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Fantasy & Science Fiction

JAN/FEB

**Ghosts Doing the
Orange Dance**

Paul Park

Marc Laidlaw

John Langan

Robert Reed

Kate Wilhelm

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Novelet: **THE LONG RETREAT** by Robert Reed

Robert Reed jokes that "I adore good thought problems. When my daughter wakes me from a perfectly good sleep, I'll say, 'Leave me alone, honey. Daddy's working on a thought problem.' Then I'll ask myself important questions, like: What if every sofa in the world grew six inches longer? What if cats made agreeable pillows, instead of people being disagreeable pillows for cats? And what if there was a world so large that you never needed to stop running away from your problems?" Perhaps this new story grew out of that last thought problem. But probably not.

The beach is made of white sand and fine black mud, but the blood is what catches the eye—red and clotted, the largest splotches connected to severed limbs and the soggy, deflated remains of other men's vitals. Immune to the carnage, our Emperor walks slowly down to the water and half-falls, half-sits, and then slumps forward, fighting to catch His breath. Moments such as these are rare and ruled by exhaustion. Soldiers wearing our colors died at this place, yet no one asks about the units involved or the names of lost officers. All that matters is this delicious opportunity to do very little. If the great man rests, His court is free to do the

same. Even the busiest of us sit while accomplishing our work, conferring quietly, using yesterday's maps and each other's friable memories to determine what our next step should be, assuming that we ever possess enough energy to move again.

Only the best ideas are presented to the Emperor. Or rather, to His long-serving assistant.

I am that man, officious and loyal Lieutenant Castor.

In sober, fearful voices, staff officers inform me that fleeing east along the lakeshore is impossible. Last night our enemies surrounded Jicktown, and even though reports claim that the redoubts are holding, we know better. Trapped men always lie, hoping for salvation. Our scarce, badly equipped reinforcements have been dispatched to places less doomed. Most pushed west, marshaling for a weak counterattack. But great fires are now burning in the west, columns of dense black smoke rising high up in the morning air. When the breeze allows, we can smell the new ash and hear the soft cough of enemy howitzers. Yet despite such bleak evidence, several officers insist that following our doomed legions is the only viable route. These are generals and high colonels, and I am nothing compared to them. Yet they speak in imploring tones, hoping I will listen, praying that this lowly lieutenant will agree with their assessments. Because no decision has value if the Emperor decides otherwise, and that is why my superiors treat me as special, hoping my voice will find a skillful way to offer up these urgent, critical opinions for His judgment.

Better than anyone, I understand the great man.

Perhaps better than He knows Himself, say the whispers and long, openly envious looks.

I finally stand and go to Him, saying, "Sire," while bending low. "Perhaps we should strike out toward Illig."

The Emperor will always be handsome, but little sleep and a miserable diet have degraded His chiseled features. Like all of us, He needs hot water and soap. But His situation is worse than simple filth. I smell urine. I smell feces. Not for the first time, I wonder about His health. He has been demanding privacy and a toilet, which is odd considering how little there is to eat. It occurs to me that our leader must have soiled Himself: a small problem with obvious solutions. I could approach any officer, demanding clothes for our master. To the man, they would fight for the privilege of serving Him. Yet I decide to ignore the stink. The Emperor is also a creature of supreme dignity, and what leader, no matter how dire the circumstances, accepts spare underwear from His people?

These are my thoughts when He looks up suddenly, as if hearing my thoughts.

We are a miserable lot. But despite every deprivation, the great man is aware enough to ask, "What about the Owl Division?"

"Our Owls or theirs, Sire?"

Both armies like to name their crack formations after admirable predators. But we lost our Owls, as he reminds me. "They were broken last week," He says, leaning near enough that I can see every white whisker as well as the artful scar inflicted in an adolescent knife fight. "Right now, their Owls are just past that foul smoke, pushing between Gothemburg

and Illig. But if we hurry, we might just slide past unnoticed. If we leave right now."

How does He know this? I haven't seen any trustworthy intelligence to support that claim. But as I remind myself, no one else has access to every dispatch, including those too terrible to share.

"If we leave now?" I ask doubtfully.

A soft, sorry laugh leaks out of Him. "No, now is too late. Our moment just slipped past, unnoticed. Sorry."

As the war worsens, His humor sharpens.

On my own initiative, I say, "Perhaps we should steer north again. Slip past the slower troops and back into the Dale Grand?"

He dismisses that idea with a single deep grunt.

My knees ache. I sit directly on the beach, glancing at the nearest officers. Then one of them—a girlish young fellow with yellow-white hair, chimes in, "We could strike out across the lake, maybe."

The idea isn't new. Each of us has considered the possibility, and for endless fine reasons dismissed it out of hand.

But the great man straightens His back, smiling now.

"Yes," He announces. "Exactly."

Because the question must be asked, I blurt out, "But how do we do this? We'll need quite a few boats and enough fuel, if everyone is to come."

How many boats? How many drums of diesel? Even as I deny the possibility, my methodical nature spells out the enormous, probably insolvable difficulties with this kind of

undertaking. We have been traveling for months now with trucks and lighter vehicles, and our feet still enjoy clomping about in worthy boots. To become a navy here, on a whim, seems like the wildest dream.

Then the girlish man says, "I know a little bay, very close."

Only our Emperor considers this unexpected source of hope. No one else is desperate enough.

"A bay, you say?"

"Yes, Your Highness." The man kneels and bends forward, kissing blood and mud. "I grew up not far from here. That bay has a big village, and the village has always made its living fishing these waters. These are thrifty people, and pragmatic. Exactly the sort to hide away fuel in tight times and keep their strong little boats in good repair."

"How little are the boats?" I ask.

The fellow blinks and says, "Pardon?"

Our leader has a deep, irresistible voice known across the world. "Suppose we acquire everything that floats. How many boats, and how many of us will be able to slide off across that water today?"

The officer calculates, or at least pretends to. "Seven boats, I would guess."

He must be exaggerating.

"We can take maybe eight people per vessel, plus pilots."

This news devastates. There are more than a hundred of us in the Emperor's court, and we have been this way for a very long time. Despite casualties and constant illness, our group has endured, additions matching losses, a small but

robust gathering of talents serving as the center of our glorious if badly damaged nation.

The great man stands. Never as tall as I imagine, He is impressive nonetheless. Swaying slightly, not quite certain about His balance, He speaks with a secure, robust voice. "That's what we will do," He announces. "Act on my orders this moment, and spare nothing to make me glad."

I want nothing as much as His praise and a flash of that admiring grin. Even when I know the prospects are lousy, I want to believe that He will pat me on a shoulder and thank me for my selfless service.

But it is the youngster, this upstart, who begs for that coveted pat.

"Every boat, every drop of fuel," the Emperor demands. Speaking to His new favorite, He orders, "Whatever method is best to achieve these prizes. If patriotism fails, chop off heads. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Take who you need and add three tough bodies, just to be safe." Then He turns, teasing me with a half-wink and adding, "You'll remain beside me, Castor."

I want to cry, and I'm not certain why.

After glancing across the flat oily water, He asks, "How many islands do we have to choose from, Lieutenant?"

Many, I have heard. But I confess that I have no idea of the count.

And with a deep laugh, He says, "Perfect, son. Just perfect!"

* * * *

One of the old map boxes, sealed for years and laboriously carried to this nameless place, is cracked open and its contents are pulled free, the most useful maps unfolded and scattered on small tables. Places that I have never seen fill the enormous sheets of paper. Islands beckon. The largest splotches of gray are substantial and usually quite distant. The smallest dots are nameless, riding on the white lake water without towns and little hope of habitable quarters. But there are several land masses not too far offshore, some with vaguely familiar names and little cities that intrigue Him and then His staff. Distances are measured, travel times estimated. We feel busy as well as important, and that is when the war intervenes. One of the Long-Arm guns has been fired—a gigantic cannon that was dragged in pieces to a hillside, then assembled and loaded in an operation that takes a thousand men several busy days. The weapon is malevolent and loathed because of it. No warning roar cuts through the air, no sense of impending doom. All at once, an enormous shell explodes above the beach perhaps a quarter league to the east, many tons of explosive turning to noise and hot gas, driving steel balls across the muck and smoke-infused water.

Four men fling themselves over our leader's body.

I am first on top and untouched by the steel, and jubilant because of it.

It is a brief, bracing terror, and as often happens in moments like this, what follows is peace and a sense of renewed security. Most likely, this was a random shot. And even if the enemy knows our location, we are safe for the

time being. The Long-Arm is inaccurate and very slow to fire—an instrument of terror designed by engineers and touted by pudgy generals sitting in distant quarters. If this is their best means to kill us, then we might as well drop our trousers and wave our bare asses at the fangless bastards.

The euphoria lasts several minutes. And then the boats arrive.

I count three boats, no more.

Standing on a chair, the Emperor counts six but admits that only three are lake-worthy, each towing a small skiff in its wake.

The girlish man stands on the lead boat, on the bow, looking grim-faced until he is close and then putting on a false smile that makes me want to laugh out loud. Three boats, is it? And tiny ones at that!

In his absence, I asked for his name.

Captain Rake—the last known survivor of the infamous Ocelot Brigade. He joined us just two weeks ago, after one of our resident generals took him in as a second-tier assistant.

By name, I call to Rake. He flings a heavy rope in my direction, his burly arm powerful enough to bring it within a few strides of shore. But I refuse to retrieve the offering. A colonel, rather less proud than me, wades in to his waist and brings back the prize. Rake orders the motor killed, presumably to save fuel, and then like a small king, he waits while his superiors tow the filthy old fishing boat to the beach.

"We can carry six," he begins, referring to his craft. "Seven, including the pilot. And I can do that job well enough."

"What about the skiffs?" I ask.

"Eight more bodies in each. Though it'll be a cold, wet ride, particularly if we push our pace."

The Emperor studies each vessel. Then with an expertise that I didn't suspect, he points out, "That little trout-chaser there...she looks faster than these other two, am I right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rake admits.

"Are any more boats coming?" I ask.

Rake shakes his head. "This is all that was left."

No one speaks, waiting for an opinion from Him.

Then, to give the rest of the group hope, Rake adds, "There's a second bay farther along. Not a place for fishermen, but it used to have vacation homes and quite a few sporting boats."

Tiny craft short of fuel, but I keep my opinions to myself.

"The rest of you could go to that second bay," the captain suggests. "Take what you need there and follow us later."

He says, "You" and "Us" because he can't imagine being left behind. An obvious plotter with all the cunning of an eight-year-old boy, and I can only hope that the Emperor will pick another pilot for the next portion of our retreat.

"So how many can that trout-chaser carry?" the Emperor inquires.

"Four, and some luggage if you don't mind the crowding," Rake admits. "Plus the pilot, of course."

"Can you handle that powerful machine?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Easily, yes."

I hear the mistruth in the voice and wait for the Emperor's wrath. Yet the great man startles me, fooled by this sloppy act, accepting every promise that is being thrown His way.

Nodding, He says, "Fine. Wonderful."

He turns toward the rest of us. "Field Marshall Zann stays with me. With my luggage and the crowns and our two strongest radios. And I want General Hawthorne too. And..."

He hesitates.

I die, for an instant.

"And Castor, of course."

Of course, yes. I try not to sigh but can't help myself, and I fight the urge to laugh in relief, succeeding only by the barest of margins.

"The maps will be carried on my skiff," the Emperor continues, plainly having thought these matters through. Then, to frame that decision in the kindest light, He adds, "We'll be moving fast, and it wouldn't be fair, drowning my loyal team in my wake."

Heads nod weakly in agreement.

With neat efficiency, He decides who rides in the remaining two boats, those not mentioned now forced to find other means to cross open water. Then lifting one of the maps, he says, "We'll rendezvous here," and points at a circular island waiting twenty leagues offshore. "Called Marvel, by the looks of it. And what a rich, perfect name that is!"

Loading the Emperor's boat is the first concern, and that honor is carried out with rushed efficiency. Those to be left behind work fastest. No doubt they want us gone so their self-centered hunt for suitable vessels can begin. I don't

blame them. In their place, I might do the same. But when they begin tossing the sealed boxes into our skiff, I approach and stare until the captain in charge says, "Neater, men. Neater."

Field Marshall Zann has already claimed the seat behind the pilot, its empty partner reserved for Him.

The Emperor will be last onboard. Despite our desperate circumstances, He lingers for a few moments, giving orders to one general and repeating those words to another. What matters is this final opportunity to be saluted and knelt before. What He relishes are these tiny gestures of affection from people who might be dead by nightfall, or wish they were.

I sit beside Rake, noticing as he studies the helm a little too intently.

"You say you can handle this machine?" I ask.

He says, "Absolutely." But then he glances at me—a liar's gesture to see if his audience believes what it just heard.

At last the Emperor steps into the cold surf, grimacing as the water climbs to His knees. His shock betrays much; weakness rises from His core. Accepting one of General Hawthorne's hands, He fights just to climb over the low railing and then collapses on the deck. His skin is gray, every muscle limp. This deep lack of vigor perplexes Him. But worse, his sickness terrifies us. Zann and Hawthorne even trade glances, using their eyes to pose the same awful question:

"What if He should die?"

He won't die. He cannot. My certainty is sudden, reflexive and primal. Yet I struggle to find good reasons to hold onto

these instinctive beliefs. A greater-than-mortal master, the Emperor is wise and powerful in a multitude of ways. During these awful years, He has survived ambushes and miserable luck. Worse abuse than illness has rained down on his body and soul, yet hasn't He always come away grinning? But remembering that grin, I try to recall how long it has been since that weary face lit up the world with its joy.

The past is no guide for the future. Circumstances change, and while history is endless, someday this Emperor will pass. His health is lousy. But just as terrible is my own foolishness, unable to imagine an existence where this man does not stand astride our great nation.

"Drive this damned boat," Hawthorne yells.

Rake turns and pushes at the throttle, the boat's twin engines shivering as they press against the lake water. We accelerate quickly—faster than our pilot intends, no doubt—and the beached skiff feels the yank of the rope and fights the pressure until it has no choice but to turn and follow.

"Careful with the maps," Zann snaps at the pilot.

Rake says nothing. But the skiff almost capsized, and he shudders and shrinks down a little, considering the consequences of that nightmare.

For some while, we say nothing. Spent and reflective, we are thrilled with our escape but too ashamed to admit it. I watch the land recede. Men are running, making ready in their mad fashions, but faces vanish quickly and then the uniformed bodies are soon lost as well. Nothing remains of the beach but a narrow gray line where water meets land, and moments later the beach too is swallowed.

The Emperor remains sitting on the tiny deck. Joking, He claims that the heat and vibrations of the engines help the ailing body.

Hawthorne looks at me, perhaps wondering if I'd like to take my turn caring for our leader.

I surprise myself, allowing him that grave honor.

What matters is watching Rake handle the boat's wheel and the long brass throttle, and how he reads the map and both compasses, and his method of aiming at the waves that continue to roll toward us. Boats are simpler than trucks, it seems. But I tell myself that I could master this job well enough, if design or an emergency placed me in his seat.

Something moves behind me. The general suddenly throws a steel pail into the lake, clinging to the rope and bringing it up full. Half is poured back. The other half is given a shot of detergent—the harsh brand normally used to wash fish scales off raw hands. But his intention is to soak rags and wipe down the Emperor's face and arms and hands, sounding like the father of a very important boy, saying, "Now look up, Sire. Higher, please. I want that neck a little less grimy, Sire."

Unnoticed by me, the land has vanished. Behind us is nothing but water and the enslaved skiff. I watch the latter for a little while, trying to anticipate its shifting, almost carefree motions. Then a thought suddenly strikes. Or rather, I remember its presence. More than once, this odd matter has brought me out of the deepest sleep, and for hours I have lain awake, helplessly trying to pick apart the conundrum.

Zann is the perfect audience, and an occasion this ripe will probably never come again.

Leaning over my seat, trying to speak just loud enough for one man to hear, I ask, "When does this change?"

"Change?"

"The war's nature," I say. "Its plan, its course."

"Change how?" Zann is a brilliant, perceptive man. A good military mind with twice as many soldiers wouldn't have accomplished the miracles that he has. But what seems obvious to me is a mystery to him. Shaking his head, he admits, "I don't know what you mean, son. What about the war is going to change?"

I lean closer. Through the throb of the engines, I shout, "When do we stop retreating?"

He looks baffled.

Hawthorne stares at both of us. Did he hear what he thinks he heard? He wants to know, but the Emperor has just unfastened His black dress jacket, exposing a rib-rich chest more suited to a plucked bird.

"Stop retreating?" Zann repeats.

Rake glances my way, implying that the same sorry problem has also occurred to him.

"You think this is a retreat, Castor? Is that it?"

We never use such an explicit term, no. "Except I can't remember the last battle won," I say. "We lose divisions, entire armies. The enemy rolls deeper into our country, until the Emperor has to abandon His estate and flee."

"But there is a difference between retreat and a simple redeployment," Zann warns. "Between losing ground and surrendering the war."

I say, "Yes, sir."

He fumes.

"There are matters that I don't understand," I admit. "I'm just one person, and certainly not half as smart as a field marshal—"

"You're a small man," Zann snaps.

Not physically, no. But I accept his criticism without complaint.

Yet I haven't understood him. With a firm tone, he explains, "Everybody is small, Castor. Even the Emperor is just a tiny creature compared to the enormity of our good nation."

"Of course, sir."

"Now I'm going to ask you one question." He leans forward, gray eyes burning. "Do you know how large our nation is?"

"Of course not, sir."

"And why not?"

Embarrassed, I confess, "I'm only His assistant. And our nation's precise dimensions are the deepest, deepest of secrets."

"Who does know this?"

I glance at the sickly man on the deck.

"Not even Him," Zann warns.

My surprise is total. And, overhearing the conversation, Rake jerks his head and then the wheel, causing the boat to swerve sideways across the open water.

The field marshal enjoys our mutual astonishment. "When the Emperor's grandfather was still a young man," he explains, "brave explorers were assembled, then sent forth to

map the full extent of our empire. Armies cost less than that expedition, and for the next twenty years those exceptional souls pushed out in every direction, out to the fringes of what was known, and then past. And do you know what they discovered?"

"Not at all," I mutter.

"No end to the cities and villages, to the lakes and seas and continents beyond. Elaborate, inadequate maps were drawn. Each map was made secret and stored inside the heavy boxes behind us, waiting for the awful moment when we would need such tools. Yet even our best cartographers managed only a partial mapping of one corner of the nation. It is that vast, and we are that tiny."

"But the people," I begin, trying to comprehend this logic. "Those distant souls in far-off cities and villages?"

"Our people." Zann gestures over his shoulder. "His people."

My mind refuses to understand.

"Our nation isn't just endless, Castor. It's also ancient beyond measure. And there has always been an emperor at its heart—this man's ancestors, and before them, other family lines that are barely remembered. It is the Emperor and His court that maintain this culture of ours, a society that can endure the worst abuses imaginable."

"But our enemies—"

"What about them?"

I don't quite know what to ask.

So he asks for me. "How can our nation be endless, yet find itself invaded by others? Is that what you want to know?"

I nod, though I'm not sure that is my concern.

"Now that is a very good story, Castor." He laughs sourly, shaking his gray face. "One thread of His grandfather's expedition did manage to find an edge to the Emperor's realm. There is an invisible but utterly real line, a kind of boundary or border, where our people do not live and the others begin."

"Where?" I blurt.

He gestures over his shoulder with one hand, while the other hand thoughtfully strokes his ragged beard. "The truest particulars of this story have been lost. We don't know who to blame or why. But what we believe happened is that our explorers met a similar team representing their realm, and standing at that border, somebody chose their words poorly, and that's how this war was born."

I have never heard this tale. Absorbing it will take time; I wish the field marshal would have pity and stop talking now.

"Do you understand? When your territory is boundless, retreat is an impossibility."

I don't find his logic convincing, and perhaps my body says as much.

Zann ignores all doubts. "Our most vital and secret maps show that critical border region. We know its length, Lieutenant Castor. We know how the land looks. Think of a flat, barren plain fifty leagues across, bracketed on both sides by mountains that cannot be climbed. That's the only route between their lair and our good nation, and yes, maybe they are winning the battles today, and maybe that will continue for the next thousand years. But we are a different people.

You recognize that, surely. We are one soul, and even though they can slaughter millions and billions, some of us will endure inside the conquered lands. Even as slaves and wolf packs, we will persist. No matter how many they murder, more of us will join even newer armies, giving back the miseries in kind. And that's why their fight is hopeless. They throw their soldiers into punishing and securing what cannot be held. Their lines of communication grow precarious. The war front widens every season, demanding more and more from their armies. It is the invaders who are the fools, and even if we do nothing, this flood will eventually run out of blood."

At last, Zann draws silent, satisfied with his performance.

An obvious question begs to be mentioned, but Rake says it first. He turns and offers a cursory, "Sir," to gain his superior's attention. Then he asks, "But what if the enemy is as numerous as we are? And what if their damnable nation is boundless too?"

"An infinite mouth, you mean? Large enough to consume any meal?" The field marshal grins, pretending to consider this thorny problem. But then he says, "Oh, that's an easy one, boy. Remember that distant valley, fifty leagues across? I have seen reports: Our enemies have put down ten thousand pairs of rails at the border, troop trains running endlessly as they move into what is ours. Yet even with that, what is possible? One turn of the clock and a million armed soldiers charge forward. But what do those armies matter, set against a multitude that will swallow every foe, forever?"

* * * *

For the sake of my sanity, I have concluded that Rake is not my enemy. At least for this moment, we are partners in a great endeavor, and that's why I ask about our engines and fuel loads, plus the tricks that he uses to calculate the distance covered and our current position.

"Eight leagues," is Rake's estimate of how far. Then, one associate to another, he admits, "If we weren't towing this heavy skiff, we'd be a lot closer to Marvel by now."

A grunt comes, and I glance over my shoulder. The general and field marshal flank the Emperor, each carefully holding an arm and elbow as He kneels, trousers at His ankles, concentrating His aim on the empty bucket.

Nothing but gas and blood escape from His bottom.

I turn away, ashamed by my prurient, little-boy curiosity.

"Over there," Rake says, pointing out into the heavy fog. "Can you make out that dark mass?"

"Barely."

"The Isle of Blue," he reports.

The map in my hand began the day as a pristine relic from an earlier time. Since then it has been folded and written upon, flying steel has cut through it, and someone's filthy thumb has left an ugly brown print on the Isle of Blue. Yet if Rake is correct, the island's near shore isn't half a league from us. "We should see it better than this," I mention.

Rake nods, explaining, "The farther out you go on this lake, the worse the mist is. It has to do with the chilled water. At least that's what the fishermen claim. Though I have my doubts."

I wait, thinking he will explain.

But he won't. Instead, he says, "That patch of rough ground is famous for its ladies. Very pretty, very mean. They will play the most amazing games with a willing man, but if the objects of their affections disappoint, they will cut them off and throw them in the drink."

"Delightful," I offer.

We laugh grimly, quietly.

Then, for an instant, if that, one engine loses power. It is a sudden event that passes so quickly I'm not certain it actually happened. But Rake heard enough to frown now, admitting, "I don't trust our fuel. It's old and possibly wet, and water in the lines might present problems."

Another concern on top of a mountain made of worries.

He dips his head now, and with a conspirator's tone whispers, "I listened to what the Zann was telling you."

I ignore him, examining the map, trying to find a nearby island to serve us if our boat loses all power. Not the Isle of Blue, please.

"About our nation's size...it was fascinating, wasn't it?"

"We shouldn't discuss this," I remind him. Then I repeat the old saying, "'Keep secrets off your tongue, and nothing can be told.'"

Yet Rake won't let the subject die. "I know I haven't been in His court as long as you. A few weeks compared to how many years? But ever since I was big enough to understand what people were saying, I've heard stories about our Emperor. How He is good and wise. How no other soul could direct the war against our sworn foes. Maybe His face was a

mystery, and His given name too. But He builds passion among people everywhere. For instance, I can't count the times that I've heard grown men argue about the size of His boots, or the size of His prick."

I nod, appreciating that reasonable confusion.

"I had never seen the Emperor. But when I spotted your group—at a distance and through the smoke—I understood that this was His court. And with a second glance, I understood which soggy, sorry fellow was Him."

The Emperor moans now.

I bite my lip, making my own tiny pain.

"The nation must have its leader," Rake admits. "It always has. Those fortunate enough to see His face describe Him to others, and those others do the same when they wander far, and that must be how these stories flow. This empire. This wonderland. It seems incredible, but that's how it is. Which makes me wonder how such a thing can occur so easily...so perfectly—"

"What else could happen?" I ask.

"I don't know," he concedes. "But doesn't it make you curious, thinking about the mechanism that holds our nation together?"

"And why does the sun rise, and where does it go in the night?" I reply. "Yes, your question is reasonable. But in these times, it is a fancy, unimportant question. Maybe later, once this war is finished...."

My voice trails off.

Both of us laugh quietly at what seems impossible.

Then the Emperor groans again, consumed by misery while His most loyal officers help pull up His dirty trousers. A few sorry blankets provide the simplest mattress for His suffering, fever-ravaged body. Zann and Hawthorne are focused only on their patient. And this is the moment when Rake leans even closer, speaking into my ear. "I am different from most people," he promises.

I start to say, "You are not."

But he proves himself with the words that follow. "What if this man that we are escorting...what if he is not the true emperor? What if He, and I mean the real He, created a fictional court and sent off this imposter to play the role?"

"But why?" I blurt.

"To mislead our enemies for these last awful years, of course." Nothing can be more obvious. "They chase what has no value, and meanwhile the heart of our people is free to move and act as He wishes."

In the same morning, I have heard two impossibilities. And if anything, this vision is more incredible than the infinite world.

I sit back in my seat, offering no reply.

"The Emperor is a story," my companion maintains. "A great and probably eternal story, yes. But why should we believe—where is the compelling reason—for us to believe that the ill old fellow shitting out his guts behind us is really that great man?"

The engines remain strong, carrying our boat across the next fold on the map. I turn it over in my hand, and Rake asks the name of the next island that will pass to our left.

What I see is a dot, nameless and almost invisible. I don't know why, but I invent the name, "Larner's Rock," and his response is immediate.

"Yes," he says. "Now I remember, yes."

I am tired enough to weep, but my head is full of ideas, questions, and possibilities waiting for a voice to shape them. I want to sleep and cannot, and then, believing that I will never again close my eyes, I fall away into a deep slumber that ends soon enough with a hard shake of my shoulder.

"He wants to speak to you," the dark voice announces.

General Hawthorne is a powerful man, even in his latter years. He has always been a presence in the court, a disciplined force that approves of very little, and just now, for some reason or another, he seems to despise me utterly. But when I don't climb to my feet immediately, he repeats the order. "He wants your ear. Just yours. It's important, and I don't know why, but if you see any weakness, don't let Him talk. Tell me. Tell Zann. At the first sign of trouble."

"How is the patient?" I ask.

The general surprises me. A smile breaks out, sudden and brilliant, as he admits, "Better. The fever broke. Just a few moments ago, in fact."

Sure enough, the man on the blankets has better color, and while weak, He can smile as always, beckoning me with one hand, then the other.

I approach, and kneel.

He watches as His knuckles are kissed twice, and then He says, "Castor. I have a question for you, my boy."

"Yes, Sire."

"Do you wonder why I never promoted you to captain or colonel or some level more appropriate to your mission?"

I shake my head.

"Has the matter ever occurred to you?"

"It has," I admit, wincing with shame.

"Well, there are good reasons, believe me." Then He winks before casting His gaze at the three men sitting at the opposite end of that very little boat. "I must tell you something, Castor. Now is the time."

"Yes, Sire."

"Someone onboard this vessel is going to try to kill me."

This deep, awful lake has more impossibilities swimming in it than it has fish. No one else could offer these words and make me believe them. Even He, and even on this desperate day, strains my sense of place and purpose.

I say, "No," too loudly, the others glancing over their shoulders now.

The Emperor says, "Quiet."

"No," I repeat in a breathless whisper.

He watches me, and waits.

"Which one?" I manage.

"If you were to guess, which man would you select?"

I consider the matter, just for a moment. There is no way that I could feel more paranoid than I am now.

"Are you armed?" the Emperor asks.

"Yes." But I force my hand not to touch my holster and the firearm inside it.

"Loaded, is it?"

"Yes."

"I don't quite recall, son. Are you a good shot?"

He does recall. His mind seems designed to recollect details like these. But He wants me to tell Him, "I'm an excellent shot, Sire."

That bolsters me, that subtle praise.

Our boat runs into a tall wave, and at the crest, we drop slightly. The Emperor lifts and then hits the deck, cursing softly. "How much longer do we ride this tub?"

I have a solid estimate, but the journey seems less important now. What I want is guidance, which is why I ask, "How do you know about this assassin? And for how long? On the shoreline, did you realize...that one of them is entertaining this kind of...?"

I can't say, "Crime." The word is too tiny, too mild.

"I knew it on the beach," He responds, enjoying His own opacity. "And that's why I picked who I picked to come on this voyage."

"Tell me who, Sire."

He shakes His head and lies back on a rough little pillow.

I sigh and shiver, wondering what else to say.

"Lieutenants are perfectly respectable officers," He offers, answering his own long-ago question. "Your rank places you near the top of any hierarchy, but not so high that you are blinded. It is the perfect station from which to watch and learn. And that's why I kept you as such. Because if I made you more than that...."

His voice falls away.

General Hawthorne has come up behind me. "Enough, son. Enough." The powerful hands grab me by the shoulders,

almost dragging me to my feet. "You don't mind my interruption, do you, Sire?"

"Not at all," the Emperor allows.

"Rest," Hawthorne advises, "and I'll bring you some cold broth from our stores."

Says the Emperor, "I can't tell you how nice that sounds."

* * * *

The assassin is here, and it must be Rake.

That was my first guess, and for a little while nothing else makes sense. But why would the Emperor invite His would-be killer onboard? A small man with odd ideas can easily be pulled aside and dealt with by other small men. But Zann and Hawthorne are different conundrums. How would the Emperor deal with a traitor so close to Him? What action could he take to defeat a figure so important and famous and loved...so vital to the nation that the simple accusation of crime would throw the court into an uproar?

The situation is impossible.

My burden seems immense. But when I close my eyes and think about nothing—willfully emptying my head of distractions and self-pity—the obvious answer waits, smiling at me like a cherished friend.

To the field marshal, I whisper, "We must talk, sir."

The old face regards me with suspicion. What did the Emperor tell me a few moments ago? He wants to know, as does Hawthorne. With a circumspect nod at his associate, he says, "Here." A single step puts us as far from the others as possible, but when we lean across the boat's railing, eyes

peering down into the swift gray water, he can whisper into my ear and I can return the strangely intimate gesture, the future of the nation balanced upon these next phrases.

"I've been given an order," I begin. Then I look back across my shoulder, making certain that no one is overtly watching.

Zann nods, barely enough patience to hold his tongue.

"It's a difficult order," I say.

"Often they are," he agrees, trying to coax more from me.

"No," I say. "This is not like His other commands. We aren't abandoning cities or good men for the sake expediency. This is much more personal and more terrible, and I want you to tell me something. Please, sir. Is that man lying behind me...is that our true Emperor?"

Zann starts to straighten and then thinks again. "Yes. Of course He is."

"And He has full possession of His faculties? Which is to say, this isn't just the fever throwing words at me."

"The Emperor isn't well, but He's lucid and sane." The old man touches my forearm, assuring me, "The illness has been difficult, but He is as clear-minded as any of us. Really, we should marvel at the Great Man's capacities to endure, and feel blessed in so many ways."

"I'm not blessed," I say.

"That is your failure, not His."

I nod.

The field marshal watches me, and waits.

With a measured tone, I pose the central question. "If you were given charge over the Emperor's fate—if He told you

that no one else could be trusted with this critical mission—then would you accept the task and do it, without hesitation?"

"Without hesitation," Zann claims, "and with joy in my heart. How else can one do the bidding of his master?"

"I'll search for the joy, but I don't think that I'll find it."

Zann shrugs, unconcerned by my palpable weakness.

Unfastening my holster, I lift my pistol from my hip and turn and shoot Rake in the back of his skull. He has no warning. He dies and slumps forward, and the boat attacks the next large wave too brazenly, our little boat starting to turn in response, threatening to come around and collide with the towed skiff. It is all that I can manage to throw the body aside and grab the wheel, and then with the hand that holds my weapon, I shove the throttle up until the big engines are idling.

We have existed inside a war of sudden and vast violence, yet neither officer can react to something this close, this sudden. Hawthorne tries to rise to his feet, and in doing so drops the cup of cold soup into the Emperor's lap. He looks down, offering some quick apology. Then he looks up again as I shoot him in the forehead, sending him off into the cold, bottomless water.

"Son?" Zann exclaims. "What is this—?"

I shoot him last. I shoot him twice. That second shot is revealing. I have never liked the field marshal as an officer: too talented for armies that deserve less brilliance at the helm, too much genius stubbornly achieving wonders when what is required is to change the nature of this endless conflagration.

Zann's body crumbles into a uniformed heap.

I go to the Emperor, kneel, and say, "Sire. I didn't know what to do. And then I realized you weren't sure which man was your enemy...."

The handsome, badly weathered face stares at me carefully.

"To save you and your office, I killed each one of them."

"Yes, I see," he whispers. Then a little louder, "Your weapon, Castor. Give it here, please."

I place it in His hand.

He says, "Yes, I thought you might take this wise course. Which is why I like you, son. Why I trust your good sense and your rational soul. You adore the nation that you serve, enough even to do this awful deed."

"Thank you, Sire." I bend low, I kiss His soggy, water-bleached feet. "Thank you."

"But here is the crux of the matter," the Emperor continues. "I have fallen out of love for this collection of worshipping and foolish people. My feelings, in fact, are nothing but bitter anymore. And how can I serve such a throng when I know another being is more suited?"

My eyes lift.

He smiles at me. "You misunderstood what I told you, yes. Which is entirely reasonable, yes."

"Sire—"

"None of the dead were the assassin," he claims.

And in another moment, He gives me the most terrible proof.

* * * *

The mist lifts in time to reveal a flat, wet island of no possible significance. Even from offshore, Marvel betrays the comfortable poverty common among places that barely belong on any map. My first inclination is to continue on my way, shepherding my fuel until I reach more fruitful destinations. But the boat's engines hesitate again, and one simply refuses to start up again. I sit at the wheel, aiming for what looks to be a small city. Locals gather on the wharf, watching the approaching fishing boat. But nobody seems particularly interested in this stranger. I am just another refugee: a curiosity and a small distraction from their little days.

Suddenly my last engine chokes on the nefarious water. I drift nearer, and one last time, I spin the dials on both radios, learning nothing except that our enemies have improved their jamming techniques.

When I can make out each face, I stand.

The gasp is audible, prolonged but full of doubt. Could it be? Is such a thing remotely possible? Each man and woman asks the same inescapable question, but it is the boy standing in front who thinks to yell at me, demanding answers.

"Where are you from? Who are you? And why do you wear the Emperor's uniform and crown?"

I say nothing. When it serves my interest, I will answer. What matters most is to study those who study me, employing that calm parental glare that I have seen used every day in the Emperor's court. Then to the boy, I call out, "Swim to me. Grab my line and tow me in."

To his credit, the boy hesitates.

Then some older fellow says, "Do it," and the boy launches himself, covering the cold water with a few strong strokes, grabbing the soggy rope and fixing it in his teeth, turning and grunting as he serves my bidding.

Others join in, although not always the best swimmers. Legs kick and hands fight for their hold, and the effect of so much confusion and wasted energy gets me to the wharf no earlier than I would have on my own. Yet by the end, a portion of my audience is saving the Emperor. I am He, the heart of our nation. Despite my own pounding heart and a mouth parched as a hot stone, I have the authority to thank all of my helpers and watch others drag their cold, suffering bodies into the air.

Kneeling is easier than swimming; most of my audience pays respect to my jeweled crown, if not to me.

Each wants to know where I have been.

"Between Jicktown and Illig," I say, motioning toward the mainland. "The rest of the court is following me in other boats."

My conviction meets doubt and some pain.

Then a young woman steps forward, kissing the back of her hand because mine has not been offered. "But Sire...that shoreline was taken this morning. One of the enemy's lightning brigades struck while your generals were on the beach, still loading their boats—"

"How do you know this?" I roar.

"A fisherman friend of ours was watching. He was offshore, and he saw it all."

"We thought you were dead," another woman admits.

Everybody stares at me, and in particular at the stains left behind on my one-of-a-kind uniform, blood and shredded brains refusing to surrender to soap and determined scrubbing.

"How do you know what this fisherman saw?" I inquire.

"He came straight back here," she says. "He arrived almost one bell ago. But he didn't see you out on the water."

The mist must have hidden me. And I wasted moments drifting, disposing of bodies and changing my clothing while piecing together what still feels like a ludicrous plan.

Yet it is a plan, and what does an Emperor do better than make ready?

With a firm voice, I claim, "There is good in this awful thing. My court is dead, yes, but perhaps our enemies believe I am dead too."

Confusion twists their faces.

"We have been given extra time," I point out. "There are no boats to be had on the mainland, and it will take the invaders days to bring new boats overland. They won't realize I am here, with you, until I have left for safer ground. With my new court beside me, of course."

This city of modest fishermen and bakers and machinists and smart, soggy children is beginning to crowd near me, each one of them wondering how it would be to belong to my chosen few.

"First," I say, "I need food and a bath."

They nod willingly.

"Next, a number of trustworthy boats."

A small fleet floats in this little harbor.

"And I want those boxes and my other luggage unloaded and guarded. And while I rest, you will begin to build a militia, arming your men and women however you can over these next few days."

With a few words and barely enough breath to fill a child's balloon, the Emperor has changed the character of everyone's life.

Noble delight bubbles forth, and that first boy asks, "So how soon will we attack the bastards, Sire?"

"Very soon," I promise. Then, pointing to the north, I add, "There is a valley waiting for us, son. Between high mountains, and it is the only important place in the world. But you and I will go there together and bring down those mountains, closing it off and winning the war for All Time...!"

Department: **BOOKS TO LOOK FOR** by Charles de Lint

Relentless, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2009, \$27.

A Big Little Life, by Dean Koontz, Hyperion, 2009, \$24.99,

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Relentless is the new Dean Koontz, a fast-paced thriller about what happens when a writer lets a bad review get to him. It has great characters and writing, mixes humor with drama, and goes at a rollercoaster pace in places. But we've talked a lot about Koontz's novels in this column and I don't know that we need to discuss another at this time except to say that if you enjoy his style of thriller, *Relentless* won't disappoint you.

At the moment I'm more interested in talking about *A Big Little Life*, a nonfiction love letter to the memory of his golden retriever Trixie. Trixie was an assistance dog, trained by Canine Companions for Independence in California, who was retired after three years due to an injury. She went on to live with Koontz and his wife Gerda for another nine years before succumbing to cancer.

Any dog lover is going to appreciate Dean's memories of Trixie, though how many readers of this magazine will do so purely on the basis of its subject matter is up for conjecture since most people in the f/sf field appear to prefer cats. Perhaps it's because cats are completely content to spend long periods of time sleeping while you read or watch a movie—so long as you absently scratch it behind the ear, or

let it sprawl out beside or on top of you while you're doing so. Dogs require a larger commitment of time.

I'm generalizing, of course. I grew up in a rural setting where we always had cats and dogs, and we have one of each as I write this. My cat's content to spend hours sleeping on her bed on one of the bookcases in my office while I work. The dog would rather go for a walk or play, and gives me mournful looks when I can't do either.

But I'm drifting away from the real reasons I want to talk about *A Big Little Life* in this column.

For one thing, it's a wonderfully positive book, without being saccharine—something that's a bit of a rarity in this cynical age in which we find ourselves. And if you catch yourself groaning as you read that, well, point made (if not necessarily taken).

But the reason *A Big Little Life* should be of particular interest is for the insight it gives into the mind and heart of one of the major writers of the f/sf field.

Wait a minute, you might say. Isn't Koontz a horror writer?

Well, he's written books that might be considered such, but he started in this field by writing sf, and most of his novels fit under the somewhat larger umbrella of speculative fiction. The stories take a simple scientific principle, something we might see in the newspaper, or it was given a passing reference on the evening news, which Koontz then spins out in the best tradition of "what if?"

Even referring to his books as thrillers is somewhat of a misnomer since they tend to contain a lot of humor without sacrificing "the ticking clock" that a thriller requires.

I like the mix, but having followed Koontz's work for a long time now, one of the things that's intrigued me in reading his more recent books is the spirituality that has come to underlie many of the stories in the past six or seven years. It has its basis in Christianity but bears little relation to the more strident elements that are usually presented to us by way of radio shows, TV evangelists, and the news whenever some particularly provocative quote can make a headline.

The truth is that the followers of most religions go about the practice of their faith in a much less confrontational manner. It's the militant element that gets the press because they make better headlines. Unfortunately that leaves those of us on the outside with a distorted view of what it's actually about. And probably embarrasses the believers who follow their religion's actual tenets, rather than distortions pulled out of context from their holy texts.

The spirituality that has begun to work its way into Koontz's books is of the quieter sort, embracing rather than judgmental. Koontz tells us in *A Big Little Life* that he had drifted away from the Church, but all it took was a single dog—which both science and the Church have decided doesn't have a soul—to remind him that there's more to the world than what can be seen and measured and catalogued.

The whole trick to writing something that will be meaningful to your readers is to write about what's meaningful to you. Koontz has always done this, but much of what he's chosen to write about has been on the outside. Now he's looking inside—a parting gift from the remarkable dog

who came into his life one fateful day in 1998—and his books are the richer and more resonant for doing so.

I'm not saying *A Big Little Life* is a religious tract. First and foremost, it's a wonderful story about an extraordinary dog. The insight it gives into Koontz's novels is simply a bonus.

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Here After, by Sean Costello, Your Scrivener Press, 2008, Cdn\$20.

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Sean Costello made a bit of a splash in the late eighties/early nineties with books such as *Eden's Eyes* and *The Cartoonist*. He penned one more horror novel and a couple of thrillers before he kind of faded from the public eye. This tends to happen in the publishing field for any number of reasons, so when it did, I did what most readers do: I found other things to read.

But I remembered liking those books, so when *Here After* showed up in my P.O. box, I was happy to give it a try.

Peter Croft is an anesthesiologist. At the beginning of the book he's just lost his ten-year-old son, David. Grief makes it hard for him to let go and he spirals into an understandable depression that makes him unable to do his job properly. Instead, he sits in his empty house, just marking time. But then he starts to get what seem to be messages from David with clues to children who have gone missing.

Suddenly, Croft has a purpose again.

It doesn't matter that people think he's crazy—he thinks he might be a little crazy—but it gives him a chance to connect to his boy once more and maybe help others from having to go through what he did.

Costello hasn't lost his touch over the years. The prose is still sharp, the characters well drawn. That said, I found this a hard book to read—particularly the first third—and I imagine it would be even more difficult for anyone who has lost a child. Croft's grief is so deep, and it's so realistically portrayed, that it leaves one feeling emotionally drained.

I'm not saying it's a bad book—not by any means. But it's not one that I would ever reread.

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Three Days to Dead, by Kelly Meding, Dell, 2009, \$6.99.

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What a terrific opening: Evan-geline Stone wakes up on a cold morgue table, in a stranger's body, with a big gap in her memory that includes how she ended up there in the first place.

She's one of a Triad of bounty hunters whose job is to get rid of all the murderous creatures that exist just out of sight: vampires, trolls, and the like. Stone's Triad were the best at their job, but something happened and now all three of them are dead, except Stone has come back, stuck in the body of a recent suicide that has none of the motor skills Stone once took for granted.

She needs to find out what happened, but every Triad, every monster, even the mundane police are after her. She's on the run and on a deadline because it also turns out that the reincarnation spell is going to wear off in three days. When it does, she'll die again, but this time it's for good.

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Three Days to Dead is a fun, fast-paced book, with a likable lead and a lot of energy. I liked pretty much everything about it, though I could have done without the complete Hollywood ending. The first rule of magic is that there should be a cost, otherwise it becomes too much like pulling a rabbit out of a hat as opposed to something with resonance. But hey, there's already a second book in the series on the publisher's schedule, so it's not like we didn't know how it would turn out.

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Street Magic, by Caitlin Kittredge, St. Martin's Press, 2009, \$6.99.

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I have one big problem with this book, and I'll get to it in a moment. First, let me tell you this is a great addition to the ever-expanding sub-genre of Urban Fantasy.

Pete Caldecott (a woman, never mind the distraction of the name) is a Detective Inspector with the London police. While investigating the kidnapping of a young girl, she follows a tip only to come face-to-face with a mage named Jack Winter

whom she saw killed before her eyes twelve years previously. Winter is still the bleached-blond, punk rock reprobate she knew, except now he has a heroin habit. Otherwise, he's very much alive.

Kittredge reveals their history before Winter's "death" in bits and pieces throughout the text as a determined Caldecott and reluctant Winter track down the kidnappers. The latter are from "Black London," a dangerous hidden world where supernatural creatures live, magic is real, and life is cheap.

Winter is completely at home in Black London, respected and feared, with a running *Escape from New York* joke where the first thing everyone says when they see him is, "I thought you were dead." Caldecott has connections to the hidden realm as well, something that surprises and frightens her, but not enough to stop her from tracking down the kidnappers who, by this point, have snatched more than one child.

Now I've heard that some British readers find that the British idioms in *Street Magic* don't entirely ring true to their ears, but I, and I'm sure most North American readers, won't pick up on that. The dialogue worked for me. I liked the back and forth between Caldecott and Winter and how Caldecott doesn't suffer fools. She's bright, smart, full of attitude, but with the wherewithal to back it up. Black London succeeds in being both quirky and dark, and includes a great updating of the Green Man theme. And the story itself works as a bewitching combination of fantasy, punky mainstream, horror, and noir detective.

I even liked Jack Winter.

All in all, it's a terrific debut of a new series except for one thing: I've met Jack Winter before.

Now I understand offering up a homage to another creator's work. It's part of the conversation of art where one work inspires another. But there's no indication anywhere in the text that Kittredge is paying tribute to John Constantine, the character Alan Moore created in *Swamp Thing*.

Constantine went on to be featured in his own series, *Hellblazer*, which is still being published on a monthly basis.

Kittredge's Winter is more like Constantine than Keanu Reeves was in the movie *Hellblazer*, and that was an official adaptation. The similarities abound: their punk rock beginnings, the London setting (okay, Constantine is from Newcastle, but he's best known for being based in London), the disastrous spell gone wrong in their past, the bleached hair, the self-centered personalities that rub everybody the wrong way until they turn on the charm, the hodge-podge magic that gets them out of one scrape after another, but with an underlying understanding that they also carry a bigger and more dangerous magical heritage.

Sure, there are little differences, but they're inconsequential. The only real difference is that Winter is a junkie (something the cover artist or art director missed with the buff Winter on the book's cover, but that isn't Kittredge's fault.)

I really wanted to like this book. I really did like it, but I kept getting kicked out when one more thing would remind me of how this could just as easily be a novelization of a *Hellblazer* story, though of course it isn't.

What's disappointing about this is that Kittredge has the writing chops and imagination to spare. She shows flare and originality throughout *Street Magic*, except with this one character. Unfortunately, this character is a major one, and unlike borrowing from folklore or mythology, he's not up for grabs.

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Dark Entries, by Ian Rankin & Werther Dell'edera, Vertigo Crime, 2009, \$19.99.

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And speaking of John Constantine, crime writer Ian Rankin takes a turn penning a story that sees Constantine coming up against the horror of...reality television.

Haunted Mansion is a new British reality show and a huge success until the house actually starts attacking the contestants. Constantine is called in as a consultant and is put into the house and on the show to see if he can find out what's going on from the inside. The problem is, the whole thing's a trap set especially for Constantine, and there's no way out.

Rankin brings a new spin to the character, placing him in a far different setting than the usual seedy London streets where we would expect to find Constantine. But while *Dark Entries* proves to be effective as a new *Hellblazer* adventure, it also works as a telling commentary on the current state of popular culture without even a hint of a lecturing tone.

The art is in black and white, courtesy of Werther Dell'edera, best known before this as the artist on Vertico's *Loveless* series. His art is spare, with a lot of vigorous linework, mostly composed of many widescreen panels per page, which I'm assuming is to mimic the experience of watching widescreen TV.

If you haven't tried *Hellblazer* before, *Dark Entries* is an excellent entry point.

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Locke & Key #1: Welcome to Lovecraft, by Joe Hill & Gabriel Rodriguez, IDW Publishing, 2008, \$24.99.

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Locke & Key #1: Head Games, by Joe Hill & Gabriel Rodriguez, IDW Publishing, 2009, \$24.99.

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There are so many comics published these days that it's impossible to keep up on them all—not to mention, who can afford to? But there are shining examples of the genre that shouldn't be missed and this is one.

Readers of this column will be familiar with Joe Hill. He's an acclaimed short story writer and novelist with a handful of awards under his belt and an impeccable lineage for a writer of dark fantasy and horror. Gabriel Rodriguez is best known for his work on *Clive Barker's The Great and Secret Show*. Together they have created one of the more fascinating and original fantasies I've run across in some time.

In volume one we meet the Locke children, teenagers Tyler, Kinsey, and their younger brother, Bode. Their father was a teacher and in the opening pages we learn that he has been killed by an ex-student. To get them away from all the attention and hoopla surrounding their father's gruesome death, their mother, Nina, moves them from out west to their father's old family home in New England, to a house named Keylocke in the town of Lovecraft. (You have to ask yourself, if you were in a situation like this, would you move to a place called Lovecraft? But I digress....)

Keylocke is a big rambling house full of secrets, some of them quirky and kind of cool, some of them deadly. It all hinges around these magical keys. There's the Anywhere Key that allows you to open a door and step through to anyplace you want to be. The Head Key which, when inserted into the back of the head (where a keyhole magically appears), allows you to take out things that you don't like (like the ability to feel sad, or a specific incident) or put in things (such as a textbook from school so that you don't have to study because you *know* everything in the book now). There's the Ghost Key that when you turn it in a lock, makes you fall down—for all intents and purposes, you're dead, but your ghost can go anywhere. And there are others, their abilities not yet described in the book, like the Gender Key, and the Echo Key.

Young Bode finds the first of them and that sets into motion a whole string of events that just go from bad to worse. I don't want to tell you too much because the joy of inventive series such as this is in your discovery of each new marvel and danger. Let me just say that Hill never goes

exactly where you think he will, and therein lies much of the pleasure.

I mentioned earlier that the three principal characters are a child and two teenagers, but there's a large cast of all ages and this definitely isn't a book aimed at young adults, though I'm sure they'd enjoy it. I don't know how I missed this series previously, but I'll be checking it out on a monthly basis from now on.

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Hunting Ground, by Patricia Briggs, Ace Books, 2009, \$7.99.

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Mercy Thompson: Homecoming, by Patricia Briggs, David Lawrence, Francis Tsai, & Amelia Woo, Daniel Brothers Publishing/Del Rey, 2009, \$22.95.

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I'm not going to spend a lot of column space on these two books. It's more to let you know that the second "Alpha and Omega" novel is just as strong a contender as any of Briggs's previous Urban Fantasy books.

As for *Homecoming*, Del Rey's done a fine job of collecting the first arc in hardcover. We talked about some individual issues in a previous column, but to recap quickly, this tells the story of Mercy's arrival in the Tri Cities and shows us how she first met many of the familiar characters from the prose series. At the time we last looked in on them, only a couple of

issues were out, showing lots of promise. I can tell you that all involved did a fine job of bringing the story to a satisfactory conclusion. And it's a handsome, if slender, book.

If you're a fan of the prose series, you don't want to miss this.

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From the Pen of Paul: The Fantastic Images of Frank R. Paul, edited by Stephen D. Korshak, Shasta/Phoenix, 2009, \$39.95.

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I'm a big fan of old pulp magazine art, especially the covers. The big bright colors; the inventive machines, space ships, aliens, and monsters; the glorious imagined landscapes of other planets and the deeps of space. These artists had no access to the resources we have today, yet their depictions remain iconic.

Tastes in art have changed over the years. What was once commercial and a selling point is now considered quaintly old-fashioned. But for those of us interested in the history of the field, the art from the old pulps are still eye-popping signposts along the way of biographies and bibliographies—gateways into a world that never was, but remains alive in our imaginations.

One of the first practitioners in the field was a young Viennese artist who arrived in the States in the early part of the twentieth century, bringing with him the more mundane artistic skills of calligraphy and architectural and mechanical

drafting, all of which he used to underpin the subsequent fantastic flights of imagination that he created for the early pulp magazines.

Frank R. Paul is rightly called the father of science fiction illustration, as he was the cover artist for Hugh Gernsback's first issue of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, for which he also designed the magazine's iconic logo. He went on to do more than 200 published covers and five times that many black and white interior illustrations. His art illustrated stories by the likes of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jack Williamson, and Edgar Allan Poe.

Perhaps more importantly, his art on the cover of magazines first attracted to the field young men who would later become giants: authors such as Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, the artist Chesley Bonestell, and even the ultimate fan, Forrest J Ackerman. When you consider how many young creative minds were stimulated to go on to do their own work after reading their books, viewing their cover art, or in the case of Ackerman, flipping through the pages of *Famous Monsters*, Paul's influence on our field becomes quite astonishing.

This collection reprints a wide range of Paul's early cover art from various sources—bright, fantastic paintings that leap off the page. There's a short biography and some other text, but mostly it's simply page after page of these wonderful pulp covers and I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in both the history of our field and the art that brought the stories so vividly to life.

There's also a deluxe edition available for an additional \$20 that contains an index of all the covers and black and white illustrations.

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Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

Department: **BOOKS** by Chris Moriarty

Shambling Towards Hiroshima, by James Morrow,
Tachyon, 2009, \$14.95.

How to Make Friends with Demons, by Graham Joyce,
Night Shade Books, 2009, \$14.95.

The Last Theorem, by Arthur C. Clarke and Frederik Pohl,
Del Rey, 2009, \$15 (reprint).

City at the End of Time, by Greg Bear, Del Rey, 2009, \$16
(reprint).

Implied Spaces, by Walter Jon Williams, Night Shade
Books, 2009, \$7.99 (reprint).

* * * *

This month, my pets, I have a whole armful of pretty shiny new books for you. Interestingly, however—and this was completely unintentional on my part—none of them are by pretty shiny new writers. If this month's column has a theme, it's that old dogs still have plenty of tricks left in them.

