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# Penumbria Goes Free! And Other Tales

by Jeff Georgeson

Ain't reorganization wonderful?

In the last two months we here at *Penumbria* have been debating, and agonizing, and discussing, and wondering (and perhaps even doing a bit of wandering) about the direction our magazine has been heading, and where we want it to head, and how best to get it there. While I won't share the answers to all of those questions with you, I will share these:

Beginning with the April 2k4 issue (that's this issue, of course) of *Penumbria*, we are becoming (re-becoming) a free online magazine. We've decided to do this so that everyone can enjoy our contributors' works and so our work (as in putting together the magazine) can be seen by everyone, especially the pdf layout we spend so much time on each issue.

Those of you who have free subscriptions won't be affected, as you'll still be notified of new issues and don't need refunds.

Those who have paid for subscriptions have the opportunity to get your money back (at a rate of 50 cents per month remaining on your one-year subscription). You can also leave the money with us as a much-appreciated donation.

Those who had no subscription will now be able to see an entire two years' worth of *Penumbria*, from interviews with Kenji Kamiyama of

Production IG to an exploration of virtual idols to a history of the videogame industry.

We are looking at creating an index of all the stories, poetry, artwork, graphic narratives, interviews, and articles ever put into *Penumbria*, so that you (and we!) can easily find what you're looking for in those ever-growing MB of back issues.

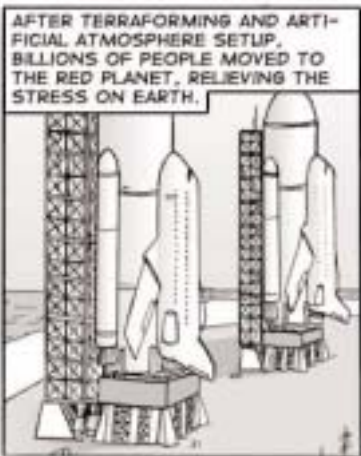
We are also rethinking the way in which we put together annual anthologies. It costs far too much (with too little return) to put them out as annual magazines, so we are looking into putting out an actual book. This project will not come to fruition this year, and we will not be publishing a print anthology in 2004.

Finally, contributors will continue to be paid at the rate of \$10 per piece, and in other respects the magazine will continue to be the same leading-edge publication we have come to love.

Thank you for supporting *Penumbria*, and of course donations are still happily accepted :)

Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor, psfm  
April 2k4

*Do you have comments about anything in the magazine?  
Go to <http://www.neomythos.com/phpBB/viewforum.php?f=2>*



## Notes

Welcome to Mondo Mecho!

I started the ideas of this comic almost two years ago, but work has, suffice to say, been slow...

This is an ongoing story, though I try to have at least some kind of humor or tension at the end of the page, so you don't lose hope altogether.

At the bottom (or side) of the comic page I'll include some notes for the current page because, well, I like notes ^\_^

//Rag

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Believe it or not, I hate drawing lots of people and giant cityscape pictures ... yet I end up including them every time I make a story...

The square at the first panel could have been even more packed, but I wanted some overview.

Panel 3: You'd need quite a lot of those shuttles to move billions of people! o\_o

by Jesper Nordqvist

*Editor's note: As he says, welcome to Mondo Mecho, a new comic that will be featured for many issues in Penumbric! We will run not only the comic, but also Mr. Nordqvist's notes (well, most of them; some are a bit out of context here). For the full Mondo Mecho experience, we suggest going to [www.ragathol.com](http://www.ragathol.com).*



PART ONE: WHAT'S FOR WORK TODAY, HUN?



## Notes

That newspaper pad is quite similar to today's Palm Pilots, but more advanced and with a holographic screen.

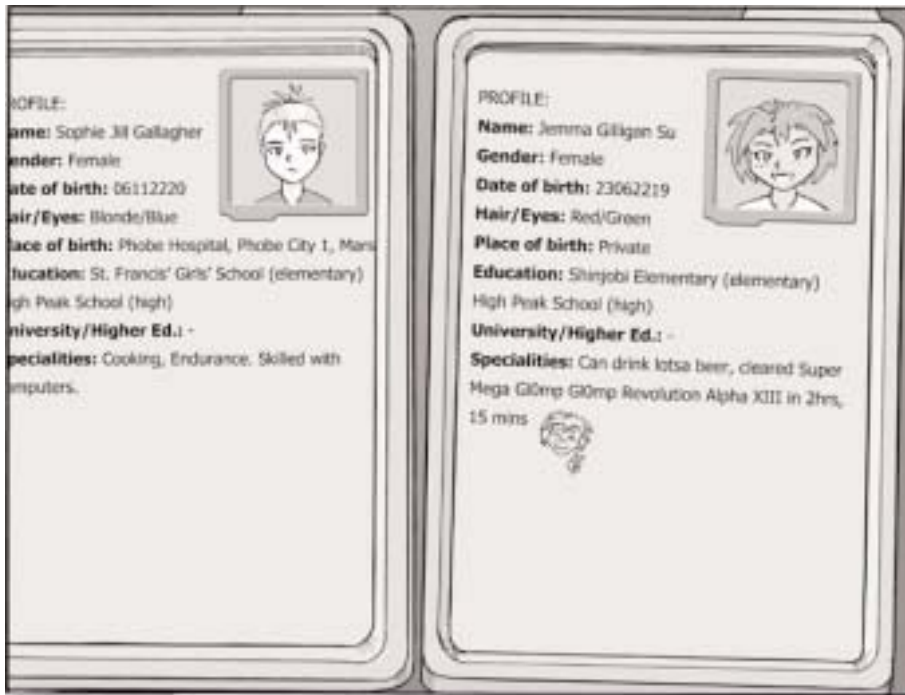


## Notes

Oya, this page is all crap..

~\_~

I swear, Gehenna's proportions are different in every fricking panel... And there was no end to the ink smudging and general crap when I drew the page.. God bless digital touchup.



## Notes

This page was actually finished (ink) before 2 am, a bit disappointing...

Guess I went a bit overboard with the tones ^\_^. but hey, tones are what make the picture look good.

Those things in the bookshelf in the background are info files, like the ones of J & G on the table. They wrote those reviews themselves, by the way...





## Notes

J&G goes rogue!

If you wonder what the heck that fence is doing there, just keep on reading...  
If you do not ponder this mighty question, keep reading anyways...



## Notes

Ergo; the fences are there to stop the traffic from going overboard ... the traffic should be quite heavy, but I don't want the pictures to be too messy either... It's always a matter of balance, though the massive fence textures may have tipped the scales this time... >\_<

Kan du se dig själv, Martin? ^\_^

I don't know if you've noticed, but I have actually stopped inking my pages now (yes, really).

I've once again moved over completely to pencil... every once in a while I think that it should be fun to use ink, I don't really know why, maybe because you're supposed to ink a comic...

Well, anyways, it sucks, so I have once again taken to my very best purchases yet: the Pilot Color Eno with light blue leads and the fabulous Stabilo All 8008 pencil ^\_^

Now I sketch the pages with light blue pencil and make the clean drawing directly over the sketch with the black lead. When I scan the page (in grayscale), the light blue does not show up at all, and I automatically have a clean drawing ^\_^

This saves a tremendous amount of time in the inking department, and it looks better too, I can do freer lines.

It doesn't mean the total job on the page is less though.. I sat for at least four hours with the tones on this one >\_>

But it's a bit special too... I hope you like the new results ^\_^

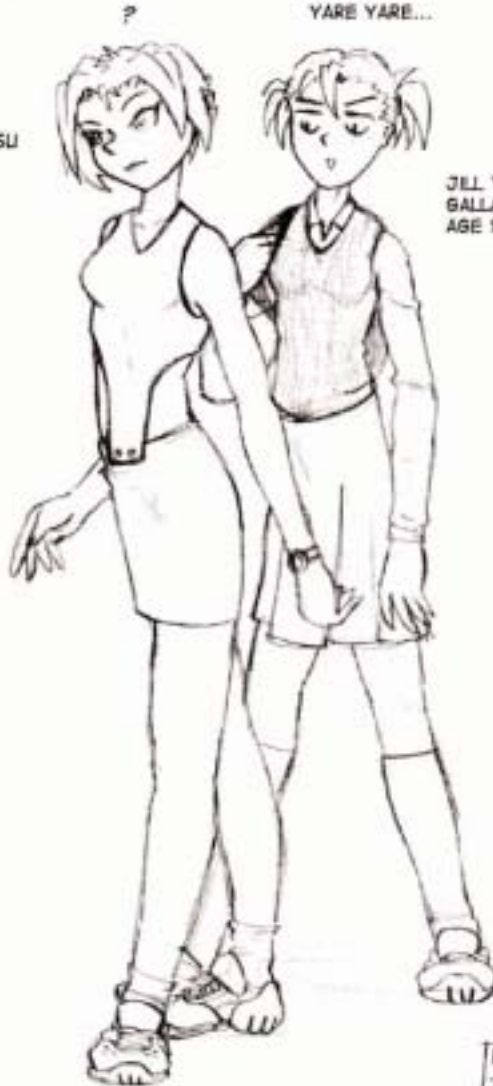


# MONDO MÊCHO

## RANDOM ART DAY 01

ON THEIR WAY HOME FROM SCHOOL, THE TWO YOUNG FRIENDS ENCOUNTER A STRANGE LITTLE MAN...

