Rick said.

"I warned them against the concert," Ali said. "But they played well."

Mr. Ataturk asked, "Perhaps they shall play the Bachus, now?"

"We're contracted for tomorrow night at the Narghile," I said.

"I think you should fly to Athens tomorrow," Ali said. "The Submission Faction has agents on this side of the Green Line as well."

"And in Athens, too," Shayla said. "Fly to Roma."

"We're playing the Narghile," I said.

"God-willing," Ali said. It sounded like a curse, not a blessing.

"The rock gods smiled on us tonight," Vlad said.

"Watch how you speak," Shayla said, irritably.

"Ever the pious one," Ali said.

They argued in Turkish. Turkish, not Greek, seemed the language best suited for their quarrels. I noticed that we seemed to be driving past the same spot-lit ruins again and again: Venetian forts, columned Roman temples turned to churches. There were few pedestrians but many UN Humvees, some with machine guns. I wondered what protection a gun would give against Amanita. I apparently kept seeing the same four-story office building, dark glass windows separated by bands of aluminum, like buildings you could see in any city of the world. The streetlights were Halloween orange. I wondered if we were really driving in circles, or if I was just tired. I wondered if at night all cities are the same.

"Where do you take us, Mr. Ataturk?" Ali asked. We were out of the center city, on a wider road.

"My villa. You need bodyguards tonight."

"Thank you, but Strovlos is safe."

"Downtown Dharma is a target now."

"I will call protection friends if it will please you."

"The Grey Wolves?"

"They will make us safe. They despise the Submission Faction."

Shayla turned around in her seat and whispered to me, "Turkish mafia."

Ali said something violent to her in Turkish.

I closed my eyes and thought of my koi pond.

"Okay, Strovlos," Mr. Ataturk said. "But please comport yourself as a gentleman, Ali."

"Yes, sir, forgive my impudence."

A minute later, we'd started up the hills leading to the Strovlos neighborhood.

"Wild shit," Vlad said.

I opened my eyes to see what he was talking about.

There were half a dozen buildings burning on the Turkish side of Nicosia. It looked like an oil refinery at night.

At the house, we parked in the driveway. Shayla, to Mr. Ataturk's disapproval, got out of the SUV with us. "I walk poor Rickie to door," she said, putting her arm around Rick. The patio was recessed, out of sight of the SUV, and once there Rick put his arm around Shayla, too.

"You will not take liberties even if she acts the whore," Ali growled, as we stood on the patio.

"Fuck you," Rick said.

Ali pushed Rick into a bush. Its dead branches snapped beneath his weight. Vlad looked amused. I was pissed, and when Ali grabbed Shayla, I thought they were fighting. It was only when I tried to separate them I saw that Ali was forcing a kiss upon Shayla. Trying to pull them apart, I ended up grabbing Shayla's scarf and getting a sharp elbow in my gut from Ali, leaving me gasping.

"Go inside, the three of you," he told us. And to Shayla: "Go back with your Papa."

She swore at him, then grabbed the scarf from my hands, and said to me: "Why do you worship a suicide? For what cause did Kurt Cobain die?"

I couldn't answer that question.

"I call protection friends, as I promised Ataturk," Ali said when we were in the living room. He pulled out the Gandhi book from the bookcase. Behind it was a pistol of some kind.

"Sweet Jesus," Vlad said.

Ali handed the gun to him.

"I thought you were going to shoot us," Vlad said.

"I am your manager. I might knock you out for your own safety. Not shoot. I would advise you, however, Mr. Rick, to stay away from a woman who believes she is Courtney Love. And you, Mr. Dennis, sing or preach about love, but do not presume to understand the circumstances of other lovers."

"My bad," I said.

Ali said to Vlad: "You have the gun, in case the fundies make it upstairs."

Ali said to me: "Pull the plants out of Rick's back, and apply antiseptic." And then: "I call the protection."

Sitting in the bathroom, drinking Coors Lite from a can to calm my nerves, I pulled nettles from Rick's pale back. He flinched a little. I think it was more unpleasant for me: there was blood, and blood scares me. I once freaked out when a girl in the mosh pit got pummeled over the head with a beer bottle at a show in Spokane. So much blood streamed down her face that I dropped my guitar and yelled at the audience: "Stop moshing! This chick's hurt! Call 911!"

Rick hardly even flinched when I washed the cuts, then put Neosporin on them, and Band-aids on the worst punctures. I had given him a milligram of Xanax, but he hardly seemed to need it. "She's so hot," Rick said. "And she likes me!"

As I was washing my hands in the sink, my cell phone jingled.

I dried my hand on a fluffy white towel before picking up. "Hey, Aunt Martha."

"I heard you played a concert today."

"Yeah! We rocked!"

"I thought you were going to play at the Bachus."

"What do you mean? We *were* at the Bachus."

"Somebody's put your show on Roctube. I don't remember the Bachus having pornographic carvings on its walls."

I got tense. I breathed mindfully. "Okay. We played the Narghile. We played for the Turks. And we did a damn good job. We had fundies and Americans and Turks in fezes, and we did something positive. We—"

"Dennis, you need to leave Cyprus at once. Fly out tomorrow if you can get a flight. It may take a couple of days before the State Department declares Cyprus hot, but it's not worth risking your life."

"But Aunt Martha, you said Cyprus was safe."

"I was wrong. Get out before the airport is shut down. And if you can't get out, stay where you are. In Andros's house."

"How do you know I'm—"

"Your cell phone tells me your exact latitude and longitude."

I felt a black mass well up inside my chest. "But the concert. It was good. I was finally doing something real."

"Come home. There are plenty of Muslims even in Seattle."

"But they're secular."

"Dennis, save yourself. The new strain of Amanita is worse. Faster-acting. The Submission Faction hit Ankara today too, and there are already hundreds of deaths reported."

"How many exactly?"

"I talked to Andros. Even he has decided to extend his stay in Greece another month."

"I want to do something brave." I sounded as whiny as Rick.

"If you want to do something brave, call your mother."

Rick was picking a few last nettles out of his shirt. He looked at me, face sad for the first time that night. "We're not going *home*, are we?"

I couldn't answer him.

Next morning, Rick was gone. Vlad and I went from room to room, calling his name. We found Ali in the living room, thumbing through a spy novel, sipping whiskey. A Turkish mafia dude with a crescent-moon stud in his eyebrow sat in an easy chair. He was staring out the front window, holding a gun with the same unnering ease Blake the Brit had held his.

"Where's Rick?" I asked.

The mafia dude chortled. Ali took another sip of whiskey, then coughed discreetly. "He has gone on a date with Shayla."

Vlad and I looked at each other, and, like a guitarist and bass player who knew too aggressive a chord change might provoke a volatile crowd, we decided not to press Ali for details.

We went out front. "A *date*? What does that mean?"

Vlad shrugged. "Maybe just what he said. You think it's mafia-slang for offing somebody?"

"That's not funny," I said.

"Chill, dude. What happened to Zen?"

"Rick's gone," I growled. I led us around to the back of the house, but Rick was not there. Nor was my koi pond, any more than the first time we had seen the backyard.

But there was another Turkish mafia dude, gun in his lap and bud in his ear as he listened to his MP3 player.

"*Gunyadin*," Vlad said.

The Turk flashed the peace sign without looking at us. Or more likely the V-is-for victory sign. "What did you say to him?"

"Good morning," Vlad said. "Dude, call Aunt Martha or something. You're freak-ing."

I was. But it was warranted. I hurried back inside and up into the rock and roll room and I took out my acoustic guitar. I strummed a D major chord. Its sound was so flat I had a second of disorientation, wondering if I'd touched the wrong strings. Or if my hands were even mine.

I strummed carefully and heard the same sound.

"Xanax," I said.

I didn't even need to pull the white sock out of the guitar to know it was half-empty.

I called Rick on my cell.

"Twelve thousand years old, dude!" he answered.

"What? Where are you?"

"In the Antiquities museum. It's got this Earth Mother figurine, big tits and all. Neolithic! Can't imagine *her* eating at KFC or Quizno's. Can you say unglobalized?"

"Rick, are you high?"

"On life! Wait—Shayla wants to say something."

"Hello, Mr. Dennis," Shayla said. "We are perfectly safe. There are fewer alcohols than to be found at my father's villa. And there are no mafia to ogle me as Ali fumes."

"Is Rick using? Is he stoned?"

"He has taken a couple bars. He is coherent."

"He stole my secret stash!"

"He is not wild. You need to let him be an adult. You need to stop being co-dependant."

She *must* have spent time at Betty Ford, to learn crap jargon like that. "I'm the band leader. He's my responsibility. We're playing the Narghile tonight! We don't want him to do what he did at the Boston show."

Some static, then Rick: "I'm not Keith Moon."

"How many bars do you have on you?"

"I'm in control. Shayla's not going to let me get myself shit-faced. And *you* know it's withdrawals, not using, that gives you a seizure."

"It's withdrawing after *overdosing* that seizes you."

"Shayla's watching me."

"Like Courtney watched Kurt!"

"Dude, I can't believe you'd even *say* that."

"Sorry, man." I breathed. This was madness. The city hummed with traffic; I imagined spores of Amanita dispersed like bleeding-edge pollution from the tailpipes of cars. Madness. I breathed again. "I'm worried. We have a concert to play tonight, and you're not here."

"We'll be there. Unless you've chickened out and you mean the Bachus."

"No. I mean the Narghile. Just get here, back to Stravlos, by four PM. Deal?"

"Ten-four, sir," Rick said, with a giggle.

For Rick, a giggle is as good as a lie.

Vlad and Ali and the mafia-dude were watching the big screen TV when I came back downstairs.

Shots of protesters throwing rocks at riot police. A voice-over in Greek, then screencut to a hospital interior, which had to be in Turkish Nicosia, judging by the 1940s-style ward with its tall windows and its beds separated by curtains. On each bed there lay a man or woman mottled with bright colors, green, yellow, blue. For some the mottles had turned to welts; for others, into long extrusions, straw-shaped, at the top of which puffs of organic matter, laden with spores, were being gently snipped off by nurses, then deposited into biohazard bags. Flowers, I thought. The most colorfully-beflowered patients were in oxygen tents.

The oxygen tents glowed: the puffy things were luminescent.

I realized the man we'd seen in St. Nicolas had been a man on his way toward death.

I told them Rick and Shayla had gone to the museum.

"Safe until the Submission Faction pours the Amanita spores into the ventilation systems."

"That's crap," Vlad said. "They haven't said anything about this side of the Green Line."

