

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction



Issue 25

THEAKER'S QUARTERLY

Issue 25

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Happy Days

Stephen Theaker

“**S**tephen, you’re absolutely correct. Reading any part of your work is indeed an embarrassment.”

When someone said that to me recently, it happened to be a case of mistaken identity, but anyone who has read past issues of TQF will know that the comments are, by some strange cosmic coincidence, entirely accurate. That’s one of the things that makes this issue so great – there is less Theaker than ever! In fact, looking back, only one issue of TQF out of the previous seven has had any of my fiction in. Bad for me, but good for the magazine, I think, even if it means it is straying distressingly far from its original purpose.

My goal here was always to put together a makeshift magazine, one in which I would do every job until someone better came along to do it instead. And so it began with my fiction, my illustrations, my reviews and so on. The first thing to be replaced was my fiction, as my ramshackle efforts were replaced by real live contributors. In recent issues we’ve seen what proper reviews look like, thanks to the pen of Rafe McGregor. Now we’re just waiting for someone to relieve us all from the agony of seeing my illustrations in most issues! This issue I’ve dug into my box of Corel clipart to find lots of lovely photos.

My ultimate dream is to be displaced as editor. Nothing would make me happier than to see *Theaker’s Quarterly* continued by other hands while I enjoy my dotage.

Coming up soon is National Novel Writing Month – or NaNoWriMo. I

think I’ll probably be writing novels in November as long as I live, regardless of whether the actual event is still going on. But I’m not an ML (a local organiser) this year: I stepped down last December. It’s been many years since I’ve taken part without being an ML, and I’m looking forward to it a lot. Let someone else worry about where to hold events; I’ll just worry about where to put my characters!

This year’s ML’s Guide to Life says: “MLs are ambassadors for the Office of Letters and Light in the forums. ... We’ve had a few instances, however, where MLs have used the forums as a battleground, squabbling with participants or belittling other MLs and decisions made by staff.”

I couldn’t help wondering if they meant me (though for all I know that comment might have been in there for years), and I was a tiny bit hurt by the thought – most particularly because I thought such criticism would probably be fair! I got into a couple of fairly frisky arguments when moderating the Rules & Regulations forum for a couple of years, and I might even have described it as a battleground at one point: it certainly felt like one.

It takes a lot of patience to deal with the type of imbecile who turns up in the rules forum of a novel-writing event to ask if it’s okay to knit a scarf or learn to juggle instead of writing a novel, and I was fine with that. What I wasn’t really prepared for, in my first ever spell as a forums moderator, was the astonishing anger of those people when someone says that something is against the rules. What really baffled me was that they were never happy to just do their own

thing and ignore the rules: they really needed someone to say, “You’re eating a pie a day instead of writing a novel? Well, of course that’s okay.”

This year there’s a NaNo Rebels section of the NaNoWriMo forum, which is a great idea. But of course it’s full to bursting of people saying things like, “I’m glad they’ve changed the rules” or “I’m hula hooping this November, but that’s not against the rules” or, even more annoyingly, “I’m writing a novel about cats, which breaks all the rules ‘cos I’m crazy”. My favourite post so far was by someone who said something along the lines of, “I’m glad they opened this forum, because I wanted to sign up for this event but I hate writing fiction.” If you hate writing fiction, what was the attraction of a novel-writing challenge? Gah!

I wonder if the 24 hour comics challenge is besieged by people who want to make films or darn socks or train monkeys...

I’ve just returned from Fantasycon 2008, organised by the British Fantasy Society, which was great fun. I wish I hadn’t had to go on my own, but it’s hard to find babysitters for an entire weekend. Still, everyone was very, very friendly. Going to an editorial panel involving the likes of Jo Fletcher from Victor Gollancz and Pete Crowther from PS Publishing was both an education and a sheer pleasure, while listening to people like Ian Watson and Dave McKean talk was marvellous. Plans are already afoot to make next year’s event even bigger and better, and I’d thoroughly recommend it to anyone.

Contributors

Ralph Robert Moore's fiction has been published in America, England, Ireland and Australia, and translated into Lithuanian. He has been anthologised in the nineteenth edition of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, edited by Ellen Datlow; *Ten Years of the Best of Sign O' the Times*; *Darkness Rising*; *Revelation III*; *Dark Distortions*; and *Read By Dawn* (edited by Ramsey Campbell). An interview with him, as well as a bibliography and new story, is in the seventh issue of *Midnight Street* (edited by Trevor Denyer, famous – of course! – for his contributions to our own *New Words*). His story "The Machine of a Religious Man" was nominated as Best Story of the Year in the 2006 British Fantasy Society Awards.

Other magazines that have published his fiction include *Albedo One*, *Collages and Bricolages*, *ChiZine*, *fugue*, *Lullaby Hearse*, *Lunatic Chameleon*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, *Redsine*, *Revelation*, *Roadworks*, *Sein Und Werden*, *Sign O' the Times*, *Songs of Innocence (and Experience)*, *Space and Time*, *The Los Angeles Times Calendar Magazine* and *Thirteen*. His novel *Father Figure* was published in 2003. He recently completed his first play, *Duck Eggs*. His website SENTENCE, at www.ralphrobertmoore.com, features a wide selection of his writings.

J.R. Parks is a professional writer of children's graphic novels. His works of fiction and poetry have been published in such anthologies as *The Northridge Review*, *I Am This Meat*, *The Bandersnatch Vol. II*, *Centres of Expression*, *Parade of Phantoms*, *San Jose Zine*, and others. He is also the author of *Machine Town: Flight of the Sky Captain*, as well as a graphic novel adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Two of his pieces have been professionally recorded into audio editions, and can be heard on his website (www.jrparks.com).

John Greenwood has made contributions to most issues of TQF following

his return from a round-the-world trip, and was ultimately made co-editor in recognition of his efforts. To this issue he contributes an astonishing three episodes in the life of the Newton Braddell!

Rafe McGregor is a crime fiction author who spends far too much of his time rereading the work of H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. He lives with his wife in a village near York. More details can be found on his website (www.rafemcgregor.co.uk).

John Hall is best known as a Sherlockian scholar, and a member of the International Pipe Smokers' Hall of Fame. His numerous literary interests include Raffles, Sexton Blake, and he shares with his friend Rafe McGregor a keen interest in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. He is the author of *Special Commission*, a medieval murder mystery. A previous story by John, "Shaggai", appeared in TQF#23.

Bob Lock is a Welsh writer of science fiction, fantasy and horror, whose debut novel *Flames of Herakleitos* was published in March 2007 by Screaming Dreams. His work has also appeared in *Cold Cuts 1 & 2*, and *Cone Zero*, edited by D.F. Lewis, and online at Whispers of Wickedness, Sfcrowsnest, Scifi UK Review, Alienskin, Sams Dot Publishing, Fiction Online, Sffworld and his very own blog (<http://bob-lock.blogspot.com>).

Richard K Lyon is a semi-retired research scientist/inventor whose hobbies include collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. He has also published numerous short stories and novelettes. A collection of the latter, *Tales From The Lyonheart*, is available from Barnes and Noble, etc. In collaboration with Andrew J Offutt, famed author of *My Lord Barbarian*, he wrote the Tiana trilogy (*Demon in the Mirror*, *The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*), and *Rails Across the Galaxy* for *Analog*. To our magazine they have contributed "The Iron Mercenary" (TQF#19), "Arachnis" (TQF#22), "Devil on My Stomach" (TQF#23), "The Hungry Apples" (TQF#24) and, this issue, "Naked Before Mine Enemies".

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Dave McKean and Grant Morrison Might Work Together Again, Maybe, One Day, If We're Lucky

During the panel at Fantasycon 2008 on graphic novels, Dave McKean, a guest of honour at the convention, mentioned in passing that he is still on good terms with Grant Morrison – with whom he collaborated on the bestselling Batman book, *Arkham Asylum: a Serious House on Serious Earth* – and that from time to time they discuss the possibility of working together again. There were no firm plans at present, though, and he didn't sound too keen to work for DC again, so *Arkham Asylum II* probably isn't on the cards!

He also said that although his preference now is to both write and draw, having “recalibrated” to comics and book work after his experiences in film-making, he will always be open to working with Neil Gaiman, and talked with obvious pleasure about their long creative relationship.

He stressed to would-be comics writers in the audience the importance of developing relationships with artists, rather than waiting to have them assigned, and pointed out that the main complaint of would-be comics artists at art college is how hard it is to find a writer.

He also talked with excitement about the many, many possibilities that remain to be explored in comics, saying that there is still much “virgin territory”. Looking back, he described *Little Nemo* as one of his biggest influences.

On another panel, discussing his work in film, he mentioned the differences between film executives in the

UK and the USA. In the UK, he said, they say no, no, no at the meetings, and you have to keep chipping away at the no until they say yes.

In the USA, on the other hand, “They say yes, yes, yes, and then they stop answering your phone calls.”

Death to Our Rivals!

All other magazines are the enemies of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*! Here are some of the magazines to have apparently bit the dust in just the last month or so (according to Duotrope): *The Arabesques Review*; *Arcane Twilight*; *Areté*; *artisan*; *Beauty/Truth*; *Beginnings*; *Coach's Midnight Diner*; *dANDelion*; *Dred*; *Great Western Fiction*; *Nefarious*; *O'Brien's Literary Speculator*; *Oddlands Magazine*; *pLUNGE*; *Science Fiction: a Danish Science Fiction Fanzine*; *Serpentarius Magazine*; *Sputnik57*; and *Snow*Vigate*. We dance on their graves (but mourn their passing).

New Elric Novels – in French?

Postscripts 15 is, like every issue of that fine magazine, a work of art. It features a huge selection of science fiction from the likes of Brian Stableford, Eric Brown, James Lovegrove, Terry Bisson, Mike Resnick and Stephen Baxter, plus sixty pages devoted to Paul McAuley. The cover art by Al Feldstein is lovely, as is the interior art from Ben Baldwin, Liz Clarke, James Hannah and Ian Simmons.

However, what caught my eye more than any of that was the note preceding Michael Moorcock's contribution, “Sumptuous Dress: a Question of Size at the End of Time”, where Moorcock wrote: “Publishing

new Elric books in French with my friend Fabrice Colin is quite probably the project which most tickles me at the moment.”

Fabrice Colin is a French writer who has built a remarkable bibliography since the publication in 1997 of his first novel, *Neuvième cercle*. Michael Moorcock's bibliography isn't too shabby either!

Soon after the news broke on the BFS website, it was confirmed by Colin, who said that Michael Moorcock would mostly plan the novels, while he would write them alone, but the project was on hold until foreign rights were sorted out – it might happen within weeks, or it might be months. He promised to post news on his blog as soon as he had it.

If their collaboration does indeed lead to new Elric novels, I'll count the decade I spent studying French as having been very well spent indeed. Any Elric fans who can't read French might want to start taking lessons!

Comics Exhibition at Harrods

Curated by Rich Johnston, writer of *Lying in the Gutters*, the Harrods “Comic Timing” Exhibition will run until 31 October 2008. It is located on the Lower Ground Floor and is directly down the stairs from Door Five, by the Knightsbridge Tube exit.

The exhibition includes original artwork from comics and comic strips as diverse as: *Watchmen*, *Judge Dredd*, the *Bash Street Kids*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Korky the Kat*, *Oor Wullie*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *V for Vendetta*, *From Hell*, *Commando*, *Finbar Saunders and His Double Entendres*, *Tank Girl*, *Tale of One Bad Rat*, *Mauretania*, *Captain Britain*, *Breakfast After Noon*, *Slaine*, *Robusters*, *All Star Superman*, *The Filth*, *Hellblazer*, *Face Ache*, *Jackie*, *Commando*, *Look-In*, *Judge Death*, *Jack Staff*, *Books Of Magic*, *Goddess*, *Wired World*, and *Charley's War*.

Jack

Bob Lock

“Aren’t you ready yet, Jack?”

The boy looked sheepishly at his father before answering, his voice a quiet whisper.

“Don’t wanna go...”

“Don’t want to go. You–don’t–want–to–go.” The boy’s father dwelt on each word as if savouring its flavour and sighed. “You said the same thing last year... but you went.”

“Didn’t wanna go then either but...”

“But?” His father shook his head.

“You said I was being childish, so...”

His father looked down kindly on the youngster and sighed again.

“Look, I didn’t mean to belittle you or make you feel silly. I was just pointing out what the other kids would say if they knew how you felt. It’s just a festival thing. It doesn’t really mean anything at all. But, kids can be hurtful, if they think you are scared or –”

“I’m not scared!” The boy interrupted his father and then looked downcast before continuing in a quiet voice. “I just feel sorry for them. That’s all.”

“Sorry for them... I thought we had this out last year. We *grow* them. They are just *things*. They don’t *feel* anything!” His father was unable to keep the exasperation out of his voice.

“But we don’t *know* that, Dad!”

“And we don’t know if they *do*, either!” His father was shouting now.

The boy’s mother entered the small kitchen, a frown upon her face and her hands upon her hips.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

The father nodded towards their son, “Jack doesn’t want to come with

me to get the Halloween stuff and to make the lanterns.”

“So you’re shouting at him over it?”

“I got a bit carried away. Sorry, Jack. Sorry dear...”

“It’s not the Halloween stuff, Dad. I just don’t like making the lanterns, you know, scraping out the insides.”

Now his mother shook her head, “Don’t be silly, Jack. It’s just a way of celebrating the festival. The lanterns can look really pretty with the soft glow of a candle shining through from the inside.”

Jack thought they looked menacing but his main concern was whether or not it was painful. If *they* could feel and think. If every year at Halloween *they* dreaded the harvesting and the subsequent slaughter. He glanced at both his parents; they were looking at him benignly, awaiting his response.

“Mam, Dad...” He pondered for a moment. “What if – somewhere else in this universe or perhaps in some alternative universe – the same thing is happening – but to us. How do you think *you’d* feel if every time Halloween came around someone sliced

open the top of your head – scooped out the insides – poked holes for eyes and noses – gashed a big slit for a mouth and put a burning flame inside? What if it was the *humans* growing *us* and doing it to *us*? Do you think *we* would feel pain? Do you think *we* would be scared?”

His mother and father looked at one another and laughed.

“Jack O’Lantern, you’ve been reading too many of those pulp science fiction comics again, haven’t you?” His father laughed once more.

“That’s what this is all about! Jack, that’s just fiction, they’re just stories, not real,” said his mother with a smile. “Now I think it would be better to put all those ideas out of that little pumpkin head of yours and go with Daddy to the supermarket before all the humans are bought up.” She shooed him towards the door and patted him gently on his rind.

The boy shrugged, nodded quietly and followed his father outside. He looked up into the darkening sky as the first stars of the evening appeared like little pinpricks on a cloth of dark velvet and wondered...



Strangers Wear Masks of Your Face

Ralph Robert Moore

He was helping a black woman with a flat tyre when he woke.

In that moment between coming out of his dream, and just before opening his eyes, he realised there was someone in his bedroom.

Someone standing in the darkness, near him, looking down at him.

Philip kept his eyes shut, breathing regularly, pretending to still be asleep, not knowing what to do.

As he carefully exhaled through his nose, terrified, he realised there was more than one person in his bedroom. All of them standing around his bed.

Bending over, trying to determine if he were really still asleep. Or just pretending.

He kept breathing in and out, slow and deep, heart pumping violently below his ribs.

Eyelids closed, he sensed one of them bending closer.

Slip!

The right side of his head rocked against the pillow.

He had been punched in the face.

Was it a punch?

Eyes shut, breathing in through his nostrils, breathing out through his nostrils.

He tasted metal.

His tongue rolled around his teeth, tip lifting, tapping against something tall and sharp in the middle of his mouth.

Knife blade.

Stabbed down through his maxilla, point resting on the soft pink tissue behind his bottom teeth.

Breathe in! Breathe out!

He kept his eyes closed.

Whoosh. The blade withdrew upwards, out of the right side of his face, lifting his head off the pillow.

He let his head flop back down.

His tongue tip lifted to the roof of his mouth, feeling a soft slit that hadn't been there when he went to sleep.

The tip of his tongue explored the slit, tasting warm, sticky liquid.

"Are you awake?"

Instinct told him to pretend he was still asleep.

He stayed on his back, limbs out in imitation of sleep, pain from the knife stab starting to burn.

"I guess you must still be asleep."

With a crunch, the left side of his face sunk down. Hard knife blade stabbing into the left side of his cheek, through his maxilla, popping down past his pink gums, past the Novocain bumps of dental work.

The tip of the blade scratched across the fillings in his molars, fingernails down a blackboard.

Tears slid out the sides of his eyes, into his ears. He kept his lids closed, sensing that if they knew he was awake, they would do far worse.

The one who spoke before said, "Let's go."

Philip felt the top sheet peeled off his body, his pyjama pants pulled down, thrown sideways, exposing his genitals, his back lifted as his pyjama top was pulled up off his abdomen, his deliberately limp arms, thrown sideways.

He was bundled up in the bottom sheet from his bed, like a hammock, carried down the stairs of his apartment building.

Outside, he could feel on his face it was still dark.

They threw his sheet-bundled body on the floor of an automobile's back seat. Lots of car doors slamming, engine starting.

With a backwards jerk, the car drove away.

He was rolled up in his bed sheet, down around shoes.

No one spoke.

His body was thrown left, right,

the car twisting around tight curves at a high speed.

After another throw, he snaked his right hand out of the bedsheet, reached up, banged his knuckles around until they hit the back door's lever, pulled up on the lever, and before the shoes around him had a chance to react, flung himself, in his wrapped-up sheet, out of the car, onto the fast-passing pavement, body bouncing across the pavement, down an embankment, as farther up the car's brakes screeched, body bouncing out into the air, landing with a splash in the cold waters of Lake Michigan.

He started swimming, throwing one arm over the other, left, right, trying to get as far from shore as possible.

Shouts coming from far away.

He swam half a mile out, then followed the coastline, for an hour.

Paddled his body vertical in the dark green ripples, amid the moon's bouncing reflections, looking behind him, looking at the shoreline.

No one.

He splashed to the shore, stood up wearily, cold water dripping off his body.

At the top of a grassy hillock, bright pink lights.

He staggered towards the pink lights, arms swinging in front of him.

Freddy's Fish Fry.

He padded barefoot across the parking lot, only a few cars left.

Pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

Inside, a lounge with leather booths, wooden tables, ceiling lights, lots of them, orange, pink, red.

He made his way over to a gleaming curve of the long, deserted bar.

From a door behind the bar a tall man appeared, dark hair, black moustache, white shirt. He walked over slowly, passing the bottles beside him, carrying in both hands a silver martini shaker. Once he reached the curve of the bar where Philip stood, he leaned over the polished wood grain, to see if Philip were wearing pants. He was one of those men with regular features, who should look handsome, but doesn't. The too-tall forehead, or something. "How's it going?"

Philip was still trying to catch his breath. "Not so good."

"You get mugged or something? Have a seat."

He put a small paper napkin in front of where Philip pulled his naked ass up onto a stool.

"I was attacked. In my bedroom."

The bartender tilted his head left, examining Philip's face. "Fuck, man. They cut you up."

"Yeah."

"You don't have any money, right?"

Philip used the small paper napkin to blow his nose. "No."

The bartender shrugged. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

He drifted back a minute later, cup of hot coffee, small plate of buttered toast.

Philip took a sip of the coffee, its heat hurting the two slits below his eyes.

"You want me to call the cops?"

Philip thought about it. "I really don't know. I guess... I don't know. I'm not sure what I want to do."

"You're still in shock, man. You're fucked up."

"Philip? Is that you?"

A woman walked over from one of the tables, shoulder-length dark hair, eyes narrowed under the bar's ceiling lights.

Philip dropped his right hand to his lap, covering his genitals.

He turned on his stool towards her approach, shoulders going back with the shock of realising that, incredibly, it was Ileana Walker.

"It is you!" Her dark eyebrows scrunched, but her eyes stayed good-natured. "Why are you naked?"

"He got attacked in his bedroom. Look under his eyes. They cut up his fucking face. It's The Path. See the horizontal cut under each eye? That's the fucking Path."

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

Philip added his left hand to the right hand in his lap. "Yeah. I mean, I'm in some pain, my head's messed up, but... Is it really you? Jesus!"

Ileana nodded her head, dark eyes glowing. "I can't believe I'm seeing you again! What's it been? Ten years?"

He nodded, both hands covering his cock and balls. "Yeah. About

that." He looked at her face. The same big, beautiful dark eyes, black eyebrows, wide cheekbones with freckles. "You look great. You really do." His right and left hands stretched further apart in his lap, rising.

She let out a happy breath. "Would you bring us..." She reared her head back, embarrassed, innocent, silly. "What do you drink?"

"I don't know. A Manhattan?"

"Do you still want the buttered toast?"

"No, I guess not. Thanks for bringing it."

They watched the bartender walk away.

She sat on the bar stool next to his, leaning towards him with those big eyes. "This is incredible. Are you still living with..."

She knew his girlfriend's name, but pretending not to remember it, that his girlfriend was so inconsequential she was not worth remembering, was one of the flirtations Ileana had tried back then.

He remembered the time Ileana lifted the phone away from her ear, holding his eyes, telling him his girlfriend was on the line, knowing his girlfriend could hear what she was saying, asking if she should tell her he was too busy to speak to her, and he normally said no, out of loyalty, but this one time, to please Ileana, to acknowledge there was something between them, an office romance, although an innocent one, never consummated, but so powerful nonetheless, he said, Yeah, tell her I'll call her back, and he watched as Ileana, with this new power, this new permission he had given her, casually bent her wide lips back to the black telephone's receiver, saying in an exaggeratedly polite voice, eyebrows raised, Philip's too busy to speak to you, listening another moment, enjoying that his girlfriend lost this round, gently hanging up the phone without another word. His allowing Ileana to treat his girlfriend that way, even if only once, was something that still gave him a sexual charge, years and years later. That evening, Priscilla had raged at him, stomping around in her t-shirt and bare legs, snatching up the book he was reading, tossing it across the rumpled bed they shared.

"Don't ever let her treat me that way again!" And he hadn't. He didn't want to be the type of guy who cheats on his girlfriend. But he always remembered that one time, when he chose Ileana over her, and the way Ileana had so casually spoken into the telephone receiver, big dark eyes swung up to watch him as she said what she said into his girlfriend's ear.

"Priscilla. No."

"Someone else?"

"No. I'm free."

"She was such a bitch." She looked at him.

"Yeah. I admit it. She was a bitch. She always figured I had a crush on you."

"Yeah?" She shut her eyes inwardly.

"Which I did."

She looked down at her black shoes. "A girl can tell."

"Did you... did you have a crush on me?" He realised how pathetic that sounded, but also, with a stab to his heart, understood how important her answer was.

She gave him the soft smile he remembered from back then. "Yeah. Didn't you know? Sometimes, after we'd talk, during break or in the halls, at the photocopier or whatever, I'd go back to my cubicle and type on my keyboard, Mrs Ileana Benton."

He ducked his head. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"I've thought about you a lot over the years since you moved to Milwaukee. Wondered how you were doing. If you were still with Brent. I kept seeing you in the local stores, except it wasn't you, it was just women who looked like you."

Her face turned solemn. "We were living in Milwaukee, where he had been transferred, I found a job, things were going okay, so for New Year's Eve I thought, why don't we have a special meal? To, you know, kind of celebrate and everything. So I bought this rib roast, right? USDA Prime. It was beautiful, Phil. But. I cook the roast, it's got a meat thermometer stuck in it, it's finally done, he sits down at the kitchen table, I put out the mushrooms I cooked, au jus sauce from a package mix, mashed potatoes, Brussel sprouts. I'm carving the roast, one red, juicy slice after another

falling forward, I'm sawing down the next piece, and my carving knife rubs against something hard in that slice. So I pull the knife up, fold down the top part of the slice, see there's something dark in the meat. That's never happened before. I'm thinking, oh my God, we spent so much money for this roast, and it's contaminated."

He felt jealousy at her using the word, "We".

"So I poke at the dark circle with the tip of the carving blade, it feels hard. Metallic. You're not going to believe this. I pinch at it with my thumb and forefinger, pull it out of the meat. You're never going to guess what it was."

He raised his bare shoulders, so incredibly happy to be talking to her again. "I don't know."

She rested her right hand on his forearm, like she used to, ten years ago. "A bullet!"

"What?"

"A bullet! I'm serious! I held it in my fingers, thinking, How did a bullet ever get in the rib roast? And he says, Maybe someone shot the cow while it was still grazing in the field, and the butchers just never noticed." Her face turned solemn again. "The bullet was really hot, you know? I mean, it was made of metal, it had been in this roast that was in the oven for a couple of hours, so while I'm examining the bullet, it gets too hot to hold..." She started crying, big tears rolling down those wide, freckled cheeks. "So I toss it out of my hand, it's burning my fingers, but I toss it really, really lightly, like a... soap bubble or something, and it lands on Brent's dinner plate..." Her face collapsed. "And, and, it went off, the bullet went off, he was leaning over to look at it, and as it hit his plate it exploded..." Her voice got higher. She waved her arms. "And the bullet went right up into his forehead. It smacked, the force of it, smacked his head back, he fell off his chair, sideways, and he's dead."

"What?"

"I know! I couldn't believe it." Her eyes teared up again, glistening. "The police couldn't believe it. I was under suspicion for months."

"That's awful." He looked at her

teary face, touched the back of her right hand, thin tendons and blue veins, as it rested on the bar near her Manhattan. Felt a sexual tingle. "But... If the bullet, if someone shot it into the cow... there's two parts to a bullet. I'm not a bullet expert, but there's the casing, where all the gunpowder is stored, then there's the bullet itself. If someone shot the cow, the casing would stay in the rifle or revolver or whatever. Only the bullet itself would go into the cow. And that's just a piece of metal. There's nothing in that piece of metal that could cause the bullet to fire a second time. There's no gunpowder behind it."

"That's what they said! The police. But what I pulled out was a whole bullet. I'm not a bullet expert either, but it had the tip plus the casing."

"But then... did they ever figure out how the bullet got in the cow in the first place? If it was an intact bullet, with the casing, that meant it had never been fired from a gun."

She shrugged. "They never figured it out." Her dark eyes went inwardly, returned. "One of the cops, he was nicer than the other one, he confided to me people find all kinds of weird things inside rib roasts. He said he'd heard of cases where people, just carving up a cooked roast at the kitchen table like I did, had found necklaces, gold watches, and once, a complete set of false teeth with a ruby embedded in the front of each tooth. I have to pee."

Philip watched her walk away, eyes dropping to her shapely rear end, just like he used to do, so long ago, when she'd walk away from him.

She turned around unexpectedly, stopping, arms by her sides, looking over her left shoulder, catching him. "Be right back."

He raised his right hand.

The bartender floated over. "So, you know her?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like you and her..."

"It was one of those situations where we worked together for years, we flirted with each other all the time, but nothing ever came of it. We were both living with other people at the time, we both felt it would be wrong to cheat."

"So the two of you never..."

“Hmm? No. It was three years of foreplay.”

“She was the girl who got away.”

“Yeah. I’ve never met anyone like her. The way we connected, could talk to each other for hours. I felt so good, so happy whenever we were together. Each day, when I got to work, I always looked forward to seeing what she’d be wearing. We never kissed, not once, never even hugged, but I’ve made love to her thousands of times, in my mind. I always wondered how my life would have been different, if we had less of a conscience.”

“You got a second chance now.”

“Maybe.”

“She’s a real whore.”

“What?”

“I’m serious, man. She’ll fuck anybody.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She’s got a reputation.” He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I’m telling you. She puts her legs up in the air for everybody. Buy her a drink, she’ll go down on you in the parking lot. Guaranteed.”

“Hey, I appreciate you gave me the free coffee. But fuck you.”

The bartender held up both big hands, lined palms. “I’m just saying.”

“I don’t believe you. Fuck off.”

He rapidly swirled his bar cloth over the wood grain in front of Philip, wiping away the circular rings of moisture from their picked-up, put-down, Manhattans. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

Ileana came back, tilting her head to one side, a decision made while she was sitting on the toilet. “So where are you going to sleep tonight?”

He felt his heart thump. Still cupping his cock and balls in his lap, he raised his bare shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“I’m on my way back down to Milwaukee.” She shrugged, one of those shrugs that try to be casual, but betray nervousness. “If you want... why not stay with me? You know? I have a green blanket in my trunk. My apartment has a guest bedroom. You can’t go back to your old place. They

might be waiting for you. Do you have anything of value there?”

He pretended to do a mental catalogue, but knew the answer already. “No.”

They drove through Bailey’s Harbor, past the cherry and apple orchards, ghostly and black-limbed at this quiet hour, to Highway 57, then down the peninsula, towards Milwaukee.

Her apartment was downtown, on West Wisconsin Avenue. She parked out front, at the curb.

Leaning across the glowing blue dashboard, she whispered conspiratorially to him. “We have to hurry, so no one sees you’re naked. I could get thrown out.”

He followed her across the sidewalk on bare feet, in the moon-filled silence of the world, clenching his green blanket around his shoulders, up the stone stairs to her building’s tall glass double doors.

No one in the lobby, at this hour.

She pressed for the elevator, looking around nervously, turning her beautiful face back to him, smiling.

Once they were on her floor, the old fashioned elevator doors pinging open, she ducked her head out, dark hair swinging, to make sure the coast was clear.

They hurried down the carpeted hall, her key already out, to her door.

Her apartment surprised him. It was really nice, white walls, high white ceilings, crown moulding, dark oak frames around the doorways and windows.

She tossed her hair, proud. “It’s an historic building. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I have a balcony.”

He could see, beyond the French doors at the opposite wall of the living room, the dark iron rails. “I probably shouldn’t go out on it in this blanket.”

“Are you hungry?” There was a small kitchen unit on the right side of the living room, separated by a ster-num-high black counter, small orange pots of basil, thyme, oregano.

He realised he was.

He sat in his wrapped-around blanket on her living room sofa, while she pulled a can of Campbell’s

Chicken and Noodle soup out of an overhead cabinet, rinsing the round metal top off under her kitchen sink tap, popping the lid, dumping the spiralled yellow noodles into a stainless steel pot.

She didn’t eat herself, just watched him while he spooned the soup up to his mouth.

“Be careful how much you put in your mouth, so it doesn’t ooze out those two slits below your eyes.”

Once he was finished, she made them both a Manhattan.

He took a sip, green army blanket still around his shoulders. “I can’t believe I’m actually in your apartment.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah, I really do.”

She lowered her dark eyes. “The apartment comes with two bedrooms. I had to rent a two bedroom in order to get a balcony, but I only have one bed. You can sleep in my bed with me. But I don’t want to do anything tonight.”

He sat back on the sofa, rearranging the army blanket to keep himself covered. “It’s so weird we met.”

“Yeah!”

“Like a second chance.”

Her voice got soft. “Yeah.”

“Do you go to that bar often?”

“Hmm? Sometimes, when I’m travelling up north. We’re trying to find funding for some of the light-houses up there, to restore them.”

“That bartender? Do you know him pretty well?”

“Roy? No, not that well.”

Eyes bright, she took his hand, led him down the hall, to an ajar door, pushing the door open.

It looked like a girl’s bedroom. The bedroom of a girl who lives alone, decorates her walls to be surrounded by things that make her feel happy, and safe.

The bed they’d be sharing was a twin.

She bent over in front of her bureau, pulling, out of the bottom drawer, a pair of pink pyjamas.

She went across the hall, to the bathroom, to change. Shut the bathroom door behind her. All the way. The doorknob went, Click.

He pulled down the left side of the

floral bedspread, picturing her making the bed each morning before she left for work. Every other girl he knew just left the bed unmade, day after day.

He let his green army blanket fall. He had an erection. He was going to leave the blanket on the white carpet, thought better of it, picked it up. Folded it against his chest, placing it in a neat bundle on the carpet near the bureau.

Heard the bathroom door opening, hurried into the bed on its left side, pulling the top sheet and blanket up over his chest.

She came into the bedroom in her dark shoulder-length hair and pink pyjamas, her body's outlines obvious under the cotton. She looked nervous. "Are you naked?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"I'm going to turn off the light on my side of the bed before I get in, okay?"

"Sure."

In the darkness filled with grey, unfamiliar furniture shapes, he felt her side of the bed lower as her hour-glass weight lay down on the mattress. More mattress bouncings, her rolling over onto her right side, facing him. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could see her wide, freckled-cheek face grinning at him. "Is this weird, or what?"

"You and me in bed together?"

Saw her upper teeth gleam. "Yeah."

"I used to fantasise we had to go to a client meeting out of state."

"Really!"

"Yeah. And there was this problem at the hotel, all their rooms were booked, we couldn't have separate rooms, we had to share the same hotel room, we're standing at the hotel check-in desk, kind of thinking, Well, what should we do? And the clerk is saying, You have to decide, we've got other business travellers bidding on that one room already, so in a panic, we don't want to sleep on the street, it's a strange city neither of us has been to before, we say, Okay, we'll take it. And the hotel room we get is really small, the bed is actually a single..."

"Oh, okay."

"Plus our baggage is lost, it's in

Nome, Alaska, or Siberia, or it accidentally got put on a moon rocket, it's 140,000 miles away from Earth, floating in a space capsule, so all we have are the clothes on our backs, which we have to keep crisp for our client meeting the next morning, so that means we can only sleep in our underwear in this narrow bed, but the air conditioning isn't working, so we have to sleep together naked, in a bed about a yard wide, which means our arms and legs are intertwined, and I am... so engorged."

"Gee."

"Really. Like I've never been in my life."

Her invisible hand touched his invisible cheek.

He went on. "And this fantasy?" Her fingertips felt the wetness on his cheeks. "It doesn't end with me 'fucking' you. It ends with me telling you something I never had the courage all those years to tell you. That the first time I ever saw you, you took my breath away. That I love you."

She leaned over in the dimness, kissed his tears. "I knew," she said sincerely. "I always knew, and I always felt the same way. All those talks we'd have, at my cubicle or yours, or in the hallways... I fell in love with you."

They didn't kiss. They could have, but they didn't. She rolled over in the darkness, so she had her back to him. He sensed, in invitation. He put his arms around her, but didn't try to touch her breasts, or rear end, or between her legs. She put her small hands on his. He fell asleep smelling her hair.

* * *

When he woke, her side of the bed was empty, sunlight on the rumpled sheet.

"Ileana?"

He walked warily down the apartment's centre hall, bare feet, green army blanket around his waist.