JEMMA SU  
AGE 18



JELL "GEHENNA"  
GALLAGHER  
AGE 17

### ABOUT COMICS AND CHARACTERS

When my friends and family see my stuff, they often say that they recognize Jemma from somewhere, and it's no wonder, given that she's inspired from so many other characters. At first sight, she might look somewhat like a clone of Kei from Adam Warren's *The Dirty Pair*, and where looks are concerned, she has much of Kei indeed, though it's quite coincidental.. I first made up Jemma and Gehenna before I had even read *The Dirty Pair*, but maybe they have formed after DP... Other influences for Jemma are Kaolla Su (the jumpyness and the surname as a little wink) and Mitsune Konno (slackerism) from *Love Hina*, and not least Clover Conelly from Chynna Clugston-Major's excellent comic *Blue Monday*. Strangely enough, Gehenna has no real influences of that kind... but then I'm fighting to make her more of a lead character instead of the sidekick, too...

A webcomic with really great characters is PockyBot, arted and crafted by my online buddy //c0ry. Featuring no less than futurepop, '80s retro gaming, tofu, squishy giant penguins and wacko kids in a random 3am hit mix, this webcomic is unlike anything else. Be sure to check it out.

And finally, for you three people in the world that are actually reading this comic, and possibly the rant too, I have a special treat for you ^\_^ I've gotten my hands on a real goodie, signed idol cards of Jemma and Gehenna! [See the cover of this issue—ed.] Feel free to distribute them, possibly together with a link to my site (nudge nudge).

Cheers  
//Rag

# Film Artifact: A Review

by Bruce Boston

It appears to be a film  
of the century past  
and the century present  
but it is unclear when  
it was made or exactly why.

Or perhaps it is from  
another century altogether,  
left here by chrononauts  
from the far distant future,  
an incomprehensible artifact  
aimed at changing all Time  
for reasons equally abstruse,  
an artificial rendition  
of newsbreaking events  
that have become unhinged  
in the course of history.

The print is grainy,  
lacking all color except  
the faintest sepia tones,  
filled with shadows that  
shift relative to the light,  
images stretched slantwise  
and cast beyond recognition,  
spirit shades that evolve and  
flicker with a visual intensity  
that can supersede the scenes  
sliding past before your eyes.

And every time you run  
this cinematic curiosity  
through the sprockets,

each time you try to wring  
meaning real or symbolic  
from its reeling progression,  
the events portrayed seem  
to shift ever so slightly.  
(Further evidence of tampering  
by time travelers or merely  
the flaws of imperfect memory?)

The only soundtrack is music  
and that also changes from  
hot jazz to cool and back again,  
from country twang to the bare  
animal lust of heavy metal rock,  
from masterly classic compositions  
to the savage rage of gangsta rap.

There are no titles or credits  
either before or after the film.  
There is no dramatic structure  
nor any clear effort to convey  
a theme or sense of the whole.  
The opening scene begins with  
the onset of unnamed catastrophe.  
The fade out transpires suddenly  
in the midst of another cataclysm,  
manmade or natural or god sent,  
without explanation or resolution.

The cast numbers in the thousands  
though most individual figures  
are indistinguishable in the crowd.  
The ever changing leads are played

by actors you have never seen before,  
although more than a few resemble  
types you have known all your life.

There is the eternal victim,  
pressed back to the brick wall,  
to the ground, to the barbed wire,  
face blanched with absolute terror.  
There is the assassin whose flesh  
remains always cool to the touch,  
his ballbearing eyes reflecting  
a past peppered with shots so clean  
they appear nearly bloodless  
in their crosshair accuracy.  
There is the nobody catapulted  
to the stage and the limelight,  
dancing his or her heart out  
with manic and joyous excitement  
as the orchestra crescendos.

And every one of these figures,  
heroes and heroines alike,  
friends and inimical foes,  
walk-ons and one-liners,  
appears to be tearing into  
the future at a furious pace

with hair blown back and  
features distended as if  
by the three-gee pulse  
of a rocket's final flare  
touching high acceleration  
as it flees the Earth's pull.

This is a film you cannot miss  
no matter how hard you try.  
It is playing in a theater so near  
and so multiplexed that when you  
attempt to leave you find yourself  
trapped in another auditorium where  
the same feature runs continuously.  
It is a film unreeling on the backdrop  
of your brain like the bad dreams  
of a dissolute Saturday night.

And what frightens you most,  
more than its incomprehensibility,  
more than its tedious repetition  
or the way it jump cuts inexplicably  
from one Grand Guignol to the next,  
is the undeniable realization that  
you have seen your own likeness,  
your absolute image as a celluloid clone,  
looming larger than life on the screen.

# The Forest for the Trees

by Greg Story

“When a young Charwinian finds a good place to put down roots, he becomes a tree.”

Cheryl Onyx thought how a humanoid could never say such a thing without smiling. The vegtapoid, however, had no teeth. Inhaling deeply, Cheryl leaned into the aisle to get a better whiff of the intoxicating aroma coming from the talking plant positioned mid cabin. Its long branches stretched out towards all forty seats aboard the interstellar. Sensing her move, the vegtapoid obligingly maneuvered a frond full of delicate yellow flowers closer to Cheryl.

The scent wafting out had been designed to arouse the sales staff aboard ship. The spicy smell emanating from the anthers summoned up images of wicked mischief in Cheryl. The mouth in the stubby center stalk mimicked human speech perfectly. It had been grafted from a parrot plant.

In a soothing voice, the vegtapoid continued the presentation.

“This process allows adult Charwinians to live as trees for many centuries, and in no small way accounts for the planet Charwin being the most popular tourist destination in the Cancer Constellation. Of the forty-seven million square kilometers of land surface, currently thirty-five percent is maintained as magnificent old growth forest. The remaining two thirds offers excellent investment opportunity.”

Cheryl’s fingers tingled as she brushed pollen off her bare forearms. Mustn’t take too much, she reminded herself. United Planets wanted their account executives peppy, not stoned. Still, it was nice to snuggle in her ergonomic seat imagining she was in a spa being pampered by a dozen handsome attendants. Involuntarily she started to squirm, and when her sales manager, J. D. Tarn, sitting alongside tapped her shoulder, she had to stifle an impulse to embrace him.

“Go ahead and fanaticize now if you want. Just remember to concentrate on closing the deal once we land. U.P.’s authorized us to spend up to twenty million credits. For that kind of dough, they’re going to want results,” Tarn snapped.

As he had throughout the six-hour flight, Tarn was fiddling with his laptop. Cheryl understood that part of the reason the regional manager was here was to keep an eye on her, the company’s youngest field rep. The old fart, to think she’d nearly thrown her arms around him. Tarn was within rights to catch her out like that though. It was easy to OD on vegtapoid essence when their resin was peaking.

“Remember, the Charwinians will play plenty for forest management, and they’ve got the resources to finance it. What are the estimates of the gold deposits under that desert we’ll bid to transform?” Tarn asked.

Cheryl knew he was testing her and hated him for it.

“Six hundred thousand troy ounces,” she answered mechanically.

“Not a bad rate of return for a twenty million credit outlay,” Tarn said.

If we land the contract, Cheryl thought to herself.

There were agents from six other companies aboard ship.

Cheryl Onyx never was much good at dealing with children. At twenty-two standard years, she didn’t feel any need to develop the mothering instinct quite yet, but on Charwin, she had no choice but negotiate with kids, a veritable class full in this case. All natives over age ten were coniferous trees. Smart as whips, the young resembled

whips with handles like stalks for heads and leathery snakish bodies. They dropped from the trees by the score year round and fed on the fallen leaves of their parents until it was time for them to stick their heads in the ground and sprout up.

Cheryl kept tapping her pointer against the podium to get the group's attention. The Charwinians bobbed in mass like cobras following the movement. Her words were transcribed by a computer into a holographic stick figure that twisted furiously about on a levitating platform beside her. Charwinian juveniles communicated by wriggles. When they began to coil and bounce around the room, Cheryl felt like she was on the inside of some spring wound device that had exploded.

She checked the monitor for a translation of reactions to her presentation so far and grimaced at the statements flashing on screen.

“They should have sent a vegtapoid.”

“She can barely jiggle, let alone bounce.”

“She's so slow you'd think she was already planted.”

Cheryl advanced the overhead projector to the next picture. It displayed a graph of how much new growth could be accommodated in the existing forests on Charwin juxtaposed to the base line of the current number of mobile young that would soon need growing space.

“The time will quickly come for each of you to plant yourselves. As the chart clearly shows, fewer than three percent of newly planted Charwinians will survive more than six seasons because of overcrowding due to the shortage of suitable space,” she said.

Despite extensive briefing, Cheryl screamed when one of the Charwinians sprang at her from out of the crowd and wrapped itself around her arm. Its rapier thin tail kinked and straightened at blinding speed. Recovering her composure, Cheryl positioned the creature closer to the recording camera and watched the monitor for a translation.

“We know all about your company's proposal to transform the Radaph

Desert into forest and excavate gold in the process. Before we trust you with a project that size, you're going to have to demonstrate your capabilities on something smaller.”

