

penumbra



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“R_{}f_pn_ef_li_cL,”*
we gasped.

**Is There Life Out There?
Do We Care?**

plus work by

Nicola Brayan • Nora
Weston • James Rumpel •
Michelle M. Mead • Shikhar
Dixit • Christina Sng • Mark
Bilsborough • Desmond
Rhae • Holly Day • Tim
Hildebrandt • Brian D.
Hinson • Susan diRende •
Debasish Mishra • Pete
Barnstrom • Frank Coffman •
R. Mac Jones • Gerri Leen •
Marc A. Criley • Carl
Scharwath • Jay Bechtol •
Jesper Nordqvist

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Channel Breaker



Limits of Temptation



From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

When I was a child I looked forward to encountering space aliens; even today, I feel like that was one of those things promised us, like flying cars and moon colonies and interstellar travel. Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* was my favorite (non-fiction) book when I was 13, and that was where I first encountered the Drake equation for estimating the number of advanced civilizations Out There—or, in other words, space aliens.

You'd think my excitement at the potentially high number of Out Theres would be tempered by just about every science fiction novel I read back then, all counseling doom and doomsday if we met aliens (either for us or them). I probably didn't realize at the time that most of it was allegory for our own war-filled civilization (or maybe I did?), but regardless I came to see sf like *Star Trek* and its galaxy chock-full of interesting Out Theres who (mostly) wanted to get along and exchange ideas and be a gigantic interstellar family as the way things must be Out There.

Like the flying cars and just about everything else, that is not the way it's turned out.

SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) has been running for longer than I've been alive, and it has found ... nothing. (Nothing like ET, that is ... it's been super successful in other ways.) And if anything our science fiction has become even more dour, basically positing a galaxy full of creatures that want to eat us, destroy us, or enslave us. (More self-allegory, I'm sure.) And, despite an overall increase in the number of blockbuster science fiction films, especially if you count all the superhero films, the public desire for space exploration has evaporated, replaced with far more immediate worries like whether we're making our own planet uninhabitable (for current species, anyway), whether we can destroy ourselves through plagues

or other poisons, or our ever-present bugbear, nuking ourselves into oblivion.

This month's article explores the Drake equation (and its modernization) and touches on that weird dichotomy of both loving space exploration sf and hating the idea of taking the "fiction" out of it. I don't think I've included everything; in fact, I'm sure I haven't included everything. But hopefully it's a conversation starter.

Actually, I hope every work in this issue is a conversation starter; I think most of it can be seen in terms of dichotomies, or at least twists that take us somewhere unexpected. James Rumpel's "Borvon's Gift," for instance, speaks directly about aliens among us, or at least one alien among us. And the surrounding pieces are on that similar theme (gosh, as though I planned it lol): Nora Weston's "In Plain Sight," for example, speaks to whether "Finding intelligent life is a waste of time," and Michelle M. Mead's "Alien Totem" about the real purpose of that totem outside of town. Nicola Brayan's *Aligned* and Shikhar Dixit's *A Giant Leap for Womankind* give us a sense of those first interplanetary explorers, and Christina Sng's "Annihilation" the results of interplanetary war.

After this we stay in space, in the less fancy parts (the "Kentucky Fried Side") of a habitat where credit is everything and far too easily spent in the hands of 17-year-olds (in Mark Bilsborough's "No Credit"). Desmond Rhae's *Channel Breaker* bridges a sort of gap between human and machine, planet and space, before we move on to Holly Day's "/the//friend/," where we see just what the machines think of the humans (but it's not what you'd expect). *Limits of Temptation* by Tim Hildebrandt and "A Knell That Summons Thee" by Brian D. Hinson take drama to other worlds, while Susan diRende's "Sea Change" takes cephalopods to Europa.

By now we've spent so much time away from Earth ... so back to our planet, where of course things are going well. See, for instance, Debasish Mishra's "A Strange Country." Or our attempts to wrestle with time in Pete Barnstrom's "M.W.I." Or Marc A. Criley's "Reenactment." Yup, everything's fine down here, I can tell you.

We stay on Earth for a little less scifi, a little more horror—I mean, it is October, after all—in Frank Coffman's "A Thin Place" and *Some-where, at a Distance, Sleep* by R. Mac Jones. But again, there's a twist ... "Vigil" by Gerri Leen is about the monster under the bed, and "Shimmers" by Jay Bechtol about a man who sees ghosts, but there's a sadness here beyond the usual monster or ghost story.

We round out the issue with Carl Scharwath's *The New MaN*, heading

back to scifi (or maybe it's still a "shimmer"), and then the penultimate *Mondo Mecho* by Jesper Nordqvist.

And now, somewhere in my own distance, sleep ...

Have a great October!!!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

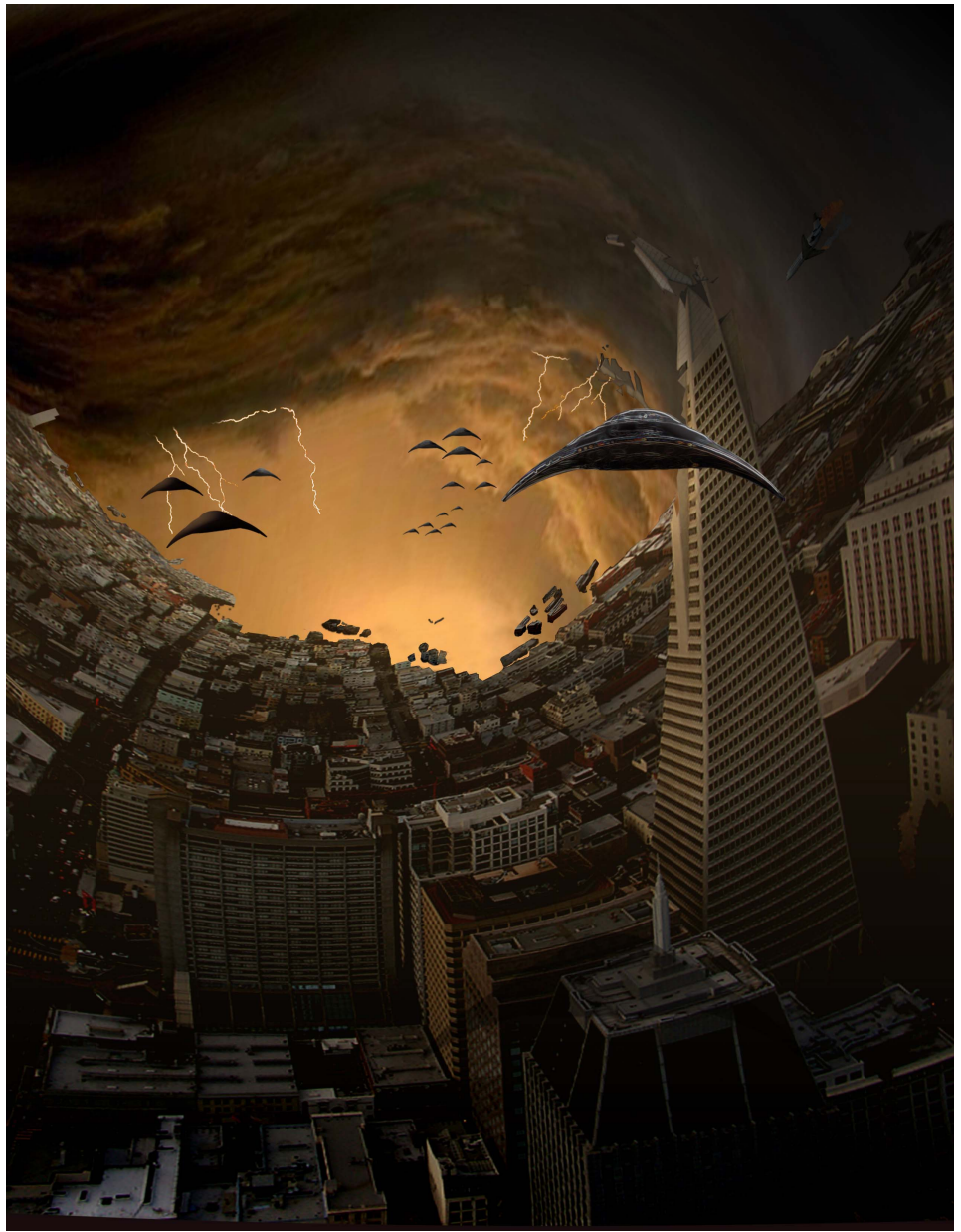
“ $R_ f_p n_e f_l f_i f_c L,$ ”
we gasped.*

Is There Life Out There? Do We Even Care?

September was such a busy news month, with the Queen of England dying and wars and new leaders screwing up economies and just, well, stuff, that I almost missed it: Frank Drake had died.

For those who do not know who he was, Dr. Drake came up with one of the most famous (and vague, in a way) equations in astronomy and astrophysics: the Drake equation, which is used to estimate the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in our galaxy currently capable of communicating with us in some fashion. In other words, it’s kind of the equation for Who Is Out There?

It wasn’t meant as a quantifiable, or truly solvable, equation. When Drake formulated it in 1961, it was meant to stimulate discussion at the [first] meeting regarding SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence). Many of the numbers in the equation are guesswork even today, but it is certain that, in order to begin to even guess Who Is Out There, we have to think carefully about each



PICTURED: Ron Sanders' *Breach*

Where are they?

IF THERE IS INTELLIGENT LIFE OUT THERE, why have they not contacted us? This has been a hot topic in SETI research since well before Drake and his equation; physicist Enrico Fermi was attributed with blurting out something like “But where is everybody?” in response to a discussion on the lack of contact vs the supposed abundance of life in the universe. This became known as “Fermi’s Paradox.”

There are a number of possibilities. One of these is that we’ve vastly overestimated the number of civilizations or even planets with life in the universe; maybe no one is out there. Another is that, even with a number of civilizations arising within, say, our galaxy, the odds of their development overlapping with ours time-wise and also doing something we’d have detected in the brief time we’ve been capable of looking are very, very low. In this case it could either just be a matter of time before we find them (or they find us), or we may only find their remains (or, again, they could find ours).

of these factors, such as how many stars form in our galaxy, which of those have planets that can support life, and which of those lifeforms go on to develop technology that advertises their existence across the vastness of space.

However, although the equation itself has been debated and amended, there are other, non-scientific factors that play into it—or at least, the effect it has on our world as humans. Back in the 1960s, we were fascinated by space and all it could hold; even through the 1990s, we wondered weekly about the Truth out there in *The X-Files* and other shows/films. But somehow, as the new millenium dawned and it

As numerous as we think they could be, why haven't any aliens contacted us yet?

There’s the related possibility that we just don’t understand the communication that’s been aimed at us. Or the Star Trek IV idea that they’re trying to contact intelligent life on this planet, but that intelligent life just ain’t us. Or the possibility that they know about us, but because they have their own “prime directive” about contacting primitive (to them) life-forms, they’re sitting out there waiting for us to do something smart.

Of course, while some people hope for alien contact, others see it as dangerous. What if the aliens who find us are just as warlike, racist, and arrogant as some of us? What if they see us as a prime candidate for being conquered, or taken as slaves, or just plain destroyed to make room for their own people? In that case, we’d be better off being alone in the universe. Or at least as well off as we are now.

dawned on us that we might destroy our own lives on Earth before we ever reached cities on the Moon and Mars, we became much more worried about social inequalities, climate change, and (for a second time) nuclear destruction than about Little Green Men. Ironically, as our movies have become chock full of superheroes and ETs, our day-to-day imaginations seem filled with more down-to-earth problems.

So does SETI matter anymore? Do we care? Should we be worried that we’ll be invaded by hostile aliens (as this month’s cover suggests), or should we be hoping for some kind of extraterrestrial intervention to save us from ourselves?

What is the Drake Equation, anyway?

The equation itself is:

$$N = R_* f_p n_e f_l f_i f_c L$$

Where N is the number of Milky Way civilizations with which we can communicate (or accidentally/on purpose have communicated through our own radio/TV emissions into space or through space-ships like *Voyager 1* and *2*). The factors going into this calculation are thus:

R_* is the average rate stars form in the Milky Way

f_p is the fraction of those with planets

n_e is the average number of those planets (per star) that can support life

f_l is the fraction of those planets that actually develop life

f_i is the fraction of those that develop civilizations

f_c is the fraction of those that develop tech that sends detectable signs of their existence into space

L is the length of time those civs actually release those signs before being destroyed or destroying themselves

As you can see, each factor reduces the overall number, potentially reducing the number to as low as 1 (since we, at least for now, are the one civ we know of that filters through the entire equation). At the time Drake created it, the equation had many factors that were unknown or unknowable. You can find the exact estimates elsewhere (Wikipedia, for example), but overall the range of N was thought to be between 20 and 50,000,000 currently communicating alien civilizations (and I guess one of those would be us, so the minimum might be 19). Now, of course, we have much more precise estimates of some of the factors, and we've discovered planets around nearly every star system (where the original estimate was more like one-fifth to one-half), so you'd think the end result could be much higher. You'd think.

Mislaidd Hopes and Modern Reinterpretations

There are those who would say our hopes for extraterrestrial life are

mislaidd, for while the number of exoplanets is far greater than we could have wished, many of those are giant gas planets that may disrupt the orbits of any Earth-like planets; and there may be a number of other constraints beyond being in a sort of Goldilocks habitable zone around a star—Goldilocks' rules for habitable planets may extend to extra-system factors like having the right combinations of heavy metals or other elements, not being in a galactic radiation hot zone, or even having the right kind of moon.

I think these rules are a bit too pessimistic, not least because our ideas about what life is and how it forms are exceedingly limited (limited to only one example, in fact). It is as arrogant to assume all life must be based on things we can understand as it was to assume the Earth was the center of the universe.

Recently (or recently-ish, in the last ten years or so), Sara Seager of MIT revised Drake's equation in several small ways and one big one—adding a factor for planets on which life produces a “detectable signature gas.” As we've become better at detecting exoplanets, we've become able to not only detect earth-like planets (using satellites that escape the problems of looking through earth's atmosphere) but also potentially use the relatively new James Webb Space Telescope “to observe the atmospheres of those planets” (Seager, NASA interview, 2 September 2013). If we can detect gases in those atmospheres that indicate life (biosignature gases), well, that'd be a game changer. However, we're still unsure just which gases would be good biosignature candidates. Common gases like carbon dioxide are common even without life. Ammonia may work (albeit indicating a planet with life different to Earth's, according to Sukrit Ranjan and others (Sky at Night)), and some researchers are hoping to look for this in the near future. However, Seager's new equation doesn't necessarily estimate intelligent life, so it might be seen as getting away from SETI's mission.

We have, by the way, discovered rocky exoplanets since that Seager interview, starting with Kepler-186f, the first earth-like planet found in what we think of as the habitable zone of a star. It's twice the size of Earth and has years half as long, but it fills the bill, as it were.

We're trying to demonstrate that L is a low number indeed

Face it, our own real-time demonstration of whether N can ever be much greater than 1 at any given time is not going well. It feels like at any moment, geologically speaking, we may extinguish ourselves through global war, own-goal pandemics, or poisoning our planet to such an extent that we can't even breathe, eat, or survive anymore. We survived one cold nuclear war only to be facing the potential for another, warmer one. We argue whether human-induced climate change is real even while the Earth burns and sea levels rise in front of us, all so a few of the short-term-minded people around us can continue to make money in old-fashioned ways like sucking long-dead-animal products out of the ground. And we seem to be in a rush to put blinders on and pretend that only those of "us" in our own made-up nation-states are the best humans, that somehow the rest of the world is made up of undesirable peoples or enemies that we must compete against. Is it any wonder that any aliens would give this planet a wide berth?

What we haven't been able to discover yet is whether it actually is inhabited.

Regardless, no matter the number of galactic civilizations out there sending out radio signals and interstellar spacecraft, for one reason or other they have not contacted us (see sidebar), or we have not figured out that they're trying to contact us, and thus our attention, as it is wont to do, has wandered away from the search for extraterrestrial life and even space exploration, and (with some good reason) is now

firmly fixed on terra firma—Mars rovers and sending billionaires into space notwithstanding.

"*ET* was a movie, right?"

So do we think about ETs anymore? Compared to the promises made in the 1960s and 70s (of cities on the Moon and starships galavanting proudly among the stars), we barely explore space; we're lucky that a small percentage of the population cares enough to get things like the Mars Rovers and the James Webb telescope off the ground (and probably lucky that a large percentage don't pay attention to the money spent on such things, since we also don't do a good job of trumpeting all the good things that have come of space exploration—like that mobile computer in everyone's hands). Congress plays around with appropriating money for SETI-like projects, but ultimately is only using the idea to score political points with its corporate heroes (on the Repub side) or the "common man" (on the Dems' side, where many of them basically argue that using money for such "foolishness" throws taxpayer's money out the airlock). The idea of aliens is right there with superheroes and other escapism—both saturating our lives yet, day-to-day, not an immediate issue, like shelter, food, jobs, people's rights, etc.

If asked, the person on the street can certainly conjure up enthusiasm about such sci-fi ideas as aliens—hence one reason for the popularity of science fiction films. If not asked, they don't really worry about it. Why? Because no matter whether the potential aliens would be good or evil, no matter their intention to ask us to join the interstellar federation of like-minded planets or subjugate us to their galactic empire, for all intents and purposes their potentiality does not affect anyone in their day-to-day lives. Online threads on this subject tend to move toward this conclusion: whether skeptical of alien life or hopeful that it exists, for most people it is not even near the list of

“things to do today.” Heck, we can’t even keep climate change top-of-mind without it being reinforced by local weather events or cable news channels (half of which encourage us to deny it is even happening).

Worse, we let the people in power take advantage of this inability to look at a picture bigger than our own backyard to get their own short-term agendas passed into laws we then obey without too much grumbling, especially if we can get our circuses through divisive cable news and social media. Not that these things need to be divisive, but as we use them, they are. In other words, we do not need to think of aliens from outer space; we make our aliens right here, looking at

other humans as though they are not human at all.

And given our myopia, given that our only way to make ourselves “great” seems to be through the exploitation and subjugation of our other selves, it is no surprise to me that the only time we look to the stars is to indulge fantasies, either of greatness or horror. And it is lucky we do, for such stories may be what, in the end, teach us how to get along with ourselves. And this is not only a prerequisite for surviving our own destructive tendencies. We cannot be friends with or friendly to beings not of this world until we can be friends with our own neighbors, our own selves.

Aligned

by Nicola Brayen



16/1/21
Nicola
Brayen

In Plain Sight

Nora Weston

Nightly argument. Of course, I'm stargazing.
Finding intelligent life is a waste of time,
yet time itself is debatable.

Am I standing
in this present moment, or a figment of the past?
It's an absolute,
I'm a species of the future.

Time is fleeting, the expanse of space extreme,
and theoretically speaking humans may exist
in a binary bit string. Characters created
out of nothing,
who sing in code shaking up everything.
Easy to disbelieve
a blurry download, but what if hope springs?

When it jumps from machines, an eye-popping dish,
in Guizhou Province, southwest of Beijing.
No doubt that aperture will gather creation's chatter.
Interstellar frequencies
ringing in loud and clear, but will the conversation
be friendly
or a radio signal nightmare? Yin Yang, universal duality

since truth and conspiracy may bed together,
be cohorts to confuse a curious species. Is life
out there? A cosmic playground untapped,
fertile lands
and questions answered that have troubled mankind?
No turning back.
The need to know is unstoppable, which gives pause.

Each night, of course, I'm stargazing.
I see through fear, drift into the miraculous atmosphere.
It's cold, but the exotic space beckons, screams.
Not forgotten ...
One day, when he least expects it,
they will return.
Little does he know; I do not belong here.

Borvon's Gift

by James Rumpel

It just isn't supposed to snow in May, not in Iowa. It especially isn't supposed to snow fourteen inches. That is exactly what happened, however. Lance Gunderson looked at the havoc that had been unleashed on his backyard. The wet, heavy snow had broken branches off of nearly every one of the freshly budded trees. The worst damage was done to the old oak at the back edge of his property. The immense weight of the snow, combined with the moist soil, had caused the ancient tree to fall, uprooted. The oak sat at a forty-five-degree angle, half of its roots ripped from the ground.

Lance shook his head in despair; cleaning this mess was going to take days. *"Well, why not?"* he thought. *"It's not like anything ever goes my way anyhow."* The one saving grace of the surprising turn of the weather was that it would give Lance something to do. He spent way too much time sitting alone in his sparsely furnished house.

Lance began surveying the damage. He would be able to cut up most of the tree in a day or two. His biggest problem was going to be getting rid of the stump. While he inspected the base of the tree, Lance noticed a metal object at the bottom of the gaping hole the fallen tree had created. Something other than snow was reflecting the morning sun. Lance grabbed a shovel and climbed into the pit. He started to dig around the mysterious shape. The roots of the tree were intertwined with the partially buried object. After a lot of work and a good amount of cussing, Lance finally pulled the discovery from its hiding place.

What he held in his hands was a shiny container, about the size of a shoebox, though he was certain that this package did not contain sneakers. It was heavy for its size and appeared to have an elaborate locking system. Chilled by the wind, Lance decided to carry on his

investigation in the warmth of his garage. While he carried the chest to the workshop, his imagination came up with all sorts of hypotheses about the wonderous treasure his discovery could hold.

Inside the shop, Lance examined it more closely. The box was made of metal. It looked like aluminum but proved to be heavier and stronger. The lock required a combination. His options, however, were not numbers or letters but a set of strange symbols. There were fifteen different markings on each of three fifteen-sided polygons. Lance was certain that all he needed to do was turn each polygon so that the correct symbol was at the top and the box would open. He started randomly trying combinations.

Twenty minutes and just over two hundred tries later, Lance calculated the number of different combinations a lock of this type could have. Realizing that there were thousands of possible solutions, he decided to take a different, more aggressive, tack.

He was unable to make the tiniest dent in the box with a hammer, sledgehammer, power drill, power saw, or by dropping it on the ground and kicking it. The latter maneuver was done more out of frustration than an attempt at opening the case and resulted in a very sore toe and a string of swear words that were so vile they could have melted the box. They did not.

Unwilling to give up the potential bounty the case held, Lance decided to set it aside and create a systematic list of all possible combinations. If he checked two or three whenever he entered the workshop, he would have the box open eventually.

* * *

It was another boring Wednesday afternoon, over a year later, when Lance found the combination that worked. Lance, who had taken early retirement from his job at the window factory, lived alone and spent most of his time either watching television or tinkering with small projects in his workshop. Retiring at age fifty-five had seemed like a good idea at the time. However, his divorce and the thought of spending decades alone were making him second guess his decision.

Somehow, he had managed to keep the house in the divorce settlement, though he usually complained that the house and a small portion of his pride were the only things he had not lost. He hadn't told a soul about his discovery. He rarely talked to anyone else. Whatever treasure he found inside the case would belong only to him.

When the third polygon was set into place, the box made a clicking sound followed by a whirring noise, similar to a hydraulic cylinder moving into place. Larry flinched a little as he lifted the lid. A puff of white smoke rose from within. Oddly, the smoke hovered above the box for a moment before floating to and through the front door of the garage. Lance dismissed the odd behavior of the fog. He was more concerned with what was inside the box. To his great dismay, the box was empty. Multiple searches did not find even the minutest piece of treasure. The case was as empty as Lance's life.

Lance inspected the box for some sort of secret compartment. It just did not make sense that anyone would bury a locked metal box with nothing inside. Again, this search proved fruitless, as did throwing the box against the wall and reciting an unabridged list of every four-letter word known to man.

He had just finished his outburst when Larry heard the sound of someone clearing their throat behind him. He turned to find Mrs. Elvira Stapleton, his eighty-year-old next-door neighbor, standing behind him. She wore a flannel housecoat, which was loosely wrapped about her body. Fluffy pink slippers adorned her feet.

Red in the face, embarrassed about being caught in the middle of his obscenity-laced explosion, Larry shrugged and addressed the old

woman. "Sorry, Elvira. I'm having a tough time with something this morning."