She was at the stove, still in her pink pyjamas, happily stirring yellow and white eggs around in a skillet.

She twirled around. "I'm making you breakfast in bed." Her eyes glanced down. She giggled, cheeks blushing. "Guess you're glad to see

me, sir." She turned back to her scrambling. "Very impressive."

He repositioned his hands to have the blanket hang less tightly around the front of his thighs.

Her right hand kept circling the wooden spoon in the skillet. "I thought once we eat, I'd go to Johnnie Walker's and buy you some clothes."

"I don't have any money."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't worry about that. You can pay me back once you get a job."

On the counter, a folded *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. He slid the warm black and white sections apart, looking for the want ads. "Someone told me once, when you're looking for a job, start off by going for an interview at a place you don't want to work, just to get those 'looking for a job' jitters over with."

"Oh, I didn't mean you have to look today. I just meant, you know, whenever." She carried two steaming white plates over, each with a big pile of yellow egg curds, curled bacon, triangled toast.

While she was out shopping for him, he went through the ad columns, glumly circling with blue ink the few places he thought he might get accepted, all of them entry level.

At eleven he heard a key in the lock of her front door, hastily threw the army blanket over his body, turned the sound down on the TV.

It was her, both hands holding shopping bags. She bumped her hip against the door, until it shut and clicked. She looked happy, cheeks flushed. "I want a fashion show!"

He slipped his fingers through some of the handles, taking the bags from her, following her into the bathroom.

"You can try them on here, see how they look, in the mirror, then come out and show me."

He modelled the different outfits for her, casual clothes and two sets of striped pyjamas.

She sat on the edge of the bed, grinning. Slid her dark eyes sideways at one point, when he was standing in front of her in a pair of canvas slacks, grey shirt. "I think it's incredibly sexy I get to dress you up, however I want."

He spread his hands apart at his hips. "Whatever you want me to, I'll wear."

After he had dressed up in the bathroom the final time, bare knees lifting, hands fastening shirt buttons, he went in his new blue and white striped pyjamas to the kitchen, picked up the want ads. "I found a listing I thought I'd try."

She raised her shoulders. "You don't have to find a job today, Phil. I know you're a sincere person, you're not going to 'sponge' off me. Wait until your face heals."

He smiled at her. "I want to pay my share."

"Is it a, 'I don't really want this job, the interview is just to get me over my first interview' type job?"

"Yeah. It's in Wauwatosa, which I guess is just north of here." He looked at her, embarrassed. "It's for a bouncer."

She reared her head back happily. "Wooo! I'll get to feel your biceps every night, while you tell me about all the ass you kicked."

The ad read, Apply in Person, so the two of them got in her car, drove over.

Wauwatosa had a neighbourhood feel to it, the main street filled on both sides with taverns, bakeries, bridal shops.

The place they were looking for was Krushing's, a German restaurant.

It occupied the corner of a block, the outside of the building done in Bavarian style, white mortar with dark wood beams.

"I'll wait in the car."

He pushed through the tall wooden door, entering into a short hall with autographed black and white pictures of celebrities on the walls, Liberace, Ralph Bellamy, McLean Stevenson, Tom Smothers, a polka band leader with piano keys on the lapels of his tuxedo.

Inside, the place looked deserted. Bar to one side, lots of silent wooden tables, an unoccupied stage in the centre.

He tilted his head back to be heard in the emptiness. "Hello?"

A woman in her fifties came out, beauty parlour blonde hair, frilly black and white waitress outfit that ended at mid-thigh.

"We're not open until five."

"I'm applying for the bouncer job. It said to apply in person."

She turned her head to the left, raised her voice. "Florian? That's a nice pair of pants. Florian?"

Florian, presumably the owner, came out, a tall balding man in a puffy white shirt, black vest and shorts, hard face, handlebar moustache.

They sat at one of the empty wooden tables.

"So what makes you think you got what I want to be a bouncer?"

Philip should have felt nervous, but he didn't. In fact, he was surprised at how calm, how in control, he felt. "May I call you Florian?"

Florian, resting both wrists on his big bare knees, ducked his head. "Sure. Of course."

Philip started speaking, not knowing, after each word came out, what word would follow, but follow they did. "I figure you're a businessman."

"Sure."

"So it's All You Can Eat night, you got a full house, moving a lot of drinks and food, and there's a table where the folks are getting a little too rowdy. The men are talking loud, they're ordering new drinks almost as soon as the latest are set down, they contented themselves with a few 'hells' and 'damns' earlier in the evening, over the appetisers, but now they're up to 'bitch' and 'shit', and you know 'fuck' and 'cunt' aren't too far away. They're trying to catch the eyes of the girls at all the other tables, even the tables where it's not just a guy with a sports jacket, it's a guy with a sports jacket and his parents or in-laws."

"I get those types of fellas every All You Can Eat Night."

"You're trying to provide good food, good service, happy times, I guess some entertainment, seeing that stage over there, and these guys are guaranteeing the people at all the tables around them will never come back to Krushing's again. Plus, you know about word of mouth. Is Krushing's any good? How's the food? Krushing's? I went there once. That's it. A bunch of drunks ruined our meal."

"So what do you do? You watch them from the waitress station for a

while, hoping they'll straighten out, but they never do. Finally go to their table, bend over, talking quietly to them, asking them with a smile to please watch their language, there's kids and grandmas here. And what do they do? They look back at you bleary-eyed, food stains on their shirts, treat you like you're an asshole."

"I lose a lot of the old-timers, that's for sure. I'm almost at the point where I'm taking veal off the menu. So what would you do?"

"What would I do? I'd march right over to that table, early in the evening, before anyone but you and me know there's a problem. I'd put this hand here on the shoulder of the ringleader, and you know what I'd say to him?"

Florian looked back at Philip, lips pursed under his big black handlebar moustache.

"I'd say, Guess what? You won our door prize. We're gonna name a Krushing's drink after you! Come on back behind the bar so you can sample it. Then I'd get that motherfucker behind the bar, out of sight, in the storage room, and I'd kick the living shit out of him. I'd get everyone at his table to go back there, for a group photograph, and once I slammed that door shut, I'd show them what their piece of shit hero looks like, crawling on the knees of his torn pants across the concrete floor, lettuce on his head. I'd put my hand against the chest of each and every one of them, male and female, shove them against the wall, and tell them, You ever come back to my restaurant again, or go to the police, I'm gonna split your fucking head apart."

Florian leaned back in his wooden chair, bare legs stretching out of his black shorts, dark eyes looking at Philip, considering what Philip had said. Finally, he tilted his head to one side. "Okay. Probably, that would work. But just shove the ringleader around some behind the bar. Don't kick the shit out of him."

"I can do that."

"I got another question. What about those two slits under your eyes?"

Philip felt his confidence falter.

"I figure, The Path did that to you. Am I right?"

"Probably."

"And The Path, from what I read in the Journal-Sentinel, once they do that to a person, stab down twice in his face like that, that person, he eventually wants to stab down into another person's face. The Path's victims, or converts, or whatever you want to call them, the paper says they start to get a real anger building up inside them. So how do I know, one night, you're not going to go crazy and stab one of my waitresses in the face, or try to stab me in the face?" He pointed his thick index finger at Philip, smiling under his handlebar moustache. "This is a restaurant. We got knives everywhere."

Philip looked around at the empty tables, sat up straighter in his seat. "Don't believe everything you read. I was affected by being stabbed in the face. There are... spirals in my head now, that never were there before. But it's good. I see possibilities I never saw before, like applying for this job. I'm a level-headed person. I'm not going to do anything I don't want to do."

* * *

Ileana was sitting behind her steering wheel, listening to the car radio, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, not noticing his approach until he was almost at her rolled-down window.

She raised her dark eyebrows, right hand twisting down the volume. "How'd it go?"

He stood by her driver's door, in the clothes she bought him, head feeling like it stretched all the way up to the blueness in the sky. "I got it!"

She raised her dark eyebrows. "Wow! But, did you want it? I thought this was like..."

He shrugged. "It's a job."

They decided to celebrate. He could have anything he wanted for dinner. He chose a USDA prime rib roast.

After dinner, dirty plates still on the table, candles melted halfway down, yellow flames flickering, she poured him more wine. "Do you remember the first time we ever talked?"

"Yeah. The first word I ever said to you was, Two."

"I asked what floor you wanted. I remember. I saw you around the office, wondered who you were. One of my girlfriends told me your name. I really liked it. Philip. It sounded like a good name."

"I always noticed you when I was walking through the halls. It was like... at the beginning of a crush? Where you think, Hey, there's that girl again! And I'd watch you as long as I could, walking by, trying not to get caught."

"I noticed you watching me. I liked it. You were shy though."

"Maybe a little."

"Yes, you were. Don't be embarrassed. I liked it. There were a couple of times, like when we happened to be standing next to each other, waiting at the security check to get into the building in the morning, or to leave at night, when you could have said something to me, even something like, Boy, it's cold this morning! I even half-turned in your direction a couple of times, to encourage you. But you never did."

"It's true. I was shy. I tried to think of things to say, but they all sounded really stupid."

"Well, you know. A lot of times, it doesn't matter what you say, just that you say something. A girl doesn't care if the first words out of your mouth aren't really clever or original. All she cares about is, you're trying to speak to her. You're showing you like her."

"I guess I was a real dork, huh?"

She bent her beautiful face forward, laughing, leaving her mouth open afterwards. She reached through the halos of candlelight, grabbing his hand, holding it. "You weren't a 'dork', Phil. Do you remember the first time we had a conversation?"

"Yeah. It was on the company intranet."

"God, you do remember!"

"I sent an e-mail, my first important e-mail, to about thirty people in the company. It was on quality control, new protocols I was going to establish. I spent a long time polishing it, because it was going to a lot of department heads who had probably

never heard of me before, and I wanted to make a good first impression."

"It was Friday evening, about four-thirty."

"Close to the end of the work week, yeah. I raced to get it finished in time to be able to include it on my weekly status report. You remember, back then, everyone's computer was set up so that when you got an intranet e-mail, your computer would let out a beep."

"Yeah."

"I had all the e-mail addresses in place, text in the body of the e-mail, and I held my index finger over the Send button, thinking, Here goes! then pressed the button. Nothing, for about two seconds. Then all over the floor, beyond my cubicle, I could hear, travelling farther and farther away from me, Beep! Beep! Beep! That was so cool. Knowing all these different 'movers and shakers' had just received my protocols, including you. Especially you."

"I saw your return e-mail address in my inbox, but I knew right away from the title it wasn't a personal note, it was business-related."

"But you replied to it."

She propped the right side of her face on her palm, elbow on the table, looking dreamily at him. "Yeah. I wanted to see if you'd e-mail me back."

"You wrote something like, It looks like you put a lot of hard work into this, Philip!"

"Which was kind of stupid, but I wanted to talk to you."

"I e-mailed you back. Something like, I appreciate your compliment. I tried to think of something to add."

"You added something like, Your opinion means a lot to me."

"Then you e-mailed me, saying, You deserve a great weekend for all your hard work. By then, a lot of people were standing up in their cubicles, turning off their lights. I pictured the two of us almost alone in the building, on separate floors, having this e-mail conversation. I have to admit, it gave me a sexual charge."

"Oooh!"

"I e-mailed back, I don't have anything planned. How about you?" After I sent it, I was nervous, staring at my computer, the long list of an-

swered e-mails in my inbox, wondering if you'd reply. I got ready to leave, then Beep! The bolded font of a fresh e-mail, from you."

"I said I was going out of town. Actually, Brent and I were going north to stay with his parents, but I didn't want to say that, because I thought it would discourage you."

"Then the next time we saw each other, I asked how your weekend was."

"You asked me a lot of questions. If I had seen such and such a movie, was I from Wisconsin originally... a whole bunch of stuff. You really opened up after that."

"I wanted a lot of information about you, so it didn't turn into one of those situations people sometimes get into where every time we ran into each other, we only talked about the same subject that had originally connected us, like, Oh, what did you think of my revised protocols, or, Did you go out of town this weekend, too?"

He poured them some more white wine, tilting the circular mouth of the bottle up after the level had risen halfway up her glass, but then, as an indulgence, like waking up in the morning and deciding to sleep another fifteen minutes, he tilted the mouth of the bottle back down, filling her glass, and his, to just below the rims.

She lowered her head, dark eyes mischievous. "Phil, can I ask you a question? A personal question?"

"Sure."

She bit her luscious lower lip. "Did you... those years we would flirt with each other, confide in each other, did you ever masturbate thinking about me?"

He grinned. "Yeah. A lot."

She sat up. "Really? Like what?"

"What were my masturbatory fantasies about you?"

"Yeah! If you don't mind sharing."

"I'd... masturbate wondering what your legs look like, your breasts, what it would be like to kiss you, to be on top of you, to go down on you. Everything. Really, everything."

"When would you do it?"

"After Priscilla fell asleep. Or early in the morning. Or when she was out shopping, or taking a shower, to where I could tell by the sound of the

water hitting the shower curtain it was safe. I used to masturbate a lot thinking about that time she called me at work, and you answered the phone, asked me if I were too busy to talk to her? Remember that?"

She lowered her chin. "Yeah! I told her you were way too busy to talk to her, then lowered the phone back on its cradle while she was still whining away. I masturbated to that, too."

"Honest?"

"Sure. That was the day you chose me over her. I masturbated to that a lot. Still do." She puckered her wide lips, puffed out both candles, the extinguished wick smell sharp. Her dark eyes regarded him.

He got into his striped pyjamas in the bedroom, while she changed again in the bathroom.

Since he had pyjamas on, he stayed standing, waiting for her.

She came out in pink pyjamas, reached behind her, turned off the bathroom light.

Walked across the hall into the bedroom, eyes lowered, hips moving up and down, smile on her face. "Just so you know, these are different pink pyjamas. They're not the same ones I wore last night."

"You like pink, huh?"

She lifted both hands to her temples, pushed her dark hair away from her face, in control, lips pushed out. "So... you want to kiss me?"

The front of his striped pyjama pants sagged forward with the weight of his erection. "This is our first kiss. I want it to be in bed. First kisses are almost never in bed."

He got in on his side, she on hers, both pulling down their side of the bed cover, bringing the cover back up, once they slipped under, to their shoulders. He slid over, put his arm around her shoulder, tilted his mouth down to, tilting up, her mouth.

Her lips were softer than in his daydreams. Her tongue wriggled into his mouth sooner than he expected.

He moved his mouth to the warmth of her throat, kissing and nipping under the wishbone of her jaw, holding onto her shoulders, struck at how delicate she was, her hands encircling his head, keeping him in place, their bare feet brushing against each other.

She grabbed his forehead, holding him still. "I want to kiss those beautiful, beautiful blue eyes of yours."

He lay back, hands on her pyjama'd hips, not wanting to rush things, knowing he still had all her luscious body to touch and hold for the first time ever, feeling the moist heat of her mouth on his left eye, blinding it, his eyelids instinctively closing, the pink tip of her tongue sliding between the lashes, licking open the lashed lids, carefully licking his eyeballs.

They broke.

Her face was flushed, front of her pyjama top rising and falling with her breaths.

She reached under the sheets, invisible knees poking the blanket up left, right, elbows hiking. Grinning like a naughty kid, she yanked her pink pyjama bottoms out of her side of the sheet by its long legs, as if by the long ears of a magic trick, tossing the bottoms in the air, sideways.

She settled her dark-haired head on her white pillow, large, sly eyes sliding right, naked under the sheets from the waist down, every soft, warm, round inch of her from the hips down ready to be looked at, caressed with his sliding palms, kissed. He pulled off his pyjama top, bare arms lifting, biceps and triceps flexing. Lifted her pyjama top, pink flannel exposing her belly button, ribs, unexpectedly wide breasts, dark nipples poking straight up.

Her right foot snagged the elastic waistband of his pyjama bottoms, pulling them down to his ankles. He kicked them off under the sheets, with a muffled violence.

Climbed on top of her, fronts of their bare bodies touching for the first time ever, after all those years of flirting, him rubbing his tall cock against her cunt, both of them curling their heads back, groaning, with the incredible, joyous physical pleasure of their genitals touching.

He slid his cock halfway up her slick cunt, where it met some tightness, took his time to slowly pump it up another inch, another, another, her beautiful, dark-framed face rolling back on the white pillow, fingers gripping his bare ass, until the big head was all the way up inside her,

and her cunt's muscles, accommodating, gave in to the fat length.

He looked down, into her eyes.

They started fucking each other, nice and slow. Looked down to watch his wide cock slide effortlessly in and out of her cunt.

He cleared his throat. "I've never felt such a perfect fit."

She nodded, looking up at him. A tear appeared in her eye. "Phil?"

"Yeah?"

Her lower lip trembled. "I've been really lonely."

He bent his face forward, kissed the rolling tear. Looked down into her eyes. "You're never going to be lonely again."

"Really, Phil? Honestly?"

"Yeah."

She shut her eyes, smile on her face.

He grinned. "I want to make love to you a hundred different ways. It's so frustrating I can only do one position at a time." He reached down with both big hands, palms on the outsides of her soft breasts, putting his thumb and index finger around the base of each nipple, pinched them as hard as he could, lower lip pulling down from his teeth.

Her throat, hips, reared up gratefully.

With his left hand, he grabbed the back of her neck, angling his cock up even deeper, her bare knees jerking up mid-air with each more violent pump, his right fingertips curling down into the moist black hairs of her cunt, slipping down into the wetness between her cunt lips, tickling her swollen clitoris, tickling it, vibrating his index fingertip over its swell, tickling it, slapping it left, right with his top fingerpad, pinching it, tickling it, pinching it as hard as he could, her spine rising off the soaked sheets. She grabbed onto his left shoulder, mouth opening, eyes closing, thighs jerking up, up, up, ass banging down on the bedsheet, throat letting out a sharp, violent moan.

He slowed his pumps, waited for her eyes to reopen.

When they did, they were soft, dreamy. "Mmmm."

"You liked that?"

"Mmmmm. Yeah. I always figured. You knew how to fuck me. Re-

ally, really fuck me. All those years... didn't you know what I was saying to you, standing so close to you when we talked, laughing at all your jokes, reaching out and touching your shoulder? I was telling you, you can fuck me. I want you to fuck me. Girls get so frustrated."

He kept sliding his stiff cock up inside her cunt. "I was stupid. But I'm not stupid anymore."

She rested her dark-haired head against her white pillow, shutting her eyes for a moment, enjoying his continued pumping. Chuckled. "God, you sure aren't." She let out a sigh, swung her legs up, feet over his head, plumping the undersides of her thighs on his chest.

The wonderful weight of her bare thighs against his chest made him even harder. He ran his hands over their smooth skin, muscularity.

She popped her eyes open, smirk on her lips. "Ready?"

He wasn't sure what she meant. Nodded.

With a surprising grace, she swung both white calves around his neck, small feet sticking up elegantly behind his head, underside of her right calf pressed against his throat.

Ankles crossed behind him, she lifted her shapely ass off the sheets, tightening the underside of her right calf against his Adam's apple.

He reached his hands up instinctively, to pull her tightening calves off his throat, but stopped his hands midway, letting them hang, veins and tendons.

Her bare ass lifted off the sheets again, ankles tightening behind his head, soft, plump underside of her right calf closing off more of his air. He started seeing white pinpoints.

His palms slid up and down the warm fullness of her thighs, giving in.

They kept fucking.

She looked up lazily at his distress, in control. Her bare ass lifted again, underside of calf shutting off all his air.

He went somewhere else, palms feeling the strength of her thighs.

"Almost there?"

He couldn't talk, since her calf shut off his vocal cords. He nodded.

Gripping his neck with her calves, she stretched up his spine.

Sun! Burst!

He slapped his cock up into her, riding his orgasm, rows of teeth stretched apart.

Once he was down, she casually unwound her calves from around his neck, stuck her big toe between his lips. He gratefully sucked its round joint.

He fell on his back, stomach sucking in. "God."

She snuggled next to him, one lovely knee drawn up. He glanced down at the forty-five degree angle of her calf, the one whose underside had pressed against his throat, cutting off his air. Felt a stomach-turning wave of lust. "God."

She swung her dark eyes up to him, smug smile.

"Did... I don't want to bring up past lovers, but am I right in thinking Brent taught you that?"

Her smugness changed to a concerned look. "Yeah. I mean, we don't have to do it anymore if..."

"No. That's fine." He looked again at her angled calf, remembering how good it felt across his throat. "It really turned me on." He felt himself getting hard, even though he had just come. "I hate to ask, but... what would he do for you?"

"Really? You want to know?"

He felt embarrassed. "Yeah."

Using both small hands, she pushed her dark hair away from her face. "I probably look really messy right now."

"No. I like you messy."

She grinned. "Okay, well, usually, he'd go down on me. He'd go down on me, I'd have my orgasm, you know, then he'd get on top of me and, you know, have intercourse with me while I put my calves around his throat."

He met Brent at a company picnic at Ridges Sanctuary. Didn't like him one bit, wouldn't have liked him even if he weren't Ileana's boyfriend. Ivy league blond hair, smile that's always a sneer, showing too many teeth, habit of talking over everyone else's words. Pictured him, without wanting to, on top of Ileana, cock up inside her, holding her feet, showing her how to criss-cross her ankles behind

his head, this younger Ileana practicing how to get her calves just so around Brent's throat until she had them the way it pleased him, because back then, she wanted to please him.

"Did he have a big cock?"

She did an exaggerated blinking. "Excuse me?"

"I know. It's an asshole type question, but granting that it is, whose cock was bigger?"

She looked flustered. "Gee, Phil. Okay. Well, yours."

"Are you just saying that, or... I know. It's a horrible question."

She put her right hand against his cheek. "No, honey. Really. Yours is bigger."

"I'm an asshole."

"No, you're not. I understand. But I guess, it's like me asking, whose 'pussy' is tighter?"

"I know."

She raised her dark eyebrows. "No, I mean, I'm asking you, whose pussy is tighter?"

"Oh! Well, yours, of course. Maybe since he didn't have intercourse with you so much, just went down on you. I read somewhere, it was an article by a psychiatrist, he said when a man's preferred method of sex with a woman is cunnilingus, that usually means he has homosexual tendencies, since cunnilingus doesn't require him to have an erection, and he can't get a full erection with a woman because he's gay. It was all based on some big, authoritative study they did."

She took in a breath to say something, stopped. Rearranged her expression. "So while we're talking about the past, what would you and her do?"

"Just straight fucking. Mostly, to be honest, make-up sex. We'd fight all the time." He could always tell, in the middle of an argument with Priscilla, when she'd start getting horny despite herself, that haunted look she'd get, eyes dropping in her sockets like she was checking something internal, unhealthy flush on her cheeks, little lips giving out shorter answers until she'd pull off her t-shirt, lay on her back, legs spread. He always thought her springy, light brown pubic hair, the natural pattern in which it grew, was pretty.

An hour later, while the rest of the city slept on, they took a break from the nose nuzzlings and gentle smiles of their conversation to make love again, Philip going down on Ileana this time, telling her ahead of time, since she'd see the top of his head, that he suspected he was developing a bald spot, her puffing out her lips, waving her left hand, saying, "Don't worry about that," Ileana strangling Philip again with her calves. An hour after that, the radio on top of her dresser playing, at a low volume, old Beatles songs, they finished telling each other about everyone they had fucked in the past. She had had more partners than him. Half an hour later, after several beers, Philip held her sobbing upper body in his arms, feeling her tears drop on his bare chest, while she talked about how guilty she felt about Brent's death. Twenty minutes later, two beers later, they had their first fight, about why Roy the bartender would call her a whore, she insisting she barely knew him, nothing he said was true, then once that was settled, he told her about the masturbatory fantasy he had for years, imagining her and Priscilla settling down on a mattress in a sixty-nine position, kissing each other's inner thighs, cupping each other's bare asses, tonguing each other's cunts. A while after that she told him she had once, as a kid, thrown a rock at a neighbourhood dog, hitting him on his snout, causing him to run whimpering down the street, and he told her about the time, when he was fourteen, after a swim meet, he sucked another boy's cock.

She touched herself between her legs while he told her. "Did he come in your mouth?"

"Yeah. But I didn't swallow it. I tilted my head, let it spill out on the shower tiles."

She kept touching herself, eyes glassy. "I want to give you a blowjob, but I want it to be exactly like the blowjob Priscilla would give you, okay? Tell me exactly what your former girlfriend would do with her lips and her tongue and her fingers while she sucked you, and I want you to close your eyes during it and picture yourself in bed with her instead of me, okay? Like you're coming in her

mouth instead of my mouth, okay? Was her mouth really warm?"

* * *

He stood up from the toilet seat, finished wiping, glanced down at the front of his bent body, noticed how pronounced his abdominal muscles had gotten the past month, working out on Ileana's home gym.

Stopping in front of the full-length mirror in their bathroom, he looked at his naked body.

Ileana wandered in, nude except for a white bra. "Ooooh!"

He bent her over the bathroom sink, her small hands on the hot and cold water spigots as he slid his long cock up inside her cunt, bumped her ass up, up, up a thousand times, fingers pinching nipples under her lopsided white bra, until her lips burst apart, spittle on the mirror, knees caving. He lay on the bathroom floor, closing his eyes as she locked her plump calves around his throat, lifting her left hip, lifting it, lifting it, until his cock shot.

When they were fully dressed, she went up on tip-toe, kissed his forehead. "I'll buy some shrimp on the way home, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. There it is." He bent over, picked up a bar of Irish Spring from the bathroom floor. "This fucking thing was under my back the whole time you were choking me." He flung it angrily at the mirror. It bounced off its rapidly approaching reflection, ricocheting around their bathroom.

Krushing's closed at ten, so they usually ate dinner around midnight. He could sleep late the next morning (Krushing's didn't open until five in the afternoon). She had to be at work by eight o'clock in the morning, but she never complained.

He always called their apartment between eight and nine, from the bar, while Florian was on stage in his white shirt and black vest and shorts with the house band, doing his shtick and cajoling all the diners to put down their forks, stand up by their tables, and do the Chicken Dance.

Greta, the fiftyish waitress with the mid-thigh black and white serving costume he met when he applied for the job, came over to him after he

hung up the phone, took his finger out of his left ear. She had a good figure, but her face looked old, wrinkled mouth and jaw like a steam shovel. Once, she pressed her surprisingly soft body against his front, to whisper in his ear above the general noise that Florian was really pleased with him. After that, he always turned his body sideways when she approached.

"Florian wants you should talk to the people at table nine. College kids."

He shouted over the din of the Chicken Dance. "What's the problem?"

"They say they don't have the money to pay for their meals. Doris asked them if they could postdate a check, and the lead one, he with the blond hair, he just laughed and asked for another round of drinks." She grabbed his right shoulder. "You know what all the waitresses are calling you?"

He shook his head, looking over at table nine.

"Mr 3 Cool."

"What?"

"That's right. Mr 3 Cool. All of them think you're so cool, you're three times the regular cool guy. Even Ingrid calls you that!"

"Okay."

"I want to show you something."

He took a step back, cautious around her since that time she pressed her body against him.

Steam shovel mouth grinning, she reached both hands up to mid-face, fingers wiping away her makeup, exposing a thin, horizontal red scar under each cheekbone. "I'm one too! Just like you."

He felt a chill.

Her fingers smeared her makeup back over the two knife scars.

Philip walked down the aisle between the tables, side-stepping waitresses carrying trays of steaming knockwurst and sauerkraut, wondering why Greta singled out Ingrid, a black-haired waitress of eighteen from Germany who wore her long hair in side braids.

He stopped by table nine, letting his hands hang from his sides. Before The Path, he would have nervously put his hands in his pockets. No more. Two boys, two girls, all around

twenty. "What's this I hear about a problem paying your bill?"

The blond-haired, wide-faced boy at the back of the table shrugged good-naturedly. "We don't have any money. We're poor college students." He looked at the other three, rolled his eyes at them so Philip could see the eye-rolling.

"If you eat, you have to pay."

"Yeah, well, we don't have the money, Adolf. Didn't I just say that?" He sat back, glancing at the others, who snickered.

The Chicken Dance finished, to wide applause. The dining room got quieter, so Philip didn't have to raise his voice. "Your bill comes to eighty-eight dollars. Not bad, to feed the four of you, with plenty of drinks. We'll figure a tip of twelve dollars. That means you owe one hundred dollars. Let's have it."

The college boy leaned even further back, enjoying himself. "Bring us another round of drinks. We'll think it over."

Philip gave him a tight smile. "I want you to remember one thing."

"Whatever."

"I want you to remember that when I asked you to pay the money you owed, I first asked you politely."

The college boy shrugged. "Whatever." Then, testing, someone who had gotten away with a lot in life by testing, he said, "Hey, you know what? Fuck you."

Philip turned towards the stage, where Florian, microphone to his mouth, was watching.

Philip brought his curled right hand up to his mouth.

On stage, Florian spoke into the microphone, his voice magnified. "Guess what we gonna be doing now, ladies and gentlemen?" He called three of the black-clad band members over, talked to them a moment off-microphone. They reached over their heads, lifting an incredibly long alpine horn off the hooks it hung from, among the glass beer mugs dangling from the ceiling. The horn was twenty feet long. "We gonna do a song with one of the longest alpine horns in the world."

As all the people at the different tables swung their heads forward to watch this incredibly long horn get

carefully lowered from the ceiling by three band members, steadying it along its length, Philip reached across the table, grabbed college boy by the front of his shirt, enjoying the look of privileged outrage in college boy's face as his head bent down, seeing the fingers wrapped around his buttons, and hoisted college boy out into the aisle, stepping behind him, puppet-walking him down the row of diners distracted by the alpine horn to the back kitchen.

Once in the kitchen, he propelled college boy forward, until his face bounced off the stainless steel overhead shelves, and the punk fell backwards onto the floor.

"Stay here."

Philip returned to the dining room, hustled the other three college kids out from behind their table, marched them to the back kitchen.

When he had all four of them in the back kitchen, college boy with a bloody nose, he stood in front of them, hands hanging from his sides. "If you eat food you can't pay for, you have to clean dishes. Pedro?"

Pedro carried out four stacks of dirty dishes, set them on the stainless steel counter.

"Clean them."

College boy got off the floor, wiping his bloody nose. "Where's the fucking dishwasher?"

"We don't have one back here."

College boy looked around, didn't see a sink. "So how are we supposed to clean the fucking dishes if you don't got a dishwasher or a sink?"

Philip put the first dirty plate in front of college boy. There was a smear of gravy on it from the veal oscar, some uneaten egg white, leftover spaetzle, a few green broccoli florets. "Lick the plates clean."

College boy reared his head back, eyes fierce. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

It turned out, Philip wasn't kidding.

* * *

"So, I thought, I don't know, maybe we could get away after your shift at the restaurant Sunday, take an overnight vacation."

Ileana's face rested on Philip's chest, profile between his nipples.

He stroked her dark hair, combing

it away from her features so he could see the freckles on her cheeks, remembering how often, years ago, he had fantasised about kissing those freckles. Now he could kiss them anytime he wanted. "Okay."

She looked up again into his eyes. "I think a vacation, a mini-vacation, would be good for us." She lowered her eyes again. He saw the black pupils switch left, right, as she phrased the next sentence in her mind, worry in her pupils. "I guess, I don't know. It just seems like lately, we've kind of not been spending a lot of time with each other."

He kissed the top of her head, smelling her hair. "I know. It's my job. Florian really believes in me, he's the first boss I've had that does."

"I know."

"Yeah, maybe get away for a night. But not a big city. Every night in the paper, there's more and more stuff about The Path. They're in all the big cities now."

"I know."

"It used to be, their ideas were universally rejected. People spoke out against them. But now, it seems like more and more people are saying, Well, their ideas aren't that bad."

"We could go to Madison."

"What's in Madison? I was thinking maybe the Dells, for the fall foliage."

"My mom and dad live in Madison."

"Oh." He couldn't think of anything to say.

"We wouldn't stay with them, we'd get a hotel room in town. Just maybe, have dinner with them, so they can meet you. Then after dinner, we go back to our hotel room, have some drinks, maybe watch some porno on TV..."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Could we?"

He lifted his head off the pillow, kissed her freckles, her lifting lips, her happy eyes.

It turned out the college kid came from a wealthy family.

A few weeks after Philip made the kid pay his bill, a mailman showed up at Krushing's with a certified letter for Florian.

It was from a legal firm in downtown Milwaukee.

The letter informed Florian, in long paragraphs that included parenthetical references to state statutes and case law, that Drew Stilton's rights had been violated during his visit to Krushing's, and that although Mr Stilton had offered several times to pay his debt with a personal cheque, Mr Philip Benton, in the employ of Krushing's, had rejected Mr Stilton's offers and had wilfully subjected Mr Stilton to grievous physical and emotional distress in front of three witnesses willing to testify to that effect. The lawyer wanted fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000.00) in damages from Florian, and threatened to file a complaint against Krushing's if that sum was not forthcoming within ten (10) days from receipt of the letter.

Florian waited until Philip finished reading the letter. "This is bad, Philip."

"It's bullshit."

"Yeah, but I can't afford to pay no lawyer fifty thousand dollars. I told you, push them around a little to get our money, but don't rough 'em up." He let Philip see the disappointment in his eyes.

Philip took the letter from him. "I'll handle this, Florian."

"How you gonna handle it, Philip? Look at the paper this letter's written on. This is a big time lawyer, Philip."

"It's fine. I'll handle it. I'll meet with him."

Florian raised his black eyebrows. "With who? This lawyer? You're not a lawyer, Philip. You're a bouncer."

Philip felt a shaft of shame go through him. He could tell his cheeks were red. "I'll handle it." He swallowed. "I won't let you down."

Philip and Andrew, one of the cooks at Krushing's, were having a late night smoke outside the bright entrance, overhead street lights picking up the grain of the sidewalk. Philip, as usual, leaned his back against one of the Journal-Sentinel newspaper dispensers, the type of metal box on legs where you drop in a quarter, lift the front clear plastic lid, take out a paper.

"Oh!" Andrew raised the hand that held his cigarette. "Meant to tell you. I'm up for a speaking part in a new movie."

Philip exhaled. "Really? Is it a black man part, or an any man part?"

Andrew wrinkled his forehead. "Black man part. But, hey, you know. Next time it won't be, if I get noticed this time."

"What's your speaking part? Do you want me to read lines with you again?"

"It's just one line, man."

"So what's the line?"

Andrew laughed, shaking his head. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure? You're sure you're ready for this?"

"What's the line?"

Andrew ducked his head. Raised it, pausing a moment to get the reading right. "That dog sure do like toothpaste!"

