
Rocketships and Stuff

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Jamieson
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Regnini (bottom) Previously appeared in Merry Widow edition,
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This is dedicated to my wife, Paris, who drew most of the illustrations in
the book, and who put in hours and hours editing it.

This is also dedicated to Adam Seligman, of Echolalia Press, who gave me
much encouragement and worked with me toward publishing it before his
untimely death at the age of 37. May there be many jazz musicians and
critics where you are.

Most of these stories were written between 1988 and 2002. Some have
stood the test of time better than others. David Letterman's days of dropping
watermelons on Plexiglas (tm) are long passed, and now he's a merrily
retired man with a huge white beard that would put Santa Claus to shame.
Both computers and politics have changed since I wrote “*Redemption*”.
Computers progressed. Politics did not. Not much has changed since “*In
the Beginning of Days*”, except instead of pieces of flint, we now use
Zippos.



Rocketships & Stuff

Rocketships and Stuff Contents

Redemption.....	1
Cosmic Charlie.....	37
Simple Simon.....	62
At the Beginning of Days.....	83
A Visit to Earth.....	98
One Way Trip.....	103
Winter Wonderland.....	107
Only A Test.....	114
Equinox.....	117
The Merry Widow.....	131



Redemption

IT WAS JUST A GOOD OLD BOY COINCIDENCE. I was a magazine editor who was out of work, and Maury needed a magazine editor. Some mutual acquaintances told him about me, and he showed up at my doorstep, and asked, “Would you like to edit a new science fiction magazine?”

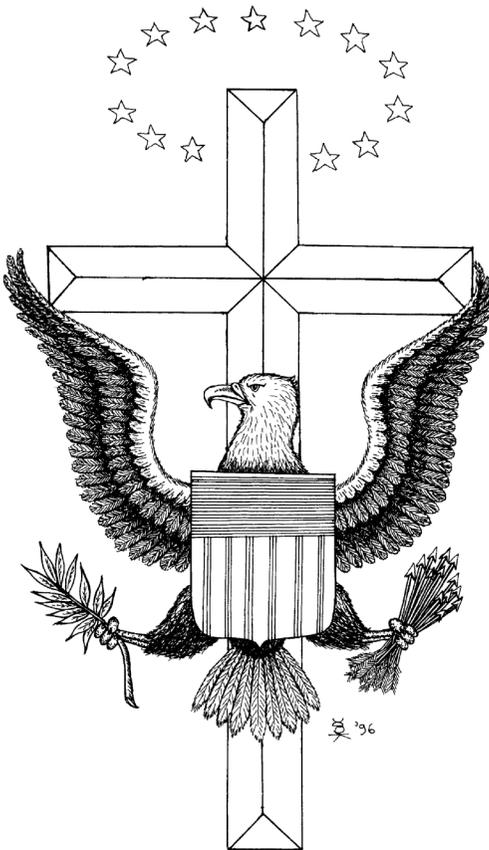
Would I! I had been a science fiction fan since I was eight years old, even tried writing some SF in my teens. When I grew up, it grew up with me, and I kept right on reading it.

So I said “Yes” and Maury said “Fine” and handed me his business card. “Be there at 8 A.M. sharp.” With that, he turned and walked down the path. Startled, I gaped at his retreating back and wondered if this was a joke.

I closed the door and peered at the card. Maury Stankiewicz, 910 S. Almer Lane. Walking distance! No commuting! I grinned, and mentally added the gas I would save to the salary I had made on my last job.

Speaking of salary, that wasn’t mentioned. Not that you can cover a lot of ground in a five-second job interview.

I glanced toward my kitchen, where the sounds of snuffling and gobbling filled the air. Four large, hungry dogs, eight cats, and a mortgage. At least it would pay more than unemployment did and—I would be editing a science fiction magazine! I gave myself a big hug, and went in to tell



the menagerie the good news. They weren't noticeably impressed, but the dogs at least seemed glad to hear it.

The next morning, the bloom wore off, and a healthy skepticism accompanied me to the office. Nobody hired an editor that way. There had to be a catch.

I got to the office at 7:58 A.M. Maury was waiting for me.

Without a word, he unlocked the door, ushered me in with a point. "That's your desk," he said.

Bare wood floor. Couple of low-watt incandescents in the cracked ceiling that did little to augment the weak winter light that managed to sneak through the grimy windows. Rickety, wooden kitchen chairs and desks, no computers. No computers?

"We'll have the bathroom running next week, according to the landlord. With winter coming on, I plan to get a heater in here today. Now, is there anything you need? Anything at all?"

No bathroom, either? "Maury, when are the computers coming in?"

"Computers?" Maury looked at me like I had just offered to slip a live trout down the front of his trousers. "What do you need computers for?"

It was my turn to give Maury the live trout look. "Layout, story management . . ."

"Layout? I can do that!" Maury made a sweeping gesture toward what I assumed was his desk. It had to be his: It was the only one in the room with all four legs. I could see a T-square and an Exacto knife. "I used to do layout this way in high school."

So had I, for that matter. I figured it to be one of those We-suffered-in-high-school-and-now-it's-your-turn kind of things, like gym and civics. It taught me to really appreciate computers. The dogs could go back on dry food, and the cats could catch mice. I wasn't about to dick around with manual layouts.

"Maury, where did you find a publisher that would accept manual layout?"

This time, it wasn't the trout look. Maury looked as if I had just offered him the whole hatchery. "I'm still working on a publisher."

I stifled a laugh. "No publisher. I see. Look, Maury, it's been ten years since anyone did manual layout. You'll be lucky if you find a publisher who even accepts it, and they're going charge the moon for converting it."

Maury got a stubborn look that I was going to become very familiar with, and I pressed the advantage. “Get a computer in here, and it’s going to pay for itself on the first issue. The first issue, Maury! Not only is layout ten times faster, but you can upload the electronic version direct to the net, you can do 3-D art work.”

“First issue? Do you know how much computers cost?”

I did. I had one at home. Of course, I’m something of a technofreak, so it had all the bells and whistles. I gave Maury a price about one half of what I paid for mine. He mumbled that he would look into it, and told me to start figuring out how to attract writers. Still fighting back laughter, I told him how I could do that. He growled a bit, but let me go home and fire up my own computer. Since I didn’t know if I was going to go back, let alone if we would get a computer in that dingy little office, I settled for mentioning the magazine in passing in specific SF areas on the net, mentioning hot stories I had heard the magazine was printing and great articles. It’s amazing how much work goes into convincing people that they’ve discovered you, especially when you don’t quite exist to begin with.

Rocketships & Stuff had a staff of three, if you count Maury as staff. The other staffer was the artist/illustrator, a scruffy guy who went by the name of Roach.

Right. That was us. Two Hugos and a Nebula in our first two years, and we got voted ‘Best SF Magazine’ in our third year when we scooped up every award in sight. We vanished two months after that. We won praise from the critics, we were loved by the fans, and Roach is now one of the highest-paid illustrators in the business. He and I, we made out pretty good with Rocketships & Stuff.

One week later, there were two things I knew about Maury Stankiewicz and his magazine, Rocketships & Stuff. First, Maury knew nothing about Science Fiction. Maury had never heard of Asimov, or Brin, or Clarke, or any of the rest of the alphabet through Zelazny, for that matter. He thought Heinlein was a type of French rocket. He believed there were Martians. Native Martians, that is, and not Eurospace settlers. The entire history of the space program seemed to have passed him by. I wasn’t prepared to swear Maury even knew there was a space program.

Second, I hated the name of the magazine. It wasn’t meant to be cute, or camp. Maury had selected it after long and arduous thought, convinced that Rocketships & Stuff was just the right title to lure in

that lucrative teenage demographic. I tried explaining to him that it would be a tough sell to kids who laughed derisively at the antique special effects in those old Star Wars movies, but got nowhere. Once Maury made up his mind about something, it was made up, unless he forgot.

It wasn't until late in my second afternoon with the magazine that I finally found out what the often-invisible Maury proposed to pay me. Four dogs, eight large, hungry cats, and a mortgage. I could live with it.

Maury was crazier than Napoleon's cat, and dumber than a bag of hammers. If it wasn't for Roach, I wouldn't have lasted a week. Not only did Roach speed up the process needed to get used to Maury, but he showed me some of the cover art work he had already done—on spec!—for Maury. I knew we had a gem of incredible value in Roach.

Those covers are classics, now. They were done in the style of the old magazine covers from the '20s and '30s, rocket ships on fins with portholes around the nose, bug-eyed monsters and screaming women, weird Zion Park landscapes, done mostly in earth tones. They came into style briefly back in the '80s, and then were forgotten again.

Roach did them, not because it was his particular style, but because that was what Maury wanted. Maury was convinced that this was how all SF magazines should look. As long as Maury signed the paycheck, Roach was willing to sign those old regurgitations.

However, Roach was a restless soul, and couldn't leave such art without at least a bit of more modern irony in it. Readers quickly learned to spot the little discrepancies in his art work, like the air horn on the side of the space ship, or the extra breast on the screaming earth woman. That last was my personal favorite, since a closer look showed that the screaming earth woman, in fact, was raping the BEM. Pharmacologists and Narcotics agents took a keen interest in the 'alien vegetation' with which he populated other planets.

We hit it off. He was my senior on the magazine by a day, and Maury had rented the office just ten days before that. With Maury usually gone, we would spend hours trying to figure out why someone who knew nothing about science fiction, magazines, or modern post-diluvian science would start this type of business. He wasn't any older than us, perhaps 30, and didn't appear especially well-heeled. About the most believable scenario we could devise was that Maury was a secret agent from a hostile foreign power, possibly the old USSR, and

he had selected the role he had because people expected SF magazine owners to be weird, reclusive, and a bit out of it. It wasn't a very good theory, but all the other theories started with the stipulation that Maury was not a member of the human race, and neither of us was quite ready to accept the idea of a space alien running a science fiction magazine. Too camp.

We decided that Maury was supposed to poison the minds and weaken the will of the nation's youth with subversive and surreal stories. In those first few months, we were bored enough often enough that we hoped it would turn out to be something like that.

It's amazing how many answers you can come up with when you don't have anything else to do, and don't want to screw around with boring, normal answers.

Roach also pitched in that first week and convinced Maury that it would save a lot of time and money if the magazine editor had a computer that he could use to transmit corrected copy to the printer. If we were going to be a magazine, the computer was pretty much a necessity for setting up copies for the net subscribers, too.

Or so I thought.

Silly me. Maury didn't want anything to do with 'telephoning the magazine to people.' Real magazines, in his view, existed on paper only, and we eventually became the only magazine in the country with a circulation over 5,000 not to have a net access.

I did finally pry a computer out of Maury— a creaking, cranky old P-6 that I could at least edit copy on and send to the printer at a piddling 'ho-hum, got all day' 25 mb/sec. Rate.

I promptly started hitting the fanzines, letting them know that a new, professional SF magazine in need of submissions was on the market, and to please send hard copy only, SASE. I was smart, and didn't mention our payment schedule. On the other hand, the magazine had an amazing amount of cachet for something that didn't even exist: Thanks to the careful groundwork I did that first week at home, several other users were mentioning neat things they had heard about in the pages of what was already affectionately known as RS&S.

Fans are fans, and the stories started piling in within three days. Maury was delighted, and impressed. He had opened his office two weeks earlier, and hadn't gotten a single submission. Of course, he

hadn't told any writers that we existed, but that's what he hired an editor for, right?

Submissions from fans usually mean a big slush pile. Many of the stories were so bad that I only had to read the first page to know that a particular story was a gomer, and stuff it on the slush pile. On the other hand, there are a lot of extraordinarily talented fans out there, and within two weeks I had assembled a collection of stories that I thought would do us proud.

The morning before I was to take the whole mess and zip it down to the printer, Maury came in, sat down, plucked a manuscript out of the slush pile, and started reading. By then, I had started wondering if Maury really could read, so it was something of a relief to see him doing that, and more to the point, staying out of my hair while he did it.

After a few minutes, he started laughing. He slapped his knee, and said, "This is a very funny story. Oy, voy!"

"Oy, vey," I corrected absent-mindedly. Right from the start, Roach had warned me that Maury claimed to be Jewish, but that Roach had his doubts about that. He thought Maury just claimed to be Jewish because he imagined he would have a psychological advantage doing business deals. I put that assertion, odd as it sounded, under the same category as our Maury-the-space-alien-magazine-owner theories until I heard Maury mention that he had eaten Yom Kippur and eggs for breakfast.

"This is great." I tried to ignore him. "No, really—you've got to read this story!" He handed it to me, and my heart sank. It was a truly dreadful 'crossover' piece, written by some fourteen year old kid, about Q versus the Evil Empire.

"We can't use it," I explained to Maury. "The characters aren't original, and some of them are copyrighted." And, I added mentally to myself, I was damned if I was going to correct the 47 spelling and grammatical errors I found on the first page alone. Maury waved my objection aside with the air of someone too intelligent to bother with such trivialities as breaking the law. "Run it."

"But . . ." I said.

"Run it!"

Four dogs, eight cats, and a large, hungry mortgage: That didn't allow for luxuries like self-respect. The good news was that it didn't

allow for the folly of self-hatred, either. I shrugged and started coping with the incredible array of grammar and spelling errors.

The first issue went out, complete with Roach-deco cover and several dozen copyright violations, and I held my breath. The ‘evil empire’ characters didn’t feature anyone George Lucas might recognize, but I was worried about the Q character. Fortunately, the kid presented him so incompetently that he bore almost no resemblance to the TV and motion picture character of the same name, and so somewhere in glittering offices in the smoggy miasma of southern California, big, vicious lawyers probably explained to annoyed CEOs that you can’t copyright a letter of the alphabet, and advised them to let the matter drop.

That’s assuming they heard about us at all. We did a print run of 3,000, and only sold 500 copies. Fortunately, if there was one thing Maury could do well, it was sell ad space. We went to press knowing that any copy we sold would be pure profit. God knows what Maury told those buyers. We had ads for yard implements, vacation resorts, and heavy equipment.

It wasn’t much of a start, but we did get noticed. That crossover piece got us more mail, mostly from other young wannabes who were annoyed by the plot resolution, than any other story we ran that year.

After that incident I kept the slush pile carefully hidden from Maury, who never noticed it was gone. That eliminated our favorite theory of Maury vaporizing the minds of Our Youth with sub-par stories.

We settled into a routine. We tripled our newsstand sales the next month, and sold out the month following. Maury increased the print run, and the number and quality of submissions started improving.

Our first big break came out of the blue, one warm summer morning. I went down to the PO to pick up the latest manuscripts — we still weren’t accepting electronic submissions—and when I got back, I picked up the first one at hand, glanced at the name in the corner, and started gibbering.

I reined myself in by the scruff of the neck. It could easily be a joke; maybe some kid ‘borrowed’ the name in order to get noticed. I pulled out the manuscript and started reading.

It was him. Three paragraphs in, I knew this was no fake.

Nobody else in the world could write like that. I had read his major works—La Pantera Negra, Life in the DMZ, Barney and Bill in

Space—and I was more reserved than most of his fans. I merely considered him a cross between Joseph Conrad and God. Others insisted he was God, and yet others maintained that God was just his typesetter. He was at his peak as a writer, and he doubtless made life easy for the award nomination committees: “Did he write any short stories this year? Fine. That takes care of that. How about Novellas?”

I read the manuscript, spent a half hour reflecting on the human condition, wiped the tears from my eyes, and came back to earth. Why would someone like him bother with a small, third-rate magazine like us? We didn’t pay squat, didn’t even have the wider exposure of the net. I poked around in the envelopes, looking to see if there was a note or anything that might explain it.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up. Roach was grinning down at me. “What is it this time? Superman versus the Xmen? Or maybe Robocop against the Ferengi?” Roach was a pain sometimes.

I got my revenge by wordlessly handing him the manuscript and watching the expression on his face change. He plumped down into a chair and started reading.

I turned back to my desk and started redoing the layout. There wasn’t much doubt in my mind which story was going to get played up. I glanced at the rough sketch for the cover, pulled the manuscript for the story it promoted, and discovered that it was about the same size as the story Roach was reading. Good. That made life easier. Roach’s cover could go on the next issue, along with that story.

I heard a stifled sob behind me, and glanced over my shoulder.

Roach was done reading. Looking at the expression on his face, I gave him 45 minutes to recover.

“OK,” I said when he remembered I was in the room, “How do we get this one past Maury?”

“Eh? Hell, just tell him that putting this name on the cover will triple sales!”

“Without letting him see the manuscript?”

“Why shouldn’t he see it?”

“Half the first page is in Spanish. You know how Maury feels about that.”

“Oh, yeah.” Maury was one of those people who thought if English was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for him.

“So are you going to reject the story?”

I winced. The idea of rejecting this story gave me the same feeling a hard-core Church of America Redeemed member might get from learning Thomas Jefferson was an agnostic.

“Look. You need to run this story, and you need to convince Maury that we need as big a press run as he can manage. You tell Maury about the profits he’ll make, he isn’t going to care about a few foreign phrases.”

“The hell he won’t!. Remember the time you ordered tamales instead of tacos?” In Maury’s world, taco was an English word, tamale wasn’t. He made Roach eat it outside in the snow.

“So what are you going to do?”

Inspiration struck. I reached over and punched up a fresh screen on the computer. “I’m going to redo it in pure, xenophobic English!”

“What?” Roach stared at me. “Just like that? You’re going to rewrite his whole story?”

“For Maury’s benefit! This,” I waved the manuscript in the air, “gets swapped back in before we go to press!”

That’s how it worked out. Three hours of typing, translating from a language I didn’t even know all that well, and Maury never even looked at the damn thing. However, he did listen when Roach and I promised him that he could deduct every issue he didn’t sell from our checks if he would only make as big a print run as he could, and he did go and have over 25,000 copies made. We sold out in five days. Maury was happy, and Rocketships & Stuff suddenly had some real respectability. The story won the Hugo and the Nebula, and Roach got a fantasy award for best cover illustration. I got nominated for best editor but didn’t win, and the magazine subscriptions tripled.

Best of all, we started getting submissions from other big name writers. I figured The Presence was a single shot, but later events were to prove I guessed wrong.

With sales booming, Maury all but vanished from the office. He went out and sold ad space, which is what he loved to do, and we put together a great SF magazine, which is what we loved to do.

Roach and I weren’t scratching our heads over why Maury had started the magazine any more. He was making good profits, enjoyed selling ads, and we modestly agreed that he had picked the best people to do the magazine that he possibly could. Success glossed over the sheer improbability of the whole existence of Rocket Ships & Stuff.

Christmas came, and we got fat bonuses, and a pay raise. I started buying better brands of pet food, and thought about a new car. The office got carpeting and decent lighting, and I even upgraded to a computer system from the same millennium that we lived in.

The following summer brought a bit a trouble, and wound up costing us a shot at a second straight Hugo winner. In the spring, I had gotten a strange little piece from a writer I hadn't seen before.

It was eerie and Discordian, a dark 'dream state' type of story. He knew what he was about—he knew what rules he was breaking, and why. From a purely artistic standpoint, it was a great piece of writing, and I knew if we wanted to stay competitive, we had to challenge the readers and take a risk now and then.

Maury didn't like it. Not that he read the story; he didn't like the author's name. Maury had some interesting ideas about what good 'Sci-fi names' were. Polish was good, Russian even better. If a name struck him as being sufficiently British, hyphenated or with

an extra 'e' on the end, that was good, too. I wondered what he would do if a writer named 'Rodriguez' submitted a story.

I couldn't show him the story. Maury hated gloomy and confusing stories.

Maury thought John Carter was an inappropriate name for a science fiction writer. That's the same Carter who walked off with every award in sight and made some other magazine editor a happy and wealthy person last year. He came to us first, and we rejected his story.

I later met him at a Con and got a little salt in the wound. Not only was Carter his pen name, but he hadn't been particularly stuck on it. He would have been perfectly happy to have seen print under his own, ethnic name. I had simply failed to notice it on the copyright on his manuscript. We both politely pretended he had never submitted a story to Rocket Ships & Stuff, and we wound up friends.

I started wondering why Roach and I didn't just kill Maury, hire a good ad salesman, and become rich and famous.

The day after Carter won the Nebula, Roach wandered into the office and noticed that I was screaming and punching out the windows. In Maury's office, this wasn't exactly unusual behavior, but Roach already had learned what had brought on this particular tantrum, and also punched a few windows—his own windows, the damn fool. I learned early in my RS&S career not to take this type of

work home, where I might have to freeze for it until I got the windows replaced.

So Roach took me over to the Chinese joint down the street, and shared a nasty little secret with me.

Roach is a ‘baccer. Well, so am I. Prohibition was still fierce right about then. We had gotten our first complaint from the Church of America Redeemed because Roach showed a character on an issue cover ‘baccing—in a space suit, no less!

The Chinese joint had a ‘bacc room. It had one of those names that sounded like a loose aggregation of vaguely Chinese sounding words, and probably meant something like ‘Stick a pencil in my goat, honkey running dog.’ The stuff they had in the ‘bacc room was probably the only genuinely Chinese thing in the whole place, and the fact that a half hour later I had gone from black rage to a fit of the giggles suggested that they had a little of that old Chinese standby, opium, mixed in.

The next morning, there was a bill on my desk for the glass I broke the day before, but with no comments attached. Maury was used to his employees having temper tantrums. In fact, I think he was secretly a little bit pleased by the whole thing. I wasn’t as pleased, and nearly put out some more windows. Roach stopped me.

Roach and I started hanging out together after work a lot of the time, usually at my place. Roach is one of these types who forms immediate bonds with cats and dogs (but not mortgages), and loved my computer, which really was a rig to give Steve Jobs a wet dream.

A year later—on my birthday, for what that’s worth—we were loitering at my place. The magazine was showing steady growth, and things in the office ran as smoothly as they ever did. Roach was leaning through assorted whiskers and tails in order to poke around with my computer system, while I shuffled through my mail.

“ello!” I said in my best fake British accent. Roach glanced over, eyebrow upraised. I waved an envelope at him. “Something from the Deemers.”

Roach peered at the eagle-cross-and-stars logo of the Church of America Redeemed on the envelope. “Lucky you!” he enthused. “What do those assholes want?”

“Money, no doubt. Or maybe just my mind.”

Roach considered this. “Must be the money. Interest rates are high.”

“So are you. Shut up and let me read.” I got halfway through before I started giggling. At Roach’s perplexed look, I explained, “They don’t like how we’re doing the mag.”

“Good! At least we’re doing something right. What’s it say?”
I took a breath:

Dear Friend:

We are contacting you in the spirit of love and caring that our Lord expects of us. As a member of the mass media, you are in a position to add to the sum of human knowledge and endeavor, the most glittering jewel in the diadem of the Lord.

“What’s a diadem?”

“Sort of a crown thing. Look up Queen Elizabeth II, 1952 Coronation.” Roach leaned toward my computer without annoying any cats, and started pecking, while keeping an ear cocked in my direction. I read on:

. . . diadem of the Lord. Yours is the power to inspire, to give hope, to feed the intellectual hunger of millions of people in our United States of America.

As you know, the Church of America Redeemed holds those values of liberty and freedom that all Americans hold very dear. There is nothing the Lord values more than those who speak truth without fear, knowing they might die for speaking those truths, as our Lord did.

It is an extraordinary tradition that you, a journalist, follow. Remember, the Lord also demanded that all men who held the truth to their hearts should go out and bear witness to the Lord.

Your publication, “Rocketships & Stuff,” dealing as it does on an every day basis with the wonder and precision of the universe, is in an admirable position to remind good Americans everywhere of Who is responsible for this. Your magazine, with its youthful ideas, exerts a major influence on American boys and girls.

We note with sadness, that you have missed some golden opport—“

“—Roach, cut it out! You’re getting drool on my keyboard!”

. . . some golden opportunities to place the Glory of God before the eyes of our children.

We are sympathetic to your need to achieve commercial success with your magazine. There is a misapprehension in your trade that a devout author cannot write as convincingly, nor as well, as the writers you normally select for your magazine. This is a fallacy.

Did you not receive our list of writers who are turning out some of the finest work in America today?

Roach cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Yeah, I got the list about three months ago,” I explained, “and I didn’t recognize a single name on it. I threw it out.”

“Did Maury see it?”

“Yeah. He brought it to me, in fact, and told me to keep an eye peeled for work from these guys. Said the last thing he wanted was a run-in with a bunch of religious fanatics.”

“He would. Did he seem particularly concerned about it?”

I thought about that. “No, not really. Just kind of annoyed. I don’t think he likes Deemers much.”

“Who does?”

“Thirty million people, is what they say. Let me finish this . . . whoa.”

“What?”

As you doubtless realize, there are brilliant and talented people serving the Lord who can also serve your needs, and the needs of your readership. We have been working hard to create an atmosphere of love and trust in America, so that all may enjoy the cherished freedoms and the love of the Lord that is the birthright of all so fortunate to be born here.

To this end, we are compiling a list of reading material that exemplifies the faith and love that we all share with Our Lord. This list shall be sent to every American in the country.

We would like very much to add the name of your wonderful magazine, *Rocketships & Stuff*, to that list. We don’t need to tell you of the benefits you would gather from being on this most valued list, and what golden opportunities you might miss by not taking this opportunity.

All we ask is that you give some of our writers a chance. If the mark of the church appears next to a story in your magazine, readers will recognize it as an endorsement of the wholesome quality and bright American idealism that we all love so much.

We understand that your magazine is made up several months in advance, and we have no desire to be unfair, or make you feel pressured.

Therefore, we will watch with interest over the next six months for stories that reflect your desire to exalt the glory of the Lord and join with Americans in a mass exercise of faith and brotherhood.

Some people have objected that this impinges on some imaginary, man-made standard of ethics. We are sensitive to those concerns, but feel that there are higher ethics to be considered here. By refusing the Lord His own, you are practicing nothing more than freedom from truth, and that is not only an affront to the Lord, but a disservice to all Americans who love truth. We hope you will lift the blinders from your eyes, and join us in the wonderful land we call God's America today.

Yours sincerely, . . . blah, blah, blah.

Roach rocked in his chair a couple of times, tapped his thumb against his upper lip, and stared at me. "That's a pretty direct move," he observed.

"About as subtle as a five dollar whore," I agreed. I tossed the letter on my desk. "The bastards are trying to pressure us into letting them run their stories."

"Christ." It didn't sound like Roach was exalting the Lord when he said that. "What do we do?"

That was a good question. The Deemers had first appeared on the scene about 20 years earlier. After the 'War of Values' fiasco of the 1990's and Naughties, the religious fringe had vanished to lick its wounds. Then the Reverend Thomas Fassburg, founder of the Church of America Redeemed, had emerged, preaching that the founders of the country loved truth above all else, and that Fassburg's particular version of the truth was what they were striving for. Jefferson, Franklin and Madison were saints in the Deemer church, the Constitution Holy Writ. Of course, the Deemer version of what the Constitution really meant wasn't quite what the Supreme Court

thought it meant, and probably not what the founding fathers—especially Madison and Mason—had in mind, either.

In the past ten years, they had gained some thirty million adherents, and were busily electing people to office, especially in the south and west. Rather than appropriate one of the existing political parties, they started their own, running as outsiders. The gamble, staged in the middle of a nasty recession, paid off, and they had about a quarter of the seats in the Senate. They also had several television and computer nets, and their own satellite system.

In short, they were nobody a magazine with a circulation of under 50,000 wanted to tangle with.

I gestured for Roach to move away from the computer, sat down, and started tapping. At Roach's look, I explained, "I'm looking over names in the slush pile to see if there's any Deemer stories worth running."

"You can't be serious."

"Roach, you pick your fights so you win them. We're a science fiction mag. We go for avant-garde stuff, we're heavy on the questioning of conventional values. That doesn't play well with the Normals, who like their stuff bland and safe. We've gone as long as we have without getting much pressure from these folks, simply because they didn't take us seriously. Looks like we caught their attention, somehow. Churches don't usually lose fights with folks like us."

"What about that one TV preacher in the 90's?"

"The one who also claimed the President was Satan? Nobody took him seriously!" That wasn't entirely true. The country never had a shortage of religious whacks, and three states did pass those idiotic anti-Satan laws before the public returned to its collective senses. "Roach, we're in the position of a man soaked in gasoline taking on someone armed with a flame thrower. We're humanistic and we question authority. Those are major no-nos to the church.

At a time when Fassburg and his people are telling people not to consider ideas that might shock the founding fathers, we're encouraging writers to shock and challenge, especially the kids.

Politically, we're poison!"

"Shee-it." Roach gave me a disgusted look.

"I don't like it either, Roach." The names and titles of stories in the slush pile popped up in front of me. "Look, there's some pretty

decent stuff in the pile. Maybe—just maybe—there’s a story in there by a Deemer that isn’t total crap.”

I studied the screen furiously, trying to ignore Roach’s eye tracks. After a minute, he stood up, placed a cat on my shoulder, and said in a quiet voice, “Gotta feed my own pets. I’ll stop by in the morning.” I nodded, and kept tapping keys until he left, watching the screen like my life depended on it.

I didn’t feel any great hope about finding a decent story from a Deemer, but at least finding their stories would be easy for me.

When I set up the slush pile data base, I had thought to have a slot for a special interest notation. There were a lot of groups that had hit on fiction as propaganda, from the KKK to the Greens, and early on, I decided to start keeping track of who was sending what, just for my own amusement.

Three hours and two dozen stories later, I gave up. Much of it was competent writing, and a couple were pretty good from a technical standpoint, but the stories all had a deadly sameness to them. The hero was pious and American, and always won. The plots were done in the primary shades of a 1950s television show, where the bad guys were obviously sick, or evil, or both, and the heroes . . . well, Dudley Dooright came to mind. The heroes had no ambiguities, no moral lapses, and always reached satisfactory plot resolutions where no reader could wonder if justice was done.

Could I use that as some sort of one-shot theme issue? I wondered. I was looking at a fanfold of hard copy on my desk, just getting the glimmering of an idea, when the doorbell rang. It was Roach. I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to him just then, but invited him in anyway.

Roach was cheerful. He flopped back in a chair, and with a wide grin, pulled some envelopes from his jacket pocket. He tossed them on the table, three envelopes, each with the Deemer logo in the corner. “One from my house. One from the office. One from Maury’s mailbox,” he explained.

