

Esther M. Friesner - True believer

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TRUE BELIEVER

"A spoonful of sugar," sang Mary Poppins, "helps the medicine go down." But while it's rare, there are occasions when perhaps it's better not to take the medicine, such as the following case of an eight-year-old boy who doesn't know what his pharmacist has in store for him....

Esther Friesner is the very funny author of sixty short stories and two dozen novels. She lives in Connecticut and clearly knows a thing or two about rodents and children.

"AW, MOMMMMM, DO I haaaaave to?" Jimmy Hanson screwed his mouth shut and made a prune-face, prunes being the only thing he hated more than medicine. (He had even told his parents that prunes were an alien plot by the Toad-Men of Skraax to take over the minds of Earthlings before the invasion, human minds being just so much Silly Putty to the aforesaid Toad-Men, or so the latest issue of Captain Hamster and the Frenzies said. For some reason his parents remained unconvinced.)

Mrs. Hanson stood at her son's bedside, calmly pouring out a dose of thick cola-colored glop into a tablespoon. "Yes, you have to," she said. She placed the open bottle on Jimmy's nightstand and gave him a nonsense-now look. The spoon of doom swooped down to the boy's lips. "So open up."

It was the direct approach, and Mrs. Hanson knew it was doomed to fail. Still, every time the hour struck for Jimmy's medication, she went through this little charade for form's sake. It was rather like the way Mr. Hanson suggested a just-the-two-of-us trip to the movies on nights when he wanted a conjugal right or two.

In point of fact, Jimmy not only did not open up, he clamped both hands over his mouth and glared at his mother. Mrs. Hanson shook her head: Why did she even bother? Time for a little bribery. "Jimmy, darling, while I was out I bought you a nice present. You can have it just as soon as you take your medicine."

"Whi'zit?" Jimmy inquired suspiciously from behind his self-imposed gag.

"It's the very newest issue of your favorite comic book, that's what."

Slowly the hands lowered. Jimmy sat up a little straighter in bed and declared, "Huh-uh. Can't be. I already got the May issue of Captain Hamster and the Frenzies." To prove his point, he snatched up one of the two dozen comic books bestrewn the counterpane and held it so that his mother might see its garish cover and know herself to be caught and shamed in a lie. It was no mere coincidence that he likewise held the book so that it effectively blocked his mouth against any sneak attacks of the maternal spoon.

"Yes dear, I know, but that's not the one I bought for you." Mrs. Hanson was beginning to lose patience. She had not been as gently raised as Jimmy and it was an effort for her to maintain an air of sweet reason when all her instincts clamored to drop negotiations and simply scream Look, you spoiled little yard ape, I've already missed ten minutes of General Hospital. If you don't want to wind up doing a guest shot there, you swallow this stuff now!

However, Mrs. Hanson's whole experience of marriage and maternity had been the triumph of pop-psych and theory-of-the-moment over instinct and gut-reaction. Therefore when a skeptical Jimmy demanded to see proof that his mother had indeed purchased a newer edition of Captain Hamster, she complied without demur.

Setting the filled spoon down carefully atop Jimmy's chest of drawers on her way out of the room, she returned in jig time with the comic in question. "See?" she said from the doorway.

"That doesn't look like Captain Hamster," Jimmy challenged. "Anyway, Daddy just brought me this issue last night."

"Daddy buys you all your comics at the newsstand across from his office downtown. Maybe they don't have the latest issue."

"Oh yeah? He said he bought this one at CVS in the mall!"

"Darling, it says Captain Hamster and the Frenzies right here on the cover, and it says June too. Maybe they changed artists. Besides, I didn't buy this at a newsstand or CVS. I bought it at a genuine comic book store."

"The kind you won't let me go in." Jimmy's brow was knit with the pain of past civil wrongs done him in the name of parental judgment calls. At eight years old he couldn't spell censorship but he could tell it when he saw it, all right. "The kind you don't go in either. How come you did?"

Mrs. Hanson sighed and patiently explained, "When I went out to fill your prescription, my car broke down before I got to the mall. I just barely made it into a service station. You know I don't like leaving you home alone for long when you're sick, so I asked the nice man if there was a pharmacy nearby. Well, there was -- a real old-fashioned drug store with a soda fountain and everything -- and the comic book store was only a block before it. I got your medicine and your present while my car was being fixed. See how Mommy's always thinking of you? Now you just open up for Mommy and --"

"I will if you lemme hold Captain Hamster," Jimmy replied. He looked angelic enough to be packing a shiv.

Motherhood works havoc on perception. Mrs. Hanson heard surrender in her baby's voice when what she should have heard was the sound of butter firming up rock-hard in his mouth. She offered him the comic with one hand and closed in with the filled spoon in the other.

In a breathtaking exhibition of speed and dexterity, Jimmy contrived to slap the new issue of Captain Hamster into the Back off, Jack! position across his mouth while at the same time flinging the old one aside so that it knocked over the open bottle on his nightstand. As the last dribble of medicine oozed its way into the shag carpet, Mrs. Hanson's last drop of patience went the way of the dodo. The neighbors who heard her scream only stopped short of calling 911 because they didn't want to be a bother.

Little Jimmy took the one remaining dose of his wasted medicine without further ado, in rightful fear for his life.

Mrs. Hanson went downstairs to the kitchen to call Jimmy's pediatrician, Dr. Beeman, and ask for a refill on the prescription. She had just hung up the phone when she felt something heavy fall on her shoulder. She turned to find herself staring into a pair of slightly buggy, definitely beady black eyes set in a hairy brown face. A teensy, triangular nose framed by bristling whiskers twitched furiously at her.

"What's this we hear about you yelling at your son?" the giant hamster demanded.

"Yah! Yah! Lemme at 'er! Lemme pound 'er! That'll learn 'er!" Something vaguely human was bouncing wildly up and down behind the hamster, its mop of untamed hair flying. It beat disproportionately large hands rhythmically on the kitchen walls, the counters, even the ceiling, like hell's (or possibly Bedlam's) answer to Gene Krupa.

"Easy, Bongo." The hamster held up one dainty pink paw. From a great distance away, figuratively speaking, Mrs. Hanson noted that the roly-poly beast was clad in a blue jumpsuit, complete with yellow cape. She'd never known there was that much Spandex in the universe.

"Aw c'mon, Cap, let Bongo do a number on her." A fresh voice butted in. For some reason it seemed to be coming from the oversized hummingbird zipping around the hamster's head. On second glance, Mrs. Hanson saw that it was no hummingbird but a winged girl in a spangled pink thong leotard. Despite her small size, she flaunted a pair of mammaries that simply had to be an aerodynamic disadvantage.

"Do it! Do it!"

"Be silent, Laggi, Girl of the Starways," said a fourth voice. "It is not always Bongo's turn to deal with our foes. Sometimes they belong...to me." Those warm, sinister, seductive tones put Mrs. Hanson in mind of dark places where unspeakable secrets murmured siren songs, luring the unsuspecting ever closer to

a hideous doom. She realized it had been much too long since she'd last cleaned out the bathtub drain.

