

Interview with Robert J. Sawyer

By
Lesley L. Smith

What is unique about written fiction as compared to other entertainment?

Prose fiction is the only form that actually gets you into the head of another character. Through the use of limited point-of-view – either first- or third-person – the reader *becomes* a character in the story, seeing only what that character sees, feeling only what that character feels, knowing only what that character knows. It creates identification, not just in the literary but also the psychological sense. Watching as a spectator on the sidelines, as one does when viewing a movie or a TV show, is an impoverished experience compared to actually becoming the viewpoint character – that's why prose text endures, and always will endure.

Do authors have an obligation to help spread understanding of diverse peoples? Was this issue on your mind when you wrote the *Neanderthal Parallax* (*Hominids, Humans, and Hybrids*)?

Authors have no obligation whatsoever; no member of the audience has a right to impose any agenda on an artist of any kind. That said, I *choose* to celebrate diversity and multiculturalism in my work; I'm very proud to have been nominated twice for the Spectrum Award, which honors positive portrayals of gays and lesbians in SF, and I was thrilled to see a website on the depiction of religious people in SF name my character Sarkhar Muhammed from *The Terminal Experiment* as the most realistic Islamic character in SF. But the issue at the heart of the *Neanderthal Parallax* is something different, and I tip my hand right up front with the opening epigram, which is from a nonfiction book called *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*. Those novels are my exploration of what it means to be a strong male, and the accountability my gender has for the evil it has done in the world.

Of course, the ultimate diverse peoples would be extraterrestrials. You have often written about aliens, e.g. *Illegal Alien*, *Factoring Humanity*. What do you think it is about aliens that are so appealing to humans?

The masks, the disguises. The TV series, "Alien Nation," did this particularly well. When

we talk about aliens, we hide, at least at the outset, what we're really talking about. That said, although I do employ masks, I make them translucent if not out-and-out transparent. The aliens in *Illegal Alien* are defended by an African-American civil-rights attorney; the parallels are obvious.

You have often addressed spiritual issues, such as the soul in *Terminal Experiment*, a human overmind in *Factoring Humanity*, and God in *Calculating God*. Why is science fiction with spirituality a theme for you?

In part because it's an area few others have explored in any real depth. We're all supposed to nod appreciatively when people mention Clarke's *The Nine Billion Names of God* or *The Star*, or Asimov's *The Last Question*, but the debate in them is so simplistic as to make the stories risible to anyone who knows any theology. SF is an ideal vehicle for in-depth discussions, but most – not all, but most – of what's been done in the area of religion that has endured in the field is at short lengths. I saw a street few others were working, and started knocking on doors, seeing what I'd find.

Another issue you have often investigated is consciousness and machines, be it uploaded human consciousness, as in *Mindscan* and *The Terminal Experiment*, or conscious/self-aware machines, as in *Factoring Humanity*. Since you've spent so much time on this issue, what conclusions have you drawn about whether machines can be conscious?

I think we're going to see a paradigm shift in the next few years about artificial consciousness that echoes what happened in the debates about extraterrestrial life. For decades, the received wisdom – and the unchallenged assumption behind most SF, not to mention the SETI program – was that the universe must be teeming with intelligent life. Now, we've come to realize just how complex the chain of contingent circumstances was that led to us being here. As one small example, if we didn't have a freakish, oversize moon, formed by a random impact, Earth would be a hellhole with a runaway greenhouse effect, like Venus. Well, as I've researched my latest series of books, the *WWW* trilogy about the World Wide Web gaining consciousness, I've discovered why everyone has always done the actual birth of machine consciousness either off-stage, *a la Neuromancer* or in a ridiculous fashion *a la* just about everything else: it is so hard, so complex, so unlikely a thing to have happen that I suspect no matter how complex our computers become it will never emerge spontaneously, and it's going to be a good long time, if ever, before we can replicate it on any substrate that doesn't have a belly button.

I can't help noticing that your novels always deal with dramatic moral issues such as murder, rape, revenge, abortion, marital infidelity, terminal illness, genocide, and incest to name but a few. Why do you include such emotional issues in your work?

No one would ask that question of any genre *except* science fiction. That's the litany of issues that make up the moral landscape today, and mainstream writers, mystery writers, romance writers, and so on all explore them all the time. The question from my point of view isn't why *I* do it, it's why so many of my colleagues prefer a sterile, unemotional, uninvolved, escapist view. Writing about people *in extremis* is incredibly liberating, because it tears off the normal veneer of civility and let's you get at who these characters really *are*.

Since the early 1990s, you've published a huge amount of fiction. How do you remain so prolific?

Do I seem prolific? I've done less than two million published words in the last 20 years – I started seriously writing my first book in 1988. My buddy, Harry Turtledove, does 700,000 published words a year. But I'm lucky that almost everything I've published is still in print; that helps give the illusion of being more productive than I am. I wish I could do two books a year – my publishers wish that, too – but I just can't. A book a year is my pace, it seems. How do I do that? By parking my fanny in a chair and working every single day.

You have been nominated for, and won, a number of awards, including Nebulas and Hugos. In your expert opinion, what is it that makes some SF novels stand out above all others?

It's changed over time. There was an era when stories about *things* could win the top awards in the field: *Ringworld*, *Rendezvous with Rama*. Now, it's stories about people that make the biggest mark. It took an awfully long time, but SF is discovering that, just like every other field of writing, the most interesting thing to write about is the human heart in conflict with itself – even if that heart happens to be battery-driven!

What is your favorite book you've written and why?

For a long time, I answered that question by saying *Factoring Humanity*, because it did best what I always set out to do: combine the intimately human with the grandly cosmic. But, quite unusually for me, I'm changing that answer to say my most recent book, *Rollback*. Not only has it gotten the best reviews I've ever had (and I've had mostly great reviews since day one for my books), but more than any book I've done, it really does bridge my own two personal worlds: that of genre science fiction (which is how I'm published in the US) and mainstream literature (which is what I'm perceived to be a part of in my native Canada). *Rollback* in no way gives short change to hard-SF concepts (hell, it was serialized in *Analog* – you can't get any more hard-SF than that!) but it still has been widely embraced by people who have never read SF before. As it happens, on the day we're talking, I got my very first copies of the paperback edition of *Rollback*.

What is your favorite book by someone else and why?

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. It's not at all about what it appears to be about on the surface. It's a thematically driven, ideas-rich book, and it's got unforgettable characters.

I must admit, one of my favorites among your books is *Flashforward*, partly because of the high-energy-physics setting and its use of quantum theory. I also enjoy it, however, partly because it raises the issues of fate and free-will not unlike Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*. What inspired *Flashforward* and was the *Foundation Trilogy* part of it?

Interesting. You're the first person to raise a comparison to the *Foundation Trilogy*, and my book has been out for 10 years now. I honestly don't think Asimov had anything to do with it. Some books have complex inspirations, but not *Flashforward*. It came about when I was at a high-school reunion, and everyone was saying, 20 years on, "If I'd only known then what I know now..." as if it was obvious that foreknowledge of the future would make one's life happier. I simply got to wondering if that was really true, and *Flashforward* was the result.

You've taught science-fiction writing a number of times. What's the most important advice writers should hear?

Write *your* stories. Don't write fan-fic, media tie-ins, things you think *other* people would like to read. Write what *you* want to read in a universe of your own creation. Trust me. In terms of feeling good, "I made this!" beats all hell out of "Oooh, I love what you did with Spike as a four-year old!"

You are also considered a futurist. What prediction are you most proud of?

An odd question: predictions are about rational extrapolation. Am I proud that I was talking about global warming long before it was fashionable? "Proud" doesn't seem the right emotion. The one I get the most email about is predicting the name of the current Pope, Benedict XVI, back in 1995 in *The Terminal Experiment*.

What are the similarities and differences of a futurist versus a science fiction writer?

A science-fiction writer's job is often to make social comment, and to find the most entertaining extrapolation of what we know. A futurist's job is indeed to predict the future. A science fiction writer's job, as Ray Bradbury so famously said, is very often to prevent the future, by sounding a warning call.

I've heard you're not going write any more short stories and instead focus on novels from now on. Why? What are the pluses and minuses of novels compared to short stories?

Short stories are very hard work, don't pay nearly enough, and I don't enjoy writing them. I've done more than 40 of them, and I've been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and Bram Stoker awards for short fiction, and have won the Crime Writers of Canada's Arthur Ellis Award, *Analog* magazine's *Analytical Laboratory Award*, and *Science Fiction Chronicle's* Reader Award, all for best short story of the year, plus five Aurora Awards – Canada's top honor in SF – for best short story of the year. In May of 2008 a second volume of my short stories is being published – *Identity Theft and Other Stories* – and with it, all my short fiction will be collected and in print. It seems a fine time to take my bow from that part of the industry and settle in to do just the things I really enjoy.

At one of your speaking engagements you said that the short story is the way genre writers have traditionally broken into the business. Do you think that's still true? Why or why not? Any suggestions on how we can help the genre short story market?

Oh, absolutely it's still true. With more and more publishers not willing to look at unagented manuscripts, and most agents wary of people with no publishing credentials, getting credits as a short fiction writer is still the standard career path. As for how to help the genre short story markets, one word: subscribe. If more people don't, they will die; they're in critical condition already.

What do you hope to accomplish with Red Deer Press's Robert J. Sawyer Books?

I've been publishing books either by new authors or by authors whose careers have stalled: damn good writers who never found the audience they needed with a bigger publisher. I'm giving some great books a home and treating the authors with tender loving care.

What's your next book to be published and when is it coming out?

My next book is called *Wake*, and it's volume one of the *WWW* trilogy I mentioned earlier. I'm just putting the finishing touches on it now, and it should be out in 2009. The theme is just that: the waking up of a global consciousness, with all of it happening step-by-step on stage while the reader watches. It's been the hardest book I've ever written, but I really do think I've managed some cool stuff in it.

Silvermesh

By
Simon Cooper

The hospital appointment card floated into the bin like a mini Concorde. The envelope it came in had URGENT written in red letters front and back. I scrunched that into a ball and flung it with the other rubbish. It was 4:30. Katie was due home in an hour. I rolled up the dressing gown sleeve on my right arm, picked up the loaded syringe, and pressed the needle against the flesh above my wrist, just past the Silvermesh join.

Silvermesh – my perfect hand, like a mercury glove. After the operation, I thought of it as my bad hand, as if the mashed remains of my bones hid under the metallic sheen. I couldn't move it, just lay watching it twitch for a week. The doctors said full sensation should return. They were right about that at least. Then, it became my good hand, my stronger, better-than-new, superhuman hand. I could crush a three-by-four beam, yet still feel the soft hairs on the small of Katie's back rise up at my touch. Now it wasn't good or bad, just spreading.

I pushed the needle into my vein. Heroin loaded my system and I dropped back on the bed. Junkie Joe saves the Silvermesh Kid again.

"Clint? You home?"

The ceiling spoke and my eyes opened. "Shit." I rolled off the mattress and swept the needle and gear onto the floor and under the bed. The strap around my bicep slipped off easily. I shoved it into the bin and pushed the appointment card and envelope to the bottom then slumped back against the dresser. The door opened and Katie came in, her long streaked hair wet on her shoulders.

"Bloody Belfast traffic doesn't know if it's coming or going. It just sits there. Like we never get rain for Christ's sakes." Her head tilted sideways. "You all right? Back early again?"

I pushed myself up. "I was tired, I took a shower."

"So I see." She sidled over to me, slipped her hands through the join of my dressing gown and around my waist. Her teeth pressed down on her lower lip. "Are you hungry?" She kissed me before I could say no. Her hands moved lower and she kissed my neck. "Are you hungry, carpenter man?"

"I'm kind of tired still."

She pulled back and tightened my dressing gown around me. "Sure." She sat back on the bed and nodded at my hand. "What's it like today?"

"No different."

“Let me see.”

“Why?”

She folded her arms, giving me the “Katie don’t take no for an answer” thing. That’s how she topped the sales league every other month. The day I walked into her shop, I didn’t even need a new mobile phone. That was a long time ago, before the accident.

I offered her my hand, the gown sleeve still half-rolled up my arm. She gripped it with one hand like she was going to pull a thorn out, but her other hand smoothed gently over the sleek material up to the join. Her eyes studied it and her fingers traced the wavy line where flesh began. I couldn’t imagine the Silvermesh felt the same to her as it did to me. Like it would be cold or something?

There was no ridge or reddening at the join. At a glance people used to think I had painted my hand. Then the procedure became more common. Silvermesh, the perfect solution for all your extremities, once upon a time.

“You picking at that cut?” She tapped the dot of smeared blood where I’d injected.

“Yeah, couldn’t help it.” I wanted to tell her the truth, but I needed more time. “The spreading has stopped though, hasn’t it?”

“It seems to have stopped.” She lifted my hand and kissed the smooth palm.

“Now, do you want a cup of tea before I order pizza?”

“Love one. And so good of you to go to the trouble of cooking. You really didn’t have to.” She pulled off her ankle boots, sat back on the bed and opened a drawer on her bedside table. Out came a packet of cigarettes and the joint tin she bought at Glastonbury. It was decorated with a huge ganja leaf and dancing mushrooms.

“Do you not want to come into the kitchen?”

“No, I’m going to have a smoke here if that’s all right? You’re not the only one who’s tired, you know?” She popped the lid, fished out some papers and licked the end of one. “Sorry, I’m tired as well. Are you making tea?”

I nodded, not wanting to go, with my stuff under the bed, but not able to loiter either. I left her to it and walked to the kitchen.

I filled the kettle and flicked it on. Katie liked a smoke and booze and nothing else anymore. I didn’t even smoke. We’d left our party nights behind long before the accident and most of our friends wound down at the same time. But there were always ones like Joe. He got into the junk. I bumped into him a month ago, on the way back from the hospital. He’d moved in a couple of streets up. I hadn’t seen him in a few years, but that was the way with Joe. He laughed at me when I told him I didn’t even smoke anymore.

He asked me how the hand was doing and I told him about the spread. Why not? I wouldn’t have left him alone in my house and Katie wouldn’t have him in at all, but he was a friend from way back and that still meant something. He nodded, all serious, like Joe doesn’t do and said he’d heard about that problem. He said he could help me.

Steam bubbled from the kettle. My bloody eyes were welling up. Stupid.

“What the fuck is this?” Katie stood in the doorway, the flattened out letter in her hand.

“It’s nothing.” Stupid.

“Nothing?” She quoted, “With the recent wave of rejections, it is important that all early participants in the Silvermesh program contact the hospital immediately.” She marched over and slapped the paper on the counter top. “What the hell are you doing?”

I held out my hand, the glisten gone in the dark room. "It's stopped hasn't it? I don't need to go and see them."

"We don't know if it's stopped. It's been a month."

"I know what they'll say."

"You don't know that for sure, there's maybe a treatment we don't know about that will stop it. And what the hell are you doing lying about it, when was the last time you saw Dr. Boyle?"

"That time, a month ago. I told you what he said. If it's spreading, amputation is the only option."

"Then, that's what you'll have to do."

I stared at her. "It's stopped. I know it has. You've seen it too." She didn't understand. She tried but she couldn't and I didn't want to make her. I didn't want her to have to understand.

"We'll manage. Together." She tried to touch me and I pushed her back.

She stepped away. "You've got to go and see Boyle. It's the only thing to do."

"Jesus Christ, I know what he'll say." My hand balled into a fist and I drove it down on the paper. The counter top splintered from the blow. "Don't you get it? He's a surgeon and I'm a test case. He probably can't wait to cut it off and take a look? He'll do it even though it's stopped spreading, just to be on the safe fucking side. Don't you understand that?"

Katie stood still. She didn't shout back, she didn't cry. She didn't deserve this.

"You're bleeding," she said.

I looked at my hand. It stung from the impact, like I'd slapped my palm against a wall. A trickle of blood ran from a cut on my forearm, above the wrist. The Silvermesh didn't have a scratch on it. My legs felt weak, the adrenalin draining from my system mixed with the comedown.

"You don't understand." I couldn't look her in the eye. Outside a horn blasted twice, someone's taxi had arrived.

Katie glanced at the window as if it was for her. "We'll talk about this later. I'm going out." She grabbed her car keys and her coat. It was still wet, must have been a downpour.

The needle and smack looked all wrong on the kitchen table beside a bowl of oranges. It was medicine – I had to keep thinking of it like that. Heroin used to mean dead rock stars or the grey ghosts shivering in side streets. From the sublime to the ridiculous, don't ask me which way around. Now, party kids took a rap to ease the come-down, or mixed in crystal meth for the ultimate sex. There was no reason I couldn't handle a once a day fix. But there were still dead rock stars and still plenty of hollowed out street addicts.

It was after 10 when the front door opened and Katie came in. She stopped. Her eyes went from me to the stuff on the table and back to me. She shook her head and opened her mouth to speak.

"Wait, sit down. I need to tell you about this, please."

She dropped her bag, dragged out a chair and sat. Her jacket had dried off but her eyes looked red. I told her the truth. I'd been using the smack once a day and only once,

for the last month. I told her about meeting Joe and how I didn't believe him. Then, I told her I'd looked it up on the internet. There were a few places it said the same thing. Desperate success stories by others like me. I told her it wouldn't get any worse – the drug. I told her I could control it.

"I'm sorry I lied to you."

She sat a long time and stared at the bowl of oranges. She breathed in deeply and rubbed her face as she blew out. Her hands spread. "The internet? Junkie Joe? Do you hear yourself?"