“You broke into Maury’s mailbox?”

“Yeah.” Roach’s ear-to-ear grin didn’t look particularly repentant.

“What? At his house?”

Roach grinned even wider and nodded. “Just wanted to buy us some time.”

“Buy us time for what?”

“To change your mind. I know Maury would knuckle under, no questions asked. So he doesn’t know about this just yet. That gives me time to work on you.”

I put my palms up and grinned back. “You can put it back. I got it figured what we’re going to do.”

“You did? Great!”

I grinned and tossed him a copy of *Jesus is my Copilot*, by one Michael Hopkins. “I found the perfect Deemer story to run.”

Roach got about half way through the second page before tossing it down. “This is garbage!”

“Sure is,” I grinned. “One of the worst stories I’ve ever seen.”

That was being kind. Vile was more like it. The guy had a sick mind, and felt the greatest expression of Divine American Will involved the messy slaughter of various thinly disguised aliens, each representing some of the nastier racial stereotypes around. It reminded me of Spinrad’s *Iron Dream*, except this guy wasn’t just exploring an aberrant mind—he was living in one. The Deemer church was jingoist, but not noted for screaming racism. Religious fringes have fringes of their own.

Roach pointed at several paragraphs I had struck out. “What happened here? Guy got too vile even for you?”

By way of response I unblurred the text.

“Heah I is, Massa Tom! Heah I is,” called a colored man as he came around the corner of a small stable where he kept his pick-up truck Boomerang. “Was yo’-all callin’ me?”

“Have this ready by night, and set it up at the far end of the shooting gallery.”

“All right, Massa Tom. I’ll jest do dat, fo’ yo’,”

“Charming. Guy thinks this is how we speak?”

“His future features a return to slavery, with African-Americans eager to return to the idyllic life of servitude. But awful as this is, that wasn’t the reason I deleted it. It’s plagiarized.”

“Really? Who the hell writes like that?”

“Guy named Victor Appleton. Back about 80 years ago. He had a set of juveniles surrounding a character named ‘Tom Swift’. He changed the word ‘mule’ to ‘pick-up truck’ and otherwise it’s word-for-

word. I'll have to scan the whole story to see what other nasty surprises are in there.”

“Eighty years ago? So he didn't actually violate copyright?”

“No, but he didn't attribute, either. That's part of our editorial standards.”

“Such as they are.”

“Don't start. I figure we run this, and you do some art work for it that really shows where this guy is coming from; you know, BEMs with human heads—curly black hair, yarmulkes, and hook noses, Stephin Fetchit faces, nasty evil slant eyes. Let your imagination run wild on this one.”

“Make the Deemers look like screaming racist scumbags, is that it?”

“That's it.” I leaned back and folded fingers over my belly, and looked smug. “What do you think?”

Roach ran his tongue over his lower lip and gazed into space for a minute. Crossing his arms, he said, “Well, it's better than nothing.”

That wasn't quite the effusive response I was hoping for. I needed Roach to work with me on this one. I clicked a key. “Look here. The church even gives out ‘Certificates of Writing Merit’ and Hopkins was kind enough to enclose a copy. Signed by Fassburg and everything. He's Deemer-sanctioned, so they won't even be able to say we picked a fake to make them look stupid.”

Roach narrowed his eyes. “OK. That might work.” He stared at me, face motionless, while I gazed back, trying to read his mind.

He was suddenly animated and said, “Hey, you thirsty?”

I was. And hungry. Roach pulled a wad of bills from his pocket. “Go get dinner and booze, and I'll play around on your computer. Want to try something.”

When Roach played with my computer, amusing things happened. The last time, it was sound effects. He managed to fool three of my cats into thinking there was a hostile feline inside the monitor. “Have fun,” I agreed, and went.

When I got back, Roach looked up and said, “What, Chinese again?” Then he said, “Do you have a spare keyboard and mouse? This is going to be a two-man job.”

“I always get Chinese when I have company. The cats don't beg, because they don't like it. Keyboard and mouse in the bottom drawer

on your left.” With that, I went into the kitchen, poured some beers and stuffed the food in the microwave for a quick reheat.

I sat down, pushed the beer into Roach’s free hand, and looked to see what he was up to.

The screen showed a still shot of Hitler orating at Nuremberg.

“Triumph of the Will,” Roach explained tersely, and clicked it into motion. Hitler gesticulated and shouted silently, while Roach’s voice intoned the contents of the letter in a voice over. “Eh,” I said, unimpressed.

“Well, what do you want for a half hour work? You any good at morphing?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Good. There’s a file shot of Fassburg in your Reply directory. Fetch it out and paste Fassburg’s puss on old ‘Dolf there.”

“Hold it. No. I don’t like this.”

Roach stopped what he was doing and peered at me. His face was very still. Without warning he took the mouse and flung it against the wall of my den. “God damn you,” he said in a tired voice. “What is your fucking problem?”

I protested, “I don’t have a . . .”

But Roach was just warming up. “You sit around and pat yourself on the back because you think you’re a hot-shit editor who, though some sort of personal magic, infuses the magazine with artistic quality and integrity. But it’s a lie. You knuckle under to Maury, and you were going to knuckle under to those goddamned holy fascists, and just when I think you’ve grown a little bit of backbone after I go out and put my ass on the line, you wimp out again. Well, fuck you, and fuck the magazine. It’s going to be trash, and it’s going to end up that way because you are a trash editor.” He started to get up.

Well, a lot of what he said was true. I knew that. And if it had been true this time, I would have got mad and kicked him out, and the next day, one of us would have quit the mag while the gutless one stayed on. Maybe I would have worked up the gumption to ask Maury to write Roach a nice letter of recommendation.

I hadn’t balked because of loss of nerve. In fact, my reason for balking had made the situation sort of funny, but I didn’t dare laugh. I shot from my seat, grabbed his arm. He made a fist, paused. I weighed twice what he did. I put up a hand, palm out. He flinched back from the hand, and when the expected blow didn’t land, relaxed a little. I

used the hand that wasn't full of Roach to rub at my chin. "Yeah," I said. "I've been a trash editor. You're right, and we'll talk about it. But it isn't why I don't like this."

I pulled Roach over to his chair, somewhat gently, and waved at him to sit down. He sat, and I continued quietly, "We can get stock shots of Hitler anywhere. He's all over the Net, especially in the Dittohead areas. We can get shots from some of the other big Nuremberg rallies. But take a look at the people in the podium area. That's the 1934 rally. Riefenstal's work.

"It's the one that people fight so hard to keep out of view, because it takes that banal, evil little man, and gives him the power and authority that he actually had to become leader of Germany."

I reached out and hit a key, putting the video into motion. "Watch Hitler." As I said that, I slid the mouse over a vernier dial, bringing the sound up.

We watched in silence as the long-dead dictator gesticulated and shouted. My German was weak, but there were subtitles. The camera kept cutting from Hitler to individuals in his audience, all watching the speaker with rapt and even worshipful attention.

A good orator can get his audience to nod agreement with the cadence of his speech. Yup, yup, that's true—oh, yes, that's right—yup, yup . . .

The massed Nazis weren't just nodding. Their eyes were narrowing, their chins firming as Hitler's words filled them with resolve, pride and self-respect. The camera went back and forth, and did what so few documentaries did, and showed the electric feedback between orator and audience, building on an already powerful scene.

Leni Riefenstal, one of the greatest geniuses with a camera in the 20th century, showed Nuremberg as it felt to the people who were there, and not as the silly Chaplinesque collection of buffoons that Americans were used to seeing.

Roach shivered, which was my cue to shut it off.

"Scary guy," I commented. "He's been dead 70 years, and he still frightens me.

"Roach, did you know that you couldn't find the full video of 'Triumph' on the net until just the last three years or so? A lot of people fought having it in public domain. You watched a few minutes. It's three hours long.

“It’s an old flat screen, black and white documentary, and it can still win converts to a dead maniac. It’s art at its best.

“Roach, if we used it to twit Fassburg and his followers, we would be taking this work of art and warping it, twisting it to a contemporary and political bit of fluff. We would be trying to legitimize ourselves by co-opting someone else’s genius. Never mind what the copyright law says here; it’s plagiarism, and plagiarism at its worst.

“Isn’t that exactly the sort of thing that the Deemers are trying to pull on us?”

Roach stared at the blank screen. Maybe angry shouts goose-stepped through the back of his mind. Perhaps ghosts of his ancestors, suddenly elated, whispered in his ear. Or maybe he just pictured one of his covers redone to advertise Deemer values.

“OK. I see your point. I’ll dig out some other footage.”

“Food first, then paste. You like Moo Shu Pork?”

* * *

I wound up spending the rest of that night, animating Fassburg’s mouth and making it move in perfect synch with the voice over. Roach had picked one of the propaganda rallies from the early 40’s, ridiculously overblown and heroic. It made what we were doing a bit easier. Certainly, compared to what Roach was doing, I had the easy part.

Roach was taking Hitler’s voice, phoneme by phoneme, and matching it to the voice over. I’d heard of it being done before, but never from one language to another!

It took him four hours to get the gutturals out and make the Germanic ‘R’ sound an American one. Roach resisted the impulse to give the long-dead dictator a comic-opera German accent, and had him shrieking in pure midwestern American accents.

That was the other part of his accomplishment that defied belief. Hitler was indisputably a gifted orator, with a voice that could caress or bludgeon. Roach had the pitch, tone and intensity match the course of the letter in a credible manner.

We got some sleep, and by noon we were back at it, getting Fassburg’s facial expressions to match the voice. That was mostly my

bailiwick, and it kept me busy while Roach went to work on the surroundings.

We skipped the obvious cheats. We used frames, but at a rate of 120 per second. Fassburg had a mustache, and while we didn't mess with the configuration he had cut it in, we did manage to make it move exactly the way Hitler's did. We added a slight breeze that caused the huge banners to wave slightly, and provided a plausible reason why a lock of Fassburg's blow-dried hair would

fall across his forehead just so . . . It helped that we stole an old political campaign trick, and reversed Fassburg's face, left-to-right, so the normal asymmetry of the face was backwards, and made him look just a bit off, somehow. It also conveniently moved his hair part to the correct location.

It took two full days to get everything right, and by Sunday noon, we declared it good.

Good? It was gorgeous! Here was Nuremberg in all its psychotic military glory, with the Swastika on all those banners replaced by the Deemer Eagle, Cross and Stars. The eagle, however, wasn't the friendly American eagle from the great seal. This eagle had wings with straight, angular lines, and a deep frown.

Here was Fassburg, red faced and screaming, in the absurd brownshirt outfit, making those funny little gestures of Hitler's.

Surrounding and below him were virtually every Deemer leader and affiliated political hack we could find in the files, applauding and Sieg Heiling for all they were worth. We swiped from an old propaganda stunt and looped them so they would look even sillier.

As Fassburg/Hitler's little speech ended, the curtains behind him opened majestically, showing a huge portrait of a copy of Rocket Ships & Stuff . The cover art work was Rodin's Praying Hands. Immediately after the speech ended, one of the hands slithered down below the page margin and out of sight, while the other made a slow, dramatic turn toward Fassburg, and partially clenched, leaving only the middle finger extended. A voiceover (mine) intoned, "Extremism ends with mass murder, war and

hatred. But it often begins with good intentions, coupled with strong-arm tactics. Reverend Fassburg is not Adolf Hitler, and the Church of America the Redeemed are not the Nationalist Socialist Party. However, when you change history to suit your tastes, and pressure artists to meld to your opinions, and believe those opinions

to be superior to the rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Constitution, you have taken a first, big step toward the sort of destruction and ruin that Hitler visited upon the world. Turn back, Reverend Fassburg, and remember what it means to be an American.”

We thought it made for a pretty dramatic response.

We slept for 16 hours, and then gave it one more look. I hated to mess with it, but figured we needed the ‘computer simulation’ icon in the corner, flashing steadily throughout the entire thing. It was so realistic a simulation that we could open ourselves up to a lawsuit otherwise. It also served to put a no-tamper lock in the encryption, so nobody but us could open the file and alter it further.

Roach and I got some talking done during all this. In a nutshell, I told him to just watch. I wanted to fight now, even if it meant my job.

We mass-mailed the bastard, all 15 gigs of it, to every SF and Fantasy conference on the net. We probably annoyed a few Sysops who might be low on disk space, but we also knew that at least 15 million people would see it—Our people, SF fans and writers and publishers. Some of them, I was sure, had gotten the same letter we had.

The next day, we went back to the office. Maury shuffled in, picked up some folders, and shuffled back out, mumbling happily about ad sales. By 10 A.M. I had 4,000 pieces of e-mail, and Roach reported it was about the same on his end. The e-mail address for the magazine itself had over seventy-five thousand messages.

I quickly composed a generic “Thanks for contacting us on this important issue” auto-answer note for the magazine account, and flushed the e-mail file before my hard disk had a meltdown. Going back to my own account, I scanned the welcome list to see if any friends had written me, and was immediately awarded with 25 hits.

I went through, leaving quick notes to let them know what was going on. Then I expanded my search. Nothing official from the Deemers, but supportive messages from several writers and other publishers in the business.

I keep a crank file of known nut cases on the net, and I had some volume there. One guy wanted to sue me for defaming Hitler.

He was serious, and I thought it was cute. Another promised I would fry in hell for using computer technology to subvert Aryan ideals. And so on. I love the crank file. Unfortunately, I was getting a lot of support from that segment of the population, too.

It stayed quiet in the office all morning and into the afternoon, with nothing but the constant flutter of the hard drive to show what a shit storm we had stirred up.

Roach and I discussed our future. RS&S had given us both some pretty solid reputations, and the little act of defiance we had uploaded assured that we would have lots of people willing to look out for our welfare. It was worth our while to consider starting our own mag once this blew over.

I can't even say I felt guilty about what we were doing to Maury. Here he was, paying us and making it possible for us to get our big breaks in the science fiction field, and we thanked him by stealing his mail and involving him and the magazine in something we were pretty sure he wouldn't approve of. Maury was an aggravating fool, and we both knew that on an intellectual level, the magazine had succeeded despite him, and certainly not because of him. I kept bouncing it back and forth in my head, and wasn't getting any answers.

The phone rang, and Roach picked it up. "Rocketships & Stuff . . . yeah. No, I'm the artist. Um, OK, yeah, he's here . . . who shall I say is calling?" Longish pause. "One moment please."

Roach cupped the phone and gestured wildly. "It's Him!"

"Who?" I asked, exasperated.

He told me.

I grabbed the phone.

It took me a couple of tries before my voice worked. "Hello?"

It's an pleasure to talk to you, Mr. . . . OK, Lew. Pleased to hear from you."

We talked for about ten minutes while Roach fidgeted. He would press his palms together and lean one way, and then the other, and make little grunting noises. I didn't understand his body English, but I could see why he was doing it; it's not often miracles happen twice.

When I hung up, I slumped back in my chair and whistled. Roach was nearly purple.

"He's sending us a story," I told Roach. I shook my head in disbelief. "He doesn't want payment for it. He says the Fassburg movie was payment enough."

"Wait. He's giving us this story?" Roach gave his ponytail a tug and gave his pencil a bite. Then his expression changed. "Pity it will

never see print. I doubt we'll be around long enough for that issue to get out."

I already had that figured out. "All we need to do is get the next issue uploaded to the printer before Maury fires us. He won't even think to check to see what's in it."

"How long do you think we have?"

"How alert is Maury, and how fast will the church descend on us?"

Alert? Maury? Not as long as it was a net phenomenon only.

As for the Church, it tended to be dogmatic/authoritarian, and so response had to come from the top. Roach knew that, and replied, "Several days, at least."

"And we've got support here." I waved at the telephone I had just used. "I guess we hit one of his buttons. He was telling me his daughter is a Deemer, constantly nagging him to write about 'more pleasant stuff.' He got a variation on that letter, too. He's pissed, Roach, and I guess he's been pissed for some time. This story he's sending is about the church."

I checked with the computer, and was awarded with a little ding. I scanned the incoming story area, and saw that a half-dozen stories had come in during the day. It wasn't slush pile stuff, either.

All the stories came from noted writers, people who had hardback publications, and it included one mainstream author who normally had nothing to do with SF. Nothing from Lew yet.

The stories were from people who were on my mental 'accept unless real garbage' list, and so I printed two copies from the first one in the queue, and passed one along to Roach so he could start thinking about illustration for it. I could see that even if the church somehow failed to see our valentine, it was going to be a busy week for us. Whether this next issue ever saw print or not, we were going to do it up right.

I pulled up the first story, read about a page, and started chuckling.

At Roach's glance, I explained, "This one goes after the church, too. Deals with the intellectual poverty of dogmatism."

On a hunch, I had the computer scan the manuscripts to see if 'religion,' 'dogma,' or 'suppression' were words used in the five other stories. To my delight, I got positive hits on all five of them.

Two of them hit on ‘Redeemed,’ and they all hit on ‘freedom.’ It didn’t take a genius to spot a trend. These writers all had scrapes with the Church, and they all were submitting stories they had written as a result of those scrapes. I didn’t have any trouble understanding that impulse. When I stopped to think about it, that’s exactly what I was doing.

The computer dinged again, and this time it was Lew. I pulled out the file, and whistled. It wasn’t just a story. It was a full-fledged novel, *A Darker God*, 100,000 words or more. I gawped while I considered the implications. Even with First NA Rights only, running it for free in RS&S would cost him at least a hundred thousand dollars in potential royalties. I eyed the cranky old laser printer we had finally convinced Maury we needed, and decided to send the file home. I told Roach what was going on, and sent his machine a copy, too. I knew what I would be doing tonight.

I shuffled through the other manuscripts and gave each a quick read. They all were directly about the church, and none were very complimentary. All of them addressed the threat to creative liberty the church posed. All were very, very good. Even without Lew’s novel, we had enough for a full issue already.

Composing this issue would be like teaching a dog to eat. I printed out a copy of Hopkins’ magnum opus, stuck a post-it on it that said “Lead story” and scaled it across to Roach.

He looked at it, pulled his head back and squinted, and cocked an eyebrow at me. “You still want to run this?”

“Sure do. Then we’re going to follow it with stories by Povich, Bartlett, Carter, Villareal, Bredlow, and Robinson. And Roach, I want you to really emphasize that Hopkins is a Church of America Redeemed writer. Put their logo next to the title, use the church colors, and we’ll run a box with his Deemer certificate in it. Then we’ll follow it with six of the best SF stories I’ve ever seen, all attacking the church.”

Roach grinned. “I love it!”

“Oh! And Roach, just this once, do you mind if I suggest a cover for this issue?”

Roach eyed me. “Depends.”

“I would like you to have the Praying Hands again.”

Roach held up a sheet. He had the hands about half-done.

They were asymmetrical, one black and indefinably male, the other white and feminine. “Like this?”

“God. We’re both geniuses.”

Dave the printer had a question for us. “Just how big is this issue going to be?”

“...um...”

“That’s what I thought. Right now, you’re up to 435 pages.

That, in scientific circles, is considered a larger amount than your usual 256 pages.”

I thought furiously. We usually tried for 210 pages of text in a 256 page issue. This was nearly double that.

I had it. “How about a double issue?”

“You could do that. Why not just serialize the novel and do this over three or four months? I’m sure you know you’ll make better income that way.”

I didn’t want to get into that. “I don’t want to break the novel up. How much would it cost to band two issues together in plastic?”

He told me. I smiled, and said, “Good. It’ll be a double issue then.”

“What cover price do you want for that?”

I gave him a number. He whistled, and said, “That’s a lot more than double the price!”

“So? We put ‘Special Collectors Edition’ on the front.” I chuckled. “We won’t have to lie, that’s for sure.” A thought struck me, and I gestured at Roach. Both hands praying, and then I slid one hand down, and pulled in all but one of the fingers on the remaining hand. “Second cover” I mouthed at Roach. He nodded vigorously.

I stopped to consider what the Post Office considered obscene these days. “Uh, Dave? Set it up so the second cover is on the second part on the inside...”

* * *

That night, I finished reading *A Darker God*. The antagonists were Deemer leader types. They were pleasant, sincere, concerned and moral. They wanted nothing more than a decent, civil society, with less crime, less broken families, less fear. They were noble, brave, and courageous. They were utterly terrifying. Lew was too good a writer to demonize the church. Instead, he painted a dark,

brilliant portrait of how such an outfit could utterly destroy a culture and a country while trying to do the exact opposite. It was harrowing, it was gripping, and the plot rolled to its climax with the inevitability of a Shakespearean play. Lew showed the psychological torture and eventual dismemberment of the protagonist in a way the Bard couldn't touch. It was classic literature, something people would be reading 500 years from now.

I had just reached out, and figuratively slapped the church across the face as hard as I could. Lew, on the other hand, had just tossed a nuke at them.

I even briefly wondered if A Darker God would be a death knell for the Church.

Over the next three days, we waited for the hammer to drop.

E-mail to the magazine shot past the half-million mark, and was still running about fifty thousand pieces a day. I couldn't even begin to read it, but random sampling suggested that on the nets, at least, sentiment was running about eight to one in our favor.

Dave set several records in setting up, and by day three, we were getting feedback from the retailers. Early sales were astronomical. One book chain ordered their usual, sold out in five hours, ordered three times as many more, sold out in three hours, and were screaming for more. I told Dave to do a second run and lied to him when he asked about authorization. Too bad I wasn't on a percentage plan.

Roach and I started setting up for the next issue. For me, it was easy picking stories. It seemed like everybody who was anybody in the field of science fiction wanted to get published in RS&S. The slush pile grew from about 25 stories a week earlier to over 3,000. I didn't have a clue what I was going to do about that, but started by having the computer auto-reject any that contained spelling errors. Unfortunately, most wannabes had the same spell-checker I did, and it only trimmed about 200 stories. Life was even worse for Roach. His imagination just suddenly shut down on him. He would spend a couple of hours staring at a blank sheet of paper, clearly at a loss for what to draw. I took him to the 'bacc room and got him good and loaded one night, and it helped a bit, but the fact was, his creative juices just weren't flowing. It wasn't his fault, but it meant the work days were long and boring.

Maury wasn't around much, either. That was a blessing, but it meant I felt even twitchier when he did turn up and poke his nose in to make sure we were still working.

Three days of dread, anticipation, and a letdown after the huge emotional rush of making the Fassburg file and pirating the magazine out from under Maury. I actually felt relief when Maury came in Friday morning and fired the both of us.

Roach and I let off some steam by screaming at Maury, but it was more ritual than rage. He screamed back, and accused us of trying to sabotage the magazine by making the Fassburg file, and asked why we did it. I showed him my copy of the letter from the church, and he told me it wouldn't have hurt me a bit to run a couple of their stories, and that I was just stuck on bullshit college ethics. I didn't have to pretend to get angry on that one. Defensively, yes, but the anger was real nonetheless.

The church had sent a rep around to Maury's house to tell him they were upset. Maury didn't think that was particularly sinister.

No, they added smoothly—they were very upset. They showed him a still from the file, the final frame with the obscene gesture under the magazine title. Maury demanded to know what on earth made us think he would permit such a thing to be associated with the cover image of a decent, family-oriented magazine. Roach and I kept our yaps firmly shut at that particular point.

"I talked to the printer, by the way," Maury snarled. My heart sank. "To tell you the truth, after discovering this stunt, I was worried that you were suddenly out to fuck up my magazine. I wanted to make sure you hadn't put a bunch of crap stories in the next issue, just to make me look even worse."

Maury gave me a level glare. "He says it's the best issue we've ever done. Even congratulated me. It seems I'm now a millionaire. But it would have been your goddamned ass if he had said anything different!" He left it to us to imagine what he had in his arsenal besides firing us. Maybe not firing us?

Roach and I shut down the computers, and Roach gathered a couple of his favorite styluses, and we walked out of the office of Rocketships & Stuff for the last time.

It turned out that most of Maury's rage really had been *pro forma*, too. He had written out our final paychecks, including 'severance pay,' which amounted to a full year's salary for each of us.

Even Maury could show a little appreciation. I think.

To this day, I've never figured out if he was really angry about that file or not. Was the huge bonus hush money, or atonement? Three years working for him, and I didn't understand the man at all.

Roach and I ran—literally—to the bank to get the checks cashed, and then went out and got bombed. We lost 48 hours, and just the vague memories I have suggest that we blew off a fair bit of steam. We got picked up and hauled home by the cops once, apparently for standing outside an empty Deemer church and yelling “We're not gonna take it!” The next morning, we made tracks for the store and proceeded to get blotto again. At least that was our only legal entanglement. It was embarrassing having to go to the clinic for tests. I hadn't pulled any stunts like that since college.

* * *

A couple of days after that, Roach and I got together and started making plans to start our own magazine. We had capital, and talent. The question was, Should we do it?

The Church had finally publicly reacted to the file, and stung, was hitting us with a huge wave of propaganda. Roach's ‘Finger for Fassburg’ frame was all over the net, along with warm, concerned lectures from church people about how this showed the moral poverty and utter lack of resources of people so depraved that they felt they had to hate an organization that so loved freedom and devotion to God. They ‘forgave us’ for our “puerile outburst” and assured readers that they were convinced that potentially, we were mature, stable, decent people who had merely succumbed to a rash, childish impulse. This was all crafted in tones that said pretty convincingly that they thought nothing of the sort. They were trying to destroy us by treating us with respect. Oh, those bastards could write when they needed to. They just couldn't write decent science fiction. I wondered in passing if Hopkins still had his Writer's Certification from the Church.

Then they sorrowfully announced that they had discovered that we had been fired for lying, and misuse of magazine funds.

Technically, that wasn't true: Maury didn't know about that yet when he fired us. Given what really happened, and the fact that we didn't want to see our capital sucked down in legal expenses, there

didn't seem to be much we could do about it. For all we knew, Maury had figured out what had happened, and complained to the church.

We couldn't exactly call up the local Bishop and ask.

I decided to quit monitoring the net for a day or two. The size of the firestorm was daunting. It was getting to the point where I was starting to wonder if I was just a childish ingrate who had attacked the church for doing nothing more than trying to help me overcome my bigoted and malignant views of religion. I didn't mention any of this to Roach, which suggested that maybe I wasn't taking it all that seriously. But if they could raise doubts in my mind, I didn't want to know what effect they were having on the rest of the world.

Thus, when Lew called me a couple of days later, I was insulated and isolated, cocooned and marooned, and just generally out of touch with things. The first thing he wanted to know was if we really had been fired. When I told him we had, he asked if the net rumors about why we got fired were true. So I explained to him that the Fassburg file had been done without Maury's knowledge or consent, and that we had failed to warn him after the fact.

"I am probably the most reputable writer in SF these days. I give you my finest novel, free, and you put it on a magazine with an obscene gesture on the cover." My stomach dropped like a rock.

It honestly hadn't occurred to me that Lew might be offended.

There was silence on the phone for a moment. Then he chuckled.

"OK, That's brave. Kinda goofy, but brave." The voice turned businesslike again.

"OK. What about the accusations of misappropriation and misuse of funds?"

"Um. Well, we did kinda go above our job descriptions in putting the last issue together." I swiftly sketched out for him the story behind that. "I hear Maury has ordered two more print runs, so he can't exactly say we did him any financial harm."

I wanted Lew's approval. I wasn't sure I was going to get it.

"OK. I guess the one that worries me the most is this stuff about the church claims of slander by you and your artist."

"How does that follow? They wrote that letter! Are they trying to deny it?"

"No. I'm talking about the Hitler file. Didn't you guys know to put a SimLock icon on it? The other stuff I can understand, but that was just plain stupid!"

“We did. We simlocked it with 128-bit encryption.”

“You better take a look at what they say you did.”

I went to the Deemer site. It had the file. “Hold on,” I told Lew.

It began after the morphing of Fassburg’s features into Hitler’s. The ‘translation’ appeared to be not from the text of the church letter, but an actual translation of Hitler’s speech, which was virulently anti-Semitic.

The voiceover was there, and in my voice. But it wasn’t my voiceover. “Extremism ends with mass murder, war and hatred. But it often begins with strong-arm tactics. Reverend Fassburg is Adolf Hitler, and the Church of America the Redeemed is the Nationalist Socialist Party. When you change history to suit your tastes, and pressure artists to meld to your opinions, and believe those opinions to be superior to the rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Constitution, you advocating the sort of destruction and ruin that Hitler visited upon the word. Reverend Fassburg, remember what it means to be an American. And not a Deemer”

“Those sons of bitches,” Roach muttered. “That isn’t our file.”

Stunned, I could only nod. I had gone out of my way to differentiate between Fassburg and Hitler. Maybe I was wrong.

There was silence for a moment on the phone, punctuated by Lew’s breathing. Then I heard keyboard clatter. “Yes. I see the tracers, right where they should be. Hmm. This is interesting. Computer simulation, and I see you put a lock on it.

Let me check something here.”

I waited, puzzled. The file should self-destruct if someone tampered with the computer simulation lock.

“Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho,” Lew said softly. I could almost feel the slow grin spreading across his face. “You can nail them for this.”

“You think?”

“Heh. It’s been all over the net. Now I’m looking at the original you sent me.” There was a pause. “Oh, my. I’m not a lawyer, but I think you can hammer Fassburg’s hide to a barn door over this.”

“But my computer simulation icon is right there.”

“It’s a fake. This is clearly based on your file. They’ll hardly be able to claim that it accidentally fell off.”

I thought furiously. It was possible to remove the icon from a single frame of a sealed file, but it was pixel-by-pixel work. It would take the better part of a day to remove the icon, and replace it with

pixels congruous with the surrounding picture. Keys were clicking at the other end of the line.

“Are you equipped to scan for watermark?” I asked.

‘Watermark’ was a second, ‘invisible’ icon that consisted of nothing more than a slight elongation of the pixels that could be seen only when the file was encrypted rubbish. You couldn’t see it with the naked eye, and it was considered nearly impossible to expunge.

“Doing that right now,” he replied. “This will take a few minutes.”

While I was waiting, I flipped on my own computer and called up a copy of the poster. It would have someone’s ID on it, but it wouldn’t be mine. I had set the watermark to vanish if tampered with. If the church did it, proving they did it wouldn’t be too hard.

