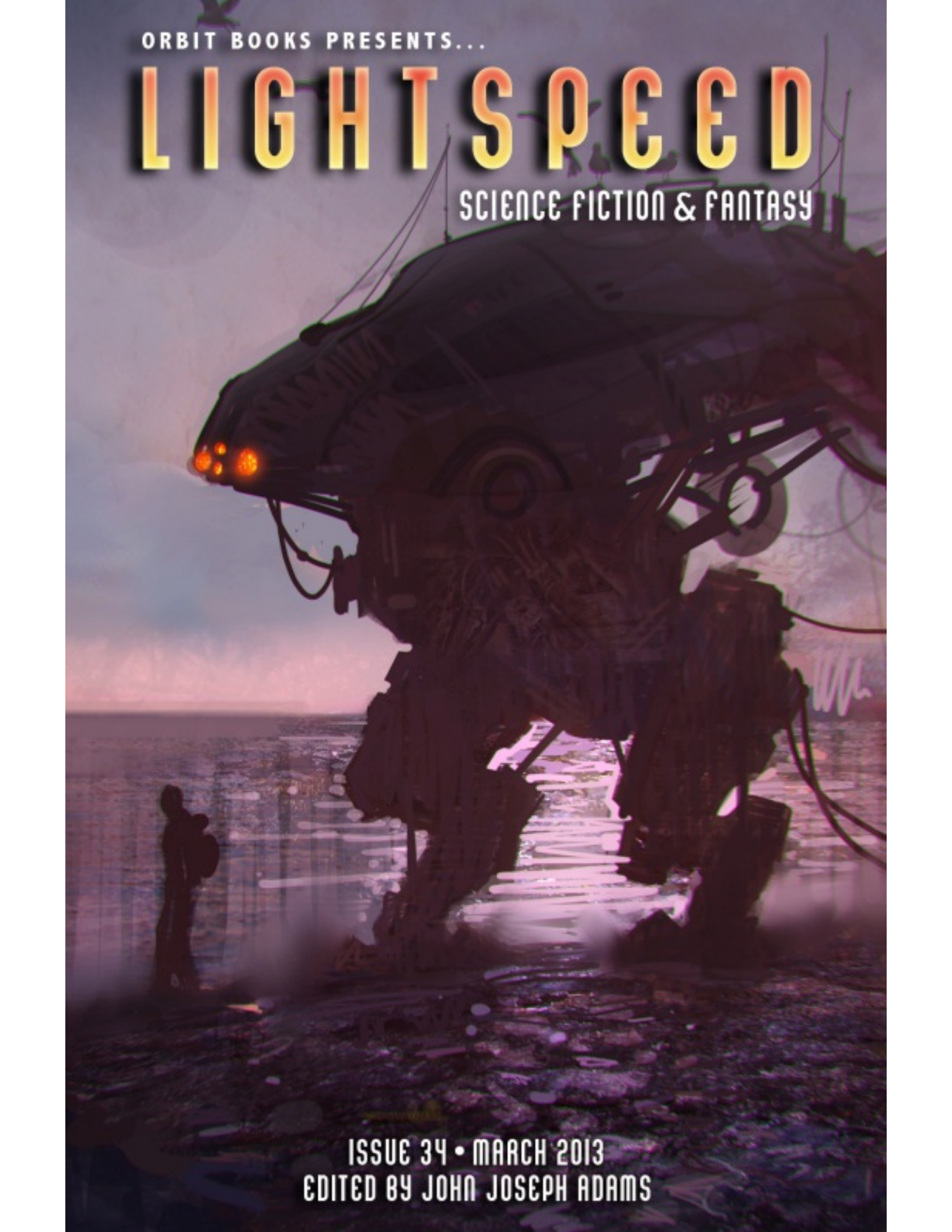


ORBIT BOOKS PRESENTS...

LIGHTSPEED

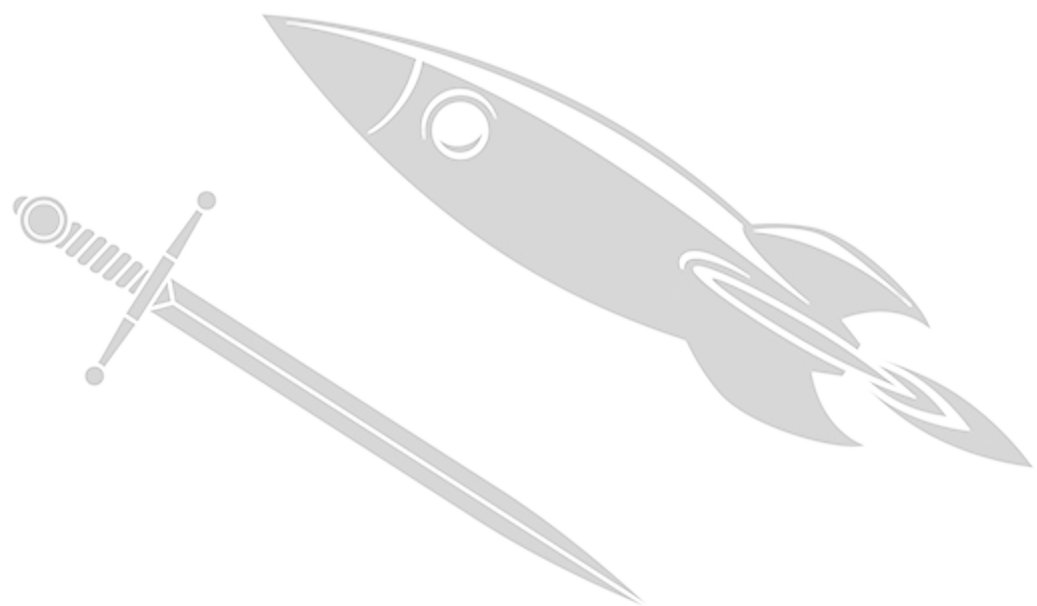
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



ISSUE 34 • MARCH 2013
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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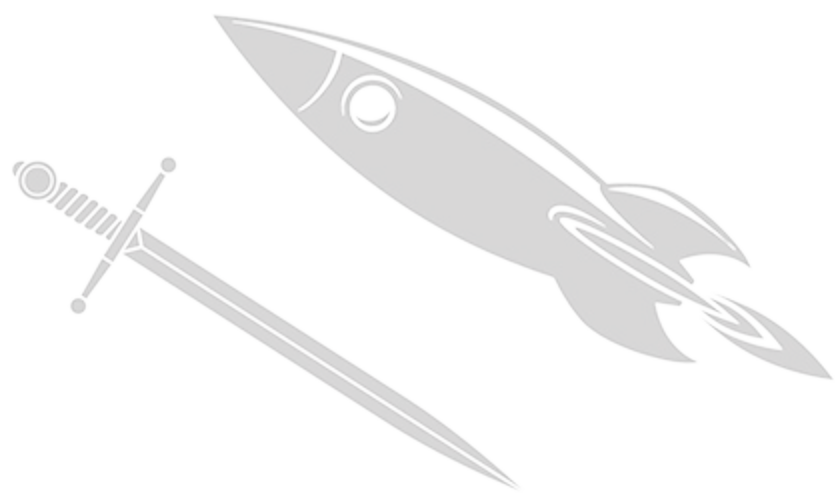
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(2015)

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FROM THE EDITOR



Foreword to Humble Bundle Edition

John Joseph Adams

Lightspeed is a digital science fiction and fantasy magazine. In its pages, you will find science fiction: from near-future, sociological soft SF, to far-future, star-spanning hard SF—and fantasy: from epic fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, and contemporary urban tales, to magical realism, science-fantasy, and folktales. No subject is off-limits, and we encourage our writers to take chances with their fiction and push the envelope.

Lightspeed is a 2014 Hugo Award Winner (and a four-time Hugo finalist), and stories from *Lightspeed* have been nominated for the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Award.

Edited by bestselling anthologist John Joseph Adams (i.e., me), every month *Lightspeed* brings you a mix of originals and reprints, and featuring a variety of authors—from the bestsellers and award-winners you already know to the best new voices you haven't heard of yet. When you read *Lightspeed*, it is our hope that you'll see where science fiction and fantasy comes from, where it is now, and where it's going.

• • • •

This issue was selected for inclusion in the “Apocalypse Bundle” for Jake Kerr’s story “[Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince](#),” which I point out in case you would like to jump right to it.

In this issue you will also find additional information about [other books](#) edited by me that you might enjoy, as well as a [special offer](#) for Humble Bundle readers that lets you get a free three-month subscription to *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*.
Enjoy!



John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist’s Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man’s Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com’s *The Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

Editorial, March 2013

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue thirty-four of *Lightspeed*!

First off, just a reminder: The nomination period for the 2012 Hugo Awards closes on March 10, 2013, so there's still time for you to submit your nominations. The 2012 Hugo Awards will be presented in San Antonio, TX during LoneStarCon 3, the 71st World Science Fiction Convention (Aug. 29-Sep. 2). Anyone who has a supporting or full membership of LoneStarCon 3 as of January 31, 2013 and all members of Chicon 7 (last year's Worldcon) may nominate works. If you didn't attend Chicon 7, and you don't plan to attend LoneStarCon 3, you can still nominate by purchasing a supporting membership. Nominations may be submitted through the online ballot at lonestarcon3.org/hugo-awards.

If you'd like to reference a list of all *Lightspeed* stories (and other material published by yours truly in 2012), visit my personal website at johnjosephadams.com/blog. There, I've sorted everything into their proper categories (short story vs. novelette, etc.), including material from my 2012 original anthologies, *Armored* and *Under the Moons of Mars*.

Also, if you are planning and eligible to vote for the Hugos this year, you're eligible for some free stuff! Just visit johnjosephadams.com/blog for details.

Speaking of awards, the Nebula Award nominees for this year have been announced, and we here at *Lightspeed* are thrilled to have two finalists in the short story category: “Give Her Honey When You Hear Her Scream” by Maria Dahvana Headley and “The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species” by Ken Liu. So congrats to Ken and Maria, and to all of the other nominees!

In other news, late last month, I had two new anthologies come out. The first, from Tor, is *The Mad Scientist’s Guide to World Domination*, featuring original stories by Diana Gabaldon, Seanan McGuire, Austin Grossman, Naomi Novik, and many others. For more information, visit johnjosephadams.com/mad-scientists-guide.

Also just out is *Oz Reimagined: New Tales From the Emerald City and Beyond*, which I co-edited with former *Realms of Fantasy* editor Douglas Cohen. It features all new stories by Jane Yolen, Seanan McGuire, Tad Williams, Orson Scott Card, and many more. Plus, the cover and each individual story is illustrated by *Lightspeed* illustrator Galen Dara. To learn more, visit johnjosephadams.com/oz-reimagined.

With all that out of the way, here’s what we’ve got on tap this month:

We have original science fiction by Jake Kerr (“Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince”) and

Rich Larson (“Let’s Take This Viral”), along with SF reprints by Holly Phillips (“Three Days of Rain”) and Angélica Gorodischer (“The Sense of the Circle”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Sarena Ulibarri (“The Bolt Tightener”) and Lisa Tuttle (“The Dream Detective”), and fantasy reprints by Felicity Savage (“Ash Minette”) and Karen Joy Fowler (“Lily Red”).

For our ebook readers, our ebook-exclusive novella is “Things Undone” by John Barnes, and of course we have our usual assortment of author and artist spotlights, along with feature interviews with acclaimed authors Philip Pullman and Angélica Gorodischer.

Our issue this month is again sponsored by our friends at Orbit Books. This month, look for *Wolfhound Century* by Peter Higgins. You can find more from Orbit—including digital short fiction and monthly ebook deals—at www.orbitbooks.net.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And remember, there are several ways you can sign up to be notified of new *Lightspeed* content:

- Newsletter: lightspeedmagazine.com/newsletter
- RSS Feed: lightspeedmagazine.com/rss-2
- Podcast Feed: lightspeedmagazine.com/itunes-rss
- Twitter: [@lightspeedmag](https://twitter.com/lightspeedmag)
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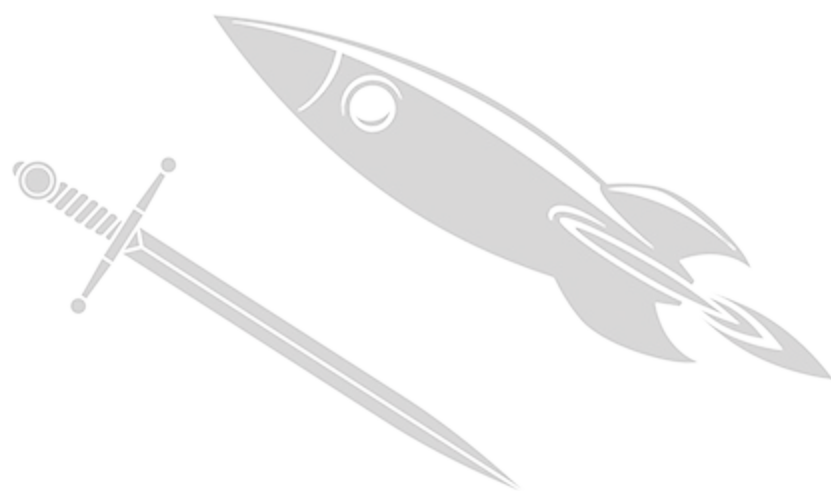
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Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!



