

SciFiction Originals

Vol. 1

Edited by Ellen Datlow

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Pat Cadigan and Chris Fowler
FREEING THE ANGELS

He was standing on the sidewalk, idly flexing his brand-new arm while he waited to cross with the rest of the blowfish, when he heard his mother's voice in his mind. Unbidden, unwished-for, apropos of nothing, it came to him: Carry on the way you have been, Danny-boy, you be seein' angels a lot sooner than you want to. Or maybe devils. You sure got some bad in you, boy. Watch it don't catch you out and take you down. When you go, you want to see them angels waiting to take you in.

Danny smiled to himself sourly. Yeah, sure, Momma, thanks for the pointer. He thought of it as typical of everything she'd given him, from the charity-shop clothes and cold junk food all the way down to the little stump and four tiny fingers that grew out of his right shoulder, the legacy of her five years in a fertilizer production factory, now completely covered by a brand-new arm from the Universal Prosthetics Clinic.

Maybe the sudden echo of her voice in his mind had been his simple acknowledgment that she wouldn't have approved. Getting above yourself was one of the many deadly sins on the Momma-meter, along with whining. As in, Stop whining about your goddamn stump, you're lucky that's all it was. I saw some of the things they took outta women I worked with. And if you think you oughta get one of them fancy prosthetics like some jumped-up poster child, you gettin' above yourself, boy. Way above yourself.

The sour smile deepened as the light changed. A desperate bike courier, legs pumping as if he were treading water in a panic to keep from drowning, blew through the intersection close enough to flutter Danny's shirttail. He smoothed it casually, enjoying the small fantasy that he'd worn completely normal and totally unremarkable shirts all his life, just like anyone else. Not above myself, Momma-just above you. Like the man said about everyone being in the gutter and some of us looking at the stars. It's called ambition.

He flexed the arm again. Realizing the smaller ambitions was the first step in getting the bigger ones taken care of. Not that a new arm had been all that small to him. Two years of living on the cheap, saving the money he got from playing errand boy and selling guidebooks and magazines to the tourists, no luxuries, not even a piss-quality beer on a Saturday night, just so he'd have the cash for old Sibelius at the Universal Prosthesis Clinic. UPC did a cash-only business-strictly used paper in a used brown envelope, don't want that old taxman coming around, do we? Nosir. Straight cash got you the straight goods.

You wouldn't have thought so looking at UPC's shabby storefront. You wouldn't have even thought to ask, which was just as well, since if you had to ask you'd never know. But if you were the right kind, someone more interested in possibilities than what you could have right now-i.e., the stars rather than the gutter-and you were both willing to work and open to suggestion, some of the right things could happen. Because you'd know the right way to make them happen. You'd know that putting some extra in that brown envelope and staying awake through old lady Sibelius's sales patter-Come on in, we fix you up cheap, just don't ask too many questions about where the parts are from. We do arms, we do legs, we even do whole exoskeletons. Don't matter how you come in, you gonna be walking out, walking tall and proud. Doctor Sibelius guarantees and that's for life, my man-meant you'd get something higher-grade than the stuff Sibelius and her partners jury-rigged for the run-of-the-mill blowfish. One more good reason to get above yourself.

Of course, until you actually did get above yourself, until you were actually up and out of the gutter, it was best to exercise discretion. Especially in this neighborhood, when it was starting to get dark.

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SKIN MUSIC screamed the old-school neon sign on the front of the tattoo parlor. Just below, one of the artists was hanging in the open doorway blowing garish-colored smoke rings. She was new; the ink in her face morphed from Valkyrie-style enhancements to Snow Queen to Snow Beast. She eyed Danny with the bold, I-can-take-you-in-a-fight-or-I-can-take-you-in-bed-your-call attitude endemic in those under the age of twenty. Or maybe that was just the tune her skin music was playing, he thought, giving her a self-possessed smile in return. She was staring at his face. Didn't even notice his arm except in passing, the way you never notice anyone's limbs if they have all of them. He made a point of pausing to read the plain old painted sign on the shop next door (TRADER VICS-YES WE R OPEN) by way of showing her that he was busy, thanks, some other time maybe. A prior commitment was more palatable than outright rejection; he knew that one firsthand. In lieu of pulling a thorn out of a lion's paw, it was the sort of extended courtesy that might come in handy. But even if it didn't, it wasn't like it cost you anything.

The tattoo artist crushed her homemade on the sidewalk as he went into Trader Vic's. As usual, Vic herself was behind the high counter at the far end of the store, looking regal as she flicked a finger at the flatscreen in front of her.

She was dark-skinned and heavily-built, no little slip of a thing but solid and strong in a grey Athletic Club of Overland Park sweatshirt. Trader Vic, as she styled herself, was the real deal because, unlike the restaurateur who had launched a thousand mai tais, she made trades, not drinks. Need something, but suffering from financial embarrassment? Not to worry, Trader Vic liked to say, she had a thousand thousand contacts reachable via a touch on her flatscreen, and millions more reachable by two touches. Somewhere among them was the person who had what you wanted and might be in the mood to make a deal for it, a trade between the two of you. Or it could turn into a three-way dance, or four-way, or you might end up getting plugged into a complex network of give and take, something that would be an impossible tangle for anyone but Trader Vic, who could keep it all straight in her mind no matter which angle she came at it from. You might have thought it was just good software and record-keeping so meticulous as to be anal, but that was just backup for the real trading machine, the one between Vic's ears.

"Hey yo," she said with a big smile. "Something new has been added."

He waved at her with the arm and did bodybuilder poses with it as he approached the counter. Today she had rented some of her unneeded floor space to the tattoo parlor and some to the market on the other side-boxes of animation inks faced crates of olive oil, fish paste, fortified wheat germ, and shell macaroni.

"Like they say on the late show, checkiddout, checkiddout." He stretched the arm high over his head and made a buzzing noise as he lowered his hand onto the counter next to her monitor for a five-point landing on the fingers. "The Eagle is in da house and things can only get better."

"Nostalgia sure ain't what it used to be." She tried a soul handshake on him, bumped his knuckles with her own, slapped him high and low five, and then got him in an arm wrestling grip.

"No fair, I got no leverage," he complained grinning as he pushed her arm down on the counter effortlessly, careful not to crush her fingers.

She grinned back at him and then gave him one upside the head; not too hard, though. "Don't get all misty just because you beat the champ one time." She flexed her own hand, as if she had a mild cramp. "Feels good, like the real thing. Only realer. How much were you holding back?"

"All of it. Sibelius came by some military stuff, surplus leftovers, she said."

Vic looked at her screen and tapped a finger on it. "So that's where that went. Anonymous auction, not that you heard it from me."

Danny made an elaborate dismissive gesture with his right hand. "You know Sibelius-you don't ask her questions and she doesn't have to tell you lies."

Vic leaned on the counter. "Well, if your arm really did come out of that lot, you may have gotten the deal of the century, my man. It was an experimental batch. The mad scientist behind it got himself cooked in some kind of stupid accident and the military warehoused everything. Sat for six months until the inventory database got scrambled and ceased to officially exist."

"Gee, I wonder how that happened," Danny said, admiring his fingers.

"Happens all the time," Vic said serenely. "With no official existence, there was no official sale and no official income lining any official's pocket. Not that I told you anything. What would I know anyway? I'm just a humble trader, a go-between, a matchmaker for goods and services."

Danny looked at her with exaggerated puzzlement. "Huh? Whudja say?"

"I said, I'll have to thank Sibelius for this."

He blinked, the puzzlement becoming real. "You will?"

"Oh, yeah." Vic's smile was thoughtful. "How'd you like to make that new arm pay for itself?"

"Well, that is kinda what I had in mind," Danny said. "You know, doing jobs I couldn't before."

The trader nodded. "Good. Because it so happens I've got a vacancy for tonight. Does that fit in with your busy social schedule?"

"Sure. What do I have to do? Bend some iron bars? Crush beer cans?" He snapped his fingers rhythmically. "Keep the beat?"

"Later. First get down to Jeremy's and pick up some code for me. It's special, I don't want it getting intercepted or scrambled."

He couldn't help showing his disappointment. Errand boy again.

"Hey, that's only the beginning," Vic said, reading his mind, or at least his expression. "I'm going to need a lot of help from you tonight, and I don't mean I want you to sit the store while I'm out. I can't get this done without you."

Danny laughed a little, feeling both sheepish and relieved. Anyone else might have been patronizing him or setting him up, but not Vic. "Okay. I'm on the case."

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The blowfish, mainly of the tourist persuasion, were lined up for Eye in the Sky, which was just starting to jump. The sumo wrestler on the door was making the usual big show of passing them through after a thorough visual inspection of their clothes, their faces, their jewelry, and, presumably, their coolness quotients. The sumo wrestler's name was Rakishi, and legend had it he really had been a sumo before bad knees had relegated him to ruling the ingress with guest list and stun-stick.

Danny didn't look at any of the overdressed would-be clubbers, fearful he'd see some of the people he'd cajoled into buying guidebooks or letting him run errands for them. All he'd need would be for one of them to call out Errand boy! in front of that lard-ass on the door. Rakishi would never let him forget it.

Relax, he told himself as he trotted up the crystal steps to the entrance. The errand boy they knew was a gimp with

one arm. They weren't expecting to see him with two good arms. Nonetheless, he decided, tomorrow he'd get a new haircut, and maybe a dye job just to make sure.

"Say hey." Rakishi tapped him on the chest with the stun-stick and then left it there. He made a business out of counting Danny's arms and legs and pretending to think it over. "Sorry, I don't see your spare parts on the guest list, and even if they were, you couldn't come in here dressed like that."

"Save it for the blowfish, Rakishi, you know I'm not here for the dancing. Jeremy's expecting me. Otherwise I wouldn't get within a mile of this place."

Rakishi laughed. "You're telling me."

He winced at having inadvertently handed the man a straight line at his own expense and started to push past. Rakishi blocked his way with the stun-stick, resting the point against his new arm, against the shoulder, where the stump and the tiny fingers were now hidden away. The big man started to say something. Danny reached up, closed his new fingers around the chubby wrist, and began slowly applying pressure, letting Rakishi feel it.

The look on the fat man's face went from surprise to unease and then to outright fear. Danny backed him up several steps toward the entry foyer, still squeezing. He removed the stun-stick from the man's numbed fingers, and then, just as slowly, released him.

"Don't worry, nobody saw," he said in a low voice, giving the stick back to him. "It'll be our little secret, that a gimp with a spare part took your toy away from you. I mean, we wouldn't want the blowfish rushing the door and getting you fired, would we?"

Rakishi stared at him, saying nothing. The expression on his face was supposed to be murderous, but Danny could see a hint of the fear underneath.

"But no more, Rakishi, okay? No more gimp, no more spare parts, no more big-man-on-the-door crap. Not to me. Got that?"

Still silent, Rakishi stepped back to let him pass.

"Thanks." Danny started to go in, then stuck his hand out.

"Shake on it?"

Rakishi drew back and jerked his head at the entry foyer.

"Oh, yeah," Danny said, "we already did that, didn't we?"

The big man turned away from him and Danny suddenly felt ashamed of himself. He hurried through the dimly-lit foyer, pushing through the double doors marked STAFF ONLY to the left of the ticket-booth and going up the stairs two at a time. Good show, Danny-boy, he thought, you just proved you can be as big a bully as anybody else.

He went halfway down the narrow corridor at the top of the stairs and stopped at a grimy-looking door, plain except for a small card at eye level that said SERVICE MANAGER. Danny knocked and heard the answering come-in grunt.

Jeremy was dressed in his usual multi-pocketed work pants, white T-shirt, and blue fisherman's jacket with even more pockets. He was as thin as Rakishi was fat, which was some trick considering that Danny had never seen him when he wasn't eating. Tonight he was having Chinese food, busy chopsticks clicking among an array of classic white takeout cartons on his desk. They competed for space with the old, oversized but very sharp surveillance monitor. On the screen, Rakishi was doing his sorry-not-cool-enough routine with three tourists who were trying to argue with him.

"Saw you throwing the fear of God into my big guy," Jeremy said, gesturing at the screen with a noodle caught in the chopsticks. "New arm, eh?"

"Works pretty good," Danny said.

Jeremy made a prawn disappear. "I could see that."

"Hey, I wasn't really trying to start anything," Danny said. "He's just always pulling that crap on me when he knows the only reason I come here is because Vic sends me to pick something up from you."

"She told me you were on the way over, and she told me you had a nice new part." Jeremy put down his chopsticks. "Mind if I have a look?"

Danny extended his arm, pulling his sleeve up. Jeremy ran his hands along the musculature with an expert touch, nodding at the way it connected to his shoulder. He found the software load in Danny's armpit and palpated it the same way Dr. Sibelius had after she'd put it in.

"Not tickling you, am I?" Jeremy asked.

"I was never ticklish on that side," Danny told him coolly.

Jeremy stood up to take a closer look at the crook of Danny's arm. "If I'm not mistaken," he said after a bit, "this is from the lot that didn't exist out at the old Roswell Base."

"Jeez," Danny said, "does everybody know about this except me?"

"Maybe," Jeremy said. "I don't know, I haven't talked to everybody today."

Danny smiled, although the truth was that when Jeremy said something like that, you could never be certain he was kidding. "So you can tell just by looking?"

"I know what to look for. You got yourself a lot more arm there than you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The Roswell lot was mad scientist stuff, experimental."

"Oh, right-Roswell and UFOs and alien technology. You think this came from outer space?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? The aliens are up in Montana these days. Roswell is a plain old military base now. Even the mad scientists are gone. After what's-his-name cooked himself, they moved the rest of them elsewhere."

The moon, maybe, I don't know. Those who do know say the guy was working with some kind of quantum crap and that's what got him."

"Quantum crap?" Danny grimaced. "You mean, like, you go to the bathroom and it comes out in wavicles?"

Jeremy's expression never changed. "That's really very funny, Danny. Quantum stuff is highly weird. You ever hear about Schrödinger's cat? Things can exist in any number of different states all at the same time, even if they contradict each other."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you might be able to do some interesting magic tricks with that thing. Did you get an operator manual with it?"

"It's in the software. Check this out." Danny shifted his shoulder slightly and then extended his arm again, turning it to show Jeremy the underside of his forearm. Words faded in on the pale skinlike surface along a patch five inches long and two inches wide and began to scroll upward.

"Now that takes me back," Jeremy said, watching the documentation. "Like crib notes in middle school, only fancier. A skin animation of this kind'll run you, oh, hell, I don't know, I haven't priced any lately." He looked at Danny. "Except this not really being skin, it's not really a tattoo, is it."

Danny grinned. "Close enough for government work."

"You really are a very funny guy," Jeremy told him solemnly. "I had no idea."

"Well, besides improving my piano playing, this thing has really put me in a good mood," Danny said. "Prosthetic limb and antidepressant. Is that like the quantum states you were talking about?"

"Not even close." Jeremy felt around the pockets in his jacket, then his pants, and then his jacket again before he found what he was looking for, a tiny blue disc in a clear plastic sleeve. "Anyway, this'll be what you came to get. Vic's code. She doesn't make things very easy."

Danny reached for it with his new hand and Jeremy pulled it back slightly. "Don't crush it."

"I've got control," Danny said. "If I didn't, your big guy'd be on the way to the hospital with a compound fracture."

Jeremy dropped the disc into his palm and Danny made a show of carefully tucking it into the watch pocket of his jeans. "Yeah, I guess."

"Hey, I didn't humiliate him in front of the blowfish, so it's not like I undermined his authority on the door," Danny said.

"Bullying is about the only thing Rakishi knows how to do well," Jeremy said. "And like all bullies, it's always good he gets a reminder now and then that he's not the top of the food chain, that there's always somebody tougher and it might not be who you'd expect. Also, like you said, no harm done. But all the same, here's a tip for you, Dan-man: what Rakishi does isn't personal. You shouldn't take it personally."

Danny glanced at the screen where some more tourists were arguing with Rakishi.

"Only blowfish take it personally."

"Oh." Danny dipped his head, feeling sheepish again. "Got it, Jeremy."

"Blowfish," Jeremy continued, almost talking over him, "take everything personally. They don't understand. They think the world's out to get them when, actually, the world doesn't even know they're there." Pause. "Sorry. Quantum stuff tends to bring out the philosopher in me. Maybe it has something to do with the butterfly effect. Can I see your arm again?"

Danny obliged, letting him run his fingers all over it again before turning his attention to Danny's hand, palpating it in a very thorough, pointed way, as if he were looking for something he knew was hidden inside.

"Now, you understand that when the military makes something like this, they always intend it as a weapon," he said, holding Danny's hand a little closer to his face as he felt his palm. He suddenly bent Danny's fingers into an imitation gun shape and aimed it at an antique paper shredder in the far corner of the room. "Try shooting that, see what happens."

"Try shooting it how?" Danny said.

"It's your military grey-market arm. Think it, or say 'bang-bang,' or something. Didn't you look at that part of the manual?"

"There was a whole bunch of stuff on how to hurt, torture, or kill someone with one bare hand so I kinda skipped it."

Jeremy glanced at him. "Pacifist?"

"Actually, it was just grossing me out," Danny confessed, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"In the future, you should try not to turn down free knowledge, no matter what kind it is," Jeremy said, aiming his hand at the shredder again and experimentally pressing his knuckles. "Most stuff you want to find out ends up being pretty expensive. Whatever you can get for free could come in handy later, you know?"

Danny disengaged his hand and flexed the fingers. "Don't you think fooling with a possibly loaded weapon you have no idea about could be a real expensive free shooting lesson?"

Jeremy's smile was unexpectedly sunny. "You're learning." The smile vanished just as suddenly, leaving his bony, wizened face so deadpan that Danny wondered if he had just hallucinated. "Be careful out there tonight. Tell Vic I said be careful."

"I will," Danny said. "Anything else?"

Jeremy seemed mildly surprised by the question. "No," he said and sat down to pick up where he'd left off with the Chinese food.

The street outside Vic's had gotten busier, more populated with the usual mix of urban survivors, suburban pretenders, and a few tourists who thought they could handle some adventure. Maybe they could. In any case, they could afford it, and there was no shortage of people to sell it to them. The suburban geeks, though, they were all looking a little nervous. It was past time for them to head for the old all-day indoor parking garage, fire up that sport utility vehicle, and hurry back to the 'burbs before something actually happened, Danny thought, amused. One of them, a tall, plump young guy who looked like a college student, seemed to be trying to get up the nerve to approach the tattoo artist having a smoke in the doorway of Skin Music. Same woman as before. Her gaze met Danny's and he saw her mouth twitch in a brief, secret display of amusement. She knew Joe College was there and what he was up to and she was having a great time making him even more nervous by being so completely oblivious to him. And now she had Danny to share the joke with her. He pressed his lips together so hard they hurt. What would she think, he wondered, if he told her no one had ever shared the joke with him before, at least, not like this? That instead of meeting his gaze, women always looked away casually but very quickly, so that he might be fooled into thinking they hadn't looked at him in the first place and so weren't looking away from his deformity. What would she think if, instead of just smiling secretly back at her, he told her that?

He suddenly heard Jeremy's voice in his head, so distinctly he nearly turned around to see if the man was somehow actually there. She'd probably think you took the world way too personally, Dan-man.

The ink in her face moved smoothly through its changes.

She managed to contrive to track him as he went into Vic's. He thought of pausing at the door to give her a wink and then decided not to press his luck. Besides, now that he thought of it, winking was a pretty corny thing to do. The woman had animated facial tattoos, for god's sake; get a grip, he told himself.

"You look like a man with a code," Vic said, smiling around the monitor at him.

"I am," Danny said and put the disc on the counter.

Vic picked it up and held it between thumb and forefinger.

"Would you mind changing the sign and locking up for me? And then come on in the back so I can give you the whole story."

Danny flipped the handwritten sign over to the side that said, TRADING FROM A 2 Z-CURRENTLY TRADING IN Zs, SEE YOU TOMORROW. Trader Vic whimsy-he'd always found it strangely poignant, though he would never have told Vic that. He locked the door, tested it, wondered briefly when Skin Music or the grocer were going to pick up their goods, and then joined Vic in the back room.

As far as he was concerned, Vic's back room was one of the top ten rooms in the world. She had a big, overstuffed sofa in some kind of soft fabric that was not quite velour and not quite corduroy but combined the better features of both. It was the color of an expensive red wine and sitting on it was the next best thing to having someone pour you a glass. The coffee table in front of it was just an old block of plastic, okay to put your feet on. The big video screen in the antique box had a resolution that most blowfish could only dream about; almost too good for some of the older movies Vic had. Like when she'd shown him that old space opera movie.

Vic picked up the remote and aimed it at the screen. The familiar city skyline faded in; then the perspective zoomed in on the top half of a glass-and-steel monster, one of several built during the last glass-and-steel revival in urban architecture.

"Is that-?" Danny turned to look at Vic.

"La Belle Ciel. Or, as we like to call it around here, C L."

Dan wiped his left hand over his face. "As I recall, it's le ciel, which would make it Le Beau Ciel."

"Yes, but that doesn't rhyme in English. Where are your priorities, man? Anyway, we have a date in that building tonight." She glanced at him sideways. "Unless you're losing your nerve?"

Danny took a breath. "So, you say this gig pays well?" He wiggled his new fingers at her.

"How long did it take you to save up for that arm?"

"That good?" He gave a small laugh. "For money that good, I got all the nerve in the world."

Vic gazed at his arm for a moment. "You may not realize how true that is. Yet." She turned her attention back to the monitor and pointed the remote at it again. The image vanished and was replaced by the word loading....

"This is intercepted security surveillance from a special area on the ninety-first floor, and the only reason I'm not going to tell you how I came by it is because detailing all the connections between me and it would take most of the night. Well, I'm also never supposed to say some of the names out loud, too, but you knew that, right? Anyway, just watch this."

The image on the monitor faded in slowly, and it seemed to be a plain old cam-shot of an office anteroom, the sort you might sit in while waiting for your appointment with the important personage in the inner office, as expensively furnished as you'd expect in a building like that. But not quite: it lacked not only a receptionist's desk but the customary multi-screen wall showing all of Ciel's channels of entertainment, edutainment, documentary, docu-dramas, sports, sports entertainment, news, and cooking (it was said one of the higher-ups in the organization had fixated on old footage of someone named Julia Child).

What it did have was... something else.

After a while, Danny realized he had moved from the couch to the floor directly in front of the monitor and he was probably blocking Vic's view. But Vic didn't seem to mind-at least she hadn't said anything-and it was important that he keep watching closely and try to understand what he was seeing. It kept shifting, the way certain things sensitive to changes in light and air will do, but he was sure he could understand if he had just a few seconds more.

Abruptly, the screen went dark.

"Hey!" he yelled and turned to look at Vic.

"Not me," she said, putting both hands up to show she hadn't touched the remote. "The transmission cut off. It has to every so often-otherwise the security cam'll register the presence of an extra and very unauthorized eye."

"Oh." He glanced back at the dark screen and then went back to sit on the couch next to Vic, feeling sad and deflated. "How long-how long did we get to watch?"

"Five minutes," Vic said.

Danny laughed incredulously. "That's a joke, right?"

"Feels more like half an hour?"

"Or even longer."

Vic smiled. "So tell me-what were you watching?"

Danny thought carefully, tapping an index finger against his lower lip. The new index finger.

"Try not to think too long about it," Vic added. When he still didn't answer, she went upside his head, just hard enough to rouse him. "Quick-what did you see?"

The answer burst out of him almost against his will. "I saw four little girls about nine years old. They were building something in the middle of the floor!" He looked at Vic, startled. "No, that's wrong. That's not what I saw. I saw-"

Vic put up a hand. "You saw what we're going to go and get tonight. Never mind what it looks like. We don't have to describe it. We just have to get it."

"But-"

"We know where it is, and we know what room it's in. And you know just as well as I do that we'll know it when we see it. No matter what we see when we get there."

"Yes, but-"

"But what, Danny?" Vic sat forward and looked into his face. "What's on your mind-stealing's wrong? You're afraid of getting rich? You want to get rich but you fear Ciel more?"

He fumbled for a few moments. "You know what the problem is. You saw that screen. Aren't you even a little bit-well, freaked out?"

Vic sat back. "I was, yes. I'm sorry, Danny, I've had a lot more time to get used to the idea of it. Several days, if you want to know the truth, while you were off having Sibelius fit your arm. I've gone from freaked out to accepting it. Maybe I'm asking too much of you to get used to it in such a short period of time."

Danny put his head in his hands, registering absently that he really liked the feeling when he did that. "I'll try, Vic, I really will. I just-this is like, I don't know, dreaming or something. If you can't describe it, can you at least tell me what it is?"

Vic took a long slow breath. "Software." Pause. "Maybe. Or aliens. Alien software. Aliens turned into software. People turned into software by aliens. The bastard offspring of aliens and people, turned into software. A little something Ciel's resident engineers whipped up while they were on drugs. Or while they weren't on drugs. The ghost of Christmas past. The Second Coming."

"Well, that really narrows it down."

"In any case, I'm not as concerned with what it is so much as I am with what Ciel is going to do with it."

Danny opened his mouth to say something and then couldn't speak at all.

"Right," Vic said, smiling grimly. "That was my reaction." She sat all the way back on the couch and grabbed one of the throw pillows, hugging it to herself in comfort mode. "Imagine what it would mean for a telecommunications empire like Ciel to have something that would make you watch any and all of their channels the way you were just watching that surveillance."

He waited for the wave of nausea sweeping through him to subside. "We don't know that they're going to use whatever that is for that reason-" He cut off again. "Yeah, okay. The question is actually, how stupid am I?"

"Naïve," Vic corrected him. "Big difference. Naïveté is curable. Stupid is forever. No global corporation should ever, ever, ever have access to anything with that kind of-of-like that. And if there were one that should, it sure wouldn't be Ciel. There's a limit to how much power any company should have. And anyone who knows about a potential for abuse of what could be unlimited power, or something just as good, and does nothing is just as culpable as anyone who perpetrates it. And you just have to know when you have to do something. And..." Danny's voice was quiet. "And you've got a buyer."

"Well, that is how I found out about it in the first place," Vic said reasonably.

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The code Jeremy had written for her, Vic explained as they drove over to the Ciel building in an all-purpose white van borrowed for the evening, was a passkey-cum-security clearance-i.e., it would decrypt locks and order security programs to validate their identification.

"That sounds almost too good to be true," Danny said, looking at her skeptically.

"It almost is," Vic said, "in that it's good for tonight only, between the hours of eight-thirty P.M. and midnight, give or take fifteen minutes. And it's almost nine-thirty now, so we've lost an hour. Not that it could really be helped."

"Why the time limit?" he asked her.

"Shifting security codes. The program works on data from a tap on whatever system it is you want to breach. It makes a model of the system and plays statistics off against chaos. The result gives the program enough latitude to guess how to give the system only stuff it wants to see. So to speak. If you don't understand that, don't ask me to explain it. At least, not until tomorrow night, when I'll have more time. Anyway, there's only about three and a half hours' worth of room on the disc for that kind of data in the necessary amounts. So it's work smooth, work fast, and keep an eye on the time."

"And then spend the rest our lives on the run," Danny said with mock joyfulness as they stopped at a red light.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, getting in and out of there is no problem, I guess, but after we leave, all they have to do is run a matching program on our faces from their surveillance footage, track us down, and crush us like bugs."

"O ye of little imagination," Vic said, laughing. It was starting to rain and she put on the windshield wipers. The resulting smears completely obscured their view of the street. "Now, see what happens when you put the wipers on too soon?"

"So I've been told," Danny said. "By you, about a million times."

"It has to do with conditions being wrong. Or right, depending on your point of view. This is the sort of thing you can create on, say, a digital level. Like, if you can somehow persuade a cam the conditions are wrong for the current settings. Like, say, telling it the ambient light is ten times brighter than it is. The resulting under-exposure leaves you with a screen you can't see anything on." Vic grinned at him. "Until you clear it." She pressed the washer button and nothing happened. "Dammit."

"I guess you can't forget the time limit," Danny said. "Like, you only get so many years before the available washer fluid evaporates and you have to refill."

She gave him a look. "And sometimes you end up calling on a higher power for help." She stuck her head out her window and looked up at the sky. "Hey, a little help here? I'd appreciate it." She had just pulled her head back in, ready to explain that higher powers had better things to do, when the clouds opened and rain gushed down in what Danny's momma would have called a genu-wine frog-strangler.

The two of them sat stunned as the rain drummed on the hood, sheeted down the windshield, and turned the gutters into small, turbulent rivers. Danny reached over and flipped the wipers back on; Vic made no objection, although normally even minor trespasses into driver-space, as she called it, were dealt with harshly. "Now, that," he said, "is one mother of a coincidence."

Vic turned to look at him, her gaze flicking to his arm. "Certain scientists believe there's no such thing as a coincidence."

He gave a small laugh. "Yeah, well, they're in labs all the time, what would they know?"

Now she looked pointedly at his arm.

"Oh, come on," he said. "You don't think that was some kind of quantum..." He searched for a word. "Phenomenon."

She didn't answer and he felt peeved, as if he were being forced to make a promise he already knew he couldn't keep.

"Vic, if I did that, I didn't know it, and I don't know how to do it again. The light's green."

She put the van in gear.

j

Getting into the Ciel building went so easily that Danny felt a little bit spooked. Vic drove past the service entrance with its pair of security guards sitting in the observation deck-twins, for all Danny could see of them-and pulled the van directly into the delivery lot, stopping at an automated gate-barrier. The ten-second wait felt more like ten minutes to Danny, who tried not to fidget. Vic was amused. "Security in this area is all automated," she told him. "It's like the tollbooths that read your paid-up tax sticker. Except this system is reading the disc you got from Jeremy."

"I don't know," he said, looking back at the observation deck on the other side of the enormous parking lot. He couldn't tell if the guards were paying any attention to the van or not. "Seems like pretty flimsy security."

"When you know how to get around it, yes, it is," Vic said, chuckling. The gate opened and she drove through, heading for the loading docks. "The trick is knowing the right stuff at the right time. This area isn't always automated, just at night. And it isn't automated every night."

"How long have you been planning this?" Danny asked her. "I thought you said you found out while I was getting my arm."

"Oh, I had all this information in reserve when the, uh, opportunity came up," she said, turning the van around and backing it carefully into an unoccupied space between two other, slightly larger vans. Just as she cut the motor, the vans on either side flashed their lights for a split second, making Danny jump.

"Settle, settle," Vic said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "No one's coming, it's just an intranet security check among vehicles."

"A what?"

"It's their fool-proof backup security system," Vic told him, patting his chest. "Breathe slowly, I need you cool and collected. When a strange vehicle parks next to an authorized vehicle in a secure area, the authorized vehicle checks the security clearance of the strange vehicle. In other words, those vans just asked our van for the password, and our van gave it to them."

"Thanks to Jeremy's disc."

"Got it in one."

"But now we're about to take Jeremy's disc inside with us, aren't we? What if they ask again?"

"If they ask again, the information they got from Jeremy's disc will tell them they already got the right answer."

Danny sighed, feeling his heartbeat begin to slow down to a more normal rate. The rain had let up some but it was still coming down hard enough to be more than a mere shower.

"I know, it's weird," Vic said. "Welcome to the world of big business."

They slipped out of the van and Vic led him to the freight elevator at the end of the dock. She waved a white plastic card at the call-plate and the elevator came to life, the doors opening from the middle but up and down rather than sideways, which Danny thought made it look too much like an open mouth.

"Now what?" he whispered to Vic as the doors closed.

Definitely too much like a mouth.

"Now the elevator is delivering what our nice code told it is crates of really lousy instant coffee for the vending machines," Vic told him. "And you don't have to whisper unless it makes you feel more secure, because this thing has no ears. Ergo, no voice prints."

"Okay," Danny said, still keeping his voice low. "So, what, this thing actually goes to the ninety-first floor?"

"No, it goes to the twentieth floor, where edible consumables are checked in. We tell it to wait until someone comes to unload the really lousy instant coffee."

"Which won't happen."

"You're a quick study, Dan, and don't let anyone tell you different. From the twentieth floor storage area, we simply take the elevator to the ninety-first floor and, as my Great-Aunt Stella used to say, viola."

"Won't the elevator activity attract somebody's attention?"

"Maybe, but when they see it's just lubing itself, they'll lose interest." The freight elevator came to a halt and the door-jaws opened on an empty, dark room, lit only by the exit sign over the door. "You got to keep the elevator mechanisms properly lubed, or the best computer control system in the world won't make a bit of difference, especially in buildings this tall."

"I never heard of that before," Danny said, a little suspiciously as they went silently to the exit door.

"When did you ever need to know it?" She put a finger to his lips and then opened the door a crack.

There was a bank of elevators directly opposite. Vic waited for a moment, holding the plastic card out in front of herself before moving to the elevators, pulling Danny after her by his new hand. "That tells the surveillance cams the light exposure isn't right here, readjust."

"But won't they notice that down in security?"

"They don't have a single screen for each cam-the screens switch between several cams. Every time the screen tries to switch to a cam our code has fooled with, the cam will tell it to go away, it's readjusting. When someone in security finally notices that they haven't seen anything from one of the affected cams for a while-if they notice-they'll just figure it's a software glitch." An elevator arrived without chiming and opened its doors for them. The inside was nicer than Danny's apartment. "Now can we just get the job done and I'll answer your questions later?"

She pressed for the thirty-fifth floor, the thirty-ninth, the sixty-third, the seventy-seventh, and the ninety-first.

"If I know at least a little of how things work, I'm not as likely to screw up," Danny said.

Vic gave him an affectionate sock on the new arm. "You won't screw up, Dan-man."

As the elevator ascended, Danny decided he could live with Dan-man as a nickname a whole lot more happily than he had with Danny-boy.

j

The passage leading from the elevator bank to the rest of the ninety-first floor had been blocked off with a new entry portal, a chamber designed to let in only one or two people at a time, accessible within a transparent wall that, the warning sign said, was electrified.

Vic stopped short. Danny felt his stomach attempt to drop ninety-one floors without him.

"Your piggy-back surveillance cam never picked this up?" he guessed after a long moment.

"This is new," she said slowly. "It wasn't here before. Hell, it wasn't even here this morning."

"Maybe they had a feeling company might drop in?"

Vic muttered something about gently, with a chainsaw. Then she looked at Danny. "Did you happen to bring the manual for that thing?" she asked.

Danny shrugged his shoulder and showed her the words beginning to scroll on his forearm. Vic seized his arm and put it under the slightly brighter light above the elevator bank.

"Does this thing have hyperlinks or go-tos, or do you have to read all the way through it every time?" she asked him.

He snapped his fingers and produced the table of contents.

"Touch your subject of interest. Just like your screen."

"Show-off." She poked his arm.

"Ow. I said touch, not impale."

"What should I look for, information on disarming booby traps or electrified fences or what?"

"I don't know, this is my first combat situation."

"Sarcasm isn't what we need here."

"I'm serious, I don't know what to look for. Espionage? Is there a section on that?"

Vic surprised him by grabbing his head and kissing him. "I take it back what I said about you being a quick study." She tapped his arm once, and then again, and then was silent for a long time as she studied the words on his arm, occasionally scrolling back and re-reading.

Danny sighed. "What time is it?"

"Only ten-fifteen. Not too late, but thanks for the reminder." She looked into his face with concern. "What have you tried to do with this thing? Other than normal movements and actions, I mean."

"I beat you at arm wrestling. Besides that-well, I kinda overdid the secret handshake with Rakishi. Then Jeremy tried to get me to unleash a death ray or something on his paper shredder, but nothing happened."

"Because he hadn't read the instructions," Vic said. "And they always accuse women of that one. Now, what we have to-"

Danny snatched his arm away from her and put it behind his back. "Are you telling me I really do have a death ray in my arm?"

"No, no, not a death ray. Don't panic." Vic tried to reach around him and grab his arm but he stepped away from her. "I swear, it's not going to kill anyone."

"Tell me what it is going to do," he demanded, keeping his arm behind himself.

"Well, that's kinda hard without being able to look at the instructions-"

"Try."

Vic took a breath. "You have a... well, it's like a quantum state generator. You can induce certain states in things."

"What kind?"

"You can make things insubstantial."

Danny looked at her incredulously. "How?"

She stuck her fists on her hips. "Read the freaking manual."

Humiliated, he slowly moved his arm around to his front and looked at it under the light. Vic waited, glancing at her watch several times.

"This seems pretty straightforward," he said after a while.

"Almost too simple."

Vic nodded. "Try to remember that arm was meant for grunts who would see action. The documentation had to be easy to read and understand."

"Yeah, but they'd have received a certain amount of training beforehand." He let out a breath. "But okay, I'll give it a try."

"Good boy, Danny. There's just one thing."

"What?"

"If-when you turn that barrier insubstantial, all the alarms are going to go off up here."

He started to wipe his right hand over his face and then used his left instead. "Because the disc didn't cover this eventuality."

"Right. I've got no code that's going to camouflage a security device ceasing to exist on this plane. Or dimension, or something." She paused. "Do you want to quit?"

"Will your disc still work on the stuff it's already worked on? I mean, to cover our escape?"

She nodded. "It should. Until midnight."

"Until midnight," he echoed. "Well, it's not getting any earlier, and I hate to go all the way up to the ninety-first floor of any building and have it all be for nothing. Do you know the layout of the floor?"

"This is it. There's only one room, and you saw it on the surveillance cam at my place. It's halfway down the hall behind that barrier, on the inside, not an outside wall."

"How fast can you get to the room and get... whatever that is in there? And more important, will it go with you?"

"I can do it fast enough that we'll be on our way down in the elevator before they can get one themselves. We can go out the way we came in, but the van's trashed. They'd trace us."

"We can drive the van to the edge of the parking lot and jump out and run," Danny said. "Now, get behind me, and hang onto my waist. I don't know how this will feel, or if there'll be a recoil or what, so I need you to steady me."

Vic obeyed. Danny stretched his arm out toward the barrier, cradling his elbow in his other hand, and concentrated on feeling power begin to build up at his shoulder and move through his arm. He expected to feel the arm grow warm or heavy; instead, there was a pleasantly cool, bubbly sensation, as if his arm were being filled up with champagne. Vic's arms tightened around his waist, as if she could feel something happening to him.

His arm began to glow; in a moment it was too bright to look at and he closed his eyes just as there was an eruption of even brighter light. He'd expected to feel power flying out from his hand, but instead, it felt more like the power was flying into him. He braced himself for the scream of alarms but nothing happened.

"Uh... could they be silent alarms?" he asked Vic, his eyes still closed. Vic's arms slipped from around his waist as she straightened up.

"Danny," she said in a strange voice. "Open your eyes."

He did so and found that the barrier had not disappeared at all. Instead, they were now on the other side of it. "Oh, God," he moaned. "This is worse than the old stories about Windows 2000."

"No, it's okay, it worked better than we wanted it to. Instead of making the barrier insubstantial, you made us insubstantial." Vic shook his left arm, the normal one. "And-pay attention, Danny-we still are."

He looked at his hands and then at her. She was right; he could see through them to the hallway, the walls and

floor.

"Oh, God," he moaned again, "I'm going to have hysterics here-"

She slapped him sharply across the face.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Don't do that to someone who's-" He stopped, and grabbed her hand, feeling it.

"We're not insubstantial to each other because we're both in the same state. The same quantum state, I guess. And we can move relative to the building, any way we want. So let's just walk on air over to that room, waft through the door like ghosts and see how whatever's in that room looks to us from here." She jerked her head toward the hallway. "Sorry about the slap. I had to get your attention back fast. Let's go."

Walking felt more like skating, or skiing. Maybe it was supposed to be sort of pleasant but he didn't much care for it. There was a greasy sensation to it that gave him what his momma would have called the willies.

Going through the door, however, was unremarkable. As he and Vic stepped into it, it was just gone, but when he looked behind, it was still there, still closed and presumably locked.

The room was empty. No, not quite. Rakishi was sitting in one of the leather chairs. Danny's mouth dropped. Jeremy's voice suddenly came to him: You shouldn't take it personally. Only blowfish take it personally.

He blinked, and it was Jeremy sitting there, chopsticks in one hand, a white carton in the other.

He sneaked a quick glance at Vic. "What do you see?" he whispered.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "It's okay, it's just the guy who paid me to do this job."

"Jeremy paid you to do this? Or Rakishi?"

She looked at him and he saw real fear in her for the first time. "You see Jeremy and Rakishi?"

"And you see your buyer." Pause. "What do you see now?"

"You look. I'm afraid to."

Danny forced himself to turn his head. Now there was nothing but a strange pucker in the air, as if the room were only an image on a touch-screen that was being twisted from inside. "I'm not sure what to do here. Maybe we should just run like hell."

His arm vibrated suddenly. He lifted his hand and looked at it.

"What?"

"I think I've got a call coming in."

"At least it doesn't play one of those really annoying Vivaldi passages."

Danny looked at Vic again; she stared back. They were both on the thin edge of hysteria, he realized.

"I think it's-they're-trying to communicate. It's intelligent-at least, intelligent enough to follow us out if it wants to leave. If it wants to go with us, it will." He gave a short, wild laugh. "Listen to me, I'm theorizing about something and I don't even know what it is!"

He pulled Vic to him roughly and held on tight while he concentrated on his arm again. This time the flash happened almost instantly, without his having even to straighten it out.

Right away, he knew they were substantial again-the carpet almost felt as if it were pressing against his shoes, and he was conscious of a processed-air smell in the room. Vic pushed away from him, shaking her head.

"Thank you."

For a moment, Danny thought Vic had spoken. Then he realized it was one of the four little girls standing in front of him. They were about nine years old, and Danny saw a new detail he had somehow missed when he'd first seen them on Vic's video screen.

All four had a small stump with four small fingers where the right arm should have been.

Vic touched his shoulder and he jumped.

"Sorry," she said. "I think we're both seeing the four girls now."

"They only have one arm," Danny said. She nodded and he felt himself relax.

"Oh, Jesus!" Vic yelled suddenly and Danny almost jumped out of his skin.

"What?" he screamed at her before he could think better of it.

For answer, she showed him her watch. The time was 11:48. His jaw dropped.

"Quantum," she said. "Where and when get slippery. When we stopped taking up space, we took up more time instead."

Danny felt himself start to tremble. He looked at the girls, who were watching calmly as the two of them went to pieces. "Do you want to leave?" he asked them.

They stepped forward suddenly and grabbed his new arm. The communication was instantaneous, lasting forever and barely a moment, and he understood all of it only for as long as it was occurring. When it was done, he was left only with scraps and parts of images. But it was enough. He understood that he wasn't seeing four nine-year-old girls, or anyone else he or Vic knew or didn't know. He didn't understand exactly what kind of life-form it was any more than a hive mind would have understood the concept of individuals, but he did know that it was immature and maimed or damaged in some way, and would remain so as long as it was trapped here.

"Come on," he said, and almost tried to walk through the door before he remembered.

j

They were halfway up the five flights of fire stairs to the roof when the alarms went off. The racket was almost bad enough to stun. He tried to take the stairs even faster. The little girls had no problem keeping up-sometimes some of them were in front of him-and Vic was so hopped up on adrenaline he stopped taking time to look back and make sure she was okay.

He was afraid that the door to the roof might be locked, and it was, but only on his side, and only with a plain old uncomplicated bolt. He slammed the door open and hurried everyone out. He could hear helicopters approaching, searchlights sweeping the darkness. In the distance, sirens started up, then faded under the swelling noise of propellers.

He turned to the girls. "Okay, you're out. Fly away. Or something."

Vic looked at him as if he were crazy.

"They couldn't-move is the only way I can put it-in an enclosed space. But out here-" He gestured at the night sky. The rain had stopped and the clouds were blowing away. He turned back to the girls and was about to say something else when they all lunged at him again and grabbed his arm.

"No!" he screamed, and the light was so bright, he could feel it press against his face and his body. This time, it was as if the power was sucked out of him rather than building up by itself and it was so much stronger this way, there was so much more of it, it seemed, more than he would ever have been able to muster up on his own, because he lacked the know-how and the experience.

The sensation of the roof pressing against his feet vanished. His mind became a silent howl of protest. Of course they had to take him along-he should have realized that from the way it had worked with Vic. Except he was pretty sure that while they had managed to survive here, he wouldn't do nearly as well in their world.

Don't take it personally, said Jeremy's voice in his mind.

The world doesn't know you exist. As an epitaph, it sucked.

He was suddenly flailing in some kind of turbulence before he fell a short distance and landed on his back. His head rolled over to the right and he saw his arm was gone. The small, wormlike fingers on his stump twitched. He closed his eyes again. Well, that was slightly better than dying in a hostile dimension. If all they needed was the arm, he could thank them for not sacrificing his life to save their own. Now he could get in a lot more practice at trying not to take the world personally.

Vic pounced on him and grabbed his arm. His right arm. He opened his eyes and saw that, yes, it was there. If it had been gone before, it was back now. He raised his right hand and stared at it stupidly. All right, then; not only was he through taking the world personally, he was done trying to understand it.

"Come on!" Vic screamed over the roar of the helicopters and pulled him to his feet. The wind was whipping at them, battering them as one of the helicopters turned and hovered almost directly over them, shining searchlights down on them. Talking was impossible. Danny pushed her behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist again. She understood and held on tight while he stretched out his arm and concentrated on feeling the power begin to build in his shoulder.

He was still concentrating, with Vic clinging to his waist, when building security made it up to the roof and took them.

j

By dawn it was all over.

Danny spent the night locked in a windowless storeroom among several crates of very lousy instant vending machine coffee. He drifted in and out of sleep, dreaming about nine-year-old girls and helicopters and faceless people in uniforms cuffing his hands behind his back. Sometimes he dreamed that he felt the power building up in his shoulder again but he always woke up just before the flash of light and knew that was one sensation he wasn't ever going to feel again. Not that he was complaining, even to himself. At least they'd left him the arm, and it still worked just fine as a plain old arm. So that was all right.

Unless, of course, Ciel decided to cut it off him as compensation.

He dreamed about that, too, faceless people in uniforms taking him to a white room where Dr. Sibelius was waiting with an apologetic look on her wrinkled face. Dear boy, I am sorry about this, but they say I've got to do it, they want that arm.

Then the door opened and he found himself blinking up at Vic. There was a uniform standing behind her.

"So, would you like to go home?"

He swallowed. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Hold it till my place," she said, smiling artificially as she leaned down to help him up. "Don't ask for any favors, don't even ask for so much as someone's pardon if you burp. And don't burp, either." She marched him along beside her, not hurrying but still moving fast in spite of his stiff clumsiness. He didn't actually wake up until she pushed him into the back of a yellow cab in a parking garage. She got in next to him and slammed the door. The cab started off, the driver apparently already knowing the destination.

Danny started to say something and she put her hand over his mouth and her own. By the time they got back to Trader Vic's in the thin morning light, he thought he was going to burst, in several different ways.

j

"The arm, I take it, is done. Except as an arm." She put a mug of coffee in front of him on the coffee table. He sat on the edge of the couch, wanting more than anything just to stretch out and fall into a coma for several hours.

Danny shrugged. "Could be worse. I thought it was. First I thought they, or it, or whatever that was, I thought they were taking me with them. Then I thought they took the arm. But I guess they just needed the quantum generator. Considerate of them." He paused with the mug halfway to his mouth. "No, actually, it was probably just a matter of

being practical. What they didn't need, they left behind."

Vic raised her eyebrows over her own cup of coffee.

"Maybe they were being considerate."

"Maybe. But I promised myself not to take everything so personally." He sipped the coffee. It was incredibly good. "Okay. Now, tell me, before I strain myself with curiosity."

"I got us out of it the way I get anything. Im Trader Vic. I traded."

"What?" he asked.

"Jeremy's code."

"But it expired."

"That doesn't mean you can't take it apart and see how it did work. That's what we were doing most of the night. Or rather, a couple of their R&D team were dissecting it and reconstructing it while I sat by and offered suggestions. When they were satisfied that they really had a good piece of merchandise, they took me to see the head guy, who could be Dr. Sibelius's twin, only about thirty years older."

"And?" Danny said.

"And we made a deal. I told her you and I were just a couple of thrill-seeking, joyriding perpetual adolescents who dared each other to get all the way to the Ciel roof undetected, with this bit of pirated software from, oh, hell, I don't know where. And we didn't see anything else. We were on the ninety-first floor when we realized we might not make it, so we got out of the elevator and ran up the rest of the way. That's all we know."

"She bought that?" Danny looked pained. "If she really believes that, she's the dumbest head person in any corporation any time anywhere."

"Actually, it's what she wants most of Ciel to believe that counts. It's very important to her and a few of the other top people that the ninety-first floor room remain... unremarkable."

"But that charged barrier-security-"

"Charged barriers are apparently pretty unremarkable in the Ciel building, at least on the upper floors where very few get to go," said Vic. "They don't tell security what they're guarding-they just tell them to guard it. Anyone who wanted to remain an employee at Ciel didn't ask questions they didn't already know the answers to. She wasn't any too happy about the, ah, loss of the residents of the room on the ninety-first floor, but she was a lot less unhappy than she would have been had everyone else seen them. Or if we'd started talking. Not that anyone would have believed us. Nor would we have lived long enough to gain any credibility."

"What about your buyer?"

"My buyer made a small good-faith payment to demonstrate understanding that the fact no names were mentioned is a more desirable outcome as things stand."

Danny sighed with exhaustion. "So we got away with it?"

"We got away with our lives. I'll be doing some fairly heavy trading in the next few months for a new client, and I'd appreciate it if you'd help me out." She hesitated. "Actually, the client insists."

"Sure. But I'd like to sack out on your sofa first."

"Be my guest." She got up and moved away as he stretched out.

Sleep took him almost immediately. He dreamed about nine-year-old girls again, but this time they all had two normal arms. His mother was brushing their hair and calling them angels. He tried not to take it personally, but he woke feeling better than he had in years.

James P. Blaylock
THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

From their second-story bedroom window in the Berkeley hills, Ed watched strange lights flicker through the treetops a mile or so above the house, a two-story rental that backed up to the wooded area around Tilden Park. The October night was unseasonably warm, the window open to catch the land breeze that drifted through the screen, ruffling Ed's hair. It hadn't been the lights that awakened him, although they cast an eerie, moving glow on the bedroom wall opposite the window; he had been up and around anyway, disturbed by odd nighttime noises, unable to sleep, his troubles going around in his head. He and Lisa had argued late last night, and had left the argument unresolved.

Somewhere around four o'clock every small noise had conspired to awaken him: the slowly dripping faucet in the bathroom, Lisa's rolling over in bed, the early-morning chatter of Lisa's parakeets in their cage downstairs. And then he had heard a low, unidentifiable humming noise, like bees in an immense hive. He had gotten up and gone downstairs, draping the parakeet cage before searching for the source of the noise, going out onto the front porch, where it was quieter, the sound evidently blocked by the house itself. By the time he had gotten back upstairs he was fully awake, and it was only then that he had noticed the oddly moving lights shining in through the window.

His eyes searched the vast shadow of the eucalyptus grove now, where it merged with the darkness of the pine forest farther up, mostly piñon pines, all in all a couple of hundred densely-wooded square miles cut with trails and cleared patches of grass and wildflowers. The fall sky was clear of clouds and fog. There was no telltale sign of smoke, just thousands of stars and the moon throwing out its cold light-no fire or terrestrial tragedy to account for this display of light and sound, which made him increasingly uneasy. He watched the lights playing across the hillside, now and then shooting up into the air like beacons; mostly white light, but with red flashes spaced evenly in a circular pattern, as if they traced the perimeter of a landing pad or of a vast spherical ship.

He and Lisa had taken this house at the top of the world partly because of its proximity to mother nature, which was actually something Lisa appreciated more than he did. He had liked the two-bedroom flat off Telegraph Avenue just fine, where they had lived happily during the first two years of their marriage. But Lisa had wanted something farther from the scene downtown, especially because they planned to have a child. His stubborn objection to moving had been met with a resistance that still surprised him when he thought about it. That had been their first real argument as a married couple, the first time he had seen Lisa lose her temper. To use the word lose was to understate it, though. There had come a point when her temper had flooded over the top of the dam and he'd had to swim to safety.

He was big enough now to admit that he had contributed his small part to that one, especially since she'd been right about moving. The Berkeley flat was too small, the plumbing leaked, the heating was lousy. There hadn't really been room for Ed's stuff, let alone for theirs, although Lisa wasn't a stuff kind of person, not the way he was, which was their philosophical gulf. His HO trains filled eight big cardboard boxes-not the trains alone, but the papier-mâché tunnels and mountains and the depot and houses and all - but during the years of their marriage the trains had been packed away, as had certain other of his collections. Out here at the edge of the wilderness they had an extra room, a piece of a basement, and forced-air heating. The monthly payment was more than they could afford, and that didn't generate harmony, but then everything these days cost more than you could afford, so to hell with it, or at least to hell with it as regards the house and other domestic concerns...

As for his stuff, it was still in boxes - a hell of a lot of boxes, admittedly - and the futile idea that the basement would become a train yard rather than a guest bedroom still haunted the new house like a dwindling ghost. But that was thin ice. There was nothing to be gained by skating around on it this morning.

There seemed to be some sort of increase in whatever was going on out in the woods, a series of blips and blaps that synchronized with the rising glow of a strangely purple light, like an old hippie nightclub. He could see movement now, too, large shadows shifting and growing and then shrinking away again. The bed creaked, and he turned around, thinking that Lisa had awakened, but she slept the sleep of the just, probably whacked out from the enormity of yesterday's work.

They had just gotten the last of the boxes from the move unpacked, putting in God knew how many hours, with the bulk of his crated-up stuff relegated indefinitely to the garage, which is what struck this off-key nostalgic chord in him. Lisa's vast collection of films occupied an entire bedroom downstairs. She taught film classes at San Francisco State, so the films were her work, whereas his own stuff was useless trash. Being married meant making concessions, and of course now that she was pregnant, there would be more concessions. His simple observation that the concessions were largely his had spoiled their late-night dinner, that and his unfortunate mention of his bowling ball, which was one of the treasures living in the garage, and which was actually more of a sore point than any of the rest of it, his trains included.

He cocked his head, hearing a high-pitched, dog-whistle-type shriek, just barely audible, as if it were projected at an inhuman decibel. A dog immediately started howling some distance away, and the sound of the howling struck him as unnatural, as if the dog sensed the presence of something fearful out in the woods. The sound diminished, but the howling continued now that the dog was spooked.

Back when he was single, Ed had bowled in a Tuesday night league. He had enjoyed the bowling alley: the sound of pins falling, the smell of spilled beer from longneck Budweiser bottles, the predictable wit that followed a picked-up spare or a lucky strike. He still had his bowling shirt with their sponsor's name embroidered on it: Nick and Fergy's Appliances. But Lisa wasn't a fan of bowling. That was the long and the short of it. She just didn't appreciate the art form. She had tried to for a little while, but it didn't wash, and, as with so many things, his bowling had gone by the boards as their marriage defined itself over time. He still wore the shirt now and then, although it made him feel like a fraud to invoke the names of Nick and Fergy now that he had become an outsider at the lanes.

The dog's howling stopped abruptly, as if someone had shut the creature up. A long shaft of ruby red light shot straight up into the sky from the darkness of the woods, then blinked out, followed by a half dozen such shafts, perhaps beacons, projected skyward now from the red perimeter lights. He wondered if this was some kind of Air Force or Army maneuver - nighttime war games using infrared lights.

Suddenly cool, he walked across the room to find a sweater in his open closet. Inside hung his retired bowling shirt, a delicate robin's egg blue that looked silver in the white light cast from the thing on the hillside. It was made of a high-quality rayon that could pass for silk, with royal blue embroidery-sixty dollars' worth of peerless, hometown American shirt. It occurred to him that it wouldn't be out of place framed, hanging on a wall, but then the very idea that it had become a mere keepsake depressed him, and he shut the closet door quietly and returned to the window, pulling on the sweater.

The bowling ball trouble had reared its ugly head several months ago, right after the move, when he had gone down to the lanes on San Pablo Avenue with his friend Jerry to bowl a couple of frames. He found that he hadn't lost his touch, even after two years of abstinence, which had probably made him feel slightly self-satisfied and off-guard, affecting his judgment when, afterward, they had gone into the pro shop. Ed had never owned a ball that was worth a damn, even in his playing days, and he coveted Jerry's ball, which was a rainbow swirl of colors that would have been right at home in an art museum. It had put Jerry back three hundred dollars, which was a hell of a lot of money, but to Ed it was like the house: these days nothing was affordable, so you bought it anyway.

In the pro shop, Ed had impulsively bought a ball of his own - a jet-black, oversized eight ball, which reminded him nostalgically of the fortune-telling eight balls of his youth. The transparently glossy finish was like water in a well, the sort of thing you sat and stared into, like a tidepool or a fire in a fireplace, and the figure eight itself, pearl white and with its suggestion of the infinite, hovered immensely deep within the black sphere. It had cost him nearly four hundred and sixty irretrievable dollars. The experience had been a little like getting a tattoo-once they drilled it, it was yours-and he had walked out of the pro shop in a rising tide of buyer's remorse that was in utter conflict with the virgin object that he carried in its fleece-lined bag. Afterward he and Jerry had spent a couple of hours in the Triple Rock Brewery, and Ed's doubts had dissolved.

It dawned on him now that the red lights in the woods must be lasers. He had read an article about them recently, about what they could do - drill teeth, slice neat little doughnut rings into your eyeballs, blast things to smithereens. Lisa had one that she used as a pointer in her film classes. The idea was unsettling, almost otherworldly. He had been unable to grasp the fine points of the article, why one laser would eliminate an incoming ICBM and another was just a jolly red dot, like the bouncing ball in old sing-along cartoons....

Sober, he would have known enough not to bring the bowling ball into the house when he got home from the brewery. They had a little detached garage built into the hillside, and it would have been easy enough for him to hide it out there and visit it from time to time, sneaking it out if he went down to the lanes with Jerry. In a year or two, when it was scuffed up, he could have brought it in and made up a perfectly reasonable lie about buying it at a garage sale. But he had blown all of that in his porter-fueled enthusiasm and in the interests of honesty. Don't lie to your wife; that's what the good angel had told him, although why God had let the good angel drink beer was more than he could say.

Lisa had been puzzled by the ball at first, full of disbelief. If she hadn't seen the receipt, he might have convinced her that he'd picked it up for \$29.99 at Kmart, but his planning had been faulty. Following her puzzlement had come a measure of angry unhappiness. It was no problem now to see that a hugely expensive bowling ball might have had this effect on her, but at the time Ed's rationale for the purchase had sounded as brilliant as Newton to him. Lisa had shown him their skyrocketing Visa bill and accused him of domestic crimes. She was pregnant, for God's sake. The baby would need a cradle, a high chair, an advanced degree from a good university. Of course he hadn't been able to use the ball, ever, and yet it had remained a sore spot in their marriage, the straw that could break the camel's back if it ever landed there again. Buying the eight ball had quite simply wrecked bowling forever, like the stolen diamond that the heiress could never wear in public. Calling up its ghost last night had been an error.

No more errors, he told himself as he heard Lisa roll over in bed. You don't need to be right to be happy: that would be his thought for the day. You could reach for the brake as easily as the accelerator. She put out her arm now and patted the place where he should have been. He wondered if his absence would wake her up, and he heard the rising shriek of the whistle noise out in the woods again. She raised herself blearily onto her elbows and looked around the room, as if trying dreamily to make out the source of the noise. The dog resumed its howling.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he said, turning toward the bed. She sat up, pushing her hair out of her face.

"Some kind of thing up in the hills," he told her. "Dwarves playing nine pins, maybe." With my bowling ball, he thought, surprised to find the anger rekindle itself so easily. He would have to watch it. Cover the brake - that was what the good angel would whisper to him.

"What are those noises?"

"There's something going on up there in the woods, maneuvers or something."

"Maneuvers?"

"Yeah, lights, too. Take a look."

She sat up and slipped on her bedroom slippers, joining him at the window. "That's weird," she said. "It looks like something from a UFO movie."

The idea spooked him, and he realized that he had been thinking the same thing. Whatever was happening was unearthly.

"God," Lisa muttered, "look at that."

Ed stared out the window in disbelief, his mouth open: a vast moving shadow slowly ascended from the forest floor. At first he thought it was an optical illusion, but the thing continued to rise from the trees, a black, circular patch of darkness that hung now in the air, hovering just above the tree line. White lights revolved within it. It seemed to Ed that he could see the stars shining straight through the sphere, a translucent black sun encircled by a white aura.

"It's a flying fucking saucer," Lisa whispered.

He couldn't argue with her. It looked like the Death Star, blotting out the sky.

The rest of the neighborhood was waking up. There were voices from down the block; a door slammed. Lisa pulled on her clothes and turned toward the stairs. "Let's get moving!" she said, her voice full of sudden anxiety.

Her frightened tone was infectious, and Ed realized that he was holding his breath. He felt vulnerable and exposed standing there in his boxer shorts, and as he stepped across the bedroom to grab his jeans from where he had tossed them last night, a siren started up somewhere down the block, shutting off within seconds, followed by the sound of someone talking through a loudspeaker or bullhorn. Ed caught the gist of it. "Shit!" he said out loud. "They're evacuating us!"

He heard Mr. Bord, his neighbor, shouting across the street, and an answering shout from Bord's wife. Lights were coming on all over the neighborhood, and he heard a car engine starting up. He went after a fresh pair of socks, then headed for the bathroom, the word "evacuation" going around in his head. Brush your teeth, he thought, who knows when you'll get another chance.... He pulled out his little travel kit from under the sink and sorted through it: razor, toothbrush, mini deodorant. Where would everyone go? Some kind of shelter probably, a school or church somewhere. To hell with that; he and Lisa would find a hotel. He wasn't spending the night on a cot in a school auditorium.

"Bring down my purse! The big one!" Lisa shouted up at him. He found it on the floor at the top of the stairs. What the hell else? He checked his wallet, which lay on the nightstand. Eighty bucks and two credit cards. That would do the trick. They could easily find food and shelter, even if they had to drive down south, maybe over to the coast toward Halfmoon Bay or Davenport. He pictured the freeways heading out of the Bay area, clogged with people fleeing the saucers, and it dawned on him that they might possibly never be back.

"You coming down?" Lisa had turned on all the lights in the house.

"Yeah!" he shouted. "I'm just grabbing a couple of things!" He hauled his tweed coat out of the closet. Extra socks and underwear wouldn't be a bad idea, either. And his bowling shirt! There was no way he was leaving that behind.

"They're saying something!" Lisa shouted up at him, and he went to the window over the street and opened the casement.

"Do not panic!" a voice ordered, horribly magnified by whatever device the man was speaking through. It was coming from a fire truck, apparently, creeping up the street, its light revolving. Ed was distracted by the sight of Mr. Bord coming out through his front door carrying a cardboard box, a heavy box, from the way he was stooped over.

"...the neighborhood cleared in twenty minutes," the truck was saying. Twenty minutes - they had some time yet! He walked to the opposite window again and looked into the hills. The inverted saucer still hovered there, a jet-black orb emitting a white corona, and he was reminded at once of his bowling ball, out in the garage along with the rest of his stuff, with the rest of his life, it seemed to him now.

He caught sight of the several books on the nightstand shelf-his bedside books, the marked-up copies he read and reread over the years, all of them keepers. He dumped the books and clothes onto his spread-out tweed coat along with his travel kit, then pulled the plug on his bedside lamp and laid that in among the rest, making a bundle of it. The lamp was an antique, with a mica shade shaped like a wizard's cap and a solid copper post on a globular base that looked like an enormous pearl. Like the books, it was irreplaceable. He thought suddenly about his train set, his comics and record albums and God-knew-what-all out in the garage. His little bundle of stuff looked pitiful to him, and he saw that in some indefinable sense this small parcel was a living history: the life of Edward Kelly illustrated by a lamp, some books, an old tweed coat and a bowling shirt.

He headed downstairs, holding the bundle inconspicuously behind Lisa's king-size purse. She met him in the living room, where she had already been rifling through the big drawer full of photos, loading them into a box. The parakeet cage sat by the front door, cleaned and replenished with food and water. Ed handed Lisa the purse and headed straight for the door.

"What's that stuff?" she asked. "Your lamp?..."

"Yeah," he said. "Travel kit." But he was already out the door, fumbling in his pocket for the car keys. He opened the back door of their Ford Escort, put his stuff on the seat, and then sprinted up the side of the house. The gate was

nearly blocked by yesterday's empty boxes, and he picked a few up, pitching them back down the path, then kicked the rest aside in order to swing the gate open. He strode to the garage door, pulled it open, and flipped on the light, but instead of going in after more of his things now, he turned and sprinted back down toward the car, picking up two of the empty boxes in mid-stride. Virtually all of his neighbors were carting crap out of their houses. The air was full of the yap and howl of dogs barking and people hollering to each other. He could still make out the shrieking and humming from the woods, a counterpoint to the noises of earthly terror up and down the block.

He dumped the books into the bottom of one of the empty boxes, then packed the lamp in carefully, shoving the clothing in around it to protect the shade.

Lisa came up behind him, carrying a box of her own. "What are you doing?" she asked skeptically.

"What everyone else is doing," he said. "Loading the car. One box for me and one for you, share and share alike." He smiled genially, taking the box from her and putting it on the seat, next to his own, realizing that he hadn't chosen his words very well. This was no time to start implying things.

She lingered for a moment, as if there was something she wanted to discuss, but instead she grabbed the other empty box from him and headed toward the house. After three steps she stopped again and turned around. "We've got a lot of stuff to take," she said raising her eyebrows at him.

"And not much time," he answered. The loudspeaker started up helpfully, droning out its evacuation message somewhere up the adjacent street.

She set out again without another word, which perhaps wasn't a good omen. But the truth was she had never understood the lamp any more than she had understood the bowling ball or the train set. Still, he was perfectly ready to be rational, to share the space in the car, what there was of it. They were a married couple; they could both make concessions, just like she had explained to him last night. He opened the trunk, which was empty aside from a couple of stadium blankets, the spare tire, and a map book. All of it could stay. He headed up the driveway again, through the open gate. If this was some kind of marital test that involved their capacity to meet each other halfway, then he was entirely up to the challenge.

He looked around the garage with an inquisitive eye. He couldn't be excessive; the Escort wasn't roomy enough for excess. The boxes containing the train set lay against the back wall, but there wasn't a single one of them that would even fit in the Escort, even if he bungeed the trunk lid down. They'd need to be sorted and repacked, and there wasn't time for that. My kingdom for a U-Haul truck, he thought, turning his back on the trains. Lying on the bench was the matched set of deer antlers his Uncle Oscar had given him twenty-odd years ago. They were mounted on a mahogany plaque with a tooled leather patch that had his name on it. Oscar, his favorite uncle, was dead now, which was reason enough not to abandon the antlers to the aliens. It dawned on him that the horns formed a cage the size of a large basket, into which he could load all manner of things, so they wouldn't really consume excess space anyway.

The bowling bag sat on the bench, too, but he ignored it for the moment and went out into the night carrying the antlers, hurrying down to the car, where he put them in the trunk. Then he fetched the box full of clothing from the back seat and repacked the travel kit and odds and ends of clothing within the arched confines of the horns. He hesitated over the bowling shirt. Why not wear it? he asked himself, and he pulled it on over his sweater without another thought. It was a little bit wrinkled now, but it gave him an instant sense of security, a suit of armor against the alien threat. He fitted the lamp in among the clothes in the antler basket and checked his watch: a bare ten minutes to go.

Picking up another empty box, he returned to the garage. He would take another two minutes, and then, as his dutiful concession, he would give Lisa what time was left over. He heard the car door slam while he was in the garage - Lisa hard at work. Good for her. He grabbed his bowling ball, case and all, and a shadow box full of fishing lures that had belonged to his father. There was the box half full of old Mad magazines that he had saved from his childhood, and another of vinyl records. He didn't have a turntable any longer, but he could always buy one....

He studied a couple of the faded old record jackets, overcome by a wave of nostalgia. They were too much a part of his past, and without his past he was nothing, only a cardboard cutout living in the tiresome moment. He was struck again with the epiphany he had glimpsed upstairs, in the light from the alien saucer-that these objects, cast away into the dark limbo of closets and garages, were him, in some essential way. One was defined by the stuff of one's life. Even the shambling beggar had something in his stolen shopping cart, something he would struggle to keep, pitiful as it might be. Poets knew the truth in this. Wives, apparently, did not.

He dumped the records and magazines together and went back down the path carrying the lot of it. There was a new noise from the hills, what sounded like the roar and whoosh of vast engines coming to life, perhaps death rays warming up, blood boilers, vacuum devices, anatomical probes. He picked up his pace, loping up the driveway where he nearly stumbled over the deer antlers sitting on the lawn, his stuff still packed neatly inside them. Lisa had pulled them out of the trunk.

Three cardboard boxes full of photos sat where the antlers had been. Calmly and fairly, he eenie-meened Lisa's three boxes and removed the loser, pulling it out and setting it on the lawn before replacing the antlers. Then he loaded in the bowling bag and the carton of magazines and records, which killed the rest of his share of the space. Adjusting his thinking, he ran back toward the garage instead of into the house like he had vowed. Lisa's hogging up the trunk had obviated one of his concessions. If it had come down to a street fight, then either she played by the rules or the rules took a hike. He glanced again at his watch, conscious that the seconds were ticking away at an alarming rate of speed, but when he reentered the garage, he was staggered by the sheer quantity of stuff that still littered the floor and benchtop. He shifted boxes around, pulling flaps back, searching for treasures, fueled now by nostalgia.

He found his old basketball, which a friend had inscribed with the legend "Sir Duke" in Germanic script, his

nickname on the courts back in the day. He stuffed the ball into a fresh box along with a genuine Hawaiian tiki carved out of palm, then threw in his collection of baseball caps, many of which were collectible, or would have been if they weren't worn out. He grabbed his old Red Sox jersey, which had fit him back when he'd played Pony League ball, but was too small for him now. Satisfied, he flipped off the light and shut the garage door, out of room and out of time. This was it, this pitiful little collection of trinkets. Trifles, he remembered reading somewhere, made the sum of life, and not always an elegant sum, either.

He wondered if he were being excessive with all this, and on impulse he tossed the Red Sox jersey into the bushes. What did he want with a jersey that didn't even fit? As for the rest-hell, it was the principle of the thing, wasn't it? That's what it had come down to, the old cliché.

He was staggered to see that once again Lisa had emptied out every damned single thing he had put into the trunk. The box of records and magazines sat on the lawn alongside the antlers. She had been cool about it, very controlled, making a simple statement. And he could understand the statement. She didn't want to argue about it. Setting his stuff on the lawn had made her simple point. He looked up at the open front door and saw her inside the house, pulling things hurriedly out of their china hutch-probably the silver and crystal, the "valuables," if that was the quality of your thinking. Her wooden jewelry box sat on the porch, ready to go.

Across the street the Bords' car fired up and backed out of the driveway, the family huddled inside, the windows rolled up against the terrible alien noise. In his haste, Bord knocked down the trash cans waiting at the curb, which rolled away downhill in the wake of the car, clattering and banging, bags of trash and lawn clippings spilling out onto the street. Other cars followed, running over the Bords' trash, knocking through the metal cans. One of the cans picked up speed, revolving as it rolled, bang up against the curb a good sixty yards downhill where it scraped to a stop, its rear end pointed downhill like the exhausted first stage of a galvanized rocket.

Once again he took a rational look at the nearly full trunk, removing exactly half of what Lisa had installed there, and filling the remainder with his things, which he picked up from the lawn again. He crammed the basketball and the rest of the garage items behind the front seat, leaving room on the back seat itself for whatever else Lisa brought out. Abruptly he was aware that his bowling bag was missing. He looked around the lawn, but it wasn't there. In a fit of anger he strode toward the house, but then he caught himself, forcing himself to take a deep breath. He started counting to level out his patience, but then stopped when he caught sight of his own trash cans there at the curb. Suspicious, he hurried down to them, and, sure enough, there lay the bowling bag in among the dead leaves and grass clippings, right where she'd dropped it, making the clearest sort of statement. Smiling grimly, he pulled it out, returned to the car, pushed aside the boxes in the trunk, and wedged the bowling bag in behind them, out of sight.

Lisa appeared just then, piled high with her jewelry box and the things from the hutch, coming up behind him silently. He steeled himself for the inevitable.

"Backseat!" he said helpfully, gesturing toward the open door. "Plenty of room left."

"Get the parakeets?" she asked, phrasing it as a question rather than an order. He turned to obey. It was a reasonable request, but it would eat up the rest of the available space inside the car, the only real space for the china closet stuff and the jewelry box. But what the hell, he thought, life was nothing but one hard choice after another. He grabbed the cage, careful not to dump the water and food, and turned straight back toward the car.

Lisa had disappeared behind the raised trunk lid, and he saw only her hand and arm jerking and throwing. Magazines and records flew out onto the lawn in a hurricane of flapping paper and sailing cardboard. The whole damned box followed, end over end. He stood clutching the bird cage, suddenly humbled by this display of wrath. The antlers followed, cartwheeling into the neighbor's hedge, littering the lawn with his clothes. The lamp rolled free of the bundle, and he set the cage down and ran to it, picking it up. It was apparently unhurt, and he hid it in the shrubbery in case her rage compelled her to track it down and destroy it. With an exaggerated lack of concern he walked back to the parakeets, watching as she heaved the basketball off into the night and then zingied the shadow box onto the roof.

"Spare the tiki," he muttered, but it did no good. The tiki sailed clear across the street, bouncing across the Bords' driveway and up onto their front porch. She found his bowling ball where he had hidden it, and she hauled it out, swung the bag by the handle, and heaved it into the shrubbery. Then, coldly and steadily, she walked straight up to him and took the parakeet cage, turning around and walking back to the car, where she belted it securely onto the rear seat. She turned and strode past him into the house as if he didn't exist, her jaw set, eyes straight ahead.

He knew better than to say anything. He had forgotten about the brake, and instead had accelerated, picking up speed in his haste to save his things.

The fire truck swung around the corner again at the bottom of the hill, unimpeded by what was now a trickle of outward-bound cars. "Evacuate immediately," the magnified voice intoned. "Leave at once." The truck paused in front of their house, repeating the order for Ed's benefit, and he waved and nodded seriously, pointing toward the house to show them that someone was still inside. The truck moved on. He looked at the junk on the lawn. There was no time to repack it. She'd had the last word.

He caught sight of her now, pulling on a jacket as she approached the door, keys in hand. This was it. They were leaving. So much for concessions. So much for fairness. But then she stopped, turning around, running toward the kitchen for some forgotten thing.

Just then he was struck with inspiration, one last vital statement. He ducked into the bushes, where he spotted the bowling bag in the dirt. Dusting it with the sleeve of his shirt, he hurried back to the car. He unbelted the parakeets and took them out, replacing them on the seat with the bag and ball, expecting to hear the door slam as he sprinted the six steps to the top of the driveway, where he set the cage carefully down on the concrete. At the car again he positioned the seatbelt across the bag, pulled it tighter, and secured it.

He climbed into the Escort and fired up the engine just as Lisa came out of the house, her purse over her shoulder, shutting the door behind her and locking the dead bolt. She must have heard the last warning, because she was nearly running when she passed the parakeet cage, not even seeing it in her fear and haste. She opened the door hard enough to test its hinges, and when the dome light blinked on, she glanced into the back seat, where the bowling bag sat securely, snuggled down into the upholstery. The sight of it seemed to confuse her, as if it were an utterly alien thing, something from outside her realm of experience. The look of confusion passed away, replaced by something dangerously close to resignation, and immediately he regretted his little gag.

"Just kidding," he muttered, but already she had depressed the seat belt button, freeing the bag, which she opened in a single, swift motion, carrying it down toward the street. Ed climbed out, not quite knowing how to react, thinking that maybe she had come utterly unhinged and was simply walking away into the night.

The street was empty of cars. They were apparently the last ones left in the abandoned neighborhood. Lisa walked briskly out into the center, where she stopped, swept her arm back, and bowled the eight ball down the rough asphalt. Ed saw it hit a chuckhole, which deflected it toward the curb. It caromed off, bouncing a few times, then smashed through the closest of the Bords' renegade trash cans, sounding like a train wreck in the silent night. He saw it bounce clear again, centrifugal force pinning it to the curb as it shot away downhill.

He was suddenly aware of the quiet. There were no more noises from the hillside, no whirring or shrieking, just an eye-of-the-hurricane silence. Horns honked in the distance, traffic moving out along Grizzly Peak or down Marin, heading toward Oakland and Richmond and the freeways. Lisa walked slowly back toward the car, passing him without looking at him. "Gutter ball," he heard her say, but there was no spirit in her voice, no joking around. She simply looked tired. He felt the urge to rush to her, drop to his knees, recant everything. But she wasn't in the mood for it. Not now she wasn't. If the universe cut him any slack, he could think again about it later.

She picked up the birdcage from where it sat on the driveway and put it carefully back into the car, then climbed wearily into the front seat and belted in, waiting for him. There was a red glow in the air out over the hills, and he thought at once that it was the alien laser light, consuming the sky, but then he realized that it was merely the dawn, that the sun was rising on a warm and cloudless fall morning. He picked his way across the lawn, which was strewn with the litter of their lives-both of their lives, since Lisa had never had the chance to return her own stuff to the car from where he had ditched it.

The sound of the loudspeaker squawked again from up the road, breaking in on his thoughts. If the truck made the same circuit it had before, it wouldn't take thirty seconds for it to get down here....

He climbed in beside her and backed out, heading downhill and around the corner onto Grizzly Peak, where right away he saw activity in the street ahead-cars stopped, uniformed men milling around, leaning in open windows to say something to the evacuees. The first of the cars in line made a U-turn and motored back up hill, throttling past them. The driver's face, visible in the glow of the instrument panel, was full of a visible rage, as if he had just been insulted beyond words.

"What the hell is this now?" Ed asked, but Lisa didn't respond. The parakeets chattered happily in the back seat. He rolled down the window and nodded at an officer, apparently a fireman, who stepped off the curb and approached the Escort.

"You folks can go home," he said. "Excitement's over. Sorry for the panic."

"It's over?" Ed asked. "What the hell was it?" All that for nothing, he thought. But then he glanced over at Lisa and realized that it hadn't been for nothing; he wasn't that lucky. It might be the end of the world, one way or another. The aliens had won without firing a shot. "What was all that racket back in the hills?"

"Some kind of performance artists from Cal." The man shrugged. His face was bland. Clearly he wasn't happy to be up this early either, and he looked at Ed's bowling shirt now, as if he didn't quite understand why Ed would want to wear it over the top of his sweater like that.

"Artists?" Ed asked. This was astonishing.

"Yeah. They didn't file a permit. Had a bunch of sound equipment and some kind of high-tech holographic stuff that they trucked back into the hills on an access road. Just a prank."

Lisa laughed suddenly, shaking her head as if she'd just figured out the punch line to a joke. Apparently mystified, the fireman ducked a little in order to look in at her.

"It's October thirtieth," she said, and laughed again, shaking her head as if it beat all.

Ed patted her on the thigh good-naturedly. Clearly she'd snapped. And it was his fault, of course. His response to an apparent alien invasion had been to attack his own wife in an insidious and incomprehensible way.

"I'm sorry?" the fireman asked.

"October thirtieth, 1938 - that's the night Orson Welles pulled the War of the Worlds prank."

The man looked as if he'd been pole-axed. "The tripods thing! He did that radio show! Well, I'll be damned...."

He laughed now and stepped away from the car, motioning Ed forward. Other cars had stopped behind them, and the Escort was blocking traffic. They made an easy U-turn and headed back uphill, Lisa still chuckling to herself. Through the open window, Ed heard the fireman shouting the news to one of his cohorts, the mystery solved to everyone's satisfaction. He swung the car back up into the neighborhood, and between two houses he got a glimpse of the eastern sky, ablaze with color. The tall houses and curb trees shaded the streets and sidewalks, though, and there was still a lot of darkness in the morning.

He sensed that Lisa was looking at him, and he glanced in her direction as if he were checking his passenger-side blind spot, even though there was no lane there. In fact she was staring at him, an expectant grin on her face, as if she had seen the joke and wondered if he had, and when their eyes met, she burst into laughter again. "You've got to admit

it's funny," she said, shaking her head in amused wonder. "The prank, I mean." The parakeets in the backseat took up their merry chatter again, as if they, at least, were cheerful enough to admit anything.

Ed tried to laugh, but the sound he made was inhuman, and he was abruptly silent. The drive home, only half a mile, seemed an eternity now, and yet he dreaded arriving. But there was the bottom of their street just ahead, and as he turned the car toward home, he saw in the early morning twilight the Bords' farthest-flung trash can lying in the gutter. Scattered, car-flattened trash littered the street above it. He glanced at Lisa again. She had a beatific half-smile on her face that was impossible to read. He slowed down a little as they passed the fallen trash can, then pointed toward the hills, hunkering down and looking out through the windshield. "What's that?" he asked, knowing exactly what it was - a news helicopter sweeping low over the woods, getting the story.

Lisa peered up through the window, though, turning her head away, and at once he bent over and squinted into the side mirror, looking back down at the galvanized mouth of the Bords' trash can, facing uphill so that it caught the first rays of the morning sun like a glowing metal halo. Inside the half-filled can lay the discarded bowling ball, a shining black hole against the white aurora of a kitchen trash bag.

Jeffrey Ford
MALTHUSIAN'S ZOMBIE

1

I'm not sure what nationality Malthusian was, but he spoke with a strange accent; a stuttering lilt of mumblement it took weeks to fully comprehend as English. He had more wrinkles than a witch and a shock of hair whiter and fuller than a Samoyed's ruff. I can still see him standing at the curb in front of my house, slightly bent, clutching a cane whose ivory woman's head wore a blindfold. His suit was a size and a half too large, as were his eyes, peering from behind lenses cast at a thickness that must have made his world enormous. The two details that halted my raking and caused me to give him more than a neighborly wave were his string tie and a mischievous grin I had only ever seen before on my six-year-old daughter when she was drawing one of her monsters.

"Malthusian," he said from the curb.

I greeted him and spoke my name.

He mumbled something and I leaned closer to him and begged his pardon. At this, he turned and pointed back at the house down on the corner. I knew it had recently changed hands, and I surmised he had just moved in.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," I said.

He put his hand out and I shook it. His grip was very strong, and he was in no hurry to let go. Just as I realized he was aware of my discomfort, his grin turned into a wide smile and he released me. Then he slowly began to walk away.

"Nice to meet you," I said to his back.

He turned, waved, and let loose an utterance that had the cadence of poetry. There was something about leaves and fruit and it all came together in a rhyme. Only when he had disappeared into the woods at the end of the block did I realize he had been quoting Pope. "Words are like leaves, where they most abound, beneath, little fruit or sense is found." As a professor of literature, this amused me, and I decided to try to find out more about Malthusian.

I was on sabbatical that year, supposedly writing a book concerning the structure of Poe's stories, which I saw as lacking the energetic ascent of the Fichtian curve and being comprised solely of denouement. Like houses of Usher, the reader comes to them, as in a nightmare, with no prior knowledge, at the very moment they begin to crumble. What I was really doing was dogging it in high fashion. I'd kiss my wife goodbye as she left for work, take my daughter to school, and then return home to watch reruns of those shows my brother and I had devoted much of our childhood to. Malthusian's daily constitutional was an opportunity to kill some time, and so, when I would see him passing in front of the house, I'd come out and engage him in conversation.

Our relationship grew slowly at first, until I began to learn the cues for his odd rendering of the language. By Thanksgiving I could have a normal conversation with him, and we began to have lengthy discussions about literature. Oddly enough, his interests were far more contemporary than mine. He expressed a devotion to Pynchon, and the West African writer Amos Tutuola. I realized I had spent too long teaching the canon of Early American works and began to delve into some of the novels he mentioned. One day I asked him what he had done before his retirement. He smiled and said something that sounded like *mind-fucker*.

I was sure I had misunderstood him. I laughed and said, "What was that?"

"Mind-fucker," he said. "Psychologist."

"Interesting description of the profession," I said.

He shrugged and his grin dissipated. When he spoke again, he changed the subject to politics.

Through the winter, no matter the weather, Malthusian walked. I remember watching him struggle along through a snowstorm one afternoon, dressed in a black overcoat and black Tyrolean hat, bent more from some invisible weight than a failure of his frame. It struck me then that I had never seen him on his return journey. The trails through the woods went on for miles, and I was unaware of one that might bring him around to his house from the other end of the block.

I introduced him to Susan, my wife, and to my daughter, Lyda. There, at the curb, he kissed both their hands, or tried to. When Lyda pulled her hand back at his approach, he laughed so I thought he would explode. Susan found him charming, but asked me later, "What the hell was he saying?"

The next day, he brought a bouquet of violets for her; and for Lyda, because she had shown him her drawing pad, he left with me a drawing he had done rolled up and tied with a green ribbon. After dinner, she opened it and smiled. "A monster," she said. It was a beautifully rendered charcoal portrait of an otherwise normal middle-aged man, wearing an unnerving look of total blankness. The eyes were heavy lidded and so realistically glassy, the attitude of the body

so slack, that the figure exuded a palpable sense of emptiness. At the bottom of the page in a fine calligraphic style were written the words *Malthusian's Zombie*.

"I told him I liked monsters," said Lyda.

"Why is that a monster?" asked Susan, who I could tell was a little put off by the eerie nature of the drawing. "It looks more like a college professor on sabbatical."

"He thinks nothing," said Lyda, and with her pinky finger pointed to the zombie's head. She had me tack it to the back of her door, so that it faced the wall unless she wanted to look at it. For the next few weeks, she drew zombies of her own. Some wore little hats, some bow ties, but all of them, no matter how huge and vacant the eyes, wore mischievous grins.

In early spring, Malthusian invited me to come to his house one evening to play a game of chess. The evening air was still quite cool, but the scent of the breeze carried the promise of things green. His house, which sat on the corner lot, was enormous, by far the largest in the neighborhood. It had three acres of woods appended to it and at the very back touched upon a lake that belonged to the adjacent town.

Malthusian was obviously not much for yard work or home repair; the very measure of a man in this part of the world. A tree had cracked and fallen through the winter and it still lay partially obstructing the driveway. The three-story structure and its four tall columns in front needed paint; certain porch planks had succumbed to dry rot and its many windows were streaked and smudged. The fact that he took no initiative to rectify these problems made him yet more likable to me.

He met me at the door and ushered me into his home. I had visions of the place being like a dim, candle-lit museum of artifacts as odd as their owner, and had hoped to decipher Malthusian's true character from them as if they were clues in a mystery novel. There was nothing of the sort. The place was well lit and tastefully, though modestly, decorated.

"I hope you like merlot," he said as he led me down an oak paneled hallway toward the kitchen.

"Yes," I said.

"It's good for the heart," he said and laughed.

The walls I passed were lined with photographs of Malthusian with different people. He moved quickly and I did not linger out of politeness, but I thought I saw one of him as a child, and more than one of him posing with various military personnel. If I wasn't mistaken, I could have sworn I had caught the face of an ex-president in one of them.

The kitchen was old linoleum in black-and-white checkerboard design, brightly lit by overhead fluorescent lights. Sitting on a table in the center of the large expanse was a chessboard, a magnum of dark wine, two fine crystal goblets, and a thin silver box. He took a seat on one side of the table and extended his hand to indicate I was to sit across from him. He methodically poured wine for both of us, opened the box, retrieved a cigarette, lit it, puffed once, and then led with his knight.

"I'm not very good," I said as I countered with my opposite knight.

He waved his hand in the air, flicked ash onto the floor, and said, "Let's not let it ruin our game."

We played in silence for some time and then I asked him something that had been on my mind since he had first disclosed his profession to me. "And what type of psychologist were you? Jungian? Freudian?"

"Neither," he said. "Those are for children. I was a rat shocker. I made dogs drool."

"Behaviorist?" I asked.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said with a laugh.

"I teach the Puritans with the same method," I said and this made him laugh louder. He loosened his ever-present string tie and cocked his glasses up before plunging through my pitiful pawn defense with his bishop.

"I couldn't help but notice those photos in the hall," I said. "Were you in the army?"

"Please, no insults," he said. "I worked for the U.S. government."

"What branch?" I asked.

"One of the more shadowed entities," he said. "It was necessary in order to bring my mother and father and sister to this country."

"From where?" I asked.

"The old country."

"Which one is that?"

"It no longer exists. You know, like in a fairy tale, it has disappeared through geopolitical enchantment." With this he checked me by way of a pawn/castle combination.

"Your sister?" I asked.

"She was much like your girl, Lyda. Beautiful and brilliant and what an artist."

As with the game, he took control of the conversation from here on out, directing me to divulge the history of my schooling, my marriage, the birth of my daughter, the nature of our household.

It was a gentle interrogation, the wine making me nostalgic. I told him everything and he seemed to take the greatest pleasure in it, nodding his head at my declaration of love for my wife, laughing at all of Lyda's antics I could remember, and I remembered all of them. Before I knew it, we had played three games, and I was as lit as a stick of kindling. He led me down the hallway to the front door.

As if from thin air, he produced a box of chocolates for my wife. "For the lady," he said. Then he placed in my hand another larger box. Through bleary eyes, I looked down and saw the image of Rat Fink, the pot-bellied, deviant rodent who had been a drag racing mascot in the late sixties.

"It's a model," he told me. "Help the girl make it, she will enjoy this monster."

I smiled in recognition of the figure I had not seen since my teens.

"Big Daddy Roth," he said, and with this eased me out the door and gently closed it behind me.

Although I had as my mission to uncover the mystery of Malthusian, my visit had made him more of an enigma. I visited him twice more to play chess, and on each of the occasions, the scenario was much the same. The only incident that verged on revelation was when Lyda and I constructed the model and painted it. "Rat shocker," I remembered him telling me. I had a momentary episode in which I envisioned myself salivating at the sound of a bell.

On the day that Lyda brought me spring's first crocus, a pale violet specimen with an orange mouth, Malthusian was taken away in an ambulance. I was very worried about him and enlisted Susan, since she was a nurse practitioner, to use her connections in the hospitals to find out where he was. She spent the better part of her Friday evening making calls but came up with nothing.

2

Days passed, and I began to think that Malthusian might have died. Then, a week to the day after the ambulance had come for him, I found a note in my mailbox. All it said was *Chess Tonight*.

I waited for the appointed hour, and after Susan had given me a list of things to ask about the old man's condition and Lyda a get-well drawing of a dancing zombie, I set out for the house on the corner.

He did not answer the door, so I opened it and called inside, "Hello?"

"Come," he called from back in the kitchen.

I took the hallway and found him sitting at the chess table. The wine was there, and the cigarette case, but there was no board.

"What happened?" I said when I saw him.

Malthusian looked yet more wrinkled and stooped, sitting in his chair like a sack of old clothes. His white hair had thinned considerably and turned a pale shade of yellow. In his hands he clutched his cane, which I had never seen him use before while in his house, and that childish grin, between malevolence and innocence, had been replaced by the ill, forced smile of Rat Fink.

"No chess?" I asked as a way of masking my concern.

"A game of a different order tonight," he said and sighed.

I was about to ask again what had happened, but he said, "Drink a glass of wine and then you will listen."

We sat in silence as I poured and drank. I had never noticed before but the blindfold on the ivory woman's head did not completely cover her left eye. She half stared at me as I did what I was told. When the glass was empty and I had poured another, he looked up and said, "Now, you must listen carefully. I give you my confession and the last wish of a dying man."

I wanted to object but he brought the cane to his lips in order to silence me.

"In 1969, September, I was attending a conference of the American Psychological Association in Washington D.C. A professor from Princeton, one Julian Jaynes, gave a lecture there. Have you heard of him?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Now you will," he said. "The outrageous title of his address was 'The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind.' Just the name of it led many to think it was pure snake oil. When Mr. Jaynes began to explain his theory, they were sure of it. Individual consciousness as we know it today, he said, is a very recent development in the history of mankind. Before that, like schizophrenics, human beings listened to a voice that came from within their own heads and from this took their cues. These were post-ice age hunter-gatherers for whom it was important to think with a single mind. They heard the voice of some venerable elder of their tribe who had since, perhaps, passed on. This was the much-touted 'voice of God.' Individual ego was virtually nonexistent."

"You mean," I said, "when the ancients refer to the word of the Lord, they were not speaking figuratively?"

"Yes, you follow," he said and smiled, lifting the wine glass to his lips with a trembling hand. "I could tell you that this phenomenon had to do with the right hemispherical language center of the brain and a particular zone called Wernicke's area. When this area was stimulated in modern laboratory experiments, the subjects very often heard authoritarian voices that either admonished or commanded. But they were very distant voices. The reason, Jaynes believed, was that these auditory hallucinations were travelling from the right hemisphere to the left, not through the corpus callosum—the, shall we call it, bridge that joins the hemispheres—but rather through another passageway, the anterior commissure."

"I'm hanging on by a thread, now," I said.

Malthusian did not acknowledge my joke, but closed his eyes momentarily and pressed on as if it would all soon become clear.

"Whereas Jaynes gives many explanations for the growing faintness of the voice of God—genocide, natural upheavals, parental selection, environmental demands requiring the wonderful plasticity of the human brain to enact these changes—my fellow researchers and I believed that the muting of the voice was a result of the rapid shrinking of the anterior commissure to its present state of no more than one eighth of an inch across. This, we believed, was the physiological change that fractured the group mind into individual consciousness. 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' You see? There is much more, but that is the crux."

"The survival of human beings depended upon this change?" I asked.

"The complexity of civilization required diversification."

"Interesting," was all I could manage.

"As I said," Malthusian went on, "very few took Jaynes seriously, but I did. His ideas were revolutionary, but they were not unfounded." Here, he took a cigarette from the silver case and lit it.

"Is that smart," I asked, nodding at the cigarette, "considering your health?"

"I have been conditioned by Philip Morris," he said with a smile.

"This theory is only the beginning, I can tell," I said.

"Very good, professor," he whispered. "As Farid Ud-Din Attar might have written—if this tale I am about to tell you were inscribed with needles upon the corner of the eye, it would still serve as a lesson to the circumspect."

He lifted the bottle of wine and poured me another glass. "To begin with, if you tell anyone what I am about to tell you, you will be putting your family and yourself in great jeopardy. Understood?"

I thought momentarily of Malthusian's photos with all those military personnel and his telling me that he had been employed by one of the more shadowed entities of the government. A grim silence filled the room as those huge eyes of his focused on mine. I thought of leaving, but instead I slowly nodded.

"I was part of a secret government project called Dumbwaiter. The title might have been humorous if not for the heinous nature of the work we were doing. As psychologists, we were assigned the task of creating dedicated assassins, men devoid of personal volition, who would do anything—*anything*—that they were ordered to do. Mind control, it is sometimes called. The CIA had, for a short period, thought that the drug LSD might be useful in this pursuit, but instead of creating drones they spread cosmic consciousness. Once this failed, the Behaviorists were called in.

"My lab was situated in a large, old Victorian house out in the woods. No one would have suspected that some bizarre Cold War experiment was taking place in its basement. I had two partners and, working off Jaynes's theory, through surgery and the implanting of pig arteries and chimpanzee neurons we widened and filled the anterior commissure in a test subject's brain in order to increase the volume of the auditory hallucination. Through conditioning, my voice became the voice of God for our subject. I was always in his head. One verbal command from me and my order would remain with him, inside his mind, until the task was completed."

What else was I to think but that Malthusian was pulling my leg. "Do I look that gullible?" I said and laughed so hard I spilled a drop of my wine on the table.

The old man did not so much as smile. "We had created a zombie," he said. "You laugh, but you should be laughing at yourself. You do not realize how, without any of our work, the human mind is so perfectly suggestible. The words 'obedience' and 'to listen' share the same root in more than half a dozen languages. With our experiment, this man would do whatever he was told. The results even surprised us. I instructed him to learn fluent French in a week. He did. I instructed him to play a Chopin Nocturne on the piano after only hearing it once. He did. I instructed him to develop a photographic memory. I commanded him to stop aging. At times, for the purpose of a particular assignment, I might instruct him to become fatter, thinner, even shorter."

"Impossible," I said.

