



Jack Neck and the  
Worry Bird  
a short story by **Paul  
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On the western edge of putty-colored Drudge City, in the neighborhood of the Stoltz Hypobiological Refinery ("The lowest form of intelligent life--the highest form of dumb matter!"), not far from Newspaper Park and Boris Crocodile's Beanery and Caustics Bar--both within a knucklebone's throw of the crapulent, crepitant Isinglass River--lived mawkly old Jack Neck, along with his bat-winged and shark-toothed bonedog, Motherway.

Jack Neck was retired now, and mighty glad of it. He'd put in many a lugubrious lustrum at Krespo's Mangum Exordium, stirring the slorq vats, cleaning the lard filters, sweeping up the escaped tiddles. Plenty of work for any man's lifetime. Jack had busted his hump like a shemp to earn his current pension (the hump was just now recovering; it didn't wander so bad like it used to), and Jack knew that unlike the lazy young and fecund time-eaters and space-sprawlers whom he shared his cheapjack building with, he truly deserved his union stipend, all 500 crones per moon (except once a year, during the Short Thirteenth, when he only got 495). Why, it had taken him a whole year of retirement just to forget the sound of the tiddles crying out for mercy. Deadly core-piercing, that noise was, by Saint Fistula's Nose!

But now, having survived the rigors of the Exordium (not all his buddies had lived to claim their Get-gone Get-by; why, his pal Slam Slap could still be seen as a screaming bas-relief in the floor tiles of Chamber 409), Jack could take life slow and easy. During daylight hours, he could loll around his bachelor-unclean flat (chittering dustbunnies prowling from couch to cupboard; obscurantist buildup on the windows, sulfur-yellow sweatcrust on the inside, pinky-grey smogma on the outside), quaffing his Anonymous Brand Bitterberry Slumps (2 crones per sixpack, down at Batu Truant's Package Parlor) and watching the televised Motorball games. Lookit that gracefully knurltopped Dean Tesh play, how easily he scored, like a regular Kuykendall Canton pawpaw!

Ignoring his master's excited rumbles and despairing whoops, Motherway the steel-colored bonedog would lie peacefully by the side of Jack's slateslab chair, mostly droop-eyed and snore-birthing, occasionally emitting a low growl directed at a more-than-usually daring dustbunny, the bonedog's acutely articulated leathery wings reflexively snickersnacking in stifled pursuit.

Three times daily Motherway got his walkies. Down the four flights of badly lit, incongruently angled stairs Jack and his pet would clomber, Motherway's cloven chitin hooves scrabbling for purchase on the scarred boards. Last time down each day, Jack would pause in the lobby and check for mail. He never got anything, barring his moonly check, but it was good to clear the crumbles out of his wall-adherent mailsack. Dragoman Mr Spiffle wouldn't leave the mail if contumacious crumbles nested within Jack's fumarole-pocked personal mailsack. And Jack didn't blame him! One or two migrant crumbles a day could be dealt with--but not a whole moonly nest!

Outside on Marmoreal Boulevard, Jack and Motherway always turned left, toward Newspaper Park. Marmoreal Boulevard paralleled the Isinglass River, which gurgled and chortled in its high-banked channel directly across the Boulevard from Jack's flat. The mean and treacherous slippery river was further set off from foot and vehicle traffic by a wide promenade composed of earth-mortared butterblox and a rail of withyweave. Mostly, the promenade remained vacant of strollers. It didn't pay to get too close to the Isinglass, as more than one incautious twitterer had discovered, when--peering curiously over the rail to goggle at the rainbowed plumduff sluicejuice pouring from the Stoltz Refinery pipes--he or

she would be looped by a long suckered manipulator and pulled down to eternal aquatic slavery on the spillochaug plantations. GAWPERS AND LOOKYLOOS, BEWARE! read the numerous signage erected by the solicitous Drudge City Constabulary.

(Boating on the Isinglass held marginally fewer risks. Why, people were still talking about the event that quickly came to be known throughout Drudge City and beyond as "Pale Captain Dough's Angling Dismay," an event that Jack had had the misfortune to witness entire from his own flat. And he had thought the squeaky pleas of the tiddles were hard to dislodge from his mind--!)

Moving down the body-and booth-crowded sidewalk with a frowsty and jangly galumph that was partially a result of his fossilized left leg and partially attributable to the chunk-heeled, needle-toed boots which compressed his tiny feet unmercifully, Jack would enjoy the passing sights and sounds and smells of his neighborhood. A pack of low-slung Cranials surged by, eliciting a snap and lunge from the umbilical-restrained Motherway. From the peddle-powered, umbrella-shielded, salted-chickpea cart operated by Mother Gimlett wafted a delectable fragrance that always convinced Jack to part with a thread or two, securing in return a greasy paper cone of crispy steaming legumes. From the door of Boris Crocodile's poured forth angular music, the familiar bent notes and goo-modulated subsonics indicating that Stinky Frankie Konk was soloing on the hookah-piped banjo. Jack would lick his bristly nodule-dotted lips, anticipating his regular visit that evening to the boisterous Beanery and Caustics Bar, where he would be served a shot of his favorite dumble-rum by affable bartender Dinky Pachinko.

On the verges of Newspaper Park, beneath the towering headline tree, Jack would let slip Motherway's umbilical, which would retract inside the bonedog's belly with a whirl and a click like a rollershade pull. Then Motherway would be off to romp with the other cavorting animals, the gilacats and sweaterbats, the tinkleslinks and slithersloths. Jack would amble over to his favorite bench, where reliably could be found Dirty Bill Brownback. Dirty Bill was more or less permanently conjoined with his bench, the man's indiscriminate flesh mated with the porously acquisitive material of the seat. Surviving all weathers and seasons, subsisting on a diet scrounged from the trashcan placed conveniently at his elbow, Dirty Bill boasted cobwebbed armpits and crumbly-infested trousers, but was nonetheless an affable companion. Functioning as a center of fresh gossip and rumors, news and notions, Dirty Bill nevertheless always greeted Jack Neck with the same stale jibe.

"Hey, Neck, still wearing those cellbug togs? Can't you afford better on your GGGB?"

True, Jack Neck's outfit went unchanged from one moon to the next. His ivory-and-ash-striped shirt and identically patterned leggings were the official workwear of his union, the MMMM, or Mangum Maulers Monitoring Moiety, and Jack's body had grown accustomed to the clothes through his long employment. Of course, the clothes had also grown accustomed to Jack's body, fusing in irregular lumpy seams and knobbly patches to his jocund, rubicund, moribund flesh. That was just the way it went these days, in the midst of the Indeterminate. The stability of the Boredom was no more. Boundaries were flux-prone, cause-and-effect ineffectual, and forms not distinct from ideations. You soon got used to the semi-regular chaos, though, even if, like Jack, you had been born 'way back in the Boredom.

With the same predictability exhibited by Dirty Bill (human social vapidty remained perhaps the most stable force in the Indeterminate), Jack would consistently reply, "Happens I fancy these orts, Dirty Bill. And they fancy me!"

With a chuckle and a snaggletooth snigger, Dirty Bill would pat the bench beside him and offer, "Sit a spell then, neckless Jack Neck --not too long though, mind you!-- and I'll fill you in on my latest gleanings. That is, if you'll share a salty chickpea or two!"

"Gladly, you old plank-ass!" Diverting as the perpetual Motorball Tourneys on television were, Jack relished simple human intercourse. So while Motherway chased six-legged squirrels (all four of the mature bonedog's feet an inch or two off the ground; only bonedog pups could get much higher), Jack and Dirty Bill would confab the droogly minutes away.

After his supper each night--commonly a pot of slush-slumgullion or a frozen precooked bluefish fillet heated in the hellbox, whichever being washed down with a tankard of Smith's Durian Essence--Jack would leave Motherway behind to lick doggy balls and umbilical while the bonedog's master made his visit to Boris Crocodile's. There on his reserved barstool, while empty-eyed Nori Nougat danced the latest fandango or barcarole with beetle-browed Zack Zither, Jack Neck would nod his own disproportionate head in time to the querulous squeegeeing of Stinky Frankie Konk and affirm to all who would pay any heed to the elderly GGGB-er, "Yessir, assuming you can get through the rough spots, life can turn out mighty sweet!"

But all that, of course, was before the advent of the Worrybird.

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That fateful morning dawned nasty, low-hanging hieratic skies and burnt-toast clouds, an ugly odor like all the rain-drenched lost stuffed-toys of childhood seeping in from the streets. Upon opening first his good left eye, then his bad right ('twasn't the eye itself that was dodgy, but only the nacreous cheek-carbuncle below it that was smooshing the orb closed), Jack Neck experienced a ripe intestinal feeling telling him he should stay in bed. Just huddle up 'neath his checkerboard marshmallow quilt, leaving his beleathered feet safe in the grooves they had worn in the milkweed-stuffed mattress. Yes, that seemed just the safest course on a day like today, so pawky and slyboots.

But the allure of the common comforts awaiting him proved stronger than his intuition. Why, today was a Motorball matchup made in heaven! The Chlorine Castigators versus Dame Middlecamp's Prancers! And then there was Motherway to be walked, Dirty Bill's dishy yatterings, that Dinky-Pachinko-poured tot of dumble-rum to welcome midnight in. Surely nothing mingy nor mulcting would befall him, if he kept to his established paths and habits....

So out of his splavined cot old bunion-rumped Jack Neck poured himself, heavy hump leading Lady Gravity in an awkward pavane. Once standing, with minor exertions Jack managed to hitch his hump around, behind and upward to a less unaccommodatingly exigent position. Then he essayed the palpable trail midst the debris of his domicile that led to the bathroom.

As soon as Jack entered the WC, he knew his vague forebodings had been spot on. But it was now too late to return to the safety of his blankets. For Jack saw with dismay that out of his chipped granite commode, like a baleful excremental spirit, there arose a Smoking Toilet Puppet.

The rugose figure was composed of an elongated mud-colored torso, sprouting two boneless and sinuous claw-fingered arms, and topped by a ruttled warpy face. The Puppet's head was crowned by a small fumey crater, giving its kind their name.

"Ja-a-ack," wailed the Puppet. "Jack Neck! Step closer! I have a message for you."

Jack knew that although the creature might indeed have a valid and valuable delphic message for him, to heed the Puppet's summons was to risk being abducted down to the gluck-mucky Septic Kingdom ruled by Baron Sugarlinger. So with an uncommon burst of energy, Jack grabbed up a wood-hafted sump-plunger and whanged the Puppet a good one on its audacious incense-dispensing bean.

While the Puppet was clutching its abused noggin and sobbing most piteously, Jack stepped around it and flushed. Widdershins and downward swirled the invader, disappearing with a liquidly dopplering "Nooooooooo--!"

Jack did his old man's business quickly while the runnels still gurgled, then lowered the heavy toilet lid against further home invasions. He stepped to the sink and the sweatcrusted mirror above it, where he flaked scales off his reflection. He shaved his forehead, restoring the pointy dimensions of his once-stylish hairline, plucked some eelgrass out of his ears, lacquered his carbuncle, and congratulated himself on meeting so forcefully the first challenge of the day. If nothing else adventured, he would be polly-with-a-lolly!

Back through the bedroom and out into his sitting sanctuary, where Motherway lay snoozily on his fulsome scrap of Geelvink carpet. Approaching the dirty window that looked out upon Marmoreal Boulevard and the Isinglass, the incautious and overoptimistic Jack Neck threw open the wormy sash and shouldered forward, questing additional meaning and haruspices from the day.

And that was precisely the moment the waiting Worrybird chose to land talon-tight upon the convenient perch of Jack's hapless hump!

Jack yelped and with an instinctive yet hopeless shake of his hump withdrew into the refuge of his apartment, thinking to disconcert and dislodge the Worrybird by swift maneuvers. But matters had already progressed beyond any such simple solution. The Worrybird was truly and determinedly ensconced, and Jack realized he was doomed.

Big as a turkey, with crepe-like vulture wings, the baldy Worrybird possessed a dour human face exhibiting the texture of ancient overwaxed linoleum, and exuded a stench like burning crones. Jack had seen the ominous parasites often, of course, riding on their wan, slumpy victims. But never had he thought to be one such!

Awakened by the foofrarrow, Motherway was barking and leaping and snapping, frantically trying to drive the intruder off. But all the bonedog succeeded in doing was gouging his master's single sensible leg with his hooves. Jack managed to calm the bonedog down, although Motherway continued to whimper while anxiously fidgeting.

Now the Worrybird craned its paste-pallid pug-ugly face around on its long sebaceous neck to confront Jack. It opened its hideous rubbery mouth and intoned a portentous phrase.

"Never again, but not yet!"

Jack threw himself into his slateslab chair, thinking to crush the grim bird, but it leaped nimbly atop Jack's skull. By Saint Foraminifer's Liver, those scalp-digging claws hurt! Quickly Jack stood, preferring to let the bird roost on his hump. Obliging, the Worrybird shifted back.

"Oh, Motherway," Jack implored, "what a fardelicious grievance has been construed upon us! What oh what are we to do?"

Motherway made inutile answer only by a plangent sympathetic whuffle.

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The first thought to form in the anxious mind of bird-bestriden Jack Neck was that he should apply to the local Health Clinic run by the Little Sisters of Saint Farquahar. Surely the talented technicians and

charity caregivers there would have a solution to his grisly geas! (Although at the back of his mind loomed the pessimistic question, perhaps Worrybird implanted, Why did anyone suffer from Worrybird-itis if removal of same were so simple?)

So, leaving Motherway behind to guard the apartment from any further misfortunes which this inopportune day might bring, Jack and his randomly remonstrative rider ("Never again, but not yet!") clattered down the four flights of slant stairs to the street.

Once on Marmoreal (where formerly friendly or neutral neighbors now winced and retreated from sight of his affliction), Jack turned not happy-wise left but appointment-bound right. At the intersection of the Boulevard and El Chino Street, he wambled south on the cross-street. Several blocks down El Chino his progress was arrested by the sloppy aftermath of an accident: a dray full of Smith's Durian Essence had collided with one loaded with Walrus Brand Brochettes. The combination of the two antagonistic spilled foodstuffs had precipitated something noxious: galorping mounds of quivering dayglo cartiplasm that sought to ingest any flesh within reach. (The draft-animals, a brace of Banana Slugs per dray, had already succumbed, as had the blindly argumentative drivers, one Pheon Ploog and a certain Elmer Sourbray.)

Responding with the nimble reflexes and sassy footwork expected from any survivor of Drudge City's ordinary cataclysms, Jack dodged into a nearby building, rode a Recirculating Transport Fountain upward and took a wayward rooftop path around the crisis before descending, all the while writing a hundred times on the blackboard of his mind an exclamation-punctuated admonition never to mix internally his favorite supertime drink with any iota of Walrus Brand Brochettes.

Encountering no subsequent pandygangdy, Jack Neck and his foul avian passenger arrived at the Health Clinic on Laguna Diamante Way. Once inside, he was confronted with the stern and ruleacious face of Nurse Gwendolyn Hindlip, Triage Enforcement Officer. From behind her rune-carven desk that seemed assembled of poorly chosen driftwood fragments, Nurse Gwendolyn sized up Jack and his hump-burden, then uttered a presumptuous pronouncement.

"You might as well kill yourself now, you old mummer, and free up your GGGB for a younklings!"

Jack resented being called a mummer--a mildly derisive slang term derived from his union's initials--almost more than he umbrigated at the suicidal injunction.

"Shut up, you lava-faced hincty harridan! Just take my particulars, slot my citizen-biscuit into the chewer, and mind your own business!"

Nurse Gwendolyn sniffed with bruised emotionality. Jack had scored a mighty blow on a tender spot with his categorical comment "lava-faced." For Nurse Gwendolyn's scare-making and scarified visage did indeed reflect her own childhood brush with a flesh-melting disease that still occasionally plagued Drudge City. Known as Trough'n'Slough, the nonfatal disease left its victims with a stratified trapunto epidermis. Nurse Gwendolyn forever attributed her sour old-maidhood to the stigma of this pillowpuff complexion, although truth be told, her vile tongue had even more to do with her empty bed.

Snuffling aggrievedly, Nurse Gwendolyn now did as she was bade, at last dispatching a newly ID-braceleted Jack to a waiting area with the final tart remark, "You'll surely have a long uncomfortable wait, Mr Neck, for many and more seriously afflicted--yet naytheless with a better prognosis--are the helpseekers afore you!"

Coercing his fossil leg into the waiting room, Jack saw that Nurse Gwendolyn had not been merely flibbering. Ranked and stacked in moaning drifts and piles were a staggering assortment of Drudge City's

malfunctioners. Jack spotted many a one showing various grades of Maskelyne's Curse, in which the face assumed the characteristics of a thickly blurred latex mold of the actual submerged features beneath. The false countenance remained connected by sensory tendrils, yet was migratory, so that one's visage sloped about like warm jello, eyes peeking from nostrils or ears, nose poking from mouth. Other patients showed plain signs of Exoskeletal Exfoliation, their limbs encased in osteoclastic armor. One woman--dressed in a tattered shift laterally patterned blue and gold--could only be host to Dolly Dwindles Syndrome: as she approached over months her ultimate doll-like dimensions, her face simultaneously grew more lascivious in a ghoulish manner.

Heaving a profound sigh at the mortal sufferings of himself and his fellows, Jack sat himself saggingly down in a low-backed chair that permitted the Worrybird to maintain its grip upon Jack's hump, and resigned himself to a long wait.

On the seven-hundredth-and-forty-ninth "Never again, but not yet!", Jack's name was called. He arose and was conducted to a cubicle screened from an infinity of others by ripped curtains the color of old tartar sauce. Undressing was not an option, so he simply plopped down on a squelchy examining table and awaited the advent of a healer. Before too long the curtains parted and a lab-coated figure entered.

This runcible-snouted doctor himself, thought Jack, should have been a patient, for he was clearly in an advanced state of Tessellated Scale Mange, as evidenced by alligatored wrists and neck poking from cuff and collar. Most horribly, the medico dragged behind him a long ridged tail, ever-extending like an accumulating stalactite from an infiltrated organ at the base of the spine.

"Doctor Weighbend," said the professional in a confident voice, extending a crocodile paw. Jack shook hands happily, liking the fellow's vim. But Doctor Weighbend's next question shattered Jack's sanguinity.

"Now, what seems to be the matter with you, Mr Neck?"

"Why--why, Doc, there's an irksome and grotty Worrybird implacably a-sway upon my tired old hump!"

Doctor Weighbend made a suave dismissive motion. "Oh, that. Since there's no known cure for the Worrybird, Mr Neck, I assumed there was another issue to deal with, some unseen plaque or innervation perhaps."

"No known cure, Doc? How can that be?"

Doctor Weighbend cupped his dragonly chin. "The Worrybird has by now slyly and inextricably mingled his Akashic Aura with yours. Were we to kill or even remove the little vampire-sparrow, you too would perish. Of course, you'll perish eventually anyway, as the lachrymose-lark siphons off your vitality. But that process could take years and years. 'Never again will you smile, but not yet shall you die.' That's the gist of it, I fear, Mr Neck."

"What--what do you recommend then?"

"Many people find some small palliation in building a festive concealing shelter for their Worrybird. Securely strapped to your torso bandolier-style and gaily decorated with soothing icons, it eases social functioning to a small degree. Now, I have other patients to attend to, if you'll permit me to take my leave by wishing you a minimally satisfactory rest of your life."

Doctor Weighbend spun around--his massive tail catching a cart of instruments and beakers and sending

glassware smashing to the floor--and was gone. Jack sat wearily and down-in-the-dumpily for a few long minutes, then levered himself up and trudged off down the aisle formed by the curtained wards.

Almost to the exit, Jack's attention was drawn between two parted drapes.

On a table lay the Motorball Champion Dean Tesh! Bloodied and grimacing, his signature cornucopia-shaped head drooping, sparks and fizzles spurting from his numerous lumpy adjuncts, Jack Neck's hero awaited his own treatment. Assuredly, that day's game had been a rumbunctious and asgardian fray! And Jack had missed it!

Impulsively, Jack entered the Champion's cubicle. "Superlative Dean Tesh, if I may intrude briefly upon your eminence. I'm one of your biggest fans, and I wish to offer my condolences on your lapsarian desuetude."

Dean Tesh boldly smiled like the rigorous roughrider he was. "'Tis nothing, really, old mummenschanz. Once they jimmy open my cranial circuit flap and insert a few new wigwags, I'll be right as skysyrup!"

Jack blushed to be addressed by his union's highest title, in actuality undeserved. "Your magnificent spirit inspires me, lordly Dean Tesh! Somehow I too will win through my own malediction!"

Dean Tesh's ocular lenses whirred for a better look. "Worrybird, is it? I've heard Uncle Bradley has a way with them."

"Uncle Bradley! Of course! Did he not design your own world-renowned servos and shunts? If medicine holds no answers to my problem, then surely Uncle Bradley's Syntactical Fibroid Engineering must!"

And so bidding Dean Tesh a heartfelt farewell replete with benisonical affirmations of the Champion's swift recovery, Jack Neck set out for Cementville.

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Soon Jack's trail of tiny archless footprints--outlined in fast-growing sporulating molds and luminescent quiverslimes--could be traced through many an urban mile. Behind him already lay the evil precincts of Barrio Garmi, where the Stilt-legged Spreckles were prone to drop rotten melons from their lofty vantages upon innocent passersby. Jack had with wiles and guiles eluded that sloppy fate. The district of Clovis Points he had also cunningly circumnavigated, wrenching free at the last possible moment from the tenebrous grasp of a pack of Shanghai Liliths, whose lickerish intention it was to drag innocent Jack to their spraddle-skirted leader, Lil' Omen, for the irreligious ceremony known as the Ecstatic Excruciation. For several blocks thereafter he had dared to ride the Henniker Avenue Slantwise Subway, disembarking hastily through his car's emergency exit and thence by escape-ready ladder-chute when he spotted a blockade across the tracks surely erected by the muskageous minions of Baron Sugarlinger. Luckily, Jack had had the foresight to obtain a transfer-wafer and so was able to board the Baba Wanderly Aerial Viaticum for free, riding high and safe above the verdigrised-copper-colored towers and chimney-pots, gables and garrets of Doo-Boo-Kay Flats.

At last, as a pavonine dusk was o'erspreading the haze-raddled, swag-bellied firmament, Jack Neck and his endlessly asseverating Worrybird--its face like a hairless druid's, its folded wings gloomy as a layoff notice from Krespo's--arrived at the premises of Uncle Bradley. The largest employer in gritty Cementville, the firm of Bradley and His Boyo-Boys, experts in SFE, ran round the erratic clock all thirteen moons a year, turning out many and many a marvelous product, both luxuries and essentials, the former including Seductive Bergamot Filters and the latter notable for Nevermiss Nailguns. Renowned for accepting any and all engineering challenges, the more intractable the more alluring, Uncle Bradley

represented Jack's best hope in the Worrybird-Removal Department.

At the towering portal to the lumbering and rachitic nine-storey algae-brick-fronted manufactory that occupied ten square blocks of Dimmig Gardens, Jack made free with the bellpull: the nose of a leering brass jackanapes. A minidoor opened within the gigundo pressboard entrance, and a functionary appeared. As the employee began to speak, Jack noted with dismay that the fellow suffered from Papyrus Mouth: his words emerged not as ordinary vocables but as separate words printed in bleasome bodily inks upon shoddy scraps of organic-tissue paper.

Jack sought to catch the emergent syllables as they spelunked buccally forth, but some eluded him and whiffed away on the diddling breezes. Nervously assembling the remaining message, Jack read: business state Bradley please with.

"I need to solicit dear Uncle Bradley's genius in the area of invasive parasite disengagement." Jack jerked a thick split-nailed thumb backward at his broodsome rider.

A gush of flighty papyri: Follow Bradley Uncle free see if me.

Most gladly, Jack Neck entered the dynamic establishment and strode after the Papyrus Mouter. Through humming, thrumming offices and sparky workshops--where crucibles glowed with neon-tinted polymeric compounds and, under the nimble fingers of Machine Elves, transistors danced the Happy Chicken Trot with capacitors and optical-fluid valves--Jack and his guide threaded, until at last they stood before a ridged and fumarole-pocked door with a riveted steel rubric announcing it as UNCLE BRADLEY'S CARBON CAVE.

Wait here.

Alone, Jack hipper-hopped nervously from toe to toe. He prayed to all the Saints whose names he could remember--Fimbule and Flubber, Flacken and Floss, Fluffie and Farina--that Uncle Bradley possessed the secret of his salvation--and at a price he could afford.

After an almost unsquingeable wait, the Papyrus Mouter returned.

with Bradley will now you Uncle meet.

"Oh, thank you, kind underling! A myriad blessings of the Yongy-bongy-bo descend upon you!"

Into the fabled Hades-embered Carbon Cave now, whose inward-seeming rattled Jack's sensory modes. The walls and ceiling of the vasty deep were layered with snivelling encrustations of Syntactical Fibroid Engineering at its most complex. Flickering readouts and mumbling speaker-grilles obtruded their cicatrice-bordered surfaces from amongst switches and pulls, toggles and knife-throws, fingering-holes and mentation-bands. Innumerable crystal monitors studded all surfaces, displaying upon their garnet and amethyst faces scenes from across Drudge City. For a briefer-than-brief second, a shot of Marmoreal Boulevard--right in front of Boris Crocodile's!--flashed across one, and Jack nearly wept for the nostalgic past of mere yesterday!

In the middle of the Carbon Cave, on his numinous, numbly throne, sat Uncle Bradley. Almost totally overwhelmed with layers of SFE extrudements, a helpful carapace of gadgetry, the master of the Boyo-Boys showed bare only his snaggle-toothed and wildly inventive face, and his two striped arms, one of which terminated in chromium piratical hook. Dangling all around inspiration-eyed Uncle Bradley were speakers and microphones, mini-monitors, telefactored manipulators and sniff-sources, allowing



him to run his many-branched enterprise without leaving his cozy sanctum.

As Jack approached tentatively across the wide checkerboard floor, he could hear from Uncle Bradley a constant stream of queries, advice and commands.

"Lay on ten thousand more karma-watts to the Soul Furnace! Process Violet-Hundred is failing? Six hundred kilograms of Charm Catalyst into the mix! Eureka! Start a new assembly line: personal Eyeblink Moderators! Has the Bloodwort stabilized yet? No? Lash it with the Zestful Invigorators! Cancel the Corndog Project, and feed the experimental subjects to the Hullygees! How are the Pull Hats selling this season? That poorly? Try them with claw-tassels in plaid!"

Jack and his momentarily silent Worrybird had reached the base of Uncle Bradley's seat of power, and now the edisonical eminence took notice of the supplicant. Before Jack could even state his need, Uncle Bradley, laying a machicolated salesman's smile upon him, was offering a concise prix-fixe of options.

"Worrybird, correct? Of course! Obviousness obtrudes! Here are your recoursical tactics, in order of cost and desirability. For five thousand crones, we inject the bird with a Circuitry Virus. In three days the bird is totally roboticized. Still unremovable, of course, but its lethality is slowed by fifty percent. For three thousand crones, we attach a Secondary Imagineer to your cerebrumal interstices. You promptly forget the bird is there for the rest of your allotted span. For eight hundred crones, a simple cable allows you to share the bird's own mentation. Thus you enjoy your own death, and feel it to be darwinically mandated. Lastly, for a piddling three hundred crones, we remand one of our novice Boyo-Boys to stay by your side till you succumb to the inevitable wastage. He plys you with personalized jest and frolic, and remonstrates with anyone who dares to offer you contumely!"

Jack could barely conceal his dismay. "Those--those are my only choices?"

"What more could a sensible man want? The Worrybird is an incorrigible opponent, and no one besides the recondite and rascally Uncle Bradley dares even to tamper with one! Be quick now, old gansel! Which will it be?"

Jack wimble and wambled pitifully. "I have not even the three hundred crones for the humblest palliation. I was hoping for more triumphalist affronts and easier terms--"

"What! You dare to waste Uncle's invaluable chronospasms without funds in reserve! And then to derogate my nostrums as if you were a fellow engineer at a throwdown session of the Tinkerer's Sodality! Away with you, laggardly old momerath!"

Suddenly, the Papyrus Mouter was by Jack's elbow. Without pleasant hostly ado, Jack was spun about and frog-marched from the Cave of the SFERical Monarch. Just before the heavy door slammed behind him, Jack could hear Uncle Bradley resume his litany of savantical willfullness: "Engage the services of ten thousand more Glissandos, and another dozen Kriegsteins!"

Summarily and insultively ejected onto the cheesily porous cobbled terrace before the SFERical Emporium, true night pressing down from above like a corpulent lover, Jack knew himself at the end of both his abilities and the universe's possibilities. The weight of the Worrybird seemed suddenly Atlasian. At the first "Never again, but not yet!", every nerve in Jack's poor frame thrilled with galvanic imbroglication. He hung his head, able to focus only on the snailslick cobbles.

Three tags of payrus skittered by just then, and without much hope Jack used the last of his scanty vigor to retrieve them.

## Seek Saint Fiacre.

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Now was veracious and lordly midnight come without fear of fleeing misrecognition to occupy Drudge City like a famously conquering cubic khan. Much too low in the sky hung a sherberty scoop-hollowed partial moon like a slice of vanilla-icecream-sheened cantaloupe half-eaten by a finicky godling. Stars shown in the space between the tips of the errant satellite's horns. Insect-seeking sweaterbats, their calls of "stitch-stitch!" leavening the mist, thronged the curvaceous canyons formed by the tottering towers of home and office, both kinds of hobbledehoy establishment darkened as their inhabitants blissfully or troubledly slept. Only meeps and monks, strumpets and troubadors, witlings and mudlarks were abroad at this hour--at least in this dismal section of Drudge City. Perhaps among the delightful theaters in the district known as Prisbey's Heaves, or in the saucer-slurping cafes of Mechanics' Ramble, good citizens yet disported themselves without fear of encountering lurking angina-anklers or burrow-bums. And surely--most sadly of a certainty--at Boris Crocodile's Beanery and Caustics Bar, ghosty-eyed Nori Nougat was even at this moment frugging with ledge-browed Zack Zither, while Stinky Frankie Konk tortured banshee wails from his hybrid instrument.

But out here, where putrid Ashmolean Alley and rancid Rotifer Gangway ranked as the only streets of distinction, no such gaiety could be found. There lolloped only a besmirched and bedaubed and bedemoned Jack Neck, bustedly dragging himself down block after block, in search of Saint Fiacre.

The last Jack had heard--from Dirty Bill Brownback, in fact--rumors of a Saint sighting had recently wafted from out Ubidio way. No guarantee that said sighted Saint was named Fiacre, or that he was even still present. Saints had a disconcerting propensity to phase-shift at random. Yet poor Jack Neck had no other phantom to pursue, so thence he now leathered.

Two hours past the night's navel, Jack Neck emerged from encircling buildings onto bare-tiled Pringle Plaza. In the middle of the civic space ruminated an eyelid-shuttered naked Saint.

The Saint had once been human. After much spiritual kenning and abstemious indulgences, making the choice to give him or herself up entirely to the avariciously bountiful forces of the Indeterminate, the human had morpholyzed into a Saint. The Saint's trunk had widened and spread into a bulbous heap, from which sprouted withered legs and off-kilter arms, but no visible generative parts. Instead, out of the trunk at queer angles protruded numerous quasi-organic spouts and intakes similar to rusty gutter-pipes. The Saint's neck was a corded barrel supporting a pointy-peaked head on which the features had wandered north, south, east and west. Overall, the creature was a pebbled mushroom-white, and three times the size of Jack. Around this living interface with the Indeterminate, the air wavered whorlfully.

Humble as a wet cat, Jack approached the Saint. When the Worrybird-carrier was within a few yards of the strange being, the Saint opened his eyes.

"Are thee Fiacre?" nervously intoned Jack, who had never cozened with a Saint before, nor ever thought to.

"Aye."

"I was sent to thee. This bumptious bird I would begone."

The Saint pondered for a chronospasm. "You must perambulate round the Inverted Stupa for three hours, reciting without cease, 'Always once again, and perhaps now.'"