Ali laughed. "They do not want the airport closed yet. They want the Americans to fly home while there is still the possibility."

"We're not flying home, not today," I said. "We have a concert to play."

"The concert," Ali said. He finished his whiskey and poured himself another. "It will not happen. Shayla and Rick will find a hotel room in which to die. When I finish my drink, I shall call Omar and cancel our performance."

"You will do no such thing," I said. "We're playing."

"This is not a video game," Ali said. "I cannot see your Aunt Martha advocating such a foolish course of action."

"We're contracted."

"Neither is Omar a fool. He will change the date if must be."

"To when? A year from now, after all this Amanita shit has blown over?"

"If God wills."

"If God wills," I said.

Ali raised his eyebrow. I realized my mistake. It didn't matter that his command of English was shaky; he had caught my sarcastic tone. I was here to heal the rift between West and East, not widen it. "I apologize. I'm on edge. I'm worried about my Rickster."

Ali nodded. "You are the good friend."

"Thanks. But don't you see, we need to do the concert?"

"You are also the fool."

I strummed an imaginary guitar. No, more: I smashed a power chord on an air guitar that once belonged to Jimi Hendrix. Now the mafia-dude looked alarmed. Good for him. "We need this concert, Ali. We got to take a stand. We got to let the Submission Faction know we're not going to be intimidated into crawling into bunkers and eating canned rations like there's been a nuclear war or something. We got to let people know that life goes on. We got to get our message out. And if we can't get it tonight, we might as well just say the terrorists have won."

Ali examined the rainbows the ice cubes in his drink made as they caught a ray of sunshine. Then he said, "You will drive me to the drinking. We will try, inshallah, to go to the show. But you must bring back Rick. And I must confirm that Omar has not been the wise man and canceled the concert himself."

"Cool," I said.

It had been easier than I'd expected.

I'd thought he'd at least want to double his commission.

I called Rick. "Are you still at the museum?"

"Flying high, my friend" he sang.

"Seriously. Where are you? Can you drive back here?"

"We're in the land of the Lotus Eaters!"

"Can you put Shayla on?"

Rick giggled. "She's tuning her guitar!"

Rick was wasted. He couldn't have downed half the contents of the sock—that would have knocked him out—but I was sure he'd done at least ten bars. I remembered that Aunt Martha could track my cell phone through its GPS chip. I called her, interrupting her during a meeting, but that wasn't what pissed her off. "Dennis, you have got to fly out *today*. The airport will be closed tomorrow."

I explained about Rick.

"He never learns, does he?"

"The thing is, if I give you his cell number, can you call him and track him like you track me?"

"Negative." Then she sighed. "Give it. I'll call you back. But just act responsibly for once."

* * *

Rick and Shayla were at Ataturk's villa. I drove the Fiat there, Ali beside me, giving directions in English, talking over the Greek GPS voice, which we could not figure out how to silence, Vlad in the back seat reading Gandhi's biography. I don't know how he could read like that. The whiskey evaporating off Ali and the winding roads were making me nauseated, and I was at the wheel.

Ali had left the mafia-dudes at the Strovlos house. "Mr. Ataturk does not approve of the protection."

We could have used some of the protection, I thought. Plumes of smoke rose from Turkish Nicosia, but I also saw smoke coming from old Nicosia, this side of the Green Line. "See, Islam and the Christianity are united, by the flame!" Ali said. He waved his glass flask in a toast, then took a swig. "You will drink, Mr. Dennis?"

"No, thanks, I'm driving."

Whoo-whoop European sirens made their sound a few blocks distant.

"Tell me, Mr. Dennis. Why the beer, but not whiskey? Why Omar's special Coke, but not cocaine?"

We passed a U.N. Humvee driving up the Strovlos hill. I thought of my koi pond. "I saw my best friend almost die. I stopped all the rock star crap I'd been doing. I decided to become an adult."

"Rick and Dennis went to rehab together," Vlad said. "Dennis found Zen. Rick found that as long as we watched his every move, he wasn't likely to overdose."

"And you, Vlad? You are the perfect one?"

"I was more into chicks. Drinking I could handle."

Ali laughed. "To the chicks!" Then he drank deeply.

We heard the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire as we reached the bottom of the hill. Here Ali directed us away from the Old City. As we reached an onramp to a highway, U.N. soldiers stopped us at a checkpoint. "Where are you going?" one, with an Indian accent, asked us.

Ali said: "We have an appointment with Mr. Felix Ataturk, in the Lakatamia neighborhood."

The soldier looked at me. "Sir, do you feel unwell?"

"Huh?"

"You are pale. Is your throat sore? Do you have a cough?"

"No," I said. "Just nervous." Then lamely, "Namaste."

The soldier stared at me. Shit, I thought, he thinks I'm mocking him. Then he motioned impatiently. "Go on. Drive safely."

We got onto the highway. It was slow going—there were a lot of people fleeing central Nicosia in their little cars—but gradually we got away from the Stalinist-looking apartments, then past little neighborhoods of white stucco houses with bright blue doors. Finally Vlad asked: "Did he think Dennis has Amanita?"

Ali laughed so hard he sprayed droplets of whiskey across the windshield. "Not just Americans are the fools. Exit here."

We were waved through another U.N. checkpoint, then drove down a straight road lined with palm trees and big houses with manicured lawns. It felt like a nice neighborhood in L.A. Some places were even watering their lawn though it was the middle of the day. No global warming here, apparently. Ali had me turn onto a long gated driveway. There was a guard who stopped us and to whom Ali handed a silver-plated pistol. We passed through the opened gate and parked.

"You want to see Ataturk?" I asked Ali.

"He will extend to me the courtesies of the host."

Stone steps, pillars, a heavy door opened by a gray-haired tuxedoed man who could have been Ataturk's brother. Then I felt goose-pimples: after the heat outside, the AC indoors seemed as frigid as the Quizno's cold-storage unit. I thought *Orange County*

McMansion, but then I got a look around. It was heavy on the old-world ambience. Checkerboard marble floors, a grand piano with a bust of Chopin, glass-doored bookshelves, half-size statues of Greek gods, on one wall a painting of people in black flying hand-in-hand over the rooftops of some Russian-looking city. An ostentatious Koran, huge and gilt-edged, opened on a lectern. The smell of flowers and tobacco. No electronics in sight.

"This way, please, gentlemen," said the tuxedo. He had a posh British accent. I wondered if Ataturk had sent him to England to butler-training school.

He led us down a hallway to a game room.

Ataturk and Shayla were playing pool while Rick was playing a video game, a vintage arcade Missile Command.

"Nuclear annihilation!" Rick giggled.

"Dennis, Vlad, Ali," Ataturk said, shooting without looking at us. He missed. (Lots of red balls, a few colored balls; I think they were playing snooker.)

"Mr. Ataturk," Ali said, "*inshallah*."

"God be with you," Ataturk said.

"You smell of drink," Shayla said. Ali pursed his lips; I breathed and thought of my koi pond. Then Shayla came around the pool table for her shot, and I saw she was wearing a Guns 'n Roses T-shirt. Was she that clueless, or was she trying to provoke me? Didn't she know about Nirvana's feud with G & R? The Kurt would have said something biting; but I kept counting my breaths.

Shayla shot, sinking her ball effortlessly.

Ataturk was unperturbed by her shooting. "The last flight out of Nicosia is at eight PM. I can obtain tickets for you."

"Do you think they will let them on the plane, Papa? They have quarantine rules."

"Dr. Ahmet will provide the necessary paperwork attesting to their health," Ataturk said.

"They insist on playing their concert, sir," Ali said.

"At the *Narghile*?"

"They are the fools. But I am their manager, and Omar has not cancelled."

Ataturk shot. He missed badly. "Why this suicide-loving with the rock stars? Tell me, the Jim Morrisons and the John Lennons and the Kurt Cobains? Why?"

"It is a fundamentalism," Shayla said. I wondered why she didn't correct him about Lennon. "There is honor in being a rock martyr."

"In Paradise, we get seventy-two virgin groupies!" Rick giggled.

"That's offensive, sweetie," Shayla said.

Ali coughed for several seconds, then drank from his whiskey flask. Shayla glared at him, alcohol rather than blasphemy apparently the worst of the two sins.

"We're not going to be martyrs," I said. "We're going to play a concert, and give people hope, and maybe help calm things down."

"Do you not say, pride goeth before the fall?" Ataturk said.

"We're not much into quoting Jesus," Vlad said.

"Rick started to sing the Sunday school ditty, 'Jesus Loves Me!'"

I cut Rick off. "Thanks for your concern, Mr. Ataturk, but we're doing the concert. Rick, are you coming with us?"

"Did Eric Clapton sing 'Cocaine'?"

Ataturk said, "Perhaps I should inform the U.N. about the tunnel between the Quizno's restaurant and the St. Nicolas church."

Ali: "I know other ways across, Mr. Ataturk."

"I know those ways, too." He shot again, successfully this time, though with a haphazard roll that seemed to bring him no pleasure. "Your British friends will not be amenable to your baksheesh."

Ali said something in Turkish, not offensive I think, but provocative enough that Ataturk shook his head. "Are you Brian Epstein, now?"

The reference to the Beatles' suicidal gay manager seemed lost on Ali. Shayla got it though, and walked to Ali. She was brandishing her pool stick and he raised his arm as if to parry a blow. But she put her arm around him instead, and told Ataturk: "I am going with them for the concert. Please, Papa, do not try to stop us. If you do, I shall sleep at Strovlos tonight."

Ali turned pale, and returned her hug mechanically.

Ataturk laid his stick on the table. He straightened his tie. "I am a Western man. I will not enforce my will upon my daughter. But I ask that you—Ali, and Dennis, and Vlad—recognize the fundies care little for human life, and less for the female life. Please protect her. And you, Ali—do not bring heavy guns into Turkish Nicosia. The Russians have armed the Submission Faction heavily."

"It is a mad world if the Russians would support the terrorists," Shayla said.

Though his daughter had spoken, Ataturk looked at me. "Call your aunt if you doubt my word." His face went sad, lines deepening as if he'd aged years in a moment's time. "I have a supply of masks that filter the spores. Please wear them. Please also do not have physical contact with anyone in the Turkish Nicosia, even concert-goers. And if any of you develop the Amanita symptoms obviously, please to call me, and I will send medical help. Then we can get you out of Cyprus even if the airport is closed."

Shayla let Ali go. She looked scared for the first time.

And Rick was shaking, Missile Command flashing its grim GAME OVER message repeatedly behind him.