“Of course we're interested in anything you care to suggest,” Cheryl said as the creature paused.

The Charwinian glanced over at the dancing hologram projected beside the podium to see what she'd said. The blue green orb at the tip of the creature's head had all the expressive qualities of a human eye. Hard to believe that one day it would turn into a taproot.

“Very well. Floods in the Maska Delta killed all the trees in a tract covering a thousand hectares. That wood is a ripe breeding ground for insects and disease. We've already calculated that it will cost your company one hundred thousand credits for proper removal. There's the potential to recover five to twenty thousand ounces of gold in the process.”

Cheryl did some quick calculations. Even at the low end of the estimate, U. P. could realize a profit of more than one hundred percent.

“I'll take it up with my sales manager,” she said trying not to sound too anxious and wondering whether such emotion would translate.

“Please do. By the way, that dead wood can still be made into high quality paper,” the Charwinian said.

The creature jumped back to join its mates, leaving Cheryl with an Indian burn on her arm.

\* \* \*

Tarn so loved the arrangement he caught the next interstellar back to U. P. headquarters to grab the glory for it before the deal was finalized. Cheryl caught him by phone aboard ship when he was just far enough out for there to be only a few minute delay in transmission.

A Charwinian council had summoned Cheryl back for another round

of negotiation. The youngsters appeared hopping mad as they sprang around the room like rubber balls coming disconcertingly close to her at times. A flurry of messages flashed on the translator screen.

“The deal is off.”

“We’ll tear up our contract.”

“We have one further demand.”

“Respect must be shown the remains.”

The system was recording so many responses it took a while to catch their gist. As Charwinians bounced by, Cheryl swayed out of the way, struggling to remain at her post behind the podium, which seemed the safest place in the room. While holding the phone and checking the monitor, she tried to distill the multiple dialogues on screen down to a single narrative.

“The Charwinians are terribly concerned what we do with the trees we clear from the Moska Delta. They’re still asking for them to be converted to paper, demanding in fact, but they’re further requiring the paper be treated with devotion because these trees are like their forefathers. To insure devotion, they’re insisting the paper be used as currency,” she hesitantly explained.

Then as Charwinians flew around the chamber in a frenzy, Cheryl waited and waited for the response that finally came.

“I’d be happy to guarantee that. I’m not sure they’re aware of it, but U.P. prints all the currency in this quadrant. I can even promise that their ancestors won’t end up in any of the small stuff. Nothing but twenty and fifty credit notes,” Tarn said from somewhere beyond the exosphere.

The computer translated his words into holographic wiggles for the Charwinians. The way they proclaimed “hooray” left Cheryl cowering.

\* \* \*

On her second trip to Charwin just over a standard year later, Tarn met Cheryl at the spaceport. He’d been on the planet nearly the whole time, first overseeing the Moska Delta clearance, then pressing ahead with the massive reclamation of the Radaph Desert. Cheryl couldn’t help notice Tarn was wearing the epaulets of a project manager. She’d resigned herself to hearing all the boring details of the gargantuan operation, but Tarn broke off the conversation before she’d even picked up her luggage.

“I haven’t got time to fill you in on what’s going on. The parrot plant will bring you up to speed. I’ve booked you a room at the Carlton. As soon as you’re briefed, catch up with me at the end of the Trans Radaph Canal. I’ve left a hovercraft in your name at the hotel garage. The autopilot’s already programmed,” he said in a rush.

Handing Cheryl a small potted plant, Tarn then abruptly hopped in his hovercraft parked illegally outside the baggage claim zone and took off. He hadn’t even offered to give her a ride to the hotel. Cheryl couldn’t help noticing how nervous he’d looked. The man seemed to have aged a decade. She didn’t exactly feel at ease in the taxi run by a robot that made inane small talk while driving like a maniac.

Once in her bland but comfortable room, Cheryl took a moment to relax and unpack before prompting the parrot plant. The true value of vegtapoid explanations lay in the emotional response they set up via scent. The process worked best with the listener in a meditative state. Cheryl lay down on the bed and took a few deep breaths, then aimed the high intensity beam built into the headboard onto the plant’s leaves to jump start the presentation.

Attar of roses filled the room, relaxing Cheryl and making her imagine lush gardens and soft summer nights. Then a harsh vinegary odor snapped her to attention as the parrot plant began to speak.

“While the words I am saying were taught to me by a human, the message I bring comes from the Charwinians. Recent events prove the following is true.

“The trees in the Maska Delta that were converted into paper by Unit-

ed Planets were diseased. The virus that contaminated them, however, would not harm Charwinians. The trees themselves manufactured the virus within their sap for the express purpose of infecting humanity. Any humanoid who touched that paper in any form is currently infected.”

At this point, Cheryl sat bolt upright in bed. Of course she'd touched some form of that paper. Anyone in a galaxy wide quadrant who'd handled a twenty or fifty credit note in the last half year had. United Planets had been distributing currency made from that paper to over eleven hundred planets for at least that long. One would have to be very poor, very young, or perhaps outrageously rich not to have handled some of that money.

The plant continued in a sing song voice.

“The virus has a dormancy period of one standard year, during which time there are no discernable symptoms. At that point, the virus mutates into a new form that causes a breakdown of hemoglobin. Death follows within forty-eight hours.

“The Charwinians have an antidote for the virus. It is an enzyme secreted by their offspring that is absorbed directly through humanoid skin. The Charwinians suggest their young be distributed to all planets infected in order to distribute the antidote. Humanoids of course can refuse, and scientists may be able to replicate the antidote, but it is an extremely complex protein molecule difficult to synthesize.”

The parrot plant's burl shaped mouth closed up, signaling the end of its speech. Cheryl wanted to cross-examine at length, but parrot plants could only be taught to speak, not think. Feeling suddenly vulnerable, she ran into the bathroom and checked the whites of her eyes for redness and her gums for swelling. When had she first touched that money? There'd be no way for anybody to know when they were infected. After brushing her long brown hair, Cheryl almost panicked after finding six strands caught in the bristles.

She changed clothes before the windows. The beautiful view now seemed malignant. Rolling hills covered with conifers looked like angry welts. Dark clouds scudding in from the east heralded a storm.

Cheryl was glad she had to meet Tarn out in a treeless desert.

As always, the autopilot flew at terrifying speeds. It raced down a heavily timbered valley, skimming just above the treetops. Cheryl didn't stop biting her fingernails until both the hills and the trees petered out. The hovercraft followed the arrow-straight line of a recently excavated irrigation canal for a hundred kilometers before coming to a jarring halt at a construction site.

Cheryl had to jump out of the way of a hurtling laserdozer whose driver appeared hell-bent on making the day's digging quota. Tarn was talking pompously to a work crew gathered around a foreman's outstretched blueprints. He seemed annoyed by her presence.

“What the hell did you get us into that Maska Delta deal for?” he said, pulling her aside so the others wouldn't hear.

“You're the one who took credit for it,” she snapped back at him.

“All right, forget it. Listen, Space Command's just requisitioned all the interstellars on this planet, so we're both going to be stuck here for who knows how long.”

“Does the Federation know about the disease yet?”

“Why do you think Space Command's taken over shipping? We're in enough trouble without trying to keep something like that secret. Six weeks ago all the Maska Delta loggers died, and a Charwinian council informed us about this virus. Then just two weeks ago all the workers at the new paper mill died, except for six guys who managed to get a Charwinian to jump on their arm.”

Cheryl remembered that a Charwinian had once leaped onto her arm. She hoped this gave her immunity.

“Are the Charwinians willing to give everyone the antidote?” she asked.

“Who knows what they'll do? Who knows what they're capable of? Space Command's already started transporting Charwinian young

out,” Tarn shouted while ludicrously waving his arms about.

\* \* \*

It took Cheryl nearly a year to get a flight off Charwin, and then it was under false pretenses.

“Space Command thinks you’re going to do a study of how Charwinians are adapting to earth, and in a way you will be. Governments all over the galaxy are lining up to kiss Charwinian ass. U. P. can’t afford not to take advantage of the situation,” Tarn told her on the drive to the spaceport.

Though grateful that he wasn’t accompanying her on such a long trip, she muttered something small about their having been reduced to fertilizer salesmen. Tarn had explained that U. P. was undergoing a vast restructuring to concentrate on the manufacture and marketing of plant nutrients.

“Listen. Business ain’t exactly been good lately. Space Command still has control of all merchant vessels, and all they’re shipping is Charwinians and their leaves. Nobody even wants to guess how many casualties there’ve been, but it looks like a lot of civilizations have been completely wiped out, and everybody’s scared that as the Charwinians that have planted themselves mature on new worlds, they’ll manufacture new strains of virus. We still haven’t synthesized an antidote for the old one. So if we temporarily have to make our dough catering to Charwinians, it’s nothing to sneer at because for the moment that’s all the business there is,” Tarn snapped back.

Once aboard the interstellar, Cheryl discovered her boss had loaded her laptop with more data on U. P.’s new product line than she could wade through during twenty hours of flight time and three wormhole transfers. On the last leg of the trip, she opted for a dream encapsulation of current earth events and slept through a montage of headline news that felt like a nightmare.

