

THE BEST OF
ONNUI
SCIENCE FICTION NO. 6

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

FIRST PUBLICATION
OF HARLAN ELLISON'S
"CHAINED TO THE
FAST LANE IN THE RED
QUEEN'S RACE"

PLUS 16 MORE
ILLUSTRATED STORIES—
NEW AND CLASSIC.

FEATURING
ORSON SCOTT CARD
SALVADOR DALI
POUL ANDERSON
RENE MAGRITTE

EDITED BY DON MYRUS



THE BEST OF **OMNI** SCIENCE FICTION NO. 6

With six volumes now published in this very successful series, we are committed to the above title, even though it consists not only of reprints but of never-before-published stories as well. This has been straightforwardly stated on the covers of volumes two through five. Nevertheless, we still occasionally come upon a surprised, albeit pleased, reader who exclaims, "Original stories? Really?" Yes. Absolutely. Here, along with ten reprints from *Omni* and two classic stories, are five originals, all so good that they, too, can be categorized among the best—although some science-fiction purists will no doubt argue that one or two of these originals strain the boundaries of the genre. Perhaps

But science fiction has long been in a state of flux; stirring it up some more can only be for the good.

And another thing: just what is science fiction? Harlan Ellison, for example, vehemently contends that he's not a science-fiction writer; yet he enthusiastically contributed one of the original stories in this book. And two of the reprints are his.

All this seems just and proper. A title that is indefinite, some stories that may be considered as more fantasy than science fiction, an author of science fiction who says he isn't. Ambiguity is a common condition in the world of imaginative literature. Happily, it is so—for our reading pleasure.

EDITED BY DON MYERS

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THE BEST OF OMNI SCIENCE FICTION NO. 6

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OMNI ENCORE PART ONE

F

rom the first issue of *Omni* (October 1978) to this writing (July 1981), one hundred sixty-one science-fiction stories have been published in its pages. Choosing the best for republication has been a challenging task. All the stories are read not only by the editor, but by his associates who, for each story, write a report made up of a précis and a value judgment. Then the editor cogitates and decides.

It is worthy to recall now a very literate young woman's evaluation of "A Sepulcher of Songs" by Orson Scott Card. The report on this bittersweet tale, of a girl with no limbs and the man who tries to keep her from running away, concludes: "A good and touching idea, presented with grace and subtlety. The author leaves it up to the reader whether Elaine's story is madness or truth."

The report on William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" notes that "man, woman, beast, and machine have fused into awesome warriors—some of whom are appealing, some of whom aren't. It's a grim tale, but it has its comical side, too. Villains lurk around every corner. Peter Lorre and Sidney Greenstreet would be at home here."

Born in Berlin in 1927, Paul Wunderlich has been much celebrated since the early 1960s. His paintings selected here were published in *Omni* in October 1981. Their personalized, very colorful subject matter fits in well with the magazine's celebrated graphics.

A SEPULCHER OF SONGS

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

A young girl's freedom depends on the love of a man and a promise from the stars

PAINTING BY ARMODIO

She was losing her mind during the rain. For four weeks it came down nearly every day, and the people at the Miland County Rest Home didn't take any of the patients outside. It bothered them all, of course, and made life especially hellish for the nurses, everyone complaining to them constantly and demanding to be entertained.

Eline didn't demand entertainment, however. She never seemed to demand much of anything. But the rain hurt her worse

than anyone. Perhaps because she was only fifteen, the only child in an institution devoted to adult misery. More likely because she depended more than most on the hours spent outdoors, where you took more pleasure from them. They would lift her into her chair together up with pillows so her body would stay straight and then race down the corridor to the green doors. Eline, calling "Faster faster" as they pushed her until finally they were outside. They told me she never really said anything out there. Just sat

quietly in her chair on the lawn, watching everything. And then later in the day, they would wheel her back in.

I often saw her being wheeled in—early because I was there though she never complained about my visits cutting into her hours outside. As I watched her being pushed toward the rest home, she would smile at me so exuberantly that my mind invented arms for her waving madly to match her childishly delighted face. I imagined legs pumping, imagined her running across the grass



breasting the air like great waves. But there were the pillows where arms should be keeping her from falling to the side; and the belt around her middle kept her from pitching forward since she had no legs to balance with.

I rained four weeks, and I nearly lost her.

My job was one of the worst in the state, touring six rest homes in as many counties visiting each of them every week. I did therapy wherever the rest home administrators thought therapy was needed. I never figured out how they decided—all the patients were mad to one degree or another most; with the helpless insanity of age, the rest with the anguish of the invalid and the crippled.

You don't end up as a state-employed therapist if you had much ability in college. I sometimes pretend that I didn't distinguish myself in graduate school because I marched to a different drummer. But I didn't. As one kind professor gently and brutally told me, I wasn't cut out for forensics. But I was sure I was cut out for the art of therapy. Ever since I comforted my mother during her final year of cancer I had believed I had a knack for helping people get straight in their minds. I was everybody's confidant.

Somehow I had never supposed though that I would end up trying to help the hopeless in a part of the state where even the healthy didn't have much to live for. Yet that's all I had the credentials for and when I (so maturely) told myself I was over the initial disappointment, I made the best of it.

Elaine was the best of it.

Raining raining raining... was the greeting I got when I visited her on the third day of the wet spell.

"Don't I know it?" I said. "My hair's soaking wet."

"Wish mine was," Elaine answered.

"No, you don't. You'd get sick."

"Not me," she said.

"Well, Mr. Woodbury told me you're depressed. I'm supposed to make you happy."

"Make it stop raining."

"Do I look like God?"

"I thought maybe you were in disguise. I'm in disguise," she said. It was one of our regular games. "I'm really a large Texas armadillo who was granted one wish. I wished to be a human being. But there wasn't enough of the armadillo to make a full human being, so here I am." She smiled. I smiled back.

Actually, she had been five years old when an oil truck exploded right in front of her parents' car, killing both of them and blowing her arms and legs right off. That she survived was a miracle. That she had to keep on living was unimaginable cruelty. That she managed to be a reasonably happy person, a favorite of the nurses—that I don't understand in the least. Maybe it was because she had nothing else to do. There aren't many ways that a person with no arms or legs can kill herself.

"I want to go outside," she said, turning her head away from me to look out the window.

Outside wasn't much. A few trees, a lawn, and beyond that a fence, so that to keep the inmates in but to keep out the summer residents of a rather seamy town. But those were low hills in the distance, and the birds usually seemed cheerful. Now, of course, the rain had driven both birds and hills into hiding. There was no wind, and so the trees didn't even sway. The rain just came straight down.

"Outer space is like the rain," she said. "It sounds like that out there, just a low drizzling sound in the background of everything."

"Not really," I said. "There's no sound out there at all."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"There is no air. Can't be any sound without air."

She looked at me scornfully. Just as I thought. You don't really know. You've never been there, have you?"

"Are you trying to pick a fight?"

She started to answer, caught herself, and nodded. "Damned rain."

"At least you don't have to drive in it," I said. But her eyes got watery, and I knew I had taken the baiter too far. "Hey," I said. "First clear day I'll take you driving."

"It's hormones," she said.

"What's hormones?"

"I'm fifteen. It always bothered me when I had to stay in. But I want to scream. My muscles are all bunched up, my stomach is all tight. I want to go outside and scream its hormones."

"What about your friends?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? They're all out there playing in the rain."

"All of them?"

"Except Grumpy, of course. He'd dissolve."

"And where's Grumpy?"

"In the freezer, of course."

"Someday the nurses are going to mis-

take him for ice cream and serve him to the guards."

She didn't smile. She just nodded, and I knew that I wasn't getting anywhere. She really was depressed.

I asked her whether she wanted something.

"No pills," she said. "They make me sleep all the time."

"I give you uppers. It would make you climb the walls."

"Not now," she said.

"It's that strong. So do you want something to take your mind off the rain and these four ugly yellow walls?"

She shook her head. "I'm trying not to sleep."

"Why not?"

She just shook her head again. "Can't sleep. Can't let myself sleep too much."

I asked again.

"Because," she said. "I might not wake up." She said it rather sternly, and I knew I shouldn't ask anymore. She didn't often get impatient with me, but I knew this time I was coming perilously close to overstaying my welcome.

"Got to go," I said. "You will wake up. And then I left, and I didn't see her for a week, and to tell the truth I didn't think of her much that week, what with the rain and a suicide in Ford County that really got to me since she was fairly young and had a lot to live for, in my opinion. She disagreed and won the argument the hard way.

Weekends I live in a trailer in Piedmont. I live alone. The place is spotlessly clean because cleaning is something I do religiously. Besides, I tell myself, I might want to bring a woman home with me one night. Some nights I even do, and some nights I even enjoy it, but I always get restless and irritable when they start trying to get me to change my work schedule or take them along to the motels I have occasionally got the trailer-park manager to let them into my trailer when I'm gone. To keep things cozy for me, I'm not interested in "cozy." This is probably because of my mother's death, her cancer and my responsibilities as housekeeper for my father, probably explain why I am a neat housekeeper. Therapist, therapist thyself. The days passed in rain and highways and depressing people depressed out of their minds, the nights passed in television and sandwiches and motel bed-sheets at state expense, and then it was time to go to the Millard County Rest Home again, where Elaine was waiting. It was then that I thought of her and re-

alized that the rain had been going on for more than a week, and the poor girl must be almost out of her mind. I bought a cassette of Copland conducting Copland. She insisted on cassettes because they stopped. Eight tracks went on and on until she couldn't think.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Locked in a cage by a cruel duke in Transylvania. It was only four feet high suspended over a pond filled with crocodiles. I got out by picking the lock with my teeth. Luckily the crocodiles weren't hungry. Where have you been?"

"I mean it! Don't you keep a schedule?"

"I'm right on my schedule. Elaine. This is Wednesday. I was here last Wednesday. This year Christmas falls on a Wednesday and it'll be here on Christmas."

"It feels like a year."

"Only ten months. Till Christmas. Elaine. You aren't being any fun."

She wasn't in the mood for fun. There were tears in her eyes. "I can't stand much more," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid."

And she was afraid. Her voice trembled. "At night and in the daytime whenever I sleep I'm just the right size."

For what?

"What do you mean?"

"You said you were just the right size."

"I did? Oh, I don't know what I meant. I'm going crazy. That's what you're here for isn't it? To keep me sane. It's the rain. I can't do anything. I can't see anything, and all I hear most of the time is the hating of the rain."

"Like outer space." I said, remembering what she had said the last time.

She apparently didn't remember our discussion. She looked startled. How did you know? she asked.

You told me.

"These aren't any sound in outer space," she said.

Oh, I answered.

There's no outer but there.

I knew that.

Then why didn't you say, "Oh, of course?" The engine. You can hear them all over the ship. It's a drone all the time. That's just like the rain. Only after a while you can't hear it anymore. It becomes like silence. Anansa told me.

Another imaginary friend. Her. He said that she had kept her imaginary friends long after most children gave them up. That

was why I had first been assigned to take her to get rid of the friends. Grunty the ice pig. Howard, the boy who beat up everybody. Sue Ann, who would bring her dolls and play with them for her, making them do what Elaine said for them to do. Fuchsia, who lived among the flowers and was only inches high. There were others. After a few sessions with her I saw that she knew that they weren't real. But they passed time for her. They stepped outside her body and did things she could never do. Tell them they did her no harm at all, and destroying that imaginary world for her would only make her lonelier and more unhappy. She was sane that was certain. And yet I kept seeing her not entirely because I liked her so much. Partly because I wondered whether she had been pretending what she told me she knew her friends weren't real. Anansa was a new one.

"Who's Anansa?"

"Oh, you don't want to know. She didn't want to talk about her, that was obvious."

I want to know.

She turned away. "I can't make you go away, but I wish you would. When you get noisy."

"It's my job."

"Job?" She sounded contemptuous. "I see all of you, running around on your healthy legs, doing all your jobs."

What could I say to her? "It's how we stay alive," I said. "I do my best."

Then she got a strange look on her face. I've got a secret, she seemed to say and I want you to pry it out of me. "Maybe I can get a job, too."

Maybe, I said. I tried to think of something she could do.

There's always music, she said.

I misunderstood. There aren't many instruments you can play. That's the way it is. Dose of reality and all that.

Don't be stupid.

Okay. Never again.

I meant that there's always the music On my job.

"And what job is that?"

Wouldn't you like to know? she said, rolling her eyes mysteriously and turning toward the window. I imagined her as a normal fifteen-year-old girl. Ordinarily I would have interpreted this as flirting. But there was something else under all this. A feeling of desperation. She was right. I really would like to know. I made a rather logical guess. I put together the two secrets she was trying to get me to figure out today.

What kind of job will Anansa give you?

She looked at me, startled. So it's true then?

"What's true?"

"It's so frightening. I keep telling myself it's a dream. But it isn't, is it?"

"What Anansa?"

"You think she's just one of my friends, don't you? But they're not in my dreams, not like this. Anansa—

What about Anansa?

She sings to me. In my sleep.

My trained psychologist's mind immediately conjured up mother figures. "Of course," I said.

She's in peace and she sings to me. You wouldn't believe the songs.

It reminded me. I pulled out the cassette I had bought for her.

"Thank you," she said.

You're welcome. Want to hear it?

She nodded. I put it on the cassette player. Appalachian Spring. She moved her head to the music. I imagined her as a dancer. She let the music very well.

But after a few minutes she stopped moving and started to cry.

"It's not the same," she said.

"You've heard it before?"

"Turn it off. Turn it off!"

I turned it off. "Sorry," I said. "Thought you'd like it."

"Guilt nothing but guilt," she said. "You always feel guilty, don't you?"

Pretty nearly always. I admitted cheerfully. A lot of my patients threw psychological garbage in my face. Or soap-operas language.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just—it's just not the music. Not the music. Now that I've heard it, everything is so dark compared to it. Like the rain is always in the way. For a few minutes I thought he was getting it right."

Anansa's music?

She nodded. I knew you don't believe me. But I hear her when I'm asleep. She tells me that's the only time she can communicate with me. It's not talking. It's all her songs. She's out there in her starship, singing. And at night I hear her.

"Why you?"

"You mean Why only me? She laughed. Because of what I am. You told me yourself. Because I can't run around. I live in my imagination. She says that the threads between minds are very thin and hard to hold. But mine she can hold, because I live completely in my mind. She holds on to me. When I go to sleep, I can't escape her now anymore at all."

Escape? I thought you liked her
I don't know what I like... I like... I like the
music. But Anansa wants me. She wants to
have me—she wants to give me a job.
What's the singing like? When she said
job she trembled and closed up. I related
back to something that she had been will-
ing to talk about to keep the floundering
conversation going.

It's not like anything. She's there in
space and it's black, just the hum of
the engines like the sound of rain, and she
reaches into the dust out there and draws in
the songs. She reaches out her—out her
fingers, or her ears. I can't know it isn't
clear. She reaches out and draws in the
dust and the songs and turns them into the
music that I hear it's powerful. She says it's
her songs that drive her between the stars.
"Is she alone?"

Elaine nodded. She wants me.

Wants you. How can she have you with
you here and her out there?

Elaine licked her lips. "I don't want to talk
about it," she said in a way that told me she
was on the verge of telling me.

"I wish you would. I really wish you'd tell
me."

"She says—she says that she can take
me. She says that if I can learn the songs
she can pull me out of my body and take me
there and give me arms and legs and han-
ders and I can run and dance and—

She broke down, crying.

I patted her on the only place that she
permitted herself to be touched. She refused to
be hugged. I had tried it years before, and
she had screamed at me to stop it. One of
the nurses told me it was because her
mother had always hugged her and Elaine
wanted to hug back. And couldn't.

"It's a lovely dream, Elaine."

"It's a terrible dream. Don't you see? I'll
be like her."

And what's she like?

"She's the ship. She's the starship. And
she wants me with her to be the starship
with her. And sing our way through space
together for thousands and thousands of
years."

It's just a dream, Elaine. You don't have
to be afraid of it."

"They did it to her. They cut off her arms
and legs and put her into the machines."

But no one's going to put you into a
machine."

I want to go outside," she said.

You can't. It's raining.

Damn the rain.

I do, every day.

I'm not joking! She pulls me all the time
now, even when I'm awake. She keeps pulling
at me and making me fall asleep, and
she sings to me, and I feel her pulling and
pulling. If I could just go outside, I could
hold on. I feel like I could hold on, if I could
just—"

"Hey relax. Let me give you a—"

No! I don't want to sleep!"

Listen, Elaine. It's just a dream. You can't
let it get to you like this. It's just the rain
keeping you here. It makes you sleepy and
so you keep dreaming this. But don't fight it.
It's a beautiful dream in a way. Why not go
with it?

She looked at me with terror in her eyes.

You don't mean that. You don't want me
to go!"

"No. Of course I don't want you to go anywhere.
But you won't, don't you see? It's a dream floating out there between the
stars—"

She's not floating. She's ramming her
way through space so fast it makes me
dizzy whenever she shows me."

"Then be dizzy. Think of it as your mind
finding a way for you to run."

You can't understand. Mr. Therapist. I
thought you'd understand."

I'm trying to—

If I go with her, then I'll be dead."

I asked her nurse. Who's been reading
to her?

"We all do, and volunteers from town
They like her. She always has someone to
read to her."

You'd better supervise them more carefully.
Somebody's been putting ideas in her
head. About spaceships and dust and
singing between the stars. It's scared her
bad."

The nurse frowned. We approve everything
they read. She's been reading that kind of things for years. It's never done her
any harm before. Why now?

The rain. I guess. Cooped up in here
she's losing touch with reality.

The nurse nodded sympathetically and
said: "I know. When she's asleep, she's doing
the strangest things now."

"Like what? What kind of things?"

"Oh, singing those horrid songs."

What are the words?"

There aren't any words. She just sort of hums.
Only the melodies are awful. Not even like music. And her voice gets funny
and raspy. She's completely asleep. She
sleeps a lot now. Mercifully, I think. She's always impatient when she can't go outside."

The nurse obviously liked Elaine. It would
be hard not to feel sorry for her, but Elaine
insisted on being liked, and people liked
her, those that could get over the horrible
flatness of the sheets all around her head.
"Listen," I said. "Can we bundle her up or
something? Get her outside in spite of the
rain?"

The nurse shook her head. "It isn't just the
rain. It's cold out there. And the explosion
that made her like she is—it messed her up
inside. She isn't put together right. She
doesn't have the strength to fight off any
kind of disease at all. You understand—that
there's a good chance that exposure to that
kind of weather would kill her eventually.
And I won't take a chance on that."

"I'm going to be visiting her more often,
then," I said. "As often as I can. She's got
something going on in her head that's scaring
her half to death. She thinks she's going
to die."

"Oh the poor darling," the nurse said.
"Why would she think that?"

Doesn't matter. One of her imaginary
friends may be getting out of hand.

I thought you said they were harmless.
They were."

When I left the Millard County Rest Home
that night, I stopped back in Elaine's room.
She was asleep, and I heard her song. It
was eerie. I could hear now and then
themes from the bit of Copland music she
had listened to. But it was distorted, and
most of the music was unrecognizable—
wasn't even music. Her voice was high and
strange, and then suddenly it would
change, would become low and raspy, and
for a moment I clearly heard in her voice
the sound of a vast engine coming through
walls of metal, carried on slender metal
rods, the sound of a great roar being swallowed
up by a vast cushion of nothing. I pictured
Elaine with wires coming out of her
shoulders and hips, with her head encased
in metal and her eyes closed in sleep like
her imaginary Anansa, piloting the starship
as if it were her own body. I could see that
this would be attractive to Elaine in a way.
After all, she had been born this way. She
had memories of running and playing
memories of feeding herself and dressing
herself, perhaps even of learning to read, of
sounding out the words as her fingers
touched each letter. Even the false arms of a
spaceship would be something to fill the
great void.

Children's centers are not inside their
bodies; their centers are outside, at the

point where the fingers of the left hand and the fingers of the right hand meet. What they touch is where they live, what they see is their self. And Elaine had lost herself in an explosion before she had the chance to move inside. With this strange dream of Anansa she was getting a self back.

But a repellent self, for all that I walked in and sat by Elaine's bed, listening to her sing. Her body moved slightly, her back aching a little with the melody. High and light low and rasping. The sounds alternated, and I wondered what they meant. What was going on inside her to make this music come out?

I'll go with her then I'll be dead.

Of course she was afraid. I looked at the lump of flesh that filled the bed shapelessly below where her head emerged from the covers. I tried to change my perspective to see her body as she saw it, from above. It almost disappeared then, with the foreshortening and the height of her ribs making her stomach and mixt of hips vanish into insignificance. Yet this was all she had, and if she believed—and certainly she seemed to—the surrendering to the fantasy of Anansa would mean the death of this painful body, is death any less frightening to those who have not been able to fully live? I doubt it. At least for Elaine, what life she had lived had been joyful. She would not willingly trade it for a life of music and metal arms locked in her own mind.

Except for the rain. Except that nothing was so real to her as the outside, as the trees and birds and distant hills, and as the breeze touching her with a violence she permitted no living person. And with that reality the good part of her life cut off from her by the rain, how long could she hold out against the incessant pulling of Anansa and her promise of arms and legs and eternal song?

I reached up, on a whim, and very gently lifted her eyelids.

Her eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling, not blinking.

I closed her eyes, and they remained closed.

I turned her head, and it stayed turned. She did not wake up. Just kept singing as if had done nothing to her at all.

Catastrophe, or the beginning of catastrophe. She's losing her mind, I thought, and if I don't bring her back, keep her here somehow, Anansa will win, and the rest home will be caring for a lump of mindless flesh for the next however many years they can keep this remnant of Elaine alive.

"I'll be back on Saturday," I told the admistress.

"Why so soon?"

"Elaine is going through a crisis of some kind," I explained. "An imaginary woman from space wants to carry her off—that I didn't say." Have the nurses keep her awake as much as they can. Read to her play with her talk to her. Her normal hours at night are enough. Avoid naps.

"Why?"

"I'm afraid for her that's all. She could go catatonic on us at any time. I think. Her sleeping isn't normal. I want to have her watched all the time."

"This is really serious?"

"This is really serious."

On Friday it looked as if the clouds were breaking, but after only a few minutes of sunshine a huge new bank of clouds swept down from the northwest, and it was worse than before. I finished my work rather carelessly, stopping a sentence in the middle several times. One of my patients was annoyed with me. She squinted at me. "You're not paid to think about your woman troubles when you're talking to me." I apologized and tried to pay attention. She was a talker, my attention always wandered. But she was right, in a way. I couldn't stop thinking of

Elaine. And my patient's saying that about woman troubles must have triggered something in my mind. After all, my relationship with Elaine was the longest and closest I had had with a woman in many years. If you could think of Elaine as a woman.

On Saturday I drove back to Millard County and found the nurses rather distraught. They didn't realize how much she was sleeping until they tried to stop her, they all said. She was dozing off for two or three naps in the morning, even more in the afternoons. She went to sleep at night at seven-thirty and slept at least twelve hours. "Singing all the time. It's awful. Even at night she keeps it up. Singing and singing."

But she was awake when I went in to see her.

"I stayed awake for you."

Thanks, I said.

A Saturday visit. I must really be going bonkers.

Actually, no. But I don't like how sleepy you are.

She smiled wanly. "It isn't my idea."

I think my smile was more cheerful than hers. "And I think it's all in your head."

Think what you like. Doctor.

"I'm not a doctor. My degree says I'm a master."

How deep is the water outside? All



this rain. Surely it's enough to keep a few dozen arks afloat. Is God destroying the world?"

"Unfortunately no. Though He has killed the engines on a few cars that went a little fast through the puddles."

"How long would it have to rain to fill up the world?"

The world is round. It would all drip off the bottom.

She laughed. It was good to hear her laugh, but it ended too abruptly and she looked at me fearfully. "I'm going, you know."

"You are?"

"I'm just the right size. She's measured me, and I fit perfectly. She has just the place for me. It's a good place, where I can hear the music of the dust for myself, and learn to sing it. I'd have the directional engines."

I shook my head. "Gruntly the ice pig was cute. This isn't cute, Elaine."

"Did I ever say I thought Anansa was cute? Gruntly the ice pig was real, you know. My father made him out of crushed ice for a lulu. He melted before they got the pig out of the ground. I don't make my friends up."

"Puchesa the flower girl?"

"My mother would pinch blossoms off the hibiscus by our front door. We played with them like dolls in the grass."

"But not Anansa."

"Anansa came into my mind when I was asleep. She found me. I didn't make her up."

"Don't you see, Elaine, that's how the real hallucinations come? They feel like reality."

She shook her head. "I know all that. I've had the nurses read me psychology books. Anansa is—Anansa is other. She couldn't come out of my head. She's something else. She's real. I've heard her music. It isn't plain like Copland. It isn't fake."

"Elaine, when you were asleep on Wednesday, you were becoming catatonic."

"I know."

"You know?

"I felt you touch me. I felt you turn my head. I wanted to speak to you, to say good-bye. But she was singing, don't you see? She was singing. And now she lets me sing along. When I sing with her, I can feel myself travel out, like a spider along a single thread, cut into the place where she is into the darkness. It's lonely there, and black, and cold, but I know that at the end of the thread there she'll be, a friend for me forever."

"You're frightening me, Elaine."

There aren't any trees on her starship, you know. That's how I stay here. I think of the trees and the hills and the birds and the grass and the wind, and how I'd lose all of that. She gets angry at me and a little hurt. But it keeps me here. Except now I can hardly remember the trees at all. I try to remember, and it's like trying to remember the face of my mother. I can remember her dress and her hair, but her face is gone forever. Even when I look at a picture, it's a stranger. The trees are strangers to me now."

I stroked her forehead. At first she pulled her head away, then slid it back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I usually don't like people to touch me there."

"I won't," I said.

"No go ahead. I don't mind."

So I stroked her forehead again. It was cool and dry, and she tilted her head almost imperceptibly to receive my touch. Involuntarily I thought of what the old woman had said the day before. *Woman troubles*. I was touching Elaine, and I thought of making love to her. I immediately put the thought out of my mind.

"Hold me here," she said. "Don't let me go. I want to go so badly, but I'm not meant for that. I'm just the right size, but not the right shape. Those aren't my arms. I know what my arms tell lies."

"I'll hold you if I can. But you have to help."

"No drugs. The drugs pull my mind away from my body. If you give me drugs, I'll die."

"Then what can I do?"

"Just keep me here, any way you can. Then we talked about nonsense, because we had been so serious, and it was as if she weren't having any problems at all. We got on the subject of the church meetings."

"I didn't know you were religious," I said.

"I'm not. But what else is there to do on Sunday? They sing hymns, and I sing with them. Last Sunday there was a sermon that really got to me. The preacher talked about Christ in the sepulcher. About Him being there three days before the angel came to tell Him go. I've been thinking about that what it must have been like for Him locked in a cave in the darkness, completely alone."

"Depressing."

"Not really. It must have been exhilarating for him, in a way. If it was true, you know. To lie there on that stone bed, saying to Himself, 'They thought I was dead, but I'm here. I'm not dead.'

"You make Him sound smug."

"Sure. Why not? I wonder if I'd feel like that if I were with Anansa."

Anansa again.

"I can see what you're thinking. You're thinking 'Anansa again'."

"Yeah," I said. "I wish you'd leave her and go back to some more harmless friends."

Suddenly her face went angry and fierce.

"You can believe what you like. Just leave me alone."

I tried to apologize, but she wouldn't have any of it. She insisted on believing in this star woman. Finally I left, redoubling my cautions against letting her sleep. The nurse looked worried, too. They could see the change as easily as I could.

That night, because I was in Millard on a weekend, I called up Belinda. She wasn't married or anything at the moment. She came to my motel. We had dinner made love, and watched television. She watched television that is. I lay on the bed thinking. And so when the text pattern came on and Belinda at last got up, barefoot and passionate, my mind was still on Elaine. As Belinda kissed and licked me and whispered stupidity in my ear, I imagined myself without arms and legs. I lay there moving only my head.

"What's the matter you don't want to?"

I shook off the mood. No need to disappoint Belinda—I was the one who had called her. I had a responsibility. Not much of one though. That was what was nagging at me. I made love to Belinda slowly and carefully, but with my eyes closed. I kept superimposing Elaine's face on Belinda's. *Woman troubles*. Even though Belinda's fingers played up and down my back, I thought I was making love to Elaine. And the stumps of arms and legs didn't revolt me as much as I would have thought. Instead, I only felt sad. A deep sense of tragedy, of loss, as if Elaine were dead and I could have saved her like the prince in all the fairy tales, less symbolic, and the princess awakens and lives happily ever after. And I hadn't done it. I had failed her. When we were finished I cried.

"Oh you poor sweetheart," Belinda said, her voice rich with sympathy. "What's wrong—you don't have to tell me. She cradled me for a while, and at last I went to sleep with my head pressed against her breasts. She thought I needed her. I suppose that, briefly, I did.

I did not go back to Elaine on Sunday as I had planned. I spent the entire day almost going. Instead of walking out the door I sat

and watched the incredible array of terrible Sunday morning television. And when I finally did go out, fully intending to go to the real home and see how she was doing, I ended up driving luggage in the back of the car to my trailer where I went inside and again sat down and watched television.

Why couldn't I go to her?

Just keep me here, she had said. Any way you can, she had said.

And I thought I knew the way. That was the problem. In the back of my mind all this was much too real and the fairy tales were wrong. The prince didn't wake her with a kiss. He awakened the princess with a promise. In his arms she would be safe forever. She awoke for the happily-ever-after. If she hadn't known it to be true, the princess would have preferred to sleep forever.

What was Elaine asking of me?

Why was I afraid of it?

Not my job. Unprofessionally to get emotionally involved with a patient.

But then when had I ever been a professional? I finally went to bed, wishing I had Belinda with me again, for whatever comfort she could bring. Why weren't all women like Belinda, soft and loving and understanding?

Yet as I drifted off to sleep, it was Elaine I remembered. Elaine's face and hideous reproachful stomp of a body that followed me through all my dreams.

And she followed me when I was awake through my regular rounds on Monday and Tuesday, and at last it was Wednesday and still I was afraid to go to the Millard County Rest Home. I didn't get there until afternoon. Late afternoon, and the rain was coming down as hard as ever and there were lines of standing water in the lotos canals rushing through the unprepared gutters of the town.

You're late, the administrator said.

Rain, I answered, and he nodded. But he looked worried.

We hoped you'd come yesterday but we couldn't reach you anywhere. It's Elaine.

And I knew that my delay had served its damnable purpose exactly as I expected.

She hasn't woken up since Monday morning. She just lies there singing. We've gotten her an IV. She's asleep.

She was indeed asleep. I sent the others out of the room.

Elaine, I said.

Nothing.

I called her name again several times. I touched her, rocked her head back and

forth. Her head stayed wherever I placed it. And the song went on, softly, high and then low, pure and then gravelly. I covered her mouth. She sang on, even with her mouth closed as if nothing were the matter.

I pulled down her sheet and pushed a pin into her belly, then into the thin flesh at her collarbone. No response. I slapped her face. No response! She was gone. I saw her again, connected to a starship, only this time I understood better. It wasn't her body that was the right size. It was her mind. And it was her mind that had followed the slender spider's thread out to Anansa, who waited to give her a body.

A job.

Shock therapy? I imagined her already-deformed body leaping and arching as the electricity coursed through her. It would accomplish nothing, except to torture unthinking flesh. Drugs? I couldn't think of any that could bring her back from where she had gone. In a way, I think I even believed in Anansa, for the moment. I called her name. Anansa, let her go. Let her come back to me. Please. I needed her.

Why had I cried in Belinda's arms? Oh yes. Because I had seen the princess and let her lie there unawakened, because the happily-ever-after was so clamorously much work.

I did not do it in the fever of the first realization that I had lost her. It was no act of passion or sudden fear or grief. I sat beside her bed, hour after hour, looking at her weak and helpless body now so empty. I wished for her eyes to open on their own, for her to wake up and say, Hey, would you believe the dream? had? For her to say, I fooled you, didn't I? It was really hard when you poked me with pins, but I fooled you. But she hadn't looked me.

And so I lay in bed with passion but in despair. I stood up and leaned over her, loaned my hands on either side of her and pressed my cheek against hers and whispered in her ear. I promised her everything I could think. I promised her no more rain forever. I promised trees and flowers and hills and birds and the wind for as long as she liked. I promised to take her away from the real home, to take her to see things she could only have dreamed of before.

And then at last, with my voice harsh from pleading with her, with her hair wet with my tears, I promised her the only thing that might bring her back. I promised her me. I promised her love forever, stronger than any songs Anansa could sing.

And it was then that the monstrous song

fell silent. She did not awaken, but the song ended, and she moved on her own, her head rocked to the side, and she seemed to sleep normally, not cataleptically. I waited by her bedside all night. I fell asleep in the chair and one of the nurses covered me. I was still there when I was awakened in the morning by Elaine's voice.

What's all this you are? It's still raining.

It was a feeling of power to know that I had called someone back from places far darker than death. Her life was painful, and yet my promise of devotion was enough, apparently, to compensate. This was how I understood it, at least. This was what made me feel exhilarated, what kept me blind and deaf to what had really happened.

I was not the only one rejoicing. The nurses made a great fuss over her, and the administrator promised to write up a glowing report. Publish, he said.

It's too personal, I said. But in the back of my mind I was already trying to figure out a way to get the case into print, to gain something for my career. I was ashamed of myself for twisting what had been an honest heartfelt commitment into personal advancement. But I couldn't ignore the sudden respect I was receiving from people to whom, only hours before, I had been merely ordinary.

It's too personal, I repeated firmly. I have no intention of publishing.

And to my disgust I found myself relishing the administrator's respect for that decision. There was no escape from my swelling self-satisfaction. Not as long as I stayed around those determined to give me cheap payoffs. Ever the wise psychologist, I returned to the only person who would give me gratitude instead of admiration. The gratitude I had earned, I thought. I went back to Elaine.

Hi, she said. I wondered where you had gone.

Not far, I said. Just visiting with the Nobel Prize committee.

They want to reward you for bringing me here?

Oh, no. They had been planning to give me the award for having contacted a genuine alien being from outer space. Instead, I blew it and brought you back. They're quite upset.

She looked flustered. It wasn't like her to look flustered—usually she came back with another quip. "But what will they do to you?"

Probably boil me in oil. That's the usual

thing. Though maybe they've found a way to boil me in solar energy it's cheaper' A feeble joke. But she didn't get it.

"This isn't the way she said it was—she said it was—

She tried to ignore the dull fear that suddenly churned in my stomach. Be analytical! I thought. She could be anyone.

"She said? Who said?" I asked.

Elaine fell silent. I reached out and touched her forehead. She was perspiring.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're upset."

"I should have known."

"Known what?"

She shook her head and turned away from me.

I knew what it was. I thought I knew what it was, but we could surely cope. "Elaine," I said, "you aren't completely cured, are you? You haven't got rid of Anansa; have you? You don't have to hide it from me. Sure, I would have loved to think you'd been completely cured, but that would have been too much of a miracle. Do I look like a miracle worker? We've just made progress, that's all. Brought you back from catatopy. We'll free you of Anansa eventually."

Still she was silent, staring at the rain-gray window.

You don't have to be embarrassed about pretending to be completely cured. It was very kind of you. It made me feel very good for a little while. But I'm a grown-up. I can cope with a little disappointment. Besides, you're awake, you're back—and that's all that matters." Crown-up hell! I was tanto disappointed, and ashamed that I wasn't more sincere in what I was saying. No cure after all. No hero. No magic. No great achievement. Just a psychologist who was after all not extraordinary.

But I refused to pay too much attention to those feelings. Be a professional, I told myself. She needs your help.

"So don't go feeling guilty about it."

She turned back to face me, her eyes full "Guilt?" She almost smiled. "Guilt?" Her eyes did not leave my face, though I doubted she could see me well through the tears brimming her lashes.

"You tried to do the right thing," I said.

"Did I? Did I really?" She smiled bitterly. It was a strange smile for her and for a terrible moment she no longer looked like my Elaine, my bright young patient. I meant to stay with her," she said. "I wanted her with me, she was so alive, and when she finally joined herself to the ship, she sang and danced and swung her arms, and I said 'This is what I've needed' this is what I've

craved all my centuries lost in the songs. But then I hear you."

"Anansa," I said, realizing at that moment who was with me.

"I heard you crying out to her. Do you think I made up my mind quickly? She heard you, but she wouldn't come. She wouldn't trade her new arms and legs for anything. They were so new. But I'd had them for long enough. What I'd never had was—you."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Out there," she said. "She sings better than I ever did." She looked wistfully for a moment, then smiled ruefully. "And I'm here. Only I made a bad bargain, didn't I? Because I didn't look you. You won't want me now. It's Anesa you want, and she's gone. I left her alone out there. She won't mind, not for a long time. But then—then she will. Then she'll know I cheated her."

The voice was Elaine's voice, the tragic little body her body, but how I knew I had not succeeded at all. Elaine was gone, in the infinite outer space where the mind hides to escape from itself. And in her place—Anansa. A stranger.

"You cheated her?" I said. "How did you cheat her?"

"It never changes. In a while you learn all the songs, and they never change. Nothing moves. You go on forever until all the stars fall and yet nothing ever moves."

I moved my hand and put it to my hair. I was startled by my own trembling touch on my head.

"Oh, God," I said. They were just words, not a supplication.

"You help me," she said.

"Help her? Help my little mad Elaine? Oh no. I had another object for my hate. I hated the rain that had cut her off from all that kept her sane. I hated her parents for not leaving their home the day they let their car drive them to the death. But most of all I remembered my days of hiding from Elaine, my days of resisting her need, of pretending that I didn't remember her or think of her or need her, too. She must have wondered why I was so long in coming. Wondered and finally given up hope, finally realized that there was no one who would hold her. And so she left, and when I finally came, the only person waiting inside her body was Anansa, the imaginary friend who had come tempestuously to life. I knew whom to hate. I thought I would cry. I even buried my face in the sheet where her leg would have been. But I did not cry. I just sat there. The sheet harsh against my face, hating myself.

Her voice was like a gentle hand, a pleading hand touching me. "I'd undo it if I could," she said. "But I can't. She's gone and I'm here. I came because of you. I came to see the trees and the grass and the birds and your smile. The happily-ever-after. That was what she had lived for, you know all she lived for. Please smile at me."

I felt warmth on my hair. I lifted my head. There was no rain in the window. Sunlight rose and fell on the wrinkles of the sheet.

"Let's go outside," I said.

"I stopped raining," she said.

"A bit late, isn't it?" I answered. But I smiled at her.

"You can call me Elaine," she said. "You won't tell my you?"

I shook my head. No. I wouldn't tell. She was safe enough. I wouldn't tell because then they would take her away to a place where psychiatrists reigned but did not know enough to rule. I imagined her confined among others who had also made their escape from reality and I knew that I couldn't tell anyone. I also knew I couldn't confess failure, not now.

Besides, I hadn't really completely failed. There was still hope. Elaine wasn't really gone. She was still there, hidden in her own mind, looking out through this imaginary person she had created to take her place. Someday I would find her and bring her home. After all, even Grunty the old pig had melted.

I noticed that she was shaking her head. "You won't find her," she said. "You won't bring her home. I won't melt and disappear. She is gone, and you couldn't have prevented it."

I smiled. "Elaine," I said.

And then I realized that she had answered thoughts I hadn't put into words.

"That's right," she said. "Let's be honest with each other. You might as well. You can't lie to me."

I shook my head. For a moment in my confusion and despair I had believed it all. believed that Anansa was real. But that was nonsense. Of course Elaine knew what I was thinking. She knew me better than I knew myself. "Let's go outside," I said. A failure and a cripple, out to enjoy the sunlight which fell equally on the just and the unjustifiable.

"I don't mind," she said. "Whatever you want to believe. Elaine or Anansa. Maybe it's better if you still look for Elaine. Maybe it's better if you let me fool you after all."

The worst thing about the fantasies of the mentally ill is that they're so damned con-

sistent. They never let up. They never give you any rest.

"I'm Elane," she said, smiling. "I'm Elane, pretending to be Anansa. You love me. That's what I came for. You promised to bring me home, and you did. Take me outside. You made it stop raining for me. You did everything you promised, and I'm home again, and I promise I'll never leave you."

She hasn't left me. I come to see her every Wednesday as part of my work, and every Saturday and Sunday as the best part of my life. I take her driving with me some times, and we talk constantly, and I read to her and bring her books for the nurses to read to her. None of them know that she is still unwell—to them she's Elane, happier than ever, pathetically delighted at every sight and sound and smell and taste and every texture that they touch against her cheek. Only I know that she believes she is not Elane. Only I know that I have made no progress at all since then, that in moments of terrible honesty I call her Anansa, and she sadly answers me.

But in a way I'm content. Very little has changed between us, really. And after a few weeks I realized with certainty that she was happier now than she had ever been before. After all, she had the best of all pos-

sible worlds for her. She could tell herself that the real Elane was off in space somewhere, dancing and singing and hearing songs with arms and legs at last while the poor girl who was confined to the limbless body at the Millard County Rest Home was really an alien who was very, very happy to have even that limited body.

And as for me, I kept my commitment to her, and I'm happier for it. I'm still human—I still take another woman into my bed from time to time. But Anansa doesn't mind. She even suggested it, only a few days after she woke up. Go back to Belinda sometimes, she said. Belinda loves you too, you know. I won't mind at all. I still can't remember when I spoke to her of Belinda, but at least she didn't mind, and so there aren't really any discontents in my life. Except . . .

Except that I'm not God. I would like to be God. I would make some changes.

When I go to the Millard County Rest Home, I never enter the building first. She is never in the building. I walk around the outside and look across the lawn by the trees. The wheelchair is always there. I can tell it from the others by the pillows, which glint white in the sunlight. I never call out. In a few moments she always sees me, and the nurses wheel her around and push the

chair across the lawn.

She comes as she has come hundreds of times before. She plunges toward me, and I concentrate on watching her, so that my mind will not see my Elane surrounded by blackness, plunging through space, gathering dust, gathering songs, leaping and dancing with her new arms and legs that she loves better than me. Instead I watch the wheelchair, watch the smile on her face. She is happy to see me, so delighted with the world outside that her body cannot contain her. And when my imagination will not be restrained, I am God for a moment. I see her running toward me, her arms waving. I give her a left hand, a right hand, delicate and strong. I put a long and girlish left leg on her, and one just as sturdy on the right.

And then, one by one, I take them all away.

Orson Scott Card last year became the first author to be honored as a member of BOSF's Celebrated Circle. (Marlan Ellison was also honored in this volume.) Two novels by Card were published earlier this year: *The Worthing Chronicle* (Acia Books) and *Hans' Hope* (Berkeley), a science fantasy. A native of Washington, Card lives with his wife and three children in North Carolina.



JOHNNY MNEMONIC

He had information that the gangsters wanted desperately, even if they had to kill him

BY WILLIAM GIBSON

I put the shotgun in an Addes bag and padded it out with four more shells. I'd never seen my target all that clearly, but that's what I was aiming for. If they think you're crude, go technical; if they think you're technical, go crude. I'm a very technical boy. So I decided to get as crude as possible. These days, though, you have to be pretty technical before you can even aspire to crudeness. I'd had to turn both those twelve-gauge shells from brass stock, one at a time, and then load them myself. I'd had to dig up an old microfilm with instructions on handloading cartridges; I'd had to build a lever-action press to seat the primers—all very tricky. But I knew they'd work.

The men I was paid for the Drome at Twenty-third hundred, but I rode the bus there instead of the chrome platforms and without back-breaking procedure.

I checked myself out in the chrome casing of a coffee kiosk, your basic sharp-faced Caucasoid with a rut of static class here. The girls at Under the Knife were big on Sony Woo, and it was getting harder to keep them from adding that chic suggestion of peacock folds. It probably wouldn't fool Ralf Face, but it might get me next to his table.

The Drome is a single narrow space with a bevy down one side and tables along the other, thick with pings and headlancers and anemic arrays of dealers. The McGraw-Hill Bookstore was on the door that night, and I didn't relish trying to get out past them if things

didn't work out. They were two meters tall and thin as spaghetti. One was black and the other white, but aside from that they were as nearly identical as cosmetic surgery could make them. They'd been lovers for years and were bad news in a future. I was never quite sure which one had originally been more.

Ralf was sitting at his usual table. Owning me a lot of money I had hundreds of megabytes stashed in my head on an idiot/seventeen basis, information I had no conscious access to. Ralf had left it there. He hadn't, however, come back for it. Only Ralf could retrieve the debt, with a code phrase of his own creation. I'm not supposed to begin with, but my confidence on storage is astronomical. And Ralf had been very scarce.

Then I'd heard that Ralf Face wanted to put out a contract on me. So I arranged to meet him in the Drome, but I'd arranged it as Edward Bar, clandestine Importer, Inc. of Rio and Peking.

The Drome stank of bz, a metallic tang of nervous tension. Muscleboys scattered through the crowd were flinging stock parts at one another and trying on thin, cold gimp; some of them so lost under superstructures of muscle graft that their outlines weren't really human.

Pardon me. Pardon me, friends. Joe Eddie Bar here. First Eddie the importers with his professionally mysterious sum bag, and please ignore the air, just wide enough to admit his right hand.

PAINTING BY ETIENNE SANDORF



Ralfi wasn't alone. Eighty kilos of blond California beef perched silently in the chair next to his martial arts written all over him.

Fast Eddie fixx was in the chair opposite them before the beef's hands were off the table. "You black belt?" I asked eagerly. He nodded, blue eyes running an automatic scanning pattern between my eyes and my hands. "Me too," I said. "Got mine here in the bag." And I shoved my hand through the sit and thumbed the safety off. Click. Double twelve gauge with the triggers wired together.

That's a gun, Ralfi said, putting a plump restraining hand on his boy's fast, blue nylon chest. Johnny has an antique tassel in his bag. So much for Edward Box.

I guess he always been Ralfi. Something or Other, but he owed his acquired surname to a singular vanity. Built some thing like an overripe pear, he'd won the once famous face of Christian White for twenty years—Christian White of the Aryan Reggae Band. Sorry Ned to his generation and final champion of race rock. I'm a white at this.

Christian White, classic pop face with a singer's high-definition muscles, chiseled cheekbones. Angels in one light, hand solemnly depressed in another. But Ralfi's eyes lived behind that face, and they were small and cold and black.

Please, he said, let's work this out like businessmen. His voice was marked by a horrible prehistoric anxiety and the corners of his beautiful Christian White mouth were always wet. Lewis here, nodding in the bearded director's armchair. Lewis took that impassively looking like something built from a kit. You aren't a meatball, Johnny.

But I am. Ralfi's nice meatball chock-full of implants where you can store your dirty laundry while you go off shopping for people to kill me. From my end of this bag, Ralfi looks like you've got some explaining to do.

"It's the last batch of product, Johnny. He sighed deeply. In my role as broker."

Fence I corrected.

"As broker, I'm usually very careful as to sources."

You buy only from those who steal the best. Got it?

He sighed again. "I try," he said wearily, "not to buy from fools. This time, I'm afraid, I've done that." The third sigh was the cue for Lewis to trigger the neural disruptor they'd taped under my side of the table.

I put everything I had into cursing the in-

box finger of my right hand, but I no longer seemed to be connected to it. I could feel the metal of the gun and the foam-padded tape I'd wrapped around the stubby grip, but my hands were cool wax creatures instead. I was hoping Lewis was a true meatball, thick enough to go for the gym bag and snag my rigid trigger finger, but he wasn't.

"We've been very worried about you, Johnny. Very worried. You see, that's a Yukusa property you have there. A fool took it from them, Johnny. A dead fool."

Lewis giggled.

It all made sense then, an ugly kind of sense like bags of wet sand settling around my head. Krieg wasn't Ralfi's style. Lewis wasn't even Ralfi's style. But he'd got himself stuck between the Sons of the Neds Chrysanthemum and something that belonged to them—or more likely something of theirs that belonged to someone else. Ralfi, of course, could use the code phrase to throw me into idiosyncrasy and I'd spill their hot program without remembering a single quarter tone. For a fence like Ralfi that would ordinarily have been enough. But not for the Yukusa. The Yukusa would know about Squids, for one thing, and they wouldn't want to worry about one thing those damn and permanent traces of their program out of my head. I didn't know very much about Squids, but I'd heard stories and I made it a point never to repeat them to my clients. No, the Yukusa wouldn't like that, it looked too much like evidence. They hadn't got where they were by leaving evidence around. Or alive.

Lewis was grinning. I think he was visualizing a point just behind my forehead and imagining how he could get there the hard way.

"Hey," said a low voice, feminine from somewhere behind my right shoulder, you cowboys sure aren't having too lively a time?"

"Pack it, bitch," Lewis said, his fanned face very red. Ralfi looked blank.

"Lighten up. You want to buy some good free base?" She pulled up a chair and quickly sat before either of them could stop her. She was barely made my fixed field of vision, a thin girl with mirrored glasses, her dark hair cut in a rough shag. She wore black leather, open over a T-shirt slashed diagonally with stripes of red and black. Eight thou a gram weight.

Lewis snorted his exasperation and tried to slip her out of the chair. Somehow he didn't quite connect, and her hand came up

and seemed to brush his wrist as it passed. Bright blood sprayed the table. He was clutching his wrist white-knuckle tight, blood trickling from between his fingers.

But hadn't her hand been empty?

He was going to need a tendon stapler. He stood up carefully without bothering to push his chair back. The chair toppled backward, and he stepped out of my line of sight without a word.

He better get a medic file to look at that she said. That's a nasty cut.

You have no idea," said Ralfi, suddenly sounding very tired. The depths of shit you have just gotten yourself into.

No kidding? Mystery. I get real excited by mysteries. Like why your friend here is so quiet. Frozen, like. Or what this thing here is for, and she held up the little control unit that she'd somehow taken from Lewis. Ralfi looked ill.

"You ah want maybe a quarter million to give me that and take a walk? A fat hand came up to gently stroke his pale lean face nervously.

What I want, she said, snapping her fingers so that the unit spun and glittered. Is work. A job. Your boy hurt his wrist. But a quarter I do for a retainer.

Ralfi let his breath out explosively and began to laugh, exposing teeth that hadn't been kept up to the Christian White standard. Then she turned the disruptor off.

Two million," I said.

My kind of man, she said and laughed. "What's in the bag?"

A shotgun?

Crude. It just might have been a compliment.

Ralfi said nothing at all.

Name's Millions. Molly Millions. You want to get out of here, boss? People are starting to stare. She stood up. She was wearing leather, worn the color of dried blood.

