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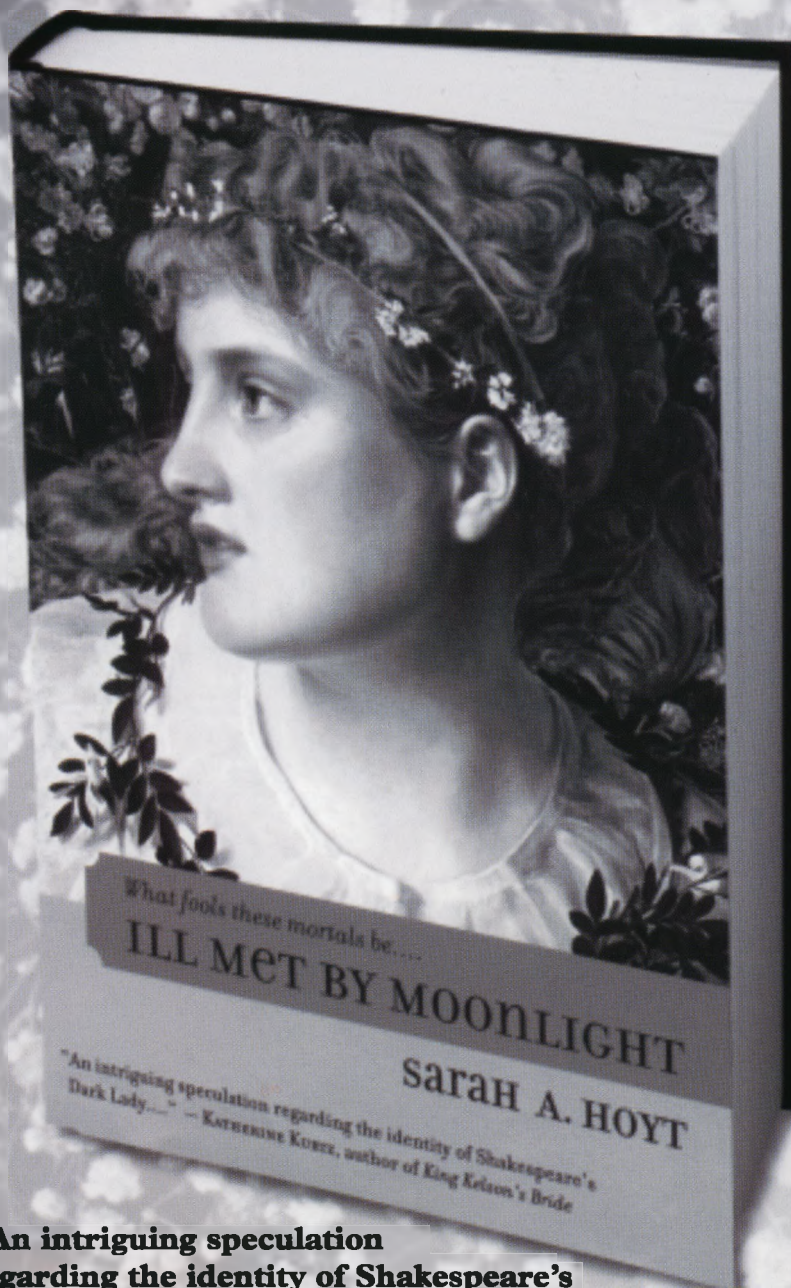
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# STORIES OF THE IMAGINATION FANTASTIC®

Winter 2001

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Cover art by Sean Murray; interior art by Marianne Plumridge-Eggleton.

# Ed-itorial

You meet some interesting people on the road.

I have been traveling a lot this year (Washington, D.C., Park City, UT and Bathsheba, Barbados, all in a few weeks) and was reminded of what a creature of habit I have become. I found myself being truly pissed off on my flight back from Washington due to a 30-minute delay. "Oh, shit, I might miss that episode of *Friends* that I've seen 423,686 times."

I've learned in my travels that buying a local beer can yield not only a good time, but a wealth of information as well. It was in a truly Budweizerian moment that I met Daniel. Our conversation led us to a private beach where the gentle waters of the West Coast of Barbados lapped on the shell-crushed shore. After hearing me complain about not being able to get a good map, Daniel explained that, "we really don't want ya dri'vn." Fair enough, I related, we don't tell the tourists about our secret spots on the island either.

"Yeah, Mon?"

"Long Island." Suddenly we understood each other much better and Daniel's speech lost much of its thick Caribbean accent. A fisherman and grower of exotic flowers, he explained how he had a woman at home who was pissed at him for not being home with her. He told of how the military had recently been combined with the police due to the rising crime rate, which was directly attributable to sagging tourism. He was happy I was there. I later sold my "crappy" CD player (that's how I described it to the would-be purchaser) for five dollars less than I paid for it. Things seemed a little tougher in Barbados since I was last there. A shame. "Things'll pick up," I said to Daniel as we parted.

"Yeah, maybe when this government go," he whispered back.

"You had to bring that shit up?" I shouted back, but he was gone.

Some of you may be a little surprised that I didn't mention the election in my last editorial. There was a mix-up with the graphic artist and half my editorial got mistakenly deleted. The missing part was a comical speech I wrote on the night of Al Gore's concession, prior to his speech. If anyone still cares, write me an e-mail and if there's enough interest I'll post it on the DNA website. It was not as CNN as Warren's accurate and entertaining analysis in his Winter editorial of *Absolute Magnitude*, but it was good for a laugh. Who knew the laugh would never end.

I recently met a woman activist while in Washington who explained in nauseating detail the election night war room she and some other PR pseudo-activists had set-up to monitor Al Gore's all-but-certain victory. It was she and her people that stopped Al Gore from getting on stage and conceding. I heard he never got out of the limo, but what the hell do I know. Shock still twisted her pretty face with rage and resentment. Dubya was already ripping apart the fabric of the orderly utopia left behind by pig-genius, Bill Clinton. When we parted, I almost liked GW.

Park City. I hit this town at the wrong time of year. A week after the end of the ski season and a few weeks shy of the summer season...the place was deserted. With a little imagination, however, one could imagine the streets filled with people and snowmobiles parked on the main road. This setting is where I met Joan Kenley, PHD, for the second time. I concluded, upon our first meeting, that Joan was from another place, another planet perhaps. Preaching about breathing, the relationship between the body and the mind, the "horror center" (stomach) and love being the driving force behind everything, she lost me from word one.

However, while my NY colleague's disdain rose, mine fell away. At one point she broke down crying in front of the group after she read a passage about an old friend from her book. I laughed to myself, then thought it took guts to do it. So, at work when I feel like I'm ready to blow a gasket, I breathe, and cool down the engine.

In the past I have used this page to bring attention to the loss of a unique individual, in some cases people I never met. March 4, 2001, marks the passing of Jenna Felice, an editor at Tor books and long time partner of editor/writer Rob Killheffer.

I did not know Jenna very well, but strange friendships bloom in the wee hours of the night, sitting on a hotel bed, or standing in a bathroom with a tub full of beer and ice—the people of the east coast SF convention circuit knew Jenna, and her wonderful personality. She always seemed to be smiling, she enjoyed her work, its products, and the SF community. It is unfortunate that those of us who enjoy SF fiction will now be deprived of the works that Jenna would have undoubtedly created in the future. Most sadly, we will be deprived of her.

You meet some interesting people on the road.

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Edward J. McFadden

### Publisher

Warren Lapine

### Associate Editor

Patrick Thomas

### Administrative Assistants

Dawn McFadden

Carol Joyce

### Layout & Design

Angela Kessler

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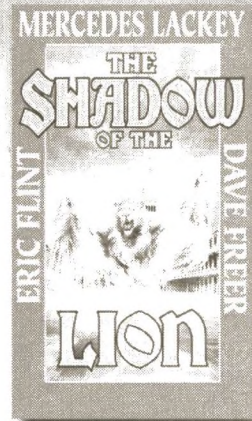
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An orphaned outcast must find his strength.  
A reluctant prince must choose  
between duty and pleasure.  
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must make uneasy alliance.  
All will be consumed by an evil  
greater than they have ever known,  
if they cannot find safe harbor beneath*

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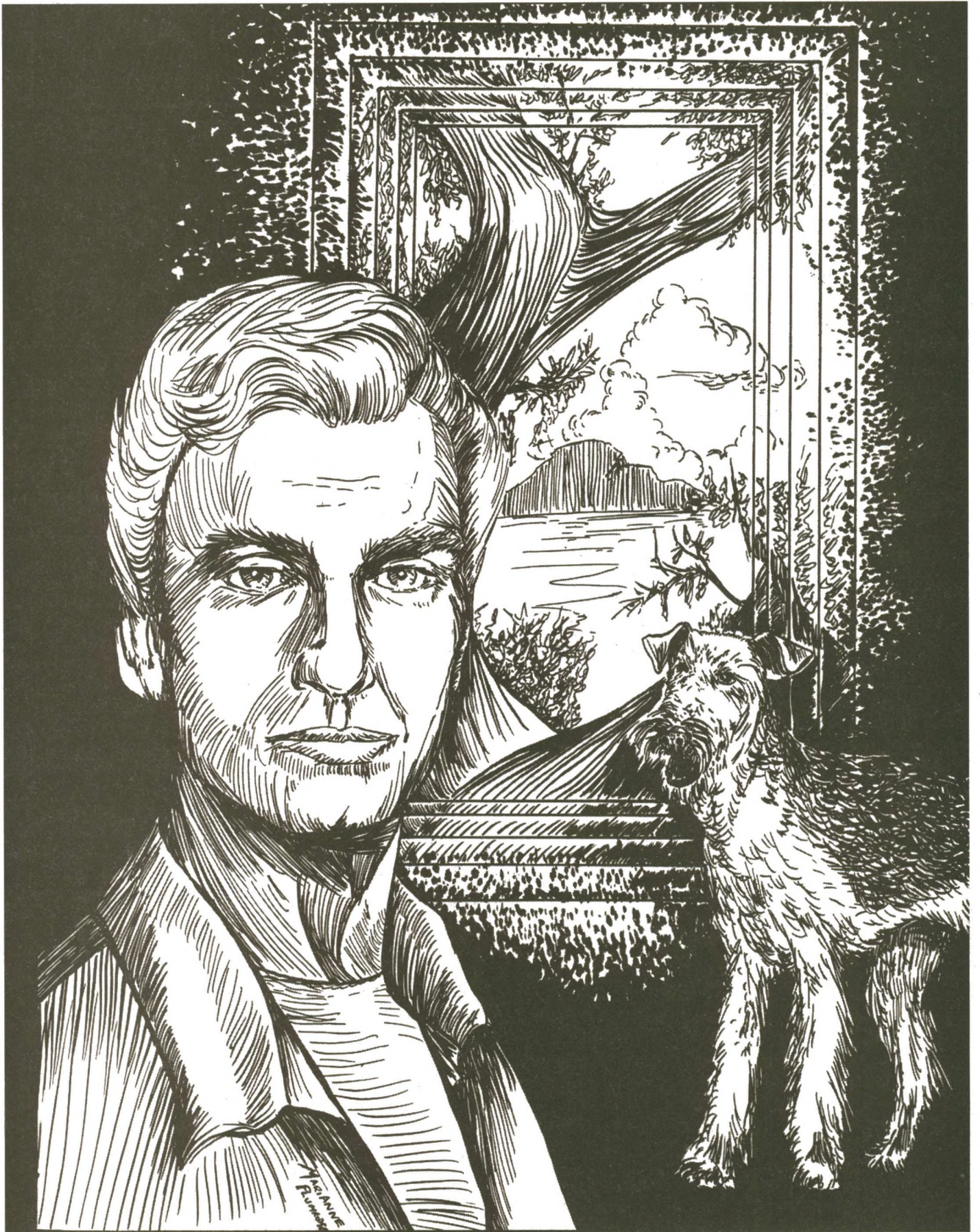
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Michael  
Rumsey



*"Roadmaster" by Leland Neville appeared in my collection The Best of Pirate Writings. His work has also appeared in Not One of Us, The Fractal, Figment, and The New York Review of Science Fiction. One of the reasons I love to publish time travel stories is getting to hear the bitching and moaning when I say, "Time travel stories are science fiction!"*

# time sharing

By Leland Neville

*"We know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events except when these are mental events that we directly experience." —Bertrand Russell*

The leather leash tightens, pinches your flesh. "No!" You apply a sharp corrective jerk, just like the most expensive dog behaviorist in North America patiently demonstrated during a series of private one-on-one training sessions. The leather slices your hand. "No!" Caesar, sixty pounds of determined Celtic terrier, a credit to his breeding and genetic fine tuning, forces his way into the box hedges that parallel the gravel access road. You have no choice but to follow. Caesar is focused, deaf to your angry commands. You promise him a treat, pizza, his favorite. Branches scratch and poke your arms. Caesar suddenly stops pulling; his breathing is fast, heavy. "Come on boy, let's go home." Then you see what Caesar smells.

"Taylor? Is it okay if I call you Taylor?"

Taylor and the detective are about the same age. When Taylor extends his hand and addresses her as Detective Fillmore there is no insincere "just call me Lindsey" interplay. Taylor knows what the detective is doing and can't think of a reason to not play along. He would be disconcerted if she were not defensive about her unimposing presence: average height but small framed, pale skin almost translucent. Short blond hair. Except for a few delicate lines beneath her washed out blue eyes she could pass as twenty-five years old. "Taylor is just fine."

Her cotton candy pink fingernails delicately tap the gray Sony plastic protrusion in her right ear. Lindsey is informed that she has been allotted one hour for this interview. Then: "I hear your stomach rumbling. Shoot for thirty minutes." The voice belongs to Lenny. He has been warned to remain serious and focused; this is neither the place nor the time for distracting verbal asides. However, a sit down lunch, she quickly calculates, is a real possibility if the suspect quickly demands a lawyer. Taylor is wealthy enough to have a live-in lawyer.

"You didn't touch the body?"

"No. I don't think so. I could tell she was dead. . . ."

She doesn't challenge his medical expertise. "So we won't find your fingerprints on the body?"

"I guess it's possible. I came in contact with the body when I was trying to get Caesar out of the brush. You might find a fingerprint. I don't know. Dead bodies are not something I see everyday. The mind plays tricks. I was upset."

"Those scratches on your arms and the cut on your hand . . . how did you get them?" Detective Fillmore doesn't listen again to Taylor's exasperated explanation concerning his dog, the leash, the branches. The narrative Taylor spins is indistinguishable from the stories she hears daily from the parade of poor and brain impaired criminals who crowd her schedule. Lindsey momentarily wonders if this Taylor Houston is the same Taylor Houston whose information profile she perused less than an hour ago. Mistakes do occur; Lenny isn't the only overworked employee in the department. Taylor Houston. Age 38. Never married. A vid assembler. The detective lets her eyes wander around the living room in Taylor's cottage. That's how Taylor had referred to his house—as a "cottage"—during an interview with a British entertainment "reporter" two years ago. Lindsey can still hear the interviewer's gushy, fawning voice dripping like honey; Lindsey was tempted to deactivate her ear piece. What possible facts could she have been expected to ascertain from that puerile puff piece? The information team is supposed to do some screening. At least Lenny's background comments were amusing. He is an excellent mimic.

Lindsey's eyes wander around the cavernous room chockablock with pricey paintings and artifacts. No, this is the Taylor Houston who is the successful video assembler. This is the man who can buy what's not for sale. Taylor Houston is one lucky man. ". . . and that's when I called the police. Well actually I called our private security force first. They actually called you."

"Do you actually have many enemies, Taylor?"

"No. I don't think so." A manicured hand passes through his short bleached hair, once, twice. Nervous energy is generated; Taylor's small and wiry body needs to keep moving. He remains seated, both legs pumping to an internal staccato rhythm. "I don't see what this has to do with me? I just found the body."

Lindsey receives information from Lenny about a death threat Taylor reported two years ago. A concerned citizen upset about the sexual nature of his vids was going to teach Taylor a lesson. Is that relevant, Lindsey wonders. Anonymous threats must be as common as nervous breakdowns. The entertainment industry is almost as hated as the police. She is again tempted to pluck the ear piece from her head. The info team is supposed to be about information, not minutia and trivia. Sure they're exhausted, but who isn't? All they do is complain. Except for Lenny, who both complains and clowns around. "Forty-five percent of the people who call the police to report



a body they just happened to find also, it turns out, had something to do with the body becoming a body. We don't like to advertise that fact, Taylor, it discourages citizen involvement, but I'm telling you that now so you can understand why you are now a suspect. It's just statistics, nothing personal."

"Yeah sure. You're doing your job."

"You can even call your lawyer." You should call your lawyer, Lindsey thinks. Taylor is behaving like a guilty man. He's trying too hard to be helpful. He's being too solicitous. If he calls his lawyer she will have time for lunch. Maybe Noodles Express. "Do you time-travel, Taylor?"

His body stops twitching. "Time-travel? That's against the law."  
"That's not what I asked."

You have more money than God could print in a decade. You are one of the approximately sixty vid assemblers who monopolize the business. You are a minor celebrity to the millions of gullible people who still believe that furnishing story lines involves more than just connecting computer generated sex and violence scenes with transitional dialog. The consumers, bless their innocent hearts, insist your scenarios are documentaries passed off as entertainment to delude government prosecution. They keep sending off their hard earned money so they can actually own the limited vid editions, signed and authenticated. How nice of you to share your time-travel experiences with them. But it is only the entertainment producers who really matter. They believe in you because the masses who hate science and embrace conspiracies believe in you and, of course, are willing to part with their money to travel vicariously with you. Your scenarios will inevitably fall below an acceptable level of profit and you will be jobless. It will be a luxurious retirement, but the important people will stop calling, the beautiful people will vanish, and the smart people will forget you ever existed.

Do you believe in time-travel? The government doesn't. Well, at least not enough to invest in it. And why should it when their own scientists almost unanimously declare that "meaningful" contact with the past will always be impossible. Time-travelers will never be more than ghosts passing through a tear in the universe. There are no mathematical equations that describe time-travel. Talk of a vibrant play of energy in the minds of those who believe in traveling (and also have the right chemical balance) does not equate in the material world. Time-traveling, respected and certified scientists reason, is nothing more than drug induced and implant amplified hallucinations. Has a traveler ever returned with so much as a spore that could be scientifically classified as unique to a past era? Of course not. It is the UFO nonsense all over again.

Do you believe enough in time-travel to trust the black market drugs from Brazil and Russia? To trust the delicate implant/genetic operation only performed in Austria by a surgeon who claims it is not a medical procedure and therefore exempt from Euro scrutiny. Do you believe enough to pay the exorbitant tangle of bribes? And then what? The rumors are that the traveler always arrives at the same approximate place and time in the past. It is always a 16<sup>th</sup> century village in northern China, or a 13<sup>th</sup> century farm in Brittany. It might even be a desert, timeless, empty. Maybe this lack of choice has something to do with an individual's brain chemistry. No one seems to know.

"Should we go down to headquarters now?" Lindsey asks. "Maybe it would be best if you met your lawyer there."

"So I am going to be arrested?"

"We could just talk now. Hypothetical. Not about you, of course."

"Of course not. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Not yet."

Caesar looms large, enters the room and sluggishly makes a straight line for Lindsey. He begins to sniff her shoes, her ankles, her knees. "Get away from her, boy. Come on, get out of here."

"It's okay. I love dogs." She vigorously scratches his bumpy head. "How old is he?"

"Twenty-five. I was just thirteen when I got him. Veterinarian medicine has been just one step ahead of . . . the inevitable." Taylor's voice softens. "He was a genetically altered dog, but I didn't want him because of that. A neighbor was going to get rid of him. He was too strong. Too willful. Wouldn't listen. Well, he still won't listen, but it's nothing personal. He has his own agenda. He's still strong, but slowing down. Caesar's always been there for me. He needed the first life extension operation when he was only seven years old. I used my tuition money and borrowed the rest. Dropped out of college. The smartest thing I ever did." Caesar, as if on cue, walks over to Taylor and lays down at his feet. "Let's say I know someone who time-travels. Someone who is like me in many ways."

"Do you know how many people have been arrested in the last five years for traveling, Taylor? Exactly zero. Time-travel is a victimless crime; the official reason it is against the law is because a few excitable scientists believed that maybe someday someone would develop a way to actually interact with the past and change the present. It's a preemptive law. Traveling is more desirable since it's officially illegal. The government knows that. The government supports any business that keeps the money churning. You've really made it if you've got the money to travel. There aren't even any cheap knockoff versions of time-traveling to buy. It's something to aspire to. Anyway, an awful lot of money has to change hands before traveling is possible. The bribes alone could support a medium sized country. It's unregulated. Travelers are elite, know each other. It's tough to infiltrate. It's a cult for the rich playing make-believe. In short, Taylor, time-traveling is good for the economy because it is illegal. I guess time-travelers help pay my salary. . . ."

Taylor enthusiastically interrupts. "You have to believe in the wonders of traveling. That it is special, just like we once believed that space travel was special. Many people believe that the travelers, or the scientists, or the government, or all of them, lie. That they have conspired to make it seem less exciting than it must really be. That there is contact between the ages. That there is sex and violence. That history can be changed. That we might wake up some morning and find Hitler president. Ban time-travel! Imprison the travelers! But most people want to not only believe in the conspiracy but also to believe that they are only one lottery ticket away from becoming a traveler. They know that the travel-vids I assemble are just thinly veiled documentaries. 1000 BC. Western Ireland. A brave people fighting a losing battle against the European invaders who steal their gold and capture their women. Helpless against their iron weapons and the cruel ways they employ them, the brave people conjure ghosts. Can iron defeat magic? I'll keep traveling and sharing."

Lenny can't control himself. He is almost shouting. Her ear piece crackles. Lindsey feels like a peripheral piece of computer equipment. "Do you believe? Clap your hands if you believe!"

Lindsey isn't sure why Taylor keeps talking without a lawyer. He certainly must realize that what he is saying could be admissible in court. It's not that he thinks he's too smart or is too innocent to need a lawyer. Lindsey has seen this before: the talkative suspect driven by guilt. He knows he will be exposed. Taylor wants to tell his story before it begins to get reinterpreted through lawyers, the police, and the media. Taylor needs to tell the truth. Lindsey just happens to be convenient. It happens in the best of neighborhoods.

Lenny is still laughing. "Do you believe?"  
Yes, Lindsey thinks. I do believe.

You first met her over fifty time-travel episodes ago. She approached you, a young woman alone, unconcerned about her own safety. Although you have both learned some words from each other's language, only the simplest concepts are shared. Her name is Kara, but you have been unable to ascertain her age. To Kara age could be an alien concept. She is old enough to have babies. Kara is probably a teenager. Her skin is porcelain; she has all her teeth. She would be beautiful in any millennium. Kara saved you from the clutches of a bog, subterranean claws at your ankles, pulling you under. You grasped the stick, then her hand, warm and solid. It was not a hallucination. She did not vaporize at your touch. Contact through time can be established; the scientists were wrong. Time-traveling is not an elaborate con game. Perhaps the scientists had been right until this moment. Maybe a renegade scientific experiment has changed the very nature of time-travel. But whatever the reason, for you time-traveling is a reality.

There is something extraordinary about Kara. Now, whenever you travel, she finds you. Her world is xenophobic, but she has never displayed any fear about your strange ways and words. Or is it your own twenty-first century prejudices that are the problem? Pre-Christianity, pre-Freud, pre-capitalism, and pre-information made for an era of simpler and freer people. Every action does not resonate with eternal consequences. Evil is not a sociological and psychological construct. The killing of a bad man brings only joy. The sex with Kara is as playful as any you have experienced with a twenty-first century woman. Kara is pre-guilt.

You do not know if her parents are living, if she has any brothers or sisters. She has made no attempt to introduce you to the village. She has expressed interest in your belt buckle, your metal belt buckle, gold plated. Does she think that after a sufficient quantity and quality of sex have been dispensed you will demonstrate the technology that was used to produce it? That you will show her how to fashion it into weapons? Perhaps Kara and her people are not so simple and innocent. They all believe you to be a traveler from the continent who possesses the knowledge to construct the ultimate weapons. What better inducement to share than by providing you with the village's most desirable virgin?

You, however, see Kara as just another accessory. How much better, you realize, the sex is in 1000 BC. Men who claim to time-travel often describe their trips as priapic events, the distant women instinctively demanding a share of their future sperm, the men realizing an opportunity to spread their genes earlier in the timeline. (Sexual delusion? Few time-traveling women have reported similar impulses.) But if these unleashed cravings exist, why wouldn't the orgasms be more intense? What could be more exciting for men than sex that could change history? Sex that could destroy the present? You are living the ultimate adolescent's dream: the best sex money can buy, convenient and irresponsible. Poor Kara, an innocent vessel, the means to your ends. How does a teenager living in 1000 BC respond to modern chemicals? Those tasty, mood altering snacks? What went wrong? How did her body end up here? Science will positively place Kara as a visitor from another era while simultaneously proclaiming it impossible.

She must be a "natural"; only a few drugs and ready to span the ages. Could it be that most ancient people are "naturals"? Have the centuries of civilization made it more difficult for modern people to time-travel? Are the genetic modifications perfected by a few Austrian doctors a surgical way to reclaim our old form? Any

advances in time-travel would not filter down to the level of the police. The corporate scientists have learned not to talk; what the government doesn't know can't hurt them. It's not like any of the financing comes from the government. The opposite is true: hush money from the corporations finds the influential federal officials. And the government is content to hear no evil; any scientific advances brings out the troublemakers, the extremists, mothers, and the religious, who demand a halt to the tampering with God and nature. There is just too much freedom, and the fact the wealthy have most of it makes life even more dangerous. The rich believe the rules don't apply to them, that they can buy their way out of any difficulties. The troublemakers exert all their energy on the obvious.

A woman from the past, dead? How has the world already changed? What future generations have been deleted? Oh well, get me my lawyer. Good luck finding witnesses. Talk about your flimsy circumstantial evidence. But you don't want a lawyer. You know that within a few hours, maybe less, the crime lab will have determined if she is from the past. The probably cause of death will also have been established, and any physical contact in the past month will soon be public knowledge. Maybe sex with a thirteen year old three thousand years ago in a distant land is not a violation of our federal laws. Maybe murder neatly fits through the same loophole in the law. Hasn't the victim been dead for three millennia? Is that what this is all about? Does your wealth make you above and beyond the law? Or will it never get to trial? Will the government decide that this really is a security matter, better kept hidden from an innocuous public? You are playing games. . . .

"I would like a drink," says Lindsey. "Water would be just fine." Taylor, dog at his side, leaves the art laden room. Lindsey stands and gives the room a quick 360 degree once over. No photos or personal items except for one are visible. Lindsey studies the framed certificate, inconspicuous on a book strewn coffee table. Honorable mention for work done on the Cave Dwellers entertainment series. She has never heard of the Cave Dwellers. The certificate is ten years old. She hears Caesar's nails clicking against the wooden floor, returning with his master. She picks up the certificate. "I know you've won some pretty impressive awards, but what's this?"

"First time I got paid for assembling. Saved Caesar. It made me realize I could make a living at it. Cave Dwellers was all formula, simplistic formula, but I learned I could assemble a plot without letting any cleverness or creativity contaminate it. I began to internalize the standards of assembling. After Cave Dwellers, every project I worked on was more successful than the one before. Did you know that I was once pressured into having a DNA analysis? I was pretty much told that if I didn't give up the tiniest piece of me I wouldn't get the job. Well, I matched up pretty closely with computer programmers, mechanics, and accountants. The producers were thrilled. I don't invent stories, I report. I stay between the lines. I don't do art, Officer Fillmore. Anyone, not just your crime lab, can check my DNA. It's in the public domain. It is on the Net. They can check me out against people living and dead with similar matches. They won't find a creative man or woman in the lot. Assembling is not about self-gratification. The audience shouldn't be required to figure out what the artist is trying to do. I am an agent of entertainment."