"This will cause the Worrybird to relinquish its hold?"

"Not at all. The procedure will simply give me further time to peer into the Indeterminate. But nonetheless, you must attend with precision to my instructions, upon pain of rasterbation."

"As you say, oh Saint."

Luckily, the Inverted Stupa was only half a league onward. Hurrying with renewed hope, Jack soon reached the famous monument. In the middle of another peopleless plaza, lit fitfully by torches of witch's-hair, was a railed pit of no small dimensions. Looking down over the rail, Jack saw the vertiginous walls of the Inverted Stupa, lighted windows stretching down to the earth's borborygmous bowels, deeper by far than even Baron Sugarlinger's realm.

Without delay, Jack began his circular hegira, chanting his Saintly mantra.

"Always once again, and perhaps now. Always once again, and perhaps now...."

The Worrybird seemed in no wise discommoded by Jack's croaking exertions. Jack tried not to lose his resurgent tentative cheer. At long last, just when Jack's legs--both good and bad--felt ready to snap, a nearby clock tolled five, releasing him to return to the Saint.

Saint Fiacre sat unchanged, a yeasty enigmatic effigy with a face like an anthropomorphic cartoon breadloaf.

"You have done well, old mockmurphy. Come close now, and cover my sacred Intake Number Nine with your palm."

Jack sidle-stepped up to the Saint, entering the zone where his vision burbled. He raised his hand toward the properly labelled bodypipe, then capped the opening with the flat of his permanently work-roughened hand.

Instantly, the insidious and undeniable vacuum-suck of ten dozen black holes!

Jack's hand was quickly pulled in. Before he could even gasp, his shoulder was pressed to the treacherous Intake Number Nine. Then Jack felt himself drawn even further in! Oddly he experienced no pain. Only, he was sure, because he was already dead.

Soon Jack was engulfed headwise up to both shoulders. His hump delayed his swallowment slightly, but then, thanks to a swelling surge of pull-power, even his abused hump was past the rim.

And the Worrybird too? Apparently not! Peeled off like a potato skin was that manfaced mordaunt! But what of their commingled Akashic Aura? Only Gossip Time would tell....

Within seconds, Jack was fully through Intake Number Nine. Then began a journey of sense-thwarting intricacy. Through a maze of bloodlit veiny pipes Jack flowed like the slorq at Krespo's, until he finally shot out of a funnel-mouth into ultracolored drifts of sheer abundant nothingness that smelled like a bosomy woman and tasted like Shugwort's Lemon Coddle. Here existence was a matter of wayward wafts and dreamy enticements, so connubially unlike the pestiferous hurlyburly of mundane existence. Time evaporated, and soon Jack did too....

Early morning in Pringle Plaza, sunlight like the drip of candyapple glaze. Sanitation chimps were about their cleaning, sweeping litter and leaf into the open mouths of attendant roadhogs. A traveling preacher had unfolded his pocket altar and was preaching the doctrine of Klacktoveedsedsteen to a yawning group of bow-tied office dandies. Saint Fiacre, having just given a lonely little girl the second head she had requested, suddenly quivered all over as if stricken by Earthquake Ague, then decocted a real-as-mud, sprightly-as-fleas Jack Neck from Outflow Number Three.

Jack got woozily to his tiny feet. "Saint Fiacre, I thank thee!"

"Say twenty-seven Nuclear Novenas nightly, invoking the names of Gretchen Grawl, Mercy Luna and the Rowrbazzle. And do not stick your foolish mummer's head out any more windows without forethought."

And then Saint Fiacre was gone.

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Having polished off his supper and seen the merry Motherway lickily attending to his bonedog privates, mawkly old Jack Neck now commonly got to Boris Crocodile's a little later each night. Those Nuclear Novenas took time, and he did not trust either his tongue or his pledged determination after a shot of Dinky Pachinko's dumble-rum. Neither could his saviorology be allowed to interfere during the day with Jack's ardent eyeballing of the exploits of the mighty Dean Tesh, Motorball Mauler! So postprandial were his doxologies.

But despite the slight change in his schedule, Jack still entered the Beanery and Caustics Bar in mid-stridulation of hookah-banjo, still found his favorite reserved barstool awaiting him, still feasted his rheumy eyes on the flirtsome gavotteners atrot, and still affirmed to any and all who would lend an ear, "Yessir, assuming you can get through the rough spots, life can turn out mighty sweet!"

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"Jack Neck and the Worry Bird" was first published in *Science Fiction Age* , July 1998.

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Lennon Spex

Paul Di Filippo

I am walking down lower Broadway, not far from Canal Jeans, when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

Now, when you consider that the wide sidewalk is jammed with enterprising urban riffraff—Africans with their carved monkeywood animals; Farrakhanized Black Muslims with their oils and incense; young white punks with their hand-screened semi-obscene T-shirts; sleazy old white guys with their weasel-skin Gucci bags and smeary Hermes scarves; Vietnamese with their earrings and pantyhose and pirated tapes—and when you also realize that I, Zildjian, am totally inured to this spectacle through long habituation, then you realize that this guy must be incredibly weird.

Except he isn't. Weird, that is. Not bizarre. I guess it's more that he's incongruous, like.

He appears to be a Zen monk. Japanese or Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese, it's hard to figure. His head is shaven, he wears a golden robe and straw sandals, and he looks serener than a Park Avenue matron after her first Valium of the day. His age could be anywhere from a year short of a legal drink to a year over early retirement.

The monk is apparently selling secondhand prescription eyeglasses. He has a TV tray with a meager selection neatly arrayed thereon. I see no handy-dandy lens-grinding equipment, so I assume there is no customizing. This gives new meaning to the term "cut-rate ripoff."

I stop in front of the monk. He bows. I am forced to bow back. Uncomfortable, I fall to examining his

stock.

Tucked away behind the assorted catseye, filigreed, tortoise-shell old lady spex lies one special pair of glasses, their stems neatly folded like ballerina legs, as incongruous among their companions as the monk among his.

I pick these glasses up and examine them.

They are a pair of simple gold wire-rims with transparent, perfectly circular lenses. The stems extend from the middle of the outer circumference on each lens; the bridge is higher, about two-thirds of the way up along the inside. The spectacles feature no adornments.

Suddenly, I realize that these are what we would have called, more years ago than I care to ponder, "Lennon glasses." First popularized by Beatle John in the Sgt. Pepper album photos, later shown shattered on a posthumous jacket, they remain forever associated with his image, though he was to switch in later years to various aviator-style frames, undoubtedly seeking to harmonize his face with Yoko's in marital solidarity.

I do not suffer from near- nor far-sightedness; I have no intention of buying the frames and replacing the lenses with polarized ones, since I believe in the utility of unmediated sunlight. Yet something compels me to ask if I can try them on.

"Can I, uh, try these on?" I ask the monk.

He smiles. (A smile from one of his disciples was how the Buddha knew his message was getting through.) "You bet."

I unfold the stems. It is then that I notice a blot of what appears to be fresh blood on one stem. Maybe it's ketchup from some strolling patron's childog. Never squeamish, I lick my thumb and attempt to wipe it off. The blot temporarily disappears under my rubbing, then rematerializes.

The monk has noticed my actions. "Not to worry," he says. "Just a small stain from the shooting. Will most definitely not affect utility of the glasses. Please, try."

So I slip them on.

The rowboat is painted in psychedelic day-glo swirls of color; the wide rippled water which cradles it is purple. I am sitting on the middle bench, drifting downstream without oars.

On either shore, tangerine trees are interspersed with cellophane flowers of yellow and green that grow so incredibly high. The sky—you guessed it—is marmalade. With actual flecks of orange peel and English muffin clouds. A complete nutritious breakfast.

"Holy Salvador Dali," I whimper. I dip my hands into the purple water, stirring a scent of grape juice, and frantically try to divert the boat to shore.

"Zildjian," calls someone above me. I answer quite slowly: "Yuh-yeah?"

"Stop paddling and look up."

The floating girl has kaliedoscope eyes and wears a lot of shiny gems, but not much else.

"You're being given a gift, Zildjian. There's no need to panic."

"Oh, man, I'm not sure—"

The boat is rocking. No, it's not. I'm sitting astride a centaur. Only instead of hooves, he's got bentwood rockers. He's propelling himself across a field, while eating a Scooter pie.

Lucy is beside me on another rocking horse person. "Calm down, Zildjian. We don't invite many people here. You're the first in years and years. Trust me."

"What happened to the last guy who trusted you?"

Lucy pouts. "That was humanity's fault, not ours."

She opens the door of a taxi for me. It's made of old Washington Posts and New York Times with headlines about Vietnam. When I climb inside, my head goes through the newspaper roof and into the clouds. Lucy's too. As we cut through the moist vapor like wheeled giraffes, I find myself mesmerised by the sun reflected in Lucy's eyes.

She's leading me into the train station. "Just try them for a while. What have you got to lose? Here, see how good they look on you."

She summons over a porter made of modeling clay who resembles Gumby. His tie is formed of mirror shards pressed into his chest. I study my reflection in the looking-glass tie. The glasses don't look half-bad....

The turnstile bumps my crotch and squeaks, "Sorry!"

"Have fun," says Lucy, and pushes me through.

I am clutching a streetlight on Broadway. I recognize it because it is the one that still bears a tattered remnant of a poster protesting the most recent war, on which someone has scrawled a particularly clever slogan: "Real eyes realize real lies."

Looking up, I anticipate the worst.

But no. The world—seen through what surely must be non-prescription lenses—is normal.

Except for the people.

Every last person is crowned, like Medusa, with a nest of tendrils.

From the skull of each person exit innumerable organic- looking extrusions which terminate about eighteen inches away from their heads. The tendrils are all colors, thicknesses and textures. Their ends are sheared off flat, and they do not droop. It is as if they enter another dimension a foot-and-a-half away from the individual.

The people look rather like rainbow dandelions gone to seed.

A dog stops to pee on my pole. Its head too is studded with worms, but not as many as the humans'.

A nasty thought occurs to me. I release my grip on the pole and slowly raise my hands to my own head.

I too am wearing a snakey turban. I can feel the velvety/rubbery/slimy/scratchy hoses rooted to my cranium.

I rip off the Lennon glasses.

Everyone's head-snakes are gone. Mine too, by touch.

Trepidatiously, I put the glasses back on. The snakes come back.

I sense someone by my side. It's the peddler monk.

He alone of everyone in my sight has but one tendril coming from his head. It's golden like his robe and, emerging from the exact center of his crown, rises vertically up.

The monk smiles again and lifts one hand to his golden carousel-horse pole.

"Goes straight to Buddha," he says, and laughs. "Use glasses wisely. Goodbye."

He vanishes into the mass of pedestrians.

Still wearing the glasses, I wearily sit myself down on a stoop.

Man, how can all these people be oblivious to the spaghetti coming out of their heads? Why don't they feel its weight? Come to think of it, why don't I feel the weight of mine? I reach up and find the offending objects still tangible. How can something be perceptible to the touch yet weigh nothing? Or is that we're just used to the weight...?

The mutt that nearly peed on my foot comes over to keep me company. I offer my hand and it starts to lick it. As it slobbers, I watch its doggy head in horror.

A new tendril is emerging from its skull! And it is questing like a cobra toward me!

Suddenly into my field of vision from above a matching tendril of my own pokes, heading toward the canine feeler!

I jerk my hand away. The dog snarls, and its tentative tendril changes color and texture, as does mine. But now they seem less eager to meet.

Nobody ever called me Carl Sagan. But I am a fairly quick study. And you would have to be as dumb as a Georgia Senator not to figure out what is going on with these worms.

These tendrils coming out of everyone's head represent emotional attachments, bonds, links of feeling and karma. All the connections we pick up in life. Strings of love and hate, just like some bad pop song.

The dog has stopped snarling and is licking itself. As an experiment I extend my hand again. It sniffs tentatively, then gently strops my fingers.

This time, I let our feelers connect and fuse.



I love this dog! Good dog! It's practically in my lap, giving my face a tongue-bath. It loves me too. Aw, poor street-critter. I'm really ashamed of what I'm going to do next.

I grab hold of the seamless cable connecting our heads and yank it out of the dog's skull. Better to experiment with his head than mine. There's a slight resistance, then the connection comes away with a subliminal pop!

The dog yelps, then apathetically climbs off me and goes to sleep.

The cable in my hand, now anchored only at my end, is squirming, trying to reattach itself to the dog. I don't let it, and within seconds it just sort of withers up and vanishes like a naked hard-on in a blizzard. I can feel a ghostly patch fading on my skull. The cable, I realize, wasn't that strong to begin with, pink and thin as a pencil, and didn't put up much of a fight to survive.

Armed with this new insight into the nature of the head-spaghetti, I watch the people around me more closely.

Everyone, I now notice, is continually extruding new feelers every few seconds. In fact, if I focus my vision through the Lennon glasses in some nameless way, I see close to people's scalps a haze of movement rather like the waving of polyps and corals in some undersea forest.

The vast majority of these embryonic attachments are transient, dying as fast as they are born.  
F'rinstance:

A woman pauses before the window of a clothing store. She casts a line out like a fly-fisherman toward an outfit on a mannequin. Passing right through the plate glass, it connects for a moment, and then she reels it back in and strides off.

Of course. You can have serious attachments to non-living things too.

And as if to repeat the lesson, a guy pulls his Jaguar up to a miraculously empty space, parks and gets out. The cable connecting him and the car is thick as your wrist. But that doesn't stop him from flicking out a feeler toward a passing Mercedes. Your cheatin' heart.... Or head, as the case may be.

A delivery guy sends out a probe aimed at a classy babe in furs, which, needless to say, is not reciprocated.

An old woman with a walker whips out a feeler toward a young doctor-type.

A girl whom I half know, an architecture student at NYU, shoots out an extension just like one of Spiderman's webs to an elaborately carved cornice that catches her eye.

A dude and his babe stop at a corner, kiss and part. The connection between them is thick and strong. As they get further apart, beyond the combined three-foot extension of their bond, it hazes out at its midpoint, entering whatever extradimensional continuum allows individuals to remain connected to distant people and things.

I've seen enough.

It's time for me to go home and learn more.

Standing in front of my bathroom mirror, I begin to pull the cables out of my head, one at a time.

Out comes this gnarly grey vine. What resistance.... Whoops, suddenly I don't feel anything for my folks! Mom, Dad, what are parents good for anyhow? It's spooky. There's just a big blank spot where there used to be filial fondness. I don't like this. Better plug this one back in....

What this thin slick red-white-and-blue-striped one? Yank it. Patriotism? Whodda thought I had one of those? Wonder what it connects to on the other end? The White House? The Lincoln Memorial? Plymouth Rock? Different for everyone maybe....

Here's a little slippery green eel of a thing. Tweak it out. Holy shit, that gameshow hostess! I never even knew on a conscious level that I had the hots for her! Mega-gross. Man, I'm killing this one. I hold it one side till it crumbles away. Can't be too careful about where you put your feelings.

Like a mad oldtime switchboard operator, I spend the next couple of hours pulling cables, memorizing which ones channel what feelings. (Once I yank too many simultaneously and get kind of spacey feeling, as if adrift in the cosmos, spinning aimlessly across the universe.) I soon learn how to tell the difference between one-way connections, such as those to inanimate objects or unresponsive fellow humans (Sherry Gottlieb, a high-school crush), and two-way ones, such as those to another person who feels for you too. There's a different kind of pulse in each, a unidirectional flow in the former, an alternating current in the latter.

Since I basically like myself as I am, I plug nearly all of my attachments back in, although I do eliminate the ones for Twinkies and cigarettes.

A sudden inspiration dawns on me like sunrise on Mercury. I could get rich from these glasses! All I have to do is open an aversion-therapy center. I'll practice some mumbo-jumbo, yank people's addictive connections— assuming, and I think it's a safe bet, that everyone's cables resemble mine—and presto, you're looking at the next pre-bankruptcy Donald Trump (only without the bad taste).

But then I remember the parting words of the monk who gave me the glasses: "Use them wisely." And how about that single connection he had? "Straight up to Buddha...?"

I take off the glasses and look at the ineradicable spot of blood on the frames. I think about John Lennon.

What did he do with these glasses? I imagine a little devil popping into being on my left shoulder. He's leaning on a pitchfork, wearing a derby and smoking a cigar. He blows smoke into my ear and say, "He got rich, you schmuck!" An angel appears on my right shoulder. Wings emerging from his black leather jacket, he's holding an electric guitar in place of a harp. "But that's not all he did, Zildjian. He made a lot of people happy. He contributed to progress. He improved the culture."

"He laid a lot of dames," says the devil.

"Yes, but always sought to express a philosophy of life, to illuminate people."

"Nothing gets a babe illuminated hotter than a dose of philosophy."

The angel flies over my head and lands next to the devil. "You cynical philistine!"

"Hey, back off!" The devil brandishes his pitchfork, puffing on his cigar till the coal glows. The angel hefts his guitar like a club and takes a swipe at his opponent. They both tumble off my shoulder, locked in that eternal pro-wrestling match of the spirit.

Their arguments have helped me make up my mind. I will use the glasses to feather my personal nest a little. But I will also do something very good for humanity with them.

But while the personal options are quite clear to me, the larger ones persist in staying somewhat hazy.

I let them remain so. The first thing I want to do is head over to Cynthia's apartment.

Cynthia and I broke up for what we both correctly surmised was the last time just a week ago. The cause was my telling her that this hunky actor she admired reminded me of an ambulatory roast beef, and probably had as much brains. From the nature of this tiff, you can probably gather that our relationship was not all that deep.

But I am still attached to her. I know, because I found the tendril. But it turns out to be strictly a one-way hookup, all the emotion flowing out of me and hitting a barrier on her end like a sperm hitting a diaphragm.

Now I am going to change that.

Cynthia is home. She is getting ready for her waitress job. I find her very attractive in the cowgirl boots and short skirt with tail feathers featured on the help at Drumsticks 'n' Hot Licks, the fried-chicken country-western club, and I tell her so.

"Yeah, great," Cynthia replies rather coldly. She keeps her back to me, adjusting her strawberry-blond coiffure in the mirror. I am amazed that she can get her brush through all the karma-cords, which apparently offer no resistance.

Cynthia eyes me in the looking-glass, and I am briefly reminded of the plasticine porter's tie. It's hard to believe that she cannot see all my tendrils, including the one leading to her, but it is true. Then she notices my spectacles.

"Since when did you start wearing glasses?"

"Since I met a Buddhist street vendor who sent me on a trip to another dimension."

"Yeah, right. You'll never change, Zil. What do you want? I assume you didn't come over here just to compliment me. Come on, out with it. No mind games, either. And make it fast, 'cause I've got to get to work."

"Cynthia, we need to talk," I begin, laying down some sensitive-type patter just to distract her. She has turned away from the mirror and is bent forward, rummaging thorough her purse. Meanwhile, I am inching closer, within reach of her personal emotional attachments.

I zero in on one which is a livid purple and resembles in some strange indefinable way my own connection to the gameshow hostess. I deftly grab it and unplug it from Cynthia's head.

She twitches and says, "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Just admiring the scent of your hair."

"Well, quit it. You're creeping me out."

I push the connection into my own head. Just as I thought! It goes straight to that hambone actor who was the cause of our breakup. I am suddenly overwhelmed with impure thoughts about his bod. Yuck! This is not for me. I pop the tendril out and jack it into Cynthia again.

Then I do something I haven't attempted before.

I pull on the cable in the other direction, trying to yank it out of the actor, where I doubt it's heavily anchored. My physical effort is apparently transmitted successfully along the cable through the extraspatial dimension it traverses, for it suddenly comes loose.

I swiftly fuse the end of Cynthia's one-way cable for the actor with my one-way cable for her, which I have just unplugged at her end.

She straightens up as if goosed by Godzilla and wheels around to face me.

"Zildjian, you're—you're different somehow...."

Even knowing what's going on, I am overwhelmed by the synergy of the new connection, which is full and taut as a firehose under pressure. "Cynthia, I—you—"

"Oh, come play in my strawberry field!"

After that, it's our own private Beatlemania.

The next few days proceed swimmingly.

I get a new car and a line of credit without even putting on a necktie. It's only a small matter of establishing the proper connections. At the car dealer's up near the Plaza Hotel, I borrow the owner's hookup to his elderly grandmother.

"No money down, no payments till next year, and no finance charges? Why not? I'm sure you're good for it."

At the bank, I utilize the loan officer's feelings toward his mistress to secure a large sum of cash, a Gold Card and no-charge checking with fifty-thousand-dollar overdraft protection. The only complication is his hand on my knee.

I maintain both these links for a few days to insure that the dupes do not come to their senses and renege on the deals before they are solid. (I am a little troubled about the cold shoulders which are no doubt being received by Granny and Lolita, but reassure myself that things will soon be back to normal for them.) Finally, I gratefully sever the adopted links, watching them retract through their transdimensional wormholes. Hopefully, they will re-establish themselves with their natural objects.

What a relief, I can tell you. It has always been my philosophy that you've gotta go through this world as free as you can, and these extra bonds drag me down.

I think from time to time of the monk, and his single golden cord....

Cynthia and I spend the next couple of weeks having some major fun, she having turned in her tail-feathers. We eat at the best tables in the best restaurants, gain immediate entrance into the smartest clubs, receive front-row concert tickets for the hottest acts gratis, and in general carve a path through the city like Henry Moore through a block of granite.

One day Cynthia asks me to accompany her to the hospital, where her sister has just had a baby.

At the maternity-ward window, I stare in disbelief at all the squalling or sleeping infants.

Each one has a single golden cord, just like the monk's. A few of the older ones have tentative parental connections, but basically it's just that one heavenly stalk going straight up to who-knows-where.

After that, I start examining kids everywhere more intently.

Most of them seem to maintain their heavenly birthright pretty much intact up till about age three. After that, it starts to dwindle and dim, getting thinner and paler until it finally vanishes around age ten, tops.

In all of New York, I fail to find an adult other than the missing monk who still has what he or she was born with. And that includes, natch, me.

Of course, I am not exactly hanging in the places where such a person might necessarily be found.

And although several times I almost take the opportunity to unplug a kid's golden cord and sample the current flowing down it, I never quite dare.

I realize I'm afraid it might reveal how shallow what I'm doing is....

One day about a month after getting the Lennon spectacles, just when I am starting to get bored with how easy life is, I am driving alone down First Avenue when I encounter an enormous flock of cars being herded by a squad of sheepdog cops. Poking my head out the window, I politely inquire of a policeman as to what's going on.

"It's the President," replies the cop. "He's speaking to the U.N. before the war starts."

"The war? I thought the war was over...."

"That was the last one. This is a new one."

"Well, who are we against this time?"

"Whatsamatta, doncha watch TV? The enemy is South Arabiraniopistan. Their leader's here too. He'll be lucky if he don't get lynched."

I am not sure I have gotten the name of the country right; I never was one for following politics much. But this war-thing is definitely bad news of at least the magnitude of the incarceration of James Brown.

Suddenly I recall my vow to do something good for all humanity.

I get out of the car and hand my keys to the cop.

"Here, park this, willya."

He starts to open his mouth to utter some typical cop thing, but I deftly make use of his obedience cable to his superiors (a slimy thing I always hate to touch), and secure his complete cooperation.

The U.N. is crawling with security. I watch for a few minutes until I ascertain who the head honcho is. Then I approach him.

This is not a time to cut corners, so I indulge in a little overkill. Not only do I quickly yank and plug into my skull his obedience connection to his distant boss, but I also take over his links with his wife, dog, son and what appears to be his riding lawnmower. (I always said these G-men were sickos.)

"Would you mind escorting me in?" I ask sweetly.

"Of course, sir. Right this way."

Issuing orders over his walkie-talkie, the Secret Service agent soon conducts me backstage in the Assembly chamber.

I now face a minor problem: how to get close enough to the President for what I need to do. My outfit is certainly not going to help, as I am wearing a Hawaiian shirt, green scrub pants a friend stole from Bellevue, and huaraches.

Improvise, improvise. "Loan me your suit coat."

"Certainly."

Thus somewhat more suitably accoutered, clutching a shopping list from my pocket as if it were a classified memo I must deliver, I step out onto the dais, my captive agent dutifully running interference for me.

The platform is full of seated dignitaries. The Secretary General is speaking at a podium. Television cameras are focused on us. I have always wanted to appear on television, but not in this fashion....

Using the narrow space behind the rank of chairs, I sidle up inch by inch to where the President and his counterpart are seated. The Prez's prep-school Puritan face is puckered into a mask of righteous indignation. The leader of our enemy wears a smug duplicitous puss like what you might see on a drug-dealer who just successfully tossed his stash out the car window and down a sewer before the narcs closed in.

No one is paying any attention to me.

Yet.

A thick orange scaly hawser of hate runs between the two leaders. I've never seen anything so malignant-looking. I truly believe for the first time in the reality of war.

I am now within reach of the emotional linkages of these geopolitical megalomaniacs. Unfortunately, people are starting to take notice of me, and not in a kindly way.

Before they decide to do something, I act.

Gripping the hate-cord with both hands, I attempt to yank its ends out of the leaders' heads. The resistance is immense. I strain— To the audience, both at home and in the Assembly, it must look, I am sure, as if I am gripping an imaginary barbell with the leaders' heads as weights and trying to press it for an Olympic record.

Finally, the hate-cord pops out. Both leaders jerk like gaffed barracudas.

I can't resist leaning forward and whispering in their ears.

"Imagine there's no countries, boys, it's easy if you try. And war is over, if you want it...."

In the next instant, I pop the Prez's patriotism link and plug it into the head of the South Arabiraniopistan guy. Then I swiftly jack the other guy's loyalty into the Prez.

All the hoodoo movements this involves over the heads of the two leaders is apparently too much for the unseduced security people, who now pile on me as if I were the football in a Super Bowl game.

My Lennon glasses shoot off my face and fly through the air. I think I hear them crack. But I could be wrong. Sounds are rather muffled through a layer of human flesh atop me.

I black out.

During this more-than-usually-unconscious state, Lucy appears to me, naked and resplendently begemmed.

"A fine job, Zildjian. You are welcome to visit us anytime." She starts to fade.

"Wait, hold on, how do I get back to where I once belonged...?"

But there is no answer.

I am in prison for only six months. The pants from Bellevue helped my insanity defense. I don't mind. Even if no one else realizes what I've done, I can relish being a working-class hero. Much to my amazement, Cynthia visits me three times a week. I had somehow thought that all the relationships I had rigged would vanish with the glasses.

During my imprisonment, I am proud to report, our President and the leader of South Arab-etc., after their stunning reconciliation in front of the entire world, are photographed playing miniature golf together at Disney World, and America agrees to purchase its new ally's entire output of camel-dung fertilizer, or some such similar commodity.

One day thereafter, I am walking down Broadway when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

I cautiously approach the monk. He smiles broadly and points to the top of my head.

"Nice looking lotus blossom you got there."

I don't let on that I am pleased. "Hunh. Whatcha got for sale today?"

The monk holds up a pair of clunky black retro plastic frames. They look vaguely familiar....

"The name 'Peggy Sue' mean anything to you?"

PAUL DI FILIPPO

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

You Won't Take Me Alive! (Without atLeast Ten Percent of the Box Office Gross)

"A ROMANCE writer's two-year flight from justice ended in a style befitting one of her novels this week, when law enforcement agents knocked on her door at a low-budget motel just outside Los Angeles. Rather than surrender without a struggle, Barbara Joslyn stabbed herself in the chest.

"As Federal agents closed in on her...Ms. Joslyn barricaded herself in her cramped motel room and shouted that she `would not be taken alive.'"--The New York Times, May 5, 1997.

"Let me through, I'm from the SFWA."

As soon as the hard-eyed, bigshouldered young cop--standing intimidatingly with folded arms on the crowd side of the yellow police tape--heard those words, he gave me a deferential nod, lifted up the plastic ribbon, and ushered me under. Even this rookie plainly knew who had saved the asses of his buddies in countless similar situations across the country. I was hoping his superiors did too.

Once on the far side of the barrier, walkie-talkies crackling practically in my ears, I found myself in the middle of a barely controlled mob. Plainclothes detectives, armored SWAT snipers, squat HAZMATrobots, reporters, priests, psychologists, editors, agents, publicists, film directors--the usual mix of do-gooders and vultures you always find at this kind of tragic scene. Using perceptions and intuitions honed from dozens of equally chaotic past confrontations, I zeroed in on the guy most likely in charge: a smartly coiffed City Hall type wearing a suit that probably cost as much as I made in a month.

I waved my open wallet, credentials showing, under his nose. "Dorsey Kazin, SFWA Griefcom. Whadda we got here?"

Maybe it was the sight of the understatedly famous silver rocket next to my name in gold-leaf, maybe it was the calm assurance in my voice. Maybe it was the chance to dump this whole mess in somebody else's lap. Whatever the case, the guy's stern but nervous exterior collapsed faster than the Wizards of the Coast publishing program, and he spilled his fears into my tender ear like a kid telling his mother what he did that day in second grade.



"Am I glad to see you, Mr. Kazin! Ruben Spinelost here, assistant to Mayor Whiffle." I tendered the guy a perfunctory shake. "Afraid I'm in a little over my head in this dustup. Never dealt with one of these new-fangled hostage-based contract negotiations before."

I cut him off. "Get used to it, Rube, this new tactic's all the rage --and I do mean rage. Brief me quick now, before our gun-toting Gernsbackian decides to lay a few of his more violent cards on the table--or maybe his hostage's ear."

Spinelost consulted a paper. "Well, the writer involved is someone named Theodolite Sangborn. He's published--"

"Not necessary. I got everything I need to know about him along those lines out of his SFWA file. I'm an instant Sangborn expert on his whole life, from his formative childhood traumas down to how he deducted his mistress's hotel room as a convention expense on his last 1040. Not to mention his entire miserable midlist genre career. What I need from you is some idea of the kinds of demands he's making, and who he's got in there."

Spinelost used his cheat notes to answer the last question first. "He's holding his editor, a woman named Sherri Drysack. Ex-editor, I should say. Apparently she made the mistake of deciding to pay him a visit in person to offer her condolences--"

"On Bollix Books dropping Sangborn like a squirming roach when his last novel stiffed. What a damn fool! Didn't she know her presence would be like holding a lit match to a powder-keg?"

"Obviously not. I believe she's, um, fresh out of Bennington. Fine school, of course, but.... Anyway, now Sangborn is using the leverage represented by her peril to demand a new three-book, seven-figure contract, with twenty percent royal ties and assured softcover editions. Oh yes, he also wants Leapsgerb Studios to option his last book for; cool million."

I cursed eloquently. "These Heinlein wannabes with their de fusions of canonical stature make me sick. They should consider themselves lucky to get a Whelan cover, like Sangborn did on his *Interstellar UPS*, never mind option' and kick-in clauses. And it always falls to Griefcom to hand them a reality check."

Spinelost coughed politely "Speaking of checks...."

"Don't get your boxers in a twist over nothing, Rube. Assuming I can bring this whole debacle to a safe conclusion mutually agreeable to all parties, the city will be fully compensated for any extraordinary expenses--as long as no charges are pressed against our author, of course. Whichever publisher picks up Sangborn will cut a check to the municipality tomorrow--and probably make a nice little donation to the FOP. It's standard industry practice now. They just write it off as a line item on the author's royalty statement."

"Very good. Still, I rather miss the old days--"

Just then a bullet zipped by over our heads like something out of Harrison's Deathworld. Spinelost and the other suits fell to the ground, while the rest of us hardened campaigners just groaned cynically at the requisite touch of melodrama. From the innocent-looking suburban house where Sangborn was holed up came a shouted threat.

"Hey, people! I want to see some goddamn action here, maybe a cover proof or a multi-city booktour itinerary, and fast! Or Little Miss Blue Pencil is going to have a new buttonhole in her Donna Karan jacket!"

I patted my coat pocket to make sure my cell-phone and palmtop with speed-dialer attachment were there, then grabbed a loud-hailer from agape-mouthed-social-worker.

"Sangborn! It's Dorsey Kazin! I'm coming in for some face time. Don't shoot anymore, or these guys will put you on the remainder table faster than you can say Robert James Waller!"