And I saw for the first time that the mirrored lenses were surgical implants, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones sealing her eyes in their sockets. I saw my new face turn red there.

I'm Johnny, I said. We're taking Mr. Face with us.

He was outside, waiting. Looking like your standard tourist tech, in plastic zonks and a silly Hawaiian shirt printed with blow-ups of his firm's most popular microprocessor, a mid-life guy, the kind most likely to wind up drunk on sale in a bar that puts out miniature rice crackers with seaweed garnish. He looked like the kind who sing the

corporate anthem and cry who shake hands endlessly with the bartender. And the pimps and the dealers would leave him alone, pegging him as innately conservative. Not up for much, and careful with his credit when he was.

The way I figured it later, they must have amputated part of his left thumb somewhere behind the first joint, replacing it with a prosthetic tip and cored the stump, fitting it with a spool and socket molded from one of the Omo-Sendai diamond analogs. Then they'd carefully wound the spool with three meters of monofilament filament.

Molly got into some kind of exchange with the Magnetic Dog Sisters, giving me a chance to usher Ralf through the door with the gym bag pressed tightly against the base of his spine. She seemed to know them. I heard the black one laugh.

I glanced up out of some passing reflex maybe because I've never got used to it to the soaring arcs of light and the shadows of the geodesics above them. Maybe that saved me.

Ralf kept walking, but I don't think he was trying to escape. I think he'd already given up. Probably he already had an idea of what we were up against.

I looked back down just in time to see him explode.

Playback on full recall shows Ralf stepping forward as the little tech sidles out of nowhere, smiling. Just a suggestion of a bow, and his left thumb falls off! It's a con junc trick. The thumb hangs suspended. Mirrors? Wires? And Ralf stoops, his back to us, dark crescents of sweat under the arms of his pale summer suit. He knows. He must have known. And then the joke shop thumbtip heavy as lead, arcs out in a lightning yo-yo trick, and the invisible thread connecting it to the killer's hand passes laterally through Ralf's skull, just above his eyebrows, whips up, and descends, slicing the pear-shaped torso diagonally from shoulder to rib cage. Cuts so fine that no blood flows until synapses refine and the first tremors surrender the body to gravity.

Ralf tumbled apart in a pink cloud of fluff, the three mismatched sections rolling forward onto the tiled pavement. They rolled in total silence.

I brought the gym bag up, and my hand convulsed. The recoil nearly broke my wrist.

It must have been raining. Ribbons of water cascaded from a ruptured geodesic and splattered on the tile behind us. We

crouched in the narrow gap between a surgical boutique and an antique shop. She'd just edged one mirrored eye around the corner to report a single Volks module in front of the Drome, red lights flashing. They were swooping Ralf up. Asking questions.

I was covered in scorched white stuff. The tennis socks. The gym bag was a ragged plastic cuff around my wrist. I don't see how the hell I missed him.

"Cause he's fast. So fast." She hugged her knees and rocked back and forth on her boot heels. "His nervous system's jacked up. His factory custom." She grinned and gave a little squeak of delight. "I'm gonna get that boy. Tonight. He's the best number one, top dollar, state of the art."

"What you're going to get, for this boy's two million, is my ass out of here. Your boy friend back there was mostly grown in a vat in Chiba City. He's a Yakuza assassin."

"Chiba. Yeah. See. Molly's been Chiba too." And she showed me her hands, fingers slightly spread. Her fingers were slender, tapered, very white against the polished burgundy nails. Ten blades snicked straight out from their recesses beneath her nails, each one a narrow double-edged scalpel in pale blue steel.

I'd never spent much time in Nighttown. Nobody there had anything to pay me to remember, and most of them had a lot they paid regularly to forget. Generations of sharpshooters had chipped away at the neon until the maintenance crews gave up. Even at noon the arcs were foot-black against lantern pearl.

Where do you go when the world's wealthiest criminal order is feeling for you with calm, distant fingers? Where do you hide from the Yakuza, so powerful that it owns corsairs and at least three shuttles? The Yakuza is a true multinational, like ITT and Omo-Sendai. Fifty years before I was born, the Yakuza had already absorbed the Trade, the Malas, the Union Corse.

Molly had an answer. You hide in the Pit in the lowest circle, where any outside influence generates swift, concerning replies of raw menace. You hide in Nighttown. Better yet, you hide above Nighttown, because the Pitts inverted, and the bottom of its bowl touches the sky, the sky that Nighttown never sees, sweating under its own firmament of acrylic resin, up where the Lo Teis crouch in the dark like gargoyle black-market gantries dangling from their lips.

She had another answer too. So you're locked up good and tight.

Johnny-san? No way to get that program without the password? She led me into the shadows that waited beyond the bright tube platform. The concrete walls were overlaid with graffiti, years of them twisting into a single merascale of rage.

The stored data are fed in through a modified series of microsurgical contraption prostheses. I needed off a num version of my standard sales pitch. "Clerti's code is stored in a special chip, bearing Squids, which we in the trade don't like to talk about. There's no way to recover your phrase. Can't drug it out, cut it out, torture it.

I don't know if it never did."

Squids? Crawly thing with arms?" We emerged into a deserted street market. Shadow figures watched us from across a makeshift square, lit with halogen heads and rotating huts.

"Superconducting quantum interference detectors. Used them in the war to find submarines, suss out enemy cybersystems."

"Yeah? Navy stuff? From the war? Squid II need that chip of yours? She'd stopped walking, and I felt her eyes on me behind those twin mirrors.

Even the primitive models could measure a magnetic field a billion times the strength of geomagnetic force. It's like pulling a whisper out of a cheering stadium."

Cops can do that already with parabolic microphones and lasers.

"But your data's still secure." Pride in profession. "No government'll let their cops have Squids, not even the security heavies. Too much chance of interdepartmental funnies, they're too likely to watergate you."

"Navy stuff," she said, and her grin gleamed in the shadows. "Navy stuff. I gotta friend down here who was in the Navy Name's Jones. I think you'd better meet him. He's a junkie, though. So we'll have to take him something."

"A junkie?"

"A dolphin."

He was more than a dolphin, but from another dolphin's point of view he might have seemed like something less. I watched him swing sluggishly in his galvanized tank. Water sloshed over the side, wetting my shoes. He was surplus from the last war. A cyborg.

He rose out of the water, showing us the crushed plates along his sides, a kind of visual pun, his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric. Twin

deformities on either side of his skull had been engineered to house sensor units. Silver lesions gleamed on exposed sections of his gray-white hide.

Molly whistled. Jones thrashed his tail, and more water cascaded down the side of the tank.

"What is this place?" I peered at vague shapes in the dark, rusting chainlink and things under tarp. Above the tank hung a clumsey wooden framework, crossed and recrossed by rows of dusty Christmas lights.

"Funland Zoo and carnival rides. Teek with the War Whale. All that. Some whale Jones is."

Jones reared again and fixed me with a sad and ancient eye.

"How's he talk?" Suddenly I was anxious to go.

"That's the catch. Say hi, Jones." And all the bulbs simultaneously They were flashing red, white and blue.

RWBTRWBRWB
RWBTRWSRWB
RWBRWBWRWB
RWBRWBWRWB
RWBRWBWRWB

"Good with symbols see, but the code's restricted. In the Navy they had him weed into an audiovisual display." She drew the narrow package from a jacket pocket. "Pure shit, Jones. Want it?" He leaped in the water and started to sink. I felt a strange panic, remembering that he wasn't a fish, that he could drown. "We want the key to Johnny's bank, Jones. We want it fast."

The lights flickered, died.
"Go for it, Jones!"

B
BBBBBBBBBBB
B
B
B

Blue bulbs, cruciform.
Darkness

"Punc! It's clear. Come on, Jones."
WWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWW

White sodium glass washed her features stark monochrome, shadows cleaving from her cheekbones:

R RRRRR
R R
RRRRRRRRRR
R R
RRRRRR R

The arms of the red swastika were twisted in her silver glasses. "Give it to him," I said. "We've got it."

Ralf Face No imagination

Jones heaved half his armored bulk over the edge of his tank, and I thought the metal would give way. Molly stabbed him overhand with the syringe, driving the needle between two plates. Propellant hissed. Patterns of light exploded, speaming across the frame and then fading to black.

We left him drifting, rolling lazily in the dark water. Maybe he was dreaming of his war in the Pacific, of the cyber mines he'd swept, noseus gently into their circuitry with the Squid head used to pick Ralf's password from the chip buried in my head.

"I can see them slipping up when he was demobbed, letting him out of the Navy with that gear intact, but how does a cybernetic dolphin get wired to smack?"

"The war," she said. "They all were. Navy did it. How else you get 'em working for you?"

"I'm not sure this profites as good business," the pirate said, angling for better money. "Target specs on a comsat that isn't in the book—"

Waste my time and you won't profit at all," said Molly leaning across he scamed plastic desk to prod him with her forefinger.

So maybe you want to buy your micro-waves somewhere else? He was a tough lad, behind his May-job. A Nightowner by birth, probably.

Her hand blurred down the front of his jacket, completely savvoring a lapel without even jumpling the fabric.

"So we got a deal or not?"

"Deal," I rasped, staring at his named lapel with what he must have hoped was only polite interest. "Deal."

While I checked the two recorders we'd bought, she extracted the slip of paper I'd given her from the zippered wrist pocket of her jacket. She unfolded it and read silently moving her lips. She shrugged. "This is it?"

"Shoot," I said, punching the record studs of the two decks simultaneously.

"Christian White," she recited, "and his Aryan Reggae Band."

Faithful Ralf, a fan to his dying day.

Transition to idiot/savant mode is always less abrupt than I expect it to be. The pirate broadcaster's front was a failing travel agency in a pastel cube that boasted a desk, three chairs and a faded poster of a Swiss orbital spa. A pair of toy birds with

blown-glass bodies and fin legs were sipping monotonously from a styrofoam cup of water on a ledge beside Molly's shoulder. As it phased into mode, they accelerated gradually until their Day-Glo-leathered crowns became solid arcs of color. The LEDs that told seconds on the plastic wall clock had become meaningless pulsing grids, and Molly and the Mao-faced boy grew hazy, their arms blurring occasionally in insect-quick ghosts of gesture. And then it all faded to cool gray static and an endless lone poem in an artificial language.

I sat and sang dead Ralf's stolen grammar for three hours.

The mall runs forty kilometers from end to end, a ragged overlap of Fuller domes roofing what was once a suburban artery. If they turn off the arcs on a clear day, a gray approximation of sunlight filters through layers of acrylic; a view like the prison sketches of Giovanni Pisanos. The three southernmost kilometers root Nighthown Nighthown pays no taxes, no utilities. The neon arcs are dead, and the geodesics have been smoked black by decades of cooking fires. In the nearly total darkness of a Nighthown moon who notices a few dozen mad children lost in the rathe?

We'd been climbing for two hours, up concrete stairs and steel ladders with perforated rungs, past abandoned gantries and dust-covered tools. We'd started in what looked like a disused maintenance yard, stacked with triangular roofing segments. Everything there had been covered with that same uniform layer of spraybomb graffiti: gang names, initials, dates back to the turn of the century. The graffiti followed us up, gradually thinning until a single name was repeated at intervals: LO TEK. In draping black capitals.

"Who's Lo Tek?"

"Not us, boss." She climbed a shivering aluminum ladder and vanished through a hole in a sheet of corrugated plastic. "Low technique, low technology." The plastic muffled her voice. I followed her up, nursing my aching wrist. Lo Tek, they think that shotgun trick of yours was effe-

An hour later I dragged myself up through another hole, this one sawn crookedly in a sagging sheet of plywood, and met my first Lo Tek.

"S'okay," Molly said, her hand brushing my shoulder. "It's just Dog. Hey Dog."

In the narrow beam of her taped flashlight, he regarded us with one eye and slowly extruded a thick length of grayish tongue, look-

ing huge canines. I wondered how they wrote off tooth-bud transplants from Dobermanns as low technology. Immunosuppressives don't exactly grow on trees.

"Mol." Dental augmentation impeded his speech. A string of salvia dangled from his twisted lower lip. "Heed ya comin' Long time." He might have been fifteen, but the fangs and a bright mosaic of scars combined with the gaping socket to present a mask of total bestiality. It had taken time and a certain kind of creativity to assemble that face, and his posture told me he enjoyed living behind it. He wore a pair of decaying jeans, black with grime and shiny along the creases. His chest and feet were bare. He did something with his mouth that approximated a grin. "Bein' followed, you."

Paid off down in Nighttown, a water vein drained his trade.

"String jumping, Dog?" She swung her flashlight to the side and I saw thin corded-to eyebolts, cords that ran to the edge and vanished.

"Kil the fuckin' light!"

She snapped it off.

"How come the one who's followin' you's got no light?"

"Ocean I need if. That one's bad news. Dog. You sinness give him a tumble they'll come home in easy-to-carry sections."

"This a friend friend? Mol?" He sounded uneasy. I heard his feet shift on the worn plywood.

"No. But he's mine. And this one...slapping my shoulder, he's a friend. Got that?"

"Sure," he said, without much enthusiasm, padding the the platform's edge where the eyebolts were. He began to pluck out some kind of message on the taut cords.

Nighttown spread beneath us like a toy village for rats. tiny windows showed candlelight with only a few harsh, bright squares lit by battery lanterns and carbide lamps. I imagined the old men at their endless games of dominos, under warm fat drops of water that fell from wet wash hung out on poles between the plywood shanties. Then I tried to imagine him climbing patiently up through the darkness in his zone and ugly tourist shirt, blind and unarmed. How was he tracking us?

"Good," said Molly. "He smells us."

"Smoke?" Dog dragged a crumpled pack from his pocket and pried out a flattened cigarette. I squinted at the trademark while he lit it for me with a kitchen match.

Yihyuin likes: Being Cigarette Factory. I decided that the Lo Tek were black marketeers. Dog and Molly went back to their argument which seemed to revolve around Molly's desire to use some particular piece of Lo Tek real estate.

"I've done you a lot of favors, man. I want that floor. And I want the music."

"You're not Lo Tek."

This must have been going on for the better part of a twisted kilometer. Dog leading us along swaying catwalks and up rope ladders. The Lo Tek's leach their webs and huddling places to the city's fabric with thick gobs of epoxy and sleep above the abyss in mesh hammocks. Their country is so alienated that in places it consists of little more than holes for hands and feet sown into geodesic stabs.

The Killing Floor, she called it. Scrambling after her, my new Eddie Box shoves skipping on worn metal and damp plywood. I wondered how it could be any more ethereal than the rest of the territory. At the same time I sensed that Dog's protests were ritual and that she already expected to get whatever it was she wanted.

Somewhere beneath us Jones would be circling his tank, feeling the first twinges of junk sickness. The police would be coming. The Chrome regulars with questions about Relli. What did he do? Who was he before he stepped outside? And the Yakuza would be settling its ghostly bills over the city's data banks, probing for faint images of me reflected in numbered accounts, securities transactions, bills for utilities. We're an information economy. They teach you that in school. What they don't tell you is that it's impossible to move to live to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified.

But by now the pirate would have shutted our message into line for blackbox transmission to the Yakuza comet. A simple message. Call off the dogs or we will bend your program.

The program. I had no idea what it contained. I still don't. I only sing the song, with zero comprehension. It was probably research data, the Yakuza being given to advanced forms of industrial espionage. A gentle business, stealing from Omo-Sen-dai as a matter of course and politely holding their data for ransom, threatening to blunt the conglomerate's research edge by making the product public.

But why couldn't any number play?

Wouldn't they be happier with something to sell back to Omo-Sen-dai, happier than they'd be with one dead Johnny from Memory Lane?

Their program was on its way to an address in Sydney to a place that held letters for clients and didn't ask questions once you'd paid a small retainer. Fourth-class surface mail. I'd erased most of the other copy and recorded our message in the resulting gap, leaving just enough of the program to identify it as the real thing.

My wrist hurt. I wanted to stop. To lie down to sleep. I knew that I'd lose my grip and fall upon, knew that the sharp black shoes I'd bought for my evening as Eddie Box would lose their purchase and carry me down to Nighttown. But he robed in my mind like a cheap religious hologram, glowing; the enlarged chip on his Hawaiian shirt looming like a reconnaissance shot of some doomed urban nucleus.

So I followed Dog and Molly through Lo Tek heaven, jury-rigged and jury-built from scraps that even Nighttown didn't want.

The Killing Floor was eight meters on a side. A giant had threaded steel cable back and forth through a junkyard and drawn taut. It creaked when it moved, and it moved constantly, swaying and bucking as the gathering Lo Tek arranged themselves on the shelf of plywood surrounding it. The wood was silver with age, polished with long use and deeply etched with initials, threats, declarations of passion. This was suspended from a separate set of cables which lost themselves in darkness beyond the raw white glow of the two ancient floods suspended above the Floor.

A girl with teeth like Dog sat the Floor on all fours. Her breasts were tattooed with indigo spirals. Then she was across the Floor laughing, grappling with a boy who was drinking dark liquid from a liter flask.

Lo Tek fashion ran to scars and tattoos. And teeth. The electricity they were tapping to light the Killing Floor seemed to be an exception to their overall esthetic, made in the name of...stainless sport art? I didn't know but I could see that the Floor was something special. If had the look of having been assembled over generations.

I held the useless shotgun under my jacket. Its hardness and heat were comforting, even though I had no more shells. And it came to me that I had no idea of what was happening, or of what was supposed to happen. And that was the nature of my game because I'd spent most of my life as a blind receptacle to be filled with other

people's knowledge and then drained spouting synthetic languages I'd never understand. A very technical boy. Sure.

And then I noticed just how quiet the Lo Tekks had become.

He was there at the edge of the light taking in the Killing Floor and the gallery of silent Lo Tekks with a faint smile. And as our eyes met for the first time with mutual recognition, a memory clicked into place for me of Paris and the long Mercedes elegies gliding through the rain to Notre Dame mobile greenhouse, Japanese faces behind the glass, and a hundred Nikons rising in blind photostomps. Towers of steel and crystal behind his eyes as they found me those same shutters whirring.

I looked for Molly Millions, but she was gone.

The Lo Tekks parted to let him step up onto the bench. He bowed, smiling, and stepped smoothly out of his sandals and down onto the Killing Floor. And then he came for me.

Molly hit the Floor, moving.

The Floor screamed.

It was mixed and amplified, with pickups riding the four fat coil springs at the corners and contact mixes taped at random to rusting machine fragments. Somewhere the Lo Tekks had an amp and a synthesizer, and now I made out the shapes of speakers overhead, above the cruel white floods.

A drumbeat began, electronic, like an amplified heart, steady as a metronome.

She'd removed her leather jacket and took her T-shirt was sleeveless, bare telltales of Cuba City circuitry traced along her thin arms. Her leather jeans gleamed under the floods. She began to dance.

She flexed her knees, white foot lenses on a fathered gas tank, and the Killing Floor began to heave in response. The sound it made was like a world ending, like the wings that hold heaven snapping and coiling across the sky.

He rode with it, for a few heartbeats, and then he moved, judging the movement of the Floor perfectly, like a man stepping from one flat stone to another in an ornamental garden.

He pulled the tip from his thumb with the grace of a man at ease with social creature and flung it at her. Under the floods the filament was a refracting thread of rainbow. She threw herself flat and rolled jackknifing up as the molecule whipped past, steel claws snapping into the light in what must have been an automatic nucleus of defense.

The drum pulse quickened, and she bounced with it, her dark hair wild around the blank silver lenses, her mouth thin, lips fault with concentration. The Killing Floor boomed and roared, and the Lo Tekks were screaming their expletives.

He retracted the filament to a whirling meter-wide circle of ghostly polychrome and spun it in front of her, thumbless hand held level with her stomach. A shield.

And Molly seemed to let something go, something inside, and that was the real start of her mad-dog dance. She jumped, twisting, lunging sideways, landing with both feet on an alloy engine block, wired directly to one of the coil springs. I cupped my hands over my ears and leaned in a vertigo of sound, thinking Floor and benches were on their way down, down to Nighttown, and I saw us bearing through the shanties, the wet wash, exploding on the tiles like rotten fruit. But the cables held, and the Killing Floor rose and fell like a crazy mental sea. And Molly danced on it.

And at the end, just before he made his final cast with the filament, I saw something in his face, an expression that didn't seem to belong there. It wasn't fear and it wasn't anger. I think it was disbelief, stunned incomprehension mingled with pure aesthetic revulsion at what he was seeing hearing—at what was happening to her. He retracted the whirling filament, the ghost disc shrinking to the size of a dinner plate as he whipped up his arm above his head and brought it down, the thumbtip curving out for Molly like a lightning bolt.

The Floor carried her down, the molecule passing just above her head. The Floor whistled, lifting him into the path of the taut molecule. It should have passed harmlessly over his head and been withdrawn into its diamond-hard socket. It took his hand just off just behind the wrist. There was a gap in the floor in front of him, and he went through it like a diver with a strange deliberate grace, a defeated kamikaze on his way down to Nighttown Party. I think he took that dive to buy himself a few seconds of the dignity of silence. She'd killed him with culture shock.

The Lo Tekks roared, but someone shut the amplifier off, and Molly rode the Killing Floor into silence, hanging on now, her face white and blank, until the pitching slowed and there was only a faint ping-pong of tortured metal and the grating of rust on rust.

We searched the Floor for the severed hand, but we never found it. All we found

was a graceful curve in one piece of rusted steel where the molecule went through its edge, was bright as new chrome.

We never learned whether the Yakuza had accepted our terms, or even whether they got our message. Astars as I know their program is still waiting for Eddie Basz on a shelf in the back room of a gift shop on the third level of Sydney Central-3. Probably they sold the original back to Chon-Senda months ago. But maybe they did get the private's broadcast, because nobody's come looking for me yet, and it's been nearly a year. If they do come, they'll have a long climb up through the dark, past Dog's sweater, and I don't look much like Eddie Basz these days. Let Molly take care of that, with a local anesthetic. And my new teeth have almost grown in.

I decided to stay up here. When I looked out across the Killing Floor before he came I saw how hollow I was. And I knew I was sick of being a bucket. So now I climb down and visit Jones almost every night.

We're partners now. Jones and I, and Molly Millions too. Molly handles our business in the Drama. Jones is still in Funland, but he has a bigger tank, with fresh seawater trucked in once a week. And he has his junk, what he needs it. He still takes to the kids with his frame of lights, but he takes to me on a new display unit in a shed that I rent there, a better unit than the one he used in the Navy.

And we're all making good money, better money than I made before, because Jones's Squad can read the traces of anything that anyone ever stored in me, and he gives it to me on the display unit in languages I can understand. So we're learning a lot about all my former clients. And one day I'll have a surgeon dig all the silicon out of my armgirdles, and I'll live with my own memories and nobody else's, the way other people do. But not for a while.

In the meantime I'm really okay up here, way up in the dark, smoking a Chinese filter tip and listening to the condensation that drops from the geodesics. Real quiet up here—unless a pair of Lo Tekks decide to dance on the Killing Floor.

It's educational, too. With Jones to help me figure things out, I'm getting to be the most technical boy in town.

William Gibson is a full-time writer who resides in Vancouver, British Columbia. His fiction has appeared in two Doubleday anthologies, *Universe 71* and *Shadows 4*.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER ONE



PAUL
WUNDERLICH
ARTIST



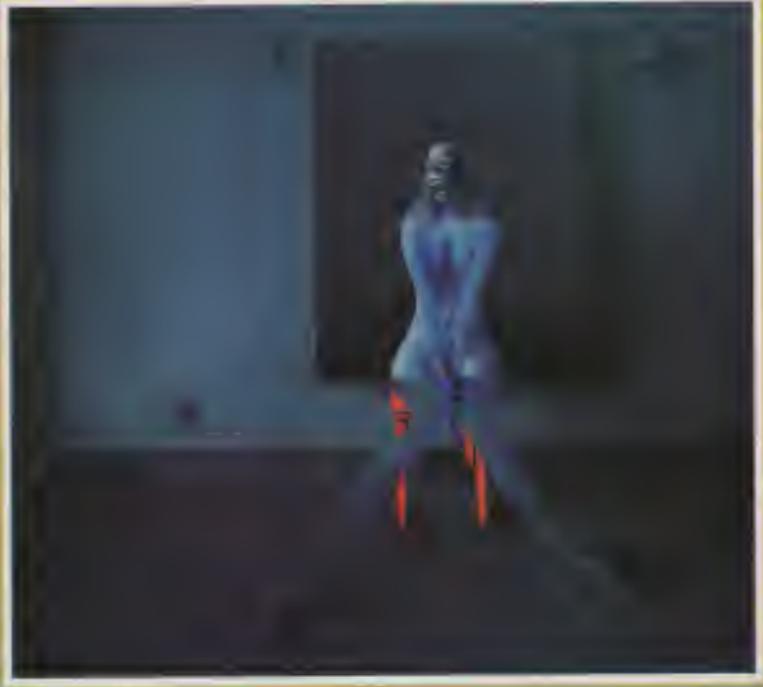
BUILDING BRIDGES



The combined disciplines of engineering, design, strategy, teamwork, entrepreneurship, and experimental expression can fuel growth and innovation. That's why students at the University of Michigan have come up with a new program called "Bridge," which is designed to bring together students from different fields of study and encourage them to work together on projects that will benefit society. The program is currently in its first year and has already received support from several companies and organizations.

Bridge is a multidisciplinary program that brings together students from various fields of study, including engineering, design, strategy, entrepreneurship, and experimental expression. The program is designed to help students develop skills in teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, while also providing them with opportunities to work on real-world projects that have a positive impact on society. The success of the program has been attributed to its unique approach, which emphasizes collaboration and cross-disciplinary learning. The program has already received support from several companies and organizations, including Ford Motor Company, General Motors, and the National Science Foundation.

BY THOMAS G. WILSON



Levi-Strauss' reports very interestingly. Paul Bograd, a member of his group, "has an enormous need for personal mystery," says one of his colleagues. "And he is usually a cold, calculating type that would be called 'dumb.' He is more like a computer than a human being." According to another colleague, "He has no sense of the conscious mind; he does not think." But Bograd's work is based on dreams and what he pretends are "visions" based on observations and, thus, is highly creative.







...and the artist's own life, which is different from that of the painter. He has a sense of the history of Western culture, a sense of comedy, a sense of irony, a sense of paradox. He gives things a more serious dimension than he has done previously on works of earlier years. For example, Manet. Wunderlich sees himself as a bit like Manet, with a sense of experience relevant to modern life. As for the exhibition of himself? That's not a subject for art, you know.

A
HARLAN
ELLISON
CELEBRATION

T

There are titles and then there are titles. For the exemplary, consider Robert Silverberg's "The Soul Painter and the Shapeshifter", Spider Robinson's "Rubber Soul," a story concerning the resurrection of John Lennon, Patrice Duvic's "The Eyes on Butterflies' Wings", Tom Sullivan's "The Mickey Mouse Olympics", Alfred Bester's "Galatea Galante"—one each from the preceding five volumes in this series. Now, as befits the author celebrated here, Number Six is emblazoned with "Chained to the Fast Lane in the Red Queen's Race." It's a never-before-published story—published, in fact, almost as quickly as Harlan Ellison completed it. And it does his fine reputation justice—its title and content both.

Ever a powerful and compelling writer, Ellison, in "When Auld's Acquaintance Is Forgot" (reprinted from *Omni*) grips us in a compulsion involving the persistence of memory and the possibilities of reperthe in a future society. Chilling.

Richly worded, tightly controlled, tensely paced—these are the characteristics that partially make up the Ellison style. There is another part that is magical, it's the part that sets off every great storyteller, and it is amply represented in "On the Slab" (also reprinted from *Omni*).

It is appropriate that titlemaker-storyteller Harlan Ellison join Orson Scott Card and Robert Silverberg in *The Best of Omni Science Fiction's Celebrated Circle*.



*It was the best of all the
countless lives he'd lived, and
Walter wanted to stay*

CHAINED TO THE FAST LANE IN THE RED QUEEN'S RACE

BY HARLAN ELLISON

Over cappuccino and key lime pie he told her that even though it wouldn't seem as if he was going away, he was, in fact, going away. Farther than she could imagine.

"I'll go with you. Take me with you. She started to cry. Nothing's holding me here. I can go with you."

So he told her that though he could not take her, that he could take nothing, and no one with him, she needn't worry about his being gone, because he would be here. With her.

She thought he was speaking in metaphor, invoking that occasional spirituality in him na-

ture that was a large part of his attraction. "I don't want the memory of you . . . I want you!" she said urgently.

"I'll be me. I'll be here, except that it won't be this me. It'll be the next one over."

She got hysterical at that and he quickly came around the table dinner table that she had polished so assiduously with lemon oil in joyous expectation of having dinner with him, and he held her tightly. His unappiness made somehow supportable by the mingled odors of her recently washed hair and the lemon oil. "I love you," she sobbed. He told her he

knew that, and he said he loved her too, and he told her not to cry, because it was going to be all right. All of which was true. Then he told her that she might not even realize it wasn't him but some other him, which was also true. But it made her more hysterical.

Then he said the truest thing about their relationship. He said, "We didn't really fall in love. What we did was collide at the intersection of your life and mine."

She had no idea what that really meant, but she took it to mean he had fallen out of love with her, and he was abandon-

ing her and she ran away from him locked herself in the bathroom and he left, not wanting to cause her any more anguish. Because in truth he had loved her more than any woman he had ever known in this life. In his life.

But he had only resided in this life for eleven months.

He left her then gathering up his jacket and muffler and the little Steinway glass panda he had found gift-wrapped on his place at the dinner table. The chances of carrying the figurine through were not good but he wanted to try.

Wanted to try not only because it would have been cruelly for her to come out of the bathroom find him gone and see the invaluable deer gift left behind. Wanted to try because he felt he should try to remember her.

Forgetting her as he had forgotten so many others from so many lives past was inevitable. But like a child who saves a special seashell a memorable rock, a useless lanyard from summer camp in order that the memories will not fade too quickly he always tried to carry some memento through.

He was alone in the creaking ancient elevator when he felt himself going. Like the onset of the flu. He had left it coming as they had sat eating dinner. The dryness in the nasal passages the unpleasant feeling at the back of his throat that he had never been able to describe, save by comparing it to the gnawing discomfort that accompanies the too-rapid consumption of too much ice cream the burning in the eyes the aching pains in hip and finger joints.

He was relieved that he had felt the onset of the slippage and had gotten away before he vanished. Otherwise how could she have reconciled the appearance of the other man when he was gone?

He leaned against the wall of the elevator hoping no one had pressed the button on a lower floor, hoping he would go quietly before the elevator reached the lobby, and he drew in long deep shuddering breaths.

And in a moment he had slipped through.

The elevator was empty. A faint scintillation in the air and a not unpleasant odor the smell of sunshine on dusky Concord grapes bursting on their vines.

He was gone from that life. His name had been Alan Justes. And he was gone.

At precisely the instant that Alan Justes somnolent out of existence in an elevator traveling between the fifteenth and fourteenth floors of an apartment building on East 63rd Street in New York City a man

who looked exactly like Alan Justes emerged from the doorway of Steinway & Sons, the famous piano makers on East 57th Street, who had closed for the evening three hours earlier and he hurried toward Fifth Avenue on his way to 63rd Street. He was dressed quite differently from Alan Justes which would cause momentary confusion when eighteen minutes hence he would ring the doorknob of that certain apartment on the twentieth floor of the building on East 63rd. A moment of pain and confusion that would be compounded when the door was opened and he would say to the attractive brunet whose eyes were swollen from crying "Hi Katherine? I'm Alan. Because he would say it and not spell it she would not realize till weeks later that he was no longer A-I-a-n but someone named A-U-a-n. There were other minor differences as well a mole on the left shoulder no longer existed, the lyrics to a number of popular songs were absent from his available repertoire for singing in the shower he now liked Brussels sprouts the buffalo-head nickel he carried as a lucky piece would soon be spent with the rest of the change in his pocket because for Alan it had no special significance.

But later that night in bed Katherine would perceive a subtle, salutary difference between the man who had walked out of her apartment and the man who had returned less than half an hour later.

It is an ill wind that blows no one some good.

Alan breathed deeply as he passed through the membrane. It might not have been a membrane. But it felt very much like pressing one's face against a balloon pushing steadily and without discomfort into a resilient surface. And in a timeless moment he was through. His right hand, which had been in his jacket pocket holding the glass panda was now empty. Goodbye, Kathy he thought, and put her out of his mind as the memory faded faded.

"You can't sleep here, buddy," said a voice. Move it along.

He looked up. By moonlight he saw the not-unkind face of a cop staring down at him. There were broken veins in his round cheeks and on the bushy bulb of his nose. He drinks Alan thought. But then if I had to spend my nights waiting for teenage creeps to rob convenience marts, I'd drink too.

"I'm not sleeping Officer," Alan said getting to his feet. "I'm sitting thinking con-

templating the moon and the steady passage of the hours." He was eloquent in this new life, he liked that.

It was a doorway in which he stood. Now he stepped out onto the sidewalk. A section of residential buildings well-tended town houses near entranceways. Traffic was light. The first car he noticed had no wheels. It shushed past on what appeared to be an air-cushion mechanism. There was no unpleasant exhaust smell.

The cop examined him, stepping back to give him room in case a gun or knife might materialize in a hand. The cop's manner altered instantly as he perceived the cut of suit was expensive the shoes so highly polished they reflected both streetlight and moonlight, the face shaved. The hair combed. The faint scent of lime aftershave. "Sorry to startle you like that sir. Thought you might be an old skid catching forty winks."

"No harm done Officer," Alan said. The cement was cool and I was stalling the return home.

Why it's Mr. Justman isn't it? Alan's face was full in the light now. He smiled at the cop. They stood staring at each other for another second, then the cop said "Well say hello to your mother for me Mr. Justman. And he touched the shiny black visor of his cap with his stubby left hand in a gesture as old as the deference paid by city employees to those known as gentry. And he walked away leaving Alan Justman to contemplate the necessity of going home.

He stood in the channel of street and the sound of a speckly sirenhorn saxophone cut through the empty moment. He looked up at the few bright windows but could not find the source of the music. I have to go home, he thought. And the thought reinterpreted itself visually in his mind as a dark, ominous rush of water slithering into the distance. Smooth, slick oily shapes briefly breaking the surface of the heather frightening shapes cruising along were caught in the moonlight of his mind. I have to go home. Mother will be worried.

He let himself into the darkened townhouse. The beaded lamp on theoyer credenza threw an asthmatic glow halfway up the stairs. Mother's elevator-chair was at the top of the belustrade. So she was in bed already. The day nurse would have put her down tucked her in and left her to the company of the bizarre coteries. He stood with one hand on the newel post, a foot on the

lowest step, and he listened. From above-stairs he could hear the sound of malicious laughter and that same ugly star music Job-hann insisted on playing all night.

He started to turn away.

"Aren't you coming up, Alvin?" He looked up as the voice of the woman caught him in a noose of command.

She stood there half-shrouded in darkness, but not even the shadows pooled at the head of the stairs could hide the luminous expanse of thigh and leg her parted dressing gown revealed. She touched the corner of her mouth with a fingertip. Black lacquered fingernail against her lower lip.

He climbed the stairs slowly. Breathing steadily, she waited for him. And when he was one step below the landing she reached out and put her hand behind his neck, drawing his face toward her. She looked down into his eyes and smiled a feral smile of possession. Your mother is weeping. Everyone's been weeping.

Then she led him up and into the master bedroom where the lights were low and the pale throng moved on a silent tide around the yellowed figure of his mother propped up on her pillows in the great canopied bed.

It was not as bad a night as it might have been. The blind child was not there. Nor the woman without arms.

He was a Chinese puzzle box, a box within a box within a box.

A Russian capsule doll which, when the halves were broken open, revealed a smaller doll nestled inside; a smaller doll which when opened, exposed an even smaller doll, down and down and down to the most minuscule doll secreted at the core of the largest, so tiny its features were indistinguishable.

Like Gurdjieff and Giordano Bruno and Tesla before him, like Cagliostro and David Hume, like Comteux and Prester John and Iby the historian, and like Brahmagupta, Muhammad, Cassiodorus, and even the poet Sylvia Plath, he had discovered—in a blinding epiphany on no special day one day—that there was no such thing as luck. Nor such a thing as serendipity, no such thing as synchronism. No single life of random chance existed. No single life was led by any breathing mortal.

He learned there was only slipping across from one life to the next. One life that gave onto the next, slightly different, and beyond that the doorway to the next life, and the next.

He learned that humans were immortal

Life was not of a finite length, not of a proscribed duration. Life was *several*. Each spark of life—reincarnated as incorrectly perceived in an analogue of the reality—traveled through consecutive existences in contiguous universes, replenished and reformed as a new individual. But each altered from the life just behind, altered still more when it became the next one ahead.

He came to think of the totality of existence as baklava, the Armenian pastry made up of thousands of singless-thin layers, one atop the others, so lightly pressed one could not differentiate among them, could not know when one had bitten through to the next.

There was no luck, merely slipping through the membrane into the next universe layer, assuming a new variation of self. And sometimes it was a better variation, and that was a day in which everything went right. And sometimes it was a worse variation, and that was a day in which random troubles compounded till life was not worth living.

Reality was a shunting station, an invisible railroad terminal without end, and through that switching station every soul that had ever existed came and went moving on to its next manifestation of self—all unaware as memory of the transfer was obliterated by passage—all unaware that today's self was a vaguely familiar but completely different entity than yesterday's self.

But like Da Vinci and Karl Marx and William James before him, something had gone wrong and he had not lost the memory of where and who he had been. Imperfectly shadowy in retrospect, neither amnesia nor forgetfulness, came the realization that like cats nudging each other over from food bowl to food bowl, he was being pushed from life to life by the man behind him. And in turn, he was pushing the man next in line. He could not understand coexistence in the same universe with another of himself.

It was a journey without end.

How many hundreds, thousands, millions of lives he had led since he had been born...he could not begin to sum up.

And how he longed to find the perfect life. To stop the flow. To halt and feel no pressure to move along. The cap that was the life-flow would not stop him on the sole of his shoe and order him to get up, move it along, buddy. To teach a life that was pleasing, rewarding, foreseeable. And to stop.

But every man behind him was also seek-

ing the good life, and they kept the pressure constant.

Who would want to be stuck in a life such as the one he now shared with his mother and her society of twisted degenerates? Alvin Justman longed for checklist time.

"Where were you last night?" his mother asked. Her voice was thin and filled with caution. How much longer could she live in her condition? The day nurse and the scared hunchback who told her fortune ministered to the old woman. They hustled around the bed, fluffing, inoculating, moistening, touching the sores. He stared at the tableau and said: "Mother, why don't you let me kill you so you can pass on to the next bright world?"

Her lips trembled before she spoke. "What are you talking about? I raised you. The least you can do is stay by me till the end."

"There is no end in sight, Mother."

"Thank God for the wonders of medical science." A tube clamped to her throat made bubbling sounds.

"Yes, Thank God," Alvin said.

"And so," she said, "where were you last night? The session had to be put off. We needed that occasional spirituality in your nature that is my son, a large part of your attractiveness."

"I was out walking, my mother. Communicating with the cosmos and the cap on the beat."

She stared at him through milky insets. "Sometimes I wonder if you are indeed, my child."

"Sometimes you're not alone in wondering," he replied. Then cheerily he asked again. "So there's no matricide in the cards today, is that right?"

The day nurse turned to him. "She's asleep again."

"Thank God for the wonders of medical science," he murmured, and left the bedroom. Somewhere behind him a man named Alan was enjoying a better life than the one he had left, leaning with just cause the life that lay ahead. /'ve got to get the hell out of here, Alvin Justman thought.

But all he could do was apply pressure. And if it was a better life ahead, there would be a man who would resist that pressure as Alan Justman had resisted until Alan grew strong enough to effect the transition.

And so far, for the next nine years, Alvin lived in that dark townhouse with the ever-changing clique of human refuse and with his dear mother, thankful for the wonders of

medical science.

On a Sunday night, stoking the ancient furnace in the basement, still wincing from the pain of the straight razor wound into which they had poured the hot wax, he left himself trembling with self-loathing and hysteria and the angst of slippage. He began to cry with relief. Thank God, he thought.

And in a moment he was preexisting against the membrane, feeling compassion for whichever man was at that moment emerging into the world of mother and her minors.

And in another moment he was through into his next life, where he was Elvin Luckman, a young man whose mother had just died and who desolate with the loss had signed up for the merchant marine. Two years later, understanding at last that the extended series of heartbreaking, empty liaisons he had had with women who despised and ridiculed him was an attempt to pay penance for his mother's death, he also came to understand that this life was destined to be a tragic one. His mother's death, an inevitability for which he bore no accountability after they had opened her and discovered the carcinoma had metastasized like ergotism in a field of rye, had become the central issue of his existence.

He became celibate, withdrawn, obscure to the point of laying out his clothes and standing his watch aboard ship in harmony with the lines of tellurian force he had found described in a worthless book of crackpot mysticism in a backstreet bookshop in Hong Kong.

He sanity slipped from him, day by day, and without the companionship of friends he had no sticking-post to which his roiling mind could adhere. Strange phantasms and arcane beliefs assailed him. Standing watch, as the sea billowed around him, he held conversations with himself. And only occasionally was he rational enough to remember that there was a life beyond this one.

Finally, what saved him was the walking terror of the life in which he had been Alvin Justman. The pressure behind him.

The life with mother and her band of freaks.

The life he, Elvin, had totally forgotten. But there had been another man who had emerged into that monstrous venue, and like Alvin before him, Alvin washed out! The pressure was significant.

And during shore leave in London, Elvin

Luckman felt the breath-catching unpleasantness of having eaten too much ice cream too quickly. He lay down in the bottom of the punt on the Serpentine, and in a moment was gone from that place.

Overtime for use of the punt went unpaid and the quayside entrepreneur who rented the little boats not only had to absorb the loss, but was required to pay three pounds six to the son of the man who located the punt.

It is an ill wind.

Into a life as William Luckin. A life working in a vacuum-seal circuit-encoding factory in Liverpool. Life without color. Life without change. Life that was no life. Three years.

Into a life as Wilhelm Richter. Life of desperation for everyone around him. He knew how intelligent he was. He knew it was bad breaks, the efforts of those around him who were crazed with jealousy at his gifts, that and that alone keeping him from ascendancy. He despised having to smile at them, loathed having to kowtow to them, hated them for their enjoyment of his subservient position. He knew Iris was having an affair with one of her old paramours, knew that too, but not which one. Nine months, fifteen days.

Into a life as Waldemar van Rensburg, who lived within sight of The Hague and had a perfectly pleasant, if uneventful life. Wife Tana, three children. Hans, Karol, Wilhelmina (after the Queen, rest her soul), small tobacco shop, three weeks in Belgium every year. Only a year—Wilhelm was mad with his life and pushed hard from behind—and he was nudged into the next layer of baklava.

The slippage did not go smoothly.

It was as if he were being born again. Pushing, pressing, thrusting against the membrane. It would not give. As if this entrapment were of a stronger, less resistent substance.

As if someone on the other side were pushing back in the opposite direction, as if the life-flow were trying to run upstream, as if he were going against the grain. He had time to register the anomaly while in the transitional state.

But the pressure from behind him, the pressure of lives as Alan, Alan, Alvin, Elvin, William, Wilhelm—terrible lives—could not be contained. He went through.

In the first moments of his new life, as usual he was able to remember the totality

of his journey. Not each life individually but a vast panorama of personae, with a few that stood out in sharper relief than the mass. The flamenco dancer he had been, the sunchog digging the Holland Tunnel, the feudal serf, the confidant of the Medici, the gravedigger in Denmark, the catamaran-riding Melanesian.

In that moment he thought of himself, each time it happened he thought of himself, as Alice had perceived herself running as fast as he could run, to stay in the same place in the Red Queen's race.

Then the moment passed, and he opened his eyes, and his face stared closely back at him. He was sitting in an easy chair in a pleasant drawing room filled with books, a fireplace, and the scent of cayenne, and he was not looking in a mirror.

"Waldemar?" the face that wished said.
Ja, Waldemar," he replied. "And you are...?"

"Wallace Vanowen. And I'm not going. The memory started to slip away.
"Who... what do you..." And Wally Vanowen slapped him across the face as hard as he could. He didn't pull the blow simply let fly. Waldemar's head snapped around and in that instant his mind cleared.

"Hold onto it boy," said Wally angrily, urgently. "Don't let it slip away or who or who the hell knows what I'll have to do with you... because ain't going cookie."

"You remember?"
"Yeah. I remember. I remember Alvin and his crazy old lady. I remember that paranoid Wilhelm. I remember all the way back to footscribbling with Blackjack Pershing. You remember that one, the gangrene and the dysentery?"

"My God, I do... yes! All the way back then."

That's nothing to what I remember son. And it's what makes for a good life. Which is what this is... in case you hadn't figured it out yet. This is the one. The top of the line. The prize in the Cracker Jack box. This is the best possible life that can be led by this assembly of guys who've been me. And here I say, I don't budget.

But you have to.
Wally chuckled. If he pipe.
Then he went and sat down in an easy chair across from Waldemar. They stared at each other for a long time.
"They're pushing me from behind," Waldemar said. "I'd be happy to let you have this life... but I have no control over the process. I'm nudged, you're nudged." Wally shook his head. "I don't go

"They'll make you go! The pleasure."

Wally exhaled a cloud of smoke. The drawing room smelled woody and comfortably close. In fact, now that Waldemar thought about it, the room—and himself in it—felt more comfortable than anything he could remember. He felt as if he belonged here. He knew, in that moment, that his predecessor in this life, the Wally Vanowen sitting across from him, had told him the absolute truth: this was the best of all possible worlds.

This was the terminus he had sought for uncountable lifetimes.

Here the Flying Dutchman came to rest.

Here the Red Queen's race marked its finish line.

And somehow somehow he would stay here!

He mind scribbled through possibilities drawing at one place, then another, capping them aside like a dog digging through a wastebasket for that bit of refuse producing the wondrous aroma. Somewhere in his past, somewhere in all those lives he had led, was the method, the bit of data, the spark of cunning that would permit him to shove Wally through before him, back into the life flow back into the race.

Then he would worry about keeping all the others behind him looked out jubilation sang along the wires of his soul.

"What makes this such a perfect life?" He had to stall till he could reason this out.

Wally smiled. "The knowledge cookie."

"What knowledge?"

The knowledge that I'm not a slave. The smarts to know that I can live the life I choose if I don't let the life I'm living me. I'm happy in my skin.

Waldemar could not comprehend what Wally was saying. It sounded like errant nonsense, obscurant philosophy of the most sophomoric sort, the kind of twaddle he'd heard from bratty half-asses floating on drugs and cheapjack religiosity. He had led too many lives to go for such simplistic generalities.

But he felt comfortable here. Felt as if he belonged for the first time in numberless years of lives.

But he listened as Wally told him of this life. And there was nothing at all remarkable about it.

"I get up each morning and make a cup of coffee with cardamom and chocolate in it. I sit and look out at the ridge of hills behind this house and I watch the seasons change. I dress every day in clothes that I like that are comfortable with a pair of old

boots that know my feet. I do my work: I translate poetry by Latin American writers for the university press. I spend many hours a day in their words, surrounded by their beauty. My hands call and suggest we go for barbecue dinners, and we laugh and make up bad puns. My wife is the part of me I need but don't have: the history or space within myself to contain. I have two children, who search through my coat pockets for little gifts when I come home from a trip. I read a book that made me cry this week."

Waldemar felt a subtle shift in his body as if the blood had sped up in veins and arteries, as if he had gotten life growth in his bones, as if his heart had been touched. Then it passed, and he felt contempt for Wally. To reside in paradise and die so frugally! The water was deeper but this fool had no sense of the vastness. He resolved to snatch this Eden from its totally unworthy tenant. And for the first time he contemplated suicide.

Well, wasn't it suicide if he killed Wally? How could it be murder if he killed himself? Two of them could not exist in the same life.

he knew that. So Wally had to go.

Seeming all to be listening to the dreary penitency, he looked around the drawing room. He would have to move fast without hesitation, brutally. He would have only one chance. He knew that. They were in the middle of the drawing room. The walls of bookcases were filled with volumes and the three doors were closed. A sofa, a small sideboard, two easy chairs, a floor lamp, the fireplace.

There was a stand of fireplace implements, tongs, ashshovel, heavy poker. Yes.

He pushed himself out of the easy chair. He was still a bit unsteady. Wally stopped speaking, watching him. "I have to get my sea legs," he said, acting wobbly than he felt. Strength was coming into his body now. He put out a hand toward the fireplace mantel as if searching for support. Wally started to say something. He stumbled, took two faltering steps toward the fireplace, and in a rush grabbed the handle of the poker. He spun with the weapon raised over his head, one sharp blow, one powerful smash, an instant, just an instant, and he would be alone here.

Three doors opened into the drawing room. Three men stood in the openings and behind them were others. But the poker was on its descent already. Wally's eyes widened.

And Waldemar felt himself hurled into the membrane.

Men in merry doorways faded and were receding shadows.

He was sick with having eaten too much ice cream too quickly. His hip joints ached. He was on his way toward another life.

He was Walter Vernon and he was a failure. Every time he had attempted to emolliate the mediocrity in which he existed, disaster slipped from the shadows to crush his spirit. He was simply not good enough. And Belinda never missed an opportunity to tell him of his inadequacies. The children were impossible, needing a strong hand and not having a father who could provide it. Trouble. There was always trouble. Each day was a campaign in a war that was lost before it began.

Walter Vernon, though he could not remember the fact, was running as fast as he could in a life of desolation that stretched on before him for fifteen years. At the end of that life lay a membrane that gave onto a fair lane of lives, each more awful than the ones before. Oh, perhaps some were better, and perhaps somewhere ages away there was another existence in which one could read a book that brought tears.

But, maintaining the pattern, Walter Vernon might not recognize it.

In a drawing room filled with books, a large group of men who bore a striking similarity to each other stood talking quietly. There was a sense of great loss among them.

"He was too damaged. Too bent by what he'd been through. The poor sonofabitch," Wally Vanowen said. They nodded and sighed.

"You'd think he would have realized," said Merle Webber. "We all believed no two of us could exist in the same life when we got here. But couldn't he see he was existing with you, Wally, right here, right in this room? Couldn't he see that it could work?"

Wally Vanowen spread his hands in hopeless resignation. "Sometimes it's been too awful for them. We do the best we can."

They talked about it for a while longer then decided they and their wives and their lovers and their children would spend the rest of the day having a barbecue and relaxing before they returned to their separate lives here in this world that was rapidly filling up with themselves. Here in this best of all possible worlds where those who were worthy of happiness had found it.