Lindsey has, of course, heard this argument before. She is certainly sensitive enough to avoid emasculating words like "imagination" and "creativity." Are they all dull males like Taylor? The rich ones probably are. Lindsey is surprised that men still have the mental resources it takes to believe in time-travel. For men, she determines, there must be an extra drug in the mixture. Or could Taylor have



enough of the female in him to have the necessary mental elegance it takes to believe, to have an imagination? All the best detectives are, of course, female. They pay isn't as good, but the satisfaction is better. She must use her entire brain, not just the left side. Taylor is one unhappy man. And the sadness she sees in him is unrelated to his culpability with the dead girl. Sadness. It is of course evident in all men: their inability to accept their restricted role in society, their unwillingness to change, to cooperate, network, empathize. Their need to dominate in world where most women choose their loyalties by emotional and psychological compatibility. Men are still territorial, even if the territory is a tiny slice of the past. Men cannot change.

Her own life would not have been possible a half century ago: her child is the result of an anonymous pre-screened donor. Her companion is a woman ten years her senior who is the stay-at-home care provider. Theirs is a non-sexual relationship. The only intimacies they share revolve around the health of Andrew. Anna is uninterested in detective work, and Lindsey can't imagine engaging her in a conversation about quilt art. Her companion needs one day a week with a lesbian support group. Lindsey is happy with an occasional mid-week break at the beach. Sometimes she will meet a man, sometimes not. The success of the weekend is determined by the weather and sleep replenishment—not about getting laid. Anna, of course, silently disapproves. Heterosexual sex, dirty and dangerous, is too much about the baser instincts: instant gratification, superficial appearances, sex, sperm, and sand. There is an unavoidable element of violence. The definition of completed sex revolves around penetration, not sharing. Bodily fluids must be deposited or, for most men, the sex is not authentic. It is unseemly behavior for a mother. But Lindsey does not want to exchange verbal intimacies with the men she meets. She picks up enough of those on her job. Her heterosexuality is neatly compartmentalized; except for those rare beach breaks, Lindsey is half detective and half mother. Brain and heart. Alpha males need not apply.

"We certainly are opposites, Taylor. Police work is too meticulous. We can collect so much molecular evidence that a murder can be scientifically linked to just about anyone living or dead. So, of course, the expensive lawyers can get just about anyone off. Well, they could if it wasn't for those juries. Since science makes everything possible, motivation is now the determining factor. The jury has to believe in the guilt of the accused. Feel it. Does he look guilty? It's ironic that science has forced the judiciary system to return to the days of juries voting their instincts. I guess part of my job is to get inside the suspect who is the criminal. If the jury follows my lead, there is a conviction."

Taylor nods, not listening.

You are angry over some perceived slight. She was behaving silly, splashing the cold water after you had made your displeasure about her childishness known. She really is a child, but that is no excuse. Her hands are cupped with icy water. "No," you command. Kara understands the word 'no.' The freezing liquid splashes your bare genitals. She laughs as your scrotum retreats into your belly. You grab her arm, hard. "I said no." A shudder passes through her body but she laughs, attempts to break your grip. You squeeze harder; another shudder is followed by a sob. Your chilled balls have already positively responded, sending waves of testosterone throughout your body. Order will be restored, the hierarchy maintained. You should release Kara. She will turn, bury her face in your chest, unashamedly cry. The ensuing sex will be the best ever.

But she is young, has not had time to fully understand the immutability of male ascendancy. Kara pulls free, attempts to kick you in the midsection. Your stiff arm drives into the shoulder of her

off balance body and she falls backwards. You laugh. You are teaching her the ways of Kara's own era, a time you instinctively understand better than the aberration that is the twenty-first century. Here it is about natural law; artificial consequences are thousands of years away. Then you see the water turning red. Fear and disbelief replace triumph. This wasn't supposed to happen. It was an accident. You weren't mad at her, not really. You carry her from the water and place her gently on a blanket. She is shivering, but before you can comfort her the wound must be stanching. You push the blanket into the gaping injury; the blood slows but there is still not much time.

You could just walk away. This has happened three millennia ago. But you can't. You are responsible. Maybe you even love her. If you can get Kara back to your home, back to the present, there is a chance. Returning with someone from the past can now be done. It shouldn't be attempted, of course, no one really knows how changing the past in this manner will effect the present, but there's no time to worry about that now. How much time does Kara have left? Her blood continues to flow between your fingers. Science is always too cautious.

You consider your own future. She could die in your home. You could, of course, return Kara to her own home, risking the wrath of her family and friends. Your mind is now firmly in the twenty-first century. What if Kara was assaulted in the past but dies in the present? Can you be punished by twenty-first century law?

"Can I have a look around?"

"Again?"

"I'd like to see the time-travel chamber."

"It's in the hallway. Just outside the bedroom."

Caesar follows Lindsey down the short, bare hallway; the aged and polished oak floors radiate wealth. How hard would it have been to cleanup the blood after having dragged her body to the access road? Removing every trace would be impossible; the crime scene team can recover the odor of blood. Taylor must know that. Did he wrap her body in a fur blanket before traveling, the same blanket they made love on back in Ireland? The crime scene team will just have to find that blanket; Taylor didn't have time to dispose of it.

The chamber is unostentatious, nothing more than a closet, the oak door as burnished as the floor. Lindsey has seen perhaps a dozen chambers; most were placed prominently in the living room, more prized than a Picasso. Caesar is vigorously scratching at the frame, wagging his tail. She opens the door and the dog leaps into the chamber, barking loudly and repeatedly. The inside of the chamber, barely large enough for two standing adults, is dark and cool. A single plastic wall switch detracts from the smooth copper interior. She thinks she can detect the faint odor of disinfectant. Lindsey bends; the smell rises from the dog. But in the corner of the chamber a stain, small, oval, seems to glow like the sun. Evidence. Sloppy housekeeping can be a detective's best friend.

"Come on Caesar, leave her alone." The dog lowers his head. "Come on. Go outside. It's a nice day. You need some fresh air." The dog obediently follows Taylor. Lindsey crawls to the stain, brown, round, no bigger than her thumb nail. She cannot imagine it having missed Taylor's fastidiousness. The crime scene team can start with the chamber. She should immediately notify them. The house should be sealed off. Will Taylor claim that the evidence was planted? That her presence has already contaminated the integrity of the crime scene and made the collection of evidence useless. Of course. The jury's decision will be resolved by their instincts about him—and her. That will be an engaging decision, Lindsey thinks, but it won't have much to do about reality. One juror who doesn't believe time-travel is possible, just one scientist, can nullify the process. She of course



won't need a jury to determine his guilt or innocence. She'll know.

"Find anything?" Taylor sounds disinterested.

"Maybe." Lindsey stands, looks him in the eyes.

"Well, just let me know when I'm under arrest. That's when I stop being so accommodating. I'd look so foolish in front of my lawyer. Even more foolish. . . ."

Your first attempt to take Kara to your home failed. You held Kara tightly, pushing her quivering body into yours. You both gasped; a dark curtain gently fell. Her eyes conveyed trust. You wouldn't and couldn't hurt Kara. She wanted to go where you lived. She wanted to see the future . . . as long as you would always be there with her. Three thousand years into the future. She couldn't comprehend. Kara just knew it was far away, but you would be with her. You would take care of her. Trust.

You love Kara and want to share your world with her. Two worlds are better than one. Your motivation was selfless. Perhaps Kara would decide to stay. What is wrong with giving her that choice? Present century romanticism about the past tends to ignore the harsh reality. Disease and an early death are the least of it; cruelty reigns and a woman's life is inhuman. You have seen the bruises on her face, gently touched them. She is chattel. Kara brushed your hand away, embarrassed that you showed her the obvious. How many times have you seen her cower, waiting for the blow, shuddering at some slight you could not apprehend? Yes, you have the means to take her away from all of that. She deserves a better century.

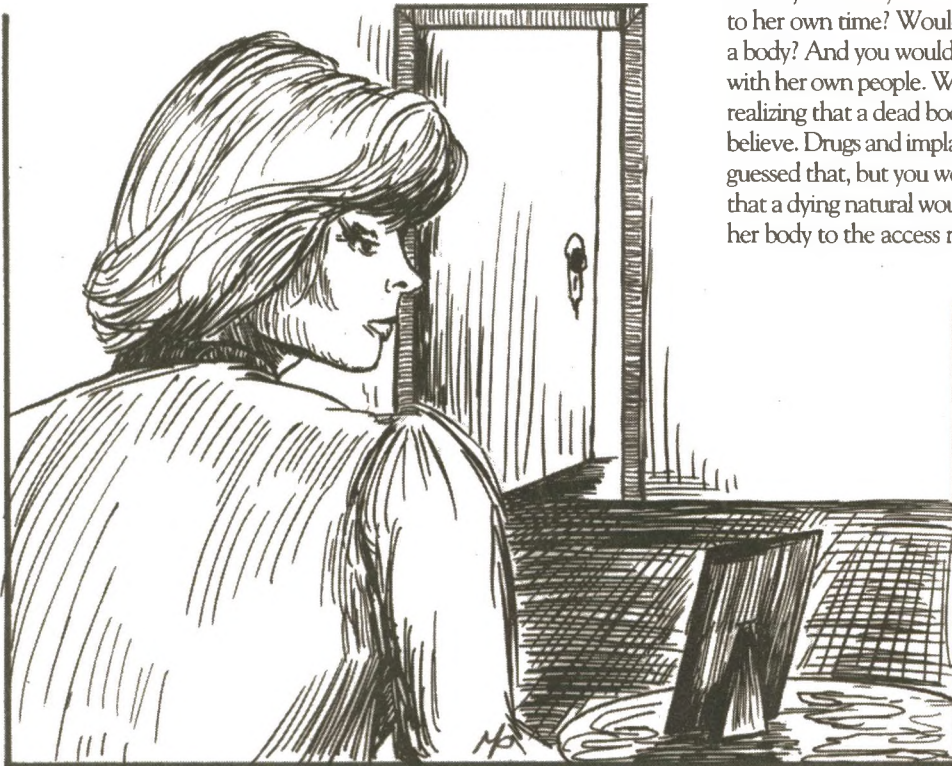
Could she die during the transport? Of course. You both could die. There is always danger. There is a percentage of people who are allergic to almost any drug. The drugs used for time-travel are manufactured in countries where quality control are of little importance. What unknown viruses are present in Kara's body that might make her particularly susceptible? And if she arrives safely, what twenty-first century germs, harmless to antibiotic fed contemporary people, could quickly kill her? You have tried to take all the precautions, given her a stew of vaccines and vitamins, but doubts gnaw at your stomach. You love her. You are

not behaving selfishly.

Suddenly your arms hold only air. She has remained in the past. You have never felt so alone. Caesar bounces around you, a package of uncontrollable joy. "I haven't been gone that long, boy." Kara is only a few minutes away. It would take you longer to walk to a neighboring house. But time does matter. She is dead, her bones long ago swallowed by peat. No. You reprimand yourself. Time is not linear. Is she now experiencing the same feelings for you? Is she smelling her hands, catching the lingering traces of your body? Does she shed a tear? Do her hands cup her belly, imagining your child? Or are you already almost forgotten? Out of sight out of mind. People had to live in the immediate present. How many babies did the average mother bury? Were they even given a name? Mercifully, there was no time for grief.

You try again and again, readjusting the drugs. If she needs an implant booster . . . you don't consider that possibility. Even the simplest surgery is beyond you. The drugs will work, they have to. You know that Kara is a "natural." She certainly does not need years of analysis to overcome the psychological resistance to traveling that cynically resides in even the most gullible of twenty-first century people. She believes in you. She loves you.

How many times did Kara come home with you? Did she share your bed? Was she ever afraid? Did you show her any of the world outside your home? Were you afraid of her vulnerability to disease? Is that why you would return with her to the past? Perhaps you wouldn't seem so special to her once she discovered this century. Or was the first time she came home with you also the last time? You couldn't stop the bleeding. Maybe she never wanted to go. Maybe Kara understood the concept of time-travel well enough to always say no. But when she was unconscious, resistance was futile. And it was, of course, for her own good. Traveling with her was a long shot—but what other chance for survival was there? You thought Kara was again dematerializing, leaving your arms to die in her century. But what you detected was her life withering; a three thousand year death ride. Was she alive when you carried her out of the chamber and into your home? Or did she die along the way? When you realized she was dead, did you try to take her back to her own time? Wouldn't that be the most efficient way to dispose of a body? And you would tell yourself that Kara would want to be buried with her own people. What happened? How distraught were you before realizing that a dead body can not travel through time? The dead don't believe. Drugs and implants are ineffective on the dead. You should have guessed that, but you were upset, not thinking clearly. Or did you think that a dying natural would be able to time-travel? But why did you carry her body to the access road? What was the hurry? Why panic?



Taylor glances at his wristwatch, yawns. The detective has been at his house for almost an hour, an eternity as these preliminary interviews usually go. After a half hour even the most ignorant suspects begin arguing about search warrants, lawyers, and evidence. "I won't be much longer," says Lindsey like a school marm. "You are being very cooperative."

"How much longer before the results are in about the . . . body?"

"Another hour before we know the basics."

"Like if she is a twenty-first century victim."

"Yeah, that should be an easy one."

There should be an obvious absence of contaminants impossible for a hermit living in Antarctica to avoid.”

“Do you think I’ve already been linked to the murder by the media? How quickly do those in the know relay the information?”

Lindsey can’t even pretend that media money hasn’t found every police unit in the country. Why give stories away to those rich bastards? Make them pay. Everyone does it. The final resolution, perhaps even the truth, will in time be revealed. It’s just one of the downsides of being wealthy and almost famous. She wants to tell him to grow up. “It’s out there. The mysterious body. Your working in vids. Time-traveling. Right about now your personal life is being analyzed. Speculations are running wild. Ever married? Any long term relationships? No? Must be a pedophile. Then they really start to dig. How have the last projects you have been involved in made out? Are they starting to lose money? Getting a little repetitive? Have you been living within your means? It is always fascinating to hear about how the rich can find ways to blow away fortunes. Crazy investments. Personally designed drugs. Time-travel.”

A voice from the crime lab, Lenny doing a take off on a local sonorous news reader, whispers into Lindsey’s ear. “We would never sell information. Good gracious no! Just being a part of your adventures is enough for us.” Lindsey suppresses a smile.

Taylor stands, suddenly reinvigorated. Are the designer drugs kicking in or is it the time-travel talk? “I’m just a reporter, trying to relate what I see. If people don’t want to pay for it anymore, well, there’s absolutely nothing I can do about it. Tastes change.”

“What’s it like, Taylor?”

They both know the subject is time-travel. “I’m inside a bubble that expands and shrinks by its own volition. Sometimes it’s the size of a football field, sometimes no bigger than this room. It’s opaque. You can’t walk through the bubble; it grabs you, forces you back inside. You see shadows on the other side of the bubble. People can enter the bubble, but you can’t leave. It is a phenomenon apparent only to the traveler.

“I’ve heard other stories, Taylor.”

“So have I. Traveling is subjective. Observer based. No two people ever relate to the same experience in the same way. Some might be elaborating. Some might be lying. Who knows? It might even be some big scam. All the implants and drugs and analysis could just be a fraud. Maybe time-travel is nothing more than a hypnotic suggestion and some hallucinogenic drugs. No respected scientist has ever been able to travel—but respected scientists are ruled by skepticism and cynicism. Their very presence contaminates the phenomena. The media has attempted to time-travel respected journalists, but there aren’t too many of them. They are more cynical than the scientists. Gotta believe. There is an enormous audience for anything scientists and the press denounce. They’ve been good for business.”

No two people relate to the same experience in the same way? Is he talking about two people sharing the same event? Taylor and Kara? Of course he would deny that. “I hope what you’re telling me remains consistent, Taylor. I’m sure a lawyer can smooth over any discrepancies, but your audience would know that you have an active imagination. And that, I take it, would not be good for business.”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t. Almost as bad as if they found out I was, say, broke.”

“So your audience hates science, the media, and the poor?”

“They hate what being poor means. They hate what’s old and rejected. Publicity is a double edged sword.”

There is an almost inaudible hum. Detective Fillmore touches her earphone and it engages. “What have you got?” She covers her ear

with the palm of her hand to dampen extraneous noise and to signal Taylor that the preliminary results are being assembled and downloaded. “All right, Lindsey. The plastic surgery and dental work were obvious clues, but we went ahead with a body scan. Jane Doe is not from the past. Her lungs have souvenirs from this century that have been accumulating since she was a baby. We’ll have her real name in a moment. Can you hold?”

Your perfect skin, teeth, and hair advertise your elite status. Your nose is tastefully ethnic, just what your plastic surgeon recommended a year before the middle-class began their second rate imitations. You mention the vids and fame and fortune and her eyes grow big. You don’t normally go in for these sort of sexual games, but sometimes your libido needs to be stoked by a girl in awe of your status. Maybe she hasn’t heard of you, but she knows about you. “I’d like to be an actress someday. Do you use real actors? Models? Is it all computerized?”

“We need pretty and talented women,” you tell her. “The computers still need the real thing to digitize. You are, I take it, the real thing.”

She giggles, wraps her arm around yours. Her friend was right; this bar does attract men in the Business. Men who can help her career.

You show her the time chamber and she gushes. “I read about this. I knew it was true. But I thought only one person can travel at a time? And that it takes all sorts of drugs, and genetic engineering, and even psychoanalysis. . . .”

You gently place your finger over her lips. “Every year it gets easier. Just a few drugs. Soon there won’t even be a need for that.” You see the hesitation in her eyes. Her instincts are warning her, her mother’s voice is loud and clear. “We do the photographic digitizing on location now. It adds to the realism. Of course it is more expensive, but the industry is so competitive.”

“Can anything go wrong?”

“You can’t get hurt. But some people can’t time-travel. We just have to hire a different model. Genetic engineering might work, but there isn’t time. And there is the budget to consider.”

“Would I make a good model?”

“Perfect. If you could travel, of course.”

“Well, of course.” She squeezes your hand. “Can I travel?”

“Now?”

“It would be fun. You could show me around. We could show each other around.”

It is an old and common story: she resists. Suddenly, this uneducated, girl, her overripe body molded by an artless plastic “consultant” in Mexico, her face, a rough approximation of the hottest actress du jour, doesn’t want you. She sips the white wine you have brought her, spills the rest in the sink. “I don’t feel so good. Can you take me home?”

What next, you think. What does it mean when—you don’t even remember hearing her name—this piece of second world work resists? You shove her away in disgust. Her body flies into the wall. You didn’t push her that hard. You look at your arms, see the scratches. It is her own fault. You weren’t going to hurt her. It was almost self-defense. An action instantly regretted.

“By the way, Lindsey. . . .” Lenny is mumbling. Lindsey furrows her brow, concentrating, “his income is probably less than mine. His last two projects were big losers, and he backed them up with his own money. I guess time-traveling is getting old. And this Jane Doe, real name Allison Curry, has probably never been too far from home—distance or time-traveling. When Taylor Houston said he never touched the body, he wasn’t lying. The DNA isn’t from your guy. We



know who it is from. He's done this before. Always manages to lawyer his way out. You guys just can't get the indisputable goods on him."

Taylor is again checking his wristwatch. "I assume, Detective Fillmore, you know who the young girl was?"

"Yes. I can't tell you her name."

"I guess you know that her name wouldn't mean anything to me. You now believe I'm innocent. I can see it in your eyes. What convinced you—the DNA?"

"Then why the guilty act? And don't tell me that you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Taylor opens a drawer on the coffee table and withdraws a remote communicator. He activates the wall screen. "It scans the major news, business, and entertainment networks, saving the programs that I might find relevant."

"I do understand the principle of profile construction, Taylor. We almost all do it."

"Well, one of the names it is programmed to look for is mine. It's the nature of the business. Really. I'm not an egomaniac. You have to find out not only if you are being mentioned, but what is being said. I never save these into an electronic scrapbook. It is just business."

"Fine." Lindsey's voice cannot contain her anger. "Instead of scanning for the latest pornography, like most men, you look for your name. Why am I not surprised?"

The wall screen is showing Taylor receiving an award, raising the trophy high above his head. The news reader is providing a quick overview of his career highlights. The words 'Murder Suspect' flashes like neon below his picture. "Reliable sources tell us that Taylor Houston is a suspect in the murder of a young and as yet unknown woman. Her nude body was found near Houston's home in the exclusive Beach Woods neighborhood. We have also learned that time-traveling may have played a part in the murder." The picture on the wall quickly changes from a long shot photo of Taylor's home to some stock footage of a time-travel chamber.

"This," says Taylor, "was being broadcast only ten minutes after you arrived at my home. Your friends at headquarters don't waste much time." Taylor punches a few keys on the remote communicator. "Forty-eight stories during the last hour that mentioned my name. The last time my name was mentioned was..." He taps a few more keys. "... six months ago."

"Your friends in the entertainment business don't spare any expense." Lindsey is instantly embarrassed by her defense. Her anger sounds hollow, false. She has never taken a bribe. It's not that difficult to say no. Really. She understands she was used and has been beaten by both Taylor and her cronies. Fine. It happens. "There's no such thing as bad publicity—right, Taylor?"

"Do you think that this has been a publicity stunt?"

"Am I supposed to say no?"

"That I found the dead girl and immediately looked at it as a career boost?"

Lindsey should just leave, quickly and silently. There is still time for a cup of noodles to go. There is no need for a debate or any further communication with Taylor Houston. But how stupid does he think she is? "You are quick and creative. I'll give you that. I was starting to believe that 'I'm only a reporter' shit. There's been all this recent speculation about group time-travel and bringing people from the past to the present. And then knowing that I would bring up time-travel, and someone back at headquarters would know that is precisely the type of story the networks are looking for..." Lindsey

shakes her head, exaggerating the gesture of disbelief. "But to discover the body of a dead girl and then quickly come up with a subtle plan to suck me and the media into your affected culpability... why am I even telling you this. Again, congratulations. You can think on your feet. And your ability to manipulate both the police and media is brilliant."

"I'm a realist. I know how things work. You concluded when I did not immediately call my lawyer that I must be a corrupted and delusional person. The rich can buy their way out of anything. Since I was not ready to start buying I must be guilty. Is that the way your brain operates?"

Lindsey stands, preparing to leave. "I assume every suspect is guilty..."

"Wait." Taylor reprograms the remote. "How long have they known I didn't do it?"

"Who? Oh. Probably since I told you."

The wall screen remains blank. "Nothing yet. The last story about me concerned my probable guilt. My innocence has already been replaced by another scandal. Oh, there might be a mention of me during the news wrap-up, but my value is gone. The truth has been buried. There will be no need to report my finances."

"And your career has been given a jump start."

"No, it just hasn't been destroyed. That might still happen, but I've got time for maybe one last success."

"A man walking his dog discovers a body. Common fodder for the media. Your name and this upscale neighborhood would have made it a bit more intriguing, but..." Lindsey sits back down. "So that's what this was about? Money?"

"Money is reputation. If you don't have it no one wants to give it to you. An old story. But it is even more than that. I was doing a pretty good job of keeping up appearances, but the harmless little story about a man—me—walking his dog would have been a giveaway."

Lindsey calls Caesar, who lumbers over and sits at her feet. She scratches his head; the dog's eye light up in the luxury. "This bump. It's an implant."

"I don't know if two people can travel together, but traveling with dogs has been possible for five years. It doesn't, incidentally, work with cats. It's no cheaper to prepare a dog than a human. A wild extravagance. I don't go along with every new fad, but Caesar really enjoyed the walks in the past. More intriguing odors I guess. Less civilization."

Lindsey remembers the dog scratching with anticipation on the time-travel chamber door.

Taylor continues. "He really liked his walks in old Ireland. So did I. Nothing ever happened there. Nothing. That's what made it so nice. I made up all my stories. Pure fiction. I haven't had the money to time-travel in over three years. That's why I walk him at night, just in case someone saw us and figured it out."

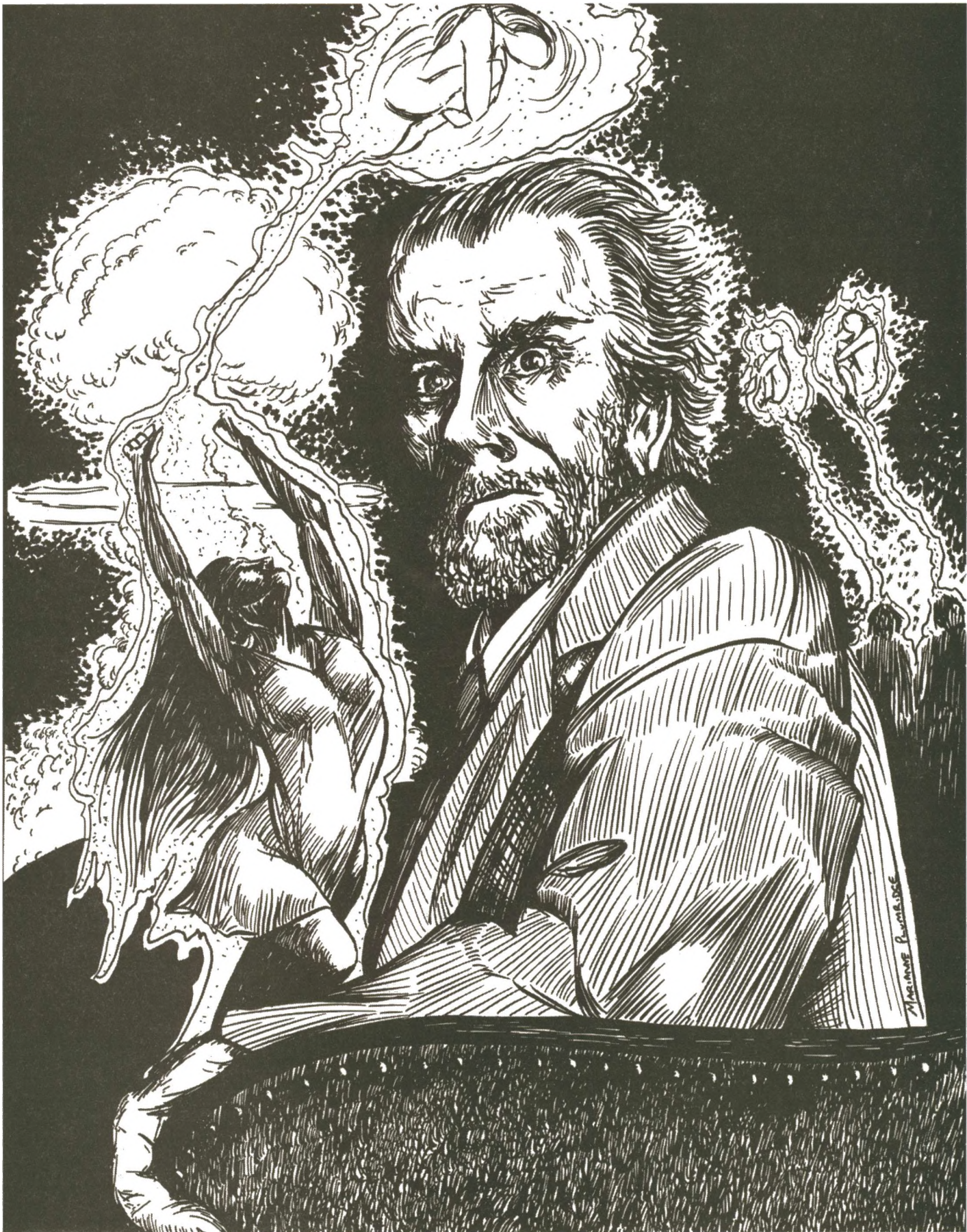
"Maybe if you had told me he ran out an open door, and you were looking for him..."

"Maybe. But as you know, Caesar is not much for running anymore. I think this way was better." He again checks the wall screen; there is still no mention of the crime's resolution. "If it gets out that I've been making up stories..."

"Now, when they view the specs to your next entertainment, the powers that be will remember that you were somehow connected to a dead girl."

"Right. Won't even raise an eyebrow. But making up stories... I could get sued."







William R. Eakin's first book, *Redgunk Tales*, appeared in the spring of this year. His quirky tales have appeared in some fifty publications, including *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Science Fiction Age*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He invites visitors to his website at [www.sfwa.org/members/eakin/](http://www.sfwa.org/members/eakin/).