In fact, the overload of new books from old favorites was so great that I'm having to put one off—and it's a big one. So here's fair warning for the faint-hearted: my next column will be a C. J. Cherryh extravaganza, not limited to currently in-print books (after all, why should it be, when we all have internet booksellers at our fingertips?) and centering on this year's *Regenesis*—the eighteen-year-awaited sequel to Cherryh's dark masterpiece, *Cyteen*.

Actually, I'm a bit regretful about the postponement because *Regenesis* offers fascinating parallels with Greg Bear's *City at the End of Time*. Both books showcase great hard sf writers revisiting the settings and themes that defined their most ambitious mid-career books. In Bear's case I find this backtracking particularly satisfying because I've always felt that the Campbellian cyberpunk-fantasy mythos of *Queen of Angels* was an underrated pivotal moment in our genre.

But more on that later. In the meantime, we have other fish to fry. They are big fish, dear reader, and we won't be gentle with them. So take these reviews with a bushel of salt. These are all phenomenal writers working at the absolute top of their game. No need for kid-glove first-novel treatment here. When you're dealing with gods, honesty is always the safest policy.

* * * *

I know it's an accepted reviewing cliché to call any remotely humorous book a "romp," but *Shambling Towards Hiroshima* actually is one. In every sense of the word.

James Morrow, if you haven't yet encountered him, is the exasperatingly yet charmingly quirky author of a long line of metaphysical satires like *Towing Jehovah*, *The Eternal Footman*, and *The Last Witchfinder*. In *Shambling Towards Hiroshima*, he is up to his usual mischief. He parachutes us into the bizarre underworld of B-movie monsters and their groupies. When Syms Thorley, a.k.a. Gorgantis, is press-ganged onto a top-secret navy project to secure Japan's surrender with fake movie footage of the destruction of Tokyo

by fire-breathing reptiles, he sees Operation Fortune Cookie mainly as an interruption of his "serious" monster *oeuvre*. However, things turn grim when the movie fails to convince the Japanese High Command and Truman is forced to use the A-bomb. Thorley plunges into a morass of regrets and self-recrimination. Was he somehow responsible for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? If his shambling had been better, would history have unfolded differently? In the midst of his existential despair, Thorley experiences a sudden improvement in his professional fortunes: rediscovered top-secret footage of Thorley's performance sparks a monster movie revival in Japan, including a slew of new Gorgantis movies. He becomes an international B-movie star, toasted at sf conventions around the globe. And yet, he stays true to his principles, accepting Guest of Honor invites only to harangue his bewildered fans with impassioned anti-nuke speeches in which he likens himself to the *hibakusha*, the "burned people" of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Does this all sound unbelievably tasteless yet? If so, then I've probably done a decent job of describing the book.

None of which changes the fact that this book was a ridiculously fun read. God only knows why. I certainly don't. This is the sort of folderol that only James Morrow could pull off. Which he does. With a full measure of his usual exasperating charm.

The one flat note in this otherwise pitch-perfect satire is its curiously dated feel. It reads like a book that was written back in the Reagan era. The framing narrative pays lip service to the idea of a "lost" manuscript, but there is no real

thematic heft to the conceit. Morrow's characters—from his straight-arrow G-men to his Swanson-esque horror divas—are clever riffs on atomic age stereotypes. But in the end it is the story itself that feels antique. Our big fears have changed over the last few decades. Nuclear annihilation seems almost quaint compared to humanity's other self-inflicted wounds. (Yeah, I'm talking about you, global warming, religious wackjobs, dying oceans, and that creepy thing that's happening to frogs lately....)

In the end, reading this book felt like listening to an oldies station. And to the extent that Morrow fails to grapple with this disconnect, the book remains a charming and nostalgic romp and not the powerful political satire that Morrow is capable of delivering.

Still, there's a lot to be said for a charming romp. It's sure as heck more fun than sitting around thinking about six-headed frogs.

* * * *

If we are picking our favorite literary fantasy writers, then I vote for Graham Joyce. Early and often. Okay, maybe Geoff Ryman can give him a run for the money. Maybe. But I wouldn't bet Auntie Em's farm on it.

How to Make Friends with Demons is the story of William Heaney, a man who has lived his entire adult life convinced that he is under a curse. He tries to neutralize the curse by living a rational "demon-free" existence and performing convoluted (and not always legal) acts of charity. When a scheme to sell counterfeit first editions of Jane Austen throws

him into the path of a demon-possessed Gulf War vet, Heaney's carefully constructed life comes unraveled and he is forced to resurrect his past in order to figure out where things went so terribly wrong for him.

This novel builds up a powerful head of steam—but it does it slowly enough that I wondered at times how Joyce was going to pull all the threads together by the end of the relatively slender volume. This is typical of Joyce's novels. They aren't zero to sixty in point six seconds Ferrari-style books. They're more like old-style Soviet tractors: the kind that run on bear grease at eighty below zero, plow a straight furrow in solid rock, and can be conveniently retrofitted as tank chassis the next time the Germans invade.

Also vintage Joyce is the book's slightly off-kilter narrative arc. His novels always have an odd little hitch in their get-along that keeps you from ever truly relaxing into the story. Every time I pick up a new Graham Joyce book I'm terrified that some idiotic editor will finally have put the thumb screws on him to "fix" these "mistakes" ... which of course aren't mistakes at all, but elegant crimes against reader complacency committed with malice aforethought.

Happily, Mr. Joyce seems to be fairly resistant to thumbscrew-wielding editors. But just in case he ever wavers—where do I mail my check in support of the Keep Graham Joyce Just the Way He Is Foundation?

* * * *

I hope I get old like Frederik Pohl and Arthur C. Clarke. In fact, I hope we all get old like these guys. If we could figure

out how to do that we could probably end war, stop global warming, and maybe even fix that thing with the frogs. Sorry to say, most people are already on the wrong track by the time they're about seven.

Be that as it may, *The Last Theorem* is a genuine and highly satisfying blend of these two great writers. True, it does not have the austere majesty of early Clarke. True, it didn't really pan out as a novel about number theory. True, there isn't really any Big Sexy New Science Idea in the book. And true, the science ideas and social mores of this book feel rather quaint at times. Sometimes the quaintness is charming. ("Hey, look, Myrtle, it's a Sky Hook!") At other times ... not so much. (For example, the hero's homosexual affair with his college roommate is written off as a "youthful indiscretion" from which he recovers with about as much emotional conflict as most people recover from a head cold. And then his suspiciously June Cleaver-ish wife gets her Ph.D. from MIT and then uncomplainingly takes ten years off to stay at home with the kids because—as she explains it—that's just the way life is, and sensible women just try to keep up with the professional literature in their spare time. I know this is going to make me sound like a shallow and trivial person (which I am), but I spent a distressing amount of time wondering just *how* apocalyptically bad this couple's sex life was....

Honestly, though—who cares about all that? This is a genuine Frederik Pohl and Arthur C. Clarke novel. It's a worthy addition to both men's works. And, best of all, it's a chance to sit down one more time with a pair of old, old

friends and find them just as sharp, witty, and wise as they ever have been.

* * * *

I haven't been paying enough attention to Greg Bear lately. In theory he's one of my favorite hard sf writers. But lately he seems to have abandoned sf in favor of mainstream-ish near-future technothrillers. And reading airport books by Greg Bear is sort of like listening to Glenn Gould play the Boston Pops. He writes them so well that it seems downright churlish to complain. But for cripes sake...doesn't the guy who wrote *Slant* and *Blood Music* and *Queen of Angels* have better things to do?

Or anyway, that's my excuse for letting *City at the End of Time* languish unread on my desk for several months before I got around to looking at it.

What was I thinking?

City at the End of Time is about the furthest thing in the multiverse from an airport novel. It's also true hard sf. Reviewers who've characterized the book as Miéville-esque urban fantasy haven't just missed the boat—they're still staggering around in the fog trying to find their way down to the water.

In essence, this book is a vast, oceanic riff on Jorge Luis Borges's "Library of Babel." Bear is not the first writer to pen a meditation on this seminal story. However, this is the only "Babel" variant I can remember that has enough intellectual and emotional muscle to read like an independent story, rather than a mere retelling.

It all begins with a map, *natürlich*. Thus far we are still in the domain of fantasy. But this is not one of those "worlds with square corners" maps that Ursula K. Le Guin likes to make fun of. Instead, it is a forbiddingly abstract set of interlocking circles: a cryptic image that challenges readers to produce their own explanations. On first seeing it I wondered if it might represent a mitochondria's eye view of the world outside the sheltering cell walls. Or perhaps the sort of inside-out, topsy-turvy cosmology that might be conceived by beings that inhabit the mantle of a star? Or, maybe...well, my other speculations were all even more embarrassingly off target.

The map is a tease, of course. But Greg Bear is an honest tease—as are all great writers. He keeps the mystery alive not by stingily withholding information but by presenting rich, vivid, wonderfully polyvalent clues that challenge readers to come up with new hypotheses and test them against the unfolding story. It is a gauge of Bear's mastery that the book never feels like a cheat and that he manages to craft a reading experience that blends the rigors of scientific method with the more homespun pleasures of good gossip.

The reading experience was not wholly gripping on a page-by-page level. At least not for me. But slack moments are inevitable in a long novel whose core subject matter has more to do with quantum physics than human emotions. And when I did catch myself skimming it was almost always because I was impatient to find out what was happening in the *other* storyline. That says volumes.

I also felt another kind of impatience while reading this book—one that is characteristic of the experience of reading really great hard sf. I wanted to know what Bear was *after*. I wanted to get to the end of the book in order to be able to look back and take stock of the whole territory. And not just the territory of this particular book. Because of course much of the pleasure of reading fine work by a writer deep into his career is the chance to see how each new book fits into the larger picture of the writer's work as a whole.

In many ways, *City at the End of Time* represents the fruition of the strand of Bear's work exemplified by *Queen of Angels*. I confess, I feel vindicated by this, since I've always felt that *Queen of Angels* deserves more attention than it gets. That novel's major weakness—both internally and in terms of its wider reception—was Bear's overt reliance on voodoo mythology. For reasons that had nothing to do with the book itself, it became hard for readers to separate the loas in *Queen of Angels* from their opposite and better known numbers in William Gibson's neuromancer trilogy. But Gibson's loas are largely arbitrary names overlaid onto the fundamentally alien processes of emergent artificial life. Whereas I've always thought that Bear was after something else—some Straussian web of meaning flexible enough to encompass all of our worlds, internal as well as external, artificial as well as organic.

I think—I think—that this is what he's still after. And in *City at the End of Time*, he successfully recasts his quest in terms broad enough to encompass quantum cosmology, modern theories about galactic evolution, and even Buddhist

and Hindu mythology. The result is a novel as intellectually challenging and aesthetically satisfying as anything he has ever written before.

* * * *

And now we come to the last old dog on our list: Walter Jon Williams.

I guess I ought to give you the most important news first: this book was by far the most entertaining read of anything I looked at while preparing this month's column. Its send-up of gamer culture is a hoot. The plot charges ahead like a bullet train. (This is, of course, always the case in Williams's books, but sometimes one needs to say even the things that go without saying.) The characters are intelligent and charismatic enough to resonate long, long after the last page is turned. And I haven't even gotten around to mentioning Williams's masterful deployment of the infinite narrative possibilities of pocket universes.

I complained in a prior column that NASA killed Science Fantasy. But happily technology giveth as well as taketh away. And everything we lost when NASA made Mars boring has been recouped in spades on the VR frontier. Want sword-slashing Amazons riding giant telepathic lizards? You got 'em—and all at the low, low price of a little painless handwaving about Vingean singularities, Matrioshka arrays, and pocket universes.

Williams has taken full advantage of this technopoetic license to weave together a world that combines the sensual thrill of slumming it in the science fantasy badlands with the

more cerebral joys of working out just how those lizard-straddling Amazons got there. Best of all, he has placed at the center of his book a hero uniquely conceived to illuminate the landscape: a "scholar of implied spaces" who charts the *evolution* of artificial universes.

This is where *Implied Spaces* makes the jump from mere space opera (not that there's anything wrong with that!) to full-fledged hard sf. This is new—to the best of my knowledge. And it's important.

One of the great structural weaknesses of most current hard sf is the failure to grasp the true scope of evolution. It's not really anyone's fault, strictly speaking; it's just that sf writers, albeit Very Smart Persons (VSPs), are still members of the human species. And our species still hasn't quite wrapped its collective mind around Darwin. (For more on this, see Dennett, Dawkins, Wilson, Szathmary, and a lot of other VSPs.)

All systems evolve. Including systems of information. Artificial, organic, biosphere, noosphere. It's all information. It all evolves. Even the very cogs and flywheels of evolution itself evolve. (After all, what is natural selection but a marvelously honed system for the transmission and preservation of genetic information?)

The failure to appreciate the arbitrary nature of our habitual division between natural and artificial information systems has resulted in a sort of unspoken notion among many sf writers that post-Singularity minds and bodies will somehow be subject to different rules of evolution—or perhaps not subject to evolution at all. Oh, no one says it. But

it is the ghost in the machine—or rather, the absence of a ghost. It is there in the overly tidy political systems, in the static biospheres, in the absence of mosquitoes, in the general sentiment that stuff, including the stuff we're made of, is going to work better in the future.

Hogswaddle!

Life without mosquitoes (or some artificial version thereof) wouldn't work. More to the point, life without mosquitoes—and all their biospheric and noospheric equivalents—would be boring.

Walter Jon Williams grabs this fundamental truth two-fisted—and runs with it. I won't rob you of the pleasure of watching his meditation on artificial evolution unfold through the course of this masterful novel, but I have one word that should perk up the ears of any reader of Gould and Dawkins:

Squitches.

Okay. That's it then. Get off your duff and go read the book.

And happy squinch hunting....

Short Story: **BAIT** by Robin Aurelian

Robin Aurelian, who contributed a handful of stories to our pages in the late '90s (including "Proxies" and "Jelly Bones"), returns with an unusual and amusing fantasy.

Navin hugged his daypack to his stomach. Inside it, he had packed his favorite games—the ones that involved casting protection circles and solving puzzles. Unlike most kids in his eighth-grade class, he wasn't interested in piling up a high body count. "Where's the fairy repellent?" he asked.

"Packed," said Mom.

"Outlaw bait?" Navin said.

"I forgot," said Dad. He headed for the garage.

"What about the sleeping bags?" asked Navin.

"They're in the station wagon," said his older sister, Spike.

"Will you quit asking questions so we can get this show on the road?"

Navin hated the twice-a-year family hunting trips, and always tried to get out of them. Spike adored and excelled at hunting and fishing. She'd bagged three outlaws, an adolescent river dragon, and an angel last summer, which had kept the housetrolls and brownies and gnomes happily fed for months. Dad was no slouch at hunting, either. Mom was better at rendering whatever game they caught, and she

made Navin help her at base camp every year. They brought Navin along so they could hunt his permits.

All Navin brought home was bites. The weirdest things bit him. Last fall, he had caught a fever/chills combo that made dressing difficult, and the spring before that, a water nixie had chewed on his finger and he got bloat. When he was in sixth grade, he'd spent a month with blue skin. No doctor, occult or otherwise, had been able to tell what caused the condition, but he just knew it was the result of some kind of bite.

"Why do I have to taste so good?" he muttered.

Spike heard him. She always heard him when he least wanted her to. "You have to be good for something," she said. "Maybe we could use *you* for bait."

Navin thought of Spike putting a hook through his stomach and dropping him into a lake. He wondered what she'd catch.

"Stop torturing your little brother and get in the car," said Mom. It was something she said often. Usually Spike only paid attention to the second half.

Navin had to sit in the back seat with Spike. She spent the drive drawing tiny targets all over his right arm in indelible red and black ink. It hurt a lot less than other things she threatened to do to him.

The enchanted forest Dad drove them to for spring break was near the Superstition Mountains, one of Navin's least favorite locations on Earth. Right now the Ridiculous Trees were in full bloom. Navin sneezed blue pollen onto his shirt. It stained.

They were almost to their reserved campsite when Spike cried, "Stop the car!"

Dad pulled over, the way he always did for Spike. Spike grabbed the big net and the miniharpoon and leapt out of the car. She ran into the trees beside the road, letting loose a hunting cry. She knew so many Navin couldn't keep them straight. Some attracted attention, and others served to terrify. She sometimes used them on him, but he didn't always react correctly, which to Spike was just further evidence that he'd always be a feckless, useless magician, and she would always be a mighty hunter.

The air in the car was stuffy and smelled of the decaying baits Spike had packed. Navin rolled down his window and rested his arm on the sill. One of the lesser gnat fairies flew in, settled on his skin, and plunged its proboscis into the red center of one of Spike's targets. Maybe he could get really sick right away, and be sent home or to the hospital, so he could skip the rest of the trip.

Unfortunately, he didn't have an extreme reaction to the bite—just the normal swollen, itchy bump, this time more decorative than usual thanks to Spike's artwork. The gnat hummed a tinkling song after it had finished, summoning a bunch of other gnat-fairies. Not all of them restricted themselves to the targets. Apparently his undecorated arm was just as tasty, and they liked his face, too. He crossed his eyes to watch three on his nose. Courteously, they didn't bite him in the eyes or mouth.

"Navin, what is *wrong* with you?" asked his mother, spraying clouds of odoriferous repellent over him and stinging

his eyes. "It's not like we can use those for anything. Stop wasting blood."

The gnats were undaunted by the repellent. One on his face gave him a kiss before she flew off. He touched the small warm spot on his cheek as Mom got out the fly swatter and swatted away most of the others. "Roll up your window, for heaven's sake," said Mom.

Navin sighed and obeyed. He was covered with small welts. He peeked into the neck of his shirt and saw a dragonfly pixie nestled against his chest, its little red mouth pressed to his skin. The mild narcotic it secreted as it sucked made the itching from the gnat bites fade, and started him hallucinating. He let his head roll back and watched sunlight twist and dance in sparkling patterns on the ceiling.

Spike whooped, wrenched open the back door, and collapsed onto her seat, the net plump with three stinking, bloody howlet corpses. "Here," she said, dropping them in Navin's lap. "Make yourself useful." She wiped her bloody hands on his shirt.

"Good start," said Dad as he turned the key in the ignition. The car trolls under the hood growled in anticipation of a feast.

Spike whistled her triumph song.

The bodies were still warm, one of them twitching. Navin turned around in his seat and rescued the rendering kit from the snarl of luggage in the back. He fished the first howlet out of the net, opened its belly with a surgical knife, and dumped the internal organs into the collapsible gut bucket. Spike watched to make sure he cleaned out everything that would

putrefy fast. He packed salt into the corpse and then worked the other two. Afterward he sat sticky and stinking until they reached the campsite and he could rinse off under the pump.

The campground was full of hunters; it was the first day of the season, and everybody needed food for the household appliances and power trolls. Spike screamed with joy when she discovered that her boyfriend had set up a tent on the site next to theirs. Spike's boyfriend was almost as great a hunter as she was, and he was just as happy to see her as she was to see him. They immediately set up a challenge on who would kill the most game by the following evening.

Spike and Dad geared up in orange vests and loaded themselves with weapons and carry sacks, then rushed off into the forest.

"Catch us some trout for supper," Mom said. She handed Navin a fishing pole and some bait. She had already skinned the howlets, fed a few cuts to the car trolls, and iced all the other useful parts.

Navin headed for the lake. He settled on a rock and opened his shirt to let out the torpid dragonfly pixie, her abdomen now swollen with his blood. "Hey, handsome," she whispered, clinging to his finger. "Wanna incubate my eggs?"

"Um, no," he said.

"Too late! I already laid them!" Her wings buzzed into a frenzy of flight; she took off across the lake. A young dragon broke the surface of the water and snapped her up.

Navin headed home half an hour later with five fish on a string and something the size of a squirrel attached to the small of his back. It had crept into his shirt while he was

drowsing, but its bite woke him up, a ring of fire like a brand pressing into him. It had four legs braced against his back, and their claws pierced his skin, anchoring it where it was. When he tried to pull it off, it hurt as though he was trying to tear chunks out of his flesh. He stopped pulling at it, and the pain subsided until all he felt was its weight and the sleek short fur that covered it. He figured Mom would handle it.

A campfire burned in the stone circle at their campsite. Dad and Spike were back, roasting were-rabbit haunches over the flames; three gutted outlaws hung from their seasoning tree, toes tagged with turquoise family hunting permits.

"I got the big one," Spike said.

Navin spat the fish and held them over the fire.

"He tried to catch *me*! Jumped down from a tree on top of me, the fool. Had a wallet full of cash, too." She pulled it out to show them. Four red toe-tags fell out.

"But that's—" Navin said.

Spike threw the tags into the fire. "Whoops," she said, and smiled.

"I caught something, too," Navin said, when he could stop thinking about the fact that Spike had killed a hunter, not an outlaw.

"Yeah, some tiny fish. Nice job, nimmnull," said Spike.

"Something else," Navin said. "I don't know what. It's on my back."

"*Navin*," said his mother, exasperated. She jerked his shirt up and gasped.

"Uh oh," said Spike.

"Criminy!" Dad said.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" Mom said. Her voice squeaked.

"Can we cut it off?" Spike asked.

"It's too late. It's fused with his spine. We'll have to let nature take its course."

"What is it?" Navin asked.

"Something rare," Mom said. She sounded subdued. "I'll tell you more tomorrow. For now, enjoy your dinner. Better sleep on your stomach." She gave him not only all the fish he had caught, but two of the were-rabbit haunches, and she kissed his cheek before she bundled him into his tent under three layers of netting.

"Come on, Mom. What is that thing on Navin?" he heard Spike ask Mom while he was drifting off to sleep.

"A cullathoat. A parasite. It comes alive once it colonizes another lifeform. Unless Navin can separate from it using his own power, he doesn't have long before it takes him over." She sounded sad. Would she miss him? He thought maybe she would. He and his mother shared many tasks; she always appreciated a job well done. His father had never had any use for him.

Finally something had bit him he couldn't walk away from, he thought, and tested his mental temperature. In a way it seemed he'd been waiting for this all his life. If he wouldn't hunt, he would be hunted. This time by something bigger than his finger.

Spike would probably miss using him for target practice.

He raised himself on his elbows, got a glowstick and lit the end with the faintest touch of magic, then rummaged through

his pack until he found his protection circle kit. This was a practice kit that had no practical applications, and the parasite was already inside any circle Navin could cast. Still, he pulled out the diagram of the strongest circle in the set and laid it on the floor.

"What does it eat?" Spike asked.

"Children," Mom muttered. "If he had stronger magic, he might have a chance to detach it, but I don't have high hopes. He doesn't seem to have a fight-back gene. Look at the way he lets things bite him all the time. He should have fought it when it first bit him. I think it might be too late now."

"Poor kid. He's always been kind of puny," said Dad.

"If the other thing wins, can we use it as bait?" Spike asked. "Or do we hunt it?"

"Sometimes, Spike, you're a horrible child," said Mom.

"Wait till tomorrow," Dad said.

Navin had learned his anti-fighting strategy early, from bouts with Spike. When he collapsed into a helpless state, it bored and frustrated her, whereas fighting back got him much worse punishments, and he never could win. The bites of other things interested him. Once something bit him with steroid side effects and he'd bulked up for a week, which had been fun. Another time he'd gained extra sight and could see emotions. Some of the bites had narcotic effects; he enjoyed altered states.

He had hatched a number of subcutaneous eggs, and some of the babies were affectionate before they flew or ran or slithered off. Others wanted to eat their way out of him,

and he wasn't as sanguine about that. In those cases, he told Mom, and she took him to the Parasite Removal Clinic.

Now he tried to marshal his magical power, which he used primarily for lock charms to keep Spike out of his room (most of them snapped open when she focused on them) and invisible charms to keep anyone from noticing him when he wanted to sneak out of the house or get a head start. He built power between his hands, a faint blue ball of force, spinning as he added everything he could muster to it. "Evict," he said to it, and pressed it against the warm, sleek-furred lump on his back.

The thing squalled, but didn't release its hold on his back. Its feet scrabbled, its claws digging deeper into his flesh.

He muffled his own cries in his pillow as the pain intensified. They both lay quiet, the thing unmoving, Navin waiting until the pain dropped to a bearable level.

He mustered power a second time. The ball was smaller and dimmer this time, though he worked longer to call it. This time when he lifted it to his lips, he whispered, "Sleep it."

When he pressed it to the animal, the animal squirmed once—pain!—and lay still. It relaxed under his hand, and its almost unheard breathing slowed. Navin waited, then tried to pull the animal off him. The claws came loose of his flesh, but the mouth remained fixed. Fused with his spine, his mother had said. Could he slice it off? No, or Mom would have said. He tugged until the pain was so intense all his muscles locked and wouldn't allow him to move.

He called once more for magic. Only flickers came. He closed his eyes and reached into the deepest well of himself,

asking for everything he had, and finally the glow strengthened. When he had gathered every shred of power he could find, he whispered, "Change us into something nicer." He pressed the power against the sleeping parasite, now part of him. The animal did not struggle against this enchantment; he felt it spread from the animal into himself, and it felt comforting and good.

Navin slept for a while, then woke to strange pressures in his head, hands, legs, spine. In the dim light of the fairy repellent, he saw that his skin had changed: it was faintly furred, striped with shadows. His upper teeth pressed against his lower lip in a new way. He touched a tooth, and his finger came away bloody—he hadn't felt the cut! And what was with his fingers? Instead of fingernails, he had hard points on the ends of his fingers. He clenched his fingers and claws sprang from sheaths.

His body below the waist had changed completely. He had haunches now, strange braidings of muscles under heavier fur, and his feet had elongated, heels high off the ground, toes longer, clawed now. His knees bent wrong. He took a couple steps, and aside from a tendency to fall forward, he managed.

Everything smelled loudly. He was way aware of the seasoning carcasses of Spike's and Dad's kills, the blood-soaked ground below them, the many scavengers thronged there to take advantage of the feast; his mother and father smelled of campfire smoke, roasted meat, and sex in their double sleeping bag in the next tent. Navin smelled the camping gear, the different woods still smoldering under a

layer of ash in the campfire, the scents of trees, night-blooming carnivorous flowers, the massed and active life in the forest all around him, one thing preying on another.

He heard rustles in the underbrush, the beat of many different sizes of wings, the squeaks and cries of mating or hunting, and he almost knew what each creature was just by the sound.

I know, whispered something inside him. *I know which ones are good to eat. The best one is—*

That smell from Spike's tent. The sour sister scent, a blend of other creatures' blood, her own sweat, the girl, her youth, and her boyfriend, curled with her, also tasty, tender, sour and sweet. His mouth watered thinking about their muscles and blood and organs.

He blinked, trying to steer his thoughts away. He glanced around his tent, found his pack, with its old games. It was hard to work the zippers with his new claws, but he taught himself. Should he leave the games behind? No. He could always toss them later. He snuck out of the tent, much more quietly than he'd been able to manage before, and ghosted through the camp, taking two of Spike's best knives, some smoked meat his mother had prepared (though it smelled rancid and greasy to him now), and one of his dad's firestarters. Would he need clothes? His fur wasn't very long, but he wasn't cold. It was spring. He didn't know who he was becoming or where he'd be by winter. He found a microfleece blanket and shoved it into his pack.

He told himself to run before anyone else woke up, but he couldn't resist parting the tentflap and peering in at Spike and

her boyfriend. They were both speckled with the musty-scented blood of their kills, and Spike's fingernails were caked with it. Spike and the boy smelled almost too old to Navin's new senses, not as succulent and inviting as younger kids would smell, yet better than anything else in camp. He stared down at his sister's hands that had hurt him so often, and thought how incapacitated she would be if he ate just one of them. He imagined the little bones crunching between his molars, and saliva dripped from his mouth.

Spike stirred. Her eyes opened. She stared straight at him.

She was unarmed, tangled with her boyfriend, naked, and she smelled tastier than anything else within a mile. He took an involuntary step toward her.

Her hand darted out, came up with a gun. Of course, she wouldn't sleep without a weapon near, especially while she was on a hunt. "Navin?" she said. Her idiot boyfriend finally woke at the word and turned to stare up at him.

Navin licked his lips—his new tongue was longer than the old one, and seemed able to work around his new teeth without cutting itself—and stared at his sister. Bite her, let her shoot him, what?

Not let her shoot him. He'd sat still for too much of that.

His stomach growled. She'd shoot him if he went for her. Anyway, he didn't want to be what she was, a hunter. Did he?

Claws, sharp teeth, drooling at the thought of fresh meat. He didn't really have much choice. He turned away from Spike and dropped the tent flap, and then, before she could rise, he ran into the forest, his feet quiet, his breathing smooth. He could see well enough to avoid branches, traps,

the snares of those who hunted with their own body parts and those who had come here from the city. He climbed a loquat tree, displacing a hive of hornet fairies and three nests of meat-eating crows, and made a place for himself as high up as there were branches to hold him.

From here he could see stars. Even if we can't eat Spike, he thought, we'll be able to find enough to eat, won't we?

One of his hands darted out, returned with a small naked baby tree gnome. Before he knew what had happened, it was in his mouth, and oh, it tasted delicious!

Sure, thought his new other half. *We can find what we need. We can find what we want, but you have to let us get it.* An image of Spike, looking plump and tender and helpless, flashed through his mind. What happened to my niceness spell? Navin wondered.

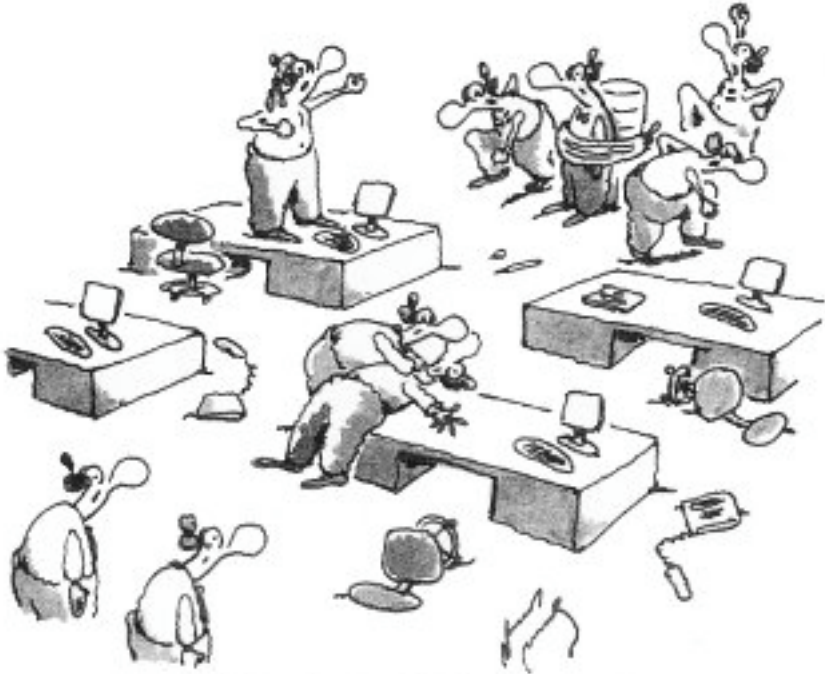
Without that curst spell you hobbled us with, we could have had the fingers off that tricky sister before she woke, and the toes off her boyfriend, too. That spell worries us.

His hand snatched two more baby tree gnomes from the nearby nest. So small and rounded, soft-skinned and squirmy. They smelled like ambrosia.

Babies, he thought. Babies had never hurt him.

They squalled until he bit their heads off.

* * * *



*"I don't understand it, sir, the computers
have only been down for an hour."*

"I don't understand it, sir, the computers have only been
down for an hour."

* * * *

Novelet: **WRITERS OF THE FUTURE** by Charles Oberndorf

Charles Oberndorf is the author of three novels: Sheltered Lives, Testing, and Foragers, and he is working on two more. He teaches at the University School in Cleveland, where he has taught seventh graders for more than twenty-five years. His new story, like his last ("Another Life" in our Oct./Nov. 2009 issue), is set in the far future, but unlike the last one, this tale would get a PG-13 rating if it were a movie.

* * * *

Once there had been a thousand worlds. Ten million remaining flesh and blood souls: all this humanity divided amongst spheres, wheels, and cylinders, all these worlds orbiting the path Mars once followed.

And there were the Minds, that silver-yellow halo circling the sun where Earth once flew its steady course. The Minds had converted the rest of the solar system to their own purposes, and nothing else remained but possibility. One day we might overwhelm the Minds and limit their omnipresence. One day we might build starships and seek other worlds where humanity might start over.

Now a hundred worlds orbit the path Mars once followed, at most one million remaining flesh and blood souls. We live the Old Age of mankind. Today's entropic sadness is to be newborn, or ten, or twenty, to be full of youth and to not feel old at all.

—Magnus Esner

* * * *

I. A Writer's Beginning

When I was an adolescent, Magnus Esner was my favorite writer. You had to wait a year, a whole 687 days, for a new novel to come out, and you had to join a queue to read it. In those days, a book by Esner could only handle a hundred readers at a time. I still remember when it came my turn to read *Suicide Missions*, the anticipation I felt while putting the gear on. I was in my reading chair, head back, hands draped on armrests, legs outstretched, and I was no longer living in my world, but instead I was living in another world, in Haynlayn. I was in my tiny bachelor's quarters with a bed that folded into one wall and clothing hampers that pulled out from the other. I was Rahul Valentine in my tiny room, watching my hands pick up items for cleaning teeth, washing skin, placing them in my kit while Esner's voice, the perfect storytelling voice that probably wasn't his voice at all, said, "He was getting ready to depart in his one-man fighter. He would fly sixty-five million kilometers until he reached the Minds. He knew he wasn't coming back. He knew he would never see Nina again, never again feel her warm kisses. He

would never push off in the free-fall gym, never play wallball again, never again rage against his father's expectations or his mother's absence from his life."

Here I was, eight years old, a mere adolescent, a reader, and I was Rahul Valentine, who would have been alive hundreds of years ago, if he'd really existed, and I was preparing to die for the future of mankind. This was back when there were more than a thousand worlds, when Haynlayn waged its singular war against the Minds. The reader me, the real person in the reading chair, would be so tempted to cop out, to find a different way to attack the Minds. Maybe I'd think of a way to plant a bomb before getting caught and thus escape with my ship and my life intact. Or maybe I'd come up with a special impossible plan that would lead to harmony between the Thousand Worlds and the Minds, but Esner had me believing that Valentine wouldn't do any of those things. Rahul Valentine would fly sixty-five million kilometers and dive right into the heart of the enemy, perhaps destroying just a few million tons of memory before his ship was obliterated, and that would be a worthy statement that humans would not live benignly before the omnipresence of the Minds, circling the sun like a silver-yellow halo where once our Earth used to orbit. How I loved the way Esner wrote!

The next chapter: I was no longer Rahul Valentine, a solitary fighter pilot. I was Nina, his lover. I stood by Rahul as he packed his kit, and I tried to talk him out of going. The reader me yearned to have such a lover, because girls didn't seem to take an interest in anything I did. But in this case,

while Rahul made his final preparations, while his ship was being readied, while he was given his final briefing, Nina secretly investigated the purpose of the mission. In chapter four, she discovered the mission was a ruse, that Rahul has been set up to die. I knew immediately who had arranged this. It was Alexander Sober, and that's who she now confronted. I knew it was a mistake to confront Sober, but I could feel her passionate stubbornness carry us down the corridor to that office door.

My friend Henry had also loved *Suicide Missions*. He couldn't believe that Nina would confront Sober like that. Why alert the bad guy before you had any proof to use against him? Henry was appalled. And in Henry's reading, Nina stopped right in her tracks, just outside Sober's door. She so badly wanted to pound her fist, so badly wanted to confront him, but this didn't convince Henry at all. And Nina realized that deep down it was the wrong move to make. She had four weeks until Rahul's ship reached the Minds, four weeks in which to warn him. She would keep an eye on everyone.

This is what made Esner such a great writer. He knew the points where a reader might want to let things go differently, and he plotted for them. In some books, if you disagreed, the book just went blank. Other books were powerful enough that you could invent the rest, but often then the novel would have this odd, dreamlike feel, as if reading the ghost of a book that might one day exist.

On the afternoon of a scheduled rain, Henry and I compared our readings. Henry thought the middle part was slow. Nina did too much observing and not enough acting. I

said, Not a problem the way I read it. Henry was adamant: It was utterly stupid for Nina to confront Sober the way she had in my reading. But it's more exciting, I insisted, if she does. Later that year, when everyone was queuing up for the new Esner, Henry reread *Suicide Missions*. He allowed Nina to burst through that door and tell Sober exactly what she thought, putting her own life in immediate danger. You're right, he said. It's not quite convincing, but it sure is more intense.

After I turned ten, having reached legal maturity, I went on my worlds tour. The first few worlds are a blur to me because all I wanted to do was get to Santa Fe, where I had arranged to attend one of Magnus Esner's workshops. I had submitted a sample chapter, and I had been accepted. Clearly I had some talent and the possibility of a future.

From a distance, when light from the sun hits its solar panels, Santa Fe gleams like a sword spinning through space, but up close, it's clearly shaped like a crucifix formed by the joining of two cylinders. My father would have expected me to know the exact challenges involved in keeping such a configuration rotating; fortunately, my elder sister lived next door to him and she was the one to know if such a marvel were an engineering feat or not.

I have distinct memories from later in my worlds tour of stepping out into a new place and taking in all its differences. I don't remember if I ever took in how Santa Fe was an organic world, how the wood was genetically programmed to form benches and kiosks and one-story buildings. I may have only noticed the saints that lined the paths and hung in store

windows. I do remember being careful how I walked. It was three-quarters the gravity I was used to, and the adult Santa-Feans all seemed a touch taller, the women looking down on me. Most of the time I spent in my head. Even though I'd never seen an image of him, I was picturing Magnus Esner opening the door to his home, shaking my hand in greeting, and saying how much he'd loved the chapter I had sent.

The person who let me into his home was his wife, Hortensia, but she told me to call her Tensi. I had thought Esner's wife would look much like Nina in *Suicide Missions* or Gabriela in *My Brother Worlds*, but Tensi was a portly woman who smiled at the end of each social transaction and hardly any other time. I was disappointed that Tensi wasn't beautiful; it cast doubt on all my future expectations as a writer.

I was the last one to arrive. The other workshoppers were waiting idly, so Tensi with a few waves of the hand showed me the accommodations. I grew up in Varle where a family had two tiny bedrooms, and a living area which included a kitchen. Brother and sister—and almost all couples arranged to have a boy and a girl—slept in bunk beds. The living room couch was for the younger sibling when the elder brought home a lover. Tensi pointed at a kitchen the size of two of our living areas, then waved her hand at a separate dining room, with a table big enough to seat twelve. She counted off the master bedroom along with five guest rooms, each with a bunk bed, each with two tiny desks.

Tensi started to make room assignments—I was to room with this young-looking guy from Angkor—but Tensi realized

that one of us was named Amar, not Omar, that there were five males and five females, which made it impossible to pair members of the same sex in each room. A young woman, maybe eleven or twelve, about my sister's age, said, "Look, it doesn't matter to me. I can bunk with anyone."

"But you're from Haynlayn, dear," Tensi said. The young woman had just thumbed her personals onto the registration pad. "You're more flexible about these things than other people are." Tensi was clearly flustered, and I couldn't tell if she was trying to honor her own culture, Santa Fean culture, or the mosaic culture I was just beginning to learn to negotiate as I traveled from world to world. "Maybe, dear, it would work best if you slept in my room and Magnus could bunk with..." She signaled an older man, the only one who didn't yet have a room assignment.

He shook his head. "No, no. I'm sorry. I don't sleep with men." I wondered where he was from. Most worlds had a service year where boys bunked with boys and girls bunked with girls, but there were a few worlds where boys would live with their parents until they lived with their wives. On such worlds, men bunking together could only have one connotation, and I guess on his world it wasn't a positive one. "I would be happy to share a room with the young lady from Haynlayn."

The young lady turned to me and asked where I was from. When I told her, she turned back to Esner's wife and said, "He grew up sharing a room with his sister. This will work."

Tensi hesitated for a long time, looking at the woman from Haynlayn, the old man, and at me. She settled her gaze on

the old man, "I'm sorry. I respect all cultural differences, but one or two. You'll have to bunk with this gentleman—" she pointed to the young man from Angkor "—or you'll have to make arrangements at a guesthouse."

The young woman, my future roommate, sat next to me at dinner. When the young guy from Angkor and the old guy got up for seconds, she gestured in their direction. There was something very similar and halting about the way they both walked. "He just got rejuvenated," she whispered to me, nodding toward the young one. "Angkor is one of the few places you can do that. But only if one of your children has died. Isn't that sad?"

"The math seems awkward. He can have another son to replace the son he lost. But does that mean he can have two children?"

She looked at me. "I'm tired of math. Aren't you? You and I get married." Her voice turned singsong. "You have a son by me. I have a daughter by you. Sta-bil-i-ty for E-ter-ni-ty." She touched my arm, and lowered her voice. "Doesn't all this stability drive you a little bit crazy? Shouldn't society be a little more improvisational?"

I loved the feel of her hand on my arm, right on my forearm, and I liked the way she was looking at me, as if asking to join a special club. How could I reveal myself to be another member of the stability-for-eternity club?

Amar, a slender redhead, with her hair cut in furrows to represent her commitment to an agricultural life on a world where hairstyle was a sign of occupation, was in earshot. She

said what I didn't dare, "But there are only a million humans left."

"A cliché," my roommate said. "The first set of genetic humans could have been as little as five hundred people. A million seems to be just plenty of humans enough."

I felt comfortable talking with this young woman, whose name was Gale Brisa. When we said our good nights and went to our shared room, when we were sure Tensi wasn't around, we talked about how odd it was that Esner had not shown. We talked about what we thought he'd be like. Gale was certain he would not match our expectations. I pictured us spending the week as a couple, and over the course of the evening, I had developed my own expectations. I had heard about women from Haynlayn. During that time after dinner, I thought about our time alone in the room. I expected her to say something like, "Look, if you're horny, tell me, and if I'm in the mood we can have fun. I'll expect the same privilege, though." I know etiquette changes world to world, sometimes home to home. In our shared room, before my sister married and moved out, we changed with our backs to each other, out of respect, and there were many times when we'd find a reason to leave the room while the other undressed. This woman, Gale, she undressed casually, as if we were husband and wife. I looked away, out of courtesy. We were talking intensely about Esner's most recent novel. We both had reached different endings, but neither of them had been pleasing. I wondered what would happen if I didn't turn away when I pulled off my slacks and climbed naked into the top bunk. I usually wear a slipon, and I remember my anxiety as

I tested the parameters of our relationship. She didn't avert her eyes, and I remember thinking that maybe she was checking me out. But if she looked at all, it must have been like gazing at a familiar piece of furniture because she climbed under her covers, wished me good night, and put out the lights. It took me forever to fall asleep.

Esner wasn't there for breakfast. His wife spoke with each of us, asking more questions about where we were from, what we liked to read, what we liked to write, all the questions I expected her husband to ask. In fact, I'd pictured her husband and me alone, drinking coffee or wine, engaged in an elaborate exchange about writing, though, truth be told, I had never imagined what topics we'd actually discuss.

After Gale and I helped Esner's wife fold up the dining room table and set it into the back of the room, Magnus Esner casually walked in and said, "Hello, everyone."

I'd pictured Esner to look like someone just a few years older, an elder brother. I had not pictured this man, who looked a little like my uncle, scrawny, with well-trimmed hair and mustache, his hair growing gray. He spoke slowly, as if we might misunderstand, and he never looked any of us in the eye.

He described his routine, how he'd have breakfast, how he'd monitor his protein intake, what kind of people he'd talk to in advance, what kind of databases he'd sign up for, how he'd plot for different contingencies. "You never know in theory," he said, "what the reader will want to have happen. But if you can make them feel like a character will do only one thing, you can take most of your readers along with you."

He went on at length, growing more and more pedantic, talking less and less as if we were actually there. If I hadn't shaken his hand, I would have sworn this was a recording standing and speaking in front of us.

Esner wrote in the afternoon, and roommate pairs were assigned jobs to help pay for the bandwidth we'd use once we started writing. Gale and I were assigned to work the plots of land that Esner was responsible for. Tensi joined us. I pictured her as a woman who'd sit to the side and order us about, but it was weeding time in these particular plots, and she was kneeling alongside us. She told us she'd read our submissions. "I think both of you are very talented," she said. "But I feel like the only thing you've read are Magnus's books."

Gale had told me this morning that she'd purposely written a pastiche of Esner's work, that she had thought that would be the best way to get in. On her tour she was going to visit four other writers, and for each workshop, she'd done a pastiche of that writer's work. She was going to Ovid where she would see Marie Michel Rocher, considered one of the finest writers. I had been too embarrassed to say that the work of this hermaphrodite writer bored me and that all I liked were writers who wrote like Esner, especially of those heroic days when humans fought back against the Minds. Now, in the garden, I expected Gale to say something in her defense, but she kept on working. I was about to rise to tell Tensi of Gale's accomplishments, most likely because I still dreamed of sleeping with her, but Gale looked at me and I held my tongue.

"You know, you should both write poetry. Magnus used to write poetry. He would have been a fine poet. But he didn't like the idea of being a poet and working in these fields. I think it was his poet's understanding of language that made it so he's the writer he is today, so that you and I are pulling his weeds for him."

Gale nodded, but I was certain she was gritting her teeth as her fingers clawed around another set of tiny roots. Haynlayners took great pride that everyone carried their own share of the work in maintaining their world. I felt a little sour, which was odd, because just a few moments before I was happy with the idea that I'd be pulling weeds for this writer I loved.

We had more than an hour of free time until dinner. I wanted to sit in the park and watch the people, but Gale said if we did that she'd be bored with me by tomorrow. So we visited the floating cathedral. It hung in the air, right in the center of the crucifix design of Sante Fe, right where there would be zero gravity, though chameleon-coated cables actually held the structure in place so it rotated with the rest of the world and therefore kept the same perspective to the stationary observer.

As we entered, two deacons rose from a bench of conversing deacons, echo whisperers in the vast cathedral. They wore black tunics with white crosses as well as anonymity masks. Only their irises and lips suggested their individuality. The blue-eyed one took me gently, one hand cupping my elbow, the other hand cradling my forearm. "Where would you like to go?"

"Up front," Gale said.

The floor was far enough away from the center of axis that there was some gravity here, and the deacons' careful grasp helped smooth our steps forward so we wouldn't rise too quickly into the air.

The deacons left us in the third pew from the altar. Gale sat in the center, and I sat next to her, not close at all if the church had been crowded, but close in the sense that I could have sat at the end of the pew. Gale did not move away from me, nor did her body stiffen as if I'd come too close. I felt comfortable now, as if a certain level of intimacy had been accepted.

Below us, out came the sliding bit so we could kneel during prayer. I knelt just to see what it was like, and the material was organic and molded to the shape of my knees. A curved inlay came out of the pew, and I realized I could rest my forehead against it.

Gale said, "Don't do that."

"Why not? It might be cool to be connected with the universe." Which is what I'd read. You got a feeling of the vastness of space, of all we knew about orbiting stars, and planets, and meteors, and novas, all the expanse of God coming to you as you prayed.

"The only way they could feed you all that data is through the Minds. You put your head in that, it's, well, like placing it in an electronic maw. Who knows what the Minds will eat up?"

I wanted to lean forward and place my head in that comfortable maw just because she'd told me not to. I don't know if I was flirting with the desire to experience the

universe or if I was flirting with her, that way you refuse to bow to another's will so that later your bending toward it is equivalent to the gravity of your attraction. But now the curved skullcap looked vaguely obscene. I, too, had grown up on a world that refused all contact with the Minds. Why else love the work of Magnus Esner if it wasn't to recapture that dream of human sovereignty, of a time when the universe might once have belonged to us?

Funny. It was my father, the one who I want so much to impress that I resent him, who keeps reminding me that the whole Mind-human relationship is very complex. It's my absentee mother who thinks like Gale; it was for her that I sat back and said, "No. You're right. It probably won't be the universe."

"Or God," Gale said.

I looked around the giant spaces of the church; at the light pouring through the clear windows. How easy it would be to sit up so quickly and join the light above me. I pictured myself rising high enough that I entered free fall, and there I drifted waiting for one of the deacons to reach out to me with some metal pole. I gave up on the notion of transcendence.

Dinner was served with assigned seats, and I found myself placed between Tensi and Esner. Several people eyed me from time to time as if trying to calculate what had placed me there first. Gale was at the other end of the table, between the young man from Angkor and a woman, around twenty, who had metallic forearms and hands. I was proud to be seated next to Esner, anxious not to look like a sycophant because every now and then people glanced our way to see

what we were talking about, but I also longed to be next to Gale. Esner ate without speaking. Every question that came to my lips sounded like something that would be asked in the most routine interviews. Poor Tensi didn't know what to say to me; at the garden she'd already asked me the routine questions of my life. So I asked her those questions, and she seemed to respond to the idea that someone wanted to hear her story for a change.

Esner was focused on Gale. I was half-listening because Tensi was telling me about their children while at the other end of the table they had started talking about the variations of the one person-one child limit. But soon it was clear that everyone was arguing with Gale. She had wanted to write a story where one world abolished the limit, and it would be a good thing, not a tragedy. The consumption of limited resources would drive the world to new creativity.

Esner's voice cut through every conversation. "If I understand you correctly, you're not proposing to write a tragedy. Or a warning. Your story would actually speculate about what future conditions would be like if this were to happen."

Gale hesitated.

Everyone at the table was waiting for her response.

"Well, yes," she said.

"You know, it's been ages since anyone has written such a story."

Esner told us to take a break, to enjoy the night air of Santa Fe, to walk off our meals. We would enjoy some evening reading when we got back. I was rising from the

table, ready to clear my plate and somehow intersect with Gale, when Esner's hand clapped my shoulder. "We have to prepare you for your reading."

The woman with metal forearms wanted to know if Gale would set this story on a world that actually existed or would she make up a fictional world.

It was hard to listen to this and make sense of what Esner was talking about. His tone became condescending. I must have missed the bit of procedure that morning when he went on and on. I had sat between Esner and Tensi as a prelude to this evening when everyone would read my submission piece. Esner had been surprised that I didn't have any questions during supper. Usually the first reader was very anxious.

The guy from Angkor wanted to know if Gale really believed it was wise to set up such an unstable system. He was arguing the point as he followed Gale and the other woman out the door.

Tensi had finagled a guy my age—I think he was from Yorubana—to help her clean up, and while Esner was setting me up in a writing chair, the two of them were readying ten reading chairs in the space where the dining room table had been. The chairs were like a gathering of the ages, from one reupholstered with fresh fabric and scarred legs, to one that was threadbare and creaked when Tensi unfolded it. The writing chair was locally made, Esner said, and it looked like no writing chair I'd ever seen, not a trace of metal or fabric, all wood and organic coverings, and when I sat in it, tendrils looped around and into my ears and Esner placed eye patches with the textures of leaves over my face.

We had all returned from the walk. There was some chatting, then Tensi said it was time to take a seat. Everyone avoided the old rickety reading chair, but when Esner leaned forward to sit there, at least two, maybe three people offered to take it instead of him. "No, no," he said. "I'm rather fond of this one."

And now I was seated, and they were seated, ready to begin. I thought of myself, back at home, sitting in the community library, working an hour here, an hour there, certain I was creating something absolutely new, and soon there would be ten readers testing it out. Here they weren't reading it the way I'd read all of Esner's works; they were reading it the way people did on most anti-Minds worlds, places where people didn't trust the limited sentience of a book, so the only way a person could experience the joy of an open narrative was on an occasion when the writer themselves appeared on the world to give public readings.

My story starts with a dinner between friends. Gregory has just come back to Haynlayn from his worlds tour. Gregory tells Ben various adventures, but saves his secret for last. He went to Bombay, where human-Mind contact is permitted. He downloaded himself into Mindspace. Gregory says, "When I die, I won't die. And my secrets won't die with me." Ben screams at his friend, "How could you do this? Get out! Get out!"

It takes Ben several days to regret his reaction and to wonder about what secrets Gregory could have. Several more days, he hears nothing from Gregory and he begins to worry. He goes to Gregory's tiny bachelor's apartment to patch

things up. There's no answer at the door. There's no answer to his calls. Ben's thumbprint has been programmed to the lock, so he enters. Gregory lies unmoving on his bed.

The meds determine cause of death to be poison. Gregory's mother won't even talk to Ben, and Gregory's father says, "We have enough shame." Both parents testify before the review board: Gregory returned home agitated and upset. The review board calls on Ben. Ben tells them of Gregory's high spirits, his future plans.

"But you didn't see Gregory for the next five days," the review board chief asked, a man by the name of Findley. "Why not?"

How does Findley know this? Before Ben knows what to do or say, they get the story out of him. The board determines that Gregory had gone to Bombay, downloaded himself, and had returned home to commit suicide.

Ben refuses to believe Gregory killed himself, but how to prove that? How to find out what bigger things are going on? Ben travels to Bombay. He goes to the guesthouse where Gregory stayed, but only one person there has even the vaguest memory. Just another young man on a worlds tour. He asks around at shops and tea houses, but no one recalls having seen Gregory, or better, they recall having seen a lot of young men who could have been Gregory.

Ben decides to download his mind, and then he can talk to Gregory. He finds a place where he can download his mind, he goes through the necessary steps to be permitted in the cubicle. A reader, this guy who was picky about everything, knew the skullcaps in Bombay didn't look like the ones I'd

imagined. The book's level of sentience should have corrected for that, and it did, and once the image changed, he let his Jake put it on.

It's the first time I felt the readers rebel. Ben's data in Mindspace can talk to Gregory's data, but the mind saved in Mindspace will not be permitted to communicate with the outside world until the body has died.

One reader thought: This must be where Ben realizes he's gone too far and has to live with injustices and not knowing. Another thought: Ben should have realized his sexual attraction for Gregory a long time ago because who would come this far to prove this much if they weren't desperately in love? I realized: I'd failed. When I wrote this chapter, I had thought it would be just enough to have Ben want to know the truth, but of course, he's about to kill himself and surrender the joy of living in this particular body.

Such failure.

I wasn't convincing enough.

I was waiting for each of them to take off their headsets.

There was a knock at the door to the cubicle. Please, Ben, we have to talk. You want to consider what you're doing.

It's Findley. He's caught up. He won't kill Ben here on Bombay, but Ben will never see Haynlayn again. He will die without knowing the truth. It's now or never.

It worked, but I hadn't done it. Esner had. He had so politely volunteered to take the broken-down chair, he had taken the one chair that must have been rigged to feed into the writing chair.

Afterward, they discussed my story. Someone named two novels with similar themes. Someone else named another title, and the lack of originality echoed through the group. My mood varied so much that the floor and furniture seemed to waver. I wanted just to get up and leave. The woman with the metal forearms—she had a name like Sonisa, something that sounded almost like the Spanish word for smile but wasn't—she liked how Findley had appeared and forced Ben to go into Mindspace. Others, who had been more accepting, said how much they liked that idea and would have liked the chapter more if that had been part of it.