At 4 PM, we went to Quizno's. There were a dozen people in there, but none was eating; the ones closest to the window were huddling beneath the tables. "It's him!" an American chick squealed, pointing to Ali's Mafioso, the ear-budded skinhead, quizzical-looking as he held his AK-47.

The chick beside her, British, said, "Chill, Marcy." To us: "There's a sniper outside, shooting people in Western dress." She looked at Shayla, who was in her dark fundie threads. Then: "Why do the lot of you wear surgical masks?"

"To filter the Amanita spores," Ali said.

"Are those guns?" She was referring to our guitars.

Rick giggled. "We're gonna rock!"

"Where is the restaurant man?" asked Ali; no one was behind the counter.

No answer.

We found the hunchbacked proprietor of the Quizno's sitting atop a box of cabages in the walk-in freezer. He was shivering, and pale except for the bright spots on his cheeks, colorful as freckles on a cartoon character. We all stepped away from him except Ali. "Why are you here, my friend?"

"Hot," the man said.

"You'll freeze to death." The two argued in Greek until the man fell into a coughing fit, then Ali lifted him up. He dragged him out of the freezer and into a little office, desk unruly with receipts, where he sat him on a well-worn easy chair. Then Ali called an ambulance and reported, in English, that there was a man sick with Amanita at the Quizno's. "*Ohi! Ohi!*" the man shouted: no! Then he said something more in Greek.

"He complains that we will leave the door to the tunnel unlocked," Ali said.

"And that the Turkish Army will sneak into his restaurant," Shayla said.

Rick giggled.

* * *

The old church smelled sickeningly sweet. People prayed in the pews, lay sleeping in the pews, sat rigidly in the pews as they stared blankly at the Crucifix. So many of them had Amanita I was reminded of the candlelit Christmas Eve services of my childhood, except here puffy-bulbed stalks and luminescent welts provided a light more colorful than that of any candles. Rick started singing "Ring of Fire." The old priest with the ZZ Top beard studiously ignored us; he was giving last rites to a dying man. A young woman in a headscarf who was carefully pruning the stalk off a little girl's cheek stared daggers at us.

She caught most of the spores in a plastic bag, but I saw a few flutter around the girl like gnats above a flame.

Rick stopped singing. "Who are we fooling? These Halloween masks are about as safe as *fish nets*!" He raised his hand as if to pull off his mask.

"Hush, sweetie," Shayla said, pulling his hand down.

"For once, the madman speaks the sense," Ali said, but he did not take his mask off.

The street was eerily deserted, the lights out (Ali told us) from a power outage. Ali walked point ahead of us, the Mafia-dude followed in the rear, both with guns drawn. We walked in the shadows next to the buildings. We smelled smoke, the sweet Amanita smell, also something sweet-yet-nauseating which I did not recognize until I tripped over a glowing gray bundle.

"They spray the corpses to retard the decay," Shayla explained.

The lights were bright in the Great Mosque. "Generator," Ali said.

Before the doors to the huge building men and women were crying as they stood around a dozen glowing corpses. The dead had been sprayed gray in a haphazard fashion, so their flower-stalks glowed brightly.

"The Garden of Earthly Delights," Rick said. Then: "Shayla, can I have a bar?"

Shayla had a leopard skin purse from which she pulled out a 2mg bar.

I stepped between them. "How much has he had?"

"This is his sixth of these today."

"Too much," I said.

"Are you his nurse-maid?" Shayla asked.

"Give him half. I don't want him falling asleep during the show."

"Do what mommy says," Rick said.

I took no offense. Lame insults are even more pathetic when you've got crones in Mylar wailing over dead bodies. I observed Shayla carefully, though, making sure she broke the bar in half, then gave one half to him.

"I take the other half," Ali said, grabbing it from Shayla's hand, then washing it down with whiskey.

"What happened to Mr. Clean?" Vlad said.

"Mohammed, blessed be his name, does not forbid Xanax, does he, my dearest?"

"No, but he does forbid suicide," Shayla said.

When we reached the Narghile, Omar shined a flashlight into our faces. "Mr. Rick, you take the tranquilizer?"

"Wherever it wants to go!"

"Yeah, he's had some," I said. "He remembers the contract. And Shayla's keeping him in control."

Omar and Ali spoke in Turkish for a moment. I don't know where their conversation started, but I saw where it ended: Ali swallowed from his whiskey bottle, then threw it in the gutter. I wanted to jump out of my skin, Vlad stepped back, but Shayla affected boredom. It's over now, I thought, broken glass barely visible. *We're done.*

But then Omar shook Ali's hand and we were granted entrance to the club.

The Narghile had no generator. It was sticky and warm inside. Candles glowed on every table. All the tables were occupied, and there were even a few people standing. But the club was empty compared to the night before.

"How can we play without power?" I asked.

"I have a battery for the keyboard!" Omar said. "And you can play acoustic, like Kurt Cobain unplugged!"

"That was *Nirvana* unplugged," Vlad said. I could hear the irritation in his voice. He knew that bringing up the *Nirvana Unplugged* concert would be the only thing that could make me want to play the show no matter what.

"And I have let in no man that has the Amanita pox on his face!"

That was just gravy.

"You got any special Coke?" I asked.

The crowd cheered us as we climbed on stage. I was warm with drink and after I set down my guitar cases, I put my arms out as if to embrace the audience. "We're Downtown Dharma," I said. They cheered again. Some of them waved their cell phones at me.

I couldn't see the *Girlz Gone Wilde!*, but I blamed the darkness of the club.

I brought out my acoustic guitar, and I tuned it to Shayla's synth. Dressed Islamic she looked like a nun again, but cute, like the kind you could have a crush on if you went to a Catholic high school. But there was a furrow to her brow, and as she played a chord I saw her fingers trembling. "You okay?" I asked.

She stared at me. "Bally."

"Whatever," I said.

"Never mind!" Rick said, giggling.

At least *he* would have fun tonight, I thought.

"So what are we playing, boss?" Vlad said, strumming at his bass, its unamplified sound tiny.

"Let's start with 'Flies,'" I said.

"Flies in the Vaseline," by STP, is good for opening a set, though grunge purists sneer at the band. But people of a certain age recognize the song, and the thought of a bunch of flies, trapped in a goo that doesn't even have the benefits of something sweet like honey, seemed a perfect metaphor for the mindless inertia of terrorism, both for its perpetrators and its victims. The audience clapped politely. They didn't get the message. So I talked, explained the metaphor, saying how fundies of any creed were no wiser than flies, how the audience in its willingness to rock on nights like this showed the kind of open-mindedness and tolerance that no fly or fundie could ever know. I noticed Ali wasn't doing his throat-cut gesture of the night before, and I would probably have kept yakking, but Vlad came up to me and said, "You're losing them with this fucking sermon. Make music."

He was picking his bass strings harshly, but without amplification it was not a scary sound.

"Okay," I said. We did Kurt's "Lithium," because a song about schizophrenia is obviously applicable to a place like Cyprus; and then we did "Bleached Whale" again, and that song, where I get to scream like The Kurt himself, translated a little better. I wish love, not anger, was the universal language. I saw a Taliban-dude pounding his placemat with his fist so hard I was afraid his candle-jar would boogie right off the table. I mellowed things a little with a cover of Pearl Jam's "Jeremy," because how can you be more PC and save-the-world than Eddie Vedder? But then Shayla came over to me. "What are you doing, these covers?"

My balls tingled because of her proximity; she'd pushed back her headdress, and a loose black hair was stuck to the corner of her lips. But her angry eyes pissed me off.

"It's *my* band. I don't like to shoot my wad first song. Why don't you just make sure Rick keeps drinking Gatorade?"

Without smiling she went back to her synth.

I felt dirty having spoken to her so crudely.

I noticed Vlad was still picking at his bass. Angrily. Fine. We'd go with his anger. "We're going to do a song called 'Puget Sounding,'" I said, and the crowd whooped and waved their cell phones, though they would not have known the song unless they'd downloaded it. It's got a wicked bass line, even morbid you could say, because the shape of the bass, its attack and decay and now-quiet, now-frenetic energy represented the sonar machine searching for the sunken bodies in the Sound. The suicides, the drunks, the prostitutes, the battered wives, the gangstas gone capped. But there were more bodies than ever, judging by the intricacy and urgency of Vlad's picking; and I heard Shayla trying to follow him, playing minor chords that complemented the mood without overwhelming it. And for me it was easy to twist the lyrics: not AIDS but Amanita victims, not gangstas but terrorists, not suicides but martyrs. I sang of the seabed thick with sponges and anemone waving in the dark though it was not dark and the waving things were the luminescent stalks feeding off their victims and shifting in the cold currents. It was dark, it was real, it was angry. It seemed to satisfy Vlad.

The crowd was left uncomfortable. They clapped but looked dour and I saw even the Taliban swallowed Special Coke. I knew why. The song was hopeless, despairing. It would not unite, except in the sense that the dead to a man have no tribal loyalties nor constituents save Amanita and the bacteria of decay.

At a table I saw a Turk turned blue; at another I saw the Japanese businessman from last night was striped red. And I saw the harlots in the ceiling: the pantalooned busty coquettes had wooden bulbs, grotesque disfigurements, carved like supernumerary breasts into their cheeks.

The crowd shouted and clapped suddenly. I knew why. Shayla clasped my shoulder. She'd taken off her scarf and her robe and wore just the G & R T-shirt and blue jeans. "Be less morbid. Give them something to believe in."

"They got you," I said.

"And you got Kurt. Where is he tonight?"

Some dude who'd pounded the table shouted, "Put a!" and Shayla did the devil's horn gesture at him as she returned to her keyboard.

I was energized. The touch of a woman can do that as well as any drug. I saw that the growths on the ceiling carvings were shadows, the blues and reds on concert-goers' faces just candlelight filtered by colored glass. I decided to do a reprise of "Gutter Preacher."

Vlad was still angry, fingering his strings so hard he drew blood, and Shayla followed his emotional lead, though with a subtle, almost gentle, touch; I think she knew that forcefully elaborating upon his anger might lead to violence. I made my Preacher gruffer, cruder, but my Alcoholic Kid less anti-Muslim than the night before. No "should I carry the cross up Khyber Pass?" but, "should I kick some faggots in the ass?" The crowd cheered at my homophobia. I was ashamed to think how Kurt would have reacted. I strove to find a balance. Not offensive, but harsh enough so I could tell my story. We finished with the crowd attentive, none of last night's razzes, but likewise, no one moved enough to sing the final choruses with me.