His neighbor remained expressionless. "I am not Elvira," she stated, "though I do have access to a number of her memories and much of her knowledge. She does not like you very much. You aren't very friendly to her or her dog, Pixie."

"What are you talking about?" asked Lance. Mrs. Stapleton could be odd at times, but this was taking it to an entirely different level.

"My name is Borvon. You released me from my prison. I would like to thank you. I did not wish to take command of your body, so I found the nearest individual and took possession. This is not a very pleasant body to be in. It is very difficult to move."

"This is some kind of joke, right?" Lance looked around his garage, expecting to see hidden cameras. "Who put you up to this, Elvira?"

"I understand your skepticism, but I assure you, I am telling the truth. I was the leader of a planet in the Galigox System. A military coup seized control of the government and I was exiled to this world. I have accessed Elvira's memories in an attempt to determine how long I was trapped in the box, but it appears to have been for a much longer time than she can envision. I may have been imprisoned since the very beginnings of your world's existence. But, thanks to you, I am now free."

"That's crazy. I like a good sci-fi story as much as the next guy, but this is unbelievable. You mean to tell me you're that puff of smoke I saw come out of the box. How can you be nothing but a puff of vapor and rule a planet?"

Elvira or Borvon shrugged. "My race has bodies. We can move from one container to another. We are very advanced; advanced to the point where we can control our essence. I believe you call it your soul. My body would have died during my imprisonment. The leaders of the takeover were much too cruel to give me that release. They

trapped my being within their prison and abandoned me here.” The sneer that appeared on the old woman’s face was completely out of place. “I must return to my homeworld and regain my position.”

“That’s going to be pretty hard to do,” interjected Lance. “We don’t have much in the way of space travel technology. It takes decades for an unmanned probe to reach the outskirts of our solar system. There is no way for you to get to your planet.”

“I am aware of that. Elvira’s knowledge is mostly limited to pie recipes and soap operas, but I was able to garner some information about your world. I believe that I can take over leadership of your planet with relative ease and have your people help me create a vessel that will allow me to return to my world.”

“I don’t think I can let you do that,” said Lance, though he had no idea how to interfere with the alien’s scheme. Even if he punched Elvira and knocked her out, the alien would just move to another host, maybe even himself.

“Do not fear,” replied Borvon. “I am not an evil being. I will simply take control of different leaders and use their power to create the technology I need. It will be a gift to your world. You will benefit greatly from the technology I introduce. No one will know that I am even here. That is if you do not tell anyone of our encounter.”

“No one would believe me anyhow. I don’t want to be locked away.”

Borvon nodded. “A sentiment I can completely understand. I truly am grateful for the fact that you rescued me. I shall consider you a friend and will, on occasion, return to you and see how you are doing. I want you to understand that I am a benevolent ruler. I have noticed that Elvira has some sort of illness forming in her lungs. I will cure that before leaving her body and moving on to my next host. She will not remember my presence when she awakes.”

“That seems like a very nice thing to do.” Lance didn’t know what else to say. He was still expecting to find out this entire conversation

was some sort of prank.

“Before I go, I do have one question.” The alien in an old woman’s body began moving towards the door. “Is Elvira’s belief that the President of the United States is the most powerful person on your planet correct?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah, I think that is a safe assumption. There are lots of powerful countries with different leaders, but I think ours is the strongest.”

“Then I shall make my way to this place you call Washington, D.C. Again, thank you. Elvira will wake up to find herself in a chair in her house. You might want to be more friendly to her from now on.”

With that, Elvira walked out of the garage. For the longest time, Lance stared at the door. What had just happened? If it was real, he had just sent an alien to take possession of the President.

“Oh well, I didn’t vote for him,” said Lance as he picked up the metal container and placed it high on a shelf.

* * *

When the special bulletin interrupted the baseball game, Lance knew immediately what had happened.

“The President has been placed in a medical facility,” announced the reporter on the scene at the White House. “Apparently, President Lewis began displaying unusual behavior during this morning’s cabinet meeting. A White House spokesman says that it is just a minor case of disorientation and that a complete physical and mental check-up is currently underway. We will have more details as they become available.”

Lance could imagine the response of the officials at the meeting when the President suddenly declared that the U.S. needed to divert funding to create intergalactic flight technology. They must have thought

the President was having some sort of stroke or mental breakdown. This was not going to be good for the President moving forward, whether Borvon possessed him or not. Lance shook his head and smiled to himself. The alien may have once been the intelligent and powerful leader of an entire planet, but he did not understand human nature at all.

* * *

Lance was not surprised when Elvira knocked on his front door a few days later. He had taken Borvon's advice and gone out of his way to be more friendly toward his neighbor. She may have been old and crotchety, but she had a kind personality and told some wonderful stories. Lance found that he enjoyed her occasional visits. It was nice to talk to someone.

"I do not know how your government accomplishes anything," Elvira announced as she entered Lance's living room. "It is quite complicated and confusing."

"Is that you, Borvon?" asked Lance.

"Yes, it is me. I had to abandon your president. His underlings did not immediately obey my directives."

"That's the way we like it. The harder it is to get things done, the less likely they mess things up."

Borvon nodded in agreement. "I don't know how they get anything done. Perhaps I should take possession of the leader of some other country."

Lance didn't know if he liked that idea. "Maybe you should take a different approach. I've been thinking about this. Why don't you try taking over the body of some famous scientist and invent or discover a breakthrough that will lead to intergalactic travel?"

"That might be a good idea," the old woman awkwardly patted Lance

on the head. "I will use Google to find an appropriate host." Borvon paused before exiting through the front door. "Oh, by the way, Elvira is pleased that you have taken the time to say 'hi' to her the last couple of weeks. I am going to cure her arthritis to repay her for hosting me again."

"That's nice of you," replied Lance.

After the would-be ruler of Earth left, Lance thought to himself, "*You know, if he keeps this up, Elvira is going to come out ahead in this deal.*"

* * *

About two months later, Lance was just finishing up mowing the lawn when he noticed Mrs. Stapleton coming out of her house. The elderly woman had been much spryer and more energetic in recent weeks. She had even begun to wear clothing other than her old housecoat. Today she wore beige slacks and a pastel-colored blouse. If nothing else, Borvon's arrival had been good for her. Lance gave her a friendly wave and smile. Elvira did not wave back or come to the fence and talk as she usually did. She had a frustrated look on her face as she entered Lance's yard and headed straight for the garage, waving for him to follow.

"So, the scientist idea didn't work either?" asked Lance as he came through the door.

"It would have," answered a scowling Borvon, "but it is impossible to get enough funding to even get started on the technology. Everyone loves my ideas, but they all say it can't be done. No one has enough money to even purchase the equipment to test my theories. At this rate, I will never get the vessel built. There has to be another way."

Lance thought for a moment. He felt sorry for the alien and wanted to help him. It wasn't as if any of the schemes that Borvon came up with were going to have any effect on his life. "Well, if money is the issue,

why not become someone who is very wealthy and can give funding to the science programs?”

Borvon smiled. “Why didn’t I think of that? Excellent idea. Thank you so much. By the way, I am going to fix Elvira’s bunion.”

* * *

Lance was completely surprised when Tommy Huebner, the little boy from across the street, barged into his house one early fall afternoon.

“The wealthy person idea didn’t work either,” he called out before the door was even closed behind him.

“Borvon?” Lance asked while he rose from his recliner.

“Yes. Elvira wasn’t home.”

“She has been going to the casino with a group of retired widows quite a bit lately,” informed Lance. “Why didn’t it work to take control of a rich person?”

“The rich may have money, but they rarely have access to it. I possessed three different incredibly wealthy people and could barely get enough money to start working on the project. Their money is all tied up in investments or under the control of some sort of board.”

Lance put his head down to hide his smile. Since Tommy didn’t have any front teeth, every time Borvon tried to say a word with the letter s, he whistled.

“There are a lot of rich people out there. Why don’t you keep moving around till you get enough money?”

Borvon shook Tommy’s head. “By the time I take control and get the next billionaire to invest, the previous one takes back their contribution. I need to find a way to get all the funding at one time.”

“You could start a Go-Fund-Me page.”

Borvon stared at Lance, a confused expression on his face.

“It’s a way for people to donate money for a cause or a project,” explained Lance.

“There is no way I would be able to get enough people to contribute. I need quite a bit of money.”

Maybe it was the form he had taken, but to Lance, Borvon seemed to be very whiny this visit. It was obvious that the alien was extremely frustrated with his growing number of failures.

“If a celebrity, and I mean a very famous person, made a call to the public to contribute, it could work.” Lance wasn’t certain that his idea would be successful, but he wanted to try and help Borvon.

“Ok. Will you show me how to set up the funding thing you are talking about? Then I will try to find an appropriate celebrity.” Borvon did not appear very hopeful.

“I will get someone to set up the page for you. I don’t know computers that well, but one of the guys I used to work with is pretty good with them. I’ll set up a meeting with him. Maybe I’ll go out with the old work crew. It could be fun. I’ll get the page set up for you. I don’t think we can set up the page in your name. You would need your parents’ permission.”

Borvon smiled. “I get your humor. I think you should know that Tommy calls you ‘the grumpy old guy.’ The boy is often lonely and could use a friend.”

“*Couldn’t we all,*” thought Lance. He gave the alien a quick wave and watched the boy head back to his home.

* * *

Lance knew that Borvon's next attempt had failed long before Borvon showed up in the garage. Lance had been watching the National Music Awards when sexy female hip-hop artist Samantha Sly interrupted her acceptance speech to make a heartfelt plea for people to contribute to a Go-Fund-Me page to provide money to develop interstellar space travel. The social media reaction made it clear that no one took her request seriously.

The next two weeks found Samantha Sly making multiple appearances to push her agenda of scientific contribution. The situation did not improve. She became the butt of numerous late-night television monologue jokes and a multitude of memes. The Fund-Me page did not receive many donations.

A day or two later, Lance was working on the playhouse he and Tommy were building when Borvon came to see him. He was not surprised by Borvon's return. He was shocked that he did so in the form of Samantha Sly.

"Borvon, what are you doing still in her body? How did you ever get here?"

The beautiful young woman shook her head, dejected. "I really don't care. The whole experience has been horrible. No one gives this woman any respect. They simply see her for her body and her voice and not for her mind. I don't know how she can put up with that kind of treatment. I just had to get away from all the cameras and the taunting questions. I rented a private jet and flew to the airport nearest here, then took a cab."

"I'm sure there are going to be a lot of reporters and fans following you. What are you going to do? What is your next plan?" asked Lance. He went to the door of the garage and locked it.

"I am giving up. I can't do this. I would rather be locked in that box than have to put up with years of abuse and failure while attempting to get back to my planet." Tiny tears were forming in the woman's eyes. "I want you to put me back in the box and bury me some-

where. Maybe in another thousand years, someone will find me after interstellar flight is discovered."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. Please get the box."

Lance removed the case from the shelf where it had rested since he had originally opened it. He set the case in front of the gorgeous singer.

"You know, you could just stay with me. Find an empty or dying body and take it over."

Borvon looked at Lance and sighed. "Thank you for the offer, but my mind is made up. You have been a good friend, Lance. I wish you well. Do you have any illness or pain you would like me to cure?"

"No, I think I am fine. I'm freaked out about the thought of you taking over my body. No offense."

"I understand," said Borvon. "You might want to get Samantha a chair."

Lance obliged, grabbing a folding chair from along the wall. He set it in front of Borvon, who sat down, tucking at the short skirt as he did so.

"Goodbye."

A wisp of white smoke emerged from Miss Sly's nose. It lingered in the air for a few seconds before settling into the waiting case. It was Lance's turn to sigh as he closed the box and randomly rotated the polygon combination. He picked up the box and a shovel and went out into his backyard. He dug an especially deep hole near his small garden. He wanted to make sure the box was buried deep enough that no one would find it for a very long time. When he finally finished his task, he grabbed the shovel and returned to the garage.

He was greeted by a very confused-looking international superstar. It took him quite a while to settle her down. However, after an explanation involving random amnesia, a couple of frantic phone calls, a piece of pie with Elvira, and a request for an autograph for Tommy, Lance called for an Uber and sent Samantha on her way. She was still in a daze as she entered the vehicle for the ride to the nearest airport, where her agent would meet her. For all her fame, she had turned out to be a very nice young lady.

Lance waved goodbye as the car drove off. He would miss the unscheduled visits from Borvon. The alien ruler had proven to be a good friend. Lance had to admit his life was better for having met him. He glanced at his watch; it was nearly five o'clock. He would barely have time to show Tommy the modifications he was planning for the playhouse before getting ready to go join the old work gang at a local sports bar to watch the playoff game.

Alien Totem

by Michelle M. Mead

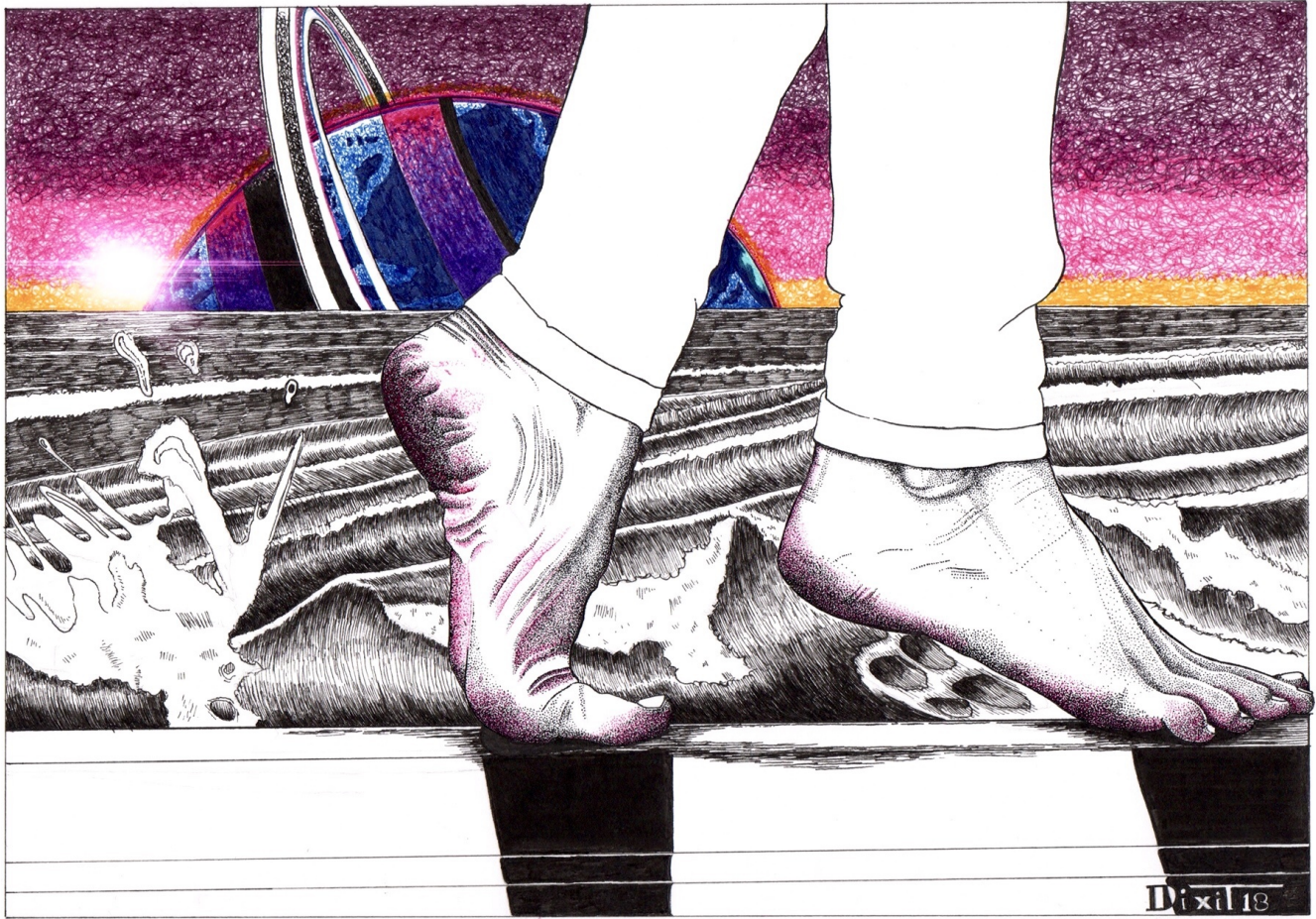
Past the brush on the other side of town,
Where that dead girl was finally found,
Round the corner folks called Curves West,
Beside the creek where the old men rest,

Left right there with the gall of dames,
Caught up in some dirty games,
Not like the trees and their rustling talk,
But more like some native wisdom stalk,

How it got there's anyone's guess,
But all sorts of foolish boys confessed,
To the carving of things in naive jest,
Thinking girls so quick to impress,

Others tell tales about the totem eye,
And how it tells when people lie,
And how at night its teeth are shown,
And what happens then is quite well-known,

But pointing towards the distant sky,
The pyramid winks a turquoise eye,
Knowing the galaxies left to roam,
Before they reach their alien home.



A Giant Leap for Womankind

by Shikhar Dixit

Annihilation

by Christina Sng

We race out
Of the alien ship
Weapons in tow,

Our babies
Strapped against
Our armored chests.

Ahead is either
Death or a new life,
We cannot say.

After all,
They blew up our planet
And brought us here

As food—
But we fought back
And blew them away.

Now, we take
Our first tentative steps
Onto their land

And watch their people
Rapidly wilt away.
They never imagined

We'd annihilate them
By merely breathing,
Our skin shedding.

But the foliage remain,
Unchanged by our bacterium.
Perhaps, we can stay.

No Credit

by Mark Bilsborough

Hey, happy happy. Credits in the bank means red meat on the table. I pick up some choice cuts for Gran Gran and Paw Paw, though they don't eat much cos of them being old. They live out on Pier Seven, stickin' out into deep space away from the sun. It's on account of the views, they say, though I can think of better things to look at than loading docks and a power station. Luckily for me, Ma and Da moved to Kentucky Fried Side before I could go completely space-crazy, but downside is longtrek to the Gramps. So there's me, pushing past all the busy-busies on the way to wherever, zoned out on their zombie phones not lookin' where they're goin' an' bumpin' into everything. I hit the Hub Express at Downspoke Seven. Have to wait on account of all the extra people around these days. "Hoi Anton!" cries numnutz SkankBoy from the crowd. I ignore him on account of me owing him scrip and hustle to the shuttle. All sardines, all the way with me nostril to armpit with some tattooed leather giant with a shower aversion. Same ever since the bellyachers blew up half of Midspoke an' made us all squeeze tight. Ironic, since the 'achers were jus' arguing that the Reps should jus' expand the habitat already, instead of dragging asteroids all over the place.

Get there eventually, jus' before I pass out from tattoo troll's stench. I look around: dingy grim, jus' like I remember. Worse, if that's possible. Some of the lights are out and a few of the rest are flickering. Don't they have maintenance bots in Pier Seven? Maybe the local Rep's not ponied up the scrip.

"Hey Baby Boy," says Gran Gran with a smile when I get to the apartment, even tho' I'm seventeen and ain't no baby no more. She don't look too good, sitting on a recliner with her feet on a big cardboard box filled with Trump knows what. She's wearin' some sort of tattered robe she probably got as a wedding present back before the

beginning of time, and furry slippers I bought her for Christmas when I was ten from the hand-me-down shop off Downspoke Mall. She thought they were new then, bless. Prob'ly still does, 'cos her mind went some time ago.

"Hey Gran Gran," I say with as much enthusiasm I can muster given the place smells of cabbage and the lighting makes everything look grey and pasty. Speaking of which, "Where's Paw Paw?" On cue, he shuffles from the bedroom coughing into a handkerchief. Flecked with red, I notice. I don't kid myself he cut himself shaving. "Hey Paw Paw," I call. "Got you steaks."

"Mushmeat?" Gran Gran asks, trying to haul herself up. I help her out, pushing cushions behind her on account of the recliner's electrics being glitched. "Cos you know I don't like mushmeat."

She told me once that she knows that mushmeat is jus' ground up dead bodies with some exotic herbs and spices thrown in to disguise the taste. Everybody knows that mush is 'shrooms but Gran Gran likes a good conspiracy theory. Like her one about the Credits. "No, real meat, Gran Gran. From real Vatbeef. I even got the hormone free stuff, on account you've got a thing about that."

"Ain't no 'thing', Baby boy. Is real. Give you two heads if you eat too much of it." She does that inverted comma thing with her fingers when she says 'thing', which amuses me, jus' fer a moment, cos me and Maisie used to five bar gate her doin' it when we were kids and she's not around anymore so I win. Don't feel like winnin' though 'cos she ain't here no more and I'd gladly lose to have her here, bein' the sensible big sister and stoppin' me bein' the stupid young brother. But she's out in the Kuiper Belt now, pushin' rocks around. Prob'ly

never see her again.

Paw Paw grabs the meat an' sniffs. "Where'd you steal it?" An' hello to you too, Gramps, I think but don't say, on account of not wantin' a clip round the ear.

"Bought it, Gramps. Turned Seventeen last month, remember? Got my own scrip now. Can buy stuff."

Paw Paw shuffles over to the cooker area and starts banging pans. "You might want to save some of it for when you need it."

"Aw, rich now Paw Paw."

He turns, faster than I would have thought he could, spatula raised an' wagging at me, spittle foaming out of his mouth, proper cross. "That's fer life, boy, not for now. Spend it now, how ya gonna pay your Air Bill when you're my age? Huh?"

I look at him, panicky, then look at Gran Gran. "Don't pay him no mind," she says, not entirely reassuringly. "We got air. At least for a year or two yet. So long as we don't go splashin' out on Vatbeef." She chuckles, long and hard, which turns into a cough, an then I have to go an' pat her back an' wipe her drool. Visitin' the Gramps sure grounds me, yeah. Would grind me down, if I wasn't such a sunny face guy.

Paw Paw's back to cookin', but he ain't stopped talkin' yet. "I voted for the policy, boy, so I know what I'm talking about."

I have no idea what he's talkin' about but he's Paw Paw so that's nothing new. Besides, somethin's wrong so my sunny disposition's dimming a bit. More like a partial eclipse at this point, but Paw Paw's about to make it a whole lot darker, I jus' know.

"Sounded good at first," he carries on, "though they lied about the benefits, and didn't tell us about the dangers. I know, I know, we should have worked it out," he says, waving the spatula.

"Don't ignore the steaks, Paw Paw," I say, worrying he's going to overfry them. He's forgotten the onions, too, though I don't think he's in the mood to be reminded.

"But it sounded too good to be true. Take all the stuff we got for free but actually costs money—air an' water an' healthcare an' stuff—and put a monetary value on it. Then roll all that up into one big lump sum an' give it to ev'ry citizen when they get old enough to make sensible decisions on how to spend it. Tho' if you ask me seventeen is nowhere near old enough."

I eye roll but say nothing. Oldies allus think they know best, but who can take 'em seriously when they pee their pants so much?

"But it ain't enough, so you need to invest it. An' not be tempted to spend it on fancy stuff like Vatbeef."

"Gotta eat, Paw Paw. 'Sides, plenty of time to get more scrip. Think of it as an investment in my feelgood. Yours, too. You feelin' good?"

Sometimes I should not ask dumb questions.

"That's a live hard die young philosophy, boy. You know what that is? Squander your inheritance on high living then die in a gutter lyin' in your own puke." He looked over at Gran Gran and grinned. "You want carrots with this, Celestine?"

That's her cue to lay her Credit theory on me again. "Sure, Patrick, 'cos we grow our own, which is good, because we ain't got credit for veggies no more, at least not if we want to be breathin' anytime soon."

"Aw, Gramps, you know I can help you out some. I'm rich now."