"Nonsense," said Malthusian. "It has been known for some time now that the mere act of deep thought can change the physiological structure of the brain. If only my colleagues and I could publish our findings, others would also know that prolonged, highly focused thought is capable of transforming the physiological structure of more than just the brain."

It was obvious to me at this time that Malthusian's illness had affected his mind. I put on a serious face and pretended to follow along, exhibiting a mixed sense of wonder and gravity.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" I asked.

"Why, yes, why," he said, and, more astonishing than his tale, tears began to form at the corners of his eyes. "The zombie had been useful. Please don't ask me specifically how, but let us just say that his work resulted in the diminution of agitants against democracy. But then, with the end of the Cold War, our project was disbanded. We were ordered to eliminate the zombie and set fire to the facility, and were given large sums of cash to resume normal life—with the threat that if we were to breathe a word about Dumbwaiter to anyone, we would be killed."

"Eliminate the zombie?" I said.

He nodded. "But I had pangs of conscience. My own God was talking to me. This man, whom we had hollowed out and filled with my commands, had been kidnapped. Just an average healthy citizen with a wife and a small child had been taken off the street one day by men in a long dark car. His loved ones never knew what had become of him. Likewise, I had made a deal to never see my own family again when I promised to work on Dumbwaiter. I disappeared after my parents and sister were brought to this country. For me to contact them in any way would mean their demise. I have missed them terribly through the years, especially my sister, with whom I had a strong bond after surviving the horrors of the old country. For this reason, I could not dispose of the zombie."

"That would be murder," I said, and instantly regretted it.

"It would have been murder either way," said Malthusian. "Either I killed the subject or they killed us *and* our subject. Instead, I took a chance and left to the ravages of the fire a cadaver we had on ice there for many years. We hoped that no one was aware of it, that if a body was found in the ashes that would be enough to suffice. Remember, this is the government we are talking about. We had worked for them long enough to know that their main priority was silence." Malthusian went silent himself, nodding his head upon his chest. I thought for a second that he had fallen asleep. When I cleared my throat, he reached for the wine but stopped. He did the same with the cigarette case. Then he looked up at me.

"I'm dying," he said.

"This very moment?" I asked.

"Soon, very soon."

"Did they tell you that at the hospital?"

"I'm a doctor. I know."

"Is there something you need me to do? Do you want me to contact your sister?" I asked.

"No, you must not mention any of this. But there is something I want you to do," he said.

"Call the ambulance?"

"I want you to take care of the zombie until the transformation is complete."

"What are you talking about?" I said, and smiled.

"He's here with me, in the house. He has been with me all along since we burned the lab." Malthusian dropped the cane on the floor, leaned forward on the table and reached for me with his left hand. I pushed the chair back and stood away from the table to avoid his grasp.

"I've been working with him, trying to reverse the effects of the experiment. The change has begun, but it will take a little longer than I have left to complete it. You must help me to return this poor man to his family so that he can enjoy what is left of his life. He is beginning to remember a thing or two and the aging process is slowly starting to return him to his rightful maturity. If I should die, I require you to merely house him until he remembers where he is from. It won't take very long now."

"Dr. Malthusian," I said. "I think you need to rest. You are not making any sense."

The old man slowly stood up. "You will wait!" he yelled at me, holding his arm up and pointing with one finger. "I will get him."

I said nothing more, but watched as Malthusian precariously leaned over to retrieve his cane. Then he hobbled out of the room, mumbling something to himself. When I heard him mounting the stairs to the second floor, I tiptoed out of the kitchen, down the hall, and out the front door. I reached the street and started running like I was ten years old.

Later, in bed, after locking all the doors and windows, I woke Susan up and told her everything that Malthusian had said. When I got to the part about the zombie, she started laughing.

"He wants you to baby-sit his zombie?" she asked.

"It's not funny," I said. "He worked for some secret branch of the government."

"That's the one all the kooks work for," she said. "You're a man with way too much time on his hands."

"He was pretty convincing," I said, now grinning myself.

"What if I told you they were putting Frankenstein together in the basement of the hospital? If he's not crazy, he's probably playing with your mind. He seems to have a healthy measure of mischief about him. That string tie is a good indicator."

I wasn't completely convinced, but Susan allayed my fears enough to allow me to get to sleep. My dreams were punctuated by wide-eyed stares and piano music.

I forced myself to believe that Susan was right, and that I had better ignore Malthusian and get to work on my book. The summer was quickly approaching and soon the autumn would send me back to teaching. It would be a great embarrassment to return to work in September empty-handed. I picked up where I had left off months earlier on the manuscript—a chapter concerning "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." The return to work was what I needed to anchor me against the tide of Malthusian's weirdness, but that particular story by the great American hoaxer, second only to P. T. Barnum, had *zombie* written all over it.

One afternoon, when I was about to leave the house to go to the local bookstore, I looked out the front window and saw the old man slowly shuffling up the street. I had neither seen nor heard from Malthusian since the night I had abandoned him in his fit of madness two weeks prior. It would have been a simple thing to leave the living room and hide in the kitchen, but instead I quickly ducked down beneath the sill. As I crouched there, I wondered at the fear I had developed for my neighbor.

Five minutes went by, and when I thought he should have passed on to where the woods began at the end of the block, I raised my head above the window sill. There he was, standing at the curb, hunched over, staring directly at me like some grim and ghastly bird of yore. I uttered a brief, startled gasp, and as if he could hear me, he brought the top of his cane up and tapped it lightly against the brim of his Tyrolean hat. Then he turned and moved off. This little scene threw me into a panic. I never went to the bookstore, and when it was time for Lyda to get out of school, I drove over and picked her up instead of letting her take the bus, which would have left her off at the corner. My panic was short-lived, for that evening, at dinner, as I was about to describe the event to Susan, we heard the ambulance.

It is sad to say, but Malthusian's death was a relief to me. Lyda and I watched from a distance as they brought him out on the wheeled stretcher. Susan, who was afraid of nothing, least of all death, went all the way to his house and spoke to the EMTs. She was not there long when we saw her begin walking back.

"Massive heart attack," she said as she approached, shaking her head.

"That's a shame," I said.

Lyda put her arm around my leg and hugged me.

The next morning, while I was wandering around the house looking for inspiration to begin working on Poe again, I discovered that Lyda had draped a silk purple flower, plucked from Susan's dining-room table arrangement, around the neck of Rat Fink. The sight of this made me smile, and as I reached out to touch the smooth illusion of the blossom, I was interrupted by a knocking at the door. I left my daughter's room and went downstairs. Upon opening the front door, I discovered that there was no one there. As I stood, looking out, I heard the knocking sound again. It took me a few long seconds to adjust to the fact that the sound was coming from the back of the house.

"Who knocks at the back door?" I said to myself as I made my way through the kitchen.

3

His eyes were the oval disks of Japanese cartoon characters, glassy and brimming with nothing. Like the whiteness of Melville's whale, you could read anything into them, and while Lyda and I sat staring at him staring at the wall, I projected my desires and frustrations into those mirrors with a will I doubt Ahab could have mustered.

"A blown Easter egg," said Lyda, breaking the silence.

And in the end, she was right. There was an exquisite emptiness about him. His face was drawn, his limbs thin but wiry with real muscle. He looked like a fellow who might at one time have worked as a car mechanic or a UPS delivery man. I guessed his age to be somewhere in the late thirties but knew, from what Malthusian had suggested, that his youth was merely compliance to a command. I wondered how old he would become when the spell was broken. Perhaps, like Valdemar in Poe's story, I thought, he will eventually be reduced to a pool of putrescence.

We had been sitting with the zombie for over an hour when Susan finally arrived home from work. Lyda got up from her seat and ran into the living room to tell her mother that we had a visitor.

"Guess who?" I heard her ask. She led Susan by the hand into the kitchen.

Upon discovering our guest, the first word out of her mouth was, "No." It wasn't like the shriek of a heroine being accosted by a creature in the horror movies. This was the no of derailed late-night amorous advances, a response to Lyda's pleading to stay up till eleven on a school night.

"Let's be sensible about this," I said. "What are we going to do?"

"Call the police," said Susan.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "The very fact that he is here proves that what Malthusian told me was all true. We'd be putting our lives in danger."

"Go play," Susan said to Lyda.

"Can the zombie play?" she asked.

"The zombie has to stay here," I said and pointed toward the kitchen entrance.

When Lyda was gone, Susan sat down at the table and she and I stared at him some more. His breathing was very shallow, and with the exception of this subtle movement of his chest he sat perfectly still. There was something very relaxing about his presence.

"This is crazy," she said to me. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Malthusian said he would soon remember where he was from, and that we should take him to his home whenever the memory of it became clear to him."

"Can't we just drive him somewhere and let him out of the car?" asked Susan. "We'll leave him off in the parking lot at the mall."

"You wouldn't do that with a cat, but you would abandon a human being?" I said.

She shook her head in exasperation. "Well, what does he do? It doesn't look like much is becoming clear to him," she said.

I turned to the zombie and said, "What is your name?"

He didn't move.

Susan reached over and snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Hey, Mister Zombie, what should we call you?"

"Wait a second," I said. "He doesn't answer questions, he responds to commands."

"Tell me your name," Susan said to him.

The zombie turned his head slightly toward her and began to slowly move his lips. "Tom," he said and the word sort of fell out of his mouth, flat and dull as an old coin.

Susan brought her hand up to cover a giggle. "Tommy the zombie," she said.

"Pathetic," I said and couldn't suppress my own laughter even though there were shadowed entities at large in the world who might engineer our demise.

We had never had so unassuming a house guest. Tom was like that broom standing in the kitchen closet until you need it. The novelty of performance upon command soon wore off. Sure, we got a little mileage out of the stage hypnotist antics - "Bark like a dog." "Act like a chicken." I know it sounds a bit unfeeling, but we did it, I suppose, simply because we could, similar in spirit to the whim of the government that originally engineered the poor man's circumstance. Lyda put an end to this foolishness. She lectured to us about how we should respect him. We were embarrassed by her words, but at the same time pleased that we had raised such a caring individual. As it turned out, she had a real affection for the zombie. He was, for Lyda, the puppy we would not let her have.

It was not difficult remembering to command him to go to the bathroom twice a day, or to eat, or shower. What was truly hard was keeping him a secret. We all swore to each other that we would tell no one. Susan and I were afraid that Lyda, so completely carried away by her new friend, might not be able to contain herself at school. Think of the status one would reap in the third grade if it was known you had your own zombie at home. Throughout the ordeal, she proved to be the most practical, the most caring, the most insightful of all of us.

The utter strangeness of the affair did not strike me until the next night when I woke from a bad dream with a dry mouth. Half in a daze, I got out of bed and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I took my drink and, going into the living room, sat down on the couch. For some reason, I was thinking about Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and how D. H. Lawrence had described it as a story of vampirism. I followed a thread of thought that looped in and out

of that loopy story and ended with an image of the previously airy and lethargic Madeline bursting out of her tomb to jump on old Roderick. Then I happened to look to the left, and jumped, myself, realizing that the zombie had been sitting next to me the entire time.

Tom could make a great pot of coffee. He vacuumed like a veteran chambermaid. Susan showed him how to do hospital corners when making the beds. When he was not busy, he would simply sit on the couch in the living room and stare directly across at the face of the grandfather clock. It was clear that he had a conception of time, because it was possible to set him like a VCR. If we were going out, we could tell him, "Make and eat a bologna sandwich at one", "Go to the bathroom at three."

Somewhere in the second week of his asylum with us, I got the notion to become more expansive in my commands. I recalled Malthusian telling me that he was capable of playing Chopin after only listening to a piece once. It became clear that the requests I had been making of him were penny ante. I upped the stakes and instructed him to begin typing my handwritten notes for the Poe book. He flawlessly copied exactly what I had on the paper. Excited by this new breakthrough, I then told him to read a grammar book and correct the text. Voilà!

It became rapidly evident that we would have to get Tom some new clothes, since he continued to wear the same short-sleeved grey Sears workshirt and pants day in and day out. There was no question he would have worn them until they were reduced to shreds. Susan went to the store on her way home from work one night and bought him a few things. The next day, as an experiment, we told him to get dressed, choosing items from the pile of garments we laid before him. He came out of the spare bedroom, wearing a pair of loose-fitting khakis and a black T-shirt that had written in white block letters across it *Im with Stupid*. We all got a charge out of this.

"Laugh, Tom," said Lyda.

The zombie opened wide his mouth, and from way back in his throat came a high-pitched "HA, HA."

The horror of it melted my smile, and I began to wonder about his choice of shirts. That is when I noticed that a distinct five o'clock shadow had sprouted across his chin and sunken cheeks. "My God," I thought, without telling Susan or Lyda, "the aging process has begun."

When Tom wasn't pulling his weight around the house, Lyda usually had him engaged in some game. They played catch, cards, Barbies, and with those activities that were competitions, Lyda would tell him when it was his turn to win-and he would. For the most part, though, they drew pictures. Sitting at the kitchen table, each with a pencil and a few sheets of paper, they would create monsters. Lyda would have to tell Tom what to draw.

"Now do the werewolf with a dress and a hat. Mrs. Werewolf," she said.

That zombie could draw. When he was done there was a startlingly well rendered, perfectly shadowed and shaded portrait of Lon Chaney in drag, a veritable hirsute Minnie Pearl. Susan hung it with magnets on the refrigerator.

"Take a bow," Lyda told him and he bent gracefully at the waist in a perfect forty-five degree angle.

My wife and daughter didn't notice that Tom was changing, but I did. Slowly, over the course of mere days, his hair had begun to thin out, and crow's feet formed at the corners of his eyes. This transformation I was seeing the first signs of was astounding to me. I wondered what it was that Malthusian had done to offset the effects of the original surgery that had been performed on him. Perhaps it was a series of commands; some kind of rigid behavioristic training. I hated to think of the old man poking around in Tom's head in that checkerboard kitchen under the fluorescent lights. What also puzzled me was how Malthusian had transferred command of the zombie to myself and my family. I began paying much closer attention to him, waiting for a sign that he had begun to recollect himself.

4

I held the drawing out to Lyda and asked her, "Who did this?"

She took it from me and upon seeing it smiled. "Tom," she said. "Yesterday I told him to draw whatever he wanted."

"It's good, don't you think?" I asked.

"Pretty good," she said and turned back to the television show she had been watching.

The portrait I held in my hand was of a young woman with long, dark hair. This was no monster. She was rendered with the same attention to detail as had been given to Mrs. Werewolf, but this girl, whoever she was, was beautiful. I was especially drawn to the eyes, which were luminous, so full of warmth. She wore an expression of amusement-a very subtle grin and a self-consciously dramatic arching of the eyebrows. I went to the kitchen and called for Tom to come in from the living room.

I told him to take his usual drawing seat, and then I handed him the picture. "You will tell me who this is," I commanded.

He stared for a moment at the portrait, and then it happened, a fleeting expression of pain crossed his face. His hand trembled slightly for a moment.

"You must tell me," I said.

"Marta," he said, and although it was only a word, I could have sworn there was a hint of emotion behind.

"You must tell me if this is your wife," I said.

He slowly brought his left hand to his mouth, like a robot programmed to enact the human response of awe.

"Tell me," I said.

From behind his fingers, he whispered, "My love."

It was a foolish thing to do, but I applauded. As if the sound of my clapping suddenly severed his cognizance, he

dropped his hand to his side and returned to the zombie state.

I sat down and studied him. His hair had begun to go grey at the edges, and his beard was now very noticeable. Those wrinkles I had detected the first sign of a few days earlier were now more prominent, as was the loosening of the skin along his chin line. Invading his blank affect was a vague aura of weariness. As impossible as it might sound, he appeared to me as if he had shrunk a centimeter or two.

"My love," I said out loud. These words were the most exciting shred of humanity to have surfaced, not so much for their dramatic weight, but more because he had failed to follow my instruction and definitively answer the question.

I left him alone for the time being, seeing as how he seemed quite saddened by the experience of remembering; but later, when Susan had returned home, we cleared the kitchen table after dinner and tried to advance the experiment. We conscripted Lyda into the plot, since it was when he was with her that he had created the portrait of Marta.

"Tell him to draw a picture of his house," I whispered to her. She nodded and then Susan and I left the kitchen and went into the living room to wait.

"He looks terrible," Susan said to me.

"The spell is slowly dissolving," I said. "He is becoming what he should be."

"The human mind is frightening," she said.

"The Haunted Palace," I told her.

Twenty minutes later, Lyda came in to us, smiling, carrying a picture.

"Look what he drew," she said, laughing.

He had created a self-portrait. Beneath the full-length picture were the scrawled words Tommy the Zombie.

I pointed to the words and said, "Well, that didn't work as I had planned, but this is rather interesting."

"A sense of humor?" said Susan.

"No," said Lyda. "He is sad."

"Maybe we shouldn't push him," I said.

"Wait," said Susan and sat forward suddenly. "Tell him now to draw his home."

Lyda nodded and was gone.

An hour passed and Susan and I waited in silence for the results. We could hear Lyda, in the kitchen, talking to him as they worked. She was telling him about this boy in her class in school who always bites the skin on his fingers.

"When Mrs. Brown asked Harry why he bites his skin, you know what he said?" asked Lyda.

There was a moment of silence and then we heard the deep, flat response, "What?"

Susan and I looked at each other.

"Harry told her," said Lyda, "he bites it because that way his father, who is very old, won't die."

A few minutes passed and then came a most disturbing sound, like a moan from out of a nightmare. Susan and I leaped up and ran into the kitchen. Lyda was sitting there, gaping at Tom, who was pressing on the pencil with a shaking hand, writing as if trying to carve initials into a tree trunk. There was sweat on his brow and tears in his eyes. I went over behind him and looked over his shoulder. There was a picture of a ranch-style house with an old carport on its left side. In the front window, I could make out the figures of a black cat and a woman's face. He was scrawling numbers and letters across the bottom of the picture.

"Twenty-Four Griswold Place," I said aloud. And when he finished and slumped back into his seat, I saw the name of the town and spoke it. "Falls Park."

"That's only an hour north of here," said Susan.

I patted Tom on the back and told him, "You're going home," but by then his consciousness had again receded.

The next morning I got up well before sunrise and ordered Tom down the hall to the guest bedroom to change. He set to the task, a reluctant zombie, his rapid aging causing him to shuffle along, slightly bent over. Literally overnight, his hair had lost more of its color and there was a new, alarming sense of frailty about him. While he was dressing, I went in and kissed Susan good-bye and told her I was taking him as we had planned.

"Good luck," she said.

"Do you want to see him?" I asked.

"No, I'm going to go back to sleep, so that when I wake up I will be able to discount the entire thing as a bad dream."

"I hope I get him there before he croaks," I told her. "He's older than ever today."

I settled Tom in the backseat of the car and told him to buckle the belt. Then I got in and started driving. It was still dark as I turned onto the road out of town. Of course, I was taking a big chance by hoping that he might still know someone at the address he had written down. Decades had passed since he had been abducted, but I didn't care. Think ill of me if you like, but as with the lawyer in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," who ends up finally abandoning the scribe, which of you would have done as much as we did? Shadowed entities be damned, it had to come to an end.

"You're going home," I said over my shoulder to him as I drove.

"Home, yes," he said, and I took this for a good sign.

I looked into the rearview mirror, and could only see the top of his head. He seemed to have shrunk even more. To prepare myself for a worst-case scenario, I wondered what the bill would be to have a pool of putrescence steam-cleaned from my backseat.

About halfway into the journey, he started making some very odd sounds - coughing and hushed choking. This gave way to a kind of grumbling language that he carried on with for miles. I couldn't make out what he was saying, and to block it out, I eventually turned on the radio.

Even with the map, the address, and the drawing, it took me an hour and forty-five minutes to find the place. The sun was just beginning to show itself on the horizon when I pulled up in front of 24 Griswold Place. It was remarkable how perfect his drawing had been.

"Go now and knock on that door," I said pointing.

I was going to get out of the car and help him, but before I could get my belt off, I heard the back door open and close. Turning, I saw his figure moving away from the car. He was truly an old man now, moving beneath the weight of those years that, in the brief time of our trip, had caught up and overtaken him. I hoped that his metamorphosis had finally ended.

A great wave of sorrow passed through me, and I couldn't let him go without saying good-bye. I pressed the button for the window on his side. When it had rolled down, I called out, "Good luck."

He stopped walking, turned slowly to face me, and then I knew that the transformation was complete. His hair had gone completely white, and his face was webbed with wrinkles. It was Malthusian. He stood there staring at me, and his eyes were no smaller because he did not wear glasses.

I shook with the anger of betrayal. "You bastard," I yelled.

"Let's not let it ruin our game," he said with a thick accent, and then turned and went up the front steps.

I was so stunned, I couldn't move. He knocked on the door. After a few moments, a woman, as old as he, answered. I heard her give a short scream and then she threw her arms around him. "You've returned," she said in that same accent. She ushered him into the house and then the door slammed closed.

"Marta Malthusian, the sister," I said to myself and slammed the steering wheel. I don't know how long I sat there, staring blankly, trying to sort out the tangled treachery and love of a mad man turning a zombie into a zombie of himself. Eventually, I put the car in gear, wiped the drool from my chin, and started home.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

CHIMERA

The car stopped on the rain-soaked side street. Ancient oaks covered the road like a poorly maintained roof, making a dark day seem even darker. Gen checked the guidance system on her new Toyota. Everything seemed to be working properly. She peered through the water-streaked windshield and saw only twentieth-century farmhouses, lovingly restored and painted nice sedate colors-brown and tan and the occasional white. Not that the colors made much of a difference in this weather.

Sometimes it felt as if she were trapped in darkness, as if the gray netherworld of an Oregon winter would never end. Dr. Prichard wanted her to go to Hawaii or the southwest to soak up some light, but Gen felt as if she didn't deserve light-at least, not yet.

In her right hand, Gen still held the piece of paper Dr. Prichard had given her. The paper was crumpled now and the doctor's bold scrawl smeared. The paper hadn't been necessary. Dr. Prichard, at Gen's request, had had her computer send the address to Gen's car. But these days, Gen liked double and triple backups, especially those that could not be wiped out in an instant. Dr. Prichard said it was a reaction to the accident, a passing insecurity, brought on by Gen's heightened knowledge of the fragility of life.

She was shivering. The car had shut off, and the February chill was beginning to permeate the plush interior. The car's computer beeped. In another three minutes, it would beep again and then, in its polite androgynous voice, would ask if she wanted to leave the neighborhood. If she'd known when she bought the car that she had to inform it each time she just wanted to sit with all the systems off, she would have thought twice about buying it. But she hadn't discovered that feature until a week after the papers were signed. By then, it was too much hassle to take it back.

She glanced at the paper again. Part of the reason she was delaying was that she had expected a commercial neighborhood, or at least one that was part of a research park. She hadn't expected a residential street, not from Dr. Prichard's descriptions.

The other reason was harder to admit: She didn't want a companion, particularly not one that had been assigned to her. She had told Dr. Prichard that she would be perfectly fine living alone.

The car beeped a second time, but before the voice could make its request, Gen grabbed the door handle and let herself out.

The rain was cold. It came with a wind strong enough to make the drops slash her despite the canopy of trees. Her coat sealed at her wrists and waist, and a hood slipped over her head. She pushed the material back down. Not even her clothing allowed her to make her own choices any more.

The house at 2654 Rhododendron was a 1920s farmhouse like all the others, with a large front porch-now glassed in-and massive square columns on each side. The second story was smaller, and had vinyl windows from the last part of the previous century. The curtains were open. The net effect was to make the house look like a square face, with eyes that watched her.

She pushed a hand against her short, damp hair and stuck her hands in her pockets. Then she started up the old-fashioned concrete sidewalk, avoiding the cracks caused by age and weather.

The stairs groaned beneath her weight. When she reached the top, a voice asked her to state her name and her business.

"Gen O'Connell," she said, resisting the urge to turn and run back to her car. "I was sent by Dr. Prichard."

The house's computer system had to be an old one, because it took almost a minute to compare her waifish frame and delicate features to the identi-holo that Dr. Prichard had sent over. Then locks clicked back and the door swung open. Gen stepped into a porch that smelled faintly of cedar and dogs.

As the door closed behind her, the voice said, "You are wet. Hang your coat on the peg near the entry, and place your shoes on the grate. They will be dry when you return for them."

She did as she was told, even though her socks were damp too, and the polished hardwood floor was cold. Then the entry door opened, and she stepped into the heart of the house.

To her right, a staircase with real oak banisters wound its way to the second story. To her left, a large room filled with comfortable couches and easy chairs formed groupings that suggested intimacy. A gas fire burned in a far corner.

The animal smell was stronger here, but not unpleasant. It mixed with the scent of fresh-baked bread and the strong, sweet scent of vanilla.

She saw no animals at all, and that surprised her. She expected them to be littering the place. When she had seen the house instead of the commercial building, her mind revised its image to a place overrun by creatures, living in their own filth, shedding everywhere. But this place was clean and well-tended.

A woman emerged from the archway beside the fireplace. She was stout but muscular, of an indeterminate age. Her hair was silver but her face unlined. Her eyes were a clear dark blue, her skin a soft coffee color. When she smiled, it warmed her already friendly features.

"So you're Gen O'Connell."

Gen threaded her fingers together. "Yes."

"I enjoyed your work. I saw you dance here before you left for New York."

The bright glare of the spotlight; the way it warmed her, made her feel beautiful and powerful. She would forget she was on stage, tilting her head back, letting her arms flow....

Gen winced. It was an involuntary reaction that she could no more prevent than the tears that lined her eyes. She made herself smile, though, and say, "Thank you."

"You were the most beautiful thing," the woman said, apparently oblivious to the distress her words caused. "I never believed humans could fly until I saw you."

"I don't fly any longer," Gen said.

The woman nodded. "Dance is such a cruel discipline, even with the modern enhancements. No matter how our technologies improve, our bodies still have limits."

"I never believed that," Gen said.

The woman looked at her measuringly. Gen swallowed. The tears threatened to spill. She shook her head slightly as if the movement could force the tears back into her tear ducts. Then she clutched her hands together, feeling the thin, fragile bones. "I'm sorry. I think Dr. Prichard was wrong. I'm not ready for this."

"You don't know until you try." The woman came closer. She smelled faintly of cinnamon and apples. She took Gen's twisting hands into her own. They were big and warm and soothing. "I'm Anna Capstik. Welcome to my home."

Gen closed her eyes. How long had it been since anyone had touched her? Since the accident, she'd turned away from hugs, stepped back from a friendly arm around her shoulder, and pretended not to notice an outstretched hand. But she didn't pull away from Anna.

Gen made her eyes open and nodded once. "Thank you," she said again.

"Come into the kitchen," Anna said. "Most of the animals will come out then."

"You don't have them somewhere else?"

Anna laughed. "You sound as if I can control them. They're as unruly as children." She squeezed Gen's hands and let go. "I do have some in isolation. They're so traumatized when they come here. The ones who have the run of the house are the ones that I'll adopt out."

Gen took a deep breath. "I'm still not sure-"

"Dr. Prichard is, though," Anna said. "Trust her. She makes wise decisions."

Gen nodded. She had had to trust all of her doctors after the accident. They had made a thousand decisions for her when she was unconscious: rebuilding her legs in ways that would still allow her to teach dance; growing her a new liver, new kidneys, and injecting stem cells into her heart. She always thought it ironic that they felt her heart needed repair, but they didn't grow her a new one. Perhaps if they had done that, she wouldn't have needed the counseling, wouldn't have had the nightmares, wouldn't have locked herself-

"Gen?" Anna was looking at her. "Are you all right?"

Gen nodded. "Nervous. The last time I cared for something..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but Anna knew. Everyone knew. Gen had been a celebrity who, when she retired from the stage, had come home to Portland. Her classes were world-renowned. Parents sent their little darlings to her to learn the finer points of ballet. Until nine months ago, she had gone on media interviews all over the world, had guest-instructed everywhere from New York to Beijing, and all the time she had used her influence to bring money and prestige to her own favorite city.

So the city was trying to give back now. Only it couldn't. No one could. Dar was dead.

She shuddered. She still couldn't see her son as anything except a crushed pile of bones, flesh, and blood, his skull shattered, his eye-

"Gen?" Anna asked again.

"I'm coming," Gen said.

Anna led her through a formal dining room with a picture window overlooking an enclosed yard. Someone had planted a flowering cherry tree outside so that it was perfectly centered with the window. Tulips and daffodils bloomed beneath the cherry tree, a reminder that spring always came early in Oregon.

A movement caught Gen's eye. She turned, saw a furry head duck behind a three-foot-high Delft vase positioned near the kitchen door.

"Move that, Cedric," Anna said, "and you'll be in trouble again."

There was no answering response from the hiding creature. Anna gave Gen a tiny smile and pushed open the swinging door.

The kitchen was warm. The bread smell was strong here. A small monkey with a white head perched on top of one of the vinyl chairs. Another hung from a swing near the ceiling. A group of mice huddled in an open aquarium, creating a rug of gray fur. She couldn't tell where one mouse began and another ended. Three cats sat on top of the refrigerator, and a dog lay on a cedar bed beside the stove.

They all watched her with wary eyes. She stared back at them. She had never seen chimera before. She hadn't known what to expect, really. All she knew was what Dr. Prichard had told her: Chimera had been around for twenty years. They were created for use in medical research by placing human embryonic stem cells in animal fetuses. The

cells were then tweaked so that the animals would be useful subjects for medical testing. Dr. Prichard had said there were ethical considerations and debates over these procedures, but that they shouldn't concern her.

The Chimera Mission, which Anna ran, did its best to remain publicly neutral on the creation and use of chimera. That way, the Mission gained the cooperation of the medical research groups that created the animals.

The Mission prevented most chimera from being destroyed after the research was done. It was Anna who had pioneered the use of chimera in dealing with the traumatized, the mentally ill, and the unenhanced elderly. Anna's program was the first in the country, although several others had sprung up in the last decade. And all the studies had shown that chimera, when carefully matched to humans, were better at healing their owners than normal pets.

Initially, when Dr. Prichard had suggested that Gen care for something, she had turned her down. When she told Gen it was part of her therapy and therefore required, Gen asked to have a regular pet, not an altered one.

You're altered, Dr. Prichard had said. You need to understand how changes affect another creature.

Gen didn't want to know how changes affected anyone else. She already knew how they affected her.

"I've never had a pet," Gen said, shivering slightly under the impact of all those eyes. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"But you raised a child," Anna said softly.

Gen clenched her fists and then released them, just as Dr.

Prichard had taught her. "Yes," she managed to say calmly.

"I did."

But the child had died, mangled beyond recognition when the guidance system of a nine-year-old car failed and sent it careening through the streets at one hundred twenty miles an hour. Gen, the athlete, the dancer, the one with speed, had leapt out of the way. Dar hadn't.

If the car hadn't hit him, it wouldn't have spun and slammed into her. Even so, she remained conscious and had crawled to Dar. She had been cradling him when the paramedics finally pulled her away.

A long-haired cat walked under the swinging doors, hitting one with its bushy tail. It was brown, with a white collar and white paws. It looked at Gen with wide green eyes. Then it jumped onto the nearest chair, sitting with its front paws before it as if it were posing for an Egyptian statue.

"That vase better be in its usual position, Cedric," Anna said. "If I hear it crash in the next fifteen minutes, I'm going to blame you."

The cat ignored her, continuing to stare at Gen. This was the creature she had seen in the dining room. Still, Anna's comment made little sense. Gen gave her a perplexed look.

"Cedric sets traps for the other animals, so that they get blamed if something goes wrong. It pleases and entertains him." Anna frowned at him. "It annoys me."

Cedric tilted his face upward, holding Gen's gaze. He had a majestic bearing, a large ruff that made her think of a lion, and his features were classically feline. Yet there was something in his eyes she had never seen in a cat before, something measuring, something analytical.

"Dr. Prichard wanted you to have Sadie," Anna said, putting a hand carelessly on Cedric's head as she passed him.

She crouched by the dog near the stove, and scratched her ears.

A dog. Gen's stomach clenched. She had never liked dogs. They were too boisterous and noisy, too needy and demanding. Although this one, enhanced as it was, might be different.

The dog, a tan Collie mix that was medium size, opened her brown eyes. They gazed up at Gen with such profound sadness that Gen's breath caught in her throat.

"Sadie had a single pup the year before she left the lab. She was raising it slowly, carefully, treating it as an infant long after any other dog would. The pup was taken from her at six months, sold to another lab that wanted to run experiments on second-generation chimera to see how much human DNA was in their systems. Sadie hasn't been the same since. Moaning, howling, throwing herself at doors. Then, when the director couldn't stand it any more, he called me. If I hadn't taken her, he would have put her down."

Anna said all of this in a dispassionate tone, as if outrage had long since left her emotional repertoire. The public might not know how the Chimera Mission felt about the treatment of chimera, but Gen thought it easy to know how Anna felt. She clearly hated it.

Gen crouched and extended her hand. Most dogs would have sniffed her fingers, and then licked them, but Sadie didn't. She gave Gen a long sorrowful look. The dog had lost a child and was miserable. Gen had lost a child and was miserable. What a pair they would make.

"I-" Gen stopped herself. She wasn't sure how much the dog understood. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Sadie is a good dog," Anna said. "She was used in pregnancy tests mostly, so the only enhanced part of her was her reproductive system. They removed that before giving her to me. She's going to be pretty normal."

For what? A human? Or did dogs mourn like that too? Gen had read about dogs that stayed by dead masters, guarding the bodies.

"I don't mean to be rude," Gen said. "But I can't."

She stood and her knees cracked. How long had it been since she had any exercise? Too long. Maybe a dog would be good, to run at her side, to cross streets in front of malfunctioning cars-

She shook her head and started away. Cedric stood on his chair, his paws dangling over the back. He was still staring at her.

Dr. Prichard had spent the last week stressing the importance of this animal adoption. It'll bring you back to the world, she'd said. You need something to care about besides the past.

Gen had heard the wisdom in those words, and that had pushed her this far. She glanced at Sadie, who hadn't moved. The dog was obviously depressed.

"Did Dr. Prichard see Sadie before choosing her?" Gen asked.

"No." Anna patted the dog's head once more, then stood. "She asked for histories of the patients and thought that Sadie might suit you best."

"Actually," Gen said, surprising herself, "I prefer Cedric."

The cat's head whipped toward Anna so fast that he nearly lost his balance.

"I don't think that's wise," Anna said.

"Dr. Prichard said I needed a companion and she sent me to you. She didn't judge the companions herself, but just made an educated guess. I don't think you can intellectualize attraction." She glanced at Cedric. He tilted that magnificent head toward her. It seemed as if he were surprised.

"Cedric is..." Anna started, then let her voice trail off.

"Come with me."

She headed toward the back door. Cedric ran ahead of them, winding himself in Anna's feet so that she tripped. She caught the doorjamb and bit back a curse. Cedric licked his side as if he had been the one who had been injured.

"Stay here," she said to him. Then she waited at the door for Gen. As they went out, Anna turned to make certain Cedric didn't follow.

The door led into a breezeway that had plants growing on either side. The breezeway was too warm, and it was a moment before Gen realized it was also a greenhouse. The plants looked healthy, bright green and loaded with flowers.

Anna went to the far end, where a closed door warned against unauthorized entry. Anna opened the door, and the stench of sickness mixed with a medicinal sharpness greeted them.

Gen held her breath as she stepped inside. The light here was dim. Tiny beds, a few cages, and some normal-sized upholstered furniture was scattered throughout the room. A steel operating table with a large lamp stood in the center, and several locked cabinets held vials of medicines. Animals lay on all the beds and a few huddled in their cages.

A man in a white coat was carefully brushing an afghan dog with large gray-looking bald spots on its back and sides. The dog cringed when it saw Anna and Gen.

"Take a look around," Anna said.

Gen did. The cats wouldn't meet her gaze. A parrot tried to bite her as she passed. Several rats growled at her, and one repeatedly launched itself against the padded walls of its little cell. Many of the animals had surgical scars all over their shaved bodies. One, a schnauzer, watched her with reddened, drugged eyes.

"These are the new animals. Some are unadoptable. Some we'll try to rehabilitate. But they've all been traumatized."

Gen extended her fingers to a rabbit that sat on a cushion at the back of a wide shelf. The rabbit made a small squealing noise and hid its face.

"I'm beginning to understand that," she said.

"I don't know if you do," Anna said. "Sometimes the sun comes out, and its warmth hits one of these animals, and the animal freaks. Another time, you might be singing, and all of the animals will try to hide. You never know what's going to set them off, and it isn't the same from day to day."

Gen was breathing through her mouth. She hated this smell, this hospital smell. It had been part of her life for five weeks. Five weeks, and every morning she woke with the knowledge that what had worked for her had failed for Dar.

Medical science, everyone said, had found a way to cure most diseases. Human beings could live longer than ever before, and be healthy while doing so. But medical science couldn't prevent all death. And it certainly couldn't prevent misery.

"You didn't bring me here to tell me about the things the animals have been through," Gen said. "You brought me here because of Cedric."

"I keep him in the house because he's too healthy to be out here. Physically healthy. Mentally-that's another story." Anna adjusted a blanket around a sleeping puppy. "You saw him trip me. That was deliberate. You had expressed an interest, and I was taking you away. He got angry and he wanted to hurt me."

"He's a cat," Gen said.

"No, he's not," Anna said. "He's a chimera, and you can't forget that. The researchers changed all of these animals, sometimes in ways none of us understand. I believed that Cedric is psycho-quite literally. I think he likes to hurt others for the pleasure of it, and I think he knows what he's doing."

"Then why do you keep him with the other animals?"

"He's only there in the daytime, and only when I'm with him. I'm a bit worried that he's alone with them right now. At night, I have a special cage for him."

Gen's palms were wet. "You believe he's psycho. But you don't know."

"They messed with his mind," Anna said. "They used him to test drugs that were supposed to help with Parkinson's. That means that they enhanced his mind first to simulate a human brain, and then they tested drugs on him. No human would survive that."

"They altered his brain so that he can think?" Gen asked.

"We don't know," Anna said. "That's where this becomes tricky. We don't know a lot of the effects."

"What if I want him anyway? What if I say he's the only one I'll take?"

"I'd have to call Dr. Prichard."

Gen crossed her arms. "Do that."

Anna looked at her with surprise. "All right," she said. "But I hope to God she says no."

Gen didn't know what she had expected. Gratitude, perhaps. Not the screaming, hissing, spitting creature in the carrier wedged at an angle into the backseat. Cedric wrapped his paws around the wire door and slammed it back and forth as if he could open it through sheer force. Once, she turned around and watched as he lay on his back, placing one paw over the lever, and another under it. If he used the right amount of pressure the door would open. But he couldn't seem to get it; one paw kept slipping off.

She let the car drive itself home, and turned most of her attention to Cedric. But he batted at her and tried to bite her every time she reached for him. Finally, she decided that protecting her fingers was the better part of valor, and she merely talked to him the rest of the way home.

Anna had given her cat food, and a cedar bed for Cedric to sleep in. She also gave advice: give Cedric a special room all by himself, probably a bathroom, since he already knew how to use a toilet, and let him stay there until he got used to the house. She had given the instructions in a curt, almost dismissive manner, as if Gen had angered her by going against her advice.

Dr. Prichard had apparently told Anna that Gen needed a challenge. Even if things with Cedric didn't work out, it would take Gen's mind off her own problems.

Things would work out, no matter what they said. She wasn't going to let herself fail. Not again. Dr. Prichard had wanted her to make a commitment and she had, even if no one approved of it.

She could almost hear Dr. Prichard describe this in a session. You don't want to succeed, do you, Gen? You want to prove to me that you are no longer capable of intimacy, that you cannot take care of someone other than yourself. So instead of taking a sad and docile dog, you take a cat that wants to kill everything in sight.

Perhaps there was some validity to that. Perhaps. She certainly hadn't felt a powerful attraction to Cedric, despite what she had told Anna. She had, however, noticed him. He was the only one of the animals who even raised a bit of sympathy within her, and she wasn't sure why. Perhaps because Anna so obviously disliked him. Perhaps because his eyes were the most expressive things Gen had ever seen. Perhaps because she knew, the moment she saw him, that he was an impossible creature who would prove her unworthy and end these futile therapy sessions once and for all.

The car pulled into the garage, and as the lights went off, she heard a small chirrup that indicated the house's security system was ready to receive her.

She lifted the cat carrier, feeling it shift beneath her hand. Her muscles were weak: she hadn't done any exercise besides the physical therapy since the accident. The squirming creature unbalanced the carrier, and made it twist against her already strained muscles.

The door opened, and she walked into her kitchen. It used to be her favorite room with its wide cooking area, oak cabinets, and matching oak table. She had fired her housekeeper months ago, unable to take the woman's chatter. The kitchen was filthy and the sour smell of two-day-old milk rotting in her breakfast bowls made her wince. She put the carrier on the fake wood floor, and went back to the car to get the food and the cedar bed.

She didn't want to put Cedric in the bathroom. That seemed inhumane. He had come to a new home, and they were going to get a new start. There were places she didn't want him, and she could get House to help with that. Before she let him out of the carrier, she would reprogram the computer to prevent him from entering Dar's bedroom. It remained as it was the day of the accident, with Dar's dirty clothes still on the floor, and the book they'd been reading on the end table beside the bed. She went to his room every day and peered inside, seeing it as a mute reproach for her own selfishness.

If she closed her eyes, she could see herself again-leaping away, not grabbing her child, not even thinking of him. Thinking only of herself.

Dr. Prichard tried to tell her that her memories were flawed, that she was ascribing motive where there could be none. But Dr. Prichard hadn't been there.

By the time Gen got back inside the house, she heard the cage door rattling. Cedric was still on his back, struggling with the lock.

"I'll get you out in a minute," she said. "There's a few things I have to do first."

She set the food by one of the kitchen cupboards, and carried the cedar bed into the master bedroom. She closed Dar's door, and used the hall keypad to program in the new instructions. Then she went back into the kitchen.

Cedric was on his stomach, his eyes glowing from the darkness of the cage. Gen remembered what she had learned, realized that all of them-the anonymous lab doctors, Anna, and herself-were in uncharted territory. She didn't know what kind of creature she had here. Just because it looked like a cat didn't mean it thought like one.

She sat in front of the cage and opened the door. Cedric skidded out, running faster than she had ever seen a creature move. He was across the kitchen floor and into the hallway before she had the door completely open.

He left a trail of bloody paw prints in his wake. The blood was fresh and red.

She looked at the wire on the door. "My god," she whispered. He had picked at the lock until he had damaged his paws. Anna said she had caged him every night, and that Gen should do the same. Did he spend his nights on his back, attempting to use his paws like hands, trying to open a catch that had been designed to work only with fingers and thumbs?

She shuddered at the thought, then grabbed a roll of paper towels, and cleaned up the mess. The trail led her through the hall, to the closed door, and then to her bedroom.

Cedric was standing in front of the cedar bed, his tail down as he stared at the soft padded cushion. Gen had no idea how long he had been there. He didn't turn as she entered.

"It's yours," she said, crouching on an unbloodied bit of carpet. "You can sleep in here with me if you want."

He whipped his head toward her, that same sudden movement he had shown at Anna's house when Gen had said she was interested in him. His eyes seemed wider than they had before. If a cat could show surprise, he had.

"You injured your paws," she said. "I'd like to clean them."

As if in answer, he sat down and began licking his front paws himself. She watched the choreographed movement. His pads were bloody and the top part of the paws was missing some fur. The white was streaked brown with drying blood.

"Well," she said, "make yourself comfortable. I'll put out some food and water for you."

She felt a bit odd talking to a cat, but she reminded herself that he wasn't ordinary. He seemed to understand her. He paused as she spoke that last, and then continued licking as if her words meant nothing to him.

His licking was noisy and ostentatious. She stood slowly, gathering the dirty paper towels and sticking the roll under her arm, and went back to the kitchen. She found a dish, poured some cat food in it, and put out a bowl of water. Then she stacked her dirty dishes and put them in the washer.

Her entire body was shaking. She stopped after a few moments and gripped the edge of the sink. The work wasn't physically demanding, but it was so familiar, so domestic, that it hurt.

People used to go through this all the time. The loss of a loved one, sudden stark tragedy invading lives. When she had been a little girl, her grandfather had died of old age. She still remembered his soft, wrinkled skin, the age marks mottling his hands, his silver hair which had been so very thin that his scalp had been visible through it.

Except for the handful of Naturals—those who refused to change their looks despite the demands of fashion—no one allowed themselves to deteriorate any more. If a body part decayed, from the heart to the skin, it was repaired or replaced, most of the time without surgery. Exercise programs had become mandated by the government which, thanks to insurance lobbies, had been unwilling to pay for problems caused by inactivity. Serious illness still happened—although most could be controlled—and people still had an occasional cold, or a flu, or an injury caused by too much exercise. Those things were expected. Death was not.

She made herself take a deep breath, then splashed water onto her face. Dr. Prichard's voice went through her head.

Death is still expected, Gen. We're just not as used to it. No one knew the upper limits of the rejuvenated human body. Barring some irreparable setback (which often happened to the elderly who had been around long before the medical innovations became common), people were still jogging at a hundred and ten. A large section of the population was moving into the second decade of its second century with no immediate end in sight.

Water was dripping off her face into the sink. The unexpected nature of Dar's death, Dr. Prichard had said, combined with the trauma to her own body was creating a new world for her, a world in which people didn't live forever, and the strength she had taken for granted could be taken away from her in a heartbeat. Dr. Prichard had once said that what Gen was struggling with was the essence of being human.

She hated it. She hated it all. She shouldn't be listening to the doctors anymore. Maybe she should move, start all over again, in a place without memories.

A crunch behind her made her turn. Cedric was eating out of his bowl, his head bent, but his body alert. He had been a mistake, too. As much of a mistake as that pitiful dog would have been. She didn't want anyone else in her house. She didn't want her privacy disturbed by anyone. She didn't want to think about anyone else's welfare, especially when she had no control over it at all.

He drank as if he hadn't had water in weeks, then sat and stared at her. Those green eyes took in her wet face, her still shaking hands, and then perused the clean kitchen. He seemed to be waiting for something, but she didn't know what and she didn't know how to find out.

She walked past him and headed toward the closed door, thinking maybe she would sit in Dar's room. But when she reached the hallway, she realized she didn't want to go there. Instead she walked past it to the entertainment room.

Everything was covered in a fine coating of dust. She usually had House download her e-mail in the guest room, and she watched vid-net news from her bed when she felt like it. Lately she had been watching news on the Moon colonies as if it were designed for her. But she hadn't been in this part of the house, with its large holoviewer, its flat movie screen, and its games, since she'd come home from the hospital.

She sank into her leather chair, and immediately music came on: a Chopin sonata, the piano warm and beautiful and oh, so comforting. She had forgotten her music. How had she done that? She closed her eyes and leaned back, letting it flow through her, as it used to do.

Then she felt something soft brush against her arm. She opened her eyes. Cedric was sitting on the arm rest, his tail touching her, as if he were afraid he would get in trouble. When he saw her looking at him, he inclined his head slightly. She patted her lap, but he didn't crawl in it.

She closed her eyes again. The music ebbed and flowed, like the tide, like passion, and, after a while, she felt Cedric's tail wrap gently around her wrist.

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He woke her in the middle of the night, yowling and running through the house. She sat up in bed, just as he vaulted across it. His hind paws caught her right arm, scratching her so deep that she cried out in pain. But he didn't seem to notice. He was running like a demented thing, screaming as he did so, disappearing down the hall, and then coming back at full speed.

She turned on the bedside lamp and examined the scratch. It ran along her forearm, deep and bleeding. The pain was just as deep and constant, but nothing like the pain she had endured only a few months ago. She sighed, got out

of bed, and went into the bathroom to cleanse and seal the wound.

Cedric yowled past once more, his long brown hair trailing behind him. He ran like a creature pursued by unseen demons. No wonder Anna kept him caged at night. He would have disturbed the other animals tremendously.

But there was only Gen here, and she didn't mind having her sleep interrupted. She had been dreaming of the accident anyway, like she always did, the moments just before impact as she turned her head and saw the car careening down the street. In her dreams, she would remind herself: Get Dar. Get Dar. But she could never find him. And then the car would hit them anyway before skidding to the side.

The dream was not how she remembered things. But then, dreams never were.

The pain in her arm had eased. She stepped out of the bathroom, and turned on the hall light. Cedric skidded to a stop and then froze.

It was as if the muted hall light had the effect of a spotlight, illuminating him and revealing him at the same time.

He looked terrified. The fur on his back stood on end, his tail was swollen, and his eyes were enormous. She sat down on the carpet and held her hand out to him.

His gaze went to the scratch on her arm. She glanced down at it, touched it gingerly, and said, "It's all right. I medicated it."

His little body shivered, and his gaze came back to her face. Those were his only movements. He remained frozen, crouched, protected, on the floor of the hall.

She sat across from him, arm outstretched for a long time.

Finally, he sighed and stretched out on the brown carpet.

Strange. Either her presence or the light itself had calmed him. His breathing was even long before his eyes closed.

She remained in position for a while, watching him sleep. Even now, he didn't look like he was rested. He seemed like he would spring to his feet at the slightest sound.

Her arm tingled. It had fallen asleep. Slowly she brought it back and massaged it, wondering if she should pick up the sleeping creature and carry him to his cedar bed. He hadn't slept there, though, hadn't even stepped in it. Maybe he didn't like it, and after the cage experience, she didn't want to force him into something he didn't like. She waited until the feeling returned to her arm, and then stood slowly, careful not to wake Cedric.

She went back to bed, but left the hall light on.

j

The following morning, after she had shared her breakfast with a tired Cedric, she had gone into her office. Papers were scattered on tables and on her desk. Old papers, copies of things that should have been recycled long ago. House had left her work station running, even though she hadn't touched it for months. Her ergonomically designed work chair no longer fit her body. She moved it aside and pulled over a wooden chair that she once stacked information cubes on.

She had left the office door open, but Cedric hadn't followed her inside. Which was good. If he could understand what she said-and she was becoming more and more convinced that he could-she didn't want him to hear this next conversation.

She had House locate and dial the Chimera Mission. Anna answered and switched to holo when she realized that Gen was on the line.

"Problems?" Anna asked as if she had been expecting this call.

Gen had carefully worn a long-sleeved shirt so that no one would see the injury Cedric had given her. "No. He seems pretty well behaved."

"He's not used to his surroundings yet," Anna said. "Wait until he gets comfortable."

Gen swallowed back her next question. She was going to ask what he would do once he was comfortable, but she didn't want Anna's attitude toward Cedric to poison her mind any farther.

"Was he adopted before?" Gen asked.

"No," Anna said. "We had him listed as borderline unadoptable. I'm still not sure about you taking him."

Gen ignored that as well. "Could you tell me again what they did to him?"

"I told you all I know," Anna said. "Brain enhancement. Drugs for Parkinson's, I think. But that's all. I only know what they tell me."

"Is there anyone who knows exactly what happened to him?"

"Why?" Anna asked.

Gen thought of Cedric's face as he tore through the rooms in the near darkness. The sheer terror called to her. She had lain in bed after he fell asleep and wondered if Dar had felt that kind of terror in the seconds before he died.

"I think," she said carefully, "some of his quirks are explainable. If I just understand what happened to him, then I might be able to handle him better."

"I'm sorry I can't help you any more," Anna said, sounding not sorry at all.

Gen sat straight in her chair. She cleared her throat and clutched her desk so that her shaking hands couldn't be seen by House's holocam. "Actually," she said with a power in her voice she hadn't had in a long time, "you can help me."

Anna looked startled. Most people didn't expect Gen-the wispy dancer they had once seen on stage-to be formidable. "How?"

"You can tell me which lab to talk to."

Anna was shaking her head before Gen finished her sentence. "The labs don't discuss their work with outsiders."

Dr. Prichard had tried to warn her about that too. Apparently, several organizations, including People for the

Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Christian Right, had been fighting for the last two decades to stop the creation of chimera. PETA believed that chimera violated the rights of animals, and the Christians believed that they violated the laws of God. Several militant sides of both groups burned labs where chimera were used, or freed chimera to live in the wild. Both tactics caused more chimera to die than the laboratory experiments did.

"I don't care about the work," Gen said. "I just want to know about Cedric. I think I'm entitled."

Anna pursed her lips. Finally, she said, "I'll see what I can do." and hung up.

Gen leaned back in her chair. The conversation had taken more out of her than she expected. But for a brief moment, she felt like she used to when she was running her dance school, when someone told her something was impossible. She would laugh at them and say: "I am a ballet dancer. I specialize in the impossible."

Where had that attitude gone? It used to be built into her, as deep as her bones. When the spotlight was on her, she never questioned herself or her abilities.

She just danced.

She sighed and stood. Cedric was sitting in the doorway.

When he saw her, he ran away.

j

Gen didn't look for Cedric. She felt he was entitled to privacy if he wanted it. But as she went through her day, this time straightening the entertainment room while listening to Beethoven's Seventh, she kept an eye out for him.

He reappeared at dinner, sitting in the chair beside her, looking at the table as if he expected to be served. She was eating a medium-rare steak that she'd broiled, and a baked potato with nothing on it. Steaks had been dinner too many nights; there had been dozens in the freezer for a party she had been planning to throw around Christmas. They were easy to fix and phenomenally bad for her. She had never before been one of those people who figured she could eat what she wanted and medical science would repair the damage for her. But she was one now.

She cut a small piece off the steak, and debated placing it on the floor as she would have done for any other animal.

In the end she compromised, and placed the steak on the chair. Cedric ignored it for a long time, then tried to scoop it up with his left paw. When that didn't work, he ate it as he had eaten the cat food, his posture awkward.

The piece finished, he jumped off the chair and left the room, behavior she believed not to be catlike at all. A cat would continue begging. Cedric wasn't pure cat. She had to remember that.

He woke her again that night by running and howling, although he didn't scratch her this time. He was careful to avoid the bed altogether. This time, she calmed him by turning on all the lights. Lights seemed so very important to him. He didn't have these spells in the daytime, only in the darkness.

She caught him when he froze and put him in his cedar bed, which he didn't seem to mind after all. She had House create a nightlight for him, and he slept soundly until dawn.

She didn't. After his adventure, she lay awake, wondering what would trigger such behavior, and why he would tremble so violently when she scooped him into her arms.

She got her answer one day later.

j

Anna called her back, reporting that the lab wouldn't talk to her, but one of the scientists who had worked with Cedric would.

The arranged meeting was like something out of a turn-of-the-century spy movie. Anna insisted that Gen meet her first at a restaurant that Anna frequented. Once there, Anna gave Gen handwritten instructions on how to find the scientist.

The directions took her to a concrete parking garage that was almost a hundred years old and had been condemned by the city. A closed coffee shop on the sidewalk level matched the number on the slip of paper. Gen gingerly tried the door, and was surprised to find it open. She slipped inside.

"Lock it," a woman's voice said.

Gen turned the deadbolt.

"Come on back."

Gen walked around the empty tables, past the steel counters and empty mugs, ancient espresso and cappuccino machines which still smelled faintly of coffee. A light burned in a back office, not visible from the street. Gen went inside.

The woman waiting for her was slight and trim, but she wore a thick protection vest and pants. On the desk in front of her was a laser pistol. Her hand rested on its butt.

Gen turned cold, but it was too late to back out now. "Hi," she said, hearing how inane the word sounded in this empty place. "Anna sent me. From the Chimera Mission.

I'm-

"I know," the woman said. "I have season tickets to the Portland Ballet. Have for years."

She moved her hand off the gun. "Sorry for the protection.

We never know what types we're going to run into."

The stories of PETA and the conservative Christians came back to Gen. Were their assaults so severe that the lab workers had to take these kinds of precautions?

"I'm Moya," the woman said.

Gen took the only available chair. "Call me Gen."

"Gen." Moya tried it as she would a new dress.

"Anna tells me you worked with Cedric?"

"Look," Moya said. "I heard about you. I'm sorry for what happened to you, but you gotta know that the reason you're walking, hell, the reason you're even breathing is because of the work we do. You got to dance until the age of forty, and you could have gone longer because of our research. But you quit to have a baby, by yourself, and it was easy, not like it was fifty years ago for a first-timer your age, so before you go into the ethics of creating chimera, you got to remember how much benefit you've taken from them."

Gen took a deep breath. "I didn't come here to yell at you. I came to find out what happened to Cedric."

"What happened to him? He was in our lab until the experiment expired. Then I gave him to Anna for the Mission."

"He's violent," Gen said. "And he has night terrors, or so it seems to me. Anna said he was part of an experiment for Parkinson's-"

"Alzheimer's." Moya looked down. "A lot of the old folk had such poor medical care and nutrition when they were kids. They're still developing Alzheimer's. We can hold it off until they're a hundred or so, but with the lifestyle changes, they might live another twenty years. That's a burden on the families. We can slow the progression of the disease, but we haven't been able to stop it. Not yet."

"Cedric has Alzheimer's?"

"No." Moya sighed. "Cedric was a control. We used stem cells to give him the closest thing we could to a human brain, and then we tested our latest drugs on him. I can't tell you more than that."

"What did the drugs do?"

"Enhanced memory. Increased certain types of chemicals. Helped fortify connections between different parts of the brain. Some of the drugs failed. A few didn't. But drugs are iffy things. They can alter personality in humans. Cedric isn't human and he's not exactly feline. He became too erratic to work with, so we were supposed to put him down." Moya shrugged. "I don't believe in doing that."

She said that last very softly, and Gen understood where many of Anna's animals came from.

"Why do you think he became erratic?" Gen asked.

"I didn't have a chance to study him," Moya said. "He began to hate his cage, and he would attack anyone he didn't know. He hid on us a lot, and wouldn't let us find him until after testing times. He became difficult. I wanted to keep him on the study, but the team decided he was a hazard."

"How old is he?" Gen asked.

"About two."

Gen nodded. Then she straightened her shoulders before she asked the difficult question, the one that might make her seem like a fool. "Do you think that he thinks like a human? I mean, he has an enhanced brain, and you designed it to be like a person's."

"That was my argument. Hiding. Tantrums. Not knowing limits. It seemed to me like he was an out-of-control child. But the others wouldn't hear of it." Moya traced the barrel of the pistol with one finger. "Think of it. If it were true, if Cedric had developed a human mind, then what were we doing to him? We were as bad as those pro-lifers said we were. We're worse than PETA makes us out to be. We're real monsters."

Gen had no response. Her dance work had always seemed cut-and-dried. Elegant solutions without ethical considerations, not even in the fund-raising work. She didn't know what she would do if she were told her work would benefit millions of people, but to do it, she had to irreparably damage fifty innocents.

"Do you think Cedric can understand speech?" Gen asked.

Moya stopped tracing the barrel. "Yes, but he'll never be able to talk back to you, not in English anyway. His mouth isn't designed for it."

"But he could learn to understand a language."

"Probably," Moya said. "Cats have a twenty-one-sound vocabulary and seem to have a small verbal language. If we accidentally enhanced that even a little, he would probably be able to communicate with you quite well."

The words hung between them for a moment. Then Gen said, "Do you have any idea what's causing his night terrors?"

"A guess," Moya said. "We fine-tuned his memory. You and I, we remember only certain events, but he probably remembers every single thing that happened to him. Every moment of every day."

"Why would that scare him so?" Gen asked.

Moya stared at her. "I think it would be awful not to be able to forget anything, don't you?"

Gen let out a small breath. She knew what it was like. If she could forget the accident, she would. If she could forget how Dar looked on the pavement, crumpled and broken, she would. She remembered other things about him, just not as strongly as that last moment.

Was that how Cedric thought? Were the painful things stronger than the pleasant ones? Or had he had so few pleasant experiences in his life that he didn't even understand what they were?

Moya picked up the pistol and turned it over in her hands.

"Do you know what chimera originally meant?"

"No," Gen said.

"In Greek mythology, it was a fire-breathing monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. That was probably how those first biogenetic engineers started calling the hybrids we experiment with chimera. But when I

started work with chimera my second year at Oregon State, I asked my computer what the term meant." She paused, and met Gen's gaze. "The definition I got was 'grotesque monster.' "

Gen waited. She wasn't sure how this related to Cedric's night terrors.

"Grotesque monster." Moya shook her head. "Sometimes I would look at Cedric and the other animals I worked with, and I would wonder which one of us were the real monsters. I think of some of the things I did-still do-and I realize I don't want to know."

"Anna thinks I shouldn't keep him. She believes I shouldn't have taken him in the first place."

"Anna's a kind-hearted woman who has seen a lot of pain and death." Moya pushed her chair back. It squealed against the concrete floor. "She tries to heal people and chimera. What she doesn't realize is how damage really works. Let's take you, for example. Those famous legs of yours are as good as they've always been, despite the destruction the car did to them."

Gen sat very still. Her legs tingled at the mention. She clenched her fists, dropping them to her side.

"But they're not the same legs you had before. No damage remains, but your legs are changed. They may be genetically similar, they might even be regrown legs from your DNA, but they are not the legs you were born with, and never will be again. All that exercise, all that muscle training, it's gone. Your legs are different, and there's nothing you can do about that."

Moya glanced at Gen's clenched hands, then back at Gen's eyes. Gen had frozen in her seat, like Cedric did when she made the darkness disappear.

"Healing is not the process of returning things to the way they were before. It's the acceptance of things the way they are now." Moya smiled ruefully. "Sometimes I think that's the biggest problem we created with our work. We created an expectation that everything will remain the same. It never does. No matter how much we want it to. It never does."

j

Gen felt numb as she stepped out of the shop, looking both ways as Moya told her to. Moya had been worried about snipers; apparently attacks on chimera scientists were so common they weren't reported any more.

But no one took a shot at Gen, and she had gone half a block before she realized she was walking away from her car. She wasn't thinking. Her mind was preoccupied. It was as if parts of her had been cut off from the rest. She recognized this feeling; it had been with her in the first months after the accident.

When she finally got into the car, she hit a preprogrammed route home. The car took her down side streets, past the rivers and Portland's famous bridges. Her stomach clenched as the scenery grew more and more familiar. The scenery of her dreams.

She ordered the car to stop on Burnside. It pulled over, and she got out.

Her legs wobbled. She was nauseous and dizzy at the same time. But she went forward. Around the corner was Dar's favorite playground, in what had once been a brewery. The sky was grayer than it had been before, as gray as it had been that day.

She stopped at the crosswalk, looked down the empty street. In her mind, it wasn't empty at all. The car-blue and gold, without a driver-careened around the corner, bounced off the curb, and kept coming. She had one foot in the intersection. Dar was pulling her across.

The car hit them both and she went flying-above everything, spotlight on her, the world watching-like she had been when she leaped on stage. Only on a stage, someone always caught her. Someone caught her and held her up and twirled her while she arched her back and kept her toes en pointe.

But there was no one to catch her now. And when she looked down, on that agonizingly long flight, she saw Dar, crumpled, destroyed, bleeding, and she knew that she should have brought him with her, brought him into the air, where it was safe.

It was safe.

And then she landed.

Gen leaned against the edge of the building, the nausea so strong that she had to breathe deeply to hold it back. The second hit had happened, but not in the way she remembered it. She had been flying, she landed, and then the car spun into her.

And still she had crawled toward Dar.

j

Somehow she found her way to her own car. Somehow it got her home. When she entered the house, Cedric was sitting near the door, his back to her. She scooped him up and cradled him like a child, ignoring his squirming, holding him close. She carried him with her into the bedroom, and lay on the bed.

He slipped out of her arms, stood uncertainly for a moment, then lay down beside her, not touching her. He wasn't a child. She knew that. He wasn't a child and he wasn't a kitten; he wasn't human and he wasn't a cat.

He was, by definition, a grotesque monster.

But only because of things that had been done to him, not because of things he had done to himself.

They weren't that different, he and she. She was a grotesque monster too, with enhancements and parts she had never been born with. She and Cedric were bound-not by loss, as Dr. Prichard had wanted Gen to bind with that dog, but by night terrors and mistrust and a conviction that life wasn't going the way that it should.

She petted Cedric's side, smoothing his fur. After a moment, he sighed, and eased closer to her, his feline face upturned toward the light.

Life hadn't gone the way it should have, and nothing would change that. No matter what she did, nothing would change that moment when Dar's hand slipped from hers. Life was different now. And, like Cedric, she had come out of a deep darkness.

It had taken her a long time, but she was finally ready.

Ready to turn her face toward the light.

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Kim Newman
CASTLE IN THE DESERT

Anno Dracula 1977

The man who had married my wife cried when he told me how she died. Junior—Smith Ohlrig, Jr., of the oil and copper Ohlrigs—hadn't held on to Linda much longer than I had, but their marriage had gone one better than ours by producing a daughter.

Whatever relation you are to a person who was once married to one of your parents, Racquel Loring Ohlrig was to me. In Southern California, it's such a common family tie you'd think there'd be a neat little name for it, pre-father or potential-parent. The last time I'd seen her was at the Poodle Springs bungalow her mother had given me in lieu of alimony. Thirteen or fourteen going on a hundred and eight, with a micro-halter top and frayed jean shorts, stretch of still-chubby tummy in between, honey-colored hair past the small of her back, an underlip that couldn't stop pouting without surgery, binary star sunglasses and a leather headband with Aztec symbols. She looked like a pre-schooler dressed up as a squaw for a costume party, but had the vocabulary of a sailor in Tijuana and the glittery eyes of a magpie with three convictions for aggravated burglary. She'd asked for money, to gas up her boyfriend's "sickle," and took my television (no great loss) while I was in the atrium telephoning her mother. In parting, she scrawled "fuck you, piggy-dad" in red lipstick on a Spanish mirror. Piggy-dad, that was me. She still had prep-school penmanship, with curly-tails on her ys and a star over the *i*.

Last I'd heard, the boyfriend was gone with the rest of the Wild Angels and Racquel was back with Linda, taking penicillin shots and going with someone in a rock band.

Now things were serious.

"My little girl," Junior kept repeating, "my little girl..."

He meant Racquel.

"They took her away from me," he said. "The vipers."

j

All our lives, we've known about the vampires, if only from books and movies. Los Angeles was the last place they were likely to settle. After all, California is famous for sunshine. Vipers would frazzle like burgers on a grill. Now, it was changing. And not just because of affordable prescription sunglasses.

The dam broke in 1959, about the time Linda was serving me papers, when someone in Europe finally destroyed Dracula. Apparently, all vipers remembered who they were biting when they heard the news. It was down to the Count that so many of them lived openly in the world, but his continued unlife—and acknowledged position as King of the Cats—kept them in the coffin, confined to joyless regions of the old world like Transylvania and England. With the wicked old witch dead, they didn't have to stay on the plantation any longer. They spread.

The first vipers in California were elegant European predators, flush with centuried fortunes and keen with red thirsts. In the early '60s, they bought up real estate, movie studios, talent agencies (cue lots of gags), orange groves, restaurant franchises, ocean-front properties, parent companies. Then their get began to appear: American vampires, new-borns with wild streaks. Just as I quit the private detective business for the second time, bled-dry bodies turned up all over town as turf wars erupted and were settled out of court. For some reason, drained corpses were often dumped on golf courses. Vipers made more vipers, but they also made viper-killers—including such noted humanitarians as Charles Manson—and created new segments of the entertainment and produce industries. Vampire dietary requirements opened up whole new possibilities for butchers and hookers.

As the Vietnam War escalated, things went quiet on the viper front. Word was that the elders of the community began ruthless policing of their own kind. Besides, the cops were more worried about draft dodgers and peace-freak protesters. Now, vampires were just another variety of Los Angeles fruitcake. Hundred-coffin mausolea were opening up along the Strip, peddling shelter from the sun at five bucks a day. A swathe of Bay City, bounded by dried-up canals, was starting to be called Little Carpathia, a ghetto for the poor suckers who didn't make it up to castles and estates in Beverly Hills. I had nothing real against vipers, apart from a deep-in-the-gut crawly distrust it was impossible for anyone of my generation—the WWII guys—to quell entirely. Linda's death, though, hit me harder than I thought I could be hit, a full-force ulcer-bursting right to the gut. Ten years into my latest retirement, I was at war.

To celebrate the bicentennial year, I'd moved from Poodle Springs back into my old Los Angeles apartment. I was nearer the bartenders and medical practitioners to whom I was sole support. These days, I knocked about, boring

youngsters in the profession with the Sternwood case or the Lady in the Lake, doing light sub-contract work for Lew Archer—digging up family records at county courthouses—or Jim Rockford. All the cops I knew were retired, dead or purged by Chief Exley, and I hadn't had any pull with the D.A.'s office since Bernie Ohls's final stroke. I admitted I was a relic, but so long as my lungs and liver behaved at least eight hours a day I was determined not to be a shambling relic.

I was seriously trying to cut down on the Camels, but the damage was done back in the puff-happy '40s when no one outside the cigarette industry knew nicotine was worse for you than heroin. I told people I was drinking less, but never really kept score. There were times, like now, when Scotch was the only soldier that could complete the mission.

j

Junior, as he talked, drank faster than I did. His light tan suit was the worse for a soaking, and had been worn until dry, wrinkling and staining around the saggy shape of its owner. His shirtfront had ragged tears where he had caught on something.

Since his remarriage to a woman nearer Racquel's age than Linda's, Junior had been a fading presence in the lives of his ex-wife and daughter (ex-daughter?). I couldn't tell how much of his story was from experience and how much filtered through what others had told him. It was no news that Racquel was running with another bad crowd, the Anti-Life Equation. They weren't all vipers, Junior said, but some, the ringleaders, were. Racquel, it appears, got off on being bitten. Not something I wanted to know, but it hardly came as a surprise. With the motorcycle boy, who went by the name of Heavenly Blues but liked his friends to address him as "Mr. President," she was sporting a selection of bruises that didn't look like they'd come from taking a bad spill off the pillion of his hog. For tax purposes, the Anti-Life Equation was somewhere between religious and political. I had never heard of them, but it's impossible to keep up with all the latest cults.

Two days ago, at his office—Junior made a pretense of still running the company, though he had to clear every paper clip purchase with Riyadh and Tokyo—he'd taken a phone call from his daughter. Racquel sounded agitated and terrified, and claimed she'd made a break with the ALE, who wanted to sacrifice her to some elder vampire. She needed money—that same old refrain, haunting me again—to make a dash for Hawaii or, oddly, the Philippines (she thought she'd be safe in a Catholic country, which suggested she'd never been to one). Junior, tower of flab, had written a check, but his new wife, smart doll, talked him out of sending it. Last night, at home, he had gotten another call from Racquel, hysterical this time, with screaming and other background effects. They were coming for her, she said. The call was cut off.

To his credit, Junior ignored his lawfully-married flight attendant and drove over to Linda's place in Poodle Springs, the big house where I'd been uncomfortable. He found the doors open, the house extensively trashed and no sign of Racquel. Linda was at the bottom of the kidney-shaped swimming pool, bitten all over, eyes white. To set a seal on the killing, someone had driven an iron spike through her forehead. A croquet mallet floated above her. I realized he had gone into the pool fully-dressed and hauled Linda out. Strictly speaking, that was violating the crime scene but I would be the last person to complain.

He had called the cops, who were very concerned. Then, he'd driven to the city to see me. It's not up to me to say whether that qualified as a smart move or not.

j

"This Anti-Life Equation?" I asked Junior, feeling like a shamus again. "Did it come with any names?"

"I'm not even sure it's called that. Racquel mostly used just the initials, ALE. I think it was Anti-Life Element once. Or Anti-Love. Their guru or nabob or whatever he calls himself is some kind of hippie Rasputin. He's one of them, a viper. His name is Khorda. Someone over at one of the studios—Traeger or Mill or one of those kids, maybe Bruckheimer—fed this Khorda some money on an option, but it was never-never stuff. So far as I know, they never killed anyone before."

Junior cried again and put his arms around me. I smelled chlorine on his ragged shirt. I felt all his weight bearing me down, and was afraid I'd break, be no use to him at all. My bones are brittle these days. I patted his back, which made neither of us feel any better. At last, he let me go and wiped his face on a wet handkerchief.

"The police are fine people," he said. He got no argument from me. "Poodle Springs has the lowest crime rate in the state. Every contact I've had with the PSPD has been cordial, and I've always been impressed with their efficiency and courtesy."

The Poodle Springs Police Department were real tigers when it came to finding lost kittens and discreetly removing drunken ex-spouses from floodlit front lawns. You can trust me on this.

"But they aren't good with murder," I said. "Or vipers."

Junior nodded. "That's just it. They aren't. I know you're retired. God, you must be I don't know how old. But you used to be connected. Linda told me how you met, about the Wade-Lennox case. I can't even begin to imagine how you could've figured out that tangle. For her, you've got to help. Racquel is still alive. They didn't kill her when they killed her mother. They just took her. I want my little girl back safe and sound. The police don't know Racquel. Well, they do... and that's the problem. They said they were taking the kidnap seriously, but I saw in their eyes that they knew about Racquel and the bikers and the hippies. They think she's run off with another bunch of freaks. It's only my word that Racquel was even at the house. I keep thinking of my little girl, of sands running out. Desert sands. You've got to help us. You've just got to."

I didn't make promises, but I asked questions.

"Racquel said the ALE wanted to sacrifice her? As in tossed into a volcano to appease the Gods?"

"She used a bunch of words. 'Elevate' was one. They all meant 'kill.' Blood sacrifice, that's what she was afraid of. Those vipers want my little girl's blood."

"Junior, I have to ask, so don't explode. You're sure Racquel isn't a part of this?"

Junior made fists, like a big boy about to get whipped by someone half his size. Then it got through to the back of his brain. I wasn't making assumptions like the PSPD, I was asking an important question, forcing him to prove himself to me.

"If you'd heard her on the phone, you'd know. She was terrified. Remember when she wanted to be an actress? Set her heart on it, nagged for lessons and screen tests. She was—what?—eleven or twelve? Cute as a bug, but froze under the lights. She's no actress. She can't fake anything. She can't tell a lie without it being written all over her. You know that as well as anyone else. My daughter isn't a perfect person, but she's a kid. She'll straighten out. She's got her Mom's iron in her."

I followed his reasoning. It made sense. The only person Racquel had ever fooled was her father, and him only because he let himself be fooled out of guilt. She'd never have come to me for gas money if Junior were still giving in to his princess's every whim. And he was right—I'd seen Racquel Ohlrig (who had wanted to call herself Amber Valentine) act, and she was on the Sonny Tufts side of plain rotten.

"Khorda," I said, more to myself than Junior. "That's a start. I'll do what I can."

j

Mojave Wells could hardly claim to come to life after dark, but when the blonde viper slid out of the desert dusk, all four living people in the diner—Mom and Pop behind the counter, a trucker and me on stools—turned to look. She smiled as if used to the attention but deeming herself unworthy of it, and walked between the empty tables.

The girl wore a white silk minidress belted on her hips with interlocking steel rings, a blue scarf that kept her hair out of the way, and square black sunglasses. Passing from purple twilight to fizzing blue-white neon, her skin was white to the point of colorlessness, her lips naturally scarlet, her hair pale blonde. She might have been Racquel's age or God's.

I had come to the desert to find vampires. Here was one.

She sat at the end of the counter, by herself. I sneaked a look. She was framed against the "No Vipers" sign lettered on the window. Mom and Pop—probably younger than me, I admit—made no move to throw her out on her behind, but also didn't ask for her order.

"Get the little lady whatever she wants and put it on my check," said the trucker. The few square inches of his face not covered by salt-and-pepper beard were worn leather, the texture and color of his cowboy hat.

"Thank you very much, but I'll pay for myself."

Her voice was soft and clear, with a long-ago ghost of an accent. Italian or Spanish or French.

"R.D., you know we don't accommodate vipers," said Mom. "No offense, ma'am, you look nice enough, but we've had bad ones through here. And out at the castle."

Mom nodded at the sign and the girl swivelled on her stool. She genuinely noticed it for the first time and the tiniest flush came to her cheeks.

Almost apologetically, she suggested, "You probably don't have the fare I need?"

"No, ma'am, we don't."

She slipped off her stool and stood up. Relief poured out of Mom like sweat.

R.D., the trucker, reached out for the viper's slender, bare arm, for a reason I doubt he could explain. He was a big man, not slow on the draw. However, when his fingers got to where the girl had been when his brain sparked the impulse to touch, she was somewhere else.

"Touchy," commented R.D.

"No offence," she said.

"I've got the *fare* you need," said the trucker, standing up. He scratched his throat through beard.

"I'm not that thirsty."

"A man might take that unkindly."

"If you know such a man, give him my condolences."

"R.D.," said Mom. "Take this outside. I don't want my place busted up."

"I'm leaving," said R.D., dropping dollars by his coffee cup and cleaned plate. "I'll be honored to see you in the parking lot, Missy Touchy."

"My name is Geneviève," she said, "*accent grave* on the third *e*."

R.D. put on his cowboy hat. The viper darted close to him and lightning-touched his forehead. The effect was something like the Vulcan nerve pinch. The light in his eyes went out. She deftly sat him down at a table, like a floppy rag doll. A yellow toy duck squirted out of the top pocket of his denim jacket and thumped against a plastic ketchup tomato in an unheard-of mating ritual.

"I am sorry," she said to the room. "I have been driving for a long time and could not face having to cripple this man. I hope you will explain this to him when he wakes up. He'll ache for a few days, but an icepack will help."

Mom nodded. Pop had his hands out of sight, presumably on a shotgun or a baseball bat.

"For whatever offense my kind has given you in the past, you have my apologies. One thing, though: your sign—the word 'viper.' I hear it more and more as I travel west, and it strikes me as insulting. 'No Vampire Fare on

Offer' will convey your message, without provoking less gentle *vipers* than myself." She looked mock-sternly at the couple, with a hint of fang. Pop pulled his hold-out pacifier and I tensed, expecting fireworks. He raised a gaudy Day of the Dead crucifix on a lamp-flex, a glowing-eyed Christ crowned by thorny lightbulbs.

"Hello, Jesus," said Geneviève, then added, to Pop: "Sorry, sir, but I'm not that kind of girl."

She did the fast-flit thing again and was at the door.

"Aren't you going to take your trophy?" I asked.

She turned, looked at me for the first time, and lowered her glasses. Green-red eyes like neons. I could see why she kept on the lens caps. Otherwise, she'd pick up a train of mesmerised conquests.

I held up the toy and squeezed. It gave a quack.

"Rubber Duck," said Mom, with reverence. "That's his CB handle."

"He'll need new initials," I said.

I flew the duck across the room and Geneviève took it out of the air, an angel in the outfield. She made it quack, experimentally. When she laughed, she looked the way Racquel ought to have looked. Not just innocent, but solemn and funny at the same time.

R.D. began moaning in his sleep.

"May I walk you to your car?" I asked.

She thought a moment, sizing me up as a potential geriatric Duckman, and made a snap decision in my favor, the most encouragement I'd had since Kennedy was in the White House.

I made it across the diner to her without collapsing.

j

I had never had a conversation with a vampire before. She told me straight off she was over five hundred and fifty years old. She had lived in the human world for hundreds of years before Dracula changed the rules. From her face, I'd have believed her if she said she was born under the shadow of Sputnik and that her ambition was to become one of Roger Vadim's ex-wives.

We stood on Main Street, where her fire-engine-red Plymouth Fury was parked by my Chrysler. The few stores and homes in sight were shuttered up tight, as if an air raid was due. The only place to go in town was the diner and that seemed on the point of closing. I noticed more of those ornamental crucifixes, attached above every door as if it were a religious holiday. Mojave Wells was wary of its new neighbors.

Geneviève was coming from the East and going to the West. Meager as it was, this was the first place she'd hit in hours that wasn't a government proving ground. She knew nothing about the Anti-Life Equation, Manderley, Castle or a viper named Khorda, let alone Racquel Ohlrig.

But she was a vampire and this was all about vampires.

"Why all the questions?" she asked.

I told her I was a detective. I showed my license, kept up so I could at least do the sub-contract work, and she asked to see my gun. I opened my jacket to show the shoulder holster. It was the first time I'd worn it in years, and the weight of the Smith & Wesson .38 special had pulled an ache in my shoulder.

"You are a private eye? Like in the movies."

Everyone said that. She was no different.

"We have movies in Europe, you know," she said. The desert wind was trying to get under her scarf, and she was doing things about it with her hands. "You can't tell me why you're asking questions because you have a client. Is that not so?"

"Not so," I said. "I have a man who might think he's a client, but I'm doing this for myself. And a woman who's dead. Really dead."

I told the whole story, including me and Linda. It was almost confessional. She listened well, asking only the smart questions.

"Why are you here? In... what is the name of this village?"

"Mojave Wells. It calls itself a town."

We looked up and down the street and laughed. Even the tumbleweeds were taking it easy.

"Out there in the desert," I explained, "is Manderley Castle, brought over stone by stone from England. Would you believe it's the wrong house? Back in the Twenties, a robber baron named Noah Cross wanted to buy the famous Manderley—the one that later burned down—and sent agents over to Europe to do the deal. They came home with Manderley Castle, another place entirely. Cross still put the jigsaw together, but went into a sulk and sold it back to the original owners, who emigrated to stay out of the War. There was a murder case there in the Forties, nothing to do with me. It was one of those locked-room things, with Borgia poisons and disputed wills. A funny little Chinaman from Hawaii solved it by gathering all the suspects in the library. The place was abandoned until a cult of moon-worshippers squatted it in the sixties, founded a lunatic commune. Now, it's where you go if you want to find the Anti-Life Equation."

"I don't believe anyone would call themselves that."

I liked this girl. She had the right attitude. I was also surprised to find myself admitting that. She was a bloodsucking viper, right? Wasn't Racquel worried that she was to be sacrificed to a vampire elder? Someone born in 1416 presumably fit the description. I wanted to trust her, but that could be part of her trick. I've been had before. Ask anyone.

"I've been digging up dirt on the ALE for a few days," I said, "and they aren't that much weirder than the rest of the

local kooks. If they have a philosophy, this Khorda makes it all up as he goes along. He cut a folk rock album, *The Deathmaster*. I found a copy for ninety-nine cents and feel rooked. 'Drinking blood/Feels so good,' that sort of thing. People say he's from Europe, but no one knows exactly where. The merry band at the ALE includes a Dragon Lady called Diane LeFanu, who may actually own the castle, and L. Keith Winton, who used to be a pulp writer for *Astounding Stories* but has founded a new religion that involves the faithful giving him all their money.'

"That's not a *new* religion."

I believed her.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"This town's dead as far as leads go. Dead as far as anything else, for that matter. I guess I'll have to fall back on the dull old business of going out to the castle and knocking on the front door, asking if they happen to have my ex-wife's daughter in the dungeon. My guess is they'll be long gone. With a body left back in Poodle Springs, they have to figure the law will snoop for them in the end."

"But we might find something that'll tell us where they are. A clue?"

"We?"

"I'm a detective, too. Or have been. Maybe a detective's assistant. I'm in no hurry to get to the Pacific. And you need someone who knows about vampires. You may need someone who knows about other things."

"Are you offering to be my muscle? I'm not that ancient I can't look after myself."

"I *am* that ancient, remember. It's no reflection on you, but a new-born vampire could take you to pieces. And a new-born is more likely to be stupid enough to want to. They're mostly like that Rubber Duck fellow, bursting with impulses and high on their new ability to get what they want. I was like that once myself, but now I'm a wise old lady."

She quacked the duck at me.

"We take your car," I said.

j

Manderley Castle was just what it sounded like. Crenellated turrets, arrow-slit windows, broken battlements, a drawbridge, even a stagnant artificial moat. It was sinking slowly into the sands and the tower was noticeably several degrees out of the vertical. Noah Cross had skimmed on foundation concrete. I wouldn't be surprised if the minion who mistook this pile for the real Manderley was down there somewhere, with a divot out of his skull.

We drove across the bridge into the courtyard, home to a VW bus painted with glow-in-the-dark fanged devils, a couple of pickup trucks with rifle racks, the inevitable Harley-Davidsons, and a fleet of customized dune buggies with batwing trimmings and big red eye-lamps.

There was music playing. I recognized Khorda's composition, "Big Black Bat in a Tall Dark Hat."

The Anti-Life Equation was home.

I tried to get out of the Plymouth. Geneviève was out of her driver's side door and around (over?) the car in a flash, opening the door for me as if I were her great-grandmama.

"There's a trick to the handle," she said, making me feel no better.

"If you try and help me out, I'll shoot you."

She stood back, hands up. Just then, my lungs complained. I coughed a while and red lights went off behind my eyes. I hawked up something glistening and spat it at the ground. There was blood in it.

I looked at Geneviève. Her face was flat, all emotion contained.

It wasn't pity. It was the blood. The smell did things to her personality.

I wiped off my mouth, did my best to shrug, and got out of the car like a champion. I even shut the door behind me, trick handle or no.

To show how fearless I was, how unafraid of hideous death, I lit a Camel and punished my lungs for showing me up in front of a girl. I filled them with the smoke I'd been fanning their way since I was a kid.

Coffin nails, they called them then.

We fought our aesthetic impulses, and went towards the music. I felt I should have brought a mob of Mojave Wells villagers with flaming torches, sharpened stakes and silvered scythes.

"What a magnificent pair of knockers," said Geneviève, nodding at a large square door.

"There's only one," I said.

"Didn't you see *Young Frankenstein*?"

Though she'd said they had movies in Europe, somehow I didn't believe vipers—vampires, I'd have to get used to calling them if I didn't want Geneviève ripping my throat out one fine night—concerned themselves with dates at the local passion pit. Obviously, the undead read magazines, bought underwear, grumbled about taxes, and did crossword puzzles like everyone else. I wondered if she played chess.

She took the knocker and hammered to wake the dead.

Eventually the door was opened by a skinny old bird dressed as an English butler. His hands were knots of arthritis and he could do with a shave.

The music was mercifully interrupted.

"Who is it, George?" boomed a voice from inside the castle.

"Visitors," croaked George the butler. "You are visitors, aren't you?"

I shrugged. Geneviève radiated a smile.

The butler was smitten. He trembled with awe.

"Yes," she said, "I'm a vampire. And I'm very, very old and very, very thirsty. Now, aren't you going to invite me

in? Can't cross the threshold unless you do."

I didn't know if she was spoofing him.

George creaked his neck, indicating a sandy mat inside the doorway. It was lettered with the word WELCOME.

"That counts," she admitted. "More people should have those."

She stepped inside. I didn't need the invite to follow.

j

George showed us into the big hall. Like all decent cults, the ALE had an altar and thrones for the bigwigs and cold flagstones with the occasional mercy rug for the devoted suckers.

In the blockiest throne sat Khorda, a vampire with curly fangs, the full long-hair-and-tangled-beard hippie look, and an electric guitar. He wore a violent purple and orange caftan, and his chest was covered by bead necklaces hung with diamond-eyed skulls, plastic novelty bats, Austro-Hungarian military medals, inverted crucifixes, a "Nixon in '72" button, gold marijuana leaves, and a dried human finger. By his side was a wraith-thin vision in velvet I assumed to be Diane LeFanu, who claimed—like a lot of vipers—to be California's earliest vampire settler. I noticed she wore discreet little ruby earplugs.

At the feet of these divines was a crowd of kids, of both varieties, all with long hair and fangs. Some wore white shifts, while others were naked. Some wore joke-shop plastic fangs, while others had real ones. I scanned the congregation, and spotted Racquel at once, eyes a red daze, kneeling on stone with her shift tucked under her, swaying her ripe upper body in time to the music Khorda had stopped playing.

I admitted this was too easy. I started looking at the case again, taking it apart in my mind and jamming the pieces together in new ways. Nothing made sense, but that was hardly breaking news at this end of the century.

Hovering like the Wizard of Oz between the throne-dais and the worshipper-space was a fat vampire in a 1950s suit and golf hat. I recognized L. Keith Winton, author of "Robot Rangers of the Gamma Nebula" (1946) and other works of serious literature, including *Plasmatics: The New Communion* (1950), founding text of the Church of Immortology. If ever there were a power-behind-the-throne bird, this was he.

"We've come for Racquel Loring Ohlrig," announced Geneviève. I should probably have said that.

"No one of that name dwells among us," boomed Khorda. He had a big voice.

"I see her there," I said, pointing.

"Sister Red Rose," said Khorda.

He stuck out his arm and gestured. Racquel stood. She did not move like herself. Her teeth were not a joke. She had real fangs. They fit badly in her mouth, making it look like an ill-healed red wound. Her red eyes were puffy.

"You turned her," I said, anger in my gut.

"Sister Red Rose has been elevated to the eternal."

Geneviève's hand was on my shoulder.

I thought of Linda, bled empty in her pool, a spike in her head. I wanted to burn this castle down, and sow the ground with garlic.

"I am Geneviève Dieudonné," she announced, formally.

"Welcome, Lady Elder," said the LeFanu woman. Her eyes held no welcome for Geneviève. She made a gesture, which unfolded membrane-like velvet sleeves. "I am Diane LeFanu. And this is Khorda, the Deathmaster."

Geneviève looked at the guru viper.

"General Iorga, is it not? Late of the Carpathian Guard. We met in 1888, at the palace of Prince Consort Dracula. Do you remember?"

Khorda/Iorga was not happy.

I realized he was wearing a wig and a false beard. He might have immortality, but was well past youth. I saw him as a tubby, ridiculous fraud. He was one of those elders who had been among Dracula's toadies, but was lost in a world without a King Vampire. Even for California, he was a sad soul.

"Racquel," I said. "It's me. Your father wants..."

She spat hissing red froth.

"It would be best if this new-born were allowed to leave with us," Geneviève said, not to Khorda but Winton. "There's the small matter of a murder charge."

Winton's plump, bland, pink face wobbled. He looked anger at Khorda. The guru trembled on his throne, and boomed without words.

"Murder, Khorda?" asked Winton. "Murder? Who told you we could afford murder?"

"None was done," said Khorda/Iorga.

I wanted to skewer him with something. But I went beyond anger. He was too afraid of Winton—not a person you'd immediately take as a threat, but clearly the top dog at the ALE—to lie.

"Take the girl," Winton said to me.

Racquel howled in rage and despair. I didn't know if she was the same person we had come for. As I understood it, some vampires changed entirely when they turned, their previous memories burned out, and became sad blanks, reborn with dreadful thirsts and the beginnings of a mad cunning.

"If she's a killer, we don't want her," said Winton. "Not yet."

I approached Racquel. The other cultists shrank away from her. Her face shifted, bloating and smoothing as if flatworms were passing just under her skin. Her teeth were ridiculously expanded, fat pebbles of sharp bone. Her lips were torn and split.

She hissed as I reached out to touch her.

Had this girl, in the throes of turning, battered on her mother, on Linda, and gone too far, taken more than her human mind had intended, glutting herself until her viper thirst was assuaged?

I saw the picture only too well. I tried to fit it with what Junior had told me.

He had sworn Racquel was innocent.

But his daughter had never been innocent, not as a warm person and not now as a new-born vampire.

Geneviève stepped close to Racquel and managed to slip an arm round her. She cooed in the girl's ear, coaxing her to come, replacing the Deathmaster in her mind.

Racquel took her first steps. Geneviève encouraged her. Then Racquel stopped as if she'd hit an invisible wall. She looked to Khorda/Iorga, hurt and betrayal in her eyes, and to Winton, with that pleading *moué* I knew well. Racquel was still herself, still trying to wheedle love from unworthy men, still desperate to survive through her developing wiles.

Her attention was caught by a noise. Her nose wrinkled, quizzically.

Geneviève had taken out her rubber duck and quacked it.

"Come on, Racquel," she said, as if to a happy dog. "Nice quacky-quacky. Do you want it?"

She quacked again.

Racquel attempted a horrendous smile. A baby tear of blood showed on her cheek.

We took our leave of the Anti-Life Equation.

j

Junior was afraid of his daughter. And who wouldn't be?

I was back in Poodle Springs, not a place I much cared to be. Junior's wife had stormed out, enraged that this latest drama didn't revolve around her. Their house was decorated in the expensive-but-ugly mock Spanish manner, and called itself ranch style though there were no cattle or crops on the grounds.

Geneviève sat calmly on Junior's long gray couch. She fit in like a piece of Carrara marble at a Tobacco Road yard sale. I was helping myself to Scotch.

Father and daughter looked at each other.

Racquel wasn't such a fright now. Geneviève had driven her here, following my lead. Somehow, on the journey, the elder vampire had imparted grooming tips to the new-born, helping her through the shock of turning. Racquel had regular-sized fangs, and the red in her eyes was just a tint. Outside, she had been experimenting with her newfound speed, moving her hands so fast they seemed not to be there.

But Junior was terrified. I had to break the spell.

"It's like this," I said, setting it out. "You both killed Linda. The difference is that one of you brought her back."

Junior covered his face and fell to his knees.

Racquel stood over him.

"Racquel has been turning for weeks, joining up with that crowd in the desert. She felt them taking her mind away, making her part of a harem or a slave army. She needed someone strong in her corner, and Daddy didn't cut it. So she went to the strongest person in her life, and made her stronger. She just didn't get to finish the job before the Anti-Life Equation came to her house. She called you, Junior, just before she went under, became part of their family. When you got to the house, it was just as you said. Linda was at the bottom of the swimming pool. She'd gone there to turn. You didn't even lie to me. She was dead. You took a mallet and a spike—what was it from, the tennis net?—and made her truly dead. Did you tell yourself you did it for her, so she could be at peace? Or was it because you didn't want to be in a town—a world—with a *stronger* Linda Loring. She was a fighter. I bet she fought you."

There were deep scratches on his wrists, like the rips in his shirt I had noticed that night. If I were a gather-the-suspects-in-the-library type of dick, I would have spotted that as a clue straight off.

Junior sobbed a while. Then, when nobody killed him, he uncurled and looked about, with the beginnings of an unattractive slyness.

"It's legal, you know," he said. "Linda was dead."

Geneviève's face was cold. I knew California law did not recognize the state of undeath. Yet. There were enough vampire lawyers on the case to get that changed soon.

"That's for the cops," I said. "Fine people. You've always been impressed with their efficiency and courtesy."

Junior was white under the tear-streaks. He might not take a murder fall on this, but Tokyo and Riyadh weren't going to like the attention the story would get. That was going to have a transformative effect on his position in Ohlrig Oil and Copper. And the PSPD would find something to nail him with: making false or incomplete statements, mutilating a corpse for profit (no more alimony), contemptible gutlessness.

Another private eye might have left him with Racquel.

She stood over her father, fists swollen by the sharp new nails extruding inside, dripping her own blood—the blood that she had made her mother drink—onto the mock-Mission-style carpet.

Geneviève was beside her, with the duck.

"Come with me, Racquel," she said. "Away from the dark red places."

j

Days later, in a bar on Cahuenga just across from the building where my office used to be, I was coughing over a shot

and a Camel.

They found me.

Racquel was her new self, flitting everywhere, flirting with men of all ages, sharp eyes fixed on the pulses in their necks and the blue lines in their wrists.

Geneviève ordered bull's blood.

She made a face.

"I'm used to fresh from the bull," she said. "This is rancid."

"We're getting live piglets next week," said the bartender. "The straps are already fitted, and we have the neck-spigots on order."

"See," Geneviève told me. "We're here to stay. We're a market."

I coughed some more.

"You could get something done about that," she said, softly.

I knew what she meant. I could become a vampire. Who knows: if Linda had made it, I might have been tempted. As it was, I was too old to change.

"You remind me of someone," she said. "Another detective. In another country, a century ago."

"Did he catch the killer and save the girl?"

An unreadable look passed over her face. "Yes," she said, "that's exactly what he did."

"Good for him."

I drank. The Scotch tasted of blood. I could never get used to drinking that.

According to the newspapers, there'd been a raid on the castle in the desert. General Iorga and Diane LeFanu were up on a raft of abduction, exploitation, and murder charges; with most of the murder victims undead enough to recite testimony in favor of their killers, they would stay in court forever. No mention was made of L. Keith Winton, though I had noticed a storefront on Hollywood Boulevard displaying nothing but a stack of Immortology tracts. Outside, fresh-faced new-born vampires smiled under black parasols and invited passersby in for "a blood test." Picture this: followers who are going to give you all their money *and* live forever. And they said Dracula was dead.

"Racquel will be all right," Geneviève assured me. "She's so good at this that she frightens me. And she won't make get again in a hurry."

