

# penumbra

speculative  
fiction mag

Aug 2k24 • vol viii issue 2

## Environmental Nightmares

*May or may not  
include apocalypse*

Prose, Poetry, and Art  
Issue Featuring

Jennifer Walker • Tim Hildebrandt •  
Ojo Victoria Ilemobayo • Avra  
Margariti • Michael Rook • Carl  
Scharwath • J. J. Steinfeld • Marco  
Etheridge • Shreejita Majumder •  
Peter Alterman • Matteo Moretti •  
Janis Butler Holm • Denny E.  
Marshall • Lillie E. Franks • Julie  
Shiel • Brad Fraunfelter • Lisa Short  
• Emmie Christie • J. L. Royce •  
Sultana Raza • Derek Alan Jones •  
R. Mac Jones • Yuliia Vereta •  
Patrick McEvoy • Andrea Montano



*Penumbria* is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2024 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

*(Wherein the bright spark of competitive sport ignites into the dark flame of apocalyptic destruction, and we have a frank discussion about ED ...)*

There's so much Olympics coverage right now my brain is filled with thoughts of competition, whether that be swimming the fastest 1500 meters, running 200m in record time, or getting the gold in high jump, fencing, vaulting, gymnastics, etc etc. (Or, if you're watching the commercials, apparently you should just tell your children to give up and let AI write letters to their favorite athletes for them, as apparently even writing an effusive letter is beyond the reach of normal humans now.) But as plastic Coca-Cola cups are left scattered about the Paris venues, and as the constant medal tallies show that this is as much about aggrandizing countries as actual people, we may be reminded that racing to be the best is sometimes the worst thing for humanity as a whole, for we have politicians, technobillionaires, and fossil fuel companies all vying for the top spot in ED ... err, that's Environmental Degradation, not that the other kind of ED isn't applicable as well, in some metaphysical way.

Right now the real race, the one that overshadows sport of all kinds, seems to be between destroying our environment and some other form of apocalypse; oh, the pretty words are spoken, about how we'll regulate polluting industries, and research new, clean technologies, and stop war in our time, and our governments meet with one another every year to pretend that they're doing something, but really, compliance with their own promises is entirely voluntary; the reality is we have Project 2025 people trying to defund all environmental protection, deregulate polluting industries, and bring war home to their own people (well, I'm sure they've already decided that anyone to the left of Christian Na-

tionalism isn't really their own people, and much like wartime propaganda from WWI and WWII, are dehumanizing all who disagree with them, so that any military action on Dictator Turnip's part against "protestors" will be against an Other, not against actual Americans).

In this race, we're basically encouraged to bet on whether we can make the air so toxic we all die before someone throws a nuke at someone else, or it becomes so expensive to live that millions die of starvation and homelessness, or we're all ordered into the gulag by a gang of thugs we accidentally (or on purpose) let into government, or we come up with some other way to destroy ourselves while the Earth shakes in dismay and the gods all get ready to dispose of another science experiment. (And then I suppose with their last breaths the Turnips and Muskovites of the world will blame the rest of us for not being great enough, or for being too liberal, or gay, or trans, or for being female, or not manly enough, or not white enough, or ... well, the thousand excuses about how it couldn't really be their fault, could it, for their own follies and mistakes that have brought us down, and (sigh) we get to live and die with that, so ...

Well, that was a dark path away from the light and power and *joie de vivre* of the Olympics, wasn't it? And I feel it's a path we (I) tread here at *Penumbria* regularly. Partly because it's our job, or at least a focus, these dystopias that litter our lives. But still, maybe too regularly. So while the issue is filled with ED and apocalypse, we've sprinkled a few hopeful pieces here and there, as we try to do every issue. Which does still, at this time, anyway, mirror the real world—there is still hope, still time (just) to survive our nightmares. And while the hope may be as elusive as a gold medal (or any medal), it's there, it exists, and we're not done yet.

Jeffrey Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbria*



# Florida People

by Jennifer Walker

“You ever been inside a hurricane?” the old woman was saying. “Right in the eyewall when the wind’s whipping so wild nothing can stand it and everything breaks? Even your own skin lifts up off your body and tries to flap away.”

She did that thing then with her arms, shaking them and making all the loose skin flatten and pull from the bone like she did every time she felt a big storm coming. It used to scare Gale, thinking of her grandma pressed taut against her own skeleton, all that extra skin snapping in the air. But that was when she was little and didn’t know much. At sixteen now she knew a lot. She knew about the Hurricane Haulers.

\* \* \*

“Hey, tell me more about the Hurricane Haulers,” Gale whispered over the breakfast plates. “Mr. Innis told us—”

“I’ll tell you about the Hurricane Haulers.” Gale’s mother slapped a plate of protein strips on the table between them. “It was absolute hell. Waking up at all hours, no permanent address, living in a beat-up van with no climate control, no bathroom, no place to even cook a goddamn meal because of all the radar crap we carried. And for what? So your grandma could spend ten years locked up while me and your uncle bounced around in foster care? Uh uh. We are not gonna go through this again. There was nothing, and I mean nothing, exciting, or glamorous, or even good about being a Hurricane Hauler. The government is right. We got no business messing around with energy capture. That’s what all the big companies like EcoTech are for.”

But Gale knew different. She’d seen her grandma fiddling with some

wires up on the roof when they first moved into their cottage, and afterward every time the wind blew over thirty their energy bill went down. She bet her mom knew too, but EcoTech charged so much for energy they wouldn’t have been able to keep the cottage if they paid full price. Almost everyone in town had to steal a little energy to get by. Most people had contraband solar panels, snuck out of the EcoTech factory in hundreds of pieces and reconstructed in basements or garages at night. They tucked them under false roof shingles or eaves when the inspector drones flew by. The trick was not to steal too much and raise suspicion. That’s where her science teacher Mr. Innis went wrong, and now he was doing twenty-five to life down in Clearwater and Gale had to deal with the lady from Integrative Art until they found a qualified replacement.

“It’s gonna be a real big one,” her grandma said as soon as her mom’s back was turned. “Maybe the biggest one yet. Can you feel it?”

Gale always could. It started as a twinge picking her spine and then it built and built. But what good could it do her anyway? It’s not like she could go out in a storm and find the eyewall. This wasn’t her grandma’s time. Now as soon as the hurricane sirens started everybody was required to quarantine inside and every building stayed underground until the hurricane watch lifted. If you were outside the safety drones found you and escorted you to the nearest building before it sank. Companies like EcoTech who’d already paid for the rights to a storm’s energy couldn’t take the chance even one rogue energy capturer might mess up their profits. She’d never even seen a hurricane, just felt all that power and chaos roil through her as she sat at home or in school as the day continued on, subterranean but undisturbed. She wanted to know what her grandma knew, wanted to

scream into the wind as her skin tried to tear from her bones. It was a gnawing want, a destiny thwarted. She would have been a great Hurricane Hauler. Maybe the best.

Her grandma watched her, dried lips cocked to a smile and rheumy eyes gleaming. Yeah, Gale could feel it. Already it was an earthquake in her gut.

\* \* \*

Her Mom got talky again on the way to school. School was never canceled due to weather like back in the day. Nobody even did weather reports anymore. That was considered stealing the energy industry's intellectual property rights and got you the death sentence. But on a day like this any idiot could see something was coming the way the sky sat steely and stumped over the seawall, so low it seemed trying to press through Gale's passenger side window as her mom's jalopy coughed down the street.

"I really hope you're listening Gale," her mom said. "Your grandma is...how do I say this nicely?" She tapped the self-driving consul with the first fingers of both hands arrhythmically. "Okay. Look. She's crazy. Absolutely flipping insane. That's how she got out, you know? Otherwise she'd still be down in Clearwater with that science teacher of yours. Declared criminally insane by the courts and after some time in a prison hospital, and some treatments, she got to get out. Hey! It's not funny. I'm serious, Gale. Your grandma's a nut. And not only that, she's selfish, and greedy, and a total borderline, narcissistic sociopath. I should know. She raised me. So do me, and yourself, a big favor and drop this whole Hurricane Hauler BS. She doesn't need to be remembering all that stuff. And what's with all the interest anyways? Don't you even realize how good we have it? Look around."

Gale was. Their whole coastal town took about ten seconds to take in. Every building was almost identical: utilitarian, proportionate, sleek in steel and glass and concrete. The school, stores, restaurants, and civic hall were all on the same street, next to the seawall, and a grid of hous-

ing stretched behind it. When the hurricane hit all of it would sink into the ground, leaving only flat pavement to weather the assault. Even the patches of color and green, planter boxes spread through the wealthier parts of town, would disappear into the earth at the first siren's sound. This was the way all towns and cities were built now; and whether it was a hurricane or tornado or tsunami or flooding or mudslide or extreme heat or cold, every place had the ability to hide in the earth until it was safe to resurface, as well as an underground exit strategy when it wasn't. They were built by the energy tech companies to house and keep alive their employees. They ran all the shops and restaurants too, since no one ever had enough money to start their own business. There might still be towns somewhere deep in the interior of the country that weren't run by the energy tech sector, but as far as Gale knew all the old places people used to live had been destroyed by climate disasters before she was even born.

"Do you know what this place used to look like before EcoTech came in and opened up the factory?" her mom said.

Gale did. She'd seen an old photo in school of something called a beach. It stretched in a white stripe along the ocean with rows of houses reaching back from the water in greens, and blues, and yellows, and pinks, all standing on spindly legs like storks. There was no seawall then and there were people on the beach, even people in the water. Now, as far as Gale knew, there was no beach; the ocean pounded right against the seawall. Not that she'd ever seen the water, the seawall too thick and high and stretching all up and down the coast, everywhere. Maybe, like those possible non-company towns, there were possible breaks in the seawall, and beaches, where people could go and see the sea. And maybe they even swam in it.

"It was nothing but a strip of dirty, busted sand with some half-blown-over shanties left in the streets. No seawall," her mom was saying, pointing to where the reinforced concrete structure rose like the side of a mountain into the sky. "There was no grocery store, no school, no canteen, no safe place to live! It was just filled with drunks and outcasts and thieves and liars, those people you kids today call the Hurri-



cane Haulers. Just a bunch of losers, really, who couldn't hack it inland and came out here thinking they could make a fortune if they could just find the right spot in the right storm. Do you know how many people died? Do you know how many times me and your uncle almost died!"

She was hitting the consul now, really whacking it so lights started flashing and the vehicle stopped. "Oh shit! Come on," she cried and gave it one more good thwack. All the lights came back on and the engine started its uncomfortable whine.

Gale still said nothing. She was watching the sky, and the clouds had started to swirl.

\* \* \*

By the time she got to Science her insides were rolling around so much she couldn't sit still. She pounded the floor with her feet, hammered her hands into her desk, jumped if anyone called her name. All the other kids had seen her like this before, during the bad storms, and they were too busy goofing off while the Integrative Art teacher fumbled her way through the EcoTech-approved energy module to pay her any real attention. Outside the wind had already started up and the rain was coming down in forty-five-degree diagonals, lightning pricking the blue-black clouds with yellow-white shocks. Even through the school's thick concrete walls and triple glazed windows the roar of the storm was coming, its deep register rumble, like the blare of a freight train speeding towards a crash, starting a tremble through the floor. The whole class just got louder and louder, building as the storm built, the anticipation of that first siren, and then the groaning shift when the building would start to sink, and the always unknown of how long before they would come back up, and the things they could get up to underground, away from their parents, prickling their bodies like static electricity. So when the faint beeping started from inside the climate conductor under the window next to Gale's desk no one else noticed it. And they didn't notice it either when she picked a small, blinking device out of the conductor and ran to the bathroom.

It was definitely an energy harnesser. She'd seen enough of them on warning adverts and in the movies to know. Just holding it could get you the death penalty. "Fucking Mr. Innis," she said and breathed through her teeth as the beeping bounced off the bathroom tile and the blinking washed red on the metal stall doors. On the tiny screen a line swept around in a circle with every flash, and a red smudge, maybe a spiral, was moving from the upper left corner toward the center. Towards Gale. Not that she really needed the harnesser's radar to know the storm was here. Everything inside her was jumping now, popping and bouncing, and like a release the hurricane siren finally wailed.

The building creaked, the pipes clanged, and the low thrum of the descending motors began. Gale, like every kid in the school, knew this moment well. It was the transition, the brief glimpse of time between being a normal school above ground and a sequestered school beneath it. It was absolute chaos. It didn't need to be this way, the teachers, the principal, the administration, even the parents always working to prevent the pandemonium caused by the first siren's call. But the kids, by instinctual agreement, refused to be tamed. And now the hallways filled with the manic shrieks of a hundred children gone mad and Gale knew this was her only chance.

What would have been the point of Mr. Innis hiding his energy harnesser right next to her desk if she didn't actually use it? Even if her mother didn't want to talk about it, everyone at school knew she felt the hurricanes, knew she had the power of people like her grandma and the old Hurricane Haulers to find the eyewalls and get the best energy hauls. And why should huge companies like EcoTech keep all the energy for themselves? Why couldn't regular people have a chance to get a little ahead too? Gale didn't know how much energy Mr. Innis's homemade device could harness, didn't even know if it would work. But she did know that just because something was illegal didn't mean it wasn't right.

She rolled out a top floor window just before it slipped underground. The storm was wild now, the rain a thousand hammers whacking her forehead and shoulders and thighs as she ran, half crouched, to hide

behind the slowly sinking department store across the street. It didn't take long to realize she didn't have to worry about the safety drones. The wind was now too strong for anything to fly overhead. She tried to look at the energy harnesser in her last moments of shelter before the department store disappeared, but the rain beat at her eyeballs and blurred the screen. So she flipped the energy receiver switch to on and shoved the harnesser deep inside her pocket. She didn't need it to find the eyewall. She just needed to follow the rampage rattling in her chest.

It led her a few dozen yards away to the sea wall, almost ramming her into it in the storm-spurred darkness. The wind had become a numbing roar, and she hugged the rung of a maintenance ladder cemented in the wall to stay upright. Still, her feet lifted right off the ground until her legs were flying straight behind her. It was hard to breathe into the wind, clinging like that, and she opened and closed her mouth like a netted fish, not knowing how to take in the air stampeding towards her face. Then it came, mouthful after mouthful, and she managed to hook a foot around a rung below her, and then she started to climb.

The energy harnesser was now shaking so hard she kept having to stop and push it back in her pocket. It was slow going, the wind forever threatening to snap a snaked arm or linked foot off its secure hold and sling her to the ground. The sea wall was high, maybe 800 feet, maybe more. The wind only strengthened; the rain stopped then started then washed water down in relentless waves. And still Gale climbed because the pounding thrashing her outsides finally matched the maelstrom messing her insides and it told her exactly where to go.

At the top of the seawall Gale curved her elbows, knees, and ankles around some rebar spiking skyward until she was stable. She'd never been so high. What she could catch of her town through the soaked and clobbered haze, the regular grid of streets, flat and empty, looked like a foreign pattern, a hieroglyph of untranslatable meaning, and it gave her the feeling she was now unreal, no longer part of the known world.

On the other side of the wall were layers of gray furor, spinning continents of cloud jolted by lightning that reached into the terrible swell of the sea. The water was nothing like the flat blue expanse in the old picture. It sundered and seized; it trembled and twisted, crashing down on itself again and again as it churned its dark mass into ranges of foamy white. The seawall shook in its wake. And as Gale watched, the wind slamming her eyelids back so she could not blink, her lips flat against her teeth, the sea rose up in a column that filled the limits of her vision and touched the sky.

A billion hands pushed each cell of Gale's body flatter, so her nose pressed close to her ears and her sternum clapped her spine and her thighs kissed the back of her legs. This was it, what her grandma had talked about. And although Gale could do nothing, not even breath, it no longer mattered. Air and water were pushing through her body anyway, exploding every membrane until she was free to be just the essential molecules of her existence. And there, in that elemental state, girl and storm inexorably fused, it occurred to her, as a final thought, that maybe her mother was right.

\* \* \*

The old woman found her granddaughter's body because she knew where to look. All the drones had seen were some ragged clothes caught up on the top of the seawall. It took her most of the night to climb up, in secret, but it was worth it. The energy harnesser was still there, in the pants pocket, charged now with more energy than their coastal town could use in a thousand years. A better haul than any seen in her day, but then again the storms were only getting stronger. It was a shame the girl hadn't been four or five feet to the left. She might have missed the worst of the eyewall and still made the historic haul. A harnesser can only hold so much energy, after all. The old woman slowly pushed the girl's remains into the sea lapping below, better to hide what had happened. Then, carefully, tucking the harnesser into her shoulder bag, she started the long journey back down.



# Summer 2030

by Tim Hildebrandt

# Whispers of Shadows

by Ojo Victoria Ilemobayo



# Mother Moon

by Avra Margariti

Used to be we would catch our mother  
In the forest, belly bulging like the moon,  
Munching on animal bones.  
She would shepherd us back to bed,  
Her knees full of dirt, hair like witch's broom  
Bird bones wedged hollow as flutes  
Between her teeth.

Don't blame me, she would lament.  
I'm making a whole new human out of nothing  
Every time your father visits;  
Fetus flesh and viscera and gore  
In the sac of my stomach,  
I can handle those.  
But the bones, oh the bones.

Years later when we saw the deer,  
Those mild-eyed grass gnawers  
Devouring animal carcasses in winter  
To reconstruct majestic vernal antlers;  
When we went to school to learn  
About calcium, phosphorus, and sodium  
We understood

And wondered if we could carve up  
And serve father or forest on a platter  
For our full-mooned mother's feeble bones.

# Let the Dead Vote!

by Michael Rook

Logan flipped Zach over the City Council table like he was dominating a big-balled rottweiler. Zach's nasty flag went with him: *Give Ghosts A Chance: Vote Yes on 2!*

The crash echoed off the twenty-foot ceilings of City Hall's Main Room, protestors scattering while the Council tried to shield themselves. Folding chairs and water bottles went everywhere. It was so crowded that someone must've knocked into the room's controls, because the meeting notes winked out, gone whether you had Expanse Implants or just Expanse Glasses like me.

The sinful title went too:

*November 6th, 2042 – Public Discussion – Reconsidering Referendum 2: Do the good people of Lakeside Hill believe the dead shall have the right to vote?*

I'd gone to homecoming with Zach once. As he crawled under the table, searching for a front tooth on dirty tiles, I remembered the minty taste of his lips. His Expanse Glasses must have broken in the fall because his flag had dematerialized along with the ridiculous Uncle Sam virtual suit he'd equipped for the night. Virtual clothes gone, blood ran down his graying beard and onto his old Ohio State sweater. We locked eyes. His quivered, but then he disappeared behind panicked feet.

"Get him out of here!" Franklin shouted, finally finding his deep Chairman's voice.

Two cops hauled away Logan, stunning their way through the crowd,

all of us choking the room like gut-to-gut hogs. We fogged up the windows and smelled too, the way only hot, angry people can stink when boxed in as fall gets colder and wetter off the lakeshore.

The only ones who didn't stink were the dead. But the ghosts among us, in their fuzzy voices, shouted just as brutally. Spit foamed on their semi-clear lips.

Logan threw me a wild look. I pumped my bible at him, and he grinned as they shoved him out.

"Sit down!" Franklin shouted, seeming ready to split his banker's suit. "For God's sake, sit down!"

Someone hissed *blasphemy*, but Franklin ignored it, laying his Implant-tinted eyes on the speaker's stand and me. "Hannah," he said, "go on if you're going to."

Ghosts and people noisily found their seats. I opened my bible and clicked my EGs to Main Participant. "Only God—"

"For fuck's sake, Hannah!" someone yelled.

"Don't you dare!" I shouted and clenched the book's leather. "Only God has dominion over the living and the dead. Psalm 103: *The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.* It's right there, Franklin. We'll all be judged. Stop this!"

This time, a whole mess of Libs, college students, and their ghost allies tried to shout me down. Franklin's eyebrows arched furiously as

Mary Nelson, a regular at our church, bolted from her Council chair like she was ready to pull a Logan on the first Lib she could grab. I slapped closed my bible, ready to join her—but someone else clicked to Main Participant, a halo seeming to highlight them.

“Please!” a woman yelled, and the room quieted. “We’re debating if we should add *more* voices to who picks our future,” she continued. “Shouldn’t we listen to the ones we already *have*?”

I searched the Council table and found Beth Mulray. I really didn’t know her. She’d moved to town to teach high school history and all I remembered was Kiara coming home and saying, *Mom, the kids sit still for Mrs. Mulray*. She was pretty: not intimidating-like, but the kind you want to like you. Some people had said the same about me.

She was also the fifth and final vote on the Council. It was her, Franklin, Mary, Professor Reddy, and Alice Kuma. Our all-powerful City Council. The ones our pre-Civil War charter said had to decide any vote that came back deadlocked—like Referendum 2 had, a week ago.

It’d *tied*.

I’d never imagined that we had so many faithless in our town. Never.

And just yesterday Mulray had told the *Lakeside Tribune* and all the other press, hundreds that had descended like rats, what she was thinking about Referendum 2. The news sites all wanted the big story coming out of Lakeside Hill—the first town in the whole fifty-four states to put the full rights of the dead to a vote.

And, sin on sin, Mulray had told them she was leaning *yes*.

“Hannah ... Rainworth, right?” Mulray said to me. “Do you have more?”

I like to sound educated, because I am. But I can get passionate.

“This is ... *important*, that’s what I want to say. Like cancer and a heart attack and a stroke all rolled into one. That’s what we’re *all* saying.” I swung my bible at our crosses and American flags and sparkling paintings of Heaven, many of them virtual. “We’ve got no right. This is *God’s* role, don’t you see?”

Mulray started to respond, but the Main Participant halo jumped to Professor Reddy, who sat next to the artist, Kuma.

“*We*,” Reddy said, “recognize *many* Gods and beliefs. We’re also, Mrs. Rainworth, humans who must write our own laws. No God can do that.” He paused. “Not even yours.”

I get passionate and I can mess up.

I know that.

“Then you can be *damn* sure,” I said, “that when you try to take that vote I’ll be here with my *gun*. We’ll—”

In my EQs’ display, a notice said that any more threats would dispatch the cops. I went quiet, but not because of the machine. Our side roared, sending the Council flinching.

Mulray stayed quiet.

The meeting went back to speechifying, and that didn’t even end when we all spilled out into the rainy November night.

Later, at home, the house felt empty, Kiara off in school and Tyler now dead a year. And when he finally floated in from talking with his buddies, living and dead, I made Tyler pray with me like I had ever since we were married. I made him try to join hands even if we couldn’t. He didn’t want to, growling like a busted old radio that he knew what we needed to do and that I did too. I screamed that we needed to pray, that I couldn’t think without His word. Never could. And, so, we prayed. And I could think.

My mind and soul hurt. I swear it felt like they already burned. But while there was the usual anger, there was also some doubt now.

*Shouldn't we listen to the ones we already have?*

But the Council's vote was only three days away.

And Mulray, sin on sin, kept leaning *yes*.

\* \* \*

“They always take it too fucking far,” Tyler said later that night, hunched towards our living room feed. John Kennedy led a rally of the Dead Votes Party. Marilyn Monroe waved. They were married now. “Don't they get it?” Tyler hissed. “Don't they get this is how things break? Stretch, sure. Shit, *bend*. But they always take it too far.”

“Look at me.”

Tyler's eyes had always seemed sleepy, or a little high. 'Course in life he'd been as born-again Christian as me, hadn't even done drugs until he'd hurt his shoulder, unable to sleep, even sitting up. Then the meat plant's insurance had cut him off and we'd had to make deals with whoever could get him painkillers, using the measly cash we got from running Dad's farm. After Tyler died, the hospital had told me that the dose that had killed him could have killed a whale. But I still loved his eyes, even if they were now semi-clear.

Kennedy gave way to Marilyn, she going on about all the things they'd learned since they'd died, and all that they could teach us. *No one could want better for you than your dearly departed*, she said. She always been smarter than they'd let her seem. Still, it made me think about 2037 and those Stanford professors making their announcement.

*Ghosts*—except they hadn't said ghosts; they'd said *Conscious Remnant Matter*—had always been with us, we just hadn't been able to see them. The professors had flicked on their new cameras—quantum me-

chanics stuff, they'd said—and we'd all seen the shadow bodies moving around behind them.

Two years after that, me and Tyler and half the church had watched the feed from the Supreme Court when that old woman had thundered down the Court's marble stairs, screaming:

*They did it, God save us, they really did it!*

The lawyers of *Conscious Remnant Matter Individual 1 v. The United States* had come out next. They'd proved, they'd said, that their client met the “minimum standard of personhood.” One of them, the dead one who'd once led the ACLU, then said, smugly:

*Citizenship is next!*

We'd protested in Columbus. Argued online. EGs on, I'd prayed virtually with forty million others in Church-World.

Then came Referendum 2. Even though most of us were still farm and factory folk—*You want meat sometimes, Lib? Then someone's got to make your meat*—we also had Orion College in Lakeside. So proud of their teachers and kids from all over the world they were, many feeding the space research center down the shore. Prouder than of us, certainly.

The college folk, the Libs, they really liked Referendum 2.

And I guess I didn't blame them, the regular folks like us who had to go work there, more robots in the fields and the plant every day now. It must've gotten in your head, eventually.

But the vote had come back *tied*.

And then it'd gone to Council.

Watching us, the whole country had gone mad.



“Five of them,” Tyler said, reaching for my nightly tequila, though he then seemed to remember he couldn’t drink it. “For a town of eight thousand.”

“At least four thousand aren’t God’s people,” I said. “We know that now.”

“I know. But if Mulray votes yes, it’s like ... what do they say? A domino. Us first, then a big city, then a state. Dominoes. God’ll close off Heaven if we let that happen.”

“Tell me, Ty. What’s it like to talk to Him?”

“I can’t explain. Me and Nick and Robbie ... He don’t have to talk. You just *know* what He wants. The vote’s got to be stopped. And it’s got to be clear what’ll happen if someone tries it again.”

The carpet was frayed and I played in it with my toes.

“Gorgeous.” Tyler hugged me—I could feel fuzziness, if that was it. “He’ll close Heaven. I want to go. I deserve that, right? Don’t we?”

“I know,” I said, trying to lean into him. “But let me talk to her. Mulray. Just once.”

Tyler’s eyes opened wider.

He nodded. But he also lifted a finger.

Just one.

\* \* \*

I went to see Beth Mulray in the morning. She lived by the woods, like us, but her cute backyard sloped right up to a hill of rain-heavy pines, the trees so thick someone could stand there all night and Mulray would never see them. Two ghosts lingered in her driveway, one with

a sign: *CRM & STILL HUMAN: VOTE YES!*

Mulray opened the door wearing the athleisure we’d all worn in our twenties. She went up on her tiptoes to look over my shoulder.

“Too early and too nasty for more protestors?” she said. “Come in. It’s warmer.”

Her den, full of cozy, older furniture, had a great view of the woods. Serene-like. But her own feed made me pause. Donald Trump shouted at a Respect the Dead rally, then chatted up Rush Limbaugh, a cigar rigged so he could pretend to smoke.

*Rush, do they really want someone like me voting again?*

His smile looked fake, but a lot of what Rush said made sense.

*Death certificates, Mr. President. For ID? Do you know how easy it is to fake a death—*

The feed went dark.

Mulray took off her EGs, tapping them. “Some people say it’s these that did it.”

“What?”

“The years of using them, along with all the time in virtual reality. It sped up our evolution. Did you know scientists have seen new brain activity when a spirit is around? It’s why we can see them a little without the glasses, they think. And why our kids can see them even better.”

“Spirits?”

“Yeah?”

“I like that better than ghosts.”

“Beautiful, isn’t?”

“Yeah,” I said, quieter. “Like *spiritual*. Sweet like a song.”

I thought that might do it, that Mulray might turn disgusted, the Jesus-freak having done exactly what she’d expected. But she just handed me a frame showing her, a handsome bearded man, and two such girly-girls that their bows looked like body parts. All four stood by a Catholic altar.

“Communion?” I asked, shocked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Communion ...” I repeated. And that did it for me. I got loud. “Then how can you believe that this is anything but God’s place to decide? How can you think about voting *yes*?”

Mulray picked up her EGs and pointed to mine. She ran me through the bookmarks in her search history: *Unbounded-Media and CRMs: Perception Expansion or Mass Delusion? What if it’s Our Diets? All Those Psychotropic Supplements. Climate Particles & Fast Evolution.*

And on.

“It’s this stuff that makes me less sure,” Mulray said. “What if it isn’t God? Or what if there’s more than God?”

I pulled off my EGs sharply.

Mulray took of hers. “Why are *you* so sure?”

She said it so calm I just started to talk. About how much the Libs argued with each other, never coming up with an answer. About how, bottom-line, they’d been wrong about ghosts, and we’d been right, the *whole* time. About 1 Chronicles: *For everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to God.* About what Dad had said when the ALS had

finally gotten Mom, that God kept the living and dead separate to make it easier. And about Tyler. How God would keep him—*all* of us—out of Heaven if the referendum passed.

Mulray glanced outside. “Do you ever wonder why some of them don’t come back?”

