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Soul Searching

MichaelO

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Imperfect Verse

Rose Lemberg

I said to my father, "Circle my waist with a frost-biting sword and send me to battle the Aesir."

"I won't let you run around with a blade like some boy." King of the giants, he towered above the warriors and the winter-weary retainers crowding our hall. "Learn dignity." He constricted my brow with circlets, wound spirals of soft red gold round my arms. "It was a mistake to name you Battle-Adornment, my daughter. Stay at home."

I snorted.

"Choose a mate from among my men."

I broke some gold off my armrings and threw it like dripping red meat to the giants that crowded around us. They bent for it blustering, bickering like bitches. "None here are my size."

"You are unruly," my father declared, "but I will set you a task well worth your sitting and staring."

At his sign the servants rolled in three stout barrels belted with bronze. They were warded with whispers that the wise of our women had dug out from under the fens. The vats buzzed, and I ran my fingers over the smooth agate of my arms.

"Are there bees in those barrels?" I asked.

The giant-king said, "Not honey-makers. Mead itself." He frowned. "Kvasir, they called him. Our short-sighted enemies, the Aesir, fought fiercely with some foreign folk, and in the end they made peace by spitting, and when the spit soured they shaped Kvasir. He was too smart to sit still and too wise for his own renown. He traveled around and bragged. The dwarfs slew him, mixed his blood with honey, and poured him into these vats. I slew the dwarfs."

The killing talk made me thirsty. My father's breath hovered between us, sweet with beer, bitter with rot. "And what is the destiny of such a dangerous drink?" I wanted to spill it down my throat, send it to slosh in my stomach.

"Its fate is to be hidden. To spite the Aesir," the king said. "You will guard it under the mountain."

I tugged on my braid and fumed, but my father was firm. Instead of a soul-stealing blade, he encircled my waist with keys and

set me under stone, deep under the silver-strung hall. My room held a bed and the barrels and a wardrobe of winter woolens; the floors were covered in furs, and the walls were lichen-lit. My keys were useless ornaments, for I could not go out. My father's servants brought me sustenance. There was nothing at all to do, and winters were long in Bjarmaland.

I sent my mind back to my grandmother's whispers, the old fen-magic, and swore to devour this draught. If I were to remove the bronze circles, the barrels would break, spill the mead on the bearskin-covered floors. Of the word-warders I worried, but I whispered the fen-words at them, my name and my maternal lineage, the unbroken line of giantesses fettered under the earth.

When my servants began to whisper of spring, the last of the wards parted for me.

I dipped my hand into the drumming drink and took a sip.

A stream and a ferry, a gray-bearded man smelling of sweat, and of the wet-feathered ravens under the hood of his cloak—they were croaking, croaking that warriors grew like trees in the slaying field and their red sap was sweet raven-drink.

"Who are you?"

The bearded stranger parted his hands. "I have bedded hill-women and witches that rode the wet winds, but I never have seen one of such a shimmering stone."

A raven spoke harshly under his hood, but I knew not its language.

I opened my eyes. Words were arranging themselves into shapes on my tongue, like wild geese in flying formation. Something new had entered the world. What should I call it? I did not know, but it stung. I had to spit it out somehow.

I spoke.

Maiden, oh maiden,
of what mother were you born,
what fates had you fashioned
to pine for the crow-feast,
the pasture of pikes,
battle, over these barrels?

Ah. But the word-beer had tasted somewhat bland. Kvasir's essence and honey alone could not spike my drink. I unwound the key belt and put one key between my teeth. Over the next few months I sucked it into sharpness.

- - -

The ruler of boulder and bog came down to check on the barrels, smelling of early summer and hops. I restored all the wards in a blink of an eye, watched his blue chalcedony body cloud with suspicion, but he found nothing. Men. Even my father knew little of sorcery born in the swamp. The words of my kinswomen hid my deceit. So he frowned at me and marched out.

I summoned my servingwomen and said, "I have need of this bronze beaten cup. You will bring me another to hold my beer." They obeyed, for they knew my temper and feared for their flesh. When I had sent them away, I unraveled the word-wards again.

I had sucked my key into a whispering blade, and now I filled my cup from one of the vats and tore the tunic over my heart. The key burrowed deep; my body's hearth-wine dripped into the drink. I lowered the key into the liquid and stirred, smiling up through the ceiling at my father who sat in his hall, oblivious to me, listening to the stupid council of giants barely strong enough to lift up their tankards of beer. I whispered, "Your men are battle-shy bench ornaments. You would be better off giving your blade to me." I closed my eyes and took a sip.

He was close. I could smell the winds of summer in his hair; his eyes glistened green. He walked in a wheat field my uncle's nine slaves were mowing, and his chin bore no trace of the beard. He carried a whetstone in one hand. "Slaves, why look you so grumpy and woeful?"

They shouted back their replies, thankful for an audience. "The giant-king would not hone our scythes." "Look at this." "Blunt." "Abomination."

The stranger shook his shoulders with laughter, and I strained to make out the ravens tattooed on his bare forearms. He was not a giant, but handsomely shaped. His disdainful smile shivered all the way down to the small of my back, promising pleasures fiercer than fighting. "Let me sharpen your scythes," he sang to the slaves, and his whetstone hissed hunger into the blades. Ah. Like a woman of the giants, he knew his fen-magic. "Here, here," he crooned, handing the blades back to my uncle's men, and I saw them quake with greed as they pleaded with the stranger to part with the precious sharpening stone.

He said, "Whoever catches the whetstone shall be its warden." He threw it against the sun. I watched the slaves hack

at each other, the sky-wheel sparkling madly in their eyes, and the whetstone falling, falling, falling.

The stranger stood over the quivering slices of flesh and smiled. "This is how you will quiver," he said to the mountain, he said to me, "when I pierce you."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He grinned even wider. "I am come for you."

"What is your name then?" I whispered.

"Call me Ill-Doer."

I opened my eyes to the stale lichen-light of my prison, and the shape of his shoulders faded to memory. I muttered under my breath:

Ravens' reeve,
spilled scythe-sweat
raked red
—on my rock—
runes of ruin.

Ah. The heart-sap I spilled had improved my draught, but still it tasted stale and sour in between the layers of sweet amber. I whirled the key in the cup once, twice, then put the vessel under the bed. I bound the bedboards with my grandmother's swamp-song, then lay down on top of my summer-weight blankets to dream of his cruel face.

- - -

I did not have to wait till winter. The mountain wobbled. My uncle's voice sounded like beetles over thin leather. "It is drilled all the way through, Ill-Doer."

A voice from my visions answered, "No, it is not."

The sound of a bone snapping, and then a buzz; dust and silt poured out of a sudden hole in the stone. The odors of autumn drifted in, mushrooms and berries and blood and wine. And after the smells a serpent slithered, thin, harvest-colored, the black head a royal crown to its golden length. The snake hit the floor, shook itself into a short man, black-haired, green-eyed. He stared at my body beneath my shift and the agate of it blushed.

"Your uncle would break the bargain and cheat me," he said, "for all I had mowed his fields when his nine slaves became indisposed." He looked me up and down. "But I think it will not take me much to seduce you."

I petted the sheets. "Oh, not much at all, sweet Ill-Doer. Winters are long in Bjarmaland, and inside this cauldron even the summers are faceless and stiff."

"Stiff," he echoed, and came yet closer, the smell of the harvest heady on his hands. "Stiff. I like the sound of it, my sweet. And what is your name?"

"I am called Battle-Adornment."

"Good, then." He wound my braid round his wrist, and in his eyes I saw ferries pulled across the night by night-mares, each of the black horses covered with hundreds of will-o'-the-wisps. His tongue pushed past my lips, and the moistness of it danced in my mouth like a trout in a stream. He tasted of rotting trees in the bogs and of trees hale but twisted, their branches tangled in ravens' wings, and his teeth tasted sweet with bilberry juice. His knees parted my thighs. I moaned into his mouth. *Yes. Yes.* The air in my chamber had been stagnant all summer and spring, but now the heavens hammered at me; insistent clouds beaded my skin. I clamped my teeth down on his tongue and a crimson rivulet ran, and his cries meshed with mine. I turned him over then, straddled his hips, rode him down from the ragged rocks of my pleasure. He screamed his seed out. It snaked down my leg, all the way down, following my fen-words through the bedding and into the secret cup below.

I smiled.

He asked, "Did I entertain you?"

I took up my key and licked the handle, coating it with saliva and his tongue-blood. "Silly stranger, it would take more than your little something to entertain me."

"I will prove you wrong," he said.

It took him three days and three nights to do so.

- - -

I lay on my coverlets sated and sighing like a fat seal sunning itself after having fished, and my agate skin darkened into a gray streaked faintly with rose. He clambered unsteadily to his feet and looked down at me, grinning a little—it must have felt good to him, to tower above a daughter of stone. "I am thirsty, Battle-Adornment," he said. "Let me drink of your mead."

"Have you not had enough of my mead?" I said, smoothing the shift over my hips.

"From the vats," he snarled.

I fanned myself lazily with my hand. "One sip only."

"My thirst will not be quenched with less than three," he said, "for the three nights I spent in your moody embrace."

"Go ahead, then. For my satisfaction you may have three sips, but not more." A whisper removed the wards.

He stepped up to the first vat and tilted it, and in one gulp he emptied it into his gullet. He siphoned the second likewise, and the third; looked at me bloated, triumphant. "And now I have swallowed back my spit," he said, "the mouth-moisture that made Kvasir. It has matured beautifully. I shall call this potion *Poesy*."

He fell to the floor, flickered into his serpent-form. I rolled off the bed to stomp him, but in this shape he was lithe even though his belly was loaded; he slithered into the hole he had drilled and my smiting fist missed him by a hair. I cried after in my fen-voice, my grandmother's voice, "Ill-Doer, Many-Shaped, Gray-Beard, No-Beard, Betrayer, Ravens'-Get, Ravens'-Meat! May your favorite child die, may you lose an eye, may your hopes all burn into soot!"

I kicked the wall and turned away from it, took out the precious brew that had now absorbed Ill-Doer's semen. This fourth vessel he had overlooked. I dipped my key in the drink and watched the caked tongue-blood dissolve. "The essence of your life, Ill-Doer, you treacherous talker," I said, "in my poesy-potion, but not in yours." I mixed till the liquid thickened, and brushed my lips against the rim. Took a sip.

Saw him huffing in eagle-shape, lumbering across the sky, feathers athunder, rubbing and clapping against each other. And I smelled fear in his sweat, for my father was gaining behind him, a broader eagle, his own shape speedy and slim.

"Slay him!" I screeched, and Ill-Doer's eagle looked over his shoulder, shaking, and some of the stolen mead escaped him in a stream of piss. I squinted; down below, on the ground, puny humans were waiting with mouths agape for this yellow rain, hopeless rhymesters to be, bad poets, hangers-on. Oh, but now that my lover was lightened, he sped across the horizon to the Aesir's abode, where they waited for him with a vat—and the giant-eagle lagged behind, not daring to fly over the armored walls. I saw Ill-Doer's eagle throw up the poesy into the Aesir's vessel, then settle into a hooded, gray-bearded man-shape.

"Poesy-mead," he announced. "I will dole it out to my favorite men to be poets."

I opened my eyes. "Men. Always the men have it best, be they giants or Aesir. Men hack at each other with axes and swords, and now men shall puke out poesy too. What of the daughter of giants?"

And I spoke thus:

Bore through the boulder into my blood,
Sprouted his seed and skinned my heart.
Mountains are meek,
Soon my two feet will torture the earth,
Pushing his passion into a birth.
Winter will speak for me.

Ah. But I did not feel that the marriage of our vein-waters had made the brew any better. Only more bitter. I put the cup back under the bed.

My father thundered down the stairs, breathless, plucking stray feathers from his chalcedony surface. He kicked the empty vats. "You! What poisonous passion made you mad enough to open your legs to an enemy, one of the Aesir? Why would you shame me so?"

"Why? You imprisoned me under the earth," I screamed. "And if only you'd given me a rime-sword as I begged, then I would have beheaded him, and if only you'd given me man-magic, a shape to shift into, as you would have if I were your son, I would catch up with Ill-Doer and rip him apart. But I'm only a daughter and so...."

"You took his seed. What will I do with the fruit of his labor?"

I snarled back at him, "The fruit of *my* labor has nothing to do with you, for I will deal with it as a fen-woman must. You will not see it."

His chalcedony paled. Doubt rippled through the sheen of his flesh, but he dared not dispute my decision. He had locked me into this womanhood, and now a woman's revenge would be mine.

He left me to lie there. I dreamed of words growing, a forest of ferns in my mouth, and I dreamed of words rocking my waves like the ships of the dead in November's bleak harbor. Perfect

poesy would be my weapon. It would burn and boil and blister, peel off the heart like a smoldering molt.

One more ingredient was needed, to give my potion its final potency.

There was a watery movement in my womb. I placed a hand on my belly, momentarily in doubt. It was growing inside me. I did not know this being, and yet I'd already ordained its fate. But what was a single spark worth compared to words that would live on after all mountains crumbled and all lives were spent?

I rolled in my bed, to dream of the babe's cry ringing. Its blood bursting into my brew.

Perfect verse.

- - -

When the birth-hour came I had the key handy, the vessel under my bed. I shouted at my servants to get the brat out already, I did not care how malformed. All it had to do in its life was cry, once only, to prove its vitality before it was remade in the mead. And meanwhile I screamed and screamed, my agate darkening into a filmy red, and the mountain heaved when I pushed. Again. And again.

A ripping. A stream of lava rushed past my legs.

I could breathe. I could speak.

"Give it to me," I said.

"A son." The servingmaids cooed, cutting the cord. "And a good-looking babe, if on the smaller side. Look at all this fine black hair." The creature screamed then, the pitiful wail of a piglet about to be slaughtered for a feast of words.

"Give it to me," I said. "And get out."

They placed it on my belly. Red and slimy, twitching aimlessly.

"Get out."

They knew my desire, and yet they dared not disobey me.

When the key turned in its lock I shifted the creature up to my chest, to see. A wrinkled old face, gaze unfocused, wandering. I waited for it to do magic—a son of Ill-Doer and Battle-Adornment had to have something. I waited for it to speak, to plead for its life, but lips instead tapped on my breast, and I felt the redness recede from the agate.

He had no magic. He was soft and warm, warm as a son of the Aesir, but under the slime he was the translucent bluish-green

of chalcedony—just like my father, but younger, newer. I had spent the long winter dreaming of this death, but now the babe looked at me. Helpless. Trusting. I was the mountain itself in those eyes. Mightier than the land.

And who knew what this babe could become? Who knew what lifetime of words I'd be killing in him to add to my magic?

The agate that was my skin slowly turned milky-white. I put my son to my breast, and he fumbled there; I squeezed milk for him until his warm lips found purchase.

Wonder escaped my lips in a huff and I lowered my hand, coated with my son's birth-juices, stained with milk, into the vessel and stirred. Brought the cup to my lips and emptied it in one gulp.

I spoke.

Dirt grows, unknowingly,
into mountains as strong as these soft
womb-walls
that sheltered your life, nurtured you
into the air. And for this,
I'll—forever onwards—
content myself with
imperfect verse.

Suggestions for Distributing Your Poems

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming

Neatly write your best lines onto pieces of crepe paper
and go to a fancy restaurant.
Bribe the maitre d' and lie your way into the kitchen.
Here, distract the pastry chef by upending bowls of berries
and slip your flowery verse into the flourless tortes.
Some diners may choke on your work,
while others, disgusted, will spit it out
into their partners' faces.
But some may swallow your poem whole,
and digest it over coffee.

Write a poem on an umbrella
and go out in the rain.
Watch the lines melt onto the street
and pause briefly at crosswalks and traffic lights
before continuing on their way.
Most will disappear down drains,
first their periods, then predicates, then personal pronouns.
But a few key phrases may be picked up by wingtips
and stamped as fading footprints throughout the city.

Text message lines from a poem
to different friends and wait for their answers,
like "Who is this?", "Are you drunk?", "WTF?"
Until you receive, if you are lucky,
"That's nice, you should write that in a poem."

Nature's Children

T.F. Davenport

As we made for the low ridge encrusted with vegetation, the sun peeked over the valley wall. Tendrils and blossoms unfurled in the light and grew. Insects followed scent roads among the stretching plants, and the wordless odors of morning blew over my pores. To me, these were the raw smells of life, but they seemed only to irritate the youngster trudging beside me. My companion was small and pale, and picked through the undergrowth as though repulsed by it. Boredom and resentment spiced the air.

Behind us loped the broad-haunched gather beast. It snuffled noisily, inhaling spores for nutrition, veering wide to bypass a herd of enormous flame-colored slugs. The gastropods cut swathes in the foliage; behind them stretched trails of barren dirt. One could watch the trails fill in again: sprouts and mold-stars blossoming, insects hustling in with their eggs. The gather beast caught up to us, devouring the unfamiliar growths to which I directed it.

The youth and I had been arguing all morning. We kept the traditions of civil debate, picking evocative features from the landscape and using them to make our points. I was framing a challenge around the scent of the titan slugs when I noticed the youngster lagging, its attention already fixed on them.

"Look at the trails they leave." The words dispersed in the flagging breeze and seeped into my pores. "I've never seen bare soil outside the enclave. See how quickly it sprouts again?"

The gather beast was straying. I tightened my mental grip on it. *Try this one,* I urged. *Over here.* I extended my mind to the foliage around us; every unrecognized animal, fungus, and plant I found, I commanded to hold still while the gather beast swallowed it.

"Quickly, indeed." I mimicked the slugs' musk as a reference scent. "And now I suppose you'll compare them with our kind. You can admit it. I know your beliefs."

Without shame, the youth clawed a yes.

A shrub whose bowl-shaped leaves tracked the sun turned them to me as we approached. A mental twist, and it dropped its seeds as the gather's many tongues uprooted it. Tiny arthropods, transporting their eggs, laid down their bundles at my command.

I marked more novel growths for consumption, collected the eggs and seeds, and urged the youth to move on. The gather beast gathered and tramped after us.

"Child," I said, "perhaps you lack a classical education, or perhaps the one you received was beaten into you insufficiently. In any case, follow, inhale well."

I referenced the slugs again. "Those giants devour because they're hungry today. We do because we're afraid of tomorrow. If we allow a species that's not completely docile to survive, what will its offspring decide when they face the same choice about us?"

"Exactly," the youth said. "No species will ever have that choice."

"And you would give it to them?"

The would-be philosopher paced along, sucking, as they say, on its thoughts. Up the uneven grade, we kept as our landmark a mountain capped with a strange growth—a pale fungus or hive structure covering the peak in lumps. Below it, the slopes and the hills were forested, and it was those trees I had come to investigate.

An aggressive breed, the trees had at first been thought harmless, the sort of species that rides to prominence on a single trait—a poison secretion or a parasite stage in the birth cycle—then crashes to extinction when prey adapt and become predators. We had thought we were right in this judgment when a single stand of trees all but enveloped the mountain in a few days. When the forest did not fall, but spread down the slopes into the foothills, the enclave sent me to investigate. I brought the youngster along because its parent had hoped—vainly, I feared—that the combination of good sense and authority might have some effect on it.

"When I was three years old," the youth sprayed finally, "I took my first job, in the gather beast mangers. I had to cull each litter down to one calf, leaving only the biggest and most pliable." The youth tapped its own skull with a talon. "What's the best way to cull calves? You have the mothers devour their young. One after another. We didn't even have to feed them when they were calving. They couldn't understand why they were doing it."

My contempt softened. "Look into its mind now."

The youth did so, and flinched, horrified.

"Now you understand." The gather's mind was a place even I avoided. In sumptuous textures, it imagined flaying us down to

the bone with its muscular tongues, storing us in its holding gut, trotting home to regurgitate us to its kin. In every moment it was about to do this. It had no idea why it hadn't before.

"Do you think we could fight it off? Do you think we could outrun it?"

The youth plucked a seed off a shrub, considered, then tossed it aside.

"Do you think," I pressed, "that every vine dropping its fruit for you couldn't ensnare and digest you in a heartbeat? Do you think every crab that kneels at your blind, brainless feet couldn't fell you in an instant with its sting?"

The youth did not respond.

"We have *nothing* except telepathy. Evolution has left us behind. We do what we must to survive."

Its answer was so soft—the scent so sparse—it was almost lost on the breeze. "But why such *cruelty*?"

At that moment we crested a low ridge. The tub of the valley stretched before us.

When I'd stood there a few days earlier, the landscape had writhed. Pale creepers tangled with scarlet fungus; worms, mollusks, beetles, and flies fought and scavenged among them. What we saw now was a monoculture. The furred columns began at the base of the ridge, propagating north and west to the mountains and up their sides.

There was no sound except the labored huffing of the gather beast, and little smell besides my frantic speech to the youth. I tried to convey my joy. Megafauna and megaflora were often the most useful of species; witness the gather beast, the thorn stockade—or the unique slime mold a day to the north, which not only fed but *contained* an entire enclave. But such titans were unfortunately just as rare. Slow to breed, they adapted sluggishly and slid without warning into extinction. Two stable finds at once—the forest and perhaps the mountaintop growth—that was unheard-of luck.

My companion expressed its disgust in a particularly gauche way, by exhaling the odor of feces.

As is customary for travelers, we lunched on the locals: two crustaceans, a sprig of vine, and a naked gray creature that was nothing but juice around splintery bone. For all its moral protest, the youth heartily enjoyed this repast. It stood on its rears and

fronts, scratching itself with its midclaws. "I'll be going back to the enclave now. Shall I take the gather beast?"

I delivered a sharp knock to its mind, to show it whose skin was black. "You will take the gather beast down to the forest with me. Useless philosophy may impress other children, but you'll do some work before you return to it."

Leading the gather and the sulking youth, I descended the ridge to the patient trees.

- - -

"So I was told," Bio Akim said uncertainly, "that there was going to be a road here."

The only answer his colleague gave was a scowl.

They worked in the shade of the trees' lobed crowns; where the sunlight shone in the clearing, pollen and spore grains hung as if suspended in oil. Mil Fusako squatted on the lichen at the far end of the clearing, bent over a wireframe gadget, grunting as she tugged a link into place.

Akim went back to his scan of the nearest tree. The immense, shaggy columns had lately acquired a parasite they couldn't digest. In nine percent of cases the effect was sterility, and the forest was looking unlikely to meet its spread target by the end of the year. He hunted for the knurls of mold that signaled infection.

A powerful groan from Fusako, and the link snapped into its joint. She looked about to flop backwards, but kept her balance and stood. The little robot whirred into motion. "If you must know," she panted, "there was a road, yes. We brought the frigate to low orbit and used the main beam. It took half an hour to burn a trail; by the time we finished, most of it was already overgrown."

"So we settled for steps?"

She didn't answer, but analyzed the gold icons dancing across her visor, and whispered commands. The little robot squatted and began digging.

Perhaps reminding a Mil of failure was not the best way to open a conversation. Mentally, he tried out various topics. Work was out; before settlement she'd been clearing land for the city. That she had ended up in the employ of Bios, planting trees of all tasks, suggested disgrace from a Mil's perspective. Family was out as well, for unlike Akim she wore no obvious mark of her status in that area. Similarly sex, science, gaming, politics, literature....

"A shepherd," he whispered, and pointed. If the animal had been there before, he hadn't noticed it. A black insectile shadow, it skulked among the knobby roots a few meters away.

The shepherd stood waist-high, a mantis built on a larger scale. A long abdomen balanced on four legs, stocky torso angling upwards. From the shoulders grew a pair of slim arms, ending in talons meant to hook flesh and pry open shells, both of which were abundant on Pera. Reptilian scales in place of chitin allowed the black animal to move fluidly, more like a wolf than an insect.

"A shepherd?" Fusako asked.

Folding its four legs, the creature sat down to watch them.

"My name for it. They seem to always travel with other animals. But what does that mean, right? It could be the sheep and something else the shepherd, or that relationship might be meaningless on Pera—"

Fusako cut him off. "But why did you name it at all?"

He had no answer for her, and that seemed to be what she was looking for. She returned her gaze to the digging robot, whispering commands as the pile of flung dirt grew higher.

They both looked up at a crunching sound: the shepherd was deftly picking crabs off a tree, shelling and eating them.

"If it comes near the digger, I'll roast it," Fusako warned. She fingered the pistol riding low on her hip. "Anyway, the hole is ready."

"Help me with the seed?"

She nodded. Akim unsealed his pack and got out the seed, a beige tuber as long as his thigh. They lowered it carefully into the hole, then Fusako whispered again to the digger. With a dipping, bird-like gait, it crossed to the pile of dirt and swiftly refilled the hole. A low mound formed. As the mechanism tamped its spade-arm on the pile, green lichen bloomed fast enough to watch. Akim became suddenly *aware* of the shepherd's eyes on him. It watched with soft eyes, gold-on-gray in the predator flatness of its face.

It continued to watch as the digger disassembled itself, and as they hoisted their packs and left the clearing.

Fusako scowled again as they ascended the slope. "What is it about this that appeals to you?"

"What, the shepherd?"

"This." She swept her gaze over the lichen floor broken with root humps, the moss on the trunks, the great trees blocking the sunlight. "All of it."

Akim stopped for a moment, relieved, because the slope was starting to get steeper. He placed his hand on a trunk. "Feel this." He laced his fingers through stiff moss.

Looking at him, she placed her white glove next to his red one. "What am I supposed to feel?"

"Under your hand, and on your suit, and in the air between us, trillions of organisms are going about their business. Spores and microbes, air-krill, insect larvae. We could breathe this air if not for the life in it."

She looked unimpressed.

"But just over the mountain range—" he gestured behind them "—a single mold colony masses nine times the weight of Pera City, and nearly half as much as the frigate."

She resumed walking. Grabbing his pack again, he followed her.

"I was from California," she said, "when it still existed. Twice in my girlhood I saw Earth's largest organism, which must now be ashes. By the time the refugees arrive, your airborne creatures will be less than ashes, and it's your work that makes it so. So why do you love them?"

"I suppose I can't help it. I grew up on Mimas—all ice and metal and total sterility. I didn't even know about microbes until I was ten. When I learned about them I didn't believe it; I looked at my feces with a magnifier—"

Fusako let loose with a laugh, a clear, high-pitched laugh that came surprisingly naturally from her. It was as if he saw her for the first time. She walked beside him with a new looseness, this slender woman in white. The nanoweave suit encased a petite figure; small breasts rode the swell of a nascent pregnancy. The visor revealed an open, somewhat plain, Oriental face. Her expression was confident and her skin the same pale brown as his. "You're strange," she said. "You hang on to a useless thing like a mold colony, but you give your past away freely."

"You told me your past."

She tilted her head. "But California is dead."

He had no answer to that. Her suit was white and his red—caste colors. Both were membrane-thin, but Akim thought he

could cup her breast and still fail to touch her. Not that he could even *attempt* that, of course; carry the fantasy too far, even, and his hand would cramp up. The muscles would knot and the joints would stiffen, until he replaced Fusako in the fantasy with his wife Niran, bringing him back to legality.

The slope had grown steeper. Using the lichen-humped roots as steps, they soon emerged from the forest. Sol Pera burned white in the teal sky. In its light the shadows were sharper, the colors brighter.

Where the shade of the trees ended, so did the changes they worked on the soil. On a dirt layer too thin to support trees, the lichen exploded into all manner of growth. The spongy green gave way to tangles of wormy, segmented vines. Twists of blue fungus rose like unearthly termite nests. The march of insects on every surface was so intricate as to be hypnotic.

They hiked, boots crunching, uphill. Somewhere under the fantastic vegetation to their right lay the wide, useless staircase—as overgrown as the rest of the slope and even harder to climb. They followed it towards the city's main gate.

Pera City straddled the peak like a pale octopus, the central accretion of domes and towers forming its body. Embracing the rock like tentacles, ribbed corridors shook slightly as dim people and vehicles hurried from the few outlying buildings to the city center. Gleaming, beetle-shaped sweepers kept close to those arms like anxious young, scarring the rock with acids and nano-radulae to keep the growth back.

"This may surprise you, Fusako," Akim said, huffing as he approached the main gate, "but that was the most pleasant conversation I've ever had with a Mil."

He looked around and noticed she no longer followed him. A white heap was crumpled some ten meters back.

Before he reached her body, she had died. Blooms of fungus spotted her still face. Then gray wool—a foam mold—flowed out of her mouth. It pressed against her visor, filling her suit, and oozed out of her boot heel where a tiny puncture had let the spores in.

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In the soft-smelling gloom, we crept over earth bulged up by giant roots. Columns let in slants of light, illuminating spore grains as the gather beast sucked them in.

Life was sparser and slower at the feet of the trees. Existence in the forest seemed wholly devoted to them, as if they had crowded out the species that did not in some way serve them. The ground supported few plants and a thin bedding of lichen. Only on the trunks did life flourish. Arthropods grazed and stalked one another on a vertical shag layer of moss.

Apart from the trees, few species grew here that I didn't recognize. I compelled a few odd bugs down the gather's throat, but mostly it grazed on lichen. We wandered along, the youth and I, to the rasping sound of its many tongues. The forest was enchanting and cool, blessedly scentless of talk.

In a small clearing I told the youth to sit down and I settled at the base of a trunk. The moss crushed softly against my back. Hooking a talon, I dug out a plug of moss and enough of the fibrous pith to make a good start on dinner. To this makeshift banquet I added a pair of nine-legged spiders hoping to slink by unnoticed. The moss and the spiders dissolved in a tangy mélange, reminiscent of a red-capped fungus cultivated near my home district. I hoped the spiders were not the only two of their kind. So much for the appetizers. I nibbled the pith—and spat.

The yellow chunk plopped onto my abdomen, oozing from there to the forest floor. I shuddered and spat, swabbed my palate with lichen, and spat again, purging every shred of that taste. "That taste!"

The youth scooped out some pith for itself, tried it, and recoiled. "*Inedible,*" it declared.

This neologism took me a moment to understand, but once I did, I agreed. "The trees might be useful for clearing land...." But then I imagined a valley overrun by them. They would threaten our cultivations in the east, perhaps even the enclave itself. I swept a foreclaw around me. "No. The forest will have to go."

The youth didn't answer, but looked up at the silent columns.

"The question is how to do it. Extend your mind. Examine the five links: eating, excreting, birthing, symbiosis, infecting."

In answer, the youth stood up to leave. "I know you intend to teach me the lesson my parent sent me out here to learn, but the whole premise repels me. Why aren't we discussing how to adapt to the trees, or at worst how to make use of them, instead of how to annihilate them because they threaten our comforts?"

"Young one, we're not discussing anything. Dramatic law—what you theorists call *irony*—dictates that if I did allow the forest to spread out of control, mental runts like yourself would be the last to die. Now, as much as I'd enjoy the smell of a thousand young morons repenting and cursing themselves while trees took root in what was once a prosperous enclave, I'd probably not live to savor it. You wish to remain ignorant of why this work is necessary; that's fine. But per your parent's wishes, you will stay and see how it's done."

"No, I will not! I maintain that the callous use of other species is *not* necessary, but only the easiest way to maintain luxury...."

A historical epic's worth of scents filled the air, but I ignored them. I swept my mind wide, to skim the dull thrumming of floral subthoughts, the few bright pluckings of nearby animals. It seemed, as I had first suspected, that every species serviced the trees.

And yet.... Here and there in the forest, I sensed a unique rhythm. A large animal: slow-moving, I sensed, omnivorous, devoted to the fearsome trees not only by necessity, but seemingly *by choice*. A pair of the pluckings drew closer. I stood, leaving the youth and the gather beast with instructions to wait for me. Soft odors of flint and wax emerged. I soon came upon them.

Nothing could have prepared me for their appearance. They stood nearly as tall as a gather's third haunch, balancing an elongated body on two long, powerful-looking legs. Seeming constantly on the verge of toppling, they caught themselves with each step. Likewise, they gestured with only two arms, each one ending in supple, five-digited paws.

But by far the strangest feature was the animals' skin, or rather *skins*. They seemed to have two layers of skin. The outer was poreless and slick: bright red on the larger biped and white on the smaller. I glimpsed the inner layer only through a clear membrane at the face. On both of them it was a rich light brown.

The red-skinned creature stood closer to me, appearing to study the nearest tree. The white one, smaller and warier, focused its gaze on a stringy burrowing creature that was digging a narrow pit in the soil. When the white one saw me its mind flickered faster; a paw fell to its hip, caressing a silver parasite. Now what could be the meaning of that?

I sat down to observe them. From time to time the red one looked at me. Behind the membrane its face was expressive and delicate. Fine muscles shaped it and controlled the blinking of a pair of large eyes. And behind those eyes...thoughts shapeless and squirming, colorful like the thoughts of all animals.

Hiding in the undergrowth were perhaps a thousand types of invertebrates. I sifted mentally until I found the one I was looking for: the minute barnacle we know as a drill. Mobile and multi-legged in its larval stage, the drill grew a thick shell in maturity, rooting to the skin or carapace of a host animal. It lived as a parasite until it began secreting a powerful solvent, burrowing into its host to lay eggs.

I directed a few larvae to adhere to the bipeds' feet. Then I convinced them it was time to mature and breed. In doing this I had no intention to increase the number of drills in the world; they already abounded beyond their usefulness. My goal was to see how the bipeds reacted when their outer skins were pierced.

I withdrew my mind and found that my appetite had returned. I snacked on some crabs while I watched them.

The digging ceased and the red biped joined its companion by the hole. The sinewy burrower came waddling out. Their young? I wondered. It also walked on two legs. The two bipeds walked over to what I'd at first taken to be a rock furred with smooth lichen. In fact it was a husk of some kind, concealing a giant seed. With no fuss at all, the two bipeds lifted the seed and planted it. I watched, frozen, while the burrower refilled the hole.

I was afraid, of course. But my foremost emotion was triumph. I was *right*. A race had arisen to challenge us. The bipeds cultivated, they almost certainly communicated (though I couldn't tell how), perhaps they even commanded. I returned to the red one's mind.

Imagine the tails of a thousand tiny worms flicking over your scales. Imagine a fog congealing, choking you in colloidal slime. That was how it felt in the red biped's mind. Into this system, which I ill understood, I fed the standard conditioning for an animal of this size: to recognize people and not attack us, and, insofar as its nature permitted, to feel kindly disposed towards us. I also planted a compulsion to return to this spot on the next day. As if it had felt me enter, the red one looked at me warily. The burrower curled into a pellet, which the white biped sealed inside the husk.

The white biped stood with arms folded across its chest. The red one gestured at me, then the two of them set off towards the mountain, the red one bearing the husk on its back. As for me, I stayed in the clearing, mind wide open for some reaction to the drills.

At length, I perceived a faint spasm. It might have been a death, but at that distance I couldn't be sure.

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Akim woke to Niran's voice, or perhaps her voice woke him.

"*Canım?* Listen to me, Akim. Are you awake?"

He cracked his eyelids and clenched them against the light. He groaned. Dull pain throbbed all over his body.

"Allah. Sweetheart, listen. Don't agree to anything, okay? Say as little as possible. Just hold on until I get there. Love you."

The dot on his eardrum went dead. Under his suit—he was still wearing his suit, though his helmet and gloves were absent—scaly bandages covered bruises on his legs and flanks, as if someone had beaten him. No one had, of course; consent implants would stop any fist before it touched him. But evolution through violence had left its imprint on his mind, and the thought occurred nonetheless. He sat up, and the memories came rushing in with the nausea.

Fusako's death. Lifting her corpse like a sack of blood: bones and organs already pulped, but still warm. Scavengers streaming over the lichen. He must have fainted, bruising himself in the fall, because the next thing he remembered was pain and a great arm around him—frayed wire split and twisted into a pincer. It had lowered him in through the ceiling.

He hadn't been questioned. Inside the ambulance he'd remained in a sealed chamber. The stench of vomit was overpowering. Two Meds on the other side of the window stripped and cleaned him with waldoes. No one had touched him.

Which meant he was under quarantine.

He could tolerate the light now, and a glance around him confirmed his surroundings. Set in one wall was the leaden gleam of a gel door, the kind that sterilized whatever passed through it. Spongy cushions were piled on the floor; except for a toilet hatch, there was no furniture. This, at least, was a mercy. Like most of the colonists he had grown up in low gravity. Some had

adapted, but Akim had never quite accepted such artifacts as tables and chairs. All in all, the small room could have been his salon at home, except that, in place of his wife's tapestries, waldoes and nanoclave nozzles hung on the two opposite walls, limp like the mouthparts of a sleeping insect.

The fourth wall was a glass partition, and this assured him that he was indeed held in quarantine. The business-like room on the other side held chairs, desks, and a pair of men attending to palm computers.

They must have noticed him moving, for the dot on his eardrum came back to life. A soft voice said, "Bio Akim, we're glad to see you safe."

A dark-skinned elderly man had spoken. He wore the blue tunic of Pol caste. Gray coils of hair were bound back in a knot of dreadlocks, and his face folded like the palm of an old glove as he flashed Akim a weary smile. Earth-born, Akim surmised. If not baseline human, then very close. Those wrinkles must have developed in the half-year since landing, as Pera's one-and-one-fifth gravities layered stress on the man's unmodified body. Yet he got to his feet with seeming ease. And Akim found himself sharing that ease.

"I suppose you know where you are," the Pol said.

Akim looked up at the square of ceiling. It was gray rock, sweating moisture. "Down in the mountain, I'd guess, under the city. I suppose you'll tell me I'm here for my own good."

The Pol chuckled, showing jarringly white teeth. "I would," he admitted. "But I don't think you need to hear it. But do you know *why* you're here?"

Recalling his wife's warning, Akim said nothing.

The doctor frowned. Shifting uncomfortably in his padded chair, he had seemed invisible when the Pol was speaking. He plainly did not like this. A shoulder badge identified him as Vaughn and, in the hieroglyphic jargon of the sciences, revealed his focus to be neurology. Sandy mustache bending, his mouth formed silent commands. A reticle shielded his left eye, acrawl with tiny gold text.

As if to reassure both of them, the Pol said, "Good Akim, this is not a prison! You're being protected here, you have my word. But you must tell the doctor—" indicating Med Vaughn, stout and

serious in his caste's gray-green "—tell him, how long have you had your neurological problem?"

"I've never had one."

"I was afraid of that," Vaughn said. "What killed Mil Fusako was exposure. A flaw in her boot's sealant layer reacted with an organic acid—you would probably know more about that than I do."

"But my suit's intact."

Med Vaughn nodded. "As I said, a flaw. A glitch in the growing process for which other suits are now being checked." He coughed. "As far as we can tell, you haven't been exposed to any Peran contaminant. Which makes your unique brain activity a puzzle. Let me show you."