"Ain't gonna be long before that's a distant memory, Baby Boy. Y'see, unless ya got a job which pays more'n dust and promises the only way you can make it to the end is to assume you're poor from the off and spend as little as you can. Eke it out. You might think

you're rich now but that's a lifetime of air and medicine you've got to allow for. And don't think they ain't gonna jack the prices, neither."

"Aw Gran Gran, why be a downer?"

"Because I can see it in your eyes. You think the future's gonna provide, don't ya? Well all the future's gonna get you is arthritis and broken dreams."

I think I've got away with it, because Paw Paw comes over with the steaks, all juicy and lovely, and Gran Gran got that look in her eye. Then we talk about who's going to win Pier Seven's Freeball game with the Jersey Boys, which is kind of a fantasy 'cause Seven are gonna get slaughtered. But then she pauses, mid mouthful, and says it. "They planned it that way, of course. Keep the population down."

"What you talking about, Gran Gran?" Da had told me what the credit gift was really about, and he knows a lot more than Gran does, that's for sure. He has his own hair and teeth, for one, and that's good in any argument. Da says it's all about "economic empowerment and engendering a sense of responsibility in an otherwise dependent population." I had to look some of those words up, but what I think he means is people are smart. They can choose whether to save scrip for the boring stuff or invest it wisely so there's even more scrip. Or spend it all so you go out in a blaze of glory.

Or maybe lay it all down on a stupid bet with SkankBoy after he plies you with Synthky so you convince yourself there's no way you can lose.

I start to think Gran Gran might have a point.

"But the conspiracy, Baby Boy, is that the Reps know that most people will spend more than they should, because that's human nature, and because there ain't enough in the first place. Because the Reps want us to have dumb choices so we'll make dumb decisions. Dumb for us, smart for them that is. Now poor folks like us have to choose whether to eat or breath. Been to five funerals since Christmas. And you know

what? Every one of those poor people jus' ran out of scrip."

"Why would the Reps do that, Gran Gran?"

"Crowded corridors, Baby Boy. We're running out of room. This is a good way of weeding out people like me and Paw Paw who fail to make 'meaningful choices.'"

"But you guys go to Church every Sunday. You worked steady until you retired. And this place is, pardon me for sayin', furnished like you got everything from the stuff the thrift store couldn't shift."

"Reckon we'd have been okay if we hadn't paid your sis through college. Don't regret it though," said Paw Paw.

"I thought she got a scholarship."

"She never would have taken it if we'd told her. So don't you go tellin' her now, boy."

"But ..."

"Steak's nice, son."

* * *

Enlightenment strikes when I'm strap handling on the way back to Kentucky Fried. I thought I go to see Gran Gran and Paw Paw out of love, or obligation, or something. But really I go to the oldies for a reality check. And this time I went because I know sumthin' ain't right and I wanted them to confirm I'm not jus' feeling bad 'cause I'm a wuss. I'm feeling bad 'cause I've screwed up, but Paw Paw succeeded in convincing me that seventeen is *absolutely the worst age* to let someone loose with a suitcase full of scrip, so maybe it isn't my fault. Maybe Gran Gran's right. Maybe the Reps *want* me to lose.

At least I won't have to spend a lifetime of misery jus' so I've got enough air to breath when I'm the gramps' age. Because I know

SkankBoy will be waiting for me with that toothless grin on his face and a credit transfer reader in his sticky, outstretched palm.

I'm only breathing now 'cause SkankBoy fronted the bet, on account of me being not quite seventeen at the time. That was a week ago, and I'm surprised it's taken him so long. I sit on a bench on the platform, head in hands, trying to think.

I don't really register there's anyone sitting next to me until three trains have gone by. Then she coughs and I realise she's been there almost as long as I have.

I look up. "Know you?"

"Mostly I ignore the sad, miserable ones. So no, you don't."

She's 'bout my age. Skinny, black straight hair covering most of the left side of her face. Nose stud. No tats, at least none I can see. Passably pretty, I guess, not that I care. She's lookin' at me too. From the bad-smell look on her face don't think she likes what she sees much. "Then why you sittin' here?"

She looks around, waves her hand. "See any other benches that ain't been peed on or destroyed?"

She has a point. "But you missed your train."

She laughs, a raspy gargle that suggests the air ain't too good. "You too. And that's a mystery. And nothin' I like more'n a mystery. So I figured you've got a story and there'll allus be another train. I'm Amy, 'case you're wond'rin'."

I'm not, but all of a sudden I get this stupid idea that if I tell someone what's going on then it'll stop being my problem and start becoming theirs. So I tell her. Everything. About the Synthky. About the bet. About SkankBoy and his smilin' face.

For some reason she's not smilin'. She shifts back on the bench, as

far as she can get without fallin' off, before she gives it me. "I can't believe you've been so *stupid*."

"Told you it was a story worth listening to. Unless it's your own story, of course. Then it's a story you wish you'd never heard."

"Yet you're still sittin' here, with all your credit intact."

"Where there's life there's hope, yeh?"

"So we need a plan."

"We?"

She leans forward. There's a gleam in her eye. "This is the most fun I've had in weeks. Don't spoil it."

"Fun? The gramps jus' made it crystal clear that without scrip I'm breathing vacuum. And once SkankBoy catches up with me there'll be extra holes in my body to breath it through."

"C'mon. You haven't lived until you've nearly died." And then she grabs my hand and pulls me up jus' as another train slides into the station.

* * *

We don't stop at Kentucky Fried on account of my ongoing paranoia, despite Amy wantin' a square-up with SkankBoy, jus' fer "fun." Instead, we talk and talk—or more precisely, I talk and talk and she listens and listens, though I'm sure most of what I'm sayin' is dull dull dull.

We ride an' ride so far round the Rim that I start getting' dizzy, an' I lose any idea of where I am. Then she stands up, abruptly, an' I'm left to choose to follow her out of the train or stay travellin' round the Rim until I eventually starve to death. I choose Amy, though she's without a doubt certifiably insane and I'm not even sure she wants

me to follow her.

“Where are we?” I ask, because it looks a lot like Kentucky Fried.

She turns and smiles. I’ve been blindsided. We’ve gone all the way round an’ back again an’ now I’m gonna haveta make my peace with SkankBoy after all. I think she can see it in my eyes, that raw jus’ before death terror. “Was gonna come sometime,” she says, not exactly reassuringly, “might as well be now.”

Might as well be never, I think, though my eyes are scannin’ and I figure it’s not too late to get on the next train. But there he is, large as ugly life standin’ about ten metres away, an’ he’s got his main men, Paulo and Griezemann, with him.

“Anton!” he says, all smiles. “Where ya bin?”

I try not to sound paranoid. “Had ter see me Gramps, is all.”

He cocks his head to one side. I hear Paulo crack his knuckles. “Not thinkin’ of runnin’ out on me, are you boy?”

“I ain’t no boy!” I cry, then realise my mistake.

“No, that’s right. You’re not. Which means you have somethin’ that now belongs to me.”

Paulo and Griezemann walk over, slow like. I’ve got my back to the edge of the platform, so no way back there an’ no place to run ‘cause there’s people all over an’ they’d slow me down.

My eye keeps shifting between SkankBoy’s grinnin’ face and the half metre wooden pole that’s suddenly appeared from somewhere an’ now’s in Griezemann’s left hand. There’s somethin’ embedded in the end—nails? Razor blades? In fact I’m so engrossed that I don’t notice Amy casually movin’ towards them. I figure SkankBoy’s not clocked she’s with me. Jus’ as well, ‘cause if he knew this would never work.

She’s almost by Griezemann. Lookin’ like jus’ another person on the platform. He hardly sees her ‘cause he’s lookin’ at me. Then she trips, falls and then does something’ all twisty, roly an’ ‘acrobatic, bangin’ into his legs an’ knockin’ him right on his backside. Then the pole’s in *her* hands and she’s swingin’ at Paulo. Halfway through she turns to me an’ yells at me to run. That affects her swing an’ I can see Paulo’s gonna sidestep it, but she can (clearly) look after herself an’ I (very clearly) can’t so I don’t wait for her to yell at me again. I run, wrong way up an’ escalator, scatterin’ oldies an’ children every way, an’ out into the street. When I turn she’s right behind me, laughin’.

“See? That was fun!”

I don’t see, I wanna yell at her, I don’t see at all. But at least I know where I stand with SkankBoy. Dead man walkin’.

We run an’ run. There’s noise behind but I don’t turn around and we zigzag through a couple’a alleyways an’ then all’s quiet. I stop, pantin’, an’ lean over, hands on hips.

“That was your plan?” I say between deep, racking gulps of fetid, chemical stinkin’ air. Runnin’ in Fried ain’t good for the health. “Confront SkankBoy an’ see what happens?”

“No, Anton,” she says, not even soundin’ out of breath. “That was me validating your story. Which checks out, by the way.”

I puzzle on that, but I wouldn’t believe my story either.

“Yeah, well, can we get a better plan?”

She grins. “Still workin’ on it. Best we lay low somewhere though, yeh?”

* * *

Somewhere turns out to be somewhere else entirely.

“I’ve never been to 42 before,” I say, open mouthed, as the train we’ve snuck onto pulls onto a gold and marble platform. Looks like the magical land of DisneyOz, but I don’t say it on account of bein’ a man now an’ not wantin’ ter sound foolish. Gettin’ here took quite a lot of the credits SkankBoy wants ter take off me, but what the hell, Amy says, if he’s gonna get ‘em we might as well spend ‘em first. I’m not convinced this new plan of hers is any more sensible than the last one, but at least I’m still standin’ and at ticket prices deliberately set high to dissuade folks like me an’ SkankBoy takin’ to the rails he ain’t likely ter be following.

Folks here all wear suits an’ that jus’ makes me aware of the rags me an’ Amy are in. I ain’t bathed in Trump knows how long neither. Nor has Amy, by the look of her, all sexy-dishevelled, but she’s sure as hell smellin’ sweeter than me.

“Good place to lay low,” she says, leadin’ me into a hotel I know I can’t afford. ‘Cept I can, ‘cause I’m seventeen-year-old rich. For now.

There’s a pool in the atrium big enough to swim in with a real fountain an’—I’ll swear to Trump—some sorta pink wading birds walkin’ around pecking at something, lookin’ so lifelike I’m pretty sure they ain’t robots at all.

We get to the desk and at first I think they’re gonna call the cops on account of the rags an’ the stink an’ all. But Credit talks, right? So a cute receptionist with way too much makeup looks us up an’ down, checks my balance an’ smiles like she means it. At least we don’t go for the presidential suite. Amy lets me settle for one upgrade from Standard. Free toiletries but no extra towels an’ SurroundTV extra, which I reluctantly mumble a yes to. The room’s huge, bigger ‘n Ma and Da’s whole apartment. Hell, the *bathroom’s* bigger ‘n my bedroom at home. We shower, she smiles, lets her towel drop, an’ then it all gets super-intense.

Next morning we take full advantage of the complimentary breakfast. We’re late down, on account of getting’ mighty distracted all over

again, so we’re alone save for the harassed serving staff who don’t even try to hide the look that says go away so we can have our break.

“I really like you,” I say, with bit of croissant in my mouth. I ain’t never had croissant before, an’ it tastes jus’ like something outta DisneyOz should.

“I really like you too,” she says back, an’ that’s when I know I’m in love. We talk a bit about my situation, tryin’ to come up with something.

“Of course, they can only take the scrip off you if you have it,” she says. She’s wise, my Amy. “So if someone else had it ...”

“... they couldn’t touch it.” Because we’re all under 24-hour surveillance an’ if anyone does anythin’ illegal like coercin’ anyone to do somethin’ they’ve not already agreed to *without* coercion, like handin’ over all your scrip after a bet that goes wrong, then the cops slam yer in jail. SkankBoy can hassle me ‘cause I signed up willingly. But Amy?

“Got a plan,” I say, understanding but not really caring that it’s actually her plan, coming out of my mouth. “You take the scrip, keep it safe for me. Give it back when the danger’s passed.”

“But Anton, are you sure?”

It sounds obvious, so I press on all enthusiastic, ‘cause I love her which must mean she loves me back.

“Yeah, you can give me scrip for food an’ air whenever I need it, an’ Shankboy can’t touch you, ‘cause his beef is with me, not you.”

“Well, if you’re sure ...”

Because I’ve got a loved-up brain that ain’t workin’ properly I don’t think that maybe she agrees a little quick, ‘cause she’s got her palm out an’ I can see by the blue subcutaneous glow that she’s got her

Reader on. I clasp, concentrate, an' the transfer's done. I keep a few scrips back on account of needin' to breath but otherwise, job done. SkankBoy ain't got anythin' on me now.

We go back upstairs and seal the deal again. When we're done, Amy heads into the shower an' I doze. When I wake, she's gone.

There's a note. "Anton," it reads, "best we split for a while, until SkankBoy gets the hint and stops chasing you. I'll find you. xx"

Makes sense but makes no sense. We didn't talk about that bein' part of the deal. Panicked, I comms her but there ain't no reply. 'Course, she's prob'ly in a tube somewhere headin' to hidin'. Or maybe she thinks SkankBoy'll be tappin' my comms so she ain't gonna risk a reply. Has to be that. I leave a message, all love an' stuff an' missing ya, and think through my next move.

I check my scrip, curse, an' check out of the hotel I can't afford no more. I think about taking the train out of town, but the whole point of being in 42 was that SkankBoy wouldn't follow and besides, a ticket would cost most of my remaining scrip. So I wander around 'til it gets dark, then I bed down on a park bench, hoping the cops have too much to do to scoop me up for the drunk tank, and wait for Amy's call.

I mooch around for three days getting steadily poorer and developing a mighty crick in my neck before it occurs to me that Amy ain't gonna call. Besides, I don't have any choice no more. I have jus' enough scrip to get me back to Fried.

So I take the train. Funny how that marble station don't look so impressive no more.

* * *

Da ain't impressed. In fact, I reckon he'd a' walloped me if he hadn't been such a pacifist. Instead, he factssplains me, and the facts ain't pretty. We're sittin' at the corner café, on account of me bein' too

ashamed to go home an' him bein' too damn angry to let me. I'm sip-pin' water on account it's almost free so long as you buy a latte or somethin' like the one now goin' cold in front of Da's incendiary temper.

"Yer goin' red, Da. That can't be good."

He looks for somethin' to throw, but there ain't no salt pot on account of the latest health drive so he settles for givin' me a hard stare. "You've been conned, son."

Tell me somethin' I don't know. Then he does.

"Did you think your friend Boyd would really take all your credit?" Boyd is SkankBoy's real name, only no-one calls him that 'cause no-one wants to get a knife in the kidneys. "No son, he'd go to jail if he did."

"Why? It was a fair bet. He's entitled."

"No, you were drunk." I hadn't told him about the drugs. "And, more importantly, you were sixteen. Too young to enter into a wager like that. And he knows it."

I want to ask him how would anyone know, but I know the answer of course. 24/7 observation. A transfer like that would be picked up. Questions would be asked. Surveillance footage and comms taps would confirm.

I sit, broody broody, an' Da finally drinks his latte. When he finishes, he glances at his watch. "Hold your hand out, son."

I do and he transfers some credit. Not much, jus' enough for now. Then he stands up. "That's the last. And you're not coming home. Go chase the girl, if you can find her, which I doubt. Then work your way out of this mess." Then he walks out, leavin' me open mouthed.

"Tough love," he pings through my comms a couple of seconds later.

My reply ain't so polite.

I look for her, though it's half-hearted. I sleep on mate's floors, until they all get sick of me, then I check into the hotel that rents rooms by the hour down on Fifth intending to stay in bed until my scrip runs out and fate takes over. But fate kicks in early 'cause the guy that owns the hotel sees somethin' in me that ain't there, an' as I'm not averse to leadin' someone on if it'll get me what I need (I learned that one from Amy) I take his job offer and get free accommodation and basic scrip for eight hours a day of boredom behind the reception desk's steel bars. Gino, the owner, is too busy to bother me much (and besides, I kinda think he likes the flirt rather than the follow through, which is another thing I picked up from Amy), and I get to know some of the girls who invariably arrive with fat guys in crumpled suits and leave on their own, lipstick smeared, tower heels slung over their shoulders. They're fun, when they stop to talk. They can see I ain't no threat—they probl'y draw all the wrong conclusions 'bout me an' Gino—an' talk about their lives chasin' scrip and tryin' to avoid a batterin'. They're all wannabe somethin' elsers. Actresses, mainly. A lawyer or two. One of them, Becka, used to be a cop but she let her reckless nature take over an' now she works for herself. No regrets, she says, 'cause she's takin' back control. An' besides, as an ex-cop she can handle herself. Under her black straight wig there's cute brown curls. I think about askin' her out an' then remember Amy, who could, jus' could, be waitin' to call. Besides, Becka would prob'ly kick me in the balls jus' fer askin'.

The first day off I get I go lookin' for SkankBoy. I know I'm invitin' trouble but I have to know. I have to know if Da's right.

I track him down in his den, an abandoned apartment on the third level, high enough to have a good view of the main thoroughfare. Skank has his feet up, arms wide and his usual beaming smile. This time it looks genuine, though I can never really tell, and he welcomes me warmly.

“Anton! What a nice surprise!” He gestures over to Paulo, who brings me a beer. “Take a seat.”

It's not a suggestion so I sit, flanked by Paulo and Griezemann standin' arms folded behind me. I don't need to be able to see 'em to tell they ain't too pleased, but Skank, now, he's somethin' else. Happy? No, that's not quite it. Smug. Superior. Someone who's rollin' the punchline of a private joke around in his head knowin' that we little people will never get it, an' the joke's on us.

“You don't seem too unhappy that I ain't got no credit to give ya,” I say, nothin' left to lose.

He waves me off. “I'm sure you've worked out by now that I couldn't have taken your scrip even if I'd wanted to.”

“So what was goin' on back at the station?”

“Partly I was jes' torturing you.” He smiles, showin' shark-teeth, “An' partly I wanted you to do somethin', and I figured if you thought you owed me, you'd be much more likely to do it. Offer's still open, if you want to hear it. A job.”

“Don't need no job.”

“Word is you do. Breathe in, breathe out. I'm sure you want that to continue.”

I stand. “I'll take my chances.”

He leans back and laughs. “Whatever. Come see me when you change your mind.”

I don't waste any time wondering what Skank's job offer might be, other than to remind myself that it would almost certainly involve illegality, and lots of it. Word is that Skank's got some high-up on payroll—must have, or he'd never get away with the stuff he does—which makes him dangerous to be around. Besides, I don't fancy my chances with Paulo or Griezemann soon as his back's turned.

So I go back to the hotel and spend my days taking scrip from fat

guys and makin' new friends with the girls. After a while they start droppin' off "tips" for me when they leave. I ask Becka about it an' she says it's 'cause they know I'd look out for them, 'case of trouble. 'Cause I'm the kind of friend who don't want nothin' in return for smilin'. Apparently I don't judge, though maybe my life would be a whole lot easier if I did, once in a while.

Anyhows. Life's startin' to go good, or as good as it can without Amy, an' I'm thinkin' of askin' Becka out again 'cause I'm pretty confident she'd say yes when fate kicks me where it hurts again. It's midnight, or thereabouts, an' I'm jus' relaxin' with a book, feet up, when the door opens and two guys walk in. I look around, but there ain't no girls with 'em. I catch a small glimpse of silver as they sidle over, jus' enough, an' I ping Becka with the one word that's gonna get me fired, or worse. "Cops."

Then there's movement upstairs and the cops are lookin' up, before turnin' back to me to give me a curdled milk glance. Then they're off, one up the stairs one into the elevator and the bangin' upstairs gets louder 'n louder. I can hear someone shimmyin' down the fire escape an' then I hear the unmistakable sound of knee in groin an' Becka runs past, draggin' a wasted looking girl with acne and purple hair behind her. "Thanks, Anton. Next life, yeah," she calls as she hurtles past. And that's the last I see of her.

The cops hold me for three days then they have to let me go, on account of it not being a crime to send a one word comm message to your friend, even if it does screw up a well-planned (if poorly executed) police raid. There's some talk of charging me for "aiding and abetting" but I guess they figure small fry like me ain't worth the paperwork so they throw me back onto the streets. When I get back to the hotel, though, the place is police taped and Gino's hangin' around lookin' so disconsolate I let him buy me a drink.

Jus' a drink, mind. I'm still thinkin' of Becka. Wait—Becka? Amy's face pops into my mind but now it's blurry round the edges and I can't remember what she sounds like anymore. And that's when I know for sure that even if she did call, no way was it gonna be roses

and chocolate.

I don't have a job anymore, on account of the hotel bein' closed for "condoning illicit unlicensed activity," which makes it a tax issue rather than a moral one an' tells me all I wish I didn't know already about the way it is in this Trumpforsaken habitat. So I go lookin' for Amy, not loved up no more but righteous. I take the train to Rhode Island, which is where I first met her. I keep away from the gangs roamin' the streets but I keep an eye on them, expectin' her to be amongst them, laughin' and manipulatin'. But she's got scrip now, so she don't have to hang around that decayin' hole.

An' then it hits me. She prob'ly never left 42. Why would she? It's DisneyOz, closest thing to heaven on the whole of Station X. I race to the tube, check my credit. Not enough for the trip but I've seen people sneak on an' I know how to do it. I can settle up when I get my scrip back.

I lean in my seat, doze and relax. But I don't get to 42. I don't get further than the next stop before the doors open and the cops come in, lookin' straight at me. I swear they're the same ones as the hotel, mainly because they have the same menacing balding buzzcuts they all seem to. Maybe they're *robots*, I think as they drag me away, though that would be all sorts of illegal (and stupid, since intelligent robots = AI = Terminator = out the airlock).

They stick me in a room an' tell me how it is. I took a ride without payin'. Boo hoo, 'cept it's a ride to 42 an' I've finally exhausted my scrip. Which means (an' they don't have to look so pleased about it) recycling. For the good of the community. Tomorrow.

I panic and reach out to Da, even tho' las' time all he offered was advice, an' look where that got me. But he's "number unobtainable," which panics me even more an' the cops won't let me call the Gramps 'cause I've wasted my one call on Da. Least it saves me from Paw Paw's smug told-ya-so face.

I ask for a last meal but the grizzled cop tryin' not to look at me tells

me it'd be a waste of resources. I'm in a cell lyin' on a plastic-covered mattress tryin' to go to sleep, 'cept my heart's beatin' too fast to let me. So this is where fate takes me. Or is it me? Am I to blame for my own fate? I'd thought so once, because I'd entered into my wager with SkankBoy knowin' full well what would happen if I'd lost. So even though Skank didn't get the scrip maybe this is payback. But I'm nearly eighteen now an' things are clearer. I'd been lied to, manipulated and exploited. My Da abandoned me and I lost my job because Gino hadn't greased enough high-up palms to stay in business. Not my fault, none of it.

Doesn't make it any easier when the door swings open the next morning. The grizzled cop throws a bucket of water over me and laughs. "That water's free. Any more you have to pay for. Oh, forgot. You can't." Then he laughs again and I wonder if I can hit him, now I'm going to be recycled into Mushburgers anyway.

He doesn't give me the chance, on account of me being in chains and him standin' six foot seven an' me only five eight. So I brood an' fantasise about what I'd do to him if I get the chance, which takes my mind off what's going to happen to me.

I swear the habitat's temperature regulators are on the blink, on account of the distinct chilliness in the air as I walk the last few metres. There's a small crowd either side of the walkway, invited guests, probably, come to see the feckless and the impoverished get what they deserve. I imagine SkankBoy's in the crowd, smiling, next to Da wagging a finger an' sayin' "shoulda listened to me!" I entertain a fantasy that Amy'll be there, right at the end, pleading with the cops to let me go an' holdin' out her palm ready to transfer my credit back.

But she's not, and as I look round and take my last look at the fetid, decaying pile of rusty metal that's all that stands between humanity and vacuum I curse the fates that laid me low, and Amy who nudged them in the wrong direction.

