The Visionaries
by Robert Reed

Regarding Mr. Reed's new story, we've been told (by reliable but unnamed sources) that while the manuscript for it sat in your editor's pile of submissions, Mr. Reed received an unexpected phone call. The call was from a gentleman in Sherman Oaks, California, whose name you might find on our masthead. We were not privy to its contents, but Mr. Reed sent us an email in which he said he was now hiding in his basement with his shotgun in his lap.

We wish Mr. Reed well and we hope the events surrounding this story won't affect his amazing productivity. (It isn't hard to type with a shotgun in one's lap, is it?)

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Everyone is an unmitigated failure.

And then success comes, or it doesn't.

When I was still an unpublished author, I wrote a long story about an average fellow wandering through his relentlessly unremarkable life. His world wasn't particularly different from mine, except for being set in some down-the-road future. The plot was minimal, the sf ideas scarce. Yet something about the narrative felt important to me. Typing like a madman, I produced a 25,000-word manuscript complete with rambling conversations and a contrived terminology. The next several drafts were agonizing attempts to reshape the work, creating something leaner and more salable. But I couldn't seem to apply even the most basic lessons of effective writing. In the end, I had a novella nobody would willingly read.

But on the premise that I didn't know squat, I licked a fortune in stamps and addressed the oversized manila envelope to the first magazine on my list of professional markets.

A few weeks later, both the manuscript and a standard rejection note were jammed into my tiny mailbox.

The next magazine yielded the same discouraging result.

The third market was decent enough to include little index cards, one card begging for a plot, while another explained how the golden age of

science fiction was twelve—the implication being that if I wasn't writing for my boyhood self, I was wasting everybody's precious eyes.

But this was the 1980s, which were something of a literary heaven. There was a surprising number of healthy professional magazines as well as various anthologies and semi-prozines, each of those markets endlessly dredging the muck for worthwhile stories. And I was a stubborn soul, which can be a blessing for any would-be author. The same tired manuscript could circulate for years, and whenever editors changed or new markets opened up, I found myself with fresh targets to bombard.

But in this case, rabid conviction wasn't necessary.

I won't mention where I sent my novella next, except to say that the market was tiny, and it died long ago.

The blunt truth is that I have taken, and am now breaking, a solemn pledge to confess nothing, including that little tidbit. But it's important to take this single risk—for reasons that will, I hope, grow clear in time.

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Ten days after sending off the manuscript, it returned to my mailbox.

On this occasion, nobody bothered with a rejection slip, and my big paper clip was missing too.

Bastards.

I was still trying to decide which address to write on the next envelope when my phone rang. A voice that I didn't know asked if I was so-and-so, and when I admitted that I was, the voice introduced himself before inquiring if I would like to sell him my story.

I recognized the gentleman's name, as it happened.

If you enjoy good science fiction, then perhaps you've read his work. Though probably not, since our old voices tend to fade away rather quickly these days, through retirement or death, or simply because tastes change inside the tiny, fickle world of publishing.

As a writer, I had sold absolutely nothing.

And here was somebody who wanted to purchase my work. So I

gulped once and blurted, “Yes, of course. Sure.”

“Very good,” he said.

“I didn’t realize,” I managed. “You’re an editor too?”

That earned a breathy silence. Then the wise old author told me, “No,” before adding, “This is a rather unique situation.”

I didn’t have anything to say.

He referred to me as, “Sir,” and then asked when we could meet. “These matters are best done in person,” he said.

I teased myself with images of being carted off to some writerly location, like New York or San Francisco, or maybe Oxford, Mississippi.

But then he promised, “I can be standing at your front door in ten minutes’ time.”

“Where are you?”

“At the Holiday Inn.”

I was as naïve as could be, but this seemed like an unlikely twist in the ongoing plot.

“May I come and make my offer to you, sir?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Very good.”

He hung up, and then I hung up, considering what little I knew about this semi-famous author—the novel and handful of stories that I had read, and what I thought I might have heard about the man.

Did I have time to buy beer?

I settled on running the vacuum and stacking my dirty dishes in the filthy kitchen sink, and then because much of the world appreciates pants, I pulled on a clean-enough pair of jeans.

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Writing can be very easy or brutally tough, depending on the specific task in question. When I hide my many weaknesses and make a parade of my two or three genuine strengths, I think I do rather well for myself. The trouble is that even after years of practice, I'm still learning exactly what my strengths are.

The most important lesson I ever taught myself is that I'm not in the prediction business. To succeed, all I need to do is catch an interesting glimpse or two of somebody's future. Not my future, or even my world's. But *somebody's* tomorrow has to be imagined and then grafted into my present, which is always interesting to me, and of course the present has its roots buried deep in the fecund, well-watered past. Which is why science fiction, at least in my head, serves as a perspective where all times blend together in a palatable, too-often predictable stew.