He whispered a command. Two yellow diagrams of explosions and curls splashed into being on the glass partition. Lilies, curling endlessly back on themselves. "These are Ying projections of human neural activity. On the left—" the diagram appeared stunted and small next to its mate "—is the pattern we keep on file to identify you. The one on the right was taken by your helmet when it entered emergency mode."

The doctor flipped up his reticle, a gesture in which Akim recognized his own habit of rubbing the thin beard on his chin: he was reaching his point.

"The most...conservative thing I can say about this neural activity is that I don't know anymore how your brain is keeping you alive, or conscious, or sane. Yet you are. It's something new."

"Do you think it's contagious?" Akim asked.

Med Vaughn blinked his pale eyes. "How could it be?"

The man in blue shook his head, disappointment plain on his tired face.

"Then you have no right to keep me in quarantine!" More calmly, Akim went on, "I want my wife here. Immediately. She's a doctor of consent law—"

"*I* am a doctor of consent law," the Pol retorted. "Be certain you've consented to stay here, until such time as Med Vaughn releases you."

At that moment Pol Niran entered. A teardrop-shaped woman in blue, her slimness had gone to baby fat with the growth of her pregnancy. Wobbly and huffing in her third trimester, she surprised Akim by making an awkward curtsey in front of the older

Pol—something Akim had never seen her do. She acknowledged the doctor with a tilt of her head.

The blue-tunicked man nodded. Niran straightened and said some words in the fluid Pol language. His reply seemed to stun her. Then her voice cut into the common audio channel. "Akim, dump me all your consent records."

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"*Canım*, I am *mortified* you had to go through that."

Alone on the outer road, they had slipped into Turkish, their intimate language. Niran rode beside him under the corridor tube's arches. Her sedan chair's legs tapped on grooved metal, and the membrane stretched between ribs smeared the sunset to a raw, red glow.

"I *was* pretty furious." He smirked. "But safety first, right?"

"That wasn't the point. Well, maybe it was part of the point. Anyway, public health wasn't the main thing at stake there. Neither was the neurological thing, whatever it was."

Akim shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was just a software glitch. You know Med caste doesn't even cut their own code? They have Comms do it."

Niran *tsk*ed. "That's disgraceful."

"Oh? Who cuts *your* code, *canım*?"

Niran reddened. "Eng caste."

"Slightly less disgraceful." He squeezed her arm. "So what was the point of it, then?"

"Political theater." Niran bit her lip. "And call me arrogant, but I think part of it was a test for me. A test of my legal knowledge, of whether I could actually get you out. With Carver you just never know."

"Wait a minute," Akim said. "Pol *Carver*?"

"That's the man himself."

"He's so...abusive."

Niran lifted her chin, *tsk*ing gently. "He's a better man than you can imagine. But he knows it, and that's why he doesn't tolerate opposition."

When Akim just stared at her, she went on, "Remember, we can vote to depose him any day at any hour. We consent to his leadership, pretty much unrestrained, because we know he's the best there is. If we had no leader at all, there'd be nothing in charge

but our own promises, and those we can't depose." She tapped the scar on her temple that marked the implant of her consent chip—the record, and enforcer, of society's only laws. "Carver has a good sense of just how far he can push it. If he'd really intended to keep you there, he probably could have."

"But for what—a political reason?"

"Right. Fusako's death is going to make waves. I mean, when you think about it...half a year since Landfall, and no deaths? It's amazing. An accident was only a matter of time. I think he would have preferred for this to happen in the first week, in some clear-cut situation where it was obviously the victim's fault. But this is so mysterious, and gruesome.... He needs to show his commitment to safety. Slapping quarantine on you was a public show of that."

Akim swallowed. Not for the first time in that long day, he tried to recall Fusako's face. He'd never been good with faces, and hers was already fading. He remembered picking her up—her suited remains flopping warmly, boneless, food for the foam mold mashing against her visor. But the attractive, unsettling stranger—the only Mil with whom he'd exchanged more than ten words at a time—was gone.

"I assume there'll be a funeral."

She shook her head. "I spoke to her three husbands right after the accident; that's why I was late. If there's a funeral, they'll do it privately."

"She was pregnant."

"They don't seem to know which of them was the father. Again, I think that's just the way they do it."

Leaning towards him—automatically he moved closer—she took his hand. Her small grip barely enclosed his middle three fingers. In silence they passed the Pol-Comm tower, a plastic spike aimed straight up at the orbiting frigate. In the sunset, its windows smoldered.

On their right, the treetops gaped to afford a view of the basin. The forested western half was tranquil; sundown reddened the petaled crowns. The wild eastern half glimmered. Clouds of glowing insects numbering in the billions were already taking wing, moving like slow whales in the shallow valley that had once been a lake. Couples, trios, and larger families crowded to watch the nightly displays. The largest women reclined in sedan chairs, but all of them carried pregnancies.

"I want to get you home," Niran whispered in Turkish, as her crawling chair cleared a path for them. "I want to get you a hot bath and a meal, and make you forget all of this...."

When the door of their suite hissed shut behind them, she did everything she had promised. Her body, graceful, plump, and exotically pale, was the only thing in his senses for an hour. She cried out as they coupled on the woven kilim, lying on their sides like two spoons pressed together.

In the afterglow, he held her loosely in the dark. His clumsy, large hands—no one had ever called them scientist's hands—held a hip and a soft breast. The red in the window had ripened towards violet, then died in the yellow of the tube roads' phosphorescence. "You and Carver had a lot to talk about," he said drowsily.

"Mm-hm," she mumbled. "He has some public relations work for me."

"What kind?"

"Oh, it's about the planet." She brushed her lips to his bicep. "Terraforming is war, right? Anyway, that's how we're going to package it." She rolled in his arms to face him, belly pressing his thighs, braids batting his nose. "I was really proud of that, actually. If Pera's the enemy, then Mil Fusako was a war casualty. So what form can our grieving take besides a greater commitment to the Project?"

He watched a man's shadow lurch by on the ceiling.

"I wonder."

Her chuckle was a moist puff on his neck. "You do?"

He fingered the fringe of beard on his chin, wondering what he should tell her, and how much.

When he didn't answer, she put some distance between them. "*Canım*, what is it?"

"You had pets when you were young, right?"

"Always a cat or two growing up. In Istanbul you could pick them up right off the street."

Raised in the sterile steel corridors of Mimas, where the ventilators collected sneezes and grams of biomass were the currency, Akim boggled at the thought of cats on the street. Such wealth was unimaginable.

She noticed his hesitation and laughed. "What did you want to ask me?"

"Whoa. Well, I've just heard of this, I don't know, but you'd undress in front of your cat, make love with your cat in the room, wouldn't you?"

Now she burst out in giggles. "Well, I don't know about *sex*! I was eleven when the family left Earth. But yeah, undressing, sure."

"What about Pol Carver? Or some stranger?"

"No."

"*That*," said Akim, "is what I felt. That presence. There was an...animal, down in the forest this morning. A shepherd, I call it; it's never been properly catalogued. Except I don't think it's an animal. I think it's a person."

Niran shook her head, eyes wide and serious. "Akim, that is *not* funny at all."

"Who's being funny? This is science. You ask a question and you find the answer."

"That's a dangerous question."

"How can it be dangerous?"

"'How can it be dangerous?'" she hissed. "Allah, Akim, listen to me. If there's intelligent life on Pera, then someone, eventually, will get on the q-transmitter and send the news back home. When that happens, the Solar Government will call off the Project."

"Of course they won't."

"We don't know that. It was two years for us in transit, but thirty for them. There's a whole new set of people in power, but we're still consent-bound to the government. Now, a lot of settlers are on their way already, and a lot of babies are about to be born. And if we have to halt our expansion for a bunch of *sheepdogs* in... if there's no room for those people, no cities, no good soil to feed them...is that what you want?"

"No!"

"Well, that's how a question is dangerous."

She turned away, and in the dark he clung to her.

"But what happens if they *are* intelligent?"

"Nothing," she said. "Because they're not."

- - -

"You missed them," I said as the youth's queries drifted into the clearing.

The youth caught wind of my answer and came to me. "Missed who? Was someone here?"

I explained, my chemical misting so frantic it edged into telepathy. The youth recoiled. Mind talk implied control; it was reserved for animals. "No," I signaled, not knowing whether mentally or chemically. "Collect the gather beast. We have to go."

I continued explaining as we headed east. I described the bipeds with their double skins, reproduced their flint-and-wax scent. I described the burrowing slave-animal, the sowing, the evidence of communication. The growth on the mountain.

The mountain.

Of course. That structure on the peak was their enclave. They were reasoners, cultivators, commanders. Given the chance, they would surely exterminate us.

"Surely not," the youth said. "I agree that they seem to behave like people, but what threat do they pose? They live on the mountain, we in the valley at the river mouth. We all live comfortably. I see no reason for conflict."

I led the youth out of the forest. Under the softness of gathering moisture, a sharp tang laced the air; pungent insects bobbed on the leaves around us, swallowing spores and stoking their light glands for a night of mating. The bipeds must have harnessed a similar species: the peak was ablaze with lights.

They were a young race, new to thought. It was clear from their use of the burrower that they'd evolved some kind of telepathy, yet it was equally clear they had no means to counter my control of them. They also retained at least one pretelepathic defense, the second skin that kept out parasites. It was a waste of energy; with time, their evolution would focus on harnessing better protectors. Their minds would sharpen and their bodies would shed all redundancies, just as we had lost our venom in the mythic past.

They were a young race, and we were old. I was old. How many years had I lived, and how many days in a year? I didn't know. It was held that the sun was unchanging and therefore unliving. Some of the young tracked its movements, clogging the air with their arguments, their new systems of cycles and counting. But nothing had ever come of it. Measured or not, every life reached an end.

The bramble walls entered my view, tangled black before a darkening sky. Pale fruits rustled among the long thorns. The brambles unlaced, pulling aside to allow us entry.

Drawn in by the swirl of voices, the babbled miasma of commerce, pleasure, and public life, the youth cantered ahead. I had the gather beast follow it.

I ambled down a narrow side lane that would eventually join the main boulevard to the center. Ornate trees grew close together. In their branches a few people dozed, claws and bristled midlegs dangling. The plants bore fruit or housed edible parasites, and by daylight the workers tended them, massaging their plant-minds to maximize yields. Glowing vines followed my path from limb to limb, lighting the lane and the knobby trunks. The path spilled into a wider road, where I joined the domestic traffic.

A few gather beasts shambled, bellies distended with food or refuse, but most of the traffic flowed underfoot. A mulchipede laid its chitinous length across the road, chewing lichen at one end and, at the other, shitting humus on a splay of root. I followed stick-legged firebugs down faint-smelling trails to the enclave's center. Here the road widened into a plaza. The firebugs collected on an ashy circle, where grumbling children arranged bramble and twigs in a heap.

About two hundred, the fraction of our tribe that was hungry and present, reclined on soft lichen around the heap. I sat in my accustomed spot, close to the center.

An impulse rippled out of the crowd, compelling the firebugs to martyr themselves for the sake of their hive. Staccato pops echoed, and wood smoke hummed in our pores. Slick warmth advanced from the pile. Yellow talons of fire clawed up through the wood.

The blaze attracted both beasts and people. As more of them settled around it—the beasts on their stomachs, the people in comfortable arrangements of vines—a new pair of children appeared, bearing armloads of plants and crushed insects. These were the contents of the gather beast, preserved until now in its holding gut.

Other youngsters sprang up to help. The food was passed out to the crowd. More beasts disgorged and doubled the feast, tripled it. Children distributed, and over two hundred people soon had something to eat. Not much, perhaps, but quantity was not the point. The food was enough for everybody to taste a bite of this, a scrap of that, and to give their opinions on the new species collected. A council of elders, including myself, would then

decide which ones to cultivate, which to exterminate, and which to leave alone.

I took the eggs and seeds from my chest pouch and sorted them on the ground. When the server came to me, I accepted a scrap of blue leaf and a ragged leg joint. I puffed my thanks.

The air blossomed with conversation. An expectant parent begged everybody nearby to try a petal of a certain flower. I set its seed aside.

"Disgusting," fumed someone else. That egg was placed in a separate pile, the animal tossed into the fire.

The feasters shared food and opinions, filling their stomachs also with enclave-grown insects and fruit. Gusts of contentment stirred the warm air. I continued dividing the seeds.

Dinner had tired us, and we got through the council meeting in only a few minutes. We decided to cultivate the broad-petaled flower, and we condemned an astringent vine and two types of crab to extinction. The other species we allowed to survive, insofar as they could on their own.

Finally, I brought up the bipeds. I explained my fears. I described their husbandry of the trees and the evidence I had seen of sapience. I satirized the young philosopher's arguments and had their laughter misting so thickly that it visibly obscured the air.

For the forest, the judgement was extinction. For the bipeds, there was some debate as to their utility as slaves. I would head an expedition to settle this question tomorrow.

- - -

After a night of violent dreams, Akim awoke before dawn. He put his boots on, sealed his suit, clipped on his pistol and other gadgets, folded and pocketed his helmet, and chased a breakfast of sweet soya with coffee. Niran responded groggily to his kiss, presenting a red, sheet-wrinkled cheek as she turned away from the window.

Excitement cleaved his fatigue away. Despite the events of yesterday, he was thrilled, even anxious, to get back to the forest. The door hissed shut behind him. He broke into a jog down the ribbed, worming corridor. His feet carried him past branches in the road, where vacant apartments awaited their tenants and the low domes of factories mulched Peran biomass into voltage, sugar, protein, and polymer.

Past the roofs bloomed the artichoke tops of the ecocide forest. He joined the ring road leading to the south gate. At this early hour the traffic was mostly robotic. Little couriers flashed by bearing organic samples. Sedan chairs, like spiders without heads, crawled to the homes of their pregnant riders. Outside the membrane the mountain sloped down abruptly. Past the swathe of rock kept bare by the sweepers, the trees spilled into the basin like an army of raiders. They blotted the colorful native foliage, which broke against the forest like a slow sea, so violent was the tide of dieback and growth.

From the main gate he took a sedan chair instead of hiking his way down as usual. He'd been working among the trees for an hour when the blaze of Sol Pera peered over the eastern cliffs. Yellow blades slit the curdled, damp colors in the forest. Akim took his readings and samples, crunching back and forth over the lichen, while the pair of shepherds kept him company.

The black one he recognized from the day before. The other had to be its pup. Its scales were white with faint mottling, its body smaller and its face more openly curious. It watched him work while its parent deftly shelled beetles and ate them.

The pair watching him seemed to occupy the extremes of shepherd color and size. As the morning wore on and the slits of sunlight clotted into patches, other shepherds passed through the clearing. Most of them were mottled gray, and their small, angular heads barely reached Akim's waist. A visitor rarely lingered for more than a minute. Each one stopped before the other two, some clawing the lichen a little and some cleaning their bristled legs with their mandibles, and then departed. None except the pup gave him any overt attention.

So it was with the pup that he would first try to communicate. A botanist, he had only vague notions of how to go about this. He'd read once that an animal's reaction to its mirror image could test its sapience, but even if he had a mirror he'd be hard-pressed to explain what he was doing with it if the Bio committee ever reviewed his suit footage. So he collected his readings, annotated them, and fielded calls from other team members. When he glanced at the young shepherd, its eyes met his, then flicked away to a stubby arthropod scaling a tree. Without thinking, he plucked the insect off the moss—it stabbed at his glove vainly with

a stinger—and tossed it to the young shepherd. The pup caught it and masticated noisily. Akim found another and threw it.

Further success eluded him. As many beetles, crabs, worms, and spiders as he threw to the pup—and as eager as it seemed for more—he could not induce it to come over to him. He had a vague idea of befriending it. He tried throwing crabs on the ground in front of it, but they simply crawled to the nearest tree—the one the shepherds sat under, so the pup got its treat anyway.

At last he concluded that the shepherds were indeed intelligent, inasmuch as the pup had outsmarted him. Another call came in, and he used that as an excuse to stop feeding it.

"Bio Akim," Med Vaughn said, "I thought you'd like to know that you're having, um, an *episode*."

"Are you sure? I don't feel anything."

"Be that as it may, the difference is quite drastic, I assure you. At any rate, I thought you'd like to know."

From the corner of his eye, he saw the shepherds getting to their feet.

"All right.... Oof!" He tripped over a knot of root. The two shepherds had left the clearing, and although he could not have said why if asked, it seemed only natural to follow them. "I'm just about done here. Should I come in after my shift?"

"I think I'll send a carriage for you. In case you faint again."

"All right, then." The connection dropped.

Other shepherds joined their procession. One, banded like cut marble across its back, drew a gentle claw down Akim's thigh. Others inspected his belt, his holstered pistol, and especially his hands.

They *are* intelligent, he thought. This is fantastic. He regarded the shepherds with new affection. They peered upwards with tiny, agate-ring eyes.

They all emerged into another clearing, where a gargantuan beast waited. He recognized it as one of the shepherds' companion species. A belly on eight stout legs was how he would have described it. A blind, milky head dangled thick appendages, and the whole body heaved as though breathing through its skin.

Did this animal act as their queen in some way? Or was it more like a dog, or a beast of burden? No doubt the answer would present itself as he observed them further. No doubt many answers would present themselves.

His name would go down in history.

As he knelt in front of the beast, he could do nothing but marvel at his discovery.

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When I first saw them, the trees and their high lobes had shaded a garden of seclusion and calm. When I returned the next day with an army, the columns blotted the dull light of morning. How many species had they also blotted?

Workers dispersed among trees and rooty hillocks. The air warmed, resounding with creaks as photosynthetic lobes opened high above. Spiders crawled out on the moss. The trees' thoughts beat slow and patient. There would be no change in this when they fell, no last scramble to avert extinction. The trees would topple calmly, rot away, dissolve.

By then the biped was descending the mountain. In the sea-like torpor of the forest, its mind stood out like a flame, bright and erratic. I set to work at once. I wanted to get the deforestation started before the biped's arrival, allowing myself some leisure to study it.

I began with the mosses coating the trees. As usual, what appeared to be one species was in fact a large, loose family. None could be induced to consume their hosts, nor could any of the local insects. I ransacked the forest for a suitable herbicide—tasting, sniffing, probing mentally—until the prize I sought literally drifted into my mouth. A tiny, floating pod contained the spores of a mold parasite already infesting some of the trees. The spores harbored small ambitions: to mate (as they saw it) with certain chemical barriers unique to the trees, thereby depositing further spores within its seed-bearing organs. In this way the mold commandeered the trees' reproductive systems, retailoring them to produce spore pods of the kind I'd just swallowed. Like any blight, the mold would destroy its host population if it spread quickly enough.

My call dispersed in the damp air. Workers poured in from all directions. I showed them how the crustacean we call a drill could be seeded with spores, then placed on a trunk and activated. "Repeat this," I urged. "As many trees as you can."

Sixty claws dropped in assent. Within seconds I was almost alone.

"You must be under the impression," I said, "that the struggle to survive doesn't apply to you."

"This isn't about survival," the youth said.

I gave it no answer. Wax and flint floated in on the breeze. I sat down and motioned the youth to do likewise. Other bipeds moved distantly in the forest, alone or in pairs. This one strode into the clearing alone.

It was such a clumsy creature. As workers arrived with reports—the drill technique appeared to be working—we watched the red-skinned biped lurch back and forth on only two long legs. With each step, it seemed to topple, until the rear leg pulled forwards, finding purchase at the last possible instant. Perhaps that was really grace.

I couldn't have said what it was doing. Various small creatures—hard, silver, and angular—clung to its waist and chest. Periodically it held one of those parasites in its paw, stirring the air before a nearby tree. Then its wobbling carried it to the next tree, where it repeated this strange act.

"Truly, a fearsome beast."

"It looks as weak to us as we do to a gather beast," I replied. "But who's the master and who's the slave?"

"Watch." The youth leaned forwards. The biped snapped to attention. Eyes peered through membrane at the youth, then the biped plucked a squirming barb-tail roach from a trunk—allowing itself to be stung, I noted—and tossed the morsel to the youth, who caught it in mid-air.

"You see?" At its command the biped fetched more invertebrates. It had soon served up quite a feast. "Imagine their potential as harvesters, planters, foragers—their versatility as domestic slaves. They could free up thousands for more important pursuits."

I exhaled mirth. "'More important pursuits?' It would free them to inhale your speeches against culling, against environmental control. For a hater of luxury, you're certainly eager to provide it."

"I'm eager," the youth said sourly, allowing the biped to stop, "to save an interesting species from a pointless end. I speak the language of luxury because it's all you understand."

My amusement shaded into contempt. It was impossible. Even if we domesticated the bipeds, could we control the breeding of their whole population? A single mutation might shield them from telepathy. This was a danger with any species, but in this case it could be lethal. How would we put down a creature that took

the sting of a barb-tail without flinching? Not only was the idea suicidal, it would appeal instantly to the white- and gray-skinned, the working ages.

"I'm willing to consider this," I said. "But first we must examine this one, to determine if the species is really of any use to us."

Examination would end in dissection. The youth looked sadly at the wobbling giant, and agreed. It drew the biped behind us on a mental leash as we exited the clearing and made for a meeting point where a gather beast waited.

"You'll come with me to the enclave," I told the youth. "If the bipeds have the potential you think they do, you can present your case to the council. But I must insist on secrecy until then."

The youth's agreement was as much a lie as my own.

Others joined us, intrigued by the captive enemy. I assured them that physically, at least, the creature was harmless. Then they were probing it with claws, handling its parasites, and peering through the membrane at its alien, brown-on-white eyes.

The trees parted to reveal the gather beast and a crowd of onlookers. I asked the youth to position the biped's head at a level with the gather's mouth. The youth did so, forcing the biped down to an awkward half-standing position.

Events after that came in a rush.

The youth galloped forwards, wedging itself between the gather beast and the biped, gesturing frantically at the latter's face. A warning? Or a threat, to provoke the act that followed? The biped fell onto its back, and in that frozen moment I realized that *no one*, not me nor the youth nor any one of us assembled there, was controlling the biped.

The result was instant and incandescent. The youth and the gather fell away in a burst of light. Caustic smoke billowed up in a heap, and I was gone from the clearing amid a dense pack of trees, scrambling around hillock and column. Workers stampeded around me, the air awash with panic and charred skin. I don't how much time passed before my senses cleared. When they did, I found myself out of the woods entirely.

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"Prepare yourself, Akim. We're coming."

Akim picked himself up off the forest floor, wondering who *we* included—the doctor? Prepare himself for the doctor? Greasy smoke whirled from a heap swarming with scavengers. His head throbbed, and he fought with the sense of a dream fading, something crucial.... It was gone. For some reason, his pistol lay on the ground. He picked it up and reholstered it.

Minutes later an enormous silver crab stepped deftly between a pair of trees. Its chassis reflected the drab forest. Six legs branched innumerable times until they frayed at the ends like old twine. Each such appendage was split in three, claw-like, to grip the turf.

The crab pushed into the clearing and knelt. A hatch popped, and out stepped Niran in a blue environment suit, followed by Pol Carver. She came to lean heavily on Akim's arm. "Cooperate," she hissed on a private channel. "You don't know how dangerous he is right now."

But Carver's smile was anything but dangerous. He was—and Akim knew with certainty that this expression was genuine—a wise grandfather regarding a favored child. Pol Carver walked slowly, almost hobbling on the root-broken ground. "Akim, I want to commend your handling of a difficult situation."

"Yes. Thank you, Pol."

"I don't see any need to bother with titles, do you?"

Akim shook his head.

"So you wouldn't mind apprising me of that situation, then?"

Niran took his hand.

"I...um...." But as if called to life by the great leader's request, details filtered back. Enough returned to sketch his encounter with the two shepherds: the dream-like procession into the clearing; their coordinated, intelligent behaviour; then the flash. He'd fired his pistol.

"So you consider these shepherds, as you call them, to be intelligent?"

"I'm certain. At least at the level of human children, I'd say."

"Or apes?" Niran put in.

Pol Carver smiled at her.

"Maybe," Akim said. "Would they have any less right to live?"

"Let's talk about the right to live," Pol Carver said. "Six million refugees have already left Earth, the greatest migration in

human history. The terraforming is already in motion. Where we stand will one day grow Terran crops, from them children, and from them, cities. Ask yourself: Even if these creatures are intelligent, can we afford to preserve them? And if so, in what capacity? As a museum species? The future you have in mind might be worse for them than extinction."

"That's perfectly true," Akim said. "We're just doing what they'd want for themselves—"

Niran cut in. "Sir, you know my husband has been...ill, lately. I don't want you to take what he says at face value when—"

"Niran! Let me—"

"It's fine," Carver said. "You've committed yourself to nothing." At this, Niran relaxed. "What you've said, however, is interesting and profound. I assume you have evidence to back it up, and I'm sure this evidence will be the cause of much discussion in the upcoming days. You can take part in that discussion, if you'd like."

"Yes, I would. Very much."

"Excellent. Draft a research proposal and I'll see you get time for it."

"I already have something in mind," Akim said.

The grandfatherly smile returned. "Something *light*, mind you. You'll be needed for meetings. And for parenting soon, yes? There's one other issue. Until a decision is reached, I'll require your word that you won't discuss the shepherds outside of Pol caste."

By word he meant consent-binding. "I can't promise that," Akim said. "I—" His breath stopped. The sensation was of liquid metal filling his throat, where it set and hardened. He dropped to his knees, sputtering, his fingers shredding the green lichen. It was the precipice of a major consent violation.

"I'm afraid you must."

It was Niran who dredged the crucial clause from his contract of citizenship: *By action or inaction, consenter shall not endanger the Pera Project.* He couldn't speak of the shepherds, because even to make their intelligence known would endanger the colony's future.

They rode back together in the rope-legged coach. Columns rushed past the silvered windows. They waited in silence on the pillowed floor, on cushions spun out of local biomass. Niran and Carver had stripped to the tunics under their suits. Akim, who

wore only shorts underneath, laid his gloves and helmet to one side. Niran's hand felt cold in his.

The consent he had given burned in his brain, a leash on his will as real as that applied by the shepherds. He'd have to be creative in circumventing it. Carver, Pol caste, even his own wife would be his opponents in this chess match, this maneuvering in the game of consent. Akim wondered how soon his "illness" would appear among other field workers. He didn't know what kind of influence the shepherds exerted, nor its limits. But if other colonists came down with the malady, he could experiment on how to protect them. How the shepherds reacted could indicate their intelligence. Then he would simply publish his data. The conclusions would be present but unstated, or at least worded vaguely enough to thread the labyrinth of his promises.

It should have been a difficult decision. He should have agonized: six million lives, or a race of aliens. But by the time the coach loped out of the forest, and the domes and towers of Pera City rose sparkling from the summit, he'd already decided. Despite the dangers they might represent, and the terrible cost of their survival, he could not help but regard the shepherds as friends.

- - -

Invasion plans drift on the wind. The valley thunders with crashing timber. The forest is sterile and the bipeds are completing the work for us. Daily they come staggering down the mountain. Trees topple at a breath from their silver-shelled slaves. The bipeds rove, raze, and try to replant. I couldn't have wished for a better outcome.

The youth's demise was a fortunate mistake. My conditioning on the biped kept it from perceiving us as a threat; it was the gather beast that triggered the attack. Happily, the youth was a casualty. I'd known I'd have to discredit its agenda at some point, but I hadn't foreseen the first accidental death in living memory. Sympathy for the bipeds is now unthinkable.

Who would think of it when the threat is so plain? The bipeds travel in groups now, their thoughts an orchestral hum, attended by armies of silver animals. These servants are all that prevent an assault. Regardless of species—pack beast, digger, firebreather—the servants cannot be detected mentally. Each one behaves like an organ or limb of the biped controlling it. It means every biped is a multitude: a true symbiote, united in one mind with its slaves.

So message moths wing to the nearby enclaves, begging war beasts and reinforcements. We will soon have enough gathered to invade their home on the mountain.

Until then we are studying them, observing their capabilities, guessing their numbers, and laying plans. We hope to eliminate the hive in a single day.

Lost Lying on Your Back

Steven J Dines

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never Is, but always To be blest."
—Alexander Pope, *An Essay of Man*

I will tell you what happened, since you choose not to remember.

You left the grocery store laden with bags and took a shortcut through Lily Park. It was a hot, sticky afternoon and you were on foot. They don't want people like you driving around in cars. They think you'll pick a fight with whomever you thought you saw in the rearview mirror. You don't laugh at things like that. You can't.

Near where the lilies grow, you stopped and stared awhile at the cherub in the birdbath. You were unsure if he was meant to be Cupid or not. He seemed to be just a boy without wings. Forever poised, with bow and arrow aloft, ready to fire but holding, he stood on one leg while pushing back the other, almost toppling, *almost*, but with luck and grace he would never fall, never release the bowstring from his fingers, but stand there instead, still, perfect, forever.

You walked on, laden.

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You pushed open your apartment door with your foot. The dust and clutter of neglect that you had come to accept, if not embrace, suddenly embarrassed you in the presence of a neighbour.

"Go on inside," you said. "Just drop the bag on the couch."

"Sure, Mr. Burgess."

A good kid, David. You knew his mother, Neve, but not his father. The boy, you were certain, did not know him either. David's mother rented the apartment two doors down from you. She worked long nights in short skirts. You never bought.

The boy entered, looked around.

"Wow, it's dark in here," he said. "Forgot to open your curtains, huh? Mom opens mine *way* too early in the morning."

At the end of a long shift, no doubt, you thought.

"I can open them for you if you like." He dropped the brown-paper bag of groceries onto the couch arm.

"No," you said. "Thank you, but you don't need to do that. I'll open them later."

Look at the boy's eyes, you thought. You're confusing him.

You tracked his gaze over to the curtains that held back a city and its broken skyline. Backlit by the morning sun, the holes in the thin fabric burned like fireflies and spilled bright coins onto the floor. Many wishes had been made in your apartment, but like those coins they vanished when you reached out to touch them, and towers...towers fell and did not stand again ten years on, proving one thing: When you fell in this city, you stayed fallen. Ground Zero. You saw no reason to look out your window and be reminded of that. So the curtains remained closed.

It's a good thing if he *is* confused, I told you.

Remember? Remember me telling you that? "Children should have no inkling of curtains and darkness." Those were my words.

You moved into the kitchenette and began unpacking the groceries.

"Thanks for the helping hand, David," you said, your back toward him. "You know, you're pretty strong for your size. How old are you? Nine? Ten?"

When the boy failed to answer, you turned around. He stood close to the window, curtain held aside, craning his thin neck and squinting at something that had caught his eye. Sunlight washed the room and exposed thick colonies of dust on the carpet, furniture, and pastel brown walls. With the curtains drawn, at least you could deny the dirt.

David was looking at the window box. It was cypress, a white-picket-fence design: a touch of Rockwellesque suburbia in the lurid urban sprawl. Rot resistant, too.

That might explain how it survived your *tenancy.*

Nothing grew in the window box. You had never planted anything in it *to* grow. You did not see yourself as a man who loved flowers, and yet whenever you could you went to the park and walked among the white lilies, while nearby pigeons splashed

and cavorted around the feet of the cherub that may or may not have been Cupid.

You wondered if David knew of his mother's nocturnal habits. If he did, he did not seem damaged by it in any way. Perhaps he remained oblivious. But you did not know what he thought about nights, when she slipped from the apartment to service husbands and fathers in darkened cars. You thought that maybe he cocooned himself in blankets and stared up at the ceiling cracks, like you used to.

"Mr. Burgess?" David pointed toward the window box. Then he turned to look at you. "What are you growing in there?"

"Never mind."

"Can I give it some water?" he said. "It looks like it could use a drink."

You glimpsed the seemingly-infertile earth through the gap in the curtains and wondered how children had the ability to see things adults could not.

"We could all use a drink, I guess," you said, and set about filling two tall glasses, one to the brim with water, the other with three shots of whisky, straight. They told you not to drink while you were on the drugs they prescribed, but what the hell did they know? They—the doctors, the terrorists—were full of ideas, *ideals*, quick-easy solutions to long-hard problems, but—

Shit is what they're full of. But then nobody's as full of that as you, right?

You carried the drinks into the living room. The boy took the glass of water from your hand. *He* took it. You did not hand it over. Then you lifted the window so he could reach outside. You turned away and dropped yourself onto the couch, where you drank the whisky, waiting for him to finish his futile exercise. You wondered if hope was contagious.

"So are you going to tell me?" he said after he'd poured half the water into the window box. "What you're growing out there?"

You stood in time to see the water pooled on the hard, dry earth disappear. There one moment—the sun's reflection shimmering on its surface like the yolk of an uncooked egg—gone the next, it vanished as though some living thing below suddenly awoke with an unquenchable thirst.

"I'm growing a bright young boy like you," you said.

David looked embarrassed. "You're teasing. Come on, tell me, what is it?"

"Okay, it's a flower."

"What kind?"

"I don't know," you said. "How about a lily? Do you like them? It doesn't really matter if you do or don't; nothing will ever grow in that thing. I've tried."

You watched a tiny crease form at the top of his nose.

"Mister?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you have no family?"

"No," you replied. "No family. No wife, no kids. Broken home, home broken, that's me." You quickly changed the subject. "The earth in that box is dead. There's no nutrients, no goodness left in it. In fact, it's probably toxic from all the pollution in this city. Anything planted in there will die in no time."

"That's sad," David said. "About your family, I mean."

"Nobody loves me, I guess. Not like your mother loves you."

The crease appeared again. "You said that like she *doesn't* love me."

"Did I? Sorry. I'm sure she does in her own way. But she's a career woman, isn't she? That can't leave much time for her to spend with you."

More creases, like ripples on a silk sheet. Every one a half-formed question.

"What if I was to look after it?" he said, turning back to the window box. "You're only down the hall. I could drop by every day, more if you like, and I could make sure it gets water. I bet I could make it grow, Mr. Burgess. I bet I could if you gave me the chance."

"I'm sorry, son," you said. "But I don't think your mother would be cool with the idea of you spending time in my apartment."

"But I wouldn't be any bother, Mr. Burgess." David's eyes bulged with excitement. "No bother at all. All I'll be doing is watering the flower and keeping a good eye on it. Say it's okay. Please, please, *please*?"

You knew it was a bad idea—

Yes, you knew, didn't you?

—and yet you could not shake the notion, itself like a seedling breaking from dark earth into blinding light, that David's care and influence might make something grow in there. Wouldn't that be truly inspirational, or even life-altering? You had never planted any seed in that window box—though the boy didn't know that—but what if he could do it, make something grow from nothing?

Then everything would change.

"Well," you said. "I guess it's fine by me."

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Every night you allowed the boy to enter your apartment to water the window box. When his mother left at sundown, he crept down the hall in his light-blue cotton pajamas—several years too small for him—and tapped on your door. You prayed no one found you and your young neighbour together, because they only wanted to think a thing was wrong.

You wanted to reach out and touch the boy. He had no visible father and a mother who staggered home at 4 a.m. with a bellyful of strangers. On several occasions, you had awoken to the muffled sounds of her vomiting the night's takings. What David thought or what lies she must have told him, you could only guess—or try to remember.

You bought a toy watering can, fastened a bow to its handle, and presented it to him. Encouraged, he would sprinkle the earth, pull a stool from the kitchenette over to the sill, and sit there, waiting and biting on his lower lip. With the curtains open and the window raised, you let sun and city back inside. You even unearthed an old vacuum cleaner and, starting with the upright itself, gradually cleared the dust from your apartment. Throughout, you kept one eye on the boy and the box, waiting.

David never wanted to leave. Sometimes you had to coax him from your apartment with promises of a seedling the following day. But where there was no seed, there was, of course, no seedling, and you feared the boy's patience would inevitably wear thin. So you startled him with your knowledge of Spider-Man and Sponge Bob, Frodo and Harry, but, like the bird that landed on the window box one grey evening, they offered an all-too-brief reprieve.

"Come see this, Mr. Burgess." The boy climbed onto his knees on the stool and pointed. "It's right outside. I don't think I've ever seen one this close before. No way—it's pooping all over the window box!"

You crossed the room to see the pigeon simultaneously walking and shitting, depositing a runny white trail dotted with lumps of undigested food. You hated those birds: fat, verminous things, like yourself. It strutted back and forth, stabbing at particles it thought it saw, seemingly in some desperate hope that one, just one, might have some sustenance to it. Finding nothing, it flew off to do the same thing someplace else.

"*Eww*," David said, laughing and pinching the end of his nose. "It stinks."

You lifted boy and stool as one and moved them aside. Then, shielding your nose and mouth with the crook of one arm, you covered the pigeon's droppings with uncontaminated earth, patting it firmly down to ensure the shit and the smell stayed buried.

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Another week vanished and you surprised even yourself with the sheer number of distractions you conjured up for the boy. Anything to keep his hope alive, you decided. You knew its importance in not only a child's life but any life, and you wondered again if hope was somehow contagious. But, like any mood, hope surged and waned, even in a boy like David.

He sat cross-legged in front of the couch you had decorated with a *Toy Story* bedcover to make the place seem less cave-like (and more homey, inviting, and safe from whores) and contemplated the shifting curtains. Quiet that night, more reflective than usual, he seemed much like the city itself, whose balmy breath drifted in through your window. You watched him and tried to guess his thoughts.

She's too blind to see I'm growing up. Too interested in herself, in sleeping things off, in not telling me what those things are. She treats me like a pet, something she says she likes to have around but maybe she actually doesn't and is afraid to admit it, like she's used to me but would rather I was someplace else—someplace she could visit once in a while—so she didn't have to crawl out of bed and cook me dinner every day. Or have to make the money to put the food in the fridge in the first place. Well I've got myself a friend: Mr. Burgess. We hang out, we talk. Sometimes we watch TV and sometimes we read comics, and he'll make me a ham sandwich without crying or yelling. The way I like it, too, because he asks *me what I like and what I don't. He wants to know. Mr. Burgess, he's like the daddy she never gave me.*

The boy brushed a tear from his eye then wiped it on his jeans. You saw the dark, wet spot on his knee and immediately wanted to dive in, as though you were as small as a Lilliputian and it was a midnight pool.

Then he spoke, right? Do you remember what he said? I'll tell you:

"I miss Mom…."

You realized something: The boy was not watching your wind-blown curtains but instead what lay beyond them. The city, the night, the Thing that regularly swallowed his mother. You were wrong about what he'd been thinking. But you were right about one thing: You *were* small enough to swim in his tears.

You glimpsed the cover of the comic book that lay on the floor at David's feet. It showed a superhero with the ability to transform himself into any creature on the planet. A man who would never have to look in a mirror and see the same face twice, you thought.

"If you could be an animal, David, any animal, what would you be?"