“Are you 768-AW-2X352-1YY?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Somebody duped this from off the screen. Couldn’t copy the watermark, of course, and their own computer put its own on once he switched it back to the same format.” Unless it was done on a computer I could conceivably have access to, it would prove that the picture on the poster was not my work. Roach’s personal signature number wouldn’t appear on that, either. But somebody’s would. I started feeling a lot better.

“They’ve been posting this all over the place. It’s fake, and they know it’s a fake. They’re using it to accuse you of criminal misconduct. I think you need to sue the living hell out of them.”

“Those bastards. Know any lawyers who will work on consignment?”

Lew chuckled. “I’ll lend you mine. He used to work intellectual properties for Disney. They let him go because he was too bloodthirsty. He doesn’t lose cases.”

“We can’t afford someone like him.”

“My treat. I owe you a favor.”

“You owe us a favor? How do you figure?”

“Well, I got some other news today.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. You leave the net for just two lousy days . . . “What news is that?”

“This is between you and me.” He paused for my assent. “I got a call from my daughter last night. You remember I told you she was a member of that cult?”

I wasn't likely to forget.

"She bought the magazine and started reading *Darker God*. She was shocked that I had written a new novel and not told her. Before she . . . back when she was more secular, she used to be my sounding board and informal editor. She was hurt that I would undertake a major work and not even let her know I was doing it. I reminded her the Deemers had condemned Bill.

"While I was talking to her, somebody from the church dropped in on her and warned her not to have any copies of *A Darker God* around. I guess the idiot said something about how she would have to account for herself to the church, being a relative of mine, and she blew up and told him to go to hell.

"The upshot is that while she's not ready to abandon her faith, she is thoroughly disgusted with the church. I think by the time she finishes *A Darker God*, and sees herself in it, she'll be well on her way to breaking loose from those cultists."

"She was your central character, wasn't she?"

There was a pause. "Look, we can continue this over lunch tomorrow. Bring that artist fellow, too."

"Roach? Sure. Where, when, why?"

"Valentino's. Noon. I have a job offer for you two."

* * *

I'm finishing this up at my desk in the main office of the wildly popular Redemption magazine. I'm editor-in-chief, with a staff of five, and Roach oversees the artists staff. Lew and his daughter run the show, of course. He reads every word that goes out, and sometimes makes polite, informed remarks that help, rather than hinder. I thought I knew what being an editor involved.

Lew, with care and patience, is showing me just how little I really knew. We just finished our fourth monthly issue, and Lew wrote an editorial for it that came right out and said that while we would give the same consideration for stories written by members of the Church of America Redeemed that we do for anyone else, the church logo would never, ever appear next to any story in the magazine, no matter what laws Congress passed. Tomorrow, Lew goes up to Washington to testify against the proposed Literary Code.

The ‘Deemers are leaving us alone for now. We’ve got them in court, and I still spend too much time writing out depositions and discussing strategy with my lawyer, but the bottom line is that we are likely to get a huge settlement and an apology from the church for defamation. They still have their lackeys going on about how we promote nihilism and disdain for American values on the net, but the same laws that let us publish the magazine let them do that, and that’s fine with me. It’s a fair trade off. I’ll put my credibility up against theirs any day.

We had one case brought against us, by Michael Hopkins. It was dismissed by the judge, who ruled that submitting a manuscript to a publication was prima-facie evidence that the author was desirous of having the story published.

Rocketships & Stuff isn’t out of my life just yet. For one thing, I just heard this morning that I have been nominated for the Hugo for Best Editor, and we might see a half dozen more nominations involving that one double issue over the next few days. And the Nebulas are yet to come up.

I don’t know where Maury is. Thanks to some conversations I had with Dave the Printer, I have a pretty good idea of what happened to him.

Church people somehow managed to convince Maury that the fantastic sales and profits from the double issue resulted from the church-sanctioned lead story by Hopkins. If poor old Maury had ever gotten into ‘that dumb computer stuff’ and logged into the net, he would have known better. For one thing, the notation that the Church had annulled Hopkins’s ‘Writing Credentials’ had gotten out all over the net, and should have warned Maury that somebody was lying about something. Unfortunately, Maury liked being in a vacuum, and the church was designed for filling those types of vacuums.

So he hired a Deemer editor and artist, and they compiled another double issue, with nothing but officially sanctioned stories.

Then Maury authorized a print run of a half million copies. It must have taken every cent he had.

The issue bombed. Dave reports that the outlets returned over 90% of the copies a month later.

Six weeks passed, and another issue came out. Dave thinks that Maury managed to get the church to make good on a guarantee that the previous issue would succeed, and got most of his losses back.

I picked up a copy of that issue the day it came out, and read it. It looked like Maury did the whole thing himself, and at first, I was surprised. About half the stories were slush pile material, but

the other half was pretty decent. Stuff I might have accepted if I was still there. I leafed back. Even the marginal stories were just that—marginal. None of them were that bad. I reminded myself that it was dangerous to underestimate Maury, and mentally wished him luck.

It turned out to be equally dangerous to overestimate him. The whispers started on the net the day after the final issue of *Rocketships & Stuff* came out, and within a week, the proof was there for all to see. Maury had taken stories from old issues of other SF magazines, changed the names of the titles and author's names, and run them. It was pure, blatant theft. I can't even begin to imagine how he thought he could get away with it.

Maury was last seen moving rapidly to the West, with dark flickering shadows with briefcases in hot pursuit. Nobody ever heard from him, or *Rocketships & Stuff*, again.

I have four large, hungry dogs, and eight large, hungry cats.

I no longer have a large, hungry mortgage, because I paid that sucker off. I also have a large, hungry love for the work I do, and want to keep on doing it for the rest of my life.

I feel redeemed.

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Cosmic Charlie



I SHOULD BE GETTING USED TO THE SIGHT of an eight-lane expressway without other cars, but I haven't. It's unnerving.

"God, what a lovely morning!" Kathy wriggled a shoulder stretch in the cramped passenger seat of my Civic and gazed uncritically over

the Atlantic. “I’m glad now that we got an early start. New York is the pits this time of year!”

Any time of year, I thought, but said nothing. I was glad to be out of the city myself, but didn’t share her joy in the weather. The sky had a brassy sun in a high steel haze, and the Atlantic was silver sullen, waves indecisive in a fitful breeze. In the coves invisible from the highway the locals would be moving boats to the leeward sides, and carefully stocking firewood, water and other provisions. You don’t have to live long in these parts to know when a big blizzard is coming. I wasn’t looking forward to driving back this night. We were freelancing it, hoping to get some samples of local opinion on the disaster. The story would be pretty thin—Yankees, I knew, would not be too concerned with events in a place like Trenton. But I hadn’t seen Syd in over a year, and I needed to get out of the city myself.

We set forth at the hideous hour of 4 A.M. with the glee of kids on a family picnic. Sunrise found us well along the 495, near Harvard, well away from the miles of urban squalor that predawn darkness had cloaked for us.

I considered Kathy from the corner of my eye. Born and raised in New York City, 25 years old. Knew less about the local weather than I did, and I was a California transplant, arrived just two years earlier. But the first year had been in New Hampshire, where you could still see the stars.

I wondered, idly, if the stories were true that city folks once lived to ripe old ages without ever seeing a star. Certainly, you still couldn’t see any from the bright miasma of Manhattan.

The stars had been bright over Berkeley, but Berkeley was gone. If stars still shone there, they shone on blood-scented water and a plague of the earth that killed humans.

To my left was a hillside, sparsely settled by birch with patches of snow in the shadows. Inland, the snow was deeper, whiter, but here, where the salt air was, snow didn’t linger. By evening, I knew, the slope would be white again.

And now Trenton. The thought came back, insistent, refusing to be deterred by the innocent splendor of the New England coast.

The plague was there, right next door to my new home, just like in Berkeley. For years we had read with horror of the spread—Asia, to Africa, to Europe, to the Americas. And then the West Coast.

The world's population had reduced to a billion people, and no end to the carnage was in sight. Blooming spots on the face of the earth, and a new colony growing yet again.

I felt Kathy's hand on my shoulder. "It's not here yet. We're alive, so there's still hope."

I managed a grin. "That obvious?" At her nod, I continued, "I feel sometimes like it's chasing me, personally."

She looked pensive. "I guess if I had moved twice because of it already, I might wonder the same thing."

"Guilt, maybe." I changed lanes for the turn-off. "That was the hardest part, both for Syd and myself. We survived—three years now, and no after effects. No physical after effects, that is. We're part of that one tenth, or whatever, of one percent that Survived. Makes me feel a bit conspicuous."

"But didn't the doctors say . . . ?"

"The doctors don't know shit. All the tests came back normal, which is no surprise since they don't know what the hell it is they're testing for! At least Charlie says that we're either lucky sons-of-bitches, or blessed by God. That's probably closer to being right than the doctors will ever be!"

"Charlie?"

"He. Yeah. Cosmic Charlie. You'll probably meet him today. He's one of Syd's regulars."

"Um."

A few minutes later we pulled up to Syd's place. The sky had gone almost pure white, with thin bands of gray cloud here and there. Syd was standing out in front of his place, looking apprehensively at his porch.

"You afraid it's going to blow away on you?" I shouted.

"Ayup." Syd continued staring pensively at his suspect eaves.

"What's this 'ayup' crap? You going native on me?"

"Ayup." Syd suddenly turned, a broad grin giving the lie to his indifference. We exchanged a big bear hug. Survivors have a way of being extra glad of seeing one another.

I gave Syd a looking-over. New England agreed with him. I turned and introduced him to Kathy. They exchanged 'meetchas, and we went inside.

Syd is a good bartender. He doesn't drink. He watched his older brother take the long slide of alcoholism, eventually dying at the age

of 46. About then, Syd decided that he just didn't need a drink anymore. Syd maintains a relaxed attitude toward others' drinking—as long as they have a similar relaxed attitude about their drinking.

Syd got the place about a year before, dirt cheap. The owner took note that the dead zones appeared in coastal areas, and had decided to move to Nebraska. He explained to everyone that he was tired of seeing the salt air do a number on the paint of his car, which got him a variety of grins, and off he went.

The barroom was one of those large and cozy types of places, with a big stone fireplace, cathedral beam ceiling and a warm light.

When Syd took it, hunting trophies had hung along one wall, and antique whaling equipment along another. Syd promptly replaced the trophies with wildlife photos that he had taken himself, of animals experiencing the joy of life. The whaling paraphernalia was replaced with lovely oil paintings of sailing ships that he had gotten from God-knows-where. Without disturbing the atmosphere of the place a bit, Syd managed to change the entire tone. The juke box lost most of its collection of country and western, to be replaced with Gaelic ballads and folk music. The regulars came in, sniffed suspiciously at the new decor, and settled back in. The only change that anyone ever noticed was that fewer people spent time crying into their beers, and there were fewer scuffles. Syd wasn't out to reform anyone; he just let them see that there were gentler ways of living.

We grouped at a table next to the bar. The place, unsurprisingly, was empty. It was still early in the morning, and most of Syd's regulars would be out getting ready for the coming storm. Syd observed that the place would probably crowd up once the storm really got going. Yankees didn't fight nature. They did what they could, and then they waited. Syd's was a good place to wait.

Syd poured some coffee, and sat down with us.

"Syd, how far native have you gone? I'd have thought you'd be pleased to see me. Or at least surprised!"

Syd grinned. "Pleased, yeah. Surprised, no. I would have been, I guess. Last time we talked, you were planning to go to Atlanta and follow up on that corruption story. But Charlie kept saying you were coming today."

"Charlie said that, eh?" I shook my head and grinned. "He still a demon weather predictor?"

"He forecast this storm."

I shrugged. Some of the locals probably saw it coming a week earlier.

“Back in August.”

“In August. Right.” I gave Syd a skeptical look. He seemed sincere, so I added, “Has anyone bothered to check his accuracy on any of this stuff?”

“Not that I’ve heard about. The locals take it in stride. So-and-so can put a hex on his neighbor’s catch, and Charlie can predict weather and visits from distant friends months in advance. No biggie, as far as they’re concerned.” Syd gave a weak grin. “First, I never pay much attention until it’s too late. And then, I don’t want to annoy people. They like having a ‘psychic’ sort on hand.”

“And I’m sure Charlie wouldn’t want you to write them down, either. Probably it’s just a routine to cadge drinks.”

Syd shook his head. “Charlie doesn’t cadge drinks. He’s got money.”

My grin widened. “OK, so he likes to bullshit people.”

“Well, I’ll have to start writing them down,” Sid gave a vague wave, presumably at whatever he imagined he might write on. “He works cheap, give him that. I wonder how much those bozos on TV get paid to forecast yesterday’s weather? How was traffic coming up?”

“Light.” In fact we only saw a couple of dozen cars the whole way. “Manhattan is emptying out.”

“Everyone going inland?”

“Mostly. Some are moving out on the sound, taking over empty homes. I don’t think there’s a million people in New York these days.”

“Must be pretty slow for you at work.”

“I’m out of work. The paper folded.”

Syd looked shocked. “The New York Times folded!?”

“That’s why I’m here. I figure to head to Nova Scotia in a few days. I want to start out talking to the New Acadians, and then work my way southeast to Yarmouth. From there, back inland, and maybe wind up near the west coast.”

Syd regarded me doubtfully. “That’s a long trek. Are you sure crossing the country is feasible? I hear that gas stations and restaurants are getting scarce.”

“Inland is still OK. Doesn’t look that bad around here, either.”

“It’s not bad here. Most of the locals have lived here all their lives. Little things like the threat of sudden death aren’t going to scare that lot off. So why make this trek?”

“I figure to get out and talk to people.”

“And . . . ?”

I shot my arms out, pantomiming holding a notepad and pencil. “Tell me sir, quoth I, what is your story?”

Syd laughed. “You realize that every out-of-work reporter in the country is doing just that?”

“I’ve got something else in mind. I’m not interested in hearing about where they were the day Seattle died, or how Aunt Bertha bit the big one. I want to find out how they feel about the dead zones.”

“I imagine they’re pretty much against them, guy.”

I gave Syd a look of mock deep agreement. “You see my problem. How do I ask that without it sounding idiotic?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you are asking.”

“Hamm. Did you ever read much science fiction?”

“Some.”

“Any end-of-the-world stuff?”

“Sure.” Sid rolled his eyes in recollection. “*On The Beach, Lucifer’s Hammer, Forge of God This Is The Way The World Ends.*”

“Fine. Good collection, that. You have taste. You ever notice how in those stories, people are either resigned to their collective fate, or pissed off, or in a total blind panic?”

“*Childhood’s End?*”

“Well, that was a bit different. You had what amounted to a deity manipulating humanity. That isn’t happening here, and you aren’t seeing the types of reaction you might expect. People are taking the ‘zones in stride. You don’t hear talk about the world coming to an end, except for the religious fanatics, and when aren’t they talking about that? Most people, on the other hand, act as if this is just some sort of adjustment period, and afterward there’s going to be all kinds of prime beach-front property available.”

“Well, that’s because everyone figures that they are safe inland. Get fifty miles from salt water, and you’re safe. So why think the world is ending?”

“You’ve heard about Australia?”

“Uh-huh. Plane went down near Adelaide. They think everyone on board was dead when it crashed, right?”

“So it must have flown over a dead zone. Must have. What else would kill everyone at once? But it was never anywhere near an ocean—it was flying from Sydney.”

“So somewhere in the Outback, there’s a dead zone that hasn’t been noticed because it’s so remote. If someone was trying to keep the lid on that, they didn’t manage too well.”

“So it would seem.” I rubbed my hands together. “So we might have an inland ‘zone. Shouldn’t people be running around screaming ‘shit, we’re doomed!’ or some such?”

“Remember the Ukraine scare last year?” Kathy looked at each of us in turn. “They found a small town full of dead people.”

“And it turned out to be pneumonic plague.” I had done peripheral write-ups on the story. Compared to the Black Death, the ‘zones were a good, clean death.

“There still wouldn’t be panic. People are getting used to the ‘zones.” Syd lifted an eyebrow at me. “Been a while since I heard of any Survivors got lynched.” I saw his eyes flicker at Kathy.

“She knows, Syd.” I tried smiling. I suspect I failed miserably.

“It seems I scream in my nightmares.”

Syd nodded. Kathy rested a hand on his. “Syd, I don’t have any problem with Survivors. Honest.” Syd gave a noncommittal nod. “What was your story?”

Normally, the best way to strike up a conversation with a Survivor was to ask him what his story was. At least, if you happen to be a Survivor yourself.

“I was in my apartment. I heard a crash, and went to the window to see what happened. Traffic was still moving, but it was moving aimlessly. I watched a car plow into a fire hydrant. Water gushed up, nobody seemed to notice. I went outside, and found everyone dead.”

If Kathy was disappointed, she hid it well. Or maybe she realized that some people couldn’t even acknowledge it even happened. Compared to some, Syd’s narration was an exercise in vivid detail.

Syd had accepted Kathy. It had taken me six months to tell her just the beginning of my story. I had heard a knock at my door, and went to answer. A kid was leaning against the jamb, with the pizza I had ordered propped against the same jamb. The expression on his face was that worn by anyone waiting for an answer at a door. It didn’t change when I opened the door, and it probably still hasn’t. He might still be standing there.

It had taken me several minutes to realize he was dead.

Syd broke in on my thoughts. “A few months ago, I would have been pretty paranoid about you knowing about me. People aren’t used to Survivors, few as we are. But they are also used to the ‘zones, as many of them as there are.”

“We’ve come a long way from Hong Kong.” I nodded, Kathy looked puzzled. “There were about a dozen Survivors from Hong Kong. We think. All we know for sure is that 24 hours after Hong Kong died, one Survivor had committed suicide, another had gone mad and murdered another, and a third got lynched as he was coming into a clear area. The other Survivors all simply vanished. Hiding or dead, nobody knows.”

I added, “There were rumors of Survivors getting lynched here in the States, although I don’t think we were ever able to verify any.” Syd pursed his lips, shook his head. I continued, “But we got careful, real fast, just in case.”

“I think we’re safe from lynch mobs. Nobody wants to take out their frustrations on us.”

“Even if the Australian thing turns out to be true?”

“Even then. I think part of it is the way the ‘zones work. Death is instant, and apparently painless. It’s a spooky death, but it’s not terrifying.”

“The ‘zones are scary, but the death isn’t. You’re right: I’ve heard people say enough times that if you gotta go, that’s the way to do it.”

“Exactly. They cordon off the ‘zones so people don’t blunder into them by mistake, but they are suicide Meccas. People simply jump the barricades, run in a hundred yards, and drop.”

“What was that line of Woody Allen’s? Death doesn’t scare me. Dying scares me!”

Syd laughed. “That’s it. This is a gentle death. It doesn’t scare people the way something spectacular like spontaneous combustion or exploding would.”

“Ugh. I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Some advice. Don’t get Charlie started on it. He started talking about gory deaths the other night, and got so graphic I thought I was going to have to kick him out. I think Charlie’s a vet. He’s got the blood-and-guts descriptions down pat.”

Kathy caught my eye. “This the same Charlie you were talking about earlier?”

“Yeah. Good old Cosmic Charlie.” Syd chuckled.

“Some barkeep you are! This guy is in, night after night, and you don’t know if he’s a vet or not?”

Syd glared at me. “Fine. You try getting a straight answer out of him!”

“I thought you guys liked him.”

“We do, we do. It’s just that Charlie is pretty off-the-wall sometimes, and when he gets like that, you want to take him in small doses.”

Kathy looked baffled. I tried my hand. “Charlie’s . . . interesting.” Kathy looked resigned. I think she realized that she wasn’t going to get anything more coherent out of us.

Syd cleared his throat. “OK. So what you’re saying is that people aren’t reacting to the ‘zones in any way that you think they should, and you want to find out why. Am I right?”

“Basically.” I leaned forward to try to explain. . . .

* * *

Morning drifted fitfully into early December afternoon. The sky became mackerel skin, scudding. At one point, Syd had me get wood and start a fire. Syd wasn’t avoiding a chore. He knew that I was from the back areas, and realized how much I missed those mundane little tasks.

We spoke of the life of the distant past, Berkeley’s towers and light comedies at risqué little theaters, hiking on overpopulated trails, visits to the City. And the ‘zones. The winds outside gusted fretfully, whispering threats to the oil-paint clippers on the walls within.

Syd and I tried talking out some interviews, but made little progress. I wanted to get at people’s deepest feelings about the ‘zones, and we didn’t know how to go about that.

“You could ask Nicole,” Syd said. Nicole was a Berkeley Survivor. “She might . . . ohmigod.”

“What? What is it?”

“How could I forget? Nicole called the day before yesterday. She’s in Nova Scotia.”

“Well, that’s convenient.”

“No, no.” Syd waved my response away. “Nicole was in Trenton last week.”

I stared, letting the implications sink in. Trenton died. Last week. Nicole was in Berkeley when it died. She was in Trenton when it died. We knew that Survivors alone could reenter dead zones without harm. Indeed, some had, finding the dead to be easier company than the living. But what none of us knew was whether anyone could Survive the onset of a ‘zone twice. Did all ‘zones kill in the same way? Would anyone who Survived one ‘zone Survive any ‘zone? Did the onset of a ‘zone differ in any way from onset to establishment? Was the one in ten-thousand (or less) survival rate a matter of happenstance or something else?

Nicole’s case promised to provide some answers.

“So how is she?”

“Shell-shocked, as you might imagine. She was on a crowded bus when it happened.” I imagined, and shuddered. “She had to climb over a lot of carrion to get out.”

“But not harmed by the ‘zone?” Syd spread his hands, shrugged. “We should give her a call.”

“Wait until dark. That’s what Charlie says. Says she needs to hear from us more then.”

“That’s pretty insightful.”

“Especially since I hadn’t told him about Nicole when he said for me to do that. He’s had me call her every night, sometimes early, sometimes late. He has a knack for knowing when she needs company the most.”

The conversation paused. Kathy, lost in her thoughts, gave a slight shudder.

Syd got up, threw some wood on the fire. “Getting chill in here. Dark outside.”

I glanced out. The sky was a steel warning, the barrel of a gun.

Syd sat down, and continued. “You were saying that you plan to go from Nova Scotia to the southwest, right?” At my nod, he continued, “Are you going through Oklahoma?”

I looked blank. “Oklahoma? What’s in Oklahoma?”

“What’s his face. The Scottish preacher. “

Kathy snapped her fingers. “Kevin Campo.”

“Campo. Yeah. The one who says that the ‘zones are a warning from God and all that.”

I gave Syd a sour look. “Why should I visit him?”

“Knock some sense into his head, maybe?”

We both looked puzzled, so Syd continued, “This Campo fellow says that the unrighteous perished in the ‘zones and only the elect survived. I don’t like being fingered like that. I don’t feel superior to those who didn’t live.”

“Also,” he continued, “we had a lot of friends who died. Good people. Who is he to second-guess the validity of their lives?”

Kathy nodded. “Bad enough that every tinhorn preacher around is making that noise. Now we have to import them from Scotland.”

A new voice sliced the dimness of the room. An anile cackle, followed by, “Scotland doesn’t have much in the way of an ‘inland.’ Campo must think all his countrymen deserve death.”

Kathy gasped, and I jumped, spilling my coffee. I whipped around as I stood, and stared into empty space for an instant. Then my eyes swivelled down, and I found a pair of blue, blue eyes staring back up at mine from about a foot lower. Charlie grinned up at me, teeth like Stonehenge.

Syd glared, and said, “Dammit, Charlie. You enjoy scaring people, don’t you?”

“Not my fault if people aren’t alert.”

“That’s no answer.” Then, “How did you get in? The back door’s locked.”

Charlie smirked and crossed his arms. I looked at the front doors—unlocked, but with a series of cowbells strung down them to announce the comings and goings of people. “Syd, are those for show, or do you keep clappers in ‘em?”

Syd looked disgusted, strode over, and gave the door a gentle nudge. The bells obligingly clamored. Charlie gave that cackle again. “Charlie knows about bells. You try to put bells on Charlie, but bells are Charlie’s friend.”

“Well, how did you get in?”

Charlie ignored the question, instead going behind the bar, scooping up a glass, and pouring himself some wine.

“Makes himself right at home, doesn’t he?” Kathy muttered.

Syd considered, whispered his answer. “He’s pretty good about that, you know? He’ll do it when no one is here, or in a case like this, where it’s ‘just friends’ visiting. Doesn’t try it when there’s customers about.”

I chuckled. “Does he pay for that?”

“Always. Two bucks a night, in cash.”

“That seems cheap.” It wasn’t any of my business, but I couldn’t resist. “How much does Charlie drink, anyway?”

“He’ll take that glass of wine and nurse it ‘til closing.. Believe me, I’ve watched.”

“But he’s always soused.”

Syd’s warning look cut me off. I watched Charlie’s shock of white hair bobbing toward us. “Charlie,” I called out. “Did you hurt yourself? You’re limping!”

Charlie made a peremptory wave at Kathy. “She expects me to walk this way. So I thought I’d oblige her.” Kathy flushed.

Charlie grinned at her. “My name is not Quasimodo.”

“Quoi . . . quoi . . . “

”Nasty stutter you’ve got. Or are you just asking me ‘why’ in French?” He stuck a gnarled finger in Kathy’s face. “What’s your name?”

“K-kathy . . .”

“OK-k-k-k, K-k-kathy. What’s your last name? And I hope it doesn’t have any ‘k’s in it!”

Kathy’s expression tightened. “McEwen.”

Charlie looked delighted. “Oh, HO! A Scot! Und wha’ parrt a’ Scootlund be ye firrm?”

Kathy’s tone was glacial. “A small town called New York.”

“Ah, a lapsed Scot. Pity. I was going to ask if Kevin Campo was a friend of yours. Are you Laotian?”

“What? Do I LOOK Laotian?”

“Are you Laotian?”

“No! Why do you want to know if I’m Laotian?”

Charlie puffed out his chest. “Because I’m the Chairman of the Fair Play for Pol Pot Committee.”

Kathy wore a dazed expression. “Pol Pot? The guy who murdered all those people in Cambodia?”

“The very one. Don’t you think he deserves fair play?”

“No. Of course not. He’s an evil man!”

Charlie’s smile was gentle, but his eyes were shark-like.

“Suppose I told you that maybe Pol Pot wouldn’t like the fair play I had in mind?”

I spoke up. “Charlie, Pol Pot killed Cambodians. Why are you worried about Laotians?”

“For Laotians, Pol Pot was an inconvenience. All those refugees invading their neighborhoods. For Cambodians, however, he was a personal disaster. He transcended anger for them. Ask a Cambodian about Pol Pot, and he shrugs. He cannot begin to explain it. Ask a Laotian about Pol Pot, and he’ll look annoyed. Ask about Pol Pot’s victims, and the Laotian’s anger will emerge.”

I thought about that. When the disaster was big enough, people always seemed to be more militantly angry about injustice and tragedy for others than for themselves.

“Charlie, when have you ever talked to any Asians?” Syd confronted him. “Have you ever been outside of Maine?”

“There’s Asians in Maine . . . still.” Charlie rattled off something in a strange tongue.

“What was that?”

“Hmong. It’s the language usually spoken in that part of Asia.”

We looked at one another. None of us spoke Hmong, or even knew what it was supposed to sound like. In the gust of laughter that ensued, Syd said, “OK, we’ll have to go along with you and assume that was Hmong.” He grinned and shook his head at what he doubtlessly considered Charlie’s audacity.

“Do Survivors hate the dead zones?”

That stopped the laughter cold. Despite myself, I pulled my head back. What Did I feel about the ‘zones? Themselves? How could I hate something that large, that impersonal?

“Charlie, when I came here, these guys,” her face a mask of indignation, Kathy waved at us, “were telling me how sharp you were. But you are a vulgar, rude . . . “

”You are not a Survivor!” Charlie’s voice was like a whip. “You hate the ‘zones, don’t you? You are angry at what the ‘zones have done to your friends!”

Charlie turned to me. “Now you know what to ask when you cross the country.”

I gaped at Charlie. Don’t ask people the obvious; ask them how they think the Survivors feel! Through projection, their true feelings would emerge.

“. . . And if the person you’re speaking to happens to be a Survivor, the answer will be even more revealing.” Charlie finished my thought for me. He turned to Kathy, who was still sizzling mad.

“Please forgive my rudeness. My friend thinks better if he has to defend someone he cares about. To get him thinking, I was rude to you, and I apologize.”

Kathy rallied, and snapped back, “Are you a Survivor?”

Charlie grinned again, his facial expression softened. “Kathy, we’re all Survivors until we die.”

Charlie reached out and took her resisting hand, gently. “I’ll slow down. I promise.” He gave her a warm smile. She returned the smile, obviously against her better judgement. The corner of her mouth twitched, stopped.

The building gave a slight heave, and the walls groaned. We could hear branches clashing in battle. Syd stood up. “Sounds like your storm just got here, Charlie. Kathy, you want a drink?”

“Whose storm?”

At Kathy’s nod, he went behind the bar. Charlie listened, ear cocked to the ceiling. He called to Syd, “Stop worrying about your porch. It’ll hold.”

“You think so?”

“Replace it before November next. You’ll be fine.”

Syd cocked an eyebrow. “You figure we’ll still be here then, huh?”

“Oh, yes.” Charlie chuckled. “Maybe the dead zones are afraid of me.”

I shook my head. “I shouldn’t wonder.” Syd brought a beer to Kathy, sat back down. “So, Charlie. How do you feel about the dead zones?”

Charlie gave him a bland look. “You asked the wrong question. You’re supposed to ask how the Survivors feel.”

“I know how I feel. I was asking you.”

“Do you?” It was Syd’s turn to look bland. “Very well.”

Charlie sipped his wine, regarded us. “They heal the earth.”

“They’ve killed billions of people.”

“They heal the earth.” Charlie repeated, as if my interruption simply amplified his remark. After a moment’s silence, Charlie looked around. “None of you have any problem with that?”

“Yeah.” I paused, gathering my thoughts. “I’ve often heard that maybe the ‘zones were doing exactly that. I knew a guy in New Hampshire, he didn’t know I was a Survivor, and he kept going on about how Gaia was combing the lice out of her hair. To him, Gaia—

the Earth Mother—was a sentient being, her mind being a composite of all living things. He saw Humanity as being a cancer in Gaia’s body.”