"I don't know," Gale said. "At that point it's not a choice anymore. The author has manipulated character and reader into a situation where there's only one option."

I looked at Esner.

"Gale's right," he said, "but, Sonisa, would you have kept reading if he hadn't been forced into that choice?"

"Probably not."

That night, when we were alone, I wanted to tell Gale that it had been Esner, that I wasn't manipulative, not that way. But the truth is, even though she clearly had looked down on the idea, I wished I'd thought of it.

"You know," she said, after we both were in our separate beds and the lights out, "I didn't want to embarrass you, but my biggest problem is that he kills himself."

"It wasn't like it was easy for him to do that," I said. Again, I felt that spinning, as if reality had fallen away.

"No. But was it as hard as it really would be? Everyone makes it sound so easy to die in these stories. Oh, the

character says, I have a version of myself seventy million clicks away in Mindspace. But it's me, the me here and now, the only me I know, who's about to die. I have no connection with that other me. I think the only people who could do it are the people who would be willing to end their lives even if they had no backup."

I couldn't sleep. I wasn't the future brilliant writer I thought I would be. I was a thinker of shallow thoughts. I had to be saved in secret and I didn't have the courage to admit it. I clambered down from the bunk.

"What's wrong?" Gale asked.

"I can't sleep. I'm going to take a walk."

I hoped she'd offer to join me, but instead she told me how beautiful Santa Fe was at night, that a walk would do me good. While I walked, I imagined that when I got back she'd offer me a massage to help me relax. In one version, we end up relaxing into each other's bodies. In another, she slips on clothes so I won't get the wrong idea, and her hands, which I imagine as skilled and powerful, send me to sleep.

The room was silent when I got back. I listened to her breathe and realized she was truly asleep.

In the morning she asked me, "Are you feeling better?" and she sat next to me almost like a protector.

Esner walked by, patted the back of my head, and told me it was hard to be the first one to go, and then he sat down by Gale. Tensi, who was serving food, watched him. Yesterday, he'd helped her in the kitchen. Esner wanted to talk about the story Gale discussed last night with Sonisa, the one about the world where the one-person-one-child limit was not observed.

"That wasn't your submission piece," he said.

"No," Gale said and she smiled. "I haven't written it."

"Yet," he said. "What you mean is you haven't written it yet." He smiled, but the smile was more awkward punctuation than anything else. "What fascinated me was that you wanted something different. Change. Back before the end of Earth, there was a whole fiction devoted to change. They imagined how we'd live on other worlds. How we'd travel there. You haven't read any of that, have you?"

"I don't think so. I read *Alone*."

I think most of us had read *Alone*. It was set before Minds had torn apart Jupiter. A world augmented with engines used Jupiter's gravity to accelerate out of the solar system. But it wasn't going all that fast, so over time people forgot they were on a world and thought it was the universe.

"But," I said, anxious to be too much on the edge of the conversation, "that story is designed to make us feel content with what we have. We have the other worlds. We know where we are." I felt like a bit of a hypocrite. I was certainly happy to be where we were. Sure, I loved the stories of fighting the Minds, but that didn't mean I wanted to go back and restart that war. There had been a thousand worlds. When raiders from Haynlayn went and blew up some part of the Minds, the Minds retaliated by picking some world that was not Haynlayn and destroying it. Eventually a small armada of human ships laid siege to Haynlayn to put an end to the war.

I looked to Gale to watch her nod; I no longer felt like a hypocrite.

Esner said, "No. I mean written way before then, before the Minds. It might be important to your fiction. If you're willing, I can help you get access."

"Did their stories predict the Minds?"

"What do you mean?"

"At some point," Gale said, "they had to figure that machine intelligences would grow tremendously powerful. What did they think of all that?"

"Well, they imagined humans more involved in the process. People would be augmented. They might have new biological capabilities or connections with the machine intelligences. They did think there would be computers who'd save their entire personality. They imagined they'd get new bodies and record their old minds on the new bodies."

"So their stories encouraged people to trust the new developments? So when people augmented themselves and the machine minds augmented themselves even more, people were led to believe that was a good thing, right?"

Esner sat back. The conversation wasn't going where he'd wanted it to go. Tensi had turned away, I guess, to hide her response.

"Should we even read their fiction?" Gale said. "They told us to embrace these changes. Look at what happened. Aren't they, in some metaphorical sense, traitors to the human race?"

I don't remember the rest of the morning all that well but I remember the silence that followed. Esner had us get in the reading chairs; he'd take the writing chair. As people moved about, Sonisa went up and placed her metal hand on Gale's

forearm and said something quietly; Sonisa had that look, half-friendship, half-condescension, of someone giving advice. Gale's face hardened and she pulled her arm away. Last night everyone had wanted to sit next to Gale; now there was a vacancy in the reading chair next to her. The young guy from Angkor sat as far away as he could.

Esner did this exercise several times where we would go through a section of one of his books in progress; one day it was *Invasion Minds*, another time it was *The Resurrection*, but he would give us scenarios where we would hope the character would do something different. As he'd respond to the new situation, he talked about the response he was making and why, and how he handled different readings because in the end, the book would sit on a world and have concurrent readers wanting different things at the same time.

I think it was that afternoon, but maybe it was the next day, when Gale and I were assigned neighborhood watch. Esner showed us how to handle the cell phones, so we went out to each item indicated on the phone screen, made a call to the building or the bench or the tree by the bench, and made sure the cells were functioning fine. At some point, we were told, there might be a little blip, some anomalous growth, which had to be corrected right away. It was boring work, but you had to concentrate on the screen, so it wasn't like pulling the weeds where we could talk while we worked. I expected Gale to point out how easy it would be for the Minds to interfere with the programming, to turn all these organics cancerous.

"You know," she said, "only one of us needs to do this. Would you mind if I went to the library to look some things up?"

How could I say yes? I wanted to be with her. How could I say no? I wanted to say yes to everything she asked.

She didn't go directly to the library, she told me later. She first went to Esner's place. Tensi was out with the gardeners and Esner was supposed to be left alone to write. According to Gale, or according more to my memory of what Gale said, Esner was happy to see her. She apologized, and he accepted. She told him she wanted to hear more about these stories. He told her titles—none of which I remember—and the names of the writers, back in the days when writers actually applied ink to paper. He had copies. She could read them. He'd go get them. She said she would love to read them later, she'd taken up enough of his time. When she told me this, I wasn't sure if she was taking advantage of his sincerity or of his attraction to her.

She next went to the library to read about these stories, to find out about these people. She found me calling the tables and chairs in a restaurant. She was clearly agitated, and I, knowing nothing of her adventures, wondered what had happened. I asked if she was okay; she said something to the effect that she was fine. She wanted to use the phone. "I'm just too full of energy to watch you work." At first I was happy just to watch her, but she held her body so tightly, she stared too intensely at the screen, she moved directly from the exterior of a store to the internal cabinets, to the counter, that my gaze felt invasive. I ended up staring at the curve of

wood, taken in by how this world was more curved than flat, trying to occupy my mind with something other than the knowledge that I barely existed in whatever world Gale Brisa was seeing.

I think it was that night we did Gale's chapter. She sat between Esner and Tensi, and they talked more about these stories Esner was interested in, all the ones that imagined a variety of futures, everything from inhospitable worlds made hospitable to humans fighting aliens for galactic supremacy, all of it rather depressing when you thought of our situation, ninety-eight or ninety-nine worlds, whatever it was back then, circling the Sun, following the orbit Mars once used when Mars still existed, all of us wondering, in the backs of our minds, which world would go next, what minor error or oversight would cancer-grow into the death of another world, another nine or ten thousand souls, all their stories gone.

Everyone at dinner seemed to be in a good mood, maybe because Esner and Gale were now getting along. It was like we'd all forgotten the kind of things she'd said during the week, or the rest of us didn't add it up until we read the story itself.

Alice lives on Haynlayn back during the time of the Thousand Worlds, and she's lost a father, an aunt, two cousins, and a brother to the war against the Minds. The brother she'd despised until he was declared dead, and now she can only think about how much she misses him. On her worlds tour, she purposely goes to the worlds that have some contact with Minds. Because she's from Haynlayn, the source

of conflict with the Minds, she normally would be forbidden entry on certain worlds. But she has a set of forged documents: She has a different last name and a different DNA profile, one more likely to match the gene pools found on Confluence, a Mind-friendly world.

She makes her way around, finds groups of students her age, and on one Mind-friendly world, she ends up joining a group that explores the mystical side of life. They contact the remembered dead who live in Mindspace. One member of the group claims to have communicated with something or someone that claimed to be one of the Minds. Finally Alice makes contact with the Last Ones.

I've sat in library reading chairs. You sometimes watch the other readers. You lose focus when someone laughs out loud or when someone says, *Oh, my*. However, each person is reading something different: You can only see their external reaction to an internal event unfolding within their skulls. But here, there was a sudden silence; you suddenly knew that everyone had stopped breathing. A chair creaked. Someone had sat up, and I listened to the shifting of the chair and of fabric as they removed the headsets.

"Listen," Esner said. "You are writers. Not priests. Keep reading."

A set of footsteps receded; a door closed. Some people have to dramatize the level to which they've been offended.

The rest of us stayed with Alice, who was as shocked as we. No one ever talked about the Last Ones, the humans who didn't fight, who didn't flee, but who allowed their minds to be recorded before their actual space was turned into Mindspace.

Alice befriends one. He, perhaps she, calls themselves Junior. At times Junior takes human form, changing sex and clothes, and sometimes Junior is a pyramid or a sphere; one time he's a dragon.

Alice arranges a private conversation with Junior so no other Last Ones or Minds can eavesdrop. "Help us," she says. "You can help cause damage. You can help us bring down the Minds."

"Why?" Junior asks.

"Isn't it obvious? The human race is in trouble. They've taken everything. We have no extra resources. No place to grow. They kill us."

"Then don't attack. If you don't attack, they won't kill."

"What's the difference? With nowhere to go, we'll eventually die out."

"You should all come here," he says. "No one ever need die again."

Despondent, feeling almost lifeless, Alice returns to Haynlayn knowing the coordinates of where the Last Ones live. She passes on the necessary numbers to the authorities. A month later, after the next attack, after the Last Ones have been wiped out, she discovers that she misses Junior.

When we talked about the piece, Amar wanted to talk about the irony of the ending and Sonisa wanted to know if Alice was working as a spy for Haynlayn, but the guy from Angkor and the old guy and the woman with furrowed hair were adamant. Did Gale really think the Minds were all that Evil? Did she really think the Last Ones all deserved to die like that? Wasn't that genocide?

Gale had told me this was a pastiche of Esner's writing, and during the whole reading I had wondered: Where are the thrills, the chases, the ticking clocks? Most readers, when they decide to read everything Esner's written, start with his second book, *Battle Plan*. Only his true fans read his first novel. "It's like *All the Deaths of Love*," I said out loud. Tristram travels from world to world to track down the next of kin of two friends...they died in the war against the Minds. Alice is kind of like that. She's trying to find someone who'll help her fight against the Minds, someone who can really do something."

Did my comment save the day? If nothing else, it got them to look at Esner, to gauge his response. "I think," he said, "this story felt like a dead end to the writer. I think that's why she's thinking of these new stories, stories that look to the future."

Gale said nothing. Her body was just as rigid as it had been this afternoon when she came back from the library. Her eyes were dark, a darkness I hadn't seen since the night my mother stormed out of the kitchen and out the door. As discussion wound down into awkward conversation, as Tensi offered us something to drink before bed, I tried to smile at Gale, but she only glared. Everyone looked one way or another, but it was as if she'd become invisible.

Somehow I imagined I'd say the right words. I once had thought I could talk my mother into staying. It was a strange desire because Gale's story had put me off. While the rest of us were drinking wine or beer or water, Gale rose and walked off into our room. Esner started to follow, but stopped. I saw

Tensi give him a hard look. I wasn't sure if she was saying,
Give her space (or) Don't you dare.

When I went into the room, Gale was packing.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't stay."

I wanted to say, If you have that thin a skin, you better
cancel the other workshops.

She started to tell me what had happened this afternoon,
how she'd seen Esner, then gone to the library. "I checked.
All the stories he wanted to show me. None of them are in
any human library."

"Then where did he get them?"

She looked at me as if I were stupid, but she didn't bother
to explain. "He's an utter hypocrite," she said. "Writes about
the so-called glorious days when we fought the Minds. And
then goes and talks to them. I did a long trace. That's how he
does his research. That's why his details are so good. That's
why he understands so well the strategy of the Minds."

"It's not like your story is anti-Minds. Alice is left with
nothing."

"I don't write propaganda," she said to me. "But I won't
make my living by being in contact with the Minds."

I was looking for something to say. I think I tried to tell
her what a wonderful writer she was.

"You're not so bad yourself," I remember her saying. She
looked at me for a moment, and I thought this would seal our
mutual understanding. I wanted to pull her to me in a long
embrace, but by the time the thought was done, she had
turned and walked out the door, walking straight ahead.

Several approached her. "If you have any questions," she said, jerking her head in my direction, "ask him."

They came to me, Esner glaring. In the end, they didn't want to believe that Gale had left for the reasons she'd stated. They were all certain I'd made a sexual advance. I spent the rest of the week wishing I'd packed with her, had been quick enough to turn myself into her travel companion. I don't like to think back on the rest of the week, of how often I sat alone even when there were people sitting on either side of me.

* * * *

II. The End of the Tour

After I left Santa Fe, I attended other workshops, and I learned to dislike writer after writer. I kept hoping that I'd run into Gale. You always hear stories about how people on their worlds tours keep meeting up. Once or twice, I saw her from a distance, but when I ran up to her, it turned out to be a woman vaguely shaped like Gale.

On Bombay I meet Dosamai, whose mother had died while the ephemeral patterns of her brain were being recorded to be stored in the Minds. Dosamai's mother had grown up on an anti-Mind world, and she had felt ambivalent about the Minds. But there was family pressure. "Don't do this, dearheart, to your children. Please think of your grandchildren. They will want to talk to you. How can you leave them all alone? How can you be so selfish?" Dosamai's mother acquiesced and allowed her brain to be scanned.

And something went wrong and there was no Dosamai's mother, no grandmother for future generations, not in the flesh, not in Mindspace, and Dosamai was certain the Minds had done this because of her mother's attitude toward them. At this point, Dosamai was emotionally ready to leave Bombay, and falling in love provided a socially acceptable motive. And who better to take her away than someone who rejected the Minds? I liked her. I liked her toughness. I admired her willingness to deal with all the assimilation programs my world demands of all future residents. I wasn't old enough to know that a woman who falls in love with her rescuer will, in the end, always be disappointed by him. I was wise enough to know that I would think of Gale more often than she thought of me and that I would never see her again.

* * * *

III. Open Universes

Ten years later, there was great controversy over a novel by Ana Calamar. For years she'd been writing closed narratives. If you wanted to read an open version, one that would respond to your reading, Ana Calamar had two assistants who handled that; you were instructed to read about their personalities and literary views before choosing which version of an open book you would read. The novel that drew all that attention was called *Our Future*.

In it, a group of anti-Mind rebels kill everyone on a world in close contact with the Minds. The strategic leader has spent her youth in contact with the Minds, and that is how she

developed the necessary knowledge to plan a successful operation. Her team convert the emptied world into a starship and fly off to restart humanity in another solar system. The plot concerns all the efforts to put a stop to the plan, so as a reader, you're forced to sympathize with the underdogs, the killers of 9,587 people. Between chapters, Ana Calamar provides brief profiles of some of the people who died in the takeover, some people terrible, some wonderful, some a mixture of both. But by the end you have a sneaking suspicion that Ana Calamar believes that the trip to a new world, whether it exists or not, is worth these deaths.

If you're eight or older, you know all about the controversy, you probably had a strong opinion one way or another. Twenty worlds barred Ana Calamar from entry. Several notables from Haynlayn and my world argued that Ana Calamar had a point—to allow entropy to continue, to be unwilling to do something drastic, even if it failed to start a new life away from the Hundred Worlds, was a mistake—and for a while twelve Mind-centric worlds barred anyone from Haynlayn or Varle; even ships bearing passengers from those two worlds were not allowed within a thousand kilometers.

I read other novels by Ana Calamar, and they all featured great transformations. Those who loved her writing loved those transformations; those who didn't always said they were immoral. We live a balanced life in the Hundred Worlds; balance is the key to survival. Great transformations, at least of the kind Ana Calamar writes about, are a threat to stability, a threat to the future of the human race.

Somewhere along the way, in one reference or another, or maybe it was in an interview, I discovered that Ana Calamar was a pseudonym for Gale Brisa. It turned out she did the occasional workshop, and a year later, someone on her staff read my sample, and I was accepted.

Ana had relocated to Santa Fe, and as I traveled there, I realized for the first time how her narrative technique owed itself to Magnus Esner, the way she led the reader to make the choices her characters made. Because her writing competed with open narratives, she must work harder to make the reader feel like there was only one clear option with each decision, but she had to do it with finesse. Her writing, at least to me, felt politically manipulative, but each time she made a point, there was some character who chose a path that made you feel like there were other solutions, not to the story, but to the political problem presented by the story.

Ana looked more than twenty years old, but it was a common look for anyone who did a lot of traveling between worlds, soaking in radiation, going through one regimen or another to correct the destruction done the body. She greeted each of us as we arrived, but she didn't seem to recognize me or my name. I wanted to say, Don't you remember? but the answer would only make us awkward. What was there to remember of that week together?

Ana's quarters were normal sized. The living area was slightly larger than usual because she'd had one of the walls of one of the bedrooms removed. Ana didn't want her writers to stay in a guesthouse, so there in the living area was one double bunk and one triple. There were also five writing

chairs, four of them clearly having lasted years, if not decades, without any kind of refurbishing.

"My home is now your home," she said at dinner, "for the next week. You've come here to break free. Whatever world you come from, you've had to learn to be in balance. This has made you a good person; it's made you a lousy writer. Here, there will be two rules. No modesty and no screwing. You change in front of each other like in any pilots' locker room. No turning away—" for a moment I was certain she was looking at me "—and no ogling, either. This is going to be intense, and I want the intensity in your writing. If you need to screw...when you thumbed in and picked up all the house info, you also received contact info for three men, three women, and one unreformed hermaphrodite. They're good, they're discreet, and they give me ten percent. I would like to refurbish these writing chairs. However, I'd prefer you save the energy for your own work.

"Now, if you need solitude, take a walk. During the day, my bedroom door is opened. If you just want to be alone, go in, close the door, and no one will talk to you until you decide to come out. You have to come out, however, when I want to sleep.

"You look like you have something to say."

She was looking at me, and even if I had something to say, I knew better than to say it. I marveled at the transformation. This was the same woman who ten years ago kept it to herself that she'd been accepted to workshops by some of the most prestigious writers, this was the same

woman who had gone to hide in her room rather than argue with Magnus Esner.

The next day, she had us talking about the nicest thing we ever did, the meanest thing we ever did, and if it didn't sound mean enough, she said, "Come on. You're not *that* nice." Then she wanted to know the most selfish thing we'd ever wished for. I made up something I've now forgotten; at that point, my most selfish wish was to share her bedroom. A week before my most selfish desire had been to come to this workshop to be with her.

From there we moved to things we wished were different about the worlds we lived on, things we wished were different about the Hundred Worlds, things we wished different about our contact or lack of it with the Minds. From there, she had us making up stories, thinking out plots. She was merciless, not at all like Magnus Esner. She kept harping, "How are you going to convince the reader to go along? You have your character do what? Tell me, what do you really know about human nature?"

One young man, a ten-year-old on his worlds tour, broke down and dashed out to the street. A sixteen-year-old woman, the mother of two, glared at Ana and followed him out.

"Let's break," Ana said. "Everyone take a walk. We'll meet for evening wine."

I had experienced some tension with one of the other guys, who was twenty, like me, and clearly entering his own era of recriminations, so when the thirty-two-year-old woman

took hold of her cane and walked out with him it was clear that I wasn't welcome.

Alone for the first time with Ana, I had nothing to say.

"So," she said, "from what you say, it sounds like you still haven't been in contact with the Minds."

I thought she was deriding me. All I knew of the Minds was gathered from readings, from testimonies of others, but never once had I put on a skullcap to communicate with humans who now lived in Mindspace. Then I realized there was something nostalgic in her voice.

"I made first contact just to read the stories Esner had told us about." She poured me a glass of wine, then sat down on the floor. "These stories were very hard to read. You had to know something of the time they were writing about to imagine the other worlds they were imagining. There was this one story. It was like the story *Alone*, but it was so different. It was about these people who'd been traveling for a long time. They could walk the entire universe. Then someone figured out that the Universe was bigger. They were just on a very big spaceship that took a long time to get anywhere. And I thought: This is about us. We've let our universe become too small. We can expand it in one direction, and that's by going to the Minds. But for flesh and blood humans, this is it. There are no more stories about the future. I wanted to change that. Even if the futures I write are just made up. Even if they can't come true. Even if it would be a bad thing if they came true."

At first, I wanted to place my arm around her shoulders. It sounded like she sought comfort. But soon her voice found a

rhythm and anger. She spoke as if I were going to argue the contrary.

"I like your writing," I said. It's a shame that my closest avowal of love sounded like a jokey whine. But it did serve to break the tension.

"You liked Esner's writing, too," she said.

"Not after I met him."

"So, now that you've met me, what do you think of my writing?" She smiled. I liked the flirtatious sound to her voice.

We talked for a while, and I felt a growing intimacy, even though we never talked about intimate things. I don't know if she ever married, if she ever had children, if she had a lover. We talked about novels. She talked about books she read that only the Minds have stored away. I wanted to have access to those stories, but I hesitated.

"How did it happen?" I asked. "When we met, you wouldn't even put on a prayer cap."

"I thought I told you. It was to read."

"No. You were so adamant. What changed your mind?"

"I think everyone comes to a point where they wonder why they hold true to their younger selves. Sometimes it's an act of annihilation to believe in something different. It's a terrible moment if you don't like the outcome."

I could have asked if she liked the outcome. I could have told her that I liked the outcome.

"My feeling is this," she said. "It's a cliché. The Minds didn't get it. When they stored away everything, they didn't feel like they were wiping away humanity. Their utter refusal to understand how we feel, as flesh and blood, is their moral

failure. I decided I don't want to believe anything so powerfully that I can't take in another way of seeing things."

What she said was so commonplace that I was disappointed. Like many writers, she was smarter in her fiction. I asked, "Will you download your mind?"

She shifted on the floor and looked straight at me. "Why?"

"Well, I don't know." For the first time, I pictured us, sitting, our two selves in Mindspace, talking for eternity.

"If I download my mind, it will go on forever. That mind will think she's continuous from me. But the mind in this body, by which I mean my heart—" At this point, she took my hand, placed it against her head, then right against her heart, and she talked about how the mind in her body would end, it would still die, it would still struggle at the end knowing that for this mind, this mind in her body, it *was* the end. I heard the sense of the words, but I was more aware of the warmth of her breasts pressing against my thumb and pinky. Her eyes shone because they were moist. The intensity of her feeling could be felt more intensely than anything that might have passed between us ten years ago, when we were starting our adult lives. I wanted to kiss her. But she took my hand from her heart, kissed it lightly, and said she had to start making dinner.

When I returned home to Varle, I discovered my son sleeping on the couch. My daughter, who was nine, a year away from her own worlds tour, was sleeping in their room with her lover. It seems odd to go through the routine of making sure her seven-year-old brother has what he needs from the room, never knowing for sure if Paul will stay the

night or not. Dosamai and I are in bed early on these nights. I was never graced with the opportunity to sleep in someone else's home in the arms of their daughter. Dosamai and I are only comfortable making love when our daughter doesn't have a guest over.

One night, after making love, during that restfulness in which our relationship is truly at peace, Dosamai says, "In a year she'll be gone. It makes me yearn for a third child." She shifted in bed to get a closer look at my face. "That's a selfish thought, isn't it?"

"No. It's a very human thought."

"Murder's a human thought. But it's not a good one to have." She wasn't arguing. She was thinking out loud, her voice wandering into sleep.

I thought about the idea. What if a group of couples all decided they'd have a third child? Sure, it would upset the balance, but it would force the world they lived in to find some way to grow, to expand. It would be a story to fight against entropy, to fight against our end. It was most likely another story I would never finish, but that night, I couldn't sleep the idea seemed so wonderful.

Short Story: **SONGWOOD** by Marc Laidlaw

Gorlen Vizenfirthe, the Bard with the Gargoyle Hand, last appeared in our magazine in the March 2009 issue. Here we have a new tale in this series, but this one concerns the gargoyle whose hand Gorlen owns. It also concerns something that utterly baffles gargoyles: human behavior

Marc Laidlaw reports that he recently enticed another F&SF contributor, Ted Kosmatka, to work with him in his day job as a game designer for Valve Software.

Ocean passage was never easy for a gargoyle. Most were content to pack themselves away in a carton, but Spar had developed an unusual (for a goyle) appetite for the ever-varying spectacle of clouds in slow parade against blue depths or starry night skies. Besides, packing arrangements took several days—even weeks, depending on the port and its stringencies—and on this occasion he had not even several hours to spare. If he failed to leave tonight, then morning might find nothing left of him except some black gravel fit only to be swept into the harbor. Complicating matters, the port was unfamiliar and all the ships looked equally sea-unworthy in the dark. He compared them to the crumpled list of vessels leaving that night, scribbled out by the terrified

quartermaster at his request. Three smeared names matched up to three creaking candidates that chafed against the dock as if restless, like himself, to be away. But how was he to choose among them?

As he cast about for some differentiating factor, he noticed a pale face nodding down at him from the nearest of the ships. A feminine creature, friendly and alert—and definitely, alluringly, beckoning him aboard.

Spar bowed back, a gesture he had learned from humans, unsure if she were signaling to him. In response she dipped her head closer, affirming his silent question with her entire being.

This was the portent he sought, and more than he needed—especially now that he heard voices raised in the night, footsteps turning from the wharf and rumbling down the dock. He sprang into some dangling lines that spilled from the deck and pulled himself aboard, finding the planks reverberant beneath his heavy feet.

Before long, his pursuers rushed out along the dock. Spar hunched low, peering over the side through the mounded net. A party of torch-bearing men paused at each ship, demanding of whatever watch was on duty the right to board. In some cases the requests were met with indifference and the ships were boarded, in others with defiant bellows and the men moved on. But the ship Spar had selected was quiet and dark, its occupants no doubt off carousing, and it seemed likely the searchers would board without opposition. He leapt lightly to the mast and climbed to its peak, clinging there like a sky-barnacle watching them come and go below. He much

preferred the stability of a traditional spire or roof peak; but he enjoyed the advantage of watching their every move from above. They swept their torches into the corners where he had first hid, making him glad he had ascended to the height. And just as they began to argue about who should climb into the riggings, Spar heard even angrier voices rising from the wharf. A sizable flood of men were streaming from the tavern district.

"You there! Who's that aboard our ship?" said a belligerent voice like a stone drawn across a rasp.

"Stowaways or customs agents!" another, shriller, speculated.

"Either way—dead men!"

What happened on the dark deck was never entirely clear to Spar. Those in the vanguard of the newcomers quickly scrambled aboard and confronted the interlopers in a muddle of violent shadows and shapes. He soon heard heavy splashing on the side opposite the dock, and then muttered consultations that ended in agreement on the advisability of a hasty departure. Relieved of his immediate apprehension, Spar considered returning to port. But there was no concord between his wishes and this crew. The men spread out through all the crannies of the ship like black wine spilled and drunk down into thirsty wood. In a goylish panic, he saw a number of them scurrying up the rigging, toward the very spot where he watched and waited.

It required no special effort for Spar to remain immobile, for movement contravenes the gargoyle's essential nature. Still, it occurred to him that any who climbed this high would

be surprised to find one of the yardarms replaced by a stone arm. He hunched there like a petrified seabird, his wings slightly parted, and felt the ship begin to rock more deeply underneath, Spar himself swaying like the bob on an inverted pendulum. Faintly luminous sails of pale violet snapped out, full of the night wind, and the lights of the dock began to pull away. Spar watched until the lamps of the port were as small as the stars above, and then some dark eclipsing buttress of headland must have moved between the ship and land. They were away.

* * * *

The first night passed with no further incident, save toward morning when he realized dawn would find him pinned against the sky by the mainmast, plain for all to see. While the dark still held sway, he descended slowly, avoided the more alert sailors, crept among the dozing ones, and made his way down into the hold, so packed with cartons, crates and tarpaulined lumps that he knew he could hide here undisturbed.

Except for his weight, he could be no burden to the ship's crew. An ordinary stowaway would have to pilfer the stores to survive; not so Spar. The crew ought to have no objection to his presence. Still...superstition ruled any ship. Spar knew himself to be inconsequential as long as he stayed unseen and out of the way, but sailors had been known to jettison their entire cargo for fear of the goyle it might contain.

His only regret that first day was that he had no view of sea or sky, and must wait for nightfall if he wished to find a

position with more scenic potential. The seamen stumbled about on the deck; heavy weights dropped from time to time, reminding him of family footsteps; he heard the occasional clang of a bell marking hours; and once a throat-clearing figure crept down into the hold and rummaged among the supplies, kneeling out of sight for several minutes, muttering and gasping at something unseen, freezing when voices came near the hatch, then limbering up and lurching away to abovedecks when they'd moved on.

Spar watched and waited: unblinking, unbreathing, unmoved.

At last the ship grew quiet except for that occasional bell. He ascended past sleepers in swaying hammocks, climbing to a spray-damp deck.

He had missed the day entirely and was left with only stars to console him. For a time, a watchman traced the vessel's cramped byways, casting a lantern about. But soon the lantern settled and from its fixed location came irregular snoring. Water slapped the ship's sides. Spar moved toward the bow, absorbed in the pleasant tip and tilt of the deck. Something about the rhythm, leaping and falling, reminded him of the feminine creature who had beckoned him aboard.

In all his time on the ship, during last night's fray and the day's long wait, he had heard no female voice. Had she called him aboard and then slipped away herself? Or was it possible the ship might conceal another stowaway, one hidden elsewhere in the many nooks and crannies?

As he pondered possibilities, leaning forward to watch the seafoam cleaving against the prow, he saw a pale form in the

water, leaping ever ahead as if narrowly outrunning the ship. At first he thought it a fish, but it swam so strong and steady, so perfectly matched to the speed of the vessel, it seemed more like a reflection of the moon traveling with them. In fact, its pallid glow was very much like that of the moon, not to mention the lovely bright features smiling up at him from the water, yet not of the water.

"Aren't you going to say hello?"

He raised his eyes and looked out through the dark wet air into which they sped—and there she was: craning around to look back at him over her shoulder. The very same one who had seemed so glad to see him board the ship last night. How was it she floated out there ahead of the craft? Why did she not turn and face him?

Finally, he saw her nature. She was fixed to the prow of the ship—was, in fact, its figurehead. A lithe yet sturdy feminine form, her figure gave only passing tribute to the mammalian bipeds that had carved her. To Spar's eye she was finer in every respect. She made him momentarily ashamed of his own crude shape.

"I beg your pardon," he said, enraptured. As little as he saw of her—with her fullness turned away from him, suspended above the rushing dark—there was something about her that made him feel for the first time the potential of quickstone for...quickness. "Hello! Hello, indeed!"

Mainly keeping an eye on their course, she granted him another quick glance.

"And your name?" she asked.

"Spar."

She laughed.

"Why is that funny?"

"I'm amused that a creature of stone should be named for a ship's part, and the same whose role you played last night. Spar!"

"It is a respectable mineral name. I was not aware it had some maritime application."

"No matter. I did not mean to wound your dignity."

"I do not believe I possess such a thing as dignity."

"Really? I had thought you were composed entirely of it."

"This is quickstone. Not quite a homogeneous composition, but close enough. Perhaps you are unfamiliar with the stuff, out here on the open water, where it has no reason to be."

"And what is your reason for being here, O Spar of Stone?"

"Nothing worth your time to hear it related," Spar replied.

"But what of yourself? Why are you here?"

"This is my grove," she said. "Where else could I be?"

"Your grove?"

"All the timbers of the ship...we were cut from the same stand of songwood, from the same deep patch of forest. Once we stood together, old nurses and guardians, fathers and mothers, shoots and sprouts. It had always been so. Then one day the flesh came with axes and saws, and I watched my family hacked down around me. The pitiless flesh took no notice of our screams...until they reached me. Me, they could hear. When they stopped their hacking, I believed I had some power over them. But they had only stopped to congratulate themselves on their good fortune. They had been looking for songwood, which grows in rare groves like mine. Once they

were sure of what they had, they commenced to cut me down. Later, another man carved me into this shape, which is hardly my true one."

"Any more than the form you see is my true form," said Spar. "We have much in common then. I too was deeply alive, my consciousness a flicker in the span of a quickstone seam, until the day a human hacked me out in a huge block and whittled me down to this clumsy shape you see. My mind was cut off forever from the great ocean of stone."

"Your form is not unpleasing," she said, "but I can tell that there is more to you than that."

"And to you," said Spar. "At least water is friendly to your kind. And here you are with your grove all around you, while I am far from home and family—far from land. But will you tell me your name?"

"I am Sprit," she said.

"Are you alone of your kind, Sprit?"

"From time to time, in certain harbors, I have seen other figureheads carved from songwood like myself. Mainly they guide the gallant ships, far too proud to consort with this dingy vessel. As you must have noticed, my crew is unsavory even by fleshy standards."

"I've seen little of them, but they were handy enough at dispatching last night's search party."

"Oh, truly, they are practiced at violence. Their captain's the cruelest of them all. I have not always belonged to him. My first owner was a placid, peaceful sort, which contributed to my falling so quickly from his possession. Each of my many masters has been nastier than the one before. You picked a

fine ship to stow aboard, Spar. Still, I am glad for your company. No one here speaks to me, except occasionally to ask my seafaring advice." She laughed. "As if I—who grew up in a deep wood, seeing stars only in winter, bound utterly to the land—would have the faintest expertise in celestial navigation or other matters maritime!"

"What do you tell them when they ask?"

"I make things up," she said with a coy smirk. "Speak in riddles. Oh, they love that! It keeps them busy for weeks. I especially enjoy tormenting the captain with the suggestion that he is continually drifting past hidden treasures that would be his if only he weren't too obtuse to unravel my riddles. He tolerates me because, owing to his superstitious nature, he believes I bring uncommon luck. If he'd truly observe his sorry condition, he might question just how much luck I've brought him, or myself."

"Your tale saddens me," said Spar, who felt such a twinge as he had only felt previously for stonekind. How strange that wood and stone should have so much in common—including the enemy, flesh.

"Perhaps I exaggerate," she said. "It is all I have, I'm afraid. Now that I can no longer stretch my limbs to the sky or my roots toward deep springs, there's nothing left to reach with but my words. I was meant to regale my grove with tales and poetry and songs, but they are deaf and dumb now, mute planks. I wish to believe there's life enough left in them to feel my love. But at other times I hope they bear no wits...for how horrid it would be, trodden upon by unworthy

boots, unable to change or grow or even die in a natural way."

Spar noticed a pale golden sap trickling down her cheek. He reached out and touched her side. She put out her hand and took hold of his. Together they stood for a long while, unspeaking, as the ship plowed on into the night.

Toward morning, when they reluctantly parted hands, it was as if they had grown together in the dark hours: Spar-and-Sprit. He asked her if she might suggest a hiding place with a view of the horizon, but she knew nothing except the bow. She knew not their destination, nor how long the journey might last. Rather than risk discovery, he returned to his previous place in the hold, arriving just as the first morning bell began to sound.

The second day passed much like the first, save for the new restlessness pervading him. A gargoyle was not meant to feel agitation, but Spar had trouble remaining at rest. He continually restrained himself from raising the hatch to gauge any change in the light. The bells came at interminable intervals. The tiresome voices of men, men, nothing but men. After an age, however, there came a change in the ordinary sounds of the ship. He heard a high tone raised above the grumbling, a musical note that wove and wended its way through the creaking and clanking and cursing. It took him a moment to realize Sprit was singing.

For me? he wondered. Or was this a common occurrence? He could not imagine it was a typical treat for the sailors, and in fact it was wasted on them. The voices of the men began to whine and wheedle, full of complaint, until finally he heard

the gruffest of them cry, "Shut the bitch up! If she doesn't quit, I'll carve a plug from her arm and stopper her up with it!" There was laughter at this, followed by escalating threats of mutilation and even fire. Spar grew ever more enraged and indignant. How dared they! It seemed strange they would treat her thus, if they truly believed her a talisman of luck. Yet it was not the first time the goyle had seen humans deride the very thing they knew (or anyway, believed) to be their best hope of happiness.

Finally Sprit fell silent, and there was much cheering.

Moments later, the hatch creaked open, softly shut, and feet came clomping down the steep steps. The throat-clearing figure, same as yesterday. Again, the young crewman went to a covered pile, threw back the tarp, and crouched there for some time, quietly busy. Spar gained no more insight into this activity than he had the previous day; and in fact, it would hardly have interested him had he not detected a pattern that promised to give some insight into the secret heart of men. As abruptly as before, the figure stood up, tightened and smoothed the tarp, and hurried out again. Not long after, Spar heard footsteps on the boards above. Then a small riot of voices accompanied by shuffling cards, clinking coins, shattering glass. While he waited for the men to drink themselves into their nightly stupor, he made his way over to the covered pile, to the spot where the visitor had stood, and pulled back the oily cloth to reveal a puzzling assortment of objects.

Nothing there seemed of particular value. Several warped wooden trunks with verdigris-encrusted clasps, some barrels,

and a variety of objects that Spar took to be art—perhaps loot the captain had acquired in the same manner he'd taken ownership of this vessel and of Sprit. The art was a miscellany: A battered brass ewer on a length of chain. Several canvases, stretched on water-warped frames, depicting landscapes, livestock, unclothed human females. A large salad bowl fashioned of a single piece of lovely dark wood. The latter interested Spar because it made him think of Sprit. Its smooth curves, reminiscent of her strong shoulders; its polished hollows like the hollow of her throat. The mere notion that it was carved of wood, even though hardly as warm and alive as she, he found curiously compelling. In fact, who could resist? He ran his fingers along the edges of the bowl, tracing its deep concavities with solemn fascination. Was this what the crewman had also come to worship in the gloom? Had Spar discovered the beginnings of an affinity with humankind? With a care approaching reverence, he set the bowl back where he had found it, close by the forked nightmare portraits of unwholesome female flesh. He pulled the tarp back into place.

When the ship was once more sunken into silence, Spar made his way to Sprit's side. He found her mute, with long golden runnels of sap encrusting her cheeks as if she had spent the day weeping. She brightened at the sound of his voice, and turned as far as she could to send him a smile.

"I heard you singing today," he said.

"I'm glad," she said. "They threatened awful things if I didn't stop, but I haven't felt the mood come over me in

many years. A spell so rare I couldn't bear to waste it. It never occurred to me that they might hate my songs."

"They are hateful things," said Spar. "And hate-filled. Miserable in their little lives. I wish...."

But it was such a strange thought that he stopped before he could finish it.

"Wish what, Spar?"

How odd it felt to say it: "I wish I could take you away from here. Even though it is selfish, almost a wish of the flesh ones—because it would mean taking you from your grove."

"I believe I divine your sentiment," she said, "and I thank you for it. But you are right. Even if I were free to leave, I would be too torn. Who would care for the planks, were I to abandon them?"

"Would they even be aware of your absence?" Spar asked, hesitantly.

"I have no way of knowing. I must assume so, and comport myself accordingly. But I would go with you if I could. I have never met anything like you, Spar. I hate to think of the day we pull into port, and you go on where I can never follow."

"I as well," said Spar. "I wish I could remain out here all day long, without a care to what the soft ones think. I don't fear for myself, you understand, but you...what might they do to you?"

"Let's not think of such things. We have the whole night before us. Will you hold my hand as you did last night? Did you feel how strange it was? As if we were growing together?"

"I thought only I felt that," Spar whispered, and took her wooden hand with his hand of stone.

That night she sang a lullaby of the grove and a slumbering peace descended on the ship. The boards ceased creaking, their passage through the sea so steady that it almost seemed they were not moving. Forward, ever forward they flew, which meant morning rushed up to meet them and Spar was almost caught out in the open. As the crew stirred, groggy and cursing, he made his way by little flits of movement between the last shady crannies of night, finally back down into the hold. But today he had a plan, something to look forward to. His feelings for Sprit had made him bold.

Forsaking his previous position, he set himself where he could keep an eye on the odds and ends beneath the tarpaulin. If the throat-clearing visitor returned, he was perfectly poised to observe whatever occurred. Without such distraction to keep himself amused, the thought of another long day apart from Sprit would have been unbearable. As it was, he held himself in a private humor, and the waiting was delicious rather than otherwise.

The pattern played out as predicted. Late in the day there came a squeal of the hatch, followed by cautious footsteps. Before the hatch dropped, Spar caught sight of the visitor's face in a slanting beam of light from above. It was a young human, pock-faced, gangly, with bubbling breath and popping eyes. The boy went swiftly to the draped pile of cargo, folded it back, and began rummaging among the items. Spar leaned forward, ever so slightly, hoping to determine precisely which

inanimate object had made the boy its slave. He clearly heard a hollow ponk as the wooden bowl was shifted.

At that moment, the fellow froze in an attitude of listening. Spar was quite sure he had made no detectable sound or movement; no pulse or respiration could betray him. A room with a gargoyle in it is exactly as quiet as an empty room. Yet the boy slowly craned his head around and stared straight into Spar's dark corner. His eyes popped even farther from their sockets, his skewed teeth glinted in a wet grimace, and he gulped loudly. Spar had tucked himself in with his hands on his knees, wings folded together, in hopes of looking like something that might have been inconspicuously stuck back here for several voyages. But still...the boy seemed preternaturally suspicious, senses heightened by guilt or shame, as if caught in the midst of some illicit activity and expecting apprehension.

The moment stretched out into gargoyle minutes: unchanging. Then, slowly, the boy put out a hand and pulled the tarp back over the cargo. Spar held still, braced for the boy's inspection, but it never came. He backed softly toward the steps, then ascended in a rush. The hatch banged shut.

Spar waited for repercussions, voices raised in outcry, feet pounding overhead...but nothing befell except the evening bell. He supposed the boy too embarrassed or ashamed to speak of his presence below deck. Humans were prisoners of strange inhibitions, visible in their complexion, which Spar could only describe superficially and despair of understanding.

The third night was one of quiet confessions. Sprit, knowing Spar hated missing the day's sights, had saved her

recollections and spread them out for him—from the morning kekells that had swarmed the ship, crapping on her shoulders until she caught one and wrung its neck, to an afternoon visitation of deepridge finnies. She described how at sunset she had spied a mountain in the distance, shimmering and possibly unreal, a mirage; but also possibly marking the end of their journey. Spar wondered how he might contrive to stow away even longer, remaining with the ship from port to port. And both wondered aloud how they could feel this way—as if they had known each other always, and wished always to remain together. Songwood and quickstone, so unlike but sharing one soul.

She looked back at him as she always must, over her shoulder, out of the corner of her eye. It was frustrating—like seeing the moon always gibbous, never at full.

It was then she said, "The humans speak of love as if it were something only they possess."

"Of course they would," said Spar. "It is more of that selfishness of theirs. As if the world did not exist before they entered it. But what is more ancient than stone? And which grew first, flesh or wood? If there is love, they must have stolen it from us."

"What do you mean, if there is love? Do you not feel it, Spar? Have you not felt it since the first night?"

He bowed to her slightly, remembering the quickening he'd felt the moment he first saw her dipping toward him out of the dark above the pier.

"It is true," he said. "This is love, more ancient than flesh. I do love you."

"Oh, Spar, I—"

But she did not finish, for at that moment light flared upon her cheek and Spar's shadow leapt out across her. He turned and saw they had been discovered. A handful of men stood on the deck with lanterns suddenly uncovered.

"I told you!" said the phlegmy voice of the bug-eyed boy. "A gargoyle's aboard! That's why it was gone from the hold."

"Aye, it was up here consorting and all." The captain spat. "You treacherous bitch. You repay us by betraying us?"

Sadness was in Sprit's eyes, and a fine old anger. "I have done nothing but the work of the ship," she said evenly. "This is no business of yours. My private life is not your concern."

"You have no private life!" the captain sneered. "You are my creature. And now you've brought evil aboard! This explains our long run of bad luck, don't it? How long have you been harboring this devil?"

"I owe you no explanation," she said.

The captain clomped forward. "Take the thing, men," he said. "Overboard with it."

No one moved, nor did Spar, but he found his voice. "I have done no evil, nor mean you any. But it will take more than this number to move me if I do not will it."

"No evil? You've perverted my bowmaid! She had no thought of else until this time. Where now will she steer my ship?"

"Away from all hazards, I'd wager, unless you force her into them. You needn't look to us for evil explanations when plenty hide here among you. Ask your cabin-lad there. Him! Ask him what he gets up to, down in the hold."

The boy began to gasp and stammer and his eyes nearly came unsprung. Spurred by his reaction, Spar stabbed the knife in deeper:

"Yes, you ask him what he's up to with the salad bowl!"

For a moment, so blank were their eyes, he wondered if he had hit far wide of the mark—guessed recklessly with regard to human passions. No one moved. Yet in the next moment, the captain let out a growl: "Never mind him, lads—he's just trying to baffle us!"

The pipsqueak shrieked, and then they were rushing heedless at Spar. All he did was raise his arm to sweep them aside, and three men went down with cracked skulls. Standing his ground came naturally to Spar. But a weakness new to him appeared suddenly in the fray.

"Please," Sprit cried, "please, he's done nothing but keep me company in the night! He is kind, that is all!"

The captain rose from the deck, rubbing his forehead, the cabin boy laid out cold beside him.

"Leave the goyle, men. I know what to do. We can trust the bitch no longer. I want my shipwrights here, double! And tell 'em to bring their tools!"

Feet scurried off. By now there was no one left snoring in the depths of the ship. All were on deck, marveling at the scene, laughing, cursing. At the edge of the sea, a pearly orange glow betokened morning. A dozen men moved toward Spar, but they fell back when he spread his wings. Meanwhile, others worked their way out onto the bowsprit, along the prow; and these were men with saws and axes.

"Cut her loose, men! She's brought us nothing but evil anyroad!"

Sprit's lips were fastened tight, fiercely clenched, as they began to saw and chop into the pale wood low along her body, where the lovely lines of her figure smoothed into the stockier lines of the ship. Spar tried swatting at the men but they were just out of reach; they were agile and limber as apes, after all, and this was hardly his natural habitat.

"Stay, Spar!" she called, seeing his agitation. "It hurts me not. Look to yourself!"

"I care only for you!" he said, and the crew laughed for the most part, although a few stared at him, perplexed.

The last deep cuts were made, and her fate decided. Sprit sagged forward with a splintering sound.

"Farewell, my grove! Wood of my wood!" She bent so far that her face almost touched the water. "Farewell, Spar!"

And then, with a cry, she dropped. A long splintered stake was all that remained of the ship's figurehead.

The crew let up a cheer.

"What now, goyle?" said the captain, thrusting an ax toward Spar, but not so close that he might chip the blade.

Spar did not hesitate. The ship forged on no matter what might have been said, and Sprit was being borne away with every passing second. He moved quickly aft, plowing through the men who didn't clear a path fast enough, and finally put himself just above her. She was floating with her face in the water, her arms held close before her, her ragged stump unmoving.

Spar jumped.

His weight carried them both beneath the waves, but by the time she realized what had hit her, Spar was losing his grip. She struggled to face him, flailed for his hands, but it was too late. Their fingers failed to clasp. He was sinking fast, like the stone he was, while her natural buoyancy sent her rocketing back to the surface. She breached the ocean's face and leapt free, then settled back in a foamy surge to stare down helplessly after him. Spar sank into ever darker waters. She floated in light, a tiny shape waving to him...or so he thought. The blackness of the depths was such it must have hidden him before too long. But he could still see her for quite some time. The evil oblate blot of the ship, at the end of a long rippled wake, rushed forward. She drifted along behind it, carried freely by currents he would have to work to follow.

At last he hit bottom, and though he grieved to find himself in a vast plain of sludge and rock, he never allowed his gaze to waver. The day so far above was brightening, and against it he could barely see her pale loveliness adrift. Spar began his forward trudge, moving against the gathered weight of the sea, never taking his eyes away from her. She must have been caught in a strong current, for no matter how fast he traveled, she seemed to be always pulling ahead. Then again, her path was smooth and simple, while his was choked with pipes of gnarled rock, huge mats of tangled algae, toppled temples and sunken cities full of blind alleys and slimy cul-de-sacs. Every obstacle was an occasion for wrath. No matter how quickly he conquered each, he sensed her pulling away. The ship was long gone. Eventually night came, matching the upper world to the one below. The

darkness around him felt no different than what filled him. But he never despaired. He marched on.

At some point he discovered he was falling again—a plunge so protracted that in comparison, his initial fall from the ship seemed like that of a pebble tossed into shallows. Some abyss had swallowed him. Down there, where he landed at the deepest reach of darkness, he found thickened pools of light and heat. The blood of the Deepweller oozed from cracks in the ocean's floor, giving him strength and resolve, sending him on his way with greater purpose.

He began to count his steps, assigning a duration to each, and that way tallying the accumulation of hours into days. When he found an obstruction in his path, he climbed it. Sometimes it was nothing, a collapsed pile of stones, a sunken hulk. But then there came a wall he climbed for a week. And when he had surmounted it, the skin of the sea was so close that he broke through within hours and found himself staring up at stars.

A pale strand stretched ahead of him, limitless and gently curving. The ocean current flowed along the shore like a river, breaking against jagged searocks, dragging snarls of tangledrift. He followed the litoral margin through the rest of the night, and as dawn broke he began to feel something close to panic.

Caught in the mats of tide-flung wrack were broken boards of a particular sandy pale color that instantly evoked the wood of his beloved. Spar moved as quickly as he could on the packed gray sand. In the brightening day, he saw torn violet sails among teeth of rock. He saw the splintered prow

of a ship that had already been mutilated by the hands of its captain. And there hung the swollen body of the captain himself, impaled on the ragged stake that had once borne Spar's beloved. Plentiful boards floated and bobbed in the waves, but just as numerous were the bloated bodies of men, eaten to the bone by crabs, blown to putrefaction by sandflies and waterfleas. He paid no mind to any of these, but pushed on until against all hope he saw white shoulders bobbing in a tidal pool, half buried in kelp, face down among the anemones. With a cry, Spar turned her over and found her staring up at him, smiling, as if she had expected him all along.

"I felt you coming," she said. "Such heavy steps."

He carried her above the strand and propped her in the earth on a point that overlooked the shattered wreck. They surveyed the ill that had come to her ship. "Your grove," he said solicitously. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Now they are free," she said. "I think, in the end, they avenged me. They willed themselves against the rocks, despite the efforts of the men. Wood and stone—we foiled them. I heard the timbers singing as the ship broke apart."

"And here we are...wood and stone together. But what now?"

"Now, sweet Spar? You journey on when you wish, instead of at the whim of men."

"But you...."

* * * *

"I am songwood. How can I come with you? Look! Already it begins."

She gestured to the ground. After only moments in the soil, her trunk had begun to thicken and dig new roots into the earth.

"You planted me, Spar. As a second home, it is a lovely spot. Those offshore rocks will always remind me of you."

"I consider them my brothers," Spar said.

"Then they are my brothers too. And as often as you wish to return, I will be here waiting for you. And while wood may not endure as long as stone, I can promise there will always be a grove here, constantly renewing. You will return, Spar. I know you will."

* * * *

"And have you?" asked Gorlen Vizenfirthe, the human bard to whom Spar had told his tale.

"Not yet," Spar said. "But for stone, life is long. I stayed with her a fair while—time enough to see the first stand of new trees rise along the point. A fine young grove was growing, all of them as lovely as their mother, shot up from the tips of her roots. Soon I will see her again. It may be hard to find her among so many thick new trees. But I will know her by her songs."

"She sounds remarkable. Perhaps you would introduce me, if we ever travel that way. I would like to hear the songs of the grove. I've never met a human bard who knew them."

Spar considered this. "I had not thought these matters would be of interest to a human. I see there are things I may learn from you yet."

"I wouldn't count on it, but I may be able to offer elucidation on one particular point."

"Yes?" said the goyle, in stony earnest. "And that would be what?"

"The salad bowl."

Novella: **GHOSTS DOING THE ORANGE DANCE: (THE PARKE FAMILY SCRAPBOOK NUMBER IV)** by Paul Park

While there have been scads of autobiographical stories in our pages, we haven't seen many tales that blend memoir, family history, and science fiction the way this remarkable tale does.

* * * *

1. Phosphorescence

Before her marriage, my mother's mother's name and address took the form of a palindrome. I've seen it on the upper left-hand corner of old envelopes:

Virginia Spotswood McKenney

Spotswood

McKenney

Virginia

Spotswood was her father's farm in a town named after him, outside of Petersburg. He was a congressman and a judge who had sent his daughters north to Bryn Mawr for

their education, and had no reason to think at the time of his death that they wouldn't live their lives within powerful formal constraints. He died of pneumonia in 1912. He'd been shooting snipe in the marshes near his home.

I have a footlocker under my desk that contains the remains of my grandmother's trousseau, enormous Irish-linen tablecloths and matching napkins—never used. The silver and china, a service for twenty-five, was sold when my mother was a child. My grandmother married a Marine Corps captain from a prominent family, a graduate of the University of Virginia and Columbia Law School. But their money went to his defense during his court-martial.

For many years she lived a life that was disordered and uncertain. But by the time I knew her, when she was an old woman, that had changed. This was thanks to forces outside her control—her sister Annie had married a lawyer who defended the German government in an international case, the Black Tom explosion of 1916. An American gunboat had blown up in the Hudson River amid suspicions of sabotage.

The lawyer's name was Howard Harrington. Afterward, on the strength of his expectations, he gave up his practice and retired to Ireland, where he bought an estate called Dunlow Castle. Somewhere around here I have a gold whistle with his initials on it, and also a photograph of him and my great-aunt, surrounded by a phalanx of staff.

But he was never paid. America entered the First World War, and in two years the Kaiser's government collapsed. Aunt Annie and Uncle Howard returned to New York, bankrupt and ill. My grandmother took them in, and paid for the

sanatorium in Saranac Lake where he died of tuberculosis, leaving her his debts. In the family this was considered unnecessarily virtuous, because he had offered no help when she was most in need. Conspicuously and publicly he had rejected her husband's request for a job in his law firm, claiming that he had "committed the only crime a gentleman couldn't forgive."