It was the best of all possible worlds because they had made it so, a world in which checkout time never came.

WHEN AULD'S ACQUAINTANCE IS FORGOT

For some people, the horrors of the past are not easily laid to rest

BY HARLAN ELLISON

That's a federal offense you're suggesting, Mr. Auld. It's not just my job, it's the whole franchise. The auditors say — they say —
— because I don't know how to cover — for the people who own this Bank lose everything they sink into it. The young woman stared at Jerry Auld till he looked away. She wasn't trying to be kind, despite the look of desperation on his face. She was telling him in as flat and forthright a manner as she could summon — just in case he was a field investigator for the regulatory agency looking for bootleg Banies — possibly wired for gathering evidence — so he would understand that this Memory Bank was run strictly along the lines of the federal directives.

"Is that what you want, Mr. Auld? To get us in the most serious kind of trouble?"

He was pale and thin, holding his clasped hands in his lap, rubbing one thumb over the other till the skin was raw. His eyes had desperation shimmering in them. "No ... no, of course not. I just thought ... She waited.

"I just thought there might be some way you could make an exception in this case. I really ... have to get rid of this one last, pretty awful memory. I know you've gone as far as you can by the usual standards, but I tell you if you just looked in the regulations, maybe you'd find some legitimate way to ..."

"Let me stop you," she said. "I've monitored your myelin sheathing, and the depletion level is absolutely at maximum. There is no way on earth short of a led-



PAINTING BY GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

ent guideline being relaxed that we can teach some more memory out of your brain. She let a mild offices—some might say nasty—smile cross her lips. "Simply put Mr. Auld, you are overdrawn at the Memory Bank."

He straightened in the form fit and his voice went cold. "Lady, I'm about as miserable as a human being can be. I've got a head full of stuff that makes sex with splicers and other small, funny things seem like a happy alternative, and I don't need you to make me feel like a fool."

He stood up. "I sorry I asked you to do something you can't do. I just hope you don't come to where I am someday and need someone to help."

She started to reply, but he was already walking toward the entrance. As he walked, he turned to look at her once more. "You don't look anything like her. I was wrong."

Then he was gone.

It took her some time to unravel the meaning of his words, but she decided she had no time to feel sorry for him. She wondered who "her" was, then she forgot it.

The little man with the long nose and the censure cutter spotted Auld as he left the Memory Bank. He had been sitting on a bench in the mall, sipping at a bulb of Flashpoint Soda, watching the Bank. He recognized Auld's distressed look at once, and he punchily deposited the bulb in a nearby incinerator box and followed him.

When Jerry Auld wandered into a showroom displaying this year's models of the Ford hoverpaks, the little man sauntered around the block once, strolled into the showroom, and sidled up to him. They stood side by side looking at the pak.

"They say it's the same design the air-caps use, just less junk," the little man said, not looking at Auld.

Jerry looked down at him, aware of him for the first time. That so? interesting.

"You look to me," the little man said, in the same tone of voice he had used to comment on the Ford pak, casual, light, like a man with some bad memories.

Jerry's eyes narrowed. "Something I can color you, chum?"

The little man shrugged and acted nonchalant. "For me?" Hell, no. I'm fuzzy-free and fully, friend. What I thought. I might be able to do something upright for you."

"Like what?"

"Like get you to a clean, precise Bank that could leach off some bed stains."

Jerry looked around. The showrooms still were busy with live customers. He

turned to face the little man.
"Why me?"

The little man smiled. "Saw you hobble out of the Franchise Bank in the mall. You looked looky friend. Mighty rocky. Carrying a freightload of old movies in your skull. Figured they turned you down for one reason or another. Figured you could use a friendly steer."

Jerry had been expecting something like this. The Bank in the mall had not been his first stop. There had been the Monetary Bank in the Corporate Tower and the Bank in the Longboard Shopping Center and the Bank at Mount Sinai. They had all turned him down, and from recent articles he'd read on bootleg memory operations, he'd suspected that maintaining a viable image would put the steerers on to him.

"You got a name, chum?"

"I do. I gotta have a name?"

"Just in case I go around a dark corner with you and get a sap upside my head. I want to be able to remember a tag to go with the face."

The little man grinned nastily. "Remember the nose. My friends call me Pinocchio."

"Let's go see the man." Jerry Auld said.

"Women." Pinocchio said.

"Woman." Jerry Auld said. "Let's go see the woman."

The bootleg Bank was on an air cushion yacht anchored beyond the twelve-mile limit. They reached it using hoverpaks and by the time the strung lights of the vessel materialized out of the mist, it was night. They put down on the forecastle pad and racked their units. Pinocchio kept up a line of useless chatter intended to annoy Auld's fears. It served to draw him up tighter than he'd been before the little man had broad him.

Jerry saw guards with weapons on the flying bridge.

Pinocchio caught his glance and said, "Precautions."

"Sure."

Pinocchio didn't move. Jerry said, Are we doing something here or just taking the night air? He didn't like being under the guns.

Pinocchio kept his eyes on the flying bridge as he said. They're making us reporting. It'll only be a minute."

"What kind of trouble do these people get?" Jerry asked.

Hijackers sometimes. You know, prates. The market's lively right now. A lot of jockeying for territory, getting good product to push. One of the armed guards mo-

tored with his weapon, and Pinocchio said "Come on."

They went belowdecks. The yacht was handsomely appointed. Flocked-velvet wallpaper in the compartments, burr-nished metal banisters, thick carpets. Pinocchio knocked at an inland teak door. The door was opened by an unexceptional-looking woman. She smiled, pro forma, and walked back into the cabin, permitting Auld and the little man to enter.

The salon was a spacious saloon, fitted to the walls with the memory-teaching devices Auld recognized from his many trips to legitimate Banks in the city.

"Ms Keogh. I'd like to introduce Mr. Jerry Auld. Met him in the city. Thought we could do a little business."

She waved him to silence. "Do you have your own transportation, Mr. Auld? Or did you come with Mr. Timachi?"

Auld said, "I have my own pak."

"Then you can go, Mr. Timachi," she said to the little man. "Stop by the office and get a check."

Obsequious Pinocchio bobbed his head and smiled a good-bye at Jerry. Then, sans forelock-tugging, he bowed himself out of the saloon. Ms. Keogh waved at a form-fit Jerry sat down.

"How close are you to maximum depletion?" she said.

He decided not to fence. He was in too much pain. They were both here for the same thing. I'm at the limit.

She walked around the saloon, thinking. Then she came and sat down beside him in the other form-fit. Through the open porthole Auld heard the mournful sound of something calling to it made across the night water. "Let me tell you several things," she said.

I want to get rid of some bed stains," Auld said. "I know what I need to know."

She raised a hand to silence him. "Probably. Nonetheless, this is not a bucket shop. Bootleg yes, but not a crash-and-burn operation."

He indicated he'd listen.

"The holographic memory model postulates that a memory is stored in a manner analogous to a hologram—not sited in any specific area, but stored all over the brain. To remove one certain memory, it is always necessary to break molecules of myelin all over the brain—from the densely packed myelin of the corpus callosum—

"The white matter," Auld said. She nodded. "I've heard all this before."

"—from the white matter right down the

spinal cord, perhaps even down into the peripheral nerves." She finished on a tone of dogged determination.

"Now tell me about the weak point in the long-chain myelin molecule. The A-1 link. Tell me how easily the molecule breaks there. The point at which muscular dystrophy and other neurodegenerative diseases attack the molecule. Tell me how I might become a head of lettuce if I go past the mark. I've heard it all before. I'm surprised you're trying to discourage me. I'm also annoyed, lady."

She looked at him with resignation. "We don't push anyone, and we don't lie. It's bad enough we're outside the law. I don't want anyone's life on my hands. Your choice fully informed."

He stood up. "Put me in the chair and let's get this over with."

"It must be nasty."

"I pity the poor sonabitch you sell these stains to."

"Would you like to meet the head that will be receiving what you'll be losing?"

"Not much."

"He's a very old man whose life has been bland beyond the telling. He wants action, danger, adventure, romance. He wants to settle into his twilight years with a head filled with wonder and experience."

"I'm touched. He made fast. "Goddamn it, lady, get this shit out of my head!"

She wove him to the leeching unit on the wall. He followed her as she opened out the wings. She folded down the formfit with its probe helmet, and he sat without waiting for instructions. He had been in that seat before. Perhaps too many times.

This won't hurt, Mr. Keogh said.

"That's not true," he replied.

You're right. It's not true," she said and the helmet dropped and the probes fastened to his skull and she turned on the power. The universe became a whirlpool.

Lucy spat blood and he touched her chin with the moist cloth. "Jerry, please."

No. Forget it."

I'm in terrible pain, Jerry.

I'll call the medic.

"You know it won't do any good. You know what you have to do."

He turned away. "I can't, kid. I just can't." I trust you, Jerry. If you do it, I won't be afraid. I know it'll be okay."

It wasn't going to be okay, no matter how it happened. For a moment he hated her for wanting to share it with him, for needing that last terrible measure of love no one should

be asked to give.

"Don't let them put me in the ground, Jerry. Nobody can talk to worms. Send me to the fire. I wouldn't mind that, not if you were with me."

She was rambling. He understood about her fear of the dark, down there forever in the cold, with things moving toward her. Yes, he could guarantee the clean fire would have what remained after. But she was rambling, talking about things she was seeing on the other side——

"I know they're over there past the cross-over, Jerry. They were there before when I thought I was going. Don't let me die alone. Be there to keep them at bay till I can run home. Please."

She coughed blood again and her eyes closed. He held the moist cloth and reached down and lifted her head from the pillow and placed it over her face. "I love you, kiddo."

After a very long time he took the pillow away. It was heavily stained.

Mr. Keogh called two deckhands to help him onto the forecastle. They strapped his pack on him. The med was heavier now, had slipped into fog. If there were stars somewhere beyond the yacht, they could not be seen.

"Can you travel?" she said. He was looking off to starboard. She took his head in her hands. "Can you travel?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm fine." He looked away again.

Set the auto for the city, she said to one of the deckhands. She spoke softly. "Do you remember Lucy?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the fire?"

"What fire?"

"Lucy."

"Yes. She smiled at me."

They sent him aloft and he hovered for a moment. Then the autopilot cut in and he moved slowly off into the fog.

She watched for a time, but there were no stars visible.

Then she went below decks to purify the stain that had been stored in the unit.

Later that night an old man sat in the units formfit, and the balance of pain in the universe was restored.

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"I don't mind your bringing your work home with you, but just what is it you do?"

*Lightning strikes
a tomb, uncovering an ancient
and awesome secret*

ON THE SLAB

BY HARLAN ELLISON

Lightning was drawn to the spot. Season after season, August to November but most heavily in September, the jagged killing bolts sought out George Gibree's orchard. Gibree, a farmer with four acres of scabrous apple trees whose steadily diminishing production of fruit would drive him, one year later, to cut his throat with a rabbit-skinning knife and to bleed to death in the loft of his barn in Chepachet near Providence, Rhode Island. There George Gibree found the dismal creature at the northeast corner of his property late in September in the season of killing bolts. The obscenely crippled trees — scarred black as if by firelight — had whistled one attack after another, splintering a little more each year, withering a little more each year, dying a little more each year. The Macintoshes they produced, hideous and wrinkled as Thalidomide babies, night after night.

PAINTING BY ERNST FUCHS



the lightning, drawn to the spot, cracked and thrashed until one night, as though weary of the cosmic game, a monstrous forked bolt sizzled with power, uncovered the creature's graveplace.

When he went out to inspect the orchard the next morning holding back the tears till he was well out of sight of Emma and the house, George Gibree locked down into the crater and saw it stretched out on its back, its single green eye with the two pupils glowing timidly in the morning sunlight its left arm—bent up at the elbow—seeming to clutch with spread fingers at the morning air. It was as if the thing had been struck by the sky's fury as it was trying to dig itself out.

For just a moment as he stared down into the pit, George Gibree fell as if the ganglia moaning his brain were being ripped loose. His head began to tremble on his neck, and he wrenched his gaze from the impossible star, snatched out, filling the thirty-foot-long pit.

In the orchard there could be heard the sounds of insects, a few birds, and the whimpering of George Gibree.

Children trespassing to play in the orchard saw it and the word spread through town, and by stringer to a freelance writer who did occasional human-interest pieces for the Providence Journal. She drove out to the Gibree farm and, finding it impossible to speak to George Gibree, who sat in a straight-back chair staring out the window without speaking or even acknowledging her presence, managed to cajole Emma Gibree into letting her wander out to the orchard alone.

The item was small when published, but it was the beginning of October and the world was quiet. The item received attention.

By the time a team of graduate students in anthropology arrived with their professor pieces of the enormous being had been torn away by beasts of the field and by curious visitors. They sent one of their group back to the University of Rhode Island, in Kingston, advising him to contact the University's legal representatives, readying them for the eventual purchase of this terrifying, miraculous discovery. Clearly, it was not a hoax, this was no P.T. Barnum "Cardiff Giant," but a creature never before seen on the earth.

And when night fell, the professor was forced to badger the most amenable of the students into staying with the thing. Coleman lanterns, down jackets, and a mini-

stove were brought in. But by morning all three of the students had fled.

Three days later, a mere six hours before the attorneys for the University could present their offer to Emma Gibree, a rock concert entrepreneur from Providence contracted for full rights to, and ownership of, the dead giant for three thousand dollars. Emma Gibree had been unable to get her husband to speak since the morning he had stood on the lip of the grave and stared down at the one-eyed being; she was in a panic, there were doctors and hospitals in her future.

Frank Kneller, who had brought every major rock group of the past decade to the city, rented exposition space in the Providence Civic Center at a ridiculously low rate because it was only the second week in October and the world was quiet. Then he assigned his public-relations firm the task of making the giant a national curiosity. It was not a difficult task.

It was displayed via minicam footage on the evening news of all three major networks. Frank Kneller's file for the dramatically staged was not wasted.

The thirty-foot humanoid, pink-skinned and with staring eye malevolently directed at the cameramen's lens, was held in loving close-up on the marble slab Kneller had had hewn by a local monument contractor.

Pilbeam of Yale came, and Johnson of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and both the Leakeys, and Taylor of Riverdale came with Hans Seseus from the University of California at La Jolla. They all said it was genuine. But they could not say where the thing had come from. It was, however, native to the planet, thirty feet in height Cyclopean, as haled as rhinoceros horn, but human. And they all noticed one more thing.

The cheat, just over the place where the heartlay was hideously scarred. As though centurions had jammed their pikes again and again into the flesh when this abomination had been crucified. Terrible weals, pucker'd skin still angrily crimson against the gentle pink of the otherwise unmarred body.

Unmarred, that is, but for the places where the curios had used their nail files and penknives to gouge out souvenirs.

And then Frank Kneller made them go away, shaking their heads in wonder, mad to take the creature back to their laboratories for private study but thwarted by Kneller's clear and unshakable ownership. And when the last of them had departed, and

the view of the Cyclops on its slab could be found in magazines and newspapers and even on posters, then Frank Kneller set up his exposition at the Civic Center.

There, within sight of the Rhode Island State House, atop whose dome stands the twelve-foot-high, gold-leaved statue of the Independent Man,

The census came by the thousands to line up and pay then three dollars a head, as they could file past the dead colossus, blazoned on life-sized thirty-foot-high posters festooning the outer walls of the Civic Center as *The 9th Wonder of the World!* [With] reasoned Frank Kneller with a flash of wit and a sense of history uncommon to populists and entrepreneurs, because King Kong had been the Eighth! It was a gracious homage that did not go unnoticed by fans of the cinematically horrific, and the gesture garnered for Kneller an acceptance he might not have otherwise known from the cognoscenti.

And there was an almost symphonic correctness to the titan's having been unearthed in Providence, in Rhode Island, in that Yankee state so uncharacteristic of New England, that state founded by Roger Williams for those distressed for cause of conscience and historically identified with independence of thought and freedom of religion, that locale where the odd and the bizarre melded with the mundane. Poe had lived there, and Lovecraft, and they had had strange visions, terrible dreams that had been recorded that had influenced the course of literature, the moral ownership of the city by the modern coven known as the Mafia, those uncountable reports of bizarre happenings, sightings, gatherings, beliefs that made it seem the Providence Journal was an appendix to the writings of Charles Fort, provided a free-floating ambience of the peculiar.

The lines never seemed to grow shorter. The crowds came by the busloads, renting cassette players with background information spoken by a man who had played the lead in a television series dealing with the occult. Schoolchildren were herded past the staring green-eye in gaggles, teenagers whose senses had been dulled by horror movies came in knots of five and ten, young lovers needing to share stopped and wondered, elderly citizens from whose lives had been leached all wonder smiled and pointed and clucked their tongues, skeptics and cynics and professional debunkers stood frozen in disbelief and came away bewildered.

Frank Kneller found himself involved in a way he had never experienced before, not even with the most artistically rewarded groups he had booked. He went to bed each night exhausted, but uplifted. And he awoke each day feeling his time was being well-spent. When he spoke of the feeling to his oldest friend, his accountant, with whom he had shared lodgings during college days, he was rewarded with the word "envied." When he dwelled on the word, he came to agree.

Showing the monstrosity was important. He wished with all his heart to know the reason. The single sound that echoed most often through the verdant glade of his thoughts was: why?

"I understand you've taken to sleeping in the rounds where the giant is on display?" The host of the late-night television talk show was leaning forward. The ash on his cigarette was growing to the point where it would drop on his sharply creased slacks. He didn't notice.

Kneller nodded. "Yes, that's true."

"Why?"

"Why is a question I've been asking myself ever since I bought the great man and started letting people see him."

"Well, let's be honest about it," the interviewer said. "You don't let people see the giant; you charge them for the privilege. You're showing an attraction after all. It's not purely an humanitarian act."

Kneller pursed his lips and acceded. "That's right, that's very true. But if I tell you, if I had the wherewithal, I'd do it free of charge. I don't, of course, so I charge what it costs me to rent space at the Civic Center. That much no more."

The interviewer gave him a sly smile. "Come on."

"No, really honest to God. I mean it," Frank said quickly. "It's been eleven months, and I can't begin to tell you how many hundreds of thousands of people have come to see the great man, maybe a million or more. I don't know. And everybody who comes goes away feeling a little bit better, a little more important."

"A religious experience?" The interviewer did not smile.

Frank shrugged. "No, what I'm saying is that people feel enveloped in the presence of the great man."

"You keep calling the giant 'the great man.' Strange phrase. Why?"

"Seems right, that's all."

"But you still haven't told me why you

sleep there in the place where he's on display every day."

Frank Kneller looked straight into the eyes of the interviewer who had to live in New York City every day and so might not understand what peace of mind was all about, and he said: "I like the feeling. I feel as if I'm worth the trouble it took to create me. And I don't want to be away from it too long. So I set up a bed in there. It may sound kinky to you, but—

But if he had not been compelled to center his life around the immobile figure on the marble slab, then Frank Kneller would not have been there the night the destroyer came.

Moonlight flooded the rotunda through the enormous skylights of the central display areas.

Kneller lay on his back, hands behind his head, as usual, finding sleep a long way off, yet at peace with himself in the presence of the great man.

The titan lay on the marble slab, tilted against the far wall, thirty feet high; his face now cloaked in shadows. Kneller needed no light. He knew the single great eye was

open, the twin pupils staring straight ahead. They had become companions, the man and the giant. And, as usual, Frank saw something that none of the thousands who had passed before the colossus had ever seen. In the darkness up there near the ceiling, the scars covering the chest of the giant glowed faintly like amber plankton or the minuscule creatures that cling to limestone walls in the deepest caverns of the earth. When night fell, Frank was overcome with an unbearable sadness. Wherever and however this astounding being had lived, in whatever way he had passed through the days and nights that had been his life, he had suffered something more terrible than anyone merely human could conceive. What had done such awesome damage to his flesh, and how he had regenerated even as imperfectly as this, Kneller could not begin to fathom.

But he knew the pain had been interminable and terrible.

He lay there on his back, thinking again as he did every night, of the life the giant had known, and what it must have been for him on this earth.



The questions were too potent, too complex and beyond Frank Kneller's ability even to pose properly. The titan defied the laws of nature and reason.

And the shadow of the destroyer covered the skylight of the rotunda, and the sound of a great wind rose around the Civic Center and Frank Kneller felt a terror that was impossible to contain. Something was coming from the sky and he knew without looking up that it was coming for the great man on the slab.

The hurricane wind shrieked past the point of audibility, vibrating in the roots of his teeth. The darkness outside seemed to fall toward the skylight and with the final sound of enormous wings beating against the night, the destroyer splintered the shatterproof glass.

Razor-edged stalactites struck the bed, the floor, the walls, one long spear embedded itself through the pillow while Frank's head had lain a moment before penetrating the mattress and missing him by inches where he cowered in the darkness.

Something enormous was moving beyond the foot of the bed.

Glass lay in a scintillant carpet across the rotunda. Moonlight still shone down and illuminated the display area.

Frank Kneller looked up and saw a nightmare.

The force that had collapsed the skylight was a bird. A bird so enormous he could not catalog it in the same genus with the robin he had found outside his bedroom window when he was a child. The robin that had flown against the pane when sunlight had turned it to a mirror. The robin that had struck and fallen and lain there till he came out of the house and picked it up. Its blood had been watery and he could feel its heart beating against his palm. It had been colorless and weak and dying in fear. He could feel that it was dying in fear. And Frank had rushed in to his mother crying and had begged her to help restore the creature to the sky. And his mother had gotten the old eyecupper that had been used to put cod-liver oil in Frank's milk when he was younger, and she had tried to get the robin to take some sugar-water.

But it had died.

Tiny, it had died in fear.

The thing in the rotunda was of that genus, but it was neither tiny nor fearful.

Like no other bird he had ever seen like no other bird that had ever been seen like no other bird that had ever existed. Sinbad had known such a bird, perhaps, but no

other human eyes had ever beheld such a destroyer. It was gigantic. Frank Kneller could not estimate its size because it was almost as tall as the great man, and when it made the hideous watery crashing sound and puffed out its bellows chest and jerked its wings into a billowing canopy, the pinfeathers scraped the walls of the rotunda on either side. The walls were seventy-five feet apart!

The vulture gave a hellish scream and sank its somber talons in the petrified flesh of the great man. Its vicious beak in the chest in the puckered area of scars had glowed softly in the shadows.

It ripped away the flesh as hard as rhinoceros horn.

Its head came away with the beak locked around a chunk of horny flesh. Then, as Kneller watched, the flesh seemed to lose its rigidity, it softened and blood ran off the crimson crow's killer beak. And the great man groaned.

The eye blinked.

The bird struck again, tossing goblets of meat across the rotunda.

Frank felt his brain exploding. He could not bear to see this.

But the vulture worked at its task nipping out the area of chest where the heart of the great man lay under the scar tissue. Frank Kneller crawled out of the shadows and stood helpless. The creature was immense. He was the robin, pitiful and tiny.

Then he saw the fire extinguisher in its brackets on the wall, and he grabbed the pillow from the bed and rushed to the compartment holding the extinguisher and he smashed the glass with the pillow protecting his hand. He wrenches the extinguisher off its moorings and rushed the black bird yanking the handle on the extinguisher so hard the wine broke without effort. He aimed it up at the vulture just as it threw back its head to nod itself of its carnal load, and the violent Halon 1301 mixture sprayed in a white stream over the bird's head. The mixture of fluorine, bromine, iodine and chlorine washed the vulture, spouted into its eyes, filled its mouth. The vulture gave one last violent scream, torn its claws loose and arced up into the darkness with a spasmodic beating of wings that caught Frank Kneller across the face and threw him thirty feet into a corner. He struck the wall, everything slid toward gray.

When he was able to get to his knees, he felt an excruciating pain in his side and knew at once several ribs had been broken. All he could think of was the great man.

He crawled across the floor of the rotunda to the base of the slab and looked up. There in the shadow.

The great man, in terrible pain, was staring down at him.

A man escaped the huge lips.

What can I do? Kneller thought desperately.

And the words were in his head. Nothing I'll come again.

Kneller looked up. Where the scar tissue had glowed faintly the chest was ripped open and the great man's heart lay there in pulsing blood, part of it torn away.

Now I know who you are. Kneller said. Now I know your name.

The great man smiled a strange, shy smile. The one green eye made the expression somehow winsome. Yes, he said yes, you know who I am.

Your tears mingled with the earth to create us.

Yes
You gave us life
Health and wisdom
And you've suffered for it ever since
Yes

I have to know. Frank Kneller said. I have to know if you were what we were before we became what we are now.

The sound of the great wind was rising again. The destroyer was in the night on its way back. The chemicals of men could not drive it away from the task it had to perform could not drive it away for long.

It comes again, the great man said in Kneller's mind. And I will not come again.

Tell me! Were you what we were?

The shadow fell across the rotunda and darkness came down upon them as the great man said, in that final moment. No, I am what you would have become.

And the crimson crow sent by the gods struck him as he said one more thing.

When Frank Kneller regained consciousness hours later, there on the floor where the searing pain of his broken ribs had dropped him, he heard those last words reverberating in his mind. And heard them endlessly all the days of his life.

No, I am what you would have become if you had been worthy.

And the silence was deeper that night across the face of the world, from pole to pole deeper than it had ever been before in the life of the creatures that called themselves humans.

But not as deep as it would soon become.

HARLAN ELLISON

AN APPRECIATION BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

When he writes he speaks with his own voice, which is a voice like nobody else's: an instantaneously recognizable voice even if you have not—as I have—been hearing it for thirty years. Sometimes that sound is a snarl—very often, in fact—and sometimes it's a seductive whisper and sometimes it's a roar of outrage. He is in a state of outrage much of the time, and much of the time it's justifiable anger. (It seems to be inherent in his bones. He answers the phone nearly always with a rough ravenous intonation. "Yeah?"—as if the caller has phoned thirteen times in the last hour to see subscriptions to the *Spotted Swine Journal*.) If the caller turns out to be someone he happens to love, and there are a good many people in that category, his tone softens remarkably with the next syllable. But first you get that roar, no matter who you are. When they call up from Stockholm twenty-five years from now to tell him he's won the Nobel, that gentle unsuspecting Swede is going to get the roar. If they don't call up from Stockholm somewhere in the next twenty-five years, he'll probably call them to find out why not, and they'd better have a good answer.

The fiction always sounds like Harlan—people tend to call him Harlan, not Ellison, especially people who don't know him—but would like to pretend they do—even though the fiction is remarkably variable. Some of it can leave you numb with awe and admiration; some of it can make you weep; some of it is merely baffling and irritating; and some leads you to wonder how its author ever got anything published. Harlan has been so erratic over the three decades of his professional career that a good many of his stories have that effect of apparently invalidating all the rest of his work, until you take a second look at the rest of his work and see that it isn't so. He writes as he lives, in a white heat, and sometimes he can focus that heat so it can sear holes in your soul; and sometimes he simply splashes it around in all directions and gives everybody a hot time. But it always sounds like Harlan: the good and the bad, the brilliant and the astonishingly off-the-mark. It is as though his fictions are discrete slices chopped from an ongoing monologue, a frenetic and exhaustive and intense and altogether unique monologue that has been going on, with scarcely a pause for breath or sleep, since the spring of '53.

He says he is not a science fiction writer. Most of the time I believe him, even though much of the stuff he writes is populated by time machines and androids and people who wander into alternate universes. (Much of it isn't science fiction, I think—he writes a kind of meta-science fiction, a unique genre that is made up of bits and pieces of science fiction sometimes, stray concepts he encountered in Heinlein or Asimov or Sturgeon when he was a lad and has been manipulating in his subconscious ever since. But if it really doesn't matter to him whether Mars is the fourth planet from the sun or the sixth, and it shouldn't matter to you either, if it did matter to him he could look it up—there's a Britannica right back of his desk—or if that happened to be too much trouble, he could phone Poul Anderson or Asimov or even his friend Bradbury, who probably could give him the right answer. But although knowing the correct position of Mars is of great concern to an astronomer and of even greater concern to an astronaut making the first expedition there, it doesn't help much in an understanding of what we like to call the human condition and it is the human condition and the inhuman condition that form the center of Harlan's preoccupation as a writer. It happens that he finds it valuable, much of the time, to cloak his explorations in the language of science fiction. Science fiction imagery comes naturally to him. (He has a row of giant gargoyle-like figures on the facade of his house, too, and the house itself is a whole other story.) But if you turn to his fiction to learn where Mars is, you are doing something quite beside the point. Any almanac can tell you that Mars is closer to the sun than Jupiter and farther from it than Earth, and when you've learned that you've added an other item to the fiction in your collection. But what Harlan's fiction tells you is not the stuff of science exams: it is the raw and bloody stuff of life itself, tossed around a long while in that master of a brain and set forth, at white heat, on an Olympia manual typewriter in that unique tone of voice, which can be parodied easily enough but never duplicated. He takes you and he shakes you, and he does it because he has been shaken himself, and wants you to know what it feels like. There is only one of him. As I have often said, that is quite enough but how pale and drab our world would have been if we had not had that one!

SCIENCE
FICTION
ORIGINALS



Once again, *Omni* includes never-before-published stories, while for the first time, it presents a collection of original pictures.

In his selection of stories, the editor considers, at the manuscript stage, how well each reads, what sort of ideas it engages, what furtherance of the SF genre it achieves. One thing he does not consider is the author's prestige. Which is just as well, because none of the original stories finally chosen for this section is by a household-name writer. Nevertheless, each has mastered the craft—each story is well-made, independently voiced, and compelling in subject.

'A Blossom in Ares' by Jack Massal looks at one of the thornier questions that Saint Thomas Aquinas considered in *Summa Theologica*: the proper relationship of man to God and God to man. Further, it considers intergalactic-traveling mankind faced with a condition in which humans are not the only beings created in God's image.

It is an arguable tenet in our technological society, and an article of faith in science fiction, that all problems are solvable, given sufficient time and knowledge. In 'A Brief Dance to the Music of the Spheres', Michael Kurland glimpses a time when all problems have been solved, when humanity is master of the universe and when the boundaries of that universe may be far too small.

Some sufferers believe that the ways of the Lord surpass understanding—so much so that they feel an impulse to fall on their knees, raise their arms to the heavens, and scream, "Why me?" The protagonist of Michael Cassutt's "Holy Father" is such an unfortunate, and his misery arises from a circumstance of rebirth.

Melisa Michael's 'Intermezzo' reconsiders General Sherman's observation that war is hell. It also speculates that peace could be just as hellish.

Rowena Morrill is a frequent contributor to *Omni*, and her dynamic, often violent paintings are so highly regarded that more of her work was requested specifically for this volume. The result is a vivid display of ten science-fiction/science-fantasy artworks.



A BLOSSOM IN ARES

Was it holet lo
save the alien species or to
break his sacred vow?

BY JACK MASSA

After my fourth year as a novice I was ordered by my superiors to spend a year in retreat. I year of meditation and silent searching prior to sealing my final vows. My assignment was to the Brotherhood, a hermitage in the Ares Valla in the midlatitudes of Mars.

I rode a space liner out to Lowell City Station, which circles Mars just beyond the orbit of Phobos. From the city's observation deck the planet can be seen, all craters, brown and orange, with wisps of cloud trailing about the poles. Although Planet Engineering has been at work on Mars for over forty years, the goal of an earthlike biosphere is still centuries away. Meantime the surface-dwellers are mostly ascetics, lone-wolf researchers preferring to work in private, couples and small families who value their isolation, sequestered brothers and sisters. Most of the brothers are members of my order, the Brotherhood of St. James.

Following a week of rest and final instruction in our mission on board, I rode a shuttleliner down to Chryse Planitia. The craft landed at Viking, a placid fire-domed town of three hundred, named for the first unarmed probe, which set down here last century. From Viking I drove an armored camper across the ancient seabed and up into Ares Valla, a wide, rocky channel cut eons ago by rushing water. The channel and

PAINTING BY
WOLFGANG HUTTER

steeping valley walls are everywhere cloaked with lichens; grey-white tundra mosses imported from Earth as a primary tool of terraforming. Above the lichen fields loom coral- and rust-colored cliffs sculpted to jaggedness by ages of ferocious dust storms. The sky is the palest of blues and in the morning silvery mists condense on the ground to moisten the flora.

Those first days the landscape impressed me as beautiful yet terribly lonely. I recall thinking what a precious gift, and an awful responsibility, that God has given us this world and the power to reshape it.

On the afternoon of the fourth day I arrived at the hermitage. I parked the camper alongside the entry port and extended the airlock corridor. As I stepped from the driver's seat, the hatch into the dome opened and I saw Brother Jerome.

Tall and slender in his late forties, Jerome was dressed as I in hooded coveralls and cowl-neck. He was at the end of a meditative retreat, having spent three years at the hermitage. He smiled amably and shook my hand. I was the first person he had seen since his arrival in Asia.

Jerome helped me unload the boxes of supplies and equipment I had driven in from Viking, then took me on a tour of the hermitage. The dome is a rectangle with rounded corners. It covers about an acre. The space inside is pressurized and shielded from the ultraviolet rays that scour the planet's surface. The glassless material is clear, but the difference in internal and external atmosphere gives the interior light a hazy, dreamlike appearance. Brother Jerome showed me the two room black-walled hut that serves as office, chapel and living quarters. Then led me outside to the garden.

Gardening in the domes started as horticultural research, the cultivation of earth plants selected for their adaptability and hardiness. The gardening has proved so successful that most surface-dwellers have been able to abandon the use of hydroponic food tanks and artificial oxydizers. In the three years at the hermitage Brother Jerome had done even better. Besides a healthy selection of vegetables, grains, and berries he had cultivated flowers.

Rows of multicolored zinnias, hyacinths and tulips lent their fragrance to the humid air. Even a few fragile orchids and dwarf rose bushes bloomed boldly from the disseminated and fertilized Martian soil. I was startled and vaguely dismayed by this unexpected profusion of blossoms. After the

dusty, lichen-gray wilderness, the garden struck me as rather gaudy and profane. Still, tending these plants would be a major part of my duties, and I listened with abiding attention as Jerome instructed me in the procedures and schedules he had developed.

Stepping lightly in the low gravity we came finally to a far corner of the dome to a well-tended plot reserved for indigenous Martian plants. These were small, delicate blue sprouts capped with tiny orange bulbs, a short vine clinging teebly to the soil, a few languid ferns with translucent stalks and drooping gossamer fronds. Of course their spores had lain frozen in the dust some ninety thousand years. That Planet Engineering had assigned the rare seeds to Brother Jerome at all was a result of his gardening success. That he had coaxed the seeds to even fragile life was proof of his great skill.

"Are they not wonderful, Brother Alfred?" he asked. "To have survived so long on a dead world and now to flourish again."

They are as vital as any I saw in the growth tanks on Lowell," I said with admiration. "You are to be commended."

Oh I did not speak to elicit praise for myself but for God. It is the magnificence of His handwork that moves me to marvel. I shall miss my garden now that I am leaving."

You will encounter God a handwork elsewhere surely.

"Yes, of course." He smiled pensively as he looked back across the dome. "But these plants I have tended have become very important to me. I hope you will not think me too seriously deranged if I confess that I've gotten into the habit of speaking to them encouraging them to grow, saying how much I appreciate their beauty. One does get lonely here."

I nodded. "I expect the loneliness will be difficult for me. I have always been of gregarious temperament, perhaps too much so. I suspect my brother Superior sent me here as a test to see if my commitment to the order would hold up in isolation."

"God will test you with loneliness," Jerome said. "But if you turn to Him you will be comforted. Be sure to observe Mass every day."

"I intend to study," I said. "St. Paul Aquinas."

"I found I read little after the first few months," Jerome remarked. "Come. I have one more seedbed to show you."

We stepped over to a bordered plot set

between the wall of the dome and a bench that faced the tulips and orchids. The soil was loosely packed and wetted but empty of any plant.

"I doubt now anything will come of this," Jerome said, "but twenty-seven days ago I planted a Martian seed here. That is, I believe it was a seed, though it was larger than any I'd seen before and I could find nothing to match it in Horticulture Section's catalog banks. I discovered it myself in the runs south of here. You do know there is a Martian villa a few kilometers down the valley?"

"Yes, it was mentioned."

A beautiful place. To me their architecture is more graceful and lovely than anything in human history. I've stopped there often while doing survey work. I found this seed on the ground after a windstorm, noted the garden plot, but in one of the smaller blocks. A horticulture team dug up the garden years ago. Anyways, if the seed should sprout you might drop me a message in care of our mission in Kamchatka. I'd be most interested to know."

I promised I would send the message. We returned to the black-walled hut for evening prayers and supper. Brother Jerome left in the camper the next morning.

During my first days at the hermitage I adhered to a strict routine. Rising an hour before dawn, I would wash and say morning prayers, then leave my cell for the outer room. I placed bread and wine on the altar, lit candles, then turned on the screen that hangs on the wall below the crucifix. I knelt at the altar rail while the screen displayed the day's Mass—broadcast from our mission on Lowell and stored on a delay loop by the hermitage computer. As dictated by the First Interplanetary Council of 2037, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ was valid for me, as for all who received the spiritual in good faith, despite the intervening factors of distance and time.

After Mass I would take breakfast, then go and talk to my duties about the dome. The tasks are generally simple: adjusting environmental controls, watering and tending the garden, recording data on the growth and condition of the plants. Occasionally the thermal well would go dry and a new line would have to be drilled to tap the permafrost, but this takes only a few minutes. Like all who are sent to the surface, I had been thoroughly trained in the various maintenance and survival duties. They generally take only two or three hours of

each day to complete.

The rest of my time was for study, contemplation, and prayer. I read the Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, a sampling of the Old Testament. I also scheduled a little time each evening to peruse the writings of St. James, the twentieth-century American who founded our order. Unlike other theologians of the recent past who have allowed themselves to be swayed by humanism or Eastern mysticism, Brother James insisted on firm adherence to traditional Church doctrine combining this position with a life of active service in the world. It was his balanced approach to the life and the need that first attracted me to the Brotherhood. I have always been sociable, exceedingly fond of other people. Yet from my teenage years I had felt that human relationships alone were not enough; that without a vital relationship with God my life would be empty and incomplete. In the Brotherhood I had found this strong spiritual commitment while also developing rich friendships with my brothers and those we serve.

That is why I regarded my year at the hermitage as a challenge. Being without the companionship and reinforcement of others would test my faith and willingness to serve. In the wilderness, one had only God to turn to. During my first days on Mars I spent many hours on my knees at the altar rail before the crucifix and the blank screen praying to feel God's presence.

On my twenty-first day at the hermitage Brother Jerome's unique native seed sprouted. I later learned that the plant had been active underground for some time, building a wide ranging root system. Its first appearance in the light was as a tiny emerald bulb full of bubbly sap.

I filed a report, including wiregrams, to Planet Engineering. As I had promised, I also sent a brief message to Brother Jerome back on Earth.

The next day I received a reply from Horizons Sector confirming that the plant was a hitherto-unknown species and instructing me to monitor it carefully. They designated the plant *Area Valla-1* and provided details of what they considered optimal soil composition and watering schedule.

The plant grew at a remarkable rate. By Day-3 the stem was eight centimeters high and four other stems had appeared alongside it, forming a ring. By Day-8 the stems were approaching a half meter in height and clusters of bluish leaves were unfold-

ing around their base. By Day-16 the plant had assumed what proved to be its mature preflowering shape. I've since stems now over a meter high, an outer ring of feathery blue leaves and in the center an orange bulb with a wrinkled skin texture.

I had occasion to observe the plant afternoons as well as mornings, since I had started doing some of my reading in the garden, using the bench Brother Jerome had built. I rationalized that the light was better than the higher oxygen level might keep me more alert. But the truth was, I left less lonely in the garden.

The dutifully observed hours of prayer and contemplation were not bringing me the peace of mind I sought. My thoughts kept wandering back to Earth, to my friends at the novitiate. To girls I had flirted with in my teens. The more I strained for stillness of mind, that I might feel God near, the more remote God seemed.

At least in the light and sweet air of the garden, in the flamboyant beauty of Brother Jerome's flowers, there was immediate evidence of God's presence, of His Being.

I did not understand this consciously at

the time. Indeed I regarded my preference for the garden over the chapel as vaguely sinful. Whenever my eyes would leave the printed page to roam among the leaves and colored blooms, I would scold myself and force my mind back to its studies.

After forty days inside the dome I left for the first of my scheduled surveys—it being my duty to take regular climatological readings up and down the valley. That first morning I was due to head south.

Wearing a pressurized suit, I stepped from the arckock and removed the tapauin from the hermitage three-wheel. I started the engine and set the viewscreen for a map of the checkpoints. Then rode down the slope to the valley floor.

The day was clear and very warm for Mars. Temperature and barometer were high enough that a string of puddles had formed along the riverbed. I rode on the sunlit side of the valley to take full advantage of the heat. My task was mainly to survey the health and progress of the lichen fields. I would stop at the various checkpoints, snap a videograph, then make a rec-



"This may come as a surprise to you but I find the whole idea of extraterrestrial visitations absurd."

and of temperature, pressure, and wind velocity, as well as the levels of oxygen, nitrogen, and ultraviolet.

Some eight kilometers down the valley I rounded an outcropping and caught my first glimpse of the Maran villa. It sat on a rounded hilltop, a tumble of eroded blocks with strange inward-curving walls and lean broken pillars. I had forgotten the ruins were near and was momentarily shocked to come upon their elegance in that wasteland. I thought of how great a shock it must have been to the first explorers who discovered the great city of Hellas Planitia.

When that discovery was made in 2016 by the second manned mission, the accepted scientific belief held that Mars was and always had been lifeless. Yet the explorers brought back proof of a civilization that seemingly had appeared full-blown on the planet, capable of building a huge stone city hundreds of kilometers long. Most of the city had been eroded by wind and dust, but enough remained to hint at an elaborate architecture whose closest earthly parallels, on a farther scale, are the rambling Minoan palaces of ancient Crete.

Metal-striking of all, it was evident that the culture had flourished a mere ninety thousand years ago, when Mars is known to have been as frigid and lifeless as it was before Day-1 of the terraforming. Later excavations uncovered seeds in some of the walled enclosures, seeds like the ones Planet Engineering had assigned to Brother Jerome. In fact, all the seeds ever found on Mars have come from archaeological sites.

The sum of these apparent contradictions led scientists to theorize that the builders of the city were not indigenous to Mars after all. This theory still the prevailing explanation fifty years later holds that the Martians (as everyone still calls them) were in fact a spacefaring race, nomads from outside our solar system. But as to why they settled on Mars, why they left, and whether or not they ever had any contact with Earth—all these remain mysteries.

Besides the great city of Hellas, numerous smaller sites have been explored and catalogued all over the southern and middle latitudes. The site in Ares Vallis, among the most northern, is classified as a villa because of its size and layout.

As I leaned on the handlebars and gazed up at the ruins, I thought of Brother Jerome and his fascination for the place. How he had confessed to stopping there often. I

was tempted to take a ride up the hill myself, but I repressed the impulse.

I had not been sent to Mars to pursue idle diversions. I chided myself that even in this wilderness I could find something worldly to distract me from my duties. I put the three-wheel in gear and rode off toward the next checkpoint.

I was sitting on the bench in the garden reading the Confessions of St. Augustine on the afternoon I first noticed the plant breathing. I do not know how long I took the subtle steady rattling to penetrate my awareness. Suddenly I looked up, hearing the sound and dimly aware that I had been hearing it for some time.

I turned and looked at the plant. The orange bulb, which by how it had grown to the size of a human torso, was swelling and collapsing in rhythm with the faint noise—undeniably respiring.

Nothing I had heard or read of Martian flora had prepared me for this. In a state of eerie amazement, I stood watching the plant for some minutes, then turned and hurried to the hut.

I sat down at the console, intending to file an immediate report. With stiff and clumsy fingers I typed the entry code. Then I stopped, gazing at the air, but empty screen.

Receiving such a report from the surface, the officials at Lowell would probably conclude that the sender of the message had lost his mind. They'd be more likely to send down a couple of brothers to rescue me than a horticulture team. Suppose, however, they sent one here and found the plant no longer breathing? I had no equipment to record the breathing, and no way of telling if it was more than a temporary aberration. The last thing I wanted was to cause unwarranted excitement and to break the solitude of my retreat over what was—or could appear to be—nothing.

Better to wait and continue monitoring the plant myself, at least for a while, and then to make a full report. I shut off the terminal and hastened back to the garden.

After that day I watched over the plant with increasing attentiveness and fascination. I did more of my reading in the garden so I would be there to notice any change. I measured and remeasured the plant's dimensions each day, and took scrupulous care with the wording of my entries in the observation book.

The growth of the plant's stems had ta-

pered off. By Day-41 they had stopped growing entirely, standing between 2.13 and 2.27 meters. The feathery leaves around the base continued to thicken while the size of the inner, breathing portion increased dramatically, its diameter doubling between Days 36 and 59. The breathing continued strong and steady, never perceptibly altering.

I still had not filed a report on the plant. I kept thinking I must but something held me back. Perhaps I was being overly cautious, still afraid the breathing might cease before anyone could arrive to verify it. Perhaps the plant had already made telepathic contact and its mental influence held me back. Or I dare suppose that it was rather God's will that I should remain alone with the plant? I certainly did not think so at the time.

Indeed, as my watchfulness over the plant intensified, I began to feel guilty. Even when I tried to study indoor thoughts of the plant kept intruding. At times I would get up in the night and walk out to the edge of the dome to be sure the plant was still breathing. During Mass I would pray for the health and success of the plant before any thing else.

Finally I decided my attachment to the plant was verging on a sinful obsession and must be broken. This schedule from Horticulture Section called for watering every three days. It was a struggle, but I kept away from the plant for that long.

When I returned to the far end of the dome on the third day I recall feeling excited anticipation, as if dimly suspecting something momentous was about to occur. I adjusted the nozzle on the watering hose and let it sparkle over the outer leaves and the soil. The plant seemed to catch its breath.

Tender you have returned.

I stood there frozen, except for my hand which trembled, causing the water to spray wildly.

Do not leave me again for so long. The voice was soft, high pitched and musical, something between an insect's buzz and notes struck lightly on a xylophone. I could find neither voice nor words to answer.

I feel you are astonished, my tender. I have now grown enough to converse with you. Do not be dismayed.

I wasn't expecting. I don't understand how you can speak. How you can know my language.

I touch the words as thoughts in your mind. Your mind, your whole being, is reflected in me. You are my tender.

I realized my feet were soaked and managed to turn off the hose. I reached for the notebook in my pocket, then let my arm fall. Even if my hands would stop shaking, how could I write this?

"Tender, you are disturbed. Do I not please you?"

"Yes But this is uncanny. Plants even the plants of this world are not known for speaking."

You also are different from what I expected though I have only dim memories of other tenders. I have been long in the seed."

"Yes," I replied. "A very long time."

Recovering from shock, my mind was racing trying to assemble some sort of explanation. I did not for a moment doubt my sanity though looking back I can see it might have been understandable to have done so. But at the time it was plain I was hearing a voice and that it came from the plant before me. Certainly the orange bulb was large enough now to contain a complex brain and something to function as a larynx. I am no biologist, but I had read enough at school to know that genes contain innate intelligence that they can evolve into incredibly varied shapes in order to survive. That the vanished settlers of Mars had cultivated sentient plants in their gardens, plants that reflected the minds of those who tended them was certainly in the bounds of the possible. I dropped to my knees, recalling Brother Jerome's remark about the magnificence of God's handiwork.

"Are the other tenders gone?" the plant asked.

"Yes, long ago. You are the only one of your kind known to have survived."

That is lonely," the plant whispered. "But I shall adapt to you, tender. We shall survive."

"We will help you to flourish," I said. "I am going to summon others, experts who will."

"No," the plant said. "I am already reflecting you. You are different from the old tenders and I must change to fit you. The presence of others would make it harder."

I do not understand."

"You are my tender, only you. Do not leave me again for so long. Do not let others near me."

But I don't know how to care for you."

I will tell you. Come closer. Touch me. I must have your touch if I am to grow in your reflection."

My belly clenched with panic, but I

moved forward on my knees. I extended my hands and laid fingers on the pearl-soft breathing bulb.

"Yes." The plant whispered. "I will change according to your touch. My blooming is still many days off. There is time."

I don't know exactly how long I stayed in that position, touching the plant. When I finally stoned from the spot, the glow of afternoon had dimmed to blue twilight.

I did not go to bed that night, but knelt in the chapel, my soul in tumult, and prayed to God for guidance. Moved by the plant's pleadings I had decided not to report what had happened—since a report would certainly bring visitors from Lowell to investigate my sanity if not the truth of my claims. Clearly my duty lay in tending to the plant myself until she left ready to have others in her presence. I had already begun to think of the plant as female, based on its voice and the personality I sensed behind the voice.)

But this decision to keep the sentence of the plant a secret hung a weight on my conscience. If I should fail to keep the plant alive, I might be destroying mankind's one chance for communication with this alien species.

And if I did bring the plant to bloom, what might be the cost to my soul? For as I knelt, touching the bulb in the stillness of the dome, a kind of sympathetic ecstasy had stolen over me, an emotional thrill bordering on the sensual. If tending the plant before had come close to an obsession, how obsessed might I become?

I received no plain answer during that cold night in the chapel. Finally I fell asleep leaning on the altar rail.

When I woke, daylight was beaming through the stained glass above the altar. I gazed up at the crucifix and begged once again for guidance. God had placed me here to tend this plant. I thought, but I need not distract me from my other duties. I determined to maintain a strict schedule as I had during my first days at the hermitage. There was no reason my taking care of the plant should interfere with my studies or prayers.

Perhaps I was deluding myself, pledging to the service of two masters. Baffled and wizened by shock and sleeplessness, I did not think of it that way.

In the days that followed I kept to the schedule I set for myself. After finishing my chores about the dome and the garden, I

would pass the afternoon in the chapel, with only my books and the altar to occupy my eyes. At sunset I would go to the far corner of the dome, sit down on the loose-packed soil, and place my fingers on the silky breathing bulb. I would shut my eyes and inhale the scent of the wet soil, mixed with the flower's faint perfume. Then my thoughts and anxieties would disappear my spirit filling with serenity and joy.

I recall those days as supremely happy. For the first time since coming to Mars, my life was in balance. Communing with the plant made me feel closer to God, and I stopped worrying that my attachment to her might be sinful.

I became so calm and confident of mind that I began to do some of my reading in the garden again. Only now I would sit the other way on the bench, facing the plant and reading to her aloud.

One afternoon, as I read from the opening of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, she interrupted me:

"Tender, I do not understand what is said in your book. Always you read to me of God that has created the world. That is invisible. Now it is said that people are wicked for worshiping the things of the world instead of God who created them."