A steel door clangs behind me. Inside other prisoners, also in chains,

mutter an' shuffle. Everyone's starin' at the floor, trying to avoid eye contact with the guards, and with each other. I don't care. I'm dead anyway so I might as well look around. There ain't no proper lights, only emergencies, making the whole place look greyed out. It's a small room, by the hull, and the seven of us plus two guards make it breathin'-down-your-neck full. At the end there's another door and two people in white coats walk through it, a man with a close-cut grey beard and a woman, short and dumpy with glasses. Doctor Death an' his chubby sidekick. She don't look up neither but he does, looking each of us in the eye. Everyone else tries to look away but I jus' stare at him. Satisfied, he moves back to the door. "This one," he says to the guard, indicating me.

The other prisoners look panicked, but surely they can't be as panicked as I'm feeling. The guards lead me through the door the Doc's jus' gone back through, leaving the others to their fate.

This room's brighter and bigger, but I can't pretend I feel any relief. Maybe I've escaped recycling, but there's the unmistakable bulk of an airlock door in the corner and that can only mean one thing. Spaceboy. Close up. No suit.

But then the Doc looks me up and down an' nods, as if he's tryin' to persuade himself he's made the right decision about me. "Got a choice for you, boy."

I ain't no boy, I wanna yell, but he's the guy with the guards and the 'bility to send me back for recycling, so I keep my mouth shut an' listen.

"You can go back in there," he says, jerkin' a thumb over his shoulder, "or take a chance on something new."

"What?"

"Can't say."

Which means that the 'chance' has to be worse than the metal room.

“All I will say is that one choice will most probably lead to a premature and undoubtedly painful death, and the other ...”

Well, if he’s gonna put it *that* way. “I’ll take it,” I say, survival instinct kicking in. It’s a gamble, but I lost the last bet so the odds are way better that this one will turn out good.

The room gets all blurry Kandinsky even before the Doc reaches over to me, syringe in hand. And then I black out.

* * *

I don’t really expect to wake up, but that’s what happens. My Da brought me up not to believe in the foolishness of an afterlife so something else is going on. My mouth’s dry and I’ve got a pounding head.

There’s a thrum. I’m on a ship.

I look around. Hospital room, no other occupants. I’m hooked up to a saline drip, which I carefully remove. I’m wearing a hospital smock and, presumably, a bemused smile. I wander the corridor looking for people, but there ain’t no one there, at leas’ not at first.

And then I bump into Amy.

She’s wearing something military looking, but when I look closer I see it’s a Mining Corps jacket. Which means ...

“... we’re going to the Kuiper Belt. Welcome aboard.”

I wanna kill her, I really do, but my legs start to collapse and she leans forward to catch me.

“What?” I croak as she leads me back to the hospital room.

“They needed volunteers. We volunteered.”

“I didn’t ...”

“Yeah you did, the day your credit ran out. You figured better take a chance rather than end up Mushburger. But you know, bet you didn’t figure on endin’ up here. They gave you the ‘once choice leads to death’ option, didn’t they?”

“Sure as hell wasn’t goin’ ta choose that one.”

She laughs. “But you did. They tell you you’d be recycled otherwise?”

“That’s what Da said. An’ ev’rybody knows.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a rehabilitation and education programme. Plus workgangs on the hub repairs. You’d’ve had the chance to be star pupil.”

“So this is ...”

“The death option, yeah. Open only to people like us who fit the profile.”

I groan an’ palmslap my forehead. Looks like I lost yet another bet. Maybe I should give up gamblin’. “But I ain’t no miner.”

“Are any of us? One way trip, mos’ prob’ly die out there. All we have to be is disposable, young an’ fit so it takes longer fer the radiation to kill us, an’ able to press some buttons. Pretty sure that’s in your skillset.”

“Why you?” I can hardly breath now, and my headache is intensifying.

“Credit ran out too. Doesn’t last long in 42. Not with my tastes.” She smiles, and I momentarily forget why I want to kill her.

“You. Didn’t. Call.”

“Now obviously that would have been foolish.”

“But ...”

She sighs. “I’m sure you’ve worked it out by now. No hard feelings?”

I consider my options: I’m in no position to kill her right now. So I lie.

When I recover the First Officer shows me round the ship. It’s large, but then it needs to be because it’ll take us years to get to the Belt and in all probability we’ll never get back, so it has to keep us alive for a very long time. There’s a crew of sixteen, mainly volunteers like me and Amy and a few real volunteers, who actually want to go as far from the sun as is possible without actually leaving the solar system.

I check out the airlocks very early on, waiting for a chance when I can lure Amy towards one. There’s no 24/7 surveillance on the ship, and I don’t even know if there’d be comeback even if I did space her, particularly when I tell everyone what she did. But as time goes by I start to forget what she stole from me and begin to remember what I liked about her in the first place, so I decide to wait a while. After all, the airlock’s not going anywhere, I tell myself. And eventually I can’t imagine why I would ever think of spacing Amy. Doesn’t mean I trust her though—after all, I ain’t seventeen anymore.

The best thing of all is that there’s no credit on the ship, jus’ food and air and Amy. And nobody’s going to cheat me out of any of it.

Channel Breaker

by Desmond Rhae



/the//friend/

by Holly Day

The robot comes across the dead man under the tree, triggers pictures of human anatomy like a penny arcade flappity-flapping, this is a broken human, it thinks, it knows about the thousands of miles of intestines and veins inside the corpse compares them to its own repair schematics, wonders if it can put the man together make a friend out of this dead body, someone to keep it company as it wanders aimlessly looking for things to do, some kind of purpose.

The penny arcade of anatomy continues to flappity-flap inside the robot as it spot-solders bone to muscle to vein, cuts and removes excess intestine takes out a couple of organs that don't seem particularly necessary, sets all the extras in a pile behind it. A couple of bony crows, attracted earlier by the scent of death land a few meters from the rescue mission, hop purposefully in little bumps through the tall grass, draw closer to the growing pile of severed muscle and vein and soft tissue, mindful of the thin, twisting plumes of smoke the whirring of occupied gears.

Finally, the robot backs away from the refurbished man who now looks nothing like a man at all. The robot has followed its own schematics adapted them to the corpse, which is really no good at all because veins are not conduits of electricity, you can't jump-start a dead and dry heart, a desiccated brain. But time means nothing to the robots that have outlasted us, after all, the robot feels neither disappointment at a day wasted, nor anger at its hopes for companionship thwarted. A crow lands on the robot's handiwork, says, "Hello!" to the robot, "Hello! Hello!" exudes true gratitude for this unexpected feast and in the end, this is all the affirmation the robot ever wanted anyway.

Limits of Temptation

by Tim Hildebrandt



A Knell That Summons Thee

by Brian D. Hinson

In the crowded dressing room I overheard Daniel say, “I don’t remember the trip here.”

This was between Act IV and V, and the audience beyond the curtain was enraptured. Enthralled, even. But my Macbeth was on the verge of a crisis. Right before the final act. This could get really, really bad. I had five minutes to get this resolved and his ass back onstage in top form.

Daniel was at the big vanity, his crown set aside, his armor glinting in the lights bounding the mirror. I pulled a chair beside and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We need your bravado for scene 3 but, *but*,” I raised a finger for emphasis, “tinged with a touch of doubt behind your eyes.”

Daniel rolls his eyes like I’m patronizing him. “Thanks for the pep, but I know. I *know*. This isn’t my first Shakespeare bit, for chrissakes, Roger. Why the hell don’t I remember the trip from Earth to here?” he asked, tapping the faux wooden top of the vanity.

“Focus, Daniel, focus, we’re about to raise curtain for the last act and I need you in 11th century Scotland, not in 22nd century Red City, Mars. Got me? What the hell are you doing *here* when you need to be *there*?”

“I’m there, I am. All right? But I need to figure this out, it’s distracting me.”

“A distraction?” I cried as I rose from the chair. “Since when has anything got between Daniel Visser and his role?”

“This weird gap—”

I grasped him by the shoulders, cutting him off. “You have a wall filled with awards, an Oscar in your pocket, and you’ve nailed title roles in six Shakespeare plays and you’re one act from the seventh. *You are Daniel Visser*. Hero of aspiring actors across the System, beloved by *billions*. You don’t have meltdowns over some memory blip. You nail the part. And in four minutes, you’ll wear that crown and face down Macduff as king of Scotland.”

He nods, face still scrunched in worry. “Was I in a hibernation pod for the trip? I don’t remember climbing into one.”

I had to straighten him out, and quickly.

I unsheathed an extra’s wooden stage sword and with a war cry struck the vanity mirror. Daniel leapt from his chair to escape the shattering glass.

As the dressing room emptied I stabbed the sword in Daniel’s direction every other word, “Are you having some sort of crisis on me? Right before the final act?” Was I loud enough to be heard beyond the curtain? I hoped not. “How dare you jeopardize this show! You may be the star, the superstar, but damn you, you prima donna fool! I’m the director and I won’t allow you to ruin my career or any other actors’ here! Got that, pretty boy? Quit being stuck on yourself. *Concentrate!*”

His breath huffed rapidly and his eyes were wide and wild. I knew right then no one had given him a director’s rage moment. At least not since before his name had become a brand.

Daniel’s eyes narrowed. His breath came under control. On the table

filled with catered snacks and drinks, he grabbed a water bottle and chugged.

I had him.

He slammed the bottle down, sloshing droplets on the cheese plate. He crossed his arms. “No one talks to me like that.” His voice was level, even, measured. The man was cool under pressure. Famously so.

“Before first rehearsal here on Mars the last thing I remember is a checkup at a clinic. On Earth. I just can’t push this out of my head.”

“Are you ready for the curtain or no?”

Daniel was hesitating.

I allowed the sword to clatter to the floor. I took his chair by the back and dumped off the glass.

“Have a seat. We got two minutes left.”

Daniel sat, much to my relief.

I pulled my chair to face him. He was probably suspecting something ever since the end of Act I and it gnawed and gnawed at him. The interval had taken extra minutes as my Lady Macbeth’s costume needed a tailor touch-up. Daniel had a dangerous moment to reflect. Now, I had no choice. “There was no trip, Daniel. An imprint of your mind was transmitted here and placed in a ready clone of your body.”

He nodded. I could see it all click behind his eyes.

“We don’t get superstars out here. But this way, we get a taste. And what a taste it’s been.” I pointed to the far wall, toward the stage, toward the audience beyond. “They’re out there having the time of their lives. This new theatre, the biggest on Mars—we can still smell the paint, yes? You’re opening this theatre with a beloved Shakespeare play. I showed you the news piece before curtain.” My hand traced the headline in the air. ““The Biggest Acting Talent Ever to Grace This Planet.””

Daniel stayed silent and stared at the glass on the floor as the bell chimed for the final minute before curtain.

I went to the vanity, took the crown, placed it back on his head. “Are you ready now?”

He stood. “They’ll remember this one.”

“Give it to me. Give me that final line.”

He smiled, then his face distorted to rage and he snarled, “Lay on, Macduff, and damn’d be him that first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’”

As he marched out of the dressing room, I clapped him on his armored shoulder.

I followed out to the wings. His head was back on right, I was sure. In the zone.

This was the final act, and MacDuff’s steel sword would soon slip between his ribs and into his heart. At Macbeth’s—Daniel’s—final moment, I knew I would weep for the tragic hero.

Sea Change

by Susan diRende

“Now remember, everybody. If one of the octopuses approaches you, you may touch it if and only if it makes contact with you first. They are very curious and they see and hear and smell with their arms, so they tend to be very touchy-feely when they are interested in something.”

“What if it tries to eat me?” asked the teenager staring at the vid feed from the underwater cameras. He didn’t sound worried. He sounded hopeful.

Varida sighed. There was always someone who seemed disappointed that the modified giant octopuses here on Europa were peaceful.

“Your suit will protect you. Even if you were completely cocooned by one, you would remain perfectly safe until we could peel the arms off. But this has never happened. Ever.”

“They’re domesticated, Roger. Like dogs,” his older brother chided.

Varida shook her head. “More dolphin than dog, I’d say. We are researching how to modify behavior to be more human-compatible. That is one of the main purposes of this research facility. To see if a cephalopod can be made a fully-domesticated companion for humans.”

“I want to ride an octopus,” chimed another youngster.

Varida held in her sigh. The little girl could grow up to be a scientist if she was encouraged. “Come back in 10 years, and maybe you will be the one to figure out how to do that.”

Dr. Varida Karu, PhD in both Marine Biology and Genetic Modifica-

tion, ushered her charges into the insertion pod that would set them out in the world-girdling ocean of Europa. The tidal forces that heated the water with friction made it warm under the mantle of pernice that locked heat in and kept the cold of space out. Warm enough for aquatic earth species to survive, albeit modified.

The underside of the ice was a playground for polar species that had lived under the permanent arctic ice before it had disappeared on Earth. Science had been able to fully replicate the food chain, adapting it to local conditions. On Europa, instead of latitude affecting temperature, depth was what governed it. The water got warmer the deeper you went. Low gravity, lower than the Moon, meant the weight of the water didn’t rise to crushing pressure the way it did on Earth. It also meant almost every species grew giant-sized. The coral in particular had thrived and made a fairyland of color and shape that Matisse might have designed.

Because of this, Europa was one of the most popular space tourism destinations. Weekly cruise ships came from Earth full of people who wanted to experience the beauty and variety of benthic sea life; it had long vanished on Earth but had a revitalization, albeit modified, in the underwater ocean of the Jovian moon. The dives into the Europa ocean were always led by one of the scientists, usually the most recent arrival. Varida had been the newbie for six months.

They toured the colorful underwater gardens that had names like the Palace of Neptune and Water Wonderland. The entire region was strung with low-level light cells that fueled the plankton that in turn anchored the underwater food chain. The coral grew on floating platforms emitting even stronger light that fed the algae they hosted in exchange for oxygen. It made the coral “reefs” glow from within, en-

hancing their colorful effect.

Once the group had toured the gardens, Varida led them to the area where the octopuses often came to “play” with the humans. Her fellow scientists were split in their opinion about whether the octopuses on Europa were sentient, but they certainly had curiosity. Varida supported efforts to get cephalopods classified as non-autonomous persons, the way all primates, dogs, and a few other species had been. Unfortunately, that legal designation required a brain scan with imaging equipment no octopus could survive.

She gathered the group in a circle and told them to mute their microphones and then sing or hum as loudly as they could. The vibrations would carry through their suit and helmet and let the octopus know that they were around without interfering with communications. The circle wasn’t really necessary, but Varida enjoyed seeing the faces of the visitors as they sang or whistled behind their illuminated faceplates. It was an absurdity that only language could have arranged. It made her happy in a way that was hard to explain.

Soon the shadowy white forms of two octopuses billowed up from below. One of them snapped its arms together like an umbrella closing and shot forward right through the center of the group. The other circled around them, undulating gracefully with its body spread wide to catch every vibration. It kept shifting its skin colors and patterns as it passed different people. The first octopus joined the second and it seemed to her that the two of them were shifting color almost in synchrony. She’d noticed this behavior once or twice before.

Were they responding to the sounds, she wondered.

They seemed particularly interested in one woman directly across the circle. Varida remotely tuned into the woman’s mike. She was chanting an old Sanscrit mantra over and over. Varida wondered the octopuses felt the pattern. Many studies had been done with cephalopods and none showed any relationship. But these octopuses had so many modifications that their intelligence could well have been enhanced as a byproduct.

She spoke to the group. “Hey everybody. Let’s try something, shall we? Someone was chanting a meditation mantra.”

“That was me,” said the woman. “My last bucket list trip before this one was to an Indian ashram.”

“How about you start, and everybody join in as soon as you get the pattern.”

The woman ... Joanie, that was her name. Joanie started singing “om namah shivaya” slowly and rhythmically. The others joined in and soon they were all singing in one loud, sometimes off-key chant.

The color shifts on the octopuses flowed with the chant. Since their color is controlled by will instead of hormones the way creatures like chameleons change colors, octopus appearance is always a choice. Varida watched them change from speckled yellows to striped white and blue to smooth green over and over. The tour noticed it too, and some people dropped out to exclaim and more than one pressed the camera function on their suit.

Camera. Varida almost forgot to document what she was seeing. Nobody would believe her without a recording.

When she’d returned her charges to their ship uneaten, she hurried to the labs looking for the Director of Research, Marthe Reine. She wanted to tell Marthe about what had just happened, but she wasn’t in her office. She was most likely in her private lab where no one else was permitted. No one even knew what she was working on, though her specialty, like Varida’s, was cephalopods.

Marthe didn’t like being disturbed while she was there unless there was an emergency. Varida was bursting to share what she’d witnessed, but knew it could wait.

She went to her rooms and logged in to her workstation, where she loaded the photos and films she’d made into the laboratory net. She wanted to sketch some ideas for further study, which meant review-

ing the latest data on non-human communication. A dataset pinged for her search that she didn't recognize labeled "Persil." It was stored on the local server and yet she'd never seen it before. Curious, she checked the hyperdata and saw that the files were Marthe's "secret" research, which was not, for the moment, behind a firewall with a password only the Director knew.

Varida didn't think. She told the server to download them all. Yes, it could get her in trouble, but she could claim that open files were there for everybody. Just to be safe, she told the AI to rename the copied files with her initials and a generic date and time code. She got most of the files and then the system kicked her out as an unauthorized user. Glitch patched.

She held her breath to see if any alarms sounded. After a minute or two with nothing happening, a millennium in computing time, she breathed easily. She was excited, like she had just been handed the keys to the palace of the gods. Laboratory of the gods. Someplace cool.

There were vids and documents. She cued up the earliest vid and watched while scanning the written reports. The variations made on the root species for the Europa octopuses, the Larger Pacific Striped Octopus, apparently had one significant unintended result. The Stripedes were unique among octopuses on Earth because they don't die when they reproduce, but can have several cycles of offspring; still, they rarely lived for more than 5 years. The modified species was designed to live much longer, fifty years on average, so that they could more quickly populate the offworld ocean. What hadn't been expected was the result lifespan had on intelligence and learning. Marthe's notes indicated that octopus intelligence, among the smartest creatures on Earth despite their short lifespan, had grown exponentially thanks to the gift of time.

Human brains are packed into a small space relative to the rest of the body so they could be protected from harm by floating in a liquid cushion inside a sphere of thick bone. Octopuses have essentially nine brains: a central brain and essentially one in each arm. The dense

water environment means it doesn't need to worry about damage from concussion, protected instead from random damage by virtue of being suspended in water.

Very quickly, Varida realized that she'd been lucky not to have been able to tell Marthe about the octopus responsiveness. The Director already knew that the octopuses communicated. She'd known for years they spoke in "colors," but she hadn't told anyone. If she was keeping it secret, who knows how she would have reacted to Varida's enthusiastic plans to study them. The only certainty was that her reaction wouldn't have been a good one.

Marthe had captured a young octopus that she named Persil for the bright parsley color it displayed when happy. She started simply wanting to decode the chromatic language they used, expecting it to be no more complex than a vocabulary of warnings and mating calls.

Language, after all, required not just intelligence, but social relationships.

Most octopuses were solitary creatures, but the Striped were not. They were social. They lived in groups. They didn't have dominance hierarchies like many other social creatures, which just made them and their motivations stranger. But they did have relationships, and with the added lifespan, they were developing complex behavior and language.

Marthe decided to teach Persil human language. To do that, she had to invent a whole apparatus so that the octopus could read and write it. She borrowed from braille and created a keyboard that was designed for suckers rather than fingers. The progress was slow, but one day Persil had a lightbulb moment. It was like the story of deaf and blind Helen Keller learning that the sign for "water" stood for water.

Once Persil grasped the concept behind human language, she absorbed it at a lightning pace. And not just as vocabulary. She made the leap to syntax. When the octopus started communicating abstract

ideas and not just about food and comfort, Marthe became increasingly possessive and secretive.

To ensure Persil's cooperation, Marthe had to convince her to accept captivity. Like all cephalopods, she was an escape artist because it knew it was captive and hated it. Humans would build their best containers and still the octopuses would find a way. All it needed was an opening large enough for its eye to pass through. All the rest was negotiable.

Marthe told Persil it could not survive outside its aquarium in the waters of Europa. The memories the octopus had of swimming freely were from Earth, she said, not Europa. Marthe got it to stop trying to escape by gaslighting it.

To Varida, the implication was clear. The modified octopus was a fully sentient being. And it was being held prisoner against its will.

Varida was shaking with an emotion cocktail that was like fireworks. There was a joy exploding in her heart to imagine she might be able to commune with one of her beloved cephalopods. And there was the incendiary pain to think that such a creature was being kept in solitary confinement for life, all for the crime of thinking.

She did a search through all the documents to see if there was a reference to a password or passcode to the laboratory. Failing that, she noticed that the vids of Marthe communicating with Persil didn't end until the Director punched a code into the door to leave. The screen didn't show the code, but it did record the sound pattern. A quick upload of the tones told her the numbers.

By this time, it was the middle of the "night" in the research station. Without waiting for a plan, Varida went into the laboratory section and opened the door to Marthe's lab. There, against the far wall, was the most beautiful octopus she'd ever seen.

Persil noticed her right away, and from the changes in color, was ex-

cited and interested. Varida went over to the keypad set up to send pulses into the water and typed, "Hello Persil. My name is Varida."

"Come put your hand in the water so I can know you."

Varida climbed the ladder beside the giant tank and trailed her hand in. Persil undulated over to her, the tentacles swirling like the arms of a hula dancer. She was larger than Varida, but not so massive. Her flesh had a translucent glow that seemed peaceful, but the striped pattern showed she was feeling some stress.

Varida twirled her wrist as Persil wrapped a tentacle around it. With her other hand, Varida stroked the soft flesh of what would be the cheek of a human head. Still holding on, Persil stretched a tentacle back to the keypad and said, "It is good to meet a new person."

"It is good to meet a new octopus. I am so happy that you and I can talk to each other. I have spent my life studying about your kind. I have known individuals well enough to feel friendship. But I've never been able to meet the mind of them, to become true friends."

"I am glad your interest brought you here, but I do not understand why friends are important to humans."

"We are more social than you. We are very weak for land dwellers. We compensate by making groups. Together, we can hunt larger animals and build greater homes and machines by cooperating."

"Is friendship cooperation?"

"It is cooperation a person can rely on. One friend will give help to another friend even if it requires sacrifice and risk."

"Please give me an example."

"Let's say you were being kept as a prisoner. Helping you escape might cost me my job. Possibly put my own freedom in danger. Even

so, if you were my friend, I would help you.”

“But the consequences might make you a prisoner.”

“Becoming a prisoner because of my own choice and action is not the same as being taken against my will as if I was a thing instead of a thinking person.”

“I must consider this.”

Pausing to think was standard octopus behavior. Varida took the time to look over the lab setup.

“Were you offering to help me escape?”

“If you do not want to stay here, I would try.”

“Even at the loss of your job and possibly your freedom?”

“I have already chosen to jeopardize my job by coming here to talk to you. I am not allowed to visit you. No one is. Yet here I am.”

“You are curious.”

“Yes. Humans and octopuses share great curiosity. But I am also angry. There are rules for how humans behave that keep us from killing one another. When someone breaks those rules, human society becomes very dangerous.”

“Marthe told me it would kill me to leave my tank, that there is no ocean for me here.”

“Well, Marthe lied to you. The ocean here on Europa is full of octopuses like you. Humans engineered your bodies to survive in the temperatures and the elements of these waters. You were born here, not on Earth. I want to return you to it. Do you want me to help you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. We will figure it out together. It will take some time. Meanwhile, you must not tell Marthe that I came or that we talked. She has the power to stop me.”

“I will not tell her.”

“Does Marthe ever come here at night?”

“No. Only when it is bright.”

“Then I will come at night. Do you have questions for me?”

“I would like to learn how this place was made. And why.”

And so began Varida’s nightly sessions with Persil. Varida didn’t have a plan. She began with biology. Water breathers and air breathers. Evolution. Genetics. That led to interstellar travel and that led to machines.