“Don’t come ... You mean gh—spirits?”

Mulray nodded, then rubbed the frame. “Noah,” she said. “Cancer. We still haven’t fixed that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, then prayed out loud, an Our Father.

She didn’t stop me.

“I haven’t seen him once since he died,” Mulray said, her tone wavering for the first time. “Isn’t that weird? Doesn’t he love me or the girls? Did he stop? Is that what happens? He’s moved on? He just ...”

I clasped both of her hands in mine. “Oh, no. No, no, no,” I said. “The ones that come back, that stay, they’ve got something God wants them to do. Like Tyler. If your husband isn’t here, he’s in Heaven. And he’ll be waiting. Thanks to the spirits we know that now, for sure. He still loves you. He does.”

Mulray smiled. “Are you sure?”

I nodded hard, clenching her hands.

We talked a little more, about our girls, about the world now, and about what we wanted. I brought it back to God when I could, thinking about Tyler.

Gently, Mulray released from my grip.

“Do you know what Noah said?” she started. “He said there’s only one

reason people believe in God: Because it makes them feel good. They might say people existing can only happen if there's a God, or that living His way is the only way to have purpose. But Noah didn't buy it. *How are you sure?* he'd say to someone at lunch after church. Eventually, they'd all, kind of frustrated, say, *I have faith*. But Noah still wouldn't stop, even when I'd get a little mad. *But why?* he'd say. And that's when they'd get very P-O'd. *I just like it, okay!* they'd yell. *It makes me feel good! What the fuck is wrong with that?* Then they'd apologize for swearing, so embarrassed, and Noah would apologize too. But he'd also fight a little smile, I could tell, because he'd been right. And, even if he could be an asshole, he was right a lot of the time. I know that. I loved him for that."

But I crunched up inside like I'd been stabbed. "*I just like it,*" people had said? Noah had forced them to say?

"Or maybe," I said, trying not to shout, "He was a *total* asshole sometimes. Tyler can be. But God is *real*. *Ghosts* are real. How can you not—"

Mulray shook her head, the way a teacher does when you have a point, but not enough of one.

"We all want things that make us feel good," she said. "Things that help us. I think about that with this vote. Can you imagine how much the dead could teach us? There's the history too. When, in all the decades, has giving more ...people ... the chance to vote been a bad thing? I wish I could know there's a God and what they really want, like you do. That would be better than all this doubt. But I can't. So, I've got to choose."

She trailed off, picking up the picture frame.

Her trailing off, *her* doubt—it kept me from going nuclear.

*She* wasn't sure.

There was an opening.

"I want *you* to feel better," I said, softly and quickly. "I'll pray for you. I will. And I'll come back. Alright?"

Mulray, eyes misting, nodded.

I left.

When I saw the spirits at the end of the driveway, I gave them a smile and the sign of the cross. And the finger.

\* \* \*

Tyler and his ghost buddies were waiting for me. I explained about Mulray. "She's gettable. She could vote *no*."

I told them about her husband, about her wondering why he'd never come back. "He's been dead a year," I asked. "Can you find him?"

Tyler's buddies exchanged looks like they sometimes did when I was around, but one piped up, "Yeah. Yeah."

I fixated on Tyler. "*Can* you?"

He surveyed his buddies. "Sure. Show us, Gorgeous." He pointed to our feed receiver, which gave us all the info we needed—so much was public these days. I found info on Noah Mulray.

Before they left, I tried to grab Tyler. "Are you sure?"

He did what he could to run a finger over my cross and my collarbones. "Daniel 4:34: *His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures*. We're working for Him, Gorgeous. He'll help us. I'm sure."

I spent the day chatting with other organizers, discussing last-ditch rallies. But everyone was so crazy, so scared and angry, that we couldn't agree to much. Afternoon turned to night. I had no idea what it took

for Tyler and them to travel into the dead places, or where they went—I'd know it when it was time, he'd always said. So, I toked some weed and ran through my socials. People were saying such ugly things about Lakeside Hill. About *us*. Eventually, exhausted, I prayed and went to bed.

It's still hard to explain what it's like when one of them comes into your house, but you know. Maybe our brains were changing a little, like Mulray said. Or maybe God had tuned us in better these days. I shuddered, wondering *why* He'd do that. Seemed like an End-Times sign, didn't it? But I headed to the living room.

Tyler sat in the dark. Before I could say anything, he waved to my EGs. Once I had them on, he sent me to my socials.

The video was everywhere, A big bonfire burned on the beach that I could just tell was in Lakeside. A crowd gathered around it, ghosts and people both—including folks I knew.

Professor Reddy and Alice Kuma stood near the fire. There was a pile of something next to them. I couldn't tell what it was until Reddy reached down and snatched up a leather-bound book marked in gold.

A bible.

“This damn ... superstition,” he said to the crowd. “*This*,” he went on, as Kuma plucked one too. “If we don't show them, they'll come for us. That's how it always goes.”

Then, as if as practiced as dancers, they tossed their bibles into the fire.

I gasped so loud I jumped, ready to—ready to, I don't know what, but the sense of my soul already burning poured over me like boiling fat.

And it got worse.

Mulray waded through the group. Without a word, she grabbed a bible

and threw it in.

“No ...” I heard myself say, words dry. “She wouldn't!”

Tyler shook his head.

“It could be a deepfake!” I said, getting face to face with him. “How do we know?”

He leaned towards me hard, the fuzziness of him enough to back me down. “She lied to you, Gorgeous, right to your face.”

She couldn't have. Wouldn't.

But the other option was that Tyler was lying.

And why would a *ghost* lie?

“Gorgeous, you know what this means?”

I shook my head, teeth grating.

“Got to make an example of her,” Tyler said. “That's what God wants.”

That couldn't be what He wanted.

But then I thought of those burning bibles.

Who was I to question God?

\* \* \*

I had to see Mulray one more time.

I got there in the morning but found no protestors—people or ghosts.

But what I did find stopped me short.

Mulray furiously sprayed at her garage with her hose. In the cold, the water had to be so icy that it probably wanted to freeze by the time it ran the length of her driveway. Meanwhile, Mulray's occasional whimpers as she cleaned put a stall on my fury.

So did the message painted in blood on her garage door:

*VOTE "NO" OR YOUR HUSBAND WILL STOP LOVING YOU*

I walked with my mouth open. Also, I was probably heavy-heeled, because Mulray spun.

"*You*. Get the fuck out of here!"

Still speechless, I managed to send a link to her EGs. The bible-burning video.

"Are you serious?" she said, killing the link. "Can't spot a fake? Really?"

"If it's fake," I said, aiming a finger at her garage door, "then why did someone do that?"

Mulray shook her head. She cranked the nozzle to a sharper spray and the blood started to run off. I thought she was done with me, but then she threw more words over her shoulder.

"You know what the problem is? The rest of us, me, we don't know what'll happen. It might go bad. But we accept that. We're willing to try. To give things a chance. But *you*, you're always so afraid. It owns you."

And for the first time, it felt like she was talking down to me.

I blew up.

"*You* told us we were stupid," I shouted. "Dumb as pigs! You said

ghosts weren't real! But we were right! And you still think we're wrong about God! You were wrong, Lib!"

The spray went limp.

"Don't lump me in with anyone," Mulray said. "I just wanted to help. Everyone."

"Help ... " I knew I was lit up. I knew I was. But I couldn't ... "They aren't *alive*! They've got no stake in our lives. Forget God, if you want to. How can you not see that they can't be the same as us?"

Mulray bored into me with eyes that said she could blow up too and was barely holding that back.

"Who," she said, "says what 'alive' means these days? You?"

My wrath was shameful, I admit that, but I ran right up to Mulray. All I could see was that family picture of her at Communion. All I could think of was her prick husband.

"Things got hard," I hissed at her, "And you gave up, didn't you? Not just on God, but on anything being right or wrong. Is that how you *help* everyone, by giving up?"

Then words came out that I wasn't sure were mine, or didn't feel totally mine anymore, but come out they did.

"I feel bad for you," I said, "but I get why your husband won't see you."

Mulray's eyes went wide. Her voice, though, came out cold and flat.

"At least," she said, pointing a dead-looking arm at her garage, "I didn't pick the side of terrorists."

My mouth fell open, to say who knows what, my words or old words

that would have once been mine, but Mulray had had enough.

She blasted me in the face with the hose, the water even icier than I'd guessed.

“Leave!” she screamed, while I backpedaled. *“Never talk to me again!”*

\* \* \*

Tyler leaned on our gun safe. Once I'd grabbed the auto-rifle, he and his spirit buddies corralled me into a prayer circle. The more serious members of the church, the living ones, joined soon after. We prayed until it got dark. We all hugged. Then a few hustled me into a floating GM Air Pickup.

Above Mulray's, in the pines, we prayed once more. Then they fanned out, living and spirits, only Tyler sticking behind.

In her den, Mulray watched feeds through her EGs, her windows so bright and the night so dark she could have been a glowing feed herself.

I sighted the rifle. Actually, it sighted itself. When it lit up green, I just had to fire.

Mulray stood, wine in hand. She started swaying. EGs still on, she *danced*. My heart sped up worse than it had already drummed.

“Do it,” Tyler whispered, fuzzy and harsh. “It's the only way. They've got to be shown.”

But doubt crept up my throat. It burned like a claw-fingered hand of acid.

How were Tyler and his dead buddies so sure this was what God

wanted? Had they even found Mulray's husband, the one who'd never come to visit her?

*Do you ever wonder why some of them don't come back?*

What if God hadn't sent them? What if something else had?

*What if there's more than God?*

If ghosts and God were real, then what else was? The Devil?

What if that's why Tyler couldn't go to Heaven? He'd never been perfect. Neither had I. And what if *we* were wrong?

I thought of the millions—the billions—of them. The ghosts. People have been dying for so very long.

*Why would a ghost lie?*

Tyler blew me a kiss. But I didn't like it. It was like one of those kisses you got sent that meant sex but not love. Now, but not later.

I thought of all of us who were still alive.

Billions and billions of us. Like Kiara.

Who would be alive in the future. Like her children, if she had them.

And I thought about Tyler and his dead friends. Telling us they knew things ... but not telling us how they knew them.

The gun tracked Mulray.

If she voted yes, if the dominoes fell ...

The dead could have so much power over us. Tyler and his friends.

And whatever else might be out there, with them.

I hoped Mulray, inside her EG world, danced with her husband.

The sight went green.

I shot.

\* \* \*

We took our seats in front of Council's table. They'd refused to cancel the meeting. Unanimously. But there was no hot blood in the room tonight. There were just bodies breathing and shifting their weight as we stared at five empty chairs. Even the spirits fidgeted.

Someone hissed my name from the other side:

"It had to be her. Remember what she said about her gun?"

Tyler rubbernecked, but I didn't.

I focused on Mulray's empty seat. At church, when I was a girl, I'd sometimes found myself staring at the priest's empty chair when he was at the pulpit. It had never really seemed *empty*, that throne-looking thing. I'd thought something was there, even when the priest wasn't. It just wasn't a thing that could be empty.

I scanned the room. Neither the living nor the spirits showed off flags or signs this time—except for one. A little redhead who couldn't have been older than seven held up black letters on yellow paper:

*Let The Dead Vote!*

Kuma came in first, grabbing everyone's attention. No EGs on, she sat with a look that said she wished she had a gun. Mary came next, hands folded in prayer. Franklin followed, shaking his head. Reddy came

last, wiping at tears but seeming determined not to make a sound.

After what seemed like a painfully long pause, Franklin started. "I call to—"

"Dammit, Franklin, are we going to take it or not?" Kuma cut in. "We said we'd take it. Just do it."

I felt the fuzzy tingle of Tyler reaching for my thigh.

"Sure," Franklin said, no bass in his hollow voice. "Sure."

Kuma leapt up. "Does the Council believe that—"

"That's not the rule, Alice," Mary said, though without any of her usual boldness. "Someone's got to make a motion. We've still got to follow the rules. We do."

"Oh, let's just do it," Franklin said. He looked down table. "Professor?"

Reddy dabbed his eyes and nodded, sharp and clear as a *fuck you*.

"Simple voice vote," Franklin said. "Is it the belief—"

The crowd, at least our side, suddenly seemed to understand what was going on. Shouts rose around me on warm breath and dead tongues, but Franklin silenced everything but the Council by killing their EG and Implant mics. The spirits seemed to get it and quieted too.

"Is it the belief of this Council," he said rapidly, "that Councilwoman Mulray should *still* be allowed to vote on Referendum 2?"

In any other meeting, I do believe at least half the room would have rushed him. But not tonight.

"Aye," Kuma said, folding her arms.

“Aye,” Mary said, crossing herself.

“Aye,” Reddy said.

“Aye,” Franklin said.

And then Beth Mulray came into the room. Spirits didn’t quite *glow* as much as have a *sheen* to them, like a soap bubble, and that’s how Mulray looked. She wore the same sweater she’d worn last night, though it was clean. The blood must not have ...

I swallowed. Lots of folks looked my way.

Mulray took a position behind her old chair. She looked all over the room, if never at me.

Kuma’s face had expanded into a mix of shock and grief, but she still got out her words. “Do it, Franklin.”

Franklin also seemed horribly mesmerized by Mulray, but his Main Participant halo began to pulse.

“On the matter of Referendum 2, which ...” He hauled in a big breath. “Well, you know what it says. On 2, what say the Council?”

“Aye,” Kuma said, voice cracking.

“No,” Mary said, clasping her hands before her face as she shut her eyes. “No, no, no.”

“How can we not?” Reddy said, voice hollow. “Aye. I say aye.”

Franklin rolled his lips over his teeth. “Beth, I’m sorry, but I still can’t. Forgive me, but no, I vote no.” He crumpled into his seat, a hand covering his brow.

Mulray stood with her arms at her sides, staring at us all.

*Shouldn’t we listen to the ones we already have?*

“Beth?” Kuma said.

*Never talk to me again!*

Mulray found me. Gasping heads spun.

“I,” Mulray said boldly, but then broke down. “*No*. I vote *no*. Let them make their own damn mistakes.”

And with that, she sobbed so loudly I swore she could have still been alive. She fell towards Kuma, who tried to grasp her, but couldn’t, of course. They eventually found a way to position themselves in what looked like a hard hug.

The room exploded, screeches so loud it felt like The Rapture had ripped open the ground right below us, joy and horror then all sounding the same.

\* \* \*

It was a mess outside, people and ghosts mobbing the lawn, when I finally found Tyler. His eyes had their drowsy look, but his spirit’s forehead creased right down the center.

I said all I could, all I’d been thinking. Boiling on. “Aren’t you *glad*?”

He threw me an ugly look. “*Glad?* Glad? It happened. It *still* happened.”

A crowd across the lawn flagged down two cops. Some of them pointed at me. There were even some church parishioners with them. Parishioners who’d been with us in the trees above Mulray’s last night.



Parishioners who'd seen what I'd done with my rifle.

Tyler put his nose to mine. "Don't you get it? She *voted*. She was dead and she voted. It's over. It's *done*."

The cops and crowd seemed surprised when I stepped clear of Tyler and threw them a wave. Some of their mouths unhinged when I made

a path to meet them. Spirits drifted all over the lawn and I tossed my EGs into the grass. The spirits remained in my sight, if fuzzier, as did the living. I didn't see Mulray among them, though I thought I would soon.

At least, I hoped.



# Planet Funeral

by Carl Scharwath

# An Unpublishable Sequel to the End of the World

by J. J. Steinfeld

It is a million years hence  
from when it just happened  
something like a lamentable B-movie  
from the late 1950s or early 1960s  
certainly not in memorable whimper  
or big or little existential bang  
not in anything definable or identifiable  
nothing anticipated, imagined, or envisioned  
apocalyptic or cataclysmic—it simply occurred  
something nebulous between  
a devious plan and a dark, dark joke  
the slate, however, wiped clean as oblivion,  
the cockroaches, of course,  
hung on, concerned neither  
with devious plans nor dark, dark jokes  
no comprehension of endings  
no comprehensible regrets  
no diagnosable anxiety  
or fear of non-existence  
in other words, no nothing  
worth writing home about

that is, if there had been anything left  
resembling home or hearth  
merely bystanders, so to speak,  
to the end of the world  
scurrying about as before  
but caught in some sort  
of evolutionary plan or joke  
as evolving was in order  
in a million years or so  
as remarkable in intellect and aspirations  
as those before the world ended  
and a handful evolved  
into something like poets  
one of whom wrote a sequel  
to the end of the world  
but could not find a publisher  
who hadn't outlawed in strongest terms  
the language and words and sentiments  
used by those who had been there  
before the end of the world.

# The Bowl of Usefulness

by Marco Etheridge

When Nick's luck deserted him, it ran away like a scalded dog. A fist slammed into his ribs, reminding him how far that dog had run. Nick sagged under the blow. Rough hands hoisted him up by armpits and forced him to stagger forward. Nick's hands were cuffed behind his back, steel biting into his wrists. His feet wobbled while harsh voices echoed off the dark walls. He tried to remember why blood was running into his eyes.

"Knock that shit off. You keep beating him, we'll have to drag this meat to the cells."

"Why bother? I say shoot him in the head. Nobody cares if he dies now or later."

"We follow orders and toss him in the cell. Don't make trouble. You can kill him later."

The angry guard grabbed a handful of Nick's hair and wrenched his head back. Nick felt the guard's hot breath on his ear.

"Listen, you. Walk like a man, or I beat you to death right here."

The rough fingers released his hair. Nick struggled to hold his head up. Another voice spoke.

"He'll do it, Mate. Best walk if you can."

Nick blinked at the blood trickling into his eyes. He willed his shaky feet to stagger down the stinking corridor, splashing through puddles of oily water. Far down the echoing tunnel, a pool of light glowed in

the darkness. Pain shot up his legs, up his spine. The pain screamed in his aching skull.

*You had to play the pathetic hero, didn't you? You broke their rules and your rules. Now you're paying for it. You're going to die here. And for what? You barely knew the woman's name.*

Until yesterday, Nick was nobody, a ghost in the shadows. Keep your head down, don't make waves. Say nothing and no one hears you. Make yourself invisible to everyone, especially the goons.

Keeping a low profile was an essential survival tool in the new Federated American States. Sink under the surface. Blend in. Obey every rule. Go to the meetings. Do as you're told. It wasn't much different from his old life.

Nick's jangled thoughts were cut short. The goons let go of him and Nick fell to the floor. Rough concrete gouged his knees, then scraped his cheekbone. Nick blinked at the harsh light. He saw the steel bars of a cell. Shadowed figures behind the bars. He heard the rasping of steel against steel, saw the cell door sliding.

The angry guard barked at the shadows.

"You monkeys stay back."

The goons threw Nick into the cell. A knee crushed his back, pinning him.

Handcuffs clicked loose.

Nick's bloodless arms fell to his sides, numb and useless. The knee lifted from his back. As Nick gasped for breath, a boot slammed into his ribs. The force of the kick rolled Nick over onto his back. The goon's face hovered above him, huge and leering.

"I'll be back, Sweetheart. Then we can clean up our unfinished business."

The laughing goon stepped out of the cell. The door clanged shut. The goons disappeared into the darkness. The sound of their splashing boots was the last thing Nick heard before blackness took him.

\* \* \*

Nick lay on a beach. The sand felt warm against his back. He heard waves lapping the shore. He wanted to sleep, but tropical birds dropped out of the casuarina trees. The stupid birds pinched and pecked. Nick blinked against the glare of the sun. The bird faces wavered into men. The salt smell of the ocean and feathers gave way to the stench of unwashed bodies and shit.

A brown face swam into Nick's wavering vision. Stern brown eyes peered down from above a black beard shot with gray.

"White man, can you hear me?"

Nick managed a feeble nod.

"Lift him."

Strong hands held his arms, his neck, and his head. They hoisted him and sat him on a steel bench. The bearded man leaned in, his sharp eyes gleaming. Nick felt the supporting hands disappear. He wavered but stayed upright.

The brown man held him at the wrist, then pushed up the sleeve of Nick's gray blouse, exposing Nick's pale forearm.

"He is unbranded. One from the Inside. Guard your words."

The bearded man pulled down Nick's sleeve and released him.

"We do not deal with Insiders. If you are a spy, we will kill you. Even if you are not a spy, you may die today. Still, I will do for you what I can, while I can. The goons will return as soon as the bosses decide your fate. If they lead you to the right, they are taking you to the wall. Then you must pray to whatever god you hold sacred. If the guards lead you left, back the way you came, perhaps we will see you again. I have no more to say."

The man rose and walked into the shadows. Five other men followed, leaving Nick to stare through steel bars.

He heard their whispered voices. He heard drops of water falling to the floor, a silver sound measuring out the time he had left. Fear coursed up his spine. He did not want to die, not now, not like this. Then came quiet footsteps. A lean Black man sat down beside him.

"They'll be coming for you. Listen. A stranger helped me once. Different place, different cell, but still. I owe a debt, so now I pay it."

The man pointed to the darkness of the corridor.

"These goons aren't men. They're animals. You understand? No matter where they take you, you gotta walk strong. You beg for mercy, they'll just make the pain last longer. They enjoy it. You stay proud and silent, it makes them mad. They'll finish the business quicker. Quicker is better."

As if drawn by the man's words, heavy boots echoed in the corridor. The Black man vanished. The goons appeared at the bars. The older one spoke, his voice tired and hard.

"New man, stand up. Hands behind your head. Walk back to the bars."

Nick did as he was told. He felt steel against his back, and fear in his

spine. His guts clenched.

The door grated open. The angry goon bent Nick's arms behind his back, cuffed his bloody wrists, then dragged him into the corridor.

"Hello, Sweetheart. I'm back."

The older guard hauled the door shut and locked it.

"Move. They're waiting."

The goons turned to the left. The angry guard shoved Nick from behind.

"You heard him. Walk, Sweetheart."

\* \* \*

Two hours later, the goons marched Nick back to the cell. No longer numb, his forearms felt as if they were on fire. The pain seared into his chest, etched each nerve ending in flame. None of that mattered. He was alive.

The cell door grated open. The younger goon uncuffed Nick's wrists and shoved him inside. Nick stumbled but stayed on his feet. The door clanged shut and the goons splashed away.

He walked to the bench and eased himself down, resting his arms palms up on the stamped metal table. Six men materialized from the shadows and seated themselves without a word. The bearded man faced Nick across the table.

"Show me your forearms."

Gingerly, Nick raised the sleeves of his blouse. Thick red welts rose from his exposed flesh. Red-hot iron had seared the skin an angry crimson. A black crust formed over the oozing burns. The welts

formed a symbol. Three bars running up his forearm, the center bar shorter than the bars to either side.

"Do you know this brand?"

Nick shook his head, wincing at the pain.

"This is Xi, the fourteenth letter of the Greek alphabet. The first letter in the word Xénos, which means outsider, as in xenophobic. Xenophobia is the guiding principle for these barbarians. You are now branded as we are."

Silently, each man raised his sleeves, revealing matching scars. The white scar tissue contrasted with the black, brown, and tan of their skin.

"What is your name, White man?"

"My name is Nick, Nick..."

The bearded man silenced Nick with a raised hand.

"We do not use family names. They have no value. Nick is not a suitable name for an honorable man. Henceforth you will be known as Nikolas. I am called Razan. Welcome to the Outside, Nikolas. May you live to be useful."

Razan gestured to the others. They held their hands before them as if holding an imaginary bowl. Their voices intoned the same greeting.

"Welcome, Nikolas, may you live to be useful."

Their chanted words sent a chill down his spine, despite the searing heat from his burnt flesh. What bizarre world had he fallen into? Who were these people?

Razan spoke again.

“Thus, we acknowledge one another. Individually, we are as nothing. But gathering our nothingness together, as in a bowl, we become something. We become strong. This you will learn.

“I’m sure you have questions. It will save time if I tell you what to expect. Then we can find out who you are. Time is short. This place is a holding facility. The animals will soon move us back to the camps. Shall I continue?”

Nikolas nodded. Razan spoke, his words weaving an all too familiar history.

In hindsight, the animals made subjugating a nation look easy. Rich White men put a clown in the spotlight, a distraction while they worked in the shadows. The new president was a buffoon, a yapping lapdog. When they were ready, the rich men murdered their pet. Blame fell on the Brown folk, as it always will.

A new leader emerged. He was not a buffoon. This man declared a state of emergency and unleashed the new army. The thugs renamed the country. Then came the roundups.

This new regime had no use for Muslims, nor any people of color, or anyone they considered outsiders. The outsiders were slow to fight back, and thus they were taken. Razan found himself a prisoner, scooped up in the first wave.

The animals already held the strings of power before their coup. Unlike the outsiders they hunted, the goons did not hesitate. The new bosses arrested every member of the House of Representatives. The Senate was purged. Congress became a rubber stamp for harsh new edicts.

Paramilitary squads rounded up anyone who dared to raise their voice against the regime. In a matter of months, the bosses had what they wanted: A White America ruled by White Americans. They formed the Army of the Heartland, sealed the borders, and the thing was done.

The United States of America ceased to exist, replaced by the Federated States of America. World leaders condemned the FAS, but their protestations were all bark and no bite.

Then came civil war, what the Whites called the Mongrel War. The people fought bravely, but they were too weak to defeat the Army of the Heartland. Some soldiers deserted, not all of them brown and black. They joined the people, but they were slaughtered with the rest. Rifles are no match against drones and tanks and laser-guided missiles.

Razan shook his head, remembering.

“Four years I have been caged in their filthy camps. But you, Nikolas, tell us your story. How did a White man land himself on the Outside?”

Nikolas looked down at the table. He did not want these men to know what a fool he was, but somehow, he could not lie.

“I was absent from a mandatory community meeting.”

The men stared at Nikolas. The lean black man held up his hand, palm outward. Razan nodded.

“Nikolas, this is Thomas. Speak, Brother.”

“Did you miss the meeting, or did you deliberately not attend?”

“I didn’t go. They were going to cane a woman I knew. I was sure they’d call on me to beat her. I just couldn’t do it.”

“Knowing exactly what would happen to you, you chose not to go to the meeting. Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s how it happened.”

The man named Thomas paused as if weighing his words.

“I mean no offense, but while I see bravery in your actions, I also see stupidity.”

“No offense taken. I can’t explain it. I never fought back, no protests, nothing. I was a mouse, kept my head down, did my job. A good little cog in the gears, never making any noise. But the thought of caning that poor woman in front of everyone broke something in me. So, I hid out. Then they found me.”

“Listen to me, Nikolas. You get called out to cane someone in the camps, you step up and do it. Lay it on hard enough to look real and try not to kill the poor bastard. Otherwise, you end up a dead hero. Dead heroes are useless.”

Razan held up a hand.

“Yes, Brother Razan.”

“Nikolas will learn a great many lessons. The most important is learning how he can be useful. What did you do on the Inside?”

“I processed data. Compiled lists of people, their addresses, where they worked, how they voted, simple computer stuff.”

“Was this your work before the FAS?”

“No, back in the old days I was a white hat.”

“I am not familiar with the term. What is a white hat?”

“I was a computer hacker, but one of the good guys. In the trade, we were called white hats. The bad guys were the black hats. When security folks wanted to find vulnerabilities in a computer network, they hired white hats to hack the system.”

There was a long pause before Razan spoke.

“I will tell you two things. If you are spying for these animals, we will find out, and we will kill you. Please have no doubts about that. Second, I think I know how you can become useful.”

Razan extended his hands as if holding a large bowl. The other five men did the same. As one voice, they spoke three sentences.

“May you live to be useful.”

“May you be useful.”

“May your death be useful.”

\* \* \*

Half a year slipped past as Nikolas learned how to survive in the camp. He worked on the pig farm he had been assigned to. He endured the stench and noise of the pigs. Nikolas came to know their constant hunger and the danger of falling into their pens. Nights he spent in the crowded barracks. He had not seen Razan, or the others, since the day he was processed into the camp.

Razan’s words stayed with him. As his branded flesh healed to ropey scars, Nikolas learned that he was no longer a mouse. He traded quiet fear for silent observation and patience.

He observed his fellow inmates. Despair was the quickest way out of the camps. When an inmate stopped eating or succumbed to the filth of the place, Nikolas knew that he would soon feed another body to the pigs.

Debauchery was the middle path. Tobacco, coffee, sugar, and sex were hard currencies. Contraband flowed freely between both the inmates and the guards. Illicit trade at night was far brisker than any labor during the day.

Defiance was the third path, almost invisible to the untrained eye. As



Nikolas began to see, he became aware of the others. He saw the useful men scattered amongst the inmates. They moved through the camp like ghosts, in ways he could not. Their impassive faces did not meet his eyes, yet they were always there. Nikolas realized he was being watched.

Serving out his silent probation, Nikolas listened to the other inmates. He listened to the talk of the barracks, and he listened to the guards. The more he listened, the more he learned the structure of the camps.

The camps were meant to be a unified system, but that was a myth believed by no one except the regime's propaganda machine. Millions of people had been transported from the cities. Their purpose was to farm, tend livestock, work in the mines. They served as cheap labor for the bosses.