"I know, but I'll show you it. There's this one forum with a load of people doing the same thing. It works for them too. There's one guy had his feet and hands cut clean off on a fairground ride. He got the operation and has Silvermesh spreading from all corners. Except he's letting it happen, giving off about everyone using drugs. He thinks he's going to be superhuman. He calls himself the silver surfer." I laughed, like it was a joke that had nothing to do with me.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he's the crazy one, going on about using drugs." I picked up the plastic bag with its brown crumbs. "It is a drug, just a drug, like all medicines, but no doctor's going to prescribe it are they? They can't have a load of people getting addicted after it was the doctors put us in this position."

"So, you're going to be a junkie the rest of your life?"

"No, I can handle this. One hit a day is stopping the spread, is that so bad?"

Her eyes said it was worse than bad. "I don't know."

"Neither do I, but let's try this." I held up my hand. Sometimes, in lamp-light like this, it sort of looked bronze, as if there was a statue somewhere missing a right hand. "I can't work with one hand."

"You can carve with your left."

It was a repeat of how we talked when the hospital gave me the option of Silvermesh.

"I make furniture, not sculptures. You know that."

She nodded, then after a moment her fingers stretched out, as if she was about to grab for the needle. She pulled her hand back into her body and closed her eyes. "Okay then." She opened them and pointed at me. "Once a day, and we check you every morning. If it moves even a millimeter more up your arm, that's it, you go and see Boyle. Promise – now."

Tears formed in her brown eyes. The bag of smack was still in my grip. I set it on the table and covered it with my hand. "I promise."

The shops were shut by the time Joe had sorted me out so I stopped at our local to get Katie some cigs. The place was quiet but the barman served three people who came in after me.

"Hey, packet of Silks over here," I said.

He looked over, then past me at the widescreen blaring out news, then nodded to me as if I'd just come in. My arm itched at the elbow but I wouldn't rub it in here, I had enough paranoid shakes as it was. I caught my reflection in the mirror and looked away, over to the widescreen. I'd seen the news three times already but couldn't pull my eyes

away. It was the item on the death of the silver surfer. Multiple organ failure, once the Silvermesh invaded his torso. Six months ago he thought he was going to become immortal and tomorrow he'd be yesterday's news. The old guy next to me at the bar avoided my eye, coughed, and moved away.

"It's not contagious, you know?" I held my hand up and tugged my jacket sleeve. He shrugged and took a seat at a table. Three guys in Rangers tops at the next table stopped drinking and stared at me.

"There you go." The barman said and put a packet of cigs on the counter.

I took out a fiver and slid it across to him. He looked at me like I was the last drunk of the night, then picked it up.

"Keep the change, eh?" I shoved the packet in my jacket pocket and left.

I opened the front door to find Katie in the hall, two suitcases by her feet on the pile of overdue bills and the letter from the rental agency serving notice. So this was the day. It wasn't exactly a surprise. I'd been broken her promise and plenty others in the last six months, but the reality of it hit me in the gut. Or maybe it was shivers from the need.

"Katie." It croaked out of me.

Lines formed across her forehead. She picked up her luggage and bowed her head away from me as she pushed past. I grabbed her arms. She wriggled away and knocked me against the wall with her cases.

"I can't do this anymore. You fucking do this, but I can't watch you."

I let go of her. "All right, go then. See you about. Been a nice one." I flicked up the back of my hand.

She spun, knuckles white from gripping the case handles. "That's your way now isn't it? Run away." She shook her head but didn't leave.

Maybe I could make her stay? What was there to stay for? "You're the one running."

"That's what you think?"

She dropped the cases, grabbed my hand, and yanked the jacket sleeve up. Her nails dug into the Silvermesh of my forearm. The fold of my elbow above the join was a mess of scabs and fresh wounds. She let go and the four thin indents left by her nails smoothed out.

"Enjoy your death. Maybe you'll be lucky and the junk will get you first." She lifted the suitcases and struggled for the door handle.

"Wait."

She shook her head, walked out, and slammed the door behind her. I felt like crying but held it back. If she came back in, I didn't want her to see that. Outside, the car started. It idled for what seemed forever, before it pulled away. The tears emptied into my system and anger surged to the fore.

My jacket sleeve had slipped halfway to my wrist. I clenched and unclenched my hand. It wasn't even mine anymore, just an alien thing wanting to colonize me. I fed it every hour and still it advanced, ready for the last defenses to fall so that the full invasion could begin. I peeled off my jacket and ran through the house, out to the garden, to the tool shed.

I'd built the shed and wired it up myself. Those were the days before I became a self-pitying piece of shit. What a self-pitying thing to say.

Most of my tools were sold to pay for the drug since I lost my job, but I kept one thing. I almost yanked the door from its hinges and flicked on the light.

The mitre saw was under the bench, its circular blade in the raised position. I lifted it onto the table top, plugged it in, and laid my perfect silver arm on the metal base. With my elbow just below the blade, I could slice clean through, above the join. I flicked the on switch. The blade's jagged edge became an unbroken circle. Four thousand RPM made a hell of a racket at 12 o'clock in a cul-de-sac.

I reached across with my left arm, my real arm, my real hand on the handle above the hinged blade. One quick press and hold – it would be over before I knew it.

Someone once told me that Belfast had the best doctors in the world for violent ligament damage. It was all the kneecappings and punishment beatings in the bad old days. I felt the power of the blade in my hand. How many times had I cut with it? Hundreds? Thousands? Just one quick press and hold was all it would take.

I pushed down, but pulled my arm back as the blade hit. There was a screeching sound and sparks flew from the blade as it sank into the Silvermesh. A burning sensation spread up my arm, like a hundred Chinese arm burns. I cried out and pressed down. Acrid smoke rose from the motor, I used all my strength, still unable to saw through. There was a clattering sound and the motor stalled. The blade stopped immediately, stuck halfway through the arm.

The blade lifted easily and I threw the machine to one side. There was a deep groove, like a line traced in butter. It filled out again, leaving no trace. Every day I hoped it wouldn't get any worse. Every day I hoped there would be a call from the hospital to say they'd found some way of dealing with it. But they didn't call.

I had enough gear in my pocket to hold it back another night. I would go to the hospital tomorrow morning.

I woke on a bed full of sweat. My body trembled, withdrawal sick but worse than it should have been. This was how it was each time the Silvermesh jumped. My heart raced with the hope that I was wrong, today, of all days. I pulled up my sweater sleeve. Overnight it had spread to an inch above my elbow, if I didn't get another hit, a bigger dose, it would jump again. That was the pattern. I wouldn't even make it to surgery.

My wallet had a cash card but my account was cleaned out and the joint account had been cancelled. I dragged myself off the bed, over to the dresser and pulled the top drawer open by mistake. It was bare, Katie's stuff gone. I shoved it closed, opened the one below and grabbed a pair of white sports socks I never wore. Inside was 30 pounds. There should have been 50 and I couldn't even remember when I raided it. It was enough – Joe would sub me the rest, he was an old friend. Scrub that, I was a good customer.

My jacket lay where I'd dropped it in the hall, and the door was open a crack. A pang of hope rose in me that she was back. It faded quickly. The door mustn't have shut properly when she left. Katie's face came to mind, not the way she was last night, but back in summer, before everything. I pushed back the memory, grabbed my jacket, and opened the front door.

Joe lived three streets up. I knocked on the white framed door, and Joe opened it. His thick beard made it hard to know if his smile was genuine or at your expense. There

was a constant watery film on his lower eyelids. He said he only ever slept for 30 minutes at a time, day or night, like Winston Churchill. Joe talked a lot of shit and looked as opposite to Churchill as a man could get.

“Clint.” He pushed the door open and swept his hand in a courtly gesture of welcome. I ducked into the dank hallway and he shut the door behind us.

“I need a rap. It’s jumped again.”

“Yeah?” He sounded like he needed another 20 minutes sleep. “Better get you sorted then, hadn’t we?”

I followed him into the living room. You could tell by the room that Joe was a dealer not just a junkie. A brand new plasma screen and a stack of hi-fi separates sat apart in one corner, superior amongst the tat and grimy brown sofa and chairs.

He took an old cigar box from a shelf and rested it in his lap. It looked like something I imagined Churchill actually would have owned. He held out his hand.

I dug the 30 out of my pocket. He looked at it, sat back, and put the box on the sofa beside him.

“Now, Clint, you know asking for credit only offends.”

“Jesus, don’t fuck about. It’s above my elbow. I’ll get you the rest later.”

“Let me see it,” he said and rubbed his beard, his nose high in the air.

“What? Stop messing about.”

“I haven’t seen it in a while, that’s all.”

There wasn’t time to argue. I took off my jacket and shoved up my sleeve like he’d asked me to roll over and beg. He had.

“Man, that’s wicked shit. And it’s strong isn’t it? You could crush bone with that thing, couldn’t you?”

“Fuck you, Joe.” I pulled down my sleeve.

“Here.” He handed me back my money. “It’s not enough.”

“I’ll get you the rest.”

“You’re going to need more than 50. Jesus, I never saw anyone shoot like you and not turn blue five minutes later.” He lifted the cigar box and stood. “I’ll give you what you need, but I’ve got a little job for you first.”

“I haven’t got time for this.” I stood up to face him and tried to ignore the cramps in my gut.

“Shut the fuck up.” He pointed at my face. “It won’t take you long, and you’re going to do it. Otherwise you’ll be the next silver surfer.” He smiled, his beard not hiding his pleasure. “Come and see this.”

I followed him to a bathroom. Inside, a young guy sat on the bare rim of a baby blue toilet. His ankles were taped to the bog with industrial tape and his hands were tied behind his back. His head jerked up and he tried to move backwards. It must have hurt because he moaned through the black sock stuffed in his mouth.

He was naked to the waist and there was blood on his chest from three deep cuts on his left shoulder. The blood had dried in places and mixed with a life-size tattoo of the red hand of Ulster over his heart. Underneath was the Loyalist battle cry: “No Surrender.”

“All right, Eddie? Had a good night, son?” Joe looked at me to gauge my reaction.

I just stared at the guy. I wasn’t about to argue for an innocence he probably didn’t deserve, but he didn’t deserve this either. Nobody deserved this. “C’mon, Joe, what the fuck’s going on?”

Joe ignored me and grabbed my Silvermesh arm. The guy's eyes widened. "You're going to like this, Eddie, wee present for you." He turned to me. "Show him what you can do, hit the wall there." Joe stepped back.

I knew Joe was buying from the heavy mob, but I never thought he'd joined up. A ring of piss spread down the guy's leg like he'd held it in all night. It stank. My hand balled into a fist, the Silvermesh felt indestructible. I'd call the police when I got out of there, I just needed out. I punched a hole through the plaster wall on the left and broke an upright strut like it was balsa wood.

"That's the way," Joe said. "Bionic fucking man in the house."

The guy moaned through the sock and looked away.

"We finished now?" I turned to Joe.

His eyes glistened and he shook his head.

"Do his caps."

"What?"

"Do his fucking kneecaps. Then you can have a nice wee sleep." He wagged the cigar box at me.

I turned to the guy on the toilet. He stared at his feet and whimpered. My hand was still balled into a fist. If I punched too hard I would rip his leg off. I flattened my palm out.

"Fucking do him!" Joe said, and the guy looked up.

I pulled my arm back, twisted around, and jabbed Joe in the right leg. It felt like I'd pushed my fingers into jelly.

He fell to the ground screaming. His lower leg stayed straight as if disobeying orders. He dropped the box and scrambled for his boot. I fell on him, pinned his arm with my knee, and gripped his throat with my Silvermesh hand.

"Don't move," I said, and he stopped. "Good." I punched him in the face with my left hand, then again, and again, and again. He blacked out and his body went limp beneath me. I released his throat and lowered my ear to his mouth. He was still breathing. I grabbed the cigar box and slumped back against the wall. The guy on the toilet struggled, his eyes pleaded for release.

I went to the kitchen, cooked up, and came back. Joe was still out and the guy was quiet. He watched as I lifted my sleeve. The Silvermesh hadn't spread any further. I injected. There was a rush but nowhere near a high, as if the Silvermesh had swallowed this one whole.

I staggered to my feet and the guy shifted and groaned for help. I went to the living room, found a phone, and called a taxi. Then, I called the police and tied Joe's arms behind his back.

When the taxi arrived, I got in and closed the door.

"Royal Hospital, quick." I held out the 30 pounds, and the driver took it without answering.

The taxi's acceleration made me nearly puke so I lay sideways and closed my eyes. There was faintest wail of police sirens behind us and for a moment I was back in time, in the ambulance, after the accident.

The Colossal Walden

By

Clifford Royal Johns

As Suzanne's plane glided into O'Hare, she stared out at the Tree. Its wide arrowhead shadow darkened Grant Park and cooled the glare from Lake Michigan. At the bottom of the highest pine cone, 1,300 feet above the asphalt, Suzanne had an appointment in a few hours to meet Walden. Even better, the summons had arrived just before the revelation and commencement of his latest AIN project in Chicago. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly.

After a moment, she risked a glance across the center aisle. The man continued to stare at her. Turning back to the incoming landscape, she realized she should have smiled at him or at least looked nonchalant. He must be one of the protesters, she thought. She had just completed her architecture degree with an emphasis in Architecture Imitating Nature. At graduation that morning, protestors had disrupted some of the ceremonies by shouting and waving ridiculous placards, one of which stated, "AIN: Architecture *Perverting* Nature." They hadn't even matched up the letters properly.

Suzanne considered the Tree the epitome of architectural achievement. With its startling evocation of nature, its immense organic form, it dwarfed the city's skyscrapers ideologically, if not physically. The Tree made a statement like no other building in the world, and she wanted to work for the company that had built it, for the man who had envisioned it, for Walden.

While waiting in the taxi line, she saw the protester again. He was talking excitedly in a small group of "similar uniques," her name for people who thought themselves distinct individuals and demonstrated it through outward appearance, but ended up all looking the same.

Entering the taxi, she said, "The Tree," and the system knew where to take her.

She relaxed into the seat and pulled out her letter. Yes, she had the right day. Yes, she actually would talk to Mr. Walden. She had told everyone that she'd come to Chicago to interview with the premiere AIN company, Colossal Engineering, but the true prize was speaking with Walden himself. He wasn't much of a designer, but he was a marketing genius. He could make people see the future, make them imagine. Walden was an idea man.

And the public loved him, as did local politicians and even some national celebrities. For his current AIN project, the one he would reveal tomorrow, he had

secured permission to build without any of the usual public hearings or building commission meetings. He hadn't even specified what he would build. Genius.

She relaxed into the taxi seat, folded her arms across her chest, and imagined becoming a partner in Colossal Engineering before she reached 30. She pictured herself walking into her estate in Oak Brook, brick with columns, and greeting her housekeeper, petite with olive skin.

She had read about Walden's 14-bedroom house that simulated an enormous boulder sitting alone on the prairie. He used a trolley to get around.

While she rode the elevator up and over to Walden's office, Suzanne saw herself reflected in the polished walls. She tugged at her bra strap and breathed deeply several times. Finally, the doors opened.

She didn't move. Instead she stared at Walden's office. Thirteen-hundred feet up hanging on a massive branch, and he'd installed a transparent floor. The furniture seemed to float above the city.

Walden's desk, a carved wood eagle, soared in place. The guest chair resembled a goose defending its territory, head high, wings also spread. Behind the desk, a black stalactite suspended from the ceiling, presumably a private toilet space. The light brown ceiling almost disappeared behind the lights. All very AIN.

Suzanne felt herself shaking, her muscles tensing.

It wasn't until Walden looked up that Suzanne realized he was sitting at the desk. His body blended with the black form behind him, but his white face seemed to hang unsupported and unreal. She thought his suit was beaver, but it might have been shaved mink. His hair, thick and black as his suit, swooped from his forehead like the brim of a hat, then flowed back over the top of his head.

When he noticed her standing in the elevator, he unplugged himself from his computer and walked around his desk. He reached up to push a strand of hair back where it belonged.

She stepped off the elevator, careful not to look down, and stuck out her hand. "Good evening, sir, I'm Suzanne Finch." Did her voice waver? Was her hand a little moist? She looked at Walden, but thought about the ground far below. She almost laughed when she realized how lucky she was to have worn slacks instead of a skirt.

"Suzanne, welcome to Colossal Engineering." He held rather than shook her hand. "Have a seat." He sat on the wing of his desk and looked down at Suzanne, who perched on the goose's carved tail. "Call me Walden. Everyone does."

"Thank you, Walden." It was awfully kind of Walden to sit higher, so she could avoid looking at the city far below.

"So, Suzanne, I've read your portfolio, and some of the architects have read your school papers. I'll tell you right out, we're interested. I invited you here today, Suzanne, because we need people like you, people with your background, people with your perseverance, and I think if you spend a few days with us, you'll choose to join Colossal."

The only thing that kept her from immediately standing up and shouting, "I'll take the job!" was the thought that if she looked down, she would tumble right out of the goose chair onto her head. After this momentary delay, she remembered to appear

indifferent, at least for the moment.

Walden gave her a rundown of the company, information she had already discovered. The chatter allowed her to appear interested while she inwardly dissected his previous statement. Had he really offered her a job? No, he'd said that after a few days with them, she would choose to join Colossal. That wasn't a job offer. After all, joining the company wasn't her choice, it was his.

Suzanne's accommodation for the night was on the east side of the Tree at the bottom of another pine cone – a special guest suite, perhaps an honor. The view was, of course, spectacular, but only the bathroom had an opaque floor. She slept in the tub.

