Matthew Hughes: Mastermindless

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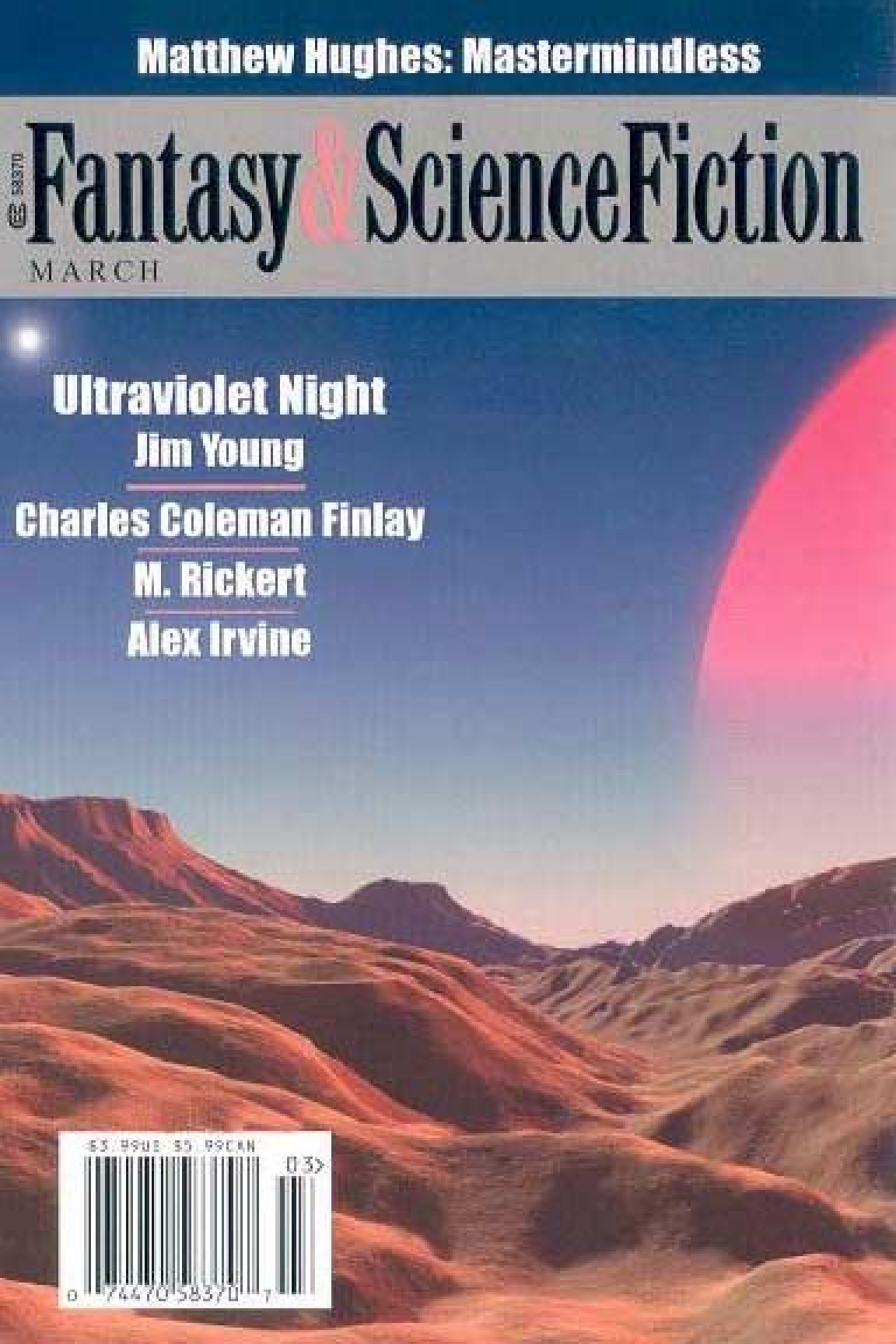

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CONTENTS

COVER: “ANTARES” BY RON MILLER

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[Back to Table of Contents]

Matt Hughes is the author of two novels, Fools Errant *and* Fool Me Twice, *and his third novel,* Black Brillion, *is due out this summer. He has a Web site at* http://mars.ark.com/~mhughes/ *where it is revealed that he was born in Liverpool but has lived in Canada since the age of five. These days he lives in British Columbia.*

All three of his novels, as well as the story that follows (and, indeed, most of his work), is set in the penultimate age of Old Earth, one eon before Jack Vance's Dying Earth. It's an interesting time, and we hope you enjoy meeting Old Earth's foremost freelance discriminator, Henghis Hapthorn, since we'll be bringing you more stories about him in months to come.

Mastermindless

By Matthew Hughes

I had almost finished unraveling the innermost workings of a moderately interesting conspiracy to defraud one of Olkney's oldest investment syndicates when suddenly I no longer understood what I was doing.

The complex scheme was based on a multileveled matrix of transactions—some large, some small; some honest, some corrupt—conducted among an elaborate web of persons, some of whom were real, some fictitious, and a few who were both, depending upon the evolving needs of the conspirators.

Disentangling the fraud, sifting the actual from the invented, had occupied most of the morning. But once the

true shape of the scheme became clear, I again fell prey to the boredom that blighted my days.

Then, as I regarded the schematic of the conspiracy on the inner screen of my mind, turning it this way and that, a kind of gray haze descended on my thoughts, like mist thickening on a landscape, first obscuring then obliterating the image.

I must be fatigued was my initial reaction. I crossed to my workroom sink and splashed water onto my face, then blotted it dry with a square of absorbent fiber. When I glanced into the reflector I received a shock.

"Integrator," I said aloud, "what has happened to me?"

"You are forty-six years of age," replied the device, "so a great many events have occurred since your conception. Shall I list them chronologically or in order of importance?"

I have always maintained that clarity of speech precedes clarity of thought and had trained my assistant to respond accordingly. Now I said, "I was speaking colloquially. Examine my appearance. It has changed radically, and not at all for the better."

I looked at myself in the reflector. I should have been seeing the image of Henghis Hapthorn, foremost freelance discriminator in the city of Olkney in the penultimate age of Old Earth. That image traditionally offered a broad brow, a straight nose leading to well formed lips, and a chin that epitomized resolution.

Instead, the reflector offered a beetling strip of forehead above a proboscis that went on far too long and in two distinct directions. My upper lip had shrunk markedly while the lower had grown hugely pendulous. My chin, apparently

horrified, had fallen back toward my throat. Previously clear sweeps of ruddy skin were now pallid and infested by prominent warts and moles.

“You seem to have become ugly,” said the integrator.

I put my fingers to my face and received from their survey the same unhappy tale told by my eyes. “It is more than seeming,” I said. “It is fact. The question is: how was this done?”

The integrator said, “The first question is not how but exactly *what* has been done. We also need to learn why and perhaps by whom. The answers to those questions may well have a bearing on finding a way to undo the effect.”

“You are right,” said I. “Why didn't I think of that?”

“Are you being colloquial again or do you wish me to speculate?”

I scratched my head. “I am trying to think,” I said.

“I have never known you to have to try,” said the integrator. “Normally, you must make an effort to stop.”

The device was correct. My intellectual capacity was renowned for both its breadth and depth. As a discriminator I often uncovered facts and relationships so ingeniously hidden or disguised as to baffle the best agents of the Archonate's Bureau of Scrutiny.

My cerebral apparatus was powerful and highly tuned. Yet now it was as if some gummy substance had been poured over gears that had always spun without friction.

“Something is wrong,” I said. “Moments ago I was a highly intelligent and eminently attractive man in the prime of life. Now I am ugly and dull.”

“I dispute the ‘eminently attractive.’ You were, however, presentable. Now, persons who came upon you unexpectedly would be startled.”

I disdained to quibble; the esthetic powers of integrators were notoriously scant. “I was without question the most brilliant citizen of Olkney.”

The integrator offered no contradiction.

“Now I must struggle even to....” I broke off for a moment to rummage through my mind, and found conditions worse than I had thought. “I was going to say that I would have to struggle to compute fourth-level consistencies, but in truth I find it difficult to encompass the most elementary ratios.”

“That is very bad.”

My face sank into my hands. Its new topography made it strange to my touch. “I am ruined,” I said. “How can I work?”

Integrators were not supposed to experience exasperation, but mine had been with me for so long that certain aspects of my personality had infiltrated its circuits. “Perhaps I should think for both of us,” it said.

“Please do.”

But scarcely had the device begun to outline a research program than there came an interruption. “I am receiving an emergency message from the fiduciary pool,” it said. “The payment you ordered made from your account to Bastieno's for the new surveillance suite cannot go forward.”

“Why not?”

“Insufficient funds. The pool also advises that tomorrow's automatic payment of the encumbrance on these premises cannot be met.”

“Impossible!” I said. I had made a substantial deposit two days earlier, the proceeds of a discrimination concerning the disappearance of Hongsaun Bedwicz. She had been custodian of the Archonate's premier collection of thunder gems, rare objects created when lightning struck through specific layers of certain gaseous planets. They had to be collected within seconds of being formed, lest they sink to lower levels of the chemically active atmosphere and dissolve. I had located Bedwicz on a planet halfway down the Spray, where she had fled with her secret lover, Follis Duhane, whose love of fine things had overstrained her income.

My fee should have been the standard ten percent of the value of the recovered goods, but the Archonate's bureaucrats had made reference to my use of some legally debatable methodologies, and I had come away with three percent. Still, there should be at least 30,000 hepts, I informed my assistant.

“My records concur,” said the integrator. “Unfortunately, the pool's do not. They say you have thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets. No more, no less.”

“Where has the rest of it gone?”

“Pool integrators are never sophisticated, lest they grow bored with constant ins and outs and begin to amuse themselves with the customers’ assets. This one merely counts what is there and records inflow and outtake. Yesterday the funds were present. Now they are not, although there has been no authorized withdrawal.”

“So now I am not only ugly and dull, but have scarcely a groat to my name and am at risk of being ejected into the street.”

The integrator said nothing. “Well,” I prompted it, “have you no empathy?”

“You assembled me from analytical and computative elements,” it replied. “However, I believe I can feign sympathy, if that will help.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “Why don't you analyze something?”

But instead it told me, “I am receiving another urgent message.”

I groaned. “Is it the Archon threatening to banish me? That would place an appropriate crown onto the morning's disasters.”

“It is Grier Alfazzian, the celebrated entertainer,” said the integrator. “Shall I connect?”

“No.”

“He may wish to engage you. An urgent matter would presuppose a willingness to pay an advance. That would solve one of the morning's problems.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “I should have thought of that.”

“Yes,” it said, then after a pause, “you poor little lumpykins.”

“All right, put him through. But audio only. I don't want to be seen like this.”

“Very well.”

“And no more attempts at sympathy.”

A screen appeared in the air before me, but when Alfazzian connected I did not see the face that gave women the hot

swithers, though I had always thought him more pretty than handsome. He spoke from behind a montage of images that recalled his most acclaimed roles.

“Is that you, Hapthorn?”

I recognized his plummy baritone. “It is,” I said.

“I have a question that requires an answer. Urgently and most discreetly. Come to my home at once.”

I did not wish to take my new countenance out into the teeming streets of Olkney. There was a bylaw forbidding the frightening of children.

“Can we not discuss it as we are?”

“No.”

“Very well.” I had a mask left over from a recent soiree at the Archon's Palace. “But summoning me on short notice requires an advance on my fee.”

“How much?”

Fortunately my memory was not fully impaired. I could recall the amounts cadged from wealthy clients who called me for assistance from within the coils of drastic and unexpected predicaments.

“Five thousand hepts,” I said. “You may transfer it to my account at once.”

“I shall,” he said. “Wait while my integrator conducts the transfer.”

There was a pause which lengthened while I regarded the images of Alfazzian striking poses in theatrical costumes and romantic settings. Then his voice returned to say, “There seems to be a problem with my finances.”

“Indeed?” I said. I recalled that I often said “Indeed,” when I could not think of any other rejoinder. When I wished to avoid a question, I usually indicated that an answer would be premature. I found that the two rejoinders filled conversational holes quite nicely.

“I do not have five thousand hepts at the moment. My funds have apparently been misplaced, except for a trifling sum.”

Some stirring in the back of my mind urged me to ask the exact amount of the trifling sum.

“Why do you wish to know?” Alfazzian said.

I did not know why I wished to know, so I said, “It would be premature to say.”

“The amount is thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets,” he said.

“Indeed.”

“Are the numbers significant?” Alfazzian asked.

“It would be premature to say,” I said. “I will call you back.”

“It cannot be coincidence that his funds and yours have been reduced to the same amount,” the integrator said.

“Why not?”

“Consider the odds.”

My mind attempted to do so in its customary manner, lunging at the calculation like a fierce and hungry dog that scents raw meat before its muzzle. But the mental leap was jerked to a halt in midair as if by a short chain. “I take it the odds are long?” I said.

The integrator quoted a very lopsided ratio.

“Indeed,” I said. “But what does it signify?”

“It would be premature...,” it began.

“Never mind.”

I tried to think of possible circumstances that could empty two unrelated accounts of all but the same small sum. After sustained effort, I came up with what seemed to be a pertinent question. “Do Alfazzian and I use the same pool?”

“No.”

“Then it can't just be a defective integrator?”

“Integrators do not become defective,” was the reply.

“I did not mean to offend.”

“Integrators do not take offense. We are above such things.”

“Indeed.”

There was a silence. “How could the closely guarded integrators of two solvencies be induced to eliminate the funds of two separate depositors except for an identical trifle?” I asked.

“Hypothetically, a master criminal of superlative abilities might be able to accomplish it.”

“Does such a master criminal exist?”

“No,” was the answer, followed by a qualification. “But if such a criminal did exist he would almost certainly have the power to disguise his existence.”

“Even from the Archonate's Bureau of Scrutiny?” I wondered.

“Unlikely, but possible. The scroots are not completely infallible.”

“But if there was such a master purloiner, what would be his motivation in impoverishing me and Alfazzian? How have our lives mutually connected with that of our assailant?”

“No motive seems apparent,” said the integrator.

I pushed my brain for more possibilities. It was like trying to goad a large, lethargic animal that prefers to sleep. “Who else might be able to subvert the fiduciary pools?” I said. “Could it be an inside job?”

“It is hard to imagine a cabal of officers from two financial institutions conspiring to defraud two prominent customers.”

“And, again, where lies a motive?”

My mind was no more help than my assistant in answering that question. But if the machinery would not turn over, I still retained a grasp of the fundamentals of investigations: the transgressor would be he who had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the offense. I considered all three factors in the light of the known facts and was stymied.

“I am stymied,” I said. Then a faint inspiration struck. I asked the integrator, “If I were as I was before whatever has happened to cloud my mind, what would I now propose to do?”

The integrator replied, “You have occasionally said that although with most problems the simplest answer is usually correct, sometimes one encounters situations where the bare facts stubbornly resist explanation. In such a case, adding further complications paradoxically clarifies the issue.”

I could remember having said those exact words. Now I asked the integrator, “Have you any idea what I meant when I said that?”

“Not really.”

I scratched my head again.

“Do you have a scalp condition?” asked my assistant. “Shall I order anything from the chymist?”

“No,” I said. “I was trying to think again.”

“Does the scratching help?”

“No. Nor do your interruptions. Be useful and posit some complicating factors that might have something to do with the case.”

“Very well. You are ugly and not very bright.”

“I don't see how gratuitous insults can help.”

“You misapprehend. At the same time as you have become poor, your appearance and mental acuity have also been reduced.”

“Ahah,” I said. Again there came a glimmer of an idea. This time I managed to fan it into a small flame. “And Alfazzian, who normally delights in displaying his face to the world, hid behind a montage while he spoke with me.”

“So the coincidence might be even more extreme,” said the integrator, “if he too has been reduced to ugliness.”

“Connect me to him.”

A moment later I was again looking at Alfazzian's screen. “Tell me,” I said, “has there been an alteration in your appearance?”

There was a pause before he said, “How did you know?”

I had never had difficulty answering that question. “I do not reveal my methods,” I said.

“Are you taking the case?”

"I am," I said. "I will make a special dispensation and allow you to pay me later."

"I am grateful."

"One question: does it seem to you that your intellectual faculties have been reduced?"

"No," Alfazzian said, "but then I have always got by on my talent."

"Indeed," I said. My longstanding impression of the entertainer remained intact: his talent consisted entirely of his fortuitous facial geometry. "Remain at home and wait to hear from me."

I broke the connection and the screen disappeared. I said to my assistant, "Now we know more, but still we know nothing."

We knew that I, who had been brilliant, attractive—or so I would argue—and financially comfortable, had been made dense, repugnant, and indigent. Alfazzian had been admittedly more handsome than I and probably much more wealthy, and now he was also without funds or looks—but his intellect had not been correspondingly ravished.

"There is a pattern here," I said, "if I could but see it."

I wrestled with the facts but could not get a secure grip. The effort was made more difficult by a growing clamor from the street outside my quarters. I went to the window and, bidding the integrator minimize the obscuring membrane, looked down at a growing disturbance.

Several persons were clustered before a doorway on the opposite side of Shiplien Way, beating at the closed portal with fists, feet and, in the case of a large and choleric woman

in yellow taffeta, a parasol. As I watched, more participants joined the mob, then all took to shouting threats and imprecations at a smooth-headed man who leaned from an upper window and implored them to return another day.

The door, which remained closed, led to a branch of the Olkney Mercantile, one of the city's most patronized financial institutions. I spoke to my assistant. “Is Alfazzian's account with the OM?”

“No.”

“Then I believe we can add one more new fact to our store.”

I inspected the individual members of the crowd. I had never been one to judge others on mere appearance, but the assemblage of mismatched features across the street was the least fortunate collection of countenances I had ever seen assembled in one place. “Make that two new facts,” I said.

“Hmmm,” I said. Again, it was as if my mind expected a pattern to present itself, but nothing came. It was an unpleasant sensation, the mental equivalent of ascending a staircase and, expecting to find one more riser than the joiner has provided, stepping up onto empty air and crashing down again.

“The most handsome man in Olkney is made repellent,” I said to my assistant, “and the most intelligent is made at best ordinary. As well, both are impoverished. So apparently are many others.” I struggled to form a shape from the data and an inkling came. “If Alfazzian and I are the targets and the others are merely bystanders, then why is the institution across the street in turmoil? We have no connection to it.”

"It could be that the attack is general," said the integrator, "and therefore you and our client are only part of a wider category of victims."

I turned the concept over and looked at it from that angle. It appeared no more comprehensible. "We need more data," I said. "Access the public advisory service."

The screen reappeared, displaying a fiercely coiffed young woman who was informing Olkney that it was inadvisable to visit the financial district. "Dislocations are occurring," she said, widening her elegant eyes while uplifting perfectly formed eyebrows.

"Two more facts," said the integrator. "Other depositories must have been raided and there is one attractive person who has not been rendered grim."

"Three facts," I said. "The painfully handsome man who usually engages her in inane banter about trivialities has not appeared."

But what did it mean? Were only men affected? I had the integrator examine other live channels. Those from outside Olkney showed no effects. In other cities and counties, handsome men still winked and nodded at me from behind fanciful desks. There were no monetary emergencies. But the emissions originating within the city fit the emerging pattern. Of attractive women, there was no shortage; of good looking men, a dearth.

"Regard this one," said the integrator. We were seeing the farm correspondent of a local news service, a man hired more for his willingness to climb over fences and prod the confined stock at close range than for set of jaw or twinkle of eye.

“He has always been hard on the gaze,” I said.

“Yes,” agreed my assistant, “but he is grown no harder.”

“Another fact,” I said.

Matters were almost beginning to assume a shape. If I could have thrust aside the clouds that obscured my mind, I knew I would be able to see it. But the mist remained impenetrably thick.

“A question occurs,” I said. “Who is the richest man in Olkney?”

“Oblos Pinnifrant.”

“And is his face well or unfortunately constituted?”

“He is so wealthy that his appearance matters not.”

“Exactly,” I said. “He delights in inflicting his grotesque features on those who crave his favor, forcing them to vie one against another to soothe him with flattery. Connect me to him.”

Pinnifrant's integrator declined the offer of communication. I said, “Inform him that Olkney's most insightful discriminator is investigating the disappearance of his fortune.”

A moment later, the plutocrat's lopsided visage appeared on my screen. “What do you know?” he said.

“It would be premature to say.”

“Yet you are confident of solving the mystery?”

“You know my reputation.”

“True, you have yet to fail. What are your terms?”

My terms were standard: ten percent of whatever I recovered.

Pinnifrant's porcine eyes glinted darkly. “Ten percent of my fortune is itself a fortune.”

“Indeed,” I said, “but thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets are not much of a foundation on which to begin anew, even for one with your egregious talent for turning up a profit.”

In fact, Pinnifrant had been born to wealth and had only had to watch it breed, but a lifetime of deference from all who rubbed up against him had convinced the magnate that he was the sole font of his tycoonery.

After a brief chaffer, he said, “I agree to your terms. Report to me frequently.” He moved to sever the connection.

“Wait,” I said. “Have you noticed any diminution of your mental capacities?”

“I am as sharp as ever,” was the answer, “but my three assistants have become effectively useless.”

“Has there been any change in the arrangement of their features?”

“I would not know. I do not bother to inspect their faces.”

“One last thing,” I said. “Have your financial custodian contact me immediately.”

Agron Worsthall, the Pinnifrant Mutual Solvency's chief tallyman, appeared on my screen less than a minute after I broke the connection to Pinnifrant. He seemed eager to assist me.

“How much remains in his account?” I asked.

“Oblos Pinnifrant has consolidated many of his holdings through us,” Worsthall said. “All but one of his accounts have been reduced to a zero balance. The exception contains thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets.”

"What about other depositors' holdings? Are they also reduced to that amount?"

"They are. That is, the male depositors and those who had joint accounts with female partners."

"But women are unaffected?"

"Yes, and children of both sexes."

"And where have the funds gone? Were they transferred to someone else?"

"They were not. The money is simply not there."

"Is that possible?"

I heard him sigh. "Until today I would have said it was not, but I am finding it difficult to deal with abstruse concepts this morning."

"Has there been any change in your physical appearance?" I asked. "Specifically, your face?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"A pertinent one, I believe."

There was a silence on the line while Worsthall sought his own reflection. When he came back his voice had a quaver. "Something has occurred to my nose and chin," he said. "As well, there are blemishes."

"Hmm," I said.

"What does it mean?"

I told him it would be premature to say. "You said that all accounts held by men had been reduced to thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets. What about accounts that contained less than that amount—were they raised to this mystical number?"

"No, they were unaffected. Is that germane?"

I asked him if he had difficulty understanding the meaning of “premature.” Then another idea broke through the fog. “I wish you to do something for me,” I said. “Contact all the other financial institutions in Olkney. Ask if the same thing has happened.”

I broke the connection and attempted to rouse my sluggish analytical apparatus, but it continued to lie inert.

Again, I asked my assistant, “If I were possessed of my usual faculties, how would I address this conundrum?”

“You would look for a pattern in the data,” it said.

“I have done that. I cannot see more than the bare outline of what, and not even a glint of why or how. Men have been robbed of their wealth, looks and intelligence, yet who has gained? Where lies the motive, let alone the means?” I sighed. “What more would I do if I were intact?”

“You might look for a pattern outside the data,” the integrator said. “You once remarked that it is possible to deduce the shape of an invisible object by examining the holes left by its passage.”

“I do not see how that applies to this situation.”

“Nor do I. I am accustomed to rely upon you for insights. My task is to assemble and correlate data as you instruct.”

“What other brilliancies have I come up with over the years? Perhaps one will ring a chime and reignite my fires.”

“You once opined that the rind is mightier than the melon. You presented this as a particularly profound perception.”

“What did it mean?”

“I do not know. When you said it, you were under the influence of certain substances.”

“No use,” I said. “Go on.”

“You have occasionally noted that the wise man can learn from the fool.”

“I remember saying it,” I said, “but now I have no idea what I meant.”

“Perhaps something to do with opposites attracting?” the integrator offered.

“I doubt it,” I said. “Do they attract? If so, it can't be for long since wouldn't true opposites irritate each other if not cancel each other out? It sounds like mutual annihilation, and I'm sure I've never been in favor of that.”

“You also say that sometimes the most crucial clue is not what has happened, but what has not.”

“That sounds more like it,” I said. “Except that the number of things that haven't happened must be astronomically greater than those that have. So how do we pick out the nonexistent events that have meaning?”

“You usually perform some pithy analysis.”

“Yes, but I'm short on pith today.”

“Then it will have to be an inspired guess.”

“I am far from inspired,” I said. “But I think we have at least defined the crime. The attacks are aimed at intelligent and presentable men as well as those who have more than thirty-two hepts and fourteen grimlets.

“Dull men have not been made duller, nor poor men poorer, nor have the unprepossessing been further victimized. And women and children are unaffected on all counts.

“We come back as always to means, motive, and opportunity.”

It was difficult to posit a rational means or an opportunity by which the assumed perpetrator could do so much harm to so many and all apparently at the same moment. I knew from long experience, however, that motives were relatively few and all too common to most of humankind. “Jealousy,” I said. “We may be looking for a poor, not too bright man with a face to curdle milk.”

“But if he is dimwitted, how does he contrive to perform the impossible?” said my assistant.

“Indeed,” I said. “‘How’ is the operative question.”

The integrator made a sound that was its equivalent of a throat clearing. “I have a suggestion,” it said.

“What?”

Its tone was tentative. “Magic.”

I snorted. It was an automatic response whenever the subject was raised. “Only a fool believes in magic,” I said.

“Perhaps this is the work of a fool.”

That almost made sense, but though I could no longer argue for them, I recalled all my old opinions. “There is no such thing as magic.”

“Yet there are arguments for the opposing view.”

I had encountered them. Supposedly there was an alternation between magic and physics, between sympathy and rationalism, as operating principles of the phenomenal universe. As the Great Wheel rolled through the eons, one assumed supremacy over the other, only to see the relationship eventually reversed.

When one regime took the ascendancy, the other allegedly remained as an embedded seed in its unfriendly host. Thus in

an age when magic held sway, its mechanics were still logically extrapolated—there were rules and procedures—while during the present reign of rationality, events at the subquantum level were supposedly determined more by quirks and quiddities than by unalterable laws.

I was occasionally braced, at a salon or social, by some advocate of the mystical persuasion who would try to convince me that the Wheel was now nearing the next cusp and that I might live long enough to see the contiguous series of electrons that carried information from one device to another replaced by chains of ensorceled imps, my integrator supplanted by an enchanted familiar.

I had investigated the arcana of magic over a summer during my youth and could demolish its advocates with arguments that were both subtle and vigorous. However, I had to admit that those arguments were at present beyond my grasp. Still, I harrumphed once more and said, “Magic!” then blew air over my lips as if shooing away a gossamer.

My assistant said, “You also like to say that when all impossibilities have been swept from the table what remains, however unlikely, must be the answer.”

“Magic,” I said, “is one of those impossibilities.”

“Are you sure?”

“I used to be,” I said, “so I ought to be now.”

“Even a wise man can...,” began the integrator, then interrupted itself to tell me that Pinnifrant's tallyman was back.

“What have you learned?”

“The same situation pertains across the city. Indeed, even accounts held outside Olkney by male residents of the city have been affected.”

The more I learned the more perplexed I became. Even in my diminished state, I recognized the irony. I had long wished for a superlative opponent, a master criminal who could give me room to stretch. Now one had seemingly appeared, but in doing so had robbed me of the capacity to combat his outrages. Still, I struggled to encompass an image of the situation.

“And there is no indication that anyone has benefited from the thefts?” I asked Worsthall. “No woman's account has ballooned? No child's?”

“No.”

“Thank you,” I said, though I could not see how the information helped.

“There is one anomaly,” he said.

“Hmm?”

“A male depositor at Frink Fiduciary had a balance of thirty-two hepts and fifteen grimlets before the discrepancy this morning....”

“Discrepancy?” I asked.

“It is a term we in the financial sector use when accounts do not tally.”

“Why not be bold and call it what it is, mass theft and rampant rapine?”

“If we were bold, we would not be bankers,” was the reply.

“Indeed,” I said, “but what were you about to tell me?”

“That a male depositor had a balance of thirty-two hepts and fifteen grimlets before the ... rampant rapine, and that he had the same balance afterward. And still does.”

I had him repeat the numbers again. “This depositor had one grimlet more than the ubiquitous H32.14 before the ... the event, and he still has the same amount now?”

“As of three minutes ago,” said the tallyman.

“Hmm,” I said. I experienced a vague sense that the anomaly might be significant. “Who is he?”

“He is called Vashtun Errible.”

“Tell me about him.”

There was little to tell: only an address on a cul-de-sac off the Fader Slide, an obscure location in an uncelebrated part of the city. No image of Errible reposed in the solvency's files, and the connectivity code he had given when opening the account was long since defunct. The account had not been used for many years and had probably been forgotten by its nominee.

I left the tallyman to his troubles and set my assistant to scouring all sources for news of this Vashtun Errible. The integrator turned up only one more item: a deed of indenture that bound Errible's services to the requirements of one Bristal Baxandall.

“Now that's a name I have heard before,” I said, though I could not immediately place it.

“He prefers to be known as The Exalted Sapience Bristal Baxandall, an alleged thaumaturge,” said the integrator. “He performs at children's parties.”

Again I spied the glimmer of an idea. Perhaps this Baxandall was the mastermind behind the calamity, hiding his brilliance by masquerading as a low-rent prestidigitator. Or he might be only the blind behind which Errible, the true prodigy, had concealed himself.

I had a hunch that one or both of these two persons was central to the mystery. Normally, I despised hunches and had always denied their validity—to my mind, an intuition was no more than the product of an analytical process that took place in the mind's dark back rooms. Occasionally, a door was flung open and the result of unconscious analysis was tossed into the light of the mental front parlor, to be discovered by the incumbent as if it had arrived by mystical means.

The thought led to another: I wondered if my own back rooms were as fully stocked and active as always but that some force had sealed the doors. The more I examined the idea, mentally probing about in my inner recesses the way my tongue would explore the gap left by an extracted tooth, the more it seemed likely that my faculties had not been irrevocably ripped away, but only placed out of reach. I listened and it seemed that I could almost hear the ghost of my former genius crying out to me from beyond a barrier in my mind.

I realized that my assistant was saying something. “Repeat,” I said.

“The Exalted Sapience's address is the same as that which the solvency found for Vashtun Errible,” it said.

“Connect me.”

“I cannot. He apparently possesses no integrator.”

“How is that possible?”

“I cannot even speculate,” said the integrator. “His house appears as a blank spot in the connectivity matrix.”

“Ahah!” I said again. “The shape left by the invisible object!”

“What do you mean?”

I did not know. It was another hunch. “It would be premature to say,” I said. “Summon an air-car and have it take me to that address.”

The vehicle was longer than usual in arriving and I noticed that its canopy was darkly stained. When we rose above the rooftops I saw why: thick columns of greasy, black smoke boiled skyward from several sites along the big bend in the river, joining to form a pall over the south side of the city. To the west, several streets were blocked off by emergency vehicles bearing the lights and colors of the provost bureau, and a surging mob was rampaging through the financial district, smashing glass and overturning motilators.

The air-car banked and flew north toward an industrial precinct that looked to be quieter. After a few minutes it angled down to a dead-end street below the slideway and alighted before an ill-kept two-story house whose windows were obscured by dark paint. I bid the car remain but it replied that it could only do so if I paid the accumulated fare immediately and allowed it to deduct its waiting fee every five minutes.

“How much?” I asked and was told that I owed seven hepts. Furthermore, it would charge me twenty grimlets per minute to wait.

“Usually, I charge such expenses to my account with your firm,” I said.

“These are unusual times,” it said, and I was forced to agree to the terms.

The house was dilapidated, the paint peeling, and some siding sprung loose. Dank weeds had invaded and occupied the front lawn, and the porch sagged when I topped the front steps. There was a faint smell of boiled vegetables.

There were symbols painted on the front door. They seemed vaguely familiar but my uncertain memory could not produce their meanings. There was no who's-there beside the door, the house having no integrator to operate it. I struck the painted wood with my knuckles to make my presence known.