The whole planet was still in a shock from the recent die off. Over half the population had succumbed to the effects of the virus. People had gone to extraordinary lengths to get a Charwinian to jump on their

arm. Images of people on their knees reaching out towards coiling Charwinians stuck in her mind long after waking, long after landing. Only twenty million offspring had been sent to earth, which worked out to about a thousand people per snake-like creature.

It was hard to tell from the dream images whether the Charwinians or humans were at fault for the failure to immunize so many. Apparently, arrests were still being made of people accused of hoarding, capturing, selling, and killing Charwinians. About the same time the mass deaths of humans began, the Charwinians started planting themselves. Both processes were completed within a few weeks. The Charwinians were now all saplings.

Cheryl tried to drum up interest in the company’s line of nutrients, pitching them to various levels of earth’s bureaucracy. She visited nine capital cities in nine days, but her sterling U. P. credentials merely got her meetings. No government minister would commit to a deal. To buy some time, Cheryl deliberately posted her report to Tarn via snail mail, knowing that with all the restriction still in place over shipping to Charwin, it could take weeks for her missive to reach him.

Everybody on earth seems to be adopting a wait and see attitude regarding the Charwinian saplings, she wrote him. Many have planted themselves poorly in arid or stony soil, and many of these are obviously dying, but nobody in an official position wants to take a stand on what should be done.

It was obvious from what every official had told her that the whole galaxy was waiting for word from the Charwinians themselves on what should be done, but they weren’t talking.

A week later Cheryl was in San Francisco trying to persuade recalcitrant senators to fund a research project into how the Charwinian saplings were doing. After another day of turndowns, the front desk of the hotel where she was staying informed her that she had a hyperlink call. Going down to the hyper booth off the lobby, she knew only Tarn would damn the expense for a near instantaneous cross galaxy call and wondered whether the man had received her report yet. Standing nervously in the phone booth, Cheryl was keenly aware of



how much each minute was costing. Tarn had just read her lengthy letter, and she was momentarily taken aback at the way he seized on what she considered a rather minor point.

“What’s all this crap about forests dying wherever the Charwinians have planted themselves?” he shouted across five thousand light years.

“Not entire forests, just certain select trees,” Cheryl answered.

“Is this in any way connected to our fertilizer mixes? They’re designed to simulate conditions on Charwin, and there’s nothing in the soil there that should hurt earth trees.”

“No, no. U. P. labs here have run tests. Every plant tested grows like mad when fertilized with our mix.”

“How are the Charwinian saplings there doing on the stuff?”

“It’s like I wrote you. It’s impossible to get authorization to run tests on the saplings. From the few clandestine experiments we’ve managed to perform, they seem to be helped by the stuff.”

“Then why did you make your report sound so alarmist? U. P. doesn’t care if a few native plants die.”

Cheryl hadn’t thought she’d made anything sound alarmist, but knew better than to argue the point with Tarn ready to rage. After their time together on Charwin, she realized his anger likely stemmed from something completely unconnected.

“I guess I didn’t make myself clear, Mister Tarn. A lot of earth trees have fallen on top of Charwinian saplings. The numbers appear too large to be random incidents.”

Tarn surprised her by replying in a tone of rapture.

“That’s great. We’ll bid to remove every tree growing within a hundred meters of a Charwinian sapling. I need figures, number of saplings crushed, number of trees falling, distribution, ease of access,

etcetera. And be quick about it. Space Command is evacuating all humanoids off Charwin. I’m not even sure where I’ll be in a week.”

\* \* \*

With Tarn soon to be in transit, Cheryl struggled to write up her theory of what earth trees were up to. To be exact, the theory was that of forest ranger Franklin Serrano. She’d met him on a field trip to Redwood National Park.

The damp environs of this fern-filled forest had proved especially attractive to the Charwinians. The Prairie Creek watershed contained earth’s greatest known concentration of Charwinian saplings. Cheryl hoped to use the place for a government funded study of some sort, and Ranger Serrano had graciously volunteered to give her a tour.

After laboriously hiking in from the coast, they’d stopped to rest beside a small stream. Both were sitting on the side branch of a recently fallen monarch. The ranger had informed her that the trunk of the immense redwood had wiped out an entire grove of Charwinian saplings, which had sprouted in the boggy bottomland.

“This tree fell two days ago. I counted the rings on it yesterday. It’s been growing for more than two thousand years,” Serrano said.

Cheryl whistled appreciatively.

“You’ve got to understand,” the ranger continued. “Redwoods are virtually impervious to insects, fire and disease. About the only thing that can hurt them is excessive trampling of their shallow roots by people, and this tree was nowhere near a trail. Otherwise, they usually only topple in a severe windstorm. The winds only gusted to ten knots night before last, and they were coming out of the west. You can see this tree fell due west into the wind and against the slope.”

“What do you think happened?” Cheryl asked.

The ranger had paused dramatically. Cheryl saw he wanted to be prompted to go on.

“I think it fell on those saplings on purpose. I can’t prove it. I wouldn’t even know how to try, but I suspect something similar’s happening all over the earth. Our trees have somehow sensed that the Charwinians are a threat to them. They wouldn’t be wrong. Once the Charwinians begin to reproduce, they could take up all the forestlands in just a few centuries, maybe less. They might even start ordering us to clear out native vegetation. Our trees are protecting themselves by the only means available to them.”

Cheryl hopped off the branch and walked down to the base of the trunk where hundreds of tiny green shoots were poking out of the fractured roots. Serrano had pointed out that any one of these outgrowths could eventually develop into a hundred-meter tall tree.

“Are you saying our trees are intelligent too?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but they can chemically transmit warnings to each other. When a blight hits a section of forest, sensor cells in the leaves of nearby trees will pick up airborne particles emitted by the damaged trees and trigger the manufacture of antitoxins. Charwinians are a foreign agent. Who knows what kind of chemical messages they’re sending our flora.”

\* \* \*

Before Cheryl finished her report, Tarn sent her a hyperlink telegram that he needed proof pronto that earth trees would not be able to wipe out all the Charwinian saplings. She couldn’t decide if this signaled that Tarn was angling for a contract to exterminate Charwinian saplings or protect them. A debate was raging on earth on which course to take. The news showed similar arguments taking place throughout the federation.

No interspecies communication had taken place on their home planet since the Charwinians first informed humans of the virus; humanoids had recently been evacuated from the planet, and there weren’t believed to be any Charwinian youth still in their mobile communicative state anyplace else.

At her request, Ranger Serrano downloaded an aerial reconnaissance map to Cheryl that clearly showed six groves of Charwinian saplings beyond reach of any trees. He followed up with a phone call.

“I hope you don’t think that because our trees can’t do the job we should wipe out all the Charwinian saplings,” he said.

## Misclassified Romance

by Stan Yan



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“Why would you think that?” Cheryl asked.

She was worried that in the upcoming hyperlink call Tarn had scheduled he would propose exactly that.

“I follow the news. I’m telling you though, our know-nothing leaders are nuts if they think we’ll be able to find all the Charwinians that have planted themselves.”

“But aren’t there just a few isolated specimens growing beyond the range of other trees, and won’t they be easy to spot?” Cheryl said.

“It’s the saplings growing deep in evergreen forests that will be tough to find. They look too much like several other species of pine,” Serrano said.

“But I thought they were all being crushed by earth trees,” Cheryl replied.

“Huge numbers may be trampled worldwide, but even if ninety percent get wiped out, which seems an absurdly high figure, that could still leave a couple of million Charwinians hidden away in forests all over the world. We still don’t know what cognitive abilities these creatures have in their treelike state. Do we?” Serrano asked.

“They don’t appear to have any sensory organs in their mature state,” Cheryl replied.

“That doesn’t mean they won’t know what we’re up to. That doesn’t mean they won’t unleash a new plague of some sort.”

“It’s hard to get any data about Charwinian life cycles now that Space Command has the planet under quarantine.”

“All the more reason to play it safe,” the ranger concluded.

An hour later in a hyperlink conference with Tarn, Cheryl learned U.P. was now committed to wiping out Charwinian saplings.

“The Federation has decided they’re too dangerous to keep around. No telling what they’ll do when the next generation drops from trees. We’ve got to get rid of them while they’re still in a noncognitive state.”

Cheryl found she was making the same arguments as Serrano had about the impossibility of ever finding all the saplings.

“That’s what makes this such a sweet deal. It takes thirty years for a Charwinian sapling to mature to the point where it bears offspring. Uprooting most all the saplings will probably only take a couple of years, but just to be sure, we’ll demand funding for a massive search effort for a third of a century or more. After what’s happened, who’d dare oppose it? Here’s the kicker as far as you’re concerned. I’m recommending you be put in charge of U. P. operations on earth.”

Cheryl felt like she was floating as she exited the hyperlink booth. Project manager at age twenty-five. No one in U. P.’s three hundred-year history had ever attained the rank so young.

\* \* \*

Career wise, Cheryl did well during the planet-wide search and destroy mission against Charwinian saplings. Around the time it appeared the very last small tree had been ruthlessly uprooted and burned, a jealous executive let it leak that she was the person the Charwinians had originally proposed the Moska Delta deal to. The resulting firestorm of publicity linking her to the deadly virus led the company to conclude she was expendable. She wound up marrying some drip more to change her name than anything else.