Syd grinned. “Are we lice, or are we cancer? Sounds like he didn’t like people very much.”

“He didn’t. Used to spend all his time explaining how all evil was a product of our minds, and that if we all did get killed, the earth would be a garden of Eden. He got mad when I pointed out that I would rather be a louse than a cancer.”

“Why would that make him mad?”

“Maybe because a louse is an individual life form. There was a subtle reminder that individuals were getting killed, rather than some large, amorphous indistinguishable mass.”

Charlie, listening intently, looked up. “Did you ask him why he was still alive?”

“Um.” I felt the tips of my ears get hot. “Actually I didn’t handle it quite that well. I got fed up with the ‘granola-without-the-crunch’ philosophy and asked him why he hadn’t committed suicide yet.”

Syd sucked his cheeks and looked pained. Charlie asked, “Did he?”

“Commit suicide? No, of course not. He moved to Minnesota instead.”

Kathy spoke up. “I don’t see how this ties in with healing the Earth.”

“Let me save a bit of time here, Charlie.” Syd gave Charlie a humorously exasperated look. “Charlie has been talking about this stuff a lot. In short, he’s been pointing out that we’re already seeing major improvements in the air quality, and that the plankton along the coasts seem to be increasing rapidly.” Syd glanced at Charlie. “Does that cover it?”

Charlie looked sour. “No. Does anyone want to hear the rest of it?” Taking noncommittal silence for approval, he went on, “The air and the ocean are just a part of it. The dead zones have become wildlife sanctuaries, rivers are starting to come back a bit, and there’s even some indications that the ozone layer is starting to replenish. There hasn’t been a war—anywhere—in over a year. Terrorism stopped dead the first year. Violence of all kinds is down. The United States had—what was it? Fifty eight thousand murders four years ago, 510 last year.”

“Well, hell, Charlie, there’s less people.” Syd objected.

“You’re on the right track, but you don’t know it.” Charlie leaned back against his chair and smiled at us. “Sure, there’s less people. But there’s not that many less. Figure that maybe 75% of the people alive four years ago are still around?”

That sounded about right. We nodded.

“So the murder rate is just one per cent of what it was. The war rate is exactly zero percent. Now, why is that?”

Charlie was getting a little pedantic for my taste. I decided to light a fire under him. “The dead zones are killing all the bad people and leaving the good.” I gave Charlie a smug smile.

Charlie bounced to his feet, chair crashing behind him. “No, no, no, NO!” He brought a fist down on the bar, making some glasses dance. “That’s not it at all!” He glared at me, face red, any didactic decorum gone.

Delighted, but a bit appalled at the strength of the reaction I had provoked, I asked, “OK, so what is it?”

“Why can’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do. You just haven’t thought it out.”

“Charlie.” Syd leaned against a wall, gunslinger’s posture. “I think I detect a bit of resentment. Now, are you asking us this as friends,” Syd’s voice dropped, “or as Survivors?”

“I’m asking as a friend—and yes, young lady, I’m asking you, too. I know what you’re really asking, Syd.” Charlie looked disdainful. “Believe me, you two are proof that being a Survivor equates to no special worthiness.”

I sucked on my teeth. Syd guided us squarely into that one.

Not that I shouldn’t have expected it; we had been playing up the survivors versus everybody else until hell wouldn’t have it.

Charlie sighed. “OK, I apologize.” He pointed at me. “Not bad. That was the oldest debating trick in the book, and old Charlie got sucked right in. But I had no business letting irritation cause that remark.” Syd and I both nodded, understanding. Making the type of remark I had to a non-Survivor carried potential risks. Hell, a snide comeback was getting off light, in some quarters. I opened my mouth to apologize in turn, but Kathy spoke first.

“Charlie, I think I know why.”

“Oh? Tell us, Miss. What is it?”

“People appreciate each other more.”

Outside, the wind howled agreement. I paused, apology forgotten, to taste the idea. When was the last time I was mad at the world in general? It had been a while.

Charlie sat down, facing Kathy. Resting his chin lightly in a lined hand, he almost whispered, “I think you might be right. Go on.”

“We MATTER more. We’ve all lost so much, what we have left means more.”

Yes, that felt right. Charlie watched Kathy intently. She continued. “Life didn’t mean much, not when you had to face the billions and billions of lives around you. There were so many of us, and we were all so tied up in trying to protect what little we had that made us unique.”

“Did you lose so much, really? Or did you gain?”

“Um. Both, I guess. We lost friends and relatives, great people, cities, lovely places. There’s a lot of us left, but we’re threatened. So we care more.”

“We care more.” Charlie looked at each of us. “Is there a greater gift than that?”

“We’re scared, Charlie. We all think we’re going to die, so we huddle together for comfort. Like a bunch of kids out in the storm.”

Charlie looked at me. “Are you scared?”

“For me, no.”

“For whom, then?”

“For all of us, I guess. Humanity. Are we finished?”

“I think not.” Charlie pulled back his head, and for a minute looked for all the world like a man adding numbers in his head.

“No, I think not. I don’t believe that anyone really thinks that, either.”

Charlie’s echo of my thoughts earlier in the day made me consider. Charlie was right; only a few people really believed we were all going to die.

“So you care more. Does that sound hokey? Can you say it?”

I shrugged. “OK, I care more.”

“That wasn’t too easy to say, was it?” I nodded rueful agreement, a bit puzzled at myself. “I’ll explain that in a moment.

“So people care more. It’s not something anyone thinks about; not in those terms. But if you’ve ever had a sick child, or even an ailing pet, you tend to be a little bit kinder, even if the malady is

minor. And this isn't a minor malady. With so much death already, why would anyone want to kill? Or hurt? Or even threaten? Syd, when was the last time you had a fight here?"

"About six months ago. Um, you talked them out of it."

"Yeah. Some silly dispute over the Red Sox. Wasn't even a real fight. A few years ago, people used to get into punch-ups fairly often here."

Syd nodded. He'd heard stories. "Now, Syd, part of that is you. You hate violence, and you despise drunkenness. But in the old days, that wouldn't have been enough. Hell, you'd have gotten ganged up on! These Yanks fought for fun. They never hated one another, this place is too small for that. But then they stopped fighting for fun. It wasn't fun anymore."

Charlie tapped the edge of his wine glass. "Been hearing a lot lately about 'survivor's guilt.' Only they call it 'Survivor's Guilt,' with the capitals. I reckon you two have been hearing that phrase a mite, here and there." Charlie shot us a speculative glance.

"Psychological mumble, for the most part. But you both had something real that you had to deal with.

"You both find it hard to say 'I care' because you are alive to say it. You wonder what gave you that right. From there, you doubt that you have any rights at all, including the right to love."

Charlie looked at Kathy. "But you have a form of it, too. You wonder if you would have whatever it takes to be a Survivor. You wonder what you'd think of yourself if you don't have what it takes," Charlie held up a hand, "and don't tell me about how patently absurd that was. The human mind is usually patently absurd. Part of you is perfectly prepared to feel inadequate in the event that you die!" Charlie grinned. "Amazing, but true."

Kathy chuckled. Charlie continued, "Now you have a key to yourself. You have to play around with it, getting it to open up that part of your mind, but it will fit. Trust me.

"For you Survivors, it's a bit tougher. You've were forced to stop to count the cost. You wonder if this 'kinder, gentler' world is for real. Is a child good to a sick puppy because he loves the puppy, or does he just fear losing it?"

I stared. It was the very image of the thoughts running through my mind.

“Are you just children, huddled together against a storm? Or has this just brought out something that the tide of Humanity had squashed under the mass of its numbers?”

Charlie spread his hands. “Humanity survives, and maybe 100 years from now, everything will be like it was a few years ago. Or maybe it won’t. Personally, I think there is good in people. I think they can learn!”

“Charlie, are you religious?”

“Me?” Charlie started, glared at Kathy. “Never been in a church in my life. Don’t aim on starting.”

“You talk about learning. This implies a teacher.”

“Learning implies learning. Nothing more. But suppose there is a big sugar daddy in the sky. Is he a meanie?”

“Killed two billion people, is all.”

“And the five billion that lived before them. Syd, do those nine billion people mean anything to you? Why should they mean more dead than they did alive?”

“Charlie, I can’t think in terms of billions. I’m not equipped for it. But I can think in terms of two dozen.” I gestured at Syd.

“He lost that many people who he was close to. So did I.”

“Are you insisting that I wallow in your guilt? OK: You lost people you cared about. But, Syd, chew on this; running this bar, there are a lot of people here and now that you are closer to than anyone in Berkeley.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. Suppose a ‘zone opened up here tomorrow, and you Survived alone. I was dead, Jeff was dead, Lou, Pete, Abe . . . all your regulars. All dead. Lying on this floor in front of you.”

“OK, OK.” Syd raised trembling hands to his temples.

Charlie rested a hand on Syd’s shoulder. “Sorry. But am I right?”

Syd buried his face, but nodded.

“What you lost is not equal to what you have gained. You’re learning how to love, my friend. You just don’t know it yet. Listen.” Charlie held up a finger.

“Do you hear it?”

I frowned, concentrating. The wind hammered a demand for entry. Somewhere telephone lines shrieked their defiance. And then I heard it; a sibilant hiss that came from everywhere and nowhere. Granulated snow, falling almost horizontally.

“The storm is a tiger. But its true voice, that of the snow, is one of a kitten. Before tonight ends, hundreds of deer will die.

Tens of thousands of mice, rabbits squirrels, and yes, a few kittens, these all will die. Somewhere, right now, a majestic elk will labor into the blowing ice, searching for food that is not there, shelter that cannot accommodate it, finally succumbing, alone and frozen.

It will be the storm’s voice of the kitten.”

Kathy’s face was a study in horror. My cheeks were numb—and to my surprise, wet.

“And if any should think on it at all, they will dismiss this tragedy as being just nature’s way. They won’t even see it as being cruel.

“Hunters like to talk about how storms like these weed out the weak specimens, the impure specimens. But in reality, an animal’s chances mostly depend on pure individual happenstance. Tonight, millions of kittens, no match for that mighty elk, will live. But they are inside, warm and cozy. Another, smaller elk will live because he happens to be on the leeward side of a mountain.

“Eventually, people will notice that the world is a nicer place.

Some will say it’s because only the best Survived. I think that this would be the most tragic mistake that could be made.

“You see, Survivors aren’t special. You did nothing to ‘deserve’ to live. You merely failed to ‘deserve’ to die. You are no better than those who died. And emphatically, you are no worse than those who died, although it’s going to take a while before you believe that.”

“I’m not sure. I’m alive because the universe is random?”

“You don’t like being alive?”

“I don’t like the idea of the universe being random. Lonely feeling.”

“Suppose it wasn’t random? Suppose that the Great Holy Muffin or whoever is running the show said ‘I’ll spare that kitten, and that one, but not the rest of those? Aren’t you right back in the category of being ‘special’ somehow—one of God’s elect, maybe? Isn’t that what that Campo fellow is saying?”

I heaved a sigh. “Charlie, I know you want to help, but neither of those answers help much. Either I’m a lucky son-of-a-bitch, in which case I’m ‘lucky’ in a cold and chaotic universe, or I’m one of a capricious God’s chosen. Both strike me as rotten reasons to be a Survivor.”

Charlie's voice rose slightly. "Both reasons. You don't like being one of God's select?"

Charlie's eyebrows went up in mock inquiry.

"It invalidates the lives of nearly everyone I ever knew. Bullshit on that."

Charlie's eyes glittered. "OK, let's talk about God for a minute."

"Must we? I thought you weren't religious."

"I'm not. Churches are for idiots. But let's figure out this God chap—someone's hand has to be on the throttle, or it is all random. So let's take a look at God as a builder, rather than as a great cosmic tit in the sky.

"OK." Charlie rubbed his hands briskly, raised them above his head, a magician's gesture. "God creates . . . Everything! Blooie! He's got it down pretty good—stars, planets, galaxies. Nice big pretty toy for him to wander around in. Maybe he's getting lonely, or maybe he's aching over the question of where He came from, and wants help in solving it. Or both. At any rate, he gets ambitious, and decides to make himself some people for company.

"Well, biological life is fantastically complex. Even an ameba has several million chemicals in it. Humans have billions, and god isn't as powerful as people make him out to be. He does his best, but humans have limitations, maybe the same ones he has.

"Right. He's got himself some company and folks willing to guess at answers to the great cosmic riddle. Fine. But after a while, there's too many people, and they've gotten the idea that god is this unapproachable, omniscient being that isn't into their reality.

"So he pulls the great cosmic chain, and flushes. But he grabs this chap named Noah, and says, 'These people weren't righteous, but you are, so build a boat and . . .' But you know that story.

"Things dry out, and Noah establishes a new civilization. But Noah tells his kids 'We survived because God thought we were special.' His kids take that and run with it. They're saying, 'Yeah, we're pretty hot shit.' But some of them—like you—don't really buy into that idea, and they branch off. They form new beliefs, different cultures. The True Believers, convinced that they are the Holy Hot Shit, go out and start massacring the others—for their own good, of course.

“God rubs the bridge of his nose, and wonders tiredly why he didn’t realize that they would screw it up like that. So he starts talking to people, telling them, ‘No, that’s not what I meant at all.’

He even tells some, ‘Go out and tell ‘em to care about one another and drop that dreadful arrogance that you are Holy Hot Shit.’ All that happens is that people start running around saying that they are

Holy Hot Shit because they are humble! “Well, for god, this isn’t working out at all. He’s ready to blow his Holy Lunch over the whole thing.

“So he takes off to think things over for a while. When he gets back, things have gotten ‘way out of hand. There’s six billion people, with weapons that can destroy the planet, and the planet itself is desperately sick. In a few more years, most of those people are going to be dead.”

Charlie paused and looked at us. “Did any of you think that if the ‘zones hadn’t shown up, people would be dropping like flies by now, anyway?

“So here’s god, and he’s already concluded that extreme measures are called for, and he has come back to find that those extreme measures aren’t going to amount to much more than whether he does it himself, or lets people do it to themselves.

“He’s already figured that there is a population ideal—let’s say that he thinks that five million people is about right. But that’s less than one-tenth of one percent of the population. He can weed out the truly vicious and useless people, but most people are at least passably decent. He can get rid of every person capable of murder, for instance, and three days later the population is just what it was before, because most people are not power-mad or evil.

“So he starts the ‘zones. He’s got them set up to be pretty much random; kill all who fail to meet standards, and kill all but point ex percent of those that do. Don’t go for the best, because their kids will just develop that damn superiority complex all over again.”

I felt restive. This was beginning to sound like Campo’s garbage.

“In about ten years, most people are gone. Meanwhile, because of the ‘zones, people aren’t paying close attention to the fact that in other areas, certain, ah, Select Individuals have picked up this habit of suddenly dropping dead for no good reason at all.

Not many people at all, and the rest haven't really noticed that the loss of these individuals presents no loss to everyone around them. But life is getting better."

Charlie leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, an guileless expression on his face. He shrugged. "So maybe god's next move is to get the word out that there's going to be a new approach, and hope that this time, people get it right."

Syd looked wistful. "Sounds nice. So what would this message be?"

"Something along the lines of, I'm not perfect. You taught me that, because I made mistakes with you. Stop trying to pretend that I am perfect, or we'll never be able to communicate. And that's the real reason you exist. To talk to me."

Charlie leaned forward, fiddled with his glass. "Most of the holy stuff says that god created man in his image. Suppose that this is literally true: Humans are about equal to god, who has the same flaws? God started out wrong, by not seeing his own limitations.

But he needed to learn and grow, just like people do, and he's grown enough to realize that he and people have to grow and learn together from now on."

Charlie stopped talking, and the ticking of a clock filled the room. A new image came into my head; God as a harassed kid, barely out of adolescence. Trying his best, and being frustrated and dismayed because most people were too damn dense. Taking his good ideas and turning them into monstrous evils . . .

Kathy caught my eye. She smiled. "That would answer a lot of questions about the world, wouldn't it?" Syd nodded.

"It's nice, Charlie," I agreed. "But it won't wash. People need a cosmic tit, not a flustered kid. That's an appealing idea of the nature of God, but people won't accept it. They either want God to have all the answers, or they'll look to people like Campo to provide answers for them."

"You don't think people can outgrow that idea? Can they stop being kittens?"

I smiled. "Like I said, it's an appealing idea. But I don't even know if there is a God."

"Listen." Charlie inclined his head toward the doors. I listened, heard nothing.

“The storm’s letting up,” he said. “Don’t you folks want to get up to Nova Scotia by tonight?”

“Ah, no. we’re going back to New York first. We have to close out a few things.”

“No. Don’t go back to New York. Go straight to Nova Scotia.”

“Charlie.” I paused, struck by the intensity of his look. “Look, Charlie, tell us why we shouldn’t go to New York.”

“A ‘zone will open there tonight.” Charlie hooked a thumb at Kathy. “She might not survive, and I think she should.”

I laughed my exasperation. “Charlie, even you can’t predict the ‘zones!”

“Can’t I?” Charlie gazed at me intently. “OK.” He slapped his hands on his thighs and stood up. “Let’s take a look at the sky, shall we?”

We got up and accompanied Charlie to the doors. I watched the back of his head bob in front of me, and wondered. Charlie has always had a strong personality, but I had never seen him so hypnotic, so powerful.

He stopped at the doors and ushered us in front of him with a sweeping, theatric gesture. He wore a wide grin under glittering eyes. Puzzled, I stepped past him. And stopped dead. A warm sun shone down on the parking lot, yellow through a little bit of summer dust. Along the edge of the parking lot, tulips stood proudly, petals just starting to droop, the first sign of early summer. Grass waved in a gentle breeze, and the scent of pine was on the air. The ocean was a deep, deep blue.

A perfect, cloudless summer day.

From behind us, Charlie spoke. “I’ll put it back in a moment.

But that is my new promise for your future. Please don’t call it a Covenant”

I turned. “Charlie? Are you . . . ?”

Charlie held up a hand. “The name Charlie will do just fine. Nova Scotia. Don’t go to New York. Don’t speak of this. You’re right, people aren’t quite ready to accept these changes. Not without my direct help, anyway. And I’ll be up to help you. I’ve learned a few lessons myself.”

I stared at Charlie’s hand. Where it had been, what it had done . . . a million thoughts went through my head, and I don’t think all of them were mine. “Uh, thanks.” I managed.

Charlie gave Kathy and I an impatient shove. “Go,” he said.

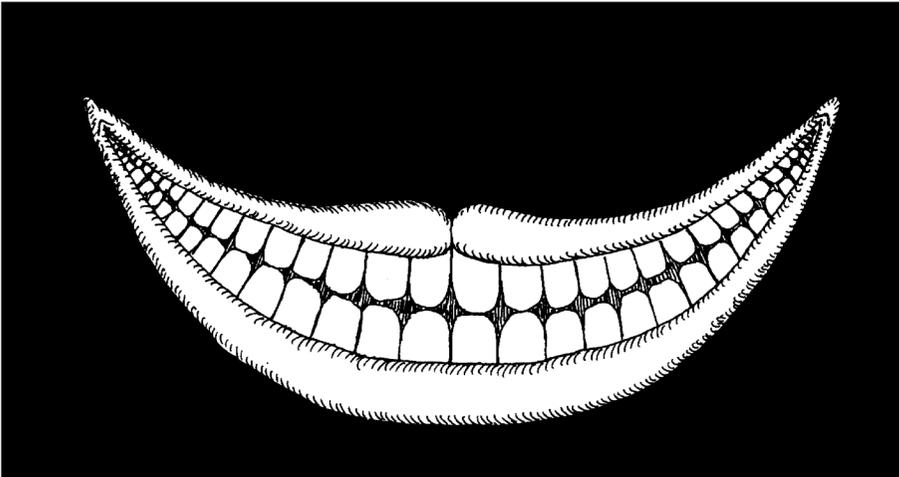
“Syd and I need to talk a bit here. I’ll be in Nova Scotia next week, and don’t worry—I have ways of finding you.” He grinned. “We’ll talk then, I promise.”

We turned and walked across the parking lot, gusts of snow blowing up around our faces, biting at our cheeks. We could make Nova Scotia by dawn if we left now.

The storm, a steel gray hammer, moved on toward New York.



S mp S mon



CHARLIE FL ATED AB VE THE MIDDLE F THE A IFI , a ou
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C ar e crea e a C es re rn, m es on , an n ns ace
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It would fade away in about fifteen minutes, and Charlie wondered if the observatory happened to be looking visually at this chunk of sky tonight.

Astronomers were prepared for the extraordinary, the sublime, the wonderful, the inexplicable. This made them somewhat less prepared than the general population to deal with the ridiculous.

This made them frequent targets for Charlie, and more than one astronomer spent the rest of his life being carefully quiet about the giant turtle, or the dancing bear with the parasol, that he had seen one dark, lonely night.

Charlie eyed his creation and returned the grin.

Then he flickered back to the surface of the earth, swooping over angry gray Atlantic waves off the east coast of America, where it was morning rush hour. Charlie had other things to do besides tease astronomers. The world was his oyster.

* * *

Dave leaned back in his chair, and twiddled his pencil. “So you actually fell five stories?”

“Um, that’s right, yes, five stories.” Dave’s guest sat upright in his leather seat, hands clasped hard between his knees, shoulders pulled forward so hard Dave wondered if he could breathe. But for all of that, the voice was steady, and despite the hot television lights, the brow was dry. Not stage fright, then.

That’s just how he . . . what was his name, anyway? Simon? Yeah, Simon . . . liked to sit.

“So who pushed you?” Dave was rewarded with a burst of laughter from the audience.

“Nobody pushed me, Dave.”

“No?”

“No. I jumped.” Dave tossed his pencil over his shoulder to the sound of breaking glass and a drum riff from Paul.

“Let me get this straight. You **jumped**?”

“That’s right. My girlfriend didn’t believe me when I told her I could do it without getting hurt.”

“Oooooohhhh, Now I see! Your girlfriend kept saying you couldn’t do it, and you finally decided to show her! Get Met—it pays!”

Over the appreciative whoops of his audience, Dave eyed his guest. That the fall had been deliberate hadn't gotten mentioned during the pre-show briefing. Not for the first time in his career, Dave wondered if he had a raving lunatic on his hands. He saw that Simon, looking earnest, had unclenched his hand enough to let his thumbs hook out over his knees in what Dave supposed was an expository manner, and he was saying something, drowned out by the audience, and an ecstatic outburst from the band.

“ . . . just picked myself up, and walked away.” Simon looked frustrated, and Dave realized that he had tried to continue speaking over the roar of laughter. Dave felt a similar frustration; Simon's description of his fall to the press had been vivid and comical enough that the producer had booked him for the show. Now getting a fresh and spontaneous story would be nearly impossible.

“Simon, what was the fall like?”

“Well, Dave, like I just said, it was quick. The ground just came right up at me, I felt a bump, and then I was lying there with my nose pressed against the sidewalk.”

“In New York, that could be more fatal than the fall!”

Simon gave Dave a ‘what-in-the-world-are-you-talking-about’ look, and said, “I've tried it from smaller heights before, and never gotten hurt. But five stories! Gee, Dave, I was nervous!”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying you've done this before?”

“Oh, yes, dozens of times. I started out small, falling from a footstool, and worked my way up.”

The audience was silent now, puzzled. Dave himself was nonplused, and felt like he was in the middle of a Monty Python skit. “So Simon, are you saying that anyone can work their way up to a five-story fall?”

“No, of course not!”

“Again, I want to caution our viewing audience from doing this at home. This should only be done with the proper equipment, and under the supervision of a trained professional.”

Simon's “Huh?” was drowned out by the audience. He reached in his pocket and pulled out what looked like a Zippo.

Dave watched, wondering if he was going to light up a cigarette.

Simon's deep breath coincided with the crowd quieting down.

“I had this in my pocket. As long as I'm wearing this, no fall can hurt me.”

“That . . . lighter stopped you from getting hurt?”

“That’s right, Dave. Nothing can hurt me as long as I have this.”

Dave shifted in his chair to face Simon directly. This interview was getting stranger by the second. “Is it kind of your rabbit’s foot, or a lucky charm?”

“No, nothing like that. It . . . well, I don’t know. I just know it works.”

Dave decided the possibilities of this conversation were exhausted. “So what you are saying is that the sidewalk came up and hit you, but you were saved when it bounced off your silver cigarette lighter?” Dave paused for the zinger. “Friend, you should be writing for NBC news!”

That got him various war whoops and staccato bursts of white noise from the band. Relieved that it wasn’t a complete disaster, Dave turned to the camera, slapped on his best disarming grin, and said, “Folks, we’re having more fun than humans should be allowed to have. We’ll be right back with Dr. Ruth after these important messages . . . Right. Simon, thank you for coming, head backstage and the guys back there will tell you where to go next.”

Dave watched Simon shuffle off stage and narrowed his eyes in thought. He wondered if he shouldn’t have drawn him out a bit more. He sounded completely sincere, and the fact was, he HAD fallen five stories and not been hurt.

The ‘commercial break’ was fake, of course—the show was being taped and wouldn’t go on the air for eight hours. But Dr. Ruth needed five minutes or so before she would be ready. Idly, Dave thought about going backstage and talking to Simon, maybe ease a few ruffled feathers, but then the producer was there with a sheet full of questions for the Doctor. Dave shrugged it off.

Fifteen minutes later, Dave was feeling relaxed and happy. Dr. Ruth, as always, was entertaining, charming, and amusing. The next segment, the weekly “Fatuous Cat Award,” would be presented to someone rich and famous who had made a truly idiotic statement to the media in the past week, was one of his favorites, and this week, with the award going to a Major League ball player who had complained about the lazy, overpaid garbage men in his area. Dave had a Sanitation Engineer who had played semipro in the audience and an amusing offer to make the millionaire ballplayer. The show would wrap up with “Ten people most likely to be picked as stand-ins

if NBC ‘simulates’ a Presidential press conference.” Dave never passed up an opportunity to get a few digs in at GE.

“Hey, Dave!” Startled, Dave looked around. Unsure where the voice came from, but knowing it wasn’t from the audience, Dave glanced off the set to the left, where the producer was. He was staring and pointing up, mouth agape. Dave glanced up to see . . .

Oh, Jesus.

Thirty-five feet above the set floor, Simon hung gaily from the outside of the lighting catwalk, one hand gripping the railing, feet planted against the edge of the walkway. He was using his other arm to wave at Dave. “Look out below!” Simon whooped, “Here I come!”

With that, Simon twisted around, letting go of the railing and fell in a perfect swan dive. Dave frantically made a slashing motion across his throat at the main cameraman. As Dave crossed his windpipe a second time, Simon landed with a heavy, mortal-sounding thud. To Dave’s horror, there was a crackling, splintering sound.

Dave and Dr. Ruth collided as they sprang up, and only quick reflexes on Dave’s part saved Dr. Ruth from making her own heavy thud on the stage. But because of that, one of the musicians got there first.

“Jesus Fuckin’ Christ on a Crutch!” was the musician’s professional opinion. Hearing that, Dave paused and gathered his nerve, expecting to see intestines and other yucky stuff like that spread all over the stage.

Dave glanced at his hand, saw the broken pencil, and tossed it aside. He leaned forward. “Is he breathing?”

“Sure I’m breathing. Shouldn’t I?” Simon looked up at Dave, shot him a grin. Simon sat up, and the musician said, “No, man. Stay put. You might be bleeding inside!”

Simon stood up over the loud protestations of the musician, and to Dave’s relief, two parameds strode from off stage, carrying resuscitation gear. “OK,” one of them said, glancing around, “Who fell?”

“He did.” The paramed looked at Simon, lifted an eyebrow.

“What kind of fall did you have?”

“From up there,” Simon pointed.

“Up . . . there? OK. Let’s get you back down on the floor.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” The parameds both grabbed Simon and lowered him carefully.

Sensing that he wouldn't be of much use where he was, Dave went over to help his producer calm down the audience.

Occasionally, he glanced over. The parameds knelt beside Simon, who once again was sitting up. At one point Dave saw one of them taking his blood pressure and while the other laid out what looked like some kind of inflatable pants on the floor next to him.

Finally the paramed who had spoken earlier came over. “We're done here, sir.”

“Is he going to be OK?”

“Sir, he is OK. No injury.”

“What hospital are you taking him to?”

“We're not taking him anywhere. He doesn't want to go, and we don't have any overriding medical justification.”

“What? You've got to take him! He just fell three stories!”

The paramed stifled a sigh. “Sir, we can't force a healthy man to go to a hospital against his will.”

“Healthy? He just tried to commit suicide!”

“Izzat so?” Holding a hand palm out to tell Dave to stay where he was, the paramed walked over and started talking to Simon. The other paramed stood back, talking into his radio. Suddenly feeling vaguely apprehensive, Dave watched closely from the audience pit as Simon smiled and shook his head. Minutes later, a cop joined the trio. The cop spoke to the first paramed, and then turned to Simon, asking questions and jabbing in his direction with the antenna of his portable radio for emphasis. Simon kept smiling and shaking his head as he answered the questions.

A moment later, the cop walked over to Dave and waving at him to speak up with his radio, asked “What's the story here?”

Dave explained the events leading up to the jump. The cop listened carefully, fiddling with the squelch button on his radio. At the end, the cop looked at Dave and said “Did you encourage him to jump?”

“No!”

“He says he didn't ask you because you would have told him no.” The cop gave Dave a steady look. “Look, I know what kind of show you run here. I hear any more reports of people risking their lives for the cameras here, and I run your ass in. Izzat clear?”

“Look, I didn’t . . .”

“**Izzat Clear?**”

Dave clenched his teeth and glared at the studio rafters. He could have been happy as an insurance salesman in Indiana, but noooooo.

“That’s clear, officer,” he spat out.

Dave watched, furious and outraged, as the parameds and police officer left. Spotting Simon to the side, he signaled to a stage hand, who trotted over. “Get him out of here,” Dave seethed.

The stage hand escorted Simon off stage. The producer walked over to Dave and saw him gazing after Simon.

The producer was very good at his job, which included being able to guess accurately at Dave’s thoughts. Unfortunately, this time he guessed wrong, and because he didn’t hear the conversation between Dave and the cop, he had no way of knowing how much insult he was adding to injury.

“No, Dave,” the producer said. “Not the camera-under-the-plexiglass thing. Not with a human. Besides, RCA would never give permission.”