The boy glanced across his shoulder. "That's easy." He shrugged. "I'd be a lion."

"King of the jungle. Of course."

"Yes, Simba in *The Lion King* or Aslan from that movie about the wardrobe. Only he was a magic lion so maybe he doesn't count. Any sort of lion, I guess, except those zoo lions; they just look sad all the time. What animal would you be, Mr. Burgess?"

"Something small," you said, "like an insect. A creep-crawling spider or roach maybe. Then I would slip under doors and hide in dark, shadowy places waiting to *JUMP!* out and scare little girls—little boys too, I see. Maybe I wouldn't be so mean, just scuttle up their bedposts, climb under the covers, and tickle their feet while they slept."

"A lion ain't scared of insects like spiders or roaches." David turned, momentarily interested. "He could stamp and crush them flat with his paws before they tickled him."

"Maybe," you said. "Maybe not. But I like your fighting spirit."

When the boy turned away, no doubt stealing a glance at the window, you told yourself you were an insect already. You relied on the rest of the colony to provide for you. They allowed you to live, to continue, but never to prosper. They controlled you,

your life, you, everything, you, and they felt they had the right to monitor, to ask questions. To provide answers that made them feel better instead of you, when maybe...maybe you knew the answer all along.

You clapped your hands to get the boy's attention. "What do you say we throw some darts?"

The boy grinned. "What, you have some here?"

"I went out today," you said. "And maybe I got us a board. What do you say?"

You remembered how you took your usual route home: through Lily Park.

"Aw, *cool*. Can I throw first?" He was already on his feet.

"Sure. Throw as many as you like, but you'll need to give me a second to put a nail up first."

You took the darts from a drawer and held them out for the boy. He took them, carefully, then moved to the couch, where he started a closer inspection, fascinated, as all boys were, with anything sharp, anything dangerous. As you made the first few taps to bed in the nail, you glanced across your shoulder, and what you saw made you ache inside. David sat on the couch, barely taking up half a cushion, turning and twirling a dart in his small hands. You were struck by how it seemed as if he was alone in the apartment, just him and that dart, unplugged and curious, an outcast from a generation brought up on video game consoles, thankful while they only ever expected.

And the world defaced such angels.

You missed the nail and brought the hammer down hard on your thumb.

- - -

The boy stood in the tawny glow of the table lamp and threw the darts like it was what he was born to do. The window was closed, the curtains drawn, and you sat, thumb bandaged, laughing and slapping the leather of the couch arm with your good hand for applause. The unadulterated joy on his face made you begin to believe that the window box and the flower that would never grow might somehow be forgotten and that the nights you shared together could go on forever.

And then you watched a tear slip down the boy's cheek and a dart take an errant path through the air, missing the board by

feet and sticking in the wall. Your smile faded and you had to fight the urge to rush over to him.

"What's wrong, David?"

"I...I can't come visit you anymore, Mr. Burgess," he said. The words were barely spoken before tears started to stream down his face. "Last night my mom found out I've been coming here. She told me to stop."

"But we're not doing anything wrong," you said.

David nodded. "I know, but she was really mad. I went home and she was already there. I found her lying on the floor all curled up in a ball crying. Her clothes were ripped and she had bruises on her face. When she saw me she asked me where I'd been, and I couldn't lie to her because...because she doesn't like me telling lies. And when I told her she got mad. She said I mustn't visit you ever again. I tried to tell her. I tried to tell her I was only watering your flower and reading comics but she swore and said no. I'm so sorry, Mr. Burgess. I really screwed things up, didn't I?"

"It's okay," you said, teetering on the edge of the couch. "It's okay. Tell me, where is your mother now?"

"She went out. She put makeup on her face to cover the bruises and she went."

The consummate pro, you thought.

"So tell me something, why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you one more time to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?"

The boy nodded. "We're moving to a new apartment. My mom, she's been saving for a long time and she says she's got enough for a better place now."

"And do you know where she got that money *from*?" you said. "Same place she got the bruises. It's bad money, David. Bad."

"What do you mean?"

And then you were on your feet, dwarfing the boy.

"I mean are you going to let her take this away from you?" You shook a finger toward the window. "I was relying on you to grow that flower. You told me you would."

The boy took a step back, then another—toward the window, away from the door.

"But it isn't working, Mr. Burgess," he said. "I've poured water on it every day and nothing's happened. It's just dirt, dead dirt. I wanted to grow you a flower, I did, but I don't think I can."

"So you are...you're going to let her take it away. I'm disappointed, David."

"But she's my mom. I *have* to do what she says."

You stabbed a thumb at your chest. "And who am I?"

The boy hesitated, then: "You're Mr. Burgess, the nice man who lives down the hall."

"I thought we were friends. Was I wrong in thinking that?"

He shook his head in the exaggerated way of children when words are out of reach.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Mom says I can't be friends with grown-ups."

You looked away from him then, toward the window, and found yourself relieved the curtains remained closed. You did not want so much as a glimpse of what lay beyond. It was enough to know it was still there. The city. The Thing. The Great Unfairness. And who controlled it? Gave birth to it? Planted the seed from which it grew?

Them.

The ones who would never allow you to be happy, but dangled it in front of you like bait on a hook. The ones who would never allow you—or his mother for that matter; she was damned too but didn't know it yet—to reach your better place. The ones who wanted to keep you right where you were, trapped, fixed by pills and bills: plenty of one and not enough of the other.

"You know…your mother is right," you said. "We really can't stay friends. What she doesn't know is they'll try to fix her too. They try to fix everybody."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Throw another dart for me."

"What? Why?"

"Because I want you to. Because I'm asking. Throw another dart. Aim for the bull this time. A million bucks says you can't hit it."

He pulled his arm across his eyes.

"You're on."

Holding your breath, you watched.

Poised, with a dart pinched between his thumb and index finger, readying to throw but holding, gauging distance and angle, he stood on one leg while he bent back the other, almost toppling,

almost, but with luck and grace he would never leave, never let go, but stand there instead, still, perfect, forever.

And then he threw the dart.

- - -

You made an appointment and they laid you down and later on handed you a prescription you could not read, would not understand. They questioned you, they listened, then questioned you some more—always questions and never answers—while on paper pads they scratched notes you could not read, would not understand. And they wondered why you were confused. They even coughed and tried to hide their frown when you described your fantasies. You heard the outrush of breath when you told them they still were: fantasies.

And you thought about the boy who put his lap under your hand.

You asked them to remove the desktop flower from the office and they asked why. You said you felt like it was staring at you. More scratches. And you wondered how they would make their little scratches if you took their pen and skewered their eyeball with it, like a pickle on a stick. You could click-click the button and dot all those selfish i's written all over their inflated brains. You'd say something like: "A *pen* for your thoughts, doc." And you'd want to laugh hard and long but you wouldn't be able; the flower on the desk would only stare harder. Besides, they—the doctors, the terrorists—were so self-important, so self-absorbed, so self, self, self, they were probably all I's—capital—anyway. Still, you enjoyed picturing the scene.

And you thought about how after your last appointment and a trip to the store you let a boy help you up the stairs with your groceries. The boy who would one day put his lap under your hand. You'd told them he would.

Walking home, you told yourself they ignored you, left you alone, unsupervised. Why, they practically taught you to use your hands when all you wanted was to be shown how to make a single flower grow.

You took the shortcut through Lily Park. It led you past the birdbath and the cherub you now knew was Cupid. His stone skin was spoiled by ribbons of spray-painted graffiti. You hung back awhile and looked on in horror as people walked by without so much as a glance in his direction.

You walked on, laden.

Outside your apartment block, you stopped and swallowed one of their pills, the ones they always gave you and you sometimes did not take, the ones they said would make the staring flower and the voice in your head—

Stop? Never.

And you hoped it wasn't too late.

You entered your apartment to the comic book lying near the couch where the boy had left it and the dart still stuck in the wall but slack, like it was trying and failing to hold on.

The boy was gone. She took him. He did not want to go. He had a new room with no cracks in the ceiling and a window box outside, which he watered every day with the can you bought him. A single lonely flower grew. At night it stood in the cold and rain and pressed its petals to the glass, peering in. You hoped he would awaken sometime and see the flower at his window, the tears leaking from its eye, rolling down its petal lashes, and ache as you ached for what was lost.

It was a cold apartment. Your curtains shivered in the breeze. You walked across to the window, pulled them aside, and started back when you saw what occupied the window box. Near the centre, a pale white needle poked up from the soil, reaching, clawing for sunlight. A flower. At least, the beginnings of one.

It couldn't be, could it? You were hallucinating, had to be. It couldn't be a seedling, despite the boy and you wanting and willing something to grow in there for weeks. Miracles did not happen, boys did not stay around, or indeed stay boys forever, and flowers did not grow from seedless soil. You would take another pill—several if that's what it took—to erase the teasing vision and silence the voice in your head that told you you'd done something wrong—

Something terrible.

But it *could* be real, you thought. It could be the work of the Thing. The Great Unfairness. To make a flower grow when a boy had already put his lap under your hand and left you forever, what could possibly be *more* unfair? More ill-timed? No matter, the pill—

Make it pills, why don't you? The whole bottle.

—would take care of it, of everything. You headed into the bathroom to wash the sweat from your palms and to fill a glass with water.

The bathroom was a crawling stillness. You wiped steam from the mirror above the sink, opening a window on yourself, and there, there, there it was in the face staring out at you, in at you. Regret. You felt it, saw it, in the movement of a sink-stranded cockroach rocking sadly on its carapace in a splash of blood, legs needling for purchase, trying to flip itself over, to turn things around. Lost lying on its back. Yet it never gave up, not for the whole time you stood and watched it in reflection. It never gave up. The cockroach, compelled, walked the air.

And behind you, beyond you, a boy lay in your bathtub.

Infrared Richard Kadrey

The Prophet of Menlo Park

Douglas Engelbart Carries on his Vision

Paul Spinrad

The day is December 9, 1968. The place, the Fall Joint Computer Conference in San Francisco's Brooks Hall.

At a table in front of the theater sits Douglas Engelbart, sporting a headset and demonstrating a new powerful computer system complete with monitor, keyboard, and mouse. The two-thousand-seat auditorium is outfitted with video cameras, microphones, a microwave link, and an Eidophor projector beaming massive pictures onto the front wall.

On the screen, the larger-than-life split image shows Engelbart on the right as he guides us through the demo. On the left, we see his computer monitor, actually his office computer monitor thirty miles away at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Menlo Park. He is remotely connected via twelve-hundred-baud modem to the SRI system, keying and editing a simple document. Throughout the demo, the video camera back in Menlo Park stays trained at the terminal, while cameras in the auditorium pick up shots of Engelbart's face and hands, equipment, or some other team member involved in the presentation.

The Promised Land of Computing

Engelbart was directing what is now known as "the mother of all demos," a milestone event that earned him the title Father of Personal Computing. Attendees—accustomed to programming mainframe computers via punch cards—were being introduced to what have since become the essentials of modern computing: networking, teleconferencing, word processing, e-mail, file sharing, hyperlinks, integrated text and graphics, windows, and the mouse. He was also presenting his broad vision of a world where computers not only make our lives easier but also serve as the salvation of modern civilization.

Personal-computer pioneer Alan Kay was there. "Doug was like a biblical prophet," Kay recalls. "His talks were not for infor-

mation, but to show a promised land that needed to be found and the seas and rivers we needed to cross to get there. He always had a powerful physical presence, and his demos with the projector reminded me of Moses as played by Charlton Heston, parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*."

The demo—fitting the utopian spirit of 1960s San Francisco—embodied personal empowerment and revolution. While hippies at rock concerts were having their minds blown by music, lights, and LSD, Engelbart was blowing minds with his far-out projections. But he was aiming for people's left hemispheres, not their right. The presentation didn't just chart a new course for computer science, it also set the bar for demo-craft. The dazzling demos Steve Jobs and his team give at Macworld today tap into the sense of spectacle that Engelbart introduced to the form.

Engelbart's example scenario was not about the computing process itself. It showed how someone could use a computer to make a shopping list and a map to help run errands after work, how to edit a document, and how to write hyperlinked source code. In an era of plain text, before anyone could fuss about details like fonts or color, Engelbart had developed fundamentally new ways of interacting with information.

The young Engelbart began thinking about using technology to augment human intelligence or "raise the collective IQ" while in the U.S. Navy, just after World War II, running a radar and radio hub in the Philippines. "Twenty years old, and my little shop was the center for communications for the Pacific Fleet," he recalls. "Imagine that!"

It was a time of triumph, promise, and big questions about civilization. Against a backdrop of teletype machines and radar screens, Engelbart read Vannevar Bush's 1945 essay "As We May Think," which examined the challenge of information overload in an increasingly specialized world and described the electronic logic machines that would help humans navigate it. A few years later, Engelbart was newly engaged and working at Ames Research Center (now NASA Ames) in Mountain View. After seeing Professor Paul Morton give a presentation about computing at the University of California at Berkeley, he knew that was what he wanted to pursue.

"My brother-in-law had told my wife, 'It's so nice that you married a guy with a good engineering job,'" he recalls. "So then

what happened? I quit my job to go back to school, and she had to work."

Engelbart and his wife, Ballard, moved to married-student housing near the Berkeley campus, which was filled with other GI-Bill students. He worked on the CALDIC, the California Digital Computer, an early high-speed model that Morton and his students built from scratch with the help of the U.S. Office of Naval Research. "I had grandiose ideas about how people could use computers and screens, like radar screens, to deal with complex, urgent problems," Engelbart recalls. "I think it took Professor Morton by surprise to have a student so out there."

After earning his Ph.D. in 1955, Engelbart joined the Berkeley faculty as an assistant professor of electrical engineering. But he had concerns about getting tenure because others in the department considered his ideas offbeat. So he left to work at SRI, where he was eventually to direct his own research laboratory of nearly fifty staff, pioneering his vision for computer systems.

He secured government funding and wrote his 1962 paper "Augmenting Human Intellect: A Conceptual Framework," a wide-ranging think piece that described how people could work interactively, define connections between documents, and represent their structure and underlying logic. Recorded information could be nonlinear and interactive, he argued, unlike the static writing systems humankind had so far invented.

Engelbart was describing something that did not exist. Fortunately, J.C.R. Licklider at the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency shared enough of his vision to fund Engelbart's research group, the Augmentation Research Center (a reference to the augmentation of collective human intelligence through technology), and start implementing Engelbart's ideas. Five years later, the innovations developed by the twelve-person group were ready for prime time. And the rest is history.

Managing Information Overload

The 1968 demo was a high point for Engelbart. A few years later several ARC members left SRI for nearby Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), where they furthered their ideas about computing following the same strategy: Build the tools you want to use, rely on them for your work, and refine them through

experience. Engelbart left SRI in the mid-1970s after a falling-out with the president. Recent authorial collaborator Valerie Landau says that, although Engelbart is widely regarded as a technology genius, he does have his detractors, who might describe him as uncompromising. "Doug is the worst salesman in the world," Landau says. "He does not cater to male hierarchical protocol, and he won't negotiate."

Today, still trying to interest the world in the unrealized possibilities of his 1962 paper, Engelbart says some of his concepts would be easy to implement. For example, the Internet defines links for clicking and jumping to entire pages, or at best major section divisions. Engelbart advocates linking to any section, subsection, or sentence of any document, so that one could jump to each individually, as we refer to biblical passages by chapter, number, and verse. This would give every sentence in every document a life of its own. Links themselves could also have different types that characterize the relationship between the things they connect: citation, supporting evidence, counter-argument, and so on.

A greater challenge is implementing Engelbart's concept, following Vannevar Bush, of embodying a document's underlying reasoning and logically tying it into the entire corpus of human discourse. Programming computers to work with language like this is far more difficult than it appeared in the 1960s, but systems being developed today are getting closer. For example, software developed by the company Powerset (recently acquired by Microsoft) has built a representation of the semantic structure of all of the English sentences in Wikipedia.

With those pieces in place, Engelbart argues, each document added to the system would contribute its logical content to the society's collective repository of beliefs and reasoning. The result would be a system that would work more like a shared brain than a library, capable of generating its own logical connections, isolating errors in reasoning, and chaining backwards from any statement to underlying assumptions and supporting or contradictory evidence. Science and law already revolve around logical argumentation and consensus, Engelbart adds, so they would be perfect test cases for utilizing such linked argument structures.

Language probably raised the collective IQ of our primate ancestors by enabling individuals to learn indirectly from the experiences of others, but one individual can assimilate only so much

material in a single lifetime. Engelbart's hypothetical system would raise humanity's intelligence by allowing everyone to benefit from the collective experience at any time. The system would digest all the reasoning, and we could tap into it as needed to research questions ranging from how to make lemonade to whether to go to war.

"It's all one problem," Engelbart argues. "It's the meta-problem of how to use technology to increase the collective intelligence, and how to coevolve the society with the technology."

Retired and relaxed now at eighty-three, Engelbart has been honored many times for his early work, and the list of his admirers reads like a who's who of computer science from the decades that followed his 1968 masterwork: Andy van Dam, Alan Kay, Ted Nelson, Jaron Lanier, Marc Andreessen. Where others shared his vision and furthered the work, his instincts proved dead-on. If his most ambitious ideas are ever realized, the worldwide brain that results will probably consider him a prophet of biblical stature.

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Nov. 17, 1970 D. C. ENGELBART 3,541,541

X-Y POSITION INDICATOR FOR A DISPLAY SYSTEM

Filed June 21, 1967 3 Sheets-Sheet 1

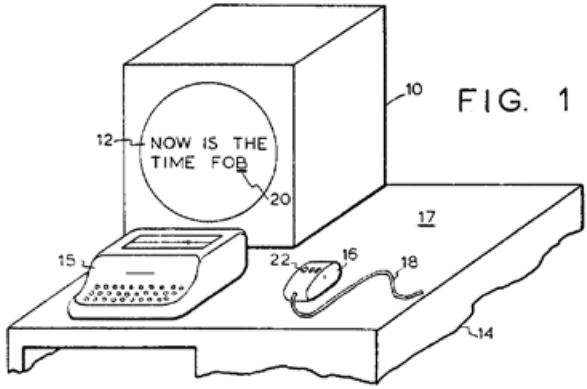

FIG. 1

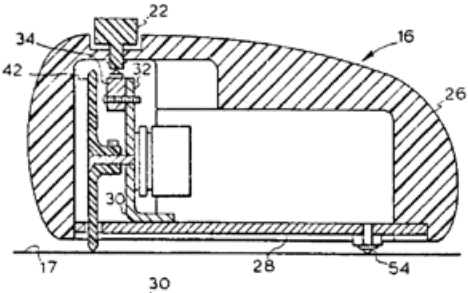

FIG. 2

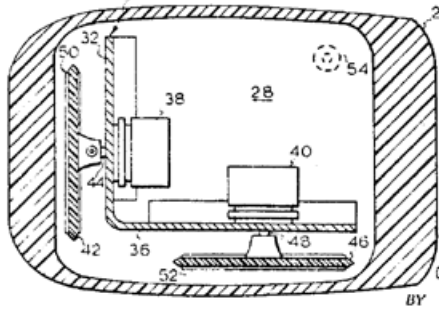

FIG. 3

INVENTOR.
DOUGLAS C. ENGELBART
BY
Lindenberg + Freilich
ATTORNEYS

At Doug Engelbart's right hand during the demo was the first computer mouse, which he invented in 1963. Patent US3541541 is only one of twenty patents Engelbart holds for various digital devices.

Aftermath

Isabel Cooper Kunkle

Once, the cafe had light wooden chairs, the sort that heated in the sunlight and were smooth against your skin, with lines and grains to trace during a particularly difficult conversation. You could move them easily, squishing ten people in at one table or shunting excess off to the side. Now the chairs are heavy ironwork, with swirls, reminiscent of paisley, that press into flesh, leaving red welts on any bare skin between neck and knees. In the summer, shirtless men who sit there come away looking like Indian shawls.

It's impossible to move these chairs. They're bolted firmly to the ground. Moving them might disturb the patterns chalked on the concrete at the cafe's borders; someone might cut through a star or scratch out just the wrong line on one of the twisty Arabic letters. Most people are careful these days, yet few trust others to be so.

"They could get it inlaid," she says, gesturing to the chalk circles and triangles, pulling the comment out of nowhere—hammering it together out of pure awkwardness. She's always been good at breaking ice that shouldn't exist. "If they're so worried, I mean. It can't cost more than the new chairs, or the business they lose because nobody can sit where they want anymore."

Alan turns his head to look over; the movement leaves a strand of hair against his neck. A shattered skyscraper across from him reflects sunlight to turn that hair pure gold, and Sam swallows hard, coffee burning the back of her throat. *Lead me not into temptation, for I can find the way myself. Damn.*

"Human nature," he says. "It's not like it's changed or anything."

- - -

*Alpha: al*fə (n)*

1. *The first letter of the Greek alphabet.*
2. *The first one, the beginning.*
3. *(slang) Alpha Project, 2010-2015. See also: Initiative 1315.*

- - -

Anyone who lived in a city learned to ignore the homeless. Anyone who stayed in this city had learned to ignore all manner of disturbing things. People's gazes jumped sideways at him, then away, making sure that he was a harmless shadow and then letting him fade into the tangle of shattered glass and twisted metal. Nobody could pay attention to everything, not and stay sane.

Sometimes, people did stop to look, the way they might have ogled a two-headed rat or the aftermath of a train wreck. Two old women had walked by him once, and one had stopped to put money in his bowl while the other, with an empty sleeve dangling at her right side, had watched him from behind cracked spectacles. "Is he real?" she asked her friend.

"Why wouldn't he be?" When he heard the first woman speak, he knew that her companion had said things like this before, too often. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

The one-armed woman met his eyes for a moment, then ducked her head and replied. "Not mostly."

There were people who did, especially here and now. He'd seen them bustling about the worst of the sites some mornings, serious men and women in glasses accompanied by even more serious men and women with guns. Metal gleamed in the sun, and wires twisted around them like snakes, like eels, like the things he tried to avoid thinking about. One of the men had seen him and looked for a long while. He'd turned away.

The woman who'd given him money had also watched him for a minute. Her eyes, despite her age, were clear, dark, and very sad. "If a city had a ghost," she'd said, in sympathy and recognition, "he'd be it."

He hadn't really heard then; the world had been fading around him the way it always did, sooner or later, and real conversations had gotten lost amidst voices from garbage cans and people whose faces suddenly turned into those of rats. Later, when he'd been clear enough to think he knew what was real and what wasn't, he'd remembered the conversation. At the last statement, he'd put his face in his hands and laughed, rocking back and forth in the twilight as people sped past him, too hurried to stop and look.

- - -

"....[E]ffectiveness of conventional weapons appears limited, but extant. Research into potential methods of protection is ongoing; reports

vary and witnesses are unreliable. We are ready, however, to cautiously recommend the following...."

—Dr. Haroshi Jakodo, 6/17/2015. Translated from the Japanese.

- - -

The girl at the corner table always orders the same thing: coffee and a cinnamon bun. She's dark-haired and dark-eyed, but her hair's curly and her eyes round, her body tall and curved. Clearly American, even if her English didn't give it away. Her friend's a more varied customer. For a while, they came in together almost every day. This is the first time Haruko's seen them back in four months. They don't hang on each other like they used to, but she doesn't much care; she's more interested in whether they still tip well.

While she waits for the soup, she lets the counter hold her up. It's been a long day; more customers than usual, and tips don't mean anything to either her back or her feet, stupid flesh that they are. Pain is all they know, and the kitchen's heat doesn't help anything, any more than Kanaye's shouting does. She wants to tell him that water only boils so fast, but bites her tongue. Jobs aren't falling from trees, and her apartment needs its sigils renewed, and she'd like a new pair of shoes sometime before winter.

Besides, he doesn't mean anything by it, and she's old enough to know that. Reiko burst out crying earlier today—she'd spilled soup and he'd asked how such a clumsy girl had ever learned to walk—but Reiko is young. When Haruko was growing up, Reiko would still have been in school, but even high school is a luxury these days, and she has no family to send her. It's not even a rare enough situation to be tragic. She'll toughen up in time, and she'll stop spilling things. Hopefully soon, since they can't exactly afford waste.

"All right?" Kanaye, at the counter, doesn't stop chopping meat, but he does look up at her. He's not a bad man, she'd told Reiko after her crying fit, and it's true. Just worried, that's all, and Haruko can understand that.

- - -

"Please find room in your heart and home for a Tokyo refugee this year!"

—Electronic banner ad, paid for by Aid for Alpha Victims, December 2016

- - -

"No, if it's human nature to be that short-sighted, I wouldn't be able to tell." Nobody even knows whether the patterns work. Some people claim to have seen it happen, enough that others believe. And still more, without any actual faith, use them anyhow, laboriously chalking them into the broken concrete outside their houses or wincing while burly men tattoo them onto their skin. Just in case.

Alan shrugs, a liquid motion that scarcely disturbs the blue silk of his shirt. The trend these days is loose and billowing—maybe fashion's old tendency to pick up whatever's least practical, maybe a need for distraction, something that you can leave behind like a lizard's tail. It doesn't matter. Alan's always paid attention to it and never, as long as Sam has known him, thought about the causes. Not like he thinks about everything else. "No, that's part of it. Everyone else sees what you're doing. Just not you."

"Nobody saw Alpha," she points out, knowing that it's become the high-school slut of arguments these days, the way the Nazis—*What* did *philosophers do before Hitler?*—used to be. Oh well.

It makes him pause for a second, but he holds up a hand quickly enough. "Other people see small things while they're happening. They only see the big ones afterwards, when it's too late."

She starts to reply, but the waitress is there, putting down a bowl of soup in front of Alan and refilling Sam's coffee mug. Alan thanks the girl in quick, fluent Japanese; she smiles at him and turns to go. A new scar, pink, runs up the back of her right leg like a seam, disappearing finally beneath the hem of her short skirt. Sam looks away, back into the darkness of her coffee mug, then up at Alan.

"So what you're saying," she begins, hoping she sounds as casual as she wants to, wishing it wasn't so important that she sound that way, "is that, as a race, we're screwed."

"And you're surprised?"

Sam shakes her head. "Just hope you're wrong, as usual."

"Screwed doesn't mean dead," he points out. "In fact, unless you've suddenly got religion or started living in the sixteenth century or some—"

"—or I find excessively-literal men really annoying?"

She sees his grin the moment before it appears, hears his laugh in advance. They aren't visions of the end of the world or the fall of Troy, but even cut-rate pseudo-precognition sucks sometimes. Once she wouldn't have known. She's not sure whether she misses that time or not.

Sam tears a strip of fleshy cinnamon-flavored dough away from her bun. Western food tastes odd these days, and she spends money on places like this more out of nostalgia than desire. "I think you're right, though. Screwed is something you can get through, something you can get over. And if you get over something, you're stronger when you're done."

She doesn't meet his eyes.

- - -

"Fire? Ice? We were wrong. Nobody imagined how the end would come. Nobody could have."

—Unnamed Citizen, Tokyo

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He didn't know whether restaurants had left food out for the homeless before; he'd never been the sort of man who would have checked. Some of them did now, though, scraps that he received gratefully, careful not to take it all. There weren't as many homeless around as there used to be, and he didn't like to think about that, but there might still be others. He didn't eat more than his share.

At least, he thought he didn't. Madness was a thing he remembered all too well in his saner moments; about to go to sleep, he'd recall the way a railing had suddenly grown bristly spider-leg fur under his hand, or the bright look of fresh pooled blood in the morning sunlight, and his mind had no blank spots, only warped ones.

Some of them were too warped, though; sometimes the first thing he saw on returning to sanity was the remains of a computer, or half a pink-papered wall, and he'd realize he'd woken up in the ruins. Even the other homeless didn't sleep there, fearing the ghosts the old woman had mentioned, perhaps, or the things that

had come into or gone out of those buildings; they feared that they'd go to sleep and the sickly-yellow pretornadic light would come again, the freight-train howling, and something would come *through*. The others were right to fear, whether or not they were right about Them, and he was always surprised when, sane again, he woke up alive after a night in the ruins.

Then again, he was surprised that he'd survived the night every time he woke. Once he'd thought that perhaps he couldn't die, then thought that perhaps he died all the time and just didn't remember. Perhaps the woman who had called him a ghost was right.

Hunger convinced him otherwise, usually; hunger and the other mundane needs of his body. In the paraphrased words of Shakespeare, who he was not surprised he still remembered, if you cut him, he bled. He knew this well. It was part of what kept him believing that he was real.

Mostly, though, he believed that he was real because it would make too much sense if he wasn't.

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"*....[I]f we have learned anything from Alpha, it should be that science cannot hope to hold the answers. It should be—but it isn't! The arrogance, the cosmic gall of the new ivory-tower intellectuals will only bring us closer to destruction!*"

—Rev. Bruce Carter

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"Talked to your folks lately?" she asks.

"A couple days ago. The usual." Alan rolls his eyes, an affectation that she knows disguises two facts: That concern makes him feel loved, and that he knows his family isn't being unreasonable. She lets him get away with it and go on. "They don't understand why I can't be setting broken legs and taking out appendixes in Jersey somewhere."

Sam shakes her head. "They understand. It just doesn't make them feel any better. If there's one thing we should've learned from Alpha, it's that—"

"—there are things man wasn't meant to know?" The arch of one golden eyebrow is perfect. "I don't think Lovecraft meant my relationship with my parents."

Around them, the cafe is almost empty, even with the sun high overhead. In one corner, an older man and woman talk while two small children play under nearby tables. The boy holds his hands up, wiggling his fingers, and chases his screaming sister around the iron fixtures. The wind picks up, making Sam's shirt billow and her flesh clench, cold, around her bones. She'd chosen black silk, knowing he'd notice. "Everyone understands everything they need to, I think," she says. "Or at least everything they ever will."

Alan eats some of his soup before answering, noodles hanging down over the edge of the spoon before he slurps them up. "I thought I was supposed to be the pessimistic one."

"Screwed isn't dead, remember? Your parents are proud of you. They understand. They just want to see you again. It's hard to balance things like that."

"Thanks," he says, and then, offhand, "you put things like that well. You'd be a good mom, I think."

At least when she knows what's coming, she can brace for it. She freezes for a moment, a rabbit in front of a car. She shouldn't be here. Not now. One day, maybe she can sit here with him and everything he says won't hurt, but it's not today.

Today, the best she can do is pretend. And it would be so easy to give up, to let everything show. Maybe it'd even be worth it; maybe, if it made things come out right, she wouldn't even hate herself afterwards.

She smiles up at him. "Nah. My kids would all have root canals before they went to high school."

She doesn't taste the coffee, but it's hot and liquid, which helps. "How's Natsuki?"

She really shouldn't be here. Maybe she's always known that.

But that's never mattered before.

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"Congress authorized $3.2 billion in international military aid today, most of it directed at Japan, as well as an additional $1.5 billion in scientific funding to study the aftereffects of Project Alpha...."

—*The New York Times*, 10/21/2015

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Once upon a time, the city had been a place of gleaming glass and shining metal and sharp, precise right angles. Back then, a small man with small glasses and a nice suit had been the stereo-

typical citizen. Now, the same small man in the ruins of the same nice suit crouched in the ruins that had once been offices and apartments, begging for coins and not knowing what they were worth. The glasses had broken long ago. It was funny. It wasn't why he laughed.

Someone had saved him once. He didn't remember all of it, and felt guilty that he couldn't. It had been night. There had been an alley, and something in the alley. A man had come, a young man who wasn't from the army. Soldiers had uniforms, which the young man didn't, and guns, which he did. Bullets hadn't killed the thing in the alley, but there had been a smell like burning honey and the young man had grabbed him by the arm and pulled and said, "Run, you stupid fuck."

When he remembered what the woman had said, he'd laughed because once he'd sat in a room and worked on equations. He'd laughed because once he'd entered another room and looked at the shining glass and gleaming metal and sharp right angles there and nodded approval. Then he'd gone away, or been sent, he couldn't remember which now, and so he was there to watch as the city crumbled and rebuilt and crumbled again. It wasn't funny at all.

Once they'd gotten behind a fence, the young man had pressed coins into his hand. The young man's grip had been very strong. "Take these. Stay someplace at night." He'd stood, feeling the designs on the metal pressing lines into his palm, and wondered why. Perhaps he looked like an older brother, or a favorite uncle.

He'd put his palm on the other side of the young man's and turned their double-joined hands over, giving the coins back, keeping one. It was the smallest, though he didn't know if that meant anything.

Some nights, when he remembered who he was and where he'd come from, he thought about more potent repentance. Half of his ancestors would have damned him to Hell for it, had he any chance of Heaven otherwise, and the other half would've praised him for an honorable man. Even they had been obliged to ask their superiors, though, and his superiors were long gone. Some of them had formed the new color scheme at Project Base, while others had gone to their deaths weeping—just pausing to thank the executioner on the way. But asking would have meant it would be a favor, not penance, and he didn't deserve favors.

"You have to...." There had been despair in the young man's voice, as if he was the beggar.

Words didn't come easy these days, but he'd shaken his head and slowly formed them. "There are others." And then, two more, because the young man reminded him of someone he didn't remember and didn't want to but loved anyway. "Thank you."

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"*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold*."
—W. B. Yeats

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"Silver. Nice." He's looking at her gun now, tapping the shining barrel with his cracked thumbnail. Silver is in this year, replacing matte black, and the new models have some sort of advance that prevents the bullets deforming, no matter what metal they're made of. "Birthday present?"

Sam shakes her head. "Not really. Mom sent me a pair of earrings for that, and a couple of minidiscs, and a bunch of junk food. This year's line came out just now, though, and the timing is pretty nice. Dad said he was thinking about getting my initials engraved on the barrel or something."

Samantha is twenty-six. Ten years ago she'd never seen a gun, much less shot one. Her parents would probably have committed ritual suicide in front of a shrine to Doctor Spock if they'd ever thought about buying her one, for her birthday or any other time.

She was in college for Alpha. Packed into the dorm room of the kid with the widescreen TV—witnessing disasters at the same time and place is supposed to bring you closer, but Sam never saw him after freshman year and doesn't remember his name—she'd watched the footage with everyone else on the floor, silent and horrified. In those first minutes of shock, she'd thought of Sunday afternoons in front of the movie channel. *It would be Tokyo.*

In the shiny surface of the gun, her eyes look large. Pale, at least compared to those of most people around here.

"Are you all right?" Alan asks.

Everyone can shoot these days, and everyone wears silver. People keep going. It's possible that they're winning. The end of the world, like so many other things, isn't everything it was cracked up to be.

She looks up at him, relaxes her hand on the coffee cup, and smiles. "Just...time passing, I guess. And everything else. Sorry."

"No, I get it. You almost forget sometimes. And then you don't."

Skyscrapers splinter upwards like broken teeth around them, and the chalk is very white against the sidewalk. There's the gun in her hand. "And you wonder how you could have. But sometimes you have to. Sometimes it's the only thing you can do."

"Yeah."

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"All I can say is that I'm sorry. We never meant this. Any of this. We meant only the best. I swear it."

—Dr. Glen Sterling, pre-execution video

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Reiko is dragging her leg when she brings in the couple's dishes, not much but enough for Haruko to notice. She turns towards Reiko, who is automatically steadying the plates on the counter by one of the metal tubs. "Go home early. I'll be fine here."

"But—"

Haruko holds up a hand, too tired for tact. "You're limping. It's near dusk. Go home."

A month ago, the girl might have protested, but a month ago, both her legs were smooth and whole. "Thank you," she says. "Good night," and then, without pausing to take off her hairnet, she grabs her sweater and is off to the escort station. One of the men there will see her home safe, or as safe as anyone can be.

Half a cinnamon bun goes in the smaller tub, the soup and coffee down the sink, much as Haruko wishes there was a way to save them. There's a small man in a tattered suit who gets food here sometimes, his movements quick and neat, and she's seen how thin he is. Still, there's half a cinnamon bun and the ends of quite a few sandwiches in there, and that's more than he gets many nights. She tucks the tub under one arm. The other, though larger, is still small enough to fit on her other hip.

Haruko picks through the warding, careful not to disturb it, and lays the scraps at one corner of the street. Then she can hold the other tub away from her, and she is relieved, since the raw red meat inside it tends to slip over the sides, and her uniform is

clean. That one goes in front of the cafe, and she'll have to pick it up early the next morning, before customers get here. Still, if any of Them can reason, she figures it's worth the trouble to have Them know where it came from.

Haruko makes her way back inside. It's easier to get through the warding without the tubs' weight to worry about, and she's had lots of practice. She washes her hands, slips on her jacket, and turns the sign in the window so that it reads "Closed". Kanaye lives here, but he goes upstairs for the night before she leaves, and who is she to complain about that?

Outside, the sun is setting in blood.

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Deadman on the Titanic

Alicia Adams

Deadman sat atop a smoke stack,
flicking the ash of his cigarette to the deck below
before raising the filter to his blue lips.

A man in a tux with a tight bow tie
stood at the base of the stack and looked up.
"You there," he said, "corpse.
You are an anachronism. You're too early.
You see, the ship's not yet sunk."

"It is you who are the anachronism, sir," said Deadman,
"for you understand that the ship will sink,
and yet it has not."

"But I thought," chimed a woman in a beaded
red dress, "that 'anachronism' only pertained to technology,
like Henry VIII browsing Match.com."

"No, no, my lady, you are mistaken," said the gentleman
with the bow tie. "An 'anachronism' pertains to any
person—or object or idea even—that is out of place in time."

"It's an easy mistake to make," said Deadman.

The ship lurched and swayed as chunks of ice
slammed against the deck. Deadman caught one
as it flew and pushed the orange circle of his cigarette tip
against it. It hissed.

"Is this ice an anachronism?" asked the lady,
turning a glowing slab in her gloved hands.
"Why would the ice be an anachronism?" asked the gentleman.
"It's prehistoric," said the lady.
"Yes, but there's ice in all times," said Deadman.
"What about global warming?" asked the lady.
"Damn it," said the gentleman, "that's the third
conversation this week that's turned
into a discussion of global warming."

Fletcher´s Lunch

Jason Hardy

It came up in one of the traps, the wood frame bowed about its body. Murmuring, we gathered 'round. Jones unhinged the door and it scuttled out, a sallow, sow-bellied thing on knobby spider legs.

When Fletcher probed it with his gaff, it turned and spat forth a wiry tendril. The barbed tip rent his back. It had harpooned him through and now drew him whole into its yawning maw.

Chaos. A rifle crack, a surge of men. But the beast, nimble despite Fletcher's bulk, gained the rail, splashed below, and was gone, unscathed but for our curses.