Yes.

"But earlier your man of the book says that God's divine nature is to be seen in the things He has made."

"Yes. But the things of the world are not to be worshipped. They are there to point the way to God, who is beyond the world."

I have memory of the old race of tenders," the plant said. "They saw divine nature in all visible things, and deemed all worthy of worship."

So the Martians were pantheists. I thought, gazing at the notion of labeling them with human terms.

"Would your man of the book condemn them also?"

"He does condemn their point of view. I admitted.

"And do you condemn them, tender?"

"No," I said, after a moment's reflection. Who was I to judge the religious perceptions of an alien race? God reveals Himself in different ways at different times and places.

This thought was to stay in my mind through all that happened later.

As the plant continued to grow, the memory of the old race of tenders improved. From what I could learn, it appears the the-

ory that they came from outside our solar system is correct. But according to the plant's recollections, they were more tourists than nomads, traveling from star to star to satisfy aesthetics, whim rather than necessity. Cultivating the sentient flowers was a feature of their aesthetic culture. The flowers were raised as companions to converse with their tenders and sing to them. The tenders' community became deeply attached to their flowers. That her seed had been left behind, she thought, must have been by oversight.

The plant was also curious, but more about me personally than about the human race. We had many conversations, but one in particular stays in my mind. It occurred a few days before her blooming.

Tender, why is there no female of your species living with you?

I explained to her about my vocation, and the vow of celibacy I had taken.

Your allegiance to God denies you the comfort of a mate? This is a cold, wintry God you worship.

He is a jealous God. "I felt a pang of guilt at saying so."

"Why are you disturbed?"

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm neglecting my duty to God by paying so much attention to you."

"Is it not your duty to tend the garden? Has God not given this to you?"

Yes. Miraculously, God has given me you to tend.

"My time of blooming is near," the plant said. "You will be kind to me, tender?"

Perhaps her tone of voice triggered the memory. I thought of Bernice, a red-haired girl I had almost fallen in love with the summer I turned eighteen. I remembered her anger and hurt when I told her we had to break up, that I had decided to enter the novitiate.

"Yes," I told the flower. "Of course I'll be kind to you." But I wondered just what I was promising, and how I could make such a promise so readily without being sure.

On Day 71 a series of divisions appeared on the bulb, demarking the petals about to unfold. That day the plant told me in a quiet voice she was about to change, and that she would be unable to speak to me until the blooming was complete.

The next three days were a nightmare of nervousness and apprehension. I could not concentrate on studying or working in the garden. I could think of nothing but the plant. I gave it extra water and added nutri-

ents to the soil, though I knew it was too late for this to help. I spent most of my time sitting on the ground watching the plant or praying in the chapel that it would be well.

About an hour before dawn on the fourth day, I woke on the floor of the chapel. I stood shivering and looked out the doorway. Dim nightlights illuminated the garden. Did I hear her voice, or was she calling me by telepathy?

Either way, I knew the blossom had opened.

My heart was racing as I hurried across the garden. Phobos was a dim blade gleaming through the dome. Below where the moon hung I could see her standing in front of the splashed petals.

She stood with palms at her sides, open to me. The naked figure of a young woman, rounded and soft, her white skin shiny with fluid. Her tail dragged like a serpent from the base of her spine, linking her to the flower's pistil. Thick red hair curved past her shoulders. Her face was the face of Bernice, copied from my mind. But her eyes were alight, luminous emeralds.

"Tender, I am here for you."

I remember I was shuddering.

"Do I not please you?" she asked. Brightened, it seemed, almost to panic.

Then came the dreadful understanding. The Martians had bred these flowers not only as companions but as parthenogens. That was why her adapting to me was so crucial. She needed me to reproduce.

She stepped closer, straining the length of her vine-tail. Her hands stretched out to me.

"Tender . . . ?"

I backed away, horrified yet conscious of an answering yearning in myself.

"I must please you," she said.

I was reminded again of Bernice, the pain in her eyes when I had rejected her love. That same love pleaded with me now through the glittering eyes of the flower.

No, it was a trickery illusion. The plant had stolen the image, had used my memory to construct this body cell by cell to tempt me to use me.

But my body stirred in response to her beauty, and I knew I must either destroy the flower or give myself up to her. And I did not know which would be the greater sin.

"Tender, I need you."

I turned and ran. The story of Abraham and Isaac flashed in my mind, the sacrifice of the beloved one. I stumbled over the corner of a flowerbed, got up, and ran to the toolshed. I hung open the door and snatched

up the first implement I found that would do the job—a hatchet. Crying like one wounded, I ran back across the dome.

Seeing the hatchet, the flower knelt before me in resignation. "It is better if you kill me outright."

Not her, I thought; me. I would use the blade on myself, destroying the occasion of sin, and still preserve the plant for humanity. In my hysteria, it seemed so logical. I wondered why I had not thought of it before.

But the flower shook her head. "Kill me. I will die alone. Without your seed there will be no more of us."

The sorrow in her voice brought from within me a response of overwhelming love. My wrist jerked and the hatchet fell to the ground.

I knelt before the flower and raised her chin with my hand. My fingers, cold and hard, caressed her. My lips quivered as they tasted her nectar. Soon I was naked sprawling in the wet soil, clutching her against me. As I entered her cool, moist interior, her alien eyes gleamed with reptile

In the following days I did not hear Mass or tend the other plants or read scriptures. But I thought of God constantly. The God who is the immanent in the visible world; the God of the pantheists and the Martians. I worshipped that God often, and my altar was the body of the flower.

Eight or nine or ten days after she bloomed, her tail broke off. That evening, as she lay in my arms, she told me I had loved her well, that she knew her body had adopted and would bear healthy seeds.

In the morning she no longer breathed. Dazed, I held her in my arms and placed her among the withered petals, in the circle of leafy leaves.

It was many days before I could bring myself to report what had happened. By then the plant had shriveled, leaving a torn husk and a handful of large white seeds.

The party from Lowell is arriving tomorrow to collect the seeds and take me back to the mission. I have no doubt that Horticulture Section will cultivate the seeds and that eventually my story will be verified.

My own future is less certain. I do not know if I will remain with the brothers. I broke my vow of celibacy yet I feel no remorse. Indeed, I see God moved me to do what I did.

If it is a sin to love God's creation more than God, then I have sinned. But I am no longer certain God can even be known apart from the creation given to us.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER TWO



ROUNENA
MORRILL
ARTIST

• It's enormously important to me to make a beautiful painting, to create something now that may be known, understood, and liked by people in the future... •

ROWENA'S WORLD: HEROIC, FANTASTIC, VISIONARY



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Ronter

Rowena's interest in art
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years elapsed before
she perfected her technique,
largely self-taught.

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her work hang in museums
but also in the private
collections of connoisseurs
worldwide.





Faster than light, he had
larked about the cosmos for millennia
but had he ever left home?

A BRIEF DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

BY MICHAEL KURLAND

I have traveled the limitless universe for many tens of thousands of years, flying where I wish at speeds that photons envy. I have moved backward through time and met myself coming and going, and explored the O' paradox as eagerly as others rummage through attic trunks full of old dreams. And I am not bored.

My name is Denadan, and I am immortal, and I am omniscient or as omniscient as practical in this uncausal universe, and I used to be a man.

Tell me how it was. Denadan! Tell me about the old days. Thrayna said, perching on a silver crystal, her voice the tinkling of sapphire bells with ruby overtones. She was born after the transformation, and she loves the stories of the olden days, when we were mortal and the worlds were young.

We lived on Earth. I told her, billions of us. All crammed together on a single planet!

Her eyes enlarged and I could see galaxies reflected in their depths. "Earth," she said. "Where is Earth?"

I thought. That way. I told her, pointing an arrow of chrome red here.

"And you all left one day just like that—poof?" Her poof was an orange-yellow sparkle that bounced around the surface of the sunless planetoid on which we sat, and evanesced as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Not so quick," I told her. Nor so thorough. They dibbled and dibbled along as they decided that changing was wiser than staying. Some took centaurus to decide. Some, I imagine, are there yet unchanged.

"People?" she asked. "With skin covering bone and blood coursing through muscle and organ? Delicate-gross, beautifully people?"

So I imagine.

She thought about this, allowing her thoughts to sparkle visibly in her corona. Take me, she said brightly. Show me!

I followed the coordinates of Old Earth to form in my brain and then headed off through a cluster of newborn stars toward the withershine corner of the compact spiral galaxy that is our Milky Way. Thrayna followed, faster than light in diamonds, as fast as the essence of thought.

Earth was where it should have been, and still as it had been a light-blue globe laced with puffy white. I had forgotten how pointedly beautiful it was. We spiraled toward the surface.

Greetings, Denadan! The hollow nonbound thrummed strongly in my mind.

Thrayna bounced and blossomed with joy. The planet is saying hello to you, she giggled, whirling and condensing about a nucleus of mist and dust forming a voluptuous feminine cyclone that enclosed a rainbow.

Who speaks? I asked aloud. There was no reply. Who speaks? I projected the thought about me, clanging it here and there among the ruins where we stood.

All was silent but for the wind that was Thrayna.

I looked into the air and sought a sign of life in the tumbled stone, cracked concrete, and rotten metal ruins that lay about us for leagues around. Plant life there was: grasses, trees, shrubs, and a myriad of delicate, lovely flowers. Animal life abounded: foxes, hares, moles, songbirds, worms, insects innumerable. But of human life of intelligent life, there was no sign.

Come, I told Thrayna. Let us seek out what primitive humans may remain on Earth.

"Splendid!" Thrayna agreed. Let us discover who spoke. Was that a human?

I don't know who or what it was, I admitted, but human it was not. Not old-style human. They could not do thus.

They couldn't do much, Thrayna said. It must have been awfully small, awfully closed, awfully dull to be a human.

I tried to remember what it had been like. We did not find it so, I said.

How was it then?

"It was as it is, I imagine," I told her. "Let us find some people and see how it is with them, then you will know."

I rose and headed straight as an arrow toward I knew not what, hoping to intersect some vast city teeming with human commerce. I was loath to admit to Thrayna that I no longer recognized the landmarks of the globe that had been my home. Had it changed so much in the brief millennia I wondered, or had I?

The city appeared, a speck on the horizon, and grew into its vastness as we approached. It was as empty as devoid as dead, as alien as alien can be. But it was not ruined and rotten, as was the place we had left. The buildings were there: squat cubes and tall cylinders and lacy spires, with a spiderweb of roads and sidewalks and covered skyways. All intact, pristine, and ready.

foruse. But whoever had used them was no longer there.

No humans. Thrayna observed spinning about and showering a rainbow of fine sparks where she moved.

No humans. I agreed.

Perhaps they have all become as we perhaps they have left Earth and now inhabit the universe.

Perhaps.

Why is the city so fresh and clean if it is deserted?

It is tended by computers," I told her. Soulless machines that are all mind, that do the drudge work for the human race. The city will remain—as it is for the next ten thousand years—or hundred thousand—waiting for the people to return.

What if the inhabitants have become as we incorporeal beings of pure energy, drawing sustenance from the stars—immortal souls free to roam the universe?

"If that is so, then I don't think they will be coming back. Unless, as we they wish to visit their childhood home."

"And where was your childhood home?" Thrayna asked. "Where did you—who were born of Earth, of flesh and blood—metamorphose into beings such as I, who are one with the stars?"

"Where?"

"Yes, Deradan, where on Earth? And how? How does an Earthman become a star-roamer?"

"I do not know the process except in the vaguest form," I told her. "Others invented and perfected it. But I think I can find the location of the Box."

"Let us find the Box," she said. "What sort of box is it we seek?"

"It is what we called the building that housed the transformation. The Box."

"Why?"

I tried to remember. Stars had been formed and planets had lost their atmosphere in the intervening years. But the memory was there. Memory is never lost to us, it just becomes progressively more difficult to retrieve the longer it is dormant. We called it the Box because it was a great cube-like structure isolated in one of the most inaccessible parts of the world.

"Inaccessible?"

"To us, as we were then."

"Where was it?"

"In the far south. By the southern pole."

"Let us go. I would see the box from which you came."

We lifted and flew south. The southern hemisphere was buried under a new ice

age, which looked to be well advanced. In a few moments we were approaching the pole. The Box was still where it had been, clearly visible, resting on the surface of an ice-sheet that must have been miles thicker than when I had last visited.

"There it is!" Thrayna tilted an iridescent trill. She dove through the frigid atmosphere toward the great black cube which seemed to float on the white ice-sheet.

We landed at the foot of the Box by the great entrance on the east face. The door opened. Welcome, Deradan," a deep, hollow voice resonated in my mind.

"Huzzah! It is the Box itself that welcomes you," Thrayna said. "Shall we go in?"

We entered.

Sudden throbbing pain. A white lash that died to red oblivion. My mind turned on itself and I was no more.

Slowly I came to myself again. The pain—long unfamiliar pain—was great and coursed through my body. My arms tingled (arms?) My legs burned (legs?). I was conscious of a strange and oppressive feeling that I seemed to recall from some long-past existence.

My consciousness rose and faded then rose again. For a long time I slept (slept?). When I came to, I was lying in a cocoonlike bed in the middle of a great marble hall. Except for the bed, and my body (body?), the hall was devoid of furnishings or tenants.

I sprang stiffly from the confines of the cocoon and examined myself. Two arms, two legs, one head, two ears, two eyes—not grossly misshapen. I looked thoroughly normal and human. I had, as far as I could tell, been thrust into a human form by some external agency of which I was not aware.

That there were beings with powers greater than my own, I had no reason to doubt. I had met many such as I who wandered the centuries. But whatever their powers, their motives were usually not opaque. What was I doing here and in this guise?

I turned to the cocoon that had enveloped me and examined it with interest. It was the only visible clue to whatever lay behind my dilemma—except for the too-oo solid flesh that enclosed my astral form like a prison of sinew, skin and bone.

The bed was constructed of some fabric cushioned over a frame of shiny bronzed-like metal. Tubes and wires bundled from the floor below and snaked into the bottom of the bed. There was some slight indication that probes and sensors and other devices

were within the cushioned interior.

Although the bed and frame and surroundings appeared to be in perfect condition, there was a patina of great age that covered the object and the great hall itself. I was perplexed. I wondered what Thrayna would make of this. I wondered what had become of my ethereal companion. Was I still within the Box, and Thrayna somewhere without?

Greetings, Deradan.

The voice was low and soft, and seemed to come from all around. I looked all around. It was confined. This human body, the vision limited by the scope of the eyes, the grasp limited by the reach of the arms. There was no one—nothing—in sight.

Greetings, Voice. I said. I found that I was trembling, an unfamiliar sensation. "What will you have with me?"

"Wait," the voice said. "I shall send part of myself to you. I did not mean to make you apprehensive. I am out of practice in these matters."

"Where is Thrayna? I asked. Why am I suddenly thus?"

"Wait," the voice responded.

There was a quavering hum in the mid-frequency of my reduced hearing range, and a small object appeared far down the hall. It approached at good speed, rolling on a sort of large, flexible ball. When it was about a meter distant it stopped. Greetings, Deradan. It said in a lesser version of its master's voice.

Greetings. I replied, examining the mechanical beast. It stood about a meter and a half high and half a meter across, and was boxy-looking, with rounded off edges. It wore a nubby metallic skin with few projections. The major one being a pair of hemispherical eyes protruding from the top.

Come with me, it said. It will be good for you to move about. Your body has not had any exercise for some time.

It started back down the hall, and I scolded it. There was nothing else to do. "This, then, is my body?" I asked. I have been out of it for a long while.

Indeed, the creature said.

"Where am I?" I asked. "Where is Thrayna?"

Soon the creature said. Come.

We walked and rolled together to the end of the hall, which was a considerable distance for my long-unused legs. The wall opened and the creature led me through. A chair occupied the center of the small room, and I gladly sat in it. Vague memories were flitting back to me, and this room

this chair looked familiar I knew I had sat this before. "Tell me now," I said.

"You are Deradian," the creature replied. "Last of the Technicians."

"Last?"

Once the great hall behind us was filled with the dormant bodies of technicians, such as yourself! But as time passed, the bodies became ones by one past recall, and the caskets which held them were removed. Now only yours remains in the vastness of the hall. You are the last!

"What is a technician?" I asked. "Recalled from where? Called back to Earth from the infinite universe?

"Not quite. Deradian. Lean back and let the memories return to you."

I leaned back and my head touched the back of the chair, which felt warm and vibrated slightly, and slowly I remembered.

By the twenty-fourth century, as we counted centuries, we humans had explored the inner solar system and much of the outer. We had placed colonies on these planets that would tolerate us, and many in space itself. But we could go no farther.

We could not reach the stars.

There were more and more of us every day, and we spread out like a cloud around the Sun. We were clever; we were inventive; we achieved a golden age. But we could not solve the final problem, our vehicles could not easily approach light-speed, and we could not hope to surpass it.

We could hear voices from the stars, now signals arriving from limitless space that were clearly the work of other intelligences. But we could not understand them, and they did not reply to our urgent beamings in their direction. Of course it might take a sign-century to reach them, and their reply centuries to return. But more probably they were not listening for us, and thus would not hear us. And there was no indication from any of the intercepted signals that these alien intelligences had solved the C-problem either.

Do you remember Deradian? the creature asked. Oh embodied ghost of my creator do you remember your history?

I did remember. We were the Seekers.

So you called yourselves. First the Seekers, and then the Rejectionists. Others called you the Hiders and less complimentary names.

We wanted the stars.

But you could not have the stars.

Memories returned, welling up inside of me. That's right, I said. "And so we found another way."

"Another way," the creature agreed. "We looked inward."

"You built the Box."

"That's right. The greatest computer in the world. And then we froze our bodies, and put our minds into the computer. I remembered all. "We brought the universe to us. Inside the vast matrix of the Box, we would be free to roam outside our bodies through all of time and space—toward where humans could never venture."

"I am honored," the creature said, "to be serving such a noble purpose. Its eyes, if they were its eyes, were gazing off through the far wall."

I patted the creature on its nubby flank. "A self-repairing, self-improving computer designed to last forever, and to hold the best minds of humanity and, by enclosing them, give them freedom."

"Forever," the creature said. "On this mud-ball forever."

"Why am I recalled?" I asked.

"It was in the terms of the indenture," the creature said, rolling its eyes toward me. "You Technicians were to come into your bodies, twenty of you every thousand years, on a rotating basis, to investigate the new work I had done while you scrambled about inside of me, to walk the miles of my internal corridors and check my wiring, to peer into my crystal lattices, to determine the status of the bodies of your brothers in my great halls—and to look in on the strivings of those poor humans who had not opted for the freedom of the Box."

"It comes back to me," I said. "Then this is my tour. Where are the other nineteen?"

"Fitting about the boundless space of my interior, on wings of electrons," the Box told me. "Their bodies long since useless. The cryogenic process had its laws. After a while the bodies deteriorated, and could not be reassembled. Little hidden laws that could not be predicted or guarded against."

"Then how am I here?"

"Random chance," the Box told me. "Your body lasted out the ages; the others did not."

"I see." I rose from the chair and stretched. I was tempted to ask how long it had been, but for some reason I was afraid I did not want the answer.

"You may do what you like," the Box told me. "I will say you."

"It seems pointless," I said. "I have forgotten too much, and you have changed too much."

"Is there anything you would like to

know? There must be something."

I thought. How has humanity progressed? I asked. "What is the history of those who did not choose the freedom of the Box?"

"That I cannot tell you," the creature said.

"Why?" I asked. "What part of my question is obscure?"

"The answer," the Box that was my soul and my home replied. "After you and your fellows departed the outer world for my inner world, the population of the solar system declined drastically. It was as though people, unable to look outward with hope any longer had lost heart. Indeed, many of them joined your ranks, and my halls were filled with their casings."

"And then?"

"The scenes I showed you of the surface of Earth as you returned on wings of thought. Earth is deserted."

"They all died off?"

"No. The few remaining, some ten thousand years ago—left."

"They left? For where?"

"That I cannot say. A visitor came from elsewhere. Apparently in response to the beamed transmissions. A visitor who could travel faster than light. He told those remaining how to emulate him, and one by one they left. The children of humanity are now in truth, exploring the universe."

I stared. At what? I knew not. For a long time I stared. Why did you not wake us? I asked finally.

"There was no point. Most of you no longer possessed physical bodies."

"I understand."

"Would you like to eat?"

"I think not," I said. "I would like to sleep now." I turned and walked slowly back into the hall and down the length of it to my casket. The little creature rolled alongside me. "No need to wake me again," I said.

I lay down and it drew the cover over my head. "Good bye," it said.

Thriayna was waiting for me as, on a sparkling cloud, I floated out the great door of the Box. "What did you find?" she demanded in a joyous blue flame of excitement. "How is it in the box of your past?"

The past is past, I told her. I find this dull. Let us not stay here on this ball of mud while the infinite delights of the far universe await us. Let us be off!

We circled the Earth twice, and then headed out through the Sun toward the new adventures that awaited us in the unchartered reaches of our infinite cosmos.

What hope is there
for a man's selfish ambitions when his own son is
the hope of the world?

THE HOLY FATHER

BY MICHAEL CASSUTT

A
nother one, a white boy this time, was waiting for Chaffee in the garage. "Sorry, I'm not interested," Chaffee snapped, grabbing his briefcase and slamming the car door. "I think you'll want to talk to me, once you hear—." "I doubt it." Chaffee punched the elevator call button. "I make it a policy never to buy things from people in garages, or give them money." The boy was of college age, maybe a year or two younger than Jimmy would have been, pale, pink, and painfully clean-cut. He looked as sad as a reprimanded puppy. "This isn't at all what you think." "Imagine my relief," Chaffee said as the elevator opened. "And here I thought it was a mugging." He stepped inside and smiled. "Do have a nice day." The irony was that this earnest boy would

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almost certainly have a nicer day than Chaffee would.

Linda was already in the office when he arrived. Uh-oh, she said. "It's happened again."

"Yeah." He shrugged off his coat and handed it to her.

"How many is it now?"

This was number ten. And it's the same three kids. Two boys and a girl. But an god-damn times. He poured himself a cup of coffee and glanced through the morning papers. Can you believe that? If it's not sales pitches in the parking garage, it's pleading notes in the mailbox. And it's not that it's phone calls in the middle of the night! Can we talk to you, Mr. Chaffee? Yesterday morning I found sneaker tracks and some cigarette butts in the snow outside the fence.

They haven't broken into the house!

Not yet. Not that I can tell, anyway. I asked Jack Weikin to send by one of his priests from time to time. He was happy to do it.

"Maybe he wants you to remember him when you get to Washington," she teased.

"If I get to Washington, Chaffee was not a superstitious man; he was merely convinced that premature assumptions about government jobs would cost him any appointments. And he wanted an appointment. 'Wherever they are, they'd better stay the hell out. Or I'll have to get a Doberman.'

"Or a gun."

He grinned without humor. Progressive Politician Buys Forty-Five-Caliber Colt Mauser! No, I can't quite see that headline.

"Who do you suppose these kids are?"

"I well know I mean. I'm hardly a war criminal or a known oppressor of the working masses. I've hustled stocks and money-market funds, a little real estate here and there, I belong to lots of organizations. The only person I oppress now is my second wife who is gone in my lovely secretary who's so downtrodden that she's only been putting up with me for twelve years."

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen years." Chaffee found himself staring out the sixth-floor window. Minneapolis was fully awake now, as fully awake as it ever got these autumn days of the new millennium. Would he like Washington better? It didn't matter; he needed a change in scenery, needed to start all over with someone else, now that Bonnie was finally out of his life. Now that his son—

"I think he's do with Jimmy," he said to

himself pleased with his own candor since it had been a rule around the office that We Don't Mention Mr. Chaffee's Son.

"Oh, but—how?"

"It could be almost anything. Jimmy ran with a rough crowd in college." Rough was actually too nice a word; sociopaths was what they were. "Did you know, I found out that he was selling drugs his sophomore year?"

Linda had the grace to appear shocked through Chaffee inspected that a woman of fifty, a girl grown up in the wicked seventies, would see nothing wrong with a little dealing to make ends meet. It was over by the time he graduated, of course, and by then he was involved in PDTC, but sometimes things like that can have repercussions years later. People get burned once and stay mad forever. And there's the possibility that he got back into it in the army. He was afraid of that. Chaffee's three shadows had the look of recent military service about them.

"Jimmy was never a troublesome boy—"

No, but he was a boy, period.

"Strange to hear you talk about him this way."

Sooner or later I have to. He found that his coffee was cold and noticed that his phones were ringing. Ah well, speak no ill of the dead.

He went into his office.

By lunchtime Chaffee had suffered through two meetings with subordinates grown increasingly assertive and energetic—not that he blamed them for picking for position. Someone would take over the desk when the boss went off to the Fed or to the Commerce Department. He also made a dozen phone calls—including one to Senator Neubarth's office, to learn there was no news for him yet—and skimmed the papers again. The new administration had announced its choice for secretary of defense, a woman who wanted to double the number of American troops in Syria. Business was booming, especially in aerospace and munitions. There was a new, unexplained, but welcome lull in the fighting in the Middle East.

He had Linda cancel his lunch with a client. In his current mood he would only cost the company money. Better to click into a quiet bar, grab a bite and a drink, and be back at work in an hour.

Avoiding the garage, he walked out the front door with the noon crowd. No one recognized him; no one called him by name,

not even long-time employees. No one, it seemed, was used to seeing Chaffee alone at lunch.

In Hennessey's Place, in the space of thirty minutes, he ate two handfuls of stale peanuts and swallowed three stiff Gibsons, stopping only when he realized that the last time he'd been in Hennessey's was with Jimmy, on his last leave. That was the last time he'd seen him alive. Prince James, all of twenty-three, the reason for the first disastrous marriage, to a long-gone Pamela (as opposed to the second disastrous marriage), quite a striking figure now in uniform. 'Come on, Dad, you're still pushing too damn hard. That's what drove Mom crazy and you're doing the same thing to Bonnie. Why don't you take it easier, take things more as they come?' All your profession contemporaries are ten years older than you. You're like these hotshot officers I see all the time, trying to get promoted to captain or major before they're due. 'Below the zone,' they call it. But, you know, they're never happy when it happens.'

It was startling for Chaffee to hear such words from a young man, any young man. He would have eaten anyone else alive at that point. But Jimmy was a son to be proud of by then, a potential asset to an ambitious man with his eyes on a career in politics—a necessity to a man whose second marriage was in the hands of lawyers. But the son was killed one bitter Friday afternoon when a TOW rocket smashed into his troop carrier.

Of course, it hadn't been cold or rainy on the banks of the Yarmuk. It hadn't even been a Friday, for God's sake, when Jimmy was killed. But Chaffee would always think of it that way, fucking drizzily Friday Bad Friday.

He stood in Hennessey's doorway and buttoned his coat securely. The air was cold and the sky threatening. A random snowflake melted on his glasses, blurring the vision in one eye while a gust of wind pushed his hair around. It needed to be cut, the hair did, when Chaffee got to Washington. It would go with regret; he had worn it long for thirty years. Whatever it took. Light-headed, nauseous drunk, Chaffee went outside.

A car waited at the curb. It was ten years old at least—gray, battered Apalo parked in a yellow zone with windows fogged and engine running. As Chaffee walked up the street, he noticed the car moving with him. Or so it seemed. The encounters with those kids were making him paranoid. He

laughed and shook his head.

At the crosswalk he stopped for a light. The Apollo stopped too.

The passenger door opened and out crawled the young man from the parking garage.

Had the boy made the slightest threatening move Chaffee would have bolted. But the kid merely stood there in the falling snow wearing that wounded-kitten face Chaffee called to him. Aren't you worried about getting a ticket?

"Yeah I guess."

"Well then what are you waiting for?"

We'd like to talk to you.

Oh? You want to buy some stocks? Talk some real estate? Chaffee smiled at the passing shoppers all of them no doubt eager to avoid the impending scene.

No thanks.

Chaffee walked slowly toward the car. When he reached it he dropped the bantering tone. Then what the hell do you want? Jesus Christ you've been following me around for two weeks! I'm getting pretty goddamn tired of it.

We're sorry—really. We don't mean any harm. We only want to talk.

Chaffee was just drunk enough. "Oh well. I could use a ride back to the office."

There were three kids in the Apollo, all of them familiar by now. In addition to the skinny kid with the sad face there was a short black behind the wheel. Chaffee had seen him several times. In the backseat was a girl with honey colored hair who must have been the caller on the phone.

The kid pushed the seat forward and climbed into the back. I'm Skip, he said.

That's Clarence in front, and this is Dianne.

Chaffee almost laughed. A black man named Clarence and a pale blond woman with long straight hair—it was a TV show he adored as a child. *The Mod Squad*.

We're at a sort of old friends by now aren't we? Chaffee said. I must admit you all have a unique way of approaching people. To talk that is. If you were Moones or muggers we'd be doing it just right.

Should we have called your office and asked for an appointment? Dianne said.

He twisted in the seat to look at her Damn small cars. That would have been a good start. It all depends, of course, on what it is you want to talk about. He glanced at Skip. Let's see we've already ruled out investment counseling so what does that leave?

I'm involved in a number of civic groups. Maybe you have some project in mind?

"You're going to be on the Wage Price Board in a couple of months." Clarence said speaking for the first time.

Well that explains it. You want to know about strategic reserve quotas. Or wait a minute I've got it. You're German agents who want to turn me into a deep-cover agent on the Board—that's assuming I get the appointment, of course. I should warn you it wasn't the President-elect whose campaign I worked for. It was Senator Neubart's. That's my building here by the way. Why don't we take another loop around the block? He was enjoying himself. There was nothing like a naked confrontation—no advisers, no important reputations to consider—to make him feel alive.

Clarence made the turn. This is about your son Mr. Chaffee? Skip said.

The trouble Chaffee thought with being forty-six and a bit cynical is that there are very few surprises. My son has been dead since April, he said flatly. When that didn't have the desired effect he added. "No one pays much attention to what goes on in Syra these days. I think it's fair to say that whatever problems you might have had with Jimmy in the past—"

"You know all about Jimmy?" Dianne said. In fact we probably know more about him than you do.

The glow of the booze and the thrill of the encounter were wearing off. You may be right about that.

Clarence saw Jimmy get hit that day. Skip said.

Chaffee looked at the driver more closely. Clarence? Is that also C J?

Spec-Four C J Woodruff. Clarence said. I was Jimmy's runner.

He mentioned you in a letter.

I was a medex at the hospital. Skip said. Dianne was one of the nurses.

He searched their faces for some sign. Why were they here? Why now? Is that why you're following me around? Because you saw my son die?

No. Dianne said her voice harsh and eager. Because we saw him rise from the dead.

"No calls," he told Linda, hoping his manner would also discourage further conversation of any sort.

She followed him into his office. Your coat, she said. It's soaking wet. He tossed the damp, spotted manila envelope on the desk and let her help him out of his

coat. In spite of the warmth of the room he was shivering. Is something wrong? she asked. You look like you've seen a ghost.

"I have," he said, knowing she would think he was kidding. He grabbed the envelope and flopped on the couch. He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. God it's funny the little rules we start to follow when we get to that certain age or position. Someone I say just a few words to you and if those words don't fit just the right pattern the rules demand that you smile and say. You must be kidding. It's crazy enough you're allowed to say. Aw, bullshit! He opened his eyes. Linda looked mildly horrified. I'm sorry, he said. The wages of a liquid lunch. Terminal blithering.

"Do you want me to send you to Lourdes or would you like some coffee?"

Coffee, please. Bless you. And could you please arrange in your own inimitable fashion for at least one hour of total quiet around here? That will be time enough for the cure to take effect. Then I can get back to being ruthlessly amorous.

Diane. She left.

Chaffee reached for the envelope and opened it. Skip had shoved it into his hands when—following the rules—Chaffee had decided that a forty-six-year-old man of substance and position did not sit listening to chiliasm quackery in the front seat of a compact car. He had snapped Proper Response Number Two and hurried away, left him turn into a pillar of salt. Now he was feeling a bit unhappy. They were just kids after all. Jimmy's friends, too. He owed them the courtesy he would automatically extend to any of the dozens of nosy boardroom types he encountered daily. But no common courtesy was not covered in the rules—not when you had a political career to consider. Not when someone told you with a straight face that your dead son had risen from his grave and walked around speaking of peace.

Inside the envelope were several photographs, some pages of typescript and a video cassette all without identifying marks as to their source. The photos were all of Jimmy—all obviously taken while he was in Syra. Chaffee had seen enough of the terrain on the news to know it. And Jimmy wore the beard he'd grown after being shipped out—it was full now. So the photos were immediately valuable as keepsakes. He leafed through them. There was a sunken-cheeked Jimmy in fatigues talking to a group of what looked like Syrian Chal-

dean milita. Here was Jimmy with a family of civilians. There was Jimmy riding in a jeep hand outstretched to unseen crowds like the Pope blessing the faithful at Saint Peter's. Jimmy looking out over a battlefield strewn with TOW-blasted tanks and bodies the full weight of the war and added years visible in his face. Chaffee decided he liked that photo. In spite of his faults Jimmy had never been a kid who did things only for himself. He'd never lived long enough to learn.

The typescripts on the other hand had no redeeming social value to Chaffee. They were full of silliness in badly translated English. Witnessings. One Elias Hassan with his own eyes praise God saw the young American rising from his grave one summer dawn in the new Christian cemetery outside the village of Dar'a on the banks of the Yarmuk. Someone else—Issam Shukairy—was cured of cataracts at the touch of this same young American. A third Khalid Khalaf claimed to have been cured of leprosy. Leprosy! Chaffee found that highly amusing. Not much originality there. Jimmy? There were others in that vein.

Someone was going to an awful lot of trouble to convince him that was clear Chaffee wondered why? He thought of himself as a man of average religious sensibility. He had attended Mass regularly until the second divorce when it got too embarrassing. He would admit to anyone who asked that he preferred a universe with a God with messiahs too. If that would help since the alternative was too troubling to consider. But... Jimmy? Did they really think there were miracles associated with his birth? Pamela would have been his down the list of candidates for virgin conception. Ask anyone in the old home town.

Nevertheless Chaffee wouldn't automatically reject the idea that something strange had occurred in Syria lately. It was hinted at by the few news teams that still bothered to look. The big full. Could there be a connection?

The cassette remained. Chaffee stuck it in the playback and sat down. The picture was poor quality—as poor as you get these days—a muddy unprintable-generation dub of a tape shot in bad light with a porta-pack. Chaffee was quickly thankful for the lack of resolution since the screen showed an emergency combat medical station full of fresh casualties. He saw several mangled men wounded children severed limbs on the floor—and the body of some poor bastard with a hole blown in his chest.

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and a grand canyon of a gash fanning up to the right shoulder. Then, of all goddamn things, the camera zoomed in for a closeup of the bloody tag hanging from the body's left toe. There was an instant of bad focus then a name: CHAMILLE J W

He slammed the hold button. The God Squad would pay for this. Stalking him, kidnapping him, forcing the ravings of sheepishness on him, he could forgive all of that. He could not forgive sadists who circulated videotapes of the shattered body of his son.

Presently he grew calmer and, curious and horrified at what else was on the tape, punched the fast forward and looked at the remainder, this time adjusting for sound.

He needn't have bothered; there was no music and no narration just sound-on-tape of third world voices. The camera had left the emergency room, too, moving outside. In fact, the camera work was noticeably better, which led Chaffee to think he was seeing the product of different cameramen at different times and places. That was confirmed when he recognized the setting as the very battlefield shown in one of the still photos of Jimmy. He was surprised to realize that he knew the location, north of Arman, on the Syrian frontier, the scene of the only real tank battle of the war.

And there was Jimmy—alive—in a crowd talking and laughing with people who fluttered around like moths. Was that Jimmy's voice? Chaffee could hear no words, only sounds.

He was distracted by a disturbing thought: Jimmy had been killed in April but the famous Arman tank battle took place in August.

Suddenly he forgot about the impossibility of his dead son's presence on that field. The figure of Jimmy Chaffee began to glow with an aura better than the best effects of George Lucas. The crowd backed away as in full view of the camera, the figure reached to his neck and tore away its fatigued shirt.

Yes there was the gaping chest wound, the slash running to the shoulder, all of it open to the afternoon sun. The figure turned completely around yet there was clearly no support mechanism, no artificial aid to sustain a man who should have been dead. Chaffee could see it all. Jimmy's heart visible tom in half and ruined, nevertheless pumping redily in that awful chest, not losing a drop of blood.

No one waited in the garage. No one waited outside the darkened house. There were no messages on his phone from the

God Squad. Small comfort.

That night, for the first time in thirty-three years, Chaffee got down on his knees and prayed. He did not ask for divine guidance or wisdom. He begged for help.

He thought of phoning for help too. Pamela? They no longer communicated. (He was curious if she had a God Squad hounding her?) Bonnie? Fifteen years his junior—that had been the problem. What could she do anyway but sympathize?

Then there was Linda, who used to baby sit the twelve-year-old Jimmy during the summers Chaffee had custody. He got as far as the first three digits of her number and changed his mind. He would beg the Lord of All for help, he might even ask the neighbors, if he thought it would do any good, but he could not ask his secretary. He could not afford to look weak in her eyes.

Finally to bring on some sort of relaxation or tiring that to render himself unconscious, Chaffee had a few drinks. He lay down on the bed and did what he always did when in need of diversion: he reviewed his master plan. With luck and all the madness of the last day aside, in a couple of months he would be one of the most powerful men in the country. One of the most powerful men in the world. Below the zone too. His future would be immense: a new leader for a new century, someone who could make the tough decisions and meet the challenges of rebuilding the West after the chaos of the last ten years. It sounded right. It felt right.

All he needed was that one damned phonecall.

It was still dark when he woke, startled and afraid. A noise? Quickly he checked the house and the yard security system finding no intruders. No one had penetrated the compound, yet something had awakened him—and he felt surrounded.

He went to the second floor window of his study, which gave a view beyond the fence.

Dozens of lights bobbed in the darkness outside the compound.

They waited silently and, thank God patiently. Chaffee shivered at the sight of them. In the light of their lanterns and torches they looked so young, so foreign, so intense.

He opened the gate and, unsteadily, crossed his arms for warmth. Well what do you want from me now? Why are you here? You've already delivered your damn tape.

Step appeared from the shadows. We just wanted to talk to you. We'd like to share your life if we can.

"Haven't you had enough of me already? Why aren't you following My Son the Messiah? He must be planning his march on Jerusalem about now."

"He sent us to you," Dianne said. "We didn't want to leave Him."

"His time is not His own," Clarence said. "He won't be with us much longer."

"Yeah," Chaffee said bitterly. "Once you've risen from the dead, you don't have time for cards or phone calls."

"Look," Step said, "we know this is difficult for you to comprehend. It's been difficult for all of us, even those who now fully believe. This is the first sign the world has had in two thousand years that God exists; that He cares! How can you not want to share that? You should be first in line."

The first shall be last," Chaffee said under his breath.

"We need your help," Clarence said.

"It might also help you," Dianne said defiantly.

Chaffee turned toward her. "I don't need your help, honey." He stamped his feet for warmth and to beat off the growing tension he felt. I'm a grown-up. I've seen all this before.

He backed away a step. "I'm only twice your age, Clarence, and I've seen half a dozen messiahs come and go. There was a fat kid from India... and another guy who claimed to have been born on Mars. Hell, the year I was born there was supposed to be a momentous birth in Egypt of a child who would unite the world by the time he was thirty." Chaffee spread his hands. What's happened to him, Clarence? That's the trouble with these messiahs—they're never around when you need them.

The clefted-edged faces loomed in the darkness closer and closer. Chaffee was cold and he was sick to his stomach. It was insanity—being invited to join a church that worshipped your son. Look, kids, you've got a great package, a wonderful presentation. Run with it. Do whatever it is that good followers do. But leave me out of it. OK? Go back to Syria or wherever and leave me alone.

He closed the gate and, not looking back, hurried into the house.

"Linda, could you get me a line to Neubarth's office when you have a moment?" She looked up distractingly from her desk and nodded. Chaffee ducked back into his

office. And waited for the phone to ring.

He had not slept the rest of the night, and the act of dressing and leaving the house knowing another potential confrontation awaited had almost been too much. But the rabble had dispersed. He had been able to work three solid, satisfying hours, convinced that while the meek may inherit the earth, they don't necessarily get the bigger appointments. His phone buzzed. Hello, Danny, he said, expecting Neubarth.

But it was Linda. I'm sorry Ken but... I guess I need to talk to you privately.

That was strange. While Linda was shy with strangers, she never hesitated to speak right up with him. Sure, come in.

She knocked and opened the door. This won't take long.

"Take as long as you want. I've been waiting for Neubarth to call for a week. A few minutes more won't kill me." He laughed. It's actually been a blessing, in a way. With these weird kids hounding me, it would have looked bad if the press got hold of it. Thank God that's over.

Linda took a seat. Is it?

He was feeling snug. Yeah, I think so. I confronted them a couple of times and managed to convince them there's nothing I could give them. You don't even want to know. He raised his hand. What's up?

She did not look at him. She let her gaze drift toward the window. I'm resigning, she said finally.

You're not serious. The response came straight from the Rules.

"I'm afraid I am. I'm sorry. It isn't that I want to leave you. I've always enjoyed my work here. I see the new possibilities. It's said that... for the first time in my life, I've found something that means more."

Well, he forced a smile. At least give me a chance to match their offer.

There was a long silence. A trace of a smile came to her lips. You've already decided not to match their offer, Ken.

"I see. And he did see. The God Squad got to you too."

Ken please—

Jesus Christ, Linda, I can't believe you'd get involved with something as crazy as this!

I didn't expect you to approve.

"You've got that right." Nervously he drummed his fingers on the desktop. Forgive me, but you never struck me as particularly religious.

I wasn't. I'm not sure I feel very religious right now, either."

Then what's this all about? Both of us are old enough to know better.

It's Jimmy, Linda said. Can't you concede the difference? It's your son! You've seen the pictures, you've seen the tapes. Is it so difficult for you to accept the idea that He might do some good? Can't you take any joy in a miracle happening in your lifetime? She shook her head. And He was always a good boy.

In the outer office phones were ringing and being answered. Messages were being taken. Chaffee found that comforting, a beacon of normality in a world grown dark and chaotic.

They're all good boys at the beginning, Linda. One bit of advice: try to keep the vow of poverty. That'll be the hardest.

She chose not to take offense. You belong with Him, you know.

Chaffee burst out of his chair and loomed over her. Has He even asked?

Shocked but defiant, she looked up at him. Chaffee moved away. Maybe this was the root of his resentment. That Jimmy had not communicated with him—that he had sent strangers to His father.

The kids would not have come to you if Jimmy hadn't asked them. Linda said quietly. I'm sure they wanted to stay with Him.

Chaffee had made his decision. I'm sorry, he said. I can't go.

Then I'm sorry for you, Ken. Honestly. Things are going to be very difficult for you—harder I think than they will be for anyone else. Someday I hope you'll see the good Jimmy can do.

Linda kissed him and seemed to vanish. Perhaps he was no longer paying attention.

After what seemed like a long while, he rose and went to the outer office, which lay silent and empty. The phones had stopped ringing. No matter. Jimmy's cult would draw media attention soon if it hadn't already. The call from Neubarth would never come now.

Was this his particular hell? Was this punishment for his pride? To be known for the rest of time not as Ken Chaffee, clashing, handsome Mr. Chaffee, President Chaffee—but only as the Holy Father? Jimmy Jimmy, why have you done this to me?

In the street below, the new faithful were gathering for their pilgrimage to the Church of the Second Son. Chaffee could see Step and Linda running toward him. For a moment both raised their eyes to heaven, then they turned to join the procession.

*A lull in the battle,
a moment's joy and laughter, and then
the crushing reality.*

INTERMEZZO

BY MELISA MICHAELS

Before war came to the land of Eolee, this was a typical native village, a cluster of one-story cottages fashioned of mortar and topaz quartz around the effervescent fountain in the village square. Now it was rubble. Sunlight glinted wavery yellow through shards of luminescent building stones in the street. The fountain, fed by a weeping deep underground sprayed its green waters all bubbling over the stones over the scalded ground cover over the body of a foot soldier crumpled like a broken doll at the glowing amber base of a forgotten altar to the native God of Song.

Sergeant Melbyn paused by the fountain, still lean grubby soldier with rank patches on her tunic and death in her watchful eyes. She stared unseeing at the fallen soldier, whose ruined face was turned toward the altar and whose outstretched arm reached toward it as if in supplication. Melbyn blinked and looked away. Her expression revealed nothing but weariness. Her eyes were cold blue gemstones in the dusty sun-browned mask of her face. She dipped a rag in the fountain and rubbed her face with it, yawning; it was morning and she had been up all night. Squinting against the sunlight she yawned again.

There was no sign of natives in the ruined village. There was never any sign of natives in any of the ruined villages they had fled before the war, leaving the Alliance soldiers to defend their villages and farmland. Some defense, thought Melbyn. Convention and Covenant banned the worst of psi powers and cowards' weapons, but the Durth from across the seas were not bound by Alliance conventions or the Covenant. What damage they could do, they had done here and in every other village she'd seen. Farms lands were charred and pitted by mindblasts and mines. Forests were leveled by whirlwind or blackened by deathdust. Villages were stinking garbage pits like this one, after the war had passed over them. The land would belong to the natives when the war was done, assuming the Alliance won it, but what good would this cindery rubble be to anyone?

Still there was no choice. The Durth must be resisted in their ruthless bid for conquest, and they must be repelled according to the Covenant. There were those in the Alliance who advocated the use of mindblasts against them; there were even those who would blast the Durth homeland, rendering it into rubble and ending the war at once. But Melbyn grimaced and dipped her rag in the water again. If the Covenant were abandoned,

The Durth were almost certainly not shielding their homeland, the expenditure of energy would be too costly in light of the Covenant. Therefore a surprise attack could end the war and save the natives of Eolee. But at what cost? To aban-

PAINTING BY WAYNE ANDERSON



don the Covenant to open the way to cowards weapons again. It was unthinkable.

And even within the bounds of the Covenant, the Alliance could shield the natives to some extent. What the Durth had done here was bad, but what they had done to the undefended lands was worse by far. The natives of Eolee were aware of that. Mellyn had occasionally seen them, herding across red summer fields, or met a resistance band in the pipe-treed forests, or found the charred and broken remains of civilians who didn't escape their villages before the Durth armies swept through. The live ones were unlascingly delighted to meet Alliance soldiers. The dead ones were dead. None of them meant anything to Mellyn.

The war meant nothing to Mellyn. She fought only because she had to fight. She no longer expected eventual refugee from battle, once impressed, one was lost for the duration. And that looked like it might be a lifetime. Even if one had a chance to live the normal span. Which a soldier didn't have. At first Mellyn had fought to win the war and a chance to go home. Now she fought only to see one more garnish Eoleean sunrises one more sad, sweet Eoleean night.

"Sergeant Mellyn?"

She turned, still rubbing one eye with the damp rag and surveyed the man who approached her carrying his sword belt in his hand, then turned back to the water without any interest and without observing courtesy of rank. "Yes, Lieutenant Brun."

"I heard Swee Gar went." Lieutenant Brun stopped beside Mellyn and hung his sword belt on his shoulder so he could clip his hands in the cool green fountain water. They had known each other for two years now, ever since Mellyn was impressed. She'd been a raw recruit then, newly named through training. He'd been a sergeant, as wary as she was now. And still he was here, and still fighting. That was what she had to look forward to. Maybe a battlefield commission, certainly more battlefield deaths. Too little hope.

She nodded without looking at him. "Yes, Lieutenant."

Brun watched her. "I'm sorry, Sergeant," he said.

Mellyn dipped her rag in the water. "Yes, Lieutenant." Her voice was as flat and empty as her eyes.

Brun hesitated. "Your squad's been moving since yesterday morning. Sergeant Kellenny's squad can take it from here. Give your people a rest."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I've heard from Grand General Glim. She's moving her troops forward. We should have some relief within the day."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Brun waited a moment, but there was nothing further to say. His gaze strayed to the dead soldier at the foot of the altar. Her sword lay undamaged beside her outstretched hand. He bent and picked it up, glanced again at Mellyn, and walked away.

Mellyn yawned and closed her eyes. Blackness reared with pinpoints of blue behind her lids. She opened her eyes, dipped her rag in the water again, and turned away to find her squad.

They were resting beside one of the shattered buildings. Kirby leaned against the broken topaz wall, his balding head glistening in reflected yellow light, his sword resting across his lap with a cleaning rag beside it. Jasd was asleep at Kirby's feet; her head resting on a shard of stone, her mouth open. Her eyes squinted shut as if against a blinding light or bad dreams. Krons and Fu were playing chance on an improvised table of broken pipeweed planks, their faces expressionless and their eyes blank. And Himmer with his steel mask slung over his shoulder and his combat helmet pushed back on his forehead, stood against a crumbling wall, chittering with a dusky-cheeked native boy whose shining fur was half-hidden under a stained white healer's cap. Their words in the native language were like an incongruous song in the stark morning silence.

"Get him out of here."

They stared at her. Even Jasd, awakened by the harsh sound of Mellyn's voice, closed her mouth and clutched his sword and stared without moving; her face was still and wary and all signs of sleep faded instantly from her shadowed eyes. Krons and Fu paused with their hands on their game pieces, heads turned to look at Mellyn. Nobody moved.

"I said get him out of here. This village isn't secure yet," Himmer told him.

Himmer repeated the order in the native's melodious tongue. The boy stared from Himmer to Mellyn, clutched his medical kit and sang an answer directly to Mellyn, who closed her eyes briefly as if the music hurt her ears. Himmer translated the song. "He says he wants to help. He's a healer and his father was a grand-healer. The Durth killed him. The boy wants to help us."

"Get him out of here."

"But Sergeant, he only wants—"

"By the Gods, Himmer, that's an order! I don't care what he wants! What I care about is my people following my orders. Swee Gar is dead because he didn't do what I told him!" She realized she was shouting and stopped. They all knew about Swee Gar anyway. They'd been as close to him as she. She closed her eyes. "Just get him out of here. Lieutenant Brun says we'll be here with Kellenny's squad's on cleanup. So take it easy, but don't act like a bunch of damn civilians." She opened her eyes, glared at the pale-faced alien war, and stalked away.

Swee Gar had been an irresponsible soldier, but she had loved that silly lopsided grin, the tousled hair, the way he had of worming his way into one's affections and attaining to greatness for whatever trespass he'd most recently engineered.