It just so happened that drain was an unfortunate thought to have right then, for the fourth voice belonged to a female whose unnerving smile revealed a formidable pair of fangs. She shunned the Spandex togs of her companions, favoring instead what resembled a full-body covering of black seaweed. Like Laggi (Girl of the Starways) she was a prime candidate for severe lower back pain after the age of thirty.

She took one of Mrs. Hanson's hands in both of her own and with a look only slightly less intense than a coiled cobra's said, "I am Lexa. I walk the night. And I hunger."

Mrs. Hanson couldn't quite make up her mind whether or not to tell this person that it was only three o'clock and that she was walking the mid-afternoon. She decided against it. Some people didn't appreciate having their mistakes pointed out to them by total strangers.

Before Lexa could pursue the conversation, the caped hamster stepped between the two ladies. "First we allow her to explain her shameful treatment of our pal, Jimmy. Then we extract the full measure of justice." The tiny eyes, aglow with righteous indignation, fixed themselves on Mrs. Hanson. "Well? "

"Thank you very much for the opportunity," said Mrs. Hanson, and fainted.

Mrs. Hanson's belief in the curative powers of fainting spells was based entirely on her experience watching soap operas. In that happy realm, it was generally the case that if the heroine found herself facing the unfaceable, she'd faint, subsequently to come to her senses and be handed the happy information that It Had All Been Just a Horrid Dream. (Unless, of course, faltering ratings demanded that she come out of the faint only to pass into either full amnesia or a coma, depending on the state of contract negotiations at the time.)

Such was not the case for Mrs. Hanson. She revived to find that her uninvited callers were still there, that they had contrived to transport her unconscious form upstairs to her own bed, and that Captain Hamster had rooted through her drawers and soaked her best WonderBra in water to make a cold compress for her forehead.

She rose up squawking inarticulate protests, one black, lace-trimmed B-cup slipping down over her eye. Little Jimmy stood by her bedside, holding Lexa's pallid hand and snickering. "Gee, Mom, you look like a pirate," he declared, delighted.

"A sissy pirate," said Bongo, then added, "Arrrh."

Before Mrs. Hanson could respond, Captain Hamster spoke up: "Mrs. Hanson, we beg your pardon. Our pal Jimmy has explained that you were only trying to make him take his medicine. Although we do not approve of your methods, we are willing to overlook minor maternal thuggery in the interests of the boy's health. We feel quite comfortable leaving him in your capable hands once more."

"Leaving....?" Mrs. Hanson could not believe the sweet words she was hearing. She didn't know whence this gang of refugees from a nightmare had come, but she no longer questioned their reality vis-a-vis her sanity. Illusions did not tote full-grown women up an entire flight of stairs, as a rule. And since they were real, she didn't so much care where they'd come from as when they were going to get the hell gone.

"Of course, dear lady. The Frenzies never stay where they are not wanted. I promise you, we will be out of your house and your hair anon." "And my underwear drawer," Mrs. Hanson specified.

Captain Hamster raised one paw and crossed his heart with the other. "Superhero's honor."

One week later, Mrs. Hanson's opinion of superhero's honor was not a thing lawful to be uttered, but at least it was somewhat less incendiary than her opinion of some of the other lifeforms infesting her home. Unfortunately, she couldn't call the exterminator to get rid of them either: They came from the government and they were there to help. They said so. And they showed their IDs and badges and guns to any who dared disagree.

One of these lifeforms was Dr. Lorenzo Oglethorpe, Ph.D., who had neither badge nor gun, but whose unarmed tongue was a hideous implement of destruction nonetheless. It was a vast and terrible pity that he was off limits to exterminators everywhere, for in his own modest way he embodied their professional Grail: He looked exactly like the world's biggest cockroach.

"There's really a very simple explanation for what's happened to your son," said Dr. Oglethorpe.

"Sure there is," said Mr. Hanson, settling back in his favorite armchair. Although it was a weekday, he was at home, on leave with pay until further notice. His employer had proved to be quite understanding of the extraordinary situation chez Hanson, especially after a visit from the government. Now the lucky man took a pull at his beer and frowned to find the bottle empty. "Be a pal?" he said to the FBI agent at his elbow, brandishing the longneck in his face.

"I'll get that, dear." Mrs. Hanson sprang from her seat, closely followed by the agent assigned to her. She snatched the bottle from her husband's hand and hurried into the kitchen. Behind her, Dr. Oglethorpe was expanding upon Jimmy's condition, although he had yet to examine the subject in person. The government-appointed man of science had arrived at the Hanson household that very morning, just after Jimmy's departure for school, yet his lack of firsthand data did not bother Dr. Oglethorpe for an instant. As he himself had said when accepting the Nobel, "Formulate an elegant enough hypothesis and you can always persuade the facts to fall into line."

In Jimmy's case, Dr. Oglethorpe's hypothesis had something to do with Chaos

Theory and cough syrup. Mrs. Hanson didn't need to hear it. She didn't want to hear it. Whenever a professional nerd like Dr. Oglethorpe promised you a "very simple explanation" it was never simple, except to another herd. Wayne Hanson didn't have the scientific know-how to program the VCR, but at least he could fake interest and comprehension while the good doctor droned on.

"Better him than me," she muttered, flipping the lids off a pair of longnecks.

"You say something, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Hanson's personal G-man.

"I was just wondering if you'd like one too," she replied brightly.

"Thank you, ma'am; not on duty."

"Okay." She shrugged and sucked down half a bottle, then belched and giggled.

"Ma'am, are you all right?" The agent seemed to be sincerely concerned.

"No." Mrs. Hanson absorbed the remainder of the beer with a second gargantuan swallow. "Now I am."

There was a sharp humming in her ears. "Did anyone ever tell you that chug-a-lug contests were what brought down the exquisite galaxyspanning civilization of the Form?" It was Laggi, Girl of the Starways, and not the abrupt attack of some beer-fueled illusion. The minuscule heroine hovered in front of Mrs. Hanson's eyes, a blur of wings. "Captain Hamster wants me to tell you that there's to be no more alcohol in this house. It sets a bad example for little Jimmy."

"Little Jimmy is in school right now, along with a bodyguard of seven --count 'em, seven -- FBI agents, and you can tell Captain Hamster from me that if he'd spend less time running my life and more time eating those pesky Jehovah's Witnesses, he might do some actual good around here," Mrs. Hanson snarled.

"Hmph!" Laggi's weensy lips curled with scorn. "In the first place, Captain Hamster does not eat Jehovah's Witnesses or any other religious proselytes; he only stuffs them in his mighty cheek pouches of steel until they've learned the error of their importunate ways. Besides, he doesn't stuff all of them; just the ones who can't take a hint. Second, he says that last batch wasn't Jehovah's Witnesses, they were video journalists from HardCopy. Third, he wants to know why your house is under constant siege by these people, and fourth --" She zipped over to perch provocatively on the FBI agent's shoulder and croon in his ear, "-- has anyone ever told you you look like David Duchovny?"