The Tiger Man

Geordie Williams Flantz

I really don't know how I got here. All I can tell you is that it happened in very small increments. For instance, first she wanted the little pug dog, Riley, and then she started going on long weekends with a girlfriend from work. She brought home the mysterious grizzly-bear sculpture late in August, and only then, after I'd been prepped in that way, did she introduce me to the tiger man.

I was sitting on the couch in front of *World's Unlikeliest Animals*, still wearing leather gloves because I'd been pulling up the weeds from around all the trees in our yard. It was late in the summer, so I'd been doing yardwork in anticipation of the first snow. The leaves weren't really off yet, but I remember all the apples had fallen down around the crab-apple tree, their soft bodies gumming up my shoes and smelling alcoholic.

I was done with the weeds, sitting in the living room on the leather couch I'd had since college. Marie, who'd always loved that couch, had come home the week previous and told me she was buying a new one. It wasn't that she didn't still love the old couch, she told me, but she had also found a new couch that she loved, and that she wanted to bring into our house. Thinking of it now, I suppose it was strange how she sat down beside me and held one of my hands in two of hers, tears gathering in her eyes.

"Can I still keep the old couch?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, of course you can." And then she threw her arms around me, weeping against my shoulder.

This was nice, but the documentary I'd been watching about possible worms on Mars came back from commercial, so I was perhaps not fully in the moment.

A week later, though, I was sitting on the old couch again, a bowl of Froot Loops in my lap, the TV showing pictures of blind cave frogs and strange glow-things that hung from the cave ceiling like iridescent, moth-eating snot. That was when Marie came in through the front door and, trailing her, the tiger man.

He left a strong impression, I suppose because he was a giant, and because his blue eyes shone so fiercely from the dense tangle of his beard and his jutting eyebrows.

"Honey," said Marie, in the very careful voice she uses to deliver difficult messages. "This is Jack. He's the person I told you about."

I admit, at that moment, I felt at a disadvantage. For one thing, who was Jack? If she had told me about him, I must not have been listening, which happens sometimes. Also, while still comfortable, the old couch had busted all its springs years ago, and the cushions had grown flat, so that you sat quite close to the floor, with your butt sunk down, like a child on a grown-up's toilet. From down there, Jack seemed as big and unassailable as a mountain cliff.

"It's nice to meet you," said Jack in a voice like a thunder-god might have, or an announcer for television commercials. His five fingers swallowed my hand and my wrist as we shook, me still crouching like someone trying to poop in the woods.

"Oh, of course," I said, not wanting to look like a bad husband in front of our guest. "It's nice to meet you, too." Then the three of us exchanged looks for a while, and it was clear something embarrassing had happened, though I didn't understand at the time. I tried to smile harder to make up for this. Marie looked like she was going to cry.

That night, Jack made us all supper: tender little white-fleshed fish filleted in some sort of lemon sauce. It was wonderful and I told him so. I ate all my fish and then had seconds, and then realized that I'd eaten almost the whole pan of fish by myself, while Jack and Marie had barely touched their plates. "Oh," I said, "I'm so sorry."

But it seemed I'd created another awkward situation, so that Jack and Marie could only sit blushing at one another. I felt ashamed then, like a child disappointing his parents.

"It's okay," said Marie, pausing to drink more wine. "I'm sure Jack is really pleased you like his fish." And Jack nodded, though he looked angry. But Jack always looks angry.

That night, we watched a movie called *Brewster McCloud*, and Marie cried at the end, though, as usual, I didn't understand why. "I thought it was a comedy!" I said, not angry with her but with myself, because of always confusing these things.

When I turned the light on, I couldn't help but notice how Jack had his arm around my wife, and how their hands were entwined, the ball of them resting in Jack's enormous lap.

When I went to pee before bed, I found them together in the bathroom, brushing their teeth over the sink at the same time. Jack was wearing one of those little cotton tank tops and a pair of boxer shorts, and I was amazed by how his entire body was covered in voluminous swirls of chestnut-colored hair. You could get lost in the crazy windswept patterns of it, and I must have done so, because when I looked up, they were both staring at me, toothpaste dribbling down Marie's chin. "Sorry," I said, backing out the doorway. "How rude of me."

A few minutes later I caught Marie alone at the refrigerator's ice dispenser, and I confronted her in a whisper. "Is Jack spending the night?" I asked, still too embarrassed to let on that I didn't know who this Jack was or what he was doing at our house in the first place.

Marie looked quietly exasperated then, though she kindly pushed my cheeks together with the palms of her hands, kissing me on the forehead. "Oh, sweetie," she said, pity in her voice. "You know we've been over this."

I couldn't say anything to that, so I just took my turn at the purified-water spout.

At first it was strange, all of us sleeping together, but Marie had thought ahead in buying the king-sized bed, and I can't say it wasn't comfortable. I slept on the outside next to Marie, so in some ways it was just like any other night. There was, of course, the tiger man's heavy breathing, but I have always slept easily, and there was something almost soothing about the way Jack's big breaths seemed to surround my own, encompassing them. It reminded me of being a child, napping next to my father, who died when I was twelve.

That first week, I didn't talk to Jack much, only an "Excuse me," if we accidentally met in the hallway, or the occasional "Good morning." He worked in the day, carpooling with Marie, so after seven I had the house to myself, just like always. The leaves started falling, and I spent a lot of time in the yard. Inside, I tried to keep all of Marie's new things carefully dusted.

I cannot say exactly when my life became so dull. When I was a child, my mother called me her little dreamer, which is my nature. At some point, however, my dreams became flat and uninteresting, like a lawn that's only grass with a cement sidewalk running right down the middle.

In the evenings, Marie would come home like always, only Jack would be with her, looking disheveled and tired. He always had the strongest smell on him then, and would go quickly to the shower, as though he was ashamed. It was not a bad odor, but rather rich and enticing to me.

"It's the cats," Marie explained one day, pushing her red lips tightly together. Marie is a lawyer and insists on wearing makeup to the office, though I think she looks more beautiful without it. That's when a light bulb finally popped inside my head: She had told me something about a carnival once, or a circus. A man she'd met there who worked in the cages with the tigers and the other big cats.

"He was so worried about them," she said, more to herself than to me. "But it sounds like things are better now. They hate that he's spending nights away from them, but he says they'll be okay." I didn't know whether she meant the carnival people or the tigers. Her face had that terrible worried look she'd recently cultivated. "Please don't say anything about the smell," she said. "He's a very sensitive man."

It was around that time that the new couch finally got delivered. We put it in the living room, and I helped Jack move the old couch down to the basement, though honestly he could probably have done it by himself, that's how strong he is. The new couch had strange angles and was bright red, so that it reminded me of an electric guitar. I called it the guitar couch once, and it caught on, so then we all called it that. I admit that the guitar couch was better for Jack—very sturdily built—but I could never get comfortable on it. And, if you ask me, it stuck out like a sore thumb in that room, amidst the old family photos and the braided rugs. The spider plant on the stereo cabinet almost seemed to recoil from it, growing toward the window.

It did kind of go with the statue, though, which Marie had carefully positioned in the foyer. She told me it was pretty expensive, but it's not like I should be upset, since all the money we had was hers anyway.

The statue itself made me nervous, though. It was a black cube, but with parts of its insides cut away, so that it was a little like a forest with its trees grown too close together. This is what it seemed like if you touched the statue, but from farther away it didn't look like anything, except that from certain angles it did look

like something: from one angle a grizzly bear standing, and from another a deer peering out of the woods. It was made of dark, sweaty wood, and its oily residue got on my fingers when I dusted it, which I did every day, but always with a shiver.

I kept the house immaculate that first month, and we all tiptoed around each other like there might have been someone dying in one of the unused rooms, someone not to be disturbed. One day Marie called from work during her lunch hour. I was out pruning my lavender, putting the little bushes to bed for the winter, but I got her message later in the afternoon:

"Hi, sweetie! Just thought I'd give you a call. I know this has been really hard, but I wanted to tell you again how much it means to me, and how much stronger it's going to make us. I really believe that, you know? Anyway, I was thinking that I've been spending a lot of time with Jack lately, and maybe it would be nice if we went out sometime, just the two of us? I'll make a reservation at Charlie's, how's that sound? Okay, love, hope you're not working too hard. Jack's making salmon tonight, remember. Your favorite! Love you, sweetie, bye!"

I thought about this message a lot over the next few days, but when Marie offered to go out again on Thursday, I turned her down without really knowing why. It just seemed wrong to me, leaving the tiger man at home all by himself. And he would like Charlie's, I thought. They had very good fish there, and that seemed to be all that he ate.

Also, I admit that I had bad thoughts of Jack prowling around the house when I wasn't there to keep an eye on him. What if he took a reckless walk through the yard? His enormous feet would go stomping through my flower beds, compacting all the carefully-layered soil. And then I imagined him slipping back into the house, dirt clumps caking the floor in the foyer as he paused there, his eyes blazing at that awful statue.

No, I told myself, Jack is very careful. He would never walk through the flower beds. And yet I could not get those images out of my mind.

I suppose that Jack had come to feel important to me, not dear exactly, but like a central figure in my life. In part I felt responsible for him, like Riley the pug dog, who Marie had brought home but soon forgot in the busy shuffle of her life. We had not bonded right away, Riley and I, but after the tiger man came, we

were pushed a little closer together. Riley hated the tiger man, couldn't get over the smell on him, the scent of all those wild cats. If the pug was upstairs when Jack entered the house, she would go crazy, barking the huge man into a corner, so that I was not sure who to feel sorry for, the tiny dog or the monster of a man with his angry, trembling eyes.

Sometimes Riley's barking would remind me of my father, who'd had a little scar on his leg from where a Shih Tzu bit him. It was a half-moon scar in the very big bulge of his calf, and when he fell asleep on the couch, I would touch it with my fingers. "It's the little dogs you've got to watch out for," is what he always said.

Which I guess is the same way Jack must have felt, because whenever he was home, Riley had to be in the backyard or the basement, which meant that she really became my dog then. I was the only one who ever saw her.

I started thinking about this more and more on the nights I slept in the basement, or rather didn't sleep, as the sounds from upstairs always kept me awake, and Riley too, both of us staring up at the ceiling with our ears perked.

The first time was only a few days after Jack arrived. Marie caught me at the ice dispenser again; neither of us can sleep without a glass of water on the bedstand. She took my wrist, and I was shocked at how beautiful she looked, young and sensual, her hair shining in the blue light of the Crushed Ice button. "Sweetie," she said, tracing the veins of my arm with the point of her finger. "Jack and I were wondering.... We wanted to know if you could maybe stay down on the couch tonight. Or maybe you could just watch TV for a while? Isn't it Shark Week? You wouldn't want to miss Shark Week. I'll just come and get you when we're done."

"Shark Week is next week," I said. "Tonight is only reruns."

"Oh," she said. "I guess I remembered it wrong."

There was a long pause and her face twisted up in that anguished way again, though she still looked very beautiful.

"But that's okay," I said, jumping in to fill the awkward silence. "I've been meaning to read that book you gave me for my birthday. Maybe I'll just go down and read that. Sit on the old couch for a while."

She stared at me gravely, and I wondered what was happening, if maybe I'd said something wrong. She gripped my arm tightly in both of her hands.

"Sweetie," she said. "Are you *sure* this is okay?"

"Oh, of course," I said, shrugging, smiling awkwardly because I didn't really know what she was talking about. "This is great," I said.

And then she turned and went into our bedroom with Jack, and I climbed down to the basement where it was cold and the old black-and-white TV played only static. I covered myself and Riley with an afghan, and we sat together on the couch, her shivering and growling at the ceiling, where the mysterious sounds of the tiger man were shaking the dusty rafters.

It might seem strange to you, but the truth is it never really bothered me to hear the tiger man and my wife making love in our bedroom. I was intrigued, captivated by the thought of this huge, fur-covered man copulating with my wife. I couldn't help thinking about his cats at those times, picturing their long, narrow backs and the coiled muscles in their legs as they prowled slowly around their cages, around the tiger man who spoke to them using only the language of his massive body, and his smoldering eyes. Was it Jack who was a tiger mauling my wife? Or was my wife a tiger, raking his chest with her claws, sinking her tiger-teeth into the flesh of his neck?

No, I thought. They are both tigers. The tigers make love in my bedroom.

The sound of their lovemaking became almost hypnotic to me, and it was like a beckoning voice I could not ignore. Their rhythmic thumping became a kind of song, a drumbeat that shook me and made my feet move, like a somnambulist dancing through the night. And perhaps I *was* sleepwalking. It seems possible now, when I think of how sleep-deprived I might have been, and the odd, muted way the world seemed, the shivering strangeness of the little dog and the glistening orbs of her eyes.

I do not know how many nights went by like that before I found my feet creaking up the wooden steps, stalking the tiger man's drumbeat.

In the foyer, though, I stopped. There was ghostly moonlight shining through the crescent window over the front door, and it fell across the room, lighting the statue in such a way that its secret

was revealed to me, or at least that is how I thought of it at the time. Riley had followed me up the steps, and she was prancing nervously around my feet, biting at my heels. I barely noticed her. I was too frightened, locked in by the terrible thing I saw so clearly in the wooden cube.

It was this exactly, I can easily describe it: Facing me, eyes peering from the dark corner of the room, was the grizzly bear, erect on two stout legs. Now, though, I could see that he was holding a limp form in his front paws: the body of a doe; and that he was tearing at her long throat, sucking the blood from her torn carotid. It was very clear, and yet there were still tricks in the wood, all those slippery shadows. Because was the bear not also a man with a hairy face and burning eyes? And was the doe not a pale and beautiful woman? It was then I heard growling and noticed Riley was now crouching at my feet, her ears thrust forward toward the living room doorway, where the tiger man stood watching me, tufts of wiry hair exploding from his undershirt.

I screamed then, shrieking in fear and backing away toward the door, tripping, trembling helplessly against the wall. Jack stepped into the foyer and flipped the light switch, so that everything was thrown into bright, dull relief.

"Woah there," he said, his big voice shaking the room. His angry eyes looked down at me, but his hands were raised in a reassuring gesture.

Like someone waking up from a bad dream, I dared another look at the statue. Its sides were flat and safe now, the swirls in it only menacing in the most vague, just-hinted-at way. The bear-man and the deer-woman were nowhere to be found.

Jack dropped to his knees then, and it took me a moment to see that he was trying to calm Riley, reaching out toward her with a meaty finger. "It's all right," he rumbled, and the pug didn't growl like she always had before. Then the tiger man was stroking her back, and she suffered him.

"Good girl," said the tiger man. "Everything's all right." He looked up at me, and I realized I was shaking, tears running down my face. "Hey," he said and, rising, he gripped my shoulder in his hand. He pulled me against his huge chest, and I laid my head down willingly, intoxicated by the big-cat smell that never quite washed off him, and by the pillow of hair beneath his undershirt. "You're freezing," said the tiger man, and I was, the skin of my arms raised

in goosey lumps. "Okay," he purred, "all right," his big hand pawing at the back of my head: petting me. "Come on," he whispered, "why don't you come to bed?"

Inside, our room was warm and dark, and Marie woke when the door opened, still looking so beautiful to me, starlight sparkling through the window and nesting in her hair. "Sweetie," she asked, "are you okay?" And Jack guided me through the doorway.

"Fine," I said. "I just had a little scare." And then I was crawling beneath the covers, and she was running her hands through my hair, holding me against her soft breasts.

The tiger man came and sat beside us, and Marie said, "We should never have sent you away like that," and I didn't know whether this was true or not, but I felt Jack's hand on my knee, and then we were all smiling strangely and petting each other, like people petting tigers, or tigers petting people, and I found myself thinking of the way big cats will groom themselves, lying in the sun. I ran my fingers over the tiger man's fur-covered arms. His hair was as soft as thistle silk, so it didn't tangle up my fingers as they wandered, and soon I came to the nubs of his nipples, very springy, and I put one in my mouth.

I imagined Jack's chest and back were endless grass-covered plains, and I brushed my cheeks across them while he turned and gathered me up in his arms. He and Marie were entwined, and their fingers were on my skin, which seemed very naked and hairless next to Jack's, though I didn't feel self-conscious.

Instead, I felt something building inside of me, quivering in my belly and rising up into my throat. It was a groaning, moaning, growling sound, very fierce and lyrical, and then the others responded, all of our bodies roaring, spreading our music through the porous walls of the house.

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There are things in life that you give up on explaining. Such as why, when you're a twelve-year-old boy, your father takes his gun into the woods and shoots himself. This is not the sort of thing that gets better when you grope around for answers.

Do I dare tell you that it is similar with the tiger man? I hesitate to say this, because now people will say, "Oh, you are a sick person because of what happened to your father. That is why you made love to that awful tiger man." If you think this, you are wrong.

I cannot tell you exactly why it happened, only that all my loneliness opened up that night, blooming like a flower in the foyer.

When I woke up in the morning, the world seemed bright in a way I'd never recognized before. Marie and Jack lay sprawled around me on the bed, still sleeping, and I felt very safe between their bodies. Riley was whining and scratching at the door, so I crept out of bed as quietly as possible. She frisked about in a circle when I let her in, chasing her tail in excitement. Carefully, I picked her up in my arms, seeing all the fine hairs on her back. Then we crept back into bed, where it was warm, and where the others were beginning to wake.

The Grammar of Desire

Paul J. Kocak

Commanded to diagram a sentence,
I was too afraid, in seventh grade, to walk to the blackboard
And chart the chalky patterns of my percolating desire (forget about love, or other sentences).
And what would I tell you, how would I fill in the blanks
For subjects, predicates (nominatives, adjectives), and
Objects (direct and indirect), prepositional (and propositional) phrases
Arching on August nights toward split infinitives (how very late I learned you *can* fracture the
Infinite, or at least the finite, with *he*, *she*, or *it*—and other sordid pronouns)?

Passive or active, I ached for the article, the real article (definite, indefinite, who cares now),
But instead found a sea of gerunds (*yearning*, *losing*, *mourning*, *searching*)
Ending in dangling participles, always looking
For that perfect conjunction (*but...yet...and....*), as if that would punctuate
My tangled syntax with proper interjections.

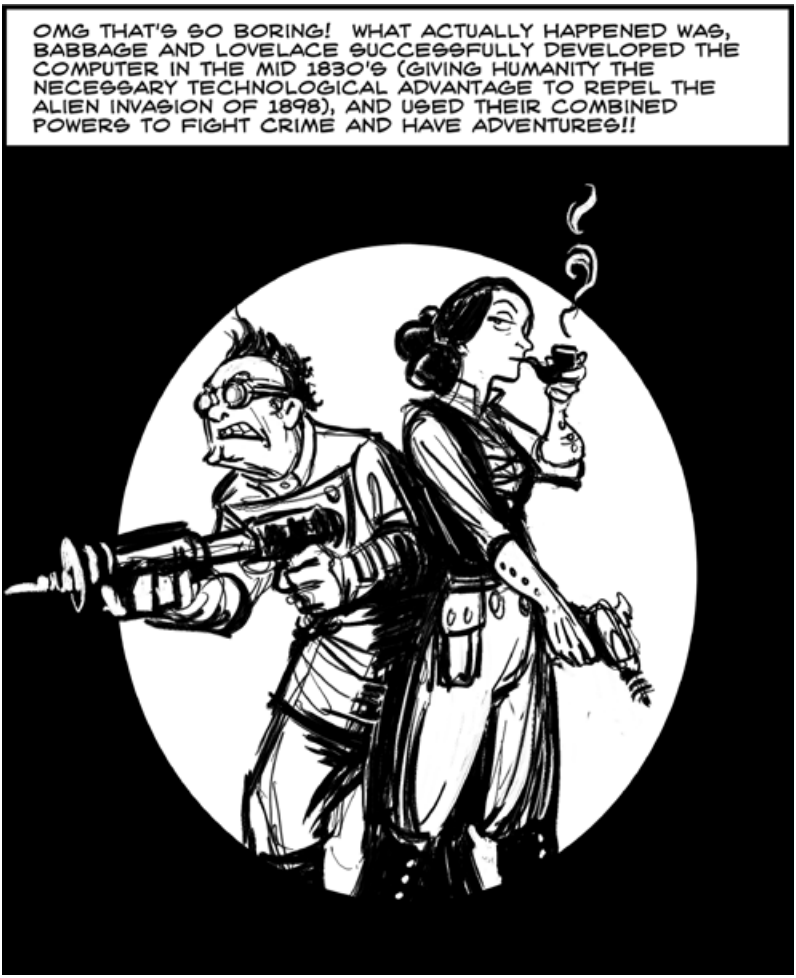
ADA LOVELACE THE ORIGIN!

BY SYDNEY PADUA

ADA'S MOTHER HIRED THE FINEST MATHEMATICIANS AND SCIENTISTS OF THE AGE TO TURN HER INTO A HUMAN CALCULATING MACHINE!!
MEANWHILE, IN HIS SECRET LABORATORY, CHARLES BABBAGE IS WORKING ON THE RADICAL NON-HUMAN CALCULATING MACHINE...
NO ONE HAS THE INTELLECT TO GRASP THE GENIUS OF MY DIFFERENCE ENGINE!!!
SHORT-SIGHTED FOOLS!!!
DIDN'T THEY GIVE YOU THAT HUGE GRANT THAT YOU THEN USED FOR A TOTALLY DIFFERENT MACHINE THAT YOU ALSO DIDN'T BUILD?
SILENCE, MINION!
THEN, AT A PARTY IN 1833, FATE INTERVENED...

NOBODY UNDERSTANDS ME...
ASTOUNDING!!
IN ENABLING MECHANISM TO COMBINE TOGETHER GENERAL SYMBOLS IN SUCCESSIONS OF UNLIMITED VARIETY AND EXTENT, A UNITING LINK IS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN THE OPERATIONS OF MATTER AND THE ABSTRACT MENTAL PROCESSES OF THE MOST ABSTRACT BRANCH OF MATHEMATICAL SCIENCE!!!
EH?!
A NEW, A VAST, AND A POWERFUL LANGUAGE IS DEVELOPED FOR THE FUTURE USE OF ANALYSIS, IN WHICH TO WIELD ITS TRUTHS SO THAT THESE MAY BECOME OF MORE SPEEDY AND ACCURATE PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR THE PURPOSES OF MANKIND THAN THE MEANS HITHERTO IN OUR POSSESSION HAVE RENDERED POSSIBLE!!
YES, YES EXACTLY!!
HEY LOOK, WE'RE PREGNENT FOR THE INVENTION OF THE GEEK.

THIS MUST BE TWITTERED!
WAIT, THIS IS A FAN.
SUDDENLY, THERE IS A GAPING HOLE IN MY LIFE OF WHICH I WAS HITHERTO UNAWARE.
IN COLLABORATION WITH BABBAGE, ADA PRODUCED, IN THEORY, THE FIRST COMPUTER PROGRAMME...
SOME SORT OF MATH THING FOR THE NEXT-GEN ANALYTICAL ENGINE WHICH I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
UNFORTUNATELY, ADA DIED AT ONLY AGE 36, AND BABBAGE NEVER DID BUILD ANY OF HIS CALCULATING ENGINES.
THE NEXT STEPS IN COMPUTING WERE NOT TAKEN UNTIL THE 1930'S. BABBAGE'S ENGINE WAS FINALLY BUILT IN 1991, YOU CAN SEE IT AT THE SCIENCE MUSEUM IN LONDON.


OMG THAT'S SO BORING! WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED WAS, BABBAGE AND LOVELACE SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPED THE COMPUTER IN THE MID 1830'S (GIVING HUMANITY THE NECESSARY TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE TO REPEL THE ALIEN INVASION OF 1898), AND USED THEIR COMBINED POWERS TO FIGHT CRIME AND HAVE ADVENTURES!!

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Getting Yourself On

Andrew N Tisbert

The note drifted to the floor when he opened his locker.

Vic reached between the bench and the lockers to pick it up, then smoothed the wrinkled paper against his thigh. It told him to call the nursery so they wouldn't send Daniel home at the end of the shift. It reminded him to save his pill. And it told him these things were important.

To him.

The note was in his handwriting.

He remembered sitting in his auto-kitchen early this morning, gazing out his portal screen at the tiny blaze of the sun amidst all that black, rubbing the pencil thoughtfully along the tattoos hooked across his face. But he felt no connection to the haggard middle-aged man who'd done it. He recognized himself as a fact among facts, without emotion. Along with the name of his ten-year-old son, along with the proper way to fit a vacuum suit, what it felt like to walk in point-five gee, how he'd crumpled the note and flattened it out again three times before finally slipping it into the pocket of his jumpsuit. So he understood that once he accessed his personality from its storage unit in the top of his locker, the message would take on a significance he simply didn't feel right now. And with himself on, he knew, there would also be fear.

He blinked his eyes and made the call. Then he grabbed his lunch and headed back to work.

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Dr. Nelson Kaunda hated living on Ceres. He hated the coarse, vulgar camaraderie of spacemen. He hated suiting up and air locks and gravity variations. He hated living inside a glorified cave.

It didn't matter that the sector was designed to feel like a miniature city. It didn't matter that the local recreation area had a rippling lake half a kilometer wide and palm trees and billowing soft ferns that waved mildly in the currents of the ventilation systems. It didn't matter that you could lie there on the beach on sand white as salt and listen to the children from the workers' nursery squealing

as they chased each other, with light that imitated the sun pretty damn well soaking your face. It didn't matter because you still knew you were in a cave, a series of man-made tunnels beehiving through a rock the size of Texas. Everything, even gravity, was counterfeit, and if you looked closely, the whole illusion disassembled. You were on a space station owned by a profit-hungry corporation in the middle of the asteroid belt. And you didn't fit in.

Kaunda rose from his desk and crossed to the bar. A shot of whiskey was what he needed. He poured, drank, picked at the bristling hair of one eyebrow. You spend half your life struggling for an education, to make a better life...for what? To get stuck pretending to care about these company men? His next appointment, Victor Sampers, was the same as all of them. Stupid, petty, desperate men who looked down on *him*.

And why? Because he didn't have implants? Because he didn't wear the company tattoos like a tribal badge on his face? It was funny, really. When companies had started using tattooed encryptions on their workers, the ACLU had been outraged. Now the laborers were damn proud of them. As if they enjoyed degrading themselves. Like how they called their Personality Safety Storage units "Piss."

There was a tap on the door. Kaunda decided to have another shot before he answered. It burned all the way down to his shaky, empty stomach. He shouldn't have worked through lunch. He was too busy. There was supposed to be one on-call psychiatrist for every forty employees using PSS units, and his caseload was almost eighty.

All he had to do was get through the last nine months of his contract and he'd be sailing back to Mars. Then who knew? Maybe he could save up enough money to return to Earth. At least on Mars you could actually hike up a mountain.

"Come in," he said.

Victor Sampers was a squat, frightened-looking man, his receding hairline accentuated by the thin gray wisps sticking straight up from the top of his head. The company logo covered his cheeks and forehead like two halves of a fish's skeleton and his auditory communication link was a garish septum ring—a pretty standard choice for the cyborgs. Kaunda wouldn't have needed to listen to his file to recognize his social anxiety disorder. With

secondary martyr complex, and a dose of chronic depression to go along with it.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Sampers." Kaunda crossed the office and shook the man's hand, too aware of his own duplicity in the dull glow of whiskey.

"Vic," the cyborg said, and didn't wait for Kaunda to offer a seat. "Call me Vic."

A streak of antisocial personality disorder in the mix as well? Kaunda watched him settle into the soft padding of the couch only to immediately shift to its edge and clasp a knee in tense, threaded fingers. No wonder these companies didn't want them operating equipment with their personalities on. Kaunda leaned against his desk and smiled down at the man. "Don't be nervous. You aren't in trouble."

Victor Sampers pushed his lips out and shrugged. He stuttered softly when he spoke. "Wh-why am I here? My checkup isn't until—"

"Yes, we might as well get right to the point. The fact is, we've noticed abnormalities."

"I...." It took about three seconds, but his pasty face flushed a deep red. Kaunda could feel the heat as the man started sweating.

"You haven't broken any rules. Yet. But the company likes to be proactive about these things. Mr. Sampers. You understand the personality safety storage system is for your own safety, don't you?"

"Piss? Of course."

"Then why are you trying to circumvent the system?"

Kaunda hadn't thought the man could get any redder. "Don't deny it, sir. Your foreman reports you've been writing yourself notes with your personality on."

Victor Sampers looked as if he'd been caught masturbating. For effect, Kaunda stared him down until he looked away. It didn't take long.

"Do you think you're special, Mr. Sampers? You'd rather leave yourself on, daydream on the job, take rash shortcuts, bring personal problems to work? Maybe even take out your frustrations on company equipment, or, worse, your co-workers? Hold emotional grudges against your foremen? They used to let people

like you come to shift with their personality on two generations ago. And look what happened then."

Vic opened his mouth, blinking.

"That's right. People got hurt. Or killed. Lost time on the job, higher maintenance costs. There's no difference between personality and disorder, Mr. Sampers; it's just a matter of degree. That's an outmoded concept, a myth, that was destroyed when we found a way to separate general personality—the GPD—from nominal mental functioning.

"Do you know, Mr. Sampers, what occurred when people started using the PSS technology?"

Victor Sampers just looked up at him, Adam's apple bobbing. Kaunda could have warmed his hands over the man's simmering resentment.

"There was immediately a seventy-eight-percent increase in production. A sixty-nine-percent decrease in maintenance cost. An eighty-percent decrease in staff turnover. And most importantly, there was a twelve-percent reduction in worker deaths and serious injuries. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Sampers looked sullenly aside, toward the wall where Kaunda's remote monitor and control systems for the PSS units blinked and blipped. "Uh, Piss is for my own good."

"That's right. 'Piss' is for your own good. And there are laws for their use to ensure *your* safety. That's why we're required by OSHA, the UN, and interplanetary treaty to provide them."

Sampers' right leg started bouncing. "So why don't *you* have a Piss?"

Sarcasm from this little man? The whiskey buzz helped Kaunda force down his rising irritation. Some careers simply required the lens of personality for efficiency, and were duly compensated for the risks. Like political office and the entertainment industry, psychiatric counseling fell into that category. Leave it to cyborg space-trash to question the legitimacy of Kaunda's PSS-exempt status. He let it pass.

"My suggestion to you, Mr. Sampers, is that you find a way to relax. A little fun is probably all you need. You have a son, don't you? Do something nice with him. Enjoy your personality and your off hours for a change. Isn't that concert tonight—that pop star the company is flying in for one show?"

"His name is Reginald."

"After the weekend, we'll schedule you for a complete workup, just to make sure nothing is wrong with your PSS mapping." Kaunda smiled. "We've got to cover all the bases, right?"

Hesitantly, Victor Sampers rose from the couch and stumbled for the door.

"And Victor," said Kaunda before the man could get away. "No more notes to yourself, okay?"

Victor Sampers did not meet his gaze. He just slithered out the door.

Dr. Kaunda tugged at an eyebrow as he rounded his desk and sat down. There could be something wrong with the man's mapping, he supposed. It was tricky business to capture and store a person's neurological pathways and genetic parameters. You had to segregate the areas in cerebral activity that signified and defined personality, the GPD, so the neural pathways they used could be inhibited. Any number of things could go wrong during the process. Really, it always surprised him there weren't more problems.

He sighed, and wondered how much his home town on Arizona Bay had changed since he was a boy.

- - -

It felt good to be surrounded by your posse, even when your agent sent you across space out past Mars to the middle of nowhere to do a show on a bloody asteroid. You could get through the time in the ship, and then the decontamination and the air lock. The obligatory administrative welcome. You could turn the most mundane activities into a party. That's what Reginald Farrow liked to do. That and sleep. He'd hibernated through three-quarters of the six-month journey out here. Now he was going to have some fun, one way or another.

The company had put the seven of them up in a suite of rooms overlooking the lake that served as the centerpiece of the workers' recreational park. It wasn't a bad view, really. There were a couple of sailboats out toward the middle, gliding lazily across blue and shimmering diamonds.

"You're ahead of your time, Reginald, that's the problem." His agent had come backstage after the show in Athens and perched his bony ass on Reginald's make-up counter. Reginald stared at the knots of vertebrae under his fishnet business suit in the mirror.

"What are you trying to tell me, Stein?" Somebody squealed behind him. There was laughter and affected applause. He stared at that knotted snake writhing as Stein shifted uncomfortably.

"Numbers are down, Reggie."

"Did you see the crowd? They were shaking when they left the auditorium, man. They could hardly walk."

The snake moved again. "Maybe that's the problem."

Maybe it was the excitement from performing. Reginald's stomach burned and he was trembling like his overwhelmed fans. He wanted to punch this scrawny agent punk right in his thin slit of a mouth.

"People aren't comfortable with field art. You blew up too fast, and now we're getting a backlash against us. Some people are afraid of the technology, you know, as if we're trying to get under their skin, control their thoughts—"

"That's horseshit, Stein, and you know it."

"I know it. You know it. But Middle America thinks the way you stimulate their kids is pornographic and dangerous. We need time away. Give the public a chance to catch up, to absorb your true message."

Reginald snorted. He looked up from the reflection of Stein's back to search his sharp cheekbones, the point of his cleanly-shaven chin, his overly-thickened eyelashes. "Just sit around and let the copycats steal my audience?"

"New Worlds Corporation has a contract for you. Fly out to Ceres, do an exclusive show for their contract cyborgs. They'll pay well, and people will see it as a charity gig. You'll be a hero, you'll be out of the Born-Again Christians' hair for a while, and, if we play the promotion right, you'll be twice as big as you are now when you get back."

"In a year."

"Consider it an investment."

Reginald looked in the mirror again. "How much are they paying?"

He had to admit, the money was exceptional. There must be some political angle New Worlds didn't want to talk about to warrant those figures. And so they'd made their way out into space.

Now Gruber, Stan, Kimmii, and Alice—his tech-crew foremen—sprawled across each other on one of the plush crimson

couches, laughing and tearing off their clothes. Deacon, his road manager, was already laying out some lines on a golden tea table. And Reginald stood in front of the transparent wall overlooking the lake with his field programmer, Indira. "Sailboats," he said. "Who can afford sailboats in space?"

"Probably a couple of their psychiatrists, or some administration bigwigs."

Reginald turned to her and let his eyes slowly take in the jiggling swell of breasts under her cotton tee shirt, her flat stomach, the rise of pubic bone behind her gray sweats. He loved her bluish-black skin, the almond shape of her eyes, the way her matted hair never seemed to belong to her. They had finally started sleeping together on the way to Ceres. Reginald was delighted.

He pointed to Deacon. "Listen, guys. We've got a show in about six hours. Don't get too ripped, you know? They're throwing a big after-party in the gardens on the roof—" He sensed Indira stiffening a little beside him. But he didn't stop. "Is all the gear stowed? What about my PSS library?"

Kimmii shoved Alice's black thigh off her head, giggling. They'd been trying to incite a wrestling match with the other two. "Your personalities are all set up in your bedroom, man."

"Reggie, ease up," Indira said softly.

It was no big thing, but his stomach dropped, almost the same feeling he got coming out of zero gee. That was the downside of having sex with his programmer. All of a sudden he was constantly going over everything she said, every expression she made, every blink and twitch, as if it were a secret code she was using to tell everyone but him how she *really* felt. He hated it.

But that was just his personality.

"I'm 'eased up' enough, considering that I'm traveling with half-a-billion dollars' worth of stored personalities. And what about my uncle? You know how important he is to me. If I want to make sure everything is squared away before everybody starts getting retarded, that's my prerogative." He'd raised his voice, and everyone stared at him. He glared right back at his techs, but thought he saw Indira roll her eyes in the corner of his vision.

Deacon sat on the carpet and crossed his legs. He held up his hands. "You're right, Reggie. We'll wait. No biggie. In fact, we should go down to the amphitheater to check on our crews

and make sure the sound and lighting and the sensory-interfacing guys are all okay."

Even though he felt guilty for yelling, even though he was queasy about Indira making faces behind his back, it felt good to show everybody who was boss. They'd been getting too familiar with him. And they didn't seem to appreciate all that he did for them: the money, the parties, the drugs, the personalities, the fame that spilled over from him onto them. Kimmii had been doing sound in a dirty Hollywood dive before he'd hired her. Stan and Gruber were has-been roadies for some aging has-been rap band suffering their final death throes in the Midwest. Alice had been homeless at a shelter in the marshes of Paris, for Christ's sake. They all owed him.

If Reginald held his head just right, he could pretend to still glare at all of them while he watched himself in the edge of the mirror that hung over the gold-plated dresser. His caramel skin was perfect, a creamy film over the ripples of muscular shoulder and chest—it was a trademark of his that he never wore a shirt. Seeing himself there, looking so in-charge and powerful, calmed and reassured him. He watched the tension in his neck dissipate as he relaxed.

Deacon had frozen, staring at nothing in the middle of the room. Alice was playfully poking his arm with a finger. "Hey, Deak. You all right?"

"Leave me alone, I'm reading." Without turning, he said, "You should have taken one of these optic sheaths when they asked, Reggie. They're transmitting directions to me. Every two-centimeter tile in every wall and ceiling and floor contains an accessible eye. It says the cyborgs have an even better interface, a whole eyeball thing, and their possible perspectives are almost endless; they will a perspective and the program finds it. There's auditory too, just this little earring...." He tugged at an earlobe. Reginald hadn't noticed the tiny stud there before.

"There's no one here I want to talk to," he said. Deacon shook his head as if he'd just said something stupid. Alice and Kimmii laughed.

It was good to be surrounded by your posse. Even when you had just spent six months together in a cigar box rushing through space and you kept thinking you wanted to kill them.

Reginald shrugged. The after-party would do them all good. They needed to let off pressure. And he would make sure it was... memorable. New personalities all around. He would have Deacon bring a couple dozen of his best nutjobs to the gardens on the roof. But not his uncle. That would stay here under lock and key.

What good was owning his uncle's personality, he wondered, when he hardly used him anymore? What he wanted was to be able to sit and talk with him, ask his advice, receive his sympathy. He missed his uncle. He didn't want to be him. He wanted to hang out with him.

- - -

It was almost a year now since Vic had met with the woman in personnel. He'd come in on his own time, which meant he'd had himself on. He'd wanted to feel and react. He'd thought it would allow him to be assertive.

"We've been over it, Mr. Sampers." He couldn't remember her face, other than to say she was an old woman, and it was hard to understand just why she was out here on an asteroid in the first place. What he did remember was the sweat trickling down his spine and getting slick underneath his bloated belly. He was nervous and afraid, and it made him mad.

"Th-there must be a way around it," he said.

"Your implants belong to the company. You signed the lease agreement on them to finance your life in space. Frankly, I don't understand your complaint. The company pays for everything: your room and board, the nursery, your child's education—"

"I don't care about that."