# THE LION AND THE LAMB

BY WILLIAM R. EAKIN

Professor Kendrick Lamb fumbled with his pipe and forgot to wipe away the string of saliva from its stem as he pushed it into his pocket and plopped down into the leather seat of the Austin Healey. He was chronically pissed and his fierce jowls showed it: seventy-nine and still a puppet for imperialism at the American University. Chako smiled at him from the passenger's seat with her young, girlish, powerfully intelligent, sardonic smile and Garreth in the back with his sawed-off shot gun and red headband said, "Let's do it." Kendrick slammed the gearshift forward—the gearshift a concession to nostalgia—and they took to the air over the jungles of New Brazil, the new lush rain forests below in re-planted terraces that disappeared over every horizon. The greenery rocked back and forth in their wake. Transport-Connect 5 appeared quickly—silver streams of flying cars rushing toward a hole in the ground—and they were caught. Without a bump, without a sound, they hit the flow of traffic and plunged into artificial light. A stream of ions from the Transport-Connect struck the high-density elements at the back of the car, perfectly configured for his schedule only, and they shot suddenly away in a Dionysian dance of energy, flipping through the tunnel-labyrinth, inner earth streaking by above and below, and finally flying out of the network along the off-ramp at Market Street, SF Bay Area Station.

The car sped out onto the broad boulevard, just above the heads of countless people and Garreth said, "Watch out. This is it." They could hear him ready his gun. "Here's where they take us out."

Chako leaned her head on Kendrick's shoulder and he whispered, "Extremist paranoiac, your brother." These kids were bright and street-wise, but street-worn, too.

"Humor him," she whispered back. Her warm breath tickled the white hairs in his ears. "Better yet, forget him. I want to *hurt* you tonight."

Kendrick nearly giggled and then caught a drop of saliva just inside his lips. He reached for the pipe in his nervous way, his callused hands quivering with age. She kept him from it and instead leaned closer. He could smell her: hyacinth and jasmine and something inexplicable—bitter but not unpleasant—something he'd smelled in the streets of New Hong Kong, where they'd met after one of his lectures on Neoplatonism, if he remembered correctly. She kissed the scaly, wrinkled skin at the back of his neck and he shivered.

The car was lower now, nearly street-level, and sliding through the thick throng of people; they could feel Garreth's tension mount, the gun whipping now from side to side.

"God, Garreth, how can you stand to be this way all the time?" she sighed at him.

He said simply, "Stop here." As if he were in control.

They looked back and followed his gaze through the shuffling crowd—a mass of trench coats and shopping bags and guns and bare legs.

"Connect," said Garreth suddenly and he was out of the car with his gun, trampling through the amorphous mass to disappear. In a moment he was back. "Okay."

Kendrick slammed the car into gear and they went on, guided by an automatic pilot that filtered them through the masses.

"So what today?" she asked Garreth.

He laughed; he seemed more at ease now that he'd picked up and now that they were moving with traffic toward the Golden Gate bridge, the sun going down over the Pacific. "Dimeth. In yopo." *Dimethyltryptamine*, the next increment, this time in a South American snuff. It was just a supplement to the massive DMT-releasers already prying the hyper-hallucinogenic chemicals from their brains. "Some Thorn Apple Thick, too. And some cactus flower for the old man."

"Cactus—" sputtered Kendrick, finally getting the unlit pipe to his mouth.

"*Cereus grandiflorus*."

"Stimulates the old pump," whispered Chako into Kendrick's creased ear. "Reduces sexual exhaustion." Her hand fell on his thigh and he closed his eyes just as they caught the airflow across the bridge. *Never date a grad student*. But he always did, and it always seemed to lead to trouble; they abused him.

He was having chest pains and did not want to talk and that was certainly okay that Garreth who said nothing for the remainder of the trip except to repetitiously mutter "*diggadah diggadah diggadah*" under his breath as he swung the gun nervously from side to side. Progressive forgetfulness; increasing brain vacancy. Kendrick tried not to notice and Chako fell asleep as they left traffic in the hills of the North and flew over the remnants of a state highway to finally stop at the gate of Mulberry Creek.

"There'll be a moon out tonight," Chako said sleepily in Kendrick's ear, waking. Her voice was sultry, seductive, and sleepy; he wanted to taste her breath. He could feel his desire growing. He wanted to devour her—seventy-nine, and he did not really need anything for sexual exhaustion.

"It'll mean more light, more security in these hills," snapped Garreth from the back, leaping up from some stupor. The gate in front of them opened and men with guns came out to greet them. Garreth handed them two vials. "Dimeth," he told them. "The next dose. But keep all your sensors open, you understand?" They nodded. They were trained like superwired robots to sense intrusion, even

from their own crystalline high-hallucinations. They waved the car through and Kendrick guided it up the ginkgo-lined lane toward the house.

He closed his eyes as they passed the tent-city that had popped up all around the grounds—a regular village, a bustling market and a grocery store; vendors calling out with everything from leather goods to sensory deprivation equipment; a cyberporn shop and a restaurant—all in plastic tents, of course. An army had to be cared for.

Wark, the cartoon-like one-eyed guerrilla chieftain with six semi-automatic weapons strapped to his naked back, met them at the door of the house. His voice was always pounding: “We are the cybernauts! We are the future! We are the visionary bridge from animal to eternity!”

“Obviously,” whispered Kendrick facetiously to Chako, the unlit pipe rammed under his teeth. Wark’s greetings had become so automatic that Kendrick failed to hear in them his own words.

Garreth said simply, “Cool,” and gave Wark most of the remaining goods. When Wark returned a masculine grunt, Garreth added “Tell them to go easy on the TAT. Everyone’s At Ready tonight. Understand?” Wark grunted again and waved the Professor, Garreth and Chako to the house—Garreth picked up again with *diggadah diggadada* as he went in. The vaguely audible drumming of chopper blades on the antique helicopters they’d stolen to guard the perimeters were silenced by the closed door.

Finally, Kendrick was in his world. He went to his bar and poured a Glen Livet on the rocks. Only when the Scotch burned a line across his lips did he feel at home and begin to feel close to *her*, even though she’d been dead some thirty years, to feel a little sentimental. Garreth’s army could have the grounds, and even the house—they could not have the memory-space he’d carved for Andrea. He would not let them in there.

The old CD player kicked on at a wave of his hand: *Those fingers in you*—Frank Sinatra. Andrea—sweet, burning, deep Andrea, wild in his arms, wholesome and drunk with the flower of passion and pain and magic bursting between them—Andrea had played “Witchcraft” that first night she brought him up to her cabin, a kind of joke; the joke ran on and on and the night grew thicker with the moisture of love and the fury of a future coming on too inevitably and too hopefully, because hope inevitably and always gave way to bittersweetness; Icarus’ fall—and they could feel this of their relationship even in the first few nights of love-making; at least, he’d been able to feel it. “*Witchcraft...it’s strictly taboo...*” went on and on, their heads were spinning, and their lips burning with Scotch and love, until he finally whispered, “God, I am falling in love with you.” Frank Sinatra became an interminable force in their lives.

Chako and Garreth had followed him into the room and she now responded, “It’s dangerous to reminisce. Nostalgia is our only enemy. You’ll lose the edge—”

His own words again. The aged professor turned with drink in hand: “Scotch, either of you?” He knew neither would accept; they were too young and too hard-core and too pagan; Andrea had grimaced the first night they slugged Glen Livet together: he’d thought it was cute; there was innocence; her youth differed from theirs. It was grace, motion, sweet fragrance, a touch of the hand across a cheek, a gentle, irrepressible drive to love and to experience and to fuse with him. The Glen Livet, like Sinatra, became an intractable strand that wove together their lives.

“You teach that, you know,” Garreth reminded him. “Don’t lose

clarity, Concept-Father, don’t lose resolve; nostalgia is your enemy, you will lose the edge—” Garreth was so nervous he could jump. He obviously did not like to see his Concept-Father like this, nostalgic. It brought everything they did into question.

Chako put an arm on her brother’s to stop his nervousness. He nodded and said, “I’ll retire to my quarters.” They’d agreed to leave the old man some of his quirky memories. They had to keep him happy.

“Yes,” whispered Chako.

Garreth faced Kendrick stiffly, put his hands together in front of his heart, bowed and whispered, “Good night, Father of All Real Concepts.” It was not facetious and was much more respectful than Garreth had been most of the day. By real concepts, he meant true ones, in his own twisted way. It was a title Garreth himself had invented.

Kendrick turned away and stirred his drink; Garreth handed Chako the remaining dimeth and the cactus and Thorn Apple Thick as he started out of the room. “Good night,” he nodded to Chako, and then he was gone with his incessant *diggadah diggadada diggadada*.

Kendrick envisioned the drugs in Chako’s hands without turning. “So, to show my ignorant old age—despite the fact that I am the world’s god-wizard of hallucinogenics of the more philosophical variety—what the hell is Thorn Apple Thick?”

“TAT,” she said matter-of-factly. “Atropine and hyoscine. Thick is street-strength, a salve you rub on your genitals—it gets you going, horny and hallucinating simultaneously.”

“So you think I need that along with the cactus?” He turned up Sinatra and poured something else—more scotch—into his drink. *That moonlight in your*—

“Not need, not need, baby. It’s just—” She sat down in his arm chair, her body like a sleek cat’s usually, but now slumping down with the energy reserves spent. Chako spoke now with an inaudible quake in her voice that betrayed her sense of uncertainty: “We all do it. We’ve got to get the most out of—out of our lives here, together, while we can, I mean—” And then she stopped, looking into the steel-gray eyes he turned her direction; they seemed those of an old and angry prophet.

His eyes penetrated into hers: “Are you ready? Are you willing to do what your brother and all these warriors have come to do? Can you—you, Chako, girl, sweet feminine thing, intelligent but not—not like this, perhaps—can you really do such a thing?”

She looked away, fearful that she could not. The personal doubt was like a burden grown additionally heavy with rainwater. The streets had never prepared her for the demands of the revolution that now brewed in this room and house and on the grounds, brewed and grew like a firestorm waiting to burst.

“Look in my eyes!” He wanted to make her see, to make her know she was not up to this thing they were going to do, that she was not cut out for it. Not so that she would back out, but so that she would *feel*, feel how she was and how important he was to the cause. “You are young, fresh, innocent in your own way, intelligent—you can back out. You’re not capable of this and you know it. Look in my eyes!”

She saw the movement of the inevitable in his face. Maybe she really was not ready.

The raid would come—tonight, perhaps tomorrow night. But the end was near. Garreth’s end, and the revolution’s, and hers. She closed her eyes, and then was thankful that he turned back to the bar—a pressure lifted. She closed her eyes and waited patiently for



him to turn around again, but he did not; an old-fashioned timepiece on a bookshelf clicked the minutes away; she caught her head as it nodded; then she was asleep, silent like a lioness tired from wandering the bush in search of food, tired from hunting the last of rats on the burnt Savannah.

He shook his head over the drink. She'd bared her soul these last nights, confessing in near-tears how she'd been told to pretend infatuation and later orgasm, how she'd led him on at first, how that had opened the gates to her brother's army. If Kendrick was one of the only remaining intelligentsia to carry international travel privileges, he was a valuable tool: of course Garreth would want Kendrick's freedom of movement to network the revolution. But that was only at the start, she swore again and again, now she really loved him—or rather, really had from the beginning. Only now did she truly realize it, as they lay together in each other's sweat, their heads buzzing with new flowers of dreams they shared. She imagined the brilliant fiery chariots in the sky as they ripped the fabric of night above the compound, as young warriors stood stunned by the sparkling communal visions their own minds had made.

Kendrick closed his eyes, listening to the music, and tried to make the sublimated anger subside. Why was he angry? Because she'd confessed that she imagined she was using him? He'd known this all along, as if he'd read her mind from the beginning. It didn't matter. Someone would use him—if not Garreth's guerrillas then the imperialistic World Council. Someone.

He was angry because she imagined she could replace Andrea—she imagined that she was potent, powerful, perfect enough to replace the past, when in fact she was young, a violent punk. He felt the blood rushing to his head and he took a deep breath. The anger drained away as much as it could and the only thing to replace it was the silent, soft yearning for her, for Andrea, the empty yearning that seemed more and more to bubble to the surface now that they were so close to final implementation. He pictured Andrea with the Glen Livet in her hand, the ice jiggling, her lithe body swaying back and forth to the seductive jazz behind the ancient singer's voice. He remembered smelling her: a smell of berries and wild honeysuckle natural to her skin, a smell of the Scotch they shared.

Now he turned to look at Chako, sleeping on the couch as if her conscience were clear; how could she of all people sleep with that kind of look? These damned kids were mad, stark, raving mad, and

she and her brother were the worst. *Never date a grad student. And never teach anything that's true.* Andrea had been a grad student of his, too. *You are supposed to agree philosophically with the head of your dissertation committee!* he'd once screamed at her. She'd replied,

"You're brilliant," and then kept arguing and arguing and arguing, and who the hell cared back then? Who the hell would have envisioned that surreal day when the World Council troops eradicated the young, radical elite *intelligentsia* she represented, shot them in the halls and left their bodies to rot?

"Why not me, why not me!" Kendrick had shouted hysterically running from his office across the bleeding bodies of his best research assistants. "Why not me?" he'd screamed into the face of the World Council soldier. Particles of flesh still revolved in the air around them.

"Because you are innocuous, Professor," the soldier in the blue exoskeleton had said. "Politically innocuous. Irrelevant." But those had been Andrea's words, hadn't they? He couldn't remember. *A puppet for imperialism*, Andrea had said. *For the status quo.*

Kendrick shook himself. *Irrelevant.* He tried to shake away the thorn-spikes of doubt and fear that day had implanted in the cracks and secret faults deep inside him; *Irrelevant?* Chako surely did not think so, nor did her brother, nor did the World Council. Why, otherwise, would they have half the damned surveillance satellites in the hemisphere trained on his property, his compound? *Irrelevant* indeed. The Glen Livet burned and other guerrilla-drugs that had burrowed long-term into his system kicked in, and suddenly an artificial wave of good feeling urged itself through him. Now he shrugged all the negativity away as if it were mere tissue paper; he leapt up into the air, and fell in a twirl like a youngster, not someone nearly eighty. He again leapt into the air and drifted down like a kite in dwindling winds. He leapt again and held out his hand and a Scottish terrier-sort of energy mass took it in her paw and they twirled together in a swirl of waltz. Sinatra had turned into a waltz and the notes came out like crystalline flakes of snow to cover the

room at a waltz's tempo. The terrier barked, and now Kendrick shouted, "Yes! Yes! By all means! Hand me my kilt and bagpipes!" And there was an electric thrill of music as he shouted incomprehensible words to invisible warriors and to a interwoven mass of lambs and lions in the distance that had already negated the walls of the house.

He'd awakened Chako with his shouts, he realized, as the Scottish terrier transformed into her lithe young body with glazed eyes; he woke her again before she slumped to the floor with robust shouts,



"We are the cybernauts! We are the future! We are the visionary bridge from animal to eternity!" And he woke her again with Scottish-pagan singing and stomping up and down, woke her enough so that she could dance, furiously, like a puppet enslaved to his inhuman Dionysian energy, an energy that made them fly up to the ceiling in concentric circles and then let them fall, stiffly, so that they could walk and crawl, stumbling and tripping and laughing and singing and barking and crying to their bed, forgetting Thorn Apple Thicket and simply sleeping.

He woke. It was night. There was movement outside the bedroom window. He went, saw a crowd gathering like a big twisted knot at the hill on the backside of the property. A flicker of normal consciousness: In the pajamas into which Chako must have eventually helped him, he slipped over the sill and onto black earth. Pipe in his pocket—*good girl*. He had her trained. Kendrick listened for a moment: the sound of distant choppers, familiar ones, and below that the great bass, multi-voiced sea-sound of Didjeridus playing here and there in the encampment. Someone went by. And then someone else. *Accelerated, sustained levels of communal hallucination—*

"What?" he asked of a third person, passing. It was Wark, Wark in a trance like an initiate into the Mysteries. —*will make us free.*

Wark responded: "Saucers. Flying saucers. Must be government," and then he grunted and was gone like a wild pig into steamy underbrush.

"It's the drugs—" Kendrick started. *Share the drugs, share the vision, and share the transformation.* Too many words had been spoken in his lifetime. "It's just paranoia—" He stopped. He saw them, too, not flying saucers but discs of light running like fire across invisible lines of sky. No—it was—it's *the damned moon, the damned moon and massive doses of a primitive Dimethyltryptamine-releaser. We are far in. We are far in—to be having this—to be communally refracting the sky.*

Wark was beside him, sweating in the night. There was the smell of grass and salt air and something drug-induced, electric and like musty mushrooms, as if they could all smell the electric-aura of the earth. Wark said, "What is this, Father?"

He'd always liked Wark—somewhere in that tank was a kid, maybe even well intentioned, just a cyberpunk with the brusque bravado of youth. Now Wark was afraid. They all were. "Wark, it's the damned moon, Wark, the damned moon and massive doses of DMT-releasers. We are far in. We are communally refracting the sky."

The moon seemed to have split into several, indeed, now, into countless moons, each a white disk with vibrant rainbow auras. Wark, stupid Wark, turned to the professor at that with a kid-like excitement barely contained by muscles and staunch soldier-exterior. "Then—then we're close."

"We're close," said Kendrick and then they saw the others lifting, hundreds and thousands of El Greco-like wisps of disembodied soul; they rose like feather-embryos, like a cloud of half-instantiated fire flies, sparkling with pixie dust, they rose and Wark and Kendrick rose and could see their snake-like golden cords that held spirit to body. The compound became a garden of astral fetuses, water lilies rising to the surface from effervescent depths. Minds—pure minds—became one with the discs of light; there were millions of them, drifting upward and waving in the ripples of cosmic currents—and then fading, just the empty star-flecked sky, and the refracted moon.

"We're close," repeated Kendrick, his voice buzzing all over the compound like a whisper of wind. Without looking again at the discs of light hovering in and now nearly covering the night sky, he went back to his bed.

"Andrea!" he called out, but he felt mute. She walked with a steady insistence and did not turn around. They'd been married two years; she was well into her doctoral work; he was too old for her, too strong; life was strained; she was angry with him and his power; he could see the anger through her haunches as she walked from his office down the hall. "I'm sorry, damn it, I just can't accept this—I mean—"

She whipped around at him and even her gentle brown eyes could look fiery, penetrating. "Damn it, Ken," she'd called him Ken for short, "I agree that reality is consensual—a group of Hindus in a religious ecstasy think they see Krsna or Kali, hell, yes, okay, the god is real for them; a bunch of drunks see the same pink elephant and—Fine. Just fine. I'm glad to continue using lysergic acid diethylamide and DMT-releasers and whatever the hell else you want me to use in the experiments—I told you that."

"We're agreed, baby. Let's just stick with that first—"

"I'm sorry, Professor—" God, her voice was chilled, crisp, like an ice sculpture. "But I do have to get on with some sort of dissertation proposal, you know. And it's supposed to be original work, not your thought but mine—"

"Don't be so steamed."

"This—this escape from the body crap you're preaching—it doesn't fit—with me, with my politics—" Now he saw that she was struggling to keep the anger from bursting through her into a sob; there were tears in her eyes. He had her. She said: "I'm looking for realities that cultures can share to—to promote human justice—"

"Human justice," he sneered at her. "Contradiction in terms."

"I'm not just looking for escape—I'm trying to make this world livable."

"You are a child. You are a brilliant child."

"I am not a child."

"A Romantic. An Idealist. Call it whatever you like."

"I am looking to overthrow the unjust World Coun—"

"Overthrow. Revolution is the wishful thinking of the uninitiated. Your work is worthless."

"To—" she choked back a sob. "I—I'm trying to do something. And, hell, you're looking for tools of mass suicide."

"I don't call philosophy suicide—not in the sense you mean, and you know it."

"Do I?"

"Plato—"

"Fuck Plato. *The philosopher practices death.* What kind of crap is that?"

"Not real death, Andrea—escape from the body, from pain and desire—seek things of the soul, not—"

"I am not one of your Freshmen, Ken. Don't treat me like that."

"It's just that you are acting like a Freshman, Andrea. You can't seriously expect me to be interested in your revolution—"

"You could at least listen—"

"You are supposed to agree philosophically with the head of your dissertation committee."

"You're brilliant, but—"

"Maybe you need to think about a change—"

She was crying now. "You're the only philosopher in the



department doing the kind of—”

“There are other philosophers who—maybe you should get out of epistemology altogether and think about—political philosophy or—”

“You know perfectly well you’ve got to stay on my dissertation committee as long as I’m even in the department, damn it. You’re chairperson.” She gave him a look he only half comprehended, a question deep in her gentle, committed irises—“How could I have fallen in love with someone—like you!” He saw the love-hate helix knotting itself in her eyes. He chewed the pipe tighter into his teeth.

“Maybe you need to consider—a bigger change, then—Maybe, Andrea, you need a much bigger change of plans—” The suggestion cut into her like a thorn. To leave the program would mean leaving him, too. Her face showed the heart inside, rupturing, “Are you—” The tears came freely now and for the first time he felt her pain, like a little thorn in him, but he ignored it because he had her, he’d broken her, she would come over—he knew it. After all, he was right, damn it. *Irrelevant.*

She tried arguing her case a last time, the tears coming now and increasing with the embarrassment of having broken down and then breaking down even further. And between the real sobs she said: “It’s just that—that it’s easy for a comfortable American white male to talk about transcending the body and its desires—it’s easy to do that kind of high-falutin’ metaphysics with a full stomach and an air conditioned house and a full-time job and that smug damned unlit pipe of power in your teeth. Try being a single mother with three kids living in a cardboard box in a crowded alley. She—I—she wants things of the body and to know that those needs are okay; I want a philosophy to affirm body. It’s easy to play Socrates when martyrdom isn’t even an option, when you’re a puppet for imperialism and the status quo—” *When martyrdom isn’t even an option.* . . .

He simply smiled. A lion smiling at wounded prey, the executioner smiling above the torture bed: “Andrea, you know I have no political convictions. Just commitment to pure, unencumbered mind—real revolution.”

Her anger tried to catch up with her sense of loss: “What else would the World Council want you to teach—be content with your bodily situation and think only of things spiritual! Bull, Ken, that teaches us complacency.”

“I teach spirit unencumbered, freedom from body and all memory of pain. That, Andrea, is our purpose—to forget the things of the body.”

“You teach progressive forgetfulness! How could that be healthy? We’re frying the brains of—”

“Forget our ties with body and soul will be free—only nostalgia drags us back. Revolution of your sort is nostalgia, Andrea, wanting what the old guard possessed. Revolution is reactionary.”

“You want obliteration, I want affirmation. You’re—you’re mad.”

“No, I just want freedom. And that, baby, is philosophy—at least in my department.” The iron grate seemed to fall around them. At least in my department—that was strong language. It spoke to her, he could see it in her eyes, and he could see her spirit crumple.

When he saw her again at home she was so full of the Glen Livet that she looked like a swollen piece of meat ready to burst into streams of fluid at the touch of a fork. She was nearly unconscious on the floor and the “Witchcraft” track was playing on an eternal return: *That moonlight in your hair*... He looked at her and, though she was sloppy-as-hell-drunk, he desired her. He drank a scotch and then another, feeling somehow that he needed to forget or strongly affirm what he’d just done to her, and then he slammed down several more

until finally, their reality was consensual again and they could desire each other once more.

He woke. He felt refreshed. All light sources—the crack at the door, the thin light lines of the window shades—all light seemed to glow with rainbow hues and a visual-warmth, a good feeling. He went to the window and pulled up the shades; outside in the rainbow air, reverberating with good feeling, were the countless masses, some hundred thousand of them.

“More came in the night,” he said to Chako as she sleepily joined him. “It’s time—tonight.”

“Yeah,” she replied and she stayed looking with amazement at the multitude, at what she and her brother and the professor had accomplished, bringing all these people from all over the earth for the single-minded purpose of transcendence.

Kendrick was as happy as he ever got, and he went to the dresser and found a kilt and a plaid brogan and bag pipes and he said to her, “Yooohooo,” and put them on and suddenly they were doing some imagined Scottish jig. Their feet did not stay on the ground and the walls of the room were woods and highlands and mountain tops; she became a Scottish terrier and then they kissed and swirled back from the sky of the hallucination to land together to see again that he’d donned his tweed coat and simple brown tie and was ready to go teach.

He said merrily, “Jiggity jig!” and they were off through the house, Chako on his arm, and they found Garreth, waiting at the door with his gun, watching the countless revolutionaries milling about in the shanty town that had once been Kendrick’s front lawn. Garreth said, “They’ll take us out today. We’re so close, they know it. They can feel it. Surely their spy equipment can sense the power we’re generating, the aura of the New Jerusalem spilling from this place. Surely. We’re so close, it’ll be today.”

Kendrick grinned with what was almost a lion’s grin and said, “They’re not taking us out. Let’s go, class starts at eight, Toronto time.” And so they went, catching the Network tube at Market street: Toronto today, the old man at the wheel, Chako at his side, as always—it was her claim, her place, her man—and Garreth to protect them in the back chanting “*diggadah diggadah diggadahada.*” The sun above the great, glittering spikes of Toronto’s skyline looked to them like it was set in solid Vaseline, its rays splintering the mass with stiff lightning—the result of the drug-haze, the accumulated hallucination, the world transforming with Blakean power into a New Jerusalem. Kendrick let Chako snuggle at his shoulders and said, “So you see it?”

The Vaseline cracks were turning colors. “It just looks like overcast and smog to the uninitiated. To us, it—” It was a new world of color; it was *their* sun, *their* world. They were on the bridge from the animal.

“I see it,” replied Chako. Despite his characteristic lack of sensitivity for human emotions, he sensed that she may as well have said, “I’m afraid, Father. I’m desperately afraid.”

Well, it did not matter. It was too late to back out now. Chako shivered: she knew it, too. He should have comforted her but he could not, any more than a lion could comfort the sacrificial lamb. She’d agreed to this—in fact, once she’d been convinced that his program was synonymous with total revolution and freedom, why then—she’d been the inroad to her brother and his army and his connections with the worldwide underground network. Used by them to access Kendrick, and vice-versa.

At the American University, Toronto Center, Dr. Kendrick Lamb lectured while Garreth posted himself at the door and spoke to the connect-man, who'd crawled from the Toronto underground to meet in the hall. Chako listened, drifting in and out, her body wracked by too much constant motion and too many pounding hallucinogens, many of which the DMT-releasers had drawn from the recesses of her brain matter. Her body knew it was time, as well.

She knew this lecture by heart; this was Philosophy 101, the class that had hooked her into new and more private conversations with him, the class that had convinced her that the guerrillas were in need of re-education, changing their program for the goal of final liberation that he taught. He always began the course with the quote from Plato; Kendrick recited it now without thinking about it, and Chako and Garreth barely listening in the open door mouthed the words: *"From whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? whence but from the body and the lusts of the body. . . ? If we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body. . . . That, class, is the best of what western thought has offered us—That is true philosophy."*

"But—" Some male student had raised his hand, a westerner unlike most of the Japanese there, some Type-A sort. "Einstein couldn't even button his sweater. Too far gone in the mind; not enough body." There were some giggles.

Kendrick nodded and poo-pooed the comment: "Plato tells us that the Philosopher will seem like a madman. But just seem so. There is a divine madness—" And out in the hall Garreth was mumbling *"diggadah diggadah diggadahada."* The dream was coming to fruition, the madness was building, the hyper-hallucinatory constructions of stellar geometries beyond the imaginable, far beyond anything like normal perception, were rising up into the skies above Mulberry Creek. The last of the guerrillas, counted with the last of the Toronto contingent, were on their way to Mulberry Creek, on their way to what Garreth and Chako and Wark and the Didjeridu players and countless other undergrounders thought was genuine rebirth, departure for a new, consensual reality of perfection, the New Heaven and the New Earth.

On the way from the lecture hall with Chako on his arm, Kendrick was stopped by a Japanese woman with a too-young face. "Professor Lamb, I wanted to meet you—" He looked at her and liked her and enjoyed her smell—something that reminded him of small purple flowers.

Chako eyed her suspiciously: too much like the women Lamb enjoyed for breakfast. "And you must be Chako. We've heard so much—we know all about—I mean, Professor Lamb, we know the World Council killed your wife and we know how—politically committed to change she'd become. You—you and Chako and your army have become heroes for my little group—we—we're urgently interested in and—most of us—wish to come to be with you—I mean, to study at—at your feet to be—"

"I'm sorry. It's really too late, my dear. You'll have to study on your own."