Mrs. Hanson snatched up the little alien and squeezed her with enough force to crush a full beer can. The assault had no ill effect, for --as Jimmy could have told his mother in a moment -- Laggi's body was strong enough to withstand the whole gamut of cosmic forces from Asteroids to Zeta Rays. (Lucky for Laggi that

Mrs. Hanson didn't know her only weakness was a severe allergy to dairy products, or the put-upon housewife would've dunked the Girl of the Starways in moo juice like an alien Oreo.)

"Now you listen to me, you twerp!" she bellowed. "You go back and tell Super Rodent that he's the reason we're combing paparazzi out of the privet hedges; him and the rest of you. When you idiots showed up, you could've just left this house and us in peace, but no: You had to hang around until the neighbors noticed. You had to stay put until the cops came, and the press, and the government!"

"I don't see how it's any of our doing," Laggi replied in the same tone of voice

Mrs. Hanson generally used on Jimmy, five parts condescension to one part long-suffering patience. "Our purpose is to right wrongs find fight crime. How could we do either until we found out where the wrongs and the crimes were happening? So we had to wait for the six o'clock news, except by that time we were the six o'clock news. You know, some people aren't too cheap to spring for cable so they can get CNN."

"You don't get cable?" The FBI man was appalled.

Just then, there was a loud riff on the door leading from the kitchen to the back yard, then a FLAM! that blew it off its hinges, aided and abetted by the battered body of another federal agent. Bongo stepped into the room, grinning ear to ear.

He was promptly followed by Captain Hamster, who scurried through the ravaged portal and stared down at the bruised and bleeding man. He turned to Bongo and peevishly demanded, "Once, just once, couldn't you simply knock?"

"What can I say?" Bongo shrugged. "I got rhythm." His devil-maycare attitude evaporated when he saw what Mrs. Hanson had clutched in her hand. "Hey! Wottcha doin' to Laggi, Girl of the Starways?"

Before Mrs. Hanson could reply, a slender white hand materialized out of thin air, its blood red nails tracing the length of her ribcage, tickling without mercy. Helpless laughter shook her; she released the alien adventuress just as her assailant, Lexa, became fully visible.

"Dear God, how did you do that?" the G-man blurted.

"How?" Lexa echoed in tones favored by better sepulchres everywhere. "Does it truly matter, the how? In the vast, shadowed realm that is eternity, so little truly matters. I know this, for I am Lexa. I walk the night. And I hunger." She lowered smoky eyelids and drew nearer, adding as she closed in on him, "Also, do you know you look like David Duchovny?"

He blushed becomingly. "Well, I have been told that I --"

"Shall we find out if you taste like him too?"

"I saw him first, you breathing-impaired bimbo!"

Mr. Hanson, Dr. Oglethorpe, and the spare FBI agents walked in just in time to help break up the cat fight between the winged alien and the vampire.

Mr. Hanson quickly decided to leave the peace-keeping violence to the professionals. Taking his wife by the arm, he drew her off into a DMZ corner

of

the kitchen. "Honey?" he said in his patented just-the-two-of us-movie-hotcha wheedle. "Darling? Uh...Do you think you could maybe remember where that drugstore was where you got Jimmy's prescription filled?"

"I already told you, I don't remember," Mrs. Hanson snarled. "I only went there because I happened to get stuck in the neighborhood. I never intended to go back, so I didn't pay attention to where it was, just like I told you and the journalists, and the FBI and that chinless geek Oglethorpe. And I'm getting damned sick and tired of being badgered about this. Dr. Beeman can give you all the copies of Jimmy's prescription you want, so why bug me?"

"Because it is not the prescription per se which is important," said the aforementioned chinless geek. Dr. Oglethorpe too had opted to retire from the field of battle. He was presently cleansing the left lens of his eyeglasses with a pristine white pocket handkerchief. (Laggi, Girl of the Starways, was a fierce fighter, but not the world's most accurate shot with spit.) "You see, Mrs. Hanson, the original medicine which your son took is a simple compound meant to relieve heavy otolaryngological congestion."

"Well of course it is," said Mrs. Hanson blandly while inside she was screaming. He's going to make me listen to his simple explanation! Damn gun control anyway! She cast about for the nearest escape hatch, but all exits from the kitchen were blocked by the squabbling forces of Law and Order versus Truth and Justice.

"Ordinarily, it would have done nothing more to your boy than relieve symptoms of stuffy ear, nose, and throat," the doctor went on. "It is a readily available, frequently prescribed, and constantly stocked pediatric medicament. However, it is my theory that at the drug store where you purchased one particular bottle of this elixir, the pharmacist was, er, less than punctilious in the execution of his professional duties and--"

"He stored the stuff wrong and it went funny on him," Mr. Hanson put in.

Dr. Oglethorpe sniffed. "Hmph! I see nothing humorous about a molecular-level change brought on by undetermined environmental factors. Nor the effect it has had on your son."

"Oh no?" Mr. Hanson folded his arms. "Anything that kid wants to be real gets real! He wants to see a giant rat in tights, whammo!, he gets a giant rat in tights. And as soon as the little woman remembers where she bought the stuff, I'm going over there, buy a bottle, suck it down, and start doing a little wanting of my own. You don't think that's funny, just wait'll you hear me laughing on board my own private yacht!"

"Uh, Mr. Hanson, sir?" It was the agent whose resemblance to David Duchovny had set off the Lexa/Laggi donnybrook. Having successfully reduced that brawl to an exchange of nasty personal remarks (with Bongo as the gleeful referee, he was at liberty to turn his professional attention elsewhere. "Sir, it's not that

simple."

"I should say not!" Dr. Oglethorpe agreed. "The medicine in question is not sold over-the-counter. You would need a prescription to --"

"Besides," the agent put in, "if your wife does happen to recall the location of the drugstore where she purchased the cough syrup in question, we'll have to confiscate all remaining supplies for reasons of national security."

Mr. Hanson took umbrage and launched into a spirited rant against Big Government. It was one of his standard rants, an old favorite that his wife had heard many times before. While Wayne inveighed against jackbooted thugs (though he couldn't tell jackboots from jack squat) she ignored him with a clear conscience and gave herself up to one surprising thought:

I actually understood Dr. Oglethorpe's explanation! Wow. And after all those years of More telling me that real girls can't handle science.

Yes, it had all come together for her in one vast Unified Geek Theory. However, there were still a few details bothering her. Seeing as how the squabble between Laggi and Lexa had run out of steam, she sidled over to the presently unoccupied cosmic quartet of wrong-righters to doublecheck her conclusions.