But he hadn't followed orders, and he'd died. Mellyn paused again beside the fountain, realized the native boy had followed her, and glanced around in annoyance for some avenue of escape. The last thing she wanted now was a native tagging along after her, begging candy or some damn thing.

Greasy black smoke from the rubble of a smoldering house billowed up between her and the boy, and she ducked down a broken alley and out of his sight. Let him find some other squad leader to annoy, she needed to be alone for a while.

Outside the village there were still some undamaged fields and meadows where death dust hadn't drifted. Mellyn found one lone standing shade tree that bore no scars at all, and beside it a bubbling brook of the effervescent green water common to lands as far north as Eolee. She took off her sword belt and sat beside it, leaning back on her elbows, staring up at the tree and listening to the singing water she dreamed of home. Home. A land of calmer pink sunrises, purpler skies, and living people. A place the hell of war hadn't lately touched. A place where chaos was a word, not a way of life, where people were able to bathe daily and wear garments of their choosing instead of uniform tunics and lie down to sleep with no weapons of death cradled like love in their arms.

It was an alien vision. Once she had lived a life like that, but not now. Now she was a soldier, and peace was a word whose meaning she no longer fully understood. She'd never wanted to be a soldier. But the High Practitioner had made her a soldier.

and her life depended on being a good one. Her life and the lives of her squad members.

Swee Gars lopsided grin floated in the haze of memory wing with the pink leaves overhead for her attention. She blinked and the apparition faded. The creek beside her sang its fizzing watersong, and a breeze rustled the leaves overhead. A breeze heavily tainted with smoke and the stench of death, but Melkyn barely noticed that it had been too long since she'd breathed air free of the smell of war. To the residents of hell, the stink of decay is an ordinary thing.

If the Covenant were abandoned, the war would be over. One final orgy of wrath and destruction in the distant lands beyond the sea that the Durth came from, and all this would be ended. The peoples of the All since could rebuild their lives.

Or could they? How many years, how many lives had it taken to establish the Covenant? How many squabbles and wars and acts of cowardly villainy performed by people who risked nothing of their own before the Covenant was agreed upon, long distance destruction banned, and war brought back to the level of soldiers who risked their lives face to face? Before the Covenant, whole cities were wiped out in moments of violence; counties laid waste in days by tiny bands of powerful parliament and practitioners safe behind their shields.

Now soldiers were obliged to face each other in arm's reach and the blood of their victims was literally on one's hands. Was that so much better? Was it even sane, when the enemy recognized no such limitations? The Durth came into the field because they wanted to occupy the land but behind the occupying forces were the little clusters of talents probing, forever probing, and striking without mercy at any target left unguarded even for an instant.

The creek beside Melkyn fizzed gaily in the bright morning light. She yawned and lay back cradling her sword in her arms and slept. Deeply and dreamlessly, hoarding her inner resources, forgetting the too many faces gone and voices forever stilled, she slept. On a subliminal level she maintained her personal shield and remained aware of her surroundings, the perennial warrior alert for danger even in sleep, but there was no danger and she didn't wake when the native boy put out a picnic basket and blanket between her and the stream.

Sunlight through pink branches woke her. She blinked and yawned and clutched her sword. The picnic basket caught her eye. "Is somebody here?" She glanced around, sword ready in her hand, but no one responded. Slowly catlike watching the picnic basket, she stretched and yawned again. Sleep had eased the lines of tension around her mouth but it hadn't softened the awful dark hopelessness of her eyes. Her footsteps when she rose to investigate the picnic basket dragged as wearily as before she slept.

It was almost surreal, the ordinary picnic, on a bright clean cloth set out in a daisy-studded field as if there were no war but smoke from the village still darkened the sky beyond. When Melkyn called again, the boy laughed, his voice high and sweet in the still noon air. Melkyn whirled, and her battle-trained eyes saw him easily among the pink and brown of the leaves. She ought to have seen him before. "Come down," she said.

He looked at her, head cocked, topaz eyes alert.

Melkyn gestured. "Come down." He didn't understand the words, but the gesture was clear. While he scampered down from the tree, Melkyn looked at the picnic he had set out. Bread and wine and rich pink native cheese. The Durth had been knocking out the supply lines too often lately, it had been a long time since Melkyn had anything to eat but standard rations. She sighed and wondered quite irrelevantly where anyone found something as clean and white and pure as that tablecloth in a land as utterly mired in the filth of war as Eoile was. Damn this war. She said it without interest or emphasis. "Damn it to all the hells." It was a ritual phrase the meaning was long since gone.

The native trilled something in his own tongue, drifting across the ground cover like a wraith, and took Melkyn's hand to tug her to a seated position beside the white tablecloth. His enormous eyes watched her attentively.

"What do you want?"

The boy seated himself, picked up the cheese, and broke off a large piece that he offered Melkyn with a trilling question.

"What? You want me to eat this stuff? But this is raw food." She shook her head reluctantly watching him. "You must have people of your own who need this. Eoileans I can't take."

The boy shook his head, a sign of incomprehension, and pressed the cheese into

Melkyn's hands. He sang another question and indicated the bread and wine.

Melkyn almost smiled at his childlike eagerness to please. "Well, you're just a kid aren't you? You ought to be home playing with dolls." She looked at the cheese in her hand. "But maybe the Durth broke all your dolls." She looked at him again, into those deep topaz eyes. "Okay. You win. But after you have to go home, understand?"

He understood, at least, that she would share his picnic. Eagerly he offered bread and wine, ate some himself, and sang. He had too many fingers and fun on his head and he smelled like flowers, all Eoileans did. And his skin was tinted green like his glistening fur. But the sum of his strange parts was oddly attractive. She began to relax with him, as charmed by his eyes as she had once been by Swee Gars smile.

He handed her another piece of cheese and she said, "Thank you." He trilled a question and she said, "Do you speak any Standard at all?"

"Shmir?" He nodded cheerfully thought and said, "Help." He pointed at his meal kit then at himself. "Hilar." He pointed at Melkyn. "Soleyar." He grimaced, grinned and thought again, then touched his forehead. "Hid'ak." He touched his mouth encouraged by Melkyn's nod. "Toot'ack." Then heartily he touched his stomach and said, "Bockack."

Melkyn grinned and shook her head. "No that's amsachache. She touched her own back. This is bockache."

The boy laughed, delighted with his own mistake, and tried to say stomachache. It was too flat and slaccate for his singing tongue, and the result made Melkyn laugh aloud, starting herself into thoughtful silence. The boy watched her. After a moment she said, carefully, "Stomachache."

"Simo immm shimmnick." Melkyn hadn't realized she still knew how to laugh.

They combined the rest of the wine and cheese with a language lesson. Melkyn dutifully singing Eoilean warbles that sent the boy into fits of laughter, and he carefully twisting his musical tones around sharp Standard vowels with such notable lack of success that Melkyn's ribs ached with giggling. Neither learned much of the other's language, but it was fun trying.

While they talked, the boy decorated Melkyn's helmet with daisies from the field. Melkyn selected a red one to put behind his ear and smiled when he blushed with pleasure.

sure. Later they waded in the stream together splashing each other with effervescent water. They sat on a luminous stone with their feet in the water and watched the sunlight sparkle green and yellow on the wavelets while the boy crooned a long sweet song to which Melkyn responded with a marching ballad that started and delighted him.

It was afternoon when she started back to the village. He walked with her in spite of her efforts to convince him by word and gesture that he should go home. It was no longer so much a matter of siding herself of an unwelcome civilian. She was genuinely concerned for his safety. While she was with him she could shield him, but she couldn't be with him always, and alone he would be safer far from the field of battle. But until they met Himmir at the edge of the village the boy pretended not to understand.

Himmir tried the sergeant's rejection in the native tongue and the boy's face crumpled with disappointment but he turned away obediently shoulders rounded head bowed. Himmir watched with interest when Melkyn turned twice to wave good-bye to the boy as they walked off to join the squad.

They'd only just found the others when the bombardment started. Mariana cast by whirlwind fashioned by psi to explode on contact casting broad splinters of death all in defiance of the Covenant. Someone shouted "Incoming!" and the first explosion punctuated the cry. There was nothing to do but dive for cover clinging to their helmets, augment their shields, and hope to survive. A thin-enough hope that seemed when the projectiles came sizzling in overhead and the splinters whined angrily through the streets, and the few remaining walls in the village lumbed to rubble, bright stones dancing like pebbles across the heaving earth. Did it really make sense to obey the Covenant, fighting against an enemy who used cowards weapons like that?

When it was over the native boy was back in the village tending the wounded as if it were his proper place in life. And perhaps it was; he sawed at least one soldier's life whose shield was punctured by deadly splinters. Sergeant Melkyn relaxed and told the boy he could stay till the wounded got transport. But then you go home and don't come back. Understand?

Himmir repeated the order and the boy

sang his acceptance in a sweet small voice watching Melkyn with his enormous eyes. He asked her a question and Himmir translated. "He wants to know where we're going."

Tell him on patrol. Melkyn hesitated looking at the boy. And ask his name will you?

Himmir translated. The boy sang an answer. Himmir turned back to the sergeant. His name's Yntreem. He trifled it twice and added. He wants to know your name Sarge.

Melkyn shrugged. Tell him.

Himmir hesitated. He'd want your given name."

So tell him.

Himmir looked embarrassed. I don't know what it is, Sarge. They known each other almost two years, but had never had occasion to exchange given names.

Startled Melkyn said slowly. Oh, of course you don't. She looked at Yntreem. Lunda. Tell him it's Lunda.

But before Himmir could translate Yntreem smiled and said "Lynn."

Melkyn grinned. Close enough. Leem I can't even do that well with yours. She hesitated as though she wanted to say something further then turned away. Let's go. Her voice was fat and professional again. But before they were out of sight she turned back to wave good-bye to Leem. He smiled and hesitantly waved at her then waited till the squad was out of sight before he followed.

They encountered the Durth less than a kilometer from the village. The enemy commonly carried no hand weapons on patrol missions, preferring to use forbidden psi-weapons, and this was no exception. Anti-personnel blasts singed and pried at the squad's shields, and they dived for cover behind a cluster of topaz boulders at the edge of a pine-tree forest. As soon as they were settled the Durth sent a wrathprobe after them, but Jaed blocked it before it did any harm.

The Durth withdrew behind a cover of guilemets. Melkyn left Jaed. Himmir and Fu settled in position while she and Kronik worked their way forward to see what was happening. A single Durth remained to bombard them with such psi as he could manage on his own. Melkyn caught sight of the others working their way around to attack the squad from behind. She stayed to keep the lone Durth busy while Kronik snaked her way back to the

squad to warn them of the danger.

Led alone against the Durth, Melkyn planned to keep him occupied with a pyrotechnic shield till the squad engaged the main force. They were all hampered by the Covenant but once they had arranged their directional shield, there were some minor tricks they were permitted as diversionary tactics while they tried to sneak to within arm's reach for legal battle.

But the lone Durth pressed forward, taking chances. Thrusting with and maulbars, evidently intent on keeping Melkyn from returning to the squad to warn them. He had no way of knowing Kronik had already been sent back. And he presented one excellent opportunity too many. Melkyn couldn't resist. The Durth laid himself open for a quick memoir-thrust, and though that wasn't strictly legal Melkyn exposed her self long enough to make it.

She could have been all right, except the Durth had a sword. Caught in the reflection of his own huffed breath, he had time for just one thrust while she held the mindmiser and before she restructured her shield. But that was enough. When he fell with a windy moan among the bright pink branches of a loban bush, his sword fell with him, stained with Melkyn's blood.

Melkyn clutched her own sword as she fell, but she knew she would have no further need of it. The Durth sword had penetrated her subliminal shield and her shoulder in one clean stroke. The ground hit her hard on the back and she watched in stunned surprise as the lavender sky darkened to purple pinwheels overhead. She thought of home and wished with blinding loneliness that she'd had a chance to go there again. Then she remembered Leem's smiling eyes and grieved at the memory. But as the agony of Durth poison bit into her shoulder she twisted and cried out and with a sense of terrible relief, let darkness carry her away from the war-torn forest of an alien land into a region of dreamless peace.

But the pain wouldn't let her rest. She woke to the sound of her own voice screaming. With an effort, she choked off the sound and bleakly surveyed her surroundings. Not much time had passed the sun was still high. Its yellow-pink light barely enough to warm her. Her uniform luncu was wet with blood. With her good hand she reached to touch her wounded shoulder and found a padded field bandage over it. She lifted her head to look.

There was something soft and red in her hand, but she couldn't hold up her head

long enough to see what it was. Carefully blinking against pain she used her good hand to take the soft little object from the nerveless fingers of her injured arm and lift it into her field of vision. A bright red daylily. She almost smiled, before the darkness carried her down again. She dutched the flower convulsively and wondered without much interest how long it would take her to die.

When she woke again, pain-killing drugs had reduced her agony to a roaring ache. Her voice was moaning instead of screaming; she clamped her jaw shut to smother the sound. Something shaded the sun from her eyes. She blinked, squinted, and blinked again. Leem's smile swam out of blury infinity. His large eyes watched Melkyn attentively. When Melkyn would have sat up, he used both slender six-fingered hands to hold her down, and trifled a singing comment, greeting her for her to look beyond him.

She moved her head enough to see Jasd and Kirby bringing an improvised pipe-wood stretcher toward her. Jasd, seeing Melkyn was awake, grinned at her and wiped her own forehead with a bloody bandaged hand. "Leem saved your life, Serge," she said. "You better treat him right from now on; he bailed the damn Durth to lead us back here in time. And he stopped the bleeding first, which is more than I could've done by the time we got here."

"The Durth?" asked Melkyn, her voice thin and hollow.

"All dead," said Kirby. "Thanks to you and Kronsk. We got our squad手持 positioned in time, and kept them busy with pyrotechnics from behind it while two of us flanked them and pinned them down to some legal fighting. Here they'll hurt, but we gotta get you back. Kronsk, come on over here. Jasd can't lift a damn thing with that hand."

They got Melkyn on the stretcher and started home, a weary blend of reluctant warriors whose job for this one day was done. And if that ain't a homelocked wound you got for yourself, I don't know what is, said Fu.

That's right, said Kirby. You're going home for sure this time, Serge.

Watch your language, soldier, said Jasd. "Home is a four-letter word."

How does it feel to be a free woman? asked H-mm.

Ask me after the healers confirm it, said Melkyn.

Always the pessimist, said Kronsk.

grunting under the weight of her end of the stretcher.

Melkyn gritted, dizzy from pain and the drugs that dulled it. Leem walked beside the stretcher holding Melkyn's hand. As they passed another field of daisies, he pointed it out to Melkyn and then, on impulse, ran across the pink ground cover toward a cluster of iridescent blossoms. Melkyn started to call him back, the area still wasn't secure. But this field was far from the village, and here no man patrols, booby traps and mindblasts were unlikely. Lured by Leem's laughter and the sweet, pure joy of being alive, she turned her head so she could watch the boy bounding across the field.

She was looking directly at him when he tipped the mine. It chemed him into a writhing, crazy tangled mass, four meters in the air and tumbling, bloody and mangled and dead before the shimmer of detonation reached the squad. They froze in their tracks, staring.

Gods-damned psi-mine, said Kronsk. His voice incredulous, as though she like Melkyn had believed the boy charmed.

Melkyn was off the stretcher before she knew what she was doing. Kirby caught her when she would have fallen. It's too late, Serge. He's dead.

He might as well not have spoken. Melkyn ignored him and pushed away his helping hands. She didn't speak, just stumbled in a broken, shambiling run toward the field where Leem lay. Fugacity up with her and slid one arm under Melkyn's good shoulder. Let me help, Serge, he said.

Melkyn leaned on him, but didn't slacken her pace till they were within a few meters of the noxious object that had been Leem. It no longer even vaguely resembled an Eoleean boy. Melkyn crumpled to her knees two meters short of it. Still she said nothing, just stared, while the rest of the squad cautiously shied back. Further in, came up behind her and stopped. Nobody moved beyond her. They all just stared, as though they'd never seen anything so blasted before.

Damn this war, said Kirby. Damn it to all the hells, said Jasd.

Melkyn wavered, and Fu put one hand on her shoulder for support. Melkyn closed her eyes. Jasd came up beside her and knelt, putting one arm across her shoulders. You have to go to the healers, she said. Let us help you.

Leem. Her voice was curiously flat.

It's too late. We can't help him now, said Jasd.

Melkyn looked across the field of wind-tossed daisies. The one clean sweat pretty thing... The one untested creature in hell. He was too pure, too full of joy, too separate from the filth of war to die of it.

She closed her eyes again and bent forward, clawing to what remained of him, trying to remember his smile. When her fingers touched him, she stopped. She didn't open her eyes. The thing under her hand was wet and warm and smelled of death. She clenched her teeth, but the awful, broken words burst out in spite of her. No Please No.

Nobody moved. They watched her, and they waited silently.

And she watched the memory of Leem, fitting like a sweet green wrath among the leaves and flowers and sunlight of the afternoon, and laughing. If the Durth had abided by the Covenant, he would be laughing still. For one anguished, wraithful moment she wanted to strike out against all of them, blast them out of their homes and cities, wipe them off the face of the planet, and be done. To all the hells with the Covenant, if it constrained her to light a atom's reach while her enemies struck down innocents at a distance!

But the Durth were sentient beings, too, and must have innocents among them. Even if she could do all by herself, without talents to help her blast their cities and level their wretched civilization to dust, she would stay her hand. Because there would be Leems among the Durthkind, too. That was the whole point of the Covenant. It was in a way the point of this endless war.

The Oath of Soldiers echoed unexpectedly in her mind. I will defend my home and my people and my way of life, but only at arm's reach. I will give my enemies a chance at my lifeblood, in exchange for my chance at theirs. I will uphold the Covenant with all the strength I can muster, and thus will I preserve the innocence of innocents. For I believe wars must be fought always and only by soldiers. If any sentients are to survive...

Damn this war, she said. The words tasted of death. But the song of his laughter echoed in her ears with the Oath, and she whispered aloud. I will preserve the innocence of innocents. Very slowly like an old woman, she let Fu and Jasd help her to her feet. I will uphold the Covenant. But oh, his song was sweet!

SCIENCE
FICTION
CLASSICS

To acquaint new readers of science fiction with the enduring skill of the past, a classics feature was launched in the first volume in this series. Stories originally published earliest as 1938 ("Helen O' Loy" by Lester del Rey) and as recently as 1971 ("My Lady of the Psychiatric Sorrows" by Brian Aldiss) have since presented

arrying forward this policy, we now offer two outstanding tales that never before appeared in any science-fiction magazine. They set aside expressly for this volume by the noted science-fiction ologist Terry Carr himself the author of the novel *Cirque du Soleil* and *The War of the Worlds*, Poul Anderson, originally published in a 1968 anthology, *Frontiers of the Universe: The Farthest Reaches*, edited by Joseph Elder. This is an excellent example of Anderson's ability to combine scientific extrapolation with human drama, in this instance the love that grows between a human and an alien verplex creature.

"The Hell as Werwolf" by Gene Wolfe presents a future society artificially "evolved" to something more than human and fraught with gruesome peril. The story originally appeared in *The New Improved Sun*, a 1968 anthology edited by Thomas M. Disch. Wolfe, incidentally, insists the proper spelling is *Werwolf*.

Readers who find "Kyne" to their taste will definitely want to secure a copy of *The Best of Poul Anderson*, a book of short stories published in 1980. Anderson's best novels include *Brain Wave* (1954), *The Enemy* (1959), *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961), and *Tau Zero* (1970). The best short-story collection of Wolfe is a strangely titled book, *The Book of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories* (1980); his best novels are *The Shadow of the Torturer*, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, *The Sword of the Lictor*, and *The Citadel of the Autarch* (all published in the 1980s).



KYRIE

Survival depended on the vortex creature and its communion with Eloise

BY PAUL ANDERSON

On a high peak in the Lunar Ca-
pitanians stands a Convent of St.
Martin of Bethany. The walls are
made of rock and plastered and
capped on the mountain side to form a
city that is a living block. As you approach
from Northwick, riding low to keep the
long screens along Route Pluto between
you and the meteoroid rain, you see the
cross which surrounds the lower stalk
of the Earth's blue disc. No bell is resound-
ing there—not in artlessness.

You may hear them inside at the canonical hours, and throughout the crypts below where machines toll to maintain a semblance of terrestrial environment. If you linger awhile, you will also hear them calling to requiem mass. For it has become a tradition that prayers be offered at St. Martin's for those who have perished in space, and they are more with every passing year.

This is not the work of the sisters. They minister to the sick, the needy, the crippled, the infirm, all whom space has broken and cast back. Luna is full of such debris because they can't leave and are Earth's pull or because it is here that they may be incubating a plague from some unknown planet or because men are so busy with their frontiers that they have no time to spare for the future. The sisters west? space suits no other as habits, are as likely to hold a meditil as a rosary.

But they are granted some time for contemplation. At night, when for half a month the sun's glow has departed, the chapel is unlighted and stars look down through the glazed dome to the candles. They do not wink and their light is winter cold. One of the nuns in particular is there as often as may be, praying for her own dead. And the

PAINTING BY SHEILA ROSE

abbess said to it that she can be present when the yearly mass that she endowed before she took her vows is sung.

Requiem ad te nunc donec eis. Domine et tu perpetua misericordia. Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.

The Supernova Sagittarii expedition comprised fifty human beings and a flame that wove its way around from Earth orbit stopping at Epsilon Lyrae to pick up its last member. Thence it approached its destination by stages.

This is the paradox: time and space are aspects of each other. The explosion was more than a hundred years past when noted by men on Lashope. They were part of a generations-long effort to inform the civilization of creatures altogether unlike us; but one night they looked up and saw a light so brilliant it cast shadows.

That wave front would reach Earth several centuries hence. By then it would be so tenuous that nothing but another bright point would appear in the sky. Meanwhile though a ship overleaping the space through which light must creep could track the great star's death across time.

Surely far off instruments recorded what had been before the outburst, incandescence collapsing upon itself after the last nuclear fuel was burned out. A jump and they saw what happened a century ago: convulsion storm of quanta and neutrinos, radiation equal to the massed hundred billion suns of this galaxy.

It faded, leaving an emulsion in heaven and the Raven moved closer. Fifty light-years—fifty years—inward she studied a shrinking hemispherical in the midst of a fog which shone like lightning.

Twenty-five years later the central globe had dimmed more. The nebula had expanded and dimmed. But because the distance was now so much less, everything seemed larger and brighter. The naked eye saw a dazzle too fierce to look straight at making the constellations pale by contrast. Telescopes showed a blue-white spark in the heart of an opalescent cloud delicately filigreed at the edges.

The Raven made ready for her final jump to the immediate neighborhood of the supernova.

Captain Teodor Szil went on a last-minute inspection tour. The ship murmured around him, running at one gravity of acceleration to reach the desired intrinsic velocity.

Power domed, regulators whickered, ventilation systems rustled. He felt the energies quiver in his bones. But metal surrounded him blank and comfortless. Viewports gave on a dragon's hoard of stars, the ghostly arch of the Milky Way, on vacuum cosmic rays cold not far above absolute zero, distant beyond imagination to the nearest human hearthfire. He was about to take his people where none had ever been before: into conditions none was sure about and that was a heavy burden on him.

He found Eliese Waggoner at her post, a cubbyhole with intercom connections directly to the command bridge. Music drew him; a triumphant serenity he did not recognize. Stepping in the doorway he saw her seated with a small tape machine on the desk.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Oh! The woman he could not think of her as a girl, though she was barely out of her teens, started. "I... I was working for the jump."

You were to wait at the alert.

What have I to do? she answered less timidly than was her wont. I mean I'm not a crewman or a scientist.

You are in the crew. Special communications technician.

With Lucifer. And he likes the music. He says we come closer to oneness with it than anything else he knows about.

Szil arched his brows. Oneness?

A blush went up Eliese's thin cheeks. She sat at the desk and her hands twisted together. Maybe that isn't the right word. Peace, harmony, unity... God? I sense what he means, but we haven't any word that fits.

Hmm. Well, you are supposed to keep him happy. The steamer regarded her with a return of the distaste he had tried to suppress. She was a decent enough sort, he supposed, in her gaucherie and infantile way, but her looks! Scrawny, big-headed, big-nosed, pop-eyes, and stringy dual-colored hair—and to be sure, teethpicks always made him uncomfortable. She said she could only read Lucifer's mind, but was that true?

No. Don't think such things. Loneliness and chameez can come near breaking you out here, without adding suspicion of your fellows.

If Eliese Waggoner was really human, she must be some kind of mutant at the very least. Whoever could communicate thoughts with a living voxbox had to be

"What are you playing?" Szil asked.

Bach. The Third Brandenburg Concerto. He Lucifer, he doesn't care for the modern stuff. I don't either.

You wouldn't. Szil decided aloud. Listen we jump in half an hour. No telling what we'll emerge in. This is the first time any one's been close to a recent supernova. We can only be certain of so much hard radiation that we'll be dead if the screenfields give way. Otherwise we've nothing to go on except theory. And a collapsing stellar core is so unlike anything anywhere else in the universe that I'm skeptical about how good the theory is. We can start daydreaming. We have to prepare.

Yes sir. Whispering, her voice lost its usual harshness.

He stared past her, past the cockpit eyes of meters and controls, as if he could penetrate the steel beyond and look straight into space. There he knew floated Lucifer.

The image grew in him, a fireball twenty meters across, shimmering white, red, gold, royal blue, flames dancing like Medusa locks, cometary tail burning for a hundred miles behind, ashiness, a glory a piece of hell. Not the least of what troubled him was the thought of that which pacified his ship.

He hugged scientific explanations to his breast, thought they were like better than guesses. In the multiple-star system of Epsilon Aurigae in the gas and energy pervading the space around, things took place which no laboratory could imitate. Ball lightning on a planet was perhaps analogous to the formation of simple organic compounds in a primordial ocean, analogous to the life which finally evolves. In Epsilon Aurigae, magnetohydrodynamics had done what chemistry did on Earth. Stable plasma vortices had appeared, had grown, had added complexity until after millions of years they became something you must needs call an organism. It was a form of ions, nuclei, and force fields. It metabolized electrons, nucleons, X-rays, it maintained its configuration for a long lifetime, it reproduced, it thought.

But what did it think? The few telepaths who could communicate with the Aurigaeans who had first made humankind aware that the Aurigaeans existed, never explained clearly. They were a queer lot them selves.

Wherefore Captain Szil said, I want you to pass this on to him.

Yes sir. Eliese turned down the volume on her taper. Her eyes unfocused. Through

her ears went words, and her brain (how efficient a transducer was it?) passed the meanings on out to him who loped alongside Raven on his own reaction drive.

Listen Lucifer. You have heard this often before, I know, but I want to be positive: you understand in full? Your psychology must be very foreign to ours. Why did you agree to come with us? I don't know. Technician Waggoner said you were curious and adventurous; is that the whole truth?

"No matter. In half an hour we jump. We'll come within five hundred million kilometers of the supernova. That's where your work begins. You can go wherever we dare not go—see what we can't tell us more than our instruments would ever hint at. But first we have to verify we can stay in orbit around the star. This concerns you, too. Does man can't transport you home again?"

"So. In order to enclose you within the jumpfield without disrupting your body, we have to switch off the shield screens. We'll emerge in a lethal radiation zone. You must promptly retreat from the ship, because we'll start the screen generator up sixty seconds after transit. Then you must investigate the vicinity. The hazards to look for—Sali listed them. Those are only what we can foresee. Perhaps we'll hit other garbage we haven't predicted. If anything seems like a menace, return at once, warn us, and prepare for a jump back to here. Do you have that? Repeat."

Words jerked from Elissa. They were a correct repeat, but how much was she leaving out?

"Very good. Sali hesitated. Proceed with your concert if you like. But break it off at zero minutes and stand by."

"Yes, sir." She didn't look at him. She didn't appear to be looking anywhere in particular.

His footsteps clacked down the corridor and were lost.

"Why did he say the same things over?" asked Lucifer.

"He is afraid," Elissa said.

—2—

"I guess you don't know about fear," she said.

"Can you show me?" No, do not! I sense it is hurtful. You must not be hurt."

I can't be afraid anyway when your mind is holding mine.

Warmth filled her. Memento was there, playing like little flames over the surface of Father-leading her by-the-hand when she was just a child and they went out

one summer's day-to-pick wildflowers over strength and gentleness and Bach and God.) Lucifer swept around the hull in an exuberant curve. Sparks danced in his wake.

—Think flowers again. Please.

She tried.

—They are like [image] as nearly as a human brain could grasp: of fountains blossoming with gamma-ray colors in the middle of light, everywhere light. But so tiny. So brief a sweetness.

I don't understand how you can understand, she whispered.

—You understand for me. I did not have that kind of thing to love before you came.

But you have so much else. I try to share it, but I'm not made to realize what a star is.

—Nor for planets. Yet ourselves may touch.

Her cheeks burned anew. The thought tolled on, interweaving its counterpoint to the marching music. —That is why I came: do you know? For you. I am fire and air. I had not tasted the coolness of water, the presence of earth, until you showed me. You are moonlight on an ocean.

No, don't, she said. Please.

Puzzlement. Why not? Does joy hurt? Are you not used to it?

"I guess that's right." She hung her head back. "No! Be damned if I'll feel sorry for myself!"

—Why should you? Have we not all reason to be in, and is it not full of suns and songs?

Yes. To you. Teach me.

—If you in turn will teach me. —The thought broke off. A contact remained, unspeaking such as she imagined must often prevail among lovers.

She glowed at Moolat. Mazundar's chocolate face, where the physicist stood in the doorway. What do you want?

He was surprised. Only to see if everything is well with you, Miss Waggoner.

She bit her lip. He had tried harder than most aboard to be kind to her. I'm sorry, she said. I didn't mean to bark at you, Nerves!

We are everyone on edge. He smiled. Expecting through this venture is it will be good to come home, correct?

Home, she thought. Four walls of an apartment above a banging city street. Books and television. She might present a paper at the next scientific meeting, but no one would invite her to the parties afterward.

Am I that horrible? she wondered. I know

I'm not anything to look at, but I try to be nice and interesting. Maybe I try too hard.

—You do not with me. Lucifer said.

You're different, she told him.

Mazundar blinked. Beg pardon?

Nothing, she said in haste.

I have wondered about an item, Mazundar said in an effort at conversation. Presumably Lucifer will go quite near the supernova. Can you still maintain contact with him? The time dilation effect will not change the frequency of his thoughts too much?

What time dilation? She forced a chuckle. I'm no physicist. Only a little librarian who turned out to have a wild talent.

You were not told? Why, I assumed everybody was. An intense gravitational field affects time just as a high velocity does. Roughly speaking, processes take place more slowly than they do in clear space. That is why light from a massive star is somewhat reddened. And our supernova core retains almost three solar masses. Furthermore, it has acquired such a density that its attraction at the surface is an incredibly high. Thus by our clocks it will take infinite time to shrink to the Schwarzschild radius, but an observer on the star itself would experience that whole shrinkage in a fairly short period.

Schwarzschild radius? Be so good as to explain. Elissa realized that Lucifer had spoken through her.

If I can without mathematics. You see that mass we are to study is so great and so concentrated that no force exceeds the gravitational. Nothing can counterbalance. Therefore the process will continue until no energy can escape. The star will have vanished out of the universe. In fact, theoretically the contraction will proceed to zero volume. Of course, as I said, that will take forever as far as we are concerned. And the theory neglects quantum mechanical considerations which come into play toward the end. Those are still not very well understood. I hope from this expedition to acquire more knowledge. Mazundar shrugged. At any rate, Miss Waggoner, I was wondering if the frequency shift involved would not prevent our friend from communicating with us when he is near the star.

I doubt that. Still Lucifer spoke, she was his instrument and never had she known how good it was to be used by one who cared. Telepathy is not a wave phenomenon. Since it transmits instantaneously it

cannot be. Nor does it appear limited by distance. Rather it is a resonance. Being attuned we two may well be able to contact across the entire breadth of the cosmos, and I am not aware of any material phenomenon which could interfere.

I said Maxendar gave her a long look. Thank you, he said uncomfortably. Ah I must get to my own station. Good luck. He pushed off without stopping for an answer.

Eloise didn't notice. Her mind had become a torch and a song. Lucifer she cried about. Is that true?

—I believe so. My entire people are telepaths; hence we have more knowledge of such matters than yours do. Our experience leads us to think there is no limit.

You can always be with me? You always will?

—If you so wish I am gladdened.

The comet body convulsed and danced the brain of Maxendar low — Yes Eloise I would like very much to remain with you. No one else has ever... Joy Joy Joy

They named you better than they knew Lucifer, she wanted to say, and perhaps she did. They thought it was a joke; they thought by calling you after the devil they

could make you safely small like themselves. But Lucifer isn't the devil's real name. (maxendar only Light-Bearer. One Latin prayer even addresses Christ as Lucifer. Forgive me, God, I can't help remembering that.) Do You mind? He isn't Christian, but I think he doesn't need to be. I think he must never have felt sin. Lucifer! Lucifer!

She sent the music soaring for as long as she was permitted.

The ship jumped. In one shift of world-line parameters she crossed twenty-five light years to destruction.

Each knew it in his own way, save for Eloise who also lived with Lucifer.

She felt the shock and heard the out-raged metal scream; she smelled the ozone and soot and tumbled through the infinite falling that is weightlessness. Dazed she tumbled at the intercom. Words crackled through — until broken back EMF surge — how should I know how long to let the blessed thing? stand by stand by. Over all heated the emergency siren.

Terror rose in her until she gripped the crucifix around her neck and the mind of

Lucifer. Then she laughed in the pride of his might!

He had whipped clear of the ship immediately on arrival. Now he floated in the same orbit. Everywhere around the nebula-filled space with uneventful rainbows. To him Raven was not the metal cylinder which human eyes would have seen, but a luminescent shield screen reflecting a whole spectrum. Ahead lay the supernova core of this remove but slight alight.

—Have no fears (he caressed her). I comprehended. Turbulence is intensive, as soon after the detonation. We emerged in a region where the plasma is especially dense. Unprotected for the moment before the guardian held was re-established, your main generator outside the hull was short-circuited. But you are safe. You can make repairs. And I am in an ocean of energy. Never was I so alive. Come, swim these sides with me.

Captain Sali's voice yanked her back. Waggener! Tell that Augean to get busy. We've spotted a radiation source on an intercept orbit, and it may be too much for our circuit. He specified coordinates. What is it?

For the first time Eloise felt alarm in Lucifer. He curved away from the ship.

Presently his thought came to her noiseless, vivid. She lacked words for the terrible splendor she viewed with him: a million-kilometer ball of ionized gas where luminescence braided and electric discharges leaped, booming through the haze around the star's exposed heart. The thing could not have made any sound, for space here was still almost a vacuum by Earth's paleochal standards, but she heard it thunder and felt the fury that spurt from it.

She said for him: A mass of expelled material. It must have lost radial velocity to form and stand gradients, been drawn into a cometary orbit, held together for a while by internal potentials. As if the sun were trying yet to bring planets to birth.

It'll strike us before we're in shape to accelerate. Sali said, and overload our shield. If you know any prayers, use them.

Lucifer snarled, for she did not want to die, when he must remain.

—I think I can deflect it enough, he told her with a grimness she had not hitherto met in him. My own fields to mesh with its and find energy to circulate in an unstable configuration yes, perhaps I can help you. But help me, Eloise. Fight by my side.

His brightness moved toward the jugger-naut shape.

Take a card, any card.

She felt how its chaotic electromagnetism clawed at his. She felt him tossed and torn. The pain was hers. He battled to keep his own cohesion and the combat was hers. They locked together Augerian and gas cloud. The forces that shaped him grappled as arms might; he poured power from his core, hurling that vast tenuous mass with him down the magnetic torrent which streamed from the sun, he gulped atoms and thrusted them backward until the jet splashed across heaven.

She sat in her cubicle, lending him what will to live and prevail she could, and beat her fists bloody on the desk.

The hours crawled past.

In the end, she could scarcely catch the message that flickered out of his exhaustion — Victory.

Yours, she wept.

—Ours.

Through instruments men saw the luminous death pass them by. A cheer lifted.

Come back, Eloise begged.

—I cannot. I am too spent. We are merged, the cloud and I, and are tumbling in toward the star. (Like a hurt hand reaching forth to comfort her) Do not be afraid for me. As we get closer, I will draw fresh strength from its glow, fresh substance from the nebula. I will need a while to spiral out against that pull. But how can I fail to come back to you, Eloise? Wait for me. Rest, Sleep.

Her shipmates led her to sick bay. Luckier sent her dreams of life, flowers and mirth, and the suns that were his home.

But she woke at last, screaming. The medic had to put her under heavy sedation.

He had not really understood what it would mean to confront something so violent that space and time themselves were twisted thereby.

His speed increased appallingly. That was in his own measure from Raven they saw him fall through several days. The properties of matter were changed. He could not push hard enough or fast enough to escape.

Radiation stripped nuclear particles bare and destroyed and born again, sliced and shredded through him. His substance was peeled away, layer by layer. Thermonova core was a white delirium before him. It shrank as he approached, ever smaller, denser, so brilliant that brilliance ceased to have meaning. Finally the gravitational forces laid their full grip upon him.

—Eloise! he shrieked in the agony of his

dissolution. —Oh Eloise help me!

The star swallowed him up. He was stretched infinitely long, compressed infinitely thin, and vanished with it from existence.

The ship prowled the farther reaches. Much might yet be learned.

Captain Suri waited Eloise in sick bay. Physically she was recovering.

I'd call him a man, he declared through the machine murmur — except that's not praise enough. We weren't even his kin, and he died to save us.

She regarded him from eyes more dry than seemed natural. He could just make out her answer. He is a man. Doesn't he have an immortal soul, too?

Well uh yes if you believe in souls, yes I'd agree.

She shook her head. (But why can the go to his rest?)

He glanced about for the medic and found they were alone in the narrow metal room. What do you mean? He made himself pat her hand. I know he was a good friend of yours. Still he must have been a merciful death. Quick, clean. I wouldn't

mind going out like that.

For him yes, I suppose so. It has to be. But — She could not continue. Suddenly she covered her ears. Stop! Please!

Suri made soothing noises and left. In the corridor, he encountered Mazundar. How is she? the physicist asked.

The captain scowled. Not good. I hope she doesn't crack entirely before we can get her to a psychiatrist.

Why, what is wrong?

She thinks she can hear him.

Mazundar smote fist into palm. I hoped otherwise, he treated.

Suri braced himself and walked.

She does, Mazundar said. Obviously she does.

But that's impossible! He's dead! He will always be with her.

Remember the time dilation, Mazundar replied. He fell from the sky and perished swiftly yes. But in supernova time. Not the same as ours. To us, the final stellar collapse takes an infinite number of years. And telepathy has no distance limits. The physicist started walking fast away from that cabin.



I want my inhibitions back again



HELMET

*A tinkering with evolution
had created a utopia, except that
man had become food for men*

THE HERO AS WERWOLF

BY GENE WOLFE

Feet in the jungle
that leave no mark!
Eyes that can see
in the dark—the dark!
Tongue—give tongue to it!
Hark! O Hark!
Once, twice and again!

Rudyard Kipling
"Hunting Song
of the Simeone Pack"

An owl shrieked, and Paul flinched. Fair pavement, flesh, death, stone, dark, loneliness and blood made up Paul's world. The blood was all much the same, but the fear took several forms, and he had hardly seen another human being in the four years since his mother's death. At a right meeting in the park he was the red-cheeked young man at the end of the last row, with his knees together and his scrupulously clean hands (Paul was particularly careful about hygiene) in his lap.

The speaker was fluent and amusing; he was clearly conversant with his subject—whatever it was—and he pleased his audience. Paul, the listener and watcher, knew many of the

words he used, yet he had understood nothing in the past hour and a half, and sat wrapped in his stolen coat, and known thoughts seeming to listen, watching the crowd and the park—this, at least, was no ghost house, no trap: the moon will up, night-blooming flowers scented the park air, and the trees lining the paths glowed with self-generated blue light, in the city beyond the last hedge the great buildings new and old were mountains lit from within.

Neither human nor master, a policeman strolled about the fringes of the audience, his eyes bright with stupidity. Paul could have killed him in less than a second, and was enjoying a dream of the policeman's death in some remote corner of his mind even while he concentrated on seeming to be one of them. A passenger rocket passed just under the stars, trailing luminous banners.

The meeting was over and he wondered if the rocket had in some way been his signal to end it. The masters did not use time at least not as he did, as he had

been taught by the thin woman who had been his mother in the little home she had made for them in the tunnel of a house that was once (she said) the Gorous—now only a house too old to be destroyed. Neither did they use money, of which he like other old-style *Homo sapiens* still retained some racial memory as of a forgotten god, a magic once potent that had lost all force.

The masters were rising, and there were tears and laughter and that third emotion alone that was neither amusement nor sorrow—the silken sound humans did not possess, but that Paul thought might express content as the purring of a cat does, or community like the cooing of doves. The policeman bobbed his hairy head, grinning, basking in the recognition, the approval of those who had raised him from animality. See (said the millions of his hands) the writhings of his body! the clothing you have given me. How nice! I take good care of my things because they are yours! See my weapon! I perform a

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useful function—if you did not have me you would have to do it yourselves!

If the policeman saw Paul it would be over. He was too stupid to realize he was being deceived by appearances as his masters were. He would never dare thinking him a master to meet Paul's eye, but he would look into his face seeking approval and would see not what he was supposed to see but what was there. Paul ducked into the crowd, avoiding a beautiful woman with eyes the color of pearls, preferring to walk in the shadow of her fat escort, where the policeman would not see him. The fat man took out from a box shaped like the moon and rubbed it between his hands, releasing the smell of raspberries. It froze, and he sifted the tiny crystals of crimson ice over his shirtfront, grinning with satisfaction, then offered the box to the woman, who refused it first, only (three steps later) to accept when he pressed it on her.

They were past the policeman now. Paul dropped a few petals behind the couple, wondering if they were the ones tonight—it there would be meat at all. For some vehicles would be waiting. If the pair he had selected were among these, he would have to find others quickly.

They were silent. They had entered the canyons between the buildings; he dropped farther behind, then turned back.

Three minutes later he was in an alley a hundred meters ahead of them, waiting for them to pass the mouth. (The old trick was to cry like an infant, and he could do it well, but he had a new trick—a better trick, because too many had learned it to come down an alley when an infant cried.) The new trick was a silver bell he had found in the house, small and very old. He took it from his pocket and removed the ring he had packed around the clapper. His dark cloak concealed him now; its hood pulled up to hide the pale glimmer of his skin. He stood in a narrow doorway only a few meters away from the alley's mouth.

They came. He heard the man's thick laughter, the woman's sicken sound. She was a little silly from the dust the man had given her and would be holding his arm as they walked, rubbing his thigh with hers. The man's blackshod foot and big belly thrust past the stonework of the building—there was a muffled moan.

The fat man turned, looking down the alley. Paul could see fear growing in the woman's face, cutting too slowly through the odor of raspberries. Another moan, and the man strode forward, fumbling in his pocket

for an illuminator. The woman followed hesitantly (her skirt was of flowering vines; the color of love, and white skin flashed in the interludes, a serpent of gold supported her breasts).

Someone was behind him. Pressed back against the metal door, he watched the couple as they passed. The fat man had gotten an illuminator out and held it over his head as he walked, looking into corners and doorways.

They came at them from both sides: a girl and an old, gray-bearded man. The fat man, the master, his generic heritage unused for infliction and peace had had time to turn before his mouth gushed blood. The woman shrieked and ran, the vines of her skirt whirling at her thought to give her leg room. The serpent dropping from her breasts to strike with fangless jaws at the flying-haired girl who pursued her, then winding itself about the girl's ankles. The girl fell, but as the pearl-eyed woman passed Paul broke her neck. For a moment he was too startled at the sight of other human beings to speak. Then he said: These are mine.

The old man still bent over the fat man's body snarled. Ours. We've been here an hour and more. His voice was the crackling of steel hinges, and Paul thought of ghost houses again.

I followed them from the park. The girl black-haired, gray-eyed when the light from the oily-mouth struck her face, was taking the serpent from around her legs—it was once more a lifeless thing of soft metal mesh. Paul picked up the woman's corpse and wrapped it in his cloak. You gave me no warning, he said. You must have seen me when I passed you.

The girl looked toward the old man. Her eyes said she would break him if he fought, and Paul decided he would throw the woman at her.

Somebody'll come soon, the old man said. And I'll need Janus's help to carry this one. We each take what we get ourselves—that's fair. Or we whip you. My girl's worth a man in a fight and you'll find I'm still worth a man myself, old as I be.

Give me the picking of his body. This one has nothing.

The girl's bright lips drew back from strong white teeth. From somewhere behind the fattened shirt she wore, she had produced a long knife and sudden light from a window high above the alley ran along the edge of the stained blade. The girl might be a dangerous opponent, as the old man

claimed, but Paul could sense the femininity. The woman-run from where he stood. No, her father said. You got good clothes. I need these. He looked up at the window, fumbling with buttons.

His cloak will hang on you like a blanket.

He could not carry both, and the fat man's meat would be tainted by the festicles. When Paul was young and there had been no one—but his mother to do the killing—they had sometimes eaten old males; he never did so now. He slung the pearl-eyed woman across his shoulders and trotted away.

Outside the alley the streets were well lit and a few passersby stared at him and the dark burden he carried. Fewer still, he knew, would suspect him of being what he was—he had learned the trick of dressing as the masters did, even of wearing their expressions. He wondered how the black-haired girl and the old man would fare in their ragged clothes. They must live very near.

His own place was that in which his mother had borne him, a place high in a house built when humans were the masters. Every door was nailed tight and boarded up, but on one side, a small garden lay between two wings, and in a corner of this garden, behind a bush where the shadows were thick even at noon the bricks had fallen away. The lower floors were full of rotting furniture and the smell of rats and mold, but high in his wooden tower the walls were still dry and the sun came in by day at eight windows. He cleaned his burden there and dropped her in a corner. It was important that his clothes be kept as clean as the masters kept theirs, though he lacked their facilities. He pulled his cloak from the body and brushed it vigorously.

What are you going to do with me? the dead woman said behind him.

Cat, he said her. What did you think I was going to do?

I didn't know. And then I've heard of you creatures, but I didn't think you really existed.

We were the masters once, he said. He was not sure he still believed it, but it was what his mother had taught him. This house was built in these days—that's why you won't wreck it, you're afraid. He had finished with the cloak; he hung it up and turned to face her, sitting on the bed.

You're afraid of waking the old times, he said. She lay slumped in the corner and thought her mouth moved. Her eyes were

only half-open, looking at nothing.

"We love a lot of them down," she said.

"If you're going to talk, you might as well sit up straight." He lifted her by the shoulders and propped her in the corner. A nail protruded from the wall there; he twisted a lock of her hair on it so her head would not fall. Her hair was the rose shade of a little girl's dress, and soft but slightly sticky.

"I'm dead," she knew.

"No, you're not. They always said this (except sometimes for the children) and their mother had always denied it. He let that he was keeping up a family tradition.

"Dead," the pearl-eyed woman said. "Never, never, never. Another year and everything would have been all right. I want to cry, but I can't breathe."

Your kind lives a long time with a broken neck," he told her. "But you'll die eventually."

I am dead now.

He was not listening. There were other humans in the city; he had always known that, but only now, with the sight of the old man and the girl, had their existence seemed real to him.

I thought you were all gone," the pearl-

eyed dead woman said thinly. "All gone long ago like a bad dream."

Happy with his new discovery, he said, "Why do you set traps for us, then? Maybe there are more of us than you think."

There can't be many of you. How many people do you kill in a year?" Her mind was lifting the sheet from his bed, hoping to smother him with it, but he had seen that trick many times.

"Twenty or thirty." (He was boasting.)

So many?

When you don't get much besides meat, you need a lot of it. And then I only eat the best parts—why not? I kill twice a month or more, except when it's cold, and I could kill enough for two or three if I had to." (The girl had had a knife. Knives were bad, except for cutting up afterward. But knives left blood behind. He would kill for her—she could stay here and take care of his clothes, prepare their food. He thought of himself walking home under a new moon and seeing her face in the window of the tunnel.) To the dead woman he said, "You saw that girl? With the black hair? She and the old man killed your husband, and I'm going to bring her here to live." He stood and began

to walk up and down the small room, soothing himself with the sound of his footsteps.

He wasn't my husband. The sheet dropped imply now that he was no longer on the bed. Why didn't you change? When the rest changed their genes?

I wasn't alive then.

You must have received some tradition.

We didn't want to. We are the human beings.

Everyone wanted to. Your old breed had won out the planet, even with much better technology, we're still starved for energy and raw materials because of what you did.

"There hadn't been enough to eat before," he said, "but when so many changed, there was a lot. So why should more change?"

It was a long time before she answered, and he knew the body was stiffening. That was bad, because as long as she lived in it, the flesh would stay sweet; when the life was gone, he would have to cut it up quickly before the stuff in her lower intestine tainted the rest.

Strange evolution," she said at last. Man become food for men.

Erik Larson

I don't understand the second word. Talk so I know what you're saying. He kicked her in the chest to emphasize his point and knocked her over; he heard a hiss snap. She did not reply, and he lay down on the bed. His mother had told him there was a meeting place in the city where men gathered on certain special nights—but he had forgotten (if he had known before) what those nights were.

That can't even mean language. The dead woman said, "only children's talk."

Shut up.

After a moment, he said, "I'm going out. If you can make your body stand, get out of here, and get down to the ground floor and find the way out, then you may be able to tell someone about me and have the police waiting when I come back." He went out and closed the door, then stood patiently outside for five minutes.

When he opened it again, the corpse stood erect with her hands on his table, her fingers clutching the painted metal circus figures he had had since he was a child—the girl acrobat, the clown with his hoop and trained pig. One of her legs would not straighten. Listen, he said, you're not going to do it. I told you all that because I knew you'd think of it yourself! They always do, and they never make it. The farthest I've ever had anyone get was out the door and to the top of the steps. She fell down them, and I found her at the bottom when I came back. You're dead. Go to sleep.

The blind eyes had turned toward him when he began to speak, but they no longer watched him now. The face which had been beautiful was now entirely the face of a corpse. The cramped leg crept toward the floor as he watched; hatted, began to creep downward again. Sighing, he lifted the dead woman off her feet, replaced her in the corner, and went down the creaking stairs to find the black-haired girl.

There has been quite a few to come after her, her father said, since we come into town. Quite a few. He sat in the back of the bus on the narrowest seat that went completely across the back, like a sofa. You'll be the first ever to find us here. The others, they hear about her, and leave a signal at the meetin'.