"What?"

"That's it. 'That dog sure do like toothpaste!'"

"You're kidding."

"Hey, it's another credit on my resume."

A man walking by on the sidewalk reached in his pocket, pulled out a quarter, stood in front of Philip. "You want to move out of my way?"

Philip stood up from leaning against the newspaper dispenser. "What?"

He was an inch taller than Philip, thinner, in an expensive black overcoat. "Get out of my way so I can buy a paper?"

Philip looked at Andrew, moved away from the dispenser.

The man dropped his quarter in, pulled down the square front lid, reached in.

"Make sure you only take one paper."

The man pulled a paper out, glanced at Philip. "What was that?"

"I said, make sure you only take one paper. That's all you paid for."

The man let out a chuckle, thin handsome face, folding the paper, tucking it up under his left armpit, looking at Philip like Philip had no idea who he was talking to. "You want to say that again?"

Philip tugged the paper from the

man's armpit, staring him in the eye, scanned the headlines. The Path were holding a rally.

"That's my paper."

"Fuck you."

"You want some trouble?"

Andrew spread his hands apart. "Hey, come on. My friend's just saying, you have to show some respect. Don't just order someone to move out of the way. Use the magic words. Please. And Thank you."

"Give me my paper."

Philip let the paper fall out of his hands to the sidewalk, the sections, in the falling, separating. "There's your paper."

The man looked down at the separated sections of the paper spilled around his expensive black shoes. "Pick it up."

Philip held the man's eyes. "I got a better idea. Have your mother pick it up, after she finishes sucking the cocks of every dog in your neighbourhood, the dogs afterwards committing suicide over the shame of having sex with such a worthless shit whore as your mother."

The man stared into Philip's eyes. Philip stared back.

The man turned on his heel, walking away. "Fucking Path psychotic."

Andrew put his hand against Philip's left shoulder, stopping him. "Let it go. He's an asshole. Let it go, man."

* * *

Philip went to the lawyer's office on a Monday, since Krushing's was closed Mondays.

He stepped out of the elevator into a hushed, carpeted space, floor to ceiling windows showing panoramic views of Milwaukee skyscrapers.

Walked over to the receptionist's counter, soft pings of incoming calls behind her. She looked too young to have such an important job.

"I'm Philip Benton. I'm here to see Dan Barton for a ten o'clock appointment."

She looked up at him, blue eyes below blonde bangs. "Have a seat, please." She turned sideways in her chair, pressed a button. "Your ten o'clock is here."

He flipped through the colour pho-

tographs in *Milwaukee Today*, different food festivals.

A man in a dark suit, balding head, came out, stopped by the receptionist's desk a moment, placing his hand on the counter, walked over to where Philip was seated.

"Mr Benton?" He held his hand out.

Philip put the magazine back on the table beside him, stood, ignoring the outstretched hand. "You're Dan Barton?"

He followed Barton down a few quiet hallways to a glass-encased room.

Three men were already sitting around the conference table. He recognised the college kid, Drew Stilton, his male friend from that evening, and an older man with angry blue eyes, white hair, who was obviously, by his nose and chin, Stilton's father.

A black camcorder had been carefully positioned on its silver tripod, its one large glass eye pointed at where Philip was directed to sit.

"We're recording this discussion. I assume you don't mind?"

Philip took his seat. "Actually, I do mind."

Barton spread his hands out. "Fairly standard procedure."

Philip put the tripod and attached camcorder on its heavy side, pushed tiny buttons until the blinking red light winked out.

Barton shrugged. "Okay." He put his elbows on the table, pointing with both index fingers at Philip's face. "Just for the record, those cuts under your cheekbones, those are marks of The Path, right?"

"They are, but I escaped from them."

"What do you mean, You escaped from them?"

"They were transporting me when I rolled out of their car. They marked me, but they didn't have time to influence me."

Barton looked around at the others. "Well, the way I understand it, the marking in and of itself is all that's needed. The process may be slower, but -"

"Have you been marked?"

"No. You're a..." He consulted his notes. "A bouncer, right?"

"Yeah."

"When did you become a bouncer?"

"When I moved to Milwaukee."

"Before or after you were marked?"

"After. But that doesn't mean anything."

"What were you before you were marked?"

"An auditor."

"Kind of a desk job, right?"

"What's your point?"

"That transition you made, from sitting behind a safe desk all day to becoming a bouncer, isn't that a fairly typical transition for someone who's been marked by The Path?"

"Being an auditor can be confrontational."

"To what degree? When you were an auditor, Mr Benton, did you ever force someone to lick dirty plates?"

"I didn't audit dirty plates."

"Isn't it true you forced my client to clean a large number of dirty plates, plates that had been dirtied by someone other than himself, by people who were strangers to him, with his tongue?"

"That's what it says in your letter." Philip pulled the letter out of his jacket pocket. Slid it across the conference table to Barton. "Did you write this letter?"

Barton sat back. "I prepared it, yes."

"I know someone else actually wrote it, you get paralegals or clerks to do all your work for you, yet still bill your clients at your own hourly rates, but I'm asking you if you basically composed this letter, putting together a few ideas on a yellow legal pad."

Barton glanced at the senior Mr Stilton. "That's the way it works."

"Are you right-handed or left-handed?"

Barton allowed himself a smirk. "What?"

"You heard me. Are you right-handed or left-handed?"

The senior Mr Stilton spoke up, old hands folded on the tabletop. He looked sideways at Philip like Philip had a bad haircut and a big Adam's apple. "You humiliated my son over some negligible incident -"

Philip swivelled his head in the old man's direction. "Shut. The fuck. Up."

The old man popped his eyes. "I don't know who you —"

Barton sat up. "Let's not use that language."

Philip glared at him. "Are you right-handed or left-handed?"

Barton spread his hands apart. "Right-handed. What does it matter?"

"So in other words, your right hand wrote this letter to my employer."

"If you want to look at it that way, yes."

Philip reached across the conference table, grabbed Barton's right wrist, twisted the wrist, smashed the ganglia of fingers down, big college ring on one of the fingers, smashed the fingers down on the hard wooden edge of the table until he heard a satisfying crack that told him he had broken Barton's right hand.

Once his wrist was released, Barton pulled his mangled right hand up to his mouth, tears in his eyes.

Philip leaned across the conference table. "If you write another letter to my boss, I'll chew your right hand off. If you dictate the letter into a microphone, I'll reach my teeth into your mouth and pull your tongue out." He turned to the senior Mr Stilton. "If you hire another attorney to pursue this complaint, I'll chop off the hand that writes the cheque for the retainer." He looked at Drew Stilton. "And as for you." He reached over, grabbed Stilton by the back of his neck, tilted his face up, bounced his fist off Stilton's face once, twice, three times, four times, five times, six times, until the kid was sobbing, blood flying.

* * *

Ileana stared at him. Her drink on the kitchen counter by her right hand was unsipped.

"So anyway, that's what happened."

She finally roused herself. "How did you get out of the building?"

"Just walked. Left the conference room, found my way back to the main reception area after a couple of wrong turns, even waved to the receptionist as I left. There was blood on my hand. She may have noticed, she may not have."

Her dark eyes looked worried. "But Phil, don't you think he's going

to report this to the police? You assaulted him. He's a lawyer. And you assaulted the college kid."

He put his left forefinger back in his mouth, wetting it, rubbing away more of the blood on his right knuckles, turning the red to pink. "They won't. I put the fear in them."

She touched the cold side of her glass, unhappy, still didn't lift it. "Yeah, but... I don't know." She let out a sigh. Raised her thin shoulders. "I never understood why you went there in the first place. Florian hired you, he expected you to use some force. You're a bouncer. If he gets sued, why not let him handle it? He must have liability insurance."

He scrubbed furiously at his bloody knuckles, not looking at her, ears rising on the sides of his head. "Tell me you're not defending this college kid."

"No! Of course not."

"You weren't there. You didn't see the arrogance on his face, tilting back in his chair, looking at me like I'm just hourly help while he's got all these connections, and his rich little daddy." His mouth twisted down.

She put her hand on his forearm. "Phil, honey, I'm on your side. Come on!"

"Then be on my side! Defend me! Say, You know what? I really admire what you did! You had to deal with this fucking asshole, this worthless piece of shit, and you smashed his fucking, arrogant face in. You taught him. You punished him. Are you saying that?"

Ileana's eyes glistened. She reached out her hand. He violently moved his arm away, still rubbing at the blood.

"Come on, honey. I am on your side."

He stood up. "Then say it, for once! Say, Don't think about it, Do it!"

She screwed her face up. "What?"

He thumped at his chest. "No one takes advantage of me. No one."

"Phil? Honey? Those are Path sayings. Why are you repeating them?"

"It doesn't matter what they are. They're the truth."

"They're not. Come on."

He swallowed his drink in a single Adam's apple bobbing gulp,

slammed the empty glass down on the counter. "I know who I am. I'm not afraid."

"Darling? Sweetheart? You're getting too caught up in the Path. You're letting their ideas influence you too much."

He snorted. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

She gestured at the counter. "Look at all these tracts you bring home." She read some titles. "Who Are You? Can You Do It? Why Not Right Now?"

"They mean something to me. I wouldn't be where I am today if the Path hadn't stepped in."

"What are you talking about? They cut into your face, Phil."

"Yeah, and if it hadn't been for that evening, I never would have met you again. Did you ever think about that? Do you even care?"

She swallowed her drink, took both their empty glasses, made two more. "Of course I think about it." She drank about half her new drink, while he drank all of his. She went back to the side of the refrigerator, brought over the bottle of vodka, the bag of ice from the sink, placed both on the counter.

"Don't get my pamphlets wet!" He scooped all the pamphlets away from the dripping plastic bag of ice, dropped them to the carpet on his side of the counter.

Burrowed his right hand into the cold plastic bag of ice, getting blood on the ice cubes, pulling some ice cubes out, dropping them in his glass, upending the vodka bottle over his glass. "A lot of this comes back to that same question."

Ileana's shoulders drooped. She drank the rest of her drink, poured another, going more into herself.

"Did you fuck him?"

"No. I told you."

"So, he just decided to say out of the blue, to a total stranger, Watch out for her, she's a real whore, she fucks every guy who comes in this bar. Why would he say that? Why would he say that, Ileana?"

She looked tired. "I don't know, Phil. I knew him, I used to stop there sometimes to eat on my way up or down the lake on business, but I have no idea why he would say that."

Maybe he's just an evil person who likes to play with people's heads."

"Well, it's so easy for someone to play with my head, right?"

"I'm not saying that."

"Did you ever fuck anyone you met there?"

She lowered her head wearily, pouring a new drink. Looked up at him. "Why are we doing this, Phil? We could have a great evening together, like we used to. Make love, which we never seem to do anymore, fry up some flounder, watch a little TV..."

"As long as we fuck the way Brent taught you to fuck, right?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, I hit a sore spot, didn't I?"

She finished her drink, reached for the bottle. "Just shut up, okay?"

"Did you ever fuck anyone you met at that bar?"

"Cut it out."

"You did, right? I can take it."

Her shoulders sagged. She started crying. Looked up at him. "What do you want from me? Why can't we just have fun?"

He raised his voice. "Did you ever fuck anyone you met at that restaurant!"

She stepped back from her side of the kitchen counter, bent over, threw up. Threw up again.

He reached his hand out, contrite, to her shoulder. She shook her shoulder away. Poured a new drink.

They were silent for a while, that hurt silence between lovers where neither one is going to say the first word, out of pride, instead talking to the other in their heads, to a more reasonable version of the other.

Finally, after a few more wordless drinks, he broke the silence. "This is nothing, it doesn't mean anything, but I kissed one of the waitresses at work."

She shot her unhappy head up. "What?"

"It doesn't mean anything. It just happened. I kissed her, but that was it. I didn't put my hands on her breasts or anything. It was just a kiss."

She looked astonished. "Who?"

He hung his head. "Ingrid."

"Who?"

"I don't know if you ever met her. She's from Germany."

"How old is she?"

"She's like... eighteen, I think."

She slapped him across his face. Started crying. He felt ashamed, seeing how much he had hurt her. "Why would you do that?"

He was crying himself. "I don't know. The thing is... she's been marked by the Path."

She stood up, furious. "The Path! The Path! I am so fucking sick of hearing about the Path!"

"I'm sorry."

She tilted her head, looked at him with glazed eyes. "You want to know something? I liked you." He cringed at the past tense. "I really did. Back then, years ago? I thought you were this really sweet, cool guy I could talk to. You read books, you were respectful towards me... I really liked you, Phil. I always thought, I always thought..." She started sobbing. "I always thought if you and me ever got together, it would be innocent. We'd both be innocent. There'd be no anger. It would just be good." She wiped her nose with the side of her right hand. "And when we got together, up there at that stupid restaurant, I thought, you know what? My dreams have come true. And they did, they honestly did, for a while. But you're changing so much."

"Changing how?"

She shrugged. "Everything makes you angry now." She wiped her eyes. "We go to the supermarket, you think somebody looks at you the wrong way, and you're ready to smash their head in." Fresh tears rolled down. "I watch you while we're eating, or looking at a TV show, or whatever. I see your face contort in fury over I don't know what, all these interior conversations you're having. There's this tremendous anger in you that was never there before. You flip your middle finger at everything. I don't know how to deal with it, Phil. I don't know how to help you."

They moved to the bedroom, bringing the vodka bottle with them, passing it back and forth.

She put on her pink pyjamas, got into bed next to him. "So who's this Ingrid?"

"She's just this stupid waitress.

She flirted with me a few times. After a while, I flirted back. Once, when we were both in the back room, she did her version of the chicken dance for me. Except it wasn't a true version, where she bent her elbows and put her hands in her armpits. It was a version where she lifted her arms straight up in the air, and swung her hips side to side. About a week ago, she grabbed my hand, pulled me into the back corridor, and wiped the makeup off her cheeks to show me she was marked, too. She was the same as me."

"She's not the same as you, Phil! We're the same. Not you and her!"

"Well, she's marked."

She sat by herself in her pink pyjamas on her side of the bed, head in her fingers, long black hair spilled over her face, crying. He reached out for her, but she violently shook off his hand.

Finally, she rose from the bed, stumbling, landing clumsily on the carpet.

Got back up, staggered out of the room.

Philip sat on their bed, head spinning, worrying about what he had done, if the police were going to come. He didn't give the lawyer his address here, though. He was sure of that. They wouldn't know how to find him until tomorrow, when they could go to the restaurant. Florian had his address on file.

Ileana came back in, holding a steak knife.

He cringed, but then she pushed it into his hands.

She swayed in front of him. "Mark me."

"What?"

"Mark me! Two strikes down under the cheekbones. Then we're the same. We'll think the same." Her eyes looked around stupidly. "I've got eighteen thousand dollars in savings. We'll leave the apartment early in the morning, get the cash, drive out of town. I have a sister who lives in Nevada. We'll stay with her until we're able to get fake IDs. Then we can go anywhere we want."

He looked down at the knife in his hands. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"You'd do this for me?"

She sniffled. "I love you, Phil." Raised her head, spoke sincerely. "Whatever it takes."

She lay on her back in her pink pyjamas across their bed, dark eyes looking up at him. "This will solve our problems, right?"

He grabbed the knife, raised it over her face, blinking to clear his vision. "Yeah. You'll be part of The Path."

She twisted her face to one side, tears rolling out of her eyes. "I don't want to be alone. I don't like being alone."

He raised his hand. "You'll never be alone now."

He plunged the knife down.

She raised her head instinctively off the pillow, anticipating the pain, frightened.

With her head raised, the knife, instead of going in below her left eye, went in the middle of her forehead, with a loud *slipp! crunch.*

Her tongue spilled out.

He unwrapped his fingers off the handle of the knife, keening.

Her dark eyes fluttered open, tongue going back inside, red bead of blood rolling down to her left eyebrow.

She scrunched her eyes, tears welling. Tilted her head to one side, black handle of the steak knife sticking up out of her forehead. "You missed, didn't you?"

"I'm so sorry!" He went to put his

hand back around the black handle, to pull the blade out.

"Don't! Even more blood will come out." Her dark eyes looked up at him, glistening.

"I'll call 911."

"Don't! Don't leave me!" Her voice came out high, like a kid's. "I'm scared." Her mouth opened, mucus on her teeth. "I'm afraid I'll die while you're in the other room calling. I don't want to die alone."

He bent over her, sobbing. "What have I done? I'm so stupid. I'm so fucking stupid!" He closed his eyes, saw them soon after he moved in with her, walking into a supermarket together, such a novelty, him and her in a supermarket together, shopping for food for their shared apartment, she a head shorter, and he could tell by the way she walked next to him she felt happy and confident, she was drawing strength from him.

"I'm having trouble seeing."

He raised his head.

Watched her close her left eye, right eye. "Phil, I'm losing my sight."

"I'll call! Let me call."

"No! Don't! I want you to stay here." Her right hand fumbled forward, searching, found his hand. Her dark eyes switched left, right below the black handle of the knife. She tilted her head to one side, warm tears sliding out. "This is so unfair." Her face got red. "So unfair."

His fingers wiped the tears from her eyes, reached up, wiped at the

blood sliding down her forehead, tears mixing with the blood, turning her forehead pink.

"It would only take me a moment to call for help."

"Please don't leave me! I don't want to die alone."

"Is there a phone jack in here?"

She didn't respond.

"Ileana? Is there a phone jack in here?"

As he watched, her irises changed to orange, pink, red.

Her black pupils froze above the freckles on her cheeks.

* * *

He escaped from Milwaukee that same evening, stealing her car. Wound up in Mobile, Alabama, working for The Path, buying groceries for the local infestation.

Each day he went to the Piggly-Wiggly, makeup under his eyes, pushing his shopping cart down the bright aisles, checking off items on his long list.

Each visit, he'd see her at least once. Standing behind her cart at the check-out counter, airplane hanger height of the supermarket above her, that downcast look we all get in our eyes when alone; silently reading the ingredients on the tilted side of a cereal box; third person in a line of overcoats to rent a movie; holding a man's sleeve against her own arm in the Men's Department, to see if the shirt might fit him.



Mississippi Sunshine

J.R. Parks

Mississippi gets damn hot in the summer, the kind of hot that gets stuck in your chest like gravy and makes you feel sleepy at noon. Hell, it was gonna be dark soon and there I was trying to peel my sticky ass off the vinyl seats of my '79 Charger. I was like a damn fly on glue paper, twisting around the steering wheel, my ass wetter than a nun on Saint Patty's. I had the damn insurance forms scattered all over the back seat too. I was late. Late wasn't even the word. I was upside-down fucked by a silverback gorilla. What a mess I was, I tell you what. And that wasn't even the half of it.

I fixed my tie in the rearview mirror, combed down the bushy mutton chops and handlebar 'stache. I was in a hurry but took one last shot of Jack from my flask. Had to straighten out my class ring too, Verny High Football 1964. That baby was solid silver and fixed with mama's birthstone. Fine craftsmanship too. I had a lot of pride in that little ring, but I'll be damned if it wasn't an embarrassment sometimes.

My knuckles were still killin' me from the brawl the night before. More like a can of ass whuppin' really; I was too drunk. Stumbled over myself like a silly fool. Damn. I made a move on another man's lady. The black eye wasn't good for business either, so I sported some oversized aviators I got in Saigon. Slick too, made me look like a moustachioed Johnny Cash. I was rollin' babe – hell

who am I kidding, I looked awful, worse than ever – but that certainly isn't sayin' much. Probably why Linda took the kids to Florida with Casper. Casper? Who in the world names their kid Casper? Shit, Linda wasn't the best lady, but better than that sleazy chump. But then again, at least he was there.

Yep, I was a deadbeat scofflaw – an old timey dinosaur; still drowning in the bottle and spending my days romping around with a suitcase impersonating an insurance salesman. Door to door at first, but I'd worked my way up to cold calling. Yeah, I'm that guy; the one you hate callin' during that rerun of *Taxi* while you're munching that microwavable lasagne. People get mean when they're hungry too. Like mangy strays fighting over dumpster scraps. Sometimes you get lucky though. That's why I was in the car stewin' in my own ass perspiration; I had a policy to sell.

His name was Jerry Seaver. Yeah, Seaver – you know, like the family from *Growing Pains*? He was a rich out-of-towner building a vacation home or some business. I don't know who takes vacations out here. Frankly I'd rather build somethin' in Maui, catch a few rays, maybe get me some of that islander tang. But hey, whatever floats your turd, Jerry.

It was a shitty gig, but there was steady work with all the hypochondriacs in the world; a lot of new folks in town too, getting work at the Jack-

sonville Canned Spaghetti Factory. A lot of people comin' and going. People that could be talked into any policy with the right scare tactics. I ain't much of a doomsdayist, but it pays the electricity bills. And back then when I was doorbell pushin' for green – when the sun went down, shit man, it stayed dark.

So there I was, knockin' at Jerry Seaver's door, hoping he wouldn't get a glimpse of the wet diamond on the back of my short sleeved dress shirt, two sizes too small. It was an old two story country house, painted blue, maybe built in the forties. Had those classic southern pillars on it, and some old mucky foliage hanging down the balcony. Looked like the place was being renovating or some such, most of the second floor under plastic tarps, blowing around in the wind, shiny with the twilight sun. Shit, I was late. Jerry was probably just gettin' ready to sit down for *American Gladiators*. Damn, I was gonna miss it too. Figures.

The door opened wickedly fast and there stood Mr Seaver, damn near four foot high, kinda squirrely with beady dolls eyes. He had slicked back blonde hair and a buck-toothed grin.

"Good evening Mr Seaver, I'm here from Verny Insurance. First of all, I'd like to apologise for being so tardy, traffic was something else." Traffic? Shit man, after about ten years of makin' excuses, you plum run out of the clever ones. Traffic in a

town like this was like whores in a monastery.

"Ah yes, Mr Dennis is it? No need for apologies we can get started right away," Jerry said. He had a thick accent, sounded English, maybe Aussie.

"Of course sir. I've got your plan right here in my briefcase, all you need to do is sign a few forms and we'll have this place insured." I tapped the suitcase, praying to God I didn't leave any forms floatin' around in the backseat of my car.

Jerry smiled with tightly pursed red lips. He was wearing a tight yellow spandex single suit with the blue stripes. Man, I hoped he was workin' out or something. Threads like that could get you killed around there.

"Yes, yes. Come right in. You can see I'm having a lot of work done around here. Bloody contractor's been out for weeks. I'm quite annoyed with him. I think I'll have to hire out a new company."

"Sorry to hear it, sir. I tell you what, I'll make a few phone calls if you'd like. I know some guys in town that do fixtures." Still talkin' out of my ass, I'd make up anything. You know you gotta seem like you're really helpful. Clients dig a problem solver, especially one who cares. Not that I did or anything. Shit, I didn't care about tomorrow. I only care about makin' enough money to drink myself back twenty years.

Jerry led me through the door into the house. It was a nice place, walls decorated with some of that fine china, looked like some kinda collection. There were faces painted on them too, like everyday people. One guy looked like this old fart named Barney that worked a pizza joint in the mornings. Bastard looked like a nightmare version of myself – just meaner and older. Anyway, I'd go in there from time to time after a long night, order myself a Hawaiian. That old fucker'd heckle me fierce: "You ever been in a sinkin' ship, boy? You ever mess yourself on the deck of a destroyer?" Old guy was on the USS Arizona when it was bombed by the Japanese. That must have been a tough gig too. Anyway, the guy's face hangin' on the wall looked just like him.

"I make them myself you know. I

enjoy capturing people's faces," Jerry explained his hobby and then continued with business, "Alright, we can settle here in the kitchen. May I get you something to drink, Mr Dennis?" Jerry eyed the pit stains welling up under my arms.

"Oh gosh, that'd be great sir. And call me Bucky, all my friends do." Bucky Dennis, after my uncle Mickey "Buck" Dennis. He was a semi-pro ball player in Kentucky until he was arrested for moperly: moperly with the intent to expose himself. It happened in my teens. Hell of a ball player, almost got signed a few times. It's funny how nobody remembers that though – just him streakin' by that senior centre with his junk in the wind. Bum Wrap Bucky; it runs in the family.

"Bucky. Hrm, interesting name." Jerry opened the vintage refrigerator and poured me a glass of pineapple juice. Must be a health food nut, explains the stretchy threads. Damn, pineapple juice went down smooth and tangy.

"Nice place you got here, sir." Small talk's the way to keep 'em interested, people buy the person not the product. Hell, I know I would. There was this one time in Bangkok...

"Yes well, once the place is finished. It's a vacation home really, a place to get some privacy." Jerry waved his arm around the kitchen. It was a nice kitchen with a granite island in the centre, looked like all the cabinets needed to be put in though. I could see cereal boxes and the tin cans of that Jacksonville Spaghetti all lined up real neat like. That Brit wasn't much for taste, but that's how it was over there right? Bad food.

"Where you vacationing from?"

"London, actually. I'm a trader there." He was smug about it too.

"Yeah, I bet there's a lot of stress that comes along with that gig."

"Oh yes. It's killer. But I have my dish painting. And I used to play a great deal of cricket in the spring." Jerry flicked his fingers trying to communicate something.

"Yeah cricket, that's what you boys call soccer out there."

Jerry picked up the policy folder.

"Well, Mr Seaver, shall we get on

with the paperwork, so I don't take up anymore of your time?" I laid the old suitcase on the kitchen table, opened it up and stacked his policy right next to a vase of petunias. Pineapple juice was really hitting the spot.

"Yes, I'd like to go over some of these if you don't mind."

"Not a problem at all. You go right ahead and give those a once over. Sometimes they're dense, but hey, so are those claim investigators." I squeezed out a laugh.

"Yes," Jerry replied abruptly, hardly paying attention. Those Brits are straight to business kinda guys, no nonsense.

A few minutes passed and I started feelin' the sting of my bladder. You see, I've got an abnormally small bladder. I'm talkin' a freakin' peanut here. Sometimes I can't even finish a cup of coffee before I start leaking like a toddler. It made my tweens a nightmare. Linda never cut me any slack about it, and after I had to take a potty break during our wedding vows she never let it go. She used to call me Tina Tinkle, 'cause I was like the six year old in my daughter's Girl Scout Troop. Poor thing pissed herself every meeting, must have been a nervous tick. Linda – what a bitch.

"I'm not seeing flood damage," Jerry said.

"It's there, right beneath fire." This guy was a stickler. Fuckin' pineapple juice. I could feel my insides swelling up. My back teeth weren't just floatin' they were damn well going down with the Titanic. Shit on me, I had to pee.

Jerry just sat there thumbing the pages, zippin' right to left like a coked up typewriter. Quick and whip, page to page man; he was super scrupulous.

"Uh, excuse me. May I use your restroom?"

"Yes, of course. The loo's upstairs to the left, two doors down."

"Thanks, much appreciated," I said, and lickity split I was runnin' up the stairs. They creaked loudly and whinnied like a donkey gettin' friendly with a horse.

The second floor was in serious disrepair, the broken up drywall leaving wide open crawlspaces. Dingy turquoise paint peelings slowly

sagged, eroding with neglect. There was work being done though, tools scattered about messily; even a brand new chrome paint sprayer coiled up with about twelve gallons of green wood sealant. I flexed my stomach and walked into the john.

"Jesus!" My first step into the bathroom nearly had me falling right through a six foot hole in the linoleum. Made my heart murmur and everything, and that ain't keen if you drink and smoke like a chimney.

"Mind your step, Mr Dennis!" Jerry called from the kitchen, "There's a nasty gap in the flooring – old bathtub fell right through."

It was dark out and I could see the moon rising up over the weeping willow in the yard. The nasty dent in the hood of my Charger shined in the pale light. I undid my drawers.

"What the – Huh?" I flipped on the light to find two porcelain bowls gleaming under the fluorescents. Hell, I already had my dick in my hand and everything when Jerry chimed in again.

"Uh, oh yes, uh Mr Dennis. Use the toilet on the right, the left one by the hole's not hooked up. Should have had it hauled out weeks ago!"

I didn't answer. I just aimed and put out the fire. I was whizzin' like a champ. Let me tell you, there isn't anything I know that's like that feeling. The minute pee. It's better than sex and pancakes.

Life has a way of pissin' on just about everybody. We all get tuckered out, battered and broken by something. Feels good to piss back. Let it out. Even then, life has a way of shitting on you smiling. I thought I knew the worst of that when Linda took the kids. But leavin' the Army? That was the candy in my piñata. Things made more sense in the Army. Sleep, fight, and chow. Things got done too. Out here a man can't even patch up the holes in his john, never mind the hole in his heart.

I finished and fixed my tie. Ugly thing was made out to be a chessboard or something. I looked at my mug in the mirror. Took a real hard look. The aviator shades had to come off, didn't want Jerry to think I was one of those "I wear my sunglasses at night" hipsters. Ah, hell. I looked like

a Jack Russell Terrier with the black eye. Courtesy of that beauty's beef cake last night. He didn't much like the way I hounded his lady. Who would? Fine thing though, almond sky blue eyes, nice hourglass figure, dark supple skin. I tell you if I was in my own bathroom I'd squeezed one off.

I fixed my moustache with the tiny comb I kept in my wallet next to my daughters: Minnie and May, both twelve now. I washed up and dried my hands on a lacy towel, Little Red Riding Hood pattern, cute. It was finally coolin' down outside. Moon was pretty too, one big white eyeball in the sky. I bet he'd wink after a few glasses of Jackie D. Suddenly, I heard a glass shattered downstairs.

I figured I should help clean it up, him bein' such a nice fella and all. I peeked out of the hole in the bathroom floor. "Hey Mr D, I'll be right down."

I could see the upside-down kitchen from the ceiling. The petunia vase was in pieces, watery glass mixed with sweet smellin' Mississippi Violets everywhere. I took a step over the hole towards the door when I saw the blur of something run across the living room.

"Hey, Mr Seaver, might want to keep that dog away from the glass. You know those mutts, don't know what's good for eating."

There was some ruckus coming from downstairs, crashing, trashing.

"Jerry? You all right down there?"

The noise stopped. There was absolute silence. I could hear the blood in my head, thumpin' like a Huey over a jungle insect symphony. And hell, not even the crickets were outside playin' fiddles. I opened the door and made my way down the hall, poor bastard probably had a heart attack. Shit, he'd be laying there in his yellow spandex single suit, coughing and wheezing. I'd have to do mouth to mouth on that son of a bitch. I had to give him some aspirin, you're supposed to do that. Needed a doctor. Then I heard the stairs creak.

Damn, what a scare. Thought Jerry was a goner for sure. Jesus H. The banister groaned, I didn't remember it groanin' before... but it definitely groaned right then, sort of growled

too. That stupid mutt was walkin' up the stairs sniffin' me out, meanwhile Jerry was probably floundering in the kitchen of his brand spankin' new vacation home, wallowing in insurance papers, gaspin' for air like a goldfish on the sidewalk. Shit man.

So I walked out. Then I froze. My balls shriveled up like raisins and I felt my heart quiver like one of those vibrating beds at Frank's Motel.

And that's when everything I ever knew in my life, and all the shady stuff I've done rose up and kicked my ass like my own personal Macho Man Randy Savage. The booze, the drugs, the women and the wandering. My Minnie and May. The pals I left back in Vietnam screamin' in the jungle. It all combined into that one moment in time – when an eight foot Wolf Man's savage eyes met mine, those long chalky fangs gnashed like a motorised wheat reaper.

And so I said the first thing that lit up that dusty old bulb in my mind: "Shit. On. Me."

I tried to keep my cool. Keep my cool like a man that's about to be mauled by the beastly agent of Satan himself. I dove back into the shitter, slammed it shut and prayed. The monster was on the other side of the door before I could think. Claws screeched against the wood, carving away my sanctuary. I was trying to brace myself when the hairy fists hammered through the wood like it was wax paper. I heard myself squealin' too, like a peanut bladdered Girl Scout. I was a dead man walking. I knew the score. Goddamn werewolves. You never think it'll happen to you.

I watched helplessly as the bloody, barking, snarling muzzle exploded through the door like an axe head. Rabid. Frothing. To think I went out of my way to bring Jerry his insurance policy. Now this fucked up Londoner was gonna eat my ass. Or worse yet, leave me livin' with the curse, so I'd haunt the greater Mississippi area, eatin' other people's asses. Bum gig, if you ask me.

I tried to keep the door from swinging open and knocking me through the hole in the floor. It was only a one storey fall and if I didn't twist my ankle I could get to the

Charger and burn rubber. The stink of the werewolf's maw surrounded me. The gore matted snout snapped ferociously, the fetid teeth clacking together. The howling beast chomped the air like a bear trap, inches from my face. Then suddenly the doorbell rang.

The Wolfie pulled his snout from the door. I could hear the stomping feet and claws scrambling down the hall. Silence. The doorbell rang again. Huh, damn thing was workin' fine for that poor schmuck. Figures. *Ding dong.*

"Hello?" A woman's voice cooed. Southern hospitality. The sweet thing probably brought a tray of cookies for the new neighbour. Say what you may, but I wouldn't trade a good home style mama for all the salt in the sea. "My name's Sally... from next door. I brought over some cookies to welcome you into the neighbourhood."

"Dammit lady, get the hell outta Dodge." Fear for my immortal soul kept me whispering like a kid swap-pin' gossip in Sunday school.

"They're chocolate chip. I can come back later if you're busy." Her patience was wearing thin. Nosey southern mamas, always in other people's business!

My brain was a freight train. I had to do something. Werewolves aren't a discriminating bunch; they kill anybody, even sweet old ladies. I'll get her out of here. So I shouted from the hole, "Uh, I'm kinda busy right now, lady. I've got some unpacking still!" Okay, you think she'd buy that right?

"But you've been moved in for weeks. Let yourself relax a bit," she replied.

"Uh, no! Now's not a good - !" Before I could finish there she was, standing beneath the hole in the ceiling. And she damn well took my breath away.

"You're Sally?" I could hardly believe it. Black eye girl with the beef cake!

"Welcome to Verny, Mississippi!" Her pouty lips were caramel, and the perfume she wore wafted up sendin' shivers through my moustache and down my soul. There was a looker, the definition of foxy.

"Listen to me - !" I couldn't hear

my own thoughts through the monstrous howl that interrupted my warnings. I saw the terror in Sally's face. The cookie tray fell right out of her hands like autumn leaves, each delicious doughy disc falling in slow motion. I couldn't see the Wolf from where I was standing, but the stench carried up through the linoleum.

She screamed, falling backwards over the couch.