New camps sprang up. The system devolved into feudalism, with the bosses acting as lairds. They guarded their fiefdoms, consolidated their power, and paid lip service to the regime. The plantation culture of the Antebellum south had risen again. Greed was the engine that drove it.

Camp life was grim for men but far worse for women. Families were broken apart, and children shipped to youth camps. Young women deemed attractive were forced into the sex trade. The rest ended up in segregated labor camps, or the kitchens and laundries. Women and girls were under constant threat from anyone in power, male or female.

There was another world outside the camps. Guerrilla fighters occupied the contested zones, holdouts from the Mongrel War. They fought and died in the mountains of the West or the swamps of the Southeast. The guerrillas bribed their way in and out of the camps. Greed and chaos paved their path. They recuperated, recruited new soldiers, then disappeared once more to die in lopsided battles.

\* \* \*

Winter passed into spring, bringing heat and humidity to the Midwest. The stench of the pig farm rose with the warmer weather.

Nikolas was at the washing trough, scrubbing at the accumulated filth of his workday. As he washed away the grime, he guarded his sliver of soap, a commodity more precious than tobacco. Splashing water over his head, he sensed the presence of another. He spun to the side, his dripping hands raised to fight. Water ran from his hair into his eyes.

A lean black man stood one long pace away, hands interlocked at his waist.

“Greetings, Brother Nikolas.”

Nikolas straightened and wiped the water from his eyes.

“Greetings, Brother Thomas. You are well?”

“I am well. Brother Razan sends his regards.”

Nikolas nodded. He met Thomas' eyes and held them.

“You have done well, Nikolas. I am glad to see you've survived. That is not the message, but I am glad to find you alive. It is no small thing.”

“I'm glad to see you as well, Thomas. What is your message?”

Thomas scanned the area before he spoke.

“A guide will come for you tonight, after the evening meal and before lights out. You will be near your bunk and ready. Do not move without your guide. That would be very dangerous.”

“Brother, how do the guides get past the guards?”

“This is not time for discussion. Greed and bribes, that's the short answer. You will learn more, but not now.”

Nikolas nodded.

“Then fare well, Brother. May you be useful.”

Thomas walked away without a backward glance. Nikolas watched Thomas disappear around the corner of a ramshackle farm shed. Retrieving his precious soap, Nikolas turned back to the trough and resumed scrubbing himself.

\* \* \*

Nikolas sipped the coffee, real coffee served in a clean mug. Long-forgotten memories flooded his mind. He forced his focus back to the table and the present moment. Three other men sat around the small wooden table, Razan was on his right, Thomas at his left. A small Asian man sat opposite Nikolas. Razan had introduced him as The Elephant. Another man stood at the door of the shack holding a shotgun in the crook of his arm. Four men who could move through the camp as if they were invisible.

The Elephant resumed the conversation.

“Our current situation is similar to the Chinese government when I was a young man. The goons want to filter Internet traffic. The bosses are addicted to social media. It is a propaganda tool they are very fond of. This gives us an opportunity. They haven’t shut down the Internet. In their arrogance, they think they can control it. Unfortunately for us, they do control it to a large degree. This makes it very dangerous for us to infiltrate their network and get our messages to the outside world.

“The camps compete with each other. Our jailers are greedy and that is useful. Bribes allow us to move about the camp, but not into their computers. How do we access their networks without getting our people killed in the process?”

Nikolas willed his mind to be calm. The others watched him in silence. He chose his words before he spoke.

“The problem is not accessing the FAS network. The real problem is

surveillance further up the chain. It’s a certainty that they have Internet security people monitoring traffic from the camps. Because their watchdogs know where to look, rogue signals are easy to find.”

The Elephant raised his hand. Nikolas stopped speaking and nodded.

“Then, to use an old phrase, they are looking for a needle, but in a small haystack.”

Nikolas did not speak until the man nodded his head. He turned the problem over in his mind, looking for a solution. There was a way, and he saw it.

In the old days, hackers installed malware or tricked network users without attracting attention. The web was an enormous system, with millions of servers to hide behind. But now the thugs had narrowed the playing field.

The camp rebels used encrypted tunnel protocols to send information packets over the government’s network. And that was exactly what the security people were hunting for. The goons monitored emails from the camps. When they saw a government user sending encrypted data to an IP address outside the closed borders, alarm bells went off.

Nikolas explained all this, then looked across the table.

The Elephant remained still as a statue. Then he began to speak.

“Yes, Brother Nikolas, the alarm bells go off. Then the soldiers appear. They confiscate the infected computer, kill anyone they think is involved, and we are forced back to square one. Your thoughts would be welcome.”

He gestured across the table.

“I think your analogy of a haystack gives us the solution. They are looking for a single needle in a small haystack. That needle is our en-

encrypted tunnel. If we increase the number of tunnels, we force them to look for more needles. We create decoy tunnels that lead nowhere. Their only purpose is to divert attention from our real tunnels.”

A chuckle broke the silence. Pinned down by the eyes of The Elephant, Thomas dropped his head. Then he held out his right hand, palm up.

“Brother Thomas, speak.”

“I apologize, Sir. A thought burst into my head. I did not mean to interrupt.”

The men were silent. The Elephant repeated his gesture to Thomas.

“Very well. As Brother Nikolas was speaking, I remembered an old movie about a group of men in a prison camp. They plan to escape using tunnels. To confuse the enemy, they dig multiple tunnels. If one is found, they have others. The thought made me laugh. I apologize for the interruption.”

The Elephant smiled.

“Of course, I remember this as well. The tunnels were named Tom, Dick, and Harry. Brother Nikolas, can this be done?”

His thoughts racing ahead, Nikolas realized it could work. He would target computers used by low-level bureaucrats in the camp administration. From there he could burrow into third-party accounts, the trucking and construction contractors that serviced the camps. Create tunnels inside of tunnels, all of them spreading the same message to the world beyond the borders of the Federated American States: Help Us!

All eyes were on him.

“Yes, it can be done. The tunnels will be harder to find, but the FAS will detect them eventually. When they do, the goons will still come.”

Nikolas waited for the other man to speak.

“Yes, the beasts will come, and then honorable men will die. I am called The Elephant because I refuse to forget the old ways. We must fight. Understand this, each of you. It is imperative that our message reaches the outside world. Others must know of our struggles. Only from the outside can we hope for aid. We cannot prevent the deaths of honorable men, but we can make their deaths useful. You will begin work on this. Razan and Thomas will guide you. I am done here.”

The Elephant rose from the table. The other men did the same. He held his hands in front of his chest.

“May you be useful, Brother Nikolas.”

Then he turned and walked to the door. The man with the shotgun followed him into the darkness.

\* \* \*

Nikolas took up his new duties with a vengeance. The work gave his life purpose, and he took pride in it.

He worked every possible evening, anytime he could slip away without his absence being noticed. Razan or Thomas would guide him to the access point. He worked in basements and storage rooms, patching into the camp network by means of a contraband laptop.

Other nights, a well-placed bribe bought them an unlocked door or an open window. Then Nikolas worked inside the dingy offices of camp administrators, the sort of men who kept passwords under a coffee-stained blotter. This work was easier and faster, but far more dangerous.

Nikolas created a series of phishing emails, each designed to look like an official FAS communication. As the weeks passed, the work began to yield results. And as those results became tangible, the danger increased.

One midsummer evening, Razan and Nikolas sat in a dank cellar beneath an administration building. The connection to the camp network had gone dead.

“There’s nothing more I can do from here. The connection is gone. I am sorry, Brother Razan.”

The older man smiled.

“Tonight, it is just we two, Nikolas. We can dispense with the formalities. You have made great progress. Do not apologize.”

Razan lifted a rucksack from the dirt floor.

“We have some quiet time, a rare blessing these days. I have tea. Would you like some?”

“Yes, thank you Razan.”

Razan poured tea from a thermos into tin mugs. He handed one to Nikolas. The metal was hot against his hand.

“May I ask you something, Razan?”

“As you wish.”

“How did you and the others come to be in that holding cell? I have wondered about that. Were you taken from the camp?”

“An astute question. I wondered when you would ask. The answer is simple. We were on a mission to kill two particularly heinous guards. Luck was not with us. We were captured before we accomplished our task.”

“Why didn’t the goons kill you? Why send you to the holding cells?”

Razan sipped his tea before answering.

“In all forms of struggle, you must understand your enemy. The men that run these camps are very stupid and very greedy. That does not make them less dangerous. Quite the contrary. But understanding their stupidity and greed helps us deal with them. Bribes are the way we move about. Short-term gain is the only thing these animals understand.

“When we leave the camp, we carry alcohol and drugs. If we are caught, we plead the excuse of slipping away for a party, or to look for stray women. The guards understand this because it is constantly on their minds. So, they confiscate the drink and drugs, give us a beating to maintain appearances, then send us to the cells.”

“Then you did not kill the guards you were sent after?”

“No, not on that occasion.”

“Do you believe it does any good, killing guards or sending messages to the outside world?”

“Nikolas, our small works are part of a much greater whole. Our individual lives are of no importance. Yes, we may kill two guards and perhaps a few less of our people suffer. That is a small, good thing. We send messages into the world and more people know of our plight. That is another small, good thing. But spread those actions through the entire network of the camps, through the battles in the contested zones, and it stretches these animals to their limits. You and I will die and be forgotten, but our individual actions have consequences. These tyrants will fall. Tyrants always do. In the meantime, we must remember that while we do our small deeds. We recognize that when we speak the mantra.”

The two men drank their tea. Razan broke the silence with a question.

“Nikolas, did you have anyone left on the Inside when you were taken?”

He struggled to answer Razan’s question. Images flooded his mind,

memories of a time before the stench of pigs. He thought of his clean apartment, of being able to shower when he wanted, eat when he was hungry. His life had been regular, regimented, and empty. Even if he could, he would never go back. These men in the camp, Razan, Thomas, and the others, were his family now.

“No, there was no one. My parents died before the takeover. I have a sister in Cleveland, but I lost contact with her after the travel restrictions were laid down. I never married. I went to work, went back to my empty apartment, and attended the community meetings.”

“What about the woman? You chose not to go to the meeting because of a woman. Or is that too personal a question?”

Nikolas shook his head, sipped at the lukewarm tea.

“No, that’s the ridiculous part. It wasn’t personal at all. I was infatuated with her, but no more than that. There were snitches everywhere, in the apartment building, in the meetings, in the shops. Everyone was being watched. She and I shared a few smiles between us, a few quiet words whispered at the bus stop. Her name was Clara. That’s all I knew about her, about her life. It was an empty fantasy.”

“Perhaps, but it does not make your actions less honorable. And now you have become a useful man.”

Nikolas paused, then asked the question.

“Razan, did you have people on the Inside?”

The man drank off the last of his tea. He examined the bottom of the empty mug.

“Yes, a great many people. Come, we need to be going.”

The men set back to the work at hand. Nikolas stashed the computer gear while Razan packed up the thermos and mugs. With a last check

of the cellar, Razan picked up a pistol and slipped the weapon into his work jacket. Extinguishing the single overhead light, Razan crept through the darkness to the door. Nikolas followed.

\* \* \*

The long Midwest autumn faded to winter. The evening air was sharp, carrying the promise of a hard frost before sunrise. Thomas and Nikolas slid through the shadows between the barracks, two ghosts moving fast and low. Laughter burst out in front of them. Thomas grabbed Nikolas by the shoulder and pulled him down into the shadows. Thomas pointed to a small dark opening at the base of the tarpaper wall beside them. Nikolas nodded and wormed his way into the blackness of the crawl space. Thomas followed. The two men pressed themselves to the cold earth, listening and waiting.

Nikolas felt the warm breath of a whisper in his ear.

“Something isn’t right, Brother. The guards aren’t supposed to be in this sector and there are too many of them for a normal patrol.”

“Maybe someone snitched on us.”

Nikolas rolled on his side, reaching a hand inside his jacket. He pulled a small notebook from a pocket. He felt for Thomas’ hand in the darkness, pressing the notebook into it.

“Thomas, we have to get this list to The Elephant. This is everything from the last three weeks. It’s the only copy. The list of all the solid tunnels, safe enough to send messages for months.”

Nikolas heard a chuckle in the blackness.

“What could possibly be funny, Thomas?”

“I was thinking how handy a real tunnel would be right now. Wouldn’t have to be Tom or Dick. We could call it Zelda. Yessir, I would crawl

right into Zelda's tunnel if it would get us out of here."

Nikolas stifled a laugh and poked the other man with his fist.

"What would Razan say if the goons caught us under here, giggling like schoolboys?"

"Yeah, he'd be pissed for sure. Nikolas, you know what I did on the Inside?"

"No, what did you do?"

"I was a history professor, tenured and everything. Not bad for a Black kid from the projects."

"Really?"

"Sho'nuf."

"Stop that. That shit isn't funny."

"Lying here in the dark with a White man, a bunch of other White men trying to find us, I think that shit's funny as hell. Let me ask you a question, Nikolas. You have any Black friends on the Inside?"

The question cut like a sharp knife.

"No, I didn't. People I knew from work, but no one I could call a real friend. And I'm not proud of that."

"I hate to break it to you, but I wasn't any better. I knew White folk from the university, but I didn't invite them to my home. It was the same with the Hispanics or Jewish folks on the faculty. We were all professional and cordial, but after classes, we went our separate ways.

"I taught my kids to be proud of who they were. There's nothing wrong with that. But at the same time, I watched these powerful bas-

tards driving wedges between people. Every warning sign was there, but I only saw the small picture. I was teaching history, but not seeing the history being repeated in front of my own eyes."

"You gave it more thought than I did, Thomas. I was just keeping my head down, you know? A good little cog in the gears. Don't make waves, don't make noise. This stuff doesn't concern me. That's what I told myself, right up until that moment that I couldn't take it anymore."

"Was she beautiful, that woman?"

"Matter of fact, she was. But now I can't remember her face."

"My wife was beautiful. Brought three children into this world, got more beautiful with each one."

Nikolas felt his memories seeping into the cold earth beneath him. He heard Thomas' steady breathing only inches away.

"Listen, we're running out of time. I've got to be back in my bunk before bed check. You've got to get that notebook out of here."

"And now you're going to tell me you've got some sort of a plan."

"Nothing fancy, just a simple diversion. I slip out and head for the barracks. I'll knock over a trashcan or something. Make some noise. When you hear that, you head for the edge of camp."

"Nikolas, the goons are out for blood tonight. Something has gone very wrong. Anyone they catch is in for more than a beating."

"Right, so I make enough noise to attract their attention and then disappear. If my luck runs short, I can use the Razan trick. I'll be a drunk inmate out looking for a bit of fun."

"That only works if you have some booze to bribe them with, which

we don't."

"Then I'll have to play the white privilege card, throw out the secret handshake."

"Now whose shit ain't funny?"

"Let me steal the words of my best friend. Here I am, lying in the dark with a Black man, a bunch of White men trying to find us. I think that shit's funny as hell."

"That's a damn shame, using my words like that."

"I know it is."

Nikolas reached through the darkness. He felt Thomas' hand close over his, squeezing tight.

"I'm going now. Time for me to be useful."

"Brother Nikolas, you are already a useful man."

"Thank you, Brother Thomas. I'll be seeing you soon."

Thomas watched his friend crawl through the opening and disappear into the night.

\* \* \*

Nikolas belly crawled across the cold earth. He peered through the small opening of the crawl space. The glow of the camp lights seemed far too bright. As he pushed himself outside, his hand fell on a loose brick lying in the dirt. Clutching the cold weight of it in his hand, he crouched against the wall of the building.

Scanning the narrow space between the barracks, Nikolas tried to get his bearings. When he was sure, he moved forward. Blood pounded in

his ears. He heard the rough voices of guards and the crunch of boots on the gravel between the barracks.

*Easy, take it easy. Get far enough away to give Thomas a chance, then make some noise. The goons will follow the racket, Thomas gets away, and you slip back into your bunk. But not yet, we're still too close.*

He crept to the corner of the first building and stopped. A wide graveled alley lay between himself and the next building. Taking a deep breath, he set out across the open space. The gravel crunched under his soles, loud and menacing, but there were no shouts of alarm. Nikolas hugged the side of the far building, moving fast and low. For the first time, he was glad the barracks lacked windows.

Another alley opened in front of him. On the other side of the alley, he saw what he was looking for. Two steel trash drums stood side by side. Nikolas sprinted now, heedless of the noise. Running straight at the steel drums, his foot lashed out. The kick sent the first drum clanging into the second. Both toppled to the ground with a metallic crash that rang into the night.

\* \* \*

Lying on the cold dirt, Thomas counted away three minutes. He spent the time planning the swift death of whoever had betrayed them. Someone had snitched, and Thomas would make them bleed.

Reaching the end of his count, he slithered across the packed earth. His head emerged into the dim lights of the camp. His eyes searched from side to side, but nothing moved. There was no sound of the goons and no sign of his friend.

Thomas scrambled through the opening and onto his feet. Hunched low and moving fast, he reached the end of the building and crossed the first open space. He swerved to the far side of the next building, zigzagging his way toward the far side of the camp. As he passed the second barracks, a ringing crash broke the stillness. He sprinted across

the open gravel and hid in the shadows, his ears strained for the sounds of pursuit.

Shouting voices replaced the clamor of falling metal. The shouts were answered by other angry shouts. For the space of a long breath, the night was still. Then the stillness was shattered by the booming shocks of gunfire, the echoing reports coming too fast to count. There was a pause in the echoes, then one final shot.

Thomas slumped to his knees, his hands limp in front of him. His chin sagged to his chest. For the space of five heartbeats, he remained still, as if frozen to the ground.

Alone in the darkness, Thomas raised his head. His back straight, shoulders no longer sagging, Thomas extended his hands. He held them before his body as if holding a large bowl. In a voice quiet as death, he intoned five words.

“May your death be useful.”

He dropped his hands to the cold ground and pushed himself upright. As a shadow amongst shadows, he ran, vanishing into the night.

\* \* \*

Loud shouts followed the din of the fallen trash drums. The voices were close, coming out of the night from all directions. Nikolas swore under his breath and began running. Before he reached the next alley, he heard footsteps thudding on the gravel ahead. From behind came the voices of goons near the overturned trash cans. They were too close and coming too fast.

Nikolas skidded to a stop just short of the next open space. He could hear at least one guard closing fast. He threw himself against the build-

ing on the right, his back pressed to the tarpaper wall. In his left hand, he still held the brick he'd lifted from the cold ground outside the crawl space.

*Sorry, Thomas, I guess I won't be seeing you. But you're going to escape, so at least one of us will make it. Meanwhile, these animals are about to find out just how useful I can be. Please, let this bastard come from the right, that's all I ask.*

He gripped the brick with splayed fingers, the weight of it like a hammerhead at the end of his arm. He raised his left arm into the night, his muscles tensed and ready. The running footfalls grew louder, and a dark figure careened around the corner. Nikolas swung the brick with all his strength.

The guard emerged from the shadows in the same instant the brick smashed into his face. For the space of one heartbeat, everything froze. The crunch of broken bone, the guard's body suspended in mid-air, the shock of the blow pulsing between the living and the dying. Then the dead guard thumped to the ground and Nikolas began to run.

The night erupted into a cacophony of thunderous gunshots. Angry hornets buzzed past his head. Something slammed into the small of his back, and he sprawled forward onto the gravel.

As he fell to the ground with a bullet in his back, Nikolas saw his parents' front porch in summer on an afternoon heavy with thunderstorms. His parents sat side by side in their rockers. His sister was sitting beside him on the glider, her head leaning on his shoulder. They were all together, safe under the eaves of the old porch, watching the gathering storm.

Then a huge bolt of lightning flashed, and everything vanished.



# A Slow Apocalypse

by Shreejita Majumder

I looked at you at the end of the world  
In the fading light of the dying sun.  
You took in the sky, one last time,

"It feels like we had just begun."

You and I, we're getting a little tired.

The world keeps ending, hinting that it's almost through  
So, we've been bracing for impact; it's only natural that  
If I'm going, I want to be gone with you.

The sirens blared, and they never stopped  
Bridges burn, people run amok.  
We watch with empty eyes  
I suppose it's no surprise

A clean end would be too good to be true.

I looked at the hazy sky above  
The inky blues with the fractured pinks  
"We might still make it," I said,  
And you laughed  
The slow sad sound of broken things.

So, we've been running. I've been  
Holding out hope. You drive over —

Shattered glass  
Bird bones  
A book on gardening

— I'm starting to choke.

You say we're getting there  
(there's nowhere left to go.)

But I'd follow you anywhere, the heavens know.

Would it be alright, to leave unseen  
When the world burns like a movie scene?  
Quiet  
Unknown  
With the last good, forgiving, breeze.

Together, till the end, in silent seas.

I will hold your hand when the tides start to swell  
And hope you are holding on  
(they say I do it well)  
And we'll brave the siege, awash.  
The waves crest and crash —

Salt water on skin  
Until it seeps within.

# Lifelines

by Peter Alterman

It still creeps up on him, even now after decades, the conviction, the absolute conviction, that he is supposed to be living his life in Prospect Falls, a high school math teacher and baseball coach with a stay-at-home wife who wears plaid shirts and jeans and has her curly brown hair pulled back in a red, white, and black print bandana. And the kids. Three kids.

Instead, he trails his lifeline like a lizard's tail, sitting in his insulated office behind his mahogany desk at the rear of the largest of his three plumbing supply warehouses on the western side of town near the police impound lot, a life filled with all the material comforts he could wish, a business he inherited from his father and has grown into the juggernaut it is today, an advantageous marriage into wealth and power and history, but forever chained by the rule of his Church to a woman who dismisses him as unworthy of her and two grown sons who barely acknowledge his existence.

It comes upon him at times like this, the feeling that he is straddling a crack in reality, one foot in each lifeline. He's half-convinced he's living on the wrong side of the crack. He wonders if he just up and walks out, gets in his car and drives the thousand or so Interstate miles to Prospect Falls, will his wife and children be waiting for him in their white clapboard house across the street from the baseball field? He'd park his car at the curb and walk across the green patch of lawn to the front door. Looking back, he'd see that the Mercedes sedan had morphed into the old Toyota he is proud to keep running.

None of them would be surprised to see him walk in.

"You're late again, Michael," Penny would say from the kitchen.

"Yeah, Dad, what's with that?" his oldest daughter the tween would say, trying out a mood.

The little ones, five-year-old twins Joy and Bobby, would run up to him laughing, each grabbing a leg at the knee, threatening to bring him down.

What could he say? It's been a long trip from my other life? No, he'd simply say, "Sorry" and gather the twins up in a group hug before washing up.

But it is almost seven in this life and he'd made a dinner reservation with his accountant at the usual steakhouse downtown because why bother going home, nobody will care now that it is only him and Fern in the big house, and she is rarely home before he is in bed, asleep and dreaming.

So he shuts down the computer and turns off the lights and walks through rows of crowded steel shelving filled with PVC pipe, valves and tubing, porcelain toilets, gaskets and chromed steel hardware, to the side door and out into the sticky summer night and nobody knows he's gone since he's long ago given up day-to-day interactions with the staff, leaving that to his managers.

Mike is almost to the steakhouse when he gets a call from his accountant. "So sorry. A last-minute crisis has come up and I have to cancel. Apologies. We'll reschedule soon." The voice sounds hollow and far away.

He's pretty sure there's not really a last-minute crisis, but what can he

say? “Not a problem, Jerry.”

It feels like the last straw, like he is alone in an echoing tunnel; like he is invisible; like he is a ghost. If he disappears the business will continue to run; the boys will continue on with their lives; God knows it won't affect Fern at all. She probably won't notice his absence since they sleep in separate bedrooms. Their lives have gone off in different directions now that the boys are on their own.

He has to make an effort to let go of the steering wheel. He stares at his palms and their odd creases, forked lifelines that look like lightning bolts circling his thumbs. He has become invisible, a ghost in his own life.

He feels his other life calling, urgent. Irresistible. On impulse Mike swings the Merc towards the Interstate and tells it to set a route to Prospect Falls.

It is sheer fantasy. Of course there is no family waiting for him, no white clapboard house across the street from a baseball field. He's no high school math teacher, he's the owner of the largest plumbing supply company in the metro Richmond area. Or not. He honestly doesn't know. And so he drives on.

Mike meets darkness about the time he stops for food off the Interstate in Front Royal. He drives in silence, forcing himself to think about nothing except the asphalt ahead of him and the traffic around him. He stops for the night at a Comfort Inn north of Pittsburgh, has a bowl of Cincinnati chili and an Iron City lager, walks up to his second floor room and immediately falls asleep. He dreams his cell phone is ringing, but for some reason he is unable to make his arms move to pick it up. He knows it is Penny calling him. Before dawn he jerks awake, heart pounding, arms flailing, tears running down his face. He grabs the cell phone and realizes the ringing in his dream is the phone's wakeup alarm, which erases the dream though not the mood.

After washing up and dressing he grabs a quick coffee and a pastry in

the hotel lobby on the way out. It is still dark. He stops to top up the gas tank at a station near the onramp to the Interstate. The Merc's automatic headlights snap off near Youngstown.

He is moving between lifelines, connected to neither, outside of space and time. He exists only as a part of the car, an autopilot whose only purpose is to move it along towards its destination.

Mike makes it from Pittsburgh to Chicago with only a single food, fuel, and comfort stop, pulling into a Hyatt off I-90 around sunset, where he repeats the previous day's routine, though as he hangs up his suit and shirt he wonders in passing where he's misplaced his pocket protector, the one he's kept all his adult life. It has his father's plumbing business information printed on it, “Marshall and Sons” with a cartoon of a grinning plumber brandishing a pipe wrench as if it is a weapon. It is the last physical connection he has to his father in a past before his lifelines diverged. If only he'd followed his dream and gone to school at Madison instead of staying home and going where generations of his family have gone. If only he'd majored in math instead of business. If only he hadn't married Fern. If. If. If.

Eventually, he falls asleep. Once again he dreams his worried wife is calling him and once again his body is frozen, unable to respond. Once again he wakes with his heart pounding and tears running down his face.

Mike sits alone in the hotel café drinking bitter coffee, eating greasy bacon and flavorless scrambled eggs. The Channel 9 weather girl is on the big screen TV over the buffet table, apologetic, showing images of a clouded horizon to the north. She points at various numbers on the map behind her with one perky arm and says, “Highs in the mid-nineties though a front is dropping down from Alberta and that should cool us off. The National Weather Service has issued a severe thunderstorm watch for the metro region starting mid-afternoon and continuing until midnight.”

He'll be driving right into it.

Mike slides behind the wheel and heads for the Interstate. On the way he notices an open surplus store at the same time he notices that his clothes stink. He goes into the store to buy clean clothes. The selection is limited, and he comes out wearing a white short-sleeved dress shirt and cheap khaki slacks. He throws a large plastic bag with his worn clothes into the back seat. He is molting.

To the northwest the morning sky is smeared with ominous clouds, navy, black, and red near the horizon with gray sky peeking through in streaks. The weather matches his mood. It never occurs to him to wait for the front to pass: he's sure the Merc can handle any weather short of a tornado.

Initially, traffic on the Interstate is heavy with service workers in old Corollas and Civics and beat-up Ford Rangers heading in to early shifts. He rolls through Rockford hardly slowing down, crosses into Wisconsin and through Madison, briefly caught up in rush hour traffic, then launches again onto overlapping Interstates 39, 90, and 94 just as he is a man living overlapping lives.

North of Madison the clouded horizon begins to grow tall and wide until it becomes an immense dark curtain, greenish-black like a deep bruise, directly ahead across the bridge over the Wisconsin River near Dekorra. Halfway over the bridge his car punches into the cloud at 80 miles per hour and the storm swallows him. The Merc's headlights flick on. Rain batters the windshield like steel pellets and the wipers sweep at them futilely. All he can see ahead is formless gray. His heart races and his mouth is dry.

A bolt of lightning strikes in front of him and the accompanying thunder crack slams the car like a sledgehammer. The world is rent in two by the violence. He does not have time to brake or swerve.

The car speeds through the instantaneous crack in space left by the bolt and leaps into bright sunshine. The highway ahead is clear and light traffic is moving at speed. He does not understand. In the rearview mirror he sees a column of smoke rising from the bridge, but as he

watches it is gone, an illusion of a different life. Mike checks the speedometer and is surprised the old Toyota can even do 80 anymore.

He knows what has happened. He has crossed lifelines. His heart is filled with terror and joy. He laughs and cries. Tears run down his cheeks. He is going home.

Hours later Mike slides off the Interstate at the exit for Prospect Falls. He turns right and proceeds past the high school baseball field, its chain-link backstop behind home plate, the warped wood benches and bleachers filled with predatory splinters, the field bright green from recent rain, patches of white chalk here and there marking the remnants of foul lines.

He takes a left onto his street. It is just as he's known it would be, lined with tall oak and elm and behind them the row of modest ramblers facing the field. Bright window and door trim in black and red and green and blue, and the occasional under-window flower boxes like the one where Penny grows roses in the house where she grew up.