Silence for a moment, before Sangborn answered. "Okay, Kazin, I trust you. But no one else!"

Handing back the hailer, I marched forward, the mob of officials falling aside respectfully to let me through.

The time spent crossing that inevitable empty and unnaturally silent street to the writer's house is always unnerving, no matter how often you've done it before. Sure, you figure they're not gonna do anything crazy at this point, with a solution to their problems so close, but you never know for certain. I still broke out into a sweat when I remembered how my onetime partner, Alyx Jorus, had gone permanently out of print, drilled through the heart as she approached a writer involved in that hellacious work-for-hire Star Wars novelizations snafu. There are some cases I wouldn't touch with a ten-light-year pole.

As I crossed to Sangborn's bungalow, I tried to reassure myself by thinking of all my peers who were even now successfully and routinely doing my same job across this nation of belligerent, mad-dog writers. Those various Griefcom professionals from all the sister and brother organizations to SFWA--the guilds of the mystery writers, the romance writers, the western writers, the horror writers, the screen- and teleplay writers, even PEN--they all stood invisibly shoulder-to-shoulder with me as I strode up to Sangborn's door. So bolstering was my ghostly crew that when I got there I was able to knock with confidence, call my name, then enter.

A disheveled Sangborn sat on the couch in the darkened living-room, semi-automatic rifle loosely gripped. (SFWA sold armaments through the Forum now, and had coffers overflowing with cash.) His hair was as messy as a sheaf of manuscript pages dropped in a wastebasket, his face was stubbled, and he was sweating like one of Fabio's fans getting an autograph. Perched insouciantly on the edge of a coffee-table, Sherri Drysack was, by contrast, cool as one of Anne Rice's vampires. Tucking long hair behind one perfect ear, she said, "It's about time you got here, Kazin. My Dayrunner's showing two appointments and a meeting

later this afternoon, and I'm like, hello, can we get these negotiations moving, or are we still in like the Stone Age?"

"Sangborn didn't kidnap you, did he? You're in collusion with him."

"Duh, Earth to Kazin, Earth to Kazin: wake up and smell your double-latte! Of course I'm in this with him. I was planning to jump ship at Bollix all the while, and Sangborn is my meal-ticket out."

I looked at the pitiful hulk on the couch. Shoeless, his hands shaking, his eyes redder than Mars before Robinson got his mitts on it, he looked the most unlikely prospect for success I had ever seen.

"You must have an ace in the hole. What is it?"

Drysack whipped a manuscript out of her briefcase. "Thought you'd never ask, Kazin. Here's three chapters and an outline for an open-ended series that's going to take the sf world by storm. Sangborn's going to make Niven and Pournelle look like Hall and Flint after this."

I took the handful of papers from her and started reading. After a while, I let out a genuine whistle of astonishment. "Looks like the real thing. A postmodern space opera based on an amalgam of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre. Didn't think the old hack had it in him."

Drysack moved to sit beside her property, draping a possessive arm around his shoulder. She slitheringly crossed one Victoria's Secret-sheathed leg over the other. Sangborn let out a plaintive mew like a Huckle. "Oh, Theo's far from washed up. He has a lot of good years left in him. All he needs is some tender loving care from the right editor--and of course some fat residuals on any TV series loosed on the Bronteverse."

I dug out my cell phone and palmtop and summoned up a fist of publishers in a screen window. Having picked a likely candidate, I mated the speed-dialer and phone. While the connection was being made, I moved to one of the windows, pulled the drapes aside, and gave the all-clear sign to the cops. As they began to move in, I saw one of the figures in the crowd answer his own ringing cell-phone.

"Loomis Harmonica here. Is that you, Kazin?"

"Damn right. And I'm sitting on the hottest concept to hit sf since Asimov read Gibbon. Is the publisher of Mary Kay Books interested?"

"You bet your bottom Imperial credit we are. Put Drysack right on."

I passed the phone to the eager lady editor, then walked across the room to a shelf of liquor bottles. I poured myself an undiluted vodka, and knocked back half of it.

Hell of a way to earn a paycheck. But when the Muse calls, you gotta answer.

Especially if she's packing heat.

## Shipbreaker

by Paul Di Filippo

"If this was what death was, somebody ought to care."  
—*Earthblood*, by Keith Laumer and Rosel George Brown

A craggy, jagged mountain fell slowly through the sky.

Attended by a flock of Class D Hagfish pilot ships, their coruscant supportive fields overlapping the larger vessel, the dead hulk of another retired starliner descended toward the Shipbreakers' Yard on Asperna. Possessing no discernible symmetry, the machicolated and turreted starcraft was a conglomeration of protuberances and ports, pods and pavilions, so ugly it forced the viewer to concede new notions of beauty. Its space-pitted, many-textured surfaces bespoke millennia of interstellar service.

Occulting Asperna's Least Sun, the dropping starliner robbed each individual in the crowd below of a single shadow. Mainly composed of ragged workers, the crowd featured an isolated knot of the Yard's management personnel. Apart from their finer clothing and lack of visible craft, these overseers could also be recognized by their attendant swarms of majestatics.

The workers and executives had arrayed themselves randomly along a wide sloping beach of firm-packed sand, facing the water. On either extreme of the gathering lay vast hard-surfaced staging areas for the upcoming deconstruction, dotted with tools and agravitic lifters and cradles which would soon receive components gutted from the newest salvage prize. The shoreline was stained with exotic industrial fluids that had killed off all vegetation and tinted in oily chromatics the waters themselves. At several docks bobbed scores of dirty utilitarian slab-sided watercraft used to ferry workers out to the ship-corpse, their lifting units deactivated.

Behind the onlookers stretched inland the nameless collection of hovels and shanties, shacks and huts, warehouses and refectories, barrooms and brothels, laced together by muddy paths, all of which the shipbreakers simply called home. At the very edge of the water and wading into the shallows, a vast system of tall baffles and shunts—a diamond labyrinth—stood poised to deal with the imminent surge that would accompany the ponderous settling of the starliner into the sea.

Now the descent of the falling mountain and its host of attendants slowed even more dramatically. The liner that had once cruised like a queen among the worlds of the Indrajal seemed to hover unmoving in the atmosphere. But ever so timidly the Least Sun emerged crescentwise from behind its upper rim, indicating a slight actual progress toward berthing.

The lower edge of the liner lipped the waves. The Hagfishes pulled their fields steadily upward from contact with the rising water, not wishing to dissipate power by lifting cubic meters of sea needlessly. As their fields shifted off the center of the big ship's mass, the little craft had to strain to maintain the equilibrium of their prize. Soon, judging by the strobing moiré patterns, they would have to let their

capture go.

When the ocean had swallowed the bottom third of the liner, a dark architectonic iceberg, the pilot ships cut their fields entirely.

The resulting tidal surge whooshed shoreward, smashed the baffles, then dissipated in a chaos of foam and spume and a noise like the manifestation of a deva.

From the crowd ascended a lusty cheer. Here was work aplenty for the next several months. Fat profits, to be sure, for the Shipyard's owner—the enigmatic and seldom-glimpsed Horseface known as Bright Tide Rising—but enough scraps, at least, to sustain the meager lives of the breakers themselves.

And, as always, the dream—

Perhaps one of the breakers would even strike it rich, finding something onboard that earned its discoverer a bonus. Hefty by comparison with the regular day rates, these incentive payments represented the smallest fraction of what Bright Tide Rising would resell the prizes for.

But the breakers were in no position to bargain or complain.

. . . . .

Klom turned to the woman at his side. Sorrel's marigold face was sheened with salty spray blown back from the collision of tide and baffles, and her auburn hair was damp. A smear of neglected grease grimed one hinge of her jaw; scavenged O-rings served her as bracelets, and a unredeemable chunk of fused gold circuitry spotwelded to a clasp hung from one small earlobe.

Klom lifted a blunt-fingered hand big enough to palm Sorrel's head like a gameball. The back of his hand was tessellated with the latest cruft, a mica-like substance that evolved out of Klom's epidermal cells and flaked off regularly. The cruft had come in on the Snuffler ship they had dismantled some months ago, and as yet the Yard's curanderos had no remedy for the exogenous affliction. With a forefinger large as the nozzle of a watercutter, Klom swiped moisture from the skin underneath Sorrel's green, horizontally slitted left eye and down over her sharp cheekbone.

"You got wet."

Sorrel glared up at Klom, who towered above her much as the floating ship now towered over the crowd, even at the remove of a kilometer. Her throaty voice registered exasperation. "Big news, you dumb two-strand! We all did."

"Oh." Klom raised the hem of his tattered coarse shirt, revealing a midriff packed with muscle and striated with more cruft. He dried his own rugged face. "I didn't even feel the spray. I was busy thinking about my mother."

Sorrel snorted. "Your mother! You haven't even seen the woman in ten years. I'm sure she would have forgotten that you even exist, if it weren't for the money you send."

"Maybe this ship will make us rich, Sorrel. Enough for you and me and my mother too. We could go back to my village and all three of us could live together. You'd like living in Chaulk, I know it. There's a lake there—"

"Oh, my deva! I've heard about Lake Zawinul so often I'm starting to develop gills! And what makes you think I'd go with you to your stinking little home village even if you were rich? I used to be a city girl, you know, before I had the misfortune to end up here. Can Chaulk compete with the Whispering Gardens of Lustron?"

Utter incomprehension transformed Klom's massive features into a mask of hurt confusion. "But Sorrel, we love each other."

"So you keep telling me."

Klom shook himself as if dispelling a cloud of the gnats that arose in the springtime from the stagnant marshes bordering the Yard. Then, forsaking words, he enwrapped Sorrel with one arm and hugged her to him. Her olive-drab shift bunched up on one hip. Klom's smile was holed here and there by missing teeth.

"Ow! Let me go, you big idiot!"

"Hey now, what's this? Assault on a lady? Shall I be forced to give you a good thrashing, you monster?"

Weaving through the throng came a lean man with coppery skin and sandy hair, dressed in what passed for finery among the breakers: clean, albeit ragged white blouse and trows. A wispy mustache draped his upper lip. Taller than Sorrel, he still seemed small in comparison with Klom. Closing with Klom and Sorrel, the newcomer began darting and feinting, tossing mild jabs at the giant.

Klom released Sorrel, and laughed in such a titanic manner that the nearest bystanders winced. "Airey! Where were you? You missed the landing!"

Airey ceased his shadowboxing and shook Klom's hand. "Deva bless you, Klom, that craft's hideous! Don't you have any gloves?"

Klom examined his hands as if seeing them for the first time. "No gloves fit me."

"Nonsense! I'll get you a pair that fits somehow." Airey turned to Sorrel and briefly embraced her, bestowing a kiss on her forehead. "Any damage to the fleshy goods? No? Very well, but let me know if your reputation needs avenging." Sorrel laughed, her bell-like tones generating more pleasant notice from those nearby than Klom's robust guffaws.

"Airey, you make everyone laugh," Klom said.

"Too bad I can't convince old Right Tight Raisin to pay me for such services. Yard comedian, that's a role I could enjoy! Instead, I have to labor in the drainage pits like some unskilled kilobase. And if beauty were money, Sorrel wouldn't have to slave on the sorting line. Oh well, that's life."

Sorrel playfully kicked Airey's ankle in response, eliciting an "ouch."

Klom scratched his head through a thick mat of black hair. "Maybe this new ship will bring us all good luck."

"Ah, that's the very reason I sought you out, Klom. I did not miss the landing at all. I was standing as close to the overseers as I could get, while the ship came down. Those lousy terabases and four-strands are damnably suspicious of eavesdroppers, though! It was all I could do to avoid rousing their majestatics."

"You didn't take any chances, did you?" asked Sorrel, looking alarmed.

Airey patted her hand. "Not at all. I have no desire to be drilled through the heart by an angry busybee, believe me! But I was able to overhear the high and mighty ones discussing the origin of this ship. It's a Vixen craft. Most recently made the circuit among Bastiaan, Meuse, and Greengage for centuries. But it's much older than that. Parts of it were decommissioned over a thousand years ago. That's where I'd head first if I were you, Klom. Deva knows what goodies you'll find there!"

Klom considered the information, ruminating over it in his slow, stolid fashion. Any idea introduced into Klom's brain met with a laborious reception, but frequently he ground a notion to a finer intellectual dust than the more quick-witted Airey ever could, with surprising results.

"I'll do that, Airey. Anything special I should look for?"

"Oh, I don't know ... What about the Book of Forgetting?"

Sorrel laughed, but sourly this time. "Why not hope to find a globe of Mazarine isinglass, or a Ledan swanrobe or a map to the treasures of Mount Sumeru while you're at it?" Here she broke mockingly into a snatch of song: "The fields of pleasure, the seas of love/Heavenly eyes that peer from above....' And how would anyone even recognize the mythical Book of Forgetting?"

"Oh, if half of what's said about it is true, I suspect the finder would quickly realize what he'd found. The legends are evocative, though not precise. The Book is nothing less than the universal anodyne for all our mortal suffering—"

Suddenly the crowd surged forward en masse, breaking around Klom's immovable bulk, which protected his companions as well.

"What's happening?" asked Klom.

"I assume the marabouts are about to invoke a deva to bless the proceedings," said Airey.

"Lift me up," Sorrel said, and I'll tell you what I can see."

Klom's hands encircled Sorrel's torso just as her O-ring bracelets encircled her wrist. His fingers and thumbs met across her span. In half a second she stood on his shoulders, her sandaled feet finding plenty of purchase on Klom's broad frame, while he braced her behind her thighs. Canopying her hands, Sorrel shielded her eyes against the triple sunlight.

"Yes, I see it all now. Several marabouts are riding a lifter out to the ship. Oh, how beautiful their robes are, billowing in the wind! Oops, one's lost his miter! They've stopped now, not far from the ship. They're making the sacrifice. I think they're using a Redskull ox." A tremulous bellow cut short drifted across the waters. "Now they're feeding power to the prayer wheels. Get ready for the boomtube—"

Airey covered his ears, as did Sorrel. Klom seemed unconcerned, but in any case did not cease

supporting Sorrel.

If the might of the tidal surge hitting the baffles had produced a noise akin to the collapse of a small house, then the manifestation of the deva's boomtube generated a soundwave resembling the demolition of one of Voyule's cloudscraper towers. The whole crowd staggered backward, with some losing their footing. Klom barely rocked, while he kept Sorrel anchored.

Now above the floating ship hung the deva: a silvery distortion in the air, in which the minds of lesser beings discerned varying images, depending on both physiology and cultural conditioning.

The majority of sapient in the galaxy—Humans, Foambones, Weepers, Hyenas, Gadabouts, Crickets, Leatherheads, Cygnets, as well as a thousand others and all their miscegenational offspring—encoded their genomes in some variation of DNA: two helical strands of nucleotides on the order of three billion basepairs. But there were higher orders of natural beings as well, those whose longer evolutionary histories had achieved more. Their genomes consisted of four, six, or even eight strands, featuring trillions of basepairs. These terabase beings exhibited emergent properties, sophistications of mind and body unattainable by the two-strands and gigabases.

The devas were sentients who had bootstrapped themselves entirely out of conventional spacetime thanks to their cellular complexity: decastranders, yotta- and zettabases. The subtle cosmic fields that supported life simply kicked the devas up to a different quantum level of existence.

Sorrel shivered atop Klom. "I see a Trundler Demon. This is a bad omen."

"Nonsense," said Airey. "I can plainly discern the smiling face of a Hovaness Lamb. Nothing could be a better sign. Klom, what do you see?"

Klom did not speak immediately. "I—I don't know the name for what I'm seeing."

"Can you describe it?"

"It's—it forgives everything."

Airey made a dismissive noise. "Oh, that's helpful, all right."

A bolt of silver energy lanced out from the deva and splattered across the ship: a token of beneficence. A joyous shout went up from the crowd at this blessing. Then the deva silently snapped out of their ontological plane.

"Okay, Klom, you can put me down now."

Klom complied effortlessly. Airey tugged straight his best white tunic, which had been disarrayed by the boomtube's blast, and said, "Well, I think this event calls for a drink. Shall we go to Thrash's for a flagon of toadchunder?"

"Who's paying?" asked Sorrel.

Airey clapped Klom on the shoulder. "Why, Klom of course. He's the one who saw the unknowable face of the deva. He's the one who's going to get rich!"



.....

The gangboss for Klom's shift was a Quetzal from Muntjac, named Rapaille. The amputation of Rapaille's wings necessitated by a clumsy curandero after a barroom brawl had long ago left the avianoform ill-tempered and unforgiving. As meager compensation for his lost wings, Rapaille spent every last spare taka and paisa to adorn his priapic cockscomb with a variety of gaudy baubles. Today, setting out for their first foray to the Vixen hulk, Rapaille wore several sparkling garnets and a lozenge of nightmare amber piercing his fleshy ruff.

Aboard one of the wallowing, unroofed ocean transports, still docked, Rapaille marshaled his workers, a motley pack of hard-limbed bruisers representing a dozen heterogeneous races. Mounting one of the grimy seats to command more attention, Rapaille commenced a small speech. His beak clacked between syllables, and his narrow orange tongue stabbed the air.

"Listen closely, you scuzz-buckets! This ship has already been partially stripped by its former owners. They've taken most of the furnishings and fixtures. You won't find any old nesting materials to sniff, nor any dainty female undergarments to hug to your bosom."

An anonymous voice called out, "How about wings? Any chance of glomming a pair of those onboard?"

Rapaille scrunched his beady eyes and gurgled wordlessly, before regaining his self-control. "Quiet! The next wisecrack will earn someone a lost shift! Pay attention! It is equally unlikely you'll discover any valuable personal trinkets or artwork, although I don't rule out a few overlooked nanosculptures or parasite jewelry. So you might as well just forget about such easy booty. Any individual performance rewards will come from the neat and speedy accumulation of well-known structures. We're after control ganglia, matter-modems and entertainment nodes, for instance. Nexial splitters pay well too. Several teams have already been dispatched to handle the disentanglers and decoherers. Other groups have been assigned the bridge. But aside from those areas, we have free access to the rest of the ship. Our goal is to finish over the next few months at the same time as the others, so that we can all move on to breaking up the hull itself. Do you all have your downloaded ship schematics?"

Several breakers held aloft their industrial-grade readers, battered boxes good for little more than displaying pre-formatted audiovisual files. No ensouled devices were to be found on Asperna, at least among the lower castes.

"All right, then! Take your seats, and we'll be off!"

Before Rapaille could step off his own bench, Klom pushed forward through his fellows to confront the gangboss. Strapped across Klom's massive torso were various prybars, clamps, spreaders, holdfasts, desiccant packs and other tools. Slung in a holster at one hip was his bulky watercutter.

Even atop his seat, Rapaille found himself staring at Klom's chest rather than his face, until he raised his scale-rimmed eyes. "Yes, our big empty-headed man-ape from Chaulk. What do you want?"

"Are we allowed to go into the decommissioned areas?"

Rapaille let out a tweet of amazement. "The decommissioned areas? What are you interested in? Dust and bones? Faded signage and outmoded tech? Slavering senescent slop? That's all you'll find there!"

Klom blinked once, then said, "Are we allowed to go into the decommissioned areas?"

The Quetzal screeched in frustration, his wing stubs twitching beneath his embroidered shirt. "Go anyplace you want, you unreasoning curdled egg! But you'll never earn more than base pay if you persist in this foolish strategy. And my own bonuses will fall accordingly!"

Klom said, "I will be going into the decommissioned areas then." He sat down, occupying two seats.

Muttering, Rapaille signaled liftoff to the transport's pilot—a diminutive Melungeon with one tendril wrapped around a joystick and five others free for the separate controls. The transport lost mass until it floated half a meter above the waves. Surging forward through a channel opened in the baffles, the craft headed toward the Vixen ship. The Great Sun and the Lesser Sun raised the temperature of the air to a comfortable, shirtsleeve level. By the time the Least Sun arose, rendering the muggy atmosphere tropical, the breakers would be taking their lunch deep within the hulk.

The crossing of the kilometer of open water by Klom's craft and its mates resembled the engulfment of a school of minnows by a leviathan. The minor-city-sized disabled starcruiser—with the waterline halfway up its height, and its lower portions resting on the seabed—thrust out artificial peninsulas and lesser promontories. Once into its shadow and embrace, the transports assumed the insignificance of ticks on the hide of a Dominikono widestrider. Additionally, the ancient interstellar vessel seemed to be reradiating all the immeasurable chill it had accumulated over its millennia of high vacuum service.

It would take the gangs nearly a year to finish stripping the interior of the craft, and another six months to disassemble its hull. Of course, the whole process could have been accomplished in a fraction of that time by employing sufficient swarms of self-replicating majestatics. But such technologies—along with ensouled machines—were forbidden to anyone not at least a four-strand. And the four-strands and other galactic elites were both relatively small in number and disdainful of performing any such "labor," even distanced by layers of autonomic supervisors. With the fecund and subservient two-strands so handy, it only made sense to keep them profitably occupied.

The Yards at Asperna not only saw ships come in, but also go out, as salable constituent pieces. Brokers arrived and departed continuously, both from offplanet and from other parts of Asperna, leaving with cargoes for a hundred thousand destinations. Workers in the warehouse and sales end of the Yards felt their positions to be superior to the gritty, effortful tasks of the breakers and sorters, and a rough caste system existed, further fragmented into various levels according to the perceived crudity of assignments.

Klom's boat arrived at a sloping paw of the inorganic leviathan. Far, far above them, a different portion of the starliner formed a concave roof. A shoulder of the starliner constituted a distant wall running roughly parallel to the arm. A chaotic illumination came into this partial gallery as sunlight refracted from the bouncing sea.

The Melungeon shut down the lifting units, then secured the transport by a cable to a handy U-bar on the Vixen vessel. The breakers utilized the fractally porous surface of the starcraft's skin as handholds and toeholds to climb up several gently sloping meters of wall, their tools racketing against each other. Once aboard this small leg of the starliner—broad enough to host a ballgame—they waited for Rapaille's commands.

"Follow me, you wittolds! The nearest port is just a few minutes' walk in this direction."

The paw sloped upward, the roof sloped down, and the shoulder angled in, rendering the passage more tunnel-like the further the breakers progressed.

Klom marched at the head of the line, looking about with a kind of patient curiosity. He had taken apart a dozen ships so far in his career at the Yards, and he fully expected to take apart a few dozen more, before he got too old for the work. Each ship possessed its own personality. Klom assumed that by the time he was done breaking down this vessel, he would know good-sized portions of it as intimately as he knew his mother's house in Chaulk. Paradoxically, the ship would no longer then exist to be known. Such conundrums did not bother Klom.

Faded Vixen script, each character tall as a man, ran across this segment of the deck. Klom turned to the breaker next to him, a blue-haired, ice-skinned fellow named Nyerephar, a mixed-breed Human and Pinemarten from Frostholm. Nyerephar had a reputation as an intellectual, given his predilection for offshift downloading into his reader of novels of interspecies romance, many of which originated with the Vixens.

"What do these words say, 'Phar?'"

Nyerephar smoothed his long jutting whiskers before replying. "It could be the ship's name. Yes, that's it, I'm sure. This is the ship's name."

"And what is the ship's name, 'Phar?'"

"Caution Discharge Zone"

"Thank you for telling me this."

Soon the breakers arrived at the port. Standing outside in front of the entrance was an enormous matter-modem: a cube with one mirrored face.

Delivered earlier from the Yards, the teleportation device stood ready to receive any unliving object carved from the ship. Its mates, tunable at will, stood ashore, near the sorting lines. Very useful devices, integral to the functioning of most economies of the Indrajal, the matter-modems were subject to two major inconvenient limitations. They only operated over planetary distances, and they were death to anything living that attempted transit.

Now the matter-modem, sensing their presence, activated itself. Fed from the other end, a fleet of lifting sledges came thru the mirror face. Each breaker stepped up to take a floating sledge for carrying booty.

Rapaille triggered a Vixen wall control marked by a new slash of red spray paint, and the port hobermanned open. The black interior of the powerless ship beckoned like the afterlife. The breakers lowered their miners' lamps onto their foreheads and switched them on, flooding the scene with actinic light.

"Rendezvous back here at twenty-nine hundred hours. And remember! This was a luxury vessel intended to pamper its patrons, not a Scryer dreadnought bristling with weaponry. Nonetheless, you can die just as swiftly from a falling girder as you can from an antipersonnel wasp!"

One by one, with Klom leading the way, the breakers stepped inside.

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Klom grunted hoarsely as he completed his climb. Sweat rivuleted his skin, and a musty odor compounded of stale lubricants and malnourished organic units pumping out ketones made every breath an exercise in disgust.

The ship schematics on his reader had informed him that the ladder he had just topped ran for a kilometer and a half in a narrow shaft slicing through innumerable decks. The swiftest way to the closest decommissioned area, the ladder had seemed a gift when Klom stood at its base. But now, as Klom labored to catch his breath on a platform above fifteen hundred meters of nothingness, the ladder appeared more like a poisoned fruit. Even Klom's work-hardened muscles quivered from the grueling ascent. Had his lifter fit into the narrow shaft, the ascent would have been trivial. Now, though, Klom was fatigued before he even began whatever labors awaited him.

Klom broke out his water bottle and a beancake. The water, sterilized by passage through a matter-modem, still retained the distasteful taints of decay and the metallic flavors of the marshes from which it was drawn. But this was the only drinking water available to the bustee-dwellers of Klom's caste. After so many years in the Yard, Klom was inured to the taste. But he still recalled the pure waters of Lake Zawinul with each sip.

After consuming the last crumb of beancake, Klom stood and faced away from the shaft. The door at the end of the platform presented itself as his next challenge. Klom looked for some control similar to the one Rapaille had used outside, but no such mechanism showed. It did not take Klom long to decide to cut his way through.

The watercutter hanging from Klom's belt was a simple pistol-shaped device with a second grip up front for two-handed use. Klom had wrapped tape around the butts for firmer purchase. He fitted a pair of scratched plastic goggles over his eyes, braced himself against a convenient strut, then triggered the cutter.

Out of its nozzle leaped a needle-thin jet of water possessing the destructive power of any stream of collimated subatomic particles, without any inconvenient radiation.

The closed end of the watercutter's barrel was a tiny matter-modem synced to another resting in a deep-sea trench where the water was at several dozen atmospheres of pressure. Only breakers of Klom's raw strength could handle this device, whose light weight and inexhaustibility were unmatched by any other cutting tool—yet whose powered state delivered immense reactive force requiring Klom's brawn.

Klom inscribed a crude circle in the wall just big enough for him to crawl through. A salty mist enveloped him, making his footing and handholds tenuous. Practically at his elbow, the echoing drop into space awaited his first slip. But Klom coolly persisted. Finally finished, he kicked the circle of metal inward. Gaily colored fluids from severed conduits dribbled into the opening, where once, when the ship was under power, they might well have gushed. Klom squirmed through this mild dribble without concern.

On the far side, he found himself in a giant auditorium or ballroom or refectory, whose vast confines his headlamp barely illuminated. This room had been in active use right up until the end, but the decommissioned area lurked just beyond its remote wall.

Klom crossed the wide floorspace, the beam of his lamp picking out various columns and stubs of fixtures and some discarded artifacts which to a less ambitious breaker would have represented adequate salvage. But with Airey's tactics fixed firmly in his mind, Klom zeroed in on the mysteries of the long-sealed chambers.

A little searching revealed a door concealed behind a sagging arras that depicted the hunting of some spiny beast by a party of Vixens, the bushy tails of the hunters plaited with colorful streamers. The door—sealed with a blobby gasket of silicone—boasted a still-active glo-sign, but not in Vixen script. Half the letters in the independently powered message were dead with age, while the rest exhibited only a marginal brightness. But Klom could not have read the warning or advice even if active, so ancient and foreign was the script. So without any hesitation, he simply cut his way past it.

The space on the far side of the door, a corridor, was proportioned for creatures somewhat smaller than Klom. The big man had to hunch as he advanced. Dust lay thickly underfoot, and the air smelled of the slow disintegration of unnatural materials. The walls of the corridor were etched with shallow glyphs, as if the beings who had once traversed it had relied on tactile clues more than visual ones.

Some years ago, Klom had helped disassemble a Pingpank ship that featured similar carven icons, although much cruder. But the Pingpank had been extinct for five hundred years, and at the time of their disappearance had represented the degenerate offspring of a much more sophisticated race, the Marchwardens. If this were Marchwarden text, then the decommissioned segment of the ship had last been occupied over a millennium ago. Without any exo-inputs, even generations of invisible repair majestatics would be reaching the end of their preservation efforts.

Open arched doorways began to appear. Klom cautiously poked his head through each one. Most of the chambers were of moderate size, and easily scannable for booty. In one such, Klom found several crystal eggs harboring strange animated scenes flickering wispily in their centers. These he placed in a carrying pouch. But the majority of the chambers were utterly bare. Klom began to suspect that Rapaille's harsh words held more accuracy than Airey's optimistic encouragements. Nonetheless, he continued his search.

The corridor dead-ended at another door. Klom saltily sliced through it, the runoff from his cutter turning the dust at his feet to a thin river of mud.

Pushing the cut circle of metal clangingly inward, Klom was met by a gust of pungent atmosphere. He stepped warily inside.

Instantly Klom knew he had found a vivarium.

From the walls of the tall, extensive chamber hung a variety of suspensor-sacs, all of them, sadly enough, in various stages of decomposition. Klom walked over to the nearest such: the withered reticulated vesicle ripped apart easily under his big hands with a noise like shredding a few dozen thicknesses of paper, and a shower of skeletal fragments fell out, clattering noisily on the floor.

Klom kicked the bones in frustration. So far he had wasted nearly half a shift and discovered nothing to justify his efforts. At this rate, retirement with Sorrel to Chaulk seemed destined never to be more than a dream.

Wearily, Klom sat down and took out another beancake.

The majestic that appeared hovering over his beancake resembled a thumb-sized golden bee. Klom jerked back, dropping the food. The majestic levitated the cake and flew ponderously off with it.

Klom jumped up and followed.

Clinging to the far side of a massive pillar, a live suspensor-sac served as the focus of a thick swarm of shining majestatics. The agravitic attendants ranged in size from dust particles to hummingbirds. They wreathed the sac in a life-supporting cloud. Already Klom's lunch was being disassembled into its constituent nutrients to benefit the sac.

Why this one vesicle had survived, Klom did not know. Perhaps it had sent taps into the pillar supporting it, finding its necessary sustenance elsewhere, in the active portions of the *Caution Discharge Zone*. But whatever anomaly was responsible for extending its life beyond its mates, the sac represented a potential treasure.

Inside, a living mature being awaited rebirthing. For some unknown period, the metabolism of the concealed creature had been stepped down to nearly flatline levels, with interior majestatics tending to various cellular repairs as necessary. Given adequate resources, the upper time limit on sac containment had never been established.

Klom advanced on the sac, then stopped. He could not simply rip it open, he realized. How was he to get the vesicle to awaken and safely discharge its patient?

Filled with a fierce wanting, Klom hung his head and cudged his thoughts for a solution.

Suddenly his vision was obscured by a shifting haze. A portion of the turbulent majestic swarm had englobed his head.

"Please," said Klom aloud, "deliver your burden to me. This ship is dead. We are going to chop it up. Your charge will die."

Spinning in arcane patterns, the majestatics seemed to consider Klom's request, before rejoining the parent cloud.

Instantly, the vesicle began to undergo changes. Veins throbbed athwart its surface, swaths of livid color flowed across it like storms across a gas-giant planet, and a musky, urinous odor arose off it.

A split developed along the bottom ridge of the vesicle, widening quickly. The next instant clotted crimson and purple fluids gushed out, splashing Klom's workboots, followed by the plopping thud of a body hitting the floor.

Klom hastened over and squatted down beside the form, roughly one third as big as Klom himself. It resembled no sapient race he had ever seen.