The Werewolf approached, its dark furry hind legs lifting the enormous bulk, shifting slowly, claws scraping the wooden floor.

"Sally, baby. Girl of my dreams." My breath ran cold. Then I stood up, gripped the old toilet and shouted like I had a pair: "Hey Jerry! Heads up, hombre."

I lifted with my legs and managed to heave the seventy pound bowl up and out through the hole in the floor. The porcelain projectile rocketed down onto the Wolf's back, crashing and shattering into an explosion of bowl fragments and white powder. The beast yelped and tried rising slowly, but collapsed again. I'd bought some time.

I crashed through the door and raced down the steps. "Sally!"

The monster stirred, dragging itself across the floor like a wino. "Come on baby, while he's stunned!" She was out like a light. I'd have to carry her to the Charger. I grabbed her by that cute little waist, no time for courtesy, and lifted her right up over my head running for the door. I could see Jerry's hairy blur stir amidst the porcelain rubble. Then Sally woke up screaming and kicking her legs. Her green dress flew right up over my eyes and my feet couldn't keep up with my head, so I went straight into the door with a thud. And that's when I heard that godforsaken guttural hiss of the Wolf.

Sally, she's hooting and hollering, kickin' me right in the jaw. I flipped up her dress, and there old Wolfie was, blocking the only exit. He roared, spitting putrid phlegm that stuck to my face like too much shaving cream. There wasn't much I could do, so I spat back, snatched a decorative dish and clocked him right in the kisser. Boy, he was pissed. Jerry loved those plates.

The werewolf howled, so I hit him again, makin' my way up the stairs like a damn trapeze artist balancing on a wire. "Quit squirming!"

Jerry withdrew like a dog gettin' the skunk. I made the best of it, hauling Sally up the stairs. She was still wailing.

"For the love of Cochise, shut up will ya!?" I felt like I was back in Saigon where just about everyone you know is shouting obscenities at you. Your leather-faced CO, your doped up pals, the fanatical enemy, and just about every local tryin' to sell you some cheap junk. I could feel the heat too, that thick jungle humidity you couldn't escape. And the meat stink could make a Billy goat ralph his breakfast. Damn, that Hellhound needed some Juicy Fruit.

"Do something! He's comin' up the stairs," Sally screamed again, kickin' wildly at the approaching behemoth.

"Get in the crawl space!" I turned my head and spotted a monkey wrench. I went for it, but before I got it old Wolfie was on me like white on rice. I could feel the wind from outside blowing the plastic drapes - that big dark blur, parading through the separate curtains. It really was a half assed paint job in there.

No time for critiques - that Werewolf was stalkin' me. Maybe I could get lucky; maybe I could catch it off guard. Would've helped with Sally's beef cake last night. Sweet Sally.

Shit man, there she was hiding like a squirrel in a tree. I could marry a woman like that; I could settle down and start over. Make up for things.

"You sure look pretty."

"What!?" Sally contorted her face with surprise, looked like a catfish.

Wolfie pounced, purring like a chainsaw. I tripped backwards over the paint sprayer, right into the coiled nest. I was either gonna be minced meat or a hero, so I grabbed the chrome sprayer and let Jerry have it. The thing was loaded up with wood sealant and I shot green tinted goop right into the monster's eyes. It belled with rage, covering its face. It snorted, sniffed, and hacked as it fingered its peepers. Fucker was blind.

"Get your ass outta there," Sally tugged on my collar so hard it ripped.

I took her hand and the two of us dove like synchronised swimmers into the crawl space. Our hearts were both pumping fiercely. Jerry raged behind us, knockin' things over smashing two by fours and tool kits. We navigated through the walls, dodging the patchy openings of two by fours and torn up petunia pattern wallpaper. They looked like the house's rib cage. The werewolf rocketed past the openings trying to cut us off. Blindly grabbing air through the cracks in the drywall.

"Quick, down the plumbing," I said, lowering Sally down the crooked tree of copper pipes. "We'll get underneath the floor. It's too big to follow us."

I started crawling down the cold pipes. If the contractor did do anything it was a fine job of making the water flow. Sally was almost down. I could see the kitchen through a tiny drill hole. No sign of Wolfie, though.

"I'm almost there." Sally had a sweet voice, the kind of voice you expect from a forest nymph or one of Santa's elves. She was probably a good singer too.

"Oh my god!" Sally cried.

I looked down to see something I had not seen in a long time: the dead. And man oh man, was he messed up. Looked like a pile of red Legos with a hard hat, all splattered in messy junk. Sometimes out in the jungle you'd run into some poor schmuck like that, all chewed up and spit out by the man – didn't matter if it was Ho Chi Minh or the suits back home. Hell, we were all just kids. Bum gig for America's sons. But even after all of it, the fighting and my pals dying – nothing was worse than getting off that plane in Wichita. There wasn't any marching band, not even a waving flag. Just a forest of picket signs callin' me a baby killer. And shit man, what did they know – just a bunch of apple pie communists. What did they know? I was in Saigon, man. But hell, we were all just kids.

"The Contractor." I said, sliding down the last pipe. Sally snatched me up, holdin' me close like a stuffed teddy bear. Damn, she smelled nice, like a peach cobbler mixed with hot sex and coconut. "It's alright. I'll tell

you though, he sure looks like a human pizza."

Sally punched me right in the gut, "Creep!"

"Ugh, hey, I just tell it how it is. Ain't nothin' we can do for him now. Shit, you're a firecracker aren't ya?" I was putting the moves on her again.

"You're sick. Freakin' redneck pervert!" It appeared I'd pushed the sensitive button. But hell, I was a man of the world not some backwoods hick from *Deliverance*. I loved stuff like Italian architecture, Johnny Cash, and my favourite food was Pho.

"Hell, I just bailed you out of a heap of trouble, sugar. Least you could do is show some couth. You know what I mean?"

"I'm not the one trying to get busy on a corpse."

"It's called romance, doll! Who ever said anything about getting busy? Now, I think I deserve some gratitude!" I was getting heated. It wasn't enough we were getting chased by an eight foot man-eater-spawn from the tenth flippin' circle of Hell. This lady was gettin' mad, and frankly, I'd rather be chased by a werewolf.

"Enough, enough. I can't handle this." She was lookin' around the place – me too. Something eerie about a Wolf Man's basement.

"Look there. You see that?" she was shivering.

There was a big gopher hole in the middle of the floor, leading down into the dark. Thousands of little white roots protruded from the cloddy dirt. I took out my lighter but the thing was so deep no little Bic flame was gonna illuminate that abyss.

"Should we take a look?" I asked. Short wafts of warm air flooded from the hole. They didn't smell like popery, but I'll be damned if they didn't smell like roses compared to Jerry.

"No way, you're freakin' crazy. We're safe here." She took the lighter out of my hand.

"I don't know if it occurred to you – but that pile of guts over there didn't just spontaneously combust." She knew I was right. "Look, I used to be a tunnel rat. I'll just take a look. It's probably one of them geothermal wells."

"Wait," she said, batting those pretty blue eyes.

"It's ok, babe. I'm Bucky Dennis, I seen it all." If only I had. Sure I'd been a tunnel rat. I'd even killed a man down there. Nothing can prepare you for taking another man's life in the belly of the earth, where all the lights are out. We were like two starving explorers journeying to the centre of the world. We met on common ground, struggled and one of us died. Hell of a thing to experience, but hopefully that prepared me for what I had to do then.

So down I went at a creeping angle, holding onto those roots and lowering myself down like a moustachioed orang-utan. The mud was slick but I had my heels dug in pretty good. My fists gripped the roots in big tufts, the little flame from my lighter flickered between my fingers. And I knew I was descending when Sally's sweet face disappeared from sight.

All sorts of creepy crawlies slithered and skittered over my arms. Worms are cool, they help things grow, you know what I mean? But, beetles and spiders and that crap. Shit, man. I tried to keep my cool. What would Sally think if I couldn't kill a spider in the tub once we were married? I got ahead of myself again. That's how the big mistakes start. You think something is one way but it's really another.

"Bitch!" No Sally, not even Linda! I lost my footing. I couldn't move, I was dangling there like a Golden Gate suicide reject. I pulled myself up, my forearms burned. The insects all over my arms, their tiny legs pinching their way up to my face. "Shit-pie. Mother – !" I lost my grip and tumbled down maybe twenty yards.

Tree branch! Thing caught me right in the twins. Good thing I froze some jizz in '83. My nuts hurt like hell, but I was alive. I sat there a spell, wheezing like an old hound, gripping the muddy walls, covered in muck and subterranean grime. It took me a minute to notice the light from below.

I was only a few yards from something. It was a chamber of some sort – more like a tomb. Skeletons were in

heaps down here, some old, some fresh. The twisted corpses were lit by lamps dug into the walls. Some of the bodies were pretty ripe, the musty bile smell like a hog's day old spit-up. The whole place must have been the Wolf's Den, where he kept his meat and buried his bones. Bunch of folks down there, some stilled clothed, wearin' watches to boot. I heard Sally shout something, his voice carried pretty well down the hole, but I couldn't make out the words. Then I noticed something familiar – Barney the pizza guy.

It was him for sure, looked just like me plus forty pounds and some white hair. Jesus, I knew what was goin' down. Jerry was makin' dinner out of everyone in town. Vacation home my ass. Barney's wacky grin was painted up on that dish. The whole damn lot of skeletons were people Jerry'd painted onto those fine china sissy plates. Jerry Seaver: Werewolf and Fruitcake Serial Killer. I knew there was something creepy about the spandex.

Sally shouted again, something: "Up!"

I was scratchin' my head when a long rope fell right down the hole. Nice work Sally, girl. So I took a mitt full and started up. I was a few feet when I heard trouble around the bend.

The Werewolf straddled the pile of skeletons, salivating over a big old thigh bone between his chops. The tattered yellow jumpsuit looked blood red in the dim lamp light. It lunged at me.

I scurried up the rope like a frightened spider up a web, the Wolf not far behind, clawing at the earthen walls, digging the roots right out and scattering the bugs all over the damn place. The feverish eyes glared through the darkness. I couldn't see anything but those eyes. I pulled and pulled until finally I was at the lip of the tunnel. I turned and kicked the shit out of the monster's head. Sally was there too, scrambling towards me.

"Cut the rope!" I yelled.

Sally went for it.

"How you like cricket now, you Werewolf son of a – !" The cord slid past me faster than a drag car, and

Jerry howled as he tumbled into the pit.

Man, it was getting serious. We were up to our ass in bad times.

We were in the floor trekking in the bowls of an old house, striding over mud and guts trying to escape certain doom.

"Look, if we can get to my Charger, we'll *Smokey and the Bandit* right outta Dodge. You square?" No way I was spending another minute in that place.

"Don't you know anything? That thing would run us down no problem." Sally was full of all sorts of useful information. "We'll have to wait out the full moon. The curse ends when the sun comes up."

"Look I already knew that," I said.

"Did you? Well, Mr I'm not so sure you understand the gravity of the situation. I happen to know some things. My Grandmama was a Jamaican Voodoo witch and she –"

"Look here, my name's Bucky first of all. And secondly, I've seen enough movies to know damn well what we're dealin' with. Jerry's a goddamned werewolf from London on a vacation retreat from his busy job as hellhound across the pond. He probably heard there was plenty of good eats down here and decided to carry the curse over seas. The Devil himself is in that fucker's veins. He's stalking innocent folks and eating their souls. He's even collectin' their portraits on the wall!" I was riled up.

"Now, we can either take our chances in this deathtrap or get the hell out of here. Frankly, I don't give a damn what you think. I'm voting for Dodge City." There I said it; I let her know I was more than a deadbeat good old boy.

"Alright, fair enough."

"Damn right its fair. Now, if you have any light bulbs over your head feel free to divulge." We were both quiet for a moment. In moments of crisis you sometimes need a little time to let it sink in. I can remember one guy named Denny Phelps, Brooklyn boy in Nam; he sat through three tours. Somethin' like eight years. Denny said it didn't bother him, all the killing. He went home and spent two years workin' at a wharf in San Francisco. Well, one day

he flipped out while pullin' in a crab net. He went *Looney Toons* right there, goin' off in pidgin Vietnamese, smashin' up those poor crustaceans like a rabid jack hammer. It took six guys to calm him down, and after that he spent the rest of his days diddlin' himself in the county mental ward. He was the poster child for keepin' things bottled up. Sometimes you've got to let things out. Let 'em go. That's just life. And the tears in Sally's eyes were doing just that thing.

"It's alright darling. Tell you what, we'll hunker down under the living room floor, and keep it real quiet-like until morning." When I held her close I thought of Linda. I was never there for her really, but she was no angel either. Cheated on me twice, but I let it slide. Minnie and May. My girls. They were the only ones I really cared about. I wanted to see them grow up, go to college, make a better life than I had. But I was under two restraining orders too many.

"Bucky?" Sally questioned, her pouty lips puckered up.

I puckered up too, ready to plant one on my sweet Sally.

"You look really familiar. Have we met?"

"You don't remember?" How does a woman forget something like that? I was all over her; I was debonair, like Don Jose. Who could forget a moustache like mine?

"Do you work at that pizza place off of Sutter?"

"Hell no! I'm Bucky! The cat from last night. Bucky! Your stupid ass beef cake thrashed me after I asked you to dance. You don't remember that?"

"Oh my – that was you?" She was playing dumb, "Beef cake? I didn't even know that guy. Golly, you alright?"

I pointed to my black and blue eye and said, "I just want to tell ya, he got some lucky shots in, alright. I had a few too many, okay? You know how it is."

"Huh, sure didn't look that way." She shrugged and pulled her knees up to her chest. We both sat in the dark a long while. I listened for the beast. It was one of those too quiet moments, but I'll take what I can, when I can get it. Pretty girl in the mud, Wolfman

on the prowl. Life throws you curve balls you know? Some times you swing and miss, sometimes well, you know. Home run.

"I wanted to dance with you," she said, almost inaudible.

"What was that?" I heard her just fine.

"I wanted to dance. You seemed like a nice guy, a chauvinist perv, but nice." A little smile curled her lips, her white teeth contrasting against her dark skin. Her short hair'd been dyed reddish, looked pretty through the glowing beams of florescent light peering down through the cracks in the floor. It all felt a little like camp.

"Maybe come sun up, we could get some eggs or something," I said.

"You think it's gone?" she asked, looking up through the floorboards.

"Yeah, probably ran off into the woods. That or eating one of the neighbours. You can never figure what they'll do after the savage beast takes over. No sirree-bob, not even—" I was chatterin' away when I heard the rusty sigh of old nails being pulled out of a piece of wood. Before I could say: "Ass-monkey-tuna-fuck!" light from the living room flooded the crawlspace. The werewolf skulked over the opening and went for me. I rolled left, Sally too.

"Shit, get deeper." It occurred to me again. The Contractor must have had the same idea. Thought he'd be safe. Shit, we walked with our elbows through the mud and sludge. Charlie could have been waiting around any corner. I wished I had my forty five. Then Wolfie's fingers wrapped around my ankle like hairy shackles.

"Jesus shit-pie!" I screamed.

Sally turned around, grabbed my arm. Good girl. She started pulling. But damn, Jerry was one strong sucker. He was pulling me back towards that toothy grin. I had dirt under my finger nails.

Sally tossed over the Contractor's hardhat. I was right under the Wolf, and started smashing the helmet hard as I could against the bastard's head. The wood sealant glistened off of the matted black hairs. Saliva dripped from its mouth like a leaky faucet. I reached for my lighter, just inches away. Sally tugged me by the collar but it was no use. Then I had it and

struck that little metal wheel, sparkin' a flame that shot right over Jerry's face, singeing the hair. The Werewolf's giant hand gripped my belt buckle like grim death and heaved me up into the living room. Sally screamed.

The monster threw me around the room like a rag doll. Made me wish I was back in the bottle, gettin' flogged by Sally's beef cake. 'Cause he was tough, but not this tough.

I tasted the crimson gore streaming down my moustache; the salty life was leavin' me. I was going downtown, and fast too. It pumelled me again, those razor sharp nails digging right through me, sending me spinning like a dradle across the floor and into the brick fireplace. My whole life slowed down to a baby's crawl and I looked up with blurry eyes. I saw the great Beast there before me scowling. Its crooked fangs chattered as that black tongue writhed like a slimy pit viper. I heard the hisses, snarls, and growls: but above all – a low and mournful voice was callin' my name. I knew it too. Johnny Cash, lookin' down from heaven saying: "Bury me not... on the lone prairie."

I thought of daughters Minnie and May. Their curly hair bobbin' as they flew their kites by the river. I thought of Denny, and my boys out in the jungles of Vietnam. I didn't leave those guys flounderin' face down in the rice paddies just to be eaten by a werewolf. I had to act. I had to strive. I was gonna be somebody... not like Barney tossin' pizzas. I could see my sweet Sally peering out the belly of that hell hole. And I knew she was the one.

Seemed to me we're put on this earth for one reason. Sure, we make our own destiny. Lord knows I had. But who's to say that all roads don't lead to the same place. Hell, we all end up a worm feast somehow, somewhere. This was my moment. This was mine. Time to make a name for Bucky Dennis, insurance salesman.

I stood up.

The Monster's eyelids narrowed.

Then I clenched my fist and said: "Hey, Jerry. Let's roll, hombre."

His shaggy nape sprung out like a hideous jack-in-the-box. He barked

ravenously. But I stood my ground, curled my fist and swung right for his peaches. The Wolf bellowed, shrinking back. But I held on and squeezed my hand like an iron vice. I pinched those lycanthropic testicles like I was juicing lemons. And man that Werewolf roared, shuttering and lashing out with every demonic limb. He tore up the place, flingin' me around all over, before collapsing suddenly. I stood up and watched strange smoke rise from the monster's huevos. Wolfie moaned, whimpering like when you pull a puppy's tail. I looked at my hand. Verny High Football 1964, solid silver with my mama's birthstone. I kissed the ring and I swear that fucker twinkled like Mississippi sunshine.

I was on a roll, bud. But Jerry wasn't out of it yet. Just pissed off and ornery. Nauseous too – and I say that because when he got up, he wretched Devil's bile onto the floor. And you ain't never seen vomit like that. We're talkin' rank.

Wolfie was on all fours charging towards me like a wild steer. But I tucked my legs and rolled over its back.

"Toro!" I sang like Johnny Cash with a bloody grin.

The creature howled and the whole place rattled. Dishes shook right off the wall and shattered. The windows cracked and busted. The pipes started squirting water from the crawl spaces, flooding the place like a rice field. And that rancid meat stink – damn was it foul.

I screamed too, shouting back like a grizzly bear as I charged, my holy fist flyin'. I kidney punched him, ass punched him, smashed his jaw, and clobbered his nose. The water rushed beneath our feet and we started slip-pin' and sliddin' like we was lubed up for a skin flick. Then Jerry got me with a left hook and sent me sliding into the granite kitchen table.

I wobbled to my feet and there he was, fists raised like a title fighter.

"One last tango, Jerry."

We battled like giants, knuckles flying. He knocked me into the cereal cabinet and I scowled as the colourful rain of Lucky Charms lodged into my mutton chops. I clutched a loose can of Jacksonville

Canned Spaghetti and had at him. I fuckin' smashed Wolfie's face until he was spittin' teeth. And I didn't give up there. I bashed his head flat against the floor, demon blood squirtin' up my nose until I was snortin' tomato sauce.

"Die you British spawn of Satan! How you like this little taste of Italy!? You dish painting – spandex wearing – fish and chip eating, dickweed!"

Jerry's legs twitched. The tattered yellow jogging suit turned red. That chalky smoke started to rise from the mangled monster, sizzling.

Sally came out of the crawlspace, soaked, scared. Like a ragamuffin.

The Werewolf wasn't moving.

"It's alright, sugar. I think he's

dead." I sat back and picked a chunk of wolf skull outta my moustache.

Sally stepped over the gory hulk, leaned over and helped me to my feet. I tried to act tough, but couldn't help groaning as we headed down the hallway. She held me close, holding my hand. The birds chirped a sweet summer melody outside as the sun came up over the willow trees. And she laid me near the Charger.

I could feel Sally's tears on my chest, her soft hand over my wounds. There was fluid in my lungs. I knew it. You can't take hits like that without hittin' something vital. I'd seen it before. Sally knew.

"I don't mean to be a pervert – but you look damn fine with that green

dress clung over that little figure of yours."

She laughed, but I could tell she wasn't happy.

"I have a mind to ask you dance."

"I'd love to," she said. "Oh, Bucky!"

So we just sat there curled up next to my Charger watching the sun peer out over the willow trees. Tiny diamonds of light glittered through the lush green of the weeping leaves. And from afar we heard the sweet song of sparrows on the air. That's when I knew I'd be ok. New days were coming. Hell, a brand new life was coming. And what better way to welcome something like that – than with a big old helping of Mississippi sunshine.



In the Vale of Pnath

John Hall

I believe that I have already told you of how young Edmund Fiske, after his peculiar experiences in the old church of St Michael and All Angels in the late twenties, moved away from Arkham County, and of how he was subsequently rather disturbed by events in the apartment building in which he chose to live early in the thirties.¹ He moved about for a year or so after the latter, for there was a restlessness deep within him, and at the time with which we are now concerned he was living in a minor city in a remote state. He was staying at a little private hotel, a situation which was unsatisfactory for a particular reason. Not financial – for he could well afford to buy the place outright had he so desired – but because his books and curios were in storage, apart from one or two choice pieces that he kept with him, and he fretted about them. He fretted for those in store, lest the bookworm should be attracted to the banquet, and he fretted for those in his hotel, lest a discriminating thief, knowing the true value of the mouldy old tomes, should be tempted to ply his trade.

Fiske thus required a bigger place, and for the first time in his relatively short life he thought that a more permanent abode might be a good thing. To this end he left his name with a Mr Dawes, an estate agent. One bright spring morning, Fiske was called to the telephone in the lobby of the ho-

tel, and Mr Dawes – a man of about the same age as Fiske himself – said cheerfully: “May have just the place for you. Are you free this morning?” In half an hour Fiske was picked up outside the hotel by Mr Dawes, in his car. “It’s an hour’s drive,” explained Dawes as Fiske climbed in, “and the place is pretty remote, so you may want to think about buying a car yourself.”

“Is there a town nearby?”

“Yes, only a mile off, but it’s a small place. It has everything you need, of course, and there’s a bus station, with regular runs to the city.”

“Then I probably won’t bother with a car,” said Fiske, “though I do like the look of the new Fords.” And since Dawes’s own car was last year’s model, and they were both young men, there ensued a lengthy discussion of matters automotive, which need not concern us.

What does concern us is Fiske’s reaction as they climbed a low hill, traversed a brow, turned a corner, and came to a fine vantage point. Dawes stopped the car and waved a hand. “Well?”

“Marvellous!” Fiske was not exaggerating, for he had seldom seen a better view. Below lay a valley of fine agricultural land, well-tilled, with occasional patches of ancient woodland, and a little river which held the promise of trout. Low hills surrounded the place on every hand, and a

dozen tiny brooks and rivulets babbled down to join the river.

“The locals call it the ‘Vale of Pennath’, which is a touch poetic, I think,” said Dawes.

“*Pnath?*” Fiske frowned, for the name sounded odd; familiar and yet strange at the same time.

“Pennath. P-E-N-N-A-T-H. The name of the town, you know, just over that way. And the house too, in point of fact. Pennath House.”

“It sounds vaguely familiar. Have I heard the name somewhere?”

Dawes shrugged. “It always sounds English to me. The Lake District, perhaps, or else Cornwall? The story I heard was that it was a corruption of ‘Pennyworth’, because some old chap reckoned there wasn’t a pennyworth of folk in the place, or not a pennyworth of goods and chattels – the story varies according to who tells it. I don’t know how true that derivation is – very likely nonsense – although the place is hardly crowded, even today, as you see.” He pointed to an old house a little way from the town which straggled up one side of a hill. “That’s Pennath House, the old wooden building. That’s where we’re bound.” He waved in the other direction. “The town is spread over the hills there, as you see. About ten minutes’ walk – fifteen maybe. Did I mention there was a bus service? Quite good, I’m told.”

“It’s a bit remote, even so,” said Fiske. “Presumably there’s snow in

1. We hope to bring you these stories in future issues of *Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction*.

winter? Hmm, I think I'll need a car after all."

"Oh?" Dawes regarded him professionally. "You sound as if you've already made up your mind to take the place!"

"Yes, I am taking the place – unless the drains are bad, or something," said Fiske. "I can see from here that it's exactly what I wanted."

* * *

The drains, and everything else, were fine. In fact the last owner had installed a brand new bathroom and central heating system, almost frighteningly modern and efficient. Fiske signed a cheque, and the other necessary documents to start the process of buying, there and then. Moving in took him only a short while, and he quickly made the acquaintance of his near neighbours.

Mr and Mrs Graham Harte were a happily married couple in their fifties, lived at no great distance from Fiske, and invited him round to tea on the day of his arrival. The Hartes had two children. Bernard was twenty years old, and attending college, though temporarily home on a mid-term vacation. Mildred, more popularly "Millie", was twenty-two, and lived with her parents. Mr and Mrs Harte took to Fiske at once, he being a polite, good-looking, and well-educated young man, and the junior Hartes were not unimpressed either. Bernard was at that age when a man is inclined to hero-worship. He admired Fiske's car (newly purchased), his moustache, and his pipes. He resolved at once to acquire the first (his father's funds permitting), encourage the second (a hopeless effort), and persist with the third (after several unsuccessful trials). As for Millie – Millie just admired Fiske.

Completely unconscious of the admiration he had engendered in the younger Hartes, Fiske in his turn admired Mr Sorenson. It was while Fiske was sharing a drink with a Mr Harte, that the latter informed him of Mr Sorenson's huge collection of old books, manuscripts, and artefacts of a curious nature. Mr Octavius Sorenson was a bachelor of some sixty years of age, who lived on the outskirts of town, no great distance from

Fiske and the Hartes. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that Mr Harte himself was a somewhat conventional man, a pillar of the local church, and preferred the ordinary to the outré. Fiske was determined to make the acquaintance of Mr Sorenson as soon as possible and began contriving schemes whereby he could arrange an introduction.

No elaborate scheme was called for, however, for the two men were destined to meet quite literally by accident only a day after Fiske's conversation with Mr Harte. Fiske took a drive out towards the town – perhaps to take the air, or perhaps to buy a bottle of whisky now that the intemperate nonsense of Prohibition had been dispensed with – and the road led past Mr Sorenson's property. Fiske was not yet fully *au fait* with the mechanism of his new car, or so it seemed, for he took a bend in the narrow, winding road a touch too fast, and ended up putting his car in a ditch. Fiske swore loudly as he climbed from the vehicle. He removed his jacket, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and prepared to push.

As he leaned over the hood, another car drove up the road in a stately fashion and came to a halt. The passenger asked Fiske if he needed a hand and when he answered in the affirmative directed the chauffeur to do the necessary. Thanks and a discussion of the road and the weather followed, and it emerged that the passenger was none other than Mr Sorenson himself. It appeared that he had also heard of Fiske through Mr Harte, and informal introductions led to an equally informal invitation to Sorenson's house the following day. Fiske accepted with alacrity and appeared promptly at the appointed time.

He found Mr Sorenson to be both knowledgeable and hospitable, and positively eager to allow Fiske to see his vast accumulation of books and the like. Fiske found that rather than exaggerating Mr Harte had considerably understated the collection. You might have thought from his – Christian, shall we say – name that Mr Sorenson came from a large family, but he was actually an only child, his name the result of his father's taste

for the classical. The elder Sorenson had also had a large fortune, which his son had inherited and greatly augmented, to the extent that he was in the enviable position of being able to do pretty much whatever he pleased without troubling about sordid practicalities like the state of his bank balance. His own tastes inclined, like those of Fiske, to what we might call the macabre. Mr Sorenson had a purpose-built library the equal of many a small university or college, and had besides a good many rooms in the house furnished almost exclusively with bookshelves to accommodate the overflow from the main collection.

"Books," Mr Sorenson said, "are tools; there to be used." He poured Fiske a generous drink, laughed, and added, "Proper books, I mean, not fictional trash!"

Fiske happened at that moment to be looking at a row of books devoted to magic. He waved a hand and asked, "These, too?"

Mr Sorenson laughed again. "Why not? Oh, not the spells and what you, no. I can't imagine that swallowing a live toad would bring you the woman of your dreams – more likely to put her off, I should think. No, what interests me is this: why should anyone think, believe, that it would work? That's the attraction of these things for me. Trying to work out why people came up with them in the first place, why they believed – still believe, in many cases – what, on the face of it, is complete nonsense."

"Hmm. I know what I meant to ask you... the name 'Pennath', where does it come from? I can't help thinking that I've heard it, or something very much like it, somewhere, and can't for the life of me remember where it was."

"You probably know that the usual tale is that the discoverer of the place thought there wasn't a *pennyworth* of people here when he saw it. Or that some disgruntled settler's wife – I mean some settler's disgruntled wife – thought there wasn't a pennyworth of use in trying to make a living here. Something of that sort," said Mr Sorenson.

But something in his tone made

Fiske ask: "And you accept that explanation?"

Sorenson lowered his voice, though the two of them were quite alone in the library. "Tell me, have you heard of Ptolemy's *Almagest*?"

Fiske frowned. "Of course."

"Of course, but have you heard of the *Almagest* of Johannes von Fürst?"

Fiske wracked his brains. "The Hebrew scholar?"

Mr Sorenson nodded approvingly. "No, you are thinking of Julius Fürst, but even so, I doubt if one in a thousand men your age would know the name. No, Johannes von Fürst preceded his illustrious namesake by a few centuries, and his *Almagest* is a trifle more uncommon than that of Ptolemy. It was burned by the public executioner of Heidelberg in 1463 and remarkably few copies survive."

"And von Fürst?"

Sorenson laughed. "I have no doubt that he would have joined his magnum opus in the flames, had they caught him. He was pretty much a pagan and advocated a very unconventional way of life. No, he disappeared under what one must call very mysterious circumstances. Of his great work, only five copies are known to survive." He paused, then added in the casual manner assumed by the true collector, "I have one here, as a matter of fact."

Have you, by Jove? thought Fiske, although he had no time to say it for Sorenson continued immediately.

"I imagine you are similarly unaware of the curious *Chronica* of Baldwin, the renegade monk who was walled up in his cell in Aberdeen on the personal instructions of Innocent VIII – himself a man of the foulest reputation?"

"I fear so."

"Von Fürst contains only a passing mention, of course," said Sorenson, half to himself. He stood up. "I have only a translation of the *Chronica*, by John Maudsley, the English antiquarian, in the 1780s." He led the way out of the room.

Fiske followed his host down a corridor, up a flight of stairs, and across a landing. They halted before a closed door and Sorenson produced a key. "My private study. I keep it locked; a bit of dust is a small price to

pay for knowing that my real treasures are undisturbed." He unlocked the door and stood aside for Fiske to enter first. The room was furnished in the style of an ordinary businessman's office, except that against one wall stood a pair of metal cabinets, looking like a pair of gun-safes. And indeed Sorenson said, "I keep my rifle and shotguns in there," gesturing to one of the cabinets, "but in this one..." He produced another key, unlocked the other cabinet, and opened the door to display a half dozen shelves, each laden with ancient tomes. Sorenson selected a particular volume without hesitation, removed it carefully from its place, and set it down on the desk top. He flipped open the cover to show what Fiske assumed would be the title page.

Fiske was astounded to see that the book was hand-written. "This can't be the original manuscript!"

"Oh, yes. There was a small-scale printing by Jacob Tonson, but the Victorians treated poor Maudsley worse than Oscar Wilde! The Reverend Doctor Jenks, a half-mad clergyman, took it upon himself to track down all the copies he could find and destroy them. He said he'd been personally instructed by the Almighty in order to prevent another Sodom and Gomorrah. A few more of that edition survive than of the *Almagest*, but not many. I don't possess a copy myself, though I've chased one or two false leads over the years, but the original manuscript is some small compensation." He turned the pages as he spoke, evidently looking for a particular passage. "Ah, yes, here we are." He looked at Fiske over the spectacles he had put on. "I may say that the original *Chronica* was written in a code of Baldwin's own devising, and is pretty dense in places, in consequence of which I differ from Maudsley in my interpretation of one or two cruces. However, the distinction is not usually significant."

"Please go on, I'm most interested to know what it says."

"Here is the relevant passage. Maudsley quotes Baldwin as saying, 'And the *deuterotheoi*' – Baldwin's word, which Maudsley interprets as meaning 'the Second Order of Gods', or perhaps 'demons', to which view I

am inclined – 'shall come amongst men in the Vale of Pnath, and shall wreak havoc among those who deny them, and shall consume their own with fire, taking them back whence they came.' What do you think of that?"

"Sounds pretty comprehensive, doesn't it? Once can imagine wreaking havoc amongst one's enemies, but why consume one's friends with fire?"

Mr Sorenson laughed again. "I told you it was matter of interpretation. It may be that neither Maudsley nor I have properly cracked Baldwin's code, however, one thing that seems clear is the mention of the 'Vale of Pnath', wherever that may be located."

"And no clue is given?" asked Fiske.

Mr Sorenson shook his head. "It may be merely a coincidence, of course, a similar sounding name."

"I sincerely trust that's the case!"

Mr Sorenson appeared grave as he closed the book and returned it to the cabinet, which he then carefully locked. "We'll be more comfortable in the library, don't you think?"

Fiske would gladly have traded a lifetime of comfort for half an hour amongst the books he had glimpsed, but he could hardly admit as much. Instead, he followed his host back down the stairs and into the library, where Mr Sorenson poured generous measures of whisky with a shaky hand.

Fiske had had enough whisky to make him bold enough to say: "You seem rather disturbed by something, sir. I trust my naïve query hasn't caused you any distress?"

Mr Sorenson managed an unconvincing laugh. "No! No, not really. It's just that..." He took a prodigious swallow of his drink.

Fiske said nothing in response, merely raising an eyebrow.

Mr Sorenson took another, more restrained, drink and continued. "There is a strange parenthesis to all this. You see, some thirty years ago – when I was about your age, actually – a curious sort of hobo drifted into the valley here. He claimed that he'd been 'drawn' here, almost as if he were returning to the place of his

birth. An odd fellow, too. I couldn't tell his age – you know how it is with these vagabonds, outside in all weathers, no decent meals. He was probably no more than forty or fifty, but he looked older, much older. We're a pretty tolerant bunch of people here, or at least I like to think so, and nobody bothered much about the old chap. Quite the contrary, in fact, they gave him a few cents and some food, and then he did odd jobs in return for meals or a night's lodging in the barn, that sort of thing..." He took another drink of whisky before he said, "Then things started to happen."