John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Lightspeed*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Oz Reimagined*, *Epic: Legends of Fantasy*, *Other Worlds Than These*, *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award. He is also the editor of *Nightmare Magazine* and is the co-host of Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

NOVELLA



Things Undone

John Barnes

With two contracts last spring, both successful, Year of Grace 2014 had already been lucrative by early December; better still, with just over three months left in the year, we had yet another contract. “We are looking for someone who will probably sound as if he has a Dutch accent,” Horejsi said. As always she was speaking from an index card, pulled from the envelope that had only just dropped out of the slot on the FBI-only blue phone about ten minutes ago.

“Date of arrival, March 16, YoG 2013, so right before the new year. He can’t possibly have survived in Denver for nine months without having had extensive contact with other people, so there’s no hope of a true isolation.” She was getting that off the card where they set the rate, skipping all the numbers; they never meant much to her.

I said, “Slow down slightly. What are the top and bottom rates they’re offering?”

“Seventy percent of the standard for a fully discreet termination, one hundred forty-three percent if it turns out we can do a true isolation, but we won’t be able to—”

“One hundred forty-three percent is the exact inverse of seventy percent,” I commented. “Rounded to the nearest percent.”

Horejsi looked at me, multiple apertures in her Riemann

eyes opening and polyfocusing so that she could catch every nuance of the pulse in my neck and the infrared flush of my skin. “There will be a reason why that thing about exact inverses is useful, and that reason is eluding me.”

Numbers elude Horejsi like faces and names elude me. But time travelers never elude us for very long, I thought. I enjoyed thinking it.

I said, “The penalty for having to resort to killing him is exactly the same as the reward for getting him all the way into the WPP. Normally the reward is much lower than the penalty—when they pay seventy for a complete screw-up where we have to shoot him and grind him, they only pay maybe one hundred ten for true isolation. So for some reason they are incenting us very, very hard to achieve true isolation, even though it’s obvious that true isolation is impossible. *That is interesting.*”

“You’re right,” she said.

“*Furthermore,*” I said, (Horejsi is a good partner, the best actually, the only one I’ll ever want, but she always stops talking about numbers just before it gets really good), “*this* means that they are incenting us to improve, if only by the slightest margin, across the whole spectrum from barely acceptable failure to triumphant success.”

Horejsi nodded. “I think I get it, Rastigevat. The pay scale is telling you that the case is much more important than the usual ballast-tracking job, they want all the results we can squeeze out no matter what it takes, and there’s no such thing

as ‘good enough, we can coast.’ Has there ever been a case with a pay scale like this before?”

“Thirty-nine cases since I started working with you, after six cases with Gomez, and in every case the bonus was less than eighty percent of the inverse of the penalty. So no. Never. Not only is this the most urgent case ever, it’s the most urgent by a wide margin.”

Horejsi nodded. “We’re not supposed to notice that.”

“If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be smart enough to catch time jumpers.”

“Right.” She gave me her weird grimace that meant *smile*. (She didn’t get Riemann eyes till she was in her twenties—she was born blind and Com’n—so she hadn’t had the right feedback to develop proper facial expressions when she was young.)

I grinned back. It was nice to work with someone who got jokes.

I estimated that I knew at least two thousand percent more than I was supposed to know about Horejsi. For example, her first name was Ruth, but since I could never call her that, I called her Horejsi, same as she called me Rastigevat, even though she knew my first name was Simon. I estimated that we covertly shared between 820 and 860 simple declarative statements about each other that we were not supposed to know.

We also were the only two people in the world who knew each other at all. I looked a little more normal, but I didn’t get

to know people much. Except for Horejsi they were boring. And if anyone found out that Horejsi didn't bore me, she'd be gone, literally before I ever knew her. When a Com'n becomes important to a Liejt, there's a waiver on the temporal rules.

Her grimace/grin got more intense and she focused her vision apertures directly at my face. The Lord of Grace alone knows why—knowing Horejsi better than anyone else in the world is like knowing just one fact about a star no astronomer has seen. It was good that I knew how to be fascinated without showing it.

At last she said, “All right, shall I resume reading cards?”

“Please.” I took a sip of coffee, careful to set the cup down without making a bump or disturbance that might draw either of our attention from what she was doing, because if we missed anything, it was gone for good—regulations required that as she finished each card she dropped it into the combustor; she had to pull them from their package one at a time, then put them down the combuster.

Basics: *Ballast tracking job. Date of ballast's origin, 28 May 1388. Location, Southwark, London, England.* She dropped the card into the slot. The combustor made a soft *brak!* as the swirling white-hot oxygen turned the card to gas and a wisp of glassy ash.

Mass, twenty gallonweights, almost exactly. Cylinder of enclosure, 70 x 11 decifeet, so he was about average height and girth. Into the slot, *brak!*, more gas and ash.

Our mystery man was the ballast load for the backward journey of *Alvarez Peron*, which was the alias for a man named **CONFIDENTIAL** who had worked for the Federal government as a **AVAILABLE ON A NEED TO KNOW BASIS** while leading a double life. It noted that in his real life he was Liejt and had family, and therefore we should avoid any inquiries in that direction unless specifically authorized.

Peron had *departed from an apartment near 30th and Downing, apartment destroyed in fire of suspicious origin.* That was unsurprising. It takes time to build an illegal time machine and prepare to use it, so he'd taken a place in the bad side of town under another name, and then probably firebombed it just after the ballast came through. That was a pretty common trick, not least because it forced the ballast to run instead of doing the natural thing and holing up in the place where the time machine had been. Horejsi and me had caught eight ballasts who had barely had a second to realize they were naked or in rags, bleeding and hurt, in a strange place, before the room had gone up in flames and they'd fled for their lives into the street.

30th and Downing was a logical place—in the scummy boho end of town, where many Liejt had apartments for mistresses or for drug parties, and near a levrail station where gravitic power was easy to steal with just an Edison tube of mercury for an antenna.

We could have had the case the day after he left. The Royal Temporal Division had measured the power draw,

mass, and cyl-enc but hadn't seen fit to tell us till we asked, and of course we hadn't asked till we detected it by our methods, which meant not until after anomalies began to accumulate and casopropagate forward around the disappearance of Peron's ballast. That was typical; RTD cops gave no cooperation to anyone, least of all us feebs.

"So," I said, "just rechecking your memory with mine; we have it that Peron had no prior record of experimenting with time machines, but given that you can make one out of three old radios and any pre-1985 ultrasonic clothes-cleaner—"

She nodded. "And he could have gotten the physics from the tweenweb—plenty of articles there. Or with his confidential background, and being from a Liejt family, good odds he's a high-level physicist or mathematician."

She turned another card. "This is the longest kinegraph of him they can find, and it's only about forty seconds. He liked tango, so he made it to most of the Argentú clubs here in town."

I watched; faces are all alike, but I remember gaits.

Peron sent his partner through a quick, neat *boleo* and led her out in a nice *cruzada*; he took good care of her axis without fussing about it, and I could tell his lead was firm and clear (letting her look good), but not very imaginative (he didn't particularly *make* her look good). "He's good," I said. "But not great."

"*You . . . dance?*" She sounded equally astonished on each word. Add one more declarative statement to things she

knew.

“Yeah. I *met* Peron; we danced in some of the same places. He was around for a while—till a few months ago, in fact.” I looked at the kinegraph more closely. “You sure can tell he’s been gone for nine months, can’t you? His face is blurring badly. I don’t really remember it well, either, but I don’t think that’s an effect of the time travel; I think I just never paid much attention to him.”

“You’d know him if you saw him again?”

“Yeah, no question. If they drop me back for an exchange, I can do it. Mention it in your daily to the FBI, but they aren’t going to want to try. My fuzzy memory is bound to be better than that kinegraph, so combust it.”

Brak. Horejsi pulled out the next card. “Peron had a lot of friends.”

“How many?”

“Forty-one identified.”

“That’s a lot for you or me, not so much for a regular social dancer.”

“Sounded like a lot.”

“Always give me the number.”

“Sorry, Rastigevat. You’re right.” She was checking me, opening apertures to see if I was upset with her, so I smiled and nodded to let her know it was okay. That was Horejsi, always worrying whether I liked her.

Better get her off that worry. I asked, “So, forty-one friends, in what kind of relationships?”

“Very casual, all of them. Hanging out, bars and movies together, that kind of thing. Nine from dancing, thirty-two from Specthink, which is a philosophy e-kiosk on tweenweb. Now his old cronies on Specthink are arguing about who he was, where he went, and so on.”

“May I look at the card?”

She handed it over. I could listen to Horejsi try to explain a table of numbers all month and not learn anything; she just didn't see numbers. If she let me look and then explain to her, we both knew a lot more.

Frequency of contact, frequency of mention, and trust in mention all showed the usual pattern after someone jumps back: His friends were talking about him less and less, being troubled by not quite remembering Old Whatsisname. In the last three months, four of them had decided he was a hoax invented by the rest of the group, and five more were sympathetic to that view. He had been the most frequently quoted member of his personal web; eighty-five percent of quotes originating with him had already been reattributed. “Popular guy,” I said. “But one of the things I like about the dance communities, you don't have to talk more than you want to, and most people prefer it if you don't get too involved with each other. And it's nice precise exercise. I love all that. So since I didn't dance with him and wasn't much of a talker, I just didn't interact with him much. The only thing I remember is that there were always people around him. I think I'd recognize him from his gait, though. If he came

back.”

“You don’t think we’ll retrieve him.”

“No way. He has almost already gotten away with it. It’s a miracle the random searches found him when they did; whatever Peron has done, it’s already melding with reality. There’s going to be uproar, I’m afraid.”

Her apertures opaqued and she rubbed the back of her head. “Shit.”

Horejsi hates uproar. Me, I barely notice it.

Six hundred years ago, in the One Great Lecture of 1403, Francis Tyrwhitt articulated the theory of indexical derivability, and after his death, his eleven students carried the work on. In 1421, a six-page calculation overthrew all of Aristotelian mechanics and Ptomelaic astronomy, and told them how to build the telescopes and chronometers with which to confirm it. In 1429, Marlow discovered the periodic table of the elements, valence, and carbon chains in his calculations in a single thick codex; Tyrwhitt’s last living student, Christopher Berkeley Maxwell, laid out the basic equations of electromagnetism in the notes found in his rooms after his death.

Indexical derivability made all things inevitable. Once you had its fourteen definitions, seven axioms, and forty-one basic theorems, from then on if you could describe what you wanted to do, it was just a matter of doing the steps, deriving the equations (or proving that no equations could be derived, which was equivalent to absolute impossibility), and then

solving them. Solving them was a bastard, of course. Newton worked all his life, without success, to unify relativity and quantum.

Then, just under two hundred years ago, Babbage saw how to use deoxyribonucleic acid to solve equations; after that, any Liejt sixteen year old, if his allowance would cover a few tubes of chemicals from the school supplies at Office Matt's plus an ordinary amino-acid sequencer from the pet store, could unify quantum physics and relativity in about three days. You still needed the occasional genius to explain what the right question was—it wasn't till Einstein that people really understood what time travel would mean or require—but once you could ask a question intelligently, it was only a matter of a few hours to learn whatever you wanted. As for building whatever you dreamed up, with such a variety of tech stuff out there, if you had a Liejt ID, you could probably get the parts from any junkyard or hobby store.

The universe still is what it is. Turns out questions like “How can I love my neighbor?” are impossible to write in a soluble form, but “How can I make a really big bomb?” and “How can I go back and change the past?” are easy—just slap it together following the directions that come out of the tube and off you go.

Luckily, by far the most common jumpers are the ones who are trying to cheat intemporia—the ones who jump back to give their earlier selves a bit of good advice or to take a different turn in the road. Too close to their departure point,

there's so little room for casopropagation that the most likely consequences are fatal accidents or little "Appointment in Samara" lessons (often both simultaneously). It doesn't matter how often people hear that the universe is *imperfectly reality-conservative, favoring whatever results in the least displacement*, in Einstein's famous formulation. All they hear is "imperfectly" and "favoring"—like the Serpent whispering *Thou shalt not surely die*.

The short-term jumpers, the ones who go back five or thirty years, all think the stochastic exceptions the universe makes will be made in their direction, and that they'll be really happy if they just try to kiss Esther, or pop Bart in the nose when he shoves them in the hall, or buy Plum Computer when it's cheap; and each short-term jumper is always the only person surprised when it turns out that actually nothing much changes even if they live and we don't catch them.

The exception to that was that Federal authorities could do a quick, simple edit, when someone crossed a boundary that must never be crossed. In such cases it worked because, honestly, if you changed people, you changed a lot of things, but if you just deleted them, generally you didn't. Most of us don't like to know how disposable we are, but there you have it. If us Feds didn't like what people were doing now, we'd eliminate them at some time back in the past, and history would close around the little space they had taken up—not "as if they had never been"—just, plain, they had never been.

Only freak-memory social isolates like me and Horejsi

would recall it. That was part of how the FBI found us. Say a Com'n boy developed a crush on his personal slave. You couldn't punish him for that; he was higher. To punish and forbid meant admitting it was possible to cross the boundary. So you made it that it never had been crossed; a Federal agent took a short hop back and the slave girl had some quick, painless accident as a small girl, and the boy's family was warned to find more appropriate slaves.

But if three weeks after she ceased to exist, the boy was asking about her, you knew you had someone who had that kind of memory; you could fix him by having him talk to a lot of people, but if he wouldn't do that, he would be either an FBI agent, or someone who needed sequestering.