She had to wait forty years for her reward. In the 1970s a West German accountant discovered a discrepancy, an unresolved payment which, with interest, was enough to set her up in comfort for the rest of her life.

At that time she was director of the Valentine Museum in Richmond. Some of her father's household silver was on display there in glass cases, along with various antebellum artifacts, and General Jeb Stuart's tiny feathered hat and tiny boots. She was active in her local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. She used to come to Rhode Island during the summers and make pickled peaches in our kitchen. I was frightened of her formal manners, her take-no-prisoners attitude toward children, and her southern accent, which seemed as foreign to me as Turkish or Uzbeki. She had white hair down her back, but I could only see how long it was when I was spying on her through the crack in her bedroom door, during her morning toilette. She'd brush it out, then braid it, then secure the braids around her head in tight spirals, held in place with long tortoiseshell hairpins.

She wore a corset.

One night there was a thunderstorm, and for some reason there was no one home but she and I. She appeared at the

top of the stairs, her hair undone. She was breathing hard, blowing her cheeks out as she came down, and then she stood in the open door, looking out at the pelting rain. "Come," she said—I always obeyed her. She led me out onto the front lawn. We didn't wear any coats, and in a moment we were soaked. Lightning struck nearby. She took hold of my arm and led me down the path toward the sea; we stood on the bluff as the storm raged. The waves were up the beach. Rain wiped clean the surface of the water. For some reason there was a lot of phosphorescence.

She had hold of my arm, which was not characteristic. Before, she'd never had a reason to touch me. Her other hand was clenched in a fist. The lenses of her glasses were streaked with rain. The wind blew her white hair around her head. She pulled me around in a circle, grinning the whole time. Her teeth were very crooked, very bad.

* * * *

2. The Glass House

It occurs to me that every memoirist and every historian should begin by reminding their readers that the mere act of writing something down, of organizing something in a line of words, involves a clear betrayal of the truth. Without alternatives we resort to telling stories, coherent narratives involving chains of circumstance, causes and effects, climactic moments, introductions and denouements. We can't help it.

This is even before we start to make things up. And it's in spite of what we already know from our own experience: that

our minds are like jumbled crates or suitcases or cluttered rooms, and that memory cannot be separated from ordinary thinking, which is constructed in layers rather than sequences. In the same way history cannot be separated from the present. Both memory and history consist not of stories but of single images, words, phrases, or motifs repeated to absurdity. Who could tolerate reading about such things? Who could even understand it?

So our betrayal of experience has a practical justification. But it also has a psychological one. How could we convince ourselves of progress, of momentum, if the past remained as formless or as pointless as the present? In our search for meaning, especially, we are like a man who looks for his vehicle access and ignition cards under a streetlamp regardless of where he lost them. What choice does he have? In the darkness, it's there or nowhere.

But stories once they're started are self-generating. Each image, once clarified, suggests the next. Form invents content, and so problems of falsehood cannot be limited entirely to form. A friend of mine once told me a story about visiting his father, sitting with him in the VA hospital the morning he died, trying to make conversation, although they had never been close. "Dad," he said, "there's one thing I've never forgotten. We were at the lake house the summer I was twelve, and you came downstairs with some army stuff, your old revolver that you'd rediscovered at the bottom of a drawer. You told Bobby and me to take it out into the woods and shoot it off, just for fun. But I said I didn't want to, I wanted to watch *Gilligan's Island* on TV, and you were okay

with that. Bobby went out by himself. And I think that was a turning point for me, where I knew you would accept me whatever I did, even if it was, you know, intellectual things—books and literature. Bobby's in jail, now, of course. But I just wanted you to know how grateful I was for that, because you didn't force me to conform to some...."

Then my friend had to stop because the old man was staring at him and trying to talk, even though the tubes were down his throat. What kind of deranged psychotic asshole, he seemed to want to express, would give his teenage sons a loaded gun of any kind, let alone a goddamned .38? The lake house, as it happened, was not in Siberia or fucking Wyoming, but suburban Maryland; there were neighbors on both sides. The woods were only a hundred yards deep. You could waste some jerkoff as he sat on his own toilet in his own home. What the fuck? And don't even talk to me about Bobby. He's twice the man you are.

Previously, my friend had told variations of this childhood memory to his wife and his young sons, during moments of personal or family affirmation. He had thought of it as the defining moment of his youth, but now in the stark semiprivate hospital room it sounded ridiculous even to him. And of course, any hope of thoughtful tranquility or reconciliation was impeded, as the old man passed away immediately afterward.

Everyone has had experiences like this. And yet what can we do, except pretend what we say is accurate? What can we do, except continue with our stories? Here is mine. It starts

with a visit to my grandfather, my father's father, sometime in the early 1960s.

His name was Edwin Avery Park, and he lived in Old Mystic in eastern Connecticut, not far from Preston, where his family had wasted much of the seventeenth, the entire eighteenth, and half of the nineteenth centuries on unprofitable farms. He had been trained as an architect, but had retired early to devote himself to painting—imitations, first, of John Marin's landscapes, and then later of Giorgio di Chirico's surrealist canvases; he knew his work derived from theirs. Once he said, "I envy you. I know I'll never have what you have. Now here I am at the end of my life, a fifth-rate painter." His eyes got misty, wistful. "I could have been a third-rate painter."

He showed no interest in my sisters. But I had been born in a caul, the afterbirth wrapped around my head, which made me exceptional in his eyes. According to my father, this was a notion he had gotten from his own mother, my father's grandmother, president of the New Haven Theosophist Society in the 1880s and '90s and a font of the kind of wisdom that was later to be called "new age," in her case mixed with an amount of old Connecticut folklore.

When we visited, my grandfather was always waking me up early and taking me for rambles in old graveyards. Once he parked the car by the side of the road, and he—

No, wait. Something happened first. At dawn I had crept up to his studio in the top of the house and looked through a stack of paintings: "Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance." "The Waxed Intruder." "Shrouds and Dirges, Disassembled."

This was when I was seven or eight years old. I found myself examining a pencil sketch of a woman riding a horned animal. I have it before me now, spread out on the surface of my desk. She wears a long robe, but in my recollection she is naked, and that was the reason I was embarrassed to hear the heavy sound of my grandfather's cane on the stairs, why I pretended to be looking at something else when he appeared.

His mother, Lucy Cowell, had been no larger than a child, and he also was very small—five feet at most, and bald. Long, thin nose. Pale blue eyes. White moustache. He knew immediately what I'd been looking at. He barely had to stoop to peer into my face. Later, he parked the car beside the road, and we walked out through a long field toward an overgrown structure in the distance. The sky was low, and it was threatening to rain. We took a long time to reach the greenhouse through the wet, high grass.

Now, in my memory it is a magical place. Maybe it didn't seem so at the time. I thought the panes were dirty and smudged, many of them cracked and broken. Vines and creepers had grown in through the lights. But now I see immediately why I was there. Standing inside the ruined skeleton, I look up to see the sun break through the clouds, catch at motes of drifting dust. And I was surrounded on all sides by ghostly images, faded portraits. The greenhouse had been built of large, old-fashioned photographic exposures on square sheets of glass.

A couple of years later, in Puerto Rico, I saw some of the actual images made from these plates. I didn't know it then.

Now, seated at my office desk, I can see the greenhouse in the long, low, morning light, and I can see with my imagination's eye the bearded officers and judges, the city fathers with their families, the children with their black nannies. And then other, stranger images: My grandfather had to swipe away the grass to show me, lower down, the murky blurred exposure of the horned woman on the shaggy beast, taken by firelight, at midnight—surely she was naked there! "These were made by my great-uncle, Benjamin Cowell," he said. "He had a photography studio in Virginia. After the war he came home and worked for his brother. This farm provided all the vegetables for Cowell's Restaurant."

Denounced as a Confederate sympathizer, Benjamin Cowell had had a difficult time back in Connecticut, and had ended up by taking his own life. But in Petersburg in the 1850s, his studio had been famous—Rockwell & Cowell. Robert E. Lee sat for him during the siege of the city in 1864. That's a matter of record, and yet the greenhouse itself—how could my grandfather have walked that far across an unmowed field? The entire time I knew him he was very lame, the result of a car accident. For that matter, how could he have driven me anywhere when he didn't, to my knowledge, drive? And Cowell's Restaurant, the family business, was in New Haven, seventy miles away. My great-great-grandfather personally shot the venison and caught the fish. Was it likely he would have imported his vegetables over such a distance?

Middle-aged, I tried to find the greenhouse again, and failed. My father had no recollection. "He'd never have told

him," sniffed Winifred, my grandfather's third wife. "He liked you. You were born in a caul. He liked that. It was quite an accomplishment, he always said."

Toward the end of her life I used to visit her in Hanover, New Hampshire, where they'd moved in the 1970s when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It was her home town. Abused by her father, a German professor at Dartmouth, she had escaped to marry my grandfather, himself more than thirty years older, whom she had met in a psychiatric art clinic in Boston, a program run by his second wife. It surprised everyone when Winifred wanted to move home, most of all my grandfather, who didn't long survive the change. He had spent the 1930s in Bennington, Vermont, teaching in the college there, and had learned to loathe those mountains. In addition, I believe now, he had another, more complicated fear, which he associated with that general area.

Because of her illness, Winifred was unable to care for him, and he ended his life in a nursing home. He was convinced, the last time I saw him, that I was visiting him during half-time of the 1908 Yale-Harvard game. "This is the worst hotel I've ever stayed in," he confided in a whisper, when I bent down to kiss his cheek. But then he turned and grabbed my arm. "You've seen her, haven't you?"

I didn't even ask him what he meant, he was so far gone. Later, when I used to visit Winifred in New Hampshire, she got in the habit of giving me things to take away—his paintings first of all. She'd never cared for them. Then old tools and odds and ends, and finally a leather suitcase, keyless and locked, which I broke open when I got home.

There in an envelope was the drawing of the horned woman riding the horned beast.

There also were several packages tied up in brown paper and twine, each with my name in his quavering handwriting. I brought them to my office at Williams College and opened them. The one on top contained the first three volumes of something called *The Parke Scrapbook*, compiled by a woman named Ruby Parke Anderson: exhaustive genealogical notes, which were also full of errors, as Winifred subsequently pointed out. Folded into Volume Two was his own commentary, an autobiographical sketch, together with his annotated family tree. This was familiar to me, as he had made me memorize the list of names when I was still a child, starting with his immigrant ancestor in Massachusetts Bay—Robert, Thomas, Robert, Hezekiah, Paul, Elijah, Benjamin Franklin, Edwin Avery, Franklin Allen, Edwin Avery, David Allen, Paul Claiborne, Adrian Xhaferaj....

But I saw immediately that some of the names were marked with asterisks, my grandfather's cousin Theo, Benjamin Cowell, and the Reverend Paul Parke, an eighteenth-century Congregationalist minister. At the bottom of the page, next to another asterisk, my grandfather had printed CAUL.

* * * *

3. The Battle of the Crater

Not everyone is interested in these things. Already in those years I had achieved a reputation in my family as someone

with an unusual tolerance for detritus and memorabilia. Years before I had received a crate of stuff from Puerto Rico via my mother's mother in Virginia. These were books and papers from my mother's father, also addressed to me, though I hadn't seen him since I was nine years old, in 1964. They had included his disbarment records in a leather portfolio, a steel dispatch case without a key, and a bundle of love letters to and from my grandmother, wrapped in rubber bands. I'd scarcely looked at them. I'd filed them for later when I'd have more time.

That would be now. I sat back at my desk, looked out the open window in the September heat. There wasn't any air conditioning anymore, although someone was mowing the lawn over by the Congo church. And I will pretend that this was my Proustian moment, by which I mean the moment that introduces a long, false, coherent memory—close enough. I really hadn't thought about Benjamin Cowell during the intervening years, or the greenhouse or the horned lady. My memories of Puerto Rico seemed of a different type, inverted, solid, untransparent. In this way they were like the block of pasteboard images my mother's father showed me at his farm in Maricao, and then packed up for me later to be delivered after his death, photographs made, I now realized, by Rockwell & Cowell in Petersburg, where he was from.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Surely in the greenhouse I'd seen this one, and this one—images that joined my mother's and my father's families. Years before on my office wall I'd hung "Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance" in a simple wooden frame, and beside it the military medallion in gilt and

ormolu: General Lee surrounded by his staff. Under them, amid some boxes of books, I now uncovered the old crate, still with its stickers from some Puerto Rican shipping line. I levered off the top. Now I possessed two miscellaneous repositories of words, objects, and pictures, one from each grandfather. And because of this sudden connection between them, I saw immediately a way to organize these things into a pattern that might conceivably make sense. Several ways, in fact—geographically, chronologically, thematically. I imagined I could find some meaning. Alternately from the leather satchel and the wooden crate, I started to lay out packages and manuscripts along the surface of my desk and the adjoining table. I picked up a copy of an ancient Spanish tile, inscribed with a stick figure riding a stag—it was my maternal grandfather in Puerto Rico who had shown me this. He had taken me behind the farmhouse to a cave in the forest, where someone had once seen an apparition of the devil. And he himself had found there, when he first bought the property, a Spanish gold doubloon. "You've seen her, haven't you?" he said.

"Who?"

A lawyer, he had left his wife and children to resettle in the Caribbean, first in the Virgin Islands and then in San Juan. He'd won cases and concessions for the Garment and Handicrafts Union, until he was disbarred in the 1950s. Subsequently he'd planted citrus trees in a mountain ravine outside of Maricao. His name was Robert W. Claiborne.

In my office, I put my hand on the locked dispatch case, and then moved down the line. In 1904, his father, my great-

grandfather, had published a memoir called *Seventy-Five Years in Old Virginia*. Now I picked up what looked like the original manuscript, red-lined by the editor at Neale Publishing, and with extensive marginal notes.

Years before I'd read the book, or parts of it. Dr. John Herbert Claiborne had been director of the military hospital in Petersburg during the siege, and subsequently the last surgeon-general of the Army of Northern Virginia, during the retreat to Appomattox. A little of his prose, I remembered, went a long way:

We would not rob the gallant Captain or his brave North Carolinians of one feather from their plume. Where there were North Carolinians, there were brave men always, and none who ever saw them in a fight, or noted the return of their casualties after a fight, will gainsay that; but there were other brave men, of the infantry and of the artillery,—men whom we have mentioned,—who rallied promptly, and who shared with our Captain and his game crew that generous rain of metal so abundantly poured out upon their devoted heads.

Or:

We were descendents of the cavalier elements that settled in that State and wrested it from the savage by their prowess, introducing a

leaven in the body politic, which not only bred a high order of civilization at home, but spread throughout the Southern and Western States, as the Virginian, moved by love of adventure or desire of preferment, migrated into the new and adjoining territories. And from this sneered-at stock was bred the six millions of Southrons who for four long years maintained unequal war with thirty millions of Northern hybrids, backed by a hireling soldiery brought from the whole world to put down constitutional liberty—an unequal war, in which the same Southron stock struck undaunted for honor and the right, until its cohorts of starved and ragged heroes perished in their own annihilation....

Or even:

But how many of our little band, twenty years afterward, rode with Fitz Lee, and with Stuart, and with Rosser—rode upon the serried squares of alien marauders on their homes and their country,—I know not. As the war waged I would meet one of them sometimes, with the same firm seat in the saddle, the same spirit of dash and deviltry—but how many were left to tell to their children the story of battle and of bivouac is not recorded. I only know that I can

not recall a single living one to-day. As far as I can learn, every one has responded to the last Long Roll, and every one has answered *adsum*—here—to the black sergeant—Death.

In other words, what you might call an unreconstructed Southerner, gnawing at old bones from the Civil War. I glanced up at a copy of the finished book on the shelf above my desk. And I could guess immediately that the typescript underneath my hand was longer. Leafing through it, I could see whole chapters were crossed out.

For example, in the section that describes the siege of Petersburg, there is an odd addendum to an account of the Battle of the Crater, which took place on the night and early morning of July 30, 1864:

But now at certain nights during the year, between Christmas Night and New Year's Day, or else sometimes during the Ember Days, I find myself again on the Jerusalem Plank Road, or else re-treading in the footsteps of Mahone's doughty veterans, as they came up along the continuous ravine to the east of the Cameron house, and on to near the present location of the water works. From there I find myself in full view of the captured salient, and the fortifications that had been exploded by the mine, where Pegram's Battery had stood. On these moon-lit nights, I see the tortured chasm

in the earth, the crater as it was,—two hundred feet long, sixty feet wide, and thirty feet deep. To my old eyes it is an abyss as profound as Hell itself, and beyond I see the dark, massed flags of the enemy, as they were on that fatal morning,—eleven flags in fewer than one hundred yards,—showing the disorder of his advance. Yet he comes in great strength. As before, because of the power of the exploded mine, and because of the awful destruction of the Eighteenth and Twenty-Second South Carolina Regiments, the way lies open to Cemetery Hill, and then onward to the gates of the doomed city, rising but two hundred yards beyond its crest. As before and as always, the Federals advance into the gap, ten thousand, twelve thousand strong. But on the shattered lip of the Crater, where Mahone brought up his spirited brigade, there is no one but myself, a gaunt and ancient man, holding in his hand neither musket nor bayonet, but instead a tender stalk of maize. Weary, I draw back, because I have fought this battle before, in other circumstances. As I do so, as before, I see that I am not alone, and in the pearly dawn that there are others who have come down from the hill, old veterans like myself, and boys also, and even ladies in their long gowns, as if come immediately from one of our

'starvation balls,' in the winter of '64, and each carrying her frail sprig of barley, or wheat, or straw. On these nights, over and again, we must defend the hearths and houses of the town, the kine in their fields, the horses in their stalls. Over and again, we must obey the silent trumpet's call. Nor in this battle without end can we expect or hope for the relief of Col. Wright's proud Georgians, or Saunders's gallant heroes from Alabama, who, though outnumbered ten to one, stopped the Federals' charge and poured down such a storm of fire upon their heads, that they were obliged to pile up barricades of slaughtered men, trapped as they were in that terrible pit, which was such as might be fitly portrayed by the pencil of Dante after he had trod 'nine-circled Hell,' where the very air seemed darkened by the flying of human limbs. Then the tempest came down on Ledlie's men like the rain of Norman arrows at Hastings, until the white handkerchief was displayed from the end of a ramrod or bayonet—there is no hope for that again, for even such a momentary victory. This is not Burnside's Corps, but in its place an army of the dead, commanded by a fearsome figure many times his superior in skill and fortitude, a figure which I see upon the ridge,

her shaggy mount trembling beneath her weight....

This entire section is crossed out by an editor's pen, and then further qualified by a note in the margin—"Are we intended to accept this as a literal account of your actual experience?" And later, "Your tone here cannot be successfully reconciled."

Needless to say, I disagreed with the editors' assessments. In my opinion they might have published these excised sections and forgotten all the rest. I was especially interested in the following paragraph, marked with a double question mark in the margin:

Combined with unconsciousness, it is a condition that is characterized by an extreme muscular rigidity, particularly in the sinews of the upper body. But the sensation is difficult to describe. [...] Now the grass grows green. In the mornings, the good citizens of the town bring out their hampers. But through the hours after mid-night I must find a different landscape as, neck stiff, hands frozen into claws, I make my way from my warm bed, in secret. Nor have I once seen any living soul along the way, unless one might count that single, odd, bird-like, Yankee 'carpet-bagger' from his 'atelier,' trudging through the gloom, all his cases and contraptions over his

shoulders, including his diabolical long flares of phosphorus....

* * * *

4. A UFO in Preston

Benjamin Cowell had made his exposures on sheets of glass covered with a silver emulsion. There were none of his photographs in Edwin Avery Park's leather valise. Instead I found daguerreotypes and tintypes from the 1850s and earlier. And as I dug farther into the recesses of the musty bag, I found other images—a framed silhouette of Hannah Avery, and then, as I pushed back into the eighteenth century, pen and pencil sketches of other faces, coarser and coarser and worse-and-worse drawn, increasingly cartoonish and indistinct, the lines lighter and lighter, the paper darker and darker.

The sketch of the Reverend Paul Parke is particularly crude, less a portrait than a child's scribble: spidery silver lines on a spotted yellow card: bald pate, round eyes, comically seraphic smile, suggesting the death's head on an ancient grave. It was in an envelope with another artifact, a little handwritten booklet about three by six inches, sewn together and covered in rough brown paper. The booklet contained the text of a sermon preached at the Preston Separate Church on July 15, 1797, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Rev. Parke's public ministry. Because of its valedictory nature—he was at the time almost

eighty years old—the sermon includes an unusual admixture of personal reflection and reminiscence. Immensely long, it is not interesting in its totality, and I could not but admire the stamina of the Preston Separatists, dozing, as I imagined, in their hot, uncomfortable pews.

For the Reverend Parke, the most powerful and astonishing changes of his lifetime had been spiritual in nature, the various schisms and revivals we refer to as the Great Awakening. Independence, and the rebellion of the American Colonies, seemed almost an afterthought to him, a distant social echo of a more profound and significant rebellion against established doctrine, which had resulted in the manifest defeat of the Anti-Christ, and the final destruction of Babylon.

Moving through the sermon, at first I thought I imagined an appealing sense of modesty and doubt:

...it wood not Do to trust in my knowledge: or
doings or anything of men of means that
sentered in Selfishness: and tried to avoid Self
Seeking: but in this I was baffled for while I
was Giting out of Self in one Shap I should find
I was Giting into another and whilst I
endeavored not to trust in one thing I found I
was trusting in Something else: and they Sem
all to be but refuges of lies as when I fled from
a lion I met a fox or went to lean on the wall a
Serpent wood bite me and my own hart dyed
and my every way I Could take and when I

could find no way to escape and as I thought
no Divine assistance or favour: I found
Dreadful or it was my hart murmuring in emity
against God himself that others found mercy
and were Safe and happy: whilst I that had
Sought as much was Denied of help and was
perishing. I knew this timper was
blasphmonthy wicked and Deserved
Damnation: and it appeared to be of Such a
malignant nature that the pains of hell wood
not allow or make me any bettor thoug I
Greatly feared it wood be my portion: but this
Soon Subsided and other Subjects drew my
sight.

As is so often the case, these subjects were, and now
became, the problems of other people. Nor did the Reverend
Parke's self-doubt translate automatically into compassion:

...if any one was known to err in principle or
practisee or Did Not walk everly there was
Strickt Disapline attended according to rule,
bee the sin private and publick, as the Case
required: and the offender recovered or
admenished that their Condition be all ways
plaine, their Soberiety and Zeal for virtue and
piety was Such their Common language and
manners was plaine and innocent Carefully
avoiding Jesting rude or profain

Communications with all Gamblings and
Gamings: excessive festivity frolicking
Drinking Dressing and even all fashenable
Divertions that appeared Dangerous to Virtue:
and observed the Stricktest rules of prudence
and economy in Common life and to have no
felloship with the unfruitful works of Darkness
but reprove them.

Even though my office window was open, the heat was still oppressive. I sat back, listening to the buzz of the big mowers sweeping close across the lawn. This last paragraph seemed full of redirected misery, and it occurred to me to understand why, having given me my ancestor's name, my parents had never actually used it, preferring to call me by a nickname from a 1950s comic strip. I slouched in my chair, letting my eyes drift down the page until I found some other point of entry. But after a few lines I was encouraged, and imagined also a sudden, mild stir of interest, moving through the ancient congregation like a breeze:

...in Embr Weeke, this was pasd the middle of
the night when I went out thoug my wife would
not Sweare otherwise but that I had not
shifted from my bed. But in Darkness I betoke
myself amongst the hils of maise and having
broken of a staff of it I cam out from the verge
and into the plouged field wher I saw others in
the sam stile. Amongst them were that sam

Jonas Devenport and his woman that we had still Givn mercyfull Punishment and whipd as I have menshoned on that publick ocation befor the entire congregation. But on this night when I had come out with the rest: not them but others to that we had similarly Discomforted. So I saw an army of Sinners that incluyded Jho Whiteside Alice Hster and myself come from the maise with ears and tasills in our hands. I was one amongst them So Convinced in my own Depravity and the Deceitfullness of my own Hart of Sin the body of Death and ungodlyness that always lyes in wait to Deceive. On that bar ground of my unopned mind these ours wood apear as like a Morning without ligt of Gospill truth and all was fals Clouds and scret Darkness. Theire I saw printed on the earth the hoof of mine enemy: a deep print up on the ground. In the dark I could still perceive her horns and her fowl wind. Nor thought I we could hold her of with our weak armes. But together Inking hands we strugld upward up the hill by Preston Grang nto the appel trees led by that enemy common to al who movd befor us like a hornd beast together with her armee of walking corses of dead men. Nor could I think she was not leding us to slaghter by the ruind hutts of the Pecuoeds theire: exsept When I saw a Greate Ligt at the top of the hill coming throug

the trees as lik a cold fire and a vessel or a shipe com down from heavn theire and burning our fases as we knelt and prayd. Those hutts bursd afire and a Great Ligt and a vessill on stakes or joyntd legs was come for our delivrance: with Angels coming down the laddr with theire Greate Heads and Eys. Nor could I Scersely refrain my Mouth from laughter and my tongue from Singing: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth: or singing like Israel at the Red Sea: the hors and his rider he has thrown into the Sea: or say with Debarah he rode in the heavens for our help, the heavens Dropped the Clouds Dropped Down Water: the Stars in theire Courses fought against Ceera: who was deliverd into the Hand and slain by a woman: with a Sinful weapon. If any man doubt it theire is stil now upon that hill the remnts of that battel. Or I have writ a copy of that Shipe that otherwise did flie away and leving ondy this scrape of scin ript from man's enimny in that hour of Tryumph....

In my office, in the late afternoon, I sat back. The diagram was there, separately drawn on a small, stiff card, the lines so light I could hardly make them out. But I saw a small sphere atop three jointed legs.

Then I unwrapped the piece of skin, which was tied up in a shred of leather. It was hard as coal and blackish-green, perhaps two inches by three, the scales like goose-bumps.

I looked up at my grandfather's painting above my desk, "Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance." I had examined it many times. The ghosts are like pentagrams, five-pointed stars, misty and transparent. They are bowing to each other in a circle, clutching the oranges in their hands. In the misty landscape, under the light of what must be the full moon behind the clouds, there are cabinets and chests of drawers where other ghosts lie folded up.

But now I noticed an odd detail for the first time. The furniture is littered across a half-plowed field. And in the background, against a row of faux-gothic windows, there are men and women hiding, peering out from a row of corn placed incongruously along the front. Their faces glint silver in the moonlight. Their eyes are hollow, their cheeks pinched and thin.

I got up to examine the painting more closely. I unhooked it from the wall and held it up close to my nose. Then I laid it among the piles of paper on my desk.

These similarities, these correspondences between my mother's family and my father's—I give the impression they are obvious and clear. But that is the privilege of the memoirist or the historian, searching for patterns, choosing what to emphasize: a matter of a few lines here and there, sprinkled over thousands of pages. Turning away, I wandered around my office for a little while, noticing with despair the boxes of old books and artifacts, the shelves of specimens,

disordered and chaotic. A rolled-up map had fallen across the door. How had everything gotten to be like this? Soon, I thought, I'd need a shovel just to dig myself out.

But through the open window I could smell cut grass. I turned toward the screen again, searching for a way to calm myself and to arrange in my mind these disparate narratives. Because of my training as a literary scholar, I found it easy to identify some similarities, especially the repeating motif of the corn stalk, and the conception of a small number of unworthy people, obliged to protect their world or their community from an awful power. And even in the scene of triumph described by the Reverend Parke—achieved, apparently, through some type of extraterrestrial intervention—was I wrong to catch an odor of futility? This was no final victory, after all. These struggles were nightly, or else at certain intervals of the year. The enemy was too strong, the stakes too high. Our weapons are fragile and bizarre, our allies uncertain and unlike ourselves—no one we would have chosen for so desperate a trial.

I sat back down again, touched my computer, googled *Ember Days*, idly checked my email, not wanting to go home. The buzz of the lawnmower was gone. The campus was underutilized, of course. The building was almost empty.

I cleared a place on my desk, crossed my arms over it, laid down my cheek. Not very comfortable. But in a few minutes I was asleep. I have always been a lucid dreamer, and as I have gotten older the vividness of my dreams has increased and not diminished, the sense of being in some vague kind of control. This is in spite of the fact that I sleep poorly now,

never for more than a few hours at a time, and if a car goes by outside my bedroom, or if someone were to turn onto her side or change her breathing, I am instantly awake. As a result, the experience of sleeping and not sleeping has lost the edge between them. But then at moments my surroundings are sufficiently distorted and bizarre for me to say for certain, "I am dreaming," and so wake myself up.

With my cheek and mouth pressed out of shape against the wooden surface, I succumbed to this type of double experience. I had a dream in which I was sufficiently alert to ponder its meaning while it was still going on. Not that I have any clear preconceptions about the language of dreams, but in a general way I can see, or pretend I can see, how certain imagery can reflect or evoke the anxieties of waking life—the stresses on a relationship or a marriage, say, or the reasons I was sitting here in my office on a sweltering afternoon, instead of going home. I dreamed I was at one of those little private cave-systems that are a roadside feature of the Shenandoah Valley Interstate—I had visited a few with Nicola and Adrian when he was four or five and we were still living in Baltimore. But I was alone this time. I felt the wind rush by me as I stood at the entrance to the main cavern, a function of the difference in temperature outside and inside. It gives the illusion that the cave is "breathing," an illusion fostered in this case by the soft colors and textures of the stone above my head, the flesh-like protuberances, and the row of sharp white stalactites. Perhaps inevitably I now realized I was in the mouth of a sleeping giant, and that the giant was in fact myself, collapsed over my office desk. And as I ran out over

the hard, smooth surface, I realized further that I had taken the shape of a small rodent; now I jumped down to the floor and made a circuit of the room, trying to find a hole to hide in, or (even better!) a means of egress through the towering stacks of books.

* * * *

5. A Detour

When I woke, I immediately packed my laptop, locked my office. It was late. I went down to my car in the lot below Stetson Hall, seeing no one along the way. I passed what once had been known as the North Academic Building—subsequently they'd made the basement classroom into a storeroom. The glass they had replaced with bricks, so that you couldn't look in. But even so I always walked this way, in order to remember my first trip to Williams College years before, and the class where I had met my wife. In this dark, cannibalized building, Professor Rosenheim had taught his 100-level course on meta-fiction. Andromeda Yoo (as I will call her for these purposes) had been a first-year student then.

These days we also live in a town called Petersburg, though the coincidence had never struck me until now. It is across the border in New York State, and there are two ways to drive home. One of them, slightly longer, loops north into Vermont.

Usually I take the shorter way, because I have to stop and show my identification and vaccination cards at only one state

inspection booth and not two. There's hardly ever a line, and usually you just breeze through. Of course I accept the necessity. The world has changed. Even so, there's something that rubs against the grain.

But that afternoon I headed north. On my way along Route 346, it occurred to me suddenly that I recognized the façade in the painting of the star-shaped ghosts. It belongs to a gingerbread construction, a mansion in North Bennington called the Park-McCullough House, at one time open to the public, and not far from the campus where Edwin Park taught architecture and watercolor painting in the 1930s, until he was dismissed (my father once claimed) for some kind of sexual indiscretion.

But apparently, much later, subsequent to his marriage to Winifred, he had revisited the place. I knew this because of a strange document in a battered envelope, part of the contents of his leather valise, a scribbled note on the stationery of the Hanover nursing home where he had ended his life, and then a few typed pages, obviously prepared earlier, about the time, I imagined, that he had painted "Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance." And then some more pages in a woman's writing—when I first glanced at them, I had discounted the whole thing as some sort of meandering and abortive attempt at fiction. Now, as I drove home, I found I wasn't so sure.

The note was attached to the pages with a paperclip, and the thin, spidery lines were almost illegible. Yet even though the letters were distorted, I could still see vestiges of my grandfather's fine hand: "Ghosts; ghosts in the moon."

And here is the typed text of the manuscript: "Now that I'm an old man, dreams come so hard I wake up choking. Now at midnight, with my wife asleep, I sit down hoping to expunge a crime—a tiny crime I must insist—that I committed in the Park-McCullough mansion on one autumn night when I was there alone.

"In 1955 I moved to Boston and married Winifred Nief, who had been a patient of my deceased wife. Within a few years I retired from my architectural practice and removed to Old Mystic to devote myself to painting. About this time I became a member of the Park Genealogical Society, an organization of modest ambitions, though useful for determining a precise degree of consanguinity with people whose names all sound like variations of Queen Gertrude the Bald. Its standards of admission, as a consequence and fortunately, are quite lax.

"Starting in the early 1960s, the society had its annual meeting each Halloween weekend in the Park-McCullough House, a boxy Second-Empire structure in Bennington, which was no longer by that time in private hands. At first I had no wish to go. Quite the contrary. Winifred was bored speechless by the prospect, and I couldn't blame her. But something perverse about the idea nagged at me, and finally I thought I might like to revisit that town, without saying why. Enough time had passed, I thought.

"Winifred said she might like to drive down to Williamstown and visit David and Clara. She could drop me off for the afternoon and pick me up later. I had no desire to see the children go out trick-or-treating. In those days I didn't

concern myself with my son's family, except for Paul, though in many ways he was the least interesting of the four. He'd been born in a caul, which my daughter-in-law had not seen fit to preserve. The youngest daughter was retarded, of course.

"Winifred dropped me off under the porte-cochere on a beautiful autumn day. Among a dozen or so genealogists, it was impossible for me to pretend any relation to the former owners, who by that time had died out. But we traipsed around the house, listening with modest interest to the shenanigans of the Parks and the McCulloughs—Trenor Park had made his money in the Gold Rush. Even so, he seemed a foolish sort. Success, even more than accomplishment, is the consolation of a mediocre mind.

"The house itself interested me more, designed by Henry Dudley (of the euphonious New York firm of Diaper & Dudley) in the mid 1860s, and displaying some interesting features of the Romantic Revival. It was a shameless copy of many rather ugly buildings, but I have often thought that true originality in architecture, or in anything, can only be achieved through a self-conscious process of imitation. I was especially taken with the elegant way the staff's rooms and corridors and staircases were folded invisibly into the structure, as if two separate houses were located on the same floor plan, intersecting only through a series of hidden doors. In fact there were many more secret passageways and whatnot than were usual. I was shown the secret tunnel under the front. There was a large dumbwaiter on the first floor.

"The docent told me stories of the family, and stories also about screams in the night, strange sounds and footsteps, lights turned on, a mysterious impression on the mattress of the great four-poster in the master bedroom. These are standard stories in old houses, but it seemed to me that an unusual quantity had accumulated here, a ghost in almost every room, and this over a mere hundred years of occupation. For example, there was a servant who had disappeared after his shift, never to be heard of again. A fellow named John Kepler, like the philosopher. He had left a wife and child in the village.

"I had thought I would go to the morning session and then use the afternoon to stroll about the town. As things turned out, I found my leg was bothering me too much. I could not bear to walk the streets or even less to climb the hill to the campus, for fear I might be recognized. I berated myself for coming within a hundred miles of the place, and so I took refuge in the mansion past the time everyone else had departed, and the staff was preparing for a special children's program, putting up paper spiderwebs and bats. The docents were so used to me they left me to my own devices. Waiting for Winifred to pick me up, I found myself sitting in an alcove off Eliza McCullough's bedroom, where she had written her correspondence at a small, Italianate, marble-topped table.

"I sat back in the wicker chair. I've always had an instinct for rotten wood, and for any kind of anomaly. I happened to glance at the parquet floor beneath my feet and saw at once a place where the complicated inlay had been cut apart and reassembled not quite perfectly. In old houses sometimes

there are secret compartments put in for the original owners, and that secret is often lost and forgotten in the second generation or the third. And in this house I thought I could detect a mania for secrecy. I put my foot on the anomaly and pressed, and was rewarded by a small click. I could tell a box was hidden under the surface of the floor.

"I confess I was nervous and excited as I listened at the door for the footsteps of the staff. Then I returned and knelt down on the floor. I could see immediately the secret was an obvious one, a puzzle like those child's toys, plastic sliding squares with letters on them in a little frame, and because one square is missing, the rest can be rearranged. Words can be spelled. The little squares of parquetry moved under my fingers until one revealed a deeper hole underneath. I reached in and found the clasp, and the box popped open.

"The hole contained a document. I had already been shown a sample of Eliza Park-McCullough's handwriting, the distinctively loopy, forceful, slanting letters, which I recognized immediately. I enclose the pages, pilfered from the house. But because they are difficult to read, I also transcribe them here:

God I think I will go mad if I don't put this down and put this down. Esther tells me to say nothing, to tell nothing and say nothing, but she does not live here. Nor will she come back she says as long as she lives. And the rest are all gone and will not come back for an old woman, nor can I tell them. It would be prison

if they knew or an asylum. So here I am alone in the nights when the servants go back behind the wall, and I take the elevator to the second floor. And I cannot always keep the lights burning and the victrola playing and the radio on, and then I am alone. It has been twenty years since Mr. McCullough died and left me here, a crippled bird who cannot fly to him! So in the night I drink my sherry and roll my chair back and forth along the hall. I spy from the front windows, and I can almost see them gather on the lawn, not just one or two. But they nod shyly to each other as they join in the dance. The lamps that they carry glow like fireflies. But they are also lit from above as if from an enormous fire behind the clouds, an engine coming down. Some nights I think it must land here on the roof, and if I could I would climb to the top of the house, and it would take me up. Or else I lie on my bed and listen for the sounds I know must come, the clink of the billiard balls on the green baize, and the smell of cigar smoke even though it has been two years since I had them take the balls and cues away. I asked them to burn them. I am sure they thought me insane, but I'm not insane. Nor was I even unhappy till the monster came into this house, and if I'm punished now it is for giving him his post and

not dismissing him. But how could I do that? John McCullough, do you forgive me? It was for his high forehead and curling brown moustaches and strong arms like your arms. Do you know when I first saw him, when he first stood there in the hall with his cap in his hands, I thought I saw your ghost. No one is alive now who remembers you when you were young, but I remember. That boy was my John brought back, and when he lifted me in his arms and carried me upstairs before the elevator went in, when he put me down in my wheel-chair at the top of the stairs, I scarcely could let go his neck. Do they think because I'm paralyzed that I feel nothing? Even now, past my eightieth year I can remember how it felt when you would carry me up those stairs and to my room, me like a little bird in your arms, though I could walk then and fly, too. Do not think I was unfaithful when I put my face into his shirt when he was carrying me upstairs. And when he put me down and asked me in his country voice if there was anything more, why then the spell was broken. I do not say these things to excuse myself. There is no excuse. Though even now I marvel I was able to do it, able to find a way that night when they were all asleep and I was reading in my room. Or perhaps I had gone

asleep. 'Is that you?' I cried when I heard the click of the billiard balls and smelled the cigar. I thought it was you, the way you put the house to bed before you came up. I pulled myself into my chair and wheeled myself down the hall. 'Is that you?' And when I saw him coming up the stairs, you ask me why I didn't ring the bell. I tell you it was all a dream until he spoke in his loud voice. I had no money about the place. Perhaps he thought I'd be asleep. He smiled when he saw me. He was drunk. I am ashamed to say I do not think he would have hurt me. But I could not forgive him because he knew my secret. I could tell it in his smiling face as he came down the hall. He knew why I could not cry out or ring the bell. Oh my John, he was nothing like you then as he turned my chair about and rolled me down away from the servants' door. 'Is that right, old bird?' he said. He would not let go of my chair. Once he put his hand over my mouth. And he went through my jewel case and he turned out my closets and my drawers. He could not guess the secret of this box where I keep the stone. Then he was angry and he took hold of my arms. He put his face against my face so that our noses touched, and he smiled and I could smell his cologne and something else, the man's smell

underneath. I could not forgive him. 'There in the closet,' I said, meaning the water closet, though he didn't understand me. I let him wheel me over the threshold, and then I reached out on the surface of the cabinet where Mr. McCullough's man had shaved him every morning. There was no electric light, and so I reached out my hand in the darkness. The man's head was near my head and I struck at him with the razor. Oh, I could not get it out of my head that I had committed a great crime! It was you, John, who put that thought into my head, and I did not deserve it! I pulled myself into my room again. I found a clean night-gown and took off my other one and lay down on my bed. When I made my telephone call it was to Esther who drove up from the town. I think I was a little insane, then. She scrubbed the floor with her own hands. She told me we must tell no one, and that no one would believe us. She said there was a space where the dumb-waiter comes into the third floor, a fancy of the builder's she'd discovered when she and Bess were children. It is a three-sided compartment set into the top of the shaft. Esther does not live in the real world, though that is hard to say of your own child. She said the stone would keep the man away. But otherwise he would come back. She laughed

and said it would be an eye for him. We'd put it into his head and it would be his eye. We'd claim he'd stolen it and run away. We'd claim a rat had died inside the wall.

"I sat reading these notes as it grew dark. Then I folded up the pages and slipped them into my jacket. I sat at Mrs. McCullough's desk and stared out the window. Darkness was falling. I poked at the floor with the end of my cane. Winifred was late. The box in the parquetry was closed.

"The docent's name was Jane Mears, and she was a beautiful, shy woman, with soft hair, if you care about that sort of thing. She stood in the doorway with a question on her lips. I asked her whether there was any story of a famous jewel that appertained to the house. And she told me about a massive stone, a ruby or sapphire or topaz or tourmaline the size of an orange that Trenor Park had won in a poker game in San Francisco. According to the story, it was delivered to his hotel room in a blood-spattered box, the former owner having shot himself after he packed it up.

"It disappeared around 1932,' she said.

"I didn't say anything. I was not like other members of my family, or like my cousin Theodora who had died. I had never heard the voices. There had been no membrane over my eyes when I was born, no secret screen of images between me and the world. But even so I was interested in the anomaly, the corpse at the top of the shaft, a jewel in his mouth, as I imagined. A ghost's footprint in the dust, or else the men and women who had come out of the corn to follow my great-

great-great-grandfather up Bartlett Hill in Preston, where there was a machine, or a mechanical robot, or an automaton with the cold light behind it and the stag running away.

"When Winifred drove up, I was waiting in the drive. She had stories to tell me about my son's family. I asked her to take the long way round, to circle by the campus, and we drove through North Bennington and watched the children dressed as witches and Frankensteins. There was a little ghost running after his mother, carrying a pumpkin.

"I motioned with my finger, and Winifred drove me toward the Silk Road and the covered bridge, then past it toward the corner where my car had spun out of control. She chattered about her day, and I responded in monosyllables. She made the turn past the tree where I had lost control. She didn't know, and at first I didn't think I would say anything about it. But then I changed my mind. 'Stop,' I said, and I made her pull over onto the side of the road. I gave her some foolish story, and left her in the car while I limped back in the darkness to deliver my gift."

* * * *

6. Andromeda Yoo

As I sped home at dusk, I wondered if I should retrace my grandfather's steps and drive up to the Park-McCullough House along Silk Road—it wasn't so far out of the way. Perhaps I could find the tree he was talking about. But I passed the turnoff and continued, pondering as I did so the differences and connections between this narrative and the

previous ones. That Halloween night, I thought, there had been no ghosts in the cornrows, and no cornrows at all, lining the front of the mansion or surrounding the elaborate portecochere. But then why had my grandfather chosen that image or motif for his portrait of the house? Though it was obvious he had read the Reverend Parke's sermon, he had no way of knowing how it corresponded or overlapped with various documents from my mother's family—manuscripts he'd never seen, composed by people he'd never met.

But after I had crossed into New York State, I left behind my obsessive thoughts of those dry texts. Instead I imagined my wife waiting for me. And so when I arrived home at my little house beside the river, there she was. She had brought Chinese food from Pittsfield, where she worked as a lawyer for Sabic Plastics.

What was it my grandfather had said? "...A beautiful, shy woman with long black hair, if you care about that sort of thing. She stood in the doorway with a question on her lips..."—when I first read the description I had thought of my wife. Driving home, remembering that first reading, I thought of her again, and wondered how I would answer her question, and whether she would be angry or impatient, as the docent at the Park-McCullough house, I imagined, had had every right to be. But Andromeda was just curious; she often got home late after supper, and in the long September light, everything tended to seem earlier than it was. We made Bombays-and-tonic and went to sit on the deck looking down toward the swamp willows, and ate seaweed salad and chicken with orange sauce out of the white containers with

wire handles—very civilized. Andromeda raised her chopsticks, a further interrogation.

And so I told her about the mystery, the ghosts in the corn. As I did so, I remembered the first time I saw her in Professor Rosenheim's class, fresh-faced, eager to engage. Rosenheim had given them an early novel of mine, *A Princess of Roumania*, and it was obvious to me that Andromeda had liked it very much. The class itself was about meta-fiction, which is a way of doubling a story back upon itself, in a fashion similar to my grandfather's description of the double nature of the Park-McCullough mansion with its manifest anomalies. It was possible to see these kinds of patterns in my own work, although I always warned students against complexity for its own sake, and to consider the virtues of the simple story, simply told.

Rosenheim had invited me up from Baltimore to discuss *A Princess of Roumania*, a novel that had become infected almost against my will with references to the past, with descriptions of locations from my own life, and people I had once known or would come to know—all writing, after all, is a mixture of experience and imagination, fantasy and fact. I had accepted his offer because the trip enabled me to revisit the town where I'd grown up, and where part of the novel was set. Already by that time, Baltimore had ceased to feel like home.

And so I spent the weekend visiting as if for the first time the locations where I had set *A Princess of Roumania*. It was strange to see how I had misread my own memory, how little the text recalled the actual places. Lakes had become ponds.

Rivers had become streams. Subdued, I met Rosenheim the night before the class, and we sat in a bar called "The Red Herring," and it was there that he first told me about his student, Andromeda. "You'll see what I mean tomorrow. None of this will be difficult for her. She'll figure out not just what you said, but what you meant to say. If only the rest had half her brains," he said, peering at me through glasses as thick as hockey pucks.

But then he roused himself, brandishing in his right hand the text of something else I had been working on, a "memoir," or fragment of science-fiction, which I would finish many years later, and which, ill-advisedly maybe, I had emailed to his class a couple of days before. "How dare you?" he said. "How dare you send this without my permission? Did you think I wouldn't find out about it?"

"Did you think I'd be jazzed about this?" he complained, indicating the phrase "whispered drunkenly" in the text. "Did you think I'd want them to think I'm an alcoholic? Though in a way it's the least of my problems: Right now they are reading this," he whispered drunkenly, conspiratorially, "and they have no idea why. Right here, right here, this is confusing them," he said, pressing his pudgy thumb onto the manuscript a couple lines later, a fractured and contradictory passage. "Andromeda Yoo is reading this," he said, his voice hoarse with strain. "You...you'll see what I mean tomorrow."

Now, years later, as we sat with our drinks in Petersburg, she was supremely sensible. "I agree with you. There must be something else besides the sermon, some other manuscript." She smiled. "You know, this is like what I do all day. I took a

Bible history course in college, and I think the thing that made me want to be a lawyer was the discussion of the Q Gospel—you know, how you can deduce the existence of a missing source. It's all meta-fiction, all the time. That's what I learned in college. So that's what we have here. Where's the actual text?"

For the purposes of this memoir, I have narrated it verbatim, as if I carried the document with me, or else had committed it to heart. But that's not so. "It's in my office," I told her. Some birds were squawking down by the stream.

"What do you think your father means by a 'sexual indiscretion'? It couldn't have been just sleeping with students. That's what Bennington College was all about, wasn't it? Its founding philosophy. In the 1930s? Didn't you get fired for *not* doing that?"

"I don't think my father knows anything about it. He's just guessing."

This was true, or at least it was true that I thought so. "But it must have been something pretty humiliating," continued Andromeda. "I mean, thirty years later he couldn't even walk around the town."

"I guess."

"Although maybe the only reason he joined the genealogical society was to go back there, to have an excuse. The way he talks about it, it's not like he had any real interest."

"You're wrong about that," I said. "He made me memorize a list of all the Parks, although we tended to stop before Gertrude the Bald."

"Hmm—so maybe it's about the jewel. But the problem is, there must be at least one other source for this business about the cornfields, something that doesn't involve anything about the Claibornes. Because there are two sources from that side, aren't there? Doctor Claiborne *and* his son? Was there anything about it in the court-martial?"

"Maybe, but I don't know anything about that yet. I was saving it for later. I haven't told anyone."

She frowned. "Who would you tell?"

"Well, I mean the people who might be reading about this. I've told them about Doctor Claiborne and the Battle of the Crater. But the court-martial, I guess I'm already foreshadowing it a little. Part of it, anyway."

Andromeda looked around. There was no one in the neighbor's yard. Not a living soul, unless you counted the cat jumping in and out of the bee's balm.

"That sounds crazy," she said indulgently. "Particularly since now you've mentioned it to me."

"Never mind about that," I interrupted. "We don't want to pay attention to everything at once. One thing after another. Speaking of which, isn't there something else you want to tell me? I mean about this. Now might be a convenient time."

I didn't like to bully her or order her around, especially since it felt so good to talk to her, to let our conversation develop naturally, as if unplanned. All day I had been listening to people's voices inside my head, ghosts long departed, and in some sense I had been telling them what to say.

The sun had gone down, and we watched the bats veer and blunder through the purple sky. The yard was deep and needed mowing. Suddenly it was quite cold.

Petersburg, New York, is a small village in the hollows of the Taconic hills. Quite recently, people like Andromeda and me had started buying up semi-derelict Victorians and redoing them. The town hadn't figured out yet what it thought about that. As a result, we kept to ourselves; we were busy anyway. Andromeda had a gift for interior spaces, and a special talent for making things seem comfortable and organized at the same time. She liked Chinese antiques.

She turned to me and smiled. "Okay, so let's get it over with," she said, raising her glass. "You know that Bible Studies class I told you about? Well, the second semester was all about heresy. And when you talk about this stuff, I'm so totally reminded of these trials in this one part of northern Italy. It was kind of the same thing—these peasants were being prosecuted for witchcraft. But they were the opposite of witches, that's what they claimed. They talked about a tradition, father to son, mother to daughter, going back generations. On some specific nights their souls would leave their bodies and go out to do battle with the real witches and warlocks, who were out to steal the harvest and, you know, poison the wells, make the women miscarry, spread diseases, the usual. I remember thinking, Jesus, we need more people like this. And they never gave in, they never confessed, even though this was part of the whole witchcraft mania of the sixteenth century. I'm sure they were tortured, but even so, they were just so totally convinced that the entire Inquisition

was part of the same diabolic plot to keep them from their work—they'd seen it all before."

Andromeda Yoo was so beautiful at that moment, her golden skin, her black hair down her back. I felt she understood me. "Another interesting thing," she said, "was that these people were never the model citizens. There was always something dodgy or damaged about them. You could tell it in the way they talked about each other, not so much about themselves. And of course the judges were always pointing out that they were sluts and whores and drunks and sodomites and village idiots. But they had a place in the community. Everyone was on their side. They had to bring people in from neighboring counties just to have a quorum at the executions."

"That's a relief," I murmured.

She got up from her chair and came to stand behind me, bent down to embrace me—I didn't deserve her! "I'm glad I got that off my chest," she said, a puzzled expression on her face. "Now, where were we?"

And we proceeded to talk about other things. "What do you think he left next to the tree?" she asked. "I'll bet it was the jewel. The tourmaline the size of a pumpkin or whatever. I'll bet that was what was in the secret box under the floor."

"That's crazy. It never would have fit."

"What do you mean? That's what it was for. Do you really think Esther would have left it in the dead man's mouth? Or in his eye—Kepler's eye, wasn't that it? No, she wanted to see where it was hidden. That was probably how she'd found the compartment at the top of the shaft—looking for the jewel."

Maybe she had hired the guy in the first place, or she was his lover—no, scratch that. She was probably a lesbian. That's what her mother probably meant about not living in the real world."

"Really. But then why wouldn't she have stolen it that night? Why leave it in the box?"

"I'm not sure. But that's what your grandfather meant about a tiny crime. He just had it for a few minutes. He'd taken it on impulse, and he had time to think during the drive. How could you dispose of such a thing?"

Andromeda had been adopted from a Korean orphanage and then orphaned again when her American parents died in a fire. And they themselves were also orphans, had met in an orphanage, possessed no family or traditions or history on either side—I don't think I had ever known their names. Maybe they had never even had any names. This was one of the things I found comforting about Andromeda, together with her calmness and common sense. She was so different from me.

Our bedroom, underneath the eaves, was always warmer than the rest of the house. Later, I had already dozed off when I heard her say, "I think it probably has to do with his cousin, Theodora. Didn't she kill herself?"

"Yes, when she was a teenager. It was a terrible thing. He was an only child, and she was his only cousin, too. My father always said it was some kind of romantic disappointment. Maybe a pregnancy."

"You mean a 'sexual indiscretion.'"

"I suppose so. But not the same one. The dates don't work out."

"Well, what do you know about her? Is there anything in your boxes?"

"I think there's a photograph. A locket."

"Where?"

I had hung up my pants before we lay down, and put my wallet on the dresser with some loose change, a pocket knife, and a number of other small objects. The locket wasn't among them. It's not as if I carried it around. "I don't know," I said.

But then I felt something in my closed fist. "Wait," I said, opening my hand, revealing it on my palm. It was round and gold, as big as an old-fashioned watch, and had an ornate "T" engraved on the lid. Inside there were two photographs, a smiling young woman on one side, and an older man in a bowler hat on the other, my grandfather's uncle Charlie, perhaps.

"Turn on the light," Andromeda said. "I can't see anything."

There was a reading light beside the bed. I switched it on. Andromeda lay naked on her back, one hand scratching her pubic hair. She turned onto her side, raised herself on one elbow, and her breasts reformed. "Look at the depth of the case," she said. "Maybe there's some kind of secret message inside, under the photograph. There's enough room for a letter folded six or seven times. Look—that's a place where it might lever up," she said, sliding her fingernail under the

circle of gold that held the image. Because of her legal work for Sabic Plastics, she had all kinds of special expertise.

Theodora Park had a pleasant, happy face with a big round nose like a doorknob. I thought to myself she might have made a good clown in the circus, though no doubt that was partly because of her distended lips, the white circles on her cheeks, and the fright wig she was wearing underneath the potted geranium that served her for a hat.

"Look," said Andromeda, her beautiful young (Why not? What the hell? She had been a non-traditional student at Williams, older than her classmates, but even so—) body curved around the locket, which we held between us. And under her fingernail, whether it was just a trick of the light, but the woman in the photograph seemed to shift and move and change expression—a sudden, exaggerated grimace, while at the same time the man in the bowler hat and big moustache frowned in disapproval. And that was certainly enough, because Andromeda's black eyes filled with tears. "No," she said, "oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...."