"Things?"

"Strange things, unpleasant things. Farm animals attacked and mutilated. Unexplained accidents that should never have happened, and never *had* happened. Soon the rumours started and the fingers began to point to this old tramp. I call him 'old', but as I said, one couldn't really tell. Then came a really bad incident. A man was injured by a tractor that, as he put it, 'had a life of its own' –"

"Oh, really!"

"I know, I know, but in a small place like this folks aren't always the brightest. Anyway, the fellow was taken into custody – you've met Sheriff Weaver? No? A good man; I'll introduce you tomorrow. Weaver locked him up, partly on suspicion of just about anything you could name, and partly for his own protection, because there was talk of tar and feathers, if not downright lynching. It was fortunate that he did because –" Mr Sorenson's voice quavered and he took another drink. "Because while the old tramp was safely in the local goal, a child was abducted, a little girl."

"Good God!"

"As you say. Ruth Mason, her name was. She vanished, on her way home from school."

"When you say 'vanished' –"

"Vanished," Sorenson repeated. "She was never found. There was no body and no trace of blood, or violence, or anything. It was as if she'd never existed. The hobo couldn't have been involved so he was driven to the county line, given a few dollars, and told to clear off. Even that was a bit harsh, in my view, but I

think the fellow knew it was really for his own good."

"There were no other suspects?"

Mr Sorenson gave a mirthless grin. "I'll come back to that. You see, I haven't told you the end of it yet. A day or so later, the hobo was found in the next county – or what was left of him. He'd apparently burned to death, quite unrecognisable. He was only identified from the bits and pieces he carried around wrapped in an old blanket, his worldly goods, you might say."

Fiske shook his head, unable to think of a response.

"As you can imagine, the case was investigated a bit more thoroughly than the death of a homeless, friendless itinerant usually is. Weaver suspected – and I half agreed with him – that it was some local ruffian who wasn't convinced of the chap's innocence, and wanted some private 'justice'. What else could it be, after all? There was a tiny possibility – never entirely ruled out, though I never believed it – that it was nothing more than an accident, one of the many that had occurred recently. An old hobo full of moonshine got too close to the fire on a chilly evening... I suppose it's possible that it *was* an accident."

Fiske was rather embarrassed by all this, but said, "Yes, I'm sure these unfortunate fellows are more prone to fatal accidents than you or I. It's still a terrible thing to happen, though."

"Yes, of course." Mr Sorenson hesitated. "Only – only – my family have owned this place for, oh, sixty years or more? We haven't always lived here what you'd call 'full-time'. My father's business was in New York, and we had a place in Vermont where we went most weekends, so this was for the summer holidays. When I was about twenty-five or so, my father told me a story about a very similar sequence of events that had happened soon after he and my mother bought this place, five or six years before I was born. The same thing happened, or pretty much, judging by his account: farm animals badly used, unusual accidents, and a disappearance, a young boy on that occasion. Once again there was a scapegoat handy, an old coloured man, not too sound of mind. This was a good few

years back and things were a touch rougher then. When the coloured man was found burned to death in a shack, some people made pious noises about the Ku Klux Klan, but nobody made any effort to find out who was responsible.

"You think history is repeating itself?"

Sorenson nodded. "So it seems. Of course every age has its monsters, its night-walkers, its deviants, but it's always struck me as very strange. The parallels, I mean, they're disturbing." He gave an exaggerated shudder and deliberately changed the subject.

Looking back on his conversation as he walked home later that day, Fiske thought Mr Sorenson probably had a mild monomania, harmless enough, and nothing to be concerned about. The deaths of the tramp and the coloured man were tragic, but didn't warrant further attention from Fiske. So was the disappearance of two children, but there was nothing necessarily sinister in the circumstances, dreadful though they were. This was an isolated rural community with streams and rivers about, and presumably caves, wells, potholes, and such, just the sort of places to which children were drawn like iron filings to a magnet. The animal mutilations could either have been drunken hooligans from the city, or bored local youths. The "Vale of Pnath" was an intriguing phrase and an even more intriguing concept – perhaps worthy of a little research culminating in a paper in *The American Journal of Unexplained Phenomena* – but the ravings of some demented old monk were hardly to be taken seriously. There was no need to seek a more complex explanation where a plain one would suffice. Aside from which the alternative was awkward.

Unthinkable, even.

After the passage of a day or two, Fiske thought no more about the odd incidents Mr Sorenson had described, and set about the serious business of enjoying himself in his new home. To begin with, his possessions had to be brought from the various places they had been stored; and since most of possessions were books, shelves had

to be designed, made, and fitted. When this was completed, Fiske began arranging his books by subject, within subjects alphabetically by author, and where necessary within authors, by height, shortest to tallest. One day, thought Fiske, he must produce a proper catalogue of his collection, but that could wait until he was old and grey, and no longer buying books every week. The process of arranging his library was as lengthy as it was pleasant, for each book he touched seemed to fly open of its own accord and demand that he read at least a few of its pages. All too often those few pages proved so absorbing that he turned to the title-page and started reading the whole volume from the beginning.

As Fiske was new to the area, he also received a good many invitations, especially from those families with unmarried daughters. By the same token, as master of his own house for the first time in his life, he wished to reciprocate this hospitality, and began giving modest parties. Having little or no culinary or organisational skills himself, he sought a recommendation from Mrs Harte for assistance. She pursed her lips at the thought of "some local woman" having the run of Pennath House and Fiske's collection of books and curios, and the result was that Millie Harte acted as hostess at Fiske's first party.

All in all, life was very pleasant for Fiske, with his books and his neighbours for company. He spent a great deal of time with Mr Sorenson in particular, who had generously given him the run of his library – with the exception of those treasures which were safely locked away. Fiske very naturally dropped some broad hints in this direction, but Mr Sorenson always replied only with a man of the world grin, and obviously had no intention of indulging him. Once or twice, however, he made his own hints to the effect that when he knew Fiske a little better, the young man might not find the locked cabinet entirely out of bounds.

In addition to maintaining her role as Fiske's hostess, Millie took to calling for him each day and insisting that he leave his "fusty old books" to

either go for a walk, or a drive, or play tennis. Fiske was not a reluctant participant in these outdoor activities. While he enjoyed Millie's company, he did not enjoy it quite so much – or in quite the same way – as Millie enjoyed being with him. While Millie had privately decided that "Millie Fiske" would look very well in the society pages, Fiske looked upon her as a lively and likeable younger sister. This difference of outlook did not bode well, but it was not a disastrous difference for anyone as determined as Millie, who resolved to make Fiske forget his ideal woman. For Fiske undoubtedly had a hypothetical ideal, and the appearance and disposition of this *femme fatale* was far removed from Millie.

At the end of October, Fiske's perfect match arrived in the Vale of Pennath in the form of Mrs Rosalind Mortimer. Mrs Mortimer had skin of a pallor which set the older ladies muttering darkly of arsenic, belladonna, and not going out much except at night. She had long black hair, complemented by her eyes, their blackness not the dead, cold colour of onyx, but the warm, living darkness of jet. Mrs Mortimer was a year or two younger than Fiske, and thus eminently suitable in every way. Or so he thought.

Fiske met Mrs Mortimer for the first time at the Hartes, where both had been invited for cocktails. Mrs Mortimer said something like, "How do you do?" and Fiske was completely smitten. Despite his interest in antiquarian books and curious phenomena, Fiske could be an exceptionally practical man when the occasion demanded. The first task was to determine whether there was a Mr Mortimer in the picture or not. Though this would have made little difference to Fiske's long-term objectives, it would have required an alteration of tactics. But it seemed that there was no Mr Mortimer, although it was undisclosed whether this happy circumstance was the result of either divorce or death. Disregarding these finer details as totally irrelevant to his goals, Fiske merely took pleasure in the knowledge that Mrs Mortimer was alone in the world, and began to

seek her company as much as might be considered proper.

He did not at first know that Bernard Harte had been similarly affected, though he soon became apprised of the fact. Bernard was once again under his father's roof, due to some small misunderstanding with the college authorities – the precise nature of which remained vague, but had nothing to do with his moustache or pipe. Mr Harte was considerably miffed by his son's untimely return, and even more displeased when he decided to make a damned fool of himself with a woman ten years his senior. He confided as much to Fiske one afternoon. Fiske could only reply that he sympathised with Mr Harte senior, but could quite understand the position adopted by Mr Harte junior. The elder Mr Harte now found himself in an unenviable position. While he would have been delighted to have Fiske cut Bernard out with Mrs Mortimer, he still entertained hopes that Fiske might take Millie off his hands. The entire situation, in fact, seemed set to degenerate into something like the plot of one of the more sickly types of romantic novel.

It would have been better had it done so.

* * *

A few weeks after Mrs Mortimer had taken up residence down the road from Fiske, he was approached by his housekeeper, Mrs Chaffer. "Here's a thing, sir!"

"Oh?" Fiske had imbibed a touch too much whisky the previous night and was not at his best.

"Terrible doings over at Mr Townsend's, I hear."

Townsend was one of the local farmers. "What sort of terrible doings, Mrs Chaffer?"

"I can scarcely put a name to it, sir. Them poor animals, treated like that."

"Has someone been interfering with Mr Townsend's livestock, then?"

Mrs Chaffer nodded sagely, but could not elaborate as she knew little more than that a number of Townsend's sheep and cows had come to some harm. Fiske was naturally reminded of his conversation with Mr Sorenson, which had been all

but forgotten in the intervening few months. It must, he thought, be a coincidence, but he was not surprised when Mr Sorenson called later that morning.

"Heard about these mutilations at Townsend's?" he asked without preamble.

"Only from Mrs Chaffer, whose reports are not always reliable."

"It's true enough," said Mr Sorenson grimly. "I'm going there to see for myself now. Do you want to come along? My car's outside."

Fiske was feeling a bit brighter after a decent breakfast and three cups of strong coffee, so he accepted Mr Sorenson's offer. Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the farm, and Fiske met Townsend. The man was a couple of years younger than Fiske, and clearly shaken by the events, as he spoke to Sheriff Weaver. His wife looked thoroughly upset, and remained very much in the background, clutching their only child – a boy of nine or ten – to her.

Fiske had already formed a high opinion of Weaver's abilities, but the sheriff could offer no plausible explanation when he was shown the bodies of the two sheep and cow that had been tortured and killed. "Surely these creatures must have made a considerable noise, being treated like this. Did you hear anything, sir?" Fiske asked Townsend.

The farmer shook his head. "Nor did Lettie."

Weaver promised Townsend was that the matter would receive his earnest attention, but it was all he could do. On the way back to their cars, the sheriff expressed his private opinion that it was "devil-worshippers" from the city.

"Or just devils," muttered Mr Sorenson in a voice so low that Fiske only just caught it, and Weaver missed it altogether.

Once they were back in the car, Fiske asked, "Did you mean that literally? About devils, I mean?"

Mr Sorenson laughed nervously, and tried to make light of it. "Ridiculous, isn't it? To men like us, modern, rational men. But then Maudsley believed it. Superstitious old simpleton, you'll say, and very likely you're

right! I'll tell you one thing, though. Mrs Mortimer had best watch out."

"Oh?"

Mr Sorenson nodded at his own reflection in the car's mirror. Yes. She's a stranger, you see, and they'll want a scapegoat when history repeats itself."

"I can't see that happening," said Fiske, with a laugh that was not entirely convincing. "I'm a stranger here myself, come to think of it!"

"Yes, but you're known to be a friend of mine, and of the Hartes." He didn't say this with arrogance, but with the assurance of someone who has lived in the same place long enough to be certain that anyone for whom he vouches will be accepted by the local families. After a pause, he continued. "And there's also the initials."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite follow you."

"The initials. R-M for 'Rosalind Mortimer', but it could equally stand for 'Ruth Mason'."

"The little girl who disappeared thirty years ago? Does Mrs Mortimer look anything like that girl?" asked Fiske.

"No, she doesn't. For one thing Ruth was very fair, and Mrs Mortimer is very dark."

"I suppose there is such a thing as hair colouring," said Fiske, not troubling to hide his scepticism.

"Now you're making fun of me! Still, it makes me think, even if it doesn't do the same for you."

"So what do you think? That these children disappear and come back years later, at which point the whole cycle of violence and horror starts up again?"

"I don't know what I think, but I know this isn't the end of it, not by a long chalk. You remember the old manuscript, the translation of Baldwin's *Chronica*?"

"What of it?"

"There's another passage in there, one I didn't quote to you. It goes: 'Except They be summoned, They cannot appear'. He doesn't say who 'They' might be, but one could hazard a guess. I, myself, am firmly convinced that some people are a focus of evil, just as saints are a focus of good."

Fiske was not to be won over. "I don't think Mrs Mortimer has anything to worry about."

* * *

A week after the disturbing events at the Townsend place, Bernard Harte burst into his parents' house, announced that he intended to blow his brains out, locked himself in his room, and carried out his resolution using the 12-gauge shotgun Mr Harte had bought him the previous Christmas. The resultant turmoil may well be imagined, as well as the bitter feelings that arose when it was realised that Bernard had rushed home directly from Mrs Mortimer's house.

Fiske visited Mr Sorenson after he heard the news.

"History repeating itself; I knew there'd be more! And do you see how even the Hartes – intelligent, educated, city folk – are blaming Mrs Mortimer. I told you she had best watch out."

Fiske could no longer dismiss Mr Sorenson's fears for Mrs Mortimer's safety, and called upon her at once. He found her distraught.

"I cannot understand it," she kept telling him. "I'm sure I never gave him to think – I'm sure I never led him on, or anything like that!"

After reassuring her as best as he could, he said, "I know it smacks of running away, but I think you might be better off moving out of this place until it all blows over."

"Will it blow over?"

"It must. After the inquest –"

"Will I be required to give evidence?"

"Possibly. But you could let me know your address, and I could contact you if required. How's that?"

After some persuasion, Mrs Mortimer agreed to spend a few months with her sister in Vermont, and gave Fiske the address then and there. He helped her pack and she left the next morning.

* * *

A week after Bernard's funeral, and a couple of weeks after Mrs Mortimer's departure, Mr Harte returned early from his morning walk, a little out of breath. Mrs Harte instinctively

knew something was wrong, and so it proved.

"Little Billy Townsend!" gasped Mr Harte. "He's vanished!"

"My Lord!"

Mr Harte paused to recover himself. "I've just talked to Weaver. He's rounding up a search party. Somehow, I don't think it will be any good."

"Poor Mrs Townsend!" said Mrs Harte.

"I'll go and tell Edmund – Mr Fiske – he'll want to help, I know," said Millie. Without awaiting an answer she left the house and set off at a run.

Millie turned the corner and noticed the new engine of the volunteer fire brigade before she saw the smoke and flames that billowed from Pen-nath House.

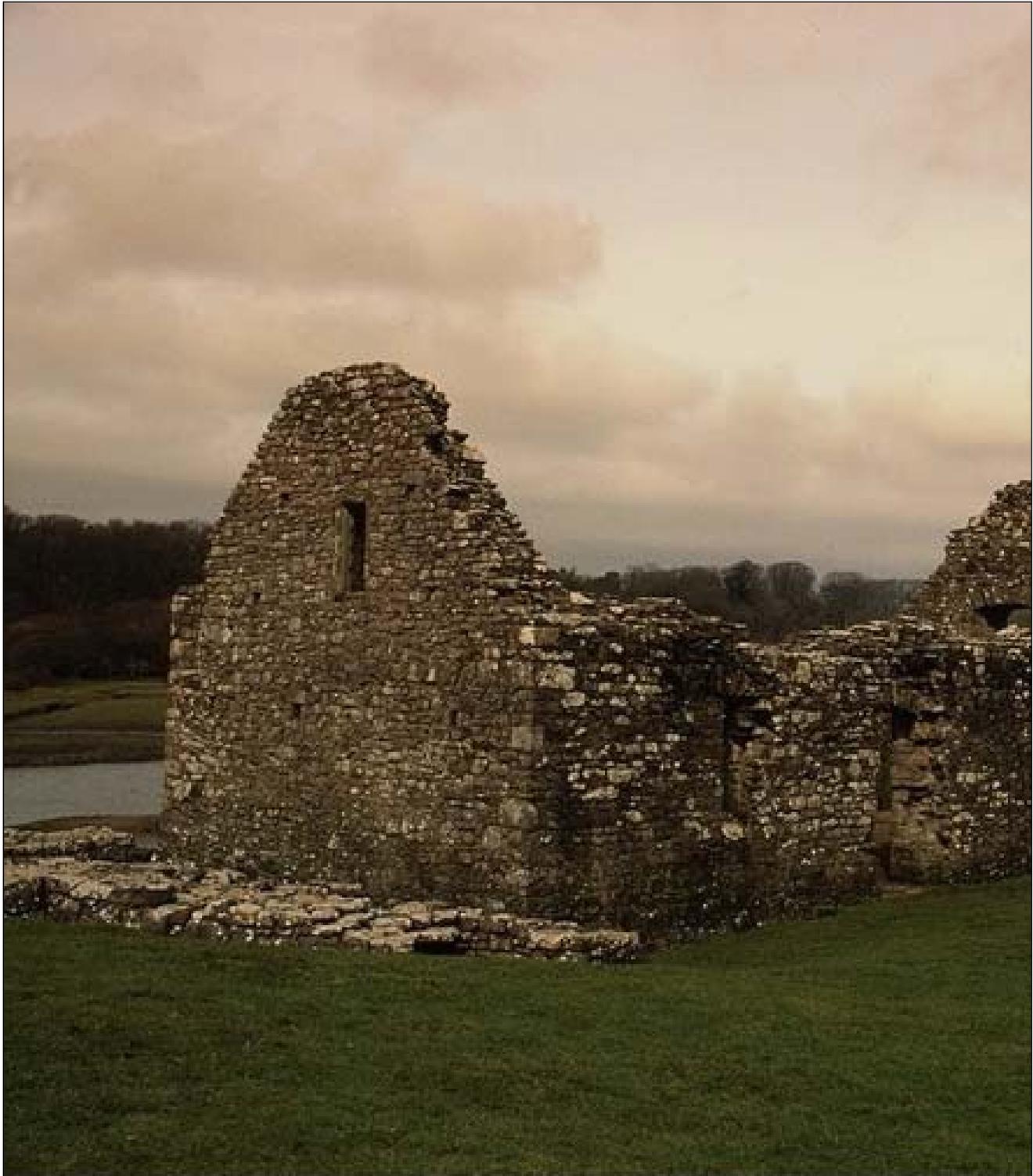
Mr Sorenson was not surprised when he heard the news. He knew

that Fiske had experienced more than one strange occurrence in his young life. He was not surprised at all. "Except They be summoned, They can not appear."

Millie took a while to recover from the shock, and married a very ordinary, local gentleman thereafter.

Mrs Mortimer tired of Vermont and travelled to Europe.

A year later she married an Italian count.



Murder in the Minster

Rafe McGregor

Bauer watched the short motorcade halt outside Hofbau Minster. He glanced at his watch – half an hour before midnight – then back through the binoculars. As always, the king travelled with only a small bodyguard of Secret Police. The men were crisp and economical in their movements, and two of them disappeared through the main entrance, a set of monstrous wooden doors. It appeared as if they had been swallowed up in the maw of a skeletal stone beast. Bauer rested the binoculars in his lap and waited.

He stared at the Minster, a compact, misshapen cross in the middle of a snow-covered graveyard, but had to lean closer to the window to see the tops of the spires and tower. They rose so high into the heavens that they seemed unsteady, as if on the brink of toppling over. The thought amused him. He leant back and scanned the road below. Deacon's Lane was empty. So was Deacon's House, except for Bauer upstairs and the corpse of the custodian downstairs. Sister Antoinette had been a nun in life, and although he despised everything that Roman Catholicism stood for, he hadn't wanted to kill her.

But the stakes were too high to leave anything to chance.

Bauer brushed his knuckles over the ridged, oily flesh on the left side of his face. The burns were over ten years old, courtesy of Brigadier Rassendyll, the Englishman who was

head of the Secret Police. Bauer had shot him in the throat in return, but the bastard had survived. The luck of the devil. He'd been hunting Bauer and his Resistance ever since, each seeking to exterminate the other. But Rassendyll wasn't here tonight. Tonight Bauer would end their long, grim duel all on his own.

He lifted the binoculars as one of the bodyguards returned to the motorcade. Two by two, the rest took up their positions, covering all three entrances to the Minster. A man in a grey cape, with dark red hair and a black eye patch, debussed from the middle car. Rudolf Elphberg, or King Rudolf the Sixth of Ruritania as he was known to the world. Bauer watched him stride into the great, gaping mouth alone. A few seconds later, the other bodyguard joined his colleagues outside the Minster, closing the huge door behind him.

Bauer moved quickly. He dropped the binoculars and headed for the stairs, touching the butt of his pistol for luck. Down past the corpse, and down again to the wine cellar. He had already raised the flagstone in the middle of the floor, and a torch and crowbar lay on either side of the square of darkness under the raw, sodium light. He knelt, took hold of the torch, and lowered himself into the narrow excavation. The uneven walls were slick with moisture and the tunnel was so low he had to

crouch down. Later, he would have to crawl for about twenty feet.

He knew this because he'd already made the journey once, last week.

Bauer groped his way along through the belly of the earth: under Deacon's Lane, under the graveyard, under the chapter house, and then under the north wall of the Minster. He was shivering and caked with grime when he arrived at the end of the passage. Rusty iron rungs were riveted to the foundation blocks, and he used them to climb up into a priest's hole. It was so small that there was only half a flagstone of floor space. He squeezed into it, switched off the torch, and was immediately enveloped in a complete and impenetrable darkness. He shuddered, feeling the weight of the tons of stone pressing in on him. The icy hand of fear closed around his heart and he forced a cough to get his lungs working again.

Bauer squatted and very carefully set the torch down between his feet. He placed both of his hands flat on the stone in front of him and felt for the small indentation. He found it a minute later, and pushed hard with two stiff, dirty fingers. The door rasped as it opened, revealing shadows dancing and twisting on the limestone wall. He could hear a voice echoing from the right – the bishop. He stood, drew his pistol, and screwed the silencer onto the end of the barrel. Then he stepped out into

the niche, leaving the concealed door open behind him. Everyone knew about the priest's hole and the three hundred year old emergency exit. They also knew that the tunnel had been impassable since part of it collapsed in 1877.

They were wrong.

Bauer looked out from the niche, at the tomb of Marshal Strackenz – Ruritania's greatest soldier – sitting stolid under a decorative canopy. The sanctuary was illuminated by a faint light filtering through the quatrefoils, and the flickering of candles beyond the choir screen. He couldn't help gazing up the thin, needle-like columns opposite, to their teetering capitals, and the great ribbed arches of the ceiling. He felt his balance start to go, and averted his eyes as he steadied himself. He poked his head out from the niche. To his left, the apse was small, dark, and empty. To his right, the choir screen effectively blocked his view of the nave. More importantly, it blocked the views of the king and the bishop on the other side. Bauer slipped out into the sanctuary, and stole towards the nave, using the aisle formed by the clustered columns.

It had taken him two years to find out where Elphberg attended Midnight Mass. Two years and three of Rassendyll's men tortured to death. The first had been brave, incredibly so. He'd screamed like a pig, but he'd told them nothing. His death was slow and painful. The Resistance had bungled the second interrogation. It was Bauer's fault for leaving it to one of his lieutenants. The man was determined to extract the information, but his brutality proved counter-productive when he killed the prisoner by accident. Bauer had taken charge of the third himself. The policeman parted with the location after five hours: a private ceremony conducted by the Bishop of Hofbau in the country's smallest cathedral. Then a fast drive to Zenda, where the king issued his Christmas message to the nation at one o'clock precisely.

Not tonight.

As Bauer passed the north transept, he flexed his fist around the butt of his pistol and smiled. The weapon was a product of their Czech

neighbours, the most reliable handgun in the world. He had already killed five men and one woman with it, and he knew it wouldn't fail him. He glided past the choir screen and into the nave. The hundreds of candles cast more shadow than light, and the stained glass windows only increased the effect. Bauer looked up at the clerestory. The richly moulded ribs supporting the ogive-arched vault looked like the bones of a leviathan seen from the inside. He couldn't help feeling small and insignificant – just like the priests intended – until he caught sight of Elphberg, kneeling before the bishop at the high altar.

Tonight Bauer was neither small nor insignificant: he was the instrument of the destruction of the Royal House of Elphberg.

He eased behind a column, keeping to the shadows. He held his pistol loosely in both hands – ready for the kill – and examined Elphberg, now only a dozen feet away. Unlike most of Europe's parasites, Rudolf dressed simply. He wore the scarlet tunic, white breeches, and black cavalry boots of the King's Royal Cuirassiers – of which he was Colonel-in-Chief – with only two decorations. Around his throat, the Order of the Red Rose of Ruritania, worn by all the aristocracy, and on his chest, a lone medal; a memento of his military service in Britain, where the Elphbergs had chosen exile over the new People's Republic.

Like most of his ancestors, Rudolf had a shock of dark red hair and a prominent, elongated nose. But it was the eye patch that now dominated his features. Bauer recalled the ambush, three years ago, as if it was yesterday. He and five of the Resistance had launched a rocket-propelled grenade at the royal limousine. Prince Rupert, the nine year old Duke of Strelsau, had been killed instantly, along with everyone else – all except Rudolf. Like Rassendyll, he had the luck of the devil. But the attack hadn't been wasted; it had deprived him of his only heir and his right eye.

In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king.

Not for much longer. Once the

Elphbergs were gone, the darkness would lift, and the people would embrace socialist democracy again. Bauer eased back the hammer of his pistol, and rested his right forefinger on the trigger. Elphberg stood and the bishop blessed him a final time. He offered his hand to the bishop and they shook. A modern king indeed, but still a throwback to the oppression of the absolute monarch. He turned to leave the Minster.

Bauer stepped from the aisle and raised his pistol. Elphberg stopped dead. The bishop – startled – clasped his hands tight under his violet maniple. Bauer focused on the bridge of Elphberg's nose through the front sight of his pistol.

Something was wrong.

The eye patch was on the right hand side. Bauer's right, Rudolf's left – but that wasn't right. Bauer lowered his pistol slightly and squinted in the half-light. The nose was fake. So was the red hair.

Rassendyll.

"I tortured three of your men for this. How did you do it?"

Rassendyll spoke softly. "Only three men knew about tonight. His Majesty, me –"

"And the bishop." Bauer glanced up at him. But it wasn't the Bishop of Hofbau, it was someone else, and that someone had produced a pistol from under his maniple.

"And Reverend Father Sapt, Chaplain-Major of the Royal Defence Force."

"Drop it, Bauer," said Sapt, "it's over."

"I thought priests were forbidden to kill."

"In your case, I'm prepared to risk eternal damnation."

Bauer saw a flash of movement from Rassendyll and when he turned back, the policeman was pointing a small pistol at him. "The eye patch. I should've realised."

"A necessary risk. My left eye isn't good enough for a clear shot in this light."

"Did you know I'd use the tunnel?" Bauer asked.

"What tunnel?"

Bauer was tempted to kill Rassendyll anyway, regardless of the

consequences. It would be suicide. Satisfying, certainly, but ultimately pointless. On the other hand, he'd already escaped from the Secret Police once before, and he knew he could do it again. He lowered his weapon, dropped it, and raised his palms.

Sapt covered his pistol, and began reciting, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

Rassendyll said, "God save the king."

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses..."

Bauer had his second revelation of the night an instant before the bullet penetrated his skull. He fell, his head hit the hard stone, and he knew no more.

Sapt made the sign of the cross over him. "As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..."

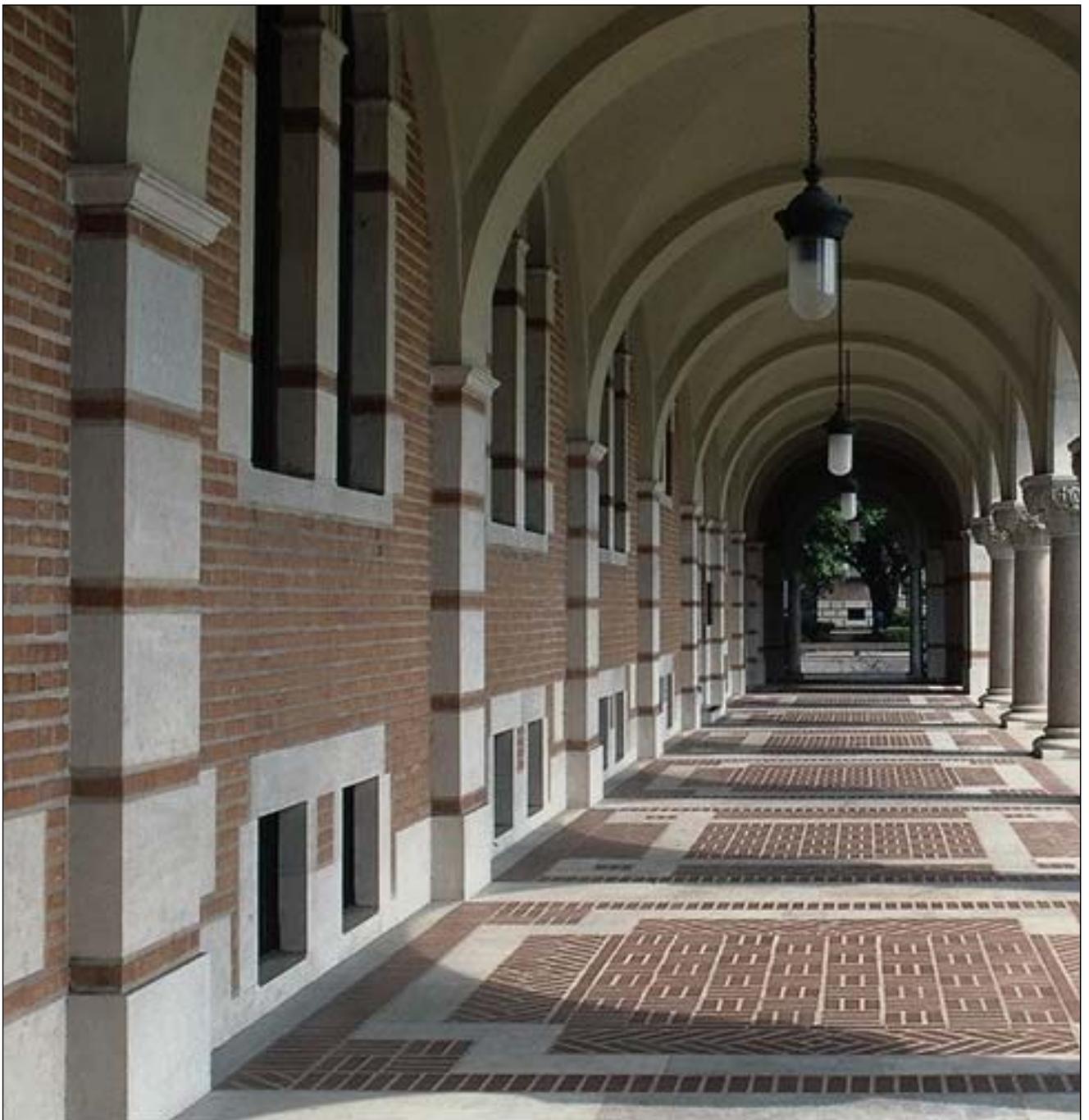
Rassendyll knelt down and placed two fingers on Bauer's throat. He felt the pulse and the life slowly ebb away.

"For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and

ever. Amen." Sapt stepped down from the dais and stared at the body, and the blood pooling on the stone. "At last, it is over."

Rassendyll waited until he was sure. He checked his watch as he rose. "Come along, Major, we can just make it to Zenda before the His Majesty goes on the air."

As they walked through the nave to the western doors, Sapt clapped him on the back. "You're quite right, Richard. I wouldn't want to miss delivering our Christmas present. I suspect His Majesty will be especially grateful, not to say generous."



Naked Before Mine Enemies: a Tale of Tiana

Richard K Lyon &
Andrew J Offutt

After all her travails, after all the perils she'd survived by pluck and prowess – and sheer genius, she mentally added – Tiana had her prize: a box of ebony, banded with silver. And what did it contain? A skull! A human skull.

True, a sizable emerald was inextricably implanted in one eye socket.

Hardly enough to make a girl queen of the world, she mused, a woman who'd not tolerate being called girl by any other. Still, the thing should bring a good price, once I get to a source of coin. Maybe it was worth it at that... almost getting myself killed and losing every stitch of my clothes! One does rather wish the blasted box held a nice useful dagger – jewelled, of course – rather than a skull, but...

Being (potentially) rich as a duchess did not, she reflected morosely, change the fact that she was naked, hungry, unarmed, and a long way from her ship. Somewhere far downriver it lurked, awaiting her as a: *Vixen*, the ship whose crew of pirates she commanded.

Still... some luck's with me, at that.

Fish could be caught in this lake only in autumn. When the bluegills came surging down the river, men were here to meet them; for the present, their little village was deserted. Nice of them to leave this small, entirely serviceable boat; and how fortunate that compunctions about stealing were unknown to the mind of Captain Tiana Highrider of Reme!

She considered, teeth in lip. Were she willing to spend the time thoroughly searching the abandoned village, she might well find something to wear and a bit of preserved food. Yet she listened to her instincts, which now suggested that such a delay would be a bad risk. Best she keep moving; certainly this damned box was valuable to those she'd left behind.

Tiana pushed off.

After nigh a day of negotiating the swift and oft treacherous river, she was weary of arm and sore of bare

bottom. Without joy she watched the sinking of the sun, crimson against the forest's deepening green. Now she tried to decide whether night-boating was worth the risk. This river was –

Green eyes narrowing, she looked about and sniffed. Smoke. The wind from downriver carried its unmistakable odour, and now she could discern traces, wafting above the tree-line.

Farmers burning their fields after harvest? Hardly likely, in early summer! No cooking fire plumed up such smoke and odour, for all her stomach's hopeful rumbling. Her jaw hurt and she stopped clenching her teeth, with an effort. Something here boded ill, and she did not dare not discover what it was before she continued.