"Mr. Sampers, you can put money away at a discount toward ownership of your equipment. When it's paid for, you're free to go work anywhere you like."

Vic was starting to shake from deep inside his stomach and out to his fingertips. "By the time my lease is up my implants will be worn out and outdated. I'll be unemployable."

"Don't believe every projection you hear on the web, Mr. Sampers," she said. "But even if that were true, the company has re-up agreements that would offer you a bonus for initial signing along with free maintenance and upgrades. You can't lose."

It occurred to Vic now, as he ate a peanut-butter sandwich from the pay-as-you-go dispenser in his auto-kitchen, that he did remember another aspect of the woman's looks. Her eyes had

been huge, dull orbs, gray and steady. He could have screamed at her, jumped on her desk naked. He could have bitten her nose off. She wouldn't have wavered from the protocols of her job. It had been a mistake to go there with himself on, hoping to persuade her to help him. She was working. Any part of her he might appeal to had been in Piss.

He'd left the personnel office that day trembling on the edge of convulsions, more determined than ever to get his son off Ceres. Maybe his life was ruined, but Daniel deserved better. If the company couldn't be reasonable, then he would just have to figure out some other way. Vic was nothing, a middle-aged cyborg with no prospects, no education, and no self-respect. He would die before letting Daniel inherit that life.

Now the opportunity to save his son was before him and his hands were shaking.

Vic walked down the dark hall to his bedroom to change out of his jumpsuit. With the lamp by the door sending a wedge of amber across the floor, he paused in his underwear to inspect the collage covering the wall beside the tousled bed. He called it his Reggie Wall.

Daniel had started it. He was infatuated with the rich, privileged celebrities who glutted the web. People who never had to store their personalities away—indeed, they flaunted personality like some kind of fashion. Sometimes Vic couldn't tell if Daniel really loved those pop stars or if he just hated his father. There was a black derision all twisted up in Daniel's hero worship, a web of scorn hidden in his childish enthusiasm. Daniel had become old enough to feel cheated by his father's failure. The boy was careful never to direct any observations specifically toward Vic, but his attitude toward the company workers was clear. They were simple and used-up and beaten. They were chattels. Vic knew that the more clearly Daniel realized this, the more he resented his father. He made fun of their tattoos. He shunned the very mechanical devices the cyborgs wore with pride. Daniel's auditory communication device was no bull ring; it was a stud in his cheek you couldn't even see, as if he were ashamed of the simplest mechanical interface.

In the past, Vic had tried to talk about this with his psychiatrist. Kaunda had told him Daniel was young; he'd grow out of it and begin to understand the difference between the real world

and the fantasies of celebrity on the web. And when he turned sixteen and the company provided him with a full set of implants, he would realize how hard Vic had worked, how much he'd sacrificed for the boy, and Daniel could start his own career with the company with gratitude and respect. And if he still wanted to leave the company, well, he could start putting his money aside to buy out his lease, like any responsible young man. You'll be proud of him then, Kaunda had assured Vic, you'll see.

It was not what Vic wanted to hear. Sure, there were times when he resented his son's attitude. But he didn't want vindication. He just wanted Daniel to be happy, to have a chance at something more. There was no opportunity for his boy on Ceres.

When news of field art burst onto the web, it was all Daniel could talk about for months. And the center of it all was Reginald, the child actor turned dancer who became the first bona-fide pop field artist. Daniel was taken with Reginald's raw charisma, his supple, perfect body, his wild, uncompromising personality. Later, Vic became taken with him for entirely different reasons.

Vic scanned the stories and pictures he'd printed from the web. A review of Reginald's debut concert, articles on the controversy around field-art technology, pictures of Reginald performing, Reginald's impish smile. There were over a hundred Reginalds grinning away at Vic from the wall. But Vic didn't care about Reginald's image, or his art, or his money. What captured Vic's imagination was Reginald's hobby. He collected personalities.

Reginald held copyrights to, and owned copies of, nearly a thousand personalities, according to some websites. Even if that number was grossly inflated, Vic knew his library was one of the largest of its kind in the solar system. He was a junkie, and even though his doctors repeatedly warned him and other collectors that constantly imposing the Piss mapping of other people onto one's head caused serious damage that would eventually turn one's brain to Swiss cheese, he donned personality and pieces of personality—mixing and matching—the way others changed their clothes.

But there was one personality he wore only on the most special occasions—his most prized possession. Reginald's uncle had willed his personality to his favorite nephew before the boy turned thirteen. That was the Piss Vic had to steal.

Reginald's uncle had been a self-made billionaire, a man who had spent his childhood in poverty, the son of a Martian pig farmer.

He was wildly charismatic, close friend and confidante to great scientists, wealthy politicians, and beautiful movie stars. He was bright, funny, and talented. Thomas Farrow had beaten all odds to become the creator of field-art technology, a vital, dynamic man. It was just the type of novel personality that Daniel would need to escape the prison of life on Ceres. If Vic could get ahold of it and give it to his son, then anything was possible.

He'd been planning for this night for a long time.

But after his meeting with the doctor, he'd almost abandoned the whole scheme. Had Kaunda suspected something? It seemed like he'd been toying with him, with those comments about writing notes, lecturing him about Piss, then bringing up Daniel.... Do something with your son, he'd said. Vic had almost thrown up in the hall when he finally left the office. But no. If Kaunda knew what was on Vic's mind, he would have done a lot more than lecture and schedule a Monday-morning workup. Vic shook his head. This was going to be hard enough without letting his imagination run away with him.

His son glittered in his eye, then the image solidified. Vic had been dreading this.

Daniel, ten years old, eyes set like jade stones in the pale ivory of his skin, regarded Vic from his nursery dormitory. "You got yourself on yet?" he asked coldly. The boy hated talking to Vic when he didn't have himself on.

"Hello, son." Vic felt tension contract his throat.

"What's going on, Dad? Why'd you stick me here?"

"I'm sorry. Something came up." Yeah, he thought, something that will change your life. He wished he could say it, but he knew his son wouldn't understand. "Forgive me?"

"Yeah," the boy said reflexively. But he tucked his chin down and regarded his father with only one piercing eye. An awkward silence stretched on until he said, "But Dad. I thought you would bring me to the concert." He didn't lift his chin.

"Can't they bring you from the nursery?"

"They could," the boy said, "if I'd gotten on the field-trip list yesterday. Nobody knew my dad would call and stick me at the last minute."

Vic didn't know what to say.

"You know I love Reginald, Dad. Can't you come get me? We can go together. It would be—"

"I'm sorry, Daniel, no." Vic saw the beginnings of tears welling in his son's eyes.

The sobs began.

For a moment Vic considered. I could take him and leave him at the concert alone when I go to steal the Piss. But no, he knew it wouldn't work. He couldn't put his son in danger. "It's just not possible, son," he said sharply.

Daniel flinched as if he'd been slapped and Vic felt guilty immediately. Defensiveness followed, rising from his bowels like acid fire. "I'll call you later tonight."

"Don't bother," said Daniel. Tears streaked his face.

"Son...."

"I hate you! You're nothing! I hate you, you...fucking cyborg!"

Daniel's image was gone. There was just the ridiculous Reggie Wall in front of him.

Vic sagged to the bed and raked his thin hair back with both hands. He knew a lot of company workers, older men, who'd stopped putting their personalities on after work. When he asked them why, they could never really answer him. But Vic was beginning to understand. Somewhere inside them, some vestigial shadow of emotion told them it was too much bother. There was no point. Vic didn't feel alone when he was stored in his Piss.

He told himself Daniel would thank him someday. It didn't really help.

- - -

Dr. Kaunda was turning out the office lights when his optic sheath glimmered. He turned from the doorway, a little woozy from his last shot.

"Sorry to bother you, Doctor."

One of the cyborg foremen faced him in baggy coveralls, expression impossible to read beneath his tattoos. Just as well, thought Kaunda. The dullness of his eyes was enough indication he was still stored in his PSS.

"I was just leaving," Kaunda said.

"I've been requested to have you review the afternoon's control-room recordings for group fourteen."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"It's protocol, sir. Victor Sampers had some problems today." He said it as if reading from a cue card. "If you would just call up the last hour of his shift, it'll quickly become apparent, sir."

Dr. Kaunda glared around the room as he moved to his desk. He pulled out his chair and sagged into it. "We wouldn't want to break protocol, would we?" he said, tugging at his eyebrow.

"No, sir," said the foreman, ignoring, or unaware of, his sarcasm.

Sighing, Kaunda told his computer to run the recording. The foreman disintegrated and was replaced with Victor Sampers' control room.

Normally, watching cyborgs work amused Kaunda. They looked ridiculous as they twisted and turned and clawed the air in a silent dance, lost in their cybernetic senses and unaware of their flesh and blood. But Sampers had caused him enough trouble for one day, and Kaunda wanted to go home. His stomach burned and his head hurt and he just wanted to sleep.

It had been a busy afternoon for the cyborgs. They'd had lab supplies on their way to Europa, drilling equipment headed for Titan. They'd transferred water from Saturn's rings into Martian shuttles. The encryption beneath their tattoos gave them access to the company data feeds, and the cerebral and spinal implants let them manipulate the equipment in the vacuum of the port and docking areas.

Normally, they became immersed in that world, as if they were actually standing out there on the asteroid's surface, by the shuttles and interplanetary ships, with some kind of roving, disembodied vision, with an endless number of arms and legs and fingers.

But something was wrong with Sampers. He was distracted by the other cyborgs in the control room. He kept turning and looking at them. Then you could tell by the way he grimaced and jerked around that somewhere out on the surface he was dropping cargo, tripping over storage modules. Kaunda wondered how the man had made it through the day. It was as if he were working without his hyper-feel.

Kaunda tugged even harder at his brow. Why would anyone try to work without his pills? Hyper-feel enhanced your kinesthetic sense and allowed you to lose yourself in your bodily extensions.

With the pill, you felt you had arms that reached out beyond your body.

He swallowed hard, and actually felt a wave of nausea. Should he do something about this now? He'd heard stories of employees who saved up doses to take them all at once in an attempt to deepen their access into company systems. Something about the higher dose enabled a small percentage of individuals to don multiple systems like well-tailored suits on their virtual bodies—even subsuming new access codes within their kinesthetic perception, rendering them malleable by feel. The problem was that an overdose of that magnitude was often fatal. Kaunda had never personally seen anyone try it. And Sampers just didn't fit the profile. No, Kaunda thought, wait until Monday. There was no sense in alarming the company for nothing. He'd gotten probation the last time that happened. Ended up adding an extra month to his contract.

He shrugged and headed for the door. First the letters, and now this. Victor Sampers was a pain in the ass.

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The amphitheater faced down toward a stage directly on the edge of the lake. Night-phase lighting had switched on, and lanterns glimmered off the waves that lapped the shore. The company visitors' hotel was a block away and limo shuttles had brought Reginald's techs backstage first so they could go over the equipment settings and Indira could make sure her programming was properly installed. Company security cyborgs brought Reginald backstage later, when the amphitheater was filling with the excitement and sounds of about a thousand people finding their seats.

Standing in the dark beside Indira, Reginald looked out on the stage. You couldn't see the field he would dance in, of course, but he'd always thought he could sense the slightest shimmering there. Indira said it was his imagination. If anyone knew it would be her. Reginald had never bothered to get a grasp on the technology involved. He knew that he danced in the middle of some kind of energy field. Indira programmed the field so that each movement he made triggered a specific function. The programming could be sensitive enough to register a twitch or bead of sweat, or it could be programmed to recognize only certain lucid patterns. Through the field, Reginald's movements were transformed into strings of sensory input. His motion could be translated as music, or

language, or visual hallucination. He could trigger aromas, tastes, even tactile and other physiological experiences—or any combination. It all depended on the interaction of his choreography and Indira's programming.

When they composed together, Indira always told him to think of any sensory modality within the framework of a musical scale. After all, she would say, all things can be broken down into a mathematical progression. He had to admit she understood what was going on a lot better than he did, but he wasn't willing to agree with his critics, who said programmers like Indira were the real artists, not the spoiled, beautiful celebrities who hired them.

The audience sat in a similar field, except that theirs was receptive, allowing them to experience sensory data as if it were their own. The experience, by all reports, could be overwhelming.

Some company administrator whose name Reginald couldn't remember had walked onstage to introduce him. Watching from the side, the lights blazing in front of him, Reginald reached for Indira's hand. At first he thought she tried to move away. Then he was almost startled when she grasped his fingers and gave them a squeeze. "Have a good show," she whispered and he smiled.

Then he couldn't hear anything except the tidal roar of the welcoming crowd that shook through his body as he stepped out onto the stage. The lights blinded him and he was aware of the crowd beyond as one ferocious animal, more an idea than a reality. He stood in the center of the stage and pulled off his robe to stand naked and wait for the quiet to come.

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The concert was Vic's alibi. He had planned to head to the restroom halfway through the show, take the doses of hyper-feel he'd saved, and sneak out to the hotel. That would give him plenty of time to do what he had to do. But when the time came, he almost didn't leave his seat.

Being in the receptor field was a lot like working in the control room. The silent, unmoving spectators in the dark all around you became unreal, dust in the periphery, while every move Reginald made stirred sensations that passed right through you. There was music, unbelievable music that soared and ached with each turn of Reginald's sweat-glistened forearm, each twitch of a golden thigh. Reginald was the avatar of almighty God. All sensation came through his perfectly-muscled, beautiful body.

As Vic watched him dance, he was filled with a soft, aching love that ebbed and flowed like an ocean, overwhelming him. All he could do was float there in its plastic grasp, lost. Waves of emotion and visceral feeling rose and crashed in him. He smelled lilac, he felt the firm press of a lover's breasts against his chest, he was deeply aroused, and it all emanated from Reginald, from God, moving there in the center of the glaring lights. The more deeply Vic fell into this reality, the more there was to feel. And see. Reginald's arms, his twisting body, were interlaced with visions. Vic could see angels, flying sadly across the myriad cities of Earth. There was New York before the floods, Istanbul, Khartoum. He tried to stop the visions. Wasn't there something he had to do? Didn't he have to be somewhere?

It was guilt that broke Vic from the concert's spell. His son would have loved this, he thought. He would have been carried away in glory. And he wasn't here—because of Vic. A familiar sinking feeling came to him, and he clutched at it. It became his elevator down to the real world around him. He shook his head violently as he started to see the crowd around him again. Then he forced his shaking legs to take him up the stairs in the aisle and out toward the restrooms.

When he got to the hotel, he crouched behind a stand of ferns lining the sidewalk that led to the entrance. Two company security officers chatted idly inside the lobby, occasionally looking through the revolving doors toward the concert. You had to be in the receptor field to hear anything from the amphitheater, but an orange glow was visible over the trees along the street, and occasionally there was a burst of noise from the crowd.

Vic's pills were kicking in and he was still shaken from the receptor field. He couldn't tell if it was the drug or an aftereffect from the show that made the air shimmer as if it had come alive, as if he'd never really seen the world's true nature before.

He filled up with a sensation of great, euphoric power. He looked at his arms, flexed them. It felt as if he could reach out across the whole sector, the whole asteroid, out into freezing space, with those arms. He let his visual perspective wander. He floated behind the guards to look at himself hiding, barely making himself out in the shadows. He passed through the revolving doors and into the bright gold light of the lobby, lingering over the fat blue couches, the polished-stone fountain that bubbled beneath a glit-

tering chandelier, the bored worker behind the check-in counter; he counted the security workers at the back entrances, the rear elevators, the mezzanine. He flew from floor to floor, up to the circular roof, where company workers had set up tables of steaming food and a sound system with hidden speakers strewn through the trees and bushes. A fake stream rippled and wound through mossy rocks, ferns, and willow trees. In the center stood a dance floor, and he hovered over the steaming pool surrounded by hyacinths and lilies beside it. With the high wall circling the edge of the roof, Vic was surprised at the number of areas that couldn't be seen through the visual system. He passed down through the ceiling into what had to be Reginald's suite on the top floor: litter-strewn luxury, transparent wall overlooking the lake and the amphitheater, a massive bedroom crammed with stacks of Piss units whose green lights blinked, winking right at Vic.

He smiled. For the first time, he let himself truly believe his plan would work. Actually, it looked *too* easy.

With those massive, infinite arms, he reached out to the rear of the hotel, unlocked and opened every door he could find, sent service elevators rising and falling and rising again. Caterers couldn't get to the roof from the kitchens. Security guards went scurrying. The two guards in the lobby stared into the air, apparently getting orders from their superiors through their eye implants.

Vic waited.

Security in the back would suspect some kind of glitch in the system. There would be a lull in activity while techs looked it over. Then he would start the front elevator bouncing, just around the corner from the lobby counter. The stupid cyborgs in the front would check it out.

It all worked perfectly. Vic got to the stairs without being seen. He closed the eyes in tiles around him as he went, laughing as he climbed. Reginald as the avatar of God? He was nothing with his little dance, nothing compared to Vic.

When he reached Reginald's suite, Vic unlocked the entrance with his imagined hands and went inside. Reginald and his people had left lights on all through the place. The air smelled like opium. There were couch cushions thrown on the floor, dirty plates on the table by the glass wall, empty bottles everywhere. Vic already knew which door led into Reginald's bedroom, and he didn't hesitate.

Against the far wall by the enormous canopied bed were the stacks of black Piss units. There were little bits of white tape on the top edge of each where Reginald had labeled them with a red marker. Some had names Vic recognized, some were just numbered. In the far right corner he found what he wanted, marked simply "Uncle." Slowly, reverently, he put his hands—his real hands—on it. Then he froze.

There had been a sound in the hallway. He looked.

A company guard was there, an extra finger—his gun—attached to one hand. For a moment Vic remembered how serious his offense was. This big, thick man could shoot and kill him if he wanted to.

Vic pulled his hands from the unit. The guard was apparently considering whether or not it was necessary to go inside Reginald's suite. All right, Vic thought. They were conducting a sweep of the building because of the "glitch" that had throbbed through the elevators and doors and blinked so many eyes closed. He should have thought of that; it was a reasonable protocol. But they didn't really think there was an intruder. The guard would move on, since everything was quiet now and it was more important that the company not invade the privacy of their guests. Still, Vic was glad he had shut the eyes surrounding him in the bedroom.

The guard nodded at the door, unlocking it.

Vic forced himself not to bolt. He felt his heart pumping great slugs of blood to his fingertips. He eased himself to his knees, a palm sinking into the thick carpet.

Nervously, he sent his vision through the hotel again. Guards walked the halls on at least seven floors. The two in the lobby were relaxed—at least they suspected nothing. They looked to the front doors, smiling and nodding as men in black suits and women in scanty evening gowns began to file in. Scientists, dignitaries, administrators, company liaisons, and public-relations officers. Vic had taken too long; people were arriving for the party. Now it would be harder to get out of the building.

Voices in the other room brought his vision back to the suite. Scanning the mess, the guard had called up one of his co-workers. Vic's hand clutched at the carpet.

"Can you see in the bedroom?" the man asked, then listened. "That's odd," he said. "We've gotten eye service back everywhere else. Wait, let me localize the area and do a search." There was

silence that stretched on through four slow breaths. "I thought so. The light is dim, but I can see a forearm, a hand in the carpet, the edge of the bed...."

Vic realized in horror the guard was looking through his eye. He hadn't even known that was possible. He started shaking. It's over, he thought, done. Betrayed by my own eye. And I've betrayed my son. Daniel....

As the guard stepped into the bedroom, extra finger raised, Vic felt tears stinging the eye that was still tissue.

- - -

Dr. Kaunda sat up in the darkness, light flickering in the optic sheath in his left eye. "Yes, yes. I'm awake," he said.

A security guard regarded him. "You mind turning on a light, Doctor? I can hardly see you."

"Of course." He swept an arm across the nightstand, found the light. "Now why the hell are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

"I'm just following procedure, sir. A man on your caseload has gotten himself into a little trouble, a Victor Sampers."

"Sampers? What's he done now?"

"I'm supposed to request you come out on his behalf while we sort things out here, sir."

Kaunda frowned, and his stomach started burning. God knows, if it's serious they'll try to blame me, he thought, as if it's my fault they can't function. It's somebody's fault, all right, but they're a lot higher on the food chain than I am.

"I've notified my central control, Doctor, and I've also called Reginald's road manager down, to see how he would like to deal with the situation."

Reginald? If the pop star was involved, the public relations people would definitely be looking for a couple of good scapegoats.

"I've taken the liberty to send a shuttle out for you already, sir."

"What? Oh. Of course. I'll be here." Kaunda cursed quietly. He smelled crucifixion in the air.

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Vic sat on the couch staring up at the guard. He still felt the presence of God in him, still felt as if he could fly, as if his arms

could reach across the stars, but he had no idea what to do with that power. He balanced his elbows on his thighs and swept back the thin hair on the top of his head. Reginald's road manager was there too, pacing angrily from the couch to the glass wall and back again, spitting impudently on the floor.

"What was this man doing in Reggie's bedroom? What kind of place is this? How the hell did he get in here?"

"Mr. Deacon," said the guard. "It would be helpful if everyone stayed calm. The psychiatrist is on his way. When he's here to represent this man, we can discuss how you want us to deal with the situation."

Deacon stopped and clenched a fist. "I can tell you how to deal with the 'situation' right now. It's an outrage. Reggie may very well sue the company for this affront. This...this *cyborg*—" two fingers escaped his fist and he jabbed them at Vic "—was here to steal Reggie's PSS library. There's no other explanation. Do you realize what that's worth?"

Vic hated this haughty banty rooster of a man. He was a spoiled child. He had never had to work a day in his whole pampered life. Vic would have liked to show him what life was like for him. Vic would make him see....

Make him see.

The guard had called Deacon here through the company communication system. That meant he had an optic sheath.

Vic's shoulders tensed as a plan came to him. The guard was used to dealing with company workers, people who were aware of their own impotence. His attention was clearly on Deacon, a man he perceived as vibrant, assertive, powerful. Vic had nothing to lose, and he was not going to give up on Daniel's future, not yet.

He used his dominant eye to look beside himself without turning. There was a lamp there by the couch, a bit of a stretch away, with a heavy glass base. He noted its position, and the distance to the security guard. Euphoria surged through him again as he reached through imagined space and hurled every visual perspective he could scoop into his imagined hand at the road manager's optic sheath. He hurled a hundred eyes at Deacon, then gathered up a hundred more and threw them too.

Deacon choked and stumbled backward as uncountable visions bombarded him. His hands flew up. "Whoa," he said. "Wait a minute." He tripped, falling on his back.

Startled, the guard turned and reached for the man. "Are you all right, Mr. D—"

Vic swept up the lamp. There was a spark, a pop, and the light went out as he swung the heavy glass base at the security guard's temple. The impact hardly made a sound, just a sickening little thud that felt a little like hitting a softball. The guard sprawled face-down on the carpet, blood already spreading like a halo around his head. It was intense, queasy fear that made Vic raise the lamp again and let it swing down on the already-motionless head. This time he felt more of an impact, a slight bounce.

Deacon sat up, confused and not really seeing what was happening around him. Vic hit him with the lamp, too. There was that thud again, and the road manager fell unconscious.

Vic dropped the lamp, an almost orange smear of blood across its glass. He knew he hadn't hit Deacon nearly as hard as the guard. Reginald's man would be fine, maybe have a headache tomorrow. But the security guard—that was a different matter. Vic found himself gasping for breath, shaking with terror that he might have killed him. He wished he didn't have himself on. He suspected he could kill a million men if his personality was in Piss and never twitch, never blink an eye.

There was no way he could make it down the stairs. Security knew he was here; probably they'd seen what had just happened. He really only had one chance. He would have to go up. Vic knelt beside the guard and began trying to work the limp body out of its uniform. If he pretended to be security himself, maybe he could convince Reginald that the company had the intruder in custody. Reginald wouldn't want his party disrupted, and maybe he could get security to stand down enough for Vic to get away. Vic knew it was an absurd plan, but it was the only hope he had.

He struggled with the limp body, but gave up on taking anything but the guard's uniform jacket. His own plain-colored pants and shirt would have to do. He glanced at himself in the mirror that was hanging over a gold-plated dresser; took in his tattoos, the ring in his nose, his hair standing on end.

He couldn't do this alone.

Focus, he thought. Don't stop moving. Don't start thinking. Do it for Daniel, for your son. He took a deep breath, ran into the bedroom, and grabbed the Piss marked "Uncle."

The personality would have to overlay his own; he had no way of storing his. They say doing that kind of thing shreds your brain, he thought as he jogged out of the suite. His heart stuttered and an ache pulsed down his arm, either from the hyper-feel overdose or a fresh eruption of terror. He had no idea how he would make this work.

Don't think; keep moving, he thought. Do it for your son. Focus.

- - -

Reginald sat on what amounted to a throne for the guest of honor, with gold arms and thick purple cushions. The dance music was too loud, an aggressive, dated tribal beat, all make-believe drums and bass punctuated with bright slices of electronic keyboards. Multicolored lasers split the air and occasionally all motion around him stuttered as strobe lights kicked on.

Alice and Stan had swapped personalities already, and they stood in the pool laughing like hyenas, their soaked clothes stuck to their steaming bodies. Alice had a nosebleed; they were exchanging vicious punches with glee.

Various company couples were on the dance floor beyond the pool and the flowers, but mostly the Ceres inhabitants were lined up at the long tables of food, sipping their wine and watching Reginald's people as if they were an interesting exhibit at the zoo. Reginald had let the backstage crew attend tonight, and they were putting on a good show for the locals, drinking voraciously, throwing food at each other, hanging from trees, or just howling up at the fake black sky. Kimmii had made her way to a clot of obviously-important administrators and their wives. She was ranting wildly, arms flailing. At first Reginald thought she was angry at them, then he realized she was having an animated conversation with someone who wasn't there. The men and women around her looked vaguely embarrassed and more than a little confused. It was probably PSS Number Seven, Reginald thought, a paranoid-schizophrenic mapping that obsessed Kimmii. She always said Number Seven was better than dropping acid. She screamed, and then giggled. Reginald had lost track of Gruber; he was probably off in the shadows trying to impress the youngest girl he could find.

Reginald knew he should join the party, but a blanket of deep sadness had drifted over him. It was partly, he knew, just the letdown from the intense high of performance. But when he tried

to shrug it away, he gulped for air as if he were drowning. Indira was mingling with, well, everyone but him. She was by the elevator doorway right now, smiling as she listened to some company PR woman tell her a story. She had taken off her blouse and wore only a pair of very tight, very high shorts. Reginald watched, feeling intensely jealous, as she shook her matted hair back, teeth shining. The Ceres woman reached out and, perhaps accidentally, brushed a hand over one of Indira's dark breasts.

Reginald tried not to imagine what they were talking about. Indira glanced his way and an unpleasant look crossed her face for an instant. Reginald turned away and wondered what his uncle would do. Uncle Tom was bright and funny and talented. He would know how to handle this.

Indira hadn't put her personality in PSS and taken on another one. What she had done was cut and paste, adding aspects of a stored mapping to pieces of her own. It was a way to take on a part of a personality without losing yourself. So while she got a vacation from herself, it was impossible for Reginald to know for sure what behavior belonged to her and what was an aspect of someone else's canned responses. That's what made him craziest right now. Was it Indira snubbing him, or was it the carefree party girl she'd injected into her head like a drug?

It wasn't that he didn't sympathize with her need to escape herself for a while, and to escape him. He did it more than anyone he knew. He understood how frustrated she was by the lack of respect she got from the fans. It was hard to watch the adulation he received every night from the crowd when it was her work that made it all possible. It must be hard for her not to hate him. And he couldn't help it; he loved the way people treated him. He was sure that made it even worse.

But all this resentment hadn't been apparent to him until they'd started screwing. He didn't understand that and he didn't know how to deal with it. What *would* his uncle do? Reginald was of a mind to send Deacon downstairs for Uncle's PSS. But he'd lost track of his road manager.

The elevator opened and a security guard brushed past Indira. Reginald wouldn't have given him a second thought except he looked so scared. He was sweating and he glanced quickly from side to side as he moved away from the door. The strobes came on again

and the guard appeared suspended in time and space, even as he came closer to Reginald.

Reginald still didn't really want to don his uncle's personality. He wanted to solve his own problems, not hide behind someone else's personality.

The guard had obviously spotted Reginald and was headed toward him, across the footbridge that spanned the stream, across the dance floor, through the ferns and flowers. Reginald rolled his eyes, wanting to be left alone. He'd grasped the arms of his chair to rise when he noticed the PSS tucked under the man's arm.

"Mr. Farrow," the guard yelled over the music.

Reginald leaned forward. "What? I can barely hear you—"

"Mr. Farrow. We need to talk."

"That PSS belongs to me, doesn't it?"

"That's what I need to speak with you about."

Reginald sighed. He watched Indira over the guard's shoulder. She was headed toward the tables, laughing at something a tall man in a maroon frontless tuxedo had said. "I suppose we could head down to my rooms for a minute."

Yes, the guard was very scared. His head jerked around as if to find somewhere else to go, then he combed back his hair with both hands. "It w-won't take long, sir. I can hear you all right."

Watching Indira, Reginald shrugged. "All right. You mind telling me why you've got my uncle?"

"The intruder."

"What intruder?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't know what?" Reginald hollered.

"Th-there was an intruder, Mr. Farrow. He tried to steal your uncle. He's been captured and they've taken him away, so you don't have anything to worry about."

"If I don't have anything to worry about, why are you even telling me now?"

The guard blinked and swallowed, hard. Reginald couldn't see Indira now and just wanted the man to leave his uncle's PSS and go away.

"I saw the man, and he was clearly just a worker who had gone a bit nuts, clearly acting on his own. My idiot boss wants there to be a full sweep and if that happens your party is going to

be shut right down. I tried to tell him the administration will be mad at him if he does it, but he won't listen to me."

Reginald stopped searching the crowd and studied the man. There was something familiar about him. Something likeable under the fear. "What do you want me to do?"

"Call security and tell them you want them to relax. Tell them they're disturbing you and the rest of the guests and they need to back off."

Like him or not, this is ridiculous, Reginald thought. Can't they do anything right on Ceres? "I suppose I can do that," he yelled. "I don't have a communications implant.... Will my phone work?"

As Reginald reached into his pocket, the guard nodded, a profound relief spreading across his face, and the sense of familiarity grew. Reginald paused. The man's story didn't really make any sense, and he had no idea what he would tell security. Then again, he didn't really care, either, just wanted the man to leave him alone. He thought he saw Indira on the other side of the pool and considered just walking right up to her and asking her to dance. Then again, he wasn't sure he was ready for rejection.

"Is there a code I need to dial, or what?" The elevator doors opened again, and another guard stepped onto the roof with a dark-skinned man dressed in a rumpled smoking jacket. "Then again, why don't I just talk to your friends behind you?"

The guard turned slowly and Reginald could tell he paled, even in the inconstant lighting. Turning again, he put a hand on Reginald's shoulder and leaned close to his ear.

"You've got to help me," he said firmly, almost belligerently. Something in his tone made Reginald pause again.

"Uncle?"

He looked at the PSS unit. Rage started to trickle into his stomach.

"Yeah. Mixed with me. You can have him back. I'm sorry. There was nothing else I could do and I need your help. Please."

"Let's just call your friends over and we'll—"

"You don't want to do that. The one in the jacket's my psychiatrist. He'll take me into custody and put me through tests to determine the exact neuro-paths of our personalities before they let you get your uncle back. I'm a cyborg; they own me. And this new personality needs to be studied carefully before they'll jeop-

ardize their investment pulling it out of the tangle that's become my head. It'll be weeks before you get your uncle back, if you get him back in one piece at all."

Reginald frowned. Was that true? Ceres *was* out in the wild frontier....

"Come on, Reggie. Just hear me out. They'll still be there after that."

Reginald almost laughed. Was he being played by his own uncle? "Come to the back with me," he whispered into the man's ear. "I'll let you explain yourself."

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They moved away from the lights and the music through damp underbrush, their faces whipped by hanging branches. By the time Reginald stopped and turned to Vic, it was so dark his motion was a suggestion, a flitter of shadows beneath shadows, and the noise from the party was only a dull tangle of impressions. They stood under the arching branch of a willow tree. Vic couldn't see the wall at the roof's edge through the underbrush. There weren't any tiles here to see with, he realized. He switched to night-enhancement in his dominant eye, and the greenish image of the pop star radiated in front of him. The man's eyes glowed.

"Thank you," said Vic. Reginald was leering at him; that glowed too. An acid bitterness stirred as he realized Reginald wasn't being nice. He'd given Vic this respite out of boredom or worry over his precious uncle's Piss or something else equally unrelated to Vic. Swallowing the feeling down, he thought of Daniel. He had failed his son and now he skulked in the darkness, pathetically trying to bargain an unimaginable escape. His head was starting to ache and he had to concentrate to keep his vision in focus. "Thank you," he said again. He was having trouble keeping his thoughts straight.

"All right, that's enough. You've got a lot of nerve, I'll give you that."

"All I ever wanted was a future for my son," Vic blurted.

"And you do this by getting yourself arrested?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Oh no?"

Vic searched Reginald's face. The smile had gone. Was he curious, empathetic, just playing games? Or was this how polite society expressed anger? "You're entitled. You can go anywhere

you like and no one can tell you what to do. You can buy whatever you need: a mansion, a shuttle, an education—"

"Doesn't the company provide you with all you need?"

Vic snorted. "You run around here wearing personalities like they're colorful suits, not a care in the world. I have to put mine in storage for most of the day. My son hates me like that. He's lost all respect for me because I'm stuck here on Ceres and there's nothing I can do about it. I've got to pay for my son's keep out here. You get to the point where there just isn't that much difference, you know, between the you at work with your head in the Piss and the you at home so drained and beaten you start to wonder why you bother getting yourself on anymore in the first place."

A throbbing pain shot down Vic's arm. He tried to shake the tension out of it; his vision was blurring even more. Was it the hyper-feel? he thought. Was he going to have a goddamn heart attack? Shit. Just hang on. He could never explain himself like this without the influence of Reginald's uncle. He had to keep talking. He had to convince him before he ran out of time.

"So why are you in space at all, if it's so bad?"

Vic gasped for breath. "As a young man, you know, I was part of that whole generation that was told the new frontier is out in space. Martian terraforming was going strong. There were the new communities on the moon, huge expeditions to Saturn, Jupiter, mining opportunities.... Join the people who are taming space, they said. I wanted to...."

Vic shook his arm again. Reginald's forehead wrinkled in concentration. He looked like he was staring at one of those three-dimensional puzzles that reveal a secret picture if you hold your focus just right.

"I dreamed of standing on Titan with the glittering arch of Saturn's rings over my head, of looking up from a smooth plain on Io to the bloated presence of Jupiter, its great red eye staring back down at me. We put everything on the line to ship out. Companies were buying land and development rights up like candy. We wanted a piece of it and we signed the contracts that gave us the opportunity to get into space, and by the time we figured out we'd sold our souls it was too late; we owed so much back it would take a lifetime to get clear of it all. I don't blame my wife for abandoning me anymore. She had family that put up all their property to bring her back to Earth. The courts gave me custody of Daniel, my son,

because I was the responsible one, I had a job; I was steady and stable, a good citizen. I only wish now she had taken him. But she just wanted out, at any price."

Had it really been like that? Vic wondered. His own words felt so foreign to him. Focus, he thought. The pain was sharper now. His chest was heavy. Do it for Daniel.

"So you're a failure, and your son doesn't respect you. Did you honestly think that stealing someone else's personality would make your boy think more highly of you?"

Vic blinked. "You don't understand. It's not for me—"

In the distance, the music stopped. Excited voices yelled in confusion. Then floodlights came on from the walls, sending black swaths and flutters of shadow skittering all around them.

Vic heard Dr. Kaunda's voice behind him.

"He's right there, for Christ's sake!"

Before he could turn, something collided with his shoulder and he was spinning to the ground. Then there was a knee in his back and a guard's menacing finger by his cheek. He tried to lift his face out of the moss and dirt, managed to twist his neck enough to see Reginald.

The pop star was bellowing at the guard restraining Vic, waving his hands wildly. "Take it easy," he was saying. "That's my uncle! Give him a break!"

"Don't worry about it," Vic whispered.

Reginald bent down to look at him. "If my uncle wasn't for you, then who was it for?"

"You're not too smart, are you, Reginald?" Vic had great godlike arms that could reach into space. They flailed somewhere outside him and only made him feel even more helpless. "I wanted it for my son. So that he could be somebody that mattered...."

He heard Dr. Kaunda again, telling Reginald to back away, things were well in hand. He watched as understanding dawned on Reginald's face. Another guard's feet shifted in the dirt beside Vic's head. The pop star straightened, taking a step backward, then started to laugh, blowing out huge gusts of wind. All the bitterness Vic had felt over the last few years percolated and seared through him, overflowing into the soil around him.

"Please, Mr. Farrow," said Kaunda. "We have things under control, sir. Please step back."

Reginald stepped forward again and bent to face Vic. "Now it's you who doesn't understand. You see, I would do that, let your son take on my uncle. It would be like bringing him back to life. It'd be fun. And weird, talking to a little boy and getting my uncle's thoughts! I mean, you're right about me. I do whatever I want. I would sign the papers tonight and take the boy with us when we leave, if that's what you wanted.

"But not now. Not after you invaded my privacy, tried to steal my uncle, and dumped him into your own mixed-up head, you stupid fuck."

The acid that filled Vic mixed with the pain and heaviness in his chest. Exhaustion overcame him. He couldn't move.

"Mr. Farrow!" said Kaunda again. "Please move away from the prisoner."

And then, "The son of a bitch is having a heart attack."

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Don't die, you miserable piece of shit, thought Kaunda as he pushed on Victor Sampers' chest. A crowd was gathering around them that included the most beautiful woman Kaunda had ever seen wearing nothing but a tight stretch of shorts. He almost stopped pumping as she hooked one of Reginald's arms in hers, the soft edge of one breast brushing against the pop star's bicep.

"That's my uncle," Reginald yelled. "You better not let him die or I'll sue this place back to the Stone Age."

"It's under control, Mr. Farrow." One of the security guards knelt beside him and started emergency breathing. Kaunda nodded to him gratefully. I am so incredibly dead if this man dies, he thought over and over again as the crowd began to murmur. He could hear Reginald explaining what had happened in a loud, excited voice.

"Come on, Sampers." He stopped and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Indira?"

"This isn't about you, Reggie," said the woman, raising her voice to talk above the growing crowd. "Don't you get it? This guy killed himself for his kid."

Please don't be killed, Kaunda thought. How am I going to explain this? The guy went on a rampage, stole a personality, maybe killed a guard. He's got to be stoned to the gills with hyper-feel. And I'd been warned. The company had brought him to my attention.