"Let me see if I've got this straight: Jimmy always wanted you to be real, so as soon as he took that screwed-up cough syrup you became real?" "Quod erat demonstrandum," said Captain Hamster.

"Uh-huh," said Mrs. Hanson, as if a Latin-spouting rodent were an everyday occurrence. "Well, that accounts for it." "For what?"

"For why we've been attracting sects and violence like free gin attracts Republicans. Why our front steps are hip-deep in pamphlets from Buddhists, Bahais, Baptists, Brahmans --"

Captain Hamster raised a staying paw. "I get the picture. I do read the newspapers before I shred them for bedding, you know. I get out of my giant nuclear-powered exercise wheel sometimes."

It was no use: Mrs. Hanson was on a roll, and she didn't even need a giant nuclear-powered exercise wheel to keep going. "-- Muslims, Methodists, Manichaeans --" She paused, took a deep breath, and concluded: "-- Jews, Jains and heaven-help-us gymnosophists! They're all after Jimmy because if Jimmy wants something, it's so. Including what he wants about God, the universe, and -- and --" She spread her hands. "--and the cough syrup did it?"

The hamster nodded. "More or less."

"And if I can remember where I bought the cough syrup, maybe the pharmacist has some more, and then the government can go confiscate it, analyze it, duplicate

it, and use it only in the best interests of national security?"

"Um..." Captain Hamster never could tell a lie. "It will make the government very happy if you can remember where you bought it, yes."

"And once the government's got it, maybe we can sic these religious noodniks on them, for a change?"

"Well, I suppose..." The hamster shrugged very expressively for a creature with no shoulders worth the name.

"Oh, well if that's all -- !" Mrs. Hanson had one of those bell-like laughs singular in its power to annoy. "I charged my car repair on Visa and I gave my husband the receipt. It's got the garage address on it. Find the garage and you'll find the drug store, find the drug store and you'll find the--"

"-- boy's been kidnapped!" shouted the bloody and bedraggled FBI agent who lurched into the kitchen and collapsed into Captain Hamster's outstretched paws.

Less than one hour later, the kitchen was virtually deserted. The wounded agent had barely gasped out half his tale before Captain Hamster and the Frenzies as one shouted their copyrighted battlecry, "Duck and cover, here comes Justice!" and charged off. The other G-men did their comrade the courtesy of letting him tell the full story: How a suicidal band of men (and possibly women) in ninja-knockoff black p.j.s and face masks had stormed the P.S. 187 lunchroom; how Jimmy's bodyguards had been unable to use their firearms, for fear of hitting the children; how in the fierce hand-to-hand combat that followed, the masked invaders had defied both the agents' kung-fu and the lunch-ladies' auxiliary attacks with iron ladles, Formica trays, and Swedish meatballs.

A gallant defense, to no avail: The invaders glommed Jimmy and were gone. Luckily -- if the word could be applied to such a parlous situation -- as they were making their escape, one of their number slipped on a Swedish meatball, fell, and was captured. Under questioning he revealed all, including where his confederates were taking the boy. He even gave the FBI agents a business card with the address of the zealots' hideout on it.

"How did you get so much out of him so fast?" asked the agent who really did look a lot like David Duchovny. "I mean, the regulations say we're not allowed to torture suspects, but --"

"I used my fake IRS badge," the battered agent replied. "He sang like Streisand." He then passed around the tattle-tale business card.

That was all the remaining G-men needed. They lit out without a backward glance, leaving Dr. Oglethorpe to accompany their injured comrade to the hospital and the Hansons to stand in the midst of their halfwrecked kitchen looking like idiots.

Mrs. Hanson broke down into wild sobs and clung to her husband while he did his poor best to comfort her. "Look, honey, it's not like they don't know where Jimmy is. The worst is over. Now the only thing we've got to do is wait here and

--"

"The worst is over?" Mrs. Hanson was no superbeing, but she had powers of ridicule and sarcasm far beyond those of mortal men. "And I suppose an armed hostage situation with our son in the middle of it is just a little walk in the park?"

"Depends on the park," Mr. Hanson replied, trying to lighten the mood. "Ow," he added when his bride wordlessly expressed her desire that he stop playing the fool. She would have added a dollop of harsh words to accompany her patented instep-stomp, but tears overcame her once more.

Her husband held her close, whispered soft words that were the usual nonsense most people intone when trying to soothe the distraught. His assurances had as much footing in reality as a politician's promises, and were similarly based on what he thought his audience wanted to hear.

Mrs. Hanson had spent enough years in the company of Mr. Hanson to recognize yet another load of his patented bushwah when she heard it. He meant well this time, but he had snowed her once too often in the past for far less noble reasons, one of them named Donna and the other Tawni. In ordinary circumstances she would have snapped, "Oh, clam it, Wayne. If someone blew up the whole damn world you'd still try telling me that everything was going to be all right. I believe you about as far as I can shotput Newt Gingrich. Grow up, would you?" Then she would have resumed bawling even louder, just to show him who was boss.

These were not ordinary circumstances.

To her own silent astonishment and completely against her will, Mrs. Hanson found herself becoming less hysterical. The longer her husband rattled on about how the SWAT teams would never do anything to endanger Jimmy and how the FBI had the situation under complete control, the more she became convinced that he was right. The sensation was at once comforting and terrifying. One tiny spark of self-determination flared up in the back of her mind, demanding What the frap is going on here? What's happening to me?

She caught herself saying, "Yes, darling, of course you're right." Her vision flickered. She realized she was actually batting her eyelashes at the goofball she'd married, and that words were escaping her lips bathed in the richest tones of unconditional faith and adoration. The last ort of her former contempt for Mr. Hanson stuck around until it heard her say, "I'm not afraid of anything bad happening so long as you're here to protect us." Then it went belly-up beyond hope of resurrection.

"How right you are, my angel," said Mr. Hanson. (Was it a trick of the light, or was his jaw squarer than before? And where had that manly cleft in his chin

sprung from?) "There's no need to fear so long as I am here to make everything all right. And I will. But why do we waste our time, waiting for others, less worthy, to do what only I have the power to accomplish?" He thumped his chest.

"But you were the one who said we should wait here, my beloved," she replied, running her fingers through his flowing locks. The erosions of time had been miraculously reversed -- better than reversed, for Mr. Hanson had suddenly sprouted a mane of hair that could only be described as lush and -- could it be?

-- heroic.

"Would I suggest so craven a course of action? Forbid it, almighty God! Our little boy needs us. Our place is with Jimmy!" he declaimed, and he swept Mrs. Hanson up in arms gone inexplicably muscular and bore her out to the car.

It was a cow-crap brown Toyota when he popped her into it. By the time he drove through the fifth red light, it had transformed into a sleek, midnight-black vehicle one-third Porsche, one-third Batmobile, and one third robo-panther. He drove at speeds only seen in Spielberg movies, had no accidents, got no tickets, and wore no safety belt. As for Mrs. Hanson, the only sounds she seemed capable of making were alternately "Eek!" and "Oooh!"