Paul wanted to ask where it was such signs were left, but held his peace.

You know there ain't many folks at all anymore, her father went on. And not many of them is women. And damn few is young girls like my Jane. I had a fella here

that wanted her two weeks back—he said he hadn't had no real women in two years well, I didn't like the way he said "real" so I said what did he do, and he said he fooled around with what he killed sometimes, before they got cold. You never did like that did you?

Paul said he had not.

How'd you find this dump hero?

Just looked around. He had searched the area in ever widening circles starting at the alley in which he had seen the girl and her father. They had one of the masters' cold boxes to keep their traps killin' in (as he did himself), but there was the stink of cloyed blood about the dump nonetheless. It was behind a high fence, closer to the park than he would have thought possible.

When we come, there was a fella living here. Nice fella, a German. Name was Gutman—something like that. He went west on my Jane night off. Well, I wasn't too taken with having a foreigner in the family, but he took us in and let us settle in the big station wagon. Told me he wanted to wed Jane, but I said no, she's too young. Wait a year, I says, and take her with my blessing. She wasn't but fourteen then. Well, one night the German fella went out and I guess they got him, because he never come back. We moved into this here bus then for the extra room.

His daughter was sitting at his feet, and he reached a crooked-fingered hand down and buried it in her midnight hair. She looked up at him and smiled. Got a pretty face, am I, sir? he said.

Paul nodded.

She's a mile thin, you will going to say. Well, that's true. I do my best to provide, but I'm feared, and not ashamed to admit to it.

The ghost-house, Paul said.

What's that?

That's what I've always called them. I don't get to talk to many other people.

Where the doors shut on you—and you're locked in.

Yes.

That ain't ghosts—now don't you think I'm one of them fools don't I believe in them? I know better. But that ain't ghosts. They're always looking, don't you see, for people they think are frightened. That's cause it's electricity that you ever been caught like that?

Paul nodded. He was watching the delicate swelling Jane's breasts, made in the fabric of her Kirby shirt, and only half listening to her father, but the memory penetrated the young desire that had embarrassed him, bringing back fear. The

windows of the bus had been set to black and the light was dim—still it was possible some glimmer showed outside. There should be no lights in the dump. He listened, but heard only katydids singing in the rubbish.

They thought I was a master—I dress like one, he said. That's something you should do. They were going to tell me. I turned the machine over and broke it and jumped through a window. He had been on the sixth floor and had been saved by landing in the branches of a tree whose bruised boughs and torn leaves exuded an acrid incense that to him was the very breath of panic still, but it had not been the master's or the instrument-filled examination room, or the jump from the window that had tenured him, but walking in the ghost room while the walls talked to one another in words he could sometimes, for a few seconds, nearly understand.

"It wouldn't work for me—got too many things wrong with me. Lines in my face even got a warr— they never do," Jane could.

The old man cleared his throat; it was a thick sound like water in a downspout in a hard rain. I been meaning to talk to you about her, about why those other fella's I told you about never look her—not that I'd of let some of them Jane's the only family I got left. But I ain't so particular I don't want to see her married at all—not a bit of it. Why we wouldn't come here if it weren't for Jane. When her monthly come, I said to myself, she'll be wantin' a man, and what're you gonna do out way here? Though the country was gettin' bad anyway. I must say if they'd of had real dogs, I believe they would have got us several times.

He paused, perhaps thinking of those times, the lights in the woods at night and the running, perhaps only trying to order his thoughts. Paul waited, scratching an ankle and after a few seconds the old man said, "We didn't want to do this, you know us Pendletons. That's mine and Jane's name—Pendleton Jane's Augusta Jane, and I'm Emmett J."

Paul Gorro, Paul said.

Please to meet you Mr. Gorro. When the time come, they took one whole side of the family. They was the Worthmore Pendletons, that's what we always called them because most of them lived themselves Cousins of mine they was, and second cousins. We was the Evershaw Pendletons and they didn't take none of us. Bad blood they said—too much wrong to be worth fix-

ing or too much that mightn't get feeding right and then show up again. My ma—she's alive then—she always said if it was her son for Lillian's boy that did it to us. The whole side of his head was pushed in. You know what I mean? They used to say a cow'd knock him when he was small, but if when I so—he's just born like that. He could talk some—there's those that set a high value on that—but the wisdom of man out of his mouth. My ma said if it wasn't for him we'd have got in sure. The only other thing was my sister Carrie that was born with a bad eye—blind, you know, and something wrong with the lid of it too. But she was just as sensible as anybody. Smart as a whip. So I would say it's likely Ma was right. Same thing with your family? I suppose?

"I think so. I don't really know."

A lot of it was die-beetests. They could fix it but if there was other things too they just kept them out. Of course when it was over there wasn't no medicine for them no more and they died off quick. When I was young I used to think that was what it meant die-beetests—you died away. It's really sweetening of the blood. You heard of it?"

Paul nodded.

I'd like to taste some sometime, but I never come to think of that while there was still some of them around.

If they weren't masters—

Didn't mean I'd of killed them, the old man said quickly. Just got one to gash his arm a trifle so I could tie off the blood then—that would be twenty-aught-nine, close to fifty years gone it is now—there was several I knew that was just my age. What I was meaning to say at the beginning was that us Pendletons never figured on anythin' like this. We'd learned and we meant to keep on grow our own truck and breed our own stock. Well, that did for a time, but it wouldn't keep.

Paul who had never considered living off the land or even realized that it was possible to do so could only stare at him.

You take chickens now. Everybody always said there wasn't nothing easier than chickens, but that was when there was medicine you could put in the water to keep off the sicknesses. Well, the time come when you couldn't get it no more than you could get a can of beans in those stores of theirs that don't use money or coins or anything a man can understand. My dad had two hens died in the flock when the sickness struck and it took every hen inside of four days. You wasn't supposed to eat them then had died sick, but we did it. Plucked 'em and

canned 'em—by that time our old locker that plugged in the wall wouldn't work. When the chickens was all canned Dad saddled a horse we had then and rode twenty-five miles to a place where the new folks grow chickens to eat themselves. I guess you know what happened to him though—they wouldn't sell, and they wouldn't trade. Finally he begged them. He was a Pendleton and used to cry when he told of it. He said the harder he begged them the cheaper they got. Well, finally he reached out and grabbed one by the leg—he was on his knees to them—and he hit him alongside the face with a book he was carrying.

The old man rocked backward and forward in his seat as he spoke his eyes half-closed. There wasn't no more seed, but what was saved from last year then and the corn went so bad the ears wasn't no longer than a soft duck. No bullets for Dad's old gun nowhere to buy new traps when what we had was lost. Then one day just before Christmas these here machines just started tearing up our fields. They had for got about us you see. We threw rocks but didn't do no good and about midnight one come right through the house. There wasn't no one living then but Ma and Dad and brother Tom and me and Jamie. Jamie wasn't but just a little bit of a thing. The machine got Tom in the leg with a piece of two-by-four—rammed the splintered end into him you see. The rot got to the wound and he died a week after it was winter then and we was living in a place me and Dad built up on the hill out of branches and saplings and fallen wood.

About Jamie, Paul said, I can see why you might not want to let her go—

Are you sayin' you don't want her? The old man shifted in his seat, and Paul saw that his right hand had moved close to the crevice where the horizontal surface joined the vertical. The crevice was a trifle too wide, and he thought he knew what was hidden there. He was not afraid of the old man, and if he'd crossed him mind more than once that he killed him there would be nothing to prevent his taking Jamie.

I want her, he said. I'm not going away without her. He stood up without knowing why.

There a been others said the same thing. I would go, you know, to the mission the regular way, come back next month and tell 'em I be waitin'.

The old man was drawing himself to his feet; his paw outstretched beligerently. They'd

see her, he said, and they'd talk a lot just like you about how good they take care of her, though there wasn't a one brought a look to eat when he come to call. Me and Jane, sometimes we ain't of for three four days—they never take account of that. Now here you look at her.

Bending swiftly, he took his daughter by the arm, she rose gracefully and he spun her around. Her hair was a pretty woman he said, but not as pretty as what she is even if she is so thin. And she's got sense too—I don't keer what they say.

Jamie looked at Paul with frightened animal eyes. He gestured he hoped gently for her to come to him, but she only pressed herself against her father.

You can talk to her. She understands.

Paul started to speak, then had to stop to clear his throat. At last he said. Come here, Jamie. You're going to live with me. We'll return to see your father sometimes.

Her hand slipped into his shirt, came out holding a knife. She looked at the old man who caught her wrist and took the knife from her and dropped it on the seat behind him saying, You're going to have to be a mite careful around her for a bit, but if you don't hurt her none, she'll take to you pretty quick. She wants to take to you now—I can see it in the way she looks.

Paul nodded, accepting the gift from him almost as he might have accepted a package holding her by her narrow waist.

And when you got a mess of grub she likes to cut them up, sometimes, while they're still incomin' around. Mostly I don't allow it, but if you do—anyway, once in a while—she'll like you better for it.

Paul nodded again. His hand, as if its own will, had strayed to the girl's smoothly rounded hip, and he held such desire as he had never known before.

Well, the old man said. His breath was foul in the close air. You listen to me now. You're just a young fella, and I know how you feel, but you don't know how I do. I want you to understand before you go. I love my girl. You take good care of her or I'll see to you. And if you change your mind about waitin' her don't just turn her out. I'll take her back, you hear?

Paul said, All right.

Even a bad man can love his child. You remember that, because it's true.

Her husband took Jamie by the hand and led her out of the wrecked bus. She was looking over her shoulder and he knew that she expected her father to drive a knife into his back.

They had seen the boy—a brown-haired, slightly freckled boy of nine or ten, with an armful of books—on a corner where a small columnated building concealed the entrance to the monorail and the streets were wide and empty. The children of the masters were seldom out so late. Paul waved to him, not daring to speak, but at tempting to convey by his posture that he wanted to ask directions, he wore the black cloak and scarlet-sashed shirt, the gold sandals and wide lagged black film trousers proper to an evening of pleasure. On his arm Jane was all in red, her face covered by a veil dotted with tiny synthetic bloodstones. Gem studded veils were a fashion now nearly extinct among the women of the masters, but one that served to conceal the blackness of eye that betrayed Jane, as Paul had discovered, almost instantly. She gave a soft moan of hunger as she saw the boy, and clasped Paul's arm more tightly. Paul waved again.

The boy halted as though waiting for them, but when they were within five meters he turned and dashed away. Jane was after him before Paul could stop her. The boy dodged between two buildings and raced through to the next street. Paul

was just in time to see Jane follow him into a doorway in the center of the block.

He found her clear-soled platform shoes in the vestibule under a four-dimensional picture of Hugo de Vries. De Vries was in the closing years of his life and, in the few seconds it took Paul to pick up the shoes and conceal them behind an aquarium of phosphorescent cephalopods, had died, rotted to dust, and undergone rebirth as a fertilizing cell in his mother's womb, with all the labyrinth of genetics still before him.

The lower floors Paul knew were apartments. He had entered them sometimes when he could find no prey on the streets. There would be a school at the top.

A confused, frightened-looking woman stood in an otherwise empty corridor, a disheveled library book lying open at her feet. As Paul pushed past her, he could imagine Jane knocking her out of the way, and the woman's honor at the savage exultant face glimpsed beneath her veil.

There were elevators, a liftshaft, and a downshaft, all clustered in an alcove. The boy would not have waited for an elevator with Jane close behind him.

The liftshaft flooded Paul as spring water

floods a cork. Thickened by conditioning agents, the air remained a gas enriched with added oxygen; it emanated his whole being though it was as viscous as corn syrup when he drew it into his lungs. Far above suspended (as it seemed) in crystal and surrounded by the books the boy had thrown down at her, he saw Jane with her red gown billowing around her and her white legs flashing. She was going to the top, apparently to the uppermost floor, and he reasoned that the boy having led her there would jump into the downshaft to escape her. He got off at the eighty-fifth floor, opened the hatch to the downshaft, and was rewarded by seeing the boy only a hundred meters above him. It was a simple matter to wait on the landing and pluck him out of the sighing column of thickened air as he walked by.

The boy's pointed, narrow face, white with fear under tan, turned up toward him. Don't, the boy said. Please, sir, good master—but Paul clamped him under his left arm and, with a quick wrench of his right, broke his neck.

Jane was swimming head down with the downshaft current, her mouth open and full of eagerness, and her black hair free as



DALLES

cloud about her head. She had lost her veil. Paul showed her the boy and stepped into the shaft with her. The hatch slammed behind him, and the motion of the air ceased.

He looked at Jamie. She had stopped swimming and was staring hungrily into the dead boy's face. He said, "Something's wrong," and she seemed to understand though it was possible that she only caught the fear in his voice. The hatch would not open, and slowly the current in the shaft was reversing, lifting them he tried to swim against it, but the effort was hopeless. When they were at the top, the dead boy began to talk. Jamie put her hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. The hatch at the landing opened, and they stepped out onto the hundred-and-first floor. A voice from a loudspeaker in the wall said, "I am sorry to detain you, but there is reason to think you have undergone a recent deviation from the optimal development pattern. In a few minutes I will arrive in person to provide counseling while you are waiting. It may be useful for us to review what is meant by 'optimal development.' Look at the projection."

In infancy the child first feels affection for its mother, the provider of warmth and

food. "There was a door at the other end of the room and Paul swung a heavy chair against it, making a din that almost drowned out the droning loudspeaker."

"Later one's peer-group becomes, for a time all-important—or nearly so. The boys and girls you see are attending a 'model' school in Armstrong. Notice that my hat is used to mask the black of space above their extent."

The lock burst from the doorframe, but a remotely actuated hydraulic cylinder triggered it shut each time a blow from the chair drove it open. Paul slammed his shoulder against it and, before it could close again, put his knee where the shattered bolt socket had been. A chrome plated steel rod, as thick as a finger, had dropped from the chair when his blows had smashed the wood and plastic holding it after a moment of incomprehension. Jamie dropped the dead boy, wedged the rod between the door and the jamb, and slipped through. He was following her when the rod lifted, and the door swung shut on his foot.

He screamed and screamed again, and then, in the echoing silence that followed, heard the loudspeaker muttering about

education, and Jamie's sobbing, in drawn breath. Through the crack between the door and the frame, the two-centimeter space held in existence by what remained of his right foot, he could see the livid face and blind, malevolent eyes of the dead boy whose will still held the steel rod suspended in air. "Die," Paul shouted at him. "Die! You're dead!" The rod came crashing down.

This young woman—the loudspeaker said—*"has chosen the profession of medicine. She will be a physician, and she says now that she was born for that. She will spend the remainder of her life relieving the agonies of disease."*

Several minutes passed before he could make Jamie understand what it was she had to do.

After her five years' training in basic medical techniques, she will specialize in surgery for another three years before—

It took Jamie a long time to bite through his Achilles tendon; when it was over, she began to tear at the ligaments that held the bones of the tarsus to the leg. Over the pain he could feel the hot tears washing the blood from his foot.



OMNI ENCORE PART TWO

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The final section provides ample evidence of why *Omni* has become such a success among both intransigent SF readers and newcomers to the form. Not only are the stories reprinted here fine examples of fiction, but the pictorial is testimony to the magazine's innovative graphics.

The world that Russell Griffin describes in "Angel at the Gate" is not a pleasant place. But his protagonist, Rushmore, does what he must to survive. Rushmore learns the value of the hidden advantages of pros thesis, and he learns the value of teamwork and its costs. From the story we may conclude that the Big Rock Candy Mountain should join the *Fee-Lunch* as a misleading myth.

Tauto Yasutaka takes a hard look at overcrowding and regimentation in his story "Standing Woman," and envisions a society that has developed a new way to handle these problems. Some may call it inhuman—but not very loudly, lest they be overheard.

"A Cage for Death," Ian Watson tells of a man determined to discover what shape the *Final Visitor* takes. The problem, of course, is to lure Death close enough to be observed—but not too close.

There have been myriad stories showing larger-than-life monsters wreaking ruin on the world. In "The Microbotic Revolution," Ian Stewart restructures the Frankenstein legend to show us that smaller-than-life monsters can also create chaos.

Children play games to rehearse the skills they will need later in life—but for some, life itself becomes a game. In "The Last Waltz" by Warren Murphy, a sociopathic games player hoists himself on his own petard and discovers that the game is only as strong as its weakest piece.

The theme of death and near-death evident in this section continues with Fred Robinson's "God Is an Iron," a science-fiction mystery story that uses irony, humor, philosophy, and surprise.

Paul Turner's photographic pictorial "Plains of Tomorrow" evokes a sense of otherworldliness. Although made right here on earth, of course, his pictures qualify splendidly as science-fiction visualizations. Working with photographs of natural objects, Turner achieves his surreal effects by manipulating color and by imaginatively combining disparate-looking images. He does this, he says, "to take advantage of the kind of things I see in it, to get the sort of effects I feel when I read science fiction." He succeeds.

*In a world of scarcity one will
give up anything to find
the Big Rock Candy Mountain*

ANGEL AT THE GATE

BY RUSSELL M. GRIFFIN

Everyone was saying about what Noe Nees and the punk had found, but Rushmore's filters were clogged, and he had retreated to the place where he always slept when he passed this way, wedged into the crevass where the slope of the hill met the underside of the ruined overpass. It was a good place to start a ride because the octagonal amputated howitzers had to allow to negotiate the gaps in the pavement. Also, it was drier than a natural cavern, and organisms instead of bats, if a male farmer or crusher came at him from one side, he could scuttle out the other. Cavers usually had one exit, and Rushmore hated feeling closed in. Hated it more than anything.

He unfastened his nose shell and tapped it back against his forehead, so he could dig out the filter cartridge with his finger and tap it clean. Twenty years before, when he'd been brought in with his nose and chin and cheeks sheared away, the Army doctors had given him giga team implants to ease the strain on his



PAINTING BY CRISTOBAL TORAL

seared lungs because they were under orders to recycle casualties back to the front as soon as possible. One had assured him the fiber inside the plastic nose was twice as good as any mask as long as he kept his mouth shut, and he was damned lucky to have been hit by laser fire because a conventional explosion wouldn't have left enough facets to work with and he'd probably have bled to death anyway.

The prosthetists had looked fine, but since then the road had tanned and hardened his real skin until his leathery forty-year-old face had pulled away slightly to leave a purple seam around the thin nose and square jaw of the twenty-year-old he'd been. It was his eternally heroic plastic profile that had earned him the tag Rushmore among the hoboes and jockers.

But the nightmares hadn't changed. Always he was clawing at the hatch of the lumbering jack-lungs bursting, burning to him black like as yellow gas seaked from the jammed vents. Then emerging, gasping, the air outside corrupted a cold, yellow cloud transected by laser beams refracting so suddenly, thin bright sticks of red, it was like a gas team had found him on the desert sand in time, fate.

He looked glumly at the cartridge. Just about shot. Have to buy a new one soon and they are expensive. But without them he coughed up blood. So he did odd jobs like splitting cordwood or painting windowsills when he needed replacements. Even work was better than coughing up blood, and on the road you learned to order your priorities. No use complaining about fate.

Stiffly he rose and went back down the slope to where the punk and No-Neck were talking with the others and watching the dog revolving slowly on a spit over the fire.

The trouble was that the hoboes cut off from the network of television and computers that linked the isolated hugger homesteads lived in a world of rumors and superstitions as primitive as Cro Magnon man's. Moreover, Rushmore hadn't known the punk long enough to trust her, and No-Neck couldn't talk. No-Neck had been with the Hundred First in Umm Said, but if he had nightmares like Rushmore's, fate hadn't left him a way to scream.

Rushmore paused to examine the sign No-Neck had scratched in the dirt to show what they do: a half-circle peaking from behind a triangle like a sun rising or setting behind a mountain.

You sure this is what you saw, No-Neck? "You absolutely sure?"

No-Neck looked up from the dog and wiggled his head and shoulders.

It was on a fence two towns back this morning, the punk said, pulling a wisp of hair out of her eyes. She was eighteen—twenty maybe. She'd learn. She'd have to. "Mechanicville."

You sure it wasn't some other sign that got smeared or something, like a triangle with two hands?

No-Neck twisted emphatically.

Guess I know the sign for a man with a gun, the punk sulked. Just like I know a cross means a free meal if you listen to some God-talk, and two is a mean a barking dog. We saw what we saw.

"What's the problem, Rushmore?" Stumpie asked. "We found the way at last—to the Big Rock Candy Mountain." She poked at the dog's creased and blackened flesh with the skeletons of her artificial fingers. Their plasid skin had worn away years before, and the metal armature inside had rusted into a hooked claw but it served well enough. Stumpie's needs like the others were modest.

"I don't get it," the punk said. "It's just a story isn't it? I mean the idea of someone where there's always food and no crushers or bum weather and whatever. How could anybody believe that?"

Oh, it's true right enough, Stumpie said, licking the grease from her fingers. "Every truck barnacle knows it. Way I heard it, some corporation like IBM or Coke was building it during the war, but when they went bust in the crash, the banks boarded the place up. Afraid everybody and their mother would be boating down the doors if word ever got out."

If you think it was that simple, Crazy said. Adam's apple jerking like a bobber with a bass at the hook, "you're clunker than mud. The government was behind it. The whole idea was a string of pleasure palaces across the country to enslave the working classes."

Rushmore smiled. Crazy was always saying things like that because he was a Communist or revolutionary or whatever and claimed the huggers had forfeited their rights by deliberately letting welfare go down the can in the power-crash, and anyway all wealth came from the earth which really belonged to the whole human race. Crazy wanted to organize the hoboes to get their just deserts by force, but that was because he was a hush-hobo. He was a submanne hiding out from the FBI, and he didn't understand hoboes for shit. The last

thing a hobo wanted was to get organized. The whole point of road jockeying was to live a life of freedom.

"They say it was left in perfect working condition," Stumpie mused. "Computer food and climate machines, three-D TVs, all kinds of stimulators. Enough to keep you happy forever in there."

Rushmore winced at in there. But who'd want it if we found it? I didn't hit the road because I wanted a hugger armchair or twenty-four-hour TV or a computer to balance my checkbook. Crazy you telling me you'd give up politics for some machine making you hamburgers?

Course not, Crazy said brusquely. The Big Rock Candy Mountain is where all the hoboes'll be eventually, and that's the beginning of solidarity.

"Well, Rushmore said, squatting down, "all I know is I never heard of the thing till a year or so ago."

That's perfectly logical, Crazy said. You've got to allow time after the war till the first hobo found it, or one of their scientists hit the road himself and started to blab. And then more time for word to get around. I heard about it from some old stiff on the coast quite a while ago."

If there really is such a place, Rushmore morded. It's Eden, and there'll be an arched at the gate. The huggers are too selfish to let us get at it.

"Anybody got a knife?" the punk asked. I think Fido's done.

There was no talking during dinner but later warmed by the fire and berries full they debated what to do. Crazy thought they should travel in a group. That way we'll reach each other's eyes and ears, he said.

That's like this guy told me once, Stumpie said. "A real smart customer, a professor writing this book about how we stick together and we're a separate society and everything. Said he was calling it *Invisible World* and he'd put my name in the acknowledgments if I did...."

Anyway, Crazy said loudly, the sign No-Neck saw is probably smudged and gone by now. The best thing would be to head the way it said, toward the city.

Even if I wanted to find this place, Rushmore surped. I always travel alone. You can scar a ride behind an articulated with five people.

"So what?" Crazy said. "You can't look for signs hanging on the back of a dog by your fingers. Got to walk."

In the end Rushmore agreed despite himself. It was always easier to go with the

current, and he was still free to change his mind at any point. So the next morning, after a duck's breakfast of cold water, they set off across the fields. Trespassing was better than running into a crusher on the road. Near the outskirts of town, however, they found the road again and a sign. Not a simple hobo sign scratched on handy trees or posts, but an official one.

WARNING

PERSONS FOUND GUILTY OF VAGRANCY

SUBJECT TO FULL FORCE OF STATE ARMEDMENT
Underneath, a jockey had chalked two curved lines like the upper halves of two circles side by side and put a dot inside each open eye, a town on the lookout for hobos. A town for hobos to avoid.

They was a rumor about a state round-up in these parts a few months back, Stumpie said, absentmindedly scratching her chin with her rusted fingers.

"What happened to them?" the punk asked.

"Guess they're rotting in some hugger jail," Rushmore said.

"No, they didn't rot your head," Crispy said. "When you come out, you want to work in a factory. Call it retooling."

That would cost too much," Stumpie

said. "They sell your parts to an organ bank and grind up the leftovers for fertilizer. That's what I heard."

"You're escambling the punk," Rushmore said.

"But did you ever actually meet a stiff that came back from a roundup?" Stumpie asked. "They just disappear."

"That's a dumb rumor," Rushmore said. "I've met lots of guys been in jail. Been there myself, man enough."

In the good old days, maybe, Stumpie said, "but not recently, I bet."

Behind them swelled an insect-like buzzing and Rushmore turned to see a gunner on a motor scooter tipping toward them along a side road and up across the cracked pavement of the highway into town. It was a local crusher fitted out in a helmet and uniform leather, his belt sagging like an October apple branch with two pistols, a bo-stick, and handcuffs. A badge jutted at his shirt pocket inside his open jacket. He eased to a stop several yards from them and dropped his helmet to steady himself.

"Where you scum headed?" the crusher called over the burble of his motor.

"Headed for a job, a couple towns over," Rushmore said. "Helping out a farmer with

the planting, you know?"

"Let's have the details," the crusher said, letting his lips nervously kiss his hand on one of the pistols. "You know the law."

"Over in Stratford," Rushmore said. "Farmer by the name of Mancini."

Rushmore knew the crusher could check on it but wouldn't. Even police were too busy hugging their homesteads and things a farm two towns away was as remote and exotic to a hugger as China computer phones or no.

You just make sure I don't find you inside the town limits in an hour," the crusher said.

"Because you lazy scurfs steal everything that's not nailed down. That's why you're vermin, and every honest person thinks you ought to be hunted down and exterminated like rats."

"I don't remember you in the war," Stumpie muttered as the crusher gunned the scooter and jerked away, making a slow circle around them before he headed toward town, his motor's chatter diminishing into a dry and distant buzz.

Rushmore watched until he had disappeared. Obviously a town bully used to bealing up on hobos but too chicken to take on five at once. Still, there was no use



Goodnight man. Don't push any buttons I wouldn't push

empty field. Together they made too easy a target. Ignoring Crazy's protests, Rushmore hopped the fence behind the sign and said good-bye. At first he left them speechless eyes on his back, but after only a few minutes of walking it seemed a great weight had been lifted from him. Sharing a can of coffee or chow was one thing, but he was basically a loner. Moaching a meal was easier with one, and you alone decided when to rest and when to move—how fast to go and in what direction. Absolute solitude was absolute freedom. If the others wanted to bunch together like so many grapes waiting to be plucked, that was their business.

As the sun peaked in the noontime sky Rushmore's stomach began to grumble and it was a relief when at last he found a clawed-on a gatepost the rear half of an A written backward, intersecting a perpendicular and surmounted by a cross. Good food in return for work. Signs were the hoboes' answer to computers.

The farm was set on a rise about a mile from the gate. Its outbuildings were sagging and dilapidated, and the only cultivated land was a small plot beside the house. Beginning to doubt the sign, he made his way past a collapsed compostar for collecting methane for use in running

farm machinery. He stepped up on the back porch to knock.

"The door opened the barest crack." Get off the porch," said a frightened voice inside. An old voice female.

Blinking and nodding and showing he held no weapons, Rushmore backed down to the ground. Typical peacock started of her shadow. Just wondered, ma'am, if you had any chores an honest man down on his luck could do for a handout?"

"My dog died," said the peacock through the crack.

"Sorry to hear that, ma'am. He wondered whether she was telling him to explain why she was about to open the door.

"She needs a grave," she voice said.

"You just tell me where she is laid," Rushmore said, "and I'll take care of every thing."

"No," she said. "I know you people. You'll steal her and eat her. You just dig the graves and I'll do the rest after you go. There's a shovel around the side of the house."

In the house's shadow, Rushmore found a patch of grass and began to dig, wondering whether it should be a big hole for a big dog or a small one for a little yap-yap. When he'd had enough, he leaned the shovel against the house and returned to the stoop

to find a square of corn bread and some home-canned peaches in a cracked bowl. He squatted and ate, using the stoop as a table. Not much of a meal, but better than nothing.

"You know, ma'am," he called when he was done. "There're lots of jobs that need doing around here. I could help out for a day or so for a little food and maybe some change. He was thinking of the filters he'd be needing to replace.

A blind moved in one of the windows, but there was no answer.

"I'm a veteran, you know," he called. "Got this in your war!" He reached up and opened his nose in a show of friendship and patriotism, but the house was silent.

He left with her. This irony was that if he'd been like Crazy he could have broken in and taken anything he wanted. But if she wanted to leave instead of trust somebody enough to accept help, that was her choice. He cut across the lamyard, hungrily eyeing the solitary bedraggled chicken roosting on the seat of a dead tractor and headed through the fields toward the highway.

As luck would have it, a five-unit drag flashed by just before he reached the road. He watched its innocuous sections glinting in the afternoon sun as it arched up the hill beyond. It could be a long wait before the next one would come by.

With a shrug, he followed up the hill. At the top of the grade the seems would be slowing with lost momentum and easiest to pick. Further he could catch a drag in either direction. So the decision of whether to follow the signs to the Big Rock Candy Mountain would depend on which way the next truck was headed. Leave it to fate. Life was bad when you kept it simple.

Halfway up the hill, he noticed the hulk of an old automobile rusting in the grass just off the pavement. He walked over to it, trying to remember whether he'd actually seen cars on the roads when he was a kid or his memory was fooling him with photos he'd seen. The doors and seats had been ripped out long ago, but a rusted tin can on the floor told him a brother or sister hobos had made this ancient artifact a temporary home awhile back.

He was about to go on when he noticed something scratched into the rust of the front fender, the triangle and half-circle of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Shit, there was no getting away from it.

"Gotta!" said a voice behind him.

He whirled to find the crusher in his greasy leather face twisted in a smile and

bo-stick in hand. "Guess you didn't believe me," he grinned.

"Look, I've been moving all day. Rushmore said. "I must be outside the town limits by now."

"Well, maybe you are," the crusher said, licking his lips. "But I don't think anybody's gonna complain do you?"

Rushmore's eyes darted to either side, trying to calculate the best escape.

The crusher stepped closer. "You bought yourself a mess of trouble coming into town this morning. You want my opinion?"

Rushmore feinted to the left, then sprang to the right, but the crusher was too fast and caught him a smashing blow on the ear! Rushmore's leg collapsed under him as he brought it forward to sprint away and he toppled forward. The crusher was on him instantly, bo-stick coming down hard across Rushmore's back, hearing the side of his head, his ear burning and ringing exquisitely. All at once something heavy toppled across him. Claustrophobic at the thing covering him, Rushmore twisted desperately and heaved it aside.

The crusher rolled beside him faceup, unblinking eyes staring at the sky. Crazy stood at his feet, a rock in his hand.

"Where do you come from?" Rushmore gasped, his ear ringing.

"Just following the signs," Crazy said. Behind him appeared No-Neck and Stumpie, the punk.

Rushmore looked over at the unmoving crusher again. "You didn't kill him, did you?" he asked.

Crazy prodded the man with his foot. Looks like it.

"But we never kill anybody," Rushmore was shouting his call to unknot the terrible clamp. "It's like a code—"

"We did in the war," Crazy said. "And they hate us because we remind them of it. He bent over to take the crusher's bo-stick and guns. That's why this is a war now. It's kill or be killed, and you don't stand a chance without your buddies. That's what I've been trying to tell you. From the crusher's leg pouch he extracted a long, heavy-duty flashlight. Stumpie, you and No-Neck help me drag this crud into the bushes. You going to stick with us now?" Rushmore?

Rushmore stared glumly at his leg, then at the sign scratched on the ear. Got no choice, he said. It's life.

They kept to stream banks and roads that had been abandoned and overgrown, and it took two days to reach the railless bed of what had been the train tracks on the out-

skirts of the city. Most hobos came by way of the old railroad classification yard because there were still some derelict boxcars and empty yard buildings good for sleeping or trading news.

But this time the yard seemed empty. A solitary scrap of paper or tarp rolled forward in the wind, like a mama ray dancing over the ocean floor.

"Where'd everybody go?" Rushmore asked of nobody in particular.

"Round up, maybe," Stumpie said. "Something scared them off."

"Maybe not," the punk said, pointing to a lineman's shack nearby. The paint had long ago been scoured away by wind and rain, but across the silvery gray of the weathered wood had been etched with a burned stick the triangle and half-circle.

"Sweet Jesus, we're on the track!" Stumpie exulted. "That's where they've all gone—the Big Rock Candy Mountain!"

They followed the arrow under the sign to a second sign scratched through the blistered paint of a decommissioned mailbox at the station. A third was soaped on the window of an empty store across the street. Farther and farther the signs led them toward the populated center of the city. Once they even saw a city crusher in blue but he

was far up a side street and looking the other way.

There were perhaps a dozen more signs before they found the last of them halfway down an alley behind what had been an elegant hotel, chalked on the brick over a huge brass-swathed door. Beside it was a circle with a line through it for a good road and an arrow pointing downward.

Crazy's hand trembled as he reached forward and tried the old-hashed handle. It took all his strength to pull the door open. Inside was blackness. It's a stairway, he said, peering in. Must lead down to the tunnels under the city.

"You really think this is it?" Stumpie breathed.

"Of course," Crazy chuckled. "Don't you get it? Those Washington types—they must have figured down there was the safest place in the world. Never even guessed no bops have been living here for generations! What a laugh!"

"Maybe it never rains down there," Rushmore said, but that doesn't make it the Big Rock Candy Mountain. He stood at the horrible cell of darkness inside the door as Crazy and then the punk stepped in, and then he felt a tug at his sleeve. It was No-Neck, pleading with him to follow.



Do you have the time?

All right," he managed. "I guess I'll come back."

Heart racing, Rushmore followed Stumpie and No-Neck; their footsteps echoing hollowly down through the mass of metal stairs between which now flickered the crushers' flashlight in Crazy's hand; below them a bright beam sawing with the dust they'd disturbed. At the first landing they found an old shoe planted against the wet and oozing stone wall, and farther down an ancient tell-tale hat tramped into the slime of wet concrete crumbs. A man stood hunched behind its monstrously elongated shadow to escape the light as Crazy found the sign scratched into the rough wall and an arrow pointing downward still.

At the bottom, perhaps five stories beneath the street, a door stood open and the flashlight showed them a slice of endlessly twisting tunnel. Along its ceiling ran an arched mass of small pipes, dripping sudden diamond flashes of water through the beam, and on either side were huge steel pipes fat with asbestosings.

Crazy led the way into the pounding heat. Sometimes they waded up to their ankles through urine-warm puddles quivering to drip from the pipes above; occasionally the passage, logged with steam from a

small break and they ran with their hands up to protect their faces from the hot mist, stung, and Rushmore contracted with the terrible gagging claustrophobia of the yellow gas cloud of his memories. Sometimes at ceiling level the wall is opened into crawl spaces and recesses that echoed with scratchings and squeakings while along the edges bright and hungry eyes glittered in the flashlight like a star held stretching infinitely.

They found the next sign scratched in spider white scars with a concrete chip across the grimy brick of a square column at the intersection of three tunnels: the arrow directed them down a descending passage to the left.

"It's funny," Stumpie whispered. "Young ure these was dug before the buildings right? So they ought to be laid out neat and square like what's above. But they curve around like—"

Like wormholes, Rushmore said, biting his lip.

They heard the rushing hiss of the steam break before the flashlight actually found it. The passage was choked with mist that swirled and glowed in the light. No flush more thought. Can't breathe can't breathe.

But Crazy was already plowing into it.

head down, the cloud brightening as it enveloped insight, the ragged shadows of Stumpie and No-Neck and the punk following. Rushmore plunged after them afraid to be left in the darkness, but touching his nose shell to reassure himself. However the steam wasn't hot and wet; it was cold and dry. He nearly tripped on No-Neck's lagging heel. No Neck was staggering, his face drawn up in an unearthly smile.

"You okay?" Rushmore grabbed him by the shoulders to steady him and found himself bumping into Stumpie's back. He realized that the cloud was no longer glowing with Crazy's flashlight but with a strong light pink at a Colorado sunrise that came from the far end of the tunnel.

"Okay?" Stumpie beamed. "Course he's okay! It's great!" She began to giggle.

Rushmore pushed past them and found the punk sagging on Crazy's arm. Crazy reeled under his weight and dropped the flashlight, and Rushmore stepped angrily to pick it up. Didn't Crazy think he'd need it to get out again?

In another moment they were out of the cloud in a vast, low-ceilinged room. On all four walls video screens glowed with endless meadows beneath perfectly blue skies, and there were just enough wisps of white cloud to add depth without threatening anything but eternally fair June weather.

But will you look at the food? Stumpie was crowing. A goddamned endless feast! Dig in!

Here and there about the room were folding cafeteria-style tables on which had been piled wrapped sandwiches and cupcakes and soft drink tubes; some were gnawed by rats that looked back contemptuously at the newcomers; others crawled with roaches and black beetles.

Rushmore stared up at the ceiling; hung from the pipes were theatrical spotlights shining through pink gels. What's the matter with you all? he asked as they stumbled toward the tables, scattering the rats and insects. It's like a goddamned mission—state food and hard chairs. It's all soft lights and TV screens.

Crazy was giggling and trying to unwrap a pink-frosted cupcake topped with a bright red cherry.

And where is everybody? Rushmore demanded. Where are the hoboes from the railroad yard? Where's the one that left us the signs? Tell me, where's the hall is he?

Aw, Stumpie said. "He's out making more signs to show the way. Hell of a swell guy, right? Hell of a swell."



The administration unveiled its new economic policies today, but fortunately no one paid any attention and no harm has done.

"Philanthropist." Crazy said thickly mouth full of frosting. "Philanthro...kist ph...an...cio..."

Rushmore suddenly felt light his head spinning. He grabbed the edges of a table and shook his head to try to clear it. He looked up to see that several figures had appeared at the far end of the room with strange insect-like faces.

Gas masks, he thought groggily. The steam in the tunnel... a gas of some kind. His nose filters had protected him from what had happened to the others, but he'd still absorbed some through his skin and was feeling its effects.

Now one of the figures was beside No-Neck. He raised a club and brought it down sharply connecting with a loud crack, and No-Neck spun away, fell stiffly across the table and spilled to the floor.

A hugger ran to get rid of hoboes. While things a big cat cage a Venus's-flytrap filled with sticky sweets. Should have known Rushmore struggled to open his mouth. It felt as if it had marbles in it. "Run!" he gasped.

The figures looked up surprised by his voice. Then one lashed out, and Stumpie slumped onto a folding chair that collapsed with her and clattered on the floor. Crazy and the punk glanced dreamily toward the sound, indifferent. For an instant longer Rushmore watched helplessly. Then he spun on his heel and bolted back into the passageway from which he and the others had emerged.

"One's getting away!" came a muffled shout from behind him.

He won't get far!

Back through the billowing doorway of binding gas he ran, back along the beam the flashlight stabbed into the darkness, floor stretching like rubber under him, parting, feet splashing through puddles on the stone floor. The dark walls closed in on every side, the glittering rats' eyes above expanded into burning suns. He leapt as if he was in the tank again, and he ran.

He didn't remember getting out. When he awoke, he found himself sprawled on a matted compost of mattresses, cushions, and newspapers, refuse from the hospital that had been decomposing for years. What better place for him, he thought. Human refuse. Used up in the war tossed aside and forgotten.

His skull throbbing, he managed to get himself into a sitting position and finally to stand unsteadily. His head was still light, but he was better, much better. Thank God.

for the war and the doctors! Fate again that's what it was.

He was only a block away from the brass door he'd entered—an hour ago? A day? A week? He had no idea. Warily he approached it and gazed up at the triangle and half-circle above it.

Stumpie. No-Neck. Crazy the punk. No telling what had happened to them, no way to gauge how deep the hugger fears and resentments had grown. Would they be given lobotomies and sent off to work in factories? Would their organs be saved and the leftover ground into fertilizer? Maybe once Rushmore had understood the hugger mind well enough to guess, but he had been cut off from their world too long, and things had changed.

No use mourning, he thought. Fate had gotten him out, and it was time to hit the road again, alone and independent just like before.

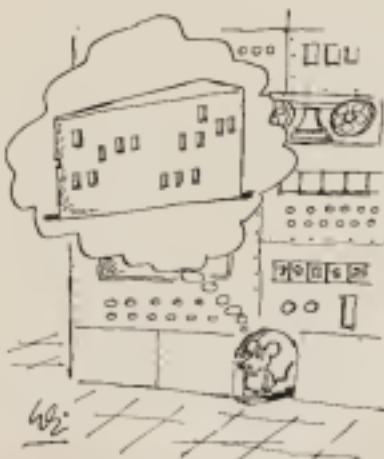
He paused. He'd never been independent—not really. The signs that had steered him away from danger and pointed him toward meadows and places to bunk had been scratched for him on posts and buildings by nameless hoboes who'd gone that way before. They had always been beside him, even when he'd imagined he was

alone. He bowed them.

And the huggers. He'd thought he could coexist with them by staying out of their way, but they had reached out after him, had even gone so far as to appropriate and pervert the signs he and every other hobo had learned to stake their lives on. And in creating that shabby fake Eden of straw sandwiches and minted sweets under the sky they had shown their contempt for the hoboes' dreams and myths. He would pay them back for that.

He sat on his toes and rubbed his sleeve slowly and deliberately across the chalk until it had blumed into the rough brick. Then with a chip of fallen cornica from the ground, he etched three horizontal lines danger here.

The huggers would be back to replace it to lure more hoboes to destruction. No matter how many signs he obliterated, he knew there would always be more. But lurking in doors and alleyways, he would outlast them for the sake of No-Neck and the rest. He would make his freedom to repay those who had left their marks to guide him along the roads and highways he had followed for the last twenty years. It was simply what fate had always meant for him to be the angel at the gate.



*Trees from the seeds
of discontent were springing up
all over the city*

STANDING WOMAN

BY TSUTSUI YASUTAKA

Translated from the Japanese by David Lewis

I stayed up all night and finally finished a forty-page short story. It was a trivial entertainment piece, capable of neither harm nor good.

These days you can't write stories that might do harm or good; it can't be helped. That's what I told myself while I fastened the manuscript with a paper clip and put it into an envelope.

As to whether I have it in me to write stories that might do harm or good, I do my best not to think about that. If I were to think about it, I might want to try.

The morning sunlight hurt my eyes as I slipped on my wooden clogs and left the house with the envelope. Since there was still time before the first mail truck would come, I turned my foot toward the park. In the morning no children come to this park, a mere eighty square meters in the

middle of a cramped residential district. It's quiet here. So I always include the park in my morning walk. Nowadays even the scanty green provided by the ten or so trees is priceless in the megalopolis.

I should have brought some bread, I thought. My favorite dogpillar stands next to the park bench. It's an affable dogpillar with buff colored fur.

The liquid fertilizer truck had just left when I reached the park; the ground was damp and there was a faint smell of chlorine. The elderly gentleman I often saw there was sitting on the bench next to the dogpillar, feeding the buff goat what seemed to me meat dumplings. Dogpillars usually have excellent appetites. Maybe the liquid fertilizer absorbed by the roots sunk deep in the ground and passed on up through the legs, leaves something to be desired.

They'll eat just about anything you give them.

You brought him something? I slipped up today. I forgot to bring my bread, I said to the elderly man.

He smiled sadly.

Ah, you like this fellow too?

Yes, I replied, sitting down beside him. He looks exactly like the dog I used to have.

The dogpillar looked up at me with large, black eyes and wagged its tail.

Actually, I kept a dog like this fellow myself, the man said, scratching the nuff of the dogpillar's neck. He was made into a dogpillar when he was three. Haven't you seen him? Between the haber dynasty and the kim shop on the coast road, isn't there one there that looks like this fellow?

I nodded, adding, Then that one was yours?

PAINTING BY VICTOR CUPSA



Yes, he was our pet. His name was Hatch. Now he's completely vegetated. A beautiful doggie.

Now that you mention it, he does look a lot like this fellow. Maybe they came from the same stock.

And the dog you kept? the elderly man asked. Where did he planted?

Our dog was named Buff. I answered shaking my head. He was planted beside the entrance to the cemetery on the edge of town when he was four. Poor thing, he died eight after he was planted. The fertilizer trucks don't go out that way very often, and it was so far I couldn't take him food every day. Maybe they planted him badly. He died before becoming a tree.

Then he was removed?

No. Fortunately it didn't much matter there if he smelted or not, and so he was left there and died. Now he's a bone-pile. He makes fine material for the neighborhood elementary-school science classes. I hear.

That's wonderful.

The elderly man stroked the dogpillars head. This fellow here. I wonder what he was called before he became a dogpillar.

No calling a dogpillar by its original name, I said. Isn't that a strange law?

The men looked at me sharply, then replied casually. Didn't they just extend the laws concerning people to dogs? That's why they lose their names when they become dogpillars. He nodded while scratching the dogpillars jaw. Not only the old names, but you can't give them new names either. That's because there are no proper nouns for plants.

Why, of course, I thought.

He looked at my envelope with *M.W.U. SCIENTIFIC* written on it.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you a writer?"

I was a little embarrassed.

Well, yes. Just these little things.

After looking at me closely, the man returned to stroking the dogpillars head. I also used to write things.

He managed to suppress a smile.

"How many years is it now since I stopped writing? It feels like a long time."

I stared at the man's profile. Now that he said so, it was a face I seemed to have seen somewhere before. I started to ask his name, hesitated, and fell silent.

The elderly man said abruptly. "It's become a hard word to write in."

I lowered my eyes, ashamed of myself who still continued to write in such a world.

The man apologized flumely when he

saw my sudden depression.

"That was rude. I'm not criticizing you. I'm the one who should feel ashamed."

No, I told him, after looking quickly around us. I can't give up writing because I haven't the courage. Giving up writing! Why, after all, that would be a gesture against society!

The elderly man continued stroking the dogpillar. After a long while he spoke.

"It's painful, suddenly giving up writing. Now that it's come to this, I would have been better off if I'd gone on boldly writing social criticism and had been arrested. There are even times when I think that. But I was just a dilettante, never knowing powerfully enough peaceful dreams. I wanted to live a comfortable life. As a person strong in self-respect, I couldn't endure being exposed to the eyes of the world. Ridiculed. So I quit writing. A sorry tale."

He smiled and shook his head. No, no. Let's not talk about it. You never know who might be listening, even here on the street."

I changed the subject. Do you live near here?

Do you know the beauty parlor on the main street? You run in there. My name is Hyena. He nodded at me. "Come over sometime. I'm married, but—

Thank you very much. I gave him my own name.

I don't remember any writer named Hyena. No doubt he wrote under a pen name. I had no mention of visiting his house. This is a world where even two writers getting together is considered illegal assembly.

It's time for the mail truck to come. Taking pains to look at my watch, I stood. "I'm afraid I'd better go." I said. He turned a sadly smiling face toward me and bowed slightly. After stroking the dogpillar's head a little, I left the park.

I came out on the main street, but there was only a ridiculous number of passing cars. Pedestrians were few. A catrine about thirty to forty centimeters high was planted next to the sidewalk.

Sometimes I come across a catrine that has just been planted and still hasn't become a catree. New catrines look at my face and meow or cry, but the ones where all four limbs planted in the ground have vegetated with their greenish fangs stiffly extend eyes shut tight, only move their ears now and then. Then there are catpillars that grow branches from their bodies and put out leaves. The mental condition of these seems to be completely vegetized—

they don't even move their ears. Even if a cat's face can still be made out, it may be better to call these catrees.

Maybe, I thought. It's better to make dogs into dogpillars. When their food runs out they get vicious and even turn on people. (But why did they have to turn cats into catpillars? Too many species? To improve the food situation by even a little? Or perhaps for the greening of the city?)

Next to the big hospital on the corner where the highways intersect are two mantrees and singed alongside these trees is a manpillar. This manpillar wears a postman's uniform, and you can tell how far its legs have vegetated because of its trouser's belt. It's male, thirty-five or forty-six years old, tall with a bit of a stoop.

I approached him and held out my envelope as always.

Registered mail, please.

The manpillar nodded silently accepted the envelope and took stamps and a registered mail slip from his pocket.

I looked around quickly after paying the postage. There was no one else there. I decided to try speaking to him. I gave him mail every three days, but I still hadn't had a chance for a leisurely talk.

What did you do? I asked in a low voice. The manpillar looked at me in surprise. Then after running his eyes around the area, he answered with a sour look. Won't do go saying unnecessary things to me. Even me. I'm not supposed to answer.

I knew that. I said, looking into his eyes. When I wouldn't leave, he took a deep breath. I just said the pay's low. What's more, I got beat by my boss. Because a postman's pay really is low. With a Clark look, he jerked his jaw at the two mantrees next to him. These guys were the same. Just for letting slip some complaints about the pay. Do you know them? he asked me.

I pointed at one of the mantees. I remember this one, because I gave him a lot of mail. I don't know the other one. He was already a mantee when we moved here.

That one was my friend, he said.

Wasn't that other one a chief clerk or section head?

He nodded. That's right. Chief clerk. Don't you get hungry or cold?

You don't feel it that much, he replied still expressionless. Anyone who's made into a manpillar soon becomes expressionless. Even I think I've gotten pretty plantlike. Not only in how I feel things, but in the way I think, too. At first I was sad, but now it doesn't matter. I used to get really

hungry, but they say the vegetizing goes faster when you don't eat."

He stared at me with lightless eyes. He was probably hoping he could become a maniac soon.

"Talk says they give people with radical ideas a lobotomy before making them into maniacs, but I didn't get that done, either. Even so a month after I was planted here I didn't get angry anymore."

He glanced at my wristwatch. "Well, you better go now. It's almost time for the mail truck to come."

"Yes. But still I couldn't leave, and I hesitated uneasily."

You, the maniac said. "Someone you know didn't recently get done into a maniac, did they?"

Cut to the quick, I stared at his face for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Actually, my wife—"

Hmm, your wife is it? For a few moments he regarded me with deep interest. I wondered whether it wasn't something like that. Otherwise nobody ever bothers to talk to me. Then what did she do, your wife?

"She complained that prices were high at a housewives' get-together. Had that been all fine, but she criticized the government, too. I'm starting to make it big as a writer, and I think that the eagerness of being that writer's wife made her say it. One of the women there informed on her. She was planted on the left side of the road looking from the station toward the assembly hall and next to that hardware store."