After her divorce, Cheryl kept her married name and set herself up as a business consultant near San Francisco. Tarn hadn’t stuck up for her with the company during her force out, so it surprised her to learn after he suddenly died from a stroke that he’d left her an inheritance. She attributed this largesse to a guilty conscience. In any case, it was enough money to see her consulting service through the first lean years. People gradually forgot about her role in what was being perceived galaxywide as a far distant tragedy. Cheryl lived comfortably

into middle age. When she received a call from Ranger Serrano, it had been thirty years since their last conversation. At first, she didn't even remember who he was.

"Boy, you sure are hard to track down," he said in a cheery voice as if it had only been a few days since they'd last spoken. "I was wondering if you could tell me what sort of setup I'd need to talk to a Charwinian."

"Well let's see. You'd need a videocam, holographic projector, and a computer with the right software. But listen, Space Command still isn't letting anyone go to Charwin, and it's my understanding that all worlds have wiped out their saplings."

There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line. Cheryl suddenly recalled that Ranger Serrano always hesitated before saying something portentous. Finally, he began.

"Look, I've spotted some funny growths on some young redwoods along Prairie Creek. I think they might be Charwinians, and they look like they're about ready to drop."

"I don't want to get involved with Charwinians again. Understand? U. P. has got the software you need in their files, I'm sure, but I don't know anyone over there anymore, and nobody over there wants to know me. If you find out anything, just send me a parrot plant to tell me what's going on," Cheryl said shrilly and hung up.

She waited in dread for the plant to arrive.

\* \* \*

A whiff of jasmine, a hint of gardenia, and her old favorite, roses, filled the bedroom. The odors made for a mood of nostalgia so intense as to be painful.

"Forests should exist for the benefit of trees," the parrot plant began. "That is all the Charwinians want. Humans are welcome to walk in the woods. Perhaps they can learn something contemplating their

magnificence. Perhaps both sides have something to learn from each other.

"Certainly there has been enough killing of Charwinians and humans alike. Regrettable acts were committed by both, mainly from ignorance. It was no easier for Charwinians to understand humanoid lifestyles than it was for humanoids to understand those of the Charwinians. For the Charwinians, the vast majority of their existence consists of philosophical review and reflection of the experiences gathered during their brief period of mobility.

"The trees that produced the virus simply wanted to give their offspring a chance for new experiences on new worlds. They did not realize the value humanoids place on individual lives. There was widespread devastation of forests on Charwin in the early stages of contact with humanoids before cross species communication was established. No retribution was ever sought by Charwinians. They entirely accept mass die offs from drought, disease, and fire. Humanoids were regarded as a natural progression in calamities.

"The Charwinians responded with their own progression. Once on new worlds, some decided to plant themselves just as if they were on Charwin. Others first injected portions of the base of trees with enzymes that fed on cellulose. These Charwinians then calculated which way the trees would fall and planted themselves accordingly. They were hoping to achieve a merger with the trees that toppled upon them.

"So far the effort has only proved successful with coastal redwoods on earth. Time will tell if they emerge from other species."

The parrot plant lapsed back into silence. A lingering smell of roses remained. Cheryl felt a sweet sadness for lost youth, lost opportunities. She went outside to clear her head.

Her patio was bordered by eucalyptus trees, themselves foreign to the western coast of North America. She'd never really liked them. They always seemed so messy, the way their bark peeled off in long brown strips. Or was that bark hanging down from the branches?

# Shrunken Monkey Heads

by Christina Sng

Shrunken monkey heads  
Wait in the dark,  
Lined up like soldiers  
Across the stairway,  
Faces frozen mid-scream  
While their heads were  
Carved open in an instant.

You freeze in the doorway,  
Breath reeking of fresh brain  
After the feast. The servants  
Must have neglected to discard  
The dead husks, leaving them  
On the stairs like a cruel joke.  
You exhale sharply and the crisp

Copper scent twirls and seeps  
Gently into their dry nostrils.  
Then their eyes snap open  
And fix upon you a cold stare.  
Out of nowhere, a storm of  
Headless monkeys leap onto you  
And begin to claw and tear.

# Like Stardust Is the Longing for the Days Gone By

by Joseph A. Ezzo

Cliff Markham had just finished lunch at a small delicatessen with his best friend, Arnie Fields, when he spotted something among the crowd of sidewalk pedestrians that utterly baffled him. Up ahead of them, jostling between the streams of lunch-hour walkers, two women were moving with uncanny speed and grace. Both were dressed identically: long-sleeved white blouses, very short black skirts, high-heels. Both had long, very straight black hair, although Cliff thought that he could detect a few swirls of gray in the hair of one of them (who was slightly shorter than the other). Perhaps on the surface of it the two women should not have appeared quite so unusual to Cliff, save for two things. First, it was an icy, wintry day, with webs of snow dusting the trees and awnings of entryways; and second, the two women appeared to be moving *through* the sidewalk crowd. Not around them, not in between them, but as if the other pedestrians were not there at all. He stopped and tapped Arnie on the chest, pointed ahead.

“Do you see them?” he blubbered, squinting his eyes. “What do you make of that, Arn?”

Arnie duly stopped at his friend’s side. “At what, Cliff? If there has ever been a more typical crowd at lunchtime here, I can’t recall it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I hear you, Arn, but that’s not what I...look! There they go, into that building.” Cliff jumped about frantically for a few seconds, snatching at Arnie’s arm. “Come on, would you?” he cried out, panting heavily.

Before Arnie could respond, Cliff had succeeded in grabbing his

sleeve and was thrusting him forward, lunging and angling around people in front of them, never losing sight of the doorway into which the two women had disappeared. Arnie, never one to get excited (he sold commercial real estate for a living, after all), did not hinder Cliff’s progress, but did ask for an explanation. “Is this really so important, Cliff?”

Cliff found that he could not answer, did his best to remain latched onto Arnie’s arm and to propel the two of them through the throng of pedestrians. They stumbled into any number of them, and while Arnie was quick to apologize, Cliff plowed forward, heart beating furiously. Perhaps people understood; they were well accustomed to frequent contact with others on the sidewalks, and dressed as they were in their bulky winter ensembles, which cushioned such contacts, no one seemed to care much. Cliff gave this no more than a passing thought. As they neared the doorway of the building where the women had entered, Cliff pointed again, tried to hustle Arnie even more.

The building came into view; it was a very narrow, two-story brownstone with a glass-fronted entryway. The glass was covered by sheets of newspaper. On the door itself was a For Sale sign over which was stamped “Sold!” Cliff paused at the doorway, looked at Arnie, then shrugged. He reached a hand toward the double doors, saw that they were secured by a thick chain affixed with a massive padlock. He bent over for several seconds and sucked in air, tried to steady his heart. A tremor rushed through him, and he wondered if Arnie could see how markedly he was shaking. “Know anything about this building?” he asked, unable to think of anything else.

Arnie, who was likewise catching his breath, shook his head. “I could find out, if you really want to know.”

“Well I do, Arn! Do it, please!”

Arnie laughed a bit nervously. “Sure, buddy. Whatever you say. Wouldn’t take but a few minutes.” He extracted his address book and a pen, jotted down the number over the door of the building. “I’ll get a fix on it this afternoon, give you a call and let you know.”

Cliff nodded. He felt himself starting to settle down, knew he probably should apologize to his good friend for his strange behavior, but could only manage a half-hearted thanks.

“No problem. About time we got back to work, I would say.” Arnie replaced his address book and pen, met the eyes of his friend. “So, Cliff, do you want to tell me what this is really all about? You took me on quite a chase there.”

Cliff noticed that Arnie was staring at him rather intently, as if genuinely worried about his good friend. Cliff tried to laugh it off. “Ah, I was probably just seeing things, Arn. I’m sure that was it. Who knows, maybe it was the pastrami.”

Arnie smiled. “Well then, lay off the pastrami if it’s going to interfere with your sanity. I’m no longer in the kind of shape I can go racing up and down sidewalks in winter. And just after lunch, no less. I’ll call you later when I know something.”

*It was the pastrami, Arnie, of course,* Cliff thought later, as he walked listlessly toward his office, huddled in his coat against the cold. If only it were that easy; a simple biological hiccup that had unnerved him, that would quickly run its course and be gone for good. No, this perturbation came from somewhere far deeper, more sinister. Cliff sensed that it harked back to the last night of his family’s vacation, one they had planned for more than eight months, that was itself now several months in the past...

\* \* \*

Nora and Janie proved unaccountably exhausted that night; so much so that shortly after supper they were lying on the twin beds of the hotel room, eyes closed, in suggestions of complete repose.

“Hey, guys, come on,” Cliff exhorted them, “it’s our last night here. Tomorrow we’ll spend twenty hours on airplanes getting home. There’ll be all kinds of time to sleep then. Let’s get out, see the city one last time.” To his amazement, neither of them stirred, except when Janie rolled over once and stretched, then sighed back into sleep.

“Guys, please,” he pleaded. “We don’t want to go home knowing we wasted our last night here.” He paced about the room, the tile floor cool and refreshing against the soles of his feet. “Okay, if you’re going to do this to me, then I’m going to count to three, and if you’re not getting up then, I’ll just go by myself. And don’t blame me later.”