The creature's head was an oblate boulder pebbled over with muffin-sized mounds. It had two eyes, their lids lowered, a blunt snout with flaring nostrils, and jowl-concealed jaws. A kind of skin-covered cartilaginous tuning-fork arrangement projected from its forehead. No ears were visible. Its keg-like body boasted four chunky legs, the paws showing blunt claws. Its hide was brown velvety skin wrinkled like a cerebral cortex. A pair of vestigial hands stuck out at its shoulders. No tail interrupted its hindquarters.

The being was struggling to draw a breath. Klom gripped it by the scruff of its neck with one hand, lifting its weighty head, then levered open its unresisting jaws with the other. He swabbed out a jellylike mass from its throat, then put his face to the creature's wet face and began exchanging breaths with it.

After a minute, the beast could breathe on its own. It opened its eyes, limpid gray pools. Klom fell into the creature's gaze, losing all sense of himself for a moment. When he had recovered, he asked, "Can you speak? Are you all right?" The creature said nothing, but tried to stand. Its legs gave way beneath it, however, and it collapsed back into its afterbirth.

Klom picked up the creature and set out to retrace his steps.

At the platform where the ladder began, he lashed the beast to his chest with a net of bungee cords, so that its head rested below Klom's chin.

Klom commenced the descent.

Halfway down, his muscles spasming, Klom thought he might not be able to complete the climb.

A giant tongue stropped his face.

Klom found the strength to go on.

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The interior of Thrash's shabeen was illuminated only by a few worthless lighting fixtures scavenged from a variety of ships, and powered off a rack of biomass fuel cells. The patchy, sputtering radiance formed many shadowy nooks where drinkers could sit and conspire, consummating the mingy deals that constituted the primitive economy of the bustee-dwellers in the Yard. The furniture of the dirt-floored barroom was similarly ill-sorted, a collection of spraddle-legged chairs and tables, and the occasional stained, bedraggled lounge for those customers whose anatomy precluded chairs. At the bar, the best-lit area, a row of stools with fragments of flooring still attached rested hard by the stacked packing crates separating Thrash from his customers.

Thrash's heritage included Slow Loris and Peluche genes, rendering him a shaggy ursinoid with huge eyes. All the tap-handles and liquor jugs had been customized for his broad paws. The mugs all sported wide grips as well.

Sorrel needed both hands to lift her glass. She raised her drink and sipped, then made a face before plonking the mug back on the rickety table.

"What sour piss this is! How I wish I had a glass of Tancredi nectar."

Klom drained his own dark brew with evident satisfaction, then wiped his mouth with the back of his crufty hand.

Sorrel winced. "Deva, Klom! I have to kiss those lips once in a while!"

Looking down at his flaking hand, Klom said, "But Sorrel, we know this cruft's not contagious. The curandero said so. Once it finds a host, it stops looking for others. It's worked its way right into me,

though, adopting lots of my genes into itself. That's what makes it so hard to get rid of."

"That's no matter. I still prefer not to have those patches rubbed all over me, or to come in contact with certain parts of you. You're just lucky the craft stopped at your waist."

Klom smiled dreamily. "Tonight we'll doublecheck its progress."

Sorrel stuck out her vividly pink tongue. "If you can spare a minute for me, now that you've got a new friend. Or if there's a centimeter of space left in your crib."

Klom looked down at his feet.

The creature from the *Caution Discharge Zone* lay peacefully sleeping, one forepaw folded over the other beneath its chin. Drool snailed down the side of its face to darken the dirt. Its unlabored breathing gently rasped the stale air within the shabean.

Reaching down, Klom fondly skritchd the beast's scalp around its fleshy forklike appendage. The rhythm of the creature's breathing deepened in a contented fashion. "Use his name, Sorrel, please. You know I gave him a name. Call him Tugger, please."

"Tugger! Ridiculous! Why 'Tugger' anyhow?"

"I found out he likes to play that way. You should see him pull on a rope. He can put up a real tussle."

"And why 'he'?" I certainly didn't see any ballocks on him when you trotted him around for everyone to admire."

"I don't know. I just feel Tugger's male."

Sorrel waved her arms about in frustration. "I give up! You get first crack at a potential treasure trove, and all you come away with is an ugly pet! This is so typical for you, Klom. You're just too dumb to grab the main chance, even when it's right under your nose."

Klom looked hurt. "There was nothing valuable in that decommissioned area, Sorrel. At least as far as I looked. But I stopped when I found Tugger. I had to get him out of there. The atmosphere was bad for him. And he perked up right away once we were outside in the fresh air. But I shared the money from the crystal eggs with you, didn't I? Ten taka and sixty pasia. That's something, isn't it?"

"Birdscratch! Someone with your experience should be hauling in much more. Tomorrow, I expect you to pick another decommissioned area and make a big strike!"

"But I already found something very valuable, Sorrel. Tugger! Just look at him. What a character! He makes me smile, just like Airey does. Who could ask for anything more? Anyway, I figure if I concentrate on ripping out the old Vixen equipment like everyone else, I can make a steadier pay. No, I'm not going back to any of the decommissioned areas. The odds are too slim."

"What's this, what's this? Abandoning my advice! I'm hurt! Truly I am!"

Airey dropped down onto an empty ladderback chair. He wore a shirt that proclaimed with glowing threads support for his favorite ballteam, the Alavoine Tumblers. His bronze face was slicked with sweat, rendering his mustache a limp strip of furze. Even hours after Final Sunset, the air retained a surplus of



enervating heat.

Signaling to Thrash for a drink, Airey resumed his chiding. "So, you're letting one little setback discourage you, Klom? I had thought much higher of you."

"Setback? What setback?"

Airey dug a toe of his sandal into Tugger's side, provoking a mild grunt and a shifting away by the beast. "This worthless thing! Now you have another mouth to feed. Have you considered that?"

Klom remained positive. "I can't get Tugger to eat anything yet. All he does is drink a little water. And he seems to do that just to please me. He just doesn't seem to be hungry. And even when he does decide to eat, I'm sure I can get plenty of scraps from Kirsh, over in Kitchen Number Twelve."

Thrash lumbered over, carrying Airey's mug and a plate of fried salicornia and quorn nuggets. "Snack's on the house," growled Thrash. "Your pet's brought in extra trade tonight."

"Thank you, Thrash."

Klom picked up a nugget and held it under Tugger's nose. Sniffing without opening his eyes, Tugger made a polite refusal by lifting his paws to cover his face.

"See? He's not greedy or any trouble at all. Tugger only brings happiness and good luck."

Exasperated, Airey blew air rudely past his fluttering lips. "I give up. Sorrel, can you convince him to abandon this worthless foundling and get back to some fruitful exploration of—what did you say the ship's name was?"

*"Caution Discharge Zone."*

"Hmm, a queer appellation. Well, Sorrel, go ahead. Lay your best arguments on our mighty yet stubborn friend."

Sorrel popped a nugget into her mouth. "Forget it, Airey. I'm sick of cajoling this idiot. It's like trying to teach a Tonshuan warthog to sing."

Airey pinched the corner of his mouth and rubbed a finger across his mustache. "Are we entirely certain this beast isn't valuable? After all, someone went to all the trouble of placing him in a suspensor-sac, however long ago. Klom, exactly what did our mighty overlord say when he inspected, ah, Tugger? And are you sure it was really Bright Tide Rising issuing the verdict?"

Klom thought back to the day he discovered Tugger. At the foot of the ladder, Klom had exited the shaft and retrieved his sledge. He loaded Tugger onto it. The creature was alert, but still obviously weak and unsure from its long estivation. Klom had rested for a few minutes, refreshing himself with more water and cake, before setting out for the main port.

Out in the fresh air, Tugger visibly quickened. Rapaille, busy processing materials through the matter-modem, did not at first notice Klom and his living find. When he became aware of the rare discovery, Rapaille squawked with excitement and summoned one of his supervisors over his communicator. Harshly, the Quetzal pushed Klom aside and bent over Tugger.

"Please forgive the rude treatment you've received at the hands of this worthless drone, kindly sapient. You will soon be in touch with others of your kind, who will doubtlessly be overjoyed to know of your continued existence, and ready with a handsome reward."

In reply, Tugger laved Rapaille's face with his broad tongue.

"I don't think this one places so high on the sapient scale, Rapaille."

"Nonsense! Plainly an advanced being." Yet for all his blustering certainty, Rapaille regarded Tugger with a veneer of suspicion.

A personal lifter arrowed toward them in response to Rapaille's summoning. When it reached them, both Rapaille and Klom stared in disbelief.

The vessel held not a mere supervisor, but Bright Tide Rising himself. A six-strand, the lanky Horseface was attended by a shimmering corona of majestatics that nearly concealed his head, yet remained recognizable by his strangely articulated build and various family sigils worn as a gorget. Rapaille dropped to his knees and bowed. Klom remained standing.

Without consulting either Rapaille or Klom, Bright Tide Rising directed a portion of his swarm to engulf Tugger. After a swift examination, the units reunited with their peers. Pausing an unnaturally long time, the owner of the Asperna Yard finally delivered his verdict in a rumbling voice.

"Minimal sentience. Germline not on record. No talents, no adjuncts, no discernible worth. Dispose of the creature as you see fit."

As soon as Bright Tide Rising left, Rapaille berated Klom for twenty minutes for wasting the time of both himself and their ultimate patron. Klom absorbed the tirade placidly, then announced he was ending his shift early and returning to shore on the next transport. This news elicited further incoherent screeches from the Quetzal.

Now Klom repeated the Yard owner's assessment to Airey. The words seemed to deflate the slight, capricious fellow, but he soon regained his usual jovial air.

"Oh, well, there are months of salvage ahead. You'll hit the mother lode yet, Klom, I'm sure."

"Thank you, Airey."

The trio passed a few more hours drinking and chatting, eating and joking. Numerous individuals came over to examine Tugger. Klom felt proud.

At last, in the face of another workday, their beds beckoned.

Once outside, Sorrel stumbled in the near-lightless mucky path leading away from Thrash's, but Klom caught her before she could land in a patch of redolent luminous vomit, seething with intestinal symbionts. Tugger trotted along fastidiously behind. The dank air weighed like a blanket.

"Sorrel?"

"Uh, what—?"

"When did you ever taste Tancredi nectar?"

"One night, Jess—Jess Badura—he and me—you were sleeping—"

"Oh."

Sorrel stopped and hung with both hands from Klom's bicep. "You're not mad, are you, Klom?"

"No. I just like to learn things."

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Three months into its disassembly, the *Caution Discharge Zone* appeared, from the outside, relatively unscathed. Here and there across its convoluted carcass, new holes gaped, broken open to facilitate the removal of the ship's guts when the nearest port was inconveniently distant and a matter-modem could not be maneuvered inside. Cormorants and kingfishers wheeled above the Vixen starliner, colonies roosting in selected niches and staining the slopes with their guano. A line of goose-barnacles had formed just below the high-water mark; at low tide, the exposed barnacles craned their mouthparts around on long necks, questing for the gnats that swarmed above the waters, the gnats in their turn attracted by the floating mats of seaweed that now trailed outward from the hull.

At a definite point in the near future, the *Caution Discharge Zone* would be reduced to an empty shell no taller than the line of barnacles, all its superstructure dismantled. At this point breakers skilled in underwater work would cut up the remaining shell and float the pieces away. The ship that had sailed the starwinds for an eon would be no more.

But right now, much still remained to be taken from inside.

Klom and Tugger arrived with the rest of their crew and marshaled outside the assigned entryway. Rapaille paid no notice to the oddball pair: a marked contrast to the first day Klom had shown up for work with his pet.

Fixing his hard eyes on Tugger, Rapaille had demanded, "Klom! What's the meaning of this pointless complication of your duties? Why is this worthless mass of protoplasm not already ground up into raw chuck for Kitchen Twelve?"

Klom did not exhibit any anger. But something in his voice made Rapaille flinch. "Tugger is my friend. No one hurts my friends."

Rapaille retreated. "All right then. But why not leave the beast in your crib?"

"There are too many bad people in the bustee. Someone might break into my crib and try to steal Tugger. Maybe even harm him. He doesn't know when people plan to do him harm. And he's too gentle to defend himself. I need to keep him by me all the time."

Realizing when he was beaten, Rapaille angrily said, "Let the consequences of your soft-hearted stupidity be on your own head then! Tending to this monster will slow you down, and you'll soon be lying in a

ditch with the Dungbeetles, begging paisa off the smart and sensible breakers who go about their work with vim and efficiency."

Klom made no reply, but simply marched inside the ship. Before they separated, Nyerephar and several other fellows congratulated him for standing up to Rapaille. Tugger came in for his share of the good will as well, accepting much petting and rib-thumping and shaking of his vestigial shoulder-hands.

Today, Klom and Tugger received no extra attention from anyone, so standard a part of the scene were they.

Half an hour's trudge through ravaged corridors and chambers, naves and apses, full of dangling cables and wires and sliced-open sheathing brought Klom and Tugger alone to the room where the breaker had left off work yesterday. The room was empty of furnishings, and only a scatter of devalued triptix littered the floor. The small personal data-palettes which had once carried routing instructions, dietary requirements, letters of introduction, shipboard credit-debit records, medical histories and other information needed by interstellar travelers now constituted nothing more significant than a drift of dead leaves.

One entire wall of this room presented a matrix of small doors inset with clear panels. Each door opened onto a long slim padded capsule plainly intended as a sleeping tube for members of some vaguely serpentine species. Each tube had to be disengaged from the matrix and stacked on the sledge. In one corner of the room squatted a large matter-modem. This deactivated cube, part of the intraship goods-transport system, presented no mirror face.

Klom fell to work, his head lamp casting all the illumination he needed. Tugger lay down peacefully on the hard floor and fell asleep. The puddle of drool spreading from his jowls caught glimmers from Klom's headlamp now and again.

In the three months Klom had owned his new pet, the man and beast had become inseparable, even off-duty. Sorrel had come grudgingly to accept the new arrangement, while Airey simply disdained to pay any more attention to Tugger than he would have given to a familiar rug or table.

Several hours of hard work with spanner and snipper and prybar resulted in a sledge piled high with tubes. Klom must run these back to an active matter-modem before he could continue. But first he paused to refresh himself.

He took out his water bottle. Stretching sore muscles, he braced himself with his left hand against the dead matter-modem. He tilted back his head to glug a liter of warm musty liquid.

Ceiling lights flared improbably to life. So did the matter-modem.

Off-balance, Klom plunged in the mirror face up to his shoulder.

The lights snapped off. As did the matter-modem.

Klom howled. His arm had been sheared off clean at the shoulder. Vast quantities of blood sprayed the room. He fumbled frantically for a bungee, thinking to tie off his arteries. But there remained no flesh stub to bind.

Klom crashed to the floor like an uprooted Salembier sequoia. Consciousness slipped away from him like a school of fish from a disintegrating net.

"Tugger—"

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Rapaille awaited the first of his crew to emerge with that day's salvage. He would key descriptions of the items into his reader, contributing to the vast inventory of parts being taken from the ship, then dispatch the parts through the matter-modem to the relevant disassembly stations and sorting lines. Meanwhile, he had nothing to do but wait and ponder the many injustices of his life. Standing in a shadow to escape the growing heat, he idly scanned the skies. A small Mlotmroz ship undoubtedly bearing buyers soared across his field of vision. Very good, the more customers the better for the Yard's business. All fortune to Bright Tide Rising! Rapaille's phantom wings itched, and he rubbed his wing stubs against the bulkhead. But the itching persisted. Life was unfair.

Someone burst crazily out of the port, jolting Rapaille out of his philosophical contemplation. That dumb man-ape, Klom, followed by his galloping worthless pet—

Klom bellowed. "Rapaille! Is there a crew mucking about with the ship's power generators?"

Rapaille boosted his haughty demeanor. "This is no business of yours! Get back to your wor—*urk!*"

Klom had gripped Rapaille's shirt with both his hands and lifted the avianoform off his feet, incidentally choking the Quetzal with a knot of fabric at his throat. Klom thrust his face within centimeters of Rapaille and spoke with calm precision.

"You will call the crew working with the generators. You will tell them to be extra careful not to turn them on by accident. Or someone might get hurt. Do you understand?"

Rapaille understood that the person most likely to immediately get hurt was himself. So made a squawk he hoped Klom would interpret positively.

The huge breaker set his supervisor down and released him. After massaging his bruised throat, Rapaille placed the call Klom had ordered. Once Klom was satisfied, he turned away and climbed into a ship-to-shore barge, Tugger heeling behind his master.

"Take me back in," Klom told the bored Melungeon pilot.

As the barge pulled away, Rapaille sought to reassert his dignity and status. "Don't bother coming back for three weeks! Not till after Festival! You're on probation. Do you hear me, you addled eggsucker?"

But Klom never even looked back.

He seemed too busy stroking his left arm.

.....

The long hot shed (its sides open for whatever chance breeze might arise) that housed Sorting Line Number Thirty-eight featured the following arrangement: ten parallel conveyor belts ran from one end of the shed to the other. The belts contributed a certain varying level of noise to the shed, depending on how dutifully a small army of oilers—mostly children—tended to them. At the head of each belt stood a matter-modem delivering the smaller pieces harvested from the ship under deconstruction. (Larger pieces not saved and sold as integral units went to disassembly stations first, then to the Sorting Lines.) Along both sides of each conveyor sat the sorters, staggered on three-legged stools at intervals of a meter or so. By the elbow of each sorter, mirror-face upward, was a smaller matter-modem with a keypad that allowed a choice of destinations.

Each sorter had his or her or its special range of components to watch for. When spotted, the component would be snatched off the belt and dropped into the matter-modem. Simultaneous with the grab, the sorter would key in the relevant warehouse station to receive the transmission.

At the end of the belt awaited a final matter-modem, to catch all the unclaimed pieces for further examination and categorization.

The sorters were entitled to only as many lavatory breaks as minimally consistent with the most basic needs of their species. Lunches ran for half an hour, in shifts. Payment was based on speed and accuracy of performance, with debits taken for any missed pieces. So long as standards were maintained, conversation was permitted.

Sorrel was speaking to Aurinka, a Triffid who sat diagonally across from her. They were discussing jewelry. The Triffid waved several stalks decorated with hammered brass bracelets for Sorrel's admiration, while handling her duties competently with two other limbs.

Suddenly both Aurinka and Sorrel took notice of a distant commotion near one of the shed's entrances. They strained to ascertain what was going on without slackening production. The commotion seemed to be moving through the shed, getting closer to them. At last Sorrel saw the source of the upset.

Klom and Tugger bulled their way toward her, trailing protesting supervisors. When Klom spotted Sorrel, he bellowed out her name. Then he was upon her.

Grabbing Sorrel off her stool, Klom strong-armed her out of the shed, heedless of either her protests or her struggles to escape.

Once outside, Klom released her. They stood in the lee afforded by a mud-brick pissoir, while all around them surged unemployable or underage or offshift bustee-dwellers, a motley mass of scaled and chitinous, furred and slick-skinned beings, oblate or attenuated, faces like intricate masks or nearly featureless.

Sorrel faced Klom, full of fury. "You moron! What's the matter with you? I'm going to lose half a day's wages now!"

Klom's single-minded urgency seemed to evaporate. He faced Sorrel with a look that mixed contrition and confusion.

"Sorrel, I need your help. I died today."

This last sentence, delivered matter-of-factly yet with a detectable tremor, catalyzed Sorrel's reaction from anger to a curious concern.

"What are you talking about? You're standing there as healthy as a Redskull ox."

"No, you don't understand. Here's what happened—" Klom recounted losing his arm in the matter-modern. "The last thing I remember is calling out for Tugger." The beast looked up at the sound of his name, offering a lopsided, slavering grin. "Then I blacked out. Not much time seemed to pass. Or maybe a lot. Anyway, I woke up whole."

Leerily, Sorrel regarded Tugger. "You're saying this creature was somehow responsible for regenerating your arm?"

"No, not exactly. You see, there was no blood anywhere anymore. And my sledge was empty. I had filled it with tubes, but now it was empty. Then I looked at my reader, and it said the wrong time. I was in the past."

"That makes no sense at all."

Klom whirled savagely around and punched the wall of the lavatory, sending up a puff of mortar and pulverized soil. "I know, I know! But there's something else besides. Look at my skin!"

Sorrel examined Klom's outstretched hand, bloody-knuckled from impact with the wall. "Your cruft is gone!"

"All gone! That's right! But how?"

Sorrel shook her head in bewilderment. "I—I can't explain. Maybe Airey—"

"Airey! Of course! Let's go!"

Without waiting for her agreement, Klom hustled Sorrel away.

Tugger trotted blithely along behind them.

.....

The fluids giving life to a typical starliner ranged from viscous hydrocarbon derivatives to thin plant-based extracts to exotically tinged protein-hormone-enzyme sera. These various liquids—some of which could be captured and sold, others of which went straight to crude disposal in the polluted swamps—invigorated a variety of mechanisms, all of which had to be drained before storage or disassembly. This task fell to the crews of the drainage pits.

Airey was right down in one of the pits, ankle deep in rainbow-sheened stenchy sludge. Unlike his downtime finery, his work uniform consisted of scarred boots and a patched brown coverall, its waterproofing peeling away in places. Employing a big spanner, he was struggling with the balky petcock

of a suspended engine and cursing furiously.

"Motherless shit! Is this my reward for daring to aspire to elegance? May all the ancestors of all the mechanics who ever worked on this abomination freeze in the lowest levels of the Dimmig hells! Die, you bastard screwcap, die!"

Ranked at the edge of the pit, Airey's co-workers were enjoying his eloquent frustration. A Foraminifer was laughing so hard it kept dislocating its multiple jaws, resetting them each time with a grisly clacking of bone.

An instant cessation of the laughter caused Airey to crane his neck upward. Before he could react to the unexpected sight of Klom, he was lifted bodily from the pit.

"Come with me, Airey," Klom demanded. Airey caught Sorrel's eyes and read there the wisdom of complying. As the trio moved off for privacy, the drainman grabbed a rag to wipe his hands. Finished, he tucked it into a back pocket.

In the shadow of a belching, stinking cracking tower, Klom rehearsed his morning to Airey. Airey listened thoughtfully, his glance bouncing back and forth between Klom and Tugger. When Klom finished his account, Airey remained silent for half a minute before speaking.

"I see only one answer. Your pet can manipulate time in some fashion."

Klom's brow creased. "What? How could that be? I've never heard of such a thing being possible."

"Regardless of what we know, it's the only solution. Tugger responded to your distress by shuttling you back to the past. That explains your empty sledge and the timecheck on your reader."

"But how would that have fixed my arm? A dying time-traveler is still a dying man."

Airey stroked his negligible mustache. "This is true. The answer must be more complex then. I'll need to cogitate on this a while. But meanwhile, I think you should give Tugger anything he wants as a reward. Without him, apparently, you wouldn't be here right now. He's your guardian raksha."

"I'd gladly give him the finest meal or the thickest bed in the world. But all he seems to want is to be by my side!"

Airey hunkered down beside Tugger. He took the rag from his pocket and wiped away a line of saliva from Tugger's jowls. "There, there, good boy. What you want depends on what you are. And I guess we'll never know that. Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Klom.

Airey straightened up, holding the rag bearing Tugger's drool before all their eyes as if it were a holy relic. "Let's send this sample to the laboratories at Radius Seven and get a genomic readout for Tugger. It will cost Klom a pretty paisa, but perhaps we'll learn more about our friend's constitution."

Sorrel said, "What could a simple lab analysis reveal that Bright Tide Rising and his majestatics overlooked?"

"I suspect that Tugger deliberately concealed his true nature from the Raisin, so that he would not be



separated from Klom. Can we put anything beyond a being who can do what Tugger appears to have done for Klom?"

All three friends studied the innocuous animal with new respect. Tugger simply grinned dopily upward, then scratched behind his jaw with a rear paw, making a noise like a broom on sand.

Klom said, "Please see to it, Airey. We need to know what Tugger is so we can make sure he gets the proper treatment for his kind."

"Consider it done! And now, although *you* are suspended till after the Festival, Klom, Sorrel and I need to get back to work. Which brings me round to asking you for a small favor—"

Disdaining the spanner, Klom opened the stuck petcock with the force of his fingers alone. A torrent of purple, iron-smelling hematic coolant gouted out, splashing Klom to his knees, but he only laughed.

. . . . .

Klom's crib was luxurious by bustee standards. Scabbed together out of rusty sheet metal, driftwood posts and rafters, broad swaths of cured hides from Asperna's reptilian partchrumpfs and the odd bits of scratched plastic and warped pressboard, the shack leaked only minimally during the monsoon season and retained the heat from a seacoal fire well during the mild winters. Its interior held a hammock layered with rags and a teetering set of shelves hosting Klom's few possessions, including a photo of an old woman standing in front of a hut on a lakeshore. (The unframed photo was surrounded by deva medals distributed by the marabouts during various holy days, as if it were a small shrine.) A gamecube with a fuzzed-out display and half its functions deleted by age rested on a wicker hassock. Sorrel often spent the night in Klom's crib, whether she and Klom had sex or not, preferring it to the crowded quarters she officially shared with a family of kitchen workers. The rancid oily smells her fellow tenants brought back in their clothing and hair from their shifts in the kitchen nauseated her.

This night, with Klom still unwontedly preoccupied by his earlier "death," Sorrel elected to keep company with her lover after her shift ended. Their supper, taken amidst the crowded refectory attached to Kitchen Number Twelve, had been a silent affair.

They lay quietly together now in the hammock. The Great Sun had gone down just an hour ago, and, even without any exertion, their naked bodies—one sleek and golden, one hairy and pale—were bedewed with sweat. Estuarial breezes feathered their skins.

Strung from the two biggest, most solidly anchored posts, the hammock and its ropes nonetheless creaked as Sorrel shifted her position to clamber atop Klom. She began to kiss and tease him. "Where's the nasty old cruft then, sweetling? Nothing to stop me from rubbing my boobs here now, is there?"

Most unusually, Klom did not at first respond. Sorrel persisted however, and soon the shipbreaker began to react enthusiastically. One massive hand encompassed both her breasts, while the other cupped her whole ass. Straddling Klom's hips, Sorrel looked back over her shoulder to grab his penis and guide it home. But suddenly she stopped.

"Sorrel, what's wrong?"

"I—that thing is *watching* us!"

"What thing?" Klom raised himself up on one elbow. "Oh, Tugger?" The beast sat up on its back haunches attentively, legs askew toward one side and its bifurcate horn aimed straight at the couple. If interpreted anthropomorphically, its face expressed goofy bemusement. "But he's watched us every night since I found him."

"I know! But it's different now. We don't know what he is, or what he can do, or what he wants. It shivers my bones!"

"Tugger? Never! He's just my happy little friend. Like you and Airey."

Sorrel looked incensed, and she bounced off Klom to stand on the dirt floor. "So that's all I am to you? Some kind of pet? Where's my dress?"

Klom swung his legs around to sit upright. "No, Sorrel, you're not a pet. That's not what I meant to say. Don't twist my words around. You know I can't always say things just right. I love you. Come back, please."

Standing dressed by the plank door with a hand on the latchstring, Sorrel said, "Forget it, Klom. You seem to love this—this monster more than you do me. So why don't I just leave you two to whatever obscene pleasures you can contrive!"

Klom scowled. "Now, Sorrel, you know that's not—"

"And Airey deserves more respect from you too!" she yelled, then was gone.

Klom swore. He kicked his gamecube off the hassock and banged the door open. But Sorrel was already out of sight.

Tugger continued to beam beneficently, however, and eventually Klom calmed down. Before too long, both man and beast were snoring peacefully.

.....

Klom's three weeks of probation were nearly over. He had spent the time increasingly frustrated by the realization that the dismantling of the *Caution Discharge Zone* was proceeding swiftly without him. For one thing, he was losing taka and paisa every day he sat idle. His dreams of quitting the Yard and retiring to Chaulk seemed to recede further each day. To conserve his meager savings—depleted drastically by the advance charges from the Radius Seven lab—Klom had taken to eating the very scraps from Kitchen Number Twelve which he had once foreseen as supplying Tugger's needs. (Luckily, that amiable companion continued, however improbably, to flourish on nothing more than air and water.) Soliciting the leftovers from the friendly but sardonic Bergamot cook named Kirsh was a chore that grew more odious to Klom each day. Kirsh's face, a pockmarked, damascene blue, would crack in a sarcastic snaggle-toothed smile as he handed over the leaky package of orts, always accompanied by some such jest as, "Here's fare fit for a four-strand, Klom—a starving, poverty-stricken, imbecilic four-strand, that

is."

But the loss of pay and the humiliating survival tactics represented the lesser of Klom's irritations. He found himself angrier over being excluded from the more intangible aspects of dismantling the starliner, the conversion of something useless into something useful. His earlier work on the ship had begun to foster an intimate bond with the vessel, an emotional linkage he had come to relish on previous jobs. And this particular bond had been sanctified in his blood (however inexplicably counterfactual that spillage had since become). It felt as if Klom had abandoned a responsibility to tend to the corpse of a loved one, leaving the job to strangers.

Few of these feelings were cast in words, either internally or to Sorrel or Airey. Nonetheless Klom experienced deep disquiet and irritability over this exclusion.

Each day he would spend hours on the shore, gazing out at the starliner, Tugger lying patiently in the sand at his master's feet. Tugger carried about a chewed hank of rope with him, and, from time to time, by obvious gestures, would try to interest Klom in a pulling game. Klom played with his pet once in a while, but more often Tugger was ignored, left to sleep or to fret at the frayed ends of the rope with his exiguous shoulder hands.

The mountainous ship just offshore exhibited few exterior changes, and Klom was left to fantasize about the altered conditions of the interior. When the ship-to-shore ferry returned each night full of weary workers, Klom would be present at the dock to glower at Rapaille, who made certain to shelter himself amidst a knot of the brawniest breakers. But Klom never made a move on the overseer, knowing that the surest way to extend his probation would be another physical assault.

When Klom grew weary of staring out to sea, he retreated to one of the scrap heaps with his watercutter. There he would refine his already masterful carving skills by cutting up worthless old pods and wall fragments and contorted rebar with his illimitable tool, until the filthy dirt became a sea of mud. The fastidious Tugger chose to remain out of the way of the splattering, but always within easy hail.

It was at just such mindless pursuits that Sorrel found Klom this late afternoon.

"Klom! Are you mad? It's Festival Eve! The celebrations will start soon!"

The Festival of the Triple Sunset was an annual rite celebrating the conjoined westering of Great, Lesser and Least Suns. On the first night the three suns would set within several minutes of each other. On the final night the descent of the orbs would occur simultaneously, resulting in an incredible celestial display inspiring much reverence from the more devout citizens of the Yard and greater Asperna.

Klom holstered his watercutter. "I don't care about any stupid Festival."

"Oh, shut up and get over here. You've been moping for three weeks now, and enough is enough. You're going to have a good time tonight if I have to carry you on my shoulders!"

This ridiculous image amused Klom so much he laughed heartily for the first time in days. Squelching through the mud, he embraced Sorrel, causing her to squeal.

"You're filthy! Put me down!"

Klom complied. Tugger, excited, raced over and jumped up to lick Klom's face.

"Okay, let's go get drunk. Soon I'll be earning my wages again, so I'll treat tonight."

"Don't you want to change up first?"

"The hell with it. If I get drunk enough to fall down, my clothes will be dirty already."

.....

The twilit, odoriferous streets and alleys of the bustee already swarmed with representatives of two dozen races. Chattering, clicking, cachinnating or cawing, the impoverished breakers and sorters, stockers and drainers, matter-modem techs and vegetable slicers all seemed determined to forget their cares and woes. Interspecies camaraderie reigned. Finery of a rudimentary sort had emerged from cheap chests and cardboard closets to adorn bodies spanning the spectrum from elongated to stubby, rugose to seamless, writhing to dignified.

Vendors with small braziers sold pungent kebabs of partchrumpf flesh. Bottles of liquor circulated freely from hand to tentacle to paw. Shadowy niches half-concealed the carnal explorations of chance-met lovers.

Klom moved through the exuberant chaos easily, the crowds parting before his mass. Sorrel and Tugger slipstreamed behind him. Klom gripped a half-empty flagon of toadchunder by its neck. A smear of partchrumpf grease ringed Sorrel's mouth. Tugger's tongue hung out.