Heading into shore, she pulled the boat up onto the mud bank. With branches from leaning trees she hid the small craft; a large leafy branch served to erase the marks of her passage and labour from the mud – and stingingly abrade her bare thigh. Perhaps she should also hide the ebony casket. After all she'd endured to ob-

tain the thing, though, she was loath to part with it. She told herself it was better strategy to keep it with her.

It was after all treasure and Tiana was, after all, Tiana.

Having taken all the precautions she could, she entered the forest, with stealth. Bare buttocks long seated in the boat objected to this resumed use of their muscles.

The trouble with being a woman so perfectly built as I, she thought, and walking naked this way, is this accursed jiggle-joggle!

She was approaching more than smoke, she soon knew, for everything that went into fire left its imprint in the air. The captain of *Vixen* sniffed, considering. Ahead was no fire of grass or trees, but of seasoned lumber. Little undertones of odour told her of other things in the flames, some unfamiliar. Not all; she recognised the scent of burning flesh. Her stomach snarled and she damned it for its cannibalistic leanings.

She came upon a path that wound its way through the forest, apparently leading toward the source of smoke. The easier walking along the trail would save her bare feet from stones and stubs, and her skin from whippy branches, grimly thorns, and burrs. Nevertheless, she grimly chose to walk parallel to the path. Naked or no, she'd be ready to dive into a clump of bushes; the signs were all too clear that she might not like those she could meet on the trail.

Tiana could not imagine who such might be. No savages peopled this part of the world, and Thesia was hardly at war with any of its neighbours – having conquered and enslaved them all.

Reaching the top of a small hill, she looked down to see what she'd feared: a small farming village. Fields of growing wheat surrounded the burning ruins that had been a cluster of a dozen or so houses. If humans survived, she saw no sign. All too likely the men had bravely and foolishly hurried right out to be slaughtered by experts while the women and children remained inside to be burned alive, after a bit of use.

Barbarian attack? Those Drood-damned Symrians from the hill-country?

Tiana, it is not your affair, she told herself, when the urge to make the villains pay rose strong within her – an impulse all the stronger because she could see them clearly.

Below, not fifty yards away, a small hut stood nestled cosily to the forest edge. Smoke – honest smoke from a cookfire – poured from the hut's stone chimney. Men in steel-studded leather jacks and the horned helms of Thunlander Light Cavalry milled about outside.

They've spared some poor woman to use and kill later – after she's cooked dinner for the murdering monsters!

For all her mounting anger, what Tiana saw was disturbing in another way. These were the swine King Hertes had hired to help oppress their own countrymen! Why had they suddenly broken peace with their employer's kingdom? Was the black box so important? Something important was afoot. It was something Tiana didn't understand, and that was a situation Tiana could not bear.

She understood the sound behind her: footsteps.

Someone was approaching, and who but an enemy? She nodded, considering. Aye; she saw no horses below. A raiding party of this size would leave a man behind to mind the mounts, and in the cavalry it was the horses that ate first. The one approaching must have watered and fed them, and was now returning to join his fellows for dinner. Tiana pressed close against a huge tree – a scratchy one.

If I kill him as he so richly deserves, I can steal horse and sword – perhaps even armour – and be away before those other scum miss him!

From around a bend in the trail he appeared then, a shortish, wiry youth with a city-bred cunning written on his weasel's face.

A street-tough joined the army. And praise Theba – he's just my size! She thought happily and amended, Well... maybe a bit slight in the chest.

The young cavalry trooper walked with eyes alert and sword at the ready. Nevertheless the thought did not occur to Tiana that such a formidable young man should not be assaulted by a stark naked woman with-

out weapons. Vanity and pride were not always conducive to good sense, which was why she had to be clever and strong as well as swift. Confident of those qualities, she sought the most direct way of dealing with this situation.

Quickly she set down the box. She had to look only a little before she found a nice large pine cone. Wagging her shoulders with both hands behind her as if flirtatiously flaunting her nudity, she stepped out onto the path before the trooper. Rather than smile, she adopted the subtlety of a coolish, arch look.

"And to think I thought all cavalrymen were old and ugly and bow-legged!"

The sight of so fair a woman, with her beauty so completely revealed, would have painted a frozen stare on the face of any man. This one's astonishment was compounded by Tiana's words, and she added more.

"I have something for you-u-u..."

His sword arm quivered down. Eyes bulging, he asked numbly, "What?"

"This!" And she slammed the pine cone full into his face.

A stone would have been a lot nicer, but the knobby-knurlly thing was a good start. In the instant that he was blind and mazed with shock and pain, her left hand caught his sword arm. She yanked him toward her while her knee rammed up into his crotch and the point of her elbow slammed into his neck. Another such blow, harder and better placed, rewarded her with a distinct snapping sound. His sword flew from a jerking arm. The soldier, his head now hanging at an ugly angle, no longer breathed. His body partly pivoted, trying to fall, and Tiana released his wrist. He fell.

There. Swift and easy as a cat slaying a rat! He probably never had a mother anyhow.

Though there had been but little sound, Tiana was hardly pleased to hear a shout, all too near. "Kerreas! What happened?"

Damn them! They sent more than one with the horses. Now where did this uncooperative wretch drop his sword?

Another voice: "Mayhap something's amiss? Kerreas?"

The speakers were some distance down-trail, following Tiana's victim. She was trapped between them and the main force at the end of the path, down the hill. Then –

Ahhh! She retrieved Kerreas's sword, though at cost of having to pluck it from a thornbush that tried to eat her arm. *Now to slip away from here without...*

A man came dog-trotting around the bend in the path. His mouth sagged at sight of the naked young woman standing over his apparently dead comrade. Rather slowly in his shock and indecision, he began to raise his crossbow.

"Shoot her, quick! Loose, Kensh, before she gets away!" That from a man behind him, and then there was another, goggling:

"Who liked Kerreas anyhow? Sur-render, girl, and we'll show you a great good time!"

"Shoot her, Kensh! Stick an arrow right in her gut!"

"J-just a girl? And nekkid?"

The sword in Tiana's hand, by the feel of it a well-balanced weapon, rose high above her head. It flashed at the crossbowman. In a continuation of the same violent movement she was wheeling away without waiting to see how well Kensh loosed his nasty quarrel while wearing a sword in his gut.

She bolted at a dead run, still – damn them – naked.

Like a horribly angry bee the crossbow screeed past her head to disappear into the leafy forest. She kept moving. *If I can get past the main squad before all the noise stirs them up, I'll make for the village. It's not burning so fiercely that I can't get through, and they're apt to go around rather than follow. Then I can – oh blast! I can burn my feet, is what! Well...*

The trail widened into a clearing. There, in perfect semi-circular formation stood Thunland soldiery. They faced her with levelled cavalry-spears as though she were some hunted beast. Tiana was given the choice: stop running or impale herself. Tiana stopped. Even then her swift-moving

gaze was picking out the man whose copper-chased helmet indicated rank.

"*Captain!* These men tried to *rape me!*" she cried, gesturing at her pursuers just as they came into view. "They couldn't agree who'd be first, and –"

She paused, frowning as she looked back along the trail. The crossbowman was unmarked, while the bald spearman bled from a sword-cut that had laid open half his face. *Hmp*, she thought, *that stupid sword must have been poorly balanced at that!*

"And this man," she continued, pointing at the spearman, "slapped Kerreas, who hit him with his sword, and then these other two fell on Kerreas and broke his neck. Oh it was horrible! I ran, and –"

"Captain Ashina," the crossbowman interrupted, "this flame-haired slut is lying."

"A natural flame-haired slut, too," one of the men with the captain said.

"She's the one killed Kerreas, poor boy," the crossbowman went on. "Broke his neck the way a wolf kills a rabbit."

Tiana's voice was an incredulous little squeak: "Me?"

"Aye," the spearman put in, "and it was her what cut me! Threw Kerreas's sword like a dagger 'r a spear, she did, and..." The fellow's voice trailed off at the expression on his captain's face. Ashina looked as if he'd just eaten a green apple. With a worm.

"I'll pass over the murder of your fellow soldier Kerreas," Captain Ashina began in a dangerously soft tone, and his droopy broad moustache twitched. "He was a snotty little snake and probably earned worse, years ago. He's small loss. But" – and his voice rose to challenge thunder – "troops who forget their orders because of rut and then lie about it afterwards are of little use when they're whole, and *none* when they're wounded!" I

He stopped. His words hung in the air as a dreadful threat.

"Aside, m'girl," he muttered, giving Tiana's flank a slap as he passed her.

"You think I'd believe that this lovely slip of a girl with her genuine

red hair and pretty – her pretty form **BROKE THAT GANG-BOY'S neck?!**"

"Captain, I swear by the mud on the Turtle's back –"

"Miscor, you've got a bad cut there," Ashina said. "But I think I can stop the bleeding for you."

Like a striking viper then the captain's sword-arm flashed, and the bald spearman crumpled to the muddy ground. The bleeding from his face was most effectively stopped: scarlet poured copiously from his slashed throat.

"As for you two," Captain Ashina snarled at the others, "the next time we have a really nasty job needs doing, it's yours! Now go stuff your lying bellies." With his soldiers thus accounted for, the youngish captain turned back to Tiana. "My dear, we were just having supper." He gestured toward the hut and smiled, displaying large teeth beneath the bushy-droopy sorrel moustache. "Would you care to join us?"

Tiana returned the mock courtesy by smiling right back. "Really I'm not hungry, but if you insist," she said, noting the twitch of his sword, "I'll keep you company. Would you perhaps have a spare tunic?"

Even at this distance she could smell the stew acooking, and Tiana's Caranga-trained nose told her something most interesting. Her stomach growled and she ignored it. Fasting would do her a lot of good. Lots of philosophers said so.

"Afraid not," Captain Ashina said, and several men sighed in relief. It would be criminal to cover this lucky find of theirs – and besides, they'd just have to rip it off later, anyhow. How many times would twenty go into one?

Tiana kept her eyes sweetly wide and her head high while Captain Ashina ceremoniously ushered her toward a smallish one-room structure of braided kinkoo branches under a roof of thatched straw. Around the edges of the roof were woven bright serhawk feathers and within the thatching – though sharp and knowing eyes were required to note them – were the birds' white skeletons.

Tiana's vision was sharp, and she knew more about this place than

these stupid murdering Thunlanders did. Surrounded and close-watched by helmeted soldiers carrying sharp weapons, Tiana thought it politick to accompany their captain.

Before the hut, a cooking fire danced under a black iron pot big as a cow's head. The Thunlanders apparently saw nothing strange about the fact that the smoke swooped straight into the hut and up the chimney. Beside the suspended kettle, slowly stirring its contents with a long wooden spoon, stood an old woman, a crone innocent of teeth. Her time-ravaged face was twisted and ugly beyond even its obvious years. The perfect witch of the woods, Tiana mused, as the woman raised a brown, gnarled finger to level it at her.

"Would you like some of my stew, dearie?" she asked, croaking like a raven or a serhawk on the wing.

"Oh, no thank you."

"Claims not to be hungry," Ashina said, letting one hand stray to his guest's backside, "but I'll have some."

Tiana tried to be unobtrusive about edging away from spidery fingers. As their captain knelt to retrieve his trencher from the ground, one of his men muttered:

"Best have her eat some more, to be sure she's added no... spice."

"Oh you suspicious soldier-boys," the crone said with a horridly toothless smile, and downed a generous spoonful of her savoury stew. Ashina, satisfied, let her fill his plate.

"Girl," he said between mouthfuls of meat, leeks, herbs and gravy, "as I am sure you appreciate, you find yourself in a delicate position."

"Yes, I'd certainly appreciate something to wear. Even a dish-cloth?"

"Cooperate like a nice girl," he said, ignoring her words, "and I'll deal kindly with you."

"A nice girl," one of the troopers muttered. "Who needs a nice girl?"

"Otherwise," Ashina said, favouring Tiana with a wolfish grin while gravy dripped from one moustachio, "I shall have to follow my orders..."

"Dearie," the old woman interrupted, "do try my stew. I'm sure you'll love it and that little belly of yours

looks like it would welcome good meat."

Tiana ignored the proffered bowl, instead taking the spoon from the crone's claw-like hand. Raising it to her mouth, she sniffed, and touched it to the tip of her tongue. Eyebrows sweetly arched, she returned the spoon.

"For what it is, it is very well done, mother. An excellent choice of seasonings. But – thank you – it's not to my taste. You see, I've –"

"Enough," Ashina snarled. He sat down. "Girl, I said –"

"Captain, I am no more girl than you are boy, as I'm sure you can see." And Tiana stood with her shoulders well back. Someone snickered. It was not the captain.

"Look here trull, are you going to be a cooperative girl, or –"

"Captain, why don't you let me –"

"But Cap-tainnn," Tiana said, interrupting the drunk-looking trooper. Her eyes were wide in innocence and her arm was amove as if aimlessly, the better to jiggle her bilobate chest. "I don't know what you want. How can I help *or* hinder you in carrying out your orders, when I don't know what they are?" As if idly, she rubbed one shapely hip.

"My troopers and I," Ashina said, his words ever so slightly blurred, "are part of a very large force combing this countryside."

"Oh my."

"Yes. All of us have orders to search for some Drood-sent black box, and to kill all we meet who object to search..."

"Oh how awful! And such nice-looking horse-soldiers, too. Oh I assure you, you are welcome to search me, Captain Ashina!"

Men laughed, and one volunteered, though in a strangely weak-voice, considering the nature of the task he requested.

"First questioning," Ashina went doggedly on as though focusing only on the words he had to get out, "under torture, you understand, any who might have knowledge of the Drood-damned ebony box. Now I don't suppose a slip of a naked girl like you knows about such. It's stolen property, you see. But you can most assuredly be cooperative in other ways,

and maybe on the morrow we can find you – some nice clothing."

"She KNOWS!" This from the hag, in a raucous hawkish shout, while she aimed her long spoon at the naked redhead. "She's the one! I have the Sight and I know!"

The last standing trooper sat down, rather suddenly. Tiana tried to look fresh and innocently uncomprehending while Captain Ashina glanced back and forth from the time-deformed old woman to the gloriously well-formed and naked young one. Confusion clouded his eyes – or something did. It seemed to be glazing them, as well.

"Wha's this –" Ashina began, and gave his head a hard jerk as if assaulted by mites.

Tiana kept her eyes wide while she addressed Ashina of Thunland. "Now let me see if I understand you," she said in a calm sweet tone. "If I cooperate, meaning play the whore to this gaggle of armoured lovers of yours, I may get a whole big reward of something to wear. If I don't, then you rape me, second you torture me to death. Is that about it?"

"Yessss," a trooper muttered low. Strangely, his eyes failed to brighten.

"Aye, girl, you've got it," Ashina mumbled, the words falling mangled from his lips, which seemed to have gone lazy. "But what the hag just said –"

"Witch," Tiana said. "Witch, not hag. But it doesn't matter," she went on equably. "Thank you all the same, but I'd prefer just to be raped."

"What?"

"You heard me!" Tiana stood with legs well apart and hands on hips. "I said it will just have to be rape. And, Ashina, my baby-burning friend, it's your place to begin the horrid deed. Up up man, I'm waiting!"

He started up, but fell back onto his buttocks. "I – I don't feel well..." His eyes strayed their glassy gaze in the direction of the crone.

"Well come come now! By my count, there are two-and-twenty of you," Tiana snapped. "Surely among so many brave slaughterers, you can get up the manhood for such a task!"

"Quamos," the captain snarled with a gesture in the general direction of a slouching trooper, "give the fire-

haired slut what she wants! Kensh – fetch that hag over here.”

As the first hulking oaf commenced to rise from the fallen tree whereon he sat, Tiana's foot flashed out to catch him full in the face. He went tumbling backward over the great log. Kensh had started for the old woman; spinning completely around, Tiana slammed her forearm across his back just above the buttocks. A cry burst from the crossbowman while Tiana snatched out his sword.

“I'll take this slut,” a full-bearded hulk said, starting up. “I only had two this afternoon: virgins. What fun are they?”

“Oh, I'm so glad you said that,” Tiana said, and drove Kensh's sword into the man's mouth. Another was rising; she kicked him backward.

“Next!”

What followed was hardly a fight. Those troopers who retained strength to rise, rose; Tiana knocked them down and kept them down until the poisoned stew had finished its work. Ashina drew dagger and Tiana kicked his arm so that he slashed his own leg. As she raised her sword, the old woman called out.

“No! He's their leader,” she said, weak-voiced. “Mine! Must be mine.”

“Yours,” Tiana said, and waited.

She had not long to wait. The last of the Thunlanders to succumb was Captain Ashina, who managed three last words though his face had gone the colour of ashes.

“I – don't... understand...”

“True enough,” Tiana said, and she spoke on swiftly, to send her words with him into the darkness. “You understood nothing of the people you

butchered, butcher. Had you eyes to see, you'd have known this is the home of a Thesian hawkwitch, a woman who'd go to any length to repay you. She has.”

Captain Ashina might or might not have heard the last few words; he was gone off with his men and their victims. Tiana glanced around without seeing the old woman. Knowing the hag had not departed, Tiana peered into the hut. Aye, the hawkwitch lay on a blanket in the darkest corner.

“Mother,” a pirate asked gently of a witch, “they are yours. Is there an antidote I can fetch you?”

“Nay, child. It is better that I die. For the vengeance I owed, and took, it is a small price.”

“The vengeance is taken, mother. Tell me – why did you seek to betray me to our common enemy?”

The reply came drifting from the shadow-splotted darkness in a voice laboured, as though the woman fought back death to speak her final words.

“Because it was your fault, your doing; all this evil. When I saw you, I knew. You have the casket. You meddle in something forbidden to humankind, girl... Tiana, pirate! Send the box with me where I go, else all the hands of the earth and the powers of the sea and even the eyes of the sky shall rise up against you!”

“But,” Tiana began to protest, and she held her tongue. Tiana knew better than to argue with the dead. She departed the hut of the hawkwitch.

A few minutes later she was back, bearing the ebony-and-silver casket.

It had grown disconcertingly warm, lying there in the cool shade of a large tree. With most ambivalent

emotions, she crossed the hut and bent to place the cause of so much trouble into the dead hands of the witch.

“Take it with you, mother,” she murmured, and gritted her teeth as she envisioned the fine gem within the box. Straightening resolutely, she returned to the open doorway. “By the Cud, I can hardly wait to get back aboard *Vixen* and about the simple trade of attacking ships again!”

Just outside the doorway she paused for a last mournful look at the treasure she'd fought so hard for. Thus she was able to see it explode in a great sheet of flame that engulfed the witch and ran straight up the wall of the hut.

* * *

The sun had died to bequeath the sky to a red, ill-portending Moon when Tiana rode from the village of the dead. She did not know its name, or the names of any who had lived and died there. Now she was mounted on the best of their horses and clad and equipped in such of the Thunlanders' clothing and weapons as suited her. The bundle behind her saddle contained a score of daggers and swords of Thunland manufacture; there was some profit in such, at least.

Behind her, the last of the houses burned; a funeral pyre whose crimson and smoky flames added to the sky's gloomy omen.

Ashina and his men she had not touched. Serhawks would love their eyes. Better still, they were two-legged jackals; let their four-legged kin tend to them.



Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown

John Greenwood

In the Mountain of Sanity

Space adventurer and amateur watercolourist Newton Braddell crash-lands on the planet Kadaloor, having forgotten all details of his mission. Having escaped from both the Punggol, a bellicose race of purple spheres, and the mind-bending mushroom known as Thanggam thanks to his android servant Eunos, Braddell continues on his quest to cure himself of a brain disease caused by electric beetle larvae he accidentally ingested. On the brink of either death or despair he is rescued by the inhabitants of City Hall, a human city hidden inside a dormant volcano.

I awoke to find Miss Lavender at my side and a hypodermic needle in my arm.

"You were screaming so loudly, one of the other guests called security," she told me. "They thought you were being murdered."

And indeed I had been, in my sleep, as happened every night. The ghost of Marsiling took a life for a life, and always with new and more horrible methods.

I was surprised at Miss Lavender's boldness, and was thankful that I am a firm believer in pyjamas. Still, I was abashed at being discovered abed, and tried to cover myself with the thin sheet of silvery material that had been provided for me.

"No need to be embarrassed," said Miss Lavender. "There's no shame in night terrors. This is just a sedative." She withdrew the needle expertly. "It will also help with your blood pressure. As a matter of fact, I came to remind you that your first session of therapy is due to start in a few minutes. There'll be a brief medical assessment too, but it's nothing to worry about."

"What? What therapy?" I looked around me, wild-eyed, still only se-

mi-conscious. Since my childhood the prospect of being late had always thrown me into an irrational panic. Worse still to find myself late for an appointment I never knew I had.

"Your introductory therapy session," said Miss Lavender mildly. "All guests of City Hall are encouraged to begin their journey to complete sanity as soon as possible. I asked Eunos to pass the message on to you. He's starting his first session this morning too, you know."

"He never mentioned anything about it," I said, reaching for my clothes, a shapeless boiler suit of the same silvery material as my bed linen, identical to that worn by Miss Lavender, and indeed almost all the Cithallians. I had assumed that this uniform had some symbolic or functional significance, and had asked Mr Orchard to explain the garment's popularity to me. Was it designed to protect the wearer from some kind of radiation found beneath the Earth's core? Did it insulate against the geothermal energies? No, my guide had replied. It was just the latest fashion.

"Oh, well, he probably just forgot to tell you," said Miss Lavender, ob-

servicing my annoyance. "Nothing unusual about that is there?"

I alone knew that this was more than unusual. Eunos was virtually incapable of forgetting anything. His memory banks were, so he had assured me, inexhaustible. If the android had neglected to tell me something, he had done it purposefully. The thought of it made my blood simmer like the magma that bubbled all around us. So the Citihallians had still not worked out how Eunos differed from the rest of us! They would have a real shock, I thought to myself, when they came to perform their medical examination.

Miss Lavender arranged for us to take breakfast together, ordering the meal through what I now realised was a kind of intercom system, a series of water-filled tubes which threaded their way around the entire city complex, ending in the deep white basins that could be found in almost every room and corridor of City Hall. Next to each basin sat a pad and stylus, and written messages, folded into a waterproof capsule, were floated along the tubes. The destination of these messages was chosen by a series of metal levers, resembling the fingerboard of a saxophone, that ran along the underside of the basins and controlled the complex convection currents that guided the message capsules to their addressees.

I confess that I had previously mistaken this communication system for plumbing of a more Earthly purpose. Already feeling self-conscious about the hullabaloo I had subjected my neighbours to, I chose not to reveal my blunder to Miss Lavender at this stage. I only hoped that some unsuspecting Citihallian had not received a rather unpleasant missive that morning, and that if they had, they would be unable to trace it back to its sender. I was still trying to make a good impression on Miss Lavender, and unpleasant revelations of that sort could be disastrous.

We sat together on a public balcony overlooking one of the many public spaces that had been hollowed out of the mountain, a high-ceilinged, well-lit chamber of impressive proportions, its walls tiled with mosaics depicting heroes and heroines in City

Hall's history, both the visionary engineers who had first proposed the mountain hideaway, and the psychologists who had developed the lifelong program of therapy that aimed to rid citizens of warlike tendencies.

It was a stirring sight, even for an outsider like myself, but an outsider I would always remain, I felt, despite the best intentions of Miss Lavender and her colleagues to persuade me otherwise. I was grateful for the hospitality of these gentle troglodytes, but eventually I would have to move on. My biggest regret was that I would leave Miss Lavender behind, for already I had developed a kind of infatuation with that lovely creature. Perhaps the long period of my forced celibacy and solitude, both aboard the *Tanjong Pagar* and on my haphazard trek across the lands of Kadaloor, had rendered me more than usually susceptible to her charms. After all, Miss Lavender was the first human woman I had set eyes on in over five years, since I had kissed my own mother goodbye in the Relatives' Waiting Room of Spaceflight Academy, back in Queenstown, Europe.

But no! Damn and blast these petty qualifications! I may have been suffering from psychotic episodes, hallucinations may have dogged my days and hideous nightmares trampled through my nights, but I was certainly not imagining Miss Lavender's beauty, and I should not like the reader to think that I was merely hankering after the first sight of the female form. Was I a man profoundly in love? I asked myself that question a hundred times as I sat opposite the object of my affection, gazing into her eyes as she talked and ate and smiled, but could not answer with certainty.

Our shared breakfast consisted mainly of paper-thin pastry rolls filled with some unknown sweetmeat, and a reddish drink that smelled of coffee, but tasted more of cinnamon. The Citihallians' table manners were notable: instead of using plates and cutlery in the way I was used to, they combined the functions of both in a single implement. Our dishes were arranged around the edge of a metal wheel, smaller than a side plate, each delicacy speared onto the

end of a blunt prong. At first I attempted to tug at one of the dishes with my fingers, but a disapproving glance from Miss Lavender was enough to curtail my clumsy attempts. For the second time in her company I blushed, feeling like a chimp being taught to sit at the table and eat like a man. By following my companion's example, I tried to master the art of Citihallian repast: the wheel itself is held in one hand, with the thumb resting in an indentation at the hub, allowing the whole contraption to revolve freely. As each delicacy rotates past, it can be plucked from its prong with one's teeth. After several failed attempts I began to wonder whether the humble knife and fork were not an easier means to convey food to the mouth.

As echoes of conversation from the crowds below swirled up to our precarious balcony, I tried to find out as much as I decently could about her life. Was she married or otherwise unavailable? No matter how I tried to draw her out, my companion sidestepped my questions. I did not even know her first name: one of the more peculiar customs of City Hall ensured that personal names were only ever revealed to one's most intimate acquaintances. For a society that prided itself on its rationality, this taboo struck me as neurotic. But who was I to question? I was hardly a model of mental health myself.

On that score I had high hopes. What a stroke of good fortune that I had stumbled across an entire community of psychologists, at the moment when I needed their help most. The very existence of City Hall was such an extraordinary co-incidence that several times during the past few days I had begun to suspect that this was just another cruel trick played on me by my mutinous subconscious, and that I would soon wake to find myself shivering in a wind-blasted mountain pass, with only Eunos for company.

But if this was a dream, I did not wake from it, and for company, instead of a tetchy android, I had the lovely Miss Lavender, at least for the time being. Finding her unforthcoming on the subject of herself, I tried to sound her out on the likelihood of me

making a full recovery of my mental faculties.

“I wouldn’t presume to judge,” she told me, as an old waiter with the wise smile of a sage cleared our table. “I’m not an expert in that field at all.”

I had already given Miss Lavender a rough outline of my complaint: the electricity-generating microbes colonising the interior of my skull were playing havoc with my synaptic firings, causing all manner of unpleasant side-effects. “But surely you have people here who can treat such diseases,” I said, with some desperation in my voice, as she rose from the table.

“Very possibly,” she said. “I’m sorry, Captain Braddell – I have never heard of your condition. But you mustn’t worry. We’ll do everything we can to help you.”

Even Miss Lavender’s smile could not lift my spirits when I considered my chances of recovery. She left me at the entrance to the office of Dr Lakeside, a small, bald, rotund man who listened to the whole of my story, from my travels through outer space aboard the *Tanjong Pagar*, or at least what I could remember of them, right up to the moment when Mr Orchard and his team of orientation officers had rescued me from an icy death on the mountain, a week ago. Dr Lakeside sat in silence as I talked. His office was not like that of any psychologist I had encountered before, and during my training at Space Flight Academy, I had seen my fair share of them. The room was shaped, I think deliberately, like the inside of an egg. There were no flat surfaces anywhere, and the continuously curving wall glowed with a gentle luminescence from some exterior source. The only items of furniture in the room were two asymmetrically shaped beanbags, fixed into the floor very close to each other. I had tangled with these eccentric armchairs before in my quarters, but still had not mastered their use, with the result that I fidgeted during the whole interview, no doubt convincing Dr Lakeside of my disturbed mental condition. Once I had finished speaking, he scratched his head for a few moments, poked inside his ear with the end of his stylus, then stood up and left the room

without a word. I do not think he had spoken more than two sentences in the entire session. After a short delay, during which I considered what Citi-hallian etiquette might demand of me in these circumstances, I followed him through the exit, a soft, undulating tube which had to be crawled through on one’s belly, until I emerged, sweating and irritable, at the reception desk. Dr Lakeside was nowhere to be seen, but his secretary informed me that he was already hard at work, analysing my statement, and that he would report back to me with his findings in a few days.

Disarmed, I left the offices, and decided to seek out Eunos to find out what he was up to. Since our arrival we had seen very little of one another, and I for one had been thankful for this period of respite. Just how the android had occupied himself in City Hall I had not bothered to enquire. I had vaguely assumed that he was engaged in some kind of research, perhaps seeking out botanical experts who might help us pinpoint the exact location of the Redhill Clementi. I had rarely seen Eunos idle, and it seemed natural that he should keep himself busy, and further the interests of his master.

The Citi-hallians were still under the illusion that Eunos was a man like any other, and with each passing day it grew more difficult to break the news to them. I could not explain to myself why I had not cleared up this matter straight away – perhaps some animal instinct had warned me to play my hands close to my chest, at least until I knew I could trust these strangers. But now that I had joined in the charade of treating Eunos like a normal human, to reveal his true nature would place me in an uncomfortable position, particularly in the eyes of Miss Lavender, with whom I had discussed Eunos on many occasions, but had found no opportunity to divulge his secret. This, I admit, was the largest obstacle to making a clean breast of it: Miss Lavender’s opinion of me had become paramount in my mind.

After a brief period of confusion amid the labyrinth of tunnels that riddled the mountain, I found my bearings, and made my way back to my

guest room, hoping to discover Eunos there, or at least some clue to his whereabouts. I turned a corner, and our familiar corridor came into view, but I could never have anticipated what I was to witness next.

I am sure that Miss Lavender did not notice me as she left Eunos’s room, rather stealthily it appeared to me, and hurried away down the corridor. Did I imagine her hair slightly dishevelled, and one of the buttons on her boiler suit fastened wrongly? There was only one way of discovering the truth, and as soon as Miss Lavender was out of sight, I rushed up to Eunos’s door, determined to find it out.

By the time I had reached it, second thoughts had already come along, and instead of bursting in unannounced, I knocked. An inexplicable delay followed, while I stood and fumed and tried to push away the horrible visions that were flashing through my mind. Eventually, Eunos’s habitually inscrutable face appeared in a crack in the door.

“What do you want?” he said, his synthetic features perfectly blank.

I vacillated. “Any progress?” I asked. “On locating the Redhill Clementi?”

Eunos shrugged. “Some,” he said. “But we still have a lot of work to do.”

“We?” I asked. “You mean Miss Lavender has been helping you with your research?”

“No.”

I pushed the door open, and Eunos stood back as I entered the room, not entirely in control of my own actions. What did I expect to find? Evidence of a wild debauch? Of course, there was nothing of the kind, but that in itself was no evidence that it had not taken place. Eunos’s room was almost identical to my own: a miscellany of irregular and strangely proportioned cushions were strewn across the richly coloured carpet. The only difference was that in Eunos’s case, such human luxuries were entirely redundant. The android had no need of sleep.

“So what was Miss Lavender’s business here?” I asked as my eyes scanned the room feverishly.

"It was a personal matter," was the robot's outrageous reply.

I snorted my indignation. "Personal? What personal business could you have, Eunos? Surely she did not come to discuss the progress of your therapy!"

Eunos continued to meet my eye calmly. "No," he said. "I refer to a personal matter of Miss Lavender's. A question of romance. She wished particularly to discuss it with me as an impartial advisor."

I mulled over his reply: it seemed plausible enough. I even entertained the notion that Miss Lavender had come to consult Eunos about me, as though he were a robotic matchmaker. But my jealousy was not to be quelled so easily. Surely, if Miss Lavender had mistaken Eunos for a real man – and I would have to admit my own culpability in any mistake of that kind – then she would have been quickly disillusioned.

Not necessarily so, my jealousy whispered to me. Although it had never before occurred to me, I wondered now whether Eunos was equipped to perform all the functions of a man. If so, he would no doubt exceed the capabilities of a normal man in this as he did in all other physical activities. These were sickening thoughts. Could Eunos have deceived us both, convincing Miss Lavender of his humanity, as he had convinced me of his honesty? I would have infinitely preferred this to the other possibility: that Miss Lavender had deviant inclinations, and had arranged this rendezvous in the full knowledge of Eunos's mechanical nature. The very idea induced a murderous anger in me. And she called herself sane! How could anyone in such a depraved society dare to judge the sanity of others! I had fallen amongst a race of wantons, but would not stay a moment longer than was necessary.

"Well, I hope you've been enjoying yourself," I remarked, as I swept out of the room, intending to quit City Hall that very day. As I slammed the door, I could still hear Eunos's voice behind me, patiently explaining how androids have no capacity for enjoyment.

Bombshells

It is a curious and hitherto unexplained fact that it always takes an excessively long time to pack one's bags when one is in a fit of pique. The vexation I now felt at Eunos's betrayal was second only to that I had experienced as an infant, when a favourite toy had been vomited upon by my younger sister. It seemed impossible that my belongings could have ever fitted inside the meagre backpack I had borrowed from Eunos without some artificial distortion of spacetime.

Perhaps my inability simultaneously to pack and remain enraged was a stroke of luck, for by the time Mr Orchard entered my private chambers, I was still trying to force one last shoe into the side pocket of the backpack, addressing it in such terms as though it were a surrogate for Eunos himself. Greeted with such a sight, my guide must have despaired of Citihallian therapies ever reaping positive results.

Orchard coughed politely. "I hope you are not considering leaving us, Captain Braddell," he said in a low, calming tone.

"And what are you going to do to stop me?" I demanded, dragging the contents of my bag out once more.

"Nothing at all, of course," he replied, with an embarrassed smile. "You are, of course, free to go at any time, although just at the moment I would not advise it."

I threw the bag onto the floor with exasperation, and turned to face him. "And why not?" I asked. "Because I have not yet reached the pinnacle of sanity enjoyed by the rest of your citizens? Well, I apologise, Mr Orchard, but I am afraid that circumstances have rendered that a remote possibility!"

"Well, your therapy has barely begun, that is true," he replied. "And it would be a shame to abandon your journey towards complete rationality so soon. But there is a more pressing reason why we would discourage you from quitting City Hall at this juncture: Punggol surveillance craft have been spotted in unprecedented num-

bers around this area since you arrived with your friend Eunos."

"My friend?" I hissed. "I believe you have made an error. I arrived here with no friend!"

There was a grain of truth in this last remark, however unkindly it was meant, since Eunos had always insisted on his status as a servant, and I considered it doubtful whether any mechanical device could be said to offer genuine friendship, any more than Raffles, my pet snake-mouse could. Certainly Raffles had shown me more affection, however selfishly motivated, than Eunos was capable of.