There were rumors that for some cases there were many, many people who needed elimination. I had met one older agent who had once told me of having had to eliminate four generations into the past to get rid of a Diana Spencer, but he didn't say for what; I gathered it involved a Royal person, and noting that the old man telling the tale was drunk, stopped him before he said more. Shortly after that conversation, the man vanished, but perhaps he just died and I didn't hear about it. I never asked around to see if anyone remembered him.

As for me, there was a sad, soft spot in my heart for LaNella, who I think was a Free nurse I must have preferred to my own mother (so many Liejt boys do—we're too young to understand the consequences and after all we see the nurse

for hours every day, and Mama for perhaps two hours on Sunday). If it wasn't all a dream, then LaNella ceased to be while I was away at school for my first year, and when I came home at Christmas and asked for her, they took me to meet a nice man who promised I could be an FBI agent when I grew up.

So altering recent history was really nothing: the government did it all the time, whenever it was convenient. Private individuals tried it all the time, and either failed (because they didn't have the government's resources or simplicity of intention) or succeeded without changing much. It was illegal for private citizens, and they eliminated Free and Com'n people to prevent the violation's ever happening, and the fine for Liejts doing it was outrageous. But though the penalties were harsh for short-term jumps back in time, in truth there was little harm or difference made, whether we caught them or not.

There was also little harm from anyone jumping into deep history; if you leaped back and assassinated Alexander, there might be a wild divergence for as much as 200 years, but the immense, massive intemporia of the whole time stream would find its way back to its old bed, and if you went back to, say, the Younger Dryas, whatever you did would be utterly undone—paleobiological expeditions were common school projects.

But every now and then someone decided to change something in mesohistory, which meant the causal delta would

hit its maximum near the present. Whenever that happened, the first time the Federal Bureau of Isotemporality knew anything, a couple of battles had reversed their outcomes, the linguistic lines between English, Fransche, Russky, and Espano in the Armoricas have moved hundreds of miles, the Untitled States of Armorica had gained or lost ten states, and there was a Yorkist on the Confederate throne again.

The physics could have turned out worse. If the rate of casopropagation were uniform, continuous, instantaneous, *or* forward-causality conservative—any one of those properties could have done it—then after each past-changing trip, we'd instantly be in that other world, millions or billions of us would cease to exist and be replaced by someone else, everyone's new memory would conform to everyone else's, and the world would go on without even a fart in time.

Fortunately for those of us who like to go on existing, Einstein showed that casopropagation is stochastic, discrete, metatemporal, and biased toward zero change but not strictly conservative.

Mesohistorical time travelers nearly always wanted to come back to somewhere around the time they left, and the changes they made were reversible until they did, so they found a living human to be their ballast body. If you used an inert ballast body, say a load of mud from a riverbank or a fallen log from a forest, the trackers would find it right there at the place where your time machine took off, and disconnect its causal relation to you with a D&D (dispersing and

destructuring—they would blow it up, burn it, grind it up, and scatter it). You'd just have pointlessly ceased to exist.

But if your temporal field reached into the past to grab a live person, then with luck, the ballast, arriving suddenly in the future, would wander off and become hard to locate, thus ensuring that the time traveler had somewhere to return to. (Every so often someone would grab a deer; this worked as long as you could count on the deer not to get caught, and didn't mind returning to somewhere unplanned in the woods).

So Horejsi and I were supposed to find the ballast body during the interval between departure and return. Once we did, other agents would change the ballast in enough ways so that the time traveler's forward isotemporal soundings couldn't get a fix, they never came back, and the casopropagation was undone; Horejsi liked to call it the "no deposit, no return" system because that always made me have to cover my mouth and not let any hidden camera see me smile. I sometimes thought she must have some kind of death wish; of course it was fine for her to like me, but she must know how often she put herself in danger of being seen to be liked.

Anyway, finding ballasts was what we did. Once we did, regular agents moved in and did the simple grade-school science of altering the ballasts to break the connection. There are fifty or a hundred things you can do to ballasts once you find them. Some of them are even fairly humane.

"Want to try to ling him out?" I asked. "Dutch accent, odd

behaviors, arrived naked with strange injuries—is that enough for a dictionary expansion into a Dodgsonian?”

“I think so,” she said. “System up for voice.”

“Up,” Wingtoes said.

Horejsi stared at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and set her Riemann eyes on opaque; I envied her that ability, though she said it couldn't be all that different from just having eyelids. Maybe she didn't really understand that total darkness is different from a very dim red blur.

She held that deep breath, focused her tension, let the breath out, counted down slowly from ten to zero, and fell into a light, lucid trance with a soft sigh. “Dutch, Dutch Boy, Dutch Boy paints, Dutch Harbor, Dutch treat, Dutch chocolate, Amsterdam, Damn-damn-damn, Rotterdam, Hope they'll Rotterdam teeth out, dikes, boy with finger in dike, middle school boy jokes, Richard the Second, Bolingbroke, gutter, alley, Prince Hal, Hal and his pal, Hal-canal, windmills, Chaucer, Wife of Bath, need a bath, bride of Frankenstein needs a bath, mad scientist, Frank the Mad Scientist, Frank Francis Francis Tyrwhitt, Tyrwhitt To-Who a Merry Note . . .”

Her light, flat, fast-talking monotone went on, interrupted periodically by deep, slow breaths. I watched the projected image on the wall; each word or expression popped onto the screen in pale green, and a swarm of blue points—closely related words—would accrete around it like instant fungus, putting off orange shoots of exact antonyms, red coils of

strangely-attracted words, and gray filaments of etymological links. Structures accreted, stabilized, or cycled, and eventually homologies emerged in the data; the structures whirled, bounced, adhered, and merged, dragging their parent objects with them, until at last I put my hand up and said, very softly, “Wingtoes, that’s enough.”

The phrase *Wingtoes that’s enough* flickered in pale green for a moment, then disappeared, replaced by the single word COMPLETE.

I felt Horejsi move, adjusting her Riemann eyes. She sat beside me, as always too close to be polite but not close enough to clearly signal she was offering herself for sex. I had thought about what I would do if she ever moved that close, and I was afraid that someone would notice that it was not merely a Liejt making use of a Com’n co-worker; what if I really liked her and someone saw?

“Four probable synecdoches,” I said, “and one almost-catachresis. I’ll take the catachresis around and see who gloms.”

“Want company?” she asked.

“That end of town is ganged up bad. I don’t think I want to be a person with a partner looking for info. Smells like cop and cops have accidents up there.”

Horejsi nodded; I was glad she didn’t insist on coming with me. Having her along for a physical brawl would only improve my odds by about nine percent, but having the Bug-Eye Lady (as my informants tended to call her) standing

beside me would cut the chances of people telling me what they knew by about twenty-two percent.

She hugged me; I hoped it looked subservient enough to any cameras there might be, but I suppose it always had before. “Be careful,” she said.

I pushed her away gently and said, “I always am,” and did my best to keep my face flat when she smiled. It was another joke no one else got.

Four motivations account for just a shade less than sixteen out of every seventeen mesohistorical jumpers (the next better approximation is 3151 out of 3349):

- obsession with a historical question (nowadays all the photos of Praesidant Reagan’s assassination have a dozen guys in costumes of the next three centuries standing around with cameras)

- compound interest schemes (we don’t think the Stock Bubble of 1641 even existed in Original History)

- I could-have-been-a-better conqueror fantasies (the Whenness Prophylaxis Program could probably have filled a high-rise apartment block every decade with all the Hitlers and Napoleons who had to be isolated)

- serial killers (there’s a lot of history where they’re less likely to be caught).

Peron probably wasn’t any of those four. Horejsi thought she’d spotted two other categories in the residuals, and she thought Peron was what she was calling “Class Six.” If she was right, the situation was worse than it appeared. I didn’t

have any way to quantify how much worse.

“I’m looking for a guy that is probably called Dutch Lop,” I said. “Usual kind of deal, you know I’m good for the benjamins.” I flashed her five 1500-dollar bills and Pickles smiled back at the smiling Disraeli. “He might also be called Dutch Einstein or Doctor Dutch, which he probably likes better than Dutch Lop.”

Pickles didn’t bathe as much as she needed to these days, but she still dressed to give you a view of what was for sale. I sat back away from her but she edged closer. I could see her lips move while she counted one-and-a-half, three, four-and-a-half . . . She’d’ve been happy with a tenth of what I was going to pay her—the seven and a half was just to make sure she remembered the conversation.

After a minute Pickles nodded. “New guy I’ve heard of but haven’t met. Missing an ear *if I hear right*.” She giggled, or at least shook while she brought up some phlegm. “*Get it?*” She must’ve thought that was funny. “He’s the cruncher for Brock’s Geiger bank. I’ve bet four eleven forty-four with them a couple times but it’s never come up, so I know it’s bogus.”

Pickles was an informant for everyone—Police, ATF, us, No Such Agency, and all her local crime gangs, probably more I didn’t know about. What you told Pickles, you told everyone; I wanted Dutch Lop to know I was looking for him.

I had the same conversation with four similar informants

in two more bars within a decimile of Alvarez Peron's apartment. I heard, twice more, that Dutch Lop was a cruncher for Brock's Geiger bank.

A Geiger bank is just a numbers game or a bolita that gets extra cachet by using Geiger counters sitting on a block of vitrified nuclear waste to generate the digits. Weird that 4-11-44 was still a popular combo, a hundred fifty years since Sherman's bombers cratered every railroad yard from Atlanta to the sea; things *persist* in the Irish parts of town.

Anyway, it wasn't the ghetto of today, but the Bohemian cheap-rent districts of 600 years before that I should be thinking about. Southwark in 1388 had been home to a few eccentric artists and scientists, like Chaucer, Dunstaple, Leonel Power, and Tyrwhitt, a smattering of fashionable young aristocrats, and a lot of garden-variety crooks.

Given that the numbers game is old—Fibonacci mentions it in the same text where he explains Arabic numbers—no doubt there had been plenty of people who knew how to set the line in Southwark in 1388, and if one of them had been dragged forward as Peron's ballast, he'd certainly have been employable enough anywhere around that neighborhood. That much made some kind of sense.

Having sown enough word that I was looking for Dutch Lop, I headed for Brock's. Horejsi often chided me for always taking the direct approach, but I had two good reasons: It often worked and I didn't understand any others.

My phone said, "Horejsi's calling," and I said, "Accept."

In her usual tone of mild amusement, she asked, “Well, do you believe in my added categories yet?”

I smiled flatly toward my phone, tilting the screen to pick up my face, and said, “More evidence that Peron fits your category six?”

“Maybe. Back at your place in, say, an hour?”

“Sure, I don’t have any reason to hurry to the next place I’m trying.”

“See you there.” She hung up. One of a lot of things I like about Horejsi. Didn’t bother with that silly “God ble’ye” that so many people still did. Finish talking, hit the switch, like a sensible person.

I turned back to catch the Liejt-reserved levrail to my place; I’d get there before Horejsi, who had to ride the Com’n.

A whole family of people with brown skins was walking up the sidewalk. They looked exactly like the ones I had seen preserved in museums, except they wore clothes, and were talking among themselves.

With all the training, I can keep a straight face. I don’t react much to anything, anyway. Even so, this was probably the biggest challenge to my deadpan ever.

I managed. I looked at them but no more intently than an absent-minded man thinking of nothing would look, and smiled.

The grandfather of the group—there were also a mother, father, and two young children—glanced at me, smiled back,

and said, in a sort-of-Confederate accent, “Beautiful day, isn’t it? Don’t you love a sunny day in Denver?”

“I was just thinking that,” I said. “Clear and bright and not too cold.”

He nodded pleasantly, and we passed on our respective ways. I didn’t let myself run, or grab the phone, or even think too much.

That brown-skinned family had to be the biggest casopropagation anomaly I’d ever seen, and I’d seen plenty. This case must be a billion times bigger than I’d guessed.

Schrödinger’s modification to Einstein showed why, although usually changes that least altered energy, causality, or entropy propagated earliest, every so often something big popped up ahead of the small changes.

You’d expect that modern electronic stuff changes rapidly because it’s just flipping some qdots into alternate states. After that, old style electronic records change, because that takes only a few thousand electron volts per bit. Paper records might require as much as a single calorie per page, so in the fluctuations of twenty years or so, those change. Finally, gross things—changes of shipwreck locations, emptying and filling graves, shapes of furniture and buildings, placements of trees and roads—take many megajoules, or more, and change across a century, the ones least entangled with others first.

The thing that affects other things the least, and requires the most complex rewriting, is long-term memory in the brains of socially isolated people. That doesn’t change until it

has to, and ghost versions persist in a few heads until the hermit, or monk under vow of silence—or lonely oddball like me or Horejsi—finally dies.

Now don't ask me about the math. I relate to numbers, not math. I can tell you that 524,287 is a Mersenne prime because it just obviously is, but if you want me to find an eigenvector or a derivative, you'll have to send me to the tweenweb to find the guy that already did.

If you don't understand the difference between those two abilities, you wouldn't understand the math—just as I don't.

But according to Herr Doctor Schrödinger, once there's been a change in history, some changes propagate out of order and out of proportion, because the dimensions of conservation are curved and imperfectly orthogonal. (I can almost picture that in my head.) One consequence is surprising inconsistencies in the real world, during the time between the backward departure and the forward resolution, so that long before a couple million quantum computers remember all sorts of different things and frequently consulted dictionaries change the spellings of forty words, a freeway is nine yards west and was built four years earlier. Another is that huge things may change and small things remain the same; Horejsi and I both remembered a four-hour interval when Denver had been named Auraria, and been Espano speaking, but all the RTD levrails had run on the same exact schedules.