Imagine my honored guest as being male and white. Though even if that happens to be true, I'm not admitting much, since sf writers frequently have testicles and a European heritage. I'll also warn you that he, or perhaps she, has subsequently died. Although that could be another misdirection—an easy lie meant to keep you safely removed from the truth.

For the purpose of this telling, he was a middle-aged fellow with bright eyes and a trim white beard as well as a considerable weight problem. And I lived in a small apartment at the top of a steep flight of stairs, which meant that to make good on his promise, he had to fight a lot of gravity to reach my front door.

Hearing his gasps, I stepped out on the landing and quietly watched the ongoing drama.

He survived the climb, barely, and once the poor gentleman could breathe again, he shot me with an all-business stare, introducing himself.

I shook a sweaty hand and invited him inside.

This was a weekday evening, as I recall. Sunlight was pouring through the big west window. I had always assumed that writers were endlessly curious souls, but my guest acted distinctly uninterested in the details of my life. He ignored my posters, records, and dirty dishes. He gave my bookshelves a quick glance, probably just to hunt for his own name. Then he collapsed into an old green chair that my mother had donated to me instead of the Salvation Army. I occupied a lumpy sofa with a similar pedigree. He was dressed for comfort, but I can't remember what he was

wearing. I do have a vivid memory of his briefcase, however. It was small and leather and rather expensive looking, sitting in his expansive lap. Beside me was the battered copy of my story, fresh from the day's mail. I don't remember any pleasantries. If we made small talk, those ordinary words have been lost to the ages. But he did name my story by its title and then mentioned that he had read it through more than once, and he was prepared to offer me a fair sum to own every last word.

"Own every last word," was his phrase. I have never forgotten that.

In a rare show of business acumen, I put on a skeptical face, asking what was fair.

"Twenty cents," he told me.

At that moment, I would have sold the manuscript for any stack of pennies—just so long as I was admitted into the ranks of the professional.

But then he added, "Per word," and watched as my expression changed, taking a certain joy out of what my eyes and gawking mouth showed him.

I gasped, not quite believing what I had heard.

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Then my benefactor reached into his briefcase, big hands pulling out a fat manila envelope. With a flourish, he withdrew a stack of one hundred dollar bills, and he counted out fifty of those green treasures, spreading them across the freshly vacuumed, decidedly ugly shag carpet.

There isn't a novice writer who hasn't dreamed of his first sale, the scene often accompanied by the clashing of cymbals from an orchestra playing giddily somewhere offstage.

But I doubt any of us envision this kind of moment.

Dumbfounded, I stared at that staggering fortune. For me? For a story that couldn't find any other home?

"I don't remember," I whispered. "What magazine wants this?"

The man hadn't noticed my apartment, but he had a stern, absorbing way of staring into my eyes.

“Or is it for some theme anthology, maybe?”

“No,” he said, his voice just short of loud, the single word delivered with a rigid backbone.

“And how did you find it? Do they let you read the slush piles?” I asked, naming the last market to reject me.

He took a long wet breath. Sternly, he said, “My methods have to remain confidential. And I have to warn you: We have no intention of actually publishing your work.”

“No?”

He sat back in the old chair. When he stopped staring at me, his eyes lifted. “If you accept our money,” he explained to the ceiling, “then you’re making a solemn and binding commitment. From this day forward, whenever you write about—”

He named my protagonist; “Merv,” I’ll call him.

“Send your work directly to us,” he told me. “And only us.”

“Who is ‘us’?” I inquired.

From the briefcase came a tiny white business card, nothing on it but a P.O. box address and a phone number—the former set at one end of the country, the latter wearing an area code from the opposite coast. “I promise. We’ll pay handsomely for everything of value. But you shouldn’t expect traditional contracts or other paper trails. This is a handshake arrangement. And with the handshake comes my word that as our relationship matures, we will offer you substantial increases in pay.”

“If I write about Merv again.”

“You will,” he assured. “Probably not often, but it will happen. At random intervals, and for the rest of your life.”

“Okay,” I managed. “But what’s this all mean?”

He dropped his gaze, and with a sly smile, he told me that he knew quite a bit more than he would ever admit.

“And who’s ‘us’?” I asked again.

My benefactor set the business card on top of the hundreds and then sat back in that awful old chair.

“I don’t understand,” I confessed.

With a shrug, he said, “But you’re a bright youngster. From what I see, you’re even a little bit clever. Keep filling the pages with words, and there might actually be a modest little career waiting for you.”

That was heartening news, I thought.

“But you’re never going to publish my story? Ever?”

The old writer’s patience frayed a little. “Here’s one very good lesson, son. One freelance writer to another: If somebody offers to buy your very worst work, and they pay you real money, and on top of that, they swear that the world will never see what you have done ... well, you should take their charity, my boy, and smile while you do it.

“Am I understood?”

My benefactor had a talent for predictions.