Mike parks in front of the house and turns off the car. He won't be late for dinner after all. He sags a little. It's been a long and stressful trip, but now he is home. He grabs his briefcase from the passenger seat-when had he ever owned an old-style brown leather briefcase?-and gets out of the car. The air is sweet with the perfume of Penny's roses. His body aches to hold her.

He opens the door, steps into the foyer, and lays his briefcase against the wall. Inside it smells like pot roast. It is a heavy meal for late June, but he doesn't mind; he hasn't had pot roast in so long. The twins come pelting in from the backyard and fling themselves at him. He crumples carefully to the floor, arms around them, laughing.

Penny comes out of the kitchen brushing a rogue wisp of hair from her forehead, smiling at her brood. She is exactly as he knew she'd look, and in that moment he knows he belongs in this lifeline. The thought passes and his need for her overwhelms him. He rises and the twins

scoot away to the backyard to investigate the dog's barking.

Mike flings his arms around her and presses her to him, kisses her passionately, intensely, deeply. She responds in kind as she always has, and they feed on each other until they might as well be one single glowing being. Breathless, they come apart, hands still caressing each other.

“Well,” she says, happy. “Guess you missed me. Rough day?”

How can he tell her how far he has come to be with her in this moment, how long it has taken him to find her, what ocean of space and time he has sailed to be with her? So instead he says, “Do I smell pot roast?”

“You are one big stomach, aren't you?” she says, playfully patting his belly with her palms. She disappears into the kitchen. “Dinner in twenty minutes.”

Cassandra, twelve, slouches into the dining room muttering. Mike remembers his sons at the same age, walking gloom clouds studded with acne. He says to her, “I'll help you set the table.”

She ignores him. Nevertheless, they begin to work together in silence laying out tableware and flatware on the walnut dining room table Penny's father Ike made. He's been gone five years now, and in quiet moments Penny still mourns him. Mike wonders if Cassie will ever feel that way about him. For now, he knows to be near and patient. He wonders in passing whether crossing lifelines he's become a different person or whether he is simply aware of the mistakes he's made before, though “before” no longer means anything. He knows another lifeline exists on the other side of the crack, and he fears its power to pull him back.

Dinner with his young family descends into the usual chaos. He slices the pot roast and lays a slice on each plate as it is passed around the table. Penny adds potatoes and carrots. Cassie picks at her food, refusing to enter into the idle conversation, and replies to questions in

monosyllables. The twins squabble over nothing and slip bits of meat to the lurking dog. Mike's heart is filled with joy.

It is summer in the upper Midwest and the sun sets late, near nine o'clock. The twins go to bed reluctantly, unwilling to end the day before dark. Cassie retreats to her room and her iPhone. Mike and Penny sit out back on plastic lawn chairs. She is holding a juice glass filled with white wine. He holds a highball glass with two ice cubes cooling two fingers of whiskey. He is waiting for it to be time for them to go to their bedroom, to watch Penny undress and put on the nightgown he will slip off over her head. His blood pounds in his body as he imagines her naked.

Penny sips her soda. She turns to him. “We have to talk about money,” she says.

“I know,” he says. “Tomorrow.” Money is the last thing he wants to talk about. There is never enough money. He does not want to think about anything other than making love to his wife. He reaches out and caresses her cheek. “Isn't it time to go to bed?”

Mike undresses while Penny is in the bathroom. He folds his pants over the back of a chair and takes off the sleeveless white shirt and tosses it over the pants. He stands next to their bed naked, looks at the shirt and wonders where he's lost his pocket protector.

Penny comes out of the bathroom in her short summer nightgown that barely reaches the top of her thighs, hard nipples pressing the sheer cloth that reveals her breasts: she is ready for him. He is stiff with anticipation. They fall into bed and come together and make love as though it is their first time, urgently, and then languidly, passion building and breaking like waves on a beach.

“I love you,” he says to her.

“I love you,” she says to him.

They sleep, then wake after midnight and steal out to their backyard

and make love on the yielding grass under the stars. They sleep again, then wake as dawn breaks and scamper back to their bed before the neighbors or the children can see them.

The twins pounce, clamoring for breakfast. Penny yawns and shoos them away, then climbs out of the bed and wraps a terrycloth robe around her naked body. She follows the children to the kitchen while Mike pads into the bathroom and showers. He is filled with joy. He wishes he could live in this moment forever. At the same time he wishes to dig a deep groove in this lifeline and plow it to his end.

The morning routine imposes itself. Mike comes into the kitchen and pours coffee into a mug. It is his turn to oversee the children. The twins are at the table eating cereal and milk. Cassie has come out of her room in her counselor-in-training uniform, green-on-white t-shirt and green shorts, and sits across from the twins drinking heavily milked and sugared coffee and eating a cup of flavored yogurt. She is twelve and wearing her first brassiere. Overnight she has colored a broad green stripe in her brown hair and she wears heavy eye makeup that makes her look like a startled raccoon. He says nothing.

The camp bus pulls up to the curb in front of their house and honks its horn. The children push themselves away from the table. The twins race out the front door. Cassie follows behind, distancing herself as much as possible from her brother and sister. Mike notices that Cassie has rolled the top of her shorts and her cotton panties peek out as she moves. He can tell she is feeling her hormones and must be attracted to a particular boy. He needs to mention this to Penny. He follows and catches them at the bus, kissing each on the tops of their heads as they climb in.

The bus pulls away with their children. Penny is waiting for him at the open door. "You're a good father," she says. She is in jeans and a plaid shirt. Her damp hair lies loose around her face; she has also showered.

"I try to learn from my mistakes," he says.

"What mistakes?" she says.

What can he say? If you could see the mess Fern and I made of the boys? So he shrugs and smiles sadly. He loves all his kids. There are other things to discuss.

They walk into the kitchen and fill their coffee mugs. Hip to hip they lean back against the countertop and sip. It's June and school is out. They should have time.

But they don't. He feels his other lifeline, full of obligations and consequences, tugging at him. The kitchen feels as if it is flickering between real and unreal like a light bulb about to fail. The crack in space and time that opened into this lifeline is snapping shut and he knows he is being sucked back.

He turns to Penny and holds her to him tightly, wishing she can anchor him there. Her hair is soft against his cheek. He whispers "I love you" in her ear.

She folds her arms around his neck. "I love you," she says.

They kiss.

He blinks his eyes to clear them from the bolt. His ears ring from the thunderclap of air exploding into the vacuum torn in the sky. The car's engine dies, then catches and roars. His heart is pounding against his ribs and his palms are damp and his mouth is dry. By the slimmest of margins he has avoided being struck by lightning.

Driving rain splatters against the windshield and the helpless wipers. Lightning flashes off to either side of the highway. He crosses the bridge and the storm is failing. The wipers are clearing the windshield and now Mike can see the glowing red taillights of cars and trucks ahead. The worst of it is over. Twenty miles up the Interstate the storm is a memory and summer heat is beginning to dry the asphalt.

She is gone. The children are gone. Mike pulls off to the side of the highway and stops the car. He cannot go on. His heart is broken.

Traffic rushes past, buffeting him. He sobs uncontrollably, forehead resting on the wheel.

He puts the Merc in gear and starts up the highway, intent on reaching Prospect Falls before dinnertime, though he knows it will only bring him more pain. He exits the Interstate and turns right and drives past the baseball field, turns left onto the street lined with oak and elm. There is the house she grew up in, though it is painted pale green with black trim and there is no flower box filled with roses. He parks across the street, engine idling silently, unnoticed, as if he is a ghost.

An older Penny is standing on the lawn watering it with a hose. The Toyota Corolla is parked in the short driveway with its hood up. Two people lean into the engine compartment, torsos and heads obscured. They stand and straighten. A young woman holds something heavy in one grease-blackened hand. She gives it to a short and heavy man wearing a stained baseball cap. Together they walk up to Penny and show her the part. She drops the hose. There is laughter. The three of them hug, greasy hands and all.

Mike sees that Penny is happy in this lifeline. Though he's steeled himself for disappointment, it is too much. He is crushed by despair. He pulls away from the curb and returns to the Interstate heading south, back to the former capital of the Confederacy. He belongs nowhere else.

He crosses the Wisconsin River bridge in full sunlight, Dekorra to the left, driving automatically with no room in his heart for anything but grief. He fights the urge to yank the steering wheel to the right, to smash through the retaining wall and plunge into the river. Twice his hands twitch on the steering wheel. Perhaps it is only the car's lane assist feature nudging the Merc back into its lane that keeps him from the abyss.

Somewhere between Madison and Rockford, Illinois, his cell phone rings for the first time since he's started his journey four days ago, proof he's almost a ghost in this lifeline, too. It is a commercial real estate broker. He lets it go unanswered. He feels the familiar garment of his lifeline enfold him.

Two days later he pulls into the circular gravel drive in front of his house in time for dinner. As he opens the car's door his old vinyl pocket protector falls out onto the ground. It is the brand his father burned into him before he knew he had choices. Rage and grief rise up in his gorge and he grinds it into the sharp gravel with the heel of his shoe, but it is indestructible. The gardener will pick it up tomorrow and return it to him.

He meets Mrs. Hernandez, their housekeeper, in the foyer.

Drained of emotion now he asks, "Is Mrs. Marshall in?"

She shakes her head, "No, sir."

Mike doesn't expect her to be. She might be at the golf club or at one of her committee meetings, the art museum or the garden society or the Republicans. She might even be with a lover.

"Please make a light dinner for me," he says and heads for the shower.

The hot water melts the numbness and he cries for the life he could have had, tears mingling with the filtered water. Despite his Church's rules he could divorce Fern, sell the business and—do what? That is the question: do what? He lets the moment of rebellion go, swirling down the drain. The groove he has plowed in this lifeline is so deep.

# Blind Fortuneteller

by Matteo Moretti

Alejandro knocked gently at the bathroom's door. His neck was hurting; he wanted to get seated and get on with the job.

"Are you okay in there?" he asked, receiving no answer. He began to worry, Ed had been in that bathroom for over ten minutes. Then the door swung open and Ed Jacovazzi came out, wiping his face with the back of his hand. Alejandro looked at him and thought that his friend looked rather pale.

"Is everything all right Ed?" he asked.

"I'm fine," he said. "Let's go, we're late."

The two men strolled through the corridor. To their left, the large windows showed the skyline of the city of Amsterdam, the sun high in the sky. Its reflection on the sea gave the impression that the city was surrounded by liquid gold. Alejandro loved that sight; it was so much better than the Madrid slums in which he was born and raised. The two men reached the room where the artworks were being conserved. Nicole, the vice-senior-assistant-director, was waiting for them.

"You are late, boys."

"It's his fault," said Alejandro, pointing at Ed. "Golden boy here was busy making himself pretty for you."

"Cut it, will you? Let's get to work," Ed said, visibly annoyed.

"Are you okay Ed?" she asked him. "Are you unwell by any chance?"

"Just a little headache, that's all. What's with you people today? You act like I'm on my deathbed."

"Well I'm sorry, it's just, I don't want to get a bad reading from you. The next Biennale in Capetown is very important and our artists want to know if their works will be well received. If you are not at your best, you may get a wrong vision of the events and that's-"

"And I'm telling you that I'm fine. Jesus. What's with all this concern? Let's just get this thing over with."

Ed sat himself in a nearby chair and Alejandro did the same. Nicole then proceeded to bring to them the artworks that would be shown at the Biennale. Alejandro grabbed the first object, a small statue made of wood and metal that showed a couple having sex, or so he thought. He never really understood the objects that were showed to him, it wasn't his job.

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After the fortunetelling session, Nicole asked Alejandro to stay for a little while. It was unusual but he didn't object. Ed left the room and the two of them remained alone. For a second, Alejandro hoped that she would confess her secret love for him; it was silly but a part of him hoped so. Those hopes were crushed fairly quickly.

"We need to talk about Ed," she said. "Have you noticed something strange about him recently? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"Uh, no, not really. He seems tired, but that's it."



"Well, I would like you to investigate this. Have you noticed how recently most of his readings are rather, how can I say, obscure? When we ask you to give a reading of the future of an object you tend to be sure of what you are saying. But with Ed, I don't know anymore. He seems often unsure and undecided; his readings are vague, even today. With most of the objects he touched he only gave us a partial reading of their future reception. This isn't good, and you know it."

"So, what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"I want you to talk to him, like a friend. Ask him how he is doing," Nicole said.

"But I already did that and he doesn't want to say."

"Look," she said, gently grabbing his arm, "try again, be gentle as you can be. Maybe tell him that I noticed something is wrong and that I'm concerned. Not only me but half the board of directors is concerned about his recent performance."

"Are they really concerned about him?" Alejandro asked.

"Well, I don't know that, but maybe you can use this to force him to talk." She smiled wickedly. "When finesse fails there is always force."

Alejandro nodded silently and left the room, searching for Ed. Usually, after a fortunetelling session, Ed liked to relax smoking a cigarette in the large balcony of the building, close by the cafeteria. He couldn't help but think about what Nicole said to him, about Ed no longer being as precise as he used to be. Alejandro couldn't believe he never noticed anything like that. Maybe Ed's reputation had grown so big that he ignored his shortcomings.

After all, Ed Jacovazzi wasn't just another precognitive individual, he was the Golden boy who could see up to a year in the future, and the best part about him was that Ed was completely human-looking. Alejandro was a mutant in body and abilities, but Ed represented some-

thing unique, the two worlds, the human and the human mutation, combined in one body. Ed had the best of the two worlds, the esper ability to see what was to come and the good looks of a Mediterranean gigolo. Only God knew how it had happened but somehow it had, a good looking mutant.

Just as he predicted, Alejandro found Ed smoking on the balcony. The sun was setting behind his back, once a golden sphere up in the sky now reduced to an orange incandescent ball melting into the ocean.

"Hey Ed." Alejandro greeted him. "How is it?"

"Another day looking at crap called art. It's going great, let me tell you."

"Yeah, some of that stuff was, wow, really bad. Uglier than me," Alejandro joked.

"Come on, you ain't so bad after all."

Alejandro smiled, thinking how to approach the subject.

"Look, I wanted to ask how you're doing."

"Again? Jesus, what are you? My mother?"

"No, no it's just ... it's just Nicole, she was concerned about, about your performance back there."

"My performance?" Ed asked. "What's wrong with my performance?"

"Well, huh, Nicole said that your readings aren't that accurate anymore and, and that she is not happy about it."

Looking at his friend, Alejandro realized how concerned he really was. He wanted to stop, he had no reason to dig into his friend like this. But Nicole gave him an order.

"She also mentioned the board of directors, they are not amused by your readings recently."

"What?" Ed looked scared now, on the verge of panic. Alejandro regretted mentioning the board.

"But you know how these things are, it's just a storm in a cup, it will pass over quickly," he said, trying to calm Ed down, but failing to do so.

Ed's face became distorted by fear and sadness; he buried his face in his hands and started sighing, suffocating his cries of despair. He stood there, sobbing quietly. Alejandro panicked; he wasn't expecting anything of this sort from Ed, and he tried to calm him down, weakly grabbing his shoulders to stop his sobbing.

"Maybe, maybe we can still fix it. Come on, there is no reason to react like this."

"You don't understand," Ed said, showing his face. "I'm losing it. I'm losing my sight."

Alejandro looked at him and understood immediately what he meant. Ed looked at his colleague and felt something like relief. He didn't even think about speaking about his problem to someone else. Noticing that he had dropped his cigarette, he lit another one. His hands were shaky.

"How long?" Alejandro asked, almost whispering. "For how long haven't you been able to see into the future?"

"I can still see, just not as good as before. I used to have one year of time; now I can do that for just six months," he answered, puffing out smoke.

"But when did it start? And how?"

"I don't have a clue. I don't know exactly when, but at some point I

noticed that my time in the future was becoming shorter and shorter. At first it was nothing, just a few weeks shorter than the usual, I thought, nothing to worry about. But the weeks became months and now my time is reduced to only half of what it used to be. If this keeps up I'm going to lose my ability. Do you understand what that means? Do you?" he asked, almost frantic.

"Of course I do. Have you tried to figure out what's wrong with you?"

"Are you kidding me? I have been to dozens of doctors and they found nothing wrong with me. I'm a healthy man, solid as a rock. So I figured that maybe the problem was psychological, and I decided to go to an analyst. But nothing, nisba, nada, niente, zero. I don't know what to do."

Then an awful thought ran through his head. He gripped Alejandro's hand so quickly that the mutant almost jumped with surprise.

"You won't tell Nicole about this, will you? If she finds out it's all over for me. You won't tell her, right? We are friends, aren't we? I invited you into my house, eat my food, drink my wine and-"

He stopped, a new unpleasant idea coming to him. His wife.

"Gina. Oh God. If she finds out..."

"Don't worry Ed, I won't tell her. Calm down."

"It's just...Gina..."

"Gina loves you, she will understand."

"Alejandro, you just don't get it, it's not just about my job, if I'm really losing my powers my entire life is finished."

"What are you..." Alejandro started to say, before understanding what Ed meant. "Have you been using your power outside work? That's

against advice, you know it."

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Ed silently nodded in agreement. The "advice," as Alejandro called it, was a series of regulatory guides for mutants with precognitive abilities. It was written by a team of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians. It was meant as a guide for any mutant who wanted to be accepted into the wider society. They were supposed to use their powers only in their selected job; using precognition during everyday life, for instance, was considered detrimental to the autonomy of the single individual.

"I know," he said, feeling like a thief being caught. "I know it was dumb, but I couldn't help myself."

The two men fell silent. Under them there was the city, rumbling with small hovercraft and old wheeled cars. Alejandro lit himself a cigarette, the sun slowly falling into the sea.

"Maybe I can help you," Alejandro said. "How about you let my doctor visit you?"

"What's the point? I've already been to dozens of doctors."

"I know, but my doctor specializes in mutants. He is pretty good and I'm friends with him. He won't tell anyone about your problem. I can get an appointment for you using my name, so even if Nicole or the board of directors were to suspect something they won't know that you visited him. What do you say?"

"A mutant specialized doctor..." Ed mumbled by himself. Why hadn't he thought about that before? Probably because of his looks; he was too human looking compared to Alejandro. He felt human, despite his ability. He looked at Alejandro and his oversized cranium; that deformed man was offering him a chance.

Ed shook his hand, the cigarette hanging on lips that were curled in a faint smile.

When he closed the door of his luxurious apartment Ed felt a new wave of discomfort assaulting him, and he wondered if he could really trust Alejandro. The two men had worked together for almost six years and they were on good terms with each other. But was that really enough of a reason to trust him? What if he was planning on removing him from the Von Koffer Company? And why had he told Alejandro everything? Ed wondered if his desperation had really managed to get the best of him.

He went to the kitchen, pouring himself a large glass of wine, and memories of the old days came rushing to him. The old slums where he was born, the horrible deformed people who lived with him and close to him, the crooked smile of his mother and how she lacked both arms. When he got out of that stinking place he felt liberated, free from seeing those horrible people everyday. He didn't think of himself as a mutant; he always thought of himself as human born to the wrong family. He had wondered, in the past, who could have been his father. Probably a human, a pervert with a mutant fetish; it was his fault that he grew up surrounded by monsters and he never tried to search for him.

Emptying the glass, he heard the apartment door opening and the familiar noise of stilettos clicking on the floor. Gina noticed him and gave him a bright smile.

"Home already?"

"Seems like it. They didn't have enough crap to show me today."

"Poor you. Sitting on a chair, predicting the future and getting paid for it. What a stinking dead end job. When are you going to rock the boat, Ed? When are you going to rebel?" she joked, stroking her curly red hair.

Ed replied with a bitter smile. She had no idea what was going on

within him. He tried to change the subject.

"You want something to drink?"

"No, thank you. I have been drinking with my friends. God, I hate those girls. Damn empty-headed idiots-"

"I never understood one thing," he said, pouring himself another glass, "why do you go out with those other girls if you dislike them so much? I would never want to surround myself with people I dislike."

"I have to, it's my job. I can't be a model forever, I need to think about the future. Designing new clothing requires people who can wear these clothes and make them look good. My friends are all good looking girls and they are perfect for the job, but they are dumb as a bag of dirt."

She dropped onto the brown synthetic crocodile sofa and Ed sat beside her. He liked the fact that she was smart; Gina was a fashion model and wanted to be a fashion designer, climbing the ladder in her field. He had no doubt that she was going to make it--she had the drive, the passion, and the ideas to make it happen.

Then he thought about telling her what was going to happen; he regretted the idea and stopped himself from speaking. Gina was a lovely girl, but she could be very superficial and materialistic. What would happen if he told her that soon he would find himself powerless? Ed was the breadwinner in the house; Gina earned a good amount of money, but her lifestyle depended mostly on Ed. Women didn't like to be sole earners of the family, Ed was sure of that, and feared that Gina would dump him once she discovered his problem. He had to find a way to stop his power from fading; it was about his job, his status, his money, and the woman who was looking at him with bright blue eyes.

"What are you thinking, Golden boy?"

He reached for her and they exchanged a kiss, before being interrupted by Ed's phone. He cursed at the high Heavens and answered the call.

"Hello? Who's this?"

"Mr. Jacovazzi," said the unknown voice, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

"We haven't met yet, and so far the pleasure is all yours. Who are you and what do you want? I'm busy."

"My apologies. I represent a very rich client who would like to employ your talents for-"

"No," he replied. "I work for the Von Kofter Company, you want my service you gotta go through them first. Until then you can have a good evening."

He ended the call. It wasn't the first time that someone tried to recruit him for a personal job. The thing that really stuck to Ed was the accent of the man; he'd never heard that kind of accent before. He has no time to think about that, Gina was already kissing his neck.

"Where were we?"

\* \* \*

Doctor Singh was an Indian man with short gray hair and thin glasses. He looked at the two men in front of him; he knew Alejandro very well while the other man, Ed Jacovazzi, was a newcomer to his studio.

"Mr. Jacovazzi," he began, in a deep voice, "I'm going to ask you a question that may appear unrelated to your condition, but please answer anyway. Tell me, are you still capable of doing the things you could do when you were a boy? Running very fast, jumping, pushing, playing?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Please answer me."

"I still can do these things, but of course I'm not a kid anymore. But

I'm not an old man either, I'm not even forty. What does that have to do with me?"

"Because I studied your cells, and I noticed something very strange. Your cells, those associated with mutant DNA, are aging. Very fast."

Doctor Singh gave him time to absorb the information before speaking again.

"As you know, mutants were born due to the excessive amount of toxic substances in the air and the water. Chemical pollution over the years has been accumulated in the human body, creating a new strain of human, the mutant. But the mutant is a defective human, sometimes it even lacks important body parts, like arms, legs, eyes, ears, and so forth ... mutants make up for those missing limbs with esper abilities like yours. The thing about you that is most astounding is your mixture of human and mutant DNA, they balance each other almost perfectly. What is happening right now is that this balance is in crisis because the mutant cells in your body are dying: mutants have a shorter life span compared to the regular human, and your mutant cells are dying and being replaced by human cells. In short, Mr. Jacovazzi, you are slowly turning human, and your system has therefore no need for esper abilities like precognition or such."

"Fuck," Ed said, biting the inside of his cheek. "What do I do now? How do I fix this?"

"There is no fixing this," the doctor replied. "The medical condition that you want to cure is simply called aging, and reversing the flow of time is impossible. Considering the speed at which your mutant cells are dying you will lose your powers in less than two months."

"Wait," he said, trying to negotiate some form of pointless bargain, "what about getting more mutant cells into my body? There is DNA editing nowadays, they use it to make custom babies in certain cities. How about we use that on me?"

"DNA editing is useful on a baby that is being formed in a womb, not on a fully grown man. And inserting external mutant cells inside your body will probably cause some very undesirable side effects. I strongly advise you to not do anything of the sort."

Ed slumped on the chair, feeling crushed by the words he just heard. It was over, him becoming powerless was inevitable.

"Aside from this, you are in perfect health. I understand this may be a blow to you, but there is nothing wrong with you on any level."

Ed didn't reply, ignoring the doctor's words. Alejandro helped him, standing up from the chair.

"Thank you doctor. I'll pay the bill for his exam."

Alejandro accompanied Ed home and sat with him for a drink. Ed didn't even touch his glass; he felt his entire body going limp, unable to move, as though something heavy was dragging him down.

"It's all over," he said. "I'm going to lose my job and my money, Gina will leave me once she gets tired of having me around doing nothing in the house. I'll end up homeless or in a slum populated by mutants." He surprised himself by the way he said those things, calm and collected.

"Don't be so dramatic. I'll help in any way I can. Sure, you will probably lose the job, but you can find something else to do. I mean, you made people very rich with your predictions, that must mean something, right?"

"You don't understand, all my life, I never did anything more than this. I'm a fortuneteller, I have no other skill, I never had the need to learn other skills, and I never cared; now I'm going to lose the only thing that defines me and I'll become nothing. Who needs a fortuneteller who can't read the future?"

This time, Alejandro had no answer.

The next month passed quickly for Ed. He asked the Von Kofter Company for an extended vacation, and he had spent it walking around the city, wondering about his future. He had not used his powers in the last month and was afraid of doing so, scared about how much they could have decreased. He didn't mention this to Gina; he wanted to wait for the right moment to do so, knowing that it would never come. There is no right moment for bad news.

Sitting in a small open air cafe he just waited for the day to pass. Then he noticed a young couple coming toward him.

"Sorry to bother you but...are you that human-looking mutant who can read the future?" the woman said.

"Yes, I am that man. Guilty as charged. How can I help you?"

"Well, we were wondering...can you read us our future? We were thinking about marrying but our families do not approve, they say we should wait more time and get better paying jobs before doing something so serious."

"I'm afraid I can't help you miss," he said, lighting a cigarette, "I can't do that."

"Oh please mister, it would mean so much for us. It will make our parents understand that there is no problem for us getting married now."

"I'm doing this for your good. I don't want to spoil your fun. I mean, aren't you excited to see how your story will turn out?"

"But..."

"Not to mention that what you are asking me to do is illegal. I can't use my powers outside of work," he said. Then an idea clicked in: he could use the woman to see how much of his powers were still with him. He

reached out for her, and the woman smiled, embarrassed.

"I see, sorry if we bothered you."

"No problem," he said, winking at her, and the two shook hands. It was all Ed needed to begin his prediction. He started to peer into the future of the young woman, but the visions were spotty at best. He pushed himself further into the vision: one week, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks...

And that was it, less than a month of future foresight and it was a blurred vision, not very clear or understandable. The only thing he remembered seeing was a marriage scene and the young couple being very happy. Then the beginning of marital life together, but nothing more. It was very generic, making it impossible to give them a definitive answer; he had to work with what he had. Looking at the young woman he tried to fabricate a response.

"You two will get married and will be very happy," he said. The young woman smiled and the young couple left, saying goodbye to him. He waved his hand to them and saw them disappearing into the crowd. He didn't lie to her; he told her what he saw after all, no reason to feel guilty about it. But he was concerned about his powers, they were fading fast, faster than the doctor anticipated. He would have to talk to Gina sooner or later, there was no way of avoiding it.

His thoughts were interrupted by a man sitting in front of him. The first thing he noticed about the tall man was his dress, a purple-colored suit with a golden shirt and a bright green tie. His eyes were obscured by purple-tinted shades. He gave him a bright smile.

"Mr. Jacovazzi," he said in a familiar voice, "How are you doing today?"

Ed tried to pinpoint the moment the first time he heard that voice. Then he remembered, snapping his fingers.

"You are the guy who called me, the one who works for the rich

client," Ed said, recognizing his strong accent. The man smiled, looking relaxed.

"My name is Joseph, forgive me for bothering you again but we followed your advice and went to your employers, the Von Kofter Company, and negotiated with them. It took us some time, but they finally told us that you were not available for the time being, that you are on vacation."

"That's correct. So don't bother offering me anything Joseph, I'm not working right now."

"I'm afraid I have to insist. Or else I'll be forced to report you to the authorities."

"What are you talking..." Ed fell silent. An awful idea formed in his brain. Joseph gave him another smile and showed him a small tablet, playing a short video, showing Ed and the young couple with Ed telling them about their future.

"You understand Mr. Jacovazzi that you just committed a crime that violated human/mutant relationship outside the workspace."

"How did you get that video?"

"Please. Who do you think sent that young couple to you, Mr. Jacovazzi?"

Feeling like an idiot, Ed clenched his fist, feeling sweat accumulating on his forehead. Joseph spoke softly to him.

"My employer has a need for your talent and he is willing to pay a reasonable price for it. If you follow me I will accompany you to your destination and pay you handsomely for your service. If you refuse, this video will be sent to the authorities and you will be arrested."

Joseph turned his head, looking towards the port. A small group of

seagulls was flying above the water. Among them, there was also a small white police drone.

"European police security is very well equipped for dealing with suspects inside large cities. I wonder how long a man like you can last. Can you outrun and armed police drone, Mr. Jacovazzi?"

"Listen," Ed managed to say in a trembling voice, "you don't understand...I can't help you...my...my powers..."

"I know the regulations, there is no point in explaining it to me," Joseph said, sounding bored.

"No, it's not about that. My abilities, my powers, they are..." he stopped talking. Was he really going to confess to that man such an important secret? He was already trying to blackmail him, what was the point of telling him the truth?