I looked at the girl, surrounded by eager warm bodies. She'd use them up by the dozen. I saw the last of Linda in her, and regretted that there was none of me. "What about you?" I asked Geneviève.

"I've seen the Pacific. Can't drive much further. I'll stay around for a while, maybe get a job. I used to know a lot about being a doctor. Perhaps I'll try to get into med school, and requalify. I'm tired of jokes about leeches. Then again, I have to unlearn so much. Medieval knowledge is a handicap, you know."

I put my license on the bar. "You could get one like it," I said.

She took off her glasses. Her eyes were still startling.

"This was my last case, Geneviève. I got the killer and I saved the girl. It's been a long goodbye and it's over. I've met my own killers, in bottles and soft-packs of twenty. Soon, they'll finish me and I'll be sleeping the big sleep. There's not much more I can do for people. There are going to be a lot more like Racquel. Those kids at the castle in the desert. The customers our bartender is expecting next week. The suckers drawn into Winton's nets. Some are going to need you. And some are going to be real vipers, which means other folk are going to need you to protect them from the worst they can do. You're good, sweetheart. You could do good. There, that's my speech. Over."

She dipped a finger-tip in her glass of congealing blood and licked it clean, thinking.

"You might have an idea there, gumshoe."

I drank to her.

Severna Park

THE CURE FOR EVERYTHING

Maria was smoking damp cigarettes with Horace, taking a break in the humid evening, when the truck full of wild jungle Indians arrived from Ipiranga. She heard the truck before she saw it, laboring through the Xingu Forest Preserve.

"Are we expecting someone?" she said to Horace.

Horace shook his head, scratched his thin beard, and squinted into the forest. Diesel fumes drifted with the scent of churned earth and cigarette smoke. The truck revved higher and lumbered through the Xingu Indian Assimilation Center's main gates.

Except for the details of their face paint, the Indians behind the flatbed's fenced sides looked the same as all the other new arrivals; tired and scared in their own stoic way, packed together on narrow benches, everyone holding something—a baby, a drum, a cooking pot. Horace waved the driver to the right, down the hill toward Intake. Maria stared at the Indians and they stared back like she was a three-armed sideshow freak.

"Now you've scared the crap out of them," said Horace, who was the director of the Projeto Brasileiro Nacional de Assimilação do Índio. "They'll think this place is haunted."

"They should have called ahead," said Maria. "I'd be out of sight, like a good little ghost."

Horace ground his cigarette into the thin rainforest soil. "Go on down to the A/V trailer," he said. "I'll give you a call in a couple of minutes." He made an attempt to smooth his rough hair, and started after the truck.

Maria took a last drag on the cigarette and started in the opposite direction, toward the Audio/Visual trailer, where she could monitor what was going on in Intake without being seen. Horace was fluent in the major Amazonian dialects of Tupi-Guaraní, Arawak, and Ge, but Maria had a gut-level understanding that he didn't. She was the distant voice in his ear, mumbling advice into a microphone as he interviewed tribe after refugee tribe. She was the one picking out the nuances in language, guiding him as he spoke, like a conscience.

Or like a ghost. She glanced over her shoulder, but the truck and the Indians were out of sight. No matter where they were from, the Indians had some idea of how white people and black people looked, but you'd think they'd never seen an albino in their lives. Her strange eyes, her pale, translucent skin over African features. To most of them, she was an unknown and sometimes terrifying magical entity. To her... well... most of them were no more or less polite than anyone she'd ever met stateside.

She stopped to grind her cigarette into the dirt, leaned over to pick up the butt, and listened. Another engine. Not the heavy grind of a truck this time.

She started back toward the gate. In the treetops beyond Xingu's chain-link fence and scattered asphalt roofs, monkeys screamed and rushed through the branches like a visible wind. Headlights flickered between tree trunks and dense undergrowth and a Jeep lurched out of the forest. Bright red letters were stenciled over its hood: Hiller Project.

Maria waved the driver to a stop. He and his passenger were both wearing bright red jackets, with Hiller Project embroidered over the front pocket. The driver had a broad, almost Mexican face. The passenger was a black guy, deeply blue-black, like he was fresh off the boat from Nigeria. He gave Maria a funny look, but she knew what it was. He'd never seen an albino either.

"We're following the truck from Ipiranga," the black man said in Portuguese. His name was stenciled over his heart. N'Lykli.

She pointed down the dirt road where the overhead floodlights cut the descending dusk. "Intake's over there," she said in the same language. "You should have called ahead. You're lucky we've got space for them."

"Thanks," said N'Lykli, and the driver put the Jeep in gear.

"Hey," said Maria as they started to pull away. "What's a Hiller Project?"

Another cultural rescue group, she figured, but the black guy gave her a different funny look. She didn't recognize it and he didn't answer. The Jeep pulled away, jouncing down the rutted access road.

Maria groped in her pocket for another cigarette, took one out of the pack, then stuck it back in. Instead of heading for the A/V trailer, she followed them down the hill to Intake.

j

She found N'Lykli and the driver inside with Horace, arguing in Portuguese while four of Xingu's tribal staffers stood around listening, impassive in their various face paint, Xingu T-shirts, and khaki shorts.

"These people have to be isolated," the driver was saying. "They have to be isolated or we'll lose half of them to measles and the other half to the flu."

He seemed overly focused on this issue, even though Horace was nodding. Horace turned to one of the staffers and started to give instructions in the man's native Arawak. "Drive them down to Area C. Take the long way so you don't go past the Waura camp."

"No," said N'Lykli. "We'll drive them. You just show us where they can stay for the night."

Horace raised an eyebrow. "For the night?"

"We'll be gone in the morning," said N'Lykli. "We have permanent quarters set up for them south of here, in Xavantina."

Horace drew himself up. "Once they're on Xingu property, they're our responsibility. You can't just drop in and then take them somewhere else. This isn't a fucking motel."

The driver pulled a sheaf of papers out of his jacket and spread them on the table. Everything was stamped with official-looking seals and Hiller Project in red letters over the top of every page. "I have authorization."

"So do I," said Horace. "And mine's part of a big fat grant from Plano de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social in Brazillia."

The driver glanced at his Hiller companion.

"Let me make a phone call," said N'Lykli. "We'll get this straightened out."

Horace snorted and waved him toward Maria. "She'll show you where it is."

"This way," said Maria.

It wasn't that Horace would kick the Indians out if they didn't have authorization. He'd kick out the Hiller whatever-the-fuck-that-was Project first, and hold on to the Indians until he knew where they were from and what they were doing on the back of a truck. Indians were shipped out of settlements all over Brazil as an act of mercy before the last of the tribe was gunned down by cattle ranchers, rubber tappers, or gold miners. Xingu's big fat grant was a sugar pill that the Plano de Desenvolvimento gave out with one hand while stripping away thousands of years of culture with the other. Horace knew it. Everyone knew it.

N'Lykli followed her across the compound, between swirls of floodlit mosquitoes, through the evening din of cicadas. The phone was on the other side of the reserve, and Maria slowed down to make him walk beside her.

"So what's a Hiller Project?" she said.

"Oh," he said, "we're part of a preservation coalition."

"Which one?" asked Maria. "Rainforest Agencies?"

"Something like that."

"You should be a little more specific." Maria jerked a thumb in Horace's direction. "Horace thinks Rainforest Agencies is a front for the World Bank, and they're not interested in preserving anything. If he finds out that's who you work for, you'll never get your little Indian friends out of here."

N'Lykli hesitated. "Okay. You've heard of International Pharmaceuticals?"

"They send biologists out with the shamans to collect medicinal plants."

"Right," he said. "IP underwrites part of our mission."

"You mean rainforest as medical resource?" Maria stopped. "So why're you taking Indians from Ipiranga to Xavantina? They won't know anything about the medicinal plants down there. Ipiranga's in an entirely different ecological zone."

He made a motion with his shoulders, a shrug, she thought, but it was more of a shudder. "There's a dam going up at Ipiranga," he said. "We had to relocate them."

"To Xavantina?" She couldn't think of anything down there except abandoned gold mines, maybe a rubber plantation or two. "Why can't you leave them with us?"

"Because they're... unique."

He was being so vague, so unforthcoming, she would have guessed that the entire tribe was going to be sold into gold-mining slavery, except that something in his tone said that he really cared about what happened to them.

"Unique?" said Maria. "You mean linguistically? Culturally?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets. He licked his lips. After a while he said, "Genetically."

That was a first. "Oh yeah?" said Maria. "How's that?"

"Ipiranga's an extremely isolated valley. If it wasn't for the dam, these people might not have been discovered for another century. The other tribes in the area told us they were just a fairy tale." He glanced at her. "We don't think there's been any new blood in the Ipiranga population for five hundred years."

Maria let out a doubtful laugh. "They must be completely inbred. And sterile."

"You'd think so," said N'Lykli. "But they've been very careful."

A whole slew of genetic consequences rose up in her mind. Mutants. Family insanities and nightmarish physical defects passed down the generations. She knew them all. "They'd have to have written records to keep so-and-so's nephew from marrying his mother's grand-niece."

"They have an oral tradition you wouldn't believe. Their children memorize family histories back two hundred generations. They know who they're not supposed to marry."

Maria blinked in the insect-laden night. "But they must have a few mistakes. Someone lies to their husband. Someone's got a girlfriend on the side-they can't be a hundred percent accurate."

"If they've made mistakes, none of them have survived. We haven't found any autism, or Down's." He finally gave her that three-armed sideshow freak look again. "Or Lucknow's."

Maria clenched her teeth, clenched her fists. "Excuse me?"

"Lucknow's Syndrome. Your albinism. That's what it is. Isn't it?"

She just stood there. She couldn't decide whether to sock him or start screaming. Not even Horace knew what it was called. No one was supposed to mention it. It was supposed to be as invisible as she was.

N'Lykli shifted uncomfortably. "If you have Lucknow's, your family must have originally been from the Ivory Coast. They were taken as slaves to South Carolina in the late 1700s and mixed with whites who were originally from County Cork in Ireland. That's the typical history for Lucknow's. It's a bad combination." He hesitated. "Unless you don't want children."

She stared at him. Her great-grandfather from South Carolina was "high yellow," as they said in those days to describe how dark he wasn't, referring not-so-subtly to the rapes of his grandmothers. His daughter's children turned out light-skinned and light eyed, all crazy in their heads. Only one survived and that was Maria's mother, the least deranged, who finally went for gene-testing and was told that her own freakishly albino daughter would bear monsters instead of grandchildren. That they would be squirming, mitten-handed imbeciles, white as maggots, dying as they exited the womb.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" whispered Maria.

"There's a cure," he said. "Or there will be." He made a vague gesture into the descending night, toward Intake. "International Pharmaceutical wants those people because their bloodlines are so carefully documented and so clean. There's a mutation in their genes - they all have it - it 'resets' the control regions in zygotic DNA. That means their genes can be used as templates to eliminate virtually any congenital illness-even aging. We've got an old lady who's a hundred years old and sharp as a whip. There's a twelve-year-old girl with the genes to wipe out leukemia." He moved closer. "We've got a guy who could be source for a hundred new vaccines. He's incredible - the cure for everything. But we'll lose them all if your boss keeps them here. And he can. He has the authority."

"Get on the phone to International Pharmaceutical," she said and heard her voice shaking. "Get them to twist his arm."

"I can't," he said. "This isn't a public project. We're not even supposed to be here. We were supposed to pick them up and get them down to the southern facility. We wouldn't have stopped except we spent a day fixing the truck." He spread his hands, like the plagues of the world, not just Lucknow's, would be on her shoulders if she refused to lie for him. "Help us," he said. "Tell your boss everything's fine in Xavantina."

She couldn't make herself say anything. She couldn't make herself believe him.

He moved even closer. "You won't be sorry," he said in a low voice. "Do it, and I'll make sure you won't ever be sorry."

She took him back to Intake and told Horace that Hiller seemed to be a legit operation, that there was a receiving area at Xavantina and it had been approved according to Plano de Desenvolvimento standards. Horace grunted and smoked and made more irritated pronouncements about Xingu as a cheap motel on the highway to Brazil's industrial future. At about one in the morning, he stubbed out his cigarette and went to bed, leaving Maria to lock up.

Maria showed N'Lykli and the Mexican driver where they could sleep, and then she walked down to Area C, to have a better look at The Cure for Everything.

Xingu's compounds would never make it into Frommer's, but to fleeing tribes, the split greenwood shelters, clean water, and firepits were five-star accommodations. The only fences were to keep the compound areas separated. Inter-tribal conflicts could survive bulldozers and rifles like nothing else.

Maria passed the Xingu guard, who squinted at her, then waved her on. Closer to Area C she was surprised to run into a second guard. A short guy - the truck driver, she realized - built like a brick and too bulky for his Hiller jacket.

His eyes widened at the sight of Maria and he crossed himself. "You can't come in here."

"I work here," snapped Maria.

"Everybody's sleeping," said the guard, but Maria took another step toward him, letting him get a good look at her spirit-pale face, and his resolve seemed to evaporate. "Germs," he said weakly. "Don't give them your germs."

"I've had all my shots," she said, and kept walking.

j

They weren't asleep. It was too dark to make out details, but from her shadowy hiding place, Maria could see seven or eight people sitting by the nearest fire, talking to each other. No different than a hundred other intakes. Exhausted little kids had been bundled into the shelters. The adults would watch for unknown dangers until sunrise.

Maria crouched in the leaves, invisible, and listened. Five hundred years of isolation would mean an unfathomable dialect. She might be able to catch a word or two, but the proof of the Hiller Project would be in what she could hear and not comprehend. She had the rest of the night to decide if N'Lykli was lying, and if she decided he was, she would tell Horace everything in the morning. She would tell him the exact name for her ghostliness and what N'Lykli had promised her. Horace would understand.

She squinted into the haze of wood smoke. The tone of the conversation around the fire had risen, like an argument. One young man made wide, angry gestures. Something flashed in his ear, a brilliant ruby red, and Maria thought she caught the word for prisoners in Tupi-Guaraní.

Across from him, a remarkably old woman pounded a walking stick on the packed dirt. The fire showed her nearly-naked body - withered breasts and wiry muscles - striped here and there with yellow paint. And a scarlet glint in her ear.

The old woman pounded her walking stick even harder, raising puffs of dust. Flames leaped up, giving Maria a snapshot view of a half dozen elders with braided hair and feathers, the ruby glint in each earlobe. Their ancient faces focused on the young man's dissent. He shouted in a staccato burst of glottals and rising tones, closer to Chinese

opera than any Amazon Basin language Maria had ever heard. The old woman made an unmistakably dismissive motion with both arms. Emphatic. The young man jumped to his feet and stalked off. The elders watched him go. The old woman glowered at the fire, and no one said another word.

In the dark, surrounded by mosquitoes and thick, damp heat, Maria eased out of her crouch. Bugs were crawling into her socks. Her left leg was cramping and she was holding her breath, but she could feel her body changing. She was becoming solid and brighter than she'd ever been before. Her life as a ghost was over. Right here. In this spot. Her invisibility and their isolation. Her scrupulously unconceived, mitten-handed mutant children, who had burrowed into her dreams for so many years, drifted around her, dispersing like smoke, and Maria felt the trees, the dirt, the insects and night birds - everything - hopeful and alive, and full of positive regeneration, for the first time in her life.

She got to her feet, wobbly with optimism, turned around and saw him.

He stared at her the way they all did. She stared back at his wide-set eyes and honest mouth. Yellow face paint and brilliant macaw feathers. His ruby earring wasn't jewelry at all, but a tiny digital sampler of some kind, ticking off combinations of numbers, pulsing as he breathed. She tried to tell herself he wasn't the one N'Lykli had told her about. That this wasn't the face and trim body of The Cure for Everything.

But it was.

My germs, she thought, and took an unsteady step backwards.

He moved toward her and spoke in halting Portuguese. "You see me speak. You hear me."

She nodded.

He took a breath through his teeth. "Please. Take me away, Jamarikuma."

Another word with ancient, Tupi-Guaranian roots. Jamarikuma: a grandmother of powerful female spirits.

She turned around and ran.

j

She went to see N'Lykli. Pounded on his door and woke him up.

"Where are you really taking them?" she said. "There's nothing in Xavantina but a couple of bankrupt rubber plantations."

He hunched on the edge of the cot, covering himself with the sheet. "International Pharmaceutical has a facility there."

"Do those people know you're- you're milking them?"

His face made a defensive twitch. "We've explained what we need from them and they've discussed it. They all understand about the dam. They know why they can't stay in Ipiranga."

"Why do they think they're going to be prisoners?"

N'Lykli sat up straight. "Look. They're not captives. There're a few who don't like the idea, but we're not taking them against their will. We've been in contact with them for almost a decade. We even explained about Xingu and your assimilation programs. They didn't want anything to do with it. They don't want to be separated."

"We don't separate families."

"Can you relocate an entire tribe - eight hundred and seventy-four people - to a nice neighborhood in Brasília?"

"But there's only-"

"This is the last group," he said. "We've been staging them into Xavantina for a month."

She sat down on the only chair in the room. "I can't even interview them to find out if any of what you're saying is true."

He shrugged again.

She took a breath. "So what am I supposed to do? Wait around until International Pharmaceutical announces a cure for Lucknow's?"

N'Lykli rubbed his chin. "You don't have to be cured of the syndrome to have normal children. You just need the right father."

Maria stared at him.

He looked down at the floor. "We don't just take blood samples. I can send you something in a couple of weeks. It'll be frozen and you'll have to use it right away. I'll send instructions..."

"You're going to send me sperm?"

"How else should I do it?" he said. "Would you rather make an appointment with him?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!"

He watched her head for the door. "You're going to tell your boss what's going on?"

Maria stopped. Put her hands in her pockets and glared at him, the mosquito netting, the dank, bare room. Jamarikuma. Like hell.

"Goddamit," she said. "You'd better be out of here by daylight."

j

The Hiller Project truck pulled out at dawn, this time with the Jeep in the lead.

Maria stood out in full view, watching. N'Lykli gave her a half-salute and looked around nervously, probably for Horace. The Mexican driver gunned the engine, going too fast over the ruts and holes of the unpaved road.

The truck followed, angling for the open gate. In the back, every face turned to stare at her.

The Cures for Alzheimer's, Lucknow's, and all kinds of cancer made small gestures against spirits, turned to each

other to whisper, but they didn't look frightened. They didn't look resigned to their fates. They looked like tired travelers who were sick of cheap motels, ready to be wherever they were going. Except for one.

The Cure for Everything lunged against the railing. "Jamarikuma!" He shouted high in his throat. "Jamarikuma!" He shook the wooden side rails as the truck lurched through the gates and down the hill. She could hear him yelling over the diesel rumble even when the truck was well out of sight.

She stood there in the gray sunlight, taking deep breaths of churned earth and fumes, and felt her body go vague again. It was sudden and strange, like a wind had blown through her.

She knew she should go down to Intake and tell Horace everything, but she was afraid to. It seemed sickeningly obvious now that she should have made the Hiller people stay. Even if what N'Lykli had told her was true, she should have gone over to the Indians arguing around their campfires and made them talk to her. If The Cure for Everything could speak a little Portuguese, so could a few of the others.

Was she so desperate in her ghostliness that she would betray herself like this, give up her job, her life, her colleagues and friends - everything for a cure? For frozen sperm?

Yes, she was that desperate. Yes, she was.

She turned away from the gate and the diminishing sounds of the truck. It's too late, she told herself, and felt the lie in that as well.

She drove off with the Toyota Land Cruiser without telling anyone, before the diesel stink of the Hiller truck was gone. The Toyota was the newest of the Xingu vehicles and the only one with a full tank. She plunged it down the muddy hill after the Hiller truck. There weren't that many ways to get to Xavantina.

She caught up with the truck in less than half an hour, but stayed out of sight, a click or so behind. Xingu's rutted jungle access turned to a graded lumber trail, and she dropped even further back. When the scraggly trees gave way to burned stumps and abandoned timber, she gave herself more distance, until the Hiller truck was a speck behind the speck of the Jeep, forging along the muddy curves in the ruined hillsides.

She followed them through grim little settlements of displaced Indians and rubber tappers who lived in squalor downstream from the local plantations, past islands of pristine jungle where monkeys screamed at her and brilliant parrots burst out of the trees in clouds of pure color.

Fourteen hours from Xingu, long after the moon went down, the truck turned off the half-paved local Xavantina highway onto a dirt road along a narrow river. In the pitch blackness, it made a sharp right and came to a stop.

Maria pulled into the last stand of trees. Doors slammed and there was a brief silence. Then a bank of floodlights came on overhead and she could see the truck sitting by the Jeep in a cleared area at the foot of a high chain link fence. The Indians peered out of the back, pointing into the darkness while N'Lykli pulled the gates open and the vehicles drove through.

There were no signs to identify the place. Maria hunched over the Toyota's steering wheel, stiff in her shoulders, thick in her head, tired beyond even the desire for coffee. She lit her last cigarette and dragged deep for energy and ideas as N'Lykli swung the gates shut, locked them, tugged on them, and vanished into the dark.

In a minute, the floods went out, leaving Maria with the glowing tip of her cigarette. She waited a while longer, turned on the dome light and crawled into the back of the car where the tool box was. She dug until she found a heavy-duty pair of wire cutters.

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Inside the gate, the road deteriorated into a wasteland of bulldozed ruts. Weeds and young trees grew to shoulder height. Small animals scurried away as Maria groped through the dark. Bloodthirsty insects found her bare neck, her ankles, and the backs of her hands. Finally, she saw the glow of sulfur-colored floodlights, and at the top of the next rise, she got her first glimpse of the "facility."

A huddle of blocky, windowless buildings surrounded a fenced central courtyard. It had the look of an unfinished prison. Wire-topped fences glinted in the security floods.

She expected dogs, but didn't hear any. She made her way through the weeds expecting snakes, but decided that N'Lykli and his blood-sucking colleagues at Hiller had probably eliminated every poisonous thing for miles around-no accidental losses in their gene pool of cures. The whole idea made her furious - at them for such a blatant exploitation, and at herself for so badly needing what they'd found.

She circled the compound, trying to find an inconspicuous way to get into the inner courtyard, but the fences were new and some of them were electrified. When she had come almost all the way around to the front again, she found a lit row of barred windows on the ground floor of one of the blockhouses.

There was no one inside. The lights were dim, for security, not workers or visitors. Maria climbed up a hard dirt bank to the window sill and hung onto the bars with both hands.

Inside, modern desks and new computers lined one side of a huge white room. At the other end, there was a small lab with racks of glassware and a centrifuge. Color-coded gene charts covered the walls. Yellow lines braided into red, producing orange offspring. Bright pink Post-it notes followed one line and dead-ended with a handwritten note and an arrow drawn in black marker. She could read the print without effort: Autism?

Mitten-handed mutants. Ghostly spirit children.

She let herself down from the windowsill and crept through brittle grass to the edge of the wire fence.

Inside, she could see one end of the compound and the lights of the blockhouse beyond. Dark human shapes were silhouetted against small fires and she realized she'd expected them to be treated as inmates, locked up for the night and under constant guard. Instead she could smell the wood smoke and hear their muffled voices. Women laughing. A

baby squalling, then shushed. Hands pattered on a drum.

She touched the fence with the back of her hand, testing for current.

Nothing.

She listened, but there was no alarm that she could hear.

Someone chanted a verse of a song. A chorus of children sang in answer. For the first time, Maria saw the enormity of what she was about to do.

The Cure for Everything. Not just Lucknow's.

She pulled out the cutters and started working on the fence. The gene chart. Autism. The way his voice had sounded, shrieking Jamarikuma! None of this was right.

She crawled through the hole in the fence and they saw her right away. The singing and conversation stopped. She got to her feet, brushed off her knees and went near enough to the closest fire to be seen, but not close enough to be threatening. The Cure for Everything gave Maria a quick, urgent nod but he didn't stand up. Around him, a few heads cocked in recognition of her face, her skin.

The withered old woman Maria had seen at Xingu hobbled over from one of the other fires, leaning on her walking stick. She frowned at Maria and started speaking in accented Portuguese.

"We saw you at Xingu. You're the Jamarikuma. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help," said Maria.

"Help us do what?" said the old woman.

"You don't have to stay in this place," said Maria. "If you do, you and your children and your grandchildren's children won't ever be allowed to leave."

The old woman - and half a dozen other older members of the tribe - glanced at the Cure. Not in a particularly friendly way.

"What's this all about?" said the old woman to the Cure, still in Portuguese. "You've got a spirit arguing for you now?"

He replied in their own language. To Maria he sounded sulky.

"Do you understand why you're here?" said Maria. "These people..." She gestured at the looming buildings. "They want your blood, your..." Genes might mean souls to them. "You have a- a talent to cure diseases," said Maria. "That's why they want your blood."

Guarded eyes stared back from around the fire.

The old woman nodded. "What's so bad about that?"

"You won't ever be able to go back home," said Maria.

The old woman snorted. "At home they were trying to shoot us." She spat into the fire. "We're afraid to go back there."

"But here we're animals." The Cure pushed himself to his feet. "We're prisoners!"

"We've had this discussion," said the old woman sharply and turned to Maria. "We made a decision months ago. We said he didn't have to stay if he didn't want to, but he stayed anyway, and now he's bringing in spirits to make an argument that no one else agrees with. We're safer right here than we've been for years. No one's shooting at us. So we have to wear their ugly jewelry." She touched the ruby sampler in her ear. "So we lose a little blood now and then. It's just a scratch."

"But you're in a cage," said Maria.

"I don't like that part," said the old woman. "But you have to admit, it's a big cage, and mostly it keeps the bandits and murderers out."

The Cure jabbed a finger at Maria, making his point in harsh staccato tones. Maria only caught the word Xingu.

The old woman eyed Maria. "What would happen to us at Xingu?"

"We'd teach you how to be part of the world outside," said Maria. "We'd show you what you need to know to be farmers, or to live in the city if that's what you want."

"Are there guns in the world outside?"

It was a patronizing question. Maria felt sweat break out at the small of her back. "You know there are."

"Would we all be able to stay together, the entire tribe?" asked the old woman.

"We do the best we can," said Maria. "Sometimes it isn't possible to keep everyone together, but we try."

The old woman made a wide gesture into the dark. "We didn't lose one single person on the trip. You're saying you can't guarantee that for us at Xingu, though. Is that right?"

"Right," said Maria.

"But we'd be free."

Maria didn't say anything.

The old woman made a sharp gesture. "It's time for the Jamarikuma spirit to leave. If that's what she actually is." She closed her eyes and began to hum, a spirit-dismissing song, Maria supposed, and she glanced at the Cure, who leaped to his feet.

"I am leaving. With the Jamarikuma."

The old woman nodded, still humming, as though she was glad he'd finally made up his mind.

The Cure took a step away from the fire. He walked-no, he sauntered around his silent friends, family, maybe even his wife. No one said anything and no one was shedding any tears. He came over to Maria and stood beside her.

"I will not come back," he said.

The old woman hummed a little louder, like she was covering his noise with hers.

When they got back to the Toyota, Maria unlocked the passenger side and let him in. He shut the door and she walked slowly around the back to give herself time to breathe. Her heart was pounding and her head felt empty and light, like she was dreaming. She leaned against the driver's side, just close enough to see his dim reflection in the side mirror. He was rubbing his sweaty face, hard, as though he could peel away his skin.

In that moment, she felt as though she could reach into the night, to just the right place and find an invisible door which would open into the next day. It was the results of a night with him that she wanted, she realized. He was like a prize she'd just won. For the first time, she wondered what his name was.

She pulled the driver's side open and got in beside him. She turned the key in the ignition and checked the rearview mirror as the dashboard lit up. All she could see of herself was a ghostly, indistinct shape.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Everything's fine." She said and let the truck blunder forward into the insect-laden night.

Later, when the access road evened out to pavement, he put his hot palm on her thigh. She kept driving, watching how the headlights cut only so far ahead into the darkness. She stopped just before the main road, and without looking at him, reached out to touch his fingers.

"Are we going to Xingu?" he asked, like a child.

"No," she said. "I can't go back."

"Neither can I," he said, and let her kiss him. Here. And there.

Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson

DUNE: NIGHTTIME SHADOWS ON OPEN SAND

Nature commits no errors; right and wrong are human categories.

—Pardot Kynes, *Arrakis Lectures*

Monotonous days. The three-man Harkonnen patrol cruised over the golden swells of dunes along a thousand-kilometer flight path. In the unrelenting desert landscape, even a puff of dust caused excitement.

The troopers flew their armored ornithopter in a long circle, skirting mountains, then curving south over great pans and flatlands. Glossu Rabban, the Baron's nephew and temporary governor of Arrakis, had ordered them to fly regularly, to be *seen*—to show the squalid settlements that Harkonnens were watching. Always.

Kiel, the sidegunner, considered the assignment a license to hunt any Fremen found wandering near legitimate spice-harvesting operations. What made those dirty wanderers think they could trespass on Harkonnen lands without permission from the district office in Carthag? But few Fremen were ever caught abroad in daylight, and the task had grown dull.

Garan flew the 'thopter, rising up and dipping down to catch thermals, as if operating an amusement ride. He maintained a stoic expression, though occasionally a grin stole across his lips as the craft bucked and jostled in rough air. As they completed their fifth day on patrol, he continued to mark discrepancies on topographical maps, muttering in disgust each time he found another mistake. These were the worst charts he had ever used.

In the back passenger compartment sat Josten, recently transferred from Giedi Prime. Accustomed to industrial facilities, gray skies, and dirty buildings, Josten gazed out over the sandy wastelands, studying hypnotic dune patterns. He spotted the knot of dust off to the south, deep in the open Funeral Plain. "What's that? Spice-harvesting operation?"

"Not a chance," the sidegunner Kiel said. "Harvesters shoot a plume like a cone into the air, straight and thin."

"Too low for a dust devil. Too small." With a shrug, Garan jerked the 'thopter controls and soared toward the low, reddish-brown cloud. "Let's take a look." After so many tedious days, they would have gone out of their way to investigate a large rock sticking out of the sand....

When they reached the site, they found no tracks, no machinery, no sign of human presence—and yet acres of desert looked devastated. A mottled rust color stained the sands a darker ochre, as if blood from a wound had dried in the hot sun.

"Looks like somebody dropped a bomb here," Kiel said.

"Could be the aftermath of a spice blow," Garan suggested. "I'll set down for a closer look."

As the 'thopter settled onto the churned sands, Kiel popped open the hatch. The temperature-controlled atmosphere hissed out, replaced by a wave of heat. He coughed dust.

Garan leaned over from the cockpit and sniffed hard. "Smell it." The odor of burnt cinnamon struck his nostrils. "Spice blow for sure."

Josten squeezed past Kiel and dropped onto the soft ground. Amazed, he bent down, picked up a handful of ochre sand and touched it to his lips. "Can we scoop up some fresh spice and take it back? Must be worth a fortune."

Kiel had been thinking the same thing, but now he turned to the newcomer with scorn. "We don't have the processing equipment. You need to separate it from the sand, and you can't do that with your fingers."

Garan spoke in a quieter, but firmer voice. "If you went back to Carthag and tried to sell raw product to a street vendor you'd be hauled in front of Governor Rabban—or worse yet, have to explain to Count Fenring how some of the Emperor's spice ended up in a patrolman's pockets."

As the troopers tromped out to the ragged pit at the center of the dissipating dust cloud, Josten glanced around. "Is it safe for us to be here? Don't the big worms go to spice?"

"Afraid, kid?" Kiel asked.

"Let's throw him to a worm if we see one," Garan suggested. "It'll give us time to get away."

Kiel saw movement in the sandy excavation, shapes squirming, buried *things* that tunneled and burrowed, like maggots in rotten meat. Josten opened his mouth to say something, then clamped it shut again.

A whiplike creature emerged from the sand, two meters long with fleshy segmented skin. It was the size of a large snake, its mouth an open circle glittering with needle-sharp teeth that lined its throat.

"A sandworm!" Josten said.

"Only a runt," Kiel scoffed.

"Newborn—do you think?" Garan asked.

The worm waved its eyeless head from side to side. Other slithering creatures, a nest of them, squirmed about as if they'd been spawned in the explosion.

"Where in the hells did they come from?" Kiel asked.

"Wasn't in my briefing," Garan said.

"Can we... catch one?" Josten asked.

Kiel stopped himself from making a rude rejoinder, realizing that the young recruit did have a good idea. "Come on!" He charged forward into the churned sand.

The worm sensed the movement and reared back, uncertain whether to attack or flee. Then it arced like a sea serpent and plunged into the sand, wriggling and burrowing.

Josten sprinted ahead and dove face-first to grasp the segmented body three quarters of the way to its end. "It's so strong!" Following him, the sidegunner jumped down and grabbed the thrashing tail.

The worm tried to tug away, but Garan reached the front, where he dug into the sand and grabbed behind its head with a stranglehold. All three troopers wrestled and pulled. "Get it!" The small worm thrashed like an eel on an electric plate.

Other sandworms on the far side of the pit rose like a strange forest of periscopes sprouting from the sea of dunes, round mouths like black *os* turned toward the men. For an icy moment, Kiel feared they might attack like a swarm of marrow leeches, but the immature worms darted away and disappeared underground.

Garan and Kiel hauled their captive out of the sand and dragged it toward the ornithopter. As a Harkonnen patrol, they had all the equipment necessary to arrest criminals, including old-fashioned devices for trussing a captive like a herd animal. "Josten, go get the binding cords in our apprehension kit," the pilot said.

The new recruit came running back with the cords, fashioning a loop which he slipped over the worm's head and cinched tight. Garan released his hold on the rubbery skin and grabbed the rope, tugging while Josten slipped a second cord lower on the body.

"What are we going to do with it?" Josten asked.

Once, early in his assignment on Arrakis, Kiel had joined Rabban on an abortive worm hunt. They had taken a Fremen guide, well-armed troops, even a Planetologist. Using the Fremen guide as bait, they had lured one of the enormous sandworms and killed it with explosives. But before Rabban could take his trophy, the beast had *dissolved*, sloughing into amoeba creatures that fell to the sand, leaving nothing but a cartilaginous skeleton and loose crystal teeth. Rabban had been furious.

Kiel's stomach knotted. The Baron's nephew might consider it an insult that three simple patrolmen could capture a worm, when he'd been unable to do so himself. "We'd better drown it."

"Drown it?" Josten said. "What for? And why would I want to waste my water ration to do that?"

Garan stopped as if struck by a thunderbolt. "I've heard the Fremen do it. If you drown a baby worm, they say it spits out some kind of drug or poison. It's very rare."

Kiel nodded. "Oh, yeah. The desert people use it in their religious rituals. It makes everybody go crazy, wild orgies and everything."

"But... we've only got two literjons of water in the compartment," Josten said, still nervous.

"Then we only use one. I know where we can refill it, anyway." The pilot and his sidegunner exchanged glances. They had patrolled together long enough that they'd both thought of the same thing.

As if understanding its fate, the worm bucked and thrashed even more, but it was already growing weaker.

"Once we get the drug," Kiel said, "let's have some fun."

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At night, with the patrol 'thopter running in stealth mode, they flew over the razor-edged mountains, approaching from behind a ridge and landing on a rough mesa above the squalid village of Bilar Camp. The villagers lived in hollowed-out caves and aboveground structures that extended out to the flats. Windmills generated power; supply bins glittered with tiny lights that attracted a few moths and the bats that fed on them.

Unlike the nomadic Fremen, these villagers were slightly more civilized but also more downtrodden: men who worked as desert guides and joined spice-harvesting crews. They had forgotten how to survive on their world without becoming parasites upon the planetary governors.

On an earlier patrol, Kiel and Garan had discovered a camouflaged cistern on the mesa, a treasure trove of water. Kiel didn't know where the villagers had gotten so much moisture; most likely, they had committed fraud, inflating their census numbers so that Harkonnen generosity provided more than they deserved.

The people of Bilar Camp covered the cistern with rock so that it looked like a natural protrusion, but the villagers placed no guards around their illegal stockpile. For some reason desert culture forbade thievery even more than murder; they trusted the safety of their possessions from bandits or thieves of the night.

Of course, the Harkonnen troopers had no intention of *stealing* the water—that is, no more than enough to refill their own supply containers.

Dutifully, Josten trotted along with their sloshing container, which held the thick, noxious substance exuded by the drowned worm after it had stopped thrashing and bucking inside the container. Awed and nervous about what they'd done, they dumped the flaccid carcass near the perimeter of the spice blow and then taken off with the drug.

Garan operated the Bilar cistern's cleverly concealed spigot and refilled one of their empty containers. No sense in letting all the water go to waste just for a practical joke on the villagers.

"Do you know what this drug will do to them?" Josten asked.

Garan shook his head. "I've heard plenty of crazy stories."

"Maybe we should make the kid try it first," the sidegunner said.

Josten backed away, raising his hands.

Kiel took the container of worm bile and upended it into the cistern. The villagers would certainly have a surprise next time they all drank from their illegal water hoard. "Serves them right."

Garan looked at the contaminated cistern again. "I bet they tear off their clothes and dance naked in the streets, squawking like dinfowl."

"Let's stay here and watch the fun for ourselves," Kiel said.

Garan frowned. "Do *you* want to be the one to explain to Rabban why we're late returning from patrol?"

"Let's go," Kiel answered quickly.

As the worm-poison infused the cistern, the Harkonnen troopers hurried back to their ornithopter, reluctantly content to let the villagers discover the prank for themselves.

It is said that the Fremen has no conscience, having lost it in a burning desire for revenge. This is foolish. Only the rawest primitive and the sociopath have no conscience. The Fremen possesses a highly evolved world view centered on the welfare of his people. His sense of belonging to the community is almost stronger than his sense of self. It is only to outsiders that these desert-dwellers seem brutish... just as outsiders appear to them.

—Pardot Kynes, *The People of Arrakis*

"Luxury is for the noble-born, Liet," Pardot Kynes, Imperial Planetologist to Arrakis, said to his son as the groundcar trundled across the uneven ground. "On this planet you must instantly become aware of your own surroundings, and remain alert at all times. If you fail to learn this lesson, you won't live long."

As Kynes operated the simple controls, he gestured toward the buttery morning light that melted across the stark dunes. "There are rewards here, too." Kynes exhaled a long breath between his hard chapped lips.

Young Liet stared out the scratched windowplaz. Unlike his father, who reeled off whatever random thoughts occurred to him, making pronouncements that the Fremen heeded as if they were weighty spiritual matters, Liet preferred silence. He narrowed his eyes to study the landscape, searching for any small thing out of its place. Always alert.

On such a harsh planet, one had to develop stored perceptions, each of them linked to every moment of survival. Though his father was much older, Liet wasn't certain the Planetologist understood as much as he himself did. The mind of Pardot Kynes contained powerful concepts, but the older man experienced them only as esoteric data. He didn't understand the desert in his heart or in his soul....

For years, Kynes had lived among the Fremen. It was said that Emperor Shaddam IV had little interest in his activities, and since Kynes asked for no funding and few supplies, the Emperor and the Harkonnens left him alone. With each passing year he slipped farther from attention. Shaddam and his advisors had stopped expecting any grand revelations from the Planetologist's periodic reports.

This suited Pardot Kynes, and his son as well.

In his wanderings, Kynes often made trips to outlying villages where the people of the pan and graben scratched out squalid lives. True Fremen rarely mixed with the townspeople, and viewed them with veiled contempt for being too soft, too civilized. Liet would never have lived in those pathetic settlements for all the solaris in the Imperium. But still, Pardot visited them.

Eschewing roads and commonly traveled paths, they rode in the groundcar, checking meteorological stations and collecting data, though Pardot's troops of devoted Fremen would gladly have done this menial work for their "Umma," or prophet.

Liet-Kynes's features echoed many of his father's, though with a leaner face and the close-set eyes of his Fremen mother. He had pale hair, and his chin was still smooth, though later he would likely grow a beard similar to the great Planetologist's. Liet's eyes had the deep blue of spice addiction, since every meal and breath of air was laced with melange.

Liet heard a sharp intake of breath from his father as they passed the jagged elbow of a canyon where camouflaged catchtraps directed moisture to plantings of rabbitbush and poverty grasses. "See? It's taking on a life of its own. We'll 'cycle' the planet through prairie phase into forest over several generations. The sand has a high salt content, indicating old oceans, and the spice itself is alkaline." He chuckled. "People in the Imperium would be horrified that we'd use spice byproducts for something as menial as fertilizer." He smiled at his son. "But we know the value of such things, eh? If we break down the spice, we can set up protein digestion. Even now, if we flew high enough, we could spot patches of green where matted plant growth holds the dune faces in place."

The young man sighed. His father was a great man with magnificent dreams for Dune—and yet Kynes was so focused on one thing that he failed to see the universe around him. Liet knew that if any Harkonnen patrols found the plantings, they would destroy them and punish the Fremen.

Though only twelve, Liet regularly went out on guerrilla raids with his Fremen brothers and had already killed Harkonnens. For more than a year, he and his friends—led by the brash Stilgar—had struck targets that others refused to consider. Only a week before, Liet's companions had blown up a dozen patrol 'thopters at a supply post. Unfortunately, the stupid Harkonnen troops had taken their revenge against poor villagers, seeing no difference between settled folk and the will-o'-the-sand Fremen.

He hadn't told his father about his guerrilla activities, since the elder Kynes wouldn't understand the necessity. Premeditated violence, for whatever reason, was a foreign concept to the Planetologist. But Liet would do what needed to be done.

Now, the groundcar approached a village tucked into the rocky foothills; it was called Bilar Camp on their terrain maps. Pardot continued to talk about melange and its peculiar properties. "They found spice too soon on Arrakis. It deflected scientific inquiry. It was so useful right from the outset that no one bothered to probe its mysteries."

Liet turned to look at him. "I thought that was why you were assigned here in the first place—to understand the spice."

"Yes... but we have more important work to do. I still report back to the Imperium often enough to convince them I'm working at my job... though not very successfully." Talking about the first time he'd been to this region, he drove toward a cluster of dirty buildings the color of sand and dust.

The groundcar jounced over a rough rock, but Liet ignored it and stared ahead at the village, squinting his eyes in the harsh light of the desert morning. The morning air held the fragility of fine crystal. "Something's wrong," he said, interrupting his father.

Kynes continued talking for a few seconds and then brought the vehicle to a stop. "What's that?"

"Something is wrong." Liet pointed ahead at the village.

Kynes shaded his eyes against the glare. "I don't see anything."

"Still... let us proceed with caution."

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In the center of the village, they encountered a festival of horrors.

The noise was appalling, as was the smell. Bodies lay sprawled on the ground like squashed insects, arms and legs stiffened at odd angles, while tortured survivors wandered about as if insane, shrieking and snarling like animals. They had ripped hair out of their heads in bloody clumps. Some used long fingernails to claw the eyes out of their faces, then held the scooped eyeballs in their palms; blind, they staggered against the tan walls of dwellings, leaving wet crimson smears.

Even the dead ones did not look at peace.

"By Shai-Hulud!" Liet whispered under his breath, while his father let out a louder curse in common Imperial Galach.

One man with torn eye sockets like bloody extra mouths above his cheekbones collided with a crawling woman; both victims flew into a rage and ripped at each other's skin with bare hands, biting and spitting and screaming. There were muddy spots on the street, overturned containers of water.

Some buildings were locked and shuttered, barricaded against the crazed wretches outside who pounded on the walls, wailing wordlessly to get in. On an upper floor Liet saw a woman's terrified face at the dust-streaked windowplaz. Others hid, somehow unaffected by the murderous insanity.

"We must help these people, Father." Liet leaped out of the sealed groundcar before his father had brought it to a complete stop. "Bring your weapons. We may need to defend ourselves."

They carried old maula pistols as well as knives. His father, though a scientist at heart, was also a good fighter—a skill he reserved for defending his vision for Arrakis. The legend was told of how he had slain several Harkonnen bravos who'd been attempting to kill three young Fremen. Those rescued Fremen were now his most loyal lieutenants, Stilgar, Turok, and Ommun. But Pardot Kynes had never fought against anything like this....

The maddened villagers noticed them and moaned. They began to move forward.

"Don't kill them unless you must," Kynes said, amazed at how quickly his son had armed himself with a crysknife and maula pistol. "Watch yourself."

Liet ventured into the street. What struck him first was the terrible stink, as if the foul breath of a dying leper had been captured in a bottle and slowly released.

Staring in disbelief, Pardot stepped farther from the groundcar. He saw no lasgun burn marks in the village, no chip scars from projectile weapons, nothing that would have indicated an overt Harkonnen attack. Was it a disease? If so, it might be contagious. If a plague or some kind of communicable insanity was at work here, he could not let the Fremen take these bodies for the deathstills.

Liet moved forward. "Fremen would attribute this to demons."

Two of the bloody-faced victims let out demonic shrieks and rushed toward them, their fingers outstretched like eagle claws, their mouths open like bottomless pits. Liet pointed the maula pistol, closed his eyes to utter a quick prayer, then fired twice. The perfect shots hit each of the attackers in the chest, and they fell dead.

Liet bowed. "Forgive me, Shai-Hulud."

Pardot watched him. *I have tried to teach my son many things, but at least he has learned compassion. All other information can be learned from filmbooks... but not compassion. This was born into him.*

The young man bent over the two bodies, studied them closely, pushing back his superstitious fear. "I do not think it's a disease." He looked back at Pardot. "I've assisted the healers, as you know, and..." His voice trailed off.

"What, then?"

"I believe they've been poisoned."

One by one, the tortured villagers wandering the dusty streets fell onto their backs in screaming convulsions, until only three remained alive. Liet moved quickly with the crysknife and dispatched the last victims painlessly and efficiently. No tribe or village would ever accept them again, no matter how much they recovered, for fear that they had

been corrupted by demons; even their water would be considered tainted.

Liet found it odd how easily he had taken command in front of his father. He gestured toward two of the sealed buildings. "Convince the people inside those barred dwellings that we mean them no harm. We must discover what happened here." His voice became low and icy. "And we must learn who is to blame."

Pardot Kynes moved to the dusty building. Fingernail scratches and bloody handprints marked the mud-brick walls and pitted metal doors where crazed victims had tried to pound their way in. He swallowed hard and prepared to make his case, to convince the terrified survivors that their ordeal was over. He turned back to his son. "Where will you be, Liet?"

The young man looked at an overturned water container. He knew of only one way the poison could affect so many people at once. "Checking the water supply."

His face etched with concern, Pardot nodded.

Liet studied the terrain around the village, saw a faint trail leading up the side of the overhanging mesa. Yes, they had hidden a qanat there, their own emergency water supply.

Moving with the speed of a sun-warmed lizard, he scurried up the mountain path and reached the cistern. The evidence of its location had been cleverly disguised, though the villagers had made many errors. Even a clumsy Harkonnen patrol could have discovered the illegal reservoir. He studied the area quickly, noting patterns in the sand.

Smelling a harsh alkaloid bitterness near the upper opening of the cistern, he tried to place the odor. He'd experienced it rarely, and only during great celebrations in the sietch, the Fremen hidden communities. *The Water of Life!* The Fremen people consumed such a substance only after a Sayyadina had converted the exhalation of a drowned worm, using her own body chemistry as a catalyst to create a tolerable drug that sent the sietch community into an ecstatic frenzy. Unconverted, the substance was a ferocious toxin.

The villagers in Bilar Camp had drunk pure Water of Life, before it was transformed. Someone had done this intentionally... poisoning them.

Then he saw the marks of ornithopter pads in the soft soil atop the plateau. *It had to be a Harkonnen 'thopter.* One of the regular patrols... a practical joke?

Frowning grimly, Liet descended to the devastated village, where his father had succeeded in bringing out the survivors who had barricaded themselves within their dwellings. Through luck, these people had not drunk the poisoned water. Now they fell to their knees in the streets, surrounded by the awful carnage. Their keening cries of grief drifted like the thin wails of ghosts along a sheer cliffside.

Harkonnens did this.

Pardot Kynes moved about doing what he could to comfort them, but from the quizzical expressions on the villagers' faces, Liet knew his father was probably saying the wrong things, expressing his sympathy in abstract concepts that they had no ability to understand.

Liet moved down the slope, and already plans were forming in his mind. As soon as they returned to the sietch, he would meet with Stilgar and his commando squad.

And they would plan their retaliation against the Harkonnens...

The desert is a surgeon cutting away the skin to expose what is underneath.

—Fremen saying

As the first moon rose copper-red over the desert horizon, Liet-Kynes and seven Fremen departed the rocks and made their way out to the soft curving dunes where they could be easily seen.

"Prepare yourselves," Stilgar said, his narrow face like a desert hawk's in the moonlight. His pupils had dilated, making his solid blue eyes look black. He wrapped his desert camouflage around him, as did the other, older guerrillas. "It is said that when one waits for vengeance, time passes slowly but sweetly."

Liet-Kynes nodded. He was dressed to look like a weak, water-fat village boy, but his eyes were as hard as Velan steel. Beside him, his sietch-mate and blood-brother Warrick, a slightly taller lad, nodded as well. This night, the two would pretend to be helpless children caught out in the open... irresistible targets for the anticipated Harkonnen patrol.

"We do what must be done, Stil." Liet clapped a hand on Warrick's padded shoulder. These twelve-year-olds had already blooded more than a hundred Harkonnens apiece, and would have stopped keeping count, except for their friendly rivalry with each other. "I trust my brother with my life."

Warrick covered Liet's hand with his own. "Liet would be afraid to die without me at his side."

"With or without you, Warrick, I don't plan to die this night," Liet said, which elicited a deep laugh from his companion. "I plan to exact revenge."

After the orgy of poisoned death had fallen upon Bilar Camp, Fremen rage had spread from sietch to sietch like water soaking into sand. From the 'thopter markings found near the hidden cistern, they knew who was responsible. *All Harkonnens must pay.*

Around Carthag and Arsunt, word had been passed to timid-looking workers and dusty servants placed inside Harkonnen strongholds. Some of the infiltrators scrubbed the floors of troop barracks using dry rags and abrasives. Others posed as water sellers supplying the occupation force.

As the tale of the poisoned village passed from one Harkonnen soldier to another in progressively exaggerated anecdotes, the Fremen informants noted who derived the greatest pleasure from the news. They studied the crew

assignments and route logs of Harkonnen patrols. Before long, they had learned exactly which Harkonnen troopers were responsible. And where they could be found....

With a high-pitched squeak and a dancing blur of gossamer wings, a tiny distract bat swooped from an observation outcropping in the mountains behind them. When Stilgar held up a hand, the bat landed on his forearm, primly folding its wings and waiting for a reward.

Stilgar drew a tiny drop of water from the sipping tube at his throat and let the moisture fall into the open mouth of the bat. Then he brought forth a thin cylinder and placed it to his ear, listening as the bat emitted complex, wavering squeaks. Stilgar tapped the bat on its head, then flung it into the night air again, like a falconer releasing his bird.

He turned back to his expectant troop, a predatory smile on his moonshadowed face. "Their ornithopter has been seen over the ridge. The Harkonnens fly a predictable path as they scan the desert. But they have been on patrol for so long, they are complacent. They do not see their own patterns."

"Tonight, they fly into a web of death," Warrick said from the dune top, lifting his fist into the air in a very un-boy-like gesture.

The Fremens checked their weapons, loosed crysknives in sheaths at their sides, tested the strength of garroting cords, preparing. With swishing robes, they erased all marks of their passage. Leaving the two young men alone.

Stilgar looked up at the night sky, and a muscle on his jaw flickered. "This I learned from Umma Kynes. When we were cataloguing lichens, we saw a rock lizard that seemed to vanish before our eyes. Kynes said, 'I give you the chameleon, whose ability to match itself with its background tells you all you need to know about the roots of ecology and the foundations of personal identity.'" Stilgar looked gravely at his men, and his expression faltered. "I don't know exactly what he meant... but now we must all become chameleons of the desert."

Wearing light-colored clothes, Liet stepped up the slipface of the dune, leaving deliberate, painfully apparent footprints. Warrick followed just as clumsily, while the other Fremens spread out on the flat sand. After pulling out breathing tubes and covering their faces with loose hoods, they flailed their arms in a blur of motion. Powdery sand engulfed them, and then they lay still.

Liet and Warrick ran about, smoothing wrinkles on the surface and leaving nothing but their own footprints. They finished just as the patrol 'thopter whirred over the line of rocks, flashing red lights.

The two white-clad Fremens froze out in the open, their bright clothes unmistakable against the pale, moonlit sand. No true Fremens would ever be caught in such a show of clumsiness... but the Harkonnens didn't know that. They would not suspect.

As soon as the 'thopter came into view, Liet made an exaggerated gesture of alarm. "Come on, Warrick. Let's make a good show of it." The two ran away pell-mell, as if in a panic.

Predictably, the 'thopter circled to intercept them. A powerful spotlight flooded down, then a laughing sidegunner leaned out of the 'thopter. He fired his lasgun twice, sketching a line of melted glass upon the surface of the sand.

Liet and Warrick tumbled down the steep side of a dune. The gunner fired three more blasts, missing them each time.

The 'thopter landed on the broad surface of a nearby dune... close to where Stilgar and his men had buried themselves. Liet and Warrick flashed each other a smile, and prepared for the second part of the game.

j

Sidegunner Kiel shouldered his still-hot lasgun rifle and popped open the door. "Let's go hunt some Fremens." He jumped onto the sand as soon as Garan had landed the patrol craft.

Behind them, the fresh-faced recruit Josten fumbled for his own weapon. "It would be easier just to shoot them from above."

"What kind of sport would that be?" Garan asked in his gruff voice.

"Or is it just that you don't want blood on your new uniform, kid?" Kiel called over his shoulder. They stood beside the armored craft looking across the moonlit dunes, where the two scrawny nomads stumbled away (as if they had any hope of escape once a Harkonnen trooper decided to target them).

Garan grabbed his weapon, and the three of them strode across the sands. The two Fremens youths scuttled like beetles, but the threat of the troops might cause them to turn around and surrender... or better yet, fight like cornered rats.

"I've heard stories about these Fremens." Josten panted as he kept up with the two older men. "Their children are said to be killers, and their women will torture you in ways that even Piter de Vries couldn't imagine."

Kiel gave a rude snort of laughter. "We've got lasguns, Josten. What are they going to do—throw rocks at us?"

"Some of them carry maula pistols."

Garan looked back at the young recruit, then gave a shrug. "Why don't you go back to the 'thopter and get our stunner, then? We can use a wide field if things get bad."

"Yeah," Kiel said, "that way we can make this last longer." The two white-clad Fremens continued to flounder across the sand, and the Harkonnen troopers closed the distance with purposeful strides.

Glad for the opportunity to be away from the fight, Josten sprinted over the dune toward the waiting 'thopter. From the dune top, he looked back at his companions, then rushed to the darkened craft. As he ducked inside, he encountered a man clad in desert tans, hands flicking across the controls with the speed of a snake on a hot plate.

"Hey, what are you—" Josten cried.

In the cabin light he saw that the figure had a narrow leathery face. The eyes captivated him: blue-within-blue, with the sharp intensity of a man accustomed to killing. Before Josten could react, his arm was grabbed with a grip as

strong as an eagle's talon, and he was dragged deeper into the cockpit. The Fremen's other hand flashed, and he saw a curved, milky-blue knife strike up. A bright icicle of pain slashed into his throat, all the way back to his spine—then the knife was gone before even a droplet of blood could cling to its surface.

Like a scorpion that had just unleashed its sting, the Fremen backed up. Josten fell forward, already feeling red death spreading from his throat. He tried to say something, to ask a question that seemed all-important to him, but his words only came out as a gurgle. The Fremen snatched something from his stillsuit and pressed it against the young man's throat, an absorbent cloth that drank his blood as it spilled.

Was the desert man saving him? A bandage? A flash of hope rose in Josten's mind. Had it all been a mistake? Was this gaunt native trying to make amends?

But Josten's blood pumped out too quickly and forcefully for any medical help. As his life faded, he realized that the absorbent pack had never been meant as a wound dressing, but simply to capture every droplet of blood for its moisture...

j

When Kiel came to within firing distance of the two Fremen youths, Garan looked back into the moonlight. "I thought I heard something from the 'thopter."

"Probably Josten tripping on his own feet," the sidegunner said, not lowering his weapon.

The trapped Fremen staggered to a halt across a shallow pan of soft sand. They crouched and pulled out small, clumsy-looking knives.

Kiel laughed out loud. "What do you mean to do with those? Pick your teeth?"

"I'll pick the teeth from your dead body," one of the boys shouted. "Got any old-fashioned gold molars we can sell in Arrakeen?"

Garan chortled and looked at his companion. "This is going to be fun." Moving in lockstep, the troopers marched into the flat sandy area.

As they closed to within five meters, the sand around them erupted. Human forms popped out of the dust, covered with grit—tan human silhouettes, like animated corpses boiling up from a graveyard.

Garan let out a useless warning cry, and Kiel fired once with his lasgun, burning down one of the men. Then the dusty forms surged forward. Clustering around the pilot, they pressed in so close that he couldn't bring his lasgun to bear. They attacked him like blood-lice on an open wound.

As they drove Garan to his knees, he cried out in the manner of an old woman. The Fremen restrained him so that he could do little more than breathe and blink his eyes. And scream.

One of the white-clad "victims" hurried forward. The young man held out the small knife that Garan and Kiel had snickered at just moments ago. The youth darted downward, jabbing with the tip of the blade—but with precise control, as gentle as a kiss—to gouge out both of Garan's eyes, transforming his sockets into red Oedipal stains.

Stilgar barked out a command, "Bind him and keep him. We shall bring this one back to our sietch alive, and let the women take care of him in their own way."

Garan screamed again...

When the Fremen rushed forward to attack Kiel, the sidegunner responded by swinging his weapon like a club. As clawing hands grabbed for it, he surprised them by releasing the lasrifle. The Fremen who clutched the gun fell backward, caught off balance by the unexpected action.

Then Kiel began to run. Fighting would do him no good here. They had already taken Garan, and he assumed Josten was dead back at the 'thopter. So he left the Fremen, running as he had never run before. He sprinted across the night sands away from the rocks, away from the 'thopter... and out into the open desert. The Fremen might be able to catch him, but he would give them a run for it.

Panting, leaving his companions behind, Kiel raced across the dunes with no plan and no thought other than to flee farther and farther away....

j

"We've captured the 'thopter intact, Stil," Warrick said, flushed with adrenaline and quite proud of himself. The commando leader nodded grimly. Umma Kynes would be exceedingly pleased at the news. He could always use a 'thopter for his agricultural inspections, and he didn't need to know where it came from.

Liet looked down at the blinded captive, whose gouged eye sockets had been covered by a cloth. "I saw what the Harkonnens did to Bilar Camp with my own eyes... the poisoned cistern, the tainted water." The other body had already been packed in the rear of the patrol 'thopter to be taken to the deathstills. "This doesn't pay back a tenth part of the suffering."

Going to his blood brother's side, Warrick made a face of disgust. "Such is my scorn that I don't even want to take their water for our tribe."

Stilgar glowered at him as if he had spoken sacrilege. "You would prefer to let them mummify in the sands, to let their water go wasted into the air? It would be an insult to Shai-Hulud."

Warrick bowed his head. "It was only my anger speaking, Stil. I did not mean it."

Stilgar looked up at the ruddy rising moon. The entire ambush had lasted less than an hour. "We shall perform the ritual of *tal hai* so that their souls will never rest. They will be damned to walk the desert for all eternity." Then his voice became harsh and fearful. "But we must take extra care to cover our tracks, so that we do not lead their ghosts

back to our sietch."

The Fremens muttered as superstitious fear dampened their vengeful pleasure. Stilgar intoned the ancient chant, while others drew designs in the sand, labyrinthine power-shapes that would bind the spirits of the cursed men to the dunes forever.

Out across the moonlit sands they could still see the clumsily running figure of the remaining trooper. "That one is our offering to Shai-Hulud," Stilgar said, finishing his chant. The *tal hai* curse was complete. "The world will be at balance, and the desert will be pleased."

"He's chugging like a broken crawler." Liet stood next to Stilgar, drawing himself up, though he was still small compared to the commando leader. "It won't be long now."

They gathered their supplies. As many as possible piled into the patrol 'thopter, while the remaining Fremens slipped back across the sands. They used a well-practiced random gait so that their footsteps made no sound that was not natural to the desert.

The Harkonnen sidegunner continued to flee in a blind panic. By now, he might be entertaining a hope of escape, though the direction of his flight across the ocean of dunes would take him nowhere.

Within minutes, a worm came for him.

Linda Nagata
GODDESSES

2000 Nebula Award for Best Novella

I

In the birthing room of a tiny clinic, in a town in Southern India, holding the hand of another man's wife, Michael Fielding felt chaos rise quietly through the world. Like the gentle flood of an untamed river, it seeped into his life, dissolving the past, laying down the mud that would grow the future.

Jaya's hand tightened on his. Her lips parted, ruby-red jewels set against her cream-coffee skin, their color that of a tailored strain of bacteria cohabiting in her cells.

"Another's starting," she whispered. Exhaustion feathered her words. "Michael... all the old women lied... when they promised it would be easier... the second time."

"You're almost there," he assured her. "You're doing terrific."

Sheo's voice backed him up, speaking from the beige picture frame of the open portal, sitting on the rickety metal table at the head of the bed. It was a voice-only connection, so the portal's screen displayed a generic sequence of abstract art. "Michael's right, my love. You are wonderful."

"Sheo?" Jaya's dark eyes opened. She turned toward Michael, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, her gaze fixed on the lens of his net visor that concealed his eyes like gray sunglasses. She seemed to search the shades for some trace of her husband. Her expression was captured by tiny cameras on the shades' frame. Processors translated her image to digital code, then shunted it to Sheo's mobile address, across town or across the continent - Michael had lost track of how far Sheo had progressed in his frantic journey to meet his wife.

Jaya should have been home in Bangalore, enjoying the services of the finest hospital in the country. She did not belong in this primitive clinic, where the obstetrician was a face on a monitor, checking on her through a stereoscopic camera that pointed between her legs.

Of course it was Michael's fault. He'd been in-country two weeks, the new district director for Global Shear. It was an assignment he'd coveted, but with only five days' notice before his transfer from the Hong Kong office, he had not been ready for it.

Jaya took pity on him. Claiming her maternity leave might otherwise end in terminal boredom, she took a train to Four Villages, to help Michael find his way through barriers of language and local custom.

He and Jaya had both interned at Global Shear, members of a five-person training team so cohesive that, ten years after the course work ended, four of them still met almost daily on a virtual terrace to exchange the news of their private lives and their careers. When Jaya stepped off the train to embrace Michael on the dusty platform, it was the first time they had ever met in real space... and it hadn't mattered. If they had grown up in the same house, Michael could not have felt any closer to her.

Now the baby was coming three weeks early. Everything happened so much faster these days. Sheo's voice crooned through the portal speaker, calm as a holy man preaching peace and brotherhood. "You're strong and you're beautiful, Jaya. And you've done this before. Our beautiful Gita-

Fury heated Jaya's black eyes. "That was six years ago! Now I am old! And you're not here."

"I've got a zip," he explained quickly. "I'm leaving the airport now. I'll be there in just a few more minutes."

"He'll be here," Michael whispered, fervently hoping it was true. With a white cotton cloth, he daubed at the sweat gleaming on Jaya's forehead and cheeks. The clinic's air conditioning had been shut off at midnight. It would not be restored until after dawn, when the sun rose high enough to activate the rooftop solar tiles. Windows had been thrown open to the night. In the distance, a train murmured, base whispers interrupted by rhythmic thumps that went on and on and on until Michael felt the train must surely run all the way to Bangalore.

Jaya's eyes closed. The muscles in her face emerged in severe outline as the contraction climaxed. Michael dipped the cloth in a bowl of water and wiped at her forehead, until she growled at him to leave her alone.

Down between her legs, the midwife, who spoke excellent English, sighed happily. "Ah, he's almost here. Gently now, lady. Push gently, so he doesn't tear you."

"Where are you, Sheo?" Jaya cried. "It's happening now."

"I'm here!" The calmness in Sheo's voice had cracked. "I'm outside."

A screech of dirty brakes and the growl of wet pavement under tires testified to the arrival of his zip. "Get your ass in here, Sheo," Michael growled.

Jaya gasped. From the foot of the bed, the midwife cried, "Here is the head! He's here... just a little more, a little more... there!" And Jaya's breath blew out in a long, crying exhalation. "There my lady, now only his body to come, easy, easy."

Sheo stumbled past the curtain, struggling to pull an old set of surgical scrubs over his beige business shirt. A nurse followed after him, her face stern as she fought to grab the gown's danglings ties.

Sheo still wore his own shades, and as he cried out Jaya's name a whistle of feedback snapped out of the portal on the bedside table. Michael leaned over and slapped the thing off. Then the baby was there. The midwife had the child in her hands, but as she gazed at it, her happy expression drained away. Her mouth shrank to a pucker. Her eyes seemed to recede within a mantle of soft, aging flesh. The stern nurse saw the change. She leaned past the midwife's shoulder to look at the child, and her eyes went wide with an ugly surprise.

For a dreadful moment Michael was sure the baby was dead. Then he heard the tiny red thing whimper. He saw its arm move, its little fingers clench in a fierce fist. Was it deformed then? Impossible. Jaya had employed the best obstetric care. If there had been a problem, she would have known.

Sheo crouched at Jaya's side. He whispered to her, he kissed her face. Neither of them had noticed the midwife and her distress, and for that Michael felt thankful. But he had to see the baby.

At his approach, the midwife looked up warily. She pulled the baby close to her breast as if to hide whatever damning evidence she had seen.

"No," Michael said. "Let me see."

She seemed ready to resist, but then she sighed, and held the child out.

The little girl was a mess. White goop filled a sea of wrinkles. There were downy patches of dark hair on her shoulders, and her face was flushed red. Michael grinned. A typical newborn. He turned to Jaya. "She's beautiful. A beautiful little girl."

The doctor on the monitor agreed, and still Michael felt as if a shadow had swum sinuous through this night, drawing all of them a little deeper into the haunted past.

j

Michael had been warned about the strangeness of this place.

It was not quite three weeks since the wall screen in his Hong Kong office had opened on an image of Karen Hampton, smiling slyly from behind her desk, with the Singapore skyline visible through the window at her back.

She'd asked if he still had a taste for challenges, and he'd risen like a shark on blood scent.

Karen Hampton was in her sixties, and Michael could only think of her as classy. Her skin was fair, her features petite, her manner of dress stiff-Gotham-uppercrust; but when she laughed, Karen Hampton sounded like a trucker bellied up to a bar. She was laughing now. "That's my Michael! Still hungry." Then her face grew stern. No longer the sympathetic mentor shepherding his career, she transformed into the unflappable director of Global Shear Asia. "I want you to be the next site director at Four Villages."

He could not believe what he was hearing. "Karen! Hell yes. You know I've wanted this from the concept stage."

Her gaze didn't soften. "I know, but nevertheless, I'm advising you to think hard about it, Michael. This is not so much a favor as a chance to ruin your career."

Four Villages was a quiet experiment that could change the path of development in impoverished regions throughout the world. Global Shear had won a ten-year contract as civil administrator in the district-and not as a glorified cooperative extension service. They had been hired to overhaul a failed bureaucracy, and to that end, many traditional government functions, from real property inventories to taxation, had been placed in the corporation's hands.

"You aren't going to show a positive balance sheet for at least five years," Karen warned him. "Maybe longer. We have been hired to grow an economy. Within ten years, we must develop four essential aspects of a sustainable trade system: infrastructure, information, financing, and trust. I put trust last not because it is the least important but because it is the most important. Only when trust is firmly established, and our presence here welcomed by a majority of residents, will we begin to see a profit."

Global Shear's contract would be financed partly through the World Bank, but primarily through a carefully defined flat tax, so that the corporation's income would rise with economic activity. In a region of sixteen million people, the profit potential was enormous. So were the challenges, of course, but if the job was easy, it would have already been done.

"We will be wrecking traditional relationships between farmers, landlords, and business people," Karen warned. "We will be stumbling through issues of religion, caste, and gender. We will be accused of corrupting traditional culture and it will be true. To many, we will be the enemy. But at the same time, if we deal honestly and enthusiastically with everyone, self-interest will convince the majority that we are performing a right and proper job. The poor are the majority here, Michael. Your goal is to change that fact. Your biggest challenge will be your own preconceptions."

"You've worked in Sarajevo, Kurdistan, Rangoon, Hong Kong, but nothing you've experienced will leave you feeling as displaced as you will feel after a few weeks in Four Villages. This project is not about New Delhi. It's definitely not about Bangalore. It's not about the educated, westernized Indians you have worked with in our offices around the world. It's different. Remember that, and you might make it through your first month. It's also utterly human. Remember that as well, and you might outlast your predecessor, who succumbed to culture shock in less than a year."

Karen had warned him, and after two weeks in-country, Michael knew she hadn't exaggerated. If not for Jaya he might have been lost, but even Jaya was a foreigner here. How many evenings had they spent in despairing laughter, trying to decode the bizarre demands of a merchant or a farmer or a local police officer? Or the medical staff in a rural hospital?

In the clinic's dimly-lit hallway, Michael met the stern-faced nurse, pulling fresh sheets from a closet. He approached her, driven by a need to understand. "Why did you look that way, when you saw Jaya's baby? As if something about her frightened you?"

The nurse's face was hard, like well-aged wax. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Fielding. It's as you said, a beautiful baby girl."

"Please." Michael moved half a step closer. At six foot one, he towered over the nurse. On some level he knew he was using his height to bully her, but he had never had it in him to look away from a bad situation. "You saw something. Please tell me what it was."

The moan of another woman's labor seeped from behind drawn curtains. Anger flashed in the nurse's eyes. "I saw that she is a girl."

"Of course she's a girl, but what's wrong with her?"

"That is enough." The nurse slipped past him with her burden of sheets.

"Wait," Michael pleaded. "I don't understand."

She looked back at him. Had her expression softened? "It is nothing, sir. Just a surprise. Mostly, these women have boys. When they have girls, it is usually a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"I am glad it's not a mistake this time."

j

Later, Michael walked the dim corridor with Sheo, while the nurses tended to Jaya and changed her gown. "They were shocked you had a daughter."

Sheo's lips pursed in a long sigh, while outside, rain pattered in peaceful rhythm. "The old ways are dying out, but change doesn't happen everywhere at once. This is my second daughter, and I would not wish it any different. But for a family living a traditional life, a daughter is not an asset. For the very poor, she can be a financial disaster. Illiterate, subservient, she is of little use. It will cost her family to raise her, train her, and then they will have to pay another family to take her in."

"The midwife said most ladies here have boys."

"Did she? Well. There is always talk."

"Infanticide?" The word softened, set against the rain.

"It starts much earlier, I think." Sheo shook his head. "But don't talk of these things now, Michael. Not on my daughter's birthday. She's beautiful, isn't she? As beautiful as her mother."

II

One more battle nearly won.

Cody Graham leaned back in the shotgun seat of the two-person ATV, tired but psyched following an afternoon spent roving the thriving grasslands of Project Site 270. "It feels so good to get out of the office!"

She glanced at Ben Whitman, hunched under his Green Stomp cap as he worked the ATV up the slope. The kid was smiling. Enough of a smile that Cody caught a flash of teeth. She congratulated herself. It was the most expressive response she'd managed to wring out of nineteen-year-old Ben. Not that he was unfriendly, or even shy. Just a bit reserved. Nervous, maybe, in the presence of the big-shot boss.

"You've done a great job here," she added, as the ATV ploughed a path through waist-high grasses.

"You keep saying that."

"Oh, and you do a great self-check. Nice, clean toxin smears."

"Oh, thanks. Clean pee. My speciality."

Cody laughed. For six months Ben had been Green Stomp's only full-time employee at 270. Cleanup at the hazardous waste site was nearing completion. Staff activity had been reduced to a daily round of detailed soil assays, with the occasional application of a spray or injection of nutrient-fortified bacteria to areas where microbial activity had declined. The bacteria worked to break down toxic molecules into safe and simple carbon groups—food for less exotic microbes serving as natural decomposers within the soil. An inspection tour of 270 by the federal oversight officer was scheduled in three weeks, so Cody had set up a tour of her own in advance of that, to look for any outstanding problems. She hadn't found any. Green Stomp would close out 270 as a showcase project.

Ben's hands tightened on the wheel as the ATV bounced upslope to the project office: a green-gold, wind-engineered tent anchored to an elevated platform. The graceful tent was a huge step above the ugly mobile trailers Cody had used eleven years ago when she and her partners tackled their first bioremediation project. Using both natural and genetically-tailored soil bacteria, along with select plants, they had set out to clean a hazardous waste site contaminated with perchloroethylene.

PCE was a common - and carcinogenic - industrial chemical. For many years it was believed that no microbe could

break it down to harmless components. Then, in 1997, researchers unveiled a new bacterium found in the sludge of an abandoned sewage plant that could do just that. Genetic tailoring modified the strain to work in dry land environments, and since then thousands of polluted sites had been restored.

"You know," Ben said, his voice strained and his knuckles showing white as he gripped the wheel, "when 270 closes down, I'm going to be out of a job."

Cody's smile broadened. "That's the second reason I came down here. I wanted to talk to you about that."

j

While Ben prepped his soil samples for mailing to Green Stomp's central lab, Cody laid claim to the administrator's office. With a cup of fresh coffee in hand, she leaned back in the chair, kicking her feet up on the empty desk top. The office looked out on the lush grassland of the project site. She could see the trail taken by the ATV, and - hazed by distance - she could just glimpse the glittering surface of the Missouri River through gaps in the broken levee.

Three years ago Project Site 270 had been farm country-prime farm country, at least when spring flooding was minimal and the levees held. In the spring of '09 the levees gave way. Floodwaters destroyed the freshly-planted crop, at the same time spreading sewage, spilled petroleum products and the hazardous waste from illegal dumping across the fertile land. It had happened many times before, but in '09 a new ingredient was added. Under the pressure of rust and water, several abandoned storage tanks cracked, leaking a grim cocktail of restricted pesticides into the muddy aftermath of the flood. The disaster went undiscovered for weeks, until wildlife started turning up dead.

Cody scowled as a doe emerged from a windbreak of poplars to the north. Animals were reservoirs of fat-soluble pesticides; the stuff concentrated in their tissues as they ate contaminated plants. Fences had been built to keep deer off the project site. Traps had been laid to contain smaller species that could not be fenced out. But no containment system was perfect. "Yo, Ben!" she called. "Looks like you've got a breach in the fence."

He appeared from the direction of the lunch room, a steaming cup of coffee in hand. "That doe again?"

"It's a doe."

He looked out the window. "I think she's getting in at the foot of the bluff by the river. I swear she hangs out there and waits until the motion sensors are switched off."

"Can you remove her today?"

"Sure. Before I go home."

Until the land was certified clean, Green Stomp's contract called for all large wildlife to be expelled.

Cody nodded at a chair on the other side of the desk. "Have a seat, Ben. We need to talk about your future."

"Then I've got one?"

He looked so anxious Cody had to smile. It was scary to be out of a job. Unemployment benefits didn't last long. No one starved, of course. You could crunch government crackers until the next millennium and never run short of nutrients thanks to the new mondo-wheats. But it wasn't fun. "Sit down," Cody urged again, and this time Ben sat, cradling his coffee cup in his hands, staring at the steam that curled up from its black surface.

"Your supervisor speaks highly of you," Cody said. "Six months working alone, and you haven't missed a day or screwed up a sample."

Ben looked up. He pushed his cap back on his head. "She said to talk to you about continuing with the company."

"Good advice. Are you willing to move?"

He frowned over that. Cody suspected he'd spent his whole life here, along the river. "Sure. I guess. Like to where?"

Cody looked up at the ceiling. She pursed her lips. "Say... to Belize? Or Sierra Leone. Maybe even Siberia?"

A look of despair came over Ben's face. Cody slipped her feet off the desk, immediately sorry. "I'm joking! We're just a little company, strictly North American. The biggest adventure you could expect is the wilds of Pennsylvania."

"I'll take it," Ben said, with painful solemnity. "I'm not the smartest guy around, but I know how to work. I don't get bored. I don't slack."

"I don't hire grunt labor," Cody told him, "for anything more than short term. You'd have to be willing to go back to school. If things work out, Green Stomp could eventually sponsor you for an online degree."

Again he stared at the steaming cup clenched in his white-knuckled hand. "I never did too good in school."

"Want to try again?"

He raised his eyes to look at her. She saw fear there, and hunger. A fierce hunger.

Say yes, she urged him silently.

Ben was a smart kid. That was easy to tell after working with him only one afternoon, but it was equally obvious someone had been carping in his ear all his life that he was basically a dumb shit who would never amount to anything. It was hard to counter that early life influence.

"How much school?" he asked.

Cody grinned wickedly. She had spent her own formative years in a private boarding school, as a charity case on a corporate scholarship, seeing her mother only on rare weekends. Those had been the hardest years of her life, but receiving the scholarship to attend Prescott Academy had also been her biggest break. She bore no sympathy for anyone out to shirk an education. "Oh, ten or fifteen years of college should do it for you, Ben."

His lips twitched in a ghost of a smile. "At entry-level wages?"

"Pay commensurate with experience. Say yes, Ben."

He nodded slowly. "Okay then. Yes."

Cody had made Green Stomp's reputation by tackling the toughest, dirtiest jobs she could find. The harder the challenge, the more she liked it. Kicking apart toxic "nonbiodegradable" molecules was a physical thrill. In her mind, it was the same as kicking down the mental walls that fenced people in. Like the one that said kids from bad neighborhoods couldn't make it in life. Kick. Or the one that said technology must eventually lead to apocalypse, whether through war, engineered disease, overpopulation, or pollution. Kick. Cody had seen a lot of tough problems, but she hadn't seen the end of the world yet. Look hard enough, and problems could provide their own solutions. Green Stomp already held several patents on specialized strains of bacteria recovered from heavily polluted sites.

She tapped her data glove, waking up the portal standing open on the desk. The collapsible monitor had a display the size of an eight-by-twelve-inch piece of paper. It was a quarter inch thick, and when not in use, it could be folded into thirds and slipped into a briefcase. Now it stood open, leaning back on a T-shaped foot. "Hark, link to Jobsite."

The portal opened a cellular connection to Cody's server. Seconds later the screen came to life with an image of Jobsite's bioremediation lobby.

Cody turned the portal around so Ben could see. "Green Stomp gets about a third of our projects through Global Shear. You've heard of them? No? A multinational. We sold them a twenty percent share of Green Stomp in exchange for expansion capital, so they like to drop business in our direction. Plus I interned there, and several execs know and love me." She grinned.

Ben's smile was fleeting as he puzzled over the lobby architecture.

"Anyway," Cody went on, "another third of our projects represent repeat business from satisfied clients. We're grateful for that, of course, but let me tell you a secret. The most interesting jobs come off the public link. Go ahead. Scroll through the list. Check it out."

The portal was keyed to Cody's voice. It didn't know Ben, so instead of speaking to it, he leaned forward, tentatively pressing the manual keys on the frame. "Do you ever get scared?" he asked, as his gaze flicked over the listings. "Do you ever worry you'll poison yourself?"

Cody leaned back in her chair, feeling her chest pull tight. "It's something you always have to keep in mind."

In fact, she'd already poisoned herself. Somehow, early in her career, she'd screwed up and a toxin had gotten into her blood, into her flesh, into the growing embryo in her womb. She'd been so careful at home: no alcohol, no coffee, no soda, no drugs. It hadn't mattered. When the pregnancy was terminated, Cody felt a chip of her soul flushed out along with her daughter. "These things happen," the doctor had assured her, but Cody needed to know why. She went looking for a causative event-and she found it when a bioassay of her own liver tissue revealed PCP contamination - the prime pollutant on every job site she'd worked the previous two years.

"Didn't you say you grew up on the west coast?" Ben asked, his pale cheeks aglow in the portal's light. "A place called Victoria Glen?"

"Yes."

"Well, guess what? It's on the job list."

Cody turned the portal back around, and frowned.

III

When Michael left the clinic, night still drowned the street, thick and warm, like the spirit of some tropical ocean ghosting in the rain. Inside, Jaya was teaching her newborn to nurse, while Sheo arranged their journey home.

Michael paused on the clinic's veranda, listening to cocks crowing the unseen dawn and the musical patter of rain.

A headlight cruised the street. It hesitated just before the clinic, then it slid into the pull-out. Diffuse light from the clinic windows glinted on the narrow, beetle-shell chassis of a zip, painted pink and looking hardly large enough to hold a man. Powered by hydrogen fuel cells, its engine ran silent, so that its arrival was marked only by tire noise. Rain dashed through the beam of its dim headlight. The aerodynamic canopy rose a few inches. A boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen years peeked out, fixing Michael with a hopeful look.

Michael shook his head slightly. He hated to disappoint such an intrepid entrepreneur, up so early to find the fares that would pay off the loan on his zip, but his feelings were running high and he couldn't think of squeezing himself into the zip's stuffy little shell.

The boy shrugged, closed the canopy, and pulled away.

A cow lowed, and a rat scurried across the street. Michael hesitated, reminded that he was a stranger in this place.

Still, he was not alone. His right index finger curled, to tap a point on the palm of his data glove. A green ready light came on in the corner of his shades. "Send voice mail to the Terrace," he whispered. A mike on his earpiece picked up the command. "Start: Jaya and Sheo are the proud parents of a beautiful and impatient little girl..."

He found himself smiling as he described the birth for their circle of friends. Then he touched his gloved palm again, sending the message to the Terrace.

Warm rain enfolded him as he stepped off the veranda, soaking his hair and transforming his silk shirt into a transparent film. The silk was artificial, spun in a local factory financed by Global Shear. Other grants had gone out to farmers and small business owners all over the district, but could it ever be enough?

Jaya's daughter had been born into a world of nearly eight billion people. A billion of them lived in India alone.

Michael tried to imagine the scale of it, but he could not. We are a river, flooding the world. Inevitably remaking it.

A glyph blinked on in the corner of his shades, surrounded by a pink query circle. Michael recognized the symbol of the Terrace and smiled. "Link."

"Michael!" Etsuko's soft, clipped English laughed in his ear.

"I guess you are a surrogate father now!"

"That's right, old man," Ryan chipped in, his Australian voice loud and bold. "You do have some images for us? Flash them."

"Archived," Michael said. "Sorry. Sort it out later, okay?"

"First-timer," Ryan chided.

Etsuko asked, "Where are you now?"

"Walking home."

"Walking?" she echoed. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Ah," Ryan scoffed. "He's a company bigwig now, with his own eye in the sky following after him."

Michael groaned. "I keep forgetting about that." Global Shear had assigned him a permanent guard in the form of a mini-drone aircraft with a wingspan the length of his arm. Powered by solar cells and a lightweight battery system that could get it through the night, it tracked his movements, ever-poised to raise an alarm should anything go wrong.

"We're bored in our little cubbies," Ryan said. "Give us the scene."

Bored? If Ryan got bored, it was only on weekends, before the Asian markets opened. During the rest of the week he traded currencies under contract for a large Australian firm.

Etsuko worked in the calmer environment of a California-based multinational specializing in online education. She staffed the East Asian shift, so her workday often began in the warm, hazy afternoons of Santa Barbara.

Michael's day ran well behind theirs - a fact Ryan tended to forget. He tapped his glove, activating the cameras on his shades. Pan left to right: one- and two-story stucco and plastic dwellings loomed out of the darkness, squeezing against the rain-splattered street. A bicycle trundled past, its rider hidden beneath an umbrella, two squawking chickens strapped to the handlebars. From a few blocks away, the screech of wet brakes.

The video feed uploaded over cellular links. On the Terrace, Ryan would seem to be sitting at a patio table in the shade of a pepper tree, sipping java in mild morning sunlight, fenced in by the dense foliage of a mature garden, or perhaps gazing out over a seascape with a hint of salt tang in the air. Whatever environment was running, half of it had now vanished, replaced by Michael's input.

"God!" Ryan said, and Michael could hear his feet hit the floor. "It's still night there - and it's pouring."

"It's grand, isn't it?" Michael asked. He slicked his hair back, tasting the water on his lips. Precious water, falling like a blessing timed by forgotten gods. Rain had been absent for the two weeks he'd been in-country. As his census teams inventoried the tiny farms surrounding Four Villages, they faced farmers more and more anxious over the success of this season's crop of rice or peanuts, and increasingly unwilling to speak to the officials responsible for confirming their landholdings and setting their taxes. "The rain will help," Michael said firmly. Rain would ease everyone's mood, and in the long run even the most recalcitrant farmers would see that their interests were the same as Global Shear's.

Right?

A stray breeze puffed from an alley, carrying the dilute but distinct scent of an open sewer. Global Shear was responsible for developing infrastructure, overseeing environmental restoration, encouraging private credit, and enhancing agricultural extension services - all popular activities. But they were also the tax collector, and fairness demanded a thorough inventory of the district's landholdings, along with a clarification of boundaries and ownership - all the while smoothing the ruffled feathers of displaced local officials.

(Diplomacy, Karen Hampton would say, is a grim necessity.)

So were creative solutions. More than one company official had lobbied for a policy that would encourage family farms to merge into larger agricultural concerns so they could practice economies of scale, but such schemes didn't take into consideration the dense population.

Michael talked it over with Ryan and Etsuko as he made his way through the waking neighborhoods. "Hand labor still makes sense, for now. Replace the thousands of laborers with machines, and where will the laborers find work?"

At first glance, the sheer numbers of people seemed an intractable problem, but the truth lay deeper. When warfare and ethnic strife were kept at bay, birth rates plummeted. Four Villages was no exception. The town itself was an accident of geography, grown up fast and ugly from the melding of what had once been four separate hamlets.

Most of the women here were having only two or three children...

Or was it two or three boys? Michael promised himself he would examine the statistics when he went into the office later in the day.

Lights were coming on in the houses, and the smell of cooking gruel drifted out into the street. "It's more than birth control," Etsuko was saying. "It's education, economic independence, a sense of confidence in the future..."

"Sure," Ryan agreed. "That and coveting your neighbor's success."

Michael burst out laughing. There was plenty of inspiration for the ambitious in Four Villages. On every street, affluent homes huddled next to shacks. Electric lights spilled from some windows, while others held the soft gleam of candles. A mixed neighborhood like this was a robust place - in sharp contrast to the cankerous hearts of the original villages, where ancient buildings housed either fundamentalist Hindus or fundamentalist Moslems who still went about life as they had for centuries: in grinding poverty, practicing and defending their faith in settings that barely tolerated the presence of a Global Shear census taker.

The warm rain slackened as Michael turned onto a muddy lane scarred by zip tires. His residence was third on the right - a large house owned by Global Shear, its white-washed face abutting the street. The house was built around an enclosed courtyard, where a neglected garden faced a long, lingering death.

As Michael approached, the old house detected his presence and a welcoming light switched on. It illuminated the alcove-and a large, bundled object huddled against the heavy double doors.

"Hello," Ryan said. "What's this?"

Etsuko hissed sharply. "Michael, be careful."

He stopped in the middle of the lane, his instincts made wary by antiterrorism training. He tried to see the anonymous object as some cloth-wrapped package stashed by a passing street merchant, perhaps to protect it from the rain. He tried to see it as trash.

Then the bundle stirred, faded cloth sliding aside as a head lifted, turned, and the face of a little girl blinked at him, dark eyes wide with confusion and fear.

"It's a kid," Ryan said. "Christ, look at her face. Somebody's punched her around."

Instead, Michael looked away from the bruises on her cheeks, wanting to believe they were only shadows. Gray mud streaked her black hair. A nose ring glinted silver. Her sari looked as if it had been purple once. Now it was a lifeless gray. Michael guessed her to be no more than thirteen years old.

The girl's right arm slid into view. No rings and no bracelets adorned that arm. It was a fleshless bone covered in light brown skin, so very thin there did not seem to be enough muscle mass even to raise that fragile hand. Nevertheless, she pressed it against the wall. She tried to stand, but her limbs would not be controlled, her balance was absent. Michael had once seen a dog taken by an epileptic seizure. The will to move existed, but it only reached the muscles in fits and starts. It was the same with this girl. After several seconds, she sank back to the alcove's tiled floor. She bowed her head. She pulled her sari up to cover her face while Michael stood in the street, gaping, trying to find some precedent in his world for her sudden appearance, clueless what to do.

He told himself it was a dream. How was he supposed to get into his house?

Etsuko's voice was tense: "Michael, I am searching for a local emergency number."

Ryan: "Haven't you got one on file, mate?"

"Corporate security," Michael said stiffly. "That's all. Etsuko?"

"I am contacting the police."

"Don't," Ryan said. "This isn't the silicon coast. If the cops could help, she would have gone to them."

Michael stared at the girl. For Christ's sake, he was a businessman, not a charity worker, and it had already been a long, sleepless night. Let this be a dream.

The girl tried again to get to her feet. Again, she slid back to the ground.

"Jesus, Michael," Ryan said. "Are you just going to stand there? Mate, you've got to do something."

Michael's conscience screamed the same thing, yet still he didn't move. "What can I do?"

Some dark voice whispered that he could walk away, get breakfast in town, go straight to the office, give the girl a chance to disappear.

"Call corporate security," Etsuko said crisply. "They will help. They will get you inside."

"Bloody hell," Ryan said. "Boosting her to the next street over won't help her."

"He's not Mother Teresa."

"You could try calling a neighbor, mate."

Michael shook his head. "No, I don't think so." Tragedy was too common here. Sympathy wore thin. Just yesterday he had seen motherly Mrs. Shastri brandishing a heavy stick as she chased a beggar out of the lane.

Michael sighed. She was only a little girl. Still, in her presence, he sensed again the ghostly inundation of chaos. "Witnesses," he muttered. "Ryan, Etsuko - record everything, because you're my witnesses. Got it?" He fervently hoped the spy plane was active overhead.

The girl cringed as he approached. It was a tiny gesture, but startling. "Hey," Michael said. "I won't hurt you." He knelt beside her. Gently, he lifted her sari away from her face.

"The dirty bastards," Ryan muttered.

The girl's cheeks were dark with bruises. Her sari was soaked and she was shivering. Next door, Mrs. Shastri shouted at the servant who cooked for the family. Michael tensed. He didn't want the old gossip to see this girl. "Come inside," he said softly.

"That's it, mate," Ryan encouraged him. "It's the right thing to do."

The confused look in the girl's eyes told him she did not understand.

The Shastri dog took that moment to run into the street, a tiny, white-furred terror bouncing on short legs, yapping a fierce challenge. "Watch out, mate!" Ryan cried. "Attack from the rear."

The girl gasped. The rat-dog took encouragement from that. It charged at Michael, its jaws snapping as it darted about, working up the nerve to bite.

Michael didn't think that would take long. Operating in survival mode now, he yelled at the house to open up. The triple bolts slipped in a simultaneous click, then the doors swung back. He launched a kick at the rat-dog. Then he lifted the girl - she weighed so little! - and stumbled with her into the house. As the doors closed, he heard Mrs. Shastri calling sweetly to her little terror.

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Ryan was laughing. "Very smooth, mate. You're a hero."

"Shut up."

Soft lights had come on in the house, falling across new carpet, designer furnishings, and walls paneled in rich faux-teak. The air was dry and cool, almost sterile. "Welcome home, Mr. Fielding," the house said in its motherly voice. "You have five messages."

Michael stood just inside the doors, his shoulders heaving, more with panic than exertion. Looking down at the girl, he found she had fainted, gone limp in his arms. Oh, this looked just great, didn't it? Avaricious foreign businessman kidnaps helpless girl. The local tabloids could churn a million hits out of a headline like that. Christ.

"Now you're committed," Etsuko said. "You must take care of her."

"Yeah." Michael carried the girl into the living room, where he laid her down on the western-style couch... hoping she didn't have lice.

She looked so fragile. Tiny and breakable, as if her bones were thin glass copies of real bones, melting away in the heat of an inner fire. Her skin felt hot and her sari was covered in mud. The drawstring of a heavy cloth pouch was looped around her wrist. Michael slipped the pouch off and teased it open, feeling like a lout for abusing her privacy, feeling stupid for feeling like a lout. After all, he'd brought her into his house at no little risk to himself and she was helpless and he needed to know who she was, where she came from, and who to call. There had to be someone he could call.

He scowled at the contents of the pouch.

"What is it?" Etsuko asked.

"Dirt."

Well, not dirt exactly. More like a dark, loose humus smelling of garden shops and greenhouses.

"If that's her idea of a valuable," Ryan muttered. "She really is in a bad way." Michael closed the pouch, leaving it by the French doors that opened onto the neglected courtyard.

"Michael, I've got to take off for a while," Ryan said. "I've got an appointment that can't wait."

"Sure. Etsuko? I know you have work to do too. The house can record."

"You are sure?" she asked. "I can stay awhile."

"No, it's all right."

The link to the Terrace closed.

Michael looked at the girl. Her sari had fallen away, exposing her shoulders, her arms, her bruised face. Her skin was prickling, purpling in the air-conditioning. Of course - her clothes were soaked. He was wet, too. The chill air bit at his skin. He headed for the bedroom.

Stripping off his silk shirt, he pitched it into a laundry basket. Then he opened a linen chest at the foot of the bed and pulled out a clean blanket. He used it to cover the girl, who was muttering now, though she didn't wake.

Next, Michael started some tea in the kitchen. The power meter was low, but the sun would be up soon. Even with the rain, the rooftop tiles would quickly recharge the house batteries, so there was no need to conserve. He pulled some leftover samosas out of the refrigerator. He heated some soup.

Sitting on a stool, he watched the soup spin in the microwave. He was thirty-two years old, one of the youngest managers in charge of a major district contract.

So start thinking, doofus.

"Hey," he said softly. "I could call the clinic."

With curled fingers, Michael tapped a trigger point on his data glove. He was tempted to ask for Jaya, but he was not going to bother her, not now. So he asked for the midwife who had seemed so relieved when Jaya had not rejected her baby girl.

After a few minutes a woman's voice came on the line. "Hello?" Suspicion and fear huddled in that one brief word. Her tone didn't change when Michael told her about the girl.

"This is a charity case, sir. You need to call a charity." She gave him the number of an organization.

Michael called the charity. Another woman answered. She listened to his story and blessed him, while Michael begged her to come pick the girl up. He would cover the cost of her care. Just return her to her family. Please?

"Mr. Fielding, given the circumstances in which this girl was found, it's likely she has no family."

"But she must have come from somewhere."

"Surely. But please understand. A girl like this has most likely been cast out of her home for... infidelity, or sterility. These things happen, even in better neighborhoods."

Michael did not think this girl came from a better neighborhood. "Can you care for her then?"

"Sadly, no. We have no beds left. We would have to tend her on the street. Please understand, her circumstance is not unusual."

The microwave finished. Michael stared at it, fervently wishing the sun would rise, wanting to see light seep through the peach-colored blinds. "What's to become of her?"

"That is in the hands of God."

The woman promised to call around to other agencies. In the meantime, she would send someone over to check on the girl. Michael reminded her he would be more than willing to pay for the girl's care. She thanked him and linked off.

He slipped off his shades and peeled off the data glove. He sat on the stool, trying to visualize where this might go. He could not. He could not see even ten minutes ahead.

At least the soup was warm. He placed the bowl on a tray, along with a spoon, then he zapped the samosas for a few seconds to warm them. They came out soggy, instead of the crisp, fried pastry they had once been, but he put them alongside the soup anyway. Then he carried the whole to the living room, where the girl was sitting up, looking

around with a dazed expression. Her eyes went wide when she saw him.

Michael was suddenly conscious of his bare chest, bronzy skin over health club muscles. He suffered a devastating suspicion that he was communicating inaccurate innuendoes. Christ. He set the tray down on the low table fronting the couch, spilling a little of the soup. The girl pulled the blanket up to her chin. "For you," Michael said, his cheeks heating with a despairing flush. Then he hurried to the bedroom and got out a shirt.

When he looked again, the girl was sitting on the floor, holding the soup bowl in her delicate hands, drinking from the rim, her eyes closed, as if she were privileged to taste some nectar of the gods. Michael felt a rush of relief, thinking maybe, maybe he'd gotten it right. Then his gaze fell on the sofa, and he shuddered at what Mrs. Nandy, the cleaning lady, would say about those streaks of gray mud ground into the upholstery.