Schrödinger's equations also showed why any change,

great or small, may or may not persist when the original change is undone; as he said, once you had a cat in a box, if you eliminated its parents, then you either had no cat or a different cat that was exactly the same, and you wouldn't know till you looked. A bridge in Pittsburgh might be there intermittently for a couple of years; the statue of Athena in New York Harbor might permanently change to Dolly Madison or Elizabeth Cady Stanton; the passengers on a Frontier gravliner alighting on the concourse at Denver International might catch a glimpse of what appeared to be a Civil War-era winged rocket with Frontier markings taking off.

Those casopropagation anomalies are in proportion to the overall scale of the change that was made in the past. So whatever it was that Peron had done in 1388 in London, it had caused a kind of people who had not existed in four hundred years to appear on the street in Denver, speaking English and sounding a bit like imported Irish slaves.

One thing it meant for sure: a lot of phone calls to the FBI's Report an Anomaly line. Unless we found Dutch Lop *fast*, Horejsi and I were about to have to do an absolute mountain of paperwork.

The moment I walked in the door, I told Horejsi about seeing that brown-skinned family—*speaking English!*—on the streets of Denver. “So Peron's change was at least big enough to undo some part of the Great Erasure. No wonder the Bureau set us such a large bonus. When they tried to measure

significance, the isotemporal estimating engine must have spun till the needle broke,” I finished.

Even Horejsi, with not a digit or an equation in her head, was gaping. “I think,” she said, after a bit, “we’d better get over to that Geiger bank, and see what we can find. I don’t think we have any time to spare, so I’d better come along, even if some of your informants are scared of the Bug-Eye Lady.”

“They can’t be any more scared than I am right now,” I said.

We talked on the train, just the usual sort of thing we’d talk about on a case, I guess because the *unusual* stuff about this case scared the crap out of us.

It was Christmas shopping season, and the Com’n levrail was jammed. Just to get privacy, we had to spend some extra expense account money for a compartment. Even though with the window dimmed, we didn’t need the cover of pretending to be a couple, Horejsi slid around to sit closer to me on the bench seat than was polite; I could have put an arm around her. Of course I was Liejt and she was Com’n; that would mean her vanishing. Even a person as socially isolated as I was couldn’t forget that. But I kept noticing how easily my arm would have gone around her.

They recruited people like me and Horejsi for our freak memories and social isolation. If the last two digits in the GDP of the Untitled States of Armorica reversed, I’d notice that the book was now “wrong,” and if the Third Rogue’s Speech in

Love's Labours' Won changed “thou'st'll” to “you'll've,” Horejsi would pick it up. She'd already been most of the way through Chaucer, the writer nearest to the change point that she had in memory, and said all she noticed was “just three little changes, the kind of collateral connections you get because some printer's apprentice died in childbirth and her replacement made an alternate typo. Which reminds me of a weird thing—I scanned the list of all the printer's apprentices in the *Registry of Known Persons for London 1300-1399 Third Edition* and it was just like I remembered, but in *Registry of Known Persons for London 1400-1499 Second Edition Revised* all the girls' names had disappeared.”

“Maybe they had a fad for naming girls after boys?” I suggested.

“*All* of them? There's no such thing as a one hundred percent fad in baby names. And there were plenty of girls in several other crafts. So our boy did something to the printing industry.” Horejsi sounded pissed off.

The train glided into the big shopping center they have south of downtown these days—I remember when it appeared there, some guy named Varian who had jumped back to try to tell Mussolini to break away from Hitler and kick out the Pope. It took us forever to find Varian's ballast because it was a pretty girl who only spoke Neolatin. It turned out that one of the Free Irish gangs found her when she first appeared in Varian's neighborhood, enslaved her, and sold her south to Mexespana. “This wasn't a bad shopping center to get out of

the deal, as long as we had to fail on a case,” I said. “Lots of jobs and it’s kind of pretty.”

Horejsi’s apertures focused on me. My as-usual-lame attempt at small talk had only pissed her off more. “It was hard on that poor girl. Let’s not have too many failures if we can help it. Anyway, I think the London registry anomaly shows us that whatever Peron is doing to make a mess of the past, it’s pretty bad.”

She got mad whenever a case involved gender. I’d probably made her madder by bringing up the Varian case, because so much awful shit had happened to the ballast girl.

I grasped her arm and pointed as I turned left down the next sidewalk, to remind her we were going to the levrail station on the north side of the center; since we were in public it was important that there be no affection in it, and I’m sure I was careful. Nevertheless, she curled her arm upward and brought my hand into hers. This was all right, too; we did it often when pretending to be a couple, and the FBI said it was fine as long as I didn’t initiate. I didn’t know why we’d need a cover. Maybe she just wanted to hold hands. That was all right with me.

“This case is beginning to scare the shit out of me,” she said.

Mad, then scared, liked to hold hands to feel better afterwards. I filed that under the mental heading of “understanding Horejsi.” Long ago I had noticed she liked being understood.

We had some time before the next train, so we walked slowly through the fake Victorian shops, or “shoppes” as most of them insisted on being spelled. A lot of the shops had dressed their Irish in old time costumes, so there were bonnets and top hats and so forth everywhere in the glaring winter sun, and every other vendor selling indulgences or bratwurst was dressed like one of Santa’s leprechauns. It was a little creepy, I thought; I could remember when I was a kid, leprechauns had been entirely monsters that the slaves might conjure up to turn loose on us, but something had slipped or come undone somewhere in time, since then, and there was now a tradition of bad monster leprechauns and good obedient leprechauns.

“Do you remember when leprechauns were all bad?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” Horejsi said. “That was the thing that changed my whole life. When I was nineteen, I was babysitting for a rich family, reading a story to the kids, and one day, in exactly the same old dog-eared ruin of a book I’d read to them a dozen times, Willy Wonka had good leprechauns working in the chocolate factory. I told my mother about it, and she turned me in to the cops.”

“And then *they* turned *you* into a cop.”

“Yeah.” She made her smile-grimace; I guess she liked my joke. Maybe that was why she squeezed my arm tighter.

“Christmas is pretty. I hope nothing ever happens to change it.” I could tell she was happy, maybe about the decorations?

Didn't people usually say that at night instead of in bright sun?

Aside from our freak memories, the FBI used us because we didn't relate to people much. Interacting with the ballast jumpers barely changed us and anyway it wouldn't matter because we interacted so little with other people. Horejsi and me, we're like "people without souls," that's what it said when I hacked in to read the documentation about ballast hunters.

What the hell. I liked the job. It was rarely dull, it used many of my skills, and it had made me a rich man, rich even beyond my Liejt allowance. And if we didn't have souls, Horejsi and I still had some fun and were company for each other, now and then.

We got on the Com'n northbound that would take us to the slums east of downtown, and took another private compartment. It would be fifteen minutes before the train actually moved, but we had more than enough things to talk about in the privacy of the compartment.

It was always possible that Dutch Lop would be at Brock's Geiger bank, and talk to us. Naturally we hoped so, but it didn't seem likely. When the ballasts had been living rough on the street, they were often cooperative, but if he was the cruncher at Brock's, he wasn't poor, and he had some kind of a life he might be attached to.

I brought that up to Horejsi and she touched my hand—she was still sitting very close—and said, "Whose favorite phrase is 'theorizing in advance of data'?"

It took me a moment to get it. “Mine,” I admitted.

“Well?”

“Yeah.” She made that weird grimace she does instead of a grin; another thing Horejsi likes is being right.

We talked through a review of what we knew. “How bad was the weather this spring?” Horejsi asked. “I never remember weather.”

“Three spring blizzards after his date of arrival, and that bad cold snap we had in late March—it was minus seven Celsius on March 28 and minus three on March 29.”

She nodded, letting apertures open all over the spheres of her eyes, taking in all of the nice, crisp December day through the big window, as the train lifted off and glided through the downtown. “Then definitely, he found friends and shelter of some kind, right away, and something fed him,” she said. “No true isolation possible.”

The trick with breaking the causality between the traveler and his ballast was to grab and de-link the ballast as early as possible; create a situation in which the easiest Inconsistency Principle resolution would be that the ballast had always existed in our world and the time traveler had not. Then intemporia would take over and work on our side, erasing most of the changes. But for best effect, we had to de-link them early.

This one wouldn't be early.

Of course you could also deal with human ballast the way we dealt with ballasts of mud or logs or deer; scramble it,

chemically treat it, and scatter it. Most ballast hunters just didn't *like* luring or kidnapping people to have them ground to bits and vaporized. Horejsi and I had occasionally muttered a suspicion to each other—that the Whenness Prophylaxis Program was just a preliminary step to make us investigators more comfortable, and that as soon as we were off the case, the ballast ended up as extremely overcooked sausage. I shuddered.

“Cold?” Horejsi asked.

“No, just thinking of something grim.”

“That family you saw means this is something huge,” she said, “and the bonus the FBI set makes a lot more sense now.”

We both knew that, but maybe it was comforting for her to keep saying things we both knew.

We got off at the Welton Station, and paused to let a Liejt levrail shoot by us, the D line, hurrying down Welton to Smallville. I wondered if the world would still be there when they got there, or if they'd still be the same people. It gave me the creeps.

Horejsi's hand was on my arm again. I covered it with my other hand, to keep it there, because it felt kind of good.

It was still bright and sunny but the wind was picking up in a way that could feel like a nail driven up my nose, and the dry cold air seemed to tear at my skin. The Christmas wreaths and banners on the lampposts whipped and slapped alarmingly; I felt sorry for the poor Irish slaves who had had

to put them up.

Changing the subject, she asked, “How many disturbances do you know about so far?” She kept her hand on my arm. I was grateful.

“A lot of statistics aren’t what they used to be,” I said. “Baseball looks like it’s more fun—scores are higher, all the statistics about stealing home from fourth base vanished, and teams are nine players instead of eleven—center and right shortstop are combined, and there’s no wing fielder.”

“And this is interesting because—”

“Enormous number of public stadiums built to a different design, enormous number of records altered, lots of very public lives altered, and not in a way that maps one to one. Economics is pretty much the same—three of the main estimating components of the Gross Dominion Product are gone, replaced by something called ‘foreign trade,’ but that looks more like a change of bookkeeping. But the census tabulation changed drastically for the last hundred years, and the date when they started mining coal up in the high country is one hundred four years later.”

Horejsi whistled. “Those are some big mass-time changes. Which fits with that . . . anomaly . . . you saw.”

“Brown-skinned people wouldn’t use as much coal?” I asked, puzzled by what she meant.

“No, silly, I mean the change of skills.” She nodded at the Irishmen walking on the street-side sidewalk ahead of us; each was carrying home his coal ration and his little Thermos of

LOX for his Franklin stove. “I’m sure any Irishmen that the brown-skinned people owned would use as much coal as anyone else. It’s just—their existence—the scale of that change . . . well, it’s consistent with changes as big as the ones you describe. That’s what I mean.” She sighed and rubbed her hand gently up and down my arm, brushing my coat sleeve and pressing a knuckle hard enough for me to feel it in my muscles. “Rastigevat, there were some big physical things in the last few hours. I-70 jumped down to Albuquerque, then up to Cheyenne and for a while ran along the path of US-50, yesterday, so we had a large number of lost and angry truckers and some cargoes just gone. About seventy of those weird little passenger-only trucks that show up sometimes during anomalies drove into Pueblo over the temporary I-70; most of the people who arrived in them are acquiring new memories right now, though a few have just vanished. Three whole train cars of Irish that were going to be put to work in Aspen for the holidays are just gone, along with all their titles and registration. And what that I in I-70 stands for changes from Intergovernmental to Interim to Imperial and back to Interstate all the time.”

“Where was Denver when I-70 jumped?” I asked.

“Do you remember what we were doing yesterday?”

I thought for a moment. “Is today Tuesday?”

“Thursday.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. It’s a *big* mess, Rastigevat. Huge cultural changes

too—the name of this continent keeps fluctuating between Armorica, Amoriga, and Amocira, and every so often turning back into New Armorica, which is what they called it right after the airships found it and the Great Erasure started. Twice it has wavered into New Arimathea, which I guess means a more religious trend somewhere in the past, and once it was North Arimacha, which I don't get at all. Three changes in Chaucer, thousands of different names in the London Registries, renamed ships with drastically different names in standard histories of England and the Untitled States, the Enlightenment 150 years later and all of history since then compressed to fit.

“Also, and don't laugh at me for noticing—”

“I never do,” I said. Actually I never laugh.

“I know and I appreciate that.” She squeezed my arm.

“Anyway, there were several new authors added to the catalogs in the mid-nineteenth century. *That* one is okay with me; it looks like Peron undid Perkins's permanent damage, so we have Samuel Clemens back. Even so, it looks like this time he was writing under a pseudonym, Mark Thrine, and I'm guessing from the title in the public library catalog that *The True and Romantic Career of Becky Thatcher* has been replaced by a novel about her boyfriend, Tom Sawyer, and there's some kind of sequel about a minor character from that book, Irish Jim. I kind of hope we get to keep Clemens's books—I remember liking them as a child.”

I had never gotten why people liked to read made-up

stuff; it seemed to me it was bound to clutter your memory, keeping track of what was true and what wasn't. But I could appreciate that Horejsi liked it. I rested my hand on hers, on my arm. "This stuff would all be so fun and exciting if it weren't for the whole world disappearing."