Mr. Hanson finally brought his new vehicle to a shrieking, brakeburning halt in front of a comic book store in a strange section of town. As she climbed shakily

out of the car, Mrs. Hanson looked up and down the street, a sense of deja vu heavy upon her. She stared into the comic book shop window; a giant cardboard cutout of Captain Hamster stared back at her, his mighty cheek-pouches of steel crammed with bad guys.

She wanted to exclaim "Holy shit," but for some reason it came out of her mouth as "Oh my goodness me!" One block away, the street was a moil of prowl cars, fire trucks, ambulances, and assorted police transports. Yellow crime-scene tape and sawhorse barricades cluttered up the few feet of space not already occupied by vehicles. All sorts of men with all sorts of guns were swarming everywhere. A dozen bullhorns contended for supremacy.

"Loud, isn't it?" said Captain Hamster.

"Eek!" exclaimed Mrs. Hanson, jumping into her husband's arms. In the past thirty minutes she'd spent more time in his embrace than in the past thirty months.

The caped critter waddled up to the comic shop window and studied his cardboard alter-ego. "They didn't get my good side," he opined. "Are my eyes really that beady?" He made a sound of disgust, then turned to the Hansons. "The hour has struck," he intoned.

Mrs. Hanson said, "Huh?" and checked her wristwatch.

"Not that hour," Captain Hamster told her. He stared Mr. Hanson full in the face, and for a heartbeat the two of them appeared to be the poster children for Significant Pauses everywhere. "Your hour," he said.

Mr. Hanson slapped the giant rodent on the back, threw back his head, and gave one of those exultant laughs sacred only to heroes with prior script-approval and a percentage of the gross. "Oh, this won't take an hour," he said, and strode straight for the nearest prowl car, his wife and the mighty marmotoid trailing in his valiant wake.

He was met by a pair of uniformed officers who attempted to persuade him to turn back, go home, move along and break it up. He chose the latter most option.

He's not really picking up that car and holding it over his head, Mrs. Hanson told herself as she stared at her husband's new way of dealing with less-than-helpful policemen. It just looks that way. The prowl car went sailing through the air and landed one intersection down with a crump. It resembled nothing so much as one of the abandoned Concertinas of the Gods. This done, he continued his onward march, heading right for the storefront site where the police and FBI had the kidnappers holed up.

His approach was greeted by a hail of gunfire. He behaved as if the bullets were no more than bumblebees. In fact, he behaved better than that: In the past, Mr. Hanson had been known to run into the house, screaming like a schoolgirl, whenever his stint at the barbecue grill was interrupted by the appearance of anything with a stinger or a nasty bite, from chiggers to chipmunks.

Mrs. Hanson pressed her fists to her mouth and strangled a shriek as she watched

her now-beloved husband wade through the firefight. She heard herself gasp out the words, "Bullets won't stop him!" and then something heavy struck her from behind, whomping the breath from her body and sending her sprawling headfirst into the side of one of the other police cars. Pretty stars twinkled before her eyes in a charming selection of decorator shades, but she stubbornly refused to slip into unconsciousness. Something deep within her protested that it was bad enough she was spouting cliches, she was damned if she was going to live them too. She hauled herself hand over hand back into the realm of full awareness and rested over the hood of the prowl car.

"Sorry 'bout that," came a sheepish voice behind her.

She turned her head slightly to see Bongo toeing the ground, his face hot with blushes.

"I told you and told you," Captain Hamster chided his redoubtable sidekick. "Some of us were never meant to give others an encouraging pat on the back."

"Well, I said I was sorry," Bongo snapped, and slapped his hand down on the cat's roof for emphasis. The vehicle doubled up into a scrapmetal V, and its complement of officers broke into prayers of thanksgiving that they had not

been
inside their mined car at the time.

Mrs. Hanson shoved herself off the windshield and stood up. (She'd slid down the hood the instant Bongo smacked the car.) She rounded on Bongo and demanded, "What are you waiting for? Why are you just standing there while my poor husband's facing a nest of ninjas singlehanded? You're a super-hero; go help him!"

Captain Hamster intervened. "I'm afraid he can't do that now, Mrs. Hanson," he said. "None of us can."

"Why the heeee -- Why not?" Just in time Mrs. Hanson reminded herself of the Frenzies' dislike for gutter language. She'd taken enough upside-the-head lessons for one day.

"Because little Jimmy believes that his daddy doesn't need any help to save him."

"I don't care what the kid wants, he's got his nerve making Wayne go in there and --"

"I didn't say that this is how Jimmy wants it, Mrs. Hanson," Captain Hamster said softly. "I said this is how he believes it should be."

"Not what he wants but what he...?" Mrs. Hanson spoke as one awakening from a deep and discombobulating dream. Two and two suddenly clicked together on the abacus of her brain, even though the same Mom who'd taught her that girls can't handle science had said similar things about math. In that moment, Mrs. Hanson achieved a conclusion, a decision, and a plan of action all at the same time.

Bullets were still flying but not so many as before. She shaded her eyes and tried to see what had become of Wayne. He was gone from sight, but the door to the kidnapper's lair was now no more than a tangle of twisted metal and shattered glass.

She knew that door. In happier days it had sported several lines of gold-trimmed letters informing the general public that Dolan's Drugstore was open from nine to six weekdays, nine to three Saturdays, with extended evening hours Thursday and Closed all day Sunday.

The last gunshot sounded on the air and was stilled. The FBI agents exchanged speculative looks with the police until someone in authority (or with a lot of nerve) announced, "Let's move in, boys!" They plowed forward en masse, ready for anything.

Anything but Wayne Hanson, glorious in red-white-and-blue Spandex, his shoulders wider than the mangled doorway. He had little Jimmy perched on one shoulder and in either hand he dragged an unconscious ninja wannabe by the scruff. He sidestepped into the street, then tossed his captives, one by one, through the gaping doors of the waiting paddywagon. The policemen stared, nonplussed.

"Where the hell did that thing come from?" asked one.

"Looks like something out of an old gangster movie," said another. "Not like anything we've got in the motor pool."

Mrs. Hanson thought she could tell the nice men just where their newest vehicle had sprung from, but she had other fish to fry, and she was going to do them up brown in magic cough syrup. She dashed through the doorway while SuperWayne fielded the plaudits of the crowd, his rescued son grinning like a beaver at a peg-legged pirates' convention.

Inside the drugstore, all was still and a little sticky. Battered ninjas slumped in puddles of strawberry sauce and slowly cooling hot fudge. Mr. Dolan himself was still tied up and stowed under the soda fountain counter, just below the taps that spouted Coke and Seven-Up and Dr. Pepper, a piece of duct tape over his mouth. Mrs. Hanson tore it off without preamble or ceremony, indifferent to the pharmacist's shriek of pain.