"Well, that is between the two of you," said Orchard. "I don't wish to interfere in your personal affairs. My original motive was to discuss your psychological assessment, but to put your life and the lives of all Citihallians in jeopardy for the sake of your private feud would be madness indeed."

I tossed the backpack to one side and considered his words. If the Punggol were circling the area, then Orchard was right: to leave now would be unforgivable. My prior dealings with that race of purple globes had hardly endeared them to me, nor made me anxious to renew the acquaintance, despite their professed love of humanity. Again I had to concur with my host: the Punggol might have forsworn armed conflict against us; they might now venerate humanity's wisdom as embodied in the actions of the saboteur Outram Park, but they could hardly be relied upon to restrain their trigger fingers when they were unable to distinguish between a man and a giant bird. What if they mistook City Hall for the lair of the hated "stick-faces", and rained down more of their missiles upon us? I had survived one such attack already, but did not fancy my chances against another.

I sighed. "Do you think the Punggol might have followed us here?"

"It's possible," conceded Orchard, twisting his moustaches anxiously. "We've never seen so many surveillance flights."

I sighed again, this time with more depth, and wondered whether my blundering had placed yet another

Kadaloorian community in peril. Orchard seemed to anticipate my concerns, for he said, "Don't blame yourself. We made the decision to reveal ourselves to you by opening the outside door, so we must take full responsibility for the consequences. There is nothing that can be done on that score now. We must be vigilant, that is all. In the meantime, there are some delicate matters to be discussed. Perhaps we should adjourn to my office? It is a little more comfortable..."

I surveyed the bare room, the asymmetrical beanbags kicked into a corner during my tantrum, my backpack spilling clothes across the floor, and had to agree.

Orchard worked out of an office on one of the lower tiers of the volcano, within earshot of the steam turbines. Sulphurous odours occasionally wafted down the corridors into his consulting room. His principal responsibility was as a guide to newcomers, but like many Citihallians, Orchard was also a practising psychotherapist with a small list of private clients. He explained all this to me as I sat on a reassuringly ordinary chair, glancing at the abstract sculptures which populated the room.

"I specialise in delusions of extraterrestriality," he said, tracing a nervous pattern on the top of his desk, a remarkable piece of furniture carved from what looked like a single slab of obsidian. The surface was like a black mirror.

The jargon was lost on me. "I understand," I lied breezily. "But how does that concern me?"

Orchard smiled a professional smile. "It means that I am trained to treat patients who wrongly believe that they have come here from another planet."

The penny dropped, resoundingly. "You mean to say that you don't believe me?" I cried, leaping from my chair. "Why, of all the impertinent..."

I did not finish my sentence. Orchard made a soothing gesture with his hand, and I felt oddly compelled to sit back down again.

"My spaceship, the *Tanjong Pagar*..." I began again.

"...is lost in the midst of the desert," said Orchard. "A common

theme with my patients. And of course, there is no way of retrieving it, as evidence of your extraterrestriality."

"But I had a uniform!" I objected. "And badges of rank. And here, look!" I reached behind me and produced the Dover and Somerset device. "A genuine Earth artifact! The maker's mark is written here, in English, an alien language! You cannot tell me that you have seen such an object before!"

Reluctantly, Orchard examined the box. "These markings might have been made by anyone," he said. "And it appears to me to be a fairly standard translation machine. This viewscreen here, and this microphone attachment do appear to be antiques, but they are obviously of Kadaloorian origin. This evidence does not prove your claims, Mister Braddell. You must accept that you are not well, and have probably been living under this delusion for some considerable time."

"Captain Braddell!" I reminded him. "My name is Captain Braddell! And these modifications to my Dover and Somerset were made by Eunos, my robot servant."

I had spoken in haste, but now Eunos's true identity was laid bare, and there was no going back. The truth would no doubt filter through to Miss Lavender, and my pointless deceit would be exposed. On the other hand, she might already be aware of Eunos's secret. Neither possibility brought me much comfort.

I could see that Mr Orchard was taken aback by my slip of the tongue. "So you know about Mr Eunos's condition?" he said.

"Condition?" I said. "He's incapable of having a condition! He's an android. I don't know why I didn't tell you about it before. Being ignorant of your culture, I was not sure whether his kind would be welcomed here."

Mr Orchard's professional smile slipped for an instant, and he tugged on one of his moustaches as though to yank the smile back into place. "So you have been taken in by the hoax," he said.

"What hoax?" I asked. "What nonsense has Eunos been telling you?"

Mr Orchard leaned forward across his desk and placed his fingers together to make a triangle, a gesture which seemed designed to focus my attention.

"I need you to listen carefully, Mr Braddell," said the psychologist. "The truth is that Eunos is a normal human being, at least physically. He's no more an android than you or I."

I laughed in his face. "Perhaps you are in more urgent need of psychiatric intervention than I am, Mr Orchard! Eunos is certainly a robot. He has superhuman strength, needs neither sleep nor food, and can see in the dark! Are those the attributes of a normal human being?"

Mr Orchard did not avert his gaze. "And have you seen proof of these amazing powers?"

"Of course I have!" I replied with easy confidence, but no suitable example came readily to mind. I thought hard, then it came to me. "Oh yes! He lifted colossal boulders from our path when we were stranded in the gorge outside, just minutes before you rescued us."

Mr Orchard shook his head gravely. "We observed you both on our hidden security cameras," he informed me. "Eunos moved not a single stone. Those rocks were deliberately placed there by the Founding Fathers of City Hall, to trap potential invaders. The theory was that the boulders could be dislodged and might cause an avalanche. The rocks themselves were transported by crane, but thankfully we have never had occasion to spring the trap, which would have required an explosive charge. Since we have renounced violence, the wall of boulders has been hollowed out, as you have seen, and transformed into one of the many hidden gates to the city, dotted around the mountain."

"It's impossible," I stammered. "I distinctly remember Eunos lifting the rocks aside..."

"You can view the security recordings if you wish," Orchard said. "But believe me – you will be disappointed."

I shook my head, unable to comprehend the man's folly. "Even if you are right about such footling details," I said, "what man could forgo sleep

and food entirely, and recharge himself via an electrical socket?"

"We have conducted a very thorough physical examination of your friend, and found no symptoms of either malnutrition or sleep deprivation. Neither did we discover any prosthetic parts, cybernetic technology or other foreign bodies. He is entirely composed of organic matter. Often in these cases, the subject will eat and sleep in small quantities, and in secret."

"In these cases?" I queried. "You mean there really are humans who believe themselves to be robots?"

Orchard shook his head. "No, you misunderstand," he said. "In all probability, Eunios is fully aware that he is merely a man of flesh and blood. But he has been masquerading as an android ever since you met him."

I shook my head, staggered by this new betrayal. The movement made me dizzy, and I tried to sit perfectly still.

"You're absolutely sure about this?" I gripped onto the edge of that black mirrored table as though it were an anchor in this storm of unhappy revelations that threatened to sweep me away into a maelstrom of chaos and misery.

"I'm afraid we are," said Mr Orchard, reaching over to put a consoling hand on top of mine. "I know this must come as a big shock to you."

"But why?" I cried. "Why? Why?"

Mr Orchard paused, as though searching for a diplomatic form of words, then apparently gave up. "Eunios is a sociopath," he said eventually. "But one with a very specific and rare form of psychosis. The defining symptom is that the patient tries to fool others into believing him to be a robot, or other form of simulacrum. We call it..."

A great crashing sound cut him off. I was destined never to learn the technical name for this psychotic condition, for sulphurous smoke began to drift under the office door. Another series of loud explosions set the hairs on my neck upright, and I leapt from the chair through instinct like a startled animal. My companion was startled too, and tried to contact his secretary through the water-based in-

tercom, but the process was slow and tedious.

"There's no time for that!" I cried, opening the office door and catching a glimpse of the confusion that reigned without. Flames were leaping up from the unseen turbine rooms below, and alarms were screaming from a dozen different locations. I watched a piece of rock the size of a small office block flake off from the wall of the volcano and disappear into the depths. A vast cloud of dust and smoke accompanied the noise of its impact.

"The Punggol must be bombing us," said Orchard, a look of sad reproach in his eyes. "Follow me! We must hasten to the emergency exits!"

The rest of the Citihallians had obviously come to the same conclusion: long queues of people clogged most of the passageways that led to the outside world. For now their panic was contained, and most were making a conscious effort to remain calm – after all, they had a reputation as exemplars of rational behaviour to uphold – but this orderly procession would not last long, particularly once the flames reached them.

"This is useless!" I shouted to Orchard. "Is there no other way out?"

Several people looked sharply at me – my animation was clearly considered inappropriate, even in these circumstances.

"Of course there are," replied Orchard in a controlled voice. "There are dozens of concealed exits, but they will all be equally congested. All we can do is remain calm, and join the queue. Why should we consider our own survival more important than that of these other citizens? That's the best way to look at it."

He might have been right, and in my heightened state of emotion, I could not find any arguments against him, but his serenity was beyond my reach. Adrenalin had taken over, and my own priorities were very different.

"Where's Miss Lavender?" I cried. "I must find her!"

Orchard frowned. "No doubt she's congregating at the emergency exits with her fellow Citihallians," he said, a little exasperated. "There's no reason to be excessively concerned

about her welfare. She suffers no impairment of mobility and is, in fact, highly agile."

Whether it was entirely due to my jealousy-inflamed imagination, I could not say, but Orchard's last comment struck me as offensive in the basest possible way. I held my tongue, and turning from him without so much as a fare thee well, bounded off in the direction of Miss Lavender's living quarters. They happened to be only a few steps from the guest rooms allocated to Eunios and myself, so I knew the route sufficiently. The difficulty I encountered was not with navigation, but the crowds of docile, unhurried Citihallians impeding my progress, and I was forced to treat them with less courtesy than I would have wished, elbowing the patiently queuing masses out of the way. Several well-meaning City Hall officials tried to hold me back, explaining in slow, clear language that I was heading in the wrong direction. I had neither the time nor the words to explain, and thrust them aside angrily, but ruefully, as a dozen alarms continued to wail in my ears.

No wisp of smoke had yet reached the upper tiers of the volcano city, but the corridors had already emptied, and I raced along, unhindered by well-meaning citizens. In my haste I took a wrong turn, doubled back, and skidded to a halt outside the door of Miss Lavender's apartment. There was no response from the intercom, but the door swung gently open to reveal an empty room. Mr Orchard was right: Miss Lavender must have already joined the evacuation. A sheaf of papers and an uncapped pen sat on her writing bureau, and I seized on them, madly hoping for some clue to her whereabouts. A letter, no doubt destined for the aquatic communication system that was plumbed into City Hall, lay uppermost. Only once I had begun to read the unfinished missive did I consider what an unforgivable breach it was to eavesdrop on another's private correspondence. But my misgivings arrived too late: the message had already burned itself indelibly into my memory.

"Dear Eunios,

I must beg your forgiveness"

That was all that my beloved

Lavender had managed to set down on paper before the alarms had roused her to action. Instantly, a buzzing cloud of questions and hypotheses began to plague me like stinging insects. What did Eunos have to forgive? Why would she seek such forgiveness? What was she doing writing letters to my android servant in any case? Was Eunos really, as Orchard had tried to convince me, no more than a deluded, or deceiving human in the guise of a robot? And if so, was Miss Lavender aware of these shocking revelations? And did Eunos himself know that she knew? And what if...

I put my hands to my forehead, trying through physical pressure to forestall the futile cycle of thoughts in my head. But there was only one effective way to rid myself of this endless questioning, and I bounded out of there, inadvertently clutching Miss Lavender's letter in my fist, and headed for Eunos's room.

Again, and to no great surprise, the place was empty. But there was a distinct difference between the two scenes. Miss Lavender had clearly been interrupted, and had fled the room without bothering to lock the door. I had discovered Eunos's apartment locked, but fortunately knew the door combination myself. There was no sign that Eunos had ever stayed here. The mass of maps and charts, books and camping equipment which formerly had been scattered across every flat surface, were gone. The place was spotless, like a freshly made-up hotel room. It was clear to me that Eunos had made the decision to quit City Hall long before the Punggol bombs had begun to fall. I recalled our earlier contretemps. Had my angry words triggered his departure? Whatever the reasons, it was a grave breach in our relationship. Eunos had declared his intention to serve and protect me for the rest of my life. Now, apparently, he had deserted me in the midst of a Punggol bombardment. It forced me to give serious consideration to Mr Orchard's assessment, even if he refused to believe that I was Captain Braddell of the HMSS *Tanjong Pagar*.

Another explosion shook the floor, and my survival instinct took charge.

My last thoughts before I ran headlong for the emergency exits were of the Redhill Clementi, that enigmatic flower in which I had placed all my hopes of recovery, and which without Eunos's guidance and research I had not the slightest chance of finding.

The Start of a Long Descent

My escape from the volcanic city can have little interest for the reader, save for one incident, the meaning of which I did not discover until later. I had joined the great bovine throng of Citihallians trudging with patient steps towards the concealed exits in the side of the mountain, to the tune of a dozen alarms. I confess that I found their *sang froid* impossible to emulate, particularly when clouds of sulphurous smoke began to billow out through the ventilation system, and explosions sounded worryingly near. As we shuffled across an exposed gantry high above the deserted plaza where Miss Lavender and I had breakfasted, I wondered again where she might be and whether she was safe, and above all about the meaning of the unfinished letter I had discovered in her empty rooms. What did she have to apologise to Eunos for?

An unpleasant noise of shattering ceramic tiles roused me from this brown study, and I followed the eyes of the crowd up to the ceiling of the chamber, where the elegant mosaics I had previously admired were crumbling away, bringing giant shards of rock down with them. Several of these narrowly missed the packed escape gantry, then one did not miss, and the suspended walkway swayed wildly under the impact. There were screams, but no casualties. It was no less than a miracle that nobody had been hurt, and I stood bewildered for a moment, unable to believe the evi-

dence of my own eyes. Judging by its trajectory, the rock should have landed squarely on the heads of the cowering Citihallians just a few yards ahead of me. Instead some unseen barrier deflected the boulder at the last moment. It bounced clear of the gantry and fell harmlessly into the deserted and shattered plaza below. I reached above my head, expecting to find a shield of some unbreakable and perfectly transparent glass, so high was my estimation of Citihallian technology, but my hand met only empty air. Those ahead of me, who had so narrowly escaped injury at the very least, appeared similarly impressed by this inexplicable near miss.

City Hall was crumbling around us, and the next time I looked up, the roof of the chamber had collapsed in on itself, revealing a jagged shard of blue sky. Even as I gazed up in horror at this wanton devastation of a noble civilisation, the perpetrators hovered silently into view. A swarm of black rectangles blighted the heavens, and confirmed Mr Orchard's suspicions. I immediately recognised the inelegant Punggol aircraft from my earlier dealings with that warlike tribe of undulating purple spheres. It seemed an age ago that I had been taken captive aboard one of those ships and accused of working as a spy for their sworn enemies, the gentle race of flightless avians I had come to know as the Bird-People of Kadaloor, but who were to the Punggol the despised "stick-faces", on account of their long beaks.

How had the Punggol discovered this centuries-old hideaway? Again Mr Orchard's explanation was the most likely: I had been followed, ever since my first miraculous escape from the Punggol war machine. Could they have tagged me with some form of electronic device? In the absence of concrete evidence, I began to form all kinds of wild surmises. Perhaps Eunos was a Punggol spy! Certainly his apparently premeditated departure from City Hall, well in advance of the bombs that rained down on my hosts, was questionable. Mr Orchard had already sown the seeds of distrust in my mind about

Eunos's credibility: even his identity as an android was now in doubt.

It was impossible not to be impressed by the Citihallians' forward planning. It seemed that the violent destruction of their citadel was an eventuality long anticipated. That in itself would be no great surprise – they had after all chosen to build their home on the inside of a dormant volcano. Yet I could not help comparing my hosts with those communities on Earth who, at different times in history, have settled in similarly precarious environments, whether below volcanoes or straddling active fault lines. While these Earth cities shrugged off the danger, or placed their faith in gods or fate, the men and women of City Hall aspired to live with their eyes fully open. They had neither angry deities to appease nor ancient prophecies to fulfil. When the worst happened, as it was undoubtedly happening now, they refused to wring their hands or bemoan their fates. Instead they began to distribute emergency rations, self-heating bivouac bags and pairs of intelligent hiking boots which moulded themselves to the contours of the terrain at each step, making it nearly impossible for the wearer to fall over. This and a dozen other innovations had been designed, developed and mass-produced with just such a contingency in mind.

By the time I emerged from the concealed emergency exit, blinking in the sunlight, evacuation officers had already begun marshalling the refugees into groups of a hundred. Each party was to take a separate and clearly marked route down the mountain. The theory was, so I learned from my fellow escapees, that no matter what direction the lava flowed (and this was a notoriously difficult matter to predict) at least one of our hiking parties stood a chance of survival. If the volcano was awakened by Punggol bombs, then the rivers of molten rock would overtake many of us, but in this way the community could spread its bet. My informant told me these grisly facts with every appearance of cheerful optimism, and I could not but admire a society that generated such equanimity in the face of mortal danger.

Almost before my eyes had adjusted to the light I found myself assigned to a group, and when I located my fellow hikers I discovered that not only Mr Orchard but also Miss Lavender would be accompanying me down the slope of the volcano. Miss Lavender greeted me with a magnanimous smile, and handed me a pair of intelligent hiking boots. Nothing was mentioned of our recent misunderstandings, and I hadn't the courage to confront her with my recent discoveries about Eunos or to demand the truth about her relationship with him. I considered it only polite to enquire whether Eunos's name had appeared on the list of survivors, but according to Orchard there had been no sign of him.

"In any case, everything is still at sixes and sevens," said Miss Lavender. "Don't lose hope yet – your friend may yet turn up in another group."

I saw the alarm on Orchard's face as his colleague talked blithely of my "friend", and a few minutes later I spotted the two Citihallians conferring in hushed voices. By their frequent surreptitious glances in my direction, the subject of their conversation was hardly a mystery.

My hundred fellow refugees and I had gathered around a designated muster point on the slope of the volcano, a few hundred yards from the emergency exit, from which a steady stream of evacuees was still pouring. Above us the Punggol airships were mere tiny black squares in the distance, ugly punctuation in the impossibly blue sky. The Punggol had massed on the opposite side of the volcano, and were still raining down munitions on the smoking ruins of City Hall. I was one of the lucky ones – thousands must have taken a different escape route, only to find themselves directly below the Punggol fleet. Luckier still, or so I thought, I had been assigned to a group that included two of my closest acquaintances from City Hall. Later I learned from Mr Orchard that this was no accident: according to a long-established law, Orchard bore a personal responsibility for my safety, and I became the hundred and first member of my group.

After a brief delay, our party set off down the volcano. Compared to my previous mountain expeditions on Kadaloor, it was a curiously monotonous descent. Our remaining daylight hours were spent trudging in single file along a straight and unvarying path that ran from near the crater's edge down the virtually flawless cone. We were one spoke of an expanding wheel, as each group followed their own allocated route, and strayed further and further away from its neighbours.

The Punggol bombardment lasted all day, but mercifully the dull thud of the explosions faded as we marched. Mostly we walked in silence. Mr Orchard went immediately ahead of me, and Miss Lavender followed behind. To strike up a conversation with either was inconvenient, and for the most part I was left with my own thoughts for company.

Not wishing to dwell on such imponderables as the whereabouts of Eunos, or my own chances of surviving the current calamity, I made a deliberate effort to turn my attention to the surrounding panorama. After even a short period of confinement in the labyrinth of City Hall, the grandeur of the landscape staggered me. No doubt the effect on my fellow evacuees, many of whom had never stepped outside the safety of their underground hideaway, must have been infinitely more profound. Some of the party developed symptoms of shock or agoraphobia, or suffered panic attacks, and oral sedatives, thoughtfully provided as part of our emergency ration packs, proved very helpful to the more nervous hikers.

We were travelling in a roughly north-easterly direction and our horizon was an unbroken line of ragged peaks, black and forbidding in the foreground fading to ghostly grey shapes, barely distinguishable from cloud banks in the hazy distance. I could not spot a single tree or patch of green anywhere in my field of vision, and it was easy to imagine that this unfriendly terrain covered the entire surface of Kadaloor. I who had explored some of the planet's more habitable regions could remind myself that this jumble of rocks must end somewhere, but to those who

were seeing their home world with their own eyes for the first time, it must have seemed an interminable desert.

After my exertions carrying poor Marsiling with Eunós setting the pace, our journey to the base of the volcano was not especially strenuous. Nevertheless several of the younger members of our group, unused to the exercise, could not maintain the pace, and quickly over-exerted themselves. We stopped every four hours to rest and eat, and the atmosphere during these breaks was tense and morose. The three group leaders, all experienced guides who had trod this path before as part of special emergency drills, stood apart from the rest of the group to consult, and argue over, their maps. I failed to see how any difference of opinion could have arisen. Our goal was very simple: we had to get as far away from the volcano as possible before it erupted, or we found ourselves targeted by the Punggol. We were equipped with grey camouflage outfits that we were told would shield us from the hostile eyes above, but while I admired the thoroughness of the Citihallian emergency planners, I doubted the effectiveness of such measures.

Every hour or so a rumble from deep beneath our feet made us freeze in horror, then renew our march with even greater haste. It was as if the mountain had suffered some intestinal discomfort. At other times rocks hurtled past us, some larger than a man, but there was no way to either avoid or predict them.

Twice the monotony of our journey was broken when we came across other exit doors, through which evacuees were still streaming in their hundreds. I understood how lucky we were to have got out so quickly. The newcomers from the lower levels were only just being sifted into units of a hundred and were struggling into their new-fangled hiking boots. I regret to say that I had already jettisoned my own pair. Having barely managed to avoid being pitched headlong down the slope more than once, I had decided that this was one innovation too far.

Apart from our chance encounters with those emerging from the lower

storeys, we had been starved of news – radio silence had been strictly observed to avoid the possibility that the Punggol might overhear our planned escape and try to thwart us. By the time the sun set, we were only an hour’s march from our destination: an extensive shelter with basic amenities, where we would meet up with some of the other groups, and find out how the rest of the city had fared. Would Eunós be among them? Something made me hope that he would not. A tender reunion between the android and Miss Lavender would have been more than my patience could bear.

Our campsite for the night lay just below the tree line, a huddle of cabins and hastily dug bomb shelters partly concealed by the copse of conifer-like trees that surrounded it. Few in our group had many miles left in their legs by the time they flopped down onto their roughly hewn plank bunks, too exhausted even to take off their hiking boots to be recharged. We had arrived last of the four parties allocated to this campsite and the shelter was undeniably overcrowded. I suspected the cabin builders had never really believed that the whole population of City Hall would emigrate *en masse* in a single day.

But that is exactly what had taken place, and now the grimy émigrés jostled each other in the cramped, makeshift kitchen and queued for a disappointingly small number of bathrooms. Most of the floor space was swallowed up by the dormitories – little more than a glorified bookcase, where each of four giant shelves was divided into a hundred narrow bunks. It was a far cry from the spacious, exquisitely appointed apartments of City Hall, and yet despite the ever-present danger of eruption, there was an infectious, childish excitement in the air at the prospect of camping out. The liberal use of chemical sedatives by many of the more nervous hikers had perhaps added to the general atmosphere of heady euphoria.

A headcount revealed no deaths, serious injuries or missing persons, at least in our four-hundred strong section. While this news was greeted with great relief, it did not bode so well for me, as I soon found myself

without a bed for the night, every single one of the bunks having already been claimed.

“You might have shared mine,” said Mr Orchard with a sheepish smile, “but I’m afraid my snoring would keep you awake.”

“Don’t give it a second thought,” I replied through gritted teeth. “I shall sleep perfectly well on the floor. Goodness knows I had to make do with less luxurious accommodation than this at Spaceflight Academy back on Earth. I remember one time when we were on a wilderness survival course in the Himalayas. This was before they had to flatten them out of course...”

Orchard smiled wearily. “I suppose it was too much to expect you to give up your delusory world so quickly,” he said. “We really must continue your sessions as soon as possible. Punggol or no Punggol, the work of City Hall cannot be neglected.”

In all the hurly burly of the evacuation I had almost forgotten the principal area of contention between Orchard and myself. He simply refused to believe that I had arrived on Kadaloor from another planet (in actual fact from a whole other galaxy, but I refrained from mentioning that).

“Tell me,” I asked him as we sat side by side contemplating our meagre evening meal with unspoken disappointment. “Is it really so wild a stretch of the imagination to suppose that I might be telling the truth?”

It was clear that my remarks amused Orchard, but he quickly suppressed his smile. “It is not a question of you lying. I have absolutely no doubt that you believe what you have told me, unlike your friend Eunós, whose claims are, I am sure, designed to deceive,” said the psychologist.

I said, “But imagine for a moment that everything I have told you took place, in reality, not simply in the confines of a diseased mind...”

“Which episode of your life history am I being asked to reconsider?” asked Orchard. “That you arrived here from some other world which you call Earth, having travelled through the endless depths of space in some sort of ship?”

“The *Tanjong Pagar* is more than

some sort of ship!" I cut in sourly. "It is precisely a spaceship, and one of the finest in its class, or at least it was until the Bird-People decided to transform it into a giant drill..."

"But my dear friend!" exclaimed Orchard, placing a hand on my shoulder in a manner calculated to reassure me, but which I found both off-putting and intrusive. "Nobody in the history of Kadaloor has ever managed such a feat of engineering, or of daring! Not even in the Golden Age, when peace reigned between Humanity and the Nation of Pung! To punch a hole in the sky and sail amongst the stars! That is the stuff of fantasy, of poetry! Now that I think on it, I believe that the illustrious Teck Whye once composed a verse on that very theme. *'To point a rudder skyward that we might, drift out into that larger night.'*"

I could see that my guide was in a loquacious mood, and I did not interrupt him lest I miss some vital goblet of information.

Perhaps it was the informality of our surroundings that helped to loosen his tongue. We were crowded elbow to elbow alongside our fellow refugees at uneven trestle tables. Animated conversations rose from each knot of diners and mingled with the smoke from the kitchen and the night insects which had snuck their way in through the wire mesh screens to buzz around the electric lights.

At the other end of our row I spotted Miss Lavender, listening intently to a dark-haired woman of her own age. A plastic bottle stood on the table between them, and by the size of their glasses I guessed it to be pretty potent stuff. Miss Lavender felt the invisible pressure of my stare, turned and smiled once without embarrassment, before turning back to give her full attention to her friend. I wondered whether I had misjudged her. Perhaps all my suspicions were simply the product of a mind warped by jealousy. I had no proof, after all, of any indecency taking place between her and Eunos. And my mind had certainly been warped, one way or another.

When I turned my gaze back to Orchard, I found that he was studying me with a curious intensity, and for a moment I feared that he had guessed

my secret passion. To cover my embarrassment I quickly said, "I have heard of this poet, this Teck Whye you mention..."

"As well you might," replied Orchard, "for he happens to be the most celebrated and notorious poet in the world. Maybe I would be more inclined to believe that you were an alien from another world if you had not heard of him!"

I told Orchard of my friendship with the dear departed Marsiling, omitting the unpleasant details of his demise. Had Orchard known I had murdered the deaf-mute poet while under the mistaken impression that I was being set upon by a mob of wolves in human clothing, I would have stood no chance of persuading him that I was of sound mind.

Instead I narrated our enslavement to Thanggam, and my discovery of Marsiling in the bat-infested cave.

"So the mind-bending mushrooms still plague the outside?" said Orchard. "We shall have to take great care when we reach lower ground. I thought we had seen the last of those fearsome fungi when I first entered City Hall... but there is one thing I do not understand – what were you doing travelling in those badlands in the first place?"

I put down my wheel with a sigh and allowed Raffles to clear up what food remained, a task to which he applied himself with great vigour. I had never quite got the hang of Citihallian table manners and always found mealtimes in company something of a chore. In private I dispensed with the official cutlery and ate with my fingers, but privacy was suddenly in rather short supply. I took a drink of water and began to furnish Mr Orchard with an account of my mishaps in the abandoned novena mines, and those few meagre mouthfuls of beetle-larvae infected water that had doomed me to a parasitic brain disease and an uncertain future punctuated by regular episodes of madness and horror.

When I had finished telling my tale, again missing out the terrible consequences of my infection for Marsiling, I turned to Mr Orchard for advice. "Do you think there is any hope?" I asked. "Can the Redhill

Clementi really cure me, or has Eunos been stringing me along on that score too?"

Orchard hummed and hawed and rubbed his bristly chin, then straightened his moustaches before answering. "I'm no expert on brain infections," he began ruefully, "nor have I ever heard of this flower you mention, but don't let that discourage you – shut up inside that mountain all these years, we have all grown shockingly ignorant about the outside world, particularly about flora and fauna. Of course we have tried to keep our appreciation of the natural world alive, through our names. I was not originally called Orchard, you know..."

I got the impression that Mr Orchard was trying to change the subject, and I tried to steer the conversation back to the matter in hand.

"But you've read Eunos's psychological evaluation!" I interrupted him. "Do you consider him capable of practising such a deception, over such a long period, and with such inconvenience to himself?"

Orchard admitted that this was a possibility.

"I knew it!" I exclaimed, impatiently grabbing hold of Raffles, who was on the point of snatching food from my neighbour's plate on the other side, a stocky, chubby faced chap who had earlier introduced himself to me as Mr Yewtree, a doctor, and the Citihallian equivalent of a General Practitioner. As with all Citihallian names, this was an approximate translation on the part of my Dover and Somerset – it was not possible that either yew or lavender existed on Kadaloor, but no doubt rough analogues to these two Earth species did, and my translation machine had gone with its best guess.

But at that precise moment I was more interested in the existence or otherwise of the Redhill Clementi, that elusive bloom found only in the island of Romundli, within whose chemical composition lay the key to my sanity, or so Eunos had suggested. But now all of that so-called android's pronouncements were thrown into doubt.

"He must have made the whole thing up!" I cried, inadvertently

squeezing Raffles' serpentine body with such force that my pet snake-mouse squealed in alarm and wriggled desperately to get free. "The Redhill Clementi is no more real than the giant Rumbia beetles, mere phantoms of a diseased imagination! I'll wager there's no such place as the island of Romundli either!"

"Oh, Romundli really does exist," said Mr Yewtree, leaning over to join our conversation. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't help overhearing you. You see, my own ancestors hailed from Romundli. I suppose you might say that I am Romundlian myself."

"Oh? Can you prove it?" I demanded, unable for the moment to quell my irritation.

Mild surprise registered on Yewtree's phlegmatic, jowly face, and he shook his head. "No, of course not," he replied calmly. "But what possible reason could I have for making it up?"

I could think of none, and apologised. In my defence I told of how Eunos's betrayal had led me into unhealthy habits of paranoia and mistrust.

"I quite understand," smiled Mr Yewtree. "Don't give it another thought, please. Forgive my forwardness, but has it occurred to you that your companion may have invented this parasitic brain disease he claims to be able to cure you of? It's the oldest trick in the quack's book: invent the malady, then promise the cure."

Indeed this possibility had not occurred to me, but a moment's reflection was sufficient for me to dismiss the idea. "If only it were thus," I said ruefully, "but my hallucinations are very real, if you understand me.

There is no doubt but that I am suffering from some acute disorder of the mind. My imaginings are by no means imaginary."

That Mr Yewtree did not proceed to question me directly about the content of my hallucinations was a great relief. Instead, he asked, "And when was the last time you suffered an attack of this kind?"

I thought back. "It must have been before we entered City Hall... yes, I cannot recall any episodes since then... of course there are still the nightmares, but always while I am asleep..."

As far as I could recall, my last psychotic episode was the night of Marsiling's death, but I was still averse to confessing my crime. I mumbled something about needing to help with the washing up, and stuffing Raffles into my jacket pocket I made my excuses and ambled outside with my thoughts. Miss Lavender, I noticed on my way out, had taken the opportunity to join Orchard and Yewtree at their table. Was she avoiding me? It was useless to think about it, and I tried to stop.

Outside the stars had come out in their thousands, and a handful of Citi-hallians were admiring the view. Mount City Hall was still just visible as a starless black cone against the night sky. There was no visible evidence that the Punggol barrage had woken the sleeping monster, but that was no guarantee of our safety. The volcano might erupt at any moment, or else the Punggol warships discover our sanctuary amongst the trees. But a sense of reprieve, of peace, however precarious, had descended over the camp among the pines.

Snow fell silently in fat, soft

flakes, but this time at least I had nothing to fear from the cold. My bed for the night may well have been a mattress on the floor, but that was a luxury compared with the wind-blasted caves that Eunos and I had shared before the people of City Hall rescued us. And where was Eunos now? Shivering again in such a cave? Or ensconced on a Punggol craft, watching the devastation being wreaked below?

I watched as a small party of men and women emerged from the cabin and began to make their way north across the frozen ground without a word. They were soon lost among the shadows of trees. I found out from one of my fellow star-gazers that these intrepid night walkers were charged with making contact with the next camp around the base of the mountain. We were only one of dozens of groups encircling Mount City Hall. Another band had set out south to find our other neighbours. Of course radio silence was still enforced, but by the morning we should have news of how the rest of the city had fared in their escape.

Once I had picked out a cosy corner on the floor of the dormitory, I set out my bedding in the darkness, to the sound of a hundred snores. But this chorus did not keep me awake for more than a few seconds. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell for once into a dreamless sleep.

The next thing I heard was a voice, shouting out. I sat up blearily, my limbs aching. It was morning, and the night walkers had returned.

"It's a miracle!" cried the voice. "We all survived! Not a single casualty! A miracle!"



The Quarterly Review

BOOKS

All Known Metal Bands

Dan Nelson
McSweeney's, hb, 300pp

All Known Metal Bands, compiled and edited by Dan Nelson, prints in silver upon black pages the names of every metal band the author could discover, all 51,000 of them. Any writer of supernatural fiction looking for a new occult tome with which to tempt their protagonists might well find this suitable – reading any section of it aloud feels uncannily like participating in a ritual likely to end in one's own sacrifice, right up until you reach a name that makes you laugh out loud (e.g. Dogs With Jobs or The Animatronic, to pick two at random).

It contains no less than three Necronomicons, a Necronomicon Beast, and a Necronomicon, which sounds very groovy. There are five Azathoths, six Yog-Sothoths (spelt variously), five Nyarlathoteps, five Dagon, two Cthulhus and one Cthulhu Biomechanical.