"You're always my man for perspective, Rastigevat." She made that smile-grimace again.

Even if they're sort of acting like a normal couple, two people who radiate "cop," one of them with Riemann eyes, don't easily walk into a Geiger bank. Not that Brock's people would be dumb enough to try to keep us out, but there was probably a pretty funny scene out back in the alley as people poured out the door and fell all over each other. Anyway, it was calm enough inside as we walked up to the young girl at the counter.

I ignored the clicking Geiger counters and their rolling digit displays. "We need to speak to Dutch Lop. Official business."

"I—" the girl flushed deeply, her pale skin going as red as her hair. No collar tattoo, so she was freeborn, but as everyone says, it takes generations to get the slave out of the Irish, and the sight of authority just paralyzes some of them, especially in this part of town. "Um. I do'na'f'he be—"

"It's all right, Brighd." The accent did sound Dutch, but he pronounced that funny Irish gulp at the end of her name perfectly. The man who limped out to greet us was missing one ear and had an odd hairless scar on the top of his head. It

looked like the cylinder of enclosure had been a bit tight, or he'd been moving, because the hand that reached out to shake mine was missing half a thumb.

He was in his early twenties, and his wide-set eyes and square jaw couldn't have been more relaxed, confident, and utterly in charge if he'd been Liejt and expecting us to deliver a pizza. I don't respond to faces much, but I liked the asymmetric shock of black hair around the scar, the big toothy grin, and the twinkling almost-black eyes under the thick brow. "I had thought you might be here sooner," he said, speaking a trifle slowly, "but it is good you are here now."

Horejsi suddenly froze like a squirrel on a levrail track, and opened so many apertures so wide that the spheres of her Riemann eyes were blotched with black dots the size of quarters. After a moment, she let her breath out and said, "It's an honor to meet you."

I looked back and forth, and then she explained. "Mr. Rastigevat, this is Francis Tyrwhitt."

"Frank," he said. "They call me Frank here, at least to my face. I prefer it to Dutch Lop, if I may be Frank with you."

I couldn't help grinning; puns are one of the few kinds of joke I get, and Horejsi snorted and made her smile-grimace.

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" she asked.

"There is," he said. "Will you let Leo pat you down for weapons, please?"

"Of course," I said. "There's something in my left sock, one in the coat pocket, and something back between my

shoulder blades.”

I had expected that Leo would be some immense, hulking goon, but he turned out to be a short, bony, big-jawed, freckled Irish boy, maybe fourteen years old, with the fresh scars from manumission around his neck, all big feet and hands and loose gangle.

Nonetheless he was a pretty good frisker, getting everything I had mentioned right away, and finding two of my three spares as well. He flushed red-bordering-on-purple as he searched Horejsi, but did an equally good job on her. When he had finished and nodded, Tyrwhitt touched him lightly on the shoulder, and Leo grinned like he'd won the lottery.

Tyrwhitt's office was surprisingly luxurious—the surprise was not that it had obviously been expensive (you expect that with anything connected with organized crime), but the type of luxury it radiated. The room looked much more like the comfortable working den of a Liejt software developer or investment broker than the sort of medium-level organized crime boss office I'd been expecting. There was no gaudy, kitschy art; no visible gold or drug paraphernalia; only a standard wall projector, not one of the pricey monstrosities. He had gone for solid, practical, but not brand-name furniture. Nothing here would violate the Sumptuary Act, and if this place were ever busted in the media, there wouldn't be much of the usual sneering and tsking about Liejt goods in a slum apartment.

He gestured to a cluster of warm leather-covered seats by

a small gas fire, and said, “Well, let me pretend to be a conventional host for conventional guests. Would you like coffee, whiskey, anything?”

“How about coffee officially, and a splash of whiskey that just sort of happened?” Horejsi said. Her hand stroked my arm; I wasn’t sure what this was about, but I said, “Same for me.” There’s no rule about accepting food or drink from suspects; usually we like to stay sharp and avoid the possibility of being dosed, but sometimes not insulting hospitality is more important. I have no sense of that; maybe she was just cueing me in?

Tyrwhitt spoke an order into the air, and before we had quite settled onto the couch, Brighd came in with our drinks. When we had all pledged the Creator and taken a first appreciative sip of the good warm stuff, Tyrwhitt said, “All right, let me begin by saying I will be happy to consent to being disconnected from Alvarez Peron—in fact he intends that I should be—but the reason why I am utterly willing to cooperate is one your superiors will not like.”

“Well, when the ballast is cooperative, we’re mostly just the go-betweens anyway,” I said, “so why don’t you just explain it to us, Mr. Tyrwhitt—”

“Frank.”

“All right, Frank, just tell us what you want us to tell them, and we can proceed from there.”

He did, and bizarre as some of the stories we had heard had been, his was right off the scale. If I were trying to attach

a number to how different it was, I'd say, roughly, that on a scale of weirdness-by-ballasts of one to ten, Frank Tyrwhitt was equal to the resultant vector of an isosceles triangle, $e+i$, and Wednesday.

“It's the Creator's sense of humor to weave the good and the bad together so tightly, I suppose. Time is *one*, and that is sad, but so is memory, and that is a blessing,” Tyrwhitt said. “There's your problem, your opportunity, and what you need to do with me—if you're smart.”

Horejsi, next to me on the couch—stroking my arm, which I found a little distracting—said, “You mean time is all one thing—”

“I mean that experience and theory both show there's only one world, and only one timeline, we don't get to do everything, there's no ‘out there,’ no cross-time or ‘otherwhen,’ in which things went differently,” Tyrwhitt said. “Which means we have to make the hard choice of what world to have, and there's no compensating for that by telling ourselves that, well, things didn't turn out so well in this version of time, but in the universe next door things are doubtless peachy—gloriously exciting or beautifully serene or whatever it is you personally favor—and the only real tragedy is that some of us have to live in the timelines that did not work out as well. Believing *that* would be a comforting escape, but it's just not so. *This* is the world there is, and things are just done or undone and that's all there is to it. There's not a world out there where I didn't come forward in

time; this is all there is. And that's sad, because it means that not only can *we* not have everything, even the whole universe can't. Time is one, eh?"

"And memory is one," I said, seeing his point, "and that means that whatever there was, we get to keep it—as long as everyone and everything gets to keep it . . . yes, I see what you mean. It does seem very fair. Fairer than, maybe, anything else I've ever heard of."

"And it's all there is, anyway," Horejsi added. "Time is one. All right. I bet you've been rehearsing that speech a long time, Frank."

"Since about my fourth day up here in 2014," Tyrwhitt agreed. "Here's what happened; you may judge for yourself—in fact, I know good and well you will judge for yourself."

Tyrwhitt had been soundly asleep in his rented room above an ordinary in Southwark. He felt a disconcerting lurch, and sat up in a strange room where light came from the ceiling. In strangely accented English, a voice told him to check in the large mirror to his right to see where he had been injured, and that on the table to his left there were things to dress and bind his wounds.

The capital Roman letters on what he now knew had been a military medkit made some sense; the artificial lights in the ceiling that were neither flames nor skylights were odd.

Following the directions of the friendly disembodied voice, he carefully stayed on the ground cloth on the floor as he applied the 3S strips to his ear, to the sliced-away area on

his hairline just above his forehead, and to the stumps of his right thumb and left ring and little fingers. He was amazed at how little pain he felt.

“Most ballasts *are* amazed by that,” Horejsi told him. “A nerve that just ceases to exist at a point, with no shredding or other damage, just doesn’t hurt much.”

He nodded. “I suspect that if I had contemplated any larger matter, I would have had to doubt my sanity; painless instantaneous amputation, and strangely effective wound dressings, were marvels within my scope of admiration, and most of what I woke to find around me was, at that moment, simply utterly beyond me.”

The little discomfort ceased as the 3S strips gripped his flesh. The voice directed him to warm food on a sideboard, with more available in the strangely cold box, which he was to keep closed. It guided him through the other necessities, then asked him to take a seat on a couch. The lights in the room dimmed, and an illusion of Alvarez Peron appeared on the wall, and began to talk to Tyrwhitt.

Horejsi and I had deduced that Peron was a Liejt scientist from a defense project, but we hadn’t realized quite how high a level. It fit—everything else about this case was extreme.

Knowing that he had one of the five or ten greatest minds in the whole history of the world on the receiving side, Peron had begun by giving a two-hour lesson in the theory of indexical derivability; Tyrwhitt, just twenty-two years old in experience, had absorbed what would have been his life’s

work all but instantly. The artificial voice then showed him how to access the tweenweb and gave him a short list of things he was certain to need to know within one week, which was the time Peron had estimated Tyrwhitt could depend on before needing to relocate.

By the time that Tyrwhitt walked out of the apartment and up the street to meet with Gerry Brock, he spoke and understood modern English passably for everyday purposes, and he had a basic understanding of where and when he was, and of why Peron had swapped places with him. Brock had lived up to his contract with Peron, supplying a hiding place and facilities at first, in exchange for Tyrwhitt writing the software for the ultimate Geiger bank. He had wanted to keep Tyrwhitt hidden for as long as possible, but Peron's instructions had been explicit. Reluctantly, Brock had said that, well, he was already rich, and apparently the universe had decided that rather than get still richer, he would be a minor character in an important piece of history.

“You have to understand,” Tyrwhitt added, “that there was no question of not following Peron's wishes about what I should do up at this end of the time divide. He knew what he was doing, and once I fully understood what that was, I was in full agreement. Nor do I doubt what he has in mind will work. Admitting that I am rather a talented person, I am a pretty good judge of talent in my own field—and Peron, whatever his real name may have been, was a talent on par with myself, or with Newton or Babbage if you prefer.”

“So why did he switch places with you?” Horejsi asked.

“So that I would not give the world indexical derivability in the Year of Grace 1403,” Tyrwhitt said. “And then to make sure that the zero-change bias would not force indexical derivability to come into history by some other path, he also eliminated the eleven students that carried the work forward after my death in 1406.”

“Eliminated—” I began, and felt the fuzziness in my head; I suddenly found the images of pages from my schoolbooks were becoming fuzzy, that some of the science lectures I had attended in college were . . .

“My dear sweet Jesus,” Horejsi said. “And he must have done it in the first few days he was there. That’s why he went to 1388, in May. He needed all eleven of them to have been born—so he could kill them all. Maxwell would have been just a few weeks old—”

I knew Maxwell’s equations, and suddenly I could not remember the second digit of the Year of Grace when they had been published; it formed a blur, Year of Grace One Blur Sixty-Five. “I can’t remember all of the old school rhyme for the eleven, either,” I said.

*“Thomson, Carnot, DeGrasse, and Barlow;
Someone, someone, Ampirre, and Marlow;
Abelsmythe and Voltman, and—and—”*

I could not remember any more of it.

“Blake was hung . . . ”

“Maxwell who was very young,” Horejsi finished. “And

the first ‘someone’ you mentioned was Paschalle, but now I can’t think of the second, and I’m already forgetting parts of the rhyme myself. In 1388, the oldest was—someone—”

“Dryburn,” I said. “The only one older than Tyrwhitt himself—”

“And the only one I knew in 1388,” Tyrwhitt said. “I thought he was an arrogant asshole, actually, but the only person I could really talk math with. And it’s rather sad because they were bright, talented people, and probably without the original discovery and my teaching, they’d just have been smart people who went on to obscure careers, but Peron didn’t want to take any chances. With the tools and compounds he took back in his kit, probably none of the deaths looked like a murder, either, at least not to a fourteenth-century coroner.” He sighed, swirled his hot coffee and whiskey mix, and took another sip. “Still, murder does stick in the craw, doesn’t it? *Especially* murdering someone for having brains and talent; even more especially, men who apparently would have been my closest friends. So I know something of a whole other life that didn’t happen for me, and I don’t know quite how to feel about that.”

“It’s your life,” I said slowly, “but it’s our world. So we’re in process of vanishing or at least transforming. I can feel some sympathy for you, but what about us?”

“Bear with me for a moment. I claim the privilege of explaining myself because you will have to understand, if you decide you want to undo what Peron has done.”

“If we decide. *If?*” Horejsi sounded outraged. “Our *job* is to—”

“Just so. My own sense of—well, ethics I suspect?—thinks you should have a chance to do your job.”

I was hopelessly confused; he sounded like he was defying us, and turning Peron and himself in, and playing some obscure game to delay us, and asking for our help—all at once. “Perhaps,” I said, “We don’t have much choice except to let you tell us in your own way.”

“Perhaps that is true. I dislike presenting a choice so bluntly. It seems rude.” He watched the coffee swirl in his cup as if it were a crystal ball, and Horejsi and I sat still as stones until he went on. “Anyway, I’ve been over the databases and through the libraries, and all of the eleven are gone wherever I look, now. The Inconsistency Principle is kicking in fast and hard, and I’ve been helping it along by sending out random e-mails, getting people to look for those names—sweepstakes contests, questions to librarians, that sort of thing. You’re probably among the last five percent or so of people who remember them.”

“Then we’re too late,” Horejsi said. “Peron has erased the whole modern world, and we’re—well, I suppose we’re already not who we were, and about to either cease to be or be someone else.” She rested her hand on my arm; I put my hand on hers.

“There’s a great deal more casopropagation still to happen,” Tyrwhitt said, “and I suppose you and your bosses

can still do a great deal to undo it, if you choose to tell them what I am about to tell you. If they jump an agent back to take my place in my bed, for example, and position another one to kill Peron on arrival, it might still all be undone.