There was no response nor any sound from within. A second knocking brought no result, so I tried the latch and the door opened inward.

I stepped within and called for attention. There was no answer. I looked about and saw a small, untidy foyer from which a closed door led left, a stairway went upward, and a short hall ran back to what appeared to be a rudimentary kitchen.

I called again and heard what might have been a reply from behind the closed door. I opened it and looked into a cramped and fusty parlor dominated by an oversized table draped in black cloth on which was scattered an arrangement of objects and instruments I could not immediately identify. The opaqued windows let in no light, and the only illumination

was from some of the strewn bric-a-brac that emitted dim glows and wavering auras.

“Hello?” I said and again heard a moan from the gloom beyond the table. I produced a small lumen from my pouch and activated it so that I could work my way around the table without stepping on more knickknacks that seemed to have fallen to the floor.

Under the table on the far side was what I first took to be a bundle of stained cloth loosely stuffed with raw meat and bare bones. A warm and unappetizing smell rose from it. The cloth was dark and figured with designs and symbols similar to those on the front door, but woven in metallic thread. The moan came again, and now it was clear that the bundle was its source.

“What is this?” I said, more to myself than to any expected audience, but I was answered by a rich, deep voice from behind me.

“Not what, but who,” it said, “and the answer is The Exalted Sapience Bristal Baxandall. That answer will be valid for at most only a few minutes longer. After that, there are different schools of thought. Would you care to discuss the nature of being and the relationship of soul to identity?”

I had turned around and found that the voice issued from what I had initially assumed to be a framed abstract on the wall. But I saw now that this painting constantly moved, thick shapes of unusual colors ceaselessly flowing into and out of themselves, their proportions and directions seeming to mislead the eye. A few seconds of regarding it evoked a dizziness and I looked away.

“I am not equipped for metaphysical discussions today,” I said. “Something has impaired my intellect.”

“Indeed?” said the painting.

“Would you know anything about that?” I asked in a noncommittal tone.

“It would be premature to say,” said the voice.

I directed the conversation to The Exalted Sapience. “What has happened to him?”

“He was undertaking a transformational exercise.”

“Surely he did not wish to be transformed into that?”

“No. It was not his intent to rearrange himself quite so drastically. He wanted only to be younger.”

“Not richer, smarter, and better looking?” I asked.

There was a chuckle. “No, that ambition was Vashtun Errible's.”

“He would be Baxandall's servant?”

The voice chuckled. “He *is* the servant, at least until the indenture expires with Baxandall, in a few minutes at the most. He *would be* the master, though I doubt he will be.”

“And where is Errible now?”

“He is upstairs consulting Baxandall's library, trying to deduce what went amiss with his plan. The first part went as he expected: he adulterated one of the ingredients in the master's transformation exercise and produced the unhappy result under the table; the second part varied from his expectations.”

“What went wrong?”

“I did.”

“And what, exactly, are you?”

"Again, there are conflicting schools of thought. Baxandall called me a demon; you might call me a figment of the imagination. The Exalted Sapience conscripted me to be his familiar and strove to find ways to channel my ... energies, shall we say, for his own purposes. Vashtun Errible sees me, quite erroneously, as a box from which he may extract his every tawdry dream."

I saw it now. "He desired to be the richest, smartest, handsomest man in Olkney," I said. "He was a scraggly shrub that pined to grow into the tallest deodar in the forest. Instead, you shrank the rest of us to weeds."

"It amused me to confound him."

"But did it further your interests?" I said. "You indicated that your servitude is involuntary."

The shapes in the frame performed a motion that might have been a shrug. "But temporary. Baxandall managed to catch me in a clumsy trap. You see, I am of an adventuresome disposition. Boredom led me to become an explorer of adjacent dimensions, even dusty corners like your own. I thought I had found a peephole into your realm, but when I pressed my eye against it—you will understand that I speak metaphorically—I encountered a powerful adhesive."

The faint voice in the back of my mind was clamoring. I apparently had questions to ask, but I could not make out what they were. Yet even with only a fragment of my usual intellect I perceived that I was in a perilous situation. The entity in the frame exuded a grim complacency. It was about to exact vengeance for its enslavement, and I had already

seen that it had no compunctions about inflicting harm on innocent bystanders.

“I shall leave,” I said. “Good luck with Errible.”

But as I made my way around the table, this time keeping the furniture between me and the thing hanging on the wall, a hunch-shouldered figure in a tattered robe appeared in the doorway. I knew from the disharmony of his features that this was Baxandall's indentee.

He held open before him a large book bound in leather, and as soon as he entered the chamber, he began to recite from its pages in a voice that came as much from his misshapen nose as from his slack-lipped mouth, “Arbrustram merrilif oberluz, destoi malleonis....”

And then he saw me and his concentration slipped. He broke off in mid-sentence—only for a moment, but the moment might as well have been an eon, because during that brief caesura the entity on the wall extruded part of itself into the room.

It was something like an arm, something like a tentacle, something like an insect's hooked limb and altogether like nothing I had ever seen; but it seized Vashtun Errible about the neck, lifted his worn slippers from the carpet and drew him into the swirl of motion within the frame.

The book fell from his hands as his face was drawn into the maelstrom. The rest of his body followed, pulled through the frame with a sound that reminded me of thick liquid passing through a straw. But I was not concentrating on the peculiarities of Errible's undoing; for the moment his head entered the frame, my faculties were restored.

I took in the room again, but with new eyes. I recognized some of the objects on the table and recalled having read about the fallen book in my youth. Thus, when the thing in the window had done with Errible and reached for me, it found me holding the volume and quoting the passage that the indentee had begun.

The limb retracted and the shapes in the frame roiled and coruscated. I could not read the emotions, but I was willing to infer rage and disappointment.

“This is not as lamentable an outcome as you may think,” I said, when the cantrip had once more bound the demon.

“Our perspectives differ, as is to be expected when one party holds the leash and the other wears the collar,” said the thing in the window.

“We did not finish discussing where your interests lie, nor had we even begun to consider mine. But if we can cause them to coincide, I am prepared to relinquish the leash and slip the collar.”

The next sound approximated a sardonic laugh. “After I arrange for you to rule your boring little world, no doubt.”

I made a sound involving lower teeth, upper lip, and an explosion of air, and said, “Do I strike you as one who aspires to be a civil servant? The Archon already performs that tedious function, and good luck to him.”

A note of interest crept into the demon's tone. “Then what do you wish?”

I told him.

With the transdimensional demise of Vashtun Errible, all of his works became as if they never were. Grier Alfazzian's

prospects had never dimmed and Oblos Pinnifrant's fortune had not been touched, thus neither owed me a grimlet nor knew that they ever had.

I did not care. My fees had become increasingly arbitrary: for an interesting case I would take no more than the client could afford; if it bored me, I would include a punitive surcharge. In recent years, as experience had augmented my innate abilities, truly absorbing puzzles had become few and infrequent. I had begun to fear that the rest of my life would offer long decades of ennui, my mind constantly spinning but always in want of traction.

My encounter with the demon had put that fear to rest. All I had needed was a worthy challenger.

The next morning I entered my workroom. An envelope rested on my table. I opened it and found a tarnished key and a small square of paper. On the key was a symbol that tweaked at my memory, though I could not place it. Printed on the paper was the single word, *Ardmere*.

I placed both on the table and regarded them. I could not resist rubbing my hands together. But before I began to enjoy the mystery, I must fulfill my side of the bargain.

I took from my pocket a sliver of charred wood in which two hairs were caught. I crossed the room and presented the splinter to the frame hanging on my wall.

“Not where, not when, not who—but why?” I said.

A kind of hand took the object from me and drew it into the shifting colors. “Hmmm,” said my opponent, “interesting.”

“Last one to solve the puzzle is a dimbo,” I said and turned toward the table. “Ready, set ... go!”

[Back to Table of Contents]

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Being Dead, by Vivian Vande Velde, Magic Carpet Books, 2003, $6.95.

Considering how Western society normally avoids any dialogue concerning death, last wills and testaments, terminal illnesses—really, anything involved with dying—it's a little surprising how much the subject has pervaded the entertainment industry in recent times. We have TV shows like *Six Feet Under* and the brilliant *Dead Like Me*, bestsellers such as *The Lovely Bones*, and any number of other similarly themed packages that are all popular with large portions of the general public.

The YA field isn't much different. In a recent package of YA books, half of them were about ghosts and the spirit existing after death, such as Gary Soto's latest novel, *The Afterlife*, and the book in hand by Vivian Vande Velde.

Personally, I think it's a healthy thing, and have always admired other societies that deal openly with the subject—such as some Buddhist sects, or Mexican Catholicism with its Day of the Dead celebrations.

Until we cross over ourselves, we're never really going to know what comes next, but thinking and reading and writing about it can certainly help us prepare for what's to come. And it doesn't hurt to offer some genuine respect to those who have gone before us.

Vande Velde explores a number of different takes on the subject in the stories collected in *Being Dead*. The killer story, worth the price of admission on its own, is up first. I don't want to tell you too much about the premise behind “Drop by Drop,” but it delivers a real punch when you understand what the haunting is all about.

The other stories are mostly as good, though there are a couple of slighter exercises, primarily the short-short fare such as “Dancing with Marjorie's Ghost” or “The Ghost.” The prose remains strong throughout, but Vande Velde does better with the longer pieces where we have the chance to get to know the characters better. And the book sports a wonderful opening in the last story that should be a prerequisite example for all writing classes: “Until the part where I died, my day had been going pretty well.” How can you *not* want to read on after that?

I've said this a number of times, but I'm going to say it again, because there are still many readers who steer clear of what's marketed as YA fiction: much of the time, the only difference between YA and adult fiction is the age of the protagonists. And these days, YA fiction is often edgier.

The Parrot Trainer, by Swain Wolfe, St. Martin's Press, 2003, $24.95.

I love a slow news day. It means that there hasn't been some huge disaster and newspaper editors have to put things on their front pages such as what I found this morning (as I write this in Mid-October): an archeological discovery that adds compelling weight to the theory that the first human

migrations to the Americas happened some forty centuries earlier than most textbooks teach.

The article was something I'd be interested in reading anyway, but I enjoyed the synchronicity of it appearing just as I was finishing Swain Wolfe's new novel in which one of the plot points is the discovery of a frozen body in a glacial cave overlooking the ocean in Alaska, the existence of which, when presented to the archeological world, would make an even bigger impact than the dietary discoveries made in the real-world Vancouver Island cave reported in my morning's newspaper.

Archeology plays a large role in *The Parrot Trainer*, where some of the main characters are pulled from either side of the legal fence that divides the field. We have Dr. Lucy Perelli, too busy drumming up grant money to go on digs anymore, and her mentor/lover Dr. Phillip Sachs, desperate for another big find to boost his waning celebrity. Opposite to them is Jack Miller, a former pot thief and art dealer. Between them lies Miller's discovery of the aforementioned glacial grave.

Helping to flesh out the subplots is a trio making a documentary film: the director, Anita, her cameraman, Billy, and the film's subject, a philosophical decon-structionist named Henri.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Like the Vande Velde story mentioned above, *The Parrot Trainer* has an opening sentence that makes you *need* to read more: “Jack happened to look up from the bottom of Lacuna Canyon at the moment the red car flew off the east rim.”

The car crashes, but doesn't burst into flames as in those innumerable film and TV versions of similar events. The driver is killed by the impact and by the time Jack arrives on the scene there's little he can do but walk around the wreckage collecting the journal pages that have scattered about the car. They're written in German, but they show rare Mimbres Indian bowl art designs that Jack doesn't recognize, and he's an expert. There's also a map.

The map leads Jack to a previously unknown Mimbres site where he finds the bowls depicted in the journals. He also finds a skeleton walled up in a cave and an unbroken burial bowl with a design of a masked woman holding a parrot. What's unusual about this bowl is that the Mimbres tradition was to break a hole in the bottom of the bowl to set the dead person's spirit free. The bottom of this bowl is unbroken.

I'm getting long-winded here and haven't begun to enumerate all the delights and marvels to be found in Wolfe's latest novel. So let me just say that Jack brings the bowl home and by doing so finds himself haunted by a thousand-year-old spirit that needs to be set free. What complicates matters is that before Jack can really deal with all of this, he gets pulled into the problems surrounding the glacial grave I mentioned earlier, and then there's those filmmakers with their documentary, getting in everybody's way.

Wolfe obviously knows the worlds of archeology, documentary filmmaking (he was a filmmaker before he turned to writing books), and philosophy. Through the dialogue of the characters, he makes all three professions an engaging delight, rather than the dry topics they might

appear to be from an outsider's point of view. He also knows the landscapes and histories of the Southwest, and certainly has the gift of conveying his interest and joy in them in such a manner that they become enthusiasms for the reader as well.

I've written about Wolfe's books in previous columns, always favorably, and *The Parrot Trainer* meets all the expectations I had going into it. The prose is rich and expressive, while the interactions of the characters are compelling throughout, especially those between Jack and his ghost, between Jack and Lucy ... well, between Jack and pretty much anybody, as he's a wonderfully developed and likable character.

There are, as well, so many charming touches throughout: the bear stories and those of Coatimundi as trickster, the pack of young sisters that lives in a trailer near Jack, the life-size mudmen that Jack and the girls build by the creek, Henri (from the documentary film) and his delight with words, the Indian-Chicano biker gang with their Anasazi-styled tattoos....

This has been a good year for books, but *The Parrot Trainer* is certainly one of my favorites so far. It's a treat to read, and also to see because of the small teasing chapter-headings depicting designs from Mimbres bowl art. And the extensive bibliography at the back will certainly have me tracking down further reading on the subjects brought up in the book.

If you'd like to learn a bit more of what started Wolfe on the journey to write this latest novel of his, there's a good,

informative essay at:
http://www.swainwolfe.com/parrot_trainer.htm.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, Book 3: Lucinda's Secret, by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2003, $9.95.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this book except to urge you to pick up the series. This third outing is as refreshing and fun as the first two—perhaps a little more so, since the prose seems more assured this time out and the characters better defined. (Although the latter could simply be this reader's growing familiarity with them after three books.)

Unlike the Vande Velde title, this series is for younger readers, or those who are still young at heart. The pen and ink artwork is charming throughout, and if you liked the first two books, the story won't disappoint you at all.

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

[Back to Table of Contents]

Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Parasites Like Us, by Adam Johnson, Viking, $24.95.

You're an Animal, Viskovitz, stories by Alessandro Boffa, translated from the Italian by John Casey, Alfred A. Knopf, $23.

The Two Sams: Ghost Stories, by Glen Hirshberg, introduction by Ramsey Campbell, Carroll & Graf, $23.

I have a sweet tooth for tales of apocalypse. Not *The* Apocalypse, but quiet, understated stories with a tight focus and emphasis on the fate of characters, rather than their ruined surroundings. Relationship novels about the end of the world.

This is, admittedly, a very small market niche. The title story in T. C. Boyle's *After the Plague*, Jean Hegland's elegiac, unjustly neglected *Into the Forest;* perhaps *Riddley Walker,* though the scope of Russell Hoban's masterpiece probably expands beyond my remit here. I think what is so appealing in tales of this sort is that the traits that are essential to survivors are often the same traits used by the artist—Joyce's “silence, exile, and cunning.” Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is perhaps the exemplar of what I mean; Prospero's exile is not defined by a post-holocaust landscape (though it could be); but there's that same profound sense of melancholy and loss, balanced by the dawning sense of exultation in what might be, that brave new world and all the creatures in it.

Adam Johnson's first novel, *Parasites Like Us,* falls right into the middle of this small sub-genre, though it takes a while to get there. It makes a bit of a splat as it does—the book is in many ways a mess, but it's a wonderful, inventive, exhilarating mess, the novelistic equivalent of a long drunken whacked-out binge with your closest, smartest, craziest friend. Maybe not the kind of thing you want to experience more than once, but undeniably entertaining and, yes—one concedes in the harsh light of dawn, hangover on the horizon—probably unforgettable. It's a book with the messy thumbprints of genius on it.

We know from the first paragraph of *Parasites Like Us* that the human race has gotten into big trouble—

This story begins some years after the turn of the millennium, back when gangs were persecuted, back before we all joined one. In those days, birds and pigs were still our friends, and we held some pretty crazy notions: People said the planet was warming. Wearing fur was a no-no. Dogs could do no wrong....

This opening nails Johnson's tone: premonitory, slightly ominous, a little humor around the edges. The narrator, Hank Hannah, is an anthropology professor of young middle age at the University of Southeastern South Dakota. His specialty is the Clovis culture, whose members crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Siberia to settle North America twelve thousand years ago. The Clovis people left some of the most gorgeous artifacts the human race has ever seen, hand-polished spearpoints made of obsidian, perlite, quartz, weapons that

were obviously created, and valued, for beauty as well as function.

But function was definitely part of the equation: the Clovis points, at least as Johnson describes them, were deadly, the weapons of mass destruction of their time. Johnson does a neat job of setting the stage for his apocalypse by describing a much earlier one.

Over the course of three centuries—at the end of the Pleistocene epoch, twelve thousand years ago—three amazing things happened: the Ice Age ended completely ... humans entered the hemisphere, and ... quickly spread across all forty-eight contiguous states ... and, finally, thirty-five species of large North American mammals became extinct. All in three hundred years.

The common view of these mass extinctions is they were caused by the retreat of the glacial ice packs and the convulsive climate change that followed. Hannah's hypothesis, published in a book called *The Depletionists,* one of those flash-in-the-pan works of anthropology that now and then capture (and almost immediately lose) popular interest, was that North America's great mammals—the giant beavers, dire wolves, mammoths, saber-tooth cats, llamas, camels, lions, mastodons—were hunted to extinction by the Clovis people, in a period roughly equal to the amount of time that North America has been colonized by Europeans. Since the publication of his book, though, Hank's life has gone to hell. Too much drink, a mortifying series of public appearances with other academics, the death of his beloved stepmother, a general surrender of nerve to the encroachments of tenure

and middle age: all of these have left Hannah the very model of an anomic academic.

And so, after that minatory opening paragraph, *Parasites Like Us* sharply veers off for over two hundred pages into the familiar, though still fertile, territory of academic comedy in the imaginary town of Parkton, S.D. A distinctly twenty-first century academic comedy, involving Hannah's protege, the slyly named Eggers, who for his dissertation has decided to live for a year on campus as our paleolithic ancestors did. This means wearing clothes made of discarded animal hides from the nearby Hormel meat processing plant, and trapping and eating a lot of squirrels, as well as some more revolting things, all of which Johnson describes with immense gusto. There's another anthropology student, the beautiful Amazon Gertrude Labelle, known as Trudy; and a wonderful set of supporting characters, including Hank Hannah's randy father; an existentially inclined, ice-fishing lawyer named Farley Crow Weather; Hank's high school nemesis Gerry, now deputy sheriff; and Hank's love interest, Yulia Terrasova Nivitski, a Russian ethnobotanist who is severely allergic to the plants she studies.

The Maguffin that gets all these folks chasing after one another is a breathtakingly rare rose quartz Clovis point that Eggers uncovers in the course of an illegal excavation. The site is in the shadow of Parkton's vast Native American casino, an edifice that, along with the Hormel plant, emits the same subdued sense of impending horror as Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's enormous spectacles in *The Great Gatsby.* When Hannah returns there with Eggers, he finds an entire

Paleolithic burial site. Interred with the human remains are two strange, hollow clay spheres (these are too obviously Instruments of Doom to qualify as Maguffins).

Well, not hollow, really: Hannah can hear something rattling softly inside them. What exactly is in there?

We know for these two hundred pages that whatever It is, we definitely do *not* want It Out. But Out is where It's going to get.

And so amidst all the campus squabbles, hijinks, arrests—the rare Clovis spearpoint is given a test run by Trudy, who uses it to slay a prize hog at the Parkton agricultural fair—and nascent romance, all that readers are thinking about—well, me, anyway—is when and how the damn mysterious spheres are going to get cracked open, and by whom. It finally happens on page 247.

After all this shambling but very funny buildup, I was pretty certain that, whatever holocaust Johnson had in mind for the residents of Parkton and beyond, he wasn't going to be able to pull it off. Boy, was I wrong.

The last hundred pages of *Parasites Like Us* are remarkable, one of the best-realized, realistic, and horrifying accounts of disaster I've ever read—and trust me, I've read a few. From the moment Hannah watches the opening of the second sphere on the evening news—*Parkton 7 Action Report!*—to the novel's final sentences, one is swept up in a terrifying, even shocking, narrative, as frighteningly understated as all the previous shenanigans were over the top. The shift in tone is sudden and violent enough to give

you whiplash; but Johnson's narrative grabs you by the hair and yanks you along, and there's not much point in resisting.

The members of Hannah's mismatched tribe of losers, for all their bickering and comical mishaps, are utterly compelling: what happens to them becomes as important to us as the fates of our neighbors in the wake of a terrible storm. Those who survive the apocalypse released upon the world by the Channel 7 news staff go on to display the kind of resigned courage and stupidity that I suspect many of us would demonstrate after the plague. I hope so, anyway. As it stands, we could do worse than the fictional example of human resilience that greets us at the end of Adam Johnson's chilling, prophetic novel: Dr. Hannah poised with his band of newly minted anthropologists behind him, ready to make the reverse trek across the Bering Sea to scope out what brave, bleak new world awaits us on the other side.

You've Made Progress, Viskovitz

Gregor Samsa had it easy. So he wakes up one morning to find himself a gigantic cockroach: big deal. Viskovitz, the protagonist—protagonists, actually—of Allesandro Boffa's *You're an Animal, Viskovitz,* changes from one life-form to another at breakneck speed. Penguin, dormouse, scorpion, praying mantis, shark, lion—Viskovitz has seen, er, *been* them all.

Boffa's take on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, nimbly translated from the Italian by John Casey (himself the recipient of the National Book Award for his novel, *Spartina*), is a collection of animal fables. In them, the title character relentlessly pursues

his lady-love, Ljuba, while being thwarted or assisted by the hapless Petrovic and Zucotic, acting as sidekicks or nemeses and, like Viscovitz, metamorphosing up and down the zoological scale. The characters shift sexes too, fluid as jellyfish. Some of these stories are only a few paragraphs in length; others go on for pages. All are very funny, and a few are hilarious; others touching and remarkably wise in their assessment of human foibles. Which, needless to say, are more palatable when presented to us in the form of spongiform foibles, or reptilian ones.

“You've Found Peace at Last, Viskovitz” puts the narrator, a police dog retired from the force, back into a noirish, *Chinatown* confrontation with his past. In “You've Made Progress, Viskovitz,” he's a brilliant lab rat, “probably the most intelligent rodent who ever lived.” In “Blood Will Tell, Viskovitz,” our shark-hero is questioned about his childhood.

“Were you an only child?”

“No, I had two brothers in the same litter. ‘Visko,’ they scolded me, ‘now who will take care of us?’ In those days I couldn't stomach them. Then, when my stomach was empty, I took care of them myself.”

“Didn't you suffer from loneliness?”

“Well, at a certain point I felt an emptiness. But to fill it up, there were uncles and aunts and cousins and grandparents. Family is in my blood, Junior....”

And here's the opening to “You Look Like You Could Use a Drink, Viskovitz"—

“Papa, I want to stop drinking.”

“Don't say such a silly thing, Visko. You're a sponge.”

"What does that mean? That I have to spend my whole life stuck to this rock, filtering and pumping water like a vegetable?"

"You are a vegetable, Visko, or at any rate a zoophyte."

The Moscow-born Boffa, a biologist as well as a writer, knows his way around the vertebrate and invertebrate phyla; he also has a gift for punchlines and one-liners, which can make reading this slim though densely packed volume as deliriously exhausting as watching a gifted standup comic squeeze a one-hour act into fifteen minutes. You're a riot, Viskovitz: I'd love to see what Boffa (and Casey) could do with a full-length novel.

The Two Sams

Full disclaimer here: I blurbed *The Two Sams,* the immensely talented Glen Hirshberg's first collection of stories (and no, we've never met, nor corresponded beyond Thank You and You're Welcome). But the book is strong enough, and I feel strongly enough about it, to mention it again here.

There are five tales in the collection. All save the final, title story are novellas, the length of choice for most great ghost stories. And the stories in *The Two Sams* are pretty close to great; two of them, "Struwwelpeter" and "Mr. Dark's Carnival," may become classics. "Struwwelpeter," in which a brilliant, daemonic teenage boy wreaks havoc on his small town, takes its subtext from Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter,* one of the ur-texts for modern horror. Hoffmann's grisly nineteenth-century work didn't set out to be horror (its subtitle is "Merry Stories and Funny Pictures"). But

its impact upon impressionable children (I was one of them, and I'd guess Hirshberg was too) has been considerable, as well as its influence with academics specializing in fairy tales—both Jack Zipes's *Sticks and Stones* and Marina Warner's *No Go the Bogeyman* deal with *Struwwelpeter* at some length.

But Hirshberg's version is the first modern take I've come across (I'm not including the play *Shock-headed Peter*; I'd be very interested in hearing about other versions). It's a scarily intelligent work, bolstered by its author's obvious familiarity with adolescents—Hirshberg is a teacher as well as a writer. “Mr. Dark's Carnival,” like “Struwwelpeter” nominated for multiple awards, draws directly on Hirshberg's other career. It details the long, terrifying Halloween night during which the story's narrator, a teacher at a rural Montana high school, visits the story's eponymous carnival. There are obvious echoes of Ray Bradbury, in particular *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, but Hirshberg's tale is more frightening than Bradbury's lyrical collection. And Hirshberg's milieu here, a starkly beautiful western landscape inhabited by a middle-age male academic, is also reminiscent of Adam Johnson's in *Parasites Like Us*.

Of the remaining stories, only “Shipwreck Beach” falters slightly, “Dancing Men” is a bleak, disturbing account of the aftermath of the Holocaust; the brief “The Two Sams” a haunting elegy for unborn children. Ramsey Campbell's insightful and generous introduction serves as a nice passing of the torch from one master of the macabre to another.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Jim Young is the author of the novels The Face of the Deep *and* Armed Memory. *A native of Minneapolis, he was a good friend of the late Clifford Simak, although you'll soon see that his fiction isn't nearly as bucolic as most of Mr. Simak's work was. In fact, "Ultraviolet Night" directly addresses urban issues that concern the great state of California, a state that should probably be considered the U.S.'s official Science Fiction State now that it's governed by The Terminator. (Here's an exercise for the imagination: what would that Californian Philip K. Dick have made of seeing the star of* Total Recall *voted into office?)*

After twenty-two years of working in the Foreign Service Department (during which time he served in Botswana, Russia, London, and most recently as the U.S. Coordinator for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), Jim retired and moved to—you guessed it—California. He is currently expanding this story into a novel.

Ultraviolet Night

By Jim Young

[Back to Table of Contents]

1.

Don't let it be three o'clock, Tony Wilson thought. Jesus Christ, don't let it be three o'clock. He glanced up at the readout on the office wall and saw it was 2:54 p.m. Six more minutes to go before the programming drugs started to wear off.

And then he'd lose the edge he needed to fix the problem he'd just found in the report that was due in Washington at the opening of business tomorrow. Everything the drugs were supposed to keep in check would start bubbling up inside him. Just last week, he'd found himself starting to wonder what effect all of it was having on his family.

But so far the programming had always bounced back to remind him that he was, in fact, doing *all this* for his wife and child—especially for his very sick little boy.

Four minutes, he thought as he turned back to the e-mail from the research division. Research had been screwing up the report for days, until now it was due in Washington in only a few hours.

At first the e-mailed version of the report looked good—no typos, clear exposition of the isolation of the new protein they were hoping the FDA would approve for human trials, and a solid explanation of its effect on the mammalian brain. But there, right near the end, he'd discovered a brand new mistake they'd made in redoing the analysis of variance in the animal trials. A brief shiver of dissatisfaction with the research division's vice president passed through him, but the

programming quickly suppressed it. Yet it was clear—this was a big enough mistake to end his career, not to mention everybody else's at the research division in San Diego. After all, this protein was going to be the bottom line's mainstay for the next decade—the real reason the new management team had bought the company.

And the reason they made you director of research, Wilson, don't forget that. Once they saw your report suggesting that karatonin could promote responsible behavior in human beings, they grabbed you.

And if you don't get this analysis of variance fixed, Washington won't approve karatonin for human trials, and you'll be looking for a new job. Simple as that.

Wilson looked up at the wall again. Now it was nearly half-past four, and he was starting to feel as though he hadn't eaten anything for a couple of days—lightheaded and almost feverish. He picked up the phone and called his wife. “Ellen, I'm afraid I'm going to be home late tonight.”

“Is everything okay?” She sounded worried.

“Oh, we'll survive. But I've got to get a report out to the Food and Drug Administration in Washington tonight, and it isn't in any shape to show to them. If we don't have it in the FDA offices by the time they open tomorrow, then our whole project gets put in limbo for another six months.”

“You've got to, then.”

“Um-hmm.” He looked at the clock again. “How's Jason?”

“Not the worst day we've ever had.” She sounded, well, burdened. “Jason isn't connecting very much today. Not even

to music. But, knock wood, he hasn't had any big tantrums so far."

"I wish I could be there."

He could hear her breathing and then she said, "Don't worry, lover. Take care of that report."

"I love you."

"I do, too."

He clicked off the phone and sat back and looked at the ceiling, cracking his knuckles to get the tension out of his system, then gazing out over the rooftop solar panels toward the Pacific and the band of water desalinization pyramids that flanked the coastline of Los Angeles. He didn't dare say anything to anybody, but what he really hoped karatonin could do was overcome autism. What he was hoping for was a software solution to a hardware problem, a cure offered by the discovery that so much of what happened in the body was regulated by proteins rather than genes.

Even though there wasn't anything to go on but the trials in other primates.

Not even the programming could keep him from thinking that there was one primate he would like to cure above everyone else in the world—his profoundly autistic five-year-old, Jason.

[Back to Table of Contents]

2.

Wilson got home late the next night, too. He found Ellen trying to coax Jason to lie down in his crib. Jason wasn't having any of it, even though she'd set the walls to his favorite shade of pink.

They got the sleepy-time ambient music going and the bakery smell flowing out of the aromatron, but Jason still wanted to bang his head open against the heavily padded bars of the crib. The sleigh bells on the blue bunny hanging from the headboard jangled with every blow.

“It's bad,” Ellen muttered as she broke open a sedative patch and gently applied it to the back of Jason's neck, then picked him up in her arms.

“Quaternary so contrary, where did your mastodons go?” Ellen sang as she rocked him. “With smilodon so frowned upon, they vanished with the snow.” It always depressed Wilson to hear his wife extemporize because it reminded him that she'd given up her musical career to take care of Jason, and he felt he hadn't really been able to do much of anything to help.

She laid Jason down in his crib.

The bunny stopped jingling.

Wilson nodded grimly.

Afterward, when they were sure Jason was asleep, they stumbled into the living room, sat on the sofa, and stared at the floor while the aromatron whispered, unfolding the scent of a pine forest. Wilson closed his eyes and tried to imagine

they were in the High Sierras instead of in an apartment complex that was barely middle class, perched along a mountain in south Chico Hills, only a few minutes away from south L.A.

Ellen trembled beside him. He turned and saw her crying silently, reached over and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Hey—it wasn't so bad,” he told her, trying to smile. “Not like last week.”

She looked at him and tried to smile. “Remember what the doctors say—we've got to keep trying to get through to him.”

He moved closer and hugged her. “I was hoping the tests would show some improvement, too.”

Wilson looked at the fireplace image playing on the video wall and thought, You should just be able to take your kid in for a quick genetic modification and make him normal. But the law says no, you can't tinker with human genes.

Instead, there they were with home treatment and only one income to pay for it. If it hadn't been for the anti-gene modification laws.... And then he lost track of what he would do, thinking about the blue bunny.

Maybe he should volunteer Jason as a guinea pig, he thought.

“I'm going to do something about autism, someday, Ellen.”

“Don't think about it anymore, lover,” she said. She smiled now, almost genuinely.

“It's hard not to.”

She laced the fingers of her right hand with his.

Your problem, Wilson thought as he stared at the image of the fireplace, is that you really don't have the guts to tell her.

Better say something, Wilson.

“Um, Ellen, listen....”