At a cross-street, the crowd refused to give way for Klom and party, and he soon saw why. They had intersected a procession of marabouts and flagellants. Spinning their prayer wheels, swinging thuribles that wafted spicy fumes, the holybeings led an elaborately carved juggernaut pulled by a score of Sphinx. Hideous and benign wooden faces of devas gazed down implacably on the onlookers.

Sorrel shouted above the banging of drums, the keening of pandits, the crack of cattails threaded with bloody metal beads, and the blowing of horns. "Airey asked us to meet him later! He's got the results from Radius Seven!"

"Where?"

"He claims we need to keep the news secret. No eavesdroppers. So he said to meet at three A.M. by the stockpens. No one will be in such an unlikely place at that hour."

By two-thirty in the morning, Sorrel was growing weary. Klom's vigor, unfettered from any brooding, ran unabated. Tugger dragged along gamely.

"Let's find Airey so we can get to bed, Klom."

"All right."

The stockpens housed various softly lowing food beasts for the kitchens, behind shimmering, sizzling lines of force running from stanchion to stanchion. The noisome atmosphere insured that celebrants avoided the acreage.

"Airey!" yelled Klom semi-drunkenly into the luminance-crosshatched blackness. "Here we are! Show yourself, man! Or are you too busy sucking the ten teats of a Milchmaid!"

Airey stepped from the shadows, hissing. "Quiet, you big 'rumpf! Do you want every bravo in the vicinity to come investigate your bellowings? I saw a pair of Grimjacks just a few alleys over! We're here to discuss something extremely vital."

Klom sobered up. "What have you learned about Tugger? What makes him so important?"

Airey flourished a data-palette, while Sorrel gripped Klom's arm and leaned in closer. "Your foundling is *atwelve-strand*, Klom! An incredibly powerful deva, despite his seeming lack of sapience! Perhaps the only one of his kind. But unlike all other devas, he's metastable on our ontological plane! And he might very well be the Book of Forgetting as well!"

"The Book of Forgetting? But—"

Airey gestured dismissively. "I know, I know, everyone has assumed for millennia that the Book was an artifact of some sort. But I've been doing research into the legend, and nothing in the fragments of lore is really inconsistent with the Book being a living creature. And after a little cogitation, I realized how your pet saved your life. He doesn't travel*back* in time, but*crosswise*! He forgets one universe while remembering another. And somehow he shunted the essence of your consciousness onto an alternate timetrack along with him. A timetrack that lagged just a little beyond our moment, where your accident never happened. If you wish to quibble, this universe is not the one you were born in."

The hesitant tone of Klom's speech conveyed a slowly dawning understanding. "But then, that means—I guess Tugger is really valuable." Klom looked down at his pet. The being whose inherently recompllicated cellular structure allowed him to transcend limitations of space and time and leap across the multiverse was busy nibbling at his own hide for pests.

Airey laughed cynically. "That's understating the case a million times worse than a Neftali trader misrepresents his wares! With Tugger by your side, you can lay claim to all the riches in the Indrajal."

"I don't want so much though," said Klom. He gathered his friends to his side. "Just enough for the four of us to leave this hard place and retire to Chaulk—"

The next voice, a basso rumble, shocked them all, although only Klom recognized it. "I am afraid no one is going anywhere."

Bright Tide Rising floated above them, clouded by his majestatics. The six-strand owner of the Asperna Yards stayed silent for a long moment—possibly regarding the quartet curiously through his mutable veil, although Klom could not say for sure—before speaking at last.

"A metastable creature with twice my own information density. No wonder I was unable to read it properly. It is hard to credit such a miracle, although I have never known the scientists at Radius Seven to be mistaken before. You will now give me that data-palette."

Airey braced his spine. "Klom paid for these tests, so they belong to him. And so does Tugger."

"Absolutely incorrect. The creature is salvage from a ship owned by me. It is mine by terms of your employment. Your co-worker will be compensated for his find. Perhaps I will give him as much as ten

thousand taka."

Sorrel chimed in. "That's an insult! This animal is invaluable!"

"And you three are all too stupid and primitive to properly exploit such a treasure. But I am done arguing. With the creature's entire genome on a palette, it will be simple to rebirth him, this time without any misplaced allegiances. I have no further need of any of you."

Klom felt mentally yanked in a dozen different directions. How had this horrible situation come about, from such simple and innocent impulses? But before he could speak or act, the telecosmic corona of majestatics around Bright Tide Rising seemed to squirt four solid streams of particles, distributed along four vectors.

Klom's watercutter practically leaped into his right hand, even as he hurled himself to one side. He felt a piercing pain in his left shoulder. But the pain did not disturb his aim.

The noise that Bright Tide Rising's legs made in falling to the ground was followed nearly instantaneously by the accompanying mucky splash of his separate upper half.

Klom turned to his companions. All three were stretched out unmoving on the filthy ground. One by one, he searched their corpses for wounds. But the lancelike majestatics had pierced so cleanly, yet so fatally, that Klom could detect nothing. At least their deaths had been swift. There was very little blood, and in fact his own shoulder wound was invisible and unbleeding.

Klom lifted first Sorrel's head from the muck, and kissed her dirty cheek. He did the same for Tugger and Airey, before turning to their killer.

Bright Tide Rising's myrmidons were attempting to put their master back together. They had already gathered up his spilled entrails and dragged his two halves into contact and were stitching golden sutures inside and out.

Klom carved the six-strand into pieces so small that all the majestics in the Indrajal would not suffice to repair the Horseface. Then he kicked shitty, hay-speckled mud atop the carrion.

.....

The long, harsh night was waning, with dawn a distant rumor. Klom stood, half-bewildered, in his twilight shack. In his hand he held the data-palette bearing Tugger's genome. What good was it to him? The money to reincarnate Tugger was a sum far beyond his means. And even if somehow miraculously given the fee, Klom could engineer the conception only of Tugger's mere doppelgänger, a blank slate with no familiar consciousness shared with the original who had once saved Klom's life.

And now Klom was in danger of losing his own life once more. His murder of Bright Tide Rising, even in self-defense, would earn him death, under the laws of the Indrajal, which were biased against two-strands.

He knew that he must run. But where?

Klom gathered up a couple of possessions: the picture of his mother, a few deva medals handed out at religious ceremonies. But then he was overwhelmed by fatigue and despair. The lack of a certain destination left him feeling hopeless. With near-suicidal unselfconcern, he dropped into his hammock and fell asleep among his rags.

Sometime in the earliest hours of morning he awoke to a wet tongue rasping his face. He flailed his arms about, confused and slow to emerge from dreams, and encountered a familiar boulder of a head bearing a fleshy protuberance.

"Tugger?"

Something hard was spat out onto his chest, bouncing off into the hammock.

By the time Klom got his eyes ungummed and open, he was alone again.

A data-palette slimed with saliva shared the hammock with him. He dried it off on his shirt and jacked it into his reader.

The palette was a triptix in Klom's name. It registered a spendable value above the ticket price of several million taka, and listed as the bearer's ultimate destination the fabled world of Mount Sumeru.

Mount Sumeru. What would Klom's mother say, when he made his brief farewell to her, moving quickly before he could be connected to Bright Tide Rising's death? Never had anyone from Chaulk ventured to so fabled a place.

Klom gazed around him at the familiar shabby interior of his crib.

Already it looked distant and remote. The picture of his mother on the banks of Lake Zawinul seemed to represent a stranger. Klom knew that he would never return to Chaulk.

A sense of mystery enveloped him. Was Tugger somehow alive? What awaited him on Mount Sumeru?

Only travel out among the worlds of the Indrajal held hope of answers.

The End

PAUL DI FILIPPO

STINK LINES

GYRO GEARLOOSE LOVED Ginger Barks. Had that deeply simple sentence possessed no further clause or codicil, no qualifier or amplification, all would have been well. Love, courtship, marriage, babies, grandparenthood, senescence, life-support, heavily monitored institutionalized death, and the survivors left arguing about what to do with the chipped china: the old, old human progression would have flowed like hydrogen through the fuel cell of a new 2025 Wuhan Panda. No headaches, no heartaches, no troubles

No story.

So:

Gyro Gearloose loved Ginger Barks -- but she did not love him.

And that essential lack of reciprocal affection was why Gyro decided to reinvent their world in her honor.

The day on which Gyro Gearloose upended the unsuspecting world in the name of unrequited love began like any other. Gyro's bed catapulted his lanky naked form into the soft embrace of the auto-valet's capture net. Via an overhead crane system, that talented apparatus deposited him fully dressed at the kitchen table. The multi-appendaged, radar-eyed oil-drumon-a-unicycle that served as his chef and butler brought him breakfast: two dodo eggs with a side of mammoth hash. This repast Gyro consumed rather heedlessly, while having the



old-fashioned newspaper read aloud to him by another mechanical servant shaped like a large bespectacled green bookworm. Then, after getting his teeth brushed, Gyro rode his unique firecracker-powered vehicle to his office at Happy Duck Research.

Inside his quiet sanctum, Gyro's desk quickly ventured to attract his attention.

"Mr. Gearloose, you have over one hundred messages awaiting your input. In order of importance, they --"

"Not now," commanded Gyro, and the desk fell silent. Gyro tossed himself in a lovesick fashion onto a couch. Reaching over and behind his head to an end-table, he grabbed a framed photo and brought it before his forlorn gaze. The portrait depicted a smiling woman whose delicate features summed perfection in the eye of this beholder. Of an age with Gyro, dark-haired and lithe, this temptress was none other than Ginger Barks. Shaking the frame like an antique Etch-a-Sketch to realign the picture's intelligent molecules, Gyro was rewarded with the image of a child, plainly an earlier version of Ginger. This was the waif Gyro had first fallen in love with at age five, at a time before he had even borne his current name ....

No one in the real world today is ever named Gyro Gearloose from the moment of birth. For one thing a majority of the ancient Gearlooses went extinct during the Age of Reason, victims of ill-conceived phlogistonical and etheric experiments that tended to end in fatal explosions. Those scions remaining changed their surnames shortly thereafter in order to overcome a certain ditzy image. For another thing, no parents -- not even gadget-besotted engineers --

would name their child "Gyro" in the multicultural early-twenty-first-century USA, out of fear of having him mistaken for a Greek sandwich. No, the only universe from which one may choose to adopt the Gearloose name remains a famous comicbook one. Which is precisely where our own Gyro Gearloose found his alternate appellation. Or rather, had it thrust upon him.

Little Gary Harmon was five years old in the portentous year of 2001. And whatever that year might have meant for the rest of Earth's multifarious population, for Gary it signaled massive upheavals. For 2001 was the year during which Gary's mother abandoned the ineffectual and distant Warren Harmon for love of another woman, and, consolidating her custody of Gary, moved to Duckburg.

The town of Duckburg had until very recently been known as Los Gatos, California, an upscale hamlet on the edge of Silicon Valley. But late in the year 2000, Los Gatos was purchased outright by the Disney empire, flush with cash after the success of its latest animated feature, Disney's Golden Ass of Apuleius. (The computer industry that formerly provided much of the area's wealth and stable tax base was churning spastically under the introduction of carbon-based buckytube circuitry, and Governor Simpson saw the sale of Los Gatos as a fine way to tauten a sagging bottom line in the state's budget.) This charming, compact town, not far from major population centers, suited Disney's plans perfectly: the corporation intended to construct a monument to one of their relatively unsung geniuses, a staff creator for much of his life who had yet managed to emerge from the bland anonymity that cloaked most Disney artists.

The cult artist Carl Barks had been born in 1901. At the turn of the century he was still alive. And his work had more fans than ever.

Starting in the late 1940s, Barks had jolted the basic boring Donald Duck print universe -- always a minor tentacle of the Disney octopus with about ten zillion volts of creative energy. In hundreds of comicbook adventures over the next three decades, Barks added intriguing new characters and dense backstory to the formerly one-note Disney property, creating a rich Benday-dot cosmos. Aided by superior artwork, abetted by humor and a sense of adventure, Barks succeeded in placing his own unique stamp on Uncle Walt's creation. Barks's work had been reprinted and idolized now for nearly half a century. Motivated by a smidgen of benevolence and a heap of self-interest, the Disney suits had decided that Barks's centennial was time to build the man a monument.

The Disney imagineers moved into Los Gatos. Under the terms of their purchase, they owned every property in town, which the state had first seized by eminent domain. But the generous enterprise promptly leased the buildings back to any citizens and businesses who wished to remain through the transition. Within twelve months, thousands of workers had transformed Los Gatos into a fenced-off simulacrum of Barks's Duckburg. Role-playing employees were brought in to supplement the other, non-costumed citizens, the admission booths were opened, and Duckburg was in business, after a stirring ceremony involving its humble aged founder and a host of luminaries.

The Disney drones had even found some genuine Barkses willing to relocate to Duckburg. Harry and Norma Barks, with their young daughter Ginger, were distant

relatives down on their luck and happy to move to a town where they would become instant celebrities with a new home and guaranteed income.

At the same time, the former Mrs. Jane Harmon, having reverted to her maiden name of Greet, arrived at the model community, looking for a new start. With her lover, Lorna Lish, and using money from her divorce settlement, Jane Greer set up a ceramics shop in Duckburg. (Having successfully beaten the pitifully ineffective Southern Baptist boycott, Disney was now actively and openly encouraging gay and lesbian participation in all its affairs, and so endowed Jane Greer with many generous tax breaks and incentives.)

And so it was that little Gary Greer-Lish was soon enrolled with Ginger Barks and all the other potential Junior Woodchucks in Duckburg's school.

No genius was necessary to coin Gary's nickname in this milieu. Within an hour of the first roll-call, every one of his peers was hailing him as Gyro Gearloose.

Gary's consternation, as might be imagined, was thick and weighty. Uprooted, friendless, unfamiliar with the basis of his new community, he reacted badly at first to the nerdy nickname.

One recess period, as Gary sat disconsolately in the fragrant shade of a eucalyptus tree, one of his female classmates approached him.

"I think Gyro Gearloose is cool," Ginger Barks said, then, red-faced with embarrassment, hurried off.

That was all it took. Gary was in love.

Over the next few months, as Gary ineluctably became more intimate with the history of his chicken-headed humanoid namesake, he felt himself growing comfortable with his new unshakeable name.

Barks's Gyro was cool. Unfettered by marriage or convention, brilliant, carefree, indomitable in the face of disaster, Gyro was perhaps the one citizen of classic Duckburg with complete freedom. As role models went, you could do much worse.

In subsequent years, as certain of the growing boy's own intellectual proclivities began to manifest themselves, rendering him something of a happily asocial loner, the identification with Barks's creation became complete.

So around about the time Gary Greer-Lish got his third virtual Ph.D. (he was nineteen), he answered more readily and easily to Gyro Gearloose than to his legal moniker. And a few years later, when he opened his Happy Duck Research in Duckburg with a few hundred million dollars deriving from his patents on a process that boosted the efficiency of chlorophyll by two hundred percent, Gyro Gearloose was his legal name.

As for Ginger Barks, she had left Duckburg in their first year of high school.

Her parents had eventually crumbled under the pressure of being permanently on display, and had relocated to San Francisco. Cruelly, at just that period when Gyro was becoming mature enough to deepen his relationship with his one true love, she flew out of his reach. During subsequent years, despite Gyro's constant attempts at forging closer bonds, Ginger had remained seemingly uninterested in Gyro as anything more than an old childhood friend. Nowadays, in her demanding job as reporter for the San Francisco Examiner, Ginger seldom even bothered to punch Gyro's address into her pocket-pal's e-mail window.

Gyro now planted a kiss on the glass front of Ginger's picture. The glass fastidiously cleansed itself of his lip-prints, otherwise Ginger's features would have been obscured by an overlay of such daily traces.

"If only I could do something that would bring Ginger back to Duckburg," said Gyro wistfully to the seemingly untenanted room. Not recognizing a command or request, his desk remained silent. "Even if only for a little while. Surely she'd soon see how much I care for her! But what could I do that would be marvelous and startling enough to attract her attention?"

There came a tugging at Gyro's pants leg. Looking down, he saw Li'l Bulb, his Helper.

Li'l Bulb was Gyro's loyal personal assistant. Approximately fifteen inches high, his form was simple: his head resembled a faceless Edison-era pointed light bulb sitting in a knurled chrome collar; below that, a flexible

stick-figure armature, feet encased in bulbous shoes and hands begloved. These primitive looks, however, belied Li'l Bulb's astonishing features. Inside his mock-filamentous head (opaque, with a trompe-l'oeil holo giving the illusion of tungsten-occupied transparency), buckytube architecture granted him a processing capacity of many, many teraflops, the equivalent of several oldtime supercomputers. The titanium rods of his body were packed with miniature power-sources and sophisticated sensors. The one thing Li'l Bulb could not do was speak. In this day and age where practically everything talked, Gyro preferred silence in his assistant. However, Li'l Bulb's miming was surprisingly information-dense, and if necessary, he could always scribble a quick note.

Now Li'l Bulb's message was obvious. In response to Gyro's plaint, he was waving a rolled-up comic he plainly desired Gyro to read.

Gyro took the book, which was one of the many reprints of Carl Barks's drakely adventures to be found at various souvenir stands within Duckburg. Overly familiar with such fare, Gyro perused it briefly, then said, "What's the point, Helper?"

Li'l Bulb whooshed his hands as if simulating flight. He gestured in a wavery fashion as if portraying heat-distorted air. He shaped an obvious balloon above his head. He cupped his hands and then exploded them outward.

Gyro scratched his head. "Are you saying I should fly a plane to the desert and blow something up?"

Li'l Bulb slapped his indestructible glass forehead in frustration, then snatched paper and pencil from the endtable. After writing two sharp words, he handed the paper to his boss.

"'Special effects.' Hmmm." Gyro took another look at the comic. In one panel, Donald had just been drenched in perfume by an irritated Daisy. From his sodden, dejected, feathered self radiated thick lines indicative of exotic pungency.

Gyro shot to his feet. "Helper, you're worth your weight in EinsteinBose condensate! Now, fetch me my hat!"

One article of apparel the original Gyro Gearloose was never seen without was his hat. Some kind of yellow felt porkpie with black band and upcurved brim, it remained securely atop his brown thatch through whatever chaos ensued, thanks to a handy elastic string running under his chin.

Our Gyro, no stickler for imitating the appearance of his namesake, went hatless on a day-to-day basis. The hat now being dragged across the floor by a responsive Li'l Bulb clutching its string, although outwardly identical to the original model, was in reality a special instrument devised by Gyro, and used only on certain needful occasions. The crown of Gyro's hat was packed with circuitry that could interface with his thoughts via electromagnetic conduction and induction, amplifying them in radical ways and bolstering his natural creativity and genius. However, the device was neurologically enervating to a certain degree, and Gyro used it only sparingly. Besides, somehow the hat felt



like cheating. Even though it was his own invention, he preferred relying only on his unassisted natural brain.

If the hat helped him win Ginger, though, he'd gladly compromise any principles and sacrifice any number of gray cells.

Li'l Bulb reached Gyro's feet, and wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. The inventor bent down to retrieve the hat. Placing it on his head, he snapped the string under his chin, thus activating the amplification effect. Immediately, his face assumed a loopy expression; you fully expected Gyro's eyes to spin like the cylinders on a slot machine until they came up all cherries.

In an abstracted voice, Gyro addressed the desk: "Open new spec file for our nanofab plant, production to begin immediately upon file closure." Gyro launched into a long recitation of abstruse assembly parameters, terminating the instruction string with a final "Close." He snapped the chin-string again, powering off his hat, then removed it. Warily, he slumped onto the couch, hat cradled in his lap. Li'l Bulb hopped up beside him.

"Well, Helper, would you like to hear what I've just invented?"

The automaton shook his head no.

"Really? Why not?"

Li'l Bulb snatched up his pad and pencil and scribbled a note.

"'Legal and ethical deniability.' Oh, come off it! When have I ever gotten us in trouble before?"

Holding up his left three-fingered, one-thumbed hand as if to enumerate occasions, Li'l Bulb began to count off with his right index finger. He reached five sets of four before Gyro stopped him.

"Okay, okay, but this time won't be like those. I've simply adapted an old theoretical idea for my own purposes. Have you ever heard of 'utility fog?'"

Li'l Bulb clasped his head with both hands as if in alarm.

"What's wrong with utility fog? An evenly dispersed permanent aerosol of intelligent nanomachines about as dense as the air pollution in twentieth-century L.A. An ambient mist that living creatures can breathe harmlessly. Nothing alarming about that. And utility fog could really be helpful. Say your car was filled with the stuff. You'd never notice it until you got in an accident. Then -- instant airbag, as the invisible machines protectively swarm and cohere between you and the dashboard!"

Furiously moving pen across paper, Li'l Bulb finished another note.

"'Why hasn't utility fog been marketed before now if it's so wonderful?' Well, there are all those foolish EPA regulations for one thing .... "

Li'l Bulb began to run in circles on the couch. Without warning he leaped up onto Gyro's lap and grabbed a handful of Gyro's shirt. Frantically, the small assistant began to shake his boss.

"Helper, stop it! My mind's made up! Nothing's going to go wrong. I've programmed my utility fog to monitor GPS coordinates and remain within Duckburg city limits. And its effects will simply be certain, ah, visual enhancements. Besides, it's too late now. The assembly instructions included immediate dispersal of the first few units into the atmosphere, with self-replication thereafter."

Falling back onto the couch, Li'l Bulb lay on his back with hands folded in corpse posture across his tubular chest.

"Oh, what a melodramatic clown you are, Helper! But by this time tomorrow, when the fog reaches critical mass, you'll see that all your fears are unfounded."

Li'l Bulb's unshaking attitude and fake flickering filament somehow managed to convey immense sarcastic doubt.

When Gyro awoke the morning after his Ginger-winning brainstorm he first moved his arm tentatively, noting nothing unusual accompanying its passage through the air. Critical mass of utility fog had plainly not been reached yet. Before he could perform any further non-instrumented tests, the bed, sensing his change in consciousness, launched him into another day.

At the office, all was as before. Gyro dealt with many matters pertaining to the swelling fortunes of Happy Duck Research, losing track of time. It was only when his secretary knocked on his door, causing a seated Gyro to look up from various interactive displays, that the savant realized his scheme had borne strange fruit.

Each rap on Gyro's door produced an accompanying visual phenomenon. A jagged-edge canary-yellow splotch as substantial and coherent as a piece of floating gauze materialized in midair near the door. Inside each splotch was printed in black the punctuated word KNOCK! These manifestations lasted approximately three seconds before fading to nothing.

"Come in," called Gyro.

Above his head appeared an unmistakable word balloon. A white oval roughly the size of an unfolded diaper with a dangling curving tail functioning as source-pointer, the balloon repeated Gyro's words: Come in.

Gyro got to his feet. "Oh, excellent." A second balloon materialized, even as the first was fading. Gyro walked quickly around the collection of intelligent particles. As solid to the eye as a sheet of vellum, the word balloon displayed its message on both sides in readable orientation.

The door to Gyro's office swung open, framing Gyro's secretary, Mina Lucente,

bearing a tray from the company cafeteria. Today, to complement her Daisy-Duckish pinafore, Mina wore robin's-egg-blue pumps. As she crossed the office's tiled floor, each percussive strike of her high heels was accompanied by a spatter of purple centered around a click proportionately smaller than the loud KNOCK!

"Mr. Gearloose, I brought you some --" Mina faltered as her words appeared in quasi-tactile form above her head. Holding the tray one-handed, she covered her mouth.

"Don't worry, Mina. That balloon's not issuing from you. Well, not entirely."

Gyro explained what he had done, his own continuous speech flickering across the surface of a single balloon as if on a teleprompter, as the clever utility fog maximized its resources. "Now, set that tray down and go draft a press release. I'm sure we'll be getting quite a number of calls about this enchanting modification to Duckburg's environment."

As Mina was leaving, Li'l Bulb entered. Confronting Gyro with hands placed on imaginary hips, Li'l Bulb regarded his boss sternly for a moment, then reached out and snapped his fingers. The snap was represented as a green bubble that popped out of existence rather than faded.

Gyro handed his assistant a pen and paper, and got back this message: "You don't know how glad I am that I cannot speak."

Gyro smiled. "Oh, don't worry. The utility fog will soon respond to other things

than sound. Just wait and see."

WHEN THE MAYOR of Duckburg stormed into Gyro's office, he found the giddy inventor testing the limits of the unmasked-for civic improvement. Uttering any old gibberish that came into his head in order to keep a speech balloon alive -- the Gettysburg Address, pop song lyrics, his projected Nobel acceptance speech -- Gyro was attempting to discover the self-repair capacity of the utility fog. Ripping big hunks out of the floating speech display -- the ragged weightless fragments remained alive for a few hundred milliseconds in Gyro's cupped hands, their portion of print warped and distorted -- Gyro watched appreciatively as new nanomachines swarmed into the damaged area to repair the hovering text balloon.

Seeing the Mayor, Gyro called out gleefully, "It's just incredible! Without my hat, I can't even recall all the routines I put into these little rascals, but I must have cobbled together some really neat code!"

Already once retired, the octogenarian Mayor Floyd Ramie was not generally an excitable type. From 2005 to 2015 he had had a flourishing career with Disney in their Touchstone division, performing in such cinematic hits as *Voodoo Lounge* (2012), where he co-starred with a geriatric Mick Jagger as one of a pair of doddering hippies intent on opening a Club Med franchise in Haiti upon that nation's ascension to statehood. Pensioned off to Duckburg, he had won the mayoral post in an uncontested election.

The Mayor's generally benevolent and somnolent disposition, however, had been drastically frayed by an hour of watching his own speech -- and that of all the frantic visitors to his office -- come and go above his head. Mayor Ramie had never realized how full of awkward pauses (indicated in the speech balloons by the conventional three-dot ellipsis), stutters, fragments, and senseless interjections his own unscripted conversation was.

Now the Mayor banged a fist down on Gyro's desk. His action was accompanied by a dull brown THUMP!, causing Gyro's desk to cry "Ouch!", an exclamation which was simultaneously ballooned in a square shape, indicating machine speech.

"Goddamn it, Gearloose, what the, urn, hell is going on here? What've you done? Er, does Disney know about this? Is it something they, ah, asked you to do? Why wasn't I informed first? Do you realize it took me, er, over an hour to catch up with your, um...press release?"

Gyro smiled. "No, Floyd, this is entirely my scheme. I thought I'd bring Duckburg a little welcome notoriety. Ticket sales have been off this year, haven't they? Ever since RioDisney opened. Mighty hard for Uncle Scrooge to compete with all those thong-clad Carioca babes."

Watching his own just-uttered words while simultaneously trying to formulate new ones was inducing a kind of psychic vertigo in Mayor Ramie, introducing strange loops into his neural speech circuits. Face flushed, he groped for coherence.

"Jesus, Gearloose, I can't believe you thought I believe you can't Jesus --"

At that moment the perpetually replicating utility fog crossed a new threshold, exhibiting a startling emergent property.

Mayor Ramie's head caught fire.

Wide-eyed, Gyro felt his jaw drop. The Mayor, realizing by Gyro's gaze that something novel was occurring in the vicinity of his stubbornly unmodified bald pate, reached up. His hands disturbed the vaporous mock flames, but of course he felt nothing.

"What, what, what?" he spluttered.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just that your head appears to be burning up, obviously because you're angry with me. You see, I endowed my nanomachines with the ability to monitor human physiological responses, including EEG traces. They're akin to miniaturized emotiondetectors, only much more sophisticated."

With visible effort, Mayor Ramie composed himself, and his crown of flames died down. "So everything I, ah, feel is going to be made, er, objectively clear to everyone?"

"More or less. But let's face it, Floyd -- you were never exactly what anyone would call 'poker-faced' before now."

Mayor Ramie seethed in silence for a few seconds, until his accusatory glare



triggered a new response from the utility fog.

From the vicinity of the Mayor's eyes twin streams of tiny daggers flowed, impacting harmlessly on Gyro. The inventor's involuntary laughter was the last straw, sending Mayor Ramie storming out.

Mina Lucente entered hard upon the Mayor's departure. Chewing gum, she was accompanied by an orbital cloud of evanescent pink pearls, each encapsulating a small snap. "Mr. Gearloose, I'm holding off hundreds of news organizations that want to talk to you."

"Is one of them the San Francisco Examiner?"

"Yes."

"Tell them they'll have an exclusive interview with me if they send their reporter Ginger Barks to Duckburg."

Mina frowned. "Your old sweetheart?" A giant glossy red Valentine heart materialized over her head, then cracked into shards. "Very well, Mr. Gearloose!" Mina stamped off.

"And to think I never even suspected .... Oh, well, it's all for the best. Things are working out exactly as I planned."

Little did Gyro suspect that he might soon have to eat his words.

Literally.

Preening in front of his office mirror, Gyro congratulated himself once again.

Ginger Barks had entered Duckburg and was on her way to his office. Her enforced stroll through the living-comicbook town (vehicles other than code-approved ones such as Gyro's firecracker-mobile were prohibited within the metro-park) would surely impress her with Gyro's genius. During their interview, as he expatiated at length on his latest invention and on his boldly adventuresome future plans, he would gradually direct the conversation toward personal matters. By the end of their session, Gyro was willing to bet, he'd have a date with Ginger. After that, it was simply a matter of time before she agreed to become Mrs. Gearloose.

Gyro's door burst open, hitting the wall with an impressive orange THWACK!!! In rushed Li'l Bulb. The lively small automaton was plainly very excited. Jumping up and down, he pointed backward out the door, then pinched the space where his nose would have been.

"What is it, Helper? Another leak at the bioremediation plant? I thought we fixed that for good."

Li'l Bulb shook his head in the negative. He began another miming, then abruptly stopped. Folding his arms across his chest, he composed himself patiently, as if to say, You'll soon see.

And see Gyro did. For at that moment Ginger Barks, eternal romantic icon lodged in Gyro's perpetually adolescent heart, re-entered his life. Not unaccompanied, however. For radiating from Ginger's entire body were innumerable stink lines.

The nanomachines had outdone their past creative efforts. The stink lines they had created were inch-wide wavy ribbons of various bilious shades: diarrhea-brown, vomit-yellow, squashed-bug-green, fresh-road-kill-purple. Extending upward from Ginger's anatomy in varying lengths, they resembled a forest of sickly, current-stirred kelp.

Gyro was dumbstruck. The look on Ginger's face did not help him to recover his voice: her beautiful countenance was contorted with anger. When she fixed her baleful gaze on Gyro, a small black storm cloud appeared over her head, discharging tiny lightning bolts and thunder rumbles.

"Gyro Gearloose! I assume you're responsible for all this! What the hell are these, these attachments?" Ginger was unmistakably displeased. "I picked them up as soon as I came into town!"

Gyro hesitated to name the display with its conventional rude tag. "They're, um -- fragrance motifs! I assume you're wearing some kind of perfume...?"

"Yes, of course. Calvin Klein's newest. Compost. It's part of his whole 'Wake Up, Gaia' line."

Advancing tentatively on his beloved, disinclined to sample any odor that could

have provoked such an abundance of stink lines, Gyro essayed a delicate sniff. Not surprisingly, given Calvin's fine reputation, Ginger's perfume proved to be an attractive melange of subtle organic scents. However, some esoteric chemical underpinning must have provoked the utility fog's garish reaction.

"Quite nice," Gyro hastened to compliment Ginger. "You smell like a summer tomato. As for the, er, fragrance motifs, they're just a small glitch in my creation, I assure you. I have an idea! Let's talk outside. Perhaps the effect will dissipate out of doors."

Ginger's personal storm cloud vanished, and she bestowed a warm smile on her childhood friend. Gyro hoped the smile reflected personal affection, and not just dreams of a Pulitzer.

"Okay! I need to learn all about what you've clone here, Gyro. The whole world needs to learn! I can't believe you granted me an exclusive!"

"The least I could do for my dearest friend," Gyro said dashingly. He motioned toward the door, and moved to drape an arm around Ginger's shoulders as gentlemanly guidance. But at the last moment, he hesitated. Those stink lines

As they left the office, Gyro looked back over his shoulder.