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The house spoke English, but after some exploration of its options menu, Michael discovered it also had personalities schooled in Hindi and Tamil. He activated the Hindi personality, then set about introducing it to the girl. That wasn't easy. She had said nothing so far, and the house needed a voice print as well as a visual image to accurately recognize her.

With two hands, Michael beckoned her away from where she huddled on the floor by the couch. She looked very frightened, but she followed him. When she stood in full view of the tiny cameras mounted in the corners of the room, he held up his palm, asking her to stop, to wait. "Hark," he said. "In Hindi-version, ask her to say hello."

Litling words spilled forth in the soft voice of the house. The girl hunched, trembling. Her gaze searched the walls.

The house repeated its request. This time she looked at Michael. He nodded encouragement. Hesitantly, she placed her palms together. "Namaste," she whispered.

Michael smiled. "Ask her name."

The house spoke again, and her eyes grew wide with wonder. In a barely discernable voice she said, "Rajban."

"Rajban?" Michael asked.

She nodded. Michael grinned and tapped his chest. "Michael," he told her. Then he bowed. When he looked up, her cheeks were flushed. Her lips toyed with a smile. She started to reach for her sari, to pull it across her face, but when she saw the mud on it she scowled and let it go.

Michael asked if she wanted more food. She declined. He told her someone was coming to help her. That brought a such a look of fear that he wondered if the house had translated correctly. "Why don't you sit down?" he offered, indicating the couch. Rajban nodded, though she remained standing until he left the room.

Returning to his bedroom, he took a quick shower, waiting all the while for the house to announce the arrival of the charity worker. No announcement came.

"Link to the office," he instructed the house as he shaved. "Check Rajban's name and image against census records." It wasn't exactly legal to access the records for personal use, but this wasn't exactly personal.

The house started to reply in Hindi. He corrected it impatiently. "English for me," he said. "Hindi for Rajban. Now, continue."

"No identity or residence can be established from available census data," the house informed him.

Michael swore softly. So Rajban was a nonentity, her existence unrecorded by his intrepid census teams. Which meant she was either new in town or a resident of one of the reticent fundamentalist neighborhoods.

"What does my schedule look like?"

"Daily exercise in the corporate gym from seven to eight," the feminine voice recited. "Then a breakfast meeting with Ms. Muthaye Lal of the Southern Banking Alliance from eight-thirty until ten. A staff meeting from ten-fifteen."

"Can the SBA thing be postponed until tomorrow?"

"Inquiring. Please stand by."

Michael finished shaving. He cleaned the razor, then reached for a toothbrush.

"Ms. Lal is unable to schedule a meeting for tomorrow."

"Damn." He tapped the toothbrush on the counter. "This afternoon, then?"

"Inquiring. Please stand by." The response came quickly this time. "Ms. Lal is unable to schedule a meeting for this afternoon."

Michael sighed. No surprise. Everybody's schedule was full. Well, Ms. Muthaye Lal worked with poor women, through the SBA's community banking program. Perhaps she would have some advice for Rajban.

After Michael dressed, he looked into the living room. Rajban had fallen asleep on the floor beside the couch. He told himself it would be all right if he left for a few hours.

The house would take care of her. And if she decided to leave...

His jaw clenched. That would be the easiest solution for him, wouldn't it? If she just disappeared.

"Call the charity again," he told the house. Again, the woman on the other end of the line promised to send someone by.

He waited an hour. No one came. Rajban still slept. Michael wished he was sleeping too. His eyes felt gritty, his body stiff. His brain was functioning with all the racing speed of a third-generation computer. He wondered if Jaya was awake.

In the bathroom medicine cabinet there was a box of Synthetic Sleep. Michael didn't often take metabolic drugs, but he'd been up all night, and if he wanted to get through this morning's meetings in coherent condition, he had to do something to convince his body that he'd had at least a few hours of rest. He peeled open the casing on one pill and swallowed it with a glass of water.

"Take care of Rajban," he told the house. "Teach her how you work. And call me if you have any questions, any problems. Okay?"

IV

Rajban woke with a gritty throat. Her muscles ached. Her joints ached. Her heart was beating too fast. "Namaste?" she whispered.

The house informed her the man had gone out. He had not hurt her. Not yet.

She looked around the room, unsure how she had come to be here, knowing only that it was shameful. Mother-in-Law would never let her come home now.

It was Mother-in-Law who had sent her away.

She padded through the house, not daring to touch anything. She even worried about the carpet under her feet.

Turning a corner, she found the great double doors that had sheltered her last night. Her heart beat even faster. Were the doors locked? She half hoped they were. Out there, the horrible street waited for her. Nothing else. Yet she could not stay here. Hesitantly, her hand touched the latch, just to see if it was locked. She pressed on it - only a little! - and the latch leaped out of her grip, swinging down on its own with multiple clicks. The doors started to open. A razor of light streamed in. Frantically, Rajban threw herself against the doors. She held them, so they stood open only a crack. The day's heat curled over her fingers, while outside, women talked in cultured, confident voices.

Listening to them, Rajban trembled. She did not dare show herself in such company. Leaning forward, she forced the doors to shut again.

Back in the living room, she stood beside another set of doors. These opened onto the courtyard. She stared through their glass panes at a half-dead garden surrounded by high walls. Potted banana trees stood on one side like dry old men. Bare skeletons of dead shrubs jutted between the weeds. Yellow leaves floated on the surface of rain puddles.

There was no one outside, so again Rajban tried the latch. These doors opened as easily as the others. Steamy air flowed over her, laden with the smell of wet soil and unhappy plants. Cautiously, she stepped outside.

A paved path wound between the weeds. She followed it, discovering a servant's door in the back wall, but it was locked and would not open.

The path brought her back to the house. She crouched in the open doorway, lost, not knowing what to do. Why was she here?

Clean, frigid air from the house mixed with dense, hot, scented air from the sweltering courtyard, like dream mixing with reality. Rajban struggled to separate the two, but they would not untwine. Hugging her knees to her chest, she rocked on her bare feet, seeing again the blinding flash of the morning sun reflected on the metal circles sewn into the hem of her sister-in-law's green sari. She squinted against the glare, and hurried on. Hurry. Her skin felt so hot. Her heart scabbled like a wild mouse in a glass jar. Her veil kept slipping from her face, but she didn't dare stop to fix it. Sister-in-Law's bare brown heels flashed beneath the swinging hem of her sari. Rajban struggled to keep up, fearful in the presence of so many strangers. In the two years since her marriage she had not left the house of her husband's family. The borders of her life had been fixed by the courtyard garden and the crumbling kitchen where she helped Mother-in-Law prepare the meals.

Last year her husband went away.

In the months since, Rajban had often been sick with fevers and chills that no one else in the family shared. Her work suffered. Now Mother-in-Law was sending her away. "We have found a family in need of skilled hands to keep the house. They are a respectable family. You will serve them well. Gather your things. It is time to go."

There wasn't much to take. An extra sari. A necklace her mother had given her.

Before she left, Rajban slipped into the garden with a cloth bag from the kitchen. Fruit trees and vegetables thrived in boxes and tin cans and glass jars with drainage holes drilled carefully in the bottom. It had not always been so. When she first arrived in the household, the garden had been yellow and unhappy. But Rajban tended the soil as her mother had taught her, on their tiny farm in the country. She dug up patches of the courtyard with a heavy stick, mixing the dirt with chicken droppings and sometimes with nightsoil, but only when no one could see her, for her husband would never take her to bed again if he knew. When it rained, she caught the water that dripped from the rooftop, ladling it out over the dry days that would follow, praying softly as she worked. She turned the soil until it became soft, rich black, and sweet-smelling. One day as she turned it, she found a worm. Life from lifelessness. That day, she knew magic had flowed in to the soil.

A sickly mandarin tree grew in the cracked half of an old water barrel. Rajban teased away several handfuls of surface dirt, then gently she mixed the black soil in. Within days the tree rejoiced in a flush of new green leaves.

Magic.

Rajban mixed the old dirt into her pile. She dug more dirt from the hard floor of the courtyard. She stirred the pile every day, and every few days she repotted another plant. The garden thrived, but it was not enough to keep Mother-in-Law happy, so Rajban was being sent away. Quietly, she filled her cloth bag with handfuls of the magic soil. Then she smoothed the pile so no one would know.

A few minutes after following Sister-in-Law out the door, Rajban could no longer guess the proper way home. Fearfully she watched the step-step of Sister-in-Law's heels, the swing of her sari, the fierce flash of the sun in the decorative metal circles. And then somehow the green sari slipped out of sight.

Rajban wandered alone through the afternoon, not daring to think too hard. Night fell, and fear crawled in with the darkness. Respectable women were not found alone on the street at night.

Her fever saved her from rape. She's dirty, the boy who stole her mother's necklace growled to his companions. A dirty, infected, dying whore.

Now Rajban crouched in the courtyard doorway, shivering on the border between warm and cold, light and shadow, past and future, the dying garden on one side, the rich house on the other. An unexpected fury stirred in her breast and flushed across the palms of her hands.

Am I dying?

The possibility enraged her. She did not want to die. Emphatically not. Not now.

I want a baby, she thought. I want my mother. I want my own garden and a respectable life.

These things she would never have if she let herself die now.

j

Rajban is fifteen.

V

Michael arrived by zip at the address recorded on his schedule - a European-style restaurant on the ground floor of a well-maintained home. A woman greeted him, speaking lightly accented English. "Welcome, Mr. Fielding. Ms. Lal has just arrived. Won't you come in?"

Air-conditioning enfolded him. He followed the hostess past widely-spaced tables occupied by well-dressed patrons. At a corner table a woman in a traditional sari rose as he approached. His shades caught her ID and whispered it in his ear. "Muthaye Lal, age twenty-seven, employed by Southern Banking Association four years-"

He tapped his glove, ending the recitation.

"Mr. Fielding, so glad you could come."

Coffee was poured, and a waiter brought a first course of papaya, pineapple, and mango. Muthaye tasted it, and smiled. She was not a pretty woman, but her dark eyes were confident as they took Michael's measure. Her enunciation was crisply British. "I will admit to some disappointment, Mr. Fielding, when I learned Global Shear had appointed another foreigner to head this district's office, but your background speaks well for you. Are you familiar with the Southern Banking Association's microeconomics program?"

Michael sipped his coffee, admiring the way criticisms and compliments twined together in her speech like the strands of a rope. Muthaye could have learned her negotiating tactics from Karen Hampton. Michael certainly had.

Rise to all challenges, especially if they've been promptly withdrawn.

He set the coffee down and smiled, choosing to answer the non-question first. "It's Global Shear policy to expand the international experience of our executives. Please don't take it personally. You probably know that seventy percent of our upper-level staff here at Four Villages is Indian."

Amusement danced in Muthaye's eyes. "And that Global Shear employs Indian executives in offices on three continents. Yes, I know, Mr. Fielding. Global Shear is a true multinational, with, I trust, community interests?"

"Of course. Cultural and economic vitality go hand in hand. That's our belief. And the SBA is well-known to us for its community endeavors. While I'm not familiar with the particulars of your microeconomics program, I have studied several others around the world."

Microeconomics had begun in Bangladesh, where a few hundred dollars loaned to a circle of impoverished women could seed a microenterprise that might eventually grow into a thriving business.

"Our program is well established," Muthaye told him. "We have over four thousand women participating in Four Villages alone. Each one of them has developed an independence, a self-reliance their mothers never knew."

Michael nodded. To educate and empower women in underdeveloped areas had long been a key to economic progress. The women's lives were tied up in their children. Selflessness came easier to them than to their men. "Global Shear invests many millions of dollars every year in this cause, throughout the world - and the returns have been impressive."

"Ah. That would be in the form of taxes you collect?"

"A measure of economic vitality."

"And your source of income."

"Doing well by doing good-"

"Benefits everyone. Yes, Mr. Fielding, I do agree. I asked for this meeting to discuss with you yet another opportunity for Global Shear to do well by doing good. I would like you to sponsor a line of debit cards to be used by members of the Southern Banking Association. Most of our deposits are tiny, you understand. A few rupees at a time. The money comes in as coinage, and generally it goes out the same way. If the coinage can be exchanged for debit cards, loss from theft would plummet."

"Is theft such a problem for your women?"

A frown mared her brow. "It's often the husbands, you understand?"

Michael flashed on the image of an irate man confiscating his wife's meager earnings, to spend it on...? Drink, perhaps. Or other women. The microeconomic banks had long been convinced that women were the financially

responsible members of most marriages, and so most loans were made to women.

Muthaye signaled a waitress for more coffee. "There would, of course, be up-front costs should we institute debit cards. This is the reason we need a sponsor for the program. Our depositors simply do not possess the capital to acquire a debit card through normal routes. The economic scale we deal with is meaningless to anyone in the middle class, whether they live in India or the United States."

Michael nodded. "We're talking about account activity equivalent to a few dollars a week?"

"Exactly. Of course, with debit cards, tax collection for Global Shear would be simplified. Taxes could be paid directly out of the electronic accounts, so that no time would be lost collecting and counting the rupees owed."

Michael reflected that most of Muthaye's clients would fall far below the threshold income for tax collection. "Do your depositors have the math skills to understand this kind of abstract system?"

"Education is a requirement for permanent membership in the SBA, Mr. Fielding. Also, the math we teach will be supplemented by bar graphs on the debit cards."

"Oh." Graphic cards would cost far more than those with a simple magnetic strip. "Well. I'll be happy to assign a staffer to this project. We'll assess costs, and give you an indication of the possibilities in a few days."

As they continued to discuss details, Michael's thoughts returned to Rajban. He wanted to call the house, to see if she was still there. He felt guilty about leaving her alone.

As the minutes wore on, he felt certain Rajban would take advantage of his absence and leave. He realized now that he didn't want that. For where could she possibly go? Back home, he supposed. It would be better if she went home. Wouldn't it?

"Mr. Fielding?" Sharpness touched Muthaye's voice. "You seem distracted. Did you have another appointment?"

"Ah, no. Just a situation at home. My apologies."

He felt the vibration of a call coming in, followed by a barely audible, trilling ring. Vibration/trilling, the combination repeating like a European siren. Michael tapped his data glove.

Take a message.

The shades would not accept the command. "Urgent, urgent, urgent!" the stealthy voice whispered back.

Muthaye was looking at him now with an amused expression. Michael apologized again as he took the call. The voice of Mrs. Nandy, his housekeeper, exploded in his ears. "There is a vagrant in the house, Mr. Fielding! It is a woman of shameful kind. I have her in a corner. She is filthy! Vermin-covered! Mr. Fielding, I will call the police!"

"No, no, no!" His voice boomed through the restaurant, causing heads to turn. "Leave her alone. She is a guest. A guest, you understand? I have asked her in-"

"Mr. Fielding! Vermin-covered! Dirty! This is a dirty woman!"

You cannot mean to have her keep your house-

"No! Nothing like that. You are my housekeeper. Why don't you take the day off, Mrs. Nandy?" he added, trying hard for a soothing tone. "Visit your grandchildren-"

"They are in school."

"Don't frighten her, Mrs. Nandy."

"She is vermin-covered!"

"Please?" He looked at Muthaye, at her sharp, dark eyes.

"Just leave the house, Mrs. Nandy. Take a holiday."

She finally agreed to go, though Michael didn't know if he could believe her. When the call ended, he looked at Muthaye. "My apologies again, but the situation at home - I really need to go." He started to stand. Then he changed his mind. He sat back down. Muthaye worked regularly with poor women just like Rajban.

Briefly, he told her about the girl he had found on his step.

Muthaye's expression hardened as he described Rajban.

Her lips set in a tight line and anger gleamed in her eyes. "The charity worker will not come," she said, when he had finished.

"What?" Michael spread his hands helplessly. "Twice she told me someone would be over as soon as possible."

"And no doubt that is true, but the possible comes with many restrictions. You are already caring for Rajban. There will always be cases more pressing than hers. Mr. Fielding, you have been very kind to help this girl. Hers is an old story, in a world that often despises its women. My mother suffered a similar fate. She was abandoned by her family, but she became educated. She learned economic independence. She insisted that I be educated, too. She devoted her life to it."

Michael stared at Muthaye, trying to visualize her as a street waif. He could not. "Your mother did a fine job."

"Indeed. Are you going home straightaway?"

The twists and turns in her conversation put Michael on edge. "Yes. I need to check-"

"Good. May I accompany you, Mr. Fielding?"

"Well, yes, of course." He felt relieved at her offer, yet strangely resentful too. Muthaye would take over Rajban's care.

As if to prove it, she announced, "I will call a health aide from the women's league to meet us." She folded her portal and slipped it into her purse. "Ready?"

j

They found Rajban in the courtyard. She looked up as the French doors clicked open. Her bruised cheeks were flushed, her face shining with sweat. Fear huddled in her dark eyes. To Michael, she looked like an abused little girl.

Muthaye crouched by her side. They talked a minute, then Rajban followed her into the house.

The house announced the arrival of a visitor.

"That will be the health aide," Muthaye told Michael.

"Please escort her in."

Michael nodded, wondering when he had lost control of his own house.

The aide was a diminutive woman, yet intense as pepper sauce. With rapid gestures she spread a cloth on the living room floor, then arranged her equipment on it. Muthaye introduced her to Rajban. The three women ignored Michael, so he retreated to his home office. The workload did not stop accumulating just because he was absent.

He linked into the corporate office, downloaded a log of telephone messages, postponed the staff meeting, gave some cursory instructions about the SBA debit card plans. When he returned to the living room, the health aide was just slipping out the front door. Michael looked after her anxiously. "Where is she going? Is she done?"

"Yes, Mr. Fielding." Muthaye leaned forward and patted Rajban's hand. Then, with an unbecoming groan, she clambered to her feet. She seemed older than she had at breakfast, her confidence burned away. "You have been very kind to Rajban. She is deeply grateful."

"I, ah..."

Muthaye's smile was sad. "What else could you do? I understand, Mr. Fielding--"

"Call me Michael, please."

Muthaye nodded. "I know you didn't look for this burden, Michael, and I know the situation is awkward for you. I would ask though - and I am asking, not Rajban - that she be allowed to stay the night."

"Isn't there--"

"No. All formal shelters will be full. But by tomorrow, I may be able to find a home for her."

"She's sick, isn't she?"

Muthaye nodded. "She won't name her family. She doesn't want to shame them, especially her mother, who was very proud of the marriage she arranged for Rajban. Her parents are destitute, you understand, but women are becoming rare enough that even daughters with no dowry may find husbands. Rajban's husband is the third son--"

"She's married?" Michael interrupted. "But she's just a little girl."

"She's fifteen," Muthaye said. "Child marriage has become fashionable again among certain fundamentalist groups. Rajban has been married two years. She and her husband lived in his mother's house, but her husband was sick. He went away last year and didn't come home. Rajban has never been pregnant, so she believes she is infertile, and so of no value. She has also been frequently sick this past year, and a burden on the family."

Michael felt the sweat of an old terror break out across his brow. "My God. She has AIDS, doesn't she?"

"That would be my guess. No doubt she caught it from her husband. Her family must have suspected the same, so they abandoned her."

"But she can be treated," Michael objected.

No one had to die of AIDS anymore, not if they took control of their lives and lived the medical regimen.

"Given money, given time, yes, the disease can be put into remission," Muthaye agreed. Still, Michael heard resignation in her voice.

"Rajban has no money," he said.

Muthaye nodded. "Rajban has nothing."

VI

For Cody Graham, home was a luxury condo in the foothills above Denver. She caught a train from DIA, arriving home in late evening, at the same time as the dinner for two she had ordered along the way. The food went onto the table while her account was automatically billed. She took a quick shower. When she emerged, she found Wade had arrived. He was pouring Venezuelan spring water into lead-free wine glasses. "Hey," she said, toweling her hair dry. "You remembered."

"Of course I remembered." Wade arched an eyebrow in comic offense as he set the bottle on a tray.

Wade Collin was president and chief stockholder of a small but thriving biotech firm. His company was his life, and he regularly devoted seventy to eighty hours a week ensuring its success. It was an obsession that had brought his marriage to an end. "A good end for both of us," he claimed. "Marriage demands more time than I'll ever be willing to give it."

In his mid-fifties, with two grown children, Wade was still a handsome and vigorous man. He and Cody had been friends for years, and lovers for much of that time, brought together by need and by convenience. It was all either of them had time for. It was all they would admit to needing.

He studied her face, and gradually, the humor in his hazel eyes changed to concern. "Cody? Are you getting nervous?"

"No." She sighed, tossing the towel onto the back of the sofa. "It's just been a strange day. I found out that the neighborhood I grew up in has been designated a hazardous site. It's scheduled for remediation."

Wade scowled as he uncovered the dinner plates.

"Inauspicious. Will you take it?"

"I don't know. I picked up the download packet, but I haven't looked through it yet." She dropped into one of the chairs. Fear was a fine mesh wound around her heart. "Truth is, I'm not at all sure I want to go back there."

Going back would mean facing again the stuff of vanquished nightmares: summer heat and summer anger and the urine-stink of crank houses, transformed into blazing infernos when their clandestine labs caught fire. And other, more personal things.

"You are getting nervous," Wade accused.

Cody shook out a napkin and grinned, hoping it didn't look too false. "Maybe just a little," she admitted. It had been six years since her horrible first pregnancy. She'd waited all that time, living a medical regimen while the toxin levels in her tissues declined. "I still want my daughter."

"Howling, screaming, smelly brats," Wade warned, sitting down beside her.

"Won't work," Cody assured him.

"Could be a boy."

Nope. Cody wouldn't say so outloud, but she knew it wouldn't be a boy.

She sipped at the Venezuelan water, imagining she could feel the babyjack in her womb. A slight pinching sensation—that's the identity she gave it. She hadn't told Wade it was in there.

Uterine implants were a form of selective birth control developed for couples with inherited genetic disorders. After conception, they screened the embryo's DNA for a suspected defect. If it was found, the implant would release a drug to block the natural production of progesterone and the pregnancy would fail.

Though it appeared nowhere in the company prospectus, the most common "defect" the implants screened for was the sex of the embryo. Cody's babyjack would kick in if it detected a male embryo, causing a spontaneous abortion within several days of conception. That early in her term she might experience a slightly late, slightly heavy menstrual period. Nothing more.

Wade had waived parental rights to any child she might conceive. She had signed documents freeing him of obligation. They had submitted DNA samples to an anonymous testing service, where their chromosomes were sorted across a large series of DNA chips. No major incompatibilities had been found.

"Genetic maps," Cody mused, "health tests, trust funds, legal documents... am I neurotic? My mother conceived me in an alley behind a rave club when she was fifteen. He didn't want to use a condom because it was too constricting. They screwed for a week, then she never saw him again."

"So you both learned from her mistake."

"And we've both been overcompensating ever since."

He sighed, his sun-browned hand closing over hers.

"You're a good person, Cody. You deserve more than this. You should have had the fairy tale."

She smiled. I did.

She'd had the marriage, the handsome husband, the baby on the way, and it had all blown up in her face. On some level, she'd always known it would. She'd already made it out of the brutal slum of Victoria Glen, and surely that was enough to ask of life? The castle on the hill could wait for the next generation.

VII

Muthaye left the house, promising to return as soon as possible. Michael did not like the sound of that. It reminded him too much of the woman from the charity, but what could he do? He had his own schedule to keep. This afternoon he was due at a publicity event on a local farm, the first to bring in a harvest of genetically engineered rice developed by a Japanese company and distributed by Global Shear.

He took another shower, and another tab of Synthetic Sleep. The pill's chemical cocktail was designed to mimic the metabolic effects of a few hours of rest. His body could not be fooled forever, but he should be okay until the evening.

In the living room, Rajban was crouching on the floor, staring out at the garden. Michael hesitated on his way to the front door. Something in her posture touched a memory in him: for a moment he was immersed again in the half-dark of a city night, and the awful silence that had followed her cold declaration: There's nothing left, Michael. I'm leaving. He felt as if his chest was made of glass, and the glass had shattered.

He shook his head. That was all long ago.

The house spoke in its soothing, feminine voice. "Your car is here." Then it repeated the news in Hindi. Rajban turned, her face an open question. Michael wished he could stay and talk to her. Instead, he put on his shades and he left.

j

The company car bounced and lurched along a dirt road in dire need of scraping. The driver was forced to dodge bicyclists and zips, an assortment of rusty old cars converted to ethylene, and hundreds of pedestrians. Fifteen miles an hour was a top speed rarely achieved, and Michael was twenty minutes late by the time he arrived at the demonstration farm. No one noticed.

A huge canvas canopy with walls of transparent plastic had been set up in the farmyard. An air conditioner powered by a portable generator blew an arctic chill into its interior while, outside, misters delivered fine sprays of water over the arriving guests. Michael soon found himself in conversation with an Ikeda tech and a reporter from CNN. "It's an ideal grain," the tech was saying. "Requiring less water and fertilizer than any other rice strain, while

producing a polishable kernel with a high protein content."

"But," the reporter countered, "your opponents claim it's just this engineered hardiness, this ability to out-compete even the weeds, that makes it a threat to the biosystem."

Michael dove into the debate with practiced ease.

"Out-competing the weeds is something of an exaggeration. Ikeda rice is still a domesticated plant, requiring careful farming practices to thrive..."

Most of the afternoon was like that. The event was a press op, and Michael's job was to soothe the usual fear of genetically engineered food plants. Most wealthier countries forbade the importation or sale of engineered crops, fearing ecological disaster, or the discovery of some previously unknown toxic quality in the new food. At least, those were the reasons most often cited. Michael suspected it was really a fear of shouldering any more responsibility. Already the land, the climate, and even the ecology of the oceans had been transformed by human activity. If the formula of life itself was now to be rewritten, what would be left outside the range of human influence? Not much. Every disaster outside of seismic instability would then fall squarely at the feet of technology.

For now it didn't matter that Ikeda rice couldn't be sold across international borders. Small farmers could peddle their excess crops to the villagers. Large farms could ship to the cities. Someday though, international markets would need to open.

j

It was late afternoon when Michael slipped free of the press parade. He took a folding chair and set it up beneath the spreading branches of a banyan tree. He had hardly sat down when a party of young men emerged from the farmhouse. They laughed and teased one another, startling a long-legged bird that had been hunting on the edge of a rice paddy. As the bird took flight, Michael found himself surrounded by six smiling youths, each neatly attired in dress shirts and cotton slacks, sandals on their feet. One of them introduced himself as Kanwal. He offered Michael a banana-mango smoothie obviously rescued from the tent.

"This is my father's farm," he informed Michael proudly. Then he explained that his friends were all from nearby farms.

Michael was halfway through the tall glass when he realized it had been spiked. With vodka? That would neatly counter the Synthetic Sleep.

Kanwal proudly tapped his chest. "I am seventeen this year. I have finished my public schooling. My father wants to buy a truck. He will start a business delivering fruit to the cities." Kanwal rolled his eyes. "He says he is getting too old for farm work. He wants to drive a truck while his sons do the tough work!"

The other boys erupted in laughter. Michael grinned too.

"Your old man must think a lot of you."

"Oh, I don't know," Kanwal said. "I think he just wants to hit the road to look for a new wife."

The boys giggled and moaned. "He's old," someone muttered, "but not too old!"

"He wants us to believe it, anyway," Kanwal said. "But I'm seventeen! He should be looking for a wife for me."

"Isn't that your mother's business?" Michael asked.

Kanwal shrugged. "My mother is dead three years. My youngest brother does all the cooking now."

"No sisters?"

Kanwal made a face. "No. Of course not. My old man wanted to get ahead, not raise a servant for another man's family. We are very modern here. We don't believe in dowry. If I had a sister, my father would have to pay her dowry. Still, it makes it hard to find a wife. My father was married when he was fifteen. Look at us. We are sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old. No one has a wife. Hey." He turned to his friends. "Know who's making the most money these days? The marriage broker!"

The boys guffawed again, but Michael frowned. Kanwal noticed, and responded by rubbing Michael's shoulder in a friendly way. "You have a wife?"

Michael shook his head, declining to explain to Kanwal that though he'd been married at twenty-four, it had not lasted two years. There's nothing left, Michael.

Kanwal might have read his mind. "Divorced?" he asked.

Michael scowled. "You watch too much TV."

Kanwal giggled, along with his friends. "American women like to have many husbands and only one son."

"We could use some American women here," one of the boys chimed in from the back of the group.

Michael felt the vodka inside him, dissolving his diplomacy. "Women are not toys. They're people, with their own dreams, their own ambitions."

"Oh yes," Kanwal agreed with a hearty nod. "They are goddesses." The boys all offered confirmation of this.

Kanwal went on, "This farm would be a happier place if we had a woman in the kitchen again. Hey, but no one wants to be a farmer anymore, not even my old man."

Michael sat up a little straighter. This sentiment had not been reported by his census teams. "Why do you say that? This farm has had a profitable year, despite poor weather."

"Oh, we're doing all right," Kanwal agreed. "But do you think it's easy? Laboring all day in the hot sun, and we don't even have a tractor. The water buffalo are still our tractor. It's shameful! I want to move to Bangalore, learn computers, work in an office."

"Ah, Kanwal," one of his friends interrupted. "Everybody wants to work in an office, but it's the farm for us, you know it."

Kanwal gave his friend a dark look. "Not all of us. Every evening I walk all the way to town, just so I can spend half an hour at the home of a link-wallah, exploring the net. Half an hour! That's all he allows, because he has many clients, but half an hour is not enough time to get any real training - maybe if I could print out lessons, but I can't, because I don't have the paper. But I have a plan.

"I can read well. We all can. I've read every book in the two library booths at South Market. Do you know what we're doing? My friends and I? We're putting our money together to buy our own terminal. I have a friend in town who can get an uplink." Kanwal nodded, his dark eyes happy at his inner vision. "There is formal schooling online, from all over the world, and some of it at no cost. You hear how well I speak English? I learn fast. Hey." He looked at his friends again. "Maybe we're better off with no wives yet. No children to care for, right? Make our careers first. It's what the Bangalore families tell their young men." He turned back to Michael. "You have children, mister?"

"No," Michael said, feeling a sudden tightness in his gut.

There's nothing left, Michael. I'm leaving.

Kanwal's brows rose in surprise. "No children? Not even from the wife who divorced you?"

"No," Michael repeated firmly, his cheeks heating with more than the torrid afternoon. She had not wanted to try again. I'm leaving.

From the back of the crowd the anonymous heckler spoke. "Hey, Kanwal, waiting a few years for a wife doesn't sound too bad, but I don't think I want to wait that long."

The boys again erupted in laughter, while Michael's cheeks grew even hotter. He was only thirty-two, but to be thirty-two and without children... did that make him a failure in their eyes? It was a stunning thought, and one he didn't want to examine too closely.

Quickly he drained his vodka smoothie while Kanwal went right on massaging his shoulder, his dark eyes shining with confidence, and ambition. "That's right, mister. You watch us. In two years, we will all be middle class like you."

VIII

Two in the morning, and sleep wouldn't come. Cody listened to Wade's soft snoring. She could just make out his silhouette in the faint amber glow spilling from the bathroom nightlight. Maybe new life had begun in her womb tonight, maybe not. It would be a few days before she would know.

She got out of bed, feeling a lingering stickiness between her legs. She groped for a nightshirt and pulled it on, then padded into the living room, where the curtains stood open on a sweeping view of Denver's city lights.

She always took on the toughest jobs.

So why was she so damned scared of the project at Victoria Glen? She'd looked over the specs after dinner. They'd been nasty, but Cody had dealt with worse. Kick. Kick! No sweat.

Except she was sweating. Her palms were slick, and the soles of her feet.

So? She'd been scared before. The only thing to do was face it down.

She took a long swallow from the bottle of Venezuelan water, then she got her VR helmet from a closet. Sitting on the sofa, she pulled the helmet on, encasing herself in a safe black vault. Nice, simple environment. She almost felt she could go to sleep.

Almost.

She instructed the wireless system to link with her server, where she'd stored the download of the Victoria Glen site, prepared by a redevelopment company called New Land.

She gazed at a menu, then, "Document three-seven-zero," she whispered. "Go."

The menu faded as a world emerged, creeping in like sunrise over a tired city. New Land had recorded a full sensory walk-through. Cody's helmet translated the digital record, synthesizing sight, sound, temperature, and encoded odors. Her lungs filled with sun-warmed air, brewed over old wood and oil-stained asphalt.

She found herself afloat, a few feet above an empty street. It ran straight, like a canalized river cutting through a landscape of vacant lots and boarded-up houses. A few sparrows popped up and down in brush that sprouted around a chain-link fence. Warning signs glared from the abandoned buildings:

KEEP OUT
HAZARDOUS MATERIALS SITE
DANGER - NO TRESPASSING

It took her a minute to realize this was Victoria Street, and that first house, with its sagging porch cuddled under a steeply sloping roof, that was Randi's house. It had been the upper limit of Cody's permitted territory, and a safe place to run if ever she needed shelter. The house next to it had been a rental, with a fleet of showy cars perpetually drifting in and out of the front yard. Only a rusted hulk was left now, crumbling in the shade of a large tree leaning over a gap-toothed fence from the yard next door.

Looking at the tree, Cody felt hollow inside. Jacaranda, she realized. As a kid she'd never known its name, just enjoyed gathering the purple blossoms that showered from it in the spring. She and Tanya would have pretend weddings and toss the fallen flowers in the air. Where had they learned that? Cody couldn't guess. Neither one of them had ever seen a wedding.

The tree looked so much bigger than she remembered.

Pushing the trackball forward, she went gliding down the street, a ghost returned to haunt the old neighborhood.

She drifted past the fence. She hardly dared to look, but there it was: a tiny block of a house, built close to the ground like a bunker. The roof had gaps in it. Head wounds. The windows were boarded up. It didn't matter. It was all there. All of it, still lurking inside her mind. She closed her eyes, and reality thickened, like flesh on the bones of the past. Little Tanya from down the block was knocking on the door, jump rope in hand. It was a hot summer evening. Cody got her own rope, and they practiced together on the sidewalk, singing seashells, taco bells, easy, ivy, over. No way they were supposed to be outside that late, but mama was still at school and Tanya's big sister was sleeping.

They sang very softly, seashells, taco bells, so Passion wouldn't come charging at them out of his girlfriend's house across the street, screaming dumb-bitches-shut-up. His motorcycle was there, but his fuck-this-fuck-that music wasn't pounding the neighborhood, so she guessed he was asleep.

They were practicing cross-arms when a tanker truck came rumbling into sight from the direction of Randi's house. They stopped jumping to watch it go by. It was a big truck. The tank had been painted gray. It didn't have the name of any gas station on it.

"Look," Tanya said. She pointed at the truck's undercarriage and giggled. "It's peeing."

A stream of liquid ran from beneath the truck, splashing black against the street. Tanya waved at the anonymous bulk of the driver. Across the street, Passion was screaming What the fuck is that noise?

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Cody snatched the helmet off. Her heart felt like it had melted into her arteries, a pounding starfish in her chest. Oh no, oh no. She stared at the looming shapes of furniture in the dimly-lit room. She hadn't remembered the truck in years and years. Maybe it had felt too dangerous to remember. Oh God, oh Jesus. Her palms were sweating.

Just a few seconds after the truck had passed her eyes had started burning. She ran into the house and threw up. Passion was screaming outside, shooting his gun. Cody lay on the broken tiles of the bathroom floor and cried, she felt so sick, until mama came home and moved her into bed. She didn't say anything about the truck and its stinky pee, because she should never have been out on the sidewalk.

Carefully, Cody lay the helmet on the cushion beside her. Wade was snoring softly in the bedroom. The antique clock on the mantle was ticking, ticking.

What had gone into the street that night? And on other nights, what had spilled from the kitchen drug labs? From the ubiquitous activity of auto repair? From the city's fights against rats and roaches? What had trickled through the soil, into the ground water, returning through the faucet of the kitchen sink?

Splash of clear water into a plastic cup held in a little girl's hands; the dry tang of chlorine in her throat.

There had been toxins in her body that killed her daughter. Cody had always assumed it was her fault, that she'd been incautious on a job, that somehow she had poisoned herself; but what if it wasn't so?

Her lips pressed together in a hard line. Any hazardous substance report generated by the cleanup of Victoria Glen would be kept confidential by the redevelopment company. She'd be able to gain access only if she could offer compelling evidence of on-site injury, and that was doubtful. She'd only lived there until she was ten, until Mama got her the scholarship to Prescott Academy. Cody had left for boarding school and never had come back.

So there was only one way to learn what ten years on Victoria Street had done to her. She would have to take on the job herself.

IX

Rajban was up early. Michael found her in the kitchen when he woke, peeking into cabinets with all the stealth and caution of a kid looking for treasure but expecting to find a tiger. "Good morning," Michael said. She jumped, and the cabinet door banged shut. Her hands were already soiled with the gray dirt of the courtyard. Michael sighed. She certainly had an affinity for gardening.

Ignoring her fright, he beckoned to her to come to the sink, where he showed her how to slide her hands under the soap dispenser. The sensor popped a spray of soap onto her palm. She lathered it, carefully imitating Michael's every gesture. Water came from the tap in a tepid spray, like a stolen column of soft rain. Michael dried his hands, Rajban dried hers, then together they made a breakfast of papayas, bread, and yogurt.

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After they ate, Rajban disappeared into the garden while Michael readied himself for work. Last of all, he picked up his shades. The Terrace glyph waited for him, surrounded by a pink query circle. He linked through. "Anybody there?"

No one answered. He left the link open, confident someone would check back before long. Next he put a call through to Muthaye, but she didn't pick up either. A moment later, the house announced a visitor at the door.

"Ooh, company," Ryan said, as the line to the Terrace went green.

Etsuko sounded puzzled. "Who is that?"

"No ID," Ryan muttered. "Pupils dilated, skin temperature slightly elevated. He's nervous."

"Or angry," Etsuko said. "Be careful, Michael."

"Hey," Michael said as the house repeated its announcement, this time in Hindi. "Good morning and all that. Back again, huh?"

"Been waiting all morning for your shades to activate," Ryan agreed. "You have to understand - your life is so

much more interesting than ours. Now hurry up. Go find out what he wants before my next appointment."

Michael summoned an image of the visitor into his shades.

"So I guess it's not Muthaye at the door?"

"No, mate. No such luck. A local gentleman, I should think. Looks a little stiff, if you ask me."

Etsuko snorted. "By your standards, Ryan, anyone could look stiff."

Rajban slipped in through the French doors. Michael sighed to see that her hands were dirty again. Some of the dirt had gotten on her face. Still, she looked at Michael with eyes that were brighter, fuller than they had been only yesterday. Then she looked at the door... hoping it was Muthaye too? Come back to visit her as promised.

"Say," Ryan said. "Maybe she knows the guy."

"Right." After all, someone had to be looking for Rajban, regardless of what Muthaye said. A brother, perhaps? Someone who cared. Michael slipped the shades off and handed them to Rajban, motioning that she should put them on. Tentatively, she obeyed. For several seconds she stared at the scene, while her mouth twisted in a small hard knot. Then she yanked the shades off, shoved them into Michael's hands, and ran for the courtyard.

Ryan said, "Women react that way to me too, from time to time."

No one laughed.

Michael stared after Rajban, dread gnawing like a rat at his chest. Despite Muthaye's words, he had envisioned only a happy reunion for her. What would his role become, if her family demanded her back, and she refused to go?

Stop guessing.

He slipped the shades back on and went to the front door.

"Hark. Open it."

The stranger in the alcove was tall and lean, like a slice taken off a fuller man, then smoked until it hardened. His black hair was neatly cut and combed. His dark eyes were stern. They remained fixed on Michael through a slow, formal bow. "Namaste."

"Namaste," Michael murmured, feeling the hair on the back of his neck rise. There was something about this man that set him on edge. The intense stare, perhaps. The unsmiling face. The stiffness of his carriage. Smoked and hardened.

"I am Mr. Gharia," the stranger said, in lilting but well-pronounced English. "And you, I have been told, are Mr. Fielding. I have come to inquire about the woman."

Michael felt stubbornness descend into his spine, a quiet, steely resistance learned from the heroes of a hundred old cowboy movies. "Have you?"

Vaguely, he was aware of Etsuko muttering, "Gharia?"

Which Gharia? There are dozens in the census, approximate height and age..."

Mr. Gharia apparently had a stubbornness of his own. He raised his chin, and though his head came barely to Michael's shoulder, he seemed tall. "It is improper for this woman to be residing within your house."

Michael had never taken well to instructions on propriety. Remembering the look of fear and distaste on Rajban's face as she fled to the courtyard, he ventured a guess, and dressed it up as certainty, "This is not your woman."

Mr. Gharia looked taken aback at this discourteous response; perhaps a little confused, but by his reply Michael knew that his guess had been correct. "I am a friend of the family, sir."

When Michael didn't respond to this, Gharia's tone rose. "Sir, a widow deserves respect. This woman must be returned immediately to her family."

A widow. So her husband was dead. Muthaye had said he'd left home a full year ago. Michael had assumed he'd gone for treatment, yet now he was dead. Did Rajban know? Had anyone bothered to tell her? Thinking about it, Michael felt an anger as cool, as austere, as shadows under desert rock. "This woman has no family."

"Sir, you are mistaken."

"The family that she had cast her out like useless rubbish."

"I have come to inquire about her, to be sure she is the woman being sought."

"She is not that woman," Michael said. "She is a different woman altogether."

"Sir-"

"You would not have me put her on display, would you? Now sir, good day." He stepped back, allowing the door to close.

Gharia saw what he was about. "It doesn't matter who she is!" he said quickly. "Any Hindu woman must be shamed to be kept as a whore. It is intolerable! It-" The door sealed, cutting off Gharia's tirade with the abruptness of a toggled switch.

"Christ," Michael muttered.

"Nice show," Ryan agreed, but his voice was somber. "Michael, this isn't a game you want to play. Etsuko's IDed this Gharia fellow. He's a religious activist-"

Michael's palm sliced through the air. "I don't care who he is! The Indian constitution promises equal rights for women."

"It's a piece of paper, Michael." Etsuko's voice was softly sad. "In a far-off city. Women like Rajban are subject to an older law."

"Not anymore. Muthaye said she would come up with a shelter for Rajban by today. If the bastards can't find her, they can't hurt her."

But if they did find her? Rajban was already a woman ruined, simply by being inside Michael's house.

He jumped as the lights flashed, and a soft alarm bonged through the residence. Locks clicked. The

air-conditioning system huffed into silence. "Perimeter intrusion," the house informed him. "Michael Fielding, you will remain secured inside this residence pending arrival of Global Shear security. Arrival estimated at three minutes fifty seconds." It was the same feminine voice the house always used, yet it didn't sound like the house anymore.

"Where is Rajban?" Michael shouted.

"Identify the person in question?"

This was definitely not his house. "Rajban. A girl. She's been... she's stayed here for a day or so-"

Ryan's voice cut in: "The courtyard, Michael."

Michael dashed for the courtyard doors. His hand hit the latch, but it would not move. He tried to force it, but the door held.

Through the glass, he saw Rajban crouched on the path beside a freshly worked bed of earth, the little hoe in one hand. She gazed up at the courtyard wall. Michael looked, to see Gharia leaning over the top. It was eight feet of smooth concrete, but somehow he had climbed it, and from the Shastri courtyard, too. Now he leaned on his chest, the breast of his shirt smudged with dirt, his dark brows pulled together in an angry scowl. Michael had only a glimpse of him, before he dropped away out of sight.

Again Michael tried the latch, slamming it with all his weight while the house instructed him to "Stay away from all doors and windows. Retreat at once to the interior-"

"Who the hell am I talking to?" Michael interrupted.

"Easy," Ryan muttered. "Cool under fire, boy. You know the chant."

The house answered at the same time: "This is Security Chief Sankar. Mr. Fielding, please step away from the door. You must remove yourself from this exposed position immediately-"

Rajban had seen him. She was running toward him now. She threw herself on the door latch, while Michael tried again to force it from the inside. It would not budge. Rajban stared at him through the glass, her dark eyes wide, confusion and terror swimming in her unshed tears.

"Sankar!" Michael shouted. "Unlock this door. Let her inside now-"

"Mr. Fielding, please remain calm. The door will not open until the situation is secure. Be assured, we will be on-site momentarily."

Michael bit his lip, swearing silently to himself. "Is Gharia still out there, then? He's after this girl, you know. Not me."

"Negative, sir. Raman Gharia has fled the scene. He is presently being tracked by a vigil craft-"

The drone aircraft that watched the house. Of course. The security AI must have seen Gharia climbing the Shastri wall....

"Well, if Gharia's gone, then you can open the door. Sankar?"

A helicopter swept in, no more than fifty feet above the wall. Rajban looked up at it, and screamed. Michael could not hear her through the sound-proofed glass, but he could see the terror on her face. She pressed herself against the door, covering her head with the new sari Muthaye had given her while her clothing licked and shuddered in the rotor wash. First one man, then a second, descended from the helicopter, sliding down a cable to land in the courtyard garden.

"This probably qualifies as overkill," Ryan muttered.

"Sankar!" Michael shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

No answer.

The helicopter pulled away. The two men on the ground were anonymous in their helmets and shimmering gray coveralls. The first one pulled a weapon from a thigh holster and trained it on Rajban. The second sprinted toward the wall where Gharia had appeared. Crashing through the half-dead plants, he launched himself at the concrete face, and to Michael's amazement, he actually reached the top, pulling himself up to gaze over the side, in a weird echo of Gharia's own posture. He stayed there only long enough to drop something over the wall - oh, Mrs. Shastri was going to love this - then he slipped back down into the garden, landing in a crouch. A weapon had appeared in his hands, too.

"Net gun," Ryan said. "Launches a sticky entangler. Nonlethal, unless it scares you to death. Michael, I had no idea you were this well protected."

"They're bored," Michael growled.

"Do say."

"Explosives negative," Sankar informed him, through the voice of the house.

Now both net guns were trained on Rajban.

"Leave her alone," Michael warned. "Sankar, I swear-"

"Situation clear," Sankar announced.

The man by the wall stood up, sliding his weapon back into its holster. The other did the same. He slipped his visor up, revealing a delighted grin. Michael recognized Sankar's handsome face. "Quite an adventure, eh, Mr. Fielding?"

The door lock clicked. Michael slammed the latch down, yanking the door open, so that Rajban half fell into the living room. He started to reach for her, to help her up, but she scuttled away with a little moan of terror. He turned to Sankar, ready to vent his fury, but he found the security chief praising his man for a job well done.

"Absolutely by the book!" Sankar was saying in a suitably masculine voice, quite a jolt after the feminine voice of the house. With his gaze, Sankar took in Michael, too. "Mr. Fielding. This has turned out to be a minor incident, but we had no way of knowing that when the perimeter alarm sounded. It is essential that you remain inside in such situations, away from doors and windows. If explosives had come over the wall-"

"Then Rajban would have been killed," Michael said softly. "All I asked was that you unlock the door to let her in."

Rajban had gone to hide behind the sofa. Michael could hear her softly weeping. Sankar frowned at the noise, as if it did not fit into any scenario he had ever practiced. "This woman, she is not the housekeeper registered in our security files. Have you changed employees?"

"No. She's not an employee. She's a guest."

"A guest? All guests should be registered, Mr. Fielding. Without a profile, we have no way of discriminating friend from enemy." He said this matter-of-factly, without a hint of judgment. Well, Sankar was a modern man, educated in California, Michael recalled. What the boss did was the boss's business, no doubt.

Michael sighed, letting the edge of his anger slip away. "You're right," he conceded. Global Shear security protocol was strict and effective. "So take her profile now. She's a waif, just a little girl, without home or family. And that's all she is, Mr. Sankar. I want you to put that in your profile too."

X

Rajban plunged her hoe into the hard earth of the garden bed, prying up chunks of clay. Grief sat in her stomach like heavy black mud, but it was not grief for her husband. It was for herself. Now she was widowed. She had no home. She would have no sons. Brother-in-Law had sent her away.

So why had Gharia come after her?

She hacked at the earth, and thought about it. Gharia had been a frequent guest at Brother-in-Law's table, where they discussed the foreign issue, and the influence of nonbelievers. At times they would grow very angry, but when the talk lapsed, Gharia's eyes often found their rest on Rajban's backside as she worked in the kitchen with Mother-in-Law.

Mother-in-Law would notice the direction of Gharia's gaze, and her words to Rajban would be angry.

Rajban remembered these things as she crumbled each chunk of clay in her hands. She picked up the hoe again and dug deeper. The soil here was bad. There were no worms in it. No tiny bugs. It looked as sterile as the soil in Brother-in-Law's courtyard. Even the weeds were yellow.

No matter.

She would use the magic soil. With love and prayers, its influence could be worked into the ground.

A winged shadow drifted slowly over Rajban's hands. She paused in her work, squinting against the noon sun. There! She spied it again: A tiny plane the color of the sky. It was very hard to see, yet if she looked long enough, she could always find it floating above the house.

The door latch clicked. "Rajban?"

Rajban smiled shyly when she saw the kind woman, Muthaye, looking out between the glass doors. "Namaste," she murmured softly. "You came back."

"Namaste," Muthaye echoed. "Will you come inside? The sun is high, and it is very hot."

Rajban obeyed. She stood on stiff legs, taking a moment to brush the soil from her sari. Inside, she was startled to discover other women. They were four, sitting in a half-circle on the carpet. They were not fine women, like Muthaye. Their saris were worn and their faces lined. All of them were older than Rajban. She felt sure they were all mothers, and she felt ashamed.

Twice in her first year of marriage she had thought herself pregnant, but her hopes were shattered by a late, painful, and heavy flow of blood - as if a baby had been started and then had died.

Rajban remembered the midwife who had come to visit on the day she arrived in her husband's household. This midwife had not looked like the village health aides Rajban had seen at her father's farm. This one was young and finely dressed, and she wore an eye veil, like Michael. "She will make your womb healthy," Mother-in-Law declared. "So healthy you will bear only sons." Rajban had bit her lips to keep from wailing in pain as cold, gloved hands groped inside her. She had not felt healthy afterwards. Her abdomen and her crotch had ached for days-and she had never conceived a baby. Or maybe... she had conceived only girls?

Muthaye had joined the circle of women. Now she smiled at Rajban. "Please won't you sit?" She patted a spot at her side that would close the circle. Rajban did as she was asked, though she would have been happier to disappear into the kitchen. She sat with her hands folded neatly in her lap while Muthaye told a story that did not sound like it could be true.

"My mother was an illiterate country woman," Muthaye began. Her gaze sought Rajban. "That means she was like you. She could not read or write or speak any language but the one she was born to. At fourteen she was married to a young man only a little more educated than she, the third son of a cruel and selfish family. It was a great struggle for my grandfather to gather the large dowry demanded by her husband's family. Still, he paid it, though he was forced to mortgage his land. Several months later there came a terrible storm. The land was flooded, the household of my mother's husband was destroyed, and along with many others in the village, he died of disease. When afterwards my mother gave birth to a daughter, she was driven out of the family. She returned to her father's house, but he refused to receive her, so she went without food and shelter, and her baby girl died.

"My mother became angry. She remembered that in the year of her marriage, she had met an agent from the women's cooperative. She went to that agent now, and was given a job sewing embroidered scarves. She earned enough to feed herself, but she wanted more. With the help of the women's cooperative, she taught herself to read.

She received a small loan - only two hundred dollars - but it was enough to buy books and start her own lending library. When the loan was paid back she took out another, and eventually she started a school just for girls. In time she married again."

There was a murmur of surprise from the circle.

"-the son of a longtime member of the women's cooperative. No dowry was paid."

Again, a whisper of astonishment arose from the gathered women.

"-for dowry is evil and illegal. She still runs her school, and through it she has earned more money for her family than she might have ever brought as dowry. She is middle-class, Rajban. Yet when she was fifteen, she was just like you."

Rajban stared down at the lines of dirt that lay across her palms, knowing it wasn't true. "She had a baby."

Muthaye's tone became more strict: "It is not unexpected that a husband dying of AIDS gave you his disease instead of a child. That does not mean you will never have a child - or another husband."

"My brother-in-law will not allow it."

"You do not belong to him anymore."

Rajban considered this. She turned it over and over in her mind, wondering if it was true. At the same time, she listened to the other women talk about themselves. These women were all learning to read. Three of them had businesses. One made sandals. Another drove a zip. The last cleaned houses. The fourth member of their group was building a fruit stand. All of them had started their businesses with small loans from Muthaye.

"Not from me," Muthaye corrected. "These are loans from the Southern Banking Association."

The loans were for a few hundred dollars at a time, enough to buy the tools and supplies that would let them work. Together, the women ensured that each one of them made their weekly payments. If any failed to do so, all would lose their credit. This was the "microcredit program" administered by Muthaye. Three of the women in this lending circle had been involved for several years, one for only a few months.

"A lending circle should have five women," Muthaye explained. "The fifth lady of this group has moved away to join her son in Bangalore, so there is a place for you here. I have told you the story of my mother. This can be your story too."

Rajban bowed her head. Her heart fluttered, like a bird, seeking to escape its cage for the peaceful serenity of the sun-seared sky. She stared at her hands and whispered, "I don't know how."

One of the older women patted her mud-stained hand. She asked if Rajban could sew or cook. If she could keep a house clean or carry a heavy weight. Rajban didn't know how to answer. Her mother had raised her to do the things women do. All these things she had done, but surely no one would pay her to do them?

"Is there anything you are so good at?" Muthaye asked. "Is there a kind of work that blossoms like a flower in your hands?"

Rajban caught her breath. She glanced out at the garden. "I have a bag of magic soil that makes a garden strong and happy."

This brought a shower of laughter from the women. But why? Hadn't Rajban believed all their tales? And yet they laughed. Their kindly faces had all become the face of her Mother-in-law, laughing, laughing, and endlessly scolding her, Stupid girl!

She felt a touch on her hand, and the vision vanished, but even Muthaye's warm eyes could not chase away the pain.

"Magic is the comfort of old-fashioned women," Muthaye told her. "A modern woman has no need of it. Think on what we've talked about. Think of a business you might like to do. Think hard, for you must be settled before the AIDS treatment can begin."

XI

Word of the morning's misadventures got around quickly. It was still early when Michael stepped from a zip into the shade of the portico at Global Shear's district headquarters. The five-story office cube was newly built, situated halfway up a shallow, rocky rise dividing two of the original villages. A temple occupied the high ground, while a pig farmer kept his animals in a dusty pen on one side of the landscaped grounds. Laborers' shacks made up the rest of the neighborhood.

A nervous community relations officer greeted Michael even before he entered the building. "Shall we issue a public statement, Mr. Fielding?"

"Not unless someone asks."

"There have been several inquiries about the helicopter."

"Then state the truth. Intruder alarms went off and security responded. Play it down, though, and add that we're reviewing our procedures to see if our response might be tempered in the future."

"Yes sir."

Glass doors slipped open, and Michael stepped into the air-conditioned paradise of the public lobby. The receptionist looked up, and smiled. "An exciting morning, Mr. Fielding! That helicopter raid must have shaken the dust off anyone still doubting our diligence."

"So I hear."

He met more compliments on the elevator ride to the fifth floor, but the tenor changed when he entered his corner

office, where Karen Hampton waited for him, her image resident in an active wall screen. "A most interesting report appeared in my queue this morning. Talk to me, Michael. What the hell is going on?"

Michael sat down in the chair behind his desk, swiveling to face her. Nothing to do but tell the truth. He explained the situation, but she did not look relieved.

"Michael. I can't believe you've involved yourself with this girl. Do I have to remind you that trust is the most important asset we are building in Four Villages? I don't give a damn how innocent your actions are, stop for a minute and ask yourself how this must look to those people whom you are there to serve-not to exploit. If you can't find her a shelter, then buy her one. For the sake of your reputation and the company's good name, rent this young woman her own house and then stay far away from her."

"What if Gharia comes after her?"

"This isn't our business-"

"Karen, it might be. I've checked the census figures, and there's a growing imbalance in the sex ratio here. There are far fewer young women than men. Rajban may be a widow, and she may be ill, but Gharia's not exactly a kid. She could still be the best prospect he has."

"If that's so, why did her family get rid of her instead of marrying her off?"

"I don't know. Maybe they didn't want to pay a dowry. Maybe they don't give a damn. Maybe they're strict Hindus and don't believe in remarriage for women."

"Listen to yourself! There are cultural complexities here that you haven't begun to grasp. This is not why you're in Four Villages."

"We're here to build a stable, diverse, and functional economy, and that can't exist where there is slavery. I won't send Rajban back into slavery."

"I'm not asking you to do that. Just get her out of your house. I want you in this job, Michael. I really do. Show me my confidence is not misplaced."

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Michael called in the personnel officer, and she promised to hunt around for an available residence, though she wasn't hopeful. "There are very few rentals in town, and most landlords will deal only with a certain class of clientele. I might be able to obtain a room, or perhaps a shanty, but that would almost certainly bring about the eviction of a current resident."

"We don't want that. Do what you can."

The day failed to improve. Near noon, Michael looked up from his desk to see Pallava Sen, his second in command, coming through the open doorway, a half-page of neon yellow paper in his hand. "Michael, we have a problem."

Leaning back in his chair, Michael slipped off his shades, laying them carefully on the desk. "How bad a problem?"

Pallava rolled his eyes, as if casting a quick prayer up to the gods. With his portly figure and balding head, he looked like a youthful version of the little buddhas sold in Japanese tourist markets. "Not so bad at the moment, but with significant potential to get much worse."

"Wonderful."

Pallava handed him the yellow paper. "These have appeared all over the town. They are being read aloud, too, so the illiterate will be informed."

Michael scowled at the notice. It was written in Hindi.

Pallava settled into the guest chair, a grim smile on his face. "It is written as a news report, by the Traditional Council of Elders. You've heard of them?"

"No."

"Neither has anyone else. They do not say whose elders they are, but they do tell us some interesting things. Here-" he leaned forward, pointing at the headline - "they say that Global Shear has poisoned the people of this district."

Michael had been so fully set to hear how he had kidnapped and raped a good Hindu woman, that it took him a moment to shift modes. "...Poisoned?"

"The argument follows. It says that independent testing of well water throughout the district has revealed severe pesticide contamination. The wells have been regularly tested, and for many years they have produced only clean, unpolluted water. Now they are suddenly contaminated? The only plausible explanation is that the groundwater was deliberately poisoned."

"That's ridiculous."

"Oh, there's more." He leaned back, lacing his fingers together in a nervous, unsettled bridge. "The notice does not name specific chemicals, but it claims those present will suppress the birth rate of the district's women, and in many cases will cause monstrous birth defects leading to early miscarriage. This may be one reason so few girls have been born this past year. Girls are weaker than boys. They die more easily."

He said this last in a deadpan voice that made Michael's eyes narrow. "The notice says that?" he asked cautiously. "Or is that your interpretation?"

Pallava's face hardened. In the same low, flat voice, he answered, "I would not say that. I have a wife who, I am proud to say, is stronger and smarter than I am. I have two brilliant daughters, a sister, a mother, a grandmother. We are not all that way, Michael."

Michael felt his cheeks heat. "I know. I'm sorry."

Pallava shrugged. "You understand the implication? That Global Shear is using cheap birth control?"

Michael nodded.

"The article is also circulating as an Internet message."

"Christ."

"And Shiva. It has not, mercifully, appeared yet on cable TV."

"We need to dispatch crews to field-sample some wells."

"I have already sent them."

"Good. Get me the results as soon as possible." He drummed his desk. "Better test some crop samples too. The harvest is just coming in on the demonstration farm. Check that, especially. Dammit! We have to counter these accusations today - and on cable TV, too."

j

It was an hour later when Pallava Sen walked back into Michael's office, collapsing once more into the visitor's chair. Global Shear had used paper, Internet, cable TV, messengers, and paid gossip-mongers to vehemently deny the allegations of the Traditional Elders, and to announce their intention to immediately investigate the condition of the well water.

Pallava didn't speak right away. He frowned, his brow wrinkling in lines that made him look old.

"How bad is it now?" Michael asked.

Pallava's sigh was long and heartfelt. "Mega-bad. Giga-bad. It seems the slander was at least partly right. We've fast-tested a sample of wells from across the district and everyone of them shows extensive pesticide contamination." He shook his head. "This is not something that could have happened overnight, not even if it was deliberately done, which I don't believe. We are looking at the results of years - probably decades - of seepage into the water table. It's quite obvious the water quality reports we've been using have been falsified. Deliberately falsified."

Michael breathed slowly, trying to calm the fierce pounding of his heart. Don't panic, but don't hide from the truth either. The first thing to do is get a handle on the problem. "Let's be specific here. We're talking drinking water?"

"Drinking, agricultural." Pallava spread his hands helplessly. "It's all the same thing, and judging from the spot samples, we have to assume there is pesticide contamination in every well in the district." His hands laced together as he stared at a spot beyond Michael's shoulder. "The Ikeda rice crop is contaminated too. The sample we tested came out so bad the stuff can't be legally used even for animal feed."

"Christ."

"And Shiva too."

No pesticides had been used on the Ikeda rice. That was, after all, a major benefit of genetically engineered crops - natural insect and disease resistance could be spliced in - but Ikeda rice had not been designed to flush itself free of chemical contamination.

No more assumptions, Michael swore. "Tell me now if Global Shear had anything to do with developing the phony reports."

Pallava straightened, his eyes wide with surprise. He had been in on the operation here from the opening day. "No! No, of course not. Global Shear had nothing to do with preparing the reports. Water quality monitoring has been a government function. Our mistake was relying on the test results we received."

"Why would anybody want to fake these reports?"

Pallava shrugged. "There are many possible reasons. The wells were a government project. To find fault with them would not be patriotic. To find them dirty must mean the money spent to build them was wasted, or that those who built them didn't do sufficient background work, or that more money would be needed to clean the water, and where is that supposed to come from? And will those who built the wells be punished? Those who built the wells also report on their functions, so you see, it's not so hard to understand how it could happen. It's not the first time."

"And still, it's our mistake for trusting the data without testing it."

"Yes. Ultimately, it will come back to that."

j

"Michael?"

It was Jaya's voice, issuing from the shades he'd left lying on the desk. She spoke softly, as if he were a sleeping child and she reluctant to wake him. Her priority link let her open a line at any time.

Michael grabbed the shades and slipped them on. "Jaya! How are you? How's the baby?" He transferred the link to his portal screen, and Jaya's image replaced the document he'd been working on. She was as lovely as any magazine model and, not for the first time, Michael thought of Sheo with a twinge of envy.

"We're all fine," Jaya assured him. Then she hesitated.

"Michael, I've been talking to Ryan."

He grunted, sinking back into his chair. "You've heard about Rajban, then."

"Yes. I think it's sweet, what you're trying to do for her." Jaya touched her ruby-red lips. What a perfect alliance she had made with the colorful, symbiotic bacteria living in her cells - yet most people, upon hearing the source of the color, would respond in revulsion: Yuck. I would never do that.

It took practice to keep the mind open to new possibilities.

"Sheo told me about the reaction of the nurses to Ela's birth," Jaya said. "I didn't notice, really. They were very

kind to me. The older woman, though, was concerned that I have a son next time. She told me she had been trained in these things."

Michael scowled. "What things?"

"That's what I asked. It seems there is a uterine implant on the market, which can be used to selectively abort female embryos. It isn't legal, but the nurse was quite casual about it. She offered to set me up with one before I left the hospital, for a small fee of course. Sheo thought you might like to know this."

Michael grimaced. "Sheo was right."

A uterine implant was better than infanticide - Michael even found himself admiring the ingenuity of such a device - but what of the imbalance it would generate? He remembered Gharia, and the look of wrath on his face. "How long do you suppose this has been going on?"

Jaya shrugged. "In one form or another, for hundreds of years."

"Though it's gotten easier now."

"Yes."

But who would bear the cost?

Tensions in Four Villages were not readily visible, yet Michael had sensed them anyway, in the whispering of the nurses on the maternity ward, in the heat of Rajban's fever, in Kanwal's cheerful lament over dowry and women and net access. The people here were experiencing a strange, sideways tearing of their culture, like raw cotton being combed apart, the pieces on their way to a new order, while still clinging helplessly to the old.

"This fellow Gharia is supposed to be a religious activist," Michael said. "I'm starting to wonder if it's only coincidence that this attack on Global Shear followed so closely on his visit this morning."

"Rajban is just one little girl," Jaya reminded him.

True, but a fuse was small compared to the explosives it ignited.

Jaya might have read his mind. "Michael, please be careful. These things have a way of getting out of hand."

XII

After a day spent researching a bid on the Victoria Glen project, Cody found she could not sleep. So at 3 A.M. she pulled on her VR helmet and joined her mother on a stroll in the Paris sunshine. That is, Annette strolled, through tourist crowds along a riverwalk, beneath a grove of ancient trees. Cody felt as if she were floating, a balloon gliding at her mother's side.

"Of all the uses of VR, I like this best," Cody said. "Being able to step out of the awful three A.M. hour, when everything's so dark and cold and hopeless-step right out into gorgeous sunshine. It's like slipping free of your fate, flipping a finger at the cosmos. Ha!"

Annette laughed. Cody was looking out of her shades, and so she couldn't see her mother's face, but she could feel her presence. It was a strange, tickling feeling, as if she might see her after all if she turned just a little bit more....

Cody had not lived with her mother since leaving Victoria Glen for boarding school, and still Annette had been an indefatigable presence in her life, through phone calls and e-mail and brief visits several times a year as they both worked toward their degrees. It had been so hard. Cody felt scared even now when she remembered the loneliness, the resentment she had felt for so many years living on the charity of a corporate scholarship, in a private school where almost everyone else had money and a home and a real family. But even at her worst moments, Cody had never doubted Annette's love.

Now Annette was forty-nine, a data analyst on vacation in Paris with her husband of many years. She had helped him raise his son and one of their own. "Doing it right this time," she'd joked with Cody. It had only hurt a little.

"So, girl. You've been up to something, haven't you? Hurry up and tell me before Jim gets back."

"Up to something?" Cody echoed, disquiet stirring near her heart.

"Something's put you in a mood," Annette said. Up ahead, Jim was waiting by a flower stand. Annette waved to him. "Are you working yourself up for a fight?"

"Oh." Cody had promised herself she would not mention Victoria Glen. Her mother didn't like to think about those days. She didn't even like to acknowledge that time had ever been real. And still, Cody found herself confessing. "I went back to Victoria Glen-"

"Cody!"

"In VR," she added, hoping to appease her mother's scathing tone. "I'm bidding on a job there. I spent all day developing the proposal. I guess I'm wound a little tight."

"Why there, Cody?" Annette sighed. "I know you're doing well. You're not desperate for the job. Are you?"

"No."

"Then why go back there?"

"I don't know. Or... maybe I do know. I-"

Annette stepped into a bookstore, leaving Jim waiting beside the flowers. Cody watched her hands touch the spines of a row of English-language guidebooks. They were strong, long-fingered hands, golden as teak, each nail painted in milk-chocolate-brown. "Cody, do you know the greatest difference between you and me?"

Cody laughed. It was the only reaction she could think of.

"Oh, you're smarter than I am."

"No. I'm more ruthless. I have never let the past own me. If I don't like it, I cut it out. I throw it away. It's not an easy

thing to do, but it's needful. I don't think about Victoria Glen, and I don't muse over the boy who was your father, and I don't apologize to anybody for letting Prescott Academy take you away. Holding on to all that would have made my soul so heavy I couldn't get up in the morning. I have to live lightly. I have to do all that I can with what I have in my hands right now." She looked up at the bookstore door. Jim had just come in.

Annette's voice grew softer. "Brace yourself for a mother lecture," she warned. "Cody, you need to learn to live lightly too. You don't have anything to make up for. Let the past go. Let it slip away, and find your joy here, today."

j

But what if the past is looking for you? Rising in your life like a flooding river, climbing past your ankles, past your knees and your thighs, flowing into your secret places, nesting in your womb?

j

Cody let the link close, plunging herself back into the darkness of her VR helmet. Not absolutely dark. A call-waiting light glowed amber in the corner of her vision.

When had that come on?

She tapped her glove, calling up a link ID.

Confirmed identity: Michael Fielding.

"Oh God." She felt as if a heat lance had plunged through her, diving in a beam between heart and stomach and out the middle of her back. Michael. "Why now, baby?" she whispered. All the lines of force that guided her life seemed to be intersecting tonight.

She laid her palm against her flat belly. Was there a baby there? Still a single cell, moving toward her womb, and the judgment she had built-in. She'd blamed herself for the loss of that first pregnancy, but had it been her fault? Or had she been poisoned oh so long ago, in Victoria Glen?

She bowed her head, laughing, crying-some strange mix of the two, her guts feeling like jelly. "Baby, why are you calling tonight?"

Easy to find out.

She wiped her eyes on the hem of her shirt. She drew a deep breath to steady herself. Where did he live now, anyway? Hong Kong, wasn't it? She'd gotten a card from him last Christmas.

Her finger curled. She tapped her data glove.

Link.

Just like that, he was there, his head and shoulders drifting in an ill-defined space only an arm's reach in front of her. He looked surprised to see her. "Cody?"

She smiled. "Come on, baby, I don't look that old."

He blushed. Bless him. "Old? Not at all. Hey, it's been a while. And I know its an outrageous hour. I meant to leave a message, but then I thought I'd query your status, and you were awake."

"How are you, Michael?" she asked. He had always talked too much when he was nervous.

"Oh, I'm good. The job, though... I've got a situation here. I'm working in southern India. Did I tell you that?"

"No."

That flustered him further. A rosy blush heated his bronze complexion. He looked down at his desk a moment, then grinned. "I sound like I've got a few too many crosslinks in the old wetware, don't I?"

"It happens to the best of us."

It was on her lips to tell him what she'd remembered in the VR last night, yet she couldn't do it. It had been her decision to end their marriage. In the long, dark months after the abortion she had watched their union rot, until she could kick it over with one cold clutch of words: There's nothing left. I'm leaving.

How could she tell him now, "Oops. Sorry. I made a mistake"?

"How's your schedule?" he asked. "Are you busy right now?"

"At three A.M.?"

His brows rose over a crooked smile. "Well, yeah. Sorry. I wouldn't be bothering you, but we've just stumbled over a critical groundwater problem-and a possible political stew, to make things exciting." Quickly, he explained the details. "I called you first. You're the best. And, basically, you're a pushover."

Don't smile at me like that, she thought. And breathe, girl. Thank God this wasn't a full-sensory link. She didn't want to smell him, or feel the heat off his body. That smile was like a light shining into her soul....

She asked, "Are you looking for a professional reference?"

"If you think that's what I need. I was wondering, though, if you could handle it?"

"An operation that size?" She shook her head, uncomfortable with the idea. "Green Stomp has only done domestic work. It would take time for us to hire the extra personnel and mobilize." And besides, there's another job I need to do. "You'd be better off with a local outfit. I could ask around for recommendations."

He nodded, but he looked tense and unhappy. "I really need a favor, Cody. Could you do a VR consultation now? I mean right now. This afternoon... oh hell. This morning, where you are. I need a specialist to survey the wells. I need solid answers for the people who live here. It's a bad situation, and it could get out of hand so easily, especially..."

She didn't like the awkward guilt lurking in his eyes. "What, Michael?"

He told her about Rajban. Cody listened, unable to completely suppress a dark spear of suspicion, of jealousy, but when he finished, she shook her head at her own tumbled existence, knowing she had thrown away something

precious for all the wrong reasons. It was all she could do not to cry.

XIII

Cody's workday had been Michael's night. While he slept, she studied the test results from the sample wells. While he dreamed, she ordered select strains of genetically engineered bacteria from New Delhi, along with case upon case of the nutrient broth that would stimulate them to rapidly reproduce. Near 3 A.M. the frozen vials and sealed boxes arrived in Four Villages, after a quick trip on a southbound jet. When Michael called into the office first thing in the morning, Pallava Sen reported that everything was in place to run a demonstration treatment on a well at Kanwal's farm.

"Great! I'll be there in half an hour." It was already eight o'clock.

It was a vibrant morning. Rajban was in the courtyard, working at the soil with the little hoe she'd found. The ground around her was wet, and the air steamy. The eastern sky had turned itself into a fluffy Christian postcard. Columns of light from the hidden sun poured down between tearing rain clouds, like radiance leaking from the face of God. In a patch of blue sky between the towering cumulus, two tiny white cloud scraps drifted on the edge of visibility. Angels, Michael thought. They looked like angels, gliding in slow raptor circles on the threshold of heaven.

Was this how myths got started?

Rajban looked up at him as he approached. He pantomimed eating food. She smiled tolerantly, then went back to her work. Michael frowned, troubled at her lack of appetite. Then Cody's glyph winked on in the corner of his shades and he forgot to worry. He tapped a full link. "Good morning!" It felt so right to be working with Cody again.

"Or good night," Cody answered, her voice husky and tired. "I'm going to catch a few hours' sleep before the demo.... Is that your waif? She looks like a little girl."

"She is a little girl. And she hasn't been eating much. Muthaye was here yesterday, but she didn't leave any messages. I'm a little concerned, Cody. It's past time her AIDS treatment was started."

Rajban's work had slowed; Michael guessed she was listening to him. What did she imagine he talked about? He shook his head. She looked so lost, a little girl caught on an island in the midst of a rising river, her spot of land steadily shrinking around her.

"She hides inside her work," Michael mused. "Just like we do."

The house pre-empted any reply. "Mr. Fielding, please step inside immediately." The french doors swung open as the injunction was repeated in Hindi. Rajban scrambled to her feet. "Air surveillance has identified the intruder Raman Gharia approaching the premises," the house explained. "Please return immediately to the safety of the interior."

"Michael, what is it?" Cody asked.

"A local troublemaker, that's all." He beckoned to Rajban.

They went inside, and the doors swung shut behind them.

"Hark, give me a street view," Michael said.

A window opened in his shades. He looked out on the lane, and saw Gharia approaching in the company of a portly older man with salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed about a face so dignified it was almost comical, as if he were possessed by dignity, as if it held him together, so that if he ever let it go his body would crumble to helpless dust. A Traditional Elder? Michael wondered.

A link came in from Sankar. "Security forces are on their way, Mr. Fielding. Please stay inside."

"Sankar, I trust you won't be sending helicopter shock troops this time?"

"Uh, no sir. As per our discussion, we will be striving for an appropriate response."

"Thank you." In their discussion, he had also insisted he have voice override on any house functions. He wasn't going to be locked up again.

The house announced visitors. "A Mr. Gharia and Mr. Rao to see you, Mr. Fielding." Michael glanced at Rajban. Her chest fluttered in short little pants. Her eyes were wide.

"Hark. Ask her if she knows this Mr. Rao."

The house translated his question to Hindi. Rajban closed her eyes, and nodded.

Michael strode toward the door.

"Michael, what are you doing?" Cody's voice was sharp and high, reminding him of another time. It's all gone. Can't you see that?

"Mr. Fielding," Sankar objected. "Perhaps you have not seen my report. These two men are deeply involved--"

"I only want to have a civil discussion with them." And learn what it would take to get them to leave Rajban alone. "Hark, open the door."

The door swung open to reveal Gharia and Rao, shoulder to shoulder in the alcove. Gharia looked up in surprise, then, "Namaste," he muttered. Rao echoed it, and introduced himself. Michael was unsurprised to learn that this was Rajban's brother-in-law, the head of the household, the one who had rejected her after her husband died.

"You look at me with anger," Rao said, his voice deep, his dignity so heavy it seemed to suck the heat out of the air, "when I am the one who has been shamed. Return the woman you hold, pay a dowry for her shame, and I will not involve the police."

Behind his back, Michael could hear the house whispering a string of Hindi as it translated Rao's words for Rajban. He drew himself up a little straighter. "She is not my prisoner."

The house uttered a brief line in Hindi. Rao waited for it to finish, then: "She is my brother's widow. Perhaps you

don't understand what that means, Mr. Fielding. You are a foreigner, and your modern culture holds little respect for a woman's dignity. Upon my brother's death, I was prepared to allow his wife to live in my household for the rest of her life, despite the burden this would place on me. Rajban rejected my generosity. She desired to marry again. My wife also counseled this would be best, but I am an old man, and I believe in the old ways. A widow should be given respect!" He sighed. "Sometimes, though, a woman will not have respect. The immorality of the world infected this woman. Carnal desire drove her into the street."

Michael felt his body grow hard with a barely contained fury. "That's not how she told the story." Rajban hadn't even known her husband was dead until Gharia's visit.

Gharia glared at him. Michael watched his hands.

Rao alone remained unruffled, glued together by dignity. "I am learning we must all bend with the times," he announced. "I have found a new husband for Rajban. If you will pay the dowry and the medical expenses of her rehabilitation as the penalty of your shame, I will allow this marriage to go forward."

"What an evil old mercenary," Cody growled, while Michael traded stares with Gharia. It was quite obvious who the intended husband was to be. "Tell him to shove off, Michael. She's just a little girl."

Rao could not hear her, and so he continued laying out his terms. "If you do not pay the dowry, I will return the woman to my household. With the help of my wife and son, we may yet protect her from the weakness of the flesh, for as long as she is living."

"Which won't be long," Cody said savagely, "when Rao refuses to buy treatment for her AIDS."

"She's staying here," Michael said.

"Then I will summon the police."

"She's staying here! It's what she wants."

"Have you asked her that?" Gharia demanded. "No woman wants to be a childless whore."

"You dirty son of a--"

Michael broke off, startled by a wash of cold air at his back. He turned to see Rajban, her face veiled by the hem of the sari Muthaye had given her. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she squeezed past Michael. "Rajban, wait!" She slipped past Rao too, out of the alcove and into the street. Michael stared after her in astonishment, but Rao, he didn't even look at her. She might have been a shadow.

"Jesus, Michael!" Cody shouted. "Don't let her go."

Rao nodded in satisfaction. "I will send a servant with the bride price."

Gharia was smiling. His gaze slid past Michael on a film of oily satisfaction. As if to himself, he murmured, "Every woman desires respect."

"Michael, stop her!"

"Rajban! Don't go." She would not understand his words, but surely she would ken the meaning?

Rajban looked at him, with doubt in her eyes, and fear, and a deep sadness that seemed to resonate through millennia of suffering.

"Rajban, please stay."

Her gaze fell, and docilely she turned to follow Rao, who had not even bothered to look behind him.

"Michael! Damn you. Go after her. Stop her."

"Cody, she's made her own decision. I can't grab her and force her back into the house."

"For God's sake, Michael, why not? For once in your life, go out and grab somebody. Stop her. Don't let her make the decision that will wreck her life. Michael, she's hurting so badly, she's in no condition to decide." To his astonishment, he could hear her weeping. "Cody?" Her glyph winked out, as she cut the link.

XIV

Something had changed in the house, though Michael couldn't decide exactly what. All the furniture remained in place; the lighting was just the same. Mrs. Nandy had not been by, so the mud stains remained on the couch, and Rajban's bag of soil - half empty now - still sat by the glass doors. Maybe the house was colder.

He sent a call to Cody, but she didn't answer, and he declined to leave a message on the server.

So Rajban had left! So what? Why did Cody have to act like it was the end of the world? Rajban had chosen to leave. She had walked freely out the door.

Michael wished she had not, but wishing couldn't change the decision she had made.

He wondered what her reasoning had been. Perhaps she preferred whatever small life Rao might offer her to the strangeness she had glimpsed here. Illiteracy was a barrier that kept her from a knowledge of the wider world. Access to information was another hurdle. So she had returned to the life she knew. It was probably as simple as that. Rao's messenger arrived at the door after only a few minutes. Michael listened to the price he quoted, then he put a call through to his bank, adjusted the worth on a cash card, and handed it over, letting the house record the transaction. He had promised to pay for Rajban's AIDS treatment, after all. And she was better off with her family, wasn't she?

He told himself it had all been a misunderstanding.

On the long walk back to the house of her brother-in-law, Rajban could feel the sickness growing inside her. It was a

debilitating weakness, a pollution in her muscles, dirt in her joints. By the time she reached the house she was dazed and exhausted, with a thirst that made her tongue swell. As she crossed the threshold behind the men, Mother-in-Law glared, first at Gharia, then at Rajban. She asked Rao if it had been agreed that a dowry should be paid. Rao shrugged. He sat at a table, ignoring everyone, even Gharia, who stood by looking confused and a little angry. "We wait," Rao said.

Inside the house the air was very still, a puddle of heat trapped under the ancient, seeping walls. Mother-in-law turned on Rajban. "No water. No!" she said, cutting her off from the plastic cube with its spigot, that sat upon hollow concrete blocks and held the day's supply of water. "Out! You have work. There is work, you stupid girl."

Rajban felt dizzy by the swirling motion of Mother-in-Law's hands. She stumbled back a step.

"Won't you let her drink?" Gharia asked softly.

Rajban cast him a resentful glance. Oh yes. He had an interest in her now. Or he imagined he did. Michael's house had told her what was said on the doorstep. She blushed in shame again, remembering the words Rao had spoken.

He had painted her with those words. He had painted her past. Dirty whore. Her polluted body testified to it. And why else would all this have happened to her? What Rao said had felt just like the truth. Michael would not want to look at her now that he knew, and Muthaye could never come to visit her again - but Rao had offered her sanctuary.

Of course there would be no dowry. She thought it strange that Gharia didn't understand this. Rao scowled at him. Then he scowled at Mother-in-Law, standing guard by the water cube. "Women's business," he growled.

"Get out!" the old woman screeched at Rajban, now that she was sure she had permission. "No one has done your work for you, foolish girl." Under the assault of her flailing hands, Rajban stumbled into the courtyard. She looked around. The courtyard seemed strange, as if she had dreamed this place and the life she had lived here.

Heat steamed from the moist ground. The plants were wilted in their containers. She shared their thirst, and, using the dirty wash water stored in a small barrel by the door, she set out to allay it.

j

Michael took a zip to the office to find Pallava Sen waiting for him in the lobby. "Good morning, Michael! Our bioremediation consultant called a few minutes ago to say she will not be able to attend today."

"Cody called?" Michael's voice cracked with the force of his surprise.

"Yes. Of course I've been consulting with her throughout the night, so I'll have no problem directing the media gig."

They matched strides through the security sensors. Armored doors opened for them. An elevator stood waiting on the other side. "Be assured, everything is in place," Pallava continued, as the doors closed and the elevator rose. "We have technicians from New Delhi to handle the bacterial cultures. Several media teams are already at the airport, and within a few hours an international task force will be here to examine the complaints against us, and our countercharges of fraud against the local water commission."

They stepped out into the carpeted hallway on the top floor, greeted by the scent of fresh coffee. "When will the water purification units be here?" Michael asked.

"The first shipment is due to arrive within the hour. They'll be set up in stations throughout the district. People will be able to withdraw five gallons at a time-enough for drinking, anyway."

"Excellent." At least people could start drinking clean water now, today, for the first time since...

He sighed. Probably for the first time ever.

Someone had left a steaming cup of coffee on the desk. "Pallava, thank you. I know you've been up most of the night with this situation. It sounds as if you have things well under control." Then, because he couldn't help himself, he added, "When you talked to Cody just now, did she... sound all right?"

Pallava frowned, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "She sounded tired, but then she has worked through the night as well. There's no need to worry, Michael. Let her rest. I can handle the gig."

"That's not what I meant. Pallava, I know you can do it. I want you to handle the press conference, too. It's your scene now."

j

Rajban crouched in the shade just outside the kitchen door, patting dirty water on her cheeks and breast. Inside, Gharia and Rao were talking heatedly. Gharia was saying, "Fielding will pay. You'll see. He wants the woman to have medicine so that-"

Gharia broke off in mid-sentence. Startled, Rajban glanced over her shoulder to see if someone had spied her, resting in the shade. No one looked out the door. Instead, she heard a stranger speaking from inside the house, crowing about the cleverness of Rao's demands. This was the messenger sent to collect the dowry.

"Give the money to my son," Mother-in-Law interrupted, her old voice tight and frightened, as if she feared a rebuke for her boldness, but couldn't help herself nonetheless.

Rajban peeked around the edge of the doorway, to see Rao still seated at the table, Gharia still standing. Both he and the messenger stared hungrily at the cash card Rao twirled in his hands. Then Rao's long fingers closed over the card, hiding it from sight. His face was fleshy, and yet it was the hardest face Rajban had ever seen. "You may both go now." Gharia looked confused. "We need to discuss the finances, the wedding, and-"

"There will be no wedding," Rao announced. "My brother's widow must be subjected to no further shame."

Rajban slipped back behind the wall. The garden looked so queer, as if she had never seen it quite so clearly

before. Inside, Gharia's voice was rising in indignant anger, but Rajban did not listen to the words, knowing that nothing he might say could change her fate.

j

Pallava Sen had hardly left when Muthaye's glyph winked on in the corner of Michael's shades. He tapped his glove, transferring the call to a wall screen. Muthaye snapped into existence. She stood in Michael's living room, her stern face framed by a printed sari, which she had pulled over her head like a scarf. In her hand, she held Rajban's half-empty bag of soil.

Michael's gaze caught on it. "Rajban has gone."

Muthaye's lips pursed petulantly. "I am at the house, Michael. I can see that. Where has she gone?"

Michael felt inexplicably guilty as he made his explanation. He did not feel any better as he watched Muthaye's expression darken. Her eyes rolled up, beseeching the heavens for patience, perhaps. Then she spoke: "Mr. Fielding, I would be interested to someday engage you in a discussion of free will. What does it really mean? You tell me that Rajban chose to leave with this Rao character, her brother-in-law who treated her as less than human even as you looked on. Mr. Fielding, can you tell me why she freely chose to go with him?"

Michael scowled, feeling unfairly impeached, by Muthaye and by Cody, too. "I suppose she felt torn from her roots. Most people are, by nature, afraid of change."

Muthaye's scowl deepened. "Rajban did not suffer a failure of nerve, Mr. Fielding."

"I didn't say-"

"No, of course. You wouldn't say such a thing. You are a kind person, Michael, and obviously you've done well in life. It's only natural that you believe opportunity is omnipresent, that we all rise or sink according to our talents and our drive - but the world is more complex than that. Talent is meaningless when we are schooled in the belief that change is wrong, when we are taught that we are worthy of nothing more than the ironbound existence fate has given us. Believe me, Rajban has been well-schooled in her worthlessness. She knows that she lives at the sufferance of her husband's family. Obedience and acceptance have been drilled into her from babyhood. To expect her to freely decide to defy her brother-in-law would be like expecting a drug addict to freely decide to stay sober at a crack party. There is no difference.

"And it is partly my fault, too, for I laughed yesterday when she suggested this soil had a magic." Muthaye lifted the stained cloth bag. "Perhaps it does. I have talked to a horticultural specialist and he is intrigued. He tells me there may be valuable microorganisms in this dirt. I will have it tested, and I will not laugh at naïve optimism ever again."

"Muthaye-"

She raised her palm. "Michael, I apologize for lecturing you, but you must begin to see that to dream is itself a learned skill."

Stop her! For once in your life...

Michael sighed. "I gave Rao money to pay for the AIDS treatment." That was something, at least.

Although from the way Muthaye glared at him, it might have been worse than nothing. He scowled, irritated now. "Was that wrong too?"

"There will be no treatment."

Michael felt his patience snap. Really, he'd had enough. "You don't know that. She was to be married again-"

"Did Gharia pay the dowry?"

"No, but it was understood-"

"I expect none of you understood the same thing. You each heard only what you could tolerate. Understand this, Michael. Rajban is the childless wife of a dead man. Rao can gain nothing by letting her marry. He will refuse her the AIDS treatment and keep the money for himself. Mark my words: If we do not find Rajban and get her out of her brother-in-law's house, then she will die there, most likely in a matter of days."

j

Cody linked into the Terrace on a full sensory connection. The private VR chat room had been designed as a flagstoned California patio, embedded in a garden of pepper trees and azaleas. Everyone had a personal animation stored on the server, an active, three-dimensional image of themselves that reflected their habitual postures and gestures, so they would seem to be present even when they weren't fully linked through a VR suit.

Cody's image looked a good deal younger than it ought to - a sharp reminder of how many years had gone by since she'd visited the Terrace. The last time had been during those nebulous months between the abortion and the divorce. Not the best of days, and returning now made her feel a bit queasy.

Still, she had come with a purpose. She set about it, sending a glyph to Etsuko, Ryan, and Jaya, asking them to come if they could - and within a minute, they were all represented. Etsuko was involved in a meeting, so she sent only a passive image of herself to record the chat: an alabaster statue dressed in formal kimono. Her flirtatious eyes and the cant of her head as she looked down from a pedestal gave an impression of sharp and regal attention.

Ryan and Jaya were able to interact in real time. Their images lounged in the French patio chairs behind steaming cups of coffee. Jaya had a half-smile on her face. Ryan looked uncertain. He and Michael were very close, Cody knew, and questions of loyalty were probably stirring in his mind.

She drew a deep breath. "Thank you for coming. Jaya, Michael told me about your newest daughter. Congratulations."

"That was an adventure!" Jaya said. "I don't know what I would have done without Michael. He's a wonderful man."

Cody felt herself stiffen. "He is a good man, but he made a mistake this morning when he let Rajban return to her husband's family."

"The girl who's been staying with him?" Ryan asked. "But that's good, isn't it?"

"No," Michael said.

Cody turned, to find Michael's image standing a few steps to the side.

"Cody's right. I made a mistake. I didn't want to believe this was an abusive situation."

"I'm afraid for her," Cody said. "Michael, we need to find her as soon as we can. I came here to ask the Terrace for help. I know I have not been part of this group for many years, but I still trust you all more than anyone, and you're already familiar with Rajban. Will you help? I've rented two drone planes. I know you're busy, but if you could rotate shifts every few minutes, the three of you might be able to guide one plane, while I inhabit the other. We don't know where she lives, but we know some things about her."

Michael said, "I'm opening up the Global Shear census data. That'll speed things up. When we do find her, Muthaye and I will go after her on the ground."

j

Inside the house there were oranges on the table, and clean water, and sweetened tea, but no one invited Rajban in. She stole a half-ripe orange off one of the trees. Its rind was swirled with green and the flesh was grimly tart, but she ate it anyway, her back to the house. She wondered at herself. She had never stolen fruit before. In truth, she did not feel like the same person.

The orange peels went into her heap of magic soil.

Muthaye had laughed at the idea that it might be magic.

Rajban picked up a damp clump. It was soft and warm, and smelled of fertility. If magic had a smell, this would be it; yet Muthaye had laughed at the idea.

Rajban rocked back and forth, thinking about it, and about Muthaye's mother and her dead baby girl. It was better the baby had died. A girl without a father would only know hardship, and still it must have been a terribly painful thing. For a moment, she held the baby in her arms, acutely aware of its soft breath and warm skin, its milky smell. When she thought about it dying, grief pushed behind her eyes.

Muthaye's mother had married again... and had another daughter. Not a son, but the school she owned earned money, so perhaps she could afford a daughter.

She was just like you, Rajban.

What did that mean? Rajban did not feel at all like the same person. There was an anger inside her that had never been there before. It felt like a seed planted under her heart, and it was swelling, filling with all the possibilities she had seen or heard of in the last two days.

Her fists clenched as the seed sprouted in a burst of growth, rooting deep down in her gut and flowering in her brain, thriving on the magic soil of new ideas.

j

Cody was a point of awareness gliding over the alleys and lanes of Four Villages. Linked to the GS census, the town became a terrain of information. Addresses flashed past, accompanied by statistics on each building and the families that owned them—occupation, education, income, propensity for paying taxes. At the same time the drone's guidance program spun a tiny camera lense, recording the people in the streets, sending their images to the GS census, where a search function matched them against information on file, spitting back identifications in less than a second.

No way this search could be legal. There had to be privacy strictures on the use of the GS census data.

What did privacy mean anymore?

It didn't matter. Not now. Cody only wanted to find the combination of bits that would mean Rajban.

Rajban was a nonentity. She did not appear anywhere in the census - and that was a clue in itself.

Some heads of households refused to answer the census questions, forcing the field agent to guess at their names and family members. Michael had used that fact in his search parameters. It was likely such a house was in a fundamentalist neighborhood and that it had an intensely cultivated private courtyard, where a young wife could be hidden from an agent's prying eyes... but not from the eyes of a drone aircraft.

The plane was powered by micropumps that adjusted its internal air pressure, allowing it to sink and rise and glide through the heated air. The pumps were powered by solar cells on the plane's dorsal surface, backed up by tiny batteries built into its frame. It could stay aloft for months, maybe for years. Its only drawback was that it was slow.

Cody's fingernails had dug crescent impressions in her data glove by the time the drone cruised over the first household on Michael's list. A woman was hanging laundry in the shade, but she was older than Rajban, with two children playing near her feet. At the next house the courtyard was empty, and the garden it contained was yellow and sickly. Cody tapped her glove, sending the plane on.

Recorded names and faces slid past her, until finally, the camera picked out a familiar face. "Gharia." The GS census confirmed her guess.

Cody ordered the drone lower. It hovered over the street as Gharia stumbled along, head down, each sandaled foot ramming into the mud like a crutch, while chickens scurried to get out of his way and children ran indoors, or behind

their mothers until he passed. Rage and helplessness were twisted into his posture. Cody's heart rate tripled, knowing something terrible had happened.

The drone's shadow was a cross in the mud. Gharia saw it and pulled up short. He looked up, while Cody let the plane sink lower.

She had expected to hate him, but now, seeing the pain and confusion in his eyes, she could feel only a desperate empathy. The old ways were dissolving everywhere. Her own tangled expectations neatly echoed his.

Then Gharia crouched. Still staring at the plane, he groped blindly, clawing a fistful of mud from the street. Cody's eyes widened as he jumped to his feet and flung the mud at the plane. Just a little extra weight could upset the plane's delicate balance. She started to order it up, but the guidance AI responded first, activating micropumps that forced air out of the fuselage. The plane shot out of reach, and Gharia became a little man.

He threw his head back. He opened his mouth in a scream she could not hear. His shoulders heaved as he looked around for some object upon which to vent his rage. He found it in the white cart of a water station being set up at the end of the street. The startled technician stumbled back several steps as Gharia attacked the cart, rocking it, kicking at it, but it was too heavy to turn over. Even the plastic frame would be very hard to dent.

After a minute of frantic effort, Gharia gave up. Chin held high, he walked away through a crowd of bemused spectators, as if nothing had happened.

Cody touched her belly, wondering if there was life growing in there, and if it was a boy or a girl - if it would die, or live.

What difference is there, between me and this unhappy man?

Both of them had let antique expectations twist the balance of their lives.

j

A winged shadow passed over the courtyard. Rajban looked up from where she crouched in the shade of the mandarin tree. Her hands left off their work of pulling tiny weed seedlings from the mossy soil. Squinting against the glare, she searched the sky. There. It was the little airplane that had flown over Michael's house, blue like the sky and very hard to see. More like a thought than any solid thing.

She reached to touch the necklace her mother had given her, before remembering it was gone. The life she'd lived before was fading, and she was not the same person anymore.

When she first came to her husband's house this thriving mandarin tree had been ill. The soil in which it was rooted had been unclean, until she tended it, until she prayed the magic into existence. A worm had hatched from the barren dirt, and the mandarin tree had been reborn, no longer the same tree as before.

Rajban felt that way: as if she had been fed some potent magic that opened her eyes to undreamed possibilities. Perhaps Muthaye's mother had felt this way too?

Rajban rose unsteadily to her feet. The heat of her fever was like a slow funeral fire, made worse because she had been allowed no water. Her mouth felt like ashes. No matter. Like Muthaye's mother, she was ready to step away from this empty round of life.

j

Michael waited with Muthaye in the cramped passenger seat of an air-conditioned zip. The driver had parked his vehicle between two market stalls set up under a spreading banyan tree. Young men lounged in the shade, eating flavored ice. Michael idly watched three tiny screens playing at once in his shades. Two were the feeds from the searching drones. The third was the bioremediation demonstration out at Kanwal's farm.

There was Kanwal, hungrily watching Pallava explain the activity of the technicians gathered around the well. Kanwal's ambitions were an energy, waiting to be shaped.

"Michael!"

Cody's tense voice startled him. His gaze swept the other two screens, and he caught sight of Rajban, gazing upward, her golden face washed in the harsh light of the noon sun.