* * * *

7. Second Life

In fact no one was there when I got home. I feel I can pretend, as long as it is obvious: I had lived by myself for many, many years, and the house was a wreck. Andromeda Yoo is a confabulation, though I suppose she carries a small resemblance to the underdressed avatar of a woman I once met in a sex club in Second Life, or else the lawyer who

handled my wife's divorce long ago—not just that poor girl in Rosenheim's class.

No, the other stuff—the peasants from the Friuli—I had discovered for myself, through a chance reference in one of my sister Katy's books. I've always had an interest in European history. Nor do I think there is any surviving information about Theo Park, any diary or letter or written text that might explain her suicide, or if she suffered from these vivid dreams. There isn't a living person who knows anything about her. And I suppose it can be a kind of comfort to imagine that our passions or our difficulties might at some time be released into the air, as if they never had existed. But it is also possible to imagine that the world consists of untold stories, each a little package of urgent feelings that might possibly explain our lives to us. And even if that's an illusion or too much to hope for, it is still possible to think that nothing ever goes away, that the passions of the dead are still intact forever, sealed up irrevocably in the past. No one could think, for example, that if you lost an object that was precious to you, then it would suddenly stop existing. It would be solipsistic arrogance to think like that. No, the object would always be bumping around somewhere, forgotten in someone else's drawer, a compound tragedy.

I got myself a gin and tonic—that much is true—and sat at the kitchen table under the fluorescent light, studying a pack of well-thumbed photographs of my son when he was small. My wife had taken so many, I used to say you could make of a flip-book of his childhood in real time—enough for both of us, as it turned out. More than enough. I could look at them

forever, and yet I always felt soiled, somehow, afterward, as if I had indulged myself in something dirty. In the same way, perhaps, you can look at photographs of naked women on the Internet for hours at a time, each one interesting for some tiny, urgent fraction of a second.

I went upstairs to lie down. In the morning, I telephoned the offices of *The Bennington Banner*, where someone was uploading the biweekly edition. I didn't have a precise date, and I didn't even know exactly what I was looking for. But a good part of the archives was now online, and after a couple of hours I found the story. On the first of November, 1939, a Bennington College student had died in a car accident. The road was slippery after a rainstorm. She hadn't been driving. The details were much as I'd suspected.

"What do you think about what's happening in Virginia," said the woman on the phone.

"Virginia?"

The Bennington Banner is about small amounts of local news, if it's about anything. But this woman paid attention to the blogs. "There's some kind of disturbance," she told me. "Riots in the streets."

Subsequent to this conversation, I took a drive. I drove out to the Park-McCullough House. The place was boarded up, the grounds were overgrown. After ten minutes I continued on toward the former Bennington College campus and took a left down the Silk Road through the covered bridge. Along the back way to the monument I looked for likely trees, but it was impossible to tell. When I reached Route 7, I continued straight toward Williamstown. I thought if there was a

message for me—a blog from the past, say—it might be hidden in my grandfather's painting, which was, I now imagined, less a piece of De Chirico surrealism than an expression of regret.

It had rained during the night, and toward three o'clock the day was overcast and humid. In my office, I sat in the wreckage with my feet on the desk. I looked up at the painting, and I could tell there was something wrong with it. I just had a feeling, and so I turned on my computer, IM'd my ex-wife in Richmond, and asked her to meet me in Second Life.

Which meant Romania, where she was working, supposedly, as some kind of virtual engineer. In Second Life, her office is in a hot air balloon suspended above the Piata Revolutiei in Bucharest; you'd have to teleport. It was a lovely place, decked out with a wood-burning stove, but she didn't want to meet me there. Too private. Instead we flew east to the Black Sea coast, past Constanta to the space park, the castle on the beach, where there was always a crowd. We alighted on the boardwalk and went into a café. We both got lattés at the machine, and sat down to talk.

God knows what Romania is like now. God knows what's going on there. But in Second Life it's charming and picturesque, with whitewashed buildings painted with flowers and livestock, and red tile roofs. In Second Life my ex-wife's name is Nicolae Quandry. She wears a military uniform and a handlebar mustache—a peculiar transformation from the time I knew her. It's hard not to take it personally, even after all these years—according to the *Kanun*, or tribal code, women

under certain circumstances can take a vow of celibacy and live as men, with all the rights and privileges. Albanian by heritage, Nicola—Nicolae, here—had a great-aunt who made that choice, after the death of her father and brothers. Of course her great-aunt had not had a grown autistic son.

It was always strange to see her in her hip boots, epaulettes, and braid. She had carried this to extremes, because once I had told her that her new name and avatar reminded me of Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator whom I'd researched extensively for my novel—not that she looked like him. He was a drab little bureaucrat, while she carried a pistol on her hip. With Saturn hanging low over the Black Sea, its rings clearly visible, she stood out among all the space aliens that were walking around. "My psychiatrist says I'm not supposed to talk to you," I typed.

"Hey, Matt," she typed—my name in Second Life is Matthew Wirefly. "I figured you would want to bring Adrian a birthday present."

It was hard to tell from her face, but I imagined she sounded happy to hear from me, a function of my strategy in both marriage and divorce, to always give her everything she wanted. Besides, everything had happened so long ago. Now I was an old man, though you wouldn't necessarily have known it from my avatar. "Yes, that's right," I typed. "I bought him a sea turtle at the aquarium. I'll bring it to his party. Where's it going to be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Terra Nova. You know how he likes steampunk."

Actually, I didn't know. I'd thought he was still in his sea-mammal stage, which had lasted ten years or so. The previous year he'd had his party on the beach in Mamaia Sat, and I'd ridden up on the back of a beluga whale.

Now we typed about this and that. A man with six arms wandered by, gave us an odd look, it seemed to me. The name above his head was in Korean characters.

After a few minutes I got down to business. She had never known my grandfather, but I tried to fill her in. After a certain amount of time, she interrupted. "I don't even believe you have a psychiatrist," she typed. "What do you pay him?"

"Her," I corrected. "Nowadays they work for food."

"Hunh. Maybe you could ask her to adjust your meds. Remember when you thought the graffiti on the subway was a message for you? 'Close Guantanamo'—that's good advice! 'Call Mark'—you're probably the only person who ever called. And you didn't even get through."

Good times, I thought. "Hey, I misdialed. Or he moved. Hey, *le monde n'est qu'un texte.*"

"Fine—whatever. That's so true. For twenty years I've thanked God it's not my responsibility anymore, to act as your damn filter."

She knew what I meant, and I knew what she meant. It's possible for me to get carried away. But I hadn't ever told her during the eight years of our relationship, and I didn't tell her now, that I had always, I think, exaggerated certain symptoms for dramatic effect.

Once, when New York City was still New York City, I'd belonged to a squash club on Fifth Avenue. Someone I played

with got it into his head that I was Canadian, introduced me to someone else—I let it go. It seemed impolite to insist. Within weeks I was tangled up in explanations, recriminations, and invented histories. When I found myself having to learn French, to memorize maps of Montreal, I had to quit the club.

This was like that. When Nicola and I first got together, I pretended to have had a psychiatric episode years before, thinking that was a good way to appeal to her—a short-term tactic that had long-term effects. It was a story she was amusingly eager to believe, a story confirmed rather than contradicted by my parents' befuddled refusal to discuss the issue, a typical (she imagined) Episcopalian reticence that was in itself symptomatic. And it was a story I had to continue embellishing, particularly after Adrian was first diagnosed.

But like all successful lies, it was predominantly true. These things run in families, after all. And sometimes I have a hard time prioritizing: "What's happening in Richmond?" I asked her. "What's happening down there?"

Nicolae took a sip from her latte, wiped her mustache. Above us, from the deck of the space park, you could see the solar system trying to persevere, while behind it the universe was coming to an end. Stars exploded and went cold. "Matt," she typed. "You don't want to know. It would just worry you. I don't even know. Something downtown. Abigail has gone out and I—fuck, what could you do, anyway?" She touched the pistol at her hip.

After we logged off, I sat for a while in peace. Then I got up on my desk so I could look at the picture, "Ghosts Doing the Orange Dance."

Kneeling, my nose up close, I saw a few things that were new. No, that's not right. I noticed a few things I hadn't seen before. This is partly because I'd just been to the house, circled the drive. But now I saw some differences.

My grandfather had never been able to paint human beings. Trained as an architect, he had excelled in façades, ruins, urban landscapes. But people's faces and hands were mysterious to him, and so instead he made indistinct stylized figures, mostly in the distance. Shapes of light and darkness. Star-shaped ghosts with oranges in their hands. The haunted house in the moonlight, or else a burning light behind the clouds, descending to the roof. Men and women in the corn, beyond the porte-cochere. A single light at the top of the house, and a shadow against the glass. Kepler's eye. I wondered if this was where the dumbwaiter reached the third floor.

Down below, along the garden wall, a woman lay back against a tree trunk. Her face was just a circle of white, and she had long white hair. She was holding an orange, too, holding it out as if in supplication. Her legs were white. Her skirt had ridden up.

I thought I had not seen that tree against that wall that morning, when I had stopped my Toyota on the drive. My grandfather was good at trees. This was a swamp willow, rendered in miniature, so that the branches drooped over the woman's head. I thought there was no tree like that on the

grounds of the Park-McCullough house. So instead I went to look for it.

* * * *

8. In Quantico

Naturally, after forty years I didn't find anything valuable. But there was a willow tree along the Silk Road, set back on the other side of a ditch. He must have been going very fast.

I dug down through the old roots. And I did find something, a key ring with two stainless steel keys, in good condition. One of them, I assumed, was a secret or back-door key to the abandoned McCullough mansion. The other was much smaller, more generic, the kind of key that could open many cheap little locks. After a detour to my office, I took it home. I unpacked my satchel, took out my laptop. I arranged various stacks of paper on the kitchen table. And then I used the little key to unlock the steel dispatch case that had come to me from Puerto Rico. I knew what I'd find, the various documents and exhibits from the court-martial of Captain Robert Watson Claiborne, USMC.

After dinner (Indian takeout and a beer), I began my search. The trial had taken place at the Marine barracks at Quantico, Virginia, during the second and third weeks in January, 1919. There were about eight hundred pages of testimony, accusations and counter-accusations regarding my grandfather's behavior aboard the USS *Cincinnati* during the previous November, the last month of the European war. Captain Claiborne was only recently attached to the ship, in

command of a detachment of Marines. But during the course of twenty-seven days there were complaints against him from four Marine Corps privates and a Navy ensign, when the vessel was anchored off Key West.

Colonel Dion Williams, commander of the barracks at Quantico, presided over the court, and the judge advocate was Captain Leo Horan. On the fourth day of the trial, my grandfather took the stand in his own defense. Here's what I found on page 604 of the transcript, during Captain Horan's cross-examination:

463. Q. In his testimony you heard him say in substance that he came into your room on the occasion when he came there to see a kodak, and that you and he lay on your bunk or bed and that he slept, or pretended to fall asleep, and that at that time you put your hands on his private parts; that he roused himself, and that you desisted, and this was repeated some two or three times, and that at the last time when he feigned sleep, you reached up and pulled his hand down in the direction of your private parts. Is that true or not?

A. That is not true.

464. Q. Did anything like that happen?

A. Nothing whatsoever.

465. Q. Did you fondle his person?

A. I did not fondle his person.

466. Q. Or touch him in any way except as you

might have—

A. I only touched him in the manner as one might touch another, as one would come in contact with another lying down next to each other on a bed, the approximate width of which was about as that table (indicating).

467. Q. I see. Referring to another matter, will you tell the court, Captain Claiborne, what kind of a school this was you say you started at Sharon, Connecticut?

A. A school for boys.

468. Q. Average age?

A. Average age was twelve or thirteen.

469. Q. The length of time you ran it?

A. One year, just before the war.

470. Q. I see. Did you sleep soundly on board the *Cincinnati*, as a general rule?

A. I did.

471. Q. Now Captain Claiborne, in your original response to the complaint against you, in the matter of Ensign Mowbray's testimony as to your behavior on the night of the sixth of November, I have here your response saying that you could not have knowingly or consciously done such a thing. I believe your words to Commander Moses, as he testified, were that you had done nothing of the sort in any conscious moment. What did you mean by that?

A. I meant that this could not be true, that I had a clean record behind me, and that I surely did nothing of the sort in any conscious moment. He immediately interrupted me and went on to say, "Oh, I know what you are going to say about doing it in your sleep," or something of that sort. I said, "Nor in any unconscious moment, for surely no one who has had a record behind him such as I can show you would do such things as these in unconscious moments, or asleep." This is what he must have meant when he referred to a qualified denial.

472. Q. I see. The alleged conduct of you toward Ensign Mowbray—do you now deny that that might have been in an unconscious manner?

A. I do.

473. Q. I see. About this radium-dialed watch: as I recall your testimony, you had a little pocket watch?

A. I had quite a large pocket watch, a normal watch, too large to be fixed into any leather case which would hold it onto the wrist.

474. Q. Mr. Mowbray's statement about seeing a wrist-watch, radium dialed, on your wrist the night of the first sleeping on the divan is a fabrication?

A. Yes.

475. Q. You deny wearing a wrist-watch on that night?

A. I deny wearing a wrist-watch on that night.

476. Q. I see. Now, taking up the matter of this first hike, before you turned in with Walker, will you tell the court how far you went on this hike, approximately?

A. About three or four miles.

477. Q. Along the beach from Key West?

A. We went through Key West and out into the country.

478. Q. On these hikes they went swimming along the beach?

A. On that hike they went in swimming at my orders.

479. Q. Yes. What happened afterward?

A. They came out and dried themselves and put on their clothes and took physical exercise.

480. Q. How were they clad when they took this physical exercise?

A. Some of them had on underwear and some of them did not. The majority of them had on underwear.

481. Q. How were you dressed at the time that the men were undressed going through this physical drill on the beach?

A. I don't recall.

482. Q. I want a little bit more than that. Do you deny that you were undressed at the time?

A. I either had on part of my underwear, or my entire underwear, or had on none.

483. Q. Or had on what?

A. None.

484. Q. In front of the guard, were you?

A. I don't recall.

485. Q. But you do admit that you may have been entirely naked.

A. I may have been.

486. Q. You admit that? They went through these Swedish exercises, whatever they were? Physical drill?

A. Physical drill, yes.

487. Q. I see. Now, Captain Claiborne, you admit to sleeping soundly on board ship, as a general rule?

A. As a general rule.

488. Q. No problem with somnambulism, or anything of that sort?

Counsel for the accused (Mr. Littleton): If the court please, I began by saying I would desist from making any objections in this case. Nevertheless, I could not then anticipate that counsel would profit from my forbearance by making these insinuations about the conduct of the accused, in these matters that are irrelevant to the complaints against him. I did not anticipate that counsel would undertake to go all over the world asking this sort of

question about conduct which, if Captain Claiborne had not acted as he did, would have constituted a dereliction. I am going to withdraw my statement that I will not object, and I am going to insist upon the rules in reference to this witness. He needs protection in some way from the promiscuous examination regarding every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the universe. I insist that the counsel shall confine his examination to things which are somewhere within the range of these charges. We cannot be called upon to meet every ramification that comes up here. We cannot be called on to suffer the imputation which a mere question itself carries.

The judge advocate: Are you objecting to that question, the last question about somnambulism?

Counsel for the accused (Mr. Littleton): Yes, the last question is the only one I could object to. The others were all answered. I am objecting to it on the basis that it is irrelevant.

By a member: Mr. President, I also would like to arise to ask the point of these questions, so that we may know, at the time they are asked, whether they are relevant or not.

Counsel assisting the judge advocate: Does the court wish enlightenment on that?

The president: Yes.

Counsel assisting the judge advocate: If the court please, we would be very ready and willing to tell you what our purpose is, but it would disclose the purpose of the cross examination, and I don't think we are required to state before the court and before the witness what our purpose may be in bringing out this subject of somnambulism. But it is perfectly proper cross examination, inasmuch as the witness has testified to sleeping soundly at the time of these alleged incidents.

The accused: I am perfectly willing to answer the question.

Counsel assisting the judge advocate: The witness and the judge advocate are at one on that now, if the judge advocate will ask that question.

The president: As I understood, the question of the member was, "Is it relevant or not."

The member: Yes, that is right.

Counsel assisting the judge advocate: Yes, sir, I state from my study of the case that it is relevant. Does that answer the member's question?

The court was cleared.

The court was opened. All parties to the trial entered, and the president announced that the court overruled the objection.

489. Q. Very well, Captain Claiborne. Have you

ever suffered from somnambulism?

Counsel for the accused (Mr. Littleton): I object—

The judge advocate: Let me rephrase the question. Did you experience an episode of somnambulism while on board the U.S.S. *Cincinnati*, between the first and twenty-seventh of November of last year?

A. I can't remember exactly what day. But I had a sensation of being awake and dreaming at the same time. This is not unusual with me, and from time to time I have had this experience ever since I was a boy. This is only the most extreme example, and I imagine that I was affected by a sort of nervous excitement, due to the end of the hostilities in Europe, and of course my own catastrophic reversal of fortune. This was in the very early morning when I saw myself at the top of a great cliff, while below me I could see the streets of a town laid out with lines of lamp-posts, glowing in a sort of a fog. I thought to myself that I was overlooking a town or city of the dead. There were houses full of dead men, and hospitals full of soldiers of every nationality, and also influenza patients who were laid outside in an open field or empty lot. I thought there were thousands of them. At the same time there was a long, straight boulevard

cutting through the town from north to south. I saw a regiment or a battalion march along it toward a dark beach along the sea, which had a yellow mist and a yellow froth on the water. Other men climbed toward me up a narrow ravine. I thought to myself that I must fight them to protect the high plain, and I had a stick in my hand to do it. As they clambered up I struck at them one by one. The first fellow over the ledge was Captain Harrington, whom I replaced on board the *Cincinnati*, because he had died of the influenza in October—the bloom was on his face. It was a fight, but I struck and struck until the stick burst in my hand. Then I woke up and found myself outside on the balcony, long past midnight—490 Q. By balcony I presume you mean the ship's rail—

A. No, no, I mean the balcony of my hotel where I was staying with my wife. I mean I had left the bed and climbed out onto the balcony, dressed only in my shirt. It was four a.m., judging from my wrist-watch. This was in New York City before Christmas, less than a month ago, several weeks after I had been detached from the ship.

Counsel assisting the judge advocate: Captain Claiborne, please restrict your answers to the time covered in the complaint, prior to the

twenty-seventh of November.

Counsel for the accused (Mr. Littleton): Again I must object to this entire line of questioning, on the grounds that it is irrelevant.

The judge advocate: I withdraw the question—

The president: The objection is overruled. The court would like the witness to continue.

The member: This was during the third week in Advent, was it not? During what is commonly called the "Ember Days"?

The president: The stick that was in your hand, the court would like to know what type of stick it was.

The member: Captain Claiborne, will you tell the court whether you were born still wrapped inside an afterbirth membrane, which is a trait or condition that can run in certain families—

The judge advocate: Mr. President, I must agree with my esteemed colleague, the counsel for the accused—

The president: The objection is overruled. The witness will answer the question. Now, Captain Claiborne, the court would like to know if you experienced any stiffness or muscular discomfort prior to this event, especially in your neck or jaw.

A. Well, now that you mention it, I did have a discomfort of that kind.

The president: The court would like you to

expand on your answer to an earlier question, when you described your encounter with Captain Harrington. You said the bloom was on his face, or words of that effect. Did you see any marks or symptoms of the influenza epidemic on him at that time?

Counsel for the accused (Mr. Littleton): I object—

The judge advocate: Mr. President—

The president: The objection is overruled. The witness will answer the question.

A. Now that you mention it, there is a great deal more I could say about the events of that night, between the time I recognized Captain Harrington and the time I came to myself on the balcony above Lexington Avenue. If the court wishes, I could proceed. Captain Harrington was the first but by no means the last who were climbing up along the precipice, and all of them bore traces of the epidemic. Pale skin, dull eyes, hair lank and wet. Hectic blossoms on their cheeks, and in this way they were different than the soldiers marching below them in the streets of the necropolis, most of whom, I see now, were returning from France. I remember Captain Harrington because I was able to dislodge his fingers and thrust him backward with a broken head. But soon I was forced to retreat, because these

ones who had climbed the cliffs and spread out along the plain were too numerous for us to resist. I had no more than a company of raw recruits under my command. Against us marched several hundred of the enemy, perhaps as many as a battalion of all qualities and conditions, while behind them I could see a large number of women in their hospital gowns. Severely outnumbered, we gave way before them. But I brought us to the high ground, where we attempted to defend a single house on a high hill, a mansion in the French style. The weather had been calm, but then I heard a roll of distant thunder. A stroke of lightning split the sky, followed by a pelting rain, and a wind strong enough to flatten the wide, flat stalks as the fire burned. By then it was black night, and whether from some stroke of lightning or some other cause, but the roof of the house had caught on fire. By its light I could see the battle in the corn, while at the same time we were reinforced quite unexpectedly in a way that is difficult for me to describe. But a ship had come down from the clouds, a great metal airship or dirigible, while a metal stair unrolled out of its belly...

* * * *

9. Ember Days

My grandfather was immediately acquitted of all charges. The president of the court, and at least one of its members, came down to shake his hand. Nevertheless, he did not linger in the Marine Corps, but put in for his release as quickly as he could. In some ways he was not suited to a soldier's life. You can't please everyone: There were some—among them his brother-in-law, Howard Harrington—who thought his acquittal had not fully restored his reputation.

Subsequently he ran a music school in Rye, New York, hosted a classical music radio program in New York City, and even wrote a book, before he left the United States to practice law in the Caribbean. Prior to his disbarment he was full of schemes—expensive kumquat jellies, Nubian goats delivered to the mainland by submarine during the Second World War—all of which my grandmother dutifully underwrote. His farm in Maricao was called the Hacienda Santa Rita, and it was there that we visited him when I was nine years old, my father, my two older sisters, and myself. My mother hadn't seen him since she was a teenager, and did not accompany us. She could never forgive the way he'd treated her and her brother when they were children. This was something I didn't appreciate at the time, particularly since he went out of his way to charm us. He organized a parade in our honor, roasted a suckling pig. And he showed an interest in talking to me—the first adult ever to do so—perhaps from some mistaken idea of primogeniture. In those days he was a slender, elegant, white-haired old man.

Later I was worried that my own life would follow his trajectory of false starts and betrayals and dependency. Early on he had staked out the position that ordinary standards of civilized behavior had no hold on people like him. On the contrary, the world owed him a debt because of his genius, which had been thwarted and traduced at every turn—a conspiracy of jealous little minds. It was this aspect of her father's personality that my mother hated most of all, and regularly exposed to ridicule. A moderately gifted musician, he had the pretensions of genius, she used to say, without the talent. Moreover, she said, even if he'd been Franz Liszt himself, he could not have justified the damage that he caused. When I asked why her mother had stayed with him, she retorted that you don't turn a sick dog out to die. But I suspected there was more to her parents' marriage than that, and more to his sense of privilege. Laying the record of his court-martial aside, I imagined that any summary of his life that did not include the valiant battle he had waged—one of many, I guessed—against the victims of the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, would seem truncated and absurd. Maybe the goats and the kumquats were the visible, sparse symptoms of a secret and urgent campaign, the part of the ice above the water.

When my mother talked about her father, I always thought she was advising me, because it was obvious from photographs that I took after him. She had no patience for anything old, either from her or my father's family, and she was constantly throwing things away. My father's father never forgave her for disposing of the caul I was born in, and she

never forgave him for pressing on me, when I was seven, a bizarre compensation for this supposed loss. He had wrapped it up for me, or Winifred had: a sequined and threadbare velvet pouch, which contained, in a rubberized inner compartment, his cousin Theo's caul, her prized possession, which she had carried with her at all times. She had embroidered her name in thick gold thread; furious, my mother snatched up the pouch and hid it away. I only rediscovered it years later, when she asked me to move some boxes in the attic.

When I was a child I kept the thought of this velvet pouch as a picture in my mind, and referred to it mentally whenever I heard a story about something large contained in something small, as often happens in fairy tales. I had seen it briefly, when my grandfather had first pressed it into my hands. It was about six inches long, red velvet worn away along the seams. Some of the stitches on the "T" and the "h" had come undone.

But I wondered when I was young, was I special in any way? Perhaps it was my specialness that could explain my failures, then and always. At a certain moment, we cannot but hope, the ordinary markers of success will show themselves to be fraudulent, irrelevant, diversionary. All those cheating hucksters, those athletes and lovers, those trusted businessmen and competent professionals, those good fathers, good husbands, and good providers will hang their heads in shame while the rest of us stand forward, unapologetic at long last.

Thinking these inspirational thoughts, in the third week of September—the third sequence of ember days of the liturgical year, as I had learned from various wikipeidias—I drove up to the Park-McCullough house again. As usual that summer and fall, I had not been able to fall asleep in my own bed. Past two o'clock in the morning, Theodora Park's velvet purse in my pocket, I sidled up to each of the mansion's doors in turn, and tried the second key I had found among the roots of the willow. Some windows on the upper floor were broken. Ghosts, I thought, were wandering through the building and the grounds, but I couldn't get the key to work. Defeated, I stepped back from the porte-cochere; it was a warm night. Bugs blundered in the beam of my flashlight. The trees had grown up over the years, and it was too much to expect that a ship or dirigible would find the space to land here safely. The same could be said of Bartlett Hill in Preston, which I had visited many years before. Logged and cleared during Colonial times, now it was covered with second- or third-growth forest. From the crest overlooking the Avery-Parke Cemetery, you could barely see the lights and spires of Foxwoods Casino, rising like the Emerald City only a few miles away. I found myself wondering if the casino was still there, and if the "ruind hutts of the Pecuoeds" had "burst afire" as a result of the ship coming down, or as some kind of signal to indicate a landing site. Whichever, it was certainly interesting that in Robert Claiborne's account of the battle on the French-style mansion's lawn, "the roof of the house had caught on fire."

Interesting, but not conclusive. As a scholar, I was trained to discount these seductive similarities. I had not yet dared to

unbutton the velvet pouch or slip my hand inside, but with my hand firmly in my pocket I stepped back through the broken, padlocked, wrought-iron fence and stumbled back to the main road, where I had left my car. And because, like three-quarters of the faculty at Williams College, I was on unpaid leave for the fall semester, I thought I would drive down to Richmond and see Adrian, who was now thirty years old—a milestone. That was at least my intention. I had a reliable automobile, one of the final hydrogen-cell, solar-panel hybrids before Toyota discontinued exports. I would take Route 2 to 87, making a wide semicircle around the entire New York City area, before rejoining 95 in central New Jersey. I would drive all night. There'd be no traffic to speak of, except the lines of heavy trucks at all the checkpoints.

So let's just say I went that way. Let's just say it was possible to go. And let's just say that nothing happened on that long, dark drive, until morning had come.

Beyond the Delaware Bridge I saw the army convoys headed south along I-95. North of Baltimore it became clear I couldn't continue much farther, because there was no access to Washington. There were barricades on the interstate, and flashing lights. Shortly before noon I got off the 695 bypass to drive through Baltimore itself—sort of a nostalgia tour, because Nicola and I had lived on North Calvert Street and 31st, near the Johns Hopkins campus, when Adrian was born. I drove past the line of row houses without stopping. Most of them were boarded up, which could not fail to depress me and throw me back into the past. I took a left and turned into the east gate of the Homewood campus. I wanted to see if

my old ID would still get me into the Eisenhower Library, so I parked and gave it a try. It was a bright, cool day, and I was cheered to see a few students lying around the lawn.

I needn't have worried—there was no one at the circulation desk. Once inside the library, I took the stairs below street level to one of the basements, a peculiar place that I remembered from the days when I had taught at the university. The electricity wasn't functioning, but some vague illumination came from the airshafts, and I had my flashlight. With some difficulty I made my way toward the north end of that level, where a number of books by various members of my family were shelved in different sections that nevertheless came together in odd proximity around an always-deserted reading area. Within a few steps from those dilapidated couches you could find a rare copy of Robert W. Claiborne's book *How Man Learned Music*. A few shelves farther on there were six or seven volumes by his son, my uncle, on popular science or philology. In the opposite direction, if you didn't mind stooping, you would discover three books on autism by Clara Claiborne Park, while scarcely a hundred feet away there were a whole clutch of my father's physics textbooks and histories of science. Still on the same level it was possible to unearth Edwin Avery Park's tome (Harcourt, Brace, 1927) on modernist architecture, *New Backgrounds for a New Age*, as well as other books by other members of the family. And filling out the last corner of a rough square, at comfortable eye-level, in attractive and colorful bindings, stood a row of my own novels, including *A Princess of Roumania*. It was one of the few that had come out while I was living in Baltimore,

and I was touched to see they had continued to acquire the later volumes, either out of loyalty or bureaucratic inertia—certainly not from need—up to the point where everything turned digital.

It is such a pleasure to pick up a book and hold it. I will never get used to reading something off a screen. I gathered together an assortment of texts and went back to the reading area, rectangular vinyl couches around a square table. Other people had been there recently; there were greasy paper bags, and a bedroll, and a gallon jug of water. The tiled floor was marred with ashes and charred sticks, and the skylight was dark with soot. But I had proprietary instincts, and would not be deterred. I put down my leather satchel and laid the books down in a pile, squared the edges, and with my flashlight in my hand I played a game I hadn't played in years, since the last time I was in that library.

The game was called "trajectories," my personal version of the *I Ching*. I would choose at random various sentences and paragraphs, hoping to combine them into a kind of narrative, or else whittle them into an arrow of language that might point into the future. For luck I took Cousin Theo's velvet pouch out of my pocket, ran my thumb along the worn places. I did not dare unbutton it, thinking, as usual, that whatever had once been inside of it had probably dried up and disappeared. The pouch, I imagined, was as empty as Pandora's box or even emptier. How big was a caul, anyway? How long did it take for it to crumble into dust?

I set to work. Here was my first point of reference, from my uncle Bob (Robert W. Jr.) Claiborne's book on human evolution, *God or Beast* (Norton, 1974), page 77:

...To begin with, then, in that the women to whom I have been closest during my lifetime have all of them been bright, intellectually curious, and independent-minded. My mother was involved in the women's rights movement before World War I, and until her retirement worked at administrative jobs; at this writing she is, at eighty-six, still actively interested in people, ideas, and public affairs. My sister is a college teacher and author....

Given this sort of background, it will probably not surprise the reader much to learn that for most of my life I have preferred the company of women—interesting ones—to that of men. Not just some of my best friends but nearly all of them have been women. Evolution and genetics aside, then, I obviously find women distinctly different from men—and so far as I am concerned, *vive la difference!*

And on page 84:

Thus it seems to me very probable that human males possess a built-in tolerance for infants and young children, as well as a built-in interest in them and capacity to become emotionally involved with them—a conclusion

that seems wholly consistent with what we know about human societies. I would also suspect that, like both baboon and chimp males, the human male has a less powerful tendency to become involved with the young than does the female. I can't prove this, and indeed am not certain that it can ever be either proved or disproved. Nonetheless, it seems to me at least arguable that the emotional rewards of fatherhood are somewhat less than those of motherhood. Be that as it may, however, the rewards exist and I, for one, would hate to have forgone them.

In these passages I could see in my uncle a wistful combination of pedantry and 1960s masculinity. As I read, I remembered him telling me about a trip to visit his father in the Virgin Islands when he was a teenager. He had found him living with an alumnus of the music school, a boy also named Robert, whom he had already passed off to the neighbors as his son, Robert Jr. Loud and gleeful, sitting on his leather sofa in the West Tenth Street apartment, my uncle had described the farcical misunderstandings and logistical contortions that had accompanied his stay.

But what about this, a few more pages on? Here in the flashlight's small tight circle, when I brought it close:

The point bears repetition, because it is important, and because no one else is willing to make it (I've checked.)...

I thought this was a promising place to start, and so I laid the book down, picked up another at random. It was *The Grand Contraption*, a book about comparative cosmologies that my father—the husband, as it happens, of the "college teacher and author" mentioned above—published in 2005. Here's what he had to say to me, on page 142:

...Once more the merchant looked around him. Far away on the road someone walked toward the hill, but there was still time. A little smoke still came out of the eastern pot. There was no sound but he went on, softly reciting *Our Father*. He crossed himself, stepped into the center of the triangle, filled his lungs, and bellowed into the quiet air, "Make the chair ready!"

But it is time for us to leave the demons alone. Even if supernatural beings are an important part of many people's vision of the world, they belong to a different order of nature and should be allowed some privacy.

I didn't think so. Looking up momentarily, glancing down the long dark layers of books, reflecting briefly on the diminished condition of the world, it didn't occur to me that

privacy was in short supply. It didn't occur to me that it had any value whatsoever, since a different order of nature was what I was desperate to reveal.

But I was used to these feelings of ambivalence. Leafing forward through the book, I remembered how studiously my father had competed with his own children. After my sister started publishing her own histories of science, he switched from physics to a version of the same field, claiming it was the easier discipline, and therefore suitable to his waning powers. Princeton University Press had been her publisher before it was his. And after I had started selling science fiction stories in the 1980s, he wrote a few himself. He sent them off to the same magazines, claiming that he wanted to start out easy, just like me. Though unprintable, all his stories shared an interesting trait—they started out almost aggressively conventional, before taking an unexpected science-fiction turn. At the time I'd wondered if he was trying to mimic aspects of my style. If so, could it be true that he had found no emotional rewards in fatherhood?

Disappointed by this line of thought, I glanced down at the book again, where my thumb had caught. The beam of the flashlight, a red rim around a yellow core, captured these words: "The point bears repetition."

That was enough. I closed *The Grand Contraption* with a bang that reverberated through the library. Apprehensive, I shined the light back toward the stairway, listening for an answering noise.

After a moment, to reassure myself, I opened a novel written by my father's mother, Edwin Avery Park's first wife.

It was called *Walls Against the Wind*, and had been published by Houghton Mifflin. On the strength of the advance, my grandmother had taken my father on a bicycle tour through Western Ireland in 1935. This, from the last pages:

'I'm going to Moscow,' Miranda told him. 'They have another beauty and a different God—'

The tones of her voice were cool as spring rain.

'It's what I have to do. It's all arranged.'

'Yes...I wish you'd understand.'

'I'm going almost immediately. I'm going to work there and be part of it.' Her voice came hard and clipped like someone speaking into a long-distance telephone. 'Will you come to Russia with me?' she challenged her brother.

'Will you do that?'

Adrian flung back his head, unexpectedly meeting her challenge. His eyes were blue coals in the white fire of his face.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll go with you.'

She wanted them to go to Russia. It was the only thing she wanted to do. There was a fine clean world for them there, with hard work and cold winters. It was the kind of world she could dig into and feel at home in. She did not want to live in softness with Adrian. Only in the clean cold could the ripe fruit of his youth keep firm and fresh. She gave him her hand across the table. Perhaps it would work out—some

way. Russia. In Russia, she thought, anything can happen....

Anything could happen. Of course not much information had come out of Russia for a long time, not even the kind of disinformation that might have convinced a cultivated Greenwich Village *bohemiennes* like my grandmother that Russia might be a bracing place to relocate in the 1930s. Now, of course, in Moscow there wasn't even Second Life.

But maybe my thinking was too literal. Parts of what had been Quebec, I knew from various websites, were experimenting with a new form of socialism. Maybe, I thought, my impersonation of a Canadian in New York City long before had constituted some kind of preparation, or at least some caul-induced clairvoyance. Maybe my grandmother's text was telling me to move up there, to escape my responsibilities or else bring them with me to attempt something new. Or if that was impossible, maybe I was to reorganize my own life along socialistic or even communistic lines, clear away what was unneeded, especially this bourgeois obsession with dead objects and the dead past. The world would have a future, after all, and I could choose to share it or else not.

And of course all this frivolous thinking was meant to hide a disturbing coincidence. Adrian was my son's name. Furthermore, my wife had miscarried a few years before he was born, a girl we were intending to name Miranda. But I don't think, in my previous trajectories, I had ever glanced at

this particular book. The library contained several other romances by Frances Park.

Was I to think that if Miranda had lived, she would have been able to reach her brother as I and his mother had not, break him out of his isolation? Briefly, idly, I wondered if, Abigail now dead in some unfortunate civil disturbance, I could swoop down on Richmond like Ulysses S. Grant....

After a few moments, I tightened my flashlight's beam. What did I possess so far? A deluded vision of a fine clean world, with hard work and cold winters. Demons, rapid transformations, and the diluted pleasures of fatherhood. Almost against my will, a pattern was beginning to materialize.

But now I turned to something else, a Zone book from 2006 called *Secrets of Women*, page 60:

...In addition to these concerns about evidence, authenticity, and female corporeality, a second factor helps explain why anatomies were performed principally or exclusively on holy women: the perceived similarities between the production of internal relics and the female physiology of conception. Women, after all, generated other bodies inside their own. God's presence in the heart might be imagined as becoming pregnant with Christ.

It was true that I had many concerns about evidence, authenticity, and female corporeality, although it had not occurred to me until that moment to wonder why anatomies had been performed (either principally or exclusively) on holy women. These words had been written by my sister, Katy Park, who had been a history professor at Harvard University. She had left Boston in 2019, when the city was attacked, but up until her death she was still working in Second Life. Her lectures were so popular, she used to give them in the open air, surrounded by hundreds of students and non-students. For a course in utopias, she had created painstaking reproductions of Plato's Republic, Erewhon, Islandia, and Kim Stanley Robinson's Orange County. Or once I'd seen her give a private seminar in Andreas Veselius's surgical amphitheater, while he performed an autopsy down below.

She had not had children. But her words could not but remind me of my ex-wife's pregnancy, and how miraculous that had seemed. Anxious, I took the laptop from my satchel and tried to contact Nicola in Richmond, but everything was down. Or almost everything—there was information available on almost any year but this one.

So maybe it wasn't even true, that I could choose to share in the world's future. It wasn't a matter of simple nostalgia: For a long time, for many people and certainly for me, the past had taken the future's place, as any hope or sense of forward progress had dried up and disappeared. But now, as I aged, more and more the past had taken over the present also, because the past was all we had. Everywhere, it was the past or nothing. In Second Life, frustrated, I pulled up some

of the daily reconstructions of the siege of 1864-65—why not? I could see the day when my New Orleans great-great-grandmother, Clara Justine Lockett, crossed the line with food and blankets for her brother, who was serving with the Washington Artillery. Crossing back, she'd been taken for a spy, and had died of consumption while awaiting trial.

Or during the previous July, I could see at a glance that during the Battle of the Crater, inexplicably, unforgivably, General Burnside had waited more than an hour after the explosion to advance, allowing the Confederates to re-form their ranks. If he had attacked immediately, before dawn, he might have ended the war that day.

Exasperated by his failure, I logged off. I picked up a book my mother had written about my younger sister, published in 1967 when she was nine years old. As if to reassure myself, I searched out a few lines from the introduction where my mother introduced the rest of the family under a selection of aliases. Katy was called Sara. Rachel was called Becky. I was called Matthew:

If I were to describe them this would be the place to do it. Their separate characteristics. The weaknesses and strengths of each one of them, are part of Elly's story. But it is a part that must remain incomplete, even at the risk of unreality. Our children have put up with a lot of things because of Elly; they will not have to put up with their mother's summation of their personalities printed in a book...

This seemed fair and just to me, though it meant we scarcely appeared or existed in our own history. I wouldn't make the same mistake; finding nothing more of interest, I laid the book aside. Instead I picked up its sequel, *Exiting Nirvana* (Little, Brown, 2001, in case you want to check).

In that book, Elly has disappeared, and Jessy has resumed her real name. Autism is already so common, there is no longer any fear of embarrassment. But when I was young, Jessy was an anomaly. The figure I grew up with was one child out of 15,000—hard to believe now, when in some areas, if you believe the blogs, the rates approach twenty percent. Spectrum kids, they call them. In the 1960s the causes were thought to be an intolerable and unloving family. Larger environmental or genetic tendencies were ignored. But toward the end of her life, my mother resembled my sister more and more, until finally in their speech patterns, their behavior, their obsessions, even their looks, they were virtually identical.

Now I examined the pictures. My autistic sister, like her grandfather, had not excelled in portraiture. Her frail grasp of other people's feelings did not allow her to render faces or gestures or expressions. But unlike him, for a while she had enjoyed a thriving career, because her various disabilities were explicit in her work, rather than (as is true for the rest of us, as is true, for example, right now) its muddled subtext. For a short time before her death she was famous for her meticulous acrylic paintings of private houses, or bridges, or public buildings—the prismatic colors, the night skies full of

constellations and atmospheric anomalies. When I lived in Baltimore, I had commissioned one for a colleague. Here it was, printed in color in the middle of the book: "The House on Abell Avenue."

I looked at the reproduction of Jessy's painting—one of her best—and tried to imagine the end of my trajectory, the house of a woman I used to know. I tried to imagine a sense of forward progress, but in this I was hindered by another aspect of the game, the way it threw you back into the past, the way it allowed you to see genetic and even stylistic traits in families. Shared interests, shared compulsions, a pattern curling backward, a reverse projection, depressing for that reason. This was the shadow portion of the game, which wouldn't function without it, obviously. But even the first time I had stumbled on these shelves, I had been careful not to look at my own books, or bring them to the table, or even think about them in this context. There had been more future then, not as much past.

I was not yet done. There were some other texts to be examined, the only one not published by a member of my family, or published at all. But I had collected in a manila envelope some essays on the subject of *A Princess of Roumania*, forwarded to me by Professor Rosenheim after my appearance in his class. To these I had added the letters I'd received from the girl I called Andromeda, not because that was her name, but because it was the character in the novel she had most admired. While she was alive, I had wanted to hide them from my wife, not that she'd have cared. And after

her death I had disposed of them among the "R" shelves of the Eisenhower Library, thinking the subject closed.

I opened the envelope, and took out Rosenheim's scribbled note: "I was disappointed with their responses to *A Princess of Roumania*. I was insulted by proxy, me to you. These students have no sympathy for failure, for lives destroyed just because the world is that way. They are so used to reading cause and effect, cause and effect, cause and effect, as if that were some kind of magic template for understanding. With what I've gone through this past year...."

I assumed he was referring to the painful breakup of his own marriage, which he'd mentioned in the bar. Here is an excerpt from the essay he was talking about:

The novel ends before the sexual status of Andromeda can be resolved. It ends before the confrontation between Miranda and the baroness, Nicola Ceausescu, her surrogate mother, though one assumes that will be covered in the sequels. And it ends before the lovers consummate their relationship, which we already know won't last. Park's ideas about love are too cynical, too "sad" to be convincing here, though the novel seems to want to turn that way, a frail shoot turning toward the sun. Similarly, the goal of the quest narrative, the great jewel, Kepler's Eye (dug from the brain of the famous alchemist) is too ambiguous a

symbol, representing enlightenment and blindness at the same time....

"How dare he put 'sad' in quotation marks?" commented Rosenheim.

And on the same page he had scribbled a little bit more about his prize student, who apparently hadn't made such mistakes, and who had requested my address on North Calvert Street in Baltimore ("You made quite an impression. I hope she ends up sending you something. I've gotten to know her a little bit outside of class, because she's been baby-sitting for the twins...").

Dear Mr. Park: What I liked most about the book was the experience of living inside of it as I was reading it, because it was set where I live, and I could walk around to those places, there was never anyone there but me. Although I noticed some mistakes, especially with the street names, and I wondered...

Dear Mr. Park: What I liked best about the book was all those portraits of loving fathers and understanding husbands, so many different kinds. I hadn't known there were so many kinds...

Dear Mr. Park: I know we're supposed to like the heroine, but I can't. I find the others much more convincing, because they are so incomplete, holes missing, and the rest of them pasted together like collages. I mean Nicola Ceausescu, but especially Andromeda...

I couldn't read any more. How was it possible to care about these things, after all these years? Tears were in my eyes, whatever that means. Now I tried to remember the face of a woman I'd met only once, with whom I'd swapped a half a dozen letters and perhaps as many emails, before she and Rosenheim had died together in a car crash, when he was driving her home. There was no suggestion of a scandal. A drunk had crossed the line. I'd read about it in the newspaper.

Because I had been up all night, I stretched out on the vinyl sofa and fell asleep. I had switched off the flashlight, and when I woke up I was entirely in darkness, and I was no longer alone.

No—wait. There was a time when I was lying awake. I remember thinking it was obvious that I had made an error, because the sun had obviously gone down. The light was gone from the stairwells and the air shafts. I remember worrying about my car, and whether it was safe where I had parked it. And I remember thinking about Adrian and Nicola, about the way my fantasies had pursued in their footsteps and then changed them when I found them into distortions of themselves—all, I thought, out of a sense of misplaced guilt.

As I lay there in the dark, my mind was lit with images of her and of Adrian when he was young. Bright figures running through the grass, almost transparent with the sunlight behind them. Subsequent to his diagnosis, the images darkened. Nowadays, of course, no one would have given Adrian's autism a second's thought: It was just the progress of the world. No one cared about personal or family trauma anymore. No one cared about genetic causes. But there was something in the water or the air. You couldn't help it.

Now there was light from the stairwell, and the noise of conversation. For a moment I had wondered if I'd be safe in the library overnight. But it was too tempting a refuge; I packed away my laptop, gathered together my satchel and my flashlight. I stuffed my velvet pouch into my pocket, and moved into the stacks to replace my books on their shelves. I knew the locations almost without looking. I felt my way.

I thought the owner or owners of the bedroll had returned, and I would relinquish the reading area and move crabwise through the stacks until I found the exit, and he or she or they would never see me. I would make a break for it. Their voices were loud, and at first I paid no attention to the words or the tone, but only to the volume. The light from their torches lapped at my feet. I stepped away as if from an advancing wave, turned away, and saw something glinting in the corner. I risked a quick pulse from my flashlight, my finger on the button. And I was horrified to see a face looking up at me, the spectacled face of a man lying on his side on the floor, motionless, his cheek against the tiles.

I turned off the flashlight.

Was it a corpse I had seen? It must have been a corpse. In my mind, I could not but examine my small glimpse of it: a man in his sixties, I thought—in any case, younger than I. Bald, bearded, his cap beside him on the floor. A narrow nose. Heavy, square, black glasses. The frame had lifted from one ear. In the darkness I watched him. I did not move, and in my stillness and my fear I found myself listening to the conversation of the strangers, who had by this time reached the vinyl couches and were sitting there. Perhaps I had caught a glimpse of them as they passed by the entrance to the stacks where I was hiding, or perhaps I was inventing details from the sound of their voices, but I pictured a boy and a girl in their late teens or early twenties, with pale skin, pale, red-rimmed eyes, straw hair. I pictured chapped lips, bad skin, ripped raincoats, fingerless wool gloves, though it was warm in the library where I stood. I felt the sweat along my arms.

Girl: "Did you use a condom?"

Boy: "Yes."

Girl: "Did you use it, please?"

Boy: "I did use it."

Girl: "What kind did you use?"

Boy: "I don't know."

Girl: "Was it the ribbed kind?"

Boy: (inaudible)

Girl: "Or with the receptacle?"

Boy: "No."

Girl (anxiously): "Maybe with both? Ribbed and

receptacle?"

Boy: (inaudible)

Girl: "No. I didn't feel it. Was it too small? Why are you smiling at me?"

Girl (after a pause, and in a nervous sing-song): "Because I don't want to get pregnant."

Girl (after a pause): "I don't want to get up so early."

Girl (after a pause): "And not have sleep."

Girl (after a pause): "Because of the feeding in the middle of the night. What are you doing?"

Boy (loudly and without inflection): "You slide it down like this. First this way and then this. Can you do that?"

Girl (angrily): "Why do you ask me?"

Boy: "For protection. This goes here. Yes, you see it. You point it like this, with both hands."

Girl: "I don't want to use it. Because too dangerous."

Boy: "For protection from any people. Because you are my girlfriend. Here's where you press the switch, and it comes out."

Girl: "I don't want to use it."

Girl (after a pause): "What will you shoot?"

Girl (after a pause): "Will you shoot animals? Or a wall? Or maybe a target?"

Boy: "Because you are my girlfriend. Look in the bag. Those are many condoms of all different kinds. Will you choose one?"

Girl (after a pause): "Oh, I don't know which one to choose."

Girl (after a pause): "This one. Has it expired, please?"

Boy: (inaudible)

Girl: "Is it past the expiration date?"

As I listened, I was thinking of the dead man on the floor. His body was blocking the end of the stacks, and I didn't want to step over him. But I also didn't want to interrupt the young lovers, homeless people somewhere on the spectrum, as I guessed, and armed. At the same time, I felt an irrational desire to replace in their proper spaces the books I held in my hands, because I didn't think, if I was unable now to take the time, that they would ever be reshelved.

I couldn't bear to tumble them together, the Parks and the Claibornes, on some inappropriate shelf. And this was not just a matter of obsessiveness or vanity. Many of these people disliked each other, had imagined their work as indirect reproaches to some other member of the family. Even my parents, married sixty-five years. That was how "trajectories" functioned, as I imagined it: forcing the books together would create a kinetic field. Repulsed, the chunks of text would fly apart and make a pattern. Without even considering the dead man on the floor, the library was full of ghosts. At the same time, I had to get out of there.

Of course it was also possible that the spectrum kids would end up burning the place down, and I was surprised that the girl, who seemed like a cautious sort, had not noticed the

possibility. Light came from a small fire, laid (as I could occasionally see as I moved among the shelves, trusting my memory, feeling for the gaps I had left—in each case I had pulled out an adjoining book a few inches, as if preparing for this eventuality) in a concave metal pan, like an oversized hubcap. Evidently it had been stored under the square table in the reading area, though in the uncertain light I had not seen it there.

I still had one book in my hand when I heard the girl say, "What is that noise?"

I waited. "What is that noise?" she said again.

Then I had to move. I burst from my hiding place, and she screamed. As I rounded the corner, heading toward the stairwell, I glanced her way, and was surprised to see (considering the precision of the way I had imagined her) that she was older and smaller and darker than I'd thought—a light-skinned black woman, perhaps. The man I scarcely dared glance at, because I imagined him pointing his gun; I turned my head and was gone, up the stairs and into the big atrium, which formerly had housed the reference library. Up the stairs to the main entrance, and I was conscious, as I hurried, that there were one or two others in that big dark space.

Outside, in the parking lot, I found no cars at all.

It was a chilly autumn night, with a three-quarter moon. I stood with my leather satchel over my shoulder, looking down toward St. Charles Avenue. The Homewood campus sits on a hill overlooking my old neighborhood, which was mostly dark. But some fires were burning somewhere, it looked like.

I had my mother's book in my hand. Because of it, and because a few hours before I had been looking at "The House on Abell Avenue," I wondered if my friend still lived in that house, and if I could take refuge there. Her name was Bonni Goldberg, and she had taught creative writing at the School for Continuing Studies long ago. What with one thing and another, we had fallen out of touch.

All these northeastern cities had lost population over the years since the pandemics. Baltimore had been particularly hard hit. North of me, in gated areas like Roland Park, there was still electricity. East, near where I was going, the shops and fast-food restaurants were open along Greenmount Avenue. I could see the blue glow from the carbide lanterns. But Charles Village was mostly dark as I set off down the hill and along 33rd Street, and took the right onto Abell Avenue.

Jessy had painted the house from photographs, long before. According to her habit she had drawn a precise sketch, every broken shingle and cracked slate in place—a two-story arts & crafts with an open wraparound porch and deep, protruding eaves. A cardinal was at the bird feeder, a bouquet of white mums at the kitchen window. Striped socks were on the clothesline—I remembered them. In actuality they had been red and brown, but in the painting the socks were the pastels that Jessy favored. It was the same with the house itself, dark green with a gray roof. But in the painting each shingle and slate was a different shade of lavender, pink, light green, light blue, etc. The photograph had been taken during the day, and in the painting the house shone with reflected light. But above it the sky was black, except for

the precisely rendered winter constellations—Orion, Taurus, the Pleiades. And then the anomaly: a silver funnel cloud, an Alpine lighting effect known as a Brocken Spectre, and over to the side, the golden lines from one of Jessy's migraine headaches.

I was hoping Bonni still lived there, but the house was burned. The roof had collapsed from the south end. I stood in the garden next to the magnolia tree. In Jessy's painting, it had been in flower. I stood there trying to remember some of the cocktail parties, dinner parties, or luncheons I'd attended in that house. Bonni had put her house portrait up over the fireplace, and I remembered admiring it there. She'd joked about the funnel cloud, which suggested to her the arrival of some kind of flying saucer, and she'd hinted that an interest in such things must run in families.

Remembering this, I found myself wondering if the painting, or some remnant of it, was still hanging inside the wreckage of the house. Simultaneously, and this was also a shadow trajectory, I was already thinking it was a stupid mistake to have come here, even though I'd seen very few people on my walk from the campus, and Abell Avenue was deserted. But I was only a block or so from Greenmount, which I imagined still formed a sort of a frontier. And so inevitably I was accosted, robbed, pushed to the ground, none of which I'll describe. If it's happened to you recently, it was like that. They didn't hit me hard.

I listened to them argue over my laptop and my velvet purse, and it took me a while to figure out they were talking in a foreign language—Cambodian, perhaps. They unbuttoned

the purse, and I could hear their expressions of disappointment and disgust, though I couldn't guess what they were actually touching as they thrust their fingers inside. Embarrassed, humiliated, I lay on my back on the torn-up earth—it is natural in these situations to blame yourself. A cold but reliable comfort—if not victims, whom else does it make sense to blame? You have to start somewhere. Besides, these people in an instant had done something I had never dared.

It won't amaze you to hear that as I lay there, a dazed old man on the cold ground, I was conscious of a certain stiffness in my joints, especially in my shoulders and the bones of my neck. As my attackers moved off across a vacant lot, I raised myself onto my elbows. I was in considerable pain, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do without money or credit cards. I thought I should try to find a policeman or a community health clinic.

How was it possible that what happened next took my by surprise? It is, once again, because how you tell a story, or how you hear it, is different from how you experience it, different in every way. Cold hands grabbed hold of me and raised me to my feet. Cold voices whispered words of comfort—"Here, here."

Walking from Homewood I'd seen almost no one, as I've said. St. Paul, North Calvert, Guilford—I'd passed blocks of empty houses and apartments. But now I could sense that doors were opening, people were gathering on the side streets. I could hear laughter and muted conversation. Two men turned the corner, arm in arm. Light came from their

flashlight beams. In the meantime, the woman who had raised me up was dusting off my coat with her bare palms, and now she stooped to retrieve my own flashlight, which had rolled away among the crusts of mud. She pressed it into my hands, closed my fingers over it, and then looked up at me. In the moonlight I was startled to see a face I recognized, the black woman in the library whom I had overheard discussing prophylactics. She smiled at me, a shy, natural expression very rare inside the spectrum—her front teeth were chipped.