Slowly, Dave turned to face his ex-producer . . .

* * *

Simon sat cross-legged on the plush hotel bed and felt disgruntled. Not only did his jump not make the show; even his interview was cut. Even Dave’s opening monologue was different.

Simon knew that Dave wasn’t very happy with him, but he thought his interview was pretty good, even if he did say it himself, and should have stayed in. Funny, he thought, how different the stage was from what he was seeing on TV. Those little hand gestures Dave made to indicate which camera should be turned on, for instance; Simon hadn’t noticed Dave doing that during the interview. The stage faded away to the city line logo, and Simon sighed and used the remote to change to the in-house channel, which showed Casino action to the soundtrack of a local soft-rock radio station.

He took out his magic lighter, which was how he thought of it, and gazed at it. It looked, for all the world, like a regular Zippo. It worked like a regular lighter, and even required fuel and flint like a regular lighter. Simon, unsure if the lighter would still do that other thing if it was out of fuel or needed a flint, kept it up carefully. He

snapped the top of the lighter pensively a few times, looked at the engraving on the side. "To Simon, for a healthy and happy life. Charlie."

When Charlie gave him the lighter, Simon hadn't wanted it. Things had gone badly wrong in Simon's life, and Simon was the reason for it. His wife left him because he didn't know how to treat her right, he lost his job when the boss suddenly got tired of Simon screwing up all the time, and the car he was using for a house as well as transportation blew up just two weeks after he spent his last \$2,000 on it. He was broke, homeless, and jobless, and it was all his own fault. When Charlie told him he had a gift, Simon turned it down, because he was always losing things like lighters, and didn't want Charlie mad at him for not taking care of such a nice gift. "You won't lose this one," Charlie said, and stuffed it in his hand.

Charlie knew a few things that Simon didn't. Charlie, for instance, knew that Simon's wife had married him six months earlier simply to grab a modest inheritance and run. Simon would have been surprised to learn his wife's generous offer not to take him to court if he just gave her the money and the house was known to Charlie, and most of the town. Charlie also knew that Simon had been fired unjustly, not because of poor work, but because someone had to be laid off, and the employer didn't want to have to deal with unemployment paperwork. The mechanic who sold Simon that car knew it was dying rapidly, and by then, knew what most everyone else in the town knew; Simon blamed himself for anything bad that happened to him. Charlie knew about everything that had happened to Simon, and knew that Simon wasn't to blame for any of it.

There was one other thing Charlie knew. Charlie knew he could rectify the situation. Charlie had a magic lighter. After that, things started to change in Simon's life. He got his house and money back when his wife, who had never filed for divorce, was killed by her new husband, who, ironically, had a sudden impulse to try to take her ill-gotten property from her. But since the previous marriage was still undissolved, his was null and void, and all he got was arrested for murder. The paper Simon had signed giving everything to her never turned up, and since nobody asked him, Simon said nothing to anyone. About the same time, a lawyer had looked Simon up, and had informed him that a class action suit was being filed against one Joseph Grebbitz, mechanic, for false and deceptive practices, and did

Simon buy a car from the gentleman in question? Simon said he had, and two days later, a beaming lawyer had reappeared, informing Simon that Grebbitz had settled out of court, and that Simon's share of the payment, after lawyer's fees, was to be \$3,000. Simon didn't need the money any more, but found that the extra thousand was just right to cover expenses of his wife's funeral, which was almost exactly \$1,000 more than her modest life insurance had covered. Just as icing on the cake, the lawyer had gotten Simon a job as janitor in the office building where the lawyer worked. It was a modest job, one that paid an adequate salary, and it was the best job Simon had ever had in his ill-educated life.

Simon didn't equate any of this with Charlie's lighter. Sure, Charlie had told him that if he had the lighter, no harm could befall him, but wasn't that the sort of thing friends said when giving each other gifts? Simon wasn't sure because he hadn't gotten many gifts in his life, but thought it was nice of Charlie to say such a thing.

But Simon noticed one thing about the lighter. Charlie was right. Simon couldn't lose it. Not that he had to try; Simon's life was a long string of lost objects, including shoes, hats, bicycles, pets, spare change, shirts, gloves, umbrellas, and on one memorable occasion, his dad's lawnmower. Simon's rear end always tingled with the memories of his father's reaction to that one. Simon's folks always figured he would outgrow the absent-mindedness, but he never had.

For Simon to hold on to the lighter for three days was astonishing. A week was miraculous. It seemed for a while that every time Simon stepped out of a room, someone behind him would shout, "Hey, Simon! Is this your lighter?" One time a cop had pulled him over and handed him the lighter, after seeing it fly out the window off of Simon's dashboard on a sharp turn. The cop, utterly perplexed, had then continued on to answer a 911 call he had received just before seeing the lighter fall.

Items gravitated in and around piles in Simon's home in a kind of a Brownian motion, and the search for the most commonplace and frequently-used of objects could often take a couple of days. Not the lighter, though; it always seemed to be atop the pile nearest Simon.

After a while, Simon stopped mislaying the lighter all the time. It seemed that his absent-mindedness was improving at long last.

This was all a bit odd, but not odd enough to tweak Simon's somewhat limited imagination. A few weeks after he settled back in

his home, he was changing a light bulb in his basement, using a foot ladder to stand on. He lost his balance, fell back, and the middle of his spine collided with the air intake housing on the power mower that was behind him. Neither Simon nor the mower suffered any damage. The following week, Simon rested his hand on a red-hot element on his electric range. He was not burned.

Simon was able to pass these incidents off to luck.

The event that finally made Simon realize the promise behind the lighter was true came in the fall, when Simon was clearing leaves out of his eaves gutters. His was a two-story house, and his feet were planted on the very top rung, precisely twenty-four feet above a rock garden. The ladder shifted, and Simon fell gracelessly, like a bag of cement, landing at an awkward and mortal angle among the bowling ball-sized boulders and roses. He gazed at the gray autumn Maine sky for a few minutes, more confused by his sudden shift in the environment than anything else, and then picked himself up. The rock where his head had landed had a new crack, and gingerly Simon reached to the back of his head, expecting to find corresponding damage. Not a hair was out of place.

At that point, Simon pulled the lighter out of his pocket and stared at it, and had what was probably the longest series of connected thought he'd ever had in his life.

Simon took the broken rock and put it on a shelf in his living room. Simon always had a self-depreciating streak in his humor, and what a story that rock now represented!

And Simon started to experiment. Little jumps at first, followed by bigger and bigger ones. He wasn't dogging it; he would have been happy just keeping his jumping ability his own little secret, but finally someone saw him land, and when word got out, the reporters came, and didn't believe, reporting instead that he simply survived a five-story fall. Which led to the TV show.

Nobody believed him. "Nobody will believe you," Charlie said, trying to dissuade Simon from going on the show and talking about the lighter. "Even if you jump from the Space Shuttle, they'll start looking at you with X-rays and stethoscopes and CAT scans to see why you can't get hurt. They won't believe an ordinary lighter has anything to do with it."

"But they won't find anything different about me. Will they?"

“No, they won’t. And they’ll be mystified. You have to understand, Simon, that sometimes people would sooner be mystified than right.”

“I don’t understand.”

“People prefer to be mystified and not find answers in familiar places than be mystified by answers in unfamiliar places. Not understanding why your body is invulnerable to harm is more comfortable than failing to understand how an ordinary lighter can keep you safe would be.”

“I still don’t understand. I believe it’s the lighter. Why wouldn’t they?”

“You’re special, Simon.”

Simon blinked and slapped his own wrist, a habit his mother had taught him to pull himself out of those moments when Simon simply stared into space. Already the memory of the conversation with Charlie was fading back into the mists of Simon’s mind.

“I’m special.” Simon repeated the words to himself, no longer sure where the thought came from. He felt a dull ache in his chest, and a sudden need to be somewhere, anywhere, besides this empty hotel suite.

Simon grabbed his coat. While he didn’t need to worry about frostbite, head colds or pneumonia, he’d already discovered that lighter or no lighter, New York nights in the early spring were still uncomfortable.

At nearly three in the morning, the unsleeping city still roared at the sightless skies, but gaps appeared in the vast streamers of traffic, and the sidewalks were nearly deserted. In the war dance of its dreams, the city’s sirens whooped and delivery trucks sent smoke signals on the misty air. For Simon, used to the cold black calm of the Maine night, the city was an amazing and astounding cacophony, a chant to the driving compulsions of America.

Simon didn’t feel particularly driven. Glancing in both directions, he headed west, toward Central Park, almost at random.

Fitful winds blew scraps of paper that once had been very important to someone in swirls and eddies on the filthy curbs, and lights flashed their messages of avarice and control to the heedless trucks and taxicabs. In the rawness and loneliness of the night, the city confronted Simon with its blank granite faces, and Simon, disconcerted, unconsciously picked up the pace of his stroll.

As he neared an entrance to the park, a crackling, high-pitched shout came from an alcove, which caused him to jump.

“You de MAN! You de MAN!!”

There was an indistinct hurried motion in the darkened doorway next to Simon, and he leaned forward to get a better look, and then jumped back as bits of torn paper flew at him. An emaciated black man jumped out and landed on the sidewalk next to the astonished Simon with a dramatic gesture. “You de MAN!”

With that, the man started to shuffle gleefully around Simon, reaching into a torn and filthy paper grocery bag to pull out scraps of paper, which he tossed gaily in Simon’s direction. “You de man!”

“What are you doing?” Simon asked in an exasperated voice.

“What do you want?”

Suddenly, the man stopped cavorting, and faced Simon with a solemn expression on his face. In normal tones, the man said “You are the man.” Simon’s shoulders dropped with relief. Now, it seemed, he was getting somewhere. He looked at the other carefully. Not emaciated—Starved, and the clothes looked as if he had spent the entire winter in them. Looking at the cardboard tied around the shoes, and the wild, unkempt hair and beard, Simon reflected that perhaps the man had lived and slept in those same clothes for a long, long time.

Suddenly, the man’s eyes widened, and he shouted “Youdeman! Youdeman! Youdeman!” and resumed his shuffling grotesque dance around Simon.

Simon had been warned about this sort of thing. Panhandlers, he knew, were common in the city, and used some pretty elaborate tactics to get the money they needed. Simon had also been told what to do with them. “Why don’t you get cleaned up and go get a job?” he demanded.

The man stopped, and looked at Simon thoughtfully. “That’s a good idea. I’ll do it. Thanks.” And with that, the man strode off, tossing his paper bag aside, walking for all the world like a lawyer on his way to court. Simon watched with raised eyebrows until the man was out of sight. He wasn’t sure what had just happened there; nothing in his experience had prepared him for anything like that.

He pulled out his lighter, and looked at it. “Did you have something to do with that?” He watched the lighter, half-expecting an

answer, and when none came, he stuck it back in his pocket and strolled into Central Park.

He had only gotten about 50 yards in when a voice came: “Stop! Right where you are!” Simon looked around wildly, spotted a man with a handkerchief over his face and a gun in his hand about 50 feet away. He turned to run, heard the gun fire, and stopped and raised his hands. He winced as the gun fired twice more. The gunman muttered, and the shooting stopped.

“Jeez-us Christ, you’re a lucky motherfucker,” the gunman said, approaching Simon. “I don’t miss at that range. Let’s see what you got here.” With that, the gunman, keeping his piece firmly pressed against Simon’s left temple, started patting him down.

“Right,” he said, stepping back, “your wallet’s in your left back pocket. Pull it out real slow. I see you reach anywhere else, you’re a dead motherfucker. Now!”

Gingerly, Simon reached for his wallet, pulled it out slowly.

He kept his other hand in the air. Handing the wallet over, he slowly raised his right hand. The gunman stepped back three paces, aimed the gun right at Simon’s heart. With a practiced motion, he flipped the wallet open and felt in the paper money area with his thumb. “Let’s see what you got . . . Fuck ME!” The gunman wagged his thumb back and forth over a thick wad of bills, his eyes widening in amazement. “How much money you got here, anyway?”

“Um, about \$1,500. But look, I need it to get home and so on . . .”

“Shaddup.” The gunman’s eyes narrowed in thought as he continued to ruffle the bills absent-mindedly. “Fifteen *hundred*? What are you doing walking around the city with that kinda dough?”

“Well, I was told not to trust the hotel staff, and besides, I’ve got this lighter . . .”

“Aw, Jeez-us. Looks like I hit the jackpot tonight. You’re lucky—last three hits were broke, and so I scragged their asses.

You got any idea how lucky you are, asshole?” The gunman, still lost in his own thoughts, didn’t see Simon nod. “You said something about a special lighter? Lemme see.”

The gunman kept the gun steady as Simon reached in his coat pocket, withdrew the lighter. The gunman darted forward, snatched the lighter from Simon’s hand. Stepping back again and aiming the

gun, he peered at the lighter. “Looks like a Zippo to me. Nice lighter, but don’t look special.”

He flipped it at Simon, who made an awkward snatch, and for a miracle, caught it.

The gunman stood for a minute, wagging his gun indecisively. “You can’t go walking around here with that kind of money. Here, catch.” With that, he tossed the unmolested wallet back to Simon. This time, Simon grabbed at it, hit it, and it flew off to the gunman’s side. Simon glanced at the gunman’s face, and at his nod, walked over and picked it up.

“Y’know,” the gunman said reflectively, pulling the bandanna from his face, “usually, I come across something too sweet like this, well, me, I smell pork. But you ain’t pork, are ya?” At Simon’s puzzled look, he added, “You ain’t a cop?” Simon shook his head, and the gunman continued with a laugh. “Heee. I smelled setup city, and was all ready to open up and just start shooting the bushes, then I saw you muff that catch and I just thought, ‘Hey, this guy, he ain’t no pig.’ Yowtatawner?” Getting another puzzled look, he enunciated, “Are you from out of town?”

“Yeah. I was supposed to be on this TV show.”

“Thought so. Where you from?”

“Maine.”

“Oh, yeah? Where ‘bouts?”

“Small town called Chittick. You ever heard of it?”

“Nope. Never been outta the city.” The gunman—who, Simon saw, was only about 18 years old—looked Simon over. “So what the fuck am I going to do with you? You can’t walk around like that!”

“I’m OK.”

“You fucking crazy? This is a dangerous place! Hell, I should know. Look, lemme walk you back to your hotel, OK? Really, this is a bad place to be.”

“Aw, you don’t have to do that. Really—it’s not far, and I can manage.”

The gunman eyed Simon dubiously. “OK. Look, at least take this!” With that, he thrust his gun toward Simon, butt first. It was Simon’s turn to look dubious. “I haven’t fired a gun in years.”

“Hey, there’s nothing to it.” With a practiced motion, the gunman flipped the gun, caught it, and fired three quick rounds into a garbage can about 75 yards away. “It’s a very good gun,” he pointed out.

“I can see that. OK. But what about you? This is your gun, right?”

“I got others. Get going. And stay away from Biting Bennie.”

“Biting Bennie?”

“Crazy old jig, lives by the east entrance. Throws paper at people, screams “Youdeeman” or something like that, and then tries to bite out their throats. Really bad news. Go on the left side of the entrance, and be prepared to run for it.”

Simon decided not to mention he had already made that particular gentleman’s acquaintance. Pocketing the gun, he waved, grinned, and said, “Thanks!”

“No problem,” the gunman answered, and strode off into the heart of the park.

Simon watched him go and felt a rising tide of exaltation. He hadn’t realized that the lighter not only kept him safe from harm, but influenced anyone who might want to harm him.

There’s a lot of bad people in this world, Simon thought. He could do something about that, with his lighter. Hefting the alien weight of the gun in his pocket, he considered this strange new power. He knew where to start on a project to make the world better. You start at the top.

Spinning on his heel, decision made, Simon strode out of the park.

* * *

Naturally, the cops wanted to know just where Simon found this particular gun. He had decided to stop by the borough station, both to drop off the gun, which he wasn’t comfortable with, and to pick up a few odds and ends that he thought might come in handy.

The desk sergeant glared at Simon. “This is a Mauser. There aren’t very many of them in the city, and three people were killed in the Central Park area by shots from a Mauser in the past two weeks. Now, tell me again—how did you come by this gun?”

“I found it near the east entrance of Central Park.”

“Nobody tried to sell it to you? You didn’t find it near a body, or anything unusual? It was just lying there?”

“Yeah.”

“Holy Smokes,” the sergeant breathed. Sniffing, he added, “This has been fired in the last hour or so. Did you fire it?”

“No.”

“Did you open the chamber? Play around with the trigger? Hold it by the barrel?”

“No.” The sergeant gusted a sigh, picked up the gun and placed it carefully in a plastic bag. Waving a patrolman over, he said “Get this down to forensics, get it dusted, get sample rounds.” Turning to Simon, he said “You may have just given us a lead on one of the nastiest scumbags around. We think he killed five people. I guess we owe you one.” “OK. How about your badge?”

“What did you say?”

“Your badge. I would like to have your badge.”

The desk sergeant had a quizzical look on his face, the type of look people get when they’ve suddenly seen something they’ve always had blasé assumptions about in a whole different light. A farmer, learning that his pigs could, in fact, fly, might have worn a similar expression. The sergeant’s left eyebrow gave a shrug, and he carefully unpinned his badge and handed it to Simon.

“Thanks. I’ll bring it back when I’m done.” Grinning, Simon pinned the badge on his coat, and started for the door. A couple of policemen, coming in from patrol, eyed Simon curiously.

“Say, that looks like one of our badges,” one of them said.

“That’s right. I got it from that gentleman there.”

“Prescott gave you his badge, huh?” The cop giggled. “We’ll have to razz him about that.” Nudging and grinning at his partner, the policeman moved toward the sergeant’s desk.

Simon strolled back to his hotel room. It was late, and he wanted to be in Washington, D.C. in the morning.

* * *

Getting into the White House proved to be no problem.

Guards looked at his official NYPD badge and decided that here was someone important enough that he didn’t need passes or Presidential permissions. It was at the anteroom to the Oval Office where resistance stiffened. Secret Service operatives glared at him mistrustfully and decided he had an honest face.

“The President is in conference with the Ambassador with Japan. He can’t be disturbed.”

“Japan? Oh, that’s fine. I’d like to talk to him, too.”

“You really shouldn’t. They are in the middle of very important negotiations. The President’s whole economic package depends on this meeting with the Japanese.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry. In fact, I bet that old Japanese Ambassador will be eating out of my hand after five minutes. Honest!”

Ms. Hiscox, never married and never penetrated, was usually known outside the White House as ‘The Maginot Line.’ There was no way through her to the inner sanctum of the President, and, the gossip continued, the only way past her was to take a detour through Belgium. She had successfully fended off lobbyists, congressional leaders, public nags masquerading as social activists, and even members of the President’s family. The 200 marines stationed at the White House weren’t as effective a barrier against unwelcome intrusions as she was.

“OK, go ahead on in.”

“Thank you.” Simon strode past the desk and turned the knob. The President glanced up, startled. That door had never in his six years in office opened without him knowing exactly who was on the other side, and what their business was. He was even more startled when a Chaplinesque character in a winter coat with a police badge walked in.

“Good morning, Mr. President, Mr. Ambassador,” Simon said courteously.

“Good morning,” the President replied automatically. “Can I help you with something?”

“Well, yes. Yes you can. First, I want you to cut your military budget in half. You don’t really need all those A-bombs and whatnot. What’s the point in making stuff that’s only meant to hurt people?”

“That’s a good point,” the President replied. He glanced at the Ambassador, who nodded and gave a blinding smile.

“And I want you to take the money you save and use it to fix all the potholes. Several of my buddies got busted axles this Melt, and that just ain’t right.

“No . . . no, it isn’t right. And you’re right, something needs to be done about that. Mr. Ambassador, do you have potholes in Japan?”

“Indeed we do. I shall convey your sentiments to His Holiness, um . . . ?”

“Simon.”

“Simon. So pleased to meet you.”

“A pleasure.” Simon shook hands with the ambassador, and added, “Could you set up for your Emperor or Prime Minister or whoever is in charge over there to come by and visit me? I want to talk to him? And Mr. President, I want you to start work writing some new laws for me, OK?”

The President smiled at Simon and carefully pushed a button, carefully placed under the lip of his desk. Within ten seconds, two large Marine guards strode into the office, grabbed Simon by his arms, and started towing him out.

“Hey! What are you doing? Let go of me!”

The Marines didn’t reply, and within moments, the door slammed shut, and the commotion Simon was raising was immediately cut off.

The President and the Ambassador regarded one another. Both men looked drawn and vaguely disoriented. The President looked at the door Simon and the guards had just gone through and shook his head, as if waking from an unexpected nap. “Perhaps, Mr. Ambassador, we could continue our discussion tomorrow?”

Without a word, the Marines dumped Simon on the sidewalk in front of the White House. Indignant, Simon picked himself up and strode back to the guards, who were already turning back to reenter the White House grounds. Grabbing the larger one by the arm, he said “Escort me back in there, right now.”

The guard grinned down at Simon. “Look, buddy, you just broke in on the President of the United States, and tried to take over his office. That’s almost treason, buddy. It’s certainly trespass. By rights, we should be running you in.”

Shocked, Simon stared at the guard. The lighter, he thought numbly. It’s wearing off. Without a word, he turned and strode away, in the direction of the Mall. Behind him, the two guards watched, grinning. One said something, and the other gave a humorous shrug, and they walked back onto the White House grounds.

As Simon walked, a horrid thought struck him. Suppose the lighter had lost all its power? Would the guards come after him?

HAD he just committed treason? He wasn’t big on legal theory, but he supposed that breaking in on the President and trying to take over his job might be seen that way. And what was the penalty for treason? Simon stopped, theatrically put a hand on his throat, and gulped. He began running.

Charlie found Simon right where he thought Simon would be, in a copse of trees alongside the mall. Slipping up silently behind him, Charlie said “Hi!” Simon screeched and jumped a foot in the air, landing facing Charlie with white, perspiring face and wild eyes. Charlie laughed. “Gotcha!”

“Charlie!” Simon sputtered, and jumped up and grabbed Charlie’s vest. “Charlie, I’m in big trouble. Your lighter quit working, and I got people looking for me.”

Charlie looked at Simon with a look of sympathy. “Boy, you’re a mess.” He raised a finger. “First, nobody’s looking for you. Everyone involved is laughing it off as a joke.”

“You don’t understand. The President . . .”

Charlie moved his finger to his lips. “Shhh. I know all about the President.” He moved the finger away, lifted his middle finger beside it, “Second, the lighter works just fine. You still can’t be harmed.”

Charlie gave Simon an amused look. “Do you think I don’t have anything better to do with my time?” Simon looked abashed, and Charlie continued, “If you had taken over President Renouf’s office and started working your will on the whole world, terrible things would have happened.”

“Like what?”

“Ohhh, I don’t know. Maybe there would have been a nuclear war, and you would have been the only survivor. Or maybe everyone would hate you and want you dead, and even though they couldn’t hurt you, just the fact that so many people would hate you would hurt you.

“It isn’t normal human nature to be benevolent. It’s actually corrosive to the human spirit. And you were having a corrosive effect on yourself. You would be so dependent on that lighter to meet your slightest whim that after a while you wouldn’t be a real person anymore. You would become spoiled, petulant, and peevisish. You might have started hurting others for your own amusement.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“No? What about that desk Sergeant that you made give you his badge? He could lose his job for that. What did you need it for, anyway? Weren’t you just seeing if you could take it?” Simon looked deeply shamed, and Charlie added, “I fixed that, too. Notice you aren’t wearing the badge any more?”

Simon patted his coat where the badge had been. Charlie continued, "It's taken care of. But you knew, at least in the back of your head, that he could have gotten in a lot of trouble, and you certainly knew you were making him do something he wouldn't have done of his own free will.

"Interfering with other people's freedom is corrosive, Simon. You wind up losing a bit of your self every time you make someone jump like a monkey for you. I don't know if I can explain it any better than that."

"I never meant to hurt anyone."

Charlie sat back, chewing a dead twig, and watched a flurry of emotions cross Simon's face. After a few minutes, Simon looked at Charlie, tear-streaked and bright eyed, and said, "Charlie? If I promise never to use the lighter to make people do things, will the lighter stop hurting other people?"

Charlie smiled. He expected Simon to ask about the lighter, but the wzy he asked meant Charlie was right to give Simon the lighter in the first place.

"I'm sorry, Simon, but I'll have to take the lighter away from you now. Someday, perhaps, I will give you a second change. But first, you have to learn to be careful and be caring. You should try to be the type of person who never needs a magic lighter."

Charlie looked crestfallen. "I screwed it all up, didn't I?"

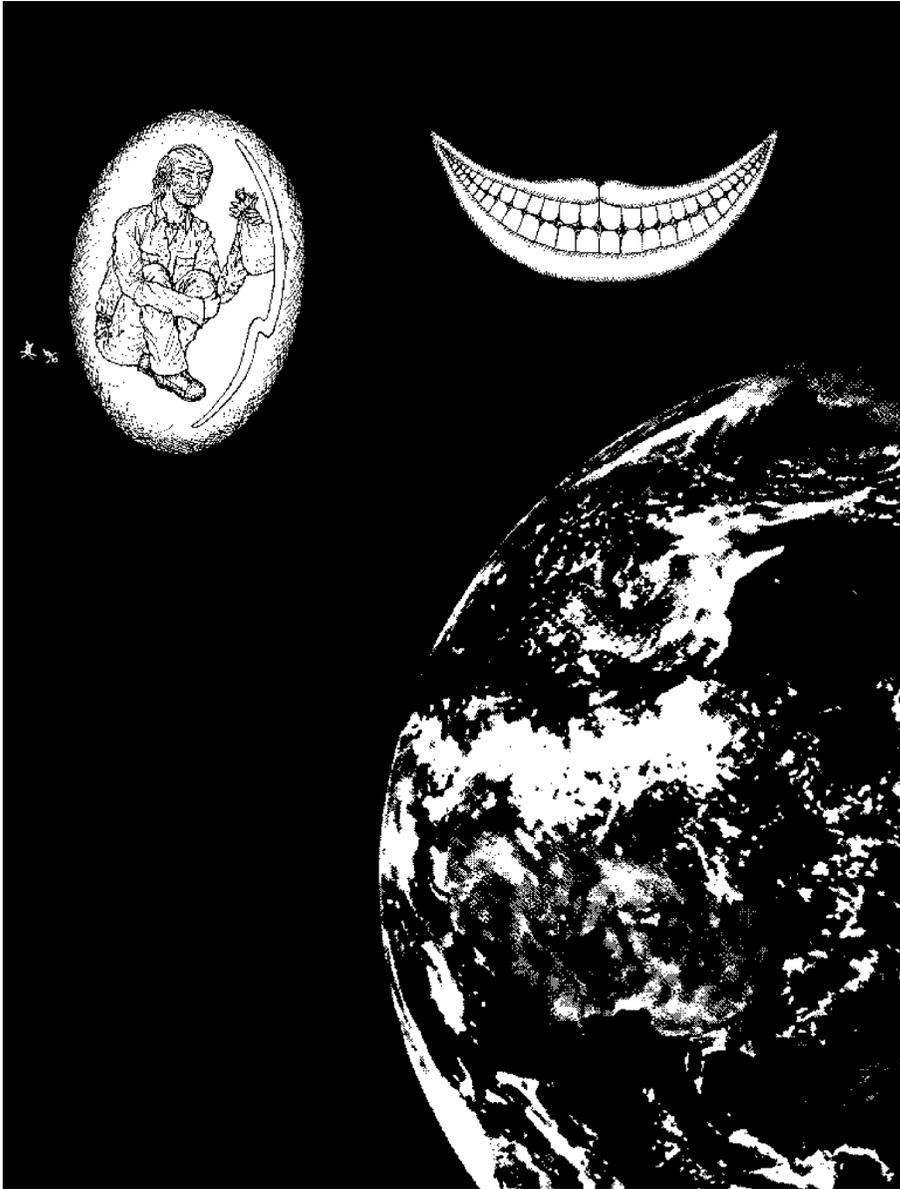
"No Simon. You did a lot of good, and the damage you did was unintentional. As I said, be careful and be caring. The rest will follow."

After a few more reassurances, Charlie sent Simon on his way back up to Maine. He watched Simon drive away, and juggled the lighter, now secure in his left pocket.

The 'magic' never was in the lighter. It was just a plain old Zippo. The magic was in Simon. And he still had it.

But Charlie knew there were two types of people: those who had magic and knew it, and misused it, and those who carried it unawares, and used it wisely.

Simon would do better now.



At the Beginning of Days



First there was grass, and acacia trees, and animals with a wide variety of cunning devices for ingesting other animals. Small animals ate the grass, and larger animals ate the smaller animals, and when that disagreed with them, they ate the grass so they could put the smaller animals back where they found them.

It was a state of affairs that seemed to work out. The trick was to reproduce before you were eaten. If you could manage that, your species would survive. If your species survived, that was called “evolution” and if it didn’t, that was called “libertarianism.” It was a system that caused few complains, since the victors had little to

complain about, and the nutrition was no longer in a position to complain.

But then one primate learned to look about, and shout, “The world is not fair!” and the human race began.

Humans were the first to demand that the universe run itself in accordance with the interests of the humans involved. Since this universe, as perceived by these humans, consisted of only a few hundred square kilometers of savanna, and the sky was just above the reach from the tallest tree, this was merely a preposterous demand, as opposed to the utter insanity of making such a stipulation of a Universe 14 billion light years wide, containing 25 quintillion suns in 5 trillion galaxies.

Whether small stretches of savanna, or vast concourses of stars with magnificent and alien civilizations, the universe proved unresponsive to the unique human notion that it tailor itself to their opinions of what it should be, and more importantly, the primacy of individual human roles in it.

So they cajoled and beseeched and genuflected and created an amazing variety of explanations of unseen causes to . . . well, to explain all this inexplicability.

Like their cousins the baboons, humans learned that they could be an implacable and frightening force on the savanna if they worked together closely as a troupe, and managed not to end up as nutrition at such a pace that they couldn’t reproduce. A half-dozen primates screaming and swinging sticks wildly will deter the hungriest leopard.