"But I read your book—on freedom. We're politically involved but

we want more."

"I'm sorry," Chako said for him. "We've moved our last group. And we've done too much world-building already. You can write to this address for a pamphlet on getting started in your own group—" The past months had meant steadily building increments of hallucinogen, peeling the psyche from the body.

"And my dear," said the aging Professor, apologetically, "even if you could catch up with us it's—it's too near the end of—my project."

"I—" Chako pushed him on. They were outside the entrance; windows let light into a foyer that had become a brilliant, glittering rainbow world, a golden Vedic temple, something sparkling and alive and astounding. Chako squeezed the Professor's hand and whispered, "We really are there, aren't we?"

"Yes, Chako, it's time. Here, let me—" he pointed to the bathroom and she let him go. Garreth started to follow him, but the Professor pointed for him to stay posted outside the door. Inside, waiting for him, was the soldier in the blue exoskeleton from the World Council. His gun still steamed. The white tile walls fell away and it seemed they were surrounded by a demolished academic hall.

"How will it happen?" asked Kendrick, simply.

"Tactical Nuke." Then: "You've done much better than we ever expected. Do you have any idea how many terrorists you've got at your place?"

"I can imagine. They think we are building a New Earth, a—Pure Land."

"Are you?"

"Imagine—the spirit soaring into a world of experience it has created—free from body, in union with all other spirits."

"We can still get you out, Professor. We know you don't have political affiliation with any of these criminals—your service before, when you called us in, when—when they were taking over your department—well, we could save you then. Now—" Kendrick nodded.

"Truth is, it's suicide to stay with them this time, Professor Lamb."

"Is it?" he looked at the man across the urinal. A thorn pricked him deep inside. He thought of her, he yearned for her; the power was dropping; he yanked his pipe from his shirt pocket and clamped it in his teeth. "I'm seventy-nine."

"Plenty of good years left."

"We'll see. Who knows which of us goes to a better place—I to die, you to—"

"You and nearly ten thousand criminals."

"Yes, I and—. Yes."

He looked up. He was alone in the room, the hallucinatory blue soldier swirling away like dust. He looked in the mirror and did a little jig, doffed his hat, twirled through the air, laughed, laughed and laughed and was gone.





The car again whirred from the SF Bay/Market Street Transport Connect Station and fell to a crawl. Kendrick looked back at Garreth; the “*diggadah diggadah diggadadada*” stopped.

“One more time, Garreth. The Final Connect, as we discussed. This time none of that cactus stuff. Just the dimeth. Final Quantity.”

“Final Quantity,” mumbled Garreth back. He was nervous and hesitated as he got out of the car and made his way to the great pharmaceutical laboratories hidden beneath the pavement of San Francisco.

Chako whispered at her elderly lover: “I felt for the girl—”

“Who?”

“The girl after class. She wanted you, I could tell.”

“How could she—”

“She’s read your book and loved your words and your ideas—just as I have. I saw her in me, seeing you in class years ago, being awestruck, wanting so badly to be with you in your new paradise—wanting so badly to translate upward from the body, to leave body for you and with you—”

“Ah, balderdash.” Kendrick looked at her with eyes that smiled and he put the pipe in the other side of his mouth. He smiled again through his eyes—*You will never be able to replace her, Chako. You are brilliant and devoted but you would never replace her—and—even Andrea was no match for me.*

“Professor, Father,” said Chako, thinking she read something very different in the smiling eyes. “I am ready to go with you beyond life. I’m ready for final implementation—with you.” *You are a megalomaniac*, Andrea had said after the fortieth rewrite of her dissertation and she threatened to leave and take all the other grads with her. And that was when he got fed up and called his contact at the World Council.

He nodded again, felt one of those deep implanted thorns, and wondered for the thousandth time if it was possible—that he would find her, find her and laugh with her. Show her how right he’d been and drink the Glen Livet Scotch with her and pet this little dog and all the other little pets no doubt his army would become for them in an alternate universe, for the god and the goddess they would be together, for the oneness they would be. They would make love, he and Andrea, like they’d never really been able to do when disagreement, when body and disagreement about body, came in between them. He gasped unconsciously and nearly spoke her name out loud. “Andre...” when Garreth climbed noisily into the car with a large package and said, “Do it.” Garreth handed the package to his teacher and Kendrick said, “Yes, good, this dose and the severing of the golden cord and we will have—” All they wanted. All any of them wanted: freedom, freedom like a clear, clean sky covering the world and touching it all with divinity and making it new, beyond the dreams of prophets and poets, remaking the world with burning light and divine comets of energy.

Kendrick pushed the gearshift forward, they kicked off, and he looked at Chako. She had a peculiar expression: she’d heard the *Andrea* nearly leave his lips. He tried to change the subject. “Did you hear that smartass in the front? He implied that I’m mad!” A string of spittle drooped to his chin as he pulled the pipe from his teeth.

Chako trembled and turned away.

“I said, he implied—I was—” In the back, Garreth chanted: “*Diggadah diggadah diggadadada.*”

“We’ll be all right, won’t we?” she whispered without turning to

either of them. The spittle still clung to his chin, a long, slender spear of it. “*Diggadah diggadah diggadadada.*” He laughed and started to sing a little Scottish ditty and she whispered: “Won’t we, Father?” He tried to pet the little terrier on the head and say, “There, there.” But he couldn’t mean any consolation. He loved this. He’d lived for this.

Lightning broke from the sky, a descent of angels through transcendent clouds—rainbow bridges lit their way. They were coming to the compound and already they could see the multitude of lotus-like fetuses suspended in the rainbow-air, suspended and blending one with another in an amorphous cloud of pulsating energy held to the earth only by thin, wavering golden lines, the golden cords waiting with an animate willingness to be severed.

They were at the gate and Wark was there, Wark’s body standing at attention like a zombie’s while above him the wild spirit turned and sang and danced like a demon-angel, like an animate and fully intelligent fetus.

“We will be all right, yes?” stammered Chako, and she looked into the Prophet’s eyes and realized he was murmuring something incomprehensible, the spittle flowing down his chin, his eyes on fire, the power and the control oozing from him palpably. She was caught in his dream.

“All things require Oneness!” His voice echoed, echoed throughout the complex as if he spoke through a megaphone, as if he’d become the wind now. He spoke to her: “Will we be all right? Truth, beauty, existence, soul—all things require being a unit, a unity, a oneness, union. A thing isn’t a thing without its oneness.” He tried to clamp down on the pipe and missed and a little reddish break appeared on his gums and through the dimeth crystalline haze she fixated on the blood; it seemed to leak down out of the massive cathedrals of his teeth onto his chin and neck and breast.

“Oneness is the most basic thing. Death means returning to the most basic.”

“That means we’ll be all right. You want me with you, fused with you. We’ll be all right, won’t we? We’ll be all right?” she repeated, over and over. Garreth was there. And Wark. Time telescoped beyond the extremes of perception. Had they already taken the final dose? “Won’t we?”

Kendrick looked at them, at the three and at the countless thousands standing in circles now behind them. They hemmed him in, looking to him with love for their peace and for their freedom. The skies fell burning. Chariots screamed from the clouds. Here was the power. He lifted his hands. He felt the strength pulsing in him, the strength to create the world. He shouted, “We are the visionary bridge from animal to eternity! I make you!” They swirled.

He motioned for the helicopters to stop; there was only the sound of the Didjeridus and the expectant breaths of the multitudes, and then a distant roar. They were floating, all of them, the golden cords all that remained of the connection with body.

“Won’t we?” asked Chako from some distant place.

“Mad?” demanded Kendrick’s voice, the voice of a Moses crying out. Would she be here, would she come here in the unity, would she forgive him? Forgive him? He didn’t even want her forgiveness.

Tactical nuke? Or its equivalent in DMT-releasers. There was a hiss, a blinding flash that sucked all of energy into a single, minute center, and then threw it out into the negation of utter newness.

“Won’t we?” asked Chako.



MARIANNE PLUMBOFF



Thomas Seay is, to the best of my knowledge, the youngest writer I have ever published. At the young age of fifteen, Thomas is currently in attendance at Georgia Tech, majoring in science. "Containment Syndrome" was inspired when, in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, a family member of one of the victims commented that death row wasn't harsh enough punishment. This is Thomas's first published short story.

# Containment Syndrome

## by Thomas Seay

### Entry 1

Though this is my first entry in this "journal," it isn't my first day in Containment. I think I've been here for about two months, but I'm not sure—I don't have a calendar to mark as the days go by.

When I was first put in Containment, our group had ten people in it. Now, there are only five left—all convicted criminals, of course, though a few continue to claim innocence. I personally gave up that plea years ago, when I realized it would no longer do me any good.

Then again, I'm writing this, and it doesn't do me any good. It's just a waste of paper, and the government doesn't give us much paper to begin with.

But it passes the time. When you have nothing to do but wait for death . . . well, time seems to pass both far too quickly and far too slowly.

And besides, if these words have any meaning at all, then it must be because someone is reading them—maybe even someone *outside* of Containment. Now that's an interesting possibility.

When I was ten years old, I read a book written by some Jewish girl during one of the World Wars: Anne Frank, that's it. The book was the diary that she kept while hiding from the Nazis.

Well, I feel a lot like that. I know that I committed my crime; I know that I'm guilty of murder, while little Anne Frank did nothing to deserve her punishment. Still, Containment is just so brutal. People sitting in their houses, watching their holovisions and sipping their tea might understand the idea behind Containment . . . but I don't believe that they really understand what it feels like.

So, if you're reading this, and you're not in Containment, take that into consideration. Read what I have to say, and then stop this punishment from ever happening again.

I know I sound idealistic, but I'm not. I'm a murderer, and the reason I'm writing this is (as much as anything else) just to pass away the time. I'm just waiting until the computer randomly draws my number and kills me.

But if I can stop one person from committing a crime that would have gotten them put into Containment—or, better yet, convince one person that the Containment system should be abolished altogether . . . maybe my wasted hours will have some significance.

And those hours will keep piling up until I die, whenever that may be. And then my journal entries will stop. I wonder if I'll even make it through this sentence before I'm killed. . . .

Shit. I'm still alive.

Oh, well. Maybe tomorrow.

### Entry 2

Pablo tried to kill himself today.

Of course, the computer wouldn't let him die, since that would compromise the whole point of Containment. Just before Pablo would have stabbed himself with a pencil, he fell down, unconscious.

I feel sorry for Pablo, more than anyone else in our little village. (We call it a village, even if that is an absurd term for a prison.) He speaks only Spanish—a language that none of the rest of us are even vaguely familiar with. I thought I was lonely, waiting for death . . . but poor Pablo can't even talk to anyone but himself.

Hell, I don't even know if his name is really Pablo. Larry started calling him that when we realized that Pablo was both an artist and Spanish, like Pablo Picasso. Whether or not Pablo is his real name, he responds to it just the same.

Poor Pablo, he takes his pencil—the same one he tried to kill himself with—and scribbles on whatever scraps of paper the government gives us. He draws fruits, or landscapes, or nudes.

Lots of nudes.

But then, who can blame him? Pablo's lonely. There are no females in our village—the government wouldn't consider giving us an opportunity for sexual fulfillment, at least not of the heterosexual sort (as far as I know, none of the other type is happening, either).

Anyway, Pablo's actually a pretty good artist.

A pity he's a murderer, too.

### Entry 3

Larry's dead, the lucky bastard.

We were all sitting down to eat dinner—all but Pablo, who has no use for the bit of conversation we have at dinner anyway. We were, of course, eating the normal filth: high fiber stuff, like oatmeal only browner, and more dry, and more grainy.

So, Larry was sitting down to eat, when suddenly his muscles spasmed and he sat straight up, his eyes wide. He let out a little gurgle, and then bile began spilling out of his lips. We just stared at each other; a few of us mumbled, "Good luck."

Luck? He already had it, the lucky dead bastard.

It's cruel that the computer chose to take Larry while he was eating, which is nominally the highlight of our days. Sometimes, I wonder if that computer doesn't have a sense of humor. A wicked, bizarre sense of humor.

So now there are four of us left. Me, Pablo, Keith, and Peter.

Only four of us left, out of ten. Only four. The executioner keeps

striking.

It had been a while since we last lost someone, so we were a bit unprepared for Larry's death. I had subconsciously been hoping, even praying, that the computer had somehow stopped working, and that none of us would die after all.

Shit. I just realized what I'm saying.

If Larry's death was so unexpected . . . then Containment is working just the way *they* want it to.

Shit.

The whole idea behind Containment is that murderers on death row shouldn't know when they're going to die. In the old days, they used to tell people, "You'll die at ten o'clock on January 20th," and that was that. They even let people have a last meal!

But then critics started saying that death row wasn't harsh enough. After all, the victims of these convicted murderers weren't allowed to *prepare* for their deaths; the victims were entirely subject to the whims of their killers.

As a solution to these complaints, Containment was devised—little villages with ten convicted criminals in each of them, villages that become a type of community. In my village, the ten of us even became friends, despite all our attempts not to.

So, in other words, the government gave each of us *something to lose*.

I still like to think that they missed something. After all, I don't grieve over Larry's death. Even though I'm a bit upset that he's gone . . . I envy him.

I wish I were dead.

*Kill me, you stupid computer! Kill me!*

No, no, I won't let it get me worked up, because if I do, then they win. The stupid government bastards win.

So take your time to kill me. Kill me whenever you get around to it. Until then, I'll keep writing, and as long as I keep writing, I'm winning. I'm striking back against you, in my own way.

Ha. Take that, you computerized son of a bitch.

#### Entry 4

The food's different today. It's not any tastier, mind you. Just a bit lighter in color, and eating it feels a bit less like swallowing a skunk.

Every morning, we get our food from the cabinets, where it appears every night. From what I can tell, the cabinets actually have two doors, like an airlock. Before the government puts in our food, they lock the inside door. Then, presumably, they unlock the outside doors and slip in our bowls of . . . well, whatever that crap is. They usually put in a few other things, too: the paper I'm writing on, and pencils, and some other things along those lines.

Anyway, both of the cabinet doors are metal. Strong, unbreakable, unbendable. We've all attempted escape through them, but it's utterly hopeless.

When somebody dies, we pick up their body and lug it over to those same cabinets. The next day, the body is gone, and we've got more food.

Based on the food's taste, I'd say that they just grind up the bodies and pour them into bowls. At least today's oatmeal-stuff was a bit better than what we usually have.

I wonder if the change in food means anything. Maybe the computer's trying to convince us of something, trying in some subtle way to make us feel even more miserable than we already do.

Nah. I'm probably just paranoid.

#### Entry 5

It has been a few days since my last entry. For some reason, the

government stopped giving us paper for a while, so I let Pablo draw on everything I had. He's spending more and more of his time drawing nowadays, getting more and more bored.

Poor guy.

Well, I haven't written much about the other two people with me in Containment, Keith and Peter. That's mainly because they aren't very interesting.

Peter's a reasonable guy. Quiet, kind of small, a bit timid. He certainly doesn't seem like a murderer; maybe he's in here for computer crimes, though I've never heard of someone getting Containment for that. He's bald, with a scalp that seems to have a life of its own.

The reason I've never been too interested in Peter is that he's Roman Catholic. He converted right after his conviction. Now he seems to think that if he prays for forgiveness for his crimes, and God accepts his prayers, then he won't really have committed those crimes in the first place. It's an interesting hypothesis. I wish I could believe in it.

So, Peter spends all of his time in his room, praying. He does nothing else except eat and sleep. If he only had a confessor, I think he'd take death with a smile.

As if the rest of us wouldn't anyway.

Keith is the exact opposite of Peter, absolutely huge, towering over all the rest of us. He's been in a gang since childhood. He'll openly admit to murdering a dozen people and raping twice that many.

See, it's people like him who I don't like. It's people like him who deserve to be put in Containment.

Not people like me.

Me . . . I just got so angry that I couldn't help but kill someone. It was only once in my life and it only lasted five minutes, but it led to all of this. Because of that, nobody will ever remember anything I've ever done except for that one crime, committed in a moment of frenzy.

Anyway, I'm not going to try to persuade you that my crime was any less severe than Keith's. It's all a matter of public record; feel free to look it up, if you like.

Damn it, there I go again. I keep talking to "you." Who the hell are *you*? At one point, I thought maybe you were reading this like Anne Frank's diary, but now I'm starting to doubt that. There's no way these scraps of paper will ever make it outside. I'm talking to nobody.

Or, worse, talking to myself. Jesus, I'm crazy.

And besides, why the hell am I comparing myself to a dead fifteen-year-old Dutch girl? I must really be insane.

Maybe insanity will make the computer feel more inclined to kill me.

I can only hope.

#### Entry 6

I'm still alive.

God damn it, I'm still alive.

Anyway, Pablo was just at my door a few moments ago. He mumbled something in Spanish and gave me one of his drawings. It's a sketch of a man standing in a field, staring into the sky. Up towards the zenith, at the very top of the paper, there's a spiral galaxy suspended in the air—only it's not really a galaxy, because it looks vaguely like a dragon. And while at first the man seems to be looking at the galaxy, it looks at the same time as if he's being eaten by the dragon. . . .



I wonder if Pablo was planning on giving this to me when he drew it. Maybe he even based it on me.

Maybe that's why I feel so much like the man.

### Entry 7

Keith, too, is gone. This time, the rest of us woke up one morning, and Keith didn't.

Now there are three of us left. I wonder who'll be the last alive.

I hope it isn't me.

Oh, God, don't let it be me.

### Entry 8

My teeth hurt.

Well, not all of my teeth, just some molar or another, way back on my right side. If the oatmeal-stuff took any chewing, I don't think I'd be able to get it down.

A toothache. Sheesh. One would think that those idiot scientists out there selecting out diets would be so kind as to make some provision for our dental hygiene. Apparently not. They certainly don't give us toothbrushes, that much is sure.

In the meantime, my fingernails aren't in much better shape. I can't clip them, so I've been gnawing them down to size—something I haven't done since I was a kid. Now their edges are jagged and yellow, and a little line of dirt runs underneath them.

If this keeps up, my body will rot away before the computer gets around to killing me. Gangrene.

Well, if that gets me dead, I suppose it'll have to do.

### Entry 9

Peter's gone. As best I can tell, he was praying when he died. I hope God took him when He did simply because Peter had finally achieved forgiveness for his crimes.

But, damn it, Peter's dead.

Fucking computer must be getting smarter. Before, the deaths were unexpected because it had been so long since the last death. We had always started to become less tense, less prepared for the moment.

This time, it's only been two days since Keith's death, and so I'd been expecting a

buffer period.

Stupid of me.

Of course, it's probably just as stupid of me to keep personifying a computer that could work entirely on random numbers.

So now there are only two of us left, me and Pablo. Given how I can't understand Pablo, I'm not sure just how much good it does me to have him around.

But if eight of us are down, then my death must be approaching. It must be.

I can still feel the scar on my back from the implant. I'm not quite certain how it works, but it must affect the brain directly—maybe a poison, or maybe there's even a tiny explosion inside the head of the victim. The bile which comes up a few seconds after death probably lends credibility to the poison explanation, especially since the implant can also knock a person unconscious if they try to commit suicide or murder.

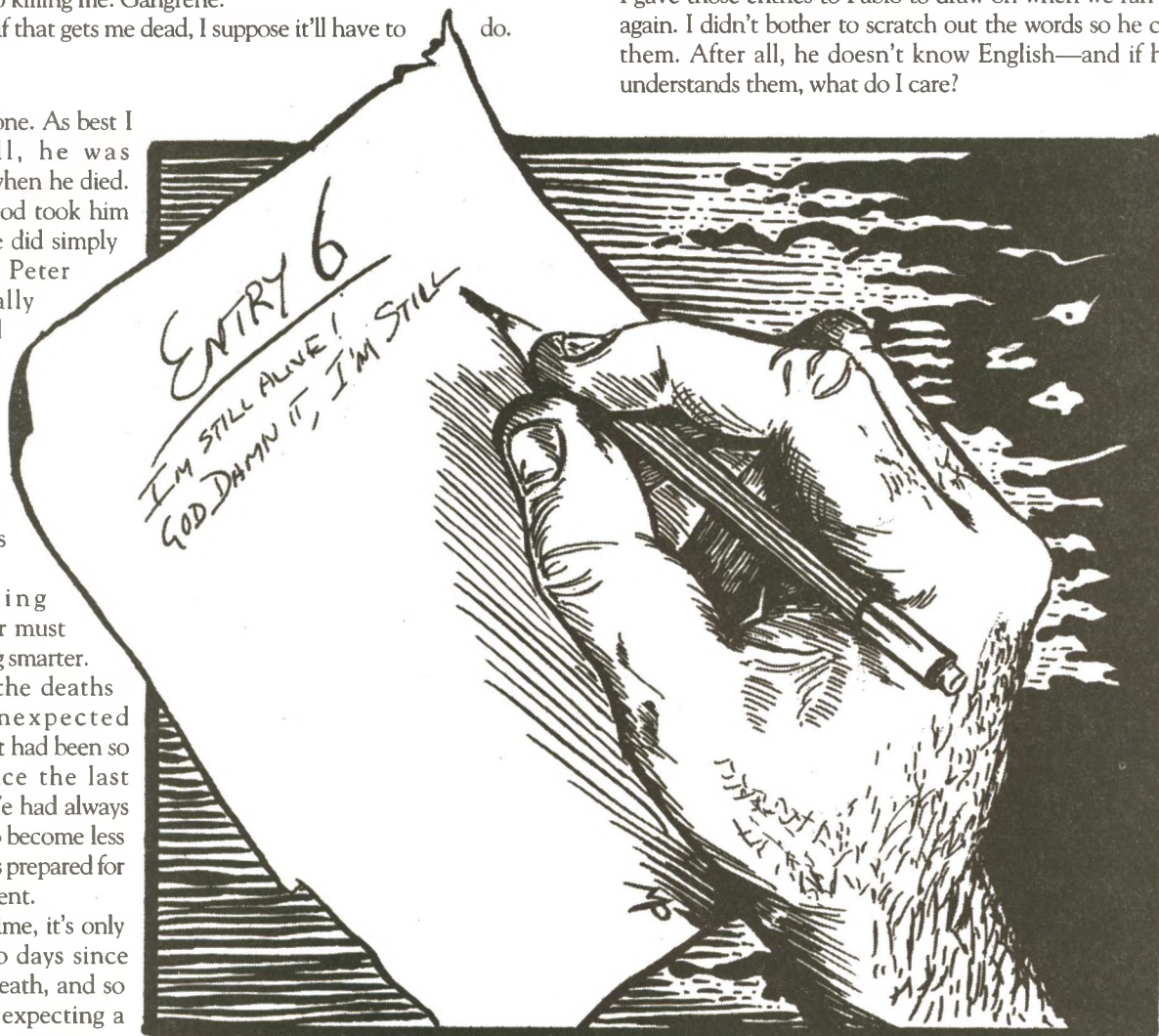
And so the computer sends out a radio signal, and the implant activates, and a few seconds later, I'm dead. Or maybe the timer is already set inside my implant, and the seconds are just ticking down.

I can almost hear it. Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .

But it's just my imagination. Otherwise, I'd be dead, and that'd be far too nice.

### Entry 15

I've written several more entries since the last one you see here, but I gave those entries to Pablo to draw on when we ran out of paper again. I didn't bother to scratch out the words so he couldn't read them. After all, he doesn't know English—and if he somehow understands them, what do I care?



Anyway, I think he tore up some of his artwork a few days ago and destroyed my entries as well.

I spent a lot of those lost entries thinking about Peter's death. I was contemplating the sheer irony of someone dying while praying to God—and the sheer cruelty of a

deity who would take a man even while that man was praying to Him. That kind of cruelty gives me even less hope than before that I'll end up in some wonderful afterlife.

But if the afterlife really does exist, maybe it won't be so damned boring.

In the last few days, I haven't heard a word spoken in the English language, outside of what I've said into the empty air. True, I think I understand Pablo on a fundamental level . . . but it's not the same.

Shit, somebody *let me out!* If you're reading this and you can do something for me, let me out. Please.

No, no, I'm going insane again. Even if you are reading this, whoever you are, there's nothing you can do for me.

Maybe I'll try praying. It didn't work for Peter, but maybe, just maybe, it'll work for me. He was praying to God; maybe I'll try praying to the devil. Yes, the devil should be willing to kill me. He'd even take some joy in doing so.

Hopefully he won't want my soul. But if he does, surely Hell is more interesting than this.

### Entry 16

I just realized something today, looking over the last of my entries. The ancient Greeks claimed that their equivalent of Hell, Hades, was more a place of boredom than torture—boredom and frustration.

Take Sisyphus. The poor guy was a king in ancient Greece who offended Zeus. So, by way of punishment, he had to push a massive boulder up a steep hill—only every time he neared the top, the boulder rolled back down again, so he had to start over.

That Greek Hades seems much more like what I currently feel than anything else. Maybe the Greeks were right, and Hades really does exist. Maybe I already died, and the damned Greek Gods decided to condemn me to eternal boredom—but, being the evil little critters they are, they neglected to mention this punishment to me. So I still think I'm alive and waiting for death, even though death has already come.

I shouldn't have read all that Greek mythology when I was a kid.

Shit, I'm crazy.

On the other hand, if I can acknowledge I'm crazy, then maybe I'm not crazy at all. Or maybe I can have the verdict on my case changed from *Guilty* to *Not Guilty by Insanity*, and I can get out of here.

Shit, I'm crazy.



### Entry 17

This is going to be my last entry, any way it happens.

They stopped giving us paper several days ago; somehow, I doubt they'll start giving it to us again. So I've given all of my paper except for this one slip to Pablo.

Pablo's drawing ridiculously fast. He'll finish one of those things every few hours—and they're all remarkably detailed, absolutely beautiful. I can't keep my paper away from him if I try. He deserves it more than I do.

I once heard that the real Pablo Picasso did a painting a day for part of his career—pretty

prolific, just like our Pablo. Who knows? Maybe I really am in Hell with all the dead people of the world, and Pablo here really is Picasso. It would explain his art.

Anyway, like I said, this is my last entry. If nobody's ever going to read this, then I guess I haven't done any harm, and I've successfully passed a bit of time. If someone is out there reading . . . thanks for listening to the ramblings of a crazy man.

Maybe I'll go on a book tour when my journal is published.

Shit, I'm crazy.

### Entry 18

Well, by God, I'm writing again. Pablo is dead.

It's just not fair. At least Pablo was *making* something, doing something worthwhile, before he died. Why couldn't I die first?

I'm writing on the back side of one of Pablo's sketches. I feel almost like I'm violating sacred territory by scrawling on these things, but my pencil isn't visible from the other side of the paper.

The drawing that Pablo was working on when he died is now covered in vomit. Such a waste.

Damn it. Why did I have to be left here alone?

Pablo, Pablo, come back. Draw another drawing. Take my paper; I don't want it, or need it.

But no, it won't happen. Pablo won't come back.

Fuck you, Pablo.

### Entry 19

Dear Pablo,

Hello, wherever you are. Heaven, Hell, Hades—wherever.

I don't know what the postage rate is to the Afterworld, so I'm sorry if this gets returned to me.

I've hung up all of your artwork on my walls; that tasteless food makes pretty good glue. Your work fills up my whole room like wallpaper. It makes the place much less dreary.

God, I've been around here forever without you. Don't you think you could drop in for a visit? Just once a month or so? And drop off some of your new artwork when you come. I'd like that.

Pablo, come visit. Please.

Do you have any power with the deity of your Afterworld? Do you think you could convince him (or her, or them) to move up my date of death? Then I can come visit you whenever I want.

Please kill me, Pablo. Please.

Oh, shit. You won't do it.