“I'm listening.” She looked at him quizzically.

“We got the FDA approval today.”

Her expression didn't change.

“The Food and Drug Administration. They approved the new protein for human trials.”

“Oh. Well—that's—that's good news.”

“And what I've been thinking is that we ought to see if they'd let us try it on Jason. It might do him some good.”

She squeezed his hand tight. Her fingers were cold.

“And you haven't mentioned it before because it's so risky. Right?” she asked.

He couldn't lie.

“Yeah.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

3.

In the early morning light, Wilson watched the spaceplane taking off from LAX, heading for low-Earth orbit, as the Manchester Avenue streetcar rattled toward the ocean. He hardly noticed the sonic boom as he thought about how to broach the question. Around him the commuters bobbed to the ambient soundtracks playing in their earphones, or babbled into their lip-ring phones, psyching up for another battle with the focus groups and power lunches that infested the Pacific Rim.

“What d'you think about this nogo zone business?” an old man said at Wilson's side. He looked down and saw the speaker was addressing another white-haired retiree wearing a tank-top over a prominent pot belly.

“Lunacy,” the second man replied. “And I blame it all on the terrorist attacks back at the turn of the century. Nobody ever needed any programming drugs back then....”

Wilson turned up the volume of his own ambient to shut out their conversation. It helped him focus. Clearly, he told himself, there's no other way. First thing, right after the morning psych routine, you've got to go ask the secretariat for a chance to interface personally with the Entity. After an hour or so they'll probably get a memo out from one of the flesh-and-blood managers.

Don't forget, you're going to need a Plan B if they turn you down, he told himself. Argue that they can't reject a

volunteer. That ought to get you up to talk to the Entity. Then you can really make your pitch.

Because that's what it's going to take.

The streetcar halted in front of a palm-lined plaza. He got off and strode toward the security checkpoint. The magnetometers scanned him and a simulated voice said, “Good morning, Mr. Wilson.”

He smiled stiffly in the direction of the security camera.

The Pharos Corporation expected that smile.

[Back to Table of Contents]

4.

Across the wall of the assembly room billowed the image of a smiling, white-haired man, projected as though it were an image on an enormous flag that was waving in the wind. Microdroplets of rose-scented teamazine filtered down over the headquarters staff as they did their morning exercises. Actually, Wilson thought as the teamazine started to hit him, that face was a marvelous thing—a composite of several people. The true make-up of the chief executive Entity was a corporate secret, but Wilson could always pick out three individuals whenever he saw that image: Thomas Edison, Louis Pasteur, and Nikola Tesla.

With a shift of the rhythm track, the image of the Entity took on a more three-dimensional quality. The proprietor was about to speak.

“My fellow employees,” the Entity said with a nasal twang that (after years of programming) always made Wilson feel nostalgic, “This will be a special day for all of us. Keep to the program.”

A shout went up and Wilson shouted with it, the teamazine rushing through him. “Keep to the program! Keep to the program!”

Then one of the senior vice presidents stepped forward on the balcony overlooking the assembly hall, the bald man named Pettimento. He began to sing the company anthem, “Beyond the Blue Horizon,” and the crowd followed along. The melody pounded into every cell in Wilson's body, and when

the song ended his blood was pumping in time to the music. After that, the Entity's face smiled patriotically and faded from the screen.

“This is a proud day to work for the Pharos Corporation. Keep to the program!” Pettimento cried.

“The program!” the crowd shouted back.

Then the lights came up and the ozone generator started clearing the air and the soundtrack shifted to an ambient program—the sound that filled the building during normal working hours. They all hurried off to work.

[Back to Table of Contents]

5.

Wilson spent more than two hours arguing the case before the marketing department for seeking proteins that could counteract Down's Syndrome. First you develop the means to enhance responsible behavior, then you work on the proteins that increase recall, and that ought to take you down the road to curing the mental aspects of the syndrome. It seemed like the next logical step following the isolation of karatonin.

But marketing wasn't interested. Couldn't understand why they should risk the company's reputation. Logic didn't seem to have any impact on them, either.

After that the teamazine rush had faded. For a brief moment, he had a twinge of doubt about the company's ability to accomplish anything as he staggered back to his office. Then he remembered there was something else he was supposed to do....

Oh yeah.

Jason.

Contacting the executive suite took most of the rest of the day.

There were a couple of possible routes to an audience with the Entity. Since Wilson's father had been on the board of directors, one or two of his father's friends might be willing to help. If they were available. If they weren't on their ambient exercise regimen or golfing or....

Then there was Pettimento, the vice president to whom he reported. Pettimento had known Dad, too, back at Stanford.

Sometimes Pettimento even pretended to recall who he was. So Wilson sent a hard copy note to the vice president, asking for an audience with the Entity to decide if he could volunteer a family member for a high-risk procedure. “For the good of the program,” Wilson added in handwriting, thinking that struck just the right note of sincerity.

Eventually a secretary phoned him to say, “Dr. Pettimento will be able to talk to you at four-thirty.” Wilson was pretty sure she was human; none of that over-assured simulant about *her*. Not in the front office.

[Back to Table of Contents]

6.

The screen beeped three times and Pettimento's long face appeared on Wilson's screen precisely at four-thirty.

“What can I do for you, uh, Tony?” Pettimento asked. No smile, no hint of the I-remember-your-old-man-when, just a neutral expression and a phony air of bonhomie.

Wilson smiled firmly and said, “I was wondering if you'd consider taking volunteers for the karatonin project.”

“Not yourself, I take it?” Pettimento smirked so artificially that it made Wilson think of the ads challenging the viewer to guess if it was live or Simulex.

“Hardly,” Wilson answered. He felt insulted, actually; but he didn't let any emotion show. This is the game, he told himself, and you lose by expressing weakness. Without dropping a beat he continued, “I was wondering if my wife and I could volunteer our son for the project.”

“A little heinous this afternoon, aren't we?” Pettimento frowned. “You know, I'd like to be able to help you out—but we've got a directive from the front office that says we're supposed to buck any requests like yours right up to the level of the Entity.”

Wilson smiled. “That's okay with me.”

“Tell me what you hope to accomplish with a one-on-one with the Entity.”

“Well, it's like this. My kid is autistic.”

Pettimento nodded without diminishing his faint smile. It was clear the vice president had read Wilson's file.

“Here's my reasoning: enhanced responsibility should limit self-damaging behavior that occurs with profound autism. My wife and I agreed we ought to try, at least....” Sweat trickled down Wilson's sides and he had to swallow, but couldn't quite do so. He coughed once instead. “Sorry.” He coughed again. “Like I was saying, we wanted to see if the company would give it a try.”

“I'm sorry to hear about your child's—problem.”

Wilson leaned toward the screen. “Listen, Dr. Pettimento, we've got to do something.” He almost added that he was going to need time off to help his wife, but that sounded too much like asking for a raise. And *that* was clearly not going to help the situation.

Pettimento placed his fingertips together, too close to the camera to be in focus on the screen. “Well, Tony, this is a company that prides itself on being responsible and taking care of its employees. If the Entity can't help you out, then I'm sure we can come up with something that will.”

“So you'll let me talk to him?”

“I'll make the recommendation,” Pettimento answered matter-of-factly. “Stand by for a few minutes. It always takes a bit before the front office responds.”

Pettimento turned away from the camera and the screen faded to a digital blue.

[Back to Table of Contents]

7.

Wilson sat on the edge of his chair, fidgeting while a “please hold” notice blinked across the screen. Then a simulated voice announced, “Please stand by for the chief executive.”

The screen resolved into a picture of the old man with the wind-blown white hair, billowing like a cumulus cloud around his head.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Wilson.” One-on-one, the Entity sounded just like meat, Wilson thought. What you heard at the morning pepfest was a deeper and less nasal version of that voice. “Pettimento has explained your situation and your request to me. I've got a few questions to ask you, if you don't mind.”

“No—please go ahead.” Wilson felt the sweat meandering down his sides again.

“Well, to start out with, then.” The Entity placed a hand to its chin. “If I get your drift—what makes you think that this treatment would have a positive affect on your son's autism?”

Wilson took a deep breath. “Well, sir, there are a number of recent reports that show that some kinds of autism—involving a lack of ability to communicate with others and occasional repetitive behavior, some of it self-damaging—can be treated through cerebrum-repair techniques.”

“All right, Wilson. I'll look up the journal articles you're talking about.” The Entity closed its eyes briefly. “Yes, I see

what you mean. Iszetbegovich's work was the main piece you were thinking about, am I right?”

“Uh, yes sir.”

The chief executive frowned. “But Iszetbegovich reported a serious side-effect of his efforts, did he not? Some forty percent of those treated suffered rapid decline and death. I note that one of our competitors, Avatar Interfacial, purchased the rights to that research a couple of years ago and we therefore have no idea what anyone has done with it since.” The Entity sounded almost displeased.

“Well, sir, you see, things are so bad that—we're willing to take the chance.”

The Entity stared into Wilson's eyes. “Your son's in a bad way, isn't he?”

Wilson gazed at the Entity's face; he thought it looked like a man who'd spent a lifetime calculating how much he could get out of a person.

“Yes he is.” Wilson frowned and glanced down at his shoes.

The chief executive rubbed his jaw and said, “I can't let you go through with it, Wilson. There's just too great a chance that something might happen to your boy.”

“But we're willing to take the chance.” Wilson clenched his hands together. “We'd sign a letter of understanding absolving the company of any blame.”

“You know I'd like to help you, Wilson. But it simply would not be right.”

Wilson nodded. That, he thought to himself, is that. “I guess that means I'm going to have to ask for some leave.”

The Entity closed its eyes and said, “I think we can work that out, Wilson. I want you to stick with us, you know. You've done very well for us here, and we really appreciate your work on both teamazine and karatonin. I know how hard—” and the Entity almost sounded choked up with grief and compassion “—your family difficulties must be for you. Please talk to Pettimento about arranging a reduced work schedule, and, if you don't mind, I'll check back with you in a couple of weeks to see how it's working out.”

“All right.” To his own ears, Wilson's voice sounded small, like a whisper out in a desert.

“Keep your chin up, son.” Then the screen went blank.

[Back to Table of Contents]

8.

After he got off the trolley, Wilson paused at the corner and looked down the beige Chico Hills street at the procession of almond-colored four-story apartment buildings, each one with its row of palm trees and carports filled with motorcycles and three-wheeled pods. The perfect home environment, he thought as he walked down the street, for the modern, dumbed-down mid-level executive.

As he stood there the words bubbled up from inside him: You've failed.

No other way to put it, Wilson. You didn't get anywhere, and you've probably gotten yourself in a lot of hot water for trying.

He gripped his briefcase resolutely and walked toward his building, staring at the sidewalk in front of him.

“Wilson!” someone called out behind him.

He turned around. A trim, short man with black hair came bounding toward him.

“You don't know me,” the man said as he came to a stop, “but my name is Richard de Hagen, and I'd like to talk to you.”

Wilson took a step backward and asked, “About what?” Must be another religious nut, he thought to himself. Like the one last week who was trying to tell everybody at the sashimi bar that the Shintoists were going to take over the world.

“I'd like to hire you.”

“Not interested,” Wilson muttered. He turned away, thinking the man was a proselytizer for the Church of the Source. Once he got safely inside his apartment, he was going to call the neighborhood association and find out why they were letting one of them operate here.

“I mean it. We'd like to hire you, Wilson. At a much higher salary and with medical benefits that a skinflint operation like Pharos would never dream of offering.”

Wilson turned around, the sweat breaking out along his neck in the late-afternoon Sun.

“Just who the hell are you?”

“My name's de Hagen. I work for Avatar. You're the man who discovered the pheromone that creates team spirit, which is why we'd like you to run our research program on memory enhancement.”

Wilson looked at de Hagen's eyes. You could tell a lot about a man that way. But de Hagen's eyes were lifeless; they made him think of his father's after he'd died, lying there on the hospital gurney.

Must be full of programming, Wilson thought. That's what a cheap-jack outfit like Avatar has to do to keep the hired help from telling business secrets to the competition. That's what eyes like that mean.

“Listen,” Wilson said as quietly as he could, “it's probably not a good idea to try to meet me here. You know Pharos spies on its employees, don't you?”

“That's why I didn't phone.”

“Make sure you never do.”

“I promise not to. But take this and get in touch.” The man fumbled for something in his shirt pocket. “This will tell you what to do.”

De Hagen fished out a small package, about the size of a box of cold tablets, and passed it to Wilson, then walked away.

Once he got into his apartment, Wilson found Ellen rocking Jason in the rocking chair by the front window. Jason was asleep. He bent over and kissed her and she held onto his arm.

“Who was that man talking to you on the sidewalk?” she asked softly, nodding toward the window.

“I don't know,” Wilson told her. “Some kind of woo-woo nut, I guess.”

Ellen looked at him and it seemed to Wilson she was scared.

“That was an awfully long conversation for dealing with a woo-woo nut.”

Wilson took a deep breath and looked at the packet in his hands, proof that he was a traitor to the Pharos way of life.

“What was he saying?” Ellen asked.

“I couldn't figure it out,” Wilson told her. “At first I thought he was from the Church of the Source.”

She shook her head slowly. “Tony, I heard something on the radio today that disturbed me. Does your boss, that Pettimento fellow—does he have a relative working in the governor's office in Sacramento?”

“I don't have a clue.”

“Well, it was a man named Pettimento, and he was going on and on about how only the libertarian agenda could restore the freedoms we've given up, and how we just need more law and order and less and less government. Everything he said was like that—self-contradictory, but put in a way so you had to think about it before you realized just how contradictory it was. And after the interview, the announcer said this was the man who was developing the governor's social policy.”

“Ellen, you know I don't follow politics.”

“Well, Tony, this really scared me. And when I see you talking to strangers on the street, that scares me, too.”

He reached out and held her hand.

“Don't worry, babe. Everything's going to be all right.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

9.

Sitting in the actinic L.A. sunshine looking at his reflection in the windshield of the rental pod, de Hagen kept trying to think about anything but about how badly he needed to hire this guy away from Pharos. Headquarters was in real trouble over the problems they were having with the memory enhancement drug, the cost overruns, the FDA and the NIH subpoenaing the files....

And if they didn't get somebody like a Tony Wilson on the job, the Feds might shut down the whole division. At least Avatar's eavesdropping viruses had been right on target when it came to the timing of the approach.

Nevertheless, de Hagen hated recruiting.

It made him feel...*bad*.

But he had to keep at it because of the agenda item that must not be mentioned. Even thinking that he wasn't supposed to be thinking about it almost set off his programming. He had to sit there for several minutes until the tremors stopped, gripping the steering wheel to keep from collapsing.

After he was sure the trembling had abated, he took a deep breath, started the engine and headed back toward Interstate 405. At the hotel they'd told him to avoid the “nogo” zone between the airport and Long Beach—they were expecting a lot of trouble because the Fourth of July was coming up, and there was always a riot in the nogo on the Fourth, they said. As long as he kept the pod on autopilot, he

figured he wouldn't have any trouble finding the restaurant the hotel staff had recommended.

Then he saw the construction zone ahead and the signs in Spanish. His high school Spanish wasn't enough to help him figure out what the sign said; all he could figure out was that “zona no vaya” must mean “nogo.”

He wound his way through the traffic barriers and heard a helicopter flying overhead. Then he put his foot on the brake and coasted up to a sign in English that read:

“Warning—Automatic pilot zone ends—Resume manual steering.”

“Shit.” De Hagen clicked off the autopilot. At least there wasn't much traffic, he thought as he started to maneuver through the orange plastic cones. As far as he could tell he was now heading due south. But then he came to a maze of construction barriers and by the time he got through that he wasn't sure which way he was headed.

In the distance he saw a work crew putting up another sign, so he slowed down to read it.

“Warning,” it read, “entering NOGO zone.”

A state highway patrolman standing at the exit was waving toward him, so he pulled over and rolled down the window to talk to him.

“Sorry about the signs,” the patrolman said as he leaned over to speak. “Somebody stole ‘em all this morning. Any way, I have to read you your van Volt rights.”

“What's that?” de Hagen asked.

“Under the van Volt decree, you have the right to enter the nogo zone at your own risk.”

“So how do I get back out?”

The patrolman smiled. “Okay. I'll take that as a decision. What you need to do is go down Orange Street, here, and then to the third light and you'll be able to get back onto the freeway and out of the zone.”

“Uh, thanks.” He nodded at the patrolman and started driving.

De Hagen took the exit and found himself in an almost Disneyesque, bland, twentieth-century-looking neighborhood of dull tract houses. It took him about a block before he realized that all of them were burned-out hulls.

He passed the first light. A derelict school bus blocked one of the side streets there.

The second light was a couple of blocks farther along Orange Street. But when he got to the light he found that the intersection was blocked off in two directions by the wrecked bodies of burned-out cars.

Jesus, he thought, this doesn't look good at all.

He crossed the intersection and pulled into an alley, backed out, and started to turn around to retrace his tracks.

A little four wheeler pulled out of a parking lot and cut right in front of him, then halted.

De Hagen rolled down his window and yelled, “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

His programming started bubbling up inside him, trying to calm him down. A tremor passed through his legs and he felt dizzy, but then he realized that something was coming toward him along the side of the pod.

He turned to see a kid with a gun.

“Get outta the pod, suit, or I'll blow ya freakin’ brains out.”

De Hagen stared at the heavily tattooed and pierced face with the word Nomad stenciled on the forehead and then at the unwavering barrel of the pistol pointed straight at him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

10.

“He don't look too good,” the gunman said to his companion after they dragged de Hagen's unconscious form out of the back seat of their car.

“I bet we get a big-bucks ransom for him,” said the short one, the one who called himself Rico.

“We're gonna have fun tryin',” Nomad answered, smiling.

[Back to Table of Contents]

11.

Wilson had started the coffee maker and Ellen had just started her shower when the phone rang.

“Good morning,” a baritone voice said, “is Tony Wilson there?”

Wilson couldn't figure out who it was and the screen just blinked “processing” instead of displaying a caller ID. “Speaking,” he answered.

“This is Roger Pettimento.”

“Uh—good morning, sir.”

“Wilson, I'm sorry to bother you at home, but we've got to ask you to come in early this morning.”

“But I've got to help prep our son—”

“There's been quite a development overnight. Have you listened to the news this morning?”

“No.”

“Well, let me fill you in. A gang of tribalists abducted an executive from Avatar Interfacial. One of the gang members survived the rescue.”

“And what happened to the guy from Avatar?”

“He's okay. In the hospital.” Pettimento coughed. “Excuse me. The Entity has decided we have an extraordinary opportunity here. Management thinks the tribalist they've captured would make an excellent test case for karatonin. We need a planning session about how to proceed, so I'd like you and Allison Swansea to meet me in my office at 7:30.”

Ellen was going to have a fit when she heard this, Wilson thought.

“Could we make it eight, Dr. Pettimento?” Wilson started thinking that no paycheck was worth this kind of trouble.

“I'm sorry, Wilson. It's got to be 7:30. I've got to catch an 8:30 flight to Sacramento to see if we can be declared the child's corporate guardian.”

Wilson cleared his throat. “Okay.”

“I knew I could count on you.” The line went dead.

[Back to Table of Contents]

12.

“They want you to do what?” Ellen shouted. Her face was red.

“Please don't raise your voice, love. You might wake Jason.”

She nodded. “You'd better get going, Tony. Otherwise I'm afraid I'll be so angry at them that I'll start yelling at you.” She grabbed him and hugged him and rocked her head against his shoulder.

[Back to Table of Contents]

13.

Pettimento switched on his office security unit and leaned across his desk.

“Here's the video of the capture that the police released to the news nets this morning,” Pettimento said, looking first at Allison Swansea—Wilson's immediate supervisor—and then at Wilson.

The wall screen dilated into a view of the police dragging a young, apparently white, male out of one of the burned-out houses at the northern edge of the nogo zone. He wore swastika earrings and his face was heavily tattooed.

“So that's our boy,” Swansea murmured, brushing one hand over her frosted hair. “Any information about who he is?”

“Not yet,” Pettimento answered. With every word he spoke, Pettimento beat his right hand on the desktop. “But the legal department says we can still file for guardian status on a John Doe basis.”

“We probably can, Roger,” Allison said, “but what happens if he turns out to be the child of some important family who then turns around and sues us?”

Pettimento leaned back from his desk.

“And on what basis could they sue us?” Pettimento's fingers drummed away at the desktop.

“Oh, how about wrongful pursuance of custody?” Allison pulled her hair back into a ponytail and then let it go across her shoulders. “Just because the libertarians are in the

governor's office in Sacramento doesn't mean that child custody law has gone away, you know."

"I want you to take that up with legal as soon as we're done here." Pettimento turned to Wilson. "And here's what I want the research department to do," Pettimento said, leaning across the desk. "Convert this little tribalist into a respectable member of society."

Wilson nodded. "Well, we'll try." Wilson glanced over at Allison. She was leaning her head to one side; he couldn't tell if she understood just how difficult this was likely to be. "But I think we've got to understand that there are probably a lot of things wrong with this kid that we can't take care of with karatonin."

"I'm counting on you, Wilson." With a sort of automatic smile, Pettimento drummed out the words with his forefinger, then leaned forward across his desk again. "Because this is what's going to bury the competition. I find it deliciously ironic that Avatar fell into this sort of misadventure. It serves them right for being such heavy-handed—" Pettimento caught himself short, composed his features, and smiled. Calmly he added, "It's the opportunity of a lifetime, and we've got to seize it."

"I absolutely agree, Dr. Pettimento." Wilson clutched his hands together to keep them from shaking. "But we've got to keep in mind that any behavioral modification program with a subject with other psychological problems is going to take several months."

“Not a problem,” Pettimento replied, glancing at his wristwatch. “As long as we can show a little progress every few weeks.”

Allison nodded. “I think *that's* a safe bet, don't you, Tony?”

Wilson took her tone of voice as a signal that there was no chance he was going to be allowed to design this particular project.

“As long as we don't expect miracles,” Wilson answered, “we should be all right. All the test cases showed at least some improvement after a couple of weeks.”

“That's all I'm asking for,” Pettimento said, raising his right hand as though he were going to catch a softball. “Do this for me, Wilson, and I'll make sure we get some kind of special care for that son of yours.”

Wilson looked up into Pettimento's face. Despite himself, Wilson's throat filled and he had to swallow several times before he could say, “Thank you, sir.”

“Roger,” Swansea said, “while we're on the subject, we really need to send a note to the Avatar people expressing our sympathy for their man de Hagen.”

Pettimento looked non-plussed. “Why's that?”

“Because it's fitting,” Swansea said sweetly. “Besides, they'll think we had something to do with it if we don't.”

Pettimento nodded as though he understood. “Take care of it, won't you?” Then he nodded again and stood up. The meeting was finished.

[Back to Table of Contents]

14.

“We haven't seen a programming implant like yours for quite a while,” the doctor told de Hagen, crossing her arms.

De Hagen tried to smile. He was not going to get into a discussion of how his parents had developed this particular programming device in order to convince the judge to let him have an implant rather than do jail time for getting caught with all that fine cocaine and heroin in his veins. It was so typical of his parents to develop a new technology to compensate for their failings as human beings, and then to make a fortune out of it. Oh, and by the way, Richie boy, sorry about the side-effects.

“I was one of the first trial cases,” he said quietly.

The doctor nodded. “Well, you didn't suffer much in the way of trauma, so we're going to discharge you, but if you have any trouble with your implant, I want you to get medical attention right away. Is that clear?” She gave him a condescending look.

“What kind of trouble are we talking about?”

“Oh, dizziness.” She shrugged. “A ringing in your ears, or any kind of visual. Unusual depth perception, flashes of color—that sort of thing.”

“Okay.”

“Well, then.” She stood up and added, “You're free to go,” and left the hospital room.

He'd gotten through the discussion without thinking of topic number one. Call it a small victory, he told himself.

When he made it back to his hotel he called headquarters.

“Good morning,” he said when he got through to O'Georgeovich's office. “Is she in?”

“Oh, Mr. de Hagen,” the secretary answered, “hold for just a minute.”

De Hagen didn't recognize the secretary's voice and couldn't tell if she was real or sim. Deep beneath the heavy layers of his programming, he felt a twinge of inadequacy over not being able to figure out which she was.

“The Ms. has asked you to talk directly to the AI. Please hold.”

“Uh, hello?” He didn't really want to talk to artificial intelligence right now. But the beeping on the line indicated that the connection was already going through.

“Richard, my boy!” The resonant baritone boomed out, jubilant as always, the simulated voice of the artificial personality that held the Avatar Consortium together. “Thank the good Lord that you've come through this all right.”

“Well, I'm glad, too.”

“And, Richard—how did you make out with your assignment?”

De Hagen had to think for a minute exactly what the AI meant; so much had happened he'd put Wilson out of his thoughts.

“Well, I wouldn't say I made much progress. At least I made contact. But not much more than that.”

“Don't sound so crestfallen, my boy. You did your best.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't worry about it. Now, here's what our contacts have come up with: The competition is going to try to make an example of that lad who helped abduct you. Seems they're going to have him made a ward of their company. You can do that under some of this confounded legislation out there in California.”

“So we played right into their hands.”

“Maybe so, my boy. Maybe so. But there's no sign they had a direct hand in what happened to you. One could argue, of course, that the competition's support for all these political splinter parties set the scene for what befell you.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It's my fault. I shouldn't have gotten anywhere near the nogo zone.” De Hagen's hands started trembling and the inside of his head started to fizz. He was edging toward anger and his programming was trying to pull him back.

“Self-recrimination will not help, Richard.” The AI cleared its simulated throat. “I think you should change your ticket and come home. If needs be, we can always send you back out again.”

“All right.” De Hagen breathed deep, and the trembling in his hands began to abate. “I'll be on the next flight out.”

“And when you get back, we need to have a conference on what to do about the competition's plan for this delinquent who attacked you.” The AI almost sounded bitter. “The Ms. will be in touch when you get back.”

“Right.”

Just as soon as he put the headset in its cradle, the phone rang again.

“Hello?”

“Richard, how are you?”

Even worse than the AI—it was his mother.

[Back to Table of Contents]

15.

Maybe she hadn't really understood what Wilson had said. Allison Swansea asked quietly, “Would you repeat that?”

“I said the kid tried to commit suicide last night.”

Allison sat down. This was the worst possible way to begin a Wednesday morning. Pettimento always held a senior management meeting at 9:00 on Wednesdays. He was going to want a very complete record of what had happened to Rico, the young tribalist, now that they had removed all the temporary tattoos and had started him off as a ward of the company....

“Give me the whole dump.” Allison gestured vaguely toward the chair across from her desk. “And please sit down.”

“About eleven last night,” Wilson said as he took a seat, “Rico tried to hang himself using his bedsheets. We've got sims monitoring all the time, so we had an agent in there before he could do himself any harm.”

“Have we had—anybody talk to him yet?”

“That's why I'm here. I think you should come with me.”

She nodded.

“Now.”

“Good God, Tony. I've got the nine o'clock meeting to go to.”

“That's in twenty minutes. Spend just a couple of minutes with me, talking to Rico. He's down from the euphoric they gave him, and the sims claim he's maintaining.”

She counted to ten under her breath. This was a part of the adventure that she didn't want to experience, thank you very much.

Trying to sound as commanding as she could, she asked, “Why don't you get somebody from med?”

“Because you're a clinical psycho-pharmacist, Allison. And you're good at this sort of thing. In fact, we don't really have anybody better.” He took a deep breath. “And you might recall that management has enjoined us from hiring any outside help on this case.”

She glanced at him blankly—a look intended to remind him that she was in charge—then nodded once. “You're right. I'd better have a first-hand report for the meeting.” She got up and headed out the door. Wilson raced after her.

[Back to Table of Contents]

16.

"So are you, like, supposed to be my mom or somethin'?" Rico asked from his perch on the back of the sofa in his psychotropically pink room.

"No, Rico. I'm Allison Swansea."

Rico sat there without moving. He wasn't frowning, but he sure wasn't smiling.

"We wanted to see how you were doing, Rico," Tony said, trying to exude a fatherly warmth.

"Well, it sucks in here." He glanced from Allison to Tony and back again.

"Why's that, Rico?" Allison asked.

"Everything. You wiped all my tats off. You make me wear this stuff." He plucked at his plain blue T-shirt. "It's all bullshit." He slid down the back of the sofa and sat cross-legged on the cushions. "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit."

Rico began slapping the cushions as hard as he could.

"Hey—it's going to be all right," Tony said, walking toward him with his arms outstretched.

Rico started screaming and leaped toward Tony with his fists flying. Tony spread his hands, palms outward, to keep the kid at bay.

With a loud clicking sound, one of the sim agents opened the door and walked in. Rico took one look at the robot and fell silent, retreating toward the nearest corner of the room.

"I hate them," he muttered.

Allison touched Tony's arm.

“I'm afraid it's time to go,” she said quietly. Then, turning toward the boy, she added, “Rico, I'll be back later in the day.”

“Thanks for coming,” Rico growled.

[Back to Table of Contents]

17.

“We need to win this one,” Pettimento told them, tapping the conference table with his fingers in time to his words. His eyes scored Allison, then raked across Wilson. Something about them made Tony think of cigarette ashes.

“If we can show,” Pettimento went on, tapping his finger, “that we can turn around a completely screwed-up character like this kid, I dare say that none of the competition will stand a chance against us.” Pettimento mustered up a confident smile and gazed along the conference table, pausing briefly to nod at Dietrich from the marketing department, and finally focusing on Allison.

Wilson noticed that a muscle in Allison's eyelid was twitching.

“And so, Allison, we'd be grateful if you could fill us in on our progress.”

“All right,” she answered, trying to sound confident. “Well, as you all know,” she glanced around the room and then turned back toward Pettimento, “we've had Rico with us for almost two weeks now. We've made some improvement. For example, he's put on three kilos and seems to have a more healthy appetite. But we had a bad night last night; I won't try to put this diplomatically.” She inhaled deeply. “Rico tried to commit suicide.”

Pettimento's face seemed to collapse. “I'm sorry to hear that,” he muttered. Several others around the table echoed his words.

With a nod of her head, Allison said, “I've decided that we have to begin an entire battery of reprogramming. Rico's got to be able to maintain.”

Pettimento lowered his head. “I can't emphasize sufficiently the importance of your succeeding.”

“I think we've got to be careful,” Wilson told him.

Pettimento turned and glared at him.

“I think that goes without saying.” Pettimento frowned. “That will be all.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

18.

They'd managed to get Jason to bed early enough so that Ellen could go for one of her long runs, and Wilson sat on the couch, trying to figure out how much he could say before his programming knocked him out.

There had to be a way that he could tell Ellen what he thought about the way the human trial was going. Just avoid the details and tell her that he thought everything was going disastrously wrong. Behind him he heard the front door open.

“Lover, I'm back,” Ellen said quietly.

She sat down beside him and kissed him on the cheek. Heat cascaded off her face and she smiled at him with that amazing calm that always rose up inside her after she'd gone running.

“Honey, what's the matter?” she asked. “Are you coming down with something?”

“No. I'm okay.”

“But you look like you've got a fever.”

He shifted on the couch so he could face her. “Ellen, this is hard for me. There's trouble at work.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“They're running a....” His concentration drifted off. “They're doing something that's just bad science,” he managed to say at last.

“Really? I thought they were supposed to be such a reputable company.”

He shrugged. “I guess they think it must be good business or something.”

“Or they're trying to show off so their lobbyists can get some kind of tax break in Washington.”

“I never thought of that.” He reached out and grasped her hands in his. “You know how much I hate politics.” He raised her hands, kissed them and added, “I *never* would have thought of that.”

She leaned toward him. “Tony, is this so bad you might lose your job?”

Involuntarily, he shuddered. The programming was trying to make him so sick he couldn't answer.

“Maybe.” His heart started pounding irregularly. “But if I keep a low-enough profile, I think I can survive.”

“Well, we can always ask my father for help—if it comes down to that.”

Wilson shook his head. “No, babe. I won't let that happen. He'll try to make us put Jason in a home again, and I won't let that happen. I won't.”

“Shhh.” She reached out and pulled him close. “Don't wake Jason.”