I finished with a whisper and the applause was polite, like the sound of rain.

Vlad was angry. He was talking to Rick. "You're pounding like we're playing fucking 'Teen Spirit.' Were you too stoned to hear where Dennis was taking the song?"

"He doesn't feel well," Shayla said.

It was true. Rick was pale. It was hot in the Narghile, and his giggles had subsided. "Drink more Gatorade, dude," I said.

As I turned away, I saw Shayla slip him another bar of Xanax. The bitch, I thought. Courtney would never have bought heroin for Kurt.

I still could not see the Girlz Gone Wilde! I saw fish-eyed Omar standing beside Ali who was drinking shamelessly from a beer bottle, foam in his mustache like white whiskers in the candlelight. I saw the Taliban dude and the Japanese businessmen and a girl in a headscarf and a kid who looked like the twentieth 9-11 bomber except he seemed scared shitless; and I realized they were all counting on me. They were silent and fearful and the Narghile was their temple and I was their priest. I could not afford to be petty. I remembered to breathe. I thought of my koi pond. "We're going to do a song by a dude named John Lennon," I said, and I sang, "Give Peace a Chance." It was too easy, maybe, but the crowd lost its deer-in-the-headlights look and some sang along. Some even flashed their cell phones.

Vlad played less angrily and Shayla was subtle and even Rick followed the mood of the song.

My optimism returned. "Let's try 'Kali's Blues.'"

With a roar of feedback so startling the Taliban-dude knocked his candle to the floor, the speakers came to life and the ensconced lights in the corners of club shone: power had returned.

I turned on my microphone. "God provides. Let's rock."

Vlad grinned. "Kali's Blues" has a heavy descending bass line that could drive even cheerleaders to suicide, but the guitar line is brighter, and Shayla chose to emphasize it. Rick remained pounding on his drums, oblivious to the shifting moods of the song, but at least his tempos were accurate. My vocals follow the bass line for much of the song, but midpoint I switch to the brighter guitar voice. That's the usual.

Tonight I stayed dark for only a few bars. "Tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes and the plague; frowns in bars and knives in superstars. Bombs in markets, guns in streets. You think it's Allah? You think it's sweet? You think eye for an eye, a tooth for a truth? You think it's God's will to kill your neighbor or swallow a pill?"

I was glad that Rick's beat was loud. It had those too drunk to follow the words nodding to the beat. But most stared at me as if demoralized. Or betrayed. I switched my tone, lightened it up. "I tell you, friend. God's the judge. You got no right to hold a grudge."

The crowd kept staring. Was it the amplification? Was it the holier-than-thou lyrics? I pushed forward. The show must go on.

"Cruise missiles, B-52s, that's the stuff of Allah's blues. Agent Orange, shock and awe, shooting freedom down your craw. Smart bombs and robot drones, blockbusters that flatten nursing homes. You think it's God? You think it's Christ? You think America gets holy props for its murder rites?"

The crowd was alert now, banging on the tables, while the westerners—a chick in gangsta pants, a couple in faded tattoos and leather jackets weathered enough to have seen our first show back in '92—looked scared, pale. I pushed on with the chorus. "I tell you, friends. God's but a judge. The West has no right to keep a grudge."

The Taliban-dude was glaring at me. Fish-eyed Omar was himself drinking a bottle of beer. "Fook you!" shouted one of the punks from last night. A doughy Turk pulled her daisy-patterned scarf tight around her ears. The atmosphere was unpleasant, edgy: I looked at Vlad, and he nodded, turned down his amp. I looked at Rick. He banged away unconcerned and would not meet my eyes.

I did the third verse: the synthesis. "Amanita, AIDS, bubonic plague and mumps. Global warming and forest land turned into dumps. Poverty, famine, hatred and war—if this is God's plan, what is it for?"

"Death to unbelievers!" somebody shouted.

I sang sweet as I could, as gentle as the Kurt in his quiet verses. "I tell you friends,

God may be a judge. But he's one of mercy, not of grudge. The acid rains he lets fly, are tears of sadness, a corrosive cry. So let's put down our guns, forget our terror, remember that God wants us to have love and pleasure—"

"Pleasure! All you Americans want is the pleasures!" It was Ali. "And see how you have corrupted the daughter of Islam!"

I turned to see Shayla pointing her middle finger at Ali as she thrust her breasts out as provocatively as she could given her clothes were still on.

"You have made her a houris!" Ali said drunkenly.

"Houris means angel," Vlad said into my mic.

Shayla laughed. I saw Ali stumble away from the bar.

Then the power went out.

The crowd gasped. Ali stumbled toward the stage. He tripped over someone's foot, caught his balance, then Omar tackled him from behind. Omar said something in Turkish that made the crowd laugh, but Ali, grim-faced, picked himself up and straightened his tie, then walked with the exaggerated stiffness of a drunk back toward the bar. Omar came up to us and said, "Maybe you should end? They do not hear your words. Not as you want them to."

"It's our manager who is the fucking loon," Vlad said.

"Shayla should not dress like this, not tonight," Omar said.

"Because Ali is piss-faced, it is my fault?" Shayla asked.

"You should not play this game," Omar said.

They exchanged a couple of harsh-sounding phrases in Turkish. I breathed. I saw the carvings as monstrosities. I saw the concert-goers as corpses sitting stiff with rigor mortis, the colors of their eyes the seeds of the flowers about to sprout. I closed my eyes and thought of my Buddha and my koi pond. I decided. "We'll play one more song."

"Ali's protection can lead you to safely."

"We'll be okay." I'd had worse crowds than this. I'd been pelted with tomatoes and squirted with beer. "You guys here are more polite than any audience in Yakima."

Omar shrugged. "Any damage to the club you will pay for."

"I'm a healer," I said. "Not a divider."

"You are the saint. But the saint must be the martyr first."

I thought of Kurt as I watched Omar stroll back towards his place at the bar. Ali was behind it now, presumably looking for a beer or whiskey. Here, I thought, was a man who cannot mix his drugs. Then I stopped that thinking. I tried to think of lovingkindness.

I strummed my acoustic guitar. Then I said, "We're going to finish with the saddest song ever written."

Vlad rolled his eyes. He probably wanted to do "Black Dog" or "Rape Me."

I played the pretty guitar intro, then sang:

"How come you guys came? Just to see my shame?"

"What else should I play, just to make you stay?"

"We don't have all night, I want to make things right."

"I'm sorry I made you blue, I deserve your boos."

"But what else can I say, but sorry?"

The crowd became subdued. Kurt could be Jesus-like in his delivery, but while I make no claim to sainthood, I am a seasoned showman, and I could be pathetic yet strong enough to alter the mood of any but the most obnoxious audience. And this audience was more terrified than challenging.

Now the harder part: Shayla, still amplified, was playing her synth like a heavy fuzzed-out guitar, drowning Vlad's ampless bass, but not my voice.

"Without love

"Without sun

"There's nothing we call fun
 "If we're sick
 "If we're shit
 "Then show me who has won.
 "Decayed.
 "Betrayed."

Okay. I was challenging them. And I was screwing with The Kurt's most sacred lyrics. But I was responsible for them. I was all the hope they had in the world. Christ and Allah had abandoned them to Amanita. I could maybe not unite West and East, but I could help them see there would be a tomorrow.

"I wish I could believe like you.
 "Have faith in what is true.
 "But too much death and wars.
 "Are like Seattle Seahawks scores.
 "Those bodybags and IEDs.
 "Amanita blown by the breeze—
 "Leaves us choking on the flowers that are beautiful."

They were glass-eyed as ever, too many watching Shayla flaunt herself, too many Rick pounding harder not softer, too many Vlad who was angry and pouting again.

I started the chorus again nonetheless.

"Without a lover
 "Without a cover
 "We get global warming burns.
 "If we're sick.
 "If we're shit.
 "It's Amanita
 "Not clover.
 "Decayed.
 "Be-trayed."
 "Yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah—"

There was a crash of a cymbal. The crowd gasped. The Taliban-dude dropped his drink. "Rickie!" shouted Shayla.

I turned. I saw Rick slumped in his seat, sticks dropped to the floor. Shayla was cradling his head. Vlad and I rushed back to him. He was breathing, but his face was pale. Pale as death, white as Ivory Soap. Except for the green and blue dots appearing beside his nostrils like hipster's zits.

"Amanita," Vlad said.

Shayla was kissing him. I pulled her away. "He *needs* me," she said.

"What, to piss Ali off?"

Ali and his Mafioso had pushed their way to the stage. "We go now," Ali said.

Shayla called someone on her cell.

"You will not let the Submission Faction rescue us!" Ali said.

"You *Armenian*. They are not the Submission Faction. They are friends of my father and the Turkish Army."

"Infiltrated by the Submission Faction! Come, Vlad! Come, Dennis! She will take you to the hell!"

Omar came up to us. He patted Ali on the shoulder. "My friend is drunk. Go with Shayla."

Outside, an ambulance with Red Crescent insignia drove up. Before it drove an armored jeep and behind it rumbled an armored Humvee with a heavy machine gun and the flag of Turkish Cyprus waving.

"All are mad," said Ali.

"Stay with Omar, then," replied Shayla.

Two medical technicians brought out a gurney. They had to lift it over a woman prone in the street whom I believed died not from the Amanita stalk growing out of her neck but the bullet hole in the crown of her head.

The med techs hoisted Rick onto the gurney and then carried him into the ambulance. Shayla motioned us to follow, and we did—all but Ali, who hesitated with his Mafioso. Then a man staggered down the street, his face neon green with Amanita. He shouted something at the Turkish Army humvee. The soldier in the humvee turned his machine gun on the green man and shot him so thoroughly he was nearly severed at the waist.

This decided Ali. He pushed his Mafioso back into the club, then came toward the ambulance, hands raised. The machine gunner turned his gun in Ali's direction. Ali did not slow. He stepped over the dead woman and then joined us in the ambulance.

"Even the drunkard has moments of sanity," Shayla said.

"Houris," Ali said, laughing weakly, as if to mock himself.

We sat together tightly, me pressed between Ali and Shayla, Vlad beside the tech who had clamped an oxygen mask on Rick's mouth and was now inserting an IV tube into his right wrist.

There was the smell of disinfectant and Ali's drink and Shayla's perfume and I wished I could trade seats with Vlad.

The other tech was taping electrodes to Rick's chest and we heard his heartbeat beating too slowly.