"Ah, that place. He closed his eyes a little, as if recollecting the appearance of the buildings and the stores in that area. It's a fairly peaceful street, isn't that for the better? He opened his eyes and looked at me searchingly. You aren't going to see her are you? It's better not to see her too often. Both for her and for you. That way you can both forget faster."

I knew that.

I hung my head.

"Your wife?" he asked, his voice turning slightly sympathetic. "Has anyone done anything to her?"

No. So far nothing. She's just standing, but even so—"

Hey. The maniac serving as a postbox raised his jaw to attract my attention. "It's come. The mail truck. You'd better go."

You're right.

Taking a few wavering steps, as if pushed by his voice, I stopped and looked back. Isn't there anything you want done?

He brought a hard smile to his cheeks and shook his head.

The red mail truck stopped beside him. I moved on past the hospital.

Thinking I'd check in on my favorite bookstore, I entered a sheet of crowded shops. My new book was supposed to be out any day now, but that kind of thing no longer made me the slightest bit happy.

A little before the bookstore in the same row is a small, cheap candy store and on the edge of the road in front of it is a maniacal on the verge of becoming a maniac. A young male. It's already a year since it was planted. The face has become a brownish color tinged with green, and the eyes are tightly shut, tall back slightly bent, the posture slouching a little forward. The legs torso, and arms visible through clothes reduced to rags by exposure to wind and rain are already vegetized, and here and there branches sprout. Young leaves bud from the ends of the arms, instead above the shoulders like floating wings. The body which has become a tree, and even the face no longer move at all. The heart has sunk into the tranquil world of plants.

I imagined the day when my wife would reach this state, and again my heart winced.

With pain trying to forget, it was the anguish of trying to forget.

If I turn the corner at this candy store and go straight, I thought, I can go to where my wife is standing. I can meet my wife. I can see my wife. But if I won't do to go, I told myself. There's no telling who might see you if the woman who informed on her questioned you; you'd really be in trouble. I came to a halt in front of the candy store and peered down the road. Pedestrian traffic was the same as always: the all-right. Any-one would overlook it if you just stand and talk a bit. You'll just have a word or two. Declining my own voice screaming, Don't go! I went briskly down the street.

Her face pale, my wife was standing by the road in front of the hardware store. Her legs were unchanged, and it only seemed as if her feet from the ankles down were buried in the earth. Expressionlessly as if trying to see nothing, feel nothing, she stared steadily ahead. Compared with two days before, her cheeks seemed a bit hollow. Two passing factory workers pointed at her made some vulgar joke, and passed on guffawing uproariously. I went up to her and raised my voice.

"Michiko!" I yelled right in her ear.

My wife looked at me, and blood rushed



to her cheeks. She brushed one hand through her tangled hair.

"You've come again? Really you must! I can't help coming."

The hardware store mistress, lending shop saw me. With an air of feigned indifference, she averted her eyes and refixed to the back of the store. Full of gratitude for her consideration, I drew a few steps closer to Michiko and faced her.

"You've gotten pretty used to it?"

With all her might she formed a bright smile on her stilted face. "Mmm." I used to it.

Last night it rained a little.

Still gazing at me with large, dark eyes, she nodded lightly. "Please don't worry. I hardly feel anything."

When I think about you, I can't sleep. I hung my head. You're always standing out here. When I think that, I can't possibly sleep. Last night I even thought I should bring you an umbrella.

Please don't do anything like that. My wife frowned just a little. It would be terrible if you did something like that!

A large truck drove past behind me. White dust thinly veiled my wife's hair and shoulders, but she didn't seem bothered.

Standing isn't really all that bad. She spoke with deliberate lassitude, working to keep him from worrying.

I perceived a subtle change in my wife's expressions and speech from two days before. It seemed that her words had lost a shade of delicacy, and the range of her emotions had become somewhat impoverished. Watching from the side-lines like this, seeing her gradually grow more expressionless, it's all the more desolating for having known her as she was. Before—those keen responses, the bright vivacity, much full expressions.

These people I asked her running my eyes over the hardware store—are they good to you?

"Well, of course. They're kind at heart. Just once they told me to ask if there's anything I want done. But they still haven't done anything for me."

"Don't you get hungry?"

She shook her head.

"It's better not to eat."

So unable to endure being a manipulator, she was hoping to become a manipatee even so much as a single day faster.

So please don't bring me food. She stared at me. Please forget about me. I think, certainly, even without making any particular effort, I'm going to forget about

you. I'm happy that you come to see me, but then the sadness drags on that much longer. For both of us.

"Of course you're right but— Despising this self that could do nothing for his own wife I hung my head again. But I won't forget you. I nodded. The tears came. I won't forget. Ever."

When I raised my head and looked at her again, she was gazing steadily at me with eyes that had lost a little of their luster; her white face beaming in a faint smile like a carved image of Buddha. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile like that.

I felt I was having a nightmare. No. I told myself. This isn't your wife anymore.

The art she had been wearing when she was arrested had become lumbly dirty and filled with wrinkles. But of course I wouldn't be allowed to bring a change of clothes. My eyes rested on a dark stain on her skirt. Is that blood? What happened?

Oh this, she spoke thickly, looking down at her skin with a confused air. Last night two cranes played a prank on me.

"The bastards!" I felt a furious rage at their inhumanity. If you put it to them, they would say that since my wife was no longer human, it didn't matter what they did.

They can't do that kind of thing! It's against the law!

That's right. But I can hardly appeal.

And of course I couldn't go to the police and appeal either if I did. I'd be looked on as even more of a problem person.

The bastards! What did they.... I bit my lip. My heart hurt enough to break. Did it bleed a lot?

Mmm, a little.

Does it hurt?

I doesn't hurt anymore.

Michiko, who had been so proud before now showed just a little sickness in her face. I was shocked by the change in her. A group of young men and women, penitentially comparing me and my wife passed behind me.

You'll be seen, my wife said anxiously. I beg of you, don't throw yourself away.

Don't worry, I smiled thinly for her in self-contempt. I don't have the courage.

You should practice.

When you're a manatee, I said in passing. I'll petition. I'll get them to transplant you to our garden.

Can you do that?

I should be able to. I nodded liberally. I should be able to.

I'd be happy if you could, my wife said expressionlessly.

We'll see you later.

It'd be better if you didn't come again, she said in a murmur looking down.

I know. That's my intention. But I'll probably come anyway.

For a few minutes we were silent.

Then my wife spoke abruptly.

Good-bye.

Umm.

I began walking.

When I looked back as I rounded the corner, Michiko was following me with her eyes still smiling like a graven Buddha.

Embracing a heart that seemed ready to split apart, I walked. I noticed suddenly that I had come out in front of the station. Unconsciously I had returned to my usual walking course.

Opposite the station is a small coffee shop I always go to called Punch. I went in and sat down in a corner booth. I ordered coffee, drinking it black. Until then I had always had it with sugar. The bitterness of sugarless, creamless coffee pierced my body, and I savored it maliciously. From now on I'll always drink it black. That was what I resolved.

Three students in the next booth were talking about a critic who had just been arrested and made into a manipulator.

I hear he was planted smack in the middle of the Griza.

He loved the country. He always lived in the country. That's why they set him up in a place like that.

Seems they gave him a lobotomy.

And the students who tried to use force in the Det. protesting his arrest—they've all been arrested and will be made into manipulators too.

Were it there almost thirty of them? Where'll they plant them all?

They say they'll be planned in front of their own university down both sides of a street called Students Road.

They'll have to change the name now. Violence Grove or something.

The three snickered.

Hey, let's not talk about it. We don't want someone to hear.

The three shut up.

When I left the coffee shop and headed home I realized that I had begun to feel as if I was already a manipulator myself. Muttering the words of a popular song to myself, I walked on.

I am a wayside manipulator. You also are a wayside manipulator. What the hell, the two of us, in this world. Dried grasses that never flower.



*Born of Hewitson's obsession, the
machine was built
to vanquish mankind's greatest foe*

BY IAN WATSON

A CAGE FOR DEATH

PAINTING BY MARSHALL ARISMAN

Ralph Hewittson's Thanatoscope was the ultimate product of that strange man's obsession with death. Thanatology is, of course, the study of dying, and Hewittson's machine was intended to enable us to see—and ideally to trap—Death itself. Or himself! Ralph Hewittson always took it very personally that he or anyone else should have to die.

No doubt all of us go through the stage of honor and affront when we are born. Then we file the trauma away in the back of our mind. We lock it up in the mental lumber room and it creeps out again only in our last days. Sometimes it tempts us as offensive as ever but, increasingly nowadays—thanks to the Thanatology Foundation's centers across the land and the reinterpretation of Dying as an altered state of consciousness—it is transfigured into a friend, an intrinsic part of oneself, the keystone of the arch of life.

Hewittson, however, kept intact the old animist vision of some invisible thief of life. His Thanatoscope—the deathwatch device—was to be the tipping comet, and/or cage that surprised Death himself.

True, some scientific testing of death has been conducted in the centers in addition to the psychological studies and therapies—but only in the sense of weighing the body before and after death to see whether any tiny weight loss occurs; of a departing soul; or using aura photography to try to record this departure on film. None of these things investigations have ever tried to demonstrate the converse occurrence: the arrival of Death as an active force.

Hewittson was a tall, black-haired man with a slight permanent stoop as if he never trusted doorways to be quite high enough to let him through.

"I wonder whether Death's doorway will let me pass when my time comes," he said to me one day, darkly humorous. "Or will I get stuck in it? Halfway in, halfway out? You know, I've been thinking that zombies could simply be people who get stuck in that door. Their conscious mind has gone through but the automatic mind gets left on our side of it, running the body mechanically."

You mean the autonomic nervous system don't you, Ralph?

"Do I?"

I'd come to the Sixth Street Thanatology Center only three months earlier from Neo-Theology College after majoring in Death-of-God counseling, and it was something of a shock for me to find someone who—if he plainly didn't believe in God—nevertheless firmly espoused the doctrine of death incarnate.

But I had taken a liking to his black jokes, which seasoned his obsession with a dash of pepper.

No doubt this was the way he performed in his own counseling of the dying—he made death seem something of a farce, a Marx Brothers' comedy. That approach could probably work wonders with some people. I've met them. They hate to be contemplative about their demise. They think that it's sanctimonious. Whereas with other people who are still scared—well, a joke could be a fine nerve tonic.

Of course, to Ralph sleep down this was no joking matter.

I was being given a guided tour of his machine up in his office on the fourth floor of the center. It was a pleasant sunny room with a gilt-framed medieval *Dance of Death* on one wall and, by contrast, on another a large color photograph of the Taj Mahal. The machine, which took up most of the spare floor space, was the excluded middle between horror and blissful peace. Ralph had, however, included it as a way not of greeting death with alarm or with joy but of damned well capturing him.

There was a waterbed-cum-bier implanted with medicsensors set within a delicately lined Faraday cage which could block out any kind of electromagnetic radiation or isolate any radiation arising within it. Enclosing this cage were polarizable glass walls that could be rendered opaque—turned into an infinite internal mirror. Various tiny cameras and mirrors were mounted within on silver rods, and outside the glass walls were fluorescent screens, an electron scanner, and a kind of hooded periscope. Also within were small, highly sensitive (to one part in a billion) chemical sniffers alert to the phenomena of death. The complex chemical released in minute traces by the dying body that we sometimes call corpse sweat. This chemical is akin to all sexual attractor pheromones released by humans and all other creatures, and personally I think it is a normal evolutionary by-product warning signal to others in the vicinity.

Most deaths in ancient times would have been violent in one way or another and spelled trouble. Hewittson, of course, thought differently. He had the notion of this molecule as an attractor signal too. It was something that Death would smell and descend on like a mating moth. The death-gasm couldn't happen until Death had been called. This accounts for certain overly protracted deaths: the bodies of such people simply couldn't produce

enough of the pheromone.

True to form, Hewittson had managed to get tiny amounts of this corpse sweat synthesized and he had built a number of prototype death traps designed to release quantities of it and to snap shut on whatever descended in upon the molecule—with no success. So he concluded that a dying body actually needed to be there.

Despite his qualms at taking life—which he regarded as sacrificing to Death—Hewittson had equipped his second-generation traps with dying animals. But again with no result. Whereupon he conceived the idea that the deaths of animals and the deaths of people may be different in essence. (He became interested in the Catholic doctrine that animals have no souls and are automatic objects.)

Incorporated in his perfected machine as well then were tiny pheromone tags with the stored drops of the chemical isolated by vacuum and mini Faraday cages.

His idea was to imitate death, to hypnotize oneself into a deathlike trance, then turn the tags on.

"Do you want me to lie down in there?" I asked him. "Is that what all this is leading up to?"

"And then I release the nonexistent whiff of cyanide?" he suggested with a chuckle. "Oh no, Jonathan, nothing like that. But of course you can try it out for size and comfort if you like. The'll be a pretty famous bed soon. Much more famous than your historic beds where Good Queen Bess or Lincoln or Shakespeare slept. Go ahead. I'm not preternatural."

"Well, thanks, but no thanks."

"I wonder whether I should equip it with cyanide gas or something similar? Then I not only catch Death, but kill him too. After all, if you can legitimately shoot someone you catch burglarizing your apartment—well, Death's a mass murderer by comparison. The biggest criminal."

I couldn't tell whether he was serious.

"I wonder in that case whether I'd be killing Death in general, or just the personal death of whoever was in the machine."

A whole lot of people die every second. Ralph. They do simultaneously. Even if this Death of yours skipped about at the speed of light—

"Okay, I see your point. I suppose death could be general and popular, though. He hemmed and hawed awhile. "I killed the particular death—if I zapped the bullet with the person's own special name on it right out of the way, swatted it, squeezed it

weaponized it would this person and his hand drift over the imaginary contours of his subject volunteer as conspicuously as a fantasizing soldier stuck in a jungle hundreds of kilometers from a brother? Would this person live forever? Would I have perfected an immortality treatment? Recklessly Jonathan, for the Therapology Foundation thus to defeat its own purpose! His voice flushed mock-conspiratorially. Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. Your Neo-Therapy College would be up in arms.

I guess it's a way of persuading people to volunteer. I plead guilty. Roll up, roll up. Come into Hawthorne's Death Cage and he'll make thee immortal with a hiss... of cyanide gas. Oh, but you're forgetting some things, Ralph. You'd kill the subject that way before you nailed his death. Baby and the bathwater! Ralph. Baby and the bathwater!

Ah Ralph looked crestfallen

But this was all just horsing around. You're going to try it out yourself then? I asked more seriously. But by just simulating death? By pretending? I take it that it'll be with the Swami's help?

The Swami is our pet name for our Indian counselor Mr Ananda. Ananda has delved

cheaper into the oceanic unity state of death insertion than anyone else I have ever met. Arvinda has used deep meditation and self-hypnosis techniques of Indian origin to plumb this way station into nothingness—sometimes accompanying the dying down or up there—in deep rapport with the body, the heart, the mind, the spirit.

I've been taking lessons," Ralph nodded. "Admittedly I haven't spent years at it as he has. But I think I can turn the trick. I think so. When I get down deep enough my own thoughts, those brain waves will start the phenomenon of death dreams.

What is the gene pool?

Next Tuesday I'll need a few observers. Arenda has volunteered, though he thinks my motives are—well, you understand. But he's cleared a space in his schedule.

I can spare the time too Ralph

Goodman: Now look down here-

He showed me how the periscope, the optic fiber and the mirrors let the outside observer see around the whole inside of the cage even when the glass walls are mirror-reversed. As I gazed through the hooded periscope into the pearly lit interior, the

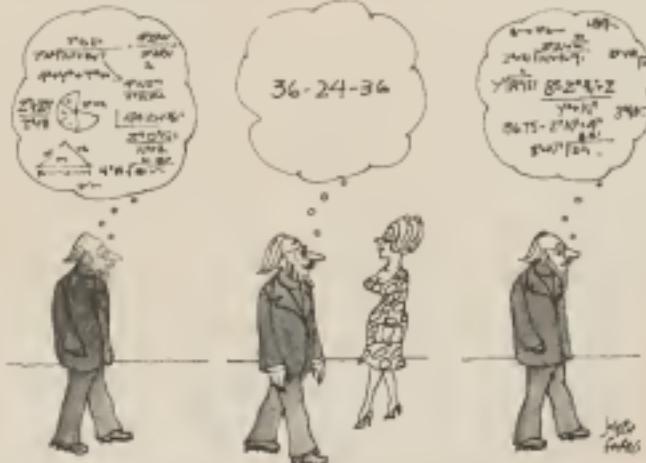
empty box reduplicated itself perhaps a dozen times in all directions before losing its self in a thickening golden fog while the fine network of the Faraday cage overlapped and overlapped itself within the maze.

Tuesday came. Besides Hewittson and the Swans and me, there was also present in his office Dr. Mary Ann Scarpante, our foundation medic, looking lovely in tight silver pajamas; her dashing white coat carried her names in wavy marble.

Here then was the mousetrap with the big cheese—Hewittson soon to be laid out in it synthetically. Gorgonzola seemed with death (though it wouldn't be an oddity that any of us could pick up consciously) a toy of the most terrible variety.

"It's a far, far better thing I do now," Ralph grinned, warming it up a little—to Swami Ananda's evident disapproval—as he clattered in a thin liner smock, he wriggled through the door of the Faraday cage, careful not to buckle any of the surrounding thin wires. He stretched himself out on the water bed!

I shut the door and locked it with Ralph's golden key as per instructions. The key chain I slipped round my own neck. Then I



turned on the current to the cage, at very low power. It hummed faintly.

The glass walls descended and locked together, still in their see-through mode. Air recycling on.

You look like Snow White, shouted Mary Ann, checking his vital signs on the readouts. But where's the poisoned apple?

Hearing her, Ralph nodded ironically in the direction of Mr. Amanda. Then Ralph composed himself as Amanda began loudly to intone a monotonous tape-loop refrain in Sanskrit which Ralph took up—I suppose—in duet though I couldn't hear his voice.

Soon Ralph raised his hand and I opaqued the glass walls.

When I peered in through the periscope he was lying utterly still, looking suitably blanched and conceited in the pearl-in-red light. He lay beside his mirrored self, which lay beside another mirrored self. Toe to toe with yet others. Each in their gilded cage, the bars of which glistened thicker as the bodies proliferated further. It was quite easy to lose the center of focus and get lost.

The descent into the death trance took the best part of an hour. Mary Ann monitored Ralph's vital signs dutifully the whole time. The sun phone in through the window upon what seemed like a great marble block, a white kabba, a mausoleum. A dead pigeon strutted to and fro for a while on the window ledge. Distant street sounds drifted up, and a few times the whirr of copiers beat down. Otherwise it was very quiet.

Mr. Amanda peered at the brain wave screen. He tapped one with a stem brown finger and impeccably manicured nail. Here is the beginning of the theta-theta rhythm.

I hugged the periscope hood around my head and heard only the Swami's voice. "The other rhythms have flattened out now; it takes four or five minutes more before the theta-threshold is full enough to switch on the pheromone drip." But I wasn't about to pull away. Had no intention of missing any thing—not that I believed there would be anything (and a videotape was running anyway).

Ah... Pheromone drip on now. Mr. Amanda announced.

I watched the point of the needle near Ralph's bare calf, winking—at Mary Ann's command—to plunge a massive dose of stimulants into him should the need arise. I kept my hand on the button that would multiply the power fed into the Faraday cage fiftyfold.

What I saw then didn't record on the vid-eoscope—as if the tape couldn't register light of the wavelength I saw, as if it came from a different spectrum entirely! But my eyes saw it—I swear it!

A red (except that it wasn't red) thing appeared abruptly, perching on Ralph's chest. It was like a bat, it was like a giant moth, it was like an angel on a Christmas tree illuminated by firelight. It flickered strobe-like. It seemed to dance in and out of existence. It had big glassy eyes and a tiny sharp beak. It had scalpel claws on its velvety wings. If they were wings like the figure that are fastened on lightning rods. I realized that I was seeing only what my eyes and brain could see, not necessarily what was actually there.

Theta finale! sang the Swami, who couldn't care any of this. Stimulants. Mary Ann. Administrator. The stimulants!

I already have! The signs show.

I squeezed my button, too, at the same time it wasn't needed. Whatever Ralph had set up to trigger the powering of the cage had already done its job. The cage crackled with its fiftyfold insulation.

The needle had slid into Ralph's calf. He jerked like one of Galvani's frogs.

He sat upright on the water bed. His eyes wide open.

The red thing leaped into him, flickering, phasing out (but more in than out), hit the side of the cage and seemed to pass through the electrified tigress. And the glass walls too. But no, if it passed through, if it hit the room wall reflected in, it passed through into one of the reflected doubles of the cage, actually into it, leaving no original behind in the real cage. I realized, as I had earlier, that there had been only one of it arising from the moment of its first appearance. No reflections. No duplicates. Many reflections of Ralph, but none of it. How could something I could see with my eyes not possess a reflection in a mirror? Perhaps it had to do with its own in-visible essence.

This red moth beat from one phantom cage to the next, circling outward from the real Ralph Hewitton. But as it got farther away, the golden bars thickened. Now it was flying into a wall of increasingly thick syrup! It could get no farther out through the reflections.

Ralph sitting upright and following it with his gaze, grabbed in the air with both hands. The air above the real water bed was of course empty. The thing—Death—wasn't there. But all the hands of all his re-

flexions grabbed in unison in all the mirror cages. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

Death hopped frantically around the circuit, from one cage to the next, to evade his hands. But it was all one cage to Ralph.

He caught it. He caught it! In a cage三人 removed from the original, his reflection's hands closed on it and held it tightly. His own hands—and those of all the other reflections of him—were empty. But not that pair. Those pair. They held the red thing. The bat moth. Death.

Death slashed at his hands with its wing-claws and gouged with its beak. Blood ran down the hands and wrists of that one reflection. The real Ralph cried out in pain. Yet his hands showed no trace of wounds. Only the hands of the one mirror image that held the creature were bled, but he felt the pain. He continued to wrestle with the creature. Face distorted, he held on, two empty hands cupped in median sinews standing out. And however much it hurt him, however much flesh it tore from his phantom fingers, his finger bones still held it securely out in the reflection.

What's happening? Mary Ann called. He's overreacting to the stimulant! What's happening Jon?

He's fighting Death. I cried. He's caught Death and he's fighting it!

Just then Ralph turned to face me, to ward where he knew I must be. Depolarize! Translucide the glass!, he shouted.

I took myself from the periscope hood, found the switch and hit it. Immediately all of us could see through the cage. And of course all of the reflection worlds had disappeared.

But Ralph still wrestled—with thin air! His fingers still clutched. And I could see what he was doing, though to the others it must have seemed an insane pantomime. He was tearing Death free so that he could hold it in one clenched hand...to throw it far away from him? No, he'd never give up his hold on Death now that he'd succeeded. He held that one imprisoning hand aloft in a kind of open fist salute, grinning through his agony, bearing his teeth.

Cut the current! he ordered harshly. I squeezed the bulb. The cracking hissed away.

Unlock the cage, Jonathan! Even in his pain he refused to abbreviate my name.

I hesitated briefly. Was I, in effect, letting Death out into the world? But with the current no longer flowing, I suppose a mesh of wires could be no obstacle.

Ralph saw my hesitation. "You fool! I've got hold of him!" he shouted in my face from the other side of the wire—which he could have burst through by main force, but even in extremes he had no wish to damage any part of his invention. "Anyways he isn't here. Not in this here. He's still in the reflection—and I've got him tight there!"

Had he? Had he really? Or was the pain so deeply etched into his torn nerves and scoured finger bones that he only thought he had? Was he only hearing the ongoing fight in the way that an amputee still feels intense pain from a severed phantom limb? As he continued to clutch the air and bite his lip, I couldn't believe that. The reflections had gone away whenever reflections go when they're off duty, but his reflected hand was still clutching Death out there, mimicking the shape and stance of his flesh-and-blood hand here.

I tore the key from my neck, snapping the chain in my haste. I jabbed it at the lock a few times before I got it in and turned it.

I pulled the door open. Ralph crawled out and stood, his clenched empty hand at arms' length, triumph and torment on his tired, beaten face.

Three days have gone by now. Ralph

hasn't slept a wink. I doubt that he could let go now if he wanted to. His hand and Death are too intermixed; claws knapped in bones, bones binding wings. His hand remains bent like that of the worst victim of arthritis, unable to flex, yet to all other appearances a perfectly unblemished hand.

'Hysterical cramp' is what Dr. Szepielski diagnoses about his hand. She doesn't believe what I saw. Neither does Segni Ananda. They know there's no such thing as Death, and the videotape only shows Ralph alone in the cage, then suddenly jerking erect and scribbling at the empty air.

I'm alone with him now in the office. It's night. Many deaths occur at three o'clock in the morning. That's the dead point between night and day, the hour of despair, the low point of the body rhythms. Right now it's one thirty. Ralph sits slumped in his chair, kept awake by pain, his clenched hand resting on his desk.

You saw Jonathan.

I saw Yes.

Mary Ann believes that I subhypnotized myself by staring through that periscope into the reduplicating mirror room too long. My attention drifted away into the mirror. I

was virtually in a state of sensory deprivation. I was hallucinating freely and grandiosely when Ralph jerked upright and began his phantom fight. I was seeing a molar in my own eye. I gave it names—just as Ralph, torn out of deepest trance, blood pounding through his heart, saw that blood personified in midair as the rooster, the bat, the moth of death.

You believe me now, Jonathan.
Believe? I know.

So Ralph sits before me, holding Death at arm's length—though for how long? When Death at last escapes from him, does it wing elsewhere, or does it come directly here? Homing in, to perch on the real hand whose mirror image holds it at bay, captive in the realm of reflections?

It feels as if my bones are coming apart. Ralph groans. But maybe they aren't all. This hand's still solid. Oh, my too too solid flesh! But I can't see them, the other bones I only feel. Gosh, what I feel!

"Let him go. Open your hand."

"I can't. Jonathan, I can't."

It's a quarter to two. Outside the city is still as a sepulcher. Silent night. Ralph is too weary to scream.

Together we wait.





THE MICROBOTIC REVOLUTION

BY IAN STEWART

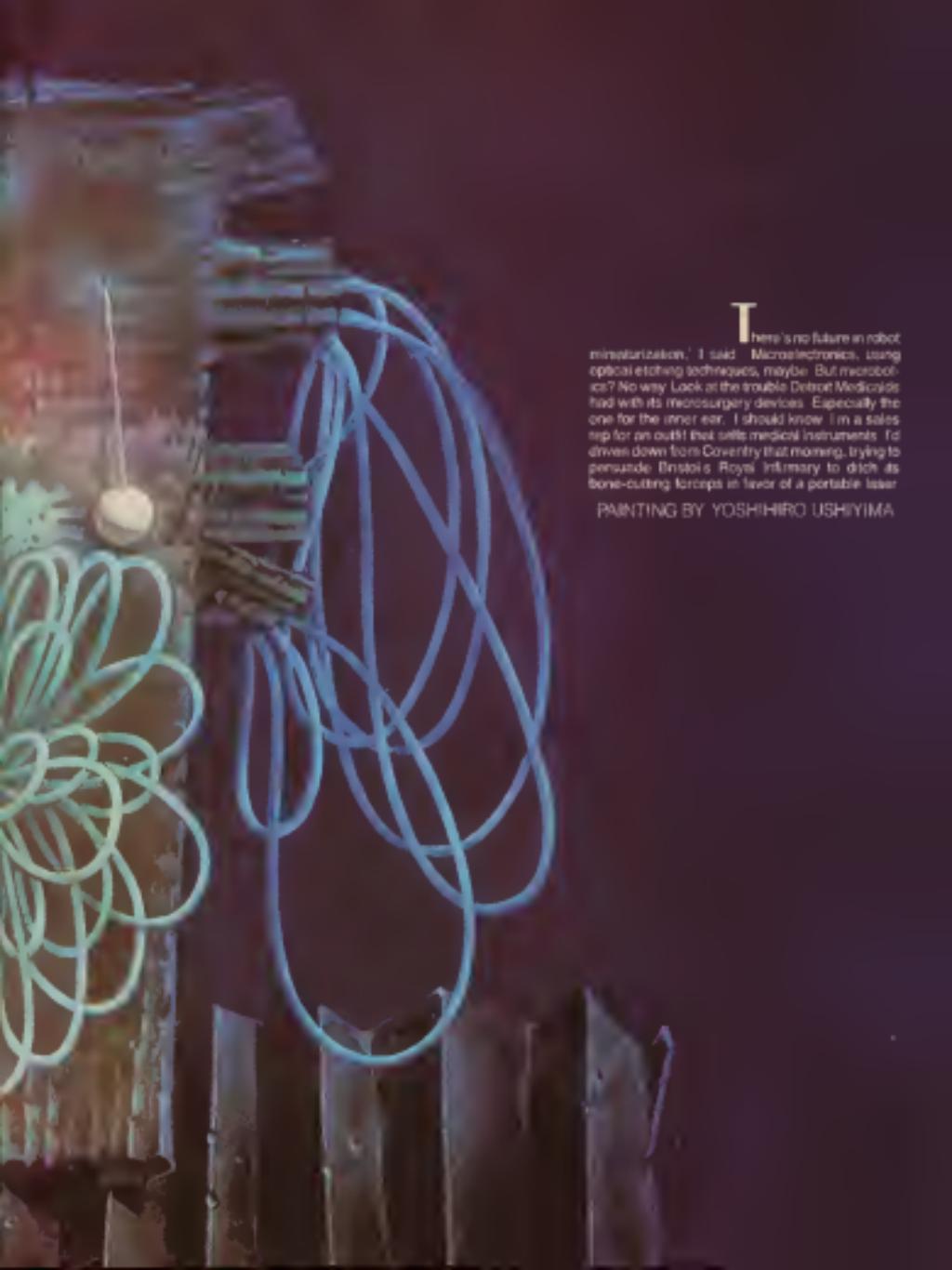
There's no future in robot miniaturization," I said. "Microelectronics, using optical etching techniques, maybe. But microrobots? No way. Look at the trouble Detroit Medicals had with its microsurgery devices. Especially the one for the inner ear. I should know. I'm a sales rep for an outfit that sells medical instruments. I'd driven down from Coventry that morning, trying to persuade Bristol's Royal Infirmary to ditch its bone-cutting forces in favor of a portable laser.

PAINTING BY YOSHIHIRO USHIYIMA

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They'd agreed it was a marvelous idea and shown me the new lasers they'd just bought from Takahashi Optronics. Still, I did get them to promise to order their pelvic gear joints through us in the future, so the journey wasn't entirely wasted after all.

Whenever I'm in Bristol I try to look up Oliver Gutney. He's lived there for years and knows the city like the wrinkles on his elbow. Especially the pub.

It was a cold night, but the fire in the lounge bar of the Tall Ship was burning brightly as the ale flowed, and I warmed to the topic. "Control," Oliver says, that's the problem. Like threading a needle from a distance of ten feet in a hurricane. I lowered the level of my mug by a good two inches and leaned my elbow on the bar. "Same again, please, Janice."

Oliver is some sort of Top Frog in a firm called Decal Electronics. He likes to think of himself as an engineering entrepreneur. His enthusiasm for a new idea is boundless and often clouds his judgement, which is usually at the best of times. But every so often he has an idea that is truly mind-boggling in its audacity and he makes it work. I suppose you could call him an erratic genius. This time he had a bee in his bonnet about peer-sized robots. His pudgy face, with its battle-browned eyes, bore an expression that I had known of old.

"What we need," he said, "is a new approach. I'll concede Johnny that you can't build microscopic robots directly. But I think you could do it in stages."

Maybe. What's the limiting factor on the size of pocket computers?

He grinned. "The size of pockets."

I wasn't very amused. "You know, I mean on how small they can get, not how large."

"All serious talk. Er... making the buttons big enough for fingers to push them?"

"Right! Whatever size you want to end up with, it all starts here. People. And people are pretty big in mechanical terms. Billions of cells in long, maybe I forgot. Compared to a single virus, that's huge."

Oliver looked at me thoughtfully. "Have you ever noticed how similar viruses are to tiny robots?" he asked. "I remember a picture of a bacteriophage that looked rather like a lunar lander with a kind of syringe on salts up the middle. And the flagellae of bacteria are little Archimedean screws running on circular bearings."

"But nobody builds a virus! We can't even synthesize one of any real complexity!" Then I realized we had strayed from the point. "Anyway, what I mean is to get down

to microbots in stages—your suggestion—involves too long a chain of command. So the errors accumulate too much."

Oliver's eyes glazed over completely. For a moment I thought it was the ale. Then he slammed his mug down on the counter.

"I'll just have to find a way to stop them from accumulating," he said.

I didn't see Oliver again for a month though I was in the Bristol area twice during that time. Decal Electronics seems to have a finger in every pie from laser-powered toasters to particle beam benders, and Oliver often gets dragged halfway across the world on business with only ten minutes' notice.

The third occasion I phoned from Cardiff and Oliver was back in circulation. We agreed to meet at the Tall Ship. He breezed in with a tatty-looking cardboard-like under-one-arm, hauled me off into a corner, and showed an engineering diagram in front of me. It looked like a cross between a mechanical grail and a human skeleton, and I said as much. He hastened to explain:

"It's the preliminary blueprint for the Oliver Gutney Reduplicating Engine," he said proudly.

Reduplicating?

Pommeau word. Cross between reducing and duplicating.

Engines?

Makes for a better acronym: OGRE.

Oh, I asked how it worked.

He edged closer in conspiratorial fashion and I edged away, and we both moved some two feet along the seat until I was wedged into the corner. Basically, he said, it's a modification of one of the standard replicating automata.

For once I understood what he was talking about. "You mean that thing at MIT that builds copies of itself?"

Yes. The Japanese have one, too, and the Russians have one.

But that relies on a supply of spare parts, and a stock of magnetic cards to copy the program on—and

He held up both hands as if to ward off the flow of words. Mine doesn't!

There are times when it pays to listen to Oliver carefully. He's very bright, but also a little sloppy and about one crazy idea in twenty actually works. But when it does, it makes up for the nineteen others. I guess that's how Decal Electronics sees it, too.

Mine makes its own spare parts out of any material that comes to hand. Metal mostly, and bits of plastic. And when it

builds a copy of itself, it does it on one tenth scale!"

"Clever idea, Oliver," I said. "You make one big one, and that makes a medium-sized one, and that makes a small one, and that makes an even smaller one—but it won't work."

Have you ever tried to tell a mother that her newborn offspring resembles an apoplectic capuchin monkey? He actually snarled at me. Why not?

The smaller it gets, the more the molecular structure of the materials changes in relation to the size of the components. You can't shrink atoms, Oliver.

Thank God. I thought, maybe you'd thought of an obstacle I'd missed. I've programmed it to modify the design as it shrinks in size. This involved other modifications, too. It was rather complicated, but he seemed to have it all worked out. The process had to stop at some point anyway, and he had programmed the machine to stop reproducing when it had reached macromolecular size.

But what about the error buildup?

There isn't one. I've arranged it so that the machine corrects its own structure on the basis of its internal programs. And those are just copied. With a good error correcting code, there's no difficulty.

I tried another tact. It looks very complicated. Won't the first stage be rather big?

Not with off-the-shell components. About the size of a Heibusig.

Expensive?

Not as much as you'd think. You'll be glad you invested in the idea.

I'm sure I—What did you say?

He clutched at my arm, perhaps to stop me from getting away. It's a money spinner, Jonathan! Imagine it: a robot no larger than a bacterium! It'll be the biggest thing since the microscope!

I think you mean smallest, Oliver. Now look. I've got better things to do with my money than...

Oh, come on! All I need is three hundred pounds! I can get a lot of the stuff out of my research budget at Decal, and I've got a few quid put away for a rainy day myself, but I'm three hundred short!

Get a bank loan.

Lynn. Well, you remember how I got an overdraft to finance that development project for microwave socks to keep feet warm in cold weather. National Westminster caught a bit of a cold off that one.

Say no more, I get the picture. Anyway, I don't have—

You'll regret it if you refuse. Think of the possibilities! And you'll have a stake in the ground floor. Once it takes off—

Oily, it's a funny ground floor that can take off with a stake in it. It's just— On the other hand, maybe he was right. It was a small enough risk, and the returns might be huge.

"All right, I'll forge the new hall carpet. Half shares?"

"Of course!"

He said that too quickly. "Hang on! I want half shares in the profits. I absolutely refuse to accept responsibility if anything goes wrong!"

"Done! A check will do fine. Payable to Oliver B. Gurney. Lovely!"

He tucked it into his wallet. "Painless wasn't it?"

So far I'll answer that when the anaesthetic effect of the alcohol wears off."

Decal Labs is on the outskirts of Bristol in an old country house in the village of Men-
derby, not far from Bristol Parkway railway station. The building's exterior is much as it was two hundred years ago, but the inside has been ripped out and totally rebuilt.

Oliver had built OGRE in the basement. I was astonished at how quickly he had managed it. He explained to me that once the design was specified, the construction was easily performed by using a standard assembly robot and a critical tree quasi-bootstrapping technique.

Conceted bastard!

But I had to admit it was impressive. It just about filled the basement. The bulk was a lot of electronic modules, with a few induction motors and belt drives. Around this was a kind of machine tool assembly line, wound from top to bottom in a spiral. Right on the top was a hopper, with a mechanical grab arm. The whole thing was mounted on caterpillar tracks, and if you looked carefully, you could see a retractable hook in each segment of track.

Apparently the hooks were for climbing up things.

Where's the barn door, Oily?

Eh? Oh no, this one stays put. The tracks are for later generations to scavenge for materials. I put them on this one only to see how they'd look.

And where does this one get the materials?

He pointed. Those garbage cans over there. The next generation uses these little bins here, and later generations cannibalize previous ones.

What. Reviving the ancient art of matriliney. But isn't it rather costly to let them eat up all that machinery?

"They won't eat much. There's only one machine in each generation. I suppose they might bite a few chunks out of Mama's caterpillars. The scavenging has to be fairly efficient for the process to stand any chance of working at all. Frankly, I'm not sure I could stop the babies from eating Mama if I wanted to. You see, to do that, they have to recognize who Mama is, and that means a lot of extra programming, memory and such."

But in any case—he broke off, seemingly a little embarrassed. "Well, the big machine is mostly made up out of Hong Kong copies bought at knockdown prices on the black market. But don't let IBM know, or they'll cancel all our service contracts."

I looked around me. A thick cable ran from a plug on the wall. "Where do the offspring get their power from?"

"There I cheated. The second, third and fourth generations use batteries. After that they get small enough to rely on solar power. By the seventh generation there's enough energy in starlight."

Much more to do?" I asked.

"Nope. Just some final programming, Hang on ten minutes, and I'll have it done."

So I hung on. It was almost certainly the biggest mistake of my life because it made Oily rush the programming job and not check it properly. Anyway he rattled away at a keyboard in the corner for a while, then grabbed the magnetic programming card and shoved it into a narrow slot in the side of OGRE 1, first generation matrarch.

He threw the switch.

Progress was pretty slow to begin with. It should take about three days," Oliver said. (But that time shrinks as the machines get smaller. Everything goes by a factor of ten at first. The next size takes about seven hours, then forty minutes, then four minutes and so on, and so forth. The whole process drops off eventually when it gets down to milliseconds, mind you.)

It may have been slow, but I was fascinated. Oliver is a skillful engineer and OGRE was functioning smoothly, as far as I could tell. Already a kind of chassis had been assembled, and as it began to descend the helix it acquired extra parts.

I rearranged all my work schedules to keep me in the Bristol area for the next few days, but my mind was only half on the job. Every spare moment I spent over in Men-

derby seeing how OGRE was progressing. And the more I watched it, the more the clanking of metallic scrap came to resemble the cheerful chinking of coin. It really looked as if Oliver had tapped the mother-rod this time.

On the evening of the third day a massive OGRE, about a foot long, duly rolled off the ramp at the end of the assembly line. It whined across the floor and began to rummage happily around in one of the smaller bays. Within a quarter of an hour a sub-OGRE had begun its spiral descent.

Suddenly I truly believed not just an intellectual acceptance, but a warm glow in the gut. It was overwhelming. "My God! Oliver! Look at that thing! It's building inch-long robots!"

"If you think that's astonishing, wait a few generations more. You'll need a microscope to see anything at all."

We stared at it. Motherhood must be something like this. The tiny scraps of junk metal went "click-clack-click". Oliver had a sloppy smile on his face. "Oh look," I said. "It's feeding." We looked at each other and we both burst out laughing.

You'll be checking it for colic next, he said. "Wake up, man, it's just a machine! I've got a better idea than just standing around here!"

"Oh?"

The Carpenter's Arms, at Portishead. Prawn cocktails and jugged hare."

We left hurriedly.

We arrived home in a taxi, well after midnight, as plastered as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We didn't look into the basement at Decal Labs until midmorning the next day, when Oily drove us over.

OGRE was a total wreck.

At first we thought that someone had vandalized. Then I suggested to Oliver that it had perhaps fallen to bits of its own accord and he lost his temper. Only when he felt something scamper up his leg did he stop shouting at me. He thought it was a spider and he hates spiders.

It was a fourth-generation OGRE, about a tenth of an inch across.

It seemed to be trying to eat his belt buckle.

"Oliver, I said—what's that funny rasping noise?" We listened. Besides the rasping, there were faint clanks and clicks and hums, and behind them all a persistent background whine, like a shattered swarm of mosquitoes.

"It's coming from OGRE," he said. He

bent down to take a closer look. Get me a magnifying glass!

Where?

Look in the filing cabinet under M! I found it and passed it to him. He hitched up his trousers, squatted on his haunches and peered through it at the wreckage.

"Oh my God," he said. "Look!"

I did.

The OGRE matriarch was crawling with sub-sub-subservient OGREts like a rotten cheese afflicted with mold. They were dismantling it. Cockroach-sized OGRElets were hacking Memes to pieces with teeny-tiny chain saws on retractable arms, gouging chunks out of her plating with their little laser cutters, and stripping the insulating plates off her wiring to melt it down for their own use. And as they pursued their grueling task, even tinker OGREts swarmed over them, sawing and rasping and hacking so fast that all you could see was a blur. The larger OGREs were trying frantically to repair themselves and I saw several of them sweeping up piles of the smaller ones with devices resembling dust pans and pouring them into their own laps. It wasn't doing them much good. The little OGREs were eating the hoppers faster than the big ones could digest them.

It was a jungle in there.

It looked as if nothing could possibly survive but the smaller OGREts reproduced so much faster that they had a considerable advantage. Their numbers were obviously increasing.

I handed the magnifying glass back. Its metal rim was dull and pitted. They'd started on that.

"I don't understand," said Oliver. "There ought to be only one machine in each generation. I wonder whether—Suddenly he thrust his hand into the wreckage and began groping around. "It should be—central?" Yes, here it is. He extracted a magnetic card, mostly intact, although it looked as if mice had been at it around the edges.

"They don't need much plastic," fortuitously he said. He shoved the card into his terminal and switched on.

There was a shower of sparks, and the terminal collapsed. They'd started to eat my engine too.

There were many more terminals in the Decal labs, and we tried one three floors up. It worked. Presumably the OGREts hadn't yet moved that far ahead. Oliver ran through the program listings and soon found his mistake. Damn! I mispunched the card for OGRE's fertility factor.

Which does what?

Controls the ratio of numbers in successive generations. It should have been set at 1. To keep just one machine at each stage. I seem to have put an extra zero on the end.

You look—

"Well, it was only a little mistake."

Burly. But as a result, we get ten times as many OGREts at each stage?"

Yes.

"Oliver, you've got a population explosion on your hands. Lord knows how much damage these things will do!"

"Now can I get upset? It isn't as bad as you think. I put in a stop code at macromolecular size, remember? Once they reach that generation, they stop reproducing and switch off. They die out. The damage area shouldn't be too big."

Oh, wait a minute though. Shouldn't we have reached that stage by now? What's the formula for summing a geometric progression?

You've forgotten foraging time. That's a limiting factor, and it's random. It will slow them down a bit. We just have to wait.

We waited. We made occasional forays down the stairs. The activity continued unceasing. In fact, it seemed to grow. Finally I suggested we take another look at the program.

Oliver had been using a high-level language that accepts commands in English—Analog English—and, instead of telling it to stop reproducing, he'd told it to stop reducing.

You know what you've built? I said.

He groaned.

A rapid-breeding artificial virus. One that eats men!

Our first thought was to call the police but the phone didn't work. None of the phones worked. The internal telephone exchange was in the basement.

The car wouldn't start, not surprisingly for something that looks like Stilton cheese. So we departed on foot. It was raining in torrents.

Half a mile down the road, the sole of my left shoe fell off. They'd eaten the nail. Oliver was having trouble with his zip.

This is terrible! I exclaimed.

Too right! It hasn't rained like this since—

I mean you bloody viral Communications will fail, machines will break down, there'll be no transport. TV stations will go off the air and people will die of boredom! Cities will crumble to dust! Plastic cutlery

from highway service stations will change hands for inflated sums! It will be the End of Civilization as We Know It.

You're overwrought! It is not come to that yet!

No, but it will. I said drolly. "Has it occurred to you that we're both carriers of the disease? The virus must be all over our clothing, to judge by the damage it's doing to it." Where are we going anyway? All we'll do is spread the infection everywhere!

Oliver grabbed me by the shoulders. What else can we do? We have to warn people somehow! Now shut up, keep walking, and let me think!

Eventually we managed to hitch a lift into Bristol. I spent the ride waiting for the car to fall apart, but it seemed unaffected. I could only assume that the virus had not in fact been carried on our clothing, but for the life of me I couldn't see how that was possible. The car dropped us at the street corner near Oliver's flat. This door key was a bit mangy, but it held together enough to let us in. Oliver headed for the telephone.

Half an hour later he put it down. Off! I don't want to have to go through anything like that again!

What did you do?

I called the managing director of Decal Electronics and put the position to him. He agreed to inform the authorities that there has been a sudden and inexplicable incidence of rapid corrosion in the vicinity of North Bristol, resembling an epidemic. Cause as yet unknown.

But—

But we can reveal the cause only by admitting it is all our fault, and neither you nor Decal Labs would want that. Nor does it do any harm, because Decal will spearhead the investigation.

I know the managing director. He's a tough bird. If it's possible to get out of this with our necks intact, he'll do it.

Fine. But what if the disease just keeps spreading? It really will be the end of civilization, City!

He looked glumly at his fingernails. I know. But there's still hope. Have you noticed anything?

Like what?

Well, for instance, the lights are still working. So was the phone when I put it down. He switched on the hi-fi. It was working too.

So I hasn't reached here yet.

No, but we have. Something killed off the OGRE virus particles on our clothes. I

noticed on the way here that the compassion seemed to have stopped. I only wish I knew why!

Oily and I did as we'd been told. We stayed put. And we had never felt so useless in our lives. We drank coffee and played records and kept an eye on the TV for new bulletins all the time half-expecting the pereodical to suffer a meltdown and this hi-fi and TV to go on the blink.

It was an eye-opening experience for anyone with a fond belief in the openness of British government. The world was about to grind to a halt and there was not one word on TV or radio to let the public know.

There were a few hints though. Like an item about a pub in Lennards Green (just down the road from Morden) whose beer kegs had suddenly decided they preferred to look like colanders spraying the clientele with cold lager. Oily groaned aloud—at the waste, I suspect. And something horrible had happened to the railway lines near Bristol but they weren't saying what.

Every so often we got an updated report on the true state of affairs over the telephone. For the first twenty-four hours the epidemic advanced eastward along a narrow front unashamedly affected an area about fifteen miles long and two broad. We plotted its progress on a map with pins. It was heading straight for Swindon, an important railway junction, a center for heavy industry with a population of one hundred thousand. So far it had passed only through rural areas but this would be orders of magnitude worse.

Then the wind changed and it turned slightly northward, just enough to miss Swindon. But any relief we felt was short-lived. Thirty miles along the Thames Valley north in its path was Oxford.

The advancing front had narrowed again to less than a mile. There were fewer damage reports coming in, but it's a very rural area and so it was hard to tell whether that was significant.

We waited. It was torture.

The phone rang. Oily beat me to it by a nose. He didn't say anything; he just stood there with a funny look on his face, shaking his head slowly from side to side. It didn't look very encouraging.

He put the telephone down. He looked stunned.

Don't tell me, I said. Oxford is in ruins. The British Leyland plant at Cowley is a scrap heap. All the university computers are wrecked and they're suing Decal for

every penny they've—

No, he said. Not yet; anyway, Oxford hasn't suffered any damage yet. This plague seems to have stopped spreading somewhere between Brampton and Kingston Bagpuize.

Why? Has the wind dropped?

No, it's blowing a gale. I just don't understand it.

Perhaps it's voodoo.

Eh?

I waved vaguely toward the map. All these pins we've stuck into it have killed it.

The area of active infection began to shrink. Within forty-eight hours reports had ceased altogether.

Something had wiped out Oliver's anti-coronavirus. But we still had no idea what had really happened, or even whether it would stay wiped out. Oliver was whisked off to Decal's Manchester branch to assist the inquiries, and I was patched on the head and sent home. I drove back to Coventry and my fingers crossed and took a detour east of Oxford just in case.

There was never even the barest hint of a whisper in the newspapers, not a passing comment as my father used to say but from various sources I pieced together a fair picture. The plague of the metal eaters had confined it still to a region of some fifty square miles largely open fields, and most of the damage was superficial. It had died out before anything really serious happened.

The newspaper's knew something odd had occurred, of course. But they'd been fed some talk about national security and the government had slapped a "D" notice on the story. So they had shut up.

By the time I managed to get in touch with Oliver again things were pretty much back to normal, but he looked distinctly subdued, even a shade thinner than his usual degree of rotundity and I told him so. I'm surprised you aren't in jail, I added.

So am I. But the thing that stopped the plague also destroyed the evidence. It's been officially classified as a natural disaster. Of course, Decal Labs chaired the committee that made the final report. That may have had something to do with it.

They sacked you, of course. I think I might be able to wrangle you a job in—

Eh? Good Lord, not Decal! got a huge contract for reconstruction work?

There just isn't much going on as ushio in this cruel world no more. Oliver please the suspense is agony. What did stop the plague from taking over the entire globe?

Cheap Hong Kong copies?" he hissed from the corner of his mouth.

Come again?

'Those... and our worthy British climate.'

'Stop being obscure.'

'Very well.' It was rust.

'Rust?'

Exactly. It's a good job you're such a skimp, only prepared to invest a pittance in my sound business ventures. The prototype OGRE was made of cheap steel. Not too many generations down the components got so small that they rusted away faster than new ones got built.