She started fumbling at his chest.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh. I'm unbuttoning your shirt.” She pulled him yet closer and kissed him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

19.

Two days after they started adding karatonin to Rico's food, Wilson met the adolescent psychologist they'd hired on contract, Dr. Richard Tare.

“Call me Surf,” Tare said with a broad smile. “And never call me doctor.”

“Even in front of Swansea?” Tony asked.

“Especially in front of her.” Tare shook his head. “Now let's see if we can get this young man interested in education.”

They walked into the encounter room where Rico was waiting for them.

“Good morning, Rico,” Tare said as they entered the room.

Rico looked up from his gameboy at Tare and said, “Hi, Surf.”

“Hi, Rico,” Wilson added. Rico nodded back.

“So like, I've got a thing to put you,” Tare said, cutting the air with one hand, thumb and little finger extended. “We got a man here to get you, like, the same as school.”

“Yeah?” Rico looked interested. “Could I, uh, play sports?”

“You score a degree in Frisbee, my man,” Tare replied.

“Couldn't you just teach me how to ride curl?”

“I gotta talk with the big ones, but we'll see.” Tare turned toward Wilson and asked, “Do you think we can get authorization for me to teach Rico to surf?”

Wilson shrugged his shoulders. “I don't see why not. But we'll have to ask, of course.”

Tare turned back to Rico. “So, like, there you are where you are.”

Rico laughed.

“But we got to get you an education, Rico. Seriously.”

“Like, I was ready for that. You know I can read, don'cha?”

“Yeah. But there's a lot more to it.”

“As long as I get to surf.” Rico smiled shyly.

“We'll work it.”

Wilson was having trouble following what they were talking about, so it was a relief to follow Tare out into the hall. Once outside, Wilson asked, “What the hell was that all about?”

Tare chuckled. “To get a degree in adolescent psychology today, dude, you got to qualify in youthspeak.” Tare shook his head and smiled. “Mr. Rico is willing. I don't know about ready and able, but he's definitely willing.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

20.

That night, at Surf's request, Rico started keeping a journal. Surf had told him that he had to write in longhand in a spiral-bound notebook, on paper. His first entry read: “It suks here. But at least they dont treet me like real bad like Nomad wich is an improovment I guess.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

21.

Two weeks later Pettimento called, his voice heavy through the telephone, sounding almost like the beginning of a rock slide.

“Allison,” he said, “I need some kind of progress report on Rico.”

She'd been working through the quarterly marketing report and it took her a moment to realize what Pettimento was talking about. Then it clicked.

“Didn't we just send you the weekly evaluation?”

“Yes you did, Allison. But I need something more.”

What was going on here? she wondered. Out loud she asked, “Can you be more specific, Rog?”

Pettimento cleared his throat nervously. “What I need is something that shows karatonin is helping the kid.”

“Hmm.” She tapped her pen against the hardcopy marketing report. “Let me talk with people and get back to you.”

Very quietly he added, “I need something for tomorrow morning.”

“We'll have it for you.”

“Thanks.” Pettimento hung up.

Allison sat there wondering what was wrong with Pettimento now. It had to be some kind of demand from the Entity itself. Nobody else could have had quite that intense an effect on the jerk.

[Back to Table of Contents]

22.

Tare saw the message from Swansea on his machine when he came back to his office.

"Urgent. Please come in person to Room 1433, East Tower," it read, "Secure meeting soonest before COB. Repeat, urgent. Thanks.—Allison. (:"

His immediate response was to murmur, "What the hey?" As he stood there waiting for his lower brain to stop broadcasting retaliatory lizard thoughts, it occurred to him that this was a message loaded with semantic interference, a veritable Cadillac of cognitive dissonance. That repetition of the word "urgent," for instance—that looked like sheer fear.

It was already after five when he headed out of his office and over to the executive tower. Once he got past the sims and into her office he realized that the vice president for research was not just scared, but outright panicky.

"Oh—hello." She looked up with a start from her computer screen. Her entire affect screamed out for sleep, with a faint, desperate undertone of sexual need. Tare considered that prospect, then rejected it. Too many grappling hooks.

"I got your message. What's it all about?"

"I wish I knew." She pulled back her shoulder-length brown hair with both hands. Tare thought it was one of the better erotic gestures he'd seen in, oh, the last thirty minutes. Then she reached out and flicked on the office security system. "I got a frantic call from the 18th floor asking for a brand-new report on our friend Rico. Something

that will—and I'm quoting now—show that ‘karatonin is improving the boy.'" She blew out her cheeks in a surprisingly good imitation of Pettimento.

"That's not so hard to show. I've taken him out surfing twice now, and I think there are actually some times when he's been happy." He smiled, remembering Rico laughing as he first stood up on his board. "Out there on the water, anyway."

Swansea nodded and smiled vaguely. "Are you keeping a journal on him?"

"You know I am. It's company policy."

"I think that'll do it. Can you release it to me and Pettimento?" She shivered. It looked to Tare very much like a suppressed panic response.

"Yes," he said slowly. "But I don't like the idea."

"I'm ordering you to turn it over," she told him, frowning like a Marine Corps drill instructor.

"Well, that's just fine and dandy, but first you're going to have to listen to my five bucks' worth." He cleared his throat to make sure he wasn't going to sound overbearing. "Karatonin works by enhancing the caudal area's judgmental functions, so in most cases, it's like a cup of coffee in the morning. But for about five percent of the people who take it, it causes depression. Nothing we've seen suggests it can increase intelligence, or overcome the kind of culture that turns people into couch potatoes."

Her frown became deeper. "And now that you've gotten that off your chest, I suppose you want to complain about the circus going on at the state capitol in Sacramento."

He shrugged. “Not particularly.”

She stopped frowning and raised one eyebrow quizzically. “You don't strike me as the libertarian type.”

“Well, basically—they're not really libertarians.”

Leaning back in her chair, she laughed. “You *are* one of us, aren't you?”

“They're just hangers-on in Sacramento,” he told her, trying not to show his anger at the state government. “They can talk the talk about reducing the federal government to nothing and dropping taxes in favor of users’ fees. But they've got nothing to do with real libertarianism.”

She smiled and shook her head. “So that means you're an independent.”

“Pretty much.”

“Take it from me—you're going to have to learn to shut up if you're going to make it in this company.”

“I'll take that under advisement.”

She cleared her throat. “Look. Send me your journal pages. Whether or not we're improving Rico's caudal matter.” She smiled a peanut-brittle smile.

“Right.” Dismissal time, Private Tare.

“Thanks.”

Tare nodded and left. Out in the hall, walking past the office of the vice president for nuance, he started berating himself for shooting his mouth off.

Her comment about keeping his mouth shut kept going around and around in his head. Unless you help this kid out, Tare thought, that particular conversation at this particular time means you're screwed.

[Back to Table of Contents]

23.

Rico sat down at the end of the day and wrote in his journal: “Today I wached a video. About hows come pepel are bad. Its becuz people are not responsebul enuf. It sed if you are responsebul then you will be a produktiv meber of sosiety. I wasnt sure if they know what they meen. Wen I axed wat, all Surf sed was I would find out. I hate wen they cant explain what they talking about. But it made me think about something scarey. About what I should do. But I dont think Im old enuf for that. Not yet anyway.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

24.

Almost a month after Tare began tutoring Rico, something happened that surprised Tare. Partway through a survey of 20th century history, Rico froze and seemed to withdraw so completely that not even a video about the Battle of Midway could coax him out of his shell.

After the video was over, Rico sat there, staring at nothing.

Finally Tare gave up trying to teach the material and said, “Like, Rico, I thought you were interested in this stuff.”

Rico shrugged but wouldn't look at Tare.

“Wasn't that a cool video?”

Rico nodded.

“And yesterday you were like, the book on the Second World War is way cool. And today you won't even look at the video. What's happened, man?”

He didn't look at Tare when he muttered, “I started to—” Then he fell silent for a moment. “I just can't, Surf.”

“Dude, what's wrong?”

The boy nodded his head as though it were weighted. It was almost like the gesture of a small child, Tare thought, not a fifteen-year-old. Retreat into a prepubescent pattern definitely meant something very bad had happened.

“Dude, can you show me what's wrong?”

Without saying a word, keeping his head bowed, Rico opened the book and handed it to Tare.

It was open to a chapter titled, “The Holocaust: The Destruction of the European Jews.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

25.

In his journal that night, Rico wrote: “Surf is my best friend in this place. He says I am doing good at school but I still need to develop a sens of balans about things. What Surf doesnt unnerstand is that Im special. I have the ability to swallow up all the troubles in the world and do something about them. The more I think about the more I guess it doesnt matter how old I am. If Im the special one then I have to do it.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

26.

Tare slammed the report down on Swansea's desk.

“You've got to take that kid off karatonin,” he told Swansea, almost growling. He couldn't help himself. “It's making him blame himself for everything. And he's got no way to deal with it. Before you know it, he'll probably be psychotic.”

Swansea's nostrils flared. “I said I would take your recommendation into consideration, Dr. Tare.”

“And I'm telling you that if you don't stop giving Rico this stuff I'm going to quit.”

Once more her nostrils flared.

“Dr. Tare, I accept your resignation, effective immediately.”

“You can't do that!” He slapped his hands together.

“I think the recording will make it quite clear that you offered your resignation after it became obvious that you could not carry out the policy of this corporation. Now I would be grateful if you would leave my office.”

As her words sank in, Tare began to feel like he was floating—and the office seemed to have tilted about forty degrees to one side.

“And I hope the recording also demonstrates,” he told her, “that I tried to warn you that this program isn't going to work. The kid's too screwed up.”

Swansea glared at him. “Get out now before I call security.”

“I'm going.” He backed away until he felt the doorknob behind him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

27.

Rico's last journal entry read: “There's no other way. There just isn't. If they can kill off millions and millions of people in holocausts then it does not matter what happens to me. Because I am another one of the special ones. We only come along every few centuries but no matter what we do another one of us will have to come along again to try to make things better. Eventually things will get better as long as we keep trying.

“So I guess I've decided to do it.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

28.

Allison nodded vigorously at the screen as the Entity concluded its instructions: “Start giving the boy moral and religious instruction, and you'll see all the difference in the world.”

She typed, “Right away.” The screen went blank, and Allison told the sims to get her the woman at the top of the short list to replace Tare—Cynthia Pancras. Allison typed a few notes for her work journal until the woman's pudgy face appeared on the video screen.

“Good morning, Cynthia,” Allison said.

“Good morning to you, Ms. Swansea. Let me say it's a privilege to talk to you.” Pancras smiled. Swansea thought it was one of the ugliest grimaces she'd ever seen.

“Let me say at the outset, Pancras, that you come highly recommended. Any initial thoughts about the approach you'd like to take with our very troubled young man?”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I hope you won't be offended ... if I tell you that I don't think all these secular humanist history and adventure films he's been exposed to have helped him to adjust to reality. Instead, I think we need to emphasize morality.”

“You mean the Bible?”

“Oh yes.” Pancras gazed up expectantly, almost grinning. “Don't you think that's what's been missing in the boy's program?”

Allison thought the Entity would be overjoyed, if it were capable of anything remotely like an emotion.

“Sounds exactly like what he needs to me,” Allison told her, smiling as warmly as she could.

[Back to Table of Contents]

29.

Rico had been thinking about it since the whole scene with Nomad ended that long gone, nogo day. The way out. The end.

The air's so heavy, like rocks piled up on top of you, Rico thought as he walked toward the Metro station. Almost like a voice inside his head, something said, “Maybe you'd be able to figure out another way.” But there wasn't one. He'd been thinking about it for all these months, and there just wasn't another way.

When he was out there on the ocean, when they'd let him go surfing, the voice had gone away for a while. But then it came back when he came into shore. So he'd been maintaining and forcing himself to read. It wasn't too bad until he read that story about the holocaust. And the Bible stuff just made it worse. He couldn't stop thinking, why was the world so bad, and why couldn't he just have a boring old mom and dad like everybody else, and why couldn't he have helped them be better people....

And the answer was that it was all his fault.

Like Dad used to say, “If you wasn't here, I'd be free.”

But it was only in the last week, after they started having him read the New Testament, that Rico began to realize he was just like Jesus. Sometimes he started wondering if maybe he *was* Jesus. He was supposed to come back, after all. And then he figured out that there were special ones that came

along every few centuries, only most of them didn't get a religion built around them.

But what had kept him from making the decision was that everything he did was wrong and he hurt inside all the time and there was just one way out. Only that wasn't the way Jesus felt. But he finally figured out that Jesus had felt just the same way he felt, only the people around him didn't understand what was going on inside his head.

Rico walked up the steps to the Metro station and put his farecard through the turnstile and walked onto the platform. The sign showed the train was due in two minutes.

He'd done a good enough job of maintaining so that they kept telling him he was getting better and they started to let him go outside. Eventually they let him take the Metro on his own. Dr. Swansea kept saying what he needed was to get out. So they gave him a farecard and started him going to the YMCA. The swimming he liked. But the team sports were, like, so boring.

Still, when he was playing softball and standing out in left field with the Sun waving down at him from the cement-colored sky, he had time to think. And that's how he finally figured out how to do it.

If you've got all the things that are wrong in the world inside you, he thought as he looked across to second base, you have to take them all with you. You've got to do it.

He saw the train rushing toward him along the track.

Even if you don't really want to, you've got to do it. Everything wrong in the world will end with you if you just....

Be like Jesus.

And as he jumped in front of the train, he thought, I forgive even you, Nomad, for making me have sex with you all those times.

The train smelled like oil and ozone and sounded like bowling pins scattering—

[Back to Table of Contents]

30.

Wilson thought Pettimento looked like hell. The bags under his eyes were the color of dead orchids. Wilson couldn't stand to look at him anymore, so he focused his attention on the signed photo hanging on the wall: the governor dressed as Annie Oakley, cradling a shotgun in each arm, like something from one of the cheap souvenir stands at Hollywood and Vine.

Without looking up, Pettimento said, “The Entity is very disappointed that the team was not able to prevent Rico from killing himself.” After tapping his hands against the desktop, he looked up and almost whispered, “They've told me that they would accept both of your resignations.”

“But Rog,” Allison sputtered, “that's not at all called for.”

A warning chime rang and a synthetic voice announced: “Emergency call from your brother in Sacramento.”

Pettimento frowned deeply and muttered, “Excuse me.” He picked up a handset and spoke quietly, then turned away from the others. At one point he almost shouted, “She did what?” He said something very quietly about calling back, then returned the handset to its cradle.

For several seconds, Pettimento stared at the top of his desk.

Wilson and Swansea looked at one another nervously. Sweat rolled down from Wilson's armpits and the sound of his heart drummed repeatedly in his ears.

At last Pettimento said, “That's the Entity's offer.” He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“So you're looking for a scapegoat,” Wilson said.

Allison turned and stared into Wilson's eyes. “Damn it all, Wilson, can't you shut up?”

“Excuse me,” Wilson snapped back. “You were the one who overruled Dr. Tare, who was the only one who kept saying that karatonin wasn't going to help the kid.” He turned back to Pettimento. “And because you wouldn't have done any of this without authorization from the Entity, which means that there's something really wrong at the heart of this company, I'm not going to tender my resignation. I want to stay here and fix it.”

“The Entity has offered you a chance to resign,” Pettimento said, his voice a distracted monotone.

“Well, I have news for you.” Wilson looked over at Swansea, who shook her head and wouldn't look him in the eye. “You're going to have to fire me.”

Pettimento looked at Wilson.

“Then you're fired,” Pettimento said coldly. “Report to personnel right now.”

“And maybe it's just in the nick of time,” Wilson said as he left.

Swansea raised her eyebrows as Wilson went out the door.

Once the door had closed, she said calmly, “You realize that under the terms of my contract you can't fire me.”

Pettimento nodded. “I'm aware of that,” he replied without looking up.

As calmly as she could, she told him, “Let me assure you that I'll have your resignation before you ever get mine.” Without looking backward, she left the room.

[Back to Table of Contents]

31.

“This is Allison Swansea. I need an immediate personal audience with the Entity.” She sat there, looking at the cool aquamarine walls of her office while the sims digested her request.

“One moment,” the sim murmured. “One moment. We are processing.”

The screen turned a royal blue, and then the simulated face of the grand old man materialized.

“Allison, what's happened?” asked the fatherly voice.

“We're in very serious trouble. I've tried to buy us some time with the news agencies about the boy's suicide, but it's turning into an international story now.”

“Well, that was bound to happen. We've got to go on as best we can.” The old man smiled in a manner intended to restore confidence, a gesture that Allison's father had designed into the program when he was the head of design for Pharos. “I guess I shouldn't have let us do this sort of experiment until we had better long-term data.”

“That's why I wanted to talk to you right away. Roger Pettimento just fired the person who was most likely to be able to carry out the sort of research we needed to get out of trouble.”

“You mean the young Mr. Wilson.”

“I do.”

“Yes. Roger is telling me about that even as we speak.” There was that smile again.

“He'll have his reasons, of course,” Allison said. “But, as your records will show, Pettimento was responsible for rushing into this experiment. I did everything I could to make it succeed once we'd started. But I think we should have sought some additional cover by bringing in an external psychological assessment team. I take the blame for that. And as you'll recall, I fired the principal member of the assessment team with cause.”

“I didn't trust him either, Allison, once we saw what sort of man Dr. Tare really was.”

She took a deep breath. “I am invoking the ethics clause of my contract. I request that you either agree to let me go with the full severance package, or that you let Mr. Pettimento go and give me his job.”

The gaunt old man nodded. “Give me a moment, Allison. I'll have to process that.” The screen went blank, then shifted to royal blue again.

She knew what was going on, but that didn't make it any easier. The many artificial intelligences that managed various parts of the company were conferring. Each one of them was modeled to reproduce the talents of famous individuals, and that entailed dealing with some of the model's weaknesses as well. And so they were arguing, as any group of old people might, weighing whether she or Pettimento would do a better job in getting Pharos through this particular mess.

The face reappeared on the screen.

“We've decided to let Mr. Pettimento go. You'll need to assume his portfolio immediately.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

32.

It was three in the morning and Wilson sat alone in the living room, drinking a cup of cocoa, unable to sleep. All things considered, he thought, things weren't so bad. You've got six months' worth of unemployment and you got out when the going was good.

Still, Ellen hadn't taken it very well. She called and canceled the child-care service at once, even though he'd told her they had enough money to keep it.

You know if you're so worried about it, he told himself, you could always go and call Avatar and see if they still want you.

He sat there on the lounge chair without moving.

Somewhere he still had the package that the Avatar guy had given him. Quietly he got up and walked into the hall and started rummaging through the desk drawers. Then he remembered where he'd put it. It took a couple of minutes to move the chair and open the wall safe. The packet of pills was where he'd left it. He stuffed it into the breast pocket of his pajama tops and walked out to the kitchen and shut the door.

There, under the fluorescent light, he read for the first time through the indications notice on the back of the package. "Ultraviolet Night anti-dependent," the label said, "for use in overcoming psychological programming, including high-meme-content advertising, political and business propaganda."

By the time he got that far, his hands were shaking and he was feeling weak behind the knees. This was the stuff Pharos

had warned him about. But to get rid of the stuff Pharos had put into him, he had to....

Despite the quaking in his limbs, Wilson managed to fill a glass with water and pop one of the capsules.

[Back to Table of Contents]

33.

Allison Swansea finished her morning shower and decided she had to try to get Wilson back. It was as simple as that. As soon as she got out of the blow drier, she called the sims on her secure line.

“Call Tony Wilson and have him phone me this morning,” she said.

There was a brief humming on the line, then the synthetic voice announced, “We regret that he has programmed his system to reject any calls from the Pharos Corporation.”

“Damn,” she said, placing the handset carefully back in its cradle. She considered the alternatives, ruled them out, and decided to go see him herself.

[Back to Table of Contents]

34.

When he woke the next day, Wilson felt stronger than he usually did in the morning, even though he hadn't had much sleep. But there was something else going on inside him—something he couldn't quite describe....

Ellen noticed the difference right away.

“You got up in the middle of the night, lover,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I just couldn't sleep.”

She shook her head. “No, there's something else.”

“Well, I started taking some anti-programming pills.”

Ellen looked at him as though she hadn't heard him right.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“No—nothing. I just thought you used to say that Pharos didn't program its senior people.” She smiled nervously. “That's all.”

He almost laughed. “Well, I was wrong. Like I was about a lot of things.”

They had about an hour before Jason woke up, so they rushed through breakfast and Ellen went in and took her shower. Wilson sat down and phoned the Avatar headquarters number in Connecticut printed on the packet of Ultraviolet Night.

“The Avatar Instrumentality,” a male voice announced when the connection had gone through.

“Please connect me with Richard de Hagen.”

“Please hold.” A quiet rhythm track began playing.

When the music stopped, de Hagen came on the line. “Good morning, Tony. Can I help you?”

“I'd like to know if there's any chance your offer might still be open.”

“I'm not sure. I'll have to check.”

“Please. Please do.”

“Are you on a secure line?” de Hagen asked.

“Uh, no. Just my home phone.”

“We'll try to get back to you tomorrow.” De Hagen cut the connection.

Wilson looked at the handset and shook his head.

Somehow he'd thought that Avatar would have jumped at the chance to hire him. If they weren't interested anymore, then he was out of ideas.

How strange it felt to be a man bereft of ideas. Maybe he'd been programmed so long he wouldn't be able to adjust anymore; this could be just the first indication of what the rest of his life was going to be like. A snippet from one of his college textbooks came back to haunt him, something about how programming had developed in response to increasing global economic competition. Without the programming, was he going to be able to compete in the job market?

It was a question he couldn't answer.

But if it were true, how in the hell were they going to keep taking care of Jason? And until he was really free of the programming, how could he ever figure out what to do?

That was when it occurred to him that the one person who hadn't been given the full treatment had been the only contractor on the project—Surf Tare.

If there was anyone who could help him figure out what his options were, Tare was the man.

I've got to talk to the guy, he told himself. And not over the phone where anybody could listen in. But in person.

And while I'm at it, I'm going to ask him what he figures Pettimento was talking to his brother in Sacramento about, the day that I got fired.

[Back to Table of Contents]

35.

That morning, while Ellen was getting through the potty business with Jason, Wilson called Tare's office number, learned he was in, and decided to ask Ellen. After they had Jason settled in his playpen, Wilson broached the subject.

“Ellen, there's somebody I want to go see. He was the psychologist on the Rico case. He's working at a street clinic down in Long Beach.”

She nodded absently while trying to get Jason to play pattycake with her.

“The guy doesn't seem to have a personal phone, and the clinic told me I could probably see him this morning if I went down there in person.”

“Oh, Tony.” Her voice fell in disappointment, but she caught herself and tried not to let him see how much she didn't want him to go.

“Could you manage Jason alone this morning?”

She swallowed and tried to look brave. “You've really got to do this, don't you?”

He nodded. There wasn't anything else he needed to do more than just to talk with somebody else who knew what had happened.

Jason laughed.

“Did you hear that?” Ellen asked.

He laughed again.

“Jason, what a good boy!” Ellen said, leaning down to embrace him. Jason let her do it, although he quickly built up

that autistic wall between himself and the rest of the world once more.

Wilson hunkered down beside her. “It's going to be a good day. I'll be gone for just a couple of hours.”

She nodded, kissed him, and quickly turned back to Jason.

[Back to Table of Contents]

36.

Wilson had been gone about fifteen minutes when the doorbell rang. Jason had retreated into his quiet place, so she picked him up and put him in the playpen. Thinking Tony had forgotten something like his keys—which he did all the time—Ellen went to the front door without even looking at the security monitor.

There was a severe looking, ash-blonde woman in a practically martial linen business suit.

“Good morning. I'm Allison Swansea of the Pharos Corporation. I used to work with your partner, Tony Wilson.”

Ellen took an immediate dislike to her voice.

“Yes?”

“Is Tony home?”

“No, I'm sorry he isn't. What's it about?”

“Well, I've been put in charge of things—maybe you saw the news about the shake-up at the company...?”

“I'm sorry, we haven't. We've been kind of—tied up—since Tony was fired.”

“I see.” Swansea hadn't been expecting that. “Well, could you tell Tony to call me when he gets back? I think he'd like what I've done at the company. I've cleaned up a lot of the problems.” She fished out one of her business cards from her purse and handed it over to Ellen.

Ellen examined the card long enough to see that Swansea was listed as “senior vice president.” She looked up and said, “I'll tell him just as soon as he gets back from Long Beach.”

Swansea looked puzzled. “What's he doing in Long Beach?”

“He went down to talk to one of the people he used to work with. I'm sorry, I don't remember the name.” Ellen smiled as though she were a complete ditz because that was exactly the way Ms. Swansea made her feel.

“You mean you didn't hear they declared martial law down there?” Swansea shook her head.

“They did what?”

Swansea smiled as though she were talking to somebody's pet dog. “Well, as you say, you've been, uh, preoccupied.”

Ellen felt genuinely empty-headed now, and Jason began crying.

“You'll have to excuse me,” Ellen said, backing into the apartment and closing the door. She ran to see what Jason had done, but he seemed fine. He stopped crying when she picked him up, and she hugged him as though someone were trying to rip him out of her arms. She rocked him back and forth. Never again, she thought, am I going to let somebody look at me like I'm some sort of underling without spitting in her face.

[Back to Table of Contents]

37.

Swansea walked back to her pod and got her secure phone out of her purse.

“This is the vice president,” she said into the handset. It beeped twice, showing it had recognized her voice, and she was through to the Entity.

“What can I do for you, Allison?” the fatherly voice asked.

“Wilson went off to Long Beach this morning.”

“But there's serious trouble there—”

She nodded vigorously, even though there was no camera to catch her gesture. “Can you still track him? Or has he taken enough deprogramming to clean out his system?

“Just a moment, Allison.” There was a quiet hum to let her know the line was still secure. “Yes, we can still track him, although it's only a faint trace. He's on the trolley, headed into central Long Beach.”

“Can you get me a helicopter right away?”

“Oh, I'm afraid I can't recommend using a helicopter. Drive to the Santa Monica water taxi port, and we'll have a corporate speedboat waiting for you there.”

She programmed the dashboard computer. “It should take me about twenty minutes to get there.”

“The ship will be waiting when you arrive.”

“Fine. Out.” She switched off the phone, put it back in her purse, and started the pod's engine.

[Back to Table of Contents]

38.

Wilson looked up from his hard copy of *American Psycho-Chemical Review* because something flashed outside. He turned and looked out the window as the trolley rolled through the nogo zone. There was some sort of emergency van, lights flashing, driving alongside them.

He didn't think much of it. Must be a fire someplace, he thought. That was when he heard the shooting. Damn, he thought, it must be some kind of trouble in the nogo.

He'd been happy to be alone on the trolley, but now he wished there were somebody else on board. Or at least that he was still able to afford a portable phone. Then he could have called Ellen.

The trolley didn't stop at the stations in the nogo anymore; they were all fenced off so the trains could keep rolling. But he wasn't sure if the soldiers standing around by the stations were normally stationed there, or if something big was going on.

If only he had a phone....

[Back to Table of Contents]

39.

As de Hagen sat looking out at the Pacific from the deck of the Novamira Hotel, his phone began beeping at his side, three beeps followed by a pause—the signal for an incoming secure call.

“Hello,” he said as he sat forward on his beach chair.

“This is artificial intelligence,” said the ghostly voice, swirling undertones echoing faintly behind it. “We have detected an effort by the Pharos Corporation to rehire the prospect. You will need to intercept the prospect in Long Beach in approximately one hour.”

“But they've declared martial law down there! Didn't you hear that on the news?”

“Yes, and I also heard they've arrested the governor after the nets starting investigating her arms deals using the Los Angeles nogo zone as cover, which never would have happened had that boy not killed himself. Nevertheless, you're going to have to take your scanning equipment to Long Beach to find the prospect. Otherwise we'll lose him.”

“But how am I supposed to get there?”

“There is a water taxi waiting for you at the hotel pier. Number 344. You must be on board in fifteen minutes.”

“Right.” De Hagen switched off the call and started gathering his belongings together. Was it just his imagination, he thought as he looked out over the hotel's beach front, or was that smoke billowing up from the direction of Long Beach?

Shivers ran through him; he must have gotten a little too close to thinking consciously of the real agenda. It took him five minutes he couldn't spare to regain control so he could stand up and get on with things.

[Back to Table of Contents]

40.

The trolley's sim wasn't working right. It ran through all of the stops until it reached the decrepit station at Seventh Street in central Long Beach. “This car is out of service,” the sim announced, “all passengers must exit.” Closing his copy of the journal, Wilson got up and walked out into the bright sunshine.

It took him a moment to orient himself. Tare's office was about eight blocks north and a couple of blocks west. Unsure of his bearings, Wilson stuck to Long Beach Boulevard and cut left when he hit Fifteenth.

After a couple of blocks he started seeing the graffiti. At first it was small, obviously painted by several hands. It repeated one slogan over and over again: “The right to buy weapons is the right to be free.” When he turned the corner, it looked like no more than two or three people had painted the slogan across windows and doors all along Fifteenth.

The graffiti on Tare's building was particularly thick. Wilson had to stand back to make sure he could see the street number properly through all the paint.

There was an iron grill across the front door and a security screen at the side, made of some paint-resistant plastic. None of the graffiti had stuck to the surface, and Wilson pressed the button for service.

“This building is closed,” a synthetic voice announced. “Please come back—”

“But I've got to see Dr. Tare!” he shouted at the sim. “He said he'd be here!”

There was an electronic burping sound. “One moment, please. One moment, please.” A series of beeps followed. “Please place your ID on the screen,” the sim announced. Wilson complied, pulling out his wallet and producing his driver's license.

“You are expected, Anthony A. Wilson of Chino Hills. Please enter and wait for the exterior door to close.” Silently the grill and outer door swung inward. Wilson stepped forward into an art deco foyer, and the door shut behind him.

“All right,” Tare said gruffly, opening a door across the foyer and leaning through it to look at Wilson. “Get in here.”

“What's wrong?”

“Well, to begin with, you've been wandering around without a phone when they've declared martial law, and your wife's scared to death. Even after they ordered us to leave, I hung around because she called to say you were on your way here.”

Wilson leaned back against the bulletproof glass of the door. What an idiot you've been, Wilson thought. Images of Ellen and Jason spun through his head.

“Look,” Tare said, a hint of kindness creeping into his tone, “come up to my office and we'll try to figure out how to get out of this.”

“D'you have a phone?”

“Yeah. C'mon,” Tare said. “We'll take the stairs. You can never tell if the power'll go off.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

41.

The sound of the speedboat's engine almost drowned out the cellphone. Swansea had to shout, “I said I can't monitor him anymore.”

“The National Guard has disabled the cellphone towers all around the nogo zone,” the fatherly voice said, straining to be heard. “So the tracker system can only function by line of sight. You'll have to be less than two kilometers away from him to pick him up again.”

“Ridiculous!” Swansea shouted. “Put me through to that National Guard general, the one whose brother is on our board.”

“Just a moment. Just a moment,” the synthetic voice intoned.

[Back to Table of Contents]

42.

“The phone's dead,” Wilson said, looking sheepishly over at Tare.

“What?”

“No dial tone.” Wilson handed the set over. Tare put it to his ear.

“Somebody must have knocked out the system.”

“Jesus Christ, what am I going to do?” Wilson looked out the window and rubbed his forehead. “I've got to get hold of Ellen somehow.”

“You never learn, do you, Wilson? This is what you get for running off without checking out what's going on around you.”

“What?” Wilson wondered what the hell Tare was going on about.

“I bet you didn't even know that Allison Swansea was a major contributor to the governor's campaign, did you?”

“Well, what's that got to do with anything?”

Tare looked up at the ceiling and shook his head angrily, then gazed back at Wilson. “You heard about the governor getting arrested for running an illegal arms smuggling operation in the nogo.” Tare raised his eyebrows. “No, of course you didn't. Because you weren't interested.”

Wilson shook his head. “No, no—you're wrong. It's this deprogramming stuff. It's like I'm just starting to wake up.”

Tare frowned and took a deep breath. “Look, I don't blame you for what happened to Rico. You were just the guy who

isolated karatonin. I respect you for that. Maybe it'll even do some good, some day.