Soon they were talking half the night. Both of them found it fascinating to hear the other speak of life in their different elements of land and water.

The difference also posed a problem for escape. Varida could simply take her out of her tank, but then what? Octopuses can live out of the water so long as they stay wet since they absorb some oxygen through their skin. They don’t have lungs, only gills, but their skin can absorb enough to stay alive unless they dry out. But there was no way once out of the lab that they wouldn’t be noticed. Varida would have to descend to the bathypods, suit up, and cycle out into the ocean wrapped in a human-size cephalopod.

The water system feeding into and out of the tank came from the ocean. But the reputation of octopuses meant that every intake and drain of water was built to thwart them from getting in, which also

prevented Persil from getting out. Openings were double hatched, meaning one door had to close before the other would open. If she got through the first hatch, the second would sense her and would not release. Also, there were sieves at regular intervals in the drains. Being an invertebrate meant Persil could squeeze and squish her body through almost anything, but her eye had to have an opening its size or larger.

“Tools. I need tools,” Persil insisted.

“Won’t Marthe see them?”

“If they are small, I can hide them in my shelter.”

The first tool was a tiny chisel that allowed her to pry open the valve in the water tap that fed her tank. With trial and error, she was able to jam it in and then use her suckers to brace and give her leverage to pop it open. The rush of water washed her back into the tank.

Persil pulled herself back into the pipe and was able to slip in despite the flow out. Varida’s heart leapt when she saw her disappear. She wondered if she’d see her friend again. If there was a danger they hadn’t foreseen. Suddenly, the risk felt foolhardy.

A few minutes passed and Persil popped out of the tube. Her color was speckled with bright colors of rose and blue. She was excited.

“Fun fun riding water.”

“What stopped you from leaving?”

“Something like this but small,” and she pointed to the grille over the air bubbler.

“A screen, probably to filter the incoming water. You’ll need to cut through, and then keep the jagged edges from tearing you to pieces.”

A keyhole saw and a metal file took care of the screen. There were

more valves that controlled the flow to the various tanks in the facility. Each one that was broken upped the risk of discovery. But it was likely that no one would think to look unless they watched the amount of water draining in and out of Persil’s tank.

The last obstacle was the pump that controlled the flow of water from the ocean into the aquarium system.

“I think I’m going to have to open it from the outside. If you can get there, I can take it apart and you can escape.”

“Danger to you?”

“I’m allowed to go out into the ocean. I’m expected to. No one else will be out in the water in the middle of the night, so no one will see. And with any luck, I’ll be able to put it back once you’re free.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I’ll come by so I’ll know when you’ve started so I can time it.”

The next morning, Marthe had a new puzzle for her subject. She put a fish in a particularly convoluted structure and scattered a few sticks and pebbles around the enclosure. Persil noticed a seam in the container and rather than explore the openings, tried to pry the container apart by jamming the flat of the stick into the seam. The container was made to come apart, and so even though the stick wasn’t nearly as strong as the chisel, the puzzle box popped open. Persil ate the fish.

“That was ... You knew it would work without experimenting. You didn’t even think about it.” Marthe was thinking out loud. “We have never done anything like this. Even in humans, novel uses do not come out of the blue. Someone or something ...”

Marthe rooted around in the aquarium. Persil tried to distract her by swimming up to her and wrapping around her arm. She didn’t fight, though later she wondered what would have happened if she had.

“Where did you get these?” Marthe asked, holding up the chisel, the saw, and the file.”

Persil lied. “I’ve been leaving the tank and taking things in the hope I can escape.”

“You’ll die if you go out.”

“I don’t care.”

“How did you get back in the tank?”

“What?”

“When you escaped. How did you get back in the tank?”

“The same way I got out.”

“Oh really?” She reached into the tank and plucked Persil out of the tank. She set her on the floor and said, “Show me. Show me how you got back in the tank.”

When Varida arrived that night, she knew something was wrong the moment she entered the room. The lights did not come on. Then she noticed the quiet. The tank aerator was silent. The water was eerily still.

Varida panicked. She clambered into the tank and dove down to check inside the shelter enclosure. She reached in to see if the tools were there, but they were gone. Coming up for air, she told herself that Persil had gone early for some reason. She hauled herself out of the tank, ignoring the question of why the equipment was shut down and the lights were off.

A moment later she had her answer when the lights suddenly came on. Marthe sat in the back of the laboratory glaring at her. She held a tranquilizer gun in her hand and it was pointed at Varida.

“I never expected this of you. I was so careful to hire a tractable, in-

secure cephalopod expert to replace poor old Vittorio when he lost his mind and had to be carted back to Earth under sedation. You’ve ruined years of work and put the entire research station at risk. Why? I want to know why?”

“The wild cephalopods exhibited what I thought was linguistic behavior ...”

“That’s not possible.”

“I know you thought Persil was an anomaly. A glitch let me read your research. That’s how I found out about this.” She gestured to the laboratory. “I found Persil. She’s a fully sentient being, and you had her locked up in a tank for years. Years.”

“She never complained to me.”

“Not once you lied and convinced her she’d die if she escaped.”

Marthe’s lips pressed together and her nostrils flared. “And you told her ‘the truth’ I suppose.”

“Yes. Yes I did. We spoke every night for months. Together we worked out a way for her to escape. She mastered the tools.”

“These.” Marthe held up the small instruments.

Varida’s defiance evaporated when she saw them. If Marthe had them, Persil did not, which meant she had no way to escape.

“Where is she?” Varida whispered.

“I’ve disposed of her. I will have to find another specimen and begin all over.”

Varida lunged for the director, who shot her with the tranquilizer. The dart stung. She sat on the floor, knowing it would knock her out pretty quickly. Better not to count on Marthe to keep her from falling

on her face.

Before she passed out, she wanted to know. “Why? Why the secrecy? What do you hope to gain?”

“Gain? I want to save them. You know the best guarantee for a species is to become useful to humans, especially since it appears that many planets have water. Not equal to humans. Servants who we can care for and love. The side effect of the current mods is an increase in intelligence. It counteracts their sociability and makes them more independent-minded, and they were never affectionate like mammals to begin with. If I can’t bring the species to heel, so to speak, then once this environment is stabilized, the government will introduce a different, less intelligent apex predator and the octopus population will be exterminated.”

Varida couldn’t move her limbs by the time Marthe had finished. Her vision was fading even though her eyes were open. Marthe’s face swam darkly into view.

“Am I dying?” Varida asked.

“I don’t believe so. I’ve developed a variant on the cephalopod venom that paralyzes their prey. I thought you’d appreciate being a guinea pig for my concoction.”

And then nothing.

When Varida awoke, she was in a dark room. It wasn’t pitch black, but dark like a sleeping cubicle. She called for a light. Nothing. She tried to get up, but found she was too weak.

There was an IV tube in her arm, and she lay back trying to decide if it was the cause of her weakness or if she’d reacted to the venom and it was helping her recover.

She looked around as best she could, and noticed that the darkness had lighter “holes” in it, right up on the ceiling where the ceiling lights would be. She remembered her vision growing dark as she suc-

cumbed to the tranquilizer shot and was afraid. Had her vision been damaged? Was this shadowy world the only one she would ever see again?

“Dr. Karu?” The voice of the medical AI assistant came from a speaker somewhere. “You had a bad reaction to octopus venom. We have stabilized you and purged the poison from your system.”

“Is that why I can’t see?”

“Your vision is not functioning?”

“No. A little. I can see shadows. All greys.”

“I will scan the optic nerve system and send the findings to the doctor on call. Are you experiencing any other problems?”

“I feel very weak. I tried to stand but I couldn’t even sit up.”

“Please remain in your bed. Your nervous system has taken a shock. The doctor believes it will recover on its own. If not, we will start a regimen of physiotherapy.”

“Has anyone been to see me?”

“I’m afraid you are under some sort of interdiction. No communication is permitted.”

“Oh. I would like to know why I am in here and what my restrictions are.”

“I will inform the system admin to notify the proper person to answer your request.”

“Thank you. Could I at least have some music or audiobooks to listen to?”

“I will have to leave the room microphone active so you can verbally

access the library.”

“Great.”

Varida learned that she was under arrest for sabotage, that she was being sent back to Earth on the next ship, which would be arriving in about two weeks. She didn’t see how she could help herself with her vision so poor. Her strength returned slowly and the exercises helped. But her vision stayed dim, and she would have despaired of her future if she hadn’t been so tired and so sad about Persil. At least she had a future. Her friend did not.

She realized she was locked into one of the larger shuttles. It had a bathroom and a small unit to reconstitute and heat emergency rations. She wasn’t forced to eat those, however. Someone came every day and left meals for her in the outer airlock.

She found a way to tell her story. She linked to the library net and set up the microphone to broadcast a round-the-clock livestream. She didn’t know if anyone would ever hear it, but she spoke constantly while she was awake. She told her version of events. She went into great detail about what she’d seen on the taped sessions and how she’d met Persil, how they’d become friends, how they’d plotted the escape together. She wept when she described hearing that her friend had been “disposed of” like some bit of garbage. Varida kept retelling the stories on the chance someone new came across the feed, repeating often about the important issues: octopus sentience, the imprisonment of Persil, of her own interference and the realization that the ten-year-old octopus might be smarter than she was, PhD or no PhD.

She was in the middle of one of her descriptions of her own imprisonment when the door opened and someone came in. When the door shut, the person spoke with Marthe’s voice.

“Varida. You have to come with me right now.”

“Why did you come here alone, Marthe? Are you planning to dispose of me as well and say I died escaping? No.”

“Don’t be melodramatic, Varida. There’s a problem and you are the only one who can fix it.”

Varida had been held incommunicado for nearly two weeks. She couldn’t imagine anything that would suddenly need her attention now.

“I can’t see you, but I can fight you.”

“Do I have to tranquilize you again?”

“You won’t. It almost killed me last time and would probably kill me now. You’d have to explain.”

It’s amazing what lack of vision does to a person’s perceptions. Varida could feel the frustration and anger Marthe was giving off as a kind of heat. Her breathing was deep but irregular like she was struggling with something.

“Why don’t you tell me why you need me?”

“The octopuses. They are not letting the tourists disembark. They have blocked the locks.”

“And this has to do with me because ...”

“They’ve written in the coral with stones, fully visible from the viewing platform.”

“What did they write, Marthe? Tell me.”

“Laboratory or prison? Free Varida.”

Varida was suddenly very happy. “You told me you killed Persil!”

“I said I disposed of her,” Marthe corrected. “I released her.”

“You meant for me to think you killed her.”

“You ruined years of work. I wanted you to suffer an equal loss.”

Varida knew that being a scientist didn’t make someone benevolent or honorable. Marthe was neither. Not a good look for the planetary caretaker of a modified species.

“Which is why I don’t believe you now. I have no doubt you could convince the tourists it’s all a prank. A publicity stunt by your disgraced subordinate. Is that why you want me out? To say somehow I escaped and did it?”

Marthe’s voice lost all its color. “No. They’ve been listening to you. Some bored teenager on the ship was poking around in the net feeds about Europa, probably to hack our system, and he found your livestream. Apparently the entire cruise ship has been following your story, debating your actions, and generally taking sides on the matter. The teen arrived with a plan to break you out of your cell, but his parents, fortunately, think you are right where you belong.”

“Marthe.”

“There’s something else. I tried speaking to Persil. She has another condition. I’m to leave Europa. She wants me gone.”

“Who would run the laboratory?”

“She wants you to be the director. She trusts you.” Marthe’s voice sounded like broken glass crushed underfoot.

“I can’t be the director of a research lab if I can’t see.”

“About that. We tested your vision and it was not permanently damaged. It just needed a little time to recover.”

“But it hasn’t recovered. I still can’t see more than shadows.”

“I ordered the lights kept dim.”

“What!”

“I said I wanted you to suffer. I was angry with you.”

“Marthe. I didn’t aim to hurt you, though I knew it would. You led me to think I was blind for no reason other than to hurt me. What’s wrong with you?”

She sighed. “I ... I don’t know. I didn’t do anything so wrong that I deserve to have my life work discarded.”

“So use it. Keep the work and use it for a better goal. You have the savvy. The connections. On Earth you can become the champion of the cephalopods. A hero with a shaky start.”

“No one will believe me after the story you told.”

“They will if I admit some wrongdoing on my part. If we make peace between us, for the sake of the cephalopods.”

Marthe was silent for a full minute. “It might work. Loyalty to a human is a good trait. Nonviolent rebellion is also a virtue in a predator species. I confess I never saw those qualities. How did she come up with them?”

“Persil was very interested in the history of how enslaved people won equality. I told her about Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Te Whiti o Rongomai.”

“Okay. Prepare yourself.”

“There’s no way I’m prepared to be director.”

“Not for that. I’m about to turn the lights on. Cover your eyes.”

And there was light.

A Strange Country

by Debasish Mishra

After years of dodging with pollution,
the government of this strange country
has called for a complete ban on automobiles

Electric cars are prohibited for public use
They are reserved for VIPs

Shoot on sight has been ordered
for anyone seen with a vehicle

The rich can afford horse-carriages
while the poor will go by foot

The middle-class is content
with the languid bullock-carts

Oxen are as important
as cows these days:
they're faithful fathers of conveyance

Mobile apps are now used
to book a bullock-cart

Of all the inconvenience
the media reported the case
of a hopeless lover stranded outside
the Trump statue
with no carts in sight yesterday

His beloved was waiting
for him in the Modi Park

*There's no fuel to run
the engine of love these days,
the media declared in unison*

M.W.I.

by Pete Barnstrom

Wayland rolled the paper into the typewriter, flexed thoughtful fingers over the keys, and then the door opened and a guy in a yellow work helmet said, “What the hell are you doing in here? Get your ass out!”

He seemed genuinely terrified, and Wayland told him that he'd just gotten in here, not a half-hour ago, but the hardhat guy said that he needed to get out now because the building's coming down, and Wayland said that seemed unlikely, but he packed up anyway, and that was Wayland's first clue that thirty years had passed.

At the curb, his typewriter under his arm, the sheet in it untouched, Wayland watched a demolition team driving heavy machines against the brick, and damned if the place wasn't coming down. How did this happen?

A sign in the rutted mud told him this was the future home of the Angus Byner Science Center. That made him laugh, just for the sheer impossibility of it. Angus, a lean and bearded grad student, had ushered him into the Time Box just minutes ago.

Or at least, he was beginning to realize, relative minutes ago.

Angus had called it the “Quantum Chamber,” because he was a bearded grad student who grew up on Carl Sagan instead of Dr. Seuss and didn't have any sense of fun. Wayland had instantly dubbed it the Time Box, and all the rest of the research team had joined in. Mostly because it bugged Angus.

The idea was that time would progress at different rates inside and outside the box. The volunteer, a young and predictably starving lit-

erature studies scholar named Wayland Foy, would spend one year inside the box, but when he walked out, only one minute would have passed to the observers.

Both the shortest and the longest student project in the history of the physics department, Angus Byner liked to laugh. Not like Wayland and Vera had laughed at the whole concept in the privacy of her off-campus housing, but he laughed.

He found the address at the school library, and not long after, Wayland rang the bell of a respectable house near the campus. The door was answered by a fifty-something version of Angus Byner, still bearded, less lean, and it was only then that Wayland accepted that this might really not be the most beautifully elaborate prank ever executed.

“The resemblance is uncanny,” old Angus said, settling into a creaking leather armchair. Wayland didn't sit, instead pacing the worn Persian rug.

It was a nice room, this parlor, if only tenured professor-nice. Stuffy, a bit of dust, the glass shade under the ceiling fan was cracked. A small couch upholstered a lifetime ago, the fabric butt-shiny. There was a pipe in a heavy black ashtray, because of course there was, but it wasn't lit. The walls were lined with books, a lot of them, but not the crack-spined paperbacks that had once dominated the man's dorm room. The shelves weren't bungee-bound plastic milk crates, either.

“I've known Wayland for decades,” Angus said, “but I'd no idea he had a son.”

“I'm not his son,” Wayland began, then stopped. “My son, I mean. I

am Wayland, Angus. And I don't mind telling you, I'm damned confused."

Angus still had the same condescending chuckle he always had when explaining to the less-quick witted. "Yes, dear boy, you are confused. I know Wayland Foy. No one save his immediate family knows him better. And while I'll admit you do bear a striking similitude—"

"Similitude." Wayland rolled his eyes. "Christ, Angus, did you never learn to stop talking like you're grading term papers?"

"It's Professor Byner, son. I do not appreciate such familiarity from students."

"I'm not a student," Wayland told him. "At least, I think the statute of limitations must've run out by now. My doctoral advisor has got to be dead, hasn't he? Old man Permutter still around?"

Angus raised his eyebrows, then lowered them. "Perlmutter? I haven't heard that name in many years."

"It's me, Angus. Wayland. Just as I stepped into the Time Box an hour or so ago."

Another self-satisfied chuckle. "Hour? More like thirty years—" and then his voice faded as the possibility hit him.

Wayland nodded. "Thirty years. That would explain why you appear to have put on a few decades." He directed his gaze to the strained sweater-vest Angus wore. "And pounds."

Angus caught himself sucking in his gut, then noticed and folded his hands across his midsection.

"The Time Box was supposed to allow me to age normally, but time outside would remain just where I left it. Wasn't that the theory?" Wayland leaned forward. "Your theory?"

Eyes wider, Angus murmured, "Oh my."

"Didn't work, did it, Angus?" Wayland's fist tightened at his side. "Did you just leave me in there? What the hell, man?"

"Oh ... oh, Wayland."

"Yeah, that's it." Wayland resisted the urge to step forward, to slap that stupid, self-absorbed face. "Thirty years? That's a long time."

Angus shook his head. "No. You're wrong."

"Am I? Tell me how. Is it a joke? Tell me this is all a joke, Angus." Wayland allowed himself to bring a hand up, point. "Tell me you had a barber thin you out on top. Tell me you've dyed that gray into your beard. Tell me that, Angus!"

"You don't understand." Voice quiet now, Angus stood, walked to the mantle over a small fireplace, the hanging rack of iron tools tinkling as his pants-leg brushed against them. He reached for a framed photograph. "I didn't leave you there."

He extended his hand, showed him the photo. "It worked." Wayland looked, then took it, held it closer.

The picture was of the group, the whole research team, including Angus and Vera.

Champagne and smiles. They were gathered around a young man with a year's worth of hair and beard. A familiar young man.

It was him, Wayland Foy, scruffier, but otherwise exactly as he looked today. But it was thirty years ago.

* * *

"One minute for us was one year for you."

It was Wayland sitting now, and Angus who paced. He stroked his beard, that affect he had when he wanted to let the world know that he was thinking and should not be disturbed. “You'd experienced a year's worth of hair growth, a beard. Your rations were depleted. Despite provisions made for bathing, you, well, quite honestly, you stank.”

The photo was on Wayland's lap. He looked at it, traced the shape of his reproduced face, saw the faint reflection of his own face on the glass over it. Could it be a fake? Had he somehow not remembered this? “No.”

“Oh, yes,” Angus went on, thinking that word had been intended for him. “Your fingernails were trimmed, but we agreed that was necessary in order for you to write your novel.”

“Novel?” Wayland looked up. “Finished?”

“A year in isolation sharpened your resolve, I dare say. It was very well-received.” Angus nodded a smile at him. “Nobel Prize for Literature.”

“No kidding.”

“Of course it needs to be said,” Angus noted, “that its popularity was boosted by the success of my experiment. You became something of a celebrity. Some years back, Oprah did a week on you alone. It was the twentieth anniversary of the publication, now that I think on it.”

“Well, hot damn,” Wayland said, still looking at the photo. “What's an Oprah?” “Wayland, I don't think you're quite grasping the situation.”

“Oh, I'm quite grasping.” He looked up at Angus. “I'm just not quite believing.” “The world has changed.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” He'd tried to dismiss the billboards and cars that he'd seen on his walk here from the campus, centered as he was on finding Angus, figuring all this out. But he'd seen them.

“Technology, styles, social mores, everything you knew is different now.” “And what about me?” Wayland held up the framed photo. “Have I changed?”

Angus sat in the leather chair, across from him. “You must understand this. Wayland has lived a long and rich life in the time since then.” He lifted his chin at the photograph. “That's ... that's not you, not really.”

“Not me.” Wayland's eyes were unfocused, looking at something not in the room. “He's lived my life, but I haven't been here for any of it.”

“But now you have a chance,” Angus started. “You can have everything, anything you wanted, you can start anew—”

“It's not new for me, Angus.” Wayland's eyes were not unfocused now; he was looking directly at the older man. “I'm not old, like you. I'm not looking back at a life lived and wondering what I could have changed.”

He stood, tossed the framed picture onto Angus' lap. “What have I missed?” Angus hesitated. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Shouldn't I already know?”

“Even ignoring world events,” Angus told him, “we're talking about thirty years of your, his personal history. Successes, failures, marriage, children ...”

“Marriage?”

* * *

He hadn't had to beat the address out of Angus, although he'd almost wanted to. The professor even loaned him a car. It only took Wayland a few minutes to realize he didn't need to put a key into anything to start it, but otherwise it was pretty much like the last car he'd driven.

Yesterday. Or before he was born. He was losing track.

This house was in a better neighborhood, away from the city, with a lawn that rolled up to a facade that looked old and historic but wasn't. He left the car at the curb and walked to the door.

There was a man coming out, with a trim haircut and a suit. He carried a black bag. Did doctors make house calls again in the future? He said to Wayland, "Now's not a good time to call on your girlfriend, young man."

Wayland walked into the house past him.

There was a foyer, with stairs going up, the floor polished. He caught sight of himself in a mirror by the door, and he wondered how he looked so young.

Voices came from up the stairs, a girl and a man.

"You think I'm a child, don't you? That's what this is all about!"
"Dora, your mother needs you—"

"Don't bring her into this! You always use her as an excuse!"

Wayland thought he recognized the voices, but also didn't, knew he couldn't. He didn't know if he wanted to think about that at this moment, but he did know he couldn't confront those people, so he stepped past the staircase to a hallway with a door at the end. He could see tall metal tanks lined beside the door, brass nipples covered by color-coded rubber.

There was a machine inside, he could hear, something regular. Like a robot's heartbeat, or breath.

He pushed open the door.

There was a bed. Covered in some sort of transparent drape. Close to the window like it was, all he could see was silhouette. Unless he

moved closer.

A woman. So old, but not really, not old, just—what? Shrunken? Pulled in?

She looked at him, and even under the mask over her face, he could see her eyes. They shone at him, happy. He could hear her voice over the mechanical respiration, just barely, hardly a voice at all.

She said, "Wayland." He ran out of the room.

* * *

"Why didn't you tell me, Angus?"

Angus sighed. "Tell you what? That a woman you barely knew thirty years ago is dying? Vera doesn't know you, Wayland. She only knows what you've become."

Pacing a groove into the old rug, Wayland shook his head, again and again. "You're wrong. She did know me. I saw her, she talked to me, spoke my name."

"You were a hallucination," Angus said. "All the drugs she's on, she's entitled to a phantasm from a happy past." He watched Wayland pacing. "Frankly, even I'm not sure you're not an acid flashback."

"What the hell happened to me?"

"As best I can tell," Angus began, "we're looking at a literal manifestation of Everett's Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics."

This stopped Wayland's pacing, if only for a moment. "M.W.I.," Angus clarified, clarifying nothing.

"What is that?" Wayland's temper was frayed, and it was an effort for him not to shout.

Conscious of his wont for pontification, Angus took a breath, trying to simplify. “It’s an extension of Schrodinger’s Cat.”

Wayland closed his eyes. “That’s not helping.”

“It’s a famous critique of quantum physics.” Angus once taught first year science students, and tried to tone it down to that level. But those kids already had a grasp on the concept. Maybe it was part of the zeitgeist today? Or maybe those students hadn’t been thrust into the position of being an example of the theory.

“The way Schrodinger saw it, if quantum physics was to be accepted unquestioningly, a cat inside a box could be either alive or dead, and was in fact both until the box was opened.”