The pseudoscience of animism led to certain oddities of behavior. On the rare occasion that a tribe could kill a predator, they learned to check to see if the heart of the animal had stopped beating. Failure to perform such a check had led to several on-the-job injuries at a time when nobody had medical coverage.

Subsequently, they equated the heart of the big cat with its strength and courage as a fighter, and it stood to reason that the heart, if ingested, would lend its properties to the person who ate it. So the slayer of the cat would get the heart, and would gain, in addition to an appalling cholesterol count, courage. The hunter would eat the heart to gain courage, and because he now believed that he possessed more courage, would have more courage. The courage came from the person, of course, but superstition insisted that it came from the cat, a belief that not only lead to a dangerously skewed view of how the

universe functioned, but obviated the notion of self-worth in the believer. Humans took no credit for their strengths, but instead assigned their valuable features, along with any good luck they had, to an amazing variety of animist phenomena, and dressed it up in ever-deepening and convoluted layers of pure malarkey to prop it up.

It was perhaps the least productive and most expensive discovery in human history.

Humans developed despite this, and devised language. It was a bit limited at first, being used to describe the edible as opposed to the inedible, but rapidly grew a syntax. Not only were there words for grubs and melons (edible), but also for rocks and trees (inedible), but it quickly expanded to incorporate such ideas as “my foot” (edible, but probably not a good idea) or “club” (not edible, but useful for rendering cats edible). Humans learned that language could be as powerful as deeds in attaining social status, and that mysticism was a great way to brag without getting called on it, and the downfall of humanity was nearly complete.

It was at this sad state of affairs that Makes Impalas Edible Mook was found in the savanna, playing with two rocks. The evening before, he had knocked a pair of rocks together to see if they would make a pleasing noise to accompany the “We killed a gazelle” chant (they didn’t), and was started and amazed to see a spark fly from the rocks as he slapped them together.

Hunting had been good, and, with the afternoon spent filling his belly and emptying his testicles, he was in a relaxed and playful mood, which in humans usually means lots of trouble for somebody.

Now he was knocking the rocks together, trying to figure out what force might be causing the spark. He happened to strike the flint and iron together just right, and a satisfying shower of sparks flew onto the dry savanna grass carpet. Certain he was on the right track now, Mook exhaled a gust of satisfaction, and watched, bemused, as a tiny ember on a piece of straw suddenly glowed brightly, even in the late afternoon sun, and then winked out, leaving a tiny plume of smoke.

“Hey, Mook! Look what I have!” Mook, startled, looked up to see Least Hunter Ook, proudly brandishing a very fat, very dead rabbit. His flint and iron forgotten (and thus deferring the discovery of the domestication of fire for at least another 1,500 years), Mook stood

up and inspected the rabbit. It met all the syntactical requirements of edibility. It was dead, and it was in their hands.

Mook felt some surprise. Ook, as a hunter, was a dead bloody loss, and only his good nature and willingness to help the women with construction of night nests prevented him from being kicked out the tribe and sharply demoted on the food chain.

“You de Man”, Mook said, saying the ancient prayer chant Praising Success in Slaying a Fat Rabbit, “You de Man.”

Ook beamed and looked insufferably pleased with himself. Mook was the only accepted male tribal member who would speak pleasantly to Ook, and even then, praise was rare.

Mook gave Ook an admiring glance (which then, as now, meant, “I don’t know how you pulled this one off, you lucky bastard!”) which quickly turned to concern when he saw Ook was bleeding from his left ear.

“How did you do that?”

Ook put a hand to his ear and examined the stain on his fingers. “Pure carelessness on my part, I’m afraid. I was swinging my spear around in the ritual to Make It Fly True and Far, and I managed to hit my ear with the point of the spear.” – Mook frowned, trying to imagine that – “Then, moments later, I spotted this big fellow. I was so excited, I forgot all about my owie until you mentioned it. Say, I really clipped myself, didn’t I?”

“You better put some leaves on it or something. Evil spirits might get in.”

Evil spirits did not get in, which, given the course of things, showed religious observers that they were, indeed, quite evil.

Over the following week, Ook’s ear healed. Unfortunately, the improvement in his hunting skills proved even more transitory, and he returned from his next three expeditions empty handed. He even managed to break his spear once while performing the ritual to Make It Fly True and Far, something he really needed to work on a bit more.

Even worse, the hunting turned sour for the rest of the tribe. Mook, too, returned empty handed, and discovered, to the dismay of his testicles, that the women of his tribe had little interest in hunters who didn’t bring back at least a rabbit or two.

Unease was just settling into desperation after ten days when Ook showed up, two rabbits in hand and bleeding from his left ear.

Even the tribal guardsman, Believing is Seeing Look, deemed this worthy of a victory dance and holler to alert the tribe. The tribal shaman and keeper of memories, Persistence of Olfactory Book, noticed this time. “We’re all very pleased, of course,” he said to Ook, “and I’m particularly happy that you’re starting to show some promise. I always knew that if you only applied yourself . . .” Book tailed off, noticing a patch of acacia leaves on Ook’s ear. “What’s with the leaves?”

Ook gingerly peeled back his wrappings, and Book sniffed at the wound. “It looks like you hurt your ear earlier, here.”

“I did, and it happened the exact same way. I was doing the Make It Fly True and Far Ritual...” he picked up his spear and started to demonstrate in slow motion. Mook, who had sidled up behind Book to listen to the discussion, prudently pulled the shaman back a couple of paces. The two men watched with some bafflement as Ook twirled the spear, ending up with the point passing through where his earlobe would have been, had he not had time to pull his head to the side this time.

Book shook his head in disbelief and looked at Mook. “Can you do that with a spear?” He asked.

Mook stepped forward. “I see the problem, Ook. When you get to the part where you are showing the spear what a rib looks like, you are waving it toward the spine, rather than away. After that, the whole thing is running backwards, and you end up with the spear in your aureolas labialis, rather than pointed at the animal. Do you see?” Syntax had made amazing progress over the past few weeks.

Book looked thoughtful. “Didn’t you tell me that when this happened last week, you caught a rabbit, Ook?”

At Ook’s nod, he continued, “And that was your first rabbit in nearly two dry seasons of trying, wasn’t it? No, don’t look like that. I understand some people develop faster than others.”

He turned to Mook. “Nobody else caught anything today, did they?”

Book tapped the bridge of his nose, always a sign that he was having big, ponderous thoughts of the sort nobody else could support. The hunters waited respectfully. After all, there was no better knowledge than secret knowledge.

“Let’s let things play out for a few days. Maybe the tribe will start catching some chow. Maybe it won’t. If they don’t, I want to be

prepared. Ook, you're on leave for a few days until that ear heals. I don't see how you can hear anything out of it anyway. I want you to practice that ritual you've developed."

"Er, the ritual I've developed?"

"Precisely. See if you can find a way to perform it that does somewhat less damage to your ear." Preferably no damage at all, Book thought to himself, but with this lout, I'll settle for minor scratches.

A week of general privation passed. Worse, the rains had ended early this year, so there wasn't as many berries and grubs for the taking. Book was annoyed to have to explain this state of affairs not once but twice to the tribal leader, Url of Dook. Dook, who had a free-floating but acute desire to see the definite article applied to names, knew that his leadership qualities were in direct ratio to the fullness of the bellies of the people below him, and was dissatisfied with Book's performance in bringing home the bacon.

Book, in turn, was looking for someone to Make An Example Of.

Other hunters, who ought to have known better, were beginning to view Ook as their potential salvation. Mook watched the diminutive Ook flail his spear about wildly, and knew the poor little guy was toast if he didn't come back the next time with at least a rabbit.

Bellies were growling, leaders were nervous, and hunters were disparaged in the gossip vine (not edible). There was talk of attacking other tribes in the area and eating their hunters in order to gain their competence, but it stayed just loose talk, since, being better fed, the other tribes were stronger.

With ceremony, Book handed Ook a new spear, and commanded that he go forth, and with the new juju that Book had bestowed upon him, save the tribe from starvation. Trembling, stuttering, and barely able to avoid spearing himself, the tiny Ook shambled off across the savanna. Mook shook his head sadly, and left the tribal patch, moving in a slightly different direction.

Ook went to the area where he had found both the rabbits, and crouched in some brush, and waited patiently. After several hours, he heard rustling in the brush about 200 feet away. Large rustling, like a tapir, or maybe even a gazelle. Moving as quietly as possible, Ook performed his variation on the Make It Fly Straight and True maneuver, whimpering only faintly as the obsidian edge sliced his

outraged earlobe. Squeezing his eyes tightly against the pain—they were flooded with tears and wouldn't have been of any help anyway. Ook let fly. The spear flew straight and true and into the bark of a sequoia tree.

Ook rubbed his eyes and stared in dismay at his spear, still vibrating in the soft trunk of the huge tree.

Suddenly, to his side, there was a trashing, and the death scream of a gazelle. Ook pulled at his spear, and when the sequoia wouldn't give it up, ran barehanded to the location of the commotion, in brush about 50 feet away. There he found a gazelle lying on its side, feet still kicking ineffectually, its life ended by a spear jutting from the side of its chest. Ook stared, his bleeding ear and stuck spear momentarily forgotten.

Grinning, Mook stepped from behind a tree. "Boy, I still got it, even at the ripe old age of 24."

Ook stared. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to hunt up by the cliffs!" Adding, slightly lamely, "You de Man."

"Well, I kinda wanted to keep an eye on you. You're under a lot of pressure to perform right now, thanks to that idiot Book."

Mook took a meaningful glance at the giant sequoia. "A good shot, but we're going to have a hell of a time dragging that back home. I suggest we just settle for our upside-down deer here".

Ook struggled with his emotions. "But this was my hunting area. I scouted it out, I found the rabbit warren..."

"So you did, so you did!" Mook waved his palms at Ook. "I'm not here to steal your thunder. I'm here to help. Look, this is your deer. You did your thing with the ear – get something on that, by the way – and Book and Dook expect results. You bring this back, the tribe eats, and then you're off the hook. You can quit gouging your ear, and the rest of us can quit worrying so much about game being scare. Mook poked at the now-still gazelle with his foot. "Besides, it looks like the game have returned, anyway."

But the game hadn't returned. Mook was wrong. The gazelle was all they had for the next week. Day after day, hunters returned, empty handed.

Ook's ear, by now distinctly tattered and no longer very good at receiving sound, healed, and he was called in to see Dook and Book.

"One more time, Ook." Book said, while Dook looked on avuncularly. "For the team."

The next morning, the slightly crestfallen Ook went out, his ear already tingling, and prepared to do his cockeared ritual.

He did so, and then he speared a rabbit.

Then another, then another. He prepped and tied off the corpses, using the ear from one as a bandage on his ear, which was now not bleeding so hard because wasn't much left to bleed from. Mook burst from the trees, out of breath. "I say, Ook, did you see a pair of rabbits come through here?"

Ook pointed to the carcasses. He had already split and gutted them.

"Three of them? That's marvelous! I flushed two of them, and hoped you might get one! Where'd the third one come from?"

Ook shrugged. In his mind, the rabbits were further apart, each from the other and from him, making his feat all the more heroic. He would have quite the tale to tell upon his return, and this time, the credit was truly his.

But damn, his ear hurt!

Mook, too, was happy. Not for his friend, but because it would keep the elders satisfied, and off his back. The last two expedition had now assured that if hunting failed in the future, Ook, and not he, would be blamed. Mook looked forward to the day when everyone would be well-fed, and such politics would not go on.

Better still, during their return home, Mook spotted fresh spoor in a number of places. The game were back, and hunting would be good.

Book was delighted, and called together all of the hunters, and had Ook demonstrate his Make It Fly True and Straight ritual.

Then he had all the hunters practice it, and after only a few moderate injuries, commanded that each hunter, upon reaching his chosen ground for hunting each day, perform the ritual exactly as Ook did it. There was minor grumbling, but everyone knew that Book had Secret Knowledge, and it was indisputable that the tribe's worst hunter, Ook, was the only one who was getting out and scoring, so obviously a couple of ears was a small price to pay.

Hunting did get better, and Ook even attracted a female, Uwana Fook, with whom he spent several deliriously happy weeks before succumbing to an ear infection.

Over the next few weeks, the tribe suffered several losses. The always amusing Practical Jook died when he failed to hear a boar crashing through the brush toward him. The secretive Hidden Nook

was clumsy in his ritual and severed a carotid artery. Right-wing Kook died of blood poisoning. And so on.

Book gave the matter much secret thought, and decreed that hunters avoid such afflictions by cutting their right ears to match.

It even seemed to help for a while.

TWO YEARS LATER

JimBobwa, elder son of the tribe of Skipperies, a small, dark-haired people, appeared in their camp with his hunters, four of them, and two bedraggled and emaciated women who clearly were from the Shook tribe. The Chief of the Skipperies, Elron, regarded the women with distaste. Jimbobwa had been sent to trade with the Shooks and bring new women to the tribe, but such tatty specimens! If his son had offered anything more than a handful of salt for the two of them, he was going to ream the little idiot with a giant sequoia.

But it turned out that nothing had been traded to the Shooks for the women, because there were no Shooks. The two young women were all that were left.

The story was simple, although perplexing. The hunters all died of a variety of ailments, all related in some way to their ears, or hearing. With the hunters all gone, the women had to rely on gathering to survive-and the past year had been a tough one. These two were all that were left.

That evening, Elron sat outside the clearing with his shaman, Huber, to discuss the matter. The Shooks were not the biggest tribe in the region, but they were capable and not prone to being wiped out by invaders. Not in such a way that the Skipperies wouldn't have heard about, at any rate.

Which meant the women were probably telling the truth.

Huber had the two women brought to where the two men were, and made them repeat the story, stopping to question them closely on the ear-jabbing ritual that seemed to have been their downfall.

After they were sent back to the clearing, Huber mused for a moment or two. Elron had been known to question the established ecumentical order, and he needed an explanation that would work to his advantage.

“Well,” he said at length, “it seems clear enough. The Shooks worshiped false gods, and they were punished by the one True God by the vehicle of their own false and blasphemous worship.”

“One true god?”

“Oh, yes. Oh, there’s plenty of lesser gods in the grass and trees and animals and whatnot, but this is The God. He reigns over all the other gods.”

“That’s some god. When do I meet him?”

Huber paused to give Elron’s incredulous tone the disapproving stare it deserved. “You don’t. He only speaks through His representatives on earth, and it’s His will that I should be one of them. He does not appear to regular mortals.”

“And this invisible god is speaking to you?”

“Even as we sit here having this conversation. Oh! Elron! I wish I could share with you the bliss and joy of His presence! He is majestic, and pure love, and fills my stomach with fine food and my heart with bliss!”

Despite himself, Elron looked impressed.

“But Elron, He is an angry god, one who was mocked by the false worship of the Shooks. That’s why he destroyed them.”

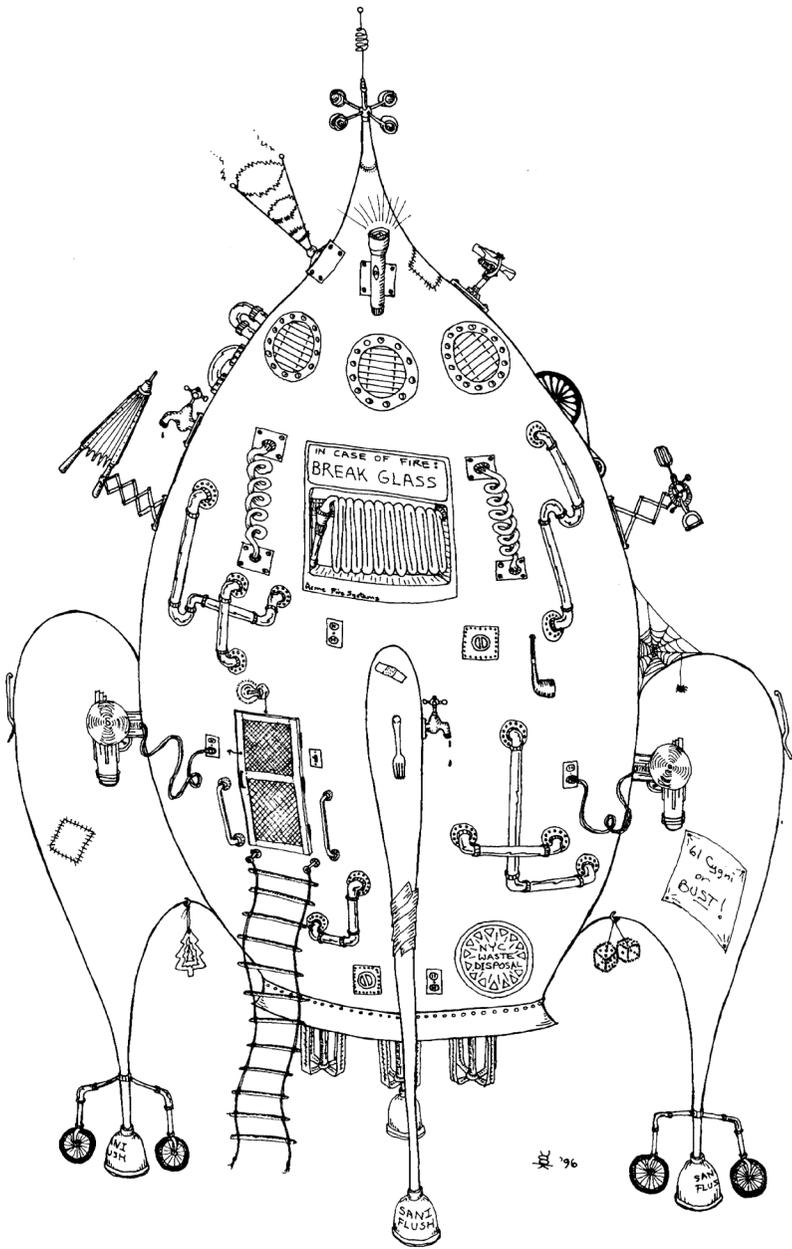
“Why didn’t he just talk to one of them like he talks to you?”

Huber glowered. “Perhaps he did. Perhaps he spoke through Book, but Book’s fellows were silly and evil people who didn’t believe him.”

Elron paused. Certainly, he didn’t want to be vulnerable to an accusation of being weak and vulnerable, and even though he thought Huber to be full of something other than fine food and bliss, his political instincts told him to go along on this one.

As if reading his mind, Huber winked. “Don’t worry too much about this one omnipotent being that destroys non-believers,” he said. “Pretty soon everyone will have forgotten the Shooks, and the story will fade. But for now, it’s not only a great way to assert our authority, but maybe, just maybe, it will stop some of our young fools from sticking spears in their ears!”

Elron knew a political winner when he heard one. The two men guffawed, and went back to the clearing to spread the Word.



A Visit to Earth

IAN MANN COULDN'T SLEEP. The Midshipman had put in six hours scanning the electromagnetic spectrum in a futile search for a sign that anyone on Earth was using forms of communication using a satellite that didn't exist 105 years earlier. The satellites had been designed to last a long time, and few would need replacing. But in the course of a century, there had to be new ones with their own carrier signals. That there weren't was disquieting. As he floated in his cabin, Ian found himself envisioning an Earth blasted to bare rock by nuclear weapons, or a green and fecund planet without humans, now extinct from a new plague or an old military grudge.

It gnawed at him. The idea that *Phoenix* might be all that was left of civilization left him feeling scared and lonely, especially since *Phoenix*, with most of its complement in hibernation, was a vast and echoing silence much of the time. Humanity had never seemed so rare and fragile.

His equanimity was further eroded by a discussion he had with a crewman, Ted Simmons, who doubled as the leading physicist on the ship. During the weeks that the ship was crossing the 26 light years from nu Phoenicis, Mann had happened to ask just how close to c the ship was moving at.

"We're going at 99.99998% of the speed of light," Simmons replied. Mann had been fascinated to see the man's knuckle joints twitching as he spoke. Ever the fastidious one, Simmons had been counting off the 'nines' as he spoke.

Mann considered this for a moment. "So what is our relativistic factor?"

"For each day on the ship, 790 days pass on Earth. A bit over 790 and a half days, actually."

Despite himself, Mann smiled at Simmons' obsessive love of detail. The number of 'nines' could make a big difference. The fact that they gained an extra half day on Earth wasn't particularly important. "So we're foreshortened to 1/790th of our length, and weigh 790 times as much."

"We mass 790.56 times as much. Or at least would, if it weren't for that damn box."

The Inertia Box. "Our mass hasn't increased?"

Simmons heaved an angry shrug. "I can't tell. What am I supposed to measure it with?"

"Point. No signs of increased gravitational attraction on objects on board?"

"None. And the ship isn't built for those type of stresses. We should have imploded."

"Imploded? Really?" Mann stared, unbelieving.

"This ship can't turn on its own axis at more than one degree every twenty minutes," Simmons snapped. "Do you think it could handle the lateral stresses from an increase of nearly 800-fold in mass? Without the box, I started seeing gravitational anomalies – measurable anomalies – at .93c." He shook his head, disgusted. "We should be dead right now."

"This seems risky."

"It is risky. And you didn't hear that from me." He gave an uncharacteristic bitter smirk. "These days the Captain doesn't want to hear about risk."

Now, the conversation haunted Mann.

Finally, with a resigned grunt, he unstrapped himself and floated to his desk. If he couldn't sleep, he might as well get something constructive done. There was a vast wealth of raw data from Hoyle to be categorized and assembled into some sort of logical order. A planet belonging to a remote and technologically superior race, it was something Terrans needed to know as much about as possible.

Ian pulled his head back and grinned at his screen. Had he really just used the old science-fiction term "Terrans"? The one used to delineate intelligent life from Earth from intelligent life...?

He had. Appropriately. They had learned little about the entities who were the true owners of Hoyle, but they now knew they existed, and that would change their perceptions of the universe forever. The "Spiders" weren't hostile, and might even be considered helpful, but a terrible gulf in communication made it impossible to ascertain their motives, or even if they had motives. Dealing with them was far too heavy a responsibility for *Phoenix* alone.

"Please, someone, be home" Ian breathed a prayer to the Earth. This was too big for their small band of explorers.

He scrolled down his list of projects. Vegetation diaspora. One pet project was to identify trees and other plants by their unique

colors and use that to determine what grew where on the largely-unexplored Hoyl. It seemed like a nice, soporific project.

A globe of Hoyl sprang up, with the prime meridian, where the settlement had been, facing him. It was seen from about 60 degrees north, where the main arctic circle was. No vegetation was green...Ian shook his head and resolved to change the coloring order. Green for no vegetation was absurd.

A red light blinked in the corner of his display, a polite advisory to let him know a line officer was looking in on his display. Ian blinked in return, and tapped the red light, wondering what officer was on the bridge at this hour of the ship's night. To his surprise, the Captain's insignia appeared next to the light.

Vargas' voice came over his console. "My apologies, Mister Mann. I didn't mean to disturb you. I saw the activity and I was merely curious."

Mann couldn't help but smile at the courtesy. Both he and Vargas had served in the Americaner military, where officers were entitled to spy on their men at any time and for any reason, without notice. "I was just doing a little work on the Hoyl data, Captain. I couldn't sleep." Mann remembered the prime directive for all middies "What can I do for you, Ser?"

"Well, Ian, if you're amenable, I would invite you up to the bridge for a drink."

Another statement that would have been unthinkable in the Americaner forces. But Phoenix wasn't a military ship, and the experiences at nu Phoenicis had bonded the small group of explorers. "It would be my pleasure, Captain," Mann said with genuine feeling. "Grant me two minutes to freshen up." Now, Ian thought, glancing around, where is my clean tunic? He glanced in the old style mirror. He was white, freckled, with slight stubble on his scalp and cheeks. Presentable enough under the circumstances. Normally, Ian had jet-black hair, but he hated the contrast between it and his pasty "Hoyle tan" acquired by assiduously avoiding the dangerous rays of the F8 star, Tsar-Ptitsa. He was bald from the neck up.

* * *

The bridge, ivory and maroon, was designed to be the heart and soul of *Phoenix*, the command center. It was, after all, The Bridge.

Would this not be the place where the captain gave terse orders to attentive officers who with a few quick keystrokes converted the Captain's wishes to reality? Was it not the place for the leaders and luminaries to gather, to wisely course the future of humanity? The curvilinear sweeps off the bridge consoles and the arching screens, along with the flying buttresses along the sides, suggested as such.

In the end, the bridge was one of the least used areas of *Phoenix*. Many of the stations at the bridge were replicated throughout the ship, and even during ships' 'day,' it was rare for more than one or two officers to be at bridge posts. Barring tense situations, its role was more that of library than command post. At 'night' it was usually deserted.

So Ian was unsurprised to find the bridge dimly illuminated, most of the great screens dark, and nobody on the bridge save the Captain in his God Console chair, and a cat, curled up in a ball, sleeping in microgravity with an utter lack of concern about half way between the 'floor' and arching 'ceiling' The cats never seemed to get stranded in mid volume as even the most experienced crew members sometimes were. They adjusted to the lack of gravity almost instantly. The diapers they had to wear, however...

Vargas waved a languid hand at the #2 chair. "Have a seat, Mister Mann."

Mann belted in. The seat was comfortable, but then, in zero gravity it could be made of granite and still be comfortable. Vargas gave him an inquiring look. "Brandy?"

"I wouldn't say no, Captain." Vargas reached into a pouch at his side and pushed a bulb toward Mann. Vargas opened his own bulb. "Salut."

"Salut."

Vargas took a contemplative sip, gave the midshipman a grin. "I was just thinking about Thislondon."

"The English city?"

"The very one. You've been there, right?"

"Just before we left. I didn't get to see much of it."

"Ah. A pity. It's an amazing place." The crew had met King Edward in a formal ceremony three days before they boarded the ship. They had been in isolation to prevent catching any diseases, which Red had compared to touring the world in a hamster cage. "You know

the city was only about 250 years old when we left, right? Despite all the old buildings?

“The old London drowned. They moved thousands of landmarks to higher ground.”

“Late twenty first century. Bad enough the oceans were rising, but the island of Great Britain was tipping southeastward into the sea. Between the two, Thatlondon is under about 50 meters of sea water. I'm sure you've seen the pictures.” Thatlondon landmarks such as the Gherkin and the Shard still poked out of the ocean—or at least still did 105 years earlier.

Vargas took a sip. “The rising water did for everything near the Thames. You go north a small way, and most of the old city is still there. But the historic part, what they call 'The City' had to be moved. So they dismantled all those old buildings and moved them about eight kilometers north to higher ground.”

“The madness of being English.”

Vargas involuntarily glanced around even as he chortled. About a eighth of the crew were from Great Britain. “They spent billions on that. Now, understand, they didn't exactly move all the buildings: mostly they took the facing and put them on new titanium skeletons and all the latest amenities. So Buckingham Palace and the Tower look pretty much like they always did, but it's superficial. Go scuba diving in Thatlondon and you'll find immense piles of ancient rubble where they once stood.”

Vargas' eyes strayed to the limning of the God Console in front of the Captain's Seat. He had been stunned to learn that it was an extravagance that cost nearly as much as the Console itself. The “wood” which he had imagined to be composite, was actually pure mahogany. He had been horrified when he learned it, since there were perhaps two dozen mature mahogany trees left in the world. Even worse was the provenance: the murderous Wasir regime of India. The deep tones reminded him of the blood of sacrificed children, an emblem of that troubled land. That it was India's only contribution to the vast world-wide project that created *Phoenix* was of little solstice.

“There was one exception. Saint Paul's Cathedral. The city elders decreed that it must be kept intact, right down to the hectares of land around it, and moved, stone by stone, with nothing to be replaced and nothing to be updated. So that's what they did. They removed it, brick by brick, stone by stone, tile by tile, pew by pew, grave by grave.”

Vargas shook his head wonderingly. “It took them fifteen years to dismantle it in an organized manner, and by then they were in a frantic race against the high tide mark.”

“What made Saint Paul's so special to them?”

“Well, part of it is a superstition that as long as the Dome was there, London would be safe. Mind you, they used to think that England's future could be secured by a flock of ravens, and the birds are long gone. And if London was safe, there was no need to move the cathedral. I guess you have to be English to understand it. Anyhow, they took another eighty years to reassemble the church. The mayor of Thislondon nearly got lynched when he joked that there were 'only three pieces left over' and the Queen—it was a queen then, Elizabeth III—declared a Jubilee, which is a protracted national holiday. All for a church that was part of a religion that included only one in twenty English.” Vargas closed one eye and peered through the clear pouch of his brandy at the wood surface of the God Console, a gesture that left Mann wondering how many the Captain had already consumed.

Vargas gave Mann an amused glance. “This story does have a point.”

Mann nodded politely. Story telling, pointless or otherwise, was a captain's prerogative.

“I went to Thislondon about a year before Departure. I spent a fortnight—um, two weeks—there, mostly as a diplomatic mission. To be perfectly honest, I was there to reassure people that an Americaner could be trusted with this mission.

“They gave me the Grand Tour, of course. Buckingham, the Tower, the Tower Bridge, the Churchill Tower, all that. It's an amazing place, truly the world capital. For a kid from Torr on in the southern deserts, it was a stunning, exhilarating thing.

“Last on the list was St. Paul's. I had seen it as we traveled around the City, and to tell you the truth, I thought it looked kind of pathetic. It was just south of the Churchill Tower, and the Tower is fifteen times as tall. So the cathedral looked small and dingy and past its time. It's...” Vargas tapped his screen, “...the thirty eighth tallest building in Thislondon. Not very impressive.

“It gets bigger and looms as you approach, much like the US Capitol Building does. It looks ordinary, it looks ordinary, and then suddenly you realize it actually pretty big. Saint Paul's may look squat, but it's actually a hundred meters tall.

“When you go in, it's like Doctor Who's TARDIS. It's bigger inside than it is out. It's vast and open and filled with incredible grandeur. The statues are like gods, and the buttresses arch into heaven. You feel like if you were impertinent enough to shout, it would take a half an hour for your voice to echo back—and it would say what you wish you had said, rather than what you actually said.” Vargas took his bulb, crumpled it, and put it in the recycle for the Charlies to take care of later. “I think that's when I finally understood why the English felt this had to be restored exactly, piece for piece, with no modern substitutions.”

“I've seen pictures. It looks beautiful.”

“Pictures don't catch the scale. It's what the English call gobsmacking; you can only stare in awe. Do you remember when you first arrived at Gabon?”