"Where do you keep the cough syrup?" she demanded, wagging the tape in his face. It now sported more than half of the gentleman's former mustache and looked like the world's biggest caterpillar.

"What? Why do you want -- ?" Mr. Dolan winced. His upper lip was an angry red and it obviously hurt to talk. "Look, lady, if you'll just untie me--"

Mrs. Hanson ignored his request. Calmly she glanced about the ruined drugstore until her eyes lit on one of those ornamental glass vessels filled with colored water. She dumped out the water, smashed the glass, selected a good-sized shard, and held it to the still bound pharmacist's throat. "It's a prescription cough syrup for kids, you just dispensed me a bottle of it a couple of days ago, I want some more, I want it now, and I bet you five bucks that if I slit your throat they'll blame it on the ninjas."

Mr. Dolan pursed his lips. "They're not ninjas," he said sullenly. "They're members of the First Church of the Divine Harmony. If you kill me, you won't be able to blame it on them: They don't believe in violence."

Mrs. Hanson surveyed the wreckage. "Pardon me if I die laughing," she said. "They kidnap my son, they beat the crap out of a bunch of FBI agents, they hole up here, they bind and gag you, they hold off all comers in a hail of gunfire, and you tell me they don't believe in violence?"

"Except in the best interests of protecting the Church and saving unbelievers from burning in hell for all eternity," the druggist clarified.

"Oh, well that sounds..." Reasonable didn't strike her as quite the word she was after. "...familiar."

The druggist sighed. "You want to talk sons, try talking to mine. He joined them, which is how they happened to pick my store for their hideout. Even swiped a bunch of my business cards! I tell you, kids today -- "

Mrs. Hanson didn't have time for this. Any minute now the FBI and the cops would come pouring in. "Okay, so they won't blame the ninjas for it if I slit your throat, but you'll still be dead, and all because you wouldn't give me one lousy bottle of cough syrup. Does that really seem like something worth dying for?"

"Hell no," said Mr. Dolan, and to quote the worse-for-ninja-wear FBI agent, he sang like Streisand (the Early Years).

Following his directions, Mrs. Hanson looked up Jimmy's old prescription in his files, told him what she found there, and with his continuing help located the large dispenser bottle on the shelves. Her eyes shone as she took it down and unscrewed the cap.

The cap would not unscrew. The cap was covered with a welter of taunting hieroglyphics instructing the would-be opener to turn cap while pressing down, pushing in at the arrows, doing the hokey-pokey, and sacrificing a red yearling bull-calf without blemish to Aesculaepius.

"It's child-safe!" Mrs. Hanson howled. "This miserable cap is childsafe and it's not even on a consumer-sized take-home bottle! Dear God, why?"

"New regulations," said Mr. Dolan. "I could help you get it open if you untied me." Mrs. Hanson's fingers flew over the knots binding the druggist's wrists and ankles. Sotto voce she cursed all Boy Scout leaders everywhere. Didn't they realize that statistics showed that thirty-one percent of all Tenderfeet grew up to be religious loonies-cum-ninjas?

Once free of his bonds, the pharmacist sat there rubbing the circulation back into his wrists. Mrs. Hanson squatted before him, bouncing on her haunches in an agony of impatience. "Come on, come on, put wheels on it, get that bottle open," she whined.

"What's the rush?"

"Don't ask questions, just do it." The glass shard flashed in his face, trimming the hairs in his left nostril.

As she watched the druggist deal with the recalcitrant bottle, Mrs. Hanson's thoughts bubbled in joyful anticipation. Soon, oh soon! Money, mansions, movie star lovers, my own line of designer clothes at prices most women can afford, a signature fragrance, everything that I always believed should be mine --

"Hurry up," she snarled, making another feint at Mr. Dolan's face with her pickup dagger.

Just then she heard a gasp from somewhere behind her. "Mom! What're you doing?" came little Jimmy's plaintive cry.

The hand that held the nasty, long, sharp pointy piece of glass went numb at the sound. The shard dropped and shattered. Mrs. Hanson turned to see her only child standing in the doorway, backed by Dr. Oglethorpe and a brace of FBI agents. From outside came the hubbub of SuperWayne fielding a host of questions from the media.

Under Jimmy's horrified stare, Mrs. Hanson sensed a bizarre conversion overtaking her. It was as if somewhere deep inside her a hungry vortex had opened up and was now sucking away all vestiges of ruthless ambition. Every Danielle Steel novel she had ever read, replete with the interlaced sagas of long-legged, orgasm-enriched, strong-minded and ironthighed career women, dwindled to so much mental dross. They were replaced by the unmistakable urge to bake chocolate chip cookies and a celestial vision of Martha Stewart's face illuminated beneath the legend *In hoc bimbo vinces*. The cavern of her skull, where once she had hosted the unslaked desire to be one of the Rich and Famous, now echoed with the alien thought: That's not how my Moro's supposed to be!

It was a frightful experience, that invasion. For the first time in her life she was living up to someone else's expectations, willy-nilly. What about self-determination? her ego wailed. What about celebrating the abiding power of me-ness?

As if you ever were self-determined, came the sneered response from the one reactionary morsel of her much-beleaguered spirit. You got married because every second article in the women's magazines is about how to nab a man and every third one's about how to hold him once you've got him. You had Jimmy right off the bat because your parents kept sending you newspaper clippings about the rising rate of infertility and the dangers of late-life pregnancies. You've let everyone else tell you what you're supposed to want so far, including Danielle Steel. Why not let your son in on the act too? Trust me, it's easier than thinking for yourself. And with a sigh of relief it tied on an apron and started hanging dimity curtains all over Mrs. Hanson's soul.

She started toward her son on wobbly legs, hands outstretched. "Oh, baby --" she began.

Before anyone else could move, Dr. Oglethorpe crossed the wreckage and was there to support Mrs. Hanson, lest she fall. "There, there, dear lady, you've been under some strain, but soon everything will be --"

"Who's that guy?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"It's all right, darling," Mrs. Hanson said, smiling weakly. "This is

Dr. Oglethorpe; you never met him. He's a scientist who --"

"A scientist?" Jimmy's voice scaled upwards, aghast.

"Well, yes dear," his mother said, puzzled by her boy's horrified reaction. "What's wrong with -- ?"

"Hey, lady!" Mr. Dolan called from behind. "You still want this?" He wigwagged the big bottle.

The air crackled. A hollow, hideous evil laugh rang out. "I'll take that!" In the blink of several eyes, Dr. Oglethorpe sprang upon Mr. Dolan like the world's biggest spider and snatched the bottle from the pharmacist's grasp. Madness had transformed his bland, geeky features into a writhing mask of power-hungry ruthlessness seldom seen outside a Jonny Quest cartoon. "Today the cough syrup, tomorrow the world!" He threw back his head and cackled, then drew a bulbous purple raygun from the pocket of his chinos.