As promised, I gradually built up a small, tidy career as a writer. Within six months, I’d made my first professional sales—a little story to a failing anthology, another to a minor magazine. One of those efforts was noticed in larger circles, and through it, I managed to sell my first novel—a rambling, exuberant, and exceptionally youthful stack of pages for which I was paid a fraction of what my unreadable novella had earned. But long before my novel’s pub date, my various monies ran out and my talents with short fiction were proving uneven at best.

Ask any writer: Careers often begin with long droughts.

After I sold a third story, I went blank. I went cold. I forgot how to write, or I was too self-conscious after my little successes to work effectively. Whatever the culprit, the only way to pay my rent was to bring “Merv” out of his strange little box, inviting him to take over my brain for as long as he wished.

But even Merv proved to be a difficult muse.

When I wanted him, the man wasn't there. I would sit and sit and sit, my butt going numb in an office chair that I'd bought second-hand from Goodwill. In those years, I wrote on a manual office Royal typewriter—a chunk of steel as reliable as the sunset—and my paper was the cheapest stock I could find, and my little desk was another worn-out gift from home. I would type Merv's real name again and again, but that did nothing. Retyping the original story seemed to help, but I eventually decided that was just a byproduct of wishful thinking. Weeks and months would pass, and then during some moment devoid of significance, I would see or hear something that wasn't entirely real. Usually a disembodied voice would call me Merv, or sometimes a random face would swim into the corner of an eye, or maybe I'd feel somebody's fingers slipping inside a phantom pocket, hunting for a set of cold car keys. And if I happened to be close to my Royal, I'd begin transcribing whatever decided to reveal itself to me.

Most of the time I managed only a few disjointed pages.

The "Merv" stories felt about as urgent and genuine as what I did when I wrote well—immersed in the images, lost to time. But unlike my sf work, there never was that delicious sense of the profound, much less any trace of an authentic plot line. And afterward, rereading the raw manuscript, the whole mess always felt contrived, cluttered, and pointless.

Like the dream you enjoyed at dawn, the experience enthralled until the moment you opened your eyes.

Around the fourth time he slipped inside my skull, I began wondering if Merv was real.

That story began and ended with my protagonist sitting before an enormous television, and I did nothing but describe what he was seeing and hearing on an ever-shifting, seemingly endless array of channels.

Seven pages was the sum total of that effort. But somebody must have liked what I did, because as payment, I received a sealed plastic package containing three thousand dollars in cash.

What if I was seeing the future?

Yet this was a rather anemic gift, as mind-bending wonders go. I had no control over when the magic would strike, much less any influence in Merv's motions, words, or thoughts. Imagine a video camera wielded by a stranger, and worse still, a stranger who had never used a camera before. The views kept leaping from this to that and back again, no rhyming reason

to the mess and not a single landmark looking even a little familiar. In those seven pages, the longest pause came when Merv picked up a cold beer, barley and hops swirling against my tongue as well as his. Then I felt his belch and heard somebody say, “Excuse you.”

I didn’t recognize her voice or know her name. But Merv turned to look at a girl pretty enough to earn a long stare from me. I’m going to call her “Mary.” But Merv didn’t stare. He barely gave his companion a glance. I heard him grunt, “Sorry,” before flipping over to a screaming commercial for some kind of computer game. Over the roars of exploding tanks, he added, “Excuse me for living, darling.”

On his finest day, Merv was an unrepentant male animal.

Yet some cosmic purpose—maybe just to serve as the punchline for a god’s joke—had connected the two of us in this fundamental way.

Perhaps other people had this odd gift, I reasoned. Perhaps millions of us did. But few of us enjoyed that very peculiar habit of sitting alone in front of a typewriter, looking at bare white paper, begging images and compelling words to find their way into an otherwise empty brain.

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Just once, I used a piece of Merv’s world inside one of my regular stories.

The first magazine rejected the work for unrelated reasons.

But two days before that manuscript returned home, a familiar voice called me. With considerable disappointment, the old writer informed me that I had broken one cardinal law: I’d employed a brand name that belonged to him. To them. “And before you send that story out again,” he growled, “I want the name removed from the text.”

I felt rather brave that night.

Or maybe I was in an abnormally bad mood.

Either way, I refused to see how one word mattered. I reminded him that there wasn’t any contract between us, and I claimed that “Merv” was just another character and I could do what I wanted with the bastard and the world that I was drawing around him.

My benefactor let me ramble for a while. Once my energy was spent, he firmly reminded me, “Through us, you have earned thousands and thousands of dollars. And now perhaps you can tell me, how much of that good cash have you declared on your taxes?”

None.

“I don’t want to bring in the IRS,” he said. “And you don’t want me to make that phone call either. Do you?”

It is amazing the things that make a young man crumble.

I whispered, “Please don’t.”

“Pardon me?”

“Don’t call them.”