*Come on, you bastard. Kill me! Why won't you—*

### Afterword:

*In this third edition of Journal of a Killer, not one word has been changed—nothing added or removed, with the exception of this concluding note.*

*The U.S. Government still has not released the name of the author of this work, citing Containment confidentiality. Analysis of the author's writing style against the styles of all known authors reveals only that this man's writing is not in any database. There has also been some speculation that the names of the other inmates, with the exception of Pablo, might have been changed, censored.*

*On another note, controversial new evidence has suggested that there might actually be two more words to this journal—words that were earlier mistaken for a long, broken line drawn during the spasms of death:*

*"Thank you."*

*Was this merely a scribble, or was it the author's final message to Pablo? I'll leave that decision to the reader.*



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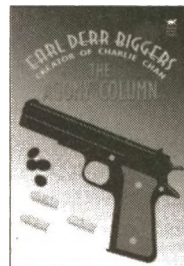
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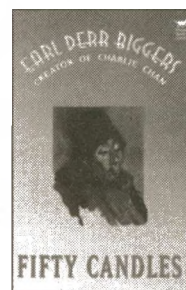
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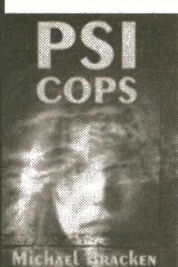
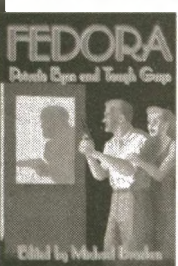
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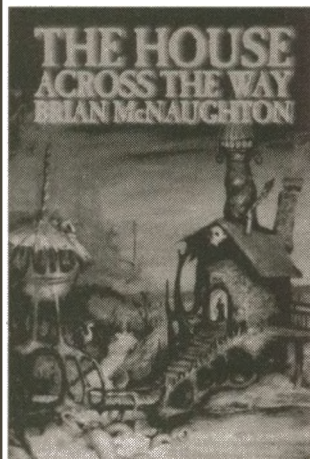
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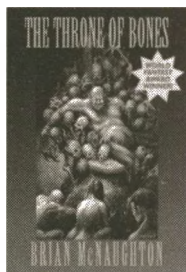
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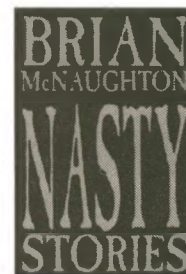
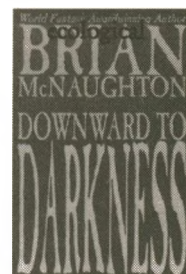
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**The Tiger Among Us, by Leigh Brackett**

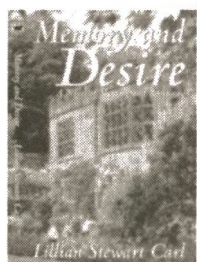
Walter Sherris made just one mistake: he took a walk along a dark road one night. Without warning, a car raced towards him and screeched to a stop; out piled five young men intent on violence. To the accompaniment of wild brainless laughter, Walter Sherris was beaten to the ground. He awoke in a hospital nine days later. And from that moment his pleasant life became a nightmare. Walter

Sherris wanted revenge for the countless and nameless others who had been mauled by the thrill seekers, the sadists, the compulsive slayers . . . the tigers loose in a tame suburban world. *The Tiger Among Us* was filmed as *13 West Street* (starring Alan Ladd).

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Claire came to the English village to find her best friend, Melinda, who'd vanished after per-



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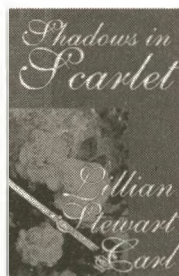
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A romantic suspense novel sure to please Carl's many fans.

ISBN: 1-58715-375-0 - *Shadows in Scarlet* (Hardcover, \$37.95)



**ROBERT COLBY**

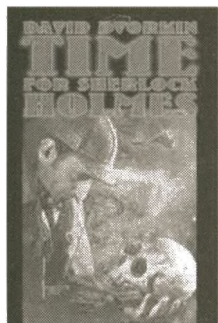
**The Captain Must Die, by Robert Colby**

For twelve long years they remembered. For twelve long years they plotted. And now Captain Driscoll was going to pay for what he had done





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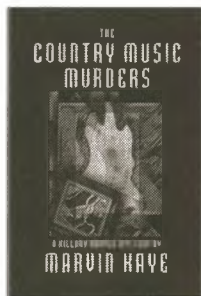
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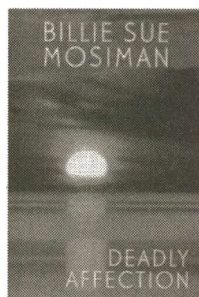
Carla Cohen, love is family and heritage—her dead sister, Francine; her brother-in-law, Sully, who helped raise her after her parents died in a tragic accident. And perhaps as much, for Carla, love is a thirst for revenge on the killer who stole her sister and turned Carla's own life into a hellish nightmare. Lansing And for a deranged serial killer like Martin Lansing? For him, love is a woman named Carla Cohen—a woman who wants to kill him. A woman he wants to kill.

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Tye Dompier was the man that every girl wanted: from the white columns of his family's mansion to his handsome face, he had it all, money, charm, a wild light in his ice-blue eyes. He charmed pretty Angie Thornton the day she moved to Moon Lake, Mississippi, and set eyes on him. But Angie was young and innocent - too young to get involved with a man as serious as Tye. So she refused his advances - and learned

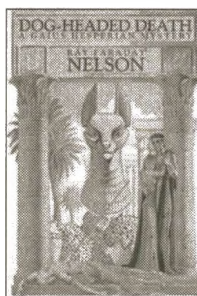


the hard way that refusing Tye Dompier was a dangerous mistake. On the shores of the languid, fog-shrouded lake, Tye came to stalk Angie - and when he trapped her, there was no one to hear her cries. And no hope of Justice in a county his family had run for generations.

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Carefully researched for period detail, *Dog-Headed Death* includes members of the extended Memnon family, including the beautiful slave girl Sabella, the clown dwarfs Suchos, Horus, and Bubo; a Parthian spy; the Centurion's nemesis, Librarian Daphnis; the Apostle Mark; Bishop Annianus; and many other characters both colorful and authentic. With a daring and romantic sub-plot, this is a fine historical novel as well as a fast-paced mystery!

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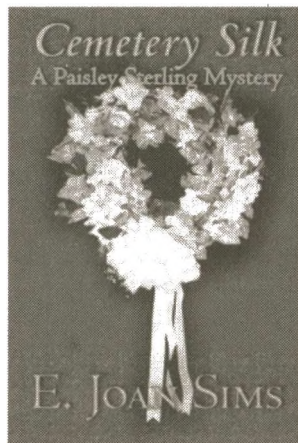
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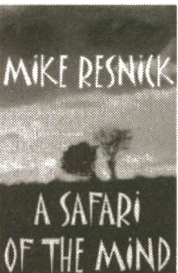
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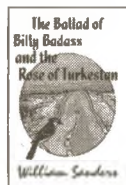
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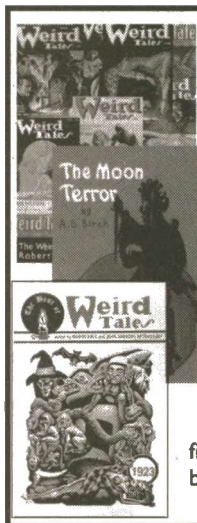
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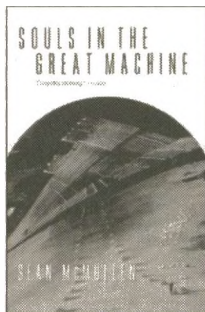
# Fantastic Bookshelf

## By Steve Sawicki

My reading habits tend to take me all over the place. I have an inclination for science fiction but find myself drawn for lengths of time to fantasy. I enjoy a well crafted mystery or a particularly creepy horror novel as well. I revel at books that manage to combine two or more of the above and I wonder at the author's intentions. In almost all of my reading however I'm searching for that experience that is so total, so complete that it makes the rest of the world go away. This experience is the one that keeps you reading past bedtime, that forces sleep from your mind, that makes you bring the book with you when you leave the house. I find such experiences come fewer for me now. It may simply be that as I've gotten older I've become harder to please. It may have more to do with how busy I am now. The sheer number of books I've read might have made driven the possibility of such experiences farther from me. It's still what I look for though and while I no longer anticipate that every book I pick up will meet those expectations I remain hopeful.

***Souls In The Great Machine*, Sean McMullen, Tor Hardcover ISBN 0-312-87055-8, \$27.95 (\$39.95 Canada), 448 pgs.**

McMullen sets this novel in a post-apocalyptic world that strongly hints to be our very own. Society and culture have reverted pretty much to a feudal level and most technology has been lost. There are still remnants of that technology but most of it either doesn't work or is too smashed up to figure out. On top of all this, every time someone manages to cobble something together a mysterious force comes down from the sky and takes it out. The few pieces of technology that people have



managed re-invent have organic basis. This is where the title comes from. The world here is a strange one, albeit one that also seems very familiar. There are librarians and mayors and armies and trains and enough political intrigue to fill an ocean. The librarians are trying to figure things out and have become almost a religion in the process. They have, in fact, managed to build a simple computer using human beings as switches. The overmayor, Zavora, sees the potential in such a thing and begins using it to her own advantage. As with any political structure, what one believes to be the right path is colored by where one stands. Zavora is somewhat of a zealot in her fervor to regain the brightness of the past and sometimes can't see past her own vision. Those around her grow uncomfortable at this, and even more uncomfortable with some of the things that the great machine is being utilized for. At the same time, one of the small bits of this computer manages to escape and, after having many adventures, returns at the head of a large army to exact revenge, more or less.

McMullen has created an enticing world that feels, as you read, half remembered. The settings are both exotic and familiar with the characters similarly constructed. I found two problems with the book however. The first is a problem that McMullen's previous book, *The Centurion's Empire*, also suffered from. McMullen seems to have a habit, somewhere around three-quarters of the way through a novel, to take a right turn and move us in directions that don't really move the plot forward. This is annoying and distracting. Good editing would take care of this. The second problem is that this is the first book of a series so there are plenty of doors left open, and it's pretty obvious where and why. Now, there's nothing wrong with series and I love series for the most part, but a writer must be smart about how the series connects from one book to the next. I prefer each book in a series to be more or less complete and finished and not simply a prelude to the next 500-page offering.

I liked this novel. I liked McMullen's previous novel. Still, I can only wonder at how much better both could have been. Should either of these problems keep you from buying the book? No, most certainly not. If for nothing else, this book is a wonder for the world building.

World building is one of those things that can draw you into a reading experience so deeply that you never want to come out. For me, one of the deepest experiences came with Frank Herbert's *Dune*. I similarly became enraptured by Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane*. Both of these books contained visions so complete and total that you had little choice, as a reader, but to become completely enthralled. Lest you think this works only for genre fiction I will share with you that I read *Airport* in one sitting and *The Godfather* in three. World building is important, but a complete and fascinating world is nothing without characters, and characters are nothing without problems to solve.

***Music of Many Spheres: The Essential Hal Clement, Volume 2*, Mark L. Olson & Anthony R. Lewis, eds., ISBN 1-886788-07-8, \$25.00, 506 pgs.**

This is a NESFA press book. NESFA, the New England Science Fiction Society, has been producing books for quite a few years now. They began by publishing commemorative volumes in conjunction with Boskone, which is the convention they run every February in the Boston area. In the past couple of years NESFA has expanded beyond that and is now publishing books on a more regular basis. Many of the books still have a convention connection, relating either to



guests of honor or regional authors, although they all are produced in the same loving and high quality fashion.

This latest offering is the second volume in a three-volume set collecting the short fiction of Hal Clement. Clement was picked by the Science Fiction Writers of America as their Grandmaster in 1999. The award is one of distinction and is given only to those writers whose work not only spans the field in time but in impact.

This volume contains work published between 1942 to 1987. It contains Clement's first published short story, "Proof," which appeared in the June 1942 issue of *Astounding Stories*, and it contains a story he wrote for NESFA itself in 1987, "Status Symbol." In between these two tales lie fifteen more stories of various lengths along with a fine introduction by Ben Bova. Only the introduction is new to this volume, the rest of the contents having seen print in various magazines and anthologies.

If there are two things that all of these stories have in common it is that they sprang from the imagination of one of the finest hard sf writers working in the latter half of the twentieth century and that they remain fascinating reads to this day. It is hard to pick up this volume without starting and finishing a story. One leads to another and it is not too soon that you are thankful that there are so many because it means you'll have something to return to.

The stories are classic hard sf, containing science, protagonists with enough wit to not only figure things out but to cobble together a solution and often turning on a scientific puzzle. The collection is a treasure and I would urge you to not only get this volume but to hunt down the first and third volumes as well. In case your wondering where to hunt you can start by contacting NESFA at P.O. Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203.

Early SF often hinged on generating a sense of wonder in the reader. This not only kept the reader from picking up on the obvious plot holes and lack of characterization but built a need for more SOW fixes. The magazines perfected this with their garish covers and outrageous claims, targeting an audience that would craved such adventures—fifteen-year-old boys. This is nothing new. If you go back and read Socrates he speaks of the methods one must use to capture the imagination of fickle youth. Socrates was way ahead of his time. Makes one wonder what effect John Campbell could have had on him.

**Deep Sound Channel, Joe Buff, Bantam Hardcover, ISBN 0-553-80133-3, \$23.95 (\$35.95 Canada), 354 pgs.**

This is one of those books that sits on the border of science fiction and mainstream. Buff sets his novel in the near future, in 2011 to be exact. It is a future of conflict and a future where tactical nuclear weapons are used with regular abandon. Buff establishes a future where South Africa goes rogue and starts sinking British and American merchant ships. NATO responds, with the exception of Germany, which takes advantage of the confusion to nuke Poland and attack the French. Before you know it there are little mushroom clouds everywhere. Buff microscopes the action down however to a pair of submarines and a single mission. On one side is the USS *Challenger*, a ceramic-hulled stealth sub given the mission of infiltrating South Africa to put an end to the compiling of a violent and deadly biological weapon. On the other side is *Voortrekker*, a sub built by the Germans around a Russian nuclear propulsion unit.

The book starts out simply enough, first on one boat and then on the other. We get to know the captains and crews of both boats, and Buff takes the pretty standard road of making the heroes pretty clean and the villains pretty dirty. It's comic-book characterization. But the characterization is not what keeps you turning pages with this book. No, what keeps you going is the action, the critical moments on both subs where decisions need to be made to avoid disaster—decisions that reflect only two bad options—one that leads to death and the other merely to serious damage. The book fairly reeks with technology and it's fascinating to follow the extrapolation of just a dozen years.

*Deep Sound Channel* is a fun and entertaining read, fascinating at times and containing enough action for a trio of novels. Fast paced, energetic and eye-opening.

One of the problems with the modern era in the genres of the fantastic is that we are bombarded with images, factoids, and bits, all of which reference the fantastic. Volkswagens morph, butter talks, babies



dance, and even the most mundane of things, like the US Marine Corps., utilizes CGI effects in their commercials. Thus, when we pick up a book it has to not only compete but to excel. And all of this at a time when the sheer number of books is more than any three people could read even if they had nothing better to do with their time.

**Within The Darkness, Golden Eyes, Michael Laimo, Flesh and Blood Press, 121 Joseph St., Bayville, NJ 08721, \$3, 24 pgs.**

I seem to recall reading this story in some small press magazine or another a few years back. That I remembered it at all speaks to the strength of the writing. The story is quite a simple one, a country doctor who is sought to help a being in pain. That the doctor is unwilling and the being not quite human both factor into the tale. The whole thing is told in the first person, so there is an immediacy to the action and to the threats. Laimo chooses wisely when he picks not only his viewpoint but his character. He chooses just as wisely a style that teases rather than exposit. There are so many ways he could have ruined this story and made it much less powerful that it signifies just how far Laimo's writing has come.

The copy I have is signed and numbered and has an introduction by Edo van Belkom. There's also a foreword by Laimo where he talks about how the tale came to be both written and published.

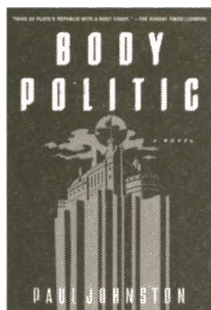
Individually we all place value on things based on our own set of beliefs, needs, and wants. There are some who walk into large bookstores and past the sixteen bookcases of genre offerings only so they can bemoan the four shelves of media tie-ins. There are others who will stand in front of fifteen hundred books and cry that there is nothing to read because the latest offering in a fantasy octology has not yet hit the shelves. The world will never serve all of our wishes at the same time. Occasionally you'll get close, and when you do, it helps to recognize it.

**Body Politic, Paul Johnston, St. Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-20279-2, \$22.95, 250 pgs.**

This novel is set in Edinburgh in 2020. This is not your typical setting for a near future thriller. The Edinburgh that Johnston creates is a police state that has risen from



the fall of the United Kingdom. The economy is driven by tourism and there has been almost no crime in five years. Into all of this comes a body, and a hauntingly familiar method of operation. The ruling body, the Council of



City Guardians, call upon Quintilain Dalrymple to catch the killer. But, of course, nothing is quite that simple.

Johnston's characters are just quirky enough to be interesting without being so odd that you can't identify with them. Dalrymple is a man with a past and just on the edge of not caring what happens. The Council is politically corrupt, although still idealistic when it comes to knowing what is good for the city. The supporting characters are interesting and with lives of their own, not just walk-ons cued by the writer on demand. And the setting is simply fabulous. I wouldn't want to live in Edinburgh but I'd sure love to watch what happens there.

The novel is fairly fast paced and very well written. The mixture of science fiction and crime is blended so well that it all seems very natural. The story itself is worthy of spending a few hours working your way through it. And I should probably downplay the word "work," since this is the kind of book that once you pick it up you're likely not to put it down until you're reached the end.

Expectations can be a hindrance at times. It's good to expect a certain level of quality and consistency but it's bad when that expectation so blinds us that we are unable to see creativity. On the other hand it's important to have guides as to where we want to go, fictionally speaking of course, so we don't just wander blindly on the book-buying path. I'm aware of this when I choose books that I think I'll want to review. And it's nowhere more present when I've got to choose between an established author and a new writer. It's particularly dicey when the established author is one I like.

**Probability Moon**, Nancy Kress, Tor, ISBN 0-312-87406-5, \$23.95, (\$34.95 Canada), 334 pgs.

Nancy Kress has written some of the hardest SF ever produced. She's tackled the big 'what-if's' without hesitation and with a style and expertise to put others to shame.

That she's done all of this without giving up character, plot, and story is simply extraordinary. So, how do you judge her work? Do you compare it simply to what has come before or do you



compare it to contemporary offerings? I posit these thoughts because I started reading *Probability Moon* with great expectations. The novel is set in the near future where mankind has spread among the stars mostly due to the remnants of ancient alien technology that allows travel between spaces almost instantly. Mankind is at war with an alien species who also uses the ancient technology. Mankind is losing. Mankind has also just stumbled onto a new system that contains one of the ancient alien artifacts. The system also contains a planet with a humanoid race that somehow always manages to unanimously settle on the what the truth is. Thus is the stage set for all kinds of conflicts as the humans attempt to figure out the artifact and the humanoids and the humanoids try to figure out whether the humans should live or die. And then the aliens with whom the humans are warring show up.

Given all of the above, you would think this to be the ideal Nancy Kress novel. Hell, you would almost consider it the perfect novel, period. Well, somewhere along the way Kress lost the plot and the novel just sort of wanders from place to place and from character to character until we reach the most unsatisfying end. The writing is excellent, the characters are interesting, and the plot pieces are superb, yet Kress doesn't manage to get them to all come together in a form that makes the book work. Sure, it's very readable, but when I reached the end I wondered exactly why I had spent the time.

These are my opinions and not, necessarily, those of the editorial staff. The editorial staff have enough of their own opinions, especially Ed, with which to get into trouble. No one paid me to write any of these reviews, except for the editor of course, and he doesn't pay me enough. I do get all this stuff more or less for free from the publishers but it's a heavy burden that comes with guilt and responsibility. Speaking of such, if you wish to thrust free copies at me you can send them to Steve Sawicki, P. O. Box 341, Watertown, CT, 06795-0341. Sending

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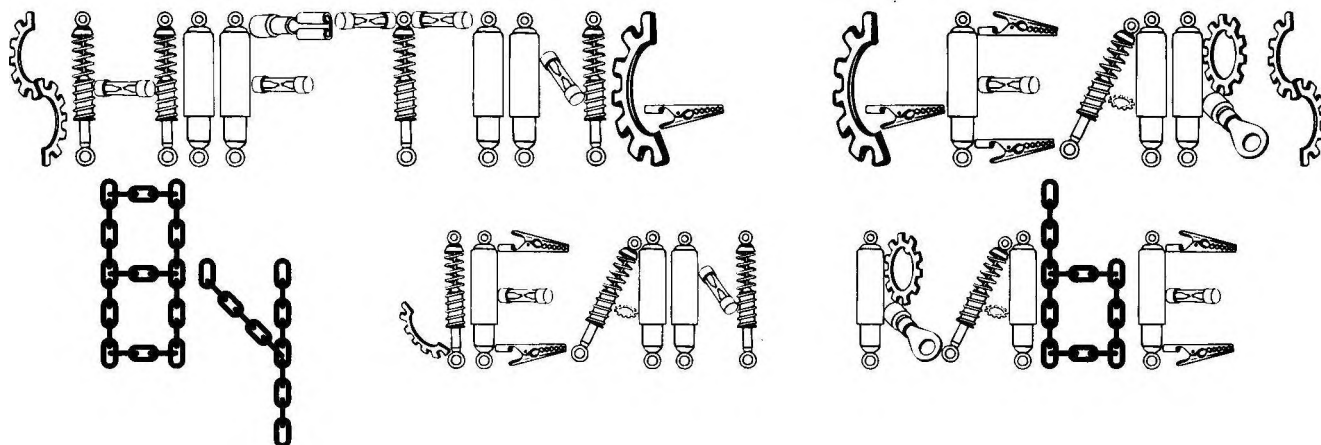
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Jean Rabe has written seven *Dragonlance* novels, several epic fantasies for TSR, and many of these works have been Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, Locus, and Barnes & Noble bestsellers. Her short fiction has appeared in over 20 professional anthologies including *Catch the Day*, *Tavern Tales*, and *Nothing Newsworthy*. She hails from Burlington, WI.



“Lovely planet they sent us to, El-Tee. Pos’tively rustic. Might go so far as to call it a Class-A ball-o-dirt.”

The Marine Lieutenant scowled at his second-in-command, a gawky Texan who looked sixteen because of his boyish face, but whose records proved him almost twice that. “A little dirt never hurt anyone, Marsh. ‘Sides, we won’t be here long. We cut through that gap an’ surprise the Dakfars on the other side. There aren’t many of them according to Intel’s spies. This’ll be easy.”

“Easy,” Marsh sarcastically repeated, wrapping the word around his tongue and using his practiced Western drawl. “Easy. Easy.”

“We free the miners,” the Lieutenant continued, “then it’s leave time for all of us back on Earth.”

“Nothing’s ever easy out here.” Marsh squatted and studied something on the ground, a bootprint that didn’t match his unit’s footgear. His dark eyes followed the tracks. “Lone man,” he whispered. “Maybe a pirate scout. Maybe a miner passing through. Can’t tell how long ago.” His gloved hand traced the print, then he rose and reached for the pulse-carbine slung over his narrow back. “Wish we never tried to settle in this part of space. Wish we hadn’t plopped miners here. Straight in the path of the Dakfars. I hate this dust.” He drew his lips into a thin line and eyed the rest of the Marine force—one hundred and twenty recruits shipped out from basic training. Dreamy-eyed freedom fighters bent on making the central quadrant into Earth territories, Marsh thought.

Marsh let out a long sigh, which sounded like dry leaves shushing across the ground. He had resigned himself to the mission, was actually looking forward to it in a way, a fight to shake his boredom. “Couple dozen Dakfars. Slimy, greedy pirates. Too bad there aren’t more, eh El-Tee? If I gotta shoot somebody, it might as well be Dakfars.” He worked a kink out of his neck and met his commander’s gaze. “Let me take point.”

The lieutenant nodded, and Marsh scuttled silently ahead. The rest of the Marines trailed several dozen meters behind. As the stars winked into view, the men quietly made their way toward a gap in Torrant IV’s iron-rich hills.

Marsh sneezed. “I really hate all this dust,” he cursed, as he ran a spindly finger across the carbine’s trigger. “Almost as much as I hate Dakfars.” He reached the far end of the gap and glanced across an uneven arid field. “I could take them all out by myself without a bother. Add a medal to my collection. To the heart-o-the-sun with pris’ners. And then leave time in Dallas with . . .” His breath caught in his throat

and his legs locked in place as he spotted something at the edge of his vision. The dust swirled around him as his comrades caught up.

“It’s all this dust!” the thickset spacer groaned. He nudged the robot forward and slammed the shop door shut behind him. “Dust ‘n sand. Every time I stay on Janu for more’n a few days the stuff gets in my bot’s joints. Makes it act up or shut down or not hear right to translate.”

The shop consisted of one large room, which when it was built would have been called spacious. Now it seemed small and crowded. The walls were lined with robots. Like soldiers, a few dozen vaguely human in appearance stood in a row, their silver, gold, brass, blue, and bronze metal plating gleaming in the light that spilled through a grime-streaked window.

Nearby were several squat constructs resembling barrels and columns, some with spider-like appendages, others with tubes, wires, and paddles sticking out of them. Robots with four and six legs, some with multiple heads, were arranged on the floor. Handheld robots in the shape of spheres and blocks hung from the ceiling, all blinking and whirring like dancehall decorations.

There were also mining robots with shovels attached, companion robots built to mimic Earth dogs and cats, domestic units with vacuum cleaners in their chests and hoses for arms, and entertainment robots that played all manner of music and could catch the signals of any planet-based vid station—while serving cocktails and appetizers. Behind the counter were shelves upon shelves filled with metal legs, arms, wheels, treads, spools of wire, circuits, chips, and hundreds of small tools. And behind that was a metal-beaded curtain through which shuffled the proprietor.

The spacer cleared his throat and scratched at the stubble on his chin. “Can you do somethin’ ’bout this bot, mister . . .?”

“Amalk,” the old man replied. He had never been a tall man, but age had stooped his shoulders, making him look small next to his burly customer. His skin was wrinkled and the shade of an egg shell, and his hair was smoke-gray and wispy like spider webs. The old man’s eyes were his one dark feature. They were intense and alive, and they carefully regarded the spacer’s sand-pitted robot, a silvery model with the vague form of a human. It looked in better shape than its ragged owner.

"You shouldn't leave him outside on Janu," Amalk suggested. "Janu's dust wouldn't be a problem for him if you kept him on your ship while you're wandering."

"Can't keep it on my ship. I need it nearby 'n case I come across some foreigner I wanna talk to. For business. It translates for me."

Amalk appreciatively ran his doughy fingers over the robot's arm. "An interpreter robot," he said. There was a hint of admiration in his thin voice.

"Yeah," the spacer returned. "A bot with lots o' languages floatin' around inside its metal head. It helps me with business."

"And you conduct your business out on the street? In the open where the dust always blows?"

The spacer ran his thick hand over the top of his head, smoothing his straggly hair. "Sometimes. 'N' sometimes in the bar. Well, a lot o' the times in the bar. But the 'tender . . . well, he won't let me take it inside. 'Only Humans,' the sign says. The 'tender don't like aliens or artificial-intelligent types. Says they make him uneasy. So I keep my bot just outside the front door. Just outside's the next best thing."

The robot engineer glided closer and ran his age-spotted hands over the silver's worn face. It was a kind gesture that was lost on the spacer. "You're in need of a good cleaning, my new friend," Amalk said softly. "Hammer out a few of these dents and give you a shiny finish. Ah, you'll gleam like distant Sol."

"Huh?"

Amalk straightened. "I said fixing him shouldn't be too much of a problem. It looks like his light-receptors are damaged."

The spacer raised an eyebrow and his lips parted in an unspoken question.

"Light-receptors," Amalk explained. "Your robot's eyes, the minute electronic devices that snag the light rays—natural and manufactured—and convert them into signals that are processed by the secondary computer at the base of his head. The computer essentially translates those signals into images so he can see. It all operates on the same principle as human eyes, probably a little better. He'll never need ocular implants as he gets older. In any event, the fittings are cracked. Dust got inside and choked the workings."

"Hate all this dust," the spacer grumbled.

Amalk's eyes narrowed and he returned his attention to the robot. "Hmn. Not just the fittings. You have some other problems, too, don't you fellow?"

"What's that noise?" the spacer cut in. "That squawky stuff?"

"It's your interpreter. He's talking to me."