In the morning, Walden's man found her there. She wondered how long he had knocked on the door before entering. He didn't act surprised about her location, but she suspected he would never show surprise. "I'll come back for you in an hour."

An hour later, they proceeded to the bee launch area in the trunk of the Tree. She sank into a low leather seat inside the bee and watched the furious, blurred action of the wings as they buzzed to the construction site of Walden's newest, and still secret, project. Walden's assistant flew the bee around giant concrete pads, one on each side of the Chicago River. They appeared large enough for multi-story buildings, and she wondered whom and how much Walden had paid to avoid bureaucratic entanglements and undue public exposure.

Some, at least, weren't happy about it. She spotted about a hundred protesters walking a large circle near the entrance to the south foundation. She couldn't see any placards, but knew that at least one stated, "AIN: Architecture Perverting Nature."

The bee alighted next to the construction office. Walden talked to a worker in a hard-hat.

While she and her silent guide waited, she noticed him glance at her. She returned his gaze, but he looked away.

Walden saw them and waved them over. "Well, Suzanne," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a comb, "now that you've seen the foundations from the air, what do you think we're building?" He combed his nearly perfect hair.

She considered. "Gate posts to the city of Chicago?"

Walden grinned, shifting from foot to foot, like a dog waiting for a treat. "I'll give you a hint. Each pad gets a shoe!"

Walden's man stared at her as though she was about to say something important, as though this were a test.

"A person?" she asked.

"Yes! A man." Walden grinned and sketched a quick check mark in the air.

She directed her eyes at Walden, but peripherally noticed the other man's shoulders sag. "How tall will he be?" It seemed to be the right thing to say.

Walden put his left arm around Suzanne's shoulder and started walking her toward the river, holding his other hand out to paint a picture. "Look at the spread of the feet, Suzanne. Fifty yards. Imagine a man astride the river, chest out, muscled arms crossed. The message?" He ran an imaginary marquee in front of her. "The city that works, the company that works, Colossal Engineering."

She saw a man in a boat fishing the river.

Walden stepped in front of her, holding both her shoulders. "He'll be 800 feet tall, Suzanne, and," he pivoted to point at the sky, "you could be working right up there when it's done. In the teeth of the AIN revolution."

Her gaze fell from the sky to gauging the distance across the river. She wondered how they could support such a structure, an 800-foot tall sail on two footings. Wouldn't the wind in the Windy City blow it over?

AIN indeed.

The visionary disappeared. Walden's man moved closer. "He went into the office for a moment. He asked me to answer any questions you might have."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind talking to one of the architects or micromech programmers. I can't imagine how he's going to keep this thing standing without sacrificing most of the space inside to structural elements. Super-Light, Double-Buckyball isn't going to solve this problem."

"Mr. Walden has chosen to progress beyond SLDB construction. This structure will be composed of substances more like skin, muscle, and bone. The muscles will be computer-controlled to keep the whole thing standing, just like you stand, with constant flexing and relaxing of many muscles. A-I-N."

Startled as she was, she heard his sarcasm leave each word in ribbons, especially the spelling of AIN. She stared out over the river, then murmured, "He's going to use micromechs to build an AIN colossus, an enormous man."

She turned full circle, looking over the site, then smiled. This is the company for me, she thought. Colossal leads the way. Everyone else only follows. She pictured herself, standing in the eye of the colossus looking out over the city. Forget the teeth. She would keep a private bee and wear air-conditioned, beaver fur suits and do lunch with celebrities and politicians, and she would have an assistant do whatever it was Walden's man did when he wasn't a tour guide for job candidates. "What are the materials for assembly?"

He shrugged. "I'm not familiar with the details, but it's what you would expect, protein strings, water, minerals. The same building blocks humans require. The result is not exactly cells, arteries, and bones, but something close. I'm told the artificial skeleton will be remarkably strong for its weight."

She noticed a crowd gathering at the far edge of the concrete pad and walked over.

He followed her. "They're about to set off the micromechs to build a rock with a plaque to commemorate the site. Why they couldn't use one of the rocks on the riverbank, I don't know."

She looked at him, but he was gazing at piles of sand, gravel, lime, water, and other materials.

A hard-hat stood by. A micromech programmer typed a last command and stepped back. "Everyone behind the lines please."

When the area was clear, micromechs exploded from their tube, racing to predestined tasks like ants on fast-forward, some carrying materials, some carrying other micromechs smaller than she could see.

Three minutes later the plaque appeared as if it had been there all along. She'd seen such demonstrations before, but they always amazed her. So instant. So clean. The results so AIN.

Her companion shook his head slowly, then turned. "Mr. Walden is over by the bee, Ms. Finch."

They landed at a nearby restaurant. Suzanne ordered trout, but it tasted bland. Walden talked more about the project. When he finished presenting a particular image, he would close his eyes and savor a bite of his steak.

Walden's man waited in the bee.

As they buzzed back to the site, she saw a convoy of refrigerated trucks exiting the expressway with police stopping traffic.

Walden rubbed his palms together. "Tomorrow is it, Suzanne. The big day. Six hours and the whole thing will be done, right down to the air conditioning, water in the toilets, and beer in the fridge." His eyes glinted, but he didn't look at her.

After they landed, Walden disappeared again. Suzanne walked to the riverbank. A dead fish bobbed in the water, white belly shining in the sunlight.

Walden's man asked, "How does it feel to be interviewing with Walden?"

"Fine." She nodded. "It feels fine." But, she didn't feel fine. Walden's plan to build a giant man using new technology had stunned her. The Tree was created from composite, SLDB stuff – all proven, durable, trusted. It swayed a fraction in the wind, but withstood shear forces through balanced tension and compression. She didn't think skin, bone, and muscle would size well even if Colossal's numbers added up to a practical structure. Beyond the technicalities, building a giant man didn't seem very AIN. It reminded her more of Frankenstein's monster than the Tree.

The man next to her coughed into his hand. "'Glorious', is what my son calls the Tree, but I can't imagine what makes people think it's anything other than impertinent."

Suzanne blinked.

He stared at the top of the Tree, the only portion visible from their location. "There is a modesty in nature that can't be copied, certainly not at 15 times the scale." He looked at her directly. "Don't you think there is a conceit in AIN?"

She turned to the river. The dead fish had drifted away. Three sea gulls flapped above, screaming and cackling at each other. "The clients like it, so who are we to argue?"

He kicked a stone into the water. "There's a Texas oil man who lives in Colorado. All hat and no cattle. He had Colossal build a duplicate of that tree near Boulder. Two hundred acres of Colorado blue spruce were shaved from the earth to make room for the proportional first floor and the ancillary construction roads and parking and photo-taking overlooks." Heaving a sigh, he rested his elbows on the railing. His head and neck sagged between his shoulders like a burden.

Then, he straightened and looked at her.

She thought he was about to tell her something important, a secret perhaps, but Walden had seen them and was walking over.

Walden looked on the verge of skipping. "Tomorrow morning at 10, you'll see Colossal Engineering in action, Suzanne." He patted her arm. "I've got to stay and straighten out a few things, so I'll see you then." He nodded once to his assistant and strode off.

When she returned to her suite for the evening, she found that someone had

placed carpets on the floor.

The next morning Walden met them at his bee. "I hope you slept well last night, Suzanne. Did you watch the site's overnight activity at all?"

"No." She hadn't looked. "Part of the Tree is in the way of getting a really good view."

They stopped at the azalea-shaped parking garage so Walden could talk to someone about press parking and a shuttle bee. As they buzzed down to the site, Suzanne understood the reason for that preparation. Blankets, coolers, lawn chairs, portable lavatories, and spectators filled every inch unoccupied by vehicles. People lounged on the grass, sat in the backs of pickups, and perched on top of busses and vans. Off to the east, the press chattered and flitted, talking to, photographing, and filming people in the crowd. Anywhere with a view was packed, and the construction wouldn't start until 10 AM.

They all had come to see Walden build something; it didn't even matter what. Even the "similar uniques," waving their signs and shaking their fists, had arrived to learn about this giant secret.

When Suzanne, Walden, and his man disembarked, Walden ran a comb through his hair. "I won't see you until tomorrow just before you leave. Enjoy the rest of your stay. I'm sure the interviews tomorrow will go fine." He shook her hand, then headed for the construction office.

His assistant led her to a transparent, single-story, air-conditioned observation building that had appeared overnight.

She watched the last of the trucks maneuvering into their assigned spots. She noticed demonstrators arguing with police on horseback near the truck entrance, and wondered what they hoped to gain. No cameras pointed in their direction and the police would not allow disruption. The public liked Walden, especially in Chicago. If the press paid no attention, the public wouldn't either.

She intended to point out the demonstrators, but her companion's gaze darted around the construction site, distracting her. "Do you think this colossus is as impertinent as the Tree?" She tried to start a conversation.

"Arrogant." He turned his upper body to face her without moving his feet. "What do you think?"

She looked back at the site. "I think as a representation of Colossal Engineering, this man will make Walden a lot of money." She adopted the company line, but wished they were building something else, something more within her grasp of architecture, more like a building.

She retrieved a bottle of grapefruit juice from a beverage cart. An ambulance weaved through the crowd toward a man prone on the grass. Probably the heat, she thought. Her grapefruit juice tasted sour. It wasn't the pink kind.

Walden held a brief press conference, broadcast for the employees and the world, during which he revealed and explained his secret, capping it by drawing an analogy to Chicago.

Then, he raised his hands and made a chopping motion.

She watched micromechs swarm out of hundreds of tubes on both sides of the

Chicago River. Many flowed into the materials trucks and back out. A few stowed the empty tubes. Others gathered at the base of or climbed the concrete pads, carrying millions of micro-assembly mechs tiny enough to move proteins around.

By 10:30 the micromechs had finished the shoes. Fifteen minutes later the legs began to appear. The scene looked as if an invisible artist slowly had sketched form and color in a line drawing with the city as a background.

"This is going to be big," she said.

"Yes." Her companion nodded. "Big indeed."

Suzanne sat in a front row of seats, transfixed by the progress. By noon, tight khaki shorts covered the hips and waist and accentuated tanned legs. Occasionally, the leg muscles flexed during a windy gust. A chain of trucks revolved through the main supply area, filling and emptying in countless revolutions. An orange liquid oozed from the top of the structure and down the sides, but some of the micromechs acted as janitors, cleaning the mess as it occurred.

She realized that the build team likely had practiced on smaller projects to arrive at this degree of precision.

"You look surprised." Walden's man must've been watching her.

She stood, thinking he was testing her. "Why did you tell me the imitation of nature is arrogant? Were you told to test my loyalty? To undermine me? Did you think I was a protester here to sabotage the construction?"

He looked at her, perhaps calculating an answer.

"Don't feed me a line," she said. "This is just between you and me."

He was silent for a moment longer, watching the construction. "I used to be an architect. I retired three years ago when my company was bought out by Colossal. They bought it at a tax sale. They bought the client list, but with the new AIN architecture and micromech construction and Double-Buckyball, well, the profession has changed completely. Walden left my company's architects on the stoop. I needed a job, so I stayed on as Mr. Walden's personal assistant."

"You're trying to avoid my question."

He sighed, held up his hands, dropped them. "Mr. Walden is not behind any of my questions, nor is he behind anything related to AIN we've discussed. He is unaware of what we've said and will remain so unless you choose to tell him."

She had studied AIN because nature fascinated her. Nature was so impressive, creating such unlikely and improbable constructions. She wanted to learn so much from it. "Why do you call it arrogant to imitate?"

He smiled, a first. "If I were to take one of your projects and reproduce it using my own methods of building and making it twice as big, would I have designed something new?"

She shook her head. "No, I suppose not."

"Yet, wouldn't my building be more impressive because it was larger? Your small structure would most likely pale in comparison. What if Walden built pyramids 10 times larger next to the ancient ones? How would people view the originals? Would they still evoke awe? Would people still wonder how the Egyptians could possibly have built them so precisely so long ago?"

"AIN architects value nature." She valued nature. "We're paying homage to nature, to the natural forms that appeal to humans. Few people find a douglas fir ugly, and

there are very few buildings that get such unanimous praise as the Tree.”

They looked out at the construction again. The micromechs were at the neck. The wider parts of the construction had appeared to be sculpted from air, but formation of the neck seemed like a picture sliding out of a printer. A sea gull swept by and picked off one of the spider-like mechs.

“It’s not arrogant,” she said. It’s a way to build buildings that people naturally like. Any company that can’t build what the customer wants will go out of business, just like yours went out of business. AIN is where the money is. It’s here to stay. It’s the future.”

Only the giant man’s hair was still under construction. The face had a quirky, aggressive stare with unblinking eyes. He moved and flexed in the breeze. Hair appeared around the ears.

She gaped in sudden recognition. With a perfect body, perfect smile, and perfect attitude, there was no mistaking it. Walden had made *himself* the Colossus of Chicago.

At school, Suzanne had never considered such an arrogant, even belligerent exaggeration of the AIN concept. She had studied the Tree, of course, but she always thought of it as an icon of AIN, not the start of a larger-than-life theme park. The colossus had become an absurd bastardization of a high principle.

She looked back at Walden’s man. He turned to look at her. Did he appear satisfied? Perhaps a little smug? He nodded to the colossus.

Complete, it was bald except for the hair on the sides of its head. The top of its head actually shined.

She laughed out loud and looked at Walden’s man. “What’s your name?”

He returned her gaze, smiling. “Anthony,” he said. “Anthony Walden. That’s my son.” He pointed again at the form outside. “The way nature intended.”

AIN indeed, Suzanne thought.

Lancelot Nova and the Hidden Peril

By
Tim McDaniel

"And now, Lancelot Nova, you will meet your doom!" crowed Drig the Dread. His tiny, piggy eyes – all three of them – glowed red, and his tusks clacked. "And when you are dashed against the rocks at the base of this cliff, your red blood sinking into the blue desert of this alien world, you will be unable to warn Earth of my cunning plan. The Terra Defense Rangers will be caught unaware when my marauder fleet pounces!"

The hot suns of Trilgar beat upon Lancelot and sweat creased his brow. He faced Drig's battalion, their yellow faces glistening not from heat, but from battle lust, their tails punctuating this murderous craving by beating the dusty ground. Behind Lancelot a few short steps was the cliff's edge and a very long fall. He threw his drained blaster at Drig's scaly feet. "You'll never win, Drig! We of Earth have never tolerated tyranny. We'll fight!"

"Ah, you will try, of that I am sure," said Drig nodding, drool sliding from his protruding lower lip. "In the past you bested Morkar the Alarming, fought Ixor the Insensitive to a standstill, and defeated the Spidermen of Ullock-tos. Most impressive." His tusks clapped thrice in acknowledgement. "But now, Ranger, you have met your match," he jabbed his own chest, "in me. I will crush you and your miserable little planet!" He turned to his minions. "Attack, minions!"

The battalion surged forward, forgoing their decomposer guns and reaching instead with their taloned digits to grasp and rip Lancelot's throat and limbs. Their howls and bellows vibrated across the valley below.

Lancelot stepped back, and the ground crumbled under his heel. Jaw set, he met the onslaught with the only weapons he had left, his powerful fists and even quicker wits. Each blow laid warriors low or catapulted them over the cliff, but they pressed in, unceasing, ugly yellow faces, piercing claws, slitted red eyes, nasty body odors, all forcing him back toward that long fall and the boulders below....

"Uh huh," said Joe Spinuzza, Lancelot's next-door neighbor, leaning against the white picket fence that separated their yards. He glanced at his atomimower clipping his grass, looked back. "Then what'd you do, Lance?"

"Well, Joe, my friend," said Lancelot, absently polishing the hood of his sleek, silver hovercar with his uniform sleeve, "I suddenly thought of a ruse. I stepped backward, feigning a fall off the cliff. In reality, I landed catlike on a small ledge, which I had noted earlier.

"Thinking me dead, the prideful Drig and his battalion never looked for my body on the rocks far below." Lancelot smirked and his tone deepened. "It was their undoing."

"Uh huh. Wouldn't that guy's name be 'Drig the Dreaded'? That makes better sense grammatically."

"Ah, no." Lancelot shook his head. "A common misconception among civilians. It is 'Drig the Dread'."

"Mmm."

"Anyway," Lancelot's voice resumed an excited cadence, "I climbed sideways and up, reaching for far flung, precarious handholds and slicing my fingers on protruding rocks. Gravel nicked my face and foul dust blew into my eyes, but I regained the cliff edge. After pausing for breath, I espied Drig and his brutes, then saw – horror of horrors! – the Silverfish Marauders, row upon row of Drig's deadly starships. Their pulsing green engines indicated their readiness for launch. Earth and its innocent citizens would be destroyed!

"I catapulted myself towards the fleet. Drig and his battalion came within inches of trapping me yet again in their vicious claws, but I dove into the cockpit of the nearest ship just by the skin of my teeth. I throttled the engines, incinerating those goons underneath, and took her up, blasting the exhaust against the fuel tanks of the other ships—"

"Yeah." Joe interrupted. "You know, my lawn's looking a little brown. Think I need some fertilizer?"

"Of course, all the other ships exploded in a devastating chain reaction. Soon, the entire fleet was ruined. I saw but a few wretched survivors wandering deaf and blind among the twisted wreckage." Lancelot's smile sparkled as he lodged his hands on his hips and straightened his shoulders so his chest stretched the white fabric of his Ranger uniform.