Joseph stood up. He was taller than Ed, much taller. Ed felt completely unarmed against that man.

"Please follow me. We are going to the location for your new job."

"I need to call my wife."

"You can do that while you travel. Let's go."

\* \* \*

After a short trip on a rocket jet the two men landed in another country. On the airstrip there were armed men who wore pale yellow uniforms; Joseph greeted them in his native tongue. Ed looked around and saw only a few trees and red earth. It looked like Mars, but he knew very well that he was somewhere in Africa. Joseph invited him to come down, and the two men got on a small military jeep and left the small airport Ed tried, awkwardly, to sit, but he had never traveled like that before. Joseph smiled, seeing how his guest was having trouble. Ed

noticed his sneering.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"We need you to tell us if something is going to work. That's it."

"And you couldn't find another one for the job. Do you really need someone like me?"

"Absolutely. This is a matter of life and death, we need only the best of the best for this job," Joseph replied. "We need you to touch a bomb."

Ed almost fell from his seat.

"A bomb? What for?"

"We need to know if it's going to work properly. It's the first time my country developed something like that, and it was very costly for us. We need to know if it is going to work."

"Then why don't you just test it? Seems easier than just kidnapping me," Ed said, shielding his eyes from the red dust that was flying in his face.

"We can't afford it. We don't have the money for a second bomb, and we don't have time. We need to use it quickly to crush the rebels. You see, Mr. Jacovazzi, my country was born from a separatist war, we achieved independence five years ago collaborating with various militias, but now those groups have revolted against us, calling us oppressors and enslavers. We can't have another war inside our borders, we need to finish these people off as quickly as we can; a show of strength is necessary, and that is why we need the bomb to work," Joseph explained. "If the bomb works, we can put an end to this conflict between us and rebels, and many lives will be spared. You can save many lives, Mr. Jacovazzi."

"By telling you if a bomb will explode or not," he said sarcastically.

"Precisely, but you don't have to worry. You will be paid for this job; you just need to do what you always do."

Ed felt like someone had tried to grab hold of his stomach from the inside. What to do? He was already far from home, and he had no way to go back without the rocket jet, so the only option was to play the game as long as possible until he could find an opening and escape. But to where? He had no idea in which part of Africa he was, and he did not recognize the small patches with the national flag colors on the soldier's uniforms. Maybe he was in West Africa, or maybe in the southern region, but those were nothing but wild guesses.

"How does your power work? I have read many newspapers about you, that's how I got this idea of using you. You spoke a lot about your success, but you never said how your power works exactly."

Ed swallowed and wiped his eyes made teary by the dust. "I need to touch the subject and then I can choose to see or not into his or her future; the same rule applies with inanimate objects. I have a time window that I can explore, for instance I can see in the future up to..." he stopped, thinking about how much time he had left. But if Joseph read newspapers and magazines with his interview then he already knew how much time he could see in the future.

"One year," he lied, "I can see in the future up to one year, but I can choose to see less time if I want to. One year is my limit."

"Very good. We won't need that much time, a few days will be enough. I wonder, however, about something. Did you ever use this power on yourself?"

"Never," he replied, and it was true.

"Oh, you already broke the rules once before. Are you telling me you never once tried to see your own future?"

"No. There is a story about a man, a precog like me. He tried to see his



own future and saw himself dying. He became catatonic; witnessing his own death and what came after killed his mind. I don't know about you Joseph, but I think that being alive but dead inside is an awful way for a man to go."

Joseph nodded silently. On the horizon, various metallic structures were appearing; they looked like army barracks and small hangars. At the gate of the military base, Joseph and Ed were greeted by an official; Joseph seemed to be treated with the utmost respect by the men around. He presented Ed to the official, a man with a highly decorated uniform and a round face. The official shook Ed's hand with enthusiasm and then went straight toward the bigger hangar in the camp. Joseph spoke lightly to Ed.

"That General is my superior officer. He is very happy to see you; you are a shining hope in this dark night, Mr. Jacovazzi. His words, not mine."

Ed tried to force himself to smile. He felt his legs giving out, he wanted to run, knowing how pointless it was. An invisible force made him follow the General. The small group, together with a band of soldiers who acted like bodyguards, reached the interior of the hangar, where a white, large rocket was resting. It was smaller than the rocket jet they used to travel, but it was still quite large. Judging by the size, it could accommodate five or six people, and many, many pounds of explosives.

"You can begin," Joseph said.

Ed walked slowly toward the bomb, his hand trembling visibly. He licked his dry lips and tried to calm down. He just had to lie like he did to the young couple before; it was no big deal in the end. He touched the bomb and the scene of a man whose skin was quickly being eroded while vomiting his own lungs flashed in front of him. Ed jumped back and fell on the floor, trying to remove that awful image which was superimposed on his eyes.

"Oh Christ," he said out loud. "What the hell is this thing? This isn't

just a bomb. What is it?"

"So, it works?" Joseph asked, kneeling beside him and helping him to stand.

"I think so, but that is not an ordinary bomb. What the hell have you been building here?"

"It's a little something that we developed with our scientific and medical branch. You see, this part of the world has often been hit with various pandemic diseases. We decided that maybe these awful diseases could be weaponized and used against our enemies. It is thanks to these kinds of weapons that we managed to win our independence five years ago."

"You people are insane," Ed said while holding his stomach, trying not to puke. "You want to release that stuff in the world?"

"Calm down. The virus cannot survive long in the open air, it will last barely four minutes and then it will die out. It is a calculated risk."

Ed tried to calm himself down, as Joseph suggested. He felt sick and couldn't get that horrible picture out of his head.

"Are you really going to use this thing? It is out of this world, it's just too insane."

"You are a man who has lived a very comfortable life so far, so I doubt you would understand. We are at war, and all wars require a tribute in blood to end. We are willing to stop this war and pay any price in order to do so. Now, you said that the bomb will work, when and where?"

Taken aback, Ed had no idea what to say. The bomb would explode, that was for sure, but he had no idea about the time and the location. He had detached himself as soon as the images were coming to him; it was just too much. There was no way to fabricate a credible lie this time.

"I don't know, it was just so confusing. I never touched something that would explode. And, and the stuff that I saw...it is just too much..." he said, trying to put on a dramatic scene. He saw Joseph's eyes trying to analyze him, digging deeper into him. Ed felt like that man was trying to read his mind.

"I see," Joseph said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You must be very tired. How about we try again tomorrow?"

"No! I did what you asked, now I want to go home."

Joseph ignored him and spoke with the General, Ed didn't understand a single word. He passed his hand through his brownish hair, feeling that he would never see his home again.

"The General said that we can arrange a very comfortable room here for you. Please, rest and tomorrow we will try again."

"This is kidnapping!" Ed shouted, fear overcoming him.

"No it's not. I promised that you will get paid, didn't I?" Joseph showed him a small black sack and opened it. He then held a small diamond with his fingers and threw it to Ed's feet.

"That diamond comes from the General's personal collection. He hopes that you will like it."

"That's nice and all, but I want to go home," Ed replied, picking up the diamond.

"Not until you give us a better reading, Mr. Jacovazzi. Until then, you will stay here as a guest. Fear not, you will like it here, the scenery is beautiful."

Having said that, Joseph ordered another man, in his mother tongue, to keep watch on Ed and then left with the General and his men. The soldier accompanied Ed to a small room furnished with a single bed,

a metallic table and chair and a small window. Outside the sun was setting now, giving the red earth a look that could only be found on other planets. Ed sighed, feeling like a prisoner. He thought about calling Gina; after all they didn't even take his phone. He checked and noticed that there was no signal; the only way to communicate inside and to the outside of the base was by using military equipment. There was nothing to do but to wait until tomorrow and hope for something.

\* \* \*

After having been served dinner by his guard, Ed noticed something--the door of his room was never locked, he was allowed to leave the room if he wanted to, but the guard would always stay by his side. That was the only thing that prevented him from escaping. Maybe Joseph wanted to treat him well in order to gain his sympathy. Not to mention that Ed really had no way of escaping the base; it was located in the middle of nowhere and he had no idea if there was a city close by. The only one who could have helped him was a local.

While eating his dinner, roasted chicken and a few vegetables, Ed formulated a plan. In order to work the guard needed to understand his language, and that was the real gamble in his design. He stood up from the chair and went to the door. The guard, a young man with a short patch of beard under his chin, lifted his eye towards him. Ed raised his hand, trying to reassure him that he wasn't going to run.

"I need the bathroom."

The guard stood up and walked behind him while Ed was going towards the bathroom. The fact that he understood his words was a good thing, Ed decided to put his plan in motion. He pretended to trip and fell down on his knees, massaging his leg and faking an injury. The guard reached for him, trying to help him stand up. It was all Ed needed: an excuse to establish contact with the guard, peer into his future and acquire some information that he could use to force him to escape the base.

When the hand of the guard touched him, Ed saw nothing. No vision came to him in any form. It was all normal, he was perfectly normal.

"Stand up. Can you?"

"Yes! Yes, I can stand. See?" Ed said, going back to his feet quickly. When they reached the bathroom, the guard remained posted outside while Ed closed himself up and fell into despair. Were his powers really gone for good? If that was really the case then it was all over; he had no way to escape and Joseph would discover his secret. What would be his fate then? Death? Torture? Or worse? Sitting on the toilet he grabbed his head between his hands. His powers were gone. Or maybe they were just weak, maybe he needed another chance to touch the guard. Only one more.

When he left the bathroom he pretended to trip again, and again the guard helped him. And again nothing, no visions of any kind. He returned to his cell, sitting at the table, and the guard returned to his watch outside the room.

Ed had no idea how to proceed. The only thing left was to wait for tomorrow and the inevitable consequences that were in store for him. He felt his stomach rumble a little and tried to finish his chicken. He sneezed a little while chewing and before he knew it, he started choking. He tried to spit it out, but he couldn't. Before he knew it, he was standing and gasping for air. He felt someone behind him, grabbing him and holding him tight, and feeling himself squeezed like a broken puppet, Ed managed to spit out the piece of chicken that was suffocating him. Finding himself in the hands of the guard, Ed did not waste his chance and tried one last time. And this time the visions came to him, blurry and distorted, but he recognized a woman and two kids, two girls, one of them missing one of her front teeth.

Ed turned to see the guard and quickly grabbed him by his shoulders.

"You have a wife and two daughters, one of them is missing one of her front teeth," he said quickly. The guard looked at him confused, and

Ed kept on talking.

"They are going to die," he lied. "If you stay here and the bomb goes off they are going to die. We are all going to die, we need to leave."

The guard hesitated, unsure about what to do. Ed kept on pressuring him, cornering him and not giving him a chance to think clearly.

"You know that I can predict the future, you saw me before, with the bomb. You were there, you know it."

"I need to talk with my superior officer," the guard finally spoke, "I need to report this."

"They won't believe you. They put too much effort and money in this bomb, they won't listen to reason. We can only save ourselves and your family; if you talk to someone right now it's all over."

The guard lowered his eyes, and Ed wasn't sure that his words reached him; he could only hope that his fake story would stick and that the guard was a good family man.

"What can we do?" the guard asked.

"We must leave this base, immediately. Then I will go back home and alert my government. You will take your family far away from here. Run, that's what you have to do."

"I don't know if I can..."

"What are you saying? This is about your family! Won't you save them?"

"I don't have the money to leave and begin a new life somewhere else. Even if we escape we couldn't..."

Ed bit his lips. He was almost there, he just needed something to con-

vince him, a final push. And then he remembered. He showed the guard the small diamond that Joseph had given him before, and the guard accepted it and put it in his pocket.

"I will take you to the closest city. There is an old airport there. If you have the money you can go home," he said. "I will take you outside the camp, stay close to me."

Ed nodded and the two men went to the parking lot, where his former guard took a military jeep and invited him in. Once they reached the gate the guard gave an explanation to the other soldier, who took notice of Ed. For his part, he tried to smile a little, a gesture of courtesy that came off as very forced from him.

The gate was opened and the jeep roamed in the dark of the night.

"What did you tell them?" Ed asked.

"I said that the Lieutenant asked for you back at the capital."

"The Lieutenant? You mean Joseph? The tall guy in a suit?"

"Yes. But his name is not Joseph; the Lieutenant uses different names when he travels abroad for secret missions. He is a scary man, soldiers don't discuss his orders, so if I tell them that he asked for you they will never complain." The guard fell silent for a second, "He is a scary man."

"I'm sure of it. But remember your family, this is for them. Remember."

The guard nodded with conviction. For a moment, Ed felt sorry for the poor sucker. After a three-hour drive, they saw the lights of a city. They drove towards a small, antiquated airport. Ed had never taken a plane in his all life.

"Here you can take a plane. There are other white men around the air-

port. You won't stand out too much."

Ed got out of the jeep and checked his appearance in the rearview mirror. His black suit was dirty with dust, but aside from that he was okay.

"Listen," the guard said, "tell your government to send peacekeepers here when you arrive home."

"Sure I will." Ed replied without sincerity. He had no clue about how to talk to his government. And he wanted to just go home and forget about what had happened.

"I must thank you," the guard continued. "I wanted to leave the army for quite some time, but I never had the courage to do so. Your words, they gave me the strength I needed."

"Come on now, there is no need to..."

"My name is Harim," he said. "I doubt we will see each other ever again. But please, don't forget me. And I won't forget you, I am in your debt."

Ed felt strange hearing those words. That man, whom he had manipulated into betraying his superior officer, was sincerely grateful to him. What would be his fate? Ed wished he had his powers back. He stretched his hand inside the jeep to shake Harim's hand. He wanted one last vision, something that could be of help to the young former soldier who helped him. The two men shook hands and Ed saw nothing.

"Good luck, Harim."

The jeep disappeared into the city traffic. Ed watched his new friend until he could no longer see him, then he hurried inside the airport, eager to reach home.

\* \* \*

A week after his little adventure in the middle of nowhere, Ed was waiting for Gina outside the synthetic clothing store. On the wall nearby, the News Channel was playing. The screen wall came on and showed the face of a young woman dressed in red. Another window, close to her face, showed scenes of destruction and misery.

"-it is still unclear how it happened, but International organizations are starting to understand what events may have unfolded in the country of Akhtam, in Central Africa. Born after a civil war that started in 2139 and that lasted for five years, the small nation was torn apart by another civil conflict, this time between opposing government militias. The General Commander Azhambeete was apparently going to deal a mortal blow to his rivals using a newly developed chemical bomb that, according to recent discoveries, malfunctioned. General Azhambeete was on site when the device detonated. The device contained a particular virus capable of consuming the flesh of those who came in contact with it. The virus has a very short lifespan, less than four minutes in open air, but this small amount of time is more than enough to kill a grown man. General Ashambeete's body was identified by dental records, since very little remained of him. The bomb exploded in a military base near the capital city of Ushindi. Many civilians died shortly after. The survivors have suffered from mutilations and disfigurement provoked by the virus. The local government is currently in disarray, since many of its members are currently deceased or missing. Among these, there is the infamous Lieutenant Kiegari that-

The face of Joseph appeared on the wall screen. Ed stared at it until it disappeared and the News Channels was turned off by the automatic system inside the walls. He heard the seagulls flying over him, a couple of police drones were among them. He felt safe, everything was right in the world.

Gina finally decided that it was time to go, after buying a shimmering purple trench and a bright green hat. Ed felt relieved, not just because her shopping was over, but also for having told her the truth. After coming back home he had told her everything. About his power loss, about his kidnapping and his escape. Gina had listened to him and then

hugged him, telling him that everything was alright. It was like being welcomed in high Heaven.

After that, he had resolved to visit Doctor Singh one last time. The doctor told him that he was indeed human now; small traces of mutant cells were still inside his body, and they could trigger visions of the future, but Ed had lost all control over them and he could no longer work at the Von Kofter Company. When they tried to sue him because of potential economic losses provoked by having kept secret his conditions, Alejandro interceded for him, negotiating that they simply let him go without benefits. That saved Ed from a long and costly legal process.

Now they were taking a walk on the riverfront, enjoying the sun and the things to come. Ed couldn't help but think about how lucky he was. Without realizing it, he was surrounded by people who cared for him, and not just for his powers. Alejandro, Gina, and even the man who helped him escape, Harim. He wondered what had happened to him. Was he among the dead or the injured? Or did he manage to save himself and his family? He had no idea, and he had not contacted government authorities to send help. He simply didn't think about it, too busy dealing with his own life. But now that everything was settled, he could do something about Harim, maybe find him and help him, if necessary. Another idea came to him, while holding Gina's hand. It was something he had wanted to ask her for a while, but he was afraid about how she might react. It wasn't an easy question.

"Listen Gina," he said, stopping and turning her around gently, "please don't get mad."

"Now I'm definitely going to get mad."

"Please, it's important. Why did you..." he spoke hesitantly, "Why are you still with me? I thought that you would leave after discovering that my powers are gone. Why are you still here?"

Gina looked surprised. Ed felt sad and fearful, maybe thinking that she

was going to tear him apart.

"You really are an idiot, aren't you? I love you, that's why I'm here."

"It's just...I thought..."

"You thought that without your powers and your job I would leave you, you told me. You think that just because I do modeling that I'm an empty-headed easy girl?" she said, pretending to be angry. "You used your powers to pick me up the first time we met, didn't you?"

Ed stared blankly at her, feeling caught. He imagined that she would be angry, and instead she was smiling.

"I figured it out after you told me your job. You told me exactly what I wanted to hear that night."

Ed remained silent, nodding slightly. There was no point in denying it. The first time he saw her it was during a party hosted by the Company; he thought she was beautiful and managed to touch her hand, peering into her future only for a few minutes, seeing what kind of words he should use. He abused his powers to get laid, and from that point on their relationship grew into something more deeper.

"Do you remember when my parents died in that terrorist attack in Brazil three years ago?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Do you remember what I did that day?"

"You cried, a lot. You threw a chair against our wall screen, breaking it. It cost a small fortune to repair."

"And then I shut myself in the bathroom, crying. Saying that I didn't want to come out, but you spoke to me through the door and calmed me down. Remember?" she asked.

"Yes, but so what?"

"You didn't touch me that day, I was on the other side of the door. You couldn't possibly have known what kind of words would have calmed me, but you said those words anyway. Because you know me, and you care for me. You never needed to see the future to have me, you knew me and loved me. That's why I'm here now, and why I want to stay with you, no matter what."

Hearing those words made Ed feel like an idiot. Gina wasn't a bimbo like he feared, and he had underestimated her. Feeling overwhelmed by his feelings he hugged her, his heart pounding like crazy in his chest. Gina smiled and hugged him back, her shopping bags falling on the ground. The two of them didn't speak, surrounded by the sound of people walking around them, the water from the canal flowing, the buzzing of a small drone hovering closer. They kissed and then the visions came to him.

Gina was on the ground, with a wound on her stomach laying in a pool of blood.

Without thinking, Ed pushed her onto the ground. Gina fell heavily on her back; she tried to get up, surprised and angry by this action.

"Ed! What the fu-"

A gunshot roared near her. She clamped her hands on her ears and saw Ed falling backwards. Turning her head, she saw a tall man dressed in a black suit. His face was heavily scarred, he was missing part of his lips, an eye patch was covering his left eye, and he was without a nose. He looked like he had been eaten, chewed, and spat out. When he spoke, a metallic robotic voice came out of his mouth.

"For my motherland, Mr. Jacovazzi," he said menacingly. "We both die together here."

Another gunshot roared in the air, but this time it did not come from

the tall man. Instead, Gina saw the man falling on the ground with a gunshot wound to his head. Seeing his face, it was like his skin was consumed by a beast, showing part of muscle tissue and bone.

She stood up and rushed to Ed. He was shot in the stomach and was bleeding. Gina didn't know what to do; she put her hands on the wound and felt warm blood coming out. The small white police drone equipped with a light firearm flew towards the tall man's corpse and hovered over him while the speaker repeated the same message over and over again.

"This is police drone 0259MET of the European Federation. Please do not touch anything. Please remain in sight. A police unit is on the way. A medical unit is on the way. Please do not touch anything. Please remain in sight."

"Please help!" Gina cried out. "Somebody help him!"

The drone flew toward her and from the front of it came a small syringe.

"METAB, one dosage, inject in the injured subject. Slows blood loss

and eases pain. METAB, one dosage."

Gina took the syringe and emptied it inside Ed's body. The small drone kept repeating its orders to the small crowd that surrounded the scene. Gina slapped Ed's cheek lightly.

"Ed, please Ed stay awake."

Weakened by the blood loss and inebriated by the painkillers in his body, Ed tried to open his eyes. It was all blurry, like his visions.

"J...Joseph...still..." he managed to say in a slumbering voice.

"He is dead, don't worry, stay awake."

Gina almost froze when she noticed that Ed had a wide grin on his face.

"Ed?"

"Thought of...something funny," he managed to say, "I didn't see it coming."



# Alien Surveillance Team

by Janis Butler Holm



# Sci-fi Creatures

by **Denny E. Marshall**

The science fiction shows  
Are hard to believe  
Aliens with strange  
Or monstrous faces

If advanced enough  
To travel great distances  
Would have at least  
Perfect teeth and skin

As far as being green  
Most likely myth or legend  
Probably would have  
Choice of any color

Maybe we imagine them  
In unflattering forms  
Because we tend to cover  
Our own imperfections

# The Kindness of Ooladon

by Lillie E. Franks

In my second semester of graduate school, I tried going to group therapy. It was where I first heard the name Ooladon.

Group therapy wasn't my idea. I just wanted help. I was keeping up with my classes, mostly, but I had no friends, no life, and every morning I had to convince myself to wait for the train that would take me to work and not just step onto the tracks and be done with it.

I'm sorry. Should I mention that? Back then, I didn't think of that as a suicidal urge, or as anything really. It was just the little back and forth that went on in my head whenever I was on the train platform. As far as I knew, everybody around me was thinking the same thing. Everyone had to make that same choice every day, every week, over and over and over.

The point is I wasn't happy. Even I couldn't avoid that. And I had to walk past the school's Mental Health Clinic every Tuesday to get to my Accounting 101 class. They had a bunch of cheery posters up, none of which I liked much. The first time I walked past them I shrugged. The fifth I sneered. After the sixth, I decided to give it a try.

They were friendly, in a professional way. They gave me some papers to fill out, and then after they read the papers they said they had to ask me some questions. After I convinced them I wasn't going to kill myself that day, they put me in group.

There were seven of us. Four other girls, one guy, one non-binary person, and Ms. Wagner, the therapist. I already felt weird about the whole thing, but it got worse once I met them all. I and one of the other women were the only two graduate students. Everyone else was a solid

four or five years younger. Ms. Wagner said that was okay because we weren't supposed to talk to each other outside of group. It still made me feel like a space alien.

The theme of the group was depression. Which, according to their questionnaire, I definitely had. Fair enough, but I don't know what my depression had to do with anyone else's. You had Alice talking about how they always felt like they were giving rather than receiving with people, Nova talking about gender, Val, who'd suffered things she didn't want to talk about as a child, and on and on it went. No one else was anything like me.

Except maybe Laura. And Laura was the one who mentioned Ooladon.

Laura was the other graduate student, though in a different program, and that wasn't the only reason she reminded me of myself. She was always the hardest to offer advice to, because her problems were so familiar. If I knew what I was supposed to do to fix them, I wouldn't be sitting here in the first place.

It was at the beginning of the session. We all started by going around in a circle and saying what had happened to us that week. It was the part I liked the most, actually. Because even after only a few sessions, I did start caring about the other people. I wanted to know what happened to them. How life was going for them, and whether any of them were getting something out of this.

That day, she was the third person to talk. Jay was finishing off talking about being in a fight with his mother, the exact fight he was afraid of getting into last week. He shrugged and slumped in the chair the way

he always did when he ran out of things to say and attention turned to Laura.

...I've discovered the kindness of Ooladon," Laura said.

Most of the group looked confused, but Ms. Wagner didn't. She looked angry. ...We don't talk about that kind of thing here."

Laura stared back. There was a blankness to that stare that I recognized too well. It was the way you looked at someone when you felt numb inside.

...I'm going to need an apology from you," said Ms. Wagner. ...I empathize with what you're feeling, but the words you say in this space can hurt your fellow members."

Laura sat in the blue plastic chair and rocked backwards and forwards, just slightly. ...There's no harm in Ooladon. There is only kindness."

...I told you that we don't mention that name in this space," she snapped. She had a look of anger verging on disgust that I had never imagined on her before. ...I'll give you one last chance to apologize and then I'll ask you to leave this room."

...There is only kindness in Ooladon. There is only kindness in Oola"

...Get out!" the therapist screamed. ...If you don't do it of your own will, I will call security to have you escorted out by force!"

Laura sat perfectly silent for a few seconds, then stood up and walked out the door of the room. She walked slowly, with a tiredness that was much more than physical. But at the same time, her face had a determination to it. She wasn't just leaving. She had somewhere else to go.

The rest of us sat quietly in our chairs. You could hear the ticking of the clock that hung over the blackboard. Tick tick tick tick tick.

I spoke up, finally, because it felt like somebody had to. ...I'm sorry, I'm a little lost. What is ... the thing she was talking about? And why aren't we allowed to say it?"

Samantha spoke up. ...It's sort of an urban legend thing? About these abandoned-

Ms. Wagner cut her off, another thing I'd never seen her do before today. ...Ooladon is a made-up word for people who don't want to do the work of getting better. It doesn't mean anything, except that the person who's using it is giving up on themselves. And that's not what you want to do, is it? Give up?"

A few people murmured agreement, but mostly there was just silence. That was a talent that Ms. Wagner had. She could make the whole group go silent. Even the most shocking revelations from one of us patients couldn't make that happen.

The room was still in shock at hearing Ms. Wagner, normally the portrait of calm, screaming at someone to get out. One glance at Val told you that she wasn't speaking again today, and she probably wasn't the only one.

As for me, I had my eye on Samantha. She had recognized the name. As far as I could tell, she was the only one who had, other than the therapist.

I felt a little jealous of Samantha. She was a high achiever, the kind of student that I could only dream of being. She got straight A's in all of her classes, at least, until this semester. She didn't speak much, but when she did, she talked about feeling lonely and empty. She also had a lot of fears about being special and if she really was, but I knew what it was like to feel lonely and empty.

...Now," Ms. Wagner said. ...Was there anyone who didn't get to share about their week?"

\* \* \*

As strange as all that was, I might still have forgotten about Ooladon if that had been all. While I was on the train back to my apartment, I tried a couple of spellings of it on the internet. I even tried the phrase Laura had chanted. There is only kindness in Ooladon. Nothing. Some local thing then. A student prank or something like that.

What stuck with me more than Ms. Wagner's anger was the way Laura had said it. Especially at the end, when she was just repeating that one sentence. There was an eerie calm to her voice, a dreaminess almost.

As tired and numb as she had also been, when she said those words, she seemed perfectly at peace. The kind of peace I didn't know people like me could find.

Of course, it was just a few words. People say things funny all the time. But it still stuck with me. If I tried, I could almost hear it.

There is only kindness in Ooladon.

When it came time for therapy the next week, I was looking forward to seeing her. I wanted to know what that weird little chant had meant to her. And if she decided not to answer that, I at least wanted to know if she was okay.

She wasn't there.

...All right," said Mrs. Wagner, as I sat down. ...I think that's everyone. Does someone want to start with something that happened in their life this week?"

I raised my hand. You weren't supposed to raise your hand, but I almost always did. ...Um, what about Laura? Is she not going to be here?"

Mrs. Wagner looked at me with that expression that was at the same time sympathetic and judging. ...Did you not hear about Laura?"

...She left the school," said Samantha. ...Just didn't show up for

classes on Friday."

The day after the session. She had decided to leave school the same day the therapist had kicked her out of the group. ...But she's okay? Like, she went home, or--"

...She's fine," said Mrs. Wagner. ...Now, let's get started, shall we? Jay, would you like to go first?"

I tried to catch Samantha's eye, but she didn't notice. That made sense. There was no reason she would associate me with Laura just because I did.

And besides, it could all be a coincidence. Maybe Ooladon was some nonsense that she'd only gotten into because she was having a mental health crisis, and that crisis was why she left the school. It was obvious, logical, simple, and didn't feel right at all.

First, there was the way Ms. Wagner reacted. She wasn't puzzled or sympathetic. She was furious. As if Samantha was talking about something very real and very dangerous.

But really, it was just the way Laura said it. That dreamy, calm lilt. As if she'd really found something that was all kindness. Something named Ooladon.

You weren't supposed to talk to anyone in the group outside of the group. But there was no way around it. I had to. Samantha knew what Ooladon was and Ooladon was something important. I didn't know what it was yet, but I knew it mattered.

...I'm afraid that's all we have time for this week," Ms. Wagner announced, finally. ...Have a good day, and I'll see you all next week."

I timed getting my things together and walking out the door to match Samantha as closely as possible. As soon as we were out in the hallway and the door was closed behind us, I whispered her name.

She turned around. She obviously had a class coming up, because she was carrying a notebook and a binder, but when she saw the expression on my face, she nodded and gestured towards the bathroom.