There was a long pause. Then he mentioned, “Oh, and by the way. You made two small mistakes with your story. And I think you missed a killer ending too. But I can help you fix those problems. I even know the editor who definitely needs to see your manuscript next.”

And that’s when I found a new and compelling reason to cherish our rich, very odd relationship.

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My first novel garnered fair to good reviews, plus a few calls for readers to watch my newborn career. My second novel had the typical sophomore problems, but the third novel found a modest audience. Then after several miscues, I stumbled into a far-future series full of distant worlds and brave humans—my own private playground for the imagination.

Combined, my writing money and “Merv money” proved good enough to lift me into the middle-class.

I joined my professional organization, and whenever attending the big conventions, I’d seek out the hotel suite that served as a party hub for writers and editors and their suffering spouses. At one Worldcon, I noticed an older woman wearing a rather flattering dress, and more importantly, I noticed that she was staring at me. The ribbon on her badge identified her as a writer. What with the difference in our ages, her interest was pleasant but not too inviting. I returned a couple of her stares with polite, empty

smiles. I drifted close enough to catch her name and a peek at her ample cleavage. And being human, I made up a story with me as the protagonist, and she was the horny old lady who had a thing for my work and maybe my body too.

I was completely, foolishly wrong.

Eating dinner with colleagues, I brought up the woman's name. Did anybody know her?

One of them did. I learned that my lady admirer was a writer by the narrowest margins—a single sale to a marginally professional market, and that more than twenty years ago. And why, by the way, was I asking about her?

"She's got her sights on me," I boasted.

"Oh, I seriously doubt that," my colleague laughed. "Since she's gay and always has been."

I must have looked disappointed.

Then with the typical writerly tact, somebody else piped in, "You're going to have to find another grandma for your May-September thing."

But I was right; the woman was keeping tabs on me.

I sat on a panel the next morning: The Effective Habits of the Working Writer. I find that success in that public environment means saying as little as possible, yet leaving the audience believing you might not be a total idiot. I thought I managed that trick quite nicely. Two minutes before we finished, the mystery woman slipped into the conference room. She sat in back, dressed for a fancy cocktail party, smiling intently at no one but me. After the panel concluded and I autographed a few books for fans, my admirer approached, waiting her turn before handing me a business card with a phone number and P.O. box that I knew by heart.

On the back of the card was a hand-scrawled note asking me to meet her in an hour, in the hotel's darkest bar.

That's where we finally made our introductions.

I was nervous in ways I normally don't feel: Heart-thudding anxiety and a drought on the tongue, my panicked brain fighting to sound brave, asking,

“Why do you keep watching me?”

Her smile was the brightest thing in the room.

“I just wanted to meet the next so-and-so,” she admitted, naming my benefactor. And her benefactor too, it seemed.

Three words best describe humanity’s attitude toward the universe:

I DON’T UNDERSTAND.

That’s what I confessed to her. I pleaded complete ignorance, and she responded with amusement and some disappointment. “I thought he would have explained this to you,” she mentioned. “Or you would have pieced it together for yourself, at least.”

I didn’t tell her my guesses. Suddenly I had no faith in any of them.

“Want to hear a story?” she asked.

“Always.”

“There used to be so many pulp magazines,” she began, the face and voice turning wistful. “One of the pulps had a certain young editor—I doubt you’d recognize his name—but he was very lucky, and he was exceptionally gifted, particularly when it came to talents that editors don’t need. For instance, the youngster had a spectacular memory for useless detail. And he had a paranoid’s ability to string together unlikely events. And where wiser editors would have stopped after page two of a bad manuscript, he would push through to the end, absorbing every cliché and lame plot twist into his cavernous brain.

“He was the genius who noticed certain key repetitions in the slush-pile submissions. Settings and time periods—near-future, you’d call this—and most important, he found a string of shared colloquialisms. Not the usual sf terms, mind you. Nothing about hyperdrives or phasers. But in two unreadable manuscripts submitted by two separate authors, there were clear references to a terminal disease called AIDS.”

She paused, weighing my response.

“When was this?” I asked.

“Maybe in the forties, maybe earlier.” She shrugged. “I probably

shouldn’t tell you that much. But somebody is going to approach you. Somebody you haven’t met yet. This will be official business, and I want you ready. And for purely selfish reasons, I hope this heads-up helps me earn your trust.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. But flattery is flattery, and it was working on me.

She continued: “Eventually that long-ago editor identified eight novice authors, none of whom could write their way out of obscurity. But each had a powerful interest in a single shared future. Each had a favorite protagonist. Like you have your ‘Merv.’ They might try to shoehorn their boy or girl into a space opera or a zombie fight. But even those inept attempts at creativity couldn’t obscure the common threads.

“After compiling his list, the editor traveled the country, meeting with each would-be writer. He discovered that all of his subjects had a consuming interest in the future. Their fascination began in early childhood, and the best two or three of them talked about closing their eyes and seeing some unborn world through someone else’s gaze. Which is how I feel when I get into that state.”