"What do you want me to do about it?" said Reginald.

"For one thing, stop acting like you've been so bereaved."

Kaunda pushed the guard out of his way and started breathing into Sampers himself. "You are not going to die," he said between breaths. "You are. Not. Going to. Die."

"What if the transfer damaged my uncle, Indira, huh? He put the whole thing in a full head."

The woman didn't respond verbally, but Reginald's tone changed. "Okay. You're right, Indira. I'm being selfish."

"It's always about you, isn't it? No matter what, it's always about the great Reginald Farrow!"

"Look, I said I was sorry!"

Kaunda couldn't believe it. There was a man dying at their feet and they were having a domestic quarrel.

"Maybe you should do what he wanted."

"What?"

"Maybe you should honor the guy's last wish. You're always complaining about wanting your uncle around, how much you miss him. Think about it. It would take well because of the plasticity of the boy's brain, right? And you had a parent willing to grant permission for it. And we're out here in the middle of nowhere. We could avoid all kinds of red tape."

"Maybe I should," said Reginald thoughtfully. "Maybe I should."

"Breathe, Sampers!" Kaunda said.

"What do you think, Deak? Gruber? I mean, it would be kind of cool, wouldn't it?"

Before long the crowd was clapping and chanting. "Back to life. Back to life." They weren't talking about Sampers.

Kaunda gritted his teeth. First get the cyborg to breathe. Then maybe he could discuss transferring the uncle into the boy, working out the regulations. If he could show these idiots that he was their ally, maybe they wouldn't press charges. Maybe Dr. Nelson Kaunda could end up saving his own ass *and* playing the hero in all of this.

The guard who'd helped him touched Kaunda's shoulder. "I think he's gone," he said.

Kaunda wanted to throw up. He felt as if he were sinking into the roof. Goodbye freedom. Goodbye Mars. "No," he said.

"Yes, Doctor. You did all you could. My report will show—"

Kaunda shook his head and hammered against his patient's chest with renewed fury. No way was he going to let this cyborg die. No way was he going down with Victor Sampers.

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Vic's son glittered in his eye. Then the image solidified and Daniel, eyes set like jade stones in the freckled glow of his skin, regarded Vic from a sunny patio somewhere on Earth. "You got yourself on?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," he said, and the boy grinned.

"Congratulations, Dad. You made it through your sentence."

The security guard had lived, and the charge had been reduced to assault and battery while temporarily insane. The company sentenced him to three months without access to his Piss, and then three more of intensive counseling when he was finally allowed to get himself on again.

Aside from his weakened heart and the migraines he'd been having since they untangled Reginald's uncle from his mind, things were pretty much back to normal. The company had even re-upped Kaunda's Ceres contract for what they called his "uncommon heroics."

Vic smiled back at his son. "I've been watching you on the web, Daniel. Looks like you're doing pretty well."

"Reggie and Indira have blown up since they got back to Earth, Dad. It's partly all the publicity over me. But it also has to do with my suggestion that they put Indira on the stage with him and have her do some of the programming on the fly. They're doing really well. They seem to genuinely like me, Dad. We make a great team."

"That's good."

"Dad?"

Vic waited.

"I don't know. I just want to thank you. You put your ass on the line for me. I know some people say the whole thing's a joke. You know, you succeeded by the whim of some celebrity asshole, and you wanted to save *me*, and instead made me somebody else and so what's the point. I guess I just don't want you to

worry about that. You were there for me, Dad. You gave me a life. I'm proud of you."

Vic made himself smile again. Uneasiness had crept up the back of his neck. He tried to ignore it, for Daniel. For his son.

"So Dad, you take care of yourself, okay? Make friends with somebody that can take you out sailing or something. Have some fun. Okay?"

"Okay, Daniel."

"Promise me."

"Yeah," said Vic. "I...promise."

Vic's son glittered in his eye and was gone.

Birthday Licks

Kevin Brown

"Ask anyone," I tell Officer Throckmorten. "My girlfriend's got a Jessica-Alba ass, but her teeth look like she's been chewing on rocks."

Standing straight against the wall, with his buffed shoes and hand-pressed-to-a-pleat uniform, Officer Throckmorten dips his chin and grins. I rattle the handcuffs chaining my good arm to the table bar. As I pull and twist my wrist inside the steel loop, it constricts and turns my hand red, then blue, and so on.

I say, "For real, though. You wouldn't happen to have an extra set of keys?"

My prosthetic arm is unsnapped and lying on the table in front of me. The three big fingers are busted off at the knuckles, and the wrist is cracked into what look like veins running up the forearm.

That, and now my father's dead.

No, seriously.

Four hours ago, none of this was true, and it was still my seventeenth birthday.

His dark hair wet-slick and comb-parted, his badge polished and shining, Officer Throckmorten says, "Tell you what, the whole key thing's out of my hands, but how's about a Tab soda?" He cracks the door, motions down the neon hall, and, looking back over his shoulder, says, "I'll just get someone to run and grab it."

The room I'm in is anything but what you see in all those cop dramas. Those one-light-lit pits with rusted interrogation tables and mildewed walls. Those two-folding-chair rooms where the angry officers kick the chairs away and hover around the suspect in the spotlight of the bare bulb overhead. Here, everything's spit-clean neon white. Everything's all rounded edges and bolted to the floor. A two-way mirror to my left catches a neon flash of light like a dagger blade across my reflection.

I lean to my chained hand and scratch at the wet gauze bandage over my right eye. And because I've lost all feeling in my fingers, it's like someone else scratching around the stitches. I twist and pull at the cuffs again, and the steel digs deeper into my

skin. Held up and dangling, in the mirror my fingers are overripe chili peppers.

Under my chewed-up fingernails, you can still see my father's dried blood caked in the quicks.

Four hours ago is my first day of seventeen, seventeen years to Mom's last day alive at nineteen, and I've got a father, two broken ribs, a girlfriend, and a fractured eye socket. Four hours ago, my old man is passed out upright on the couch. His head thrown back, mouth open. Puke stringing from his chin. Bottle of scotch between his legs and a cigarette burned down to his dried-bloody knuckles.

And me and my girl Melissa, we're in my dark room in bed. My birthday gift unwrapped and writhing, eyes closed and lip bit. My good hand working her crotch. My fake hand with its fingers cupped perfectly around one of her breasts.

And for real, her breasts are thick for sixteen, ask anyone.

So I dip my head under the covers and zigzag-kiss my way down her chest, then waist, then so on, hearing moaning, hearing groaning, then hearing yelling suddenly coming from the living room.

Melissa and me both freeze.

I hear something—furniture—heavy-thump over. From the kitchen there's dishes slapping the tile and shattering.

Melissa says, "War, don't let him hit you no more."

I wiggle out and stare at my door, wincing and holding my ribs.

She says, "You want I should call someone?"

Under the door, a bright band of light shoots on. Down the hall, the old man screams, "Warren, you fuck!" Screams, "Get off that whore and get out here!" Screams, "Birthday party ain't over, *yet*!" He kicks the wall outside my room and a picture frame drops and cracks. Slurring, he says, "I got some more presents, buddy boy."

Melissa says, "War, I mean, for real...."

Touching my swollen eye socket, I can smell Melissa's middle.

Louder, my dad's singing, "*Happy fucking birthday to you!*" and I lose my erection, like, really quick. Still naked, I stand up, peel each graphite finger from around Melissa's tit, and ball them into a fist.

But that was four hours ago.

After a few seconds, Officer Throckmorten steps back in and shuts the door behind him. He sets a can of Mello Yello on the table, opens it, and says, "Sorry, but we're out of Tab."

I stare at the can, neon green and yellow on the bone-white table. "Isn't that the stuff that's supposed to make your stick wither?" I ask. "To tell the truth," I say, waving my half-arm like a flipper, "I can't afford to lose any more sticks."

His face all round and red, his cheeks oily, he smiles down at his feet again.

Barely able to grip the can, I take a drink. The room is quiet except for the buzz of the fluorescents, and after a bit I sit straight and tell him, "Kay, I'm ready to confess again." I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and say, "I killed my father."

He glances at me, at his shoes, at me, at his shoes, sort of nodding his head, and I ask, "Shouldn't you be writing this down?"

And he says, "Someone's on the way to speak with you," and stares back at his shoes.

I take another drink of Mello Yello, lean back, and tell him I'm not entirely sure about being tried as an adult, but since four years ago Tuesday I've had hair on my nuts. "Technically," I say, "I guess I'm screwed."

He snorts a laugh and, without looking up, says, "That's not how they count it."

I look at myself in the two-way, at the seeping gauze hiding one eye. My other eye swollen black from my broken nose. I open my mouth and tongue a chipped front tooth. Taking another drink, I purple-hand wave at me-in-the-mirror, hold my half-arm up, and tell Officer Throckmorten, "My arm itches."

His mouth slack, he looks at my good arm, then my wiggling flipper, my good arm, my flipper, and says, "It can't itch. It's, like, not there."

I take another drink and tell him, "Wherever that fucker's at, it's itching."

From down the hall, there's the hollow echo of high heels on concrete. It gets louder, and Officer Throckmorten stands straight, hands locked in front of him.

It clack, clock, clacks, and it's the second time in four hours I've heard someone moving down a hall to deal with me.

It gets louder and louder, and Officer Throckmorten clears his throat.

The echo stops outside the door, a couple of foot-shadows showing under the crack. The echo knocks.

Officer Throckmorten opens the door and stands back against the wall, locking his hands.

And into the neon-glowing room, a woman steps. A block of files in the crook of her arm. I smile, wave, and take a drink, and she closes her eyes and sighs. Holding her hand out, she looks at Officer Throckmorten and says, "Keys. Gimme."

He hands her the keys and she tells him to step outside.

Officer Throckmorten opens the door and I say, "Thanks for my shrink-drink," and he sort of waves, head down, and steps out, easing the door shut behind him.

And this lady, she cocks her head sideways, and clack, clock, clacks across the room, a smile stretched across her face. All legs and high heels, all gray shirt and skirt, she sets the files down, holds the keys up with a jiggle, and says, "Let's see about getting these things off." Lips full and puckered, eyes snow-cone blue, her sandy-blond hair pulled back with a couple of strands mouse-tailing over these thick black-framed glasses, and it's just *so* sexy.

Think Michelle Pfeiffer in J. C. Penney business wear.

Twisting a key in the cuffs until they pop open, she says, "Better?"

And it feels like about a million yellow jackets stinging my hand from the inside out. I raise my hand, shaking it in the mirror, and it goes purple, then blue, then so on. "I promise you don't need those," I tell her. Nodding toward my prosthetic, I say, "I'm unarmed."

"About these," she says, slipping the cuffs into her pocket and sitting down, "sorry." She scoots the files in front of her and, still smiling, says, "I mean, what part of 'Watch him' sounds like 'Handcuff him to a table'?"

Propping her elbows on the files, she laces her fingers, rests her chin on the backs of her hands, and says, "Okay." She says, "Intros. Mr. Merritt, may I call you Warren?"

And I tell her, "Cross your legs real slow and you can call me anything you want."

She smiles a Michelle-Pfeiffer smile and says, "My name is Detective Nowell. You can call me Jessica."

I take a drink.

That small grin on her face, she stares at me, eyes wide, the only sound the hum from the lights. We sit this way for what must be two minutes and she's just watching. Taking me all in. My body language, mannerisms. Am I busy or still. Shaking or calm. Like in every cop show you've ever seen, with the rusted tables and bare bulbs, this is how they get you. Let you play into their hands.

I stare back at her, trying not to blink.

A while longer, then she sits straight, spreads the files out perfectly in front of her, and says, "Okay, what say we get started." She says, "Just so we're clear, this is not anything at all to be worried about."

And to my reflection in the mirror, I'm going, *Yeah, right.*

She says, "What this is, is not Mr. Merritt and Detective Nowell. This is just Warren and Jessica talking."

To my reflection, I'm all, *Whatever.* I'm, *Blah, blah, blah.*

"So how about we start with you telling me, just two people talking, *exactly* what happened last night."

And I'm hearing the crunching of elbow on nose cartilage.

Screaming.

The popping of fists on ribs.

Screaming.

The cracking of graphite on—

"Oh, that," I say, and take another drink.

She smiles, arches her thin eyebrows over the top of her glasses, and says, "Whenever you're ready."

"Thing is," I tell her, "I already told that one." And she nods and says she knows, but to tell *her.*

I say it's just like I told the other officers. That my father was going to take a piss, and in a fit of blind rage I attacked and killed him.

She sighs, her lips puckering out, and says, "Wanna tell me what *really* happened?" She smiles and cocks her head.

"Was it I said he was taking a piss?" I take a drink and say, "What I meant was, he was making a sandwich. One of those late-night ones, you know, the butter-and-sugar kind." Still smiling, she opens one of the files, and I say, "If you could just tell me what I said earlier, we can clear this whole thing up."

She slides a piece of paper out and places it to the side. Upside-down reading it, it says, "Audrey Memorial Hospital," and

my name on line one. Further up, it upside-down shows my father's signature. Where my mother's is supposed to be is blank.

I look her in the eye and say, "You think about it, these things just up and happen sometimes. Like unwanted pregnancies or whatever."

"So, you say a fit of blind rage?" she asks.

And I tell her that's it. That and I blacked out.

Plus, I hear voices. "The devil," I say, "he made me do it."

She opens another file, spins sixteen Polaroids around to face me, and props her elbows on the table, chin on hand-backs. These photos are new to old to oldest, the newest taken just over four hours ago. Each one bruised and bloody. Each one missing a left arm. Sixteen photos dated my birthday at the bottom in Dad's drunken scribble, from my second birthday till last night, my seventeenth.

They're my life flashing before my eyes.

What these are, my old man called them "birthday licks". Every year on my birthday, I was punished, he said, for killing my mother by being born. Most kids got bikes and baseball gloves. Video games and comic books. I got to make up for being a murderer.

For my third birthday, I got three stitches in my forehead.

My sixth was a shattered elbow and a busted lip.

Last year, a broken ankle and a separated retina.

Electrical cords, cigar burns, handsaw blades. Leather straps, palm strikes, right hooks, they were all his gifts to me, and my father never missed a single birthday.

Each year, I'd get up and, instead of a cake or a surprise party, my dad would pull this shoebox out of the hall closet and have me sit down with him and look through the years before.

Holding one up, he'd say, "Look at this one." Turning it at different angles he'd say, "See this. If you'd just died in the abortion, like any normal baby, none of this would've been necessary."

And how to hide it—he'd tell me what happens here stays here. "This is between you and your momma and me." Taking a drink of whiskey, he'd say, "No one else will know what losing a wife does to a husband."

So, to teachers and other adults, I was always falling or rough-housing. My friends' parents kept them away from me because I would show up with dark bruises and deep cuts from "fighting at

the park". Once a year, without exception, I'd come to school on crutches or vomiting blood.

Say you crashed your bicycle or got beat up by a bully long enough, you start to believe it yourself.

And it was once a year, so who's to get suspicious.

Still staring at me, Jessica says, "Well?"

In the mirror, I'm thinking, *Oh God.* My chin's wrinkled up and my face is red.

The key here is to not blink. Don't even *think* about blinking your eyes. Don't look down or away. Calm's the key, because ask anyone, a stutter or voice quiver and—*BAM!*—your ass is nailed to the wall. They got what they want, and it's back to Mr. Merritt and Detective Nowell.

She points to today's date, at the dark swelling around my ribs, and says, "Recognize these?" She cocks her head to see the photo better and says, "Wanna raise your shirt?"

Seeing it in the pictures always makes it worse.

Wincing, I tell her, "I was jumping my new bike down at the sandpits." My voice low, I say, "Boys'll be boys."

She slides the birth certificate around in front of the oldest Polaroid, then takes three crime-scene pictures and places them at the end of the newest lick.

The Warren-Merritt Timeline.

She says, "Let me tell you what *I* think happened." She taps the birth certificate and says it was noted by the delivering doctor, your mother tried to have you aborted six months into the pregnancy. Tapping her finger, she says, "She failed." She goes on about how internal complications from the attempted abortion caused her to die three months later during childbirth. "And you lost your arm," she tells me, nodding at my prosthetic.

She touches above each Polaroid and says, "And we both know what happened here."

Her fingernail clicks the table over the photos and I can feel her staring at me. I look away, but she keeps click, click, clicking her nail over age eight's concussion. Over thirteen's severed tongue tip. Fifteen's bull-whipped legs.

When she reaches the end, she pushes the crime-scene photos toward me and says, "Then—and this is just my opinion—he woke up last night, drunk and mean, and wasn't satisfied with this year's results."

She points to the first photo, our living room, with the sofa leaning against the wall, the chairs flipped and gutted. She points at the second photo, our hall, with a large black hole in the sheetrock. A bloody smudged handprint slid the rest of the way down.

She says, "And you and your girlfriend, Melissa Shrock, were in your bedroom as he made his way down the hall."

"You couldn't," I say, "be further from the truth."

She stares a second, and tells me, "Maybe, but what happened next, Melissa's already told us."

I slam my hand on the table and tell her you can't believe someone like Melissa. "You see her teeth?"

"Melissa said your father kicked the door in, flipped the light on, and tackled you, slamming your head into the floor."

And I'm hearing the thump of my skull on wood.

And screaming.

The pop of his knee to my nuts.

She looks at the bandage on my head and I take a drink of Mello Yello.

She says, "Then, you managed to roll him off and began to fight back, during which, you struck him in the right temple with your prosthetic arm." She clicks a nail on the graphite wrist and says, "And he fell limp." She points at the third photo, a police outline of my dad's body twisted beside my bedside table.

In the corner of the photo, my mom's driver's-license picture. The only one I have of her, smudged with blood.

She says, "And that's what *I* think happened."

In my reflection, from under the bandage, a tear breaks free, and I'm thinking, *Stop it!* Thinking, *Jesus!*

Not wiping my face, I take a long drink, smile, and say, "Nope. I'm pretty sure he was just making a butter-and-sugar sandwich."

She frowns and says, "You don't have to protect him anymore." She says, "Anyway, he never protected you." She begins gathering up the Polaroids: my fourth-year busted eardrum. My ninth-year fractured sternum. She places it all back in her files and says, "I just want to say, I'm so sorry, Warren."

Doing this, she's just sticking to the plan. Just following protocol. She's pretending she's on my side, *Call me Jessica,* but it's none of it real.

Because what my dad did, he often would look at me, his eyes all shiny, and say, "Sometimes, you look just like your mom."

He'd wipe his eyes and smile. Ruffle my hair a little. And doing that, telling me about my mom, felt way better than any birthday licks hurt.

So this bitch-Detective—*Jessica*—she'll never get me. Because there's always a car that hit you. There's thousands of fences you fell off. I took Mom and Dad's lives, but I'll be goddamned I take away their names.

With tears still slipping out, one, two at a time, I lean forward and say, "Those lie-detector tests, they're not always a hundred percent accurate, right? Give me one and I'll take it right now."

She stands and says, "You don't have to hide, Warren. Not now." She makes her eyes get watery, trying to sell me emotion, be my bud, and flashes that smile, that Michelle-fucking-Pfeiffer smile. *Jessica.* She cups the files back in the crook of her arm and turns.

"So," I say, "will I get the needle or just life?"

"Warren, you'll get *a life*," she says, and walks back across the room, high heels on concrete. At the door, she turns toward me, and says, "Warren?" She says, "Happy late birthday," and steps out, clack, clock, clacking back down the hall, softer, then softer, then so on.

The room is quiet except for the loud buzz of the fluorescents. Alone with my busted left arm, I finish my Mello Yello and walk to the mirror. I stare at me, at my bandaged and bruised-up face, my cheeks all wet, and it all comes out and I can't stop it. I wipe my eyes and smear my hand across the mirror, and, beside my tear-blurred reflection, I picture Mom's face, just like in her driver's-license photo. Skin smooth and one eye slightly crossed, dark hair draped behind her shoulders and a shy smile, the face says, *Son.* The lips not moving, the face says, *Sometimes, you look just like your dad,* and disappears. And then it's just the fluorescents, the mirror, and me crying. Behind me, the Mello-Yello can, glowing green and yellow on the bone-white table. I wipe my face and slide my pants down a little ways. Looking in the mirror, I check myself to make sure nothing's started to wither yet.

desideratum

Zac Carter

we played risk with fingertips so numb that
any attempts to move the plastic cavalry caused
unintentional skittering forays
across continental borders, caused no end
of narrowly averted
theoretical nuclear wars.

'and you still havent gotten the heat fixed,' you said.
'the *landlord* still hasnt gotten the heat fixed,' i said.

and our breaths condensed from
cardinal directions,
rolled across the board,
turned both dimensions of asia into
representations of scottish moors.

just 4 of us and 6 ichiban and the
goodwilled surroundings, winter
jackets and all, indian style and all,
2 dice and the countdown on the television,
muted against the susurrus of infinitely more
important territorial arguments.

'dont.'
'scared?' i said.
'of you in greenland with what. 4 armies?
oh yeah. terrified.'

you all watched with near canonical reverence
as six after six after six careened
across badly kept carpet,
as horse after infantry was plucked
from newfoundland
with cigarette in hand.

'i think theyre getting close to the drop.'
'just another year,' you said.
'its the millennium.'
'its not the millennium. its bad math,' i said.

you feigned interest in
how i set out to rearrange my lightly colored
plastic hemisphere.

- - -

and im not sure how i missed
the depression etched in your face like sumerian text. how i
missed you looking out the front windows for
snow that stubbornly refused your entreaties.

we all did though, caught up in the triple cannons he
flipped on the board,
threatening to stampede your
last aboriginal holdout with a twitching
and greedy hand.

leaned back against the couch,
cigarette going again, not knowing
that the lack of sound
was you hitting zero just as silently
as the ball on tv.

'yours,' i said.
'hm,' you said.
'your roll,' i said.
'ok,' you said.

and the dice clattered like wrist
bones across the
board.

Bust Jon Radlett

Sweet Melodrama

Tristan D'Agosta

CAST OF CHARACTERS

FELIX, a feeble man who guards the courtyard

HORNSWALLOW, a bold man who guards the courtyard

MADAM MELODRAMA, an older woman, but beautiful still

COUNT SHOESTRING, a suitor to Madam Melodrama

SIR GALLANTRY, another suitor, a powerful knight with a deep, booming voice

PRINCESS CHICANERY, a young, beautiful, and cunning princess

SCENE

Nighttime. The courtyard of a castle. There is some grass and shrubbery about, most notably a significant bush (YONDER BUSH) halfway between center stage and upstage left.

[*FELIX enters from right, cautious and afraid. When he nears center, there is a suppressed sneeze from the shadows left*]

FELIX
Who's there?

HORNSWALLOW [*Off*]
Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

FELIX
I'm standing, and unfolded.

[*HORNSWALLOW enters from left, wiping his nose with a handkerchief*]

Hornswallow?

HORNSWALLOW
He.

FELIX
You come most carefully upon your hour.

HORNSWALLOW

'Tis now struck thirty-eight past ten p.m.
Thy watch is over; get thee hence to bed.

FELIX [*Pointing between* HORNSWALLOW'S *legs*]

Poppycock!
In keeping watch on thy watch thou didst watch
Thy watch arrive and terminate my watch,
Yet I shall stay upon my watch, and watch
Thy watch, for fear that thou shouldst botch thy watch.

HORNSWALLOW

Thou pointest at my crotch.

FELIX [*Dropping his hand*]

Sorry.

HORNSWALLOW

O Felix, brave and kindly though thou art,
I pray in sweet repose thou get'st a start,
For spirits roamed this courtyard yesternight!
Sweet Felix, 'twas a melancholy sight.

FELIX

Spirits? Nay, such stories are but rubbish.

HORNSWALLOW

Thou know'st not what this royal dirt hath seen:
Upon this dirt Sir Gallantry declared
He was an eggplant, and would only marry
Madam Melodrama if she swore
Upon an oath to be a wheel of cheese!

FELIX [*Taking a step forward*]

Nay, faith! On this dirt?

HORNSWALLOW

Yea, Felix! The selfsame dirt that grew
The grass, which eaten of the hungry insect,
Satisfied the bird and moved it to
Excrete the waste in which thou just hast stepped.

[*FELIX examines the underside of his shoe*]

FELIX

How didst thou know I stood in haste on pigeon waste?

HORNSWALLOW [*Putting his hand on* FELIX'S *shoulder; sincerely*]

I know pigeon waste. But prithee, friend,
If thou wilt tarry, as thou dost insist,
To hear of Gallantry's untimely end,
As princesses recede into the mist—
Those days when men and sprites kept company,
And rightly honored was fidelity;
When knights by night took flight to right the wrongs
Of villains, and their maidens sang sweet songs.
I give you, now, in form which is the thing,
A modest tale, beginning with Count Shoestring.

[*He lifts his hands majestically and the lights brighten. He and* FELIX *withdraw right and sit on the edge of the stage, out of the light, to watch*]

[*Enter a flustered* MADAM MELODRAMA *from right, pursued by* COUNT SHOESTRING]

MADAM MELODRAMA

If thou take not thy willing leave of me,
That is, if my will thy will will not see,
Then I, thou wilt or not, take leave of thee,
For I love only one: Sir Gallantry!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Sir Gallantry, that proudly squawking cock!
Not worthy e'en to lick thy soiled sock!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Tush! Only thou wouldst mock a lady's sock.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I knock not thy sock, for who would mock a sock?

MADAM MELODRAMA

Indeed! But thou wilt mock a flock of socks,
If e'er a sock flock at thy chamber knocks!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Thou art not-a-little loony, yet
I love thee! Ne'er those lips could I forget.
The night we spent alone was heavenly.

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Wearing down*]

I am betrothèd to Sir Gallantry.

COUNT SHOESTRING
Thy tongue is false; thine eyes betray thy heart.

MADAM MELODRAMA
My tongue is firm and true, and brash thou art
To heave upon my honest tongue such spite!

COUNT SHOESTRING
Firm and true? Thy tongue was looser yesternight,
When supplely weaving silent vows of love—

MADAM MELODRAMA
Sir Gallantry will slap you with his glove!

[*COUNT SHOESTRING begins to advance on her*]

COUNT SHOESTRING
Madam Melodrama, how I love thee!

MADAM MELODRAMA
Nay, not so!

COUNT SHOESTRING
Thou art as virginal and beautiful
As a beautiful virgin.

MADAM MELODRAMA
I pine! How I pine.

COUNT SHOESTRING
Thy lips are redder than raw beef—

MADAM MELODRAMA
No!

COUNT SHOESTRING
—thy neck as white...as something that is white.

MADAM MELODRAMA
Count Shoestring!

COUNT SHOESTRING
O, let me sniff of thee.

MADAM MELODRAMA
Not here!

[*COUNT SHOESTRING sniffs her*]

COUNT SHOESTRING [*Shuddering with delight*]
Ah!

MADAM MELODRAMA

No!

[*She pushes* COUNT SHOESTRING'S *face away. He puts his hand over his injured nose*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

Ah! My nose, thou hast offended it!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Then get thee to a nosery!

[*She begins pushing* COUNT SHOESTRING *off left*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

The pain!

MADAM MELODRAMA

I hear Sir Gallantry approach! Begone!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Although my nose knows some lowly foes,
These blows will challenge those the noser knows!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Go away!

[*She gives* COUNT SHOESTRING *a final shove and he exits left*]

O heavy fortune! What am I to do?
I love the one, the other loveth me!
The one also loveth me: that makes two.
One and one make two, then plain to see
It is, the other must be one, the one,
The other one.... I do not understand.

[SIR GALLANTRY *enters right.* MADAM MELODRAMA *runs to him*]

Sir Gallantry! O, if thou wouldst hold me—

SIR GALLANTRY [*Standing erect and proud*]

I am Sir Gallantry!

MADAM MELODRAMA

My lord, methought I knew—

SIR GALLANTRY

Behold!

[*A pause, so that the audience may take in his greatness*]

MADAM MELODRAMA

Sir Gallantry, how restlessly I fret:
My heart with melancholy is beset.

SIR GALLANTRY [*Taking her hand*]

My lady fair, who holds in her my heart,
Thine art is beauty, and beauteous thou art....
Impart to me what wrecketh thy repose,

[*Drawing his sword*]

And by my right arm, I shall slay thy woes!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Put down thy fiendish sword, and listen first!

[*SIR GALLANTRY sheathes his sword*]

I find myself, by fortune fickle,
Stuck within a sticky pickle.

SIR GALLANTRY

A sticky pickle?

MADAM MELODRAMA

And getting stickier.

SIR GALLANTRY [*Drawing his sword again*]

Then by my right arm, I shall cut this pickle!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Thou canst not! It is a most sour pickle.

SIR GALLANTRY

I thought thou saidst 'twas sticky.

MADAM MELODRAMA

'Tis both.

SIR GALLANTRY

Sour and sticky? This is a sick pickle.

MADAM MELODRAMA

No pickle were sicker; this pickle tricked me quick.

SIR GALLANTRY

By my right arm, I shall slay this beast!

MADAM MELODRAMA

'Tis not a beast; if I might just explain—

SIR GALLANTRY

To me, 'tis but a measly beast,
And it shall be a beast deceased!

MADAM MELODRAMA

I need thy comfort, not thy sword, thou brute!
A pickle's not a beast, it is a fruit!

[*Pause*]

SIR GALLANTRY

...But shall be nothing more, by my right arm!

MADAM MELODRAMA

O! Canst thou do naught but knightly harm?

SIR GALLANTRY

For thee, my precious jewel, and by my right arm—

MADAM MELODRAMA

Fie on't! Thou art a stubborn knave! Be off!

SIR GALLANTRY [*Disappointed*]

If thou, fair maid, dost wish it to be so,
Then by and by on hurried feet I go.

[*SIR GALLANTRY exits right*]

[*Subtle lights on FELIX and HORNSWALLOW*]

FELIX

Hornswallow! Methinks he should instead
Have married his right arm, than Madam wed!

HORNSWALLOW

Ha, ha! Good one, Felix! But soft, who comes?

[*Lights on FELIX and HORNSWALLOW dim*]

[*Enter PRINCESS CHICANERY right*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY

My lady fair, how now! Thou look'st not well.
What knotted conflict in thy mind doth dwell?

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Courtseying*]

Princess Chicanery, what wakens thee?
Thou shouldst within thy chamber sleeping be.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou wilt not run and tell my father so?
Come, come, sweet friend, I know thou art in woe:
Thou canst not hide from my discerning eye
When thou hast cheer, and when art like to cry.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Thou know'st me like some old familiar book.
I'll tell thee, then, why so in thought I look:
Count Shoestring loveth me, and I love he;
The good Sir Gallantry too loveth me;
I love he too, but not like he the first,
The Count; Sir Gallantry I love the worst.
To him I love the worst am I betrothed,
And so to marry either, I am loath.

PRINCESS CHICANERY [*Aside*]

O, thou wretch, to steal Count Shoestring's heart!
How dar'st thou keep my love and me apart!

MADAM MELODRAMA

What?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

What?

MADAM MELODRAMA

I said nothing.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou hast a sticky pickle.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Thank you.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou lov'st the Count, and yet are loath to marry?

MADAM MELODRAMA

Am loath to choose, for both I much adore!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Yet each will love another if thou tarry.
There must be one of them thou lovest more.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Aye, the wrong one, more to my disgrace.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou must choose one to love, and speedily.
Come, now, it is Sir Gallantry, whose face
Is like a painting in its majesty.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Thou speakest highly of this noble knight.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I do! For e'en among the woeful grim,
What sullen heart could that man not delight?
The dreams of fairy queens take form in him!

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Affectionately*]

'Tis clear, examining my heart's account:
My love and life are nearer to the Count.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

The Count?

MADAM MELODRAMA

Count Shoestring, love of mine! Princess, my dear,
When love meets love, the ways of God are clear!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

What canst thou mean?

MADAM MELODRAMA

My friend, thou saidst thyself thou knowest me;
For years we've shared close company.
Dost thou, indeed, believe I know not thee?
I see thou lov'st Sir Gallantry!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

No! No! No! No!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Thou hast betrayed thy heart and shown me light,
For now I know I cannot wed Sir Knight.

[*MADAM MELODRAMA exits right*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Whither goest thou? Thou wretch! Thou thief!
Thou dumb-dumb! Fie! My moment was but brief,
My prospects fallen like an autumn leaf.

[*Pause*]

Methinks the night is too silent.

[*Another pause*]

I must
Therefore hold conversation with myself.
For what more fitting way to form a secret
Plan, than loudly to the starry sky, in
Elegance—wasted elegance! Nay,
Not so.

[*She approaches* YONDER BUSH]

For Yonder Bush will sit and lend
Its ear, critiquing my devices.
Now, Yonder Bush, thou must be made to know,
That I am lovesick for Count Shoestring; such
A noble brow he hath. A splendid brow.
I love his brow. But he does not love me,
He loves she, and she loves he, and we
Shall never be! Howe'er, if I could prove
To donkey-witted Madam Melodrama
That the Count had been unfaithful to
Her.... Ah! Sweet Yonder Bush! My razor wit
Is unsurpassable! In confidence,
I'll show to Madam, oh, some trinket of
Mine own, and tell her 'tis an heirloom, which
I shall give to no man but for he
Whom I intend to wed! And then, I will
This very selfsame plan convince the Count
To so apply, that it would turn the knight
Sir Gallantry from Madam Melodrama,
And by my ruse, to turn her gallant love
For Gallantry to hate! Good Yonder Bush,
I thank the patient ear thou lentest me,
For soon, the Count and I betrothed shall be!

[*She does not notice as* SIR GALLANTRY *and* COUNT SHOESTRING *enter right, advancing across the stage fighting*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

Malevolent oaf!

SIR GALLANTRY

Traitorous measle!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Snake-blooded horseradish!

SIR GALLANTRY

Stork-licking herring breeder!

[*COUNT SHOESTRING stops emphatically*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

Villain!

[*SIR GALLANTRY gasps and stutters at this most grievous of insults. He lunges at COUNT SHOESTRING and they exit left, still fighting*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY

And now, to put this plan into effect!
Count Shoestring!

[*A crash, followed by a groan from SIR GALLANTRY. COUNT SHOESTRING enters humming. Seeing him, PRINCESS CHICANERY puts her hands to her heart*]

O, I feel smushy inside!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Princess Chicanery! The night is late:
Wherefore art thou about the roy'l estate?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

'Tis stuffy in my chamber, that is all:
The stuff of summer nights doth stir, withal.
And Count, I have observed, in recent times,
Thyself reciting lover's rhymes
To Madam Melodrama, sweet and fair,
Who stubbornly is loath to care.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I must confess, though thou alarmest me,
That thou dost rightly judge what thou canst see.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thy love has been my friend for many years.
I have, if thou wilt lend attentive ears,
An excellent device to solve your woes—

COUNT SHOESTRING

A device?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Quite so.

COUNT SHOESTRING [*Leaning in*]

An atomic device?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Take care to listen close to every word.

COUNT SHOESTRING

Be brief, for I must use the lavat'ry.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

A handkerchief there is, belongeth which
To brave Sir Gallantry, which he would give
To none but whom he loves. Thou know'st, bewitched
He is; he breathes his loving vows to live.
I heard him say to Madam Melodrama—
Though much abridged I paraphrase it now,
For telling every subject, clause, and comma,
Self-loving prattle, rank and odious vow,
Would take the night—he said, "I give to thee
A symbol of my truest love: my mother
Gave it me, to give my wife to be.
Keep it close, and never let another
Hold it." Now, if he should in the least
Suspect that thou possessest it, he'll think
That thou and she have made a two-backed beast,
And thus his love will vanish in a blink.

COUNT SHOESTRING

Methinks thou plan'st this effort carefully,
And to my mind, 'tis satisfactory.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Before the night is out, it shall be done!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Thou hast the handkerchief?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I'll fetch it now.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I'll meet thee here! For I must find a bathroom—

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou must not leave! Thou must keep watch, so that
Upon returning with the handkerchief,
I am not caught.

COUNT SHOESTRING

But I have held it so long!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Then longer hold! Thou art a man, art not?

[*PRINCESS CHICANERY hurries off right*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

Or I, perhaps, could go in yonder bush.

[*He considers this option intensely*]

To pee, or not to pee: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
An exploded bladder, everywhere,
Or to excrete a sea of urine, and
Thereby, end it? No more. To piddle, just
A little, raining free on yonder bush:
A golden stream, as if from heaven, falls
In torrents on this noble shrubbery.
But if we should be seen: ay, there's the rub;
For if we are discovered fertilizing
Royal hedges, thoughts of reprehension,
When we have shuffled off these quarts of water,
Must give us pause. For who would bear his ills,
If feared he not for reputation's sake?
Dare I unsheathe my bare bodkin in the
Darkness of the night? Nay, it may be seen!
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.
With lovesick hearts, and bursting bladders, our
Thoughts turn cold and lose the name of action.
But soft you now! The princess comes.

[*PRINCESS CHICANERY enters with a handkerchief bearing a pattern of strawberries on either side*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Good Count,
I have it here, the gallant handkerchief!

COUNT SHOESTRING

My dear young lady, this is a napkin,
Not a handkerchief.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

It is a handkerchief!

COUNT SHOESTRING

I wager thou wouldst not blow in't thy nosegoo.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Methinks that someone has.

[*Disgusted,* COUNT SHOESTRING *begins to move off*]

But stay, this here's
The handkerchief of he, Sir Gallantry!

[*Grimacing,* COUNT SHOESTRING *takes the handkerchief*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

But someone hath unsnotted in its folds.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

An omen: the course of true love runs.
Be gallant, then, and chase it where it hides.

COUNT SHOESTRING [*Hesitantly*]

If mucus be the food of love, play on.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou must display it on thy person so
That brave Sir Gallantry will doubtless know.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I shall, Princess, and thank thee: thou art wise.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Be subtle, Count, or else meet thy demise:
If he should see that thou deceivest him,
His knightly sword will part you with a limb.
Go, get thee to some secret place and see
If thou canst wear this thing with subtlety.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I shall, and ne'er again from mucus wince.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Good Count, thou need'st but give that rag a rinse.

COUNT SHOESTRING

I' faith, the lavat'ry! Two birds, one stone,
So two desires no longer be postponed!

[*COUNT SHOESTRING exits right*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Forever more, he will belong to me!
The winds of fortune blow from east tonight,
Which means that on the morrow, 'twill be cloudy,
With a chance of rain. Yonder Bush, the light
Which thou hast shown me must be God's own glow!
Or was't the devil? Both are wise, you know.