I followed her inside and she turned around to face me. ...It's about Laura, isn't it?"

...Yes. And that thing she was talking about last session. I just want to understand."

...I'm going tonight," she said, and looked me dead in the eyes. There was that numbness again. ...I've got all my affairs in order and I'm ready. Do you want to join me?"

...What do you mean you've got your affairs in order? What is Ooladon?"

...You've been trying so hard, haven't you? To get better, to be different. All of that. You're tired of it, aren't you?"

It wasn't as strong, but I could hear that same calm, dreamy tone in her voice. It was as if she had just started down the path that Laura had nearly reached the end of. ...Ooladon is the one you're afraid of," she continued. "But you don't have to be. Meet me at 9:00. In front of this building."

Without waiting for an answer, she walked to the door. But before going out, she paused and turned back. ...I'm glad that you're coming with me," she said, and disappeared.

I didn't even have to think about the question to know. I would be there that night to meet her. I just would.

\* \* \*

I arrived about five minutes late, and she was waiting. It was a cold night and the sun had already gone down. Students were wandering around and so were random adults. Samantha smiled when she saw

me, but it was a fake smile, a polite one. Maybe she was really happy to see me, but she was too tired to show it.

Without even saying hi, she started walking south, away from campus. I had to jog a few steps to keep up with her.

...You really don't know anything about Ooladon, do you?" she asked, suddenly, as we came to the edge of the curb.

...No," I said. ...Nothing."

...I was the same way just a few days ago. All I knew was that people talked about Ooladon and that it had something to do with the building on Peel Street."

I didn't know what building Samantha meant, but Peel Street wasn't far from here. I knew basically where we would be going at least.

...What is it? Or who?"

Samantha walked silently for a moment. I couldn't tell if she was thinking the question over, or just ignoring me.

...Have you ever felt like you need to do something just to be enough? That you have to be nice enough or get a certain grade or make enough money just to give yourself a reason?"

I felt a swirling in my stomach. ...I think everyone feels that way sometimes."

...Yes, exactly! Everybody feels that way! They do! But you feel it all the time. You feel it all the time and you can't keep up with it."

The swirling in my stomach again. ...I know the feeling you're talking about."

...What do you think something would have to be to never have that

feeling? To exist entirely for itself, and to need no reason but to continue?"

Peel Street had to be nearby, but I didn't recognize the streets we were walking down. They were quiet and unfriendly, with rows of dimmed windows staring down at them like closed eyes. ...I don't know," I said. ...Not human, I think."

...You're right," said Samantha, dreamily. ...That's the first thing to know about Ooladon."

We came around a corner, and Samantha came to a stop. There was a fence, covered in tarps and occasional signs warning people to stay back. The tarp was tattered and discolored. It had obviously been there a very long time, and the building behind it had no signs of construction. Just some broken windows and painted scrawls.

...There are things in this world that don't need permission from anything, much less humans," Samantha said, and I couldn't help but notice how empty her eyes looked. Was she happy to have me with her, or did she just need someone to distract her?

...What about the kindness? What did that mean?"

Samantha took a corner of the fence and lifted it up. ...It's waiting to show it to you."

After a glance to make sure no one was watching, I ducked through the fence and Samantha followed. The ground here had been leveled, but then left that way long enough for weeds to overgrow it. In the center of the flat mess of thorns and runners, what must have been an office building rose up at least eight or nine stories tall.

The building itself was like a large, grey skeleton. Every bit of it was covered in decay, from the shattered glass to the orange and green patches of lichen on the walls. Graffiti artists had tried to turn it into a canvas, but the ugly thing still hung over all their works, heavy and

thick and dead.

It wasn't a place for anything human. Only for something like what Samantha had described. Something old and gnarled and alone.

...You'll understand soon," said Samantha, and the words had the same chantlike quality as Laura's about the kindness of Ooladon. And yet, I followed. She pushed the door open without turning the handle and I entered.

The door opened into a dark and empty room with a large wooden desk that indicated it had probably been a lobby of some kind once. Rocks, bottles, and various broken pieces of other things were spread around the room. The ceiling had once had tiles, but almost all of them were either broken or gone.

But none of that was what really struck me about the room. The first thing I noticed was an impression, one that I can't easily justify. The building no longer felt like a human space. It was large enough that people could walk through it, but it wasn't made for them. People were unwelcome.

...You can feel it," Samantha said. ...You can tell you're in its home."

...Is Laura here?" I asked. ...Is she okay?"

...This way. You'll understand soon." She walked towards a hallway next to the desk. The light didn't reach into it all, and when she stood in front of it, I could barely make her out from the background. I walked unsteadily towards her.

I could just make out her outline standing near one of several doors. My footsteps crunched on something I couldn't see as I got closer.

She pulled the door open. ...Step through there. Once you meet it, you'll understand."

There was something in the room, something large that hung down

from the ceiling. As I walked into the room, it moved, as if it was turning towards me. The moment it did, I felt my heart pounding, faster and faster. The world became a flat screen that I was falling away from. The pounding was too loud and too fast to keep up with.

All of my thoughts fled away from me except one, which repeated over and over.

*There is only kindness in Ooladon.*

\* \* \*

I woke up in the back of an immense room. Samantha was in front of me.

...Do you understand?" she asked. ...Do you?"

And I did. Ooladon had seen me and I had seen it.

...Where are we?"

...It's time for the offering," she said. ...I've been preparing for this moment all week. That's why I brought you. I wanted you to join me."

And I understood that too. Ooladon was infinitely kind. It could accept any person, just as they were, and ask nothing more from them. But it was also infinitely hungry. Ooladon stretched as high as this building and who knows how deep into the earth. Its mouth was always open for new offerings. Ooladon's kindness was its hunger.

And when you truly understood, there was nothing fearful in that. It is fearful to be eaten by a bear, because what is a bear to deserve life more than you? But Ooladon was absolute. It was and would always be. To become food for Ooladon, to be swallowed into its mouth, was as deep and meaningful a triumph as any human could ever hope to achieve.

It was enough for Laura. It was enough for Samantha. It could be

enough for me.

Samantha took my hand and gently lifted me up.

"Come with me," she said. ...I'll show you how."

You probably think that Ooladon had hypnotized me, or changed my thoughts somehow. But it wasn't so simple. It had shown itself to me, fully. I understood it and its kindness entirely. It was as if I could choose to see myself from my own point of view or from its. And I had never understood myself as well as I understood Ooladon in that moment.

Samantha walked forward, and I realized the room was not empty. There were rows upon rows of chairs, and each one had someone sitting in them. The people in the chairs were mostly older people, and well-dressed. They were deathly quiet, but watched both of us intently.

"This is our moment," said Samantha. ...Ooladon has accepted us. They're here to celebrate that with us."

Seated near one of the rows I recognized Ms. Wagner. She was looking at me with beaming pride. Finally, she seemed to be saying, you found a place for yourself. Finally, you figured yourself out.

And in front of all of this was the mouth.

An enormous hole had been carved in the back of the wall in order to reveal the yawning space that was the mouth of Ooladon. Its top was near the ceiling, and I knew that if I looked for its bottom, I would grow dizzy. Every inch of the great mouth was covered with muscles and teeth. If the mouth had lips or edges around it, they weren't visible. All we saw was an endless, tooth-covered maw.

Samantha stepped up to the edge of the mouth. ...You will follow me, won't you? It would mean so much not to be alone."

She stared directly into my eyes and stood waiting. And I couldn't answer. I couldn't meet that stare.

She waited for a few seconds, then sighed and turned back around. The crowd grew tense. This was the moment they had come for.

I should stop her, I thought to myself. But I didn't. I just watched, with the rest of the crowd.

She stretched her foot out, took a breath, and fell into the mouth.

The whole mouth writhed, pulling her down into itself. And then, it relaxed.

She was gone.

The audience's attention turned to me. I faced them. And then I faced the mouth.

But I'm alive.

I didn't leap into Ooladon's stomach. I turned around and I walked out, back into the hallway, and then out into the world. The crowd watched me, but they didn't stop me.

"She'll come back again," I heard one of them whispering.

They might be right. I don't think I'm some miraculous hero for walking away. I don't believe I'm any stronger or wiser than Laura or Samantha or anyone else who stepped into that mouth. People run away from Ooladon every day. And every day, they change their minds and come back.

I've thought about going back to that building on Peel almost every day since I left it. I fantasize for hours about returning to the one thing that ever welcomed me entirely. The one thing that ever called itself worthy of accepting my total and complete sacrifice. If I lived closer, I might have done it by now.

And yet, I'm alive.

Why did I walk away? Why haven't I returned to finish the deed? The answer is Samantha. The way she looked at me just before she fell into the mouth. Whenever I dream of Ooladon, I see her face, and a part of me turns away again.

Because Ooladon wasn't enough for her. The mouth wasn't good enough. She also wanted someone to share it with.

And I wonder what would have happened if I had reached out to her. If I had done anything.

But I didn't. I just stood there, quietly, while she fell.

I didn't want anything, but I was changed. I no longer wanted to enter Ooladon. I didn't want anything except to not be alone. To be back in group, or in class, or anywhere at all, as long as there was someone with me. Someone human. Someone alive.

It's the one thing Ooladon can't give me. So it's what I have to hold onto every day, no matter how hard it is.

Because even today, I remember the truth.

There is only kindness in Ooladon.



# The Call

by Julie Shiel

This time it was heard,  
the cry of a lonely werewolf  
calling to the tower princess  
to escape her living death;  
She an orphan pent in a high cell  
casting heated glances  
to wandering knights errant  
and singing a siren's song  
to be saved from herself.

Speaking the great grimoire  
she weaves magic spells around  
this cursed and enchanted forest,  
while the broken and rusted armor  
of those brave and chivalrous men  
flash the omen white of bone  
at the questing of beguiled ravens.

A fitting mate for the rising moon  
he sings to her a lovesong  
of a star-shaded meadow  
the savage joy of a chase  
ice-limned leaves and steaming blood;  
Lures her out of her turret  
to forsake her palace tomb  
to sever her braid and run  
with paws and bloody teeth.



# Frogman

by Brad Fraunfelder

# Monster Face

by Lisa Short

I waited until Ashlye told me they were on their way back from their cousin's wedding to sneak out of the Clubhouse alone. I had promised I wouldn't do that while they were visiting family, and I'd meant it. I would never do anything to mess up Ashlye's family visits. But sometimes, I just wanted to be somewhere that wasn't the Clubhouse—which Ashlye totally understood—and I wanted to be there *alone*, which Ashlye totally didn't.

I had at least thoroughly prepared for it—nobody in their right mind was going to get any closer to me than they could help. No shower for two whole days, filthy hat jammed low on snarled clumpy hair, baggy sweatsuit and loafers so ragged they had no style or color anymore, big cheap low-light visor and biofilm veneers for my face—I hated that last addition, but while I did want to be ugly, I didn't want to be *spectacularly* ugly. That attracted the wrong sort of attention just as much as being pretty did. And, of course, I didn't want to be recognized.

Ashlye liked to raise the specter of that last possibility when they got really sick of me sneaking out of the Clubhouse. As unlikely as it seemed that Royce was still looking for me, there was always the chance he was. Or, at least as likely, the chance that someone would say casually one day in Royce's hearing, *Hey man, I saw this girl out in the Market today, you shoulda seen her FACE...!*

If I let myself, I could imagine *his* face (expressionless) and his voice (thoughtful, rising in pitch)—*Oh? What was it, about her FACE?* But I didn't. It was enough to recognize the danger and take precautions against it. Hence the biofilms.

So I sailed out the Clubhouse's trapdoor exit and into the great out-

doors, which was all I'd dreamed it would be: hot and black as the inside of an oven, reeking of mildew and old grease. Of course, the alley outside the Clubhouse wasn't where I planned on hanging out—that was just past the alley's mouth, and even from as far back as I stood, I could feel the bass rumble from unseen holo projectors through the soles of my loafers. Lights strobed across the thin slice of leaden black sky overhead; I hurried forward, towards the slowly swelling roar of sound that was at least a couple thousand other Market-dwellers emerging from of the ruins of the city's gigaplex housing developments to gawk at the latest wonders on the cyber-mesh network.

I was halfway down the alley when I heard it—a dull, metallic *thud*, no part of the Market's revelries, coming from the rusting hulk of a dumpster a bare meter to my left. I froze, then edged warily away from it, back towards the Clubhouse trapdoor—but I was really more annoyed than worried. It was hard to imagine would-be attackers lurking inside that particular dumpster; Ashlye and I were careful to keep our alley as filthy, deserted, and worthless-looking as possible. Probably some decades-old piece of trash had simply rotted to the point that it'd fallen over inside it—I inched closer, squinting up at the dumpster's high walls, hoping to spot something that might corroborate that.

Something *was* sticking up over the dumpster's top edge, shining palely in the gloom. I crept even closer, staring, then shoved the visor back up onto my forehead and triggered my right eye implant. Though Royce had told me at the time that the implant was the best money could buy, he'd been as full of shit about that as he'd been about everything else. It never had meshed properly with my normal left-side vision, so I always had to squinch my left eye shut to get a really good

full-spectrum scan with the implant—

— and I recoiled, because that whitish, oblong bit of debris was a *foot*. A *human* foot, and not only that, a *live* human foot—as if to underline that liveliness, another faint *thump!* issued from the dumpster’s depths, sending a few rusted paint chips fluttering from its side to the ground.

Right. It was time to call Ashlye.

\* \* \*

Ashlye heaved the body up off of their shoulders and over onto my workbench. It rolled bonelessly onto its—oops, make that *his*—back, head bouncing a little at the impact. “Jeez,” I said, a little reproachfully. “If you wanted to kill him, you could’ve just done it while he was still in the dumpster.” Ashlye shrugged, mouth tight with annoyance. I sighed. “Look, I’m sorry I snuck out again—”

“No you’re not,” they snapped, then turned their back on me and stalked across the room to lean up against the wall, arms folded tightly across their chest. They didn’t have to try very hard to look menacing; they’d stopped by the Clubhouse long enough to gear up in case I had needed more rescuing than I’d indicated I did, and were consequently slim and deadly in form-fitting black mech-armor, gun ports jutting from their shoulders and hair scraped back into a long practical braid hanging down their back.

I crossed my own arms over my chest as I stared down thoughtfully at the actual rescuee. Or tried to—I’d forgotten I was still in disguise and my fingers got tangled up in the holes in the sweatshirt’s baggy sleeves. “Oh, shit. Can you keep an eye on him til—”

“Fine.”

Clearly I still wasn’t forgiven. I cast Ashlye an apologetic look as I hurried past them to my bedroom. They either saw it and ignored it or

were too busy glaring at the rescuee, still obliviously unconscious, to notice. I yearned for a shower, but really didn’t want the rescuee to wake up with just Ashlye there, so I stripped off the biofilms, yanked on the first clean coveralls I found, dragged a brush through my hair, then ran back out into the Clubhouse workroom.

He hadn’t woken up, and Ashlye hadn’t stirred from their spot against the wall. I jogged over to the workbench and hooked up some disposable leads to the standard body implant locations, then synced them with my personal console and set my best decryption apps to take a crack at anything they found. While I was waiting, I dug our med-surg kit out and slapped one of the diagnostics pads on his bare chest.

After about ten minutes, the holo tank connected to my console spat out several screens’ worth of alphanumeric. Ashlye, unable to keep cutting off their nose to spite their face, wandered over to stand behind my shoulder. “Wait, he’s *clean?*”

I couldn’t blame them for the tone of disbelief. “Of ID, yeah. Which I agree is—wait, *wait*, I don’t think he’s a Fed, don’t just chop his damn *head* off!” Ashlye resheathed their biggest knife, looking sullen. “He’s not totally clean, see?” I pointed at the second set of results. “High-level medical implants. Maybe top-level, my ware’s not good enough to be able to tell that kind of a difference.” My stomach clenched up a bit. I’d been hoping he was either some poor loser down on his luck, somebody we could actually help out, or next-best, somebody’s hired muscle that we could return to them for a suitable fee. But nobody with med implants like that was in the first category, and the rest of him was too slim and soft-fleshed to be believable as the second. No tattoos, no brands—not a single scar marked that fine-grained, eggshell skin.

The med-surg kit chimed in—no brain damage, not even a concussion. He’d been roughed up, but hadn’t ended up with anything more serious than bruises. My stomach tightened even more—whoever had jumped him, probably Market kids with delusions of ganghood, hadn’t wanted to mess him up too badly, probably because they’d both recognized what he most likely was and hadn’t had any way of knowing that

he'd been ID-scrubbed. Everyone knew Uppies were hot-wired for search-and-rescue; nobody wanted to hang around waiting for that to happen. But it was still hard to believe—Uppies, those privileged residents of the city's domed exurbs, didn't go wandering around alone in random Market alleys, scrubbed of their ID markers. Did *not*—except here he was.

As I was bending over him to look more closely at the kit's display, his eyes snapped open. For a long moment, there was no sense in them at all—it was like being stared at by a doll. As I straightened back up, he blinked hard, gaze focusing on my face a split second before he jerked away, lips peeling back from his teeth in revulsion. I jumped myself in sympathy, then realized what his problem was.

“Oh, right. No biofilms. Sorry about that, I forgot.” Not entirely accurate—in the Clubhouse, I wore what I wanted, and since I never wanted to wear biofilms, that was that. “Settle down, I'm not the one who put you in that dumpster.”

“What dumpster?”

“The one—never mind, I guess you were unconscious for that part. What's the last thing you remember?”

He stared whitely at me. “Who *are* you?”

One corner of my mouth quirked up involuntarily; I cast a sideways glance at Ashlye, who rolled their eyes. In their particular line of work, Ashlye did occasionally deal with Uppies; maybe this combined degree of entitlement and wild incaution was normal for them. “You can call me...Jade?” I'd always liked that name. “And this is, ah—”

“Ashlye,” said Ashlye flatly. That wasn't a great portent for our rescuee, but he seemed oblivious to the nuance.

“Richard,” he said, after a pause. I thought about saying *That's one of my OTHER favorite fake names!* but that seemed unnecessarily mean,

so I just nodded. “So—you found me in a dumpster?” He glanced down at his naked self. “Like this?”

“Yeah.” I turned my back on him—safe as houses, with Ashlye there—and rummaged around under my personal console. I had a quilt there, left over from a freak snowstorm a few months before—we didn't generally have to worry about keeping warm in the Clubhouse; our problem was usually the opposite. I scooped it up and dumped it on his lap.

He flinched back, his eyes darting unerringly to the right side of my face, then looked resolutely away as he bundled the quilt around his shoulders. His gaze caught on the holo tank, then roved around the workroom, lingering on my personal console and the med-surg kit. “What *is* this place?”

I didn't really have a good answer to that—the *Clubhouse* wouldn't mean anything to him, certainly not what it meant to me and Ashlye—our refuge, our hideout, our entirely illegal Market residence. “My cyber-mesh workshop,” which was also true. “It's my day job.” Ashley thought that was funny; I could tell by the way their eyes crinkled at the corners.

But not-Richard clearly didn't get the joke. “Yeah? Maybe you can help me—” Suddenly he looked desperate, or as desperate as anybody who really had no idea what *desperation* actually felt like, could look—lips thinning and pinching together, fingers clenching on the quilt til his knuckles shone white. “My sister—she ran away from home. She's done it before, but this time she came down here, into the Market. My dad's investigators think she was talking to somebody here and whoever it was, offered to take her in—but the cops haven't been able to find any trace of her, and the investigators wouldn't even come down here without military-grade support. I know she's here, though—they were right, she *was* talking to someone, though she wouldn't tell me who it was before she left.”

It was funny—I wanted to feel sorry for him, and in a way I did. There

was no doubt he was in the grip of some strong emotion over his sister's disappearance. But who really knew why he wanted his sister back? I didn't doubt Royce had pitched a fit once he'd had to accept that *I* had gone—probably a short-lived set of emotions, except possibly the rage-related ones—but then, not-Richard didn't look enraged. *Reframe*, I thought—what if one of Ashlye's cousins was missing, had been *taken!*—ooh. That helped. I couldn't help casting a quick look over at Ashlye, who looked utterly unmoved. Well, of course—Ashlye cared about their cousins all right, but only *their* cousins.

And me. Ashlye would have turned the world upside down to find me. And maybe not-Richard felt the same way about his sister—well, he had to, didn't he? To come physically down himself to the Market, ID and tracker-stripped so no one would know and try and stop him... my left eye prickled, startling me, and I blinked hard to clear the blurriness away. I *could* look for his sister; I could at least do that much for him, since I was pretty sure by now how things were going to turn out for him otherwise. I looked over at Ashlye again and waited for them to meet my eyes, then raised my eyebrows; they nodded once, slowly.

“Okay.” I put on my best businesslike demeanor. “I can do a search for you. I already have your genetic print mostly sequenced—is she a half-sister, or—” *Not a stepsister; I hope*, I thought belatedly. But Richard was shaking his head.

“Full sister,” he said. “Our father's first wife—” not terribly relevant, unless he'd made a habit of mislaying other sisters in the past. “But if you're going to search law enforcement databases, the investigators already did that.”

I wrinkled my nose. “No. Different ones.” His eyes opened wide—physical scan had put him at age twenty-two, plus or minus two years, but he suddenly looked closer to Ashlye's age, or maybe even mine. Something had relaxed muscles I hadn't even realized were tensed around his eyes and jaw. Hope, maybe? “This is going to take a little while, though, so you may as well try to get comfortable.” I pulled the sensor pads and input helmet from the cabinet above my personal console.

“Could I, uh, get some clothes—”

“We don't have any that would fit you,” Ashlye broke in irritably.

The helmet sealed around my head, cutting off my view of the workshop. I left the audio inputs disengaged, since I didn't need them for this sort of search. I was rewarded for that stupidity by overhearing him, some minutes later, asking Ashlye in a roundabout sort of way—

“You mean her *face*?” Ashlye's voice was almost too friendly. “Why doesn't she fix her *face*?”

“Well—you all have this high-tech setup, so you—”

“Maybe not everybody cares if they look pretty for you,” even more silkily.

*My face, my face*—certainly I wished that Royce had never done what he'd done to it, and even more that I'd either been old enough to understand what *infection* was, or had someone else around who'd given enough of a shit to make sure I didn't scratch at the healing scabs. Those sleepless nights, one after the other blurring into weeks, first the relentless agony of the burns, and then the *itching*—I'd lost my right eye to sepsis before Royce had realized I might actually die of it and had gotten me medical treatment. Not regenerative treatment, of course; that would have negated the original point. *Pretty attracts the wrong kind of attention...you don't want that, do you? Remember what happened to your mother? You want me to fix it so that never happens to you?*

But even after that, I'd stayed with him. I had still believed, on some desperate fading level, that he'd done it for my own good, and also I'd thought I hadn't had anywhere else to go. Royce's gang had controlled (still did, as far as I knew) a good quarter of the Market and I couldn't leave the Market—legally, I didn't even exist outside it. Things hadn't really clicked for me until a few years later, though, when he'd started visiting my room at night. *Monster-Face's* room! Not that he'd ever

called me that...not to *my* face—

At first, it had been just talk—highly technical talk about the cyber-mesh work I loved, that nobody else but him even understood, and if it was a little weird and awkward to be having those discussions in my bedroom, that was probably just me, right? Then, a few weeks after that, he'd started sitting right up next to me on the bed—then his hands had started to wander, just over to my knees at first, then higher—and higher—

I'd been right in thinking I had nowhere else to go, but *nowhere* was where I went anyway. In the dead of night, two hours after he'd left my room that last night, because even to me it had been pretty clear where all that was leading.

But *nowhere*, as it had turned out, had at least had Ashlye in it.

“Uh—Jade? You done yet?” Ashlye was doing their best to sound casual, but I could hear the tight thread of worry in their voice. I snapped to attention and realized that yes, the search was done—had been done for a good five minutes. I disengaged from the helmet and pads and turned around to face them both.

Not-Richard's face was pale and set. “You couldn't find her.”

I pinched my lips together and inhaled through my nose, then out through my mouth in a sigh. “No, I found her. I mean—what's left of her.”

I had thought he'd been pale already, but he turned white as a sheet and clutched at the sides of the workbench. “Wha—what do you mean, what's *left*—”

“She was farmed.”

His face didn't so much as twitch.

“He doesn't know what you're talking about,” said Ashlye impa-

tiently. “Man, she was *organ* farmed.” His expression was still blank. “Chopped up and sold for parts, do I have to draw you a—”

“Shut *up!*” he screamed; I flinched away from the spray of spittle flying past my nose. “What the fuck are you talking about—that's *sick*—”

“Where do you think you Uppies get your transplants, when the doctors don't have the time to grow you a nice new part?” Ashlye wore a small, tight grin that carved deep grooves around the corners of their mouth—how they would look in ten years, or twenty, maybe, if we managed to survive that long. “There's good money in it. What the hell did you think might've happened to her?”

“I don't know—some, some kingpin or drug lord holding her for ransom or, keeping her, you know—” His cheeks had gone from white to red.

Ashlye snorted a laugh. “There's enough sex in the Market to go around and then some, boyo. Nobody's keeping some random Uppie girl around just for that.”

Not-Richard stared at them; Ashlye was more than equal to staring back, and he broke first, eyes lowering to stare blankly at his quilted lap. “You're sure,” he said softly.

Ashlye didn't say anything to that—well, they weren't the one who should, really. “Yeah,” I said. “The DNA on a bunch of sales from last week matches yours, just like a full sister's would.”

“Could you—could you give me your evidence?” It was my turn to stare blankly at him. He looked up, careful to focus on the left side of my face, though his eyes were earnest enough. “Is it the kind of evidence that would stand up in court? Because—”

“She could. But she won't.” Ashlye sauntered over to the workbench.

“Why not? I can pay you—I give you my word!”

“You can’t pay us enough,” said Ashlye coolly. “You’ve *seen* us. You’ve seen our *place*. Sorry. You’ll go back to your Uppie world, there’s no word you can give that will make me believe you’d never rat us out. Why wouldn’t you? What’s it to *you*, what happens to us? But if you just vanish down here in the Market, like your sister did—whatever reason that happened to her is probably roomy enough to cover you t—”

I had to give him that much, that he had really good reflexes—he almost caught Ashlye off guard. But he was no match for Ashlye. Few were, especially naked and unarmed. At least it was over pretty quickly.

\* \* \*

Ashlye was waiting for me in the Clubhouse living room; I hadn’t been sure they would be. I’d stayed a long time in the shower. They patted the sofa next to them expectantly and I trudged over, hair still sopping wet. When I sat down gingerly on the edge of the cushion, they slung an arm around my shoulders and tugged me closer. “I’m dripping on you,” I said.

“Whatever. I don’t care.” They settled back more comfortably, pulling me with them. “Did you put him up for auction?”

“Yeah.” Organ farming wasn’t our usual gig, so we probably weren’t going to get top prices, but we could always use the extra credit.

We sat without speaking for a minute or two. “Are we going to watch something?” I asked finally. The holo tank in the middle of the room was dark and silent.

“We *could* watch something. Or I could tell you about my auntie’s

wedding.” I turned my head sharply to look up at them; they were smiling impishly.

“Wait, it wasn’t your auntie’s wedding—it was your cousin Saraya’s wedding—”

“*And* my auntie Susann’s wedding,” they said, now grinning outright. “Oh, nobody else knew about it but Susann and her new wife—*and* my mother—and now Saraya is *so* pissed off—”

“Wait!” I jumped up and scampered to my bedroom. Five minutes later I was back wearing my favorite jammies and slippers and clutching the Raggedy Ann doll that had been Ashlye’s first gift to me. Ashlye was just sitting back down on the sofa with a steaming mug in each hand. I sniffed the air. “Oh, my God, is that cocoa? *Your mama’s* cocoa?”

“She sent some back with me, especially for you. She wants to know when you’re coming to visit again.” Over the rim of their mug, Ashlye’s eyes watched me, dark and steady.

“Oh. Well.” I squirmed. “Sometime...”

“I wish you would.” They paused. “You know you don’t have to wear biofilms for her. She’s seen your face. She doesn’t care.”

“I know. I want to go.” I did want to. Sort of. Ashlye knew everything there was to know about me, but knowing wasn’t the same as understanding.

Ashlye snapped their fingers in front of my face. “Hey! Don’t start brooding again, okay? So, I showed up at Mama’s apartment the night before the wedding—”



# I Do Not Dream

by Emmie Christie

The face in the window  
Much like a small moon,  
Pitted and reflecting  
The light from my lamp,  
Wanes at the cheery brightness of eating.  
It shrinks at the slurps and all of the clinking.  
It wanes in the blooming laughter of two,  
And shrinks to a point at a circle of three.  
It hides at the edge of the crosshatched window,  
At the bottom right, unblinking, right on the brink  
Of my periphery, just so.  
It lingers.  
The moon-face rests its fingers  
And clatters—No! It's just the oak tree,  
Just a branch, they say, and return to the game  
Ignoring that the cat watches  
The window, and the golf ball-sized face in the corner.  
And soon they all say, 'hurray,' and 'good times,'  
And trot out the door to their cars and they drive  
Away, and I am still here.