“Who’s your Merv?” I asked.

“Her name’s Yvonne, and she won’t be born for another fifty-three years. Since our lives and theirs run at the same pace, that puts her more than a century in the future. Which is about as far ahead as any of us can see.” She closed her eyes, a fond smile emerging. “In every example, the visionary is linked to somebody of the same gender and age, a similar culture and essential beliefs. Merv is very much like you, I’d say—a white heterosexual Midwestern American male. While Yvonne is a Californian Free-Stater in her late fifties. She’s white and a little heavy, and she’s a very happy lesbian, and in a hundred other ways, she could be me.

“And in a thousand ways, she isn’t me at all.”

I had never asked this question aloud. But this was the perfect moment to say, “How the hell does this happen?”

“You mean, what’s the scientific underpinning?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re the young talent. How do two bodies separated by decades

make contact each other?”

I shrugged. “Somebody must have a guess.”

“Guesses are cheap.” My new friend finished her coffee, and then she told me, “I’m not a very good writer, you know.”

I didn’t respond.

“You’re far more capable than me,” she continued. “I can see that, and I don’t even like science fiction anymore.”

“But you once sent off stories.”

“In my school-girl years.” She shook her head, a young woman lurking in her laugh. “I was captivated by the twenty-first century. Enough so that my family wondered if I was mildly crazy.”

“That’s how they found you?”

“Of course. That old-time editor had built an organization around those first visionaries. He founded a mostly invisible society that still combs the slush piles, searching for key phrases or telltale words. And most important, his people are always hunting for souls like us.”

“Microsoft,” I said.

“What about it?”

“Through Merv, I saw an advertisement about them. It was a real corporation by then, but I didn’t know it.”

“We’re investment tools. Is that what you’re thinking?”

“Aren’t we?”

“We can be.” But then she warned, “There is a lesson that we like to share. Imagine that it’s 1900, and you find a photograph from the future, and it shows the typical city today. Nearly a hundred years in the future. The streets are full of cars, the skies jammed with airplanes ... and what can you do with this rich glimpse of things not yet born?”

“You tell me,” I said.

“When cars were first manufactured,” she said, “there were dozens if not hundreds of competing companies. It was the same for planes, and how could anyone look up at those tiny jets and guess that Boeing would eventually build most of the world’s airliners?”

“That’s why brand names are so important,” I offered.

“But they’re not always an answer. For instance, after decades of expansion and technological mastery, the major airlines are currently flying passengers and cargo to every part of the globe. Yet if you tally up all the bankruptcies and debts along with the profits, you end up with an industry that has never made a genuine dollar. Which leaves the airlines, as spectacular as they look, as rather bad investments, all in all.”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“And there’s a bigger problem,” she continued. “Suppose you know about Microsoft’s rich future. You go in early and buy up a ton of shares. But time is incredibly sensitive to small touches. You have to remain invisible. Your touch can’t be felt. But at some point you are going to influence the company’s evolution. Your capital will make the stock price too high, and management gets a little too confident, and the next thing you know, this baby monopoly of yours is lurching down the wrong path.

“Which forces the question: How much can you do before you begin to strangle your golden goose?”

I nodded, grinned. “So I’m a visionary, am I?”

“The same as our benefactor is,” she said. “And the same as me. Except of course that I’m much, much better at this business.”

Now I took offense.

“But why shouldn’t I boast?” she asked. “Sure, you understand plot lines and characterizations. But Yvonne and I are as tightly joined as any two ladies can be, with or without the years stuck between us.”

“So you’re the expert here,” I conceded. “All right. Do you have a guess how this process works?”

“The vision trick? Oh, sure.”

I leaned forward.

“Quantum mechanics,” she blurted. Then she laughed, at me or at herself. “I know, I know. That’s just sf-speak for magic. But that’s what this is. Magic. When I bother with the question, what I usually assume is that people have always had a tiny but useful capacity to see into the future. It wouldn’t take much talent to give us an advantage, and a tiny blessing would eventually make an impression on our genetics. What we need are connections to unborn minds that happened to be wired like ours. Since minds are filled with flowing electrons, and since electrons are ghostly things on the brink of reality....

“Well, write the logic however you want. But that’s the story I prefer. I think of the future, and Yvonne’s head is waiting for me. And likewise, it probably helps that my receptor seems just as fascinated in the past as I am in the future.”

I sat quietly, thinking to myself.

“By any chance is your Merv a backward-looking individual?”

“He’s a traditionalist,” I allowed.

A beer-swilling Neanderthal, I might have said.

I asked, “What about our benefactor?”

“Hector is his döppelganger,” she offered. “A middle-management gentleman inside the future insurance industry.”

“I didn’t mean that,” I said. “What else does he do?”