Perhaps it was only the lateness of the hour, but Mann was unprepared for the swerve in the conversation. “Eh? Ser?”

“Gabon,” the Captain repeated with an amused tone. “Do you remember what your first impressions were?”

The huge Royal Europe/African facility occupied a swath of land traversing one of the most dramatic biological synclines on Earth. To the west, the coast, and humid, warm, dense jungle—some of the few left on Earth. The western end of the base, 50 kilometers to the east, was in deep desert, where large solar powered fans were needed to prevent dunes from drifting and forming on the runways.

The personnel and operational center of the base was right on the synclinal area, so it wasn't unusual for mornings to be very damp and warm, often foggy, and by late afternoon searing desert heat, often near fifty degrees, was the norm. At night, raging thunderstorms. And no air conditioning. The place was an odd mix of the technologically advanced—the entire shuttle fleet operated from there, along with the giant heavy-lift rockets—and what could only be described as third world.

“My first impression? I have to say that at first glance, I thought it was a disaster. I landed at Gentil, and it took three hours to get to the base, over mostly unpaved roads.”

Vargas nodded, grinning. “Fortunately the road from Libreville is paved. When I heard that the Americaner crew were coming in at Gentil, I knew they would be pretty apprehensive when they finally

got here. I'm afraid we're not popular in central Africa. Everyone else came in through first world ports.”

“The base was...disconcerting.”

“Indeed. You started training in the mock bridge the next morning, if I remember.”

“I missed the bus and had to walk the two kilometers. It was miserable. Muggy, already hot. By the time I got there I was pouring sweat, and wondering if the mock bridge had air conditioning or not.”

“And what did you think when you saw the mock bridge?”

Mann considered the question. The mock bridge was a smallish rectangle of dusty blue corrugated tin, looking for all the world like one of the shanties in Gentil. “Captain, in all honesty, I wondered if the whole interstellar mission thing wasn't just an elaborate practical joke.”

“Obviously you changed your mind. What changed your mind?”

“I walked into the mock bridge. And I found...this.” Mann waved a hand, encompassing the room they were in. The Bridge. His eyes traveled up the screens to the curving ceiling, the struts running parallel to the tall back of the bridge resembling flying buttresses. The ivory and maroon colors combined to give it a rich roseate glow. His eyes widened.

“That's why you were talking about Saint Paul's,” he murmured. “This is like that. It's bigger on the inside.”

“The ceiling is only six meters high at the back bulkhead. But it looks much higher, doesn't it?” He waved an arm expansively across the front. “The curves in front create the impression that it's much wider than it is, too. It's really only twelve meters across.”

Vargas scanned the room with a glint of proprietary wonder. “I like it here, whether we're in the middle of an emergency and every station is crewed and we're all focused on solving the problem, or now, when it's dim and deserted and the biggest threat to my peace of mind is a sleeping cat.

“This is the biggest structure ever made by humanity, this ship of ours. But everywhere else, you have a sense of being inside, with no easy way out. Even the main mess. But this feels spacious.”

Mann nodded, understanding the Captain's point. He wasn't sure what to say in response. A nod, he hoped, was adequate.

Apparently it was. The captain leaned against his straps toward Mann. His striking green eyes speared Mann, and suddenly Mann realized the captain was not tipsy, and not maudlin.

“Mister Mann, like everyone aboard who is awake right now, I have to entertain the possibility that there are no humans left alive on Earth. Just the fifteen hundred of us on *Phoenix*.

“Of course, we've known that was a possibility from the day we left. King Edward called us 'humanity's last best hope' and he was right.

“This place...” he waved his hand at the Bridge, “reminds me that we may be all that is left of humankind. But we are bigger on the inside than out.”

“Yes Ser.” The thing is, Mann thought, he did get it. The possible loss of humanity made Phoenix seem a very small and fragile thing, but what was in the ship—the fifteen hundred—were the key to ensuring humanity would carry on. Bigger on the inside.

Later, as Phoenix drifted above Earth, Mann looked to see what engineer designed the bridge. The main man was someone named Chris Wren. Mann wondered if he had designed other things.

One Way Trip

TIMIDLY, THE SCIENTICS APPROACHED THE LEADROIDS and said, “The prototype ship is ready. We can leave for the stars as soon as a person is selected to fly it.”

The leadroids sat back in their collective chairs and smiled.

Things had not gone well over the past century. Food was short, as were tempers, and crime was high, as were taxes.

The promise of unlimited visas would mollify the pipples.

New worlds, new land, trade, foodstuffs. They looked down at the scientics and said, “Get us a hero to fly this ship. Make him strong and brave and handsome and young. You know what demographics we want to hook.”

And so Tom Bold (original name Sydney Krevich) was chosen. Tom had a square jaw and a flat stomach, with clear eyes filled with the vision of the future, and his voice rang with the morality of his convictions. And smart? Tom was so smart he never let the leadroids know how smart he really was, so they didn’t fear him.

The great day came, and to the cheers of the hopeful and anguished multitudes, Tom lifted off in the shuttle to the great ship that circled the earth.

At the portal to the Star Discovery (which is what the leadroids named the ship, even though the star it was going to had been discovered thousands of years ago), Tom paused for one last interview.

“The ship is so HUGE!” the commentator gushed. And so it was. Five miles long and two wide and one deep, it was the greatest human project ever made, a giant fuel tank with five big engines, and 180 cubic feet in a pimple on the top for Tom to live.

“Won’t it be difficult for just one man to fly?”

“The ship nearly flies itself,” Tom answered, with his square chin thrust out in a friendly manner. “To go down to the planet itself, I ride in a little ship that is attached to the control cabin.”

“Well, gee,” the commentator said. “You think they would at least put some side view mirrors on it or something.” Tom smiled at the commentator, young and strong eyes filled with visions of the future,

and stomach carefully flat. Then it was time to leave. In a fanfare of jubilant, patriotic colors, a holy man blessed the ship, even though the ship was not particularly religious, and Tom was off to conquer brave new worlds.

The scientifics had explained and explained how, even though it would take 25 years for Tom to get to the star and come back, he would only be six weeks older. “Relativity,” they said, and the leadroids smiled and nodded their heads wisely and said, “Ah, yes. Relativity.” And so the pipples smiled and nodded their heads wisely and said, “Relativity. Of course!” But nobody really got it.

Two weeks later, his time, Tom pulled up alongside the planet. (He actually just dropped in to orbit around the planet, but he thought the phrase looked better in his personal diary, which would net him millions upon his return). The planet lay below (actually above) him, fresh and verdant and unspoiled (or at least, not visibly poisonous from 250 miles up).

Tom landed, and found that all the dreams of humanity had come true. The air was perfect, the gravity just right, the animals edible. Fresh water gushed and gurgled copiously past vivid and lush plants, and past Tom’s square chin to his flat stomach, tasting sweet and pure. Tom grinned at the majestic mountains and sylvan plains, and knew it would take at least 150 years—at least—for the pipples and scientifics and leadroids to totally fuck this place up. By which time, Tom would have been rich, and then dead, hopefully in that order.

After two weeks of testing and sampling, and drinking pure fresh water, and eating friendly, fuzzy creatures that bounded right up to him trustingly, Tom climbed aboard his shuttle and returned to the Star Discovery. Tom fired up the mighty engines of Star Discovery, and prepared for two weeks of frantic writing in his diary and contract signing that had to be done before he landed on earth. He had just gotten to a very promising passage in his diary about making love to a beautiful native girl (he thought it might be female. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, and whatever it was, it didn’t complain) under the moonlight, and then frowned, trying to remember if the planet had a moon or not. He glanced out the port, feeling a bit foolish as he did so. Because he was five days out, he was too far to possibly see the planet. But the planet was still there, and yes, Tom could see it had a moon.

Something was wrong. Tom should be near the speed of light, and many light-hours away by now.

He tapped at various meters, even though they were electronic and tapping them did no good, and asked the ship's computer many pointed questions, to which he received blunt answers.

Tom's chin felt flat, and his stomach felt square. He might as well rip up his diary and write a real one. He wasn't going home.

* * *

The leadroids, always fearful, nearly blew the ship out of the sky before they realized what it was.

"But!" they protested to the scientifics, "the Star Discovery wasn't due back for another 12 years!"

"Something's wrong," the scientifics guessed.

"What?" demanded the leadroids.

And so the scientifics found out. They opened up Tom's cabin, to an appalling smell, and after they scooped out the remains of Tom and gave him a hero's burial, they went over all the records and charts, and Tom's diary.

"Relativity," they explained to the leadroids.

"Ah, relativity!" replied the leadroids. "Now what the hell does THAT mean?"

And the scientifics tried to explain. Time compression worked the way they thought it would. It took Tom twelve years to reach the planet, but for Tom only two weeks seemed to pass. However, you can't have two different sets of time in the same place, so whatever happened going away from earth, the opposite would happen coming back. It only took Tom two weeks to come back—but for Tom, it was twelve years. Tom only had supplies for two months. He must have found it terribly confusing.

"Well, fix it!" grumbled the leadroids, and went back to irritably shaking the pipples for more taxes.

The scientifics went back to their labs, and asked many pointed questions, and got some blunt answers. Their faces turned grey. "We can't fix it," they told the leadroids.

"Why not?" demanded the leadroids, shaking irritably.

"Relativity."

“Ah. Relativity.” The leadroids mused over this. “Now what the hell does that mean?”

And so the scientics explained again about how you couldn't have two sets of time in the same place, and when the two objects returned together, they had to match.

“Well, so what? The pipples know it's going to be a one-way trip. It means we get the ships back sooner, too!”

The scientics, by now trembling as well as gray, explained that it didn't work that way. “Sometimes time moves slower on the ship, sometimes on the earth. Because you can say that either one is accelerating away from the other, there's even odds of it going one way or the other.”

“What,” purred the leadroids menacingly, “does THAT mean?”

“It means half the trips out will take two weeks. . . “

”And?”

“Half the trips out will take twelve years!”

“Well, fix it!”

“We can't!”

“Then we'll fix YOU!”

So the leadroids had all the scientics put to death, and six months later, the society collapsed. It would be another six hundred years before anyone said 'Relativity' again.



Winter Wonderland

CAVEAT: I'm not the author of this piece. Oh, I wrote 100% of what you see here, but the original idea – a man keeping a diary of his first winter – wasn't mine. I don't know who the author is. It first came to my attention as one of those things that go from office



to office, reproducing on Xerox machines and living on bulletin boards. The pre-computer version of the virus. The copy that landed in my hands was called "Winnipeg Wonderland", and dealt with a newcomer to that Canadian city who wasn't quite prepared for the severe winters they get there. It was on a single sheet of paper, in the diary format, and had about a half-dozen "entries". It was funny, but I could see a number of elements that could be added to make it a lot funnier. So that's what I did. A friend of mine, who had opened a copy shop in Mt. Shasta, and who, like me, had found the first winter in this area a real challenge, was dying at the time, and I knew how much he loved the sort of comic broadsides that flew from office to office, and I remembered him roaring over "Winnipeg Wonderland". So I took the original and rewrote it, including elements of his life, and some of the experiences I had when I first arrived here. I got to smell the scent of white fir burning in an enclosed space ("piss fir") and had a vehicle totaled on icy roads. He got to deal with the deer ("Forest rats"), the flue fires, and the sometimes odd customers in the copy shop (I'm almost certain he never kicked any of them in the chakras, through. I'm sure he thought about it). He found a rotten way to die, and if this piece made one day a bit easier, then it was worth it. Roger Brennan, wherever you are, I hope you can download this third, and slightly improved, version. Mt. Shasta is one of the most beautiful places on earth, but if you move here, come prepared for snow. In fact, live in town.

The snow rarely gets more than six feet deep there.



DEAR DIARY

August 12:

Moved to our new home in Mt. Shasta. The place is so beautiful. The mountain stands alone and majestic. From our house we can look down our driveway and beyond, to the lights of the town sparkling below us. The air is fresh and pure, with no industry and little traffic. I'm amazed more people don't live here. It really is heaven.

August 13:

Even in August the mornings are cool. I walked down into town. What a wonderful place! The shopkeepers all ask your name, and remember it, and seem genuinely interested in you as a person!

For such a small town, there is so much spiritual diversity and tolerance!

August 14:

My wife called me into the bedroom, and we looked out the window into our back yard, where a doe and two fawns were stepping gracefully through our new garden. We were willing to share with them, because they are so beautiful, but then the neighbor's dog barked and startled them. They kicked out some of the plants when they startled, but my wife thinks she can repair the damage easily

enough. It was worth it. I don't understand how people can shoot them.

September 18:

We lit the fire for the first time last night. I guess we should have called a different chimney sweep, since the one we called when we first got here hadn't been by yet. But after two days of scrubbing and replacing the ceiling tile, the place will look fine. The smell is already dissipating. I guess I know now why they call it "piss fir"! But at \$180 a cord, it was such a bargain!

October 22:

We finally got the yard fenced off. Much as I love the deer, we didn't get any of our vegetables in. We also have racoons and possums. They ate it all.

October 23:

... and at least one skunk, I'm sleeping on the back porch if the tomato juice doesn't work. At least that's what my wife says.

October 24:

Jesus Christ! I never realized how cold 22 degrees was until I slept out in it. I smell better now, anyway.

November 18:

Those first magic flakes of snow drifted down today, striking the lawn and melting instantly. It cheered me up, because it was another tough day at the shop. I know the local economy is depressed, but storekeepers have to make a living, too. Eight cents for a Xerox copy just isn't that expensive, you know? Hunting season just ended, and I have to confess that I'm perplexed at the bloodthirsty attitude most of my neighbors have toward those sweet, gentle creatures of the forest. Hunting them for food I can see, although I could never do such a thing myself. But some of these people act like it's a personal vengeance or something!

November 20:

Ran out of firewood. But I'm not going back to that guy! He charged me three times the regular price, and my neighbors are telling me the wood was pitchy, which is why we kept having those flue fires. Got four cords of juniper from a local logger. I asked him to put the pile next to the woodshed and he dumped it in the front yard instead, but tomorrow's Saturday; I'll get it moved then.

November 21:

Well, the snow is here. I got about half the wood in before it got too deep, and some of the wood is even dry enough to burn.

I wonder what those long, skinny, beetle-like things are.

November 22:

Still snowing. Two feet. I'm amazed. I've never seen so much snow at once. It's so very beautiful. The new wood keeps the house nice and warm, and we don't even have to stay up at night, guarding the chimney. Now, this is what we came here for!

November 23:

I was late for work. The snowplow came by at 6 a.m. and left a big wake (I'm told they are called "berms") of snow in my driveway, and it took a while to dig out. I'll call the city today and see what can be done to prevent that.

November 26:

Thanksgiving. It was sunny all week and most of the snow melted, but now it's snowing again. My pile of wood is mostly still out in the front yard. The deer broke down the fence and trashed the last of the garden, so we didn't have home-grown squash with our dinner. Is there anything that grows in the ground that a deer won't eat? Damn things get into everything. I joked with my wife that next year, I would put a big sign up in the yard saying "poachers welcome!". She gave me a funny look and told me that I was overreacting. Ha, ha.

November 30:

Can you fucking believe this? Four straight days of snow! One and a half feet of the shit, and this morning, I wake up, and the sun is shining brightly. I go out, only to find the damn plow has bermed me in again. I'm going to call city hall and pitch a bitch. I don't pay taxes to have to clear their snow for them! I'm not even sure where my wood pile is. It snowed that much. Hi ho! Off to work I go!

December 1:

No income yesterday. They had some fruitloop religious festival, and all day long I had characters with shaved heads in strange robes and sandals (yes—SANDALS, in the fucking snow! Can you believe it?) Taking two hours to get just the perfect copy of the Mahareesh or some other weird Indian shit, and then they would get irate when I charged them for the 122 copies they made before getting the perfect one! Damn cheapskates! Also, I went over to city hall and talked with them about the snow pile situation. I mentioned that there was a

vacant lot right across the street from me, and would they consider piling the snow there? The five-and-dime Hitler behind the counter just looked at me and shrugged, so I told him to go fuck himself. Getting firm with functionaries works a lot better in small towns like this, I've decided. In the city, I probably would have had two big burly cops frog-march me out of the place for that.

December 2:

Whew! Do you have any idea how long it takes to dig through a six foot berm? I finished at 4 p.m. There was only four inches of new snow. I guess I better go to city hall and smooth some feathers. But that can wait 'til tomorrow. Right now, my arms hurt too much to handle making a phone call.

December 19:

Finally! We've had bright sunshine for over two weeks now, and sales have been good at the shop. I talked to the folks at city hall, and told them I was sorry I got rude, and they told me not to worry, that everyone gets upset about snow removal (hah!) at one time or another. I went to a big festival that one of the alternative churches put on last night. It was very lovely. Deer broke down the fence again, but who cares? I'll fix it in the spring.

The lawn is showing through, and tomorrow I'll be able to get more of the wood in.

December 20:

Three feet of that white shit. I went to bed last night, and there wasn't one goddam cloud in sight. I woke up to find three FEET of fucking snow! The plow hasn't even showed up yet, but I can't go anywhere – the snow is up over my bumper.

December 21:

Still fucking snowing. I think the plow came through this morning, but I can't see the fucking driveway from here to tell if I'm bermed in or not.

December 22:

I don't believe it. The berm is eight feet high. At least eight feet high. I don't know for sure because there's snow under that, and I don't know how far down it goes. It doesn't matter, because I don't even know where my fucking car is in all this shit. I parked too close to the roof of the house. The steep, metal roof that snow slides off of so well. I'm sure it's there – who the hell is going to be able to steal it? But I'm not going to get it out for weeks!

December 23:

It snowed again. Merry Fucking Christmas.

December 25:

If I get my hands on the goddam mother-fucking bastard who drives that plow, I'm going to rip out his fucking esophagus and hang the son of a bitch with it! I just got dug out when he came by today. Fuck Christmas, fuck Mt. Shasta, fuck everything! It just started snowing again.

December 26:

Got him! He, He.

February 14:

I'm feeling much better now. I understand that shooting at the snowplow driver was wrong, and if I hadn't been shaking so hard at the time, someone might have been seriously hurt. I don't know what got into me. At any rate, I'm taking medication for my back, as well as for my nerves, and it feels good to be home again.

Winter is nearly over, too: I can see patches of lawn out front, and the roads are clear and dry.

February 15:

Drove into town. Jesus, don't these people do anything besides gossip? Every storekeeper wanted to know what happened, and I heard a couple of high school kids say something about "There's the dude who shot Mr. Berm!". They acted impressed, but secretly, I think they were laughing at me. One of those fruitcake monks from the flake emporium of the hold flying saucer came by, and told me that everything that happened to me was all my fault and I should achieve transcendental consciousness and improve my ka or some such. I said, "Improve this, Mother fucker!" and kicked him right in his red chakra. While he was flopping back and forth on the ground and gasping for air, I told him that it was his fault, and with a better ka, he would have ducked and avoided my steel-toe boot. Oh, no. Oh, no. It's snowing again.

February 16:

False alarm. It stopped snowing after a few moments, but the bullshit goes on. I felt bad about that monk, and decided to stop by the abbot and apologize and see if a small donation might help put things right. I hit a goddam deer on the way, and totaled the car. Why the hell the goddam hunters can't find and kill something that big is beyond me. When the cops arrived, I was still jumping up and down on the

deer carcass and screaming. Apparently, that's against the law. They gave me a ticket.

February 17:

The car is gone. The insurance lapsed. It was due at the start of the year, and I had the payment in an envelope in the care when the big snow hit and buried the care, and I forgot about it. I'm fucked!

February 18:

It's snowing again. I don't give a shit. Do you hear me? I DON'T GIVE A SHIT! Let it snow, let it snow, LET IT SNOW! Crap. My wife has locked herself in the bathroom and won't come out.

February 22:

Six and a half feet. I can't get into town for food, I'm out of wood, my wife's gone, and I have to declare bankruptcy. Fuck it. As soon as this melts, I'm gone.

March 10:

Thank God I'm out of that Mt. Shasta shit hole. Goddam snow, goddam deer, goddam religious fruitcakes, fuck all of 'em.

Anyway, I'm in a place where it doesn't snow, and there are no deer, and the shopkeepers aren't all in your personal business like stink on shit. I think I'm gonna like it here in Fresno...

Only A Test

“THIS IS ONLY A TEST. If this had been a real emergency, you would have faced a hell unimagined by Man. Your beloved house would have ripped through your flesh in shards, as your eyes poached, and then your mind.

But we're only kidding. This is only a test.

This Is Only A Test.

Beautiful girl, hair gleaming in the California sun.

Ride your bike home.

Thought you could control the powder,
and it controlled you.

Waiting for the
world to die

you stayed alive

arterial blood running down your bathtub drain,

laced with artificial youth and vigor

because we didn't die FAST enough.

This Is Only A Test.

The forgotten man stands in America's

canyon streets of shining offal glory

Scratches hated skin

eyes conceal as he stares at alien spires

a Disneyland of greed where

men write lies

he'll buy what he can't afford

doesn't know what an atom is

Just knows there's bad shit coming down.

Doesn't he know?

This Is Only A Test.

He's had it since Korea, kept it up, oiled, deadlly.

Mexicans in his front yard, almost.

a dirty brown tide

want to steal his Chevvie

put Mariachi Music

on his four thousand dollar stereo

Encroaching. Don't share his fear.

strontium/mexican nightmare all oneandthesame and God
(!) the lawn needs mowing but
This Is Only A Test.
In Thine Father's House
]load love
]FILE NOT FOUND
]load peace
]FILE NOT FOUND
]load fear
]ENTER PASSWORD: hate
]LAUNCH SEQUENCE INITIATED
Just kidding down there.
This Is Only A Test.
Page fifteen of the nuclear war
survival manual
read in the guttering light
of a new blue sun
says dig (!) can you dig HARD?
Hope those bastard Amerikans got it
too where is Katya why did it happen will it
never end *****

(This is only a) testing
testing. Read Pages 462-528 on subliminal bonding and
addressing. Write essay, due before the holocaust, extra
credit if you name the fear.

Darkness
Born in light,
Steals our souls
rends our feelings
tears our shields
conquers those whom it serves.
This Is Only A Test.

mexican strontium,
cesium suicides
in the bright blue dawn
broken spires of wholesale lies,
cobalt psychotherapy

primal scream
in the test that neverends . . .
This Is Only A Test.

Equinox

MARCH TWENTIETH WASN'T JUST THE LAST DAY OF WINTER. It was payday.

Reg watched the truck depart, laden with about ten tons of frozen Icelandic cod, and smiled at the price he had gotten. He was still one of a relative handful of fishermen who had realized that late February and early March were prime fishing times in the Arctic. Yes, there were ice floes, but they were few and far between. For the most part the ocean heaved sluggishly under a thin coat of what was called “greasy ice”—a mixture of ice slush and salt. It posed no threat to his boat, or his nets, and, coming at a time when the sea waters were at their coldest, meant there was an explosion of marine life, including millions of fish that had been long ago fished out of the warmer waters to the south.

Wars and famine had greatly reduced demand, but humans were making a comeback. Reg was lucky enough to spot the resurgent population and get the fish to market when everyone still believed they were a precious commodity. In theory, he could take a three year vacation on the take from this season.

He was counting on potential competitors clinging mindlessly to the vision of the Arctic being a land of inhospitable wastes and endless darkness in the winter for at least one more year. Certainly they had figured it out in Russia and Scandinavia, where the polar nights weren't the frightening mystery they were in North America. In late February, he could count on at least ten hours of light each day. And at night, there was the Moon and the Northern Lights.

It was a dream-like living, where time was nebulous and existence was solitary.

In reality, he would keep on working. In the next week, he would get his boat, the *Ida Mae*, safely stored in a bunker, safe from the vast equinoctial storm that was coming. Then he would drive 600 kilometers southwest to the city of Thule. There, tulips would be opening their flowers and lawns would be bright green, and it would be time to set up what had been his main line of work—his day job, if you will.

The lakes in the hills behind Thule offered some of the best sports fishing on Earth. As March melted into April and the nights became ever shorter, the allure of mild temperatures and great fishing would attract hundreds of well-heeled hobbyists from the sweltering hells of Manitoba and Ottawa.

Then, too, there were the benefits of city life. At one and a half million, Thule wasn't the biggest city on earth, but with its casinos and theaters and matchless natural resources close at hand, it was one of the most popular tourist spots on the planet.

With a pang, Reg realized he hadn't set aside any cod for himself. The delicious fish, which commanded a month's wages in the finer restaurants of Thule, had for years lay outside Reg's lifestyle until he found a great oceanic cloud of them several hundred kilometers north of the north shore of Pearyland. East-facing Independence Fjord was a cold-water haven for the fish, who wished to avoid the roiling commotion of the great storms. It was also a spot Reg could reach with a Polar Bear Buggy, and to which he laboriously towed the materials for a cabin and a winter shelter for his ship.

Reg knew it would be time to get out, his fortune made, when he started getting neighbors, and roads, and street lights. He could retire to Iqaluit and enjoy margaritas under the palms. Boat drinks.

Reg pulled out his phone and called up the met report. It showed a big storm departing Spitzbergen, moving east. That same storm had made his return a hurried process, closing from the west and threatening 100 mile an hour winds. A precursor storm.

Pressure over the Pole was dropping, Reg noted. Not long now. He could go out into the fjord itself tomorrow for one more day of fishing, and then he had to get *Ida Mae* in her spring bed. Big storm coming.

Decision made, he went into his cabin to prepare a meal. After five months in the far north, Reg was looking forward to meals with someone for company, and meals he didn't have to cook himself.

Reg was just settling down to watch a movie when his phone rang. "Lo?" He didn't recognize the name or the code.

"Reg Massersun?" a voice demanded.

"That would be me. Who's this?"

"My name is Ian Cabot. I work for Vasily Nikolayevich Popov. I'm his personal secretary." Reg pulled the phone from his ear and

looked at it, as if the little screen could tell him something more. He'd never heard of Cabot, but he had heard of his boss, Popov. One of the richest men in the world, owner of the vast windfarms of Siberia. His company produced over half the commercial electric power used in Europe and Asia.

“Go on.”

“I will require a confidentiality agreement before I continue.”

That was mysterious. He couldn't imagine what Popov would want with him, let alone need confidentiality for. He clicked the phone, and the agreement was projected onto his dinner table. He looked it over to ensure it was just the standard form, and then let the device accept his retinal signature. Repeating any of the conversation would cost him his business, even get him jailed.

“Mister Massersun, my employer was on a cruise of the Arctic in his personal yacht, and he has developed engine trouble.”

“Doesn't he have a crew on board to take care of such things?”

“You misunderstand. Not his company yacht. His -personal-yacht. It's a twenty meter boat, and he likes to sail it alone, or with the company of one or two...select friends.”

“And you want me to go get him.”

“That is correct.”

“Where is he?”

Coordinates flashed on his screen. At least he wouldn't have to search for the craft. “That's closer to Ellesmere than it is to me,” Reg pointed out. “Why not just have the Canadian Coast Guard get him?”

There was a pause. “Perhaps I should mention what Mister Popov wishes to pay you to pick him up and deliver him and any passengers he may have discreetly to Iqaluit.” Cabot named an amount that even Popov would consider serious money. Reg would never have to work again.

Thinking furiously, Reg ran the numbers. It was about 500 miles to where Popov had managed to strand himself. It was at least that far again to Thule, and another 1,200 miles to Iqaluit.

“I don't have fuel or time to get to Iqaluit. Will Thule do?”

There was a longer pause. Reg sensed Cabot had muted his phone and was discussing that with someone with him, perhaps a lawyer.

“Can you get to Thule and keep him on your boat until we get transportation from there arranged?”

It meant sequestering *Ida Mae* in Thule. On the upside, he would be able to afford it now. "I suppose I can."

There was another pause, and the dead air told him he'd been muted out of another conversation again. He was beginning to get annoyed at the rudeness.

"Mister Masserun?"

"I'm still here."

"I've been advised that Thule is not an ideal site for Mister Popov. What's the nearest Canadian city?"

"Alert. It's right at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, about 250 miles south of where Mr. Popov's boat is located."

"Does it have a harbor?"

"No, but we can shelter my boat there, and if there's a break in the weather, you can send a plane to get your boss."

"How big is this place?"

"Alert?" Reg was mildly surprised at the question. It was the second largest city in the province of Nunavut. "About a quarter million people, I guess."

"So it has hotels and an airport and we can keep Mister Popov there discreetly?"

Reg had heard about paranoid and reclusive billionaires, and wondered if Popov was a member of that unhappy elite. "Yes, we can."

"Alert it is, then. You get half up front, half when we get him back safe and sound."

* * *

Popov's yacht was right where it was supposed to be, rolling irritably on heaving seas, a glittering, cigar-shaped futuristic dream of unsinkable technology. Reg was about an hour behind schedule, since twice en route he had spotted small schools of cod swimming north and fired his net torpedo, a lovely device that spread netting over a hundred square feet and cinched downward, netting the fish from above. As a result, his salt water hold/ballast tank held about 300 pounds of live cod. This greatly improved his mood, nearly as much as the money.

He pulled alongside the sleek, futuristic yacht as close as he dared, which was about thirty feet away. Looking at it, he wondered if

he might be able to get the engine repaired. It would be a shame to abandon the multi-million dollar craft.

He had to sound his whistle twice before the millionaire emerged. Staggering on the reeling boat, he fired a rope gangplank to the *Ida Mae*. Reg deftly secured it, and somewhat to his surprise, Popov scrambled across.

He didn't bother to say hello, but instead ran a disapproving eye over the *Ida Mae*. "This piece of crap is supposed to tow me to Canada?"

"No, Mr. Popov. My agreement is simply to pick you up and any passengers you might have, and take you back to Alert." He nodded to the yacht. "Battened down, your boat would float even if it upended. I'm guessing that when this coming storm breaks in six weeks or so, we'll find it drifting up near the pole, and still seaworthy."

"That's not acceptable. That's not what I agreed to."

"Well, it's what I agreed to, and I've got the legally binding contract to prove it. Mister Popov, you don't have many options. If you take a look at the sky..." Translucent white, with oval-shaped dark clouds scudding toward them along the horizon. "...you'll see the storm is forming. We have at most 24 hours to get to Alert and safety. *Ida Mae* can get there in about 10 hours. Towing your ship, it would take at least three times as long. And these seas aren't going to get any calmer."