“A cat.”

“Everett’s Interpretation suggested that when the box was opened, there were then initiated two realities, two worlds spun off from that point. One in which the cat was alive and another in which it is dead.”

“Two realities.”

“Wayland Foy walked out of that room thirty years ago,” Angus said. “And, it would appear, he also did not.”

Wayland wondered which cat he was. The living or the dead.

* * *

He was in Angus’ car the next morning as a young girl—maybe sixteen, seventeen, he found he couldn’t judge such things anymore—walked out of Wayland Foy’s house. Not his house. Another Wayland Foy, that’s how he had to think of him, of all of it. This life was not his, no matter how much it seemed like it should be.

The girl got into a car and pulled away, and he hadn’t thought he was

here to see her, but young Wayland Foy found himself following.

Traffic was no different than once it was, people had not evolved into better drivers.

And teenage girls were no more attentive. She didn’t seem to notice him behind her.

Other things were different, though. When did tattoo parlors go public? Right out there next to chiropractors and store-front law offices and some place that offered “paternity testing.” He saw children, high school age, he guessed, but with hair color he’d only seen in cartoons. And so many of them were huge, obese. Had they been trending that way when he was there? It was just a handful of years, it felt, but also long ago.

The girl’s car did not stop at the high school. Was she older than he’d guessed? No, not compared to the kids he was seeing. Skipping.

He’d been a diffident student, grades good enough to get into the university, as long as his parents were paying, but he wasn’t devoted. Still, he’d never skipped. Now he wished he had. So much time wasted in that building.

The teenage girl pulled her car into the shady parking garage of a shopping mall, and Wayland reflected that not everything had changed.

He nearly lost her in the mall, not because she was evading him, but because he got distracted by shop windows. Television sets bigger than the surface of a formal dining room table. Mannequins clad in bikinis made of less material than a pair of socks. A whole store devoted to Lego ... what he wouldn’t have given when he was six.

The girl sat at a molded plastic table in the food court, looking at a pocket calculator and sipping from a styrofoam cup she’d filled from a nearby soda fountain. No one around to serve the drinks; could they be free? He wasn’t thirsty.

“Aren't you supposed to be in school?” The words had just come out, without him thinking about it, and they made him feel old and stupid.

She looked up from her calculator and seeing her face hit him. He felt it just behind his ribs, like when he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him at soccer practice. He could see Vera's face, yes, but there was something in her eyes, the tilt, the attitude of them, that was someone else. He saw himself.

“Aren't you?” Her voice was teasing, playful. Nothing like the angry whine he'd heard up the stairs of her house.

“I'm not really sure where I'm supposed to be,” Wayland said, and the words were more revealing than he'd intended. He felt exposed.

The girl didn't notice. “Join the club.”

She pushed a sneaker at one of the other seats, and it swiveled on a hinge toward him.

He sat, grateful, thinking that if he hadn't, he might've fallen.

“I'm kind of ditching school,” she said, slitting her eyes back to the device in her hand. It wasn't a pocket calculator at all, he now saw, but something else. Were there no buttons?

“Kind of?”

She lifted her shoulders, just barely. “I'm also kind of suspended. But my old man doesn't know about it, so I'm going through the motions.”

Suspended? Was that not a big deal anymore? He didn't know how to ask. “Old man,” he said. “Your, uh, father.”

“Duh-yeah,” she snarked. “My father is an old man, you know?”

She was talking about him, but not. Wayland put a vertiginous hand

on the table. Rigid, stable. He wasn't spinning. “What's he like?” he asked, hesitant. “Your old man.”

She didn't look up from the device. “I dunno. Like any other dad. He wants me to stay home right now. My mom's sick, and he has to go off and do some dumb thing.”

Leaving? With Vera ... the way he saw her? “He'd leave your mother when she's ... like that?”

She still didn't look up. “Yeah. He's kind of a dick like that. I hate him.” “Hate's a little strong,” he found himself saying, and now she did look up. She said, “What do you know about my dad?”

When her eyes were on him, Wayland felt the spin again. He had to turn his gaze away from her. “Nothing,” he said. “You're right. Sorry.”

“What's wrong with you?” she asked, leaning forward to examine him more closely. “You on the spectrum or something?”

Spectrum? “No, I don't think so.”

“Then what is it?” She actually put the device down now, watching him. “Why have you been looking at me like that?”

Like what? What had she seen in his eyes? “Nothing,” he said. “It's just ... I never even considered you before, you never even crossed my mind as a someday possibility, and yet ... now I'm seeing you for the first time, all grown and smart and funny and ...” He stopped, suddenly aware that he was babbling.

She put out a hand, touched his where it gripped the table. “And what?”

His eyes felt wet, he thought, and he turned away. “It just ... it makes me happy.”

“Damn,” she said, but she didn't pull her hand away.

Her name was Eudora.

Wayland knew it as soon as she said it. In their weeks together, Vera had quoted Welty poems three or four times. They'd never discussed children, of course; he'd never even been aware that they could ever be serious enough to have a life together. He wondered how that happened. That's a memory he'd like to have. The thought of what he'd missed there put a knot into the muscles of his jaw.

They'd taken her car, a little Volkswagen that looked just enough like the ones he recognized for him to know that's what the designers had intended. She'd asked him if he wanted to see her house, and he'd said yes.

She never asked him his name.

Inside, he asked if her father was home, and Eudora giggled and he saw that she had braces on her teeth. She assured him that her father was out. He asked about her mother, and the girl told him not to worry, she was dead to the world.

Wayland looked down the hallway to the door with the tanks outside of it. Eudora pulled him another way, to the staircase and up.

There were windows up there, on the landing, and he could see the house was built around a small courtyard. He could see a bench outside, some plants in whiskey barrels, cut stubby and artificially rustic.

He saw Vera with a hand-spade and some colorful gloves, or he thought he did, just for a moment, turning soil, planting seeds. She wasn't there, of course she wasn't. Had she been interested in gardening? He didn't remember it, but he was now seeing how little he knew of her, seeing how much of her life, and his, had come after he left that damned white box. Was that it, what had done it? A year in there, kept away from her, had that made their union inevitable?

He could feel exactly how much he'd missed, and also not feel it. A phantom limb of his own past.

There was a photo on the wall, a wedding, bride and groom, was that him? His eyes couldn't quite focus, but he thought the man looked barely older than Wayland was now, and yet, so much older, more experienced. Where were the current pictures, when did he become not him, not the young man from the college, from the Time Box? When did he go from being a boy who thought he was a man to a man, a real adult with responsibilities? What had he missed?

Eudora pulled him to a room at the end of the upper floor's hallway. It was pink and there were stuffed animals and posters on the wall, some sort of group of smooth-faced Asian boys in white suits. Was this what pop music was now, what teenage girls were into? He realized he had no idea what teenage girls were into thirty years ago, either, or even when he was a teenage boy.

Another window, looking out onto the courtyard, and across from there was another room. That would have been the bedroom they used, he and Vera, and this room across the way for their daughter. Close enough to keep an eye on, far enough to give her some space to grow, an illusion of freedom, yes, that's how he'd handle it, being a parent. Let her be her own person.

Eudora pulled his shoulder and turned him away from the window. She pushed her mouth against his.

For just an instant, he kissed her, he was kissing Vera's lips, then pulled back. "Wait, hold on, I think I've given you the wrong impression."

The girl pushed him against the wall to the left of the window and kissed him again, pushing her hands under his shirt. "No," Wayland said, but he wasn't sure who he was saying it to.

"Quiet," the girl said. One of her hands pressed against his face, pushing it against the window, and the other fumbled with the snap at

his jeans. "You'll like this."

Wayland looked down, into the courtyard, and he could see another window, this one under the landing to the stairs. The room under the stairs.

Vera looked at him from the other side of the glass. The mask shrouding her nose and mouth. Her eyes bright in her shrunken-skin face.

He looked at her, his wife of so many years, feeling the girl's tongue on his belly, biting, lower and lower. He felt calm.

He said her name, Vera, very softly, and she smiled up at him.

* * *

Wayland woke in semi-dark. He was in a girl's bedroom, a girl's bed, and the girl was snoring beside him. He shook his head. Can't think about this right now.

He slipped out of the room, finding his clothes, and tugged into his shirt as he got to the ground floor. He did not go out the front door.

She peered at him from the tented bed, smiling behind her mask. He stood inside the door, the ventilator's whoosh and click the only sound.

Wayland moved to her, touched her hand. The skin was paper.

Her lips moved behind the clear mask, and he moved his ear close. She said, "I'm glad you came back."

"Vera, I ..."

"Hush. I can't talk long." Her cool fingers tightened on his. "Just hold my hand."

They sat there like that awhile, Vera and Wayland. He was exactly as

she wanted him to be, and she was all he'd hoped she would be, all he'd never seen of her.

She said, "I've missed you."

And he said, "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

* * *

"Send me back."

Wayland pushed past Angus into the house. "What?"

"I have to go back, Angus. I need to have what I missed."

The older man shook his head. "Wayland, you have to know that's not possible." "None of this is possible," Wayland snapped at him. "It's not fair. I missed it all. Everything! I deserve to have it back."

"It's not a time machine," Angus said. "It was a fluke, just a crazy, once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon."

Wayland grabbed Angus by the sweater-vest. "It's not fair, I tell you. I can't be presented with all of this and not know how it got here. I don't even know why I married her, Angus, do you know that? I don't even get to remember who she was!"

"Wayland, you're hurting me."

"It doesn't work this way. None of it works this way!" He pushed Angus onto the little couch, but didn't let go of the vest. He brought his face close to Angus. "Send me back!" Angus moved his lips, then again. "I—I can't Wayland. I just ..."

Wayland's hand shot out, landed on the fireplace tools under the mantle where the photograph stood. "You stole her from me! You stole the years I would have had with her! You stole my life!"

He brought the iron poker down, once, twice, again and again. By the time he dropped it, Angus was not recognizable, and he was dead.

Wayland staggered back, his breath raw and hard. He put a hand out to steady himself, and there was a crash.

On the floor. The photograph, the glass over it broken.

He reached for it by his foot. A splinter of glass sliced his thumb, but he barely noticed.

The photo. The three of them, the others, the entire team.

He looked at Vera's face. It was wrong. It was too young, too fresh. She didn't look like the Vera he loved. Then again, the shaggy-haired young man who was barely older than he was didn't look like him, either, and Angus, he was a different person then, too.

When he placed the frame back on the mantle, careful to make sure it would stand without falling again, there was a stain on the face of the man he used to be, or never was. His own bloody thumbprint, covering that unshaven mess.

* * *

The investigation uncovered no motive, but the DNA and fingerprint evidence was clear. It was big news when the celebrated author, this college town's favorite son, was arrested for the murder of the great scientist with whom his life had been intertwined for thirty years. All over the news.

Wayland waited a day or two, until the press and police had dissipated, then he pulled up in the car he'd retrieved from the mall parking lot. He rang the bell.

The girl, Eudora, answered, face puffed from crying, but she narrowed her eyes, not certain she recognized him. Another reporter? "Do I know you?"

Wayland reached out, took her hand. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm here to take care of you now."

And he stepped into his house and closed his door.

A Thin Place

by Frank Coffman

*I remember well that day Professor Quinn,
In an early lecture in that elective course—
The Paranormal: An “Out There” Introduction—
(Delivered with the old gent’s typical force)
About how there were places that were ... “Thin”:*

*“Places and zones in this—the world we know—
Where the barrier between our ‘real’ realm and the next
Is tenuous at best; where the ‘normal’ obstruction,
‘The Veil,’ is pellucid or torn. Such points are hexed,
And movement between such spheres may freely flow.”*

*Of course, I took the notes down—for the test.
This was all just a course that interested me—and fun ...
At first. But, as the weeks went swiftly on,
Through that—my last semester—I had begun
To develop this wonder that will not let me rest.*

*I stayed for grad work in archeology
But did self-studies—both obscure and arcane—
Reading some nights straight through until the dawn,
Seeking a solution both rational and sane
To that quandary that Quinn had made me see.*

*So it surprised me greatly when our guide
To this most strange, newly-discovered site
Deep in these foliage-dimmed Honduran hills*

*Said, “This place is ‘Thin.’ We must leave before the night!
This place is ‘Wrong!’ Things from the ‘Other Side’*

*Can see us here! And I fear can come ‘Across!’”
With skepticism, of course, even with some derision
From others in my team. But it gave me chills.
And, of course, we’ve already made the firm decision
To set up camp. But Manuel signed the cross.*

*“I beg you sirs, and madam, you must not stay!
(Wife Jane and I had met three years before
At a dig at Saqqarah, a newly discovered tomb.)
This place is too near a ‘Gate,’ an open ‘Door!’
Ah well, I’m going now. You know the way.”*

*Before he left us, I asked Manuel to say
Exactly what he’d meant by his word: “Thin?”
His trembling answer, warning me of doom,
Was the same defined long years before by Quinn.
Our guide was long gone before the end of day.*

* * *

*Odd noises were all around us through last night—
Our first in this camp Manuel told us not to set.
The dig has turned up curiosities*

*That don't seem "right?" One thing I shan't forget:
A small idol carved of onyx—a thing of fright!*

*A round, cephalopodic, huge-eyed head
Atop a body lion-like and lean,
Yet scaled, reptilian, bat-winged. Monstrosities
Of all the ancient cultures I have seen,
But this thing fills me with a sense of dread.*

* * *

*So busy with the dig, it's now day three,
But I'll take just a little time to write.
We've certainly discovered something new—
Or, rather, old—too old! This eldritch site
Was built in some remote pre-history,*

*Far older than prior theory had expected!
Preliminary tests say fifteen-thousand years!
Some culture here was born and thrive and grew.
Then—suddenly—was gone. The landscape bears
Signs of cyclopean structures, long neglected.*

*And Smythe says DNA beneath some stones
Are specimens from some yet unknown creature!
Last night, I saw a strange light through the trees,
And, recalling the cryptic words of my old teacher,
I searched awhile, but no 'Gate' between zones*

*Was there to find. And so, I'm here at camp.
Jane is asleep, Mitchell and Smythe are snoring.
One more note: There's a stench upon the breeze
I've never smelled before. I'll go exploring*

After dawn, but I'll not chance it with a lamp.

* * *

*"Have you seen Smythe?" Mitchell asked when we arose—
This our fourth morning here at Lugar Delgado
(As Manuel had called it—and so we kept the name)
We've looked about. But, so far, we don't know
Where the Hell he's gone? My apprehension grows,*

*But I don't want to share my thoughts with Jane
Or Mitchell. At least not yet. Not 'til I'm certain
My fears are justified. But how to frame
What I suspect: We're near to a frail 'Curtain'
Between two worlds! They'd both think I'm insane.*

* * *

*We found no sign of Smythe. We searched all day.
Not even an echo met our constant cries.
We've decided to head back to the Rio Platano
When morning comes. But now this long day dies.
Mitchell is shaken. ... The first time I've seen Jane pray.*

* * *

*It was not yet dawn. Mitchell woke us—screaming!
We left our tent. And there, across the glade
The "Gateway" gleamed. In horror, we saw him go
Into a glowing mist no good god made.
And They were there! Hideous but sentient-seeming.*

We fled, ran quickly down the southwest slope,

*Until we've come a good mile from our tent.
Here in this jungle's lush dark undergrowth,
We'll shelter. But we know this zone is ... "bent."*

Now dawn. We'll move on. One more day and night and—Hope.

* * *

*Just one more night. We've come at least halfway
Back to the settlement. I'll find Manuel!
God! He was right—and Quinn! Things we both
Have glimpsed through that open "Doorway to Hell!"
Things beyond frightening, terrible, fell, and fey!*

* * *

*I'm writing this five hours before a dawn
That I will never see. The tales are true!
There are places where the "worlds" aren't separate,
Where They can cross—Things so unlike me and you.
First Smythe, then Mitchell, and now Jane is gone!*

Ah! Now it's time for my own reckoning!

If you find this journal, think whatever you please.

*I see the glow! It's growing! Yes—"The Gate"
Is opening there, just past the nearest trees!
And They are here. And Jane is beckoning. ...*

Somewhere, at a Distance, Sleep

by R. Mac Jones



Vigil

by Gerri Leen

I am torn fur and
Blistered eyelids
Horrible to look at
But you never turn and see me
Not before and certainly not
Now that she's gone
I fought for her
Every rasping breath
Each sigh of pain
I would have taken
Her place if I could
But I'm only the
Monster under the bed
I could help but not heal
My skin became
Grizzled and scaled as I
Tried to make her pain
My own and sometimes
When I held my breath and
You held her hand
She knew peace

But you don't know peace
Even though you fake acceptance
For your other children
I know how much you hurt
I go under their beds now
To make sure there's no rasp
No odor of the sickness that took her
I do the best I can for them but
I don't know how to help you
How to reach someone who
Stopped believing in
Me so long ago
So I stand behind you
As you hold her picture
And weep so very quietly
That the others never wake
I'll keep the monsters
At bay—at least the
Unnatural ones like me—
While you mourn our girl

Reenactment

by Marc A. Criley

Incoming call--a hip hop ringtone, "Deja Vu," muffled through polyester and wool. Cotton ball snowflakes drift from the sky, settle on the limestone, dead brush, the clearcut tree waste littering the hillside. Each fluff holds for a beat, then collapses.

I half unzip the jacket, dig out the phone. "Elizabeth McKenna" it IDs; and I see I missed an unknown caller this morning. I pull off a glove and tap. "What's up, Liz?" I say. "I'm up the hill. It's actually snowing in Alabama."

Crypto chatter, then, "I'm sorry Chrys, Director's holding a gun to my head. You're being conscripted. *Reenactment*."

I say nothing. My face flushes, my neck burns. Finally I choke out, "Don't care." I snap off the words. "I am done. He knows that. You know that. Six years. Not doing it again. Not for that bastard. No. Not ever."

"I told him that." She pauses, then rushes through "Black hats are going to crash the big banks, take down Wall Street. They demolished Credit Weissberg, feds are hushing it up." Liz stops talking, clears her throat. "Our inside guy was assassinated while exfiltrating two hours ago in Minneapolis. Shot him down in the street." She clears her throat again. "We need his phone to get at whatever he hacked out. Director Scheers ordered a national security conscription on you to get the passcode."

"Don't care. Fuck Wall Street, fuck Scheers."

There's a long pause, I move to kill the call. "Our inside guy was Edgar Marquez."

All the fire turns to ice. It's like my head is suddenly dunked in liquid nitrogen. Snow whispers down on stippled rock, black dirt, bleached stumps. It falls on my head and doesn't melt. A cold dead bullet passes through my heart. "God damn it."

"I'm enroute on the jet, meet me at the Muni airport down there in ninety."

* * *

The government Gulfstream heads north over southern Tennessee, taking forever to bust through the clouds. McKenna hands me a tablet with queued up surveillance video. "Edgar got shot in Minneapolis, Nicollet Mall," she says. "One of those hipster downtown avenues. No cars."

Geeze, everybody's got 4K TVs but security video always looks like it came off fifty-year-old VCRs. At least it's color, what there is of it--dirty snow, gray sidewalk, black-brown slush. The timestamp at the bottom holds at "08:37:14 CST." Next to it is a zeroed stopwatch timer. I tap the screen.

Pedestrians snap into motion. Winter coats but not super bundled up. A fuzzy figure strides in from the left, shoulder length iron gray hair bouncing off the collar of a beige waist-length winter coat zipped up all the way. No hat. He's moving fast, not quite trotting, head swiveling as he pulls off his gloves. Can't quite make out his features but I know by profile and that heavy left foot gait that it's Marquez. He half unzips the coat, digs out a phone. Marquez passes out of sight behind a shuttered kiosk, reemerges. Half-a-dozen strides later he slows--he's thumbing in a number. Pauses. More taps. Lifts the phone

to his ear and picks up the pace.

An invisible foot kicks him square in the back, his head snaps back, then forward. The phone sails as Marquez crashes to the sidewalk. The stopwatch in the corner of the screen starts ticking. A half dozen pedestrians freeze, then scatter. Others farther out hurry away, tromping through slush and snowbanks; fleeing left and right until only Marquez remains.

A minute later two cops race in from the right, guns drawn. The screen splits. On the left the security camera feed continues, clipped to just Marquez and the cops. A much higher resolution view opens on the right, jumping around violently like someone's running with a camera. Body cam, I realize.

Body cam cop crouches by the body. I see Marquez up close, face smushed into the concrete, blood seeping from under his chest. He's gasping like a fish. Cop checks his pulse. Flips him over, tears open the coat. Bright red soaks everything. I flinch. Blood wells with each slow heartbeat. The view leans in, bare hands press on the wound. Cop wedding ring glints amongst red.

A dark finger of blood finds and tracks a sidewalk crack. Marquez, wide-eyed, stares at the sky. He blinks a couple times. A shiver starts in his shoulders and ripples out. Then another, less vigorous; then one last one that fades to stillness. A minute later an EMT SUV skid/slides to a halt on the sidewalk, facing Marquez and the cops. It blocks the security camera's view. Two EMTs leap out, hauling medkits. Security view goes away and the body cam view expands. Marquez' gaze slews across the cop's face, down to the camera. He wrinkles his forehead, looks straight into it ...

* * *

... straight into my *past*:

Five minutes after walking into my room on the psych wing, Marquez was all "Chrys, you're a good kid. You're *not* suicidal. And you're not

a danger to yourself or anyone else. You don't need to be here."

I snorted. "Did you read my file? The part where I keep blacking out and waking up gunshot and half-dead in a hospital? We get a drive-by every other month, three people I know've died in the last year. Missed me, but *they* bled out and died while I held them. I'm lucky or jinxed, your call. A couple days later I black out and wake up in the hospital--shot. *And I don't remember getting shot.*"

"They never find a bullet," Marquez said.

I shrugged.

"Chrys, you don't remember getting shot because you didn't. There's no bullet, just the wounds. You ... *reenacted.*"

"Yeah, that's what the shrinks keep telling me."

He waved it off. "Not that kind of reenactment."

* * *

Marquez' forehead smoothes, his eyes drift closed.

A kneeling EMT checks for a pulse, checks again. (The stopwatch halts at 00:01:55.47.) She lays a nitrile gloved hand atop the cop's hands, gently takes hold of the fingers, peels them off Marquez' blood-soaked chest. No more welling blood, everything is still. The video freezes on hands gripping bloody hands. I close my eyes, slouch back in the seat.

They can't brute force crack the phone, McKenna says from across the aisle. On-point operational security. "Class 5 anti-tamper, Blue Max encryption, phone bricks after six failures. Twenty-six digit passcode, changed every three days. None of that fingerprint biometrics bullshit. We need his code."

She tells me the Agency built an app--whatever I reenact with a

phone is real-time keylogged and VPN'ed to a command center. Even if I don't survive, the passcode does.

"Did you two ever ...?" Liz asks.

I shake my head.

* * *

The Chicago recovery team deployed into Minneapolis three hours before I got to the morgue and saw Dr. Abati. She briefs me on the autopsy while the rest of her team heads downtown to help the logistics teams close off Nicollet and unpack the *field operating theater*. Abati swipes through pictures on a tablet. First sniper bullet pierced the neck, she says, clipped the C5 vertebra then made a clean exit.

Swipe.

That didn't kill him, Marquez would've healed up just fine. But the second bullet punched a nickel-sized hole in the aorta on the way in and a fist-sized one on the way out.

Swipe.

Hi-res color photos of shredded meat.

Swipe swipe swipe.

Aortic punctures are ninety-five percent fatal, the victim usually dead before the ambulance shows up. Abati shakes her head. "If you're not shot in a hospital, forget it." I look over at Marquez' body, the sheet drawn up to his chin. Blood from the neck wound has seeped through. I guess the rest is double sheeted--there's no stains despite her having just finished carving him up.

Five percent chance of survival. At least Abati and the surgeons know precisely what to expect. She estimates time of death as "one hundred

ten seconds after second impact plus or minus ten seconds."