"I can't understand it. The fuzz. Like insects buzzing. Is somethin' wrong with its . . . vocabulator?" The spacer puffed out his chest, pleased that he'd spewed out what he considered a highly technical term.

Amalk cocked his head. "Do you mean it's speech-vocalizer?"

"Yeah." He deflated a bit. "Vocalizer. That's what I meant. Is it broken, too? Is that why I hear fuzz?"

"It's not fuzz," the old engineer muttered, sadly shaking his head. "It's language."

"Not one I understand."

"Few do."

But Amalk was one of those few. What sounded like insects buzzing around the cramped shop's interior was a specialized program language created more than a century ago on Earth and refined as man spread out into the galaxy and built an increasing number of robots to help his exploration efforts. Robots often used the program language to communicate among themselves and to computers. It was largely

unintelligible to humans. Amalk buzzed back fluently—questions upon questions tumbling from his lips. And the robot quickly provided answers.

"So you travel a lot, I imagine, being a pilot," Amalk said, finally returning his attention to the man.

"Yeah. Got my own ship. I haul stuff for people."

"Get to see much of the Eight Quadrants?"

"Yeah. I get around."

"Ever travel in Dakfar territory?" Amalk popped the chestplate off the robot and peered inside.

"Yeah. Sometimes. Not that it's any of your business, though."

"I'd bet that's dangerous. The Dakfars keep stretching their lines toward Earth settlements. Dakfar gun-shuttles flitting around, maybe even an entire pirate fleet. But then you look like you're not afraid of much."

"I'm not afraid of anythin'." The spacer puffed out his chest again, straining the fastenings on his faded shirt. "Besides, it's not all that dangerous for me. And the Dakfars're not that much different from us. Their skin's just a little thicker, eyes a little bigger, an extra finger or two. They talk funny, but my bot translates it. Anyway, I got some contacts with the Dakfars, do some odd jobs for them now and again. Stay friendly with them and you're better off. Healthier and wealthier. Know what I mean?"

"Indeed I do." Amalk's fingers prodded the robot's wires and circuits.

"Hmmm. What have we here?"

The pilot tried to look over Amalk's shoulder.

"Not good," Amalk tsked. "Not good at all. See this?"

"What? Dust got inside there, too?"

"Some. But that's not the problem. The loco-mechanism. It's wearing out. It will need to be replaced right away. Your robot probably won't be able to take more than another hundred steps or so under his own power before the mechanism burns out and locks his leg joints."

"Good thing I brought it to you to fix then." The pilot looked delighted with himself. "Back at the docking bay, they said you was the best. Also said that you was a bit off your feed .

. . . if you know what I mean. Said you think more of robots than people. Don't matter to me none about your preferences. Me, I'm just passin' through, an' I need you to fix it."

"Him."

"Huh?"

"Fix *him*. Fix your robot interpreter."

"Yeah. Is a loco-mechanism expensive? An' what is it? I know ships 'n' all. Been flyin' my hauler for years. Robotics, well, that's somethin' I never took to studyin'."

"A loco-mechanism is a series of wires and interconnected boards that gives your robot—and most other humanoid robots—signals for moving their arms and legs. In short, it provides them the ability to walk, to move, to copy a human's way of getting around."

"So can you replace this mechanism? Without it costin' me much?"

"Yes. Though not at the moment. I don't have any spares in the shop. At least not for a model like this. I can order one. But it will take some time."

The spacer slammed his fist on the counter. "So whadda I do?" I gotta be leavin' in a day, no more'n two. Got someplace I gotta go. Somethin' to haul. I need it to translate for me."

"Him."

"Yeah. I need *him* to translate for me."

"You could buy another one." Amalk eased away from the spacer's robot and gestured at his shop's walls.





"I kinda like that bronze one with three legs," the pilot said after looking everything over. "Haven't had a bot with three legs before. Does it translate good?"

"He."

"Well, does *he*?"

Amalk nodded. "A good interpreter with all the Earth dialects and with several dozen languages spoken in the central quadrants."

"Dakfar?"

"Yes. He can speak Dakfar. Trade in this robot, which I'll repair when I get the loco-mechanism shipment, and throw in seven hundred."

"Six."

"Six-fifty."

"Deal." The pilot fumbled in his pocket for a counter. The three-legged bronze interpreter cast a last glance at Amalk, looking almost sad. Uttering a string of rushed sentences in a program language, he followed his new owner down the street.

"Is the man gone?" This from an outmoded mining robot.

"The ignoramus," a partially-repaired chef robot retorted. "I've known smarter vermin-catchers."

"He is heading toward the docking bay," a gold and black interpreter said. He was craning his shiny neck as far as it would go and leaning away from the wall for a better view of the departing customer. "There. Out of sight. Fortunate riddance."

The other robots moved away from the wall and started chatting to themselves and Amalk. Some were incapable of human speech and simply chirped and hooted and hummed. The chef-robot ran through the ingredients it needed from the commons for Amalk's dinner.

"Fortunate riddance to that customer," the gold and black interpreter repeated. "This planet will be better for his departure."

Amalk quietly regarded his chattering metal friends.

"Oh, to be rid of him finally! Bad loco-mechanism indeed! I have no such thing!" the silver sand-pitted robot said. "I had quite my fill of working for that boorish man. Occasional dealings with Dakfars, he claims! Hah! He works for the pirates all the time, and he is leaving now for a rendezvous with a Dakfar captain. They use him, though he does not realize it. He does not see how truly evil the Dakfars are. Some engineer you are, old one. Bad loco-mechanism indeed!"

"I know there's nothing really wrong with you," Amalk said. "Except for the dust."

"Then why . . ."

"Because I *am* very bright," the old repairman returned. "It's a long story, my new friend. You see . . ."

"Company!" the outmoded mining robot announced.

The gold and black interpreter leaned back against the wall, and his fellows quickly joined him. They pretended to shut themselves off. The handheld units dangling from the ceiling fell silent.

A soft buzz cut through the air as the door opened. Amalk watched a pair of dust-covered grifters trundle inside. They were leading a quartet of battle-damaged road maintenance robots, one of which was pulling a one-legged black robot that looked most intriguing.

"What will you give us for these?" the taller of the two hooded figures began. "Know they're damaged, but figure you can at least get some parts off 'em."

No questions were asked about where the grifters acquired the robots. A deal was quickly struck, and Amalk passed over a counter, smiling politely as they left.

"Appears to be laser fire scarring. On all five of them." It was the deep

voice of a domestic unit. He stepped close to Amalk's new acquisitions, and his metal shoulders moved in the approximation of a shudder.

"Perhaps. But the scarring has a feathering at the edges, like from a pulse-weapon," added one of the handheld units that hung from the ceiling. "Note the slice along right wheel-mount. And that is likely what sheered off the leg of the black unit and caused the fatigue on the arm. In fact, I have witnessed . . ."

"I agree," interjected the chef-robot. "A pulse-weapon. Why, when I worked in the kitchens of a deep-mining ship in orbit about Eldan, there was an overweight Canadian who . . ."

"No. Definitely lasers," the mining robot argued. "Laser rifles likely."

"Laser fire!" Marsh yelled. "Rifles! It's a trap! Fall back to the ship!"

The high-pitched whines of laser rifles cut through the air. Dirt showered up where the bolts missed the Marines and instead hit at their feet. Where the bolts didn't miss, the Marines fell, clutching their legs and chests. The scent of burned cloth and flesh was heavy in the air. A dozen men were on the ground, dead or dying in the passing of a heartbeat.

"Fall back! Now!" The lieutenant pressed himself against the side of a hill. He cursed himself for cutting through the gap. It was a perfect site for an ambush, he realized. Only thing was, the Dakfar pirates weren't supposed to know company was coming. Marsh was right. The tracks had belonged to a scout.

"A couple dozen, El-Tee?" Marsh shot as he scrambled toward his commander. "A couple hundred is closer to the truth."

The lieutenant craned his neck forward, straining to look at the top of the hill across from him, eyes stinging from the dust that was flying everywhere. There! Prone, a few dozen Dakfars. He saw the moonlight glinting off their silver helmets. *All armed with laser rifles, looks like, he thought. Probably have pistols for close-in fighting. Probably.* The lieutenant knew his men wouldn't be able to scramble up the hillside quick enough to get close and find out. Must be an equal number of Dakfars on the hill above him. A lot more than the Marine Intel report said there would be.

"Can't fall back!" came a cry from somewhere behind the lieutenant. "Coming in the gap behind us, boxing us in!"

"How many?" the lieutenant shouted.

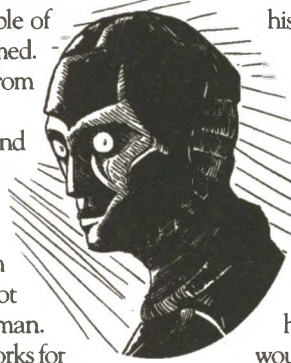
"Eighty, best guess! Maybe more!" came the hoarse reply. "Hard to tell. The dust's so thick!"

"Swarming us from the base up ahead! Coming at us on mining rovers!" Marsh hollered to the lieutenant. "I'd say Intel's spies were wrong, El-Tee. I'd say the Dakfar pirates are gonna have us for dinner!"

"No!" the lieutenant screamed. "We're not going down tonight!" He darted away from the slope and hit the ground, rolling and dodging laser fire. He paused only to take a couple of shots at the silver helmet peering over the hilltop, then he kept rolling, not bothering to see if he had hit the pirate. *Have to get a look at the other side of the hill, he thought. Just to be sure. Maybe we could charge up that hill, circle round, get back to the ship. Get out of here. Come back with a bigger force to rescue the miners. Maybe . . .*

The keen whine of a tripod-mounted laser-cannon cut through the din. A knifing pain shot up the lieutenant's right leg and into his stomach. Then the lieutenant felt nothing, couldn't move. *Dying, he thought, probably lasered my leg off. Can't feel, can't hardly swallow. So cold.* "Marsh! Your command now! Get the men out of here!"

"Fall back!" Marsh hollered. "It's suicide heading toward their base." He slung his pulse-carbine over his back and scuttled toward the bulk of his men. He leapt over the body of the lieutenant, registered that at





least a third of his force was littering the dusty ground. *Should have brought more men, more ships. But this was supposed to be a small operation. Where did all the pirates come from?*

Just ahead to his left, three Marines were squeezed together in a niche under a rocky overhang. They were taking turns poking their heads out and shooting at the silver helmets on the opposite ridge.

"Too many of them!" Marsh called as he scampered toward the trio. "Fighting retreat!" He paused when he reached the overhang, slung his carbine off his back again and took aim at a Dakfar descending the opposite slope. His finger pumped the trigger, sending light-blue bolts of energy *kzinging* off the dirt and rocks, finally finding a mark on the enemy's torso. The pirate fell. But there were more coming over the ridge now. "Leave me one of your carbines!" Marsh barked. The Marines complied, then took off running.

"Fall back!" Marsh shouted at more soldiers, as he wedged himself into the niche. He hunkered as close to the ground as he could, and his fingers flew over his own carbine, tugging at the stock, opening the compartment where the energy cells that powered the gun were held, yanking the cells out. He grabbed his spare energy cells from his belt and held them together. Then he fumbled with the carbine strap, used it to bind the cells tight. He grimaced when he saw a half-dozen more of his men fall to enemy laser fire.

"See how you like this," he cursed softly. He heaved the bundled cell pack toward the slope the pirates were climbing down, picked up the borrowed carbine, and fired at the bundle.

An explosion rocked the gap. Dirt and gravel showered the pirates and Marsh. Barely over the rumble, the Texan heard the screams of dying Dakfars. He hoisted the carbine and waited, intending to shoot at the first glint of silver he could spot when the dust settled.

"Settled in for the evening, Sir?" the domestic robot flipped up the closed sign on Amalk's shop and glanced around to make sure everything was secure. The only light inside was over a worktable where several tools were carefully laid out. Most of the robots had turned themselves off for the evening, simulating human rest. A few were in the back

room  
polishing  
each  
other.



"No. Far from settled. I'm going to work late tonight."

"On the units the grifters brought in?"

Amalk nodded. "I'm very interested in that one-legged black unit. I think he might indeed be an interpreter. But I cannot locate a speech-vocalizer. Maybe I just don't know where to look."

"A sleek design, Sir. Nothing I have seen before, and I have seen quite a few come through your shop. Either a very new model I have not spotted in the Earth engineering vids or a one-of-a-kind design specially commissioned. I suppose he might also be a very old one, an antique that has been kept in good shape and that somehow found his way out here." The domestic cocked his hammered aluminum head. "Good shape except for the missing leg, of course."

"I'll have to use that one." Amalk pointed to an olive-gray leg hanging behind the counter. "At least until I can fashion one to match the rest of his body."

"I am certain some of us could help. Unfortunately, I cannot. Electronics are beyond me. Perhaps I could polish him."

Amalk didn't reply. He was busy carrying the black robot over to his worktable. With the dust brushed off the casings, the robot looked smooth and glossy, with few sharp angles. Nothing marred its metal surface. The old engineer laid it down almost reverently and stared as his reflection in the chestplate.

"I told the grifters I was only buying you for spare parts. Truly thought so at the time," he said to himself. "But maybe I can get you running. You'd be quite the showpiece. Wonder what languages you know? How many? Wonder where you've been. Who built you? Where is your speech-vocalizer?"

"If you do not need me for anything Sir, I would like to . . ."

Amalk wagged his fingers, dismissing the domestic robot. "Hmm. Maybe I could sell you to a wealthy spacer who collects antique or rare robots. Or to a merchant who travels Dakfar raiding routes. You'd make a magnificent informer." He flipped open the chestplate and began humming. Picking through his tools, Amalk began repairing the robot.

"Definitely fixable," he said after a few hours had passed and a thorough circuit flush and memory wipe was finished. "Not in such bad shape after all. No. Not at all. Language boards intact. Ah, there's your vocalizer. The grifters didn't know what they had. All you need now is a new leg and my deeply-implemented intelligence program. Undetectable, unflushable. Perfect." He continued to hover over the robot.

"No one will ever learn you're working for Marine Intel. Your light-receptors and audio-receptors will absorb all manner of pirate activity, and you'll report to me whenever you're able to sneak away to download information. Why, maybe I'll even be able to sell you directly to a pirate! Shine you up just right to catch his attention."

Amalk grinned. The old engineer had placed nearly two hundred robots with his unique and complex program seeded deep inside them. They had been sending him information on the Dakfars for more than a year, and he relayed it to Marine Intel—which was quick to act on the knowledge.

He oiled the black robot's gears, then carefully polished the metal plates that covered most of the body. "You are a beauty," he whistled softly. The robot's face was well-defined, not unlike the



visage of the chef-robot he'd acquired a few weeks ago. But this one was almost handsome, even by human terms. The brow swept back to form a ridge that looked like the rounded knuckles of a closed fist. "Judging by that overlarge motor-mechanism, I'd say you will be able to move quickly. Oil you enough and you'll be quiet, too. You have some interesting attachments and compartments. I'll look those over in the morning."

Amalk pushed himself away from the workbench and retrieved the olive-gray leg. "Hate to put this on you, but I want you up and walking around. Make you a little lopsided, but just for a couple of days. Some of my fellows here will help me craft a new leg for you, all black and shiny, so well-made that no one but me and you—and my fellows, of course—will know it's not your original. There!" He attached the wires from the gray leg to the robot's hip, oiled the joints, then connected the power unit.

The black robot's eyes glowed white against the inky sockets.

Marsh stared up at the stars, white pinpricks against the inky sky. Most of the dust had settled, revealing that his makeshift bomb had taken out half the opposing slope—and with it quite a few Dakfars. Their armor-clad bodies were scattered amid the downed Marines, arms and legs at odd angles like broken dolls. So many bodies.

The Texan swallowed hard. He'd been in firefights, but not in any with this many casualties. "Back to the ship!" he called to the remaining Marines. "Move your feet or none of us will be making it off this ball-o-dirt!"

There were still several dozen pirates to contend with—easily three times as many as there were Marines still standing. But Marsh trusted that his soldiers were better than the Dakfars. He cocked his head and picked up what sounded like an incessant wail. The mining rovers had reached the far end of the gap. They'd be here in the space of a few heartbeats. The noise was loud, and of varying pitches. Marsh swore under his breath. There were more rovers than he had first guessed.

"Be quick!" he hollered to his men. He squatted amid the bodies between the two hills. He intended to cover the retreating Marines, even though he suspected his heroism would cost him his life. He would take a lot of pirates with him, he knew, and prayed enough soldiers would make it back to the ship so they could get off this rock and report the incident.

"Lying Intel spies," he spat.

Behind him the sound of laser rifles continued. Both sides were firing, he surmised, as the Dakfar rifles had a higher tone to them than the Marines' pulse-carbines. There was another explosion in the distance. Marsh could tell one of his men had fashioned a makeshift bomb out of carbine power cells. Faintly, he heard a victory cry, human. He allowed himself a weak smile.

"Maybe they can make it out of here after all," he whispered. Then the rovers were practically on top of him. "Where did all of these Dakfars come from?" He swiveled his borrowed carbine and began thumbing the trigger. He aimed for the lead rovers' engines, netting two before the Dakfars realized what was happening. The rovers sparked and sputtered and took their hapless riders careening along what was left of the hillside. "Two down, ten to go," he grumbled as he dodged a blast from a rover cannon and saw another vehicle headed straight toward him.

Marsh darted to his right as a cannon blasted the spot he'd been occupying a heartbeat before. He spun about on the balls of his feet, raised his carbine, and felt himself flying forward. A pirate on another rover had passed behind him, ramming the stock of his laser rifle soundly against his skull. The darkness reached up and swallowed him.

"It will be light soon. I need to get some sleep." Amalk backed away from the black robot and ran his fingers through his spider web-fine hair. "Been working on you all night." He glanced toward the shop window, where the pink light of dawn was peeking through the darkness. "Yes, get a couple of hours of rest, then give you a good polishing. Put you on display."

He made room for the black interpreter between the rest of his humanoid robots.

"You can stay up if you like," Amalk said to his new acquisition. "Make yourself at home. Think of a name for yourself." He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "See you after a nap."

The robot's bright white eyes watched Amalk shuffle to the back room. His head swiveled silently this way and that, taking in the stock of robots, noting none were active, not even the domestic. But to be certain . . . The robot glided behind the counter, retrieved a set of thin pliers, and moved from robot to robot, snipping through main power wires that could easily be repaired. Tomorrow.

Finished, it noiselessly moved to the back room, raised its right arm and released a thin laser beam. The old engineer had been pulling down the comforter and was climbing into bed.

"Wha . . ." Amalk fell to his knees and immediately fumbled in his pocket for his only weapon, a small pulsegun he always kept with him in the event someone tried to rob his shop. He tugged it free and gritted his teeth, turned and fired on his new acquisition.

The pulse beam glanced off the black metal and ricocheted harmlessly away. Amalk fired again and again as the robot walked closer.

"Stop," the robot said.

It was the first word Amalk had heard the construct speak.

"Wh-wh-what are you doing?" the startled engineer stammered. "I've done you no harm. And . . ."

"My laser," it said. "I will not kill you with it. There would be too many questions." Its angular head swiveled on its neck, its white eyes locked on the vat in which Amalk's robots were dipped for cleaning. "Yes."

Amalk crawled toward the back door, his movements slow from age and pain. The robot followed, stayed him with a strong metal hand on his bony shoulder. The engineer struggled, but the black construct was incredibly strong and held him fast, then lowered a hand to his other shoulder, picked him up effortlessly.

"Wh-wh-what are you?" Amalk stammered.

"Not something to be put on display and sold as an Intel spy." The robot's eyes glowed like white-hot coals. "I already *am* a spy. And I serve a master far better than you."

"The Dakfar," Amalk said.

The robot cocked its head in affirmation.

"I wiped your memory."

"You thought only a human could create so complex a program, so deep it could not be detected, not be flushed."

"Someone discovered me." Amalk gasped at the realization.

"And is undoing everything you and Intel have done."

The old man sobbed openly. "The Marines. What have I done?"

The robot carried him to the vat, dropped him inside, and held his head above the oily surface for several moments as if it were a bug to be studied. Then it pushed Amalk under. Metal hands held the old man there while he feebly struggled. "The shop's new owner will sell to a different clientele. And it is the Dakfar who will profit from the robot intelligence network this time."

Amalk's struggles stopped, and the robot released the body. It wiped its metal hands on a towel and returned to the shop, finding its place in the line of humanoid robots, where it waited.



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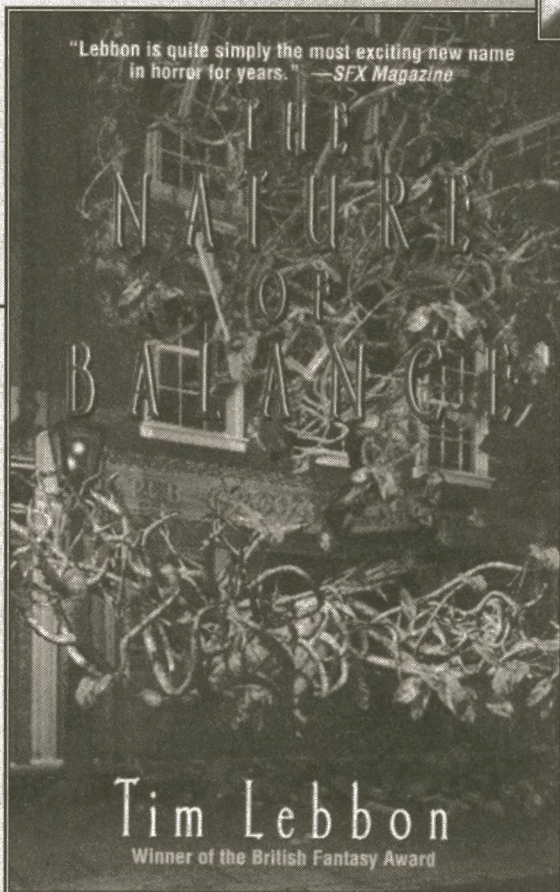
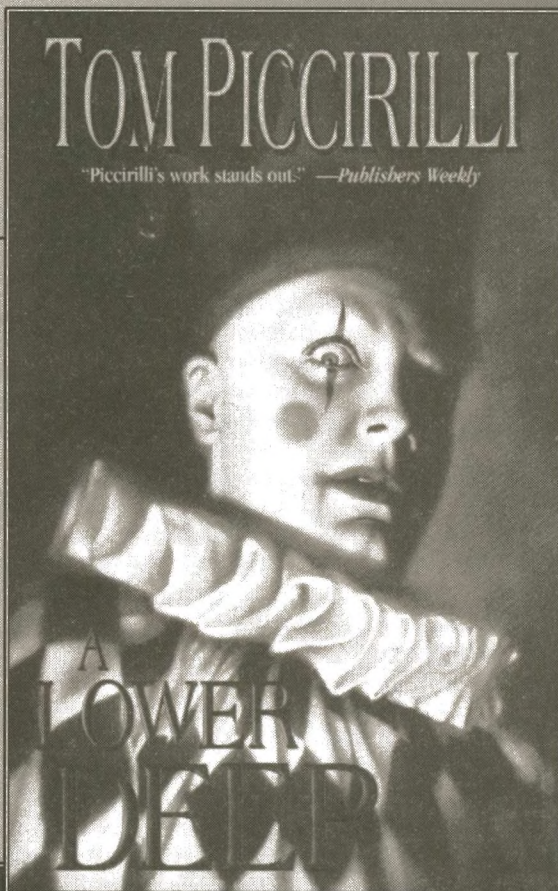
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*Writing a bio for Tom Piccirilli is like writing a biography of my brother. If you're reading this and you don't know who Tom is, here it is again: Tom was an associate editor at Pirate Writings/Fantastic for five years. He has written numerous books including; Dark Father, The Dead Past, Shards, Pentacle, Sorrow's Crown, and the Stoker Award nominated Hexes. I recently purchased a 33,000 word novella from Tom entitled "Gravesend," which will appear in Fantastic in two parts in the next year.*

# Come Back To Tell You All

## By Tom Piccirilli

Revelation and providence in the swollen black tongues streaming in the wind.

Nearly a dozen strung-up bodies hung dangling from the high pine branches, swaying in slow circles. Arms and necks flopped and twitched as the ropes softly creaked. Raynes dismounted and walked alongside his horse so he wouldn't get kicked in the face, doing his best not to bite through his own tongue. Petticoats flapped loudly like the clapping of hands. The roan snorted at the fetid stink but kept heading forward, with all the bloody feet brushing against the rifle boot and pommel of Raynes' saddle.

Dawg stopped and sat panting in the middle of the trail, head bobbing back and forth as he followed the jerking movements of the murdered. Corpses grinned and mouthed silent words, sneering, some of them gagging or trying to laugh. Men shrugged and ladies curtsied. A girl with eyes so blue that even the moonlight brought the color out fluttered her arms as if she might fly free and finally get on to heaven. Others wanted to go home and get some sleep, or kill their spouses and children. Whatever it took to ease the bitter pain of being dead.

Raynes champed his jaws so tightly that his back teeth nearly buckled. He drew his Colt .45 Peacemaker with the cutaway trigger guard and listened to the shrieks echoing in the hills, coming from the madhouse beyond the ridge. Dawg scratched in the dirt with a paw, etching odd symbols and growling softly. After a minute the hanged began to grow calm, and a few of them held out crooked fingers and pointed towards town, urging Raynes on.

Dawg had his own question and asked why Elijah had strung them up.

Raynes said, "I figure it's because he's getting a handle on how such things are done in these parts."

Dawg said it was getting worse, with souls unable to make it out of the rotting flesh or just barely making it above the brim, weighted to the world and playing around.

Re-holstering his gun, Raynes looked around. This was just a mining settlement with a few shacks and a lot of tents on the edge of town. Food had been scattered and hadn't even had enough time to go bad in this heat. Clumps of meat and cake remained where they'd

dropped. No animals had rutted here, the scavengers and vultures staying clear of the area.

It had been a church social gathering. The chapel was the size of a small cabin, made mostly out of stone they'd cleared from the hill. It had been set afire but hadn't burned all that well. The front door hung wide, scorched but still clapping open and shut. Dawg told him there was no point in going inside, but Raynes felt the need.

Members of the congregation lay strewn across the floor, shot and knifed, ribs opened, intestines hauled all over the damn place. The cross lay toppled. Raven shit dappled the rafters and clothes of the kids. Two girls had been carefully decapitated, their bodies left upon the front pew and heads in the back of the room, eyes full of sorrow, facing one another with their lips nearly touching. Ghosts flickered and crowded at the windows, tapping out rhythmic pleas. Dawg clicked his nails across the stone in answer, throwing sparks. A saber had been used to slice through the necks cleanly with one stroke.

Elijah'd had a lot of practice. Dawg reminded him that many of the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal had been only boys.

"Children," Raynes said. "The holy man's on a mission." Ascetics and zealots, that's all he ever faced. Where were the penitents?

Dawg agreed and mentioned how Elijah was singularly obsessed, and blessed.

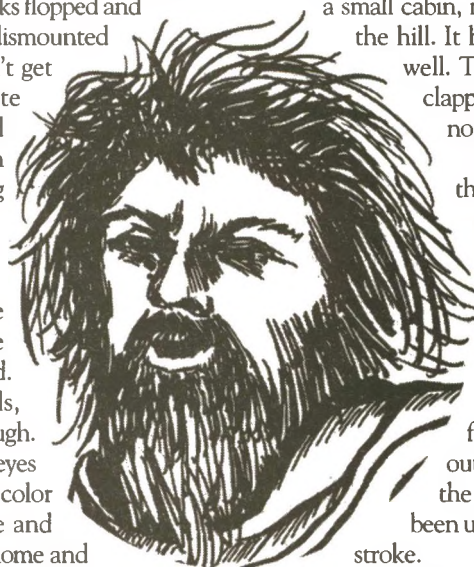
"He's as damned as the rest of us, the fool." A coarse stench wafted by beneath the blood, full of salt and thrashing. Raynes thought he smelled sex. "Did he rape the girls?"

Reluctantly, Dawg skulked about the corpses and sniffed. He said no, nothing like that, Elijah knew he was doing right killing like this, but he'd never violate them in such a manner, and Raynes ought to know that.