One of the FBI agents flanking Jimmy tried to shoot the hideously mutated scientist, but a single blast of Dr. Oglethorpe's ray turned him into a skink. The second agent was a slow learner, for which fault he too was soon scuttling all over the floor on four scaly legs. Grinning like a shark with lockjaw, Dr. Oglethorpe rounded the gun on Mr. Dolan. The pharmacist raised his hands in the most peaceable of surrenders. Dr. Oglethorpe zapped him just for the hell of it, then filled the drugstore with maniacal tittering.

"Jimmy, get Daddy!" Mrs. Hanson shouted, but to no avail. Jimmy gaped at the three hapless raygun-spawned lizards and flew into an unreasoning panic. He uttered a wail of despair and, in the best of Stupid Sci-Fi Movie traditions, bolted in the wrong direction: Not out the door and off to summon his suddenly super-endowed father, but over the skinks and straight into the arms of his mom. Even as he did so, Dr. Oglethorpe was upon them, the raygun's snout pressed to Mrs. Hanson's temple.

"Don't try anything...foolish, my dear," he hissed in her ear. He had acquired a Mittel-European accent, heavily laced with the overtones of the Orient, from the same place he'd gotten that raygun. "It would be a shame if the boy were to zee you become a zalamander, ah so?"

Mrs. Hanson moistened her lips. They had gone quite dry, despite a liberal coating of Glossy Melon Surprise. Having a raygun poking you in the side of the head did things like that, the promises of the U.S. cosmetics industry be damned. "Jimmy dear, Mommy thinks this would be a very good time to wish the naughty scientist faaaar, faaaar away," she said quietly.

"He can't wish him away," said the familiar voice of Captain Hamster. The fluffy avenger stood just within the doorway of Dolan's Drugstore, backed by the Frenzies and SuperWayne. Never had Mrs. Hanson seen so grave a look in the colossal creature's eyes. "No more than he can want or will or wink him away. I told you before: Jimmy has the power to change reality not according to what he

wants, but according to what he believes."

"That's what I thought." Mrs. Hanson nodded as much as Dr. Oglethorpe's raygun would allow. "You know, you might've been more specific about it earlier. You're the one who said that if Jimmy wanted something--"

"No, madam, you used the word 'want,' not I; you and the rest of the humans."

"This is a fine time to chop logic," the imperiled lady said. "You'd make a great lawyer."

Captain Hamster looked hurt. "I'm only a superhero," he said. "I'm usually too busy advancing the plot to explain it."

"I, on zee ozzer handt, am a zientist," Dr. Oglethorpe purred in her ear. "Und I humbly beg to assure Memsahib Hanson zat zere iss a verry zimple eggsblanation for --"

"Stow it, Frankenstein!" Bongo shouted, bouncing on the balls of his feet and drumming out his frustration on the soda fountain. The marble countertop snapped and crumbled like a piece of Melba toast.

"Let her go, you fiend!" SuperWayne bellowed from the doorway. He flexed his biceps and the concussion alone was enough to dislodge a fresh shower of plaster from the battered ceiling.

"So sorry, please not to come any closer." Dr. Oglethorpe's triggerfinger twitched. Mrs. Hanson heard a distinct click even though she was pretty damn sure that no raygun worth its salt would make a sound like a Colt .45 being cocked.

But that's how Jimmy thinks it should be? she realized. That's how he believes it is, the same way he believes that his daddy can rescue him from anything and that I'm the perfect housewife and that giant superhero hamsters really exist and that all scientists are mad scientists and -- and -- and -- !

Her heart sank. She knew how great the difference was between wanting and believing. It was a gulf of meaning that had swallowed many faiths, marriages, and Federal budgets. No matter how much Jimmy might want to see his Morn rescued from this ugly situation (skinkifying raygun to temple), he didn't believe it could be done in the existing circumstances (skinkifying raygun to temple). Even though he was only eight years old, he no longer believed in Santa, the Easter bunny, or a deus ex machina.

All of a sudden she remembered one more thing that Jimmy did believe.

"Dr. Oglethorpe, why don't you put that nasty ol' raygun down?" she wheedled.

"Why?" he echoed. "Ze mad zientist always needs zer beautiful hostage to guarantee his ezgape!"

"But it's soooo unnecessary. You've got what you came for. Gulp down a big swallow of that cough syrup and none of them will be able to stop you from

walking out of here and taking over the world before dinnertime. That is what you have in mind, isn't it?"

The doctor stared at her as though she'd turned into a skink of her own free will. "You know, zat's right." He released his hold and scratched his balding pate in thought. "It neffer occurred to me. You know vat zey say: Ven you are a megalomaniac, ze mind iss ze first zing to go, heh, heh. Veil --" He raised the open bottle to his lips "-- here's world domination in your eye."

"Oh, wait a minute, doctor darling." Mrs. Hanson laid one soft, white hand on the madman's arm. "That stuff does taste icky -- just you ask Jimmy if you don't believe me. Let me get you something to wash away the aftertaste, okay?" She used her dimples on him in ways forbidden by the Geneva Conventions. Jimmy rolled his eyes at his mother's kittenish excesses and made loud, pointed gagging sounds, but since he held fast to every eight-year-old boy's belief that all girls are mushy, his powers didn't impede Mrs. Hanson's use of full-bore feminine wiles.

Dr. Oglethorpe regarded her suspiciously. "Ah so, vhy are you beink zo nice to me?"

"You're about to rule the world. Can you blame a girl for wanting to get on your good side? Besides, how could I hurt you?" She brought the eyelashes into play.

"For zat zere iss a very zimple eggsblanation: You could zlip somesink naughty into zat drink."

Mrs. Hanson actually said the words, "Pish-tush, silly man. You're going to be drinking the cough syrup first: Whatever you believe will be real. Do you believe that a woman like me could outwit a man like you?"

"Ha!" Dr. Oglethorpe's contemptuous response was pure reflex.

"Besides --" Mrs. Hanson suggestively traced the curves of the madman's raygun with one finger "-- don't you believe that a woman like me could fall for a big, strong, mad scientist like you?"

"You could?" His eyebrows rose to new heights.

In answer, Mrs. Hanson leaned nearer and breathed in his ear, "A very simple explanation of Fermat's last theorem gets me soooooo hot."

"Ah...ah...ah..." Dr. Oglethorpe's forehead was shiny with sweat which he ineffectually tried to wipe off with the cough syrup bottle. "I zink I viiii haf zat drink, my little cherry blossom."

"Your wish is my command," Mrs. Hanson murmured, and tripped gaily over to the half-ruined soda fountain to draw him a dark and foaming draught. None of the assembled superheroes made a move to interfere, for the evil Dr. Oglethorpe made sure to keep his raygun trained on little Jimmy the whole time as surety for their good behavior.

"Undt now," he said when she returned to his side, "again a toast: To me!" He guzzled the contents of the cough syrup bottle, then dropped the empty to the floor and made a face.

"I told you it tasted icky, pumpkin," said Mrs. Hanson, passing him the chaser.