“How does our angel serve this secretive and very peculiar operation?” She winked. “He has earned a fortune by helping young visionaries become professional writers. It’s one of the best ways to keep us happy. Or did you guess that trick already? The wise, worldly author coaches us, allowing us to make those one or two early sales. And because of her tiny career, an aging dyke can attend these conventions as a professional, even though she long ago gave up all pretense of a career in fiction.”

“How many of us are there?”

“There’s just a handful of full-time writers,” she said. “And that includes you and our benefactor. Which is why, according to my usually

reliable sources, the higher-ups are looking at you to take the helm when the old gentleman finally retires. They want a younger writer to serve as their face and voice, and when necessary, to act as their bullwhip."

I tried not to feel flattered, but I was. Then I tried to embrace this possibility of success, and revulsion swept over me.

"All right," I said. "What about people like you?"

"The occasional writers?" She tossed her head to one side. "Well, there's quite a few more of us. I don't know hard numbers, but from what I've been told, six or maybe seven percent of the associate SFWA members are visionaries."

This was a lot to swallow, but I was doing my best.

"What happened to the original editor? Is he still alive?"

"I've heard he is, and I've heard that he isn't. Either way, he has no active role in today's operation."

"And who is in charge?"

"Nobody either of us will get to meet." She looked around the gloomy bar, as if that would prevent the world from eavesdropping on us. Then she leaned close, her breasts spilling across the tabletop. "But what do names matter, just as long as the money's good?"

Studies show that the human eye sees almost nothing.

Walk into a strange room and your gaze flits back and forth, up and down, noticing a chaotic series of details that the brain rapidly and imprecisely organizes into an image that only seems to resemble a snapshot. Novelty, if recognized, might beg for a prolonged stare. The same is true for perceived threats and objects of love. But what the eye ignores is everything familiar, everything safe, and if you're limited to the perceptions of an ordinary man sitting in the future—thirty-two years from the present moment, in my case—then you have to work hard to ignore the tire commercials and the next sip of beer, concentrating on the tiny glimpses of what genuinely matters.

For some years now, Mary has lived with my Merv.

She is a voice off-stage and the sleepy face across the breakfast

table, a consummate folder of laundry and the loyal delivery system of Budweiser. And while I have never seen a wedding ring riding her finger, I have the strong sense that she considers the two of them to be married, at least in some informal way.

She calls him, “Darling.”

When he looks in her general direction, she smiles.

Merv and I are entirely different species. Maybe every other visionary latches onto a brain that mirrors his own, but not me. At least that’s what I tell myself. But Merv and I do share one glorious commonality: Each in his own fashion, we are in love with Mary.

Three times, I have seen the young woman naked.

On two occasions she was dressing in a rush—for work, I presume—and my glimpses were little more than teases. But the golden incident was early in their relationship. Merv strode into the bedroom to find his lover stretched out on their sheets, on her belly, bare elbows holding up her fine shoulders and one moistened finger turning the page of a book that couldn’t have mattered less to the two men ogling her.

She was pretty and trim, younger than her boyfriend by at least ten years, and blessed with the kind of delicate face that would remain girlish until old age set in. She had an easy smile and an infectious way of flipping her dark brown hair. And she thought enough of her man to have had his name tattooed in a private place, and I imagine that’s why Merv was just then staring at her bare rump. He was reading his name, which wasn’t Merv. Then with a single finger, he traced the artful letters, dimpling the smooth firm flesh beneath.

That sweet vision came early in their relationship.

By the time I shared coffee with my female colleague, Merv’s common-law marriage had evolved past romance and then past comfortable, entering a realm of practiced indifference.

I often saw Mary’s coat on a hook and her wet toothbrush on the glass shelf above the bathroom sink. And her voice came into Merv’s ears on occasion, but he didn’t act particularly eager to look in her direction.

Once when he was alone, he paused in the hallway, and for a few moments we studied some kind of holographic image, our girl standing at

the entranceway to a public arboretum, flanked by twin beds of climbing blue roses.

My counterpart was thinking back to better days, I assumed.

But I have to warn you there is no way to reach inside the future skull. Merv picked up the picture, and because I'm a writer, I wrote a story. Merv was wishing they could start over again, or he was planning to do something special tonight, or maybe he was considering marrying the girl finally and starting a real family. With so few glimpses of their shared lives, it was possible to draw a multitude of unlikely, purely fictitious schemes

And because I'm a visionary, I dutifully recorded the company logo embossed on the holograph's silver frame.

A year after my illuminating coffee, I woke from a brief nap, sat up in bed, and found Merv staring hard at a bruised bare arm. Mary's arm, I realized. It was one of those very brief, exceptionally useless visions that I never bothered to write down. It began with the bruise and ended with him touching the arm and squeezing, and I could feel the bone under the darkened skin, and I heard him asking how it felt and she turned and smiled, but with her eyes never quite looking at him. She was staring at a point several inches to one side of him, smiling with a little more urgency than usual, and using a voice that shook me back to the present, she said, "It's fine."