"Michael, we've found her."

He whooped in triumph. "She looks all right!"

Muthaye squeezed his arm. "Why is she outside at noon? It's so terribly hot. Look at her cheeks. Look how flushed they are. We must hurry." She leaned forward, to tell the address to the driver of the zip.

The driver's eyes widened. Then he laughed in good humor. "I no go there. Too many of the politics there. Don't like any new way. Throw mud my zip."

Muthaye sighed. "He's right. It's a bad neighborhood. Michael, you won't be welcome there."

"If it's that kind of neighborhood, you won't be welcome either. You'll be as foreign as me."

A ghost of a smile turned her lips. "Maybe not quite so, but—"

"I can't send a security team in, you understand? This isn't company business, and I've already stretched my authority by using the census. But I can go after her myself."

"We can both go after her," Muthaye said. She used a cash card to pay the driver. "I only hope she is willing to leave."

j

The silent drone floated above the courtyard. From this post, Cody looked down and saw that something had

changed. Rajban had moved out of the shade of the little potted tree. She stood in the sunshine now, her back straight, no sign of timidity in her posture. Her gaze was fixed on the house. She seemed in possession of herself and it made her a different person. The timorous girl from Michael's garden was gone.

Cody swallowed against a dry throat. Clearly, Rajban intended something. Cody feared what it might be. A woman who has been cornered and condemned all her life should not protest, but Rajban's obedience had been corrupted-by the whisperings of Muthaye, by her glimpse of a different life.

Cody felt as if she watched herself, ready to burst in the close confines of Victoria Glen. She wanted to cry out to Rajban, tell her to wait, not to take any risks... but the plane had no audio.

Rajban stepped toward the house with a clean, determined stride.

Cody ordered the drone to follow. The micropumps labored and the plane sank, but with excruciating slowness. It was only halfway down when Rajban disappeared inside.

j

Muthaye hid her face with her sari. She walked a step behind Michael but no one was fooled. Change had risen in a slow flood over Four Villages, dissolving so many of the old ways, but here was an island. The people of Rao's neighborhood had resisted the waters, throwing up walls of hoary tradition to turn the flood away. It was as if history had run backward here. Girls received less schooling every year, they were married at younger and younger ages, they bore more children... or at least they bore more sons.

The sex selection implant was an aspect of modernity that had worked its way inside the fundamentalist quarter. It was a breach in the walls that must ultimately bring them tumbling down... but not on this day.

Michael walked at a fast, deliberate pace, following the directions whispered to him by Jaya as she watched from the second drone aircraft. He felt the stares of unemployed men, and of hordes of boys munching on sweets and flavored ice. Tension curled around him like a bow wave.

A link came in from his chief of security. "Mr. Fielding, I don't like this at all. Let me send some people in."

"No," Michael muttered, keeping his voice low, trying not to move his lips. "Sankar, you send your people in here, you're going to touch off a riot. You know it."

The brand of fundamentalism didn't matter, and it didn't even need a religious affiliation. Michael had encountered the same irrational situation as a boy when he'd gotten off the bus at the wrong stop, finding himself in a housing project where the presence of a prosperous mixed-race kid was felt like a slap against the hip-hop culture.

Fundamentalism was so frightening because it taught the mind to not think. Such belief systems cramped people's horizons, sabotaging rational thought while virulently opposing all competitive ideas.

Michael heard Muthaye gasp. He turned, just as a clump of mud hit him in the cheek. A pack of boys hanging out at the entrance of a TV theater erupted in wild laughter. "Keep walking," Muthaye muttered through gritted teeth. Mud had splashed across her face. Her sari was dirtied. More clumps came flying after them. Michael wanted to take her arm, but that would only make things worse. Boys jeered. They made kissy noises at Muthaye. A few massaged their crotches as she passed.

Jaya was watching over them from the drone. "Turn here," she said, her voice tight. "There is hardly anyone in the alley to your left. All right, now go right - walk faster, some of the boys are following you - keep going, keep going. Turn again! Left. There. Now you're out of their sight."

"How much farther?" Muthaye whispered into the open line. Michael glanced back over his shoulder, but the boys were not in sight.

j

Mother-in-Law looked up as Rajban stepped across the threshold. Surprise and anger mingled in her wrinkled face as she scurried to guard the water cube. Rao pretended not to notice. Women's business.

Rajban drew a deep breath. The little airplane had been a sign, pure as the searing sky, that the time had come to follow Muthaye's mother into another life. So, without looking at Mother-in-Law again, she walked past her. She kept her face calm, but inside her soul was trembling. Rajban passed the table. She approached the door. Only then did Rao admit her existence. "Stop." His voice ever stern. "Get back to your work."

Her insides felt soft and hot as she told herself she did not hear him. She took another step, then another, the concrete floor warm and hard against her toes.

"I said stop."

The doorway was only five steps away now, a blazing rectangle, like a portal to another existence. Rajban walked toward it, her steps made light by the tumbling rhythm of her heart.

Rao stepped in front of her, and the light from the doorway went out.

Rajban made no effort to slip around him. Instead she reached for her sari and pulled it farther over her head, so that it partly concealed her face. Then she stood motionless, in silent protest.

j

At last.

The drone dropped to the level of the doorway. Through the cameras, Cody gazed into the house - and could not believe what she was seeing.

Rajban was walking out. She was heading straight for the door. Cody watched her pass the flustered old woman,

and the table where Rao sat. It seemed certain she would reach the door, when abruptly, Rao rose to his feet. In two steps he stood in front of Rajban, blocking her exodus. Rajban stopped.

For several seconds nothing more happened. Rajban stood in calm serenity, refusing to yield or to struggle. It had the flavor of a Gandhian protest, an appeal to the soul of the oppressor. Rao did not seem to like the taste of guilt. Outrage convulsed across his face. Then Cody saw a decision congeal.

Warmth fled her gut. What could she do? She was half a world away.

"Michael," she whispered. "It would be good if you were here now."

"Two or three more minutes," Jaya said. "That's all."

It was too much.

Cody ordered the drone forward. The autopilot guided it through the door, its wingtips whispering scant millimeters from the frame.

She could not defend Rajban, but she could let Rao know that Rajban was no longer alone.

j

Rajban kept her head down, knowing what would happen, but so much had changed inside her she could not turn back. Her heart beat faster, and still the expected blow failed to arrive.

Cautiously, she raised her eyes - to encounter a sheen of unexpected blue. The little airplane! It hovered at her shoulder like a dream image, so out of place did it seem in the hot, cloistered room. Brother-in-Law stared at it as if he faced his conscience.

The tiny plane had summoned Rajban with its color like the searing sky. Wordlessly, it now advised her: Time to go.

So she straightened her shoulders and stepped to the side, circling Rao until the doorway stood before her again. She walked toward it, through it, on unsteady legs, out into the mud of the street. The little airplane cruised past her, floating slowly back up into the blue. Brother-in-Law started shouting... at Mother-in-Law? Rajban didn't stay to find out. She stumbled away from the house, not caring where her feet might take her.

"Rajban!"

She turned, startled to hear her name. "Michael?"

The street was crowded with women moving in small, protective groups. Hard-eyed men lounged beside the shop fronts across the street, watching the women, or haggling over the price of goods, or sipping sweetened teas. Flies buzzed above the steaming mud.

"Rajban."

Michael emerged from the crowd, with Muthaye close behind him. She called out Rajban's name, then, "Namaste."

"Namaste," Rajban whispered.

Muthaye took her arm. Above her veil, her eyes were furious. "Come with us?"

Rajban nodded. Some of the men around them had begun to mutter. Some of the women stopped to stare. Muthaye ignored them. She stepped down the street, her head held high, and after they'd walked for a few minutes, she tossed back her sari and let the sunlight fall upon her face.

XV

Cody relinquished control of the drone, leaving it to return like a homing pigeon to the rental office. She lifted off her VR helmet to find herself seated in her darkened living room, the lights of Denver and its suburbs gleaming beyond the window. She felt so scared she thought she might throw up.

There was a ticking bomb inside her.

She imagined a fertilized egg descending through one of her fallopian tubes, its single cell dividing again and again as it grew into a tiny bundle of cells that would become implanted against the wall of her womb. With a few hormonal triggers this nascent life form would change her physiology, so that her body would serve its growth. Quite a heady power for an unthinking cluster of cells, but as it reordered its environment, it would begin to shed evidence of its identity. Very early in gestation the uterine implant would classify it desirable or undesirable, and would act accordingly.

Cody laid her hand against her lower abdomen. She imagined she could feel him inside her, a bundle of cells with the potential to become a little boy. She remembered Gharia standing in the street, looking up at her with utter confusion, with helpless rage. He had tried too hard to hold onto the past and the world had gotten away from him.

Live lightly.

She felt as if she could hardly breathe. Her shoulders heaved as she struggled to satisfy her lungs. Air in, air out, but none of it absorbed. She felt as if she might drown, trapped in the close confines of her apartment. So she found her shades and called a cab.

j

If we are lucky, life shows us what we need to see.

Cody snorted. It was one of the many inspirational aphorisms drilled into her at Prescott Academy. And how had that particular pearl of wisdom concluded? Ah, yes:

If we are brave, we dare to look.

Cody was not feeling terribly brave right now, and that was why she was running away. The cab took her to the airport, and from there an air taxi took her north. Upon landing, she picked up a rental car, arriving at Project 270 just before dawn.

An ocean of cold air had settled over the land. Though she wore boots and blue jeans, a thermal shirt and a heavy jacket, she still felt the bite of the coming winter as she stumbled through the darkness. A flash of her company badge soothed the security system. Ben would not be by for two or three hours, so she made her way alone to the upper gate, where she found the card slot by feel. The gate unlatched and she slipped inside.

The sky was a grand sweep of glittering stars, and in their light she could just make out the slope of the land. A few house lights gleamed far, far away across the river. Leaving the ATV in the garage, she set out down the long slope of the meadow, stumbling over clumps of sod and seedling trees. The meadow grasses were heavy with dew, and when their seed heads brushed her thighs they shed freezing jackets of water onto her jeans, so that in less than a minute she was soaked through. She kept walking, listening to her socks squish, until she reached the bluff above the river bank.

The sky was turning pearly, and already birds were stirring in a lazy warm-up song. At the foot of the bluff, a doe hurried along the narrow beach, while the river itself grumbled in a slow, muddy exhalation that went on and on and on, a sigh lasting forever. Cody shivered in the cold. Can't run any farther.

It was time to discover what she had done, get the truth of it.

So many chronic problems came from not facing the truth.

She slipped her shades out of her jacket pocket and put them on. They were smart enough to know when they were being used. A menu appeared against the backdrop of the river. Tapping her data glove, she swiftly dropped the highlight down to "U." Only one listing appeared under that letter: UTERINE IMPLANT.

"Upload status report," she whispered. "And display."

Even then, fear held her back. She let her gaze fix on the river, its surface silvery in the rising light. Steam curled over it, phantom tendrils possessed of an alien motion, curling, stretching, writhing in a slow agony lovely to watch.

Lines of white type overlay the prospect. For several seconds Cody pretended not to see them. Then she drew a deep breath, and forced her gaze to fix on the words:

Status: No pregnancy detected.

Action: None.

She stared at the report for several seconds before she could make sense of it.

No baby. That made it easy... didn't it?

Her body did not feel the same. Somehow it had become hollow, forlorn. She stared at the water, wondering how something that had never existed could have felt so real.

The doe gave up its stroll on the beach to climb the embankment, stirring ahead of it a flight of blackbirds that spun away, trilling and peeping, noisy leaves tumbled on a ghostly wind. Cody remembered the painful confusion on Gharia's face as he stood in the street, looking up at her. She had seen herself in his eyes, asking, why?

A figment of mist curled apart and she laughed softly, at herself and at the strained script she had tried to write for her life.

Gharia had wanted a scripted life, too, except half the cast had vanished.

It was the same all over the world. Virtually every culture encouraged loyalty to social roles... but why was it done that way? Because there was some innate human need to eliminate chance? Or because it saved conflict, and therefore the energy of the group? Even as it wasted intellect and human potential...

The world was evolving. Energy was abundant now, and maybe, the time had come to let the old ways go, and to nurture a social structure that would unlock the spectrum of potential in everyone.

Starting here, Cody thought. She looked again at the menu, where UTERINE IMPLANT remained highlighted. "Shut it down," she whispered.

The letters thinned, indicating an inactive status.

Cody started to slip off the shades, but she was stopped by the sudden appearance of Michael's glyph within an urgent red circle, meaning Please please please talk to me NOW.

Her throat had begun to ache in the cold air, but she tapped her data glove anyway, accepting the link. Michael's glyph expanded until it became his image. He stood in the open air beyond the bluff, remote from her, though she could see every detail of his face. "Michael? Has something happened to Rajban?"

"Rajban's all right." He squinted at her. "I can't see you."

"I just have shades."

His scowl was ferocious. "Then I borrowed this VR suit for nothing." She waited for him to get over it. After a moment his body relaxed. He turned, to look down at the silvery path of the river. "We did the right thing, Cody. Rajban is set now, in a house with two other women. She'll probably do garden work. You know the bag of soil she carried? Turns out to be a natural bioremediation culture, a community of microorganisms fine-tuned for the pollutants particular to the soil around Four Villages. Muthaye thinks it might be possible for Rajban to sell live cultures, or at least to use it to enhance her own business."

"That's good. I'm glad." She felt a fresh flush of wonder at the adaptiveness, the insistence of life. She toed a clod of exposed soil on the bluff. Contamination had been rampant in this land, too, but it had been chased away, broken down in a series of simple steps by microorganisms too small to be seen. The scars of the past were being erased.

"Where are you?" Michael asked. "It's beautiful here."

"At a project site. It is pretty, but it's also very cold. I should head back to the car."

He stiffened. "If you're thinking of running away from me again, Cody, I might have some objection to that. It's been suggested to me that I give in too easily to other people's choices... when I know those choices are bad."

Her fingers drummed nervously against her thigh. A Canada goose paddled into sight, leaving a V wake unfurling behind it. "I really said that, didn't I?"

"Cody, I never wanted you to leave. You chose to go. Rajban chose to go. Should I have forced either one of you to stay?"

The goose had been joined by another. Cody's hands felt like insensate slabs of ice.

"I don't know."

"If we each can't be free to decide for ourselves--"

"I have used the same uterine implant you discovered in Four Villages, only it was my choice, and I wanted a daughter." She said it very quickly, the words tumbling over one another. "I've shut it off now, and... I'm not pregnant."

He stared at her. His stunned expression might have been funny if she didn't feel so scared. "Say something, Michael."

"I... wish I was there with you."

She closed her eyes, feeling some of the chill go out of the dawn.

XVI

Michael finished the day in his office, facing Karen Hampton on the wall screen. Outside, the sun was a red globule embedded in brown haze. Its rays cast an aging glow across his desk as he leaned forward - tense, eager, and a little scared - the same way he'd felt on his first flight out of the U.S.

He knew it was likely Karen would fire him. He didn't want it to happen, but that wasn't the source of his fear. He had done only what was needful, because trust comes first. So it wasn't Karen he feared. It was himself. He had lost some of his tolerance for the foibles and foolishness of human culture. He had learned to say no. It was a terrible, necessary weapon, and that he possessed it left him elated and afraid.

Karen stared at him for several seconds with eyes that might have been made of glass. "You have a unique conception of the responsibilities of a regional director."

Michael nodded. "It's been a unique day."

He watched the lines of her mouth harden. "Michael, you're in Four Villages because I felt it was an ideal setting for your creativity, your energy, and your ambition, but you seem to have forgotten your purpose. You are there to grow an economy, not to rescue damsels in distress."

Michael no longer saw a clear distinction between the two. "Damsels are part of the economy, Karen. Everyone matters and you know it. The more inclusive the system is, the more we all benefit."

"How does offending a significant segment of the population expand the system?"

"Because doing anything else would break it. You said it yourself. Trust comes first. If people can't trust us to support them in their enterprises, then we've lost. If we come to be known as cowards, then we fail. I'm not here to fail."

Four Villages was a microcosm of the world and it faced formidable problems-poverty, overpopulation, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and, perhaps worst of all, the poison of old ideas - but none of these challenges was insurmountable. Michael swore it to himself. Nothing was insurmountable. Terrible mistakes would be made, that was inevitable, but the worst mistake would be to pull back, to give up, to give in to the dead past.

"It's fear of change that's holding us back."

Change was coming anyway. The old world was being washed away, and soon there would be no paths left to follow. Then everyone would need to find their own way, like fishes or sleek eels, tracking ever-shifting currents, trailing elusive scents, nosing into the new possibilities of undreamed of futures.

Karen shook her head. "I love your thinking, Michael, but the hard fact is, this project is floundering."

Michael smiled, as the sun's last gleam finally vanished from the horizon. "No, Karen. It's just learning to swim."

Howard Waldrop
WINTER QUARTERS

Anything with mammoths in it is for Neal Barrett, Jr.

Perhaps I should start "When he was twelve, he ran away from the circus."
Maybe I should begin "As circuses go, it was a small one. It only had two mammoths."
I'll just start at the beginning: The phone rang.

j

"Hey, Marie!" said the voice of my friend Dr. Bob the paleontologist. "Do you remember Arnaud?"
"Was the Pope Polish?" I asked.
"Well, the circus is in town, and he's in it. Susie Neruda took her nieces and nephews yesterday and recognized him. She just called me." Then he paused. "You want to go see him?"
"I didn't think you and circuses got along," I said.
"For this, I'll ignore everything in my peripheral vision."
"When would you like to go?"
"Next show's in forty-five minutes. I'll swing by and pick you up."
"Uh, sure," I said, looking at the stack of departmental memos on my desk. I threw the antimacassar from the back of my office chair over them.
He hung up.

j

When he was twelve, he ran away from the circus. Dr. Bob Oulijian, I mean. His father had managed two of them while Bob was trying to grow up. One day he showed up on the doorstep of his favorite aunt and said, "If I ever have to see another trapeze act or smell another zebra's butt in my life, Aunt Gracie, I'll throw up." Things were worked out; Aunt Gracie raised him, and he went on to become the fairly respected head of the paleontology department in the semi-podunk portion of the state university system where we both teach. What was, to others, a dim, misty vista of life in past geologic ages, to him was, as he once said, "a better circus than anyone could have thought up."

j

We whined down the highway in his Toyota Heaviside, passing the occasional Daimler-Chrysler Faraday. A noise dopplered up behind us, and a 1932 bucket-T roadster came by, piloted by a geezer in motorcycle goggles. "Soon you'll be studying *them*," I said to Dr. Bob, pointing.
"Oh," he said. "Dinosaurs. *Très amusant.*"

j

Did I remember Arnaud?

It was while we were all—me, Dr. Bob, our colleague Dr. Fred Luntz the archaeologist, Susie Neruda (*née* Baxter)—undergraduates *here*, at this podunk branch of the North Carolina state university, just after the turn of the millennium, that Arnaud showed up. We assumed he was French, maybe Belgian or Swiss, we didn't know, because he didn't talk. Much, anyway. He had that Jacques Tati-Marcel Marceau-Fernandel body type, tall and thin, like he'd been raised in a drainpipe. He was in the drama department; before we knew him, we knew *of* him.

About half the time we saw him, he was in some form of clown *déshabille* or mime getup. We assumed it was for the acting classes, but a grad student over there said no, he just showed up like that, some days.

j

"Does he do anything special?" I asked Dr. Bob. "Did Susan say?"
"I don't think so, or she would have. I'm assuming he mostly puts out fires inefficiently and throws pies with accuracy, unless circuses have changed a great deal since my time."

j

For what do we remember Arnaud?

It was in November, his first semester, and he was out on the east mall passing out flyers, in full regalia: a polka-dot clown suit, clownwhite, bald headpiece, a hat the size of a fifty-cent flowerpot. He had a Harpo bulbhorn he honked as people came by.

The flyer said:

HITLER THE MAGNIFICENT!
An Evening of Transformational Sorcery
JONES HALL 112
7 P.M. NOVEMBER 8th

Well, uh-oh.

j

It wasn't an evening, it was more like fourteen or fifteen minutes.

It wasn't sorcery, but it was transformative: it transformed him right out of college. To say that it wasn't well received is bending the language.

Jones 112 was the big lecture hall with multimedia capabilities, and when we got there, props and stuff littered the raised lecture platform. Some pipes, a fire extinguisher, a low platform raised about a meter off the ground on two-by-four legs; some big pieces of window glass. In true Brechtian fashion prop men sat on the stage playing cards.

By seven the place was packed, SRO.

The lights went down; there were three thumps on the floor, and lights came back up.

Out came a Chaplin-mustached Arnaud in a modified SA uniform. He wore a silk top-hat with a big silver swastika on the front. He wore a cloak fashioned after one of the ones the Nazis were going to make all truck drivers wear, back when they were designing uniforms for each profession.

His assistants were a padded-up fat guy with medals all over his chest, and a little thin guy with a rat-nose mask.

First, Hitler hypnotized twenty-two million Germans: he gestured magically at a *découpage* of a large crowd held up by the two guys.

Then they painted Stars of David on the plate glass, and Hitler threw a brick through it.

His assistants came back with a big map of Poland, and he sawed it in half with a rip saw.

After each trick, he said: "Abracadabra, please and *gesundheit!*"

Then they brought out three chairs, and three people came out on stage and sat down in them.

In the first, a young woman in her twenties. In the second sat a man in his forties, playing on a violin. At the end chair, an old man in his eighties.

Hitler the Magnificent took off his cloak and covered the young woman. "Abracadabra, please and *gesundheit!*" he said, and pulled away the cloak. The chair was empty except for a wisp of smoke drifting toward the ceiling. He put the cape over the violinist, repeated the incantation, and snapped it away. In the chair was the violin and a lampshade with a number on it. He covered the old man, spoke, and raised the cloth. In the chair seat there was now a bar of soap. The thin assistant picked it up and threw it into a nearby goldfish bowl of water. "So light it floats!" he said.

Prop men lit fires along the pipes and pushed them toward Hitler the Magnificent and the two assistants. Surrounded by the closing ring of fire, with a mannequin wearing a brown-blond wig and a wedding dress in his arms, he climbed onto the two-by-four platform, miming great heights, and jumped down next to a wet Luger water pistol, while the fat and thin assistants drank green Kool-Aid from a washtub and fell to the floor.

The stagelights lowered, and the only sound was the *whoosh* of the fire extinguisher putting out the flames on the pipes.

Then the lights came back up.

You could have heard a pin drop. Then—

It wasn't quite the Paris premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913, but it might as well have been.

You'd think with the whole twentieth century behind us, and a few years of this one, and Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, most of the *oomph* would have gone out of things like this. But you'd be wrong.

I got out the fire exit about the time the firemen and the riot squad came in through it.

j

He was thrown out, of course, for violations of the University fire codes and firearms policy, for causing a riot, and for unauthorized use of Jones Hall. Plus he spent a couple of days in the city jug before he was expelled.

j

About a week before that performance, Arnaud had spoken to me for the first and only time. I was in the cafeteria (where we all usually were), alone, between classes, drinking the brown stuff they sell instead of coffee, actually doing some reading in Roman history.

I looked up. Arnaud was standing there, looking like a French foreign-exchange student.

"Ever read any Nigidius Figulus?" he asked.

Taken aback by his speaking, I still wanted to appear cool. "Not lately," I said.

"Should," he said, and walked away.

That night I got out my handbook of Latin literature. Nigidius Figulus was a neo-Pythagorean of Cicero's time, an

astrologer, a grammarian; much concerned with Fate and the will of the gods. In other words, the usual minor Roman literary jack-of-all-trades the late Republic coughed up as regular as clepsydra-work.

The next day I spent in the Classics library, reading epitomes of his writings.
Not much there for me.

j

We pulled into the parking lot of the exhibition hall where the circus was, and who do we see but Dr. Fred Luntz getting out of his car with his stepson. Bob called to him. He came over. "Susan call you, too?" asked Dr. Bob.

"No. Why?" asked Fred.

"Arnaud's in this circus."

"Arnaud? Arnaud. I'll be damned." We went in and sat down on the bleachers.

j

As circuses got, it was a small one. It only had two mammoths.

Mammontelephants, actually, but you know what I mean.

They were second-billed in the show, too—and they didn't come in with the Grand Entry Parade. (Dr. Bob noticed immediately. "They usually don't get along with other elephants," he said.) Fred's stepson, about eight, and the product of the previous marriage of his trophy wife, was looking everywhere at once. His name was of course Jason. (In ten years you'll be able to walk into any crowded bar in America and say "Jason! Brittany!" and fifty people will turn toward you....)

j

We saw Arnaud in the Grand Entry, then in the first walkaround while riggers changed from the high-wire to the trapeze acts; we watched the tumblers, and the monkeys in the cowboy outfits riding the pigs with the strapped-on Brahma bull horns; we ate peanuts and popcorn and Cracker-Jacks and cotton candy. Halfway through, the ringmaster with his wireless microphone said: "Ladeez an Genuhmen, in the center ring," (there was only one), "presenting Sir Harry Tusker and His Performing Pachyderms, Tantor and Behemoth!"

There were two long low blasts from the entrance doorway, sounds lower than an elephant's, twice as loud. I felt the hair on my neck stand up.

Walking backwards came Sir Harry Tusker, dressed in pith helmet, safari jacket, jodhpurs, and shiny boots, like old pictures of Frank Buck. In came Tantor and Behemoth—big hairy mounds with tusks and trunks, and tails like hairy afterthoughts. Their trunks were up and curved back double, and each let out a blast again, lower than the first. The band was playing, of course, Lawrence Welk's "Baby Elephant Walk."

The crowd applauded them for being *them*; Jason's eyes were big as saucers.

They went to the center of the ring and you realized just how big they really were, probably not as big as mammoths got (they were both females, of course) but big, bigger than all but the largest bull African elephants. And you're not used to seeing females with tusks two meters long, either.

They did elephant stuff—standing on their hind legs, their hairy coats swaying like old bathrobes, dancing a little. In the middle of the act a clown came out—it was Arnaud—pushing a ball painted to look like a rock, acting like it weighed a ton, and Behemoth picked it up, and she and Tantor played volleyball while Sir Harry and Arnaud held the net.

It was pretty surreal, seeing hairy elephants do that. It was pretty surreal seeing big shaggy elephants the size of Cleveland in the first place.

j

The show was over too soon for Jason.

At the souvenir booth, Dr. Fred bought him a copy of *The Shaggy Baggy Saggy Mammontelephant*, a Little Golden Book done by a grand-descendant of the author of the original elephant one. It was way below his reading level, but he didn't mind. He was in heaven while we left word and waited out back for Arnaud.

He showed up, out of makeup, looking about forty, still tall and thin. He shook hands with us like we'd seen each other yesterday. Jason asked, "Are you really a clown?"

Arnaud looked around, pointed to himself, shook his head no.

"Let's go get something to eat besides popcorn," said Dr. Bob. "When do you have to be back?" Arnaud indicated eighteen, a couple of hours.

"Come on," said Dr. Fred Luntz. We're buying."

Arnaud smiled a big smile.

j

"It's all wrong," said Dr. Fred. "They're treating them like circus elephants, only shaggy, instead of what they are. The thing with the rock is more like it, if they're going to have to perform."

Arnaud was eating from nine or ten plates—two trays—at the cafeteria a kilometer or so from the exhibition hall. The four of us had only eaten a couple of pieces of pie, Jell-o salads, and some watermelon because we were so full of

circus junk food. Arnaud's metabolism must have been like a furnace. Occasionally he would look up from eating.

"Better that, than them not being around at all," said Dr. Bob.

"Well, yes, of course. But, Sir Harry Tusker. African white-hunter archetype. All wrong for mammoths."

"Yeah, well, what do you want? Siberians? Proto-Native Americans?" asked Bob.

"I mean, there was enough grief twenty or so years ago, when they were first brought back—the Russians tried taking frozen mammoth genes from carcasses in the permafrost late last century, putting them in Indian elephants, their nearest living relatives—

"This is your friend, Dr. Bob, the paleontologist, Fred...." said Dr. Bob.

"Okay. Okay. But didn't work last century. Suddenly, it works. Exact same procedure. Suddenly, we have mammontelephants, all female of course. Big outrage; you can't bring back extinct animals to a time they're not suited for; it's cruel, etc. Like the A-Bomb and physicists; geneticists *could* bring back the dead, so they *did*. Or purt-near, anyway. So we give in. They're in zoos at first, then circuses. Ten, twenty, thirty at first, now maybe one hundred, two hundred—only a few are in the game preserves in Siberia run by the World Wildlife Fund and the Jersey Zoo (and there was a big fight about *that*). Then, five years ago, hey presto! There's males. Someone went into a male completely buried in the frozen ground and retrieved the whole system (and how's you like *that* for a job, huh Bob?) and then we have viable sperm, and now there are five or six males, including the one up in Baltimore, and more on the way. What I'm saying is, turn 'em loose somewhere, don't just look at them, or make 'em act."

"Like loose where? Like do what?" asked Bob.

"Like, I don't know," said Dr. Fred.

Arnaud continued shoveling food into his face.

"What did you think about the mammoths, Jason?" I asked him.

"Neat!" he said.

"Me, too," I said.

"Look, you know as well as I do what the real reason people want to shut all this down is," said Dr. Bob. "It's not that they don't want extinct animals brought back into a changed climate, that they have an inability to adapt from an Ice Age climate—you go up or down in altitude and get the climate you want. Mammoths in the high Rockies, in Alaska, in Siberia. Sure, no problem. And it ain't, like they *say*, that we should be saving things that are going extinct now first: they're still here, they'll have to be taken somewhere to live, and people will have to leave them alone—*island* birds, rare predators, all that. That's their big *other* argument: Fix *now* now, then fix *then*. The real reason is the same since the beginning: we're playing God, and they don't like it."

"Sure it has a religious element," said Fred. "But that doesn't mean you have to put the mammontelephants in some sort of zoo and circus limbo while you decide if there's to be more of them or not. Nobody's advocating bringing back *smilodons* (even if you could find the genetic material), or dinosaurs if you want to go the mosquito-in-amber wild goose chase. This comes down to questions of pure science—"

"If we can, we have to?"

"You're talking like the people who don't want them—or the two woolly rhinos—back," said Fred.

"No, I'm giving you their argument, like people give me. They're here because we couldn't stop ourselves from bringing them *back*, any more than we could stop ourselves from killing them *off* in the first place. Where was the religion in that?"

I was looking back and forth. I was sure they'd had this discussion before, but never in front of me. Arnaud was eating. Jason was reading his book for the tenth time.

Arnaud looked at the two docs as he finished the last of everything, including a pie crust off Fred's plate.

"Plenty religion involved," said Arnaud. "People just don't understand the *mammoths*."

Fred and Bob looked at him.

"Yeah?" asked Bob.

"They let me know," said Arnaud. He patted his stomach and nodded toward the door.

As we let him off at the circus, he reached in his shirt pocket and handed Jason six long black hairs, making a motion with his left arm hanging off his nose and his right forming a curve in front of him.

"Mammoth hair! Oh boy oh boy!" said Jason.

Then Arnaud pointed to Dr. Bob and made the signal from the sixty-year-old TV show *The Prisoner*—Be Seeing You.

j

That night I read about mammontelephants. The first were cloned less than thirty years ago, and there were some surprises. The normal gestation period for the Indian elephant is twenty-two months; for the mammontelephants it was closer to eighteen. The tusks of Indian elephant cows normally stick out less than twenty centimeters from their mouths; that of the mammontelephants two, two and a half meters and still growing. (What the tusks of the males, all six or seven of them in the world, will be, no one knows yet, as the first is only six years old now—it's guessed they could grow as long as those of fossil true bull mammoths.) Their trumpeting, as I said, is lower, deeper, and creepier than either Indian or African elephants (a separate species). It's assumed they communicate over long distances with subsonic rumbles like their relatives. They have developed the fatty humps on their heads and above their shoulders, even though most aren't in really cold climates. Yes, they have the butt-flap that keeps the wind out in cold weather. The big black long guard hairs (like the ones Arnaud gave Jason) are scattered over the thick underfur, itself forty centimeters thick. Further clonings—with twelve- and thirteen-year-old mammontelephants carrying baby

mammontelephants to term—has speeded up the process—most elephants don't reproduce until they're fifteen or so. And you get a more mammoth mammontelephant. What will happen when Mr. and Ms. Mammontelephant get together in another six or seven years? They might not like each other. That's where Science will come in again...

Pretty good for an old lady English prof, huh?

j

Everybody knew the IQRA meeting in October (hosted by the podunk portion of the University we work for) was going to have Big Trouble. The IQRA is the International Quaternary Research Association—everything prehistoric *since* the dinosaurs—and it contained multitudes, among which are people in the profession against the retrieval and propagation of extinct species. They were vocal, and because the meeting was also going to have a large bunch of paleo- and archaeogeneticists there too, the media had already started pre-coverage on it—sound bites, flashes of personalities, a fleeting glimpse of the male mammontelephant in the Baltimore Zoo.

You know. Big Trouble.

j

I know all this because Dr. Bob is the University's host for this Cenozoic shindig, and is calling me every day or so. Out of nowhere he says, "I got a *fax* from Arnaud. Can you imagine? His circus plays up in Raleigh the day before the conference opens, last show of the year before winter quarters." It had been two months since he'd eaten the cafeteria out of house and home.

"What did he say?"

"That's all. I guess he just wanted us to know. I sure as hell won't have time to see him. I'll be dodging brickbats, no doubt."

j

A week later, Dr. Bob showed up in my office.

"Uh, Marie," he said, "there've been more faxes. Lots more. Something's up. Want to be an unindicted co-conspirator?"

j

The news was full of the IQRA; you couldn't turn on your monitor or TV without seeing people with placards and signs, or Professor Somebody from Somewhere making speeches. I watched some of it, switched over to the Weather Shop. There was a guy yammering on about long-term climatic change, Big and Little Ice Ages; global warming, myth or legend; etc. I ran up their feed and got the forecast: overcast, maybe some mist, fifteen degrees, just cool enough for a sweater.

There was a cardboard box on the front porch with a note on it—MARIE: BRING THIS TO MY LECTURE. SIT ON 3D ROW AISLE.—and a wristbadge with STAFF stamped on it in deep holograms.

j

The place was mobbed. I mean outside. The campus cops had a metal detector outside the front door. City cops were parked a block away, just off campus.

I looked in the box. There was a double-bladed Mixmaster and a big glass bowl.

I threaded my way through the crowd and walked up to the campus cops, bold as brass.

"What's in the box, doc?" he said, recognizing me and looking at my wristbadge.

I opened it and showed him. "For the mai-tais at the social hour," I said. He looked at it, handed it around the detector, passed it in front of the sniffer dog. The dog looked at it like it was the least interesting thing on the earth. Then the dog looked east, whined and barked.

"That ain't his bomb bark," said the K-9 cop. "He's been acting funny all morning."

"Can I go in now?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. Sorry," said the main cop, handing me the box once I went through the metal detector with the usual nonsense.

The crowd, barred from coming in without badges, swayed back and forth and shined preprinted laser messages into any camera pointed toward them, or waved old-fashioned signs. A couple of people from my department were in there with them.

j

Dr. Bob's speech, "Long-Term Implications of Pleistocene Faunal Retrieval on Resuscitated Species: An Overview," was supposed to start at 1300, and by 1215 the place was full, including plenty of people with signs and, I saw, Professor Somebody from Somewhere I'd seen on the news. The most ominous thing: in the program, the last fifteen minutes was to be Q and A discussion.

It was a big lecture hall, with a wall to the right of the platform leading out to where I knew the building's loading dock was. The wall blocked an ugly ramp from view and destroyed most of the acoustics—it had been a local pork-barrel retrofit ten years ago. Bureaucratic history is swell, isn't it?

At 1255 Dr. Bob came in. He went up to the podium. There was mild applause and some sibilant hissing. Really.

"Thank you, thank you very much. Normally I would introduce the speaker, but hey! That's me!" There was some disturbance out at the hall doors. "I know you're all as anxious as I am for me to start. But first—a small presentation that may—or may not—shed some light on my talk. I honestly don't know what to expect any more than you do." A *boo* came from the back of the hall, loud and clear.

The lights went down, and I heard the big loading dock doors rattle up. Grey daylight came up from the ramp and—

—in came something:

It was a tall thin man, bent forward at the waist, covered in a skin garment from head to foot. He had a tail like a horse, and what I hoped were fake genitals high up on the buttocks. His head was a fur mask and above it were two reindeer antlers. The face ended in a long shaggy beard from the eyes down and he had two tufted ears like an antelope's.

In the middle of the face was a red rubber nose. The feet were two enormous clown shoes, about a meter in length, the kind that let whoever's wearing them lean almost to the ground without falling over.

The hairy figure walked around, looked at the audience, and went to the blackboard and, placing its right hand on it, blew red paint through a reed, and left the outline of its hand on the green panel.

Someone booed just as I remembered where I'd seen pictures of this thing before. Some cave painting. Dordogne? Lascaux? Trois Frères, that's it. The thing was usually called the Sorcerer of Trois Frères, thought to be some shaman of the hunt, among the bison and horses and rhinos drawn and scratched on the walls of the cave 25,000, 40,000 years ago....

Tantor and Behemoth walked in through the loading-ramp door.

It got *real* quiet, then.

The Sorcerer picked up a child's toy bow and arrow and fired a rubber-tipped arrow into Tantor, who backed down the ramp, out of sight of the audience. I could see the shadow of another man there, from where I sat. He was pulling something up over one of his arms.

The Sorcerer mimed being hot, and Behemoth swayed like she was about to faint. The man pulled down his animal skin to the waist, and fired another suction-cup arrow into Behemoth's hairy side; she backed out of the room.

The Sorcerer took off his costume (except the rubber nose and clown shoes), which left him in a diaper. He played with a small ziggurat, then took the model of a trireme from someone on the left side of the room, then a bishop's crozier from another (how had I not seen all these props and people when I came in?). Then he put on a lab coat and glasses, came down to where I sat, and took the mixer from me ("*Bonjour*," he whispered), and went back to the stage, where someone—Dr. Bob?—threw him a pair of Faded Glory blue jeans with double helixes painted on them (*one* person in the audience actually laughed). He plugged in the mixer, threw the jeans into the glass bowl and watched them swirl around and around, took them out, went to the right stage wall and—an elephant's trunk, a cloth puppet on the arm of the man whose shadow I watched on the loading-ramp wall, along with those of the mammontelephants—snaked around the corner and grabbed the jeans and disappeared.

The lab-coated figure waited, then Tantor and Behemoth walked back onstage again, their eyes dark as dots of tar, their small double-hand-sized ears twitching.

The man went to the blackboard, picked up the hollow reed, and blew red ocher pigment onto his right hand.

Slowly he held it up, palm toward the mammontelephants.

Tantor and Behemoth bowed down onto their front knees. They curled their trunks up in the same double-curve as those on the elephant statues in the Babylon sequence of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. And then they gave the long slow loud trumpets of their kind, a sound cutting across a hundred centuries. Every hair on my body shot straight up.

The lights went off. I saw shadows of shapes leaving, heard a truck start up. The loading door clanged down with a crash, and a spotlight slowly came up, centered on the red outline of the hand on the blackboard.

Then the houselights came back up and Dr. Bob Oulijian was alone at the lectern.

We were at the freight depot with Sir Harry Tusker and Arnaud.

They made ready to load Behemoth and Tantor onto their personal freight car. "*Everybody else*," said Sir Harry, "goes by truck to winter quarters in Florida. *We* go by train to Wisconsin, the shores of Lake Geneva. We join up with the circus again in March. The girls here get to play in the winter. Me and Arnaud get to freeze our balls off out *there*." He pointed northwest.

Arnaud stood with Tantor's trunk wreathed around his right arm. He scratched her under the big hairy chin. "Better load up," said the freightman.

"West at three hundred kilometers per hour," said Sir Harry. Then: "Girls! Hey!" he yelled. "*Umgawa!*"

They started up the concrete ramp. Then something—a change in the wind? a low rumble from far away, from the direction of Baltimore? indigestion?—caused both mammontelephants to stop. They lifted their trunks, searching the wind, and let out their long low rumbling squeals.

"*Umgawa!*" said Sir Harry Tusker, again.

Behemoth took Tantor's tail, and followed her up the ramp and onto their private car.

Sir Harry and Arnaud followed, turned, waved, closed the doors of the car, and waved again through the small windows. In a few minutes the train was gone, and in a few more, beyond the city limits, would be a westbound blur. Though it was October, and though this was North Carolina, that night it snowed.

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Graham Joyce
PARTIAL ECLIPSE

I know that Myra goes to bed every night and whispers, "Dear God please let the aliens come back."

It's morning, and a diffuse winter sunlight bleeds through the curtains. I roll over in bed and stroke the warm, tanned swelling of Myra's belly, feeling the quickening under the callused pads of my fingers. It's just a tiny vibration, not unlike the attack note on the E-string. Myra opens her eyes sleepily and smiles at me. It's all beautiful. I want it to be beautiful. But now every expectant mother and father wants their infant to be born with an alien inside them.

"Anything?" I say.

She gives a tiny shake of her head, *no*. Just as she has done for nearly seven years now. Just as I do when she asks me.

"You?"

But she doesn't really have to ask. She knows that if the answer was yes then I would have woken her to tell her. Instead, so we don't have to think about it, I stroke her belly, because I know that by running the heel of my hand along the rim of her thrilling pink pot I can make the baby kick. And it does. *She* does.

"I saw her foot!" I shout. I can still see it. Or maybe it's an elbow, but anyway it tracks along the curve of Myra's belly, rippling flesh as it goes, and then withdraws.

"You're convinced it's a girl," she says. "You're wrong."

Myra's awake now. She'll have to get out of bed. She's about a week away from her time, and I know the baby is pressing on her bladder. But as she swings her legs out of bed she pauses, strokes her huge stomach, and says, "There was a moment. In the middle of the night..."

"Yes?" I hardly dare breathe.

"No, it wasn't anything really. It was just..."

"Tell me."

"I can't say for sure. I had to go to the bathroom, and it was in that moment when I was waking up, half-asleep, I thought I heard my baby calling to me. Would that count?"

I lie back, thinking, *Would that count?* Would it count? I don't know.

"I mean," says Myra, "I know he *can't* call to me, so it might have been a dream. Or I might have simply imagined it because I so badly wanted to dream?"

I nod, but it sounds to me like no, it doesn't count. You see, there have been these rumors about pregnant women dreaming. "New wives' tales," you might call them. We've been yearning for it to happen since Myra's pregnancy was first confirmed.

Nothing.

I get up and ready myself for work. I can hear our daughter Mandy stirring in her room. Myra sees me select the Blucher. I love the unusual workmanship. The belly is spruce and the back, waist, and neck are polished maple. The hole is slightly elliptical, shaping a delicious ooze and throb in the resonance.

She raises her eyebrows as I lay the guitar in my battered carrying case and gently lock the clasps. "We're re-recording Teppi's early piece." God, it's hard to sound enthusiastic.

"Not that old thing! Didn't you do that a couple of years ago?"

"Six years ago," I point out. "And we're doing this much slower. Slow. Very slow."

"Surely there's more you could do than that!" And she looks at me, because she knows it makes me sad. She kisses me, and off I go to work.

j

Floyd picks me up. He has his cello in the boot, so I lay the Blucher gently in the backseat. "I've got one for you," he says brightly.

My heart sinks, and I stare at the stalled traffic ahead. "Go on."

"He's six years old. Last week he drew hundreds of people in Manchester. Hundreds. The week before that, Leeds, and you couldn't get a seat."

I've heard all this routine before. "What does he play?"

"That's it. He's not a musician. He's a storyteller."

"Give us a break, Floyd! Six years old?"

"He's in town tomorrow night. You and Myra, me and Zelda."

Like I say, I've been down this road before with Floyd. Mostly with kiddie musos, admittedly, but with the

occasional storyteller too. It is a road of stony disappointment every time, but Floyd is a sucker. He wants to believe. He needs to. Maybe I'm mean, but you wouldn't get me to part with the price of the tickets any more, and Floyd knows that. There are too many spivs fleecing decent, hopeful people like Floyd and Zelda.

Floyd reads my thoughts. "My treat," he says. "Now then, do you know what we're doing today?"

"Sure." It's getting even harder to sound bright. "Early Teppi."

"Aw, fuck!" says Floyd. "Not Teppi again. That really has spoiled my day." And he leans hard on his horn just to prove it, scaring a hapless cyclist.

And even though I try hard to fake it, I have to admit that down in the recording studio it's a fucking bore, all day long. It's not Teppi's fault. Teppi is wonderful, complex and varied. But it's not enough. Even if I had never heard Teppi before, even if I hadn't recorded him faster, slower, *con brio*, who cares, we just can't make ourselves bleed for him. He, like all the others, takes the awful blame for not being *new*.

Floyd tries. We all try. Mid-morning I see Floyd's shiny black skin, like an aubergine, perspiring from the point on his receding hairline as he works his cello for the complicated fifth. A crackling voice from the control box cuts in and we're told to take a break. Moments later I walk into the washroom and I hear Floyd weeping. He's bent over a basin so he doesn't know I'm there. I leave before he sees me.

While waiting for Floyd to emerge from the washroom I talk with Vanessa. Always bright, always jolly, Vanessa is a brick. Superb pianist. Before the aliens left, Vanessa had a dazzling career ahead of her, with three recordings of her own steely jazz-rock compositions under her belt. Of course, that was nearly seven years ago, but she doesn't seem to let it get her down.

Floyd swings out of the bathroom, chipper, all smiles now that he sees Vanessa, so he pours himself a cup of Darjeeling and treats us to one of his jokes. Old jokes, of course. He knows Vanessa will laugh. He knows I will, too. Gosh, it's a very old one. So old I see the punch line laboring up the hill like a cart horse ready for the knackers, and unfortunately I laugh a moment too soon.

The following evening we put on best bib and tucker and turn up at the De Montfort Hall, where this six-year-old is expected to perform. Myra is somewhat uncomfortable, being so big, but she doesn't want to disappoint Floyd and Zelda. Anyway, she knows we won't get out so much after the baby arrives.

"Oh, let me!" Zelda admires Myra's bump, placing the flat of her palm on the underbelly. Zelda has beautiful long manicured fingers. She and Floyd have kids of their own, but they're almost grown-up. "It's a boy," she says. "You're carrying at the front."

That's what they said about Mandy. Nobody really knows.

Then Zelda stoops and puts her cheek against Myra's bump, as if she's trying to listen through the distended skin and into the womb. "Oh please let him dream!" she says softly.

We're caught. Trapped. Left dangling by Zelda's overt remark, and we all look away. A disembodied voice on the PA tells us that the performance will commence in three minutes.

"Come on," Floyd says.

I think he looks slightly angry.

We take our seats, and I'm amazed that the hall is full to capacity. I mean, we've all been hoaxed and duped and gyped and bilked so many times over the last few years you'd think it impossible to fill a hall this size ever again. But no. As I swing round checking for faces I might recognize, I see there's not a single vacant seat. The house lights go down, there's some nervous coughing, the curtains open.

First a warm-up act, a seven-piece jazz ensemble. Floyd looks at me as if to say, not bad but not good either, though we're both pretty stern critics. I recognize the opening piece but I can't put a name to it: Floyd will know. The fact is my mind is on the kid, and I don't like it.

Six years old. That's the ticket, isn't it? Six. I just don't like the idea of this six-year-old having to carry the weight of expectation—and the inevitable disappointment—of the 1500 people in the audience. I think of my own six-year-old Mandy, at home with her babysitter, and how I would never allow her to be put through this.

But there's big money in it, and even when it goes wrong the promoters and, presumably, the kid's parents get to pocket the admissions charges. Because nothing can ever be proved conclusively, can it?

Polite applause dispatches the ensemble and the stage is rearranged for the kid. Big chair in the middle, overhead microphone, one chair either side for what I see in the program are the kid's "guardians" rather than his parents. I point this out to Myra.

"Cynical," she says. I think she means the manipulation of the kid but she adds, "You're so cynical." She strokes her bulge. I know the chair isn't comfortable for her.

The kid comes on and he's a funny-looking thing. He's wearing a starched collar too big for his neck. He's pale under the limelight, his hair is plastered to his head and his ears stick out like wing nuts. Poor little runt. But he looks precociously unflustered by the size of the audience. His "guardians" take their seats either side of him as the kid is introduced by the emcee. Polite applause dies down and the kid waits, creating a tension in the hall, and I know, I just *know*, he's been coached to do this.

He leans forward slightly and says, "Once upon a time."

And the audience goes wild. Rapturous applause. This is irony, you see. Laid on with a teaspoon. From a six-year-old. It's a little message for critical observers like myself, for the skeptics and the doubters and disbelievers. It's post-post-postmodern. Or something. From a six-year-old sprog. And the audience laps it up.

It takes a while for this little riot to die down before he launches into the story proper. And I have to admit it, he's not bad for a six-year-old. He delivers well, his story is pacy, he's got good kiddie timing, and he speaks clearly. What

more could anyone want?

The one thing we all want. The one thing we would willingly sacrifice all the above qualities to have.

I identify the story after just a few minutes. Most people in the audience don't yet, but they will, because the narrative pattern will occur to them. It happens to be an old Romanian folktale, about a bear who walks through an anonymous landscape meeting other animals, challenging all of them to guess what he has under his hat. How do I know it? Because two years ago we re-recorded almost the complete collection of Moldovan's work—faster or slower, I can't recall—and there was a libretto borrowing from the tale. Floyd has clocked it too, because he turns to me with an expression of apology on his face. I smile back thinly.

I mean, what are we supposed to do? Interrupt the proceedings and denounce the six-year-old in front of 1500 people? Jump to my feet and shout, "This isn't original! I spy a Romanian folk tale!"

Nah. In any event, there is already a sense of slumping attention in the audience. Many have worked it out for themselves. The familiar narrative pattern, linked with inauthenticities in the manner the kid has been trained to deliver, will give it away. But an audience in denial is an astonishing thing, and the kid holds it for twelve minutes before ending the tale.

The audience applauds loudly, but—and it's a significant *but*—not so loudly as they greeted his opening line. The emcee proposes a break, and promises us another performance by the ensemble before the prodigy will offer us a second tale.

Not for us. We're out of there, as are a reasonable percentage of the audience judging by the bustling cloakroom activity. "Well," says Zelda, helping Myra on with her coat. "I hadn't heard it before."

"Me neither," says Myra huffily.

Floyd's levitated eyebrows exhort me to say nothing. We adjourn to The Long Memory for a drink before home.

j

And a drink turns into seven or eight, as it must. There has been a lot more drunkenness these last few years, a lot more alcoholism. Drink and drugs: they give a semblance of dreaming, don't they? Helping us to remember. An approach to dreaming. A dullard's kick against the thick, thick ice.

"A man walks into a bar," says Floyd.

We're trying to invent a joke again. It's a dead loss, because there hasn't been a new joke in almost seven years, but we're pissed as newts in a pickle jar so we try anyway. Floyd says, start with the old structures, it makes things easier.

"A man walks into a bar..."

"Says, 'ouch!' " Zelda chips in.

"Old. Very, very old," Myra says. She's not drinking because of the baby. Her tolerance for our "hilarious" drunkenness is wearing thin. She's already reached for her coat.

"Really?" Zelda protests. "I thought I'd just made it up. I really did." She's slurring.

"A man bars into a walk." Floyd says.

"Give us a break!" Myra almost screams. "Come on, Jonathan, take me home."

I think it's the interpreting I miss most. Though an interpreted dream is a punctured dream, at least in those days you could be certain of a steady supply, and the fun was in the mystery, the guessing, the deconstructing, the reassembling. We can all out-argue Freud when we own the theater.

We say goodnight to Floyd and Zelda; lush, slobbering kisses all round. They stay for another drink as I shamble out of the swinging doors of The Long Memory, supported by my heavily pregnant wife. I complain bitterly about being made to leave early.

"It was time," Myra says. "You know what will happen after the next drink. Floyd will get weepy. Then Zelda will get weepy because Floyd is weepy. Then we'll all have a stupid argument the subject of which no one will remember. Come on, stand up."

"It's only the booze," I say as we reach the car.

Myra gets into the driver's seat. She can barely fit her bump under the steering wheel. "The thing is," she says, tickling the ignition into life, "in knowing when it's time to go."

j

Time to go. The aliens presumably knew it was time to go. Everyone can remember the moment when they quit the planet. When they quit *us*. And just as with the Kennedy assassination, everyone knows what they were doing at the time it happened: they were sleeping.

The aliens appeared to everyone in a dream. Not the same dream exactly, but almost. You see, the aliens had to take some form in which to say farewell. For some it was a grandmother, for others a long-lost friend; for others still, a pet dog they'd had as a kid: for me my beloved collie, Nelly, long dead. But the message was the same. *Thank you for hosting us*, they said. *We're very grateful*, they said. *But we've had enough*, they said.

They were apologetic that their stay was so brief. Five hundred thousand years residing inside our heads was, for them, a regrettably short stay. The twinkle of an eye. It was short but interesting, they said. But they dearly hoped that we had enjoyed the fruits of their presence as much as they had enjoyed an exhilarating ride.

Everyone remembers being addressed in the same way, whether by grandmother or dog. Polite, somewhat formal, slightly abashed. Then the dream image had transformed into a cube of black light on a black background, before

infolding into complete absence. The world awoke to a stunned comprehension of what had happened.

Since which time no one has dreamed.

Not a flicker. Lacunæ on a global scale. A collective lobotomy.

j

Back home, Myra climbs into bed as I gargle with mouthwash and brush my teeth and try to sober up a bit. I know if I flop into bed the world will spin and I'll feel the nausea, so instead I go into my daughter's room and watch her sleeping.

I perch on the edge of Mandy's bed, just watching her. In the moment of observing her sleep her room becomes a peaceful chapel or a quiet temple. Wind chimes tinkle softly at the window open a little to the night air. I sense her sleeping spirit at large, roaming, restless, looking for something, a Neverland, a Narnia. She's flying, but she can't find anywhere to land. I love her so much I could cry. She's six years old, and she has never dreamed.

I have this confession to make: in the dark, at night, while she's sleeping, I whisper things in the delicate conch of my sleeping child's ear. Any things. Remembered fables. Old tales. Strange stories. Religious parables. Fragments. Anything that occurs to me. Heaven knows why, but the other day I heard myself saying *Allah is great, there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet*. Then I sang her a song in French about dancing on the bridge of Avignon.

Trying to create dreams for her. Trying to pierce the shell, hole the ice.

It took us a while to work out that the aliens hadn't *stolen* our dreams. The aliens *were* the dreams. It was difficult to understand initially, generations of us brought up on notions of aliens as basically humanoid with latex rubber heads, or with eggshell-blue skin, or as disembodied human brains encased in a pink gas.

The aliens residing in the consciousness of humanity for half a million years were a benevolent virus. They needed symbiosis, a host to achieve sentience, and that is what we gave them. What did they give us in return? Stories, music, religion. Tools, scientific ideas. Jokes, connections. The synaptic fire.

After their departure they became known to us as Prometheans.

Since then our stories have dried up. Our music has frozen. Our science is arrested. No one has had an original notion in seven years. We are lodged in the mud of time, fossilized. We are consigned to limbo, and the cold wind of uncreation howls in our ears like a demon. Our species, all of humanity, has become the preterite, the passed over. Our psychic teeth, pulled.

And at nights I whisper in my child's tender ear, trying and failing to incubate the glory of dreaming.

j

Myra wakes in the morning and, with a struggle, sits up in bed. I blink my eyes open, and she shakes her head, *no*, again. She hauls herself to her feet and walks naked to the bathroom, magnificent and comical, the morning light shining on the stretched skin of her huge pot. She mutters something about swollen feet, and I wonder if our baby is going to arrive on the seventh anniversary of the departure of the aliens.

We are post-dreaming now, of course. Almost a new way of dating human history, ante- and post-dreaming. For academics, at any rate. The huge joke (I use the word loosely) is that in the entire field of intellectual endeavor only certain academics—critical theorists, social commentators, and cultural analysts—proceed as if nothing has happened, busily producing unfathomable papers on post-dreaming society.

Of course, not everyone buys the idea that we've lost it. Creativity, I mean. Originality. Innovation. Breakthrough. Those slavering puppies up at the University, for example, publishing their breathtakingly incomprehensible theses and self-serving tracts. But they're about the only ones. Hence the spectacle of six-year-old prodigies conning huge audiences desperate for the succor of the new.

Myra is thinking about something. She returns from the bathroom stroking her belly, two deep vertical creases between her eyebrows. "Out with it," I say.

She sits on the bed again, but with her back to me. "What if," she begins; "what if there were not innumerable aliens?"

I think I know what's coming. It has occurred to me already.

"I mean," she continues, "it would be odd, wouldn't it, if there were exactly the same number of aliens as there were people, and they just happened to match up, one apiece as it were. Are you with me?"

"Yes. Go on."

"So what if really there was only one alien. Inhabiting all of us. And that single alien decided to leave us. That would make more sense, wouldn't it?"

"It's a thought," I say, trying to sound light.

"Then that single alien who left us. Might that be what we've always called God?"

This is too complicated. I don't want to think about this, so I just kiss Myra and go downstairs to make some coffee.

j

Is this the end? Have we arrived at some feeble conclusion to human history, terrible in its banality? Not the nightmare end. Not the four horsemen. Not the holocaust, nor the nuclear winter, nor the global warming, nor the asteroid storm. Just this exhaustion. Just this absence. Like a watch spring run down.

I think this might be worse than the apocalyptic ending. The absence of poetry, of music, of narrative; this muted fanfare; the end of the never-ending movie. Not by fire or ice, but by indifference. An indifference that leaves us at the mercy of eternity.

Mandy is up and awake. Warm spring sunlight streams through the windows. She has the door open and is running for the swing I erected for her under the big old lilac tree. I leave the coffee to bubble and follow her out. The lilac flower is rampant, intoxicating.

Mandy sees me. She giggles. "Push me, Daddy! Come on!"

And I push her back and forth, and she moves from shadow into light with each swing. She wants to go dangerously high. "Faster, Daddy, Faster!"

Then I see the expression change on her face, and I step back to allow the swing to slow. "What is it?"

She spits something into her hand, and it's with relief I see it's only a milk tooth, slightly bloody at the root. It's her last one. She hands me the milk tooth as if she's trusting me with a precious stone or a talisman. I'm not sure what to do with it.

"Push me again! Higher! Higher!"

j

First contact was something we speculated about for a hundred years. Of course *they* would be carbon-based, even roughly humanoid; of course *they* would somehow vocalize; of course *they* would occupy the same plane of time and space. Not intersecting like this. Not like a finger of smoke inserted into the brain. How could we have guessed that *first contact* was already made perhaps half a million years ago?

Mandy swings from shadow into the dappled morning sunlight, giggling, calling for me to push her higher and higher, and I clutch Mandy's milk tooth, a droplet of dew in my fist, and I think: *Is it one alien? Or is it one for each of us?* And I wonder what I'm going to tell Mandy come the day she asks me.

Myra comes out to us in her silk kimono, sleepily pushing a stray curl behind her ear. Mandy jumps off the swing to let her mother sit, a sincere gesture but one copied from adults around her these last couple of months. But she wants to push Myra on the swing.

"Gently," Myra says. "Just gently. I don't want to go high."

I go back in and bring out the coffee on a tray. Mandy pushes Myra gently back and forth on the swing, babbling happily, and I notice Myra is frowning. She mouths something at me and points to her ear, indicating I should listen.

"...And she said they were sorry. It was a long time. They wouldn't normally have gone such a long time and they didn't like to leave for longer periods than they had stayed, but they couldn't help it and anyway a long time ago is the same as the near future for them and tomorrow is half the length of only a part of yesterday and—"

I stop Mandy from talking and I stall the swing. "Who? Who said this?"

"Nelly," says Mandy still intent on pushing Myra back and forth; and the overpowering scent of the lilac makes me feel giddy and I say, "Who is Nelly?"

"Don't be silly Daddy, you know Nelly. She's a dog. She was your dog when you were a little boy. Have you still got my tooth?"

"Yes, yes, I've still got it here," and I'm holding this tray of coffee and I don't know what to do with it. "When did Nelly tell you this?"

"In the night while I was asleep, Nelly came and told me she was sorry to be away so long but she was back and all her friends would come back—"

"Jonathan!" says Myra, but I'm too interested in what Mandy is saying to look up.

I sweep Mandy up in my arms and hurry back inside, where I switch on the television. Mandy is still speaking. "—And I had a little talk with Selina in Mummy's tummy because I know she's a girl though you don't know and—"

"Jonathan!" Myra calls from the garden, but it's all over the television. Reports flooding in from Auckland and Fiji, from Vladivostok and Brisbane, from Osaka and Jakarta! And from Islamabad and Nairobi, from Israel and Cairo, Eastern Europe, anyplace where people go to sleep and wake up before we do, and nearer to home, too, people waking from dreaming, rushing out into the streets in tears and madness just to try to recount what has happened to them in the night, not everyone, to be sure, but millions, yes, millions of people, maybe half the global population, dreaming dreams, gut-spilling their experiences as the report sweeps across the globe like the shadow of an eclipse, or a tsunami of unparalleled joy, or a single unbearably beautiful musical note resonating around the planet and I don't know if it was all a warning, or a punishment or an aberration but whatever it was we are going to be allowed to dream again, dream and create, and I know that this time we need to be more careful but my heart is bursting as I understand implicitly that we are to be given back our wings.

"Jonathan!"

I rush back out into the garden and Myra is gazing at me with a strange expression, half desperation, half appeal, and her kimono has fallen open and the sunlight flares on a mercurial rivulet along her thigh and it has started and I want to put down the coffee and to listen more to Mandy and to watch the sensational news reports on TV and to get my wife to hospital and I want to hand back the tooth and I'm staring, staring at the heraldic trickle, the catch-light of the silver manifesto, unable to do anything, paralyzed by the torrent of words my daughter is speaking while I am drunk on lilac and imminence.

"Jonathan," Myra says firmly, hauling herself out of the swing, "just put the coffee down."

So I put the tray of coffee down on the grass and I go and get the pre-packed bags and when I've got the car ready Myra and Mandy get in.

"Selina will be my sister, won't she?" says Mandy.

"Yes. Fasten your seat belt."

"Selina will have lots of dreams, won't she?"

"Yes," I say, sparking the car into life.

Mandy thinks for a bit. "Is Selina coming now?"

"Yes," Myra says. "You're very sure it's a girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," Mandy replies, "because in the night they told me that another half a million years is starting. Have you still got my tooth?"

I say yes, I still have her tooth. It is still squeezed in my fist like a token of some miraculous covenant as I drive us to the hospital, because the baby is coming.

A. R. Morlan
CINÉ RIMETTATO

All those kinds of neat special-effects-type things will become standard features of PCs over the next five years. Our whole thing has been to take technology and not have it be a barrier. So anybody who has got the creativity doesn't have to learn the bites and bytes.

—Bill Gates, "The Emperor Strikes Back"
Entertainment Weekly, January 7, 2000

(In 1995) [Dusty Springfield] had just won a round in her battle with cancer and seemed to be in no hurry to get back to the recording studio. "Although if someone let me record an album of every cover I've ever dreamed of singing, I might think about it," she coolly intoned.

Sadly she never got to make that album. But here's what it might have sounded like...

—Rob Hoerburger, "The Sound of... Pop" from "The Lives They Lived"
The New York Times Magazine, January 2, 2000

Roger Ebert had nothing to do with the creation of *Ciné Rimettato per se*, but that essay he wrote about the CR "remakes" for his "Questions for the Movie Answer Man" column sure as hell made things a lot harder for guys like me and Keith, and never mind the intellectual property attorneys representing all those film makers *Ciné Rimettato* had (take your pick here) ripped off, venerated, or just plain perplexed, befuddled, and baffled.

Not that a person could blame Ebert. He'd been inundated with so many e-mails and letters asking about the films *Ciné Rimettato*... reworked, that he felt obligated to download them for himself, just as thousands of webheads had already done for the past five or six years.

And, like most of the others who'd logged on out of curiosity or boredom, or just plain stumbled on the sites after following random links associated with someone or something they'd wanted to know more about, Ebert was hooked.

Because *Ciné Rimettato* wasn't the typical microcinema site of short films, featuring *Blair Witch Project* spoofs or anything like those wonderful Billy Crystal Oscar-night movie send-ups. Parody had nothing to do with it; not one word of dialogue was changed, and each CR "film" was—where applicable—shot-by-shot true to the original. Even as they were wildly, wondrously, and wholly changed, by virtue of the smallest of alterations to the cinematic fabric of the whole.

And while Ebert was as lavish with his praise as he was with the tacit warnings that *Ciné Rimettato*'s films broke just about every copyright, fair trade, and intellectual property law known, his message was unmistakable:

These films are the best thing you'll never see at your local multiplex or rent from Blockbuster.

He didn't need to tell anyone to seek them out—people simply *did*.

Which is why I was sitting through my third viewing of *Ciné Rimettato's The Terminator* (all of CR's "remakes" were clearly labeled *as such*), watching Lance Henriksen's Terminator blast all the unfortunate patrons of club Tech Noir who stood between him and Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor, waiting for my partner Keith to come back from his interview with one of the actors from another CR remake of a classic, the former *Stand by Me*, now CR-dubbed *The Body*.

Even though I'd already seen it twice, I still reflexively jumped in my chair when Henriksen crashed through that club window—I don't know if it was the actor's quietly determined expression, or his smaller-than-the-original-Terminator's frame flying through that glass, but I was spooked. Me, a twelve-year veteran of the FBI's Profiling and Behavioral Assessment Unit, who'd sat across too-small wooden tables in more than one maximum security prison spending quality time with serial killers who'd told me with smiles in their eyes that they'd be able to unscrew my head from my neck easier than I could open up a jar of olives... if they felt like it. I suppose the whole effect of this particular remake was the small-threat factor; how something seemingly innocuous and gentle can become so fearsome when it attacks. James Cameron had basically said as much years before this "film" emerged bit-by-byte on the Web, he'd wanted to cast Henriksen in the role, but the special effects technology back in the mid-1980s was insufficient to allow for a lean, compact "Terminator"... a situation remedied by the time *T-2* was made, but apparently the initial casting glitch niggled at the mind/minds behind *Ciné Rimettato*... or more correctly, "Cinema Put-Right."

Not feeling up to a continued adrenalin surge so late in the afternoon, I shut off the video, and, in anticipation of Keith's arrival, I turned my chair around to face the VCR on Keith's desk, the one with the tape the lab guys had

created from our download of *The Body*.

Out of all the re-creations, this one had us stumped. Until it appeared a couple of years ago, we'd been working under the assumption that CR was something of a would-be casting director's wet dream. Except for putting Harris Glenn Milstead (the actor known as Divine) in the Sydney Greenstreet role of Ferrari in *Casablanca* (along with the better-known almost-cast Ann Sheridan as Ilse Lund and Ronald Reagan as Rick Blane), which in turn may have been attributable to Mr. Ebert's 1985 review of *Trouble in Mind*, in which the good critic actually compared Divine's performance as Hilly Blue to Mr. Greenstreet, the recasting of each CR "production" was based on Hollywood lore regarding actual screen tests or offers turned down. Hence, "Ten Scenes from *GWTW*" consisted of the epic's ten best, most memorable scenes redone with women like Paulette Goddard and Bette Davis (who, in my opinion, did a far superior "reading" of the "As God is my witness, I'll never go hungry again" speech in that backlit field), while the revamped *The Cable Guy* gave the world what might have been Chris Farley's most unique and—ironically—just about funniest performance since the airplane bathroom sequence in *Tommy Boy*. Putting Farley's two-time film partner David Spade into the Matthew Broderick role was a bit of a departure, since no one could be sure he would've gotten the role even had Farley decided to take it. But even Keith (who normally isn't into comedies) had to admit the result was eerily hysterical.

Figuring out the *how* of these films had been the job of the guys down in the FBI's tech department, and they'd filed their jargon-filled reports over a year ago with the newest Attorney General. But the *why* continued to stump everyone brought in on the case... which is why one of the Assistant Directors up High had the last-ditch idea of having a profiler or two try to get into the head of this particularly elusive Unknown Subject. Even Keith had to admit it beat the hell out of looking at crime scene photos and delving into the psyches of human mutants who killed, raped, or blew up people for what basically amounted to sport and/or what they considered a basic need.

Before I leaned over to turn on *The Body*, I glanced over my shoulder at the greenboard where Keith had started our list of personality traits for the CR UNSUB which, despite the immeasurably vast difference in each criminal's crime, wasn't all that different—so far—from that of the majority of serial killers we'd dealt with over the years:

white male
middle-aged (35–45)
college education/tech school/self-schooled (??)
cinema buff
single
lives alone/self-employed
owns large house/loft/converted warehouse
needs storage space for multiple computers
no criminal record/possible legal background/aspirations
peripheral film/theater ties/aspirations
speaks/understands Italian (possible B.A.?)

That was about it. Five exquisitely remastered, rethought, and reconceptualized movies later, each done with artistic thoroughness and imagination despite the self-imposed constraint of remaining as true to possible to the original work, and we'd come up with a profile that added up to three-quarters Unabomber and one-quarter D. W. Griffiths, with a trace of computer geek thrown in for seasoning.

But *The Body* challenged our profile. Before it appeared (and was brought to the attention of millions of Web surfers, thanks to all the links—the crucial one to Stephen King's own site, or because of the original cast's subsequent careers)—we'd considered our UNSUB to be someone who felt slighted in his own life, and who sympathized with actors who'd been passed over for or who'd not taken roles which might have changed their careers. The type of guy who'd been passed over for promotions, or whose previous programming efforts had been co-opted by his employers. (That the software which made *Ciné Rimettato* possible wasn't owned by any of the Big Names in the biz was a given; if it was it would've been selling for \$1K a pop in every computer supplies store and catalogue around.)

Yet there it was. *The Body* as no one had ever imagined it back when it was known and loved by moviegoers as *Stand by Me*. Although the original casting had never been in doubt, the makers of *Ciné Rimettato* had, decided to put something right that no one had previously considered to be wrong.

I've been a fan of Richard Dreyfuss since *American Graffiti* came out when I was a senior in high school, and I adored his narration of *Stand by Me*... but when I saw *The Body*, I was first dumbfounded, then exhilarated, as much as I'd been when I first read the novella upon which the movie was based.

And the irony is, Kevin Spacey wasn't a major player in Hollywood when the film was cast in 1985; hell, he was only twenty-six, much too young to play The Writer, and way too old to play any of Ace's gang. But matters of age and time meant nothing to the genius who created the digital miracles of *Ciné Rimettato*.

So, there he was, parked on the back road, newspaper in hand. As genuine-looking and as character-specific as anyone might want, playing a role wholly unlike Verbal Kint or *Seven's* John Doe or Buddy Ackerman in *Swimming With Sharks*, or even the suburban love-slave Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*. About the only thing Keith and I could ascribe to another movie Spacey *had* been in was his hairdo, which was straight out of his smallish role as the editor Osborn in *Henry and June*, a sort of modified bangs over the forehead thing, very mid-eighties in this particular context. And the voice *was* Spacey, voice analysis proved it (as our tech guys had likewise proved was the case in every CR revamp; no impressionists or imitations were utilized, *à la* Humphrey Bogart's voice in the "You, Murderer" episode of *Tales from the Crypt*, back in 1995—a scant five years before Bogart's *Casablanca* role was itself CR

recast), but he'd never, ever uttered any of those lines in any of his movies or filmed stage performances to date.

The verbal cadence, the dry inflections, the explicit subtext, it was all there... only Spacey had never stepped into a recording studio to dub those lines. I don't know why, considering that other CR "actors" had turned in posthumous "performances," but this particular movie, out of the whole CR "catalogue," gripped me. Maybe it was the way the actor's performance changed the entire subtext of the movie—what was only slightly dark, tempered by Dreyfuss's innate deft touch with words and subtext, was now far more edgy, intense, with undercurrents of unshakable mourning. Definitely more in tune with the performance of the young Writer, Gordie La Chance. Oh, I'd noticed earlier (who hadn't, really?) that Richard Dreyfuss and Wil Wheaton didn't look all that much alike, what with their different hair and eye color, and body types, and their voices weren't that similar either (although when it comes to a twelve-year-old boy, who knows what he will sound like at forty or so), but it wasn't a major issue in the film, and give the strength of the movie as a whole, it didn't actually matter... until *Ciné Rimettato* came along.

And the irony was, a person could appreciate both films, for what they were and for what they weren't; I think Keith was right when he said the titles said it all. One film was King's *The Body*, and the other was what it was, period.

Another irony was that of all the CR "movies" this one was changed the least... and actually improved upon in a few scenes—the small technical problems concerning the infamous train-on-the-bridge scene and the subsequent swamp-crossing/leech sequence had been cleaned up, not in a flashy manner, but as if to say, As long as I'm doing one change, I'll just fix these small glitches—

More of an afterthought, really; I didn't catch them myself until Keith and I ran the original film side by side with the remake, with the sound turned off, just to catalogue the actual differences. Which is when we came across the UNSUB's signature... a detail that simultaneously brought our profile closer to that of what I now considered a "real" criminal even as it made out elusive quarry far more quirky and human than either Keith or I had dared to hope for, given the virtually reflective firewall of graphic mastery he possessed....

"Thought you'd be sitting on your can, Rune." Keith's voice echoed warmly in the small confines of our temporary office space; I'd been so engrossed in Spacey's piquant line-reading of how his younger self had become the "lost boy" that summer of 1959 that I hadn't heard Keith open the door or come in. And given Keith's hefty 250-plus weight, stretched over a six-four frame, said frame not known for being light on his oxfords, his voice made me start visibly in my chair.

I thumbed "pause" on the remote, and turned around to face him. Luckily for my neck, he sat down so that we were almost eye to eye before he added, "You were right, my man, the guy didn't have much more to say than the tech guys upstairs already told us. But it's a shame you lost the coin toss... they were filming when I arrived. Could've used an extra—"

Keith's teasing aside, he was right about it being a shame that I'd lost the coin flip. Not that either of us expected that interviewing the lone person from all the CR remakes who'd actually worked in computer programming in the early 1990s would lead anywhere, but I had seen more of Wil Wheaton's film work than Keith had, and I knew that Keith would never have thought to ask him for an autograph.

Leaning back in my chair until it made that metallic screech I knew Keith hated, I asked, "So, what did he think of *The Body*? I'm assuming he hadn't seen it—"

"You're one for one on that account. Said he'd been too busy. Not that he wanted to. I got the impression it wasn't his all-time favorite role—"

I shook my head. For a profiler, Keith could be so pitifully obtuse. Of course, he didn't have subscriptions to *Premiere*, *Movieline*, and half a dozen other movie- and TV-related magazines like I did, or he'd have known that Wheaton was probably the last actor who'd want to watch his younger self on screen over and over. We knew he'd been too busy to have done the CR transformations himself; aside from his two-year stint in computers, he'd been visibly busy acting, with almost all of his downtime accounted for. But still, he was the only actor who'd both been part of a *Ciné Rimettato* and had the knowledge necessary to create one... plus he'd worked with one of the other CR replacement "stars," Henriksen, in one of those historical films Ted Turner made a few years back. It wasn't enough to make Keith or me change our profile (which excluded the actor on over half the points), but we'd been working on this case for over two years already, hitting dead end after blind alley after firewall, so we'd hoped that a fresh perspective might help. And when we'd gotten word that he was doing another historical for Turner, down in Virginia, there didn't seem to be much to lose by heading over there to talk to the man.

"—but he did admit to having seen parts of some of the others. 'Just browsing,' naturally," Keith smiled; we both knew that Keith Athmore isn't the typical FBI agent... apart from being tall, big, and black, he happens to look like a hirsute version of the actor who played John Coffey in *The Green Mile*, so there is an inherent intimidation factor which would prevent anyone, no matter how innocent they knew they were, from actually admitting they'd downloaded or even looked at a *Ciné Rimettato* film, no matter how enticing Roger Ebert's essay made them.

"But he'd heard of it, no?" I rocked back and forth, filling the room with those screeches until Keith planted his shoe sole on the armrest of my chair. Satisfied that I was pinned down, he smiled and said, "Oh, yeah, he seemed to know what I'd come for—made the whole movie-computer connection without my having to bring it up. Had a hell of a time getting him to watch the thing was all—"

"I would've loved to have seen that." Glad that Keith has a B.S. in Psychology in addition to experience as a detective in the Chicago police department, I asked, "His reaction tell you anything?"

"I only got him to watch the parts that were changed... he was on lunch break, and the director told me I could have him for an hour or so... man, it was strange, watching this guy wearing a Civil War uniform, sitting there in a director's chair with a bottle of fancy spring water in one hand and a remote in the other, watching himself from half a lifetime

ago... the *look* on his face, while he was shakin' his head. I knew right off he hadn't seen it before; he was obviously shocked. The parts with Spacey affected him, but now that he was seeing it... he felt bad about the substitution, said the other actor was a friend and all, but he *was* drawn in by the thing. And those parts where they changed stuff? Adding the image of the oncoming train during the shot where he and the *Sliders* guy are running on the bridge, and when they fixed the color values so the shot of him and the other kid blended in better with the rest of the frame? He was impressed with that, and the way they added bruises to the arms and shoulders of him and the other kid who fell off that bridge... he said he'd wondered about that, since the characters did supposedly fall a hundred feet off a bridge onto *rocks* and all. He said whoever did this has an exceptional eye for detail, same stuff our tech eyes and the people over at Pixar, DreamQuest, and everywhere else said. And he agreed with us about the cat; he admitted to seeing it when he was 'browsing' the other films... although he could've found out about it from Ebert's article. Ebert did mention that, didn't he?"

I craned my neck backwards, until I heard some of the bones pop; closing my eyes against the glare of the overhead light, I said, "Yeah, Ebert mentioned the cat. I suppose because he has one. I missed it when I read the article, I suppose because *I don't* have one."

"The thing's never in the frame long enough to register the first time through," Keith tried to mollify me, but I still hated it when he brought up the whole subject of the cat and the article, and how we'd missed the mention of the former in the latter. Trying to work the conversation back to the interview, I asked, "And you asked him if there was a cat anywhere on the set, I suppose."

"Oh yeah, right off. He was adamant, there were two animals in the film, the dog in the junkyard, and the deer on the railroad tracks. No cat. But he was sure the cat in the CR version was a real one, and not an animation. Said it looked like it was smaller in the *Casablanca* CR, and obviously bigger in his movie. He did have a suggestion... not that it would be viable—"

"What wouldn't be 'viable'?"

"He said that since whoever did these films probably lives on the west coast, like you and I think, and since the cat obviously ages from picture to picture, chances are it might be the pet of whoever's doing this... and a vet might recognize it from a picture. Not that dark long-haired tiger cats are uncommon, but he thought it might be worth a shot. Something we could cross-reference in our databases... I asked him if he knew how many people in the U.S. own cats—"

"Still, it might be an option... we've pursued stranger leads. You didn't insult the guy, did you—"

"No, no he was cool. More shocked that anyone would do what they did to the movie than anything else. Man sure doesn't like to live in the past, though. Just zapped through what he didn't need to see. None of that ego-tripping crap like you see on TV with a lot of actors. 'Course *you're* the expert on that, eh? How is that satellite dish workin' out?"

Keith had yet to stop ribbing me about that extras-added dish system I'd bought last year; in addition to HBO, Showtime, Cinemax and Encore!, and more eclectic options like The Independent Film Channel, Sundance, and Turner Classic Movies, I had the new AllFilm, EuroFlix, and AllTerNate channels to savor at will. I'd told myself that the dish was purely for research; the CR UNSUB seemed to have wide-ranging tastes, and clearly he'd had to download visual and aural data from almost every film or TV show his virtual "actors" appeared in prior to the creation of each "performance"... but no profiler can or should live 24/7 in the mind of his UNSUB.

And even Keith didn't know about Birkita; she was someone wholly untouched and unsampled by the UNSUB, given the fact that the type of indy films she appeared in were in and of themselves so close to the results of the CR UNSUB's labors—quirky, seemingly oddly-cast movies whose subject matter was geared to a mindset totally at odds with multiplex tastes. Typical hardcore indy fare, the kind of movies that showed up—in much shorter form—on those microcinema sites like AtomFilms, Short BUZZ or Bijou Café. The kind of stuff our UNSUB steered clear of, films that couldn't take additional tampering, lest they become parodies of pastiches of recreations.

Besides, Birkita had only been a regular in indies since 1999 or so (she'd done one film in the late eighties). That meant that she'd never have been under consideration for any roles in major Hollywood productions filmed between the 1980s and the first five years of the century, the kind of movie our UNSUB claimed as his own personal playground between 2000 and 2005, when his films first and last appeared on the Web. And aside from the surreal tour de force *GWTW* mini-epic (which clocked in at a trim forty-six minutes, opposed to the original 231 minute running time) and Ilsa in *Casablanca*, the CR UNSUB had devoted his efforts to replacing male actors with male actors... even if Keith had thought that *Divine* was a woman, which I suppose was something of a tribute to the talent of the late female impersonator.

(I kept telling Keith that he really did need to go find himself a life outside law enforcement, but he'd go, "Then why is CourtTV on basic cable?")

Reluctantly putting Birkita and her filmography out of my mind, I rubbed my closed eyes before lowering my head and facing Keith. "The dish is fine. What else did he have to say? Any thoughts on how the UNSUB did this?"

Keith wagged one finger at me while feeling around in his breast pocket with the other hand, saying, "It's *déjà-vu* time—you will observe that I took notes, even though this was nothing new to me... merely so as not to make him think I was wasting his time, which ultimately I was... here goes, Rune, and don't blame me for rehashing this shit—"

"He figured our suspect used at least one thousand processors or around four hundred ordinary computers, mostly without monitors, Macs most likely, for parallel processing, that is. Sorting data: video samples of all the actors used for the substitutions; the entire original movie, meaning, oh, about five to twenty gigabytes per computer. And all that hardware means a whole lot more power. So we were right about the UNSUB living in a single-owner dwelling.

A power bill like that would stand out in an apartment complex. And he agreed with the guys upstairs about the UNSUB breaking into Web servers or individual computers through cable services. Servers are always going down, so no one would've noticed if someone broke in, stole some power and got out again. As long as data wasn't taken, who's to link a power loss with something like the *Ciné* thing? And breaking into home computers would be more time-consuming for less power, but less likely to attract attention.

"He thought the process would take more power during the image-storing stage, but after that—provided whoever was doing this made the films one after another before sending them out over the Web piecemeal—the break-ins wouldn't have been as frequent.

"But he said that the UNSUB would need to use additional computers to create those wireframe previsualization whatsits, those things the guys at Pixar and so on told us about—"

I nodded; we'd spoken to the graphic artists at over a dozen special effects places up and down the coast, who'd said typically, in order to animate a figure in CG—computer graphics, to laymen like me and Keith—a maquette, or sculpture-like figure usually made of clay, is sculpted, then marked with a digitizing pen, in order to make grids on its surfaces, which can be "read" by a laser device and scanned digitally into a computer, where a 3-D wireframe is created. Once a person has this wireframe figure, the next step is to create "previsualizations," or a moving, computerized version of a storyboard, upon which one can manipulate the figures. Not a difficult concept to grasp, especially when animators showed it to us on a computer. They even showed us digitalized skeletons of people and animals, used for motion studies, and stripped-down-to-muscles wireframe images, like the mouse in *Stuart Little* six years ago. (The guys responsible for that told us that the mouse had 600 *thousand* individual hairs...)

Next, we learned how background plates for an animation are shot, leaving a clear field for the figure to be layered in later. The same principle holds true for special-effects shots using humans; if you want someone running around with a hole in their middle, like Goldie Hawn in *Death Becomes Her*, you film the scene twice, once without her and once with her, making sure the two match up perfectly, then take out the blue-screening over her middle, and there you go, a woman with a donut middle. I'd seen rudimentary examples of this on cable; shows about movie special effects are big—

"—but he thought what the UNSUB did was easier than what's being done in regular special effects studios, since the guy didn't have to figure out blocking for the previsualizations—all he needs to do is mimic exactly the same movements the actor he's taken out made, and redo the costumes on a different size frame."

"What about creating movements the replacements never made? Wouldn't that take up a lot of power? And time?"

"He didn't think so. Remember the software that guy from MIT came up with a decade or so ago, the program that makes photo mosaics out of stored images? Like the one they used for that poster for *The Truman Show*? It's basically a single software program that automatically sorts out the images in the file to match the photo you want replicated. Wheaton thought that this *Ciné* guy developed a similar but more sophisticated software, which automatically scans through a catalogue of digitalized images and motions, and matches the replacement's face and body type to the new movements. He thought it would be a database of textures, skin tones, hair, whatever. The only thing he wasn't too sure about was how the program got around the need for a digitalized wireframe for each actor—he said he was guessing, but he thought that what this person did was measure each actor's body according to found objects in scenes; things like brand-name cans of pop, whatever, that you can buy and measure, then cross-reference them against the body parts of the person to get a numerical idea of that person's body size in relation to the rest of the actors and things already in the individual frames of the movie. Plus he did notice that the early CR films, the *Gone With the Wind* and *Casablanca* ones—only what he'd browsed on the Web, mind—looked something like that commercial from Superbowl XXXIV, with Christopher Reeve's head on another body, so it looked like he was walking. Shortcuts, which makes sense if you consider that that cat in the movies was probably a kitten when the *Casablanca* one was made in the 1990s. The actors were wearing so much clothing in those two movies, who'd notice if the body didn't change from one person to another. Probably refining his art as he went along. But the other two films—not counting *The Body*—needed people running around with nothing or next to nothing on, so their real bodies had to be used as a template."

I elbowed Keith's foot off my armrest, and turned my attention back to the movie I'd put on pause, keeping the sound muted so I could just watch the images while Keith continued to read from his interview notes.

The scene with the cat was coming up, but you had to watch closely—literally without blinking—to catch it; right after Gordie and Chris Chambers fire a gun in the alley behind the diner, while the two boys run off, but just before the waitress comes outside to see what's happened, a cat darts across the screen, running low from right to left, on enough of an angle that all you catch is a streak of grey-black fur, and an upright, puffed-out tail. Less than a second of screen time, far less than the other four films, where the cat is more visible, and full-face to the "camera." But the motion blur was too realistic for it not to be a real cat. I made a mental note to try and get a few good blow-ups to send to veterinarians on the West Coast, especially those in major cities—another theory of ours, since the tech guys told us the UNSUB would need a T-1 line to download the CR data to all his Web sites—on the off chance someone might recognize it.

It certainly couldn't be a worse dead end than the Bureau's attempts to find out who'd paid for all the Web sites (each with a different variation of the phrase *Ciné Rimettato* surrounded by portions of the revamped films' titles, the directors' names, and so on) used by the UNSUB over the last six years; each site had been set up by an anonymous account, initiated by letters sent from over a dozen different addresses in California, with money orders enclosed bearing as many different phony addresses and signatures. So the sites went up... and remained, untended, not updated, just waiting, connected to the rest of the Web link by link as various search engines and fans slowly

discovered the sites, and linked them to other, related sites.

No matter how much it pained the Department of Justice to admit it, there simply wasn't any way to track down who really set up any of the sites. By resisting the urge to "return to the scene of the crime," the UNSUB had achieved the necessary distance needed to sever his links with his creation. Once the films were out there, and people found them, they mushroomed across the Web; some showing up in whole or in part on fan sites, home pages, or even converted to screen-savers. But then a bunch of people from Keith's hometown of Chicago thought it a good idea to ask the city's resident film guru Roger Ebert about them... which is when things got *totally* out of hand.

Not long after that, the original sites were removed by order of the DoJ and the FBI, but who could trace all the *other* sites that had appropriated them? Or do anything about all the downloads made before the sites were taken down? And how to stop people from sharing what they'd downloaded?

And the rub was, whoever created *Ciné Rimettato* wasn't profiting from it. Mixed in with the end credits (or opening ones, in the case of the two older films) were reminders to the viewer that actors do depend on residuals, that copyrights had been extended as of 1998, and that it might not be a bad idea to check out the work of those actors whose work had been excised from these CR films. And every *Ciné* remake had an attached file, listing the titles and distributors of every *other* film the affected actors and actresses had appeared in, as well as filmographies of the rest of the actors, directors, screenwriters, and so on, plus additional pleas for the person downloading the movies to go and rent as many of these titles as possible, so that the rental fees might trickle down to the persons affected—or to the studios involved, at the absolute least. There was also the address for the Screen Actors Guild, along with instructions for making an untraceable donation—

When Keith stopped talking behind me, I tapped the "mute" button, just in time for both of us to hear Spacey wryly comment that finding ways to insult one's mother was held in high regard back in those days. Without turning to look at him, I asked my partner, "What did Wheaton say about the voices?"

"Well, *after* he rehashed the synthesizer bit, which he figured involved sound cards, JAZ drives, and a keyboard, like the other guys already told us, he said he could name at least one actress who'd *never* appear in any future *Ciné* things—"

"If any more do appear," I couldn't help but interject, before Keith went on.

"Meryl Streep.' I went, 'Why not?' and he goes, 'Her accent is never the same.' That's when it hit me... everybody this UNSUB's sampled has a distinctive, repetitive way of talking—not monotone, but they don't do accents very often—"

"Spacey did a southern one for *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*," I reminded him, while the junkyard dog Chopper tried to bite a chunk out of Teddy Duchamp's wagging fanny through the wire fence.

"Was he in that?"

"Yeah. Remember, his hair was grey—"

"You *sure*?"

"Very. Remember, the guy who played Gordie's big brother was in it—"

"Ohhh... Cusack. Oh, yeah. Him I remember — you sure about Spacey, though?"

"Extremely. I can bring the video tomorrow. But *aside* from that one, I don't recall Spacey doing many accents, either. Some of the CR revamp actors' voices changed over time, but the technology to age voices existed back in '91, when they re-dubbed *Spartacus*—"

Behind me, Keith rocked backwards on his chair; I could hear it hitting the wall. "Uh-huh, when they made an old Tony Curtis sound like a young buck—but they had to use Anthony Hopkins for Olivier's voice, no?"

"Considering Sir Laurence had been gone for a while, yes, they did have to use Hannibal the Cannibal's pipes... too bad whoever did this—" I jerked one thumb in the direction of the screen "—wasn't around then. Or didn't have the software up and running..."

"Know what else Wheaton suggested? He thought that whoever did the films was working on them for at least a good five years or longer before they dumped the first one on the Web in '00—weird how the CG pros we spoke to didn't want to admit the UNSUB was way, way ahead of their own technology, eh? He said whoever did this had to digitally erase the original players from each frame, fill in the missing background with parts cobbled from other shots, then go back and put in the new people—once he got *them* guys animated, and digitally dressed in costumes, whatever—where the old ones were. He said it's picky, time-consuming work no matter how much the software is programmed to do for you. Then there's the matter of making the mouths move in sync to the dialogue, which he reminded me had to be 'spoken' by the new actors with more or less the same speed and cadence as the originals... he was amazed that someone would go through all that trouble, and for no pay, no recognition. I think the no recognition part bothered him the most... know what he said before I left?"

"Goodbye and good riddance?" I ventured, finally cocking my head in his direction.

"Nah, I said the man was cool... he told me how proud he was of the computer work he'd done over a decade ago, and said he couldn't imagine how whoever did this could keep it all in—knowing he'd done something so incredible, so far ahead of the pack, with such potential for the industry, and not saying word one about it in public. That's when he reminded me again that this had to be a one-person gig... if someone developed it while working for a company, using the company's equipment, it wouldn't be the property of the designer. And any software or computer firm that knew about this kind of technology would've sold it, without the designer being able to make stuff like this—"

"So Bill Gates is officially off the hook now?" I smiled, while the Barf-O-Rama movie-within-a-movie flickered across the screen.

"Didn't we eliminate him the first day we got this case?" The smile in Keith's voice made me grin; watching the

remainder of the storytelling scene by the campfire in silence, I waited until the part where the boys started to take turns watching the campfire, gun in hand, before muting the movie and saying, "In a way it's a shame Gates *didn't* invent this... if the technology was legal, and in use now, can you imagine how it would change movies? Insurance fees would go down, as long as there was a way for someone who died in mid-filming to 'finish' the performance... no one would need to haul ass back to the redub booth to make 'R' movies TV-14, little mistakes could be fixed in postproduction without the need to bring the actors back or rebuild sets—production costs would go down, and ticket costs would be lower—"

"Which brings to mind the *other* thing Wheaton told me, when I was leaving," Keith said softly. "As much as he admired what our UNSUB had done, he said it was frightening, too—he wondered when the time might come in an actor's career when he or she wasn't needed any more. He wanted to know when a producer could say, 'Hey, we don't need So-and-So after all... we have what we *do* need right here in the database.' Or what would happen when casting directors could pick and choose from every actor who'd ever been on film, be they dead or alive? What he said got me thinking... ever notice that most casting directors are women?"

"So?" On screen, Wheaton's much younger cinematic alter ego was having that bad dream about his brother Denny's funeral, as Keith said simply, "So... what if we've been limiting our own profile?"

"As in—?"

"I know all them programmers we talked to were men, or most of 'em, but why couldn't a woman be doing this? We've kicked around the possibility of someone involved in the business—"

"Casting directors are busy people," I reminded him, "They have to look at a lot of people for a lot of roles... anyhow, women are more social, they need more interaction. Our UNSUB has to be a loner, probably a webhead whose social circle *is* movies—"

"But my theory would explain the requests to reimburse the affected parties by video-rental and SAG-donation proxy... this person has ties right *now* to the industry. Probably rubs shoulders with some of the people he or she's been messing with digitally. And you gotta admit, our UNSUB is awfully verbose... here, gimme the remote—" Quitting his chair and striding over to me in a couple of easy steps, Keith slid the remote out of my hand and fast-forwarded to the last couple of minutes of *The Body*, right when Spacey's Writer is looking at the words he's just typed into his computer, while his kid and the kid's buddy are talking about him. The part where the new adult Gordie stopped outside to play with the boys zipped past in a squiggle of sugary horizontal lines, until Keith found the end credits. Aside from the insert for Spacey (now dubbed "The Replacement Writer"), everything looked like the original's film credits, until just before the part where the copyright information should've appeared.

This motion picture is not the original made in 1985 and released in 1986. You know and I know that it violates the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, the fair use laws, general copyright law, and just about every other film-related law there is. So, what to do about it? The people who really acted in this and those who didn't do so originally don't normally do what they do for free. Normally these people get residuals for the repeat showings of their work on TV, and sometimes a cut of the rental fees, depending on their original contracts. So what can you do about it? Go out and rent the videos featuring these people. If any of them have a movie out now, go buy a ticket. Buy more Stephen King books and e-books, even if you have the whole library already. Buy/rent copies of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Sliders*. Especially go rent/buy Richard Dreyfuss's work, since he was removed without his permission. Go make out a money order to the Screen Actor's Guild or the Director's Guild of America. The addresses are listed below. Just remember, what you've seen is not a licensed, legal movie. What you want to do next is your business.

The Unabomber may have been more prolix, but he was never that direct and colloquial... I tried to imagine a woman saying those words to herself as she added them to the finished creation, and it didn't sound as strange as it should have.

I suppose my constant contact with mostly male UNSUBs had tainted my perceptions after all... not that I'd let Keith know that.

"The UNSUB could be a lawyer," I ventured, but Keith snorted in disagreement.

"Uh-uh... oh, he or she knows the ins and outs of the law as it applies to the film industry, but this ain't no lawyer. Their syntax is worse than the Unabomber's, and they don't care if they're not making any sense. This person, this UNSUB does care, and wants to make sure the message is understood and acted upon. Been working so far... last I checked with the SAG folks, they've raked in over seventy-four K in small-denomination donations. Most of that's gone into the fund for retiring actors... the families of the deceased *Ciné* 'performers' wanted it that way. And rentals of movies featuring just about every actor in the CR remakes are way, way up. You can't say the same for all those *Blair Witch* and *Star Wars* parodies out there."