The ambulance moved through the night. Lights, pockets of darkness, flames. Small-arms fire followed by the familiar and frightening roar of the Humvee machine gun. Vlad was pale and watching the tech who was adjusting the saline drip. Rick's eyes were slits and I could see only the whites. The saline tech, whose forearms I noticed were covered with coarse black hairs, shone a light in Rick's eye, then frowned and brought out a syringe from a cabinet, filled it from a vial, then injected it into the IV tube. An amber fluid long as an earthworm progressed down the tube into Rick's body.

Shayla asked the tech something in Greek and the man answered.

"It's adrenaline," Shayla said.

"Do they know he's a Xanax junkie?" I asked.

Shayla says, "I will let them know. They are afraid his lungs will stop taking oxygen because of the Amanita."

"Will you tell him how much drug you fed him tonight?" Ali asks.

"Should I tell them how much you drink tonight?" she asks.

They glared at each other. I breathed. Vlad said: "Could you two chill just for a few minutes?"

Shayla turned and spoke to the tech. I heard the word "alprazolam," which is the generic name for Xanax. We hit a pothole and one tech steadied Rick's arm as the saline tech held the heart monitor and the IV stand. The saline tech then brought out another vial and syringe, which he half-filled before adding it to the IV tube.

"Clonazepam," Shayla said.

A slow-acting benzo. I was worried it might push Rick into a coma or stop his heart entirely, but the tech knew what he was doing; he achieved a balance between the stimulant and the sedative and Rick's pulse stabilized.

Rick opened his eyes. He looked at the techs, then at Vlad and me, and then at Shayla, at whom he smiled. Ali stiffened beside me. I understood his jealousy. I wondered if Shayla's injudicious supplying of Xanax to Rick had weakened my friend's immune system.

I looked at Ali for confirmation, but Ali had pulled forth another flask of whiskey and as he sipped stared forward as if envisioning the further horrors we might encounter that night.

We hit another pothole.

But it was not a pothole; it was a round of bullets that ripped holes in the ambulance inches above Vlad's head. A piece of metal stuck in my right arm, a needle-shaped shard of glass pierced Ali square in the forehead. "Fuckers," Ali said, though he did not remove the needle. He started arguing with Shayla in Turkish as blood ran down his nose.

The Humvee machine gun roared behind us and there was no more small-arms fire to be heard.

Vlad was trembling. I had never seen him tremble before. Ali handed him the flask and he drank, and then I took the flask and I drank too. Ali did not offer it to Shayla.

"We go through the desert to cross into the Greek Cyprus," Ali said. "It will not matter, because we will all be dead soon."

Shayla yanked the needle from his forehead.

After an hour of evermore sporadic gunfire we reached the Green Line. The Humvee and the jeep fell back and the ambulance crossed at a place where the barbed-wired fence had been flattened. We drove for a minute more, then stopped. The door opened. A man in UN body armor stood there with a gun and Ali, laughing maniacally, raised his hands in surrender. "Ave Maria," he said.

"He is drunk," Shayla said.

"Why do none of you wear the masks?" Felix Ataturk said, resolving from the darkness.

"We were rocking," Shayla said. "Ali was drinking."

Ali swore at her in Turkish.

Ataturk gave orders to one tech in Greek. The tech supplied us with fresh masks. Then Ataturk said, "Come, you will be safer in the car."

We climbed out. Though it was night, the dry air was hot and the parched earth crunched beneath our feet. We saw a tank beside the UN SUV that we had been in before. Something glowed in the open turret of the tank. Ali whispered, "Though I walk in the shadow of darkness, I shall fear no evil."

If this was to meant to provoke Shayla she did not react.

I stopped by the tank. The glowing thing was a dead man who'd climbed halfway out of his turret. His skin was spotted green, and dayglo yellow stalks of Amanita had pushed his night vision goggles away from his face like the protruding eyes of an insect.

Ali turned to vomit quietly.

"I'm riding in the ambulance," I said.

"Ride with us in safety," Ataturk said. "We all go to the hospital."

"I cannot leave my friend alone," I said.

Vlad came back with me toward the still-open doors of the ambulance.

As we climbed in, Rick smiled weakly and gave us the peace sign.

We crossed the Green Line. Darkness from the windows, though occasionally I could see the brake lights of Ataturk's UN SUV. The road was rutted and potholed, and each time we hit a bump, Rick jerked on his gurney as though he were seizing and not just being jostled by the vehicle. I held him sometimes. His body was hot, and his eyes were wide open. "We rocked, didn't we," he said through his oxygen mask.

"We delivered our message," I said.

As he smiled, I saw the glow of his freckles tinted his mask green, like it brought him swamp gas, not oxygen.

"Did you get it from Shayla?" I asked.

He stopped smiling and his heart raced and Vlad grabbed my arm. "Leave him alone, dude."

As we paralleled the Green Line, back toward Nicosia, I thought we might simply be reversing our course, returning to the club and the dead bodies glowing in the street. I heard gunfire, saw buildings burning, and even saw when we were in line at a checkpoint an Amanita-sufferer press his face against the window with the bullet hole in it, his lips ringed green as if by a gaudy lipstick and his nostrils flared so that the yellow-tipped stalks emerging there might have space to grow.

The ambulance driver weaved to throw him off.

"*Poo eene* Turkish Cyprus?" Vlad asked one tech. *Where?*

The tech spread his arms wide, as if to say, I don't understand.

Or maybe: does it matter?

The traffic stayed heavy. Buildings burned nearby, but more of them in the distance to our left, where the dark hills were lit as if by signal fires. As if to communicate distress in an ancient land where electricity was unknown. Some streetlights still worked on our road. Soon we were in a built-up area, sound of gunfire echoing off the buildings. Rocks and small caliber bullets pelted our ambulance, and the four of us huddled each in a corner of the ambulance to protect us from flying glass. The techs covered Rick to the chin with a heavy woolen blanket. He laughed weakly as a sliver of glass pierced his pillow inches from his cheek. "Anybody hungry for Rick kabobs?"

We took a right turn, then drove further from the Green Line. From my perch beneath a shelf of medical equipment I could not see the buildings well, but I saw more lights and heard more sounds of other traffic and there was the echo one associates with large closely-spaced buildings. We took more turns, heard some gunfire, but more often the sound of Rick's ventilation system and his heart whose electronic beat was mercifully steady.

We stopped at the hospital. It was a six-story brick building whose emergency room entrance was cordoned off by two dozen soldiers in UN helmets and hazmat uniforms. Amanita was here, too: hands with crimson six fingers reached imploringly between soldiers, a man with a corkscrew-shaped stalk that grew out of his ear, one woman plucked the bulbs that grew like an ungainly hair transplant from her scalp and tried to push the bloody stalks into the bore holes of the weapons the soldiers carried. People shouted and threatened and pleaded to be allowed entrance, in English and in Greek and in Turkish too.

The luminescence from the assembled crowd gave a festive shine to the tall windows of the old hospital.

Ataturk and Ali led us between the cordon, Vlad and I following the techs as they pushed Rick on his gurney.

There were screams and curses and someone threw a vial which broke open on the ground and splashed my Converse with blood.

"Uniting East and West?" said one of the soldiers. It was the Brit Ali knew.

Ali sang, "What else should I say?"

Inside seemed just as crowded. There was a reception room that was standing room only with healthy-looking people fingering prayer beads or arguing with the nurse be-

hind her glass wall and what appeared to be one of the Girlz Gone Wilde! curled up asleep on a couch, leaning against a young American man in a Red Sox cap. An old doctor with hair dyed orange and a walrus mustache introduced himself as Dr. Ahmet, then led us through two swinging doors. The techs took Rick through yet another set of doors, then we were told to sit in yet another waiting room, this one less crowded.

Each of us sat on comfortable chairs and watched a soccer game between Manchester United and Brazil. Dr. Ahmet stayed with us. He had a black bag and a set of syringes and he went to each of us, injecting us in the shoulder. "Is this some tranquilizer?" Vlad asked.

"It's Mortilox," Dr. Ahmet said. "It's experimental. It retards the early-stage growth of Amanita." Dr. Ahmet's accent sounded American; he had gone to medical school at Stanford, as I later learned. "And yes, you have all been exposed. You should have left Cyprus as soon as you could."

Shayla turned away as Dr. Ahmet injected her in her bicep. I asked, "Can you be a carrier of the disease without showing symptoms?"

"Maybe if you'd already taken Mortilox," Dr. Ahmet said.

Ali laughed, bringing out his whiskey flask. "Mortilox is how you say, a placenta. A sugar pill so pharmacies can make the riches off the poor dumb Cypriots."

"If you would rather wait in the other room, continue talking so," Mr. Ataturk said.

"Apologies."

Dr. Ahmet pulled Ali's whiskey flask away from him. "This is a fine way to weaken your immune system."

"We're all dead, Mortilox or no Mortilox," Ali said, but quietly, as if not to provoke Ataturk again. Nor did he fight to keep his whiskey. Then he took his shot.

Dr. Ahmet shot me last. Physical pain gives a brief respite from the greater pain of fear.

The soccer game ended, then began again (it was a video loop), and I thought, disconsolately, how dull watching soccer was, how for all my commitment to uniting East and West, I couldn't even give a shit for the world's most popular sport.

Kurt would have laughed at me.

Dr. Ahmet spoke quietly to Mr. Ataturk, then donned his mask, which was a gas mask like the UN soldiers had been wearing, and he walked to an elevator.

I followed him and tugged at his surgical smock. "Will Rick make it?"

Ahmet shrugged. "Pray for your friend."

Then he went up the elevator.

Ataturk talked on a cell phone, the only other sounds the low-volume Greek commentary on the soccer game and sounds from Ali and Shayla, who alternated fits of coughing, like bitter rivals competing in a guitar solo contest.

I wondered if Shayla had Amanita and if she had given it to both Rick and Ali.

"Dude, we made the news," Vlad said. He showed me a *Time* magazine. It was in Greek but there were pictures from Como, including one where the girl with the burned-off hair was screaming while Vlad, all coolness, held Rick's drum-kit dolly in one hand and was trying to comfort the girl with the other.

Now Vlad's hands trembled as he showed me the magazine.

"Do you think Rick will *die*?" I asked.

"Dude, what you think upon will be manifest, right? Close your eyes and meditate."

I closed my eyes and breathed carefully, and after a moment the gallery of horrors faded and I could see my koi pond and my Buddha sitting above it with his serene and wise smile. I tried to picture Rick there too, in a lotus position, not popping Xanax but at peace nonetheless.