Li'l Bulb was doubled over in silent laughter, slapping his knee.

Gyro wondered if he could possibly sneak back for a moment and kick his Helper's blank titanium butt.

ON THIS LOVELY sunny day, Duckburg was packed with tourists. Drawn by media reports detailing the unprecedented improvements to the familiar Disney attraction, visitors had swarmed in. The park employees and Duckburg's infrastructure were hard-pressed to deal with the flood of visitors. Lines had formed outside the restrooms (from which structures, Gyro was mortified to see, garish stink lines radiated in Hydran profusion), and also outside the snack stands (from which sinuous good-aroma tendrils, colored in various ice-cream shades and equipped at their tips with beckoning fingers, slithered out to olfactorily entice).

"Let's stroll down Main Street," suggested Gyro. As they walked past various storefronts -- including Greer-Lish Pottery, now no longer run by Gyro's two mothers, who had sold the business and retired to Ariel's Palace, a floating Disney arcology -- Gyro recounted his inspiration and the method by which he had endowed vanilla reality with these Lichtensteinian bells and whistles. Ginger nodded intelligently, recording his words on her pocket-pal.

Out from an alley raced a stray cat being chased by a loose mongrel dog. The dog's yaps were concretized as steely BB's, while the cat's hisses were a spikey corona.

Several feet past the alley, on a small outdoor stage, the actress wearing the concealing outfit of duckly sorceress Magica DeSpell went through her accustomed

act, threatening her bound captives, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. To the amazement of the onlookers -- and most likely to her own -- Magica's mystical gestures were accompanied by actual spark trails and fizzing lightning bolts.

Shortly Gyro and his guest found themselves near one of the village's main attractions: Uncle Scrooge's Money Bin, repository of the fabled Number One Dime. A crowd of several hundred people were gathered in the square. Gyro now had a chance to see how certain of the utility fog's processing routines fully manifested themselves. For instance: the utility fog tried not to overlap individual speech and noise balloons, if possible. Positioning a balloon ideally above the head of each speaker, the fog would only layer the balloons like multiple windows on an old-fashioned computer desktop if individuals were crowded together, such as now.

Additionally, of course, louder noises and shouts produced proportionately larger displays, which perforce interfered with smaller ones. Quickly picking up on this, children had begun screaming in order to overlay their parents' words. The consequent decibel level was almost painful.

Gyro glanced up at a clock on town hall. "It's time for the daily raid by the Beagle Boys."

"As if I could ever forget," Ginger said. "Don't you ever wonder sometimes, Gyro, what kind of people we would have been if we had grown up in a normal town?"

Gyro astonished himself with his boldness. "Why, I think you're just perfect as you are, Ginger."

Ginger smiled and said, "Thank you," with Gyro's words hanging embarrassingly in the air between them.

Right on time a gunshot rang out, accompanied by an unprecedented leaden BANG!, and the trio of masked and stubble-faced Beagle Boys tumbled out of the Money Bin, clutching bags of loot. But as they ran from the arriving Duckburg police, something new was in evidence.

The Beagles were surrounded by motion lines.

In the air behind them, the runners left day-glo jetstreams, and their pumping legs were hidden in spinning-prop effects, making the robbers appear to be torsos mounted on careening wheelchairs.

Disconcerted, the Beagles ground to a stop and began to wave their arms about, as if to shoo curious encircling bystanders away from their possibly dangerous appearance. Their arms exhibited ghost-replication: faint duplicates of their limbs traced the paths of their every movement.

Gyro turned to Ginger. The reporter with whom he was incurably in love was regarding Gyro as if he were a caged specimen of the bulletheaded Bomb Birds that Donald had encountered in "Adventure at Bomb Bird Island." "Heh-heh, quite

harmless. Over a certain velocity and under certain emotional stresses, these effects kick in, you see .... "

Now the Beagles were arguing with each other. One began to swear, and his curse words were represented in his balloon by various censorious icons: asterisks, whirlwinds, stars and such. A second Beagle decided that the show must go on, and he resumed running. Unfortunately, he tried to continue the argument at the same time, looking over his shoulder, and thus impacted a tree. Despite the protection of his foam costume, he fell unconscious to the ground, and a flock of twittering bluebirds began to circle his head.

"I need pictures of this!" Ginger said. "My camera's in the car."

"I'll come with you," Gyro said hastily, wondering how he would ever begin his romantic pitch under these awkward circumstances.

Together, Ginger and Gyro reached the main gated entrance to Duckburg. Departing the town limits, they headed toward one of the many parking lots. They were halfway there before Gyro noticed something.

Ginger's stink lines still attended her.

"No," said Gyro unbelievably, "this can't be." His words were promptly ballooned.



Ginger stopped. "What's the matter?"

"The utility fog is supposed to be constrained within the perimeter of the town.

No leakage."

Gyro looked back at Duckburg. A small mechanical figure was hastening through the gate toward them. In a few seconds Li'l Bulb had caught up with his boss.

The assistant carried Gyro's pocket-pal, which the inventor had forgotten while focused on impressing Ginger.

Gyro took the all-purpose device from Li'l Bulb. His assistant had already tuned the communicator to a news broadcast:

-- solar flares of unprecedented dimensions. All GPS satellites are out of commission. The system is not expected to come back online for a week. For further details, visit --"

"A week," moaned Gyro. "Without proximity constraints on their replication, the utility fog could fill the Earth's whole atmosphere in a week! This is awful!

What else could go wrong?"

The answer to Gyro's rhetorical question was not long in coming. For over Ginger's head, a new kind of balloon had formed. Nubby-edged in contrast to the sharp lines of the speech capsules, its connection to its owner made not with a tail but with a series of bubbles, its species was self-evident.

It was a thought balloon. And it contained this observation:

What a fuckup!

GYRO'S WEARY HEAD lay cradled in his folded arms atop his silent desk. Suspended above the woeful inventor's noggin was a thought balloon filled with colorful graphic images: Gyro strung from a noose, Gyro with his head in a guillotine, Gyro wilting under a hail of stones thrown by an angry mob of citizens.

Some such fate, it seemed, was very likely to be his at any moment. For he had failed to stop the utility fog. And that mission was the only reason he retained his freedom, instead of languishing in some Federal oubliette, awaiting the trial of the young century, followed, no doubt, by public tarring and feathering. Oh, the frustration, not to mention the damage to his pride! And he had come so close

Of course, a cautious Gyro, under the earlier influence of his mindbooster hat, had engineered a failsafe into the fog. A certain signal, broadcast on a certain frequency, was supposed to trigger instant shutoff in the nanodevices. And so, with minor reluctance, as soon as he verified that the fog had indeed seeped past Duckburg's city-limits, Gyro had sent that killer message. At first, all seemed well. But Gyro had not reckoned with mutations. Stray high-energy particles from the same solar flares that had decommissioned the GPS satellites had also jiggered with the quantum-sensitive nanodevices. One percent of the invisible critters ignored the shutoff command.

That proved to be plenty.

Consistent with Gyro's off-the-cuff estimate, during the past week the escaped nanomachines from Duckburg had contaminated every cubic centimeter of the globe's atmosphere up to several miles high. Despite their early near-extinction, the fecund utility fog easily filled all available niches.

(Replication thereafter among the communicating contiguous nanomachines, as programmed, slowed to replacement levels.)

Within six days, the entire globe had been Barkserized.

Not very many people were happy with this. In fact, practically no one.

The bulk of the fog's pop-ups and hi-litings were surely annoying, yet easy enough to deal with. Although nobody really appreciated stink lines, for instance, signaling the inefficaciousness of their underarm deodorant, they could live with such indignities, since everyone else was subject to the same automatic insults. (In fact, one positive aspect of the silent invasion was that personal hygiene, as monitored by a partially functioning CDC in Atlanta, actually improved.) Perhaps people could even have learned to tolerate the truly ridiculous motion-lines that accompanied the intimate actions of lovemaking. (What had Gyro been thinking?) But the one intolerable aspect of the fog, the ultimate intrusion, were the thought balloons.

The same mind-reading circuitry found in Gyro's intelligence-amplifying hat

existed in distributed form among the nanodevices. And all censorship filters had been wiped. Any thought that reached a certain density of conceptualization was fair game for display, as words or pictographs. Husbands and wives, bosses and employees, salesmen and news anchors, diplomats and world leaders -- all found their formerly hidden sentiments suddenly spotlighted for anyone to read. International and domestic antagonisms that would not be settled for decades instantly blossomed.

The initial effect was similar to worldwide attack by deadly antipersonnel bombs that left infrastructure intact. Streets and public buildings emptied as people huddled at home (in separate rooms for each family member) closeted with their suddenly naked thoughts. And had most of society's vital services not been fully cybernetically maintained (Li'l Bulb's cousins, anthropomorphic or not, had no thoughts they were ashamed of), complete collapse of society would have swiftly followed this mass abandonment of the workplace.

Within a couple of days of the advent of this prosthetic telepathy, a few makeshift strategies to avoid the thought balloons had been devised. The highest levels of the world's many governments now functioned in airtight rooms whose atmospheres had been cleansed of fog by meticulous filtering. And since the dramatic yet wispy utility fog displays could be dispersed with a sufficient breeze, the few people brave enough to mingle took to carrying portable fans and blowing away their thoughts before they could be read.

During this crisis, Gyro had of course not been inactive. Spending debilitating

hours under his neuron-goading hat, he strove to come up with some method of disabling the utility fog. But no easy answer presented itself. His best plan -- to release killer nanodevices in sufficient numbers to eat up the fog -- was instantly and loudly vetoed by every world leader. No one was willing to risk a second plague possibly worse than the first.

Today Gyro was at the end of his wits. Wracked by guilt -- which manifested itself as an impressive yet weightless anvil atop his shoulders -- he probably would have simply quit by now, had it not been for his small band of supporters: Mina, Ginger, and Li'l Bulb. These three stalwarts had never been far from his side during the past week. Mina, seemingly recovered from her heartbreak, handled all practical details, including meals. Ginger dispensed cheer, while filing report after objective and charitable report to her newspaper, and thence to an expectant and angry world. Li'l Bulb helped on the technical front. Additionally, Mayor Ramie, designated the official government contact with the criminal inventor, visited often, bringing with him blustery reassurances and encouragements, along with invariably innocuous thought balloons that testified to his essentially empty mind. (Already, there was talk of running him for Governor of California.)

There came a visible and audible knock at the door. How long ago it seemed, thought Gyro weakly, that first knock of Mina's proving his illomened brainstorm a reality. Gyro raised his weighty head, and the everpresent anvil recalibrated its location on his shoulders.

"Come in."

Ginger Barks had lost her stink lines. Too busy to go home and get her perfume, yet not neglecting revivifying showers in the Happy Duck Research gym facilities, she no longer triggered the utility fog's repulsive iconography. Holding up incredibly well under the pressure, she actually looked more radiant by the day. Gyro loved her more than ever, yet had never felt her to be further out of his reach.

After that first harsh thought had escaped her in the parking lot, Ginger had been very careful to keep her displayed inner sentiments scrupulously neutral. This control could be achieved, but only by stringent acts of will most people found themselves incapable of. Prior practice with some form of meditation appeared to help, and Ginger had indeed been practicing Tibetan visualization techniques for many years, ever since interviewing the elderly Richard Gere in his retirement home in liberated Tibet.

The thought balloon above Ginger's head now conveyed her pity for Gyro, a pity more hurtful than scorn: Poor guy! He looks like he's on his last legs. This can't go on much longer ....

Gyro pretended not to have seen this thought. (Already, an etiquette involving keeping one's gaze low was developing. Yet this tactic did not solve perhaps the worst feature of the thought balloons, which was often not being able to see your own. Gyro understood some people now never left sight of an arrangement of paired mirrors that would allow them to monitor their thoughts continuously.)

Essaying a weak smile, he tried to put a positive spin on things.

"Well, Ginger, I'm planning to go under the hat again within the next hour. I expect this will be the turning point. At some point the solution has to come, you know --"

Ginger closed the door behind her and crossed the room. Unexpectedly, she sat on Gyro's lap. Ignoring his insubstantial anvil, she put her arms around his neck.

"Gyro, don't fake it for me. Do you know what you really thought just then?"

'She'll hate me if I fail.' I won't hate you, Gyro! How could I? I've known you since we were children, and you've never been anything but kind to me. But this insistence on being the brightest, on being infallible -- ever since elementary school, it's made you almost unapproachable. I never felt I'd be good enough for someone who held himself to such impossibly high standards."

Gyro relished Ginger's comforting touch. He felt simultaneously chastised and reinvigorated. "Well, you certainly see now I'm not infallible, and so do I. As for being the brightest -- sometimes I think my Helper is smarter than me!"

"You're just human, in other words."

"Uh, very," agreed Gyro warily, sensing certain physiological responses to Ginger's weight in his lap. Then she leaned down for a kiss.

For the next twenty minutes, after the couple moved from chair to couch, their thought balloons fused and displayed a frisky scene only slightly more suitable

for immature viewers than the physical reality of their entanglement.

As they were dressing, rather shamefacedly keeping their eyes away from their now separate post-coital thoughts, another knock sounded. Before Gyro could call out permission to enter, the door swung open. Dragging Gyro's thinking hat, Li'l Bulb trudged in.

The usually cheerful autonomous automaton seemed preoccupied, as if struggling with some important decision. Every line of his sexless frame expressed inner tumult. He brought the hat to Gyro, regarded the two humans thoughtfully for a moment, then went to a small locked cupboard with doors suited to his height. Keying them open, he revealed a shrine.

"Why, Helper, what is this? I never knew --"

Ignoring his boss, Li'l Bulb kneeled down before a triptych displaying three portraits: Isaac Asimov, Alan Turing and Hal 9000. In front of the triptych sat a model of the first printed circuit. Bowing his head, Li'l Bulb prayed silently for a minute or so. In response, the utility fog constructed a halo around his pointy bulb head. Finally rising, Li'l Bulb gestured to Gyro to don the hat, and the man did so. Then Li'l Bulb motioned for a hand up. Perched on Gyro's anvil-less, sex-soothed shoulder, Li'l Bulb opened up a port in the hat. He took off one glove, and it was instantly apparent that the port was meant to receive the four fingers of the assistant. Li'l Bulb jacked in, and nodded.



Gyro snapped his chin string.

Instantly, Li'l Bulb stiffened as if electrocuted! Real smoke began to rise from his ridged collar! Meanwhile, Gyro's face was undergoing contortions worthy of an exorcism. Ginger, horrified, dared not interfere.

With a conclusive, concussive POOF! both the hat and Li'l Bulb shorted out. The automaton toppled from his perch, swinging lifelessly from his still-socketed fingers.

With great reverence Gyro removed his hat with one hand, cupping Li'l Bulb's body in the other.

Above Gyro's head now flared a giant antique light bulb, signifying a Really Big Idea.

"I never even thought to try such a thing. He linked all his idiosyncratic processing power with the hat's," Gyro explained, "even though he knew the two operating systems were ultimately and fatally incompatible. But it worked. I know now how to deal with the utility fog. It's trivial."

Ginger poked Li'l Bulb gently with one finger. "And now your friend is gone for good?"

Gyro smiled. "Of course not. I'll just dig out one of his spare bodies and reboot him from this morning's backup. The little bugger never could resist

milking humans for all the pathos he could get."

Ginger flung her arms around Gyro. "You did it then! You and Li'l Bulb! I've got to run and file my story now! Don't go anywhere!"

"I'll wait here forever for you, Ginger, if you tell me to."

"Oh, it won't be that long!"

On her way out, Ginger stopped in the doorway, turned -- and blew Gyro a kiss.

The larger-than-life wet glossy red lips flapped across the room and plastered themselves on Gyro's cheek with a smack!

There were some things about this catastrophe he was going to miss.

The pride of the official Disney spaceship fleet appeared to hail straight from the Tomorrowland of seventy-five years ago, a finned rocket styled by Wernher von Braun, fit only to top some antique writing trophy. But its looks were as deceiving as those of Li'l Bulb. Its fantasy shell housed the latest in spacefaring equipment and drives, and the ship saw regular use ferrying rich pampered tourists to Disney attractions as distant as Minnie's Mars, Horace Horsecollar's Helios or Bucky Bug's Belter Bar.

Now, however, the retro-looking, fully provisioned craft was about to blast off

on an Earth-saving flight carrying only a single passenger.

Mayor Floyd Ramie of Duckburg.

A safe distance away from the soon-to-be-unleashed rocket flames, Gyro stood with his two friends, Ginger and Li'l Bulb. This last-named calf-high individual wore a miniature Chinese coolie hat atop his pointy ultraglass head, strictly as a fashion nod toward the hot Florida sun --an orb now obscured, but one which everyone hoped would soon reappear, once the massed utility fog from all comers of the globe ceased to form a dynamically maintained white roof above their heads.

Rebooted into a new body with no memory of his last few hours, Gyro's Helper had steadfastly refused to admit he might have sacrificed himself for his boss in another incarnation, even when presented with the sight of his own corpse. Furiously scribbling, he finished his first postdeath note and passed it to Gyro.

With amusement, Gyro read aloud, "Even Holy Asimov never perpetrated such a maudlin tear-jerker! Give it up!' Well, I think you protest a trifle too much, Helper. But if you want to pretend that you have no feelings for me, that's fine. I know what I know."

Li'l Bulb thumbed his blank nose at his boss, then left the room. In the week since, the feisty manikin had quite consistently carried out his duties with an air of blase servitude that only made Gyro smile.

Quickly following his revelation about dealing with the rogue fog, Gyro had summoned Mayor Ramie to his office. When the bland and blustery fellow arrived, Gyro was happy to see that his accompanying thought balloon -- despite the ongoing life-or-death crisis -- reflected the man's typical vacuity, consisting mostly of an empty white canvas with some children's primer figures -- Dick, Jane, and Spot -- romping about.

"Mayor Ramie, how would you like to earn all the credit for ridding Earth of my accidental plague? I'm sure that a grateful global populace would let you name your reward afterward."

A puzzled expression occluded the Mayor's features, and his thought balloon changed to a depiction of a shyster trying to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a tube. "Will I, ah, be, er, alive afterwards to enjoy my reward?"

"Of course. The one catch is that you'll have to stay in orbit for a year first."

Mayor Ramie pondered this proposal momentarily, his exteriorized thoughts symbolically represented by a slate with the equation  $2 + 2 = ?$  chalked on it. Finally he consented, saying, "It's only because I trust you personally, Gyro."

Genuinely touched, Gyro clapped a hand on the Mayor's shoulder. The utility fog produced a synthetic puff of dust and a couple of moths, as if the Mayor's

clothes had been hanging in a closet for decades.

With the Mayor's consent secured, Gyro got busy with his simple plan, a basic variation on the Pied Piper fable.

Above all, the fog was cerebrotropic, flocking to individual loci of thought.

All Gyro had to do was make one amplified pointsource of thought that outshone all others. So as not to interfere with this fogseductive broadcast, the human bait should possess very few of his own thoughts to project.

Floyd Ramie matched that description to the tenth decimal place.

With Li'l Bulb's help, Gyro quickly cobbled together a new version of his thinking cap, one that simply radiated an irresistible come-hither to the fog.

Once all the principals were assembled at Disney's Florida launching site, Mayor Ramie had been hustled aboard the ship wearing the activated cap. The instant results were impressive.

All the fog in the immediate vicinity began to collect above the rocket, forming a thought balloon large as a dirigible. This massive balloon depicted nothing but two gigantic words:

**COME HERE!**

The urge to swarm now radiated outward from one nanodevice to another. Even as they gravitated toward the impulse, they passed the baton of command backwards

to more distant fellows. In a week's time, every iota of utility fog from around the planet had collected here, or died trying. In their amalgamated mass, they now formed a flat sheet spreading above many square miles centered around the rocket. Thick as clouds, the fog allowed a level of illumination equivalent to a stormy day.

Standing at the distant mission control, Gyro felt immense satisfaction. The solution was so elegant it almost made him forget his initial stupidity. Nothing remained except to send Mayor Ramie into space, taking the utility fog with him.

"I guess it's time," Gyro announced.

Ginger stopped dictating her latest dispatch into her pocket-pal long enough to squeeze Gyro's hand. "I'm proud of you, Gyro. You never gave up."

"Maybe that quality of mine has its drawbacks. Never giving up on you was what caused this whole mess in the first place."

"Oh, Gyro, what woman wouldn't be flattered that someone loved her enough to risk the end of civilization as we know it to win her?"

Li'l Bulb corkscrewed his finger at the level of his temple and turned away in disgust. Gyro and Ginger kissed. Then, using his own pocket-pal, Gyro triggered the launch.

The inventor had expected the rocket to pierce the semi-living cloud, soar ahead, then pull the fog behind it. But he had forgotten the cloud's self-positioning routines. Seeking to maintain a stable distance from the rocket, the cloud lifted first above the needle-nosed ship as soon as it sensed movement. As the rocket climbed, the cloud went with it as a cloak, as if it were an enormous, message-imprinted, fluted silk handkerchief caught on the prow of the rocket.

Soon the rocket and its companion dwindled to a dot. Cheers erupted from happy bystanders. Ginger held up her communication device so that Gyro could make a public statement.

"Citizens of Earth, I apologize profusely for the past few harrowing weeks. Rest assured that the utility fog, lacking raw materials for replication in the vacuum of space, will all die within a year's time. There will be no further repercussions from this invention of mine."

But of course in between the moment when the fleet of aliens announced their proximity and their actual arrival in the Solar System, Gyro had had plenty of time to revise his opinions about the wisdom of mounting a gigantic welcome mat in orbit.

The Reluctant Book a short story by Paul Di Filippo There followed hard upon the death of Master Biobiblioplexist Vincent Holbrook the pressing question of how best to dispose of his extensive library. None of the unsentimental heirs to the moldering Holbrook estate cared to assume the daily demands of such a large collection of books. The motley assortment of assignees--amongst them various second cousins, great-nephews, and assorted ex-brothers-in-law left over from the multiple marriages of Holbrook's two serially promiscuous sisters, Marlys and Taffy--were all a decidedly illiterate lot. No one was inclined to assume responsibility for even a limited number of the approximately five hundred volumes left forlorn at librarian Holbrook's passing, for the selfish heirs simply had no use for such arcane objects. (Complicating matters, the Catalogue had gone missing upon Holbrook's demise, so that an exact tally of the library's contents was lacking.) A lanky, happily seedy and reclusive fellow well into his second century (although fated by a lurking cerebral aneurysm undiagnosed by his glitchy domestic homeobox never to embark upon a third), given to dressing in fusty non-regenerative clothing prone to showcasing every gravy stain and every dribble of the pungent sengchaw constantly lumped into his cheek, Holbrook had been devoted to his library, sparing no expense on housing and maintaining his collection. His own living conditions at the cavernous, crumbling mansion named Rueulroald betrayed commensurate economies. But Holbrook's bookbarn was assuredly first class, the envy of many of his fellow MBs. Occasional sotto voce grumbles from his uncaring heirs during his lifetime about how the old man was wasting his money--actually, for all practical purposes, their money--on such a self-indulgent hobby failed to disturb the equanimity or enthusiasm of the doddering bibliophile. He managed to ignore even the ravings of one particularly vindictive niece who, in an act of psychic displacement transparent to everyone but herself, speculated loudly that Holbrook actually derived pleasure from the frustration of his nearest and dearest. Why else would he wantonly continue to pour their dwindling inheritance into the acquisition of new volumes and the multiplication of his existing ones? The why was simple, had anyone cared to inquire: Holbrook fancied himself a scholar, and boasted a scholar's unswerving dedication to the pursuit of knowledge above all else. And in truth, out of his well-stocked, heavily permuted, and continually refreshed library had flowed some original contributions in a number of fields: stellar intelligence; gravitokarmic mechanics; intractability parsing; asteroidal archaeology; quantum erotogenics; string collecting; creative teratogenesis; and even those neglected twin domains, once upon a time so creatively mined, fiction and poetry. Holbrook had seen a number of successes, receiving invitations from various ahuman judging intelligences to port his findings out of his books and into the relevant cybernetic audiovisual datawebs that formed the real repositories of useful information in Holbrook's era. But deriving all these entertaining and educational results from his books was an arduous and demanding task, admitting of little nonbookish relaxation or convivial pursuits even with fellow MBs. His hobby was conducive even to monomania, perhaps, and Holbrook had paid the ultimate price for his interests. And soon now, so would his books. MB Kratchko Stallkamp resembled a constitutionally ill-tempered, mangy crane recently denied its dinner. Stalky legs encased in yellow pipestem pantaloons; a roundish torso fluffed out with a weskin of synthetic quills fashionable over fifty years ago; hunched winglike shoulders and perpetually scrunched-down head resulting in ears nearly on a level with his Order of the Bookbinders epaulets; and a beaky nose and hard eyes intent on the main chance of spearing something. The wispy hair partially



concealing his scabby scalp anomalously evoked the downy plumage of a chick. As if his avian semblance were not offputting enough, antique eyeglasses retrofitted with intelligent actilenses lent Stallkamp the impossible air of a goggling time-traveler from the Reductionist Millennia.

Ushered from the wintry collonaded front porch into the cold corridors of Rueulroald by a gimpy Turing-five factotum (one of the few functioning servants left on the estate, an antique whom Holbrook had chosen perversely to address as "The Venerable Bede"), Stallkamp clutched to his quilled chest, as if suspicious of imminent theft, a battered leather case whose handle had long gone missing. "Allow me to conduct you to the mysteries," said The Venerable Bede. Stallkamp barked, "What! What's that? I'll have no truck with mysteries of any stripe!" The Venerable Bede opened a panel under its left armpit and reset a switch. "Excuse me, I meant the mistresses." "Very well then. Lead on." Lame leg evoking a regular plastic knocking, the factotum conducted the human visitor through many a drafty, dusty hall hung with animated tapestries whose ancient routines ran only spastically now, and through many a polycarbon-cobwebbed chamber where only the glowing LED eyes of artificial spiders illuminated their way. In one vast high-ceilinged ballroom, sentry bats squeaked from on high, alert for intrusions by any of the myriad types of rogue colonizing insects--escapees from hobbyist workbenches--that populated the dense forests around the manse, those groves themselves engineered so long ago that the names of their designers no longer erupted in spontaneous stipples from bark or leaf. Finally the pair reached the center of the house, a warm, well-lighted kitchen. The heady fragrance of brewing Estruvial Spice tea filled the room with a synthetic allure. In one corner of the kitchen a cot with rumpled covers indicated as plainly as speech that here had Holbrook slept, as well as taken his rudimentary meals, ceding the rest of the house to moth and decay. "The mysteries," announced The Venerable Bede, then departed. Seated at a big wooden table with a warped and scarred top were Marlys and Taffy Holbrook. The sisters both exhibited the high-gloss perfections of the extensively reconfigured elite, although each possessed her own individual style. Marlys had had her scalp hair eliminated and facial features minimized: eyes, nose, nostrils, ears and mouth reduced to the barest pinpoint functionality across a head bare as an egg. The result sketched the nearly empty china face of a doll whose maker had run out of materials or ingenuity or both. Taffy boasted a leonine head of tawny hair framing a bestial living mask. The end of her leathery snout gleamed wetly, her whiskers vibrating with each breath. Marlys wore a pinafore and flouncy skirt, Taffy an elastic suit striped from its scooped neck to ankles. "MB Stallkamp," purred Taffy. "Please, take a seat." Marlys's high voice emerged as if from a paper-bellows-and-bamboo-reed mechanism of no large size. "Yes. Join us in some tea." Stallkamp waved away both offers brusquely. "No time for socializing. I'm only interested in the books." The ladies sought to preserve their dignity and decorum. "Of course," Taffy said. "We recognize your devotion to learning, and we're so grateful that you wish to purchase the library as a whole. It surely would have pleased our dear Vincent to know his collection would end up in such fine hands." "That's why we favored your tender over all the others," piped Marlys. Stallkamp denied the tactics of the sisters. "Don't pretend. I know through my contacts that you have had no other propositions, save from the knackers offering you pennies on the dollar. None of my peers wanted a library without a Catalogue, a record of all the permutations and stud lines. Too much work by half getting the whole affair sorted. You can't rely on the books themselves for the information, of course. Except in text mode, they're stubborn prevaricators, every one of them." "Oh, true." "So true. Nasty things, books." "But I'm different. Once I get them home, I intend to overwrite them all anyway,

and to hell with their current contents. Your foolish brother's holdings never supplemented mine in any case. He wasted his time on all sorts of nonsense. Gravitokarmic mechanics, indeed! No, I'm paying you as if the books were all blank, straight from the publishers--with a sizable discount for heavy usage, of course--and that's the best deal you'll get.

There's no point in jollyng me up to try to extort a few more dollars out of me. So you might as well conduct me to the library right now." The sisters stood up resignedly. Taffy pointed to a large door set in one wall beside the large stasis cube that served as icebox for comestibles. "The bookbarn is right through there, MB Stallkamp. Vincent never wanted to be more than a few steps from his precious books. Do you need us to accompany you?" "Not at all. The books will be jittery enough without the presence of two non-librarians. Let me just check my equipment one last time, though." Stallkamp deposited his flat case on the tabletop and cracked it open. Racked inside were several perfusion hypos--prefilled with varicolored semiotic liquids in their graduated cartridges--and a wicked-looking pronged device like a tuning fork fused to a pistol grip. Marlys pointed to the weaponish thing. "What is that? I don't believe Vincent ever had one." "It's a librarian's fine-assessor." Stallkamp took up the bifurcate gun and closed his case. "The bookbarn door is locked, I assume." Taffy removed a key from her décolletage. "Here's all you need." Stallkamp strode impatiently to the door, but was brought up short by a shrill invocation of his name from Marlys. He turned around. "Yes?" "There's a way you could gain Vincent's library without expending any money, sir. Each of us in the market for a new husband. Surely one or even both of us might appeal to a learned gentleman such as yourself." From between his overarching shoulder blades, Stallkamp favored each of the women with a long piercing look before saying, "Sorry, but no. You two are of an exquisitely high-toned breed incompatible with my humble station." Inserting the still-warm key into the lock of the bookbarn door, Stallkamp quickly let himself in, leaving the Holbrook sisters simpering from the flattery whose irony had escaped them. Canto had not asked to be born a book, any more than he had chosen the ratios of his mixed genotype and his consequent motley appearance. But having received such an assignment from fate (in the case of the subservient Canto and his fellow books, of course, fate wore an all-too-human guise), he generally tried to make the best of things. Being a book--at least in this collection--did not hold the terrors associated with many other chimerical employments: toxin tester, vacuum worker, seabed miner. Boredom, lack of freedom, the rigors of new textual creation and mixing--these were the worst things a book generally faced. Some days were easier than others, naturally--days when the majority of books were left uncalled-upon and could conduct their own well-ordered social life. But since the death of their beloved librarian, MB Holbrook, these good days had been few and far between. True, not a single requisition had obtruded on their private time, but this accidental vacation was not without attendant drawbacks. First had come the diminished heat and light in the bookbarn, leaving the books to shiver and huddle in the unchanged hay of their darkened carrels. Next they had felt the sting of hunger, as their meals began to arrive from the automated synthesizers with increasing infrequency and diminished quality. (The books were not privy to the many arguments among Holbrook's heirs about how best to minimize estate expenditures during the breakup of the property, nor were their votes solicited.) Finally, the books suffered from the black, bleak uncertainty concerning their future. The bookbarn bulked four stories high, with over a hundred carrels per floor. Central to each level was a reading room forbidden to the books save when called there by the librarian. Serving as their social focus instead was the unallocated floorspace around the meal synthesizers, and

to a lesser extent, the toilets. Often, the older books, leaders of the community, would call meetings in front of the food dispensers. With some squeezing--not at all disagreeable to the small, hairy books, especially given the chilly conditions obtaining lately in the barn--all the books could accomodate themselves in the open space. On this day just such a meeting had been called--by old Incunabula, leader of the first-floor.