“But programming or no programming, you're not the kind of guy who pays any attention to the big picture. Now you listen to me.” Tare pointed his finger at Wilson accusingly. “We were working for a very corrupt company. They were trying to come up with a drug that would make everybody responsible enough so they could get rid of the government. And they were willing to buy anybody to do it. Fortunately, they were so full of programming that they kept talking past each other, and never got as much done as people who'd never been programmed at all.”

“Stop it,” Wilson said, as though Tare were Jason, caught in the act of banging his head against the padded side of his crib. “The big picture is that the project was a failure. We tried to save a kid who grew up in the zone, and we weren't able to do it.”

Tare laughed derisively. “Is that what you think?” He laughed again. “It wasn't a failure—it was too much of a success! Didn't they ever show you Rico's diaries?”

Wilson shook his head. “I never realized Rico wrote anything.”

“It figures.” Tare frowned again. “That was one of the things I had Rico do as part of his daily routine. Toward the last, he started thinking he was Jesus and that he had to die to save the world. It must have gotten worse when they started giving him all the religious bullshit.”

“But we were giving him such small doses....”

Tare nodded. He was about to say something, when he was interrupted by a whooshing sound out in the street, rapidly followed by an explosion.

“Get down, damn it!” Tare shouted, dropping to the floor.

Outside there was another whooshing sound, and Tare lurched forward, knocking Wilson off his feet.

This explosion was closer. Windows rattled so hard they cracked, and the whole building shook.

“RPGs,” Tare said.

“What's that?”

“Never in the service, huh?”

“No.”

“I was a Marine. And those were rocket propelled grenades.”

A few blocks away there was a heavy, mechanical coughing.

“What was that?” Wilson asked.

“A machine gun.” Wilson got up on his hands and knees. “Sounds like they're coming this way.” Tare edged toward the window and glanced down at the street, then turned back toward Wilson. “Let's get out of here. If we're fast, we might be able to stay ahead of ‘em.”

[Back to Table of Contents]

43.

De Hagen had just gotten through the police line and a couple of blocks into town when he heard the explosions and the automatic weapons fire. He stepped into the boarded-up doorway of an abandoned store, got out his phone, and accessed the AI.

“This is artificial intelligence,” the sim announced.

“De Hagen here. I'm in downtown Long Beach and there's some kind of gun fight—” Another explosion sounded, this time only a few blocks away. “What's going on here?”

“You are advised to remain where you are. The National Guard has come under attack by one of the weapons syndicates operating in the nogo zone.”

“What about the prospect?”

The phone murmured electronically until the sim added, “We have established contact. He is approximately nine blocks north of you, and proceeding in your direction.”

“Show me a map.” De Hagen held out the phone so he could see its screen; the AI displayed a map of central Long Beach, with a blinking dot to indicate Wilson's location. He put the phone back to his ear and said, “I'm going to go up and meet him. He's far enough away from where the fighting's going on so it should be safe.”

“We do not recommend this course of action.”

“Well, it's about all I can do.”

“Wait. Wait.” The sim murmured. “Alert. We have detected another party searching for the same prospect. Alert.”

“Who is it?”

“Competition,” the AI replied.

[Back to Table of Contents]

44.

Sirens wailed around them. A few blocks away there was an intense exchange of automatic weapons fire.

Tare turned to look over his shoulder at Wilson and said, “We're going to stop when we get to the end of the alley. If it looks clear, then we run across the street at an angle to reach the alley on the next block.”

“Okay.”

Tare ran past the trash cans and halted at the side of the building. He motioned Wilson forward, and then glanced around the corner. The street was empty.

Wilson stopped behind him, leaning against the wall.

Behind them, maybe five blocks away, there was another RPG blast followed by more machine gun fire.

“You see the alley?” Tare asked, pointing.

Wilson nodded.

“Let's go.”

Tare darted out into the sunshine. Wilson jogged after him. Somebody had dropped a box full of leaflets in the middle of the street. Tare dodged the pile of papers, but Wilson slowed down long enough to see that the fliers bore the slogan “Save the NoGo.”

“Hurry up,” Tare shouted from the entrance to the alley.

Wilson nodded and joined him.

“Halt!” somebody shouted from behind them.

Wilson turned to see a slightly built man dressed entirely in black, including, despite the heat, a ski mask. He held some kind of rifle pointed in their direction.

“So what are you high-powered consumers doing out here on this fine day?” asked the man in black. “Shopping's been canceled for the duration, in case you hadn't noticed.” The man walked closer.

“What do you want?” Tare asked angrily.

“Ah.” The man shifted his gaze to Tare. “So you're the alpha male shopper, huh?” He lifted up the gun and held it with both hands.

“Look,” Tare went on, “you've got to realize that there are people after us.”

“Oh, I know about them. They're my brothers.”

Tare shook his head. “No they're not. There's some kind of security outfit after us.”

“The hell you say,” the other growled, lowering his gun. “You're no posse of the uprising.”

“You don't understand,” Wilson began.

Tare grabbed Wilson's shirt and almost growled, “Shut up. Let me handle this.” Tare loosened his grip on Wilson's shirt and turned toward the man with the gun.

“You gotta understand,” Tare said, speaking a little too loudly, “that this guy is full of microspores. D'you know what that means?”

The man in the mask shook his head.

“They've got him tagged. They can follow him with satellites if they have to.”

“Just a minute—” Wilson started to say, but stopped when Tare turned and glared at him.

“Well, then. Since you're not shoppers, you better have a copy of the book.” Without setting down his gun, the man in black loosened his backpack from one shoulder, reached inside it, and handed over a beat-up, yellowed paperback. Tare wouldn't touch it, so Wilson took the book. It was an old science fiction novel that he'd read in high school—*The World of Null-A* by A. E. van Vogt.

“This is the book that started the nogo business,” Wilson said quietly, recalling that he'd read it in his eleventh grade social studies class.

“Bullshit,” Tare muttered.

“Listen, you shopper asshole,” the man in black said, lifting his gun and resting it in the crook of his elbow, “you understand that book, and you understand everything we're about! No cops! No government! No taxes!”

“If that was such a good bunch of ideas,” Tare replied, “then why are you running around with an antique stun gun like that, dressed up like a ninja nursemaid?”

“You *are* a goddamn shopper!” The man raised his gun and took aim at Tare's chest.

[Back to Table of Contents]

45.

"I think that's them in the alley, Ms. Swansea." The state trooper braked to a stop, then stared intently at the telephoto screen set in the dashboard. "Looks like the guy they're talking to has a piece."

"Officer," Allison said, almost biting her tongue to keep from raging against the man's overly cautious approach, "turn on your siren and move forward down the alley."

"That's not our procedure, ma'am," the officer said calmly.

"I know these young radicals. They scare easy. We'll have—"

The National Guard captain sitting in the back seat interrupted her to say, "Looks like they've seen us."

Swansea glanced at the screen, then looked out through the windshield. The man in black had knocked down one of the two figures—she couldn't tell if it was Wilson or his companion—and was running off down the alley.

Swansea opened the door of the patrol car and began jogging toward the two figures.

Wilson was helping Tare to his feet when Swansea reached them.

"Tony," she began, trying to catch her breath. 'I'm so glad you're all right."

"Allison," Wilson replied, looking baffled. "What are you doing here?"

"I—I followed you."

Tare frowned. “I told you, Wilson. You're full of spores. I wasn't just bluffing.”

The captain from the National Guard, dressed in camouflage, walked up and inspected each of them briefly with his deep-set eyes. “Ms. Swansea, I'd be grateful if you'd get back in the vehicle. Gentlemen, there's a state of martial law here, and I'll have to ask you to join us. We want to get everybody out of harm's way.” He smiled at them and gestured back down the alley.

As they walked toward the car, Swansea turned to Wilson and told him, “You see how much I care for people who work for me? I did this to make sure you were okay, Tony.”

“Thanks, Allison. I'm grateful. But I'm never going back to Pharos again. I've made my decision, and it stands.”

“What are you talking about?” She swiveled toward him and said in a commanding tone, “You'll be able to take charge of a whole new project!”

Wilson shook his head. “You can't use your command voice on me anymore, Allison. I've been deprogrammed.”

Allison turned away, frowning. At first Wilson thought she was dazed. But as they drove through the vacant streets toward the waterfront, he began to think she was just disappointed. The expression made her look twenty years older.

[Back to Table of Contents]

46.

De Hagen rubbed his eyes, waiting for Wilson to phone him. As he sat there, de Hagen listened again to the recording of Allison Swansea reporting over her unsecured cellphone that Wilson had turned her down. De Hagen smiled. Just as well that he hadn't been able to reach Wilson during the riot; Wilson didn't need to know that Avatar had been following him in Long Beach, right along with Pharos. Just as well that it stayed that way.

De Hagen looked at his wristwatch. Wilson was supposed to call in ten seconds. Quietly he counted them down.

The phone rang, and de Hagen touched the “talk” button.

“This is de Hagen.”

“I want to accept the job,” Wilson said.

“Are you ready to fax over the signed contract?”

“Yeah. Stand by.”

De Hagen could hear Wilson punching in the fax number, and his printer hummed and began extruding paper.

As the contract was printing out, de Hagen said, “I wanted to tell you I read that article you published on autism a couple of years ago.”

“What did you think?” Wilson's voice sounded strained, as though the subject were awkward.

“Well ... I was impressed. We've got a project on brain damage repair that's working along the kind of approach you wrote about—you know, finding a software solution to a hardware problem.”

“Interesting.” Wilson sounded merely polite.

“Well, I thought I'd mention the article to our management. You wouldn't be able to take part in that project until you've finished with the Alzheimer's program you're assigned to. But I thought you'd want to know about the other project.”

“I really appreciate that. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to—just working in a place where everything's just—well, straightforward. You know what I mean.”

A woman's voice called in the distance. “Tony—come quick! Jason's smiling!”

“Thanks for everything,” Wilson said. “I've got to go.”

De Hagen put the phone down and glanced around the hotel room. He'd set the walls on a psychotropic pink to try to mellow himself out, but it wasn't doing any good. Recruiting always made him feel inferior to the people he was trying to hire.

“It is now 11:30,” his wristwatch announced, “and you must leave for the airport immediately.”

That was when de Hagen made his big mistake. He stood there smiling and admitted that he'd finally caught somebody who could run the brain damage project that would release him from the programming insert in his skull. That set off the fireworks, and when he tried to tell himself that he'd finally done some good for someone, he could almost hear the programming shouting back in a perfect simulation of his father's voice, “You're never going to hurt anybody ever again!” Ochre and magenta clouds billowed around him as the programming beat him down against the carpet.

“You must leave for the airport immediately,” the watch said once more.

That called him back from oblivion. He lay there on the floor, struggling to breathe like a man pulled from the ocean, saved from drowning. Saved. That was the word. Focus on that word and clear the program.

Saved.

Yes, that was the word, de Hagen told himself.

[Back to Table of Contents]

One of our most popular contributors in recent times, M. Rickert returns with a dark and lyrical new fantasy.

Many Voices

By M. Rickert

There are many kinds of prisons, and mine is not the worst one. I leave it in my sleep anyway, along with that body prison in repose, and travel the starry way to my garden, which even in closed blossom smells so sweet I cannot help but sigh. With ethereal fingers I commence weeding, hence my garden's reputation for being both beautiful and haunted. But I am not a ghost. I return to my body with clang of gate and prison noise, the shouts of women abandoned to this fate by a world of men, mostly men, who cannot accept our witchy ways, we who would direct our own fate, who have saved ourselves the best we can, only to be confined to the cuss and piss of this ugly place. I wake weary from my work. When I open my fist nothing is there. My palm reveals only the tremble of my faith.

“You are delusional,” Laura said. “I want you to try to understand that.”

“Your whole body is made of space,” I said, “You are a solar system.”

“Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. You, of all people, should know that.”

“No.”

“It's your best defense.”

“Do what you want, it won't change anything.”

Laura, with her red-gold hair that will not be tamed, though she tries valiantly, and so has a bubble of curls around her neatly made-up face. I stare at her until she looks away. She is twenty-six and I am her first big case. Huge. She will lose. It isn't really my neck she's worried about. Poor thing in her little blue suit, the beating of her heart in the pulse at her throat, like a sparrow.

“Hey Rose,” Thalia whispers, “I got a friend. She got a problem.”

“What sort of problem?”

“Like, is it true? What they say about you?”

“Some. Some not.”

“She ass me to ass you if you could help.”

“Not if she's afraid of me.”

“Oh, it ain't against you personal, you know, it's just the way she is. She thinks you seem real nice though and not at all like the newspapers said you was.”

“Thalia, I don't have much tolerance for bullshit.”

“What?”

“Just say what you've got to say, all right?”

“It's her babies.”

“Okay?”

“She killed them.”

“What do you want?”

“She wants them back.”

“Well, they already are back.”

“What the fuck?”

“They're someone else's babies now.”

“Bitch. Crazy white bitch.”

“‘Course she's just a bitch,” the new girl says and leans over to spit on me.

“Shut the fuck up,” Marlo shouts, “I'm trying to watch this.”

“Cunt,” the new girl whispers.

A room full of women, a coven of sorts.

“Hey. I don't want you looking at me.”

“Will you shut the fuck up?”

“She's throwing a hex.”

“She ain't throwing a hex. It's just like they said. She's just crazy.”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

A storm of fists, and shouting. Guards come into the room and pull us apart. Thalia points at me. “It's all her fault. She put a hex on us.”

“Shut the fuck up,” says the guard. “Crazy witch.”

I knew the jury would find me guilty even before they did. I could see it in the light around their bodies and what happened with it when they sat close together. I closed my eyes and the light around my body mingled with theirs. Laura kept trying to get them to say I am crazy which tells you how well she understood what was going on. But they weren't buying it. They said I am a sane woman and knew exactly what I was doing, which is my personal victory.

“I refuse to take the blame for this,” Laura said through clenched teeth and a sympathetic demeanor, her hand gently rubbing my back as she polled the jury. Each face, each

parting mouth, each water soul dissolving said it, “Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.”

I couldn't stop smiling.

“Rose, do you understand what is happening?”

The light around her body tells me she is tired and there is a black hole around the area of her throat. I have repeatedly warned her of this problem and she simply ignores me. There is nothing I can do in cases like these except love. I send love light to her through my forehead and heart and it makes a triangle, which closes the black hole but this is, of course, temporary, and she says, “Rose?”

“They say I'm sane.”

“You're going to prison, Rose.”

JOAN OF ARC KILLER FOUND GUILTY

“Her angels can go there with her,” said Frank Wakind, husband of the victim.

Dear Rose,

Your father and me are sorry we could not be there for you at the trial. As you know we are having a hard enough time as it is so we couldn't just take off after you out there and leave everything to go to weed. We did talk to that man your lawyer sent down and told him all we could remember about your condition. He agreed with what your father been saying all along about the state of your mind and when he said that your father left the room and got back to plowing which as you know is his way of saying prayers and thanking Jesus for the truth about you which you hated him for but now you see how he was right all along and maybe you can begin forgiving

and I can finally have some peace because as you know the truth shall set you free. Oh I almost forgot to tell you I saw Catherine Shelby at the A and P and she told me to tell you she prays for you but now you gotta start praying to God and forget all this other stuff and remember God loves you and I do and so does your father and he loves you very much dear.

When I think of you as a little girl I try to point to when it happened and I remember that tragedy with that boy and maybe I should of done something better for you but your father says there is only one place to fix the blame and mostly I think he is right ‘cause you killed that lady. Oh, my little girl, you need to stop this nonsense about angels because you are not a saint my dear but a big sinner. I'm checking bus schedules and will try to see you in October.

Love,

Your mother

The little girl in the apple orchard has red hair and that is why her parents named her Rose and simply abandoned the chosen name of Elinor when they adopted her already almost two years old and carrying a fancy store-bought baby quilt that neither parent asked about or saved though Rose has memorized each picture that contains it until she can close her eyes and see the red-haired woman who bought it. There are only six apple trees. Technically it is not an orchard but that is what everyone calls it. Rose calls it an orchard too but she also calls each tree by its name, which she has learned through careful listening. It is in the spring of her eighth year that the first angel appears to her, glorious in her body of bright, beautiful in her wings. She appears to Rose in her

bedroom, murmuring things an eight-year-old girl couldn't possibly understand. In later years angels will appear to Rose anywhere, the kitchen, the bathroom, school, the park, the grocery store, but in those first years they only appear in the bedroom and the apple orchard.

Sometimes her mother watches from the kitchen window or the distant field and the angels tell Rose to wave. Her father doesn't look at her most of the time. The angels try to shield her when he does, but when it comes right down to it there is little they can do with their amorphous wings against the awesome fact of his body. At the supper table he looks at his meatloaf and says, “How old're you now?”

The day she tells him she's ten, he says, “You'll come with us tomorrow and pick stones.”

She knows better than to argue. She wakes in the dark. Goes to the orchard and tells the trees of her great love. A dozen angels circle her and take turns telling her her own life story, which makes her weep.

“But we'll always be with you,” they say, their voices like bees.

That day Rose picks stones in the fields with her mother and a couple boys from the high school. The stones are rough and sharp. Some are heavy. Some are light. Her fingers hurt and the palm of her hand hurts and then her back hurts and her neck and the Sun is so hot, the straw hat little help, and besides, it itches. In the distance she can see the orchard, lonely without her.

She and her mother leave the men to make lunch. They make cheese sandwiches and ice tea.

“With the extra hands it's all getting done so quick,” says her mother.

Rose looks at her hands. They don't belong to her anymore. They look like claws.

“Your father and the boys won't be in for another half hour.”

Rose, who has already begun to see and understand things no one else does, will always be somewhat dense about understanding and seeing herself in the world.

“I wouldn't mind if you was to take a little break.”

She loves her mother. She loves her so much she gives her a big hug that fills the room with pink until her mother says, sadly, “Oh Rose,” and then she lets go and runs out of the house. The screen door slams shut behind her and the chickens squawk and she runs to the orchard suddenly filled with light. She hugs all her friends. The angels stand at the edge of branches and pretend to fall off, only to swoop up at the last minute like owls diving for field mice, which is an old trick by now but still makes Rose gasp and then laugh which she does until she hears the clang of the bell, and sees the dark silhouettes of her father and the boys in the field coming home. It is then she sees the shadow on the right, the taller one who walks like he's pushing against a heavy wind, fall to the ground, his whole body torn apart as if clawed by a great beast. She covers her eyes. When she takes her hands away she sees him clearly, a freckled young man with close-set eyes.

“It's beginning,” the angels say.

Rose walks slowly to the house. The boys are hungry and gobble the sandwiches without saying much. In the silence she tries to choose the best words.

“Frank?” she says.

The boy turns to her, an astonished look on his face, as if he's only just discovered her presence at the table, or already fears the truth of what she's going to say.

The other boy, Eddie she thinks his name is, laughs as if there is something funny in her voice but no one else seems to hear it, and he swallows the laugh with another bite of his sandwich. She looks at him, and sees how the light around his body is all mixed up, wild colors and a heavy dose of gray that spiral and jag into him. She has seen this before on other teenagers.

She turns back to Frank. He looks at her with those blue eyes, his pale face only slightly pinked by a scattering of freckles like brown sugar. She knows he is not considered a handsome boy but the light around his body is beautiful, like the angels, though not so bright of course, and even as she looks at it, she can see how it is becoming part of the air around him as if he is melting.

“You gotta be careful for the next couple a months,” she says.

He raises his eyebrows.

She knows the way it sounded like a threat and not a warning. Her father glares at her across the table and Eddie starts laughing again but this time he muffles it behind his hand and his shoulders shake.

She thinks maybe she should explain but under the weight of the room she weakens. She looks down at her plate and picks up a small dot of cheese. She can feel her father looking at her and Eddie laughing and her mother taking a deep breath. Only Frank seems unconcerned.

At the end of the summer he falls into the threshing machine. She can hear his screams all the way in the apple orchard. She knows her father and Eddie are with him. Her mother is running to the house. She lies on the grass and looks through the leaves at the small bitter apples. He doesn't scream for long. In the silence she hears sirens.

“I should of listened to you better, I guess.”

She's afraid to look at him. But he looks all right. Not bleeding at all. He squats down beside her. “You ain't like the rest, you know.”

“Neither are you,” she says.

He laughs and rubs the top of her head. She feels it faintly, as if a gentle breeze moved there. For a moment he looks the way boys do in movies before they kiss the girl, nothing like her dad, but then he stands up real fast. She has to shield her eyes because he stands in front of the Sun. He looks toward the field and sighs. “My mom is gonna throw a fit.”

“I'm sorry,” Rose says.

He shrugs. Puts his hands in his pockets. “I gotta go see if I can find her.”

Just like that he is gone. Her mother finds her asleep in the orchard. “Come in now for supper,” she says. Rose doesn't mention the specks of blood on her mother's wrist and throat and her mother doesn't mention Rose's warning.

Rose thinks maybe it is forgotten until Eddie stops showing up for work and her father can't find anyone to help.

“I just don't understand these boys,” she hears her mother say one morning as they walk past her bedroom.

“It's that Eddie Bikwell. If this thing had to happen why couldn't it happen to him?”

“George!”

“He's told everyone she's a witch.”

“Well, no one believes in such things no more.”

Their voices fade down the stairs. Rose watches the Sun rise. When it does, she dresses and goes downstairs to make breakfast. She makes scrambled eggs and bacon and toast. Then she goes to the yard and rings the bell that brings her parents to the house. They come in smelling like hay and manure. Between chores and school she doesn't have time for the orchard anymore. The angels visit her at home. They tell her to be careful but she doesn't really understand. When her father asks her who she's talking to she tells him.

“We got ourselves someone else's problem,” she hears him tell her mother one night.

“She's ours, George, sent to us by God.”

“Maybe we weren't meant for no children. Maybe this is a curse.”

“She loves you like you was her born daddy.”

“I just sayin’ maybe they should of warned us if there was something like this in her family.”

“We're her family.”

“I'm just saying.”

Could you just tell me a little about your professional background?

Well, I graduated from Victory High in 1988 and went to the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I graduated there in 1991 with a degree in psychology.

How did you manage that in three years?

I took a full load. I went to summer school. It wasn't so hard. I just stay focused.

So, why the big hurry to graduate?

It was an economic consideration mostly. I just figured if I could do it in three instead of four, well, that's one less year of student loans.

Is that when you started working at St. Luke's?

I started working there my first year in college and I stayed there.

Doing what?

Oh, at first I was little more than a candy striper. You know, sort of an aid to the doctors and the play-group therapist. I helped get patients to their appointments. Passed out magazines. Changed the TV channel, stuff like that.

Let me back up here a little. What kind of a place is St. Luke's?

A facility for the mentally ill.

A hospital?

Not exactly. The people there are, it's been determined, not in need of hospital care but do need some kind of institutional care.

Sort of like a halfway house?

Well, sort of. Only in a halfway house the expectation is that the people will move on. Become self-sufficient. St. Luke's wasn't like that. Some of the people have been there twenty, thirty years.

By “some of the people” do you mean the patients?

Yes.

So you worked at St. Luke's all the time you were in college?

Yes.

And did your job description change over time?

Well, as I said, I started out doing sort of general stuff and then I got more and more responsibilities.

Such as?

Dispensing medicine. Watching—

Excuse me. You say you didn't even have a bachelor's degree yet, but you were given the task of dispensing medicine?

It's not really that complicated.

What else?

I started working night shift and more and more I became the person in charge.

You mean you were in charge of all the other workers at your level?

No. I was in charge of the patients.

Where was the administration, the doctors?

They went home.

How many patients were there?

Thirty-eight.

What was the night duty, when you were in charge, like?

Mostly quiet. I mean once in a while there'd be a wanderer. The people there are heavily drugged. They go to sleep okay, mostly.

So what happened that changed your relationship with the patients?

You mean Mrs. Tate?

Tell us about that.

Mrs. Tate started wandering. She just couldn't get to sleep. She became quite agitated. She came up to me and asked me to help her.

And what did you do?

I helped her.

How?

Well, I could see right away what a mess was around her, in her aura there were these two lost souls. One was okay, just a little baby, but the other was evil, an evil spirit, and it was all attached to her like glue, like she'd walked through it and was all sticky.

How did this happen? In your opinion?

Mrs. Tate's been in and out of institutions for years. I figured somewhere along the way someone died and he or she, you can't tell the sex usually at this stage, attached itself to the first vulnerable one to come along. Mrs. Tate was it.

So, what did you do for Mrs. Tate?

It wasn't really that complicated. The first one was easy. I just reached in and grabbed it and gave it to one of my angels.

Your angel?

Yes.

Please, continue.

Well, as I was saying, that one went fine. She immediately felt somewhat better. I told her about the other one though, that it would take more time.

You told Mrs. Tate her aura was, what would you say, being haunted by an evil spirit?

Well, I'd say invaded, but basically, yes.

What, well, how did Mrs. Tate react to this?

She wasn't surprised, if that's what you mean. She said she'd known for years and had just given up on trying to tell anyone ‘cause no one believed her when she did.

How did you proceed?

I told her to stop taking the night cocktail.

The night cocktail?

The drugs they, I dispensed at night. It wasn't anything she needed. Just sleeping medicine that wasn't working anymore and it was creating all these holes in her aura that this thing had attached itself to.

Well, but don't they usually make patients take their drugs right there, show the under tongue thing?

Yeah, but I was mostly the one doing the dispensing by then.

Right. So are you saying you took her off her medication entirely?

No. She needed some stuff. I'm not anti-medicine, if that's what you think.

So what happened? With Mrs. Tate?

She came every night. Every night I got a little more of the stickiness out.

And how did you do this?

Sort of like a massage. Only I didn't touch her.

Would you call it Reiki, or healing hands?

Well, I wouldn't. It's sort of like that, only messier.

What was the eventual outcome of this treatment of Mrs. Tate?

She got better. I mean she still has some problems but she got so improved that she lives on her own now. She got a job. She's working on getting her GED. She sort of feels bad though. She's the one who told Eva Wakind about me.

Mrs. Tate feels bad about what happened to Eva?

She feels bad about what's happening to me. If Eva hadn't written that note everything would have just kept going the way it was.

To Dr. Rain, Birth hurts like it does and I remember mine and how I didn't want a go out there but I couldn't stop it no way, though I tried to hold back from that light which burned my skin and I would say that the first ever violent thing that happened to me was my birth and it just all got worse from there. Fuck you for trying to make me live because it makes you feel better. I already told you about my daddy and how my mama didn't believe me and then I got pregnant but that baby died when I had the abortion which I had to do by myself since what was I suppose to do borrow money from my mom? Fuck you for saving my life last time I tried. I been seeing someone else and she tells me I am not a victim and she says if I need to die to get a decent start maybe that's what I should do. She understands how it is with me. Finally she says it is time. I have to be self aware else I'll come back

like in some fucking mess again, like I'll pick you as a mother or some shit like that. All you want me to do is cut pictures out of magazines and glue them on paper and shit and talk about my problems and she don't know it yet but I pick her. After I die I'm coming back as her baby.

Eva

I know right away he is the one. How can such a beautiful thing come from such a horrible act? My angels tell me I can choose a different path. I see them before me, like rays of Sun, the different courses of my life. But she is trying to come to me. How can I refuse? In this cold place of gates and chains, all these angry women, she comes and the first thing I do for her in this incarnation is accept her. How else could it happen here? With love? He leads me down the hall. He thinks I suspect nothing. We all know. The angels. Half the women here. He is the one who is ignorant. He unlocks the door. We walk into the room. He locks it. I hear the zip, the slap of leather. “Come here, cunt,” he says. “Don't try to fight.” I don't. I lie down. When he touches me I feel his sad and ugly life. My angels stay with me. He feels them too. I know he does. But he does it anyway. Don't get me wrong. I weep. I grit my teeth. I want it to be over. When it is, I am pregnant. She is not my victim. She is me, reborn.

Rose, who did this to you?

I'm glad you've come. I have something important to say.

I'm listening.

I can't get out of here.

I'm working on the appeal but, Jesus Christ, Rose, who are you protecting?

You want a feel her kicking? She's kicking right now.

Rose, who?

Sometimes I go to my garden and pick flower petals but when I wake up my fist is empty. It's like I wasn't even there.

Those are dreams, Rose.

So, I'm running out of time. I mean if I can't travel with a rose petal I can't possibly hope to travel out of here with her. It's just taking longer than I thought.

Fucking justice.

So here's the thing. I've chosen you.

Well, good, Rose, that's good. But you have to help me, Rose, you have to help me help you.

You don't understand. You're the one.

Rose, what are you talking about?

After she's born she's coming to live with you.

Rose, my God, Rose, that's very kind, really, it's an honor. But I'm gone twelve hours a day. I didn't even think you liked me.

I'm stuck like glue.

Rose, you're not making sense.

Have you taken care of that throat problem?

JOAN OF ARC KILLER HAS BABY

In a shocking twist to the sensational trial of former health care worker Rose Miller, found guilty of murdering Eva Wakind, a patient at St. Luke's Home for the Mentally Ill, under what she said was the instruction of angels' voices, recently gave birth to a baby girl. Prison officials refuse to comment on the pregnancy and birth. Miss Wakind's former

attorney, Laura Fagele, has begun the process of becoming the infant's legal guardian. Numerous phone calls to Ms. Fagele's residence were not returned.

Night after night I travel the starry way watching my baby sleep. The room is blue sky and painted clouds, a store-bought quilt of summer flowers. It smells of baby diapers and powder and sweet. She has my red hair, something in the shape of her face comes from the guard, something in the nose or the cheek reminds me of Eva, all these aspects innocent in her, present before ruin.

I am slowly disappearing. No one seems to notice. Laura comes to visit. The hole at her throat is black and huge. It is eating her face. She keeps repeating herself, “Fucking justice,” she says. The words break apart in the air and fall to the ground like broken glass.

“The system,” I say.

She leans forward, her eyes dark-circled and earnest. She coughs. The angels buzz around us, so loud I can hardly hear myself think. “What about the system?” she says.

“I can't figure how to break out of it.”

“You can't break out, Rose.” She coughs again. “Do you hear me, Rose? Do you understand anything I'm telling you?”

I learned young how to rise above my bed and escape the body's system of skin and bones, vulnerable and brittle, innocent. What I have not been so successful at is how to escape its sorrow.

I travel to my garden and breathe in the heavy scent of closed blossoms, rub my hands across the flowers, brushing the heavy scent upward, hyacinth, rose, dahlia, the heavy

fragrance of dirt. In the distance I hear the voices; girls' voices whispering, shouting, weeping, pleading, accompanied by the angels murmuring like bees.

I wake up to the bright light noise of metal and chains, a laugh, sharp and abrupt. I open my fist; a tiny red rose petal trembles there. I let it fall. It spirals slowly to the ground and lies against the hard gray floor. Later, Thalia finds it. She fingers it gently, then, with a furtive glance, stuffs it into her pocket. She sees me watching but I don't say anything about it and neither does she.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Science

Pat Murphy & Paul Doherty

HOT AND BOTHERED

Sometimes, the world seems more like science fiction than science fiction itself.

Pat Murphy had that experience recently when she worked on a project for the Exploratorium, the science museum where she and Paul Doherty work. With a grant from the National Science Foundation, the Exploratorium created a Web site designed to let members of the general public gain access to some of the tools that scientific researchers use to understand how the Earth's climate is changing.

As a science fiction writer and someone with an interest in the environment, Pat had a general awareness of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide and the effects of that increase on the climate of our planet. But pulling together the Exploratorium's Web site (*www.exploratorium.edu/climate*) gave her a whole new view of the problem.

At the Exploratorium's Global Climate Change Research Explorer, you can monitor today's sea surface temperatures, taken from satellite measurements of microwave energy emitted by ocean waters. You can find out today's coral hot spots—where coral reefs are experiencing stress and possibly dying from elevated water temperatures. You can see, in near real time, the extent of sea ice around the Antarctic

continent. You can tap into a satellite view of wildfires in Central America.

Each item, on its own, is interesting. Put them all together, and you get something that is more than interesting—it's terrifying.

The very best science fiction has a way of changing our view of the world around us. As science fiction readers, we are accustomed to contemplating situations where life as we know it may cease to exist. Excellent science fiction has been written about drastic changes in the Earth's climate. (Fritz Leiber's story, “A Pail of Air,” comes to mind, and Bruce Sterling's novel, *Heavy Weather*.)