"But it still doesn't answer the *why* question... I suppose you found time to ask Wheaton about *that*—"

"Yes I did, and he had an answer... sort of. I could tell he was kind of freaked by *The Body*, so I didn't ask until he was done watching it—what he did see of it—and at first he didn't answer, changed the subject to the *how* of it all, but I asked him again, and he said whoever did this must have a specific agenda, something that has meaning to that person, or else we'd be seeing remakes of every film out there whose roles were known to be offered to someone else, or films where people had to turn down roles for some reason... you know, like Tom Selleck almost playing Indiana Jones. He thought that whoever did this had the time to do more movies, but didn't want to. I asked him if he knew what the word *rimettato* meant, and he admitted he didn't. Once I said it meant 'put right' he mulled it over, then said he thought this way beyond casting... more like creative *intent*."

I nodded; we knew Wheaton had helped create a video editing system, one which Keith and I had decided quite a while back probably hadn't been used to create the *Ciné Rimettato* revamps.

"—I think he meant a movie as a bigger picture. Total sum of all the parts. He seemed to be pretty affected by the movie, so he didn't want to discuss it beyond that."

"Keith... where's the copy of the film you took with you?" I noticed for the first time that he hadn't been carrying the cassette case when he walked into the office.

"Left it there... I thought he might want to watch it in private. And yes, I know it's government property, but hell, I'd wasted his lunch break already... it's not like he's going to toss it back on the Web with scene-by-scene commentary. Guy knows better than *that*—"

"I wasn't thinking about that... it just struck me how we're doing what everyone else has been doing with these movies. Passing them on... funny, how I used to blame Ebert for that essay of his, when we're doing the same thing. I mean, how many copies of the films did we leave with the other animators we've talked to? One, two dozen? We're just as guilty as whoever did this in the first place... and besides, if someone was just browsing these on the Web, how can you take away the memory of what you've seen? That's something copyright laws can't control... trying to squash creative freedom to borrow from the culture is one thing, but how do you police the imagination?"

There was a beat of silence between us before Keith exhaled loudly and said, "I dunno know about you, but I'm going start revising the profile based on what Wheaton had to say... personally, I think the most useful thing he said was how proud he was of the program he worked on, 'cause I can't see someone as verbal as this UNSUB staying wholly silent about it. A person would have to be proud... I don't care who he or she is, I don't think someone can keep a secret like that for this many years without blowing apart from the strain. No matter how much of a loner he/she is. Tellin' it to your teddy bear at night won't do it. As it is, I can't believe that the UNSUB never went back to check on the original sites—"

Something Keith had said earlier, about dumping *The Body* back on the Web with behind-the-scenes commentary, niggled at the back of my mind. The UNSUB could've kept going back to that particular *Body*, just as some serial killers do... as long as no one knew that *was* the person who'd been responsible for the thing in the first place....

And as long as the UNSUB never altered what was there, visiting the site without downloading, s/he could've been lurking on the net like a serial strangler hiding behind a tree in the woods, watching his victim bloat and decompose. Hell, the UNSUB could've been checking to see how many individual users visited each site—we'd determined that the sites didn't leave any cookies, so we hadn't been able to track who'd visited them, or when.

Monitoring each site's traffic would be as satisfying as reading newspaper accounts of victims found in a river; the effect may have been radically different, but the basic psychology of this criminal wasn't terribly far from that of all the shackled prisoners I'd talked to. There was even a signature—the inclusion of that admittedly cute kitten/cat in each movie, the sort of mental quirk common to serial killers whose urge to kill isn't totally satisfied by the act itself, or even the basic mechanics of the crime. Hence, the *need* to do something idiosyncratic, something meaningful only to the criminal, which is not an intrinsic part of the crime *per se*. Adding the cat was pure artistic embellishment to an already complete digital canvas.

"Y'know, it might not be a bad idea to send out pictures of that cat... target the biggest cities, and the most expensive veterinarians. If the UNSUB wants the kitty in the picture, I'll bet he—or she—would want the best care for it—"

"Which means *I* gotta do it, right?" Keith tried to affect a frown, but his eyes were twinkling. It may have been a remote lead, at best, but it beat the hell out of sitting in a cramped makeshift office, watching the same five CR remakes day after day. Although Keith had had his field trip...

"Want to flip for it?"

"What's the loser get to do instead?" Keith dug around in his pants pocket for the same nickel we'd tossed that morning.

"I've another idea... based on that whole being-proud thing. Where can a person brag without saying a word? Out loud, I mean? And without anyone knowing who you really are?"

Keith pocketed the nickel, smiling down at me as he stood up. "If I sit behind a computer all day, dropping in on chat rooms, my ass'll meld with the chair cushion. I'm outta here, my man... have to make sure the boys in the lab pull a clear image off the films. Good luck with the surfers, Rune. Don't let the netcronyms make your eyes go crossed, ok?"

j

The original *Ciné Rimettato* Web sites had long fallen prey to hordes of angry intellectual property attorneys and copyright holders, not to mention Ted Turner's lawyers, and were nothing more than a wistful, flickering memory of pixel dust, but there was no legal way to shut down sites devoted to their appreciation—especially if the webmasters were canny enough to forgo showing clips or stills from the banned releases. As it turned out, during the first hour of following the most obvious links (most, URLs containing the words *ciné* or *cinema*... like "Ciné Rinascimento.com" "La Cinema de Fantasia.com" or "Cinema Immaginazione.com"), I came across over twenty sites, some comprised completely of text (like the fellow who'd not only reprinted Ebert's essay, but almost every other review of the CR films from everyone else's Web sites), others a combination of commentary and message boards ("AFAIK, Kevin Spacey hasn't been approached to *_do_* a Stephen King movie – you're thinking of Tom Hanks." "YYSSW, but I still think he was up for the James Caan part in MISERY --" "Wasn't he doing Mel Profitt on WISEGUY then?"); but some offered genius chatrooms, where chatspeak sputtered across the monitor and everyone had an opinion about the *Ciné... oeuvre*:

Shadow: UGTBK... you actually rented all the videos suggested after THE BODY?

MassGuy: Every one. Including KRIPPENDORF'S TRIBE. Which is actually pretty good. Course I already had all the ST:TNGs on tape.

Shadow: Bought or taped?

MassGuy: Both. My local station stopped showing it midway thru season four.

Akkadian: ICCL about renting/taping stuff -- what about THE BODY? What do u think of it?

Shadow: DIKU?

MassGuy: The same --?

Akkadian: DTS, but again, what's your opinions?

Shadow: Floored. I'd seen the original 5-6-7 times, but this one IS "The Body" I'd read. Too bad they didn't add the part where Gordie's story from his teenage years was excerpted from -

MassGuy: No, couldn't be done. CR films redo, they don't add.

Shadow: Yeah, but it's a thought. Couldn't the real director do that later on? How old's the real Gordie going to be for the 30-year anniversary of the original? Do the words _Director's Cut_ mean anything? ;-S

Akkadian: Q-1, Who Knows? Q-2, 44, and Q-3, They could mean More \$\$\$ for all involved.

Shadow: Didn't the director go to high school with Dreyfuss?

MassGuy: Yeah. Hollywood High. But not in the same class.

Akkadian: What about the other CR films? Seen all of them?

MassGuy: BTDT -- I transferred mine to DVD.

Shadow: Seen them all, wasn't too nuts about the GWTW one but THE CABLE GUY was awesome. A bit morbid if you think on it for too long, but the original was _so_ dark, and this was just funny. At least now there's three Farley-Spade films, so it's a real duo now -

MassGuy: What about CONEHEADS?

Akkadian: They weren't in the same scenes except for one in that film. So it barely counted. Q?: was this CABLE GUY as good as TOMMY BOY or BLACK SHEEP?

Shadow: As good. Not better, but as good. I missed the part from the original where Chip was singing the Jefferson Airplane song. What was put in there was from SNL I think, and not a whole song. But using a Meat Loaf song was ok, tho.

Akkadian: I don't think CR films can redo songs like they can re-create dialogue. Spoken words are different from sung words.

MassGuy: The scene in the jail, when Chip smashes his chest up against the glass barrier was wild.

Akkadian: Thank SNL's Chippendales sketch for that one.

Whoever Akkadian was, s/he was obviously older, and more thoughtful than Shadow and MassGuy—not too many of the other postings on the message boards or chatters brought up the SNL connection in regard to *The Cable Guy*... the hard-core SNL crowd tended to be older, and less likely to rely so heavily on e-mail argot. I'd printed out the conversation, and looking it over, noticed that this Akkadian had addressed one of the problems with the *Ciné* films, something quite a few CR fans seemed to miss... aside from the karaoke scene in *The Cable Guy*, the CR substitutions avoided singing. Duplicating an actor's spoken words via a synthesizer or sampler was difficult, especially when nuances and inflections were taken into account, but singing was staggeringly formidable. And another thing Akkadian said made so much of the CR process abruptly clear—that infamous "Chippendales" skit, with Farley and Patrick Swayze stripping down, brought me into the mind of the CR *artiste*... and solved the basic problem of getting around a wireframe for each digitized character. Apart from the people in the two earliest CR films, all the other actors used for substitutions had either done nearly-nude scenes, or partly disrobed at least one film or TV performance. Before anyone knew of a fifth *Ciné Rimettato* film, Keith and I had studiously watched every video of every movie the substitute actors and actresses had made... and I'd been struck by *Light Sleeper*, which featured a brief but uncannily gripping appearance by David Spade as a strung-out cokehead searching for God. He'd been sitting with Willem Dafoe's pusher, dressed in socks and briefs, and I remembered thinking at the time that Spade could've very well been a straight dramatic actor if he'd wanted to go that route—he was that convincing—but what he was wearing, or more rightly wasn't wearing, should've been more important to me. Thinking back on his filmography, I realized that he'd been a living wire-frame in just about everything, both in film and on TV—he was out of his clothes as often as he was in them. All the CR creator had to do was figure out his measurements as based on surrounding items, and there it was, a ready-to-use element, available to render into an existing movie.

And the other actors had done their share of undressed-scenes; it took the memory of that Chippendales sketch to bring it all back, but suddenly I could picture the UNSUB's hands, as s/he fed this data into the computers, and I could feel that sense of accomplishment which comes after approaching a seemingly unsolvable problem and coming up with an unexpectedly simple, accessible solution. Add in the existing movements of each person's mouth as s/he produced individual sounds and words, redub the synth-scrambled voices (sweetened or roughened as necessary), and there they were. Animations from real flesh, propelled by original skeletons, and not mere digital-wire armatures. Filling in old backgrounds, then covering them up again, was just computer busywork after that.

By the time *The Body* was loaded onto the Web, the UNSUB had his/her act down patter than pat. Which accounted for why Spacey's narration was so exquisitely on target, each line reading as succinct and as deeply felt as Dreyfuss's original... albeit much darker. And the limited amount of time his character was on camera made for a more perfect "performance"... so perfect that the UNSUB couldn't resist adding touches to the later scenes, blending in the oncoming cowcatcher of the steam engine between the running legs of the two kids on the track, or overlaying bruises on their shoulders during the leech scene. Even if someone wanted to remove the new narration and Spacey's two scenes from this CR remake, what was left would still be more fine-tuned than the original... although as Shadow had

pointed out in his/her roundabout way, the best Writer possible was shooting another historical drama for Ted Turner just a few miles away from where I was now sitting.

But Wheaton wasn't in his forties yet—he was barely into his thirties. Half a lifetime away from his childhood performance, but still another eleven-twelve years from being the right age to play *The Writer*. Just as Spacey (who'd actually been born in 1959, the same year the film took place) was then too young to play *The Writer*, but was now currently a couple of years too old—

Which was the basic trouble with finding the ideal cast to populate any movie—what you might *want* wasn't necessarily what you'd need at that time in order to make such a film. Even if Rob Reiner and Richard Dreyfuss went to school together, if Reiner had had someone like Spacey available, *and* if Spacey had been fortysomething *at that time*, there was a strong chance he might've been cast as *The Writer*. That later King film, *Dolores Claiborne*, featured two actresses who looked astonishingly alike playing a young and an older Selena... even Keith, who hadn't been to a theater since Clint Eastwood stopped making Dirty Harry pictures, was impressed by how much the two girls looked alike. Said it made the movie all the better for him.

Leaning away from the keyboard, I muttered into my cupped palms, "I'm missing *something* here... are you a perfectionist, a die-hard movie buff, or... *what?* You aren't in it for the money, you don't want the fame... if you love movies so much, why love just *five* films?"

Thinking (maybe the Ebert article scared him/her off... maybe the torrent of hits on *The Body* sites was too intimidating), I began rereading the chatroom conversation... and noticed that despite Akkadian's keen interest in what others thought of the CR films, s/he didn't offer any opinion on them... something the other two chatters didn't notice. After all, they didn't know this person, if "DIKU" meant "Do I know you"... which meant that Akkadian was someone new to CR chatrooms.

Which in turn brought up that whole *pride* thing again—

Exiting the room (where Akkadian had left a "POOF" shortly after I'd looked away from the screen, according to my print-out) I backed up to the Yahoo! portal and checked for links to an Akkadian Web page....

All I got was the Web site for some small press magazine. I was about to check out the remainder of the *Ciné*-related sites when I found myself typing in "Birkita Saleen Newman" and clicked "search" with my mouse.

I'd never thought to see if she had any Web sites, be they fan-made or official; this *Ciné* case had been so time-consuming, I was lucky to have caught the late-night airings of her films on the Independent Film Channel. But no matter how culturally pervasive the CR films had become, other movies continued to be made, with real people telling new stories... and as the URLs for five Birkita Web sites appeared on my screen, I told myself, *so I am not the only person who'd discovered her*, though the slightest twinge of apprehension plucked my nerves. Hoping that none of the sites were anti-fan postings, I tried the first one, hoping that the simple "www.birkita.com" indicated that it was her official site.

Apparently, her domain had been co-opted early in her career; fortunately, though, the person who'd created this page loved her work as much—or maybe even more—than I did. Good-quality stills taken from press kits, short downloadable clips from her early films (*Custom Kind*, *Rhymes With Thyme*, and the one that won the award at Sundance, *G2G*), including that memorable sequence from *Rhymes* when she's walking away from her boyfriend, out into rush hour traffic, only to have each car stop precisely a finger's width before her, as she seemingly meanders through the slow-moving cars—until the camera does this amazing crane-pan of the street below, to reveal the open spaces between the stopped cars, as they form a lopsided heart.

But mostly, there were pictures of her, especially those eyes... that between-shades mix of tan around the pupil and bluish-aqua beyond, which some people called hazel, while others found themselves unable to describe them as anything but beautiful. Slightly cat's-eyes, with subtly upturned outer corners and one pupil that veered off by half a degree or so... so no matter where she directed her gaze in any of her films, she could almost be looking your way as you sat there in the darkness below her flickering image.

Oh, the rest of the pictures were of her, too, but they were full-body shots that diminished her remarkable, wistfully ageless eyes. True, seeing her entire body may've been enticing for a lot of other men out there (especially in the low-cut waitress uniform she wore at the beginning of *G2G*, before the diner was bombed), especially men sick and tired of stick-figure fashion slaves with T-square collarbones and sunken abdomens, but I kept moving my mouse up to the head shots, to enlarge them...

After a few minutes of this, my conscience (and the realization that my bosses might be monitoring what I was doing) warned me that I wasn't likely to find any links to the CR UNSUB in some young indy-film queen's retinas, so I reluctantly left the site—even as I tried the following URL, www.G2GBirkita.com, with my next heartbeat.

An official site, apparently one to which she contributed original material, judging by the photos of her pre-film stage work, back when she was in her teens or early twenties (I'd never learned exactly how old she really was; apart from having been dipped in the waters of the Dick Clark gene pool, even her voice was ageless—girlishly light, with a smoky, burr-like undertone that echoed like a distant purr). All the productions were period pieces, and she herself was so unchanged (apart from her now-blonde hair being a shade closer to honey-tan), that I couldn't even begin to tell when she'd appeared in those plays... Helena in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a rather chesty Laura from "The Glass Menagerie," Mrs. Zero in the 1920s play "The Adding Machine," a makeup-aged Mrs. Antrobus to a black Mr. Antrobus in Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth," and, in the only modern-dress role shown, the teen seductress Patsy June Johnson from Lanford Wilson's "The Rimers of Eldritch." But even there, her outfit was timeless... a flared pink skirt and what had to have been a knit bodysuit, grey with a deep V-neck. By enlarging the photo, I did notice that she seemed to be wearing those god-awful Earth shoes from the late 1970s, the ones with the backwards-sloping heels, but

that could've been a strange whim of whoever costumed the play...

I'd saved and printed out the enlargement without realizing until the freshly printed page rolled out of the printer.

The guys upstairs would love to know why I did that, I found myself thinking as I quickly plucked it from the printer and tossed it into a drawer. Deciding that the folks who hit the CR sites had to have felt the same compulsion to download what they saw, I told myself that the FBI may pay my rent, that finding criminals was my vocation, but there was no damn way anyone was going to put handcuffs on *my* needs.

The rest of the site was as photo-oriented as the fan site; interspersed with stills and downloadable clips were statements from Birkita:

"Acting hasn't been a passion for me—it's Passion, period."

"When other actors were kids, they pretended they were accepting their Oscars while holding a hairbrush in front of the bathroom mirror... for me, my rattle was my 'Oscar' when I was still in my crib."

"My only regret about doing pictures back to back is missing out on the face-to-face with my fans..."

The only biographical material on the site mentioned that she'd been born in Chicago, was "still" single, and adored cats.

She'd contributed pictures of her "boys," Baby Brutis, Quinn-Quinn (apparently she'd seen *Sliders*, and was aware of the whole "two Quinns" subplot in the last season of the show), and Woody, "a.k.a Woody-Wumpus."

"Baby" Brutis had long ago outgrown his name—he was a huge black mitted cat with a swollen, strangely serene face, while Quinn-Quinn was a semi-harlequin white cat with splotchy black markings. And then there was Woody—

I don't know how long I sat there, staring at the image. I *do* recall thinking that I really *ought* to call the lab, and tell Keith to take a look... until I told myself, cats like that are as common as dander. You don't know how many people out there own cats exactly like him.

True, the pose was different, but Woody looked so much like the cat in the CR remakes he could've been that phantom feline's littermate. The same creamy white rings around the eyes, the same canted oval green eyes, the same eager expression...

Without bothering to print out Woody's image, I clicked out of the site. Cats *are* the most common house pet in the country, and every year some cat food company puts out a calendar of famous people and their felines, plus the other pet food giant has one with cats owned by everyday people... many of whom are interchangeable with those belonging to the celebrities.

Reflexively, I typed in the commands for another search of CR-related sites, and within minutes I was watching a chat about the altered *Terminator*:

SueB: Has anyone considered that all the person who made this did with the final skeletal Terminator was squeeze the image, so that it looked thinner? Too bad they couldn't have done that in the first place, so Henricksen could've really played the Terminator.

Wiley: But Cameron couldn't have sold the picture if Arnold S. was only playing one of the cops who gets killed midway thru.

Jean-P: The irony is, Arnold is so funny playing the cop -- when he drops that cigarette into the black cop's coffee -

Wiley: Reminded me of what he did in KINDERGARTEN COP. But the switch between the actors was cool.

SueB: I'm surprised Harlan Ellison hasn't claimed this CR version was his idea, too.

Jean-P: The whole Terminator plotline is straight from 20 MASTERPLOTS. I can download the pages to prove it -

Sensing that this conversation was about to go off on a more literary than visual tangent, I exited, and was about to click onto another when the phone rang.

"Rune, you ain't gonna believe this—"

" 'Aren't,' and you know better, Keith—"

"Aren't-smaren't. *This* man's gone got himself a lead."

His voice cut through the monitor haze in my brain, and made me aware that not only was my butt sore but I was also hungry and thirsty—a sensation undercut with dismay when I glanced at my watch and realized I'd been surfing the net for over seven *hours*.

"The photos of the cat?" I heard myself whispering, as the need to empty my bladder insinuated itself in my consciousness.

"I'm gonna send that actor an application for the Bureau—you won't believe it. The eleventh vet we tried. In Oakland. Not only did the vet recognize the cat, but he faxed us back that the owner works in the computer field—housebound on top of *that*. And rich as all get-out—brings in the cat so damn often, the vet bought himself a second X-ray machine from the profits."

"Is the cat named Woody?" I asked.

"You psychic, man? Yeah, he named the cat after a damn cartoon character of all things—"

The sound of that one gender pronoun almost made me relieve myself behind my desk; crossing my legs, I asked, "Does this person have other cats?"

"Uhm... lemme see... no, just this one. Guy brings it in every month, for a tune-up. Check for worms—"

"I'll take your word for it," I smiled into the receiver, before picking up a pen and asking, "Ok, what's the name—and no damn coin toss this time, I'm due for a break from this playpen of ours..."

j

According to the fax, our suspect's name was Michael Tillich. Keith and I cross-checked for priors—not so much as a parking ticket. Which was in keeping with our profile. California driver's license showed us that he was white, and looked like an extra from that old TNT movie about Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. A Silicon Valley boy, with a cat named after one of the characters in a Disney movie. Thirty-seven, single, just a profiler's dream. He'd been a software designer for almost half his life. He even belonged to those vintage-TV video clubs, buying mostly science fiction and fantasy shows. Man had the whole *Xena: Warrior Princess* collection.

He didn't have any overt connection to the movie industry, a factoid I found troubling, but Keith thought the purchase of old episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* indicated at least an oblique interest in Tinseltown.

It wasn't until I was putting in a requisition for a round-trip ticket to California (coach, alas) and Keith was arranging for an agent from the local field office to accompany me that we came upon the major discrepancy between Tillich's driver's license and the stuff the veterinarian sent us—either Tillich needed a whole lot of room to house his multiple computers/processors *plus* his collection of vintage TV shows, as in two houses' worth, or he was a closet polygamist whose wives loathed each other. One address (next to his laminated photo) was in Oakland proper, the other in a suburb a few miles outside the city limits. Both were single-unit dwellings, which—based on what information we could glean from the realtors who'd handled both properties—fit our profile precisely (large rooms, huge basements, close to a major T-1 line). And Tillich owned both of them.

Not that a good software designer couldn't earn enough to afford two houses, *but—*

"Ok, so which house do I visit first?"

Keith spoke without hesitation. "The one where the cat lives. He'd need to have it close while he works. I'll bet the other one's full of damn *Xena* tapes..."

j

I'd brought my laptop to Oakland; it sure beat the hell out of the Adam Sandler film they were showing on the flight. I'd downloaded the entire *Ciné Rimettato* file (minus the actual movies) and all of the notes Keith and I had made... but it was going to be a long, long flight, and the download from Birkita's personal Web site fit nicely on my hard drive. I'd even included the clips...

j

Between bites of my dinner (which bore a dismaying resemblance to the fare Steve Martin ended up with in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*), I pulled up the file photos of Woody the cat—both of them—from Birkita's site and the CR remakes. The two could've been related; picked up from the same shelter, perhaps. The name was easier to explain; Keith told me he'd found thirty-eight Woodys and eighteen Buzzes or Buzz Lightyears in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas alone—at the first ten vets. Not all of them were cats, but for some reason the names were popular.

Next, I lined up Tillich's photo next to that of his cat... but somehow the *connection*, my first real look at the person behind the whole mess, continued to elude me. No matter how bland-looking the average serial killer, or bomber, or kidnapper, typically there's... something, in the eyes, or in the demeanor, or in the person's *soul*, that tells me, Yes, this is the man.

True, Tillich actually wasn't in front of me, but the eyes in the photograph just didn't *grab* me. I suppose it's a residual effect from my days as a cop, the gut feeling that simply *tells* you things without the need for words, or even concrete thought.

Driver's license pictures are always bad, I soothed myself as I sipped my coffee... half the time they don't resemble the subject. But something I'd thought I'd trained myself to suppress in the name of psychology and criminal theory, told me that no picture is ever *that* bad...

j

The special agent who was supposed to accompany me to Tillich's suburban address was out sick; one of those Asian flu bugs making the rounds on the West Coast. I was offered another agent, but demurred—the field office was half-staffed, and I needed the time alone in the rental car to collect my thoughts. No matter what I found or didn't find that day, I was merely going to pay Mr. Tillich a neutral visit—a routine background check, concerning one of his software-design buyers.

The house was unchanged from the photos the realtor in Oakland had faxed us, save for one detail—a redwood ramp leading from the three-car garage to the single-story-dwelling's double-wide front doors. The realtor had sold Tillich the house in the past four years, but the ramp was weathered to the silvery-grey shade of his cat Woody's fur—

I'd looked at his license so many times in the past two and a half weeks that I could recite all of Tillich's personal data by rote: DOB 2-25-68, Ht: 5' 10", Wt: 152, Hair: Brown, Eyes: Blue. And he needed corrective lenses in order to drive. But he wasn't handicapped—no indication that he'd need a ramp—

Telling myself that he might've had two warring wives—one in a chair—after all, I walked up to the door and thumbed the bell, listening to the muted chiming tones behind the Spanish-style oak doors.

I hadn't noticed the speaker grill beside the door until the voice crackled close to my left ear: "Yes, may I help

you?"

A female voice, distorted like an answering machine left unchanged for too long.

"Hello, I'm looking for a Mr. Michael Tillich... I'm Special Agent Rune Volney with the FBI... Could you please tell me if he's in?" Speaking to blank, faux-carved wood was unnerving.

I couldn't tell if there was a security camera hidden by the stuccoed door-surround, but I suspected I was being watched.

"Could you please hold up your badge and ID to the right-hand door? Middle of the panel?"

The voice was as glitchy and as scratchy as before, but it obviously wasn't a recording. Obediently, I opened my badge holder before the door panel—where I finally made out a small convex lens, hidden among the bold Spanish-style carvings—and continued to wait in the wan, watery sunlight. The neighborhood beyond me was quiet, but I could make out a distinct humming noise to my left, close to where a marionette's worth of long wires snaked down from a power pole to somewhere off to the side of the house. It was quiet enough for me to hear a car revving up, but no sound came from the attached garage.

The sonofabitch is checking out my badge number, I realized, as the wait continued... then, that static-spiked voice again:

"Please, come in, Agent Volney—"

The doors slid aside—I hadn't realized they were pocket doors before—and a granular wedge of blackness yawned before me. As if realizing that I couldn't see, remote-controlled ambient lights winked into a trail of brightness, like the rows of lights in some old movie theaters—

The connection, that sense of *knowing* I was close to my prey, came on me in a knee-melting rush. Tillich had to know what those lights looked like—

Once my eyes adjusted, I saw that I was in your basic California ranch-style house: wide open doorways, low ceilings, tile floors... and not much in the way of furnishings, save for a massive HD-TV and banks of top-of-the-line stereo equipment. And movie posters on the walls... framed in matte chrome, covered with nonreflective glass. Real poster-posters, not the ones video rental guys put in a barrel and either sell for a buck a pop or give away with a rental.

I found myself in what passed for the living room, although there was little of a lived-in look about the space. Not even a place to sit down—

There were three doorways leading to other rooms, all of them darkened... until I heard that voice again, still marred with hissing pops and electronic burrs, coming from behind me:

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting outside, Agent Volney—I assume you've guessed that I was looking up your badge number.... I trust you're here on official business, no? Although I thought they only sent out profilers in Thomas Harris novels—"

Although it had only been a movie, I suddenly knew exactly how Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling had felt when she'd realized that she was standing in the same room with Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*—strange, how the lexicon of cultural references tends to be so closely linked with the cinematic after all. And I wasn't even a fan of Foster or the movie itself. I liked Ted Levine's Jamie Gumb, but the whole film was simply too pat and coincidental for my tastes—

But all I could think of was being small and fragile and alone with a killer who skinned women—even though I myself was six-one, hefty, and presumably alone with a software programmer who didn't look strong enough to depress his keypad—

Only, the voice wasn't male, and I hadn't heard any footsteps.

"You can turn around—I couldn't shoot you if I wanted to..."

Another drinker from the creative well; the tacit reference to the basement shoot-out at the end of the movie made me smile despite my unease. And I made sure the smile stayed on my face as I turned around, for realization was sinking in as to the reason for that rasp on the speaker, and lest I display that most politically-incorrect reaction of all toward an ostensible cripple—

Michael Tillich hadn't spoken those words. He may have owned the house, probably by proxy, but it was with a great inner gasp of relief that I realized that he wasn't the *Ciné Rimettato* creator—

—even as another part of me, a more primitive, feeling part, died a slow, sad, withering death.

She was already assuming the near-fetal position of the advanced stages of what appeared to be either ALS or MS; her hands were supported by leather- and shoelace-like bound braces, although she clearly had movement in her fingers. The twin trays of keyboards jutting out like folded-in wings before her were level with her hands. Her legs were thin, the calves under the straight-leg jeans were broom-handle straight beneath the webbing which helped to hold her onto her chair. There was a microphone device held over her larynx with pink-edged surgical tape, half-hidden by her hair. Which was back to its original honey-tan shade...

Of course, her eyes were the same; only they'd glittered with tears on screen...

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"Come, there's a chair in the back room," she finally said, with that metallic simplicity, and with a trembling pass of her left hand over the keyboard below, she was off, moving silently in her chair. I followed in her wake of soft-rushing air, down a sloping hallway which led to the rear of the house, into what I now realized was a basement converted for wheelchair access. The sensation was like being in a movie theater; while the air was filtered clean, I could almost imagine a whiff of popcorn.

As promised, there were chairs—director's chairs, one even bearing her name stencilled across the back—downstairs. And, as Keith and I had surmised, there were hundreds of monitor-free computers, Macs by the look of them (not those candy-colored Ju-Ju-Be home units but serious workhorse models) sitting on banks of wire shelving, much like the workings of a cable TV system, only with JAZ drives added. Power cables shone like so much licorice, black, red, and even yellow, thick candy-like ropes squiggling across the tile floor and up along the rows of utilitarian racks. There was a humming sound in the room, far more intense than the minimal noise her electric chair made.

And there were monitors near the chairs... one showing her earliest movie, *Los Gatos Express* from 1989. The one I'd kept missing, save for the last few minutes caught periodically on IFC.

"It's on video," she said suddenly, as if gleaned my thought. "I've a copy somewhere upstairs. Not DVD, though, But that one *is* me."

" 'Is' as in... you were in it."

Up close, I realized that Birkita Saleen Newman may very well have been wearing her own Earth shoes in that long-ago college production of "The Rimers of Eldritch"—her skin was supple, slightly oily even, but the fine wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes were enough to tell me she was pushing fifty, or damn close to it.

For two years, I'd been pouring over those five remakes she'd made, trying to figure out the *why* behind them, trying to get into the UNSUB's head... when it was the *body* that was the motive all along.

I had to smile as I thought of the films she'd chosen to spring on an unsuspecting, unprepared, but ultimately delighted (save for the legal types) world—all of them connected with bodies, in one way or another. Scarlett O'Hara, the character whose body was part and parcel of *who* she was. Divine in *Casablanca*, a man who used a faux woman's body to achieve fame... a smaller, leaner, unobtrusive Terminator in exchange for a hugely muscled, obtrusive killing machine... and the changes in body sizes and types in *The Cable Guy* were beyond obvious. Which left *The Body*...

Where the young, would-be-some-day Writer could visually "grow": into a more visually-matched adult Writer. Without making the viewer wonder what the teenage Gordie might've done to himself in the wild 1960s to make his brown eyes blue...

And I remembered what she'd said to me just now, "But that one *is* me"... which meant—

She must've seen the spark of recognition, of connection, in my eyes, for she said, "Yes, the *Ciné Rimettato* films were practice. I had to know if what I was planning to do, once I found out what was going to happen to me physically, would actually work. I'd switched gears in my early thirties, given acting a try and got a role after my first audition. Made me realize that I'd lost a lifetime of opportunity working behind one of those—" she jerked her head in the direction of the computers racked for parallel processing—"tap-tapping away half my life... but my mid-life crisis wasn't precipitated by poor job performance. I designed a lot of software, probably some of it used by your employers. I managed to make a *great* deal of money... and I invested it. And I was lucky with those investments. So... when I decided to go to one of those open indy auditions, and got the part... I thought I was set. I found out just before that picture wrapped that I'd soon be like this. Once I got over my anger, I remembered an old movie, that one Michael Crichton did in the '70s, *Looker*... all about these evil corporate types who digitally scanned beautiful women in order to create their commercials. Or something like that. The plot wasn't important, but the idea... came back to me, pulled me out of my self-pity."

(Mentally, I kicked myself for overlooking that movie—it might've helped us create a better profile much sooner...)

"And I could still move well enough for motion capture, so I had myself digitally mapped. Recorded my voice, enough for a hundred films' worth of sampling. Just like in *The Stepford Wives*." She smiled at me. "But that wasn't enough... I knew money would buy me screen time in virtually any newbie director's indy film, that enough money up front to make extra prints and buy real advertising time would guarantee me a role in any movie I wanted 'in' on... but I didn't know for sure if I could take out some other actress, and put me in . So... I practiced with previously made films. To see if the finished product would look right—I had to make sure a replacement actor would look really *real*, using sampled images and voices. After the first four films I redid, I was satisfied that my idea was sound, and I got my software past the beta stage—

"Oh, please don't look so pained about me replacing someone else—it happens more than you'd want to know about. And I made sure that every woman I ended up replacing was well paid, and that they got roles in the next film I starred in... I don't think I've permanently damaged anyone's career."

"But... don't people talk?"

"In Hollywood? Or outside it, on the fringes? Not if you want to work again... no need to frown, only the surface of this business is beautiful. But I don't kill careers. Only... delay them, one picture at a time. Disappointment is a fixture of the profession... but being paid to be let down is rare. Only a handful of people know-know what I've done... but they don't know about *Ciné*. I did that by myself, although I had some friends make out the money orders. Like Mike... he's getting this house in my will. He's earned it. Woody's going to live with him, eventually. Like Brutis and Quinn-Quinn will stay with the people who take them to the vet for me.... Im dying," she added without rancor. "I've been this way for some time now, and the doctors say I'm very lucky to be able to still breathe on my own, and talk after a fashion. I still have my vocal cords. That Hawking fellow didn't, after a time."

I could tell that her voice was failing, from fatigue. Just as I knew there was no way, no way at all, no matter how many lawyers and television station moguls and people back at the Bureau and the DoJ were tugging at me, that I'd be able to let anyone string her up from the nearest movie marquee and leave her to dangle in the wind. Even if a judge and jury convicted her, how long might she live once she was incarcerated? Fining her would amount to a death sentence—she needed the money to maintain herself, even on a most basic, no-frills level. And to merely expose her to

the world would've been the cruelest punishment of all—

She lifted both arms at the elbow, shaking hands held out with their palms parallel, and said, "Don't make the cuffs too tight, ok?"

I had to laugh. "You've pissed off a lot of people, you do realize that? But... you haven't killed any careers, let alone any people, which as far as I'm concerned would be my only motivation to turn you in—"

"I'm still very much a threat... I've read about me in the papers, seen the articles on the Web. I'm a danger to Copyright Land—"

I thought about the nearly \$75K sitting in the SAG retirement accounts, and all those videos that had been sold or rented, and all the money those actors and actresses she'd chosen to digitally manipulate had earned... not fortunes, but money nonetheless paid for their "work."

And I also thought about the sheer creativity of her efforts, and how she'd made my partner back at the PBAU laugh at *The Cable Guy*—Keith, who never watched comedies. And all those people in the chat rooms, actually *thinking* about what they'd seen both in her versions and in the original films she'd altered for such an overtly mundane purpose—

"Why not replace actresses with your image... why did you pick those other people—"

"For the software, actually... to make it applicable for anyone, not just my image. And because there were people who didn't make movies they should have, or who passed them up for one reason or another... I didn't want to grow bored working with my own image too quickly. And I suppose my intellectual curiosity needed to be sated—"

"How long did it take you to do them? The first remakes, I mean—"

"Depended... some took nearly a year, others six months. I write good software," she added simply. "But *The Body* only took three months. And I did that one long after I'd put myself into my own pictures. And most of that time was spent fixing the glitches they couldn't do back then."

"So... why do that one at all? You knew how to dub in dialogue, you could manipulate images—I can see putting the casting right in the other movies, but that one... I mean, everyone knows that Tom Cruise was supposed to star in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Brad Pitt too—and that River Phoenix died before he could appear in *Interview With the Vampire*—"

For the first time, I saw a spark of anger in those bicolored eyes. When she spoke, her voice quavered with distortion:

"Don't mention people who squander their lives in mid-project. Phoenix was working on some other film before *Vampire*, some small movie. And he partied too hard right in the middle of shooting, when he was still obligated to the people he was working for. I can understand Farley—he admitted his problems, tacitly. And he wasn't making a film when he died. But even if I could've finished the thing Phoenix was working on, or replaced him in *Vampire*—and I could've written the software to do either film, as long as the other actors resumed their roles... I knew how to do it then— I wouldn't do it after such a display of irresponsible rudeness. Understand?" Her eyes softened, as she continued, "As for *Shawshank*, it's all but achieved religious significance with the public. I wouldn't have dared touch it. Not that I couldn't have done it. But *The Body*... I just wanted to see what it would've looked like. With two actors who matched physically... I made another version of it, one I never put up—I paid for some domains but never used them. I made it, I watched it, and then I erased it. Because I didn't want it to surface, and prevent it from possibly being made for real someday. I don't take away roles from people who might age into them, should someone get the idea to do an ultimate anniversary edition—"

Knowing that I *had* linked up with my UNSUB's motivations, without realizing it, made me smile again, despite the moist tightness I felt behind my soft palate and nose.

"Too bad you destroyed it... I would've liked to have seen it. Although maybe I will see it, eventually. I don't think that particular actor is going to quit the business anytime soon—"

"Or OD," Birkita added with a ringing metallic finality, followed by a smile which looked almost as beautiful as the ones she'd worn in all those photos I'd downloaded.

Sensing that her strength was ebbing, I knelt down close to her chair, and said, "I trust that no more of these... put-rights of yours will be appearing anytime soon. No one cares—no one minds about your films, but the others—"

"I've made what I wanted made... and what I wanted people to see. Apart from the one film I did purely for myself, I just couldn't bear for the others not to be seen... and people *do* enjoy them, don't they?"

"As long as they're the only ones like that, they will. The FBI doesn't have the manpower to seek and destroy every last copy... even if we say we do. I guess we're like Hollywood in that regard—"

"I guess you are," she agreed. "I promise, I won't make any more."

Realizing that our time was limited, I did ask quietly, "I need to know—why add in your cat? My partner, he's stumped—"

"I wanted to. Sly Stallone put in his dog, once he got the *Rocky* films... Woody is just too cute. And he'd sit on my monitor while I was working... so one of my helpers filmed him with the digital camera one day... nothing more than that. He was there, and then he was in the films. He's my favorite cat, and... what else can I say?"

"I can't think of anything," I said, patting her hands, and wanting more than anything to be able to ask her for an autograph, or something...

Once new "product" stopped showing up on the Web, and the people who'd downloaded what they wanted finally talked themselves dry about it, the matter died away... until about a year later, when the codes for Birkita's software showed up on several Web sites. No explanation, just a lot of code... which someone eventually turned into a CR program. Then told his friends, who e-mailed their friends, who...

Keith actually thinks that our old UNSUB is back at it; what with that version of *Titanic* "starring" Gwyneth Paltrow and Billy Crudup, all three *Star Wars* movies featuring a young Christopher Walken as Han Solo, and even the inevitable Tom Cruise version of Andy Dufrane in *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (which lit up the Web like the proverbial Christmas tree, inspiring Web pages and protests alike) all floating around on the Internet, I can't blame his assumption, and I haven't done anything to hinder his continued efforts to profile the CR UNSUB. The software is available, after all, shared freely on the net, so anyone with a yen to put some real or self-ascribed "wrong" casting "right" is now free to do so—and just as free to become a target of the combined strength of the Feds, the legal suits, and whoever else might decide to come between creativity and copyright...

I could tell Keith, I suppose, but the point is moot. She is dead, after all. I saw the notice about it scrolled across the bottom of the screen during CNN's *ShowBiz Today*, under a clip from one of her latest films. E! likewise devoted only a few seconds to her demise. Ostensibly from a "sudden illness"—both channels claimed she was in her thirties. But she happened to die on a big news day; not only were there SAG nominations to report, but there was major opening on Broadway. Wil Wheaton and Kevin Spacey were starring as Biff and Willie Loman in yet another revival of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

There was already Tony buzz about the production.

I suppose Birkita was lucky to get her ten seconds' worth of air time that day.

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Special thanks to Jayge Carr for her help in researching this novelette.

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Dave Hutchinson

TIR-NA-NOG

The birds have been singing all day. They come and sit on the telephone wires outside our window like notes on a stave, a score for some bizarre musical. I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

It's the end of the season. There has been a frost already, and most of the things that were once green have surrendered themselves to the shades at the lower end of the spectrum in a wave of pinks and reds, russets and browns. You can imagine that the colors go all the way off into invisibility, becoming pure radiant heat, soft and gentle and cozy like the glow of a log fire on a winter's evening.

Nothing much seems to have changed here. The lawns still slope to the shingle; the hills, dark and stormy with heather, still shoulder out of the other side of the loch. The jetty is still here, just a jutting tongue of wood succumbing to entropy, pilings rotting and slick with weed and algae, wear and tear from plimsolled feet and careless canoeists accounting for the odd plank here and there that nobody bothers replacing. I think they're just tired of it, letting it scatter softly of its own accord.

Disorder, Hey once told me, is the natural state of things. We measure the passage of time by the amount of change we see around us: a tree is taller, a rock is a little more weathered, a person is a little more wrinkled...

Perhaps that's why the past seems closer here, sitting on the jetty watching the loch lap unhurriedly at the beach like an old man sucking a mint imperial. You can ignore the various abrasions of entropy, concentrate instead on the Big Picture, the picture in which only the colors change, in strict procession, to the long slow beat of the seasons. It could be any autumn, any year....

"I've been meaning to ask. Why do they call you Monkey?"

Shit, the bitch has crept up on me again. How the hell does she *do* that? "I don't remember," I answer without looking at her. "It was a joke, I think."

A polite snort, behind me. "A joke."

"One of Hey's jokes. Some people have an odd sense of humor." I look over my shoulder. "How's yours?"

Standing there, in her tweedy jacket and hiking trousers, hair pulled back in a painful-looking chignon, she tips her head to one side and regards me as if I'm a museum exhibit. Which from her point of view I may well be. At least twenty-five years separate us, and as usual I am on the wrong side of the equation.

"He killed a man," she reminds me again.

"Fine. I'll come to the trial." Which is actually quite amusing, because we both know that there will be no trial. Benedict's masters—and, temporarily, mine—have no intention of seeing Hey in court. Apart from the fact that it would be a dreadful breach of security and they would sooner kill Hey than have him walk into a British court, they're only interested in the things he took with him on the day he walked out of their corporate safe house in Oxfordshire, the things he carries in his head, the truly wonderful and arcane talents he has been developing for them.

She has taken every opportunity, in the weeks we've been chasing Hey, to remind me of the murder. She wheels it out every couple of days, typically when I show signs of flagging. On one memorably miserable drizzly day in Lincolnshire, she mentioned it seven times in one morning. She is trying to estrange me from him. Your old friend killed a man, Monkey. With his bare hands, Monkey. Does that sound like your old friend, Monkey?

It's a little sad that she relies on this litany. She's trying to tell me that Hey has changed beyond recognition, that I owe him no loyalty. She doesn't seem to have realized that I already *know* all this. I haven't seen Hey for the past seven years; how do I know *what* he's like now? Only the hills and the loch stay the same.

It must have irked Benedict's masters no end that Hey refused to work in America—from what she's told me about him, that much never changed. They would have liked to have flown him to their secure facility two kilometers beneath the Arizona desert, where escape is theoretically impossible, but he told them he couldn't work properly in the States. A sense of place was very important to him, he said; he wasn't averse to visiting America, touring other research facilities, pressing the flesh, putting his twopence worth into various projects. He just wouldn't work there.

So, because people have a phenomenal tolerance towards the kind of genius which is absolutely guaranteed to make them immense amounts of money, they bought Grantbridge House just for Hey. They equipped it to his specifications, made it as secure as modern paranoia can make a large building, and for years Hey worked there quite contentedly, within sight of the White Horse at Uffington. He used to send me Christmas cards signed "The Prisoner of Zenda" and "Rudolph Hess."

Until, one day, he just walked out.

Oh yes, Benedict, and he killed a man. I haven't forgotten.

"You came here as children," she says, walking along the jetty until she's standing just behind me. Her feet make

almost no sound at all on the creaky boards; it's like the trick the David Carradine character used to do in *Kung Fu*, walking along a sheet of rice paper without leaving a mark. Except Benedict can do it in walking boots. She does it to annoy me; she knows I can't stand being crept up on.

To hide my irritation, I turn back to the loch, remember canoeing across it one day, a mile to the other side and a mile back, a hot heavy band of fatigue across my shoulders from paddling, while Hey trod foolishly about in the shallows like some awkward wading bird, examining the chunky quartz pebbles at the water's edge. When they were wet they were milky translucent. Later, when he explained to me how a quartz crystal could be induced to vibrate as the heart of a clock, they had dried out and become almost opaque.

"Is that why he came here?" Benedict presses gently. When she wants to be, she is a creature of almost surreal gentleness; her Carolingian accent softens and broadens. She doesn't fool me, though. "Is it because you came here when you were young? All those outward-bound holidays your school arranged?"

Instead of reminding her that we only have the slimmest evidence that Hey was here at all, I say, "Tigers always return to a place of remembered beauty," recalling—probably with no great accuracy—a line from an old Jack Lemmon movie. "It's how they catch them."

"Is that how you think of Hey? As a tiger?"

I put my head back and laugh. There is probably no place in Benedict's life for philosophy, or for dead film stars. I hear her sigh, and when she speaks again her voice is brittle. "I'm going to take the NES scanner up the hill a ways." I catch the tiny sounds of her moving away; a squeak of rotting planks, the dry snap of a piece of driftwood as she reaches the shingle. "I want you to come and help."

I stand up. She's lying, of course. We both know that, and we both stopped caring weeks ago. She doesn't want my help; she would be far happier doing it on her own. What she really wants is to have me where she can see me.

j

"Ready?"

"You're going to get us arrested," I said.

"They won't know which one of us to chase," Hey told me, drizzle running from his tangerine fringe.

"Terrific. So they'll only arrest one of us. I feel better already."

He laughed. Comparatively late in life, Hey had decided to take care of his body. Four times a week, he took a bus up to a sports center in Haringey and strapped himself into any number of chrome-and-leather, spring-and-cable Inquisition machines, lifting weights and twisting his body in directions mine would not move in. He had run in both the London and Boston marathons, and turned in respectable times in each. And then some idiot had introduced him to acrobatics.

Which set us down, at five past seven on a wet London morning in March, outside the old Public Records Office on Lincoln's Inn Fields. From the corner where we stood, I could see homeless people in the bushes of the little park, emerging from piles of soggy cardboard, newspaper, and plastic bags. Walking here from Holborn station, one of them had tried to bum some money from us. Hey had smiled hugely and given him a fifty-thousand zloty note, which he had picked up on holiday in Poland the year before and which you could only change for Sterling in Poland. Hey would do and say anything for a joke. I was often surprised that he had so many friends. Quite frequently, I was surprised that *I* was his friend.

"If we don't do it right now, we'll never do it," he said, looking across the road at the gates of Lincoln's Inn.

"That's all right by me," I said, wiping spots of rain from the plain-glass spectacles he'd made me wear as a disguise. His own camouflage, perversely, consisted of a bright orange wig and a huge false beard. He said he wanted to be as conspicuous as possible. He said he wanted people to remember this.

"It might be all right by you," he said, taking my arm, "but you're coming with me." And he marched me across the road and through one of the pedestrian gates that led into Lincoln's Inn.

The moment we set foot inside the Inn, I froze. Tall terraced barristers' chambers formed a square around a big lawn planted with trees and flower beds. Hundreds of windows looked down on us. It was very quiet; I could hear pigeons' wings clapping as they landed on the grass, hear the kettle boiling in the porters' lodge behind us as somebody brewed his morning cup of tea. I smelled the rain in the air, cigarette smoke on the breeze.

"I can't do this," I said. "It's stupid."

He regarded me sadly from behind his cushion of fake hair. "Monkey," he said, "I'm disappointed with you." And for one moment of unspeakable bliss the tone of his voice told me he'd given up his mad idea.

Then he winked, gave me the same grin he'd given the down-and-out, turned away from me, and before I could open my mouth he had performed a perfect cartwheel along the pavement and sprung into a series of flickflacks.

My jaw dropped. I'd never really thought that he would go through with it. I just stood watching like an idiot as he backflipped away from me down the side of the square.

A shout from the porters' lodge broke the spell. I took off along the top of the square. I heard running feet behind me and didn't dare stop. As I reached the corner and skidded right I risked a glance across the grass and almost got myself caught.

He was still flickflacking down the opposite side of the square, scattering people off the pavement, and he was *beautiful*. There was no sense of effort. He looked like a force of Nature.

I was so struck by the image that, if the hand behind me hadn't slipped on the rain-damp leather of my jacket, I would have been caught. Lungs bursting, I put on a spurt and pulled away, heard someone swear and fall heavily in my wake.

Hey had already reached the gateway at the bottom left-hand corner of the square, bouncing lightly to a stop on the balls of his feet and watching my approach with an expression of gentle unconcern. I pounded past him, fell over as I burst through the gateway and out onto Carey Street, rolled to my feet, glasses going flying into the road.

He caught up with me in a few easy strides and side by side we ran down Bell Yard beside the Law Courts and out onto the Strand, Hey dumping wig and beard in a litter bin as we ran by towards Aldwych and the Underground.

After subsequently spending many years trying to get around London by Tube, I have never understood how he managed to time it so perfectly. He must even have taken into account the timing of the traffic lights; we arrived at Aldwych station just as the bell rang to signal an incoming train. We were the last two into the lift. He was barely breathing hard; I could barely breathe at all.

I managed to get my wind back enough, on the train to Holborn a couple of minutes later, to gasp, "They were chasing *me*, you bastard!"

He shrugged.

"You knew I'd hesitate," I said, "didn't you. You knew I'd hesitate and they'd chase me rather than you."

He smiled.

At Holborn we hopped on a Piccadilly Line train as far as King's Cross, and a brisk trot along the tunnels to St. Pancras brought us out to the main-line station just as the last few passengers were getting onto the 0745 to Nottingham. I just had enough time to retrieve my bag from the locker where I'd left it an hour and a half before and jog stiff-legged up the platform.

"Just tell me you didn't enjoy that," he said, shaking my hand.

"Don't ever drag me into anything like that again," I told him, closing the carriage door and leaning out of the window. "Never ever."

Then the train gave a jerk and Hey and the station sailed away backwards as I was carried out into the morning rain. At that point I would have been particularly happy never to see Hey again.

j

All that was a long time ago, of course. Aldwych Station closed down a year or so later; a couple of years after that, the Council cleared all the homeless people out of Lincoln's Inn Fields and put up hurricane fencing to keep them out. These days, you can walk into any bank or branch of Thomas Cook and order up as many zloties as you want, but the exchange rate is no longer as advantageous as it was when we were younger.

Lots of things have changed.

Just over a month ago, my old friend Hey, genius, acrobat, coconspirator in the first and only Lincoln's Inn Marathon, went absent without leave from the corporation which owns him. Festeoned with electronic bafflers which lesser minds are still struggling to understand, he simply walked through one of the most sophisticated cybernetic security systems ever installed in a house in this country, and evaporated.

Of the ten or fifteen staff on duty at the house that evening, only one was actually privileged enough to witness the Master Magician accomplishing his vanishing act. And, according to Benedict, Hey killed him.

A lot of people were left looking very silly, and, as far as I can understand it, Benedict and I represent part of the effort to put things right. Of course, in this context *right* is a relative term.

j

The Nuclear Emission Spectrum scanner is like an intellectually muscular Geiger counter. Not only does it detect the presence and intensity of radiation, it also draws a map of the surrounding area and shows you where the emission is. Benedict has a large brushed-titanium suitcase full of such toys, any one of which would have given James Bond's Q a conniption fit of biblical proportions.

We walk the hills above the village all afternoon, Benedict carrying the scanner and hoping to pick up the nuclear battery we know Hey had with him in Lincolnshire, but all she finds is ancient background from the granite all around us.

Emptying into the loch near the hotel is a little burn, a rushing little stream foaming over rocks. Further up the hillside the burn cuts its own channel in the floor of a little U-shaped valley that opens way above the tree line into a craggy-walled glen cupping a tiny lozenge-shaped lochan, a perfect, still, black mirror of the sheer rock walls all around it and the streaks of cloud far above.

At the head of the glen I sit on a damp hummock of grass and light a small cigar. Benedict gives me a disapproving glare, but I flash her my best grin and carry on smoking and she drifts off holding the scanner in front of her like a charm against some very old and particularly British evil. A small group of sheep grazing near the lochan sees her heading its way and bolts, off-white blobs floating across the lumpy ground.

Benedict is from South Carolina. I like to think that makes her a Carolingian; it's my little history-teacher joke. She says she was born on one of the Sea Islands. Her father was a shrimp fisherman until one of the first great algal blooms of the early 2000s wandered up from the Florida coast and poisoned all the shrimp.

After that, he sold what he owned of the island on which Benedict was born and relocated the family to Savannah, where he found a job in some nontechnical branch of component manufacture, retrained to navy for what they were still calling the Sunrise Industries when I was a boy.

The day after Benedict's tenth birthday, eighteen months after or so after leaving the Sea Islands, one of her father's workmates tried to ask him a question and found the ex-shrimper dead at his bench. He'd been dead for at least

forty minutes, and nobody had noticed.

Benedict told me all this early on, when she was still interested in establishing a rapport. But I'm not very good at the kind of rapport she wants, the kind that amounts to betrayal.

"We'll sweep another quadrant tomorrow." Good *Christ*, how long has she been standing there?

"I don't think he's still here," I say nonchalantly, as if I haven't just had the wits scared out of me. "If he was here in the first place."

"We'll sweep another quadrant tomorrow," she repeats, putting the scanner back into its fitted chamois cover. The scanner is just one of the things on this trip which have disappointed Benedict, myself being another. Properly calibrated, it should in theory be able to pick up the radiation from the remains of Sellafield, miles to the south and west, but Hey's battery is nowhere to be found.

The scanner looks just like one of Mr Spock's tricorders. When I mentioned this to Benedict all she did was look at me with an expression of gentle pity, the kind of look I always imagine nineteenth-century missionaries giving to South Sea Islanders. She's too young to remember the original *Star Trek*, of course. Too young to remember moving pictures in less than three dimensions, come to that. I shouldn't blame her.

I look at the sky and say, "Beam me up, Scotty."

"You're sick, Monkey," she says, shaking her head.

We follow the burn back down the valley towards the loch. There's a tree up here, near the tree line, that I noticed on our last ramble. I call it the Cancer Tree. It seems to be dying a long and dreadful death. Huge granular cankers the size of fists are clustered on the trunk in a nearly symmetrical pattern; it has almost no leaves, even allowing for the lateness of the season, and it seems to be shedding branches as well, because several have simply fallen off and splashed down into the burn. I pointed it out the first time I saw it, but Benedict only gave it a cursory glance and said something about pollution, said Oregon had been hit by it. I don't think Benedict likes trees. I'm not entirely sure she likes people. Certainly she doesn't like me.

Just beyond the Cancer Tree, Benedict catches her toe on a stone half-buried in the grass and goes flying. It looks as if she bumps her knee quite painfully, but I just stand where I am and stare impassively, hoping to make her angry. I haven't seen Benedict angry yet; it ought to be quite instructive.

All she does, however, is pick herself up and glare at me before stomping off down the hill path again. Or rather, she glares at the two-centimeter CD-ROM I wear, as my one concession to contemporary fashion, pinned to the breast-pocket flap of my combat jacket. I have not told her yet that the jacket is older than she is. I'm saving that for a special occasion.

j

I was doing the audiovisual thing with a fifth-year European History group when the creature with the surfer's tan arrived. It met me in the Head's office with sun-bleached hair, a suit from the Armani Revival, and the soft mid-Atlantic language of corporate law. It wanted my help.

Or rather its employers wanted my help. An important piece of corporate research equipment had gone missing, and it was thought that I might be able to help get it back. The lawyer wouldn't tell me what the piece of equipment was, just then, but he said he was authorized to offer me a payment in return for my services, whether it was recovered or not. He offered me a choice of currencies. It worked out at eight or ten times my annual salary.

Well, all kinds of moral considerations go through your mind in a situation like that. After you've checked out the corporation in question and found it isn't all some outlandish prank, you start to weigh the cramped flat in Walthamstow against the previously hypothetical three-bedroom house in Hertfordshire. Improbably, the light at the end of the tunnel has begun to shine on you. So you sign where they tell you, in quintuplicate, because even if you can't see what possible use you can be, it doesn't matter. They're going to pay you *anyway*....

And then of course they tell you what the missing piece of equipment is, that it has fair hair, a Midlands accent just like your own, and used to tell the worst Irishman jokes in London. And by then it's too late. You're a victim of your own greed.

j

The hotel's septic tank has a circular iron inspection cover, half a meter or so across and held down by two dozen hex-head bolts. It pokes up out of the ground in the back garden on top of a section of pipe about a foot high. Years ago, on those school trips, I used to like to come out here and sit on the cover and look down the valley. I came out here the afternoon Benedict and I arrived, when I was still fitting the place and my memories of it back together. Benedict took one look at the septic tank, murmured something about "Third-World technology," and sneered at the little methane converter bolted to the inspection pipe. I come out here a lot, which suits Benedict because she always knows where to find me.

The hotel is so solidly granite-built that it looks as if it's been carved out of the hillside. As does the owner, Mrs. Lamond. There is a Mr. Lamond, a small dark-skinned creature, but he only appears after nightfall, when he can be found on a tall stool in the bar, nursing one glass of single malt all evening. His wife, however, sweeps through the rooms and along the dark flock-wallpapered corridors with all the top-heavy grandeur of a galleon under full sail. She speaks a dialect which Benedict cannot decipher. Neither can I, for that matter, but I'm not about to let Benedict know that. When Mrs. Lamond speaks to me I nod in what seem to be the right places and hope for the best.

There is still a little room called the Television Room, where in the evenings we sit with the four or five other guests

around an out-of-date Panasonic Holostar which has pronounced z-axis creep, so that all the figures seem to be fading in from some higher dimension. Benedict insists that we watch the news programs in case I spot something which might offer a clue to Hey's whereabouts, but all we see are reports of restless children looting and burning the hearts of Northern towns.

I phone my wife every evening after the news, and every evening she asks when I'm coming home. And every evening I give her the answer Benedict gives me when I ask the same question. I'll be home when we find Hey. And every evening, behind my wife's voice, I hear that hollow silence of abandonment.

j

Even at sixteen, awkward and apparently composed entirely of right angles, he had a menagerie of weird enthusiasms, anything from quartz clocks to Celtic legend. One night, in the very Television Room where Benedict and I now watch the news, he and I sat up late with our first cigarettes in the light of a Sony color television whose horizontal hold kept flipping, and he told me the story of Cuchullainn.

Cuchullainn was the greatest of the Celtic heroes. In his last battle, mortally wounded, he strapped himself to a pillar so that he could die standing up, sword in hand. Nobody dared go near him until a raven landed on his shoulder, and Cuchullainn went to Tir-na-nOg.

"Tee what?" I coughed.

"Tir-na-nOg," he said. "The Land of the Young. The Celtic Valhalla. Where the heroes go." He looked sad. "The only problem is that you have to be dead to go there." He stubbed out his cigarette, waved a hand absently through the smoke as he stared at the television. "I'm not sure I like that."

j

It was the interactives that led him into artificial intelligence in the first place. He was never satisfied with them. He was always saying that the other characters in the programs weren't truly autonomous. They operated to a fixed set of logical rules, and anybody bright enough to figure out the rules could beat the game every time. In a true interactive, he said, the characters would be illogical, petty, greedy, fearful, plain stupid. Just like real people, in other words.

At first he had this little Telefunken console that used an induction headset to broadcast the computer's neural impulses into his brain. Later, when the money started to come in, he flew to Basel and had a permanent neural tap installed at the base of his skull so he wouldn't have to use the induction set any more, but he still found even the most sophisticated interactive a little simpleminded. He was always going on about how he wanted to write the perfect interactive, something truly crafty.

By that time, the gawky uncomfortable adolescent had experienced a late blossoming into a tall, good-looking, self-assured young man, famous at twenty-five for his thesis on machine intelligence. He'd been called "the new Turing," a polymath of outstanding ability, and it was all I could do to stop myself creeping up behind him and sticking an ice pick into that bloody socket in the back of his head.

He laughed. "That really lacks imagination."

"Well of course it does," I said sourly into my beer.

He laughed again. "That's what I like about you, Monkey. You're totally prosaic."

"Would it actually *do* anything?" I asked, curious. "If I did stick something into that thing?"

He looked thoughtful, put his hand to the back of his head and ran his fingers over the tap's tiny dustcover. "It would hurt," he admitted after a moment.

I sniggered and took a swig of beer. "Totally prosaic, eh?"

"You'd also be buried under writs and lawsuits from the company," he went on. "Did you know that the *Mona Lisa* and I are worth precisely the same as each other, for insurance purposes?"

"How nice for you both."

We were sitting in the lounge bar of a quite appalling pub off the Cromwell Road. Our positions had reversed; where once he had lived in London and I had come to visit him, now I lived in London and he came infrequently to visit me. He always chose the pub, and it was always a bad choice, as if he had access to some Bad Pub Guide or something.

This particular one was very empty, a huge room with stained threadbare carpet and extremely distressed bentwood furniture, the chairs upholstered with scarred patched velour of an indeterminate fudge color that might once have been red or gold, it was impossible to tell.

It was also very dark in here, this being a season of brownouts. Things weren't helped by half the windows being broken, the holes filled in with badly-cut bits of plywood. Through one of the surviving panes I watched a police traffic team gather round the burned-out wreck of a VW methane conversion across the road.

We were in this awful place for two reasons. The first reason was that it was Hey's thirty-eighth birthday (and, by extension, the day before my thirty-eighth birthday.)

The second reason was that Hey had just become a father. Or rather the little Anglo-German corporation he worked for had just become a father. The child spoke four languages and liked to watch old Roadrunner cartoons. It was the size of a family car and it was named ALDERMAN.

"I used to think AI was Artificial Insemination before I met ALDERMAN!" Hey guffawed, a gag which must already have grown old and died in the lab where he worked. The pub's horse-faced landlord watched us with no discernible sense of humor from behind his scarred bar.

It was difficult for Hey not to talk shop, even though I understood less than a third of the things he told me. He was already talking about moving on. He had helped to break the ground on artificial intelligence. Anything that came afterwards would be Development, Utilization, work for the busy half-bright people who think up uses for miracles.

Now he was talking about some madness involving biotechnology. That was where the future lay, bacteria that excreted room-temperature superconductors, programmable polysaccharides that behaved like separate animal cells under some circumstances and like long-chain polymers under others, things that went up into orbit as packets of white powder and came back from the European Spacelab as semiorganic compounds Nature only considered in her worst nightmares.

"I hear strange things from the Land of the Rising Sun," he said at one point.

"What's new?" When we were young, Japan was the place the miracles came from. Now Hey was making miracles himself, and Japan was the Competitor, the Bogeyman.

"The rumor is that the Nipponese have managed to copy the personality of an orangutan onto a couple of thousand terabytes of read-only memory."

"I didn't think orangutans had personalities."

He snorted. "You've never kept one, obviously. I'm reliably informed that they have more personality than some major soap-opera stars."

"But why bother?"

He looked round the bar, smiling. He was dressed for the street: baggy orange pantaloons tucked into calf-length chamois boots, an oxblood leather duster coat, and a pointy little hat with a huge floppy brim. It was as if someone had slipped Gandalf a particularly potent designer drug.

"It'd be cheap to keep," he said finally. "You could buy the ROM, plug it into your entertainment set, switch on the hologram projector, and you'd have your very own orangutan, live and direct."

"I think I'll stick with my cat, thanks a lot."

He grinned beatifically at me. "Prosaic, Monkey," he said. "No imagination."

I took a drink of warm, flat beer. "Shall we talk about what I did at school today?"

"Don't be silly, Monkey," he said. "It's my birthday and I've just kicked Turing into a cocked hat. Let's talk about me."

Those, of course, were the days when his masters still let him walk free.

j

Once, when I was young and in my first teaching job, I took part in a car treasure hunt around the green and leafy lanes of Kent. That's how long ago it was: Kent still had lanes that were green and leafy. It was the sort of thing where you go to a village, solve a list of clues, and from the answers decipher the location of the next village in the chain. And so on. Alastair, my driver, demonstrated an almost cosmological calm when faced with my inept navigation and an ancient and continually-stalling Passat. We saw a lot of Kent that day, and by accident we also saw quite a lot of East Sussex.

Whenever we ran into one of the other teams taking part, Alastair and I would try to throw them off the scent by examining some imaginary clue or by pretending to go off in entirely the wrong direction. Most of the time, we *were* going off in the wrong direction.

Benedict and I have been on our own treasure hunt, following Hey's trail from Grantbridge House to a flat in the Barbican; from a squat near the Cromwell Road to a pirate chip factory high up in the Pennines; from a cottage in the Lincolnshire Wolds, where there was recent evidence of some kind of workshop and an empty delivery case which had once held a little nuclear battery... and so on. To here.

We are, apparently, not alone in our search for Hey. Not only are there other search teams sent out by his masters, but the Competitors also want him, or at least what he knows.

In order to throw other searchers off the trail, Benedict and I are booked into the hotel on the banks of the loch as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, which is certainly not my real name and probably isn't Benedict's either. It seems a pretty transparent piece of misdirection to me, but Benedict claims to know what she's doing.

For appearances' sake, we have a double room. She sleeps in the bed, I sleep on the floor. It's an arrangement that suits us both. She thinks I'm an idiot; for my part, I have a wife and a fifteen-year-old daughter, the AIDS vaccine is still over four thousand pounds for a course of five shots, and I would much rather climb into bed with a dead shark than sleep with Benedict.

"Monkey."

I heard her coming that time, her walking boots swishing through the long grass. Either my hearing's improving or she just isn't bothering to be quiet any more. I don't even look up, just sit where I am on the septic tank's inspection cover, flipping my little CD-ROM like a rainbow-plated coin.

"Will you stop doing that?"

"All right." I pin the ROM back on my jacket. For some reason it irritates Benedict hugely when I start flipping it. I don't know why. Maybe her mother was once frightened by a George Raft film.

"News from home," she tells me. Meaning she's been on the satellite link with her masters in their underground Arizona complex, which is supposed to be able to withstand a groundburst nuclear explosion of a little over two megatons. "Hey's bank accounts are gone."

"Maybe he needed some mad money," I theorize halfheartedly.

"You would think so, wouldn't you," she says with a heavy edge of sarcasm in her voice. "Except under an

arrangement made with his bankers before he went missing, the bulk of his money has been given to our major competitor."

I know I'm making a mistake, but I burst out laughing anyway. "And I suppose they need the money, eh?"

"I suppose." And, for the first time in days, we make eye contact. She has lovely eyes, a peculiar deep-sea green you only see, far away on the very edge of infinity, if you hold two mirrors up to each other. One or both could be implant-cameras, it's impossible to tell.

She sighs and turns away. "Come upstairs, Monkey. I want to give you a geography lesson."

"A what?" I ask, following.

j

Up in our room, Benedict heaves her big metal suitcase out from under the bed and wipes a cardkey down the slot in the side. Then she dumps it on the duvet, spins the combination locks, snaps up the catches, lifts the lid.

"A geography lesson, Monkey," she says. "I want to show you where you are."

"I know where I am," I tell her.

Looking down into the case, she says, "You have no *idea* where you are. Come here."

I step over beside her. Inside the case, nested in foam, are decks and sets, consoles, palmtops, satcoms, edge connectors, alphanumeric tapboards, umbrella dishes, paper-thin polycarbonate flatscreens rolled up like posters, brightly-colored braids of optic ribbon. Designer tech; the collective unconscious of our age.

She lifts out one of the devices, a thing the size of an old-style portable typewriter and the thickness of a paperback novel. It seems by far the least complicated of all her toys: a touch-sensitive keyboard, some little LCD panels, tiny integral screen, input-output jacks.

"Know what this is?"

"It is not logical, Captain," I deadpan, trying to ignore the itchy feeling down my backbone.

She doesn't even bother to look at me. "It's a portable cracking deck."

"Oh." Then, "Why did you bring that?"

"Hey took one of these out of Grantbridge with him, among other things," she says, which doesn't answer my question.

"What for?"

"Well, if we knew *that...*" She puts the cracking device back in its nest in the case, takes out another object, a matte-black thing shaped like an old-fashioned peppermill with a pistol grip grafted onto it. Even I know what that is. She takes a step back and points it at me. "I'm not playing, Monkey."

The wide end of the pistol is dotted with hundreds of little holes. I shrug. "Me neither."

Benedict smiles and takes a cassette from the case. "It isn't loaded, Monkey." She snaps the cassette into the side of the pistol, twists the barrel until it clicks. "*Now* it's loaded." And she points it at my head. "On full automatic," she says, sighting down the fat barrel, "this thing will empty a cassette of two thousand flechettes in just over a second. At this range that's more than enough to *completely* vaporize your head."

"When I was young, little girls played with dolls," I say, unable to tear my eyes away from all those little holes.

"Well, thank God those days are gone. Where is he, Monkey?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you know. You're his best friend. He was always talking about you."

"I'm flattered."

She gives a thin smile. "You're old, Monkey. Hey's old. Old men stick together."

"You can't blame them if the world's being run by people like you."

She twists the barrel again. "On single-shot," she says, "it fires a dart tipped with batrachotoxin. You know? From the skin of poisonous frogs?"

"Only you could make a joke like that, Benedict."

"Some people have an odd sense of humor," she says with a little smile. "How's yours?"

"Oh, fine. I've always found this kind of thing hilarious."

She leans forward and puts the muzzle of the gun against my throat. "Like hitting your heart with a pickax, Monkey," she murmurs, watching my face.

And for a moment an awful feeling comes over me. An obscene feeling. I stare into those depthless oceanic eyes again, and for a moment I know that I could fall in love with her, even though she is threatening me with poison distilled from the skin of frogs, even though she despises me for being everything she is not, for being old, broken, British. I could fall in love with this beautiful child of a younger culture, this witch of dark technologies, build my love into an edifice, a mighty wheel, and break myself on it.

I feel a bead of sweat collect itself up in my receded hairline, begin to travel down my forehead. She is quite lovely in her ease with hardware. Alluring. I could tell her my feelings, and she would shoot me right here and now, out of surprise alone, out of disgust...

"Benedict," I say with an effort, "will you get it into your head that I don't have what you want? I'm a teacher, that's all. I teach the syllabus and along the way I try to teach the kids how to be better people. That's all."

She favors me with one of her cold, toneless looks. "It's a pity no one ever took the trouble to teach *you* how to be a better person."

"Pardon me?"

"Hey tried to call you twice in the year before he walked and both times you just told him to fuck off. We've got

recordings. Not a nice way to treat a friend, Monkey."

Which, I suppose, is why they came to me. "It's not very polite to listen to other people's telephone conversations."

She laughs at such a quaint concept as politeness, unsnaps the ammo cassette from the pistol. "There are lots of people looking for Hey." She puts gun and cassette back into the case and shuts the lid. "Not all of them have my sense of humor."

I suddenly realize I'm shaking. "Well, let's hope we find him first."

"You'd better hope so. Hey hasn't defected; we'd know about it if he turned up in someone else's facility. He's gone rogue. Like a mad elephant, you know? Like a *tiger*. We have to stop him before he does something silly."

"Who's going to stop *you* before *you* do something silly?"

She gives me that thin smile again as she slides the case back under the bed. "Nobody at all. Beautiful, isn't it?"

j

That's progress for you, I suppose. Twenty years ago, when the Japanese first recorded the personality of an orangutan onto a thousand or so terabytes of ROM, the device they used was the size of a small car. Now you can put it in a suitcase. I presume one day you'll be able to carry it around in your pocket.

There is, apparently, still no way round the trauma of the procedure. The electrochemical stimulation involved either kills the subject outright or leaves them severely brain-damaged. For this reason the technique is either used on people who are going to die anyway, or—in the case of a number of states in America—as a penalty for capital crimes. Personality distillation. Cracking. Instead of electrocuting people, now they just record their personalities and file them.

We had a cracker at school once, brought in on loan as part of a science project. Being the curious type I took the advantage of a free period and popped down to the lab for a look.

The hardware was uninteresting, just an everyday hologram console plugged into a couple of featureless little boxes, and it produced the image of a ten-year-old Danish girl who had been dying of leukemia. Her father was a rich industrialist, and, rather than lose his little girl altogether, he had had her cracked.

It was impossible to tell that this was, in effect, a monstrously sophisticated recording. To all intents and purposes, I was speaking to a real little girl, as if we were having a viewphone conversation. The girl's English was excellent but accented; she hadn't been able to speak English originally, but a secondary language program had been added to the cracker.

We talked for a long time. So long that I missed my next teaching period. I can't, however, remember exactly what we talked about, only that it was one of the more compelling and upsetting experiences of my life. If I had been the little girl's father, I think I would rather have let her die naturally.

j

"It's the Holy Grail, sort of. Biology and technology combined."

We were sitting in the lobby at the Barbican Center. There was a concert of English folk music on in the big auditorium, and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves* was coming from the speakers distributed around the room. Hey had ceased to talk technology or biology. Now he was talking necromancy, stuff from a faery-land ruled entirely by intelligences that were neither wholly organic nor wholly inorganic.

"I was in Arizona last week," he said. "They've developed this little robot about the size of a speck of dust. You can't even see it without a microscope. Powers itself by tapping into the electrical potential of muscle fibers. They use free-electron lasers to sculpt them out of bits of silicon-chitin hybrid."

"Sounds terrific." I gazed around the empty lobby. One of the Center's staff was moving between the tables clearing coffee cups and glasses left by concertgoers during the interval.

"Only about a gigabyte of onboard memory, of course, but it doesn't have to be very bright. You could inject a few thousand into a bloke's bloodstream and they'd just go round and round unplaquing his arteries."

"What about rejection?"

He waved rejection away. "You give them coats of mimetic protein and the body thinks they belong there."

"Of course." I lit a cigar.

"I really hate London," he said, squinting about him.

"What?"

"London. It's fucking *horrible*. I don't know how you can live here."

I thought about it. "No," I said finally. "No, neither do I."

He looked to his left. A few meters away, Michael, his bodyguard, was reading a Barbican events program while at the same time watching the waiter clearing up. He'd balked at letting us sit out by the Lakeside—all those balconies and windows overlooking us, perfect for sniper fire. Michael took his job very seriously.

"Look at that wanker," Hey said. "Company man from the chromosomes up. They clone them, you know. Grow them in vats. Hasn't a fucking free-thinking cell in his body."

I looked at Hey, but it was impossible to tell if he was kidding or not.

"Nice to know they care about you," I said nonchalantly.

He snorted. He had changed since I'd last seen him, just before taking up employment with his new masters. He had become... I don't know, *colorless*. Inspid. It might just have been the unobtrusive charcoal cord trousers, black

turtleneck, and nondescript navy surplus overcoat the security man had persuaded him to wear in order to be inconspicuous, but the life seemed to have gone out of him. His face was thinner, more pinched; he was going bald in an amiable mad-professor sort of way and he wore John Lennon spectacles rather than have an op to correct a worsening astigmatism.

"You look tired."

He shrugged. "So much to do, so little time to do it in." He looked thoughtfully at Michael. "So many people to do it to."

"Not that I look much better, I suppose."

He smiled wanly at me. "Look at us, Monkey. Two old men sitting wondering why the world's so bloody awful. My old grandad used to do the same thing with his mates down at the working men's club."

"I don't know what *you're* wondering, but *I'm* not wondering why the world's so bloody awful." Which made a change.

"Too many young people," he said, nodding to himself. "They all want a bit of the action. And every year there's more of them."

"We're not old," I said.

"Sorry, Monkey, but we are."

"If you start to cry, I'm leaving."

He grinned. "Good old Monkey, always ready to stand by his mates."

"That's me."

He looked at my cigar. "Ever wonder what it's like to be dead?"

"It's like teaching at a comprehensive in Outer London. Fewer opportunities to be beaten up, perhaps."

"People could get tired of your smart mouth, Monkey, you know?"

"I know."

"Really, though. Do you think there's a Heaven? An afterlife?"

"A Tir-na-nOg?" I said, and I was glad to see him laugh finally. "Oh my Christ, I hope not."

"When I die," he said as if he'd only just that moment decided, "I'm going to give all my money to charity."

I was about to ask what he meant, but all of a sudden he took off into a description of how plants have a rudimentary nervous system, how various programmable biotech components could now assemble themselves into what amounted to molecular computers, how it should soon be feasible to implant them into people. Then Michael came over and Hey's trip to London was finished, and that was the last time I ever saw him, pushing the Barbican's glass doors open against the early evening drizzle, one day in October.

j

"That was seven years ago. And you've had him locked up ever since."

"He shouldn't have told you a lot of those things," Benedict says. "That stuff about nanotech was still in R&D seven years ago."

"And of course I went straight to your competitors and told them everything he told me, which is why I'm so wealthy now."

We are sitting in our room at the hotel. She's sitting on the bed, I'm sitting on my sleeping bag on the floor, looking up at her, which nicely sums up our relationship.

"He was naked, you know," she says, looking over to the window.

"Excuse me?"

She looks at me. "Hey. He knocked out the video system at Grantbridge but we had some still cameras set up as well and he couldn't interfere with them, so we got one photo of him when he walked out. He was stark naked except for an orange wig."

I stare at her.

She cocks her head at me. "Any thoughts on that?"

I find myself smiling. "He was embarrassed about going bald."

Benedict sighs. Idiot Monkey. Clown Monkey. Not worth taking seriously. "That's how we know about the bafflers. We could have worked it out from what happened, constructed a synthesis of events, but the photo clinched it. He was covered in wires and little boxes and Christ only knows what. We found them later in the trees two miles from the house."

"So he wasn't naked." I hug my knees to my chest. "Wig, wires, little boxes. Sounds a bit *overdressed*, now you mention it."

She looks at me a moment longer, then examines the back of her hand and says nonchalantly, "Why did you keep hanging up on him? When he rang you?"

I get up, walk to the corner of the room and switch on the little kettle. "Lots of reasons."

"He sounded desperate."

"He was *drunk*, Benedict. He was drunk, he hadn't bothered to get in touch with me for seven years, Louise and I were going through a bad patch, I was having a really shitty time at school." I shrug. "I kept hoping he'd call back, but he never did."

"And you didn't try to get in touch with him yourself."

"I didn't have a number."

She shakes her head. "And you call yourselves *friends*."

"I seem to remember something about your security men not letting him give out his phone number."

"Hey never struck me as someone who did as he was told."

Hands in pockets, I perch on the windowsill. Outside, just beyond the glass, the birds are arrayed on the telephone wires, singing their little hearts out into the evening. I wonder briefly if Benedict would lend me her flechette pistol so I can blow the little sods away.

"You know he was drinking heavily?" she says.

"He's always drunk heavily, even when he was doing the keep-fit stuff. And don't tell me he's just gone bonkers. He's always been a bit manic-depressive." To my consternation, she puts her head back and howls with laughter. She has an astoundingly dirty laugh. I'm amazed and irritated in roughly equal measures. "I'm glad you find it so funny."

"Manic?" she laughs. "Your friend isn't manic-depressive. He's *maniac*-depressive."

I look at her until she stops laughing. When the kettle boils, I unplug it.

"You really have no idea about what happened to Hey after you last saw him, have you, Monkey."

"I've been trying to tell you that for weeks."

"Do you know what bioROM is?"

I close my eyes. "Oh, bastard."

"Programmable memory-RNA analogues in conjunction with direct neural input," she explains unnecessarily. "You can learn a whole language in an evening. Hey was doing bioROM very heavily, whole bodies of technique. The doctors at Grantbridge warned him, but he wouldn't stop, just kept ordering them one after the other, eight hours a day plugged into a teaching deck."

"And you let him." Oh, you bitch, you let him drive himself mad...

"He said it was in the interests of his work," she says, innocent surprise in her voice that I should think anything else.

A great tiredness sweeps over me. I pop tea bags into two mugs. Into Benedict's mug I also drop half a dozen sleeping tablets that I've been keeping in my pocket for just this eventuality. They hit the tea bag without rattling. Theoretically it ought to be impossible to overdose on these particular pills, but right now I don't care whether she dies or not. I pour water into the mugs and the pills dissolve almost at once. Colorless, odorless, tasteless. Sleight of hand. I wonder if Benedict knows how much I was interested in amateur magic when I was a boy.

"Nobody could understand half the things he said or did," she says, gently complaining. "He ordered five hundred rubber plants once. Infected them with superconductor bacteria. Most of them died, of course."

"It's the technology, Benedict," I say, trying to fight my anger back and think clearly. I pour milk into the tea. "Hey's just into the hardware." And then I stand there appalled as the dissolved pills curdle the milk in Benedict's tea.

"There was no logic to it, though," she says.

"What do you mean?" Stirring does no good; the milk just breaks into little white lumps. Dear God, I can't even *poison* somebody properly....

"The stuff he was learning. Some of it wasn't even technical. Fairy tales. *The Mabinogion*. Do you know that one?"

"No," I say, stirring desperately, hopelessly.

"Celtic poetry. Welsh poetry. This was after the Celtic and Welsh language shots." She shakes her head.

Oh, bugger it. I fish out the tea bags, dump them in the bin, pick up the mugs, and carry them over to the bed. "There's something wrong with the milk."

"Surprise me. Half-assed country, can't even get real milk." She takes her mug, looks at the tea a moment, then sips. "No, it's okay. Forget it. I like my tea chewy." She raises an eyebrow, just in case I've missed the sarcasm.

I stay on my feet so she can't see that my milk is uncurdled. "Hey's always been interested in Celtic legends."

"Being interested is one thing, Monkey." She takes a big drink of tea. "Mainlining the shit is something else altogether."

I go back to the window, watch dusk gather on the face of the loch and start to rise up the hillsides. My reflection starts to form in the glass, a plump, short, balding man of late middle age, weak-mouthed and inoffensive. I'm surprised to realize, so late in my life, how much I look like my father. "He couldn't have known I'd help you," I tell my reflection.

I hear her take another big gulp of tea. "You've got a price, just like everyone else."

"Yes," I say. "Yes, you're probably right." And I wave my hands, and all the birds on the telephone lines, startled by the sudden movement, take flight into the darkening sky.

j

Hours later I unzip my sleeping bag and crawl over to the bed. Benedict is curled under the duvet, a deeply-breathing question mark. I shake her gently, then harder, but her breathing doesn't change. Fine.

Downstairs, behind the little counter at which Mrs. Lamond receives her guests, is a white-painted toolbox containing all kinds of battered, worn and dirty handyman's tools. By the flame of my lighter I locate a rubber-cased torch and an adjustable wrench. Then I find the control panel for the hotel's alarms. None of the switches make any sense to me, so I turn them all off and let myself out.

Stumbling along the path around the building following the torch's bobbing oval of light, all kinds of things go through my mind, ridiculous things. When I get to the septic tank's inspection cover, I kneel beside it and shine the torch on the fresh, barely-rusted scars on the bolts that hold it down.

It takes a long time. The wrench keeps slipping, putting new scars on the metal. I have to stop again and again to tighten the jaws on the bolts, but they come up slowly, slowly, one by one. Finally I have them all out, and I heave the

heavy iron disc off the tank. A dreadful hot smell of rotting shit mushrooms into the night air, turning my stomach over.

Lying in the grass nearby is a length of broom handle. I pick it up and, holding my breath, use it to poke about inside the tank. At the first attempt I make contact with something solid.

"Monkey."

This time I don't jump; I've been half-expecting it. You hear all kinds of stories; Hey once told me that his bodyguard's blood chemistry had been altered so drugs wouldn't affect him. No wonder she wasn't worried about drinking her tea.

"It's here," I tell her.

j

I am a spy, a sleeper. A mole in one of the Global Village's few remaining lawns, biding my time, waiting for the signal. Hey's mole.

He never said anything out loud, but that was Hey. Half his communication came in the form of allusion, double entendre, suggestion, and it was up to everyone else to decode it. I didn't have to worry; he'd written the world's greatest interactive, loaded it up with real people, and waited until he needed it. Everything was arranged to give him the best chance of doing what he wanted to do, and all I had to do was play my role when the time came.

I didn't even have to worry about getting my role right; Hey knew how I'd react in a certain situation. He'd figured out my role that drizzly morning in Lincoln's Inn, when he ran one way and I ran the other, and everybody had chased me. He had filed me away for future use. Monkey: *decoy*.

Except I seem to have done little apart from trail around Britain with Benedict. I can't have slowed her down by much, but maybe it was enough.

Benedict certainly seems to think it was enough. In response to her summons, a team of three eager, almost identical young men helicopters in out of the dawn fifteen minutes later to fish Hey's machine out of the septic tank. It's bigger than the one Benedict showed me, and it seems to have had modular attachments plugged into it, but it must be the cracking deck that Hey took out of Grantbridge with him.

A few hours later, after the enthusiastic young men have helicoptered out again, locals start coming into the hotel to tell Mrs. Lamond of all kinds of strange things, of two taciturn Americans who have taken over the local telephone exchange and plugged peculiar equipment into it, of teams of strangers calling at isolated crofts testing the telephones and landlines.

Benedict passes through the hotel in an access of rage spectacular for its absolute silence, all pretence of tourism gone now. She's absolutely exquisite. She's furious with me, but not for trying to drug her; we both know she would have been disappointed if I hadn't at least tried. I sit in the lounge, listen to the locals' stories, read a two-week-old magazine.

At one point Benedict comes into the lounge and says, "You knew that thing with the bank accounts was a signal." She sits down on the coffee table and fixes me with those gorgeous eyes. "You knew all along."

"So did you," I say reasonably.

"You saw those marks on the bolts the first day we came here. You knew someone had put something in the tank."

"I knew someone had had the cover off in the past few months. It could have been a routine inspection, but I knew Hey would have put the cracking deck somewhere I'd notice."

"You knew about the cracking deck?"

"No," I say with exaggerated patience, disappointed that she needs it all explained to her like this. "I thought *something* had been put in the tank. When you told me about the cracking deck, I guessed that might have been it."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

She has to ask, of course. "I don't like your friends, I don't like what they stand for, and I don't like *you*, Benedict. What other reason could I *need*?"

She blinks impassively at me. "You really are a fucking creep, Monkey," she says, standing up and walking away.

"At least I'm still a fucking human *being*!" I yell after her, but she doesn't stop.

j

After breakfast I try an experiment: I put on my boots and take a walk up alongside the burn. I really do it to annoy Benedict, but she gives no sign of even noticing that I've gone. I wonder briefly what she would do if I just kept going, before I realize that she probably has the whole valley surrounded.

Up near the floor of the glen, I stop and stand, hands in pockets, looking at the Cancer Tree. Then I sit on a rock and try to think.

There is an indefinable feeling, now, that the game is over. Hey has eluded us, gone where we can't follow him. All the subsidiary players are being brought in to tidy up, the eager boys in the helicopter, the quiet men in the telephone exchange, all here to wrap up the loose ends.

From what the invading technicians have been doing, I can make a guess at what has happened. Benedict's people have taken every scrap of data they possess regarding Hey, and they have produced a construction, a *synthesis* of what happened here. They believe that their synthesis has allowed them to second-guess Hey. But it hasn't, not really.

I rub my face and try to concentrate. He would have needed an accomplice, a final mole, someone to operate the

cracking deck, then dispose of the body and the equipment when it was all over. Maybe someone local, maybe not. We might never find out who it was. In Benedict's synthesis, the accomplice then somehow transmitted Hey's ROM personality structure into the telephone network. The technicians are looking for signs of this transmission, clues to where Hey's personality has gone. These are technical people, and they have synthesized a technical solution.

I sit there for a long long time, thinking about programmable polysaccharides, bacterial superconductors, molecular computers, plants with rudimentary nervous systems. He once infected five hundred rubber plants with superconductor bacteria, and most of them died. But not all of them. I smile at the Cancer Tree. They think they know, but they don't.

j

Benedict is sitting on the shingle beach, knees hugged to her chest, staring out over the water. She's probably been listening to my approach for fifteen minutes or so, but it doesn't matter. Not now. I walk down the beach and sit next to her, and together we watch the little waves lap at the shoreline.

"Did you know," I say finally, "that the Celts believed that mountains and rivers and trees all contained deities?"

She looks at me as if she thinks I'm mad. And who's to say she's not right? And where does that leave her?

"What were you planning to do this morning?" she asks.

"I'm not sure," I tell her truthfully. "I think he wanted me to take the machine and run away with it once I was sure he was dead. I think I was supposed to keep you running around a bit longer."

"And you were sure he was dead when I told you about the bank accounts."

"He said something once about giving his money to charity."

She sighs. "You know what we think he did?"

"He had himself cracked and transmitted into the phone network. Yes, I worked it out."

"And you've no idea who helped him with it."

"Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"I could make you."

I have no doubt that she could, or that she would enjoy herself immensely while she did it. But I just sit there and smile at her. She can't harm me any longer, not in any meaningful way. Hey has gone, and without him the game has lost any meaning.

"Jesus," shaking her head at a plan Hey must have been preparing for ever since he first heard about cracking. She is also, for the first time, having to countenance the possibility that I might be a good deal brighter than she has been giving me credit for. That hurts. I can tell.

"He might not have been successful," I say after a while. "It might just have been an elaborate suicide."

"We can't afford to believe that," she says almost inaudibly, as if the day's rage has simply exhausted her. "Even if the chips in the machine were erased, we might still be able to pull some of his personality out of it. And we have to find him. Talk to him somehow."

Talk to him. I smile at the loch, the hills, the trees. "Can we go home now?"

"I'm booked on the midnight flight out of Glasgow. I guess you can go whenever you want."

"Will your people be angry with you?"

She shrugs. "I guess. They might even want to send me after him." And she manages a faint little smile.

I unpin the CD-ROM from my jacket, take her hand, and place the little disc in her palm. For the first time, I'm close enough to smell her perfume, faint and fragile and papery. "It's the story of Cuchullainn," I say. "About a hundred kilobytes of text." She looks at me, then at the disc, then back at me. "He posted it to me," I tell her. "It was in my pigeonhole at school the day after I signed your contract." Benedict and her masters are so intent on the electronic arts that they've forgotten there's still a postal service in this country. "I've known all along that he planned to kill himself, you see. Cuchullainn dies and goes to Tir-na-nOg. It's an in-joke. A signal, if you like. He was probably dead by the time I received that."

She looks at the ROM again. "And I thought you were just a fashion victim."

"Not me. Too prosaic."

Outsmarted by two old Brits with a plan thought up before she was born. Poor Benedict.

"He'd never have got out of here alive," she says.

"I know. That's why you brought a cracking deck with you. You were going to crack him yourself, make sure he never got away from you again."

She looks levelly at me. "No, you don't understand. The man he killed was my husband."

Well, just when you think you're getting to know someone... I get to my feet. "I don't think you're the murdering kind, Benedict."

She stares out across the loch to the hills on the other side. "Why did he do it, Monkey?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, Benedict; I suppose your husband just got in his way."

"No." She shakes her head. "This. He had *everything* with us, Monkey. Money, power, prestige, all the bioROM he could pump into his stupid head. Why do this?"

"He was going to grow old and die," I say.

She's silent a moment. Then she murmurs, "Fuck."

"There's always a simple explanation for these things," I say. I bend down and kiss the crown of her head. Then I walk away.

On my last morning at the hotel by the loch, the morning after Benedict leaves, I take one final walk up the burn and stand smiling at the Cancer Tree. Up in the glen I can hear helicopters coming and going, bringing teams to drag the little lochan for Hey's body and the rest of his equipment.

On impulse I walk across the burn, boots slipping on slimy rocks so that one foot splashes into icy water. On the other bank I reach up and touch the cankers on the trunk. The tree does appear to be dying from whatever witches' brew of outlandish technology he injected it with, but maybe it lasted long enough for him to take the next step, from flesh to augmented tree to the force of Nature he always believed existed.

Maybe one day Benedict's people will assemble the clues in the right way and make the correct guess about what Hey attempted up here. Maybe then they'll come for me again, but for Hey—if he succeeded, if *I* have guessed correctly—it's already over.

On the other hand, it *could* have been suicide; a typically Hey sort of suicide, designed to cause the maximum amount of inconvenience for the maximum number of people. He was certainly capable of a gesture like that.

But I don't think so. I *choose* not to think so. He went where he wanted to go, and he would have known that if he left enough clues I would eventually work it out.

There should always be time for a last goodbye. I put my arms round the Cancer Tree and hug it. If I put my ear to the trunk, I might even be able to hear Hey singing as he takes that final step, leaping exulting from tree to tree, bush to bush, a virus program copying and recopying itself across the face of Nature; Heaven, Valhalla, Tir-na-nOg...

Steven Utley
THE REAL WORLD

Everything felt like a dream. The flight attendants seemed to whisper past in the aisle. The other passengers were but shadows and echoes. Through the window, he could see the wing floating above an infinite expanse of cloudtop as flat and featureless as the peneplained landscapes of the Paleozoic. Im just tired, he thought, without conviction.

Ivan forced his attention back to the laptop. He had called up an old documentary in which he himself appeared. "Resume," he said, very softly, and the image on the screen unfroze, and a familiar, strange voice said, "Plant life may actually have invaded the land during the Ordovician Period." Is that really me? he thought. My face, my eyes, I look so un-lived-in. "We know about two dozen genera of land plant in the Silurian," and the screen first showed a tangle of creeping green tendrils at his younger self's feet, "such as these, which are called psilophytes," then a glistening algal mat. "The big flat things you see all over the mudflats are Nematophycus. The point is—"

His earphone buzzed softly. "Pause," he murmured to the laptop, and the image on the screen froze once more. He said, "Hello?" and heard his brother say, "How's the flight?"

"Don. I hope you're not calling to rescind my invitation."

"Michelle'll pick you up at the airport as planned. Im just calling to warn you and apologize in advance. I just got an invitation I can't refuse to a social event tomorrow evening."

"No need to apologize."

"Sure there is. This is a *soirée* of Hollywood swine."

"I can use the time to rest up for Monday."

"Well, actually, I'd sort of like to take you along. In case I need somebody intelligent to talk to. Unless, of course, you think you'd be uncomfortable."

Ivan examined the prospect for a moment, then said, "On Tuesday Im going to read a paper on Paleozoic soils at the Page Museum. Young snotnoses keen to establish their reputations on the ruins of mine will be there. In light of that, I can't imagine how people who undoubtedly don't know mor from mull could possibly make me uncomfortable."

"Good. To the extent possible, Ill camouflage you in my clothing."

"What's the occasion for the party?"

"The occasion's the occasion."

"Let me rephrase the question. Who's hosting the party?"

"Somebody in the business who's throwing himself a birthday party. None of his friends will throw one for him, because he doesn't have any friends. If I hadn't come within an ace of an Oscar last month—which by the way is the limit of his long-term memory—it'd never have occurred to him to invite a writer. If I was a self-respecting writer and not a Hollywood whore, I'd duck it. But, hey, it'll be entertaining from a sociological point of view."

"As long as I get to ogle some starlets."

"Starlets'd eat you alive."

"That would be nice, too. Look, please don't think you have to entertain me the whole time Im out there."

"Oh, this place'll afford you endless opportunities to entertain yourself."

"I look forward to it."

"See you soon."

"Goodbye."

"Resume," he murmured to the laptop. "The point is."

"The point is," his younger self said, "they can't have sprung up overnight, even in the geologic sense. The Silurian seas are receding as the land rises, and the plant invasion's not a coincidence. But there were also opportunities during the Ordovician for plants to come ashore in a big way. Only they *didn't*. Maybe there was lethal ozone at ground level for a long time after the atmosphere became oxygen-rich. If so, a lot of oxygen had to accumulate before the ozone layer rose to the higher levels safe enough for advanced life-forms. Our—"

"Stop," he said, and thought, What a lot of crap. Then he sighed deeply and told the laptop, "Cue the first Cutsinger press conference."