"Any place closer than Alert?"

Reg splayed his hands in exasperation. "This is the Arctic Ocean. We're only 110 miles from the friggin' North Pole."

"Suppose I just stay in my boat and ride it out?"

"You can try that. You can hope it doesn't overturn and you wind up living in an upside down cabin. Oh, and it's going to be a very bumpy ride. Noisy, too, I would think."

"I'm not leaving my ship behind."

Reg peered at the man. The crazy fuck really meant it.

"OK, there's one more option. I don't know if it will really work or not—it's mostly a hypothetical notion. I don't know anyone who's tried it, but on paper it's a sound idea. Let's get some tow lines in place and get moving. Time is short."

"Where are we going?"

"North."

"North?" Popov looked openly perplexed.

“One hundred and ten miles north.”

They made it to the Pole, chased by lightning, in just nine hours. At the pole, the winds were fitful and blew little gusts from all directions. As his ship's barometer dropped below 850 millibars, Reg was relieved to see dark blue sky emerge overhead.

The equinoctial storm, which formed shortly after the spring equinox for which it was named, was the result of the biggest and most rapid warmup on Earth. In the old days of icecaps, the pole acted like land, and the equinoctial storm didn't form. But now, the cold waters of the Arctic were suffused by warm ocean currents that swept up through Baffin Bay and the Greenland sea, and warm air masses off the continents. The result was a massive stationary storm, extratropical, but with many of the features of a hurricane, including a distinct eye. Inside the eye, pressure was low, winds were light, and even as a roiling cloud wall revolved around them at nearly 200 miles an hour, it was clear and dry.

The waves were another matter. They weren't particularly big, but hey came from all directions at once. Reg put a mile between himself and the *Lolligagger*, Popov's yacht, and instructed his radar to yell if the other craft—or any other solid object—came within a half mile. Part of it was legitimate safety concern. Part of it was that he was coming to detest the man, with his perpetual sneer and cold contempt. He wasn't even going to share any of his well stocked larder, which would leave Reg on half-rations for six weeks, until he learned Reg had some fresh cod – and offered much to trade.

They bounced together, a mile apart, and did not speak. Reg watched movies and kept up on the news as the storm roiled around them. A luxury ferry went down in the Franz Josef Islands, killing dozens, a victim of the storm. If Popov watched, he watched in silence.

From time to time Popov heard sounds from the *Lolligagger*. Voices, which he supposed was a video feed. Popov had said he was alone, which surprised Reg. Cabot had indicated there would be a passenger.

But this was the North. People minded their own. It was not his business.

* * *

The morning of the scream featured a deep, rich blue sky, and deceptively white clouds bubbling around the horizon, save those in the direction of the sun, which were very nearly black. It was noticeably warmer, and Reg enjoyed undogging ports and letting the warm spring breeze through. It was morning in the most technical sense, being 2am. Late April, and night was abolished. The clouds were moving closer, but that was actually a good sign. The eye would collapse in on itself as the storm finally dissipated. Reg had fallen into a habit of sleeping two hours and waking for three, his sleep/wake pattern shattered by alienation and the polar spring.

Reg couldn't tell why he thought the scream was real, rather than just something emitted over Popov's doubtlessly top-of-the-line sound system, but he immediately started his engine and moved closer to the *Lolligagger*. At twenty feet, he hailed the craft. Uncharacteristically, the cabin door was undogged and open. He tried raising Popov on the radio. No response.

Now worried—his contract stipulated 'safe and sound'--he cast a tether and used it to rig a rope bridge. Stopping only to inflate his side bumpers in the event of collision, he scrambled across, stepping foot on *Lolligagger* for the first time.

He called into the darkened cabin. Getting no response, and after taking a quick glance about for any rogue waves, he stepped toward the hatch.

And found himself staring at the wrong end of a shotgun. From the dimness, Popov glared at him. “Just what the fuck do you think you're doing on my boat?”

Stunned, Reg raised his hands in what he hoped was a conciliatory manner. Popov emerged from the cabin as Reg carefully stepped backward, wagging the barrel of the gun in what he doubtlessly hoped was a threatening manner.

Reg put his palms forward. “I heard a scream.”

“Idiot. Do you think I don't have an entertainment system on board? I was watching a movie.”

“Sorry. I couldn't tell, and in this part of the world, it's best to look out for your neighbors.”

From behind Popov, there was a rustle. Reg's eyes flickered, looking over Popov's shoulder.

The gun moved slightly. “It's time you went back to your ship.”

Reg stared at Popov. Popov's eyes glanced toward *Ida Mae*, back to Reg, and Reg felt his spine go cold. "Take it easy, Popov. I'm going." Moving slowly, he clambered onto the rope bridge between the two craft and retreated in what he hoped was a leisurely manner. Once on *Ida Mae's* deck, he pulled back the gentry and clambered into the cockpit, itch between his shoulder blades, fired the boat's engines up and moved to a distance of a half mile, well out of shotgun range.

The little flicker of attention Popov gave was a tell, as certain to a poker player as a pinched upper lip or dropping of one eyebrow. Popov had looked at *Ida Mae* and wondered if he could pilot the craft.

Ida Mae's scruffy appearance had probably worked to his advantage. She looked, from the outside, like something out of the 20th century, and Popov doubtlessly thought she ran on coal-fired steam power, or something like that. If he felt confident he could pilot the old rustbucket, Reg's life expectancy might have been measured in moments. True, *Ida Mae* had solar panels, but what boat didn't these days? *Ida Mae* had an electric engine, powered by sun, salt water and fuel cells. Popov could pilot it.

It might only be a matter of time before his reclusive client figured that out. But why was he acting this way?

Reg was pretty sure there was a second person on board, and Popov, for whatever reason, was keeping that a secret. OK, a man's entitled to some privacy, and Reg was willing to respect that. But normal men didn't pull guns on people who were trying to rescue them.

Reg pulled his binoculars out and stood on his deck, examining the craft. For all he knew, Popov was peering back through his dark tinted ports with a set of binoculars of his own, and was watching Reg watch him. He didn't much care. He wanted Popov to know he was being watched.

That 'night', the clouds moved overhead, and soon there was a thick blanket of fog that hid the two craft from one another. Reg sat at his controls and considered his options. In about 12 hours, he could begin towing the *Lolligagger* and its strange complement back to Ellesmere. After six weeks, he was heartily sick of the sight of the sleek vessel.

He was convinced that there was a second person on board the *Lolligagger*. Popov was doing everything he could to conceal that, and the second person, if a passenger, was cooperating.

There was also the possibility the other person was Popov's prisoner, but he couldn't come up with a coherent scenario to support that possibility. Why would someone with almost unlimited wealth and power need to coerce someone to go on a sea cruise?

And it could be a grotesque fantasy on his part, fueled by his dislike for the billionaire and weeks of monotonous privation, hundreds of miles from any other human. Were his suspicions just his mind's way of dealing with the boredom?

Even if Popov was keeping a prisoner, how was Reg supposed to sneak up on and then rush an armed man on his yacht? Reg passed time devising scenarios, but couldn't come up with anything that withstood more than two minutes' critical evaluation. Except for a flare gun and a .22 rifle, Reg was unarmed. He didn't fancy his odds at close quarters against a shotgun and a man willing to use it.

He clicked his radio mike. "Popov? You there?"

There was a pause. "What do you need?"

"Storm's breaking. We can leave." Reg licked his lips. "Look, I don't want to get shot. I propose to come over in a few hours, hook up the tow lines, and we can start back. It should take four days to get to Alert."

Another pause. "That is satisfactory." A chuckle. "I won't shoot you, then."

Reg didn't feel particularly reassured.

* * *

Reg started *Ida Mae* slowly toward *Lolligagger*. He spent the previous hour emailing an account of his dealings with the recluse to various select friends along with instructions to decrypt and forward them to law enforcement agencies and the media In The Event Of. Decryption code to follow in five days. His phone had a hidden autosend.

He doubted a man of Popov's resources would ever have to face justice, but at least the people he cared about would know why he vanished.

He approached the cabin, warily. The cabin door was open, but there was no sign of Popov. He shouted, but there was no response. Shaking his head wearily, he inflated the side bumpers and came alongside and, jumping across, secured the tow lines.

A flash of motion caught the corner of his eye as he was jumping back to the relative safety of *Ida Mae*, and he froze, scanning the yacht frantically for signs of danger. He couldn't see anything. The hatch gaped open, a blemish in the ultra-streamlined yacht. He heard a splash, and then a whirring sound he couldn't identify. He watched for a moment, but nothing happened.

He began easing *Ida Mae* away with more than a slight sense of relief. The tow lines were fifty yards long, enough to give him at least a semblance of safety from the rich madman lurking in the shadows of his gleaming yacht.

He turned back. *Lolligagger* was now about twenty five feet away.

Suddenly, Popov burst out of the cabin, gun in hand, staring about wildly. Reg dived into his cockpit, knowing the paneling provided scant protection but at least Popov wouldn't know where to aim. A convex mirror on the side, used during docking, allowed him an imperfect view of the man.

His tiny figure scrambled on to the roof of his cabin, and he turned, facing away from Reg, and brought his shotgun up and fired into the water. Reg stood for a better view and could see the back of Popov's shirt was bloodstained, the back of his head matted. He was staggering, whether from a blow to the head or the rocking of the boat or both, Reg didn't know. He brought the gun to bear and fired again.

A tiny craft, no bigger than a one man kayak, came around the bow. Reg could see a figure in it, trying to steer the craft and hide from the shotgun blasts at the same time.

For an instant, Reg thought about ramming the yacht. It out-massed his craft, and chances were the yacht would survive and he would sink. What to do...

He had it.

Popov put two more shells in the gun and cocked it, ready to fire again, as the mesh from the torpedo net enveloped him. With a deft motion from years of experience, Reg sent the command to close the net pouch and begin hauling in. Popov, struggling against the mesh, slid off the cabin roof of the aft deck.

But *Ida Mae* was still in motion. The line remained tight, and with a bounce, the net, and its unwilling passenger flipped over the guard rail and into the icy drink.

Reg's first impulse was to rescue the man. The water was little above freezing, and an unprotected human could only live minutes in that.

But he wasn't the only one in the water. Reg ran to the bow, where the little lifeboat was approaching. A figure lay in the bottom, in about a foot of icy water, and it was obvious the life boat had been perforated by the shotgun. Reg could only hope the passenger had better luck.

Stretching full length, he reached down over the bow and grabbed the rider by the scruff of his neck. The person—child? The child weighed a lot less than he expected, and he was able to one arm him up onto the deck. Before turning to save Popov, he stopped to look over his catch.

A child, ten or perhaps eleven years old, and he was clinging frantically to something tube shaped and wrapped in plastic. Reg supposed it was some sort of flotation device and would have tossed it overboard, but the child wouldn't let go. "Fine," he muttered. "Have it your way." He picked the child, tube and all, and carried them into his cabinette. Clock was ticking. The child was soaked, clothing sodden. Moving quickly, Reg stripped him...no, her, of clothing, and set her down on his bed. He looked her up and down for signs of injury, especially bullets.

She wasn't yet old enough for pubic hair. Her skin was blue and she was covered in goosebumps. No bullet holes though.

Then Reg saw the burns and the bruises, and suddenly realized what this girl had been running from.

Popov was still emmeshed in netting, in freezing water that could kill a man in minutes. He wasn't moving.

Well, he could damned well wait. First things first. Reg pulled out an electric warming pad and, mindful of the dangers of warming someone with hypothermia too quickly, set it to its lowest setting and put it over the girl's body. Her blue eyes were wide open, she was gasping in shock.

Then he went out and examined Popov, still in the net alongside *Ida Mae*.

He was dead. Reg guessed it was a heart attack, and he was probably dead before he even got pulled up alongside the boat. Reg stared at the corpse without sympathy, and a stray line from an old poem ran through his head: “*There are strange things done in the midnight sun...*” He didn't have a fire handy, but he had options.

He nearly pulled the corpse up on board. Drowning accidents happened out to sea, especially in wild and remote regions. Then he saw the back of Popov's head, where the girl had hit him, apparently with the stock of his own shotgun. The gun was in the net with Popov and Reg gingerly picked it out and pressed the stock against the indentation in the back of his skull. The girl had put everything she had into one mighty blow, he guessed.

Still, it wouldn't do to bring him back like this. Reg hit the release on the net pouch, and Popov's body tumbled back into the Arctic. Reg suspected the orcas wouldn't mind. Next, he tossed the gun in. At least it would sink right away.

* * *

Four days later, he and Svetlana pulled up outside of Alert, and found Ian Cabot, Popov's flunky, waiting for them, along with a bored-looking Constable Frank Orme from the RCMP. Reg had already radioed in the tragic details—most of them—of Popov's tragic demise, how, in the course of defending himself and his ward from raiders, he had slipped off the roof of his cabin right into the drink, how Reg had tried to save him by firing the torpedo net to him to cling to, and how the girl—a waif Popov had courageously rescued from some Russian slavers—had tried to rescue him with the yacht's lifeboat. No, they left it behind. And there were a pack of orca closing in—Reg didn't want to fight the voracious and deadly mammals for the plutocrat's body.

The constable, satisfied, muttered some words into his data pad and wandered off in search of a nice cup of tea. Constable Orme didn't seem to think it was strange a fisherman would be right at hand to witness a pirate raid. Reg was hoping for official unconcern. Russian plutocrats weren't very popular in this part of the world.

Cabot had no questions about the missing millionaire, a missing passenger, or the missing money. He just sadly advised Reg that he would be unable to pay the remainder of his fee since the contract had

stipulated he be returned 'safe and sound'. But he was grateful that Reg was there to bear witness that Popov had, weeks before his death, saved this poor Russian girl, and that he would be remembered for that act of courage. He pressed the pink slip for *Lolligagger* into Reg's hand, and told him he could keep the yacht or sell it. Reg didn't mention that the yacht probably was worth three times what he was supposed to be paid. Then Cabot wandered out of Regs' life forever, with a tacit understanding that he, and Popov's estate, would never hear of Reg again.

The girl was rich, too. The object Reg had nearly tossed away was actually a waterproof container filled with cash—money Popov had promised the girl in return for her 'services'. Well, she had earned it. Reg wondered if Popov ever intended to actually pay the girl, or just used it to entice. The later, he suspected.

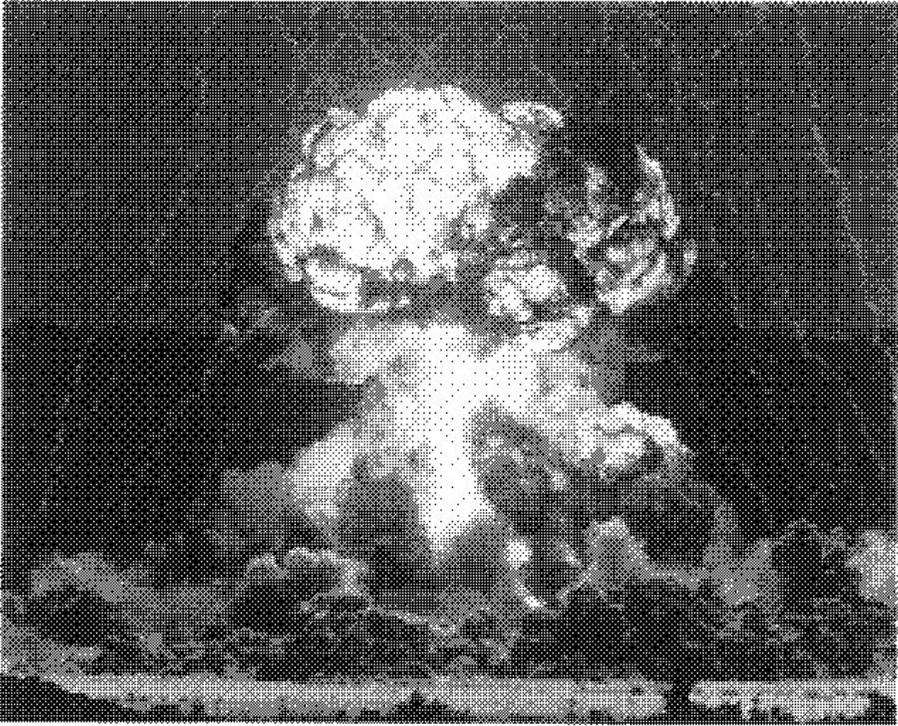
Svetlana spoke Dänsk and English, and in the boomtown atmosphere of Thule, getting her registered for classes proved to be little problem. Reg bought a home just outside of town, with a cabin for her, and devoted his time to being Thule's best fresh-water fishing guide. He didn't need the money, but he loved the work. He made lots of money doing what he loved. He also loved having a family of sorts.

In time, Svetlana's wounds, both physical and psychic, would heal. In time, she might even learn to enjoy taking tours on the *Lolligagger*, and marveled at the vast, forested shores of Greenland and Baffin. He was no longer alone.

He began work on a model of *Lolligagger II*, a grown up version that could handle the vast steaming southern reaches. He had always wanted to tour the huge island chain of Antarctica. There was a vast inland sea in South America to explore. And was it true Australia had a beautiful fresh lake in the Outback?

The Arctic, even without the ice and snow, was a strange and eerie place. It was beautiful, but in the end, still not home for humans. It was time for Reg to move on.

Credit: "The Cremation of Sam McGee" by Robert W. Service



The Merry Widow

THE MERRY WIDOW WAS OLD.

She reckoned her years at 52 the year before the plague, but stopped counting after that. Only the ambitious and the foolish mark the passage of the years, and the merry widow was neither of those things.



Someone told her that the plague was over a generation passed, a reckoning that matched the tenderness of the scars on her heart and the gaps in her teeth. The merry widow thought she might be the oldest person in the city, and took no pleasure from that thought. Morning shadows lurked at the edge of the square like coy

maidens. The sun, searching, found the fountain and splayed invitations to dance to the doomed shadows. In the shadows, the coolness of the night lingered, and the merry widow's joints reminded her that the nights were getting colder. Perhaps this coming winter was her last.

Taking a quick glance around for observers, she twisted her upper torso, working the imps of the night from her system. She thought an incantation that gave the illusion of vigor, and after another alert glance about, cracked her knuckles and shook out her stiff legs.

It would not do for her to appear as old as she felt. She counted her friends among the children of her childhood friends, and they, at least, remembered her strength and power and reckoned her still a force to be dealt with. But the children of the children, alien to the old ways, knowing little and caring less that the merry widow was more than an easily grabbed purse, must not be allowed to observe weakness.

She stepped out into the sunlight, wearing a stern visage that masked the shock of her old eyes to the sudden glare. In doorways and alleys lay the huddled forms of the intoxicants, and while it was unlikely that any would stir until the sun reached them, the widow did not tarry. Her life, she knew, weighed little against the prospect of money for another bottle of liquor. She performed morning prayer next to the fountain, and then, in a personal and more secular ritual, moved to the fountain and gazed into the waters and divined the nature of the day from the sputtering coruscations of light that the fountain threw into the unheeding air. Resting a hand on the edge, she leaned toward the water, for an instant thinking of vaulting into the clear, fresh water, and flying among the bubbles. This, too, was part of her daily routine.

Then she recoiled in disgust. A large piece of feces floated on the water, and further along the edge she saw someone had vomited into the water. Angered, she looked about, and found the boy who tended to the fountain sweeping the square's debris from the previous day with a large palm frond. Taking a deep breath, she shouted, "Edem! Come here!"

Surprised, the boy dropped his frond and trotted over. "Yes, Memib?"

"Do you see this foulness upon the water?" At the boy's nod, she continued, "Why has it not been seen to?"

“My father is not with me, and I do the work of the both this morn.”

“And where is that fat lout?”

“Memib . . . “ the boy licked his lips, and daring, the words came out in a rush. “He has gone to the north and is in different employ.” Encouraged by the slight widening of the eyes that the widow permitted herself, the boy continued, “The men of the north came to him, and told him that they had marked his facility with numbers, and that they had need of such men, and offered him wealth and a fine house.”

The widow snorted. “A fine house—a hard box that does not permit the breezes of the day to enter? And the endless counting of THINGS. Well, it should suit that pig well. And has he left you then?”

“No, Memib. He says that in a fortnight, he’ll come for me, and we’ll live together with the men of the north.”

“And lose a fine life.” At the boy’s puzzled glance, she sighed and regarded the excrement in the fountain. It would be impossible to tell the boy what he would lose. “Never mind. Just get this cleaned up.”

The boy stared at her, wooden-faced. Was he not going to live with men who lived as Gods, in a fine house in the north?

The widow stared back. She thought, but did not say, “Defy me, boy, and I shall personally feed your testicles to the pigs.” The tenor of her thoughts flickered across her face, and the boy, uncertain, fled to gather materials to cleanse the fountain.

The widow watched the boy run, strong and brown in the sunlight. She liked the boy, and would miss him. A life in a sterile box, scribbling arcane notations on paper, would be no life for him.

Still, were he to stay, might he not end up as one of the huddled forms in the doorways, senselessly drinking and pissing, lacking any purpose in life? There was no dignity left in life in the square.

The widow glanced into the waters once again. She often gazed there, seeking to divine the course of the day. She twisted her lips into a wry smile. The fountain, it seemed, had served her truthfully, if not well, this day.

She walked toward the marketplace, remembering who she was that her stance would not betray her. At the steps leading down to the market, she paused and surveyed the scene. In five summers, the tents were much less numerous, and many of those remaining were given

over to the selling of liquor. Indeed, many of the canopies were no longer made from the sturdy and honest canvas of yesteryear, but a strange, thin substance that water ran off of and that crackled in the breeze like a starved demon. The wares, she knew, would be of lesser quality; strange, alien things that attended to the body only. Gone were the singers and jugglers, the smells of the fine cooking, the open fires. And she, once the best of the beggars, was now only the last. Not even the plague made the market so gray and sober.

No matter. She came only to find foods and mayhap converse with a few of the merchants left that she knew well.

She approached Afin's tent, knowing that in the lateness of the season, his grindings would remain plentiful and inexpensive. At the corner, she stopped, startled into open amazement. The frame of Afin's booth stood, with the canvas carelessly pushed to one side. Had Afin died in the night? But no. His bald, sweating head poked up from behind his bins, and he awarded the widow with a checkered grin.

"Good morn, Memib! Come see! My stand shall be much brighter now!"

The widow strode around the bins, where Afin had dropped, and found him cutting at a piece of brilliantly-hued northern-made material.

The widow bent, and rubbed the material between her hands. Soft it was, and thin. She knew that the afternoon sun would soon rob it of its softness, but for now it was a fine material, woven too

closely for her practiced eye to discern any warp and woof to it.

"See? I shall attract the finest people with these bright colors! So much brighter than any stand in the place!"

"Yes, the color of the sunrise will certainly tell people of the quality of your wares." The widow's mouth tightened. "You ninny. Think you that people will discern what goods you have from the color of your coverings?"

Afin laughed and clapped his hands. "No, Memib. But the people will see my bright colors, and will come to me from curiosity. In time, they will know merely to look for my brightness, and they will know that Afin is selling his grains. The men of the north explained this thing to me."

"And did these men tell you what you should do if all stands in the place use this very color, or ones brighter? Should you set fire to your stand then, so that people may know that you are still here?"

“Memib, this material does not burn.”

“And have you marked the sun of late? This . . .” she gave the plastic a contemptuous kick, “does not stop the cold from entering the way that canvas does. Shall the people then know that the bright colors mean that Afin has frozen his penis and has grain that cannot be ground? Has this color blinded you to the approach of winter?”

Afin’s grin, faltering at mention of other stands having the same colors, brightened again. “Come, Memib. Let me show you another wonder!”

Gesturing for the widow to follow, he lead her into the area at the back of his stand. In the area where he slept, a box stood. He rested a hand on it, proud as if it were his son. “Mark this device well, for it truly is a wonder.”

The widow approached, and gingerly reached out and touched the top of the box. It was cold, and hard. She pushed a palm against it; heavy, but able to be carried a short distance by one such as herself. She peered around the corners. Each of the faces was white, and of a material warmer than the top, but just as hard.

“You will not be able to store much grain in this.”

Afin laughed. “It’s not for storing grain. Mark the lever upon the top. Take it at the fattest point, and move the arrow it forms as if tracking the sun across the sky.”

The widow grasped what she surmised was the latch, and twisted it to her right. She gave it a slight tug, but the top did not budge. A faint hum emanated from the box.

Suddenly, the widow felt the hot dry wind of high summer about her. Startled, she glanced up. The cold blue of late fall lay upon the sky. Her eyes swivelled back to the box. The summer wind came out of the box itself!

“Is it not a marvel?” Afin rubbed his hands and jumped from foot to foot, eager and as proud as a bridegroom. “It keeps the tent warm as a mother’s breast, from sundown to sunup, and I’ll not even know that winter has come as I sleep.”

The widow stepped back from the heat, and Afin reached forward to shut the device off.

“It did not feel warm to the touch. How is it that it contains fire and yet remains cool?”

“I know not. But it does not take fuel, and the heat it gives will be for all the winter and spring.”

The widow spoke slowly. "Surely this is a wonder. Did this, too, come from the men of the North?"

Afin nodded. "They say I have but to surrender it to their inspection in late summer each year, and I shall never want for lack of comfort come winter."

The widow shook her head admiringly. "All these years of cheating me and your other customers, and now you can live like a rich man."

"But no, Memib! They cost a pittance—a mere pittance. In sooth, I will be selling them along with my fine grains."

"At a princely sum and a tidy profit, I'll wager."

"I have an extra at hand. I will be happy to sell it to you at my special price for friends."

"Special price, is it? And which hand of mine will you carve? Or do you have carnal demands?"

Afin let a mischievous look cross his face, and decided not to risk it. "Memib, I'll let you have one for just three fairings."

Despite herself, the widow blinked at the price. Three fairings would be about three days worth of food, at her modest demands.

"Oh, Memib. The men from the north will demand an additional two fairings for the inspection. They call it a 're-charge.'"

"A re-charge?" The widow laughed. "A recharge it certainly is. Why should I pay twice for the one device?"

"I know not. But they say that if they do not receive this 'recharge,' the heater will fail to operate."

The widow considered. Certainly, the cold of the evenings were striking her with increasing cruelty. With such a device, she would no longer have to borrow from her spirit strength to stride as a woman of power in the mornings. And she could have 10 or 100 of the devices if she so wished.

"And, Memib, you could rid yourself of the heavy and smelly bundlings and canvas, and live in a light and airy place, open and warm."

"My bundlings are not smelly. And why should I wish to rid myself of my fine canvas?"

Afin gulped at his error, decided to try the sale anyway. "It would be a shame to keep the canvas and not allow the heater to perform as powerfully as it could."

"Would this harm this 'hee-ter'?"

“No. But it would not be able to work the way it could.”

“So I should exchange my canvas for this silly material, just so the device can work harder? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

Afin fell silent. He strode to his side, and pulled open a bin.

Instead of grain, there were dozens of the devices. “I’ll save one for you Memib. You’ll learn that just because you did something a way since you were a girl doesn’t mean it’s the best way.”

“Perhaps. And how is business?”

“It is a tragedy, a disaster. Many of the merchant class are gone, and those that stay prefer the prepared meals that the men of the north sell.”

“That food is of no taste or quality.”

“Still, they buy it. It is of a price like unto mine, and requires no effort to prepare. That is why I sell the heaters, too, for business is poor.”

“The market is small these days.”

“It is that. And getting smaller. Someday, perhaps, there will be no market, and I shall sell prepared foods from a metal box to live as well.”

“A sad thought. Did you know that Taxen and Edem are leaving us?” At Afin’s nod, she continued, “Who then shall care for the square? There is naught left but for the drunkards and thieves.”

“And robbery afflicts the marketplace. It is a sad time. I’m glad the men of the north have come to ease our burden.”

“Have they eased it? Or did they cause it?” At Afin’s blank look, the widow said, “Never mind. I shall think upon acquiring this heater. Meanwhile, what vermin-infested, moldy grain to you have to sell me at a king’s ransom this day?”

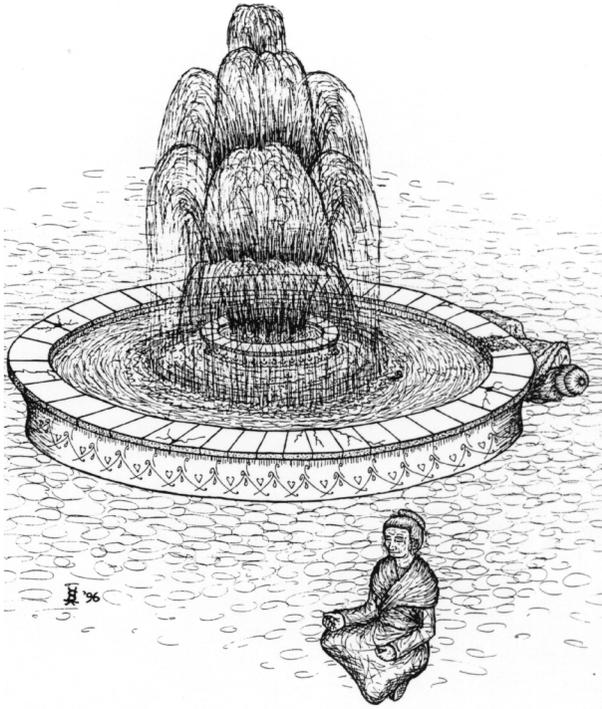
* * *

Winter came and took the widow a few weeks later, gentle as a lover.

As it was, a man of the north found her huddled shell in the pitiful area in front of her tent.

“Why,” he asked, “did this beggar woman not have a heater?”

Afin, having heard the news of the death of his old friend, was there, and replied, “She did not want one.”



The man of the north, exasperated, said “But we nearly give them away to you people. Is there some superstition? Do you prefer to live in this filth and squalor?” The man kicked at the bundlings, and Afim, shrewd in the ways of men, sensed that the man’s wrath came not from the pain of seeing a proud woman dead upon the ground, but from petulance that the woman rejected his toys. He looked at the man and wondered.

The widow’s corpse bore a slight smile. She had greeted death as she would her last friend.