It waits.  
I do not look,  
But I wash the dishes, and it waxes. It grows,  
Its gaze drags on my shoulders, its pitted eyes longing—  
Longing for what? —What could it want?  
Best not to think, best not to wonder,  
For it rises in the window to the very top corner,  
The more that I shudder and tremble and stiffen  
My neck so that I do not look—no! Don't look!  
And I turn off the lights one by one,  
Dreading the last at the top of the stair,  
Across from the window. Something clatters.  
The cat scatters!  
And I fall down the stairs,  
And keep my eyes open wide.  
I watch a show about baking all night,  
Where they talk about fondant and sweet kinds of cream,  
And I do not dream.  
I do not dream.

# The Steel Stallion

by J. L. Royce

The girl called Looby (but not to her face) was on a quest for mech. Of course success meant the sweet jangle of dollarydoo in the purse after selling the junk in Melba, but there were easier ways to live. She did it because she enjoyed the hunt, scouring the wilderness and overgrown battlefields east of Melbourne.

Today, the hunt for mech meant a hunt for a certain liarbird.

Looby quietly picked her way through the bush, stalking her prey while ever cautious of detection. This wasn't a hotbed of bushranger activity like up north, but she wasn't taking any chances. Falling into the clutches of a murderous outlaw was the last thing the girl wanted.

That morning she'd heard a liarbird's song, a faint and very curious call that intrigued her. She'd been tracking it ever since, as the sun rose and the heat grew oppressive. She paused again to listen, and sip from her canteen.

"Come on, you little dibber dabber..." Looby muttered. She tried to draw it out with her best whistles—a teakettle, a train's steam trumpet—a trick she'd learned to challenge the bird into responding. Her persistence paid off: the liarbird replied, with the sound of an axe biting into timber.

She challenged it again, creeping closer. Not to be outdone, the liarbird responded, with bird calls and the clapping of a horse at a gallop.

"That's right, my pretty..." Looby whispered, advancing on her prey. "Keep on..."

So it went. Looby scratched her skeeter bites and worried a tic she'd

found in her thick hair, moving ever closer to her quarry. Then the undergrowth rustled, not twenty yards away, and the liarbird raised its fantastic plumage.

"Gotcha!" Looby noted the trees around it and strode forward. As she did, the bird produced the curious sound that had caught her attention: a horse's whinny, but strangely mechanical, with the wheeze of a compressor beneath it.

Looby considered capturing the liarbird for its prized plumage. It seemed unfair, though, to repay the bird's clue with death. Looby strode towards the bird, sending it hopping away, and began the search.

The birds were territorial, the males challenging each other with songs and seducing their mates with lavish feathery displays. Looby spiraled out from where she'd sighted it, knowing that whatever it had heard must have been within earshot.

*And they have very good hearing,* she reminded herself. *A mile? More?*

The spiral she tramped grew larger, the day stifling, and Looby pessimistic. The she stumbled, caught herself, and glanced down. What she took at first to be a root enshadowed by the overarching trees resolved into a weathered boot.

The boot contained a foot, the foot was attached to a leg, and the leg disappeared under the long midnight blue coat of a Dragoon. He lay on his back, his face and opened gut ravaged for a season by the din-

goes and birds and other hungry creatures.

When young, Looby had seen the freshly dead, lying in the streets of Melbourne and across the surrounding battlefields. She swallowed, automatically breathing through her mouth, but found that the months had mostly carried off the stench of decay. Looby studied the corpse.

He was an officer, clearly. She gathered what salable items she could retrieve from the body with the minimum disturbance and stashed them into her ruck: a sturdy leather belt, a handsome pouch of the kind couriers bore, and a black-handled dagger. His munition pouch held a tin of cartridges and minie balls, though there was no gun nearby. She followed his outstretched arm and caught a gleam in the grass beyond.

“Yes!” The bess was a short-barreled variety favored by cavalry, but unusual. The stock had the coils and gauge of a tingler. She stuffed the weapon into her rucksack and was ready to take her loot back home when she spied a glimmer of black metal emerge from a large hummock of vines and brush.

With the excitement of her discovery, Looby had all but forgotten the liarbird’s curious song: the sound of a mech she’d never before encountered. She approached cautiously until she could pick out the shape, then rushed over and fell to her knees, tearing away the vegetation to expose gleaming black hindquarters. The torso had been covered from withers to croup with a rough blanket, wrapped and tied. She exposed the great metal head, handsomely sculpted, gleaming black metal.

A steel stallion.

She estimated the mech’s withers would be as tall as her. Looby cleared the legs and discovered one foreleg shattered.

Rocking back on her heels, Looby considered her find. She’d heard of such things: the powerful, fast mounts of British officers. Only one reason came to mind for wrapping a mech in a blanket, though. She

squinted up at the bright sun, considering. With a tug, she ripped the rotted material and tossed it aside.

Looby sought out a bit of shade in which to wait.

\* \* \*

A low chuff woke Looby from her sun-drenched doze. She slipped her knife from its sheath reflexively, glancing around without moving from her cover. The sound came again, accompanied by a twitch of the mech’s ebony head. Looby scrambled over and ran a hand over the sharply sculpted features. The empty sockets flickered, like fire-lit smoke, then resolved into recognizable eyes.

Looby had some experience with recovered mech.

“You are mine,” she said, emphasizing each word. “Per the Battleground Salvage Act of ’59.”

Its recovery began from the head. The brow furrowed, the nostrils widened, and the lips drew back. The mechanical horse whinnied.

“Hello, child,” it said in a deep voice.

Looby started back. “You *talk*?”

“How perceptive...”

“I know something about how mech works, but I never heard one talk.”

She’d seen pieces of mech guns and carriages and prowlers strewn over battlefields: levers and cables and things that made your fingers buzz if you touched them; and she knew they mostly fed on sunlight, like the tinglers. But they were just clockwork.

The warhorse tried to raise its head but fell back into the grass.

“When?” it asked.

“It’s eighteen sixty-four.”

“What of the rebellion?” it asked. “Who...”

“Won?” Looby laughed. “Does anybody ever win? We drove out you Pommie buggers—the *war for independence* was won,” she replied. “The Australian Federation was victorious.”

“And America?”

“The Rebs lost. Our gold isn’t gonna fund British wars anymore.”

The mech tried to lift its head again.

“Best not try to stand—you’ve got a crook pin.”

“I am designed to survive—”

“No, you don’t!” Looby re-covered the massive body, dragging the torn blanket across its back and laying deadfall down as well.

“What are you doing, child?”

“Making you a deal, horsie,” she replied, without pausing in her labor. Lastly, she drug over a heavy branch and tossed it unceremoniously across the well-hidden form. Satisfied, Looby sat on the warhorse’s shoulder with a grunt and began finger-combing the months of leaves and dust from its wiry mane.

“I’m gonna take off your bad leg and get it fixed—at great expense to me, understand. And you’re gonna stay here, hidden, and *stop your whining*.” She banged his hollow-sounding skull to emphasize each word. “Got that?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine—”

“I am the property of the Third Royal Dragoons, designation Heavy Cavalry, as of July thirteenth, eighteen—”

Looby pointed at the desiccated corpse. “—and you lost your rider back there, making you salvage. So you’ve gotta mind the Salvage Act. You’re mine.”

The warhorse rolled an eye towards the ground, straining to see itself, then eased back into the grass. “Understood.”

“And the only way I’ll move you is on your own four legs. So, the deal is, I get you patched up, and we’ll ride into the West.”

“I don’t think you’ve thought this through, child.”

Looby glowered down at the mech. “Let me worry about that, horsie. You just lay low here. And my *name* is Louisa O’Leary; Miss, I’m from Melbourne—well, Melba neighborhood—and I’m almost seventeen, so you can stop calling me *child*.”

“My name is Edward, if you please,” said the warhorse in precisely articulated English. “And why do you wish to ride west?”

“I’ve got people there, or so I’ve been told. My mother’s Koori.”

“Blacks, like the slaves in America.”

“No! My people were here first, and the whitefellas took the land! The Blacks in the States were kidnapped and brought there; or their parents were.”

Looby rummaged in her ruck and extracted several tools. “Now shut up, relax, and let me detach this leg.” With that, she set to work at the joint above the damage.

“I’ve had plenty of luck taking your kind apart. See this?” She waved a wrench. “Custom-made by my pal Lucky. He’ll mend your pin, good as new.”

“There.” She hefted the shattered foreleg up for the warhorse to see, then shoved it into her rucksack.

Looby stood and lifted the bag with some difficulty. “If you make noise, attract attention, get the liarbird singin’ again, you won’t get this back. Understand? So just stay quiet and I’ll return in a few days.”

The stallion eyed its truncated leg, then twisted its head to consider Looby. “They won’t let you keep me, Louisa.”

“Just let me worry about that. What they don’t know about they can’t nick, can they?”

\* \* \*

The blacksmith laid down his tongs and ran a muscled forearm over his streaming brow. Iluka, or ‘Lucky’ as the whitefellas called him, was the closest thing to a friend that Looby could claim. More importantly, since they’d met in the devastated neighborhood of Melba, he’d taught her about her mother’s people, the lessons to be learned from dreaming, the creation stories she had never known. Looby pretended not to care, but she never cut him off, either.

Lucky stepped out of the smithy and sought a bit of shade in the court beyond before speaking.

“So...you were out in the bush and found a talking horse.”

“It’s *mech*, not a real horse, silly, but yeah.”

“Sure; and its name is Edward, and you want me to fix its leg.”

Looby hauled the limb out of her bag and dumped it onto the work-

bench with a crash. “Yup.”

The young man’s serious expression dissolved into laughter, teeth brilliant in his dark face, startling a real horse in the stable across the way.

“Good one. Like the time you thought there was a Pommie hidin’ in your cellar?”

Looby snapped, “I did find a talking warhorse!”

“You’re mad, girl. First, there’s no talkin’ *mech*. I’ve been inside ’em plenty, and there’s nothing but gears and pulleys wrapped in sun-grabbin’ skin. No talkin’ parts.”

“Well, you’ve not been inside *this* one, ha’ ye?”

The conversation was cut short by Jenkins’s arrival. The merchant, landowner, and City Council member came through the stable, eclipsing the doorway, and lumbered towards them.

“Why aren’t you fixing that busted spring on my buggy, boy? Instead of chatting *this* one up.” He and Looby exchanged glances of mutual disdain.

“*Miss O’Leary*,” he said, with a smirk.

“Lord High a’ Mighty Jenkins.” She made an exaggerated curtsy, loosing a fart at the nadir.

Jenkins grimaced. “Disgusting. Don’t you have some thieving to do?”

“*Salvage*, per the Battleground—”

“Of course. Robbing the dead, more like.”

He confronted Lucky. “When?” What Jenkins lacked in strength he made up for in sheer bulk.

“Next in my queue, sir,” Lucky replied.

Looby noticed that the blacksmith had stepped between the unwelcome visitor and the bench where the mech leg lay. Now Lucky casually picked up a ten-pound hammer lying nearby and slapped it into his palm.

“As soon as we’re done chattin’ I’ll get back to work. Looby here was just leavin’ anyway.”

Jenkins nodded at the smithy and turned to go. “No-account *Looby*,” he muttered with a parting scowl at the young woman, then wallowed out the gate to the street.

She glared at him, ready to snap back, but Lucky frowned a warning.

“Pay him no mind,” he said. “Let’s talk about this job.”

Lucky picked up the foreleg and examined the damage. “This is high-quality steel. Gonna take some skilled labor—this piece has to bear a lot of weight.”

He nodded at the bulging ruck she clutched. “What did you bring me?”

Lucky acted as the go-between for selling the salvaged items Looby came upon, taking a fair ten percent for his trouble. Before they’d met, Looby had found herself, a girl in her teens, at the mercy of strangers who were at the least unscrupulous, and often abusive.

“I’ve been asking after solictors, for Pa, but they’re expensive.”

Looby pulled out several handfuls of finds.

“This won’t do it.” Lucky showed little interest in the belt, buckles, and regimental insignia, lingered over the dagger, but grunted appreciatively at the boots, well-made of English leather and cared for (until their owner’s demise). He paused in thought over the courier’s pouch.

“What was inside?”

Looby shrugged. “Nothin’ but a letter—love letter, I suppose, all flutterin’ hearts—plus a kerchief, smoking gear, like that. Not much.”

The smithy fixed her with his so-calm gaze. “Funny sort of courier, not carryin’ anything. No dispatches, no messages...”

“I swear!” she said.

“See the letter?”

Looby fetched it out of her pocket. “At least, I think it’s a love letter,” she mumbled.

Lucky wiped his hands on his stained apron, accepted the paper square, and unfolded it carefully, squinting in the bright sun.

“Lt. Reginald Wilks-Shaw...” He read, a smile growing.

“What?”

“Some love letter—it’s from his mother.”

Looby looked away.

“Should have paid more attention in school,” the smithy said.

“I had *four whole years* of it before the war, and that was enough!”

Lucky sighed and resumed reading. “Mum’s fine; little sister is fine, had her coming-out; his sweetheart misses him—”

“See!” Looby said, triumphant.

“—and she’d appreciate a letter.”

Lucky refolded the sheet and handed it back. “You should pass that along to the Post Office, or the Reconciliation Commission.”

“Sure.”

“His family would want to know. Think on it; if you were wondering about your kin—”

“Well, I’m *not*, am I!” she shot back. “Ma’s run off, Pa’s in prison, and it’s all lies!”

Looby looked ready to burst into tears, but set her face and demanded, “*Are* you going to fix it?”

“This isn’t just a buggy axle or a fireplace poker. I’ll have to replace each of them cables across the joint, with similar salvage.” Lucky fixed her again with his calm gaze.

“High quality steel...and there’s a *horse*-sized load of it? You sure you don’t want to scrap the whole thing? Probably a half-ton of metal, plus the gadgets inside—”

“No!” Looby glared at him. “Will you fix it, or not?”

“There’s still the matter of payment. What are you holdin’ back?”

Looby’s fingers grazed the black metal foreleg and again imagined herself astride the tall stallion. Perhaps *she* should dress in black—

“Well?”

“There’s somethin’ else,” she said. “I’ve got it hid, safe.”

\* \* \*

Looby had taken a squat in the impromptu community of Melba, a downtown Melbourne rooming house barely standing after the British

shelling, still habitable, but only to the most desperate of tenants. She led Lucky up the rickety back stairs (an explosion had shorn away the front of the building) and into her room. The smells of cooking and hard living crowded in from the adjacent apartments. He hesitated in the doorway as she went to hands and knees in a corner.

“C’mon then,” Looby said. “Shut the door, I won’t bite.”

The young man stepped in and pushed the door closed, with some difficulty. “Frame’s sprung,” he remarked.

“Yeah, artillery will do that.” With a grunt, she pulled the dresser aside and lifted a plank beneath it, then withdrew a long object wrapped in rags. She pulled them away to reveal the *bess*.

Lucky’s eyes went wide, and he accepted the gun with the reverence of a holy relic.

“This here—” he stroked the top “—is an Enfield short-barrel, like the Brits sold to the Confederacy. But this over-under configuration—this down here’s a tingler!”

“I know that,” Looby said, nonetheless impressed by his knowledge of the gun.

“It’s like two weapons in one—lethal and non-lethal. The Rebs sure didn’t get these!”

“You want it?” Looby asked. “Fix my horse’s leg, and no gossiping about *any* of this while you’re boozin’.”

Lucky’s broad nose flared as his eyes creased in anger. “I ain’t a drunk! And anyway—” he inverted the *bess* and pointed to the base of its stock “—it needs a power pack, else the tingler’s useless.”

Looby examined the socket, cursing herself for not searching more thoroughly.

“So do you have it?” he asked.

“Sure,” she lied. “In a safe place—another safe place, I mean. When I see the leg’s ready, I’ll fetch it.”

Lucky pursed his lips but did not challenge her.

“Alrighty.” He handed back the weapon. “Hold it until then, and don’t flash it around. You don’t want to get caught with this—it’s illegal to sell salvaged weapons.”

“This ain’t a sale,” replied Looby, “it’s a *trade*.”

“Sure.” The smithy planted his hands on his hips. His eyes wandered over her meager belongings: a billy for cooking, mismatched plates and cutlery, piles of unsold debris. “So, this is your life.”

“What of it?”

“Nothing.” He looked away, shaking his head, but paused in the doorway and turned on her.

“No! This ain’t right, Louisa—your Pa in prison, you livin’ like a shag on a rock. You deserve better, a nice life.”

Looby colored under her sunburn. “What? Marry some old squatter who wore out his last wife, needs a replacement to raise his sheep and brats? That your notion of *better*?”

“No, I—” He stammered and stopped.

“What, then?”

Lucky threw up his hands. “Nothin’! Never mind.”

“I stay here ’cause nobody cares who I am! Nobody callin’ me *Looby* and spittin’ when they do!”

He whirled and pounded heavily down the wooden stairs. “You could use a wash, you know—and clean clothes!” he shouted.

Looby watched until he disappeared into the sluggish river of drunks and slatterns wandering through her neighborhood.

\* \* \*

Edward’s great round eye flickered and brightened. “Where’s my leg?”

“Ain’t ready. Questions first.”

“I am at your service—as I have nothing better to do.” His head moved, mere centimeters. “But I need a charge.”

“As long as you keep talking.” She pulled the tattered blanket and foliage from his back. “Anybody come by?”

“Of course not.”

“Where are the papers, the dispatches?”

“Excuse me?”

“The courier’s pouch was empty. Where were his messages?”

“How would I know? I’m just a *horsie*.”

“Where were you going?”

“We were fleeing.”

“You and... Wilks-Shaw.”

“Reginald, yes.”

“Where’s the power pack for his tingler, then?”



The warhorse made no reply.

“Well, I made a deal to fix your leg. If I can’t offer that fancy gun of his, you’re not gonna get your leg back.”

Edward chuffed. “It is a flat backpack. Reginald wore it when he fell.”

Looby walked back to the corpse. The brush she’d covered it with had been disturbed, and the body was further ravaged. Fingers clamped on her nose, Looby nudged it over with her booted foot, revealing a black square strapped to his back. She gingerly tugged at the straps, unsuccessfully, then harder, nearly dislocating a desiccated shoulder. The pack came free and Looby hefted it, vigorously beating away the blood-encrusted dirt and debris.

“Thanks,” she said, and slipped it on.

“There’s something else I need,” said Edward. “Nothing special.”

“What’s that?”

“Paraffin oil,” he replied. “Two or three quarts.”

“Imported oil? Isn’t that stuff expensive?”

“Look under Reginald’s shirt.”

Looby squatted by the body, glad it was on its face. She pulled the shirt, stiff with blood, out of the trousers. Flat against the man’s back lay a stained leather money belt. Looby peeled the blood-soaked belt away from the blackened flesh, hefted it, then eagerly tore it open to reveal a cache of gleaming sovereigns. She whistled.

“For my oil,” the warhorse said. “And Louisa...”

Edward waited until the girl looked up from her coin-counting.

“Hmm?”

“Use some of it for yourself—new clothes, a haircut...a bath...”

“What business is it of yours?”

“If you’re to be my rider, you must look the part.”

The image of a rider in black, tall on a gleaming black steed, grew in her mind.

“Yeah. You’ll get your oil—if I can find it.” She closed the pouch, buried it deep in her ruck, and drew out the Enfield over-and-under. She lifted the power pack, studied its cable, and plugged it into the stock. The gauge twitched and moved up.

“Perfect!”

“Careful,” warned Edward. “That discharge can damage mech.”

“That’s why they made it, right? Stun man or machine.” She swung the barrel to point at the warhorse. “So, last question: you and Reginald were mates? Got along?”

“Certainly; a real camaraderie.”

“So, he’d have no reason to shoot you, eh?”

Edward was silent.

“Like maybe he was hurt, and you were just gonna trot off and leave him?”

The black eye smoldered red. “Never.”

“Could have stunned you. Seems like Reggie didn’t want you getting up again.”

Edward stared at her a moment, then said, “Don’t forget my oil.”

\* \* \*

“You go scavenging way out here?” Lucky, sweating profusely, trailed after his guide, burdened by his tools and supplies.

Looby made no reply, having tired of the blacksmith’s whinging during the morning’s trek.

“Usually camp overnight instead of out-and-back in one day,” she replied.

“That’s a new look for you,” he remarked.

“You mean, cleaned up?” She glowered at him. “Sod off.”

Looby secretly gloated over the new jodhpurs, knee boots, and blouse. She hadn’t styled her hair, but it was trimmed of tangles and washed. It had dried into natural tight curls, blue-black, now tucked under her last indulgence, a cabbage-palm hat.

When they reached the warhorse, Edward lifted its black head and stared at the new face.

“Edward, this is Lucky.” Looby paused, waiting for a response, then continued, “Lucky—I mean, Iluka—this is Edward.”

The blacksmith waited, eyebrows raised.

“Say hello, Edward.”

The warhorse merely snorted and lay back down.

Looby said, “Guess he’s not going to talk to you.”

“Shy, huh.” Lucky took off his pack and dumped its contents out next

to the mech with a clatter. He lifted the repaired foreleg, turning it side to side.

“See?” said Looby. “All better.”

Lucky flexed the joint, testing the action of the intricate artificial tendons. He aligned it with the shoulder and set about re-attaching it.

Looby paced the area, keeping an eye out for intruders. Lucky had, in her opinion, made far too much noise on the walk.

“There.” Lucky sat back and considered his work. “Now or never. Think we can get him onto—”

The blacksmith stumbled back as the mech rolled onto its breastbone. The forelegs folded beneath, the mech swung back its great head, straightened its legs, and lifted its breast from the grass and into the air.

“Crikey!” the blacksmith exclaimed, as the warhorse threw its head forward and reared up to its full height. “He’s a big ’un...”

Edward shivered, tossed its head, and whinnied. The mech took a tentative step on the recently repaired leg, and then another.

Looby moved to intercept it. “Now remember our deal, Edward...”

The great head dipped towards hers.

“That’s right—you’re a smart one—you haven’t got your oil! But first...I didn’t see your tack lying around last visit, so I had to make do.”

Looby shook out a saddle blanket with leather straps, which she tossed high over the stallion’s back with a little hop, then cinched around its belly.

“You were built with a saddle shape and pommel, so...” she slipped a

halter over the mech's head, handing the reins to Lucky.

"Now, that oil..." She lifted out two tins. "This wasn't cheap."

"That's not good for lubrication," Lucky said, sniffing as she opened a can.

"Well, it's what Edward wants," she retorted, "and that's the deal."

The warhorse opened its mouth and tilted its head towards her, revealing a filler leading down its throat.

"See? Now, where's that funnel?"

Lucky handed it over, shaking his head. "I dunno..."

Looby aligned the cone with the opening and began pouring the liquid.

"Hold still now," she muttered, and drained the can's pungent contents.

"More?"

Edward nodded.

Lucky opened the second can and passed it over.

"Got a grip on them reins?" Looby asked in a low voice.

Lucky nodded.

Looby repeated the operation, tapping the can to drain the last of it. She stepped back.

"Are we good?"

The mech nodded.

"Time for a ride, then," Looby said. "Feel up for it?"

Edward whinnied and stamped its repaired foot.

"Both of us?" Lucky asked. "Not too much for you?"

The warhorse snorted with what Looby suspected was derision.

"Great," Lucky said, reaching up. "I'll—"

"Not likely!" Looby grabbed the reins from him and reached high to grasp the pommel. "I ride in front—you can sit behind me."

Lucky grinned. "Sure."

"Don't get any ideas," Looby said. "Give me a boost."

He linked his fingers and she set her left foot in them, swinging her right leg over as the smithy heaved her up. Looby squealed in pleasure and said, "This is high!"

Lucky slung his pack up and willingly accepted her assist, settling in behind her.

Looby squirmed a bit, unused to the familiarity, and said, "Let's go, horsie."

\* \* \*

The ride back was as exhilarating as Looby had dreamed. Despite Lucky's fretting, they walked, then cantered, then galloped. The party backtracked to the Yarra River, then followed it southwest.

Coming from Hobson Bay, the British warships had sailed up the river into the center of the city, bombarding it. The desperate defenders had relied upon their ingenuity and several small fire ships to overcome the attackers; now, the burnt-out hulks of the British frigates lay aground.

By late afternoon, the trio had reached the outskirts of Melbourne, where they tarried until sundown. Taking some of the lesser streets recently cleared of debris, they dismounted and led the warhorse to the smithy. Cloaked in the twilight gloom, the mech could be mistaken for an animal. They concealed the warhorse for the night in the stable there.

“I’d stay here,” said Looby, “but I got to make a stop at home before we go to Court in the morning.”

“Court?” asked Lucky.

“To get what’s mine.”

“We’re heading to the Court like this?” Lucky asked.

“Not quite,” Looby replied. With that, she left for her Melba squat.

At daybreak Looby returned with a bulging ruck. Lucky sat waiting in the stable by Edward. He looked up.

“Still not talking.” He stood. “But I can *almost* figure it out, how to make mech talk.”

“Never mind.” She passed the ruck to Lucky as she inspected Edward. “We have to go.”

He peered inside. “Louisa! Why have you got the gun—”

“Shh!” She heaved herself back into the saddle.

“Shall I store it in the smithy?”

“Give it here!” Looby waved for her sack, and Lucky reluctantly passed it up before climbing on behind her.

“Told you,” she said, “I’m gonna get back what’s mine.”

Aside from street urchins scrabbling about the rubble that had been the bustling riverfront, there were none to mark their passing. In daylight, the massive warhorse was unmistakably mech, and would draw attention, but the revelation was inevitable. They headed north, away from the destruction, towards the complex of the Supreme Court and gaol, which had escaped serious damage in the Battle of Melbourne.

“Now wait,” said Lucky, “you’re not plannin’ some sort of gaol-break?”

Before she could answer, the warhorse turned and headed off the direct route she had chosen.

“Hey! Edward!” Looby cried. “Stop—whoa, horsie!”

“What’s it doin’?”

“Don’t bellow in my ear!” she said over her shoulder, then bent to the mech’s ear.

“Edward, I want to go to Court...”

She trailed off, noting their destination: the makeshift City Hall. The warhorse stopped before the municipal offices that occupied a requisitioned three-story hotel.

“Why are we here?” Lucky asked.

Just then Jenkins rounded the far corner, on his way to his office, and stopped short upon seeing them. After a flicker of surprise, his expression became guarded.

“What are you doing here?” the councilor demanded in a low menacing voice.

The question would not have been surprising, save for the fact that he addressed not the riders, but their mount.

Looby suddenly saw the pattern. “You know why.”

“That *thing* is dangerous,” Jenkins declared, wagging a fat finger at Edward.

“You would know, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not to be trusted!”

Lucky, behind her, asked, “What does he mean?”

But Looby could see it all, now: her father, in gaol, at Jenkins’s insistence; the councilor’s recognition of the warhorse; the empty pouch. “Because you made a *deal*, didn’t you?”

She fumbled in her ruck and gripped the stock of the Enfield she had loaded the night before. Lucky, seeing what she was about, caught her wrist in an iron grip.

“Don’t!” he whispered. “Shoot him and you’ll swing for sure!”

He released her as a tremor went through the mech warhorse. The riders felt it through their thighs, a vibration in Edward’s torso, building.

Lucky said, “What’s that shakin’?”

“Better ’fess up, Lord High Councilor,” she continued, “’cause the *mech* knows, too.”

“You can’t threaten me. What are you? Nothing!” Jenkins laughed. “Half-Shelah, half-boong—”

The riders were nearly unbalanced as the warhorse reared, tossed its head, and snorted. With a cough, it sprayed an acrid liquid that drenched the bureaucrat. A clicking noise came from the metal muzzle, which in moments began to glow. Edward’s great head turned to the side.

“What the Devil!” Jenkins spluttered.

The warhorse inhaled through its dilated nostrils. A gout of orange flame erupted from its mouth with a roar, missing Jenkins by a mere foot. As suddenly as it appeared the flames vanished, leaving only a burnt stench in the air to fill the shocked silence.

Lucky gasped. “Crickey—the bugger breathes *fire*.”

“Hey Jenkins—anything to say?” asked Looby. “The horsie has a mind to toast you, and I doubt I could stop it.”

Edward stamped and chuffed, the orange glow simmering around its muzzle. Jenkins frantically shook his arms, trying to rid himself of the oil that coated him.

“You’ll go up like a martyr in old Rome,” Looby promised. “You really should talk.”

Jenkins, eyes wide, raised his eyes to the girl. “I helped the Brits—I shared how we laid mines in the Yarra, the safe route.”

“And my father?” demanded Looby, clutching the pommel to stifle her rage.

“Innocent. I...planted papers in his kit.” He backed away, towards the building entrance.

“Why would you do this?”

“To incriminate him, of course.” He smiled as he reached the shelter of the stone building. “No one will believe you, girl—you’ll join your father in gaol for threatening me!”

Jenkins turned to seek the safety of the offices—and ran straight into the Mayor.

The latter was literally the immovable object in Melbourne politics: six foot six, just shy of fifteen stone, and never reluctant to throw his weight around to influence, support, and defend his people.