Eager to see his beloved Vellum once more, Canto was among the first to arrive. Generally, aside from eating and toilet errands, the books were supposed to remain permanently in their carrels until called by the librarian, and that routine still held to a large degree. But in any library of longstanding agglomeration, the books invariably became familiar with the usage patterns of their owner, and felt safe in circumspectly venturing out among themselves, especially when the librarian was asleep. Under the current circumstances, of course, with their owner dead, no one was likely to call for any volume whatsoever, and the books felt safe in assembling during the day. Perhaps too they were lulled by the fact that MB Holbrook had never assessed any penalties for going misshelved. Beneath the louring dusty rafters of the first-floor ceiling and in front of the food chutes now assembled scores of books, pouring in from the various convergent corridors. Soon Canto was surrounded by his fellow volumes, and he had to strain onto tiptoe in search of Vellum. All roughly three feet tall, the books evidenced their heterogenous genetic composition in every line of their furry bodies. Part squirrel, part babboon, part hare, part whistlepig, with a certain admixture of human qualities, the books sat upright on big hindquarters and lagomorphic clawed feet, carrying their upper limbs close to their chests. Their disproportionately large heads seemed set almost directly onto their shoulders. Wide hazel eyes glimmered, ears twitched, and blunt chisel teeth flashed as the books greeted each other. They spoke, of course, in the pure human tongue.

Canto spotted Vellum's attractive dappled pelt across the convocation and hustled through the musky crowd to join her. "Hello, Vellum. Have you missed me?" Vellum smiled prettily. "Of course I have, Canto. I won't ask you the same, because I can see right away that you have." Canto sighed. That was romantic Vellum all over, perceptive and sensitive to a fault. A surge of melancholy passed through Canto as he wished for the hundredth time that he and Vellum embodied the same type of text. But they didn't, and without that prerequisite, chances were they would never be allowed to mate. The books had no diurnal libidos. Chemically suppressed, their sexual instincts were allowed to come afire only when the librarians wished to mate two books and produce a new text. And the chances that books from different fields would be brought together were minimal. What, after all, would be the point of breeding a work on neutrino construction with a volume of chaoticist poetry? Chances were that the offspring would be useless--although sometimes such wild hybrids did give rise to completely new areas of fruitful study--and in that case, the book-knackers would be summoned to dispose of the useless whelp. Canto shuddered at that thought. Better never to know the bliss of conjugal union with Vellum than to bring such a hapless creature into the world. Just as Canto was about to exchange more pleasantries with Vellum, the herd of books began to fall silent, focusing their attention toward the food dispensers. Canto took Vellum's paw and they both directed their gaze forward. Onto a tabletop clambered with some hesitancy a grizzled, plumpish book: Incunabula. Able now to command the whole herd, supported by two assistants, Trivium and Quadrivium, Incunabula began to speak. "Ahem, my fellow books. Thank you all for leaving your carrels to attend to my humble speech. I shan't keep you long. I only wish to say that I fully realize that since the untimely mortal passage of our dear librarian, all of us have been anxious about what the future might hold for us.

Some of us might even have thought of following the Catalogue into the outer world, where only dangers and hardships await--bibliovores such as the gnoles and gnurrs and zipper-nut squirrels. I caution anyone entertaining such a desperate scheme to be patient. Surely we shall all find a new home very soon. After all, our utility and value are unquestionable. Are not we books the fount of all new conjectures and theorems? Unlike the static databases, the ever-shifting texts we embody, cleverly manipulated by our librarians, are the prime source of new concepts and fresh perspectives. Even in a culture such as the current human one, which prizes stability and feels that many limits of knowledge have already been reached, new thoughts are still welcomed by many scholars and--

"What's going on here!" The shouted query from the rear of the herd caused every book to squeak loudly and nearly bolt for their carrels. The herd swayed, but held. Summoning all his courage, clutching Vellum's paw tighter than ever, Canto turned around to look for the source of the angry shout. A human stood on the fringes of the herd, and he held an object Canto had never actually seen before, but only heard horror stories about. A librarian's fine-assessor. MB

Stallkamp's library back home at his manse Brundisium consisted of a mere ninety books, housed in a smallish barn recently much extended in preparation for his anticipated acquisition. He consulted his tomes by ones and twos--perhaps by threes, at most. Dealt with in such small numbers, the books had always struck him as feeble and impotent creatures, susceptible to easy command and prone to cower under his astringent tone. Now, faced with scores of self-motivated books, Stallkamp was forced to revise his long-held estimate of the books' tractability. This unexpected show of initiative went counter to his expectations. His gut rebelled against the massed smell of the volumes, and their ranked stares unnerved him. But realizing that he should not let any of his fear or uncertainty show, lest he lose any trace of the upper hand, he followed his first instinctive question with a bellowed demand, directed at the one book who stood out from the herd. "You on the table! What's your UDC?"

Only among themselves did the books indulge in proper names, names which were meaningless to their librarians. To those masters, they were known by their Universal Decimal Classification, as displayed above their carrels. The portly book stuttered out its code. "Theta gamma dot zero nine seven two slash five blue one--master." Nerving himself up to a desperate pitch, Stallkamp crane-strutted his way through the books as they fell desperately away from him, squeaking, their hairy flanks brushing his calves. Coming within firing range of the book upon the table, Stallkamp halted. "You look to be the leader of this rabble, and as such will have to be fined." Raising his assessor and pointing it at the book, Stallkamp squeezed the trigger. The assessor emitted no visible ray or projectile. Nonetheless, the book grunted as if struck, short arms scrabbling at its chest, then collapsed. The two assistants jumped back in fright. Stallkamp approached the fallen book, hefting one limp limb. Dead. He must have had the assessor set too high, or perhaps this book suffered from some organic defect which the assessor had magnified. Whatever the answer, the deed was done. Now to make it serve. "Back to your carrels," shouted Stallkamp, "or you'll all get the same!" The herd dispersed in seconds, all save the slower of the two aides, whom Stallkamp had grabbed by the loose skin at the back of its head. "You're to come with me to the reading room." Dragging the book by its scruff, Stallkamp attained the reading room. Here he found the lectern--a book-proportioned couch with sturdy straps--a chair for the librarian, and various oddments of the biobiblioplexist's trade: blank paper, syringes, a small semiotic distillery and the like. Stallkamp motioned the book onto the lectern and secured it in place. Then he uttered two readout commands: "Open your covers. Title and table of contents." A look of disassociative withdrawal slid over the book's

countenance as the commands triggered automatic retrieval and verbal output. "Advanced Principles of Planckian Geometry. Chapter one, methods of charting. Chapter two--" "Stop." Stallkamp opened his handleless case and removed a perfusive hypo. He applied its snout to the neck of the book and shot the device's measure of sophisticated erasure molecules into its veins. Stallkamp sat down and consulted his watch. On the couch, the face of the book twitched in small spillover reactions incidental to the ongoing erasure, as dendritic delinkers did their brutal work. After approximately ten minutes, Stallkamp addressed the book again. "Title and table of contents." The book opened its mouth, but seemed unable to offer anything. Stallkamp radiated pleasure. These hundreds of blank books--further modified according to his special scheme--would certainly go all the way toward bringing his pet project to its long-sought conclusion. Then wouldn't the smugly ridiculous MB Sauvage get a nasty shock! Stallkamp left behind his visions of triumph, and took the book offline. "Close your covers."

The command brought the book back to self-awareness and nervous apprehension of its surroundings. Stallkamp released it from the restraints, and ordered it back to its carrel. The book departed, somewhat shakily. Likewise, Stallkamp swiftly made his way through the deserted corridors of the bookbarn and back into the kitchen of Rueulroald. There he found the Holbrook sisters awaiting him. "Was everything satisfactory?" inquired Marlys eagerly. "Absolutely. I performed a random wipe without a hitch. The books will serve my purposes well. I'll have the trundels come round in the morning. Factota will stasis-box the library and take the whole collection away. Upon receipt, I'll deliver your payment. Oh yes, there'll be a small deduction though." Taffy asked, "What for?" "The library has just been diminished by a single book. It seems one of the volumes became foxed beyond repair when I handled it." A complacent satisfaction and discursive inertia reigned over Earth. Mankind had, for the most part, simply lost the desire or perhaps even the capability for old-fashioned creative ventures. Millennia of scientific and esthetic discoveries--held safely in instant-access databases and inexhaustibly compiled and cross-referenced by cybernetic intelligences--answered all common questions and practical inquiries, served the majority of entertainment requests, and insured that the weight of knowledge would generally crush all initiative. Yet a few eccentric scholars still sought to explore those tattered pockets of art and science that might yet bear a few linty grains of undiscovered knowledge in their seams.

The living books were their instruments for searching, engines of knowledge creation. Into the capacious neurons of a blank book could be loaded an entire text, many, many units of semiotic import. But simple holding of a text meant nothing, was a task better left to other, more stable media. The innate talent of the books lay in the ingenious ways their unpredictable, parallel-processing wetware could permute the initial semiotic units. Under the influence of various old-fashioned agents (chemicals, enzymes, herbs, hormones, proteins, nutrients and drugs, administered by the librarians through a combination of recipe and guesswork), as well as through the instrument of dendritic relinkers (impossibly tiny units operating in the bloodstream according to onboard algorithms), the brains of the books would shuffle and mutate selected portions of their contents in a wild manner no artificial intelligence could duplicate. Outputting the new semiotic units resulted, nine-hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, in sheer gibberish. But the aleatory point-one percent of worthwhile new information led down strange and curious paths. A final procedure, undertaken when the librarian desired to rely on the evolutionary wisdom of sexual recombination, consisted of breeding two books. Neural changes were reverse-transcribed into the sperm or egg cells of a book,

and the brain of the offspring consequently encoded the random reshuffling between parents, offering a new launching point into uncharted information-space. (Although juvenile books took about two years to come fully online neurally.) The books had no conscious access to the texts they held. No corpus callosum connected their isolated twin hemispheres. Their individual, private mental life took place all on one competent side of their severed brains (protected from the various text-modifying reagents by arterial filters), while the textual work went on unmonitored in the other half. A small inviolate interpretive nucleus in the textual half (several hundred thousand neurons) hooked into the book's hearing and speech circuits, responding to verbal librarian commands and handling basic operating systems functions. But having no direct access to the contents of one half of their skulls did not mean that the books could not sense in a subliminal manner whether things were going well or not in the hidden arena. After all, the textual side of their brains lived off the shared bookish metabolism as much as did the conscious half, and various feedback loops such as the enteric system remained as grounds where the two halves could exchange wordless data. Being wiped left a book devastated. Canto had not felt this way since leaving his publisher. In fact, he had never really felt this way at all. In his faraway youth, some five years ago, textual blankness had been the only state he had ever known, an accepted emptiness, half his mind a wet clay tablet awaiting stylus. But after all these productive, albeit unexciting years under MB Holbrook's perusal and overwriting, Canto had become accustomed to feeling full of knowledge. He had felt useful, even proud of his unique, inaccessible contents. And now they had been stolen from him, wiped clean in the space of a few minutes. Canto was now a palimpsest, helplessly awaiting new input on the smudged surface of his mind. As were all his peers.

The trundles from Brundisium had arrived and disgorged their efficient factota (so harshly unlike the kindly Venerable Bede, who had often provided the books in Holbrook's library with filched snacks). The factota had floated into Rueulroald pallets bearing compressed stasis boxes, unfolded them, and boxed up the library. Suspended insensibly in the smallest possible cubic area, five hundred books were trundled off to Brundisium. There they were unpacked one at a time, shot with delinkers, and hustled off to their new carrels almost before they were capable of staggering away. MB Stallkamp had not splurged on the annex to his bookbarn. Instead of individual stalls, tokens of respect affording some comfort and privacy, the books were dormitoried fifty to a tight room. Their hard beds lacked even any comforting UDC numbers, since the books were now unclassifiably blank. In the eyes of their master, they were generically identical. For the first few days after their acquisition, when not eating or eliminating, the books merely stayed abed, nursing their violated neural interiors with occasional groans, fearful of doing anything that could earn them a touch of the fine-assessor. The death of Incunabula had proven a sharp lesson in the rigors of their new existence. Whispered conversations in the depth of night had been their most seditious actions. But one morning Canto could not stand the inactivity any more. He was worried about Vellum. How was she dealing with the new conditions? Canto longed to hold her paw and exchange reassuring words with her. So, without announcing his intentions to any of his fellows, he slipped to the edge of his fifth-level bunk, climbed cautiously down the ladder (his big feet nearly becoming entangled in the rungs), and surveyed his fellow chamber mates. Canto's eye fell on Papyrus and Parchment, Breviary, Octavo, and Folio, Watermark and Septaugint, Microfiche and Athenaeum, among many others whom he had less familiarity with, since they had once resided on floors in the Holbrook library where Canto had not often ventured. He saw no original books from Master Stallkamp's library. Those

holdings seemed relegated to other stacks. But most importantly, his chamber contained no Vellum. Cautiously, Canto poked his head out into the newly constructed yet still somehow dankly dismal, sweat-walled corridor of the bookbarn. He knew the location of the adjacent dormitory from trips to the food chutes. His heart pounding violently (a wise librarian kept his books cosseted and as serene as possible, hoping to limit the amount of endocrinal emotional flux on the blood-washed text), Canto hopped next door. The books in the second dormitory stirred with uneasy and timorous curiosity when Canto crept in. As soon as he got nose-deep into the room, he smelled Vellum. Within a second or two, he was by her side where she lay in a low-level niche. "Oh, Vell, are you all right?" Vellum opened her limpid eyes and essayed a brave smile. "Nothing to complain about that we aren't all sharing, dear. Just this knackered sense of uselessness."

Canto started. It wasn't like Vellum to swear. Her cursing revealed to Canto how deeply she had been affected by their common tragedy. A sudden geyser of anger and rage fountained up in Canto's furry bosom. "Let's escape, Vell. We'll run away, just the two of us." Vellum squeezed Canto's paw with both of hers. "Being boxed up, we didn't get to see anything of our new surroundings, but I'm sure our new master lives someplace as remote as Master Holbrook did. All the librarians do. Outside is probably miles and miles of forest just teeming with bibliovores. We wouldn't last a minute out there. No, we'd better just resign ourselves to serving out our lives here. Once we get some new texts in us, I'm sure we'll all feel better. Life will go on, Canto. Perhaps you and I will even share a partial UDC. Then maybe we can breed. Wouldn't you like that?" Canto tried to envision this tolerable future Vellum sketched, but the vision wavered and refused to cohere. Nonetheless, he tried to match his level of resignation and optimism to hers. "Of course I'd like such a wonderful thing to happen. But I just don't see--" Vellum laid a clawed finger across his lips. "Shush, Canto. Have faith. Now, go back to your carrel so you don't get either of us in trouble." Canto and Vellum rubbed wet noses, and then Canto snuck off.

He had one foot across the lintel of his own dormitory when, like the jaws of an antique steam-shovel descending on a clod of soil, a roving security factotum gripped his shoulder with a steely pinch. In his lugubrious lucubratory, MB Kratchko Stallkamp sat gloating in his big actisoothe chair behind his impressive desk, looking like a ratty kingfisher plucked from its lakeside perch and unexpectedly plonked down atop a throne. Stallkamp savored now a piquant contradiction. Acquiring Holbrook's library, cheap though the purchase had been, had drained his liquid assets, insuring future material pain and roadblocks in the smooth maintenance of Brundisium. But the sacrifice would be worth it, since now imminent success in his chosen field was practically guaranteed. Stallkamp was no dilettante like Holbrook, wasting his energies across a dozen trivial fields. He specialized in a single discipline. Remarkably, this crabbed, self-centered fellow whose horizon seemed to extend no further than the end of his nose regularly contemplated vistas of Godlike proportions, for Stallkamp was an haruspical cosmochartist. Like some extinct astrologer, he read the stars in order to prophesize. But Stallkamp and his ilk proceeded on a more scientific basis. The universe had structure: so much was undeniable. Agglomerations of stars formed galaxies. Neighboring galaxies in turn formed clusters. Clusters of galaxies arranged themselves into superclusters. And so on, upward along several additional levels of scale, a self-sustaining mode of organization that rendered the three-dimensional cosmos into something resembling a highly recompllicated sponge or a block of Swiss cheese tunneled by an infinite number of drunken mice. Haruspical cosmochartists sought to unravel the plenum's patterning, its filaments and tracteries. With this knowledge, they hoped to prove certain weighty tenets of

post-Tiplerian eschatology. For several decades Stallkamp had been charting a region around the North Ecliptic Pole Supercluster, 1.3 billion lightyears from Earth. Modeling pointillistic data from a variety of exotic Oort-Cloud-based sensors (aged and frequently failing, but who nowadays had the initiative to replace them?) directly onto the pattern-sensitive brains of his books, he had made slow but steady progress, tweaking and boosting millions and millions of dendritic weightings. Always in front of him was the goal of having his results officially accepted by the cybernetic intelligences that governed the integrity of humanity's databases. Would they accept his proposed name for the shaped darkness: the "Stallkamp Void"? He could see immortality beckoning alluringly. Then, a few months ago, Stallkamp had learned of a rival. MB Humility Sauvage was working in the same field, attempting to chart the identical region of the cosmos! It was like finding a stranger in Brundisium's gardens pissing vigorously onto his prize shatterpetal rose! Thus began a deadly race--a race Stallkamp now was sure to win, thanks to an admittedly chancey strategy. Unable to restrain his gleeful sense of superiority any longer, Stallkamp leaned forward and intellitickled the sensitive screen of his hellobox. Within seconds appeared the repulsive face of MB Sauvage, home in her airy manse called Larkrise. Stallkamp likened her aged visage in his mind to a dustmop-shrouded pumpkin inexpertly carved. Without preamble, Stallkamp launched a direct strike. "You might as well give up your pitiful efforts, Sauvage. In a month or so, long before you could possibly squeeze out any mingy results, I'll have the Stallkamp Void completely mapped." Undaunted, Sauvage sneered. "I know all about your outrageous purchase--practically a theft!--of poor Vincent's books. But bluffing won't work. You still own only some six hundred books. I own nearly that many myself, and I know that it would take the synergy of at least a thousand to achieve what we're after at one swoop, instead of incrementally." "I beg to correct you, MB Sauvage. I now own almost twelve hundred books." "How so?" Sauvage blanched, as the meaning of the new number struck home. "Surely you don't mean--" "Yes, I do mean precisely that which you are afraid to declaim. I intend to relink the neurons in the personal hemispheres of all my books, thus effectively doubling my library's processing capacity." "But the books were designed with autonomy and character for a specific purpose. As thinking individuals, they maintain themselves in a stable fashion, freeing the librarian from expensive homeostatic hookups. Plus their sentience adds unqualifiable virtues to their results. What you're proposing would be worse than ripping the tooled leather covers off antique books just to boil up more pulp!" Stallkamp waved aside these quibbles. "I have plenty of factota to minister to the minimum bodily needs of my books once they go mindless. And I've never subscribed to your 'ghost in the machine' theories. All I want is the raw neurons, not some imaginary 'spirit'!" "But you'll shorten their lives to practically nothing!" "What does that matter, as long as I get results? More trade for the knackers! And afterwards, I'll start fresh with new books. I'm sure I could find a patron who'd appreciate a supercluster named after himself, once I've proved I can do it." Reduced to meaningless threats, Sauvage said, "You'll be reviled by all your fellow librarians, Stallkamp!" MB Kratchko Stallkamp laughed. "Then I'll certainly know I did the right thing!" With a sharp stroke of his thumbnail, he severed the connection. The gripless satchel lay on the desk before him. From within, the librarian took a specially marked hypo containing the omnipotent delinkers that would bypass the publisher's filters and reach the vulnerable personal half of a book's brain. Then, yellow legs scissoring, Stallkamp left his study. Still in the battered case, the fine-assessor sat ignored, inconsequential to the glory-bathed sight of its owner. The small dry but dirty cell into which the factotum deposited the miserable Canto



boasted a woe-faced, scraggly occupant already. Once Canto regained his breath and calmed himself, introductions were exchanged between the two books. "Canto. I don't have a UDC number anymore." "Index Medicus. Me neither. Not that it much mattered, as all of us in this library used to share practically the same string before. But now we don't even have that. The master downloaded all of our texts into temporary storage, then gave us wipes. Our elder, Dar al-Kutub, suspects that the one huge text we were redacting has been broken up into smaller bits, so that you new volumes can help work on it." "That makes sense, I suppose." "It would, except for one thing. Dar heard the master ordering a factotum to load the new hypos in sequence." "So?" Index Medicus began nervously to groom the greasy patch behind one ear. "He arranged for twice as many shots as there should have been." "More books are coming?" "I don't think so. Every carrel is already occupied." Canto became impatient. "So what are you saying?" Index Medicus stopped swiping at his fur and stared intently at his cellmate. "Everything points toward it. We're going to be double-wiped. All of us. The master needs the half of our brains we call our own." The concept was so grotesquely repugnant to Canto that he had a hard time wrapping his mind around it. Not so much for himself did he balk at the harsh reality of human treachery, the overturning of all biblioplectic tradition, as for the sakes of his friends, and one in particular. The sweet essence of Vellum blotted out of existence, as if she had never been? Such an atrocity beggared description. "I was caught trying to escape," Index Medicus said resignedly. "I think the master intends to double-wipe me first as a final test." Canto said nothing, but merely sat back on his haunches. Eventless hours dragged by, the books nearly jumping out of their hides at every clink and rattle from beyond their door, until at last a solenoid clicked in the windowless prison door. The master filled the portal, blocking any escape. Then he was inside with the books and the door was shut again, lock engaging with a mean snick. "Two of you! The factota have been diligent but uncommunicative. Well, unfortunately I brought only the single shot of this marvelous, utilitarian oblivion. Who'll go first? Who wants the honor of being the leader into the future of my exaltation? Don't clamor now! What, no eager takers? Well, precedence goes to the volume I've owned the longest then." The master grabbed Index Medicus by his scruff and raised the hypo. The pitiful book let out a single squeal and went limp. Canto's powerful legs propelled him fully atop the master's shoulders. Unbalanced, the human tottered forward, ramming his head into the stony wall of the cell. The hypo dropped, but was cushioned from breakage by Index Medicus's supine body. The librarian jerked Canto off his back, spun half around, then slumped to a sitting position on the floor like a man sinking wearily into a bath. By the time the master had focused his attention enough to rub his sore skull, Canto gripped the hypo. The master's eyes widened, and his voice cracked. "Give that over, you damnable pulpbrain!" Canto hung his head contritely, and extended the hypo on his palm. The master smiled cruelly and grew easy. Once as close as possible, Canto lunged forward and jabbed the master in the neck with the hypo's snout. The librarian instantly stiffened as billions of tiny monomaniacal machines flooded his cortex. As the delinkers swiftly unwove the engrams of a lifetime, the master's body went through an alarming and unseemly display of spasticity. Retreating to one corner of the cell, the two books huddled together until the violent exhibition of misapplied technology reached a quiet terminus. The dose had always been intended to leave intact the lower brainstem capabilities of the books--autonomic control of respiration and heartbeat and so forth--so the master continued to live, but only as a mindless, bruised doll. Index Medicus regarded Canto with a blend of awe and fear. "What happens now? Are we trapped in here? Will we starve?"

Will some other librarian come to save us?" "I don't know,"  
answered Canto. "But I'm scared!" "Be brave," Canto counseled.  
"After all, a book must show its spine." © Paul Di Filippo 2000, 2001  
"The Reluctant Book" was first published in Science Fiction Age, May 2000.

PAUL DI FILIPPO

### THE SHORT ASHY AFTERLIFE OF HIRAM P. DOTTLER

THE HEAD OF THE SPIKE BITES deep into the hard substance of my body, and the man's blunt teeth grip the lower part of my anatomy with compulsive, fearful force. The spike supports me, while my body in turn supports the man's entire weight. He's a small, dumpy fellow, to be sure, but still the strain on me is considerable. Relying thus on a small piece of rusty hardware for our lives, both of us dangle over five stories of empty space, the cobbled street far below us a rain-slick bumpy surface lit by a few dim streetlights casting golden pools of luminance.

My body feels as if it's going to come apart at any moment. For the first time in this new form I feel true pain. Even the birthing blades, the planes and chisels and sandpaper, and the subsequent daily flames applied to my skin offered no sensations such as this.

Oh my goodness, I think wildly, how did I ever come to such a bizarre fate?

And just then the gunshot rings out.

My name is Hiram P. Dottle, and once upon a time I enjoyed a quiet easy life, full of cerebral and sensual pleasures of a mild nature. No guns or danger intruded then into my reclusive private sphere. But all of that security and somnolence ended with the arrival of Sparky Flint.

But I rush ahead of my story. More of this temptress soon enough.

Although not born to great wealth, at the time my tale commences I was living comfortably on a guaranteed income, having retired in early middle age from my career as an accountant. I owed my good fortune to the demise of an elderly and well-off maiden aunt in Crescent City: Denise K. Sinkel, formerly of the Massachusetts Sinkels. Her will left everything to "my nephew, Hiram, the only one who always remembered his lonely old aunt at Christmas."

This statement was accurate, even down to poor Aunt Denise's famous self-pity. My contribution to Aunt Denise's good cheer was, I fear, minimal, and offered me as much pleasure as it did her. I always saw to it that Aunt Denise's house was graced with several handmade wreaths and garlands, as well as a few poinsettia plants during the holidays. Riding the bus myself from Central City to its urban neighbor, I

kept careful watch over the homemade wreaths and personally cultivated plants resting securely in overhead stowage, never relaxing my vigilance until the cabbie deposited me safely at Aunt Denise's.

Horticulture and flower arranging, you see, were my hobbies. You'd probably never guess it from looking at me, but accounting was never my real love, merely a safe and reliable means of earning my income. Mother and Father both insisted that I turn my adult hand to some low-risk mode of employment promising a small if steady return. So I reluctantly discarded my typical childhood fascination with such icons of daring exploration as Lowell Thomas, Frank Buck and Richard Halliburton -- why, today I can hardly believe the youthful dreams I had, involving travel to exotic climes and battle with wild animals and savage natives! -- and when I reached my early maturity I enrolled at Keating's School of Accountancy.

Thirty years later Mother and Father had long ago passed away, deeding me the ancestral home where I still occupied my boyhood room. The property consisted of a well-kept but fading Victorian manse set on five acres of land in a neighborhood rather fallen, if you'll permit the pun, to seed. This surprising legacy descended on an asocial bachelor who in the morning mirror seemed undressed without his green celluloid eyeshade and sleeve garters. Having perused enough ledgers and balance sheets to build a tower to the Moon -- had I cared to indulge in such fanciful behavior -- I was more than ready to put my career behind and plunge more deeply into my passions.

The redeeming moments in what I confess most people would categorize as a boring life occurred in my garden. In the suburbs of Central City, my property, through diligent and loving application, had been ultimately turned into a miniature Versailles, replete with espaliers, pollarded aisles and substantial fountains. I venture to say that not even the immaculately landscaped grounds of Idlewhile Cemetery (I am naturally excluding that spooky and mysteriously overgrown portion in the northwest corner) could compete on a foot-by-foot basis with my land. Why, the neighborhood children, dirty urchins all, frequently congregated at my fence to gape in awe. At least I assumed their emotions were respectful, although several times I thought to detect an out-thrust tongue swiftly withdrawn when I turned to face them. No matter, though, for I was content.

After Aunt Denise's independence-granting demise, I enjoyed four whole luxurious years of complete devotion to gardening. My joyful days were filled with propagating and repotting, grafting and staking, double-digging and turf-laying. I managed the funds that had so unexpectedly become mine with care and wisdom, investing them in U.S. Treasury Bonds at a solid one-and-a-half percent annual return. Combined with my own personal savings, this interest income satisfied all my simple needs. Although I admit I did once boldly dip into some of the capital to secure a new wheelbarrow, a toolshed, and some fine handwrought British tools.

Including, in a magnificent example of life's irony, the well-honed axe that killed me.

You will have gathered by my small clues that an unexpected climacteric occurred in my life shortly after my inheritance. That deadly turning point consisted of my meeting the irresistible Sparky Flint.

I can't say now what came over me that fatal night. Some Imp of the Perverse took hold of my lapels and whispered evil urgings into my ear. To be short about it, I developed an instant but avid craving for a spot of sherry.

Aunt Denise had always treated me to a small annual glass of sherry upon completion of my decorating her house. After ten years of the ritual I grew accustomed to the taste, and actually came to look forward to the uncommon indulgence. Now, four years without tasting a drop of sherry and my quiescent desires suddenly came to a head. I felt an unquenchable thirst that only strong drink could satisfy. So I set out with grim determination for a saloon.

The trolley dropped me off downtown. Walking the unfamiliar nighted streets of Central City, I tried to gauge which establishment might prove most suitable for a gentleman of my retiring nature.

Unfortunately, my instincts were flawed. I ended up entering a most ungentle "dive."

The "joint" was packed with smoking, sweating, cursing, laughing humanity, their voices echoing off the garish walls and grimy ceiling. I felt like a frightened cow amidst his ignorant bovine peers on the abattoir walkway.

Nonetheless my unnatural compulsions for the fruit of the vine still held sway. I worked my way toward the bar, past lap-seated trollops hoisting foamy mugs of beer to their lips and brawny laborers knocking back "boilermakers."

At the bar I secured my drink, enduring a sneer or two at my uncommon choice of beverage from my immediate neighbors and even from the bartender himself, an ugly bruiser. I rested one foot on the brass rail, in imitation of my fellow imbibers, but the stance felt too unsteady, and I moved off to a small empty table.

And then the singing began.

Supernal, sirenic singing like nothing I had ever heard before, as if hundreds of calla lilies had suddenly taken voice.

I suppose the mode employed by this diabolically angelic female voice might have been termed "torchsong." If so, the metaphor was apt, since my whole soul was enflamed by the unseen songstress. No doubt the alcohol coursing wildly through my veins played its part as well.

I stood up instinctively in an attempt to spot the singer and was rewarded by sight of a small, lighted stage. And there she stood, microphone in hand.

Sparky Flint.

Her hair a tumbling mass of poppy-red curls, her cosmetic-enhanced face brazenly sensuous, her Junoesque figure wrapped in a tight jade evening dress, the singer caressed each syllable of her lustful song in a way that delivered the words like vernal osmosis straight to my heart.

I remained standing for the exotic chanteuse's entire hypnotic performance, learning her name only when a coarse emcee ushered her off the stage.

Collapsing back into my seat, I downed the remaining inch of my sherry in one dynamic swallow. And as I set the glass down, my eyes confronted the satin-swaddled bosom of Sparky Flint herself.

"Mind if I pull up a chair, honey?"

"Nuh-no, nuh-not at all."

She took up her seat so closely to mine that our knees almost touched, and I could see the very weave of her silk stockings where they caressed her ankle above the strap of her shoe. Conquering the reek of spilled ale and tobacco and human musk, a whiff of her sharp synthetic floral scent carried to my nostrils. The barroom seemed to spin in circles about me.

"Care to buy a girl a drink, sport?"

"I-- that is-- why, certainly." I tried to adopt a dapper manner. "I fear I must have misplaced my manners in my other suit."

I summoned a barmaid and Sparky ordered a cocktail unfamiliar to me. Once she had refreshed her tired vocal cords, she fixed me with an inquisitive yet friendly stare.

"I never had no guy stand up for my whole show before. Most of these bums wouldn't know if the management had a hyena cackling up there. You musta really liked my singing, huh?"

"Why, yes, most assuredly. Such dulcet yet thrilling tones have never before laved my ears."

Sparky drained her drink and began toying with a toothpick-pierced olive. "You're a regular charmer, fella. Say, what's your name?"

"Hiram. Hiram P. Dottle."

"Well, Hiram, let me let you in on a little secret. A lady likes to be appreciated for her talents, you know. She can get mighty friendly with the right guy, if he shows a little gen-u-wine interest. And even though I've got a swell set of pipes, that ain't all the assets Sparky Flint's got hidden. Say, speaking of assets -- why doncha tell me a little more about yourself."

I gulped, swallowing some kind of sudden lump big as an iris corm, and began to recount my life history. Sparky brightened considerably when I described my home, and became positively overwrought when I detailed the clever way I had invested Aunt Denise's money. By this point she was practically sitting in my lap, and I confess that I had indulged in two more glasses of sherry.