With a begging tone, she said, "I'm fine. Let me go, please."

* * * *

I hadn't seen my benefactor in years.

One morning, he called me at my house and said that he had flown into town last night, that he was on his way from one unspecified place to another, but of course I'd want to meet with him. "In two hours," he instructed. "At the Holiday Inn bar."

At this point, I should remind you that the man at the beginning of my story was sharp and wise and by my youthful perspective, rather old. But of course he was only in his fifties then. Not quite twenty years had passed, and seventy is the new sixty, as they say. Yet the man that I saw was older and far more worn than I expected. And for the sake of honesty, I should mention that it wasn't quite ten in the morning, and he was drinking at least his second rum.

The writer in me looked for direction—some set of clues to tell me if this was going to be an ominous meeting, or merely uncomfortable.

“It’s been too long,” said a remarkably steady voice.

I looked at the empty glass next to his fresh glass, making agreeable sounds.

“You’re doing some very good work,” he mentioned.

“Which kind of work?” I asked.

The implications earned a grin. Then he sipped his rum, making a point of not answering my question.

Quietly, he said, “She told me. About talking to you.”

“Who did?”

“Yvonne’s friend.”

That’s how he referred to the lady. And by the same token, I’m probably known at the home office as “Merv’s friend.”

“She shouldn’t have done that,” he said.

I said nothing.

“That was a large breach of the rules,” he continued.

I said, “Sorry.”

“Screw the rules,” he said, the voice meant to sound drunk. But nothing about him was sloppy or off-keel. Like many fine old writers, my benefactor could hold his booze.

“What’s going on here?” I finally asked.

“Nothing.”

“Okay. So why are you here?”

“I thought I owed it to you.”

I waited.

“An explanation,” he said.

“For what?”

“She made a promise, and it won’t be kept. I’m sorry.”

I guessed where he was heading but still had to ask, “What promise?”

The poor fellow finished his drink and waved for another. Then after a deep sigh, he leaned close and said nothing.

“Are you retiring?” I prompted.

“I have retired.” He ached when he said those words. “Just short of four weeks ago, I was informed of my immediate change in status.”

I nodded.

“You’re not replacing me, son. That’s why I’m paying you this visit. You deserve to hear the news from a familiar face, and that has to be me.”

I never understood the job, certainly not well enough to know if I would ever want it, much less if I would be any good at it. But rejections always cut hard.

“You were my first candidate,” he continued. “My chosen successor and heir to the shepherd’s calling. And I think you would have done a perfectly fine job of it too. Not quite up to my standards, maybe....”

He let his voice trail off, giving me a just-joking grin.

But he was being honest.

To the best of my ability, I absorbed the news. Then after his fresh drink arrived, I asked, “Who’s going to be the next benefactor?”

His face reddened.

My guts tightened.

“There won’t be anyone.”

“But what about—?”

“They don’t want us anymore,” he informed me, his own wounds deeper and bloodier than mine would ever be.

“They don’t?”

“It’s the Internet, son. Everybody’s online, and computers are so damned easy. For the last decade, we’ve been developing software that does nothing but reach out across the world, on public sites and past most of the existing firewalls. I don’t understand Boolean logic, but these are powerful tools, and they’ve been designed to hunt for key phrases and the odd notions attached to those phrases. Things that mean nothing to most observers, but of course not to us.”

I hadn’t expected this turn. So much for precognition.

“Writers have always been scarce,” he reminded me. “But if you can reach out and snatch up a thousand useful bits of information, and you can take the gems not just from here but from China and India and Russia, and every other place under the sun....”

He suddenly seemed quite drunk.

I was empty and a little cold.

“But how do you pay all those people?” I asked.

As dumb as any string of words that I have ever said.

“They don’t have to pay anybody,” he snapped. “They take what they need. Didn’t you know? Everything on the Internet is free, dammit!”

“And us?” I managed.

For some reason, that earned a little smile and a long, impenetrable stare. Was he feeling pity for me? For himself? Or maybe was he recalling a final battle that he’d won on our behalf? Whatever the reason, he whispered to me, “As long as we’re alive, they have to pay us. If only to help keep us quiet.”

* * * *

My next novel was due last month, and I was typing as if my hair was on fire. But in the midst of a deep-space fight, just as my charismatic hero was about to dispatch the brutal villain, Merv intruded.

Visions come for no good reason.

As far as I can tell, the process is relentlessly random. Neither Merv's emotions nor mine have ever played any role in deciding when the two of us are linked. Which is why the humdrum moments are the norm: The most spectacular life is still built upon a lot of sitting and waiting, idle chatter and toilet time.

I was writing my book, and then I wasn't.

Before me was a set of descending stairs, wooden and steep. The air was dark and smelled of mold. Little cues told me that Merv was navigating his way down into the unfinished basement of his narrow townhouse. When he stopped at the midway point, I heard a sniff. A sob. Then a longer, wetter sniff that ended with a small voice coughing quietly.