He looked good for guzzling that too, but partway through he paused, lowered the glass, and stared into it. "Zis iss not zer pause zat refreshes!" he accused.

"No, it's Dr. Pepper," Mrs. Hanson told him.

"Dr. Pepper?" Jimmy echoed. "Ewwwww! Prune soda!"

Calmly and casually, Mrs. Hanson said, "Sweetie, Mommy's told you over and over, Dr. Pepper is very nice and very tasty and Daddy likes it and it is not made from --"

"It is too made from prunes!" Jimmy insisted.

"Do not contradict your mama-san, unworthy offspring," Dr. Oglethorpe snarled. "If she says it is not made from prunes, zen you viii agree or..." He aimed his raygun at the child meaningly.

"But it is so too! It is!" the boy cried with all the fervor of an early Christian opting for the lions. "It tastes like it is, so it is, and if you eat prunes or drink 'era then everyone knows what hap --"

"Eat hot skink, miserable worm!" the mad doctor shrieked, and squeezed the trigger.

A large, green, webbed hand knocked the raygun to the floor, deflecting its beam neatly. "Don't move, earthling," said the warty, pop-eyed alien who had suddenly appeared. Yellow squiggles of pure mental energy shot from his eyes to Dr. Oglethorpe's, buzzing like a hive full of asthmatic bees.

Immediately the deranged scientist froze in place, his eyes glazing over. "Yes, Master," he intoned. As Jimmy could have told him in an instant, if he'd been in any state to listen, not even the awesome powers conferred by the mutated cough syrup could stand against the psychic might of the Toad-Men of Skraax.

Two more Toad-Men materialized in a haze of twinkly lights to slap the helpless human into Salvador Dali's idea of a straight-jacket. "Good work, Commander!" said one. "Close study of this specimen will do much to aid, abet, and hasten our inevitable conquest of this puny planet, mwahahaha* croak.*" The lights twinkled all around them again and they vanished, taking Dr. Oglethorpe with them.

Bongo leaped forward. "Pulsing percussion, Captain Hamster, we can't just let

them beat it like that! He may have been a power-hungry maniac, but he was also a citizen of Earth."

"We can't let them get away with this," agreed Laggi, Girl of the Starways. "Give the Toad-Men of Skraax an inch and they'll take a parsec."

"He was evil, but he was AB-Negative," Lexa chimed in. "My favorite flavor!"

Captain Hamster sighed. "You're right. The twenty-four hour automated teller window of Justice never sleeps. Laggi, summon the Hamstarship!"

The little alien pressed her fingertips to her temples and assumed that constipated look which indicates mental telepathy (as opposed to the other kind)

in action. A loud humming overhead made the drugstore shudder as a circular section of roof melted away to reveal a hovering spacecraft. A hole irised open

in its light-encrusted underbelly and two incredibly long ropes dropped to the ground. While Lexa merely dematerialized and Laggi soared into the ship under her own power, Bongo and Captain Hamster shinnied up hand-over-hand and paw-over-paw in less time than it would take to please the most autocratic of seventh-grade gym teachers. Then the ropes were sucked back into the spacecraft

like so much spaghetti, the hole closed, and the mighty Hamstarship spun off into the cosmos.

Mrs. Hanson watched Captain Hamster and the Frenzies go, petulance creasing her

brow. "Great, just great," she muttered. "Now who's going to clean up this mess?" And when she said mess, she wasn't thinking of the wrecked drugstore or the forever-lost cough syrup or the fact that Wayne couldn't possibly sell insurance dressed in a caped leotard and tights. She was thinking of Jimmy.

Jimmy, who in five short years would be a teenager. Jimmy, who would then be ripe for believing any stupid thing his stupid friends told him. Jimmy, who would believe with all his omnipotent heart that his parents were reactionary troglodytes with the brains of cole slaw.

Mrs. Hanson didn't like cole slaw. Something had to be done.

Jimmy was still staring after the vanished Hamstarship when his mother tapped him lightly on the shoulder to reclaim his attention. "Didja see it, Mom?" he exclaimed, whirling around. "Didja see it? Gee, I wish I could've gone with them."

"You can, darling," Mrs. Hanson said.

"Huh ?"

"I said yes, you can go with Captain Hamster and the Frenzies to fight the Toad-Men of Skraax."

"I can?" This from the woman who wouldn't let him bicycle around the block by himself? That guarded look of juvenile skepticism was back on Jimmy's face full

force. Mrs. Hanson smiled inwardly. Perfect.

"Sure, you can," she pressed. "It's all up to you. You see, anything you want to

happen will happen. Now don't give me that look, dear, there's a very simple explanation: It's all because that cough syrup I fed you a couple of days ago gave you the power to --"

"It did?" Jimmy scowled. Mrs. Hanson could almost see his thought processes at work: Magic cough syrup, yeah, right, what does she think I am, a kid? She's just saying this so next time I'll swallow that yucky gunk without holding out for a new Captain Hamster comic. Well, she can't fool me! With a smug look of complete triumph Jimmy shouted, "That cough syrup didn't do anything to me! I don't believe it!" And he meant it, too.

The universe went *poik*, a comprehensive sound-effect that included a lot of retroactive reality-adjustments.

"Did you hear that?" asked Wayne, his old self once more.

"Sounded like a backfire," replied one of the restored FBI agents.

"Since when do backfires go *poik*?" a rehumanized Mr. Dolan wanted to know.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the other former skink. "You're not cleared to receive that information."

Mrs. Hanson surveyed the results of her ploy and was satisfied. She breathed a great sigh of relief and turned to her son. "Come along, Jimmy, we're going home now."

"Aw, Mommmmm, do I haaaaave to?" Jimmy dodged her outstretched hand and dashed behind the smashed-up soda fountain. Mrs. Hanson shook her head over her headstrong child and gave chase.

The chase was cut short when she stepped on something round and her ankle twisted out from under her. Cursing merrily, she picked up the offending object and was about to hurl it against the farthest wall when she noticed what it was.

It was the discarded cough syrup bottle. A single drop of the fabulous contents glistened on the rim. Dr. Oglethorpe had done his best to drain it dry, but he was a man, not a vacuum pump. Mrs. Hanson caught the drop on her fingertip before it fell and popped it into her mouth.

The structure of DNA unscrolled before her like a runaway sheet of shelf paper. Differential equations rattled through her mind as easily as nursery rhymes. She never had believed what her mother said about girls and math and science. And that was only the beginning. As for some of those women's magazine articles she'd swallowed whole, and those allwise parenting gurus she'd obeyed without question, and those three or four or fifty-some-odd gentlemen in Foggy Bottom who kept preaching that equal pay was the first step that inevitably led to devouring your young...

For the first time in her life, Mrs. Hanson knew exactly what she believed.

Somewhere in the universe the cry rang out: "Duck and cover, boys, here comes Justice. And man, is she ever pissed!"