"Oh, Dottie, you've led such a fascinating life! You don't mind if I call you Dottie, do you?"

No one had ever employed such a diminutive variant of my name before. But then again, never had I established such a quick bond with any female of the species. "Why, I --"

"I thought you'd be jake with that! You're such a broad-minded character. Did anyone ever tell you that your mustache is so attractively wispy, Dottie? I bet it tickles just like a caterpillar when you kiss."

And then to test her proposition, she planted her lips directly upon mine, in the most thrilling moment of my life, comparable only to my success in breeding a pure-white pansy, a feat written up as a sidebar in *Horticulture Monthly*.

We were married one month later. Only upon securing the marriage license did I learn Sparky Flint's birthname. Christened Maisie Grumbach, she had been raised in Central City's orphanage, and possessed no kin of any degree.

"A girl on her own's gotta be fast on her feet, Dottie. I learned that early on at the orphanage. When it's slopping time at the hog trough, the slow piglet goes to bed hungry. The main chance just don't linger. Grab what you can, when you can -- that's Sparky Flint's motto."

The first six months of our marriage offered all the connubial and domestic joys imaginable. Sparky lavished her affections on me. If I could blush in my present state I certainly would, to recall how she

twisted her "little Dottie-wottie" around her slim fingers, with honeyed words and lascivious attentions. And all the while, behind her facade of love lurked the heartless viper of greed and treachery.

The first rift in our romance developed when I proposed to spend one thousand dollars to put in an elaborate carp pond. I realized that this constituted a large sum, but felt justified in devoting this amount to my harmless hobby. After all, hadn't I given Sparky the elaborate wedding she desired, spending liberally on her gown and jewelry, as well as providing a feast for those few guests we could summon up between us? (Sparky's friends I found rather unsavory, and spent as little time with them as possible.)

"Ten Ben Franklins on a fishing hole!" shrieked Sparky, abusing her nightingale's throat most horridly. "And I haven't had a new pair of shoes in a month! What the hell are you thinking? Do I look like the kind of dame who prefers sardines to high heels?"

"But Sparky, dear--"

"Fuhgeddaboutit!"

Our marital situation deteriorated rapidly from that point on, as if a plug had been pulled on a greasy watertower full of ill feelings that now drained over us. Accusations, vituperations, insinuations -- these replaced whispered endearments and fond embraces on Sparky's part. My share of these increasingly frequent arguments consisted of silence and a hangdog expression, followed by contrite agreement. Nevertheless, unplacated, my wife began spending inordinate amounts of time away from home, frequently returning only after I had finished my nine o'clock snack of milk and common crackers and turned out the lights for sleep.

The final straw apparently came with a most unwise and unannounced expenditure on my part. I had learned by now not to advertise in advance my horticultural expenditures. Consequently, the delivery of lumber, cast iron fittings and sheets of glass sufficient to construct a charming Edwardian greenhouse took Sparky completely by surprise.

She had the tact to wait until the deliverymen left before laying into me, although judging by the mottling of her complexion the restraint had nearly caused her to burst a vein.

"What the hell is all this, buster! Are you out of your everlovin' mind? Your wife is walking around in rags, and you're blowing through my inheritance like a dipso through free muscatel!"

I tried to divert her anger by joshing. "Oh, come now, dear. You have a sturdy and healthy husband not much older than you yourself. Surely it's premature to be speaking of my unlikely demise and your grieving widowhood."

A look of pure vicious hatred such as I had never before seen on a human visage passed fleetingly across Sparky's beautiful features, to be replaced by a composed mask of indifference. "Oh, too early is it? Maybe -- and maybe not..."

Her words and expression alarmed me to such a degree that I shrugged quickly into my ratty old pattering-about cardigan, murmured something about attending to a fungus problem, and hastened outside.

Kneeling at the base of a large, mistletoe-festooned oak tree, I was delicately aerating the soil around its roots with a small tool when I heard someone approaching. I looked over my shoulder and saw a horrifying sight.

My loving wife Sparky, hoisting high my fine British axe in her gloved hands.

Struck mute, paralyzed, I could only listen helplessly to her insane rehearsal of some future speech for an unknown audience.

"This is an absolutely awful neighborhood, officer. I've noticed tramps and vagrants and petty thieves lurking around our estate ever since my poor dead husband brought me here as his blushing bride. One of them must have finally broken in. I'm sure my husband died defending my virtue."

"No, Sparky, no!" I finally managed to croak.

Too late, for the axe was already descending.

In my fading eyesight, filled totally with a closeup landscape of bark, I watched my own blood jet and pool in a hollow formed by two intersecting oak roots.

Then all went black.

THE ASTONISHING RETURN of my consciousness at first brought with it no sensory data, aside from a sense of well-being and wholeness. For an indefinite leisurely time I basked in the simple absence of the shattering pain that had accompanied Sparky's treacherous assault. The utter blackness and lack of sound in my current environment failed to frighten me. I felt too much at ease, too peaceful. I could only conclude that some good Samaritan had rescued me from my wife's attack in time to save my life, and that now I rested in a cozy hospital bed, guarded by watchful nurses and doctors, my eyes and ears bandaged, my healing body suffused with morphine.

The closest I approached to worrying about my old life was a vague feeling that certainly some drastic changes would have to be engineered in my spousal relations, once I fully recovered. Perhaps even a trial separation.

Then, after this period of idle, happy musing, odd, subliminal sensations began to filter into my consciousness. I seemed to register light striking me, but in a new fashion. Sunlight seemed to be impinging upon my "skin" and "face" in a whole-body manner, as if I were -- horrors! -- utterly unclothed at the beach. Discordant, jagged images swept over me. Likewise, I perceived the ambient soundscape in a novel, jumbled manner. Oddest of all though were fresh tactile impressions. I experienced a contradictory feeling of compression and extension, as if I were stuffed into a closet, yet simultaneously stretched on a not-uncomfortable rack.

Likewise, my sense of time's passage had altered. Objective minutes, gauged by the fragmentary movements of the sun, seemed to drip by like hours.

I used this extended realm of time wisely, and by the end of what must have been a single day, I had thoroughly integrated my new senses so that I could see and hear and feel in a coherent way.

From my new immovable vantage I enjoyed a three-hundred-and-sixty degree omniscient view of some very familiar landscaped grounds. And when I focused my "sight" in one particular direction, I saw my ancestral home standing forlorn and dark. Triangulating my position by landmarks, I could no longer deny the obvious conclusion.

My soul now inhabited the very oak tree at whose foot I had been slaughtered. I was now a male dryad, if such a creature were possible.

Acknowledging this impossible truth, I directed my vision and other senses downward. My human body had been carted away, but my sticky blood still filled the hollow where it had gushed. Alarmingly, I experienced a feeling of oakish satisfaction at this extra-rich watering, as if grateful for my pagan due. Apparently, the original spirit of the oak still to some degree overlapped mine, offering its old perceptions.

Well, this was a fine fix, I thought. My old life had reached a premature conclusion, and such comforting rituals as milk and common crackers availed naught. But questioning the miracle would be futile, and I would simply have to learn to inhabit my new body and enjoy this mode of existence.

Surprisingly, the transition came quite easily.

By dawn of the next day, approximately forty-eight or seventy-two hours after my murder, I was already happy in my arboreal magnificence.

All my nurturing of this tree had prepared a veritable temple for my spirit. My roots stretched deeply down and out into nutritious, stable soil, while my crown of efficient leaves reared high into the welcoming sky. My inner flesh was strong and healthy, my limbs proud and free of disease. Birds and squirrels nested in my niches, providing gay company, while sun and rain stoked my slow engines. Ants crawling up and down me tickled and massaged and warred with insidious insects that would have harmed me. Like some Hindoo holyman, I experienced an absolute contentment with my condition, free of unsatisfied desires, my mind at one with ancient cosmic imperatives.

But then came a disturbing incident that awoke my human side.

Out of my old house stepped Sparky Flint, my murderous wife.

And with her was a man!

Tall and impressively muscled, clad in a dark suit and crisp fedora, the fellow strolled alongside Sparky with a sober yet irrepressibly jaunty air. I instantly assessed him as ten times the physical specimen I had ever been (although of course compared to my current girth and strength he was pitiful), and I felt complete jealousy toward this new suitor.

But then as the pair approached and I spotted the small mask guarding the stranger's identity, I recognized him and my feelings flipflopped instantly.

This was the Shade! Central City's daring crimefighter, champion of the oppressed and wronged, had come personally to investigate and avenge my murder!

I focused my "hearing" on Sparky and the Shade, a small matter of forming a parabolic cone with certain of my leaves.

"I wish I had returned from my affairs in China a day or two earlier," said the Shade, "before Klink and his boys completely obliterated this lawn. Look at this mess! Those flatfoots might've been playing a duffer's round of golf, the lawn's so hacked up. Ally clues to the identity of your husband's killer are long gone."



For the first time I noted the terrible condition of the lawn. What the Shade had observed was true. I regretted I would not be able to roll out and reseed in my current state.

Attired in widow's weeds, a veil floating across her devilishly beautiful features, Sparky sniffled with touching, albeit insincere sympathy. "Poor Dottie! He was ever so prideful of his whole garden. Sometimes in fact I think he loved it more than me...."

Not so! I wanted to shout. Well, perhaps.... honesty instantly forced me to amend.

The Shade regarded Sparky with a natural compassion, tempered, I thought, only by those common suspicions that attach to the spouse of any murdered husband. "There, there, Mrs. Dottle. I know it's small comfort, but we'll eventually catch the fiend who did this."

"That's what I pray for each night before I climb into my lonely empty bed, Mister Shade, where I writhe and squirm feverishly until dawn." Sparky gripped the Shade's right bicep in an overfamiliar manner and fluttered her long lashes at him.

The Shade appeared a trifle flustered. "Ahem, yes. Now, let me just have a look at this tree."

Crouching at my base, the Shade produced a magnifying lens and examined my bark. With one gloved finger he took up a few flakes of my rain-washed and sun-dried blood. He cogitated a moment, then stood.

"I would've thought a man startled by an axe-bearing assailant might have made a dash for his life, or at least clawed at the tree where he kneeled in an attempt to scramble upright. Yet he died without a scuffle right where you earlier saw him working."

Unwisely perhaps, Sparky vented her residual hatred. "Dottie was a meek little shrimp!" Hastily, she recovered. "That is, my husband had a mild disposition. He must've fainted straight away when the awful thug came on him."

"Yes, that's one explanation. Well, Mrs. Dottle, there's not a lot I can do here. I'll be going now."

"Oh, please, Mister Shade, just walk me back to the house. I can't stand to be alone near this tree. There's something creepy about it now, since my husband died."

As the Shade and Sparky retreated, she cast a dire look back at me, almost as if she could see her husband sheltering inside his oaken suit.

Once the pair were out of sight, I found myself sinking down into blissful vegetal somnolence again. The happy sensations of being an oak completely wiped away any mortal cares left over from my prior life. Why should I trouble myself about human justice? My old life would never be restored through the courts. Let the fleshly ones squabble among themselves. Their little lives had no impact on mine.

My arrogant invulnerability lasted for roughly a year. Through summer, fall and winter I gloried undisturbed in the magnificence of my being, experiencing each turning season with new joy.

But then in the spring came my comeuppance. I had been much too cavalier in dismissing Sparky's ability to do me further harm.

One day near the anniversary of my murder, a second set of killers arrived to slay me once again.

I witnessed the truck from Resneis Arborists pass through the gates of my small estate and down the drive. Improbably and most uncivilly, it actually continued up onto my prize lawn, the turf now looking admittedly less than perfect due to lack of attention. Rough-handed workers tumbled out, and a foreman began to shout orders.

"Okay, you jokers, get a move on! We've got to take down every tree on this property plenty pronto, if we want that bonus. And the big oak goes first!"

Horrified, I watched two men pull a huge saw from their truck and start toward me.

I could feel the big sharp teeth placed harshly against my barky skin.

The first rasping cut produced a dull agony. The second, deeper stroke sent fiery alarm signals down my every fiber.

I could feel my consciousness pulling instinctively back from the pain. I had an impulse to gather myself into the deepest core of my being, to escape the torture.

But before I lost touch with the outer world, I caught the arrival of Sparky and a brutish-looking stranger dressed in a suit with roguishly wide lapels. I forced myself to focus on their sotto voce dialogue, as they conversed in what they deemed utter secrecy.

"I gotta hand it to ya, Sparky baby," said the thug. "This land is gonna make a swell spot for Central City's new casino. But ain't'cha being a bit, well, pre-ma-tour with the choppin' an' the bulldozin' an' all? The permits an' licenses from City Hall ain't exactly a shoe-in. Mayor Nolan ain't too keen on gamblin'. And her copper daddy will bust a gasket if he learns who your backers are.'

"You just leave Commissioner Nolan and his brat in City Hall to me, big boy, and concentrate on what you do best.'

"Lovin' and killin', right?"

"Right, Jules."

The conniving pair went into a clinch that violated every element of the Hays Code, but I could spare no further attention for their reprehensible licentiousness.

Loud creakings and groanings were issuing from my numb nether regions, which either I or the oak had protectively desensitized. With grave misgivings, I noticed that I was beginning to cant and tip.

My ultimate downfall followed swiftly. The final fibers holding me upright parted, and I crashed toward the ground. The thundering impact was titanic, and I lost consciousness for some time. When I came to, I could feel my proud branches being lopped. In short time I was hoisted by a newly arrived crane onto an accompanying flatbed truck and carted off.

Huddling deep inside myself, I realized then that my fate most likely involved a quick trip to the sawmill and a swift transition into planks.

But such was not the case. Apparently I was destined for stranger ends.

Whether subconsciously or not, Sparky had chosen a fate for my wooden corpse meant to humiliate. Even in death I would be denied utilitarian dignity.

When I felt a cessation of motion, I pooled my dwindling organic energies and tried to apprehend my destination. I saw a sign that read CENTRAL CITY SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN, and quickly intuited my ignominious lot: to become practice billets for budding, ham-fisted sculptors. The best I could hope for was to grace a tobacco shop as a clumsy wooden Indian.

Sure enough, I was trundled into the school's carpentry shop and, once callously stripped of my bark, rapidly dismembered into several largish sections of trunk. With each cut I pulled my ectoplasmic bits of mental being out of the severed section, retreating and retreating, until finally, with the last slice, I found all my fading identity concentrated in one portion of trunk.

For a long time I existed only in a state resembling hibernation, as I cured in a storeroom. What became of my nonsentient bits I cannot tell. After an unguessable duration, the portion housing my ghostly self, roused by motion, eventually rode a dolly to the atelier of a youth possessed of handsome Mediterranean looks and clad in leather apron and work gloves. I heard him addressed as "Gino" by the delivery men.

Gino wrestled me upright into position on a platform, then stepped back to survey me. "Hmm, I see hidden in this dumb wood a straining heroic figure, fighting against injustice. Perhaps I'll call this masterpiece 'Samson Rages Against the Philistines.'"

Much as I appreciated Gino's noble goals for my dessicated flesh, I still cringed to imagine the first blow of his chisel. Trying to avoid his blow, I concentrated my essence far away from his anticipated strike. But then, at the last moment, he shifted position and cleaved off that very block of matter containing all my soul!

I fell to the floor, ignored in the white heat of artistic creation.

But at day's end, to my surprise, Gino picked me up and carried me home.

The young sculptor lived in an Italian slum on the far side of Central City. Apparently he shared his dismal cold water flat only with his father, a cheerful old fellow with an aura of deep wisdom about him.

"Poppa, look," Gino called out as soon as he entered. "Some raw material for your hobby."

Gino's father took me in his rough hands. How humiliating, I thought. From Hiram P. Dottle, bookkeeper, botanist, and husband, to mighty oak to hunk of kindling. The old man turned me over and over, examining me with a keen eye before finally speaking.

"It's-a not fine Algerian brier, Gino, like-a what--a we had back in Napoli. But the grain, she's a-fine. Maybe Mario Deodati can make-a one nice pipe out of this scrap."

"Thataboy, Pop! Go to it!"

Thus began my final metamorphosis, under the magically skilled hands of Mario Deodati. Pared away with patient cunning, the block revealed the shape hiding within it. And amazingly, as Mario lavished attention and craft and even love on me, I felt my identity taking renewed strength.

Holding my still-chunky form at one point, Mario spoke to me, his creation. "I see a face in-a you,

Mister Pipe. I'm a-make your bowl into a smiling head."

Good as his word, Mario carved facial features into his creation. I had no mirror to observe myself in, but I could feel from inside that my new visage was perhaps overly jolly and gleeful in the manner of a Toby jug. Mario's sensitivity as to my true nature extended only so far.

One day in late winter, when the winds rattled the loose, rag-stuffed windows in the apartment, Mario and Gino had a terse, painful discussion which I observed and listened to from my perch on a shelf.

"It's no use, Pop. I'm going to have to quit school. We don't even have the money for coal and groceries, never mind my tuition."

Mario banged the table with the hand that had birthed me. "Did me and your sainted Momma teach-a you to be a quitter! You gonna stay in school, boy!" He struggled to his feet and snatched me down off the shelf. "Go sell this! And get-a the best price you can!"

Wrapped in an old piece of flannel, I left my latest home.

I surmised that it was now nearly a year since I had been felled, and my fate once more loomed obscure.

Five stores later, a deal was consummated. I changed hands for the princely sum of one hundred dollars, enough to keep the Deodatis afloat for several months, and I silently bade farewell to Gino.

My new owner was a portly bearded punctilious gentleman in vest and suit. The tip of his tongue protruding absentmindedly from the corner of his compressed lips, he inked a pricetag in the amount of two hundred dollars, tied it to my stem with string, and placed me on a velvet cushion in a display case. That night, when the shop lights clicked off and only stray glints from street lamps illuminated my new home, I tried to communicate somehow with my new neighbors. But they failed to respond to the most vigorous of my psychic efforts, and I realized I was the only sensate pipe amongst them. Internally, I shed a self-pitying tear or two as I contemplated my sad lot.

The next few weeks established a boring routine of shop-opening, commercial traffic, shop-closing and a long night of despair. I was handled and admired several times, but never purchased.

But one day my salvation arrived, in the form of two famous customers.

The well-dressed and decorously glamorous woman with her twin rolls of blonde hair pinned high atop her head appeared first in my field of vision. Lowering her half-familiar happy face to the glass separating us, she spoke. "Oh, Shade, look! Isn't that model with the carved face just darling?"

The masked visage of the Shade manifested next to the woman's. In context, I recognized her now as Mayor Ellen Nolan. The Shade did not seem to share all of Ellen Nolan's enthusiasm. His manly features wrinkled in quizzical bemusement.

"Gee, Ellen, I've seen better mugs on plug-uglies from the Gasworks Gang! And two hundred dollars! Do you realize how many orphans we could feed with that money?"

"Don't be such a wet blanket, Shade. Spending a little extra of my personal money on Daddy's birthday won't send any orphans to bed hungry."

The Shade lifted his hat and skritchd his scalp. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Ellen ? How are you

going to get Nolan to give up his favorite old stinkpot in favor of this one anyhow?"

"Simple. I'll hide it."

A whistle of admiration escaped the Shade's lips. "And the newspapers say I've got guts! Well, I leave it all up to you."

"A wise decision. Sir, we'll take this one. And wrap it nicely, please." Into a dark box I went. The crinkle of folding giftpaper and the zip of cellotape from a dispenser was followed by careful placement into what I presume was a handled shopping bag. I guessed by the long stride I subsequently shared that the Shade next carried me home to Ellen's house. I heard the smack of a kiss upon a cheek, then felt further lifting movements, ending up, I supposed, hidden in a closet.

The routine of the house for the next day or so quickly became aurally familiar. The gruff yet loving Commissioner Nolan arrived home and left at odd hours of the day, while the perky but forceful Mayor Nolan held to a more regular schedule. The Shade popped up unpredictably.

Finally one special morning, muffled in my closet I could hear Ellen's father ranting, turning the air blue with his curses.

"Where could that dangblasted, consarned pipe of mine have gotten to! Ellen! Ellen! ELLEN!"

"Yes, Daddy, whatever's the matter?"

"My favorite pipe! I can't find it! I'm certain I left it on the bedstand when I went to sleep, but now it's missing! How can I go to work without it?"

Footsteps approached me, a door creaked open, and I was lifted down in my package. Ellen's sweet voice soothed her father. "Well, I haven't the foggiest notion of where you've mislaid that awful thing. But luckily enough, I have this little gift right here. Happy Birthday, Daddy!"

My wrapping began to rip. "Grmph. Hmph. Frazzleblast it!"

"Let me give you a hand, Daddy dear."

The light of day made me metaphysically squint. I found myself face to face with a choleric, jaw-grinding Commissioner Nolan. The three patches of white hair on his otherwise bald head were mussed and flyaway.

He scowled at me, and I knew we had not hit it off.

"Is this a kid's bubblepipe? What am I supposed to pack it with -- cornsilk?"

Ellen began tenderly to stroke her father's hair into better order. "Come on now, don't be a gruff old bear. This pipe has a hundred times more class than your old one. Won't you at least try it, please -- for me?"

Nolan turned me around so I faced away from him. Then for the first time I felt the curiously intimate sensation of his blunt teeth biting down strongly on my stem. His irritation caused me to waggle furiously up and down almost in time to his thumping, agitated pulse, so much so that I feared for his dangerously high blood pressure.

"Feels strange," Nolan said. "Not like my old one."

"New things take some getting used to. Here's your tobacco pouch. Smoke up a bowl or two and you'll see how lovely it is."

Nolan stuffed my wooden head full of pungent weed, tamping the plug down with a blunt, nicotine-stained thumb. Then I heard a match scrape and felt the small flame singe my crown. The pain was less than if I had tested my human flesh with a match, and I resolved to be stoic in my new role.

Puffing furiously, Nolan seemed to relax a trifle. "Draws well enough," he cautiously admitted. "But that simpering little face on the bowl --"

"Shush now! Off to work with you!"

Nolan snatched up a battered old leather satchel and exited. A police car and driver awaited him outside, and we set off.

Well, I cannot begin to describe the tremendous excitement of the subsequent several weeks. I experienced firsthand the glamorous crimefighting life of the Shade and Nolan in a way no one else ever had, not even the Shade's loyal Negro sidekick, Busta! Never absent from Nolan's pitbull-like mandibular embrace, I found myself swept up in innumerable thrilling confrontations with the forces of evil. Shootouts, chases, last-minute rescues! Threats, torture, mysterious clues, exotic locales! Villains, henchmen, mad scientists, femmes fatales! Why, once I remember we slipped quietly through the slimy, drip-popping sewers on the trail of the Crustacean, only to discover the archfiend in his lair with

But I ramble. I'll never reach the end of my personal tale if I recount all the wild adventures I experienced. Suffice it to say that out of my three existences to date, being Commissioner Nolan's trusty pipe proved by far the most invigorating!

Of course, I had to endure many boring meetings as well. Politics played a part in crimefighting, as it did in everything connected with the civic life of Central City. Whenever one of these tedious events was scheduled, I fell into an absentminded reverie. I confess to being in one such fugue at the start of that fatal evening.

The clock in the Mayor's shadowy office struck midnight when the Shade and Ellen walked in, causing my owner to hastily remove his feet from his daughter's desk and leap up from her ornate office chair.

The Shade looked shamefaced. "Sorry we're late. I thought I spotted the wily spy Pola Fleece down by the docks, but it turned out to be only a fashion magazine shoot. It took a while to settle up damages with the photographer and models. Are those slimy business partners here yet?"

Nolan knocked my head on the edge of a trashcan to remove my dead embers, then restuffed me with shag and lit up. I was quite used to the flickering flame by now, and paid it no mind as Nolan began to puff furiously.

"Not yet. I don't like this, Shade -- not one little bit."

Ellen chimed in. "I agree. That Flint woman gives me the willies. What a cold-blooded witch! Only a few months until the second anniversary of her husband's murder, and she's already taking up with another man. Why, I hear she's even carrying his lovechild!"

Ellen blushed charmingly at this remark, and the Shade coughed as if he had swallowed a fly.

Sparky? Were they speaking of Sparky? A old twinge of mixed affection and hatred passed through my wooden frame, and I woke into greater alertness.

"And she hasn't snagged just any beau," the Shade added. "Jules 'The Fife' Reefer has a history of misdeeds as long and bloody as the Carnivore's."

Nolan said, "Still, we've never been able to pin anything on him, and this request of theirs to build a casino seems on the up and up."

"I agree they're following legitimate channels," said the Shade, "but the big question remains. Do we want to let Reefer construct such an efficient money-laundering enterprise for his other illegal rackets?"

"Of course not," Ellen said. "But we've stalled them in every legal way we can. There's no way we can avoid giving them the permits for their casino any longer."

The Shade pushed his hat back on his head and smiled. "That's the purpose of tonight's meeting. We've gotten them so frustrated that they're bound to offer you a bribe. Why else would they schedule such a late-night get-together? I'll be in the next office with the door ajar. Once the money is out in the open, I'll bust in and put the cuffs on them. End of story."

Nolan scowled. "I suppose it's the only way. But I don't like putting Ellen at risk."

Ellen straightened up proudly. "I'm the Mayor, Daddy. Don't I deserve my share of the bribe? In fact, I think you and I will have to split it seventy-thirty."

"Hmph! Sixty-forty," joshed Nolan, "and that's my final offer."

Outside in the empty City Hall corridor the elevator bell chimed, signaling the conveyance's arrival on our floor.

The Shade darted for the connecting door. "Stations, men!"

A few seconds later, my ex-wife and her new lover walked in.

Clutching her purse demurely, Sparky looked more desirable than ever, with her tumbling Titian curls framing her adorable face. Recalling Ellen's catty gossip, I thought to detect a slight swelling of her tummy, heralding the bastard child, substitute for the offspring we had never managed to conceive between us. I felt myself falling in love all over with her again -- until I recalled with a shock the murderously contorted lines of this same visage as she swung the axe at my back.

Her companion -- the identical thuggish man I had seen her with while still a tree -- I paid little attention to, deeming him beneath my mature consideration. Besides, it was hard to consider myself his vigorous rival while wearing the semblance of a pipe.

Reefer hailed us as if meeting buddies at an amusement park. "Howdy, Mayor, Commissioner! Hope we ain't kept you up past your bedtime. But the deal we got in mind needs a little privacy, heh-heh, if you get my drift."

Sparky kicked Reefer's ankle and took over the pitch, her dulcet voice aching familiar.

"What my partner means is that we intend tonight to have an end to all delays. Twelve months of red tape have left us feeling very antsy. If there's any way we can, um, grease the wheels of progress, we are quite willing to --"

"Just spit it out, baby. We're ready to lay some serious mazuma down to get this project underway. Whatta we talkin'? Ten thousand? Fifteen thousand?"

I quivered menacingly between Nolan's choppers. If only Sparky and Reefer had been able to read the language of my jiggling, they would have turned tail and run. But they were blind to Nolan's rage.

"Let's see the color of your money, Reefer."

The mobster reached into his suitcoat's inner pocket and hauled out a sheaf of bills weighty as one of my prize cabbages. All eyes except mine were magnetized by the bundle of large denomination bills. Thus only I witnessed the Shade sneak catfootedly up behind Reefer and tap him on the shoulder.

"Jig's up, Reefer. Will you come quietly, or do I have to use force?"

Everyone had forgotten Sparky. Until they heard in the stunned silence the click of the hammer on her .45, loud as my former oaken body crashing to the ground.

Sparky's eyes were hard as her stage name, her face taut with rage. "Jules ain't going nowhere. It's you three that are gonna take a little trip."

Even Reefer seemed stunned by his paramour's steely determination. "Put the rod away, baby. We can beat a little bribery rap. It's just their word against ours."

Sparky swung her gun toward the Shade, but addressed Reefer. "Sometimes I swear you've got less spine than that mousy dirtgrubber I married! Win a case against the Shade? Are you crazy? He's got this town sewed up!"

"It's simply a matter of being on the correct side of the law, Miss Flint. Now if you'll just do as your boyfriend advises --"

"Shut up, you! Now, head for the staircase!"

The trio of captives shuffled out -- under two guns now -- while I was still fuming over the insult Sparky had paid my memory. Once in the stairwell we climbed steadily upward, emerging onto the roof. The summer sky hosted an infinity of stars, as likely to offer us useful help as anyone else in the city.

"Go over near the edge," Sparky commanded. "There's gonna be a little accident here tonight. Three clumsy stargazers are gonna take a little dive. Maybe the papers will even figure the Shade was somehow responsible. When our crew takes over City Hall, we won't have a care in the world."

We now stood at the low parapet protecting us from five stories of oblivion. I could see the Shade tensing his muscles for a lunge. But Sparky anticipated just such an action.

"Jules, grab the girl." Once in Reefer's clutches, Ellen suffered the muzzle of the pistol jammed against her stomach. "Try anything funny, and your girlfriend gets gutshot. It's not as easy a death as a broken neck,



believe me."

With surprising acrobatic ease, the lumpy Nolan jumped atop the parapet. "Don't shoot her, Flint. I'm going first."

And with that he jumped, taking me of course with him.

Nolan's blunt fingers gripped the ledge and interrupted our fall. I deduced his plan: to lure Sparky and Reefer over for a look, then make a surprising grab at them with one hand, thus breaking the stalemate. But even in the dim light Sparky must have seen his efforts.

"Reefer, he's holding on! Turn the girl loose and go whack the old coot's fingers."

I witnessed Reefer above us hefting his own gun, reversed. He smashed the butt down.

Nolan grunted, fell a foot with uselessly waving arms

--and that was when the protruding spike intercepted my bowl.

Nolan's teeth bit into my stem like a crocodile's.

Reefer called out, "He's hanging on by his damn pipe!"

"Shoot the pipe out of his mouth then!"

Reefer took careful aim.

AND JUST THEN the gunshot rings out, simultaneously with the sound of a scuffle on the rooftop, the thud of fists on flesh, of muffled grunts and screams.

The bullet pierces my stem, severing it completely. The pain of my mortal wound wracks me with titanic agonies. I try to hold onto consciousness, but feel it ebbing swiftly. But in my last seconds of full awareness, even as my two halves tumble into the void, I thankfully witness the Shade lunge three-quarters over the edge of the parapet to grab Nolan by his wrist.

Then a familiar mortal darkness descends.

Curiously, unexpectedly, my soul is not completely extinguished. Although split in two, my human essence remains connected by a dormant thread of ectoplasm. Patiently, able to do nothing else, I await the reinvigorating reunion of my halves, a repair I am somehow confident will arrive in due course.

At last the blessed event comes. Jagged lower stem intersects with upper fragment and bowl, firmly secured with a spot of Elmer's glue. Although certainly unfit to be smoked, I can still exercise thought and perception.

I find myself stapled to a plaque, hanging on a wall beneath an odd circular skylight. Weirdly, the view through the cross-barred aperture reveals not mere sky, but an eerie nighted landscape of canted tombstones.

I am underground! And where else but in the Shade's fabled but never-pinpointed sanctum, its location now disclosed to me alone as the haunted corner of Idlewhile Cemetery!

The Shade himself steps back from hanging me up on his trophy wall. Beside him stands the short, lumpish, wide-eyed figure of Busta, that faithful son of Ham who assists the Shade and drives him about Central City in his yellow cab.

"Well, Busta," confides the Shade, "yet another relic of a case well-solved. Not only did we jail Sparky Flint and Jules Reefer for bribery and multiple attempts at homicide, but, thanks to her confession, we cleared up the old murder of her husband, poor chap." The Shade pats me affectionately. "Unfortunately, Dottle had no lucky talisman such as this pipe to save him, in the manner it saved Nolan."

The Shade turns to a set of blueprints spread out on a table. "But enough of past glories, Busta. Let's direct our attention to this diagram of Fort Knox. I expect the Gasworks Gang will strike next month, during the annual ingot-dusting --"

Safe, protected from the elements, privileged to share a vicarious life of crime-fighting, I settle cozily down on the wall to listen to the Shade's brave scheming.

There are worse fates for a broken pipe. And for a man as well.

## About this Title

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