"Mr. Dennis," someone said. It was Ataturk, standing beside me. "I have arranged for my yacht to leave the port of Larnaca at 4 AM. We will sail to Pyraeus, where I know a immigration official who will be glad to stamp your passports. Dr. Ahmet will sign health forms so that you and Vlad will be able to fly out of Athens. Or you can stay with Andros and Maria."

"But Rick," I said.

Ataturk shrugged. "Rick cannot travel."

"That's shit," Vlad said. "We got him here."

"He is in very critical condition." Ataturk glanced at his watch. "We will leave in two hours."

"But I need to *take care* of Rick," I said.

"They will keep him on a low dosage of the Xanax, if that worries you."

I paced, tried to turn down the volume on the damn soccer game but it seemed to be controlled by a remote, listened to Ali and Shayla shout at each other in Turkish until finally I could take no more of that and sat down between them.

Ali stunk of whiskey and Shayla smelled of a perfume so rich its very scent aroused me. They both glared at me as if angry that I had denied them the pleasure of their antagonism.

Both had taken off their masks earlier, the better to shout apparently, but pulled the masks back on after a minute.

Ataturk talked on his cell phone much of the time, with the dignified quiet of a man who had no need to prove himself with volume.

A little before midnight Dr. Ahmet came down. He pulled off his gas mask, then said to me, "You, you need to come see your friend, in the ICU."

"Is he *dying*?"

"Come see him." Ahmet's eyes were baggy from exhaustion and his cheeks were scored red by the pressure of the mask. "And you as well." He looked toward Vlad.

Shayla stood. She was wobbly and I steadied her. "I come too."

Ataturk snapped his cell shut. "*Ohi*. I forbid it."

"What? You think I will strip-tease for Rickie?"

Ali said something so offensive that Ataturk took a step toward him.

"Please, gentlemen," Dr. Ahmet said. "The surgery ward is full tonight already. And Felix, I think it would be wise for Shayla to come as well."

We exited on the fourth floor. Fluorescent lights flickered above a nurse's station. The nurse wore the white cap and white dress like nurses used to when I was a kid. There was a bank of monitors beside her that showed EKGs like a child's green outline drawings of mountain ranges. Two EKGs were flat and the LEDs flashed zero. Names were displayed in each monitor, but I did not want to get close enough to read them.

"Busy night, huh?" Vlad asked, leaning on the desk.

I had not noticed that the nurse was young and cute; the nurse pretended not to notice Vlad. Or maybe she simply didn't speak English. Dr. Ahmet spoke to her in Greek, and she nodded, then pulled two of the gas masks out from a cabinet drawer and handed them to Ahmet.

He gave one to me and one to Vlad.

"Why not one for me, doctor? Because I am a woman?"

"No," Dr. Ahmet said. His eyes watered. "Because you have the spore already."

We walked into the ICU. I felt sick. The air through the mask smelled of rubber and disinfectant; the goggles gave me tunnel vision.

And I realized that the ICU was the ward I'd seen on TV this morning, of the tall windows and green-tile walls and the patients separated by flimsy cotton curtains.

"We're in Turkey," I said.

"Dude, chill," Vlad said.

The fluorescent ceiling lights were dark and few lamps shone above the headboards of patients, but the green and red and blue holiday glow from the dying provided light bright enough to read by.

"Where's the BBC tonight?" I asked.

"The camera crew fell sick," Dr. Ahmet said. "And the correspondent is now in a coma. The new strain of fungus appears to sometimes grow from the sinuses and then into the brain. We do not have facilities for neurosurgery. She will die unless the BBC can fly her to Athens or Tel Aviv."

I felt dirty for having asked a snarky question.

"And Rickie?" Shayla asked.

"His brain is clear."

We passed a man in hazmat attire who was carefully clipping the petals that were growing from a young man's chest.

Then we came to Rick.

No one was attending him.

He lay on his back, smiling softly, eyes open; alert but in an oxygen tent, like an infant apparently happy in his incubator.

A tube emerged from each of his sides just below his ribcage, pumping out a pinkish fluid the same color as his ponytail.

The blue and green growths around his mouth had been trimmed and covered with surgical tape. But there grew from his eyebrow an orange thing like a California poppy.

"Why don't they cut that?" I asked.

"It does not interfere with his breathing."

"And that!" I saw a green tendril just appearing from his right nostril.

Dr. Ahmet shrugged. "It is not yet blocking his airway."

"Not yet!" The monitor showed how slowly his heart beat. "You're letting him die!"

"Dennis, chill, dude," Vlad said, and he touched my arm. I flinched.

"Dennis, man, remember the Buddha." Rick's voice, weak, steady, not giggly. He looked at me. His pupils were huge. Then he looked up at the water-stained third-world ceiling tiles. "It's cool, Dennis. It rocks. I see Kurt, man. I see Keith Moon. I see John Bonham. I see Nigel Preston." Rick coughed blood. His eyes were not focused on the stained tiles but were instead tracking visions only he could see. "It's a big show in the sky, man, it's a big fucking jam session and we're all tight, man, the songs they're cool the crowd it's cool the chicks are hot, can't you feel the beat?" His heart was racing and the man in the hazmat came over and injected something into his saline drip. His heartbeat slowed. "It's cool, Dennis." His voice was dull. "We're getting ready . . . for an encore."

His eyes half-closed.

"No, Rickie!" Shayla cried. She pushed past the hazmat, then pulled up the edge of the oxygen tent and climbed partly in. She kissed him, planted her lips on his, but then I pulled her away. "You fucking bitch, you already made him sick." She reached out and pulled at my mask and screamed something, something in Greek or in Turkish or in some evil incoherent amalgam of the two.

Then Vlad and the hazmat pulled me away from her as Dr. Ahmet grabbed her.

Vlad and I descended together in the elevator with a security guard. Vlad, cool Vlad, level-headed Vlad, was trembling. "What shit was that, Dennis?"

"She did it. She gave it to him."

"It could have come from anywhere. Rick fucked his immune system, big time, with all the junk you were giving him."

"And he'll go into withdrawal now," I said.

"Zen, Dennis. You're hysterical."

I tried breathing mindfully. I could not picture my koi pond, only the poppy emerging from Rick's eyebrow. We stepped into the lobby. The security guard had his hand on my elbow. He pushed us toward the exit. But Ataturk finished a cell phone conversation, then waved at the guard to halt. "Where are you taking him?"

"We are removing him from the hospital, for the safety of our patients."

Ataturk looked pained. "He was afraid of my daughter. She has the spore as well."

Ali, beside him, smirked, but his smirk turned into a cough.

"Then wait out in my SUV. And you go with him, Ali. Vlad, you stay here, because your friend may need you at the end."

"As you wish," Ali said. "But tell me—will Shayla be coming back down?"

"I think they put her in one of the beds," Vlad said.

Ataturk nodded. He turned pale, but would not speak of his fears. "Wait in the SUV, and we shall leave in an hour for Larnaca."

The streets were brighter now. The NATO soldiers had cordoned off the staircase completely so that none might enter. We smelled tear gas, and the rotten sweetness from the bodies that lay glowing in piles to each side of the staircase. We found the SUV but we had to push a dying man off it who had gripped the hood as though to find his cure in the dull warmth of the engine.

We climbed inside, and in proximity to Ali I could smell his whiskey but also the faint sweetness of Amanita.

"You have it too."

"You are brilliant," Ali said. He had another whiskey flask. "Drink. Drink, my friend."

"I don't want to be sick."

"Sick! How much of a fool are you? Alcohol retards the spores! Why do you think Shayla, not I, is the one to die tonight?"

"Shayla gave you the spore, too?"

"No! You are the fool! I gave the spore to Shayla!"

I remembered the kiss at the house.

"Why? Why do you hate her?"

"She is a whore! She is an insult to Islam!"

"Fuck you, Ali," I said. "You killed Rick."

I left the SUV. And I ran. The streets are a garden of breathtaking beauty, the green petals, the golden flowers like marigolds or poppies, the gentle purple spikes that smell sweet as honey, the green and blue tendrils delicately flowered that wrap their human hosts like the webs of a gentle and aesthetic spider. Only sometimes do I see the horrors, the gaping mouths from which branches emerge, the beflowered eyestalks that rise as if to give insectile vision to the dead, the hands in rigor mortis that raise their growths like bouquets. Petals soft as velvet cushion my steps. In the distance is gunfire and the sound of heavy trucks, but these are muffled, enervated, the last voices of violence and the mechanical before Amanita can claim them too.

I try to call Martha but there is no cell service and I fling my phone into a bush bright red as arterial blood.

The sky is dark but the streets are bright, rich with petals, choked with leaves.

Amanita knows no boundaries.

Tonight, East and West are united. ○

IMPLIED SPACESby **Walter Jon Williams****Night Shade, \$24.95 (hc)****ISBN: 978-1-59780-125-6**

Williams, who has written everything from sea-going historicals to far-future space opera, turns his hand to a genre-stretching adventure. The story is set in a future in which the human race has decided to take full advantage of the ability to carry on a virtual—and all but immortal—existence. The trouble begins, predictably enough, when someone decides to subvert the status quo.

The novel starts with the protagonist, Aristide, wandering across a desert world, accompanied by his faithful talking feline companion Bitsy. Soon they enter a caravan-serai, where several caravans are stalled by news of a powerful bandit coalition preying on anyone who ventures forth. With a few clever words and suggestions, Aristide convinces the assembled merchants and their guards that safety lies in numbers, and they set out in a well-armed group. They meet and defeat the bandits and their masters—strange “priests” who cause their victims to disappear from the world.

By that point, several things have gradually become clear: the world on which the story so far has unfolded is a sort of role-playing game scenario. Aristide has powers beyond what anyone else on the world can control. The “priests” are agents of some outside power that has designs on the entire larger civilization of which this world is one small enclave. Bitsy is Aristide’s personal link to a giant supercomputer. In short, instead of a medieval fantasy world, we are in a post-singularity world, and its very existence is about to be put to the test.

Aristide returns to his home base, a megalopolis that is the center of Earth’s

government. Here we begin to learn the real dimensions of the problem—and of the universe in which it is set. The “priests” are sending their victims into a pocket universe with the help of tiny wormholes, a feat only possible if they are being backed by one of the ten Jupiter-sized super-AIs that orbit the sun. Aristide recruits help, including Daljit, a woman who knew him under his former name Pablo.

Aristide and Daljit devise one method after another to take on the mysterious villain who has taken over the AI—only to find their every move countered. The enemy strategies include everything from a plague of zombies to an insidious scheme to reprogram everyone upon their rejuvenation following an accidental death.