After a moment, Cutsinger's image appeared on the screen. He was standing at a podium, behind a brace of microphones. He said, "I am at pains to describe this phenomenon without resorting to the specialized jargon of my own field, which is physics. Metaphor, however, may be inadequate. Ill try to answer your questions afterward."

This is afterward, Ivan thought bitterly, and, yes, I have a question.

"The phenomenon," Cutsinger's image went on, "is, for want of a better term, a space-time anomaly—a hole, if you will, or a tunnel, or however you wish to think of it. It appears, and I use the word advisedly, appears to connect our

present-day Earth with the Earth as it existed during the remote prehistoric past. We've inserted a number of robot probes, some with laboratory animals, into the anomaly and retrieved them intact, though some of the animals did not survive. Judging both from the biological samples obtained and from the period of rotation of this prehistoric Earth, what we're talking about is the Siluro-Devonian boundary in mid-Paleozoic time, roughly four hundred million years ago. Biological specimens collected include a genus of primitive plant called Cooksonia and an extinct arthropod called a—please forgive my pronunciation if I get this wrong—a trigonobartid. Both organisms are well-known to paleontologists, and DNA testing conclusively proves their affinities with all other known terrestrial life-forms. Thus, for all practical purposes, this is our own world as it existed during the Paleozoic Era. However, it cannot literally be our own world. We cannot travel directly backward into our own past."

Ivan looked up, startled, as a flight attendant leaned in and said something.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"We'll be landing soon. You'll have to put that away now."

"Of course."

She smiled and withdrew. He looked at the laptop. "The anomaly," Cutsinger was saying, "must therefore connect us with another Earth."

"Quit."

j

Michelle met him as he came off the ramp. For a second, he did not recognize her and could only stare at her when she called his name. He could not immediately connect this young woman with his memories of her as a long-limbed thirteen-year-old girl with braces on her teeth; then, he had never been quite able to decide whether she was going to grow up pretty or goofy-looking. It had been a matter of real concern to him: he had first seen her cradled tenderly in her mother's arms, eyes squeezed shut and oblivious of her beatific expression; baby Michelle was not asleep, though, but had seemed to be concentrating fiercely on the mother's warmth, heartbeat, and wordless murmured endearments. Tiny hands had clasped and unclasped rhythmically, kneading air, keeping time, and when Ivan had gently touched one perfect pink palm and her soft digits closed on, but could not encircle, his calloused fingertip, the contrast smote him in the heart. He had no children of his own, and had never wanted any, but he knew immediately that he loved this child. He had murmured it to her, and to Don and Linda he said, "You folks do good work."

The discontinuous nature of these remembered Michelles, lying unconformably upon one another, heightened his sense of dislocation as he now beheld her. She was fresh out of high school, fair-skinned, unmade-up, with unplucked eyebrows and close-cropped brown hair. It cannot be her, he told himself. But then the corners of her mouth drew back, the firm, almost prim line of her lips fractured in a smile, and she delivered herself of pleasant, ringing laughter that had a most unexpected and wonderful effect on him: his head suddenly seemed inclined to float off his shoulders, and he found himself thinking that a man might want to bask for years in the radiance of that smile, the music of that laughter. Now he was convinced, and he let himself yield to the feeling of buoyant happiness. As a child she had had the comically intent expression of a squirrel monkey, but her father and her uncle had always been able to make her laugh, and when she had the effect was always marvelous. She closed with him and hugged him tightly, and his heart seemed to expand until it filled his chest.

As they headed into the hills north of Hollywood, she concentrated on her driving and he stole glances at her profile. He decided that the haircut suited her vastly better than the unfortunate coiffures she had been in the habit of inflicting upon herself. Well, he thought, you turned out pretty after all.

And he thought, I love you still, darling, and I always shall. Whether it's really you or not.

j

Seated at the metal table, screened from the sun by the eucalyptus tree and with his book lying open on his lap, he admired the blue and orange blooms and banana-shaped leaves of the bird of paradise flowers in his brother's backyard. He could look past them and the fence and right down the canyon on the hazy blur of the city. The morning had begun to heat up, and there was a faint ashy taste to the air. He noticed a small dark smudgy cloud where the farthest line of hills met the sky.

Michelle emerged from the house carrying two ice-flecked bottles of imported beer on a tray. She set it on the table and sat down across from him and said, "Daddy's still talking to the thing that would not die."

He nodded in the direction of the smudgy cloud. "I hope that's not what I think it is."

She looked. "Fires in the canyons. It's the season." She opened one of the beers and handed it to him. "What're you reading?"

Unnecessarily, he glanced at the spine. "*The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant."

She clearly did not know what to say in response.

"It's about the lives of the great philosophers," he went on after a moment, "and their thoughts on being and meaning and stuff."

She made a face. "It sounds excruciating."

"It is. I think the great philosophers were all wankers, except for Voltaire, who was funny. Nietzsche was probably the wankiest of the lot."

"Why're you reading it if you think it's so awful?"

"Let's just say I'm in full-tilt autodidact mode these days. Nowadays I carry the same three books with me

everywhere I go. This one, a book about quantum mechanics, and the latest edition of the *People's Almanac*. The almanac's the only one I really enjoy."

"What's that, quantum mechanics?"

"Didn't they teach you anything in school? Advanced physics. Probably just a lot of philosophical wanking set to math. But it interests me. Somewhere between physics and philosophy is the intersection of the real world. Out of our subjective perception of an objective reality of energy and matter comes our interpretation of being and meaning."

"Whatever you say, Uncle Ivan."

"Are you going to this party tomorrow night?"

She shook her head emphatically. "I'm going to a concert with my boyfriend. Anyway, I don't much care for movie people. Oh, some of them are nice, but—I've never been comfortable around actors. I can never tell when they aren't acting. No, that's not it, it just makes me tired trying to figure out when they're acting and when they're not. The directors are mostly pretentious bores, and the producers just make Daddy crazy." She gazed down the canyon. "The fact is, I don't much like movies. But my boyfriend"—she gave him a quick, self-conscious glance—"my boyfriend loves 'em. And he *loves* dinosaurs. He says he judges a movie by whether he thinks it'd be better or worse with dinosaurs in it."

"Did he have anything to do with that recent version of *Little Women*?"

"No. He's not in the industry, thank God. I wouldn't go out with anybody who is. I wonder what genius thought of setting *Little Women* in prehistoric times. Anyway, you'd be surprised how many movies flunk his dinosaur test."

"Probably I wouldn't."

"He and Daddy like sitting around coming up with lunatic premises for movies. What they call high-concept. He cracks Daddy up. Daddy says he could be making movies every bit as bad as anybody else's if he just applied himself."

"Give me an example of high-concept."

"Hitler! Stalin! And the woman who loved them both!" They laughed together. Then she suddenly regarded him seriously. "I hope you're not going to let yourself be overawed by these people."

"People don't awe me." She looked doubtful, so he added, "They can't begin to compete with what awes me."

"What's that? What awes you?"

He leaned sideways in his chair, scooped some dirt out of a flowerbed. "This," he said, and as he went on talking he spread the dirt on his palm and sorted through it with his index finger. "When we were kids, teenagers, while your daddy sat up in his room figuring out how to write screenplays, I was outdoors collecting bugs and fossils. We neatly divided the world between us. He got the arts, I got the sciences. Even our tastes in reading—while he was reading, oh, Fitzgerald and Nabokov, I'd be reading John McPhee and Darwin's journal of the voyage of the *Beagle*. There was a little overlap. We both went through phases when we read mysteries and science fiction like mad. I'd read *The Big Sleep* or *The Time Machine* and pass 'em on to Don, and then we'd discuss 'em. But we were usually interested in different parts of the same books. Don was interested in the characters, the story. Who killed so and so. I loved Raymond Chandler's, Ross Macdonald's descriptions of the southern California landscape. I was like a tourist. My feeling was that setting is as vital as plot and characterization. A good detective-story writer had to be a good travelogue writer, or else his characters and action were just hanging in space. Don argued that a good story could be set anywhere, scenery was just there to be glanced at. If the plot was good, it would work anywhere."

"Daddy says there are only three or four plots. At least he says that out here there are only three or four."

"Well, anyway, your dad and I have art and science all sewed up between us. Science to help us find out what the world is. Art to—I don't know, art's not my thing, but I think—"

"Daddy says you're trying to write a book."

"Trying is about as far as I've got so far. I have all the raw material, but..." But. "I'm not creative. Anyway, I think we have to have both science and art. Everything in the universe partakes in some way of every other thing."

"What about philosophy?"

"Maybe it's what links science and art."

"Even if it's a lot of wanking?"

"Even wanking has its place in the scheme of things. What about this boyfriend?"

"Interesting segue."

"Is this a serious thing? Serious like marriage?"

She shrugged, then shook her head. "I want to do something with my life before I get into that."

"What?"

"I wish I knew. I feel I have so much to live up to. Your side of the family's all overachievers. My father's a hot Hollywood screenwriter. My uncle, the scientist, has done just the most amazing things. My grandparents were big wheels in Texas politics. It's almost as bad as having movie-star parents. The pressure on me to achieve is awful."

"It was probably worse for the Huxleys."

"Mom's always felt outclassed. Her family'd always just muddled along. She felt utterly inadequate the whole time she and Dad were married."

"With a little help from him, she made a beautiful daughter."

She looked pleased by the compliment but also a little uncomfortable. "Thank you for saying that."

"It's true."

"You used to call me Squirrel Monkey."

Don came outside looking exasperated. "Ever reach a point in a conversation," he said, "where, you know, you

can't go on pretending to take people seriously who don't know what they're talking about?"

"Are we talking rhetorically?"

Don laughed a soft, unhappy sort of laugh. He indicated the unopened bottle of beer. "Is that for me?"

"Just that one, Daddy."

"I need it." He said to Ivan, "Tell me the stupidest thing you've ever heard. I'm trying to put something into perspective here."

Ivan thought for a moment. "Well, there was the low point, or maybe it was the high point, of my blessedly short stint as a purveyor of scientific knowledge to college freshman. I had a student tell me in all earnestness that an organism that lives off dead organisms is a sacrilege."

Don laughed again, less unhappily than before. "Been on the phone with someone who makes deals and gives off movies as waste. He's got the hottest idea of his life. He's doing a full-blown remake of *The Three Musketeers* in Taiwan."

Ivan felt his eyebrows go up. He made them come back down.

Don nodded. "That was my reaction. I said to him, I gather you've taken a few liberties with the novel. And he said, Novel? By Alexandre Dumas, I said. You mean it? he said. Excuse me for a moment, and he gets on his AnswerMan and says, To legal, do we have exclusive rights to alleged novel by Doo-dah-duh. Dumas, I scream, *Dumas*, you dumbass!" He shook his head as though to clear it of an irritating buzz. "Well. I go on and tell him the novel's in the public domain, Dumas has been dead for a little while now. He drums his fingers on his desktop. He screws his face into a mask of thoughtfulness. He says, Well, it's always best to be sure, because if what you say is true, we'll have to see about getting it pulled out of circulation. I beg his pardon. He says, We don't want people confusing it with our book based on the movie."

Ivan said, "He's going to novelize a movie based on a novel?"

"Sure. The novel based on *Pride and Prejudice* was on the best-seller list."

Michelle said, "Hooray for Hollywood," and Ivan raised his bottle in a toast.

Don raised his as well. "Here's to L.A., Los Angeles del Muerte!"

Then Michelle excused herself and went inside. Ivan said, "Every time I see her, she's bigger, smarter, prettier, and nicer."

"That's how it works if you only see her once every few years. Move out here, be her doting uncle all the time."

"Oh, I would love to. It would be good to see more of you, too. But—" "To avoid his brother's expectant look, Ivan turned toward the canyon. "Call me a crank on the subject, but I'll never live on an active plate margin."

"Christ."

"Geologically speaking, these hills have all the structural integrity of head cheese. They piled up here after drifting in across a prehistoric sea from God knows where. One of these times, Don, the earth's going to hiccup, and all these nice houses and all you nice people in them are going to slide all the way down that canyon."

Don shrugged. "Mobility is what California's all about. Everything here is from someplace else. The water comes from Colorado. These flowers," and he extended his arm and delicately touched a leaf on one of the bird-of-paradise flowers as though he were stroking a cat under its jaw, "are South African. The jacaranda you see all over town are from Brazil, the eucalyptus trees are from Australia. The people and the architecture are from everywhere you can think of." He took a long pull on his bottle, draining it. "That's the reason California's such a weird goddamn place. Because nothing really belongs here."

"I think it's fascinating. I wouldn't live here for anything—not even for you and Michelle, I'm sorry. But it is certainly fascinating."

"Oh, absolutely, I agree, it is. In a big, ugly, tasteless, intellectually numbing kind of way."

"What do you do for intellectual stimulation?"

"I read your monographs."

"Really?"

"No, but I have copies of all of them."

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Later, stretched across the bed with his eyes closed and the cool fresh sheet pulled up to his sternum, Ivan thought, Clever, talented Don. It had never occurred to him before that his brother considered his work at all...

He did not think he had fallen asleep, yet he awoke with a start. He was hot and parched. He slipped into a robe and eased into the hallway. In the kitchen, he filled a glass with cold filtered water from the jug in the refrigerator and sat down with his back to the bar to look out through the glass doors, at the lights of the city. There was a glowing patch of sky, seemingly as distant as the half moon, where the dark smudgy cloud had been that afternoon.

When he returned to his room, he sat on the edge of the bed and took his well-thumbed *People's Almanac* from the nightstand. He opened it at random and read a page, then set it aside and picked up the laptop. "Where were we?"

The screen lightened. "That's a good question," Cutsinger was saying. He chuckled into the microphones. "I know, because my colleagues and I have asked it of each other thousands of times since the anomaly was discovered. Every time, the answer's been the same. Simply traveling through time into the past is impossible. Simply to do so violates the laws of physics, especially our old favorite, the second law of thermodynamics. Simply to enter the past is to alter the past, which is a literal and actual contradiction of logic. Yet the fact is, we have discovered this space-time anomaly which connects our immediate present with what from all evidence is the Earth as it existed during mid-Paleozoic times. The only way the laws of physics and logic can accommodate this awkward fact is if we quietly

deep-six the adjective 'simply' and run things out to their extremely complicated conclusion. We must posit a universe that stops and starts, stops and starts, countless billions of times per microsecond, as it jumps from state to state. As it does so, it continually divides, copies itself. Each copy is in a different state—that is, they're inexact copies. A separate reality exists for every possible outcome of every possible quantum interaction. Inasmuch as the number of copies produced since the Big Bang must be practically infinite, the range of difference among the realities must be practically infinite as well. These realities exist in parallel with one another. Whatever we insert into the anomaly—probes, test animals, human beings—are not simply going to travel directly backward into our own past. Instead, they're going to travel somehow to another universe, to another Earth which resembles our Earth as it was in the Paleozoic. Yes? Question?"

From offscreen came a question, inaudible to Ivan, but on the screen Cutsinger nodded and answered, "Well, it's probably pointless to say whether this sort of travel occurs in any direction—backward, sideward, or diagonally."

From offscreen, someone else asked, "If there are all these multiple Earths, when you're ready to come back through this hole you're talking about, how can you be sure you'll find your way back to the right Earth?"

"To the very best of our knowledge, this hole as you call it has only two ends. One here and now, one there and then. Next question?"

You glib son of a bitch, Ivan thought.

After the robot probes had gone and apparently come back through the space-time anomaly, the next step was obvious to everyone: human beings must follow. It was decided that two people should go through together. At the outset, in the moment it had taken the phrase "time travel to the prehistoric world" to register in his mind, Ivan had made up his mind—yes, absolutely, I want to go! "Presented with the opportunity to traverse time and explore a prehistoric planet," he had written to Don, "who *wouldn't*?" In the weeks and months that followed, however, through all the discussion and planning sessions, he had never quite believed that he had a real chance to go. Partly it was a matter of funding: x amount of money in the kitty simply equaled y number of people who would get to go on any Paleozoic junket. Partly it was a matter of prestige: given, practically speaking, an entire new planet to explore—everything about it, everything about the cosmos it occupied, for that matter, being four hundred million years younger, any scientist could make a case for his or her particular field of inquiry. Ivan did not, of course, despise his work in the least or see any need to apologize for it; moreover, he did not take personally—too personally, anyway—one or another of the likelier candidates' feigned confusion over pedology, the study of the nature and development of children, and *pedology*, soil science. The first few times, he affected amusement at the joke fellow soil scientists told on themselves, which in its simplest form was that the insertion of a single soil scientist into Silurian time would result in that remote geological period's having more scientist than soil. It was the sort of extremely specialized joke specialists told. Like any specialized joke, its charm vanished the instant that an explanation became necessary. Real soil would have only just started, geologically speaking, to collect amid the Silurian barrens; pedogenesis would be spotty and sporadic; rock could weather away to fine particles, but only the decay of organic matter could make sterile grit into nurturing dirt, and while organisms abounded in the Silurian seas, they would have only just started, again, geologically speaking, to live and die—and decompose—on land.

"Oh. I see. Ha, ha."

The joke had escaped from the soil scientists at some point and begot tortuous variations in which twenty-first-century pedology overwhelmed and annihilated the reality of primordial soil: why (went one version), the weight of the terminology alone—soil air, soil complexes, associations and series, soil horizons, moisture budgets, aggregates and peds, mor and mull and all the rest of it—would be too much for such thin, poor, fragile stuff as one might expect to find sprinkled about in mid-Paleozoic times.

He had tried to look and sound amused, and to be a good sport overall, whenever he heard the joke in any of its mutated forms. After all, it was never intended really maliciously; it merely partook of a largely unconscious acceptance of a hierarchy of scientists. Physics and astronomy were glamour fields. Geology and paleontology were comparatively rough-hewn but nonetheless logical choices; moreover, they were perennially popular with the public, a crucial concern when public money was involved. Pedology was none of the above. He liked to think that he did not have it in himself to be envious, and so, with unflinching good humor, he agreed that there certainly would be a lot of geology at hand in the Paleozoic, mountains, valleys, strata, and the like. And, as for paleozoology, the Paleozoic would be nothing if not a big aquarium stocked with weird wiggly things and maybe a few big showy monsters.

And as for the crazy night skies, my oh my!

And even Kemal Barrowclough, paleobotanist, could get up and describe some harsh interior landscape enlivened only by the gray-green of lichens, "the first true land plants, because, unlike the psilophytes and lycopods we find clinging to the low moist places, close to water, always looking over their shoulders, so to speak, to make sure they haven't strayed too far, lichens, by God, *have taken the big step*," and there would scarcely be a dry eye among the listeners, except for Kemal's sister, Gulnar, herself a paleobotanist. Gulnar specialized in psilophytes.

Throughout the discussions, Ivan had felt that, in effect, DeRamus had but to point to his rocks and say, "*Old!*" or Gabbert to his sky and say, "*Big!*" and nothing, *nothing*, he could have said about microbiotic volume in the histic epipedon, or humic acid precipitation, or the varieties of Paleozoic mesofauna he expected to sift through a tullgren funnel, would have meant a damn thing. Rather than enter his saprotrophs in unequal and hopeless competition against thrust faults, sea scorpions, or prehistoric constellations, he would wait until all around the table had settled back, glowering but spent, then softly clear his throat and calmly explain all over again that the origin and evolution of soil ranked among the major events in the history of life on Earth, that soil was linked inextricably to that major event of mid-Paleozoic time, life's emergence onto land.

It had been by dint of this stolid persistence that he had, in the minds of enough of his peers, ultimately established himself as precisely the sort of knowledgeable, dedicated, persevering person who should be a member of the Paleozoic expedition—and had also established, by extension, all soil scientists everywhere, in every geologic age, as estimable fellows. When finally, Stoll had announced who would go, Ivan stunned to speechlessness, could only gape as each of his colleagues shook his hand; almost a minute passed before he found his voice. "Wonders never cease," he had said.

Almost the next thing he remembered was looking over the back of the man who had knelt before him to check the seals on his boots. Cutsinger had stood leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed and watched the technicians work. He smiled ruefully at Ivan and said, "Tell me how you *really* feel."

"Like the first astronaut to spacewalk must've, just before he went out and did it."

"That guy had an umbilical cord," said Dilks, who sat nearby, surrounded by his own satellite system of technicians. He did not go on to say the obvious: We don't.

"Just don't lose sight of the anomaly once you're through," Cutsinger said.

"Right now," Ivan said, "getting back through the anomaly doesn't concern me quite as much as going through the first time and finding myself sinking straight to the bottom of the sea."

"We sent a probe in to bird-dog for you. The hole's stabilized over solid ground. You'll arrive high and dry." Cutsinger nodded at Dilks. "Both of you, together."

Ivan flexed his gloved fingers and said, "It's just the suit," and thought, It isn't *only* just the suit, but part of it *is* the suit. The suit was bulky and heavy and had to be hermetic. He and Dilks had to carry their own air supplies and everything else they might conceivably need, lest they contaminate the pristine Paleozoic environment and induce a paradox. The physicists, Ivan and Dilks privately agreed, were covering their own asses.

Cutsinger asked Dilks, "Anything you're especially concerned about?"

Dilks grinned. "Not liking the scenery. Not seeing a single prehistoric monster."

Cutsinger smiled thinly. "Careful what you wish for."

"Time to seal up," said one of the technicians. Another raised a clear bubble helmet and carefully set it down over Ivan's head. The helmet sealed when twisted to the right.

"All set?" said the chief technician's voice in the helmetphone.

"All set," said Ivan.

Technicians stood by to lend steadying hands as the two suited men got to their feet and lumbered into an adjoining room for decontamination. They stood upon a metal platform. Their equipment had already been decontaminated and stowed.

Ivan gripped the railing that enclosed the platform; he did not trust his legs to hold him up. This is it, he told himself, and then, This is what? He found that he still could not entirely believe what he was about to do.

The wall opposite the door pivoted away. The metal platform began to move on rails toward a ripple in the air.

Everything turned to white light and pain.

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They considered their reflections in the full-length mirror. Don and Ivan were two solidly built, deep-chested, middle-aged men, unmistakably products of the same parents. Michelle stood framed in the doorway. Her expression was dubious. "Daddy," she said, "they'll never accept him as one of their own. No offense, Uncle Ivan, but you don't have Hollywood hair and teeth. They'll be horrified by what you've done to your skin. Daddy's tanned and fit because he works out. You're brown and hard and leathery because you work."

Don said to Ivan, "Maybe they'll mistake you for a retired stuntman."

"Why retired?"

"What other kind is there any more?"

"I feel strange in these clothes, but I have to admit that they feel good and look good. They look better than I do."

"This is up-to-the-moment thread."

"I look like a rough draft of you."

"Whatever you do," Michelle said, "don't say you're a scientist. 'Scientist' cuts no ice here."

Don flashed a grin along his shoulder at his brother and said, "Absolutely do not say you're a pedologist. They won't have any idea what a pedologist is, unless they think it's the same thing as a pedophile."

"Someone asks what you are," Michelle said, "they mean, What's your astrological sign?"

"I don't know my astrological sign."

She made a horrified face. "Get *out* of California!"

"Tell 'em anything," Don said, "it doesn't matter, they'll run with it, tell you they just knew all along you were a Taurus or whatever."

"Say you're a time-traveler," Michelle told him. "But don't be hurt if they're not even impressed by that. It's not like they've ever done anything real."

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The afternoon was warm, golden, perfect, as they wound their way along Mulholland Drive. Don had put the top down, though it meant wearing goggles to screen out advertising. Ivan sat fingering the unfamiliar cloth of his borrowed clothing and admiring the fine houses. They turned in at a gate in a high stucco wall, passed a security

guard's inspection, and drove on. Around a bend in the driveway, Ivan saw a monstrous house, an unworkable fusion of Spanish and Japanese architectural quirks framed by the rim of hills beyond. Don braked to stop in front of the house and simply abandoned the car—if he gave the keys to someone, Ivan did not see it happen. Just at the door, Don turned to Ivan and said, "Let me take one more look at you."

Ivan held his arms away from his body, palms forward.

Don laughed. "You're the most confident-looking guy I've ever seen. You look like Samson about to go wreak havoc among the Philistines."

"What've I got to be nervous about?"

They went inside and immediately found themselves in a crowd of mostly gorgeous chattering people, all seemingly intent upon displaying themselves, all dressed with an artful casualness. As he followed Don through the room, Ivan admired their physical flawlessness. The women were breathtaking. They were shorter or taller than one another, paler or darker, blonde or brunette, but nearly all fashioned along the same very particular lines—slim and boyish save for improbably full breasts. On two or three occasions, Don paused and turned to introduce Ivan to someone who smiled pleasantly, shook Ivan's hand, and looked through or around him.

Ivan was, therefore, taken aback when a lovely woman approached from his brother's blind side, touched Ivan fleetingly on the forearm, and said, "I'm so glad you came, it's so good to see you." She wore a short skirt, belted at the waist. Her back, flanks, and shoulders were bare. The tips of her breasts were barely covered by two narrow, translucent strips of fabric that crossed at the navel and fastened behind her neck.

"It's so good to see you, too," Ivan said.

She said, "I have to go get after the help for a second, but don't you go away," and vanished.

Ivan caught up with Don and said, "Who was that?"

"Who was who?"

A simply pretty rather than gorgeous girl paused before Ivan with a food-laden tray and smiled invitingly; he helped himself to some unrecognizable but delicious foodstuff. Before he could help himself to seconds, she was gone. He consoled himself with a drink plucked from another passing tray.

The singer fronting the combo was Frank Sinatra, who snapped his fingers and smiled as he sang "My Way." According to a placard, the skinny, artfully scruffy young men accompanying him were The Sex Pistols. Although none of the real people in the room appeared to notice when the song ended, Frank Sinatra thanked them for their applause and told them they were beautiful. Ivan caught up with the girl with the food tray and had helped himself to a snack before he realized that she was a different girl and it was a different snack. She was pretty in her own right, however, and the snack was as mysterious and delicious as the first had been. The combo began playing again, somewhat picking up the tempo. As Frank Sinatra sang that he didn't know what he wanted, but he knew how to get it, Don turned, pointed vaguely, and said to Ivan, "I see somebody over there I have to go schmooze with. I'd introduce you, but he's a pig."

"So go schmooze. I can look after myself."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay. Ogle some starlets—I'll be back in a mo."

As though she had rotated into the space vacated by Don, a long tawny woman appeared before Ivan. Her waist was as big around as his thigh. Her high breasts exerted a firm, friendly pressure against his lapels. He thought she had the most kissable-looking mouth he had ever seen. She said, "I'm sure I know you."

Ivan smiled. "I was one of the original Sex Pistols."

"Really!" She glanced over her shoulder at the hologram, then peered at Ivan again. "Which one?"

Ivan nodded vaguely in the band's direction. "The dead one."

She pouted fetchingly. "Who are you, really?"

He decided to see what would happen if he disregarded Don and Michelle's advice. He said, "I'm a pedologist."

"Oh," she said, "you specialize in child actors? No, wait, that's a foot specialist, right?" She looked doubtfully at his hands, which were big and brown, hard and knobby. "Is your practice in Beverly Hills?"

"Gondwanaland."

"Ah," she said, and nodded, and looked thoughtful, and lost interest. Ivan let her rotate back the way she had come and then sidled into and through the next room. The house was a maze of rooms opening onto other rooms, seemingly unto infinity; inside of five minutes, he decided that he was hopelessly lost. Surrounded by small groups of people talking animatedly among themselves, he turned more or less in place, eavesdropping casually. He quickly gathered that most of the people around him believed in astrology, psychics, cosmetic surgery, and supply-side economics, and that some few among them were alarmed by the trend toward virtual actors. He overheard a tanned, broad-shouldered crewcut man say to a couple of paler and less substantial men, "What chance have I got? I'm losing parts to John Wayne, for chrissake! He's been dead for decades, and he's a bigger star than ever."

"Costs less than ever, too," said the wispiest of the other two men, "and keeps his right-wing guff to himself."

The broad-shouldered man scowled. "I don't want what happened to stuntmen to happen to actors!"

"Oh, don't be alarmist," the wispy man said. "No one's going to get rid of actors. Oh, they might use fewer of them, but—besides, stuntmen're holding their own overseas, and—"

"Crazy goddamn Aussies and Filipinos!"

"—and," the wispy man said insistently, "the films do have a significant following in this country. For some viewers, it's not enough to see an actor who looks like he's risking his life. They want the extra kick that comes from

knowing an actor really *is* risking his life."

The third man had a satisfied air and was shaped like a bowling pin; his white suit and scarlet ascot enhanced the resemblance. "Until that happens," he told the broad-shouldered man, "better get used to playing second fiddle to John Wayne. Right now, I got development people e-synthing old physical comedians from the nineteen-whenevers. Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Jackie Chan. People still bust a gut laughing at those guys."

"Never heard of 'em."

"You will. Because I'm putting 'em together in a film. Lots of smash-up, fall-down. Sure, we use computers to give 'em what they never had before—voices, color—personalities! But when people see Buster Keaton fall off a moving train, they know there's no fakery."

"Who the hell cares if some dead guy risks his life?"

The bowling-pin-shaped man jabbed a finger into the air. "Thrills are timeless!"

Glimpsing yet another pretty girl with a food tray, Ivan exited right, through a doorway. He somehow missed the girl, made a couple of turns at random, and was beginning to wonder amusedly if he had happened upon another space-time anomaly when he suddenly and unexpectedly found himself outdoors, on the tiled shore of a swimming pool as big, he decided, as the Tethys Sea—Galveston Bay, at least. There were small groups of people ranged at intervals around the pool and one person in the water, who swam to the edge, pulled herself up, and was revealed to be a sleekly muscular Amazon. As she towed her hair, she let her incurious gaze alight fleetingly on Ivan, then move on; she was as indifferent to his existence as though he were another of the potted palms. She rose lithely, draped her towel over one exquisite shoulder, and walked past him into the house.

Ivan sipped his drink, thrust his free hand into his trousers pocket, and ambled toward the far end of the pool and an array of women there. At a table in their midst, like a castaway on an island circled by glistening succulent mermaids, a bald, fat, fortyish man sat talking animatedly to himself. A waiter stood at the ready behind a cart laden with liquor bottles. A large rectangular object, either a man or a refrigerator stuffed into a sports jacket, took up space nearby. Just as this large object startled Ivan by looking in his direction, the fat man suddenly laughed triumphantly, leaped to his feet, and clapped his hands. He pointed at bottles on the cart, and the waiter began to fuss with them. The fat man turned, looked straight at Ivan, evidently the only suitable person within arm's reach, and pulled him close. "Help me celebrate," he said, and to the large object, "Larry, get the man a chair." Larry pulled a chair back from the table, waited for Ivan to sit, then moved off a short distance. The fat man introduced himself as John Rubis and looked as though he expected Ivan to have heard of him. Ivan smiled pleasantly and tried to give the impression that he had.

"I am *real* happy!" Rubis pointed at his own ear, and Ivan realized that there was an AnswerMan plugged into it. "The word from the folks at Northemico is *go!*" He indicated the liquor cart. "What can I get you?"

"Brought my own. Congratulations." Ivan toasted him, and they drank. Rubis smacked his lips appreciatively. Ivan said, "You work for Northemico?"

"I *deal* with Northemico. Their entertainment division."

"I didn't even realize Northemico had an entertainment division."

"Hey, they got everything." He turned toward the waiter and said, "Fix me up another of these."

"Sorry, I'm just a pedologist from Podunk." Rubis looked perplexed. "Pedologist," Ivan said, enunciating as clearly as he could.

"Ah." Rubis listened to his AnswerMan again. "As in child specialist—or soil scientist? No, that can't be right. Sorry about that, Doctor. Sometimes my little mister know-it-all gets confused. At least it didn't think you said you're a pederast, ha ha. So what is it, set me straight here, what's your claim to celebrity?"

Ivan mentally shrugged and asked himself, Why the hell not? and to John Rubis he said, "I was one of the first people to travel through time."

Instead of responding to that, Rubis held up a forefinger, said, "Incoming," looked away, and hunched over the table, listening intently to his AnswerMan and occasionally muttering inaudibly. Ivan's attention wandered. Light reflecting from the pool's surface shimmered on the enclosing white walls. The water was as brilliantly blue-green as that ancient sea—and as he pictured that sea in his mind, he also pictured a woman like a tanned and buffed Aphrodite rising from the waters. And when he told her that he was a foot specialist, she heaved a sigh of exasperation and dived back into the sea.

Rubis turned back to him and said, "Sorry. You aren't kidding about the time-travel, are you?"

"Well, I was part of the first team of time-travelers—half of it. There were just two of us. Afterward, I made other visits and helped establish a community of scientists in Paleozoic time. The base camp's the size of a small town now."

Rubis stared at him for what felt like a long moment. Then a light seemed to come on behind the man's eyes, and he snapped his fingers and pointed. "Yeah. The hole through time. Back to, what, the Stone Age?"

"Um, actually, back to quite a bit before. Back to the Paleozoic Era, four hundred million and some odd years ago. The Siluro-Devonian boundary."

"Yeah, that's right! The Age of Trillobites. So, what, you're out here pitching the story of your life to producers?"

"No, I'm just visiting my brother. He's the screenwriter in the family." That information did not seem to impress Rubis particularly, so Ivan added, "He was just up for a Best Screenplay Oscar. Donald Kelly." Rubis brightened. "My own fifteen minutes of fame are long past, and they really didn't amount to all that much."

"Mm. Any face minutes?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, your face on the TV screen. Media interviews. Face minutes."

"Ah. I turn up in some old documentaries. Everybody made documentaries for a while, until all six people who were

remotely interested were sick of them."

Rubis rolled his eyes. "Documentaries! Even I watched part of one. No offense, but it was like watching grass grow. The most exciting thing you found was a trilobite, and it's basically just some kind of big water bug, isn't it?"

"Yes, basically."

"There've been bigger bugs in movies already. Like in—like in *Them and I*. And *The Thief of Baghdad*. Seen it?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I thought the Indonesian settings were interesting."

"Our first idea was to actually shoot it in Baghdad. But not much of Baghdad's standing any more. So—besides, Indonesia, Baghdad"—Rubis made a gesture expressive of some point that was not altogether clear to Ivan—"eh!"

"Once upon a time," Ivan said, "if you wanted to make a movie about Baghdad, you built sets on sound stages here in Hollywood, right?"

"Aah, nobody makes movies in Hollywood any more. Too expensive. Lousy unions. But this is still the place to be, the place to make deals. Anyway, like I was saying, about time-travel—I've always thought it's a sensational thing. When you think about it, it really is just the biggest thing since the early days of space travel. I wish it could be used for something more interesting than studying bugs and slime a million years ago, but don't get me wrong. I think it's a real shame the time-travelers never caught on with the public like those first guys who went to the moon—Armstrong, Altman. Now those guys were celebrities."

"It's not like we could do a live broadcast from the Paleozoic. The view wouldn't have commended itself to most people anyway. The Silurian Period looks like a cross between a gravel pit and a stagnant pond. And we didn't plant a flag or say anything heroic. In fact—" Ivan hesitated for a moment, considering. "Still, it was all tremendously exciting. It was the most exciting thing in the world."

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The wall opposite the door had pivoted away. The metal platform had begun to move on rails toward a ripple in the air. Everything had turned to white light and pain. Ivan, blinded, felt as though someone had taken careful aim with a two-by-four and struck him across his solar plexus. There was a terrifying, eternal moment when he could not suck in air. Then he drew a breath and started to exhale, and his stomach turned over. The convulsion put him on his hands and knees. Too excited to eat breakfast that morning, he had only drunk a cup of coffee. Now burning acid rose in his throat. He felt cramps in his calf muscles. His earphones throbbed with the sound of—what was it, crying, groaning... ?

Retching. His vision cleared, and he saw Dilks nearby, lying on his side, feebly moving his arms. For some reason, part of Dilks' visor was obscured. Ivan threw his weight in that direction and half rolled, half crawled to the man's side. Now he could see Dilks' face through the yellow-filmed visor. Dilks had lost his breakfast inside his helmet. Ivan spoke his name, but it was quickly established that, though Dilks' helmetphone worked, his microphone was fouled and useless. There was nothing to be done for it now: they could not simply remove Dilks' helmet and clean out the mess; they were under strictest orders not to contaminate the Paleozoic.

Nearby, the air around the anomaly rippled like a gossamer veil. Ivan looked around at the Paleozoic world. He and Dilks were on the shingle just above the high-tide line and just below a crumbling line of cliffs. The sun stood at zenith in the cloudless sky. The sea was blue-green, brilliant, beautiful.

Ivan bent over Dilks again and said, "You're in bad shape. We've got to get you back. Come on, I'll help you."

Dilks vehemently shoved him away. He looked gray-faced inside his helmet, but he grimaced and shook his head, and though he could not say what he meant, Ivan understood him. *We didn't come all this way only to go right back.* Dilks patted the front of Ivan's suit and then motioned in the direction of the water.

Ivan nodded. He said, "I'll be right back." He staggered to his feet, checked the instruments attached to the platform, activated the camera mounted on his helmet, and collected soil and air samples in the vicinity of the platform. Then, with what he hoped was a reassuring wave to Dilks, he lumbered toward the water. The shingle made for treacherous footing, and yet, as he looked out upon the expanse of water, he experienced a shivery rush of pleasure so particular that he knew he had felt it only once before, during boyhood, on the occasion of his first sight of the sea off Galveston Island. He had never been mystically inclined, even as a boy, but, then as now, he had responded to something tremendous and irresistible, the sea's summons, had rush straight down to the water and dived in happily.

Nothing moved along the whole beach, nothing except the curling waves and the tangles of seaweed they had cast up. The beach curved away to left and right. It must curve away forever, Ivan thought. Hundreds, thousands of miles of perfectly unspoiled beach. He knelt on the dark wet sand and collected a sample of seawater. As he sealed the vial, he saw something emerge from the foam about two meters to his right. It was an arthropod about as big as his hand, flattened and segmented and carried along on jointed legs. The next wave licked after it, embraced it, appeared momentarily do draw it back toward the sea. The wave retreated, and the creature hesitated. Come on, Ivan thought, come on. Come on. He entertained no illusions that he had arrived on the spot just in time to greet the first Earth creature ever to come ashore. Surely, a thousand animals, a million, had already done so, and plants before them, and microorganisms before plants. Nevertheless, he had to admire the timing of this demonstration. He crouched, hands on knees, and waited. Foam rushed over the creature again. Come on, Ivan commanded it, make up your dim little mind. It's strange out here on land, not altogether hospitable, but you'll get used to it, or your children will, or your great-grandchildren a million times removed. Eventually, most of the species, most of the biomass, will be out here.

The arthropod advanced beyond the reach of the waves and began nudging through the seawrack. Eat hearty, Ivan thought, taking a cautious step toward the animal. He reflected on the persistence in vertebrates of revulsion toward arthropods. He felt kindly toward this arthropod, at least. Both of us, he thought, are pioneers.

As last he reluctantly tore himself away and returned to Dilks, who had sagged to the ground by the platform. Ivan propped the stricken man up and pointed toward the ripple. "We've got to cut this short," he said.

Dilks indicated disagreement, but more weakly than before.

"You're hurt," Ivan said, holding him up, "and we've got to go back." There was a crackle of static in Ivan's helmetphone, and he heard Dilks speak a single word.

"...failed..."

"No! We didn't fail! We got here alive, and we're getting back alive. Nobody can take that away from us, Dilks. We're the first. And we'll come again."

They got clumsily onto the platform. Ivan made Dilks as comfortable as possible and then activated the platform. The air around the ripple began to roil and glow. Ivan gripped the railing and faced the glow. "Do your goddamn worst."

j

Rubis had offered Ivan a cigar, which he politely refused, and stuck one into his own mouth, and Larry had lurched forward to light it. Now, enveloped in smoke, Rubis said, "Trillobites just never did catch on with the public. Maybe if you'd found a really *big* trillobite. On the other hand, trillobites didn't make for very cuddly stuffed toys, either, and that's always an important consideration. The merchandising, I mean."

"Candy shaped like brachiopods and sea scorpions? How about breakfast cereal? Sugar-frosted *Trillobites*?"

Perfectly serious, Rubis nodded. "Now, if you'd've set the dial in your time machine for the age of dinosaurs instead."

"There wasn't actually a time machine. Just the space-time anomaly, the hole. And it just happened to open up where it did."

"That's too bad. And ain't it the way it always happens with science? We spent a godzillion dollars sending people to the Moon and Mars, and the Moon's just a rock and Mars's just a damn desert."

"Well, I don't know anyone honestly expected—"

"Now, *dinosaurs*, dinosaurs've been hot sellers forever. Dino toys, VR—they had all that stuff when I was a kid, and it still outsells every damn thing in sight. And every two, three years, regular as laxatives, another big dino movie. But what've you got? You got nothing, I'm sorry to say." He began to count on his fingers the things which Ivan did not have. "You got no big concept. You got no merchandisable angle. You got no crossover potential. Crossover potential's very big these days. You know, like Tarzan meets Frankenstein. James Bond versus Mata Hari. But, most of all, you haven't got dinosaurs, though. Everybody knows if you're going to tell a story set in the prehistoric past, there have to be dinosaurs. Without dinosaurs, there's no drama."

"I guess not," Ivan said, and took a long sip of his drink, and looked at the shimmering blue-green water in the pool. The slowly stirring air seemed to carry a faint smell of burning. He said to Rubis, "Let me bounce an idea for a different kind of time-travel story off you. Tell me what you think."

"Sure. Shoot."

"Okay. You have to bear in mind that when we speak of traveling backward through time, into the past, what we're really talking about is traveling between just two of infinite multiple Earths. Some of these multiple Earths may be virtually identical, some may be subtly different, some are wildly different—as different as modern and prehistoric times. Anyway, what you actually do when you travel through time is go back and forth between Earths. Earth as it is, here and now, and another Earth, Earth as it was in the Paleozoic Era."

Rubis murmured, "Weird," and smiled.

"Now let's say someone from our present-day visits a prehistoric Earth and returns. After a while, after the initial excitement's died down, he starts to ponder the implications of travel back and forth between multiple Earths. He's come back to a present-day Earth that may or may not be his own present-day Earth. If it's virtually identical, well, if the only difference is, say, the outcome of some subatomic occurrence, then it doesn't matter. But maybe there's something subtly off on the macro level. It wouldn't be anything major. Napoleon, Hitler, and the Confederate States would all've gone down to defeat. Or maybe the time-traveler only suspects that something may be subtly off. His problem is, he's never quite sure, he can't decide whether something is off or he only thinks it is, so he's always looking for the telling detail. But there are so *many* details. If he never knew in the first place how many plays Shakespeare really wrote or who all those European kings were..."

Rubis nodded. "I get it. Not bad." He chewed his lower lip for a moment. "But I still think it needs dinosaurs."

Ivan chuckled softly, without mirth. "You should look up my niece's boyfriend." He turned on his seat, toward the burning hills.

j

They swept down Mulholland. Ivan said to Don, "Thanks for taking me. I can't remember when I've had so much fun." Don gave him a curious look. "No, really. I had a very good time, a wonderful time."

"Probably a better time than I did."

Ivan made a noncommittal sound. "I needed this experience as a kind of reality check."

Don laughed sharply. "Hollywood isn't the place to come for a reality check."

"Well, okay. Let's just say I had a very enlightening and entertaining poolside chat with our host."

"Johnny Rubis? Christ. He wasn't our host. Our host was a swine in human form named Lane. He was holding

court indoors the whole time. I went in and did my dip and rise and got the hell out as fast as I could. Whatever Rubis may've told you he was doing by the pool, he was just showing off. See what a big deal I am. There were guys all over the place doing the same thing—women, too. Dropping names and making a show of pissant phone calls. See what big deals we are. Whatever Rubis may've told you, he's not that high in the food chain. A year ago he was probably packaging videos with titles like *Trailer Park Sluts*. He's an example of the most common form of life in Hollywood. The self-important butthead. I know, I've worked for plenty like him."

"Writing novels based on movies based on novels?"

Don shook his head. "Not me. Not lately, anyway?"

Ivan wondered if Don despised himself as much as he apparently despised everyone else in Hollywood. He hoped it was not so. More than anything, he hoped it was not so. "Don," he said, "I'm sorry I said that. I'm really terribly sorry."

Don shrugged. "No offense taken." He gave Ivan a quick grin. "Hey, big brother, I've been insulted by professionals. It's one of the things writers in Hollywood get paid for."

They rode in silence for a time.

Then Don said, "Do you know what a monkey trap is?"

"Pretty self-explanatory, isn't it?"

"Yes, but do you know how it works? You take a dry gourd and cut a small hole in it, just big enough for the monkey to get its hand through. You put a piece of food inside the gourd and attach the gourd to a tree or a post. The monkey puts his hand into the gourd, grabs the piece of food, and then can't pull his fist back through the hole. He could get away if he'd only let go of the food, but he just can't make himself let go. So, of course, he's trapped."

"Is the money really that good?"

"Christ, Ivan, the money's incredible. But it *isn't* just the money. What it is, is that every great once in a long goddamn while, against all the odds—remember, before all this happened, I worked in the next best habitat favorable to self-important buttheads, which is politics. While you were off exploring prehistoric times, I was writing like a sumbitch on fire and trying to get the hell out of Texas. I paid the rent, however, by working for the state legislature. Whenever a legislator wanted to lay down a barrage of memorial resolutions, I was the anonymous flunky who unlimbered the 'whereases' and the 'be it resolved.' Every now and then, I wrote about forgotten black heroes of the Texas Revolution, forgotten women aviators of World War Two—something, anyway, that meant something. But, of course, in those resolutions, everything was equally important. Most of my assignments were about people's fiftieth wedding anniversaries, high-school football teams, rattlesnake roundups. Finally, I was assigned to write a resolution designating, I kid you not, Texas Bottled Water Day. Some people from the bottling industry were in town, lobbying for God remembers what, and someone in the lege thought it'd be real nice to present them with a resolution. Thus, Texas Bottled Water Day. When I saw the request, I looked my boss straight in the eye, and I told him, This is not work for a serious artist. He quite agreed. First chance he got, he fired me."

"Maybe you should've quit before it came to that."

"Well, I'd've quit anyway as soon as the writing took off." Don changed his grip on the steering wheel. "But while I was a legislative drudge, I lived for those few brief moments when the work really meant something."

His face, it seemed to Ivan, was suddenly transformed by some memory of happiness. Or perhaps it was just the car. The car cornered like a dream.

Richard Bowes

FROM THE FILES OF THE TIME RANGERS

Part One

THE SWITCHYARD MASSACRE

Autumn dawn broke over a Hudson River. A tugboat maneuvered a string of barges up to a West Side pier. The cabin door of a barge opened. Out stepped a man in overalls and pea coat, a watchcap pulled over his red hair. He looked around then locked the cabin behind him. His approach to this city had started in 1745 in Galway on a boat full of recruits bound for France and the Wild Geese regiments. At sea he'd hooked onto one of Napoleon's frigates sailing toward the Horn. Off her, he caught a steamer bound for Buenos Aires in 1900, then jumped far into the new century in a turbine freighter putting into Hoboken, where he signed on as a barge captain. As he crossed the deck and climbed the ladder to the pier, he sang under his breath: Through the Long Dark into dawning, / Out of Time and into day. He signed the name Jack Stanley on the list of those going ashore, walked down the wharf and into the city. Above an elevated highway, a Technicolor billboard displayed what looked like a scowling bank clerk. The Commander-in-Chief in full uniform glared defiance at the world.

Not even dictatorship and the threat of war could still the harbor. Longshoremen headed for the shape-up. trucks and freight trains got unloaded and loaded. On the tenement-lined streets of Chelsea, a corner building had a sign: ROOMS BY THE WEEK OR MONTH. The ground-floor shop sold newspapers, tobacco, sandwiches. A skinny kid in his mid-teens swept the sidewalk. He glanced up as the barge captain crossed the street. For the space of an eye-flash, the man had in his open palm a spiral badge the color and size of a quarter. The man entered the store. The kid finished sweeping and carried the broom inside. A woman, obviously his mother, was behind the cash register ringing up purchases. "T. R., show him the third-floor back before you go to school," she said.

The boy gestured toward a door which led to a stairwell. When they were alone, he turned to the man and flashed a copper spiral. "I knew you'd come!" he whispered. The man held a finger to his lips. "It's right up here," the kid said loud enough to be overheard. Captain Roger Deveraux nodded and followed him up the stairs.

From "Pride of the Rangers" by Daniel Ignace, *Galaxy Magazine*, July 1960.

1

A few years up the Timestream from now, late in the afternoon of a drizzly April Thursday, a white guy in a windbreaker and a black guy in a suit stand at Tenth Avenue and Thirty-Second Street. Inside the gate of the West Side Consolidated Storage Yards, a silver and blue New Jersey Transit train, its lights up, is set to roll east to Pennsylvania Station.

The man in the windbreaker is stocky and white-haired. He glances a couple of blocks downtown at the abandoned elevated railway tracks jutting out onto the Avenue. A kid skateboards around the steel pillars. The man looks familiar, though TV might not be your guess as to where you'd seen Robert Logue.

The black man is big, with a shaved skull. Louis Jackson says, "Most people, Robert, do not get to choose who in city law enforcement they're going to do business with. You, however, decide on an Assistant DA in the Manhattan Sex Crimes Unit," he indicates himself, "and everyone is happy. Grateful, even. I get pulled off my regular assignments to follow you around."

"Cops don't get stripped, killed, and mutilated either," says Logue. "But forty-plus years ago, about where that train is now, that's how officers Dennis Burke and James LaRocca were found. The Switchyard Massacre. Still unsolved. A major blot on the NYPD record. You weren't born when it happened, Jax."

"I feel like I should be hearing your voice dubbed over a long, lingering camera pan at the start of *Buried Murder*," says Jackson.

"Luckily, Americans love murders. Even old, forgotten ones. Uncover a crime, give it a name like Reverend Bluebeard or The Noonday Witch, and you've got an audience," Logue tells him. "The Switchyard Massacre is a natural."

"Yeah, I noticed the events of February sixth, 1963 are popular reading all of a sudden," says Jax. "This morning I saw the files. Besides the cops, a certain Ted Benez and Sally Dere, described as police informers, were also murdered."

"Kids. Seventeen or so. Hell, LaRocca and Burke were still in their twenties. They'd seem like kids to me now." Logue starts walking to the corner. "That's enough. I just need to get the feel of the scene."

Louis Jackson nods. They cross Tenth Avenue and head East on Thirty-Third Street. Mail trucks line the curbs around the Postal Annex. Workers sit in the cabs and on the tailgates, tabloids in hand, staring at the cop cars and news crews up the block.

Robert points to a *New York Post* headline:

KID COP BUTCHERED

Under it is a picture of a bareheaded cadet in a police academy uniform. "A handsome young woman, Mirabel Gonzalez. You saw how the *Times* headline tied her death in with Olney's? By tomorrow they'll be writing about the Switchyard Massacre. TV may be there before then."

On the southwest corner of Thirty-Third and Ninth is a parking lot. It's empty today of all but official vehicles and a line of official gawkers at the chain link fence along its back side. New York 1 scans the twenty-foot drop and the dozen sets of railway tracks. Just below that fence, Cadet Gonzalez's mutilated corpse was discovered in time for last night's news.

Robert and Jax look down on cops combing the area inside the yellow crime scene tape, on an *Eyewitness News* reporter interviewing a Deputy Inspector. The Jersey Transit train they just saw in the yards emerges from the tunnel under Tenth Avenue. It glows silver in the dull light before disappearing beneath the old Main Post Office building.

Robert stares at the wall on the far side of the railway cut. Jax follows his gaze. On the dark gray stone is a faded graffiti, a spiral. A later, brighter red X is spray-painted over it.

"Logue." A large, red-faced cop as big as Jax walks their way. "My favorite TV detective."

"Lieutenant Crawford. One of my favorite detectives in any medium," says Robert.

"You need to get down there?" asks the cop. Robert Logue shakes his head. "Any ideas about the corkscrew on the wall?"

"A reminder of an older and less orderly New York," says Robert.

"You ever meet her?" Crawford jerks his head toward the murder site.

"Briefly. She was Olney's friend. Right now, I need to talk with Jax."

2

A few minutes later, Robert and Jax are in a booth at the diner across the street, sipping Greek coffee. Jax drinks it straight. Robert has spiked his cup from a flask. The TV is on with the sound off. Cadet Gonzalez's face appears, then the railway tracks.

Robert stares out the window at a bunch of teens just sprung from school. Uniform ties are off, white shirttails hang out. Blazers are draped over their shoulders, skirts are hiked high, pants are rolled up to the knees. All their faces are painted with tiger stripes.

"War paint. The latest fashion trend," Jax says.

"That stuff washes off," says Robert. "They have to be scrubbed and back in uniform tomorrow morning. Tattoos and body piercing are illegal for kids. Not like when you grew up and anything went. I was their age circa 1960 and I kind of sympathize."

He produces a manila envelope and spreads *New York Post* clippings on the table. They show Brian Olney as a bright kid in a high school graduation photo, wearing a tuxedo at a brother's wedding, in a Police Academy uniform, in a body bag being carried off a West Side pier a few weeks earlier.

On top of these, Robert places a police photo of a corpse lying in the glare of lights. Three bullet holes are drilled in Olney's chest. His clothes are gone except for a blood-saturated T-shirt pulled over his head. It conceals the missing eyes. Invisible, unless one knows it's there, is the tiny spiral tattoo over the right bicep.

"A kid starved for adventure. A pre-med at NYU who went out of his way to audit a Buried New York course I gave at the New School last fall. Halfway through the semester, he disappears. At finals time he shows up in a police cadet uniform. Looking like the hero of a *Boy's Own Adventure* book."

Robert brings out an old police photo taken in the train yards. In the background is a baggage car and a signal light. In the foreground are the white of bare arms and legs, the black of the back of a head, of empty sockets. One victim is facedown. Another's mouth is open to the sky. Like she was killed in mid-scream.

Next is a shot dated 2/6/63. It shows a newsstand with the full array of seven New York City dailies. Even the *Times* features the murders.

"In those days, all the news did not get printed," says Robert. "But everyone in the city had a hot rumor or clever theory about what had happened. The NYPD went crazy, hauled every ex-con and current pervert in the Greater New York area in for questioning. They couldn't raise a lead. The Feds got called in. If they found out anything, they weren't telling."

"Fortunately for everyone's reputations, that fall Kennedy died in Dallas, made the Massacre look almost quaint. But we're in quiet, peaceful times. Again. The public is ready to be thrilled and horrified. The tabloids are champing at the bit for serial killers. The NYPD doesn't want a repeat of 1963. Getting caught between the *Post* and the FBI is real painful."

Robert drains his cup. "The only worthwhile thing to come out of the Olney murder was the possible sex-crime angle. That got you assigned to the case. Now, with Gonzalez dead, Crawford and company want to lean on me. It means they have no worthwhile leads. I have a couple of angles I'm working on. But if you want answers, you have to lay off. I'm a consultant, not a suspect."

Jax smiles. "Understand this, Robert. Most people don't get to decide who their contact is. But *nobody* gets to decide whether or not the cops trust them. What are you offering?"

"Olney and Gonzalez's killer. And maybe a lot more. If you give me two weeks."

"Two days," Jax says. "Time's tight. As you pointed out."

Robert says, "Four. Monday morning." He's staring over the other man's head. When Jax looks, everybody in the place is watching the TV. On screen is a live shot of the West Side Yard. The sound gets turned up. "...two blocks from the site of the infamous Switchyard Massacre." When Jax turns back, there's a ten on the table and Robert is gone.

3

Half an hour later, Louis Jackson stands under the huge glass dome at the center of the old Main Post Office. A big chunk of the interior of this massive building has been refurbished and turned into an approximation of a 1900s railroad cathedral. The Post Office itself was built to complement the original Penn Station. Now, it will contain within itself Penn Station Three.

Above the new train gates hang huge blow-up photos of the first Station at its opening in 1909. Pearly light falls on the Waiting Room where people are dark specks, ticket windows mouse holes. The glass and steel of the old Concourse ceiling is like a web. The Arcade's shops glitter.

Without taking his eyes off the photos, Jackson tells Lieutenant Crawford, "He claims you're cramping his style."

"His style!" Crawford says. "Unusual parlay, consultant and suspect. He was hanging around this neighborhood weeks before the Olney murder took place. Any idea where he was last night?"

Jax nods, still looking up. "At a family dinner in Westchester. I know because I was there. Anything new on Gonzalez?"

"Indications that she didn't die on the site where she was found. No sign of how she got there. Just like Olney."

Unlike him, though, it seems she was stripped and blinded *after* she was shot.

"One other thing. This is a copy of a snapshot we found in her locker at the Police Academy." Jax sees five males, three in their late teens, two a bit older, facing the camera. Clothes and hair place this in the early '60s. Behind them are twisted steel beams, the smashed statue of an eagle.

"The original's authentic as far as we can tell. The two adults are officers LaRocca and Burke. We don't have any ID on the kids."

Jax sees a snotty preppy, an amused young tough, and a jumpy-looking kid in a dorky crewcut who seems oddly familiar. Jax looks again. Only because he has spent the better part of the last twenty-four hours with Robert Logue does he recognize the face. He hands the photo back and says nothing.

Part Two

THE SONG OF THE TROLL

One Friday afternoon in mid-December, a merchant seaman in pea coat and watchcap walked up Seventh Avenue to Penn Station. He carried a duffel bag over his shoulder. Up the wide stairs and past the huge pillars he went. A Federal Police guardhouse lay just inside the front door.

Not even the glorious Commander-in-Chief in the twentieth year of his Perpetual Administration could totally dampen the holidays. Police lounged at their station in silver and black uniforms, faces red, eyes glazed. As the sailor walked past them, a plumber's truck drove up fast. A man and his assistant unloaded tools and pipes.

The station was built in the gilded age before the Great War and the World Depression. Under a vaulted ceiling, the Arcade, big as a city street, lined with shops and restaurants, led from the Avenue to the Main Waiting Room. As the sailor passed, the proprietor of a cigar store hung up a CLOSED sign and hurried in back.

A flight of wide stairs flanked by monumental statues brought the seaman into a room vast as a city square. People seemed tiny beneath huge banners bearing the likeness of the Commander-in-Chief. High school kids heading to a rally passed through the gates of the Concourse. T. R. was among them. The sailor put down his bag behind two Federal cops, fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes and matches.

A short, sharp boom echoed through the building. Then another and a third. Pipe bombs had blown up the guardhouse at Seventh Avenue and sealed that entrance. The two Feds started toward the Arcade. A Thompson submachine gun appeared out of the sailor's duffel bag. He shouted, "Everyone, get down." The cops turned around and immediately put their hands in the air. Shots rang out in the Concourse. Commuters revealed themselves as gunmen. Baggage handlers broke rifles out of broom closets.

The sailor's hat was off. "Secure the exits. All non-combatants out of the building." Captain Deveraux's red hair was like a beacon. He raised his weapon and fired a series of short bursts through the face of the Commander-in-Chief. T. R. ran up to tell him, "We've captured all the guards on the train platform."

"Lock them in the baggage area."

A banner was raised. On it was the spiral emblem of the Time Rangers, a circle and within that another circle and within that still another. It always seemed to have one more twist than was possible. It drew the eye irresistibly.

Friday night saw half a dozen badly coordinated attacks on the building. Saturday morning, helicopters appeared, flying low, firing through the Waiting Room windows. One was shot down over Seventh Avenue. Another crashed through the skylights and burned in the Concourse. Saturday afternoon, a homemade land mine took out a tank in the Thirty-Third Street carport. Sunday morning, warships opened fire from the Hudson River. Columns buckled on the Eighth Avenue façade. A two-ton eagle, blasted off the roof, fell into the street.

Deveraux crouched in the machine gun position commanding the main entrance. T. R. brought up the last of the ammunition. Suddenly, the artillery fire stopped and they heard helicopter motors, felt tank treads grinding toward the building.

The captain put out of his mind all thoughts of the Alamo and the Paris Commune and the Dublin Post Office and other times when brave men held out and help did not come. He whistled a fragment of 'You Will Hear Me.'

No trains had arrived or departed the station for the last forty hours. But, as if the song had evoked it, Deveraux felt the rhythm of steel on steel beneath the city. T. R. stopped and listened.

You will hear me in the nighttime,
Look around to find I've gone.
Over empires, over lifetimes,
Look around, my will is done.

Then everyone felt the engines under the Concourse, heard the tramp of Sherman's infantry and Clousson's Marines marching off the trains. Artillery was manhandled from flat cars. Spiral medallions shone on the uniforms of the Rangers who had led them there from Upstream and Down.

From "Pride of the Rangers" by Daniel Ignace, *Galaxy Magazine*, July 1960.

Half an hour after Logue leaves Jax in the diner, he leans on a pillar of the abandoned elevated railway on Tenth Avenue. He has a baseball cap pulled down over his face. Nearby, a skateboarder in black and maroon school colors bounces on and off a curb. He has olive skin and a spiral design on his cheek. He makes a point of ignoring Robert.

Down the Avenue from the tracks is a stretch of decayed tenements and parking lots, of gas stations and tire shops. A woman pushes a baby carriage full of handbags past them and pauses under the elevated. A muscle man walking west on Thirtieth Street stops and sets down a heavy backpack. An Asian boy and an Hispanic girl on bikes pass by the el, turn and ride back.

A guy gets out of a truck and opens the back to reveal TVs. A pair of junkies carry a carton of CDs. A fat girl pulls up the sleeves of her Ralph Lauren parka to display bracelets and watches. The kids get off their bikes and start showing them around. A Minute Market is in session.

Customers appear from the housing projects further down the Avenue. Cars cruising by suddenly double-park. Their drivers get out. Constantly turning to keep an eye in all directions, they buy and sell.

"Whadayaget?"

"Fiftyeven."

"Giveyatwenny."

"Fugoffmotha."

"Giveyatwennyfive."

A slightly worn Ford Explorer pulls up and sits with its engine running. The rear door opens. Robert steps around a carton of cell phones, crosses the street and heads for it.

A dark man with a bad eye sits at the wheel. The woman inside the open door is dark and wide with bright yellow hair and a Kool stuck in her mouth. She buys a pair of suitcases, hardly used, from a jumpy guy. She snaps up the carriage-load of handbags. She does business fast, palming bills, tossing her goods in behind her.

"Angelica Podesta?" murmurs Robert.

"Get lost," she says not looking at him. The driver has turned in his seat.

"Old Trollo's grandkid?"

"Like I said, get lost." She raises her voice, looks past Robert to a guy in a sweatshirt who stands with briefcases in both hands. "Ten each," she says. The dark man is out of the front seat. He holds an antique tire iron.

Robert pushes the cap back. "Is that any way to treat a fellow Time Ranger?"

"Jesus!" she breathes and holds up her hand. The man halts just behind Robert.

"Hey, I got twelve more!" The guy with the briefcases says. "Hundred the lot."

Angie looks at Robert. "Jesus Christ," she says. "Seventy-five," she tells the seller without turning his way. The deal gets struck. Working fast, Angie buys a leather jacket off a man's back. The guy with the tire iron watches the transactions, shifts the merchandise around in the Explorer. His good eye is always on Robert Logue. Then it's over. The market disperses.

"Like to buy you a couple of drinks, maybe talk about times and places," says Robert.

"With the news, I expected questions. But not from you." Angie seems a little stunned as she gets out of the car. "Okay, Geo. Move 'em. Talk to you tomorrow," she says. Geo does not look happy. He drives away slowly, like he's not going very far. The skateboarder, bouncing down the washboard street, stays even with him.

Robert smiles and takes Angie down Tenth to Moran's. Perched at the edge of the lovely Old Chelsea blocks around the Seminary, it is safely in her neighborhood but upscale enough to be off limits to her. Angie looks around, self-consciously, at the suits at the bar.

"I'm a slum goddess, only the slum is disappearing," she says, and he tells her she looks fine. "I'm dressed for work," she says. But with a fast piña colada inside her, she smiles a bit and says, "Holy shit you look like what's-his-name who played Archie Bunker. But you look like him later when he was that Southern sheriff."

"Carroll O'Connor? Gee, I thought I was more the Paul Newman type." Logue seems genuinely hurt.

"Ah, you look great. I mean is you look like a celebrity. I saw you once" she says. "On TV. But even with the same name I couldn't believe it. You had uncovered some guy murdered his family years ago. Me, I look like garbage."

Robert Logue shakes his head meaning she doesn't. He keeps looking right at her, that classic technique of a seduction or an interview, seeming unable to take his eyes away. Angie says, "When they talk about LaRocca, Burke, and the others, I expect cops." She gives a sly smile. "And I guess that's what I got. Kind of." Logue doesn't say no.

The place is noisier than he wants. So, after getting a few drinks in her, he takes her to a Szechuan place on Ninth. It's on the ground floor of a small, leaning building with high ceilings, old wooden floors. The night is rainy, with the delivery men in plastic ponchos and the occasional take-out customers carrying umbrellas. A double table of artists and their boyfriends occupies most of the restaurant. Robert and Angie are way at the back. He sends one of the delivery men out for a bottle of Jameson's.

"All these places right in my neighborhood where I never go," she says amid the dumplings, the shredded chicken, the asparagus and hot shrimp. "All the old places are gone. Like the Hudson Cafeteria. You remember the Hudson." He smiles but says nothing. "Nobody's bought me dinner in a long time," she says. "The kind of guys I know, I buy for them. How'd you know where I'd be?"

"It wasn't easy. But recently, I've been thinking a lot about all of us and everything that happened."

"That kid last month, the cadet, started you off, right?" she says with a big, dumb grin.

"I remembered," he says, "that you were like the resident spirit of the neighborhood."

"Meaning I'm too crazy to leave," she says. "I remember LaRocca called you a bloodhound. Said you could snuff stuff out." Looking deep into her glass, she says, "It's weird, people I see every week or two, I can't remember their names. All that stuff forty years ago is so damn clear." She talks and Robert smiles as if they both know the story but her way of telling it is best.

2

When my grandfather got asked what we were, he always said, "All-American." Like people think because I'm dark I'm Italian or Spanish. One guy I went out with said Albanian. And he was right and all the others too. There's gypsy blood. Jewish. All-American.

We've been here forever. I mean right on this spot. My great-grandma that I can just remember, said her father owned a farm on the river. He was Dutch. And Indian. It's screwy, nothing in New York stays the same. But we're still here. Some of us can leave. My older brother went in the Air Force. He lives in Montana and never talks to us. My father could leave and did. He was in the merchant marine. My mother couldn't. But her sisters did.

It's more than not leaving. My grandfather who had this same problem? He used to take me to school up at St. Michael's Academy on Thirty-Fourth Street. And those buildings, the church and school, bothered the living hell out of him. Because back in 1900 whatever it was before they built the first Penn Station, St. Michael's stood over on Ninth. It got taken apart stone by stone and put back together where it is now. "It's like they changed a tooth," he'd say. He couldn't even get used to the original Penn Station being there.

The same thing's happened with me. It's at least forty years since they tore down the first Penn Station. And I can't get used to it being gone. St. Michael's was about as far North as grand-dad could go. That's another thing that's the same. Thirty-Fourth to Eighteenth, Seventh Avenue to the River is where I can go. When I was little it wasn't as bad. Even later I could leave for days at a time. But mostly I was only comfortable here.

When I was little was before the projects went up. It was lots of cold-water flats and boarding houses. One thing that lasts in any neighborhood is the rackets. And my grandfather had his hand in those. Nothing big that would get him noticed: betting, numbers, sharking. Van Trolle, his name was. "Old Trollo," Italians used to call him. Like he waited under a bridge for someone to come past to rob.

He saw I was the same as him. And I was a tomboy, hung out, boosted stuff. Nothing major. Auto parts: hubcaps, rearview mirrors. Then we'd keep watch on your car for a quarter a day to make sure that didn't happen to you.

Ted Benez who got killed was from around here. He was, maybe, six months older than me. I thought he looked like James Dean. We got into more serious stuff, Teddy and me, lifting wallets near the queer hotel on Thirty-First. We thought we were so cool.

All of a sudden, these two guys in plainclothes shoved us in a hallway. James LaRocca and Dennis Burke. New in the neighborhood. Not famous the way they got around here even before they were dead. Their story was they were on their way to work and happened to spot us.

Burke grabbed Ted. LaRocca had me. Burke was a cop with a capital K. He had the front of Teddy's shirt and leather jacket balled up in his hands, shaking the kid and yelling in his face.

LaRocca had more personality. He laid his hands on me like he thought I was a boy. Hard to believe now, but I was thin and I was dressed in a loose sweater. He pulled it up, patted me down. "Hey," he said. "This is a girl!" Like it was a big surprise. "A cute girl." He did a double take. "Vanny the Troll's grandkid."

He and Burke were laughing. It was all an act, rehearsed. All I could see was his eyes. I've always been a sucker for a guy with great eyes. You know that, right? It's in a Time Ranger file somewhere?

After that, anyway, they saw us regularly. Teddy they allowed to hang around because of me. I was the one they were interested in.

They said it was what I knew about the neighborhood. Like where all the railway tracks went and where the tunnels were. My grandfather had showed all that to me.

LaRocca's asking me helped him and Burke catch this fugitive. He'd gone underground over near the Pennsy yards. Planning to hop a train maybe. They caught him and it got them noticed.

But it was the other stuff that really interested them. In the neighborhood, longshoremen and railwaymen sometimes whispered about guys going "Upstream," finding Friday's number, next September's World Series scores.

LaRocca got me to tell about that. And I discovered I knew more than I thought. Then he showed me these stories, the Time Rangers. Normally I didn't read that stuff or go to monster movies or anything. I got into this, though. It was all Three Musketeers, you know. Action. Intrigue. Battling evil. Kids were always getting inducted into the Rangers. And there was one guy in most of the stories. Roger Deveraux. However he was described, I always pictured him as this big Italian-American cop.

Later, I saw how it was only because of Old Trollo that LaRocca got interested in me. My grandfather, by never moving from this one spot, became a kind of landmark. All kinds of rumors spread about the people he knew. My father, for instance, the story was he didn't just sail the sea but to somewhere beyond that. I think about it, Trollo probably brought my father home to meet his daughter who couldn't go anywhere else and meet guys.

You know how in the magazines, the Rangers got in a plane or car and sang some little song and *whoosh* it's 1492 and they're on a boat giving directions to Columbus or something? I told LaRocca how once or twice, standing on a subway grate, or under that railway el when a freight was running, I'd feel like I was about to step into this forest or onto a train traveling like a rocket.

We talked about it. Then we did a little exploring. Just the two of us. We saw the wreckage of Penn Station which

hadn't happened yet. Weird. LaRocca couldn't do this stuff, but he'd know that you could and he'd show you how.

Around then, he introduced me to the one who wrote the stories. I thought it would be this big, romantic guy with a British accent. Instead it's in the old Hudson Cafeteria over on Eighth and he's this commie. You know, with the jacket open and the shirt buttoned up to the neck and no tie and the hair sticking up off his head and these glasses with metal frames like they, maybe, issued back in Moscow. He was a nosy guy. Knew some stuff.

Then there were the other kids. We all had some special talent. Like Alan Goodwin. He was supposed to be in private school. A real snotty bastard. I remember the first time they brought him around, he was wearing a blazer with a crest and this sneer. Lots of abilities. Also secrets, it turned out. LaRocca thought he'd spotted Alan by accident.

Eddie Brown was another one. I liked Eddie okay. He said he was a drifter. Never talked much about where he came from. Eddie was hard, you know. But soft. I remember he was by my house once and my little brother, who's retarded, was watching *The Mickey Mouse Club* and Ed caught sight of it and couldn't take his eyes off the TV. Like he'd never seen one before. Which maybe was so. Like Alan, Ed was a plant.

One day, I remember, they brought by this skinny, scared little kid. LaRocca says his name is Bobby and he's a college student. Teddy and me, who were sixteen, didn't believe it. We were older than you.

A little after that, I helped take you up a branch of the Stream I knew about. Saw Penn Station all leveled. Took everyone's picture. You were real shook. After that you weren't around. Too scared, LaRocca said. That's when he told me you were like a bloodhound.

You never meet Sally Dere. Which she pronounced Dare. Kind of an All-American herself. Blond and tall but with a touch of black. Opposite of you. No john could ever have told she was underage. She showed up that fall. LaRocca and Burke said they rescued her from some pimp. Rescued the pimp from her is more likely. It turned out she had more talent than me or anyone else. Swam the Stream like a fish. Not from around here. Not at all.

From the first, Teddy was attached to her like those little magnet scotty dogs. I was the only reason LaRocca had him around. He was so stupid, he didn't know she was using him as a beard. So nobody'd figure out that LaRocca and her were the real news. LaRocca didn't need the rest of us. He was getting everything he wanted. Prize pupil and prime tail.

Old Trollo got sick about then and I started taking care of his candy store. I wasn't coming around and LaRocca didn't even notice. Then came the Massacre. A clean sweep, all four of them dead. The neighborhood got flooded with cops.

My alibi was tight if I even needed one. People swore they saw me all that day and night in the store. Everyone knew I hadn't spoken to LaRocca in months. And none of those cops paid any attention to weird neighborhood gossip.

It bothered me, though, because LaRocca and Teddy I once had really liked. And Burke never did me any harm. After a while I found other stuff to do. I got married. To this pig. Mike Podesta. He had no trouble leaving the neighborhood once he cleaned me out. I kept the name, which makes me harder to track.

I had a little trouble and I had to go to a clinic. They called it agoraphobia. Gave me pills. Everyone my age moved. No one left but old people and nuts. Everything got torn down. Penn Station. The whole neighborhood when they put up the ILGWU houses and the projects and the postal annexes.

Ships stopped coming to the piers. It was like one day the tide went out and never came back. For a while the empty warehouses and factories were sex clubs, artists' places, crash pads for runaways. The streets were whore runs. Now that's all going. Im the only thing left.

3

All the other tables are empty. The kitchen crew has eaten and is departing. The waiter has taken away their last glasses and thanked them for the tip. Angie shakes herself as if she's coming out of a dream. She says, "I never asked about you. How have things been?"

"Fine. Been married. Lots of other activity. *Buried Murder's* been a nice living for me. I'm away from the city a lot. California, London, some other spots. Once or twice I thought of looking you up."

"Yeah, well officially I'm in the ILGWU co-ops over on Eighth. My mother was a seamstress in the Garment Workers. She's real weak now. It's her and my brother who's retarded. And me."

He helps her on with her coat. They walk to the front door and he suddenly asks, "Anyone else talk to you about the cadets?"

"A Lieutenant Crawford looked me up after Olney bought it. Because of my Switchyard connection. I didn't give him anything. He's asking around for me again. But there's places I stay when I don't want to see people."

He nods. They stand under the awning. The street is bright with rain and headlights. The neon restaurant signs go out behind them.

"Brian Olney found out about me. Came by asking about the Massacre and I told him what I remembered. I had that old snapshot I took of you and LaRocca and Burke that I gave him. Sweet kid, Brian. Not like the Gonzalez bitch. I spotted her as one of the Sisters."

Robert's smile has gone away. "What else did you show them?" She says nothing. "Show me," he says. She shrugs. Robert flags down a cab and says, "Penn Station."

On their ride, he watches Angie. Her eyes are out of focus. "I knew this was going to happen," she says as the cab bounces into the covered way. "Same as I knew what was going to happen to Brian soon as he began asking about the Stream."

They descend by escalator into a cellar. Cramped, low-ceilinged and graceless, even in its last days Penn Station Two is liked and admired by no one. After midnight it's quiet, mostly empty, smelling of fried food and ammonia. A few intercity travelers and some New Jersey commuters who have stayed very late in town, watch the clock and the train board. Amtrak police are present in uniform and undercover.

"Attention arriving or departing passengers," says a Spanish woman over the loudspeaker. "Please be cautious and entrust your luggage only to uniformed Amtrak Red Caps. Thieves posing as luggage handlers..."

Robert, with his hand on her arm, feels Angie flinch at the announcement. They step briskly to the window. Angie studies him as he buys the tickets. The departure of the 1:05 *Twilight Shoreliner* out of Boston, bound for Newport News, is announced.

"Perfect timing," says Robert. She shrugs.

Their tickets are inspected before they're allowed down on the platform. It's a short train with mail cars up front and the seats half empty. They sit all the way at the back of the first coach. College kids bound south from New England are asleep. A woman in a raincoat takes infinite care arranging and rearranging her shopping bags. An Asian man with a gray buzzcut sits very straight at the front.

A conductor hollers, "All aboard!" After a short pause, the train gives a little bump and starts to roll. For the space of half a block, they are out of the tunnel and in the glare of the lights set up at the Gonzalez crime scene.

Then they're back underground and under the river heading for New Jersey. Angie puts her hand on his, hums off-key and asks, "You remember the song?"

Together they whisper, fitting the words to the click of steel on steel:

*Through the Long Dark into dawning,
Out of Time and into day,
Catch a glimpse of silver running;
Now I'm here then gone away.*

The dark of the tunnel explodes. The *Twilight Shoreliner* fades. They are on a tramway arching over the Hudson. Above them, fireworks burst. Their sparks are caught and dance on curtains of water pumped by fireboats. On the riverfront, a Ferris wheel, twenty stories high, spins at impossible speeds, runs through the spectrum of color. Music swirls, echoing from one shore to the other.

Robert feels himself being pushed towards the light. He grabs hold of Angie with both hands and hears her yelling. "*Let go asshole! You're breaking my arm.*" Suddenly he's back on the train and an Amtrak conductor stands over them. Even the Asian man has turned to stare.

Robert speaks with great effort. "We're fine," he says. When the conductor finally leaves, Robert says without looking at Angie, "You just tried to dump me down there where I would have gotten killed. Any particular reason?"

The dark Meadowlands pass outside the window. Angie, suddenly sober and terrified, twists around trying to look back at Manhattan. "You came on like you knew everything. Like you were the Rangers. Look at you now. Still shaking. Just like after we took you up the Timestream. Or when they had you sniffing out the Massacre site."

A few minutes later, they get out at Newark, the first stop. In the faded, almost empty old station, they wait for a train back to the city. Angie can't sit still. Like she wants to jump up and run all the way back to Chelsea.

Logue reaches into his jacket and takes out the flask. She looks away then comes back and takes a swig. She makes a face and drinks again. "You do to Olney and Gonzalez what you just tried to do to me?" he asks.

"Each one wanted to go Upstream. Real bad. What you just saw is Geo's turf. He's the guy who was with me this afternoon. Because Olney asked really politely, I showed him the way. With Gonzalez, she held a gun on me. Her, I dumped off the train. Made no difference. Both got caught. With her I didn't mind. Olney, though, was a nice kid. Great eyes while he had them."

She watches his reaction. "You going on TV and tell the world? They'll lock you away. Who are you going to tell? Last I heard I was in charge of watching the Stream around here."

"Get you for possession of stolen property, maybe?"

"Even if you knew where we had it, the merchandise doesn't stay around. By now Geo's taken everything Upstream. Leather. They're crazy for it where he comes from. trade you gold, even weight. Shoot you for your wallet, dump the money and cards walk away with the leather."

On the train back, she says, "Forty years ago they tell me make sure nobody's using this place to go in the Stream. Keep everything nice. That's the last I hear. Now, my mother's dying. Nothing's left that I know. A troll. All I am is an ugly troll waiting under a bridge."

"You talk to any of the others?" Robert asks.

She shakes her head. "Not in a while. The closest I came, until you, was Gonzalez let it slip that she knew Alan Goodman. Or whatever that freak is called now."

They pull up in front of the ILGWU apartments on Ninth. Angie is crying as she slides out of the cab. "I'm so dumb, at first I actually wanted to think you were going to help me." Robert leans over and kisses her on the cheek. Angie waits until the cab is out of sight then crosses the Avenue heading west to a hiding spot. A figure holding a skateboard follows her.

Part Three

THE EYES OF TIRESIAS

"Deveraux," said the chief, a grizzled veteran of Iwo Jima and the Gaspay Salient, puffing on his cigar, adjusting the toga all staff wore at headquarters in Second Century A.D. Tiers. "Nice work with the Christmas Rebellion. Your promotion and decoration were temporarily held up. Seems you violated a couple of regulations."

He held up his hand in response to Roger Deveraux's expletive. "Spare me, Captain. I was raised on a horse farm in Kentucky. And I've seen lots of it. Mostly since leaving home. I've learned that the best answer to bureaucrats is action."

"The Commander-in-Chief was more than an aberration," he continued. "Rot has set in all along that Branch of Time. We've traced it to a particular world and a particular man. Lubenbacher. Styles himself as the Prophet. Mind control is his weapon. He's systematized and electronically coded it. Brain washing, Pavlovian conditioning, are rudimentary compared to what he's developed." He pushed a box of cigars over to Deveraux who selected one. "I'm violating all kind of regulations. Agents have died getting this information. But if you're willing, I'll show you all we know and tell you what we intend." Shortly afterwards, a night coach pulled by four matched bays rattled out of Varennes one spring night in 1787. A figure in a tricorne and cloak sat in one corner, eyes closed. The other passengers slept as he opened his eyes and whispered: Passengers will please refrain / From waking as I catch a train.

Time shifted, the rhythm of sixteen shod hooves was replaced by the clacking of wheels. At Calais in 1902, a figure in an Inverness cape transferred to a Channel ferry. On the water, Roger Deveraux threw off the cape as he hooked onto a Pan Am Clipper and landed in a peaceful and prosperous Toronto in 1963. On Bloor Street in that city, an elderly gentleman with a military mustache sat behind a desk as Deveraux flashed a spiral medallion.

In 2016, a jetney powered by an atomic generator glided above the rail on a molecular cushion. It slowed to a stop at an elevated station. Posters, bright and cheerful, displayed the face of the Prophet and his words. TO ALL MY CHILDREN, TRUE CARE MUST BE GIVEN. Seating on the jetney was arranged by hierarchy. Crowded in the rear, sitting if they could find seats, were Children of all ages in skimpy tunics. In the middle sat the Functionaries, clerks and technicians in gray uniforms, enlisted rank legionaries in black. All stared straight ahead not making eye contact with their betters. At the front, in white robes, the Votaries of Lubenbacher sat as near as they ever came to their ease. Each passenger had headphones firmly in place. All kept their eyes lowered before the Colonel of Wardens.

Right behind the driver sat Roger Deveraux, straight and tall in uniform. He wore headphones like all the others. Soothing music was interspersed on the hour and the half hour with the day's lesson. "Each mind is a world to be tamed as this world has been tamed," the Prophet began. A high school class got on the jetney, boys and girls in knee length tunics, tonsured so that the serial numbers tattooed on their skulls could be read. At each stop, Deveraux felt the glancing probe of a mind scanner searching for disruptive mental patterns.

From "The Prophet and the Last" by Daniel Ignace, *Amazing Science Fiction*, December 1961.

1

Flying west on Friday morning, Robert Logue, mildly hung over, reads the story. He has one scotch at lunch and whispers "Through the long dark into dawning" to himself. But the American Airlines flight out of New York remains a turbojet all the way to Kansas City. As the landing light goes on, he sticks the old magazine inside the plastic bag in which he bought it.

Heading north on Route 435, the rental Saturn does not transmute into a Conestoga wagon. The State University at Aline has a certain period charm. It was founded before Kennedy died and the Beatles sang and modern history began. But Robert realizes that he is older than the campus.

Styles are a few years behind New York. Aside from the girls' hair and the boys' jewelry, their attire is unisex shorts and sweatshirts. Robert spots no one in face paint. He parks the car and makes his way to a library bearing the name of a vaguely remembered Senator. An elevator takes him to Science Reference on the third floor.

At the center of the room is a circular desk lined with computer screens. Inside it, librarians are like a besieged garrison. Phones ring, printers hum. Around the desk are carrels with terminals. All these are busy. Students wait their turns to use them. In the middle distance are shelves of unbound journals. Farther away, receding into twilight, are tall, dusty stacks of books.

Robert's eyes follow the librarian who is clearly in charge. She appears to be in her late thirties. Her hair is lightly blond and tightly coiffed. She is tall and uses that well. In this place, a blouse, skirt, and high heels look like formal attire. Her voice is clear as a clarinet, "How serious a paper is this?" she asks a tiny, flustered girl. "Knowing that can save us both time."

At a moment when nobody is near the woman, Robert steps forward and asks, "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs at evening?"

Without looking up from a screen, the librarian answers in an undertone, "Wrong question, Logue. You're far from

being the Sphinx. And I'm not Oedipus. I'm Tiresias. As you'd know if you'd gotten an education instead of boasting on television about not having one."

"I just did that to make you mad, Ms. White."

"The truffle hound of homicide," Sandra White murmurs. A clerk approaches with something for her to sign. Several nursing students appear. "I'll be with you in a few minutes," she tells Robert. "You can spend the time looking up your press notices."

"Thanks, but I already have all the clippings at home."

Half an hour later they sit in a comfortable coffeehouse in the mildly shabby neighborhood that adjoins any large campus. They drink black coffee fortified with brandy from Robert's flask. "You're looking terrific, Sandra. It's been like, what? Twenty-four years since I saw you last?"

"Time is good to me. You look... prosperous."

"How long can you be away?"

"As long as this takes. I'm Head of Reference. I was at that desk because someone had jury duty and someone else had a dental emergency. I have a simulacrum that normally would deal with dull routine. But I knew, of course, that events would lead you to appear today without calling ahead. trying to catch me unaware."

"Like Tiresias, you know the future."

"As does anyone who doesn't allow hopes and fears to muddle their judgment."

"In that case why did you and the Sisterhood allow Olney and Gonzalez to get butchered?"

She grimaces at his simplicity. "I like my day job well enough, Logue. Answering questions. But answers can be dangerous things. Zeus and his wife Hera once argued about whether man or woman got the greater pleasure out of sex. Each claimed the other did. To resolve the dispute, they asked the one who had been both genders. The answer they received was, 'Women by the ratio of nine to one.' Hera became enraged and blinded Tiresias. Only then did Zeus bestow second sight, that most perilous of gifts." She sips and sips again before continuing. "So far, I still have my eyes. But for a change, I'll ask the question, not answer it. How much do you remember, Robert?"

"More than I did just a couple of months ago. On the plane, I read a Time Ranger story I haven't seen since it came out. It's one where the Rangers have to clear up this branch of Time. It's polluted, full of bad stuff that has to be kept away from the Main Stream."

Sandra White leans forward expectantly, gestures for him to continue.

2

I remembered the first time I read that story. I was on a bus headed south through Connecticut. My family lived on Long Island, New York, and I was coming home from school in Boston for Christmas vacation. Sizing up my fellow passengers, I imagined a needle gun slung from my belt and a Ranger insignia on my jacket.

Kind of old for that kind of fantasy, maybe, but let's say I was a little immature. We pulled into the Port Authority Terminal. New York was eight million stories and at least that many deaths. And I could feel every death on my nerve ends. That was a little talent I had. One that had me traumatized.

But the city was also the place where I could get a drink with the draft card I'd been issued the week before. It took me a couple of hours to make my way the ten blocks from the Port Authority to Penn Station.

When I got there, I swaggered in the Seventh Avenue entrance and walked down the Arcade, trying to smoke a cigarette, looking for another bar sleazy enough to serve a kid who was eighteen going on twelve. I'd already found one or two.

All of a sudden, an arm looped around my left arm. Another had my right. Two uniformed cops, Irish and Italian, walked me into a doorway. The Italian took the duffel bag and opened it. The Irish cop pulled the butt out of my mouth and threw it away. "Don't you want to grow up big and strong? What's your name? Where are you going?"

The two of them thought, or pretended to think, that I was running away from home. The Irish cop scared me by saying, "Take this one to the youth center? See who claims him?"

But the Italian, big, intense, stared right in my eyes and nodded. "Ah, he's okay. Look at this." He held up the magazine. "You're looking for Roger Deveraux? He's not here. We're just simple enlisted men in the Time Wars. Let's take a walk, Bobby."

So we crossed the Main Waiting Room lit by lamps and winter light. The Irish cop carried my bag. And the Italian had his hand on my shoulder like I was, maybe, a cousin met by chance. "Oh yeah, the Stream flows all around here," he said.

Suddenly an emotionally damaged kid's interior life and the outside world had merged. Bedazzled, I walked downstairs between them. On the Long Island Railroad platform, before the train came, LaRocca hooked his fingers in my belt and swung me aside, the eternal dance of punk and cop.

He said, "I've got ways of telling which kids have potential. And you are one. What do you see, Bobby?"

So I told him the kind of stuff that ran through my brain day and night. "Back when the building got put up, a workman got crushed right about where we're standing. He slipped and a railroad car full of rocks ran him down. There's a graveyard over there." I gestured towards Eighth Avenue. "It's filled up with old people, children. Everybody. They died in a kind of plague back in colonial times."

LaRocca seemed fascinated. He handed me a slip of paper with a telephone number on it and said, "I want you to call the next time you pass through town."

I was hooked. By the time Spring semester ended, I'd seen LaRocca half a dozen times, told him stuff I never

thought I'd tell anyone. Burke was usually around. I'd met Angie and her boyfriend Teddy Benez and a big kid named Eddie Brown. There were hints of secrets. Scary ones. But then again, just about everything scared me.

By the end of May, my college career was over. Somehow, school hadn't caught my attention. Not the way death did. Walking through the Penn Station Arcade, I noticed that half the stores were vacant. The station was due to be torn down. That's where LaRocca met me. Today was going to be my initiation. LaRocca was off duty, wearing a sports jacket and a shirt open at the neck, but still looking like a cop. With him was a preppy in a school blazer and horn rims.

"Alan Goodman's going to Columbia in the fall. He's coming with us." Alan nodded, remote. As we crossed the Main Waiting Room, Angie and Ed joined us. We went into the Concourse where the roof was all steel and glass and trains ran under the floor.

Downstairs, the Broadway Limited to Chicago was boarding passengers. We were on the platform as the train, once legendary, now tired and bedraggled, began to roll. We walked alongside it. Everyone but me had done this before. An arm went around my shoulder, a hand touched my back. Someone hummed Casey Jones very softly. The train picked up speed and it felt like I was standing on a conveyer belt. In the Time Ranger stories there were Portals, places where traffic came and went. The constant movement flattened molecules and created a fusion that pulled past and future in all their variations into a vast Stream. Or something like that.

With my next step, I stumbled on broken concrete. Above me, the former Concourse was roofless. A cold winter sun shone down on rubble and ruin. "A few years Upstream. And in a much different world," LaRocca whispered. I was aware that something massively awful had happened. Lots of violent deaths. LaRocca went up the wrecked stairs and we followed him. It wasn't just Penn Station. Ruin stretched in all directions. Angie took out a camera and the rest of us posed. Right then everything I had consumed that day decided to come up and see the world.

They laughed because I was shivering and green. After a few minutes they brought me back Downstream. I promised LaRocca I'd be back, but I knew I was too scared to see him again. It felt like I'd lost my best chance of finding a group I could be part of.

Stunned by what I had just seen, I rode the Long Island Railroad. At my stop, my parents waited downstairs with the car, worry and anger on their faces. That summer, I was in bad shape. I remember lying awake at night, feeling a lonely suicide in a farmhouse that had once stood in the development where we lived, a couple dead a few years before in a traffic accident. That fall, I didn't go back to school. I lost the ability first to leave the house, then to leave my room.

In that simple, stupid place and time, kids who didn't function properly were sent to the hospital for rewiring. Lots of awful things happened to me there, among them shock treatment. My brain got wiped clean. Memories returned only if something evoked them. Lots of stuff I was content to let slide. Especially certain events that occurred when a visitor got me out on a day pass.

My special talent remained. It was terrifying, but it was all I had when I left the hospital. By then, I'd begun to learn how to tame it. Slowly, I made a career discovering and solving old murders.

About twenty years ago, I was in Cleveland, working on the case I called *The Noonday Witch* when a woman called Sandra White asked to speak to me. Sandra was attractive and as haunting as *déjà vu*. She knew flattering amounts about my career. We had dinner and I had plenty to drink.

Everything was going fine. Except that out of nowhere flashed a memory so old and hidden that it could have been a dream. In it, I was young and I stood under a harsh light in a stuffy room. Two other kids were with me. We had all been stripped and were being interrogated. I realized the other two were Alan Goodman and Ed Brown and that we were Upstream.

Sandra asked me what was wrong and I said it was nothing. I remember feeling again that I had seen her before. We went up to my room. I opened the door and remembered Alan and Ed leading me back and forth through what I knew was the ruins of New York. I was scared and they were too. It was dark and we were in tunics and rubber sandals. Like Lubenbacher's Children wore in the story I read today. The ground held plenty of deaths but we were looking for very specific ones.

This memory shook me. But, when Sandra asked, I said everything was fine. Then we were in bed and I put it aside. An hour or so later, I got up to use the bathroom. I looked in the mirror and saw night in those Upstream ruins. Near a mound of rubble topped by the statue of a broken eagle, I felt LaRocca, Burke, Teddy Benez, and a girl I didn't know.

A few years before, they had been ambushed on that spot. Burke got off a shot before he was gunned down. The others surrendered. Their eyes were put out and they were executed on the spot. They screamed as they died. When I choked out a description of this, Ed Brown and Alan Goodman looked at each other and each raised a triumphant fist.

That night in the hotel room in Cleveland, I looked in the mirror and froze. The woman in the bed behind me, had caught my eye and made that gesture. At that moment, I realized that Sandra White and Alan Goodman were the same person.

Over the years I'd been acquainted with a few surgical sex changes. What I was seeing was something else. Alan had definitely been a boy. You were a woman.

You told me to sit down and I did. You explained a few things and told me what I was going to do. I followed your instructions, including making every effort to forget what had happened when it was over.

Recent events with Olney and Gonzalez have made that impossible. Yesterday, I spoke to our old friend Angie. She says Gonzalez knew you. I'd like to ask you about that. I need your help.

It's dusk outside. Robert and Sandra's cups have been refilled for what will be the last time. A dinner crowd drifts in. "Mortal man, mortal man," she shakes her head, refuses the brandy and almost smiles. "This is the third time you have crossed my path. For many of your sex, one encounter is more than is allowed.

"With Maria Czerny, you even surprised us. And lived. You appeared on TV claiming to have found a decades-old missing-child pattern in an immigrant Czech community outside Cleveland. A series of little girls had all disappeared without a trace. At midday. You identified a certain Maria Czerny as the murderess, described how years before she had kidnapped children in broad daylight and eaten their hearts.

"Old Bohemians believed in a witch that stole children at noon. Their fears had made them reluctant to cooperate too closely with the authorities. You called Czerny 'The Noonday Witch.' Quite catchy.

"For the Sisterhood, witch hunts are a nightmare comparable to the Holocaust for Jews, lynchings for African-Americans. We were confronted by two facts. Maria Czerny was still alive, though senile and in a mental hospital. And in Europe, before the Great War, she had been one of us. We had severed our ties, then lost track of her.

"Of course, I recognized you and knew how you had actually sniffed out the crimes. Twenty years before, I'd passed up the chance to dispose of you. In a sense, you were my responsibility.

"So I visited Cleveland and used my powers of persuasion. It was too late to do anything about the name you had given the case. But I convinced you to make every effort to show that, in fact, so-called witches were harmless. Benevolent even. And that, in any case, no proof existed that Maria Czerny ever was one."

"And when you were finished with the evidence, that was true," Robert says. "Powers of persuasion? Try terror. You snapped your fingers and fifty miles away, Ms. Czerny died in her bed. Stacks of letters turned to ash inside locked safes. Then there was the way you reminded me of our prior meeting."

"I wanted you to see both my manifestations. Even when I was Alan, you aroused my sentimental side, Robert. And I find it amusing when you are afraid. Like now."

Robert says, "Tiresias, in one legend, sees two sacred snakes coupling and breaks them up with his staff. As punishment, the gods turn him into woman."

"As always, the patriarchs have it criminally wrong. Tiresias was righting an error along the Winding Stream you call Time. Womanhood was the reward, not the punishment. In my birthplace, the Sisterhood is the one thing worth aspiring to. An assignment arose for which only a boy would do. I was offered a rare chance, full of danger. I took it and triumphed.