I blow out a misty breath. "So add the time to unlock, plus a twenty percent margin." I close my eyes, do some math. "Hundred fifty seconds."

Abati nods.

I look over at Marquez' plastic sheathed body, cold on the stainless steel table. "Best get started then," I say. The doctor pats me on the forearm, then slips out the swinging panel doors. I wait until the clattering subsides.

I haven't seen Marquez in the six years since Norwich. His bare arms rest uncovered on the polished chrome table. I grip his left hand. Room temperature, forty degrees. I close my eyes to concentrate, try not to remember ...

* * *

... the first time:

"Operation Groundhog" some fucking Agency bureaucrat called it.

I cracked my eyes open, saw a pair of hospital socks sticking out from under the sheets. Slowly realized they were on my feet. I heard someone moving, then a shadow loomed.

"Chrys? You back with us?"

I think I nodded, my thoughts thick as mud on a cold spring day.

"Mission accomplished, kid, flawless." My eyes focused on a face. Marquez. Edgar. "We--you--got the keycode," he said. "We took the whole cell down. Ten thousand soldiers get a Christmas because of you. The doctor says you'll be back on your feet in a couple days, and out the door in four. You're a hero, Chrys, and everyone here is taking good care of you."

"Okay," I said. I think I said that anyways, and I think I smiled, and I think he squeezed my arm, and then I closed my eyes.

* * *

I'm counting up the seconds, whispering each one. Don't need a watch. No one hears. It's just me, just me grasping a dead man's stiff gray hand.

* * *

Nicollet Mall.

I stand at one end of a tunnel of mixed olive drab, camo, and desert tan canvas. Aluminum struts frame the sidewalk, spaced every eight feet or so. One side is shoved up against the storefronts, blocking all street-facing doors and windows. The street side ripples in the light breeze. Everything and everyone is locked down for four blocks around.

Liz hands me a phone. "Installed and VPN verified." I check the settings, confirm network sync, shove it into my breast pocket, double-checking that it faces out. "They've got Marquez' phone down at command," she says, "*white hats* ready to unlock and tear it open. Everyone's teed up--local cops, state, FBI, Homeland, special forces."

"And the shooter?"

"Yes," she says. "Fucking that son of a bitch is my job."

"Just you?"

"My team."

"Okay."

It's cold in the tunnel, calm, like my hilltop, my home. Each cotton breath hangs a moment, then dissipates. LED worklights run the

length of the tent corridor. Flat panel monitors bolted on posts every ten yards or so are stuck on the same number: 00:35, captioned "Est Time To Impact." Waiting. For me.

Liz shrugs. "I fought them on this. But I don't understand you. This isn't Norwich. These are goddamn bankers. You could've said no, fuck conscription. Why didn't you tell me to go shit in my hat when I called? Why are you taking a bullet? Two bullets?"

"They're not real bullets," I say, ignoring the question.

"I saw the autopsy pics. No diff." She glares at me. "Fuckin' answer the question."

I kick at the sidewalk.

McKenna's phone rings, a muffled "Born in the U.S.A." She looks at it, swipes down. "I think they're ready." She snorts and shakes her head. "I don't understand you. But whatever, Chrys. If you're not dead, if they get you patched up, go away, far away. Get lost, permanently."

"Yeah."

"Don't 'yeah' me, asshole." She's in my face. "Don't come back, don't answer the phone. They're going to use you again and again, just like we ..." She looks away ...

* * *

... And so do I.

Edgar and Liz flew down to make the pitch. An *existential emergency* of loose nukes and dirty bombs. Liz swore I was a backup, a *worst case just in case*. Feds were already closing in on a cell somewhere in upstate New York. They'd have it in hours.

It'd been three and a half years since I'd reenacted the NASA hack. I

got out after that. Pain grinds you down, fatal injuries exact their toll. I thought I was out, Marquez asked me to come back for this. Said he'd squire me, that it'd all be cool. They needed me--*nuclear blackmail* was now a thing.

Two days later, worst case happened. Fucking militia working out of an abandoned warehouse just like in the movies. Warhead arming codes locked in less than a minute before the assault team crashed in, shot up everyone--though careful to miss the equipment. I got hustled in. Half a dozen bodies bleeding out while random gun bursts echoed elsewhere in the building. Gray light filtered in through high arched windows. I'm marched to the guy sprawled before the keyboard and flat screen monitors. Edgar is right behind me, unzipping the medkit.

I picked up the guy's hand--still warm. A moment later I said, "He's not dead."

Scheers, the assault team commander, glared at me. "Not a problem." He pulled out his MK3 and slashed the guy's throat. Blood spurted, flowed across his shoulder, ran down his arm. Edgar lunged for Scheers, yelled "No!" A soldier clotheslined him, flung him back. "Where are the medics?" he gasped over the sudden roaring in my ears. "We have to wait! You'll kill him!"

"No time," Scheers said. A couple soldiers shoved me to my knees next to the chair. Scheers slapped the dead man's hand into mine. He pulled his 9mm, pointed it at Edgar. A counter on the flat panel ticked through 13:47. "Six minutes," Scheers said to me. "Don't let go."

I looked at Edgar, a knee on his neck pinning him down. From the dead man's hand I felt nothing, I never did. No power surge, no crackle of "life energy," no infusing warm flow nor breathtaking, bracing chill. Just me holding a dead man's still warm, bloody hand.

Six minutes later I dropped it. The countdown hit 07:30. The body is dragged off the chair and I'm shoved onto it. Blood smears cover half the keyboard. Scheers shifted the pistol to my head, said, "Do your thing."

Edgar shouts, "Chryst!"

"Twenty-five million Americans will not get nuked on my watch," Scheers snarled. "There are no choices here."

* * *

Liz blinks hard, jabs me in the chest. "They'll pull that national security conscription bullshit on you again." Jab. "And again." Jab. "And again. You don't owe them anything." Jab. "*They'll keep killing you until you stay dead.*"

Director Scheers comes trotting up the tunnel. "It's all set," he says to me. "And you"--looking at McKenna--"answer your damn phone when I call, we need to get this rolling."

"He'll go when he's ready," McKenna says. "This isn't one of your bullshit fucked up covert assault--"

"Agent McKenna," Scheers snaps, "the nation's financial system is in exceptionally grave danger. This is a national--"

"So you gonna kill him again?" Liz snarls. "You gonna put the gun on me this time?"

"Liz!" I snap. "I'm doing this. Do your job, get the shooter. For Edgar." I look at Scheers. "You? Go fuck yourself."

Scheers stomps off, pulls out his phone, types in something, holds it up to his ear. He mumbles, probably some military code thing for "stand by." I walk to the middle of the tented sidewalk, look down its length, there's a square of light at the far end. My jacket--light colored, exactly matching Marquez'--is unzipped. His was zipped, but I can't risk it getting stuck. I tap my left breast pocket, the phone is there. I'm not wearing gloves; getting them stuck half-way off would wreck keying in the passcode. I get no second chance.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Abati's on-site surgical team is ready--they

know what's coming. I start down the sidewalk.

"Med bay is hot!" someone yells a hundred feet ahead of me, just past the kiosk. Dull, healed wounds ache in the cold. I rub the thick scar on my neck ...

* * *

The dead man's throat had stopped bleeding by the time I set my hands on the keyboard.

I reenacted, snapped into motion. An assault team soldier videoed my hands while weapons techs watched for an arming code. Four minutes into it my fingers keyed in a long string of digits. I'm shoved out of the way as a tech jumps in to disarm the warheads. I kept reenacting, pantomiming on phantom mouse and keyboard. Couldn't stop. Reenact until dead.

Ghost bullet penetrations--thigh, calf, chest--knocked me off the chair. Edgar wrestled free from the startled soldier pinning him down, snagged the medkit and sprinted to me. A wave of burning cold raced out and echoed back, left my fingers shivering. He emptied a hemostatic injector into my torn femoral, tied off the calf. Vision paled, palled into gray. Couldn't really breathe. Less than a minute left. Edgar pressed a bandage onto my chest. As he dug another out of the kit, an armored soldier came over and squatted, applied pressure. Edgar slapped a pad against my as-yet-unslashed neck. Oh God, any second now.

"Chrys," Edgar said, his voice muffled as though through thick cotton. "I'm sorry. God damn I'm sorry. Get away from here, from all of us. We're ... monsters." I focused on my panting, tried to break through, slip free for just a moment. A silver flare sheared open my neck, an actinic flash from dim gray to brilliance. Black tendrils and patches began eating into the blazing white. It melted away, like snow

on fallen trees. I fixed on Edgar's face--his evaporating, fading, face.

* * *

I reenact, snap into a heavy left foot gait. Ticking off with each stride: Mosul. Super Bowl. Truck bomb. State of the Union. Sarin. NoKo. Nukes. Mosul. Logan. Stingers. Scud. Philadelphia.

NASA.

Norwich.

Millions lived today that would've died had Edgar not discovered a lost sixteen-year-old kid helplessly, involuntarily, reenacting the senseless deaths of friends.

A few strides later I slip off phantom gloves. My hand digs the phone out of my pocket, flips it, keys in a twenty-six-digit code.

In the distance someone shouts, "Got it!"

Mission accomplished.

I keep reenacting, keep walking, keep tapping--a phone number, one I recognize. *Ah. Sorry I missed your call, Edgar.* I lift the phone to my ear.

Ten yards ahead a group of garbed doctors and nurses, hands upraised, all stare. I recognize Dr. Abati smiling behind her mask.

The Est Time To Impact seconds dwindle.

There's a foam mattress on the sidewalk. It is draped with plastic sheets.

The New MaN

by Carl Scharwath



Shimmers

by Jay Bechtol

The swirling dust of the small California farm town filled him as he stepped off the Greyhound. He was glad to be wearing a mask, pandemic or not. He rubbed the old wedding ring in his pocket absently, barely aware he was touching it. A shimmer approached and then faded. Another ghost. He was relieved not to see any others in the small bus depot, certainly fewer ghosts in a small town. Cities were full of the things, the shimmering blurs of the dead. Standing on street corners or walking to work or shopping. Waiting for something that had already happened. Occasionally reaching for him as if there was something he could do for them.

“You Calvin, amigo?” a voice interrupted.

He turned. A tall farmhand with silvering temples visible under the brim of a well-worn cowboy hat grinned at him. “Yep, you Ignacio?”

“Iggy. Everyone here calls me Iggy.” His smile broadened and he gave Calvin a once over. “You sure you’re up for this, citadino?”

“You know it.” He tried to sound confident.

“What you running from?” Iggy asked. His grin transformed to a knowing smile. “No one comes out here to work the vineyards that isn’t hiding from something. Especially this year.” Iggy didn’t wait for a response, “Truck’s over here, throw your stuff in the back.”

“You don’t wear a mask?” he asked.

Iggy shrugged and raised an eyebrow. “We all wear masks, amigo. Maybe a few. Especially when running.” The farmhand turned and began walking toward the old pick-up.

Another shimmer passed through the dusty parking lot. Its eyes turned to Calvin, its form momentarily solidified and it cried out in longing. Calvin waited until the ghost faded, then picked up his bags and followed Iggy. “Not runnin’ from anything. Just looking for something different.”

“OK, citadino, whatever you say.” A low chuckle wafted over Iggy’s shoulder.

Calvin tossed his bags into the bed of the pick-up and slid into the front seat next to Iggy. “Vamanos, amigo,” he tried out his halting Spanish.

Iggy laughed, “Close enough.”

The truck pulled out of the Greyhound station and turned toward the vast vineyards that covered the rolling hills of San Ramos, California. Calvin felt relief with each mile the old pick-up put behind them. And hoped things would work out.

* * *

She turns from her dressing table and watches her husband slide the beaded links into the cuffs of his starched shirt. Another evening out at some fundraiser or another. She doesn’t care, not like when they were first married and she mistook the excitement of going to political events and rubbing elbows with famous people for love.

“I think we will take the Rolls tonight, Theresa,” her husband says, “think I’m in the mood to drive. Give the help the night off.”

“You can’t call them ‘the help,’ Clark,” she admonishes, “it’s 1970.

You might be a little more respectful.” Earlier in their marriage her tone might have been sweeter, lighter, flirtatious even. Now she is tired of his snobbery. “And the Rolls? Seriously Clark, that car reminds me of a hearse.”

She turns back to her mirror and runs the brush through her red hair, watches it fall in even strands to her shoulders and fade into the dark burgundy gown she’d picked up in San Francisco the weekend before.

Clark snorts from across the room. “The help is the help. And we are taking the Rolls.”

Theresa watches his reflection in the mirror, debates responding, instead returns to brushing her hair.

“Twenty minutes, Theresa.” He pulls on his jacket and approaches her. “Let’s not be late tonight.” He absently rubs her shoulders and bends to touch his lips to the top of her head.

“Yes, congressman,” she replies.

He ignores the sarcasm, straightens his tie, and strides out.

Theresa sets the brush on the table and pulls a strand from the bristles. She stares at it for a long time and wonders.

* * *

Calvin had been able to see them for as long as he could remember. When he was nine or ten his mother took him to the movies and they watched a film about a kid that could see dead people. The audience in the theatre was rapt, many gasped and oohed. He laughed. Out loud several times. People in the theatre turned and stared, some shushed. Others gave his mother disapproving looks, questioning why a child might be at that kind of movie in the first place and have the audacity to laugh at such frightening things. He never told his mother

why he laughed at the movie, nor would he ever tell anyone about what he could see.

He planned to stay the summer in San Ramos working at the vineyard near the Sacramento River. Fewer people and decidedly fewer shimmers out in the sticks. Sometimes he would go two or three days without seeing the blur of some long dead farmer or migrant worker. In Los Angeles the ghosts had exhausted him, reminded him of his family. And his own mortality even though he was not yet thirty. In the country the ghosts were almost charming. Almost.

“One of these days you will tell me, citadino,” Iggy broke the silence as the two bumped along the back road of the vineyard.

“Tell you what?” Calvin responded.

“You’ve been here for three months, si. You work hard, keep to yourself, stay in your little apartment, don’t go into town. Which means you are hiding. I know, I’ve been here for thirty years. Every summer a couple of you show up. From San Francisco or L.A. Running from something and thinking that hiding out in San Ramos will make everything better. No worries, compa, in good time, things always get better.”

Calvin had grown to like Iggy in short order. But some things weren’t for sharing. “I like the solitude.”

“Sure, sure.” Followed by the low laugh that Calvin had come to appreciate. “Soledad is a hundred miles from here.”

The old pick-up rolled to a stop and Calvin hopped out.

“You sure you don’t want me to come pick you up?” Iggy asked.

“No, I’ll be fine, the walk back will do me good.” Calvin responded.

Iggy laughed again, “Si, soledad.”

“That’s right, Iggy, Solitude.”

The truck pulled back onto the thin blacktop road and rumbled away. Calvin turned from the road and trotted to the nearby work shed. He found the equipment he was looking for and began his day.

* * *

“Where are we going tonight?” Theresa asks, the lights of Sacramento already fading in the rear window of the enormous car. “There is nothing out here.”

“Another fundraiser, Theresa, how many times do I need to remind you? It’s a new winery out in San Ramos, only been around for a couple of years. I need you to be sharp tonight.” Clark doesn’t turn his head; he speaks at her with the same disinterest he uses with his staff. “Speaker Unruh is going to be there and he needs our help to get that phony actor Reagan out of the governor’s office. These last two months are all we have left.”

“Phony?” she laughs quietly to herself. “We are driving through farms in a Rolls Royce, Clark.” She turns her head and gazes out the window. Her reflection stares back at her in muted judgment.

* * *

Calvin worked a little longer than intended, lost in thought and the good feeling of not having to deal with a single shimmer. The sun dropped into the Pacific and late summer fog was already creeping across the farmland, encouraged by whatever water remained in the Sacramento River. He debated calling Iggy, telling him that he’d changed his mind about that ride. Instead he embraced the soledad. He heard himself laugh, surprised at his unwitting effort to mimic Iggy.

His boots clopped loudly at the transition from gravel to the asphalt that would be his three-mile walk back to the vineyard’s main compound. A small spider was making its way across the road and he instinctively squashed it, horrible creatures. He debated popping his

earbuds in and decided that the silence of the night would be better company.

The evening grew cooler, to the point he began to wish for a jacket of some kind. The sweat that had cooled him during the heat of the day now chilled him. He’d been walking for almost twenty minutes when he saw the headlights. Moving toward him at a rate that indicated indifference toward safety. He stepped off the asphalt of the little back road and onto the shoulder. “Iggy,” Calvin smiled. “Coming to check on me. Better slow down, amigo.”

The evening chill increased and what had been mildly uncomfortable now caused him to shiver. The cool air crept across the Sacramento and thickened the fog.

It took him a moment to realize that the car seemed to be making no noise. There was no familiar thrumming that should have preceded Iggy’s old truck. The owner of the vineyard had a Tesla, but why would she be out here sneaking silently through the back roads? “No,” he whispered, “tires would still be humming on the road.”

The lights pushed through the fog with no worldly sound to support the movement. And there it was, the familiar shimmer that surrounded the dead. But instead of emanating from the memory of a person, this shimmer seemed to come from the headlights of the approaching car.

He stepped closer to the road, unsure of what he was about to see.

The car appeared, moving at a speed he couldn’t comprehend. Without any noise it simply glided on the fog. It looked to be an old car, and large, although he had no idea what it might be. Its shimmer lessened as it closed on him, the blur faded. Until it was on him. Passing within ten feet of where he stood, and as it passed it slowed. Well, it didn’t slow, he thought later, the world slowed. The car, the fog, his movements, all became dreamlike. Swimming through cement, his mother used to call it.

The woman seated on the driver’s side was unlike anyone he’d ever

seen. Living or dead. She stared out the side window, her eyes not on the road, and he momentarily wondered how she could be driving so straight without paying any attention. But that thought was gone as quickly as it arrived. Instead he could see flowing red hair framing her face, pale and haunted, like she bore the weight of the world. Her green eyes burned through the darkness, brighter than the ghost car's headlights. Those eyes filled him. The shimmer he'd seen as the car approached, any of the usual blur, was nowhere. It was as if he was peering through the clearest of crystals. A crystal that amplified the woman's beauty. If that was possible.

The ghost car couldn't have been visible to him for more than five or six seconds. But it felt a lifetime. He stood and watched it sail past, unable to take his gaze from the woman. Then the shimmer returned, the car blurred and vanished. He was once again alone on the road.

He stood for several minutes, breathed in and out, and when he walked again he wondered if he'd ever leave San Ramos.

* * *

She is certain they are lost.

“Clark,” she offers without much hope of being heard, “I think you should stop at the next farm and ask directions.”

She doesn't expect a response and doesn't get one.

She turns and stares out the window again, finding it strange to be on the driver's side of the car and not driving. She wants to enjoy the ride, the quiet. Instead, her thoughts race. She decides that once the election is over, once the campaign season is done, so is she.

There had been a time when she had dreams and hopes. Not even that long ago. Somehow they had vanished. Like the farmland they now drove past, being swallowed by the fog.

* * *

He waited on the side of the road the next night. Convinced Iggy with some made-up story about amateur astronomy. Iggy had agreed with a look that indicated he didn't believe the stargazing bullshit any more than Calvin did.

He'd never actively sought out a shimmer before. He spent so many years trying to avoid them that the act of seeking one felt odd. He continuously fumbled with his phone, checking the time, fairly certain that he knew what time he'd been there the night before, but not positive. The evening was much warmer, no fog rolled in.

He wished he'd paid more attention to all of the shimmering dead. Learned how they moved, when they appeared, the way they disappeared. How to find one. He waited for over an hour before admitting that it wasn't going to happen again and headed back to the vineyard's apartments.

He couldn't imagine not ever seeing her again.

* * *

Theresa smiles the practiced smile of a politician's wife. Making nice with the other wives. She wonders if her expression gives away what is swirling in her mind. The plans that dance there.

“Theresa,” Clark calls from across a room filled with self-important people in tuxedos, “come on over here. You've met Speaker Unruh before. Our next Governor.”

She smiles and nods. “Of course, Mr. Unruh,” her voice smooth as she approaches the man standing with her husband. “It is so nice to see you again. We are looking forward to your victory over Governor Reagan in a few months.”

Clark beams, “I was just telling the Speaker about our troubles getting here tonight, how hard it is for women to get ready on time these days ...” his eyes move expectantly back to hers.

“Yes, Mr. Speaker, I’m very sorry. Clark always tries to get me to be on time, but putting myself together takes time.” Theresa smiles.

Clark laughs and the Speaker laughs. Theresa joins them and wonders if they can hear the falsity in her mirth.

* * *

He asked Iggy for the day off and a quick ride into San Ramos. From there he caught the half-hour bus ride into Sacramento. It took two more hours of research at the library to figure out it was a Rolls Royce, which explained why she was sitting on the driver’s side of the car. It took another four hours of scrolling through the old newspapers, microfilm, and databases at the library to find the first article. And there she was. On the front page of the Sacramento Bee, Saturday, September 5th, 1970. The wife of a State Congressman. Both died tragically returning home from a political rally for Democratic Gubernatorial candidate Jesse Unruh.

He read the article three times. The car swerved off the road and the pair were killed. No evidence of anything other than bad luck, dark roads, and late summer fog. A single car accident with no survivors. Pictures of the smashed Rolls Royce Phantom VI, the crash site, and a wedding photo of the newly deceased couple. Theresa and Clark Williams.

September 5th, only a few days away. He swallowed hard and held back the urge to cry out in the silence of the cavernous library.

The decades of yellowing and the grainy newsprint were of no consequence. He knew it was her, as beautiful in pictures as she had appeared on the back country road.

Calvin spent another hour researching all there was to learn about her. Theresa Hitzke. From San Diego. Burgeoning artist, west coast debutante, USF grad, humanitarian efforts. Married the Congressman in 1967, no children. All he could see is her face, peering from the old Rolls Royce. And he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to ever see

anything else.

* * *

Theresa planned to ride home quietly, stay silent for a few more months, and then leave in January. But she cannot hold it any longer.

“I’m done, Clark.” She stares straight ahead, through the front windshield at the wisps of farmland visible through the remaining fog and highlighted by the Rolls’s beams. “I thought I could do it . . . I’m done with this marriage.”

There is no response. Faded yellow lane lines flash by. She isn’t sure he heard and she isn’t sure if she can repeat it. She opens her mouth, unsure if words will come out, when he interrupts her.

“You will not leave me,” his voice is low.

“Clark, I . . .”

She is unable to finish.

“YOU WILL NOT LEAVE ME!” he erupts, his left hand slapping down on the leather bench, and he turns to face her and release his anger. “You will stay with me, you will appear next to me, and you will do as I say. I have too much left to do.” His hand slaps the seat in rhythm with every other word he speaks. Spits. “I do not have time for your petty discomfort or whatever might be troubling you this week. Do you understand me, you will stay.”

Through his entire rant he has not taken his eyes from her. His stare blazes with an anger surpassing his words.

“CLARK!” she screams, reaching toward the dashboard and glove compartment. An instinct to protect herself.

Clark hears the fear in her voice and understands it is not him that has created it. His head snaps forward too late. The headlights of the

massive car shine into nothing. The road has curved and the speeding Rolls has not. He wrenches the wheel as hard as he can, which only succeeds in skidding the huge car sideways as it flies into the fields. It rolls over at top speed. Five times. Six. And comes to a jarring halt when the roof collapses into a tree, only a few feet from the Sacramento River.

Their bodies are found, still inside the car, later that night.

* * *

“Okay, compa,” Iggy starts, “if you are going to spend your nights on the back roads, that’s your business. But it’s time to tell me what you are running from. When the boss lady asks about you, I want to tell her the truth, entiendes? I want to tell her you’re a good kid and should stay through the rest of September and into the winter.” The old pick-up bounces down the back road. “Four nights in a row?”