Cliff never did count, but did continue to pace. He sat down once on the bed where Nora lay and tried gently to rouse her. Once she raised her hand and patted him reassuringly, but made no effort to rouse herself. As he rose from the bed, he collected his money belt from the nightstand next to it and slipped it on inside his jeans. “Okay,” he announced, “I, for one, am not going to squander our last night here. I’ll be back later.” With that, he snatched up their room key and headed downstairs. He dropped off the key at the front desk, smiled at the couple working there, and headed for the double glass door that led to the street. Mac Thi Buoi, the street was called...

\* \* \*

By the time Cliff had re-entered his office, hung up his coat and removed his galoshes, strolled to his cubicle, sat down at his computer and checked his email, he had convinced himself to forget about what he thought he had seen. After all, the sidewalk had been jammed with people, moving in every direction at once, flurries were obscuring his vision, and the heavy lunch he had just finished was probably weighing on him more than he realized. Besides, he had to admit to himself that he had not really seen those women very clearly. Just a glimpse of two forms moving sinuously, then disappearing into an entryway. He got himself a cup of coffee and turned to the copy he

was working on for a local automobile dealership. He read through the first paragraph, then glanced down at his phone. Three lines were lit up. He watched as fourth light lit, began to blink. He expected to hear his name paged. Nothing came through the speaker of his phone, however, and a few seconds later the blinking light went solid. He turned back to the advertising copy.

The afternoon passed agonizingly slowly. Cliff got nothing done on the automobile dealership copy, glanced continually at his telephone. By four-fifteen he picked up the receiver and dialed Arnie's office, only to be told Arnie was in a meeting at the office of a client and would not be back today. "Did he leave any message before he left, particularly for a Clifford Markham?" Cliff was politely told that no such messages had been left.

Two hours later, he got off the train and trudged the mile distance between the station and his house, not only perplexed by what he had seen but also unaccountably morose about it. He repeatedly demanded of himself to let it go and forget about it, but the more he tried, the more obsessive he became. The snow had stopped, the clouds had parted, and the first stars of the evening were twinkling frostily in the black sky. Just as he reached his driveway, a car pulled up into it, and out popped his ten-year-old daughter Janie, followed by his wife, Nora. Janie, unusually bubbly and smiling, ran up and gave him a hug, then Nora followed. She too was remarkably good-natured.

"How was your day?" she asked, as she did every evening when he arrived home.

"It was...just another one of those days," he replied, pretty much as always. "Like...oh. I'm sure, just about any other." The three of them walked into the house together, but Cliff felt suddenly, strangely, terribly alone.

An hour later, as Janie was dutifully clearing the supper dishes from the table, and Cliff was slouching on the living room sofa with the evening paper, the telephone rang. "It's for you," Nora informed Cliff. "Arnie."

An unexpected rush of butterflies swirled in Cliff's abdomen as he took the phone. "Sorry I didn't get back to you earlier," Arnie said. "I got hung up at a couple of meetings that really got drawn out. Anyway, the building you asked about is zoned as restaurant property. My guess is that a Chinese place is going to open up there."

"Thanks," Cliff replied, aware that the information Arnie had told him nothing, only exacerbated both his morose and obsessive sensibilities. The two made smalltalk for a few minutes (Arnie suggesting they have lunch at the place when it opened), and then they made their farewells. Just before ringing off, Cliff stopped himself. "Say, how do you know it's going to be a Chinese place?"

"I don't really. For all I know, it could be a Wendy's. I just found out what the zoning was on the building and the name of the buyer."

"Name of the buyer?" Cliff felt as confused as when he saw the two women.

"Yeah. Looked like it was Chinese." After a brief pause, Arnie added, "Is this any help to you?"

*Now why on earth would you ask me that?* "Sure. Hey, I appreciate the effort, Arnie. But don't worry, I've gotten that weirdness from today out of my system. So. We'll do lunch at this Chinese place when it opens. Maybe it'll have a decent buffet."

"Now you're talking. See you tomorrow, pal. We'll go easy on the pastrami, right?" Cliff hung up to the sound of Arnie's good-natured, sonorous laughter. Later in the evening, as he settled into bed (Nora was checking over Janie's homework), he once again demanded that he put this whole business out of his mind. After all, he really had not seen anything very clearly; just that glimpse or two, and then they were gone. Into a building that was securely locked up, no less. He closed his eyes, saw the twinkling stars of the evening sky. *It's over, forget about it. Once that restaurant opens, and Arnie and I have lunch there, this'll be out of my mind forever. I only got the quickest of glimpses, anyway. Eyes play tricks on people. Everyone knows that. It could have been anything, or nothing, really...*



The only realization that troubled him, as he fell into fitful slumber, was why he had been able to recall their clothes and their hair in such detail. Maybe even their names...that could have sounded...like that of the buyer...

The next morning he found the typical breakfast of eggs and sausage that Nora had prepared for him unaccountably revolting, and even disdained his coffee before heading off to the train station. Three stops into his commute a voice instructed all passengers to exit immediately. Among the hustle and jostling of the other commuters, Cliff pushed his way onto the platform, watched security personnel storm the train. Additional security officers were ushering the people away from the platform and toward the escalators.

“What the hell is this?” Cliff heard one infuriated passenger say. A man walking nearby was talking rapidly into a cell phone, then turned to the man who had spoken.

“They found something on the train. Unaccompanied luggage of some kind. They think it might be...well, we’re in the post-nine-eleven world now, you do the math.”

Cliff grimaced, felt his stomach contract. Voices flared up all around him, grousing about bombs, terrorists, missing important corporate meetings. He stumbled into people all around him as they jockeyed to get on the escalator. At one point he was forced to stop in the crush of bodies and wait for an opening. He glanced back at the empty train, saw a group of men in navy blue shirts entering one of the cars. Just beyond them he could see two small, hardshell suitcases, grayish-brown and battered. *Why do I know those suitcases?* a voice not his own asked. He put a hand over his mouth to stifle a gasp, then renewed his efforts to push his way to the escalator.

\* \* \*

The street was oriented very strongly toward tourists now, with several fairly new (and quite comfortable) hotels, with restaurants and Western-looking bars, with tourist agencies and shops selling everything from film to backpacks to sunscreen, all conveniently signed in

English. Tucked along the sidestreets and alleys were the older, outdoor eateries frequented by the locals and the rundown, more traditional bars: small, open-fronted places with chairs along the counter of the bar – which was set against one wall – and a couple of tables in the middle. And, at the entrance, where the cracked floor of the bar bled into the sidewalk, stood women. Sometimes one or two, sometimes a half-dozen. All dressed in very short black skirts and white blouses, with long, black hair and disarming smiles. Cliff had seen them the first night they had arrived here, and every night since. And at every bar he passed, walking arm-in-arm with Nora and Janie, they invited him inside in their broken but seductive English. He could feel their eyes boring into him like a heat lamp each time he walked by. Now he passed by them again, only this time without anyone’s arms to hold onto, or to hold him.

\* \* \*

Cliff arrived home amid a light snowfall, particularly exhausted this evening, heard Nora in the distance, apparently on the telephone: “Well, I don’t know exactly, but I called the exterminators anyway. I’m certainly not going to go up there myself, not if...my God...there’re mice or rats in the room....Huh? Yeah, sure, but he was at work, and I figured I ought to do something about it instead of waiting until he got home. Yeah, they’re coming tomorrow. I think so long as the door to the attic is sealed up the way we have it, nothing can get out....Yeah, well, that’s what I’ll be praying for tonight, anyway...”

Shortly before midnight, after lounging in the bathtub for more than a half an hour, with Nora and Janie sleeping, Cliff padded slowly up the stairs to the attic. The family used it for storage, and he had not entered the space for months. Perhaps it had been in October when he brought down some winter clothing and boots. The single bulb that illuminated the stairs appeared ready to give up the ghost, and cast little light around him. At the landing, he turned and could see the door of the attic. He stopped, frowned, gasped; it was cracked open. Why had Nora told her friend on the telephone that it was sealed up? And possibly with rats running about, the door was left open. How?

Cliff collected himself and listened intently. He could not hear any-

thing. He climbed two stairs as quietly as possible, stopped to listen again. A whisk of moist, hot air sailed passed him, causing him to gag slightly. The door to the attic, he now saw, was not only opened slightly more, but the light was on inside. Cliff's bowels contracted, and he half-turned, intent on running down the stairs and calling the police. Before he could command his legs to move, he saw a shadow fall across the lens of light coming from inside the attic. A pair of grayish-brown, battered suitcases appeared just inside the door. Then they were lifted and moved from his view, and the door slammed shut. From inside the room came the sounds of creatures moving.