"Uh huh, and this Dreaded Drig – you get him, too?"

Lancelot shook his head. "Of him, I saw no sign. But if he survived the day, I hope he learned his lesson."

"Yeah, that's good." Joe was bending over, fiddling with the atomimower that had returned and switched to a low idle.

Lancelot gracefully propped an elbow on the fence. "But enough of me, Joe. How're things at the reclamation plant?"

"Oh, can't complain. One of the units backed up. We spent half the morning redistributing loads. Not fun, I can tell you, but at least I'm not one of the guys laid off last week, so there's that." Joe finished tinkering, straightened, and popped some gum into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully. "Oh, then some fool flushed one of those scorpion-pigs into the sewer. Cute when they're young, but they thrive down there, growing huge and very mean. Took most of an afternoon to get it caught."

Lancelot's attention had wandered to the cloudless sky.

"But the space hero thing is working out for you, that's good. Keeping you busy, then, are they?"

"Rather!" Lancelot's gaze popped back to Joe. "Everyday is a race against time to see who the ultimate conquerors of the galaxy will be – stalwart humans or ilk such as Drig's mindless drones, or the wormwraiths of Stilgar VI, or...say, did I tell you about the time I—"

"Oh, that's good." Joe headed toward his garage, the atomimower following at his heels.

"Yes, definitely. Well, my wife and son – and a steak! – are awaiting my return." Lancelot turned to mount the three steps to his front door.

Joe paused and eyed Lancelot. "It must be hard on your missus, being a Ranger too but doing the housework, laundry, yard work, taking care of your boy, all that. How's she been these days?"

"Just fine, Joe. Thank you for asking."

"Mmm." Joe looked doubtful. "Well, see you, Lance. Don't forget the block party next Saturday."

"Right." Lancelot leaped the steps and opened the front door in one fluid motion. "Honey, I'm—"

"Home? Good." Stella Nova said from the sofa, her six-foot frame curled on the sofa. She flicked back a lock of long, blonde hair and put down some papers. "The atomizer is still on the blink, Lance. I thought you were going to get it taken care of."

Lancelot kissed his wife on the cheek, then headed for the kitchen. "I'll fix it in just a little while." Returning, he opened a bottle of Venusian ale and dropped down on the sofa next to her.

She edged away. "That's what you've been saying all week."

"I'm sorry, Stella, dear. Today I was involved in a titanic struggle against the forces of Drig the Dread." He drank deeply. "It was a close thing. I think, not since my last battle with Ixor the Insensitive have I been so perilously close to death."

Stella blinked. "Well, I got a call from the school today, too. Melvin is struggling with Early Galactic History."

"I'll have a talk with the boy."

"I told you, Lance. We need to get him a tutor."

"Nonsense, dear. I'll work with him, get him up to speed. Soon as I can find the time." He sighed, relaxing further into the sofa tufts.

The vidphone rang.

"I'll get it." Stella darted for the unit and turned the screen away. Covering the mouthpiece with one hand, she pointed to the kitchen with the other. "Lance, why don't you go to the kitchen? Your steak should be coming out of the dispenser any time now."

"Great!"

As Stella smiled at the vidphone and spoke softly into its receiver, Lancelot entered the kitchen. Fragrant steam gushed from the dispenser's vent. He opened the hatch and retrieved his prized cut of beef. "Ah, most excellent!" He grabbed his steak knife and fork, set his plate on the table, and...ketchup. His meal wouldn't be complete without ketchup, he thought.

He poked his head in the living room.

"...maybe not the right time..." Stella murmured.

"Sweetheart, where's my Eridanian ketchup?"

She covered the mouthpiece. "Where it always is, second shelf in the vacufridge!"

Seated at the table, surrounded by all the proper condiments and utensils, Lancelot sliced into the meat covered in bright green ketchup, chewed his delectable first bite, and felt contented.

"...no, he wouldn't even notice for days if..."

"Are you coming, dear?" Lancelot called.

"I have to go, lcky....later...I promise. Bye."

Stella entered the kitchen and pulled her own meal from the dispenser.

"Was that call for me?" Lancelot asked.

"No. Just a, um, a salesman. A salesman, with, a, a wrong number." She sat opposite Lancelot and dug into her chicken salad.

"Ah. Good. I thought it might be the colonel with some fresh emergency among the stars." Lancelot smiled and winked at his lovely wife, found the newspaper on the table where the housebot had thoughtfully left it for him, and read the headlines. "'Pizgot the Petulant Implicated in Sex Scandal.'" He chuckled. "Oh, that guy. Again?"

Every couple of minutes his fork would emerge from behind the paper to spear another chunk of steak.

"Melvin's eating with Tag Lightfire's family tonight."

"Huh?" Lancelot noticed the empty chair. "Oh. That's nice." He returned to his paper.

"At least he's not with the Ender kid again, playing that silly game all day," she said.

Lancelot chewed noisily.

"He took the dog with him. The *Lightfires'* restrictor field is working just fine. You know, Joe's too nice to complain, but that dog of ours has been leaving little presents on his lawn."

"The restrictor field is out, right." Lancelot's paper rattled. "I'll see what I can make of it."

"I had quite a rough day today myself out beyond—"

"Uh huh. Listen, Stel, honey, can we talk about that a bit later? I'm just reading the paper here."

"All right, Lance. If you say so."

"But be sure to tell me later." He peered over the top edge of the newspaper at her. "I am vitally interested. I really am." He winked at her again and went back to reading.

"Oh, sure. I just thought I'd mention it, because you might notice the scar. I lost my left arm fighting a Zenzorian muckdragon, and had to have it replaced. The doctor says the itching—"

"Mmmm hmmm."

"Well, I guess I'll tell you that later too."

"Fine, darling." The fork stabbed porcelain. "Is there any more steak?"

"I'll get it."

"Great." Lancelot put down the paper. "I really ran up my appetite today. I was hanging on a sheer cliff face, a horde of Drig's thugs howling for blood above me. But where's Melvin? He'd want to hear this."

That night Lancelot clicked on his favorite purple mood light in the Nova master bedroom and snuggled into bed beside Stella.

"Lance, please, not now." She edged further onto her side.

"I'm a red-blooded Earthman, Mrs. Nova, with typical red-blooded desires."

She sighed. "Yeah, except for that time with Jack."

Lancelot's tongue clicked. "A youthful indiscretion, Stella. I haven't talked to him for weeks. Days, anyhow."

"I don't blame you, Lance." She rolled over to look at his face highlighted in dim purple. "He's got a cute b—"

"If you say so, dear. I haven't noticed." He looked away for a moment.

"You two are assigned to work together in sector 101 next week, right? The colonel says you requested—"

"Oh, maybe. I think so. I don't remember. Now," he reached for her, "about those desires...."

"Lance, I'm all doped up to stop the awful itch in my arm. It makes me nauseous."

"Oh, you know it won't take long, dearest." He snuggled closer. "Just let me—"

"Lance, no!"

She squeezed him – pinched, actually – in a sensitive area and he backed off.

"Okay, okay. I just thought you'd want to give me a pleasant memory for next week when I'm off patrolling sector 101."

"With Jack Darkstarr?"

"Mmm. You know, there've been indications of serious trouble in that sector. The colonel suspects Morkar the Alarming has been building a new base somewhere in the vicinity. Oh, that reminds me. Is my uniform clean for tomorrow?"

"Yes, I washed it when I did my own...and...how about Ixor the Insensitive? Do you think he'll be back, Lance?"

Lancelot folded his arms under his head with a sigh. "Oh, I think old Ixor has finally learned not to tangle with me. There hasn't been a peep out of him in months."

"Maybe he's planning something."

"No doubt his devious mind is even now working on some insidious plot. Whatever it is, you can bet your asteroid he'll stay as far away from me as he can...and from you, too, of course, dear. You've had dealings with him yourself, I know."

"Yes."

He turned on his side toward his wife. "But about those all-too-human needs that I have...."

"Oh, Lance, for Pete's sake!"

As it turned out, Morkar the Alarming had built a secret base from which his minions issued to menace the peace-loving peoples of the galaxy. Lancelot gained the upper hand and restored stability in the far away sector 101 though his ship was destroyed in the process, delaying his return home.

A black hovercar blocked the driveway, requiring Lancelot to park on the street in front of Joe's house. He waved to his neighbor. "Hello, Joe."

Joe nodded while putting together some contraption of hollow metal poles and chains.

Lance walked to the fence. "I guess I have company." He gestured at the black

hovercar. "Know who it is?"

"Uh...no, Lance. I guess Stella's having friends over or something."

"Stella's home? I thought she was on assignment."

"Yeah, she's home. I saw her out earlier working on the restrictor field."

"Ah," Lancelot tapped his forehead, "I meant to get to that myself. What are you working on, Joe? Looks awfully complicated."

"Oh, just a swing set for the kids." Joe sat back on his knees.

"Why, that's ingenious. Perhaps Melvin will be over to try it out after you complete it."

"He'd be welcome." Joe smiled, brushed his hands against his jeans. "I'm about ready for a break. Have a beer with me, Lance?"

"Thanks, Joe. No more time for chatting. I've got a wife, a son, and a steak waiting for me inside!"

"Another time, then."

Lancelot bounded inside. "Honey, I'm..."

Stella was lugging a flight bag toward the front door and Melvin followed her with his own bag. Behind them, a familiar horned, demonic visage leered.

An icy hand clutched Lancelot's heart. "Ixor the Insensitive!" he gasped. "How dare you reach into my home and attempt to snatch away that which is most dear to me!"

"Lance!" Stella dropped her bag.

"Fear not, my darlings!" Lancelot held one hand out to shield her and Melvin, and snatched his blaster from its holster with the other.

Stella swatted away Lancelot's gun, then backhanded him across the face.

"Sorry, dear."

He crumpled to the floor, dazed.

Stella, Melvin, and Ixor the Insensitive stepped over him.

Lancelot was powerless to stop them. He struggled just to sit up.

His wife and son threw their bags into the black hovercar. Ixor opened the passenger door for Stella, lifted Melvin into the back seat, and slid into the driver's seat. The ignition started.

"Stella?" Lancelot couldn't believe his eyes.

The family dog brushed by him, bounding out the door and into the car.

No, it couldn't be, he thought. Lancelot staggered to his feet. "Stella!" He took two halting steps.

The black hovercar backed out of the driveway.

Lancelot found himself dashing across the yard, a plan already forming in his mind. Yes, he would leap into the car, and....

He slammed into an invisible wall and slid to the grass. Every inch of his body throbbed.

Stella got out, placed the restrictor field remote control on the driveway, and walked over to Lancelot. "I fixed it myself and boosted it a bit." Her smile sparkled. She kneeled to Lancelot's eye level. "I'm sorry it had to be this way, Lance. I met Icky when we were both marooned on the ice moon of Algol VII. I, I tried to tell you about it, but you wouldn't listen. Later, we ran into each other in the fetid swamps of...oh, it's no use. I wanted to talk to you, but you and I don't..." She sighed, shaking her head, and stood

up. "We're in love, Lance. Completely in love! And he's a great father to Melvin. Don't worry, of course you'll still be able to see him. We'll work out visitation via hyperwave." She walked back to the car and got in. "Goodbye, Lance. Take care."

"Farewell, Lancelot Nova!" crowed Ixor the Insensitive, an arm around Stella.

The car soared away.

"Sorry, Lance."

Lancelot's gaze traveled from the hovercraft's exhaust to his neighbor's yard.

Joe was trimming his roses. "Tough break, huh?"

"I can't believe it," Lancelot said, shaking his head. "I just can't believe it." He stumbled back inside and collapsed into his chair. The delicious smell of cooked beef did not waft from the kitchen. Melvin's room did not echo with the sound of his three-vee. Stella did not greet him or offer her soft cheek for a kiss.

Lancelot Nova was entirely alone, lost, bereft of companionship and sympathy. He slumped further into his chair, brooding.

Later, his hand, as if of its own accord, snaked to the vidphone console. He punched in a number.

"Darkstarr residence," answered a deep voice.

"Hello, Jack?"

Diminishing Returns

By

Lindsey Duncan

Brioc studied her reflection in the stained mirror and couldn't ignore it any longer: she was thinner than she had been in the last town and shorter than she had been on the other side of border. At first she had taken it for anxiety and the many miles she had traveled since assuming her role as a Lioslaith spy, but there was no doubt now she was losing substance.

She put her hand on the tarnished frame and leaned in, not sure why she couldn't cry. The weathered boards of the inn breathed around her, a thin barrier to the city beyond. She had to be careful now, could not shift her shape so frequently, but she could not stop – not when her home country had recruited her for just that talent, not when they were counting on her.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" she asked the russet-haired blur in the mirror.

She calmed herself with an aborted shiver. If every time she changed she grew a little smaller, then, well, she could ration her changes, plan for them, keep an eye on her size. It might even be a good thing, for she had always been far too tall and built like a boy. She had something to lose.

She had everything to lose.

Brioc moved to the window, working the rusty catch until it popped out. She pushed open the shutters and let in a gust of late summer heat. Vendors hawked their wares in a melodic, aggressive cant and a rich, steamy perfume drifted down from the Avenue of Flowers. The city of Tennenun was a place of impossible variety to someone who had been born in a town that consisted of two crossed mud-paths and one brick building for shelter from bandits.

She leaned out the window until she could see the massive obsidian bulk of the Royal Archives. Deep within the twisting passages, a locked chamber housed the most secret portents of the House of Seers. Just the thought of holding it made her breath quicken. She would need to change once to get the key she needed, a second time to gain admittance to the chamber...

...she changed a third time to evade the guards on her way out, the bulky sheath of pages held close to her chest. Cold black stone loomed overhead. Brioc ran her fingers along the parchment, feeling disoriented. How could these plain pages contain such importance?

She kept her head down as she threaded into the servants' courtyard, burnt red and smoldering under the midday sun. A minor scribe leaned against the city gate, chatting with a dowdy woman with ribbons in Tir-Tennetun colors braided in her hair.

"None other than the Marchioness, Senara Isenham Tir-Elsdyn," the scribe said.

The servant rubbed her hands together. "What brings her to the city?"

Brioc would have stepped past them, but a cart blocked her way. She shunted the package against her hip and tried not to panic. It was just a matter of keeping calm a few minutes longer.

"Think she aims to court the young Tennetun heir. Would make the city part hers, soon as the family office changes hands."

"Not the father?" The woman looked surprised.

"Why waste youth and beauty on a—" The scribe cleared his throat. "Well, not to say that our good lord is without his charming qualities."

Brioc tried to edge through the space between the gate and the cart, but it was not quite wide enough. What was the use of growing smaller if she couldn't even squeeze through a tight space?

"But, my goodness, isn't Senara almost 60?"

"She keeps young by changing her shape," the scribe replied with all the eagerness of a career gossip. Brioc smiled despite her anxiety. And people complained about country women! "Every day a new face."

Someone finally moved the cart, and Brioc slipped onto the street, relief carrying her halfway to the crossroads before she paused.

Every day a new face.

Sixty years.

She had no head for numbers, but she understood how impossible that must be. Even if Senara only changed once or twice a month, the most corpulent woman would be a mere wisp of thread after 60 years.

Senara Isenham had the answer.

Brioc spun into the oaken heft of the inn and sent word to the courier that the package was ready. As soon as the tome of portents was on its way to Lioslaith, she had a mission of her own.

The Tir-Tennetun estate was in such a fluster with the august visitor that Brioc found it easy to pose as a kitchenmaid, and only a little harder to intercept a tray on its way up to her ladyship. The guest chamber overlooked the harbor, the massive stone apertures ensorcelled to keep out the elements. Massive tapestries embroidered with roses dominated the walls, framing its occupant in a visual garden. Even the traveling trunks in the corner did not detract from that impression.

Senara Isenham, Marchioness of Elsdyn, was the prize flower of that garden. Skin the color of shaved ice served as canvas for features of impossible luminosity, her lips scarlet, her eyes azure. Even knowing that Senara's appearance was a handy shapechange, Brioc was intimidated. She didn't need to remind herself to keep her eyes on the floor and her posture humble.

Senara accepted the tray without looking at its bearer. "You may go."

The voice reminded Brioc of winter winds, and she knew that was one thing that was genuine because sound and voice could not be wholly transformed.

Now or never. "Marchioness, I beg an important question of you," said Brioc.

Senara ran one gilded nail along the arm of her chair. "Yes?"

"I know someone who is a shapechanger." Brioc plunged into the question.

"Every time she changes, she loses a little piece of herself. You who are so wise and talented, is there a way to prevent that?"

It did not move Senara. "Do you think I would share such secrets with the common clay? There is a reason I have been so fortunate in my changes. I have earned it." The woman drew breath to dismiss her, then softened. "Tell your friend that to have the ability is a gift unsurpassed, and to use it frugally and with care. It is worth the small price you pay."

Brioc sucked in a breath and with it pulled down all the protests that would say too much. "Then there is a way? Can one become worthy?"

Senara looked her up and down. There was blood in the smile that finally surfaced. "Oh, little one," she said. "You don't want to do that."

She started to protest, then realized there was nothing else to say, not without coming too close to betraying herself. However important it was to have the answer, it would do her no good in the estate dungeons. As she bowed her head and backed out of the room, a small stack of journals on the desk caught her eye.

The estate's defenses did not extend to the guest wing, but Senara had a personal guard. Brioc had several harrowing moments trying to evade them. Had the guards not been a trifle tipsy...well, best not to think about it.