There are also three bands by the name of Minas Morgul, two Minas Tiriths, one Fellowship of the Ring, three Aragorns, seven Saurons, seven Mordors, and one Saruman. Legolas gets no love, though.

I won't pretend I've read every name in the book, but I think I got the gist. – *S.W. Theaker*

Anno Dracula

Kim Newman
Avon Books, pb, 416pp

I hadn't read any fiction by Kim Newman before, though I've always enjoyed his film reviews for *Empire*. I'm pretty sure that I haven't read *Dracula* either, though I've seen plenty of film versions of it, so I came to this novel in a state of literary ignorance. Luckily, Newman held my head and told me that everything was going to be... absolutely horrible!

The twin premise here is that Dracula was not defeated at the end of Bram Stoker's novel, and that he existed in the same world as many other fictional characters.

It's hard to mention that second bit without thinking of Alan Moore's later *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. There are other similarities, too, in that both authors have penned sequels taking their stories into the twentieth century. Earlier books in a similar vein include Philip Jose Farmer's Wold-Newton books (credited here by Kim Newman), and of course just about every comic published since the 1940s.

Part of me wishes that Newman had limited himself to the characters from *Dracula* – occasionally the book drives you off to Wikipedia to look characters up, rather than drawing you in to its plot – but you can't begrudge an author his enthusiasms, and in general he carries it off very well. Indeed, one of the book's most interesting ideas is that each family of vampires has its own abilities, mentalities and power relationships, as

seen in all the different vampire novels that preceded this one. Because he died before turning, Dracula's line is said to be tainted by the rot of the grave: damaged, and more demented than most.

For most of the novel Dracula himself is an offstage, pernicious presence. When he does take centre stage, the wait was worthwhile – Newman's *Dracula* is utterly terrifying, and utterly malevolent.

Overall, this is a much more plot-driven book than you might expect, and, though the mood of fear, oppression and decay is kept at a high pitch, every word compels the reader to keep turning the pages. The literary games are always subservient to the storytelling. Similarly, Dracula's far-from-bloodless coup has serious consequences for Britain's society, from its class system to its political organisations and its foreign policy, but we only learn about those things as they become relevant to the story.

A brilliant book. – *SWT*

Fear of Music: The Greatest 261 Albums Since Punk and Disco

Garry Mulholland
Orion, hb, 384pp

It's easy to love a single without loving the artist, but harder to do the same with an album. That really

comes through in this book, where it seems hardly an album escapes adverse comment for one aspect or another of the lyrics or the artist's politics. The writer's a music critic, so it makes sense that he might have fallen in love with lots of different albums by lots of different artists over the years, and after all he gets to listen to an awful lot of what's released, but it doesn't quite convince me – it makes him seem like a gadfly, always moving on to something new, dropping bands like a shot when they've worn out their fashionability. I like to listen to new artists, but at the same time I buy pretty much every album by Nick Cave, Stereolab, Sonic Youth, The Wedding Present, the Aphex Twin, etc. The number of grudging reviews of albums in here just makes me wonder if his actual 261 favourite albums would be quite a different, less varied list. My version of this book would be much duller – ten or twenty albums by each of the above, plus a couple of dozen one-offs – whereas my version of *This Is Uncool* would have been pretty similar to his.

In my copy there are quite a few unfinished cross-references (maybe that's why it was going cheap in HMV), and there's also a bit of libel on p. 323, where Mulholland writes about "Woody Allen marrying his own adopted stepdaughter" (he didn't: he married the adopted daughter of Andre Previn and Mia Farrow).

Still, this is a perfect bathroom book, and it'll encourage you to give a lot of artists a second or third try. Plenty of the albums have some kind of fantasy, horror or science fiction element to them, so that's my excuse for reviewing the book here... – SWT

Ghosts in Baker Street Greenberg, Lellenberg & Stashower (eds) Carroll & Graf, pb, 320pp

The theme chosen for this anthology is that the cases presented should in-

volve Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creations and offer both a rational and supernatural explanation. It works rather well. Unfortunately, it includes three Sherlockian essays – on psychology and its relation to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, the psychic detective in literature, and a personal reflection by Loren D. Estleman on the success of his particular brand of pastiche – in addition to the ten short stories. I suspect the essays will have a very limited interest, where a competent introduction would have served much better.

There are only two tales that don't really fit in with the rest. "Selden's Tale" by Daniel Stashower (one of the editors) is an autobiographical account by Selden, the Notting-Hill murderer in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It paints a rather pathetic picture of a wounded war hero turned drug addict, features a cameo from Sir Arthur, and has no supernatural elements whatsoever. "The Coole Park Problem" by Michéal and Clare Breathnach removes Holmes and Watson to Galway, and introduces them to Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and George Bernard Shaw. It appears to be a romantic fantasy, or perhaps a Celtic Revival faery tale, but there is no possible rational explanation for the events depicted.

The other eight adventures are all true to the theme, and of a high standard. As a general criticism, too many authors portray Watson as either credulous or only too eager to accept explanations that rely on the supernatural. This is in complete contrast to the man of whom, in "The Adventure of the Creeping Man", Holmes says, "You always keep us flat-footed on the ground". Watson was an intensely practical man, frequently praised for his commonsense, and as unlikely as Holmes to have reached for a supernatural explanation – even if he had greater difficulty grasping the rational one.

"The Adventure of the Late Orang Outang" by Gillian Linscott has already received much praise, and deservedly so. Equally entertaining is Jon L. Breen's "The Adventure of the Librarian's Ghost", but the two most intriguing are "Death in the East End" by Colin Bruce, and "The Dev-

il and Sherlock Holmes" by Loren D. Estleman. They are both atmospheric, eerie, and original ghost stories, perhaps closer to M.R. James than Sir Arthur. While the introduction of Holmes and Watson into the ghost stories facilitates their rational solutions, that is their only function, and both adventures are ghost stories disclosed by the use of supernatural sleuths, rather than Sherlockian pastiche. Perhaps that is why I can honestly say that the majority of readers are likely to enjoy the majority of the stories, be they mystery or horror fans.

Many, of course, are both, and they will appreciate the anthology even more. – Rafe McGregor

The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster

Bobby Henderson
Villard, hb, 192pp

I'm tempted to give this book a very approving review, just because the idea is so good (and so useful) and because the book makes such a wonderful prop when chatting to doorstep evangelists. I work at home in an area that has lots of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, so I encounter Christian evangelists of various stripes all too frequently, as they come to save my brown-skinned neighbours from their heathenish ways.

But to unreservedly recommend the book for those reasons would be a disservice to readers who might be wondering whether to buy it. It's not all that brilliant a book, or perhaps it's better to say that what is brilliant about it you'll probably have already seen on the author's website. – SWT

The Man in the Picture: a Ghost Story

Susan Hill

Profile Books Ltd, hb, 145pp

I bought this novella in response to – or perhaps in spite of – a review in *Prism*, one of the British Fantasy Society's publications. The reviewer, David Allkins, wrote that the ghost story has moved on from M.R. James and that there is no longer any point in attempting to recapture a style long gone. I don't believe this is the case at all, and acquired a copy to decide for myself. Unfortunately, I have to agree with Mr Allkins' overall assessment: *The Man in the Picture* doesn't quite work. But that isn't because it is an M.R. James pastiche, or because James's work is no longer relevant or entertaining.

First, it isn't so much a pastiche as a tribute or homage, a contemporary ghost story in which Ms Hill attempts to recreate the atmosphere, crescendo, and restraint which served James so well. The mistake can be forgiven, as the beginning – wherein a scholar hears a disturbing tale from his old and ailing tutor at Cambridge – is reminiscent of James at his best. The professor narrates a tale of intrigue and suspense concerning a painting of a Venetian carnival, and then – just as the story is becoming a literal page-turner – *he* nods off. Where does this leave the reader? The break in the tension is disappointing anticlimax.

The interruption is compounded by the novella being narrated by four different characters – far too many – causing regular disruptions to the build-up to the finale. As an aside, I'd be interested to discover the word count, given the small format and numerous blank pages – I suspect it is close to the borderline of the short story-novella divide. My last criticism is that while the concept of Ms Hill's ghost is a clever one, no real rationale is given for why it should continue to wreak its historical havoc into the present day. It seems almost as

if the book was rushed by both writer and editor, and put into print without careful consideration. The failure of *The Man in the Picture* is thus less to do with James than Ms Hill and Profile Books.

James's stories continue to entertain as much as ever, and he has set a standard for the ghost story which few have reached, before or since. Making a ghost – something insubstantial by definition – scary, is a difficult task for a writer and only a handful can do it well. I suspect that Mr Allkins hasn't read many of James's stories – or perhaps not recently, anyway – and probably has an image of doddering old men bumbling about the countryside taking fright at noises and shadows. James's ghosts *are* frightening, and their antiquarian and ecclesiastical settings make them more rather than less so. I'd be surprised if there are many contemporary readers who won't feel a chill run down their spine when they read "Casting the Runes", or a thrill at the originality of "The Diary of Mr Poynter".

The Man in the Picture is a disappointing read – made more so by the promising beginning – but nonetheless entertaining on several levels. Perhaps it isn't worth buying new, but I'd still recommend it as a loan from the library, or a used book. The novella is a brave attempt to follow in James's footsteps and the ghost story enthusiast will find its faults are as interesting as its strengths. – *RM*

Seagalogy: a Study of the Ass-Kicking Films of Steven Seagal

Vern

Titan Books, pb, 396pp

What Vern does so well is get at why people enjoy these films. He's superb at pulling out what's good about a film, regardless of the dross it's buried under. He's also relentlessly

hilarious, and has a tremendous eye for detail.

It's a bit weird to read his writing without any of the usual deliberate misspellings – it doesn't feel quite right – but I can understand why he's cleaned it up. It would have put off readers unfamiliar with his work.

The only question mark over the book is that it doesn't seem to address Seagal's reputation for sexual harassment, though I've hopped about a bit and might have missed it. Granted, it's not a biography, but nevertheless...

Overall, though, this is a fine and original piece of writing. I'm looking forward to whatever Vern turns to next – Wesley Snipes, maybe, or Van Damme? Of Seagal's oeuvre, I've only ever seen *Exit Wounds*, so I'm also looking forward to watching a few Seagal movies. This book's played havoc with my Lovefilm list... – *SWT*

Sherlock Holmes and the Hentzau Affair

David Stuart Davies

Wordsworth, pb, 128pp

Seventy-seven years after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's death, interest in Holmes is finally waning. Mainstream publishers have all but abandoned him and there are less than a handful of specialist presses still in business. *The Hentzau Affair* was first published by one of the latter in 1991, and was reprinted by Wordsworth as part of their *Tales of Mystery & The Supernatural* sixteen years later. It is not only a Sherlockian pastiche, but one which takes Holmes and Watson to Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins' fictional Ruritania. Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* was an instant success in 1894; but despite inspiring a host of imitations, and even creating a literary subgenre (the Ruritanian Romance), his novels lost their appeal in the second half of the twentieth century. While swashbuckling heroes

have recently become fashionable again, they are more likely to be pirates with hearts of gold than aristocrats with stiff upper lips.

There is nothing stiff or dull about *The Hentzau Affair*: it's a rip-roaring, action-packed, rollercoaster ride from London to Strelsau, with scarce time to draw breath in between. Mr Davies warms up with Colonel Sapt's arrival at Baker Street in search of Rudolf Rassendyll, pauses for a neat summary of *Zenda*, and then plunges headlong into a murder at the Charing Cross Hotel, a police raid in the East End, an appointment at the Diogenes Club, and passage to Ruritania. No sooner have Holmes and Watson crossed the border, than the real excitement begins: they are robbed, attacked, drugged... and find themselves on one of their most dangerous cases.

Mr Davies has wisely retained the novel format that worked so well for both Hope and Doyle, and the adventure embraces all the strengths of the form while avoiding the pitfalls. *The Hentzau Affair* is in effect an alternative to *Rupert of Hentzau*, the sequel to *Zenda*, and – although a Sherlock Holmes story – stands as a thriller in the finest Ruritanian tradition. The presentation of a succinct précis of *Zenda* is particularly resourceful: not only does it place *The Hentzau Affair* chronologically for enthusiasts of Hope's series, it also allows those who haven't read the originals to enjoy the novel on its own. In fact, no previous knowledge of either Ruritania or Sherlock Holmes is required; the characters, setting, and plot speak for themselves.

The narrative culminates in a crescendo bursting with swank and aplomb, and there is a clever crossover between the signature Ruritanian theme and one of Holmes' best known skills. Wisely, Mr Davies avoids an unhappy conclusion. It was the tragic end of *Rupert* that dissuaded David O. Selznick from making a sequel to his 1937 blockbuster of *Zenda*. Instead, he started work on a film called *Gone with the Wind*. Had there been two Ruritanian blockbusters... the possibilities are limitless. In general, *The Hentzau Affair* serves as a reminder that many of the successful

novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are just as gripping as last week's releases. Specifically, this resurrection of Ruritania has all the style and élan of the original, and is a delightful entertainment.
– RM

The Yiddish Policemen's Union

Michael Chabon
Fourth Estate, hb, 432pp

I began reading this edition a while ago, then half-way through got entranced by the bulging biceps and voluptuous maidens of *Savage Sword of Conan, Volume 1*. Soon my time with the book was up, and another had already placed a reservation, so I had to return it unfinished – always heartbreaking. Second time around, I had to settle for a large print edition from W.F. Howes Ltd, which rather embarrassingly for that company announces itself as *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* on the cover. It's an easy mistake to make, but I'm glad I didn't make it.

So, yesterday I was done with Conan and his savage sword, and, resisting the temptation to move onto volume two, I returned with excitement to Jewish Alaska. Large print turned out to be a boon – I felt like a reading wunderkind as I flashed through the pages, and it was ideal for reading late at night by lamplight. Having taken a month to read the first twenty-four chapters (more or less one each night), it took me an evening and a morning to read the rest.

So that's how I got to the end. Briefly, to remind myself in future years of the plot, this is where it begins: a rumpiled policeman gets beaten up a lot (often by inanimate objects) as he investigates a murder in the weeks leading up to the abolition of a Jewish settlement in Alaska.

This is an alternative history novel in the tradition of Kingley Amis's *The Alteration*, Keith Roberts' *Pavane*

and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. I won't go into the details of the differences from our world, because they are seeded through the book like little alarm clocks, but they don't seem to stem from one single change. The main difference is that the nation of Israel did not survive, and a temporary settlement in Alaska was established instead.

The story works well as a detective story. There's a lot going on, but Chabon has a knack of having his characters gather their thoughts just as you think you're about to lose the thread. It also works well as alternative history – everything is plausible, but more to the point it shows how even in a world quite different to our own similar pressures would still exist. They would just be applied in different locations.

It was very reminiscent of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, another fine literary detective novel, what with the snow, and the crimes, and the slight fantastical twist. It added to those things a narration in the present tense, which made me groan as I read the first page, but won me over pretty quickly. It served a purpose – throwing you into the events and feeling them in the here and now, rather than relegating them to a distant irrelevant past.

Having finally finished it, I'm in a rather giddy mood today, so here's the movie tagline I came up with last night: *Even when everything's different, some things stay the same*. The Coen Brothers can have that for free... – SWT

COMICS

Aliens vs. Predator Omnibus Vol. 2

Various
Dark Horse, pb, 448pp

I started reading this when it arrived,

forgetting that I'm still in the middle of the first omnibus. Never mind.

Most of this is one huge (three hundred page) story, "Deadliest of the Species", written by Chris Claremont with art by Jackson Guice and Eduardo Barreto. It's very ambitious, and Claremont makes a real effort to tell a science fiction story that's new to this universe, rather than rehashing the greatest hits. But while it's enjoyable, with a lot of exciting stuff going on, I have to admit that I found much of it baffling, including the conclusion. That may be the effect of having read it late at night, though, so don't take my word for it.

That's followed by five short stories, mostly taken from the Alien vs Predator annual, which are all pretty entertaining.

The book concludes with "Xenogenesis", a ninety-page story collected from the mini-series of the same name. It's good fun, but doesn't really surprise. I spent most of the story wondering where the big guy with short blonde hair had got to: make sure you pay close attention to the bottom panel on page 393. – *SWT*

The Authority: The Magnificent Kevin

Garth Ennis
Wildstorm, tpb, 112pp

A former SAS soldier is called into action to help the stricken members of The Authority, and along the way we see into his past. The tone is very similar to Hitman, a previous comic by Garth Ennis, in that it mixes very broad comedy with fairly serious stuff, in this case what it means to be a soldier, to take orders, in particular ones that you know are wrong.

This isn't the kind of thing that is really going to stretch Garth Ennis, but it's very entertaining, and he comes up with some very funny dialogue, especially between Kevin and the Midnighter.

As for the artwork, this is some of

the best work I've seen by Carlos Ezquerro for American comics. In previous stuff I've felt his artwork would have looked better in black and white (I'm thinking of the Preacher specials and the later 2000AD work) – it seemed very flat, with a glaze of colour over the top, whereas here there seems to be more detail and depth. Maybe it's just that he has a more compatible colourist for this one.

Overall, not quite magificent, but well worth an hour of your time. – *SWT*

Conan: The Tower of the Elephant and Other Stories (Vol. 3)

Kurt Busiek,
Michael Wm. Kaluta
Dark Horse, tpb, 168pp

A nice substantial collection. It's going over ground already covered, usually at more pace, by the Marvel comics, but the difference in approach makes it still worth reading. There seems to be more of an effort to build an ongoing narrative, which is appealing, and less verbosity in the captions, which I was ambivalent about. There was something interesting in the way Roy Thomas wrote with such elegant effusion about the adventures of a murderer and thief, but it could be an acquired taste – and reading issues in bulk you do sometimes think, as each issue launches with a flowery essay, Here we go again! On the other hand, the approach here – all the captions are extracts from a history of Conan being read as an education to a Prince – can be a bit distancing and, in comparison to Roy Thomas, a bit bland.

The artwork, mainly by Cary Nord, is of a very high quality, but the main thing I came away thinking was, What's the point of drawing nipples if

you aren't going to colour the areola? The effect is that the women look like Barbie dolls. In my opinion, John Buscema's artful arrangement of long hair and jewellery was much sexier. – *SWT*

Doctor Who: The World Shapers

Grant Morrison,
John Ridgway
Panini, tpb, 288pp

Another fantastic book of John Ridgway's Doctor Who comics, this time complemented by the writing of Jamie Delano and Grant Morrison, among others. I wish Delano, in particular, had spent a bit longer on the strip – his work here is excellent. – *SWT*

Fruits Basket (Volume 3)

Natsuki Takaya
TokyoPop, pb, 191pp

With an average rating of 4.46/5 from 600 ratings on Goodreads at the moment, this book obviously has something going for it – but whatever it was I didn't like it. I found it confusing and dull. Many key characters were virtually indistinguishable, the artwork bland, production-line stuff, the stories frivolous and weak. It reminded me of nothing so much as an Indian soap opera, with endless images of reactions and over-reactions to lame dialogue.

Reading everything backwards was a chore, though I guess complaining about that puts me in the same category as people who complain about watching subtitled films.

I just picked up the wrong book from the library that week. – *SWT*

Hellblazer: Papa Midnite

Mat Johnson
Vertigo, tpb, 128pp

Interesting miniseries prompted by the character's appearance in the Constantine movie (like many characters before him, he's given a makeover to better match the movie version), telling of his involvement with a black Manhattan Spartacus. The story is decent, and the history of it was new to me, but I was left rather wishing I'd read the source material instead. I don't want to give away any spoilers, but, given the nature of his curse, if Barack Obama wins the presidential election will we see a sequel showing the effect his victory has on Papa Midnite? – SWT

Hellboy: The Troll Witch and Other Stories (Vol. 7)

Mike Mignola, P. Craig
Russell, Richard Corben
Dark Horse, tpb, 144pp

A collection of short stories from various sources, such as the *Dark Horse Book of Hauntings* and its siblings. All the stories are written by Mike Mignola, and he draws most of them too, but P. Craig Russell and Richard Corben provide the artwork for "The Vampire of Prague" and "Makoma" respectively.

The storytelling is more minimal than in the first Hellboy collection, *Seed of Destruction* (which I started reading a day or two before writing this review), which makes it all the more evocative, and makes Hellboy's mood-puncturing dialogue all the funnier. However, I did have to be careful not to flip through the book without paying attention to the details of the art. A lot of people say they

read comics twice – once to find out what happens and a second time to enjoy how it's told – but when reading a library book you have to make the effort to do both things first time around.

All the stories are worth reading, but "Makoma", in which Hellboy finds himself living through an African legend, was superb. – SWT

Hellboy Junior

Mike Mignola, Bill
Wray, Dave Cooper
Dark Horse, tpb, 120pp

Lots of odd little stories about Hellboy from the days before he found his way into our world, mainly written by Bill Wray, of Ren and Stimpy fame. Maybe it's the geek in me, but I couldn't help wondering whether these were supposed to be in continuity or not: the hell in these stories is awfully prosaic compared to the place I imagined Hellboy coming from – basically it's a Christian hell rather than a Lovecraftian one. (Though I haven't read much Hellboy, so maybe that's the Hell you see in the other books too.)

None of this made me laugh out loud, and parts made me feel positively queasy, but it was an amusing read. Kind of like how the Beano and Dandy would never make me laugh, but I always enjoyed them. – SWT

Hellboy: Weird Tales, Vol. 2

John Cassaday, P. Craig
Russell, Mike Mignola
Dark Horse, tpb, 144pp

Lots of great little stories about Hellboy and his friends. The artwork is of an excellent standard. I almost said a uniformly excellent standard there, but stopped myself, partly because that's such a cliché, but also because the art is anything but uniform – a

dozen completely different styles appear, each of them quite marvellous. This was actually the first Hellboy book I ever read. Volume 2 of a collection of stories not written by the character's creator Mike Mignola is a funny place to start – it's what they happened to have in the library – but it left me keen to read more. – SWT

JLA: Rules of Engagement (Vol. 13)

Joe Kelly, Rick Veitch
DC Comics, tpb, 144pp

I came to this having previously read up to volume 9, a Mark Waid book, and then, earlier this week, volume 17, *Syndicate Rules*, by Kurt Busiek. What, for me, placed Joe Kelly's work here over either of those was that it felt like things were happening: relationships were changing, decisions had ramifications, villains were dangerous. What the stories here do very, very well is get at Superman's biggest weakness – not kryptonite, but being forced into making decisions in situations where there is no right or wrong answer. He has super-strength, but he has no power of super-philosophy. – SWT

JLA: Syndicate Rules (Vol. 17)

Kurt Busiek et al
DC Comics, tpb, 200pp

I really wanted to enjoy this – one of the longest modern JLA stories I've read – and I did, but it still left me a little disappointed. It's Grant Morrison's fault. His, and that of the other British invaders, like Warren Ellis, Mark Millar and Alan Moore. They can't write everything (though Mark Millar gives it a good try), but few others can match them. So a perfectly decent story like this feels a bit flat

because it lacks the flash, bang and sparkle of a Morrison JLA story. It's unfair: I wouldn't watch Two and a Half Men and complain that it isn't quite as good as Annie Hall. I try to enjoy things for what they are, but reading comics, where the geniuses and the craftsmen all use the same characters, the small things accumulate. Flash isn't quite as cheeky. Green Lantern isn't quite as imaginative. Batman isn't quite as cool. Superman isn't quite as awesome. You're left looking for what's missing, rather than enjoying what's there.

One other problem here is that the longer it goes on, the more it seems that very little is going to happen. Worst of all is a scene where the JLA are in life-or-death battle with aliens, and we're being told that they are being soundly defeated – but they're all invulnerable, and just being slapped about by energy beams. There's no real sense of peril or drama. – *SWT*

JSA: Savage Times (Vol. 6)

Geoff Johns, David S. Goyer, Leonard Kirk
DC Comics, tpb, 168pp

JSA, like its pre-Crisis counterpart *All-Star Squadron*, is a title that operates along the seams of DC's damaged continuity, stitching it up and adding new pieces to complete the patchwork. But where *All-Star Squadron*, though always a good read, often brought the story to a halt to fix minor continuity issues, *JSA* never lets up on the action, while still sorting out some pretty huge problems – Hawkman, for one. It does a marvellous job of bringing together characters and storylines from all eras – members of the original 1940s team such as Wildcat and Green Lantern, Atom Smasher from *Infinity Inc*, elements from Gaiman's *The Sandman* and John Wagner's *Sandman Mystery*

Theatre, as well as introducing new characters like Mister Terrific. This story gets a bit bogged down in the Shazam/Hawkman shared history, but is still a good read, if only to sympathise with Captain Marvel's crush on the Star-Spangled Kid! Poor guy – if he says anything she'll think he's a pervert – it's not always easy being a kid in an adult's body! – *SWT*

JSA: Lost (Vol. 9)

Geoff Johns, Don
Kramer, Jerry Ordway
DC Comics, tpb, 208pp

When I read *JSA* I sometimes wish it was the only comic being published about the DC universe, because it's here that it all makes sense. The characters have a past, present and a future, into which they are moving, rather than being stuck in an eternal present. – *SWT*

JSA: Black Vengeance (Vol. 10)

Geoff Johns, Don
Kramer, Keith
Champagne
DC Comics, tpb, 208pp

The first story is a team-up between the *JSA* of the 1950s, directly after their decision to disband, and the present team. The second continues the story of Black Adam and Kahndaq, while also warming up for the *Day of Vengeance* mini-series. It was probably my favourite Geoff Johns book to date, while the artwork, by several different hands, is very, very good throughout. – *SWT*

The Lost Colony Book One: The Snodgrass Conspiracy

Grady Klein
First Second, pb, 128pp

An odd little book, set on the peculiar island home of some peculiar people, in 19th century America. My American history isn't very good, but I think it's an alternative US, since slavery is still legal. I can't say I enjoyed it all that much – the characters were interesting, but the story's told mainly via a series of close-up shots of their heads, which becomes a bit wearing after a while. – *SWT*

The Savage Sword of Conan, Vol. 1

Roy Thomas,
Barry Windsor-Smith,
John Buscema
Dark Horse, tpb, 542pp

A marvellous collection of stories from Marvel's *Savage Sword of Conan* magazine, plus a few that appeared earlier in *Savage Tales*. Roy Thomas and Conan were a match made in Cimmeria and this volume shows them at their mutual best.

Quite a bit of the book forms a connected narrative set fairly early in Conan's career. Towards the end there's a jarring excursion into the future with an adaptation of "The Hour of the Dragon", by which point Conan has already both become a king and been deposed.

I wish I'd had this at eleven or twelve, when it would have been the most valuable treasure in my possession!

The artwork, by many hands (several stories are part-credited to "the Tribe"), is of a consistently high qual-

ity, but of course the work of John Buscema and Barry Windsor-Smith stands out. There are no sexier women in comics than those in this book (and, I'd wager, no sexier men either, though that isn't my area of expertise). – *SWT*

Starman: A Starry Knight (Vol. 7)

James Robinson
DC Comics, tpb, 180pp

Jack heads into space on his quest for an earlier Starman, taking a fairly roundabout route. The art and writing are top-notch, and as always in this title there are some lovely nods to the past, but I still find Jack himself to be the least interesting part of the book. – *SWT*

Stone Island

Ian Edgington,
Simon Davis
Rebellion, tpb, 112pp

This book collects two serials, "Stone Island" from 2000AD progs 1500-1507, and "Stone Island: The Harrowers" from progs 1550-1559, both written by Ian Edgington with lovely, horrible art by Simon Davis.

I was surprised by how graphic this was – I haven't read the main 2000AD title for a while, though I subscribed to 2000AD Extreme Edition right up to its recent demise. But it was a pleasant surprise!

The first serial is a flat-out horror blockbuster, a Silent Hill, Resident Evil, Alien v Predator dumb-but-fun bit of Hollywood excess.

The second serial has its moments, but is less interesting – a venture into what is pretty much a standard issue world-beyond-the-portal. What's beyond the portal is nearly always better left to the imagination. – *SWT*

Superman: Red Son

Mark Millar,
Dave Johnson,
Killian Plunkett
DC Comics, tpb, 160pp

Was this the book with which Mark Millar stepped out from Grant Morrison's shadow? I'm not sure of the chronology, although I know the publication of this was delayed a while and people were saying how good it was for a long, long time before it was released. It's a great book, but won't amaze anyone who's read, for example, John Byrne's *Superman & Batman: Generations* (another story which allows time to pass), or *Superman: The Dark Side*, by John Francis Moore and Kieron Dwyer, which sees Superman grow up on Apokolips. I enjoyed both of those, and I enjoyed this one too. It's supposedly quite a controversial book, but I think that's mainly because communism doesn't turn Superman totally evil! – *SWT*

Terminator Omnibus Volume 2

Various
Dark Horse, pb, 376pp

"Hunters and Killers", the eighty-page story that opens this volume, was interesting for me in being the first Terminator story I've seen or read which didn't feature any time-travelling. It made for a refreshing change, as was seeing what was going on during the war with Skynet somewhere other than the US.

"Endgame" takes us back to some of the characters who survived the stories in the first omnibus, as the Terminators try to prevent John Connor's birth. It's a good story, but it's easy to see why the comic came to a close at this point (licensing issues aside): there's a limit to how many

Terminators you can send back after Sarah Connor before their failure becomes ludicrous.

Dark Horse then lost the license for a few years, before returning with "Death Valley" (originally a mini-series just called *The Terminator*). It's an okay story that wouldn't be out of place in the current tv series. Guy Davis's artwork in the first half is good, but Steve Pugh's artwork in the second half is a huge departure, and is very hit and miss. John Connor looks rather "slow of thinking" in many panels; far from the sharp-eyed, quick-witted scamp you'd expect. ("Suicide Run", a short story which appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* at about the same time, is also included in the book.)

But if John Connor looks weird in that story, wait till you get a look at "The Dark Years". At the beginning of that story (split between the turn of the century and the Skynet war of the future), the adult John Connor looks like a stern yoga instructor, but by the end he has transformed into a post-potion Obelix. Amazingly, there's no change of penciller, so the inkers must have really gone for it on this one. The last panel has to be seen to be believed. – *SWT*

Ultimate Galactus Trilogy

Warren Ellis et al
Marvel, hb, 344pp

This is a very substantial book, so if you're looking for a blockbuster comic to get stuck into this will fit the bill nicely. The tone of the first chapter is much grimmer than the other two, and Galactus, though avoiding the inherent goofiness of the original, is a bit of a letdown. But as crossovers go this is pretty great. Each of the three main artists involved does some stunning work, especially Brandon Peterson, and all the characters involved get a chance to shine. – *SWT*

Vertigo: First Cut

Various

Vertigo, tpb, 192pp

Contains the first issues of seven different Vertigo titles (*DMZ*, *Army@Love*, *Jack of Fables*, *The Exterminators*, *Scalped*, *Crossing Midnight* and *Loveless*) and a preview of an eighth (*Air*). It hasn't left me desperate to read any of them, though they all seem like decent comics. They just felt a bit grim, taken together – two of them are set in wars, two are westerns, and another is about the ongoing war between man and vermin. The remaining two, *Jack of Fables* and *Crossing Midnight*, are the ones I'm most likely to read more of, though I'll probably be reserving them at the library rather than buying my own copies. – SWT

War Stories, Vol. 1

Garth Ennis, Dave

Gibbons, Chris Weston

Titan Books Ltd, tpb, 240pp

I remember, back in the days when letters pages in comics weren't quite so rare, Garth Ennis asking for help in completing his collection of Commando and the like: in these specials he has a crack at writing some of his own, and makes a pretty good fist of it. David Lloyd's artwork is stunning in the last of them. – SWT

War Stories, Vol. 2

Garth Ennis, Cam

Kennedy, David Lloyd

Vertigo, tpb, 240pp

Four more great stories from Garth

Ennis. My favourites were the story about catapult-launched planes, "Archangel", and the one about a prototype SAS squad, "The Reivers". I'm sure I can't be the only one who thinks Garth Ennis should do a monthly SAS comic. They turn up in just about everything he does... – SWT

Zot!

The Complete Black-and-White Stories:

1987–1991

Scott McCloud

Harper, pb, 384pp

The modern Superman comes in for quite a bit of criticism for being a bit of a wimpy new man, but the Superman of the 1950s was as much a product of his time, with his gratingly patriarchal attitude.

Zot, on the other hand, is like a Superman out of time, free of the need to appear in twenty comic books a month or to maintain a status quo. He's happy, comfortable with his powers, accepting of the things he can't change, determined to change the things he can. He has no hang-ups, but is understanding of the hang-ups of others. He's everything Superman has the potential to be.

This superb and substantial book contains nearly all of his adventures in black and white (leaving out back-up strips and a couple of issues drawn by Chuck Austen – though Scott McCloud's layouts for those issues are included). The stories are light-hearted, funny and exciting, with a bit of soap opera to keep you going from issue to issue. McCloud's approach to super-heroics and super-villainy is imaginative and innovative.

If the book has one flaw it's that the author's notes, which appear at the end of each story, might have been better collected at the end of the book. They are fascinating, but it

feels sometimes as if the author is trying to overdetermine the reader's response, in particular in his attitude to the later issues, which take place almost entirely on Earth.

He obviously loved those issues (as did a lot of readers), but after reading so many notes about how much better the comic is without the superhero stuff, I found those issues rather underwhelming. I much preferred the bulk of the book, in which the relationship stuff is just one element among many.

The art is astounding from start to finish. McCloud uses a variety of approaches to create various effects, but his main mode is a clear line style similar to that seen in Tintin, with a dash of manga expressionism.

All in all, a joy to read, and a feast for the eyes! – SWT

MAGAZINES

McSweeney's 28

Dave Eggers (ed.)

McSweeney's, hb, 300pp

This isn't one of the issues of McSweeney's that you buy for a substantial read – if it takes anyone more than an hour to read it all I'd be surprised. It's been a while since I last finished a book on the same day it was delivered!

But it's a book of fables, and the power of a fable isn't in the reading, it's in the retelling, and I could see a few of these fables having a life beyond the pages of these perfectly produced little books. It's easy to imagine a headmaster using one as the basis for a school assembly, for example.

You wouldn't want to pay twenty pounds for it, though – anyone in the UK tempted to buy McSweeney's from a bookshop should note that (at the time of writing) if you subscribe directly you can get the whole year's issues for only about fifty quid, thanks to the current exchange rate. – SWT