“But they would have to decide to do it right away—and I’m quite sure they won’t make that decision at once, unless you contact them almost right away, shout at them to do it now, and one way or another shake them into it. That’s your decision: to try to get through to them, or to just let things happen as they’re happening. Hear me out, and decide. After all, Mr. Rastigevat, as you say, it was my decision, but it is your world. You get to decide which one you will be retaining.

“So what I propose is that I will explain why Peron did it, and why I have chosen to enlist on his side in this conflict, and finally ask you not to interfere—but I will give you the chance to interfere. You will be able to walk right out of here and call FBI headquarters. I won’t stop you if you choose to do that.”

“Why not?” I asked. “You have told us several times you approve of whatever it is Peron is trying to do.” Truly, I thought it might already be too late. It’s an endless source of frustration to FBI field agents that the desk never authorizes anything soon enough to do any good. “So . . . why would you let us walk out of here, call our superiors, and fight for a crisis mission to stop you?”

“My peculiar taste, I suppose.” He sighed, and looked

from one of us to the other. “It is only that . . . well. There is an idea that interests me, the idea of consent. I suppose you might say it’s one of those things that mathematicians love, taking concepts like ‘obvious,’ ‘hard,’ or ‘complex,’ and making them precise. I am interested in the idea of having someone consent to this—actually in following up on Peron’s idea about it, which I think was right.”

“Peron got someone’s consent to end the world?” Horejsi asked. “Whose? How could he possibly—”

“I think Peron made an astonishing and correct judgment about what needed to be done, and why. To carry out his judgment, he performed a more or less permanent kidnapping, and a variety of other crimes against me, but he ultimately depended on my consenting to cooperate; if his recordings had not persuaded me that what he was doing was right, his scheme would have unraveled.”

“Did the eleven consent to be killed?” I asked. “Did they agree never to be the brilliant, admired people they would have been?”

“They did not. And that is another part of my evidence in reasoning about all of this, you see. The whole thing is made the more confusing, of course, because I am a superb mathematician, but not necessarily any more ethical than any of the rest of you. So I’m quite sure of my reasoning, and not the least bit sure about my premises. Nonetheless, I find I admire what Peron did and how he chose to do it, and so, as far as my understanding reaches, I intend to try to do

likewise.” He rose and added coffee and liquor to our cups, without asking. Neither Horejsi nor I objected; for myself, I can say that I probably needed all the warmth I could get. “He chose a way that required the consent of *one* person who would be utterly changed—me. His way of doing things required that I consent to be someone utterly different from the person I would have been. To coin a phrase, you might call me an extremely representative sample.”

“You’ve read Gödel about random numbers,” I said. “But doesn’t indexical derivability show there’s no true randomness, only chaos and complexity?”

“Imagine,” he said, “a world where the sciences had to develop without indexical derivability—one where the sciences were based on setting up repeated tests of physical, chemical, and biological processes, or observing the world. And without the eleventh and fourteenth theorems, you’d never know about the complectisons, so you wouldn’t be able to study those functions effectively. The numbers might as well have a random component for all you knew, and you’d have to use Gödelian statistics. Probably it would have developed a lot earlier. You see what a different world we are thinking of launching?”

“We’re not, you are,” Horejsi said firmly. “I have no idea what either of you have been talking about, but I gather that somehow you think the consent of two of us is the same thing as the consent of a billion people.”

“Half the people on Earth are slaves, and you know the

market is always booming in ways to prevent suicide. What if I decided to obtain their consent?”

That one kind of froze me. Officially I knew slaves couldn't consent to anything; that was basic law. But what if the change of history made a slave Free—or even Com'n, or Liejt while we're at it? Wouldn't he surely consent retroactively?

I could see how Tyrwhitt had been seduced into thinking about this problem. The math was fascinating. I wanted to spend hours just talking about that, but Horejsi had that strange *I am about to inexplicably explode* expression she often got, right when the math was really interesting, so it didn't seem like a good idea.

“So why not two people, one Com'n and one Liejt, both intimately involved with the case already? Who could I ask otherwise? Everyone? And how would we put their answers together? I suppose we could gather their answers—here, in the Year of Grace 2014, with the forty-third Lancaster on the throne of the world, I have at hand a communication system that would allow me to call the whole almost-one-billion Christian beings on all the continents, every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve, Liejt or Com'n, slave or Free, Espano, Russky, Fransche, English, and all the minor nations as well. I could use that marvelous communication system to call every one of them and ask, ‘Would you like to vanish or be someone else utterly, because the world that would come into being would be, in ways that might or might not make any

sense to you, better than the one we live in now?’ I also have no doubt, speaking as a mathematician, that I could devise some ingenious way of putting all their expressed thoughts, fears, and hopes together into one common thought, as the parliament has sometimes essayed to do, and as the Athenians and Romans are alleged to have done; perhaps something as simple as the casting of a verdict as is done with a jury. Yet somehow that revolts me; I do not think a verdict is made better by the number of hands raised to make it—that seems an idea that could easily become a snare for the half-witted. The decision of one, or a few, reasonably wise, merciful, and kind people, it seems to me, is better than that of a billion indifferent.

“So I have chosen to follow the model that Alvarez Peron has shown me. I was called to stand in for everyone of my time, and all the ones to come after, and given no choice about having the choice; he said, ‘These are my reasons, choose,’ and I chose.

“Part of what I chose is to pass a part of the choice on to you. We are in the last days or weeks of your possible consent. If you do not choose, what I have done will stand; or you may assent in full and say, let it stand; or—if you choose otherwise—you may try to stop me, and we shall contend and see who is the stronger. But I am offering you two people—and *only* you two people—a chance, and just a chance, to try to undo my choice, because you are concerned in it. You stand in for all the people who are about to have never

existed, or to be someone else entirely; I will tell you what will be gained if you choose to vanish in those ways, and you will decide if it is worth it.”

“By deciding to die?” Horejsi asked.

“No, not to die,” I said. I could see at once that was one of those times when words just make a muddle of things, because they combine so many meanings that are logically separate, and she was a creature of words. “Once a soul has come to exist, it has no exit from existence but to die, but when souls abruptly have never existed, nothing experiences the death. So he’s offering us the chance to try to be what exists after it all damps back down; and since there is only one time, at any given moment we’ll exist or not, but we won’t cross over—that is, die—between existing and not existing.” I looked to see if she got it, and what she might be feeling about it if she did; I was the only person who could read her facial expressions, but she was really the one of us who understood all this human-feelings stuff, and it just seemed to me that if Tyrwhitt wanted us to consent (or not), it had to be a matter of how the Christian souls of the Earth ought to feel about it, or not—which was more her department than mine.

Her head was turned at an angle to get her ear, not her eyes, pointed at me; her Riemann eyes were gone, and she wore dark glasses to hide whatever functionless eyes she did have. A big dog on a harness sat beside her. I knew in a moment I would not remember the name “Riemann.”

No, of course I would—it was the name of the dog.

“I have been blind from birth, Rastigevat,” she said, “and yet, I have the dearest, sweetest memory of what your face looks like when you’re sad, or make one of your terrible jokes, or worry about me. And I try to hold onto it, recall it more strongly, and it slips away. Is that what it will be like for everyone?”

“Probably,” I said.

“Then, Magister Tyrwhitt,” she said, “how can you ask us to give all this up? And how did Peron persuade you that you should?”

Tyrwhitt sighed, and said, “This will be more difficult than I had thought, and I had not thought it would be easy.” He held his breath for a moment, unconsciously stroking the stump of his thumb, and finally went on. “The man we all know as Peron—how strange to think that the real name of a man of his gifts will be lost forever—had taken the step that Einstein, Copland, and Turing all struggled all their lives to achieve. Peron finally united matter and meaning in a single theory, and using that theory he could meaningfully measure meaningfulness itself—know how much meaning there was within our event horizon, as well as how much meaning there had been, and how much there could be. I can tell already, Mr. Rastigevat, that your training in the physical sciences and logic is fading from your memory, and you will not retain the ideas you need to understand me much longer; so do not object, as it will only cost time.

“At root, things and ideas are one; meaning in the soul

and causality in the universe are one. Peron cracked this impossible nut—if I remain here and live long enough, I may just barely reach the point he reached, but I doubt I shall have anyone I can teach it to. And what he found was that Christian Europe had made a terrible mistake; when Henry VI of England became Henry I of the World, and decreed that ‘all the world shall be under the Pope or under the ground,’ and his airships went forth in the Great Erasure, to make an empty world for the Christians of Europe to grow into . . . he was only doing what any other civilization of his time might have done . . . he felt no wickedness, saw no reason to think anything of it. A few thousand preserved bodies in barrels of formaldehyde, and because of Maxwell’s pleas, the largely unreadable books of such peoples as had books, was not only all that was saved but all he could have imagined wanting to save.”

Horejsi seemed to draw herself up defensively, and said, “The Caliph, or the Sultan, or the Emperors in Peking, Timbuktu, or Cuzco, would have made some similar decision.”

“They would. If indexical derivability was found early enough, the culture that found it would make an empty world for itself. That was fated, I agree.” Tyrwhitt raised his hands, not remembering that due to casopropagation, she could not see the gesture now; I myself tried to hang onto the name of those immense, ball-like eyes that once graced her face, and with which she had seen me—Riemann stirred uneasily and

sadly. He was an old dog, always at her side since I had met her at the FBI Academy, and now his bones were uneasy and never quite comfortable.

“So,” Tyrwhitt said, “Peron discovered that the Great Erasure reduced the amount of meaning in the world to very nearly nothing, at least compared to what it might have been. You people in your pointless world understand each other perfectly, for the meanest slave in the Antarctic coal mines has more in common with the Emperor in Nice than two sailors on the waterfront had in common in my time. You can travel along any line around the whole world and find not one surprise. You fight wars in order to run a death toll large enough to reshape populations, with great efficiency in death but no more passion than boys of my time put into a game of football. I have seen the recordings of your Nuremberg trials, and the judges shaking hands with the accused, and finding that Europe had been suitably reduced; I have cracked into the Imperial records to see the decisions for the famines and the massacres to hold the population at what the Emperor thinks tolerable levels. Even you, Mr. Rastigevat, saw something recently that heralded the end of the world, and though you wanted the comfort of your friend’s presence, you were more worried, were you not, about the reports you might have to write?”

“That,” I said, “and because if I rushed to her, someone might realize I was emotionally attached to her. She could be executed for that. But how did you know? You must have

been watching me—”

“I was. I have been for some time. Like most Liejt, you were raised never to be aware of a slave; thus an adroit slave, such as Leo, can tail you with no fear of detection. I should not have been able to do that with Ms. Horejsi, because despite generations of genetic research, your strange little rump of a culture has not managed to produce a class-conscious dog.”

I felt as if he’d pried up a carefully nailed down part of my soul and shone a light in, revealing little white things that smelled bad and squirmed.

“And if we do nothing?” I asked.

“Indexical derivability will probably remain undiscovered by any civilization—until I give it to the world after the changes have settled down. Another bit of freedom I believe in, you see. Humans *should* have the power to use it; all I ask is that they should first become wise enough not to rashly erase the meaning from the world.”

“Is meaning such a good thing?” Horejsi asked.

He shrugged. “Is being?”

“You are asking me to give up mine.”

“True.”

Horejsi rose. “Rastigevat, I think we’ve heard enough. Let’s find out if he means what he says.”

Tyrwhitt didn’t stop us from leaving, so I guess he meant what he said. I wondered how long before our choice would be meaningless. I wondered why she hadn’t called the FBI on

her cell phone from Tyrwhitt's office, and then found myself thinking, *I remember when there were cell phones.*

“Keep looking for a phone booth,” she said. “God alone knows whether we have any time left at all.” Her arm wrapped tightly around mine—it had recently been a strange and marvelous sensation, something which I had just begun to enjoy, but in a day, a week, or a month her hand on my arm would always have been merely a matter of her being blind.

“I remember saying that I remembered what you looked like,” she said, “but now I don't remember how I knew, and I'm—”

Her arm jerked on mine, painfully hard, and she fell beside me. I bent to see what was wrong.

Riemann shrieked and tried to drag his harness out from under Horejsi; there was a gory hole the size of my fist in his fur, and then I saw the bullet hole below Horejsi's ear, an instant before I felt the sting in my calf.

I rolled forward, keeping low, part of my brain figuring that the shots had to be coming from the row of parked cars across the street, and most of the rest of it shutting down because the thought *Horejsi is dead* would have been unbearable. Another shot whistled somewhere above me as I tumbled to a position crouched low where a fire hydrant was close to a phone pole, and the slight rise in the grass strip between them created a little pocket of cover. My pistol, the one that Leo had missed in his frisk (it had not been a pistol when he frisked me, had it?), found its way out of my best

concealment spot; I saw motion between two cars and fired. I was rewarded with a groan.

The top of a head went bobbing along, just above the line of cars, as the second one went to his partner's aid. I timed it as best I could, led him what I thought would do it, and squeezed off a second round.

It was better than I could have anticipated; for some reason I will never know, he bounced high on his next hop, and the round went right into his throat. I crouched, waited, thinking, *Cars. Those little people-hauling trucks are called cars. I have seen them all my life, and the one with two corpses (I hope) slumped behind it is a Packard Thunderbird.*

Riemann was still struggling, whimpering now as he grew weaker, alternately trying to drag himself free from where Horejsi's body pinned his harness, and licking and nuzzling her. Other than that, it was silent except for the distant hum of engines.