The lock proved impossible, the seams of the door guarded with a spell. Brioc found entrance through the bathroom fireplace, a pit inlaid in the wall that warmed the water pipes. It took her three changes to get through. As she became herself again, she wondered if her fingers were stubbier, her bones brittle in the heat. She bumped into a trunk and winced as something rattled. She peeked inside the trunk and found burgundy wine stored in fine bottles. Why would Senara bring her own vintage? The bottles had no labels, and even Brioc knew that there was no point in a house gift that didn't display its lineage.

She slid the first journal onto her lap with a shuddery breath. It took her several minutes to focus on the words and longer to escape the creeping sensation of grave robbery. Senara made scattered references to her daily ritual; Brioc finally discerned it was some kind of bath. A more recent entry discussed bottling up the substance for it....

The bottles! Could she take one, and not be noticed? Brioc hurried to the chest, a soft tinkle of glass answering the tremor of her hands. One of the corks was loose, so she popped it and dipped in a finger. She recoiled at the taste. Blood! It was blood.

She went back to the journals, trying to find out what kind of animal's blood it was. Maybe only a little bit could help her.

"My guard captain whipped a thief today," one entry read. "Who knew such a brawny lad would not have the strength to survive it? Well, that is more for my bath."

At that instant, silence become of the utmost importance to Brioc. All the cries she could not utter overwhelmed her as she read the words. The blood bath might save

the body from changes, but it could never be worth the price. She thought about running away with the right journals and a bottle, but she could not carry them through the pipes.

Brioc turned for the door, barely thinking this time as she prepared to change. Anything to get out of here. Best to flee now and forget all about this. Brioc set the book aside. Tennenun and allies like Senara were the enemy, of course, but she had thought of them as a pleasant sort of enemy that was only by chance. Now she felt that truth spin around her.

“Well, well.” Senara’s languorous voice wrapped around her, tightening slowly into a vise of iron. “What have we here?”

Brioc whirled, all the prey instincts of the mouse she had almost become bubbling up inside her. “Milady! I—” What excuse could there be for this? “A house servant. Didn’t you send for one? They told me—” Her mind dashed along the lines of the lie, finding the pieces.

“I did not send for the one who so cleverly asked me about a friend of hers.” If Senara sounded amused, it was cold and honed, wielded like a weapon.

Brioc bit down on the protest. She had not taken the same face; she knew better than to make that mistake.

“I can see through your seeming to your heart, Lioslan,” Senara said with a tiny smile. “You show your soul like a bright banner.”

“Blood.” Brioc could not keep from whispering the words. “The blood of—”

“Of men, of women, of babes.” Senara advanced on her, one hand opening. Each finger lengthened in turn, growing a serrated talon. “And one thing more.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” The words were torn from her. “I promise.”

“A token of my own to sweeten the brew.” Senara flowed into the shape of a tiger and lunged.

Brioc shrieked, and the transformation overtook her without thought. A sparrow in flight, she darted for the window and beat her wings against the shutters until they opened a fraction further. She dropped into the night. The wood shattered into a hundred pieces as the great cat followed.

It twisted in mid-air, becoming an eagle, and Brioc plunged with a clumsy, frantic fluting of her wings. She had only practiced transforming into animals a little bit, enough to know that a fraction of animal instinct came with the change. One had to experience, spend time in that form, to gain the benefits. She had not, but Senara might well have.

Brioc had to escape, and the fastest creature she could think of was a lowland gazelle. She stumbled in the garden courtyard, tripped up even on four limbs by the bushes and creeping vines. The eagle shrieked down her neck, but bit by bit Brioc gained distance.

Then the tiger was back, and Brioc was cut off from the trellised walkway to the street. Hooves clattered and refused to turn, and Brioc collided with Senara in her shape.

Brioc’s mind fled for the smallest form she could think of, a fly. Senara chased her as snapping lizard. Its tongue sailed past, missing her by a fraction so small she could not have discerned it as a human. She might have flown out of reach, out of the

garden, but the sensation of having a hundred eyes dizzied her so much that she toppled.

She rolled end over end, reaching out for the next shape she could think of, a rabbit. Senara pursued her as the lizard, those jaws and talons more than robust enough to rip her to shreds. Yet she had no speed, and Brioc put one pace, two, then three between herself and the noblewoman.

Brioc came to a vast expanse of water, and she realized why Senara was in no hurry. Brioc was trapped by the estate lake. Maybe she should turn and fight? No, this frantic chase had taught her that Senara had all the control and experience Brioc lacked, and she might as well bare her throat.

She dove into the water as a salmon.

The hunt continued, relentless, no pause for breath. They escaped the estate and tumbled into the moon-filled streets. One change after another, and Brioc cried, the tears coming out when her shape allowed it. She felt a cold, dull ache in the wake of so many swift changes. She could become human and shout for the guards, but she would never make it. Even if she did, she wouldn't be the same.

Couldn't be, too small to be anything but a child.

Senara stood before her suddenly, not an inch shorter, a mocking succession of features fleeting across her face. "You can't win," she said. "Stand down before you embarrass yourself."

Brioc colored even though the hound she had become was incapable of blushing. "If there's one thing I'm good at," she said. "It's embarrassing myself."

When Senara lunged for her, Brioc turned into a mouse. She squeezed through a crack in the nearest wall that led to a kitchen. She snatched a memory to shapechange into, a niece she missed keenly, as she inwardly said goodbye. There was no escape here.

"Of course that's what you're good at." Senara's scornful voice followed her as she came to the door, a silhouette of perfection's shadow. "Found my little secret did you?"

"Why blood? It's monstrous." Brioc whispered.

"There is no other way," Senara said. "The change devours substance, just as every time you change a clay sculpture, a little bit more of it comes off on your fingers." She lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "One must replace it somehow."

"Dirt and water," Brioc said faintly. "Or perhaps leaves." She backed up until she bumped into a cold hearth.

Senara spoke as if to a child. "You become what you touch," she said. "Would you live your life like that, as a stone, as a tree? I have no use for that."

Dimly, Brioc sensed rescue in the words. "Yes."

Moonlight clarified around the noblewoman; she glanced at Brioc sharply, surprised. "You would, wouldn't you? Perhaps I'll leave you like that." She advanced. "What would you be, then?"

The mockery slid off Brioc as she tried not to hold her breath. "A stone in Lioslaith," she said in a rush, "perhaps a farm-marker—"

Senara laughed, curt, harsh. She lashed out, one hand pinning Brioc's shoulder to the stone hearth. "Here," she said, "right here. I'll be mistress of this city soon enough."

Brioc could have struggled, but she could not survive another shapeshifted battle. Her mind raced, but more seconds, more days, would be enough even if she lived them mute and motionless. "All right. We have a deal."

"We have a—" Senara chuckled. "That implies you have a choice." Her hand moved up to the base of Brioc's small neck with a possessive jerk; she studied the girl like a prize filly. "Release your thoughts. Surrender into it. If you fight," she paused, as if unable to believe her captive even could, "you'll shatter."

Brioc nodded numbly and closed her eyes, trying to put a leash on her thundering heart. Substance for substance, and the loss of all animate life with it. The thought flicked through her head that she could somehow absorb the next person who crossed the hearth, and she recoiled from it. Even the thought of doing that to someone – anyone – made her feel dirty, far too close to Senara.

The idea came home.

Brioc let herself drift, her mind moving with difficulty away from any one thought, especially the one that consumed her. She leaned in, and she reached out, not to the stone, but to the woman who clutched her.

Senara jerked rigid, a sound of pain forming on her lips. "What—"

Brioc saw it only faintly in the moonlight, the twisting of flesh as their arms melded together, bonded as if by an invisible touch. She felt it as if another series of veins moved through hers, pouring in, pouring out, before their minds met.

Memories battered Brioc, court functions slashed across a darkness of methodical murder and a bewildering variety of adopted guises. Senara as a child, calmly tormenting the servant boys until they had to be punished. The faces morphed, sometimes unfamiliar, sometimes pinned with sickening remnants from her own thoughts. Even had she wanted to resist, she could not have found her way. Sculpted together now, seeing through two pairs of eyes, Brioc braced herself and then let go. She was Lioslan, farmer's daughter, novice spy; whatever she had to fear, she could never forget that.

The one became the other became both. Senara fought back so furiously she blotted out everything else. And shattered.

Isolated thoughts tore through Brioc's mind where they did not belong. She smelled memory and jerked as a thousand past moments tried to replay themselves with her body – their body. Brioc gasped, stumbling forward. She landed on one knee and sought, instinctively, the refuge of her own shape.

It was there, as if unaltered from the first time she transformed.

She trembled, trying to piece through the shock to recreate what had happened. She had clothed herself in Senara and absorbed her.

A voice echoed of the inside of her mind, "I'm still here, Lioslan."

Brioc stiffened, but the first twinges of fear died without support from the rest of her. "Good," she said faintly. "You can help me."

"You must be joking." Senara's thought was dry.

"No." It was difficult, putting the thoughts together, but she could see no other way they would take shape. "My country needs to know what you know, and then we

need to repay the people who died.” Quietly, she was stunned by her own audacity, but there was no resistance, not more than a slight stirring in her head.

“You really are a stupid, simple girl, aren’t you?” There was no confidence in Senara’s scorn, or perhaps it was the fact that the voice was only a whisper under others. “This will last you for a while, but what then? You must do what I have to keep yourself alive. You can’t escape it.”

Brioc took a deep breath. She did not know how; she could not see that far. But she also knew that she had everything to lose by giving in.

“No,” she said. “When the time comes, I will find another way.”

Cosmic Music

By

Jason L. Corner

“That’s a dead man’s guitar,” Morphy said. “Don’t buy it.”

Manny looked at him sideways, frowned, then turned back to the guitar.

“Everything’s a dead man’s something here, Morphy. It’s a pawnshop.”

It was an odd-looking guitar, like a zebra with broad black and white stripes roaming across its body. Manny slung it over his shoulders, pulled his long hair out of the way, withdrew one of the many picks he kept in the back pocket of his jeans, and strummed a chord: C-sharp minor. It sang sweetly and hung in the air like the dust illuminated by a sunbeam.

“Hey,” Manny said. “It’s in tune. Can you believe it?”

“Probably Jimmy Chesterton’s ghost plays it at night.”

Manny’s eyes widened. “You’re not serious. Do you really think...?”

“You don’t remember Phreakfest 2003? Dude, if he hasn’t reached up from the grave and pulled it out of your hands, the only reason is that he’s a junkie ghost.”

Manny ignored Morphy and went to the counter, where a surly-looking pierced girl was leafing through the free city weekly, *The Other Paper*, and chewing gum.

“Excuse me,” Manny said. “Can you tell me—”

“Thirty dollars,” she said without looking up.

Manny stopped. “Only 30? This – I mean, I’m not trying to convince you to push the price up – is a really nice instrument. Why is—”

The girl behind the counter looked up with an expression that suggested that saying anything to anyone was like being put in an iron maiden, and deliberately blew a bubble and popped it. “It’s fucking Jimmy Chesterton’s guitar, man. His buddies brought it in when they found him with it. Got fucking dead guy on it. Shit, man.” With a look of queenly boredom, she returned to *The Other Paper*.

That took Manny back. Jimmy Chesterton: he had played with the Tyrannosaurus Lake Band, one of the hottest jam-band acts on the Columbus, Ohio circuit. He thought about the last time he saw Jimmy, outside in a light rain at Phreakfest 2003. Manny stood in the mud, his face and arms tingling with his last joint and the press of a thousand filthy hippies, and Jimmy, gaunt and pale, not in the middle of a blazing 20-minute workout, but leaning against the bass drum, strumming softly and singing almost inaudibly, his beard stringy and glittering with pearls of sweat, his eyes looking like they were a mile behind his head. He was only singing “Happy Birthday.” But he played it in a minor key, and he sang it without love and without irony but merely as a kind of bitter lament – one more birthday, one more step to death. Two weeks later he was dead and

nobody knew why, though people in the know said it was Colonel Heroin in the parlor with a needle.

Manny's first impulse was to put it back. But then he played another chord, A major. His hands felt warm and the sounds were crisp and thin.

"I'll take it," Manny said, handing the guitar over. The girl shifted over to the cash register, pain all over her face like Chinese writing.

"We've got to do something, after all," he said to Morphy. "The band's going in circles. People are leaving before we play and we're stuck playing in the boonies. I want to play at Little Brother's; hell, I want to play some place where people go!"

"You're in a band?" the girl behind the counter said, still looking as if she was being torn apart by ravenous wolves, but for the first time as if the wolves were only *mildly* ravenous.

Manny nodded. Morphy made drumming motions with his hands. "Camel Commando," he said. "We've got a website."

"Cool," the girl said. She blew another bubble. "What kind of music do you play?"

"Ah...*cosmic music*," Manny said, then started to say something else, but stopped.

You get this question a lot when you're in a band, and if you're in a blues band or a Latin band or a death metal band, it's an easy question to answer. People called Camel Commando a "jam band," which was fair enough, and if somebody asked what that meant, people would say, "you know, Phish, the Dead, Widespread Panic," all of which was also, in its way, fair enough. But Manny preferred the term "cosmic music." That was the title of an album by John Coltrane, one of Manny's favorite records, and it didn't sound much like Widespread Panic, but at its heart was what Manny believed in about music, which for Manny was always searching, always changing, always exploring regions that had never been explored before. Always, when you played cosmic music, you never played a song the same way twice; ideally, you never played it in the same *universe* twice. It was John Coltrane *and* Radiohead, it was Jimi Hendrix *and* Palestrina. Sitar, you say? They've had cosmic music in India for a long time. So Manny didn't say anything else.

The girl went back to her titanicly Byronic grimaces and handed Manny the guitar. Out on High Street, Morphy lit a cigarette and said, "Go ahead. Buy your dead-guy guitar. But if his zombie comes for you in the night, can I look after Glenda? Your woman's going to need some man-love when you're in the ground."

"You're not funny, man." But Manny's thoughts were drifting away already, moving around the sound of the A major, which still seemed to be floating in the air. He couldn't wait to play the guitar again.

Manny hadn't even plugged the guitar in and it already felt warm in his hands, like a big cheesy pizza slice on a Saturday night.

The stage at Oldfield's on High was backed against the wall, bar to the right, pool tables to the left, and a brown streak of floor in front of it. Your goal was to steer your audience through that Scylla-and-Charybdis pathway, to keep them in the middle, dancing and digging, not sucked away by distractions that left you cracked on the rocks. Manny had a good feeling about this night, not least because of the guitar, but also

because Glenda was there. Glenda, lithe and brunette, wearing a black turtleneck, flowered skirt, and one of her trademark floppy hats, sat at the bar with a gin and tonic glittering in her hand.

“Let’s start,” John Wenke, Camel Commando’s vocalist and bassist said.

Morphy sat down behind the drum set with a clatter and gave four clicks of the sticks.

Manny started to play. The guitar was in tune – it didn’t seem to go out of tune – and his hands felt fresher and faster when he played it, like young butterflies just emerged from their cocoons. He watched Glenda as he played, his mind half in the music, half in thoughts of her. He never quite felt like he really had her, and it worried him.

Then the second chorus cycled through, and Manny started to solo. The first note he hit, though, was misfingered, the wrong note. But Manny suddenly thought, *Let’s let that wrong note be the note; let’s wave that flag.*

And he played it again, adding swooping arcs of feedback so the note hung in the air with the cigarette smoke until every molecule of air vibrated with ecstatic wrongness. And then Manny piled more notes on top of it, equally wrong in relation to everything else, but perfectly right in relation to that one starting tone. He was totally unconscious of his fingers and totally conscious of the idea of what he was playing. Squeezing his eyes shut, he could see the architecture, shimmering like a tower with spirals chasing each other around the tower, one black, one white.

And he heard a voice at his ear that was definitely not John’s: a resonant North Carolina voice. *You’ve almost got it. Just step forward.*

Manny was terrified and he almost stopped playing. But his hands kept going, and they felt right, and Manny could almost taste the music like sweet wine on his lips. He took a staggering step forward, careful not to fall off the stage, and he smelled desert grass mingled with a strong animal odor, and he thought he heard a distant whinny.

And then he opened his eyes.

Oldfield’s was full of people. They were all dancing like madness.

“You never came over the other night,” Glenda said. “I waited up for hours. Get high and forget where I live, baby?”

Manny shrugged at sipped at his water. He usually drank beer at gigs but lately it felt too heavy in his stomach. “Just tired, I guess.”

His immediate past came to him out of order just then, with dream and reality confused. He had stopped by his place after the last gig at Oldfield’s; his intention had been to drop off his gear, grab some clean clothes and go to Glenda’s apartment. He had done all that and then gotten an idea, ninth-chords in seven-four time. He sat down on his bed to try it out. The rest of the night was an epic variation on that riff, notes appearing to him as glowing spider webs when he closed his eyes.

“*Quoi que, monsieur,*” she said, pushing her floppy hat backwards and reaching out with a napkin to dab a streak of water from his cheek. Saying that was one of her things; it was a stilted and probably ungrammatical translation of “whatever, mister,” and it rhymed, the *que* coming out like “cur.”

Morphy came over and draped his arms over Glenda’s shoulders. She didn’t

frown and she didn't smile. "We're on, dude," he said.

Camel Commando was back at Oldfield's. The air was getting warmer and the Ohio State students were walking the streets in squadrons of corn-fed blonde Midwestern girls in belly shirts and glittering bird-trap earrings, busy shaking the farm out of their hair like so much hay.