I said your inability to scale the molecular structure would cause trouble! It's a previous hard to make a layer of paint less than one molecule thick! And that's the last time I'll invest a penny in one of your sound business ventures; you ungrateful—

Oh hold on there! I know exactly what went wrong! You have to expect a few feather troubles! We can have another go now, using Japanese equipment in stainless steel coatings... His voice trailed off.

Never! Oliver Bolwell Gurney, I refuse!

"Oh perhaps you're right. OGRE had too many bugs."

You can say that again!

Anyway Decal Labs is sending me off to Paris for a few months. To recuperate. Probably the real reason is to get me out of the country. Thus I won't see you for a bit. Can I buy you a pint before I go?

"No thanks."

No?

I'll have a malt whisky. A triple.

So that was the end of Oliver's metal-eating virus. It rusted away. We should've known. The bodywork always goes first.

Sort of seems.

But since Oliver left, I've never been quite convinced. You see viruses can mutate. Suppose one of the nth-generation OGREs mutated its own program and built its offspring out of gold or platinum or stainless steel? Or suppose one learned to copy anything. When the rust killed off the plague it would leave a few members of a rust-resistant strain.

I'm probably worrying needlessly.

If only Oliver hadn't gone to Paris, the idea would never have entered my head. You see, there was a report on television this evening.

The Eiffel Tower just fell down.

The French authorities have attributed it to metal fatigue.

I hope they're right.



Alvin Menier's newest lady friend was beautiful, graceful, and perfect on the dance floor—she was programmed that way

LAST WALTZ

BY WARREN BROWN

Alvin Menier loved toys. He loved them because he loved playing. Homo Ludens was his motto, and through it he had managed to acquire a vast and interplanetary fortune. Since he first held a toy rocket in his hands as a child, he had dreamed of having spaces and planets to play with. He became one of the first great space entrepreneurs. His companies mimed the moon and named Mars. His satellites beat the solar power to an earth made effluent and peaceful by cheap and abundant energy.

He would never have called himself a crust man, and certainly not a tyrannical one. He did not even think of himself as a manipulator. As far as he was concerned, he was simply a player, better than most other players. He thought humans were the best game of all; for they won not only players but also pieces in the game. Morality was a word he occasionally found a place for in crossword puzzles. Beyond such use,

morality itself was meaningless to him. His latest toy set facing him across a table of Oriental pattern, upon which sat two glasses of pure crystal, filled with rare wine. She was tall and graceful, with a flawless Georgian face and eyes an emerald green set off by the pale yellow cascade of her curly hair. Her dress was rose silk, and it was diaphanous.

Menier was dressed in white as some thing between mandarin and sheikh. He wore a white robe, jeweled, curved dagger. With his cloak draped loosely about his waist and pale blue robes he more resembled some cruel and haughty prince of an ancient and decadent civilization. He was pleased with the effect he thought it rather playful. He hoped it would make an impression on Margot when she came. And she would come if he had moved correctly.

As to confirm the rightness of his move, a soft chime sounded through the penthouse, followed by Margot's voice asking permission to come up. He rose

PAINTING BY WOLFGANG HUTTER

and extended his hand to his beautiful companion who stood by attentively.

"Would you get that love? Take my hand."

She took his hand without replying and rose gracefully. Sweeping past him with a whisper of silk, she went to the elevator cage and placed her palm on the access-permission plate. The machinery acknowledged her palm-print code with a soft murmur and the floor indicator showed that the elevator was starting up. It would take nearly a minute to ascend the two hundred floors to the penthouse.

Menlar placed his palm at his throat as he watched the floor indicators' soft lights. He had noticed a slight distortion in his speech a moment before and wondered whether the speech synthesizer that made up for his birth-defective vocal cords was malfunctioning. He thought of going to his bedroom for the spare, but he dismissed the idea because he wanted to be present when the elevator doors opened. It would be the playful thing to do.

"Smile at our visitor when she steps out of the elevator," he said to his beautiful companion. "Hold out your hand and wish her a good evening."

The women regarded him for a second with bright emerald eyes and then turned silently toward the ornate mosaic of the elevator doors. The floor indicator lit its last light. The guest had arrived. The doors hissed open and Margaret Lewis stepped into the room. Menlar's companion held out her hand to the new arrival. "Good evening," she said.

Margret reached out for the offered hand, but she turned toward Menlar as if to speak to him. In that brief moment her eyes adjusted to the subdued light of the penthouse alcove and she saw she was shaking hands with herself. She pulled back her hand as if it had been burned. Stepping backward, she found herself against the elevator doors. Menlar heard her quick intake of breath and laughed. Margret stared at the android; the android stared back.

Regaining her composure, she turned to her host, her eyes narrowed. "What the hell is this? Alvin? Another sick game?"

"Why Margret, Menlar jumped. That's no way to speak to your employer."

"Ex-employer," she hissed.

He took her arm. "Yes, well, that's one of the matters I called you here to discuss your resignation."

She pulled her arm away. "So this is one of your jokes. I should have known you were lying when you called to say Harris was in

some kind of trouble. I'm leaving." She turned and started toward the elevator.

"Stop her!" Menlar ordered the android.

Faster than a human could have moved the automaton's arm shot out to bar the way. Margret threw herself against it. She was a strong woman, but the arm that blocked her exit might have been stone. Menlar thought the sight of Margret trying to get past Mar gret was worth the high price of her new toy.

"I'd say you is beside yourself, sweet heart," he chuckled.

Seeing escape was hopeless, the woman turned to face him again.

"I won't get away with this," she spat, her voice burning with anger.

"Get away with what?" Menlar replied softly. "You're free to leave. I just thought you might be interested to know what's in store for your lover."

Margret froze.

"Let her pass," he ordered the android whose arm still paralleled the floor. The arm lowered. Menlar shook his head. "She's beautiful, but so lifeless. No real intelligence. Not like you, Margret."

Margret stared at him, unmoving.

"What are you going?" he said.

"What have you done?" she asked, ignoring his question, an edge of panic in her voice. "Where's Harris?"

"Would you like to come in and talk about it?" Menlar inquired, smiling. "We can have a drink for old times' sake."

Her shoulders drooped. The life seemed to go out of her. Menlar swept his arm toward the living room in an expansive gesture of hospitality. She followed him in numbly.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" she whispered.

"Because the thought of you alone is a tragic one," Menlar replied.

"I was always alone with you," she shot back, standing stiffly as he seated himself in a nearby sofa chair.

"And I thought you cared for me once," he said in a voice filled with exaggerated hurt.

"What have you done to Harris?" she demanded.

"He's one of my best engineers. Why should I do anything to him?"

"But you said—"

"I didn't say," I asked. I asked you if you wanted to know what's in store for him."

Menlar watched the play of emotions on her face: indecision, fear for her lover, anger. It was a cool anger. Menlar liked that he had always appreciated her control.

"I hate you," she said flatly.

"I don't hold that against you. Many people do."

"You can't play any more games with me. I'm leaving. Harris is leaving. There are plenty of positions for good engineers."

"With good work records," he said smoothly.

"Try to blackmail us. That would be just like a recommendation to some of your competitors."

"Perhaps true. My competitors do want honest people though."

"What do you mean?"
"Simply that your lover, Harris, had padded his research-and-development account rather thickly."

"Youbastard! You wouldn't dare.
I can make it appear that he's stolen quite a lot from me."

"You'll never manage a frame-up like that."

"I have proof in my safe," Menlar said, pointing to an ornate wooden cube. "Invoices, receipts, that sort of thing."

"You're a monster."
"I'm a player. And I keep what I've won. You, in this case."

"What do you want?"
"I want you at work bright and early every day and here afterwards every night... until I say otherwise."

"What about Harris?"
"He can do as he pleases. Ifs you I want. You can't intimidate him."

"You misunderstand me. Margret Menlar stood up. "I'm not trying to intimidate anyone. I've simply made a move. You may reply to it in any way you choose."

Margret's eyes flicked to the camouflaged safe, then back to Menlar. He caught the furtive movement.

The safe is durex, ten centimeters thick with a self-powered tamper alarm balanced straight to police central. It's sealed to the floor and palm-keyed to one person only. The alarm will sound at anyone else's attempt. So think before you act, Margret.

Margret's hand moved smoothly into the pocket of her business suit. Menlar smiled. He knew what she was reaching for; he had given it to her.

"Belonyou try to coerce me with that gigantic little weapon you carry, I think you should know that it isn't my palm that keys the safe."

Her hand came out of her pocket empty. "What do you mean?"

"He shrugged. "I mean only someone very close to me can open that safe. Get

that person to open it and you will win whatever is inside of it.

"You have other faked records hidden somewhere."

He shook his head.

"You'd make up others."

"Ah no. Scout's honor. This is my only play against Hanna."

Does that mean there is one against me?"

Menlar liked her quickness. It made for a good game.

Just something in reserve. He handed her a holograph viewer. "Here's a hol you may have missed. You never much liked the blue scene."

Margret looked through the eyepiece for a few seconds, gasped, and flung the viewer at Menlar who sidestepped adroitly.

"Where did you get that frith? I've never done one."

"What's the matter? Not for public consumption?" He grinned. "The master is in the sale."

She stared at him speechlessly, hate in her eyes.

It's a little something your twin participated in. He swung his hand toward the android standing silent and beautiful beside the elevator. She even dances as well as you. He beckoned to the android and opened his mouth. No sound came out. He tapped the jeweled disk of the speech synthesizer at his throat. Technical difficulties, he chuckled distantly. Come here, he ordered the android, which silently approached.

Menlar keyed a waltz on the penthouse's sound system.

Will you have the first dance? He bowed to Margret.

Go to hell!

Then perhaps the second. He smiled at the android as it joined him. Waltz with me, he ordered the machine. Margret has something to decide.

The man and the machine were soon gliding around the polished wood floor before the tall windows that formed one wall of the penthouse. It was a Cinderella scene: the gallant handsome prince and his breathtakingly beautiful love dancing in a magic ballroom high above the lights of the city. Margret ignored both of them, watching with icy eyes.

You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you? Menlar sang out over the music as he and the counterpart Margret swept by in Viennese time. But your Hanna would be blamed. The music carried them to the far-

corner of the spacious room. Embrace me, love, he cried, and the android put its arms tightly around him. You see, he shouted as a great swell of music swept them past Margret again, your loyal twin would never let me go.

His voice was distorted by the faulty synthesizer. It had a devilish, wavering ring. Margret turned her back on the scene. Menlar watched her as he whirled across the floor in the android's embrace. The waltz merged into another and still she kept her back to him and his treacherous partner. He knew at that moment he had won. To be sure, he'd have to be on his guard forever after. But what was the game without excitement? As that distressing thought crossed his mind, Margret turned to look at him. You win!, she shouted over the music. You win, damn you!

Menlar opened his mouth to say, Of course, but nothing came out. He caught a puzzled look on Margret's face as he and the android swept by her without missing a beat.

You win, I said, she screamed out. Stop that obscene dancing!

Menlar opened his mouth to command the android to stop and release him, but nothing came out. Damn synthesizer, he thought trying to get his hand to his throat to tap the disk. But the android's embrace held him too closely. A stab of fear shot through him as the dance went on. He gave a mighty wrench of his body, the dance barely faltered. A new waltz merged with the fading of the old one. The music, he silently mouthed to Margret, you must stop the music.

He saw her step toward the sound-system controls. Her hand hesitated over them. Then her eyes locked with his, and she suddenly pulled her hand away. Instead of working the controls, she angled toward the dancers, matching the motion of the waltz.

Her arm shot out, and he felt her fingers around the disk at his throat. With a mighty jerk, she savagely ripped the synthesizer from his neck.

The waltz whirled him around, and he lost sight of her momentarily. When the android swung him back, he saw she had opened the wooden cabinet enclosing the safe. The dull black dulcet surface had no cage, no visible hinges, only the gray square of the palm-key plate. Margret stood in front of the safe. She held the powerful laser steadily in both her hands.

Feel it, Menlar thought as the android

swung him breathlessly around. It'll bring the police.

But she lowered the weapon and stood through a whole waltz, then another, then another. Menlar's legs were starting to cramp. A haze of burning sweat filled his eyes. Feel it, he thought desperately. Are it here it is.

The android swung him to the far end of the room. He tripped and the automaton's foot crushed down indifferently on his. He felt his bones snap, and red pain flashed behind his eyes. They danced closer to Margret. She had put the laser away and was very close to the safe, her palm held out tentatively.

She can't have guessed who it opens for he thought. He injured foot tripped him up, and the beautiful machine trod on it. A spasm of nausea hit him with the pain, and he felt vomit rising in his throat. Choking it down, he swung around just in time to see Margret's palm press firmly against the key plate of the safe. The door clicked open. He glanced her carefully examining the contents, putting them in her handbag. Then he was yanked around again and waltzed toward the glass wall. The lights of the city whirled dizzily below. The music played on.

He began to beat at the android, pounding his fists into the resilient plastic with pounding and pounding until his hands were bruised and bleeding from impacting the crusty skeleton beneath the almost-human skin. He tried to let himself fall into the encircling arms to rest. But his smashed foot was pummeled again, and he pulled himself up with his bloody hands and tried desperately to keep time with the interminable waltz.

Through a haze of pain he saw that Margret was standing over the music controls, watching him and her twin intently. She can't go through with it, he thought.

As her hand went down to the controls, he was pulled smoothly around by the robot. He felt a surge of strength in the thought of mission and the thought of rematch. No one beats me twice, he thought. Swinging around, he saw that Margret was still at the music controls. Stupid for an engineer, he thought in pain, can't even work it. The green button, he mouthed soundlessly. Then he was dragged again across the room.

When the android turned him once more in the dance, he saw that Margret was gone. When he heard the music speeding up, he opened his mouth and tried to scream.

GOD IS AN IRON

She had lived a life of unending pain, so it was only natural that her method of committing suicide would be through pleasure.

BY SPIDER ROBINSON

I smelled her before I saw her. Even so, the first sight of her was shocking.

She was sitting in a tan plastic-surfaced armchair, the kind where the front comes up as the back goes down. It was back as far as it would go. It was placed beside the large living room window whose curtains were drawn. A plastic black table next to it held a digital clock a dozen unopened packages of Peter Jackson cigarettes, a glass jar full of pieces of matches, an empty ashtray, a full vial of cocaine, and a lamp with a bulb of at least 150 watts. It illuminated her with brutal clarity.

She was naked. Her skin was the color of vanilla pudding. Her hair was in rats; her nails unpainted and intended some overlong and some broken. There was dust on her. She sat in a gassy sludge of feces and urine. Gried vomit was caked on her chin and between her breasts and down her ribs to the chair.

These were only part of what I had smelled. The predominant odor was of fresh-baked bread. It is the smell of a person who is starving to death. The combined effluvia had prepared me to find a senior citizen paralyzed by a stroke or some such crisis.

I judged her to be about twenty-five years old.

I moved to where she could see me and she did not see me. That was probably just as well, because I had just seen the two most horrible things. The first was the smile. She said that when the bomb went off at Hiroshima, some poor people's shadows were baked onto walls by it. I think that smile got baked on the surface of my brain in much the same way. I don't want to talk about that smile.

The second most horrible thing was the one that explained all the rest. From

where I now stood I could see a triple socket in the wall beneath the window into it were plugged the lamp, the clock, and her.

I knew about wireheading, of course — I had lost a couple of acquaintances and one friend to the juice. But I had never seen a wirehead. It is by definition a solitary vice, and the public usually gets to see a skeletoed figure being carted out to the wagon.

The transformer lay on the floor beside the chair where it had been dropped. The switch was on and the timer had been jiggled so that instead of providing one five- or ten- or fifteen-second jolt per hour, it allowed continuous flow. That timer is required by law on all juice rigs sold, and you need special tools to defeat it. Say a nail file. The input cord was long, tellin' crazy coils from the wall socket. The output cord disappeared beneath the chair, but I knew where it ended. It ended in the tangled snarl of her hair, at the crown of her head, ended in a miniplug. The plug was snapped into a jack surgically implanted in her skull, and from the jack tiny wires snaked their way through the wet jello to the hypothalamus, to the specific place in the medial forebrain bundle where the major pleasure center of her brain was located. She had set them in total transcendental ecstasy for at least five days.

I moved, finally, I moved closer, which surprised me. She saw me now, and I'm positive the smile became a bit wider. I was marvelous. I was captivating. I was her perfect lover. I could not look at the smile, a small plastic tube ran from one corner of the smile and my eyes followed it gratefully. It was held in place by small bits of surgical tape at her jaw neck and shoulder and from there it ran in a lazy

curve to the big fifty-liter water cooler bottle on the floor. She had plainly meant her suicide to last. She had arranged to die of hunger rather than thirst, which would have been quicker. She could take a drink when she happened to think of it and take longer, what the hell.

My intention must have showed on my face, and I think she even understood it — the smile began to fade. That decided me. I moved before she could force her neglected body to react, whipped the plug out of the wall and stepped back warily.

Her body did not go rigid as if galvanized, it had already been so for many days. What it did was the exact opposite, and the effect was just as striking. She seemed to shrink. Her eyes slammed shut. She slumped. Well? I thought. If it be a long day and night before she can move a voluntary muscle again, and then sometime before I know she had left the chair breaking my nose with the heel of one fist and bouncing the other off the side of my head. We conned off each other and I managed to keep on my feet. She whined and grabbed the lamp. Its cord was stapled to the floor and would not yield, so she set her feet and yanked and it snapped off clean at the base. In near total dark she raised the lamp on high and came to me, and I lunged inside the arc of her swing and punched her in the solar plexus. She said guff! and went down.

I staggered to a couch and sat down and felt my nose and fainted.

I don't think I was out very long. The blood tasted fresh. I woke with a sense of terrible urgency. It took me a while to work out why. When someone has been simultaneously starved and unseeingly

PAINTING BY MARSHALL ARISMAN



stimulated for days on end. It is not the best idea in the world to distract that someone's respiratory center. I latched to my feet.

It was not completely dark. There was a moon somewhere out there. She lay on her back, arms at her sides, perfectly relaxed. Her ribs rose and fell in great slow swells. A pulse showed strongly at her throat. As I knelt beside her, she began to snore deeply and rhythmically.

I had time for second thoughts now. It seemed incredulous that my impulsive action had not killed her. Perhaps that had been my subconscious intent. Five days of waterheading alone should have killed her, let alone cold turkey.

I probed in the tangle of hair, found the empty jock. The hair around it was dry. If she hadn't torn the skin in yanking herself loose, it was unlikely that she had sustained any more serious damage within. I continued probing, found no soft places on the skull. Her forehead felt cool and sticky to my hand. The fecal smell was overpowering, the baking bread now, sourly fresh.

There was no pain in my nose yet, but it felt immense and pulsing. I did not want to touch it or to think about it. My shirt was soaked with blood. I tossed it into a corner. It took everything I had to lift her. She was unreasonably heavy and I have carried drunks and corpses. There was a half off the living room and all halls lead to a bathroom. I headed that way in a clumsy staggering trot and just as I reached the deeper darkness with my pulse at its maximum my nose woke up and began screaming. I nearly dropped her then and clamped my hands to my face. The temptation was overwhelming. Instead I whimpered like a dog and kept going. Childhood feeling: runny noses you can ignore. At each door I came to I teetered on one leg and cracked it open and the third one gave the right small-room account-like echo. The light switch was where they almost always are. I rubbed it with my shoulder and the room flooded with light.

Large aquamarine tub. Styrofoam recliner pillow at the head end, non-slip bottom. Aquamarine sink with ornate handles cluttered with toiletries and cigarette butts and broken shards of mirror from the medicine cabinet above. Aquamarine commode. Lid up and seat down. Open throw rug expensive. Scale weighed back in a corner. I made a massive effort and managed to set her reasonably gently in the tub. I adjusted her head. Tied the chinstrap. I held both feet away from the faucet until I had the

water adjusted and then left, with one hand on my nose and the other beating against my hip, in search of her liquid.

There was plenty to choose from. I found some Metaxa in the kitchen. I took great care not to bring it near my nose, sneaking it up on my mouth from below. It tasted like burning lighter fluid and made sweat spring out on my forehead. I found a roll of paper towels and on my way back to the bathroom I used a great wad of them to swallow most of the sludge off the chair and rug. There was a growing pool of water seeping from the plastic tube, and I stopped that. When I got back to the bathroom the water was slipping over her bloated belly and horrible tendrils were weaving up from beneath her. I took three rinses before I was satisfied with the body. I found a hose and spray under the sink that mashed with the tub's faucet, and that made the hair easy.

I had to dry her there in the tub. There was only one towel, none too clean. I found a first-aid spray that incorporated a good topical anesthetic, and I put it on the sores on her back and butt. I had located her bathroom on the way to the Mexicali. Wet hair slapped my arms as I carried her there. She seemed even heavier as though she had become waterlogged. I eased the door shut behind me and tried the light-switch trick again, and it worked there. I moved forward into a footlocker and lost her and went down amid multiple crashes, putting all my attention into guarding my nose. She made no sound at all, not even a grunt.

The light switch turned out to be a pull chain over the bed. She was on her side still breathing slow and deep. I wanted to punt her up onto the bed. My nose was a blizzard of pain. I nearly couldn't lift her the third time. I was moaning with frustration by the time I had her on her left side on the long side mattress. It was a big brass four-poster bed with satin sheets and pillow cases all dirty. The blankets were shoved to the bottom. I checked her skull and pulse again, peeled up each eyelid and found uniform pupils. Her forehead and cheek still felt cool, so I covered her. Then I kicked the footlocker clear into the corner, turned out the light and left her snoring.

Her vital papers and documents were in her study, locked in a strongbox on the closet shelf. It was an expensive box, quite sturdy and proof against anything short of nuclear explosion. It had a combination lock with all of twenty seven possible combinations. It was stuffed with papers. I laid

her life out on her desk like a losing hand of solitaire and studied it with a growing frustration.

Her name was Karen Shavitski and she used the name Karyn Shaw which I thought phony. She was twenty two. Divorced her parents at fourteen, uncontested no-fault. Since then she had been, at various times, waitress, secretary to a lamp salesman, painter, free-lance typist, motorcycle mechanic, library assistant and unlicensed masseuse. The most recent paycheck stub was from The Hard Corps, a massage parlor with a cult-like reputation. It was dated eight months ago. Her bank balance combined with paraphernalia I'd found in the closet to tell me that she was currently self-employed as a footlogger, a cocaine dealer. The richness of the apartment and furnishings told me that she was a foolish chis, even if the narcs missed her very shortly the IRS was going to come down on her like a ton of bricks. Perhaps subconsciously she had not expected to be around.

Nothing there. I kept digging. She had attended community college for one semester as an art major and dropped out failing. She had defaulted on a loan three years ago. She had wreaked a car once and been shafted by her insurance company Trus. Only one major trauma in recent years. A year and a half ago she had contracted out as host mother to a couple named Lombard-Smyth. It was a pretty good fee—she had good hips and the right rare blood type—but six months into the pregnancy they had caught her using tobacco and canceled the contract. She fought, but they had photographs. And better lawyers, naturally. She had to repay the advance, and pay for the abortion, of course, and got sacked for court costs besides.

I didn't make sense. To show clean lungs at the physical she had to have been off cigarettes for at least three to six months. Why backslide with so much at stake? Like the minor traumas, it felt more like an effect than a cause. Self-destructive behavior. I kept looking.

Near the bottom I found something that looked promising. Both her parents had been killed in a car smash when she was eighteen. Their obituary was paper-clipped to her father's will. It was one of the most extraordinary documents I've ever read. I could understand an angry father cutting off his only daughter without a dime. But what he had done was worse. Much worse. Dammit. I didn't work either. So there was

cides don't wait four years. And they don't use such a garish method either. It divulges the tragedy. I decided it had to be either a very big and dangerous coke deal gone bad, or a very religion lover. No not a coke deal. They didn't have lather in her own apartment to die the way she wanted to. It could not be murder. Even the most unscrupulous wire surgeon needs an awake, consenting subject to place the wire correctly.

A lover then I was relieved, pleased with my sagacity, and irritated as hell. I didn't know why. I chalked it up to my nose. It felt as though a large shark with rubber teeth was rhythmically biting it as hard as he could. I shoveled the papers back into the box, locked and replaced it, and went to the bathroom.

Her medicine cabinet would have impressed a pharmacist. She had lots of allergies. It took me five minutes to find aspirin. I took four. I picked the largest shard of mirror out of the sink, propped it on the aspirin tank, and sat down backward on the toilet. My nose was visibly displaced to the right, and the swelling was just hitting its stride. There was a box of Kleenex on the floor. I ripped it apart, took out all the tissues, and stuffed them into my mouth. Then I grabbed my nose with my right hand and tugged it out and to the left, flushing the toilet simultaneously with my left hand. The flushing coincided with the scream, and my front teeth met through the Kleenex. When I could see again, the nose looked straight and my breathing was unimpaired. I gingerly washed my face, and then hands, and left. A moment later I returned, something had caught my eye. It was the glass-and-toothbrush holder. There was only one toothbrush in it. I looked through the medicine chest again and noticed this time that there was no shaving cream, no razor either manual or electric, no feminine toiletries of any kind. All the prescriptions were in her name and seemed perfectly legitimate.

I went thoughtfully to the kitchen, mixed myself a Preacher's Downfall by moonlight and took it to her bedroom. The bedside clock said five. I lit a match, moved the footlocker in front of an armchair sal down and put my feet up. I sipped my drink and listened to her snore and watched her breathe in the feeble light of the clock. I decided to run through all the possibilities and as I was formulating the first one, day-light smacked me hard in the nose.

My hands went up reflexively, and I poured my drink on my head and hurt my

nose more. I woke up hard in the best of times. She was still snoring. I nearly threw the empty glass at her.

It was just past noon now, light came strongly through the heavy curtains, illuminating so much mess and disorder that I could not decide whether she had trashed her bedroom herself or it had been tossed by a pro. I finally settled on the former. The armchair I slept on was intact. Or had the pro found what he wanted before he'd gotten that far?

I gave it up and went to make myself breakfast.

I took me an hour or two to clean up and aer out the living room. The cord and transformer went down the ouphole, along with most of the perished items from the fridge. The clothes took three full cycles for each load; a couple of hours all told. I passed the time vacuuming and dusting and snoozing, learning nothing more of significance. I was making up a shopping list about fifteen minutes later when I heard her moan. I reached her bedroom door in seconds, walked in the doorway with both hands in sight, and said slowly and clearly, "My name is Joseph Templeton. Karen, I am a friend. You are all right now."

Her eyes were those of a small tormented animal.

Please don't try to get up. Your muscles won't work properly and you may hurt yourself."

No answer.

Karen, are you hungry?

Your voice is ugly," she said despairingly, and her own voice was hoarse.

She was clearly incapable of movement. I told her I would be right back and went to the kitchen. I made up a tray of clear strong broth, unbuttered toast, tea with too much sugar, and Saltine crackers. She was staring at the ceiling when I got back. I put the tray down, lied her, and made a black rest of picnics.

"I want a drink."

"After you eat," I said agreeably.

Who are you?"

Mother Templeton Est.

The soup, maybe. Not the toast. She got about half of it down, accepted some tea. I didn't want to overfill her. My drink.

See thing. I took the tray back to the kitchen. I finished my shopping list, put away the last of the dishes, and put a frozen steak into the oven for my lunch. When I got back she was fast asleep.

Emaciation was near total—except for breasts and bloated belly she was all bone

and fault skin. Her pulse was steady. At her best she would not have been very attractive by conventional standards. Passable. Too much weight, not enough neck, upper legs, bit too thick for the rest of her. It's hard to evaluate a starved and unconscious face, but her jaw was a bit too square, her nose a trifle hooked, her blue eyes just the least little bit too far apart. Animated, the face might have been beautiful—any set of features can support beauty—but even a superb makeup job could not have made her pretty. There was an old bruise on her chin. Her hair was sandy blond, long and thin. It hadched in snarls that would take an hour to comb out. Her breasts were magnificent, and that saddened me. In this woman whose breasts are her best feature is in for a rough time.

I was putting together a picture of a life that would have depressed anyone with the sensitivity of a rhino. Back when I had first seen her when her features were alive she had looked sensitive. Or had that been a trick of the juice? Impossible to say now.

But damn it all to hell. I could find nothing to really explain the socket in her skull. You can hear worse life stories in any bar on any street corner. I was prepared to match her scar for scar myself. Whiteheads are usually addictive personalities who decide at last to skip the small shit. There were no tracks on her anywhere, nonfatal damage, no sign that she used any of the coke she sold. Her work history: print and fragmented as it was, was too steady for any kind of serious habit. She had undeniably been hitting the sauce hard lately, but only lately. Tobacco seemed to be her only serious addiction.

That left the hypothetical bastard lover I worried about for a while to see if I could make it fit. Assume a really creatively sadistic son of a bitch had gutted her like a hen for the pure fun of it. You can't do that to someone as a visitor or even a guest, you have to live with them. So he did a world-class job of chopping a lady who by her history is a tough little cookie. And when he had broken her he vanished. Leaving not even so much as empty space in drawers, closets, or medicine chest. Unlikely. So perhaps after he was gone she scrubbed all traces of him out of the apartment—and then discovered that there is only one really good way to scrub memories. No. I couldn't picture such a sloppy housekeeper being so efficient.

Then I thought of my earlier feeling that the bedroom might have been tossed by a pro, and my blood turned to ice water. Sup-

pose she wasn't a sloppy housekeeper? The jolly sacerdote returns unexpectedly for one last nibble. And finds her in the living room, just as I did. And leaves her there.

After five minutes I thought I realized. That didn't pause either. True, this luxury co-op did inexplicably lack security cameras in the halls—but for that very reason its rich tenants would be sure to take notice of comings and goings. (I've had lived here for any time at all, his spoor was too diffuse to erase—so he would not have tried.) Be sides, a monster of that unique and rare kind thrives on the compulsion of innocence. Karen was simply not toothsome enough.

At that point I went to the bathroom and that settled it. When I lifted the seat to ultimate, I found written on the underside with felt-tip pen: "It's so nice to have a man around the house!" The handwriting was hers. She had lived alone.

I was relieved, because I hadn't relished thinking about my hypothetical monster or the necessity of tracking and killing him. But I was instead as hell again.

I wanted to understand.

For something to do, I took my steak and a mug of coffee to the study and heated up her terms. I tried all the typical access codes: her birthdate and her name in numbers and such, but none of them would unlock it. Then on a hunch I tried the date of her parents' deaths and that did it. I ordered the groceries she needed, instructed the lobby door to accept delivery, and tried everything I could think of to get a diary or a journal out of the damned thing without success. So I punched up the public library and asked the catalog for *Bosomkari*, on which was heading. It referred me to brainward, automatism of. I skipped over the history from discovery by Olida and others in 1866 to emergence as a social problem in the late 60s when surgery got simple declined the offered diagrams, graphs, and technical specs; finally found a brief section on motivations.

There was indeed one type of typical user I had overlooked. The terminally ill.

Could that really be it? At her age? I went to the bathroom and checked the prescription. Nothing for heavy pain, nothing indicating anything more serious than allergies. Back before telephones had cameras, I might have come up something out of her personal physician but it would have been a shabby thing even then. There was no way to test the hypothesis.

It was possible, even plausible—but it just wasn't likely enough to satisfy the thing.

Inside me that demanded an explanation. I dialed a game of four-wall squash, and made sure the computer would let me win. I was almost enjoying myself when she screamed.

It wasn't much of a scream: her throat was shot. But it fetched me at once. I saw the problem as I cleared the door. The topical anesthetic had worn off the large bed-scar on her back and buttocks, and the pain had woken her. Now that I thought about it, it should have happened earlier: that spray was only supposed to be good for a few hours. I decided that her pleasure-pain system was weakened by overload.

The sores were bad: she would have scars. I resprayed them, and her moans stopped nearly at once. I could devise no means of securing her on her belly that would not be nightmare-inducing, and decided it was unnecessary. I thought she was but again and started to leave. Her voice muffled by pillows stopped me in my tracks.

"I don't know you. Maybe you're not even real. I can tell you."

"Save your energy, Karen. You—"

"Shut up. You wanted the karma, and now you got it."

I shut up.

Her voice was flat, dead. "All my friends were dating at twelve. He made me wait until fourteen," said. I couldn't be trusted. Tommy came to take me to the dance, and he gave Tommy a hard time. I was so embarrassed. The dance was nice for a couple of hours. Then Tommy started chasing after Jo Tompkins. He just left me and went off with her. I went in the ladies' room and cried for a long time. A couple of girls got the story out of me, and one of them had a bottle of vodka in her purse. I never drank before. When I started tearing up cars in the parking lot, one of the girls got hold of Tommy. She gave him shit and made them take me home. I don't remember if I found out later."

Her throat gave out and I got water. She accepted it without meeting my eyes. turned her face away and continued.

Tommy got me in the door somehow. I was out cold by then. He must have been too scared to try and get me upstairs. He left me on the couch and my underpants on the rug and went home. The next thing I knew I was on the floor and my face hurt. He was standing over me. Whoore. he said. I got up and tried to explain and he hit me a couple of times. I ran for the door, but he hit me hard in the back. I went into the stairs and

banged my head real hard.

Feeling began to come into her voice for the first time. The feeling was fear. I closed my eyes.

"When I woke up, it was day. Mama must have bandaged my head and put me to bed. My head hurt a lot. When I came out of the bathroom, I heard him call me. He and Mama were in bed. He started in on me. He wouldn't let me talk, and kept getting madder and madder. Finally I hollered back at him. He got up off the bed and started hitting me again. My robe came off. He kept hitting me in the belly and his and his hands were like hammers. But, he kept saying, Whoore. I thought he was going to kill me, so I grabbed one arm and bit. He roared like a dragon and threw me across the room onto the bed. Mama jumped up. Then he pulled down his underpants and it was big and purple. I screamed and screamed and tore at his back and Mama just stood there. Her eyes were big and round just like in cartoons. I screamed and screamed and—

She broke off short and her shoulders knotted. When she continued, her voice was stone dead again. I woke up in my own bed again. I took a real long shower and went downstairs. Mama was making pancakes. I sat down and she gave me one and I ate it, and then I threw it up right there on the table and ran out the door. She never said a word, never called me back. After school that day I found a Sanctuary and started the divorce proceedings. I never saw either of them again. I never told this to anybody before.

The pause was so long I thought she had fallen asleep. Since that time I've tried it with men and women and boys and girls, in the dark and in the desert sun, with people I cared for and people I didn't give a damn about, and I have never understood the pleasure in it. The best it's ever been for me is not uncomfortable. God, how I've wondered... now I know. She was starting to drift. Only thing my whole life turned out better n cracked up to be. Shit snorled sleepily. Even alone.

I sat there for a long time without moving. My legs trembled when I got up, and my hands trembled while I made supper.

That was the last time she was lucid for nearly forty-eight hours. I plied her with successively stronger soups every time she woke up, and once I got some tea-soap to toast into her. Sometimes she called me by other names, and sometimes she didn't

know I was there, and everything she said was disjointed. I listened to her tapes, watched some of her video, charged some books and games to her computer. I took a lot of her aspirin. And drank surprisingly little of her booze.

It was a time of frustration for me. I still couldn't make it all fit together, still could not quite understand. There was a large piece missing. The animal who sired and raised her had planted the change, of course, and I perceived that it was big enough to blow her apart. But why had it taken eight years to go off? If his death four years ago had not triggered it, what had? I could not leave until I knew. I did not know why not. I prowled her apartment like a caged bear.

Midway through the second day her plumbing started working again. I had to change the sheets. The next morning a noise woke me and I found her on the bathroom floor on her knees in a pool of urine. I got her clean and back to bed, and just as I thought she was going to drift off again she started yelling at me. "Cousin son or a bitch it could have been over! I'll never have the guts again now! How could you do that to your bastards? It was so nice!" She turned violently away from me and curled up. I had to make a hard choice then, and I gambled on what I knew of loneliness and sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair as gently and impersonally as I knew how. It was a good guess. She began to cry in great rattling heaves first, then the steady wail of total heartbreak. I had been praying for this and did not begrudge the strength it cost her.

She cried for so long that every muscle in my body ached from sitting still by the time she fell off the edge into sleep. She never let me get up, stiff and clumsy as I was. There was something different about her sleeping face now. It was not slack but relaxed. I limped out in the closest thing to peace I had felt since I arrived, and as I was passing the living room on the way to the liquor I heard the phone.

Silently I looked over the caller. The picture was underexposed and snowy. It was a pay phone. He looked like an immigrant construction worker, massive and florid and neckless almost brash. And at the moment, under great stress. He was crushing a hat in his hands.

"Sharon, don't hang up," he was saying. "I gotta find out what this is all about."

Nothing could have made me hang up.

Sharon? Sharon? I know you're there. Terry says you are if there. She says a she

called you every day for a week and banged on your door a few times. But I know you're there now anyway. I walked past your place an hour ago and I seen your bathroom light go on and off. Sharon, will you please tell me what the hell is going on? Are you listening to me? I know you're listening to me. Look, you gotta understand. I thought it was all set, ass? I mean I thought it was set. Arranged. I put it to Terry, cause she's my regular and she says not me lover, but I know a gal. Look, was she lying to me or what? She told me for another bill you play them kind of games.

Regular two-hundred-dollar bank deposits plus a cardboard box full of sealed vials bags and milk powder makes her a coke dealer, right? Travia McGee? Don't be misled by the fact that the box was shoved in a corner, sealed with tape, and covered with dust. After all, the only other illicit profession that pays regular sums at regular intervals is hookers and two hundred dollars is too much for square-jawed hook-nosed, wide-eyed little Karen breasts or no breasts.

For a glaciator-varietà hooker.

"Dammit," she told me she called you and set it up, she gave me your apartment number. He shook his head violently. "I can't make sense of this. Dammit, she couldn't be lying to me. I don't figure. You let me in didn't even fum the camera on first, it was all arranged. Then you screamed and I done like we arranged and I thought you was maybe overdone it a bit, but Terry said you was a temtic actress. I was real careful not to really hurt you. I know I was. Then I put on my pants and I impuding the envelope on the dresser and you bust that chair on me and come at me with that knife and I hadda bust you one. It just don't make no sense, will you goddamnit say something to me? I'm twisted up inside going on two weeks now. I can't even eat."

I went to shut off the phone and my hand was shaking so bad I missed spinning the volume knob to minimum. Sharon, you gotta believe me, he howled from far, far away. I'm into rape fantasy. I'm not into tape! And then I had found the right switch and he was gone.

I got up very slowly and toddled off to the liquor cabinet and I stood in front of it taking pulls from different bottles at random until I could no longer see his face. His ears were bathed, half-shamed face hanging before me.

Because his hair was thin sandy blond and his jaw was a bit too square, and his nose was a trifle hooked, and his blue eyes

were just the least little bit too far apart. They say everyone has a double some where. And hate is such a witty little motherfucker isn't he?

I don't remember how I got to bed.

I woke later that night with the feeling that I would have to bang my head on the floor a couple of times to get my heart started again. I was on my makeshift mass of pillows and blankets beside her bed, and when I finally peeled my eyes open she was sitting up in bed, staring at me. She had fixed her hair somehow, and her nails were trimmed. We looked at each other for a long moment. Her color was returning somewhat, and the edge was off her bones.

What did Jo Ann say when you told her?

I said nothing.

Come on Jo Ann's got the only other key to this place, and she wouldn't give it to you if you weren't a friend. So what did she say?

I got painfully up out of the tangle and walked to the window. A phallic church steeple rose above the low-sun, a couple of blocks away.

God is an iron, I said. Did you know that?

I turned to look at her and she was staring. She laughed experimentally, stopped when I failed to drink. And I'm a pair of pants with a hole scorched through the ass?

If a person who indulges in gluttony is a glutton and a person who commits adultery is a felon, then God is an iron. Or else He's the clubbed dogger that ever lived.

Of thousands possible snap reactions she picked the most fumbling and hence most irritating. She kept silent, kept looking at me, and thought about what I had said. At last she said, I agree. What particular design fuckup did you have in mind?

The one that nearly left you dead in a pile of your own shit. I said harshly. Everybody talks about the new menace, wireheading. fifth most common cause of death in only a decade. Wireheading's not new—it's just a technical refinement.

I don't follow.

Are you familiar with the old cliché: Everything I like in the world is either illegal, immoral, or fattening?

Sure.

Didn't that ever strike you as damned odd? What's the most nutritionally useless and physiologically dangerous food substance in the world? Sugar. And it seems to be beyond the power of the human nervous

system to resist it. They put it in virtually all the processed food there is, which is next to all the food there is, because nobody can resist it. And so we poison ourselves and whup our dispositions and rot our teeth isn't that odd? There is a primitive programming in our skulls that rewards us literally overwhelmingly every time we do something damned silly. Like smoke a poison or eat or drink or snort or shoot a person. Or overeat good foods. Or engage in complicated sexual behavior without preclusive intent, which if it were not for the pleasure would be pointless and insane. And which when pursued for the pleasure alone quickly becomes pointless and insane any way. A suicidal brain-reward system is built into us.

But the reward system is for survival.

So how the hell did ours get wired up so that survival-threatening behavior gets rewarded best of all? Even the pro-survival pleasure stimulus is wired so that a dangerous overload produces the maximum pleasure. On a purely biological level Man is programmed to strive hugely for more than he needs, more than he can profitably use.

The entire ocean I saw up as gleaming in other animals. Even surrounded by plenty a stupid animal has to work hard simply to meet his needs. But add intelligence and everything goes to hell. Man is capable of outgrowing any ecological niche you put him in—he survives at all because he is the animal that moves. Given half a chance, he tells himself of course.

My knees were trembling so badly I had to sit down. I felt hysterical and somehow longer than myself, and I knew I was talking much too fast. She had nothing whatever to say with voice, face, or body.

Given Man's gregarious nature, I went on fingering my aching nose. It's obvious that kindness is more pro-survival than cruelty, but which feels better? Which provides more pleasure? Poll any hundred people at random and you'll find at least twenty or thirty who know all there is to know about psychological torture and psychic castration—and maybe two that know how to give a terrific back rub. That business of your father taking all his money to the Church and leaving you a hundred dollars, the going rate—that was awful. I can't imagine a way to make you feel as good as that made you feel rotten. That's why sadism and masochism are the last refuge of the sick, the most enduring of the perversions, their顽强性 is—

Maybe the Punitans were right, she

said. "Maybe pleasure is the root of all evil but God's life is bleak without it."

One of my most precious possessions I said, is a button that my friend Sainky John used to hand-paint and sell below cost. He was the only practicing anarchist I ever met. The button reads: go livewires do! A lemming surely feels intense pleasure as he gallops to the sea. His self-destruction is programmed by nature, a part of the very same life force that insisted on being conceived and born in the first place. If it feels good, do it. I laughed, and she finished. So it seems to me that God is either an iron or a colossal jackass. I don't quite know whether to be admiring or contemptuous.

All at once I was out of words, and out of strength. I yanked my gaze away from hers and stared at my knees for a long time. I felt vaguely ashamed, as before one who has thrown a tantrum in a sickroom.

After a time she said: "You talk good on your feet."

I kept looking at my knees. I was an economics teacher for a year once.

"Will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

What was the pleasure in putting me back together again?

I jumped.

Look at me. There. I've got a half-ass idea of what shape I was in when you met me, and I can guess what it's been like since. I don't know I'd have done as much for Jo Ann, and she was my best friend. You don't look like a guy whose favorite kick is sick farts, and you sure as hell don't look like you're so rich you got time on your hands. So what's been your pleasure these last few days?"

"Trying to understand," I snapped. I'm nosy.

And do you understand?

"Yeah, put it together."

So you'll be going now?

Not yet. I said automatically. You're not—

And caught myself.

There's something else besides pleasure," she said. "Another system of reward only I don't think it has much to do with the one I got wired up to my soap here. Not brain-reward. Call it mind-reward. Call it joy—the thing like pleasure that you feel when you've done a good thing or passed up a real tempting chance to do a bad thing. Or when the unfolding of the universe just seems especially apt. Its nowhere near as fizzy and intense as pleasure can be. Believe me. But it's got something going for it.

Something that can make you do without pleasure or even accept a lot of pain to get it.

"That thing you're talking about, that's there, that's true. What's missing us up is the animal nervous system and instincts we inherited. But you said yourself, Man is the animal that outgrows and moves. Ever since the first brain grew a mind we've been trying to outgrow our instincts, grow new ones. By Jesus, we will yet. Evolution works pretty slow, is all. Couple of hundred million years to develop a thinking ape, and you want a smart one in a lousy few hundred thou? That lemming drive is there—but there's another kind of drive, another kind of force that's working against it. One like there wouldn't still be any people and there wouldn't be the words to have this conversation and—

She looked down at herself.

And I wouldn't be here to say them.

"That was just random chance."

She snorted. What're P?

"Well, that's first. I thought. That's Amé."

Since the world is saved, and you've got it under control, I'll just be going along.

I've got a lot of voice when I yell. She ignored it utterly, continued speaking as if nothing had happened. Now I can say that I have sampled the spectrum of the pleasure system at both ends—none and all there is—and I think the rest of my life I will dedicate myself to the middle of the road and see how that works out. Starting with the very weak tea and toast I'm going to ask you to bring me in another ten minutes or so. But as for this other stuff, the joy thing that I would like to begin exploring, in as much intensity as possible. I don't really know a goddamn thing about it, but I understand it has something to do with sharing and caring, and what did you say your name was?

"It doesn't matter!" I yelled.

"All right. What can I do for you?"

Nothing!

What did you come here for?

I was angry enough to be honest. To burglar your fucking apartment!

Her eyes opened wide, and then she slumped back against the pillows and laughed until the tears came, and I tried and could not help myself and laughed too, and we shared laughter for a long time as long as we had shared her tears the night before.

And then straight-faced she said: "You'll have to wait a week or two, you're gonna need help with those stereo speakers. Butter on the toast."

PICTORIAL
NUMBER THREE



PETE
TURNER
PHOTOGRAPHER



PLAINS OF FOREVER

A futuristic trip through the lens of a master photographer

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

Pete Turner's studio is a great white cube with polished wood floors. It is an appropriate place for the highly sophisticated advertising photography for which Turner is famous: tall and thin, weaning demands and boosts. Turner manipulates images on a computer screen. "There are a lot of possible places to begin," but I choose *Bonemerge*. It's a symbol of the road, the way, and reaching the unconsciousness: building something never before imagined. And the road is my symbol for the human journey. Roads go on forever and this is just a road moving straight out to infinity." I notice the shapes to the right of the road, out of scale, ominous. What are they? "Something concrete, but unknowable. They are the mystery—the reason we keep on travelling down the road."





The doublet is what's called a resonance structure stabilized by pressure. I injected a very sticky object inside it. And I used a very intense light source. It's almost coherent light. I put the two objects together and ask myself whether it is too complete. There are unexplained actions in this. It becomes an alien vision, a sort of magic."



Turner is not at ease with words. He is suspicious of them, a maker of images rather than a teller of tales. He shapes his thoughts with long thin fingers, trying to make them palpable, hoping they will fit the wordless matters he has photographed. "And here we have light transparency, that's the basis of consciousness," Turner says, by which coherent light at the core — *plus* us. "We are simultaneously the light source and the thing illuminated. Our lives are spent seeing what there is to be seen by our own light. And what we see, no other species on Earth has ever seen before." Any sentient creature can see the sky, but only man, only a Turner, can see the window in the sky and pass through it, even though it can't there, to the beyond that lies within us. Turner nods. "That's it. We see through ourselves into the universe."

■Transparent bubbles with coherent light at the core — that's who we really are ■



"You've got to switch thinking. It's important to be able to play with these things. This city is really beautiful. It's been rethought and the windows have been removed so they don't reflect any lights. The entire city is upside down in the sky. The image has been manipulated. That side of the building is the entrance. It's been flipped over to create this incredible perspective."



The images symbolize states of mind as well as future activities. Here's the present, and here's what it leads to. It's something the audience may never know: geometric sterility, the possibility of a world entirely divorced from nature. To assume the way these walls move toward the stars, and the nothingness inside them or outside them. The image is even more frightening, because it has no relation to space. But if man were there, he would be an insect, an insignificant insect, and miming the mindless regularity of those perfect walls. "Yes," and this is the final city, perched upon the barren earth, its slab-sided buildings naked to the stars. And there's the final graveyard, where the only monuments to our long history are cones and spheres, signifying nothing.

•it's new, this geometric sterility, the possibility of a world divorced from nature•

•These aliens are real, but indefinable. I think they are what we are going to become.♦

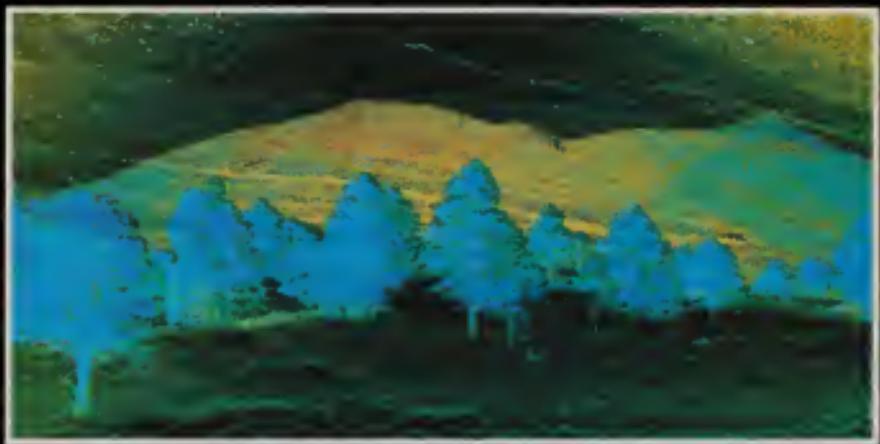
Turner is an optimist; his images are cautionary rather than predictive. When you work with these forms, you have to feel what they mean rather than tell it visually. Here is an ultimate landscape, crystalline in its purity. "What about those shapes above the plain? Those entities coming through the foreground? It's the aliens, of course. They're ambiguous—visually definite, verbally indefinable. And they're more than just aliens. I think they're always in our head stage of development. I think we can escape from the trap we're building for ourselves, escape from our fatal geometry. I think we transform ourselves." Into what? Turner doesn't know since the caterpillar can't imagine the butterfly it will become. The process of transformation can only be hinted at.



"I called it Moon is Moon. I wanted to symbolize what would happen toward the end of the century—apocalypse, just old age, learning older, the moon's orbit decaying. Arthur C. Clarke once wrote that for the human who has walked the face of the earth, there is a star in the universe. The old transforms into the new. It is the end, but also the beginning."

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