"I suppose I do, but don't sound so hurt by my asking." He got back in the saddle, rolled himself a cigarette and lit a match. "How far ahead is he?"

Dawg said he didn't know for sure, maybe six or seven hours. Maybe not even that much.

They left camp, slowly making their way up into the cliffs. They found a shallow stream among the ironwood shrubs and smoke trees,



and Raynes washed off the dust from the alkali flats. When they broke over the last outcropping of sandstone the town came into view. On the wind, they heard the Word.

First the name of Yahweh, grunted in disgust or humility, followed by that of Baal, with a tinge of bliss. Dawg stopped short and let out a whine. Raynes nearly did the same. A storm approached, stirring up a thrum of foreboding and clashing patterns of energy in the air.

Dawg gave ear for other utterances in a different language. Raynes listened too but wasn't as old, and couldn't be sure of what was being said. History made itself known. A harbinger breeze grated against his hackles, and he wondered what new turn of events was about to develop. They continued down the hill and drifted around the outskirts of town, stopping in front of the madhouse.

Dawg sat and contemplated, cocking his head left and right. Insane titters floated down but Raynes didn't hear the Word repeated.

Providence never brought you very far out of hell. Guards sat in the doorway grinning, drinking whiskey and playing cards. Screams stuck to them like grease. Dawg's tongue unfurled and he panted heavily in the burning night, flies buzzing on his tail.

Pandemonium. Like coming home to a hateful family, where disease grew strong in every room. Raynes had been locked away inside asylums in more countries than he would ever dare try to remember. Bedlam. The guards didn't vary much; they all had the same meanness to them, the identical stink of cruelty.

"Could he have been captured?"

Dawg told him no.

Moonlight glazed the chipped, unpainted wood and black iron of the building. Raynes knew it was a stupid question, but he'd just been thinking out loud. This could only start and end in one way, but he still felt the need to make it work out differently. He fought down the madhouse memories as he approached, knowing what went on up there. He got off his roan and didn't bother to tie it at the hitching post. On the other side of town songs and laughter from the saloons wavered in the darkness.

He glanced up at the barred windows above, watching the twitching silhouettes. He searched for the face of whoever had said the Word. A woman mewled, and Dawg grumbled, knowing what was coming.

The guards continued playing poker in the doorway, casually glancing at Raynes but turning in their seats to show their clubs and pistols. When he stood only a few feet away, just inside the ring of lamplight, they put down their cards and stared.

It unfolded in his mind seconds before occurring as he charted each movement perfectly, waiting for the world to catch up. The meanest one would leap first, as they forever would and always did. Hurry now. Let's get it going. Vague and incomplete faces peered from the creases of the guards' dirty clothes, some knowing his name.

See, here it is. The ugliest one jumped up, a whip coiled on his belt. A hard two hundred pounds, clearing six four, with a few scattered brown teeth almost hidden inside the overgrowth of steel-gray beard. He had praying people in his hair. Pale fingers beckoned. He had a patch over his left eye and Raynes could imagine how they called him something precious like One-Eyed Jack. Why were these type of men always the keepers of the raving?

Another stood and grinned, hoping for a little excitement. The storm would be hitting any minute, and the night pulsed with heat. Just a kid in his teens, with a puckered scar as long and thick as your thumb jutting from under his chin. His natural hatred clambered all over his features, the lust and need to torture coming through so clearly that Raynes could taste it, gummy as maple syrup.

Dawg said it was a shame Elijah had found the church but hadn't passed this way first.

"If we gave him the time, he'd get these assholes, too. But that won't be necessary."

One-Eyed Jack said, "What's that you say?"

"I wasn't talking to you."

"No?" He let out a bray of laughter, and the others joined him and started to jitter in their seats. "Who then?"

"My dog."

The kid reared back, hooting at the sky. Raynes knew he'd probably gotten the scar doing exactly this, throwing his head back and guffawing like an idiot, as someone came in quick and stuck a knife point up through his lower jaw. "That dog right there, you mean? Let me tell you, mister, he's got a powerful stink about him something fierce."

"That's because he's dead."

Three floors above, the woman shrieked, a purple sound full of bruises and ecstasy, and the guards started to laugh. Jack took a step forward and hovered over Raynes, breathing heavily with beer and spit flecked in his mustache.

More electrical friction seared Raynes' eyes. He hoped to make the righteous choice, but he wasn't sure what that might be anymore. Before he could ask to be let upstairs, Jack uncoiled his whip and with a vicious snap let it crack about an inch in front of Raynes' nose. The woman, knowing the depths of hideous devotion, cried out again, screeching, "Baal!"

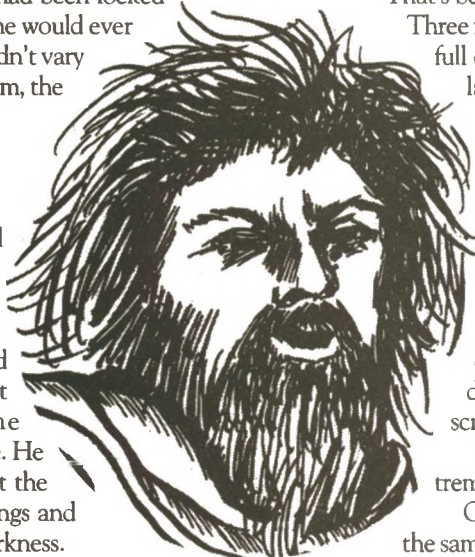
Dawg laid down in the dirt, sneezing and trembling at the scent of flooding sex.

One-Eyed Jack had a fine touch, his smirk about the same color as the leather. The smile broadened until it showed a diseased gum line, and without much care, hardly thinking about it at all, Jack whipped Raynes across the eyes.

Raynes took it because he enjoyed the cutting pain, needing it to remind him of his own humanity. Blood flowed like fiery tears, and he burst out laughing.

It happened like that sometimes, drawing from the endless well of venom. The weight of his burden, corpses wheeling in the wind, with the dignity of all these centuries coming after him—he had to laugh or wish himself back into the cave, behind the rock, and wrapped in the shroud again.

A blazing silkiness spread across his hands, as if every nerve had been lit at once. He knew he had to hold on to something tightly before the smoothness reached his mind.





In a blur of black motion he reached and drew his Colt, but didn't fire. He fingered the trigger and held the pearl grips until his nails began to split. When the blood from his eyes hit his bottom lip he let out another bark of laughter.

Now is when things would change a bit, and his asylum thoughts broke down. The kid with the scar moved next, maybe just standing to run or to plead, maybe going for the left-hand draw. He had on new boots and slipped on the floor, going down to one knee as if bowing.

Actions interlock, one sliding into another. Raynes stretched out with a tender gesture, as if to take the youth under his arm and lift him up, ask him if he wanted to go get a drink and discuss these un-Christian-like ways, they might redeem each other through brotherhood.

Rumbles thrummed overhead, thunder aching in his veins. Raynes swung into the doorway, kept reaching, and pressed the barrel of the gun to the back of the kid's head and shot his brains out through his eye sockets.

"Son of a bitch!" the third guard shouted. "Freddy! He done killed Freddy!"

The kid stayed on his feet another few seconds before collapsing backwards across the poker table. Raynes pressed the Colt forward against Jack's one good eye and shoved hard, dodging as the yolk spurted. Jack squealed and hit a high note from out of a medieval requiem, holding it as grandly as any castrato. Raynes listened and sighed, enjoying the impressive music until it died into a hiss. One-Eyed Jack did a little jig for a second as the mashed eye dribbled down his cheek.

Bedlam called for this. Who would deny it? Raynes pivoted left and yanked Jack along with him, who clawed at his face but remained strangely silent now. Cocking the hammer once more, Raynes shot through Jack's head, and nailed the third guard in the neck. Shards of skull and a lengthy strand of optic nerve smacked the dying man in the chest and spattered against the far wall. Raynes didn't wait for him to fall. He grabbed the keys off the guard's belt as the man chewed air and coughed up thick clots of gurgling blood through the enormous hole in his throat.

Yawning, Dawg got to his feet. Raynes held the ring of keys out to him. "Can you work these in a lock?"

Dawg said he wasn't sure but he could try. "Open every door you can. Let all the inmates out."

Dawg frowned and snorted because some of them were truly deranged, malefactors, murderers.

"If any of them smell of killing, rip their throats out. If you can't bring yourself to do it, let me know and I'll finish it myself."

Lightning ignited the street, outlining the shadows of the hanged that had followed him into town. Dawg had been through a lot and said he could bring himself to do it.

Raynes placed the ring of keys in Dawg's mouth and watched as he

moved off down the corridor. More shouting above, broken up with the chiming of chains. Raynes recognized the tiny voice and thought about leaving. He cleaned his gun barrel on Jack's vest. Another wave of carnal musk drenched the halls. Giggles erupted from the cells. He could still hear the dwarf two floors above screaming, part of the time begging forgiveness and then braying like an ass. Turning, Raynes found the stairwell and rushed upstairs, wondering if he was just wasting his time and condemning himself even further.

The third floor ward housed another ten inmates, most of them men who lay shackled and staring blindly at the ceiling, leering. Some were trying to work the leather straps down far enough so they could unfasten their own britches. Others babbled and held intense conversations with all the furious dead packing the room.

Raynes walked in on the continuing cries of orgasm, agitated shadows wreathing a bed full of wet whispers and ages of reproach.

Jez had enjoyed more than one man at a time before, covered in bath oils from the corners of Egypt and Assyria, wearing silks and jewelry coveted by the Suleimans. With slave boys waiting to satisfy her every wish before being led off to have their throats cut and bowels fried, served with spices to royalty.

Now three grunting, near-toothless guards sneered and grappled with her: one between her legs, slick with her perfume and sweat, another naked and holding her arms to the corners of the rusting bed frame, a quivering third leaping up and down so excitedly that he couldn't get his pants off all the way.

A girl of about seventeen cowered on her stained mattress beside them, sobbing into a torn dirty pillow. Her back had been whipped raw, scarred by teeth and knotted cords of hemp. Yellow and black bruises blotted her upper arms and thighs.

These boys had been having a damn fine time of it.

They'd put the dwarf, Ahab, in a little cage next to Jez's bed. He'd been collared and chained, forced to watch the proceedings. Raynes thought this might be justice, or perhaps only more barbarity. The desert could never be left behind. They'd muzzled Ahab with a series of buckles, but he'd managed to work them loose with all his thrashing. His lips bled into his beard and he kept kicking and calling on Baal. His love, if nothing else, seemed pure. He worked himself up into lather watching them go at his woman, but Jez didn't mind at all.

Here was whore, as she'd forever be known. She rouged her high cheekbones and still used kohl on her almond eyes. Raynes swallowed. She laughed and bounced across the mattress nearly dislodging the guard on top of her. He hung on as best he could, looking like he was about to cry for his mama. The one holding her hands finally realized she wasn't fighting him and let her go, puzzled and grimacing. The other tripped over his pants and nearly kneecapped himself against the hard wood floor.

More spirits poured in, the hanged child with the blue eyes startled by the scene and nervously crimping her slashed skirt. The guy on the floor with his pants around his ankles looked up at Raynes and said, "Who are you?"

"Lazarus."

"Hell does that mean, you sumbitch?"

"You should know." He had more patience than almost anyone, but it was finally running thin. The guard scabbled around on the floor, searching for his gun, unaware that he'd draped his holster on





the bed post behind him. Raynes drew, dropped his wrist, fired twice and shot the bastard's pecker up high over the man's own shoulder. It spun like a pinwheel, throwing spatters of blood into the guard's face. He reached for it, already dying, but couldn't quite catch the meat before it landed with a thump like raw steak hitting a skillet.

Jez noticed the activity and met Raynes' eyes. She didn't know his name, but knew him well enough. "Wait, damn you, I ain't through yet!"

"You've been through a good many year, Jezebel, you just haven't noticed yet."

That might also be true of himself. The doorway filled behind him with noise, titters and snarls and baby gurgles. He liked the sudden look of revulsion and despair in the faces of the remaining two guards. He didn't need to turn around to recognize the damned, the spit-slicked chins and rolling eyes, nervous tics contorting facial muscles, this gibbering and all the awkward gaits. He'd lived among them countless times before, in greater anguish and misery than most, much worse off than the very worst. Shrieking the secret names of God and tearing at his own eyes, trying to get back down into the soothing, tranquil darkness.

Dawg appeared at his side, grumbling that some of the insane smelled of murder but he couldn't kill them, he was sorry, and they were right behind Raynes now, foaming, and about to jump him.

"Good, I can put them to use first."

Raynes grabbed the bucking guard by the hair and hauled him, still spasming, off Jezebel and threw him back into the maelstrom descending upon the room. The stench of slaughter grew stronger. Shuffling killers snarled and fell on the naked man, tearing at his ears, eyelids, groin, and flaying him with their gnarled fingernails. Jez let out a disgruntled yawp. More chortles now, with sniggers and seething moans coming from all directions, from both the living and the dead.

The last guard flung himself sideways to the floor and tried to crawl off under the beds. Raynes didn't much care if the guy made it out or not, he'd already gotten what he'd come for.

Jezebel held her hands out, fingers working as if plying threads of souls and craving. Whore and whoremonger. Raynes took a step. Whining, Dawg shoved past him, leaped onto the bed and clambered forward over the sheets, sniffing. He bared his fangs and didn't seem to know what to do next, whether to enter her or kill her.

"Keep this damn thing away from me!"

"Still a little nervous around dogs, Jez?"

"Whoever you are, get it off!"

She'd been fed to dogs once, and that's something you never forget. Raynes said quietly, trying to reach through the upheaval of Dawg's drawn-up needs, "Listen, we don't have time for this."

Dawg agreed but couldn't make it off the bed on his own, hooked there by his heritage. Raynes shoved Dawg aside, grabbed Jez by the arm and yanked her up into his

arms. It wasn't until he saw her now, without man or beast atop her, that he understood Dawg's hunger.

Blood ran between her legs and she smiled warmly, painted eyes closed, still wanting more. Raynes felt a flush of heat in his belly and staggered back a step, gritting his teeth. Jez laughed wildly, knowing everything without even needing to look.

Twisting black hair fell in folds around her face and bare breasts the way his duster swung about his waist, hiding nothing at all. The dwarf rattled his chains and rapped the bars, but it sounded no different than church bells ringing, the hammering of his own heart, the cocking of his pistols.

She sat up and brought her dyed lips closer, that ludicrously beautiful face only an inch away from his. She smiled, this priestess of Baal, and his body shook as if having nails wrenched out of his flesh.

Jezebel touched him, and he slapped her hard. "Get dressed."

"You bastard. I'll take the dog if I have to."

"Shut up and get your clothes back on. We've got work to do."

King Ahab kept hopping. Raynes said, "Let him out but keep the muzzle on him, I've no need to listen to his bullshit."

"Screw off."

Tiptoeing around the bodies she found her clothes tossed across the room, where the mad helped her retrieve her silken garments and stolen jewelry. The teenage girl followed her around the ward and finally let out Ahab out of his small cage.

Uncoupling his muzzle, the dwarf took it all in stride, waiting for a bullet or to witness another seduction. He had no choice but to suffer the actions of his love, and escort her into every damnation. He asked Raynes, "What do you need us for?"

"I need you to help me talk to a man."

"Who?"

"Elijah."

"No one can explain anything to Elijah, you know that. It's his gift. Besides, why would he listen to us?"

"Because he knows you and you're no threat to him and never have been. He's got nothing to fear from you or your ways."

"Or yours?"

"Not from me either."

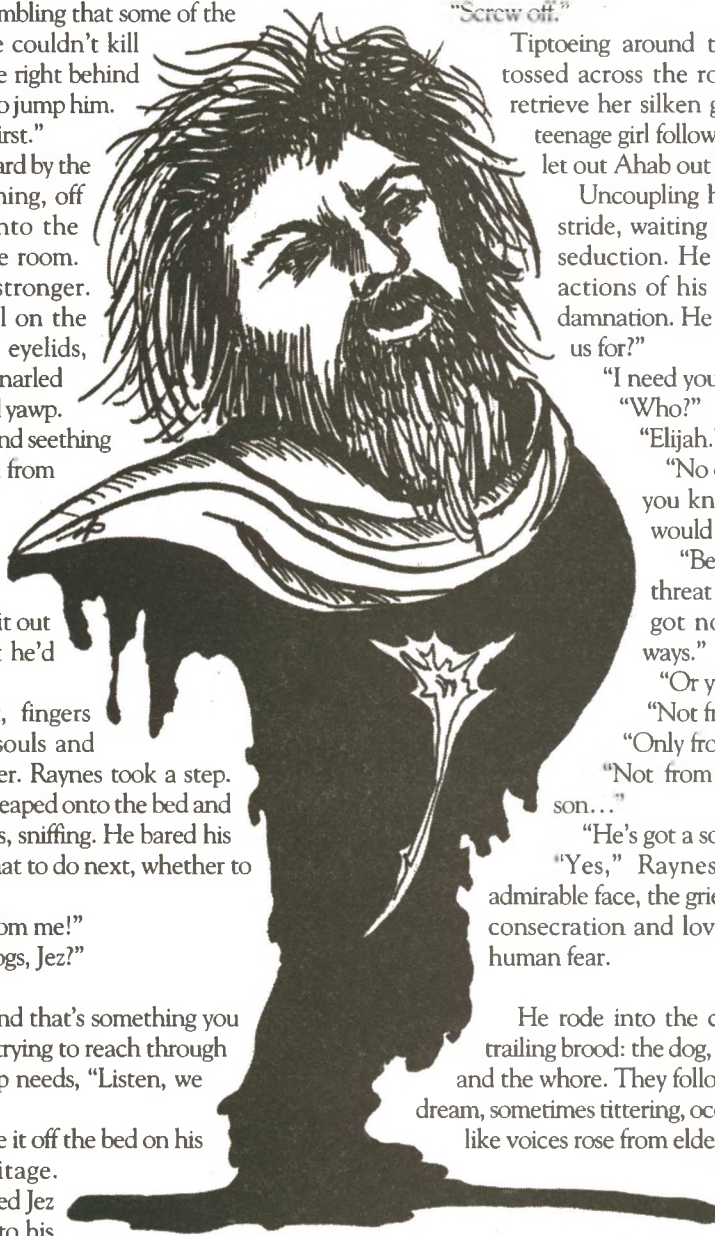
"Only from God?"

"Not from the Father, anyways. As for the son..."

"He's got a son now?"

"Yes," Raynes answered, remembering that admirable face, the grief and torment and forgiveness, the consecration and love, and beneath it all, his endless human fear.

He rode into the center of town, surrounded by his trailing brood: the dog, the demented, the dwarf, the dead, and the whore. They followed him the way fools follow a bad dream, sometimes tittering, occasionally gagging in despair. Child-like voices rose from elderly ladies lagging far behind, calling for their mothers and fathers. Coos and crooning filled the dark, with a strong wind washing the ghosts





of the murdered guards this way and that in the greasewood. Doors slammed and windows shut against the deranged sounds—wheezing and guffawing, the whimpering and the incessant mad prattling.

With long ribbons of skin still clinging under their nails, the two red-lipped killers Dawg hadn't been able to finish started to sneak off down an alleyway. Viscera clung to their necks and garments, hair streaked with piss from the terrified man they'd skinned.

Raynes let out a breath and said, "Forgot about you boys." He spurred his horse to cut them off and shot both of them in their mouths.

Oddly, for all he'd seen and learned and become, Dawg despised the cold slaying of even such maniacs as these. His great black head dipped in prayer, and he gave Raynes a nasty sidelong glance. There were lessons learned that should never be forgotten. Raynes understood that but could only carry on with his mission and his burden, despite not understanding why. And Dawg could only do the same.

"You think he'll sleep after what he did at the church? Can we catch him unaware?"

Dawg was fairly certain Elijah would spend most of the night in prayer before turning his wrath on the rest of the town at first light.

"Less than an hour before dawn. We need to get moving."

"Of course, he'll pray," King Ahab said, forced to skip along to keep up with the legion. "That's all he does when he's not killing someone. He's the perfect supplicant."

Jezebel's perfume made the spirits of the churchgoing men even more restless, and their dead wives berated them for it. Lunatics shambled along behind, grimacing happily. "Damn it! Do we really need all these idiots around!"

Dying moonlight illuminated specters in the sky, in the dust. When the butchered guards started howling so loudly that the trees shuddered, Dawg rose on his haunches and described sigils in the air with his forepaws. The howling quieted to dull murmurs and groans.

Raynes didn't mind the weird cries of the tribe, but the underlying silence of the town bothered him. He could no longer hear the music and noise from the saloons.

The teenage girl walked beside him on the left, next to Jez. Meekly, she smiled up at Raynes, sweeping dirty brown curls behind her ears. She looked no more deluded than he did most days. A part of his passion tried to rise in him, and he watched as his hand dropped, almost on its own, to reach out for her. He frowned, unsure of his own intentions. She was so thin that he almost didn't feel her, even when his arm was around her waist.

Brilliant flashes of sheet lightning blazed around them. The blue-eyed ghost huddled beside her headless mother. Raynes drew the teenage girl up and sat her in front of him on the saddle. The flimsy asylum rags wafted in the wind. Again his hand moved, and he reflected on what this meant as he pressed his fingers against her pale cheek. She leaned into his palm and he felt the heat of pain, worry and reverie. In this moment he grew closer to her than he had to any woman since his sister Martha. She turned in the saddle to glance up at him without expression, blinked twice, and stared off again. She pointed.

The storm waited for this moment of the ages, all eons beforehand bringing earth to this confrontation, divinity urging every step.

Providence and revelation, set forth in the heavily lined features of an old man.

Hewn of faith. The refiner of silver, the purger of gold, who would turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers.

Elijah, the greatest of prophets, stood as he had always stood, beyond the judgment of man.

He carried the desert with him, that blinding, searing harshness scorched into his hide. You couldn't actually look at him, but only gaze nearby, averting eyes. This was the most redeemed and sanctified The exalted, pure force of will, eminently prized by God. Such glorified self-righteousness made him seem towering though he stooped, shoulders laden with his own grandeur. Vest and coat shined with dried blood, the hat plucked low over his eyes.

White-haired, clean-shaven, teeming with power and epochs. The murdered ran screaming in every direction, as if he might come after them again for praying to the wrong god. They dwindled into shadows, hiding in the stagecoach ruts carved into the baked dirt.

The night cracked from such pressure, and the rain came.

King Ahab, seduced by false prophets, cowered at the roan's flank, ready to make a run for it. Where could he possibly go to hide from his fate? Raynes kicked out and caught the dwarf in the temple, sending him reeling backwards. "Go on. Get over there and talk to him."

"That madman? He'll gun us down!"

"He's lovely," Jez said, her hand slipping over her belly, rubbing, her appetite fired by being this close to such authority. "But cruel and ruthless."

Dawg agreed.

Raynes aimed his Colt at the center of Ahab's forehead. "Not if you convince him you've converted."

"To hell with that! I only pray to Baal!"

"Even now?"

"Especially now, you ass!"

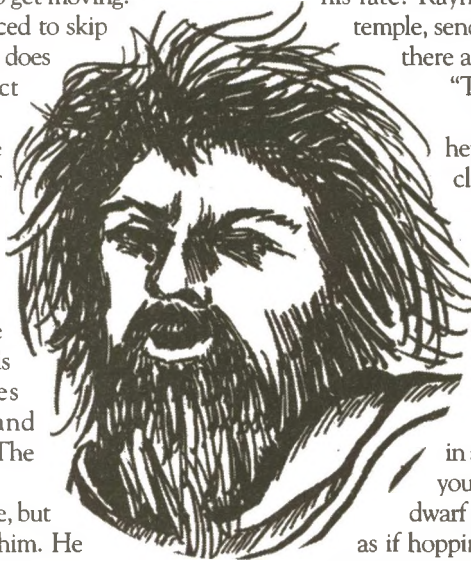
Sometimes, Raynes thought, you saw the ego in a man's god, and you questioned if that's where your own worship went, and all it ever fueled. The dwarf danced around him, occasionally leaping high, as if hopping over the heads of his decapitated priests.

Raynes felt a wave of pity slap against his chest, knowing Ahab was really no more or less cursed than himself, or anybody.

He holstered the gun and watched the dwarf shimmy and gyrate, as Jezebel joined him, the two of them enjoying themselves in their love the way Baal supposedly liked. Ahab eventually stumbled forward, those little legs having already taken too much. He wheeled through puddles and came falling at Jezebel's knees, where she stroked his wet face. The two of them clenched and soon dropped together sobbing.

Raynes let it go, and wandered down the street, followed by legion.

He knew Elijah had not spent the night praying when they passed the livery and the doors hung wide open. Horses and two pack jackasses milled about. Raynes found the sheriff's body in front of the jail, gutted and





decapitated. The lawman's head sat atop a pile of his own internal organs, still looking a bit perplexed but not really angry. It took Raynes a minute to spot the sheriff's ghost. The wraith had recognized the two insane killers twining among the tribe, and went after them again.

Elijah, beyond the judgment of man, turned and watched Raynes approach.

Weariness in the prophet's face fell like Jerusalem's walls before the might of Roman emperors. The anguish in that grimace proved that you could find no peace on either side of doom. He held his saber out and pointed it towards Raynes' heart. "You I don't know."

"We haven't met."

Perhaps the dead prodded them on, or perhaps only the pikes of their destiny pushed them up from their embrace, but Ahab and Jez stepped forward, as if fighting to gain inches beneath the weight of their own sins. Elijah almost appeared pleased to see them again, like meeting up with familiar enemies in a land of strangers. "King Ahab and Jezebel. You're still sweaty. You've always languished in your wickedness."

No real animosity in those words, just the stating of simple human facts.

It took a lot of nerve, but Jezebel managed to smile seductively, her wet hair like bull snakes easing down her shoulders. "At least I had some fun, you miserable old bastard."

He shrugged, but his gaze hardened as he turned back to face Raynes. "Another heathen."

"Not exactly."

Elijah nearly smiled, and the misery in those features would've given Raynes chills, if he weren't already far past all fear. "And what does that mean?"

"It means I serve the Lord."

A glint of hope, with an absurd leer that showed both incisors but no other teeth. "The Father."

"The son."

"He has no son."

"He didn't back when you knew him, before you rode your flaming chariot to the heavens. He does now. You killed these people for nothing."

"For God!"

"They're your brethren. They worship the same god." Irony like this couldn't be lost. If he'd come back on the other side of the globe, in the Levant by the shores of the dead sea, Elijah wouldn't have killed anyone.

"You're a liar."

"You're mixed up. That cross is the sign of the son. This doesn't have anything to do with Baal."

"You say that standing beside those two?"

Good point, actually. Raynes hadn't looked at it like that, from Elijah's lost viewpoint, and commended the Lord for showing such tact and strategy. Perhaps the Almighty knew a thing or two about men after all. Raynes had fallen for the ploy. He'd never be able

to convince the prophet of the truth now.

Scowling, Elijah came back into himself for a minute, the uncertainty in his face such a fascinating but tragic consequence to see. He said, "I'm not sure why I'm here. I haven't been told."

Raynes nodded. "I've doubts about my own cause as well." He didn't want to talk, but couldn't stop. "My own purpose, you see. My own death."

He hadn't done anything himself, but his friend had awoken him millennia ago, and nobody had ever seen fit to let him rest again. Now he had to battle the most holy of prophets, who thought everybody he ran into was a priest of Baal, and took to hacking their heads off as he'd done on Mount Carmel, in the name of the jealous God.

Shimmering black smudges swirled overhead and Raynes spun and nearly fired. Ravens carrying bread flew down and landed near Elijah, the same ones who'd fed him from their beaks when he'd fled into the wilderness. Dawg marched forward, ready to attack the birds if necessary.

"What do you know of death?" the prophet asked. He deserved to be proud, unique in that sanctity. "I alone have ascended bodily to heaven."

"Do you remember any of it?"

Revelation in a brokenhearted admission. Elijah's voice held more sorrow in it than Raynes had ever heard before. "No."

"That makes me pity you more than any other man who's ever lived."

"You...!"

Raynes had walked the earth a long time, having returned alone through the darkness, all because his friend asked him to do so. "And by the blessing of Christ, I've returned."

"There is no Christ upon the world as of yet! I've raised the deceased as well. There is fortune in that."