Manny waited for just the right moment to send it up. He held back through "Tutankhamen," and he held back through "Blue Cherry Hop," and he held back through "Goin' to Alaska," until he felt like an Indian god achieving Tantric enlightenment on behalf of the cosmos.

The next song was called "Iras Dei." Manny had written it as kind of a Coltrane tribute; he had always thought of it as his attempt at the essence of cosmic music. It had rattling car-crash parts and holy hush parts. As he started the riff that began the song, he relaxed the little knots in his shoulders and let himself go, let himself flow.

Manny played through the song, through the instrumental parts, through the second chorus and the bass breakdown. Then he began his solo. He could see, in his head, all at once, the map of it. It would start very thin and grow thicker until it ended in a big glowing circle. The details themselves were a little fuzzy – he was making them up as he went along – but he knew how the story would end, with a big rich round chord, the likes of which had never been played in this song, maybe in this bar, maybe in the state of Ohio, before.

He looked around as he was playing. Morphy was distracted, looking at something in the audience. But John Wenke, occasionally uttering a cheesy "Yeah, man!" in the microphone, was fixated on him, almost hypnotized. Glenda danced in front of the stage, and plenty of other people, doing that up-and-down chicken dance with their elbows that people did for jam bands. Manny nodded, knowing that they wouldn't believe what was coming. It loomed ahead of him, the glowing disk at the climax of the cone-shaped solo he was playing. In the meantime, the groove behind him rose in intensity, like the clattering skeleton of a thousand-headed Anklyosaur.

And it came. He played the chord.

And everything was light.

He was standing in a plain with an uninterrupted horizon on both sides. The grass came up to his waist and the wind spurred it to caress his legs. He was naked.

Don't stop playing, came a voice.

Manny looked around. To his left was a large, tall man with sunken eyes.

"John Coltrane?" he said. As soon as the words came out of his mouth, they seemed to whip sharply away and float off. "You're dead, Trane! Right after the Olantunji concert."

Coltrane smiled. *That old thing. Once I ruled an empire of squeaks and squonks, but it all seems like so many dirty rags now. All my best albums were recorded here.* Coltrane stretched out his hand. *Here comes my producer.*

A giant zebra strolled into sight. Its hooves were the size of dinner tables. It shook its head and whinnied, and sparks flew out of its flapping mane like shooting stars, drifting to the ground.

Manny felt extremely calm. At first, he had assumed that somebody had slipped

him acid, but he easily shook off that fancy.

The zebra snorted and another man came out from behind its towering leg. He had long hair and a dirty blonde beard and at first Manny didn't recognize him. Then the man grinned.

"Jimmy Chesterton! I saw you at PhreakPhest last summer! You guys smoked!"

Jimmy smiled. He looked gaunt still, and his eyes were still unfocused, but he was happy. *Hey, Manny.*

"What happened to you? I heard you died," Manny continued. "I – I bought your guitar." He reached down for it, knowing somehow, with dreamlike certainty, that although he didn't have his clothes he had the guitar. But when he picked it up it had turned into a drum, a long thin one, but with the same black-and-white striped pattern.

Jimmy just smiled again. *You keep it, man. You paid for it. I have my own now.* Jimmy reached down between his legs and brought one out.

Manny blinked several times. There was some sort of optical illusion wherein he couldn't tell where Jimmy's penis ended and where the guitar began. Manny remembered reading a story by Lovecraft, one where all the angles were wrong, and for half a second of panic he thought he might be in the abode of Great Cthulhu, now a zebra Old One. But this was no dreaming R'yleh. The air was too fresh and unpolluted, tangy with desert grass and sea salt.

I told you to keep playing, Coltrane said. Don't lose the groove. There's a million little gateways to this world of music, and you lucked into one of them. But the trick is to keep the groove up until you don't need your body anymore, and then you can stay here as long as you need to.

Coltrane had his own saxophone out, which was involved with his phallus in the same sort of illusion as Jimmy's guitar.

Manny saw with 50-50 relief and envy that his own was not. He sat down cross-legged and rested the drum on his left thigh, then struck the head experimentally. It played like a drum but it sounded like a guitar, and the precise part of the head he struck corresponded to a string and a fret. It all appeared in his head like a navigator's circular map of the heavens. Coltrane laughed and hopped on one foot as he played, and the spirals on Manny's drums began spinning, like a barbershop pole composed of indescribable bliss.

"Manny? That was hot, man! And we got it on tape!" John Wenke on his left.

"Manny? That was great! That was really great!" Glenda on his right.

"I can't wait to send this to the PhreakPhest committee! We'll get in for sure!"

Manny's right hand was shaking. He pushed it into his pocket.

"Baby, you must be tired. Do you need help packing up?"

Manny heard but didn't hear. Somebody thrust a beer into his left hand.

"Dude, that was the sweetest jam ever. We could move up from Oldfield's...play at Little Brother's or the Newport..."

Shuddering, Manny sat down on the stage. The beer was still in his left hand, untouched.

"Manny? Baby, what is it? What's wrong? Talk to me, baby."

He reached for his guitar. Somebody had unplugged it for him and put it back in

its vinyl over-the-shoulder carrying case. He unzipped it and put it back in his lap and began strumming.

“Manny, talk to me. I’m *serious*.” A pause. “Look, this is not making me *happy*. Are you on something?”

“Oh, he’s okay. He just spaces a little sometimes. Look, I’ll drive you home, okay?” That was Morphy behind him.

Manny’s eyes refused to focus. A Glenda-shaped shape had her arms crossed. Manny kept plucking the strings. There were chords bouncing around in his head like pool balls in a wind chamber. He had to play them to make them stop moving, but each time he looked closely enough to see what one was, it turned out to be three or four balls clustered together, and if you played one of them, you broke the bond and sent them all flying. When the manager of Oldfield’s walked him to the door (gently, because it had been a record-breaking night financially), his beer was still untouched.

In the middle of the night, Manny woke up hungry. He reached over to the other side of the mattress. Glenda wasn’t there. He felt with a hand and found his guitar, and realized that if he played one more note on it – that if he even left his hand there a minute longer – he would throw up. He reached again and found his phone and called her.

He talked for a while until he realized that it was her voice-mail he had heard, and not her voice. With an inner yank he pulled himself up and out of bed, and immediately fell back down. Then he got up again, put on long underwear, t-shirt, jeans, and sandals, and stumbled out the door to walk down High Street to Glenda’s. On the way, he stopped for a bagel, then for a tube of potato chips, then for some French fries, and then for a milkshake. He felt like he hadn’t eaten for days, and when he thought, he realized he hadn’t.

When he got to Glenda’s apartment, he banged on the door and stood there waiting. He banged again. You never really know if you have waited long enough for somebody to come to the door when you are knocking, especially if you are impatient, and every sound started out seeming like her footsteps but then turned into something else.

Finally, after playing a lot of stupid games with the knocker and the doorbell, Manny walked to a phone booth and called her. Again, it went to the voice mail in six rings. On an impulse, he called Morphy’s number. It went to voice mail without ringing. Manny’s shoulders slumped like two sacks of wet grain and he walked home, muttering aloud.

But maybe it didn’t mean anything. Who knew? Anyway, with a little food in his belly and a little exercise pushing his blood around his body, he felt less tense, less liable to blow up. When he got back to his room, he collapsed into bed and put his guitar in his lap and began strumming.

The gig at Little Brother’s was crammed. Hippie chicks in swirling multicolored skirts danced with dreadlocked boys, their eyes closed and their faces tilted slightly downwards and their mouths half open in beautifully vacant concentration on each note. Clouds of marijuana drifted out of the bathroom.

John Wenke said to Morphy and Manny that probably the guy from PhreakPhest

was going to be there and a spot there was Camel Commando's for sure if things went well.

Manny nodded absently; every gig had become PhreakPhest since he had picked up the guitar; every gig had, frankly, become Woodstock on Mars.

This time he didn't hold anything back. With the very first tune he opened up with a chord made out of stars and didn't even let John Wenke finish the first chorus of "All the Green Houses Where Your Sister Lives" before he was off and running. Tall grass grew beneath the feet of all the hippies and the ponderous hooves of the zebra-god appeared behind the bar. The stripes on his guitar streamed out and coated everybody, and Coltrane stood by his side, putting in a fill or a phrase here and there that nobody but Manny could hear, but everyone could feel.

Coltrane? Manny asked him during the drum solo as he leaned on his amp. *You know your wife is still here, still alive. Do you miss her?*

Coltrane smiled. *I still see her. Same way I see all these people now.*

Yeah, but...that's not really the same, don't you think? Manny was struggling. *What if she's with another man? Does that bother you?*

This is better, Coltrane said. *I don't worry about that kind of thing anymore. You shouldn't either. This is better.*

Maybe, Manny said with a shrug.

Morphy had gone back into a straight groove. Manny returned to the strings and leaned on the groove until it slowed down a little, and then he began to play. The zebra snorted contemplatively as Manny ignored the white stripes and chose the black ones and began weaving with them. There was tragedy in those stripes and there was tragedy in his notes, leave-taking and mystery and – at the end, just a little – acceptance. His highest notes screamed out as if the fretboard itself was in pain. How long he played he didn't know. In the eyes of the audience he saw the passing of generations; the African grass rose and fell. Finally, he just collapsed onto his amp, his hands on fire but still playing.

"Thanks a lot, everybody," John Wenke said into his mike as soon as the cheering died down, which took a while. "We're going to take, like, 10 minutes and we'll be right back."

Manny didn't leave the stage. He just leaned against the front of the bass drum, his hands compulsively tickling and stroking the strings.

Then he looked out and saw Glenda at the bar, in a purple sweater, her hair falling carelessly over her shoulders. Her eyes met his and she looked a little sad, and then she turned back to her beer.

It's time, came a voice from his left. Manny stared over and saw Jimmy Chesterton, strumming his black-and-white guitar-phallus.

Time for what, Jimmy?

Time to sing Happy Birthday. Here, we'll do it together. In G sharp. Happy Birthday to you...

Glenda took another sip of her beer, sighed, and looked inside her purse. Morphy sat down next to her and signaled the bartender.

Happy Birthday to you...

Morphy put his hand on Glenda's shoulder and leaned in to whisper into her ear. *Happy Birthday, Dear Manny...*

Glenda looked back at Manny for a second. Her eyes were large and a spider web of hair fell down over her nose. Then, she turned back to Morphy, biting her lip. Morphy's mouth grazed her neck.

Happy Birthday to...

Manny stepped down off the bandstand and walked over to the bar (it seemed like it was all done in one step) and smashed the guitar against Morphy's face. It broke in half and shards scattered across the floor.

All at once the zebra stepped out from behind the bar. Its nostrils flared and its eyes blinked quickly, and it stamped its hooves as puffs of steam came out of its nostrils.

You're not making it, man! Coltrane said. *Uh-oh...closin' the gate!* But his voice was already faint and receding. Manny looked around for Jimmy, but he was gone. All the people in the bar were blurry, underwater, Coltrane's features were unblurred, but he was fading away slowly. His eyes had a million small, sad lines around them.

The zebra seemed larger than ever as it reared up on its back legs, its front hooves extending past the moon. It burst into flame: a tower of fire with light but no heat, flickering snake-tongues of flame caressing Manny's arms and chest like thin cords of silk. And then it, too, was gone.

People rushed in to hold them both back and they snarled across the gap; Manny heard himself yelling at Morphy to stay away from his woman and a dozen other clichés. Somebody broke a bottle and a few bruised hippies later, Manny was standing on the street with a promise that he would never play at Little Brother's again.

John Wenke came up to him and shrugged. "Uh...look, man, you know I respect your chops, but we took a vote and you're out of the band."

"*Quoi que, Monsieur,*" Manny said, putting his hands in his pockets and turning around to walk home. Almost immediately he bumped into Glenda.

"Need a ride?" she asked.

He nodded and nuzzled her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," she replied, responding by raking her fingernails – lightly, lightly – over his scalp and walking him to her car. Her car was already full of his gear and so he had ample time, while dozing in the front seat, to realize just how hungry he was. He guessed he was always going to be that hungry from now on.

A Greater Power

By

Benjamin Crowell

Sean knew he wasn't the kind of guy who got a lot of breaks in life, and that was why he wanted to make real sure of keeping the house-sitting gig. Rich Chinese guy, here he had this fancy house on 17 acres in the mountains, but he hardly ever came around except in the summer. Sean didn't live there full time, but it was cool to have a place to go and get away from other people, plus the money was pretty good, considering that the job wasn't much work.

So when the white hazy crud showed up in the deep end of Mr. Wang's pool, it wasn't the kind of thing Sean was just going to blow off. He put in a bunch more chlorine tabs, got a sample of the water, and drove right down to Scotts Valley and got the sample tested at the pool store. They told him nothing was goofy with the chemistry stuff, and he was probably doing the right thing by just putting in more chlorine. Maybe run the filter pump for a couple extra hours every day until it cleared up.

After that he probably did get a little sloppy. It was February, and normally the pool was real easy to take care of in the winter. He and Mike took off to do some surfing down at Cowell's Cove, which was excellent because nobody was around that time of year. The next day they flew back up HWY 17 like a cruise missile in Sean's truck with Donna Summer blasting on the eight-track. That would have got Sean back in plenty of time to drop by Wang's place and check on how the pool was doing, but stuff came up. For one thing, the minute he got in the door of the room he was renting the phone rang, and it was Cindy bugging him about the child support. Sometimes she didn't really seem to get the concept that they were divorced.

By the time he got a chance to check the pool, a week had gone by, and it was worse, not better. It was nighttime, but with the outdoor lights on he could tell that there was even more of the white haze, and a smell like butterscotch. The smell made him queasy because he happened to be a little hung over. He noticed both of the floating holders for the chlorine tablets lying out on the deck instead of in the water. What was going on? He remembered putting them in the water - at least he thought he did. He tossed them back in the water. He went to pull the basket out of the skimmer, and then heard something skitter across the deck behind him. He jumped and yelled, and when he turned around, one of the chlorine floats was back on the deck, spinning around like a cockeyed top. He looked at the water, and saw something white sweeping around on the surface. At first he thought it was someone's arm, but it was way too skinny, and it curved and waved like a rope. It found the other float and coiled around it.

Sean ran back to his truck and jumped in. He ran over some of Mr. Wang's

bushes turning around in the driveway, and then burned rubber out of there.

Back out on Summit Road, he was still going a little too fast, and that was how he got pulled over by Paul Hollis.

"See your license and registration, Sean?"

Sean handed them over. There was no way he was going to wiggle out of this one. He'd known Paul since third grade, but now Paul was Cindy's boyfriend, and probably believed whatever she said about Sean. Well, he was damned if he'd yessir-nosir him.

"Your headlights are off," Paul said.

"Oops." Sean turned them on. Jesus, what could that thing in the pool have been?

"Could you step out of the vehicle, please?" Sean got out. "You been drinking, Sean?"

"Oh, I see what you're thinking." He'd had a Colt 45 to get rid of the hangover, but he knew for sure that he was sober. "No, I just had a scare. I was cleaning Wang's pool, and some kind of an animal jumped at me."

But Paul made him walk heel to toe and all of that, and damned if Sean didn't end up in the county jail. Some people get a lot of breaks, and others don't. Since he'd had a couple of DUIs before, the judge said he had to see a probation officer and go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He lost his license, and because of that he lost his job delivering the Chronicle. Without that job, he was short on money, and he couldn't afford to pay for the room he'd been renting, so after the end of the month he ended up living in Mr. Wang's house full time until he could get back on his feet again.

He convinced himself that he hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen in the pool – convinced himself enough to sleep in the house, and later on convinced himself enough to go out and look in the pool. He went out in the afternoon in Mr. Wang's bathrobe and sat on Mr. Wang's plastic lounge chair and stared at the pool with his chin in his hands. The bathrobe wasn't quite wide enough in the waist to go around his belly.

The stinking, messed up pool seemed just like his stinking, messed up life. The people at the AA meetings all acted like they were totally ashamed of how bad they'd messed things up, but the messed up versions of their lives actually didn't seem as bad as the old, normal version of Sean's. At least they were really alcoholics, so they had an excuse.

He cried a little, and then he noticed he was feeling dizzy. The butterscotch smell was strong. He lay down on the lounge chair, and closed his eyes to try to make the dizziness go away. After a while he felt peaceful. Had he fallen asleep for a minute? He opened his eyes, and noticed that there was a pale white tentacle lying on the pool deck, and the end of it was in his mouth. It didn't hurt. He could tell it was in his throat, but he hadn't even felt it going down. He thought about it, and he decided that the other end of the tentacle was in the pool. That seemed right. The tentacle was sort of throbbing. The sensation in his throat felt almost like swallowing, except it wasn't Sean's own throat muscles that were doing it. His own muscles were totally relaxed. As an experiment, he tried wiggling his toes. It didn't seem to work, but that didn't worry him too much. He felt relaxed and good.

After the tentacle withdrew, he lay there on the lounge chair for a while, feeling peaceful. Things didn't seem so bad. What was it he'd been worried about, anyway?

After a while he decided it was time to go to his AA meeting. Walking to and from the meetings took a long time, but it wasn't like he had a lot of other stuff to do. On the way, he started to think about what had happened. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed strange. Wouldn't most people have freaked out when something put a tentacle down their throat? By the time he got to the American Legion hall where they had the meetings, he had his thoughts put together enough to be sure that his reaction hadn't been normal. If he told other people what had happened and how he'd acted, he knew it wouldn't make sense to them.