Overhead, the moon moved quickly through the sky, because the clouds were moving. A bright wind rattled the leaves of the magnolia tree. People came to stand around us, and together we moved off toward Merrymans Lane, and the parking lot where there had been a farmers' market in the old days. "Good to see you," a man said. "It's General Claiborne's grandson," murmured someone, as if explaining something to someone else. "He looks just like him."

The clouds raced over us, and the moon rode high. As we gathered in the parking lot, a weapon was passed along to me, a sharp stick about three feet long. There was a pile of weapons on the shattered asphalt: sticks and stones, dried cornstalks, old tomatoes, fallen fruit. My comrades chose among them. More of them arrived at every minute, including a contingent of black kids from farther south along Greenmount. There was some brittle high-fiving, and some nervous hilarity.

"Here," said the spectrum girl. She had some food for me, hot burritos in a greasy paper bag. "You need your strength."
"Thanks."

Our commander was an old man like me, a gap-toothed old black man in an Argyle vest and charcoal suit, standing away from the others with a pair of binoculars. I walked over. Even though my neck was painfully stiff, I could turn from my waist and shoulders and look north and east. I could see how the land had changed. Instead of the middle of the city, I stood at its outer edge. North, the forest sloped away from me. East, past Loch Raven Boulevard, the land opened up around patches of scrub oak and ash, and the grass was knee-high as far as I could see. There was no sign of any structure or illumination in either direction, unless you count the lightning on the eastern horizon, down toward Dundalk and the river's mouth. The wind blew from over there, carrying the smell of ozone and the bay. Black birds hung above us. Thirty-third Street was a wide, rutted track, and as I watched I could see movement down its length, a deeper blackness there.

The commander handed me the binoculars. "She's brought them up from the Eastern Shore on flatboats," he said.

I held the binoculars in my hand. I couldn't bear to look. For all I knew, among the pallid dead I would perceive people that I recognized—Shawn Rosenheim, perhaps, a bayonet in his big fist. And one young woman, of whose face I'd be less sure.

"She'll try and take the citadel tonight," murmured the commander by my side. Behind us, the road ran over a bridge before ending at the gates of Homewood. St. Charles Avenue was hidden at the bottom of a ravine. The campus rose above us, edged with cliffs, a black rampart from the art museum to

the squash courts. And at the summit of the hill, light gleamed from between the columns of the citadel.

I had to turn in a complete circle to see it all. But I was also imagining what lay behind the hill, the people those ramparts housed and protected, not just here but all over the world. Two hundred miles south, in Richmond, a boy and his mother crouched together in the scary dark.

"I fought with your grandfather when I was just a boy," said the commander. "That was on Katahdin Ridge in 1963. That was the first time I saw her." He motioned back down the road toward Loch Raven. I put the binoculars to my eyes, and I could see the black flags.

"Her?"

"Her."

I knew whom he meant. "What took you so long, anyway?" he asked. I might have tried to answer, if there was time, because I didn't hear even the smallest kind of reproach in his voice, but just simple curiosity. I myself was curious. What had I been doing all these years, when there was work to be done? Others, evidently, started as children—there were kids among us now.

I was distracted from my excuses by the sight of them building up a bonfire of old two-by-fours and plywood shards, while the rest of us stood around warming our hands. I heard laughter and conversation. People passed around bottles of liquor. They smoked cigarettes or joints. A woman uncovered a basket of corn muffins. A man had a bag of oranges, which he passed around. I could detect no sense of urgency, even though the eastern wind made the fire roar, while lightning

licked the edges of the plain. The crack of thunder was like distant guns.

"Here they come," said the commander.

Short Story: **THE SECRET LIVES OF FAIRY TALES** by
Steven Popkes

The Emperor's New Clothes

Now for something completely different, here's the skinny on five classics of fairytaledom. When anyone asks you where you got the inside dope on 'em, be sure to tell them you heard it here first.

Emperor Thomas had heard about Po and Ho long before he met them. Not that he begrudged two scam artists a living. He liked the Salt Dodge and the False Gumdrop as much as anyone and had a good laugh on how they had modified the Glam and took everything the Widow Stein owned, right down to her porcelain teeth. But all good things come to an end and *their* end was in sight when the local magistrate hauled them up in front of the Emperor.

When Ho and Po suggested they had something in mind that the good Emperor might be interested in, Thomas was intrigued and kept a close eye on his wallet. The thought of the two of them as master tailors amused him and he let them go ahead for a month—expecting he must bid them a sad but final farewell at the month's end.

The nonexistent clothes exceeded his expectations. An early summer heat wave made the ruffles and brocade hot as

hell. A little naked parading was just the right prescription. Everyone saw through it instantly (*heh*) of course but who was going to say anything?

As the naked emperor wandered in the yard outside, feeling the gentle wind tickle him in places unexposed for decades, Thomas thought: *I could get used to this.*

A young boy on the wall called out: "He's *naked!*"

The Emperor didn't even have to raise an eyebrow. His Minister of Personal Security had the boy silenced before his next breath. The boy was immediately and publically dismembered as philosophical instruction to the populace and, more importantly, to members of the court. The Emperor was clearly the final arbiter of fashion.

As Thomas retired back inside—it did look like rain—he considered the possibilities. There were a number of Ladies and daughters of Ladies who could benefit from the gift of Imperial clothing. At least, it would benefit Thomas. And by declaring this gift Imperial, Thomas could insure the quality of the court landscape since no one would be wearing the ephemeral clothing but by his Imperial decree.

The more he thought about it, the less necessary Ho and Po appeared. But by the time Thomas sent his Minister of Personal Security to pay a visit to the two tailors, they were already gone.

* * * *

Snow White

The kingdoms of Althamea and Gerk were side by side on the coast, far enough from the seat of Thomas's empire not to worry overmuch but close enough to smell it if things got too close.

Gerk had enjoyed a regular involuntary infusion of Viking DNA resulting in a population that was big, blue-eyed and blond, heavily muscled and ready for action. Althamea's people, denied these advantages, were short, thin, splay-footed, pigeon-chested, buck-toothed, and myopic. Every few years, the Gerks would convince themselves to attack. The Kings of Althamea would sigh and reluctantly annex another hectare or two. It was a shame, really. The poor sods just didn't seem to learn.

It was no surprise, therefore, when King Richard of Gerk had a handsome son, Charles. The beauty of King Alfred of Althamea's daughter, Snow White, was a shock.

Snow White's name had a double meaning. On the one hand, it signified an innocent lack of guile and a symbol of purity. On the other, like a flat, featureless snowfall, no one could tell what was underneath. She was as smart as they come.

Her stepmother, Queen Rose, had been her father's mistress for four years before she bore him a sickly son. At that point, King Alfred had Snow White's mother killed and married Rose. Snow White was fifteen.

It didn't surprise her at all when Ho, Rose's huntsman, took her out into the forest. But Snow White's mother had been one example of how to manage a man and Queen Rose had been another. The huntsman, having been instructed to

kill Snow White and bring her wet beating heart back to the castle, was reluctant to fulfill his instructions after a couple of hours' romp with her. It's just tough to slaughter a beautiful naked woman.

Instead, he sent Snow White (and her clothes) deeper into the forest. He killed a boar, took out the heart, and presented that to the Queen. But figuring that fooling the Queen was likely only temporary, he left town.

Chance plays a big role in most lives and Snow White's was no exception. It wasn't chance that Rose sent her away. Nor was it chance Snow White lived to tell the tale—that was pure skill and single-minded determination. But it was chance that brought her to the Trollback Mine successfully operated by seven brothers named, unsurprisingly, Trollback.

Whether it was the contaminated water, persistent parasites or inbreeding, all seven brothers were afflicted with achondroplasia. They were dwarves.

The number seven has special significance in fairy tales: seven swans, seven dwarves, seven deadly sins, seven cardinal virtues. It could have been worse. This fairy tale could have been about the seven lepers.

Regardless, not all of the Trollback brothers were equally afflicted. Pedro, for example, was mentally retarded and referred to as Dopey. Karl was consumptive and called Sneazy. You get the idea.

Rupert (Grumpy) was the oldest of the Trollback brothers and had achieved the neat trick of both managing a successful jewel mine and defending the Trollback claim from

King Alfred and King Richard, the Emperor Thomas being just too far away to worry about.

Snow White's appearance out of the forest struck the Trollback brothers like a pickaxe. If she had been the shy, virginal girl her face suggested, she would still have been the only woman available. And since she was not, her effect was even more devastating. Pedro and Karl died more from neglect than anything else. The remaining brothers competed, fought, and ultimately murdered for sexual favors that before they'd never known existed. Finally, it was Rupert and the humorless Guillermo (Happy) who beat each other with oaken staves in front of the mine, the others having died under mysterious (or not so mysterious) circumstances. Rupert struck Guillermo's eye with his axe but didn't kill him. Guillermo ran screaming into the forest. But before Rupert could take full possession of Snow White, there rode onto the scene one Prince Charles, son of King Richard, to negotiate the year's taxes.

Charles, also called "Charming" as a joke, was a bona fide prince with a kingdom nearly his own just going to waste. Snow White seduced Charles and Charles returned to his father with her. Rupert followed, hating himself but still in thrall.

King Richard, a widower with his wife safely beyond harm, died the following spring of a lingering illness. Prince Charles became King Charles.

With a kingdom of her own and a constant revenue stream of jewels, Snow White hired every mercenary she could find and drafted the population without mercy. She smiled to

herself. When she was done, Queen Rose would be dancing on red hot iron plates. She wouldn't be dancing alone. King Alfred would be dancing with her.

* * * *

Jack and the Beanstalk

There's an old joke that Saint Peter, bored with his job admitting souls to heaven, began to guess the IQs and occupations of the entrants as they passed the Pearly Gates. 150: surgeon. 135: attorney. The joke's obligatory third guy showed up. Peter gave him a once-over and, too polite to give a number, said: "Get your deer this year?"

That's Jack.

He lived in a Gerklender hovel with his mother in the town of Grunt hanging out in the village square on a soap box yelling about the impending menace from Althamea. The Althameans had weakened Gerk by introducing regulations on swordbearing—the real reason Gerk hadn't won a war with Althamea in two hundred years. They had introduced foreign substances into the water to turn Gerks stupid. (The Gerks in the square, observing Jack, were almost persuaded.) They were corrupting our schools by introducing secular humanism and teaching that the earth was neither the center of the universe nor flat.

Mostly, the Gerks ignored Jack, though some of the more gullible invited him to speak at the enormous church they were building just outside of town. Jack distributed pamphlets

on the Althamean menace, abstinence family planning, and God's plan for Gerk.

Jack would have eventually died of tuberculosis, unknown and nameless, but for the draft. When the new Queen started building her army, each town was tasked with gathering up as many able-bodied men (meaning still warm, able to walk and possessing neither money nor strong ties to anyone important) as possible. The current mayor and his ministers didn't want to have anything to do with it. But, since it came from the Queen, it was a dirty job *somebody* had to do. Jack was standing in the square yelling at the populace when the Mayor hooked his thumb out the window and said, "Let's get *him* to do it."

Jack was appointed Chairman and Sole Responsible Member of the Grunt Draft Board directly by the Queen herself, since nobody in the Mayor's office wanted their fingerprints on the deal.

Jack took the office as a sign from heaven. He gave talks to hulking, nineteen-year-old eighth graders in the local schools using maps he devised to show the true size of Gerk—that is, the size Gerk would have been if it hadn't lost all those territories to Althamea over the last couple of centuries. The only indication on the map that the territories were no longer under Gerk control were little dotted lines of asterisks and a note at the bottom in print so fine it looked like a smudge saying these were "disputed" lands. Jack didn't just distribute these maps to potential recruits but to all the students, thinking wisely for perhaps the first time in his life that this war could go on for a long, long time. Forty young

children who didn't know any better grew up with these maps and eventually settled in the "disputed" lands only to find themselves loyal Althamean citizens.

So equilibrium was established. Jack sent off troublemakers, squints, boys trying to avoid incarceration, and boys already incarcerated. Nobody meaningful was tagged. Everyone was happy.

Trouble rolled up when Jack drafted Edward Serk the Younger.

Edward Serk the Younger was the son of Edward Serk the Elder who, himself, was brother to Simon Serk the Mayor.

Clearly, Jack's usefulness had come to an end.

But now came a dilemma. Jack, for all his faults (and they were many) had been appointed to an office by the Queen. The Queen had not shown herself to be forgiving. It was probable that Mayor Serk, Serk the Elder and Serk the Younger would all serve in the front lines if removing Jack could be traced to *them*.

As chance and fairy tales would have it, a transient named Ho was just at that moment passing hurriedly through town, backtracking to Althamea given the regime change. As he was obviously on the lam, the Mayor made Ho an offer: if he would take care of their problem, he could continue south without interference. Alternatively, he could be sent to the Queen dressed in the very best ferrous finery the town of Grunt could afford.

Ho agreed to the arrangement. Ever brave, Ho decided the method of choice should be poison.

Ho found Jack sitting outside his mother's hovel drinking from a jug of spiced wine. (Gerks always spice their wine since their unspiced wine tastes like pig urine.)

Casting about for some basis of conversation, Ho remarked on the fine qualities of the family cow.

Jack realized that anyone who thought the sunken-hipped, fly-bitten, half-dead Bess had any qualities at all, fine or otherwise, had to be more drunk, stupid or shifty than he was. Jack put down the jug. He would need both his wits for this contest.

"I'd love to purchase this cow," said Ho.

"Sure. Make an offer."

"I have these magic beans." Ho opened his (thickly gloved) hand and showed Jack.

"They don't look like beans," said Jack. "They look like mushrooms."

"Like I said. They're magic."

Jack took the beans and peered closely at them. "I like mushrooms."

"You—" began Ho.

Jack chewed them up and swallowed them. "Don't have much taste."

"—cook them," Ho finished.

"What?"

"Or eat them rather," said Ho hurriedly. "Whatever. Use them any way you like."

"How are they magic?"

"That depends on the person. After all, everyone has their own dreams, desires, and destinies. Also, size makes a difference in the dosage."

"All those words begin with the letter 'd,'" said Jack, dreamily, showing off his education.

"Indeed," said Ho, starting to leave. Cooking these particular mushrooms was considered necessary for their effectiveness. He'd have to come back and try something else.

"Don't forget Bess."

"Right." Ho dubiously untied the cow and started laboriously leading (dragging) the cow down the road.

Jack sat back down with his jug, wondering how long the magic would take to have an effect.

Ho returned to Grunt mysteriously sans Bess—no one ever solved the mystery of Bess. But then nobody much noticed. After assuring Mayor Serk that his problem would be solved as soon as the mushrooms worked their way into Jack's bloodstream, Ho expected no further interference. Imagine his surprise to be volunteered for active service by the new Chairman and Sole Responsible Member of the Grunt Draft Board, Edward Serk the Younger. He was never seen in Grunt again.

Later that day, all three Serks found Jack lying in a small impact crater at the base of a great tree. Ho's estimate of the mushrooms' efficacy was correct and they had, in fact, not killed Jack. It was completely clear, however, that Jack was indeed dead. The Serks surmised he had fallen from a great height (likely the adjacent tall tree) but no one could figure

out why he had climbed it in the first place. The jug next to said adjacent tree suggested a cause but, as none of the Serks had ever climbed a tree while drunk, they thought it insufficient. Jack's death remained a mystery and fodder for multiple tales told by those who were not required to serve in the Queen's army but supported the soldiers passionately over a stein of ale and a rack of lamb.

* * * *

Rumpelstiltskin

When Mary's father was caught trying to evade King Alfred's draft, he claimed his daughter could spin straw into gold.

Po, Alfred's guardsman, didn't believe him but had been given instructions that any source of funds should be reported immediately to his superiors. Thus, the outlandish claim reached King Alfred just as he was desperately trying to make a brand new son with Queen Rose, the previous model having shown itself to be defective since it had recently died.

Alfred was desperate and for more than just another son. He needed money in the worst way. His kingdom had never been wealthy except in comparison to Gerik. But now his traitorous bitch of a daughter had an army of two thousand men. How had she gotten control of the Trollback Mine? No. Scratch that. He *knew* how she had done it. The black-haired slut upstairs had taught him a great deal about how such things were done.

So what did he have to lose? Try the girl. If she doesn't make gold from straw, hang the father in the yard. He fingered his beard as he watched her from his throne. Not bad-looking, either.

Mary ended up in a stable with a couple of bales of hay. Gold tomorrow equals life. No gold tomorrow—but let us be polite.

Being a young girl and rather dim, she, of course, had no idea how to accomplish anything of the sort. In her life, if she was lucky enough to avoid until her wedding day being beaten and raped by her father, she might live to have the privilege of being beaten and raped by her husband. Thus, while her situation had not improved it had also not gotten worse by much.

From the shadows came a dwarf with only one eye. "I know how to turn straw into gold."

"How?"

"You couldn't possibly understand."

True enough, thought Mary. "For what in return?"

"Your first child."

Mary stared at him. "You're kidding."

The dwarf stared back at her and it was clear he had never made or understood a joke in his entire life.

Hm. Possible life tomorrow weighed against future brat versus certain death. Mary didn't have to know calculus to make that calculation. "It's a deal."

The dwarf piled the two bales of hay together and brought out curious instruments: ring magnets and coils of copper wire, round cylinders of glass with glowing filaments inside,

an icy flask of colorless liquid that seemed to smoke though Mary could smell no fire. From these materials, he constructed a framework around the hay, then handed her a pair of thick, smoked-glass goggles. "Better wear these," he said, donning a pair himself. A moment later came a flash brighter than the sun and forty pounds of straw became ten pounds of gold dust, the thirty-pound difference being used up by the energy of the transaction.

Since Po had been watching the whole thing (fortunately staring at Mary's full bodice at the critical moment) King Alfred showed up a few minutes later while the dwarf was still putting away his apparatus.

"You have an uncommon skill, master dwarf," said King Alfred. "What's your name?"

"Rumpelstiltskin."

"That's a curious name."

"Because of my eye. Rumply. Skin. You get the idea."

"I see." *Crazy as a loon*, thought Alfred. "What did you promise him, girl?"

"My firstborn child," said Mary.

"Ah," said King Alfred. "May I surmise, then, that the going rate for ten pounds of gold is the future promissory note of a child?"

Rumpelstiltskin nodded.

"Perhaps we can work something out. I don't have a few hundred babies immediately on hand. Is there some economy of scale we can determine? Why do you need a baby, anyway?"

Rumpelstiltskin pointed to the empty socket of his eye.
"Stem cells."

It dawned on King Alfred that this was no common dwarf.
"Do you know anything about fertility problems?"

"I do." Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. "Stem cells."

"I believe we can do business." He put his arm around the dwarf and led him toward the castle. When he passed Po he whispered: "Take care of the girl, won't you? And her father."

Po nodded. Deciding he had full discretion regarding the girl, and the father, Po hanged the father the following day and married the girl. Mary got a much better deal than she expected. Rumpelstiltskin never claimed her firstborn child and Po surprised her by neither beating nor raping her.

* * * *

Cinderella

They called Charles "Charming" for the single-minded determination with which he pursued sex. Sex with women, mostly, but there were other tales that could not be easily dismissed.

Cinderella's father had been born a peasant but managed to accrue enough wealth to come to the notice of a noble but poor family—said stepmother—who married him for his money. Dad was happy with the deal—he was marrying up—but promptly died before he could get any title for himself. The stepsisters came from a previous marriage and had noble blood. Cinderella, sired from the loins of a peasant and being born of a peasant mother, had none. It was no accident,

therefore, that she was not invited to the ball King Richard threw to find someone, anyone, who might keep his son in check. There was more than one bastard in the kingdom that looked suspiciously like Charles.

"Be careful what you wish for" are the watchwords of kings.

Cinderella sewed up a little dress and crashed the ball. She didn't have as much material to work with as she would have liked and what should have been ruffles and folds instead form fitted her décolletage. She had a very pretty face but that didn't matter much as Charles hadn't seen a woman's eyes since he was thirteen.

After a number of clumsy grabs, Cinderella escaped. As stimulating as it is to be pawed by a member of the royal family, the excitement palls. Besides, she had to get back before her stepmother and stepsisters. If the ball hadn't been masked, she wouldn't have dared go at all.

Determination being Charles's most prominent, and perhaps only, talent, he found her footprint and had glass shoes made. He reasoned that although he didn't know her face (big surprise) and her endowment would no doubt be hidden, she couldn't hide her feet.

In due time, Cinderella was discovered—something she might have had a hand in, tales of princely true love and wedding bells being popular with teenage girls back then. Regardless, neither came up. Charles bought her a nice house and visited her as often as King Richard would let him. Marriage was out of the question, of course, but that didn't stop him from siring a child on her. Cinderella named the girl

Charlena in hopes the prince would remember his daughter. Charles didn't so much but King Richard did and sent Charles on a tax mission to the Trollback Mines while he figured out what to do.

Charles returned with *that woman*.

Cinderella brought Charlena to the public square when Charles presented Snow White to the kingdom. After seeing that beautiful, pale sociopath, it didn't surprise her when Charles came no more.

Cinderella didn't miss the bump and grind but her stipend dried up, too. It was hard to maintain even a small house and daughter without visible means of support and Cinderella had no marketable skills.

Then, just when things were about to become truly desperate, a knock came on the door. She opened it and saw a sour-faced dwarf.

"I've brought you this. From Charming." He spat the name as he gave her a small bag of coins.

"Come in, please." Cinderella led him in and made tea for him. "I'm Cinderella."

"I know who you are."

"And I don't know who *you* are." She eyed him expectantly, the hot teakettle poised somewhat dangerously over his head.

The dwarf eyed her, and the kettle, sourly. "My name is Rupert. Rupert Trollback."

"Welcome to my house, Rupert Trollback." Charlena, a child of three by this point, came in and hugged her mother while looking at the stranger. "My daughter and I thank you."

Cinderella knew the coins did not come from Charles—not only was Cinderella for the moment entirely forgotten by the Prince but *that woman* would not have allowed it. Rupert was supporting her for reasons of his own. Cinderella thought she knew what they were but after several more visits, more coins, and no suggestion of the implied improper behavior, she decided she was wrong.

They found they had things in common. Rupert had a dry sense of humor and a bitter wit. Cinderella had dealt with worse and knew what was bitter and what was wit and when to tell the difference. It wasn't hard for the two cast-off exiles to become friends.

When Charles was murdered, Rupert came to Cinderella before dawn.

"Charming is dead." Rupert stood in the doorway staring up at her.

"Did you kill him?"

"I did not," he said indignantly. "But I'll be blamed for it. I'm getting out while I can and before the war starts. I don't know where I'll be going."

"I see." Cinderella was not surprised by his leaving. She was surprised at how it made her sad.

"Come with me." Rupert started to say more, closed his mouth, and waited.

Go with him? Travel with a little girl and a dwarf? It was likely Rupert had enough means to take care of them for at least a little while. She guessed she knew that much about him. She liked him well enough. Besides, no doubt *that woman* would eventually come around to get rid of any

possible claimant to the throne. Charlena's ancestry was well known.

"I have to pack."

Between the two of them, they made small bundles of needful things that either could carry. As they set out, Cinderella carrying the sleeping Charlena and following a grim and silent Rupert, she found herself smiling. Rupert was a dwarf, grumpy, and obviously still obsessed with *that woman*. At the same time, he had come to save them at great risk to himself: a woman and a child were additional burdens on top of being a dwarf on the run. Maybe he would leave if things got too tough. Maybe he wanted her to sleep with him. Maybe she should. Maybe she *would*. There were worse fates.

But for the moment it seemed a good friend was helping her escape to the hope of a new life.

That's about as good as it gets.

Short Story: **THE LATE NIGHT TRAIN** by Kate Wilhelm

In our sixtieth anniversary issue, Kate Wilhelm explored some family relations in "Shadows on the Wall of the Cave." Her new story follows suit with a very dark examination of matters both familial and fantastic.

I am sitting at the kitchen table in my parents' house with an open book, but I am not even trying to read the words. It is too cold in my upstairs room to take refuge there. I never gave a thought to how small the house is when I was growing up in it. Four downstairs rooms: kitchen, dining room, living room, a short hall with the bath and staircase on one side and my dad's room on the other. And two unheated bedrooms upstairs. My sister and I shared one of them, my brother had the other. It seemed room enough then.

When I plugged in a space heater in my room, it threw a circuit breaker and I don't dare try that again. There is no escape from a blaring television announcer, shouts, screams, cheers, commercials: a basketball game. Dad likes to watch basketball, and Mom is pretending an interest. They both have significant hearing loss and probably don't realize how painfully loud the sound is. I should buy some ear plugs, I think, and wonder why I didn't do it before. For upstairs, earmuffs would be more appropriate.

I am trying to resolve our dilemma, to all appearances one that has already solidified beyond resolution during the past seven months, since Dad's stroke in June. Now he is in a wheelchair, and my mother and I are in straitjackets. Also, I am trying to decipher the curious message my own brain is sending me by way of a train whistle.

The first time I heard the train whistle in the night, I paid little attention, simply rolled over, pulled the cover up, and returned to sleep. I gave it scant thought the following day. Just a fluke of a wind current carrying sound abnormally, I decided. I knew no train track was within miles, far too distant to hear the trains.

The next time I heard it, a week or two later, I sat straight up in bed. There was a line of light showing under my door from the downstairs hall. It was three in the morning and it was very cold in my room. As children we left the door open for heat from below to drift in, but when Eleanor reached puberty, she kept it closed, because Roger's room was right across the hall. Now I keep it closed at night. If Dad got up and saw a light upstairs, it would set him off in a rage.

The whistle sounded, drew closer, faded away. In the silence that followed, I heard Dad going to the bathroom. His wheelchair makes a squeal at random intervals. He claimed not to hear it, and my mother agreed. If he said black was white, she would nod.

I must have been dreaming, I thought uneasily, and translated a squeal to the sound of a train whistle. I knew it would be a long time before I could go back to sleep; I was too sore and it had been hours since a hot bath had relaxed

my muscles enough to allow sleep in the first place. I had spent much of the day in the orchard, trying to rake up the fallen apples. Dad had insisted it had to be done.

By way of mild protest, I had said, "I thought Mr. Garry cleaned it up when he did his."

"They had a falling out," Mom said, even as Dad started one of his ranting rages, cursing their neighbor Garry for being nosy and insolent, and me for being too lazy to earn my keep.

"Let it go," I ordered myself in bed, wide awake, listening for the squeal on his return to bed, thinking of how my feelings for him had changed. What had been fear had become simple hatred.

All through childhood and adolescence, I had feared him, not because he was physically abusive, but for his rages that came with ferocity and unpredictability over major things, like not coming straight home from school, to minor ones, like leaving a light on at night. At those times he had yelled obscenities, cursed all three children and his wife, the world and everyone in it. He had knocked things off tables, flung chairs over, broken whatever was within reach.

As much as I feared the rages, I came to dread even more his cutting, mind-numbing sarcasm and insults. "You fat pig, the boys must line up just to get a smile from someone as fat and ugly as you are." Eleanor would run from the room in tears. It wasn't just her. He had a trigger for each of us. My brother fled when he was sixteen, and Eleanor when she was seventeen. I left the day after graduation, a week before my

eighteenth birthday, and although I have visited frequently, I have not lived here since then until now.

At twelve, when Eleanor left, I was too young to run away, and I couldn't understand then why Mom stayed, but now at thirty, I well understand that she no longer has the choices she might once have had. She is as stuck as I am.

The crazy train whistle, I remind myself, and try to remember the circumstances the next time. Before Christmas, and bitterly cold, with snow on the ground and frost-decorated windows. I had to go shopping that day, and was waiting for Mom to add items to my list. Since her heart attack a few years ago, she can't tolerate extremely cold weather and has given up leaving the house until spring.

"Get some dormant oil spray for the trees," Dad ordered.

"Dad, for heaven's sake, let Mr. Garry do them the way he's always done."

Mr. Garry has tractors, motorized everything, farm hands to do the chores, and he had included Dad's one and a half acres along with his own forty- or fifty-acre orchard. I thought it was simple generosity for a long time, then came to realize he was also protecting his trees by keeping disease and insect pests out of Dad's adjoining grove.

"He puts a foot on my ground, I'll shoot him," Dad said. "You hear me, you let him in here, he's dead." He began to curse and yell and Mom gave me a warning look.

"I added it to the list," Mom said, almost inaudibly. It would have made little difference if she had screamed the words; his voice filled the house.

I took the list from my mother, glanced at it, and waited for her to count out money. It might be enough, or not.

"And bring me the receipts," Dad yelled. "All the change and the receipts. You hear me? I want to see it all! And it better be right. Stupid, you think I don't notice five dollars missing, or three, but I do, and I want the change, all of it."

I suppose that was what did it that day. I had been making up the slight difference with my own money week after week, watching my savings account erode with the inevitability of a glacier flowing into the sea.

"I haven't been stealing your money!" I yelled back at him. "And what's more I don't intend to get a spray for those damn trees! If Mr. Garry doesn't do them, they won't get done. I'm not going to try to spray an acre and a half of trees with a five-gallon sprayer in this weather, or in any weather! Sell the trees to Garry and be done with them."

I turned and walked from the room, shaking. I never had talked back to him before.

"You listen to me, stupid! Don't you turn your back on me when I'm speaking to you! Come back here! Or get your ass out of my house and stay out! Stupid! Thief! Lying stupid thief!"

He was screaming obscenities when I left the house. Briefly I worried about my mother having to listen, but not for long. She had put up with him all my life, and I had no doubt for all her married life. I could still remember nightmarish road trips and my terror that he would hit someone, kill us all, or have a stroke in his fury, and her silence. Now I wished he

would get angry enough to bring on another stroke, this time a fatal one.

That is the clue, I think at the table, the whistle came after an especially ugly day or two. Something has to break this impasse. I have to find a way to talk them into selling the property and moving to an assisted-living retirement community. With his meager pension, Social Security, and the proceeds of a sale, they could do it, just barely. But it would be better than living out here miles from the nearest village, with one in a wheelchair and the other too weak to push the chair or help him in or out of it.

Her heart attack happened a few months after he retired, not a voluntary retirement, I suspect, and during those months she dropped a circle of friends. When I asked why she never saw any of them any longer, she said, "Oh, well, you know, when you get older your interests change." He drove them off, the way he drove off Mr. Garry. In a community of retirees, she could make some friends again, have a few activities of her own.

"But he's always had an orchard," she said in the fall when I first suggested it.

"That's the point. He'll never manage it again. He can't."

"We'll see," she said vaguely. "I'll bring it up with him."

She will never dare bring it up with him. As long as I can remember, the only way she ever dealt with him was by bending whichever way the wind was blowing, do anything or say anything to try to keep the peace. And apparently she's oblivious that it isn't working, and never worked. No one could keep the peace with him.

When we children were all young, she usually tried to deflect his rages from us on to herself, and often it worked, which made me feel guilty. I was the one who tracked in mud, or who failed to take out the garbage, or whatever the particular offense was that time. At the same time I was glad whenever he turned away from me to anyone else.

Whatever any of us does, money will reach a crisis point very soon. The house is in disrepair. I'm afraid of the wiring, and the water heater is not going to last much longer. I found a job in the village in September, ten miles away, minimum wage, but a job. In the two weeks I kept it, Mom had to call me home three times. He got his chair mired in rain-softened earth, trying to get out to inspect his trees. Again when she set the brake on his chair and didn't have enough strength to release it, and he couldn't either. And he had fallen from his chair and she couldn't get him back into it. I quit the job before my supervisor fired me outright.

* * * *

He didn't want a Christmas tree, but I put a small one on an end table. Mom's smile when she saw it made it worth the gamble that crossing him always was. He hated the lights and wouldn't have them on when he was watching television, and since that was all hours of the day that he was up, the lights were seldom on, only after he went to bed at night, or when he took a nap. He wheeled into the living room that day, found the lights on, and knocked the tree off the table, cursing. I was starting dinner, heard the crash, and hurried to see what happened.

"Clean up that goddamn mess! Get that crap out of here!"

I walked back to the kitchen. I didn't touch it the rest of the day, or the next morning, and he was a madman in his fury. When Mom started to pick things up, he turned his wrath onto her. She burst into tears and ran from the room to her own makeshift bedroom in the dining room. After her heart attack, we had moved her bed so she could get some rest, and she had not wanted it moved back. Her refuge.

"See what you've done!" he screamed at me. "You're trying to kill us! You think you'll inherit my land, my trees, sell out and make yourself a little fortune. You want to kill her! Clean up that goddamn mess like I told you!"

Silently I cleaned up the mess. Then I went to see to Mom. She was lying on her bed weeping.

"Why do you let it happen?" I asked, sitting next to her, stroking her back. "You know he'll kill you with his temper fits. Or he'll kill himself. But you don't have to stand and watch. Walk out. Leave the room, come in here, and close the door."

"It's the stroke," she said, still weeping. "It changed him. He'll get better again."

"It didn't change him, Mom. Face it, he's always had that crazy temper. The only difference is that he didn't lose it as often before. Now it's every day. But it's the same."

"No. No. He'll get better. You'll see."

That night I heard the train whistle. It sounded closer, almost at the end of the driveway. It was fifteen degrees. I read at one time or another that freezing to death isn't very

painful after the first minute or two. It is said that people begin to feel comfortable and simply go to sleep.

I know why I hear it, I realize suddenly. I yearn to go out and board the train.

The basketball game is over, and I duck my head and pretend to be reading. He doesn't speak to me as he wheels himself down the hallway to the bathroom. After he finishes in there and is ready for bed, Mom will have a bath and go to bed. And the house will be peaceful and quiet until I go up. The best time of day, when they're both in bed.

He can manage in the bathroom and his bedroom. There are rails and handholds everywhere, but it's always a long process, and apparently a grueling one for him. When he comes out in his flannel pajamas with a lap robe around him, he looks exhausted. Around three in the morning he'll be up again, and then at eight, until a nap. That's a good hour also. Sometimes my mother and I have a cup of coffee and talk a little, although neither of us has much to say. All day she is on full alert, aware when he's moving, when he's settling down for a nap, when he goes in to get ready for bed. She is constantly straining to hear him, and I never say anything when she has that intent look on her face. By the time he's in bed, she is too tired to stay up longer than it takes for her bath. Fatigue alone won't ensure her sleep. She has sleeping pills as well.

And this is how it will be forever, I think, for her, for him, and for me, or until one of us is dead and the other two are free to do something else, or are forced to. Without me, they would have to move, sell the land, go somewhere else.

Whenever I call Eleanor in Seattle, there is a baby or a small child crying for attention in the background. She can't help out. No one knows where my brother is.

If he would just die, I could take Mom with me, rent an apartment, get my old job back perhaps, and start living again. If she goes first, I'll call county authorities to come take him away. One of his rages will be proof enough that he is insane. But as long as there are three of us, the pattern that has been established is how it will continue to be.

And I yearn for the night train, a trip to anywhere.

During one of our quiet afternoons I asked Mom if she ever heard a train whistle in the middle of the night.

She looked puzzled, then averted her gaze. "I did once," she said after a moment, as if an elusive memory had come into focus. "A long time ago, when Eleanor was little. A trick of my ears, I guess. There's no train close enough to hear."

"Only one time?"

She nodded. "I was pregnant again and there were other things on my mind."

Pregnant with me, I realized. Had I, from the safety and comfort of the womb, first heard it with her thirty years ago?

* * * *

This time when I hear the train I get up. I already have on heavy wool socks, and pull on my boots. I put on my robe, and take my down jacket from the closet. We had to keep our coats and jackets in our rooms, not in the family closet by the front door, where they were in his way. I don't have a light on, but I don't need one, the light seepage from under the

door is enough. I find my gloves on the closet shelf and put them on. All my actions are dreamlike, unhurried. There's no need to hurry. The night train is always on time and so are the passengers.

I am at the bottom of the stairs when he comes out of the bathroom in his robe, with the lap robe on his legs. He is turning to go back to his room when I take the handles of the chair and guide it the other way.

"What the hell are you doing? Goddamn it, let go! Take me back to bed!" His voice is loud as I wheel him to the front of the house, then reach around him to open the door. Mom won't hear him, not with her hearing loss, and the sleeping pill, behind a closed door. He is yelling hoarsely, with a note of panic in his voice.

The cold air takes my breath away and he cries out, then is gasping, pleading. I feel as if I'm floating down the ramp, and turn onto the driveway. Mr. McHenry keeps it plowed all winter.

It isn't far to the end of the driveway, fifty or sixty feet, and the train is drawing closer, the whistle like a piercing scream. I stop at the edge of the road and set the brake, and Dad is crying and cursing.

I leave him there to wait for the night train.

My bed feels warm after the cold outside, and I'm hardly even settled into it before I fall asleep.

* * * *

It was a dream, a wish-fulfillment nightmare, I tell myself, coming awake very early. It is still dark outside, and I hurry

from my room to go downstairs to turn up the thermostat and start a pot of coffee before Mom and Dad begin stirring. The house is very quiet. Too quiet.

While waiting for the coffee, I go down the hall to the bathroom and push the door open, and then on to his bedroom, where the door is already open, the way he left it in the middle of the night. In a panic, I run to Mom's room, but it is as empty as the rest of the house. A piece of paper on her pillow stirs in the draft from the open door. A handwritten note, dated and signed, from her to me, the letters spidery and uneven.

"My dearest Christy, I love you. I'm taking him out to catch the late night train."

Department: **FILMS: A PAIR OF NINES** by Lucius Shepard

Invariably, when I find flaws with a film that the majority of people approve of, I'll receive an email or three that begins something like this:

* * * *

Dear (your favorite epithet),

You must be a miserable person to hate on a film as beautiful and deeply spiritual as *Alien Super-Puma*. Do you drink the spinal fluid of a (your favorite cuddly life form) each morning in order to generate your vitriol, or are you just naturally an (your second favorite epithet)?

* * * *

People take these matters personally, I've found, though why they would presume I'm more miserable than the average run of humanity eludes me, unless the inspiration for emails such as these springs from an excess of *joie de vivre*.

At any rate, I thought I might avoid such happy-go-lucky fan mail after seeing *District 9*, until a friend of mine said he understood why I liked the film, remarking that when one sees as many "retarded science fiction films" as I do, it's only natural that I react with enthusiasm on having seen a film that's merely "mildly retarded."

This has caused me to reconsider my opinion and have a second look.

Movies act upon me like opiates and that is what enables me to endure the often brain-damaging assaults of modern cinema and sit there for two hours chomping on a Twizzler and sucking down Diet Coke. With most movies, it's only as I exit the theater that my critical faculties kick in and I begin to realize what I've seen. In the case of *District 9*, it took a while longer.

A good bit of *District 9* is shot in a faux-documentary style, enabling South African director Neil Blomkamp to cover a lot of backstory in relatively little screen time. The situation is this: more than twenty years ago, a massive alien ship ran out of fuel and came to hover above Johannesburg, South Africa (à la *Alien Nation*), with a million or so malnourished insect-like aliens (derisively called "prawns" by the South Africans) on board. Off-loaded into a huge refugee camp that comes to be known as District 9, most of the aliens appear to belong to a worker class and are incapable of other than a squalid, subsistence level existence, mainly funded by selling their weapons (superior to ours, but inoperable by humans) to Nigerian gangsters in return for cat food, which has a narcotic effect upon them. When the South Africans no longer wish to be bothered with the "prawns," they seek to move them to another camp far from Joburg. To do this, one of the most unsympathetic protagonists in science fiction film history, Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copely), an employee of a multinational, MNU, is enlisted to serve eviction notices on the aliens.

Wikus, essentially a low-level corporate goodfella who has achieved his position due to nepotism, is something of a dork

with a blond Afrikaans wife and no conscience to speak of, and he goes about his work with excessive zeal and good humor, going so far as to chortle over the sounds of alien eggs burning, commenting that they sound like popcorn popping. While doing his duty, he gets spattered with rocket fuel manufactured by a "prawn" named Christopher, who obviously is of higher status and intellect than the majority of his fellows, and inhabits an alien ship that somehow managed to bury itself in District 9 during the disembarkation. As a result of the accident, Wikus is infected with alien DNA (alien technology, it seems, is DNA-based), and begins to transform into a "prawn," first growing a claw-arm that enables him to operate alien weapons. This makes him a target for the wheelchair-bound human monster who masterminds a Nigerian gang—he wants to eat Wikus's arm in order to acquire his power—and for MNU, who want to dissect him. Desperate and increasingly motivated by panic, Wikus joins forces with Christopher in an attempt to reverse the transformation, something that Christopher claims he can do.

Reviewing a movie like *District 9* presents a challenge, for it will mean to American audiences (the majority of whom think of South Africa as it was during the euphoric dawn of Mandela's presidency) something different from what it means to audiences cognizant of the fact that the nation has undergone a decline under the leadership of President Zuma. To quote one South African with whom I spoke:

* * * *

"Most SA whites hold black Africans in contempt—the degree varies, but even the more idealistic whites have become ever more jaundiced as premature affirmative action and politically motivated public service deployments undermine any hope of creating a better life for the poor, and unemployment and crime soar. President Zuma is viewed by many whites as our version of Dubya—stupid, indulgent and cronyistic in the extreme. At the same time, black dislike of whites is on the rise as a result of such attitudes and as scapegoats for government failures are sought. Things are really ugly here these days."

However one feels about the sentiments expressed above, they appear to be a fairly accurate representation of the state of South Africa at the moment, one that is reflected to a large degree by Blomkamp's movie.

Another point: Most Americans perceive the film as an unstated dialog about apartheid, and it does remark upon the subject; but more to the point, the basic circumstance of the movie paints a picture of South Africa's xenophobic reaction to the massive influx of refugees in recent years from Zimbabwe, Somalia, and other African nations. When, say, Somali shopkeepers in Cape Town begin to undersell the indigent shopkeepers, an adverse response is guaranteed. Without a knowledge of these and other social realities, *District 9* becomes, as I've said, quite a different film, a shallower film almost incomprehensible in its excesses. For instance, the characterization of the Nigerian gangsters in the movie as bad animals may be no less palatable if one is armed with this knowledge, yet is somewhat more

understandable. And the characterization of corporations.... Well, some may differ, but having witnessed first-hand the operations of Dole and Chiquita in Central America, I have not the slightest problem with the portrayal of corporations as evil entities capable of murder and dissection and much, much more, so the suggestion implicit in *District 9* that MNU takes advantage of and even foments nationalism of the sort depicted for its own gain strikes me as a sharp and timely and something that cannot be overemphasized.

This is not to say that *District 9* is a preachy political film. Far from it. Its politics are not talked about but revealed, and it is first and foremost an action picture, a mingling of Cronenbergian ick with *Aliens*-style shoot 'em up, yet differs from most such movies in that it has a brain and (as is made clear when Wikus begins to come to grips with his fate and evolves as a human being even as he grows more alien in aspect) a heart.

There are a number of what may seem plot holes to audiences accustomed to having things explained and explained again, as if they were mentally challenged, but the lion's share can be covered by extending the logic of the film—that only those with alien DNA can operate alien technology. As for those that are legitimate flaws or omissions, I tell my writing students that if they were to fix every plot hole pointed out to them in a workshop, instead of a short story, they would wind up with a novel—they need to be selective in making their repairs. Even a masterpiece can be picked apart by a sufficiently determined critic and much of the art of writing has to do with writing strongly enough to

carry the reader past one's plot holes; the same can be said, roughly speaking, for cinema. For me, *District 9* has enough originality and narrative vigor to overcome its failings and, if one is aware of the politics that informs the movie, it becomes a very strong and interesting movie, indeed.

Looks like I won't be getting that fan mail, after all...unless I've ticked off some psychotic *District 9* haters.

Shane Acker's animated film, *9*, shares not only a numeral with *District 9*, it also began life as a short film that can be seen on YouTube (Blokamp's *Alive in Joburg*, too, can be viewed on YouTube). Acker's film is ten minutes long and presents a smoky, vaguely European post-apocalyptic world empty of human life, populated by small sock puppet-like robots and the huge, nightmarish mechs that prey upon them. The film is dialog-free and has an allusiveness that is utterly charming and compelling, qualities mainly absent from the feature film, which adds sixty-five minutes, piping cartoon voices that serve to dispel the drear, moribund mood of the visuals, and an excess of explanation that removes every last vestige of mystery from its wafer-thin, *Lord of the Rings*-ish plot (the titular character is voiced by the head hobbit himself, Elijah Wood). The youthful Acker (twenty-nine) is a vastly talented animator who shows his influences (Svankmajer, the Quay brothers) yet goes beyond them, and his short film is so good, one suspects that producer Tim Burton, whose work has become increasingly predictable and uninspired, may have had an undue influence. If you like pretty pictures, this *9*'s for you, but if you're expecting more,

stick with the short film, because in this instance less is definitely more.

Where are the Diabolo Codys of yesteryear? Hailed as the second coming of the Great Scriptwriter, you can almost hear the hiss of evaporating hype as her second picture, *Jennifer's Body*, hits the screens. *JB* is a tired, done-to-death stab at feminist horror comedy that doesn't have even half the bite of predecessors such as Mitchell Lichtenstein's transgressive *Teeth* (a movie that will seriously challenge one's manhood) and is about as scary as a flip-book presentation of a spider crawling across a blank page.

Directed by Karyn Kusama (*AEon Flux*), who here generates flashbacks to her depressingly cliched female boxing picture, *Girlfight*, and starring the mega-untalented Megan Fox, *JB* offers the story of a demonically possessed cheerleader who seeks to liberate her hometown from the oppression of teenage boys by eating them. When she seeks to snack on childhood friend Needy's boyfriend, her GFF sets out to put an end to her evil ways, though not before the pair engage in a make-out scene that has no function in the script and comes out of the blue. Gratuitous is too kind a pejorative.

Cody's too-cool-for-school, Oh-look-I-made-a-funny dialog falls flat and lifeless as an armadillo squashed by a semi, and is, in fact, the main reason for the film's failure, though Kusama and Fox provide her with ample assistance. Frankly, I was fed up with Cody's dialog style by the time the second act of her previous film, *Juno* (for which she mysteriously won an Oscar), rolled around. Here, perhaps feeling her oats after the Oscar triumph, she jams, crams, and squeezes every

piece of slangy shorthand available into each scene, until the movie begins to feel like an overstuffed suitcase, a vehicle for her cleverness to which all else—story, character, the important ideas of the movie—are subservient, neglected, and buried beneath the concerns of ego. For all her labored attempts at humor, *JB's* just not that funny. I'm reminded of David Mamet, of movies in which he's not on his game and his dialog signatures (repetitions, incomplete sentences, et al) become over-formalized and stale and devoid of meaning; but after sitting through *Jennifer's Body* I'm starting to believe that, unlike Mamet, Cody is the scriptwriting analog of a singer who can only perform one shallow, silly song.

And while I'm rounding up the recent movies, I suppose I should mention *Pandorum*, a film that echoes deep space horror flicks like *Event Horizon*, wherein two astronauts awake to find that their cargo—60,000 men and women—has been transformed into what appears to be messed-up versions of little person Peter Dinklage.

Looks like I'll be getting those disapproving emails after all.

Novelet: **NANOSFERATU** by Dean Whitlock

Dean Whitlock's last *F&SF* story was "Changeling" in our Jan. 2009 issue. He returns now with a very different sort of tale—a broadly comic story that has its tongue in its cheek (right beside its oversized canines).

Proctor was whining again. Hugh Graeber squeezed his cell phone, envisioned crushing it in his fist. Like Proctor's small skull. It would be such a nice way to end the call.

"Busloads, Hugh," Proctor whined, "they're chartering busloads of gimpy geezers for day trips north of the border. Why? To go visit pharmacies. To Hell with museums—they're visiting pharmacies! We're talking major market share here! Dammit, Hugh, we own those gomers! They're U.S. citizens!"

Graeber forced his hand to relax. He was already on his third cell phone this month. "You're frothing, Proctor," he said. "I'm going to have to blow-dry my phone."

"But it's outrageous, Hugh! It's...it's...it's all-out war!"

"You want war with Canada?" Graeber said. "Okay. You've got the list of our senators right there on your computer. Start calling in favors."

"You know what I mean, Hugh. They're killing our profits. It's economic terrorism, that's what it is! We need a fence, a wall. Mexico's got one, why not Canada?"

The limo made a sudden swerve that bounced Graeber against the padded armrests.

"Whoa! Watch where you're going, Carlos!" Graeber snapped.

"Sorry, *señor*," his driver replied.

Graeber sighed. Hired help were all the same. Proctor included. "We're not dealing with young, agile, broccoli-plucking migrants, Proctor. These are old farts. They're too stiff and blind to sneak through the woods at night through two feet of snow. That's why they need the drugs."

"They don't have to sneak! They're taking buses!"

"For God's sake, relax," Graeber said. "The new project is going to make Canada completely superfluous. Along with Pfizer and Lilly and all the rest."

"That's what you said about Vaunturplex."

Graeber squeezed his cell phone again. The memory of losing that race still made his palms itch for revenge. "A case of bad timing, Proctor, and you know it. If Pfizer hadn't come out two weeks ahead of us with Viagra we'd have been in like Flynn." What a difference two weeks could make. Particularly when you were planning the same pitch: Vaunturplex equals sexual prowess. But Viagra came first, and it sounded better. By the time they were ready to reposition as a couple's drug, Cialis had come out. And first out, first in. They were making pennies off Vaunturplex compared to Viagra and Cialis. Cialis! What a ridiculous name. Well, it wasn't going to happen again. "Make no mistake, Proctor, we are way in the lead with nanomeds. No one else even has a clue. When we go public,

Pfizer will go limp. And the gomers will drop Canada faster than a call girl with cold sores."

"We're taking a big risk, Hugh."

"It's always a gamble in this business, Proctor. You know that."

"When, Hugh? When?"

"Animal trials wrap up today. Two weeks of analysis, then human trials. Six months at most and we can go public."

"Six months? And then six more for the FDA! Every day we're bleeding profit share!"

"I know, I know! Look, the preliminary reports are good, I'm on my way to the lab now. You stick to your spreadsheets and I'll handle the F—" The limo lurched through a pothole deep enough to leave Graeber's stomach smeared on the velveteen carpet. "Kee-rist, Carlos! Look, Proctor, I've gotta hang up before I get carsick." He gave Proctor the Off thumb and tossed the cell phone onto the other seat. "What a friggin' wimp. What a friggin' country. Carlos, you don't know how lucky you are. All you have to do is drive. Just do it better, all right? I don't pay you to rip out the underbody."

Carlos—whose name was actually Arturo Realizo de Camino—nodded at the rearview. "Yes, *señor*. Sir. The roadway is very bad here." Arturo hated driving on the parkway. Too many cars, too many bumps, too many—

"Ay, *mierda!*" He hit the brake and swerved to avoid a careening taxi driven by a pinch-faced madman in a turban. The Chrysler limo responded like the barge it was, yawing into the breakdown lane and back into traffic as Arturo fought to feel the road through the overstuffed suspension.

"*Idiota!*" Arturo muttered. "*Coche estúpido!*"

He glanced in the rearview again. Mr. Graeber gave him a disappointed shake of the head.

He looked back at the road just in time to see a pothole the size of a large burro rush from beneath the truck ahead of him and dive under his wheels. The Chrysler wallowed through it with a pair of thuds that left the mushy suspension gasping for the next hundred yards.

"Kee-rist, Carlos!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." He hated the highway, hated the big rich-man car.

But it was a job, and far better than roaming the country to pick blueberries and apples and spinach and broccoli and oranges and whatever else needed picking in all the seasons of the year. Particularly now that Esperanza was pregnant. Arturo was lucky, and he knew it. Both he and Esperanza had jobs in the same city in the same country. With an employer who didn't care about Green Cards. A rich man, too important to be bothered by the immigration police. To a point: citizens could go to Canada to buy medicines cheap; Arturo didn't dare go near either border.

Arturo eased off the throttle to put a little more room between them and the truck ahead, but another cabbie took it as a sign of weakness and cut through the narrow gap to claim the breakdown lane as his own private parkway. Arturo gripped the wheel and resisted the urge to chase down the *cabrón pingüe* and rear-end his *carro grasa*. That would get him deported for sure. For just a moment, Arturo wished he was back home in Chiapas, driving the tractor on *Señor*

Agarrar's farm. Until he remembered the pleasures of running water, flush toilets, and a regular paycheck that was more each month than he could earn in a year in Mexico. At least he'd learned to drive there, even it had been only a tractor. Luckily, the limo wasn't all that different. Once you got used to the power steering and the shock absorbers. And the dark windows. And the deep seats. And the speed. And the other drivers. Particularly the ones in turbans.

Okay, only the potholes were the same, but he had managed to drive Mr. Graeber around the block that first time without making any mistakes. A day later Mr. Graeber had handed him a very official driver's license, complete with his picture beside his new name: Carlos Lopez. For two hundred dollars a week, cash, plus room and board, with two Sundays off a month, Arturo was willing to wear the silly uniform and drive Mr. Graeber anywhere he wanted whenever he wanted. For that kind of money, he would happily answer to Carlos.

Blue lights flashed up ahead in the breakdown lane. A chill squeezed Arturo's heart. He slowed even more. But it wasn't an INS roadblock. A cop had stopped the turbaned cabbie and was giving him a ticket. Arturo smiled and flashed the cabbie the finger as they rolled by.

* * * *

The research center was a gleaming, walled block of brick and glass sprouting incongruously from a grubby patch of crestfallen housing projects. Graeber was proud of the location. The price had been fire-sale right and the taxes were low. Cheap, and it took a good photo from the right angle. It

had been one of his first major decisions, and it helped solidify his position in the company: a tight fist in a satin glove (with a stiletto up the sleeve).

The security guard recognized the limo and opened the gate with a salute. They drove up the winding, landscaped drive, past the product line—a marble frieze of pills, capsules, and suppositories—to the porticoed foyer.

Graeber let Carlos scurry around to open the door, then strode through the airlock into the controlled environment of pharmaceutical research. He breathed deeply the cool, filtered air, enjoying the crisp scent of antiseptic, solvent, and stainless steel. It was the scent of profit. A hint of perfume wafting from the receptionist provided a pleasing accent reminiscent of cherries ready to be plucked. Graeber smiled. Ah, business and sex. The good things in life.