\* \* \*

"My name is Lien," she told him as they took a seat at the bar. She was not as young as the other women there, but she was nevertheless stunning. She had stopped Cliff on the sidewalk with her smile, with the slender curve of her hips and her exquisite legs. He swallowed and took a step toward her, allowed himself to be led to the bar. He ordered beer, she something he did not understand, but when it arrived, like clear fire in a chaser, it looked lethal. As soon as she finished her drink, she leaned against him, put her arm around him, and began kissing his cheek and neck passionately. Her lips and breath were hot and moist, and with each recognition of contact they drew out his resistance and dissipated it as if it never existed. Meanwhile her hands expertly worked over his chest, back, and shoulders, and he had to suppress a sudden desire to tear off his shirt so that he could feel the tips of her scorching fingers on his flesh. Her arms flowed about him, igniting swaths of white heat across his body. He was not aware that she had stood up, nor that he had also, or that he was slowly being led to the rear of the bar. Clinging to Lien for support, he passed through a darkened doorway and up a flight of old wooden stairs. A light sliced through the murkiness and he found himself in a tiny room furnished only with an old cot. Almost at once he began to sweat in the musty heat of the place. A younger woman, dressed identically to Lien, but with much fairer skin and hair, a high-bridged nose and large hazel-colored eyes, stood next to the bed.

"This is my daughter," Lien purred in his ear. "Her given name is very important in our family. It refers to the light that comes from the stars,

the dust the stars bring to earth to give us hope in all things. But I call her My. This word has several meanings, one of which is 'beautiful.' It is also the name my boyfriend – my American GI boyfriend – used to call me."

The girl bowed slightly, smiling. "The Western men who come here prefer younger women like her to women like me," Lien continued pragmatically. "You prefer her also, yes?"

\* \* \*

"How does Café Tuyet hit you?" Arnie asked him at lunch.

Nonplussed, Cliff regarded his friend with downturned lips. Arnie grinned. "I had lunch yesterday with Ryuki Ikeda – he handles, among other things, a lot of real estate deals for recently immigrated Asians. Ricky, as well call him, and I had met to discuss a possible deal where he's representing a buyer, and me the seller. Anyway, after we went over our points, I asked him if he knew anything about that restaurant you seemed so interested in. And, indeed, he brokered the deal for the buyers. A couple of women, he said. 'Very, very pretty women,' I think were his exact words. So, the place won't be a Chinese restaurant after all."

"A Wendy's then?" Cliff asked flippantly.

Arnie shook his head. "Café Tuyet, it'll be called. No lunch buffet, but we'll have to check it out once it opens, particularly after you told me how much you liked the food when you were over there, right? Ricky promised they'd be offering some delectable Vietnamese cuisine."

Cliff felt as if a stick had been jammed down his throat. He gagged loudly, coughed into his hand, which suddenly became cold and slimy.

"Cliff?" Arnie said with concern. "You okay, man? Cliff, buddy?"

Cliff forced himself to his feet, hand pressed to his mouth, and hurried to the men's room.

\* \* \*

Cliff was almost too bewildered to speak. The heat pressed in on him, squeezing his skull. My looked like no woman he had ever seen before. And she did not look all that young, barely younger than Lien. He doubted that she was Lien's biological daughter; probably a girl, all alone in the world, who had come to work at the bar, and Lien had taken her in. There was a haunting familiarity in My's eyes as she stared at Cliff that quickly began to unnerve him. He glanced at the stairway behind him; maybe best to beat a hasty retreat now and forget about this entire episode, get back to his air-conditioned hotel room...what? less than a block away. But, as if his thoughts were being read, Lien placed her hands on him again, flowed into him, and he felt himself melting like chocolate.

"No!" he cried out suddenly, but rather than attempting to pull away from Lien's embrace, he buried himself deeper in it. "Just you, Lien. I want...you."

As if on cue, My bowed again and departed. Cliff did not see her pass through the doorway, but heard her soft feet on the stairs.

Lien led him gently to the cot, took a seat on it. "My and I have worked together at this bar for twelve years," she said, sliding herself into a supine position. "You're the first man ever to refuse her for me. Nothing happens by mistake, and I have waited for this day. Thank you for coming to me." She drew Cliff to her, slid her hands under the front of his shirt. He slipped in against her, failed to stifle a moan of pleasure, closed his eyes. Sweat drenched his body, and a dull ache settled in behind his eyes. He felt her face close to his, her alcohol-laced breath mixing with the sweat on his cheeks and lips.

"She's...really your daughter?" he asked in a voice over which he suddenly had no control.

Lien hummed softly. "People here, especially those originally from the north, call her my lai, meaning 'American half-breed.' Yes, another meaning of my is 'American.' Her father left while I was pregnant. He never wrote, never came back for us. Some years ago, there was a

program here to help people like My go to live in the United States. My tried three times, and each time she was rejected. They told her she was a fake, that she had no American blood in her. Now the program is over, and we are still here. My is thirty years old, and still cannot find a husband because of her...because of what I did to her. But, as I say, we have hope in all things. Nothing happens that has no important meaning in our lives. There are many bars close to here, many girls working, but you came here, you picked me. You picked us."

Before Cliff could think to respond, she began smothering her lips with fierce kisses. The heat of her body made the surrounding air seem almost chilly. Like the air in a comfortable, air-conditioned hotel room...

\* \* \*

Cliff woke with a painful start, crying out hoarsely. His throat was like cotton, and he was bathed in sweat. The room around him was pitch black, and he gasped for air. He fumbled about, found a body next to him. Feverishly he ran up and down the back of the person. Surely it was Nora; he knew every curve of her body, its level of firmness. He groped in the direction opposite her until his hand banged down on a hard surface. He felt around for several more seconds until he found a light switch. Soft light flooded the room, and he breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

*It was all a dream. I felt like I've been sleeping for hours and hours. Of course, I fell asleep early with Nora and Janie, and dreamed it all. I've been here all the time. And today we—*

He snatched up his watch, and it took him several seconds to register the time. Then he gasped again, tongue rubbing raw against the parched roof of his mouth. He shook Nora rather vigorously. "Nora! Get up! The taxi'll be here for us in half an hour. We have to get going." As Nora moaned softly in reply, he shook her again. "Please, dear, we need to get going. Wake up Janie, and let's get packed." With that, he bolted up and headed to the bathroom. He turned on the faucet in the sink and splashed water on his face. *All a dream. Thank God*

*thank God thank God. Only a dream dream dream dream....*

\* \* \*

Cliff began to avoid the delicatessen where he and Arnie so frequently lunched, began avoiding that block altogether. At the same time, Arnie had gotten much busier with his work, and was invariably roped into lunch appointments to discuss business. Cliff took to bringing a sack lunch to work and eating it alone in his cubicle. One clear, very cold day he received a call just as he was pulling his lunch from his briefcase.

“Sorry to call on such short notice, since it’s pushing noon,” Arnie was saying, “but are you free for lunch? Do you have time to meet somewhere?”

“I...don’t...what, I suppose,” Cliff stammered. “The deli, though—“

“I hear you. Anyway, I just got off the phone with Ricky Ikeda. And guess what’s having its grand opening today? I thought we’d—“

Cliff replaced the receiver, then lowered his head into his hands. Violent waves of nausea ripped through his stomach and burned their way toward his throat. *Café Tuyet...Café Tuyet. Her given name is very important to our family...*

He left work later than usual (although he had gotten nothing done in the afternoon), could not muster the strength to make the mile-long walk home from the train station, and so hailed a taxi as he emerged from the station.

\* \* \*

Carrying his family’s luggage, Cliff reached the lobby before Nora and Janie, who were still dressing in the room. The lobby was dark and still; after a few seconds he could make out people sleeping on the chairs and sofas. As he shuffled toward the front desk, beginning to feel the weight of the luggage, he apparently made enough noise for someone to look up from one of the sofas, then slowly rise and pad toward him. When she got close enough to him, he could see that it

was the woman who had checked them in when they first arrived, and who had been working the front desk every day they had been there. She was fully clothed, and slipped behind the front desk and turned on a light.

Cliff looked at his watch, then indicated to it to her. “I have a taxi, due to pick us up in about ten minutes.” The woman nodded, took his room key from him, and then produced a receipt, asked him to sign it. She tiptoed out from behind the front desk and stole silently to the front entrance, which she unlocked. Although Cliff was fifteen feet or so from the doors, he could feel a rush of hot, moist air invade the lobby as soon as she cracked them open.

Cliff approached, peering through the glass front of the hotel for signs of the taxi. Then he checked his watch again, turned and glanced back at the stairs to see if Nora and Janie were coming. A swath of light passed over him, and he turned back to the street. The taxi had pulled up, and suddenly the woman was moving quickly, passing through the front doors and onto the sidewalk to inform the driver of something. Cliff watched sleepily, again glanced behind him. He pursed his lips, frowned. *Get a move on, girls. We’ve got to leave here in just a minute.* Again, his eyes returned to the scene in front of him. The woman was returning to the hotel, accompanied by the driver. Without a word, the latter began collecting Cliff’s luggage and hauling it down to his taxi. The woman smiled, shook his hand, thanked him for staying at her hotel. He watched her as she returned to his sofa and lay down once more. She had not bothered to turn off the light at the front desk, and that illumination allowed him to see Nora and Janie reaching the bottom of the stairs. He sighed with relief.