At the meeting, Floyd Houska surprised Sean by saying he wanted him to think about doing "90 in 90." That meant Sean would go to a meeting every single day for 90 days. Floyd would be his sponsor, and would keep in close touch with him. While Floyd was explaining it, Sean started to think about how to say no, and probably he would have said no normally, but somehow he was in a different mood now. Floyd was a skinny, tall old guy, with a red nose and spiderwebby veins on his face. Floyd had been a minister until he messed things up with his drinking.

It wasn't that Sean suddenly felt more sympathetic than he used to about Floyd and Floyd's problems in life, but...it seemed like before, he'd always had this suspicious feeling toward Floyd. They said nobody was the boss at AA, but it had always seemed to him like Floyd really was trying to be the boss. Now Sean could tell that Floyd was his friend. In fact, everybody at the meeting was Sean's friend. When Floyd was done with his speech, Sean jumped up and hugged him. Floyd seemed kind of surprised by that, but everybody clapped and cheered. When Sean hugged him, with his face pressed into his corduroy lapels, he could smell his own breath, and the funny thing was it smelled like butterscotch.

Back home at Mr. Wang's house, he thought about what to do next. It seemed like things were getting more copacetic now, and the last thing he needed was more of this weird stuff with the thing in the pool. He would just have to keep away from the pool area. Maybe if you only let yourself get tentacled once it could be okay, and you could still be normal. Anything could happen once. Mike had told him about getting drunk one time and messing around with Kenny Costa, but that was just one time, so that didn't make Mike and Kenny fags or anything. It was only if you kept on doing it that it really meant something was wrong with you.

Sean noticed he was really hungry, so he fried himself some eggs. He was so hungry that he ate them all runny, straight out of the pan, and cooked some more next to them while he was eating the first ones. He started thinking about his daughter. How old was Lisa now? Fourteen? Fifteen? Jesus, she was definitely 15, and that meant she was the same age Sean and Cindy had been when Lisa was born. On impulse, he dialed their number.

"Hello?" It was Paul's voice.

"Hi, Paul, it's Sean Reilly. Hey, I really called to say hi to Lisa, but I just want to say it's no biggie about arresting me and everything. I don't hold it against you."

"Okay, Sean. I'll put Lisa on." It seemed like a really long time until Lisa came on

the line.

"Sean?" She didn't call him Daddy anymore.

"Hi Lisa."

"Why'd you call?"

"Uh, just to say hi."

"Okay, hi."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Thanks for asking."

"Doing okay in school?"

"Better than you did, I guess."

"Yeah. All right, say hi to Cindy for me."

"Okay." *Click.*

Lisa was a great kid.

The next morning, Sean woke up with a killer headache. Maybe he was coming down with the flu. He sat around the house all day and watched reruns on TV. Floyd called during "I Dream of Jeannie," but Sean didn't want to talk to him too much. He figured he'd acted stupid hugging him and everything. He promised he'd be there for that night's meeting, and said he had to go. The more he thought about things, the more twisted it all seemed. The kitchen was on the side of the house by the pool, and even with the windows closed, the butterscotch smell was getting into the house. He thought about trying to do something about the thing in the deep end, but he didn't know what to do, and he didn't know what he'd be *able* to do, if he went out there. Floyd ended up calling again and giving him a ride to AA.

At the meeting, everybody was saying all the usual stuff...*changing playgrounds and playmates...* Floyd read a poem that didn't rhyme. Sean was thinking about the butterscotch smell. *I'm a winner today, no matter what happens, as long as I don't pick up that first drink.* The butterscotch smell was one of those things that you didn't notice until it was gone. He sniffed at the sleeve of his flannel shirt, and thought he got a whiff of it. He took a real deep breath through his sleeve, pretending he needed to sneeze. It didn't really work that well. Damn, if he could just get some of that stuff right now.

Floyd drove Sean home after the meeting. Blah blah blah. Sean tuned him out. When they got to the house, he thanked him and ran down the long driveway, smelling the butterscotch. It was good – really good. He went around to the back of the house, and the smell washed over him in the dark like a big breaking wave. It almost made him gag, but he knew it was what he needed. He stumbled, fell down on his knees, and leaned out over the pool with his arms in the water up to the elbows. This time he knew what was going to happen, but now that he was expecting it he was surprised how long it took. It seemed like he was kneeling there for five or 10 minutes, just praying for it to happen – *please, oh please, God.* Finally he felt the tendril touch his fingers, and then creep up his arm. The tip moved around his face, almost like it was asking for permission, and then the whole tentacle slid into his mouth and down his throat.

After that day, some other unusual things started happening. The first one was

that he got talking to Paul Hollis, and it turned out Paul really wasn't such a bad guy. Next thing Sean knew, he had a job washing dishes at Summit Sandwiches. Paul had talked to the owner.

Another strange thing was that the people at AA started treating him different. Barb Gerdes called him one night when she was feeling tempted to drink. She said he was a good listener. At meetings, he would say something to someone like, "Everything's gonna be okay." And the person would act like it was a big deal, like nobody had ever said that to them before. Maybe it impressed them because he really meant it.

First thing every morning he would get himself butterscotched up, and then for the rest of the day that was what it felt like: everything's gonna be okay. Sean had never really liked people before. He'd never trusted them. Now it was like he could open himself up to them. It was almost like all the people in the world had invisible tentacles, but normally they were afraid to touch each other with them. He talked Bruce Wien out of a suicide attempt, and afterward Bruce kept talking about how much it had meant to him that Sean stayed calm. Well, it was easy to stay calm when you were butterscotched.

The only problem was that sometimes if he didn't get butterscotched for a long time, he'd start feeling really bad, like that first time when he'd thought he had the flu. But it wasn't like he was really addicted to it or anything. He could always deal with it fine as long as he made sure to get dosed right before he left for work in the morning. That would always last him until the end of his shift, no problem. One time Sue, the day-shift waitress, asked him if he wanted to go shoot some pool or something after work.

He probably could have, but he didn't want to risk stretching it that long, so he said no.

He started losing weight. He'd been carrying a spare tire around for the last 10 or 12 years, ever since the divorce. Of course he knew why the weight was suddenly disappearing. He wasn't stupid. The thing in the pool needed Sean to bring its food to it. It couldn't digest food on its own. It was like a flea or a mosquito – or a baby. One night he looked out the window from the kitchen and saw a possum lying there on the deck with the tentacle down its throat. Its scaly tail wagged back and forth slowly, real lazy like. Sean was surprised it could even move its tail. He watched the whole thing, and when it was all over, the possum waddled away into the redwood trees, and he could tell that it was a real happy possum.

The thing in the pool wasn't *bad*. The relationship was more what happened with those little birds that went inside the crocodile's mouth and cleaned its teeth. The thing got food from Sean, but Sean got something back from it, too. It was an even trade. It had done a lot for him, helped him relax and be more comfortable around people. He had hit bottom before the thing came along, with that string of DUIs. And turning things around afterward, that was really happening because the butterscotch was helping him deal with people, and people were responding to him.

He kept on calling Lisa every now and then, and after a while she stopped being so suspicious. One day she came into the restaurant after school, upset. There wasn't much business, so Sean took a break and sat in one of the booths with her.

"What's the matter, Lisa?"

"Paul's an asshole," she said, not making eye contact. She had her brown school folder on the table, and on the cover was a big drawing of a bloodshot eyeball that she'd done with a marking pen.

"He's not an asshole, Lisa. He's done a good job of taking care of you. He cares about you."

"He thinks I'm a slut."

"He really said that?"

"No, but that's what he means."

"What happened?"

"Barry and me...we were in Barry's truck, out on Old Ranch Road. Paul came by in his black-and-white and started shining a flashlight on us." She was crying.

"Oh." Sean took her hand. "Everything's gonna be okay, Lisa."

"He says it's because of not going to church that I'm heading down the wrong path."

"You're not heading down the wrong path, honey. Everything's gonna be okay. Just take it one day at a time."

She sniffled and smiled at him. "You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"What about you?" she asked. "What do you think about God?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

Sean had never really thought about it much. He considered telling her what they said at AA: *Sometimes you have to take strength from a power greater than yourself.* He realized now that it was true, really true, but he couldn't exactly put it that way to her, because it would sound fake.

"You know, some people go to church," he said, "but I'll tell you what I do. I just go and sit by the pool, and sometimes I – I feel something powerful inside me."

"Really? Like a spirit or something?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

She dabbed at her face with a paper napkin, smearing her blue eyeshadow. "I'm glad you told me that. You're really cool, Daddy."

He squeezed her hand. "I think you're cool, too, honey."

"Cause, you know," she continued, "I always felt the same way you do. Like, Paul thinks if I want to get in touch with God I have to sit in a certain chair in a certain church. Well, who's to say you can't find your own personal God just sitting by the pool, right?"

"Uh...well, I wouldn't really call it God." Sean thought uncomfortably about the first time he'd intentionally let the thing tentacle him.

"Yeah, the name doesn't mean anything, right? I think everybody really worships the same God, just with different names. Don't you think so?"

"Er...I don't know."

"See, that's what's great about you, Daddy. If you don't know, you just say so. They're all so certain they know the answers. I mean, it's not like they've ever really physically touched God, right?"

"Well...."

"I think people go to church because they just can't handle their own problems. Like, they think God or Jesus or somebody is gonna come down from the sky, and all of a sudden their life's gonna get better, right? I mean, get real. It's gotta come from yourself. I really respect the way you're making it on your own. It must be tough. Are you eating okay, though? You seem awful skinny."

"I needed to lose some weight anyway." It was true that he'd been feeling kind of weak and dizzy, but he'd been figuring it was nothing he couldn't handle. He'd noticed he was starting to lose some hair these days, and he didn't really like the image of himself as a fat old bald guy. Being a skinny old bald guy had a lot more class.

"It's sweet of you to be concerned about me, though," he said. "Well, I better get back to work before the dishes pile up too much."

Sean spent the rest of his shift thinking about what Lisa had said. The more he thought about it, the crummier he felt. He didn't feel so bad about being fake to everybody at AA, but Lisa really seemed to believe in him. He'd only just got her to accept him, but what would she think if she knew about what he was really doing? She'd probably start drawing cartoons of a drugged-out Sean on her school folder, complete with those big bloodshot eyes. He remembered the cover of one of those underground comics she bought in San Francisco, a picture of a giant black beetle humping on a naked blond chick. If Lisa knew what was happening with Sean and the thing in the pool, that's exactly how she'd see it, like the world's nastiest gross-out joke.

He decided he needed to quit, but he didn't know how. The AA stuff should have helped, but it didn't. You were supposed to clean the booze out of your house. Well, how was he going to clean the thing out of the pool? Avoid the people and places that you associate with drinking? Sean couldn't do that. Finally he decided to take a bus trip. He waited until he had his days off, and bought a Greyhound ticket to Oakland. He didn't have enough money for a motel. He hung around the bus station, feeling more and more sick, until the manager started looking at him funny and they made him leave. He ended up sitting on a sidewalk, throwing up. The cops picked him up, found the return bus ticket for the next night, and put him on the bus home that same night instead. By the time he got back to the side of the pool, he felt like the tentacle could wrap around his neck and choke him to death and he wouldn't care, as long as his last breath had the butterscotch in it.

The next morning, while he was brushing his teeth, he remembered that thought, and it scared him. But what was he going to do about it? It was like he was in the grip of something that was more powerful than him. When he finished brushing his teeth, he noticed some blood on the toothbrush.

What could he have done different? Explain it to those cops in Oakland and ask for help? "Uh, excuse me, officers, but please don't put me on the bus back home tonight, because there's a squid from Mars in my pool, and I'm trying to kick my addiction to having it put its tentacle down my throat." That was the horrible thing: he was all alone with this problem, and there was nobody who could help him.

Lisa showed up at the restaurant again that day, looking more cheerful. Barry dropped her off. He seemed like a nice enough kid. He worked painting houses, and when he drove off, Sean saw that the back of the truck was full of his work stuff.

"Hi Lisa."

"Hey, Daddy." Her T-shirt had a cartoon of President Reagan with vampire fangs. "So, are you gonna tell me about your new girlfriend?"

"What?"

"Really, Daddy, it's okay. It's not like I'm gonna freak out just 'cause you get in a relationship. The divorce was a long time ago, and I barely even remember it. Is it Sue?"

"Honey, I don't have a girlfriend."

Lisa looked hurt. "Me and Barry came by the house to say hi. We smelled baking. You're not gonna try to convince me you learned to bake cookies, are you? You're not exactly a real modern 80's guy, you know."

"You came to the house? When?"

"Wednesday." That was the day he'd been in Oakland. "We brought some food over, but then when we smelled her baking cookies, we figured we shouldn't barge in on you guys, so we left. Thought we'd give you a chance to tell us officially first. Man, she was baking up a storm. What was it, butterscotch brownies? She must have made enough for a whole bake sale. We could smell it all the way down at the end of the driveway. Gonna put some meat back on your bones, huh?"

Sean felt like all the blood had drained out of his body. "Lisa, I want you to promise me something. I want you to promise you'll never go to Wang's house." He felt short of breath, and his mouth wasn't working right. "Please, I'm – I'm begging you, please Lisa. Stay away from there, honey, oh God, it's not good for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't explain it, but it's dangerous." He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Please!"

Lisa just looked at him for a long time, and then she said okay in a small voice, and left. He saw Sue staring at him.

Of course Sean hadn't been using his head. He could see that now. Wang's house was on a big piece of property, and it was all fenced around the outside, plus there was another fence around the pool area. So Sean had figured there was no way anybody else would get near the pool, and it wouldn't be a problem for anybody else, just him. Well, duh; obviously anybody who'd ever seen a monster movie should know that the thing wouldn't just stay in the pool forever. It was probably trying to take over the world. It would, like, climb out, and start eating everybody, and then it would lay its eggs, and there would be baby ones running around. So now what was he going to do about it? Before, he'd thought things were bad because he had a problem, and nobody else could help him with it. But now it was even worse. Not only was he dealing with it alone, but it was going to hurt other people too – hurt *Lisa*.

The next day when he went out to the pool, he found a dead possum lying on the steps at the shallow end. Before he even got a closer look at it, he knew in his gut that it was same possum he'd seen before. With the smell of the butterscotch blowing over him, he stepped out of his flip-flops and into the water, picked it up by the tail, and looked it over while it hung upside-down. There were lots of big bald patches on its fur. He laid it on the deck and pulled back its lips. It was missing most of its teeth, and the way its gums had pulled back and shriveled up reminded him of what he'd been seeing

recently in the mirror. He remembered thinking before about the happy possum.

He called in sick to work, took the bus down to the pool store in Scott's Valley, and rented the kind of electric pump that you use when you want to empty out a pool. They gave him one of those long, fat flexible plastic hoses to attach to it. He figured he'd toss the pump in the spa that was built into the side of the pool, and start pumping the water out. Normally if you wanted to empty the pool you'd throw the pump into the bottom of the deep end, but if he did that, the thing would probably just toss it back out, like it had with the chlorine floats. But the pool had pipes that would drain its water into the spa when the spa was empty, and eventually if he kept on pumping from the spa, the water level in the rest of the pool would go down to the same level as the bottom of the spa. Then maybe at least part of the thing would stick out of the water. Maybe then if he got a gun, he could get a shot at it. Or maybe it just wouldn't be able to stay alive in such a small amount of water.

By the time he got back to town with the pump, it was late at night, and he was feeling like he had the flu, a hangover, and food poisoning all at once, plus maybe the dentist had shoved the drill too far into his head by mistake. He had to walk home from the bus station, carrying the heavy pump and hose. He wasn't strong these days, and his arms felt like sacks of cement. He threw up twice along the road, and after that he told himself he felt better because his stomach was empty. He knew he probably wasn't walking straight. There was just a little sliver of moon, and all he could really see was the white line that ran along the side of the road. He told himself he had to keep following the line, no matter what. He got to where Wang's driveway met the road, and then he could smell the butterscotch, just a little. He wanted to pinch his nose, but he didn't have a hand free, so he turned his head to the side and tried to press his nostrils hard against the hose that he had coiled over his shoulder. He walked up the driveway, trying to go as fast as he could so he wouldn't lose his nerve, but the smell was still getting in through his mouth. He dropped the pump and the hose, and then he was through the gate and kneeling by the pool, taking big, fast breaths.

He knew he'd failed, but it didn't really sink in until the next day at work, later in the afternoon, when the happy-happy effect was starting to wear off. The pump would still be lying in the driveway when he got home. He thought about whether he'd have enough will power to wade through the cloud of butterscotch and throw the pump in the spa. He imagined himself talking about it with Mr. Spock from Star Trek.

Spock, it looks like we're in a pretty tight situation here.

Yes, Captain Sean.

What do you think the chances are that I'll be able to do the job with the pump?

Captain, considering that you've fucked up just about everything else in your whole life so far, I would say that the chances are approximately one in 397 billion.

Sure, he could try and psych himself up to give it his best shot, and that might have been acceptable if it was just him. But it wasn't just him. He couldn't even count on himself to be on the same side as the human race anymore. He was like one of the people in Invasion of the Body Snatchers whose brains had been taken over by the aliens. He could imagine just what would happen. They'd told him at the pool store that it would probably take the pump more than a day to empty a whole pool. He'd start it

going, but while it was pumping, he'd go on getting butterscotched. And then, when the water level was getting real low, and the thing in the pool was getting upset, he could imagine exactly what he'd do next: he'd unplug the pump, throw the garden hose in the pool, and say to himself, *I'll just put a little water back in to calm it down so I can get one last hit.*

"Hey Sue," he yelled through the little window they passed the dishes and orders through, "will you give me a pen, and a few sheets out of your pad?"