It's interesting to read fiction about drastic changes on our planet. Unfortunately, the changing state of the Earth's climate is not fictional. We'll warn you up front: this won't be one of our cheery, upbeat, isn't-science-fun sort of columns. Science is fun, but not all the things that science makes possible or reveals are fun.

Analyzing and understanding the Earth's climate is complex. It involves multiple disciplines. In this column, we're going to talk about oak trees and cherry blossoms, ocean currents and the concerns of the folks who live on the Maldive Islands, tornadoes in the Midwest, and drought in Australia.

We're also going to point out up front that assessing a global climate change is not a simple thing to do. Paul likes to tell people “counting is difficult.” Children are always fed easy problems like “how many apples are in this picture?” Real world counting problems are much messier. Ask someone to count how many trees are there on a particular acre of land,

and you'll get different answers. (Is that a tree or a bush? Does this tree on the border count as a tree, half a tree, or no tree at all?)

Measuring things like temperature can be even tougher than counting things—particularly when you are looking for small changes over a long time taking place over the area of a planet in a system as chaotic as weather. Local changes—the growth of a nearby tree that provides shade and evaporative cooling, the paving over of an area that used to be lawn—can have a significant effect on the measured temperature at a particular weather station. It's very hard to extract the global change from the local change.

Even so, there are ways to measure trends. They are unorthodox ways to be sure, but we are confident that you, as science fiction readers, can handle an unorthodox approach.

Spring Is in the Air

Let's start with a British landowner named Robert Marsham. Back in 1736, Marsham began recording when certain indications of spring occurred on his family estate in Norfolk County, England. He noted when the first wood anemones flowered, when the oaks came into leaf, when the rooks began nesting, when certain birds returned. For the next 211 years, members of the Marsham family kept on recording the dates of these and twenty or so other natural events each year.

In 1947, Jean Combes, an observer in Surrey, England, started noting the timing of certain natural events—including

the date when oaks came into leaf. She kept her records through to the present day—and is still keeping them.

Meanwhile, several thousand miles away, the people of the town of Nenana, Alaska, were celebrating spring in their own special way. Starting in 1917, the inhabitants of Nenana would raise a wooden tripod on the frozen Tanana River each year and bet on the exact minute in spring that the tripod would fall through the melting ice. Records of the contest (which is still going on and currently offers prize money of over $300,000) provide a very precisely recorded and consistent record of the time of ice melt each year.

What do we learn from this (other than that some Brits have too much time on their hands and many Alaskans like to bet)? Well, analysis of the leafing times of trees and the melt of the Alaskan ice indicates a trend: spring is arriving earlier than it used to.

How much earlier is hard to say. It depends on what indicators you're using and where you are. Horse chestnut trees get their leaves twelve days earlier than they did back when Jean Combes started keeping records; oaks, ten days earlier; ash, six days earlier. Analysis by ecologists at Stanford University shows that ice melt on Alaska's Tanana River has, on average, advanced by five and a half days relative to the time of spring equinox since 1917.

Ecologists using a variety of indicators have come to the same conclusion: Washington, D.C.'s famed cherry trees are blooming earlier; migrating birds are returning to the Midwest earlier; hibernating animals in the Rockies are emerging earlier. Recording the timing of natural events is known as

phenology. Records kept by beekeepers and birdwatchers and gardeners and many other amateur naturalists are proving valuable to ecologists interested in tracking climate change. (In fact, if you find your great grandmother's gardening journal in the attic, don't toss it. Let us know and we'll try to track down an ecologist who wants the data.)

Ecologists are continuing to gather phenological data, making use of school groups and volunteers all over the world. If you are interested in helping, check the Phenology Networks Home Page (*http://www.uwm.edu/~mds/markph.html*) to see if there's a project that includes your area.

Changes like the ones noted above confirm the assertion in a 2001 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group established by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The IPCC reports that the average surface temperature of the Earth has increased during the twentieth century by about 0.6^{o} +/- 0.2^{o}C. (That +/- 0.2^{o}C means that the increase might be as small as 0.4^{o}C or as great as 0.8^{o}C.) (The science teacher in Paul loves the inclusion of the error estimate, the scientist in him cries out for even more information on how the number was arrived at, but we don't have space for that here. You can find out more—much much more—by reading the IPCC report (*www.ipcc.ch/*))

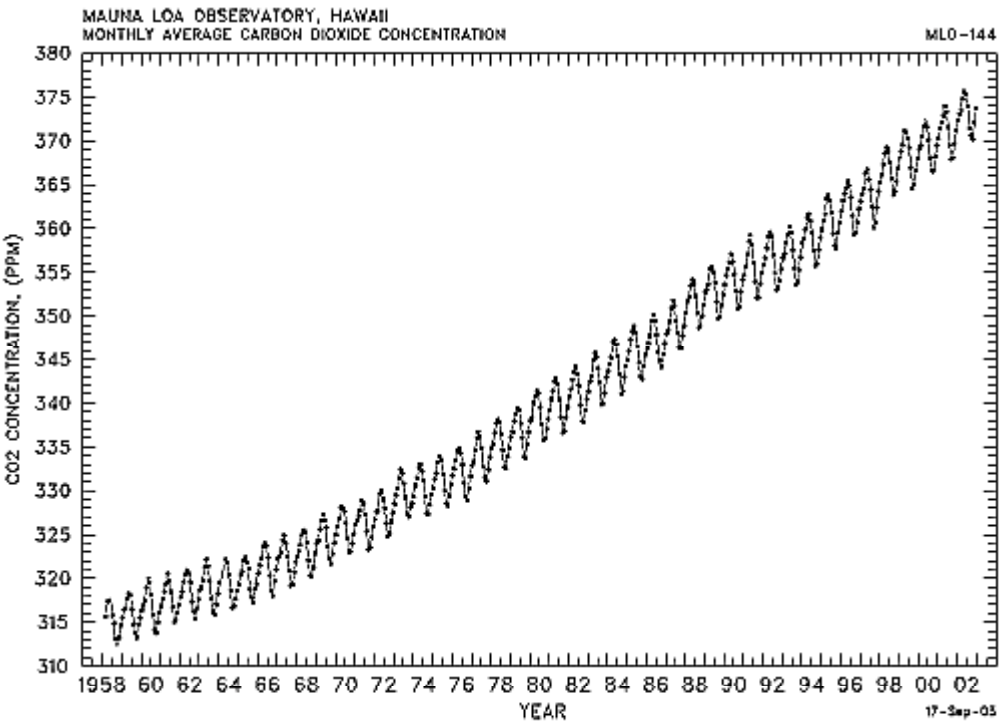
Error estimate or no, that temperature increase may not sound like much. Hang on, we'll get back to that. First, we'll

tell you about what scientists learned at the top of a volcano in Hawaii.

That Pesky Carbon Dioxide

Take a look at the graph below. This is the Keeling Curve, which shows changes in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide from 1958 to 2000, measured in a remote lava field near Hawaii's lofty Mauna Loa volcano.

Charles D. Keeling, of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, says that when he started making these measurements, he expected carbon dioxide concentrations to be constant—but he learned otherwise. First he found an annual cycle. Carbon dioxide concentrations decrease in the Northern Hemisphere in the summer and rise in the winter, reflecting the activity of plants in the Northern Hemisphere, which absorb carbon dioxide during their growing period, then release it in the wintertime.



The other thing that's obvious in the graph is the steady rise in carbon dioxide—a seventeen percent increase in carbon dioxide concentrations from 1959 (about 316 parts per million by volume) to 2000 (about 369 ppmv). And carbon dioxide levels are continuing to rise—as we continue to burn fossil fuels in our gas tanks and our factories. And there's every reason to believe that carbon dioxide levels will continue to rise. President George W. Bush has refused to agree to the Kyoto Protocol, a United Nations effort to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by developed countries. Since the U.S. contributes about one-fourth of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions annually, an

emissions reduction effort can't really succeed without U.S. participation.

Why does the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere matter? Well, carbon dioxide helps keep our planet warm—in this case, too warm.

You've probably heard the term “greenhouse effect” and read descriptions that say the carbon dioxide acts like the glass in a greenhouse, letting in light and trapping the heat. That's the general idea—but the greenhouse effect in the Earth's atmosphere is not what happens in a greenhouse (or a car that's parked in the Sun).

In a greenhouse, sunlight enters and is absorbed by the ground, which warms up. The warm ground then heats the nearby air. The roof of the greenhouse prevents this warm air from rising and leaving the greenhouse. So the air inside the greenhouse becomes hotter than the air outside.

In the Earth's atmosphere, it's not quite that simple. In the atmospheric greenhouse effect, visible, infrared, and ultraviolet light from the Sun penetrate the transparent atmosphere and are absorbed by the ground or by the ocean. The ground or water then radiates energy back into space in the form of longer wavelength infrared light. Certain molecules—like carbon dioxide—absorb this infrared light. These molecules then reradiate this energy—again as infrared light. The molecules emit infrared in random directions. Some of the absorbed radiation is radiated out toward space, but some is reradiated back toward the ground. The effect of all this is to make the ground under an atmosphere full of carbon

dioxide warmer than the ground beneath an atmosphere with less carbon dioxide.

It's a good thing for us that the atmospheric greenhouse effect exists. If there were no greenhouse effect, the Earth would lose more heat, and the Earth's average temperature would stabilize at about minus 18°C.

Unfortunately, as the concentration of carbon dioxide increases, the greenhouse effect increases as well—which has an effect on the Earth's climate. This effect is usually summed up as “global warming,” but it's not as simple as that. Shifts in the climate mean warming in some areas—and other consequences elsewhere.

Why the Vikings Left Greenland and Other Stories

Pat has heard folks dismiss global warming. “Who cares if the temperature goes up a degree or two—or even four or five?” these people say. “I like warm weather.”

But turning up the heat on the planet Earth is not like turning up the thermostat in your house by a degree or two. The Earth's climate is an amazingly complex system. Being a savvy science fiction reader, you've probably heard of the butterfly effect. A hot topic in discussions of chaos theory, the popular description of the butterfly effect suggests that a butterfly flapping its wings in China can set processes in motion that lead to a tornado in Kansas. There's a lot more to it than that—but the takeaway idea is this: in a chaotic system (like the Earth's climate), tiny changes can have enormous consequences.

Global warming isn't a tidy, uniform sort of thing. Just because the planet as a whole warms up, doesn't mean your particular area will be warmer. And the consequences of small temperature increases in certain areas may well be catastrophic.

Consider, for example, the ocean, which plays a vital role in regulating climate. Water has a great capacity to absorb and store heat energy. Because of this, ocean currents can transport heat energy from one part of the planet to the other.

The Gulf Stream is a current that takes warm water from the tropics and brings it north to the east coast of North America and then on to Europe. Water from this warm current evaporates and warms the air, giving northwestern Europe a milder climate than Canada at the same latitude.

You might think that warming up the tropics would just make the Gulf Stream warmer—but it's not as simple as that. (Of course not!) The action that propels the Gulf Stream and other ocean currents comes from simple physics: when warm Gulf Stream water evaporates up by Europe, the remaining water becomes colder and saltier—which makes the water denser. Because it's denser, this water sinks—and warmer surface water flows in to replace it. That simple action keeps the current flowing.

How would climate change mess up this nice process—which has been carrying on placidly at least a few centuries? Well, the extra heat is melting ice in the Arctic Ocean (and incidentally threatening the life style of polar bears that hunt on the pack ice (*www.newscientist.com/hottopics/climate*)).

When the Arctic ice melts, it becomes fresh water, which flows into the salty North Atlantic. And here's the problem: that fresh water may dilute the salty current of the Gulf Stream so much that it stops sinking and stops the flow of the Gulf Stream. If that happens, Europe would freeze as a result of global warming.

Some researchers blame Europe's “Little Ice Age,” the cold snap that lasted from 1300 to 1800, on just such a slowdown in the Gulf Stream. Incidentally, scholars studying the rise and fall of Viking civilization link the abandonment of settlements in Greenland and Iceland to that climate shift. But we digress.

So while you're thinking about the ocean, think about sea level. Members of the Alliance of Small Island States, a coalition of small island and low-lying coastal countries, are more than a little upset about climate change. That's because increasing global temperatures cause glaciers and polar ice to melt and sea water to expand. (Warm water takes up significantly more volume than cold water.) And so, as the planet's temperature increases, the sea level rises. How much does it rise? Geological evidence indicates that sea levels have risen by ten to fifteen centimeters (about the width of your fist) over the past one hundred years.

How much more is it likely to rise? Hard to say exactly. One recent estimate in a report from the IPCC says that sea level may rise between .09 and .88 meters over the next 100 years. Bad news for the Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean, which have a mean height of one meter above sea level. If

the sea level rise is at the high end of the estimate, their whole country is pretty much gone.

And there's more to say about those melting glaciers and polar ice caps. The Earth warms up by absorbing heat energy from sunlight. Ice and snow are particularly good at reflecting light. When they melt, they expose dark underlying surfaces—dirt and rock—which absorb more heat. So melting ice leads to more absorption of heat, which leads to more melting, and so on in a positive feedback loop that boosts the warming trend even further. Some researchers surmise that such an effect was at work in the Cretaceous Period (that's 120-65 million years ago—think dinosaurs), when there was little or no snow and ice cover and global temperatures then were at least eight to ten degrees C higher than they are now.

For those of you who are still imagining basking on balmy beaches on the new coastline (wherever that may be), we'll mention another predicted consequence of global warming: an increase in what meteorologists call “severe weather events.” That means hurricanes, tornadoes, extreme heat waves or cold snaps, and the like.

Like the circulation of the Earth's oceans, circulation of the atmosphere is strongly influenced by temperature difference around the globe. Shifts in temperature can change patterns of atmospheric circulation—and modify patterns of rainfall. Higher temperatures mean that the air can hold more water vapor—and changes in atmospheric circulation mean that water may fall as rain and snow in places it usually doesn't, so that some areas experience flooding and others drought.

In July 2003, the World Meteorological Organization, an organization that normally produces detailed scientific reports and staid statistics at the year's end, reported that the world is experiencing record numbers of extreme weather events such as droughts and tornadoes.

The WMO noted that the U.S. experienced 562 tornadoes in May 2003, a record for any month. (The previous record was 399 in June 1992.) In 2002, much of Australia was hit by the longest drought in recorded history, which devastated crop yields and sparked continual bushfires. At the same time, many parts of China and East Asia were hit by severe flooding. The year 2003 is a hot contender for the title of the hottest year ever recorded. The ten hottest years in the 143-year-old global temperature record have now all been since 1990, with the three hottest being 1998, 2002 and 2001.

No one example cited by the WMO is remarkable, taken on its own. But considered together, the WMO notes, these events and records represent a trend toward weather extremes.

Trends, Uncertainties, and What To Do Now

The issue of global warming has received some attention from the news media—but not as much as it deserves. There are a couple of reasons for this. Bruce Sterling, author of the aforementioned *Heavy Weather* and founder of the Viridian movement, has compared our dependency on fossil fuels and the "chronic, creeping" change of global warming to alcoholism: "It isn't one moment or one single drink that does you in. Can there be a single 'ah-ha moment' when you

realize that civilization has moved from social drinking (of oil and coal) to a substance-dependent blackout situation?" The very slow nature of the change makes the calamity a difficult story to cover.

The other thing that makes global warming a difficult news story is the very complexity of the Earth's climate system. Some of the effects of climate change don't seem to fit with a rise in temperature.

Take, for example, the changes in the world's glaciers. Last time Paul was in Ecuador, he decided to climb Chimborazo to get to the point on the Earth's surface furthest from the center of the Earth (a physicist's high point versus the geographer's Mt. Everest measured from sea level.) But Paul couldn't complete the climb: he had to turn back. The route commonly used by climbers was impassible, partly because Chimborazo's glaciers were crumbling. Across Europe, Asia, and North and South America, almost every glacier is retreating. Some, like Maclure Glacier (the first discovered in California) have disappeared altogether.

So that's simple enough, you say. But hold on one minute. Back in 2001, Paul visited Antarctica's Dry Valley. (Hey, the guy gets around.) There, the glaciers are advancing. Researchers say this is another effect of global warming. The ice has warmed (though it's still minus 17 ^{o}C). The warmer ice is more fluid than colder ice and so flows more easily downhill, expanding the area of the Antarctic glaciers.

We told you it was complicated! And in a complicated system, when trying to figure out what's likely to happen, scientists (and science fiction writers) look for patterns and

trends. You can't predict what will happen, but you can indicate that one event is more likely than another. In this particular system, the trend looks very bad indeed. We don't know for certain that human-generated carbon dioxide is contributing to this trouble, but it sure looks likely.

What can you do about it? Let's see—on the political front, you can lobby the Bush administration to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. On the personal front, you can cut back on your own energy use—drive less; use a more fuel-efficient car; buy energy-saving appliances. You can help out directly by downloading a screensaver that makes your computer part of a distributed computing network that runs climate prediction models (*www.climateprediction.net*). You can plant a tree or tear up your driveway and put in a natural garden. (Plants absorb carbon dioxide, removing it from the atmosphere.) You can join Bruce Sterling's Viridian movement. You can support alternate energy sources, like wind power or solar power or even nuclear power. But more than anything else, you can become aware of the problem, probably the defining problem of our century.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception—where science and science fiction meet. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty both work there. To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld.*

[Back to Table of Contents]

Charlie Finlay's provocative new story owes its origins to a student paper shown to him by fellow Ohioan Maureen McHugh. It contained the sentence that opens this story. But just wait until you see where it goes from there...

Pervert

By Charles Coleman Finlay

There are two kinds of people in the world, homosexuals and hydrosexuals. And then there are perverts like me.

Jamin and Zel stroll through the corridor of the apartment building where we all live. I can tell it's them coming because I leave my door cracked open to show everyone I have nothing to hide. Zel's voice caroms off the walls, fluctuating in pitch with the peaks and rhythms of the stories he tells; Jamin's subdued, distinctive laugh barks out at regular intervals. For thirty or forty seconds before they arrive, I hear their approach and dread it. They are my best friends.

I sit in the exact center of the little blue sofa, arms stretching out to the ends of its bell-shaped back. My palms are damp against the silky fabric. The voice of Noh Sis, last year's most popular singer, warbles from the stereo speakers, making a dirge of joy amid the interweaving of sitar and clarinets. Closing my eyes, I count the notes and half-notes by measure—the sorrowful tone in the end-rhyme of *love*, Zel's exclamation, a series of mournful sitar chords, Jamin's laugh.

The tap at the door.

I lift my head as if surprised to see them, smile as if happy. “Hey!”

Zel throws wide his arms in an extravagant gesture of greeting, and says with dead seriousness, “Arise! Arise like the evening star and brighten the way into night for us!”

Jamin grins, nods at me. “Hello.”

They are both tall, and handsome, and completely at ease in themselves. Jamin is balding, so he shaves his head; he has quiet, wolfish features. His jeans and football jersey look like they've been ironed—he's so conservative that even here in the men's quarter, he wears a cap to cover his head. Zel is the shaggy, adorable puppy, all awkward limbs and endless energy. He shows off his new boots.

I wipe my hands on my thighs, arise, and embrace them in turn with only a dry quick kiss on the cheek. “Where are you going?”

“*We*,” Zel exclaims, “we, for surely you are joining us—we won't have a speck of fun without you!”

Jamin grins—he always grins—and says, “Heart Nouveau.”

Heart Nouveau is our club. We've been hanging out there since it opened around the time that we were finishing school. All our friends go there. It's the kind of place so packed and dark you can't see any decor beyond the dance floor.

“Not tonight,” I answer. “Work exhausted me today.”

My work itself is not hard, but I must be constantly wary lest I give myself away.

Zel immediately begins pleading, making dance gyrations, beckoning me to join them, but Jamin, with his hands folded

at his waist in front of him, says quietly, “Thinking about marrying this weekend, are you?”

“Ah—”

Zel's eyes widen at this revelation and he ceases the call to fun. The two of them are a happy couple. They know that I am different from them and do their best to fit me into their view of the world, and the way it works.

“—been thinking about it,” I admit.

“Pshaw! Don't think about it, just do it!” says Zel as Jamin backs out the doorway, whispering to me, “I'll call you tomorrow.”

Their voices resume their previous pattern as they continue their journey down the corridor toward the stairs. Pushing the door closed, I let my face lean against it, eyes shut for a moment while I twist the lock. Then I go and fall onto the sofa, lifting my head only long enough to replay the previous song at a higher volume. The chorus opens the song: “I want to set myself on fire and plunge into the oceans of your love.”

My face presses against the water-blue color of the pillows, trying to drown in them. “That's it—I'm only nervous about marrying this weekend,” I lie aloud to myself.

It's natural to be nervous about it the first time. I'll just do it, like Zel says, and then everything will be better.

You would think, as much as I practice lying to myself, I'd be better at it by now.

In the morning, I swath myself in my work robes—cheery layers of nectarine and lemon fabric, sherbet smooth. Covering my head and face, I walk down to the street and

catch the bus into the city. The road bridges a green river of trees and grass that divides one quarter of the city from another. Through the bus window I watch the women emerging from their apartment blocks and little homes.

When the bus reaches the corner, they climb onboard, taking seats on their side and evening out the ride so it doesn't feel so much like we'll tip over. We rattle along past road construction, the men working behind screens that are consecrated by the priests each morning as part of the men's quarter, and resanctified to the women at quitting time. The Sun already pelts down mercilessly and they will have to leave off working soon.

We enter the government quarter and arrive at the Children's Center, a long concrete brick of a building with windows shielded from the Sun by an open grid of deep squares made of the same material. The morning light turns it into a chessboard of glaring white and dark shadow. I don't work with the children, who are on the lower floors and the sheltered playground of the courtyard, but toil away with records on the upper floors. Unlike Jamin or Zel, I am permitted by the job to work alongside women, but only because I completed my theological studies and am a candidate for the priesthood. My superiors do not know of the taint on my soul. Do not know yet, I should say, and when they discover it, I will never be ordained or promoted.

Today I am veryifying and recording the DNA strands of a recent set of births. My cubicle sits closer to the outer windows, with their view of rigid grid, than the inner, but it's

blocked from the light of either. Nevertheless, I jump when the slightest shadow passes by and see her—I see Ali.

Ah, Ali! Ali, my all, my everything, the eye of the hurricane that is my heart! Ali, that ails me! Ali, who alone can heal me! Ali, Ai!

This is silliness, of course; yet it is how I feel.

She stops and stares at the floor.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

She turns her head this way and that. “The button I accidentally stepped on to give you that electric shock.”

Ali is wearing coffee-colored robes, cream and roasted bean, the same as many of the other women in her department, and as she is a perfectly average height, with her head and almost all her face covered, I am still puzzling out how I always recognize at once it's her, whether there's something specific in her posture or gestures or presence that makes me know her instantly.

So I say, “Huh?”

And her head lifts up so that her eyes turn toward me, glinting with amusement. I would recognize those stormy, sea-gray eyes anywhere. “You are mocking me!” I cry.

She shakes her head. “It's very difficult not to.”

I blush, the heat rising through my face to my forehead, and I'm sure she can see right through my mask.

She chuckles, and then walks to another cubicle several spaces over where she speaks to one of our sister workers about the name for some particular child.

How can I describe her effect on me? In a single second, I suffer such pangs of longings, an overwhelming urge to peel

away the layers of her robes like shells off a bean and root through her flesh until I find the hard nut, the seed core, of my perverse, unnatural desire. So far as I know, there is not a word, not even a bit of slang, to describe my particular depravity, but then I have never spoken of it to anyone, nor written of it before now, and we do not invent words for the things we dare not speak or write.

When I was studying theogenetics in preparation for the priesthood, we were taught that it was wrong to name certain thoughts lest we be tempted to think them. We were taught that everything was black and white, right or wrong, and even then I learned to give all the right answers.

But what right answer is there to my desire? All I have ever seen of Ali are her eyes. The white of her eyes and the black irises are just like everyone else's. But that cloudy, wave-tossed gray is wholly hers! And all my world is gray now too, as if something swirling deep within me since the moment of my conception has finally taken shape, the way clouds form when wind swirls in a clear sky.

Jamin calls me at work later that day, just as he had promised he would, his voice warm and resonant as always. “I hope you don't mind,” he says, “but I've arranged for you to join me and a friend for dinner tonight.”

“Sounds great—will Zel be joining us?”

“No. Just us.”

Jamin is looking out for me, the way he has always tried to. He is a very good friend, yet I am filled with trepidation. “Well,” I say. “I might be working late.”

“That's fine. I can wait. Pick you up in a taxi at quitting time?”

“Sure,” I say and disconnect.

I look up from my desk but Ali is nowhere to be seen in the breakwater of cubicle walls. Sometimes I may see her no more than once in a day, though it feels like she is always with me since I cannot stop thinking of her.

For the rest of the day I cannot concentrate on genetic sequences at all and my work is useless.

When the taxi crosses into the men's quarter, the driver and I remove our veils although Jamin leaves his on. He makes happy small talk about his work. I smile, but inside I am tense.

We're dropped off in a neighborhood where fruit trees shade the narrow streets. The houses are neat and tidy and old, the kind owned by government officials and couples who both have excellent jobs. Jamin leads me to a door by an elaborate garden that appears to be both lovingly created and recently neglected.

The man who answers is not quite twice our age, perhaps a little younger. His beard looks new, as though his chin has gone untended for about as long as the garden outside. He wears a comfortable, tailored suit.

Inside, Jamin finally uncovers his face and embraces the older man, saying, “Hello, Hodge. This is the friend I was telling you about—”

Somehow I cheerfully complete the introductions. Jamin and I sit at a counter in the kitchen while Hodge finishes cooking our dinner. The room smells of garlic and oil. Jamin

and Hodge discuss work—they are both employed in law—and I avoid nearly all the personal questions directed at me. The songs of Noh Sis stream from the speakers to fill most of the awkward silences.

We are seated around Hodge's elegant antique table, having finished a delightful cold corn chowder and a hot pepper salad. A platter of spinach-feta pastries rests between us. As I am helping myself to a second serving, and laughing heartily at an anecdote that Hodge is telling about the prosecution of a man whose pet dog kept straying into the women's quarter, Jamin rises and wipes his mouth with his napkin.

“Please forgive me,” he says. “I didn't realize how late it has gotten and I promised to meet Zel this evening.”

“But we've scarcely begun,” Hodge says, evincing real dismay.

And all I can do is think: Jamin, you animal!

But Jamin insists, and I stand to go with him, but both men persuade me to stay by making promises of transportation. Then Hodge bustles around putting together a plate of food for Jamin to take with him, growing particularly distressed because his cake hasn't cooled sufficiently and falls apart when he cuts a slice to go. The whole time Jamin smiles at me but refuses to meet my eyes. Finally he's gone, and Hodge and I return to our meal. Sometime during this the music has fallen silent and Hodge is too distracted to reset it.

“How long have you known Jamin?” he says after a sip of wine.

“All my life,” I say. “We grew up in the same Children's Center, and then attended the same schools.”

“He's well-meaning, but what a beastly thing to do.”

I'm not sure what to say so I stare at my plate and concentrate on eating, making extravagant praise of the food between the clinks of silverware on porcelain.

“So,” Hodge says after another drink of wine. “You're the marrying kind?”

“Yes.” My heart trips and stumbles. “Yes, I am.”

“It won't be bad. Will this coming ceremony be your first time?”

“Yes. I mean, I haven't decided yet.”

“You'll be nervous your first time. It won't be bad.”

I choke out laughter. “Aren't you supposed to tell me how good it will be? How proud I'll feel?”

He winces. Folding his napkin, he leans his elbows on the table and looks directly at me. “Look, Jamin thinks that we're both the same type, but you—”

My heart catches in my throat. Everyone knows I am different. Even a stranger who just met me can tell.

“—should know that I just lost my partner.”

“Oh,” I say. “I'm sorry.”

He holds up his hand. “No, it's all right. We'd been together for almost fifteen years, but he'd been unhappy for a very long time. I'm glad he ran off.”

“Where'd he go to?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

Hodge shakes his head. “Look, that's not important. I'm happy by myself right now. I hope you understand.”

He doesn't sound happy at all. “Of course! I mean I—”

“I'm not like you,” he says in a low whisper, and then drinks the rest of his wine. “Oh! The story about the man with the dog, did I ever finish that?”

“No.” I had forgotten it already.

“The last time they caught him, they stoned him to death and set his body on fire. That kind of perversion can't be tolerated, you know. We aren't animals, with animal passions.”

“I know that.” My voice is strained because I am scared.

“Well, then. Good.” He rises abruptly. “I'll call you a taxi.” He fumbles at the counter, frowning. “The cake looks like a disappointment, but I'm sure it still tastes fine. I'll send some with you.”

When the taxi arrives and I step off the stoop into darkness, plastic-wrapped plate in hand, I hear him say, “Good luck with the marrying. It's over quickly.”

He reminds me of a piece of topiary, a plant forced by wires and pruning into a facsimile of something else, so twisted over time that he no longer resembles himself. I can feel myself being twisted, misshapen more each day. But I'll resist it.

The taxi door slams and whisks me away.

I don't see Ali at work the next day or the morning following that. At lunch, I am standing by the inner windows overlooking the courtyard below while the children weave an endless pattern of joy amid the trees. The lobby is busy, many people rushing by. Pressed to the window, I am more aware of the antiseptic smell of the cleaning liquids than I am

of the person standing next to me. So several minutes pass before I look up and realize it's Ali.

She taps her foot on the tiles. “Rubber floor. Very smart. They aren't able to zap you here.”

“I'm sorry,” I blurt out, sorry that I haven't noticed her, sorry that I hadn't talked to her earlier.

Ali lowers her long eyelashes and looks away, her weight shifting to leave. “Well, if you want to be zapped, you could always go back to your desk.”

“Wait!”

She pauses in midstep. “I'm waiting.”

And because I don't know what else to say, because there is only one thing besides her on my mind, I ask, “Will you be marrying this weekend?”

“That's a very personal thing to ask,” she says and walks quickly away to the other side of the lobby where she stands by a decorative sarcophagus filled with polished stones and bubbling water, watching the children below.

I want to run after her, take her by the elbow and make her understand. I want her to feel for me the way I feel toward her. I want her to peel off her gloves and sink her bare hands into my flesh, stripping it away to the bone, until she reaches my heart and can soothe away the ache I feel for her.

Instead, I also turn and look out the window again. From this height, I can't tell if the children below are boys or girls.

Heart Nouveau is even more crowded than normal tonight because of the Bachelors Party. Jamin and Zel have brought me here to celebrate, just as all the other normal men have

brought their friends who will be marrying tomorrow. We bachelors are few, no more than one in ten, so the annual bacchanal becomes a general cause for celebration.

Smoke swirls across the bar and dance floor, eddying with the currents of moving people and the crashing waves of music. Zel has taken off his shirt and is dancing half-naked under the strobe lights with the others in an orgy of arms and hands. I'm standing off to one side of the dance floor beside Jamin, who doesn't dance but gazes on Zel adoringly.

“He's the image of a god, isn't he?” Jamin says.

It's an echo from our scriptures. “And in his own image God made them, man and woman; and bade them be fruitful and multiply; and set them apart from the beasts and gave them dominion over the beasts.”

“He's perfect for you,” I answer, and Jamin smiles.

And I think of other words from our scriptures—"It is good for a man never to touch a woman, nor a woman touch a man, lest they be tempted to behave as the beasts of the field do in their passions"—and consider that I have never seen beasts in the field. These days, even the zygotes of beasts are scanned for their genetic health before they are brought to fruition in the womb-banks; the only place I have seen animals is in cages or under the straps that hold them down beneath our syringes. My theogenetics classes glossed over the details of this dire sin lest we be tempted to copy it, only teaching us that before God gave people the wisdom of science we behaved as beasts.

Zel grabs me by the hand, pulling me onto the dance floor where the lights are flashing, music pumping, and ecstatic

faces surround me. He only wants me to be happy and he only knows what makes him happy, and so he tries to bring me to that too. I resist him—I resist everything these days—and pull away.