“The taxi’s here, and the luggage is loaded up,” he informed them. He gestured with his hand toward the door, and they headed outside. The street was amazingly quiet, the sky still as black as midnight, as if the dawn was still hours away. The taxi driver had opened both the front and back doors for them, and was waiting patiently. Nora and Janie piled in back, Cliff moved toward the front door. As he lowered himself inside, voices suddenly sliced through the stillness. Cliff looked up to see two women, dressed in short black skirts and white blouses, hurrying toward the taxi. Each was carrying a battered suitcase in one

hand and waving frantically with the other. The driver called back to them.

Cliff slammed shut his door. “Please!” he cried out to the driver. “We’ll be late!” He could not bring himself to look back toward the advancing women. Surely this was not happening...”Please!” he yelled. “We can’t miss our flight! Our visas—”

But the driver was in the car and backing it away from sidewalk. He straightened the car and pulled away, gathering speed quickly. Just as he did, the two women came to within a few feet of Cliff’s window, and he saw their faces with unusual clarity. And he saw the emotions in their eyes; the hope brimming there, only to succumb, in the last instant, to something very dark. Something Cliff could not quite read, but a word did enter his mind, replacing everything else, and it pounded there repeatedly throughout the entire trip to Tan Son Nhat Airport.

\* \* \*

*I did not do that, I didn’t. I had nothing to do with it. It was a dream. I was with Nora and Janie in our room the whole time. I was...Cliff looked around. Still no sign of the dawn, although the city was coming to life, with its ubiquitous motorbikes beginning to fill up the streets. The taxi ride seemed to have been going on for hours; surely they must be close to the airport. He glanced at the driver, then turned to the backseat.*

Nora and Janie had disappeared. The backseat was awash in blood. As soon as Cliff realized what he was seeing, the stench of decomposing meat assaulted his nostrils. Suddenly the back of the taxi was filled with swarming flies. Bewildered, Cliff turned to the driver, panting heavily. “Hey, what the hell’s going on here? Where’s—”

The driver pulled up abruptly and pointed. “Hey, take it easy, huh? Isn’t this the address you gave me?”

Cliff looked at the driver as if he were mad. Then he followed the extension of the man’s arm, realized he was staring at his house. He gripped his forehead with both hands.

“Rough day, huh?” the driver asked mildly.

“Ah...what...do I owe you?”

Once inside his house, it took Cliff less than twenty seconds to discover the bodies of his wife and daughter; the trail of blood ran from one to the another, and there seemed to be enough blood surrounding each of them to swim in. He could hear echoes of voices pleading with him, he could feel the stress of unusual muscle exertion in his arms, chest, shoulders, and back. He understood that time was no longer following a logical sequence. Which meant...he glanced down at his hands, but closed his eyes before seeing them. The noises from the attic were far louder now; not just things moving around, but things talking. Voices speaking in an amazing tongue, replete with what sounded like the songs of birds. He decided to go there and find out exactly the source, but never set a foot in that direction. Sirens suddenly cut the evening air, drowning out the activity above him. As he heard car doors slamming, he heard the voice of a neighbor, as if she were speaking inches from him: “The screams were absolutely terribly. ‘Cliff, please! Cliff please!’ That’s all I kept hearing.”

\* \* \*

It took them two days to find him. The police deposited him in a local holding cell. He declined his right to a phone call; the judge ordered him held without bail anyway, so what was the point? The only person he could think of calling was Arnie, and then, perverse as it was, the only thing he could think to ask him about was the food at Café Tuyet. How they got into the cell with him he had no idea, but Lien and Tuyet surrounded him, covered him with warm caresses.

“We knew you’d call for us sometime,” Lien purred. “You didn’t abandon us, dear Cliff, as you feared you had. You’ll never have to worry about that again, My, don’t you want to say something?”

“Yes, Mother.” She sounded almost like a native speaker. “I wan to say, thank you for bringing us here. At last, after so many years. So much pain and suffering we’ve endured. Thank you, Father.”

“Now,” continued Lien, straightening up, “we have very much to do, and time is always short.” She looked and sounded very much like someone in charge. “Let’s be on our way.” She led Cliff by one hand, Tuyet led him by the other, into the icy-aired street, and soon he found himself passing the delicatessen beneath an infinite blanket of brilliant vanilla stars, the sign of Café Tuyet, like a long-forgotten friend, beckoning them in the distance.

Cliff sagged against the two women, his legs heavy and rubbery. No matter. Lien and Tuyet had no problems propelling him along. In fact, they almost seemed to be moving as if he was not there at all, much the way they moved through the lunch-hour crowd that first afternoon he spied them. *I’m dreaming this, of course. I’m dreamed it in Ho Chi Minh City, on vacation, and I’m dreaming it here again. Just as somebody once dreamed up a war over there. A war with people and death and suffering and all the rest of it. Cliff sighed, folded himself into the waiting pairs of arms, allowed himself to be swallowed by them, into the heat of a comfort more elusive and alien than he could define. I’m dreaming this, of course...I didn’t abandon them, because they were not mine to abandon. Of course...I’m dreaming...and I too have one hope now...to go on dreaming and never stop...never stop...never...*

\* \* \*

When Arnie Fields showed up at Café Tuyet for lunch on the day of the announced opening, he found an apologetic sign out front, which promised that it would be open “very soon.” Arnie opted to have lunch at a small delicatessen nearby, where he had never before eaten. He was entertaining Ryuki Ikeda, a young real estate broker just starting out in the business. A week later, the sign at Café Tuyet had been taken down. A month after that, the building was again up for sale. With Arnie’s help, Ryuki brokered a deal on the sale of the building – his first commission – to a recently-immigrated family – a mother and grown daughter – from Inchon, who planned to open a restaurant featuring authentic Korean barbecue.

# Revival

by Julie Shiel

They share the taste of strychnine,  
liquid faith like crystal purity,  
bottled in a mason jar  
scented with the ghost  
of last year's peaches.

Dusty boots thump,  
and patterned skirts swirl,  
keeping time with the choir  
of shivering tambourines,  
as they cry with broken voices  
of the rapturous divine.

The Reverend handles serpents,  
armed with shining words of God,  
and preaches fervent sermons  
with the cadence of  
the hissing snakes,  
sliding coils through grasping fingers  
scarred with memory of sin.

He sways,  
moves with strange conviction,  
and teaches salvation  
to the undulating devout,  
singing in blind ecstasy  
in obsolete tongues.

They dance,  
caught in serpentine embrace,  
anointed by the Spirit  
with sacred revelations,  
as the congregation burns,  
wrapped in spiraling religion.

# That New Death Start-up

by John Grey

Grim reaper in black coach, forget it.  
It's pretty woman in long yellow tress,  
None of that top hat, black suit nonsense,  
she's fluttering a floral cotton dress.

And don't expect slow organ dirge,  
music whistles clean and airy as sailboats.  
Save that minor key stuff for weddings.  
Death hums all the swelling major notes.

No low mournful voice recounting sins,  
No scythe decapitating,  
but a light siren trill promising more.  
and soft inquisitive hands investigating.

So don't dress somber, with drab face,  
you can wear light, unashamedly grin.  
No, today's death doesn't lock you out.  
Today's death is finality lite, has you in.



# HECTOR

BY DANA PATTILLO & T. MOTLEY

*a pod of whales*



*a herd of buffalo*



*an incest of poets*



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# Contributors' Bios

## **Bruce Boston**

Bruce Boston is the author of forty books and chapbooks, including the novel *Stained Glass Rain*. His stories and poems have appeared in hundreds of publications, including the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and the *Nebula Awards Showcase*. He lives in Ocala, Florida, with his wife, writer-artist Marge Simon. For more information, please visit: <http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston>.

## **John Grey**

Australian born poet, playwright, musician. Rhysling Award winner 1998. Recently published in *Weird Tales*, *South Carolina Review*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*. Collector of early horror writer first editions and sixties garage band albums.

## **Christina Sng**

Christina Sng, human, resident of the world, lives on the Equator with her husband and their five cat-children. She is the editor of *Macabre Magazine*, and the author of poetry collections *The Darkside of Eden* (Allegra Press, 2002) and *Angelflesh* (Sam's Dot Publishing, 2002). Her poetry has received Honourable Mentions in the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Visit her online at <http://www.mephala.com>.

## **Julie Shiel**

Julie Shiel's work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies including *Flesh & Blood*, *Brutarian*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Champagne Shivers*, *EOTU* and many others. Her poetry collection, titled *Disturbed*, is available through Shocklines or through Project Pulp at [www.blindside.net/smallpress/read/Exclusives/Disturbed/](http://www.blindside.net/smallpress/read/Exclusives/Disturbed/). Her website is at <http://www.horrorseek.com/horror/julieshiel>.

## **Stan Yan**

Stan Yan is currently cartoonist for a financial newsletter, Innerworth.com and freelances for comic book writers while he's not working on his own project, "The Wang," and running the distributorship for the Squid Works ([www.squidworks.com](http://www.squidworks.com)), a Denver-based self-published comic book creator cooperative. Currently, Stan is working on a humorous collection with Kieran Carew entitled, "One Block Down." Some notable credits include being cover artist and story contributor to the 2002 publication, "Potlatch: Comics to Benefit the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund," and 2001 first-prize winner of the Denver Comic Art Festival Underground Exhibit. Stan is currently a member of the Squid Works, Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, Friends of Lulu, and the Small Press Association.