[*MADAM MELODRAMA enters right*]

My second victim, hard upon the first,
And I withal am wholly unrehearsed!
I prithee, Yonder Bush, good guidance grant
As I the seeds of jealousy do plant.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Princess Chicanery, get hence to bed!
The cold hath come as if on hasty wings.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

My dearest friend, thou carest too much for me!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Nay, not so—too much I never could.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

So warmly thou dost speak of me! My sweet,
My heart is so with love for thee replete,
That I should like to share a secret thing—
Which thou must never use for gossiping!

MADAM MELODRAMA

Mine ears are here for thee;
My tongue will silent be.
I never shall let free
What thou entrustest me.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

How eloquently put. When I was small,
A little girl, naïve, and cute withal,
My mother gave to me a handkerchief,

And said to me, "Let no man play the thief
And take this precious heirloom, but for he
Who by his vows thy husband soon will be."

MADAM MELODRAMA

Then pray, let no man play the thief, for love's
A bitter business. How is it designed?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

'Tis white, with likenesses of strawberries
On either side.

MADAM MELODRAMA

How quaint. I cannot say
That such a handkerchief I ever saw.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

And never will, but this: it is unique.

MADAM MELODRAMA

I do adore such sentiment. Thou art
So innocent and kind to say such things,
That thou the very image of an angel
Art, so far from evil or deceit.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Dost thou think it truly?

MADAM MELODRAMA

Forsooth, thou art pure and good at heart!
A fool could reason just as I have done.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I have no doubt.

MADAM MELODRAMA

But prithee, Princess, unto bed begone,
For thou wilt surely catch a cold anon.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Take heart: the young have blood as hot as fire.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Do what thou wilt, but I shall now retire.

[*Hugging herself, she starts heading right*]

Brrrr! Do not protest no timely warning
When thou dost sniffle, cough, and ache by morning!

[*MADAM MELODRAMA exits right, just as COUNT SHOESTRING enters right; they miss each other narrowly. COUNT SHOESTRING has the handkerchief tied around his head like a bandana*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Thou nitwit—

[*SIR GALLANTRY enters left in a daze. PRINCESS CHICANERY freezes at the sight of him*]

Sir Gallantry, what summons thee?

SIR GALLANTRY
Orange juice?

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Dost thou want a glass of orange juice?

SIR GALLANTRY [*Disturbed*]
No! No. Prithee....

COUNT SHOESTRING
What ails Sir Gallantry?

SIR GALLANTRY
I will do thy bidding all, but juice,
Bring none of me! I do beseech, I beg—!

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Sir Gallantry, art thou....

[*She waves her hand in front of his face*]

'Tis nothing much.
Our knight is sleepwalking. Take him inside.

COUNT SHOESTRING
Though I to hell this knightly beast hath bade,
I'll not deny a sickly man my aid.

[*He leads SIR GALLANTRY off left*]

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Behavior strange as this comes not by chance.
Hath he o'erheard my plans of false romance?
Yonder Bush, hast thou revealed—

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Off*]
Princess!

[*MADAM MELODRAMA hurries onstage in a state*]

Princess, I slept and dreamt and nightmares came!
Appeared, perhaps. I know not what, from where,
Or what is where in dreams, or where what dreams
We dream are dreamt—but I was in my bed,
So maybe there.

PRINCESS CHICANERY
What the hell?

MADAM MELODRAMA
I dreamt Sir Gallantry had turned into
An Orange Fruit, and something evil wished
To juice his noble flesh! Princess, he screamed.

PRINCESS CHICANERY [*Annoyed*]
Madam Melodrama, aptly named;
Though dreaming seems extreme when dreaming screams—

MADAM MELODRAMA
Teeming streams of screams!

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Okay.
Thy love is not a fruit, so do not weep.
Although he was just walking in his sleep....
How odd, he said—

[*COUNT SHOESTRING enters, still wearing the handkerchief*]

MADAM MELODRAMA
Count Shoestring, what a silly thing you— Pray,
Are those strawberries on that handkerchief?

COUNT SHOESTRING
They are, my love, such luscious fruits, for I
Have tasted of their lusciosity.

[*MADAM MELODRAMA gasps*]

MADAM MELODRAMA
Tasted of those fruits! Princess, a word!

[*She takes PRINCESS CHICANERY aside*]

Is that the selfsame handkerchief...?

PRINCESS CHICANERY
Why, yes! For that is why I told thee of it.

MADAM MELODRAMA

But he— And thou— O, fie! I loved him so!
He hath deceived my heart! O, heavy deed!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

The heaviest!

MADAM MELODRAMA

I never more shall speak a word to him!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Do it, heavily!

COUNT SHOESTRING [*To MADAM MELODRAMA*]

Thy skin is whiter than a pasty maggot!

PRINCESS CHICANERY [*Aside*]

O godly poet, master of thine art,
Thy wooing feeds a surfeit to my heart!

COUNT SHOESTRING

So crimson are thy lips, that I concede
They look as if they copiously bleed.

PRINCESS CHICANERY [*Aside*]

O, kiss my bleeding lips!

[*SIR GALLANTRY enters left, proud and confident*]

MADAM MELODRAMA

Sir Gallantry!
My love!

[*She runs to SIR GALLANTRY. He holds up his hand, stopping her*]

SIR GALLANTRY

Halt before the noblest eggplant!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Madam, he sleepwalks.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Hold me in thine arms.

SIR GALLANTRY [*Proudly*]

I have no arms: I am an eggplant.

MADAM MELODRAMA

But thou wilt be my husband soon!

SIR GALLANTRY

I cannot marry, but to Parmesan cheese.

[*He looks* MADAM MELODRAMA *up and down*]

We would not make a tasty dish.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

He interacts with her: he doth not sleepwalk!
He hath lost his wit!

MADAM MELODRAMA

I prithee, hold me, I am desperate—

SIR GALLANTRY

Wert thou a wheel of Parmesan, I w—

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Tearing up*]

I beg of thee to hold me; I have just
Uncovered such deceit!

SIR GALLANTRY

Swear thou art a wheel of Parmesan,
And I shall marry thee.

MADAM MELODRAMA

My lord, not I.

SIR GALLANTRY

Thou wilt swear, or I shall not marry.

COUNT SHOESTRING

This knight is as the cuckoo bird!

MADAM MELODRAMA

I cannot swear, my lord, I cannot—!

[*A thunderous* VOICE *booms from beneath*]

VOICE

Swear.

SIR GALLANTRY

Consent to swear thou art a wheel of cheese!

COUNT SHOESTRING

This is wondrous strange!

PRINCESS CHICANERY

That there be true emotion in his madness—

VOICE

Swear.

SIR GALLANTRY

Come, upon my sword!

[*He draws his sword and kneels, holding the sword upright with the tip on the ground*]

MADAM MELODRAMA

My Lord above, assist me in my—

SIR GALLANTRY

What moldy cheese is this, that would not swear?

MADAM MELODRAMA

I cannot—

VOICE

Swear.

MADAM MELODRAMA

Propose the oath!

SIR GALLANTRY

Thou art a wheel of Parmesan cheese!

VOICE

Swear.

MADAM MELODRAMA

I swear!

[*Her emotion climaxes and she bursts into tears.* SIR GALLANTRY *takes her in his arms*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

What radish-stewing wench have I entrusted
With my heart?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

She seems as mad as he.

COUNT SHOESTRING

But whence came this madness?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I cannot say,
For reason hath no place explaining madness.

SIR GALLANTRY

My love, mine everlasting love, my life
Have I awaited thy return. Smother me.

[*They hug*]

MADAM MELODRAMA

Protect me with thy wondrous manly arms!

COUNT SHOESTRING

What abject tragedy was ours to find:
The parting of a maiden with her mind.

[*Dejected, he removes the handkerchief and hands it to* SIR GALLANTRY]

Here, take thy rag; its use is wrung from it
Like nosegoo following an epic sneeze.

[SIR GALLANTRY *takes the handkerchief and stares at it, then smothers it with affection*]

SIR GALLANTRY

What foul doings were at play
That would my blankie take away?

COUNT SHOESTRING

Didst thou say blankie?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

What further madness!

MADAM MELODRAMA

What pretty hands thou hast.

[SIR GALLANTRY *puts the handkerchief in his pocket*]

SIR GALLANTRY

In absence of my blankie, chaos reigns,
And I am like to madness.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

Thou mean'st to say, that rag belongs to thee?

SIR GALLANTRY

My mother gave it me when I was young—

PRINCESS CHICANERY

O, heavy fortune—

MADAM MELODRAMA

Heavy madness—

COUNT SHOESTRING

And heavy deed!

SIR GALLANTRY

Apologies to every man and maid;
For when my blankie, warm and wondrous fuzzy,
Flies my hold, my wits do follow fast.

MADAM MELODRAMA

I have sworn I am a cheese!

SIR GALLANTRY

Fair maid, what lunacy is this?

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Tearing up*]

I have sworn....

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I might have chosen any dirty rag;
By chance he dropped his blankie! Fie on't! Fie!

COUNT SHOESTRING

Princess, what mean these ravings?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

O, curse it all—and curse me too!
Women were not made to woo.

[*COUNT SHOESTRING puts his hands on PRINCESS CHICANERY's shoulders*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

I pray thee, tell me what distresses thee.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

O, Count, I showed that handkerchief to Madam
Melodrama, telling her my mother
Gave it me, in hope that thy beloved
Would think to her thou hadst unfaithful been.
But now my cunning is exposed!

[*She holds out her hands to YONDER BUSH*]

Yonder Bush, I submit to thee.

[*An awkward pause*]

COUNT SHOESTRING

Come, come, my princess dear; my former love
Of whom you speak hath sworn to be a cheese,
And I could never love a cheese.

MADAM MELODRAMA

I love thee, even with thy fuzzy blankie.

COUNT SHOESTRING

And never could disturb their harmony.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

But so devoutly thou hast doted—

COUNT SHOESTRING

And foolishly, at that. 'Tis thee I love,
And hath loved all along.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

But Count, that is quite out of left field—

COUNT SHOESTRING

'Tis destiny, that we should love.

PRINCESS CHICANERY

I know't, full well, but—

COUNT SHOESTRING

My dear Princess Chicanery,

[*He kneels*]

Wilt thou marry me?

PRINCESS CHICANERY

O goodly Count, how queer this night hath been!

[*COUNT SHOESTRING rises and hugs her*]

MADAM MELODRAMA [*Overlapping*]

How order comes to chaos, though I swore
I were a wheel of cheese! What bliss!

COUNT SHOESTRING [*Overlapping*]

How foolish not to love thee!

PRINCESS CHICANERY [*Overlapping*]

Wondrous night! Thou see'st, Yonder Bush!

SIR GALLANTRY [*Overlapping, and louder than the others*]

I am Sir Gallantry!

[*They continue to ad lib, fading out, as the lights fade and a spot comes up on* FELIX *and* HORNSWALLOW]

FELIX

That is a wondrous tale, but never could
Occur upon this dirt.

HORNSWALLOW

It was this dirt, I tell thee true!

FELIX

How know'st thou this?

HORNSWALLOW

Dost thou still doubt? Let us ask Yonder Bush.

[*Dim lights come on; the spotlight fades.* FELIX *and* HORNSWALLOW *rise and approach* YONDER BUSH]

FELIX

If Yonder Bush offers to tell thy tale,
Then I too am a wheel of cheese.

HORNSWALLOW

So be it, Felix. Yonder Bush, wouldst thou
Assure this Felix that my tale is true?

[*They wait for an answer. After a moment,* YONDER BUSH *begins moving off left*]

FELIX

It is offended. Look how it steals away.

HORNSWALLOW

Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!

FELIX

'Tis a shrub, and will not answer.

HORNSWALLOW

I swear this tale is true! Swear thou believ'st it!

VOICE

Swear.

[FELIX *leaps into* HORNSWALLOW'S *arms*]

FELIX

Good heavens, what was that?

HORNSWALLOW

It speaks! It doth enjoin thee swear; then do't!

FELIX

I swear, I swear! This courtyard is enchanted.

HORNSWALLOW

This dirt hath many wonders, I have told thee.

FELIX

Let us away.

HORNSWALLOW

Let thee away, for I am on my watch.

FELIX

Then heaven, if thou need it, show thee light;
I myself shall now to bed. Goodnight.

HORNSWALLOW

Goodnight, young Felix.

[*As* FELIX *exits right, the lights fade and a spot comes up on* HORNSWALLOW, *who turns to the audience*]

As per this play that you have heard,
Peculiar things have here occurred.
Deceitful plots and fickle wit;
Forsooth, it doth with madness fit.
But think on this, if mad it seems:
These lovers young were filled with dreams,
And acting in pursuit thereof,
Explored the wonderment of love.
If e'er you gentles once were young,
You have the song of lovers sung,
Hearts, forgiveness, hate entwined,
And left your wits where none could find.
Then do not judge our play uncouth:
It but revisits fleeting youth,
The days the old and young recall
As filled with joy, immense and small.
So charging you keep joy alight,
I bid you all a fond goodnight.

[*He bows*]

The Pearl Diver with the Gold Chain

Paul Hogan

Man, thanks for stopping. This is a terrible road. What is it they call this section of the Schuylkill Expressway, Killer Alley?

You call it the Surekill Crawlway? That's a good name for it. I've ridden my bike from Maine to Baja and I never saw anything like this. It's worth your life to change lanes in a Mack, let alone on a bicycle. It's a damn shame they can't squeeze a four-foot-wide bike lane along these superhighways. I mean, what would it increase the cost by, one one-hundredth of one percent? The morons never think of bikers or hikers. They have more excuses than brains, that's for sure.

Well, anyway, thanks for picking me up. I don't usually accept rides, what with my bike and pack and all. As a matter of fact, not too many people would even stop for me. I guess I look too freaky for them. I started wearing these threads when I got out of the army. I got this campaign hat from an Aussie guy I met in Nam. Man, now everybody and his brother has one. I guess it's time to get rid of it, but I'm sort of attached to it after all these years.

Oh, all sorts of people give me charms for it. I first put one of those Monopoly battleships on it and then people started laying little bikes, cannons, zodiac signs, everything on me. I couldn't very well disappoint them, so now I have more than three dozen of the damn things hanging from my hat. I think they look nice.

Now take these Levis and my sleeveless leather jacket. The only ones who wore them when I started out were motorcycle types. Now every guy in college has them. I don't understand motorcycles at all. They're noisy and dirty and expensive. And they aren't too safe either.

People used to be put off by my beard, too. Nowadays, you look strange if you don't have a beard. It's funny.

This is a nice yellow pickup truck you have.

The Electric Banana? That's a nice name for a pickup. I bet you can move a lot of junk in it. The music is nice, too. I've got a

radio on my bike. It's one of those new transistors. It sure helps to pass the time.

I'm a pearl diver. I just finished working in Boston and I'm going home to Covington, Kentucky for a while.

Yeah, I know Covington is a bad soldier town. Any town is a bad soldier town. Just being a soldier is tough. But it's time for me to go home for a while.

Oh, I don't dive for real pearls. I'm a dishwasher by trade. That's just...an in-joke, you might call it. I like pearl diving. It's just about the best job in the world. You don't ever have to worry about finding work. People will hire you for just one meal and be damn happy if you stay for two. I once had a job for three weeks straight. I didn't miss a day and they really wanted me to stay on, but pearl divers are funny people. I mean, we don't follow the crops or anything like that. We go where we want and stay as long or as short as we want. I always have my sleeping bag. All I need is a few bucks now and then for cigarettes. I can eat free anywhere, even in the finest restaurants in the United States. Why, you'd pay a hundred dollars for two at some of the restaurants I've washed dishes at.

But they pay me! You know, when the waiters come in from the dining room, they drop off the glassware first. And most times those rich people don't even finish their wine.

Well, it's an unwritten law that the glass-washer gets first crack at whatever is on the tray—right after the waiter, of course. Man, you wouldn't believe the fine wines I've had in my time. I just grab these half-finished bottles of the best wine ever made. I put them aside and when it's my turn to eat, I eat like a king. But I don't go in much for drinking or smoking anymore. You see, I can talk to people now.

Oh, I can talk to almost anybody, provided they really want to talk to me. They have to know how to talk. Of course I can listen in on almost anything, but it's much more difficult to talk and carry on a conversation. I use this gold chain, see, I keep it in my mouth twenty-four hours a day. That helps me listen. This crystal I also keep in my mouth and that helps me talk.

No, I can't talk to animals. I guess some people can but they must really want to, and I don't much care to talk to cats or dogs.

Ever since I was a kid I knew I had some sort of special power. Not that it's all that special. I think almost anyone could talk if they really wanted to bad enough. But anyway, I always knew I had something, only I didn't know exactly what it was; I only learned five years ago and then it was sort of by accident.

At first, I used to go crazy, talking and listening all the time. But now the novelty has worn off and I'm very selective. I don't just talk and listen all the time anymore.

Of course I always keep the gold chain in my mouth. You can never tell when an important message might be coming through. Well, if I'm really relaxed and really thinking nice thoughts about someone, I can tune in without these things, but it is rare and very hard so I usually don't try. My reception and transmission are a thousand times better with my chain and crystal.

I know a lot of people who have cell phones and they are always complaining about being cut off or breaking up. I never have that problem.

Well, about five years ago, I was with a buddy and we were biking down the Connecticut Valley up near Windsor Locks. It's nice up there. Course, it's getting more polluted every day. We'd stopped for lunch. It was Indian summer and we'd gone for a swim and a bath. We were just fooling around. I was looking at the leaves starting to turn before they fell and my buddy was skipping stones. He really liked to skip stones. I bet if we'd stayed at Windsor Locks and just skipped all the stones he does in a year, he'd have built a dam right across the Connecticut River. That's how much he likes to skip stones. Do you believe George Washington really threw a silver dollar across the Potomac?

I bet he just skipped it across, and I bet my buddy could have beaten him, with either rocks or dollars—although my buddy wouldn't have been foolish enough to use silver dollars.

Well, like I said, I was just lying there. My buddy had this gold chain sitting on his pile of clothes. I was sort of playing with it and absentmindedly put it in my mouth. You know how you put a pebble or straw or anything else in your mouth when you're absentminded? Man, all of a sudden, all this noise, like radio static, started to come into my head. I didn't know where it was coming from and I looked all around. I spit the chain out and the noise stopped. Man, that was something, let me tell you! I was sort of freaked out and I examined the chain real carefully. I didn't even

touch it at first. I treated it like you would a snake. You know, you want to see if it's poisonous before you pick it up. Well, I picked it up and nothing happened so I started to put it in my mouth again and the damn noise started again! All the static came back into my head. It was like tuning a shortwave radio. I spit it out and the noise stopped. I didn't call out to my buddy; he'd've thought I was crazy or flipping out.

There was nothing unusual about the chain. It was good, and I think it was about eighteen-karat gold.

I opened my mouth again and lowered the chain in slowly. I was lying on my back under one of those oaks they have all over Connecticut. Man, as I lowered it into my mouth, the traffic—that's what you call radio talk—really started to pick up! At first it was just a jumble like they must have spoken at the Tower of Babel. You know how it is when you first start to tune a shortwave radio. You pick up Radio Cairo, the Voice of the Andes, and maybe Moscow all at the same time. It takes a while to separate the voices.

Well, to tell the truth, I was sort of confused. It was like the Virgin Mary appeared to me, and I didn't want to tell anyone, even my buddy, for fear he'd think I was just crazy. I didn't want to fall down or laugh or run or shake the noise out of my head. I was fascinated.

Anyway, I started to experiment. I'd lower and raise the chain. I dropped just a few inches of the chain into my mouth and I picked up local amateur traffic, you know, people talking to each other on ham radios I guess. I couldn't get a regular radio station like WTIC in Hartford. As a matter of fact, I still can't pick up regular stations. That's why I have to carry this transistor radio with me all the time. The commercial wavelengths just don't come in for some reason. It doesn't really matter, because who wants to listen to some fool trying to sell you underarm deodorant? I mean, what have I got to say to an underarm-deodorant salesman? Maybe it's because those guys are taped and aren't real anyway. I really don't know, and, to be frank, I don't give a damn.

Soon I learned to block out the fringe signals and just sort of tune in on what I wanted to hear. I found that my reception improved with the amount of chain I put into my mouth, and when I put it all in I could really make sense out of it all. But then my friend finished skipping his two tons of rocks for the day, so I had

to put his chain back. I was still afraid to tell him about the miracle that had happened to me. Of course now I realize it wasn't a miracle so much as a discovery. He thought I was pretty strange as it was, and I didn't want to lose him. I don't make friends easy and this guy was a good buddy. We did a lot of biking together and we still communicate by our own radio system. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It wasn't for a few days that I could get a gold chain of my own. I told him I liked his chain and wanted one like it. You know, sort of a buddy chain.

Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm not gay or anything. Course, I have nothing against gays. As a cold matter of fact, if we had more gays we'd probably have less wars and pollution and poverty and all the other bad things that are now happening.

Anyway, I went into an old hock shop in Hartford and told the guy I wanted a gold chain like my buddy's. At first he looked at me like I was a bum and hadn't a dollar to my name. Now they call themselves pawnbrokers—a fancy name for hock shops. I pulled out a couple of sawbucks and you'd've thought I'd suddenly got a halo around my head.

Man, I always have a few dollars on me. I've never been broke in my life. Anyway, the guy sold me the chain for eighteen bucks. He wanted the whole twenty, but I told him I had to eat, too.

I was really excited, and as soon as I left the store, I stuck the chain in my mouth expecting to get all sorts of stuff in my head. Well, friend, there was nothing. That's right; I didn't get a damn thing. Nothing. I was really upset, and in a fit of rage, or I guess it was frustration—I wasn't really mad, just upset—I threw the chain across the street. My buddy was astonished and thought I'd flipped out. He retrieved it for me but I told him I didn't even want to touch it, that it was his.

A few days later we were in Wurtsboro, New York. We'd heard about a big sailplane meet and wanted to see it. Those gliders are really beautiful. They just float and float and float. I don't know what holds them up. God, I guess. I don't think I'll ever go up in one, but I sure like to see them soar around with the birds. Besides, I've got my bike. She's a good bike—has over ten thousand miles on her. Why, I'd bike a thousand miles just to attend a sailplane meet. Anyway, we were just sitting there quiet, soft and comfortable. Actually, I was sort of lying back so I

could see the gliders better. My friend said, "Hey, old buddy, you should take this chain back. You paid eighteen dollars for it and you ought to have it."

Well, I felt real bad because I figured I'd hurt him, what with my throwing my buddy chain into the street. It was like throwing our friendship into the gutter, so I took it back and I apologized for my terrible behavior.

I put it around my neck but it just didn't seem right, and then I absently put it into my mouth. I'll be damned if that radio business didn't start up all over again! Then I figured it out. Back in Hartford, with all the excitement and anticipation and noise and confusion, all the channels into my head were taken up with bad vibrations and there was no way I could receive. Out in the beautiful countryside around Wurtsboro, where there was no noise or pollution or confusion, just graceful sailplanes floating around with the birds in the blue sky, I could receive! All my channels were open for traffic, and friend, it just poured in.

We stayed a few days until the last glider and towplane left. You know, those old Stearman biplanes they use for towing are really nice. They are just about the only engine plane I have any respect for. They have a real job and they do it. You can keep all those Piper Cubs and Beechcrafts and especially the jets. Anyway, we stayed on and I got better and better at tuning in. I mean I could tune out all but one channel and even control the volume and everything. Don't ask me how I control the volume. I think it must be some sort of internal pressure I exert, but I'm not sure. Well, after all the gliders and towplanes and crews left and things were really quiet, I told my buddy. He had been sort of watching me and knew something funny was going on inside my head. Of course, he was too good a buddy to say anything for fear he might disrupt my thinking. That's what good buddies are like. They don't interrupt your thinking, and they seem to know when you want to talk and when you want to think.

He said he'd known something strange was going on, that it was somehow tied up with the gold chain. I guess I'd been pretty obvious, lowering and raising it in my mouth, adjusting pressure and all. He said he'd been watching me hold my breath until I'd turn blue and couldn't figure it out, but figured he'd learn soon enough when I chose to tell him. Well, I told him the whole story and he immediately put his gold chain in his mouth. He was all sort of

excited, so naturally he couldn't hear a thing. At first he accused me of lying or of just hearing things. As long as he was so excited he couldn't receive. I mean, when all your channels are full of nervousness and excitement, how the hell can you find room for the real communication lines trying to get into your head? Well, you just can't, that's all.

He sort of gave up and lost interest for a few days. Then he began to hear things. By this time we were over into Pennsylvania and the Pocono Mountains. They sure are beautiful. They aren't really mountains like the Rockies, but still and all, they are restful and very beautiful. It was well into October and the nights were clear and cool—not cold, but you still had to zip up your sleeping bag before midnight. Well, we were just sitting by the fire and I was playing my jew's harp, soft and quiet-like. You know who taught me to play and appreciate the jew's harp? Jean Shepherd. He played it almost every night on the radio, and the vibrations inside your head are really fantastic. I wonder if he can talk to people. I've often tried to get him but never could. Maybe it's because he talked on commercial radio and that puts him off limits.

Anyway, my friend said in a very low and even voice, "Buddy, I think I got it. I'm beginning to receive. It's nice and getting clearer every minute. I hear some guy talking. It's a plane and he's asking the JFK tower for instructions. We must be in the approach landing path. I can't hear the tower, but I can damn sure hear the pilot loud and clear. God, I wish I could talk to him and we could talk back and forth. I'm on his wavelength and he doesn't even know it."

Well, man, I was really happy with my reception until my buddy raised all these questions in my head about talking as well as receiving. Now I really wanted to make two-way conversations. It was nice to hear radio broadcasts, but I wanted to know people personally. I hadn't even thought of it until my buddy decided he wanted to talk to the pilot of Flight 825 or whatever it was.

We were exhausted and excited and neither of us could hear too well so we just went to sleep. You know, you can receive much better at night and in the winter than any other time. It must be radio waves because that's the way regular shortwave radio works. Shepherd once told me, on the radio of course, that radio waves are the only indestructible things in the world. Like once they start out, they never, ever stop. The vibrations just go out into space and eventually, in a million years or so, they come back again.

Shep said that Einstein discovered that. Isn't that something? Just think, I send out a message now and people hear it, those that are tuned in anyway. Then in a million years or so my message comes around again and someone else will hear it. Then it goes around again in another million years, and so on forever and ever. Of course, that assumes there will be someone here to listen. That's really weird, don't you think?

I guess I'm straying from my story too much. Where are we now?

Conshohocken? That's a funny name. Well, anyway, we went to sleep and the next day we just talked about how we might transmit as well as receive. We talked for a couple of days actually. We were getting calmer each day and our reception was getting better and better. We fished a lot, and that is almost as relaxing as watching gliders for thinking. Of course, there is more exertion in fishing, but not too much.

Anyway, we got to Scranton and went into a jewelry store and bought some more gold chains and took them into the country up in Montour County. Oh, I bet I know ninety percent of all the counties in the United States. Well, we fooled around a lot and found that we could improve our reception by using different chains and lengths and thicknesses and things like that. For instance, we found that the purer the gold, the better the reception. But then that stands to reason.

Another thing we discovered was that if the chain was exactly one meter long, the reception was the best. That sort of explains why everyone in the world uses the metric system except us. We tried to talk for hours under all sorts of conditions but apparently no one could hear us. At least, no one ever answered our CQ. That's radio talk for "Will someone please answer my call." We couldn't even talk to each other, and I'm sure we operate pretty much on the same wavelength. Everyone has his own frequency just like his own fingerprints or DNA. They might be close, but I doubt if you'll ever find two exactly the same. We even went on opposite sides of hills and set up exact times for broadcasting. We could holler across the valley to each other, but couldn't broadcast.

Nothing worked, and we were on the move heading west. By the time we got to Antes Fort, over near Jersey Shore, we pretty much had it worked out. That's a funny name for a town in the middle of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has a lot of funny names.

Anyway, we'd decided we were on the wrong track and had to approach the problem with a whole different attitude and with different equipment.

Well, Jersey Shore didn't have much in the way of radio stores, and we had to continue on to Lock Haven. That's where they used to make the Piper Cubs, so there are still a few good radio stores in town even though it's sort of a small burg. We went into one of those places that have everything from radios out of old B-29s to thirty-man life rafts. We bought little coils, tiny transistors, condensers no bigger than your thumb. All sorts of crazy stuff like that. We had a whole bike basket full of stuff and we didn't pay more than seven dollars for it.

And we also bought some crystals. We hadn't thought of crystals because they are old-fashioned and we were thinking of the latest things we could buy. Then as we were leaving, the guy said, "Why don't you take some of these crystals, they're real cheap."

I sometimes think that the guy knew what was going on in our heads and was just trying to set us straight. Well, we asked for a very small bag and he gave them to us free. Now, that was pretty nice, wasn't it?

Anyway, we kept riding north on US 120—that's a pretty road—until near dusk. It had been another beautiful day. The leaves were falling by then. We got off the main highway when we found a dirt road. We went up the road just to see where it went and ended up at a springhouse that must have been abandoned a century or so before. There was a pretty little pond fed by the spring, and it was almost completely carpeted in watercress. I love watercress, especially if I can pick it fresh myself. We made watercress sandwiches for dinner. We had nearly a half-dozen sandwiches that were about an inch thick.

After dinner we thought of smoking a joint, but to tell the truth, ever since I started talking with people, I haven't smoked too much. I don't put it down, understand, I just have other things going on in my head. Besides, I often get stopped by the cops and I don't need that sort of aggravation.

Well, we started to stick all those things we bought into our mouths and talk, but it was no good. We tried a hundred different combinations. We even wrapped our gold chains around the transistors. Still nothing. Well, it was obvious we were getting overly excited and frustrated and I reminded my buddy how we couldn't

do anything if we weren't nice and calm. We went to bed, forgetting all about the crystals that were at the bottom of my bike basket.

The next day was beautiful and clear again. We had a water-cress-omelet breakfast and my buddy then went down to the stream to wash up. I was getting our gear together but I wasn't in a rush about it. I noticed the crystals in the bottom of the basket and just popped one in my mouth and started to talk to my buddy, who was at least a hundred yards downstream from the pond.

In a minute he came running. As he came into our clearing he slowed down and got real calm. He said in a soft voice, "Buddy, you did it. I just got your message and it was loud and clear. It was beautiful, let me tell you."

Well, we laughed and threw our arms around each other in a Russian bear hug like we had just invented the wireless or something. He went back downstream and we talked back and forth for over an hour, and then the signals started to fade. We were getting too excited again. We unpacked our gear and set up camp again and just relaxed all day, and our powers slowly came back. We experimented a dozen different ways. The first day we could only talk back and forth between ourselves. Later on we learned to talk to others. It was sort of weird at first because we really didn't have too good of control over ourselves. One thing we learned was how to talk in an orderly fashion. You never know when someone will tune in on your head and if your thinking isn't orderly, your talking can really mix things up. It's surprising how disordered your thinking can be.

I once had a diamond and they really work better than a common crystal, but that stands to reason, too. I don't carry the diamond. If I'm stopped by the police and they search me and find a diamond they'll think I stole it and lock me up. I don't need that, so I just use crystals.

So within a few days we learned to have two-way talks with others. At first we could just talk to amateur radio operators and we had to lie about the equipment we had. You know how those guys spend all their time talking about their equipment, how many watts, what size mike, what make transmitter, how high an antenna tower should be, and stuff like that. We've never been able to find anyone who has a transmitter like ours except for a few friends I've taught about our system.

I really have to want to talk to someone before I turn on. I mean I'd rather have quality than quantity any day, wouldn't you?

Are we at Valley Forge already?

Well, they sure won't let me on the turnpike with this bike. I'll just go southwest on 202 to 30 and head west. Did you know that US 30 is called the Lincoln Highway and was the first road in America to go from the Atlantic to the Pacific?

I should get to Covington in a week or so if I don't get busted or something.

Sure, I'll try to talk to you. My best time is right after dinner when things settle down. I'll be around Lancaster at six. I'll make my dinner and have a cigarette and call you at seven. Since you're new at it, you should go into the woods or someplace quiet, face Lancaster, and really think about me—hard—but try not to get excited or nervous. Try not to think of anything else. If you have a gold chain, use it, but I'm not promising anything, understand? I'll try and that's all I can do.

I don't think it would help to use a crystal. It seems you have to listen a long time before you can learn to talk. That's a little like life, isn't it?

Thanks for the ride and good luck to you.

7 Ways to Fake an Orgasm

Melissa Carroll

Obligatory, a quick convulsion to let him know
you're not a necessary part of the equation, or
halfheartedly, so he knows that you don't care

enough to do the math. There's the *orgasme mélancholique*,
where memory recovers the face of a previous lover,
one who knew the terrain of your body like a carpenter

knows the texture of every tree, like Jesus, which brings us
to the religious orgasm, in which God is invoked,
a series of chants bearing his name. The pity

orgasm signifies that you're done with the romp and he can
jackhammer away, ego preserved neatly intact. The orgasm
of passion, however malingering, is for the special one who

deserves a winning smile, a fantastic hair-flip, a yelp of ecstasy.
The seventh usually occurs first, awkward and sweating against
flannel sheets in his little brother's room while his parents are

visiting the Hoover Dam. The seventh requires no fanfare, no burn.
Just a tap on the head while he's rummaging around down there
and a simple, high-pitched "Fin!"

Whether he believes you or not is none of your concern.

"7 Ways to Fake an Orgasm" was first published in *63 Channels* in 2008.

YOU MAY TALK O' GIN AND BEER WHEN YOU'RE QUARTERED SAFE OUT 'ERE, AN' YOU'RE SENT TO PENNY-FIGHTS AN' ALDERSHOT IT...
BUT WHEN IT COMES TO SLAUGHTER, YOU WILL DO YOUR WORK ON WATER, AN' YOU'LL LICK THE BLOOMIN' BOOTS OF 'IM THAT'S GOT IT!
RUDYARD KIPLING'S
GUNGA DIN
SCRIPT: JOSEPH CALABRESE
ART: HARSHO MOHAN CHATTORAJ
DIN! DIN! DIN!
YOU LIMPIN' LUMP O' BRICK-DUST, GUNGA DIN!
HI! SLIPPERY HITHERAO!
WATER, GET IT! PANEE LAO! YOU SQUIDGY-NOSED OLD IDOL, GUNGA DIN!

YOU 'EATHEN! WHERE THE MISCHIEF 'AVE YOU BEEN?
YOU PUT SOME JULDEE IN IT, OR I'LL MARROW YOU THIS MINUTE, IF YOU DON'T FILL UP MY HELMET, GUNGA DIN!

HI! AMMUNITION-MULES AN' GUNGA DIN!

DIN! DIN! DIN!
DIN! DIN! DIN!

ARMY
HOSPITAL

I 'OPE YOU LIKED YOUR DRINK...
YES, DIN! DIN! DIN! YOU LAZARUSHIAN-LEATHER GUNGA DIN! THOUGH I'VE BELTED YOU AND FLAYED YOU...
BY THE LIVIN' GAWD THAT MADE YOU, YOU'RE A BETTER MAN THAN I AM, GUNGA DIN!
WWW.THEEYESOFMARA.COM
THE END

Hidden Things

Taras Castle

The old lady tells me that inside
the belly of every songbird
there is a purse of gold coins.

We are at the butcher's shop
and she is buying a pound of liver.
It is the reason they chirp all of the time,

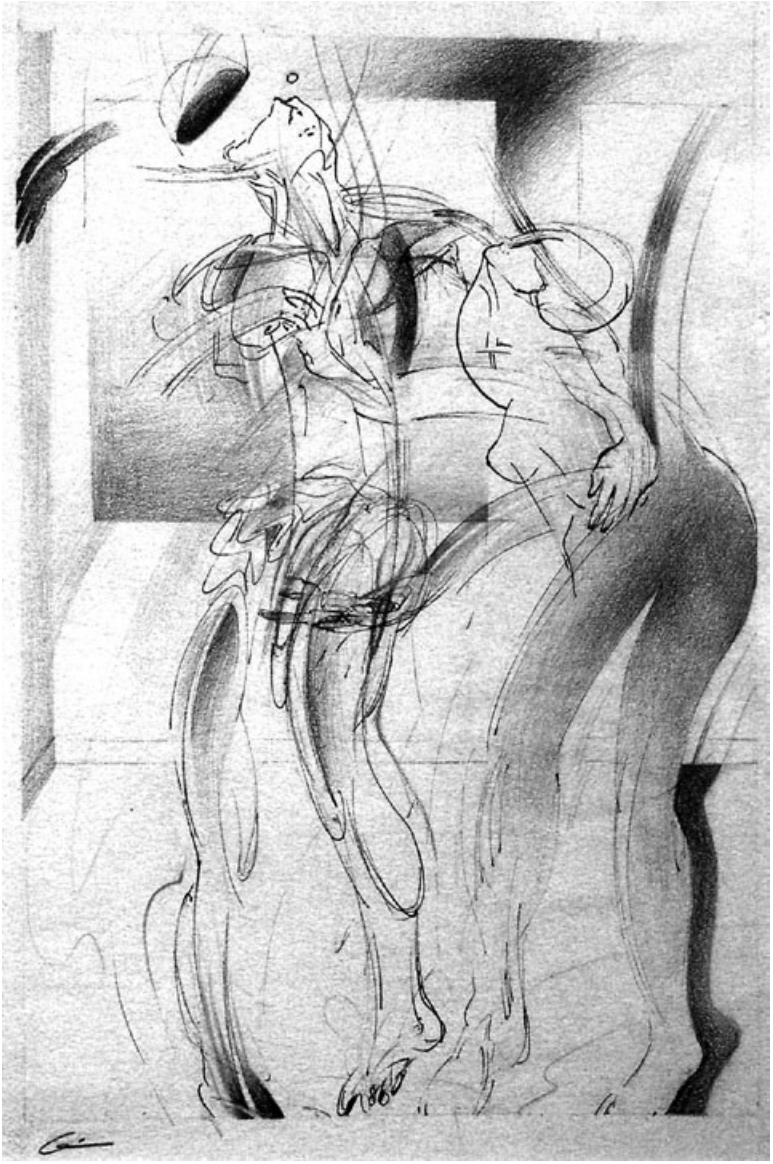
she says. They have a secret inside,
but do not know how to tell it.
She pats me on the arm and leaves

with her bag of meat clutched
against her bosom. I buy my scraps
of beef tips and head home, wondering

what secret was inside her, there
in her skull, eating away at her brain,
turning her mind into a pile of mush.

In the lamplight in front of my apartment,
I find a dead robin that has been squished
under hundreds of tires until it is nothing

but a discoloration on the street. I pull
a penny from my pocket, bend down,
and press it into the space between its wings.