He sat down in the corner of the kitchen and started writing a letter to Lisa on the backs of the order slips. He didn't know how much sense it would make, probably about as much as you could expect from a freaked-out druggie who'd dropped out of high school. It didn't fit on the sheets Sue had given him, so he asked her for more, and ended up using almost the whole pad. He folded the whole thing in half and stuck it in the back of the cubbyhole where he put his stuff while he was working. He knew they'd find it there.

"Are you okay, Sean?" asked Sue. The way she was looking at him reminded him of the clerks at the bus station in Oakland.

"Yeah, sure. I just had to write something down."

The next day was sunny and warm. The phone rang while he was eating his cereal, but he didn't pick it up. When he'd finished eating, he ran the pump's big hose from the pool area to the drain in the front of the house, hooked the pump up to it, threw the pump in the spa, and plugged it in. It blew out a few bubbles, and then the hose quivered, and from around the house he heard the sound of the water splashing into the drain.

His surfboard had collected a lot of spider webs in the garage. He brushed them off, put the board in the pool, climbed on, and lay down on his back, still wearing all his clothes. He'd never been this close to the surface before, right out in the middle of the milky water. The butterscotch hit his brain like a wrecking ball. He knew he didn't have much time before he wouldn't be able to do anything. He inch-wormed himself carefully along the rough surface of the board until his hair was in the cool water, and then his back and arms, and all of his face except for his nose and mouth. He could tell that he was almost at the point of sliding off the board. Without his body's natural buoyancy, he'd already have slipped in. The sunlight was streaming through the redwood trees, and Sean felt happy. Mr. Spock had been wrong. For once in Sean's life, he knew that he'd done something important, and done it right.

He waited for the tentacle to come. A distant worry nibbled at him - it was hard to make your brain worry when the butterscotch was coming over you - but a tiny part of him wondered whether he was far out enough on the board. He tried to inch himself a little farther out, but his muscles had already stopped working. Then he felt some water trickle into one of his nostrils, and he knew it was going to work. He heard a car come up the driveway, but his brain had a hard time figuring out what that could mean.

"Daddy!"

It was Lisa's voice. What was she doing here? He felt something touch him under his shoulders. It was the aluminum pole of the pool net. He felt himself moving through the water, and then she was hauling him out onto the deck. He saw her face now, but it

was covered with a respirator, the kind Barry used sometimes when he was painting.

"It's okay, Daddy, I've got you." She dragged him out through the gate. She was crying. "You should have told me. You didn't have to handle it all by yourself. Don't worry, okay? I've got you. Everything's gonna be okay."

She said it like she meant it.

The Amazing Mechanical Wife

By

David E. Hughes

To: ultratec.customer.service@ultratec.com
From: TheodoreBlasky@visioncom.net
Subject: Final Purchase Commitment
Date: February 17, 2335

After a six-month trial period, I've decided that I'm thoroughly satisfied with your product. Last night, I asked Andra to marry me. I'm sure the proposal was a mere formality, with Andra having no choice but to agree with this business arrangement, but I must admit I felt a certain flush of excitement when she said "yes" and accepted my down payment in the form of a 1-carat diamond solitaire from Slow Eddie's Diamond Emporium.

I realize the withdrawals she'll make from my bank account on your behalf will be stiff, but at this point I feel it'll be a wise investment.

Three points about your program deserve special praise:

1. Ultratec's Electronic Matching Service allowed me to find the product that best matched my needs without ever leaving my home.
2. Your extended trial program, where Andra and I arranged for mutually convenient times to interact, was easy and convenient. No middle man or high pressure sales tactics were involved. Although, toward the end, Andra began to drop hints that my time for a trial period was running out, that was only to be expected. After all, business is business.
3. Finally, I appreciate that you have programmed Andra in a manner that makes her indistinguishable from a human female. When I display behavior patterns that would elicit a positive response in a woman, I get a positive response from Andra. In fact, I quickly discovered the less I say about her true nature, the better.

MegaNet Electronic Chat Session

Date: February 18, 2335

Andra U. Techan: Logged On

Marianne Roberts: Logged On

Andra: Are you sitting down?

Marianne: i'm at my computer keyboard--what do you think?

Andra: Get ready for this. Theo asked me to marry him last night!!!!

Marianne: really? the guy with the . . . unfortunate mole?

Andra: No, silly. Theo is the toothpaste factory foreman.

Marianne: i remember. the guy u met on the Net w/the unhealthy interest in science fiction.

Andra: Yeah, that's the one. I thought he had a weird sense of humor when we first started dating, but he turned out to be a nice guy. I mean, really nice.

Marianne: u said yes?

Andra: Of course. The wedding's in June. You'll be my maid of honor right?

Marianne: we're talking about the same guy who asked you if you had an "off" button on your first date? the guy who wanted to know if you actually had a bowel movement when you got back from the bathroom?

Andra: Come on! Don't be such a sour puss! He's a nice guy. So what if he has a quirky sense of humor?

Marianne: he must be REALLY good in bed.

Andra: Sex isn't that important to me.

Marianne: don't play prude w/me--spill it. does he have an exquisite piece of manhood that you just can't live w/out?

Andra: I swear you're terrible! It's really not like that at all. He's a man of conservative values.

Marianne: omg! R you saying you're gonna marry the man and you haven't even taken him for a test ride? listen to me. a generous amount of alcohol and a really skimpy outfit will overcome conservative values. u don't want to marry the guy and find out he's a dud in the sack. hell, i've dumped guys just because they sweat too much during sex.

Andra: I'll keep your pearl of wisdom in mind. Do you ever think about anything other than sex? Never mind. What do ya say--will you be my maid of honor?

Marianne: what are best friends for? course i will!

To: ultratec.customer.service@ultratec.com

From: TheodoreBlasky@visioncom.net

Subject: Customer Satisfaction

Date: July 2, 2335

I'm pleased to report that, once again, your product has exceeded my expectations. I must admit I had my doubts about whether she would perform adequately in the area of intimate relations. I'd always suspected that this level of function would be difficult to program, primarily because of the essentially animal nature of the interaction. However, Andra proved during our honeymoon that it could be done.

I don't know how you managed to make her blue eyes so deep, her brunette hair so silky thick, her skin so creamy soft, and her breasts so perky, but I don't care! The point is, your product is a triumph. I've never been happier.

I also was pleased to observe that the strictures of her inherent nature were softened when we reached a certain level of intimacy.

MegaNet Electronic Chat Session

Date: July 2, 2335

Andra T. Blasky: Logged On

Marianne Roberts: Logged On

Marianne: so you decided to come back from your honeymoon.

Andra: God, I wish I didn't have to! We had a wonderful time! I'd never been outside of Earth's atmosphere before, so I didn't know what to expect when Theo booked the lunar cruise. But it was spectacular! The stars were so bright and clear when we walked the deck, and there were so many things to do: swimming, the low-grav spa, hologames, gambling. I could go on and on.

Marianne: sounds dreamy. what about the sex?

Andra: Marianne!

Marianne: come on! Spill it. Theo couldn't have been that much of a flop. i have to admit he looked pretty good in his tux at the wedding. so tell me, did you run your hands through his mousey brown hair? gaze into his hazel eyes? wrap yourself in those long, skinny arms? or did u concentrate on his remarkably tight butt.

Andra: LOL! You are a hoot! I guess if I had to describe the sex, I'd say it was good...but weird.

Marianne: promising. tell me. does he have a strange fetish like that guy i dated who was obsessed w/my ankles? omg! the things he did!

Andra: No, it wasn't that. Remember on that first date he made all those weird jokes about me being an android?

Marianne: o no!

Andra: Well, his idea of sex talk was kinda the same thing. When we started getting into it, he started talking about my pleasure programming and realistic flesh.

Marianne: my god! what did you do?

Andra: At first I was shocked, but then I thought, what the hell? We're behind closed doors. I'll give him what he wants. So, I became his "pleasure robot" and it got pretty wild after that. He liked it so much he made me play that role every night.

Marianne: i can't believe it! i didn't think u had it in u.

Andra: I'm full of surprises.

To: ultratec.customer.service@ultratec.com
From: TheodoreBlasky@visioncom.net
Subject: Customer Complaint
Date: November 13, 2335

I'm sorry to report that I've found some flaws in your product. Although I still find Andra to be a worthwhile investment, I feel compelled to report problems that you may wish to address when developing your next prototype:

1. Andra is much more expensive than I anticipated. The amount of money she spends on personal needs is astounding! She also withdraws money from my bank account on what appears to be a monthly basis. I assume she is forwarding this to you for payment because I have not received any invoices from you.
2. More significantly, she has begun talking about having children. Of course, this is absurd. Why would you put a procreation impulse in a machine that cannot procreate? Are you planning to introduce a line of android children? No, thanks! I can't imagine what you'd charge for those!

MegaNet Electronic Chat Session

Date: June 28, 2336

Andra T. Blasky: Logged On

Marianne Roberts: Logged On

Marianne: what's going on w/u? i haven't heard from u in weeks.

Andra: I'm sorry. I just haven't been in the mood for chit-chat.

Marianne: that doesn't sound like you.

Andra: I guess I'm depressed.

- Marianne: why? last i heard everything was going great! Theo got the promotion at the toothpaste factory and you moved into that beautiful two-bedroom townhome.
- Andra: I know. I know. I should be happy with what I have but it's just. Oh, this is hard to say--I can't get pregnant. I think I'm sterile.
- Marianne: i didn't even know u were trying! last time we talked about that u said Theo wasn't crazy about the idea of having kids.
- Andra: He still isn't. He's told me flat out he doesn't want any, but here's the thing. I told him maybe we should just try it without birth control for a while and see what happens and he was totally fine with that! He made some remark about if I got pregnant it would be some sort of twisted second coming. What do you think he meant by that? Maybe he really does want to have kids but he can't bring himself to say so.
- Marianne: who knows what he was talking about? let's face it, men are deranged. they act especially bizarre when it comes to the subject of having kids.
- Andra: But he seemed so CONFIDENT that I couldn't get pregnant.
- Marianne: look, if you're so worried, why don't u go to a doctor and get it checked out? maybe it's Theo w/the problem.
- Andra: No. I don't trust doctors, especially when it comes to private matters.
- Marianne: i swear. sometimes you can be so strange. it can't be any worse than my last doctor's visit. he unzipped and gave me a little "present" for my 35th birthday. still, i've got another appointment in a year. at least he has a light touch (2 bad he's married!)
- Andra: LOL. you always manage to cheer me up when I'm in the dumps. I promise I'll be better about scheduling chat sessions. Who knows? Maybe next time I'll be consulting you on baby names.

To: ultratec.customer.service@ultratec.com
From: TheodoreBlasky@visioncom.net
Subject: Payment Plan
Date: December 23, 2336

I am sorry to inform you that you will be receiving lower payments than in the past because I've told Andra she has to cut back on her spending. I lost my job recently, and I anticipate that my search for new employment may take some time. If you decide you wish to reclaim the merchandise as a result of this decision, so be it. Frankly, Andra is starting to get on my nerves.

MegaNet Electronic Chat Session

Date: February 2, 2337

Andra T. Blasky: Logged On

Marianne Roberts: Logged On

- Andra: I don't know what to do! I'm so miserable. Theo has completely lost it!
- Marianne: i'm all ears, chica. what's up?
- Andra: You know how I told you a while back that Theo started acting a little strange when he lost his job?
- Marianne: yeah, but all men do that. they venerate their jobs and their penises the same way.
- Andra: It's so much worse. He keeps asking me if I'm programmed for non-domestic functions and warning me if I don't earn my keep the company is going to reclaim me.
- Marianne: he does have a strange sense of humor. maybe it's his way of coping.
- Andra: I thought that at first, but I found some notes he made on the computer about *Resale Value of Domestic Androids.* I don't think he's joking anymore.
- Andra: I'm starting to wonder if he EVER was joking. He thinks I'm an android!
- Marianne: omg, maybe he really is losing it! you'd better find him a job, quick.
- Andra: I wish I could, but the prospects don't look good. I've sent out a few inquiries about getting a job for myself, just in case.
- Marianne: well, hang in there, kid. maybe this whole thing will blow over, and, if not, it'll be just like old times. u and me out on the town. single men w/some semblance of good looks, beware!

To: ultratec.customer.service@ultratec.com

From: TheodoreBlasky@visioncom.net

Subject: Merchandise Return

Date: April 17, 2337

I am relinquishing all claims of ownership on Andra. She moved out of my home, and I've severed all financial ties with her. If you wish to reclaim your merchandise, I'm sure you have some way of locating it.

For future reference, you may wish to soften the product's sensitivity to its true nature. Although I understand the need to make your product as realistic as possible, Andra's stubborn insistence that she is not, in fact, an android ultimately led to our separation. She completely lost control when I offered to prove her true identity by

making a small incision in her abdomen with my buck knife (which I'm sure could have been easily repaired by your technicians).

MegaNet Electronic Chat Session

Date: April 21, 2337

Andra U. Techan: Logged On

Marianne Roberts: Logged On

- Andra: It's finally over. The divorce is final and I'm moved out. I'm just ready to put that nightmare behind me now.
- Marianne: so Theo's officially available now? do u have his #?
- Andra: Marianne!
- Marianne: u know i've always had a thing for dangerous, delusional psychotics! (kidding!). so, sounds like you're doing okay.
- Andra: Yes. My new apartment's not too bad, and get this . . . I have a job!
- Marianne: Really? w/who?
- Andra: Some company called Ultratec. I'm not even sure I understand what they do. Very high tech stuff. Anyway, they want me to work in their prototype enhancement division, whatever that is. Still, the pay's good and they sound like nice people.
- Marianne: sounds great! maybe after work tomorrow we can go out on the town, maybe find some men...
- Andra: Gee, thanks, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that.
- Marianne: why not? at least you'll know that no matter who you end up w/he'll be a 75% improvement over your ex.
- Andra: Only 75%?
- Marianne: well, u did say the sex was good.

Going (More) Medieval on Lord of the Rings

By
Marty Mapes

Despite Comic Book Guy's oracular pronouncement in the 1990s that *The Lord of the Rings* could never be filmed, Peter Jackson earned a place in the fantasy film pantheon by dedicating himself completely to the films' production. Jackson took his job very seriously, particularly when it came to costumes, props, and armor. Essentially, everything on screen – every sword, every robe, even the leatherwork on each horse harness – was handmade. Nothing was purchased or rented. The net effect is that it's easy to become completely sucked in to the reality of Middle Earth.

That was my tune until I spoke to Eric Moon, a long-time fan of Tolkein's *Ring* cycle, and a professional musician. "They didn't buy anything that already existed," admitted Moon, a devotee of the books, but tepid fan of the movies. "Every tile on the floor, every single design...they made everything from scratch, but they totally didn't follow that paradigm in the music. The music is absolutely 100% 20th century orchestra music. There is no instrument [on the score] that sounds like it could have been played 5,000 years ago."

Modern symphonic music is great for filling up a theater. For a movie on the scale of *Lord of the Rings*, a nine-hour epic, the modern moviegoer probably wouldn't want to sacrifice the score to something less than larger-than-life.

But Moon says you wouldn't have to compromise full sound, and in fact you could give the movie more integrity. "There's nothing wrong with going for orchestral music," he said, "but you gotta make it all yourself, the same way that you made the horse harnesses. I would have tried to assemble an orchestra that sounded like – whether or not it was – instruments that we don't have, handmade instruments. I would have found or built handmade instruments and taught an orchestra to play them. And then the music would have sounded like it belonged in Middle Earth."

At first blush, creating a musical instrument from scratch seems more difficult and costly than, say, leatherworking, but Moon said that doesn't have to be the case. "These things are semi-universal," he said. "The idea of a flute or a violin or a drum – these exist in every culture on the earth. It's like the idea of the horse harness. We're not reinventing the idea of how to control a horse; we're just going to make our own control. We're not reinventing buildings, we're just going to make sure the detail[s] on these buildings aren't the ones you see in our world."

Moon's idea isn't that far-out. The Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev wrote the score for the 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*. If you rent the DVD, you will hear a powerful, primitive score rich with drums and trumpets.

"The battle horns sound like battle horns, and not like somebody took the trombones out of a modern orchestra," says Moon. "You could have built these instruments and challenged regular symphony players to learn to play them. You could build your own violins. They aren't going to sound as 'good' as a modern violin, but a violinist could pretty much play it, and it would be more representative of what you'd expect in [Middle Earth]. There's a deliberate sense in the [movies] to go back to primeval times. That's what gives it this mythical resonance. I think if people heard the movie orchestrated that way, [it] would impact at a much deeper level."

After just a few minutes' conversation with Moon I was ready to concede. Jackson had the right idea, but didn't carry it far enough.

To carry my point a bit further, I disagree with George Lucas' decision to go back and muck with the original *Star Wars* movies, I do wish there were some way for Moon to be given a budget, a team of craftsmen and musicians, and a WETA building in New Zealand.

When the 10- or 20-year anniversary edition of the *Lord of the Rings* is released in next-generation digital format, I'd love to have the "Eric Moon primitive-instruments score" audio option.

Sources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_design_of_The_Lord_of_the_Rings_film_trilogy
http://www.lordoftherings.net/film/production/pr_props.html