Merv's eyes peered into the quarter-lit gloom.

I saw nothing.

He took another two steps, and the familiar face emerged—narrow and still pretty despite the rich stream of blood emerging from both nostrils.

She was lying on the concrete slab of the floor, on her back, one arm lifting up while the other lay beside her at a peculiar angle, and her mouth full of blood, making her cough once again, weakly, before the soft scared voice quietly said, "No."

Mary said, "I'm sorry."

She said, "Please," and the working arm lifted higher, desperately trying to fend off whatever blow fell next.

* * * *

Last year, I was attending the Worldcon in California, and as usual, I spent long stretches of time in the writer's suite. Polite conversation and one-upsmanship are the normal state of affairs there. I found myself standing with four colleagues, sharing war stories that helped underscore

the miserable state of publishing today. And in the midst of that measured pain, a kid joined us. He happened to be a name, one of those bright souls who did more than simply write stories. He had an honest career in science, and he blogged, and I wouldn't be surprised if he had a trust fund somewhere too. Nothing about him seemed hungry. But he had been blessed with a sharp wit and an IQ that had to be more impressive than mine, and he probably couldn't imagine ever being old, and he carried with him a sense of being perpetually bored with the ordinary world.

For maybe ten minutes, he shared our air, and with just a crisp dozen sentences, he managed to mention that his first novel was being made into a movie and his last one was going to be a computer game, and he had met Spielberg, and he was up for a couple fat awards, and then before he abandoned our disagreeable company, he looked straight at me, asking, "Don't we have a wonderful life, doing all this fun work and getting paid for it, too?"

Every other writer was pissed. One sour gal said, "See how long he stays the flavor of the month. In thirty years, see where he stands."

He will be standing in the SFWA suite, drinking the free booze. That's the future I predict for all of us.

The next morning, that same young writer and I happened to appear on the same panel.

The subject is not important. (Really, the topic for any panel is just a suggestion anyway.) But two incidents stand out: First, my cocky colleague made a point of sitting beside me before we began, shaking my hand and referring to me by my first name, fondly, as if we were very close friends.

Something about his attitude teased my intuitions.

On the spur of the moment, I mentioned my benefactor's name. I knew the old gentleman was still in business when the kid got his start. Did their paths happen to cross?

The reply was a conspiratorial wink, plus meaningful silence.

The second incident came in the middle of the panel. Without warning, my new best friend offered his theory about writing.

It wasn't the topic on hand, but this was a new power in our industry. Everybody listened intently as he explained, "Stories are lies. At their very

best, they achieve quite a lot. Quite a lot indeed. But they can never describe more than a sliver of what's real, even in the simplest life. And I think it's fair to admit that more than most people, writers will believe whichever lie happens to make them happiest and most secure."

And at that point, the young titan glanced at the grizzled veteran sitting beside him, and again, he offered a telltale wink.

* * * *

Here is a new, rather different version of the story:

What if there is an organization founded in the past and dedicated to the immediate future? Maybe a wise editor working a slush pile is the founder. Maybe some other individual or group is responsible, and everything that I think I know is just a useful cover story. Origins don't matter here as much as the goal. What if the point of this shadowy, secretive group is not simply to make a profit? What if there is a second, far more impressive agenda at work in our world?

Science fiction likes to think of time travel in the same way clerks think of objects resting on shelves. Everything needs to be in its place. Touch nothing too much, and history will unfold with a predictable series of events, noble and important and well worth preserving.

But I don't think much of that model of time and space.

Touch anything, even in the tiniest fashion, and everything will change. Chaos and the most minuscule motions of the atoms will bring consequences to anyone with the capacity to dabble in things that haven't come true yet. Yes, you might make a fat living off the stock market in another ten years. But isn't there a larger, grander goal waiting for those people who can push the objects on the high selves, influencing just enough to remake things that haven't yet been?

What I think is happening is this:

Someone—black-robed monks, maybe, or white-clad government scientists—have been collecting clues about the future, and with those clues they are trying to build the tools by which they can shape what isn't real yet.

I don't think things have progressed very far, no.

Whoever is in charge, I have to believe that he or they are taking a long, exceptionally patient view of this process.

And I suspect that the project will prove impossible. But really, if you had the future in your reach, how could you not wish to fiddle with those very tempting dials?

I shouldn’t tell you any of this, of course.

But I have made it this far already, and nobody seems to have noticed or cared. And that is no small success on my part.

For doing what I am about to do, I am sorry.

You are still too young to care about what I’m telling you. You’re a child reading a story written by someone who may be dead and forgotten by now. I can’t even be sure that you’re the “Mary” that I have seen just a few dozen times in my life ... or that you will ever grow into that lovely young woman....

But I am going to tell you Merv’s real name, as a warning.

In my own little bid to change the future for the better.