“Careful, Councilor.” His appraising glance traveled from Jenkins to the warhorse. “Quite the prize you’ve got there, Miss...”

“O’Leary, sir; Louisa O’Leary.”

The Mayor nodded, wrapping an expansive arm around the Councilor’s shoulders. “You reek, sir.”

“Confession is good for the soul, Mr. Jenkins,” said Looby.

“Shut up, you...Looby.” The councilman said to the Mayor. “I never—”

“Don’t bother, sir,” said the Mayor. “I heard everything.”

He considered the girl. “What did he call you? *Looby*...O’Lubaigh? *Child of the traitor?*”

The Mayor turned on the councilor, grim-faced. “This injustice ends now.”

Several assistants had drifted out, drawn by the flaming demonstration. “Hold him for questioning—the charge is treason,” the Mayor ordered, “and call the Chief Constable. I will be seeking an audience with the High Justice concerning a case of false imprisonment.”

Jenkins was removed to await justice.

“Your friend can mind your mech while we confer with the Court, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.” Louisa was glad that Edward had suggested some personal grooming. “And thank you.”

“The Federation needs young people who believe in the pursuit of justice; it’s why we fought this war.” He nodded at Lucky. “Justice for all.”

\* \* \*

The reunion was joyous but short-lived. “Pa wants to work with the new Parliament, for the Federation,” Louisa explained, heaving a set of saddlebags high to clear Edward’s back.

“And you’re just leavin’?” Lucky asked.

“He’d just want me to wear dresses and go to school.”

“It wouldn’t hurt...”

“I guess not.” Looby cinched the straps of her gear and straightened her hat, searching for words. “It’s the stuff and nonsense that comes along with it.”

“So, this wasn’t about getting your life with your Pa back.”

“No; I reckon it wasn’t. I’ll be back, but I’ve got sights to see...people to find.”

He kicked at the dust. “You got your water? Your grub? Your—”

She said, “You’re disappointed I’m leaving.”

The blacksmith swallowed. “Yeah. I’ll miss you.”

Louisa grinned. “I’d be a lousy homemaker, always runnin’ off to the bush.”

She stepped forward and embraced him, to his surprise.

“Those stories you told me; the places you talked about—I have to see

for myself. Perhaps my mother is out there.”

Louisa released him. “Besides, horsie here has to stay out of sight for a while.”

Lucky stepped around to face the mech.

“That was a neat trick, breathin’ fire.” He ran a hand around the cold metal muzzle.

The warhorse nodded its great head. “It was, wasn’t it?”

Lucky jerked his hand away. “You do talk!” He gawped at Edward. “How?”

The mech snorted with a compressor wheeze. “Can you explain how *you* talk?” He gave his wiry mane a shake. “*If* you call that the King’s speech.”

Louisa joined her friend and addressed the warhorse. “No more King—or Queen.”

“You know,” she continued, “I’ve been thinking...about that empty pouch. A smart horsie like you...”

“Yes?” Edward prompted.

“Reginald wasn’t the courier; you were.”

Edward bent a knee in a fair parody of a bow. “At your service.”

“And Jenkins shot your officer, then used his gun on you.”

“To stop me from sharing any secrets. One in particular—the identity of the traitor inside the rebel—”

“*Federation*,” Lucky corrected.

“—organization. Fortunately, his only shot missed my head. Two shots would have spoiled the lie.”

“And you couldn’t run for help.”

“Precisely. We talked, Reginald and I, before he died, and I made a promise, that his murderer would be brought to justice.”

Edward cocked his head at Lucky. “Fine work, on my leg, Master Blacksmith.”

Lucky frowned. “I ain’t a Master yet. And the owner will probably sell off the shop. Then I’ll be out.”

“It’s not fair!” Louisa said.

“About that,” the warhorse said. “One last secret. Reginald was the paymaster for the informants. We were on our way to his treasure chest when Jenkins attacked.”

“Treasure?”

“More than enough to buy your shop, I believe.” Edward nodded to the distance. “Beyond where you found me, another mile or so. Look for the tallest mountain ash; nearby is a dead tree with a trunk split by lightning. It’s buried there.”

Lucky was speechless. Louisa clapped him on the back. “*Master* Iluka ...”

Edward turned his darkly glowing eye on her. “Where shall we go, rider?”

# Life-sparking Arrow

by Sultana Raza

*Why are you asking these questions?*

John wanted to ask Mary,  
but didn't dare break their whispered conversation.  
A part of him was amused by her childish interest in  
reviving a dead body.

*Who knew what elusive substance the soul  
was composed of, that made a man a living creature?*

He wanted to ask Mary about that  
invisible energy emanating from her intense gaze,  
that made his foolish heart palpitate for no good, illogical reasons.  
What were those almost palpable waves, vibrations all about?

*Could electrical current make a heart beat again?*

As John nodded his head sagely enough,  
a burst of lightning shook the aged house to its core  
as if corroborating his statement.

“We're lucky there's no flooding, or who knows  
if we'd survive this strong arrow of electrical strike.”  
Though he'd started drowning in Mary's eyes  
long before this whispered conversation had started.  
Cupid had showed him no mercy with his  
love-dipped fletches. But she refused to see the thunderbolt  
as a sign from the universe of jump-starting their future elopement.



It was a strange reading choice for such a young *demoiselle*. He couldn't help giving her a quizzical look as he handed her the book on one of his weirder topics. Resuscitation. All he knew was that she'd re-awakened something that he'd thought was long dead and buried within himself.

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John wondered why she'd refused to leave that insensitive jackass Percy, and take off with him into the wild unknown? They could try to synchronize the disparate pieces of their hearts in harmony, and explore the untangling of roots of their past.

\*\*\*

Though Mary was tempted, she couldn't even give a hint to John about how his own sincere wordless admiration of her seriousness would lead her to finally feel the emptiness; her 'husband's' lack of warmth in the left-hand cavity of his tightly ribbed chest.

# He, the Shore, and She, the Tide

by Derek Alan Jones

It didn't occur to him that he should recoil when he felt the hand on his shoulder. The room was black and silent, and the air was perfectly still, and he was very much aware that the hand should not have been there at all. But it had been so long, it seemed, since he'd felt any presence outside his own, that there was nothing this hand could bring to him that wouldn't be a kindness. He didn't startle, and he didn't stand. He didn't even turn to see to whom the hand belonged. He simply leaned lightly back against it, and he felt that hand squeeze gently, and it stayed there on his shoulder until his breathing slowed, and he slept.

When the sun in the eastern window persuaded his eyes to open, there was no hand upon his shoulder, and there was no one next to him. He wondered if it had been a dream, but he decided that, if it had, he surely would have dreamt of more. Besides, he couldn't remember a single dream as long as he'd been on that island, however long that may have been and wherever it may be. In fact, he remembered very little. Hardly anything at all. He was sure there was a world he'd seen that lay beyond its shores, and he was sure that there had been a time that he had been out in that world. By now, though, that was, more or less, all the memory he had.

The hand had been there, he assured himself, and he resolved that he would believe it whether it was true or not.

When he rose, he stood in the doorway, and he smelled the dew around him, and he turned his eyes to the sea. The water was calm that morning, though not entirely still, and he watched the small waves lapping at the stones along the shore. It was movement that caught his eye then – a movement wholly dissimilar from the breaking of the waves. It was slow. It was deliberate. It had substance, and it had shape. At al-

most a mile's distance, however, he couldn't quite be certain as to what that shape might be. He had suspicions, and he had hopes, but he wouldn't let those suspicions and hopes build into expectation.

He called as loudly as he could, and he found himself caught off guard by the volume of his voice. There had been no reason on this island to raise any word above a whisper, and even now he knew that it would be to no effect. Every muscle and bone in his body urged the man to run – to go, as quickly as he could, to see what the movement was. He fought the impulse momentarily, but only long enough to realize he had no reason not to go. So, he ran, and as he did, thistles and gneiss tore at his feet, but he gave little attention to the bleeding or the pain. There is something here, he thought. Something different. Something new. He ran, in utter disregard, to whatever that something was, until he reached the water, his feet in tatters and his breath in gasps.

He turned in all directions, and again he raised his voice, until the burning in his throat from the calling matched the burning in his lungs from the run. He could find no movement, save for that of the sea, but he stayed, and he searched, and he screamed until the tide went out again. He then sat himself on a jagged rock, and he laid his face in his palms.

He couldn't remember if he slept then, but he was certain that he must have, as when he lifted his head from his hands again, the sky was dark and cool. Stretched out on the ground in front of him, cast by the moon at his back, was a long and slender shadow standing just to the left of his own.

When he spoke, he spoke slowly, and as kindly as he could, afraid any sound or movement might send the shadow into retreat.

“It was you that I saw this morning.”

“It was.”

The answer was short and simple, but the voice was warm and calm, and he worried for a moment that he might lose the sound beneath the pounding of his own heart.

“And it was your hand on my arm last night?”

“Yes.”

He wanted desperately to turn his head, to see the source of the sound, but he wouldn't let himself do anything that might cost him this companionship.

“You're hurt,” the voice said, and the man wondered if he'd imagined the trace of sympathy in those words.

“I ran to you, when I saw you here.”

The voice answered with “I know.”

“I would very much like to see you. If I turned around, would you leave?”

“I might.”

The man was certain he hadn't imagined the mischief in those words.

“It's been so long since I've seen any face...” he let this thought trail off, and he replaced it with another.

“Will you stay with me, this time?”

He felt a hand brush along his back, and every nerve in his body was alight, and he turned, and he looked, and he found himself alone in the

dark again.

The walk back to the cottage seemed much longer than the morning's run, and he cursed himself with every step for not finding his boots before he'd gone. But he made it back, and he cleaned the wounds, and he wrapped his feet in linen, and he lie there in the darkness, and he replayed her voice in his mind.

She didn't come that evening, or in the morning, or the next, and the following days were a smear in his mind, filled only with the thought of her. He didn't sweep the floors of the cottage, and he didn't tend to the plants that grew in the garden plot out back. On the third day, or the fourth day, as the days began running together, he reminded himself to eat a simple meal, made from wild garlic and a hare. After what he guessed was a week had passed, he let himself believe that it all *must* have been a dream, and he resolved to put it behind him and mind the life that he'd neglected.

The next morning, when he rose with the sun, he did not look to the sea. He busied himself with the garden, and, in the evening, with a broom. When everything was in order, and both he and the house were clean, he settled in for what he was sure would be his first restful night in days.

What woke him was a gentle breath, as it brushed across his cheek, and when he opened his eyes, he found another pair looking back into his own. They were blue, and they were vibrant, almost radiant against the dark, swirled in green and with flecks of gold spread generously throughout. He was lost in them for minutes before thoughts or words would come. When he did find words, they came in a whisper, and they were fewer than he'd hoped.

“You're beautiful.”

He was immediately wracked with regret that those had been the words that came, but he had said them, and he had meant them, and he made no attempt to recant, as he saw what looked like a smile tugging

at the corners of thin, pale lips.

“You say that every time,” she answered. Those words were unexpected, and he wondered what they meant. Moments passed in silence as he studied the blue of her eyes.

“How did you get here?” These were the words with which he’d chosen to break the silence, as they seemed the most innocuous of any that came to mind.

“I’ve always been here.” She told him, stated as though it were plain as day.

“Why don’t I remember?”

“Because I keep your memories with me.”

The questions in his head were many now, but they were tangled in each other, and even as his mind was racing, her touch steadied his pulse.

“Have I?” When he asked, she looked at him quizzically, so he clarified the question.

“Have I always been here?”

At this she smiled fully, and by the time she began to answer, he’d almost forgotten what he’d asked.

“Not always, no.”

“Then, you brought me here?” He was careful with his tone when he asked, hoping he’d made the distinction clear between question and accusation.

“The sea brought you here. For me.”

“Why?”

The smile passed from her lips now, and she closed her eyes as she answered.

“To be with me. For this.”

He wished he could remember. He wished for any memory at all. She was comfortable there, and she knew him, and he wanted so badly to feel the same. But when she placed her hand lightly on the center of his chest, the questions in his mind didn’t seem to matter much at all. He draped one arm across her, and he felt the warmth of her skin, and he pulled her closer to him, until they were intertwined.

His days were different after that, as her visits grew more frequent, and while she was always gone in the morning, the sun in that eastern window would find him eager in his waking and content in his daily work, bolstered by the knowledge that there was another, now, nearby, and comfortable in the assumption that she would come back to him soon.

His evenings were consumed entirely, whether by her presence or her absence. The nights that she did come to him were spent mostly in silence, and he would drift in and out of the blue of her eyes and study the lines of her face, intent on building a memory that would carry through the nights apart.

Those nights apart were filled with questions. He would wonder where he’d come from, and how long it had been. He would wonder where she’d come from, and he’d wonder what she was. He felt the weight of those questions then, but he knew that they would flee his mind when she was with him again. He would think of Odysseus and of Calypso, and of the stories of the kelpie, but would decide that none of it mattered much, if it meant that he wasn’t alone.

Those nights apart grew frequent as the air began to chill, and by the eve of the season’s first hard frost, he’d come to expect her absence. She did come to him that evening, but she did not lie with him, standing instead in the shadows in the corner of the room.

“You’re going away,” he said to her, and he could barely see her nod. The beat of his heart was painful then, and it thundered in his ears.

“Have I done something wrong?”

“No,” she said, almost meekly. “But I have to go away.”

He struggled then to find the line between the shadows and her shape.

“Why do you have to go?”

“Because of the seasons, and the moon...”

“Then I will go with you,” he decided, and he was resolute in this.

“You say that every time,” she said, and he wondered if the same smile now was tugging at the lips the darkness hid.

“You can leave, if you want to,” she offered. “The sea will let you, if I ask. But you cannot go with me. You would die out in the waves.”

“If I die, then I will die with you. Better than staying here, alone. I will follow. I will find you. I will...” he was interrupted with a sigh.

“That’s why I take your memories. That’s why I keep them with me. If you don’t know what to look for, then you won’t run to the sea. You can leave. You can build a boat, and the sea will take you home, or you can stay, and you can wait for me, without knowing why you do.”

“And if I stay, will you come back to me?”

She answered with “Of course.”

He could feel tears in his own eyes now, and he wished that he could see hers, and he struggled to breathe through the knot in his throat and the tightening of his chest. He weighed his options carefully, and he thought on that word, “home.” But what is home, he wondered, and what, if anything at all, was waiting for him there?

“Then take the memories with you, and I will wait for you. But leave me one. Leave me something. Leave me anything at all.”

“I can leave a small one. It will be faded, though, and vague.”

“Then I will wait as long as I have to.”

The room was dark and silent then, and the chill in the air came sharply, but as the darkness turned to pitch, he felt the brush of a hand against his cheek.

When he rose with the sun in the morning, he could feel the frost in the air, and he stood inside the doorway, stopping first to pull on his boots. He turned his eyes to the sea then, and he scanned the shore for movement, not knowing what he was looking for, but knowing that, some morning, something would come.

# Shining Song to Stars 2

by R. Mac Jones



# She will be loved

by Yuliia Vereta

Remembering every word  
in the chronicle of lived days,  
the woven world crumbles  
in a deserted war, somewhere  
in the half worlds, in semitones.

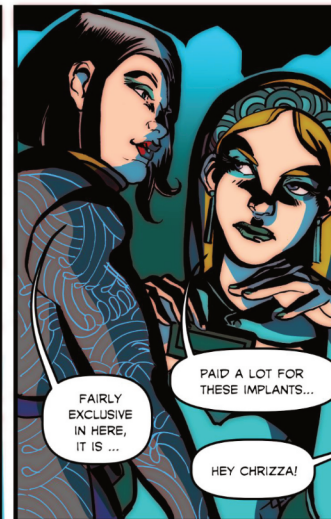
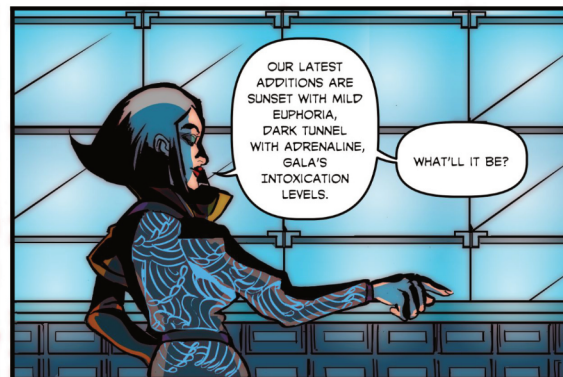
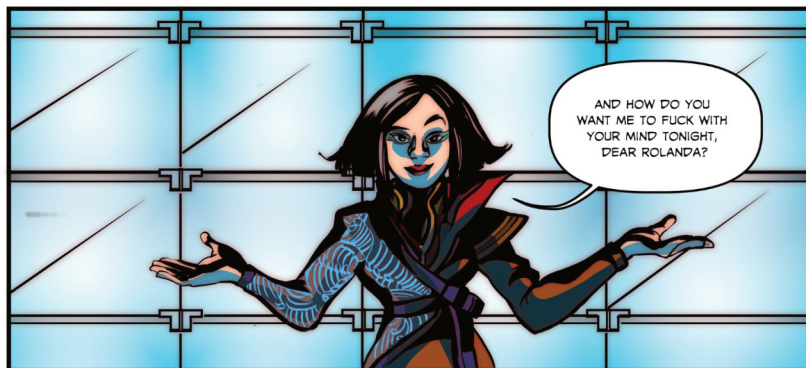
From now on, it's the hypnosis.

The shores will go under water.  
We will love her garbage,  
Plastic dumps and tobacco foam.

Eternal morning will come  
when we will be forgotten,  
Like the oil age and the fumes  
Descending in a mutable veil.

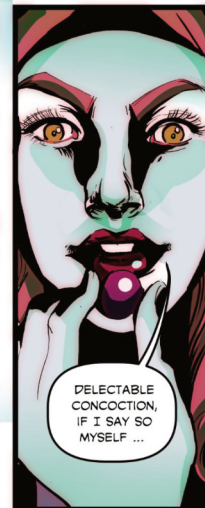
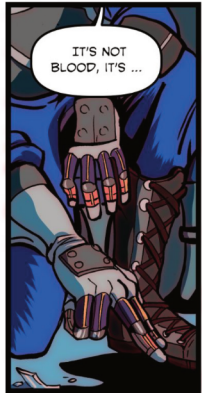
# Altered

by Patrick McEvoy and  
Andrea Montano



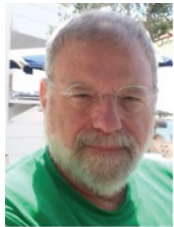






THE END

# Contributors



**PETER ALTERMAN** has published science fiction, literary fiction, popular fiction and literary criticism. Recent fiction publications include “The Faber House” in *The Bombay Review*, “They’re Playing Our Song” and “Perfect Time for Morning Coffee” in *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. Other fiction publications include: “Binding Energy” in *New Dimensions Science Fiction 9* (a 1974 Nebula first round nominee), “Scenicruiser and the Silver Lady” in *Twilight Zone Magazine*, “The General’s Picnic” in *Gallery*, “Transcendental Functions” in *Green Mountains Review*, and “Detroit Iron” in *Antietam Review*.

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**EMMIE CHRISTIE**’s work includes practical subjects, like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects, like unicorns and affordable healthcare. Her fantasy romance novel *A Caged and Restless Magic* debuted February 2024. She has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Infinite Worlds Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. Find her at [www.emmiechristie.com](http://www.emmiechristie.com), her monthly newsletter, or on TikTok.

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**MARCO ETHERIDGE** is a writer of prose, an occasional playwright, and a part-time poet. He lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His work has been featured in over one hundred reviews and journals across Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. His story “Power Tools” has been nominated for Best of the Web for 2023. ... *Power Tools* is Marco’s latest collection of short fiction. When he

isn’t crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor for a new ‘Zine called *Hotch Potch*. In his other life, Marco travels the world with his lovely wife Sabine.

Website: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

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**LILLIE E. FRANKS** is a trans author and local eccentric who lives in Chicago, Illinois with the best cats. You can read her work at places like Always Crashing, Poemeleon, and Drunk Monkeys or follow her on Twitter at @onyxaminelife. She loves anything that is not the way it should be.

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**BRAD FRAUNFELTER** grew up in the small town of Warren, PA, fascinated by the beauty of nature and inspired by comics and Sci-Fi art. Fueled by an adventurous spirit and continuous love for otherworldly realms, he spent a lot of time sketching whimsical aliens, dragons and spaceships. He attended State University of New York, College of fine arts at New Paltz, and studied art, photography and painting, ultimately receiving a Bachelor’s degree in “Visual Arts”. After graduating he moved to New York City and began a career not as a painter, but as a freelance photographer’s assistant in Manhattan’s Photo District. The skills and practical value of working with top professional advertising photographers would prove invaluable for developing an eye for light, shadow, and color.

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**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](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](mailto:hildebrandt343@icloud.com)

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**JANIS BUTLER HOLM** served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

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**OJO VICTORIA ILEMOBAYO** is a Nigerian Literary Enthusiast. She is also a dynamic poet, creative photographer, babysitter, video editor, graphic designer, and into different fields of life.

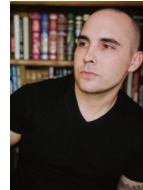
Some of her works can be found in *Southern Arinzo Press Anthology*, *Colourism Healing Writing Contest*, *Firebrand magazine*, *Sledgehammer*, *Nnoko*, *GEMP*, *Prawns paper*, *Mixed Mag*, *Agape Review*, *Mad Swirl*, *The Beautiful Mind*, *Enceladus Magazine*, *The New Man Gospel Movement*, *Fringe Poetry Magazine*, *World Voices Magazine*, *Eboquills*, *ICreative Review*, *Christian Century*, *Eco Theo*, *Thema*, *A Coup of Owl*, *Christian Courier*, *Astrolabe*, *Sledgehammer*, *Nnoko Magazine*, *Olney Magazine*, *Communication League*, *Christian Crusader*, *FEEEL magazine*, *Con-Scio Magazine*, *Typehouse*, *Ake Review*,

*Banshee*, *Off Limits Press*, *Sunlight Press*, *Hey Young Writer*, *Christianity Today*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Josephine Quarterly*, *Variety Pack*, *NonBinary Review*, *Flash Frog*, etc

She won the April-June Wakaso Poetry Prize 2024, WGT3 2023, the MUSPA Prize 2022, Lagos Hilltop Poetry Prize 2021.

She tweets @ Ilemobayo - ojo

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**DEREK ALAN JONES** spends most of his time working in a warehouse in Kansas and the rest of it writing speculative fiction. His work has appeared in *Gamut*, *Orion's Belt*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and *Tales to Terrify*, among others. Find it all at [DerekAlanJones.com](http://DerekAlanJones.com)

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**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.

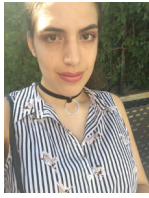
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**SHREEJITA MAJUMDER** can usually be found typing away on her laptop, or spinning stories in her head while walking along the busy streets of Kolkata. Poet, artist, writer, keeper-of-sparrows, and plant-whisperer, her work has been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Factory Four Magazine* and *Fantasy Magazine*.

She is fascinated by themes of memory, time, and personhood, and loves to explore these through sci-fi, fantasy, and horror fiction. You can find her on Twitter and Bluesky as @ennuinox.

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**AVRA MARGARITI** is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. *The Saint of Witches*,

Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is available from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

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**DENNY E. MARSHALL** has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is [www.dennymarshall.com](http://www.dennymarshall.com).

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**PATRICK MCEVOY** has had illustrated stories appear in *Glint*, *Old Pal*, *Shift*, *Best of Penumbria Vol. 6*, *Murder Park After Dark Vol. 3* and on Slippery Elm's website, among others. The short story "Um" has been published by *Metastellar*. In addition, short plays he wrote were chosen to be performed at various festivals in

NYC, including Chain Theatre's 2023 Winter Festival and self-produced Eclectica. "The Dream People" appeared online and in public for Equity Library in 2024. The short play "Retrieval" was also performed by Bunbury Players. Photography has also been exhibited with Exhibizone: *Scenic*, *Artistonish*, *HMVC*, and literary journals.

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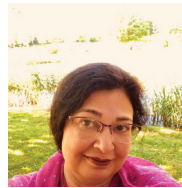
**ANDREA MONTANO** is an illustrator and comic book artist that has been working throughout the years in different publications. Andrea also produces portraits for events and children's books for a variety of clients. She lives with her husband, also an artist, in New Jersey.

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**MATTEO MORETTI** was born in Rome on 22 July 1990. His first novel *Una Goccia di Tenebra* was published in 2018 by La Caravella Editrice. "Our Love is Here to Stay" was his first work published in English. He likes movies, novels, comic books, video games and tabletop RPGs. He doesn't like happy endings.

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Of Indian origin, **SULTANA RAZA's** poems/fiction/CNF have appeared in 200+ journals. SFF work in: *Abyss & Apex*, *Entropy*, *Columbia Journal*, *Star\*line*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Focus & Vector* (*British Science Fiction Association*), *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Galaxy series*, *Blaze Vox*, *Musing on Muses Anthology* (*Birgid Gate's Press*), *Nephilim Anthology* (*Iron Faerie*) *Antipodean SF*, *File770*, and *Penumbria* etc.

Her fiction received an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train Review*. Also published in *Coldnoon Journal*, *Knot Literature*, and *Setu* etc. CNF in *Literary Ladies Guide*, *Literary Yard*, *Litro*, *inspired*, *Dream Pop Journal* etc.

She has read her fiction/poems in Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, England, Ireland, and the USA. An independent scholar, she's presented papers on Romanticism (Keats) and Fantasy (Tolkien) in inter-

national conferences.

<https://www.facebook.com/sultana.raza.7>

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**MICHAEL ROOK** is not cursed. Sure, he was named after a ghost, doesn't sleep, and writes to release the thing in his head, but he definitely doesn't blame his parents. Find his stories in *The Last Girls Club*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *After Dinner Conversation*, and the anthology *Dark Corners of the Old Dominion*, for which he also served as an editor. More tales are coming soon. In the meantime, check out his Instagram (@michaelrook10) and website [www.michaelrookwrites.com](http://www.michaelrookwrites.com), home to his occasionally interesting blog.

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**J. L. ROYCE** is an author of science fiction, the macabre, and whatever else strikes him. He lives in the northern reaches of the American Midwest, exploring the wilderness without and within. His work appears in *Alien Dimensions*, *Allegory*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Fifth Di*, *Fireside*, *Ghostlight*, *Love Letters to Poe* (Visitor Award winner), *Lovecraftiana*, *Mysterion*, *parABnormal*, *Penumbria*, *Sci Phi*, *Strange Aeon*, *Utopia*, *Wyldblood*, etc. He is a member of WWA, HWA, and GLAHW. Some of his anthologized stories may be found at: [www.jlroyce.com](http://www.jlroyce.com).

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**RON SANDERS** is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

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**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Ebb Tide Reflections*, features poetry, short stories and photography (World Inkers, NYC). Carl has four photography books, published by Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and The Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently a co-editor with *ILA Magazine*, art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for three The Best of the Net Awards (2021-23) and a 2023 Pushcart Nomination for work in *Ebb Tide Reflections*.

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**JULIE SHIEL** lives in Maryland with an orange feline fluffball and a dilute tortie that keeps him in line. Her work is appearing in upcoming issues of *Strange Horizons*, *Space & Time Magazine* and *Eye To The Telescope*. When not writing she gardens and communes with her local murder of crows.

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**LISA SHORT** is a Texas-born, Kansas-bred writer of fantasy, science fiction and horror. She has an honorable discharge from the United States Army, a degree in chemical engineering, and twenty years' experience as a professional engineer. Lisa currently lives in Maryland with her husband, youngest child, father-in-law, two cats and one puppy. She can be found online at [lisashortauthor.com](http://lisashortauthor.com) and on both Twitter and Instagram @Lisa\_K\_Short.

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Canadian poet, fiction writer, and playwright **J. J. STEINFELD** lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published 24 books, including *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022), and *As You Continue to Wait* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2022).

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**YULIA VERETA** (she/her) is a Polish writer of Ukrainian origin who is now living her third life in Katowice, where she works as a translator and is a poet on a good day and a disaster-maker on a bad one. Her speculative works have been published in print and online, among oth-

ers in *Star\*Line, Dreams and Nightmares, Asimov's Science Fiction, Leading Edge, Penumbria, Kaleidotrope, and ParSec*. She is a 2022 Best of the Net Nominee.

When she isn't working, writing or cooking, she tries to remake her stationary time machine into a smaller portable model, since the one she currently owns does not fit into the elevator of the 12-story building where she lives and constantly becomes the source of strange questions at airport customs.

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**JENNIFER WALKER** is a short story writer who grew up in a strange and unsettling place called the suburbs. Her stories can be read in recent and upcoming issues of *Eclectica Magazine, Five on the Fifth, and Bare Hill Review*. She now lives in the Virgin Islands with her girlfriend, two dogs, and an untold number

of increasingly suspicious roosters.