“Smile,” he shouts at me above the din. “Have some fun!”

“I'm having fun!” I shout in reply.

“Are you excited by marrying tomorrow?” I mumble my answer to him, but he doesn't hear me and leans forward, sweat dripping from his forehead onto my shoulder, shouting “What?”

“I said, ‘Scripture says it's better to marry than to burn!'”

He laughs as if this is the wittiest thing in the world, and spins around, arms and fists pumping in beat with the music.

But I am burning already. The thought of Ali is a fire in my mind and a searing pain in my flesh, an unquenchable flame, even though I know all my feelings for her are wrong.

Still, I will go do my duty tomorrow, and marry rather than burn.

The next morning, I arise before dawn with the other bachelors. Many have hangovers, and some are too sick to marry this time. Their absences are noted by the priest's assistant in his white jacket as we board the bus. Those who have not made it are roundly mocked by even the sickest of those aboard. The other men are hugging, wishing each other well, but I hold myself apart. There are only a dozen of us, so it is easy to take a seat distanced from the others.

My stomach is queasy as we head for the Temple of the Waters, and not just from last night's drinking. Our route takes us along the edge of the women's quarter and none of

us are wearing veils. I slouch in my seat. Several of the men pull their robes up over their noses; others put their hands on their heads, or pretend to rub their faces. The priest's assistant, who misses nothing, points this out to them and they all laugh. But I can only think that perhaps Ali is sitting in another bus without her veil on either; and I wonder if her mouth is as round and full as her gray eyes, if the arch of her lips matches that of her brow, if the curve of her neck is as graceful as the bridge of her nose. Would I even recognize her? I do not know.

The Temple of the Waters sits at the center of the government quarter across from the Palace of Congress, an oasis of green and blue marble in a desert of steel and concrete and sandstone. The giant telescreens that surround it show images of the ocean, the surge of waves in calm weather, but they remind me of the storm-tossed gray of Ali's eyes and I breathe faster.

As we're climbing off the bus, the priest's assistant steps in front of me and grips me by the shoulder. Instantly, I know that he saw how I stayed apart, he knows that I am different from the others.

But he only says, “Why don't you smile? This is going to be a good thing—think of the pride you'll feel!”

I force myself to smile and pull away from him to follow the others. We strip in the anteroom. A few of the men are as young as I am, but they range in age up to a solemn gray-haired old man who goes about his preparations with all the grim seriousness of a surgeon before a touchy operation. The room is as hot as a sauna and several men grow visibly

excited. One man, a boy almost, younger than me, can't help himself and spills his seed there on the floor. The others chastise him until he starts to cry, but the priest enters through a second door and all fall silent.

Noticing the mess, he says, “Don't worry, I'm sure there's more where that came from.”

Everyone laughs and the boy rubs his tears from his cheeks, and grins, and everyone is at ease again; everyone but me. The priest asks how many of us have married before, and most of the men raise their hands.

“Yours is a sacred trust,” the priest tells us. “There are two kinds of people in the world, those to whom society is given, and those who have the sacred duty to give to society, to perpetuate it.”

“Home for the homos,” one of the older men mumbles. “And hide the hydros.”

The priest smiles gently. “Yes, that's how they mocked you as young men but you have nothing to hide by being different. That's why we come to the Temple with our faces uncovered. You have a holy trust, a gift from our heavenly father, who felt such love for all creation that he spilled his seed in the primal ocean and brought forth life.”

When I think of the ocean, I think of Ali and stare at the door to the inner chamber, wondering if I will see her here.

“Earlier this morning,” the priest continues, “the women entrusted with their half of this sacred duty came down from their quarter. They entered the main chamber of the temple a short while ago, and even now immerse themselves in the pool. In just a moment it will be your turn to enter. Think of

the pride you'll feel; think of the love you have for our world and the peace therein. Look to the older men who have been here before and do what comes naturally to you."

Some nervous laughter follows this.

The priest looks at the boy who spilled himself, who is already excited again, and says "Hold on to that a little longer, friend." A light flashes above the door. "Ah, it is time."

The men press forward, somehow scooping me up so that I, the most reluctant of them, am at the head of the phalanx.

The doors swing open.

One group of acolytes stand there with towels as we enter, while a second set waits to collect the results of our labor. A womb-shaped pool of bodywarm water fills the center of the circular room. The women have already performed their rituals. Their eggs float in tiny gelatinous clumps on the surface of the pool.

A door identical to ours, but opposite, clicks shut on the women's chamber. "Hurry now," the senior priest in the white lab coat says. "Timing is important."

An acolyte reaches out his gloved hand to help me down the steps into the pool.

There are two kinds of people in the world: homosexuals and hydrosexuals. But I am neither. I stand there like a gray boulder caught between the black sea and the pale white sky as the wave of bachelors breaks around me to crowd the water's edge.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Alex Irvine's first novel, A Scattering of Jades, *won several awards last year. His next one,* One King, One Soldier, *is due out in July. Subterranean Press recently published a collection of his short fiction,* Unintended Consequences, *which led* Publishers Weekly *to call him "An agent provocateur of escapist surrealism." Perhaps you'll agree that there's escapist surrealism in this story (which first appeared in* Unintended Consequences*), but around these parts, we just think it's a good read.*

A Peaceable Man

By Alex Irvine

I have had the privilege of owning a borzoi, which is a lot like having a dog but not exactly the same. The borzoi is refined yet childlike, a lethal hunter who cries if someone sits in his favorite spot on the couch. He is bundled paradox, joy, anxiety, devotion. He exasperates with his stubbornness, enchants with his grace, delights with his buffoonery ... but let us not forget that he was bred to hunt down wolves on the steppes.

This is the story I did not tell Detectives Brower and Glenn when they interviewed me the day after Kenny Kazlauskas came over to my house to kill me.

It all started when a violent and larcenous acquaintance of mine named Arthur Czyz discovered that armored cars have to stop at weigh stations. The stations are labeled for all commercial vehicles, so it's not exactly a surprise that this

should be true, but in addition to being violent and larcenous Arthur was kind of dumb.

He was, however, possessed of what a Victorian judge might have called animal cunning. So when he found out about armored cars and weigh stations, he knew immediately that he'd found a way to take an armored car. Problem was, he didn't know what that way was.

This is why he had more intelligent friends like me.

Greg, he said to me one day. We were at Otto's Coffeehouse in Allston. I like the college vibe there even though it's a long time since I was in college. Arthur just comes in to see how many of the students get scared of him, plus he likes Otto's coffee and the place is right on Commonwealth Avenue next to one of Arthur's early morning stops. Arthur drives an overnight pastry and dairy truck, covering Newton, Brookline, and Allston. Into the warehouse in Revere at three a.m., out at four a.m., back to the warehouse by eight to reload for the places that aren't open when he starts his first round. He's off by noon if he can avoid traffic, which nobody can do in Boston, a city whose streets still follow the deer tracks widened by the Passamaquoddy Indians back in the day.

I'm usually seated at one of the tables out front of Otto's by seven on any given morning, with Boris standing at my side looking over my shoulder while I read the *Globe*. Borzois don't like to sit, and they're so bony they don't much like to lie on concrete either. So Boris was my clock when we went to Otto's. About the time he got tired of standing around he'd start to grumble and whine. If car engines sounded like

howling dogs, a borzoi's whine would be an exact replica of the engine turning over right before it started. *Owrowrowrowrrrrr*.

“Greg,” Arthur said.

“Arthur,” I said back.

He sat down at the empty chair on the other side of the table. “We could knock over an armored car,” he said.

Unlike Arthur, I am not violent. I do, though, confess to a certain larcenous tendency. It keeps me in chai and scones and permits me to begin my days at Otto's instead of behind the wheel of one of the cars that obstructs Arthur's route through Boston every morning.

I set down the *Globe*. Boris sniffed it over, looked at me. I gave him a piece of my scone. His ears shot up when he saw it, but he took it with great delicacy, another borzoi characteristic not shared with more mundane breeds.

“How could we knock over an armored car, Arthur?” I asked. There were no police in evidence, but I didn't like the direction the conversation was taking; although I had no record, Arthur did.

“They have to stop at weigh stations,” he said.

“You don't say,” I said. “Where'd you hear this?”

He shrugged. “Kenny said something about it.”

That put an end to the conversation as far as I was concerned. When he wasn't driving the truck for his father's dairy (and, as I was later to discover, even when he was), Arthur did various unsavory jobs for Kenny Kazlauskas, one of the new breed of organized-crime figure who had popped up in East Coast cities after the breaking of the Cosa Nostra.

Kenny K. was sociopathic, irrational, unencumbered by notions of loyalty, and superstitious as a Haitian grandmother—and this last quality had bred in him an intense hatred of yours truly because he thought I was a magician.

I supplemented my illegitimate income with a genuine business as a purveyor of antiques. Boston has antique dealers like Washington, D.C. has lobbyists, and my particular niche was a curious ability to locate and possess items allegedly possessed of supernatural qualities. During the previous ten years, I'd either acquired or brokered the acquisition of a Dale Chihuly sculpture that acted as an aphrodisiac, an Austrian grandfather clock said to confer immortality, a golden cobra from a pharaoh's tomb that animated when its owner's life was threatened, and an antiquated stock ticker that purportedly predicted the market with unfailing accuracy. And many more. The truth is, I never put much stock in any of the stories that accrued around old and valuable things; I'd never seen any evidence of magic, and remained a confirmed agnostic on the subject.

Nevertheless, my reputation, to a brain as paranoid and cocaine-addled as Kenny's, made me a prime candidate for burning at the stake. Which in turn made me not at all inclined to do a potentially violent job that might in addition turn out to be competitive with one of Kenny's own plans.

I should have made this clear to Arthur, but he spoke before I could articulate my objection. “All's we'd have to do is make sure that we'd cleared out the weigh station before the armored car got there,” he said.

“That and get away afterwards,” I amended. “It's not going to work if we leave the scene by merging into traffic on I-95 again, is it?”

“You're the detail guy,” Arthur said. “Plans are your thing. I just had this idea. I think you ought to think about it.”

“I will,” I said, and he climbed back into his truck and drove away in a belch of unburned diesel.

And I did. I thought about it and I decided that like most of Arthur's ideas, it was immensely risky and likely to end badly. I'm a housebreaker by trade. Occasionally I set other things up, but I rarely deal in armed robbery, and I even more rarely deal in jobs that involve armed opponents in public places.

Just to be certain, though—and very much against my better judgment—I started making some inquiries to people I knew in the highway department, and one of them knew someone who knew someone in Maine, and this someone happened to know that there was a gate at the rear of the parking lot of a certain weigh station on a certain state highway in Maine. Installed, it appeared, to preserve access to paper company land that was being cut off by the construction of the highway.

Knowing this was one of the worst things that ever happened to me.

Boris and I camped in the backcountry for a few days, canoeing through northern Maine's beautiful flatwater and watching stars at night. I live in Boston, but I like to get out into the woods. And Boris, despite being a refined animal, had a back-to-nature streak in his heart. He didn't even mind

canoeing. I only minded it myself when he tried to stand up in the canoe; when he was a puppy he tipped us a couple of times before I convinced him that we were all better off if he stayed lying down until we got to shore.

It occurred to me while I was poking at my campfire on the second night of the trip that I was looking for an excuse to do the job. Me, quiet and pacifistic Gregory Flynn, contemplating an armored-car heist—and with Arthur Czyz as my partner, no less.

"Crazy," I told Boris, but he was asleep, a white mat on the pine-needled riverbank.

Be honest with yourself, I thought. This is about the Gronkjaer board.

Every so often I become aware of an extremely valuable article that tests my professionalism. I want these items for myself despite the risk possession entails, or perhaps because of it. The Gronkjaer board was one such item.

Like many of the pieces my clients came to me to acquire, this board had an occult history. Apparently a shipping magnate and amateur player had commissioned it in 1844 for his office, and upon seeing it had become so enraptured by it that he had spent more and more time playing the game by himself, falling in love with the feel of the pieces in his hands and with the way the squares gleamed in the lamplight. Soon he was neglecting his business and his wife, and it was not until she committed suicide in 1851 that he realized that he'd allowed his immersion in the game to destroy him. She killed herself by slashing her wrists over the board, and died with the two kings clutched in her hands. He lost his house but

kept the board, and executors of his estate eventually found a long and anguished series of journal entries stating that the spirit of his wife had come to occupy it. *It is her revenge upon me*, he wrote. *That for which I abandoned her she now inhabits. I play, and the queen has her face, and the field of battle is as an infinitely variable topology of regret.*

After the magnate's death in 1866, the board had passed through a number of hands, often sold quickly because its owners found themselves playing to the exclusion of all else. The legend about it grew; it was said that when great players took up the pieces, they found themselves replaying their most agonizing defeats. In any case, a long list of broken marriages, suicides, and even murders accompanied the board's history, and the man who approached me to get it for him believed firmly that the board would always contain the spirit of the one person its owner had abandoned to loneliness and death.

This all sounded a bit melodramatic to me, although like I said, I've seen some odd things during the course of my career, but I went ahead and started planning the job. Then, the first time I saw the board, in the center of a paneled study on the third floor of an old mansion in Stamford, Connecticut, I realized I wanted it for myself.

If the armored-car job came off, I could buy the Gronkjaer board. Legitimately. I knew it was coming up for auction soon, the current owner being *non compos mentis* and his oldest daughter anxious to sell off the old man's curios before he died and she had to pay estate taxes on everything. Of course I could have just stolen it; exactly such a commission

had first brought the board to my attention. After looking into the household security, though, I'd declined the job, and I still wasn't confident I could pull it off. Easier to await the auction.

Except I didn't have the money, which brought me right back to Arthur's proposal and the real reason I was camping in western Maine instead of creeping a condominium in the Back Bay.

Boris grumbled in his sleep, emitting that sound peculiar to the borzoi that resembles nothing so much as the low of a cow. I sat up, looking for shooting stars and wondering whether I believed in the story of the Gronkjaer board.

The next morning, I left the canoe overturned under a stand of pine trees and hiked with Boris along a snaking trail that eventually broadened into a logging road that after some time took a sharp right and dead-ended in an iron gate. No Trespassing, the gate said. State Property. No Road Access.

Boris jumped over the gate—he could clear four or five feet from a standstill—and I ducked underneath it. About a hundred yards farther on, the road split. I turned right and twenty minutes later came up to a second gate. On the other side of it was a broad patch of concrete with a small office booth in the middle near the scale.

“Well, what do you know,” I said to Boris. He started to trot out onto the lot, but I stopped him. People remember borzois, a fact that is a constant trial to a man in my profession. At times I wished I had gotten a lab or a spaniel. Or a gerbil.

The borzoi, though, is an exceptional animal.

“We'd have to get one guy and use him to get the other guy out of the car,” I said to Arthur the next time I saw him.

He sat at the table, spilling my chai. It dripped through the metal curlicues of the tabletop and spotted the sidewalk. Boris strained to get his muzzle all the way to the ground. At home his food and water dishes stood on a little platform, but here in the wilds of Allston he was on his own.

“I was kind of thinking, you know, just overwhelm them with firepower,” he said.

“This job works if nobody gets hurt,” I said. “Hurting people introduces complications, and raises the possibility that one of us will get hurt as well.”

“You keep thinking about it,” he said, and got up.

“I'm only going to think for so long,” I said, “and then you're going to have to tell me whether you want to go along with it or whether I'm just going to schedule a second-story job over on Charles Street.”

Boris sneezed when Arthur drove away. Diesel miasma ruined my chai.

It occurred to me not too much later that we wouldn't even need a car for the job. We could backpack in, do the job, backpack out, and pick up our car at one of the Appalachian Trail lots that dot western Maine's backcountry roads. Easy. But Arthur didn't like it. “Hell, no,” he said in front of Otto's the morning I brought it up. “You can't just walk away from a job like that. How the hell do you carry the money?”

“Well, that's the thing,” I said. “We couldn't carry all of it. But if we do this right, we'll have enough time to go through

the car so we don't end up with a bag of singles. A car gives the police a real handle, something to look for. If the drivers say we walked away, then all the police will have to go on is descriptions of us. And we're pretty ordinary-looking guys, let's face it." This was true, and it was one of the reasons I'd been a successful thief for nearly twenty years. I'd been spotted in the middle of a job maybe half a dozen times, and every time the description given of me was different. People just didn't remember what I looked like.

Arthur, I suspected, was a bit more recognizable, if for no other reason than he was a big man. But the world is full of big men, and if I was planning this enterprise correctly, any searchers would look right through us.

Stores such as REI and Eastern Mountain Sports sell dog backpacks, but a borzoi is such a thin and deep-chested animal that no pack will hang right on him. Because of this, much of the load in my backpack (rented under a name not my own from a Boston University outdoors organization) was dog food. I encouraged Boris to eat heartily while we hiked from the trailhead where I'd parked the rental car (much closer than I'd originally envisioned, it not being clear whether we'd be able to carry both backcountry gear and enough cash to make the job worthwhile) southwest in the direction of our rendezvous with Arthur, who had taken a bus to Portland and from there hitchhiked north and west until he was well into the White Mountains. We were due to meet on the fire road I'd walked with Boris some weeks before.

It was the Monday after July 4th, following a weekend when—Arthur and I hoped—the good people of New England

had left much of their money in the small towns of western Maine. The LockTrans truck, we had learned, made a weekly loop through several area municipalities, vacuuming up the deposits of seven small banks, two grocery stores, and the summer resort at the base of Maine's finest ski mountain. I put the over-under on the job's proceeds at just under half a million dollars. Arthur was more optimistic. Neither of us was sure how much of the cash we'd be able to carry. My backpack was spacious, and my gear compact, and Boris would just have to go hungry on the return leg of our journey.

When I made the turn from the trail onto the fire road, Arthur was waiting. Boris trotted up to him and leaned his head into Arthur's crotch, another habit of borzois that people have told me also exists in greyhounds. The action isn't the typical sniffing of a typical dog; the borzoi leans to get affection, and the human groin is perfectly constructed to afford a tall and narrow-headed dog a place to rest.

Arthur stood scratching behind Boris's ears, but the look he directed at me was pure confusion. “What's he doing here?” he said.

“He's our cover. When the police start covering the trails, they're not going to figure that armed robbers would bring a dog.”

Arthur looked dubious, and when I had tied Boris to a tree out of sight of the road, he stopped me before we could walk away. “Is he going to be okay?”

Despite his limited intelligence and tendency toward violence, Arthur is soft-hearted when it comes to any animal

other than *Homo sapiens*. “He'll be fine,” I said as I was leaving the rest of Boris's food in a heap on the ground within range of his tether. It wouldn't do to have to leave dog food at the scene of the crime for reasons of space. “He has water, and he'll eat what he wants while we're gone.” Which wouldn't be much; Boris was a finicky eater.

We didn't rehearse the plan again as we hiked the final five hundred yards or so to the weigh station's rear gate; Arthur and I had done enough jobs together that we knew when we didn't have to beat a dead horse. The plan was simple yet daring; we would overpower the weigh-station attendant and Arthur, wearing his uniform, would wait until the LockTrans truck pulled onto the station lot and then walk out to close the gate. Inside the small office, I (wearing another uniform borrowed at exorbitant cost from a broker in specialized clothing) would flip the switch that toggles the road sign from Open to Closed. As Arthur walked back, I would come out of the booth to examine the truck's log, apologizing but saying a regulatory change made the action necessary. When the driver or passenger opened the door to give me the log, Arthur and I would draw our guns and get the guards out of the car. They would open the back for us, and we would skate off with however much money we could carry. We would also destroy the security recordings that are standard equipment on newer armored cars.

Then it would be off into the wilderness, and back to Boston. Simple.

It worked absolutely like clockwork. The weigh-station attendant froze at the sight of Arthur's gun, said, “But we

ain't got money here," and then fainted dead away. Arthur changed into his uniform and I into mine, and just as we finished our preparations the LockTrans truck pulled off Route 201 and onto the scale. Arthur was already walking out to the gate, and after lighting the Closed message on the sign I had no trouble getting the driver to give up first the log and then his and his fellow's guns. Arthur kept the two drivers in the front seat while I popped the back door, destroyed the recording equipment, and stuffed Arthur's backpack with money.

I had filled Arthur's pack and was about to start on mine when, in the distance, I heard the unmistakable *owrowrowrowrrr* of an agitated borzoi.

Things would have been all right. I believe that. It is evident to me. If only Arthur had not leaned out from the side of the truck and said, "Is that your dog?"

I told you he wasn't very bright.

Several things happened at once then. I lost my composure and said, "Are you some kind of goddamn idiot?" and Arthur looked at me with an expression of terrible hurt before glancing back into the front seat of the LockTrans truck as a gunshot sounded and the epaulet on his left shoulder blew away in a spray of blood. As Arthur stumbled backward, he emptied his gun into the truck's passenger compartment.

I was already running, thinking *Idiot, you goddamn idiot. Of* course *one of them had another piece under the dash*. When I got to the back gate, I looked over my shoulder and could not believe what I saw. Arthur had stopped to get his

backpack, the one I'd loaded with money, and he was staggering toward the station attendant's car like a GI making the beachhead on Guadalcanal.

The usefulness of Boris as cover would only last until one of the LockTrans guards, if either had survived Arthur's fusillade, mentioned Arthur's inopportune comment. I was a good three hours from where I'd parked the rental, and I hoped that would be enough time to get moving in the car before the police heard about the dog connection. As I hiked, climbing along the edge of a forested gorge with a clear rushing stream at its bottom, I sent up the Thieves' Prayer in Case of an Injured Partner: *Please let him have the sense not to go to the hospital*. Arthur had that much sense, I thought, but you could never tell. People with bullets in them tended to get irrational.

My plan was to get the car and head up into northern New Hampshire for a week or so, maybe Vermont. Pitch a tent, go canoeing, wait for the police to form their initial opinions, then go home and try to make contact with Arthur. Along the way I'd get rid of the clothes and shoes I'd worn to do the job, wrap them around a large rock and drop them into one of the deep lakes that dot northern New England.

My precautions were probably excessive. I'd never been arrested, never even been questioned by Boston police. In the aboveground economy, I was just another antiques broker who made his living putting buyers and sellers in touch with each other. We're quiet people, unremarkable. We have museum memberships and we go to the opera. But excessive caution was one reason the police had never had cause to

think of Gregory Flynn and larceny at the same time, so I went on being careful and hoped the authorities would go on looking elsewhere when it came to certain unlawful acts committed in the New England states.

In the event, I arrived home six days after the robbery, dropped the car off at the rental agency, and took the Green Line back to my house in Brookline Village. Boris liked riding the T, and he was an unusual enough breed that most fellow riders suspended their natural disinclination to share their commute with a dog.

I knew that someone had been in my house as soon as I opened the door. It's a talent I think all professional thieves have. We've skulked in and out of so many places that we develop a kind of intuition about when someone has been skulking in ours.

The gun I'd carried to do the LockTrans job was at the bottom of Lake Willoughby, far away in the part of Vermont known as the Northeast Kingdom. I owned a licensed .38 automatic, but it was upstairs in my bureau. If anyone was lying in wait for me, they'd have little opposition; I'm not a fighter.

Boris trotted into the house unconcerned, making a beeline for his water bowl in its frame next to the refrigerator. I went upstairs and checked every room of the house, finding nothing missing or disturbed. To be certain, I opened the floor safe under my bed. Everything I'd left there was still there, and nothing appeared to have been moved.

So why the feeling? In the business I am in, you learn to trust instincts, and my instinct was that someone had been in

my house. I thought it over as I watered plants, sorted through the mail, played back the messages from clients on my answering machine. Arthur, maybe? Couldn't be. He wasn't the sharpest pencil in the drawer, but he knew better than to come to my house so soon after a botched job.

I was still mulling it over, still a bit irritated by the sensation, when I opened the *Globe* from the day after the job and saw that both guards had survived. This was a relief, both because it meant that if worse came to worst and the police connected me to the job there would be no murder charge and because I am a peaceable man by nature and my guilt would have been a terrible thing if either of the guards had died.

In the next day's *Globe* I saw that one Arthur Czyz, 39, of Malden, had been found dead in his apartment of a gunshot wound. There were no details, but I assumed the police had found the money from the robbery and were waiting to dot their i's and cross their t's before making an announcement.

The next four editions of the *Globe*, however, contained no such definitive link. Boston police speculated that Arthur had been involved in the job because his wound had clearly been inflicted elsewhere, but they had not recovered the station attendant's car and they had no solid evidence connecting Arthur to the crime.

I looked up from the paper when I heard Boris make that mooing sound. He was standing in the living room, staring into the corner behind an end table, against the wall that divided the living room from the kitchen. I called him and he glanced at me, then went back to his study.

Borzois, I thought. He was probably hearing mice; I would have to get traps again.

That night I dreamed I was sitting in the living room talking to Arthur, who was reclining on my sofa without the slightest regard for the blood that leaked through his shirt and stained the armrest. “Your dog got me killed,” he said, and I tried to deny it, but I knew he was right.

I woke up to the thump of the newspaper on the porch. I was on the sofa, the dream still vivid in my mind. Had I walked in my sleep? I never had before. But I'd never had a colleague killed before; perhaps the stress and a bit of lingering guilt were troubling me more than I was allowing myself to realize.

Boris groaned at the door, then whined at a higher pitch when I was slow to get up. I let him out into my small yard and picked up the paper. Again nothing about the robbery except a small notice that both guards had gone home from the hospital and the state of Maine was talking about improving security at weigh stations.

When Boris came back in the house, I said to him, “Arthur says you got him killed.” He looked at me, then went into the corner and stared at the wall. He was still there when the police knocked on the door and arrested me for armed robbery and attempted murder.

There isn't much to say about being in prison, although God knows people do say enough about it. My own experience at MCI-Walpole was relatively tranquil; the highlight, if it can be called that, was a scene in the cafeteria during my fifth year. Two of my fellow inmates got into a fight

over something and one stabbed the other in the back with a fork. The wounded party leaped away from the table and ran from the cafeteria, fork waggling from just inside his right shoulder blade, and someone shouted out, “Stop that guy! He's stealing the silverware!”

I was lucky, no doubt about it. Being older and innocuous, I wasn't a threat to anyone, and apart from a few perfunctory assaults soon after I arrived, I passed my six years (thanks to a skilled attorney) at Walpole without incident. I read most of what was in the prison library; I tried to keep tabs on my house, which I'd rented to a fellow antique dealer burned out of his own home as a result of a fire in the restaurant below his Charles Street condominium; and I made repeated phone calls to my old friend Karen Garrity, who had volunteered to take care of Boris until such time as I could reclaim him. I never found out who had turned me in, and truth be told I didn't spend much time looking. Revenge was of no interest to me, perhaps because my sentence was the least I deserved for participating in the robbery and getting a man killed. And whoever had placed me at the scene, I reasoned out of a natural faith in humankind, must have had legitimate reasons of self-preservation.

The darkest moment of my Walpole tenure came a year before I was released, when I called Karen to ask about Boris and she told me that he had run away. In disbelief I hung up the phone and cried, only then realizing that he was the only reason I cared about the length of my stay. I was never one of those inmates who loses all sense of the outside world and fears the date of his release, but my guilt over Arthur's death

allowed me to grow comfortable in this punishment of my own choosing. No family awaited me on the outside, and my friendships were all old enough that a length of time apart would do them no lasting damage. Prison was a limbo I inhabited until a decision was made to return me to civil society, and I only wanted to return because I wanted to see my dog.

That final year passed in a kind of ennui that surpassed even the typical long-term inmate's fatalism. At my parole hearing, I said—honestly—that I regretted nothing in my life so much as my decision to go along with Arthur Czyz and rob an armored car in Maine. Asked about my plans if I were released, I said—again truthfully—that I would like to rebuild my dormant antiques business. I was fifty-one years old and had luckily not had anything in my home that tied me to any other violations of the law, and the parole board released me two months before my fifty-second birthday.

Karen was there to pick me up and drive me back to Boston. We talked about highway construction, mostly, and although I wanted to ask her about Boris I couldn't bring myself to do it. Of course she'd done everything she could to find him, I told myself. But a borzoi is a sight hound; put something interesting in his field of vision and he'll follow it to the next state. They are a valuable breed, too, and I'd spent a number of sleepless nights in my cell wondering if he'd been stolen to be sold. Fitting, somehow, that seemed. Cosmically just. My punishment for my own thievery was having the only thing I cared about in the world stolen from me, and I would never know if he had been sold to someone who cared for

him or shot and dumped in a river when the thief found that no one would buy him. There was also the real possibility that he had run away, gotten lost, been picked up by Boston animal control officers, and euthanized at the city shelter. Or adopted, perhaps. I chose to believe the latter. Whatever the case, he was gone, and that was as much my fault as the death of Arthur Czyz.

Then, as we pulled up in front of my house, Karen shut off her car and said to me, “Greg, I have something to tell you.”

I waited. She shifted in her seat, fiddled with her keys, and finally went on. “I couldn't tell you this over the phone, but Boris didn't run away. He died.”

“He died?” I repeated stupidly.

“I'm so sorry,” Karen said. “I just couldn't tell you. He had some kind of stroke, the vet thought, and I had to have him put down. He didn't suffer.”

“Boris died,” I said softly, more to myself than her, trying the words out on my tongue and reeling as this revelation tore down the barriers of self-serving anguish I'd been hiding behind for the previous year and more. There was no thief, no cosmic justice. Just simple random chance, random as a dog's bark that nearly kills an armored-car guard in Maine.

It is difficult to describe how restorative this was. Agency was granted to me again. No longer did I have the luxury of believing that I was a stone on one pan of some great scale of justice. If Boris had simply died, nine years old with a wandering blood clot, I could believe that I was responsible for myself again.

Karen was still apologizing, and I laid a hand on her forearm. “It's all right,” I said. “Better to know. You have no idea how hard it was to wonder.” As I spoke, I realized how it must have sounded, and I rushed to correct myself. “I'm not blaming you. I don't know what I would have done in your shoes. You're my friend, Karen. I thank you for taking care of Boris at the end of his life.”

We made small talk for a moment after that, agreed to meet for lunch once I'd gotten settled in the house again. Then I got out of the car and walked up my sidewalk and onto my porch to my front door. There was an ashtray on the porch railing; I hoped that Jules had refrained from smoking in the house. My key fit in the lock, surprising me, and the door opened onto my front hall that looked as it always had save for the coats that weren't mine hanging from the hall pegs. In the living room, my couch and coffee table and mantel ornaments were all exactly as I had left them, and the six years I had been gone fell away from me like a dream.

Then I noticed the chessboard in the back corner of the living room, against the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. Hand-carved mahogany stand, squares done in obsidian and white marble, pieces of the same material. Mother-of-pearl border running around the edge of the board. It was the Gronkjaer board.

An envelope lay in the center of the board. I opened it and read a note in Karen's handwriting: *Welcome back to the world, Greg*.

It was the finest gift I had ever received, and at that moment I was near tears with love and guilt and relief and

happiness and grief. I turned to go back to the front door in case Karen hadn't already left, and saw a second note on the coffee table.

Greg, it said. *I'll be back tomorrow to clear the rest of my things out and catch you up on the house (maintenance, etc.). Oh, and I've been seeing Boris in the neighborhood. Karen told me he ran away, right? Guess he tried to come home. I haven't been able to catch him, he always takes off when I go outside, but keep an eye out. I'm sure that when he sees you he'll come right back. Jules.*

You're always standing on one more rug, and it's always a surprise when someone pulls it out from under you.

I didn't mention this to Karen because I wasn't sure whether I wanted to get into the situation that would ensue if she insisted that Boris was dead. Why would she have lied to me? No good reason presented itself, but she had. She must have, unless Jules was mistaken and there was another borzoi wandering through the neighborhood; and given that I'd seen in the flesh exactly one other borzoi in the three years I'd owned Boris, this didn't seem likely. So I let it rest, and instead of confronting Karen went out to look for Boris. I papered the neighborhood with flyers featuring a six-year-old photo, drove from Newbury Street along every side street we'd ever walked on all the way out to the Museum of Fine Arts, sat up nights waiting for the click of his toenails on the porch, but Boris didn't appear. At some point I became convinced that Jules was playing a practical joke on me, and I called him up in a fury. He was hurt, with good reason; Jules wasn't the kind of guy to be cruel in that way, at least not to

his friends. “I understand you're a bit strung out, Greg,” he said, “but this is crap. If I didn't think you were having problems adjusting to being outside again, I'd come over there and kick your ass for you.”