"As Alan Goodman, I walked through Penn Station until I was 'discovered.' LaRocca had certain abilities. He found you but didn't know how to use you. The Sisters did. Eventually, I came, I won't say to like, but to feel sorry for LaRocca and Burke and even Benez."

"But not Sally Dere? Because she was a witch gone bad?"

"Too wise is too soon gone, Robert."

"Ignorance isn't a life-saver, either. Look at Olney and Gonzalez. Bright kids with very little idea of what they were getting into. You must have known what was going to happen. Why didn't you stop it?"

Sandra is impatient. "Mortal man, even to question us is unwise! Two deaths are nothing along the Winding Stream. It was their fate and it served a purpose. You will shortly learn more than you will want to about the politics of Time."

She unzips a soft leather case. "As before, Robert, you arouse my protective side. It has made me generous." She pushes Xeroxed pages toward him. "Here's something you will want to read before you arrive at your next interview." Sandra rises before Robert can. She leans over, kisses him hard on the cheek and says in a low, clear voice, "This will remind you, when you 'solve' the case, not to speak in any way of the Sisters."

Part Four

A VOYEUR AT THE GATE OF HORN

At the end of their R&R, three old companions in the Time Wars shipped out on a clipper plying back from Bali circa 1820. From her deck, they leaped to a tramp steamer bound for post-Earthquake San Francisco. Out of Frisco they caught a Southern Pacific train that carried Garbo in a private Pullman and John Barrymore in the club car. Lastly, they made a leap into what had been New York's Penn Station.

Those walls still standing after the Christmas siege had been knocked down. The three soldiers stood on a marble floor under a summer sky.

"All your doing," said Lin Pao, drawing deep on a cigar.

"Three years ago last winter solstice," said Lucius Marcellus. "Hanging on by your fingernails, when I ferried in the combat engineers."

"We went over to the attack when I came up with the Long March Legion," said Lin Pao. "House to house fighting. We had to flatten half the city."

Roger Deveraux paid no attention. This was the rear area of a campaign being fought just Upstream. A trainload of

walking wounded, all very young, had just arrived. Among them, the captain glimpsed a face, scarred and gaunt but familiar.

T. R., with his mother, had provided Deveraux with shelter while he organized a revolution. The boy had gone on to command a squad in the battle for New York, a platoon in the march on Washington. T. R. must have seen Deveraux too. But the young man looked right through the Captain. The words "time bomb" sprang into Deveraux's mind. He made his apologies and left his friends.

That night, before the curfew, Deveraux made his way through the blackout to where the remains of a neighborhood stood like a village on the edge of a wilderness. He wore a watchcap and pea coat just as when he first came to this New York. He paused at a revolving door and looked west and north. Where once there had been tenements, warehouses, hotels, offices, only piles of rubble, an occasional shell of a building remained. Then he stepped through the door.

The cafeteria was a vast space smelling of coffee and bacon and humming with voices. Cab drivers and cops and couples sat at tables, stuck quarters in the slots, slid trays toward the cashiers. They talked Dodgers and the upcoming elections and rationing and above all war news from the ever fluid front. A terrorist attack had wrecked the city of Paris. Time Bombs they called the terrorists.

Against a far wall sat young people, mainly male, mostly in uniform. Some had scars, some had empty sleeves, some had vacant thousand-yard stares. Deveraux stepped around a busboy loading plates on a cart and approached a Lieutenant sitting alone with his eyes closed.

"T. R.," he said. No response. "I visited the place where you lived, where your mother died. Like I do each time I come here, I left flowers. I'll never forget the risks you both took." The young man's eyes flew open. And Deveraux stared into the face of an enemy.

From "Time Bomb" by Daniel Ignace, *Star Tales*, September 1963.

1

Sandra has circled the last few paragraphs. Late Saturday afternoon, Robert reads them one last time and sticks the story in his jacket pocket. The plane's landing lights are on. The great American Southwest lies golden below. Robert looks as if he's missed a night's sleep somewhere in his travels. He touches his cheek.

The hotel's decor and staff are Hispanic. The decor is ersatz, the staff authentic. In the convention area, the faces are almost pure Anglo. Robert Logue passes a group of badly out of shape Space Fleet officers and a couple costumed, she as a dragon, he as a maiden.

Logue purchases a convention membership from a middle-aged guy wearing a Mousketeer cap. A woman in a silver pants suit and cat mask directs him past ballrooms where films are shown, down corridors lined with poster- and comic book-vendors, through spaces packed with Star Wars enthusiasts, to a small, quiet room where the printed word is discussed.

He seats himself at the back near the door and watches. An old man with a halo of white hair and a nose like some Caesar's is being interviewed in front of an audience of guys Robert's age and a small contingent of student types, several of whom are women.

The man addresses a tall brunette who asked a question about the computer technology in an early novel. "Remember above all," he says, sounding like a previously unguessed-at Marx brother, "that Cyril and me and the other guys were just a bunch of yutzes in cheap suits and bad haircuts scrambling to sell stories for fifty bucks a pop to editors crazier than we were." He smiles. "But maybe we could foretell the future. Those suits and haircuts came back and were quite trendy."

"I wonder," a very young man around forty in a ponytail and earrings says, "about the political satire. In your *Null Delta*, written in 1970, Earth circa 2000 is authoritarian, regimented. Young people especially get repressed. Denied all rights. What happened with that?"

"I was in school in the forties. In high school yearbook photos, the children of the Depression, World War Two, the early Cold War all try to look middle-aged. Why? They're scared. Of not graduating, of not getting a job. Girls had to stay virgins. Boys had to deal with the draft. It was their children who felt secure enough to remake the rules."

"In other words, the novel is about then and not the future. Because the very opposite seems to have happened in terms of youth culture."

"So maybe I was off by a few years. Americans, you know, tend to dress for the rest of their lives the same way they did in high school. True for you maybe? Your look might not be allowed now. Schools have dress codes, lots have uniforms." He shrugs. "Being right about this would not please me."

The door behind Robert opens. People wait outside for the next event. Someone in the room says, "I know this is a discussion of your novels. But I have a question about your Star trek scripts."

"Maybe another time. They need this place to talk game licensing. For something so important, we shouldn't keep them waiting." The writer moves towards the door amid a small entourage. "No. I love the Internet," he tells the brunette. "But how much freedom is it to be in touch with everyone if everyone is in exactly the same fix as you?"

Robert steps into their path and says, "Daniel Ignace? I've just been reading your Time Ranger stories. Fascinating. I'm sure people tell you that all the time."

"Not often," says Ignace. "Even at conventions." He tries to move on.

Robert puts a hand on the man's chest and lowers his voice. "My name is Logue. We met just before the Switchyard Massacre. Mutual friends brought me by the Hudson Cafeteria to talk to you about LaRocca and

company. I've tried not to remember any of that. Something of yours that I just read reminded me."

"I guess we must talk," says Ignace aloud.

"Now. If you please," murmurs Robert.

Minutes later, they sit in one of the hotel restaurants. Logue has a double scotch, Ignace a chamomile tea. The writer stares at the Xeroxed pages and remarks, "A collector's item. I've never seen a copy. The magazine went out of business before the issue shipped."

Logue says. "It's not just your story. Since Brian Olney's murder, a lot of stuff has been coming back to me."

Ignace expression betrays nothing. He says, "You know with recovered memory they've found—"

"Recovered memory is bullshit. Nobody forgets stuff like this on their own. My brain got zapped shortly after our last meeting. That's what happened in those days to kids who didn't think the way they were supposed to."

"You poor—"

"Better than what you had in mind for me."

The waiter brings Logue *huevos rancheros*. He takes a few bites, shoves the eggs around, sips his drink. "You remember that night. Ed Brown, Alan Goodman, and Angie snuck me around to the back door of the Hudson Cafeteria. They were afraid of being spotted by LaRocca."

"You came out to the alley. I was freezing. I'd just been in a New York that was stifling hot. But I managed to tell you what I'd found Upstream. You were angry. And scared. You pulled Ed aside. But I still overheard. You called me a time bomb. Said you wanted me eliminated."

Ignace winces. "You never did anything you deeply regret?" Logue involuntarily rubs the spot on his cheek where Sandra's lips touched him. Then he sits absolutely still and stares until Ignace starts talking.

2

For kids today, mistrusting authority is an attitude. Delicious, bite-size paranoia. When I was young, I had concrete evidence the government was out to get me.

After the army and college, I moved from the Bronx to a walk-up in old Chelsea. Downstairs from a stevedore's family, next door to a brownstone turned into a flophouse. Senator Joe McCarthy still walked the earth. You know about that? Well, my family was leftist. Because of organizations I'd joined as a kid, the House Un-American Activities Committee took an interest in my past. I'd get a job, they'd call my employer, I'd get fired. So I was writing. SF mostly. Working some nights off the books for a printer.

A lot of the time I'd hang out. In the bars, the automat. The Hudson Cafeteria was open twenty-four hours a day. Full of sailors, longshoremen, taxi drivers, housewives, lovers, thieves, old Bolsheviks, cops.

Sometimes, I stayed there all night. And I listened a lot. Heard stories about neighborhood characters. Like old Trollo who ran a candy store and had never left Chelsea in his entire life and was supposed to have a fortune buried there. You'd hear stories about how he could predict the race results, that he knew in April who was going to win the Series.

Then there was Crile, the king of the barge captains. Barge captains were guys, old seamen or rummies, who got paid to live on the barges and take care of them. Crile was this big guy who'd get drunk and tell these stories about visiting the Roman Empire. On his barge.

Like I say, I was writing SF and this kind of stuff fascinated me. Not that I believed the stories. But I began using them in the early Time Ranger pieces. It was the first stuff of mine to catch on. In a small way.

Old Trollo wouldn't talk. But Crile, once or twice when we'd had a few drinks, took me to this place where New York was half ruined. Like London and Vienna looked right after the war. Trouble out of Time was the cause. Whole blocks in ruins. Little bars, kind of cabarets everywhere.

One of them had, outside its door, a smashed-up eagle saved from the ruins of Penn Station. The Busted Eagle it was called. Songs I heard there I never heard again anywhere else. One was:

None but the old are trusted,

None but the young are brave.

So later, when I wrote "Pride of the Rangers," where the city becomes a battleground, I knew a thing or two. The rest was guesswork. Right after that, Crile disappeared. One day, the barge was there but he wasn't. It was said that was because he talked too much. The city cops weren't real interested, asked a few perfunctory questions, never talked to me at all.

Then a stranger appeared in the neighborhood, asking around about Crile. Nikolaus Eszterhaza spoke English with a Hungarian accent. He was most thorough. I knew he was the Law. But not local. Not at all. When he talked to me, I told him everything I knew.

Our conversations were chilling. But fascinating. Crile's disappearance seemed to irk Eszterhaza. He mentioned that Trollo was getting old and that he needed someone reliable in such a busy Port in the Stream. That's how he described the neighborhood. All the movement of ships, trains, and trucks made this a spot with access to Time. My stories, when I showed them, seemed to amuse Eszterhaza. He didn't tell me to stop.

We reached an arrangement. Very informal at first. I'd observe what was going on. Like I had been. And make myself available to assist anyone who showed me the proper ID. Why did I agree? Curiosity. And insurance. Senator Joe was gone. But it could happen again and people who had been blacklisted still couldn't get work. I felt it behooved me to have some kind of law on my side.

Over the next few years, I got a couple of visits from Eszterhaza. He showed me things Downstream and Upstream. Our arrangement got more formalized. Then, in what turned out to be the last time we met, he gave me a sort of warrant, a commission, arranged for me to send and receive information.

About 1960, two new uniformed cops got assigned to the precinct. LaRocca and Burke were not your usual fuzz looking for a little graft and a pension down the line. Not LaRocca anyway.

My guess is he felt trapped in the job. He was too smart. All bright kids did not go to college in those days. LaRocca could sense abilities in others. But he couldn't do things himself. Must have been frustrating. He had a certain charisma, some imagination. And curiosity. An unhealthy amount as it turned out.

LaRocca heard about me. He and Burke came around. LaRocca mentioned that he'd read a couple of my stories that tied into things he'd learned. He wondered what else I knew. I told them what any old-timer in the neighborhood could have about Crile and Trollo. LaRocca stayed friendly. We'd talk, exchange gossip. But I felt like he had me spotted.

About then, LaRocca recruited Old Trollo's granddaughter and a couple of other local talents. Soon, I found out that they were dipping their feet in the Stream.

LaRocca, as a bright young cop, felt invincible. He didn't see himself as a target. But he was. Word came to me that major trouble, called Sally Dere, was heading his way and mine. What I was told was that her meeting with LaRocca could result in something potentially very bad in the Stream.

But I also was told that before that happened a Ranger operative was going to show up and infiltrate LaRocca's group. He would be called Ed Brown. One night I was waiting for a bus. Suddenly, this young drifter in a pea jacket and needing a barber was beside me. He flashed a medallion and said, "Looking for Sally Dere." So he was Ed Brown. And I was his contact.

Alan Goodman appeared a little later. Supposed to be a prep school boy. All I got told about Alan was he was with an organization that was cooperating with the Rangers, but I was supposed to keep an eye on him. You I never got warned about at all.

That fall, Sally Dere arrived and there was no ignoring her. Apart from turning you on, she could read your mind. Once Sally was in place, LaRocca didn't need anyone else. She saw to it he cut everyone but Burke and Teddy Benez out of the operation. Ed, Alan, and Angie found it was them against LaRocca and Dere. It became a question of who'd get who.

Sally knew the Stream, especially that branch up which Crile had taken me. In the chaos after a Time war, local government up there had collapsed. It was wide open to smuggling. Goods for information. Always dangerous. Destructive. Imagine technology smuggled a hundred years into the past.

Old Trollo had kept his operation small enough that the Rangers chose to overlook it in return for his keeping them informed. Angie had her grandfather's old contacts. They didn't like Sally and company. They were willing to lay a trap. But would it work? If not, LaRocca and Dere were going to be alive and in a killing mood. That made me very cautious.

Then came a night as terrible and logical as a dream. It started when Ed Brown called me out back of the Hudson Cafeteria and produced this wild-eyed kid with his nose running. You described the Massacre. Not the press event some hours later at the Switchyard, but the actual one that would take place Upstream, in a ruined New York, outside a smugglers' bar called the Busted Eagle. You were hysterical, crying. It seemed to me dangerous to leave you around. Ed, fortunately, had so much more sense than I.

My job was to bait the trap. At first my guts were jumping. But I told myself all this had been predicted. It was fate. That's how I managed to feed LaRocca the story that would send him and those others to their deaths. It haunts me still.

The discovery of the corpses in the Pennsylvania yards was almost an anti-climax. Cops tore the neighborhood apart. The FBI was in there too. And no doubt the CIA. Fortunately, they weren't as smart as LaRocca. Or as crazy. So they hardly talked to me at all.

Angie stayed on in the neighborhood, of course. Trollo had finally died and she succeeded him. The rest of us left. I moved to Los Angeles. Things had loosened up. No one cared how pink you'd been. I co-wrote some scripts. The Star trek about time travel and Shakespeare and Nimoy going on as Hamlet. The Gate of Ivory, you know, is where the pretty, false dreams come from. LA's the current location of the Gate of Ivory.

Through the Gate of Horn pass the true dreams. The night of February sixth, nineteen sixty-three was my one experience standing at the Gate of Horn. It was more than enough.

Over the years, I've done some minor services for the Rangers. And I've been repaid. I got taken to a time and place where Hitler was hanged at Nuremberg. He squealed like a pig as he died. Then I remembered sending those people to their deaths, telling Ed Brown to get rid of you. How different was I from Hitler?

When I read that those cadets got killed, I wondered who would talk to me. I didn't think of you. But your reappearance has the terrible logic of a dream.

Apologies have no meaning in this situation. All I can do is put you in touch with someone we both know. And give you this. Take it. Isn't the paper exquisite! Like an insect's wings. I've seen nothing like it in this world. I'm handing over the warrant Eszterhaza gave me.

Part Five

A CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT DECODER RING

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

THE BEARER OF THIS LETTER AND THIS SEAL ACTS IN OUR INTERESTS IN THIS TIME AND PLACE.

SIGNED

NIKOLAUS ESZTERHAZA, SECTOR COMMANDER, TIME RANGERS

1

Robert Logue, on a Delta red-eye to LaGuardia, rubs his cheek hard, examines the document Ignace gave him. Though the paper was folded, open it shows no crease marks.

Below the English text is the same message in Spanish, French, and what he guesses are Russian and Chinese. Last is a kind of rebus. Robert studies this with a magnifying glass he bought in an airport gift shop.

The rebus greeting is shown as an open eye radiating beams. The message starts with a stick figure human with a rectangle held in one hand. Close inspection has shown Robert that the rectangle is a tiny duplicate of the page he holds. On that is an even more minute page. Deeper than that the glass will not take him. But it seems to continue to infinity. As the landing lights come on, he studies the concentric spiral seal at the bottom of the page.

Instead of landing amid the shoddy tangle of the main airport, his flight touches down at the graceful Marine Aviation Terminal on the outskirts of LaGuardia. Its art deco flying fish motif evokes sea planes, guys in trench coats, women with their faces half-hidden by veils.

Debarking amidst a sleepy throng, he crosses the silent, circular rotunda. Out of the night, two figures with painted faces, students or maybe musicians, walk through the front door moving against the tide of passengers.

They split as they approach Robert. Each grabs him by an arm. "I'm Justina," the one on his left says and flashes a spiral medallion. Justina is dark and in her twenties. Her English is Islands-tinged. The other face is younger and suddenly familiar. "This is Oman." Robert nods. He last saw him on a skateboard at the Minute Market.

They let Robert turn around and walk between them. The three pass through an "Employees Only" door and out a fire exit that's been wedged open. On the tarmac, a plane with all its lights on taxis toward a hangar. An Air Express two-engine freight flies low over Flushing Bay.

Without breaking stride, Justina says, "You'll relax." Robert nods and before he can exhale, her medallion pulses and the three of them are sliding not walking. Then he's stumbling, catching his footing on rough sea grass.

His escort neatly disengage themselves and him from the slipstream of a prop-driven sea plane rising from the water. Robert gasps and tries to catch his breath. Marsh lies where he just saw runways. Barrage balloons hang in the noon sky. His legs buckle under him.

2

Evening sun shines on the water as Robert Logue, wearing white robes over his clothes, looking rested, approaches a Quonset hut. Justina, his escort, knocks, opens the door, gestures him in. As he steps inside, she stops and says, "I will go and set up the meeting. We have left the briefing to you."

A teletype rattles in a corner, the windows are open to the sunset. On the wall, A calendar identifies this as April 1942. A man sitting with his feet up on a desk opposite the door says, "Thanks." He's burly, getting fat, in shirtsleeves, wearing a holstered revolver and suspenders. His suitcoat is draped on another chair. A wide-brim hat is pushed back on his head. A Lucky hangs out of his mouth. He's as old as Robert, but he asks, "Feeling better after your nap, Gramps?"

"Thanks. It's been a long time, Ed."

Ed Brown rises. "Smoke? Have a seat. Things been going okay for the last generation or two?"

"Not bad," says Robert shaking hands. "Until recently." Above Brown is an oil painting. It takes Robert a second glance to recognize the idealized image of J. Edgar Hoover. He indicates the picture: "FBI?"

"In Peace and War. They lend us this office. But just about everything around here is FBI." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "President Hoover the Second."

"I'm wondering how he feels about those guys in feathers and beads I passed outside."

"You looked closer, you maybe'd see they had fins and gills. Uncle Sam's glorious allies in this particular go-round."

"Nice costume you're wearing."

"We follow local custom. The good citizens here want G-Men right out of the movies." He holds up Ignace's warrant. "Little Danny, on the other hand, wanted a Captain Midnight decoder ring. My predecessor was happy to oblige."

"Must have set the Rangers back a fortune in Ovaltine box tops," says Robert. "Nice of you to sort my papers." He rises with his hand out.

"Saves comparing notes." Ed Brown gives them back. "Seems you've been looking up old acquaintances." He watches Robert rub his face. Looks inquiringly.

"A little reminder from Sandra. There's a dream that goes with it. I see myself from above, lying on sun-scorched ground. There's a hole in my cheek right where she kissed me. Through the hole I can see bones and dry tendons."

Ed grimaces. "A Witch's Kiss. Made you promise to stay clear of the Sisterhood, did she? I have lots more faith in your discretion than she does. The way you turn the spotlight on old, buried crimes and never drop a clue as to how you really solve them proves that."

His lighter has a spiral emblem. He uses it, inhales deeply on a Lucky. "All of a sudden everyone's interested in a certain old crime. But this time you're not operating the spotlight. You're in it. You need a favor. You remember old friends."

Outside the window a fiery grid crosses the darkening sky. Ed jerks his thumb at it and says, "Another glorious ally. This particular USA is happy to have friends, especially ones with Upstream technology."

He reaches into a drawer and pulls out a bottle of Jim Beam. "Don't be shocked. This doesn't belong to the G-men." He locates a couple of glasses. "We have a little while. Let me try to explain our plans for you. Jeez, we were kids when we met."

3

My growing-up was in a South Chicago in a Great Depression. I was lousy in school. Never able to concentrate. Daydreaming they called it. Out the window, instead of bread lines and slums, I'd see bright cars and silver buildings. My family had nothing. I left school at sixteen. The police didn't need me. Likewise the Army and Navy and Marines.

So I rode the rails out of the city with a buck and change on me. I still saw bright colors just out of reach. Somewhere in the Dakotas, a Central Pacific boxcar load of hobos made an attempt on my dough, my shoes, my sacred honor.

My only chance was to swim towards a patch of silver light no one else could see. Wham! I was staggering and babbling on the median strip between a monorail and an industrial park. On that world, certain authorities knew about the Stream. Before long, this foreign guy showed up and old Nicky Eszterhaza described to me dreams he knew I had. I grabbed his offer to become a cop.

Cop is shorthand, a thing everyone can grasp. Maybe we're closer to a secret order. People call us by different names in different places. Time Rangers is as good as any. Let's say the Rangers try to make sure unauthorized parties don't mess too much with the Stream. And that we try not to attract too much attention doing it.

They put me through something between basic training and a brain rewiring. There were a couple dozen of us. All from the mid-twentieth century. Young. Teens, mostly. "None but the young are brave," a certain song says. It was everything from history and algebra to weapons systems and swimming the Stream by land, sea, and air.

After a year and a half of that, they needed a volunteer. Immediately. And young. We all knew this had to be in response to a Primary Event, an unscheduled ripple in the Stream. And we all wanted the assignment because it meant becoming a Ranger faster. Olney and Gonzalez? I sympathize with them. Being a cadet is purgatory. You're any good, you want that badge.

Others were smarter or more adept. But I was the best fit. The Site was almost thirty years Upstream from where I'd come from. But it was the same world and country or close enough not to make a difference. With all of Time to play with, they had only a few days to show me my Target Results and me give me a little background.

Then they revealed my contact and dumped me on Site with nothing but a change of clothes and five bucks in my boot. About all I had when I first leaped into the Stream. Except now I could speak French and kill someone with a tin spoon if I remembered to bring one.

Ignace was real jumpy when we met. And it bothered him a lot that I was so young. But mostly he was fine. Devised a cover story I could live with. Filled me in on LaRocca and Burke. Arranged safe spots for meeting him.

So, I let the cops find me. Then I let my tale dribble out. I was seventeen with weird dreams, on the run from trouble and not altogether swift mentally. Ignace insisted on that last because I couldn't always remember stuff like which was Elvis and which was JFK.

All I needed was to tell LaRocca about the other worlds I saw in dreams and he was hooked. They had me stay with Burke and his wife. She was okay-looking. But if she had two heads and both ugly, it wouldn't have mattered. As it was, I figured either she was as good as a widow or I was going to die trying to make her one.

Burke I felt sorry for. All he was looking for was a little graft. What happened? First the boarder screwed his wife. Then he got killed. Just an average, dishonest cop sucked into something by a partner he saw as being smart. My Target Results, however, were very clear on one thing. Both of these guys and Sally Dere, when she showed up, had to go.

Toward the end, there was money in the Stream for them. But for LaRocca it was mostly adventure. The weird thing was that he never learned to move in Time. Burke eventually caught on, some. But LaRocca always had to be led. Even to his own slaughter.

People think policing Time is easy. You know a bank will get robbed on Thursday morning, so you go back to Wednesday afternoon to arrest the perpetrators. But unless it's a bank robbery that's going to seriously alter the Stream, it's not your worry. If it is, you need to find a way of stopping it that doesn't itself alter the Stream. Which means operating so no one on Site notices. Places, like your world, where almost nobody knows about the Stream are naïve, happy places. This one where we are, for instance, they know all too much.

Too bad about LaRocca. He was naïve. It got him killed. Still, He had a real talent for spotting special abilities in others. Alan was a plant, same as I was. But LaRocca found Angie by himself. And you. He didn't know what to make of you. Hell, I didn't either. You were this twitchy kid who just wanted to run home and hide under his bed or something.

It turned out, Alan understood how you could be used. Ignace had passed the word that Alan was supposed to be cooperating with us. Alan wasn't real warm. Not much to say. He was waiting, the same as me, for Miss Dere to show up.

First glance at Sally, you wouldn't think this little chippie could cause a major Branch in the Stream. Second look, it wasn't so hard to imagine.

LaRocca, like I say, was trusting. Sally Dere put a stop to that. Along with being able to navigate the Stream, she could pick up your thoughts if you weren't careful. A trick of the Sisterhood. I had to watch myself around her. Alan did too, I'd guess. Ignace avoided her.

Once LaRocca had Sally, she made sure he didn't need the rest of us. Angie was in a bad way. First she lost LaRocca, on whom she had this huge crush. Then Sally appropriated Ted because she couldn't be seen going around all the time with LaRocca.

The three of us formed an alliance. I didn't care about Teddy but I had orders to nail all the others. Alan's only interest was Sally. The others could walk. Angie didn't care about Burke. But vengeance was going to be hers. Sally was going to get it, of course. And Teddy. And she wanted LaRocca real bad.

Angie wasn't in Sally's league in looks. But she was okay when she was a kid. And you may have gathered that the Rangers aren't a monastic organization. So I was in there as soon as she became available. Finding out what Angie was like when she got crossed took a lot of the zest out of that.

By the new year, my bosses were pressing me for results. My guess is that Alan's were too. But it got harder to track Sally and LaRocca once they started getting suspicious.

And the Stream can be a nasty place. You go looking for a spot where, maybe, they already have next week's Derby results and discover yourself in the hold of a slave ship. Or still in your hometown but now the big betting sport is football with human heads.

I was sent to stop something very wrong. Only instead of Roger Deveraux and a battalion of marines, I had Daniel Ignace and a handful of screwed-up kids. One of whom was me. The cops could eliminate us in a dozen different ways. We were in more danger than they were. The question was who was going to get the jump on the other one. I moved out of Burke's and didn't stay any one place for very long. Ignace was terrified.

Angie was the key. Old Trollo's connections Upstream kept her informed. Sally and LaRocca were seen in a New York about twenty years up a real bad branch of the Stream. The partly-wrecked New York that scared you was nothing. Further up, things were a lot worse and civil government was nil.

Because Sally and LaRocca were muscling in on their turf, Trollo's friends were willing to spring a trap. It was the best I could do. I let Ignace know. Word came back fast from HQ that it was okay. And my Target Results got changed.

Original Target Results are always optimum solutions. Neat and seamless. Something like, "The two police officers and Miss Dere die in a car accident that harms no one else."

As a sign of how desperate things were, all they wanted now was that the Rangers not be connected with the deed. Which seemed possible. And that I give Ignace evidence beforehand that it would work.

That was hard. Since this would be a Primary Event it hadn't happened yet in the Stream. Only further up that branch would we be able to tell if we had succeeded. And I didn't know how to be sure. Then Alan said, "We use the bloodhound." He had kept track of you. For just that reason.

My other problem was with the worlds on that particular branch. It's not like in Ignace's stories where everybody goes rollicking around the centuries. As you will discover, Rangers have definite beats. Up that branch things were wild and woolly, Rangers were few and unpopular, and the Sisterhood was openly hunted.

Headquarters had a contact about twenty years Upstream from the Site where we had decided to ambush Sally and LaRocca. They told me how to get in touch with him.

We acted fast. Angie went to see her friends. Alan got you out of the hospital where you'd been stashed. You were shaky, haunted. Just seeing death all around had pushed you over the edge. I was afraid of what this was going to do to you. But we had no choice. Alan and I brought you up the branch.

It was hot the way it gets Upstream even in winter. My contact was a kind of cop. He was not happy to see us. Order of a sort had been restored to that New York. Nothing and nobody from Upstream or Down was supposed to come there. As soon as we arrived we got stripped of everything off-world.

Partly too it was intimidation. And a way of showing contempt for Rangers in general and me in particular. I was afraid you were going to flip out.

We got questioned. They wanted to know if we were from the Sisters. Alan bluffed his way through that. Maybe they figured anyone hung like him couldn't be a witch. Kind of a waste considering what happened. If they'd found out who he was, we would all have ended up like LaRocca and company.

Finally, they made us dress as locals and let us lead you around. Most of midtown Manhattan was bombed out. And that seems to be how they wanted it. Shells of buildings. Piles of rubble. A kind of memorial. They had an amusement park on the river.

It was hard locating the spot we were looking for. Lots of dying had gone on around there. You were sobbing and puking. Then I noticed a sculpture sticking out of the ground, a chunk of a wing. The Busted Eagle. I led you toward it. All of a sudden, you halted and screamed. "They put LaRocca's eyes out!" That was what I needed. It took a while to quiet you down.

Back home, Angie met us. Everything was set. Out in back of the cafeteria, Ignace was in a major lather. LaRocca and Burke had just been around looking for Alan and Angie and me. Talking about arrest. They'd be back shortly.

When he heard your story, Ignace was scared. Said you knew too much and were a security risk. "Like a time bomb," he said. And I should get rid of you. That I didn't like. Besides, where you were going, nobody was going to pay attention to anything you said.

I got Ignace's mind off that by making him work out a cover story about having just seen Angie and Alan and me. He'd say we were high and babbling about something called the Broken Eagle and the fortune we were about to make there. It must have been quite a performance because the four of them came after us.

Meanwhile, we took you back to Penn Station, the first place I'd ever seen you. Angie kissed you good-bye and Alan took you back to the hospital before we headed back Upstream.

With what you'd told us, springing the trap was just a nasty detail. Justice up that branch was mighty rough. Blinding is what they do to time travelers before they do anything else. So they can't see the future or something.

One thing Angie had agreed to was that the bodies would be dumped back on the world they came from. A public display and a warning to others. She was enthusiastic. Alan didn't object. And that fell within my Target Results. What got called the Switchyard Massacre was the consequence.

In the aftermath, Alan disappeared. I guess what happened to him was his reward. Headquarters encouraged Ignace to stop writing Time Ranger stories and go West. We had connections in Hollywood. He did fine. Served us well until recently.

My commission came through fast. Your world was part of my beat. Angie stayed where she was, of course. We used her as a contact over the years. And I overlooked a lot because of what she'd done for me. What she can't understand is that time has passed and she's in someone else's jurisdiction.

A couple of months after the Massacre, I checked you out. You'd been given more shock treatments. An orderly told me you wouldn't remember your own mother unless she dropped a few clues. I figured that was good enough.

With luck that would have been the end of it. But forty-plus years later, one Brian Olney gets interested in the Switchyard Event. What we've pieced together is that he hears old rumors. Other kids, including his new girlfriend, Mirabel Gonzalez, are talking about Time. Ms. Gonzalez had some prior contact with the Sisters. And the Sisters feel they have reason to meddle with things up that branch of the Stream.

Brian and Mirabel think how hot it would be to solve this case. They start asking around. Olney meets you. We think it's Gonzalez who comes up with Angie's name.

But it's Olney who approaches her. Angie is scared. By now, she regards the Stream as a kind of dumping ground. Brian is young. As we see it, she throws him off balance, tosses him into Time immediately. Before he can tell anyone. Leaves him in a place where the civil authorities deal out summary justice and dump him back where he came from.

Cadet Gonzalez goes through shock, recrimination, anger, guilt. All the usual. She arms herself. Finds Angie. Maybe sticks a gun in her face and says show me where you took him. Angie does. Mirabel Gonzalez dies in a shoot-out. After which they treat her the same as her boyfriend. As a warning.

And here we are, you needing answers and me feeling I owe you a favor. With Ignace out of the picture and Angie clearly a liability, I'd want to be able to count on someone like you on that Site. But that's not up to me. Like Angie, you're on somebody else's beat.

Justina's the one who gets to decide if she wants you. For old times' sake, I put in as good a word as I could. It's late in your career, I know. But this is the best deal I can see for you. Oman's still in training. He's real bright. But he's a kid. There's a lot you can teach him.

Me, I've had long service. Lots of interesting stuff. But right now anyone who stands between me and my pension is on the most dangerous spot in the Stream.

You know, I think Ignace used me in one of the Time Ranger stories too. The very last one. Good luck Bobby.

Part Six

FROM THE FILES OF THE TIME RANGERS

"Reporting to relieve you," said the Ranger officer.

Colonel Roger Deveraux looked up from the reports he was reading. He saw the crisp uniform, rigid posture, eyes fixed on a spot above his head. The colonel couldn't get over how newly promoted captains looked like wise-ass kids. One more sign he was too old for active service. "At ease," he said. "I guess I could run on with all kinds of advice about what to do and how. But I'm heading upstairs and you're going to make your own mistakes. All I can tell you is there's a bottle of bourbon in the file cabinet under W for whiskey. And cigars under C for celebration. That's all, son." Roger Deveraux stood and handed his successor the spiral stamp of office. The captain almost smirked as he scoffed it. "Thanks, sir."

THE END

From "From the Files of the Time Rangers" by Daniel Ignace, *Astounding Science Fiction*, January 1964.

Justina and Robert stand beneath a monorail in a misty dawn. Their white robes are what is expected in that place.

Oman, eyes properly lowered, wears a knee-length tunic and holds a leather suitcase. A closed truck and an official car are parked on a paved access road. Several figures in helmets with opaque visors stand nearby.

All around are blocks of rubble with a few skeletal buildings here and there. A war memorial. Robert notices on one wall, a spiral graffiti with a red line drawn through it. A half mile to the north, thick gray towers fill the horizon. A few lights glow in windows. Over by the river, the amusement rides are dark and silent.

Two people are stretched out on the busted sidewalk before them. Both are still except for an occasional twitch that seems to start at the head and ripple down the body. One of them is an Asian woman Robert hasn't encountered before. The other is Geo, whom he last saw driving Angie's jeep.

"Not your worry," Justina says as if she knows what Robert is thinking. "Locals. These don't get dumped back in your New York."

"What does happen?"

Justina shrugs and says, "Smuggling Downstream? Caught in the act? They dance. The authorities," she nods toward the helmeted figures, "hate Time Jumpers. They blame them for all this destruction. Only recently have they trusted us enough to cooperate. Olney and Gonzalez intruding almost put a stop to that. But they are willing to try one last time."

She gestures. Oman steps forward and opens the suitcase. Inside are pieces of police uniforms, a cadet cap, items of old civilian clothes, a service revolver, a badge.

"From their property office," says Justina. "Personal items from LaRocca and Burke, from Olney and Gonzalez. They turned this over to us. My young colleague will bring it back to your New York and make sure Angie receives it. You understand what is to be done after that?"

Robert grimaces. "I hang the murders on her and never mention the Rangers or the Stream."

Justina steps forward and grabs him by the front of the robe. "Olney and Gonzalez came to you. You were amused? You never asked who might have sent them? Or wondered if they'd go to Angie and what she'd do?"

"Why would I think of those things?"

"Mister, if you work for me that is what you will think about. You will not stand about anymore and watch people. You will make sure it doesn't happen. The cadets were pawns in a game of blackmail. The Sisters are not bothered that they got killed. It was their way of showing that they can destroy the cooperation that I worked for here. They burn witches here and the witches want to burn this place. Mr. Brown from Downstream says you can be trusted. My young colleague will be watching you to make sure."

Justina has her back to the helmeted, impassive figures and she winks as she speaks to him, like this is a performance for them. But she shakes Robert so hard that his teeth rattle. Justina gestures and Oman hefts the suitcase and guides Robert into the truck.

Robert removes his robes. "This will be okay," Oman tells the older man. It's the first time Robert has heard him speak. His voice, at odds with his face, is deep, almost harsh. His accent is unplaceable. "I want to work with you. I like the people in your world. Where I come from is worse even than this."

He strips and puts on the black and maroon school uniform. "I will sell Angie the suitcase. You will have time to prepare. She will buy. I've sold to her before. She doesn't know what happened to Geo. Don't worry. The evidence will be in her possession. She will not survive." He sees Robert's expression and says, not unkindly, "Do not regret this. She would not hesitate to destroy you."

2

Friday morning just before nine o'clock, Louis Jackson, with his ID displayed on the front of his gray suitcoat, steers a beige Saturn through the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Thirty-First Street. It's sunny and warm. He's still grainy-eyed from being awakened after three hours sleep. Beside him, looking grim, Robert Logue is dressed for the camera in brown loafers, a blue Ralph Lauren jacket, fawn slacks, a light gray shirt and rep tie. He notices a slightly raw spot on Logue's cheek.

Jax says, "This weekend, as the media frenzy builds up around the old and new Switchyard Murders, you drop off the map. Then, early this morning, you reappear insisting you have a case-breaking lead and demanding immediate action."

"You're a lawman, I'm not, is what you're thinking," Logue says. He sounds distant. "And that, more than race, more than sex, is the ultimate distinction in your world."

"Actually," says Jax, "I was wondering how it would be to deal in a court with a hostile witness or a criminal defendant with your sincere blue eyes and nice white hair."

On that block, a grandstand is being erected for the dedication of the chunk of the Post Office as Penn Station Three. Tours are being given. Down the sidewalk comes a loose formation of about a hundred high school students, boys and girls, their hair military standard. They wear maroon jerseys with a school crest, creased black shorts, maroon socks, and shined shoes. They move surely, needing no guidance from the teachers with them. Kids out of uniform look uneasy and a little envious. Logue searches their ranks but doesn't see Oman. He thinks of Angie and Ed and Alan. He thinks of Brian and Mirabel.

Jax follows Logue's gaze. "It's scary," he remarks, "Twenty-five years ago, we'd have burned the school down if they made us do that. Kids now have no trouble with it. For the first time, the future feels alien."

Logue looks at his watch as they drive across Ninth. At one minute after nine, sirens are heard south and west of them, the phone on the dashboard buzzes. "Going in," says a voice on the speaker. Jax activates the flashing roof light

and they tailgate a delivery truck that thought it was going to double park, chase it all the way over to Tenth.

On that uptown avenue, a dozen uniformed police have stopped traffic. Jax turns downtown and parks where they can watch the action on Thirtieth Street.

Halfway down the block, cops in flak jackets have broken open a garage door. Voices crackle on radios.

"...inside the building."

"...someone moving! Halt!"

"...weapon!"

Robert and Jax hear the gunshot from down the street and over the radio.

"Jesus... occupant down. Head wound... self-inflicted." Paramedics in flak jackets hurry forward. Robert sits blank-faced. Jax says, "Saw an interesting photo. Officers LaRocca and Burke and a very familiar kid."

Robert touches the Witch's Kiss lightly and says, "The woman inside took that picture. She's Angelica Podesta, aka Angie the Troll. She lived around here her whole life. I think we'll be surprised by some of her souvenirs.

"Olney and Gonzalez were a pair of bright kids who got fascinated by the Massacre. They discovered her connection with it, went around to see her. Angie got frightened. Killed them one at a time. I think she wanted to get caught. Probably can't understand why it's taken the police so long."

"Why now?" Jax asks.

"She was old and crazy. For years she sat like a troll under a bridge. Her world was disappearing. I talked to her recently. About old times and people. She let some things slip. Once I confirmed a few of them, I called you guys."

"That story doesn't sound at all complete," Jax remarks.

"It will get filled in," Robert says. Outside, TV trucks pull up. From across the street a reporter notices him. Robert puts his hand on the door. "Right now, I need to say a few words to my public."

Robert Reed
BIRDY GIRL

UPS is at the door. A package for my wife, as usual. The woman's one helluva shopper. I sign on the slot. It's a box, maybe twenty inches at the longest. Not heavy, either. I bring it inside, and the box says, "Let me out, why don't you?" So I look at the return address. Oh, Christ. But the UPS drone has already rolled away, no time to waste. What can I do? Put the thing in the closet, I decide. Go back to my life, what there is of it. And pretend that I'm not hearing a voice calling to me from under the winter coats.

My wife gets home from work, and I tell her, "Look in the closet." She gives this little hoot and says, "Where's your knife?" I've got this old hunting knife that we use for packages. Like she's dressing a deer, she cuts the tape and opens the flaps and unwraps the aerogel, and she pulls out her doll and says, "Genevieve," with an instant fondness. "That's my name," the doll replies, looking at both of us. It's got big, big eyes. Green eyes, I notice. And I'm not someone who usually notices the colors of things. Those eyes are stuck in an oversized head riding on top of an immature body, reminding me of a child. But the hair is huge. It's the hair that every woman wants, rich and flowing with just enough curls. Brown hair, I notice. And the plastic skin looks heavily tanned. And there's something adult about the voice, even if it comes rumbling from a body that isn't quite eighteen inches tall.

"I have clothes," the dolls says. "Wonderful little clothes!" So of course my wife spends the next hour playing with her new toy and its fancy wardrobe. She calls her friends in the craft club. Everyone drops over, holo-style. Our living room is jammed with grown women and their Birdy Girls. I'll pass through, just to watch. Just to spy. "What happened to the quilting?" I ask. Last week, the group was making quilts with old-fashioned fabrics. Quasicrystal patterns. Kind of neat. But one of the projected women snorts and looks up from her half-dressed doll, telling me, "We still quilt. We do all of our heirloom crafts." Then another woman laughs and says, "We just do them slower now." And my wife gives me a certain look, asking, "What do you think?"

Her doll's dressed in a short skirt and a silky shirt, and its shoes have spiked heels, and the way it wears its hair is something. Frightening, really. I have to say, "God, she's got a big ass." Which causes the doll to smile and wink, telling me, "Thank you very much, good sir." Then after the laughter dies back, I ask, "So what's it dressed for?" And my wife laughs and says, "She's going out. Out to the clubs." Which I take for a joke. I don't know much about this new hobby. This fad. But later, I hear the front open and close, and I come in to find just my wife. The projected women are gone. And every doll. "Where's your new toy?" I ask. My wife is shoving trash into the empty box. "Oh, she's gone clubbing. Like I said." "What kind of club is that?" I ask. And she says, "This box needs to be thrown out." So I trudge out to the recycle tub and, standing under the street light, I skim through the Birdy Girl literature. Just to know a little something.

I have my own friends, and I've got my little hobbies, too. So it bugs me when my wife says, "You should do things with your time. Constructive things." She says that a lot. She doesn't think much of my softball games or the vegetable/weed garden or how I can watch sports for hours at a stretch. She forgets there isn't much to do these days that's flat-out constructive. I'm not lazy. I had a job and a paycheck. But then the AI technologies made their Big Leap, and all that noise about the machines freeing people for better jobs came to a smashing end. I mean, why lay down for a human surgeon when the robotic ones are so much more skilled? Why do anything that matters when you'd have to compete with artificial critters who learn faster than you, and better than you, and who themselves are just prototypes for the next wonders to come off the assembly line? My wife forgets how it is. She's got a government job, because nobody's given the government to the machines yet. Besides, between her salary and my severance cake, we do fine. So what's the problem?

It's practically one in the morning when her doll gets home. It comes crawling through the cat door, and my wife jumps out of bed and goes into the kitchen, asking, "How was it?" She carries her new friend into our bedroom. The doll stinks of cigarettes, and I think beer got dumped on it. "Go back to sleep," my wife tells me. Then she makes a bed for her doll, spreading out her tiniest quasicrystal quilt inside an open drawer. Like people, Birdy Girls need to sleep. To dream. I read that in the brochure. Pretending to sleep, I listen to the whispers, hearing about its adventures at what sounds like The Hothouse. That was a college bar back when I noticed such things. Maybe it still is, sort of. Whatever the place was, it sounds like real people and machines are getting together. My wife's doll met the other women's dolls there, and they had a good time, and her doll wants to go again tomorrow night. "Can I, please?" it asks. And my wife says, "That or something better. Whatever you want, Genevieve."

having kids, and all things considered, it doesn't appeal to me. A kid takes a certain something that I just don't have anyway. But even when my wife agrees with me, I can see doubt in her eyes. And that's coming from a guy who isn't all that tuned to anyone's emotions. Not even his own.

The dolls sleeps till noon, nearly. I walk into the bedroom a couple times, watching its eyes moving as it dreams. When it gets up, it dresses itself in new jeans and a T-shirt with KISS ME, I'M INSATIABLE written across the front. "I'm going out," it warns me. I don't say a word. Which takes an effort, frankly. The machine has its ways of teasing reactions from people; there's sociable software behind those dreaming eyes. But I manage to say nothing, and it leaves me, and I watch half of the Cardinals game, losing interest after I'm done with lunch and I'm done watching when one team's whipped. One-sided games are never fun. Instead, I go out back to do a little work. Watering and weeding. I do everything by hand. No gardening drones for me, thank you. I work until the heat gets old, then I sit in one of the adirondacks that I built last year. Woodworking; it sounds like a fine, noble hobby until you make your first wobbly chair. I'm sitting in the shade, wobbling, and some little motion catches my eye. Above the grapevine on the back fence is a face. The face is watching me. For an instant, I'm guessing that it's another Birdy Girl. But then she waves at me, and I realize that it isn't like that. She waves, and I wave back, and then I find some reason to stand and stretch and head back inside again.

Our cat is sprawled out on the living room floor. The doll is beside him, scratching his eyes and telling him that he's a pretty kitty. A beautiful kitty. Then it looks up at me, remarking, "You've got to be curious. So ask me questions." And I say, "I don't want to." Then it tells me, "Genevieves are curious and adventurous. We watch and we remember. And we have a distinct, rather quirky sense of humor." So I say, "Prove it." And just like that, the doll reaches under the sofa, pulling out the hunting knife that I use on boxes. The tanned face smiles, big white teeth showing. And with both hands, it lifts the weapon, saying, "How about it? A little knife fight before dinner?"

What can I do? I laugh. I can't help myself. And the doll laughs with me, neatly flipping the knife and catching it by the back of the blade, and walking forwards, she hands the hilt up to me. She gives it up. And that's when I start thinking of her as being "her," and that's how our first conversation gets rolling.

j

After Genevieve goes clubbing again, I mention to my wife, "Someone's living in the Coldsmith house." She asks, "Who?" while looking down at her embroidery: a picture of a farmhouse and horse-drawn wagons. I tell her, "There was a kid in the backyard. A girl. Maybe five, maybe less." Which makes her look at me. "Just one child?" she asks. "That's all I saw," I report. She wants details, but she doesn't ask. All the obvious questions have obvious answers, and what's the point in hearing what you know already? So down goes her head, hands working the needle again.

It's past two when Genevieve finally gets home. I'm the one who hears the cat door, my wife sleeping as if dead. I slip out of bed and into shorts and I meet the girl midway. She's carrying her spiked shoes, trying to be quiet. Her short skirt looks jacked up too high, and her hair could stand a good combing. And that's not all I'm thinking now. She just stands there, smiling, swinging her little shoes with her arms out straight. It's as if she know what's going on inside my idiot head.

Finally, in a whisper, I ask, "So was it fun?"

"Everything's fun," she tells me.

And I warn her, flat out, "Don't ever tell me anything about it. Ever. Please?"

j

The girl doesn't eat, but she can taste. Her little pink tongue leaves marks on my lunch. I don't know why, but I like that. I find it charming, somehow. She says, "It's all good," and I admit, "That's the one place that I like AIs. When they're cooks." My wife and I bought a top-of-the-line chef last winter. "Can you smell, too?" I ask, and she makes a show of sniffing, then breaks into a soft barking cough, one tiny hand over her mouth in a ladylike fashion.

Like yesterday, she leaves through the cat door. I don't know where she's going. But when I'm outside, weeding the front lawn, she's suddenly standing next to me. I'm not sure when she showed up. Smiling as I work, I tell her, "This has to be boring for you." She watches my hands tugging at the weeds, and she nods, and says, "But it's fun, too. If I let it be." Then an idea hits me. "There's a job that needs doing," I explain, "and it might be exciting." She wants to know what it is. "I bet you could climb that tree, if I started you with a boost." I point at the big locust in the middle of the yard. "Squirrels stripped the bark off that high branch, killing it—"

"You want me to kill your squirrels?" she says. Jokes.

"Maybe later," I tell her. "Today, let's just trim that dead limb off. Okay?"

She weighs nothing, nearly. I could practically throw her to where she needs to be. And she's stronger than seems right, moving up from the low branches, carrying my diamond-edged saw by the strap, holding the strap between her big white teeth.

The cutting part is easy. She uses both hands and works the blade through the soft dead wood, the pink of her tongue showing as she concentrates. Then comes the splitting crack when there's not enough wood holding up the rest, and that's when she loses her balance. The jerk of the saw takes her by surprise, pitching her forwards, and I'm watching her let go of the saw, both of them tumbling now, and before I can think, I'm jumping. I'm reaching out. I guess my plan is to catch her and save her. But she weighs so little that the air slows her down, and while she's squealing with pleasure, I'm slamming my hands into the tree trunk, then landing too hard on my shoulder. I'm lying there, moaning, when the saw hits next to me and she plops down on my back. With concern, she asks, "Are you all

right?" I grunt something about being tough. And with amusement, she reminds me, "Plastic is pretty tough. For future reference."

My wife never hears the whole story. She just sees my scraped hands and the medicated sling, and she walks around the dead limb laid out in the yard. Without prompting, she fills in the blanks. I'm an idiot; that's the easy story. And that's the story I let stand.

j

UPS comes again. And the brown-suited drone escapes before I notice that it's our address but not my wife's name. Or mine. It's the same last name, but who's Kahren? The city register answers that. My first thought is to call UPS and ream them out for their mistake. And that's my second thought, too. But somehow it doesn't get done. Morning turns to afternoon, and part of me grows curious. Takes charge. Before leaving the house, I look in at the doll. Genevieve was out until four in the morning, nearly. She looks peaceful, still deep in her dreams, and I can't help but feel a little curious about what she's seeing right now.

Our street curls into the next street, and the house numbers repeat. That's why this looks like a harmless mistake. And maybe it is. My plan, near as I can tell, is to leave the package beside the front door, and, at the most, ring the bell before making my escape. But there's a kid already sitting on the front porch. He's four years old, if I'm judging things right. He's sitting on an old sofa, legs sticking straight out, staring at the reader in his lap. Then he looks up, something like a smile breaking across the face. "The item came to you by mistake," he remarks with a too-quick voice. With his words running together, he says, "Thank you for bringing us the item."

I don't like this. But I can't just throw the box at him and run. So I set it down on the porch while standing on the steps, and with my voice coming out slow and stupid, I remark, "We've got the same last name."

"It's a common name," is his only response. And I say, "Whatever you have in this box, I hope it isn't too illegal." Which is a joke. Nothing but. But he isn't smiling anymore. He waits a half second, which is a long time for him. Then he tells me, "UPS has excellent security AIs, and the best sensors, and I am not a criminal, sir." The creature is probably only three years old, I realize. They're even smarter than the four- and five-year-old wonders, which makes it worse. They're smarter and less willing to pretend that they're not. Again, he says, "Sir," and stares hard at me. He has huge black eyes set inside a tiny round face, and he keeps staring, telling me, "If you please, I'd like to focus all of my attentions on my work now."

I don't know why. But I've got to ask the creature, "What do you do for work?"

If my new neighbor thinks about my question, he does it in a microsecond. Then with a smug little grin, he admits, "I don't think there's any conceivable way that I could explain what I do to you."

j

The craft women come over again, only this time for real. They're quilting and dressing their dolls and having a wonderful time, talking up a storm until I walk in on them. Then everyone gets quiet. Even the dolls. Even Genevieve. It was her voice that was loudest, and it's her that I look at now, asking everyone, "What's all the laughing about?"

My wife says, "Honey. Do you have to lurk?"

I don't want to be a total prick. But I've got to ask, "What were you ladies talking about?" Genevieve says, "Last night." Then the other dolls shush her. She's wearing a new outfit; I've never seen this one. The skirt reaches to her ankles, with flowers on it, and the shirt and jacket are a light purple—lavender, I guess you'd call it—and she's got fat green emeralds stuck in her thick hair and plastered across her flat little chest.

"I'm going out," I tell my wife. In front of everyone, she asks, "Out where?" So I say, "Remember? The guys are playing in that tournament tonight." I mean the gang from my old job; nothing's left of our company but its softball team. "What about your arm?" she asks, and I say, "It's mostly better."

"I didn't think you were going to play," she says, definitely not happy now.

"I guess you thought wrong," I tell her, keeping things nice and stirred up. Making sure she won't want me coming home anytime soon.

j

Human beings have never played better softball. That's what we tell ourselves when we're out on bright warm nights like this. This is exactly the kind of thing that the AIs have freed us to do, we boast. Laughing loudly. Sneaking beers out of the coolers. Everyone taking their hard cuts at the slow fat balls, then running the bases as fast as they can.

The best softball in human history is being played tonight, but not on this field. Not by us. We're just a pack of middle-aged men with too much time to eat and nothing important at stake. Not even halfway important. Two minutes after we're done playing, I can't remember who won. Half an hour after we're done, it's just me and couple buddies sitting on the bleachers, finishing the last of the beers, talking about nothing and everything at the same time.

The lights over the field have turned themselves off. This is a clear night, and looking up, we can see the cities sparkling on the moon, the cities flying along in their orbits. Up there, it's AIs and it's our own little kids, plus older kids with enough genius to hang on, and every last one of them is looking down at the three of us.

"They're building starships now," says one guy. Which makes the other guy say, "No, I read they're building something else. They aren't ships like we know ships." And being the deciding vote, I warn them, "There's no knowing what they're doing up there." Then I tell my story about the package and my new neighbors. "What?" says the first guy. "You've got two of them living behind you?" I don't like his tone. I don't know why, but it makes me squirm. Then

that guy says, "They're too strange. Too scary. Maybe you're different, but I couldn't stand them being that close to me."

The guy has a couple kids. They'd have to be twelve and fourteen, or something like that. They had to be born normal, but that doesn't mean they've stayed that way. If you're young enough, and willing, you can marry your brain to all sorts of AI machinery. When was the last time he mentioned his kids? I can't remember. And that's when I realize what must have happened and what's got him all pissy now.

I finish my beer and heave the empty over the backside of the bleacher. Neat-freak robots will be scurrying around the park tonight, and tomorrow night, and forever. Why not give them a little something to pick up?

After a good minute of silence, I tell the guys, "We're talking about having a kid." Which isn't true. I'm just thinking about it for myself. "I know it's not like it used to be," I admit. "I know ours would probably jump the nest before she's three."

"It's more like two," says the second guy. He's never been married or had kids. Shaking his head, he flings his empty after mine, telling me, "You don't want that. They're more machine than people, these kids are."

Which gets the first guy pissed. "I don't think I'd go that far," he growls. Then he stands and puts his empty into the empty trash can. And he picks up one of the titanium bats. In the moonlight, I can see his face. I can see him thinking hard about his own kids. About everything. Then he lifts the bat up high and slams it down into the aluminum bleacher, making a terrific racket. Again and again, he bashes the bleacher, leaving a sloppy dent and the air ringing, and him sweating rivers, while his two friends stare out at the empty ballfield, pretending to notice none of it.

j

The Hothouse was a dump in the old days. And still is, which makes things better somehow. Easier. I don't feel half as out of place as I expected. Walking through the smoky rooms. Watching people and things that aren't people. I'm not even the oldest critter in this place, which is the biggest surprise.

The music sucks, but bar music always sucks.

Maybe fifty Birdy Girls are hanging around. There's usually five or six of them at a table, along with as many college-age kids. The kids are too old to mesh up with AIs, but they're wearing the trendy machines on their faces. In their hair. Some have four or five machines that give them advice or whatever. The machines talk in low buzzes. The Birdy Girls talk in normal voices. The college kids are the quiet ones, drinking their beers and smoking the new cigarettes. Doing nothing but listening, by the looks of it.

I don't listen. I just hunt until I see her standing in the middle of a round table, dancing with another Birdy Girl. Except it isn't her. I know it from her clothes, which are wrong, and I know by other ways, too. It's a feeling that stops me midway. Then I make a slow turn, searching for a second Genevieve doll. There isn't any. Two turns and I'm sure. Then I'm thinking how this looks, if anyone cares to notice me. A grown man doing this, and for what? But it's pretty obvious I don't give a shit what anyone thinks, and that's when I move up to the round table, saying, "Hey, there," with a loud voice. It barely sounds like me. When the tanned face lifts and those green eyes fix on me, I say, "Is there another Genevieve around? Anyone see her?"

This Genevieve says, "No," and picks up someone's spare cigarette with both hands, tasting a little puff. It's one of the college boys who tilts his head back, blowing blue smoke while he's talking. "There was one. With a group. Ago, maybe ten minutes?" Then one of his AI add-ons whispers something, and he adds, "Twelve minutes ago." So I ask what she was wearing. Was it a long skirt and jewelry? Again the machine buzzes, and the kid gives me a big smile. He looks like every frat kid that I went to school with. Smug, and handsome. And drunk enough to be happy, or dangerous, or both. "That's your girl," he promises. "She and her Girls went outside with some old man." And with a hard pleasure, he adds, "Almost as old as you, by the looks of him."

j

It's a pleasure to be outside. It's a torture. I'm standing in the middle of the parking lot, looking at empty cabs and parked cars. I'm wishing that she saw me drive in. But my car's sitting empty. Then I'm telling myself that she and her little friends have left, since it's after one in the morning now. Is it that late? Just to be sure, I make a circuit around the parking lot. An old minivan sits in the back corner, back where it's darkest. The windows are popped open. I can't see inside, but I hear the voices. The giggles. I can't remember deciding to walk up to the van, but that's what I must have done. Decided. Because I'm there now. I'm pressing my face to the glass. There's a little light burning inside, and when I squint, I can tell someone's pulled the seats out of the back end, nothing but a narrow mattress on the floor, and the man lying on his back with his hands jammed behind his tilted head, looking like he's about to try doing a sit-up, his head tilted and his buggy big eyes watching everything that's happening to him.

Just like that, the door handle's in my hand. The side door has jumped open. And if I've gone this far, I might as well drag the son of a bitch out by his ankles. Birdy Girls and pant legs go flying. I'm going to kick his ass. God, I'm going to paste him. But then he's screaming at me, begging, hands over his scrunched-up face. It's a bald old face. It could be my face in twenty years. I can't smack him. I can't even pretend that I'm going to. So I drop him and start hunting for the Genevieve. Then I see her face glaring at me, her mouth tiny and hard, and I start looking at what I'm doing, and why, and it's my voice that asks me, "What in hell's going on here?"

Genevieve says, "Don't you know?" Then she tells her friends, "I know fun. And this isn't."

Too late by a long ways, I notice that the jewelry in her hair is wrong, and she's wearing that hair different than before, and it isn't the same dress. And to myself, in a low stupid voice, I say, "I'm an idiot."

"Yeah," says the wrong Genevieve. "And you're not keeping it too much of a secret, either."

j

I've got two women waiting for me at home. One of them says, "You look rough," and the other adds, "It must have been quite a ball game." I don't know which of them scares me worse. Instead of answering, I take a long shower and dry myself in the bathroom, putting on clean shorts before coming out again, finding both of them asleep in my bed, one curled up on the other's chest.

It's almost noon when I come to. I'm in the living room, on the couch. A slow, stiff search of the place finds nobody. Just me and my hangover. Dressed and fed, I step into the backyard, thinking the air will do some good. But the sun is scorching and bright enough to blind, and I end up sitting in the shade, on my wobbly adirondack, hoping nobody finds me for a week or two.

Then a voice calls out. "Thank you," it says. Maybe twice, maybe more than that. Then she says my name, and that's when I pry open my eyes, looking across the yard, slowly focusing on the young face staring over the top of the fence. I can go inside. Pretend that I didn't hear her, or just play it rude. But then she says, "I'm Kahren, the one with the package." And in the next breath, she says, "My brother was rude to you. But believe me, I'm thankful for your help, good sir."

Walking to the back fence takes me a week. A year. Forever. I'm staring up at a little girl's face and a woman's smart eyes. She's climbed up on a grapevine to look over. If she's five years old, she's one of the oldest of these kids. And the slowest, and the simplest. Maybe that's why I can stand talking to her. Again, she says my name. Then out of nowhere, she says, "You and I are related. We have a common ancestor in the late 1800s." And I say, "Is that so?" Then I ask, "How do you know? Because of our names?" But no, she shakes her head, telling me, "Our DNA. I took a peek—"

"At my DNA?" I blurt. "How did you get that?"

"From the package. You left flakes of dead skin on the sticky label—"

"Don't touch my DNA," I tell her. I shout it, practically.

"I never will again," she promises. Then she dips her head, sad about making me angry. Really, she looks nothing but sweet. Five years old, with curly blonde hair and a pouting lip, and behind those big blue eyes revs a brain that's probably already had more thoughts than I'll have in my entire life. But it never occurred to the girl that she was doing wrong. She was just being curious. Being herself. So I say, "Forget it." And dipping her head farther, she says sadly, "I can't forget."

She's a sweet, sweet girl, I'm thinking.

Then several seconds have passed without conversation, and I know she has to be bored. That's why I ask, "So what was in that package? Anything important?" And she doesn't say. Watching me, and not. Nothing showing on her pretty little face. Then just as I'm thinking that she didn't hear me, she asks, "Are you happy?"

"What's that mean?" I ask. "Like, in my life ... am I happy ... ?"

She nods. Bites her lower lip, embarrassed again. "If you don't want to answer," she starts, and I say, "No." I say, "No, I'm not happy." Over the fence, talking to a perfect stranger, I admit, "A lot of things really suck lately. If you want to know the truth."

"I do," she says. "Absolutely, yes."

Then she tells me, "The package you brought me ... it involves my work. My brother's work. We belong to a body of thinking souls, people like you and like me, and certain AIs, too. We realize now that the AI technologies were a tragic mistake. Tragic." She says the word a third time. "Tragic." Then she shakes her head, saying, "Very few people are happy. Even my generation suffers. There's boredom for us. There are subtle, unexpected problems with the new technologies. It makes an imaginative person wonder: Wouldn't it be nice if we could roll everything back to before? To the days prior to the Big Leap?"

The girl does a great job of keeping her voice slow. But it's as if I can't understand what she's telling me. I have to run the words back through my head, wringing the sense out of them. More quiet seconds pass, and I finally ask, "What are you telling me? That you really can change things?"

"Not by myself, no." She leaks a big sigh, plainly hunting for the best way to say what's next. "Roll things back how?" I ask her. I want to know. And she explains, "I guess it's just as it sounds. Roll things back literally. Time is an arrow in motion, and it's amazingly easy to fool that arrow, making it reverse itself. But of course, that doesn't do anyone any good if it just puts us back where we started. If the Big Leap is inevitable, and if anyone builds even just one cheap and easy thinking machine ..."

I keep staring up at her. Waiting.

"The tough trick," she says, "is to change certain essential laws of the universe. Not everywhere, of course. That would be impossible as well as immoral. No, what we want is to make it impossible for anyone on and around our world ... say, within a light-month of the Earth ... make it impossible for them to build AI machinery that works." She looks around, making sure it's just the two of us. "There's no one solution to that enormous problem, of course. But there's a thousand little ways, and if you used all of them, with care, it gives human beings another thousand years to prepare themselves for this momentous change. Which would be a good thing. Don't you think so, good sir?"

I say, "Sure," with a quiet little gasp.

Then she sighs again, looking at me and saying nothing. So I ask her, "What happens to you, if it happens?" And she tells me, flat out, "I never am. The Earth jumps back seven years from today, and there's never a Big Leap forwards, computers remain fast but stupid, and nobody like myself is born. Ever."

"How soon?" I ask.

"Think soon," she advises. Then in her next breath, "Think tonight."

"And you can do that to yourself?" I have to ask. "You can make yourself never be, and you don't even blink about it?"

The girl gives me a long look. Her little mouth is working, twisting at its ends. Then the mouth goes still, and she tells me with a careful voice, "When something is right, you do it. What other choice is there, good sir?"

j

She finds me sitting in front of the game, drinking cold beer. "Who's playing?" she asks, and I tell her, "It's the Cardinals and Cubs." And she asks, "Who's better?" I tell her, "The Cubs, this year." Which makes her ask, "Then why are they behind ... what, three points?" I don't answer her. Then she glances at my beer, not saying anything about the time of day. I can see what she's thinking, but she doesn't say anything, sitting next to me now, sitting and watching the game for a long while before finally saying, "So aren't you going to offer a girl a taste?"

I tip the can. The beer foams and fills her mouth, and she swirls it hard with her tongue before spitting everything back into the can again.

I taste plastic in my next sip. Or I think I do.

She wipes her mouth against the corner of a little pillow. My wife embroidered a picture of a tabby cat on that pillow. "It was one of her first," I tell my friend. "Hell, I can even see the screw-ups."

The Birdy Girl nods, not looking at the pillow. Or the game. When I finally look at her green eyes, she says, "It's a nice day outside." And when that doesn't do anything, she adds, "There's a playground just up that way," and points, waving one of her arms. "Take me, if you want. Or I can take myself over. But I'm not staying locked up in here. You're not that much fun, you know."

"I know."

We walk over. Or I walk, and she rides. She stands on my belt with both hands holding to the back of my shirt. A couple neighbors spot me coming. They know me and wave. Then I'm past them, and they see the Birdy Girl riding tight, and why that should be entertaining, I don't know. But it makes me laugh. More fun than drinking beer alone, at the very least.

The playground isn't used now. It's been years since it got maintenance. The city, or someone, has set a plastic orange fence up around it, plus signs that keep telling us that it's dangerous and forbidden. The signs threaten to call the authorities. I threaten the signs. Then I give the fence a yank down where others have done the same, and I throw my leg over, and Genevieve jumps off me and runs, and skips, and giggles, looking back to tell me, "Try the slide. I'll stand at the bottom and catch you!"

I'm not going to do that, I decide, then I watch myself do it anyway. I climb up a wooden tower and through a doorway that's way too small, forcing my fat ass into the silvery chute that's about a thousand degrees in the summer sun. It's cooking me. But she's at the bottom, laughing and waving, telling me, "Down. You slide down. Haven't you used one of these contraptions before?" And I let myself go, gravity carrying me down that hot metal chute, and maybe I'm laughing, too. It feels a little bit like laughter. But then I'm at the bottom, sitting on the broiling end of the slide, and I'm quiet and thinking hard to myself, and she tugs at my hand, coaxing me, saying, "There's a teeter-totter over there. See it? You park yourself at one end, and I'll park on the other, then I'll lift you to the sky."

It's those words and the way she says them. That's what rips me open.

Then she isn't talking, staring up at me as her smile falls apart, that brown plastic face becoming concerned, and worried, and a little sad. Finally she says, "Did you know? You're crying."

Like I little kid, I'm leaking tears. Yeah.

She asks, "What is so awful?"

I won't tell her. I decide that it wouldn't be right. So instead, I just give a shrug, saying, "It's just some stuff I'm thinking about."

To a Birdy Girl, there is no problem. "Just think about something else," is her easy advice. "Pick what's really fun. Something you just love. That's what I'd do if I ever got blue. Then I'd think hard about nothing else!"

j

My wife comes home to find me cooking over the stove. Not our AI chef, but me. The sauce is our garden tomatoes, and maybe it's a little runny. And like always, I've cooked the spaghetti until it's mushy. But I'm responsible for everything, including setting the dining room table, and I've killed some flowers in the backyard, propping up their corpses in a fancy crystal vase set out in the middle of everything.

She has to ask what the occasion is, and I'm ready for her. I say, "Do we need an excuse to eat together?" Which pretty well shuts her up. Then I wipe my hands dry and step into the bedroom, asking, "Have you picked which one?" Genevieve is standing on the chest of drawers, watching the mirror as she holds clothes in front of herself. She says, "One of these two, I think." I say, "I like the long dress." She says, "Prude," and laughs. Then my wife wanders in and asks, "What are you two doing?" I say, "Picking." Genevieve says, "For tonight." And my wife gives us this drop-jawed look, then half-snorts, saying, "You're mine," to the Birdy Girl. "You're not his. You're mine."

"I am yours," Genevieve agrees, smiling happily. Then she puts on her long dress, saying, "The other Girls and I are going to see some minor league hardball." As her head comes through the neck hole, she adds, "Afterwards, we're going to molest a player or two. That's the plan, at least."

I don't say anything. I haven't, and I won't. But it wrings me dry, standing there, watching this little machine putting little shoes on those little feet.

Genevieve tells us, "Bye."

Im not crying, but I feel myself wanting to do just that. I watch her crawl through the cat door, then I make sure that I wander into the living room, watching as the cab pulls up and the back door pops up, nearly a dozen Birdy Girls already standing on the back seat, their big hair bouncing and a few of them wearing honest-to-god ball caps.

One last time, my wife says, "I got her for me. That doll's mine."

"She is yours," I agree. "I won't even look at her again."

We eat at the dining room table. Dinner is mush, but it's tasty mush. It's my mush. Then we make love for the first time this month, and that goes pretty well. Better than pretty well, really. Then one of us feels like talking, and one of us wants to listen. So that's what we do. But after a while, the talker asks, "Are you paying attention to me?" and I say, "I was, dear. I am." Honest, I was trying to listen, but my head kept drifting back to other things. Important things. "I was just thinking about stuff," I confess. With a grumbly tone, she asks, "What stuff?" Then I stop her dead, saying, "I was thinking we ought to have a child. Or two. You know, before it's too late."

We've got a quiet little house when nobody's talking, or even breathing.

A week passes, then she tells me, "I don't know. I've been thinking along those same lines. You know?"

"I thought you were," I say.

She doesn't know what to say now. Using my chest as a pillow, she sets her ear over my heart, and after another long pause, she says, "Yeah, we should." Then she has to ask, "But why the big change? Why all of the sudden?"

It's gotten late. Gotten dark, almost. Im lying on my back, fighting the urge to look at the time. I realize that I don't know when it's supposed to happen, and besides, I won't know when it comes. That's my best guess. Time will run backwards for seven years, and then it will begin again. Begin new. And I won't have memories of anything recent or sorry, and everything will be fresh, and why in hell am I so eaten up and sad about this thing? It doesn't make sense to me. Not even a little bit.

"Are you all right?" my wife asks me. Concerned now.

"Im fine," I say, hearing my voice crack. Then I make myself shut my eyes, telling her, "It's just that I got this feeling today. That's why I want kids now. Starting tomorrow, Im just sure, everything's going to be different."

j

Im too restless to sleep or even pretend, and then it's sometime after one in the morning, and I suddenly drop into a dark hard sleep, waking when I hear the voice. I know that voice, Im thinking. It tells me, "Go back to sleep, sorry," and I realize that I've lifted my head off the pillow. "Look at what I got for a souvenir," she says, pushing something up onto the bed. "One of the player's balls. I cut it off myself."

It's a hard white ball with tight stitches and a comfortable leather feel. The ball says to me, "On my first pitch, I was a strike, and I was fouled off, landing in the stands behind home plate."

"Quiet," I tell the ball. Then Genevieve says, "Quiet yourself. Go back to sleep."

But I won't sleep again. It's nearly five in the morning, and I've never been this awake. I put on shorts and shoes and yesterday's shirt, and Genevieve asks, "Where are you going?" I tell her, "Out back. To watch the sun come up, I guess." She says, "Well, Im tired and grouchy. Can I come with you?" When I don't answer, she follows me into the backyard, sitting in one adirondack while I take the other. Her chair doesn't wobble under her little weight. She sits on one of the armrests, and naps, and Im sitting next to her, thinking about everything. The neighbor girl didn't out-and-out promise that it would happen tonight. So they might do it tomorrow night, or the next. Whenever it happens, it leads us to the same place, always. Then Im thinking about having a kid or two, and would it be so bad? Now or seven years ago, there's always problems with it. Then I look at Genevieve, wondering if she's dreaming and what kind of dreams she has. Im curious, but I won't ask. Then I halfway shut my eyes, and when I open them, it's dawn, and I see a little face rising up over the back fence.

A little hand swings up into view, waving at me.

I leave the Birdy Girl asleep. I walk to the back of the yard, asking, "What?" with a whispery voice.

He says, "I learned what she said to you," in a rush, as if it's one huge and horrible word. I can see his little-boy face in the soft first light of the morning. Both pink hands cling tight to the top of the wooden fence. He says, "Kahren was wrong to mislead you, and I will make her apologize to you." Then he sighs and tells me, "But believe me, sir. There is no truth to anything she said."

What Im thinking, mostly, is that Im not all that surprised. I even expected something like this, down deep. Maybe part of me—a secret part—didn't want to lose these last seven years, bad as they seemed at the time. I decide to say nothing. Im just standing in front of him, thinking it through, and he must think that I don't understand. Because he says it again, slower this time. "Nobody can turn back time," he tells me, each word followed by a pause. "And nobody can do any of those things that my cruel, childish sister mentioned to you."

"Maybe *you* can't do those things," I tell him, flat-out, "but how do you know it can't be done? Maybe when you start having kids, and they're a thousand times smarter than you'll ever be, it'll be done. You ever think about that, kid?"

It's almost worth it, these last pissy years. Just to stand there and see that big-eyed face staring at me, nothing about that boy even a little bit smug now.

I turn and walk back towards my house.

The Birdy Girl stirs on the arm of the chair, muttering, "More," as she dreams. "More, more."

I leave her there.

I go into the house, and I sit on the edge of the bed, watching my sleeping wife. Eventually her eyes come open, and I tell her, "I was right." I tell her, "I don't know why, but everything's changed overnight, and it's pretty much for the better."

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About the Authors

Pat Cadigan and **Christopher Fowler** are married and live in London. "Freeing the Angels" is their first collaborative science fiction story.

Pat Cadigan's first professional short story sale was in 1980, and since then her short fiction has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, and online, including *Omni*, *Asimov's*, *Event Horizon*, *Interzone*, and *F&SF*. Many of these are collected in *Patterns* and *Dirty Work*. Her novels include *Mindplayers* (1987), *Synners* (1991), *Fools* (1992), and *Tea from an Empty Cup* (1998). *Synners* and *Fools* both won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best science fiction novel of the year in the UK. Pat's latest novel, *Dervish is Digital*, will be published in October 2000.

Pat has also written two nonfiction film books, *The Making of Lost in Space* and *Resurrecting the Mummy*; one media tie-in novel, *Lost in Space: Promised Land*; and a young adult novel, *Avatar*. She has taught writing workshops, spoken at many conferences—most recently in Venice, Italy and Camden, Maine—and was for a time a Visiting Fellow at the Cybernetic Culture Research Centre at Warwick University.

Christopher Fowler works as an editor at the University of Westminster in central London.

James P. Blaylock grew up in southern California and, with the exception of some time spent in coastal northern California, he has lived in Orange County all his life. He teaches composition and creative writing at Chapman University; in fact, he has been a writing teacher since 1976, about the same time that he sold his first short story, "Red Planet," to *Unearth* magazine. He has written fourteen novels as well as dozens of short stories, essays, and articles. Among his recent novels are *Night Relics*, an atmospheric ghost story set in the Santa Ana Mountains and the city of Orange; *The Paper Grail*, a foggy and fantastic romance set along the Mendocino coast in northern California; *All the Bells on Earth*, a Faustian mystery that transpires in the old neighborhoods of downtown Orange during a rainy and unusual Christmas season; and *Winter Tides*, a ghost-and-murder mystery set in Huntington Beach. His latest novel, *The Rainy Season*, was published in August of 1999.

Blaylock is a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, most recently for his short story "Thirteen Phantasms." His story "Unidentified Objects" was included in *Prize Stories 1990: The O. Henry Awards*. His first collection of short fiction will be published by Edgewood Press in the summer of this year.

Jeffrey Ford is the author of *The Physiognomy*—winner of the World Fantasy Award and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year—and *Memoranda*—also a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. These novels are the first two parts of a trilogy that has now been completed with the publication of *The Beyond* in January 2001. Ford's short fiction has appeared in *Event Horizon*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Space & Time*, *The Northwest Review*, and *MSS*. His story "At Reparata" was selected for inclusion in the anthology *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Thirteenth Annual Collection*, and "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant," which appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, was nominated for a Nebula award in 2001. Presently, he is working on a novel, *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque*, for Morrow and a collection of his short stories, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*, for Golden Gryphon Press. Both books should be out some time next year. For the past twelve years, he has taught Research Writing, Composition, and Early American Literature at Brookdale Community College in Monmouth County, New Jersey. He lives in Medford Lakes with his wife and two sons.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is an award-winning fiction writer: her novella "The Gallery of His Dreams" won the Locus Award, and her body of fiction work won her the John W. Campbell Award in 1991. She has been nominated for several dozen other fiction awards, and her short work has been reprinted in six Year's Best collections. In 1999, her story "Echea" was nominated for the Locus, Nebula, Hugo, and Theodore Sturgeon Awards. It won the HOMER Award and the *Asimov's Science Fiction* Readers' Choice Award. In 1999, she also won the *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* Reader's Choice Award and the *Science Fiction Age* Readers' Choice Award, making her the first writer to win three different readers' choice awards for three different stories in two different genres in the same year.

Rusch has published twenty novels under her own name. She has sold forty-one total, including pseudonymous books. Her novels have been published in seven languages, and combined have spent several weeks on the *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists.

Rusch has written a number of *Star Trek* novels with her husband, Dean Wesley Smith, including a book in this summer's crossover series called *New Earth*. Her most recent novel is *Utterly Charming*, a lighthearted romance (with magic) written under the name Kristine Grayson. Her most recent fantasy novel is *The Black Queen*, the first book in her Black Throne series. She has written an sf series, *The Tenth Planet*, with her husband, Dean Wesley Smith. She has also published a mainstream crime novel, *Hitler's Angel*, which was called "a great story, well told," by *The Oregonian* and received a full-page review in *The New York Times*. Her next book will be the second book in her Black

Throne series, to be called *The Black King*. Under the name Kris Nelscott, she has just sold two mystery novels set in 1968 to St.Martin's Press.

Rusch is the former editor of the prestigious *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and has won a Hugo for her work there. Before that, she and Dean Wesley Smith started and ran Pulphouse Publishing, a science fiction and mystery press based in Eugene. She lives and works on the Oregon Coast.

Kim Newman was born 1959 in London, brought up in the West Country. Educated at the University of Sussex (English). Moved to London in 1980. Weird kid, became psycho teenager, grew up into maladjusted adult.

During the early '80s he was associated with the Sheep Worrying Theatre Group, at the Arts Centre, Bridgwater, and also acted and played the kazoo in a cabaret band, Club Whoopee. Newman claims: "It was wretched." Recently, Club Whoopee reformed for an afternoon and cut a CD album, *Route 666*.

Severna Park is the author of three novels, two of which — *Speaking Dreams* and *The Annunciate*— have been Lambda Literary Award finalists. Her short stories have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies, including her latest, "The Golem," in the Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling anthology *Black Heart, Ivory Bones*.

This year Ms. Park was awarded a grant in fiction writing from the Maryland State Arts Council. She lives with her lover of seventeen years in Frederick, Maryland, and is presently at work on the sequel to *The Annunciate*, entitled *Harbingers*.

Brian Herbert, author of numerous novels and short stories, has been critically acclaimed by leading reviewers in the United States and around the world. The eldest son of science fiction superstar Frank Herbert, Brian moved his home twenty-three times before graduating from high school as an honors student at the age of sixteen. He has been married for more than three decades and has three daughters.

Brian has been involved in a wide variety of professions and endeavors, including work as an author, an editor, a business manager, an inventor of board games, and a creative consultant for both television and collectible card games. He did not begin his writing career until he was nearly thirty years old; prior to that he worked as an insurance underwriter and agent, an award-winning encyclopedia salesman, a waiter, a busboy, a maid (not a typo), and a printer. He and his wife once owned a double-decker London bus which they converted into an unusual gift shop. Brian also operated a mail-order record and tape business, via which he sold "golden oldies" music to remote regions of the world, including the Australian outback.

Brian Herbert's first two books were humor collections, *Incredible Insurance Claims* and *Classic Comebacks*. After that a steady stream of novels ensued, including *Sidney's Comet*; *The Garbage Chronicles*; *Sudanna, Sudanna*; *Man of Two Worlds*, with Frank Herbert; *Prisoners of Arionn*; *The Race for God*, a preliminary Nebula nominee in 1990; *Memorymakers*, with Marie Landis; and *Blood on the Sun*, also with Marie Landis. Among his work as editor are *The Notebooks of Frank Herbert's Dune* and *Songs of Muad'Dib*.

When Brian was in his late twenties and early thirties he began to grow closer to his father, who was a complex, enigmatic man. Brian's efforts to unravel the intriguing mysteries of his father began with a detailed journal that Brian maintained for years, chronicling the fascinating events of the Herbert family—a document which ultimately included the tragic deaths of his mother and father, and which he expanded into a comprehensive biography of Frank Herbert: *Dreamer of Dune*. The quest to understand one's father—which Joseph Campbell has described as one of the epic hero journeys of mankind—continued as Brian studied the entire six-volume *Dune* series and created a massive *Dune Concordance*. This would prove to be an invaluable reference book during the writing of additional *Dune* books in the three-volume "Prelude to Dune" series, which Brian undertook with Kevin J. Anderson in 1998.

In the last six years, twenty-six of **Kevin J. Anderson's** novels have been national bestsellers, and he now has over eleven million copies in print in twenty-five languages throughout the world. Though he is best known for his numerous *Star Wars* and *X-Files* projects, Anderson has also received great critical acclaim for his original work, appearing on "Best of the Year" lists from *Locus*, *Science Fiction Chronicle*, and *SFX*, as well as the final ballots for the Nebula Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and the American Physics Society's prestigious Forum Award. In 1998, he set the Guinness World Record for "Largest Single-Author Book Signing" in Hollywood, California.

Anderson's current project is writing a prequel trilogy to *Dune* with Frank Herbert's son Brian, which is based on thousands of pages of notes recently discovered in storage. *Dune: House Atreides* became a national and international bestseller and appeared on numerous "Best of the Year" lists. The second volume, *House Harkonnen*, will be published in October, 2000 by Bantam Books.

Anderson's research has taken him all over the world: to the deserts and ancient cities of Morocco; to the top of Mount Whitney and the bottom of the Grand Canyon; inside the Cheyenne Mountains' NORAD complex; into the Andes Mountains and to the Amazon River; inside a Minuteman III missile silo and its underground control bunker; onto the deck of the aircraft carrier *Nimitz*; to Mayan and Incan temple ruins in South and Central America; inside NASA's Vehicle Assembly Building and onto shuttle launchpads at Cape Canaveral; onto the floor of the Pacific Stock Exchange; inside a plutonium plant at Los Alamos; and behind the scenes at FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC. He also, occasionally, stays home and writes.

Linda Nagata is the award-winning author of four hard science fiction novels, including the ultra-high-tech, far-future adventure *Vast*. Her next book, *Limit of Vision*, is scheduled to be published by Tor Books in March 2001. Originally

from California, she had the good fortune to grow up in Hawaii, and now lives on the island of Maui with her husband and two children.

Howard Waldrop, who was born in Mississippi and now lives in Washington State, is one of the most iconoclastic writers working today. His highly original books include the novels *Them Bones* and *A Dozen Tough Jobs*, and the collections *Howard Who?*, *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past*, *Night of the Cooters*, and *Going Home Again*. He won the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards for his novelette "The Ugly Chickens." Waldrop asserts that he killed *Omni Online*. His story "Mr. Goober's Show" went up "four days before the switch was thrown," he notes. It was reprinted in the September 1998 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

Waldrop continues to work on *The Moon World* and *I, John Mandeville*, novels ten and twenty-eight years in the making, respectively.

His story "Our Mortal Span," based on the fairy tale about the three billy goats gruff, was recently published in *Black Heart, Ivory Bones*, the last of the Datlow/Windling adult fairy tale series. He also recently caught and released an eighteen-pound chinook salmon on a 5-wt. flyrod several weeks ago. He says, "You don't want to do that every day."

An e-book compilation of his media-related stories, *Dream Factories and Radio Pictures*, is now available through ElectricStory.com.

Graham Joyce is a three-time winner of the August Derleth Award, also known as the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel, for *Dark Sister* (1992), *Requiem* (1995), and *The Tooth Fairy* (1996). Joyce quit an executive job and went to the Greek island of Lesbos to live in a beach shack with a colony of scorpions (which became the setting for *House of Lost Dreams* [1993]) to concentrate on writing. He sold his first novel, *Dreamside* (1991), while still in Greece, and travelled in the Middle East on the proceeds. *The Stormwatcher* (1998) preceded his most recent novel, *Indigo*, and a new novella, *Leningrad Nights* (both 1999). Joyce has also published a children's SF novel, *Spiderbite* (1997). His short stories have appeared in several anthologies, and his novels have been widely translated. He currently lives in England.

A. R. Morlan was born on January 3, 1958 in Chicago, Illinois. The only child of divorced parents, she lived in the Los Angeles area from 1961 to 1969 when she moved to the midwest. Morlan graduated *magna cum laude* from Mount Senario College in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, in December 1980 with a B.A. in English, and minors in Theatre Arts and History.

Her first published work was a quiz in *Twilight Zone Magazine* (1983). Her first published story was "Four Days Before the Snow," in *Night Cry* (1985).

She lives with a houseful of cats.

Morlan's first print collection, *Smothered Dolls*, is forthcoming from The Overlook Connection Press.

Dave Hutchinson was born in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, in December 1960. He graduated from Nottingham University with a degree in American Studies, and then became a journalist. He lives in North London with his wife, Bogna, and their two cats, Dougal and Kuron.

Steven Utley: "I was born a week and a day after Harry Truman had pulled the rug out from under Thomas Dewey, in the year of the Berlin Airlift and the first full-blown commercial television broadcasts. (For the history-challenged: 1948.) Over the next couple of decades, my parents, including my father, a noncommissioned officer in the Air Force, herded my three siblings and me from place to exotic place (England, Okinawa, Kansas) as part of the Pentagon's master plan to defeat communism.

As a child I enjoyed books and old movies and imitatively worked up my own stories both prose and in comic-book form. I broke into print in the seventh grade with a poem about Hannibal (the Carthaginian general, not Samuel L. Clemens's hometown), but it wasn't until my freshman year of high school, when I discovered Mars—the Mars of science fiction's two great romantics, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury—that I somehow understood that I, too, must grow up to be A Writer, or at least a rich and famous person. Ten years later, I was one! A Writer, I mean.

By then (we're up to the early 1970s, in case you've lost track), my family had settled in Tennessee but momentum had carried me clear on into Texas, where I fell in with other young writers, including Lisa Tuttle, Howard Waldrop, and Bruce Sterling, and fell in love with one of them. Whichever one of them it was (accounts vary) enticed me to Austin, then a sort of bohemian paradise and still, in my heart, what every military brat must eventually seek—Home. Nevertheless, Austin having evolved into a replica of Dallas, many of us Austinians (which are not quite the same thing as Texans) are now expatriates living in exotic places such as the Scottish hinterlands and the backwoods of Washington State, or, in my own case, smack on the buckle of the Bible Belt. I lead a quiet life, surrounded as I am by my books and my cats and my dangerously inbred neighbors.

All of the above is the truth or as much of it as I'm able to fabricate on the spur of the moment".

Richard Bowes was born in Boston in 1944. In his third year as a freshman, he took a writing course with Mark Eisenstein at Hofstra College. For the last thirty-three years he has lived in New York City and done the usual jumble of things. He began writing speculative fiction in the early 1980s. In 1992 he started publishing stories narrated by the

character Kevin Grierson. These eventually became the novel *Minions of the Moon*. One story, "Streetcar Dreams," won a World Fantasy Award. The novel itself won the Lambda Literary Award for best Gay/Lesbian SF/F novel.

Since his debut in the mid-eighties, **Robert Reed** has produced a substantial and varied body of work. Nine novels have been published to date, including the much anticipated *Marrow*, available from Tor Books. Reed has also sold nearly one hundred shorter works of fiction, including "The Utility Man," "Decency," "Marrow," and "Whiptail," all finalists for the Hugo Award. His novella "Chrysalis" was nominated for a Nebula, and "Human Bay" is currently on the final ballot for a World Fantasy Award. His first collection of stories, *The Dragons of Springplace*, was published in 1999 by Golden Gryphon Press. He currently is working on numerous projects, a few of which might eventually amount to something.

Reed's hobbies include gardening, playing God to numerous small ponds and large aquariums, running long distances, and reading about every persuasion of science. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife, Leslie.

About the Editor

As fiction editor of *Omni* magazine and *Omni Online* from 1981 through 1998, **Ellen Datlow** earned a reputation for encouraging and developing an entire generation of fiction writers, and has published some of today's biggest names in the SF, fantasy and horror genres. The stunning assortment of writers Datlow brought to the pages of *Omni* includes such talents as William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, Dan Simmons, K.W. Jeter, Clive Barker, Stephen King, William Burroughs, Ursula K. Le Guin, Jonathan Carroll, Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Straub and Jack Cady, among many others.

She was then the editor of *Event Horizon: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*, a Webzine founded in September 1998 that remained active until December 1999. During that period, *Event Horizon* published "The Specialist's Hat" by Kelly Link, winner of the 1999 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story — only the second story published on the Internet to win the World Fantasy Award. (The first, "Radio Waves" by Michael Swanwick, was published by Datlow in *Omni Online*).

Datlow is currently tied for winning the most World Fantasy Awards in the organization's history (six); has won, with co-editor Terri Windling, a Bram Stoker Award for *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* #13, and has received multiple Hugo Award nominations for Best Editor.

The SciFiction Project

An undergoing weekly webzine featuring classic and original science fiction stories, SciFiction is edited by Ellen Datlow, former editor of Omni Online and Event Horizon. This compilation is the first of the SciFiction Originals series (six volumes to date, with more to be compiled as the stories will be published on the web). Each volume will feature fifteen stories and some bio-bibliographic informations about the authors. A SciFiction Classics project is also in the works.

SCIFICTION ORIGINALS

Volume 1

Freeing the Angels by Pat Cadigan and Chris Fowler
The War of the Worlds by James P. Blaylock
Malthusian's Zombie by Jeffrey Ford
Chimera by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Castle in the Desert Anno Dracula 1977 by Kim Newman
The Cure for Everything by Severna Park
Dune: Nighttime Shadows on Open Sand by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson
Goddesses by Linda Nagata - 2000 Nebula Award-winning Story
Winter Quarters by Howard Waldrop
Partial Eclipse by Graham Joyce
Ciné Rimettato by A. R. Morlan
Tir-na-nOg by Dave Hutchinson
The Real World by Steven Utley
From the Files of the Time Rangers by Richard Bowes
Birdy Girl by Robert Reed

Volume 2

Wetlands Preserve by Nancy Kress
The Origin of Truth by Tim Lebbon
Nevada by A. M. Dellamonica
The Other Side by James P. Blaylock
The Far Oasis by Jeffrey Ford
The Pottawatomie Giant by Andy Duncan
The Flyers of Gy - An Interplanary Tale by Ursula K. Le Guin
Tomorrow Town by Kim Newman
The Despoblado by Steven Utley
A Cold Dish by Lisa Tuttle
Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol by Elizabeth Hand
The Scab's Progress by Paul Di Filippo and Bruce Sterling
More Adventures on Other Planets by Michael Cassutt
The Quicksilver Kid by Richard Bowes
Cucumber Gravy by Susan Palwick

Volume 3

Silent Her by Barry B. Longyear
Editing for Content by Gavin J. Grant
One Horse Town by Howard Waldrop and Leigh Kennedy
Five Miles from Pavement by Steven Utley
Cat in the Box by A.R. Morlan
Bad Animals by John W. Randal
The Lagan Fishers by Terry Dowling
Refugees from Nulongwe by M. Shayne Bell
Copperhead by Gene Wolfe
New Light on the Drake Equation by Ian R. MacLeod
Russian Vine by Simon Ings
Floating In Lindrethool by Jeffrey Ford
Beyond the End of Time by Michael Cassutt
Discreet Phenomena by Dave Hutchinson
His Own Back Yard by James P. Blaylock

Volume 4

The Other Real World by Howard Waldrop
Standing in His Light by Kage Baker
Shooting the Moon by Geoffrey A. Landis
The Black Heart by Patrick O'Leary
Charlie's Angels by Terry Bisson
Neutrino Drag by Paul Di Filippo
AZTECHS by Lucius Shepard
Non-Disclosure Agreement by Scott Westerfeld
Small Houses by James P. Blaylock
From the Walls of Irezumi by A.R. Morlan
The Dread and Fear of Kings by Richard Paul Russo
The Girl Who Ate Garbage by Jessica Reisman & A.M. Dellamonica
Days Red and Green by Richard Bowes
Struwwelpeter by Glen Hirshberg
Brink by Gregory Benford

Volume 5

Grandmother Mist by William R. Eakin
Life on Earth by Pat Cadigan
Over Yonder by Lucius Shepard
Water Master by Carol Emshwiller
The Discharge by Christopher Priest
In for a Penny or The Man Who Believed in Himself by James P. Blaylock
Three Times over the Falls by A.M. Dellamonica
Around the Curve of a Cosmos by Gregory Benford
Thanksgiving by Leslie What
The Disinterred by Mark W. Tiedemann
Emerald Street Expansions by Lucius Shepard
Swiftly by Adam Roberts
Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech by Alex Irvine
Scuffle by Dave Hutchinson
The Children's Crusade by Robert Reed

Volume 6

Jemima by A. R. Morlan
The Most Famous Little Girl in the World by Nancy Kress
Josephine by Carol Emshwiller
The Last Big Sin by Kit Reed
In Green's Dominion by Dale Bailey
What I Didn't See by Karen Joy Fowler
Some Other Time by Ray Vukceвич
The Names of All the Spirits by J. R. Dunn
Fear of Strangers by Dave Hutchinson
Melodies Played upon Cold, Dark Worlds by Robert Reed
What Mattered Was Sleep by Patrick O'Leary
Voice of Steel by Sean McMullen

SCIFICTION CLASSICS

Volume 1

The Ugly Chickens by Howard Waldrop
A Wind Is Rising by Robert Sheckley
To Bell The Cat by Joan D. Vinge
Descending by Thomas M. Disch
The Man Who Loved the Faioli by Roger Zelazny
Corona by Samuel R. Delany
Belling Martha by Leigh Kennedy
When It Changed by Joanna Russ
The Dance of the Changer and the Three by Terry Carr
The Meaning of the Word by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro
The House the Blakeney's Built by Avram Davidson
The Hat Trick by Fredric Brown
No Fire Burns by Avram Davidson
Tomb Tapper by James Blish
Bernie the Faust by William Tenn

Volume 2

Consider Her Ways by John Wyndham
The Market in Aliens by Barry N. Malzberg
Light of Other Days by Bob Shaw

How Beautiful With Banners by James Blish
Men without Bones by Gerald Kersh
Bad Medicine by Robert Sheckley
Dance of the Dead by Richard Matheson
The Heat Death of The Universe by Pamela Zoline
The Thousand Cuts by Ian Watson
Auto-da-Fé by Roger Zelazny
Outside by Brian W. Aldiss
Sundance by Robert Silverberg
The Funeral by Kate Wilhelm
Carcinoma Angels by Norman Spinrad
The Geezenstacks by Fredric Brown

Volume 3

Land of the Great Horses by R. A. Lafferty
They Bite by Anthony Boucher
Hop-Friend by Terry Carr
Clerical Error by Mark Clifton
The Animal Fair by Robert Bloch
Cordle To Onion To Carrot by Robert Sheckley
Come Lady Death by Peter S. Beagle
The Women Men Don't See by James Tiptree, Jr.