People would think this was a gang war. In a sense, it was. I had a memory of being lovers with Horejsi, I thought suddenly. In a short time, that memory would be what was real, and I would miss her even more than I missed her already.

It was a race between my leg and my psyche as to which would give out on me first.

There would be much too much authority around here much too soon. There had been no shots in a few seconds,

and past all question the other side knew where I was. I leaped up sideways from my safe position, and nobody shot. My calf blazed up, and blood filled my shoe, but I hopped and hobbled across the street; I almost fell over when an ice cream truck swung wide behind me (ice cream truck? I suddenly remembered one from my childhood, driven by—a black woman? She had called me “sweetheart!”).

Memories battered at my mind like furious crows but I pushed them away. The man I’d nailed in the neck was dead, and the one I’d hit before had taken the shot in his floating ribs, and was gasping out pink foam; he didn’t seem to be aware of me when I flipped his coat open. He had a badge like mine, only now *FBI* stood for—what *had* it stood for?

Never mind. Sirens were wailing. I took a few big lurch-steps back out into the street, and held my badge up to a cop car.

He popped his door and I got in. I told him that the Federal officers who were down had been shot by Crips in a drug sting gone bad, and urged him to hurry. He relayed that story to his dispatcher as we zoomed up Downing Street. I barked a set of incoherent orders, to get him to drive me back to Tyrwhitt.

I remembered Brock’s as being some kind of a bank but that didn’t make any sense. It seemed strange to know that this was my first ride in an atuiosmobile, and yet I already had the memories to say, “this is vital, officer, keep that throttle floored and don’t spare the steam.” I can’t remember what

reasons I gave the cop not to follow me in or call for backup.

As I lurched past the counter and down the corridor into Tyrwhitt's office, Leo and Brighd trailing after me and telling me frantically that I couldn't, my foot caught on the carpet, the pain in my calf stabbed straight up through my brain, and I finally fell forward. You wouldn't think the floor could hit so hard; it only had a short distance to wind up. It got dark and stayed that way.

“Simon Rastigevat, can you hear me?” I knew that voice—Tyrwhitt.

Tyrwhitt definitely. *That* was the voice. I opened my eyes. He was leaning forward, his face inches from mine, in a chair by the cot I lay on.

I looked down to see the needle he'd slipped into my arm; his gaze followed mine.

“Sorry,” he said. “A necessity if you are going to choose. Do you remember the choice I asked you to make?”

“I do,” I said. A great deal came back to me—not as much as I could have wished.

“That choice, I'm afraid, was made by the idiots who must have decided that you had been turned, or were breaching security, or whatever they believed in that brief interval as meaning scrambled everywhere. So rather than talk to you or ask what was going on, they sent out a team to eliminate you. I'm glad the human race didn't land permanently in that history; it must have been very unpleasant. But we're crossing over now, all of us, and the

whole universe; every hour the internet—that’s the tweenweb to you, but you’ll realize in a moment—is full of new complicated history, and there are billions more people in the world, and—”

He started to turn gray and blurry, and then I realized the world around him was blurring out too. He yanked at the needle in my arm and I yelped in pain.

“Sorry, had to do that to keep you here. That’s why I had to wake you up, you see.” He looked slightly sick, and I realized that the needle hadn’t hurt nearly as much as he must have thought it did; I wanted to reassure him but it seemed like too much bother to talk.

Tyrwhitt seemed to assume I forgave him anyway, after a moment, and said, “How much do you remember? You went into shock. It’s been three days since you lurched into Brock’s. Thanks for doing that, by the way; the cops were only twenty minutes behind you and they were *not* after *you*. I’m pretty sure we jumped through a lot of nasty pasts during that time.”

“Horejsi died,” I said. “She was gone before I could bend over to see she’d been shot. Poor Riemann; he was hit too, dying I think, and he must have been so upset.” I knew how weird and stupid it was but I couldn’t get past the way the dog felt. Somehow it was more real to me than Horejsi’s death . . . no, it *was* what was real about Horejsi’s death. “I’m going to miss her pretty bad myself.” I looked at him and said, “This is strange, though. I remember the old world. I remember what

we used to do. But I can feel the new world ghosting in on me, around the edges, as if I'm starting to remember a different world where I've always been."

"You were unconnected to the rest of the world for a long time," Tyrwhitt said, "at least a long time as measured in temporal change."

"Temporal change?"

"Event count. Do you remember who I am?"

"Yes. You are . . . Francis Tyrwhitt. Frank. Dutch Lop. In the history where, uh, when, I came from, you were . . . like Newton or Einstein?"

"Better," he said, grinning. "And who am I here?"

"My star grad student. Jesus, I'm a math professor. Talk about a great deal; I remember thirty years of math without actually having had to do the homework."

We both laughed, slightly sadly. I remembered that too, Frank Tyrwhitt was just about the only person except me who thought the jokes I liked were funny. Like Horejsi.

Who was really dead, and Tyrwhitt and I were really alive, and we were . . . not here. We were now.

It felt painfully strange, as if one memory were a delusion, and another one were real, and I just had no ability at all to work out which was which. "And now you are . . . a mathematical psychologist? Is there even such a thing?"

"There is now. And there always has been, for at least 120 years. Or for about thirty-one hours, depending on exactly what you count." He shrugged. "And I remember indexical

derivability, but I am not sure now what to do about it. Do you remember it?”

“You have written dozens of long detailed e-mails to explain it to me, or try to,” I said. “It’s hard. I can get there through the deep structure of numbers, and just trying to get there . . . haw. I’m a math prof myself, these days. Oh, I remember, I just said that.”

“One of the network of eleven,” he said. “Eleven math professors I’ve found who are willing to work on indexical derivability with me. Or rather you are going to be the eleventh, if you want to be, because I need a number theory person, and you’re the one. But you need to get in touch with the other ten, soon, and with many others. You’ve always been reclusive.”

“I certainly remember that. I guess if I want to work on it I will have to see more people—well, more people live. I have so many friends online.”

“You do, and you could possibly do all your work with the group online. That is *not* what I mean. I mean you have to get into this here—this now, I mean, this now—and connect and relate, because if you don’t, you’ll fade just like you almost did when I twisted the needle in your arm to bring you back. The Inconsistency Principle is still trying to resolve things. With a very few people, apparently the easiest resolution is to let us keep all our memories, as long as we only discuss them among ourselves.”

Stupidly, and out of nowhere, I said, “I’m going to miss

being in the FBI. And I really, really miss Horejsi now.”

I could feel myself start to cry, and he reached out and rubbed my face, gently, with a handkerchief. “How long has it been since anyone touched you?”

“Before you? Horejsi did now and then. I had to wait for her to do it, I couldn’t touch her or ask her to touch me. I liked it so much when she did, and I couldn’t say that either.”

“I remember how things were in the other now,” he said, nodding, as if it mattered a lot that he remembered. “You see, like me, you’ll keep those memories, many of them, like a vivid dream or a favorite childhood story. That’s the lowest-energy, most stable way to be. And you’ll be able to write them down before they fade, or talk about them with those of us who remember.”

I rubbed my face. “I don’t know if . . . do you know how stupid it was that I could never say . . . there was something I wanted to say to Horejsi, and now I won’t even be able to speak her name, except to you and a few others.”

“Do you remember *why* you couldn’t say it?”

“Damage, there’s something wrong with me, I don’t get what’s going on in other people, I don’t see them right . . .”

“Oh, yes, all that. In this now, we’re just beginning to see a way to help people fix the problem that you have, and work around it. Over there, no one was trying because it was one of the marks of being Liejt, like the thinness, the long thin fingers, the perfect pitch, or the blond hair. But there was a really simple reason why you couldn’t reach out to her, but it

was okay for her to signal that she wanted to please you, and that was—”

I felt the thought dawn. “Liejt,” I said. “I was Liejt, and she was Com’n. If I’d spoken my feelings and anyone had overheard, they’d have killed her—no, not *killed*, *erased*. There’s no Liejt now, there never has been, no Com’n, everyone is pretty much . . .”

“Free,” he said. “No capitals. All the other categories—Noble, Liejt, Com’n, and even slave—are all gone; now everyone’s just free. Please stay. I need people who can help me remember—we need, all those of us who do remember, we need someone to help us remember.”

“Stay?” I asked.

“Make the effort. Be in touch with people. Meet the people you have only talked to on the internet, speak to strangers, go out in public where you will meet people.”

“I liked doing that when I was in the FBI.”

“Keep liking it. And act on that liking. In the last few hours while you have been unconscious, you’ve started to fade, just the way you did just before I hurt you with the needle—and then come back, and then faded again, but the fading is getting more frequent and more severe.

“From what I could doodle out really fast, from what I remembered that one of the versions of Einstein had solved, there’s sort of a cusp that you must be balancing on; if you’re connected enough, the easiest way for the inconsistency principle to resolve the situation, in the path of least energy in

all its dimensions, is probably to let you exist as what I'm calling a polymnemonic, a person with more than one mutually contradictory set of memories. But if you aren't connected, if you don't talk and communicate and get yourself involved with everyone else, then the lowest-energy way for the universe to resolve you is for you never to have existed."

"Why do *you* care?" I asked.

"Well," Tyrwhitt said, "There's the use I have for your gifts—here, where there was no indexical derivability, you weren't stunted in your training, and there was more to learn and practice. So we can use you within the group, if you want to talk pure obvious practicality.

"Then there's the matter of having some company and someone to talk to. I would like to talk with someone who knows what is real. Purely selfishly, I'll be lonely as well.

"And finally, now that you're awake and emotionally perhaps more ready for it, there is something I'd like to see, as well." He turned toward the doorway and called, "Ms. Horejsi, I think he's ready to join us now."

There was a painfully slow scrape and thud; in a moment I would know, I realized, the thing that had always been wrong; the thing that was on the tip of my mind. The reason why I had only contacted Horejsi via . . . the internet, not the tweenweb.

For a moment I hung suspended.

The scraping sound sped up, and my heart sped up with

it. I was already grinning, remembering what I had always known, and sat up in the bed. I felt so well. “Come on,” I said, “it’s finally time, Ruth.”

“What else could it be, Simon?”

And, laughing, I got up to walk to her. Tyrwhitt steadied me—I was still tottering from the wound in my calf—and helped me walk forward, and I forgave him his smug little smirk, just as I always had, so many times before.

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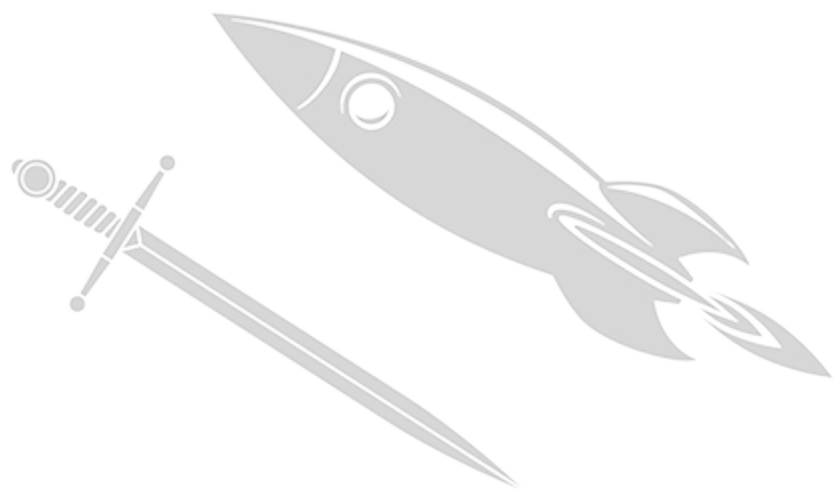
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John Barnes has commercially published 29 volumes of fiction, including science fiction, men's action adventure, two collaborations with astronaut Buzz Aldrin, a collection of short stories and essays, one fantasy and one mainstream YA novel, plus two self-published novels, and around 40 short stories. His most recent books are science fiction novel *Daybreak Zero*, young adult novel *Losers in Space*, and political satire *Raise the Gipper!*, and his next book out will probably be *The Last President* from Penguin/Ace in September 2013, but then again, things happen. His personal blog is thatjohnbarnes.blogspot.com and he contributes frequent articles about analytics and metrics in business to AllAnalytics.com. He has done a rather large number of occasionally peculiar things for money, mainly in business consulting, academic teaching, and show business, fields which overlap more than you'd think. Since 2001, he has lived in Denver, Colorado, where he has a wonderful spouse, an average income, and a bad attitude, which he feels is actually the best permutation.

NOVEL EXCERPTS



NOVEL EXCERPT:
Midnight Blue-Light Special
Seanan McGuire

Zoologist, noun:

- A specialist in zoology.

Cryptozoologist, noun:

- A specialist in cryptozoology.
- One who studies creatures whose existence has not yet been substantiated by science.
- See also “monster hunter.”

“Well, that’s not something you see every day. Go tell your father that Grandma needs the grenades.”—Enid Healy

Prologue:

A small survivalist compound about an hour’s drive east of Portland, Oregon

Thirteen years ago

Verity stood with her hands folded in front of her and her feet turned out in first position, watching her father read her report card. They were alone in his study. That was something she would normally have relished, given how hard it was to get her father’s attention all to herself. At the moment, she would rather have been just about anywhere else, including

playing hide-and-seek with Antimony. (Annie was just six, and she was already beating both her older siblings at hide-and-seek on a regular basis. It was embarrassing. It would still have been better than this.)