"I know the story. The infant son of the widow you shackled up with. But there's a difference—"

"No, there's no—"

"You're as much a sinner as any of them, Elijah. Worse, because you've been touched by the divine and forgotten what it is to have a soul."

They each waited for signs, or visions, or a sacred call. They scanned the horizon, searched the lightning for designs and intent, listened for the whisper in the morning. Each man kept turning in full circles looking everywhere, and willed an appearance of the seraphim.

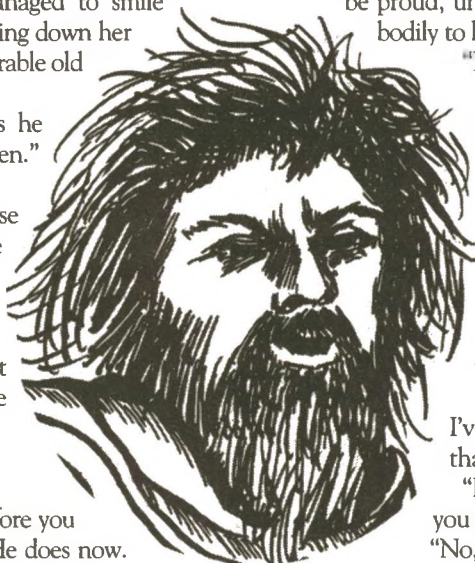
But finally, staring into one another's eyes, they had to admit to being alone.

"Let's finish this now," the prophet said.

"If we can."

Another duel between the damned.

Burning ozone filled the dawn. Roiling black clouds clambered across the sky, and an electrical tension began to rise. Heavy drops of freezing rain spattered and hissed in the burning dust. The dwarf started to dance again, and Jezebel joined him, but kept looking over her shoulder. Raynes felt a deep pull of self-pity wrenching in his chest, wishing he could let loose and leap and laugh, instead of forever having to prove the tenets of his creed.





He reached around and tugged back his duster with his left hand so he could clear leather cleanly with his right. He didn't know why he bothered, and felt ridiculous standing here in the pouring rain.

Belief held sway. Elijah simply dropped to his knees and held his hands out to the storm, raising them higher as if making an offering, the way Abraham had held the body of his son up to the Almighty in sacrifice. Crossing himself, Raynes waited.

This was the easy part. All the talk and compassion and rage had ended, worries and weakness vanished.

You did nothing because there was nothing to be done. You existed only beneath the gaze of your god, and either your conviction was enough now, alone, or it wasn't. Blood of the lamb ran as red as that of the lion.

Elijah stood, raised his saber, and walked forward through the mud.

Realizing it would do no good, but still too much of a mortal to stop himself, Raynes sighted and fired, striking the prophet in the heart. Elijah jerked left and approached more quickly.

Lightning wove across the rooftops and blasted a nearby trough. Boiling water geysered into the street and sent three of the maniacs screeching and running. Some of the others giggled and kicked the sheriff's head back and forth. The teenage girl remained beside Dawg, both of them gawking.

Raynes sighed wearily and fired five more shots into Elijah's chest. The prophet continued coming with his saber high, wielding it in both hands. Ten feet away, now five, growling the secret true names of God and bringing the blade down in a slicing arc that would cleave through a man's neck in one stroke.

Raynes almost let it happen, willing himself behind the boulder again, back into the tomb of darkness and silence. When he shut his eyes the lightning imprinted a cross on his vision.

Perhaps a cross. Perhaps the tablets scarred with commandments, or the Ark, or the blazing swords of the archangels barring the four gates to Eden. The burning bush or the sores of Job, the knife of Barrabas, or merely the laughing countenances of Moloch and Baal, Dagon and the shining golden calf grinning in all its beauty and warm embrace, the clean hands of Pontius Pilate.

For the eternal love of God, Elijah, greatest of prophets, brought

the saber whistling down to cleave another heathen in half, and Raynes turned the other cheek.

The blade passed his ear, scarcely missing his shoulder blade.

Gasping, the prophet spun frantically, slipped in the mud and fell over backwards.

Dawg knew what had to come next. He nudged Jezebel with his snout, urging her further into the street. Wet from rain and sweat, breathing hard from her dancing, but the paint still thick on her face, she took a few faltering steps. Raynes grabbed her by the arm, tore her blouse open, released all that naked beauty, and with a tinge of jealousy shoved her down on top of the prophet.

Aroused spirits wailed, wanting another crack at her. Raynes snarled and said, "Do your thing."

Elijah, who had once beheaded Ahab's four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, and who'd strung up children because they had the misfortune of praying before a crucifix, shrieked when her body touched his. He flapped his arms as if he was on fire.

Eyes opened wide in shock, Jez threw her head back and laughed. You could learn a lot about a man not only by his god, but by his lusts and self-control. Elijah scrambled on his hands and knees slinging clots of earth behind him, trying to get his fists back on the saber, but

Jez sat on his chest. King Ahab guffawed loudly and kept prancing among the lunatics.

Ravens retrieved the soggy bread and flew off to the east. Dawg sauntered over. The cackling brood descended upon the prophet, wanting and needing, matching the music of his cries note by note. Raynes watched them go past one by one—the deranged dead—to fall on the screaming old man in the mud.

Elijah tried to stand, and beckoned in his shame and determination. He cried out in an ancient language, one that Raynes no longer understood.

Without hate, perhaps only with devotion and love, Jezebel and the insane wrapped around the prophet like serpents, and Raynes decided to let it go at that. If any other fighting needed to be done, let it be done between the son and the father.

He turned his back on this town, and walked away. "Who's next?"

Dawg said he wasn't sure, there were plenty of them coming back.

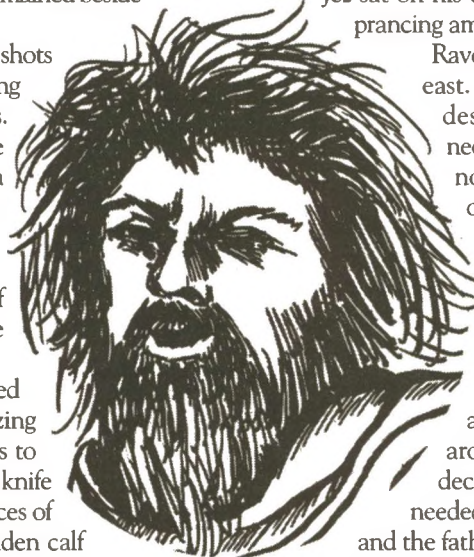
The teenage girl, shivering badly, held her arms out to Raynes, and he covered her with his duster.

He lifted her back into the saddle with him. As they rode on he tried not to moan as she pressed her tongue deep into his ear. Dawg trotted behind, proud of the role he'd played in another holy man's downfall.

Others would be rising soon. Blind Samson. Moses. Jonah, who'd learned nothing in the digestive tract of the behemoth. Maybe they were already here in the west, alive in another desert and burning with the glory of the Father.

Raynes, who'd once been the blissfully sleeping Lazarus, prayed he could show them the way back into the world through the splendor of the bleeding son, and bring everyone again into the imperfect fold of a sweet and sinning humanity.

"To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—"  
—T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*







1001 ESC

Johann Peter



*Sarah A. Hoyt appeared in Pirate Writings way-back-when and recently her stories have come to grace my mailbox again. Her work has appeared in Analog, Weird Tales, Absolute Magnitude, Dreams of Decadence, and her first novel, Ill Met By Moonlight, is out in hardcover from Ace this October. Also, I hear through the grapevine that she just sold her second and third books. I'm sure Sarah will be gracing these pages regularly in the future.*

# The Play and the Thing

By Sarah A. Hoyt

When the guest came in, I had just knelt behind the counter in the lobby to try to fix the log-in computer.

Hearing steps, I dropped the data gems and circuit nodes and stood up, thinking as I did so that I would give the poor tourist the fright of his life, shooting up from my hidden recess like a jack-in-the-box.

But I couldn't tell whether I'd frightened him or not. No earthling could. Though he was mostly humanoid—he had a head, body, two arms, two legs, a trunk—his face looked like a kid's modeling-clay attempt at a human face.

Spheroid, it had two black-button eyes, two holes for a nose, two holes for the ears, a lipless gash for the mouth, and it was light green, the color of leaves in spring. No hair.

It had been a long time since I'd seen an alien in Stratford-upon-Avon.

They had come by the dozen when I was a kid, and my father the proprietor and manager of the Swann-Of-Avon, our then-prosperous hotel.

Bird aliens, reptile aliens, insect aliens, even tall, mobile sentient bushes from Proxima Centaurus, they'd all paraded through Stratford, and I'd seen them all before I was even ten.

They had come and seen the sights, and gone to the Royal Shakespeare Theater, and taken their spaceships home, leaving me to wonder how a hermaphrodite slug from Proxima Centauri could enjoy Romeo and Juliet.

But, little by little, they'd stopped coming, leaving the occasional alien visitor as an oddity.

Still, a guest was a guest, and that too an oddity, these days.

So I smiled wide at modeling-clay man and said, in my best slow-and-carefully-enunciated-voice, "Hello, do you wish to check in?" Of course, I didn't even know if he could hear—though he had those conveniently placed holes on the side of its face, much less that he had a concept of speech—I'd seen aliens communicate through sound, telepathy, sign language, even colored light flashes.

But the gash-mouth opened and closed, forming remarkably clear English, with remarkably little accent. "Yes, I need lodgings."

I wiped my hands on my pants, keeping my smile broad and reassuring.

In every guidebook to the universe, they always mentioned that this referred to the non-aggressive gesture of humans, and I wanted him to know that the messy process was not a form of aggression. Because checking in should have been a matter of his putting his

finger in the hole of the check-in computer, getting assigned a room, and given directions to the room.

But that had been back when the check-in computer worked, months ago.

I grabbed a pad from my littered counter, and thumbed it on, then onto a new file—and away from the letter my sister had sent me from Proxima 20, telling me she'd found the land of milk-and-honey. "What is your name, please?" I asked.

He looked puzzled, giving the impression of raising the eyebrows he didn't have. "I am—" The gash-mouth opened and closed, closed and opened, in silence. "I am he-who-comes-to-see," he said, at last.

All right. Was that their word for "tourist"? Whatever. I scribbled the name down on the pad, and a room assignment, room three.

Fortunately, I didn't need the assistance of the check-in computer to tell me what rooms were empty. All of them were, except the little apartment at the back of the ground floor, where I lived in spacious solitude.

I assigned he-who-comes a room on the ground floor, too, because the lev-it, like the computer, had given up the ghost some months ago and I wasn't even sure how the top three floors fared, or if they were still livable. The autumn rains, last month, had leaked into rooms one and two, which led me to believe the rooms above them, had to be sieves.

"Do you wish to know our rates?" I asked my guest, surprised he hadn't asked.

He waved his green hand. "No." He pulled something from the depths of his light-green tunic, and dropped it on the counter with a rattle. "I'll be staying a week, and this is my payment."

"This" were Proxima gems—their encoded form of currency. Small, and transparent, like marbles with golden flecks within, they had a recognizable enough pattern to be known, even without a computer to read them. But I knew enough about Proxima—my sister having emigrated to one of its colonies—to know that they didn't encode currency below ten thousand hydras. And any human child, throughout the universe, knew that the Proxima hydra was the strongest currency in the human worlds, and the fastest-climbing one.

I picked up the smooth, cool spheres, running them through my hand, like the proverbial miser with his treasure. Only, it wasn't so much the treasure that I caressed. Visions of a working computer and lev-it danced in my head.

My smile at the alien had become a manic grin as I walked from behind the counter and said, trying not to giggle, "If you'll follow me, sir, I'll show you to your room."

He didn't run when he saw the hallway—molded ceramite, the colors that had been ingrained into it long-since faded to a colorless petroleum-jelly-grey. He didn't run when he saw the room: small, with a sagging bed, a tiny dresser, and a one-person fresher whose appliances had seen better days. "The massager doesn't work, but the flusher does, and the air jets are kind of slow, but they will dry you," I said, keeping my grin wide. Oh, please, please, let him stay. The gems jangled in the pocket where I'd put them and I imagined myself already their proprietor. I didn't want to have to give them back.

He-who-comes nodded, slow and sagely.

I dared go on, "And the face recognition lock on the door doesn't work, either, but you can have the pass-key." I handed him the small wand. If I got another guest, this might be a problem, but if I got another guest in the next week, it would also be a miracle. I'd never had more than a guest at a time in the last twenty years, and more often than not I had no guests at all.

He-Who waved his eight-fingered hand, and turned his back.

I took this to be my dismissal, and walked back to the check-in computer, my heart singing.

Staring down at the mess of nodes and gems, I wondered if I should give it up for a bad job, and wait until I had enough money to summon a computer doctor. But the gems, though in my pocket, were not definitely mine, and I didn't want to lose time on the computer.

Besides, fixing the computer gave me something to do, something other than standing at the door of my hotel and staring out at the melancholy, empty streets of Stratford-upon-Avon.

I remembered in my childhood, those streets had been thronged with tourists from the most remote colonies, their panoply of clothing and skin colors making the street seem like a circus.

I remembered standing at the door and watching.

But even back then, my father had told me that what I remembered as a flood of tourists was no more than a meager trickle, compared to the days of his childhood.

As more and more people left Earth for space, no one stayed behind except the old, the feeble, the scared. And no one came back. They'd found better pastures in space.

I thought of my sister's letter, in the pad, and grimaced. When it wasn't her, it was my brother, asking me to join him in Arcturus. My brother—my twin brother—Polydeuces, was a computer technician.

I sighed, staring at the mess on the dusty wooden floor behind the check-in desk. I wished I were one. Instead, my father had trained me to follow his footsteps—and the footsteps of my grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and my great-great grandfather before him, as innkeeper at the Swann-of-Avon.

I started assembling nodes, as I best remembered their configuration, though my visual memory had never been any great shakes.

The modeling-clay face peeked in on me, as its owner bent over the counter. "I'll be going to visit the birthplace and the Guildhall schoolroom," he said. "Guidebook says that's where Shakespeare was born and spent a portion of his childhood. Is this right?" He waved a weird-looking spherical pad at me.

On the glowing surface of the pad, glowing characters writhed and entwined like tortured earthworms. "The birthplace and the Guildhall are the places of Shakespeare's childhood."

He waved again, that odd-motion of his eight fingers.

I grabbed the pad, and sent a quick message to Welty, down the road. One of the other ten people left in Stratford, Welty must be ninety if he was a day, and he was the official curator of the birthplace and the guildhall. Twenty years ago, he'd kept them open everyday, but his advancing age and the dearth of tourists had made

him open only on demand. Well, this was demand, and when my alien got to Henley street to see the old Shakespeare house, I didn't want him to think it was closed most of the time.

So I told Welty to look sharp, and told him the alien seemed to have plenty of money and be free with it.

I went back to my assembling the nodes. One of them had been burned out—as I expected—and it was one of the principal memory ones. I was hoping that if I switched one of the secondary ones to that spot, it would take care of it.

You couldn't buy these nodes anymore. Perhaps, if this came through and the alien stayed the full week, and the gems truly became mine, I could ask my brother to send me a new check-in computer from Arcturus.

Just then, the pad trilled. I had mail. It must be Welty, telling me he had received my message.

But as I thumbed the pad on, I saw it was a letter from my brother, instead. "Cas," he said. "If you wish to come and visit, Marisha and I would be happy to show you around. Marisha and the kids send their love. Marisha says her sisters would love to meet you. Best, Pol."

Marisha's sisters would love to meet me, would they? And Pol would love to show me around Arcturus.

I glared at the broken-down nodes, the mess at my feet.

Damn.

Why could Pol never understand that I didn't want to leave Earth—that I couldn't leave, even if I wanted to.

Our father, and our grandfather and our great-grandfather before him, had all lived here, one after the other, for five hundred years—all the way back to the twenty-first century, when a Bard-struck ancestor had bought the hotel, changed its name to the family name, and settled down to write what would be the ultimate Shakespearean biography. He'd never written it, but he had left an enduring legacy, nonetheless, a long trail of Swann men, extending through the mists of time.

I'd been born in that apartment at the back of the hotel. My son would—I shook my head. Nearing forty and not having found a woman to marry, I should probably give up on the idea of a son. Although, maybe someday a nice female tourist...

My hands were sweaty and I wiped them on my pants, making the gems jingle in my pocket.

Ten gems of at least ten thousand hydras each was a hundred thousand hydras. Enough to buy a passage aboard a spaceship to Arcturus. I shook my head. No. My family had tended the Shakespeare cult for generations. It would yet become profitable again.

I looked around the shabby hotel lobby, with its moldy wood paneling, its foot-worn wooden floor. With ten thousand hydras I could refurbish the place, so that when any tourists came they'd come here first. And they'd tell their friends. And then maybe a nice lady-tourist would come in . . . I grinned at the thought.

I was still grinning when a child tripped through the door. I started out from behind the counter to meet him. On Earth, children were even rarer than aliens.

Before I could recover the power of speech, he—a boy, about eight, maybe ten, with a thin face, dark curls and intense brown eyes—oozed towards the desk. I don't know how else to describe his approach, which was neither a run nor a walk, but a flowing of his lower—breech-and-stockings encased—body. He wore Elizabethan boy's attire in dull grey.

"He isn't there," the creature-boy wailed. His face melted, changing shapes like wax in the hot sun. His features went from intent and smart to dull and heavy, then to playful and impish. His eye-color fluttered pale-blue to dark-blue, dark-blue to brown, to



black, then blue again. His hair wavered between light brown and dark brown, then black.

I retreated behind my desk.

It followed me, putting forward a hand to the counter, and holding it there. "I've felt the feel/thought of people passing through, but not *his* feel/thought. He's not there. I came across the galaxy to meet him, this man-with-words that humans talk about, but he isn't here."

I stared down at the counter. The small, childlike hand had eight fingers.

I looked up at the small face, now melting into familiar modeling-clay outlines. The pale-green face climbed up and up and up, as the body grew to my guest's outlines.

A shape changer. And he'd expected to meet Shakespeare? "Uhm . . ." I said. The ten gems in my pocket got lighter, as though ready to take flight. "William Shakespeare has been dead for over a thousand years."

He nodded vigorously, now fully-alien face bobbing up and down like a mutant jack-o'-lantern. "I know his body is gone, but his impression is gone too. I could not find it. Only thoughts/opinions of other people coming through. No man. No impression-before-the-impression." The gash-mouth opened and closed. "Not even in the place of his birth."

"Uhm . . ." I repeated, proving by my eloquence that words had indeed departed Stratford-upon-Avon. "You know, half of his birthplace burned, years ago and no one knows for sure . . . maybe that was the half he was actually born in. And no one is sure he attended the school, or that it was there. Maybe he was home-schooled, or had a tutor. Maybe his parents were wealthier than we thought."

"You mean you don't know?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head for emphasis, before thinking whether he might not understand the gesture. His gestures had been so human. "In his day there weren't many records kept," I said.

"Oh," he said, in a very human way. "You didn't have a Come-See attached to him when he died?"

A camera? "No. They didn't—" I stopped short of telling him they hadn't been invented. That would have meant telling him all of the technological progress of humanity, at least if he should prove slow in understanding things. "No one knew he would be this famous," I said, instead.

He nodded, sagely. "Places . . . Do you have other places he might have been? He was?"

I didn't even want to consider which of the two homes—Ann Hathaway's or Mary Arden's—might be the true one. I remembered reading in a Shakespeare biography that one of them was almost surely spurious, but I couldn't remember which. So I gave him careful directions to New Place and its gardens, being careful to tell him it was ruins—I didn't want him disappointed. He had said that this made no difference, and trooped out, a gallant modeling-clay man in search of Shakespeare thoughts/feelings. Whatever that might be, I prayed that he find them and that I could keep the gems. I would have the lev-it fixed and go see how much of the upper floors could be salvaged. I would install larger, better equipped freshers. I would buy a new check-in computer. I'd get my brother to advertise Stratford-upon-Avon and the fine Swann hotel in far-off, rich Arcturus. I'd turn it all around.

Impatient, restless, I slipped my pad into my pants pocket and went out the front door, following my guest.

But where he turned left, on Sheep Street, I turned right, down to Waterside Street, with its fine view of the ancient Clopton bridge that Shakespeare surely had known.

I never tired of the Stratford landscape that I'd known all my life. Walking, without paying much attention past the late-twentieth century centennial fountain, that depicted two swans in a mating dance, I walked down onto Southern Lane, past The Other Place Theater.

The Avon flowed tranquil, in eddies of pale blue, and the trees on its margins made a fine display: the golden oaks set against the vivid evergreens that retained their summer coloration. Up Oldtown street, I passed Hall's croft, the fine Tudor Mansion, and along Church Street, I made it to Chapel Street, and back home to Sheep Street, where the dilapidated early-twenty-first Swann Hotel glared at me with its colorless molded-ceramite facade.

As I walked, I imagined this street thronged with tourists, once more. I would advertise in Arcturus and Proxima first, since I had relatives there, and then I would trust on word-of-mouth to spread it further. Through Stratford-upon-Avon's renaissance, Earth itself would be born anew. People would come from distant worlds to see the cradle of humanity and some would stay. Not so many that Earth became as burdened as it had been in the late twenty first century when the space diaspora took place, but people enough to make the abandoned towns flourish anew.

A trill from my pad, and I brought it out. Another message from my brother. The Lyceum near him was looking for a teacher who could tell the young children about life on Earth. The best candidates so far were a man who had left Earth at twenty, and my brother who had left Earth at twenty-two but had no interest in teaching. Pol was sure that if I applied—

I thumbed the pad off. I wasn't going anywhere. Earth would flourish anew, and I with it. Ah. Pol could come to me if he wished.

In my mind, I designed the advertisements. I'd need to tell the colonials as much about Earth as about Shakespeare—and I'd better attach bits and pieces of recorded Shakespearean plays to those advertisements, his words being the best advertisement.

The gems jangling in my pocket, I stopped at the door to my hotel, as Shakespeare himself oozed towards me. Or at least a portly—No, consumptive—No, just inspiration-devoured—No, haggard and tired, gentleman in Elizabethan clothing, made for me as though his feet moved on casters.

Before I looked down at the eight-fingered hands, I knew that this was my guest, and before he opened his mouth, I could foretell the wail that would follow.

"He isn't—" he started.

"There?" I asked, disbelieving, my hand going into my pocket and clenching on the ten gems. Mine. Mine. I needed them to make Earth flourish.

He shook his head. His hair color wavered between salt-and-pepper and dark brown. "Not there, not in these streets. Nowhere I find him. Are you sure he lived here?"

A twinge of doubt tweaked my mind for the first time in ages. What if those who said the Earl of Oxford had written the plays were right? But no, it couldn't be. They'd been discredited too long ago. I nodded. "We are sure."

"But his thought/feel has been washed out, then," the guest said. "And I can't see how it can be. How many people have visited this place?"

My turn to open my mouth and close it, in stellar imitation of a fish drowning on air. "Many," I said. "Millions used to come every year."

He sank back, as his body, slowly, regained its play-dough impression. "But then it's all gone," he said. "He's all gone. He-who-comes-to-see can't see. There is nothing here for me. I shall leave, for London where they say in the tower . . ."

I didn't hear the rest of it. The gems in my pocket were now very light. He wouldn't stay the week.

The disgraceful thought that I could keep the gems, anyway, crossed my mind, but I shook it. Not only would it be dishonest, but stupid, too. Aliens had their ways of punishing breeches of contract, and some of those could be fearsome.

I shook my head, put my hand in my pocket, and brought out the gems. "Here, then," I said. "Since you won't stay the week."

He nodded, reached over. His hand snatched the gems from my hand. The brush of his eight fingers was icy, almost burning in its coldness.

I watched him ooze down the street, now fully a modeling-clay man.

He would have a shuttle parked somewhere. Or perhaps he would teleport. No matter. He would leave.

And my dreams left with him.

Sighing heavily, I went back to the entrails of my pulled-apart computer, and tried to put it together. Not that it mattered. My next guest might be ten days from now. Or a year.

My pad blurred.

I turned it on. The screen glowed at me: "Cas, I have checked and there's a flight leaving London for Arcturus at ten-forty-five tonight. Why don't you come and check out the place. If you decide to stay, you can have a job and can buy a house in no time at all, and Marisha's sisters really want to meet you. Pol."

I turned it off.

I couldn't leave, could I?

My ancestors had lived here long enough for their particles to be part of the soil and water. My existence—all that I was—was interwoven with the Stratford landscape: the blue-flowing river, the Sir Hugh Clompton bridge, the quiet sultriness of Anne Hathaway's cottage, the monuments to Shakespeare, the various theaters now used only for holographic projections of the plays, but still used, nonetheless.

In my mind, the alien wailed, "He isn't here."

But how could he not be here, in a town that was so imbued with his presence.

Getting up, off my knees, I walked out the front door, again.

Outside, I almost collided with a beaming Welty. Or with the advance prong of his walker-balancer that he tilted forward at a perilous angle. "I've done it, Cas," he told me. "Or your alien did. Ten thousand hydras for showing him the birthplace and the guild-chapel. Enough to join my daughter in Centaur 2."

Oh. Welty would be leaving, then. The birthplace and the guild-chapel, the

Shakespeare foundation building, would all be abandoned. I don't know what I told Welty.

In a numb fog, I walked down Sheep Street and stopped by the brass-and-steel memorial fountain. The two swans raised their heads in their mating dance, still, as I always remembered them, but when had they got so corroded and time-worn?

People had washed out the Bard's thoughts and presence, with their impressions of the Bard.

Tears filled my eyes, and I blinked at the swans' rusted necks.

The Swanns of Avon were about as rusted, as corroded.

And what had we been preserving, all this time? Just a faded memory, a nothing, an opinion of an opinion of an opinion?

He-who-comes-to-see had found nothing.

Maybe I stood sentry to an empty tomb.

My pad beeped. I turned it on.

"Cas, I've made reservations for you in the shuttle. I'll unmake them if you tell me to, but I want you know I'll be glad to pay your ticket, if you only come. There's a new world out here, waiting for you."

I stared at the pad a long time.

I looked up from it, at the swans and the aged buildings behind them, the oaks and evergreens by the river, and they all seemed to have the thin transparency of painted scenery. I'd heard that in Arcturus they had multicolored trees, and that golden birds flew among them. All of a sudden, I wanted to see those trees and those birds, wanted to experience something that my ancestors hadn't seen or felt.

I understood my brother and my sister. They might have loved Stratford as much as I did, but maybe they'd felt that it was worn thin, like a sea-rolled pebble.

It seemed to be a device peculiar to Shakespeare that his plays often contained another play within it: *Hamlet*, *The Taming Of The Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. . .

Perhaps I'd been living only in the play within the play, in my worn hotel, in my worn town.

I wanted to see the rest of the stage.

I found a stylus in my pocket. "Thanks, Pol," I wrote on the pad. "I'll catch that ship."





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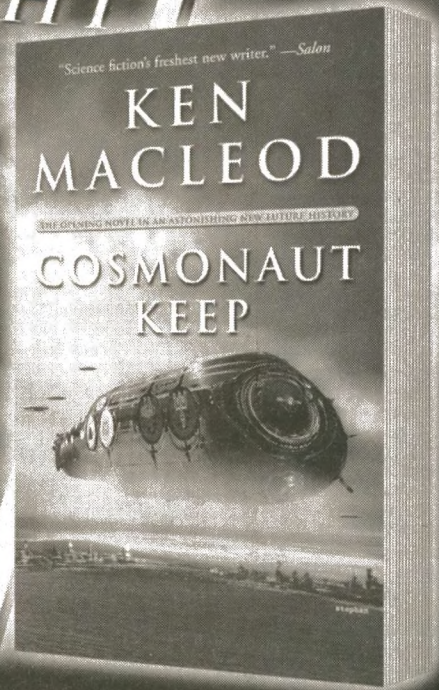
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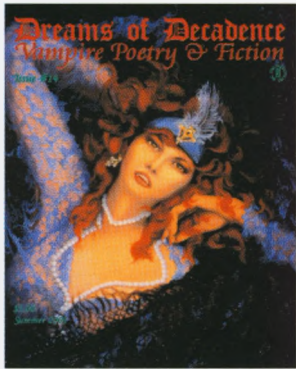
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