Tangible-2 Jerry Goins

Internal Combustion

Lucy A. Snyder

The lady on the exercise show
talks in calories burned
every hour. 413 for tennis
if you don't have a partner;
236 for soothing Tai Chi.

I want to ask her the count
for smashing an electric dryer
on a hairy, wet bathroom floor,
blindly sobbing and screaming
until your vocal cords crack.

I bend to unplug the sparking remains
as a commercial clatters: dumb company
that tells me nothing about home repair.
The exercise lady glows and smiles,
bends herself into a clever yoga pose:
244 calories and the dog faces down.

"Internal Combustion" first appeared in Lucy A. Snyder's 2009 poetry collection *Chimeric Machines*.

Liza's Home

Kenneth Schneyer

Liza can either help Ellie clean up the mess she's just made of her cereal or help Bess clean up the mess she's just made of herself. Her nose dictates the answer; grimly, she chooses Bess, taking the old woman by the arm and steering her towards the bathroom.

"Moooooooom!" complains Ellie from behind.

"Don't call me 'Mom'," says Liza to the girl. "Do the best you can; use the towels on the refrigerator handle. I'll be right back to help you when I'm done."

Bess allows herself to be led as if she were a calf on a rope. The set of her mouth betrays that she knows she's done something wrong but has too much dignity to say so. Liza helps Bess undress, gets her into the shower, uses the hand-held nozzle to clean her off, wraps her in a towel, discards the mess, throws the soiled clothes in the wash, quickly disinfects the shower, and finds something else for her to wear. Bess tolerates all of this without complaint or thanks, looking off in another direction.

By the time Liza returns to the kitchen, Ellie has finished cleaning up the cereal, using too many paper towels which are now piled up in the trash can, not the cloth towels Liza had in mind. Ellie's trying to make herself a sandwich for her lunch bag, tongue between her teeth, brow furrowed, uneven lumps of peanut butter interspersed with craters and rips on the bread. Liza can read the desperation; she moves in to take over.

"Thank you," says Ellie in a small voice.

"Good job, honey. Soon you'll get the hang of this." Liza smooths out the peanut butter, pastes together the severed bread.

"I was worried about the bus."

"I know you were. That was the right thing to do, making your sandwich for yourself; I'm proud of you." She flips the undamaged top piece onto the repaired lower half, tosses it into a plastic bag, and puts the whole thing into a paper bag with a hastily-washed apple. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to do it myself. I was taking care of Bess."

"You're always taking care of Bess," says Ellie, putting on her winter coat.

"Except when I'm taking care of you," says Liza, in what she intends to be a jocular tone, but isn't.

"It's not my fault," says Ellie, so quietly that Liza can barely hear.

"No, no, of course it's not," says Liza quickly, pulling Ellie into a fierce hug, feeling the zipper of Ellie's hood bite into her neck. "It's not your fault; it was *never* your fault. You know that, don't you?" In the back of her head, a voice says, *It's my fault; I did this to you.*

"Yes, I know," says Ellie in her ear. "I...." She stops, inhales twice. "I miss my real mom."

"I know, I know you do. I'm sorry. But you know I love you, right?"

Ellie pulls away from Liza and nods gravely. Then a muscle twitches near her ear. "The bus," she says.

"Off you go," says Liza, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Ellie only flinches a little. Inwardly Liza flinches too; it still feels vaguely indecent.

As the cold air from the door reaches into the house, Liza watches Ellie step into the bus with a mindfulness that's only dimly familiar. *When do we outgrow such things?*

Bess's wavering voice comes from behind her. "Lovely girl, that. What's her name again?"

"Ellie," says Liza for the twentieth time this week, turning to face her.

Bess perks up at that. "Yes?" she says expectantly.

Slowly enunciating each word, Liza repeats, "The girl's name is Ellie."

The look on Bess's face is as delighted as if she has just witnessed a magic trick. "Ellie!" She laughs. "Ellie! Fancy that!" Then she squints at Liza.

"And what's your name, dear? I'm sorry, it just keeps slipping my mind." Bess's voice is sociable, light, but her eyes are terrified.

"Liza," says Liza, for the third time this morning.

Her name sparks no recognition.

- - -

Mark warned her; he told her to wait.

The tiny, overly-bright project office they shared in the engineering lab didn't give room to pace, so he fidgeted instead, grabbing staple removers and rulers and dropping them again. In a tight voice, he said, "The displacement equations don't resolve in the return direction." His tone was halfway between lecturing and pleading; he picked up a pencil and gripped it tightly in both hands. "You might wind up somewhere you don't speak the language, a hundred years too early. And what if you change the past, what if you're not here in that other future? What if you erase yourself? Or what if there are two of you, one who remembers and one who doesn't? What'll you do then?"

Liza flicked her hand dismissively. "What if a white rabbit pulls a pocket watch from his waistcoat and tells me he's late?"

"Liza—"

"Well, it's all speculation, isn't it? You're making up every disaster that could happen, just to talk me out of it."

"You know that's— These *are* real-world permutations of some of the solutions to the equations; there are half a dozen others. There's even the possibility of a bounce: the cycle repeats, sends you God knows where, then brings you back here. Or maybe it doesn't bring you back at all."

The pencil in his hands snapped. He threw it at the wastebasket. Liza stared at it, willing the two pieces to come back together and form a whole. They stayed broken.

He continued, "You need to be patient. We won't stop working on the displacer. As the data comes in, we'll eliminate solutions. In five, ten years, I'm sure we'll be able to drop you exactly where you need to be, in the right time and place, and yank you back without a hitch. But if you displace before we've solved those problems, if I lose you, then I'll be working on it alone, and I'll probably never get it right. You'll be stranded for good. Why take the risk now?"

She hugged herself as if she were cold. "Because my mother died at fifty-two and my father at fifty-eight. I don't know that I *have* ten years, Mark."

They argued past two in the morning, getting nowhere. Mark's resistance was more than professional, and it touched her. But for Liza, the whole point of the displacer, the justification for engendering it, giving birth to it, enslaving her adulthood

to it, was the chance to cheat fate, to prevent the inevitable, to repair injustice.

Eventually Liza gave in, or at least pretended to. Mark could not understand the unscientific, untechnical urgency she felt.

Not too long after that, he had dinner at her apartment, the only time ever. He had been trying, in his tentative, roundabout way, to nudge her into a romance, and she invited him, though she couldn't cook worth a damn and usually avoided company. When she thought about it, her disinclination puzzled Liza herself. Why not have a companion? Why be alone?

When he entered the apartment, he stood for a moment in the doorway, the light from the common hall streaming in behind him. His eyes widened in a friendly, nervous way, and Liza realized that he thought the lowered lighting was meant to create a romantic mood.

"I always keep the lights down and the heat up," she said. "Does it bother you?"

"No, not if you don't mind my taking off my sweater. Otherwise I'll boil."

Boiling was pretty much what she was doing by way of preparing dinner, and she nodded quickly and went back to the kitchen to see to the pots. When she returned, he was in his cream-colored shirt, sleeves rolled up past the elbows, staring at the photos on the wall.

"These are all the same girl," he said. "You?"

"No, that's Dinah."

She said nothing more. Mark reached over as if to adjust the frame of one of the pictures, but stopped at Liza's quick little intake of breath. She smiled apologetically, ashamed.

He ventured again, "Your niece?"

She shook her head. "She died when she was eight. An accident. More than forty years, now."

"I'm sorry." He waited, but she said nothing more, going back into the kitchen, coming out with pasta and a sauce that she'd heated up from a package.

Mark found nice things to say about the dinner, and tried to talk about other things too, but his voice kept trailing off as he was distracted by the shrine on the walls. For her part, Liza was wondering how she felt about this man sitting across from her,

trying to imagine what it would be like to have him in that chair every morning.

Eventually he frowned at her, knitting his brow as if trying to think of how to phrase something. Then he said, "Forty years is a long time."

"I suppose."

"Most people—I don't think most people would have so many pictures, not after so long." His voice was neutral, but she could feel his probing, like when he was running a circuit test in the lab.

"I guess."

"Do you—do you know why you've got so many photos of Dinah, and none of anybody else?"

Liza felt tension in her jaw, but tried to relax. She knew he was trying to avoid saying it wasn't normal to have a gallery devoted to a girl long dead. Liza would have liked to be able to explain herself to him, but some angry part of her mind snapped that it was natural, it was normal, who wouldn't, to keep Dinah's memory alive? Who wouldn't think of her every day? Who wouldn't try to save her life?

In that instant of clarity, she realized that, feelings for him or no, she'd have slept with Mark if it had been necessary so she could keep working on the displacer. It was a wild, weird thought; the project was easily as much hers as his, maybe more, and Mark was not the sort even to envisage such a quid pro quo. Where had that idea come from?

Dinner ended, and they made pleasant noises about doing it again.

- - -

Before sunrise, Liza dressed in vintage clothes from thrift shops, pocketed old money she'd been saving for years, and made her way to the lab while Mark was probably still alone in his bed. The morning rays were just beginning to push through the brilliant red-and-orange leaves as she entered the project room.

She'd already completed the calculations, but she checked them again, adjusting frequencies and field focus. Her touch was light and soothing over the pathways and controls, the only children she would ever have. Saying the closest thing to a prayer she'd uttered since her own childhood, she began the sequence.

Every sense overloaded.

Searing light ripped through her closed lids, shrieking chords tore at her ears, bitter metallic saliva engulfed her tongue, and her nostrils reeked with the stench of putrefaction. Worst, her spine felt like it was being burned from the inside with acid. Had she been able to move, she would have screamed.

As quickly as it had started, it stopped. Liza stumbled and nearly fell into a brick wall, cool against the suddenly-hot air, dark compared to the brightness in front of her. She could not tell how long the torture had lasted; 'how long' was probably a meaningless question anyway.

She was on the sidewalk in front of a shopping center, facing a parking lot washed out with summer sun; heat waves jiggled the cars, which were longer, more stately than the cars she knew best. More of them were on the busy boulevard beyond the parking lot. Her heart pounded; she recognized that street. And, yes, although she was against a wall, in the shade, she felt the oppressive steaminess of a southeast-Michigan summer.

A glass door opened three yards to her right and a whisper of drier air reached her, carrying a hint of popcorn and newly-sized fabric. She knew that smell, though she'd forgotten it. She was outside the K-mart at Beech and Eight Mile, less than two miles from where she needed to go. *Bullseye, Mark!*

How about the temporal displacement? Nearby, she found a newspaper vendor, fished out the right coins, and looked at the date at the top of the paper:

Tuesday, July 25, 1967

"Perfect, perfect!" *Down to the very day! Down to the*— She needed to find a clock.

Inside the K-mart, the wall clock said it was half-past twelve. Later than she'd planned, but early enough, just barely. If she waited for a bus (and now she remembered there were few buses in this part of Detroit in 1967), she'd be too late. She went to the corner, crossed Beech Road and turned right, and began to walk.

The heat moved around her like a living thing as she followed the road down to the bridge and up the next hill; drugged bees drifted and dipped around her. Close as she was to the border of Detroit itself, in this era things turned rural pretty fast. The road was dirt and gravel, coated in oil once a year to keep the dust down; she'd remembered it wasn't paved, but had forgotten the

oil. Now the thick, tarry smell called up memories of complicated rainbows in little puddles after a summer shower. But it was difficult, walking on a gravel road in shoes like hers; try as she might, she couldn't avoid all the slippery rocks, and she twisted her left ankle on the way up the hill.

As she continued north, limping slightly, a hearse passed her on the right, followed by a procession of slow-moving cars with little flags. Not so soon, surely? Was she too late already? But no, this was only the first of the corteges. There would be four that day, all heading to the Catholic cemetery at the end of the road. Four funerals in one day would be unusual for that cemetery, but not in July of 1967.

She still had time.

When she reached the Marathon station at the top of the hill, she bought a Coke from a vending machine, mopping her brow. Her blouse was sticking to her and her neck was coated with sweat. The clock in the station said it was nearly one in the afternoon; it would be happening soon. She had to keep on.

She crossed Nine Mile Road, noticing the lack of a traffic light and trying to recall when they'd installed it. There was nothing on this corner now except the gas station; down the street she could just make out the junior high school, still new.

Another half mile, just after the second hearse overtook her, and she saw the house: a tan-brick ranch on a sleepy side street, sporting a circular drive that reached both Beech and the side street. Dutch elms flanked the driveway, and playing under one of them were two little girls, aged eight and seven.

Two. Dinah and Ellie.

Ellie was there.

Now that she saw her, it was obvious to Liza that Ellie would be, should be, there at this moment. But why hadn't she remembered? What did she think she remembered instead?

All her plans had involved Dinah, what to do about Dinah; no thought of Ellie had ever crossed her mind. She wanted to take Dinah in her arms and shield her, but, watching Ellie's serious, lively face, Liza felt nauseous. It made sense, and it didn't make sense, and something was keeping the pieces from fitting.

The girls hadn't seen her yet. She hung back, moving behind one of the old apple trees that still decorated the neighborhood. Her foot slipped on a green apple rotting on the neighbors' lawn,

and she twisted the same ankle again. She bit her lip so as not to cry out.

Her plan had been to convince Dinah to go inside before the fourth cortege came along. All right, she'd get both of them to go. They were pointing at the second procession as it passed. Yesterday, Liza knew, they'd also seen a series of solemn cars and little flags; they were speculating, little-girl fashion, as to how long it would be before the next one.

If she was to persuade both girls at once, she would need more time. On the other hand, if she arrived too early, they'd have time to talk to their mother and come back outside. Maybe the arrival of a strange adult would send them screeching into the house for their mother anyway? Probably not; they'd both be curious, especially Ellie.

Ellie. Ellie was here.

The third cortege arrived. Liza stepped out from behind the apple tree, limping more than ever, and crossed towards the girls under the elm.

They were playing a game now: Who can pick up the darkest of the oil-covered rocks from the road and run back to the tree with it before the next car comes? Ellie, the younger, was taunting Dinah. "You're *so slow*! I'm gonna win!"

You're so slow. You're so slow. Images, sounds, poured into Liza's head like the bursting of a balloon filled with water. She nearly fell over with vertigo.

You're so slow. Ellie, teasing Dinah. Dinah, so angry, so easily provoked by her little sister. *You're so slow.* Dinah staying on the road longer, longer, Ellie jeering, "You're so slow!" Then there would be the blowout, the car swerving, sliding leftward out of the cortege—

Ellie's fault. It *was* Ellie's fault. Liza stood transfixed, unable to move.

The girls saw her. "Who are you?" Ellie called.

"Liza," Liza grunted, not really focusing, not knowing what to do. The third cortege finished passing.

"Dinah," she said, trying to get control of her voice. "Go inside and see your mother. You too, Ellie."

"Why?" demanded Ellie as Dinah obediently started to rise.

"Do as I say," said Liza, a harsh sound coming from her throat. Dinah ran into the house.

"You're not my mother," said Ellie. "I don't have to do what you say."

Liza could hear the last cortege coming up the road. "Ellie, *go in*."

"How do you know my name?" asked Ellie. "I don't know you."

"There's no time," said Liza. The car would slide all the way to the elm tree; Ellie now stood directly in its path.

Desperate, she tried again. "Ellie, come here, come around the tree! It's important!"

Ellie stood indecisively. Liza ran over, grabbed Ellie, and pulled her away from the tree, just as she heard the tire explode like a pistol shot. Ellie screamed. The oversized blue sedan slid on the oily gravel and spun into the elm with a smashing, tearing sound, missing them by only a yard, and the tree snapped and began to fall. Ellie screamed again, clutching frantically at Liza.

Liza put her arms around the girl, trying to speak softly, but her own voice was shaking too much—

Then she felt the agony down the center of her spine, saw the blinding light, smelled the reek. Before she could push Ellie away, the same, unbearable sensory flood returned. She couldn't feel anything but the pain, couldn't hear anything but the awful chords, but she knew Ellie was still clutching her, screaming into eternity.

When it stopped, the girl whimpered and clung to the woman, hiding her face in Liza's blouse.

They hadn't moved. They were still on the lawn of the house. But the elm tree was straight and undamaged; the bushes around them had a thousand pink-and-white spring flowers. The breeze was warm, not hot, and thick with scent.

Two little girls played on a swing set, a four-year-old and a five-year-old. Their mother was close by.

Ellie and Dinah.

"The cycle repeats," Liza croaked.

They had come backwards three years, to before the accident had happened, would happen. This was a result of the displacement echo Mark had feared.

At the sound of Liza's words, the girls' mother looked up. Ellie, the Ellie who was with Liza, shrieked, "*Mommy!*"

Liza dug her fingers into the girl's shoulder, not letting her go. At the same moment, startled by the sudden yell, the other

Ellie, the Ellie on the swing, fell off. Her leg bent sharply at the wrong angle; Liza imagined she could hear the *snap*. The smaller Ellie cried out. The larger Ellie screamed.

And it all vanished: swing, mother, Dinah, Ellie with a broken leg. In their place were torment and madness in her eyes and ears, as if she'd never experienced anything else.

Then the pain stopped again, and did not return. Liza and Ellie shivered in sudden cold.

It seemed to be late fall, with an unforgiving wind under a weak gray sky that barely lit the unfamiliar street and buildings around them. She stared at the cars on the street; they were smaller, quieter than any she'd ever seen, traveling on narrow roads full of pedestrians in strange clothes.

This wasn't where she'd started.

"Where are we?" whimpered Ellie. Liza put her arm around the girl to keep her warm, but Ellie pulled away, staring at Liza as if she were a ghost.

They walked, Liza limping, until they happened upon an electronic kiosk with the date, time, and weather flashing on it:

Sat 20 Nov 2049
14:23
Cloudy 10° C

"Take me home," said Ellie, then started to cry. "Please take me home."

The date flashed over and over, as if to remind Liza of her folly.

- - -

Mark had been right. A final forward differential exactly matching twice the initial jump, which told Liza which of the multiple solutions to the equations was the right one. He'd be happy to know.

She found him, finally, in a twenty-year-old obituary in the local public library database; he had succumbed to an epidemic, unmarried, leaving no family. Alone.

She could find no record of the displacer—no published papers, no news articles, no correspondence. Perhaps it had never existed in this timeline, or perhaps Mark never resumed work on it after she abused the technology. Liza probably could rebuild the displacer if she had access to funding, if she could get the support of a lab, if she were someone anyone could trust. But what was she

to say, that she was an engineer recently arrived from 2008, courtesy of her own time machine? She'd be lucky not to find herself locked up and drugged. And what would happen to Ellie?

In the eighty-two years since the fourth cortege, the two of them had outlived everyone who might have known Liza, everyone who'd ever heard of Ellie. They looked for Dinah, but she'd died of cancer in 2010. *Forty-three extra years,* Liza told herself, tried to tell herself. *I gave her forty-three extra years, even if I'll never see her.*

Collectors bought her vintage money at a premium, but the proceeds still ran out quickly. They were exiles, alone and without succor—until Bess.

They found Bess almost by accident. Liza didn't really believe the address listing when she saw it, and they visited the little house, spending their last few dollars, more out of dogged desperation than hope. But there Bess was—falling apart, nearly helpless, her dwelling a foul-smelling, chaotic wreck—a crazy old woman who should not, could not, be there at all.

Liza asked Bess about her past, trying to reconstruct how she came to be in this place, in this time. Bess's memory was already so mangled that Liza got nothing but vague allusions to people and places she didn't recognize—except for the occasional calm, chilling reference to Dinah. When Liza tried to follow up on those tantalizing hints, the responses only left her confused.

Yet Bess recognized something: she seemed to know Ellie and repeatedly asked where they'd met. Not Liza, though; Liza was a stranger.

Nonetheless, here was a place of refuge, the only place to which Liza or Ellie had any claim. And Bess had a claim on them too: having seen the squalor and filth in which she lived, Liza found it impossible to turn away. Quickly and quietly they moved in with her, the woman and the girl, and Liza, who'd never taken care of anyone, found herself looking after a child and an increasingly-incompetent nonagenarian at once.

Even with technical skills as badly outdated as hers, some rapid self-education qualified Liza for work checking designs for performance parameters and component tolerances. It didn't pay much, but she could do it from home—for this was home, now, and she was needed. Bess could not be trusted on her own; Ellie, now enrolled in a school on the strength of partially-forged

identity papers, needed to return from each bewildering day to a home, a family.

Except that they weren't a family.

- - -

Liza is preparing a tuna casserole. Bess and Ellie are sitting at a rickety card table, playing checkers. It's something they have in common, and Ellie's impetuousness and inexperience are matched by Bess's wandering mind. Neither of them wants Liza's help in the game, and neither wants to play it with her.

It's a cold winter evening, the sky already dark; the warmth of the kitchen before dinner makes them grateful.

Bess gazes at Ellie over the chessboard. "What's your name?" she asks. "You look familiar."

Ellie keeps her face steady. Liza's proud of her; it isn't easy for an eight-year-old to hear the same question asked over and over and not react.

"I'm Ellie," says Ellie. "Short for Elizabeth."

Bess's eyes widen in wonder. "So am I! I'm Ellie!"

Ellie takes a breath before answering. "No, you're Bess. Bess is short for Elizabeth too."

"Elizabeth! What a coincidence! That's my name."

"I know," says Ellie, her eyes closing briefly.

"And what's *her* name?" Bess asks in a conspiratorial whisper, as if Liza can't hear her.

Ellie's lip trembles. "Liza. That's—" But she cannot finish the sentence.

Bess laughs and claps her hands, as if this is the best joke she's ever heard.

Liza has tracked down documents and pieced much of the older woman's history together. Sometime, somewhere, when this Elizabeth Hanover outgrew Ellie, she became Bess instead of Liza.

Ellie is familiar; Ellie is Elizabeth as Bess remembers herself.

But Liza has come to understand that Bess's history has been far different than Liza's own. No research into relativistic displacement, no obsessive drive towards a technology of meddling and redemption. Without Dinah's death as a spur, Bess ended up teaching French at the local community college, performing competently and unremarkably for nearly fifty years. No wonder she doesn't recognize Liza.

But in this they are alike: Bess has always been alone.

If any fellow teacher ever approached her in the same shy way that Mark approached Liza, nothing came of it. The only greeting cards or keepsakes Bess has are Dinah's, and only two or three of those.

Liza goes back to making the tuna casserole. She doesn't much care for it herself, not anymore, but it's comforting to Ellie, and of course Liza knows how to make it exactly as her mother did. Comfort food for Liza, now, would be sushi or tapas, foods she ate in college or with colleagues like Mark, foods that neither Bess nor Ellie enjoys. Bess likes the tuna casserole as Ellie does.

On her shoulder, Liza feels Bess's hand, with the arthritic bulges in the joints of the thumb and forefinger. She turns around to see the labyrinthine, age-scarred face, the face she can't bear to look at, the face that will one day stare at her out of a mirror.

"You can't help where I'm going," says Bess, grasping Liza's shoulder so hard it hurts.

"What?"

"You can't help where you're going either." It's singsong, like a nursery rhyme.

"I don't understand." She needs to get the casserole in the oven.

"You can't help where *she's* going either," says Bess, gesturing at Ellie.

Liza's frightened now. Nonsense. Crazy, crazy old woman.

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth," sings Bess. "Elizabeth's going to die. Three times." She laughs.

"I know." Liza's trembling, unable to keep the casserole steady. She lets it clunk down on the counter.

"You can't help any of it."

"I *know*!" Now Liza is crying. Bess takes her into a spindly, motherly hug.

"Hush now," she says, in the same lullaby voice.

Liza begins to sob outright, speaking in gasps. "I'm so *stupid*. It's all my fault."

"Yes, it is," says Bess agreeably.

"I took her mother. I took everything."

"You," says Bess, pulling away and smiling. "You're her mother."

"Not. Nobody's mother."

Liza releases herself to her tears, allowing Bess to pat her. After a few minutes she feels Ellie's arms round her stomach from behind, Ellie's head against her back.

"It's okay, Liza," says Ellie's voice, vibrating in her belly. "It's okay. I'll be okay."

"You—" Liza hiccups, tries again. "You can call me 'Mom' if you want to."

"Okay," says Ellie, her voice trembling. Then she gives Liza one last squeeze, takes Bess's hand, and leads her back to the checkerboard.

The Prettiest Crayon in the Box

Heather Lindsley

Donald sits down two barstools away from me, the closest acceptable position in a nearly-empty bar. Donald will want to talk, I can see that, but he'll be polite about it.

If his name isn't Donald, it might as well be. He looks like a man who would answer to Donald. His wife and his boss and his mother probably call him that, all the people who resist calling him Don.

He's wearing the suit of a mid-level sales rep who just met with a client. Maybe it went well. Maybe it didn't.

Donald probably has a wife and kids at home. I suspect them of making cookies. Tomorrow Donald will fly back to homemade cookies. Right now he's about to talk to me; tonight he will pick up a prostitute near his hotel. But tomorrow there will be cookies.

Donald's not quite looking at me when he says, "You eat beets?" and I wonder if that's what he sells. I've never met anyone who sold beets, so I'm starting to like him, just for the novelty. Someday I could say, *My friend Donald sells beets.*

"Yeah, sometimes."

"You like 'em?"

"Yeah, they're okay."

"Why?"

These are questions I've never been asked. I'm warming up to Don (I decide to use the name I imagine he prefers—it's the least I can do). I have to think about my answer.

"It's like you taste the actual nutrients they're giving you when you eat them. They taste like iron. Like rare steak."

"You mean they taste like blood?"

That hadn't occurred to me. "I guess that's true, yeah. And they have that dark red color."

"No, no, no." Don shakes his head. "Different color. Different color altogether. Beets are cerise."

"Cerise?"

Don betrays a gentle impatience. "Reddish purple. Beet red, you know."

"Oh. Yeah." By now I'm sure that Don is a beet salesman, or maybe an organic dye salesman. Why else would my new friend Don know and care about cerise?

"It's the betacyanin. That's the name of the pigment in beets."

"Really? Where'd you learn that?" I'm not doubting his veracity or asking him to quote sources. I'm just feeling the edge of a story here, and I want to give Don a way in. A man who knows to sit two barstools away will wait for an invitation.

"I looked it up. I'm not so big on vegetables myself. My wife makes me eat them. One night, about a year back, she made roasted beets. Fresh, not from a can. Saw it on a cooking show. Served 'em with chicken and potatoes and whatnot. I ate 'em at dinner, and they were fine. Not great, but fine. I liked the potatoes better.

"So I wake up in the middle of the night, and I'm hungry. I go down to the refrigerator, looking for leftovers. No chicken. No potatoes. Just those beets. So I eat 'em. I end up eating, what, three beets altogether. Big ones."

Don takes a roll of antacids out of his pocket and offers me one before taking two himself and washing them down with half his beer.

"The next morning I get up to pee, and it's pink. Bright pink. And I'm worried, you know—a man my age, he sees pink piss, he's gonna worry. You never know. It could be anything. They tell you to get exams, the doctors do, but who in the hell wants to do that? You put it off and put it off and then all of the sudden one day, bam! Pink piss. And then you're dead."

I imagine Don standing in his bathroom, confronting mortality with his dick in his hand.

"But all of the sudden I realize, it's the beets. The beets are making me piss pink. It's not blood, it's the betacyanin. I looked it up. And I piss pink all day. At home, at work, in the bar—all damn day."

Don's at a urinal, a pink ribbon connecting him to the deodorant cake. The cake keeps its pink, Don-given tint until it dissolves entirely, a short-lived, soluble monument to his existence.

"Wow. Pink piss all day."

"That's nothing. That night, I take a shit...."

"No—"

"Yeah. Magenta. There on the white paper, like it was drawn with the prettiest crayon in the box. Not a trace of—what's that ugly yellowy brown?—burnt umber. Just magenta. And cerise in the bowl, making the water as pink as my piss."

"I had no idea." And really, I didn't. "Beets do that?"

"That's the thing, they don't do it to everybody. There's a gene some people have; it keeps them from breaking down beta-cyanin, so it goes right through your system. It comes out just as cerise as it went in."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, and here's the kicker: It's recessive, this gene. You know what recessive means?"

"Sure. Like blue eyes."

I get a quick, approving nod. "Exactly. Blue eyes, the ability to piss pink and shit magenta after a bellyful of beets—both your parents have to have it in them, even if they don't know it."

"The hidden capacity to breed pink-pissing children."

He chuckles. "And magenta shitters," he says. "So shit's one of those things, you know? It's symbolic. The word gets thrown around a lot. 'Piece of shit.' 'Everything turns to shit.' 'Life's shit.' 'Shit for brains.' Shit's about as bad as it can get, right?"

"Right. You're right."

"But I gotta say, when I saw that magenta streak, it cheered me up. It's not like it was something I'd want to spend a lot of time around, not like it was especially...attractive, or anything. Don't get me wrong, it was still shit. But it was better than the usual shit. It was...rosier. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it does."

We sit in silence, pondering the sudden cerise grace bestowed upon something as humble as shit, the random genetic gift bestowed on someone as humble as Don.

But there's something about the silence that tells me there's more. Don, a paragon of bar etiquette, a man I've grown to admire in a remarkably short time (even though I believe now more than ever that he will pay for sex before he goes home to cookies), Don will wait for prompting. It doesn't need to be much. Eye contact will do it.

"So here it is," Don says. "Beets are okay. I like 'em fine. But I don't like 'em enough to eat them two or three times a week. Which is what I do."

"But they're good for you."

"I'm not eating them because they're good for me. I'm eating them so the world will seem a little less burnt-umber shitty."

He doesn't get that's what I meant when I said they're good for him.

"Do you think that's weird?" He seems almost nervous, like he cares what I think, like maybe he's never told anyone about this, like my opinion means something. Or maybe he tells someone at every bar he hits when he's out selling whatever it is he sells, but still, my opinion counts. He's looking me in the eye.

"No," I say, looking back. "No, I don't."

Don is trying to make the world a more beautiful place, bless his beet-eating heart.

He asks the bartender to call him a cab, downs the rest of his beer, gets up, and puts on his coat.

He nods his head to me once. "Betacyanin," he says.

"Betacyanin," I reply, and he's gone.

Contributor Biographies

Alicia Adams is an MFA student at California State University, Long Beach.

Kevin Brown won the *Permafrost* literary journal's Midnight Sun Fiction Contest and the *Touchstone* fiction competition and placed third in the *Cadenza* Open Short Story Competition. He has had work published in *Alligator Juniper*, *New Delta Review*, *subTerrain*, *Rosebud*, *Space and Time*, *UNDERGROUND voices*, *Dark Gothic Resurrected Magazine*, and *Morpheus Tales*, among others. He was recently the recipient of a Walton Family Foundation Fellowship in fiction. Visit him at his website: www.invisiblebodies.com.

Joseph Calabrese is a freelance screenwriter. He was one of the winners at Slamdance Film Festival in 2004 for his religious thriller *Second Coming* and, as a result, has received interest from several producers. His action fantasy script *The Eyes of Mara* has recently been adapted into a graphic novel entitled *Her Majesty's Bulldog Brigade*, with art by Harsho Mohan Chattoraj and Brendan Keough, published by Chimaera Comics. The "Gunga Din" short comic is a spinoff from that project and features characters found in *HMBB*. Visit www.bulldogbrigade.com for more info on the project.

Melissa Carroll scribbles verses on wet cocktail napkins, argues philosophy over vodka tonics, and channels energy through her hands. She also writes in third person from time to time. In 2005 and 2006 she won first place for poetry in the student journal *Quilt*, and has also been published in *FEILE-FESTA*, *Ascent Aspirations Magazine*, *In the Mist*, *63 Channels*, and *South Tampa Magazine*. Melissa is an MFA student at University of South Florida. For a good time, visit zenontherocks.blogspot.com.

Zac Carter: currently residing in las vegas. currently writing in fits. currently speaking at length on obscure topics to disinterested ears. can be reached at deathtohemingway@gmail.com.

Taras Castle lives in a filthy apartment and is engaged in a continuous battle with the vermin of New York City. He also has a rat and cockroach problem.

Harsho Mohan Chattoraj is a graphic novelist and illustrator based in Kolkata, India. He's worked in the comics medium for seven years, on individual projects and for clients in India, the UK, and the US. His comics published in 2009 include *Operation Military* and *Charlz of Marz*, both published in the US, and *Around the Swiss World in 20 Days*, published in India

and Switzerland. Harsho also has work experience as a journalist, visualizer, storyboard artist, voice-over artist, and promo producer, but has always been a fan of comics, since his first dosage of *Asterix* at the wee age of five.

Tristan D'Agosta grew up in a small fishing village in Maine and now lives in New Jersey. Some of his poems and stories have appeared in *hoi polloi*, *Poesia*, *Barnwood Magazine*, *Cause & Effect*, *Pocket Change*, and others.

After two years pursuing teaching and travel in central Europe and the Middle East, **T. F. Davenport** has returned to the womb of the university. He is pursuing a doctorate in cognitive science at the University of California, San Diego. His fiction has appeared in *ChiZine*, *Nature*, and other publications.

Steven J Dines lives in Aberdeen, Scotland. His work has appeared in over sixty print and online publications. His story "Unzipped" (published in *GUD* Issue 1) was selected as a Notable Story in *storySouth*'s Million Writers Award and received an Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror 2008*. He is currently writing his first novel. For more information (and stories), visit stevenjdines.blogspot.com.

Geordie Williams Flantz is an alum of the Oberlin College creative writing program and a current MFA candidate at Purdue University. His work has previously appeared in *r.kv.r.y.*

Studying with Vince Mariani (Texas), Fernando de Szsyslo (Peru), and Juan Antonio Roda (Colombia) in the 1970s and '80s, **Jerry Goins** is a Pan-American anatomist, always looking at the body upside out. In this way, his terror, joy, and tenderness toward the mortal form increase daily. The drawing *Tangible-2* stopped before it turned into a painting. It did, however, insert itself into a poem by Rumi, in the *Corazón Cinco* suite: www.jerrygoins.com/corazon_cinco.html.

Jason Hardy hails from southeastern Massachusetts, where he spends his daylight hours writing and editing for an appraisal firm. He writes fictional tales of woe when more respectable folks are sleeping, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Afterburn SF*, *Arkham Tales*, *Coyote Wild*, and *Necrotic Tissue*.

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming is a Hong Kong-born writer currently based in London, UK. She edited *Hong Kong UWriting: An Anthology* (2006) and coedited *Love & Lust* (Chameleon Press Ltd., 2008). She is also an assistant poetry

editor of *Sotto Voce* and a founding coeditor of *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* (www.asiancha.com), the first Hong Kong online literary journal. More at www.sighming.com.

Paul Hogan: Eighty-two years old. Perfect health. Visited forty-nine countries. Two years in the Merchant Marine in WWII. Two trips on a ship carrying German POWs to Europe and GIs home. Eleventh Airborne Division during Korean War. Peace Corps Regional Director in Colombia during Viet Nam War. Finishing his tenth year as a Township Supervisor. Three kids, third wife (this one's a keeper). Designed and built over four hundred playgrounds; two books on the subject. Author of "A Philadelphia Childhood." Designs and makes furniture. Web site: www.Triax2000.com. Articles in numerous papers and magazines on travel and play, including *The New York Times*.

Richard Kadrey is a freelance photographer and writer living in San Francisco. He photographs under the name Kaos Beauty Klinik. His new novel is *Sandman Slim* (Eos, 2009).

Paul J. Kocak is a former caddy, editor, bagger, teacher, hitchhiker, and seminarian. For now, he writes, edits, develops business, and ardently advocates for the serial comma.

Isabel Cooper Kunkle was educated in Rhode Island and currently lives in Cambridge, MA. In her spare time, she reads a lot, especially since she takes the subway everywhere; she also enjoys martial arts, video games, and watching trashy TV accompanied by a fair amount of alcohol. Other short stories of hers include "Higher Education," which appeared in the Winter 2008 issue of *Spacesuits and Sixguns Magazine*, and "Stone and Fire," which appeared in the January 2009 issue of *Allegory*.

Rose Lemberg was born on the outskirts of the former Habsburg Empire. She spent many happy years in Berkeley, CA, where she also received her doctorate. Rose is a new professor at a large Midwestern university. She lives in a beautiful modernist house with her family and a small army of books. Her fiction has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and the *Warrior Wisewoman* anthology and her poetry in *Mythic Delirium*, *Goblin Fruit*, *Abyss & Apex*, *GUD*, and other venues.

Heather Lindsley is a geographically-conflicted Southern Californian who keeps most of her stuff in Seattle while living in London. Her stories have been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Year's Best Science Fiction* #12.

The cover features the art of **MichaelO**, an internationally-recognized digital artist who specializes in vivid, eye-popping imagery. Michael's goal is to create art that is more than just a pretty picture, by focusing on unique concepts that tell a story. Normally we would ask you not to judge a book by its cover, but in this case, we'll take it as a compliment!

Sydney Padua is an animator, story artist, and tiresome bore working mostly in visual effects in London. She started drawing comics by accident and is still trying to figure out how to stop. *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* is a monstrous perversion of nature, viewable by horrified bystanders at 2dgoggles.com.

Jon Radlett will photograph anything, and if it's got wings, will photograph it repeatedly! Jon loves candid photography, but also experiments with still-life and tableau work. You can inspect the results at www.flickr.com/photos/jonpumpkin. When not hiding behind bushes with a camera, Jon is a teacher and psychologist in Kent, England, happily married with two cats.

Kenneth Schneyer's fiction has appeared in *Nature Physics*, *Odyssey: Adventures in Science*, *Niteblade*, *FLASHSHOT*, *Nanoism*, *Thaumatrope*, and the anthology *Misfit Mirror*. He is a 2009 graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop. During his strange career, he has worked as an actor, corporate lawyer, dishwasher, judicial clerk, typist, IT project manager, and Assistant Dean of a technology school. He was born in Michigan but now lives in Rhode Island with his wife (ritual artist Janice Okoomian), their children, and a narcissistic cat. He blogs, sort of, at ken-schneyer.livejournal.com. See his current bibliography at www.writertopia.com/profiles/KennethSchneyer.

Lucy A. Snyder is the author of the upcoming Del Rey novel *Spellbent* and the collections *Sparks and Shadows*, *Chimeric Machines*, and *Installing Linux on a Dead Badger*. Her writing has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Farthing*, *Masques V*, *ChiZine*, *GUD*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. You can learn more about her at www.lucysnyder.com.

Paul Spinrad is a writer and editor based in San Francisco. He is Projects Editor for *MAKE* magazine and the author of *The VJ Book: Inspirations and Practical Advice for Live Visuals Performance*.

Andrew N Tisbert is a miserable sonofabitch in Los Angeles with a band called Attic of Love and fiction that can be found if you look for it.

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