The lab was quiet but busy. White-coated technicians of many colors drew up sharply when they recognized him, greeting him, speaking his name respectfully. He was, after all, the Director of Research, ultimate Dispenser of Funds, Top Doc. They were his dedicated servants. And they knew it. He'd hired them and he could fire them. His second major decision: hire offshore. They worked cheap, and they knew drugs. He nodded acknowledgment as he made his way down the polished corridors to the lab shared by Doctors Wang and Sprachmaus, of China and Angola, respectively.

They were both waiting for him. Wang beamed, shattering all stereotypes of the inscrutable oriental. Sprachmaus's milk-chocolate face veritably glowed. These were young men, not gray-haired senior researchers, yellow-fingered from a

lifetime of stirring noxious compounds into lifesaving solvents. They were half engineer, half chemist, and half electron microscope, able to envision machinery so tiny it would fit inside a medium-sized corpuscle. Even better, able to build it, and not from prickly rain-forest weeds or sticky slimeballs dredged from coral seas. From soot, from sand, from cheap, common elements you could scrape off the sole of your shoe. Graeber loved the concept: cheap resources for expensive medicines. $CR=EM^2$. What a formula.

"Wang, Sprachmaus." He nodded to each of them. "What have you got to show me?"

"Great success!" Wang crowed. He had a face like an Asian choirboy, all cheeks and dimples. Graeber was certain he'd lied about his age to get his visa.

"Ja! Ja!" Sprachmaus agreed. "Da animal trials are done, and first rate!" Sprachmaus was from Angola by way of the University of Heidelberg, which was where he'd learned English. The mocha skin and surname revealed a mixed parentage; the tribal scars and accent made him a living oxymoron.

"Mice cured, cancer gone, hair glow back," Wang enthused. "All symptoms hunky-dolly!"

"All of them?" Graeber asked. They nodded in unison, a pair of ecstatic ethnic bobble-heads. Graeber suspected they'd been celebrating with some of the lab's pure grain alcohol. "What about side effects?"

They looked at each other. Their grins grew wider, if that was possible.

"Onry two," Wang said.

"Only vun dat matters," Sprachmaus put in quickly. "Come dis vay."

They led him deeper into their sanctum, through a bench-lined lab quietly busy with a team of technicians of color, into the animal farm. The sudden fug of cedar, mouse musk, and dung made Graeber's eyes water. Racks of cages filled the room in ranks. More of them ringed the walls. Generations of little white mice—and gray and black and spotted ones—went about their mousely business. The room...echoed wasn't the word. It rustled. It skritchd. It skittered with the pitter-patter of tiny, tiny feet.

Wang and Sprachmaus each pulled a cage from a rack and carried it to a stainless steel counter at the very center of the maze. They set the cages on opposite ends of the counter.

"Vatch dis," Sprachmaus said. He removed the lid and lifted the mouse from the cage by its tail. It hung stiffly, legs extended, nose whiskers bristling. Its beady little eyes regarded Graeber with a look of reproach.

Wang took out his mouse, which assumed the same stiff position. The two scientists waved their mice gently back and forth. Graeber considered buzzing the security guard. Celebration was one thing; this was looking downright schizo.

"Watch now," Wang said.

Suddenly, Sprachmaus's mouse took notice. Its head came up. Its whiskers twitched in all directions, then pointed straight at Wang. The mouse lifted itself on the end of its tail and tried to run through the air.

Wang's mouse responded with a single, coquettish squeak. Wang set it on the table, and it scurried across the stainless

steel, nose working, like a tiny breed of terrier. It centered itself under Sprachmaus's mouse, stood up on its hind legs, and reached with open arms.

Sprachmaus's mouse writhed. Sprachmaus pointed between its hind legs. "You zee?"

Graeber saw.

Sprachmaus dropped his mouse. There was a flurry of fur, a squeal of squeaks, a few love nips, and a chorus of micely panting. Five seconds later, the two rolled apart and began washing up, paying special attention to their privates.

Graeber looked at the two scientists. They were staring at him expectantly.

Dark disappointment began to swell in his chest, the harbinger of fiscal foreboding. "It makes mice horny?"

Wang looked alarmed. "Oh, no, no, no. Not just horny. Capable."

"So? Viagra will do that." Graeber felt in his pocket for a cell phone to squeeze.

"You are missing da point, Mr. Graeber," Sprachmaus said. "Viagra is fine for dirty old men. Dese mice aren't chust old, dey're ancient."

"Ancient?" Graeber asked. He glanced at the mice. The male was sniffing the female again. She was playing coy. "How ancient?"

"Two year old!" Wang exclaimed. "Back from grave!"

"That doesn't seem very ol—"

"Dis strain of mice lif only for one year, Mr. Graeber," Sprachmaus explained. "Dese mice vere at death's door when

ve shtarted treatment. Now look: dey are two hundred human years old! And dey are chust like children!"

Graeber regarded the mice with new respect. They were already through a second round and back into the grooming stage.

"More like randy teenagers," he said.

"Yes, yes!" Wang said. "You would be dead after that, yes?" He began to laugh.

Graeber glared at him. "I'm a long way from two hundred, Doctor."

Wang's face fell. "Of course. I onry meant—"

"Forget it," Graeber said. He waved at the mice. "This is great stuff. Great potential. It cured the cancer? And the hair loss? And reversed the aging?"

"Ja, ja, and ja," Sprachmaus replied.

"And this is the side effect?"

"Yes and ja!" Wang said, all smiles and nods.

"Damn. And right on schedule." Bonuses, he thought. For the director on down. "You've hired the nurse for the human trials?" They nodded. "You've started writing the analysis?" They nodded. "We've scheduled two weeks; can you cut it to one?"

The two scientists gave each other high fives across the table.

"Ve haf already shtarted!" Sprachmaus cried.

"What?" Graeber exclaimed. "When?"

"Today," Wang said. "We have ourselves injected two hour ago."

"That's crazy!" Graeber said. "You could be committing suicide!"

"Maybe mit drugs, yes," Sprachmaus said, "but dese are not drugs. Dese are little machines."

"And we design them," Wang said.

"Ve know exactly vhat dey vill do. Come, ve vill show you."

Mice in hand, they led Graeber to a dimly lit room. There, they handed over the randy rodents to a young woman in a lab coat. Graeber was astounded. She was white.

And not a healthy, glowing, caucasian pink, or any other First-World shade. She was plain white. Pale to the point of translucence, her face unmarked by a single freckle or mole. A hue made all the more white by a hood of coal-black hair swept back from the center of her forehead into a waterfall of night at the nape of her neck. Her eyes and eyebrows were as black as her hair. Her lips were somewhere in between, a grayish tone leached of color, as though Disney had filmed *Snow White* in black-and-white.

Not that the woman looked anything like Disney's simpering stereotype of budding womanhood. But she wasn't the evil stepmother, either, despite the hair. She was, like her lips, somewhere in between. Beyond pretty. Ageless. Not quite of this world.

He glanced at her name badge. Liliac Sångera. Norwegian? Not with that hair. Greek? Too pale. Some Balkan tribe perhaps.

"Liliac," Sprachmaus said, "dis is Mr. Graeber."

"Nurse plactitioner for human trials," Wang said. "Vely good with needle. Painress."

Liliac dropped the mice into a cage, pulled off her surgical gloves, and extended her hand. "Dr. Graeber," she said. "It is an honor."

"Yes," Graeber replied, enjoying the sound of his title voiced in her rich, old-world alto. He took her slender, bone-white hand. Her fingers were long and supple. Her grip was firm, and she held it a moment longer than the usual business greeting. Her eyes held his, too, but he couldn't tell if she was being familiar or testing his pulse. Maybe it was a custom from her homeland, an ethnic thing. He cleared his throat, nonplused. "Hem. Very good."

She released his hand, indicated the mice, copulating yet again. "Excuse me, but I'd best deal with these two. Such a drive for life, yes? So universal. The normal extraction, Doctors?"

"Ja," Sprachmaus replied. "For da scope."

Graeber watched, fascinated, while she separated the sated rodents, neatly slid a slender hypodermic needle into each tiny neck, and drained them of their blood. She dropped the limp corpses back into the cage and emptied the syringe into a vial, which she handed to Wang. With a slight sidewise smile at Graeber, she turned back to her lab bench. Graeber stared. He could have sworn he saw something flash at the corners of her mouth.

"Over here, Mr. Graeber," Sprachmaus said.

Graeber glanced back for a final look, just in time to see her drop the needle into a special box marked with the biohazard emblem and then raise her finger to her lips, as if

offering a prayer for their mousely souls. Or testing a flavor. It was all he could do to tear his eyes away.

A tall, gleaming cylinder stood in the middle of the room. Wang centered the vial on a platform inside. Sprachmaus fired up a console and began tapping little boxes on a touch-screen control. Motors hummed. A golden glow emanated from the interior of the cylinder, bathing the bloody vial in an eerie aura. A wide monitor flickered to life on the wall. Unearthly globules swirled into view, riding the eddies of a dark liquid.

"*Das blut,*" Sprachmaus whispered. "And dere! Look!"

Something else appeared. Something with edges and fins and what appeared for all the world to be jaws.

"Hemobot," Wang intoned.

"Say what?" Graeber muttered, eyes glued to the monitor.

"Hemobot," Wang repeated. "Nano device."

And, as Graeber watched, the man-made cell snuck up on the globule and ate it.

There were other hemobots, many, many of them. They ate some cells, stroked others. They protected. They repaired. They created replicas. They even cleaned up their own mess, smiling like little Pac-Men. Graeber watched, mesmerized.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Wang? Sprachmaus?"

"Chust fine."

"Hunky-dolly!"

"Good. I'll be back in twenty-four hours. If you're still alive, I want some."

He glanced at the bench by the wall, but Liliac Sångera was gone. Stifling a surprising surge of disappointment, he

strode from the lab. He would see her again soon.
Meanwhile....

"Carlos," he said, climbing back into the limo, "let's take a side trip to the spa."

* * * *

"Yes, sir," Arturo replied. That was another reason he got the job: no questions asked.

There was a real spa; Mr. Graeber and his wife were both members. There was a yacht club and a country club, too, and Mr. Graeber actually went to them. The spa, no. Spa was code; Arturo learned that on his first day. Mr. Graeber was in good shape, but he got his exercise in other ways.

Mr. Graeber was already on the cell phone. "Vanessa? Glad I caught you in, I'm on my way. No, not a long one, I'm afraid. Just dropping in to say hi and bye. I'll be there in...."

"Fifteen minutes," Arturo said.

"Fifteen minutes. What? Oh, nothing special. Surprise me."

He put down the phone. "Fifteen minutes, that's just right."

Arturo was already slipping the pill case out of his coat pocket. He passed it over the back of the seat. Mr. Graeber poured two of the pink knob-headed pills onto his palm and handed back the case. Another condition of the job: Arturo carried the Vaunturplex.

"Good old Vitamin V," Graeber said, as usual. He downed them with a gulp from a bottle of tonic water, always on hand in the limo's mini bar. "What would we do without it, eh,

Carlos? There's a big market for this stuff in Mexico, you know?"

"Yes, sir." Arturo had learned all this on day one also.

"Goes with that Latino machismo, I suppose. Aycarumba, I wish we'd announced Vaunturplex first."

Fifteen minutes later, Arturo pulled the limo up to the curb in front of a row of brownstone town houses on an upscale tree-lined street. He hopped out quickly to open the door for Mr. Graeber.

"We're going to be late for dinner, Carlos," Graeber said. "Pick up the usual for the wife."

"Yes, sir."

Arturo waited while Mr. Graeber rang the bell and the door opened. Vanessa, Mr. Graeber's *gringa*, greeted him this time in a fireman's hat and nothing else. No, wait, she had some kind of hose in her hand. No, wait, it was strapped to her waist. She waggled it at Graeber, then grabbed his tie and pulled him through the doorway. As she closed the door, she waved to Arturo and gave him a friendly waggle, too.

Ay, Arturo thought. To be rich in America!

Half an hour later, he was back at the curb. A bouquet of cut flowers lay on the back seat, ready for Mr. Graeber to present to his wife. A single rose lay hidden beneath the front seat, carefully slipped from the bouquet. For Esperanza, Arturo's wife. Not to make up for peeking at Vanessa. Not at all. He loved Esperanza with all his heart. Vanessa was nothing to him. Although he did feel a little guilty about enjoying the peek so much.

Mr. Graeber came out, still adjusting his comb-over. "Let's get moving, Carlos," he said.

"Yes, sir." Carlos shut the door and hurried around to get behind the wheel.

"Right in the middle of the big moment," Graeber complained, as Carlos steered the big car away from the curb. "Wham-bam and *dee-dee-dee-dee-deedley-dee*." His ring tone was *Stayin' Alive*. "Don't you hate it when that happens, Carlos? It breaks your rhythm. I should have let it go to voicemail, but it was Proctor. Business before pleasure, Carlos, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," Arturo replied, because Mr. Graeber appreciated replies. He expected you to be listening. Arturo wondered how Vanessa felt about it.

* * * *

Diana Graeber sipped her second martini and watched her husband arrive home. He came bearing flowers, a sure sign he'd been to see his doxie. She relaxed and downed her martini. Good. He would fall asleep early, without a single mention of conjugal rights.

"For me?" she said, accepting the flowers and offering her cheek for the usual peck.

Instead, he took her by the chin, turned her face toward him, and gave her a healthy kiss. She was so startled she almost started to kiss him back.

"My, aren't we romantic tonight," she said, with some trepidation. "Did you buy someone today?"

"Pfizer," he said, loosening his tie and heading for the bar.

"Pfiz—? You're kidding." More likely they'd buy you, she thought, very careful not to think it aloud.

"Yes," he replied, "but only by half."

He poured himself two fingers of his most expensive single malt, toasted his reflection in the crystal tumbler, and took what was obviously a celebratory sip.

"All right," she said, as he meandered smugly around the perimeter of the room, "I'll ask. What went right?"

"Hemobots," he murmured. "Hemobots." He rolled it around his tongue like he did the whiskey. It reminded her of a seagull swallowing fish innards. She squelched a rising gorge.

"Some sort of new drug, I take it?"

"Better," he replied. "A completely engineered and man-made medical device that acts like a drug. A cross between medication and surgery. We can patent it in so many ways they'll have to erase the word 'generic' from the dictionary." He took another sip. "Hemobots," he murmured again.

"Nanomeds." A pause. "Roboglobin?"

"And what does it do?"

"Everything, my dear. Maybe. We're not sure yet...Nanogra. Na-*noh*-gra. That has a catchy ring."

Diana didn't like the sound of it. She waved the flowers. "Well, congratulations. I'll have Maria warm up dinner so we can celebrate." She pressed the button behind the bar.

"Speaking of which," she continued, rummaging in the breakfront for a vase, "we have a little problem."

"Nublood. No, sounds like a shoe. Hmm? What?"

"We have a problem, dear. I'm afraid we're going to have to find a new Maria."

"What for? I thought you adored her."

"Well, I do, but I'm afraid she may have gotten herself pregnant."

"Kee-rist. That Carlos!"

"Exactly. You know it won't do to have a maid serving at table with a loaded oven. Oh, there it is." She spotted the Stuben vase, already on the mantle, filled with the drying remains of the last post-dalliance offering. She swapped the bouquets, wished briefly that Hugh would think to include some roses in the arrangement, and dumped the old ones into the bin behind the bar. "Besides, who knows how long she'll be able to vacuum and carry groceries and all that once the little zygote starts to swell?" She had been a bio major when they met in college. Pre-med, just like him. And got better grades. She liked to remind him of that from time to time. "She's already starting to show."

"Really?"

"I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"Hardly my type, my dear."

They smiled at each other. Both knew his type: human, female, young, willing, pretty, in that order. This Maria was pretty enough, but not at all willing; Diana had no doubt of that.

"You know," Graeber said, "these farm girls are pretty sturdy. Give birth right in the field. We don't have to shop for a replacement tonight."

"Of course not. Let's just not wait too long, all right?"

He downed a slug of whisky. "Damn. She and Carlos were a package deal. I was just getting him broken in."

"Maybe he'll stay. Give him a little raise, enough to support her while she's preggers."

He snorted. "Now there's a concept. Next you'll be offering health insurance."

"Don't be silly. But if you like him.... They don't need much to get by, these people." She grabbed the whiskey bottle and filled his glass. "Come on, let's go in to dinner, and you can tell me all about this hemonano stuff."

I'll even listen, she thought. As long as it takes to fill you up with whiskey and put you to sleep. And then a little call to Vanessa, the slacker. I thought we had an understanding.

* * * *

Arturo waited until they were alone to present the rose to Esperanza. It was very late. *Señora* Graeber kept talking and talking, long after the usual bedtime. Arturo helped Esperanza in the kitchen, then waited while she went upstairs to fold back the bedspread and turn on the electric blanket. He was not allowed upstairs, only her. And then they waited in the kitchen together until they could clean up. But finally they were able to go to their little room in the basement, and he gave her the rose. She kissed him and they hugged for a long time. She took the old one out of the bottle and put it with the others in the paper bag, where the petals dried and she could put them in the drawer with her underthings to make them smell so nice when she put them on. He liked better how they smelled when he took them off.

They lay in the bed together, too tired to make love, but not ready to sleep. Esperanza held him tightly, and he realized something worried her.

"What is it, my heart?" he asked.

She took a long time to answer. "I spoke to the midwife today on the phone," she said finally.

"About the baby?"

"About our baby." Again she hesitated.

"What did she say, dear heart?" he asked, though he was already afraid of the answer.

"I told her we still didn't feel it moving. I told her there had been blood on my panties." Her voice broke, and he held her more tightly. "She said there were many things that could cause that. She said not to worry. I should come see her."

"But you are worried." He was worried.

"She said not to worry, but she was worried. I heard it in her voice. I felt it here." She took his hand and pulled it between her beautiful breasts. He could feel her heart beating under his palm. He could feel her tears on his chest.

He kissed the top of her head, rubbed his cheek on her thick, smooth hair. "We will go see her together."

"You will come?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow night, then. I will call her and explain. She will understand. She is a true healer, even if she isn't Maya. A good woman. And you are a good man. Thank you, dear heart."

Arturo kissed her again and held her till she fell asleep in his arms. His arms fell asleep, too, but his mind would not.

Already he dreaded the meeting with the midwife. For one thing, he feared for Esperanza and the baby. For another, the midwife unsettled him. Not only was she not Mayan, she wasn't even Mexican. Her skin was white as a lily at a funeral, her eyes dark as the sockets in a skull. She appeared too young, except for those eyes. There she was wise. Ageless. Frightening. And also appealing in a way even more forbidden than *Señor Graeber's gringa*. But she was a real midwife, this Dr. Sângera, a licensed practitioner, an herbalist, and who knew what else. Other Latinos had recommended her. Esperanza trusted her. And so they would go to her, as soon as she and they were free of their daytime jobs. No matter how she unnerved him.

Arturo lay there and prayed, when he wasn't cursing. He was awake to see the first gray light of dawn seep through the single small window high in the cinderblock wall.

* * * *

Graeber called the lab precisely at 4:00 the next afternoon. Dr. Wang answered. He sounded lucid—Chinese, but lucid—a good sign. He didn't even sound hung over, which was better than Graeber could say. Diana had drunk him under the table after dinner, a fact that he wasn't about to admit to anyone, not even himself. He refused aspirin, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen. He rejected B vitamins as outright chicanery, the worst kind of tree-hugging, yoga-bugga snake oil. He even turned up his nose at hair of the dog. He dealt with the throbbing headache the way he always dealt with adversity: he laid a few people off. But Wang was

alive and well, and said the same was true of Sprachmaus. Graeber started to feel better. He left the office and had Carlos drive him straight to the research center.

He gave Wang and Sprachmaus both a searching glance as he walked through the door of their lab. They were still smiling, still glowing with an energy that Graeber could summon only under the influence of pink pills and Vanessa's most imaginative sleight of hand. As if to dispel any doubts, Wang performed a perfect handspring onto a lab bench, then nailed the dismount with Olympian ease.

"Nine-eight!" Sprachmaus called. "You zee, Mr. Graeber, dere haf been no ill effects. My vife can testify to my own, shall ve say, wigor." He grinned with the smug air that only an alpha male can achieve.

"Excellent," Graeber said, eyeing their thick hair and smooth skin with a blend of avarice and lust. "Inject me, infuse me, whatever."

"Chust a simple injection," Sprachmaus said.

"Three times," Wang added. "We have two now."

"To build up da wolume more quickly," Sprachmaus explained.

"Otherwise, build up take weeks."

"And vhy vait, ja?"

"Eat dessert first!"

"Just get on with it," Graeber ordered.

The two doctors led him through the lab again, past the mouse room, past the microscope room, to a narrow, windowless afterthought in the farthest corner. A single technician sat at a bench there, watching cloudy, yellow liquid

drip into a bulbous beaker from a complex assemblage of tubes, gauges, and blinking digital boxes, to the accompaniment of ticks, clicks, and the occasional staccato zap. The technician was Liliac Sångera.

Graeber stifled a growl of pleasure. She had been on his mind all day, a spectral visage intruding on phone calls, meetings, Proctor's laments. He had come for the nano stuff, but also to see her. Why? He couldn't say, so he squelched the question and simply enjoyed her presence.

"Good evening, Dr. Graeber," she said. "You are a brave man to volunteer for the trials."

"All in the interest of human health," he replied. He had rehearsed the line for just this occasion.

She indicated a cushioned chair beside her lab stool. "Have a seat, please. The preparation will be ready in a minute or two."

He sat, and she turned back to her dripping liquid. Wang and Sprachmaus hovered in the doorway, like vultures on a tree limb.

"Don't you two have some mice to diddle with?" Graeber snapped.

"Yes, please," Liliac said. "We must respect the subject's privacy."

"Ah, yes," Wang said.

"Ja, off course," Sprachmaus agreed.

Bobbing and grinning, they backed through the narrow doorway and out of sight.

Liliac turned to Graeber. "They are not physicians, Dr. Graeber, merely Pee-Aitch-Dees. Glorified mechanics. They

lack the sensitivity of a healer." She smiled, revealing strong white teeth that gleamed under the fluorescent lab lights. And sparkled at the corners of her gray lips.

"Well, they know their work," Graeber stammered, charmed by her faintly slavic accent, fascinated by the glint in her smile.

"There is no denying that." Liliac held up the beaker. "The potential here is almost beyond belief."

He nodded. "The profits will be enormous."

She regarded him closely. He was mesmerized by her black eyes. Definitely not a Disney girl. Oh, that smooth, white skin. He suspected it was just as white all the way down to—

"Yes," she said. "The profits. Of course, to support the research. But also what it means for humankind. A true panacea, from what the mice reveal."

"Oh, yeah, that too. A veritable Fountain of Youth. Aphrodisiac. Spa in a bottle. There's dozens of ways to market it. I'm glad to see you understand the importance of that. You're a sharp woman." He smiled, hoping she'd smile back. He really wanted to make her smile.

She left him longing. "So, we are ready." She set down the beaker and snapped another pair of surgical gloves out of a box on the counter. "Are you bothered by the sight of needles, Dr. Graeber?"

"Needles? Oh, no." He waved a hand. "Not at all."

"Good." She reached into a drawer and pulled out a syringe the size of one of Vanessa's sex toys, armed with a four-inch-long needle.

"Kee-rist!" Graeber exclaimed. "You could knit sweaters with that thing!"

"Don't worry. I shall use a local anesthetic."

"Oh, well, as long as it's part of the protocol." Graeber squared his jaw and hoped his comb-over was intact. "Don't go out of your way."

"Of course not," Liliac replied. She pulled another object out of the drawer. It looked something like a small pistol. Graeber wondered if she'd had a full background check. "Do you have any drug allergies?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. Are you a vegetarian?"

"No."

"Good. Have you had sex in the last twelve hours?"

"What?"

"Hormone residues," she said. "They affect the dosage."

"Oh. Uh, no, not that recently. Last night, though," he added quickly.

"Hm. Good for you. Do you know your blood type?"

"O negative."

"Ah, my favorite!" Finally she smiled.

"I beg your pardon?" Graeber could have sworn he spotted tiny gems set into the teeth at the sides of her smile. He stared at her mouth as she answered.

"O negative," she said. "The universal donor. There is something so ineluctably generous in that, do you not think? Even if it is not by choice."

Yes. Tiny diamonds. Glinting at the tips of her canines. Set right into the enamel. Graeber's own teeth tingled. He

wondered what other little surprises she might reveal. "Uh, that's an interesting idea," he replied, trying to remember what she had just said.

"Is it not? Remove your jacket and roll up your sleeve, please."

After you, my pale little lily. Graeber held that thought as he complied. Didn't want to rush things. Women were funny that way, and he suspected Miss Liliac was more particular than most. She was obviously a bit of a thinker, a broody mystic type. And with that faint, Old World accent...A Gypsy? That could be it: Gypsy. What did they call themselves these days? Roman? No, Romney? God, no. Romanian? Maybe that was it: Romanian.

He draped his jacket on the back of the chair, sat back down, and suddenly she had his arm in a firm grip. Before he could react, she pressed the pistol to the inside of his elbow and fired. *Whap!*

"Ow!" He jerked his arm, but she held it quite still, her supple fingers now a tight band around his forearm. "What was that for?"

"Merely the anesthetic," she said. "Let me know if you feel anything odd."

"Just an armful of pain! Kee-rist, you might have warned me."

"It hurts worse when you expect it." She let go, set down the gun thingy, and began to fill the huge syringe from the beaker. The yellow liquid looked a little sinister in there.

"That's quite a lot," he remarked, eyeing the needle as it moved toward his arm.

"Yes, you will want to stay near a bathroom this evening. How does the arm feel? Numb?" She touched it with the tip of her finger.

"I suppose. How long does it usually take?"

"It depends on how numb you are to begin with," she murmured. "Let me know if you feel any discomfort, hm?"

And she slid the tip of the thick needle under his skin.

Wang had been right; it was painless. Graeber watched in fascination as she continued to slide the needle forward. His skin bulged, a bulge that advanced toward the vein in his elbow. Bulge met vein, a tiny prod, and it was in. She began to press the plunger. He could feel a chill as the glob of yellow liquid flowed up his arm. He glanced at her face. She was staring intently at the spot where the needle went into his arm, where a tiny dot of blood seeped from the seam between flesh and surgical steel. One dark eyebrow arched. The tip of her tongue slid slowly along the edge of her upper teeth, from diamond to diamond. He felt a little heat in his groin. A little stirring, like a creature rising from long hibernation. He remembered that feeling.

And no Vaunturplex! he realized. Surely it's much too soon for the hemobots to take effect? But look how Wang and Sprachmaus had acted the night before. He watched Liliac Sångera's tongue caressing the tips of her canines. Maybe it wasn't the nano stuff at all. Maybe it was her.

Her eyes rose and met his. Black, deep, gleaming pits beneath the dark arches of her brows, a glimpse of midnight, of dark, forbidden acts—

"Do you feel all right?" she asked. "You look somewhat queasy."

"Ah. Uh, no. I'm fine. Maybe just a little, I don't know, the anesthetic probably, it'll pass, Lily. Is it all right if I call you Lily?"

"Aren't they a competitor?"

"What? Oh, yes, Lilly. Of course. How could I forget?" He laughed weakly. How could he forget? Kee-rist, what was it about this woman? "I'll just stick to Liliac."

"Hm. All done." She slid the needle out, pressed a gauze pad to the bleeding wound, told him to hold it there, and started tidying up.

* * * *

The next evening went much the same, including the visit to Vanessa afterward. He felt like a new man. He even drank Diana under the table the first night, which turned out to be a disappointment. She passed out while he was tugging her pants off. The second night he stopped when she was just hitting the slurred stage, and suggested she take a soak in the Jacuzzi. The warm water massage finished what the liquor had begun, and he took her by surprise as she sighed into bed afterward. He hadn't been this...capable, to use Wang's term...since his twenties. Even Vanessa had been hard put to stay the course. And, come morning, he was ready to go again. Diana, on the other hand, moved like she'd been through a week-long Pilates marathon. It occurred to Graeber that she could benefit from an injection or three herself. Or maybe not. He'd outlasted her, a very rare feat. Charge her

up too much, and he wouldn't put it past her to seek out an alternative, some steroidal Aryan "personal trainer" in tight sweats. No, better that he wait till they went public with the hemobots and she had to know.

The only thing that dimmed his good mood was the attitude of Liliac Sångera. She wasn't cool to his advances, she simply ignored them. Aloof, that was the word. All business. Which would have been fine in a lab tech if she hadn't been so damned...intriguing. The whole time he was there he couldn't take his eyes off her white neck, her dark lips, her sparkling teeth. He imagined nibbling those lips. Being nibbled by those teeth. Exploring the unmarked terrain of—

Dee-dee-dee-dee-diddley-dee! It was Proctor.

"Hugh, I'm looking at last month's figures. I tell you we're dying out there! I need something more to report on the new project, the nanomed stuff. But only if it's good. And if it isn't, make it up! I have to have something positive to tell the board or we're both going to be on the carpet."

"You can relax, Proctor," Graeber replied. "The human trials are already underway."

"Really? You're not just trying to make me feel better?"

"Proctor, have I ever cared how you feel?"

"Okay, okay. No need to rub it in. Look, can't you just give me a more definite idea how soon we can go to market?"

Graeber ran his hand through his comb-over. He was pretty sure he could feel a little fuzz coming up under the sideways strands. "Normally a year, what with the FDA and all, but I have an idea we can dance right past them. I tell

you, we're going to win big with this one, Proctor. Three injections and you're done."

"What do you mean 'done'?" Proctor demanded. "How done? Done *for*? Done is not a good adjective when you're marketing meds, Hugh."

"Done as in Done Over. Re-done. Done good. Done the dirty dance of the two-headed beast. You want marketing? Think Fountain of Youth. Think Eternal Life, without the boring harps. Think reborn, remade, recharged, revitalized. That's it! ReVitalize®. With Roboglobin™." Graeber loved it. It sang to him.

"Okay," Proctor said, "it's in human trials. That's good. It's injectable. That's good; more expensive. Three doses? Also good; we can charge three times. How long does it last? A week? A month?"

The singing stopped. Graeber thought back: What had Wang or Sprachmaus said about booster shots? Anything? "We'll know for sure when the trials are finished."

"Okay, I won't bring that up this time around. Maybe no one will think to ask."

"A detail, Proctor. Merely a detail. This stuff is going to be that big."

"The Devil's in the details, Hugh. You know that."

Graeber cut the call. Kee-rist! Proctor could suck the joy out of an orgasm. Now there was a guy who needed a round of ReVitalize®. Or not. The only thing that made Proctor bearable was the hope that he would worry himself to death soon. Sure, he was only doing his job, but still....

But still, Proctor was right: Graeber should have thought about booster shots himself. A daily regimen, that was how you made money. Hook 'em for life. It should have been the first thing he thought of. If he hadn't been so damned distracted by the potential. And, he had to admit, by pale, lovely Liliac. She had some fatal attraction that clouded his judgment.

"What is it about women, Carlos?" he said. "You think you know just what you like when, *bam*, along comes a new one that doesn't fit a single expectation, and suddenly you're a gormless teenaged geek again. You know what I mean, Carlos? Carlos?"

Arturo snapped back to the present. "*Si, señor*. I mean, yes, sir." He hoped it was the right answer.

He had hardly slept the last two nights. No, three. First, the night of worry. Then, the meeting with the midwife. She was, as Esperanza had said, a wise woman. She saw deeply. She had touched and listened, pressing her bone-white ear to Esperanza's belly. Touching with those pale fingers. But she had also used a stethoscope and a thermometer and a blood-pressure cuff. And she had taken a blood sample even. Arturo had winced when the needle pierced his dear wife's flesh, when her red blood had run into the slender tube, though Esperanza had said it was painless. They had lain awake together afterward, wondering what the test would reveal. The midwife had promised nothing, and her silence had been loud as a curse.

The next night, another visit with the healer. Midwife no longer. There was no baby, they knew that now. Instead,

there was sickness. There was cancer. There was death. Esperanza had cried. Arturo had almost cried. But he held her instead. He had to be strong for her. And the healer was strong for him. She put her pale, strong hand on his shoulder, held his gaze in her deep, black, ageless eyes.

"Do not worry," she had said. "There are ways to treat this. New ways."

"We have no money," he'd told her. "Not that much."

"There are ways," she repeated. "We can make arrangements."

Maybe, but there had been no sleep after that.

And now he had almost fallen asleep at the wheel. The morning's coffee had worn off hours ago. Ay! Where were the idiot cab drivers when you needed them? He scanned the lanes to either side, checked the rearview mirrors, looking for yellow cabs and turbans. A little race would wake him up. A duel. Someone to fight, to take his mind off Esperanza, off the lump growing in her belly, the curse he could do nothing about. He swung the big car into the fast lane, cutting off a pale blue Honda Civic, and giving two fingers to the driver when the *cabrón* dared honk at him. There, up ahead: a red Hummer. Arturo floored the limo. Trumpets pealed in his mind.

"Kee-rist, Carlos!" Graeber exclaimed. "Have you gone loco?"

"Yes, sir," Arturo muttered. This whole damn world is loco.

* * * *

"What are you doing to him?" Diana Graeber moaned. "I ache. I'm exhausted. I'm hung over. You're supposed to wring him out, not fire him up!"

"Golly, Ms. G.," Vanessa replied, "I'm hurting, myself. A few more evenings like that, and I'm gonna have to hire a stand-in."

"A few more evenings? Dear God, don't even say it. Just two and already it feels like a dozen. And I can't even remember the first one." The aftermath had been bad enough. Diana took a sip of her Bloody Mary. She was on her second, but it wasn't helping the two-day hangover or the memory. "It wouldn't be so bad if his technique had improved a little, too."

"Well, you know, I always thought it was pretty amazing how he could get so much out of so little."

"Amen, sister."

"Did you know when you married him just how—?"

"I knew, I knew." Diana moaned again. "What can I say? He was young and handsome; I was young and sexy, believe it or not."

"Golly, that sounds almost romantic."

If it had been one of her spa clique, Diana might have been insulted. But this was Vanessa, and there wasn't a sarcastic bone in her bountiful body. Which was not fulfilling its intended purpose!

"He was also rich, and I was way too smart for my own good. God help me, Vanessa, this was not part of the plan. What's gotten into him?"

"Maybe it's those new nano things he's been trying," Vanessa replied.

"Nano things? He told you about those?" Diana was shocked. Hugh might brag about his mistress, but he was a fanatic about company security.

"Well, not outright," Vanessa admitted. "I mean, he did say he was trying something new that he thought I might like, but, you see, when he, um...."

"Got it off?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much how it felt. Right then, he started singing, kind of: 'Nanomed, nanomed, nanomed.' Kind of in rhythm, you know?"

"Yeah. I can remember a few of those serenades." But that had been years ago. Diana put down the drink and rubbed her temples. "Vanessa, this is not good. These nanomed are like a youth serum, and he's got an unlimited supply. They aren't going to wear off."

"Golly! I'm gonna wear out!"

"You and me both, honey."

"Maybe we should get some for ourselves."

"It's not even on the market yet. And, to tell you the truth, I wouldn't want to waste my second youth on him." Diana pounded the table. From what Hugh had told her, the nanomed would remove old cells, cancers, cholesterol, the works. She couldn't even hope he'd have a heart attack in the midst of the next serenade. "Vanessa, we've got to do something. We have got to find some antidote, some counter drug, some way to get those blessed little nanobuggers out of

his system. If he starts singing to me again, I swear I'll kill him with my own bare hands!"

"Gosh, you don't want to do that, Ms. G. I'm sure we'll think of something else. Look, why don't you go visit your mother or cousin or someone. Meanwhile, I'll check with this friend of mine, this herbal practitioner I go to? She's got remedies for everything!"

* * * *

Graeber strode into the lab. "Wang, Sprachmaus, come along."

They came in a hurry, worried expressions marring their otherwise unlined faces. No hint of any negative reactions at least.

"Booster shots," Graeber said, making his way through the lab to Liliac's narrow box of a room. "How soon? How often?"

"Booster shot?" Wang stopped, and Sprachmaus ran into him. They disentangled and ran to catch up.

"Ja, ja, booster shots." Sprachmaus had claimed the lead. "Well, you see.... You...You von't need any."

Graeber stopped in the doorway, a stake through his sinking heart. They piled up behind him. He turned slowly. "Ever?" he demanded. "My whole life?"

"Ja. Tree infusions is enough, as long as you lif."

"Live much longer, too," Wang added. "Even old people like y—"

Sprachmaus clamped his hand over Wang's mouth. "Unless you are mazzively injured and require a transfusion," he said

quickly. "Otherwise, the hemobots make more of themselves, chust like real blood. Da enchineering is perfect."

Wang nodded enthusiastically.

"Idiots!" Graeber snapped. "Did I ask for perfect? Did I ever once use the word 'perfect'? Dammit, it wasn't supposed to be perfect! The plan called for regular doses! What went wrong?"

"Myidefct!" Wang cried from behind Sprachmaus's hand.

"What did you say?" Graeber snarled.

Sprachmaus snatched his hand away.

"Side effect," Wang squeaked.

"Ja, you remember, ve said dere vere two side effects?" Sprachmaus shrugged. "Dis vas da second. Da hemobots, dey learned how to reproduce."

"Just like mice," Wang explained.

Graeber reached into his pocket and squeezed his phone. He took a deep breath, and the phone case cracked. He felt a little better. He ran his other hand over the growing fuzz on his scalp. Even better. His heart began to rise. No need to panic. These guys looked stupid, but they were smart in their own field.

"Right," he said. "We're shutting down all the trials, immediately. You're going back to the drawing board. You're going to redesign these little buggers so that they die off after a month. No repair service, no vein-side garage, no reproduction, no nanosex. One month, they're all dead and gone, through the piss pipe and down the toilet. You want more, you get another injection, simple as that. A booster shot. An expensive booster shot. Get it?"

"Got it!" they chorused.

"Good. Now get to work. I want it by next Tuesday."

"Next Tuesday?" Wang gasped. "Not poss—"

Sprachmaus grabbed him by the collar and jerked him halfway across the lab. Graeber watched them scurry off. He exhaled and stretched his neck joints, feeling much, much better. He turned and stepped into the narrow room.

Liliac was watching him, one dark eyebrow arched. "You have shut down the lab," she said. Her voice was even more unreadable than ever.

"Just the trials," he said, "and only until we have the new design."

"A design that dies."

"It's safer that way," he said. The idea popped into his head, full blown and brilliant. The FDA would love it. "If they can repair and reproduce, they can go wrong, just like real blood. This way, we control its life cycle. Completely. It's for the user's own good."

Her eyebrow dropped, but there was a glint that didn't leave her eyes. "I see," she said. "Then I guess I will put things away. Good evening."

"Wait a minute," he said, "I've still got a third injection coming. No sense wasting the little buggers, right? In fact..." Another idea popped in, even better than the first. "...since we know how to make the original design, I could arrange to reward certain members of the team. Important members. Team players. Exceptional performers. If you see what I mean." He gave her his best *quid pro quo* smile.

"That would be some reward," she remarked, "but who would define 'exceptional'? You?" She opened the drawer and pulled out the little drug gun and the big syringe. "Please roll up your sleeve."

He closed the door, took off his jacket, loosened his tie, never once dropping her deep, dark gaze. He sat.

She stepped past him and opened the door.

"If you do not mind, I find it very stuffy in here with two people. Like a coffin, don't you think?"

Then she gave him the injection and sent him on his way.

* * * *

Arturo drove very carefully. He was worried, and frightened, and very angry. The night before, on the way home from the big laboratory, *Señor* Graeber had told him they must leave next Sunday, he and Esperanza. They could not stay if she was pregnant. Arturo had told him she wasn't pregnant. She was sick, and needed much treatment. Then even better you go home, Graeber had said, to be with your family. We cannot get that kind of treatment in Chiapas, Arturo had said.

"Well," Graeber had said. "It sure sucks to be you, doesn't it."

Arturo wanted to speed. He wanted to duel another Hummer, to ram a cabbie. But he didn't dare do anything out of the ordinary, anything that would draw attention from the police.

The gun was heavy in his coat pocket.

He took Exit 13 for the "spa," but turned the other way. *Señor* Graeber didn't notice. It was twilight, and he was on his damned cell phone again. Soon, Arturo was driving them through a dark neighborhood of abandoned factories. Graeber hung up, looked out the window.

"What the—? Where are we, Carlos?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir," Arturo replied. "There was road work, a detour. I must have turned the wrong way."

"Well turn back, idiot! I told Vanessa we'd be there in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir." Arturo made a careful three-point turn, then took the first side street, and the next, winding deeper into the dark neighborhood. The twilight deepened.

"Kee-rist, Carlos! This isn't the right way. You should have gone left back there!"

"Yes, sir." Arturo reversed again, then took a quick right.

"I said left!" Graeber leaned forward and pointed across Arturo's face. "That way!"

Arturo swerved hard. "Ay! What was that?" He slammed the brakes hard. The big car squealed to a stop.

Graeber thudded into the seat back. "Ow! What was what?"

"There was a person!" Arturo cried. He turned and pointed out the rear window. "Look!"

Graeber turned. "What? Where?" He peered out the window.

Arturo drew the gun from his coat pocket. His hand was shaking.

"I don't see a bloody thing," Graeber said.

"Yes, there! A person! See! On the road." Arturo pointed the gun at Graeber's neck. His palm was wet with sweat. He didn't think he could pull the trigger.

"Where? There's nothing there, you dumb wetba—"

Actually, it was easy.

Whap!

Graeber gave a cry. His hand flew to his neck. He half-turned, eyes bulging as he spotted the drug gun. Then they rolled back and he slumped sideways onto the seat.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Arturo muttered. He was trembling all over now. "I hope she knows what she is doing." He slid the gun back into his pocket and put the car into gear.

* * * *

Graeber's head swam. Clouds of black and white foamed across his vision. He wondered what they were. But not too much. Mostly he admired them. They were misty, and pretty, and pretty misty. Did fog blow in? On little cat's feet? Who said that? Who cares?

Something pricked his arm.

"Ow," he said. "You prick." He chuckled. "That's a joke."

"He's waking up!"

Carlos? Hey, Carlos. My little wetback buddy. Is that you? Did I say that? Out loud?

"Do not worry. He is completely incapable of gross motor movement."

Liliac? With Carlos? What the hey?

Graeber rubbed his eyes. Nothing happened. He tried to lift his hands. Still nothing. He blinked, and that worked. His

vision did seem a little more clear. The black mist began to look a little like Carlos. And not so black. The white mist...actually, it was black and white. Yeah, that was Liliac.

"Hey, Lil babes," he said. "Did you know they filmed you in black and white?"

"Are you sure he can't move?"

"Nothing that matters. Here, the first pint is full. Esperanza, are you ready?"

"Yes, doctor."

Another woman? That Carlos. This could get interesting. Liliac's mist drifted out of sight, followed by the brown cloud of Carlos. Graeber tried to turn his head.

"Save one for me, Carlos," he mumbled. He drifted into a four-way fantasy.

Liliac's voice woke him. She was back in front of him. "Now the second pint. That is for you, Arturo."

Who?

"How can we repay you, Doctor Sângera?"

"That is simple. When you are back in Mexico, donate blood. Once a month, if they will let you. But not any more often than that. Remember that the artificial blood will need time to grow. If you can, convince the others, those who receive your blood, to donate too. But do not let Esperanza give blood until at least a year has passed."

"It will take that long to cure the cancer?"

"Probably not, but just to be sure."

Give blood? Once a month? Graeber gave an involuntary shudder. Poor sucker. No way you'd get me to give blood.

"Thank you," Carlos said. "I will travel all of Mexico to give blood. *Adios.*"

"Yes, go with God," Liliac answered.

The other woman said something in Mexican. She has a pretty voice, Graeber thought. I wonder who she is?

The dim shapes moved away, except for the black-and-white ghost that was Liliac. He heard a door close. A few moments later...or was it an hour?...he heard another door open on the opposite side of the room.

"Hey, Doctor S., how's it going? Golly, look at all that blood!"

Vanessa! Now we'll really get some action! Graeber tried to say something, but he couldn't seem to get his mouth to move. Couldn't think of anything to say. Oh, well. He knew what he meant.

"Yes, Van. Just two pints left. Are you ready for yours?"

"You betcha! Say, how about one for Ms. G? I think it'd cheer her up."

"No, we must be gone before dawn. Do not worry, she will get one eventually, I am sure. Her kind look after themselves."

One what? Graeber wondered. Can I have one? But he couldn't seem to say it. His vision was fading, narrowing, until all he could see was a pair of pitch-black eyes in a white face framed by hair the color of night. Something sparkled for an instant, two tiny glints of light. He remembered a smile. Whose? Oh, well. Who cares? He smiled at the pitch-black eyes as they grew and merged, and swallowed his final thoughts.

Novelet: **CITY OF THE DOG** by John Langan

Six of John Langan's short stories have recently been collected in *Mr. Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters*. Searching for it on the internet has turned up the fact that another man named John Langan has written a series of college texts on writing over the past two decades. Those of you who remember the story "Tutorial" from our Aug. 2003 issue might think this coincidence of names falls in the category of "Cruel Irony."

John Langan—*this* John Langan, the one who blogs at *jplangan.livejournal.com*—is pleased to report that his first novel, *House of Windows*, should be out by the time this issue comes off the presses.

And speaking of online matters, we at *F&SF* have teamed up with the folks at *www.suvudu.com* to run some of our stories online. Take a look—*F&SF* readers are almost certain to find something of interest on the site.

I thought it was a dog. From the other side of the lot, that was what it most resembled: down on all fours; hair plastered to its pale, skeletal trunk by the rain that had us hurrying down the sidewalk; head drawn into a snout. It was injured, that much was clear. Even with the rain rinsing its leg, a jagged tear wept fresh blood that caught the headlights of the cars turning onto Central—that had caught my eye, caused me to slow.

Kaitlyn walked on a few paces before noticing that I had stopped at the edge of the lot where one of the thrift stores we'd plundered for cheap books and cassette tapes had burned to the ground the previous spring. (The space had been cleared soon thereafter, with conflicting reports of a Pizza Hut or Wendy's imminent, but as of mid-November, it was still a gap in the row of tired buildings that lined this stretch of Central Ave.) Arms crossed over the oversized Army greatcoat that was some anonymous Soviet officer's contribution to her wardrobe, my girlfriend hurried back to me. "What is it?"

I pointed. "That dog looks like it's pretty hurt." I stepped onto the lot. The ground squelched under my foot.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I just want to see if he's all right."

"Shouldn't you call the cops? I mean, it could be dangerous. Look at the size of it."

She was right. This was not one of your toy dogs; this was not even a standard-sized mutt. This animal was as large as a wolfhound—larger. It was big as Latka, my Uncle Karl and Aunt Belinda's German Shepherd, had appeared to me when I

was seven and terrified of her, and more terrified still of her ability to smell my fear, which my cousins assured me would enrage her. For a moment, my palms were slick, and I felt a surge of lightness at the top of my chest. Then I set to walking across the lot.

Behind me, Kaitlyn made her exasperated noise. I could see her flapping her arms to either side, the way she did when she was annoyed with me.

Puddles sprawled across the lot. I leapt a particularly wide one and landed in a hole that plunged my foot into freezing water past the ankle. "Shit!" My sneaker, sock, the bottom of my jeans were soaked. There was no time to run back to the apartment to change. It appeared I'd be walking around the QE2 with one sopping sneaker for the rest of the night. I could hear Kaitlyn saying she'd *told* me to wear my boots.

The dog had not fled at my approach, not even when I dunked my foot. Watching me from the corner of its eye, it shuffled forward a couple of steps. The true size of the thing was remarkable; had it raised itself on its hind legs, it would have been as tall as I. There was something about the way it walked, its hips high, its shoulders low, as if it were unused to this pose, that made the image of it standing oddly plausible. Big as the dog was, it didn't seem especially menacing. It was an assemblage of bones over which a deficit of skin had been stretched, so that I could distinguish each of the oddly shaped vertebrae that formed the arch of its spine. Its fur was pale, patchy; as far as I could see, its tail was gone. Its head was foreshortened, not the kind of elongated, vulpine look you expect with dogs bred big for hunting or fighting; although its

ears were pointed, standing straight up, and ran a good part of the way down the side of its skull. I was less interested in its ears, however, than I was its teeth, and whether it was showing them to me. It continued to study me from one eye, but it appeared to be tolerating my presence well enough. Hands out and open in front of me, I stepped closer.

As I did, the thing's smell, diluted, no doubt, by the rain, rolled up into my nostrils. It was the thick, mineral odor of dirt, so dense I coughed and brought a hand to my mouth and nose. The taste of soil and clay coated my tongue. I coughed again, turned my head and spat. "I hope you appreciate this," I said, wiping my mouth. I squinted at the wound on its leg.

A wide patch of the dog's thigh had been scraped clear of hair and skin, pink muscle laid bare. Broader than it was deep, it was the kind of injury that bleeds dramatically and seems to take forever to quiet. While I doubted it was life-threatening, I was sure it was painful. How the dog had come by this wound, I couldn't say. When we were kids, my younger brother had been famous for this sort of scrape, but those had been from wiping out on his bike in the school parking lot. Had this thing been dragged over a stretch of pavement, struck by a car, perhaps, and sent skidding across the road? Whatever the cause, I guessed the rain washing it was probably a good thing, cleaning away the worst debris. I bent for a closer inspection.

And was on my back, the dog's forepaws pressing my chest with irresistible force, its face inches from mine. There wasn't even time for me to be shocked by its speed. Its lips

curled away from a rack of yellowed fangs, the canines easily as long as my index finger. Its breath was hot, rank, as if its tongue were rotten in its mouth. I wanted to gag, but didn't dare move. Rain spilled from the thing's cheeks, its jaw, in shining streams onto my neck, my chin. The dog was silent; no growl troubled its throat; but its eyes said that it was ready to tear my windpipe out. They were unlike any eyes I had looked into, irises so pale they might have been white surrounded by sclerae so dark they were practically black, full past the brim with—I wouldn't call it intelligence so much as a kind of undeniable *presence*.

As fast as it had put me down, the thing was gone, fled into the night and the rain. For a few seconds, I stayed where I was, unsure if the dog were planning to return. Once it was clear the thing was not coming back, I pushed myself up from the sodden ground. "Terrific," I said. My wet sneaker was the least of my worries; it had been joined by jeans soaked through to my boxers; not to mention, my jacket had flipped up when I'd fallen, and the back of my shirt was drenched. "So much for the injured dog." Although doing so made me uncomfortably aware of the space between my shoulders, I turned around and plodded across the lot. This time, I didn't worry about the puddles.

That Kaitlyn was nowhere to be found, had not waited to witness my adventure with man's best friend, and most likely had proceeded to the club without me, was the sorry punchline to what had become an unfunny joke. Briefly, I entertained the idea that she might have run down the street in search of help, but a rapid walk the rest of the way to QE2

showed most shops closed, and the couple that were open empty of a short woman bundled into a long, green coat, her red hair tucked under a black beret. At the club's door, under the huge QE2 sign, I contemplated abandoning the night's plans and returning to my apartment on State Street, a trek that would insure any remaining dry spots on my person received their due saturation. I was sufficiently annoyed with Kaitlyn for the prospect of leaving her to wonder what had become of me to offer a certain appeal composed of roughly equal parts righteous indignation and self-pity. However, there had been a chance we might meet Chris here, and the possibility of her encountering him with me nowhere to be found sent me to the door to pay the cover.

Inside, a cloud of smoke hung low over the crowd, the din of whose combined conversation was sufficient to dull the Smithereens throbbing from the sound system. The club was more full than I would have expected for the main act that Wednesday, a performance poet named Marius Elliott who was accompanied by a five-piece rock band, guitars, bass, keyboards, drums, the whole thing. Marius, who favored a short black leather jacket and tight black jeans onstage, was an instructor at Columbia-Greene Community College, where he taught Freshman Writing. He was a lousy poet, and a lousy performer, too, but he was the friend of a friend I worked with, and the band was pretty good, enough so that they should have ditched him and found a frontman with more talent. This was Marius's second show at the QE2; I couldn't understand why the owner had booked him after hearing him the first time. While the club did feature poets, they tended

toward the edgier end of the literary spectrum, in keeping with the place's reputation as the Capital District's leading showcase for up-and-coming post-punk bands. (That same friend from work had seen the Chili Peppers play there before they were red hot.) Marius wrote poems about eating breakfast alone, or walking his dog in the woods behind his apartment. Maybe the owner's tastes were more catholic than I knew; maybe he owed someone a favor.

In his low, melancholy voice, the Smithereens' lead told the room about the girl he dreamed of behind the wall of sleep. I couldn't see Kaitlyn. Given the dim light and number of people milling between the stage and bar, not to mention that Kaitlyn was hardly tall, there was no cause for my stomach to squeeze the way it did. Chris wasn't visible, either. Trying not to make too much of the coincidence, I pushed my way through to the bar, where I shouted for a Macallan I couldn't really afford, but that earned me a respectful nod from the bartender's shaven head.

The Scotch flaring on my tongue, I stepped away to begin a protracted circuit of the room in quest of my girlfriend. The crowd was a mix of what looked like Marius's community college students, their blue jeans and sweatshirts as good as uniforms, and the local poetry crowd, split between those affecting different shades of black and those whose brighter colors proclaimed their allegiance to some notion of sixties counter culture. Here and there, an older man or woman in a professorial jacket struggled not to let the strain of trying to appear comfortable show; Marius's colleagues, I guessed, or professors from SUNY. The air was redolent with the odors of

wet denim, cotton, and hair, of burning tobacco and pot, of beer, of sweat. I exchanged enough nods with enough faces I half-recognized for me not to feel too alone, and traded a few sentences with a girl whose pretty face and hip-length blond hair I remembered but whose name eluded me. The Smithereens finished singing about blood and roses and were replaced by the Screaming Trees, their gravelly voiced lead uttering the praises of sweet oblivion.

At the end of forty-five minutes that took me to every spot in the club except the Ladies Room, and that left the Macallan a phantom in my glass, I was no closer to locating Kaitlyn. (Or Chris, for that matter, although I was ignoring this.) Once more at the bar, I set the empty glass on its surface and ordered another—a double, this round. A generous swallow of it was almost sufficient to quiet the panic uncoiling in my chest.

I was about to embark on another, rapid circuit of the crowd before the show began when I caught someone staring at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought the tall, pale figure was Chris, just arrived. I was so relieved to find him here that I couldn't help myself from smiling as I turned to greet him.

The man I saw was not Chris. He was at a guess two decades older, more, the far side of forty. Everything about his face was long, from the stretch of forehead between his shaggy black hair and shaggy black eyebrows, to the nose that ran from his watery eyes to his narrow mouth, to the lines that grooved the skin from his cheekbones to his jaw, from the edges of his nostrils to the edges of his thin lips. His

skin was the color of watery milk, which the black leather jacket and black T-shirt he wore only emphasized. I want to say that, even for a poet, the guy looked unhealthy, but this was no poet. There are people—the mentally ill, the visionary—who emit cues, some subtle, some less so, that they are not traveling the same road as the rest of us. Standing five feet away from me doing nothing that I could see, this man radiated that sensation; it poured off him like a fever. The moment I had recognized he was not Chris, I had been preparing the usual excuse, "Sorry, thought you were someone else," or words close enough, but the apology died in my mouth, incinerated by the man's presence. The Screaming Trees were saying they'd heard it on the wing that I was going to die. I could not look away from the man's eyes. Their irises were so pale they might have been white, surrounded by sclerae so dark they were practically black. My heart smacked against my chest; my legs trembled madly, all the fear I should have felt lying pinned on my back in that empty lot finally caught up to me. With that thing's teeth at my neck, I hadn't fully grasped how perilous my position had been; now, I was acutely aware of my danger.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. The lights went down for the show, and Chris stood between the man and me, muttering, "Hello," unwrapping his scarf, and asking where Kaitlyn was. The pale man eclipsed, I looked away. When I returned my gaze to where he'd been standing, he was gone. Ignoring Chris's questions, I searched the people standing closest to us. The man was nowhere to be found. What remained of my drink was still in my hand. I finished it,

and headed to the bar as Marius Elliott and his band took the stage to a smattering of applause and a couple of screams. Chris followed close behind. I was almost grateful enough for him appearing to buy him a drink; instead, I had another double.

* * * *

II

In the late summer of 1991, I moved to Albany. While I swore to my parents I was leaving Poughkeepsie to accept a position as senior bookseller at The Book Nook, an independent bookstore located near SUNY Albany's uptown campus—which was true; I had been offered the job—the actual reason I packed all my worldly belongings into my red Hyundai Excel and drove an hour and a half up the Hudson was Kaitlyn Bertolozzi. I believe my parents knew this.

Yet even then, the August morning I turned left up the on-ramp for the Taconic north and sped toward a freedom I had been increasingly desperate for the past four years of commuting to college—even as I pressed on the radio and heard the opening bass line of Golden Earring's "Twilight Zone," which I turned up until the steering wheel was thumping with it—even as the early-morning cloud cover split to views of blue sky—the sense of relief that weighted my foot on the gas pedal was alloyed with another emotion, with ambivalence.

At this point, Kaitlyn had been living in Albany for a little more than six months. After completing undergrad a

semester early, she had moved north to begin a Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at the University Center. We had continued to speak to one another several times a week, and I had visited her as often as my school and work schedules permitted, which wasn't very much, once a month, if that. It was on the first of those visits, a couple of weeks after Kaitlyn had moved to the tiny apartment her parents had found her, that she introduced me to Christopher Garofalo.

He was not much taller than I was, but the thick, dark brown hair that rose up from his head gave the impression that he had a good few inches on me. His skin was sallow, except for an oblong scar that reached from over his left eyebrow into his hairline. When Kaitlyn and I met him at Bruegger's Bagels, his neck was swaddled in a scarf that he kept on the length of our lunch, despite the café's stifling heat. He shook my hand when he arrived and when he left, and each time, his brown eyes sought out mine. In between, his conversation was sporadic and earnest. Kaitlyn and he had attended the same orientation session at the University for students starting mid-year. Chris was studying to be a geology teacher; after trying to find a living as part of a jazz band, he said, he had decided it was time for a career with more stability.

Once he had departed, I commented on his scarf, which I'd taken as the lingering affectation of a musician; whereupon my girlfriend told me that Chris wore the scarf to cover the scar from a tracheotomy. While my face flushed, she went on to say that he had been in a severe motorcycle accident

several years ago, in his early twenties. He hadn't been wearing a helmet, and should have been killed; as it was, he'd spent a week in a coma and had to have a steel plate set in his skull, which was the origin of the scar on his forehead. As a consequence of the trauma, he'd experienced intermittent seizures, which had required months of trial-and-error with different medications and combinations of medications to bring under some semblance of control. He was a sweet guy, Kaitlyn said, who was (understandably) self-conscious about the reminders of his accident. I muttered a platitude and changed the subject.

I wasn't especially concerned about my girlfriend having become friendly with another guy so soon; as long as I had known her, Kaitlyn had numbered more men than women among her friends, just as my circle of friends consisted largely of women. She had always had a weakness for what I called her strays, those people whose quirks of character tended to isolate them from the rest of the pack. Driving home that night, I was if anything reassured at a familiar pattern reasserting itself.

Three weeks to the day later, I listened on the phone as Kaitlyn, her voice hitching, told me she'd slept with Chris. While I'd made the same sort of confession to previous girlfriends, I'd never been on the receiving end of it before. I moved a long way away from myself, down a tunnel at one end of which was the thick yellow receiver pressed to my ear, full of Kaitlyn crying that she was sorry, while the other end plunged into blackness. Dark spots crowded my vision. I hung up on her sobs, then spent five minutes furiously pacing the

bedroom that had shrunk to the size of a cage. Everything was wrong; a sinkhole had opened under me, dumping my carefully arranged future into muddy ruin. Before I knew what I was doing, the phone was in my hand and I was dialing Kaitlyn.

The next month was an ordeal of phone calls, two, three, four times a week. After the initial flourish of apologies and recriminations, we veered wildly between forced cheerfulness and poorly concealed resentment. Once Kaitlyn started to say that Chris was very upset about the entire situation, and I told her I wasn't interested in hearing about that fucking freak. Another time, she complained that she was lonely, to which I replied that I was sure she could find company. Rather than slamming the receiver down, she cajoled me, told me not to be that way, she missed me and couldn't wait until she could see me. However, when I at last drove to see her one Thursday afternoon, Kaitlyn was reserved, almost formal. I wanted nothing more than to go straight to bed, to find in her naked body some measure of reassurance that we would recover from this. Kaitlyn demurred, repeatedly, until I left early, in an obvious huff.

Strangely, Kaitlyn's infidelity and its jagged aftermath only increased my desire to move to Albany. Those moments regret and anger weren't gnawing at me, I told myself that, had I been there with her, this never would have happened. I could just about shift the blame for her sleeping with Chris onto us having been apart after so long so close together. There were times I could, not exactly pardon what Chris had done, but understand it. Underwriting my effort to reconcile

myself to events was my desire to escape my home. As far as I could tell, my father and mother were no worse than any of my friends' parents—and, in one or two cases, they seemed significantly better—but I was past tired of having to be home by twelve and to call if I were going to be later, of having to play chauffeur to my mother and three younger siblings, of having to watch what I said lest my father and I begin an argument from which I inevitably backed off, because he had suffered a heart attack ten years earlier and I was deeply anxious not to be the cause of a second, fatal one. Although I was their oldest child, my parents had a much harder time easing their hold on me than they did with my siblings. My younger brother was already away at R.P.I., enrolled in their Bio-Med program, while my sisters enjoyed privileges I still dreamed of. When I had started at SUNY Huguenot, my father had assured me that, if I commuted to college the first year, I could move onto campus my sophomore year; during a subsequent disagreement, he insisted that the deal had been for me to remain home for two years, and then he and my mother would see about me living in a dorm. After that, I didn't raise the issue again, nor did he or my mother.

Albany/Kaitlyn was my opportunity to extricate myself from the life that seemed intent on maintaining my residence under the roof that had sheltered me for the last two decades. Every awkward conversation with Kaitlyn shook my hopes of leaving the bed whose end my feet hung over, while the arguments, aftershocks of that original revelation, that struck us shuddered my dream of Albany to rubble. That I went from the black mood that fell on me after Kaitlyn and I

had concluded our latest brittle exchange, when I was convinced I would live and die in Poughkeepsie, to driving to my new apartment and job was a testament to almost brute determination. In the end, I had to leave my parents', which meant I had to do whatever was necessary to slice through the apron strings mummifying me, and if that included working through things with Kaitlyn—if it included making peace with Chris, accepting him as her friend—then that was what I would do.

Not only did I make peace with Chris, he was to be my roommate. What would have been impossible, inconceivable, a month before became first plausible and then my plan when I failed to find a place I could afford on my own, and the guy with whom Chris had previously been rooming abruptly moved out. Enough time had passed, I told myself. According to Kaitlyn, Chris was a night owl; he and I would hardly see one another. (I didn't dwell on how she knew this.) I decided I would stay there only until I could find another, better place, and then fuck you, Chris.

As it turned out, though, after more than a year, I was still in that apartment on State Street, in what I referred to as student-hell housing. Ours was the lower half of a two-story house wedged in among other two-story houses, the majority of them family residences that had been re-purposed for college students. My room was at the rear of the place, off the kitchen, and was entered through a kind of folding door more like what you'd find on a closet. Chris inhabited the front room, next to the combination living room-dining room; between us, there was an empty room opposite the

bathroom. For reasons unclear to me, that room had remained unoccupied, though I didn't object to the extra distance from Chris. Kaitlyn had been right: he was up late into the night, sequestered in his room, which he did not invite me into and whose door—a single solid piece of wood some previous tenant had painted dark green—he kept closed. Probably the longest conversation I had with him had come when he'd showed me the basement, whose door, outside mine, was locked by a trio of deadbolts. The stairs down to it bowed perceptibly under my weight, the railing planted a splinter in the base of my thumb. A pair of bare bulbs threw yellow light against the cement walls, the dirt floor. The air was full of dust; I sneezed. Chris showed me the location of the fuse box, how to reset the fuses, the furnace and how to reset it. After I'd been through the procedures for both a couple of times, I pointed to the corner opposite us and said, "What's down there?"

Chris looked at the concrete circle, maybe two and a half feet in diameter, set into the basement floor. A heavy metal bar flaked with rust lay across it; through holes in either end of the bar, thick, heavily rusted chains ran to rings set into smaller pieces of concrete. He shrugged. "I'm not sure. The landlord told me it used to be a coal cellar, but that doesn't make any sense. Some kind of access to the sewers, maybe."

"In a private residence?"

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know."

When he wasn't in his room, Chris was at SUNY, either in class or at the library. Despite this, I saw him a good deal more than I would have wished, especially when Kaitlyn

stayed over, which she did on weekends and occasional weeknights. I would be in the kitchen, preparing dinner, while Kaitlyn sat on the green and yellow couch in the living room, reading for one of her classes, and I would hear Chris's door creak open. By the time I carried Kaitlyn's plate through to the folding table that served as the dining room table, Chris would be leaning against the wall across from her, his arms crossed, talking with her about school. Although they stiffened perceptibly as I set Kaitlyn's plate down, they continued their conversation, until I asked Chris if he wanted to join us, there was plenty left, an offer he inevitably refused, politely, claiming he needed to return to his work. During the ensuing meal, Kaitlyn would maintain a constant stream of chatter to which I, preoccupied with what she and Chris had *actually* been discussing, would respond in monosyllables. If the phone rang and Chris happened to answer it, he would linger for a minute or two, talking in a low, pleasant murmur I couldn't decipher before calling to me that it was Kaitlyn. I knew they met for coffee at school every now and again, which seemed to translate into once a week.

Of course the situation was intolerable. Forgiving Chris—believing that what had occurred between him and Kaitlyn was in the past—accepting that they were still friends, but no more than that—all of it had been much easier when I was eighty miles removed from it, when it was a means to the end of me leaving home. As a fact of my daily life, it was a wound that would not heal, whose scab tore free whenever the two of them were in any kind of proximity, whenever Kaitlyn mentioned Chris, or (less frequently) vice-versa. Had I known

him before this, had we shared some measure of friendship, there might have been another basis on which I could have dealt with Chris. As it was, my principle picture of him was as the guy who had slept with my girlfriend. No matter that we might share the occasional joke, or that he might join Kaitlyn and me when we went to listen to music at local clubs and bars, and try to point out what the musicians were doing well, or even that he might cover my rent one month I needed to have work done on my car, I could not see past that image, and it tormented me. I was more than half convinced Kaitlyn wanted to return to him, and her protests that, if she had, she would have already, did little to persuade me otherwise.

One night, after I'd been in Albany six months, in the wake of a fierce argument that ended with Kaitlyn telling me she was tired of doing penance for a mistake she'd made a year ago, then slamming her apartment door in my face, and me speeding home down Western Avenue's wide expanse, I stood outside Chris's room, ready for a confrontation twelve months overdue. I hadn't bothered to remove my coat, and it seemed to weigh heavier, hotter. My chest was heaving, my hands balled into fists so tight my arms shook. The green door was at the far end of a dark tunnel. I could hear the frat boys who lived above us happily shouting back and forth to one another about a professor who was a real dick. I willed Chris to turn the doorknob, to open his door so that he would find me there and I could ask him what it had been like, if she'd pulled her shirt over her head, pushed down her jeans, or if he'd unhooked her bra, slid her panties to her ankles? Had she lain back on the bed, drawing him onto her, and had she

uttered that deep groan when he'd slid all the way up into her? Had she told him to fuck her harder, and when she'd ridden him to that opening of her mouth and closing of her eyes, had she slid her hand between them to cup and squeeze his balls, bringing him to a sudden, thunderous climax? A year's worth of scenes I'd kept from my mind's eye cavorted in front of it: Kaitlyn recumbent on her bed, her bare body painted crimson by the red light she'd installed in the bedside lamp; Kaitlyn, lying on top of a hotel room table, wearing only the rings on her fingers, her hands pulling her knees up and out; Kaitlyn with her head hanging down, her arms out in front of her, hands pressed against the shower wall, her legs straight and spread, soapy water sluicing off her back, her ass. In all of these visions and more, it was not I who was pushing in and out of her, it was Chris—he had spliced himself into my memories, turned them into so much cheap porn. Worse, the look I envisioned on Kaitlyn's face said, shouted that she was enjoying these attentions far more than any I'd ever paid her.

While I desperately wanted to cross the remaining distance to Chris's door and smash my fists against it, kick it in, some inner mechanism would not permit me to take that first step. My jaw ached, I was clenching my teeth so hard, but I could not convert that energy into forward motion. If Chris appeared, then what would happen, would happen. In the meantime, the best I could do was maintain my post.

Perhaps Kaitlyn had called to warn him, but Chris did not leave his room that night. I stood trembling at his door for the better part of an hour, after which I decided to wait for

him on the living room couch. I had not yet removed my coat, and I was sweltering. The couch was soft. My lids began to droop. I yawned, then yawned again. The room was growing harder to keep in focus. There was a noise—I thought I heard something. The sound of feet, of many feet, seemed to be outside the front window—no, they were underneath me, in the basement. The next thing I knew, I was waking to early morning light. I could have resumed my position outside Chris's door; instead, I retreated to my room. That was the closest I came to facing him.

Had a friend of mine related even part of the same story to me—told me that his girlfriend had cheated on him, or that he couldn't stop thinking about her betrayal, or that he was sharing an apartment with the other guy—my advice would have been simple: leave. You're in a no-win situation; get out of it. I was in possession of sufficient self-knowledge to be aware of this, but was unable to attach that recognition to decisive action. In an obscure way I could perceive but not articulate, this failing was connected to my larger experience of Albany, which had been, to say the least, disappointing. Two weeks into it, I had started having doubts about my job at The Book Nook; after a month, those doubts had solidified. Within two months of starting there, I was actively, though discreetly, searching for another position. However, with the economy mired in recession, jobs were scarce on the ground. None of the local bookstores were hiring full-time. I sank three hundred dollars into the services of a job placement company whose representative interviewed me by phone for an hour and produced a one-page resume whose bland and

scanty euphemisms failed to impress me, or any of the positions to which I sent it. I wasted an hour late one Tuesday sitting a test for an insurance position the man who interviewed me told me I was unlikely to get because I didn't know anyone in the area, and so didn't have a list of people I could start selling to. (He was right: they didn't call me.) I lost an entire Saturday shadowing a traveling salesman as he drove to every beauty salon in and around Albany, hawking an assortment of cheap and gaudy plastic wares to middle-aged women whose faces had shown their suspicion the moment he hauled open their doors. That position I could have had if I'd wanted it, but the prospect was so depressing I returned to The Book Nook the following day. When I heard that their pay was surprisingly good and their benefits better, I seriously considered taking the exam that would allow me to apply for a job as a toll collector on the Thruway, going so far as to find out the dates on which and the locations where the test was being offered. But, unable to imagine telling my parents that I had left the job that at least appeared to have something to do with my undergraduate degree in English for one that required no degree at all—unwilling to face what such a change would reveal about my new life away from home—I never went. I continued to work at The Book Nook, using my employee discount to accumulate novels and short story collections I didn't read, and for which I soon ran out of space, so that I had to stack them on my floor, until my room became a kind of improvised labyrinth.

Nor did the wider world appear to be in any better shape. In addition to its reports on the faltering local and national

economies, WAMC, the local public radio station, brought news of the disintegration of Yugoslavia into ethnic enclaves whose sole purpose appeared to be the annihilation of one another through the most savage means possible. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, which had promised brighter days, an end to the nuclear shadow under which I'd grown up, instead had admitted a host of hatreds and grievances kept at bay but not forgotten, and eager to have their bloody day. On EQX, the alternative station out of Vermont, U2 sang about the end of the world, and the melodramatic overstatement of those words seemed to summarize my time in Albany.

By that Wednesday night in November, when I fumbled open the door to the apartment and stumbled in, the Scotches I'd consumed at the QE2 not done with me yet, I had been living in a state of ill-defined dread for longer than I could say, months, at least. I had attempted discussing it with Kaitlyn over dinner the week before we went to see Marius, but the best I could manage was to say that it felt as if I were waiting for the other shoe to drop. "What other shoe?" Kaitlyn had said around a mouthful of dumpling. "The other shoe to what?"

I'd considered answering, "To you and Chris," but we'd been having a nice time, and I had been reluctant to spoil it. To be honest, though there was no doubt she and Chris were part of the equation, they weren't all of it: there were other integers involved whose values I could not identify. To reply, "To everything" had seemed too much, so I'd said, "I don't know," and the conversation had moved on.

Yet when I saw that the apartment was dark, and a check of my room showed my bed empty, and a call to Kaitlyn's brought me her answering machine, I knew, with a certainty fueled by alcohol and that deep anxiety, that the other shoe had finally clunked on the floor.

* * * *

III

For the next couple of days, I continued to dial Kaitlyn's number, leaving a series of messages that veered from blasé to reproachful to angry to conciliatory before cycling back to blasé. I swore that I was not going to her apartment, a vow I kept for almost three days, when I used my key to unlock her door Saturday night. I half-expected the chain to be fastened, Kaitlyn to be inside (and not alone), but the door swung open on an empty room. The lights were off. "Kaitlyn?" I called. "Love?"

There was no answer. The apartment was little more than a studio with ambition; it took all of a minute for me to duck my head into the bedroom, the bathroom, to determine that Kaitlyn wasn't there. The answering machine's tally read thirty-one messages; I pressed Play and listened to my voice ascend and descend the emotional register. Mixed in among my messages were brief how-are-you's from Kaitlyn's mother, her younger brother, and Chris. When I recognized his voice, I tensed, but he had called to say he had missed her at the show the other night, as well as for coffee the next day, and he hoped everything was okay. After the last message—me,

half an hour prior, trying for casual as I said that I was planning to stop by on my way home from work—I ran through the recordings a second time, searching for something, some clue in her mother's, her younger brother's words to where she had spent the last seventy-two hours. That I could hear, there was none. An hour's wait brought neither Kaitlyn nor any additional phone calls, so I left, locking the door behind me.

Two days later, I asked Chris to call Kaitlyn's parents. He was just in from a late-night library session; I had waited for him on the couch. He didn't notice me until he was about to open the door to his room. At my request, he stopped pulling off his gloves and said, "What?"

"I need you to call Kaitlyn's parents for me."

"Why?"

"I want to find out if she's there."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't seen her since the other night at QE2."

"Maybe she's at her place." He stuffed his gloves in his jacket's pockets, unzipped it.

"I checked there."

"Maybe she didn't want to talk to you."

"No—I have a key. She isn't there. I don't think she has been since Wednesday."

"Of course you do," Chris muttered. "So where is she—at her parents', which is why you want me to call them. Why can't you do it?"

"I don't want to worry them."

Chris stared at me; I could practically hear him thinking, *Or look like the overly possessive boyfriend.* "It's late," he said, "I'm sure—"

"Please," I said. "Please. Look, I know—we—would you just do this for me, please?"

"Fine," he said, although the expression on his face said it was anything but. He hung his jacket on the doorknob and went to the phone.

Kaitlyn's father was still awake. Chris apologized for calling so late but said he was a friend of hers from high school who'd walked through his parents' front door this very minute—his flight had been delayed at O'Hare. He was only in town through tomorrow, and he was hoping to catch up with Kaitlyn, even see her. A pause. Oh, that was right, the last time they had talked, she had told him she was planning to go to Albany. Wow, he guessed it had been a while since they'd spoken. Could her father give him her address, or maybe her phone number? That would be great. Another pause. Chris thanked him, apologized again for the lateness of his call, and wished Kaitlyn's father a good night. "She isn't there," he said once he'd hung up.

"So I gathered."

"The number he gave me is the one for her apartment."

"Okay." I stood from the couch.

"I'm sure everything's all right. Maybe she went to visit a friend."

"Yeah," I said. "A friend."

"Hey—"

"Don't," I said. I started toward my room. "All because I stopped to help a fucking dog...."

"What?"

I stopped. "On the way to the club. There was this stray in that lot over on Central—you know, where the thrift store used to be. It looked like it was in rough shape, so I went to have a look at it—"

"What kind of dog?"

"I don't know, a big one. Huge, skinny, like a wolfhound or something."

Chris's brow lowered. "What color was it?"

"White, I guess. It was missing a lot of fur—no tail, either."

"Its face—did you see its eyes?"

"From about six inches away. Turned out, the thing wasn't that hurt, after all. Pinned me to the ground, stuck its face right in mine. Could've ripped my throat out."

"Its eyes...."

"This sounds strange, but its eyes were reversed: the whites were black, and the pupils were, well, they weren't white, exactly, but they were pale—"

"What happened with the dog? Were there any more?"

I shook my head. "It ran off. I don't know where to."

"There wasn't a man with it, was there?"

"Just the dog. What do you mean, a man? Do you know who owns that thing?"

"Nobody owns—never mind. You'd know this guy if you saw him: tall, black hair. He's white, I mean, really, like-a-ghost white. His face is lined, creased."

"Who is he?"

"Don't worry about it. If he wasn't—"

"He was at the club, afterward. Right before you arrived."

"Are you sure?"

"I was about as far away from him as I am from you."

Now Chris's face was white. "What happened?"

"Nothing. One minute, he was standing there giving me the heebie-jeebies, the next—"

"Shit!" Chris grabbed his jacket from the doorknob. "Get your coat."

"Why?"

"Do you have a flashlight?"

"A flashlight?"

"Never mind, I have a spare." His jacket and gloves on, Chris shouted, "Move!"

"What are you—"

He crossed the room to me in three quick strides. "I know where Kaitlyn is."

"You do?"

He nodded. "I know where she is. I also know that she's in a very great deal of danger. I need you to get your coat, and I need you to get your car keys."

"Kaitlyn's in danger?"

"Yes."

"What—how do you know this?"

"I'll tell you in the car."

* * * *

For all that I had been resident in the city for over a year, my knowledge of Albany's geography was at best vague. Aside from a few landmarks such as the QE2 and the Empire State Plaza downtown, my mental map of the place showed a few blocks north and south of my apartment, and spots along the principle east-west avenues, Western, Washington, and Central. I had a better sense of the layout of Dobbs Ferry, Kaitlyn's hometown, to which I'd chauffeured her at least one weekend a month the past twelve. Chris told me to head downtown, to Henry Johnson. Once I'd scraped holes in the frost on the windshield and windows, and set the heater blowing high, I steered us onto Washington and followed it to the junction with Western, but that was as far as I could go before I had to say, "Now what?"

Chris looked up from the canvas bag he was holding open on his lap while he riffled its contents. Whatever was in the bag clinked and rattled; the strong odor of grease filled the car. "Really?" he said. "You don't know how to get to Henry Johnson?"

"I'm not good with street names. I'm more of a visual person."

"Up ahead on the left—look familiar?"

"Actually, no."

"Well, that's where we're going."

"Well okay."

I turned off Western, passed over what I realized was a short bridge across a deep gully. "What's our destination?"

"A place called the Kennel. Heard of it?"

I hadn't.

"It's...you'll see when we get there."

We drove past shops whose shutters were down for the night, short brick buildings whose best days belonged to another century. Brownstones rode a steep side street. A man wearing a long winter coat and garbage bags taped to his feet pushed a shopping cart with an old television set canted in it along the sidewalk.

"How far is it?"

"I don't know the exact distance. It should take us about fifteen minutes."

"Enough time for you to tell me how you know Kaitlyn's at the Kennel."

"Not really. Not if you want the full story."

"I'll settle for the CliffsNotes. Did you take her there?"

"No," he said, as if the suggestion were wildly inappropriate.

"Then how did she find out about it?"

"She didn't—she was brought there."

"Brought? As in, kidnapped?"

Chris nodded.

"How do you know this?"

"Because of the Keeper—the man you saw at the club."

"The scary guy with the weird eyes."

"You noticed his eyes."

"Same as the dog's."

"Yes."

"I don't—how do you know this guy, the what? The Keeper?"

"Ahead, there," Chris said, pointing, "keep to the left."

I did. The cluster of tall buildings that rose over Albany's downtown, the city's effort to imitate its larger sibling at the other end of the Hudson, were behind us, replaced by more modest structures, warehouses guarded by sagging fences, narrow two- and three-story brick buildings, a chrome-infused diner struggling to pretend the fifties were alive and well. As I drove through these precincts, I had the sense I was seeing the city as it really was, the secret face I had intuited after a year under its gaze. I said, "How do you know him?"

"He...." Chris grimaced. "I found out about him."

"What? Is he some kind of, I don't know, a criminal?"

"Not exactly. He's—he's someone who doesn't like to be known."

"Someone...all right, how did you find out about him?"

"Left. My accident—did I ever tell you about my accident? I didn't, did I?"

"Kaitlyn filled me in."

"She doesn't know the whole story. Nobody does. I didn't take a corner too fast: one of the *Ghûl* ran in front of me."

"The what? 'Hule'?"

"*Ghûl*. What you saw in that lot the other night."

"Is that the breed?"

Chris laughed. "Yes, that's the breed, all right. It was up toward Saratoga, on Route Nine. I was heading home from band practice. It was late, and it was a new moon, so it was especially dark. The next thing I knew, there was this animal in the road. My first thought was, *It's a wolf*. Then I thought, *That's ridiculous: there are no wolves around here. It must be a coyote*. But I had already seen this wasn't a coyote, either."

Whatever it was, it looked awful, so thin it must be starving. I leaned to the left, to veer around it, and it moved in front of me. I tried to tilt the bike the other way, overcompensated, and put it down, hard."

In the distance, the enormous statue of Nipper, the RCA mascot, that crowned one of the buildings closer to the river cocked its head attentively.

"The accident itself, I don't remember. That's a blank. What I do remember is coming to in all kinds of pain and feeling something tugging on my sleeve. My sleeve—I'm sure you heard I wasn't wearing a helmet. I couldn't really see out of my left eye, but with my right, I saw the animal I'd tried to avoid with my right arm in its mouth. My legs were tangled up with the bike, which was a good thing, because this creature was trying to drag me off the road. If it hadn't been for the added weight, it would have succeeded. This wasn't any Lassie rescue, either: the look on its face—it was ravenous. It was going to kill and eat me, and not necessarily in that order.

"Every time the animal yanked my arm, bones ground together throughout my body. White lights burst in front of my eyes. I cried out, although my jaw was broken, which made it more of a moan. I tried to use my left arm to hit the creature, but I'd dislocated that shoulder. Its eyes—those same reversed eyes you looked into—regarded me the way you or I would a slice of prime rib. I've never been in as much pain as I was lying there; I've also never been as frightened as I was with that animal's teeth beginning to tear through the sleeve of my leather jacket and into the skin beneath. The

worst of it was, the creature made absolutely no sound, no growl, nothing."

We passed beneath the Thruway, momentarily surrounded by the whine of tires on pavement.

"Talk about dumb luck, or Divine Providence: just as my legs are starting to ease out from the bike, an eighteen-wheeler rounds the corner. How the driver didn't roll right over me and the animal gripping my arm, I chalk up to his caffeine-enhanced reflexes. I thought that, if I were going to die, at least it wouldn't be as something's dinner. As it was, the truck's front bumper slowed to a stop right over my head. Had it been any other vehicle, my would-be consumer might have stood its ground. The truck, though, was too much for it, and it disappeared.

"When the doctors and cops—not to mention my mother—finally got around to asking me to relate the accident in as much detail as I could, none of them could credit a creature that wasn't a coyote, that wasn't a wolf, which caused my crash and then tried to drag me away. I'd suffered severe head trauma, been comatose for five days—that must be where the story had come from. The wounds on my forearm were another result of the accident. Apparently, no one bothered to ask the truck driver what he'd seen.

"For a long time after that night, I wasn't in such great shape. Between the seizures and the different medications for the seizures, I spent weeks at a time in a kind of fog. Some of the meds made me want to sleep; some ruined my concentration; one made everything incredibly funny. But no matter what state I was in, no matter how strange or distant

my surroundings seemed, I knew that that animal—that what it had done, what it had tried to do to me—was real."

To the left, the beige box of Albany Memorial Hospital slid by. I said, "Okay, I get that there's a connection between the thing that caused your accident and the one I ran into the other night. And I'm guessing this Keeper guy is involved, too. Maybe you could hurry up and get to the point?"

"I'm trying. Did you know that State Street used to be the site of one of the largest cemeteries in Albany?"

"No."

"Till almost the middle of the nineteenth century, when the bodies were relocated and the workers found the first tunnels."

"Tunnels?"

"Left again up here. Not too much farther."

To either side of us, trees jostled the shoulder. They opened briefly on the left to a lawn running up to shabby redbrick apartments, then closed ranks again.

"So why are these tunnels so important?"

"That concrete slab in the basement, the one that's locked down? What if I told you that opens on a tunnel?"

"I'd still want to know what this has to do with where Kaitlyn is."

"Because she—when we—all right." He took a deep breath. "Even before my doctor found the right combination of anti-seizure meds, I was doing research. I probably know the name of every librarian between Albany and Saratoga. I've talked to anyone who knows anything about local history. I've spent weeks in the archives of the State Museum, the Albany

Institute, and three private collections. I've filled four boxes' worth of notebooks."

"And?"

"I've recognized connections no one's noticed before. There's an entire—you could call it a secret history, or shadow history, of this entire region, stretching back—you wouldn't believe me if I told you how far. I learned things...."

"What things?"

"It doesn't matter. What does is that, somehow, they found out about me."

"The Keeper and his friends."

"At first, I was sure they were coming for me. I put my affairs in order, had a long conversation with my mom that scared her half to death. Then, when they didn't arrive, I started to think that I might be safe, even that I might have been mistaken about them knowing about me."

"But you weren't. Not only were they aware of you, they were watching you, following you. They saw you with Kaitlyn. They figured...."

"Yeah."

My heart was pounding in my ears. A torrent of obscenities and reproaches threatened to pour out of my mouth. I choked them down, said, "Shouldn't we go to the cops? If you've gathered as much material on this Keeper as you say you have—"

"It's not like that. The cops wouldn't—if they did believe me, it wouldn't help Kaitlyn."

"I can't see why not. If this guy's holding Kaitlyn, a bunch of cops outside his front door should make him reconsider."

We had arrived at a T-junction. "Left or right?"

"Straight."

"Straight?" I squinted across the road in front of us, to a pair of brick columns that flanked the entrance to a narrow road. A plaque on the column to the right read albany rural cemetery. I turned to Chris. "What the fuck?"

He withdrew his right hand from the bag on his lap, his fingers curled around the grip of a large automatic handgun whose muzzle he swung toward me. "Once this truck passes, we're going over there." He nodded at the brick columns.

The anger that had been foaming in my chest fell away to a trickle. I turned my gaze to the broad road in front of me, watched a moving van labor up it. The gun weighted the corner of my vision. I wanted to speak, to demand of Chris what the fuck he thought he was doing, but my tongue was dead in my mouth. Besides, I knew what he was doing. Once the van was out of sight, Chris waved the gun and I drove across into the cemetery.

Even in the dark, where I could only see what little my headlights brought to view, I was aware that the place was big, much bigger than any graveyard I'd been in back home. On both sides of the road, monuments raised themselves like the ruins of some lost civilization obsessed with its end. A quartet of Doric columns supporting a single beam gave way to a copper-green angel with arms and wings outstretched, which yielded to a gray Roman temple in miniature, which was replaced by a marble woman clutching a marble cross. Between the larger memorials, an assortment of headstones stood as if marking the routes of old streets. A few puddles

spread amongst them. Tall trees, their branches bare with the season, loomed beside the road.

As we made our way farther into the cemetery, Chris resumed talking. But the gun drew his words into the black circle of its mouth, allowing only random snippets to escape. At some point, he said, "Old Francis was the one who finally put it all together for me. He'd found an Annex to the Kennel during a day-job digging graves. A pair of them came for him that night, and if there hadn't been a couple of decent-sized rocks to hand, they would have had him. But he'd played the Minor Leagues years before, and his right arm remembered how to throw. Even so, he hopped a freight going west and stayed out there for a long time." At another point, he said, "You have no idea. When the first hunters crossed the land bridge to America, the *Ghûl* trailed them." At still another moment, he said, "Something they do to the meat." That Chris had not dismounted his hobby-horse was clear.

All I could think about was what was going to happen to me once he told me to stop the car. He wouldn't shoot me in it—that would leave too much evidence. Better to walk me someplace else, dispose of me, and ditch the car over in Troy. He didn't want to leave me out in the open, though. Maybe an open grave, shovel in enough dirt to conceal the body? Too dicey: a strong rain could expose his handiwork. One of the mausoleums we passed? Much more likely, especially if you knew the family no longer used it. When he said, "All right: we're here," in front of an elaborate marble porch set into a low hill, I felt an odd surge of satisfaction.

I had the idea this might be my time to act, but Chris had me turn off the engine, leaving on the headlights, and hand him the keys. He exited the car and circled around the front to my side, the automatic pointed at me throughout. Standing far enough away that I couldn't slam my door against him, he urged me out of the car. I wanted—at least, I contemplated refusing him, declaring that if he were going to shoot me, he would have to do it here, I wasn't going to make this any easier for him. I could hear myself defiant, but his shouted, "Now!" brought me out in front of him without a word.

"Over there," he said, pointing the gun at the mausoleum. "It should be open."

That sentence, everything it implied, revived my voice. "Is this where you took Kaitlyn?" I said as I walked toward the door.

"What?"

"I've been trying to figure out how you did it. Did you meet her at the club and whisk her out here? What—did you have a cab waiting? A rental? I can't quite work out the timing of it. Maybe you brought her somewhere else, first? Some place to hold her until you could take her here?"

"You haven't heard a single thing I've been saying, have you?"

"Were you afraid I'd discover it was you? Or was this always your plan, kill the girl you couldn't have and the guy she wouldn't leave?"

"You asshole," Chris said. "I'm doing this for Kaitlyn."

That Kaitlyn might be unharmed, might be in league with Chris, was a possibility I had excluded the second it had

occurred to me as I drove into the cemetery, and that I had kept from consideration as we'd wound deeper into its grounds. There would be no reason for her to resort to such an extreme measure; if she wanted to be with Chris, she could be with him. She already had. All the same, his statement was a punch in the gut; my words quavered as I said, "Sure—you tell yourself that."

"Shut up."

"Or what—you'll shoot me?"

"Just open the door."

The mausoleum's entrance was a tall stone rectangle set back between a quartet of pillars that supported a foreshortened portico. On the front of the portico, the name UPTON was bordered by dogs capering on their hind legs. Behind me, there was a click, and a wide circle of light centered on the door. There was no latch that I could see. I put out my right hand and pushed the cold stone. The door swung in easily, spilling the beam of Chris's flashlight inside. The heavy odor of soil packed with clay rode the yellow light out to us. I glanced over my shoulder, but Chris had been reduced to a blinding glare. His voice said, "Go in."

Inside, the mausoleum was considerably smaller than the grandiosity of its exterior would have led you to expect. A pair of stone vaults occupied most of the floor, only a narrow aisle between them. The flashlight roamed over the vaults; according to the lids, Beloved Husband and Father Howard rested to my left, while Devoted Wife and Mother Caitlin took her repose on the right. (The woman's name registered immediately.) Under each name, a relief showed a nude

woman reclining on her left side, curled around by a brood of young dogs, a pair of which nursed at her breasts. Beyond the stone cases, the mausoleum was a wall of black. The air seemed slightly warmer than it was outside.

With a clatter, the light tilted up to the ceiling. Chris said, "I put the flashlight on the end of the vault to your left. I want you to take two steps backward—slowly—reach out, and pick it up." I nodded. "And if you try to blind me with the light, I'll shoot."

When I was holding the bulky flashlight, I directed its beam at the back of the mausoleum. A rounded doorway opened in the center of a wall on which the head of an enormous dog had been painted in colors dulled by dust and time. Eyes whose white pupils and black sclerae were the size of serving plates glared down at us. The dog's mouth was wide, the door positioned at the top of its throat. A click, and a second light joined mine. "In there," Chris said.

"I was wondering where you were going to do it."

"Shut up."

I stepped through the doorway into a wide, dark space. I swept the light around, saw packed dirt above, below, to either side, darkness ahead. There was easily enough room for me and Chris and a few more besides, though the gray sides appeared to close in in the distance. The air was warmer still, the earth smell cloying. Chris's light traced the contours of the walls, their arch into the ceiling. It appeared we were at one end of a sizable tunnel. "All right," Chris said.

"Where's Kaitlyn?"

"Shut up."

"Aren't you going to let me see her?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, I get it. This is supposed to be the icing on the cake, isn't it? You bring me to the place you killed my girlfriend, but you shoot me without allowing me to see her." I turned into the glare of Chris's flashlight, which jerked up to my eyes. I didn't care. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I said, "Jesus Christ: what kind of a sick fuck are you?"

Chris stepped forward, his arm extended, and pressed the automatic against my chest. My eyes dazzled, I couldn't see so much as feel the solid steel pushing against my sternum. The odor of soil and clay was interrupted by that of grease and metal, of the eight inches of gun ready to bridge me out of this life. Between clenched teeth, Chris said, "You really are a stupid shit."

"Fuck you."

The pressure on my chest eased, and I thought, *This is it. He's going to shoot me in the head.* My mouth filled with the taste of, not so much regret as sour pique that this was the manner in which my life had reached its conclusion, beneath the surface of the city of my disappointment, murdered by the broken psychotic who'd spoiled my relationship and fractured what should have been the start of my new life. *It's only a moment, I thought, then you'll be with Kaitlyn.* But I didn't believe that. I would be dead, part of the blackness, and that was the most I had to look forward to.

"Here you are."

Not for an instant did I mistake this voice for Chris's. It wasn't only that it was behind me—the instrument itself was

unlike any I'd heard, rich and cold, as if the lower depths of the tunnel in whose mouth we stood had been given speech. Ignoring Chris, I spun, my light revealing him, the white man with the shaggy black hair and seamed face who'd held me with his strange eyes in QE2, the man Chris had dubbed the Keeper. He'd exchanged his black leather jacket for a black trenchcoat in whose pockets his hands rested. Chris's flashlight found that long face, deepened the shadows in its creases. The man did not blink.

Chris said, "You know why I've come."

"Yes?"

"I'm here to offer a trade."

"What do you offer?"

"Him."

"What?" I looked over my shoulder. Chris still held the automatic pointed at me.

"Shut up."

"You're going to trade me for Kaitlyn?"

"Shut up."

"So whatever this guy and his friends—you think—this is your solution?"

"Shut up."

"Jesus! You're even worse than I thought."

"This'll be the best thing you've ever done," Chris said. "I've lived with you long enough to know. It's the best thing you could ever do for her."

I opened my mouth to answer, but the Keeper coughed, and our attentions returned to him. He said, "For?"

"The woman you took six days past."

"A woman?"

"Damn you!" Chris shouted. "You know who I'm talking about, so can we cut the coy routine? In the names of Circe, Cybele, and Atys, in the name of Diana, Mother of Hounds, I offer this man's life for that of the woman you took and hold."

"Let us ask the Hounds," the man said. From the darkness behind him, a trio of the same creatures I'd crossed a vacant lot to help on a rainy night emerged into the glow of our flashlights and slunk toward me. Big as that thing had been, these were bigger, the first and largest as tall at the shoulder as my chin, its companions level with my heart. Each was as skeletally thin as that first one, each patched with the same pale fur. At the sight of them, my mind tilted, all my mental furniture sliding to one side. Everything Chris had said in the past hour tumbled together. Inclining their heads in my direction, the Hounds walked lazily around me, silent except for the scrape of their claws on the tunnel floor. Their white skin slid against their bones, and I thought that I had never seen creatures so frail and so deadly. The leader kept its considerable jaws closed, but its companions left theirs open, one exposing its fangs in a kind of sneer, the other licking its lips with a liver-colored tongue. Their combined reek, dirt underscored with decay, as if they'd been rolling in the remains of the cemetery's more recent residents, threatened to gag me. I concentrated on breathing through my mouth and remaining calm, on not being afraid, or not that afraid, on not noticing the stains on the things' teeth, on not wondering whether they'd go for my throat or my arms first, on not permitting the panic that was desperate to send me

screaming from this place as fast as my legs would carry me from crossing the boundary from emotion to action. The trio completed their circuit of me and returned to the Keeper, assuming positions around him.

"The Hounds are unimpressed."

I could have fainted with relief.

"What do you mean?" Chris said. "In what way is this not a fair trade?"

"The Hounds have their reasons."

"This is bullshit!"

"Do you offer anything else?"

"What I've offered is enough."

The man shrugged, turning away.

"Wait!" Chris said. "There are boxes—in my room, there are four boxes full of the information I've collected about you. Return the woman, and they're yours, all of them."

The man hesitated, as if weighing Chris's proposal. Then, "No," he said, and began to walk back down the tunnel, the things accompanying him.

"Wait!" Chris said. "Stop!"

The man ignored him. Already, he and his companions were at the edge of the flashlights' reach.

"Me!" Chris shouted. "Goddamn you, I offer myself! Is that acceptable to the Hounds?"

The four figures halted. The Keeper said, "Freely made?"

"Yes," Chris said. "A life for a life."

"A life for a life." The man's face, as he revolved toward us, was ghastly with pleasure. "Acceptable."

"What a surprise."

"Leave the light—and the weapon."

Chris's flashlight clicked off. The clatter of it hitting the floor was followed by the thud of the automatic. His shoes scuffed the floor and he was stepping past me. He stopped and looked at me, his eyes wild with what lay ahead. He said, "Aren't you going to stop me? Aren't you going to insist you be the one they take for Kaitlyn?"

"No."

He almost smiled. "You never deserved her."

I had no answer for that.

When he was even with them, the Hounds surrounded him. From the tense of their postures, the curl of their lips from their teeth, I half-expected them to savage him right there. The straightening of Chris's posture said he was anticipating something similar. The Keeper bent his head toward Chris. "It's what you really wanted," he said, nodding at the blackness. One of the smaller things nudged him forward with its head, and the four of them faded down into the dark. For a time, the shuffle of Chris's feet, the scrape of the things' claws, told their progress, then those sounds faded to silence.

His gaze directed after Chris, the Keeper said, "Leave. What's left of him won't be too happy to learn the life he's bartered for was yours."

I didn't argue, didn't ask, *What about Kaitlyn?* I obeyed the man's command and fled that place without another word. In my headlong rush through the mausoleum proper, I ran my left hip into the corner of Howard Upton's vault so hard I gasped and stumbled against his wife's, but although

the pain threatened to steal my breath, the image of what might be stepping into the mausoleum after me propelled me forward, out the still-open entrance.

My car was where we'd left it, its headlights undimmed. I fumbled for my wallet and the spare key I kept in the pocket behind my license. As I lowered myself into the driver's seat, my hip screaming in protest, I kept checking the door to the mausoleum, which remained ajar and in which I continued to think I saw shadowy forms about to emerge. The car started immediately, and in my haste to escape the way I'd come, I backed into a tall tombstone that cracked at the base and toppled backward. I didn't care; I shifted into first and sped out of the cemetery, stealing glances in the rearview mirror all the way to my apartment.

* * * *

V

Despite the bruise on my hip, the increased pain and difficulty moving that sent me to the emergency room the next day with a story about colliding with a doorstep, to learn after an X-ray that I had chipped the bone, I half expected Chris to walk in the front door as usual the following night. It wasn't that I doubted what had happened—I was in too much discomfort—it was more that I couldn't believe its finality. Not until another week had passed, and the landlord appeared wanting to know where Chris and his rent were (to which I replied that I hadn't seen him for days), did the fact of his...I didn't have the word for it: his sacrifice? his abduction? his

departure? Call it what you would, only when I was standing at the open door to his room, which was Spartan as a monk's cell, watching the landlord riffle through Chris's desk, did the permanence of his fate settle on me.

The week after that brought a concerned call from Kaitlyn's parents, asking if I'd seen their daughter (to which I replied that I hadn't had any contact with her for weeks). This began a chain of events whose next link was her father driving to Albany to ask a number of people, including me, the last time they'd seen Kaitlyn. Within a couple of days, the police were involved. They interviewed me twice, the first time in a reasonably friendly way, when I was no more than the concerned boyfriend, the second time in a more confrontational and extended session, occasioned by the detective's putting together my disclosure that Kaitlyn and Chris had been briefly involved with the fact that both of those people had gone missing in reasonably close proximity to one another. There wasn't any substantial evidence against me, but I had no doubt Detective Calasso was certain I knew more than I was saying. Kaitlyn's mother shared his suspicion, and during a long phone call before Christmas attempted to convince me to tell her what I knew. I insisted that, sorry as I was to have to say it, I didn't know what had happened to Kaitlyn. I supposed this was literally true.

Not that I hadn't dwelled on the matter each and every day since I'd awakened fully dressed on my futon, my hip pounding, a trail of muddy footprints showing my path from the front door to the refrigerator, the top of which served as a nominal liquor cabinet, to my room, where the bottle of

Johnny Walker Black that had plunged me into unconsciousness leaned against my pillows. That Kaitlyn should be at the far end of that dark tunnel, surrounded by those things, the Hounds, the *Ghûl*, was unbelievable, impossible. Yet a second stop at her apartment failed to reveal any change from my previous visit. I sat on the edge of her bed, the lights out, my head fuzzy from the painkiller I'd taken for my hip, and struggled to invent alternative scenarios to the one Chris had narrated. Kaitlyn had met another guy—she was in the midst of an extended fling, a romantic adventure that had carried her out of Albany to Cancún, or Bermuda. She'd suffered a breakdown and had herself committed. She'd undergone a spiritual awakening and joined a convent. But try as I did to embrace them, each invention sounded more unreal than the last, no more than another opiate-facilitated fantasy.

I weighed going after her myself, returning to the mausoleum suitably armed and equipped and braving the tunnel to retrieve her. I even went so far as to browse a gun store on Route 9, only to discover that the weapons I judged necessary if I were to stand any kind of chance—a shotgun, a minimum of three pistols, boxes of ammunition for each—cost vastly more than my bookstore salary would allow. Trying to buy guns on the street was not a realistic option: I had no idea where to go, how to open any such transaction. On a couple of occasions, I found myself driving north through the city, retracing the path Chris and I had followed to the cemetery. When I realized what I was doing, I turned onto the nearest side street and headed back toward my

apartment. Some nights, I unlocked the deadbolts on the basement door and descended the stairs to stand staring down at the cement circle sunk in the floor. The chains securing the bar across it looked rusted right through; with a little effort, I ought to be able to break them, heave the cover up, and...I made sure to lock the basement door behind me.

On the morning of February 2, 1993, as the sun was casting its light across the apartment's front window, I stuffed every piece of clothing I owned, all my toiletries, whatever food was in the cupboards over the sink, into a green duffel bag that I struggled out the front door, down the front steps, and through my Hyundai's hatchback. The apartment's door was wide open, the place full of my possessions, but I started the engine, threw the car into gear, and fled Albany. I didn't return home to my parents; I didn't head north or west, either. I wanted the shore, the sea, someplace where the earth was not so deep, so I sped east, along I-90, toward what I thought would be the safety of Cape Cod. I didn't stop for bathroom breaks; I didn't stop until Albany was a ghost in my rearview mirror and the Atlantic a gray sheet spread in front of me.

All the way to Provincetown, while I pressed the gas pedal as near the floor as I could and maintain control of the car, I kept the radio at full volume, tuned to whatever hard rock station broadcast clearest. Highway to Hell bled into Paranoid became Lock Up the Wolves. Although the doors, the dash thrummed with a bass line that changed only slightly from song to song, and my ears protested another shrieking singer, guitar, none of it was enough to drown out the sound

that had drawn me from my bed the previous night and rushed me to the basement door, hands shaking as I unsnapped the deadbolts and turned the doorknob. Some kind of loud noise, a crash, and then Kaitlyn—I had heard her voice echoing below me, calling my name in that low, sing-song tone she used when she wanted to have sex. I had thought I was in a dream, but her words had led me up out of sleep, until the realization that I was awake and still hearing her had sent me from my room, kicking over several stacks of books on the way. The door open, I switched on the light and saw, at the foot of the stairs, shielding her eyes against the sudden brightness, Kaitlyn, returned to me at last.

At the sight of her there—the emotion that transfixed me was some variety of, *I knew it*. I knew she hadn't really vanished, knew she wasn't lost under the earth. She was wearing the oversized army greatcoat, which was streaked with mud. Her feet were bare and filthy. Her skin was more than pale, as if her time underground had bleached it. Her hair was tangled, clotted with dirt, her mouth flaked with something brown.

I was on the verge of running down the stairs to her when she lowered her hand from her eyes and I saw the white centers, the black sclerae. A wave of dizziness threatened to topple me headlong down the stairs. Kaitlyn smiled at my hesitation, reached over, and pulled open her coat. Underneath, she was naked, her white, white flesh smeared with dirt and clay. She called to me again. "Here I aaa-mmm," she half-sang. "Didn't you miss me? Don't you wanna come play with me?"

A bolt of longing, of desire sudden and intense, pierced me. God help me, I did want her. My Eurydice: I wanted to bury myself in her, and who cared if her eyes were changed, if her flesh bore evidence of activities I did not want to dwell on? I might have, might have crossed the dozen pieces of wood that separated the life to which I clung from that which had forced itself on me, surrendered myself to sweet oblivion, had a large, bony shape not stumbled into view behind Kaitlyn. Of the *Ghûl* I had seen previously, none had given so profound an impression of being unaccustomed to walking on all fours. It held its head up too high, as if unused to the position. Its weird eyes were rheumy, its gums raw where its lips drew back from them. It curled around Kaitlyn from behind, dragging its muzzle across her hip before nuzzling between her thighs. She sighed deeply. Eyes lidded, lips parted, she extended her hand toward me while the other pressed the *Ghûl's* head forward.

The thing pulled away long enough to give me a sidelong glance, and it was that gesture that sent me scrambling backward, grabbing for the door and slamming it shut, throwing myself against it as I snapped the deadbolts. It kept me there while I listened to the stairs creak under the combined weights of Kaitlyn and her companion, who settled themselves on the opposite side of the door so that she could murmur tender obscenities to me while the *Ghûl's* claws worried the wood. They left with the dawn. Once I was sure they were gone, I ran into my room and began frantically packing.

If the far end of Cape Cod was not as secure a redoubt as I might have thought, hoped, if Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket proved no more isolated, they were preferable to Albany, whose single, outsized skyscraper was an enormous cenotaph marking a necropolis of whose true depths its inhabitants remained unaware. I fled them, over the miles of road and ocean; I am still fleeing them, down the long passage that joins *now* to *then*. That flight has defined my life, is its individual failure and the larger failures of the age in sum. I see the two of them still, down there in the dark, where their wanderings take them along sewers, up into the basements of houses full of sleeping families, under roads and rivers, to familiar cemeteries. Kaitlyn has grown more lean, her hair long. She has traded in her old greatcoat for a newer trenchcoat. The *Ghûl* lopes along beside her, nimble on its feet. It too has become more lean. The scar over its left eye remains.

For Fiona and for Ellen Datlow, who knows about Albany

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Department: **CURIOSITIES: THE TRIUNEVERSE: A SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE**, by R. A. Kennedy (dated 1962, but actually 1912)

Edwardian Britain saw publication of several distinctive interplanetary novels worthy of retrospective consideration; the weird allegories of R. H. Wright's *The Outer Darkness* (1906) and Elizabeth Whiteley's *The Devil's Throne* (1903) both come to mind, as does Richard Lamport's *Veeni the Master* (1912), which opens with Earth's destruction and the soul transference of its "chosen ones" into the bodies of beings in another solar system.

Transference of Earth's population to another system also occurs in R. A. Kennedy's philosophical extravaganza, but the means by which this happens is far, far stranger. *The Triuniverse* opens with a scientist observing a strange phenomenon that presages the materialization of a visitor from the micro-universe. Much of the book is then taken up with a complex cosmological discourse between the two before the visiting scientist continues his journey into the macro-universe—with an unforeseen consequence.

The planet Mars reproduces by binary fission and the daughter cells devour each other until only one ravenous entity remains. This creature then systematically devours the outer planets before turning toward the Sun, a cataclysmic explosion results, and Earth is hurled into outer space with Mars in hot pursuit. Only the timely return of the visiting scientist saves Earth; the space-time fabric once more

changes, Mars begins to shrink, and Earth ends up as part of the Alpha Centauri system with Mars the size of a pea under glass in a museum.

They don't get any stranger than that!

—John Eggeling

Department: **COMING ATTRACTIONS**

Our chronovisor is currently being repaired so we can't give you the contents of our next issue with complete certainty, but here are some of the stories we're bringing you soon:

* "Blue Fire" by Bruce McAllister, in which we'll meet Boniface XII, aka "the Child Pope," and his nemesis.

* Albert E. Cowdrey will give us a bit of Southern history in "Fort Clay, Louisiana."

* "Amor Fugit," a lovely tale of time from Alexandra Duncan.

* "Epidapheles and the Insufficiently Affectionate Ocelot"—there's lots to say about this story, but for now we'll let the title speak for itself.

We'll also have a new story by Tim Sullivan that follows his "Planetesimal Dawn," and Fred Chappell is due to return soon to the world of shadow trading.

With all these stories and more in the works, now is a good time to go to www.fandsf.com to subscribe for the coming year.

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