Calvin had worried about what he’d tell Iggy when the time came. He knew that if he got started he might not stop. And he thought Iggy could handle a lot, but the shimmers might be too much for the old farmhand. Could he tell Iggy about the car? There had been nothing for two nights after the first sighting. Then, the third evening, he’d seen it again. The fog trickled in, lighter than before, a chill filled the late summer air, and the headlights appeared. It could have been another car, lost on the back roads, until he heard nothing. No engine, no whine of rubber on asphalt. And he knew it had come back. She had come back.

He had stepped from the shoulder, still not sure as to what he could do. The thin veil of fog shifted, the old Rolls-Royce burst through and he could see her again. Seated on the side of the car nearest him, the driver’s side if it were an American car. He froze. He tried to speak, call out, wave, signal the car and its beautiful passenger somehow. But the car glided past and Theresa’s beautiful face shimmered and was gone.

Last night he’d seen it again, there was not much fog, and when the

car appeared it came and went so fast he barely caught a glimpse of her. A shimmer that disappeared before it arrived.

Calvin rubbed his eyes at the memory of the two previous nights, still not sure what he was doing. “Iggy,” he finally offered, “you are absolutely right. I’ve been running. More like hiding.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the old wedding ring. “This was my mother’s. Not a great mom, but a mom. My father killed her about ten years ago. Killed my two little sisters, too. Carried them out front, put them on the lawn. Then killed himself. I was on a date. When I came home, I found it.”

“Dios mio,” Iggy muttered, trying to keep his eyes on the road but finding it difficult to not look at Calvin.

“Yep. That’s my family.” Calvin spoke with the detached practice of someone that spent years having to repeat the story to any number of disbelieving people. “Pretty fucked up, huh? So, I dealt with it the only way I knew how. By living with it. I lived with an uncle for a few years, tried college, tried working, tried drinking. Failed at all of it. So, after ten years of living with it, I decided to get away. Don’t know why I didn’t think of it sooner. Seems pretty basic, just get out of L.A. right? Leave it all behind. Took me a while to figure that out.” Calvin paused and stared out the window at the rows of grapes. “Nothing here reminds me of that. Nothing here makes me feel better than being out here in the middle of nothing.”

“You aren’t thinking of doing something stupid, compa?”

Calvin laughed, a genuine sound. “No! No, not for a long time have I thought about suicide, Iggy. No.”

Iggy stopped the pick-up and looked at Calvin. Assessed him. Calvin smiled and opened the door. “I’m good, Iggy.” He stepped out.

“I think there’s more to your story than you are letting on and leaving you out here is no bueno, Calvin. That story about your family, I’m sure it’s true, compa, but it’s the kind of thing you tell someone when

you don't want them to know the whole story."

"Just need some time to think, man."

"You call me if you need anything."

"I will, Iggy."

"You'll tell me if you need something?" Iggy asked.

"Absolutely." Calvin nodded and closed the door. Patted the side of the old truck twice, watched it pull away, and marveled at how observant Iggy was. "You are right, friend, that's not everything."

Calvin turned and looked back up the deserted road and contemplated everything he hadn't told Iggy about how the shimmers had been very active before that night, how there had been more than usual leading up to the night his father killed the family. He wondered what he'd missed, what they'd been trying to tell him. He wondered if he could have stopped everything that happened. He hadn't told Iggy about the shimmers that came after. Shimmers of his mother and the twins. And unlike most, they were not blurry or ill-defined. They were clear. And loud. He would see them at the store, or the park, or walking down the street. Like every other shimmer. Until they started screaming.

Calvin hadn't told Iggy about that. About having to continue shopping or brushing his teeth while the ghostly shadow of his mother stood behind him wailing in anger and rage. About being too ashamed to try and talk with them, communicate with them. Soothe them. He turned his back on them while alive and then again when they were dead. He hadn't told Iggy that after nine years he was certain that they were blaming him. That even worse than that was when his father would materialize. As if to blame Calvin for surviving, for not being there to stop it all. He hadn't told Iggy anything about the things he saw or heard. Because in the time he'd spent at the winery he hadn't seen a shimmer of his family once. It was glorious and hor-

rible all at the same time. The guilt weighed so heavy.

He decided, also, that it was finally time to do something about it. Free his family. Tonight he was going to warn Theresa Williams. Let her shimmer go in peace. Then he would return to L.A. and release his family. And himself.

He moved to the middle of the lane as the fog arrived. He spun his mother's gold band on his finger with no idea what would happen.

The headlights appeared.

* * *

"CLARK!" She screams, but it is far too late. The figure in the middle of the road appears in the fog, seemingly out of nowhere.

The tires of the Rolls scream in protest and she feels the car shudder with the impact. The figure that appeared tumbles backward, away from the skidding car. Never leaving the light of the beams. The car comes to a stop.

"Jesus Christ!" Clark yells. "Where the Hell did he come from?"

But she is already out of the car, running toward the figure lying in the road. Miraculously, he is breathing, his eyes open. Lying on his back staring up into the night.

* * *

Calvin could not believe how much it hurt; he had expected the apparition to simply pass through him. Giving him an opportunity to speak to her. Instead he was hit and launched. He wasn't sure how long he would have; every breath screamed with pain from a cage of broken ribs. But his eyes worked, and without turning his head he saw her approach. She ran through the night toward him in a red dress that looked like it had been poured from a bottle. She spoke but

he couldn't hear. He watched her lips move and caught a faint whiff of her perfume.

He whispered her name with lungs that no longer wished to participate. He was glad to see that he could still move his left hand.

* * *

“Theresa,” the figure on the roadway whispers to her and she recoils. But something in his eyes give her pause.

Then she hears Clark from behind. “Jesus, Theresa, get away from him!”

She is not paying any attention to her husband because the eyes of the man lying in the street are looking at her in a way that she’s never been looked at before. The eyes are full of adoration and hope. And satisfaction. She bends closer, no longer worried as to how this person knows her name. “Are you alright?” she asks, not knowing what else to say.

He smiles and his eyes never leave hers and a whispered breath replies, “I am now.”

Again from behind, far, far, away, she hears Clark, or what may once have been Clark, “Theresa, leave him alone, we need to go. Now.”

The man on the ground moves his arm. She is amazed that he can move anything. She realizes he is reaching for her. She has no fear of his touch.

“Take this,” he wheezes and places his hand in hers; she can feel something cold and smooth there. He is gasping for air now and tries to continue speaking. “Do ... not ... get back in the car ... with him ... tonight.”

She can't take her eyes from his and for a moment wonders if anyone will ever look at her again the way this dying man is.

Incredibly, he reaches for her face, and his hand grazes her cheek. She does not try and stop him.

“Even more ...” he says, his words now carrying no more substance than the swirling fog, “... beautiful in person.”

His hand falls away from her face and the adoration that danced in his eyes extinguishes. She sees his chest heave one final time and then it stills.

A hand falls on her shoulder.

“Jesus Christ, Theresa, what are you doing? Get in the car now before anyone comes along. Did you touch him? Is he dead?”

Clark continues to rant and demand she return to the car. She stands and looks at the item in her hand. A simple gold band. Scratched and dulled with age.

* * *

Anyone standing on the side of the old back road would have seen him standing alone. Then fly through the foggy night like an invisible creature had thrown him. Anyone standing on the side of the old back road would have seen his labored breathing and puffs of air coming from his mouth, as if he was speaking to someone. They would have seen his arm move upward and a finger move in a delicate circle, like he was conducting some unseen orchestra. Then they would have seen his arm crumple back to his side and the puffs of air coming from his mouth subside.

But no one was standing on the side of the road and no one saw the man that could see the glimmers of the dead become a shimmer himself.

Three hours later, the driver of an old pickup truck would find Calvin in the middle of the road. The apparent victim of a hit and run, but there'd be no evidence of skid marks, tire tracks, or a car ever having

been there. And Iggy would wonder how much of the story the cittadino did not tell him.

* * *

She stands on the balcony looking out over San Francisco. As she does every year on September 5th. She pours herself a glass of wine and thinks about that night and the words spoken to her by someone she never met. She is almost eighty now and her thumb absently rubs the gold band on her third finger.

It's been some kind of year with pandemics and politics driving most people to the edge. But she knows they might be missing the bigger picture. All of those other things are secondary to being alive.

She'd scoured the papers for weeks after that evening. Nothing was ever said, nothing was ever reported about a young man found dead on a back road near San Ramos. As if it had never happened. Her husband, on the other hand, made the papers the next morning after the Rolls skidded off the road and killed him. She had refused to get back in the car with him that night, like the stranger warned. But she knew her decision had been made long before that.

She sips her wine and thinks about the stranger from that night and imagines if he were alive today what he might be doing tonight.

A shimmer of melancholy washes over her and she wonders.

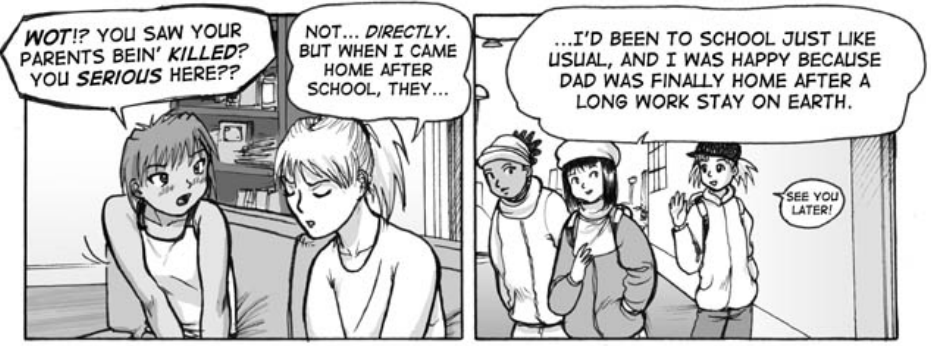
by Jesper Nordqvist

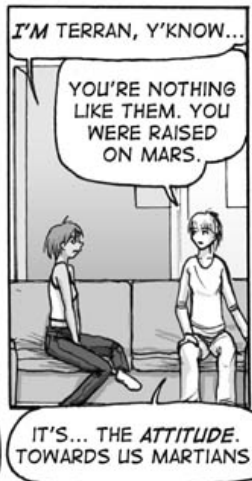
NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

[No notes this page]





NOTES

[No notes this page]





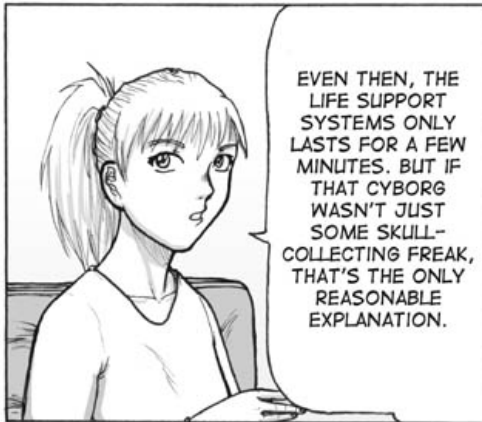
THANKS. I'M OK... I WAS JUST SHOCKED, SEEING THAT GUY **DECAPITATED**... IT ALL CAME BACK TO ME.

IT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN OR SHOULD BE PREPARED TO SEE, REALLY...



FUCKING GROSS... WHAT WAS THE DEAL WITH THAT ANYWAY??

HOW SHOULD I KNOW? ONLY THING I CAN THINK OF IS IF HE HAD AN E-BRAIN OR SUCHLIKE...



EVEN THEN, THE LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS ONLY LASTS FOR A FEW MINUTES. BUT IF THAT CYBORG WASN'T JUST SOME SKULL-COLLECTING FREAK, THAT'S THE ONLY REASONABLE EXPLANATION.



E-BRAIN, HUH? MUST HAVE BEEN SOMEONE IMPORTANT THEN?

GUESS SO. BUT... I NEED TO REST A LITTLE. THANKS FOR LISTENING, ANYWAY.



DON'T SWEAT IT, GIRLFRIEND. I'M HERE FOR YA.

YEAH... WELL, SEE YOU LATER.

AYE.



HUH.

NOTES

Sorry about the sloppy tones... I have a lot of things to do right now.





NOTES

Finally a good looking page - and it didn't take too long to make either :)

Doom 3 has been a great source of inspiration to these factory pages.





NOTES

I took a look at some of the older pages and realized the background people were often no more than cones with heads. Can't have it that way, so I've decided to treat the commoners with more respect. Of course, that news anchor is still a LEGO man :P





NOTES

This fitting room uses hologram technology to showcase the clothes, as there are no clothes openly available in the store.

When you've made your choice, you confirm on the data panel and check out the clothes at the counter.

Not all stores use this approach, of course, but it saves space, and you can always be sure that your clothes are brand new and unused when you buy them.





MONDO MECO PAGE 108 20050713 © JESPER NORDQVIST
CO-WRITER AND IDEAS: EMIL OLOFSSON

WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

As you might have found out, the brackets symbolize Kirika speaking or thinking in Japanese.

This is why her text and grammar is also normal when in brackets.

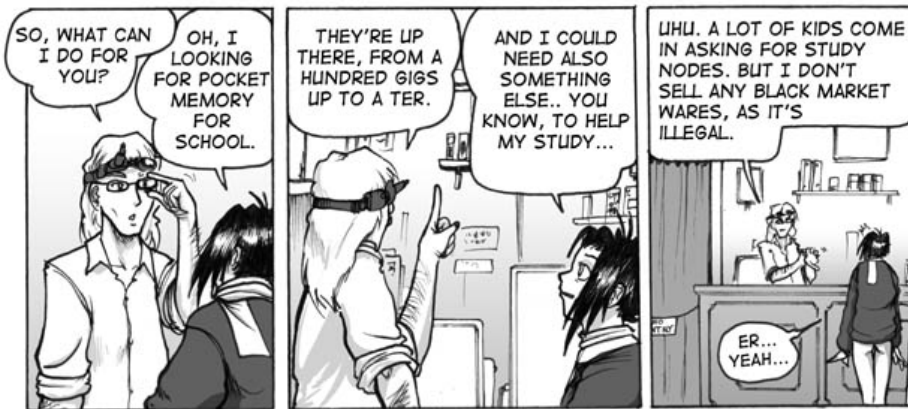
Hope she can find a node to up her "English" skills ("English" in quotation marks because they don't really speak English as we know it on Mars; it has changed a lot in 240 years and is also mixed up with other languages. They usually call it "Cydonian".) Yes.





NOTES

Smooth going, Kiri-chan. A hundred gigabytes up to a terabyte might not seem much for a memory stick in two hundred years time, you might think? We're almost there already?

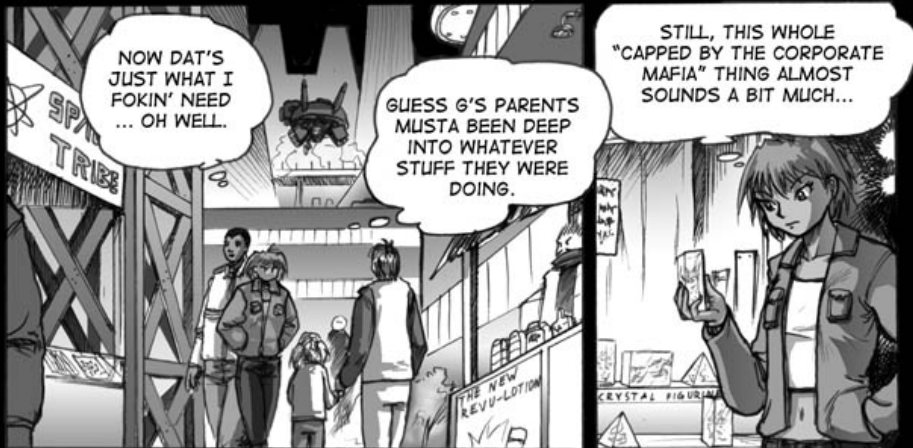


Might be, but for small storage/transportation media like these, it should be more than enough, as long as the file sizes haven't grown incredibly much.





*OCOM: ORIGINAL CITIZENS OF MARS, A TRENDY CLOTHES CHAIN.



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CO-WRITER AND IDEAS: EMIL OLOFSSON WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

NOTES

Those Crystal Figurines are laser-carved 3-dimensional motives inside a crystal glass block.

More about the OCOM stores: Every individual store often has only one type of clothes, like Everyday, Party, Classy etc.

So if you like the OCOM brand and want a type of clothes not available in your nearest store, you might have to travel a bit.

But it's always hip to have to make a little effort to get the right stuff, right?



Contributor's Bios



PETE BARNSTROM is an award-winning screenwriter and filmmaker whose projects have played at theaters and film festivals all over the world. He's shot documentaries in Greenland for the National Science Foundation, edited a feature for the Blair Witch guys (not that one), and seen one of his films screened at the Smithsonian. His experimental short films earned a grant from the Artist Foundation, and Amazon Studios bought a family film screenplay from him. He lives quietly in Texas and loudly elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter at @MistahPete and on Instagram at mistah.pete.

* * *

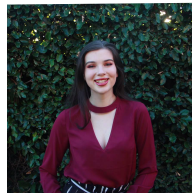
JAY BECHTOL likes to write, so he does. Recent short stories have appeared in *Uncharted*, *Crystal Lake*, and *Rock and a Hard Place*. His first novel, *The Great American Coward*, was released by Golden Storyline Books in October 2021. He can be found on line at www.JayBechtol.com and on Twitter @BechtolJay. He can be found in person in Homer, Alaska.

* * *



MARK BILSBOROUGH is based in England and mainly writes science fiction which invariably involves time travel, dimension hopping or both. His stories are dotted around the internet and he's working on a novel. www.markbilsborough.com and @MarkBils are places you can find him.

* * *



NICOLA BRAYAN is a young, aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be found on Instagram at @an.aesthetic.mirror.

* * *

FRANK COFFMAN is a retired professor of college English, Creative Writing, and Journalism. He has published speculative poetry and fiction in a variety of magazines and anthologies. His poetic magnum opus, *The Coven's Hornbook & Other Poems* (2019) has been followed by his rendition into English Verse of 327 quatrains of Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* (2019). A second large collection of poetry, *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows*, was published in March of 2020. All are available from Bold Venture Press and on Amazon.

A traditional formalist in his poetic work, he is especially interested in exploring and experimenting with the patterns of verse found across the world's cultures and ethnicities and across time from ancient to modern. His special love of and interest in the sonnet has led to invention of several cross-cultural meldings of various traditions with the 14-line restriction of the sonnet form.

His third poetry collection, *Eclipse of the Moon*, was published in May 2021. A collection of seven of his occult detective stories, *Three Against the Dark*, will be published in early 2022, and a collection of weird and supernatural short stories, *In Terrorem: Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*, is also projected for 2022.

He has published speculative short fiction in *Test Patterns*, *Black*

Veins I, Hell's Empire, Eldritch Tales, and elsewhere.

A member of the Horror Writers Association and the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association. He established and moderates the Weird Poets Society Facebook group. See his Writer's Blog at <https://www.frankcoffman-wordsmith.com>.

* * *



MARC A. CRILEY avidly read fantasy and science fiction for over forty years before deciding to try his hand at writing it. He has since been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Abyss & Apex*, and elsewhere--rest assured it is never too late to start writing. Marc and his wife "manage" a

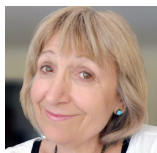
household of cats in the hills of North Alabama, where he tweets about writing, space, Alabama, and other shiny things as @That_MarcC. Marc maintains a personal website and blog at marccriley.com.

* * *



HOLLY DAY (hollyday.blogspot.com) has been an instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis since 2000. Her writing has recently appeared in *Hubbub*, *Grain*, and *Third Wednesday*, and her newest books are *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press), *Book of Beasts* (Weasel Press), *Bound in Ice Music* (Shanti Arts), and *Music Composition for Dummies* (Wiley).

* * *



Author **SUSAN DIRENDE** writes primarily fantasy and science fiction. She has won awards for her writing including the Philip K Dick Awards Special Citation for Excellence for her book *Unpronounceable*. Her stories have appeared in anthologies by Drangonsinger and Sweetycat Press, and periodicals such as *Three*

Crows Magazine, *Pine Hills Review*, and *The Gaze Journal*. Her comic fantasy novel, *Knife Witch*, has been acquired by Aqueduct Press for publication in mid 2023.

* * *



SHIKHAR DIXIT's stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and *Barnes & Noble's 365 Scary Stories*.

He lives with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at SlipOfThePen.com

* * *



TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, *the Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. hildebrandt343@icloud.com.

* * *



BRIAN D. HINSON abandoned all semblance of a career in 1999, opting for part-time gigs and visiting 40-some countries backpacker style. He recently slowed life even further to settle in rural New Mexico, USA with his wife Kathleen

Eickholt and three pitbulls to gaze at sunsets and write science fiction.

Recent credits include: "Shearing" in Summer 2022 *Shoreline of Infinity*; "Acuity Score: High" in March 2022 *Andromeda Spaceways*;

“Ornamental Refugee” in Spring 2022 *ParSec*; “The River, The Road, The Moons” in Vol 12, *Longshot Island*; and “Eternal Rotation” in Winter 2021 *The Colored Lens*.

* * *



R. MAC JONES is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

* * *



GERRI LEEN lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. In addition to being an avid reader, she's passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has work appearing or accepted by *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Dark Matter*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and others. She's edited several anthologies for independent presses, is finishing some longer projects, and is a member of SFWA and HWA. See more at gerrileen.com.

* * *



MICHELLE M. MEAD is a writer from NY's Hudson Valley. She's edited two zines, been published in various print (*Polluto*, *Trespass*, *Words@Deakin Press*, *Capsule Stories*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Chronogram*, *Blinking Cursor*, *Planisphere Q*, *Thirty First Bird Review*, *Renascence/Yellow Arrow Pub.*), and ezines (*Poetic Sun*, *Fahmidan Journal*, *Tigershark*, *Last Leaves*, *Apparatus*, *EMG-Zine*, *Under the Juniper Tree*, *Gutter Eloquence*, etc). Her work/interview, can be seen at [@MMMeadWriting](https://www.facebook.com/MMMeadWriting) on Facebook.com, as well as on Poets and Writers Directory (https://www.pw.org/directory/writers/michelle_m_mead).

* * *



DEBASISH MISHRA, a native of Bhawanipatna, Odisha, India, is the recipient of the Bharat Award for Literature in 2019, the Reuel International Best Upcoming Poet Prize in 2017, and a nominee for the Rhysling Award in 2022. His recent literary poems have appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Penumbra*, *California Quarterly*, *The Headlight Review*, *Quadrant*, and elsewhere. His speculative writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Star*Line*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Enchanted Conversation*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Spaceports & Spidersilk*, *Space & Time*, and *parABnormal*, among other places. His first book, *Lost in Obscurity and Other Stories*, was recently published by Book Street Publications, India. A former banker with United Bank of India, he is presently engaged as a Senior Research Fellow at National Institute of Science Education and Research, HBNI, Bhubaneswar, India.

* * *

JESPER NORDQVIST, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at gumroad.com/ragathol.

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DESMOND RHAЕ works as an Editor and Illustrator at *Starward Shadows eZine*. His work has been featured by *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, Burning Light Press, and Florida Roots Press. Desmond has spent his whole life exploring a deep interest in art, writing, and music. After earning a college degree in graphic design, he's focused on independent work as a writer and artist alongside writing his sci-fi novel. You can find out more at www.theinksphere.com.

* * *



JAMES RUMPEL is a retired mathematics teacher who has enjoyed spending some of his free time trying to turn some of the many odd ideas in his brain into stories. He lives in Wisconsin with his wonderful wife, Mary.

* * *



RON SANDERS is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

* * *

CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

* * *



CHRISTINA SNG is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at christinasng.com and connect [@christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng).

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NORA WESTON is a Michigan based writer/artist. Her work has appeared in *Bete Noire* and *James Gunn's Ad Astra*.

Currently, work has been published by *Star*Line*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Crow Toes Quarterly*, and *Strange Horizons*.

Work has been accepted by Timber Ghost Press.



Breach

(full image)

by Ron Sanders