Eventually the conflict breaks into all-out superscience warfare, on a scale that would’ve made an oldtimer like Edmond Hamilton proud. With the solar system expanded to many times its present size by the addition of pocket universes maintained by the controlling AIs, the scope of action is impressive—as are the weapons deployed by the two sides. At the same time, Aristide and the villain carry out their conflict on a one-on-one level, with genuine ferocity.

In short, Williams plays with the possibilities of a post-Singularity society and shows it can reproduce almost all the favorite tropes of SF and fantasy, from RPG fantasy to space opera to monster movie. Add on a healthy dose of irony, often in the form of Bitsy’s comments, and a critique of the joys of virtual living from the mouth of the villain, and you have not just a rip-roaring adventure, but a thoughtful look at larger issues.

All in all, the author is clearly having fun. So, I suspect, will most readers.

THE COMMONS

by Matthew Hughes

Robert J. Sawyer Books,

\$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-88995-389-5

Hughes, whose sophisticated adventures remind many readers of Jack Vance, here turns his hand to an original idea: a group of researchers who enter and explore the collective unconscious, known as “the Commons.”

We first meet Guth Bandar as a student on a research project with his faculty advisor. The two of them travel to a distant planet where, according to reports, a tourist attraction has sprung up around the Bololos, quasi-bovine natives who can apparently be made to act out tales from the human Commons. This is more than a curiosity to the Institute scholars; it may be the first example of the archetypes of one species being transferred to the minds of another.

At first, this is amusing—the tourists come flocking. Then the Bololos take on the nature of conquering hordes from human legend, and begin to attack the spectators. Bandar manages to avert the attack, but at the cost of leaving his mentor a gibbering idiot. Bandar returns to the Institute, attempting to tell the professors of his discoveries, but his data goes against all doctrine. Instead of being promoted, he is sent away for a year while things quiet down.

Upon his return, he locks horns with an archrival, Didrick Gabris, who manages to curry favor with the orthodox professors while cheating at every turn and working full time to undermine Bandar. The following chapters find them competing over and over again, with Bandar struggling against the odds to complete assignments and Gabris conniving to put obstacles in his way. Almost every adventure ends with Bandar somehow muddling through, only to find his latest discoveries rejected by the Institute. His only consolation is that Gabris is usually shot down along with him, but the two are destined to keep knocking heads.

Hughes sends Bandar through a series of adventures that show the Commons in all its complexities, from minimal settings where nothing is ever expected to happen to rich tapestries of action and meaning. But as Bandar continues to visit the worlds of the unconscious, he finds himself interacting more and more with the denizens of that world. One telling episode is his venture into the world of the three pigs—where he inadvertently shows the wolf a way out of the endless circle of the constantly retold story, and learns that the consequences reach far beyond this simple archetypal tale.

Eventually, Bandar’s troubles reach the point where he drops out of the Institute and takes a job as a shop assistant. To his dismay, the Commons is not done with him—he finds himself dragged into a scenario where he is clearly cast as the Hero’s helper. Knowing the likely fate of such, he bails out of the scenario—by the skin of his teeth.

But more adventures await Bandar when he takes a space journey to the scene of a long-ago battle against ruthless aliens. Suddenly he finds himself being drawn into the Commons yet again, very much against his will. And this time the stakes are a good bit larger.

Hughes has taken what in other hands might have been just a cute idea and turned it into something considerably richer. His exploration of the various archetypes of the collective unconscious is thought provoking as well as amusing. And Hughes has shown in previous novels that he has a firm grasp of nuanced, witty prose.

The individual episodes of which the novel is made up appeared as short magazine pieces. The concluding episode, “The Helper and his Hero,” was nominated by the members of SFWA for a Nebula for 2007 in the Novella category. Nebula or not—the winners aren’t yet known as this column is being written—Hughes has certainly earned recognition as one of our most accomplished writers.

FALLENby **Tim Lebbon****Bantam Spectra, \$12.00 (tp)****ISBN: 978-0-553-38467-3**

This one's a fantasy quest adventure that eschews the pseudo-medieval setting for a more primitive world that carries much of the feeling of alien-planet SF. It also carries a hard edge reminiscent more of horror than most epic fantasy.

Ramus Rheel and Nomi Hyden, are adventurers—explorers of the unsettled parts of their world, Noreela. One of them has learned of a map showing what, to the best of their knowledge, is the end of the world: a giant cliff that rises at the south end of their planet's single continent, blocking access to anything beyond. It is rumored that the gods live atop the Great Divide, as it is called. Determined to explore this anomaly, they join forces, acquiring the map, gathering a company of guards, and set off to the south.

At first, the story unfolds like a conventional fantasy quest. The guards, from a rugged hunter-warrior culture, lead the two adventurers through the landscape, pointing out dangers, telling their stories around the campfire at night. But everything falls apart one night when the cook for the night makes a hallucinogenic dessert, and suddenly everyone's inhibitions are gone. Nomi makes love to the leader of their guard company, a charismatic man named Beko. This sends Ramus into a jealous rage that results in a vicious fight that escalates to where it is impossible for the group to remain together. Ramus and a woman of the guards, Lulah, leave the group, planning to make their way to the destination by themselves.

What they will find at their destination remains a puzzle. Ramus has interpreted one image from the map as a "Fallen God," although he is not entirely certain what to make of that. But Lulah lets him know she is deeply afraid of such a being. None-the-less, she will continue on the journey.

Separately, the two parties travel toward the huge cliffs, dodging strange, of-

ten deadly flora and fauna. They encounter occasional evidence that other humans have preceded them, although it is clear that none have thought it worthwhile to settle in these lands. It is what lies ahead that draws them forward: the challenge of the cliffs, and what they may find at the top.

The ascent of the cliffs takes a harsh toll on the climbers, who still travel in two separate groups. But the climactic scenes come after the protagonists reach the top, where they face their ultimate tests. The fallen god is there, of course; but a more immediate threat is the god's followers, including one that Ramus is quite surprised to find there.

Interesting world-building (even if the exact parameters of the geography don't bear close examination), non-conventional characters, and interesting twists on the conventions of the quest fantasy. Worth staying with.

THE QUEEN'S BASTARDby **C.E. Murphy****Del Rey, \$14.00 (tp)****ISBN: 978-0-345-49464-1**

A fantasy set in an alternate world that bears a passing resemblance to Elizabethan England—right down to Queen Lorraine's red hair.

The plot begins with a royal marriage—which in this world, as in our own history, is motivated by political concerns rather than romantic foolishness. Sandalia, the sister of the king of Essandia, marries the king of Lanyarch, where the true faith prevails despite the efforts of the neighboring kingdom of Aulun to impose Protestantism upon them. When the king dies without begetting an heir, she is married again—this time to the king of Lutetia, who goes off to war after impregnating her. Luck is against her again: he is killed in war, and she miscarries. The only thing to do is find a substitute child—which she does. And this is just the prologue.

Jump years ahead to Aulun, where a young girl named Belinda Primrose is growing up in an isolated castle, mother-

less. Her father—a powerful man whose role in the kingdom keeps him away much of the time—has her brought up by servants, and sees to it that she learns unusual skills for a young woman—swordsmanship and reading. The point behind her training becomes clear when her father takes her to court, where she meets the queen—and assassinates a foreign agent her father has pointed out to her.

She also learns her own role in the world—and her father's great secret. After that, she is sent on several missions; we pick her up at a Khazarian palace, where she is playing the role of a servant. Her mission is to eliminate Count Grigori, a vicious, dissipated man who somehow threatens the interests of Aulun. She pulls off the assassination, and escapes hurriedly after one of the other servants accuses her of witchcraft. She is in enough of a hurry that she leaves her Khazarian lover, one of the guards, alive instead of eliminating him as a possible witness. After all, she is unlikely to be in this part of the world again.

But her next assignment turns out to be far more complicated than anything to date has prepared her for. She is to travel to the capital city of Lutetia, where rumor has it that Queen Sandalia is hatching plans against Lorraine. Belinda is to pose as a Lanyarchan exile, persecuted because of her adherence to the true religion, and use the pose to get close to the Lutetian queen. Belinda's route leads through Sandalia's son, supposedly fathered by the late Lutetian king. This son, Prince Javier, the reader quickly realizes has to be the "substitute" mentioned in the opening chapter.

Belinda maneuvers her way into Javier's company. Then she learns something unexpected: the prince and she share a power she has only tasted hints of, the very power that led her to be identified as a witch in Khazar. Nor has Javier ever encountered someone with the power—they experiment eagerly, forming a closer bond than either has ever found with anyone else.

Eventually, though, Belinda must

meet Queen Sandalia and discover what threat, if any, she poses to Lorraine. She discovers that the intrigues of the Lutetian court are more complex than she expected. A Khazarian diplomatic delegation arrives, and Belinda finds her cover story in danger of being ripped apart.

Murphy's approach to historic material is reminiscent of Guy Gavriel Kay's, and while very few writers are in a league with Kay, Murphy makes a good run at it. She has a good sense of how to build a plot, and several of her characters are interesting twists on their likely historic models. Lorraine is clearly Elizabeth I, but Sandalia is not really Mary Queen of Scots—and Javier is not even remotely James I. So much the better—too close an adherence to historical events is a recipe for predictability, and the book is charmingly unpredictable.

There is clearly a sequel (or two) to come, so those looking for a complete story won't find it here. But actions does come to a satisfactory stopping place, and the journey there is enjoyable.

TIM: DEFENDER OF THE EARTH

by **Sam Enthoven**

Razorbill, \$19.99 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-595141-84-2

In this YA novel, Enthoven turns loose a giant dinosaur and a feisty young protagonist in a future London. The results are highly entertaining.

Anna Mallahide is a bright, independent schoolgirl on a class trip to the British Museum, where she is teamed with her dorky classmate Chris on a sort of scavenger hunt. But Chris strays into the lower depths of the museum, where he encounters a strange woman who gives him an amulet and tells him he has been chosen as the channel of Earth's Defender, whether he likes it or not. Anna is furious when he rejoins the student group—the last to return, and with no explanation where he's been.

But Anna finds a bigger surprise later, where her father, Prof. Mallahide, arrives home uncharacteristically early. Anna

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The Biblical Cosmos Versus Modern Cosmology: Why the Bible is Not the Word of God. 355 pp. Available at Amazon.com and other outlets.

doesn't quite realize that her father is a mad scientist. Even worse, he has government funding—the Prime Minister has just given him an enormous budget to develop his ideas for a nanotechnology swarm. However, his project has gotten funded because the Prime Minister has canceled another: the one that created the giant dinosaur, T.I.M.—short for Tyrannosaurus, Improved Model.