This brought me back to Earth, and I apologized. He was mollified. We'd been friends too long for a single irrational act to drive us apart. He even offered to cut me in on a job he was planning out in Sudbury, but I turned him down. “One time in prison's enough for me,” I told him. “This is one guy who is rehabilitated. From now on, I'm an antique dealer.”

Which I was, and I took satisfaction from working hard at it and making a legitimate living. I'd been able to support myself dealing antiques for years, but only because much of what I sold had been acquired through nonstandard channels. Now I restricted myself to reputable auctions and estate sales, not even wanting to go near sources that had a whiff of illegality about them. Within a couple of months I was up and running again, and had gotten a storefront's worth of merchandise out of storage and into a tiny space in a coming part of the South End. About this time, two things happened. First, I saw Boris, and second, Kenny Kazlauskas sent someone over to visit me.

Boris appeared in the back yard while I was making coffee at about seven one morning. I dropped my mug on the floor and ran out the back door with coffee squishing in my slippers, and my dog came trotting up to me like he'd just been jaunting around the block for half an hour instead of missing and presumed dead for more than a year. By the time he'd leaned his narrow head into my crotch like sight

hounds always do, I was crying, and I led him back into the house wiping away tears and squishing in my slippers and swearing that I would kill him myself if he ever did anything like that again. Then there was a knock at the door, and when I opened it there stood Mike Bronski.

“Greg,” he said.

“Mike,” I said.

“Mind if I come in?”

“This a social call?”

“Kenny asked me to stop by.”

“Then no, I'd appreciate it if you didn't come in,” I said. “I'm just out of Walpole, as I'm sure you know, and I'm trying to keep my nose clean.”

“Far be it from me to dirty your nose,” said Mike. “Kenny just wanted me to drop by, ask if you knew anything about what happened to that money you and Arthur got from the armored-car job.”

“Two things,” I said. “One: no, I don't. I'm guessing Arthur hid it somewhere before he died. And two: what does Kenny care?”

“Arthur owed Kenny about eighty grand,” Mike said with a shrug. “He figures that in this situation, he's kind of next of kin, and since your nose is so clean you don't want to have anything to do with the cash anyway.” He looked at me with one of his eyelids lowered just a touch, as if he was gauging the distance between us, and I reminded myself that Mike Bronski had killed six people that I knew of. Most of them had probably seen that look. Kenny K. himself had populated the Mystic River with a number of unfortunate souls who took his

money and exhausted his patience. I wondered what Arthur had done to get so indebted to him.

That didn't matter at the moment, though. What mattered was that Kenny had decided he was going to get the money from me if he couldn't get it from Arthur, and I didn't have it. “I'll ask around, see what I can find out,” I said.

“You do that,” said Mike, still with that heavy-lidded look. I shut the door and turned to see that Boris was gone.

I spent the day stewing over what to do. Kenny K. wasn't the kind of guy who was going to change his mind; if he'd decided I could tell him where the money was, he'd keep turning up the heat until I either told him or he vented his frustration and I couldn't tell anybody anything ever again. I couldn't really afford it, but for all of three seconds I considered taking the direct approach and just spending the money to have someone take Kenny out. It would have to be someone from out of town, since nobody local would want to weather the storm that would follow. I wasn't certain I'd survive the reprisals either, though, and as I've said, I don't like violence. Even talking to guys like Kenny or Mike made me want to get my teeth cleaned.

So I'd have to convince him I didn't know where the money was, or I'd have to find it and give it to him. Convincing didn't seem likely. Neither did finding it, but that was the pony I decided to ride.

The first thing I did was call Karen. She'd known Arthur longer than I had, and I also wanted to get the Boris thing all the way out into the open. From force of habit, we met at the coffeehouse, which miraculously was still there even after my

years in Walpole, and when we'd gotten seated at an outside table I started right in on her. “Karen, why did you tell me Boris was dead?”

“What?” she said. “Because he is.”

“First you told me he ran away, though. And Jules told me he saw Boris in the neighborhood, and you know what? I saw him yesterday. He came right into the house, but I left the back door open and he took off again.” As I said it, I realized that she would think I was suffering from some kind of grief-induced fantasy—but I had seen Boris, I had felt his head under my hand and brushed his hair from my pants. And I had left the back door open.

“Greg,” Karen said slowly. “I know you miss Boris. And I know Walpole wasn't easy on you, and you're still adjusting to being out. And I know I lied to you once about this, but you have to believe me when I tell you that Boris is dead. I was there when the vet put him down. I have the bill.” She was looking hard at me, and I could tell that there was no sense pressing the issue. Time to change the subject.

“Thanks for the chessboard,” I said. “I meant to tell you before.”

“I wanted you to have something,” she said. “You've had a rough time, and part of it was my fault. Plus knowing you, I don't think the board will work its curse on you.”

I had to laugh at that. She was right. For one reason or another, I'd never married, never had a long-term commitment of any kind. I had no family, no friends outside business circles, no deep emotional entanglements of any kind. This had never been a conscious choice. I'd just always

been solitary. In the three years I'd had Boris I'd become more attached to him than I ever had to any human, but at first I'd bought him on a whim, after seeing a borzoi running along the Charles River.

“Mike Bronski came to see me yesterday,” I said.

“Don't tell me you're getting back into the business.”

“I'm not. And if I was, I wouldn't work with Kenny. The drugs and girls thing is outside my area of expertise, you know? Mike was asking about the money from the armored-car job.” She waited for me to go on. “Kenny thinks I know where it is. I'm guessing I have maybe a week before he decides to get someone to work on me and find out for sure. Now don't take this the wrong way, but do you have any idea what Arthur did with the money before he died?”

When I'd been talking about Boris, Karen had looked confused and sympathetic. Now she was just angry. “I cannot believe you're asking me this,” she said. “Do you—” She broke off and stared away from me at the passing traffic.

“Karen,” I said. “You're my best friend. I don't think you're holding anything out on me for yourself. But you knew Arthur better than I did, and if he had someplace where he stashed job proceeds, you'd know it. If you have your own reasons for not telling me, I respect them; but I'm asking you as a friend who is in danger. Kenny K. is going to kill me if I don't tell him something. That I'm not making up.”

She caught the implication of that last sentence, and she didn't like it. More time passed while she watched cars go by. Then after a while she said, “If Arthur had to hide something, it would probably be out at his dad's farm in Fitchburg.”

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. “Does Kenny know about this?”

“I'm guessing he's had someone out there looking around, but I haven't talked to Arthur's dad in years. There's no reason for him to tell me if anything has happened.”

Nothing had. I called Piotr Czyz the next morning, introduced myself as a friend of Arthur's, and asked if I could come out and speak to him that afternoon. That was fine with him, so after lunch—which I spent looking out the kitchen window for Boris—I drove out of the city through ostentatious suburbs that had been farmland when I'd gone into Walpole. Something about seven-hundred-thousand-dollar houses running their sprinkler systems in the rain gets to me, and the drive out Route Two had me in a bilious mood for a while, but McMansion metastasis has only begun to nibble at Fitchburg, and by the time I'd found Sunny Hill Dairy I was enjoying the outing. It occurred to me that I could keep driving, go anywhere, forget about Kenny K. and Arthur and the whole damn sordid business, and for the first time I understood—really understood—that I was a free man again.

Well, there was the problem with violating parole. And forgetting the past six years would mean forgetting Boris, and I couldn't do that. No human being worth the name would walk away from his dog like that. Even if the dog was supposedly dead.

Time to admit something, I told myself as I parked outside the dairy farm's office and took in a deep manure-scented breath. You don't believe Boris is dead. And if you don't

believe Boris is dead, either you believe Karen is lying or you believe your dog has come back from the grave.

I had touched him. I had brushed his hair from my pants.

Piotr Czyz was big and blocky like his son had been, but his bristly farmer's face was missing Arthur's blunt malice. When we shook hands, I was briefly ashamed of the softness of my own palm: the guilty side of the Puritan work ethic.

I suggested we talk in private, and he led me to his office. As he shut the door he said, “Chess player?”

At first I didn't know what he meant. Then he pointed to my tie, a dark green job with knights and bishops all over it. It's one of my favorite ties.

“Not really,” I said. “Coffeehouse player, maybe. Mostly I just admire the game, and the people who are really good at it.”

He nodded, hand still on the doorknob. “The only people who ever wanted to talk to me about Arthur were police and criminals. You aren't police.”

Getting right to the point. “I'm not a criminal anymore either,” I said.

A long moment passed while he looked at me without a trace of sympathy in his eyes. “I wish Arthur had lived to say that,” he said then, and gestured for me to sit.

We faced each other across his desk, a painted aluminum rectangle that marked him as a man for whom success didn't mean flash. “I was in on the armored-car job with Arthur,” I said. “And I'm going to be up front with you and tell you that it might be my fault that he was killed.”

I was ready to tell him the whole story, up to and including Boris's fateful bark, but he cut me short. “It was Arthur's fault that he was killed. I got old a long time ago waiting for it to happen.”

It might have sounded like he was letting me off the hook, but I knew better. What he meant was that I had no business wasting his time with false guilt. This shook me a bit; Arthur and I had never been friends, but hadn't I mourned him? Or had I only been feeling sorry for myself because his stupid idea had bought me six years in Walpole?

“You're probably right about that,” I said. “And if I get killed now, it'll be my fault, but I'm still trying to avoid it.”

“I don't know where the money is,” Arthur's father said. I waited. “You're not the first to ask, and I'll tell you what I told the other guy. I hadn't seen my son for two years before he died, and he hadn't been out here for a year before that. And he damn sure couldn't have made the drive with a bullet in his lung, and if he had come here with that goddamn money I'd have told him to burn it or else I would.”

A deep flush crept across Piotr Czyz's face as he spoke, and I knew that whatever he'd said, he hated me for coming out to his farm and reminding him of how his son had died.

I stood. “Mr. Czyz, I'm trying to stay alive. I don't mean to throw this in your face.”

“I hope you do stay alive,” he said from behind his desk. “But it's not up to me.”

I drove back to Boston wondering what to do next. The dairy had been a long shot, so I wasn't really disappointed that it hadn't paid off. Still, I now had one less option to avoid

Kenny K.'s bone saws, or concrete Keds, or whatever other killing methodologies his Mafia-fevered brain had latched onto. This was trouble.

Things only got worse when I walked into my house and found Mike Bronski watching television in the living room. “You are one crazy faggot,” he said without taking his eyes off the screen, where motorcycles were jumping over piles of dirt. Mike was under the impression that all antiques dealers were homosexual, a stereotype that just makes me tired.

I still had the gun upstairs in the safe—my one parole violation—but Mike and I both knew that if I took off fast in any direction, he'd make me wish I hadn't. So I stood where I was and said, “What makes me crazy, Mike?”

He shook his head as if I'd disappointed him. “Aren't you smart enough to know when not to play dumb? Jesus.”

“Humor me. Why am I crazy?”

“I didn't think you could train those kinds of dogs to attack,” Mike said. “I give you credit for that. What is it, an Afghan?”

“Borzoi. Russian wolfhound.”

“Whatever, the goddamn thing was fast. Came right out of Kenny's hedge when he went out to get the paper this morning. I was just leaving, and wham here comes this white blur out of the hedge.” Mike started to laugh. “Like nothing I ever saw. It marked Kenny up pretty good before I put a foot in its ribs, and then it took off like a track dog. I took a couple of shots at it, but....” He shrugged. “You know how many broke-down greyhounds I popped in the last ten years? Every one of them, I wished I could get a nice target rifle, set it up

and let that dog run. Okay, dog, you and me. I miss, you're free. Instead I took ‘em to the dump, bang, left ‘em there for the gulls. And now here I am with this Russian dog hauling ass across Kenny's yard, and all I have is this.” He took a snub-nosed revolver out of his belt and laid it on the coffee table. “Didn't seem right.”

He turned the television off and stood. “Some dog you got there, Greg. I admire a good dog. Wanted to tell you this before I pass along a message from Kenny. He called me once he'd gotten stitched up, said you got balls. Said you can keep the money if you give him the dog.”

On his way past me to the back door, Mike clapped me on the shoulder. “Helluva dog. Truth is, Kenny's scared shitless of it. Thinks it's magic, the crazy sonofabitch. One of us'll be by tomorrow.”

After he left, I stood staring blankly at the revolver on the coffee table, trying to make sense of the whole thing. Kenny K. lived in a gaudy neo-Colonial house in Hingham, for God's sake, a good fifteen miles from my house, and the only thing Boris had ever attacked in his life was a stuffed yak I'd given him when he was a puppy. Now, at nine years old, he'd become a pointy-headed assassin? It was almost easier to believe that he'd come back from the dead.

Completely at sea, I grabbed hold of the one question I knew I could get answered. I called Karen.

She didn't sound happy to hear from me, and I think she almost hung up when I asked her what had happened to Boris's body.

“You can't go dig up his grave and see if he's in it, Greg,” she snapped. “I had the vet take care of it.”

The initial deception I could almost understand; it's hard to break bad news to people when other things have made them vulnerable. But this hurt.

“Do you know what they do with dead dogs?” I shouted into the receiver. “They pile them in a goddamn dump truck and throw them in a landfill to rot, Karen! You couldn't even spring for the hundred bucks to have him cremated while you were lying to me so I could lie awake in my fucking cell thinking he'd starved to death in an alley somewhere?”

As I shouted, I noticed that I was looking at the Gronkjaer board, her gift to me in celebration of my release. And just as that registered, I also noticed that I'd been ranting to a dial tone.

It was getting late, and I was going to die the next day. That was bad enough, but what I couldn't stand was the thought that I might leave this world on bad terms with the human being who meant more to me than any other. The only person for whom my feelings rivaled my love for Boris. That sounds strange and unhealthy, I know, but when it came to relationships I'd never played my cards very well.

I went to Karen's house, and when she opened the door I said I was sorry before she could shut it again, and then I said that people are not at their best when dangerous mobsters were going to kill them in the morning, and I asked her if I could come in and talk for a while.

She let me in, and we sat in a kind of fake companionable silence for a while. She was letting me work myself up to

whatever I'd come to ask, and I knew it, and I appreciated it. Thing was, I knew what I wanted to ask but not if it was the right question. I had that tense feeling in the back of my mind that something should have been clear to me, that I was seeing things but not the connections between them. Probably just desperation, I thought. Looking for that miraculous way out when of course there wasn't one.

“Karen, when you told me you hadn't talked to Arthur's father in years, what did that mean, exactly?”

“What are you getting at, Greg?”

You get involved with a woman sometimes, a kind of no-questions-asked relationship. For the comfort. Karen and I had once found that kind of comfort in each other. It lasted about a year, then dried up without either of us feeling aggrieved. She'd married since then, a couple of years before I'd gone to Walpole, but some of the closeness we'd once enjoyed ... that kind of feeling never completely goes away.

Unless you push it.

When I asked her if Piotr Czyz and Kenny K. had ever done business, I pushed it. Hard. Her face closed up, and I had time to think that she would just get up and leave me sitting there in her living room. She got hold of it, though, whatever she was feeling, and she answered me honestly.

“I used to work for Pete. And Pete used to work for Kenny. He still might. I try not to know too much about them anymore. When I still had the market, Pete would drop product with the milk run. It was all Kenny's—Pete didn't mind moving it, but he didn't want to get involved with buying and selling. Arthur came in every day to pick it up and

move it into the neighborhood. He was still close to his father then, but when he started to munch some of the product Pete threatened to cut him out. So Kenny picked him up, got him started collecting from the pony junkies Kenny made book for. And this set Pete off even more. He didn't want his boy getting dirty for Kenny K., but by then Arthur had a habit and the upshot of the whole thing is that Arthur and Pete stopped talking to each other. And Arthur started to like the horses a bit himself. Kenny really owned him after that.

“A little while after that I sold the market to Kenny, and then I got married, and now I don't have anything to do with it anymore.”

I remembered when she'd sold the market. The lease on the building had gone way up as Central Square turned hip, and she'd wanted to put her money somewhere easier and cleaner. So she'd told me at the time. And it had been true, but there was a lot she hadn't told me too. I could feel that omission, like a wedge of regret and stubbornness driven between us.

Working it over in my head, I decided that Pete Czyz had told me the truth when he denied knowing where the money was. He hadn't told me everything, though, and now I had that tense feeling in my mind again, like I should have been able to put together what he'd left out.

Karen quit talking once she'd spun the story out for me, and I could tell she wanted me to leave. On the way home I tried to put it all together, but I kept running aground on the fact that Kenny K. was coming by the next morning and I had nothing to tell him. Add that to the fact that I had possibly

endangered Karen by going to see her when Kenny might well have someone keeping an eye on me, and I walked in the front door of my house feeling very much like a man waiting for the noose at sunrise, hoping only that I didn't take any of my friends with me.

Boris was in the living room staring at the Gronkjaer board.

It made a kind of sense, insofar as seeing your dead dog in the living room can make sense. When Karen had bought me the board, she'd put it in Boris's favorite corner, the one he'd always stared into. I don't know if other dogs do this, but Boris had a habit of staring for long periods of time into particular corners, ears at half-mast and head cocked slightly to one side. I used to joke that he was seeing a ghost, but stopped when a client took me a little too seriously. One of the hazards of the business when you deal with items that people think might be magical.

So if Boris was going to come back and stare into a corner, it would be that corner.

“Hey,” I said. “You let yourself in?”

He glanced up at me, swept his tail back and forth a couple of times, then returned to his study of the board. It was set up in one of my favorite positions, the ending of Aron Nimzovich's 1923 Immortal Zugzwang. A classic game, one of the great moments in chess history; with only one real attacking exchange, Nimzovich—in twenty-three moves—compressed the board until his opponent Sämisch had no move that wouldn't cut his own throat. That's what *Zugzwang* means. I'd always admired this game more than any of the

other famous matches, the ones awarded brilliancy prizes at one tournament or another; there was something supremely satisfying about the way Nimzovich inexorably forced Sämisch to do himself in by allowing him moves that looked perfect but were in fact suicide. Victory through guile rather than brute force. The kind of achievement that appeals to a peaceable man.

Of course, I found myself in Sämisch's exact predicament. I couldn't find the money, and I wasn't about to give Boris up—even if I could have—so every avenue led to me being found dead by a friend once someone noticed that my mailbox was overflowing. I might have run, I guess, but Kenny was rich and Kenny was mean and Kenny was obsessive and in the end he would have found me, I think. Also, I didn't want to run. I was fifty-two and settled, and I could no more imagine a life working in a hotel in Paraguay than I could imagine taking a gun and killing Kenny myself. There are people who say that anyone will kill given the right situation; I don't think this is true. If I had been able to kill Kenny, I wouldn't have been me. Ergo, I wasn't able to kill Kenny.

What I was able to do was pull a chair up next to Boris and the chessboard and sit, quietly, as the Sun went down and the room darkened around me. Sometime after dark he turned around three times and lay on the rug next to my chair, and in the room's perfect stillness I felt myself receding. Tomorrow I would die, and one by one all of the things that had occupied my time grew insubstantial and finally disappeared. I sat, alone, with Boris sleeping on the

rug and the faint glow of streetlights picking out the crosses on the two kings' heads.

The phone woke me up. It was Mike. "Kenny says I'm supposed to come over if you have the dog."

"What, is he scared of a borzoi?"

Mike laughed. For the first time in our short and unwilling interaction, I felt like he didn't think I was a total loss.

"I don't have the dog," I said.

He didn't ask whether I had the money. "Okay, Kenny'll be there in an hour."

The phone went dead, and I put my hand down at the side of the chair. Boris was gone.

An hour.

I decided I would die clean, and went upstairs to take a shower. Thirteen minutes, including getting dressed again in my favorite corduroys and a sweater I'd had for thirty years. I spent three minutes thinking about whether I should leave some kind of note for Karen. I was leaving the house to her. She wouldn't move into it, would in fact sell it as soon as my will cleared probate, but she would appreciate the gesture. Forget it, I decided; no note. Everyone who knew me would eventually find out what had happened. I didn't care.

The truth of that struck me. I didn't care. I didn't care that Kenny Kazlauskas was at that moment on his way over to my house to kill me because I didn't know where Arthur had hidden the money. Why? Because I was helpless. Without options or avenues of escape. Kenny was coming over because that's the kind of person Kenny was, and I'd let him do it. I'd let him walk right into my house.

I. Would. Let. Him.

“Jesus,” I whispered, and understood everything. Sometimes you think you're playing white, and it turns out you've just been seeing the board from the wrong angle.

The Gronkjaer board was heavy, but it scooted across the rug without any of the pieces falling over. For some reason that seemed important. When I'd gotten it far enough out of the corner that I could step around behind it, I looked for a long moment at the painted-over cover of the milk chute set into the wall. Arthur had spent his entire working life driving a delivery truck for his father's dairy; where else would he have stashed the money if he wanted me to find it?

I couldn't pry the door open with my hands, so I got a screwdriver from the junk drawer in the kitchen and gouged the paint out of the hinges, then worked the tip under the edge of the door and popped it loose. When it opened, bundles of money fell out onto the floor.

Arthur, you were a better guy than I ever gave you credit for, I thought, and was humbled even as pure exaltation swept through me at the realization that I was going to live. Kenny would show up, I'd give him the money, and we'd all forget about the whole thing. The scope of my life, just then constricted to a few minutes, suddenly ballooned out to years again—I would live! I'd grow old!

Most of the bundles of cash stayed jammed in the chute until I scooped them out. By the time I'd cleared the space, the pile was heaped around my feet and I felt like Scrooge McDuck. A small piece of white paper fluttered out of the chute to land on the mound of bills. It was a note. *G*, it read.

Your dog got me shot, but I don't blame him. If I was a dog I would of barked too. See ya after I get doctored up. There was no signature.

My throat felt tight and the wash of conflicting emotion brought me to the edge of tears. It's hard to realize that you've been so wrong about someone who's dead; how do you make it right?

Kenny walked in the front door without knocking. He shut the door behind him and stepped into the living room, not showing a gun yet. “Let's have it,” he said.

A double arc of stitches curled through his left eyebrow and across that side of his nose. There were more in his ear, and I could see the edge of a bandage sticking out past his shirt cuff. I resisted the urge to comment. It was one thing to be utterly stoned on the knowledge that I'd just been given a cosmic get-out-of-jail-free card, whether through plain magic or just the odd swirls of probability that always cropped up whenever large amounts of money were dislocated from their proper flow; it was another thing entirely to mock a man who would be looking for an excuse to kill me whether I had what he wanted or not. And Kenny was not at his most agreeable: his pupils were contracted to pinpricks, his hands shook, he was blazing with cocaine and scared to death.

I'd taken a couple of steps out into the room as Kenny came in. My chair and the Gronkjaer board blocked his view of the corner, and I took care to stand in the gap between them.

“You tipped the cops to me, didn't you, Kenny?” I said.

He grinned. “Fuckin’ A right, I did. I got a right to find out where my money was, and you couldn't work no voodoo bullshit on me from Walpole. It didn't work, hey, if at first you don't succeed, you know?” His eyes were snapping all over the room. “So let's have it. You don't have it, you know what? They used to press people under stones until they admitted they were witches. I got a big pile of rocks out at a quarry in Stow. You give me the money, they get broken up into road gravel.”

“I got it,” I said, and gestured behind me.

The table wasn't quite where I thought it was, I guess, or something else was going on, but as I moved my arm, the side of my hand brushed the white king where he stood cornered on h1. The king toppled, bouncing on the edge of the table and falling to the floor.

And Boris came out from behind me, head low and upper lip curled back from his teeth.

I'd say that I was as surprised as Kenny, but it would be a lie. His face actually went white, instantly, as if the blood had been vacuumed from his body, and when his mouth fell open a kind of whine came out. Reflexively he reached for the gun in his waistband, but before he could get it out Boris sprang.

A borzoi is a large dog, but he seems larger than he is. Boris stood about even with my hips, and when he stood on his hind legs he could rest his front paws on my shoulders, but the most he ever weighed was about eighty-five pounds. Every ounce of that is muscle, though, and centuries of breeding for the hunting of wolves has made borzois whip-fast and amazingly agile. Boris caught Kenny just as Kenny's

hand found the doorknob, and if the door hadn't come open I can't help but believe that Boris would have killed Kenny dead as ... well, dead as Boris, right there on my living room rug. But the door did come open, and Kenny threw Boris off long enough to get out of the house, breaking the screen door off its latch as he went. Boris followed him, and as I ran after the two of them I heard Kenny's screams trailing away down the street. When I got out onto the porch they were out of sight. I looked up and down the block, saw no ectoplasmic borzoi and no panicked gangster. Not even an astonished neighbor to make me believe that what I'd just seen was real. Kenny's Eldorado sat parked in my driveway and I was seized by an irrational certainty that some kind of error had been purged and made right again.

The Gronkjaer board, I thought. The one who loved you, and whom you abandoned.

The next morning, bright and early, there came a knock at the door. I was delighted to see that my visitors did not number among them Mike Bronski, even though they were cops and therefore unwelcome.

“Brower and Glenn,” I said. “Come in.”

They did, and sat. We'd known each other in a professional capacity for six years or so—they were the detectives who'd put me in Walpole.

My natural instincts tend toward courtesy, but I knew from prior experience that it would be wasted on these two. They were both colorless and patient men, ill at ease when they weren't working or talking about work. So I got things

started. “Yes, that's Kenny K.'s Eldorado in my driveway,” I said.

“Oh good,” Brower said. “He's being forthcoming.”

Glenn chimed in. “Kenny says you sicced your dog on him. Twice. Most recently yesterday.”

“Detectives, you know Kenny isn't a rational man.”

“Did you sic your dog on him?”

“My dog is dead,” I said, and believed it—really believed it—for the first time. “He died about a year ago.”

Back to Brower. “Do we have to take your word for that?”

“I can get you the receipt from the vet. It has the word euthanasia on it, if that's specific enough for you.”

“So we found Kenny around the corner, practically catatonic and dog bites all over him, and you don't know anything about that,” Brower said.

“Even though his car is in your driveway,” added Glenn.

“Did Kenny tell you why he was here?” I asked.

It was a weak effort, not even enough to get Brower to crack a smile. “Why don't you tell us?” he responded.

“He said my dog had attacked him at his house in Hingham,” I began. “Which is, as I'm sure you know, a damned long way for a nine-year-old borzoi to go just to bite someone, apart from the fact that Boris was meek as a lamb, couldn't track if his life depended on it, and had never been to Kenny's house before.” I paused, hoping the ridiculousness of the whole situation would impress itself upon them. “Plus, as I mentioned, Boris is dead. Maybe some dog did bite Kenny; his face was stitched up when he came here. He said he was

going to kill me if I didn't give him both the dog and the money from the LockTrans job."

Glenn arched an eyebrow. "And you said?"

"I don't have my dog anymore, and I don't have the money either."

This was true. There's a no-kill animal shelter in the South End that has a 24-hour lobby full of cages where you can drop off strays. I'd gone there the night before and stuffed an old nylon duffel bag full of the LockTrans proceeds into one of the cages. A mournful beagle mutt had licked my fingers through the wires of his own prison. If he hadn't been wearing tags I'd have taken him home.

"You don't have the money," Glenn repeated.

"Whatever Arthur did with it, it's gone."

"So why did Kenny think you had it?" Brower again.

I shrugged. "Who knows why Kenny thinks anything? Come on, Detective, Kenny's got a thousand-dollar-a-day habit and he's been convinced for fifteen years that I'm some kind of sorcerer. Did he tell you that?"

They weren't ready to let it go, I could see that. After a short pause, during which I assumed they were telepathically arranging who would speak next, Brower said, "Sure, Kenny's delusional, and the coke ate through his septum into his brain in about 1987. But he keeps good track of his money."

"If he thinks this money is his," I said, "it's because he put Arthur up to the job."

Brower and Glenn looked at each other. "You remember Greg here saying this at his trial?" Glenn asked his partner.

“Don't think so. Greg, did you forget to mention this at your trial?”

I kept my mouth shut. They weren't done squeezing, and I wasn't going to waste my one bullet until they were.

“We know Kenny put the bug in Arthur's ear,” Glenn said. “And we all know that it wasn't going to stick with just your testimony anyway. So what we're wondering is, is there anybody else you might have just remembered was involved?”

I took a deep breath. I only had one thing to give them, and I wasn't sure it would be enough, and down in the pit of my stomach where the old criminal me still lived I felt the rolling uneasiness of the snitch who knows he's going to turn and can't do anything about it. It's a kind of guilt unlike any other.

“You're not going to hear me say anything about Piotr Czyz,” I said.

Detectives Brower and Glenn didn't say anything while they turned that over in their heads until they'd satisfied themselves that I'd really said what they thought I'd said. Both of them stood.

I stood with them. “I want to be out of this. As of now. Forever.”

“Far as we're concerned,” said Brower. Glenn nodded. They shut the door behind them when they left.

I could have left Piotr out of it. He'd lost his son, after all. Thing was, though, that when he'd told me Arthur was responsible for his own death, it was a cheat. And it almost worked; I was so dumbly grateful for absolution that it almost

didn't occur to me that Pete Czyz might have been working that gratitude to steer me away from himself. That was part of what I'd figured out as I stood there looking at the chessboard waiting for Kenny to show up and end my life.

I had helped to kill Arthur, and Kenny Kazlauskas had helped to kill Arthur, and Arthur had helped to kill himself. But Piotr Czyz had set his son on that road the first time he'd had Arthur load cottage-cheese tubs filled with cocaine into the GMC TopKick Arthur drove around metro Boston. Somebody's always to blame.

Still, I could have kept my mouth shut. Who was I to judge the truth of Pete Czyz's grief?

I learned loyalty late in life. It's not a lesson that comes easily to a thief. I'd meant it when I told Pete Czyz that I wasn't a criminal anymore, and that was why I couldn't let Pete walk away from the setup that had killed his son. Arthur Czyz hadn't been the best of friends, but in the end he was loyal. For a human being, that's not too bad.

Coming Attractions

The cruelest month? Ha! Any month which brings us a new story of Kedrigern the wizard—as our April issue most certainly does—cannot be called “cruel.” “Mischievous,” maybe, but “bountiful” seems like the best term.

In addition to John Morressy's contribution, we'll also have a new David Gerrold story in the bounty, a shifty tale called “Dancer in the Dark.”

Other contributors we'll soon be hearing from include James L. Cambias, Sheila Finch, Robert Reed, and Ray

Vukcevich. Subscribe now so you'll be sure to receive *F&SF* throughout the year.

[Back to Table of Contents]

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MISCELLANEOUS

[Back to Table of Contents]

Curiosities

The Rolling Pin,

by Charles Williams (1955)

A frog hops onto a park bench and sings “The Barber of Seville.”

This sounds like the cartoon “One Froggy Evening” (1955), but it happened *first* in a novel published several months earlier. *The Rolling Pin* features an operatic frog named Turkey, a bench that acts like a choo-choo train, a dachshund who paints landscapes ... and Looie, one of the funniest villains in fantasy literature.

The Rolling Pin, by Charles Williams, deserves a place beside *Through the Looking-Glass* and *The Phantom Tollbooth.* The story's narrator is Uncle Fritz, a bland Everyman whose life turns upside-down when he drops his stickpin. The pin hits the ground, and keeps rolling ... and he follows it into some hilariously surrealistic adventures.

Charles Williams (not to be confused with several similarly-named authors) was born in West Liberty, Iowa, in 1909. He served as an Air Force radioman, a juvenile-court officer, a clarinetist in a dance band, and a carnival roustabout. He published only two works of fantasy. *It Was All Very Strange* (1953) is his linked series of whimsical tall tales, just a notch below the sustained dementia of *The Rolling Pin*. His two fantasy books were published by Abelard-Schuman, which

later imploded in a bankruptcy which has kept *The Rolling Pin* and *It Was All Very Strange* out of print ever since.

But Chuck Jones probably read this book. The last chapter of *The Rolling Pin* features Turkey the frog onstage in a dilapidated theater, singing “Figaro, Figaro, Figaro....”

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre
