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What's in a Title?

Kim Mohan

When I first read "A Dwelling in the Evening Air," the story in this issue by Sandra Rector and P M F Johnson, I knew I liked it. As I was reading, I didn't think about what the story was called. But then when I finished it and looked back at the first page, I realized that "A Dwelling in the Evening Air"—the title, not the story—said nothing to me at all.

It has a gently portentous sound to it, as though it ought to be evocative of something, but the phrase appears nowhere within the text of the story—no clue there. So I questioned Sandra about it when we talked. Of course, she had an explanation; there's always a reason for a title, albeit a reason that may not be apparent to a reader (or an editor).

The line is part of a poem by Wallace Stevens, provided to me by Sandra and reproduced here in its entirety. At first I wasn't too crazy about going to this much trouble; I

would have preferred using a different title that would have been self-explanatory—if not before someone read the story, then certainly after. But Sandra was politely adamant, and it didn't take much persuading for me to agree to present the story with the title—the *purposeful* title—that was attached to it when the story was written.

And now, as that Harvey guy says, you know the rest of the story. I'm not one for arbitrarily changing titles. Although I understand that in decades gone by magazine editors did this sort of thing frequently, for (as far as I can tell) no defensible reason, editors in more recent years haven't continued that practice.

There are only certain conditions under which I'll raise the issue of a title change. If I feel strongly that the title doesn't *say* anything—if it isn't somehow descriptive or evocative of what a story is about, then I'll

ask the author for an explanation or suggestion(s) for a new title. Much more often than not, I'll either accept the explanation (as I did in this case) or go with the author's preference for a new title.

Months can go by, and have gone by, at this magazine without a title being changed. But lately, we seem to be at the other extreme of the cycle. Two of the stories in the June issue were published under titles that weren't on the original submission; in this issue, there's "Dwelling"—which wasn't changed, but could have been—as well as the excerpt from Lucius Shepard's novel, which *needed* a title different from what the book is called. And next month's issue contains yet another story that came in with a title I found incomprehensible.

Will I tell you which stories have new titles? Nah—that would ruin the fun. Why don't *you* tell *me* which one you think they are? ♦

Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour by Wallace Stevens

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind,
We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

"Cantankerous" is the first word that comes to mind, and then "stubborn," closely followed by "feisty," and then maybe "outrageous." He worked hard at distancing people through calculated outbursts of curmudgeonly vehemence. But there was a heart of gold somewhere underneath all the outer gruffness, and he was deeply loved by those who loved him, of whom I was one. A childless man himself, he played the role of second father to a number of science-fiction writers of my generation, and I counted myself privileged to have been among that group.

I'm speaking of Lester del Rey, who died in May at the age of 77—another of science fiction's grand masters leaving us. Those of you who are relatively new to the sf world may think of him as the man for whom Del Rey Books—the publisher of so many science-fiction best-sellers by Anne McCaffrey and David Eddings and Stephen Donaldson and Arthur C. Clarke—was named. That is in fact not quite the case. The del Rey of Del Rey Books was Judy-Lynn del Rey, Lester's wife from 1971 until her death in 1986, who transformed and expanded the publishing and marketing of sf books in so startling a way, some fifteen years ago, that the science-fiction and fantasy division of Ballantine Books was renamed in her honor. Lester himself remained in the background at Del Rey Books, an active but much less visible participant than his wife, devoting himself chiefly to the company's fantasy line. But certainly his passionate and powerfully held opinions on writing were a mighty force in shaping Judy-Lynn's editorial policies.

His name, by the way, wasn't really "Lester." I'm not sure what it was. I don't think anyone is. The name he accepted as his actual one was, approximately, "Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Smith Heathcourt-Brace Sierra y Alvarez-del Rey y de los Verdes," but whenever some sf reference source printed some version of it Lester could usually be heard to say that they had gotten it wrong, and it may be that he added or dropped names to the string as it pleased him to do so. The official list always seemed to begin with "Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico," at any rate, and then got less predictable from there. When and how the monicker "Lester" was hung on him, I never knew, but he was using it when he began writing fan letters that were published in *Astounding Stories* in the middle 1930s, and that was the byline that appeared on his first published story, "The Faithful," in the April, 1938 *Astounding*. (But he carved any number of pseudonyms out of his collection of given names later on: Philip St. John, John Alvarez, Marion Henry, R. Alvarez, etc., etc., etc.)

Lester was a short, slender, untidy-looking man with a wispy beard, a disarming grin, and a strong, commanding voice. He got your attention immediately and knew how to keep it. I was amazed when he told me once that he only stood five feet three; surely he was the biggest five-foot-three human being on this planet. His voice had much to do with that, but so did his sublime self-assurance. (He carried a business card, for a while, that simply said, "Lester del Rey—Expert.") He could offer

answers to questions on virtually every subject; sometimes they were even the right answers, but they were always given quickly and confidently. I never saw him at a loss for words, never, not even a moment's faltering.

He was not, I think, a great science-fiction writer, and perhaps he knew it, and if he did, it certainly must have pained him; but he let no sign of that pain reach the surface. Very early in his career, in 1938, he wrote a story that became a classic: "Helen O'Loey," a warm-hearted, realistic robot story, head and shoulders over most of the sf of that time in its humanity and compassion. But it would win no awards if it were published for the first time today. A number of fine stories followed in the next few years—"The Day Is Done," "The Wings of Night," "Into Thy Hands," and especially the powerful atomic-energy novella, "Nerves." He was an important figure in the so-called Golden Age days of John Campbell's *Astounding* before the Second World War. But whereas other Golden Age figures—Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, A. E. van Vogt, L. Sprague de Camp—went on to produce a string of masterly novels and short stories in the postwar era, Lester wrote little of consequence in the fifties, less in the sixties, and then—writing fiction having become a terrible struggle for him—essentially nothing at all.

The problem was, I suspect, that unlike a lot of us he never felt *driven* to write. Writing was just a mechanical skill he had picked up, along with many others—he could just as readily have earned his living as an

electrician, a plumber, a mechanic, a typewriter repairman—and he saw it, always, as a craft rather than an art. He wrote his first story more or less to see if he could do at least as good a job as the people who were getting published in *Astounding*, and when he found that he could, he wrote some more. But in the second half of his life he often went a year or two, and sometimes much more than that, without even thinking about writing fiction. Fiction as a concept—sembling words into effective patterns—mattered a great deal to him. But he seemed to feel little impetus to write the stuff himself except when there were bills that needed to be paid, and he left us a surprisingly short list of science-fiction masterpieces for one of such lofty reputation.

Why, then, consider him a grand master?

Partly for the way he wrote: his unaffected, down-to-earth style, a valuable corrective to the melodramatic excess that afflicted so much sf of the pulp-magazine era. But we value him as much for his influence as an editor and a counsellor to other writers as for the example of his own writing.

Fiercely opinionated, irrevocably convinced of the strength of his grasp of storytelling technique, he imparted his knowledge of narrative technique to a whole generation of writers, myself among them. He edited a significant line of boys' adventure novels in the early 1950s—the famous Winston juveniles—and also, for a little while, a group of outstanding sf magazines. Before that, he was office manager for a major literary agency for many years. And throughout his entire career he functioned as a mentor, a conscience, an irritating voice of inescapable truth, for all those dozens of fellow writers. He knew what a story *ought* to be—Lester was dogmatic the way Mount Everest is a tall mountain—and he painstakingly shared his sense of craft with any writer who would listen, though he had no tolerance for fools, none whatever, and quickly separated himself from their company, emphatically and permanently, in a way that even a fool was likely to comprehend.

He was about twice my age when we met—I was 19, I think, and he would have been 38 or 39. I was a raw novice and he was a stalwart of the Campbell Golden Age. But there was no hint of patronization in his attitude toward me; we fell into a friendship almost at once, one writer with another, and it stayed that way for the next four decades. I lost my awe of him pretty quickly, and when we disagreed on something we disagreed loudly and longly, but our disputes were always within a context of love, and there was never any doubt about that. (Not that I ever won an argument with him. No one ever did.)

He could be blunt: usually was, in fact. But always in pursuit of the truth. Perhaps the best advice anyone ever gave me as a writer came from Lester, when I was 22, maybe 23, and had discovered that I could make a lot of money fast by cranking out bang-bang pulp adventure fiction at a rate of thirty or forty pages a day. "You claim that what interests you in writing is mainly to make money," Lester told me. "But in that case you're really operating against your own best interests by knocking out all this junk. You write a story as fast as you can type and you get a penny a word for it *and that's all the money you're ever going to make from it*. It'll be forgotten five minutes from now. But if you were writing at the level of quality that I know is in you, turning out the kind of fiction people respect instead of simply stuff that will sell, you'd be bringing in an income on those stories from anthology sales and reprint editions forever. So even though you tell me that you're strictly a commercial writer, what you're doing these days doesn't make any sense simply on your own dollars and cents basis."

I had never stopped to look at it that way, and his reasoning brought me up short in amazement. In my own way I am just as stubborn as Lester ever was; but within five minutes he succeeded in changing my entire outlook on my work and set me on the path toward writing the books and stories that established me in my real career.

That was his specialty—cutting

through somebody's carefully constructed bullshit to reach the carefully concealed realities beneath. I saw him do it again and again. (Nobody ever succeeded in doing it to him.)

His life was full of sorrows. His health was never very good. He out-lived two dearly loved wives, both much younger than he was, who died in different but tragic ways. His own writing career was marked by anguish, fruitless effort, and, I suspect, profound dissatisfaction with the work that he did manage to produce, though he would have denied that on his deathbed. But he was tougher than nails, and I never heard him complain about anything. (The closest he came, I think, was after the stroke that took his wife Judy-Lynn away at the age of 40 or so. "I don't have very good luck with my wives, do I, Bob?" is what he said.)

Of all the many deaths that have rocked our field in recent years, I think this one hits me the hardest. Some of those who have gone from us were greater writers than Lester—the names of Heinlein, Asimov, and Leiber jump instantly to mind, and I could extend the list—and many of them were my dear friends, besides. As I've noted, though, it wasn't Lester's writing, particularly, that won him his place in the sf pantheon, and though he was my friend, I mourn his loss in a way that goes beyond, I guess, the way one mourns a friend's death. *Isaac* was my friend, and I was saddened to see him go. But what I felt on hearing of Lester's death was a sense not of friendship ended but of a family tie sundered. I'm not speaking metaphorically, here. Sure, the whole science-fiction world is a kind of goofy family, and we all bear a certain kind of kinship for one another. But my feelings for Lester went beyond metaphor. I was one of his sons; he was one of my fathers, with all the complexities and turbulence that such a relationship implies. And I suspect that I won't be the only one who says something like that in the tributes that his death will bring forth. ♦

Bottle- hadj

Sasha Miller

Illustration by
Laura and John Lakey

Blame all of following tale concerning Raschah, most unfortunate bottle-hadj me, upon love.

Long ago, beautiful and friendly houri, name of Satimah, is highly fond of Raschah, and I am returning fondness with great enthusiasm. Jealous Imam-Baba, who is wanting favors of delightful Satimah for self, is sealing me within own bottle and banishing to Earth. Imam-Baba is head person back home in Otherwhere, admired by all with great duty and respect, elected fourteen thousand years term of office, more or less.

Is hard explaining Otherwhere time. We move back and forth between, living some here, some there, only I am not moving at all from sealing within bottle, you see. All vapor-plane within bottle, or close enough, not corpa, not real. I think Satimah is not remaining favorite of Imam-Baba all fourteen thousand years, but am on Earth very long time however measured.

Once, maybe twice out of bottle for many weary centuries. Bottle is lost, I think. Then one day somebody picks up, gives good shake. I quickly must hang on tight in personal Otherwhere or get knocked black and blue in very many unusual places.

"What's this old piece of junk here?" somebody says. "What you suppose it good for?"

"Quit fiddling with that stopper," other somebody says.

"Don't worry, bro, stay cool. I jimmied the alarm."

These are strange words I am not knowing, and am alarmed like Jimmy. Stopper is coming out so I puff up very large into corpa, very real, very solid. Outside is dark so I make flare also and light up all remarkably well. I am in small room, full of box and shelf, open door, just two human mortal fellows.

I say, "Where am I please? Last time I am out, fellow in baggy pants and rag on head is wanting three incredible wishes."

"Don't know nothing about no three wishes," one says. "We just boosting stuff from back of this old shop. We thought we done got the short stick when you come out from that bottle."

"Yeah, Purple-Skin. You done scared the pants off us, bro."

"I am not understanding boost and short sticks and pants off," I say. "All pants decidedly on." Also they are acting just as puzzled as old bottle-hadj me.

They say many strange words, trying to make Raschah understand. Bro and man and dude and cat. Say also heat and fuzz and cops. I figure out thievish gentlemen think of selves as heated fuzzy cats. I like fuzzy cats, always wanted warm fuzzy cat for company in bottle, but never think of heating one. These are very clever thievish gentlemen like last thievish gentleman I serve, perhaps more so.

"Better get outta here," first fellow says, "before we get caught alarm or no alarm."

"I can take," I say.

"Car and all?"

"Sure, car and all. What is car, please?"

They show me car is wagon outside with no horse. I put fellows in car with boost items all careful. I place more boost about self here and there and also in private

Otherwhere place in bottle. They tell me take home and where, so I do whoosh! over moon, which is fast way when on Earth, and back like that.

They have place of two rooms. One window is looking out over alley with garbage cans in. We all introduce selves, Pockets and Nosecandy and old Raschah me.

"I want a drink," Mr. Pockets says.

Right away quick I bring him good Turkish coffee.

"Don't like no espresso," he says. "No offense, but I'd rather have some of my regular stuff if you get my drift."

"Don't drift," I say. "Reach long arm in Otherwhere, bring very fast, still hot."

Mr. Nosecandy gives friend nudge in ribs. "Gotta tell him where and what, dummy," he says. "This dude got what you call a literal mind." He tells me liquor store, explains what liquor store is, tells me what to look for, gives me empty jug to go by for getting others of same.

Ho-ho! Now I reach long arm into Otherwhere, back down to liquor store, pick up many jugs nice and easy. Soon both clever thievish gentlemen are laughing and drinking, and Raschah as well. Now such good friends, they tell me don't use Mister any more.

They light up waterpipe, makes me think of home. It is not smelling like any Turkish leaf I recall, but sometimes I am of forgetful nature. Pockets looks at me smelling leaf-smoke.

"Hey, Candy-man!" he says. "This bro wants a toke, I be damn."

"Well, hell, give him one," Nosecandy says. "He brung us all that good Muscatel. Give him all he wants." I can tell he is feeling greatly generous.

I now am understanding toke. Pockets gives me pipe and I toke with great might. Suck down all the leaf-juice, sparks and all, right through the water. Never toke Persian leaf like that one before! In fact, never toke at all, but I forget to say so.

"What kind of leaf that?" I say.

"Finest kind," Pockets says. "We put little extra stuff in it. know what I mean?"

I am not knowing, but I am very polite and not saying so. Nosecandy fills pipe again, lights it, and I toke this one, one puff like the last.

"We gonna run out of bread real quick," Pockets says. He reaches into pants and takes green paper out. "You think you can get us a lot of these easy as you grabbed those bottles?"

Green papers is not bread, but I find and bring back some. Also bring back bread, nice pitas. Nosecandy and Pockets ignore bread, take green papers instead. They grin and keep filling pipe long as I want.

"Go ahead and get stoned, bro," Pockets says. "Musta been a long time."

They explain stoned. We do this two, three days I think and become great friends, much in common. They teach me many things. Pretty soon we get to telling stories. They tell me about a few months back when they damn near get caught when boosting of tee-vees. I ask what is tee-vee? They show me one. I am liking tee-vee and wishing I had one in bottle as well as fuzzy cat. Could watch all rest of fourteen thousand years you know.

Then Pockets switches off tee-vee. "If them stories you been telling us is true," he says, "ain't you supposed to do something for us when we let you out like this?"

"Oh, of immense surely," I say. I am slave of person who owns bottle but I am forgetting to say so. Head is buzzing from drinks and tokes. "I love good friends. For love of friends I now promise doing something nice for them but have no wishes left. Am genuinely out of wishes. All of same used up upon fellow with baggy pants and rag on head, you see. But can do you one favor anyway."

Nosecandy says, "You done done us lots of favors. Get us one good score and we even, dig?"

I think this is not nearly big enough favor to do good friends, just duck into Otherwhere, get good score of silky green papers

"Better lay off them places you been, uh, borrowing from lately. This time, go somewhere out of town, okay?" Nosecandy says.

"Out of town, sure. Maybe I reach long arm over moon instead of Otherwhere, more fun."

Pockets says, "Okay, okay, don't bother us none with details, don't want to know if somebody ask questions." Nosecandy takes out white powders and pretty hollow sticks with red and blue stripes on.

"Toot some of this," Nosecandy says. "All I got is a old soda straw. Better with hunner-dollar bill. That's a hint."

I don't know what hint means but I take soda straw and toot all white powders, whoosh! right up nose and enjoy what is going on inside head of old bottle-hadji me. I am feeling wondrous strange and giddy now with drinks and tokes and toots.

"He got a hell of a habit," Pockets says. "That was enough for five lines he just did."

"Just suffering de-privation, in that damn bottle so long. We can get more as long as he can keep bringing us the bread."

Silly. They are not eating pitas I bring already. Nosecandy offers another pipe, but I am wanting more toot instead. We do this another couple of days I think. Finally I am remembering job they are giving me.

"I ready for go now." I eager to do favors for my beloved friends. "What is I doing again?"

"Uh-oh," Pockets says. "He can't remember, don't want him messing around with no fi-nancial institutions no more. He do any damn thing."

"Maybe we better call him off," Nosecandy says. "His habit's too much for us, even with that long-arm trick of his."

"You suppose they done got a make on him by now with them cameras? They trace him back to us. . ."

"That's why we shuck him now, before we're toast."

"Ho-ho!" I say. Most humorous, thinking of friends as toasted fuzzy cats. I am not knowing how loud I speak till bottom of waterpipe go smush, wet on floor. I reach long arm back in Otherwhere, bring new pipe, grab right out of mouth of Imam-Baba. He is having damn funny look on face, too! "Stay here, I fix everything."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Pockets says. "Where this pipe come from?"

"Those real jewels?" Nosecandy says. He picks at one. "Told you we'd get the bread for a fresh supply. Pawn shop, here we come."

"I bring you lots pretty stuff later, you bet," I say. "Bread and pitas and green papers."

"Never mind," Pockets says. "This here pipe is good enough. You off the hook, bro."

"Right," Nosecandy says. "Go on, get lost. That's an order."

"By way of over moon." I nod head. Interesting. Shake and then nod. Rattle inside. Nod makes more melodic rattle than shake. Very glad of being off hooks of beloved friends too easily. I must fulfill promise of something nice to do for them, though, soon as can be thinking of same. Too stoned now, too bad. Maybe later. And whoosh! I go, trying for getting lost. I do any damn thing for excellent beloved friends by now, I am feeling so good.

Alas, I find I am not flying with great skill. I am nearly crashing into building but pop into vapor plane just in time. Head is clearing all of such sudden, powerful head-ache descending upon me. Ho-ho, I think. So that is why I am feeling extraordinary strange! Drinks are all well and good but that is not Persian leaf they toking in pipe after all. Wonder what I am tooting so generously up nose, too. I land in alley, pop planes back and forth for a while, until I am getting hang of it, as friends say. Vapor, I am clean. Corpa, I am stoned. I discover entirely new high, popping planes, but not much puff.

Something in vapor plane I am not noticing last time I am there. Looks like tee-vee pictures which float around very interesting. Horse rider chap with mask. Love a Lucy. Beetles which are not insects but very loud musician fellows.

I go back corpa. Whoosh, what fun! Well, they give me job to do before they say get lost and you know I am bound to do it, so I get going. Pop into vapor plane to fly. Should have done before, not making so much trouble for one and all. When I am stoned, I forget many more things than usual but in vapor plane finally remember score from out of town. I consider how to do this job and wonder where is best place for score. Have to go corpa to reach long arm. Can't do much while in vapor plane and when in corpa, I am not exactly in control of self, you know? Don't want to wait till tokes wear off, for job is job after all, to be doing with speediness and dispatch.

I think about this for long, long while, vapor-drift with Ed Sullivan, TidyBowl man and Señor Wences, also with little Italian mouse Topo Gigio. Popping planes now and then, but toots and tokes not wearing off corpa self. In fact, wanting even more toots and tokes and drinks also. Maybe I stuck in vapor plane forever? Think also about cameras in places of green papers and wonder if Raschah now being lost in vapor same as Menacing Dennis. I speed up, trying to get away from thoughts in head. Then I hear something whisper soft in ear, Otherwhere language. "Raschah. Raschah, don't you know me?"

I almost do not recognize words, I am not hearing

native speech in so long. I am not going fast over tops of town. In fact, now standing still, not in vapor plane and not in corpa either but between. Only houri can do tricks like that. They are having own powers, many highly amusing things hadji can't. Then she make self of much charm visible. "Ho-ho," I say, and hug beautiful lady with great vigor, so happy to see once again. "What you doing here, Satimah?"

"Looking for you, dumb bottle-hadji. Losing track of you for ages. I feel stirrings of magic, then I am knowing it just matter of time. Why you stay corpa so long? I couldn't find you until you went vapor-plane again."

"Very lucky for me you do find."

"No luck. Magic attracts magic. Molecular cohesion, which is modern way of saying same. You are putting things in big uproar back in Otherwhere. I am paying heavy kumshaw to make sure Imam-Baba does not send his goons. Don't you know hadji aren't even supposed to exist in the twentieth century?"

"Imam-Babu really sending goons? What are goons?"

"His hit-squad. Heavyweights."

"Orange of skin?" There is ranks of hadji, you see.

Blue skin ring-hadji for bottle-hadji to beat up, purple skin bottle-hadji for orange lamp-hadji to beat up.

"Worse. Demons. You had to do it, didn't you? Steal Imam-Baba's best waterpipe!"

"Oh-oh," I say. "Poor Raschah! I am dead hadji now."

"Don't worry. Waterpipe theft doesn't rate goon squad and Imam-Baba is sometimes fair when he stops to think about it. Nobody on Earth is really needing our kind of magic these days. Mostly it just getting in the way."

Most considerate Satimah is trying to make me feel better. Also, she is being outside in world longer and of consequence knowing more of new words than Raschah and speaking well in same. But I now realize I am in big trouble anyway which I do not want to think about. I tell her about drinks and tokes and toots.

"You do look a little wasted if you know what am meaning. So you were the one who is robbing all those savings and loans." She is looking entirely too serious.

"I take only worthless green papers, as instructed by owners Pockets and Nosecandy. Oh what is going to happen to this poor dumb bottle-hadji now? Why does beautiful Satimah bother look for him at all?"

"I am missing you always. Wishing also I'd caught up with you before you started toking everything in sight and tooting your nose full of happy dust. You can't handle it. None of us can. We're addictive personalities—twentieth-century discovery, twentieth-century words. Meaning, is reason for no alcohol, no stimulants, no downers under Islamic law."

"How do you know all this, wise Satimah?"

"I am keeping up with times, which is more than Imam-Baba does. I don't think he is stirring from his big fat cushions in five hundred years. Raschah, think! Why aren't many of us around any more? We try this stuff, we get hooked and then we just dwindle away into a pile of ashes after a while. And you doing more than a week of dust, hash, grass and coke, not to mention cheap MuscateP La-la land."

I am sad, liking neither hooks nor la-las. I am now thinking I like good times back home with Satimah better than all tokes in world. "Was going to take fast track over moon and get score for beloved friends. Now thinking of going over moon and staying there. You are leaving me in ashes?"

"I should, but I won't," she says. "But going quick over moon good idea, called sling-shooting effect. I know of exclusive de-tox place in Palm Springs, and no time to lose. Where's your bottle?"

Oh-oh. Clever Satimah is now discovering biggest trouble of all I am in. By hadji law I am slave of bottle and who owns bottle owns me only I am now told get lost but not with bottle. I must go back to my personal Otherwhere with great regularity and not doing so with drinks and tokes and toots. No wonder I am feeling thin and worn with no puff. Without bottle, soon Raschah is dead hadji, Imam-Baba and goons of same or not. "Pockets and Nosecandy have it."

"That is problem," Satimah says. "We can't wait around till they throw it away. Can't let on how badly you are needing it, either. Those alley-bums would hold you forever if they knew."

Alas, must be agreeing that regardless of being off hooks, beloved friends would do this to Raschah. Would be reaching long arm and stealing bottle for self if I could, only most expressly forbidden and also impossible. Hadji can steal any other thing, but not personal bottle or ring or even lamp. Pockets and Nosecandy must give, or throw away. Imam-Baba is now mad at me all over again for taking pipe out of his very mouth. Worry is hurting head most painful.

At last, though, I come up with plan for retrieval of same. Satimah wish to stay between-plane for doing of plan but I am thinking she is very necessary for sweetness talk.

"Maybe you right," she said. "Perhaps is good idea from dumb bottle-hadji after all. I can take care of score at same time, clear your conscience. Leave all to me."

Then we go, whoosh! to dump of Pockets and Nosecandy. I twiddle fingers, make us both look like many folks who live around here, you know, all beautiful dark of skin and walking like cat full of caution and respect-able. We knock.

"Yeah, who is it?" Pockets just talks through door.

"Customers," Satimah says. "We got money, bro."

Pockets opens door a crack and Satimah waves handful of green papers in face. Then he opens door right away big. "Come on in," he says, "and don't flash that bad outside."

I don't see Nosecandy anywhere, but am hearing big snores from other room. I think he is sleeping off toots and tokes. Seeing Satimah make me remembering rich Otherwhere, know this is not good place for beloved friends to be living. Should have thick carpet on floor, cushions, nice drapes and canopy, hanging lamps, lots of incense. Sorry for them now. Pockets looks at Satimah with warm appreciation.

"Who sent you?"

"A friend," she says. "Me and Harvey here we need-

ing new tee-vee since Harv's nephew done rip off old one to feed habit. Know what I mean?"

"I sure do," Pockets says. "What you want, color or black and white?"

Satimah gives me nudge in ribs. "Color," I say.

"That Harvey," Satimah says. "Can't afford no color. Sure would be nice, though." She smiles, looks out of corner of eyes with great charm and sweetness.

"Hey, I can probably find you something, pretty lady like you and all," Pockets says. "You want color, I think I can fix you up okay." He goes in back room where snores come from and Satimah and I search most incredible fast for my bottle. No waterpipe. Must be gone already, buying white powders for toots. Then I see bottle on windowsill with stopper right beside it. I reach for it, ouchie, and Satimah hits me hard.

"Don't touch, you idiot!" she says. "Not allowed!"

I forget, very shameful me, though have already burned fingers on. She can touch, though. I wonder why she does not take, and is not even trying to buy.

Pockets comes back with tee-vee. "Here you go. Last year's model, cable ready, and it gonna cost you hunner smackers."

I start to say we got no smackers just green papers and Satimah hits me again. "Wasn't for you and that no-count nephew we not buying no tee-vee from this gentleman in first place," she says. "That hunner's gonna take damn near all my welfare check rest of this month. Hey, bro. How about throwing in that pretty brass flower jug over there? That look nice setting on top of the tee-vee."

Pockets looks at bottle on windowsill. "That thing? Hey, that belongs to . . . to a friend of mine. But he done split, ain't heard from him since. Sure, what the hell. Take it."

"Thanks," Satimah says. She looks at me again, places elbow in ribs most heartily. "Pick it up, fool." She is meaning tee-vee. Satimah takes bottle. "I gonna get me some polyester roses for this pretty jug."

Then we leave and go into between-plane again before I can ask who is Polly and Esther. I take tee-vee, put in personal Otherwhere space inside bottle, recharge self also very quick while inside. "That is wonderful and intelligent touch how you make him give bottle instead of steal. Why do you not take, though? Much easier."

"Houri not allowed to steal," she says, all prim and proper.

"Oh," I say. From what I know of personal experiencing, that probably all they not allowed to do. "Now what, Satimah?"

"Now, we get you settled in Palm Springs," she says, "and get you dried out." And then whoosh-swish! we are gone, up and over moon, fast track and in de-tox place before you can say don't want to go.

De-tox is no fun at all but I live through it, almost. With self in sufficient disguise, doctors not knowing they work on poor old bottle-hadj and damn near kill with cold turkeys and hot steams. Good thing I am having bottle to get in and recharge. Don't much like crowded

vapor plane these days and getting tired of Brady Bunch and Mouseketeers except for Annette. Satimah is most kindly visiting me quiet in night when nobody knows. Soon we are having good times too and that is when she knows I going to make it.

"Couple more weeks and you'll be fine," she says.

"Am motivate, real good," I say, and offer her fresh demonstration of general fitness.

"Anybody ever tell you you're a sex addict too?"

I am now understanding addict and also sex. She dissolves out of very hands in most frustrating manner.

"I want you staying here just a little while longer. You might mess up again."

"Satimah! Don't you believe I learn better? Have plenty time for think, nobody giving me orders or tokes."

She look at me, laugh and frown. "Fat chance! You not learning much from all those centuries sealed in damn bottle and that's a fact. But I hope you haven't reformed altogether, you dumb bottle-hadj. Getting you out of this scrape is showing me how much I care about what happens to you."

This time Satimah does not dissolve in disappointing fashion, oh no, and I am glad we are both sex addicts together.

"When you get out of here, I am taking you back home," Satimah says.

Oh-oh. "You mean home home? Like in Otherwhere?"

"Getting it in one, Raschah."

"Imam-Baba is mad at me before, over you. Now he is even more mad because I steal waterpipe. Don't know which is worse sin, according to Imam-Baba."

"You will be thinking of way out." Then Satimah kisses me again and I am most willing to let Imam-Baba string me up by thumbs and whip bottoms of feet till he get tired. He is not getting tired soon either, you bet.

Well, when good doctors are letting me out of de-tox place, Satimah is paying the bill with more of green papers which I now know is money and maybe smackers and we go to Otherwhere. She takes me to own home, parks bottle nearby, then we have best time yet, not do much damage to her place because of prudent retiring to bottle for most strenuous portion of activities.

Too soon Satimah crawls out of bottle. "Now time to be paying that visit to Imam-Baba," she says.

"I decide I am waiting in here till term of office over. Can't be more than another ten, twelve thousand years." "Now."

So I get out of bottle also. During last portion of de-tox I have been thinking of vapor plane and tee-vee persons in. Vapor plane has always trap all sorts of storm things with great electricity. First job of hadji on Earth was creating separate vapor plane section, storage, and putting of same in to keep all tidy, not turn loose destructive upon world in general. Think tee-vee persons get trapped also out in vapor plane, stay all dim until many reruns make them become sufficient for taking forms as in original shows. I tell Satimah of this, and we make new plan while putting on clothes. She has nice clothes, very thin.

She gives me fine new baggy pants and rag on head

only with jewel in and feather, like Aladdin fellow. Imam-Baba's place not changed much, still marble palace full of carve and jewel, hadji with scimitars in sashes, lots of incense and dancing houri girls. Not seeing some old friends, though, and think sadly of hooks and la-las and ashes. Satimah tells guard we are here to see Grand Potentate, what Imam-Baba calls beloved and gracious self these days. They let us in very fast. Have orders.

Oh-oh. Imam-Baba is wearing baggiest pants, biggest jewel on head rag, tallest feather of anybody. Also is displaying big frown showing how important he is.

I drop flat on face in front of. He slams me on way down and I am knowing frown is excessively real. He is not happy, not pleasant. Satimah does sweet talk again for numerous splendid reasons many of which I hope Imam-Baba remembers from occasions when I am sealed within bottle and out of way.

"So you are bringing this insect back, Satimah. Now, what shall I be doing with him, eh?" Imam-Baba claws fingers through beard, takes toké off second-best waterpipe. Is good, honest Persian leaf, no funny business, but he is taking like no tomorrow. Imam-Baba is addictive fellow too, surprise. "Shall I be demoting him to ring-hadj and sending him back down for another few centuries?"

"Great One," Satimah says. "This very stupid bottle-hadj not deserving of your compassion, yet he is humbly begging it anyway. Will you hear him out?"

"And you, Satimah. You are begging my compassion?"

"I do, Great One, in remembering of fondness once between you and me. For reasons past all understanding. I am taking permanent fancy to this toad."

"No accounting for tastes," he says.

"Thus, if you are punishing him again, you are having to do the same to me."

He twiddles rings on fingers. "Otherwhere's loss, my dear. I am moving on to, er, other delights, but am remembering you with affection. Well then, worm. Speak!"

I lift head very small distance from floor. "Crush unworthy me under heel of foot, Great One. I know I am grievous wrong to steal best waterpipe of great Imam-Baba, but human fellows down on Earth open bottle, you see, and I am slave of bottle by your own command. I am in terrible trouble all around but generous Satimah is saving worthless hide. I bring you poor gift not worthy to replace waterpipe but hope you accept anyway." I add tee-vee speech I hear once. "I have learn error of my ways."

"Just like every other bottle-hadj who is getting in trouble and persuading some silly houri to get him out. Come to thinking on it, I am not remembering when

such a thing is happening before now. May be a first." Imam-Baba chews on ends of beard until curiosity gets best of him. "Very well. You are speaking of a present?"

"Here, Great One," Satimah says. She sticks toe in my ribs. I reach long arm, whisk tee-vee out of personal Otherwhere into Satimah's hand and she gives it to Imam-Baba.

He stares at it, corners of mouth greatly turn down. "This all? Some fool is melting a crystal ball in square pan."

"I admit it not appearing much at the moment, but just wait. May Raschah get up now?"

"Oh, yes, yes, quit slobbering on the floor, vile pig and son of a pig. Go ahead and stand up. Now, Satimah. You say this thing actually is doing something?"

"Yes, Great One." She nods at me, and I whoosh down to vapor plane storage section of Earth. I sort out very quick, enter general vapor plane and plug in to many things flying around, all lonesome and not watched any more, channel through to receiver of tee-vee. This part of plan works very fine, hope most sincerely it works in direction of Imam-Baba as well. I get back and see Howdy Doodo on tee-vee. Imam-Baba, he is looking at tee-vee with smile spreading on face. Everybody else in room is crowding around to see, too.

"Is any more of this?" he says, when program ends.

"All you want, Imam-Baba," Satimah says. "Assure you of years and years of programming to tap into, and more being broadcast all the time. And it's all yours courtesy of your faithful, humble servant Raschah."

Imam-Baba frowns again just to show me he is not such easy forgiveness pushover. I bow nice and low, head on floor and sweat little bit waiting.

"Yes, yes, well, it may do. I am not making up mind yet. I am letting you know some day." Then he turns back to tee-vee. New program now, Dragnet. Hoped for I Dream of Genie. Later maybe.

Satimah and I back out, very careful. "You have good idea, not so dumb after all," she says. "Is turning him on like your tokes and toots. He won't even be looking up until he is getting through all the old Bonanza reruns."

"Can think of lots to do in meantime," I say.

"Me, too."

We go right away quick to her place. "I am getting present for you also when I am down there," I say. I reach into personal Otherwhere and bring out warm fuzzy cats once good friends Nosecandy and Pockets. Very proud, I am at last fulfilling promise and finding nice thing to do for them, all safe and fortunate. "We are giving them good home, I think." ♦

The Death Addict

Barry B. Longyear

Code blue, code blue.

Stat time. Lights flashing, crash wagon rolling, an ominous flat tone from Room 301, the ICU nurses quietly and efficiently hurrying through their well-practiced routine: strip, drp, ventilation, clear the mouth of obstructions, insert the air passage, blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow—

"Here's the wagon. Clear! Clear, dammit!" Panic, rather than urgency, in the doctor's voice. New resident.

The whump of multiple volts passing through still living tissue, the muscles contracting and relaxing, lifting a frail old form from the bed.

"Still flat!"

"Clear!"

Whump.

Adrenaline.

Blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow.

"Clear!"

Whump.

"Still flat."

Another jolt.

One more.

A pause. A brief moment of silence to allow acceptance to spread over the losing team. Acceptance of the mortal fact that sooner or later every doctor loses every patient.

"Okay . . . time."

"Eight twenty-two."



Illustration by Alan Dineen

"Great damned way to start the shift."

"It was righteous. We did everything we could and we did it all right. Lighten up." Alberta hadn't said light-en up, *kid*, but it had been in her voice.

"She knew she was going to die, doc," said Nurse Ramos. "So did we. Didn't that news make it down to the doctors' lounge?"

"Okay. Yeah, you're right. Get her prepped and down to the morgue. I'll be back in a few minutes to sign the papers. Shit, I hate this part."

The losing team captain ducked out to hit the doctors' lounge to suck down some smoke and the first of twenty cups of coffee he'll consume that night, risking his own heart in an attempt at lifting himself out of his feelings of personal defeat. And he was taking the death personally. Nurse Ramos decided. On his shift and everything. How inconsiderate. Should the doctor live so long, in a few years it will be easier. He'll learn that the doctors never win. First quarter or overtime, death wins. Always. It's the law. Erico Ramos turned back to the task of clearing out the old tenant and preparing the room for the next contestant.

The loser this time was Rachael Raddenburg, 61, mother, grandmother, owner of a doll shop employing three persons. Nurse Alberta Smallet, who had invested some minutes of her night shift hours the past three days talking with Rachael, knew that the elderly Mrs. Raddenburg would have been mortified if she could've seen herself at that moment. She had been very fussy about her appearance, and now, her hair askew, she lay flat on her back, eyes sunken, skin pale, naked, withered breasts, stretch marks, hardened arteries, and all. She had been so afraid of dying.

Yet Rachael's face was now soft, relaxed, more than peaceful. It was as though she were in a state of bliss. "The things one tries to convince oneself of," muttered Nurse Smallet. She closed off the drip, removed the IV, and tossed the old tape and clear plastic plumbing into the medical waste. No need to bandage where the IV had been pulled. For a wound to bleed, a heart needs to beat.

Nurse Ramos checked to make certain the oxygen was turned off and removed that plumbing, tossing it into the medical waste as well. Clearing and punching off of the video monitor, he began removing the multiple leads, clips and automatic cuff that had passed on to the room monitor and the bank of monitors at the ICU nurse's station the information regarding Rachael's no longer existent heartbeat, respiration, blood oxygen absorption, and blood pressure. As he removed the self-sticking tabs to which the EKG and respiration leads had been attached, he winced at the ripping sound made by the removal of each tab. It resembled the sound of Velcro being parted.

There was no point in wincing. After all, Rachael Raddenburg was past pain. It was the sound more than the possibility of pain. It was a raucous, disrespectful sound.

"He's back," muttered Nurse Smallet. She had announced it with a voice dulled with dark humor; perhaps disgust; anger.

Erico Ramos didn't have to look up. He knew to whom

his colleague was referring. Standing respectfully in the doorway, his face carrying the same tranquil expression as the corpse's, would be Rene Boniface, the morgue orderly. Skinny, dark, spectacled, geeky son of a bitch.

"I didn't call for you," said Erico.

"I know. You ready for the cart?"

Ramos and Smallet exchanged glances and Erico faced the door. "On this side."

As Rene pushed the wheeled stretcher around the end of the bed, Erico guided one end until it was parallel to the bed and up against it. He, Nurse Smallet, and the morgue orderly leaned across the stretcher, grabbed the rolled-up edge of the bed sheet, and pulled the body onto the stretcher's surface. Rachael Raddenburg was deceptively light.

As they threw the sides of the sheet over the body, Erico Ramos saw the morgue orderly squeeze Rachael Raddenburg's hand. Afterward, the geek rolled the stiff toward the elevators and Nurse Smallet called down to housekeeping. Erico gathered the soiled laundry and stuffed it into the bag hanging from the door. He looked up just as the elevator doors closed.

At the nurse's station, Alberta shook her head and bent to the eternal paperwork. Erico sighed and looked back into the room. There were still Rachael Raddenburg's belongings to collect.

He felt a headache coming on as he opened the small metal clothes locker. Hanging inside were a full-length charcoal cloth coat and a pale blue woman's leisure suit. The suit and coat both were torn and stained, even though they had both been cleaned. When Rachael Raddenburg had blacked out, she had been in the center of a freshly asphalted piece of 37th Street. One car had bumped her as she went down. No one had stopped.

She didn't have a suitcase. Everything went into the white plastic tote bag. No purse. Someone on 37th had paused long enough to grab her purse and her shoes. In the pocket of her coat were some tissues and a plastic daily pill counter containing another failed doctor's impotent ammunition. In the nightstand an untouched cache of hospital issue: rose plastic wash basin, barf tray, cup and pitcher, tissues, body lotion, toothbrush, toothpaste, and mouthwash. Towel and washcloth, both clean. The laundry bag got the towel and washcloth, the rest went into the white plastic tote bag.

And who would rise to claim this pitiful legacy? Rachael had told Alberta that she had a will. There were a few belongings in her apartment, and the shop, of course. In her apartment, though, would be only a few old photos, some well-worn dishes, dented pots, a few things spoiling in her refrigerator, bedclothes dotted with fuzz pills, some costume jewelry, a few threadbare dresses in her closet, an eight-year-old TV, and a tiny collection of old movies to play on her VCR: *Excalibur*; Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood, El Cid*. Rachael Raddenburg's fantasies were of knights, kings, princesses, honor, courage, and courtesy. Doll shops, in addition, were like some restaurants and saloons: the place was what it was because of the owner. The new owner makes it a different place. Raddenburg's Doll Hospital died along with its owner.

Rachael had given the nurses a few names and they had managed to track down two of the woman's grown children. One of them, an attorney in Oregon, couldn't come to his mother's side due to the immense pressures of his schedule. In a few days, perhaps. Perhaps not.

Her daughter, a San Francisco real estate agent, had hung up on the nurse who had called.

Erico Ramos looked down at the empty bed. Whatever did you do, Rachael Raddenburg, to rate such a response from your offspring? What were your crimes? Child abuse? Neglect? Overindulgence? You tried too little? Tried too hard? Failed to stroke an ego or refused to bless a particularly foolish choice? What do your transgressions amount to now that the main concern of those around you is to get you to a drain table before your bladder and bowels relax? Is that what it comes down to: making the least mess on the way out?

He sealed the bag and paused as he mused over the fact that there was something else concerning him. Two days earlier Rachael Raddenburg and he had something in common: a terror of death. Now Rachael had a smile on her lips and death still sat in Erico's pocket.

Had he become a nurse to join the fight against death? If so, he thought, it had been a childish move. He knew who it was who always won in the end. Erico Ramos had learned that lesson four hospitals ago. Everyone who is born is born to die. Every person who studies to heal is studying to lose.

But Rachael Raddenburg had been wide-eyed with terror two nights ago. Last night she had been calm. She had even made a couple of small jokes to cover her embarrassment about having to use the bedpan. He remembered laughing with her, and wondering if she had bent her perception into a sufficient form of denial that she could blot out that this was it: the end; two-minute warning, get your shit together. If it had been denial, it had lasted all of the way through the next day until her death at twenty-two after eight P.M.

The look on her face, however, had been one of genuine bliss. Nurse Ramos had seen the giddy manner, had jokes, and harsh laughter of those attempting to jolly themselves out of the big dark. Eventually the jokes end, the fear fills every corner, and all he could do was give them a hand to hold as he tried to swallow his own terror.

Erico Ramos had seen hospital death in its many forms. He had seen the stare, the frozen scream, lips and tongues bitten through, tears pooled in the corner of an eye, and every now and then indifferent oblivion. All but the last had fought death down to the last gasp from sheer panic. Terrible ways to go, all of them.

He had never before seen the blissful expression that had been on Rachael's face; not until he had come to Northvale General. He had hung onto, fought for, lost, and cleaned up after six losers at Northvale, and all of them but one had carried the same joyous expression. Nurse Ramos had checked out the one exception. Patient Ben Crawford had been in ICU for only three days, then he had died, and without a happy face. In fact, he had bitten his tongue clean off. Rene Boniface, the morgue orderly, had been out that week with a virus.

Weekly staff meeting, Room 1113. Emergency room staff, the attempted malpractice suits stemming from the interstate pileup the previous November had been withdrawn as frivolous. Hang onto your notes, though. One of the patients was looking for a new lawyer. Wilbur Stokes's kidney, as well as Doctor Pinell's work on it, will be featured in the February *JAMA*. Two ICU deaths the past week, both righteous and routine.

Question time.

Erico Ramos had never done anything in those meetings before except answer direct questions. This time he stuck up his hand. "Yeah, I got a question."

"Yes, Erico?" said Doctor Janice Landry, who was chairing the exercise.

"First, what gets said in here stays in here, right?"

Dr. Landry nodded. "Of course. Those are the rules."

Erico leaned forward until his elbows rested upon his knees. He glanced first at Alberta, then back at Dr. Landry. "It's Rene down in the morgue. What can anyone tell me about him? The reason I want to know is that he seems to have some strange kind of relationship with the terminal patients—a strange effect on them."

An actionable hush fell over the room. Doctors, nurses, lawyer, and administrator racing through their memories, reexamining their cases and orders, making certain their asses were covered. The hospital's attorney blanching at the possibility of a big mistake and an even bigger scandal. There was nothing bigger than a serial killer secretly flitting from bed to bed, leaving corpses behind. Remember Donald Harvey, the nurse's aide in some hospital out in Ohio, who snuck around injecting arsenic and cyanide into the IVs? He never would've been caught except that one of his victims had been in a motorcycle accident and the law had required, in such cases, an autopsy.

Rene Boniface? No. That would be nothing but rank projection, thought the attorney. It had nothing to do with the morgue orderly. Not yet. Nothing had been proven. The attorney quickly reviewed the provisions of his own malpractice protection.

"What kind of effect do you mean, Erico?" asked the attorney.

"Look, I've been at Northvale a little over a month. In that time, up in ICU we've had six deaths."

"That's not unusual," said Dr. Landry. "This is a very large facility in a very large city. In addition we're closest to center city and the interstate. We get the majority of the Saturday night stabbings and shootings, the attempted suicides, and the traffic accident trade."

"I'm not talking about the body count, doctor. I'm talking about how they looked when they died."

"Then, what do you mean?"

"Look, one of those deaths, Benjamin Crawford, was like every other death I've ever seen. Maybe even a little more grim. He bit off his tongue, died, and that was that. The other five deaths were different."

"Different how?"

As it came out of his mouth, Erico knew how silly he sounded. "They were smiling."

Laughter interrupted Erico, and when it died down,

Dr. Kramer the staff pathologist asked, "What does this have to do with Rene Boniface?"

"He visited every one of those five when they were still alive. Rene never got to see Crawford."

Dr. Kramer held out his hands. "I don't get it. What are you saying? Are you suggesting that Rene had something to do with causing their deaths?"

"No. No, I'm not."

"Then what are you getting at?" Dr. Kramer faced the room at large. "Rene has been my orderly for more than two years. He is competent, uncomplicating, and he does his work with efficiency, compassion, and respect. I admit he seems a little strange at times, but for Christ's sake, he works in the morgue." He turned back to Erico. "Look, all of this highfalutin' anonymity notwithstanding, this is exactly the kind of thing that can permanently damage someone's reputation. If you've got a charge you can substantiate, then let's hear it. If not, then let's call it a day and get the hell back to work."

What are the charges? Erico asked himself. Rene Boniface smiles. He visits patients. The patients smile. When a patient dies, Rene shows up without being called. Not exactly Jeffrey Dahmer stuff. Erico Ramos shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Sorry. I guess I spoke out of turn."

"Erico," said Dr. Landry, "if you know something, or even suspect something, I need to know. If we're going to make any mistakes around here, I want them to be on the side of caution."

"I don't suppose I have anything more on Rene than that the guy gives me the creeps. All of those patients he visited all died with big happy smiling faces. The one he didn't have a chance to visit just looked dead; cold, gray, sour, dead. And you never have to call the guy when there's someone to be taken down to the morgue. He's always there."

Landry frowned and clasped her hands together. "Euthanasia? Are you suggesting Rene Boniface is killing these patients?"

"No . . . maybe. I don't know. Look, I said I was out of line, and I was. I had a feeling, okay? It bothered me and I said something about it, and now I'm sorry I did."

Dr. Landry held up her hand. "As I said, Erico, with the cost of being sorry so terribly high, being safe is all we can afford."

"This is idiotic," declared Dr. Kramer. "Look, these patients died with smiles on their faces. What's wrong with that? Erico, you have something against happiness? Rene shows up without being called. Did you ever stop to think that someone might've called him and didn't tell you?"

"Why?"

"Maybe they forgot. It's not a crime not to tell you every time someone makes a phone call." He grinned wickedly. "Just maybe everybody's hip to how flaky you're getting about this thing and they're pulling your leg."

Someone began humming the theme from *The Twilight Zone* and another round of giggles made its way around the room.

Erico felt his face getting red. "Okay, doc. But what about him visiting the patients? What's it do to our bedside manner to have a morgue orderly dropping in to

see our terminal patients? Before even we know they're terminally ill, I might add. Two of those patients were expected to recover. Rene visited them anyway. And they died, big happy smiles and all."

Dr. Kramer, an exasperated expression on his face, turned to Dr. Landry. "Janice, I fear young Ramos has gone off the deep end."

"Does Rene Boniface visit the patients?" asked Landry.

"Sure. So do I. So do you. So do all the medical, administrative, and housekeeping staff. So what? A relative, a friend, maybe just some nice person, an old lady or a little kid who could use a little company. What's wrong with that?"

"What Erico said about a morgue orderly dropping in on the patients. Don't you think that might be a shade morbid? He might become something of a death angel sort of thing, frightening the patients. We don't need anything like that."

"Especially in the newspapers," added the attorney.

"Nonsense," said Dr. Kramer. "Rene Boniface has a perfectly respectable job. As for dropping in on patients unannounced, I don't know about the others, but I can certainly speak to his visit with Rachael Raddenburg. She requested him."

"Requested him?" repeated Nurse Ramos.

"That's right. And before you accuse him of lying to me about it, I was the one who took the call from her and passed the message on to Rene. She asked for him by name. Early in the afternoon two days ago, she telephoned and asked for him to come up to her room in ICU."

A week passed and no one seemed to be concerned about the morgue geek, Rene Boniface. Erico Ramos didn't like looking ridiculous, hence he never mentioned the subject again. When he should chance to pass Rene in a corridor, he would look through him or turn the other way. It was true, he argued with himself, that he had been obsessed by Rene and his association with the morgue and the terminally ill patients—obsessed with death; with the fear of death. Erico Ramos had to get at least that honest with himself. It was death and Rene's seemingly friendly relationship with death and the dying that had caught his attention. If he didn't put it away soon, he, not Rene, would be the one who would be asked to leave Northvale. He put it away and did his job.

Two more days later a little girl of thirteen, Alicia Fuentes, was brought in from an auto accident on the interstate. The paramedics had been covered with blood. Alicia's family car had rear-ended a truck carrying an overhanging load of sheet metal and pipe. Alicia's left kidney was crushed, her right kidney severed, her liver shattered, and her spinal cord cut through. Nearly all of her bodily functions needed artificial assistance. Despite the Demerol drip, she was awake, in pain, and she was dying. Her mother, father, and sister hadn't survived.

In theory, if several improbable accidents happened within an extremely narrow time window, if the victims of those accidents were matchable organ donors, and if by some stroke of number magic Alicia could be moved

to the top of the eight-month-long waiting list, the girl might've lived if they could've done the operation that night, providing she had been strong enough to withstand the procedures. None of those improbabilities, however, materialized. There was no well-heelled nationwide TV campaign to come up with organs, waivers, and the green stuff that made everything happen. Not for Alicia Fuentes. There wasn't time enough to get her on *60 Minutes*. Besides, there were lots of little girls dying in the world. No one was making a special place at life's table for them, either. Alicia was just waiting to lie down, mortally speaking.

The night shift again. Erico Ramos stood next to Alicia's bed checking the drip that fed the pain killer into her tiny wrecked body. Without looking at her large brown eyes, he checked the video monitor and the automatic cuff. "Are you having any pain?" he asked automatically, his own feelings frozen from the sheer terror of what the little girl faced.

"No," she whispered.

"You look like you're having some discomfort." Erico kicked himself for saying "discomfort" instead of "pain." Patients knew that it didn't matter what you called it, pain hurts. "Are you sure I can't get you something?"

"Anything more and I'd go to sleep. I don't want to sleep. What's your name?"

"Erico Ramos. I'm one of your nurses tonight."

"Funny," she said, "a man being a nurse."

"Lots of men are nurses. Do you think it's funny for women to be doctors?"

"No. My doctor's a woman. Dr. Landry. Do you know her?"

"Very well. She's a terrific doctor. Can I get you anything? Some ice to suck on? Want me to turn on the TV? You're allowed to have it on as late as you want."

"Is it all right if I call you Erico?"

Erico Ramos looked at the girl's eyes for the first time. They were huge, clear, intelligent, and did not waver from his for a split second. "Sure. You can call me Erico. Is it all right if I call you Alicia?"

"At home they call me Ally. I prefer Alicia, though.

Erico, if I ask you a hard question, will you answer me with the truth?"

It was Erico Ramos's second worst nightmare. Please, the doctors won't tell me. Will I ever walk again? Did my baby live? Can I see my daughter? When the bandages come off, will I be able to see? Erico, am I going to die? The family's keeping secrets from me, the doctor has a yellow streak a yard wide, and the nurses won't talk. Erico, am I going to die?

"I'll do the best I can," he answered, leaving himself a technical loophole. Alicia, however, was too smart for that. She moved her piece and blocked his exit.

Her beautiful brown eyes closed as she frowned. "The best you can do is a lie, isn't it? I want the truth." Check and mate.

"What's your question?"

"My mother, my father"—her voice caught as her eyes opened and filled with tears—"my sister Dolores, are they dead?"

Judgment calls, Erico swore to himself. God, do I hate judgment calls. She was full of painkillers. She ought to be out cold. But she had to be awake. Wide awake. Erico knew those huge eyes could tell if he lied. He didn't want to disappoint her. Also, he didn't want to hurt her any more than she had already been hurt. "Tell me," she insisted.

Erico took her hand in his and nodded. "Yes. They died in the crash."

There was a long pause while Alicia cried. When she calmed a bit, she asked, "Was anyone else hurt?"

"No."

"Are you just guessing?"

"No. No one else was hurt. We would've heard about it if someone else had been brought in. Do you remember the crash?"

"I don't remember it. I was reading a book."

"The paramedics said it was a miracle they got you out alive. They said there's nothing left of the car. I'm really sorry."

Her moist, angry eyes looked up at the ceiling. She had known the answer to her question before she asked it. No one had given her credit for that. The only reason she'd asked the question was to kill that nagging hope that seemed so much more important to adults than it was to children. Before she could get on with whatever remained of her life, certain childish fantasies needed to be put to rest. "I have another question, Erico."

Here it comes, he said to himself. The big one. "Go ahead."

"Am I dying?"

Erico moistened his lips, squeezed her hand, and nodded, surprised as the tears came to his own eyes. He could've fed her the party line: not for a long time yet; why would you say such a thing; a few transplants and you'll be as good as new; that's right, stupid, life's a god-damned sitcom. All you need to do is wait for the obligatory third-act miracle closer followed by all the new things they've figured out to do with corn flakes.

"You're dying, Alicia. God, I wish I could tell you different, but that'd be a lie."

She looked at him, her eyes concerned. "Will you get into trouble for telling me?"

"No, honey," he whispered. "That's my job."

To himself he thought, that's my job. That's my god-damned job. Especially when everyone else is ignoring the subject, avoiding it, hoping that the patient doesn't notice his family's just been wiped out or that he's dying. Perhaps the patient really doesn't want to know.

The big black dragon sitting in the middle of the bed. Everyone knows it's there, but if we ignore it, work around it, and pretend it isn't there, maybe it will just go away. A great comfortable theory, except that patients really do want to know if they're going to die. There is a lot of old business to take care of, even for a little girl. Faces you want to remember, to apologize to, to forgive, to say I love you, even if it's only in one's thoughts.

A lot of times the patient won't ask if he or she thinks answering will make the medical staff uncomfortable. What a pathetic place from which to draw pity, he cursed

to himself. But Alicia wanted to know more than she pitied the staff.

Her tears were dribbling down the sides of her head. No crying. Just the tears, her eyes sad brown oceans. She lifted Erico's hand up to her mouth, kissed it, and held it to her cheek. He could feel the wetness of her tears against the back of his hand. "Thank you, Erico. Thank you for telling me." Her eyes darted back and forth in her head and she squeezed Erico's hand. "I'm so scared."

"I know, honey."

She closed those enormous moist eyes and asked, "One more favor? Please?"

"Sure, honey. Anything."

"I can't reach the telephone. Please call down to the morgue. Extension 446. Ask for someone called Rene and tell him I want to see him. I want to see him right away. Do that for me?"

"How do you know Rene?"

She shook her head. "I . . . I just know. Please call."

Erico realized his mouth was hanging open and he closed it. "Yeah. Sure." He released her hand, walked around the foot of the bed to the nightstand, and picked up the phone. He dialed the morgue and one of the orderlies answered. "Could you send Rene up to ICU, Room 307?"

"He's on his way," answered the orderly.

"Thanks." Erico hung up and looked down at the girl. "He'll be here in a minute."

She was crying. She was scared. Erico Ramos closed his eyes and choked off his own tears. He was scared, too, but for a different reason.

Rene Boniface didn't do anything but sit in a chair next to the girl's bed and hold her hand. That much Erico witnessed. He was called away, however, to bring up a new admission from emergency. The interstate had nailed another one. This time it was an off-duty police officer, Dana Storey, who must've decided his occupation exempted him from the laws of chemistry, biology, and physics. When he had taken his Olds for that flight off the overpass and dived into six lanes of rush-hour traffic, he had a blood alcohol level that looked more like his IQ. As the wheel of justice turned this time, the off-duty officer would live once his stomach and bladder woke up and went back to functioning. Then he could begin detox, rehab, and that long climb back to reality, if he chose. Two of the persons riding in one of the cars he slammed into, however, had no choices. They were dead on arrival.

By the time Erico was finished with Dana Storey, Room 307 was already vacant, the bed stripped, and housekeeping dusting up the floor. The only sign that Alicia Fuentes had ever been there was a crumpled tissue on the floor. There ought to have been a toy, a picture, a paper cutout, a book, a piece of ribbon, something besides a used piece of Kleenex. Soon that was gone, as well.

"Excuse me, Erico." He turned his head and saw Alberta carrying fresh linen for the bed.

He stood out of the way and asked, "What happened?"

"She flatlined a little after nine," came her answer. She unfolded and snapped out the bottom sheet and began cornering and tucking it in. Erico could see Alberta's face. Her eyes were red, but already she was forcing herself to occupy safe mental corners. After all, the girl hadn't been there but a few hours. Hardly enough time to get attached. That's why she's reduced in memory to "she" and "the girl" rather than Alicia. In another hour she'll lose that, too. No longer "the girl," she'll become "the patient" or simply "Tuesday's 307." That's why she "flatlined" instead of "died." Alberta needed to insulate herself from death, too. Find those safe places. Erico, too, looked for those safe places.

Well, she'd been expected to die. That's what Erico had told the girl.

Her.

The girl.

Alicia.

Alicia of the ocean-eyes. It was a clean croak, too. The girl had been all alone in the world. There hadn't been any wailing relatives or loved ones freaking out on the floor. She was even light.

"What'd her face look like?" asked Erico.

Alberta frowned as she looked back at him. "Are you all right, Erico? You're as pale as a sheet."

"The geek. What'd he do?"

"Rene?" A frown crossed Alberta's face. "Don't call him that, Erico. I don't like it. It's unkind. I don't ever want to hear it again."

Erico put his hands into his pockets and cocked his head to one side, his eyes closed. "I'm sorry. What'd he do? Rene Boniface. What'd he do while he was in here?"

"All I saw him do was sit next to her and hold her hand. I don't even think he said anything."

"What was her face like? What did Alicia's face look like?"

Alberta shook out the draw sheet and crossed the bed with it. She stood up, glanced at Erico, and said, "You know what her face looked like." She looked down at the bed and returned to her work. "It's not wrong, you know. What Rene does. It's not wrong."

"I'll know that once I know what the hell it is that he does."

"He put a smile on that little girl's face, Erico. That's what he does." She looked up at him, her eyes filled with angry tears. "That's what he does!"

The morgue was dark, the door closed. It was at the end of a doglegged corridor in the basement level, far from the hospital cafeteria, far from where a civilian could accidentally stumble upon it, helping to keep the secret that death really hadn't been conquered. Erico Ramos pushed open the door and looked inside. It was a minimalist operating room with lights, drain table, sink, supply shelves, and a desk with an automatic coffeemaker brewing upon it. There were files, forms, and paperwork cluttering up the desk between the coffeemaker and the morgue's computer terminal. Beyond the insulated door on the opposite side of the drain table was the cold room. Alicia would be in there, as well as the motorist and the

passenger crushed by Dana Storey's flying Oldsmobile. Perhaps others might be in there, as well. There were the two cancers on the sixth floor, the premature birth on the eighth, and the incredibly old man on the fifth. ICU wasn't the only unit where they died.

Erico felt as though he couldn't breathe. Death was in the room. Its feel, its smell, its clammy presence. It crowded him. Images of skulls, mold-covered hands, spiderwebs, and ancient dust raced through his mind. Gravestones, tombs, black veils, flowers, and organ music. Coffins, satin, ministers, old men and women viewing the remains, counting their own remaining moments.

He remembered his father's face as the dead man rested in his coffin. Hector Ramos's corpse had been brushed, powdered and rouged. Erico had been eleven and he remembered thinking that he had never seen his father look so neat and healthy. He was like a department store dummy taking a nap. He was even wearing a necktie; one that he hated. Everything about the funeral, everything about death, seemed unnecessarily disrespectful, needlessly cruel. Death took no notice of his father's smiles, his angers, his moments of fear, compassion, hope, and love. His father's strengths, his skill as a stone mason, his weakness for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; death cared nothing for any of it. All of those special qualities and moments that had made Hector Ramos who he was were gone, and death didn't even notice.

Death.

Dead.

Gone. The end.

Cold.

Dark

Still and silent.

Erico leaned his back against the wall and slid down until he was squatting, his sobs making him choke for air. "God!" he cried. "God, your rules suck!"

"Erico?"

He turned and started as he saw Rene looking down at him. The man's face was completely cast in shadows, obscuring it. He was carrying a donut and napkin in his hand. Erico felt his heart beating hard enough to thump against his rib cage. "Jesus!"

He pushed himself to his feet and almost leaped into the corridor. Once away from the morgue door, he steadied himself by leaning up against the wall. He took deep breaths and tried to keep his heart from racing.

"Are you all right?"

Erico turned his head and faced Rene. The morgue orderly still had that donut in his hand. "Yeah." He nodded once and took another deep breath. "I'm okay."

"You sure? I can get some help down here if you want. You look like hell."

"I'm okay," snapped Erico. "That place, the morgue. It made me feel like things were closing in on me for a bit. Maybe I have a touch of the flu."

"It's going around."

Erico stood up and glared as he snapped, "It's always going around!" He forced himself to calm down, looked into Rene's eyes, and asked, "You and the girl; when you were in her room, what did you do?"

Rene's face, dark and filled with compassion, became expressionless—wary—as he seemed to back off a bit.

"I visited her. I was only there for a few minutes, then she died. I was sitting next to her the whole time."

"Did you kill her?"

Rene's gaze remained fixed on Erico's face as he slowly shook his head. "No."

"You sure you didn't help her along? Pinch her drip? Dick with the oxygen?"

"I didn't kill Alicia Fuentes. I did nothing to accelerate her death. Perhaps I did help her, but that was limited to holding her hand."

"How did she know to call you, Rene? Why did she have me ring your extension?"

"You'd have to ask her that."

"Well, that's just a little hard to do, now, isn't it?"

Rene shrugged and half turned back toward the morgue. Erico grabbed the man's arm and stopped him. "Then here's something you can answer. How come you didn't need the phone call? You were already on your way up to ICU when I called. How did you know?"

"I just know. I always know." He looked down at Erico's hand and pulled his arm free. Looking at Erico's eyes, he said, "I can't afford not to know." He turned and walked back to the morgue.

Some days passed. Erico concentrated as hard as he could on minding his own business, to no avail. The head of nursing had him moved from the night shift and ICU both. He was now on the morning shift at the rehab unit. Instead of warring with death he had been traded down to the war against better living through chemistry; a harder form of death to see. "Just until you get back on track," Maureen Staples had assured him. Getting back on track was the head nurse's way of saying, Seeketh thou a wig-picker. Picketh thy wig, go forth and freak no more.

Erico hadn't objected to the shift and unit changes. He felt he needed a vacation from death, a vacation from Rene Boniface. Rene had become, in his mind, what Dr. Landry had called an angel of death. The association between death and the morgue orderly had become so strong in Erico's mind that he was beginning to convince himself that Rene *was* death personified: that the morgue orderly was responsible for the deaths on the unit, perhaps even all the deaths in the world.

It was silly; insane. He knew this, and he welcomed his transfer to the rehab unit. Erico needed some distance until he could get his head straight. Because he couldn't think of a single thing about his condition that he was willing to admit to another human being, he decided against the shrink. The wig would not be picked. Instead, he threw himself into his new duties and tried to bury himself with work.

The big players on the rehab unit were the group counselors. Erico dispensed medications three times a day, took vitals, escorted rehab patients to their various appointments for tests, physicals, and other kinds of therapy, and kept patient charts up to date. The rehab nurses, most of whom were recovering addicts themselves, were a breed different from any other kind of nurse he

had ever worked with. By and large they were the most positive, uplifting coworkers he had ever had. They had problems, but they talked about them to each other, without shame, and listened to each other as though they cared. The floor counselors and group counselors were the same. So were most of the patients. Eventually the patients who weren't like that began to disturb Erico.

It began on a Tuesday night just about three months after he had been assigned to the rehab unit. One of the patients came to the counter at the nurse's station while Erico was seated updating a pile of patient charts. "Excuse me? Erico?"

Erico looked up, and he could feel the blood drain from his face as he stared at a death's head. It was a face, not unusually thin, but there was the image of a death's head within the features, almost as though Erico could see through the tissues that covered the skull.

"Erico?" asked the patient. "Are you all right?"

Erico blinked his eyes, rubbed them, and willed the death's-head image from the patient's face. The patient was a boy in his late teens, Pat Nelson. Tall, olive-skinned, trimmed black hair and liquid brown eyes. His eyes reminded Erico of the little girl, Alicia. The image of the death's head would not go away.

"What is it, Pat?"

"Are you all right, man? You look like you seen a ghost."

"I'm all right. What is it?"

The kid shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "If you say so. What I want to know is what to do with my hedding and hook issue. I'm going home today."

Erico leaned back in his chair and frowned at the boy, death's head and all. "What the hell do you mean, you're going home? You've only been here a week."

Pat looked sheepish and turned his head so that he no longer was making eye contact with Erico. "I'm not going to do the whole month. This place isn't for me." It was a death's head talking. It was saying, "I'm terrified. I'm so frightened of death, I'm going right out there and make certain I die."

Death's head. Erico couldn't shake the image. Pat Nelson had bent things to the point where anything would be better than facing life, and eventual death was one piece of life those who lived in the real world all had to face. Pat Nelson was going to die. It was written, literally, all over his face.

"Pat, you know what your odds of recovering are even if you go all the way through treatment and complete it? Maybe one in three. If you quit, your chances are maybe a hundred—a thousand to one. I wish you'd reconsider."

The boy's face reddened slightly and he still refused any kind of eye contact. "I've heard the sales pitch from my counselor, and from about half a dozen members of my group. I really don't think I have a problem. All I really need to do is learn to control my using better."

"Don't try to snow me, Pat. Don't you remember back there in detox? I was there when they pumped your gut out and fought all night to quiet down your heart before it ripped loose from its supports."

"I overdid it one time," answered Pat Nelson. "One

time. Okay, I've learned my lesson, and that's it. I'll never do that again, so don't worry about it. All I need to know is what to do with my bedding and my book issue. The N.A. text and the A.A. Big Book are brand new; hardly been opened."

"I wonder why I already knew that," cracked Erico. Like the rehab nurses kept telling him, if a person wants to recover, you can't say anything wrong. If he wants to die, you can't say anything right. Recovery isn't for those who need it; it's only available for those who want it. "Stuff your sheets and blanket in your pillowcase and leave it on the floor in your room. The books are yours. I suggest you take them home with you and read them."

Later that day housekeeping found Pat Nelson's bedding stuffed in a pillowcase on the floor where he had been told to leave it. Housekeeping also found Pat's book issue in the room's trash can. Nine days later the assistant manager of the Seventh Street McDonald's found Pat Nelson himself dead in the toilet stall in the men's room at the aforesaid mentioned establishment, a few granules of blow still adhering to his upper lip.

The autopsy showed his heart had torn itself to pieces. Erico read the notice of Pat Nelson's death that made it to the rehab unit. It upset him because since then he had seen the death's head in the faces of four more of the rehab patients and one of the nurses.

Erico Ramos went to a psychiatrist and paid a total of one hundred twenty dollars to be told that he had a fear of death. A little on the extreme side, but perfectly normal. The death's heads were a manifestation of his fear in combination with twelve-hour shifts, too much caffeine, and the lifestyle of a lone wolf; he was too isolated; too much into his own head. Pat Nelson's death had been simple coincidence, as were the deaths of the nurse and the four other patients in whose faces he had imagined seeing death's heads. After all, how many had died without such advance advertising? Less caffeine, fewer hours, a little meditation, and a lot of medication.

Erico had spent long enough on the rehab unit to appreciate the risks of treating problems with Valium and other chemical wonders. He destroyed the prescription. Meditation seemed like nothing but a way to play with his nightmares, so he didn't bother with that. He did manage to arrange for fewer hours and he cut out caffeine.

He didn't have any idea what to do about his isolation, his lone-wolf lifestyle. He wasn't dating and he had no close friends or family. He didn't know what good it would do anyway. Friends seemed to be more obligation than comfort. That went doubly so for romantic attachments. It was redoubled for family. For a brief moment he considered splitting the difference and purchasing a kitten, but his landlord didn't allow pets any riskier than a goldfish. Hard to cuddle a goldfish.

He did note that several persons he had known had died recently, none of whom had spotted death's heads in advance. One was a suicide; Mrs. Baum, who worked for the cleaners next door to the apartment house. She had inoperable cancer and had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Erico had seen no death's head in her face.

Roger Stokes, a police officer who lived in the apartment building, had died in his sleep from a massive coronary. There had been no death's head in his face.

Perhaps the wiggicker was right. Imagination, lack of sleep, a preoccupation with the fear of death. Erico decided to take it easy, take care of himself, and ignore the death's heads that he continued to see. After all, anyone who had a head had a skull inside of it. A little outline here, a jutting chin, a cheekbone, the ridge of an eye socket. The suggestions were all about him. It was his imagination that was turning them into death's heads. He forced himself to relax.

One snowy night in late December Erico was driving back to his apartment on the interstate after shopping at the supermarket. In the oncoming lane was a BMW full of merrymakers wending their way from one party to another. Young, modern, and politically correct, they had designated a driver, one of their friends who could not tolerate alcohol. It was he who, after four joints and a line of coke, plowed the vehicle and his mates head-on into the front end of Erico's Mazda. When the fire department, paramedics, and coroner showed up to sort out the pieces, the merrymakers were on their way to the county morgue while Erico Ramos was unconscious, bleeding internally, and on a fast chopper heading toward Northvale General.

Dread.

Before he opened his eyes, Erico was filled with horror. He remembered the accident, the car's dashboard and steering post folding into his abdomen, the shower of glass, the stunning blow through the back of the seat into his spine that caused him to lose consciousness. He knew he was in an ICU. The heart monitor was on audio, he could feel the automatic cuff on his upper left arm, the IV taped to the back of his left hand, the blood oxy clip on the tip of his index finger, the catheter inserted into his bladder.

He caught his breath.

It was there in the room with him.

Death.

The nightmare he had fought for so long and from which he had tried to flee.

Death.

Quickly he recited to himself the Platinudes of Acceptance: Everyone dies. No one has a lock on the next ten minutes. Who does Erico Ramos think he is to be granted immortality? Everyone eventually faces their final moment. How will Erico measure up? Be a man, Erico. There are people watching. They're not only watching, they're taking extensive notes.

How will Erico Ramos go out? What will those who see him die think of his departure? If I must die, thought Erico, I want to do so with dignity, although dignity is a tough thing to manage with a piece of plastic stuck up your dick.

The automatic cuff began squeezing his arm as the tiny air compressor grumbled into his left ear with the sound of a monotone machine fart. All of his vitals would be up on the video screen, but he wouldn't be able to

see the screen unless he could face it. He could feel the sandbags against both sides of his head. Broken neck? He wiggled the fingers of his right hand and the toes of his left foot, vaguely pleased that he wasn't paralyzed.

The back of his head hurt, and he could feel that the pain had been numbed by painkillers. But his breath was short. It was as though icy fingers were gently gripping his throat, squeezing, cutting off the flow of oxygen.

Erico knew he was getting enough oxygen. He could feel the nosepiece hissing into his nostrils, smelling of stale plastic, drying out his nasal membranes. The icy fingers were nothing more than his fears. Fears of death, fears of knowledge. Ignorance is not only bliss; at times it's a bloody necessity.

Still, his breath was short; panic began gnawing at his resolve to lie still. He forced himself to lie motionless. After all, he might not be dying. It's possible. Ripping out his IV and trying to run from the room might kill the one chance had of staying alive, and staying alive was the point of all of this expensive equipment, wasn't it? Besides, he still had that piece of plastic stuck up his dick.

Nonetheless, Erico's cosmic accountant was in there hard at work making up the final tally. That *was* your life, Erico. What had you made of it? Nursing school when you could have been a physician or a great research scientist? Hell, thought Erico, I did save some lives and helped to save many more. The fleeting nature of this accomplishment, however, was never clearer. The law was still on the books: everyone dies. No one ever lost money by betting on death's eventual victory.

There were other things, though. A childhood that was lonely, save for a brief flirtation with a street gang. No one, nothing, left behind. Not even a kitten.

That was the fear of death, he thought. Finding out your ticket's expired and you hadn't yet had your turn on the ride. Dying without having lived. He could feel the tears running down the sides of his head. It was no longer possible for Erico to remain confined within his own head, and he opened his eyes. Because of his tears the images were smeared, but he blinked them away. Above was the acoustic tile set into the room's false ceiling. A corner of one of the tiles was cracked. There was a brown spot on another. Coffee? Feces? Blood?

He looked down and to his left. Next to his hand, hanging from the raised bed rail, was the combination call button and TV control. Beneath his wrist were the leads leading to the contact patches attached to his chest. The TV, hanging above the foot of the bed, was off. He looked up and to his left and saw the edge of the video monitor's side. The screen was pointed toward the foot of the bed and he couldn't view it. There was a clock on the wall and it registered a little after nine in the evening. He pushed the call button, feeling somehow ashamed for doing so.

A face appeared in the doorway. Female. Unfamiliar. "Hi. Mr. Ramos? I'm your nurse for tonight. My name's Helen. How are we doing?"

"Your half of us seems to be doing very well," answered Erico, his voice sounding strange in his ears. "I still don't know anything official about my half."

"Well, you certainly sound better." She checked the video monitor, cycled the blood pressure cuff, and took a note or two. "I can get you a little broth, if you're hungry. How about a ginger ale?"

"Nothing. How am I doing?"

"Well, your blood pressure and pulse are very good. Are you feeling any pain?"

"Not overwhelming. My head mostly. I'd like to know my condition."

Helen's face showed the nightmare. Judgment call. Tell me, nurse, am I dying? She reviewed her options and selected the elsewhere road. "The doctor'll have to tell you in the morning. I can say that you've been in a bit of a scrape, but we're taking care of you now. Your neck's been injured, so for the time being you have to remain on your back. If you need help or a bedpan, just push the button." And, before the waves of her final audio communication landed upon Erico's eardrums, she was long gone.

Of course by not answering his question she had answered it, changing Erico's question from "What?" to "How long?" He closed his eyes as a chill traveled the length of his body.

He didn't want to travel the extent of his fears again. He opened his eyes, reached for the control, and turned on the television. After running around the available channels twice, the amount of time he had left and what he was doing with it began to plague his thoughts. If he only had seconds or minutes left, did he want to go out listening to *Jeopardy* or reruns of *Cheers*? High school basketball? Oprah and women married to midget mimes with body odor?

He punched off the set and took a deep breath, letting it out as a ragged sob. Another face appeared in the door. Hesitant. Dark. "Rene."

"Yes."

"What're you doing here?"

"I'll go, if you want."

"No. No, don't go. I wanted to see you—talk to you. I just didn't know it." A pause. "How did you know it?"

Rene smiled sadly. "I told you before, man. I just know." He entered the room and stood at the right side of Erico's bed, looking down at him. His usually smiling face carried a grave cast. "How can I help you?"

"Do you know what shape I'm in?"

"No. I just got up here. Did you ask the nurse?"

"I asked her and she told me squat."

Rene nodded. "That tells you something."

Erico closed his eyes. "Yeah. About her as well as me." The fear that was choking him made his eyes jump open. "I'm scared."

Rene Boniface took Erico's right hand in both of his and held it. "I know, man."

"I'm so damned scared of dying I can hardly breathe. What did you do to those people? Rachael Raddenburg, Alicia Fuentes, all of them?"

Rene glanced down, his face troubled. "I have a gift. Maybe it's a curse. Anyway, I took them to death."

"What?"

"Death. Dying. I showed them what it's like. I can

take you there. I can show you it's nothing to fear. In fact, it's the most wonderful thing you'll ever experience." He shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "That's all I do."

"That's it? No catches? No money?"

Rene nodded. "Oh, there's a catch; a payment."

"What?"

"If I do this for you, Erico, you agree to share your death with me."

"Share my . . . death?" The fear climbed into Erico's throat, the physical sensation of being strangled. "How do I share my death with you?" he whispered. "And why? What do you get out of it?"

Rene squeezed Erico's hand. "Like I said, man, it's the most wonderful feeling you've ever had."

"I don't get it."

"You'll see. And don't worry about how I do it. I could take it. If I wanted I could take your death and share it without your permission. But I don't do that. I ask first."

Erico tried to shake his head, but the sandbags stopped the gesture. His neck muscles seemed to scream. "I don't care how. I just don't want to be afraid anymore. I just don't want to be afraid."

Still gripping Erico's fingers with his left hand, Rene reached back with his right hand, pulled up a chair, and sat down. "We have a deal?"

"Yes."

Rene Boniface nodded, closed his eyes, and held Erico's hand with both of his.

Fear comes as fear; dark as dark; pain as pain.

Death comes smooth, warm, and silent.

Feet of silk, arms of soft black cotton.

Erico felt his headache fall away, the aches and tension in his limbs, in his chest, his abdomen, his head and neck, it all fell away. He could see no lights, no colors, but he could see hope, joy, a peculiar tension that was an anticipation of something splendid about to happen.

"This was Rachael's death," said Rene, his voice speaking to Erico as from within Erico's own mind.

There was a glow, a hazy blue light high above her. Rachael could feel her arm reach up toward the light, although she could not see her own hand. She couldn't see it, yet it was not strange to her, for she understood everything.

All that had been anxiety, all that had been worry, all that had been fear. Nothing. Foolish, silly. It would have been laughable, save the reality that Rachael now understood all. Hence she understood herself, her fear, and the fears of the entire universe. The answers to all of the questions ever asked reposed within her memory. Not just her questions; everyone's questions. All that was unimportant fell away. All that was important became understood. Every cell of her body became aware and understood its place and worth to the organ, the body, the universe, the soul of Rachael Raddenburg.

Beyond the light, the warmth, perhaps its source, was the end, the beginning, the source, the center, an event/power/entity/state of such towering consequence, attaching any name to it diminished it. Next to it any conception of god that had ever existed became as nothing.

It was something of love.

The love was for Rachael, and because she understood everything in the universe, Rachael knew that she was worthy of the love. It was hers for eternity.

Glistening billows of down-soft diamonds parted and folded her within as every particle of her joined with every particle of the universe and forever became both the mother and the child of existence.

The blinding light dimmed, the warmth diminished, and Erico opened his eyes to see Rene looking back at him. Rene's face looked drawn, empty. Erico still felt the understanding, the meaning, of the experience. He had been gone for years; perhaps decades. "Rene?"

The morgue orderly nodded, his eyes still closed.

"Was that God?"

Even as he asked it, Erico could feel his understanding collapsing, his life of answerless questions returning, the love dissolving in a bath of petty doubt and self-recrimination. The clock on the wall showed the time to be seventeen after nine. "I shouldn't've asked," said Erico. "I shouldn't've said anything."

Rene sighed as his face grew a patient smile and he squeezed Erico's hand. "You're not dead. The things you see and hear, the things you feel and think begin cluttering up what you experienced. How do you feel?"

"Feel?"

"Yes. Your fear. How do you feel?"

Erico looked within himself. There was something he felt. It was the residue of a great peace slowly being eroded by a desperate sense of loss. The fear of death, though, was gone. There were still some things that remained from his experience. He felt relaxed, confident, worthy of love.

Of course it had been Rachael Raddenburg's feelings he had experienced. *She* had been the one who had been worthy of love; not Erico. The more he teased at it, the faster the feelings left him. "I can't stay like this, Rene. I'm not scared of death. It's something worse. The way I felt. I want to feel that way again." Erico squeezed Rene's hand. "It's leaving me, man. I don't want to lose it."

"It'll come soon enough, Erico."

He closed his eyes as he mentally nodded. Soon enough. Death would come soon enough. A shard of the understanding he had experienced remained in his memory. It was the knowledge of what an incredibly improbable gift life is. Any life; his life. There was no way to cast it aside now that he knew the truth.

Peace. A feeling of serenity—that everything was exactly where it was supposed to be—washed over him just as he relaxed and drifted off to sleep, the morgue orderly still holding his hand.

The next morning when Erico Ramos awakened, he was hungry. When his doctor, Janice Landry, came by her rounds, Erico was proclaimed "guardedly stable." There were setbacks, periods of progress, and a series of operations. In three weeks, however, Erico was allowed to sit up. In another four days he was, with the aid of a walker, allowed to go to his room's bathroom on his own.

Six days after that he was allowed to take a shower. In another week he was discharged and continued physical therapy on an outpatient basis.

Although he was grateful to have pulled through, each moment he lived was touched by the sense he was living on borrowed time, that he had touched something wondrous that was now gone, and that he owed Rene Boniface a death. After Erico got his old job in ICU back, he would at times see Rene visit a patient. The patient would always say that he or she had requested the morgue orderly, usually the patient died within a few days, and the remains took that last ride down to the cold room, big smile and all. Perversely, Erico envied them their smiles.

Then came almost three weeks during which no one at Northvale General died. It was nothing special; just a statistical lull in deaths by alcohol and other drugs, fatal traffic accidents, various diseases, and old age. Just as there are statistical peaks, there are valleys as well. For whatever reason, at that point in time, there were no death experiences for the morgue orderly to collect.

There was something about it all that disturbed Erico. Perhaps it was the old debt he owed Rene; perhaps it was the fact of what Rene Boniface was: a spiritual ghoul who fed upon death. A very hungry ghoul.

It was the night shift in early summer, the warm breezes carrying the scent of honeysuckle past the sealed windows, Erico sat in the almost deserted cafeteria sipping at a cup of decaf until Rene Boniface came for his usual mid-shift donut. As he went through the line, paid for his donut, and headed for the door, the morgue orderly avoided any eye contact with Erico.

"Rene," called out Erico.

Rene stopped and turned toward him. His face was drawn, his eyes wide and frightened. "What is it?"

Erico held out a hand toward the opposite side of the cafeteria table. "Have a seat."

"You don't like me, man. You never did. You needed me, once. But you don't like me."

"I want to talk."

The tip of Rene's tongue nervously moistened his lips. He glanced down at the napkin and donut in his hand, then dropped into the seat facing Erico and draped an arm over the back of the chair. "Okay, what?"

Erico glanced down at his coffee cup. "Look, maybe I wanted to thank you for what you did for me."

"You're welcome. Can I go now?"

Erico slowly shook his head as he stared at his coffee cup. One thing he had learned from his time on the rehab unit was that the only way to say it was to say it. He lifted his gaze until he was looking directly into Rene's eyes. "You need it, don't you? I don't pretend to understand much about this, but you need it."

Rene's eyes narrowed. "Need it? Need what?"

"Death—not death, but those feelings. How a person feels when he dies. You need that, don't you? You get off on it."

"Man, you are poking into something that is none of your business."

Rene began standing, but Erico placed his hand on the morgue orderly's arm. "Wait. Hear me out."

Rene settled back into his chair but withdrew his arm. "I'm listening."

"Look, I guess I feel like I do owe you something. You helped me when I was so afraid I might've died from the fear alone. The deal was I'd share my death with you, and I haven't come across."

"You will someday."

Erico sat back in his chair. "Is that a threat?"

"No. Just a reminder of mortality. Everyone dies."

"Okay. But look at you right now. It's been twenty days since you've had your fix, right? No one's died here in almost three weeks. It's getting to you, isn't it?"

"You're calling me a junkie?"

Erico nodded. "It's true, isn't it? Just like a late-stage addict, you need it. You need it just to feel normal. And you haven't had any for a long time."

Rene moistened his lips again and looked down at the arms that were folded across his chest. "I helped you, man. I helped them all. What's so bad about that?"

"Great for them. Great for me. But what about you? Look at yourself. You look like any strung-out cokehead getting ready to do something desperate to get his shit."

Rene bit at the inner skin on his lower lip as he looked at a point in space. "Erico, man, it's not like that with me. I can control it. I told you before, I always ask. I never took anyone's feelings, and I never killed anyone to get my fix, as you call it. If I was willing to do that, then I'd be down on Skid Row prowling among the homeless. All I do is share what death feels like with those who need it and share their deaths when they happen—*naturally*. I don't kill anyone."

"Look, Rene, you need help. Besides, what you can do is real special. Maybe you can make some important contribution to science or medicine. With—"

"What I do, Erico, everyone can do. You too." Upon saying that, Rene Boniface stood and pushed back the chair, picked up his donut, and left the cafeteria.

Code blue, code blue.

Stat time. Lights flashing, crash wagon rolling, an ominous flat tone from Room 324, the ICU nurses quietly and efficiently hurrying through their well practiced routine: strip, drip, ventilation, clear the mouth of obstructions, insert the air passage, blow, pump, pump, pump, pump, blow—

"Wagon over here. Let's move it. Clear." Calm in the doctor's voice. Old hand. The whump of multiple volts passing through still living tissue, the muscles contracting and relaxing, lifting a middle-aged carpenter named Pete Midori from the bed, going on the ride he paid for with a lifetime of Winstons and saturated fats.

Some scrambled tones for a moment, settling down to a steady bip, bip, bip.

"Sinus rhythm."

"Well, that was easy."

Orders for meds, a chest X-ray, this and that. Once the patient was stabilized and the others had left, Erico noticed that the man's eyes were open. Open wide. He stood next to the man's side, took his hand, and looked down into the man's face.

The death's head was there, grinning back through the man's fear.

"You're all right for now, Pete," said Erico.

The man gripped Erico's hand with surprising strength. "Help me," he whispered. "Oh, please God, help me."

The ancient enemy: the fear of death. A strange feeling of need and power, of wealth and longing, came over Erico; a vision of dangerous paths through newly opened gates. Erico Ramos looked down at face of death and said, "Maybe I can help." He closed his eyes and entered the deepest pools of his soul.

Fear comes as fear; dark as dark; pain as pain.

Death comes smooth, warm, and silent.

Feet of silk, arms of soft black cotton.

There was a glow, a hazy blue light high above them. Rachael could feel her arm reach up toward the light, although she could not see her own hand. She couldn't see it, yet it was not strange to her, for she understood everything.

"What is this?" asked Pete Midori.

"It's a death," answered Erico. "The death of a woman named Rachael."

They traveled Rachael's path, understood all and defeated the fears of the universe. They possessed the answers to all of the questions ever asked. All that was unimportant fell away. Every cell of their bodies became aware and understood its place and worth to the organ, the body, the universe, the soul.

The light, the center, the power without name.

Love.

Eternity.

Glittering billows of down-soft diamonds parted and folded them within as every particle of them joined with every particle of the universe and became both the mother and the child of existence.

Erico felt chilly and desolate as he opened his eyes and looked down upon the joyful face of Pete Midori. He released the man's hand and felt even more forsaken. "Thank you," said the carpenter. "You're an angel. You came to me when I was afraid. I don't understand it, but thank you. I was so scared. But I'm not frightened now. How can I ever thank you?"

The image of the carpenter swam before him as Erico looked through his tears. "Yes," he whispered as fresh caverns of despair yawned beneath his feet. "There's something you can do. If you should die, please share your death with me. Then I can pass it on to whoever needs it."

What was the knowing look in the man's face? Secret knowledge? Suspicion? Or only concern. Erico couldn't get over the feeling that Pete Midori knew exactly what was happening. "Yes," said Pete quietly. "Sure." Erico looked up to see Rene Boniface standing in the room's doorway. The man's face was desperate, hungry. "This one," said Erico through clenched teeth, "is *mine*!"

The morgue orderly studied Erico's eyes for a moment, nodded, and headed back toward the elevators. ♦

Home Art

William John Watkins

He was lying on one side in the fetal position, with his hands wedged between his knees, between the Kennedy rocker and the sliding glass door leading onto the living-room balcony. At first, I thought he was remarkably lifelike even from the foyer.

And the detail was extraordinary: the battered hat, the gray hood underneath with the black shoelace drawstring, the stained car coat the color of off-season tweed and motor oil, the bluish baggy pants held up with a piece of rope with a pair of red long johns showing through a rip in the knee, and workboots that curled up at the toes. They'd



Illustration by Pat Morrissey

even put in the dirt crusted under the fingernails and the white stubble above the straggly white beard with two gray drool stains.

It was remarkable, I felt as if I could almost smell the cheap wine and the urine. And then he coughed.

It was a long, hacking cough that jerked him out of his position, but he resumed it as soon as the coughing stopped. He gave me a toothless smile and a small nod and then closed his eyes again. I felt like he was a workman telling me to go see the foreman if I had any complaints. I knew it was Margaret's doing.

She was where she usually is, sitting on the rattan chair on the bedroom balcony talking on the cellular. I stormed into the bedroom, threw my briefcase on the bed, and went right out onto the balcony. It's a big balcony for a condo so far uptown, and she always sits on the far end of it looking into the sunset even though there are two huge condos between her and the setting sun. She had two wine spritzers on the little rattan table, as she usually does when I get home, and she hung up almost as soon as she saw me.

"There's a man lying in our living room," I said. "I suppose you know that."

She said, "No, dear, there's an *objet d'art* lying in the living room."

"Art," I said, "does not cough!"

"Art," she said, "can do anything."

"That is a derelict!" I said.

"Homeless person," she corrected. "And it is not a homeless person, it is art. I bought it at the Trundle Gallery in Soho."

Margaret has an appalling lack of proportion when it comes to fashion. "You cannot *buy* human beings," I reminded her.

She seemed indignant that I should challenge her on such a minor point. "You certainly *can*," she said, "if they agree to it. Look at all those professional athletes." She had a point, but it didn't alter anything. "A person cannot be art," I said.

She rolled her eyes the way she does when I'm being "particularly difficult." "It's performance art," she said.

That made me rethink my position. I had been a bit rash. It was Friday night, and she did have a party scheduled. Her parties are where style starts, and she's usually frantic from Wednesday on if she hasn't found something no one else knows about yet. She had probably hired this performance artist to dress up as a homeless person *nee* derelict and lie around during the party. Knowing Margaret, he would probably get up occasionally and insult the guests, or read to them from *Das Kapital* or the authorized Reagan biography.

"I wish you would tell me these things ahead of time," I said. "I thought he was a real dere . . ." She gave me a frosty glance. ". . . homeless person." I tried to mollify her. "He's very authentic."

She looked like she was going to work herself into another migraine explaining fashion to me. "It *was* a homeless person," she said. "Now it's art."

That made me suspicious again. "Exactly when did he ascend to the level of art?" I asked.

"Why, when I bought it, of course." She gave me that look that said it was useless explaining anything to me.

"When you engaged him for the evening?" I said.

"Don't you listen?" she said. "When I *bought* him." She said the words very slowly, enunciating the way you do when you have to explain something to Esmerelda, our occasional cleaning woman.

I believe there are certain things which Margaret does just to raise my blood pressure, and I believed the derelict was one of them. I said, "You cannot sell a human being. Not even the Trundle Gallery can sell a human being."

"Don't be tiresome," she said. "They'll be selling them all over New York within a month. The city will probably start selling them. They have thousands."

"And then what?" I said. "We'll *buy* a welfare mother to keep in the kitchen, and a junkie to give to our friends the next time one of them has an apartment-warming?"

"Don't be sarcastic," she said. "You know you don't understand anything but business." She made it sound as if all "business" was the same and *anyone* could understand business, while only the really top-rate minds understood fashion, style, and art. It was true that I was no match for her when it came to any of those.

I knew when I was out of my depth; I retreated. "All right, but he's out of here immediately after the party."

"Oh, no," she said. "I *bought* it. It's ours."

I misunderstood her so frequently that I usually repeat the unbelievable things to her just to make sure. "Are you telling me that that filthy old man is going to lie in our living room stinking of wine and urine until he becomes *passee*?"

"Except on Thursdays," she said. "And of course, during his meals."

"He's going to *eat* here?" I said.

"You certainly don't expect him to eat out on what the gallery's giving him," she said.

"What is the gallery giving him?" I asked, but before she could answer that, a more pressing question came to mind. "What *did* you pay for him?"

She looked like I'd been snooping in her checkbook again. "Eight thousand dollars, if you must know," she said. "But they'll be going for fifteen within a week, and probably fifty for an original like this one by the end of the month."

"And how much is the gallery giving him?" I said.

"Five hundred, I believe," she said. "But they only give it to him at twenty a week or he'd spend it all on booze and forget to show up again."

She's rarely wrong about fads, and for the briefest moment I considered the profit potential in the park down the street. If she was right, we could turn almost a million dollars profit on just twenty of them, and there had to be a hundred of them within walking distance. I could find twice that many on my way to work and back. I had myself convinced it was for their benefit—a safe, beautiful, comfortable place to stay, three elegant meals a day, and spending money. What more could they ask? But the flaw was equally apparent. Anybody who wanted

one could strike a deal with his own for far less than fifty thousand, probably for twenty-five a week.

She could see the wheels working behind my eyes. "Of course," she said, "you could only get fifty thousand for an authentic one."

I knew exactly what she meant. "And only a gallery could authenticate them?" She nodded. "I wonder how you would get one signed," I said.

"Well," she said, "if you had your own line, you could always tattoo them."

"Tattooing," I said. It seemed plausible to me. Certainly for an extra ten most of them would agree to have their lips tattooed like horses.

But there must have been some incredulity in my voice, because she was very defensive. "It's better than branding them," she said.

"The Trundle Gallery brands them?" I said.

"I'm sure I didn't look," she said. She gave me that arch of the eyebrow that said it was offensive even to ask.

The thought of pulling down the old man's lip to look for a tattoo was bad enough, but the idea of a body search looking for a brand was downright disgusting. I could see why she was so upset. It seemed to me you'd have to make the trademark prominent, so your guests could check it out when they thought you weren't look-

ing. It occurred to me that some version of the King's Notch—not cutting a piece out of the ear the way they did with Elizabethan criminals, of course, but perhaps a number or a signature behind the right ear—would do. Discreet enough for the discerning but accessible enough for the inquisitive.

I must admit, I rather warmed to the idea, but I wasn't completely enthusiastic until I heard Leona Helmsley saying goodbye to Margaret at the door. She said, "Margaret, my dear, you've raised tackiness to an art form! You simply *must* tell me where I can get one."

Margaret said, "I'll have John give you a call on Monday."

That was six months ago. I must admit I thought the bottom would fall out in two, but we've sold over five thousand so far and there's no signs of a downturn. Of course, there *have* been problems. You can hardly find a good homeless person on the streets any more, and you have to go all the way to Jersey to find one who isn't just an out-of-work actor. And of course, there are the cheap imports, but we're starting a new line of elderly indigents in a week or so, and we're thinking of opening a sideline in catatonics. I wanted to draw the line there, but Margaret insisted they'll be the pet rocks of the Nineties. And Margaret is never wrong when it comes to fashion, art or style. ♦

About the Authors

When **Sasha Miller** isn't writing, she spends a lot of time as an instructor for the Online Writers' Workshop, part of the Science Fiction Forum on CompuServe. Now that "Bottle-Hadji" has been published, she has another lesson to share with the workshop members—a lesson in the value of persistence and flexibility.

When we saw "Bottle-Hadji" originally, we sent it back; it didn't seem like the best possible story that could have been told with the elements she was using. Undaunted, Sasha worked with the manuscript some more and then asked us if we wanted to see a revised version. Our answer was yes, and our verdict the second time was a positive one. It's always gratifying—for the editor as well as the writer—when things work out this way.

Barry B. Longyear has been turning out a lot of top-quality short stories in the last couple of years, and this magazine has been a direct beneficiary of that increased output. "The Death Addict" is his fifth story

in these pages in a little more than a year; his most recent prior appearance was with "Old Soldiers Never Die" (March 1993).

William John Watkins says he's been devoting a lot of time to verse lately, and recently made his 300th poetry sale. But he also manages to turn out some crisp pieces of prose every so often, of which "Home Art" is our most recent example.

Lucius Shepard has few peers when it comes to vivid, imaginative storytelling. That fact is borne out in "A Personal Matter," which is one chapter from his new novel, *The Golden*. If you think you've seen every possible type of vampire story, think again—and then go find a copy of this book.

Carrie Richerson has accumulated some impressive credentials in her short career. Her first published story will be in DAW's *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, and she is on the ballot for the John W. Campbell Award

for Best New Writer of 1991–92. "By the Waters of Lethe We Sat Down and Wept" is her third published piece and her sixth sale in the genre.

"I know of nothing about my life that would interest a perfect stranger," says **Mark Noe**. "which is perhaps why I turned to fiction." He seems willing to let "The Garden of the Blue Dragon" speak for itself—which it does quite well.

Sandra Rector and **P M F Johnson** have been successful writers in other venues as individuals—but when they write fiction, they collaborate. The wife-and-husband team has sold stories to three anthologies, and now "A Dwelling in the Evening Air" marks their first professional SF magazine sale.

George Zebrowski brings this issue to a close with the conclusion of "Behind the Stars," in which young Max Sorby rediscovers the truth of that age-old adage, "There's no place like home." ♦

A Personal Matter

From the author's forthcoming novel, "The Golden"



Lucius Shepard

Other rooms of the castle's upper levels, like the cavern and the marble plain, came complete with occupants whose presence seemed a function of design, or who at least appeared to be on display. In one of these they encountered a pitiful old man chained to a wall, surrounded by scraps of gristly meat and piles of feces, who would break into a merry nonsense song whenever they came within ten feet of him, and would abruptly cease his singing when they moved farther away than ten feet, as if an internal alarm were triggered by this exact proximity. In another they found a black mastiff with a medallion of red gold about its neck who stared at them and panted; in another a lion slept beneath a rose tree whose petals were green glass and whose blooms were carved of carnelian. In a room with a long rectangular pool filled with bright water and murals on the walls depicting pale violet skies and distant snow peaks and graceful buildings with Doric columns

Illustration by Rori Walotsky

and peristyles, there were three beautiful women so involved in a sapphic tryst that not even Beheim's shouts could gain their attention. In a small chapel, its ceiling decorated with frescoes in the style—if not by the hand—of Michelangelo, a bearded man lashed to a cross spoke in a lectoral tone in a language that Alexandra identified as archaic Hebrew; now and then he would burst out laughing. In what had once been an aviary, a room littered with broken screens and rusted cages and birdlime, thousands of carrion beetles were feasting on the carcass of a huge and unidentifiable animal. In a room whose walls and ceiling were tented with black silk, a grossly fat woman lay naked on a canopied black bed, playing a game whose counters were tiny bones with ornate silver inlays; her opponent was a swarthy, emaciated man no more than eighteen inches tall, who sat on the edge of the bed, for the most part gazing in horror at the pack of little yapping white dogs that stood on their hind legs and pawed at the coverlet, trying to get at him.

There were, Alexandra said, dozens of such rooms, perhaps hundreds. Beheim would have liked to investigate them all, for he thought they might yield clues that would illuminate hitherto uncataloged facets of the Patriarch's character and thus serve to increase his comprehension of the Family; however, time was short, and they proceeded on past these rooms toward one in which Alexandra believed they would find Mikolas de Czege, the younger brother of Buka de Czege, who was patriarch of that branch. As the Valeas and the de Czeges were feuding, she was leery of confronting Mikolas, not because she feared him—she claimed she did not—but because she did not want to exacerbate the feud. "Don't let him bait you into anger," she cautioned him. "You'll never learn anything that way." Given the reputation of the de Czeges, Beheim himself was none too eager to interview Mikolas; but once he had passed this test, he thought, the worst would be behind him, and so he went forward with, if not confidence, then something of a hopeful frame of mind.

One wall of the long, narrow room where they found Mikolas was gray, with strips of peeling wallpaper hanging down and set with tall, narrow windows; behind the glass of each were powerful lanterns from which chutes of chalky counterfeit sunlight spilled onto the rough wooden floor. Like winter light, it pointed up the general disrepair and made the space it lit seem emptier, more desolate. Three children, two boys and a girl dressed in rags, all with dirty blond hair, listless and pale, all approximately eleven or twelve years old, were sitting beneath the window farthest from the door, staring into nowhere; beside them was a solitary straight-backed chair upon which some clothing and a towel were heaped. The other walls, also peeling and gray, were windowless, and from pegs thereon were suspended a variety of weapons: swords, whips, maces, spears, daggers. At the center of the room was a black pole with two buttons mounted on it that ran up into a box of white metal on the ceiling, and a man-sized dummy of pale, heavily grained wood with a saber bolted to its

hand. Its head was a long, faceless oval, pointed at each end, something insectile about the shape, and it attached to a thinnish neck; its body was scarred and nicked; a red heart was painted on its chest, and wires ran from its limbs to a complex arrangement of cables and tracks that converged upon the box on the ceiling and permitted the dummy to move about the room, even into the farthest corners. Whenever Mikolas attacked, the dummy would parry and then make a rickety-looking yet effective counterattack. After watching from the doorway for a while, studying the box and the wires, Beheim could not determine how the mechanism worked. There must be, he concluded, a device within the metal box that translated Mikolas's thrusts and parries into appropriate reactions on the dummy's part, but such a device would need be of unheard-of sophistication, and he could not begin to imagine its essentials.

Mikolas was a short, burly man, apparently in his middle twenties, with blacksmith's arms and a brutish, heavy-jawed face; thick stubble shadowed his cheeks. His black hair, which was cut like a monk's, was for the moment hidden beneath a studded metal cap, and he wore a padded tunic and leggings. Each time he swung his sword, he emitted a piggish grunt. Sweat poured down his reddened face. As he circled the dummy, it seemed he must have spotted Beheim and Alexandra standing in the doorway, but his concentration was so fierce as to admit no other sight apart from his mindless opponent, for he did not notice them until Alexandra, growing impatient, called out his name. He looked toward them, startled, then ducked away from the dummy's slash, receiving a glancing blow on the side of his metal cap that sent him reeling. He leaped to the pole, pressed the top button, and the dummy came all disjoined and hung limply.

"Trying to kill me, Alexandra?" Mikolas laughed and walked a few swaggering paces toward them; he removed his helmet and sailed it across the room in the general direction of the three children, none of whom appeared to notice. "You'll have to do better than that."

She gave no reply.

"Who's that with you?" Mikolas asked, peering at Beheim; he began unbuttoning his padded tunic.

"My name is Beheim. I've been sent—"

"Oh, right! I've got no time for this shit!" Mikolas shrugged out of the tunic, revealing a massive chest as thickly furred as a bear's; he started to unsnap his leggings. "I didn't do it, all right? Not that I wouldn't have enjoyed a drink or two from the blonde bitch. But I never had the chance. Maybe next time." He shucked off the leggings and stood naked before them, grinning apishly at Alexandra. "What do you think, cousin? A hell of a man, aren't I? Come on home with me, and I'll give you a fuck you won't forget."

Alexandra regarded him with unalloyed malice. "You'd best put your toy away," she said. "It appears all that exercise has made it shrivel."

"Oh, ho!" Mikolas shook his head as if in an excess of mirth.

"I'm afraid I have to ask you some questions," Beheim said.

Mikolas scowled at him; then, in mocking imitation, said, "I'm afraid I have to ask you some questions." He snorted in amusement. "I'll just bet you're afraid. Maybe if you stopped hiding behind her skirts, you'd learn to act like a man."

Beheim restrained himself, examined his notes. "You claim to have gone hunting with your brother the night of the murder. Exactly where did you hunt?"

Mikolas's scowl deepened, but after a moment he made a petulant noise and said, "Hell, I'll answer your questions. I've got nothing to hide. Come on." He led the way toward the chair and the seated children, his hairy buttocks jiggling. "We went hunting in the depths of the castle. That's where I picked up these three." He gestured at the children with his sword. "Make a nice set, don't they?" He propped his sword against the wall and began toweling himself dry. "I like them so much, I've given them names. This one"—he indicated the smaller of the boys, who looked to be asleep—"is Breakfast. This one here"—he tapped the second boy on the top of the head, causing it to loll to the side—"is Lunch. And this one"—he lifted the girl's chin; she gazed at him dully—"is my favorite." He smacked his lips in a parody of appetite. "Supper."

They were, despite their slackness of expression, pretty children; their necks all bore dried bloodstains. Beheim's revulsion was overwhelming, but he forced himself to disregard the children and kept his eyes on Mikolas. The man's face was the image of unhealthy excess. His skin was blotchy. A red line was indented on his brow from the pressure of the metal cap. Mad black eyes tucked into fleshy folds. The thick, cruel lips of a sensualist. A web of broken capillaries spread across his boxer's broad, flattened nose, and the lobe of his left ear was ragged and discolored; it appeared to have been bitten off.

"Is there anyone else who can testify to your whereabouts?" Beheim asked.

"Certainly." Again Mikolas pointed to the children.

"Question them if you wish."

"I scarcely think they will make credible witnesses."

"Well, you can ask anyone if these three were with me before that night. And then you can ask the children what happened and how long we took in having our fun. We had a wonderful time." Mikolas pulled on his trousers and leaned close to Beheim, enveloping him in an aura of acidic sweat. "Ever taste a virgin's blood? Quite a treat. I'd offer you some now, but sad to say, she's no longer a virgin. Active little bitch, she was. Flipped about like a fish out of water."

"You incredible pig!" said Alexandra.

"Now look what I've done! I've made her jealous."

Mikolas slipped into a red wool shirt, beaming at them.

"You know," Beheim said to Alexandra, his control faltering. "I've just had a splendid idea. There's no point in continuing the investigation. We'll probably never be able to unmask the actual culprit, but we don't have to. We have the perfect candidate right here."

Mikolas said, "What in hell's name do you mean by that?"

"You've no real proof of your whereabouts," said Beheim. "There's not a soul who wouldn't believe you capable of such an obscene act. All I have to do is dredge up one or two of your enemies who'd be willing to testify against you. Manufacture a few pieces of evidence. I believe the Patriarch would be delighted to have all this resolved so tidily."

Mikolas's expression was a cipher; he finished buttoning his shirt. "Bear with me a moment," he said. Then with one hand he lifted the taller of the two boys, pushed his head to the side, and drank from the vein in his neck. The boy's eyes showed in crescents of white beneath his drooping lids. His left hand trembled. Breath whistled in his throat. As Mikolas gulped down the blood, he stared at Beheim and Alexandra through a fringe of the boy's hair.

Beheim felt Alexandra's hand on his arm, but he needed no restraint. The children were dead already, and whatever compassion he had felt for them had been overborne by his loathing for de Czege. And perhaps, he thought, he had never felt any compassion. Perhaps all he had felt had been regret for feeling nothing.

"There now," said Mikolas, depositing the boy roughly on the floor. "Much better." He wiped a smear of blood from his mouth and gave a sigh of satisfaction. "I think I'll tell you a story. A de Czege story."

"Spare us," said Alexandra.

"No, really! You must hear this." He settled his pants about his hips, rotated his head to ease some stiffness. "There once was a man, a man very much like myself, as a matter of fact. A rough bastard who took what he wanted and dared the world to spit in his eye. Now, he was no admirable character"—Alexandra laughed at this; Mikolas paid her no mind—"but he'd never aspired to be an admirable character, so that didn't bother him. The only thing he'd ever wanted to be was as brave a man as his brother. And that was uncommonly brave, for his brother was counted among the bravest men in the country. Well"—he picked up his sword and laid the blade flat against his palm—"one day his brother told him that he'd been bitten by a vampire. He'd managed to escape, but he was sick, afraid that the vampire would be able to control him. This was a very long time ago, back in the days when vampires were taken as a matter of course, so the man had no qualms about believing his brother."

Mikolas went half a dozen paces out into the center of the room. "Do you know what the hero of my story did? He decided to kill the vampire." He glanced back at them over his shoulder. "Don't you think that was brave of him?" he asked mildly. "Knowing what a vampire was and still having the courage to confront it. You see, he realized he would never be able to find where the vampire slept, at least not before he could pose a further danger to his brother. He would have to visit the vampire's dwelling place that night and kill him while he was awake. He was afraid. Oh, he was terrified! But fear was a goad to him, and so without delay, he went to the vampire's house and hid in a closet, and when the vampire appeared, accompanied by two sickly ladies, he

stepped out from his hiding place. He had a sword in his hand. Like this one. A saber. The vampire laughed and laughed. He knew a sword could do him no permanent harm. But instead of attacking, the man drew the edge of the sword across the palm of his own hand, making a deep cut. Like this."

As he had described, Mikolas laid open the palm of his hand. Blood trickled down his wrist.

"Now this was an extremely stupid vampire," he went on. "Extremely vain. He believed his overpowering charm was responsible for the man's act of courage. And so he did not weaken the man with his eyes before taking blood. He lapped at the man's hand, almost playfully, and then he struck into the man's neck. The man was dizzy with the rapture, but he maintained his resolve, and he pulled out an oak stake that he had secreted in his belt and pierced the vampire's heart while he was feeding. The women attacked him, but they were weak, disoriented by their master's death, and he was able to elude them." He wiped his bloody hand on his trousers, examined it. "A happy ending, you might think. But there's an irony involved. The man rode home to tell his brother, only to find that his brother had died, and that in dying he had gained life immortal. Before he could give him the news, his brother judged him. And thus it was that the de Czege branch was born."

Mikolas stared at them, his face tightening. "Do you really believe that I could fear you?" he said, his voice thick with rage. "That I could fear anything?" He swung his sword in a windy arc. "If it's threats you want to play at, here's one for you. I'm going to cut you into goddamn pieces and see how long it takes for you to grow whole again."

He closed on them in a series of quick steps and slashed at Beheim's head. Beheim darted away, pushing Alexandra ahead of him. He evaded another charge by Mikolas, lunging to the right, then sprinting off past the windows, fetching up against a sidewall, where several dozen weapons hung from pegs. As he turned he saw Alexandra knocked to the floor by a blow from Mikolas's fist. She lay without moving. Beheim snatched down a sword with an ornate guard and unsheathed it.

Mikolas's laugh was exultant. "Ah! A contest!" he said. "I wondered if you were a man, and now it appears you are. Not much of one, perhaps. But enough for the business at hand, eh?" He bowed, made a flourish with his saber. "I accept your challenge."

He stepped forward a pace, wary now, but before he could advance farther, Beheim launched a desperate attack, driving him back into the center of the room, close to the black pole and the fencing dummy. For more than a minute they fought in a fury, exchanging dozens of blows, the ring of steel on steel making a bright counterpoint to their grunts and exclamations. Beheim grew in confidence. The sophistication of his attack was offsetting Mikolas's superior strength. But his confidence soon eroded as Mikolas began to fight defensively, forcing Beheim to spend his energies, seeking to wear him down. Sweat trickled into the corners of his eyes. His breath came shallowly. Through the weave of their swords he

saw Mikolas smirking. The light of the false sun was affecting his vision, flashing on the blades, dazzling him.

"I'm going to cut off your bastard head," Mikolas said, and parried. "I'm going to"—another parry, a probing attack—"put it in a hatbox. I'll feed it rats." He lunged, thrust, slashed, then retreated. "I wonder what will happen. Will it grow a new body? Will the body grow a new head? What do you think?" His shoulder brushed against the fencing dummy, and he shoved the thing aside, sending it into a jittering dance. Beheim was struck by an idea. He was not at all certain it would work, but he was absolutely certain of what would happen were some new element not added to the equation.

He spent the next minute or so in convincing Mikolas that he had grown more fatigued than in actuality he had, until at the end of that time he was in full retreat, leading Mikolas a chase throughout the room, passing closer and closer to the pole. At one point he was almost too convincing in his portrayal of weakness, and the tip of Mikolas's saber drew a hot stripe of pain across his upper thigh; but he could feel the wound beginning to heal almost immediately, and it did not cause him even momentary inconvenience. Mikolas continued to taunt, to threaten, and by this gauge, Beheim was able to measure the increase of his arrogance. Finally, with Beheim's weariness becoming a real liability, he threw himself toward the pole, hoping that he had chosen the correct angle of approach. Mikolas followed him, having to shoulder past the dummy once again, and Beheim punched the top button on the pole.

With an uncanny series of movements, the dummy seemed to reassemble itself, took on human posture and lurched into motion; reacting to the push Mikolas had given it, it slashed him across the back, then aimed a second slash at his neck, which Mikolas, in turning, just managed to parry. Beheim seized the opportunity to thrust his sword into Mikolas's side just below the ribs; he ripped the blade sideways as Mikolas howled and twisted, dropping his saber. An instant later the dummy pierced him through the belly, thus effectively skewering him from two directions. Mikolas swayed, his eyes rolled back, he vomited blood. Then both the dummy and Beheim yanked their weapons free, and he collapsed onto the floor, blood diapering his trousers and soaking his red shirt. Beheim started toward Alexandra, who was sitting up, holding a hand to her temple. The dummy came after him, its saber at the ready and wires singing in their tracks, its clever feet clacking on the boards.

He had assumed that the dummy would only react to an attack, but now, having offered no attack, staring at that oddly inimical wooden head, at the scarred body with its faded valentine heart, he knew that he had been wrong, that some undreamed-of scientific miracle had invested it with deadly independence. The dummy struck at him, its weirdly articulated joints lending a mantislike stiffness to its movements, but moving far more rapidly than any crawling thing, the persistent click and clatter of its limbs adding a sinister value to its violent intent. It was all Beheim could do to fend off its attack, let alone mount one of his own, and as he was driven across the

room he thought that the best he could hope for was that once he had been severely wounded, whatever regulation governed the dummy would be satisfied and it would desist. The dummy's saber notched his shoulder. Sliced his chest. In desperation, he ducked under the swung blade and grappled with the thing, his face pressed against the cool, smooth oval of its head; but it began to shiver and shake, to jerk uncontrollably, and he was thrown to the floor. He rolled away from a downstroke, came to his feet and sprinted toward the pole at the center of the room, hoping to reach the buttons and switch the dummy off, but it made an unearthly, ungainly leap, going unbelievably high, that carried it across the room in time to block his path. It turned to him, its limbs coordinating in a horrid mechanical rhythm that caused him to picture a crab stalking along the sea bottom toward some helpless pulpy victim.

As it confronted him, its head tipped to the side as if in perplexed study, saber pointing toward his chest, the grain of the pale brown wood seemed to contrive an eerie, eyesafe face. He could have sworn he sensed a faint radiation like the presence of personality from the thing, and he had the feeling it was measuring him in some way, matching his skills with an array of tactical possibilities. "I yield," he said, hoping against all rationality that it would hear him. He glanced over at Mikolas. Still down, Alexandra had not moved. "Stop," he said to the dummy, wondering if it might not respond to a simple command, a magic word.

The dummy took a step forward, holding its saber in an unusual high guard up by its cheek, blade pointing to the ceiling. It stood still a moment, then initiated a whirling attack, wielding the saber in great circles, at times aiming slashes at Beheim while its back was turned, moving at incredible speed. Beheim dove to the floor, tried to cut the wires attached to its legs, but could not penetrate its defense. He regained his feet and backed away, unable to do other than protect himself. He was tiring badly. Each parried blow sent a shock into his elbows. The sword grew heavy, the grip slick with sweat. He closed with the dummy a second time and wrenched at its head, its arms, hoping to tear them off, but was thrown off again before he could do any real damage.

And then, without warning, it went limp, hanging from its wires as impotent as a marionette, head down, sword trailing on the floor. Beheim, who had been in the process of scrambling to his feet, sagged back. He saw Alexandra standing by the pole, bashing at the control buttons with a mace. The children were still sitting in listless poses beneath the window, their blond hair glowing in a spill of wintry light so clearly defined it might have been a tilted column of crystal; their eyes were like smudges in their white faces. Mikolas was crawling feebly in the direction of the door, leaving a smeared track of blood as he went. After a bit he stopped crawling and sat there, his legs tucked beneath him, holding his wounded stomach. With a mighty effort, Beheim got to his knees. Once he had managed to catch his breath, he stood, walked over, and kicked Mikolas in the chest, laying him out flat. Mikolas gasped and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, Beheim stabbed him in the throat, turning the blade to widen the wound, and then in the groin. He felt tremendous joy well up inside him. Blood filmed over Mikolas's lips. He tried to speak, but the wound in his throat prevented it; he stared at Beheim with black intensity, and Beheim looked quickly away.

"Enough!" said Alexandra. "There's no purpose to this, not unless you intend to kill him."

"Now, there's an idea!"

"No." She closed her long fingers about his wrist; for an instant there seemed to be a flurry of lights and darks in her eyes. "This has not helped to ease matters between the Valeas and the de Czeges. I don't want it to go any further."

"As you wish, then," he said. "But I refuse to have him hounding me during the remainder of the investigation. Give me the mace."

"What are you going to do?"

"Break his legs. That should take two or three days to heal."

Mikolas rolled away, trying to reach his sword. Beheim hauled him back by his belt and held him while he thrashed and fumed; a pinkish liquid bubbled from his throat—the wound was healing quickly.

"What of his brother?" Alexandra asked. "And what of the rest of the de Czeges? Their legs will be whole."

"One of them, at least, will no longer pose a threat."

Beheim stretched out a hand to her. "Give it to me."

"I don't trust you," she said after a pause. "I'll do it."

"Don't be ridiculous! Go and see to the children."

"What's the use of that? If we take them away from him, they'll only return. You know that."

He continued holding out his hand, and with obvious reluctance, she passed him the mace and walked off toward the window where the children were sitting.

"You know, Beheim said to Mikolas without looking him in the eyes, "I understand you. I used to arrest men like you. Sometimes I had to kill them. I understand you very well."

He tapped the mace lightly against Mikolas's knee, watched the leg stiffen in anticipation. Then he raised the mace high and brought it down on the kneecap with all his strength, shattering bone, smashing the fabric of the trousers down into a mire of blood and cartilage. A high-pitched whining escaped from Mikolas's lips, and he lost consciousness. Beheim crushed the other kneecap with a second blow and sat patiently, waiting for him to wake up. Alexandra, he saw, was kneeling beside the children, ministering in some way to one of them. Finally Mikolas stirred. His eyes fluttered open. Focused on Beheim.

"Now I'm going to tell you a story," said Beheim, pushing Mikolas's face to the side with the ball of the mace so that he was unable to use the power of his eyes. "Not so long ago in Paris there was a maniac who had killed four women with his hands. He was, as a matter of fact, a man very much like you. A physical marvel, possessed of inhuman strength. We could see that from the brutal things he'd done to the bodies. He sent us messages, laughing at us, challenging us to find him. He boasted

that he would kill anyone who dared come near him. He wrote poems about our stupidity and mailed them to the newspapers. Eventually we discovered who he was, but since he lived on the streets, in the sewers, any dark place that he could dominate with his strength, it was no easy task to bring him to ground. At long last, however, we managed to trap him in Montparnasse one night, and we chased him up onto the rooftops."

Alexandra came up beside him and started to speak, but he held up a hand, urging her to silence. "Just give me a moment," he said. "I'm almost finished here."

Mikolas tried to turn his head, to look at Alexandra, but Beheim gave him another firm push with the ball of the mace.

"The houses in that particular section of Montparnasse are set very close together," he went on. "Many of the streets no more than alleys, the alleys barely wide enough to permit a grown man passage. The rooftops are like a country all their own, a terrain of odd peaks and gables and steep slopes, all tiled and slick underfoot even in dry weather. A dangerous place to hunt so formidable a man as our maniac. We knew he could not escape us. We had cordoned off an area of several blocks. Sooner or later we were bound to catch him, either on the streets or on the rooftops. But we had two concerns. First, we did not want to take many casualties. If we flooded the rooftops with men, the maniac would almost certainly be able to kill several of them. Perhaps more. He would leap upon them from some dark cranny and rip them apart or throw them off the roof. We would have to be very cautious. Yet at the same time speed was of the essence, for we believed that if we did not catch him soon, he would succeed in breaking into one of the apartments and wreak havoc upon those dwelling there. Naturally we were attempting to evacuate the buildings, but at that time of night it was a slow and laborious process. The chances of our completing it before the maniac decided to effect entry were negligible, indeed.

"A compelling problem, don't you agree? Seemingly one without a happy solution." Beheim nudged Mikolas with the mace. "I wonder how you would have solved it. You would have burned the whole damned area down, I'd imagine. You see, men like you are not accustomed to operating under constraints. They believe such constraints are enfeebling, that men like me who suffer them are wittings, easy prey. But they're wrong to believe that. Those constraints breed a certain type of canny strength that is often the downfall of men like you, men who put their faith in willfulness and brute force."

He noticed Alexandra staring at him and, annoyed, said, "What is it? Where are the children?"

"Both the boys are dead," she said tonelessly. "The girl . . . perhaps she will live. I've sent her on an errand. She'll be in good hands."

He glanced at the two blond, still forms seated beneath the window. Their deaths seemed almost irrelevant to the loathing he felt for Mikolas, to add no more than a thin wash of color to his emotions, and he thought now that this was because he had long since given up on them. And yet knowing that they were dead changed him in one way, making him less interested in confiding in Mikolas, more eager to get on with things.

"I'm not going to tell you the rest of my story," he said to Mikolas. "Though perhaps I should tell you how it ended. We did not lose a single man, and ten minutes after I went alone onto the rooftops, the maniac took his own life." He bent close to Mikolas, keeping his head still with the mace. "I'm not afraid of you," he whispered. "I want you to come after me. That is, if you're man enough. If you think you can face me without running to your brother for assistance. I'm sure you'll be tempted to turn what is essentially a personal matter into a feud with the Agenors, but consider what that says about the caliber of your manhood. Frankly, I don't think it's in you to engage in a conflict that you're not absolutely certain of winning. You're a coward, a bully. And not such a formidable bully at that. You couldn't kill me here, on your own ground, and anywhere else it's going to be easy for me. I'll be waiting."

He pushed himself up to his feet and sent the mace skittering across the floor into a far corner, and with Alexandra in tow, he left Mikolas to his hatred and his pain.

As they walked along a corridor that led away from the gray room, Alexandra kept looking expectantly at him, and finally she said, "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What happened on the rooftops of Montparnasse. With you and the maniac. I'm curious how you managed it."

In one of the rooms nearby a clock was tolling midnight; from the distance came terrified shouts, wild laughter, then a tinny clangor, and the convergence of these sounds, their hollow resonance and dark specificity, reawakened Beheim to the alien immensity of his environment. Alexandra's face, despite its loveliness, its openness, struck him as being a devious contrivance, as threatening and perplexing as the blank wooden face of the fencing dummy. Secrets flashed and darted in the shifting currents of her green irises. Give nothing away, he thought. Show the world a face empty of everything except that which they want to believe of you. He felt suddenly, disastrously weary, exhausted by the poisons of fatigue and adrenaline. He wanted to rest, to stop his thoughts from spinning in their unstable orbits.

"No," he told her. "Not for now, anyway." ♦

By the Waters of Lethe We Sat Down and Wept



Carrie Richerson

June 15

Despair has a metallic taste, like chewing on copper wire. For many months I have lived with that bitter cad, unable to choke it down or cough it up, waiting for the sizzle and crack of electricity to change something, anything, about my life. I promised myself that if my situation did not improve by today, my birthday, I would end it. And so I shall—but not the way I had planned. I have put away the razor. I have made the decision to save my life by giving it up.

As soon as I saw the Memory Management Institute's ad in the newspaper, I knew they were the miracle I have sought. After only

Illustration by [Clémentine](#)

one appointment with a counselor there, I feel euphoric. I have struggled in the darkness of this depression for so long, even a single ray of hope is like a carburetor. But M/M/I is more than a single ray of hope; it is the certainty of release. The Institute can give me a chance to start fresh, to leave behind the pain and regrets of the past.

My counselor is William Anders, a serene young man with a blond ponytail, a wispy beard, and gentle hazel eyes. He will guide me through M/M/I's procedures and tests, and he will give final approval for the memory erasure when he feels I am ready. William was so reassuring that I felt instantly that I could trust him. He outlined the surgical procedure that erases memories and went over page after page of consent forms, each of which he had me thumbprint. William wanted to make sure that I understood that the procedure is permanent and irreversible—but that, of course, is exactly what I desire.

William asked me to start this journal. He said that many patients panic when they wake after the procedure and can't remember who they are; that a journal in the client's own handwriting helps prove that the memory loss was voluntary, not the result of an accident. William will review my journal entries and advise me if any need to be deleted or changed to remove clues to my present life and identity. I have another appointment with him next week.

Regrets and bitterness have aged me beyond my forty-two years; William's youth and tranquility seemed like a breath of fresh air. He reminds me of a boy I loved long, long ago. (I hope he isn't embarrassed when he reads this.) Perhaps the new me, unencumbered by old heartbreaks and shames, will be luckier in love than I have been.

June 30

It has been a whirlwind two weeks—giving notice on my job and my apartment, taking most of my furniture and possessions to the Salvation Army, working with M/M/I's legal representatives to liquidate my assets and close out my financial affairs. They will see to it that all the old records are sealed under court order, and they'll have a new name, ID, bank account, and new apartment ready for me when I am discharged from the clinic.

M/M/I advises its clients to relocate to another city, but I have asked them to establish me in some far corner of this vast metropolis. I have no living relatives and few friends or co-workers who might recognize me on the street, and I have always been fond of the density of possibilities here. I think even without memories of my life here, I would miss it if I left.

I've also spent days undergoing physical and psychological tests; M/M/I's final acceptance of my application is contingent on the results of these tests and their physicians' review of my medical history. William explained that certain medical, psychological, and genetic conditions make memory erasure inadvisable, since medical files are sealed away along with all other identification.

All this is why the procedure is so expensive, why so few can afford it. It will nearly bankrupt me, but it is worth it. I refuse to worry about the future. With the weight of my past mistakes lifted from my shoulders, I know my life will improve. It has already, just from anticipation. I have had little time to be depressed this past week, and I've slept better than I have in months.

July 10

William has approved my application for voluntary amnesia. I'm scheduled for surgery early July 18. I've spent the last week saying goodbye, mostly to my favorite haunts in the city. There are few people to whom I feel close enough to explain my choice for the future. I doubt they would understand how I could choose to cut myself off this way. It is the places that are my real friends: the bench I've brooded on in the park, the cafe where I've drowned my sorrows in a cup of espresso, the theater where I've watched old movies all night. A favorite seat; a familiar, musty smell; the comfort of routine. It is strange to think that soon I will not even remember these places to miss them.

July 17

Tomorrow is the day. William stopped by my room a few minutes ago to wish me well. He assures me that he will be there tomorrow when I come out of recovery, but of course I won't recognize him. This afternoon we made a videotape together to be played for the new me tomorrow. I fixed the camera and read the consent forms aloud, and introduced William to the one I have come to think of as my successor. And I read the following, my last entry in this journal, as a message to the new person I will be when I read this again:

Don't be afraid. I did this for my good and yours, and of my free will. My gift to you is your future, a future uncluttered by the mistakes of my past. Go forward and succeed where I have failed. Be at peace.

I reread the last entry in the journal and closed it slowly, looked back at the image frozen on the videotape monitor. The person there was recognizably the same as the one who stared back at me from the mirror across from my bed: the same straight, brown hair going gray in front, jittery brown eyes, pale skin, nervous smile. We

were the same, even to the small wrinkles around the eyes and our slight double chins—but I didn't know her. I did not know me, either.

I had no name to put on that person in the monitor, no memory of how I came to be in this place, or why I would choose to make such an outrageous decision as the one described in the journal I had just read. Could it possibly be the truth?

Two men stood by in the room: one the "William" of the videotape, the other a stocky, white-haired man of about sixty in a white medical coat who had introduced himself as Dr. Davison before playing the tape for me. Now he cleared his throat to bring me out of my musings.

"I hope this clears up some of your questions, Ms. Taylor. Please don't be impatient with the nursing staff. They were under orders not to comment on your amnesia until you were recovered enough to read the journal and watch the tape. It's better this way: patients tend to find partial answers less reassuring, not more."

"Taylor? Is that my name?"

"It is now, Janet Taylor." He smiled in a self-satisfied, condescending way. I disliked him instantly. "William here has all the documents; he'll explain everything. We'll keep you here for a few days for observation to make sure there are no complications from the surgery. Most of our clients are discharged within a week. I'll check on you this evening during rounds. Any questions? No? Well, I'm sure this is all very confusing for you right now. Don't worry, you're in good hands." He patted my arm and breezed out.

I tried not to let my annoyance show, but I was seething inside. I hated being patronized by such a pompous fool. (Have I always felt that way?) My immediate reaction was to feel stubborn and uncooperative. (Have I always reacted to authoritarian prigs that way?)

With creeping horror I realized I had no knowledge, no memory, of how I had behaved in similar circumstances in the past. My anger turned into fear. How did I get myself into this situation?

A chuckle interrupted my growing panic. William had been silent during the video presentation and Dr. Davison's speech. Now he approached my head, fluffed up the pillows at my back, and leaned on the rail.

"Dr. Davison is new here at the clinic," he said, shaking his head in mock disapproval of his superior. He was smiling, and the smile lit up his young face with warmth and gentleness. I remembered what had been written in the journal about William (by me?); he did inspire a quick and easy trust.

"He doesn't mean to be so brusque. He just hasn't had enough time here to see how frightened people are at first—how they need real answers, not pats on the arm." William grinned, and the fear's grip on my gut eased a little. I hazarded a faint smile in return.

William lowered the security rail on the hospital bed. "Let's take a walk. I'll show you around the clinic and answer your questions at the same time. You shouldn't feel that you're a prisoner here."

His words acknowledged a suspicion I hadn't wanted to voice, and allayed it at the same time. He helped me

into a robe to cover the blue hospital gown. "Let me," he said when I started to fish for slippers under the bed. "You shouldn't bend over for a few days—it increases intracranial pressure."

For the first time it occurred to me to wonder just how the memory surgery had been accomplished. My fingers flew to my head and found a small shaved spot on top, like a tonsure. In the middle of the bald spot was a dimple, sensitive to my touch.

"That's where they put the socket in," William said, seeing my gesture. "It may be a bit sore for a few days."

I followed William out into a white-tiled corridor, past a nurses' station, and through a set of double doors.

"What would you like to know first?" he asked.

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "Everything!" I thought for a moment. "Start by telling me how the amnesia works. Why don't I have to learn to walk and talk all over again? How is it that I recognize this place as a hospital? How do I know how to wear slippers or tie a robe?"

"Here's the cafeteria. Let's sit and talk." About twenty people, some in hospital whites, others in street clothes, were eating or chatting at tables scattered around the large, gleaming room. Several greeted William as we passed their tables. He smiled warmly back, touched a few hands as he passed. He noticed my curiosity.

"The MMI staff is like family to me," he explained. "After my memory erasure I wanted to do something useful with my new life. I felt that my experience would make me especially sensitive to any questions or problems of readjustment clients might have. I know a lot of people on the MMI staff feel the same way."

"Has everyone who works here undergone the surgery, then?"

"Oh, no, of course not. It's not a requirement for employment or anything. But our studies show that an extraordinary number of our clients do go into the helping professions after their reorientation period. Would you like a soft drink?"

"Ginger ale," I said automatically, then stopped. "How did I know that?"

"I wanted to use that as an example." He rose and headed for a cooler against the back wall. In a moment he returned with two frosty bottles and a pair of glasses.

"Some patients hear the word 'surgery' and think we open up their skulls and lop off pieces of their brains," William began. His voice had taken on the soothing tone of someone delivering a familiar lecture. "That's not the case. The amnesia is induced chemically and electronically, by means of an implanted probe. No tissue is actually excised.

"The technique was developed by Dr. Blaine Raynal, a neurosurgeon and psychiatrist, who patented the process and founded the Memory Management Institute. The electric and chemical modifications disrupt the existing connections among neurons and empty the cells' stores of biochemicals that trigger memories. The tissue is returned to a state similar to that of a developing fetus: ready to imprint with new memories and to make new connections. The effect is localized to the area of the

brain that is the center of personal identity and memory. All of your general knowledge and skills remain intact."

"And my taste for ginger ale?" I asked. At least I could still appreciate its fizzy spiciness.

"The deepest layers of personality, like a preference for certain foods or a reaction of annoyance to Dr. Davison"—he grinned as I blushed—"survive because they are peripheral to a person's core of personal memories. Those things are *part* of the person you were, and the person you will be, but they are not the primary means of defining *you*. You have the chance now to build that definition of yourself from the ground up, any way you want."

He made it sound so simple. And so desirable. Make a mistake, screw up your life—and just erase it and start over. Certainly the person who had made this decision for me had found this an appropriate course of action, but what if *I*, the *I* of now, didn't agree? What if *I* *changed my mind*?

"Ordinary amnesia victims get their memories back, don't they?" I asked.

"If the amnesia is psychological in origin, yes; almost always, in time. The memories are merely suppressed, not lost, until the person can deal with the crisis that caused the lapse. In cases where the brain tissue itself is traumatized, memories are often lost permanently. Dr. Raynal's technique achieves the permanence of the latter without tissue damage, allowing new memories to form unimpeded."

"So I will never get my memories back?"

"No."

"And you explained all this to me before the surgery, didn't you?"

He nodded, smiling again.

"I'm sorry." I rubbed my forehead, felt the beginnings of a headache. I could not remember what in the past had given me headaches or how I had treated them.

"It's so confusing. . . ."

"No apology necessary. I know you don't remember our previous meetings or all the things we discussed. All our patients go through this. I'm here for you to talk to, ask questions—that's *my job*. Don't apologize for asking me to do it."

His patience and understanding reassured me, as much as anything could under such circumstances. "I'm a little tired now, William. Could we finish the tour later?"

"Of course. I'll take you back to your room now, and you can get some rest. Dr. Davison left a prescription with the nurse if you had a headache."

William helped me back to bed and tucked me in, "Try to sleep. The pill the nurse will bring will help. If you think of anything you want to ask me, just write it down. I'll drop by after dinner, if I may?"

"Please do." He was my lifeline, a connection to my lost former life. I didn't want to think that, to him, I was just another patient. He squeezed my hand lightly, a gesture far more comradely than Dr. Davison's paternalistic pat, and left.

The nurse brought the pill. After I took it, I played the videotape again. Why had the woman on that tape

felt the need to take so drastic an action? Why had she cut me off from my past like this? *Why?* I felt crippled, as though she had cut off my hand or my leg.

I fell asleep staring at that familiar, alien face on the monitor, and tried to dream her life.

The next day I began the schedule that would sustain me for the following week: in the morning, individual sessions with various MMI staff counselors; in the afternoon, group discussions with the five patients who had undergone their surgeries about the same time I had.

My morning appointment was with a psychiatrist, who administered tests and compared the results to tests I had taken before the memory surgery. He pronounced my cognitive capabilities unimpaired. Privately I was not sure I agreed with him. I felt very impaired, as though I'd had too much to drink or was suffering from an inner ear infection. All of life seemed somehow out of kilter, off balance.

If any of my fellow patients felt the same, they chose not to reveal it the first afternoon. We spent the session reassuring one another that we felt fine, never better in our lives. (How would we know?) I couldn't remember ever being in therapy before, but I was sure it was supposed to be less superficial than this.

I confided these doubts to William that evening as we took an after-dinner stroll around the landscaped grounds.

"Don't be too hard on your fellow patients, Janet—or on yourself. All of you feel very vulnerable right now.

You can expect the others to be as wary of letting down their guard as you are. I promise you, within the week all of you will be thrashing out your deepest fears about your new lives and helping each other get through it.

That's why MMI started the group therapy: it works. Your group will continue to meet after your discharge, for as long as you need it."

I was getting used to hearing that name, Janet, applied to me, but it still didn't feel comfortable. Like a badly fitted shoe, it rubbed in all the wrong places. I couldn't stop wondering what my name had been before. I read and reread the journal entries, and watched the videotape over and over, searching for clues to what had driven my former persona. Her plan for suicide chilled me to the bone. Why had she been so unhappy? Was I destined to repeat her mistakes, all unknowing?

I longed for even the wisp of a memory to tickle the back of my brain, but the past was a blank, black wall in my head—smooth, featureless, without a single point to anchor me. I felt adrift.

I wondered if I would ever be able to know myself, without knowing the person I had been.

The group opened up, as William had forecast. Clyde, a bespectacled, fiftyish, bear of a man, gentle and shy, became our rock, always there with a strong shoulder when the tears started. Suzanne was a model-thin blonde with a gift for digging beneath evasion to bring the unsaid up into the light of discussion. Quick, dark Meg skewered herself and everyone else with a mordant wit that allowed us to laugh at ourselves; Tom spoke seldom but

always with a ruthless honesty. And tiny Corrine, the baby of the group, shepherded us along with an efficiency that would have been galling if it hadn't been smoothed by so much warmth.

What could have happened to any of these people to make them so desperate to escape that they would completely renounce their former lives? How could Corrine, barely into her twenties, have accumulated enough disappointments in her short life to want to forget them? What monsters or malfeasances lurked in our pasts that we could find amnesia a blessing and not a curse? Only I seemed to be obsessed with these thoughts. The others moved through uncertainty into hope and confidence. I kept my fears and doubts to myself.

I spent several mornings with MMI's employment counselor. She guided me through tests that revealed I had an extensive knowledge of finance and securities. Had I been a banker or a stockbroker, or perhaps just a well-educated dabbler? The counselor scheduled interviews for the following week with employers that she assured me were sympathetic to MMI clients. I dreaded having to introduce myself to new associates as a person without a past, but MMI's accounting department showed I had only a small sum of money left over after paying for the hospital stay and all the legal arrangements to secure my new identity.

Saturday evening Dr. Davison examined my healed socket site for the last time and okayed my discharge. William drove me to my new apartment. I was grateful for his company as I walked through it. It was in a prosperous suburb of the city, but the sterility of the place depressed me. It smelled of new paint and new carpet; the bare white walls were decorated with only a handful of generic photoprints, and the contemporary-styled furniture in neutral tans inspired no leap of fond and joyous recognition. The apartment was as anonymous as the rest of my life.

I almost broke down then. William held me as I trembled. When I could get myself in hand, I apologized for my weakness.

"Janet, you don't have to be ashamed that you're frightened. I know how you feel. It's okay."

I pulled away, suddenly angry. "You *don't* know how I feel! Don't patronize me!"

He smiled, as gentle and patient as ever. "But I *do* know, Janet. I've been through this myself, remember? We all have a tough time at first, but, I assure you, it *does* get easier."

I remembered the benediction my former self had left for me: Be at peace. Here was William, peaceful, serene, able to go forward from his experience to help others. Why couldn't I accept the situation as he had? Where was my peace?

I wanted to ask William to spend the night with me. I ached to feel his strong arms around me, craved physical love with an intensity that could only have been born of long celibacy. But I feared making a fool of myself. I thanked him for his many kindnesses and sent him away, thinking all the while of the journal which had spoken of one unlucky in love.

I could not sleep that first night in my new apartment. The bed felt subtly uncomfortable, and every tiny noise made me twitch. Finally I stopped trying. I got up and slipped my precious videotape into the videoplayer and watched it over and over. By dawn, when I shut off the system, the image of my predecessor floated in front of my blurry eyes like a monstrous, distorted ghost. I went back to bed and fell into a restless doze. In my dreams I ran down endless corridors of gleaming tile, forever chasing a slight, brown-haired woman who disappeared around a corner or through a door just as I reached for her.

I determined to try harder to accept my new life. I went to three employment interviews set up by the MMI counselor during my first week out of the clinic and, despite my distaste for the process, endeavored to present myself as confident and knowledgeable. Perhaps I did not succeed as well as I thought: each employer told me they would consider my application and call me back, but none did that week, or the next.

I continued to have trouble sleeping and requested a prescription for sleeping pills from Dr. Davison through William, but the first time I used the pills I spent an agonizing night oscillating between terrifying nightmares and drugged grogginess. Later I remembered only one of the dreams clearly, but it had the power to chill me even awake: In a sun-blasted, desert canyon I approached some kind of dungeon built into the native rock. Crouching to peer through a barred window at ground level, I saw a silently screaming face. Who are you? I asked. No answer, only the face, mouth stretched wide in soundless agony. *Who are you?* I asked again. And then knew, without a doubt, *that I could not bear to know.* My own screams, very loud, woke me from that dream.

I went on fewer and fewer interviews and began to skip my peer discussion group meetings. After a few weeks, when I did return to the group, it was to hear Clyde announce that he had taken a job as an orderly with MMI, and planned to study at night so he could become a staff counselor. Meg was already working as a buyer's assistant for a large department store; Tom had been accepted for the fall term at a local university to study medicine. When the circle came around to me, I passed.

"Janet, that's not fair." Tom's voice was quiet, but his face was grave. "You've been acting like a tourist instead of a group member—missing meetings, not sharing when you are here. You're not being fair to yourself or to us."

"*Fair!* What do you know about fair? Was it fair for someone to decide to take my *life* away from me? Is it fair that I don't know who I am or what I'm supposed to do with myself? Don't give me *fair!*"

I looked at the faces around me. They were stunned and embarrassed by my outburst, but it was clear no one understood what I was talking about. I laughed bitterly. "I get more support from this *chair* than I get from you people!"

Clyde broke the silence. "Janet, any one of us would

have been glad to help you, to listen to your problems, if you had ever trusted us with your feelings. How could we know that you were hurting? You never told us."

Suzanne chimed in. "Janet, no one 'took' your life away from you. That was a decision you made for yourself. You're talking about your pre-amnesia self as though she were a different person."

"That's exactly how I feel about her: that she's a different person. She had *no right* to condemn me to this!"

We went round and round like this for almost an hour. The others refused to see my point of view. Finally Corrine spoke up. "I think we've spent as much time on this as we can afford today. Let's give it a rest and talk about something else until next time. Maybe someone will have a fresh perspective then."

"Fine. You complain that I don't share my feelings, then you brush them under the carpet when I do! I don't need this! I don't need any of you!" I stood up so abruptly that the chair toppled over behind me. No one tried to stop me as I stalked to the door, yanked it open, and slammed it behind me.

To hell with them. They didn't understand me, or care about me. No one did.

My insomnia drove me out of my apartment to wander the streets of the city for whole days and nights at a time. It should have been dangerous for a woman alone to go to some of the places I went, to be out at some of the hours I was out, but no one bothered me. I might as well have been invisible.

I inspected every building, silently quizzed every passing face. Have I been here before? Have I seen you before? Do you know me? Had I haunted this street to admire the Victorian houses, plump with gingerbread? Had I drunk espresso at this cafe? Bought the daily papers at that newsstand, or a colorful scarf from this street vendor?

Somehow it became crucial to me to remember if I had had a favorite color. I decided I liked blue, that blue on that man's cap. I followed him for several blocks as I admired the blue. Or maybe gray, like that woman's shoes. I followed her, too, until she began to throw fearful glances over her shoulder at me and took refuge in a restaurant.

Another woman passed me walking a pair of standard poodles. Had I owned a pet before the amnesia? If so, what had happened to it? Did it miss me? Did it understand I was never coming back? I tried to visualize the kind of pet I might have owned. A dog? A cat? A dog named Felix? A cat named Fido? Maybe a dog named Cat, or a cat named Dog? My thoughts burst and scattered across the darkness of my past like fireworks, and my mind skittered to chase, to catch, to hold onto even a single sparkling train. But the thoughts were too fast for me. They ran away into the dark, laughing, laughing, I could hear them *laughing*. *THEY WERE ALL LAUGHING AT ME.*

I could not eat, I could not sleep. In some corner of my mind I knew that my actions were irrational, but that part of me was too small and weak to control my increasing obsession and paranoia. Someone, a Woman With No

Name, had stolen my life, my memories; somewhere she still existed to crow over my plight and send her agents to torment me. I recorded all my observations and theories in a journal that was my constant companion.

The clear part of me, unfogged by the babble of whisps and laughter in my head, watched as my money ran out and the bills mounted up. I panhandled on the streets, ate from trash dumpsters, gave up bathing. But I had not yet been evicted from my apartment; and, one night, sitting in the middle of the floor, throwing my own waste at my invisible persecutors, the guttering flame of my sanity made one final, heroic effort to reach out. I called William. Help me. I sobbed. He promised to come right over. I knew I could count on William. My dear friend William. My only friend.

He found me hiding and weeping in a closet. I clung to him like an infant as I recounted how my enemy had subverted the members of my group and turned them against me, how she had spies and agents all over the city to keep me from learning the secrets of my past. Only with him did I feel safe.

"Janet, you need help. More help than I can give. I want you to come back to the clinic with me and see one of the psychiatrists."

I jerked away. "No! You're the only one I trust! *She* controls the doctors there. They'll say I'm crazy and lock me up. Don't make me go, William! If you love me, don't make me go!"

He was so quiet after that, his eyes held such misery, that I knew that something was horribly wrong. "You *do* love me, don't you, William?"

"Janet, I'm your counselor and your friend. I do care for you. I want to help you."

"But you don't love me."

"No, Janet. I'm married."

The little flame of sanity went out then as I gave up the fight. The one person I had depended on had betrayed me. I had no one left to turn to. William cleaned me up, then packed a small bag of clothing for me and drove me to the MMI clinic. I was numb and silent, but I would not leave without the videotape and the journal, my only pieces of evidence against the one who had destroyed me.

At the clinic I was asked to sign forms. I did not know what they said, but I signed them without resistance. I was assigned to a room, and a nurse took my temperature and blood and urine samples. I only started to whimper when she tried to take away the tape and the journal that I clutched to my chest.

"Let her keep those, nurse," William said. He came to stand beside me, but I turned my head away.

"Things will be better now, Janet—you'll see. Try to get some sleep. I'll check on you in the morning."

"No." I had *loved* him. "I never want to see you again."

His eyes filled with tears, but I did not relent, and he left, turning off the light as he went out.

In the darkness, all night, I could hear *Her* laughing.

In the morning I was taken to see Dr. Kim Yan, one of the MMI staff psychiatrists. I was grateful that I didn't

have to endure Dr. Davison again, but I didn't trust Dr. Kim either. Her color was strange, and the accent in her soft voice was odd. I answered the questions she asked in monosyllables, and felt I had no choice but to agree when she asked permission to medicate me. I was trapped here, without a single friend; I began to regret sending William away, but he obeyed my last injunction and I never saw him again.

Clyde and Meg came to visit me, but I would not talk to them. I expected that the drugs I was given would complete *Her* triumph by sapping my will, but instead, as the next few days passed, I began to feel clearer, stronger. I saw Dr. Kim twice a day, slept well, and had a good appetite. The whispers and laughter faded like a bad dream.

One morning, instead of seeing Dr. Kim, I was taken to a different office. The room was four times the size of Dr. Kim's, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the harbor and a gray-blue carpet so plush I felt I was swimming across it. A vast teak desk—on which a computerpad, a telephone, a file folder, and an abstract ceramic sculpture about six inches tall, looked lost—stood in the middle of the room. Behind it sat a small man in his mid-sixties, bald except for a thin fringe of gray hair over jug ears. He rose and extended a hand as I entered, but his gray eyes were remote, and his smile perfunctory.

"Ms. Taylor. Welcome. Please have a seat." He waved the hand I had shaken at one of the chairs in front of that playing field of a desk, and reseated himself. "I'm Dr. Blaine Raynal, the founder and president of the Memory Management Institute. I understand you're having some problems."

I nodded, wary still.

"Ms. Taylor, do you know how long you have been here? Do you understand what has been happening to you?" His tone was gentle this time.

I took a deep breath. "No. I really don't. Please tell me what is going on."

"You've been suffering intermittent delusional episodes, primarily of a paranoid character, since you were admitted five days ago. Your caseworker, William Anders, and your discussion group leader, Corrine Howe, think the problems started long before that. You consented to let us treat you with psychoactive and tranquilizing drugs, and it seems that they are bringing you out of it. How do you feel? Do you remember any of what happened?"

"A little." I said. I was embarrassed by what I remembered. How I had behaved with William! I blushed. "I feel better now."

"Don't be embarrassed, Ms. Taylor. What you said and did was your illness speaking and acting. No one blames you for it. The question is, What do we do now? In Dr. Kim's opinion, and mine, you need long-term therapy, probably continuing doses of psychoactives, or the delusions will return. Mr. Anders was right to bring you here for emergency treatment, but now that you are stabilized, we need to refer you elsewhere."

I seized the opportunity he had given me. "Dr. Raynal, I think the problem could be solved very easily. Let

me undergo the memory surgery again. I will forget my obsession with my past and all of these delusions."

Dr. Raynal looked tired. "I cannot authorize that, Ms. Taylor."

I stared out the windows at the sun sparkling on the water, ships unloading, people bustling purposefully about their lives. The knowledge—not a memory, but the slow accumulation of fact and surmise—grew in me. Had been growing, in fact, through all the days of my misery and recovery.

"I've done this before, haven't I? How many times?"

Dr. Raynal sighed. "Three times we know of, but the computer is still going through the files, and we haven't yet checked the files of MMI clinics in other cities. I recognized your picture when your problem was 'kicked upstairs,' as it were. I personally approved the memory procedure the time before last; I hoped it would solve your problem."

"And what is that problem? *What's wrong with me, Dr. Raynal?*"

"Some type of personality disorder that didn't show up on our tests, something that we don't even have a diagnostic protocol for yet, Ms. Taylor. Personally, I'd call you an amnesia junkie. You're addicted to this form of running away from your problems."

The words hung in the air. *Addicted*. I pulled my journal from my pocket and waved it at Dr. Raynal. "How do you explain the first entries in here, Doctor?"

"You are an intelligent person, Ms. Taylor. Those entries were constructed by you to give a sense of a life history without any details. You knew that Mr. Anders would review them. He saw there what you wanted him to see: someone who was suicidally depressed, but someone our procedure could help. You even flattered him a little in one entry, to make sure he would be sympathetic. Very clever. Very *experienced*, I might add."

"Mr. Anders has been very shaken by this. I've authorized a short leave of absence for him in hopes he'll get his perspective back. He's a good counselor, Ms. Taylor, and I hope your manipulations haven't lost him to us."

Dr. Raynal's implacability threatened to crush my last hopes. I let him see my desperation. "Let me try one more time. *Please*. I promise it will be the last time. I swear. You can tape me saying that."

Dr. Raynal touched a key on the computerpad. A viewscreen on the other side of the room flashed to life. I saw myself, dressed differently, seated in front of this desk with late-afternoon light streaming through the windows. "Let me try one more time. *Please*. I promise it will be the last time. *I swear*," the face on the monitor said. The image froze.

We sat and looked at each other for a moment. Then I said, "If you won't give me hope for the future, at least give me back my past. Restore my old memories. Do that, and I'll leave you alone."

He shook his head. "It cannot be done, Ms. Taylor. Those memories are *gone*, not just suppressed. No one can give them back to you."

"You can! You invented this procedure, you did years of pioneering work on the brain and memory. You must

have learned *something* that would allow you to restore my memories!"

"I can't, Ms. Taylor."

"Won't, you mean?"

"I can't!" He stood up, faced the windows. "Who do you think was the first person to undergo the memory surgery? I couldn't test it on anyone else. I had to be my own guinea pig. Afterward, my assistants had to teach me how to do the procedure, as though I were any new doctor on staff." He turned back to face me; he looked much older. "I don't remember any of the research I did. I have my notes, but there is nothing there that indicates there is any way to reverse the procedure. Perhaps if I hadn't been in such a hurry to confirm my theories, to publish my results—if I had waited, done more research, I might have discovered some way to reverse the procedure. Or maybe I simply never anticipated, never thought about the possibility that there would ever be a reason why the procedure should be reversed. We'll never know." He laughed bitterly. "I'll probably win a Nobel Prize for my work on brain chemistry and memory, but I can't *remember* any of it! I *cannot* help you."

"*You bastard!*" In my rage I picked up the first item at hand, the ceramic on his desk, and hurled it at his head. He ducked, and the sculpture shattered against the tempered glass behind him.

Without a word Dr. Raynal bent to pick up the broken bits of clay, and for a long minute, the only sounds in the room were my harsh breathing and the tiny plinks of shards hitting one another. He stood up, cradling the remains in his hands; a single tear tracked down his cheek.

"You gave me that, Ms. Taylor. The last time we met. To express your gratitude, you said, for giving you another chance." He looked exhausted and frightened.

I felt no pity for him. "What was my name, Doctor? What was my name when I gave you that?"

He placed the pieces gently on the desk. "I won't tell you that. You're Janet Taylor now. That will have to be enough for you.

"You may be a unique case, Ms. Taylor, but I can't expose this institution to the liability you represent. I have ordered an immediate change in procedures. MMI will now check all clients' fingerprints and DNA profiles against our master files before acceptance. You won't be able to sneak past us again. If you are considering suing us, you should think about the fact that we have all of your attested consent forms, videos of all your counseling sessions, and copies of all the entries in your journal, even from the last few days."

He sat down at the desk again and folded his hands over the remains of the sculpture. "My assistant has your things outside. There's a check for a year's living expenses and a letter of referral from Dr. Kim to a psychiatrist at the Mt. Horeb Medical Center. I suggest you use it; you need therapy. The letter makes it clear that MMI will pay for your treatment.

"Go away now, Ms. Taylor. Find peace somehow. I don't want to see you ever again."

There was a coppery taste in my mouth. I paused at the door. "You sorry son of a bitch," I said, before closing it softly behind me.

September 19

Despair has a bitter taste, like too many pills swallowed one after another. I stand in a high place, and around me the demons of madness are gibbering in the shadows. Sometimes I hear laughter, faint and far away; and sometimes I hear crying, louder and rear at hand. I know that someone I fear is coming for me, but I cannot remember who it is.

I wish I could remember. I wish I could forget. ♦

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The Garden of the Blue Dragon



Mark Noe

Lu Win's garden was almost as ancient as he was. Small, even for a Buddhist garden, it was surrounded by a stone wall just high enough that a tall man would have to strain to see over it. On one side, the stone wall was attached to a house; on the other, there was a narrow gate.

Three upright stones stood in the center of the garden. They did not dominate the garden, just as the stone wall did not tower over it. Opposite the gate stood a low stone bench where Lu Win could sit and meditate. To the other side, a small altar, where he usually placed a bonsai, or, if he was in a whimsical mood, a flower arrangement. Gravel, carefully raked, covered every inch of

Illustration by Nick Smith

ground except for stepping stones from the single gate to the bench and the altar.

The house itself had been burned to the ground twice: once by the Red Guard in the First Peoples' Republic of China, and once when the food riots in the Big Apple spilled down the access tube into the Land of Celestial Light.

During neither incident had Lu Win interfered with the destruction of his home. It was, after all, a less permanent vessel than the body he wore.

When the Red Guard had demonstrated in the street, yelling such unimaginative slogans as "Bourgeois lap dog of the American Imperialists!" he had stood quietly, like the helpless old man he appeared to be, and watched them put the torch to his house. When the starving mob had poured out of the tube that connected the Land of Celestial Light with the Big Apple, he had waited in the garden, unwilling to shame them by observing their misfortune, only looking up once when he smelled the acrid smoke that told him his house was burning.

Both groups had passed by the stone wall that encircled the garden as though it were sacrosanct, sensing somehow that damage to Lu Win's garden would not be tolerated.

Lu Win first conceived the notion of moving his garden to the Ark L2, then under construction just outside the orbit of the Moon, when word reached him that the Emperor Ho Qu Sihh had purchased Bubble 22, named it the Land of Celestial Light, and moved his court there. It seemed appropriate to Lu Win to follow, since he had served as a minister under one of the Emperor's ancestors in the Third Dynasty.

Lu Win had settled into the quiet life of a retired gentleman by the time the scientists who had built the Ark L2 discovered that it, and its forty-six connected bubbles, had drifted out of Earth orbit and would eventually plunge into the Sun. The scientists assured the inhabitants of the Ark L2 that they could repair the deteriorating orbit by the careful placement of several booster rockets.

Lu Win sat in his garden the night the boosters were burned. The sky glowed, the ground shook, one of the three stones shifted slightly. Then the night was quiet. The next day the scientists assured everyone the boosters had worked. The Ark L2 was no longer falling into the sun.

He took a week to decide that the new position of the shifted stone was aesthetically pleasing, and left it.

During that week the scientists announced that the boosters had worked too well. The Ark L2 was slowly drifting out of the Solar System. A second try would not be possible, since the first had placed too much of a strain on the Ark L2. It would shake apart with a second attempt, they assured everyone. Lu Win took this assurance to heart, since the scientists made it after leaving for Timothy Leary L5.

Soon after, the Emperor and his court returned to Earth.

Lu Win stayed.

At his departure, the Emperor left several thousand

peasants in a dozen villages across the Land of Celestial Light, which now that the Emperor had left was simply Bubble 22. They stayed, not from choice, as Lu Win had, but because they could not afford the return fare, or even the fare to L5 or one of the Moon colonies.

This, then, is the story of Lu Win, his garden, and the twelve villagers:

On the morning the villagers came to see Lu Win, the Ark L2 had already drifted well out of Earth orbit, and shuttles no longer passed between it and any of the other Earth satellites. The Sun had not yet started to dim, but the Moon no longer filled half the night sky.

On this morning, as every morning, Lu Win woke early and raked the gravel in his garden into the swirls of the River of Life around the three upright stones. When he was done, Lu Win sat on the stone bench and waited for dawn to illuminate his work. He waited for the twelve elders as well. He knew they would come, just as he knew what they would ask. Though he did not know what his reply would be.

The twelve elders, once they arrived, waited in respectful silence outside the stone wall. None tried to see over the wall into the garden. None questioned the delay.

A bronze gong had once hung just outside the gate. But it had been taken when the house had been burned down. Lu Win wasn't sure if that had been the first or the second time.

After meditating over his dilemma, yet still without an answer, he went to meet the twelve elders.

A collective sigh went up from them when he walked through the gate. One of them stepped forward. Lu Win couldn't tell if he was the oldest, though he had long since learned that age meant nothing.

"Revered Master," the elder began.

Lu Win held up his hand. The elder's voice trailed off.

"I am neither a master, nor a *Bodhisattva*. Ask for my help if you wish. I may give it. Do not ask for either wisdom or counsel. I have not one, and I do not give the other."

The elder bowed his head.

"Sir," he said, and Lu Win nodded. "We seek help.

Many angry youths have come into our fields. They trample our crops. They steal our livestock. They frighten our children."

"And what do you wish of me?"

"These youths, from the bubble known as the Big Apple, now camp in the hills above our villages."

"And what do you wish of me?"

"If you could but persuade them to return to their own land."

"I am but an old man. Why should they listen to me?"

At that the elder smiled, and several of the elders behind him.

"We have many old men," the elder said. "If these angry youths would listen to the voice of aged reason, we could have persuaded them to leave long ago."

"You wish for me to destroy them."

"It would be a grave sin to encourage another in violence."

"I will think on this thing," Lu Win said.

The elder looked as though he would say more, then bowed his head and backed away.

Lu Win returned to his garden. He thought for three days on the villagers' request, then hiked into the hills that overlooked the villages, taking with him three rice balls and a small jug of plum wine.

He heard the camp long before he came within sight of it, and smelled it before he heard it. Even someone with normal senses would have been assailed by the wet charcoal smell of old campfires, the ammonia stench of open latrines, and the greasy smell of unwashed bodies. Lu Win wrinkled his nose and entered the pines.

He found almost a hundred youths, as many women as men, in a makeshift camp. Mostly Caucasians, they smelled of too much meat in their diet.

A shout went up when they saw him, and suddenly youngsters were running everywhere. Many of them carried homemade weapons: clubs constructed from heavy machine struts, spears tipped with broken glass and sheet metal.

They formed a circle around Lu Win, brandishing their weapons in what he supposed was meant to be a threatening manner, as he walked to their central fire.

One of the youths, whom Lu Win supposed must be the leader, stepped forward. "What do you want, old man?" His tone was belligerent, but Lu Win could see the uncertainty that roiled deep inside him.

"I am hungry," Lu Win declared. He sat down and pulled the first of the three rice balls out of his pocket and ate it under their dumbfounded gaze.

"Are you crazy, old man?" the youth who had first spoken asked. A boy called him an "old coot," and a girl laughed. Lu Win smiled up at her and took the second rice ball from his pocket. He started eating it.

"Listen, old man, you'd better get out of here. We don't want to hurt you."

Lu Win finished the second rice ball.

While he was eating, two of the youths sat down. Others laughed nervously among themselves. Lu Win pulled out the third rice ball. By the time he had finished it, all the youths but the leader were sitting down. Lu Win looked up at him. Pulling the wine jug out of his other pocket, he uncorked it, took a swallow, and held the jug out to the young man. He looked at the proffered jug, then took it from Lu Win's grasp. Taking a hurried gulp, he sat down.

"Have you heard the story of the Buddha and the Dragon?" Lu Win asked.

Someone tittered in the back. The leader frowned.

"We're not children, old man. We don't need story time."

Lu Win gently pried the jug from the boy's tense fingers and took a sip to clear his throat.

"The Buddha Akaranarishi left his home along the shores of the Indus River and began the long trip to China, which had not yet been converted to Buddhism. After many weeks of hard travel, he crossed the Himalayas. In the foothills, he sat down to meditate. He sat thus for many days till his meditations were interrupted by a

great wind, so fierce it sounded as though it were the roar of a gigantic animal."

One youth let out a roar, and everyone laughed, including Lu Win.

"The Buddha looked up and saw a dragon floating just above the treetops. He greeted the dragon with a bow, and went back to his meditations. The dragon was curious at this human who did not run in terror at his first appearance, for he was a proper Chinese dragon, and very fearsome. He alighted, breaking the trunks of many ancient trees under the length of his great body. The Buddha, still in his meditations, did not look up till the dragon spoke.

"Why do you not run, puny human?" the dragon said.

"Why should I run, mighty one?" the Buddha asked in return.

"I could kill you with but a single breath from my mouth," the dragon replied. "Or a single twitch of my tail."

"Yes," the Buddha said. "But why should I run?"

"With those words, the Dragon's eyes were opened, and he curled up at the Buddha's feet to receive instruction."

When Lu Win had finished, he took another sip from the jug. He looked up, and saw one girl with a gleam in her eye. The others watched him with unenlightened faces.

"That's it?" the leader demanded. "What kind of story is that?"

"I thought you might enjoy it," Lu Win said.

"What happened to the dragon?" a girl asked. She was not the one with the gleam in her eye. That one would not need to know what happened. Nevertheless, Lu Win continued.

"The dragon took instruction at the feet of the Buddha for many years, till the Buddha's beard had grown long and white. One day the dragon woke from his slumbering to find the Buddha had died, still sitting in the lotus position where the dragon had found him."

The leader snorted. "That's what happened to the Buddha. What happened to the dragon?"

"Why, he began his way along the path."

"This is stupid," the leader said. "We don't believe in flying dragons."

"Of course not," Lu Win replied. "Flying dragons are but Western myths. They have wings. Nothing that large could fly, regardless of the size of its wings. Not only would it collapse under its own weight, but the mass to wingspan ratio is too great. Do you know nothing of aerodynamics?" He paused respectfully for a reply, though he expected none. "This was a Chinese dragon. They have no wings."

"Then how did he fly?"

"A Chinese dragon does not fly. He floats on the air, much the same way a kite does."

"This is stupid," the leader said.

A young boy's voice came from the crowd. "You're starting to repeat yourself, Bill."

"Well, it is." He turned on Lu Win. "Okay, old man. You didn't come here to tell us stories."

Lu Win didn't argue with him.

"So what do you want?"

"I wish only quiet."

"Quiet? So why come here? We're not bothering you."

"You trample the villagers' crops."

"Now it comes out."

Lu Win smiled. Such a cynical young man. "You trample the villagers's crops. They complain to me. My quiet is disturbed."

Bill stood and looked down at him. "You're just waiting to die anyway, old man."

"That was cruel," a girl's voice said.

Lu Win smiled. "I am waiting."

"Yeah," Bill said.

"Instead of hiding in these hills," Lu Win continued, "and raiding the villages for what they cannot hide, or do not want, you should go back into the valley. There, you will find a castle. Take up residence there. The villagers will share their food with you."

"They've agreed to that?"

"They will."

"You think a lot of yourself, old man."

Again, Lu Win smiled.

"What," Bill asked, "do they want in return?"

"They are simple people. They only wish to be left alone to tend their fields. I think that you are just the first of many who will come here, troubling them, unless someone guards the access tubes against further intrusions."

"We'll think about it," Bill said, his face clearly revealing to Lu Win that he would do no such thing.

"It doesn't sound too bad," one of the boys in the back said. Lu Win thought it was the one who had roared.

"We'll think about it."

Lu Win stood. He bowed to Bill, then to the girl in the back, the gleam still there in her eyes.

That evening, when the campfire had fallen into embers clothed in grey ash, the girl stole out of the camp and down into the fields of the peasants. There, she waited the rest of the night till the villagers came out to work the fields.

Just before dawn, at the same moment the villagers saw the girl waiting in their fields, a shadow momentarily drifted over the youth's camp. A cry went up from the few who were awake, huddled around what was left of the campfires. By the time the shadow had circled the camp twice, every eye was on the sky.

A long body, both sinuous and sensuous, drifted in the wind just above the treetops. As Lu Win had told them, the dragon did not fly, it floated, at times brushing the tops of the pines, at times twisting toward the clouds as though it were a physical embodiment of the wind, more graceful, more alive than anything any of the youths had ever seen.

At first they ran back and forth, screaming. Then, when the dragon did nothing more threatening than fly over them, first one, and then another ceased their mindless running and stood staring into the sky. Mesmerized, they watched the dragon dance with the air.

When the dragon finally disappeared from their sight, some of them cried, some looked around in confusion,

some watched the direction it had gone with a wistful look in their eyes.

Later that morning, Lu Win heard a call from outside his garden wall. When he finished with his meditations, he went out. The youths had gathered up their few belongings, and those they had stolen from the villagers, and waited on the road that passed by his garden.

"It took you long enough," Bill said.

"It usually does," Lu Win answered.

"Does that offer about the castle still hold?"

Lu Win turned and started walking. He heard the youths gather up their belongings and follow him. In a ragged procession, they passed one of the villages. The villagers were wading through their rice paddies, their pants legs rolled up, planting young rice stalks. Though the villagers watched out of the corners of their eyes, none stopped working.

The youths murmured quietly among themselves. None of them recognized the young girl who had been their former companion bent over in the rice paddies with the villagers.

After the youths had passed the village, Bill caught up with Lu Win.

"About that dragon," Bill said. "He won't bother us in the castle. Right?"

"What dragon is that?" Lu Win asked.

"Yeah, sure."

When they reached the road that led up to the castle gate, Lu Win started talking. He spoke low, so that only Bill heard him.

"Government, by its very nature, is oppressive. There are ways to make it less so. The best way is with good men."

"You think I'm a good man?" Bill asked.

"I think you wish to be. When we first mark a difference between the ruler and the ruled, we start a process. First the ruler protects, then oppresses the ruled, then falls into decadence. When that happens, the ruled rise up and put a new ruler in his place. And the process begins again."

"Sounds depressing."

"It would be, if such things were of any importance."

They walked in silence till they reached the castle gate.

"I think that the dragon would be a good standard for you," Lu Win told Bill. "He seeks neither to rule, nor to be ruled. That is something you can learn from him."

"About this dragon," Bill said. "What if he comes back? Is there any way to fight him?"

"One does not fight a dragon."

"But he can be killed, can't he?"

"One does not kill a dragon."

"But everything dies."

Lu Win smiled and returned to his garden.

The Ark L2 continued to drift out of the Solar System. The villagers tended their fields. The youths who had moved into the castle raised children of their own, grew old, and left the castle to another generation, a generation who had not seen the dragon that morning.

This generation made occasional forays into the other

bubbles, taking what pitiful possessions the survivors there might still hold. The generation after that began a campaign of conquest against the other bubbles, bringing them one by one under the banner of the dragon, till several generations later, all forty-six bubbles were ruled from the castle that overlooked Lu Win's garden.

Lu Win was aware of this, the same way a city dweller might be aware of the wind or the rain. The weather was there, but since he had no crops in the ground, it was of no importance to him. Lu Win tended his garden, and no one troubled him. Not even the tax collectors from the castle came to his gate.

He was aware too, when first one, and then another of the farthest bubbles were abandoned, either because they could no longer grow crops in their soil, or because the air or water had gone bad. By the time someone from the villages came once again to disturb Lu Win's quiet, only two bubbles remained habitable.

The Sun had become no more than a distant pinpoint just above the edge of the land. A man holding his thumb up at arm's length could completely cover it, making it difficult to tell where the twilight that now passed for day was coming from. It was the brightest star in the sky, but a star nevertheless.

Lu Win was deep in meditation when the gong outside his garden gate sounded. He did not know who had replaced it, or when.

He meditated on this for a while, waiting an hour to see if whoever sought him was impatient, and would ring the gong again, then waiting another hour to see if they would simply go away.

When he opened the gate, he found a young peasant woman standing in the road. He smiled.

"It has been a long time," Lu Win said with a small bow, and moved aside for her to enter his garden.

The young woman stepped through the gate. She looked uncertainly around. She knew that no one from her village had entered these stone walls in living memory. She did not know that she was the first person, other than Lu Win, who had ever stepped foot there.

She turned to him. "You must be mistaken, honored sir. Though I have heard stories about you since I was a child, I do not think we have ever met."

Lu Win took a seat on the stone bench and motioned her to sit beside him. "What sorts of stories?"

"That you are the Emperor. That he never really returned to Earth. That you have lived for generations. That you cannot die. That, when the land is in danger, you have it within your power to save it, if you wish."

"And is the land in danger?"

"The elders do not think so."

"Or they would come?"

"I do not think they would have the courage."

"And what is wrong in the land?" Lu Win asked.

"It dies. We plant our seeds, and few plants grow.

Those that do yield less than the seed we planted. The sun grows dim."

Lu Win glanced up at the Sun. Even a human could look directly at it now without shielding his eyes.

"Why did you come to me, and not the elders?"

"I think they have already given up."

"And you have not?"

"I am to be married."

"And you would bear children."

"And see my children's children."

Lu Win shook his head. "You will bear children, just as you have born them before. It will not be in this life, or in this place, but it will be. That is the nature of the circle of life, of the path your soul has chosen."

The young woman bowed her head and rose to leave.

"Do not be sad," he said. "Everything dies."

"Even the dragon?"

When she spoke those words, Lu Win saw the gleam in her eyes he had seen so many generations ago in the hills.

"The dragon will not experience death as you know it. Life and death form a cycle, a human cycle. You live, die, live again. The dragon does not die. He must wait for the Universe around him to do as this land has done. When the Universe folds in upon itself because it is too tired, just as this land is tired, then the dragon will go with it. Till then, he waits."

After the young girl left, Lu Win tended his garden. No one came to him after that. Some time later, when even he could no longer pick out the star that had been the Sun, he left his garden for a while and floated. But over the centuries the bubble had lost its atmosphere. Flying was not the same without the wind. After that, he simply waited. ♦

A Dwelling in the Evening Air

Sandra Rector
and
P M F Johnson

After his son Gabriel marched off to war, there was a listening, always, within Meshach Dougherty.

In the morning when he paced out to the fields amid the trills of the meadowlarks, first he gazed down the road that stretched across the prairie. In the weary evening as he turned the mule toward home, he looked back along that empty road.

On several occasions letters came, and his wife Louisa read them aloud as he hunched at the table in the dim lantern light, rubbing his thumb along the handle of his coffee mug, feeling restless, almost angry, for no good reason. The letters spoke of strange places—Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Antietam.

The last letter was dated five days after the Gettysburg conflict ended. Afterwards, no explanation came, no official document to chill their lives, just the foreboding silence.

His wife patiently continued to write every week throughout the war. Once he scrawled a few clumsy words on the bottom of the page.

Nightmares haunted him.

But otherwise Meshach allowed no time for nonsense: on the day after his mother's funeral, his father went out to



Illustration by Janet Aullis

their narrow Irish fields: such was a man's duty. Despite Meshach's mixed feelings about the work, he'd never missed a day in the fields since he filed on his land. Farming was the only way he could provide for his family.

Planting time kept him busy, then tending the fields against the crows, the weeds, the pests; summer passed, and harvest rolled around. Meshach took in the crops alone.

The winter after the war ended, his wife died.

Come spring, he stood beside her grave, surveying his acreage, the fields dusky in their evening greens. All this he had done for her. He remained strong enough for any duty, but somehow, without his noticing, his duty had abandoned him, leaving him queer and empty inside.

So he bundled a bedroll against his back, set his wide brimmed hat on his head, and walked down that road to learn what happened to his only son.

Meshach stood on a dusty street in Gettysburg. The buildings were brick, the church steeple white; he searched for a place in the shadows to rest; his eyes hurt from the bright sunlight.

A man, weaving slightly, approached him. "Mister, excuse me for saying, but my buddy looked just like you. We were soldiers together."

Meshach studied him with interest. The man appeared to be his son's age. "Ye served in the 4th Minnesota?"

The man seemed fuddled; could he be drunk? Meshach clutched more tightly to the thin bedroll slung over his shoulder, where he kept the money from the sale of his farm.

"We fought together," the man said. "Your son had a brave end."

Confused, Meshach stared at him. End? Was Gabriel dead?

"I'm sorry," the man said quickly. "You didn't know? I didn't intend. . . well, it meant a lot, having a comrade like that. You should have been proud of him."

The man's words seemed unreal, false. His son, dead. Meshach took a long, shaky breath. Something inside him didn't believe the man. Not at all.

The man licked his lips. "Your son saved my life, happened right over here."

He started off. Meshach numbly followed him.

"At the base of Little Round Top Hill," the man continued. "Your face reminds me of him so much, it's like I can remember every moment of that day. We were holding the Devil's Den."

The soldier bowed his head. "I've had no more terrifying moment than when those rocks broke free above and tumbled down, pinning my gun. I couldn't reach my gun, and the rebels charged. The bugle sounded a retreat, and our whole regiment scattered. Who could blame them? The fighting was mighty hot and I was powerful scared. Then your son turned back for me."

Meshach stood a little taller. "Did he, then?"

The man nodded. "Bravest thing I ever witnessed."

They walked on, reached a small cleft in the rocks—the stones were chipped and scored, the bullet marks visible.

In that instant, confronted with this cruel proof of the certainty that men died here, Meshach began to shudder uncontrollably.

"You should have seen him that day," the soldier went on, caught in his own reverie. "Me, in your son's place, I'd've run; I ain't too proud to admit as much. Men lay dead all around us. Gabe was hit, the blood sprayed from his back, but he just kept prying at those rocks."

The man shivered. "Gabe freed me, and I lit out for our lines. I dove into our trenches on Little Round Top, and looked back." Tears ran freely down his face, as his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "But your son, he didn't make it out of there."

Meshach felt like an iron brand was laid against his heart. He couldn't speak. Tears fell down his cheeks.

They stood, silent in the May sun. Finally, the man shrugged, and looked off into the distance. "What's funny, after he saved my life and all, I don't think I've had a lick of luck since that day."

Meshach started, noticing the man's worn clothes, his run down heels. "What are ye for doing now?"

The man seemed embarrassed. "Oh, I find work, now and again. Not recently, but times will change, I guess."

"Here, then." Meshach handed the man a gold double eagle.

The man grinned broadly as he shoved the coin in his pocket. "Thank you, mister. Thank you, kindly."

The grapes he hissed as it passed overhead. The rebel cannon battery squatted in the trees ahead like ugly metal toads. The sun was hot, the day humid. No one felt much inclined to move.

Lying in the ditch, he noticed the bushes screening him were loaded with black fruit. Happily he reached up to pick the berries, but his hand was roughly slapped aside. Surprised, he brought down his arm to find a narrow band of blood along the base of his thumb.

The veteran planting flowers in the cemetery squatted back on his haunches. His face was lined, his body bent and gaunt. The soldier shifted the toothpick around in his mouth. "He uses that story on every bumpkin that bumbles through here; no offense, friend."

Meshach's face heated. He looked toward the man rubbing the twenty dollar gold piece as he ambled toward a tavern.

Meshach felt embarrassed, then angry with himself—he had believed that stranger, but Jesus, Mary and Joseph, hadn't his son mailed a letter dated July 8, days after the battle, the last letter they ever received from their boy?

He was caught unexpectedly by a burst of relief. If the man lied, his son might still be alive, then.

He laughed out loud, a sudden explosion of emotion. "Sure, and haven't I been the fool of the fair? Well, it's a grand lesson to me. A man wants to believe himself plain and honest, but more than likely, sirrah, he's just a simpleton."

But in his mirth there was agony.

The soldier nodded. "Name's Grey, Colonel. Fought here, lost my ear to a bullet. What unit was your son in?"

"I don't know. In his last letter, just after the battle,

he said himself was in the 4th Minnesota. But before that . . ."

The colonel abruptly turned back to his work. "I can imagine why he lied about his outfit after this fight, I'll even make a fair country guess as to his real regiment: the 1st Minnesota."

Astounded, Meshach asked, "How did you know?"

The man grimly kept at his planting, tamping the soil around the roots of the petunias, soaking the soil around each plant once it was set. He was skilled at his task.

"Tell me what happened," Meshach insisted.

"The 1st Minnesota fled at Pickett's charge." The colonel spat. "They were cowards, they betrayed me. They betrayed everyone—forty thousand casualties that day, the whole battle lost. No wonder your son claimed he switched regiments."

Meshach was stunned; he couldn't believe what the man was saying.

"That cost me my command." The colonel raised his chin. "I knew what was coming, but I stood my ground: never let them accuse me of being a recreant. The Confederates shot me, left me for dead."

"My son wasn't party to such a thing!" The rage exploded out of Meshach. "Don't you say different, my son was as steady as they come. Gabriel Dougherty was his name, did you know himself?"

"Look up the rolls," the soldier said coldly. "They'll tell you."

Meshach shook his head. Ah, his temper was running away with him again. He forced himself to ask more civilly. "And where would the rolls be?"

"They keep the complete books at the Headquarters of the U.S. Army in Washington, D.C. The rolls will give your son's outfit."

The colonel walked away.

The humidity in Washington, D.C., on this midsummer day was so intense that even inside the building that housed the records of the Army, the view down the long room was obscured by mist.

Meshach stood at a table in the center of the room, leafing through the leather bound muster lists of the 4th Minnesota. The room held no chairs. A bored sergeant watched over the several men poring through the records.

Louisa had died of a broken heart, so he thought, believing their boy dead. All along Meshach suspected differently, though he'd never admitted as much. Gabriel had always been careless about his family. Anyway, if there had been a death the government would have mailed a notice. They even sent notice for the Perkins boy, who'd only gone missing; and the boy turned up nearly a year later in an artillery outfit, to boot.

Meshach wiped the sweat from his neck with his red kerchief and set to work.

The writing in the muster list was spidery, the paper a pale yellow, lined in red and blue ink. Each name was marked down with precision, and in a neat column alongside each, the town and state of the soldier. Several times he found a Dougherty, but never Gabriel Dougherty.

At last he admitted the truth. His son's name was not

inscribed among the 4th Minnesota, though his last letter had plainly stated that was his regiment. Meshach felt confused, disturbed.

With a growing uneasiness he went to the rolls of the 1st Minnesota, the regiment his son had mentioned in his earliest letters, to search through the names, considering each carefully. To his astonishment, he discovered a person from his own town of Waverly: one Abednego Smith. But no such person lived in the town.

He stared at that name until it blurred in his eyesight.

His son had lied his name.

Was he so ashamed of his own family?

Meshach had never felt this sort of emptiness, this humiliation and melancholy at the heart of himself. He'd come over from County Claire at fifteen, lucky to escape Ireland before the worst of the potato famines struck. He learned early that any man who bothered to think could know his duties, and any worth his salt went ahead and did them. You survived or you starved, and you helped others because the Bible said to, and because by God it made life easier for everyone. You didn't shirk, and you sure didn't deny your own name.

But Gabriel had. Worse, in his last letter, he'd written that he was in the 4th Minnesota, but here was proof he truly had been in the 1st, the regiment of cowards.

A band of tension slowly constricted around Meshach's middle, robbing his breath. His son lied twice. Why?

Could his son have been party to such dishonor? Had Meshach failed so badly in raising the lad? He didn't want to believe it.

But Gabriel had always roiled the emotions in Meshach's heart.

Growing up, Gabriel was a good boy who never could do enough for his Da; then he reached his teen years and began to talk about the girls, and to set out courting.

But since he was taller, stronger, Meshach required more work from him. People had their duty.

On a Friday night when the smothering air hung motionless, and heat lightning flickered on the horizon, father and son had a stormy fight over the youth's sloth. Off Gabriel stomped. Meshach raged about the cabin, striking at the empty air with his fists, while Louisa anxiously churned the butter.

Ever after, though his son helped around the farm during the week, on Saturdays he helled around town like a shiftless whiskey trader, courting the girls, adventuring, Lord knows, maybe gambling, coming home drunk and at all hours. Nothing Meshach said made any difference. It infuriated him.

Then Gabriel met a painter and became fascinated by the traveling limner's skills. Enthused, Gabriel began to sketch their home, in quick, smoky lines, always with slightly skewed perspectives. The drawings predictably annoyed his father. He went out one day to find his son, mules idle before the plow, furiously capturing a small hillscape in charcoal.

"Laddie, if you're for the sketching, why not draw what's there for the eyes to see?"

"Da, that is what I see."

"That bundle o' posies isn't so big as all that. Ye have the size wrong."

"The flowers are that big to me, in my head."

"They're not, either."

"Leave me alone," Gabriel shouted. "If ye can't do it right, don't do it at all!" Meshach yanked the pad from his son's hands and ripped it in twain.

The next morning, Gabriel enlisted.

The road constricted ahead. The teamsters on the wagons of artillery munitions whooped, cracking their whips in the clear morning air to hurry the mules drawing the wagons toward a wooden gate, trying to pass through ahead of the company of infantry marching alongside them. The gate gaped wide enough for the wagons, or for a column of troops. Not both.

The footsoldiers spied the gate as well and the thrill of competition jolted through them. They gave a holler, and charged. Startled, the mules lunged forward, and the race commenced. The infantry and artillery bove neck and neck down the narrowing passage.

The wagons were stout oak, unpainted, weathered to a splintery grey, their wheels rimmed in iron.

Some madness born of the war had seized them all laughing, the column of infantry pushed forward, driving those in front on a collision course with the wagons. Seeing this, the other teamsters pulled up their mules, but the lead team bounced on. The gap closed. One footsoldier, then another, scrambled through the gate ahead of the wagon.

The third soldier did not make it. The wagon struck a rock and lurched sideways, pinning the man between the gate and the wheel. The spokes turned, the axle caught him in the belly and ripped open his stomach. He screamed as his intestines caught on the spokes and pulled out of him in a bloody, dangling string.

"Looking for some company, farmer?" Her giggle was almost mechanical.

She stood on the wooden sidewalk in the evening, her brown dress ripped to display dirty white petticoats. Other women stood beyond her.

Meshach blushed, glanced around quickly. The clerks hurrying home from their jobs on Capitol Hill ignored them both.

"If you're so slow about reaching all your conclusions," she said, "maybe I ain't interested in you either. You think of that?"

Her smile was quirky, surprisingly warm; she seemed older than she appeared at first. That decided him. He hunched his shoulders and approached her.

"Ah," he said. "That is, can we talk?"

"Costs five silver dollars whatever we do."

With mixed emotions, he hesitated, then pulled out five dollars. "Jeez, not out here on the street. You sure got hayseeds in your hair, mister." She took the money. "Come on, after me. Strawfoot, hayfoot."

She led the way into a bar. "Johnny?"

"That'll be a buck, buddy." The man behind the bar stopped polishing long enough to look up.

Meshach handed him another dollar, feeling uneasy

at how much everything cost in this city, not quite understanding why he was paying again. Hadn't he just paid enough?

The girl led him up a narrow stair to a second floor, where a series of wooden booths lined the hall. She opened the curtain to one, gestured him inside. There was barely room for them both to stand. She climbed on a low stool, yanked the curtain mostly closed behind him, and hiked up her skirt.

"Ye don't understand," he said quickly. "I'm for asking ye some questions."

She worked at his trousers. "So ask away."

"I . . . my lad went for a soldier. He's vanished. His regiment was stationed here for a year during the war."

"Jeez, mister." She began to giggle. "I didn't ask anybody's name."

"He joined the 1st Minnesota. Did ye know them?"

"Not me, but you do have a chance at finding someone who did, farmer, I'll tell you that. Mmmm. You know what we could try?"

He put his hand over hers. "Never mind. Tell me more."

"Tell you what? The soldiers visited us, best customers a gal could ask. Each unit had their favorites. You find a dove who worked that regiment, maybe she'll know something."

Meshach sat uncomfortably on a rotting stump in the yard of a shack in the slums of Alexandria, Virginia. The midafternoon sky held no clouds. The woman he had journeyed to meet worked as a laundress, and hung out clothes as they talked, while on every side, small dark faces peered around corners to peek at the stranger in their midst.

"Yessir, I knew them Minnesota boys—softer spoken than most. Knew several." She paused, slung a sheet over the line with a practiced flip. "I remember me one boy looked just like you. Abednego."

"My son used a false name," Meshach admitted quietly. "His name was . . . is Gabriel Dougherty."

"Yessir? What drove him to that lie?"

He started to snap a reply, then stopped. Even in the heat, he felt chilled. "I don't know. I don't know. He's a good lad, feistier than some. He joined up young."

"Too young?" The woman pulled a corncob pipe from her pocket, stuffed it with tobacco from a pouch.

"He can be hardheaded." Rueilfully, Meshach shook his head. "I'm thinking he takes after his Da."

"And you disapproved of his joining the army?"

"At fifteen? What man wouldn't have disapproved?"

"Maybe he thought you'd write a letter to your Congressman 'bout the boy's age, and get him discharged." She lit her pipe. "That happened regular."

Meshach flushed. "And if I did plan as much? He's my son; he showed no sense kiting off like that. Soldiering is dangerous and foolish for a lad."

"But safer for older people, of course." She turned back to her work.

"I wasn't for . . ." he started, then paused. He continued more slowly. "Maybe there are men better suited to

raising up boys than me. Maybe had I used the strap more. But the folks did that in County Claire, and never did it make aught difference, not with me, anyway.

"I taught him what I thought to be right and honorable, and it wasn't lying his own name. Why did himself use an alias? Why did himself act so ashamed of his Da?"

She shrugged. "He lied so you wouldn't find him and haul him home—he hated farming. He said he was an artist; farming would have killed that in him."

"An artist, ye say?" Wistfully, Meshach looked at the ground. "I knew him well when he was a tyke. Cheerful. He never walked, he was for skipping everywhere. He started out a regular chatterbox, but as he grew up, he grew away, until ye'd think he was a rank stranger to me."

"Times was tough," she reminded him. "People changed, the war affected them. He and his buddies acted sometimes like they was damned. Here, I got a book of his somewhere."

She went into the shack and rustled about, then emerged to hand him a dog-eared accounts book. "He was forever scribbling in it, drawing and such. He'd scrunch down and get to ignoring everybody. He said I should have the book, I'd 'preciate it more than anyone he knew. Children aren't much for thinking about their families." She sounded apologetic. "He never told me his last name; I'd no way to send it along to you."

"Thank you," Meshach said, staring in dazed surprise at the book in his hand. He looked up.

"What was my son like?"

Her face softened at his stark question. "Better than the mattress factory men. He talked, treated you like you mattered. He was right gent. He didn't just do it and leave."

Meshach absorbed that in silence. This woman was a harlot, and his son visited her; Gabriel, whom he'd thought to be upright and God-fearing. "He degraded you and himself to have done that."

Bitterness crossed her face. "You know nothing what those times was like, the hunger, the trouble of a woman in war with children and no husband."

"It's my son who failed," he said harshly. "I've no quarrel with you."

"Well, I have me a quarrel with you," she shot right back. "Those soldiers was boys, children. They needed comfort, 'specially those as got no mail. How long was your son here—nearly a year?—and never received one letter from his father that I ever saw. *You're* a fine one to judge."

"His mother wrote him often," he said stiffly. "Is it any wonder no letter reached him when he'd lied his name and his outfit both?"

She sniffed. "You think you know what's righteous, and it's to be a Bible thumper. Let me tell you something. To your son, what mattered was kindness, thinking of others—he'd give you the blanket from his pack. That boy was a hundred times the man you be. He loved his art, but you learned him he couldn't be no other than just what you was. Your stiff neck drove him into the army."

"Why you think he reenlisted in sixty-four? Think about that. After three years of hell, once watching his best friend bleed out his life in a muddy hole; once

wounded when a minie ball creased his skull. But he chose to rejoin when his enlistment ended, go straight back into that, because he couldn't go home, not to a man who could destroy his art, his only hope." A triumphant anger rose in her voice. "How you think he felt about you?"

"It doesn't matter what he thought of me," Meshach answered. "He broke his mother's heart, that's what I'm caring about."

That night, in his dingy hotel room, Meshach sat in the smoky light of the fireplace, leaning over the battered book that was all he possessed anymore of his son's life. Never a good reader, he struggled to puzzle out the words squeezed between so many pictures—gnarled trees; wispy flowers; faces, some laughing, some burdened with anguish.

July 2.

He made us parade in full view of the enemy again.

The words on the page looped about, smudged and water-smearred, many unreadable.

We marched in column while the minie balls hissed all around. The colonel stopped us there to conduct inspection . . . that was reason enough for him. You . . . the Rebs on the hill dragging up a cannon . . . He crossed out Bill Sawyer about his fingernails being muddy. The Colonel told Bill to get down and polish his boots right . . . Johnny Reb whooping and hollering. I don't think I . . . eight men died. You would have thought he was watching pigs die.

Meshach blew softly through his teeth, remembering the Colonel's name: Grey. So his son had met his first Englishman. Sure, you'd find damned little love for the Irish in any such a man.

Every one of us agreed—how could a man support this butcher? As for me, I'd enough tyranny for one life. When the colonel spoke, sometimes it was I a I heard, they could act so alike, at times.

Our chance came on the third day of the fight. We held the center . . . could go wrong. The Rebs were losing men steadily. We'd been in a dozen fights, like this. They always . . . and under the screen, slip away. Bobby Lee was a genius at this.

So at their first charge, we broke, abandoning our trenches. Colonel . . . like a chicken, squawling around. The ink was smeared, as though by tears.

But the charge was no bluff. Pickett's men led the attack, and we weren't there anymore. We looked back

and . . . Our center folded. The battle was lost. They slaughtered our friends, our comrades.

Meshach slammed the book shut, horrified.

He watched the rebel cannon fire. After a few seconds, he spotted the ball in the air, beaded straight at him. He stepped aside, and the shell struck three men beside him, killing two and injuring the third.

July 4.

It's night. I got a stub candle in my trench.

Johnny: Reb's so close we can't light no fire. But I got to write about what I'm hearing, all around: voices in the darkness. "I'm going to win my honor back."

You can hear everyone in our regiment muttering.

"I'll pay those boys back." "We'll make good." "This ain't the end of us yet."

You can feel the wrath, the retribution, waiting for us. We've done something so shameful, I don't know how we can ever admit it. How many died because of us? But we'll pay off this debt. They're all around me in the darkness, swearing that even if it's only through our own dying, we'll pay them back.

It's a wonder, but until this moment I've never known such purpose, such a unity with these men, these friends beside me. We'll go out there tomorrow and give 'em hell.

July 5.

I don't know what I feel, or what to expect out of myself. Will I grow horns? Will I shoot a baby? Is this the war, doing it to me?

Bobby Lee shipped out again last night, he got his army clean away in the darkness. Today our officers took the time to declare a court's martial.

They asked us questions about our leaving the battle lines during the . . . I was so astonished I was dumb, so furious I could have skinned a cat.

Every one of those fellows who vowed in the night to vindicate themselves, when they were sworn in under the harsh light of day, they denied every bit of their betrayal, cool as you please. I never heard such born liars.

I began to sweat for myself, and my hands started trembling so, I showed 'em under my armpits to make them stay still. I was afraid what the officers might ask me, that they might learn my temper started the whole business. They'd take me out . . .

That's how I learned the truth about myself: I'm a coward and worse. They swore me in, and before God, swallowing bile I felt so sick, I lied like everyone else, told them I heard a command to withdraw. I've never felt so ashamed of myself.

Even now I could go tell them. But I won't. We were acquitted, every man in the regiment, cause they had no evidence to convict us.

Troubled, Meshach paced alone through the humid night, passing from gas lamp to gas lamp down the barren streets. Studying the journal, with its mass of pictures and words, was like peering in through a dirty glass at his son's life. At a tavern door he paused, morose, hearing raucous laughter within. Abruptly he entered the door. Maybe a drop of honest ale would help him sleep.

July 9.

Something strange is happening. For we claim it's haunts—a pan went flying off into the darkness, right off the fire, when no one was near it. I watched that myself.

You can't sleep. Everywhere in the night there's eyes, each pair of them sad-like, staring at you. Nails come from outside the firelight, but no one ever enters our campsite from the outer darkness. . . . Soldiers from the other regiments shun us. They know we're cursed.

At first folks said it was a prankster, then maybe some survivor of the massacre, seeking vengeance. But we know what it is. We're followed by revenants, seeking justice, ghosts that won't let us go until we atone.

I can hear the screams of the wounded rising to the cold stars.

In the margins of the journal, in blurred pencil drawings, small, twisted forms that flitted between graphite trees, their eyes huge, filled with pain—mutilated, misshapen shadows.

July 15.

Nobody can feel bad forever, I guess.

I got me a reputation, quite the parlor spiritualist—'cause I admitted I can hear their voices so plainly. It's no wonder the ghosts haunt me most—I was the one talked all the fellows into the scheme. It was the Irish in me, coming out.

I guess in a way it's funny, the fellows gather around, pestering me with questions. But I don't . . . of the living. All I know is the names of anyone who's died. They come to ask about their families back home, and sometimes I know . . . You can see the hope twist-

ing into fear on the man's face as I tell him. Still, most of the fellows think it's pretty funny.

July 17.

Yesterday a letter came from Bill Sawyer's home, and it was just like the voices told me. All three of his brothers died. I don't. . . The voices say I must. It's horrible. It's horrible. If I don't flee I'll go mad.

The hospital smelled of vomit and feces. The veterans slumped in the half-light, so many lumps in the shadows.

"Well, yes." The general with whom Meshach was speaking had commanded Gabriel's brigade. "Even experienced troops broke and fled on occasion."

"They were veterans," Meshach said. "Were they . . . had this happened before?"

"I remember the 1st Minnesota," the general said. "The outfit was cited for bravery at Bull Run. The first Bull Run fight, I mean. Oh, they saw fighting enough."

He paused, wheezing unpleasantly. "A defeat like Gettysburg, you would have thought it should make some difference in the course of the war. I don't believe it did. I'll admit the French and British came in with materiel for the South, but we still had more men, more resources. Hastened the promotion of Grant, too. More men died by war's end, maybe. What difference did that make?"

He hawked, leaned over, dribbled a string of mucus into a white tin pitcher. "What did the rebs hope to accomplish in Pennsylvania anyway? Conquest wasn't in their temperament. To make Lincoln submit? He went to defeat in the elections of sixty-four rather than yield, and President McClellan wasn't the sofite they thought. He wanted to win. So Grant took command, and just started marching south."

Thoughtful, Meshach thanked the man for his time.

As Meshach reemerged into the harsh light of the day, he noticed a nearby ridge with its endless rows of white crosses. He began to believe he might understand, dimly, those lonesome boys seeking any way out of their misery. A prayer started on his lips; the familiar words comforted him. Only as he finished did he pay any attention to the phrases he intoned. "And may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, find rest in peace . . ."

In the late night Meshach sat by the dirty fireplace of his room at the inn, reading.

Dec. 7.

We been here in the Capitol fortifications five months. I suppose it's better than getting shot at, but I feel as useless as a third wing on a rooster.

I been thinking about the folks back home, how much like Pa I am. I feel his blackness rising in me sometimes, his spiteful rages. He can be a tyrant, and so can I. But it's more complex than just fearfulness—it was

his sort of rage that made me rally the men against the colonel, the same sort of fury that drove me into enlisting. His rage destroyed my drawings. Wasn't he sorry? Why didn't he ever say so? Am I condemned to live my life his way?

Meshach rocked back in his chair. Here it was, then; proof of his son hated him. Dawn gradually filtered down the street, and into his window.

When he started on this journey, he had not known exactly what he sought. Now he was starting to understand that he searched not so much anymore to find his son, or even his son's grave, but to learn about this stranger who had been his son; what he wanted, dreamed, feared. Meshach would keep reading. If his son hated him, well, he'd always faced what he had to face.

But hours passed before he reopened the journal.

April 4.

I didn't used to think I could abide his unyielding expectations. It's strange, that I should have thought joining the army was escaping tyranny. What did I expect? Pa is right, the world is a hard place.

Pa is hard to know, he's so silent. Sometimes I think he despises the farming more even than I. Does he even know that about himself?

He's kind to his wife, self-sacrificing for us, trusted by his neighbors; when he decides he must accomplish some task, he'll have at the work unflinchingly, until the day he dies if that's what success takes. How can I live up to such a man?

I want my own life. I need to draw, to paint. I don't think that's so unusual, but he can't understand such thinking, calls it selfishness. Sometimes I believe I won't go home again when the war ends. I can't trust him around my art.

Meshach realized he was gritting his teeth. His jaw ached.

June 2, '64.

Ma's suddenly taking sick worries me. She's probably sick of her no-account son. Well, I won't bother her by writing, she's got enough troubles.

Would the folks forgive me?

I can walk away from it all, now. My hitch is up. I don't believe the ghosts would chase me back to Minnesota. But then I'll always think that at the proving blow, I crumbled.

No, I owe these ghosts so much. Tomorrow I'll

reenlist. I won't write the folks—what use would it be, anyway? The ghosts have got me by the collar.

There the journal ended.

According to regimental records, the 1st Minnesota departed on the final, bloody march south to Richmond in the late summer of '64. Restless, Meshach followed their path south.

The 1st Minnesota endured endless fighting. In other regiments, many of the veterans retired in '64, replaced by draftees, but the entire 1st Minnesota reenlisted. Not one man departed. Grim, determined, they marched south, into the maw of the war. And they died. In the Wilderness, at Spotsylvania, in the trenches of Cold Harbor, they died.

A man lay in the woods, panting with pain and thirst. The trees were lit with flickering light. The soot made it hard to breathe. The sound of gunfire was desultory, but unceasing. He moaned, sucked at his canteen. It was dry.

"Help me," he called frantically. "Is anybody there?" The fire was getting closer. The leaves crackled and hissed. He twisted away from it, but agony ripped through his shattered legs. He almost fainted, the pain was so great. He set his jaw, began using his arms to crawl away from the flames. They were in the treetops all around. He was sweating, and sickened by the intense heat.

The flames crackled. A burning branch dropped to the earth directly in his path, then another to one side. With mounting horror, he grew aware of others around him, calling, shrieking, as the fire overtook them.

At each site, Meshach doggedly reviewed the rolls of the fallen, the chronicles of the battle, preserved in county courthouses, or in historical societies, in veterans' homes, in churches, in private accounts. Never was his son's chosen name among the casualties.

After Cold Harbor, the remnants of the regiment were combined with the 48th Pennsylvania for the weary battle in Petersburg. The 48th Pennsylvania were coal miners, mostly, men who fought hard and talked little.

In the trenches of Petersburg the campaign stalled. Some of the coal miners, idled and bored, took to the notion that a tunnel under the Confederate trench, if exploded, might collapse the rebel fortifications. General Grant gave approval to proceed, thinking such a project at least would keep the men busy, though he had no hope for its success.

He did not reckon on the skill of the miners. They dug that tunnel with enthusiasm, five hundred feet long, and filled it with black powder. At a command, they set it off at dawn.

The explosion terrified the rebels, and they fled their trenches.

The tunnel collapsed, creating a great crater in the earth, and the regiment charged forward. The war hung in the balance. The Confederate line was shattered, their

fortifications broken and undefended. Their army lay vulnerable.

But General Burnside, the Union general who ordered the charge, was reviewing an artillery battery when the attack came, and the colonel of the regiment hid in a command center, terrified, getting drunk. The regiment charged down into that hole, only to find no way out, no way back. The men milled around in growing panic, seeking any escape.

The Confederates returned to discover them there, like pigs in a trench, waiting to be slaughtered. The rebels opened fire, and the chance to end the war vanished in a storm of lead.

In that place, the last few men of the 1st Minnesota perished.

He huddled on the ground, confused. He'd been shot in the head. He lay in the hot sun, in the empty space between the armies. No one could reach him. Flies buzzed around, laying eggs in the wound. When the eggs hatched, the maggots were voracious. They ate out his brains while he screamed in delirium. He took three days to die.

Upon the field at Petersburg, Meshach Dougherty gazed at the crater lying open to the evening sky. Confronted by this ugly red slash of earth, slowly being covered by straggly weeds, he need review no list, seek no proof. Here lingered a feeling he recognized, though he'd never felt such a certainty before.

Here his son had died.

A few mourners wandered the battlefield, carrying flowers. A black family, their possessions in an oxcart, slowly trundled past, headed north. He paid them no mind.

He shed no tears, though he felt a fierce sorrow, not just for his lost son, but also for his wife, and for the growing realization that he had undertaken this journey always aware, underneath, what he would find at the end.

He had gained a little insight—he'd journeyed here, not for vengeance, not for duty, but simply for love. He'd never understood, until now, just how much he loved his son.

And he stood in witness to Gabriel's final deed. The lad had redeemed himself, bitter though the taste might be for his father.

A fitful breeze rose, then died. Meshach drew out the journal, held it in his hands, turning it over and over. He opened it, to view a simple, slant sketch of tiger lilies his son had drawn.

Finally, he put the journal away in an inner pocket, next to his heart, then looked around thoughtfully, nodding. This was a likely place. The soil was not excellent, but suitable enough, surely.

He was going to farm here, by the edge of the battlefield, plant himself a nice cash crop, one in demand hereabouts. What did he know, after all, but farming?

He would raise flowers. †

The Bester Years of My Life

Julius Schwartz with Elliot S. Maggin

Alfred Bester is my name

And Terra is my nation.

Deep space is my dwelling place;

The Stars My Destination.

—from *The Stars My Destination*,

1957

Memoirs of a Time Traveller Part 2

I had this habit, when I was an editor with DC Comics, of dropping the names of my old friends in science fiction in order to inspire young writers to the heights of their talents. And if someone with whom I was working had not heard of someone whose name I dropped, I would burrow through a cabinet at the office or a bookshelf at home and press a volume into this culturally deprived youngster's palm and ask him or her for an oral book report in the next week. In one case, someone beat me to it.

"Julie!" the latest link in my chain of young writers burred, appearing in my office for a plotting session with wild eyes shot with blood and spittle collecting on his lower lip. "Have you ever heard of a writer named Alfred Bester?"

It was the early Seventies, and the kid must have been about twenty-one, turning out a comic book story every week or two and with a lot to learn. He hadn't brushed his hair or, for all I know, his teeth, and it was pretty clear to me that any story ideas he had in his head today belonged to someone else. In his hand, with a finger saving a page about two-thirds of the way through, he held a collection of short stories by my old friend.



Alfred Bester in the 1970s (left) and as a rising young writer in the 1940s

"Would you repeat that question, please?" I barked at him. "I want to make sure I heard what I thought I heard."

"I said, 'Did you ever hear of a guy named Alfred Bester?'"

I told him to wait a minute and I went into the hall.

Up the hall was Dick Giordano, an

artist of about forty who someday would be Vice President and Editorial Director of DC Comics. I pulled him into my office.

"Repeat your question!" I ordered my writer.

He did. Dick adjusted his hearing aid and smiled that indulgent smile he reserved for toddlers and drunks.

Nelson Bridwell, my assistant editor, waddled into the room and I had the kid repeat the question. Nelson burst out laughing and fumbled for his aspirator.

Carmine Infantino, the company president at the time, walked by the open door, smiling and sucking on a cigar, so I grabbed him to hear the question too. Carmine grinned and patted the kid on the head. "Good man, Bester," Carmine said.

"Well?" the unkempt writer asked, looking around at the growing crowd, glassy eyes starting to register the connection. "Y-you know him, don't you?"

"If I didn't know him," I told Elliot Maggin, "you wouldn't be here today—and neither would I!" And as a few more people wandered by the door and a few more crowded into my little office, it became clear that the work day was over. So I told pretty much this story:

I was the founding chairman of the Steuben Gang when Alfie became a member around 1939. I had no office, worked out of my apartment or whatever phone booth I could find and fill with nickels. On Thursday afternoons some of my clients and I would meet for lunch at Steuben's Tavern on Forty-Seventh Street between Sixth and Broadway. Almost everyone would order the same thing: corned beef on rye, fries and a beer, all for about fifty cents. The only exception was Manly Wade Wellman who insisted on Dubonnet wine instead of beer. Some of the other drop-ins besides Wellman were Otto Binder, Frank Belknap Long, Otis Adelbert Kline, Henry Kuttner, Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, Horace Gold, David Vern (David V. Reed), Malcolm Jameson, L. Sprague de Camp, Eric Frank Russell, and Robert A. Heinlein.

After Mort Weisinger became the editor of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* at Standard Magazines, he decided to hold a contest for new writers, with the winner to get an award of fifty dollars. At lunch one day Mort told me the prize-winning story was "The Broken Axiom" by someone named Alfred Bester.

"Don't know who he is," Mort



The two books that assured Alfred Bester of a permanent place in science fiction history were "The Demolished Man" and "Tiger! Tiger!" (later titled "The Stars My Destination" when it was pub-



lished in the U.S.). The two covers shown are from first editions put out by a British publisher.

said, "but he's going to make it big in the pulps and I'd like you to handle him and introduce him to the gang at Steuben's."

What Mort told later me was that he only pretended that Alfie's story was a contest entry. Evidently it appeared unsolicited on his desk one day in 1938 and it gave Mort an idea for finding talented new writers among his readership and possibly boosting his circulation a bit in the process. So he sat on Alfie's story and announced his contest in his October, 1938 issue. Then he pretended "The Broken Axiom" was a contest entry and in the April, 1939 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* he printed it, announcing it as the winner. It's the typical Mort Weisinger finagle: always figure out the solution before you articulate the problem. It worked well enough.

So I met Bester. He got his fifty-dollar "prize" and an introduction to me, and that started his literary career. Since I latched onto him for a prize-winning, science-fiction story I expected—and encouraged—him to write science-fiction stories. But my first sales for Alfie were two stories on the same day in another genre. On June 28, 1940, *South Seas Stories*,

a Ziff-Davis magazine also edited by *Amazing's* Ray Palmer, picked up "Treasure On Camoia" for \$135 and "The Man Who Was Tabu" for \$60 and published both in the October, 1940, issue, the latter under the house name "Alexander Blade."

The first Bester science-fiction story I sold was to *Amazing Stories*, "Life for Sale," on August 1, 1940, for \$120. "The Pet Nebula," the first story he wrote for me, eventually was picked up by *Astonishing Stories*, a secondary market, at 1/2 cent per word for \$17.50.

Alfie was a very self-effacing fellow. He continually downplayed his own talent and accomplishments—to the degree, in fact, that leads me to believe that he never really did think much of it. On April 2, 1942, I sold "The Dead Only Die Once" to *Unknown Worlds* for \$350. John W. Campbell, the editor, changed the title to "Hell is Forever" and published it in the August, 1942 issue. Thirty years later Alfie told me that this sale "was an electrifying experience. It was the single most big, big step up in my confidence. If I could make it with *Unknown*, then maybe I'm a writer after all. The only way you know you're good is the pat on



Photo by Ricca Merriford

Julius Schwartz and Harlan Ellison with Alfred Bester's
Grand Master Nebula Award

the back when other people appreciate of what you've done."

Alfie soon figured out what Mort knew: that there were not enough potential science-fiction markets to support him and his wife Rollie in anything like the manner to which he was interested in becoming accustomed. Mort Weisinger left *Standard Magazines* in 1941 when DC Comics brought him on as an editor. Jack Schiff, his co-editor from *Standard*, joined him there and together they encouraged Alfie to moonlight writing comic books. He wrote a short feature for Jack called *Genius Jones*. He also went to Sheldon Mayer at All-American Comics—which later merged with DC to form National Periodical Publications—where he wrote *Green Lantern* for which Alfie composed the rhymed testament that survives to this day as the Green Lantern Oath:

In brightest day, in blackest night,
No evil shall escape my sight.
Let those who worship evil's might,
Beware my power—
Green Lantern's light!

If someday the great works of Alfred Bester's career, like *The Stars My Destination* and *The Demolished Man*, were forgotten, it would be ironic if that piece of doggerel he wrote for *Green Lantern* were still in print.

Alfie did not create Green Lantern. Bill Finger, the co-creator of Batman, did that. Alfie did, however, create for a *Green Lantern* story in 1943 two of the more interesting supervillains: Solomon Grundy and Vandal Savage. Grundy was an undead behemoth with bleach-white skin who emerged from a dead man's swampy grave one Monday with super-strength and a naïveté that bordered on neurosis. Vandal was a Cro-Magnon man who, struck by a bolt of lightning under freak conditions fifty thousand years ago, became immortal and, growing across the years in physical strength and continually accumulating information, is one of the more dangerous and sociopathic villains of our time. Both were among Bester's first explorations of the concepts of immortality which culminated in one of his last novels, a rather wonderful story called "Indian Giver," published in

novel form as *The Computer Connection*. DC still owns both characters but has not made much use of them in years; I would like to see more of them.

By 1945, Alfie decided to get into other media and he started writing radio scripts. He wrote *Charlie Chan*, the *Shadow* and others. I used to go to his apartment two or three times a week to have dinner with the Besters because they both loved to play cards even though they were terrible card players. After dinner we would sit and play cards until midnight. At one of those dinners he told me about an editorial opening at All-American Comics. He said I should go down and apply for the job. I protested I hadn't read a comic book in my life. He said that was true of himself when he first came to write comic books as well. It was a medium in the process of being invented, he told me, so off I went to be one of the inventors.

I was interviewed by Shelly Mayer, I got the job February 21, 1944, and I started two days later.

Everything I learned about editing at All-American Comics, I learned from poring over an Alfred Bester script. I learned what a balloon was, what a panel description was, what a caption was. Bester hardly needed any editing, except for the fact that he was a lousy speller. That was something I already knew from his pulp manuscripts; the rest, I had to learn.

If I had not been an editor with DC for forty-odd years; if I had not been able to work with my mind and make up stories for a living; if I had not gathered together a reputation in my retirement as a kind of subcultural hero; if I had not been able, arguably, to say that I was partially responsible for the moral and ethical values of three generations of American kids; pointing me in the direction of All-American Comics would have been enough to cement Alfie's contribution to my life. And to top it off, that was where I met my wife; a beautiful redhead named Jean. Thanks, Alfie.

When Alfie left DC, I persuaded a client friend of mine, Henry Kuttner, to write *Green Lantern*. Hank turned

me down, but when his wife read a few issues of *Green Lantern* she fell in love with a supporting character named Doiby Dickles, GL's sidekick. Doiby was a streetwise, Brooklyn-accented cab driver whose motto was, "Soivce wot don't make youse noivus." Hank's wife insisted he take on the assignment. Oh, yes: Kuttner's wife was the writer C. L. (Catherine) Moore.

In the mid-Forties there was a radio program on WNYC in New York called *Forty-Five Questions from Broadway*—a title switch on a Broadway show by George M. Cohan called *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*. The host was Ted Cott, a neighbor of Bester's, whose guest stars would come by to answer show-biz questions. Alfie wrote the questions for the show. Once, when a guest cancelled at the last moment, Alfie asked me to fill in. He knew I was knowledgeable about show business. My fellow contestants were Henny Youngman, the "King of the One-Liners," and Michael Redgrave, a British actor whom Queen Elizabeth would someday dub "Sir Michael." I came in second, which was not bad considering the fact that the show staff fed the actors their answers beforehand.

As soon as the program ended, Redgrave leapt off the sound stage into the audience to hug and kiss an attractive girl he saw there: a British movie star named Jessie Matthews with whom I had fallen in love when I saw her in a film called *Evergreen*. In the film, Jessie had sung a Rodgers and Hart song called "Dancing on the Ceiling." Bester introduced me to Jessie Matthews, and she kissed me! One of the high points of my life. Thanks again, Alfie.

After he left comics, Bester had a habit of coming up to the DC Comics library to leaf through back issues trawling for plots, reading old Batman scripts. Every once in a while he would even swipe from one of his own scripts.

Alfie was a Hollywood kind of guy, and I'm decidedly not. Whenever Alfie saw me, and he didn't see much of me until his last five or six years, he'd greet me by hugging and kissing me. I always felt a little weird

when he did that. But whenever he was especially glad to see me, I had to steel myself for what I knew was coming—a French kiss in the ear! Took a big slurp out of it.

For the record: Alfred Bester wrote two of the finest science-fiction novels of the twentieth century: *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*, both in the Fifties. (Both novels were originally published in *Galaxy* magazine before coming out in book form. *The Demolished Man* won the 1953 Hugo Award for Best Novel. *The Stars My Destination* was first published in book form in Great Britain under the title *Tiger! Tiger!*) For many years I lost track of Alfie altogether. These were the years when he was doing his best work. He was senior editor of *Holiday* magazine for most of this time, traveling all over the world interviewing celebrities and telling the rest of the world in his working hours what to do with their spare time. When *Holiday* was discontinued he wrote a few more fine science-fiction novels, notably *The Computer Connection* and *Golem*¹⁰⁰.

Then in the mid-Seventies there was a convention in New York called Empiricon and we did some panels together. This reminded me that there was an Alfred Bester in the world.

When I used to go to a movie I liked to know who were the character actors in supporting roles. I used to see a certain bit actor from time to time whom I couldn't identify. Invariably he was a headwaiter at a restaurant with a tuxedo and a starched-and-boiled white shirt. I was determined to find out his name. So I appealed to Alfred Bester: "If you could find out who he is I'd sure appreciate it." A year or so later, I got a birthday card signed, "Birthday cheers from Alfie Bester, and also Gino Corrado."

Who be? (That was also a title of an early Bester novel.)

Coincidentally, a few days later, I was watching *A Night at the Opera* on television. There was Gino Corrado! He was huffing through a corridor wheeling a steamer trunk on which Groucho Marx sat, to be delivered to Margaret Dumont's state-

room. I thanked Alfie for the information and Alfie shot me back a note: "Many thanks, but silly boy you forgot Groucho's line to Gino [when he's trying to sell him insurance] on the way to the stateroom: 'This is a great policy; if you lose a leg we can help you look for it.' Kisses to one and all, Alfie B."

Alfie had a laugh that made walls rattle. He approached life and played his role very broadly. Had he managed to be a more public person, the public would have loved him.

In the mid-Seventies, DC Comics signed a contract with Alexander Salkind and his son Ilya to produce a *Superman* movie. Ilya asked me—I was the editor of *Superman* comics at this time—to recommend a screenwriter. Two names came to mind: Leigh Brackett, who lived in California, and Alfred Bester, who was a New Yorker. Geography made Alfie available immediately, and Ilya was eager to get started. A two-day interview with Alfie convinced Ilya that he had his writer. Ilya buttonholed Alfie's agent, shambling old Lurton Blassingame, and made an offer of \$35,000 for a screen treatment.

Ilya went to his father Alexander and said he had a writer for *Superman*. Alexander was excited until Ilya told him it was Alfred Bester; he asked, essentially, "Who the hell is Alfred Bester?" Alexander wanted somebody he'd heard of, so they ended up with Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather* and half a dozen other books, who had a pair of Oscars and several produced screenplays to his credit.

Although Bester never got around to writing a script for *Superman: The Movie*, it is interesting to speculate on how such a film—realized, no doubt, in an alternate universe somewhere—would have turned out. A bunch of us—Carmine, Ilya, my assistant Nelson, and I—got together with Alfie one day early in the life of Ilya's enthusiasm and talked through the project. The result was a long memorandum Alfie wrote to me a few days later.

It was on *Holiday* magazine stationery and dated, simply, "Friday." He began with an assurance that everything we produced as a group

was the property of all of us, a "professional courtesy." Then he drew his vision:

FOCUS: Clark Kent must be your protagonist. In the early days he was merely the springboard for Superman; a cardboard character. Today . . . we know him intimately. Heinlein once said to me, "Alfie, when I can hear my characters talking, I know the story's finished." I was flabbergasted. I can't even start the story until I can first hear the characters. Let's give Kent all the reality we can. We probably won't use all of it, but the mere knowledge and understanding will make him three-dimensional and, God willing, loveable. The audience must know, understand and love Kent. He's the hero; Superman is only his gun.

He dealt with campiness and spoofery, a problem that limited and ultimately doomed DC's previous major expedition into uncharted media, the 1966 *Batman* television show. He walked the line between speculation and farce the way only a master storyteller can. He drew a clear line between eliciting astonishment at Superman's powers and eliciting laughter.

He talked about the element of danger to a super-powerful protagonist. He understood and made a case—into which we eventually bought, to the benefit of the movie that Ilya did make—for the alteration of Superman's powers.

"Ingenuity is no problem," Alfie held, "merely hard work. We knock ourselves out devising an insoluble situation for Superman, and then knock ourselves out twice as hard inventing his solution. Ah, but the courage!" To portray courage there needed to be something a Superman could fear. Even Gary Cooper never showed fear, and to a sophisticated audience there is therefore no reason to fear for the character.

"Superman is starting a new life for a new generation of fans," he wrote, and we needed to rethink who he needed to be.

Mario Puzo is, as Alfie was, a gloriously talented writer and was certainly more bankable—as they say

in the movie biz—than Alfie. He wrote a fine script. But oh, what a movie it would have been . . . !

Harlan Ellison, the distinctive and talented fantasy writer, told me he would rather receive a postcard from Alfie saying he liked his latest story than land a big-bucks book contract any day. When Harlan heard that Alfie was in a custodial center for dying people, he called the facility and said he was a reporter from *USA Today*. He verbally elbowed his way to the chief medical administrator and told him that his patient was a very important writer, and that he would call twice a day for reports on Mr. Bester's condition. That was two days before Alfie died in 1987.

As far as I can determine, the last thing Alfie ever wrote professionally was for me. It was a little promotional blurb for the back cover of a graphic novel adaptation I edited of Ray Bradbury's "Frost and Fire." In England he wrote, "Forgive the delay, Julie dear. I'm in hospital, as you know, and barely able to write, as you can see." And then he said:

It's the ambition of the artist to "make a new sound." In other words, to see what everyone else sees but to think what no one has ever thought. This is a rare quality and Ray Bradbury is one of the very few artists who possesses it.

Six times every ten years the Science Fiction Writers of America at its Nebula Awards celebration gives someone its Grand Master award. In 1987 they told Alfie that he would receive the award that year. Someone was to give a little speech about him and there was some thought that his agent, Kirby McCauley, would give it, but I objected. I was his original agent and, pulling rank, I insisted on telling again pretty much the story I've just told.

By the time of the awards ceremony, Alfie had left us. I picked up the award but really did not know what to do with it. The banquet had been in California and I had no incentive or reason to take the bulky trophy with me on a plane to New York, and it wasn't mine anyway.

His wife Rollie had died a few years earlier. Alfie had no surviving family that we knew of, so I gave it to a friend in town for safekeeping. Harlan Ellison lives in a rambling house off Mulholland Drive that he calls Ellison Wonderland, and there it sits in a special air-conditioned room.

After Alfie died, I sat in on a Bester retrospective discussion panel at Lunacon, a science-fiction convention in New York, with Isaac Asimov, Harry Harrison and Algis Budrys. I told what I knew about Alfie, and about how he died. His last days were excruciatingly painful. A good and wise man who chooses, as Alfie did, to live large, seldom has an easy death. Talking, I soon realized that the fellow on my right was sobbing and wiping his eyes. For a moment, Alfie's final story had crusty old Isaac Asimov crying like a baby.

Alfie was to have been guest of honor at the World Science Fiction convention held in Brighton, England, in 1987 but he was too ill to attend. The committee asked Alfie if it would be all right to send a television crew to his home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to film a guest-of-honor speech and an interview, to which he agreed. Would he like anyone in particular to come down and interview him, they wanted to know. Yes, he said, he wanted Julie Schwartz to do it.

I telephoned Alfie to ask how it was, of all the people in the world, he picked me to interview him.

"*For revenge!*" he said, bellowing with labored laughter.

That laugh was still contagious, and I burst out too. And he kept on laughing and every time I tried to stop I started up again. I had to. We laughed until we hung up and I laughed some more.

I never did get to interview Alfie. I never did get him to explain for exactly what it was he required "revenge." Whenever I tell that story to anyone I get a laugh. I still don't get the joke.

NEXT: Quoth Ray Bradbury: "Thank God for Julie!" in the September issue of *AMAZING*® Stories.

Possible Worlds

Stephen L. Gillett

Or rather, for us surface chauvinists I should call this "Possible Atmospheres and Oceans." Because that's what we mean by a planetary environment.

Anyway, in several articles I've touched on some different possibilities for surface conditions. These possibilities largely depend on the ratios of the surface volatiles (the low-boiling-point substances that make up atmospheres and oceans): how much carbon, sulfur, nitrogen, or hydrogen is there? (In all cases, of course, we assume the planet's big enough to hold an atmosphere. Otherwise things aren't very interesting.)

The volatile ratios can start out differently, or they can change over geologic time. In particular, hydrogen can be lost by photodissociation—the breaking up of a hydrogen-bearing molecule in the upper atmosphere by ultraviolet (UV) light, whereupon the hydrogen escapes to space.

So let's look at some new cases while briefly reviewing the old ones.

Case I: *Wetworlds and dryworlds*

Our Earth is a wetworld. Such planets have lots of water; which means their hydrogen ratio is high, and they're reasonably oxidized (so that the hydrogen is combined with oxygen into water). Any carbon will be mostly in carbon dioxide or (equivalently) locked up in carbonates (limestone).

Of course, even a generally "Earthlike" world can be very different from

Earth. A wetworld could be all sea, for example. Scientist and SF writer David Brin has proposed, in fact, that Earth is unusually dry for a wetworld; that our planet's large land areas made possible the emergence of land life, and hence technical intelligence. If a planet is completely covered with water, it's hard to see how spacefaring or spacetalking intelligence could evolve.

The chloroxygen world I described last month is another variation. On an Earthlike world, most of the chlorine ends up in its oceans as the chloride (Cl^-) ion, because chloride is "happy" (that is, very stable) in aqueous solution. On Earth that's all that's happened.

However, Somewhere Else some microbe may have "learned" to remove electrons from the chloride in the oceans, with the result that the world ended up with a smidgen of free chlorine—in addition to oxygen—in the atmosphere. As I described, although intelligence might still arise under those conditions, developing technology beyond the Stone Age level could be grim because such an environment is ferociously corrosive.

So even having a wetworld is no guarantee of having spacefaring or spacetalking intelligence.

Or maybe a wetworld could become a dryworld, if it loses water for some reason. Mars is a cold version; probably it froze up as it lost its greenhouse effect. As carbon dioxide precipitated out into carbonates, no CO_2 was recycled back into

the atmosphere from volcanoes, because Mars is too small to have enough ongoing volcanism (and other geologic activity). (Although concern about an increase in Earth's greenhouse effect is trendy, you need *some* greenhouse effect to keep from freezing!)

A hot dryworld is another possibility, from a "not-quite-Venus" desiccation scenario. As with Venus, we have greenhouse runaway, where the oceans boil (see "The Air We're Standing On," March 1992), so we end up with a steam atmosphere. However, unlike Venus there's little carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to keep the greenhouse effect going without the steam. So after most of the water in the steam atmosphere dissociates, temperatures cool off again, maybe to livable temperatures. Thin, nearly vanished oceans; vast basins dusted whitely with salt, the ghosts of vanished seas . . . it sounds a bit like Herbert's Arrakis in *Dune*, doesn't it?

Case II: *Nitroworlds*

These are worlds where the dominant volatile element is nitrogen. I've described one type already, worlds in which ammonia (NH_3) is liquid—as has been treated in SF many times (see "Thalassogens I," December 1992). (Actually, as we saw, they're ammonia-water worlds, because if it's cool enough to condense out ammonia you'll get lots of water ice too.)

So let's look briefly at a completely different variation here. Let's start again by photodissociating the water away on a wetworld, but now let's leave a high *nitrogen-to-oxygen* ratio.

This might eventually lead to lots of nitrogen oxides in the atmosphere—nitric oxide (NO) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). Both of these compounds are highly reactive (and highly toxic; they're major components of smog). In particular, they react easily with water to form nitric acid and eventually nitrates. So if nitrogen oxides are abundant in the atmosphere, there won't be any free H₂O around. Maybe, though, seas of nitric acid could exist—just as with seas of sulfuric acid on an oxidized, high-sulfur world.

Such a world would look a lot like the sulfuric acid world. Chemical weathering would be fierce; not many common minerals would be stable under those conditions. And this again would make it difficult for any intelligent species to develop past a Stone Age.

We know of no such world, but Mars once was speculated to have lots of nitrogen oxides in its atmosphere. A few of Larry Niven's older stories treat such a Mars.

(Of course, Earth also has lots of nitrogen in its atmosphere; almost four times the amount of oxygen, in fact. The reason the Earth didn't fall into the "nitroworld" scenario is only partly because we still have lots of surface water. Given time, the nitrogen and oxygen in our atmosphere would react to form nitrogen oxides and then nitrates. However, denitrifying bacteria are continually making nitrogen again from nitrogen-bearing compounds. Thus, the nitrogen in Earth's atmosphere is as much a product of life as is the oxygen. As with the "chloroxygen" world, this suggests that the dominant gases in the atmosphere of a life-bearing planet may have a lot to do with what biochemical cycles got established first.)

Case III: *Carbon (and iron?) worlds*

Such worlds have more carbon than oxygen, so organic matter is left over once you make all the carbon diox-

ide or carbonate you can. Most nitrogen is present as gas, and there may be lots of water, too.

Saturn's giant moon Titan is a deep-freeze version of this type of world. It's full of organic matter underneath that smoggy, nitrogen-rich air. So warm up a Titan, and what would you get? A mess! Titan is mostly ice underneath its surface. When it melted, we'd get a vastly deep, scummy sea. A very wet world indeed, but one with no free oxygen.

More interesting would be a carbon world without such an overwhelming amount of water. With a carbon-rich surface, obviously there's no oxygen atmosphere. But there should be water, hydrocarbons, nitrogen, even a little carbon dioxide in the air. All in all, we end up with something that looks like an anaerobic environment on Earth. And obviously a biochemistry could work just with fermentation reactions, the rearrangement of organic molecules to extract energy, as is done by many Earthly microbes.

I have a more off-the-wall suggestion for a biochemical energy-storage mechanism, though (for reasons that will become clear): a system based on carbon monoxide, CO. This gas, of course, is more famous as a poison. It binds with the oxygen/CO₂ carrier in the blood—hemoglobin—even better than does CO₂ or oxygen. But that's not a fundamental problem; it's just a quirk of vertebrate physiology. Lots of terrestrial organisms can tolerate CO just fine. In fact, for example, I've seen it stated that green plants can use CO for photosynthesis just as easily as CO₂.

Now, it's a little-realized fact, at least to non-chemists, that at room temperature and pressure carbon monoxide is unstable. It "wants" to react with itself like this:



Under ordinary conditions, this reaction releases some 60 kilojoules of energy for every 28 grams of carbon monoxide. The only reason it doesn't happen quickly—boom!—is that at ordinary temperatures the reaction rates are extremely slow.

(This reaction, which metallurgists

call the "Boudouard reaction," can be a big problem in metallurgy, by the way. At modestly elevated temperatures the reaction *does* proceed; in fact, it goes like gangbusters and drops out a mess of solid carbon all over the place. This is called "sooting out" and is considered a no-no in such things as iron smelting.)

As you might guess, carbon monoxide is stable at high temperatures. That's why it's formed in combustion. It's made in the flame, and the flame gases cool so quickly (are "quenched") that the CO doesn't have time to react further. (And that's why CO is abundant in comets, too, at least to judge by the Halley data. The CO probably originally formed in a hot, thin gas cloud, such as one left by a supernova explosion, and has been preserved in "deep freeze" ever since. Comets are most likely leftover debris from our Solar System's formation that have been little altered since.)

Anyway, for comparison, fermenting glucose to lactic acid—a standard anaerobic respiration on Earth—releases only about 9 kilojoules for every 28 grams of glucose. So a photosynthesis that stores energy by making CO—and a metabolism that gets the energy back by making C and CO₂ from the CO—is not immediately ridiculous.

As I said, a water ocean would be OK on a carbonworld, but for something a bit more exotic, what about hydrocarbons instead? Seas of gasoline or kerosene! Liquid ethane (C₂H₆) may exist on Titan, and Isaac Asimov once proposed methane (CH₄—the simplest hydrocarbon) as a possible thallassogen (sea-former). And Venus once was proposed to have massive amounts of hydrocarbons, too, some of which made up its clouds. So the idea's been kicking around for a while.

The problem with hydrocarbons, though, at least on a body relatively close to its sun, is that they're photodissociated easily. So they'll tend to be destroyed over geologic time (in retrospect, of course, this was a naive aspect of the Venus proposal).

Now, considering photodissociation also shows a big problem in forming a carbonworld in the first

place. If all the volatiles get “rendered down” by photodissociation to carbon-rich compounds, how do you get rid of the water while keeping other hydrogen compounds? As with hydrocarbons, other hydrogen compounds are photodissociated much more easily than water. And as we’ve seen, when you photodissociate water you also leave behind oxygen—and that makes the environment oxidizing.

So here’s another possibility: the ironworld. Suppose a *very* large impact blows off nearly all the rock from a fully formed planet, leaving just the iron core. (Some scientists think this nearly happened to Mercury in our own System.) Metallic iron leads to a highly chemically reducing environment, so that carbon, hydrocarbons, and such are stable. Even if there’s not much left in the way of volatiles after the impact, surely smaller impacts by things like comets will plaster on more volatiles later. As far as that goes, some carbon will come dissolved in the iron.

So, we have a solid body that will maintain a reducing environment over geologic time. All that extra iron will soak up any excess oxygen, such as that made by water photodissociation.

We have another problem, though: iron and water aren’t stable together, at least over geologic time. Sure, we know iron rusts, especially if water’s around, but that’s basically a reaction with the oxygen in the air. But given time, iron will actually rip the oxygen out of water, leaving hydrogen behind.

Therefore, we need to find the ironworld (obviously its name is Cannonball!) a new thallassogen. Here’s a suggestion that’s untried in SF, so far as I know: oceans (well, lakes, anyway) of iron carbonyl (say carbon-*ee*l), maybe containing some nickel carbonyl as well. At temperatures a bit above the boiling point of water (and under pressure), five molecules of carbon monoxide will react with one atom of iron to form iron pentacarbonyl, $\text{Fe}(\text{CO})_5$. Similarly, four molecules of CO react with one atom of nickel to make nickel tetracarbonyl, $\text{Ni}(\text{CO})_4$.

These bizarre compounds, mem-

bers of a whole class of compounds formed by many metals, are highly volatile. Iron pentacarbonyl is a yellow liquid at room temperature that melts at -10°C and boils at about 103°C . Nickel carbonyl is even more volatile, boiling at 43°C . (Both compounds are also dreadfully toxic, at least to terrestrial animals.)

Carbonyls decompose easily with heat. This is useful in some industrial processes: carbonyl decomposition can be used to purify iron or nickel, or to vapor-deposit very thin coats of the metals. It’s a lot easier to move carbonyl vapor around, at only 100°C or so, than it is to move vaporized Fe or Ni metal at 1500°C or so!

And even though their thermal instability means carbonyls are easily photodissociated, that’s not a big problem: unlike hydrogen, carbon and oxygen are heavy atoms, so they won’t be lost from the upper atmosphere.

Now obviously, the carbonyls aren’t really stable, since carbon monoxide isn’t really stable at low temperatures. But volcanism on Cannonball will continually make CO (as long as the world is big enough to have ongoing volcanism); then, as the CO cools it will form carbonyls by reacting with all that iron and nickel. (There’s evidence of iron carbonyl formation in lunar lavas, so it can happen naturally. The lunar lavas are highly reduced chemically, and actually have little crystals of iron metal in them; and some of this iron looks to have been vapor-deposited from iron carbonyl.)

So a steady-state system with a carbonyl ocean might work. And if living things *also* are making CO, that could stabilize the carbonyl oceans even more.

Case IV: *Brimstone worlds*

Worlds dominated by sulfur I’ve talked about in a couple of previous columns, and of course we have a solar-system prototype: the Jovian moon Io. If you have a high sulfur to oxygen ratio, you might get sulfur dioxide seas (“Thallassogens II,” January 1993), whereas with low sulfur/oxygen (and low H_2O) you might

get sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4) seas (“Thallassogens III,” May 1993).

What else? Hydrogen sulfide—the toxic, rotten-egg gas—is not likely, because it has a very low boiling point, and it’s also easily broken up by UV light. But a more exotic idea yet would be molten sulfur itself as a thallassogen! Obviously such a world would be very hot, and thus a biochemistry may be difficult to arrange. But Io, with its sulfur lavas, may be an example, at least in places.

Case V: *Noble gas worlds*

The noble gases—helium, neon, argon, krypton, and xenon—are all nearly inert chemically. What about them as dominant in an atmosphere? (Radon is a noble gas, too, but since all its isotopes are radioactive, with very short lives, we’ll not consider it.)

Well, the first problem is getting them together to begin with. Since the noble gases don’t form chemical compounds, they don’t accumulate during the accretion of a small rocky planet like Earth. For example, although in the Universe as a whole neon is half again as abundant as nitrogen, on Earth neon is extremely rare. It’s vastly “depleted,” as cosmologists say: only a tiny fraction of neon atoms got trapped in the growing Earth, so that they could eventually end up in the atmosphere.

The most abundant noble gas in our atmosphere, at nearly 1%, is argon; but most of this argon didn’t arrive on Earth as argon. The argon is mostly the isotope argon-40; and nearly all of *that* comes from the decay of radioactive potassium-40 in the crust. (In the Universe as a whole, the two lighter argon isotopes, 36-Ar and 38-Ar, are vastly more abundant than 40-Ar; but both are much rarer than neon.)

One way to get a noble-gas atmosphere might be to shivel a gas giant, when the planet’s parent star swells into a red giant. Gas giants, like Jupiter or Saturn, contain lots of heavy noble gases, but they’re stirred in with vastly more hydrogen and helium. If the atmosphere is heated up enough, though, maybe

the hydrogen and helium could escape while the heavier gases are left behind.

That won't do a whole lot of good for setting up a life-bearing world, however, because by the time a star becomes a red giant it's nearing the end of its life. It means it's run out of hydrogen fuel in its core, and is starting to fuse helium into carbon instead. That doesn't last nearly as long, geologically speaking.

Is there another way, then, to get an atmosphere rich in noble gases to start with, so we can take advantage of the star's entire Main Sequence lifetime? (Or to be realistic, an atmosphere rich in neon, since it's far and away the most abundant noble gas.) Somehow we have to grow a protoplanet big enough that it starts to hold onto volatile matter out of the parent nebula (as did the gas giants in our own System), but shut off its growth before it can catch much H₂ or He, so it doesn't just become a gas giant.

The gas giants are now commonly thought to originate by "gravitational instability": a clot of matter in the condensing nebula becomes big enough to collapse under its own gravity, to make a protoplanet core. Then the core snowballs: its gravity becomes great enough to gather in additional material from the surrounding nebula, which increases its gravity, which lets it gather in *more* matter . . . etc.

(That original "clot of matter" is probably mostly just water ice. It seems the gas giants form beyond a critical point in the solar nebula; where it gets cool enough for water ice to condense. Since water is a common compound, a lot of ice condensing concentrates a lot of mass at that point in the nebula—enough to start a runaway.)

Now, if this growth could be stopped early, before the growing protoplanet glommed onto a bunch of hydrogen and helium from the nebula, we might be able to end up with a neon-rich planet. One way to do so might be for the central star to enter its T-Tauri stage. This is a brief but very luminous phase that a forming star goes through, which blows away the remains of the nebula from

which it and its planets condensed. Alternatively, maybe a major collision between protoplanets threw one into an orbit much closer to its sun, so its further growth was stunted. (Of course, as with Titan, we could simply end up with a very water-rich world instead, as described in the "carbonworld" scenario.)

There's no evidence any of this came even close to happening in our System. We have a big (4.5 AU wide!) gap between a small rocky planet (Mars) and the biggest gas giant (Jupiter), with nothing in between but leftover debris. But of course, this doesn't prove it can't—or didn't—happen elsewhere.

But even if you could accumulate noble gases, what good would it do? Since they don't form stable com-

pounds, you can't use them in a biochemistry. But Poul Anderson years ago pointed out one interesting possibility, in his novel *The Man Who Counts*: an atmosphere rich in noble gases makes it easy to arrange *large* flying creatures, because you can make the atmosphere as thick as you want without having awkward geochemical (and biochemical) side effects.

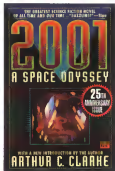
As I've said before, the Universe is more diverse than writers' imaginations. (It's also more diverse than scientists' imaginations.) We now know a lot more about our own System; here's hoping that SF writers use this knowledge as a source of inspiration! ♦



"As long as they limit it to plants, genetic engineering is fine with me."

Tomorrow's Books

August 1993 Releases



Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Aaron Allston: *Galatea in 2-D* Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. A modern illustrator learns he can pull living beings from his paintings and can enter his creations at will. But someone else with the same power doesn't like the competition.

Poul Anderson: *Harvest of Stars* Tor SF, hc, 448 pp, \$22.95. Space pilot Kyra Davis rescues the electronic ghost of Anson Guthrie, the founder of a maverick interplanetary corporation, the last bastion of liberty, to rally resistance against a repressive regime.

Poul Anderson: *A Light in the Void* Tor SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.50. A collection of Anderson's short stories from the Golden Age of science fiction.

Piers Anthony: *Alien Plot* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. A collection of sixteen short stories by Anthony, including eleven stories never before published in paperback, and an essay on writers and writing.

Piers Anthony: *Letters to Jenny* Tor Nonfiction, hc, 520 pp, \$18.95. A collection of encouraging letters from Piers Anthony to a young fan in a coma after being struck by a car driven by a drunk driver.

Eleanor Arnason: *Ring of Swords* Tor SF, hc, 584 pp, \$21.95. After decades of skirmishes with a warlike alien race, humans initiate diplomatic talks, only to find a human turncoat among the aliens.

Key to Abbreviations

hc hardcover, almost always an original publication.

pb orig paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

Iain M. Banks: *Against A Dark Background* Spectra SF, pb orig, 528 pp, \$5.99. Lady Sharrow, former antiquities thief and soldier, has a head start on finding the Lazy Gun—the most deadly weapon ever constructed by humankind. But even it may not be powerful enough to keep her safe from everyone planning to snatch the weapon from her grasp.

Nick Baron: *The Nightmare Club #2: The Initiation* Z-Wave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. Book 2 in a new young adult horror series. A murderous water spirit is luring teens to their death.

Margaret Wander Bonanno: *Otherwise* A Thomas Dunne Book, SF, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. The third book in *The Others* series. Lingri the Inept, Chronicler of the Others, traverses a war-torn land where the People, lacking a common enemy, have returned to preying upon themselves and only the Others can save them.

Ray Bradbury: *Green Shadows, White Whale* Bantam Fiction, 1st time in pb, 288 pp, \$5.99. A magical novel set in Ireland about writing a screenplay for Moby Dick.

Richard Lee Byers: *The Nightmare Club #1: Joy Ride* Z-Wave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. Book 1 in a new young adult horror series set in the Night Owl Club, a popular teen hangout reputed to be haunted. The ghost of a teen killed by a drunk driver urges a boy to drink and drive himself over the edge.

Richard Lee Byers: *The Nightmare Club #2: Warlock Games* Z-Wave YA

pb reiss paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.

Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. Book 3 in a new young adult horror series. A centuries-old warlock is playing games with a demon, with local teens as living pawns.

Leonard Carpenter: *Conan the Savage* Tor Fantasy, 1st mass market pb, 288 pp, \$4.50. After Conan is condemned to the hellish mines of Brythunia, he escapes into the wilderness and must battle Ninga, a bloodthirsty demon-goddess who has claimed Brythunia for her own.

Arthur C. Clarke: *2001: A Space Odyssey* Roc SF, tr pb reiss, 240 pp, \$9.00. A twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Clarke's classic SF novel, with a new introduction by the author.

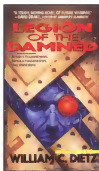
Rick Cook: *Wizard's Bane* Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. A master computer hacker is summoned to a world of dark wizardry, where he must learn how to debug spells instead of computer programs.

Jack Dann & Gardner Dozois, editors: *Dragons!* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 240 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of ten short stories about dragons. Stories by James P. Blaylock, Avram Davidson, Tanith Lee, Lucius Shepard, L. Sprague de Camp, and more.

Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, editors: *The Year's Best Fantasy And Horror: 6th Annual Collection* St. Martin's Press, hc/tr pb, 624 pp, hc \$27.95/tr pb \$16.95. An anthology of the finest fantasy and horror short fiction and poetry of the year, with the editors' year-end summary and recommendations.

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



Peter David: *Star Trek The Next Generation: Starfleet Academy #1: Wolf's First Adventure* Minstrel Books, Young Adult SF, pb orig, \$5.50. This is the first book in a new *Star Trek* series for young adults, featuring Wolf's struggles to fit in as the first Klingon to be accepted into Starfleet Academy.

Susan Dexter: *The Wizard's Shadow* Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. To save his own life, Crocken the peddler agreed to brave a dangerous wilderness to take the shadow-remnant of a murdered wizard to a distant kingdom. He soon finds being mistaken for a hero is great for business, but also more trouble than he bargained for.

Philip K. Dick: *The World Jones Made* Vintage SF, 1st tr pb, \$10.00. Classic story about a post-nuclear messiah.

Philip K. Dick: *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said* Vintage SF, 1st tr pb, \$10.00. Classic near-future story about a TV star who has 30 million viewers one day, and cannot prove he ever existed the next.

Philip K. Dick: *Now Wait for Last Year* Vintage SF, 1st tr pb, \$10.00. A classic story about the emotional maelstrom of a drug that erases its victims adrift through time.

Created by Gordon R. Dickson: *The Harriers Book 2: Blood and War* Baen SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Harriers Book 1: The Petit Harriers* are the peacekeepers and trouble-shooters of human space, but the alien Emerging Planets Fairness Court demands Mromosil observers on each ship to force human compliance with EPFC goals and methods. Novellas by David Drake, Gordon R. Dickson & Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Christopher Stasheff.

Created by Gordon R. Dickson: *The Harriers Book 1: Of War and Honor* Baen SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.50.

Series tie-in reissue, including novellas by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, S. N. Lewitt, and Steve Perry.

Gordon R. Dickson: *Space Winners* Tor SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.50. The first young people selected to leave Earth to study in the Galactic Federation must struggle to survive when they are stranded with a squirrel-like alien philosopher on a quarantined world.

William C. Dietz: *Legion of the Damned* Ace SF, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. The terminally ill, condemned criminals, and the hopeless have one last chance: they can be reborn as living weapons with human minds, cyborg soldiers in the most elite fighting force in the Empire—both more and less than human.

Stephen R. Donaldson: *A Dark and Hungry God Artses* Spectra SF, 1st time in pb, 512 pp, \$5.99. Sequel to *The Real Story and Forbidden Knowledge*. An epic story featuring a pirate shipyard and a gateway to alien realms.

David Drake: *Starliner* Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$5.99. A space epic set on a luxury interstellar starliner travelling between independent colony planets.

Philip José Farmer, editor: *Quest to Riverworld* Questar SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$5.50. An anthology of new stories set in Farmer's popular Riverworld. Stories by Farmer, Allen Steele, Harry Turtledove, Mike Resnick, Barry Malzberg, and others.

John Farris: *Scare Tactics* Tor Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Two short stories and a novella by John Farris.

Robert L. Forward & Margaret Foster: *Marooned on Eden* Baen SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Rocheworld* and *Return to Rocheworld*. A lucky few were chosen to explore the planet dubbed "Eden," prepared to never see Earth again. But they weren't prepared to be marooned without their

safety net of computers and technology on a beautiful, subtly threatening alien world.

Robert L. Forward: *Rocheworld* Baen SF, pb reiss, 480 pp, \$4.99. Author tie-in reissue. Book 1 in the *Rocheworld* series.

Robert L. Forward and Julie Forward Fuller: *Return to Rocheworld* Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. Author tie-in reissue. Sequel to *Rocheworld*.

Alan Dean Foster: *Star Trek Logs 7, 8, & 9* Del Rey SF, pb reiss, \$35.99, \$5.99. A three-in-one omnibus edition of volumes 7-9 of the adaptations of the animated *Star Trek* series.

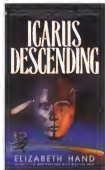
Michael Jan Friedman: *Star Trek: Shadows on the Sun* Pocket SF, hc, 352 pp, \$22.00. A *Star Trek* novel featuring Dr. McCoy through his rise to Chief Medical Officer of the Federation's flagship. Thirty years after joining Starfleet, he must face his feelings for his ex-wife, whose fate is in his hands.

Esther Friesner: *Majyk by Accident* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. First of a new funny fantasy series. When Kendal, an inept student magician, chases a cat into a cloud of Majyk (the stuff that makes spells work) he emerges with the biggest supply of Majyk in the world, and an even bigger supply of enemies.

W. Michael Gear: *Counter-Measures* DAW SF, pb orig, 648 pp, \$5.99. The third and final volume of the *Forbidden Borders* series. The commander of the mercenary Companions struggles to keep the remains of human civilization alive long enough to break free of the alien-created Forbiddin Borders.

W. Michael Gear: *Relic of Empire* DAW SF, pb reiss, \$5.99. Tie-in reissue of the second volume of the *Forbidden Borders* series.

W. Michael Gear: *Requiem for the Conqueror* DAW SF, pb reiss, \$4.99.



Tie-in reissue of the first volume of the *Forbidden Borders* series.

Colin Greenland: *Harm's Way* AvoNova SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. Sophie Farthing, an abused orphan brought up on a space station, must move beyond her repressive and gloomy past to seek her true origins and discover her destiny.

Elizabeth Hand: *Icarus Descending* Spectra SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$5.50. Set in the same universe as her two previous novels, this book tells the story of the beautiful geneslaves, the emergents, who have come to lead the other bio-engineered slave races in a war against humanity.

Tara K. Harper: *Storm Runner* Del Rey SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$5.99. Book 3 in the *Tales of the Wolves* series. The peace between wolves and humankind has been broken, and only the wolfwalker/healer/warrior Dion can heal the damage.

Harry Harrison: *A Rebel in Time* Tor SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$3.95. A madman travels back in time to reverse the outcome of the Civil War.

Robert A. Heinlein: *Podkayne of Mars* Baen SF, first tr pb, 256 pp, \$10.00. The first trade paperback edition of the classic Heinlein story about a girl from Mars who wants to be the first female starship captain. With Heinlein's never-before-published, original ending.

Robert E. Howard & L. Sprague de Camp: *Conan The Freebooter* Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.50. Conan faces the dreaded "braylukas," a deadly mix of man, beast, and demon with a lust for human blood.

L. Dean James: *Book of Stones* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. Davi Darynson, Duke of Godney, desires nothing more than to obtain the powers of magic . . . until new lady-in-waiting Sandal L'elann arrives at Castlekeep. Sequel to *Kingslayer* and *Sorcerer's Stone*.

Ellen Jamison: *Stone Dead* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.50. The horrifying story of the antique Hugger Doll that can do many things—horrible, death-dealing things.

Ruby Jean Jensen: *The Living Evil* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 480 pp, \$4.50. A horror story about a beautiful dolly who walks, talks, and kills.

K. W. Jeter: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine #3: Bloodletter* Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. When Starfleet learns of Cardassian plans to build a base on the other side of the wormhole, the crew of *DS9* is ordered to get a Federation station there first. But someone from Major Kira's past will stop at nothing to destroy her—though the fate of Bajor and the Federation hangs in the balance.

K. W. Jeter: *Alien Nation #2: Dark Horizon* Pocket SF, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.99. The *Alien Nation* TV series ended with the cliffhanger episode "Green Eyes." A script was written for a two-hour second season opener, "Dark Horizon," that would resolve the questions "Green Eyes" left hanging. This is a novelization of "Green Eyes" and the unairied "Dark Horizon."

Katharine Kerr: *A Time of Omens* Spectra Fantasy, 1st mass market pb, 416 pp, \$5.50. A novel of the Westlands. In this Celtic fantasy, the elves and humans of the world of Deverry come to realize that the omens from the shadowy land of the Guardians point toward war.

Mercedes Lackey: *Winds of Fury* DAW Fantasy, hc, 464 pp, \$20.00. In the conclusion of the *Mage Winds* trilogy, Herald Elspeth has completed her magical training. She and her Hawkbrother partner Darkwind must return to Valdemar to try to protect the kingdom from magical attack.

Mercedes Lackey: *Winds of Change* DAW Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 464 pp,

\$4.99. In *Mage Winds* Book #2, Elspeth is caught up in a desperate battle to protect the Heartstone of the Vale from a rogue sorcerer.

Mercedes Lackey: *Winds of Fate* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99. Tie-in reissue of the first book of the *Mage Winds* trilogy.

Tanith Lee: *Black Unicorn* Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 192 pp, \$3.99. The daughter of a powerful sorceress seems to have no magical talent of her own, until she finds the bones of a unicorn and brings the beast back to life.

James Lowder: *Prince of Lies* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 388 pp, \$5.95. Cyric, God of the Dead, searches in vain for the soul the friend he murdered to become divine. Meanwhile the other gods, wary of Cyric's ambition, forge a secret alliance against him. The ensuing "Gods-war" will change the face of the land forever. Sequel to the FORGOTTEN REALMS® Avatar Trilogy.

Brian Lumley: *The Last Aerie* Tor Horror, hc, 480 pp, \$22.95. This latest in the author's vampire saga follows the adventures of the twin sons of the Necroscope, as Nestor becomes a Vamphyri Lord and Nathan is trapped on Earth pursued by a maniacal psychic.

Phillip Mann: *Wulfsyarn* AvoNova SF, 1st time in pb, 368 pp, \$4.99. After the War of Ignorance, the mercy starship *Nightingale* disappeared. A year later it reappeared, battered and with only one survivor. A sympathetic machine called Wulf explores the survivor's soul to reveal the truth behind the tragedy.

Dennis McCarty: *The Birth of the Blade* Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. A prequel to the popular *Thlassa Mey* series. When the evil priests of the Dark Order seize control of the realms of the Thlassa Mey, a goddess chooses an unlikely group of protec-



tors—none are heroes, none have any real magic, and together they must halt the spread of evil.

Dennis L. McKiernan: *The Eye of the Hunter* Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 592 pp, \$5.99. In this return to the fantasy realm of Mithgar, five heroes are called by a prophecy to track the demon lord Baron Stöke.

Victor Milan: *Star Trek #66: From the Depths* Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. The *Enterprise* arrives at Okeanos, a water world settled by Federation separatists, called to act as mediators in a power struggle between the natives and the ex-Federation colony. A group of Klingons is already there, and Captain Kirk is arrested for sabotage.

L.E. Modesitt, Jr: *The Towers of the Sunset* Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 576 pp, \$4.99. An adventure about the founding of the magical society on the island of Recluse, set centuries before *The Magic of Recluse*.

L.E. Modesitt, Jr: *The Magic of Recluse* Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 512 pp, \$4.99. Tie-in reissue of the first book set on the island of Recluse.

Judith Moffett: *Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream* Del Rey SF, first time in pb, 336 pp, \$5.50. Sequel to *The Ragged World*. The Hefn have tried threats and brutal retribution to rescue Earth from ecological destruction. But unless two teens, the aliens' students, can find a way to meet their demands, the Hefn will be forced to commit genocide.

Pat Murphy: *The Falling Woman* Tor/Orb, 1st tr pb, 288 pp, \$8.95. A Nebula Award-winning archaeological fantasy novel about a Mayan city.

Andre Norton: *Golden Trillium* Spectra Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$21.95. In this sequel to *Black Trillium* and *Blood Trillium*, Andre Norton picks up the story of Kadiya as she follows her destiny.

Rebecca Ore: *Alien Bootlegger and Other Stories* Tor SF, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95. A collection of short stories by the author of *Becoming Alien, Being Alien and Human to Human*.

Steve & Stephani Perry: *Aliens Book 3: The Female War* Bantam SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. Ripley leads humanity's forces against an invasion of aliens who have overrun Earth.

Mike Resnick & Gardner Dozois, eds: *Future Earths: Under South American Skies* DAW SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of SF stories with South American settings or themes.

Lucius Shepard: *The Golden* Bantam Horror, 1st time in pb, 304 pp, \$4.99. A tale of beautiful, immortal vampires gathered in a struggle for domination.

Mike Sirota: *The 22nd Gear* Ace SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.99. The 22nd gear on Jack Miller's bike sends him pedaling through time and space, with no idea where he'll end up. Sequel to *Bicycling Through Space and Time* and *The Ultimate Bike Path*.

Joan Slonczewski: *Daughter of Elysium* AvoNova/Morrow SF, hc, 576 pp, \$25.00. Set on the same world as *A Door Into Ocean*. Raincloud Windclan leaves her backwater world to answer a summons from Elysium, an advanced city that floats on the surface of a water world. Raincloud's linguistic and diplomatic skills are needed to avert a war that would jeopardize the Elysians' greatest achievement: immortality.

David Alexander Smith: *In the Cube: A Novel of Future Boston* Tor SF, hc, 288 pp, \$18.95. A century from now aliens have landed, and Boston is the only port of entry. The city has become a technological wonderland while aliens and human struggle to make their society work.

T.W. Stetson: *Night Beasts* Pinnac-

le Horror, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.50. Genetically altered carnivorous bats are accidentally released in California and begin killing humans.

G. Harry Stine: *Starsea Invaders: First Action* Roc SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. The first hook in a new trilogy. The crew of a high-tech submarine encounters a race of aliens harvesting the floor of the Pacific Ocean—and the fruits of their harvest are human.

Amy Thomson: *Virtual Girl* Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Virtual Reality Programmer Arnold Dexter created the robot, Maggie, to be everything he ever wanted in a woman. But, separated from her creator, Maggie learns more than Arnold ever planned.

John Varley: *Steel Beach* Ace SF, 1st time in pb, 576 pp, \$5.99. Forced to flee Earth after an alien invasion, humanity makes its new home at the colony on Luna—a locale designed to be a virtual paradise, where the pointlessness of life is making the inhabitants suicidal... including the central computer.

Paul J. Willis: *No Clock in the Forest* AvoNova Fantasy, 1st mass market pb, 224 pp, \$4.50. A rusty key embedded in an apple opens the door that leads a mountain climber to a magical realm where two sisters, one good, one evil, struggle for dominion.

Timothy Zahn: *Cobras Two* Baen SF, pb reiss, 544 pp, \$4.99. A saga about a family of interstellar warriors.

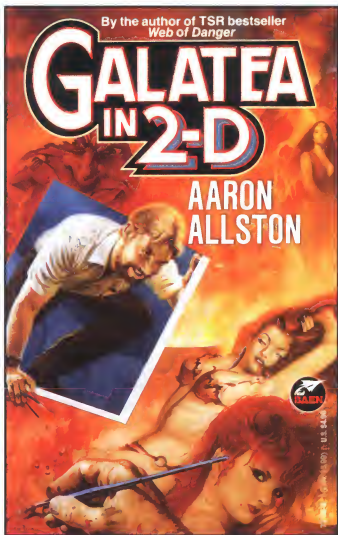
Roger Zelazny: *A Night In The Lonesome October* AvoNova/Morrow Fantasy, hc, \$18.00. A lighthearted tale about what happens when there's a rare full moon expected on Halloween night as powerful forces gather to battle for control over the gate that will appear—a gate that would give the Eternal Ones access to our world.

Looking Forward:

Galatea in 2-D

by Aaron Allston

Coming in August 1993 from Baen Books



Cover art by Gary Ruddle

Introduction by Bill Faucett

It's the dream of every artist for his paintings to come alive. But when the characters and places in Roger Simons's paintings begin appearing, it isn't that simple. When a rival artist with the same ability decides he has to eliminate Roger, things get very deadly. What follows is the beginning of a modern battle of wizards, whose power is limited only by their imaginations . . . and their art supplies. In the first excerpt from this wonderfully real, yet equally fantastic adventure we meet Roger dealing with yet another mundane disaster. In the second the artist has just discovered his power with the help of a very nubile nymph he once sketched.

Reaching for the squat bottle of ink, Roger knocked it over, and a black ink slick rolled down the drafting table toward his drawing.

Oh, it happened all the time. A glitch in his airbrush would throw a ruinous spatter of color onto a painting, or a slip with the inking pen would mar a piece of line art. Roger would watch the mistake destroy his art, then he'd pound on his drafting table and bellow outraged curses loud enough to wake the people in the apartment next door.

This piece was among the best he'd ever done. She was a woodland nymph out of Greek myth, done in black and white a few inches tall; she stared woeful and round-eyed at him from behind a thick patch of tall grass, her ears piquantly pointed, her slender body supernaturally graceful. She was perfect.

But Roger knocked the bottle over and ink poured down toward her. He didn't

even grab for the Bristol board; he knew he was too slow. He just squeezed his eyes shut so as not to see the nymph destroyed; then, reluctantly, he opened them again to view the damage.

The ink slick had stopped against the ruler laid across the bottom edge of the table. It covered half the piece of Bristol board, the half where he'd drawn the nymph.

But the nymph wasn't under the ink.

She was walking.

Moving with the curious grace of a 1930s cartoon character, the two-dimensional nymph walked another half-dozen steps away from the ink. On the unmarred half of the Bristol board, she froze into stillness, looking straight at Roger with the same sad-eyed stare—but now she was standing upright, one hand in her flowing hair, as though she'd been drawn that way.

She wore a scrap of a dress covering only one breast, continuing down into a short skirt; the pattern on the cloth looked like oak leaves. But when he'd drawn her, high grass concealed what she wore.

A wave of exhaustion hit Roger; it felt like shock setting in. He gaped at his drawing. After only a few moments he was able to utter a feeble "Uh."

It hadn't happened, naturally. Hallucinations were a lot more common than line drawings that move around. So he was hallucinating. Sure.

He squinted at his watch; years of close-in painting and sketching, too much reading, too many late-night work sessions were making him nearsighted, but he didn't need glasses. Not yet. It was 5:00, only a couple of hours after his usual bedtime. Whoops, the digital readout also said, not WED. He'd skipped a lot of sleep to finish his current art assignment and hadn't gone to bed even when it was done; he unwound from the assignment by working on the nymph. With no more than two hours' sleep in the last two days, it made sense that he was imagining things.

Obviously, he'd drawn it just as he saw it now, had fallen asleep and dreamt about it, had jerked awake and knocked over the bottle. That explained things. A tip of black-and-white grass protruded from under the ink stain.

Roger irritably brushed his brown hair out of his eyes. He didn't have time to go crazy. He had to drop off the MacMurphy Advertising art tomorrow, pick up his check, pay the worst of his past-due bills. This didn't leave much time to be institutionalized.

Tentatively, he reached out and ran his finger across the picture of the nymph. He felt nothing except cool, flat Bristol board and dry lines of ink.

Aggravated, he slumped back. *You're not going to move again, are you?* he asked. No? Well, then, the hell with you. He snatched up the drawing, took it in both hands, prepared to tear it to shreds.

And didn't. There was her sad, vulnerable face staring at him, and he suddenly couldn't bring himself to rip her—her? it!—to rip it up. He tossed the Bristol board back on the table.

I'm going to bed, then. You don't go anywhere. He rose, snorted derisively at himself. A little sleep, a little

cash, and he'd be all better. He pulled off his clothes and threw them into his dirty-clothes corner before flopping irritably into bed.

Cole MacMurphy, 288 pounds of advertising cynicism, shuffled quickly through Roger's drawings. The big man looked as though he'd rather dig dirt from beneath his fingernails than look at Roger's art. He glanced at the last one in the pile, a rendering of a computer desk laden with hardware, and put it face down with the rest. Can't use you, he said, his voice flat.

Roger's head suddenly felt light, but he kept himself under tight control. Why is that?

No good.

Roger looked at the pile of illustrations. Desperation stirred in his stomach and began to creep to his throat.

"They're as good as everything I showed you before. You liked those."

MacMurphy shook his head. "Didn't make myself clear. You're no good. We can't use you." He pulled a manila folder from a pile of paperwork and opened it. You come in here two weeks ago, say your name is R. J. MacLean.

Roger's face twitched; he knew what was coming. R. J. MacLean is a business name. Registered and everything. But your real name is Roger Simons. Found that out from a friend in the business. He told me all about you. You call yourself R. J. MacLean since nobody will hire Roger Simons. Right?

A red haze obscured Roger's vision. He jumped to his feet, leaned across the desk, furious. Look. . . .

You look. We can't use Roger Simons. You're a whiner, you don't come through when you're supposed to. Nonesuch Books. . . .

I did not screw Nonesuch Books! They screwed me! I delivered! They threw away those paintings! Roger drew himself to his full height, 6'2" though his physique was lean rather than heroic, to loom over MacMurphy. I've worked my ass off for two weeks. And now I've delivered. On deadline, Thursday at noon. So you're going to pull out your goddamned checkbook and ball-point pen, and you're. . . .

MacMurphy reached down beside the desk, picked up Roger's briefcase, and threw it out the open office window. The briefcase fell three stories. Roger could hear glass shatter when it hit. The sudden action shut Roger up, turning his tirade off like water from a faucet.

Then MacMurphy stood. He was Roger's height, but only a large basket of fried chicken short of 300 pounds, and far too much of his bulk was muscle. His voice became a low, nasty rumble. "Son, you don't come into my place and give me orders. Now, you can leave by the door. Or you can follow your briefcase. You got no time to decide."

Roger went cold. MacMurphy meant what he was saying. He was big and strong enough to back up the threat. He looked as though he wanted to. Roger glared at the other man, clenched his fist, and thought about hitting MacMurphy hard enough to break his jaw into fifteen pieces. But it wouldn't happen. MacMurphy

would slaughter him. The cold, sick sensation in his stomach got worse.

He didn't look away from the fat man, but he picked up his pile of illustrations and moved toward the door. He wanted to say something, God, anything some combination of words that would crush MacMurphy, that would make the man understand just how wretchedly subhuman he was for shafting Roger this way. But every word that came to Roger's mind sounded feeble.

So he said nothing. He felt his defeat shudder across his shoulders, felt bile burning in his stomach and his throat. He walked out of the office under the eyes of a nervous secretary and several wary-looking office workers. Out to the elevator, out to the parking lot. The shaking and the white-hot fury didn't abate. They got worse.

His briefcase had come down on the windshield of a gleaming new BMW, smashing through the safety glass. Several people stood around the car admiring MacMurphy's handiwork. One of them, a thin man with a maroon necktie, wasn't so happy; he was screaming and thrashing, punching at the air, his tie flapping with his motions.

Roger's briefcase wasn't in or around the BMW. Someone had already grabbed it and run. The perfect cap to the perfect day. One briefcase, one drawing pad, his checkbook and a calculator: he could add these to the day's losses.

Stone-faced, his stomach churning, Roger didn't mention his part in the car owner's troubles. He turned and left.

Roger drove swerving from lane to lane, jumping through yellow lights and fresh red lights. He cursed MacMurphy and those bastards at Nonesuch Books, he swore at all the drivers on the road, he snarled at the moronic commercials on the radio, he beat the steering wheel and everything in reach.

He swore especially at the red convertible that changed lanes and cut him off. It was like an ad layout in a magazine: bright red sports car, top down; handsome yuppified driver with dark sunglasses and a victorious grin; blonde woman passenger leaning over against the driver. An American Success Story.

Roger snarled at his creaky ten-year-old Rabbit. Mr. Red Sports Car, he decided, was a 32-year-old bastard junior executive with no skills except his B.A. in Sucking Up, and was paid \$65,000 a year and random blenders for not making decisions. That's life, he decided. Parasites get big money, fast cars, and loose company. The creative get the shaft.

Eventually, before he quite managed to get a speeding ticket, Roger's anger ran out of gas, leaving him weary and depressed. Another assignment shot—weeks of work down the drain, no money to throw at the bills. He'd had a year of this, and it wasn't getting any better. Nothing was getting better.

It was time to get away from everything, at least for a while. Roger checked out his wallet: it held his life's savings, a ten and two ones and drove more carefully over to Escape Velocity Books. His favorite store, with shelf

upon shelf of science fiction, fantasy and horror paperbacks, comic books, magazines, posters, art books, everything a growing boy needs. It was his oasis from reality.

(Editor's Note: some time later)

He found himself on a stony hill face and had to blink and cover his eyes against the sudden sunlight; it took several moments for his eyes to adjust.

Far below, the black, rocky hillside descended into a thick screen of green, a forest of ferns and palm trees. In the distance, miles beyond the curtain of green, he could see blue ocean, his favorite color of sea blue.

Roger turned and looked up the slope. Above was the jagged, ugly crest of a volcano's cone, alive and smoking. The sun, only part of it visible behind the volcano, shone down at him a little more golden-orange than usual; the sky was a clean, beautiful sky blue, a color he'd always loved and had only occasionally been able to reproduce.

And it was cool—oh, God, was it cool. He moved rapidly to the side of the cave mouth and let the hot flow of air pass him by; the cooler air caressed him, carrying heat away. He leaned against a rough, upright slab of rock, his eyes closed, and gulped the fresh air.

This is better, Elsie said a trifle smugly. There are trees here, and cool air. And fresh water, I can smell it.

Oh, God. Point the way.

Beyond the foot of the cone, past a thick screen of palms, banana trees, and underbrush, a waterfall splashed into a deep pool, kicked up spray where it hit, and rippled the surface of the crystal-clear water. Cliffs sheltered the pool on three sides, their shadow keeping the water cool.

Roger had the presence of mind to carefully set Elsie down on the stony bank. Then he leaped in, clothes and all, and the resulting splash still washed across the bank and knocked Elsie from her feet.

He drank until his stomach was distended, until he sloshed as he moved, until the worst of his thirst was gone. Then he floated on his back like a dead man in the water, letting the outermost layer of salty sweat wash away from his body. Finally, a little rested, he stripped off his clothes, wrung them out and threw them onto the stony bank, and scrubbed at his skin as best he could.

Only then did he remember his companion. Nymph, uh, Elsie? Where are you? The pool looked desolate, empty.

Here. You forgot about me. He barely heard her chiding call, Elsie's voice was so faint, but he turned and spotted her. She swam in a bathtub-sized cleft in the stone bank, protected from the comparatively huge waves Roger had been creating. Roger carefully swam across to loom over her.

He was startled to see that she, too, was naked.

Perhaps he wouldn't have been as startled if she weren't so perfect. When he'd drawn her—just yesterday!—he'd given her the sort of female build he most

appreciated: lean but not lanky, long-legged, high-breasted, fit and graceful. He'd made her a beauty, too; looking down at her, he felt his heart wrench a little, and was fascinated by his handiwork as she splashed and frolicked in the little pool.

Too fascinated, maybe; he felt a twinge of desire he was happy to have concealed by the pool and quickly quelled by the coolness of the water. Abruptly, he turned and moved back to where his sodden clothes lay, then hauled himself back onto the bank.

He irritably wrung out his clothes and concluded that he was one stupid son of a bitch. Not a good idea to get turned on by whatever Elsie is. Three inches tall and made of watercolor and imagination. A painted nymph, for God's sake.

Why couldn't he have done her up full-sized?

And what if he had? She'd be a full-sized painted nymph! He stood and started to get dressed.

She was still the closest thing there had ever been to his dream girl.

Dream girl. He straightened and wasn't even aware when he dropped the bundle of his pants. Kevin Matthews' dream girl. Kevin had always loved straight, black hair, and big white teeth.

If Kevin could recreate Achilles and Penthesilia, then he could also create his dream girl. He could create Julia.

Roger shook his head, trying to shake away his sudden suspicion. Julia didn't have the telltale orange highlights and oily sheen to her skin that Red and Penny did.

On the other hand, Kevin *was* capable of doing better work than Achilles and Penthesilia. That was one of the things Roger despised about him. Kevin's work was sloppy because he wasn't exacting with himself, wasn't willing to put in the hours. He did the minimum necessary work on each assignment, when he was capable of more.

Roger stooped, picked up his pants, and put them on. So if Julia Dover was a painting, what did it mean?

Kevin took up with Julia about a year and a half ago. That would mean Kevin was capable of creating her, and things like her, at that time.

That's also about the time he began to get really successful. Started getting all the plum assignments they'd both been competing for. About the time he cut Donna loose, of course. About the time of Nonesuch Books. That stopped Roger cold.

He shook his head, rejecting the thought. He'd take it as a given that Kevin Matthews, the great opportunist, would dump his wife for his dream girl. But deliberately, maliciously sabotage Roger's career? They'd gone to college together, been roommates for a time, collaborated on a lot of early work.

Which meant nothing. Roger stood for a pained minute and accepted the truth: Kevin had shot down his career. Kevin, with whatever abilities he now employed, had gotten to Nonesuch Books, sabotaged that one assignment, and made sure the story reached every ear in the business. Roger didn't know how Kevin had done it, but if the man could actually create full-sized people

like Red and Penny, there's no telling what he could do. And he must have torpedoed Donna, too. She said she couldn't get any work, either. Anger's red haze began to creep over his vision.

You should let your clothes dry before putting them on.

Elsie sat on a fist-sized rock, again dressed in her leafy scrap of a garment, posed like an artist's model. I spread mine out where there is sun and it is finally dry. You should, too. The air is moist. Your clothes will take forever to dry.

Roger forced his anger down and felt it begin to simmer at the back of his mind. He put on a smile he didn't really feel, for Elsie's sake. Maybe so, but with you around, I need the fig leaf.

She looked puzzled. Never mind, he continued. We're clean and we're not going to dehydrate in the next ten minutes. Let's try to figure out how to get out of here. Hop up. He extended his hand down, and when she leaped upon it, he transferred her to the shoulder perch.

Off he moved into the line of trees. As his shoes squished and his stomach sloshed, he was briefly able to grin at his sound effects.

Minutes later the anger was back, and Elsie could feel it. What is wrong? You were so happy back at the pool.

Roger's lip trembled as he struggled to keep from snapping at his passenger. Nothing. Everything, he grumbled, and swept aside the next frond blocking his path. The ground beyond was rough ground, rocky and irregular; he slowly picked his way between boles of trees and through thick patches of ferns, looking in vain for a path or more inviting stretch of terrain.

It's pretty. Elsie sounded uncomfortable.

Yeah, well, it's a pain, he answered. We have trees as thick as cars in a traffic jam, damned plants getting in the way every three steps, I'm starting to be as hot as hell.

You were cool only a little while ago, she said, and it sounded faintly like a reprimand.

I only thought I was cool. It was just in comparison to that chimney we came out of. It feels like summertime now. Again, he flicked his sweaty hair out of his eyes and mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

Ahead, there was a flutter of wings, and a thick patch of foliage shuddered as brightly colored birds fled skyward at his approach; it looked like the eruption of a volcano packed with paint. He saw birds flying sunward multicolored parrots, long-tailed quetzals, some strangely shaped red bird.

That was no bird. He squinted at it as it climbed quickly out of sight. The size of a large eagle, it was the precise red of an excruciating sunburn. Except for wings, it bore no resemblance to a bird. It was shaped like an iguana, legs and tail and all, and propelled through the air by a brood pair of featherless, scaly wings.

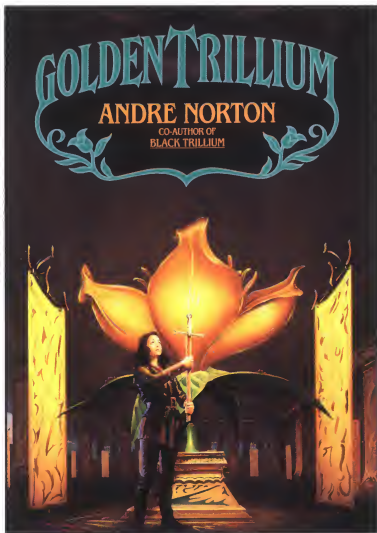
Roger froze as the memory hit him, as the red lizard-thing disappeared above the screen of treetops. I know where this is, he breathed. Which painting, I mean. . . . ♦

Looking Forward:

Golden Trillium

by Andre Norton

Coming in August 1993 from Bantam Spectra



Cover art by Mark Isherwood

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The epic saga of the three sister princesses of Ruwenda begun in the books *Black Trillium* and *Blood Trillium* now continues with this novel by living legend Andre Norton. *Golden Trillium* chronicles the challenges that confront Kadiya the Seeker-Warrior as she ventures into the foul swamplands, where she discovers, among other things, a long-lost race of intelligent creatures and a portal that connects her homeland to a universe of darkness—a gateway that threatens the very existence of the world she is pledged to save.

The prologue to this tale, presented below, summarizes the events of the previous books and sets the stage for what is to come.

There were three of them, daughters of the Black Trillium. In their full womanhood, they were to be Haramis, the Sorceress; Kadiya, the Seeker-Warrior; and Anigel, the Queen. At one birth they came into the world (which in itself was a strange and unknown thing) and at the moment of their birthing the Archimage Binah, she who was rumored to be the full Guardian of all the land, hailed and named them.

They were, she prophesied, to be the hope and saviors of their people. She bestowed upon each an amulet of amber in which was set a tiny floweret of the legendary Black Trillium, which was both the sign of their royal clan and of the land.

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Their country of Ruwenda, though for long generations it had been home to humankind, still held many secrets. A large part was swamp, out of which rose some islands of firm ground. On many of these were ruins, some large enough to be the graveyards of full cities. The King lived in the citadel, yet another of these reminders of an earlier day, save that it was still whole.

To the east, humankind drained the swamp, creating polders, which made rich farmland and offered fine grazing for herds and flocks. Ruwenda also served as the major way station for the import of timber from the south, which was needed greatly by their neighbors of Labornok to the north. Other wares came out of the swamps themselves: herbs, spices, the scaled shells of water creatures—some as bright as jewels, some so tough they could be fashioned into waterproof armor. And most rare of all came things—many so strange they could not be identified—found in the ruins on the islands.

The gatherers of these were called Oddlings—the swamp dwellers whom the Ruwendians had found upon their own first arrival and with whom they had no quarrels. Neither wanted what the other desired in the way of territory. Of these Oddlings there were two races—the Nyssomu who were more forthcoming, some taking service even in the King's Citadel, and the Uisgu, shy outlanders whose chosen land lay farther west in the unexplored swamps. What the Uisgu had to trade they brought to the Nyssomu, who in turn offered it to licensed traders. All generally gathered in the large ruined city known to men as Trevista, which outlanders could reach easily by river.

There was another race within the mires, claiming as their own the more western reaches of the north, and those none would willingly meet. Drowners, the Oddlings called them; Skritek, the learned named them. They were torturers and slayers, and an evil blight. At times they raided the polders or sought prey among the Oddlings, and nothing good was known of their saurian kind.

There was peace in Ruwenda—save for such raids as these—during the childhood of the three Princesses. Men were unaware that a storm was building in the north.

The King of Labornok was old and had occupied the throne for almost the lifetime of many of his people. His heir, Prince Voltrik, was soured with waiting. He spent much time overseas where he learned different ways and made allies—including the great sorcerer Orogastus. When the Prince returned home, this man of magic was his close companion. When Voltrik did at last assume the crown, Orogastus became his first advisor.

Voltrik coveted Ruwenda—not for its swamps, but for its control of the lumber trade and for the treasure rumored to be found in the ruined places. Once safely settled on the throne, he struck.

The mountain forts guarding the only pass were blasted into nothingness by lightning called down by Orogastus's magic. Then, guided by a traitorous merchant and with the swiftness of a snake's strike, the Labornoki took the great citadel itself.

King Krain and those of his lords who survived that battle died horribly at Voltrik's orders. His Queen fell

under the swords of those pledged to kill all the royal women, for there was a prophecy that only through them could the invaders be conquered in turn. The three Princesses escaped, each with the aid of her birth talisman—but they did not go together.

Haramis was carried by the witchery of Binah (now old and failing, else no Labornoki would have won foothold in the land) upon the back of a great lammergeier flying northward. Kadiya, with the aid of an Oddling hunter long her tutor in swamp ways, took to the swamps through an ancient passage. And Anigel, with her Uisgu mentor, the old herbmistress Inmu, escaped to the watery city of Trevista.

Each Princess in turn made her way to the Archimage at Noth, and each was set under a geas to discover a portion of a great magical weapon which would free the land.

Their trials were many. Haramis, in the mountain lands, was tracked by Orogastus. He skillfully wooed her, first out of policy and then because he believed he saw in her a fit companion for his own gathering of power. But he was unable to obtain the silver wand that was Haramis's talisman.

Kadiya was led to the lost city of the Vanished Ones and there took up the sword which grew from the stalk of the Black Trillium which had led her there. Anigel, fleeing southward with the aid of the Uisgu, came to the forests of Tassaleyo, where she plucked a crown from the maw of a life-devouring plant. There also she met the Prince Antar, son of Voltrik, sent to bring her back prisoner but already so revolted by the excesses of his father and fearful of the growing power of Orogastus, he would not fulfill his orders, but rather became Anigel's sworn defender.

Kadiya, leading her gathering army of both Uisgu and Nyssomu, joined with Anigel to storm the citadel. It was Haramis who brought to an end the life and power of Orogastus, by uniting the three talismans into one great and overpowering magical focus.

Haramis refused the crown which was hers by right of first birth, choosing rather to follow Binah as the Archimage. Kadiya also put aside her heirship, for there were secrets in the swamplands which called to her, and she knew in her heart that crown and throne were not for her.

Anigel wedded with Antar and joined the two once-enemy lands. As Queen and King Laboruwendo, both swore they would rule as one and hold the peace.

Haramis departed for the northern mountains and the knowledge stored there which drew her heart as no living thing might do. Before she went she sundered again the three talismans, taking with her the wand. The crown Anigel set within her own as part of her heirship. Kadiya again took up her sword, the point of which was missing, the pommel of which could unbind into three force-shooting eyes—one the color of her own, one that of an Oddling, and the topmost a brilliant one which had no bodily counterpart.

Kadiya joined her Oddling army and went swampward just at the beginning of the monsoon. She did not know what she truly sought, only that she must seek it. ♦

Behind the Stars

Part Two



George Zebrowski

12

The day became warm and humid. Hot breezes hurried through the forest all afternoon, carrying strange odors and small, flowery floaters. Max spotted large bladder-things drifting high up among the swaying branches, occasionally eating one of the flowers. One bladder-creature let out some air and seemed about to descend in pursuit of a floater, but a gust of wind swept them both away. Weak from lack of food, Max sat with Lucinda against a tree, dozing but unable to sleep. Emil lay on a bed of leaves.

"He's dead!" Lucinda cried late in the afternoon. Max roused himself and crawled

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

over to the motionless figure. Lucinda was crying softly as she knelt at her brother's side.

Max leaned over and saw that the boy was breathing. "He's alive."

"Maybe he'll get better," Lucinda whispered, as if fearful of waking him. Max crawled back to the tree and tried to find some sleep.

Emil was still unconscious when Max awoke and saw stars appearing over the clearing as the yellow-white sun went down. He peered at his timer and saw that it had taken ten hours for the sun to set.

Lucinda opened her eyes suddenly, turned toward her brother's motionless body, and cried, "We've got to do something!"

"Maybe he'll be better by morning," Max said, trying to put his arm around her.

"You know he won't," she answered, pushing him away.

Max remembered his father telling him about the senseless death of his friend when a quake had struck the mining town on Mercury. This made no sense, either, Max thought angrily as he looked at Lucinda.

Her eyes were wide as she stared at her brother in the twilight. "I could have kept him from going into that grass," she said.

"It wasn't your fault. He went ahead of us before we could notice the hooked briars, or suspect they might be deadly. Try to get some more rest, or we won't be able to do anything." He felt exhausted as Lucinda put her head on his shoulder.

When he awoke again, long after the alien midnight, a dim red sun had risen over the clearing. A few minutes later it was joined by a pale white sun that stayed low over the trees, casting a sickly glow into the deadly briar-grass. Max realized that they were probably on a planet circling the bright yellow-white sun that had set, in a system that included these two, more distant stars. He moved carefully away from Lucinda, then crawled over and listened to Emil's labored breathing.

"He's worse, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes," Max admitted as he stood up. "We're rested enough to carry him back now. Maybe the passage has opened."

"Moving him might hurt him even more."

"We have no choice. You take his feet."

They lifted him. He showed no sign of waking. Carrying him sideways, they moved through the forest. Max began to sweat. Emil let out a loud rasp as they began to climb the rocky incline below the outcropping. Max slipped on the wet moss but held his balance, gripping Emil more tightly as he and Lucinda staggered into the opening.

They hurried through the cave and entered the portal. When they neared the point where the barrier had stopped them, they put Emil down, and Max went ahead, feeling for the obstacle.

"It's not here!" he shouted, then bumped into it. "It's still up," he said in despair, then slid down against it and wrapped his arms around his middle to keep from shaking. His stomach knotted as he asked himself what

he was going to do. Try to keep from panicking, he supposed. Try not to let his own terrors push him and Lucinda into a panic that would destroy any chances they might have. Maybe this was what people meant when they talked about being brave—going on, staying calm, trying to survive in as reasoned a way as possible even when you were certain it would do no good.

Lucinda's dark shape sat down next to him and said, "He's going to die, and we're never going to leave this place. Why is this stupid thing here? What do they want us to do?"

"I think we got lured into this by an automatic transport system," he said. "I just don't feel that anything alive is running it."

"It's going to kill us," she said tearfully.

"If we'd been lured in for some sort of programmed purpose," Max said, "it wouldn't include letting us die."

"Then the habitat got caught by it in the same way."

"Probably."

"Where?"

"Max felt weak. "Near Earth's Sun, maybe."

"But we saw the Sun disappear as we came in."

"Maybe it only looked that way. We were pulled into a station. . . ."

Emil began to wheeze, as if something was caught in his lungs. Max and Lucinda crawled over to him.

"Emil," Max whispered.

The boy was struggling to say something, but Max heard only more wheezing. He touched Emil's forehead. It was hot with fever.

"He's worse," Lucinda said.

They crawled back to the barrier. Its hardness felt cruel against Max's back. He felt angry and resentful. Was there an alien turning it on and off somewhere?

Lucinda rested against him. "All we can do is wait," he said, "until the barrier lets us through. There's nowhere else we can go."

"We can die here or get to wander around some more," she said, "and end up even more lost." Her body shuddered against him, but she didn't cry. He clenched his teeth and tried to think. It seemed certain that the return to Earth had somehow started this chain of events. Why couldn't the habitat have stayed away? From Centauri it might have gone on to another star, and then another. . . .

He put his arm around Lucinda as she fell asleep. He listened to her breathing for a while, then closed his eyes and surrendered to the dark.

13

Voices echoed through the dark passageway, as if two or more people were conversing at the entrance.

Impossible, Max told himself as he slipped back into sleep. When he heard the voices again, he felt vaguely that he was not dreaming, but still tried to ignore the sounds.

The voices went on talking, and once in a while he could almost make out words. It reminded him of when he would try to hear what his parents were saying in

their room. He smiled to himself, feeling superior; dreams had rarely fooled him, and this one wasn't going to either, no matter how hard it tried to convince him it wasn't a dream.

"Max," Lucinda whispered.

"What?" he asked, sitting up.

She sat up next to him, and he was suddenly alert, thinking that Emil was at the exit, talking to himself in a fever.

"Do you hear voices?" Lucinda whispered.

"Yes," Max said, staring toward the opening.

Lights flashed. Emil still lay on the floor, breathing heavily as the lights came toward them. Footsteps echoed. Aliens were marching into the tunnel, on their way through to a distant world. The barrier would come down, Max realized as he moved toward Emil.

"Pull him over," he whispered. They grabbed Emil by the shoulders, slid him over to the wall, and huddled with him as the lights grew brighter.

"Who are they?" Lucinda whispered.

He felt her shaking next to him, and put his arm around her. Fear jolted through him as he watched the lights. These were the strangers who had built the interstellar passages, the star-people whose fault it was that Emil was dying. Anger surged through him as he stood up, unable to control himself.

"Come on!" he shouted, stepping into the center of the tunnel and facing the lights. "We're over here! Why'd you set up your damn passages so we'd get lost in them? Who do you think you are hijacking our habitat? You don't own the whole universe! We live in it too!" He shook, pushing the words out with his anger. "There's more of us—billions! You may get the three of us, but the rest will hunt you down, even if you are more powerful. We'll find you wherever you are, no matter how long it takes!"

Lucinda was tugging at his arm. "Max, what are you saying?"

The aliens probably couldn't understand him anyway, Max thought, so his defiance was useless. He stood his ground and watched the lights, feeling helpless as they came nearer, but trying to take heart from the fact that there were billions of human beings—a whole solar system full of them—too many for the aliens to stop, he told himself. He was now glad that there were so many.

Beams of light played over his face. He glanced at Lucinda. She was kneeling by Emil, raising his head into her lap.

"Hey—it's a bunch of kids!" a man's voice shouted.

The intruders' beams pointed upward, and Max saw two-legged, two-armed figures standing in front of him. He rushed at the figure directly in front of him, determined to strike a few good blows, but an appendage reached out and grasped his arm, holding him back.

"Who are you?" a man's voice asked.

Max was unable to answer. The aliens were in his mind, using his memories to fool him into seeing and hearing human beings.

"This one's hurt," the man said. "Who are you?" he demanded again.

"Easy," a second male voice said. "They may be in shock."

"I'm Lucinda ten Eyck. This is my brother, Emil LeStrange. Please help him."

"They're Jake and Linda's kids!" the second male voice cried. "Older, of course. But they went back to Earth nearly ten years ago."

"Who's the other boy?"

A light played over Max's face. "He looks familiar. What's your name, son?" The man let go of his arm.

"He's Max Sorby," Lucinda said.

"I knew his folks!" A light shone on the man's face.

"Max, it's me, Lucian Russell. Lucky Russell, remember?"

Max heard the words, but couldn't answer.

"They may be in shock," the other man said.

"How'd you get here, Max?" Lucky asked.

"Where's here?" Lucinda demanded.

"Centauri A-4. How did you get here?"

"It's impossible," the other man said.

"Got to get them out of here," Max heard Lucky say.

"This one's out of his head."

Suddenly it all made sense, Max realized with a jolt. The three suns . . .

"My brother," Lucinda pleaded. "He was caught in some grass with hooks on the stalks. You've got to save him!"

"Oh, my God," Lucky said. "He got into the grass. He'll die if we don't get him up to the habitat fast."

Max tried to shake off his fear and panic. "Lucky," he started to say, realizing that the passages had led them back to Centauri, where they had been found by a team from the new habitat. This man knew him. He was Lucky Russell, the planetary specialist. I know him—and he isn't an alien, Max told himself as he passed out.

14

Max dimly remembered being carried out of the tunnel and through the forest to a waiting shuttle craft. He recalled the pressure of acceleration when the ship took off. Someone had spoken to him, assuring him that he would soon arrive at the Centauri habitat. He woke up in a clean bed, trying to remember what had happened.

A brown-eyed woman was smiling at him. "How do you feel, Max?" she asked.

"Better," he said, thinking that she didn't seem very alien, then remembering that the aliens had turned out to be human.

"You passed out from exhaustion." She looked at him uneasily. "Max, are you up to having a visitor? Lucian Russell wants to talk to you."

"Where are Emil and Lucinda?"

"She's in the next room."

"Is Emil okay?"

"We don't know yet. We're hoping." She touched his cheek as she got up. "My name's Marilyn Soong. I'm your medical doctor. I'll come back when Dr. Russell leaves." She was a small, slender woman with long, black hair; her body swayed gracefully as she went to the door.

She paused there and smiled at him. "By the way, it is Max, and not Maxwell?"

"It's Maxwell, but everyone calls me Max."

"Were you named after someone in your family?"

"Dad named me after James Clerk Maxwell, because his roommate in college always kept saying that Maxwell should be as famous as Newton and Einstein. Dumb, huh, to have a first name that's actually a last name."

"I think it's just fine," she said. "And it's not always a last name." She turned and hurried out the door.

When it slid open again, Lucian Russell came in and sat down by the bed. "Hello, Max. I'm glad you're feeling better." He smiled nervously. "Now, I know damn well that it's impossible that you kids were left behind and that you were living there all these years, so can you tell me exactly how you got to be on A-4? Does it have something to do with the barrier we came upon in the passage?"

"Where's Emil?"

Lucian Russell scratched his head, mussing his neatly combed brown hair. His gray eyes gazed steadily at Max. "We made an antitoxin to the poison from the grass, but odds are we're too late. One of our team got scratched a while back, so we know the antitoxin works. I just hope we got to your friend in time, but—"

Max looked into Lucian Russell's face. The man had aged a little; the lines around his eyes were deeper, and his hair was graying at the temples.

"You weren't looking for us," Max said.

"Just lucky, I guess." He smiled, curling his lip. Max frowned, unable to laugh. "We were on A-4 investigating a periodic power surge we've been picking up. Do you know what's going on in that tunnel?"

"Emil's got to recover," Max said.

Lucian Russell gave him a serious look.

"Are you sure he's that sick?" Max asked.

He shrugged. "Let's just hope the doctors are wrong this time."

Max took a deep breath. "I think the power surge in the tunnel comes from the operation of an alien transport system."

Dr. Russell listened intently as Max told the story of how their habitat had been drawn toward the Sun and into the black sphere; how the three of them had been lured out into the station one evening, where they had discovered the terminal columns and passed through several of them, emerging at different points in what seemed to be a vast interstellar network. "We had no idea this was Centauri," Max finished, "not even when we saw the three suns."

"That's understandable, Max. You were struggling to escape danger. This kind of triple system might have been anywhere in the Galaxy."

"You do believe me?"

"You're here. There's no way you three could have been left behind ten years ago, and you wouldn't have survived if you had been. You're not sure where this alien sphere that swallowed your habitat is located?"

"It was waiting for us, but exactly where I don't know. The habitat was making its approach to Saturn's Titan

docks when the stars disappeared, then reappeared. We seemed to be jumping in and out of normal space, and each time we got closer to the Sun. Then just as it seemed that we would plunge into the Sun, it became ghostly. We passed into it and were drawn toward a giant black sphere, where the Sun should have been." Max's mind raced with excitement as he began to suspect the larger reasons for what had happened.

Lucian Russell shook his head in amazement. "Super-technology. It's all around us, from what you've told me, and has been for a long time. They've done so much. Makes us look like children."

"Every place we came out seemed deserted," Max said, sitting up suddenly. "Doctor Russell—"

"Lucky, please. No one's ever suggested more possibilities to me than you have today."

"We've got to get back as soon as possible," Max said. "Nobody knows where we are. They'll discover the passages, and people may get hurt looking for us. I told you how the columns spin, so you can't tell where you came in or where you'll come out. They've probably spun since we got here, so we'll have to start all over again!"

Lucky rubbed his chin. "Maybe not, if the barrier is still blocking our terminal. It does seem delicate, the way they got you here. Maybe you were meant to get lost and find your way here. Emil's getting hurt was an accident, of course, but I think they might have wanted human beings to become aware of the passage system, to learn how it works, especially to find this link between Earth and Centauri. It means that our colony won't be cut off by decades of slow, relativistic space travel. Living out here won't be the isolation from Earth that we expected. People will be able to go back and forth at will. It changes everything for us."

"But if this was meant to happen, why don't they show themselves? What if they built this system a long time ago, and there's no one left?"

"I hope that's not true."

"Or maybe the way we were lured into the system is just their kind of instruction course, operating on automatic for anyone who comes by."

"Could be, but I hope it's not just a blind program. You've been thinking about what you've seen, haven't you?"

"We've got to get back," Max said softly.

Lucky nodded. "I'll go back with you, if the passage lets us. Don't have any strong personal ties to hold me, even if my friends might miss me." Max dimly recalled that the man had been something of a loner. "But I'm needed for a lot of things here, so I'll have to prepare others to fill in for me."

"We could try to get back on our own," Max said.

Lucky smiled at him. "I'm sure you could. They can do without me here for a week or two, but what if I can't come right back?" He laughed. "Four light-years, and I'll be right back. Never thought I'd say such a thing in my lifetime and mean it. But if the passage closes up, the only way I'd be able to return is by slow starship. I don't want to lose the years of work I've put in to make the habitat work, but I think I should go with you."

"But you will get back," Max said, "if they meant for us to find and use the system."

"We're still only guessing about why you were lured into the system. As you said, it could have been a series of accidents, or an old automatic program."

Max started to get out of bed. Lucky lifted a hand, as if about to restrain him. "It's all right," Max said. "I don't really feel sick any more."

"Lucinda's room is through that door," Lucky said, pointing. "You'll find fresh clothes in the closet. There's a cafeteria down the hall. You and Lucinda get something to eat. I'll go brief some people on what you've told me."

As he left, Max went over to the closet. The fresh clothes were his own, newly cleaned. He dressed quickly and went over to Lucinda's door and was about to knock, but hesitated, trying to sort out his feelings. She was very important to him now. The tenderness he felt for her surprised him.

He knocked twice.

"Come in," she answered.

Max brushed the touchplate with his fingers and the door slid open. Lucinda sat in a chair, wearing her own shirt, shorts, and hiking shoes, playing nervously with the ends of her long hair.

"I saw Emil," she said, looking up with tears in her eyes. "He's very sick."

Max went to her as she stood up. They embraced, and she held him close. At home, Max realized, he had seen only her pride and intelligence. He would not have guessed that she was also soft and caring. Emil was not unlike her, but more dependent on his sister than he would admit. Both were as vulnerable inside as he was, reaching out to others as well as they could, and hurting when they failed.

"We should eat something," he said finally.

She drew away from him, avoiding his gaze, and he wondered if she would care for him when they got home.

They went out the door, down a long hallway, and stopped at a picture window, where they looked out into the Centauri habitat. Even after ten years, much of it was still unfinished, but the incurving land of the asteroid hollow was mostly green. The sunplate was a bright, clear yellow. Buildings were under construction everywhere. Max saw people working overhead, landscaping, cutting pathways and roads. A stream ran around the equatorial region of the egg-shaped space. There was more than enough room for the small population to grow.

Lucinda took his hand. They watched the new world at work, and Max felt hopeful.

15

After eating, he and Lucinda sat and watched people come and go through the cafeteria. There were nurses and doctors, maintenance people, parents and children. Max looked for people he might know from the time before the colonists moved into this habitat, but it was unlikely that he would recognize anyone after ten years,

even when faces seemed familiar. He had been born as his habitat-starship entered the Centauri system, and had been only seven when it left. He had visited this habitat during its construction, but he remembered only a dark, muddy asteroid cavern lit by harsh work lamps, filled with the roar and whine of heavy mining machines and voices shouting over public address systems.

News of their rescue had spread quickly. Many of the people entering the cafeteria nodded in greeting, but kept away. The looks of sympathy and concern on their faces revealed that Emil's condition was common knowledge.

As Lucinda gazed out the window, Max found himself admiring her slightly upturned nose, the way she held her perfect lips together, the pale skin of her neck. Her ears were a bit large, but they were mostly hidden by her abundant hair. She seemed to be ignoring him, and that was like the Lucinda he had watched from afar back home.

"Want to go for a walk?" he asked, feeling out of place.

Her green eyes looked at him sadly. "Emil might wake up." She wanted to be at her brother's side, Max realized, in the hope that he might wake from his coma before he died, and she would have a chance to say goodbye. "I wonder what's happening back home," she added, sounding lost.

"Maybe they've found out what's going on," Max said.

Lucinda stood up, looking terrified as she stared past him. Max started to turn around.

"Oh, here you are," Lucky said, sitting down.

Max tensed. Lucinda was trembling, as if she was expecting to hear that Emil was dead.

"There's been no change in Emil," Lucky said, looking up at her.

She sat down.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to scare you. I shouldn't have come up to you so abruptly."

Lucinda took a sip of water and seemed calmer.

Lucky looked at Max and said, "We have to be in the passage, ready to go through if it opens." He turned to Lucinda. "I know you feel you have to stay with Emil, but he is getting the best possible care. He might be unconscious for a long time."

"But we may never be able to return here," she said.

"Maybe the starfolk want us to get back, to establish this route."

"Then why did they close it off?"

"We can only speculate, but maybe closing it at certain points creates enough of a delay for us to think about what we're doing."

Lucinda looked at Max, and he knew that if she stayed, they might never see each other again. The alien passages might close up forever, and there would be little chance that he could return to Centauri the long way, even if a ship were sent, they'd both be grown up at different ages and changed when they met again.

Max looked at her, unable to speak, and knew that her brother had to come first.

"There's no right answer to this," Lucky said. "You can both go or both stay, or Lucinda can stay with Emil. I can go by myself if Max can draw me a map of what

you both remember, but it would be helpful if at least one of you came along. I'll back whatever each of you decides."

"Max and I will go," Lucinda said decisively. "Emil will recover or he won't, whether I'm here or not."

Max looked at her with surprise. She looked back, and he knew how guilty she felt, because he felt the same.

"If Emil dies, and I can't get back," she explained, "then my parents will lose us both, so I should go back even if Max decides to stay." She looked at him directly and said, "There's no reason for Max to stay."

"Staying would be the safer thing to do," Lucky said. "From what you've told me, we won't be going for a stroll."

"We'll get through," Lucinda said. "I'll see Emil before we go."

They sat by Emil's bed together. He was breathing regularly, but his color was a strange pasty gray with patches of brown. Marilyn had told them that all the readings coming from Emil into the diagnostic center showed a stable condition. The look on Lucinda's face told Max that she might still decide to stay. Lucky would have to go alone if she did, he realized.

Lucinda touched her brother's cheek. He stirred and seemed about to open his eyes. She caught her breath, but then he became still again. Lucinda got up and turned away.

"I'm ready," she said, holding back tears. Max felt as if he were stealing her away. She noticed the look on his face and said, "This is the right thing to do. We can't just think of ourselves."

Max was surprised at how grown-up she sounded. They went out and found Lucky waiting in the hall. He led them to the nearby elevator, which took them down to the engineering level. From there a track shuttle whisked them to the axis spaceport at the back of the asteroid, where a snub-nosed shuttle was waiting, its shielding discolored from fiery atmospheric passages.

Lucky led them up the small ramp and forward into the cramped passenger bay, where they strapped in and watched the screen light up to show the three suns of the Centauri system.

"Here we go," the pilot's voice said over the intercom. Max glanced at Lucinda. She was watching the screen as if he didn't exist, and he realized that even though she was doing what she thought was right, her decision to leave her brother was tearing at her.

Acceleration pressed him back. A rear view of the asteroid flashed on the screen as the shuttle pulled away. The habitat looked like a potato, baking in the heat of the tri-star.

Centauri A-4 was bright in the light of its sun. As the shuttle pulled toward the daylight side, Max saw green and brown continents, a sparkling ocean, clouds and icecaps, and realized that this planet had to be only one of many worlds where the builders of the passageways had left a terminal.

Max recalled that it had been decided a long time ago not to settle any of the planets in the Centauri system,

even if habitable ones were found, unless it became a matter of survival; but that would happen only if the habitat in high orbit around this fourth planet failed or was faced with danger. Exploration would continue, but nothing would be done to change the course of A-4's evolution. The species that had shown signs of intelligence would not develop for ages yet, but it would have its chance, little realizing that an older one had decided not to interfere.

The planet filled the screen as the ship turned around on its gyros and fired braking bursts. Deceleration pressed Max into his cushions. He felt shaky and closed his eyes. Lucinda's hand found his as the shuttle fell toward the planet, and after what seemed a long moment of weightlessness, the engines fired and stayed on. The ship vibrated. Finally, Max felt a gentle rocking motion as the craft settled down on its shocks.

They unstrapped and climbed down the ladder to the exit bay.

"There's enough food and water in these packs for a week," Lucky said, opening the lockers.

"We could have used these," Max said as he put his arms through the straps and positioned the pack on his back.

"What was it like?" Lucky asked. "Did you feel forced or compelled by something outside yourselves?"

"Something seemed to know," Lucinda replied, "that we were curious about what was outside the habitat."

We had to leave it—we couldn't stop ourselves."

"It's very important, what happened to you," Lucky said.

"Sure," Max answered bitterly. "Important enough to hurt Emil. They don't care what happens to us."

"The aliens didn't hurt Emil," Lucky said softly. "That was an accident. We've yet to learn what they intend to ward us, if anything."

The lock opened. They stepped in and waited for the inner door to close behind them. A breeze whipped in as the outer door opened, and Max tensed as he saw the clearing where Emil had been caught in the briars.

Lucky said, "We've burned a path to the forest, but be careful. This world looks Earthlike, but the biology gets strange and dangerous."

He went down the short ramp. Max and Lucinda followed. Smells from the burnt grass filled the air.

Lucky adjusted his radio pickup to his ear and mouth. "Jim, this is Lucky. Got me?" He waited. "Okay, you're clear." He looked at Max. "The shuttle will wait. If the passage is open, we'll call in another team to wait outside while we go through."

He led the way. Lucinda followed. Max brought up the rear, stepping carefully over the charred ground. The deadly grass stood on both sides of the path, looking innocent under the bright blue sky. Lucinda moved slowly ahead of him.

They entered the forest. Max peered into the green hues between the tall trees and spotted the overcropping.

"I wanted to ask you," Lucky said as they approached it, "why you were so angry when we found you, as if you knew exactly to whom you were speaking."

"I thought you were aliens," Max said. "And for all we knew, you could have been. I felt they were playing with us."

"I understand," Lucky said as they came to the foot of the rocky incline.

He led the way up, with Max bringing up the rear. At the opening, Lucky turned and said, "There's a flashlight in each of your side pockets."

Lucinda pulled hers from the pocket on her pack and shone it into the dark opening. Max turned on his beam, and together they went into the outer cave.

"I hope it's open," Lucinda said as they neared the square portal.

They stepped in together and approached the point where the barrier had been—and bumped into it.

"Still there, huh?" Lucky said behind them.

Max felt a moment of panic as he realized that he and Lucinda might live out their lives in the Centauri habitat. They would never see their homes and parents again. It would take more than four years for a radio signal just to tell Earth what had happened to them, but how would anyone get a message to the imprisoned habitat? And it would take just as long for a reply—nine years, at least, before he and Lucinda learned what had happened to the habitat, assuming anyone had been able to find out.

"No one at home may ever know what happened to us," Lucinda said softly.

"We'll wait," Lucky said. "Maybe the power surges were a sign of opening and closing, and not just of your coming through. It's possible the system has to recharge."

"I've noticed one thing," Max said. "When the barrier is up, the passage seems dead. There's no sign that it's doing anything. The S-curve and the feeling of blackness pressing in are gone."

"Where would the power come from?" Lucinda asked as she took off her pack and sat down on it.

Lucky set down his light so it would cast its beam upward, then dropped his own pack and sat against it. "It might be channeled from a star somewhere."

"From a star?" Max asked as he put down his pack and sat down against the barrier.

"Enormous amounts of energy would be needed to roll up space-time the way these passages seem to do when they join up distant points. The limits of space-time are not easily overcome, not with the safety this system shows."

"You've been thinking about this," Max said.

"I may be wrong about the source being a sun, but this system does eat huge amounts of power, at levels we can't even measure properly. Maybe only a sun can provide the power needed, and the surges are transient. They don't originate from a source that we can pinpoint, so I conclude that the power flows in from elsewhere, through some form of shortcut link, pumping power out of a sun, or some other suitably large source. I hope we'll be able to go through."

"The best we can hope for is to connect directly with the habitat," Max said, "wherever that is, but we'll probably come out in a long series of other places. I hope something wants us to get back."

"There's an advanced civilization behind all this,"

Lucky continued, "and we're sitting in one of its artifacts. When we received the message from Earth telling us that they were picking up alien tachyon communications, I thought that was all we'd ever find out, that the signals would remain undecipherable, and there would be no alien Rosetta Stone to help us read the language, but the message turned out to be in pictures, a diagram warning us about the infall of cometary objects from the outer Solar System, and nothing else. The message proved the existence of alien senders, and this may be their interstellar transport system."

"We can't be sure that there is an alien civilization," Lucinda replied. "This system may be all that's left of even, running on automatic, trapping people. Maybe even the signals Earth has received are automatic transmissions, sent out by machines."

"I hope you're wrong," Lucky said. "It would be sad to find that the most important discovery in all human history is a relic, and that you were lured out by a blind program."

Lucinda said, "Maybe we triggered something—a kind of mental manual for teaching people how to use the system, their way of making contact with younger races. They wait until the civilization is advanced enough, then take a sample of its people and put them through a maze."

"Some manual," Lucky said.

"I wonder if this alien civilization could be dangerous to us," Max said.

"I don't want to believe that either," Lucky replied. "With all this accomplishment, I don't see that there'd be anything they'd want from us, except to find out how we thought about things, how we regard the universe. They wouldn't want to roast and eat us." He laughed.

Max grimaced, even though he knew that the man was only trying to break the tension. "There are a lot of things no one wants to believe—but they may still turn out to be so." He could not believe that Emil would die, but it still might happen.

"I've got to go outside," Lucky said as he stood up. "Can't get a radio signal in here on my headset. We have to know if the shuttle is picking up anything from this place. Don't go away." He laughed again.

Max watched his light recede and disappear through the square exit.

"Sometimes he irritates me," Max said when they were alone.

"It's just his relaxed style, Max. Don't be fooled, he seems smart. My father's like that."

"Do you think he's telling us everything he suspects?" Max asked.

"I don't know. He's thinking very hard about all this, and he is worried about us."

"Maybe you're right," Max said. "Dad once told me how your father joked around when they were young. Dad never liked wise guys. I guess I got it from him."

"Sober Sorby—that's what my father called yours." She tried to laugh, but her voice broke. She clasped his hand and her fears were his own. Emil would die, and they would never find their way home.



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"Look!" Lucinda cried and let go of his hand.

He pushed away from the barrier and turned around. It was glowing a deep yellow. He scrambled to his feet and put on his pack.

"Lucky!" Lucinda shouted as she got up and slipped on her pack. "Hurry!"

Max watched the pulsing barrier. "Get ready! It may be now or never." Vague forms moved behind it. They seemed to have two hands and two feet. He came up close and tried to see through. A face seemed to peer back at him, but he wondered if it was his own, distorted by the glow. Then a large eye blinked at him, and he knew that it was not his own. He wanted the barrier to come down, but feared that now the aliens were waiting to bar the way home. A second face appeared next to the one in front of him. The masklike expressions seemed to be set in a look of curiosity. He put up his right hand to the barrier, and a hand raised itself to meet his, as if in a mirror. Abruptly, the figures retreated beyond visibility.

"Lucky!" Lucinda called from far behind him. "Max, he can't hear me. I'll get him."

"No! We may get separated. Are you ready?" He pointed his light.

"Yes," she said, coming up beside him. "Lucky, come back now!"

The barrier flickered, as if there was a fire on the other side.

Max took a deep breath. "Lucky!"

"Lucky!" Lucinda called again, but got no answer. "He must have gone back to the shuttle for something."

The barrier glowed brightly. Max turned off his light and closed his eyes against the sudden glare. There was no heat. He opened them to darkness.

"Is it down?" Lucinda asked.

He grabbed her hand and they went ahead slowly. Again, the strange darkness flowed around them as they followed the S-curve, and he saw the glow of the exit. They hurried to it and stepped out into the brightness of a blue station. Max looked up at the massive column rising above them, its inner storms still churning. There was no sign of aliens anywhere.

"Lucky will follow us," Max said, "as long as the way stays open." They sat down with their packs against the column and waited. "I think I saw them," he said. "Did you?"

"No, it was too bright."

"You were too far back," he said. "There were alien figures behind the barrier."

Lucinda rummaged around in one of the side pockets of her pack. "We should mark these passages. If the next one takes us home, Lucky will know how to follow us from Centauri. We'll leave messages for those who might be looking for us. Here's a marker."

Max said, "What's keeping Lucky?"

They got up and went inside, hurrying through the darkness. "It's glowing!" Lucinda exclaimed as they passed the turn and came up against the barrier. Alien figures were again moving on the other side.

The glow diminished and died. Lucinda flicked on her light. Max touched the wall, feeling its hardness once again. "We're cut off from Centauri," he said, turning his light away.

"What do we do now?"

"Try the next entrance." He felt defeated.

"We're on our own again," she said.

He said nothing as she pointed her beam up and looked at him. "Max, what is it?"

"Nothing."

"Get hold of yourself," she said firmly, sounding like the old Lucinda—precise, ready to cut him down if he gave her an opening, except that now she was on his side. "We could have all marched into that grass. Our job is still to get home. We don't have a choice anyway. We can't wait here until this thing goes down again. Come on."

They went back out into the station. Lucinda wrote a message on the smooth surface of the column:

IF YOU COME OUT ON AN OCEAN WORLD,
BEWARE OF BIG SNAKES—*Max and Lucinda*

She went to the next entrance and wrote:

THIS ONE GOES TO ALPHA CENTAURI FOUR,
BUT IT'S CLOSED SOMETIMES—*M and I*

"It's the best we can do," she said. "Let's hope the messages stay with each portal when it spins." She put the marker in her shirt pocket. "If the next portal takes us home, we'll come back and mark this entrance."

"If we can," he said.

They faced the next portal and stepped in together. Her hand slipped into his as they went forward. Max felt the familiar curve of the passage, and wondered why he could feel the turn. Even with a light in his hand, there was a sense of guiding curvature. Light-years were nothing to these shaped bridges.

He peered ahead and saw a pale glow in the exit. They came to it and looked out on a strange vista of terraces set in the side of a great mountain. Lakes of glass glistened on each terrace.

They stepped out into warm, humid air, under a mountainside terrace. The sky was gray-white and motionless, as if it were a painted ceiling.

Lucinda pointed. "Look there!"

Something had broken through the surface of a lake far below, and was moving toward the edge. The thing was large, reminding Max of whales from historical holos. It growled deeply, as if it had become aware of them.

"What is it?" Lucinda asked.

The growl echoed between the mountains. They retreated from the vista, resisting its fascination. The strange thing rose from its lake and floated upward as they backed into the portal.

"That was weird," Lucinda said as they followed the curve back into the blue station.

Max shuddered at the way the alien thing had menaced them from afar, like something in a bad dream, and wondered if they had come upon it by chance, or if it had been a warning. Again he wondered about the possible dangers of contact with aliens.

Lucinda took out her marker and wrote:

TERRACE WORLD
BE CAREFUL OF ALIEN

They entered the next portal.

17

"I can't see the way out," Max said, feeling uneasy.

"Might be a long passage," Lucinda answered.

"None has been this long," Max said as they hurried on through the darkness. "I see the exit," he said finally. They came to it and looked out into a blue station.

"The color's right," Lucinda said as they stepped out into the brightness and started across the floor. "Wait," she added, and hurried back to the column to mark the exit:

THIS PASSAGE CONNECTS WITH A BLUE STATION
THE MARKED ENTRANCE THERE CONNECTS WITH
CENTAURI A-4

"I think that's clear enough."

"Those markings had better stay with the columns," Max said.

"We haven't seen the columns spin the last few times. It's as if they wanted us to get lost, and now they want us to get home. Let's wait a few minutes and see if the column spins."

As they waited, Max thought of Emil and wanted to say something to console Lucinda, but nothing seemed right. He knew that she was blaming herself, even though it wasn't her fault. No one could look out for another person forever.

"It's starting to spin," Lucinda said as he looked out across the station. He turned around, and they watched the column blur and whine, and finally stop. They went up to their exit and saw Lucinda's sign. "That's a relief," she murmured. "We can rely on our markings."

Then, as they went out into the station and searched for the mountainous shape of the habitat, Max realized that nothing would be as it had been. The life he had loved was over, even if they got back. He felt closer to Lucinda now, but wondered how she might feel toward him later.

"I hear voices," she said.

Max stopped and listened. "I hear them, too." His pulse quickened. It didn't seem possible that they had found the right station in the vast alien web.

They ran forward. The habitat loomed up before them in the brightness, still frozen in the alien floor. Several figures were out by the forward manual lock.

"Hey!" Lucinda shouted to them.

Max hurried after her, feeling strangely detached, as if this weren't happening.

"Lucinda!" one figure cried out, waving.

Max saw Linda ten Eyck. Jake was with her. They rushed up and embraced their daughter. Both seemed thinner, and Jake had not shaved for some time.

"Where's Emil?" Linda demanded, looking around.

"Max!" his mother's voice cried. Joe and Rosalie rushed up from his left and hugged him wildly. He felt a moment of relief as his mother kissed him, but it died

away when he heard Lucinda struggling, on the verge of tears, to tell Linda and Jake the bad news.

"Max, where have you been all week?" Joe demanded.

His mother gave him a suspicious look, then glanced at Lucinda.

"When we couldn't read your wrist IDs inside the habitat," Joe went on, "we started to search out here."

"You just started?" Max asked, noticing two older boys in front of the airlock. One of them was Muhammad Bekhter; the dark-haired boy lifted a hand in greeting.

"We've been coming out here for two days," Joe said. "It seemed impossible that anyone would have come out here, but the alarm sensor insisted that the manual locks were open. I almost fell over when I went to check and saw they were open, and realized that you had come out here."

"We hoped that the three of you were together, hiding somewhere in the hollow," Rosalie added.

"Why would we be hiding?" Lucinda asked softly, turning away from her mother's gaze.

"Have you seen the column?" Max asked nervously.

His father nodded. Lucinda turned to him and asked, "Has anyone else gone through it?"

"No, we've kept people away, and someone's always on guard by the airlock."

"Good," Lucinda said with relief.

"What happened, Max?" Jake demanded, holding Linda's hand. She stood rigidly at his side.

"You couldn't pick up our IDs," Max explained, "because we were light-years away. The portals in the column lead to stations in other star systems. One of them goes to Alpha Centauri A-4."

"Emil's still there, at the colony," Lucinda said.

"He was poisoned by some briars on A-4," Max continued, "but the colony found us. He's in the hospital on the habitat. They gave him antitoxin."

Max saw Linda ten Eyck stiffen, staring at her daughter in disbelief, her hands trembling. She had lost a brother, and now her son was in danger, or already dead.

Jake put his arm around her. "What are his chances?"

"We don't know," Lucinda said in a shaking voice, still avoiding her mother's gaze.

"Can you take us to him?" Linda asked.

"The portal closed up behind us," Max answered.

"We don't know when it will open."

"Can you show us?" Jake asked.

Max nodded. "Sure, but—"

"Rosalie and I will come with you," Joe said.

"But what's happened here?" Max asked, looking at his parents, then at the guards by the airlock.

"We're in a station of some kind," his father said, "probably somewhere in a close orbit around the Sun."

"Some people wander out," Jake explained, "so we've posted guards, in case anyone gets the urge to go exploring."

"That's what happened to us," Max said, looking at Lucinda, "but the feeling wore off after we'd gone through the column."

"It seems to affect people by degrees," Linda managed to say, looking dazed as she stepped away from Jake.

Max looked at his father. "Lucky Russell rescued us from A-4. The colony's excited about the possibility of having a direct link with us."

"Sure," Joe said, "if we can figure out where we are."

"But you said we're near the Sun," Lucinda said.

"That's only a guess," Joe replied. "We could be halfway across the known universe, from what you two have told us."

Linda said, "A link with Centauri, or with anywhere else, won't mean much if the habitat remains trapped here."

Max felt uneasy before the two sets of parents. Rosalie was looking at him strangely, as if he had become someone else.

"We'll get extra packs," Jake said, looking at his wife with concern. "Are you kids up to showing us the way right now?"

"Sure," Max said, hoping that the barrier would be down.

"Could you make a sketch of the portal connections?" Linda asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes," Max said, "but there'd be no way to tell distances. We can describe the places, but not where they are. We saw different suns in the sky, so we had to be light-years away. Centauri is the only known place we visited."

Something rumbled in the distance, as if a storm were approaching. They all looked up, but the blue brightness was unchanged.

"We haven't heard that before," Linda said.

There was a flash high over the habitat. It came again, brighter. Suddenly it was flashing every second, brighter each time.

"Everyone, back inside!" the navigator shouted over the rumble.

As they retreated toward the airlock, Joe glanced at Max. "Do you know what this is, son?"

The flashes came faster and the rumbling deepened. Max stopped and turned around. Lucinda did the same, and as she looked at her he knew what they both expected.

"What is it?" Linda demanded.

"I think the aliens are about to show themselves," Max said.

18

"Look at that!" Muhammad shouted.

Max saw a dark outline in the center of the flashing area.

"A ship!" Lucinda cried.

An alien ship, Max thought, as the black egg-shape descended slowly toward the station floor.

"It's being brought in the way we were," Joe said as the flashing and rumbling stopped.

The vessel touched the floor and settled slightly on its shocks. Max saw markings on the ship's side, but the glare made them illegible.

They waited in silence. Finally, two shapes emerged from the black hull and moved across the bright floor.

They were of human height, but in the distorting glare they seemed to lack arms and heads. Max tensed as the black masses drew near, moving as if they were machines.

Jake and Linda stepped forward. The black figures halted, and one came forward. It acquired arms and a clearly human face, then raised one arm in greeting—and Max saw a woman about five and a half feet tall. She seemed slim under her black jumpsuit. Her face was pale, with some freckles, her hair reddish brown. She was an adult, but Max couldn't be sure of her age. Her light green eyes seemed to be searching for someone she knew.

"My name is Lissa Quintana-Green-Wolfe," she said in a slightly raspy voice. "I'm science officer on the ship behind me. We've been worried about you on Earth. I'm glad to see you all safe here."

There was a long silence.

The woman from Earth smiled. "You will find an entry for my parents in your scientific records, under my last name. But to save identification time, let me ask about Joe Sorby. He went to college with my father on Bernal One."

"That's me," Max's father said.

She came up to him and held out her hand. "Joe? I'm your old friend Morey's daughter, Lissa," she said as they shook hands. Joe was smiling, but Max saw that his father was puzzled. "And you must be Rosalie," Lissa said. "I grew up hearing about you two—the big miners' strike on Mercury, the quakes, the building of the habitat there. My father kept up with all of it."

"This is our son, Maxwell," Rosalie said.

"Hello, Maxwell. They call you Max?"

"Sure," Max said.

"Will you please tell us what's going on?" the navigator cut in. "I'm Linda ten Eyck. This is Jake LeStrange. Our son is very ill. . . ."

"What's wrong with him?" Lissa asked with concern.

Lucinda glanced at Max, and he knew that pieces of the mystery were coming together—the habitat's capture by the alien station, their wanderings through the alien web, and the arrival of Lissa's ship were all part of it. Max was sure that Lissa was carrying information that would complete the picture.

"My son is at the Centauri habitat," Linda said.

As she spoke, the figure behind Lissa came forward. Max saw a sandy-haired man with pale blue eyes, slightly taller than Lissa. He seemed stocky in his jumpsuit.

"This is Captain Alek Calder," Lissa said, showing no surprise at what Linda had just told her.

Captain Calder nodded in greeting. "I want you all to know that we've detected no danger in the docking procedure by which your habitat and our ship were drawn into this station."

"And where is this station?" Linda demanded.

"Inside the Sun itself," Lissa replied.

"The Sun?" Jake asked.

"All of this," Lissa continued, "may be described as a suncore station, designed to sit inside a star and draw power from the star. Obviously, the station could not be placed directly inside a sun's fusion furnace without va-

porizing, so this station exists in what may be described as otherspace, outside our space but congruent with it. This station sits in that space, where there is no sun as we know it, but which shares its location with our Sun's interior. Somewhere in this station is a device whose core blinks back and forth from normal to otherspace, and uses that infinitesimal interval of time to draw power from the Sun's fusion process. At least that's what we think happens, even if the details are very different. In effect, two kinds of space are superimposed on each other, making it possible to harness the energy of a star. To put it in very quaint terms, this station is a kind of waterwheel, turned by the controlled amounts of energy released from the Sun, much in the same way a stream or waterfall would turn a generator wheel or millstone."

"How do you know any of this?" Jake demanded.

"After your habitat disappeared during its approach to Titan," Lissa continued, "we went out to the point in space where you were last seen. We found no evidence along your course that you had disintegrated. I felt that there was *something* at the point in space where you vanished. We passed through the same window you did and arrived here, although for a few moments it seemed as if we were being pulled into the Sun. There may be two windows, one in the outer Solar System near Saturn's orbit, where you entered, and one nearer the Sun. The second one may be there to orient incoming vessels, or just as a spare. When you entered the distant window and came out closer to the Sun, you had in effect stitched through space like a needle through a folded fabric. You probably saw that the Sun was closer. You were being given a clue, terrifying as it was."

"Are you sure of this?" Jake asked.

"I've been working at uncovering something like this all my life," Lissa said. "We've been suspicious of the Sun ever since the discovery of tachyon transmissions from the stars twenty years ago. At that time we learned that our Sun is a tachyon crossroads, a focus of some kind—probably quite routine—for faster-than-light communications. The existence of this station fits in with that early observation. I'm certain that what you have to tell me will confirm and extend what I've described."

Linda asked, "What can Earth do to free us?"

"Very little, at the moment," Lissa smiled. "I suspect that someone wanted you to stay a while."

"Who are they?" Jake asked.

"We don't know anything about them," Lissa replied, "except that they exist. I suspect my ship is not under restraint, and that they wanted us to find you. I think that if we activate our g-pusher drive, it will trigger this station's departure systems, and we will be ejected through one of the existing windows."

"Are you sure?" Linda asked.

"I'm guessing that this suncore station," Lissa continued, "is part of a communications and travel net, a component of a grid for powering interstellar vessels. It probably contains repair facilities, judging by its size. Stations of this kind may be common throughout our Galaxy."

Max saw his chance. "Better than that," he said. "Over

in that direction there is a column with twelve portals. There's a tunnel in each that leads to another star system. Lucinda and I, and Emil, explored a number of them. One passage took us back to Centauri. Emil's there now, in the habitat's hospital."

"He's recovering from an alien poison," Lucinda said in a shaking voice.

"We saw living things on the worlds we visited," Max continued. "I saw what might have been intelligent beings inside one of the passages, when I was looking through a barrier that went up there."

Lissa nodded. "So the system is even more advanced than I thought. Direct interstellar passage rather than starships. But why did you enter the portals in the first place?"

"Something lured us out through the manual lock," Lucinda said, "a kind of mental compulsion we couldn't resist, and we found the column."

Max sensed that same compulsion again, but it faded quickly, leaving him with the feeling that he had accomplished his task. He glanced at Lucinda, and saw by her relieved expression that she had also felt something.

Lissa said, "The link with our colony at Centauri would be invaluable, if we could use it."

Captain Calder whispered something to her. She nodded to him, and he went back toward the ship, becoming again a dark shape in the brightness.

"We should go inside," Linda said. "I'll call a general meeting. Everyone should hear what you've told us."

Lissa nodded. "There's a lot we have to consider."

They all started toward the open lock. Muhammad smiled as Max passed him and said, "Welcome back, Max." They went through the lighted passage and came out one by one below the sunplate.

"I'm sure you've noticed," Lissa said, when they had all emerged, "that even though the asteroid is not spinning, you have your usual gravity, which means that the station's systems are maintaining given conditions."

"We couldn't know that until we came outside," Joe said. "It gave us quite a start."

It was afternoon in the hollow. Max looked out across the sunny inner landscape and remembered what he would usually be doing at this time of day. Only a week separated him from that time, but it felt as if years had passed, and it seemed possible now that the habitat would not be dismantled. There was no way to get it out of its cradle in the Sun, at least not very soon, unless the station cooperated. Unintentionally, perhaps, the alien system had saved his home. He looked at Lucinda. She smiled sadly and took his hand as they followed their parents across the grass.

19

As the habitat's assembly came to order, the navigator introduced the woman from Earth, then sat down in the first row with her daughter, Jake, Max and his parents.

The spherical chamber was silent as Lissa stood up and repeated what she had told the group outside, including what she had learned from Max and Lucinda.

"Now I want to tell you what we believe may be true," she continued, "about the civilization, or civilizations, out in the Galaxy. Many of us at the Interstellar Institute believe that the attitude of galactic civilizations toward us may be divided into two factions—nurturers and weeders. We think they've been debating about us, in a general way, for maybe a million years, or from just before humanoid life appeared on Earth. The actions flowing from this debate explain, I believe, why the habitat is here in the suncore station, and what happened to Max Sorby and Lucinda ten Eyck."

And to Emil, Max thought sadly.

"Our previous discovery of their tachyon communications, together with what you've learned here, may give us a clue to what the attitude toward us might be, or is about to become."

Max felt a rush of excitement tainted with fear, as if he was waiting for his grades, or was about to be judged in a school project. What right did an alien species have to make decisions about humankind? They were not humanity's parents or teachers.

"We've thought about this in several ways at the Institute," Lissa continued. "To some of us it seemed that if life were plentiful in the universe, then even a single technical civilization might overrun our Galaxy in less than thirty million years. That's a very short time in the life of a galaxy. It would mean that younger cultures, when they attained the means to leave their sunspaces, would encounter the galactic culture and stop developing. They would adopt the dominant culture's ideas and technologies, and lose the unique road they might have taken in ignorance of the galactic culture's existence. Some of us have argued that the first culture to sweep the galaxy might have learned this when it found itself surrounded by echoes of itself, in the form of cultures it had influenced earlier. Not wishing to have this happen again, it began to nurture worlds where life might still develop, but it also set up limits to prevent developing civilizations from bursting the bounds of their solar systems too easily and losing their individuality. They could have done this by slowing down evolutionary processes with periodic catastrophes. One example would be an inward rain of asteroids from the cometary shells that surround most solar systems. Ice ages caused by such collisions would slow intelligent life's emergence but not stop it, thus saving the galaxy from being choked with intelligent life. Cultures would emerge spaced across great stretches of time, much in the same way as parents often space their children. Individual cultures would have a chance to shine, to be themselves before meeting others. Their emergence onto the galactic stage of history would be slow, based on careful prior exchanges of technical and ecological information, of the kind that would help species control their more rampant, darker natures. Cultures engaged in purely informational exchange would be stimulated by each other's unique outlooks and experiences of nature without being swamped."

Lissa paused and looked around the gathering. "But some cultures would perish," she continued. "If the weeders exist, then they've seen many tragedies. But imagine

how terrible it would be to use up a whole galaxy for resources and have only one culture to show for it. That would be the greater tragedy. Imagine how such a dominant culture might feel when it looked back and understood what it had done. However rich it would be in knowledge and spirit, it would know that an infinity of riches had also been lost, never to be regained."

Max glanced at Lucinda's parents and saw their unease. They knew this was important, but their immediate worry had to be about Emil.

"Everything we know about the growth of science and technology," Lissa continued with great emphasis, "suggests massive exponential growth that leads to explosive cultural transformations and expansion beyond a single planet. Many worlds probably destroy themselves before they can look beyond their solar systems, but it takes only one success to spread through a galaxy. If that happens at the right time, that one civilization would not even have to destroy any existing cultures, only worlds where life might one day develop."

Lissa smiled. "Some of you might quite naturally resent the idea of being judged by alien others, or having them make decisions about our lives. But they wouldn't see it that way at all. No life can think only of itself for long. The weeders and nurturers would have seen countless forms of sunlife coming up, growing into self-awareness and tragedy at the same time. Many would weed themselves, with no one lifting a finger to destroy them. Meanwhile, the nurturers would strive to help civilizations grow up in less cruel ways. Contacting them directly would not be the way to do it, since that would alter the very individuality that is developing—which is all that any civilization really prizes in any other. So, by slowing the emergence of cultures, the nurturers would preserve a galaxy's resources, and by isolating a culture preserve its individuality. Yes, some cultures would die."

Max felt both challenged and awed by her words.

"But who could these weeders and nurturers be?"

Jake asked.

"They are probably a very old culture," Lissa replied. "Having achieved everything that younger species strive for, this is probably the only interesting thing left for them to do. Of course, we can't be certain yet that all this is true, or that the weeders and nurturers even exist." She was silent for a few moments, then began to pace back and forth before the assembly. She was graceful, Max noticed, her steps sure. She was, he realized, the most intriguing person he had ever met.

"But consider," she continued, facing the gathering, "what it means for you to be here inside the Sun. There are many ways to put together the clues and evidence we've gathered, but we must also include the possibility that clues have been *given* to us, and that we were meant to be having this very kind of discussion, in which we try to think about how galactic cultures might regard us. It may be that our Galaxy has always been safe from being overrun, because most cultures perish through nuclear wars and technological disasters, rather than from outright weeding. Perhaps ours is a young galaxy, in which the weeder-nurturers seek to prevent

what has happened in older ones. As you know, in the years when your habitat was returning from Centauri, we received what seemed to be a radio warning from the Cometary Halo, or the Oort Cloud, as it is better known. I was part of the expedition that found the transmitter, which might have been placed there by the nurturers, or by another civilization seeking to warn us about the dangers of cometary infall. Later that same year we detected a whole network of tachyon communications crossing the galaxy, with some of them passing through our sun. That was what first made me suspicious. The existence of this station makes sense of that observation. I think we'll find that stars are used to channel and amplify tachyon links, and that they also power physical bridges." She gazed out at the gathering. "They're talking to each other out there!" she said, gesturing with both arms.

A chill went through Max as he wondered what terrible things the aliens might be saying about humanity, especially if the aliens were like the whale-thing that had menaced Lucinda and him on the terrace world.

"It was fortunate that we were contacted by radio," Lissa continued, "since it's a means we knew before our discovery of tachyons. Someone wanted to make sure that we would receive and understand the warning about cometary bombardment, and perhaps wanted to do so anonymously, using a backward technology. The signals were a display diagram, showing us where the transmitter was located. You can't get simpler than that. They thought we were worth warning, too far along to let perish, as they might have let happen with Earth's dinosaurs. Or perhaps the transmitter was just a routine buoy, of the kind used to mark ocean reefs to warn ships. But one thing is inescapable—any kind of message received by one culture from another has a shaping effect on the recipient culture, even if *nothing* in the message is understood, even if it's only a nonsense message proving that the other culture exists, or once existed. The sending culture had to know that we would never look outward in the same way again."

"But is there any danger from cometary infall?" Linda ten Eyck asked.

"Not that we could find," Lissa replied. "After we found the radio buoy, we took our ship-habitat out into the Oort Cloud for a two-year survey. We charted the velocities of thousands of bodies whenever we could, and found nothing large enough to slow up bodies in their orbits to fall sunward. Of course, the Halo is large, and can be disturbed anywhere in the vast sphere it forms around the solar system. It takes only a small change in a body's orbital velocity to send it into the inner solar system. Our survey is still incomplete. The danger may well exist."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Or they're just taking a break, until the nurturers figure out what to do with us. I don't like this idea that some other culture knows what's best for us, or that it feels justified in deciding we shouldn't exist at all!"

Max realized that he felt the same way, and was glad that Jake had spoken up.

"You're right," Lissa answered, "but that may be just the way things are. And it may be that they do know what's best for us in some things."

"So where do we stand right now?" Jake demanded. "You're not even sure if any of this is true."

"Good question. Let's see if we can tie it all together. Everything that's happened since we discovered the signals from the stars seems to me to have been a way of getting us to think about our place in the Galaxy, and how we will survive the weeding process, whether it's intended or natural. We're past the era when we might have destroyed ourselves in a war or through ecological disaster, so it's possible that we're only being nurtured now. I don't think any civilization out there is longing to meet us, but they don't mind us overhearing what they're saying to each other, even though we don't understand them. We'll have to work at that, and I think they want us to. I'm certain we were meant to find this station, and to discover the link with Centauri, but I also suspect that we're supposed to have large doubts about what may be going on. Doubts protect us from being overly influenced by the weeders or nurturers. Our future remains an open possibility." Lissa looked at Max and Lucinda. "The passages you discovered and explored may be a learning maze, a labyrinth that is already teaching us to look beyond the more strenuous forms of interstellar travel. We've done it the hard way, by accelerating a habitat to relativistic speeds with enormous expenditures of energy—but now we know for sure that better ways exist, and that will spur our technical development. And one day we'll meet the Others, in the maze perhaps."

"I might have already seen them," Max said, "just for a moment, but I can't be sure."

"Did you see signs of intelligent life on the worlds you visited?" Lissa asked.

"No," Max said, "but there was life."

Jake asked, "What else are we *supposed* to learn about this station?"

"Perhaps they want us to learn to operate some of the systems here," Lissa answered. "Max and Lucinda did that when they explored the portal connections. There may be other things we can learn to do."

Max's curiosity raced, and he tried to imagine what else might be possible. For a moment Lissa seemed to look at him with keen interest, as if he might not be aware of how much he knew.

"It seems to me," she continued, "that the weeders and nurturers could not depend on the timing of natural disasters in the galaxy. For example, the nurturers might have to protect a promising species from natural disasters once in a while. A suncore station has enough energy to do a number of things. It could easily power a destructive beam to prevent comets and asteroids from striking planets, but such a beam could also sterilize planets to slow down the emergence of intelligent life. It could stop an intelligent species that turned out to be psychotic. One other thing. Stars aren't always stable. A station like this could adjust a star's energy output if something went wrong and a species was about to be destroyed."

Or it could increase or decrease solar output and wipe out life."

Max noticed that his mother looked appalled. "Can any of this really be true?" she asked. Murmurs of disapproval filled the chamber.

"We're speculating about the details," Lissa replied, "but I think the larger picture is true, or something very much like it. I'm only following out some of the implications of what we've learned, not just recently from Max and Lucinda, but over the years since the signals were received. Let me put it this way: three decades of data are consistent with what is now happening, and few of us at the Institute are surprised. We can't wish away all the supertechnology around us."

"A lot has happened since we left," Joe said. "The manner of our return seems to have taken things a few steps farther."

"I don't like this much," Rosalie continued. "Was Earth's biosphere slowed up in the past so that we got a chance to develop intelligence while other species, say birds or reptiles, didn't?"

"I doubt very much," Lissa answered, "that the nurturers were that specific. I think it's intelligence they value, whatever form it takes. They want it to grow out of its violent survivalist period, and look beyond tribalism, nationalism, speciesism, and the like."

Max heard Jake curse softly. "So we're being tested," he said in a shaky voice that betrayed his worry about Emil. "And if we fail, they'll hit us with rocks, or warm up the Sun, or just cook us to death with directed sunbeams. Who do they think they are?"

"They know who they are," Lissa replied. "I'm not so sure we know who we are. Some of us think we're angels. A lot of history suggests that we're devils. To a large degree, we're the first aliens we have to meet and get to know."

"We haven't had a war in over a century," Rosalie said.

"A century of peace is a good try," Lissa replied, "but it may be too soon to tell. The only accurate view we have of ourselves comes from our incomplete sciences, but it's inevitable that one day we'll see ourselves as others see us and may not like what we see. We should remember, when that time comes, that we haven't always liked ourselves either, which is a hopeful sign. Most of our literature and art shows that we are very ambivalent about ourselves, which is why so many books and paintings have been censored in the past. We have a lot of history to be ashamed of—the twentieth century, for example, may never be equalled for sheer destruction—and I'm not referring just to its wars and millions dead. To heat and cool cities and generate electricity, and to have the luxury of riding around in private vehicles, the people of that century nearly destroyed the ecosphere. On a more hopeful note, I think it's fair to say that humankind is capable of becoming more than it has been in the past, because we have shown great improvement. We must remember that."

"What if it's not enough for our judges?" Jake asked bitterly. "What if they've decided that we're going to fail?"

It happened on Earth. Entire societies disappeared because they couldn't keep up."

Linda stood up. "So what's next for us here and now? What if this station pulled us in blindly? What if this whole system is no longer in use, and is operating automatically?"

Lissa said, "We'll have to find out." She took a deep breath and looked around at the gathering. "I will have to leave you now. Captain Calder feels that we should make an exit run to make sure it works. Then we'll come back and decide what is to be done."

"But what if you can't get back in?" the navigator demanded.

"We have to risk it," Lissa replied softly. A murmur passed through the chamber. People stood up and cried out in protest. "It would be unfair," Lissa shouted back, "to take any of you with us now. We could take only a few. You're safe enough for now."

There was another outcry. The navigator raised her hands for silence. "I don't like it either, but it's best." The gathering quieted slowly. A few people seemed about to argue, but thought better of it.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," Lissa added, "within a week." Max noticed that she was looking at him as she spoke, and then she motioned to him.

He got up and went over to her. "We'll talk when I come back," she said before he could speak. "Don't worry, I will be back, no matter what it takes."

Max nodded and turned away.

"Come on," Rosalie said, putting her arm around his shoulders, "we've got to get you home for some rest." Lucinda stood between her parents, looking lost as she gazed at him.

"We've got to go see if the passage to Centauri is open," Max said to the navigator.

"The kids need rest," Jake said, ignoring him.

Max wanted to object, but suddenly felt very tired. The bed in his room was waiting, in the house where he had grown up, in the habitat that was still a prisoner at the center of the Sun. He was trapped with the world he had feared losing so much. Lissa might never come back. We could be here forever, he thought, imagining aliens peering in through the brightness to study their catch of human specimens.

20

Max lay in bed, gazing out the window at the familiar curve of the countryside, and imagined his world melting inside the fusion furnace of the Sun. It might be a simple task for the aliens to destroy this station by shifting it from otherspace into the Sun's thermonuclear core, to rid themselves of creatures who had blundered into their interstellar web. But then why did the aliens go out of their way to trap the habitat? Certainly not to destroy it. He closed his eyes and imagined ice comets falling toward inner Sunspace from the Oort Cloud. Beams reached out from the Sun, vaporizing comet after comet, saving the Earth. . . .

Were the aliens hostile or helpful? Was it a sign of

friendliness to have let Lissa's ship in once? There seemed to be no obvious reason why they wouldn't let her ship back into the suncore again. But there was no way to know if the ship had even gotten out. . . .

He thought of Lucinda and Emil. Their ordeal had tied the three of them together, and changed them. He cared about Lucinda, and Emil was more than a friend, because he was part of Lucinda. Emil *had* to recover, Max told himself, or nothing would ever be right again. . . .

He opened his eyes and sat up in bed. A late afternoon breeze blew in through the open window. He breathed deeply, feeling that he understood things a little better now, and would be able to sleep. Out there, around distant suns, waited the Others, the real strangers. Well, maybe not complete strangers, because they seemed to have involved themselves with human history. Did they know what they were doing? Were their aims good? Perhaps every successful species in the universe sooner or later adopted some younger one. Those who had gone ahead helped those who were just starting out, not out of goodness, but because everyone would benefit in the long run. Lissa was right about that. Knowledge and experience were too valuable to be wasted by isolation.

It made sense, he told himself as he lay back and tried to relax—unless the Others *were* in fact hostile. . . .

A knock on his door woke him.

"Come in!" he called out, and saw by his wall timer that he had slept ten hours.

He got up and rubbed his face as the door slid open. "Max," his mother said, "please come out into the living room. Lucinda and her parents are here and want to talk to you."

"Be right there," Max said sleepily as he got up and started to dress.

Linda ten Eyck looked tense when Max entered the living room, but she smiled as she greeted him.

"What's wrong?" Max asked nervously, looking at Lucinda for a clue, but seeing only resignation. His own parents stood by the dining alcove.

"We came to see how you were," Jake said, "and to ask you to come with us to check the passage to Centauri. We must find out what's happened to Emil."

"I know," Max replied. "That's what I was thinking of doing."

"Lucinda and I will go with you."

"I have to be here," the navigator explained nervously, "in case the ship comes back." She sounded unsure, as if she didn't believe her own words. It seemed to Max that she had already accepted Emil's death and needed an excuse not to go.

"We can start right away," he said, eager to help. The navigator wanted him to go, Max realized as he looked at her.

"We've been very worried," she added, her voice straining. "You two got through safely, so you'll make good guides."

"If the way is open," Max said, "then all we have to do is follow the markings Lucinda made."

"We'll wait for you out by the lock," Jake said as they left.

"I've redone your pack," Joe said, putting an arm around him and looking at him with affection.

"I wish you wouldn't go," Rosalie said.

"I have to. We know the way, so it won't be dangerous this time. It'll take only a few minutes."

"Then why take a pack?" she asked.

Max was about to answer that it was better to be prepared for any obstacles, but held back. His mother didn't need to hear that now.

"Be careful anyway," Joe said, looking tired. "I'm very sad for Jake and Linda. Your mother and I go back a long way with them, so we won't forbid you to go."

Max said, "Don't worry, I'll be back."

Max kept looking over his shoulder as they made their way across the blue floor toward the place where Lissa's ship had landed. Only its return would prove that it had gotten out safely. They might never see it again, he realized, or even have any contact with Earth except the long way around, through Centauri, unless the passage opened.

Lucinda and Jake walked next to Max in silence. She took his hand, and let it go as they came to the column. The black and gray storminess still roiled inside it, and Max felt a renewed wariness of how space itself was folded up, foreshortened, inside this alien device, making light-years into a minute's walk through the dark.

"Which one?" Jake asked.

"Here," Lucinda said. "I marked it."

Max nodded. "We'll come out in another blue station, and pass from there to Centauri."

"Go ahead," Jake said, taking Lucinda's hand.

Max stepped through the square opening and slowly followed the curve to his right, quickening his pace when he saw the exit, and came out into the blue light of the identical station. Jake and Lucinda stepped out behind him.

"Here's another," she said with relief, pointing nervously to the next entrance.

"Ready?" Jake asked.

Max tensed. Lucinda took a deep breath and bit her lower lip. His stomach tightened as he faced the portal and went in. The darkness closed around him again. He hurried along the curve, hoping—and bumped into the barrier.

"It's still closed!" he shouted in frustration.

"We'll wait," Lucinda said with sudden calm as she came up behind him. "It might have opened and closed again."

"Sit down against the barrier," Max said. "It could be a while, or in the next few minutes." It could be forever, he thought, squeezing his eyes shut as he leaned against the barrier and slid to the floor.

A flashlight came on, its beam pointing upward. Jake sat down next to him and touched his shoulder gently.

"We'll wait. If we're waiting too long, we'll leave and set up a round-the-clock watch with alarm transmitter links and someone will always be ready to go through."

"Sure," Max said bitterly. He had imagined striding through to Centauri and finding Emil sitting up in his hospital bed, eager to hear what he had missed.

Lucinda sat down at his side, and Max held her as she rested against him. They waited silently for a long time, but the barrier did not fall. He heard a deep sigh, then stood up slowly and helped her to her feet.

Max distracted himself by reading and thinking about aliens during the next three weeks, convincing himself that he was trying to understand more of what had happened to him.

He and Lucinda stood watch at the column every day, ready to go through. They would pass through the two portals and always find the barrier up. They would sit against it, waiting, and Max sometimes feared that the window into Earth's Sun had also closed, preventing Lisa's ship from reentering the suncore station. The habitat might face a future of isolation and immobility.

When they were not on watch, Lucinda and he sometimes hiked out to the stream in the hollow, and sat by the waterfall where he had always gone alone. She became withdrawn in the third week, and rarely spoke, and Max began to fear that he was only a constant reminder of what had happened to her brother.

"Don't you want to talk to me?" he asked one afternoon. "I know what you're feeling."

She stared past him, unable to speak, trapped within herself.

"Try not to let all this get you down, son," Joe said to him at dinner one evening. "Not until we know more."

"I'm not depressed," Max answered. "I'm just trying to understand." He was beginning to believe that it *had* all happened by accident. The alien builders were long dead and gone. The habitat had simply run afoul of automatic systems, maybe ones that were no longer working as well as they had been. Emil, Lucinda, and he had been lured out at random. He wondered if the aliens were clever enough to have made it seem a chance encounter.

"This station and its portals have been here a long time," Joe said, "maybe longer than human history. We won't learn everything about it right away. I think you've done quite well so far, considering."

Max was silent.

"It wasn't your fault or Lucinda's that Emil got hurt," Rosalie said.

He looked at his parents. "I know it wasn't my fault, but I'll have to live with Emil's death all my life. It'll be stuck inside me forever. If we don't get out of here, I might never even find out what happened to him."

"I know," Joe said softly. "We all collect such things. Mine have never gone away, and never will. Don't think only of how it will be for you if he's lost. You'll get very confused if you think only of yourself."

"You and Lucinda will share a loss," Rosalie said, "if that's how it turns out, and you'll have to make it bearable for each other." The look of concern on his mother's face was intense. Max had never seen her this way. "I know that Lucinda sees her mother reliving the death

of her brother on Mercury and feels guilty. Jake and Linda are dismayed that their daughter will have the same kind of loss to live with. And they're all worried sick about Emil."

Max realized that Lucinda needed him more than ever now, even when she couldn't show it. He would have to try harder to break through her worry and grief.

He stood up. "Don't worry about me," he said to his parents. "I'll be back late."

Lucinda was sitting on the grass in front of her house, and Max almost missed her in the twilight glow of the sunplate. He went over and sat down next to her.

"You don't have to talk or anything," he said softly.

"We can just sit."

"I'd like to talk," she said suddenly.

"Sure," he answered, surprised. "Go ahead."

"You've been thinking about what's happened. I know you have."

"Tell me what you think first," he said.

"I don't think the aliens are malevolent," she answered. "They expect us to look out for ourselves. What happened to Emil was simply an accident."

Max knew she was right. It wasn't reasonable to expect the aliens to have set up warnings about poisonous vegetation on every world in their transport web, but he still felt resentful.

She frowned. "Why would they take the trouble to lure us out, to get us interested, just to be mean? It would make no sense, would it?"

"You're probably right."

"I am right. One day we'll know it all. You're not going to be the only one who will help figure it out. I'm going to be right there with you."

Max felt a rush of relief. "You have been thinking."

"Of course." She leaned toward him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Just feeling all the time makes you blind."

As he held her Max knew that his fear of Earth, of returning to the large mass of humanity from which he had sprung, was gone, just as his father had said. His fears and doubts were probably like humanity's suspicion of the Others. He held the thought, because it explained him to himself. He was to Earth, and even to other people, as Earth was to the Galaxy. Earth would fear the galactic civilizations around it for a while, then would grow out of that fear, as he was growing out of his own. But there would always be new problems.

"I'm afraid for my mother," Lucinda said suddenly. "I think she'll hate me if Emil dies. She'll resent us both, Max, because we'll still be alive, while he won't."

Shaken by Lucinda's fears, Max went home. If she was right, and Emil died, then he might never be able to tell Lucinda how much he cared about her, how attracted he was to her. He had suppressed his feelings, hoping that he could tell her when all this was over.

As he walked up the road to his house, Arthur Cheney pulled up to him on his bike and stared.

"What is it?" Max asked, noticing that Arthur seemed

shy of him. He had seen the same wide-eyed nervous look on the faces of the other kids lately; even Muhammad was more nervous around him. They admired him now, it seemed, but Max found it hard to enjoy the attention. Now even Arthur was trying to ingratiate himself.

"We've got the next watch together," Arthur said.

"I didn't know," Max answered.

"I saw you sitting with Lucinda. I guess she's really upset about Emil."

Max nodded, remembering when Arthur had been her favorite.

"He didn't like me much," Arthur said. "Maybe that's why she dropped me, when Emil gave her the word. I hope he's all right, but he was a little prick in some ways. Not that I'd wish anything really bad on the kid, but he wouldn't be much of a loss."

Max was silent.

"Well, it'd be too bad for Lucinda and her parents, I suppose, but it'd give you a clear way with her."

As Arthur started to pull away, Max put his foot into the front spokes and the bike fell over. "You're a bit of a prick yourself," Max said as Arthur hit the ground.

"Hey!" the boy cried. "I thought you didn't like him at all."

"Yeah, well maybe I do, just a little," Max said, helping Arthur up.

21

Max was in the library the next day, reading about rolled-up dimensions and superstring theories, wondering if he might get some idea of how the alien passages worked, when the Sanger twins came by and stopped at his desk.

"What was it like to be lured out?" Jane asked.

"Did you feel weird?" Alice added.

Max was about to explain when Muhammad Bekhter stopped to listen. Then Arthur Cheney and a few of his friends from the lower grade wandered by. Max found himself surrounded.

"Well?" Jane asked.

Max saw that a few of the younger kids seemed eager to hear what he had to say. Stories and inaccurate rumors had begun to circulate as soon as he and Lucinda had come back, now more than three weeks ago, and the level of curiosity had continued to increase in direct proportion to the few available answers.

"Do you really know why we're here?" Muhammad asked. "My father says everyone's just guessing."

"We can't be sure," Max answered, "but—"

"Your screen's flashing," Alice said.

Max touched the message release:

I'M AT YOUR HOUSE AND WOULD LIKE
TO TALK WITH YOU—LISSA

"The ship's back!" Max shouted, springing up and pushing past the group. Voices bubbled excitedly behind him as he hurried from the library.

He raced home on his bike, and was surprised to find Lissa sitting on the back steps to his house. She looked up and smiled.

"I promised, Max, remember? I've been here for a few

hours, talking with your parents and Lucinda's. The announcement that we've returned should be going out to everyone here any minute now."

"What took you so long?" Max slipped his bike into the rack and sat down next to her apprehensively.

"We had some trouble with the ship," she said, "and I had to break a few bureaucratic heads, but I do have some good news, too."

"I thought you might not come back," Max said.

"I'm sorry for the anxiety we've caused, but it couldn't be helped. We found the other window, Max. It's just past the orbit of Venus. Alek—Captain Calder—thinks there may be others. It seems likely that we're being invited to come and go as we please."

"What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I promised we'd talk. But you're right, there's more. You're an important player in what's happened, and I want to find out more about you."

"About me?"

"Don't be so modest. I want you to come back to Earth, with a stop at Bernal One, where we'll go over what you've already recorded. We have experts and facilities there that can help you get at things you may not have registered completely, or which you don't think important. Have you drawn your map?"

"Yes, I have, and I would like to come. Have you asked Lucinda?"

"Of course. I had a long talk with her. She was with the guards at the column when our ship was brought in. She thinks that the habitat should become our outpost inside the Sun, a staging area for further exploration of the portal system. She suggested it to her mother."

"That seems logical," Max said.

"We can't take the habitat out. Its drive systems are still dead, for no good reason at all, so she thinks maybe the habitat is supposed to stay here."

"Lucinda said that?" Max asked.

"Yes, and I think she's right. The navigator agrees."

"But you will be taking people out," Max said.

Lissa nodded. "We'll ferry out those who want to get back to Earth and other points in Sunspace, and we'll bring in fresh teams. Many of your habitat's people, the navigator told me today, feel they've put in the years they contracted for, and are anxious to get back to Earth, Mars, Bernal One and the Moon, where they have friends and relatives, or new jobs waiting for them. Many just want to retire and pursue their interests for a few years. Ferry service will begin as soon as we assemble ships at the Venus window."

"When do you want Lucinda and me to go?"

"How about in a few days? Your parents will be coming with you, of course. Lucinda's won't just yet. They're still hoping for news of their son."

"You know about the closed passage," Max said.

Lissa looked puzzled. "I still don't see why it should be closed. They wanted to show us their system, so we'd see how knowledge and mind could bend the limits of space-time to overcome distance. We've struggled with relativistic ships and radio, but nothing we've done can compare to using the very strength of suns for both trav-

el and faster-than-light communications. The scale they've worked on is elegantly equal to the task." She sighed. "But maybe the builders no longer exist."

"They have to be there," Max insisted. "You've been monitoring tachyon communications for years, haven't you?"

"Maybe those are automatic, too, routine signals between suncore stations, old cybernetic systems babbling to each other."

"No," Max said. "That would be too disappointing." He realized that he sounded like Lucky Russell.

Lissa said, "I've been thinking that our suncore station is a kind of automatic cradle rocker, keeping our Sun adjusted, protecting the Earth from catastrophe. When you found the portals, it signaled to the Others that we were ready to look beyond our Sunspace, that we could appreciate, if not fully understand, what they had left for us to find." She looked at him with interest. "What do you think about the way the three of you were lured outside?"

"I think they only weakened our resistance and let our curiosity lead us," he said. "It's not too different from sleepwalking. I've read some stuff about that. Have you ever walked in your sleep?"

"A long time ago."

"Well, what happens is that you know, in a distant way, what you're doing. At least that's what it's like for me. You feel you have to do something, even if it makes no sense. When you realize it's crazy, your mind regains control and you wake up. It's as if dream states are a different way of being awake, maybe a simpler one, and you're only completely awake when all the different parts of your brain work together."

She nodded. "That's interesting, Max, but we couldn't do what they did to you. Hypnosis is the closest."

"I know," Max replied. "I wasn't affected at first. I just went along with Emil and Lucinda when they came to get me. I felt it when I came outside, and later. Other people were affected, but were stopped, so we weren't the only ones."

"But that was later. You three were the first. Any ideas?"

"Maybe just chance," Max said. "We happened to get scanned first, if that's how they did it."

"Or the system could only handle three at a time?"

"Maybe. Or maybe we were more suggestible."

She smiled. "I guess we won't know until they tell us. What plans have your parents made?"

"Dad wants to visit New York. He grew up there. Mom will probably visit her father on Bernal One, if he's still living. After that I don't know."

"What do you want to do?" she asked, looking at him carefully.

"I'm not sure," he said, looking out across the length of the hollow. It seemed too small, suddenly, to become a crossroads to countless worlds. Its importance would grow, but his endless days of school and private afternoons were over, and he was no longer sure that he would miss them. But where would there be a new place for him?

"Would you like to study at the Interstellar Institute on Earth?" Lissa asked.

Max looked at her with surprise and interest.

"I think you have the aptitudes," she said. "Our main activity, besides teaching, is the study of the alien signals that crisscross the Galaxy. But to that we'll add exploration through the portals. You'd come to your studies with a lot of experience, which at the Institute counts for very little if you can't get knowledge out of it, but talking with you makes me think you'll know how to make the most of what you've seen. You're lucky. The kind of discoveries you've made often come at the end of an explorer's career, not at its beginning."

"Do you teach at the Institute?" Max asked, feeling a growing excitement.

"I often lecture at the teaching center in the Himalaya Mountains. But we also have research branches on Lunar Backside, Bernal One, on Mars, and a research habitat in the Oort Cloud." She shook her head and smiled. "Those signals. They fascinated me when I first came to the Institute, at about your age. Now more than ever they seem to me to be the conversations of adults, and we're the children who know they're probably being talked about, now and then, but can't understand a word." She looked at him, and it seemed to Max that this slim, attractive person couldn't be very much older than he was. "You'll get a good college-level education at the Institute, and you'll meet people who have odd and creative ways of looking at things, as you do. You'll see the Himalaya Mountains."

"But will the school take me?" Max asked.

"My recommendation will be enough. Remember also that you're one of the first interstellar explorers now. You've used the alien passages, and you've been to Centauri twice—the hard way and the quick way."

"I wasn't alone," Max said.

Lissa nodded. "Lucinda has shown interest, and I think she has ability, but she and her parents can't make any decisions until they find out about her brother."

"I know she'd want to go," Max said, "but I don't know how she'll feel if she finds out that Emil is gone."

"I know you want her to attend," Lissa continued, "but you should go even if it's by yourself. I should also tell you that you'll both be given the most thorough medical exams you've ever had when you stop at Bernal. I don't think we'll find anything, but you did travel through the passages, and we have to know if you were affected."

"I understand," Max said. Things were moving faster than he'd expected, leading to a new choice just as he was freeing himself of his doubts.

"I've looked at Emil's school reports, too," Lissa said. "If you're wondering whether he would be accepted by the Institute, the answer is yes. He's very smart, much smarter than you probably knew."

Emil's struggle with the alien toxin was probably long over by now, Max reminded himself. Even if he survived, he might never be himself again. For a moment Max felt as uncertain and afraid as when the habitat was approaching Sunspace. But when he looked at Lissa and saw the confidence in her face, he felt encouraged.

"I'll come," he said with a twinge of guilt, "no matter what happens." Lucinda would want him to go, even if she couldn't. He imagined her berating him for his hesitation.

"Are you sure?" Lissa asked.

"I'm sure," Max said against his doubts.

22

Two ships waited when Max and his parents went out across the great floor to Lissa's vessel. A week had passed since her return. There would be at least one ship a week from now on, taking people out and bringing others in. Lucinda and her parents were already at the ship, saying their farewells. Max peered in the direction of the column, and made out its vague shape rising into the bright blue glare.

Linda and Jake tried to smile as Max and his parents approached, but the strain in their faces had increased.

"Take good care of her, Max," Linda said.

Lucinda looked at her mother. "I'll be back in a week or two, and I won't decide anything about the Institute before then."

"We'd come with you if we could," the navigator said, embracing her, and Max had the feeling that they had decided it would be better if their daughter went away for a while.

Jake and Linda would stay on until the new administration of the habitat took over. There had been rumors that they might even sign new contracts. They were still hoping that the passage might suddenly open. Max had heard that they were even willing to try the other portals in the column, on the chance of finding another route to Centauri, rather than wait four years for news of Emil to arrive by radio.

Suddenly Jake was talking to Rosalie and Joe was saying something to Linda. Captain Calder shouted down the gangway. Max stared back across the bright, solid sea of floor at the massive, half-submerged shape of the habitat. The rough outer crust seemed primitive next to the hard alien surface. The stone that Earth had thrown into the Universe had come to rest here, inside a star.

"All aboard!" Captain Calder shouted.

Lissa came out next to him. "Come on folks, time to go."

Joe and Rosalie started up the ramp. Max looked at Lucinda, but she was staring toward the column.

"Look!" she shouted, pointing.

Two small dark shapes were moving toward the habitat. Lucinda bolted and ran toward them.

Max sprinted after her, suspecting that the figures might be only two guards returning from their watch at the column. He caught his breath, unable to see clearly at this distance. They could be two people from Centauri, bringing bad news about Emil.

"Slow down!" he shouted, straining to catch up.

The distant figures stopped. Max slowed as Lucinda raced on.

"Emil! Emil!" she shouted to the blurry shapes, as if her words would make it so.

Max halted for breath. His stomach tightened as he followed at a fast walk.

She reached the dark shapes. He stopped and turned away, unable to look, expecting to hear her cry of disappointment. After a moment, he glanced back and saw that she was embracing one of the figures.

He hurried toward them, and recognized Emil.

The boy had lost weight, which made him seem taller, but he looked well. Lucinda hugged him, stepped back, then hugged him again, laughing.

"Max!" Lucky Russell shouted, coming toward him. "The barrier let us through, but now I'm stuck here."

"It closed up behind you?" Max asked, recovering from the welcome shock of seeing Emil.

"As soon as we came through," he said, putting his arm around Max. "It's great to see you. You did the right thing to go through."

Emil was okay. Max told himself as if in a dream, and in a moment he was embracing him, holding him close, as if he might suddenly dissolve, and Emil didn't seem to mind.

"The antitoxin stopped the alien stuff in me a day after you left," he said, squeezing Max back. "I'm glad to see you, too. Thought you'd gotten rid of me for good, huh?" He pulled free and grinned, and Max grinned back.

"We're leaving for Earth," Lucinda said with tears streaming down her face.

Emil looked around. "So they found us. Where are we?"

"Inside the Sun," Lucinda said, sniffing.

"And that's a ship from Earth," Max said, pointing.

Emil's eyes grew wide as his jaw dropped. "No kidding? The ship I believe, but the Sun?"

Then both sets of parents caught up with them. Linda pounced on Emil. Jake couldn't get close, so he embraced them both. Joe and Rosalie stood aside, their eyes glistening from relief. Max's throat tightened. His knees felt weak. It was all over. Emil was safe. He could finally let go of the doomed feeling that he thought would be with him forever. He glanced at his mother, and saw that she knew what he was feeling. Joe went over and shook hands with Lucky.

Lissa reached them and told Emil that Max and Lucinda were leaving. "You're part of the team," she finished, "if you want to come. Max and Lucinda can tell you everything on the way."

"Is he well enough to go?" his mother asked.

"He's just fine," Lucky said, looking around at the station. "We wouldn't have dared let him try to get back here if he weren't."

Jake looked at his wife. "You go along," he said. "I'll run things here for you." Linda did not object.

"I can't wait much longer!" Captain Calder shouted from the ship.

"Don't worry about him," Lissa said with a touch of affection. "Our schedule isn't that tight." She looked at Lucky Russell. "Want to come along? We can take one more."

"Oh, no," he replied. "I'd much rather look around

this place first. Reminds me of an old joke about an expedition to the Sun. They were told it would be much too hot to land on, but that didn't bother them at all."

"That's the joke?" Max asked.

Lucky smiled, obviously ready with the punch line.

"They landed at night," he said.

23

As Max watched the big screen in front of them, the black globe of the alien station grew smaller behind the ship. A ghostly image of the Sun's otherspace echo flickered faintly, as if struggling to rekindle the full fire of reality.

"We're at the window . . ." Captain Calder's voice said over the ship-com, ". . . and going through."

Suddenly the strange gray space was gone. The screen blinked and filled with stars in the forward view. The view aft stayed as an inset, showing the Sun, now restored to its fierce electric glare.

"This window," Captain Calder announced, "lets us out three million kilometers from Earth orbit."

"There's Earth," Lissa's voice added.

It seemed just ahead on the screen magnifier—a blue-green oasis in a jet-black sea, warmed by a yellow-white sun. The Moon stood guard nearby, pockmarked from battle with cosmic debris, but still copper-bright.

Joe leaned over from the seat behind Max. "Still worried about all the billions on Earth?"

Max shot a glance at Emil and Lucinda next to him, but they were looking at the screen and had not heard his father's question.

"I don't see a single one of them," Max whispered back.

His mother's hand touched his shoulder.

"It doesn't bother me any more," Max said, deciding that he didn't care if Emil and Lucinda heard.

"Hey, Max," Emil said. "We couldn't have just run into one of these windows by accident, you know. I think they move, and one of them found us when the

habitat was coming in. The Others thought we were ready, so the suncore station reached out, dropped a window around the habitat and pulled it into the otherspace station."

Max thought about the idea. "That's really good, Emil. It might even be true."

"We've been moving outward in small steps for over a century," Joe said. "You three took a large one. One day we'll turn a corner in one of those passages—"

"They're *curved*, Dad," Max said.

"—a curve in one of those passages and meet the Others. We'll be ready for them then, even if we don't realize it."

How many civilizations are out there? Max wondered, looking at the ocean of stars on the screen. He wanted to be there when his kind met the Others face to face. He would know how to reach out—and he had a few questions they might not expect him to ask, like what business it was of theirs what happened in Earth's Sunspace, even though he had a good idea of what their answer had to be . . . and he might even agree with it.

"Remember the way you felt about Earth," Joe said. "We're all in the same boat as far as the Galaxy is concerned. We're just as alien as any aliens out there—maybe more so."

"I know," Max said, looking over his shoulder. Rosalie smiled at him. Next to her, the navigator relaxed with a peaceful look on her face. She seemed about to have her first good sleep in weeks.

Max looked back to the stars on the screen. How many of them, he wondered, had been harnessed to feed the net? He tried to imagine the uses to which such a vast reservoir of energy could be put.

"I feel confident about one thing," his father said.

"What's that?" Max asked as Lucinda took his hand.

"That maybe someone out there is hoping that our kind will make something of itself."

Lucinda's hand tightened around his. "We will," Max said. "I'm sure of it." ♦

AMAZING[®] STORIES

Back Issues and Anthologies

If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING[®] Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1970s, plus almost every magazine from May 1990 through June 1993, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days. Also available is another anthology, *Cinemonsters*, which is described in detail on the following page.

All of the anthologies and most of the magazines are in mint condition. Among the copies of any single back issue, the magazines in mint condition are sold first. Every publication has a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with what you get, send back the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the return postage.

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