That might not be a problem, except that T.I.M. needs to be gotten rid of—not an easy job, considering that he's hundreds of feet tall, and still growing. His creator decides to do the job by filling his cavern with cyanide. But T.I.M. gets a cryptic mental message telling him to break free of his prison. When he gets the first whiff of the poison gas, he does just that—and breaks through the surface in the middle of Trafalgar Square. Panic time! The next section of the book is nothing quite so much as a "Godzilla stomps London" spoof.

Eventually, T.I.M. wanders down the Thames to deep waters offshore, and England takes a deep breath of relief. Not so fast—Prof. Mallahide's nanotech swarm is poised to wreak its own version of havoc on the nation. Anna and Chris are in the middle of things, of course—as

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is T.I.M., once the young protagonists have things explained to them.

Rather than being a threat to civilization, T.I.M. turns out to have a crucial role to play in saving the world from an ultimate danger. As so many mad scientists have done before him, Mallahide finds himself caught up in the momentum of his own invention. It seems like a good thing to him, so it must be the best thing for everybody. So if people don't voluntarily join his swarm of nanobots, more forceful measures must be necessary . . .

It's up to Anna, Chris, and T.I.M. to save the world. Anna is of course conflicted about fighting her own father, and the swarm is a threat sufficiently powerful to stretch even a neo-Godzilla to the limits of his ability. And T.I.M. has the usual dinosaurian level of intelligence, so it's up to the kids to save things in the end.

Enthoven plays a bit fast and loose with probability—what happens to all that cyanide once T.I.M. breaks out of his cave, for example? But given the initial premise and the playful atmosphere, most readers will let details like that slide, and enjoy the romp.

Keep this in mind if you're looking for a gift for younger readers. Recommended for light-hearted grownups, too. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The Halloween conventions are always a great place to see a good quantity of high-quality costuming. 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, and info on fanzines and clubs, 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 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2008

10-12—**AlbaCon**. For info, write: **Box 2085, Albany NY 12220**. Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (**Web**) albacon.org. (**E-mail**) committee@albacon.org. Con will be held in: Albany NY (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Crowne Plaza. Guests will include: Anne & Todd McCaffrey, Barclay Shaw, Gary S. Blog, Travis Tea.

10-12—**NecronomiCon**. stonehill.org. Hyatt, St. Petersburg FL. F. Pohl, J. Czerneda, T. Zahn, R. Wilber, R.L. Byers.

10-12—**SitaCon**. sitacon.com. State U. of NY Institute of Technology, Utica NY. "Central NY's First Anime Con Returns."

10-12—**Anime USA**. animeusa.org. Hyatt, Crystal City (Arlington) VA (near DC). P. Seitz, C. Glass, Applegeeks, Chen.

10-13—**GaylaxiCon**. gaylaxicon2008.org. Near DC. G. Ryman, A. Austin, C.S. Friedman. For gay, etc., fans & friends.

11-12—**DeryniCon**. derynicon.remuthcastle.com. Holiday Inn West, Harrisburg PA. Katherine Kurtz. Deryni & Adept.

17-19—**CapClave**. capclave.org. Hilton, Rockville MD (near DC). Writer James Morrow, critic Michael Dirda. Short SF.

17-19—**Con*Stellation**. (256) 883-5922. con-stellation.org. Holiday Inn, Huntsville AL. Duane & Morwood, the Resnicks.

17-19—**Rising Star**. rising-star.org. State College, Bluefield WV. A. Holohan, White Plectrum, D. Laney, B. Fischer.

17-19—**Arcana**. pages.prodigy.net/rekal/. Best Western, St. Paul MN. F. Paul Wilson. Celebrating "The Dark Fantastic."

17-19—**Con*Cept**. conceptsff.ca. Day's Hotel, Montreal QC. D. Brin, S. Ferris, Y. Dutil, S. Dumas. Bilingual SF media con.

17-19—**Another Anime Con**. (603) 888-9970. Radisson, Nashua NH.

17-18—**ZenkaiCon**. zenkaicon.com. Scanticon Hotel, Valley Forge (near Philadelphia) PA. Anime.

18-19—**Ireland National Con**. octocon.com. Dublin, Ireland. Ken MacLeod, John Vaughan, Derek Gunn, Harry Harrison.

23-27—**OklaCon**, 4601 Mackenzie Dr., Oklahoma City OK 73160. oklacon.org. Roman Nose State Park. For furry fans.

24-26—**MileHiCon**, Box 487, Westminster CO 80036. milehicon.org. Hyatt Tech Center, Denver CO. Butcher, Powers.

24-26—**HallowCon**, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. hallowcon.com. Howard Johnson Plaza, Chattanooga TN.

24-26—**BakuretsuCon**, Box 5342, Essex Jct. VT 05453. bakuretsucon.org. Hampton Inn, Colchester VT. T. Grant.

24-28—**Anime Banzai**, Box 1109, West Jordan UT 84088. animebanzai.com. Sheraton City Centre, Salt Lake City UT.

31-Nov. 2—**World Fantasy Con**. worldfantasy2008.org. Hyatt, Calgary AB. David Morell, Tom Doherty, Barb Hambly.

31-Nov. 2—**ICon**, 308 E. Burlington, #300, Iowa City IA 52240. iowa-icon.com. Marriott, Coralville IA. Tanya Huff.

31-Nov. 2—**ValleyCon**, Box 7202, Fargo ND 58106. (701) 232-8722. valleycon.com. Doublewood Inn. George Takei.

31-Nov. 2—**Vulkon**, Box 551437, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33355. (954) 888-9697. vulkon.com. Orlando FL. Dorn, Mumy.

NOVEMBER 2008

6-9—**IlluXCon**. illuxcon.com. Altoona PA. B. Vallejo & J. Bell, B. Eggleton, M. Kaluta, C. Vess. Fantastic illustration art.

7-9—**AstronomiCon**, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-45975. astronomicon.info. Clarion. S. Law, P. Sweeny.

7-9—**Creation**, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com. Burbank CA and Cherry Hill NJ.

7-9—**NekoCon**, Box 8486, Virginia Beach VA 23450. nekocon.com. Hampton Roads VA. Anime. "A Luau on the Beach!"

7-9—**BASCon**, Box 282197, San Francisco CA 94128. bascon.org. Embassy Suites, Burlingame CA. Adult media fanzines.

21-23—**PhilCon**, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. philcon.org. Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. Powers, Picacio, Sava.

21-23—**New England Fan Experience**, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. nefe.us. Cambridge MA. Anime, gaming, SF.

AUGUST 2009

6-10—**Anticipation**, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. anticipationsf.ca. Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$190.

SEPTEMBER 2010

2-6—**AussieCon 4**, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. australia2010.org. The World SF Convention.

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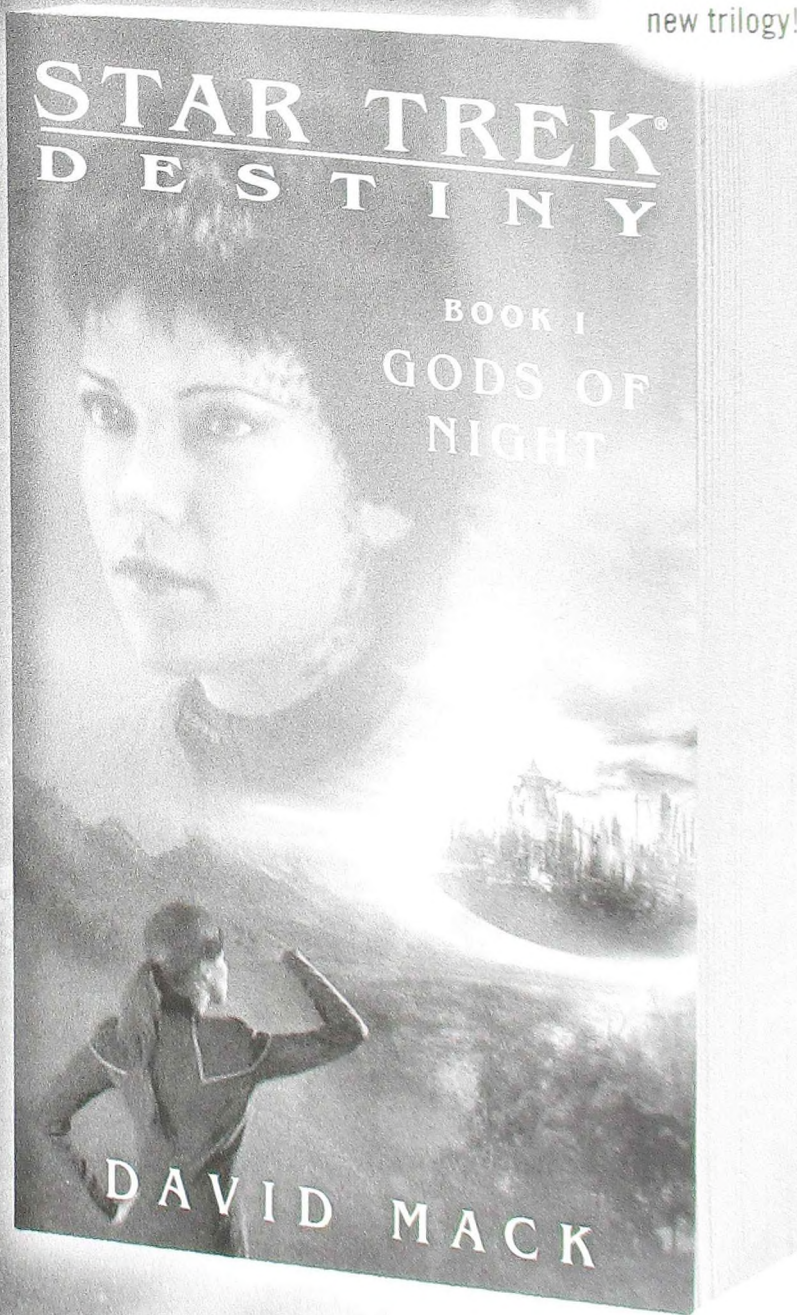
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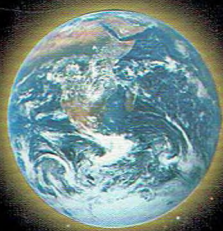
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