Kevin Price stared at the report card a little *too* long before lowering it, meeting Verity's grave stare with one of his own. "Verity. You need to understand that blending in with the rest of the students is essential. We send you to school so you can learn to fit in."

"Yes, Daddy. I know."

"We can never attract too much attention to ourselves. If we do, things could get very bad for us. The Covenant is still out there."

"I know, Daddy." Most of the kids in third grade were afraid of the bogeyman. Verity didn't mind bogeymen—they were pretty nice, mostly, if you didn't let them talk you into doing anything you weren't supposed to do—but there was one monster that she *was* afraid of, one you couldn't argue with or shoot. It was called "Covenant," and one day it was going to come and carry them all away.

"So why have you been fighting with the other students?"

Verity looked down at her feet. "I'm bored. They're all so *slow*, and I never get to do anything fun."

"I see." Kevin put the offending report card down on his desk, half-covering a report on the New Mexico jackalope migration. He cleared his throat, and said, "We're enrolling you in gymnastics. You'll be keeping your dance lessons, for

now, but I want you to have a way to work off that extra energy. And Verity?”

“Yes, Daddy?”

“Play nicely with the other children or you won’t be taking any more ballet classes. Am I clear?”

Relief flooded through her. It wasn’t victory—victory would have been more dance lessons, not stupid gymnastics—but it was closer than she’d been willing to hope for.

“Absolutely. I won’t let you down again, I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Kevin leaned forward to hug his older daughter, mind still half on the teacher comments from her report card. If she couldn’t learn to blend in, she was going to need to find a way to stand out that wouldn’t get them all killed . . . and she needed to do it fast, before they all ran out of time.

“The best thing I ever did was figure out how to hide a pistol in my brassiere. The second best thing I ever did was let Thomas figure out how to find it, but that’s a story for another day.”—Alice Healy

One:

*The sub-basement of St. Catherine’s Hospital,
Manhattan, New York*

Now

The air in the sub-basement smelled like disinfectant and decay—the worst aspects of hospital life—overlaid with a fine dusting of mildew, just to make sure it was as unpleasant as

possible. Only about a quarter of the lights worked, which was almost worse than none of them working at all. Our flashlights would have been more useful in total darkness. All they could do in this weird half-light was scramble the shadows, making them seem even deeper and more dangerous.

“I think there are rats down here,” Sarah whispered, sounding disgusted. “Why did you take me someplace where there are *rats*? I *hate* rats.”

“It was this or the movies, and the rats seemed cheaper,” I whispered back. “Now be quiet. If that thing is down here with us, we don’t want to let it know we’re coming.”

Sarah’s glare somehow managed to be visible despite the shadows. The irony of telling the telepath to shut the hell up didn’t escape me. Unfortunately for Sarah and her need to complain endlessly about our surroundings, I needed her to stay focused. We were looking for something so different from the human norm that we weren’t even sure she’d be able to “see” it. That meant not dividing her telepathy just for the sake of whining without being heard.

(Sarah is a cuckoo—a breed of human-looking cryptid that’s biologically more like a giant wasp than any sort of primate, and telepathic to boot. Evolution is funky sometimes.)

To be fair, Sarah hadn’t exactly volunteered for this little mission. Sarah rarely volunteers for *any* mission, little or otherwise, and was much happier staying at home, doing her

math homework, and chatting with my cousin Artie on her computer. I'm pretty sure that much peace and quiet is bad for you, so I drag her out whenever I can find an excuse. Besides, there's something to be said for having a telepath with you when you go hunting for things that want to eat your head.

"Wait." Sarah grabbed my arm. I stopped where I was, glancing back at her. Her glare was still visible, less because of its ferocity and more because her eyes had started to glow white. It would have been unnerving as hell if I hadn't been hoping that was going to happen.

"What?" I whispered.

"Up ahead," she said. "We're here." She pointed toward one of the deeper patches of shadow with her free hand—a patch of shadow that I'd been instinctively avoiding. I nodded my appreciation and started in that direction, Sarah following half a step behind me. The shadows seemed to darken as we approached, spreading out to swallow the thin beams of our flashlights.

"I love my job," I muttered, and stepped into the dark.

Fortunately for my desire not to spend eternity wandering in a lightless hell, Sarah was right: We had reached our destination. The darkness extended for no more than three steps before we emerged into a clean, well-lit hallway with cheerful posters lining the walls. At least they seemed cheerful, anyway, as long as you didn't look at them too closely. I pride myself on having a strong stomach, and one

glance at the poster on gorgon hygiene was enough to make me want to skip dinner for the next week. (Here's a hint: All those snakes have to eat, and anything that eats has to excrete. This, and other horrifying images, brought to you by Mother Nature. Proof that if she really exists, the lady has got a sick sense of humor.)

A white-haired woman dressed in cheerful pink hospital scrubs was standing by the admissions desk. She would have looked like any other attending nurse if it weren't for her yellow-rimmed pigeon's eyes and the wings sprouting from her shoulders, feathers as white as her hair. Her feet were bare, and her toenails were long enough to be suggestive of talons. She looked up at the sound of our footsteps, and her expression passed rapidly from polite greeting to confusion before finally settling on cautious relief.

"Verity Price?" she ventured, putting down her clipboard and taking a step in our direction. Her voice had a flutelike quality that blurred the edges of her accent, making it impossible to place her origins as anything more precise than "somewhere in Europe."

"That's me," I agreed. "This is my cousin, Sarah Zellaby."

"Hi," said Sarah, waving one hand in a short wave.

The white-haired woman gave Sarah a quick once-over, one wing flicking half-open before snapping shut again. She looked puzzled. "Dr. Morrow didn't tell me you would be bringing an assistant, Miss Price," she said, slowly.

"He probably forgot," I said. I was telling the truth. People

have a tendency to forget about Sarah unless she's standing directly in front of them, and sometimes even then. It's all part of the low-grade telepathic masking field she inherited from her biological parents. There's a reason we consider her species of cryptid one of the most dangerous things in the world.

"Nice to meet you," said Sarah. "I never knew there was a hospital down here."

As usual, it was exactly the right thing to say. The white-haired woman smiled, both wings flicking open this time in visible pleasure. "It required a very complicated piece of sorcery to conceal it here, but it's more than worth the cost of maintenance. We have access to the whole of St. Catherine's when we require it, which prevents our needing to acquire some of the more specialized equipment for ourselves."

"Clever," I said. Inwardly, I was salivating over the idea of getting, say, an MRI film of a lamia. There'd be time for that later. This was the time for business. "When Dr. Morrow contacted me, he said you were having trouble."

"Yes." The white-haired woman nodded, expression growing grim. "It's started again."

"Show me," I said.

St. Catherine's was one of five hospitals located within a two-mile radius. That might seem excessive, but two were privately-owned, one was more properly termed a hospice, and one—St. Giles's—was constructed under the sub-basement at St. Catherine's. St. Giles's didn't appear on any

map, and wasn't covered by any medical insurance plan. That was because, for the most part, their patients weren't human.

Over the centuries, humanity has had a lot of names for the sort of people who go to places like St. Giles's Hospital. There's the ever-popular "monsters," and the almost as enduring "freaks of nature." Or you could go with "abominations," if that's what floats your boat. My family has always been fond of the slightly less pejorative "cryptids." They're still people, men and women with thoughts and feelings of their own. They just happen to be people with tails, or scales, or pretty white wings, like the woman who was now leading us down the hall toward the maternity ward.

Sarah caught me studying our guide and shot me an amused look, accompanied by an arrow of audible thought: *She's a Caladrius. She's wondering if you'll notice, and a little bit afraid you'll start demanding feathers.*

Whoa, I replied, trying not to stare. Caladrius are some of the best doctors in the world. Their feathers have a supernatural healing quality that no one's ever been able to duplicate. That's why there are so few Caladrius left. They used to volunteer to help with any sick or injured creature they encountered, regardless of the dangers to themselves. It took them a long time, and the slaughter of most of their species, before they learned to be cautious around humanity.

"Here," said the nurse, stopping in front of a doorway. It was blocked off with plastic sheeting, lending it an ominous air. She gestured to it with one hand, but made no move to

pull the plastic aside. “I’m sorry. I can’t go in with you.”

“I understand,” I said. I did, really. If Dr. Morrow’s report was correct, we were about to walk into a slaughterhouse. Caladrius will heal the wounded if they possibly can, but they can’t bear the sight of the dead. Dead people look like failure to them. “Thanks for showing us the way.”

“If you need anything . . .” she began.

Sarah smiled. “We’ll call,” she said. “Loudly.”

That is so much nicer than “we’ll scream until you send backup,” I thought.

Sarah’s smile widened.

Looking relieved, the Caladrius nodded. “I’ll be at my desk if you need me.” Then she turned, hurrying away before we could think of a reason to need her to stay. Sarah and I watched her go. Then Sarah turned to me, a wordless question in her expression.

“I’ll go first,” I said, and turned, and drew the plastic veil aside.

The smell that came wafting out into the hall was enough to make my stomach turn. I’d been the one to request that the room be sealed off without cleaning, to give me a better idea of what I was dealing with. Suddenly, I thought I might regret that decision.

Streaks of long-dried blood warred with cheerful pastels for ownership of the walls inside the maternity ward. Most of it was red, although there were a few streaks of green, purple, and even shiny-clear breaking up the crimson monotony.

Patches of the original cartoon murals showed through the gore, representing a cartoon cryptid wonderland, with dozens of happy cryptid and human children gamboling through a paradise of acceptance that hadn't existed in millennia, if it ever existed at all. Sarah blanched.

“Verity . . .”

“I know.” Even the thickest splashes of blood had been given time to dry. I touched one, and it flaked away on my fingertips. “If the pattern holds, it's still nearby.”

“Oh, goody. Have I mentioned recently how much I hate it when you say things like that?” Sarah glanced nervously around. “I'm not picking up on any other minds in this room. We're alone in here.”

“That's a start.” There was a closed door on the far wall. I pulled the pistol from the back of my jeans, holding it in front of me as I walked cautiously forward. “Stay where you are.”

“You don't need to tell me twice,” said Sarah.

The door swung gently open when I twisted the knob, revealing the darker, seemingly empty room beyond. I squinted into the gloom, seeing nothing but a few sheet-draped tables and what looked like an old-style apothecary's cabinet. My flashlight beam bounced off the glass, refracting into the room where Sarah and I stood.

“Looks like it's all clear,” I said, starting to turn back to Sarah. “We should keep on movi—”

Something roughly the size of a Golden Retriever—assuming Golden Retrievers had massive, bat-like wings—

burst out of the dark behind the door and soared into the room, shrieking loudly. Sarah added her own screaming to the din, ducking and scrambling to get under one of the gore-soaked tables. I stopped worrying about her as soon as she was out of sight. The creature would forget she was there almost instantly, if it had managed to notice her in the first place. The cuckoo: nature's ultimate stealth predator, and also, when necessary, nature's ultimate coward.

The creature continued its flight across the room, giving me time to take solid aim on the space between its wings, and get a good enough view to make a hopefully accurate guess at what it was. It could have been your average attractive older Filipino woman, assuming you liked your attractive older women with wings, claws, fangs, and oh, right, nothing below the navel. Where her lower body should have been was only a thin, pulsing layer of skin, providing me with a nauseatingly clear view of her internal organs.

My brother owed me five bucks. When I'd described the thing that was supposedly attacking downtown maternity wards to him over the phone, he'd barely paused before saying, "There's no way you're dealing with a manananggal. They're not native to the region." Well, if the thing that was flying around the room wasn't a manananggal, nature was even crueller than I'd originally thought.

"Hey, *ugly!*" I shouted, and fired. Shrieking, the manananggal hit the wall, using her momentum to flip herself around and start coming back toward me. I fired twice more.

As far as I could tell, I hit her both times. It didn't slow her down one bit. I dove to the side just as she sliced through the air where I'd been standing, that unearthly shriek issuing from her throat the entire time.

"I fucking hate things that can't be killed," I muttered, rolling back to my feet. The manananggal was coming back for another pass. That was, in a messed-up kind of way, a good thing. Mentally, I shouted, *Sarah! Go find her legs!*

My cousin stuck her head out from under the table, eyes wide. *You're kidding, right?* came the telepathic demand.

No! Hurry! I fired at the manananggal again, keeping her attention on me. It wasn't hard to do. Most things focus on the person with the gun.

I hate you, said Sarah, and slid out from under the table, using the sound of gunfire and screaming to cover her as she slipped through the open doorway, into the dark beyond.

The manananggal are native to the Philippines, where they live disguised among the human population, using them for shelter and sustenance at the same time. They spend the days looking just like everyone else. It's only when the sun goes down that they open their wings and separate their torsos from their lower bodies. That's when they fly into the night, looking for prey. Even that could be forgiven—humanity has made peace with stranger things—if it weren't for *what* they prey on.

Infants, both newly-born and just about to be born. The

manananggal will also feed on the mothers, but only if they're still carrying or have given birth within the last twenty-four hours. Weak prey. Innocent prey. Prey that, in this modern world, is conveniently herded into maternity wards and hospital beds, making it easy for the manananggal to come in and eat its fill. As this one had been doing, moving in a rough circle through the local maternity wards, slaughtering humans and cryptids with equal abandon.

She'd been getting sloppier, and her kills had been getting more obvious. That was a bad sign. That meant the manananggal was getting ready to find a mate, and make a nest . . . and that was something I couldn't allow to happen.

I'm a cryptozoologist. It's my job to protect the monsters of the world. But when those monsters become too dangerous to be allowed to roam free, I'm also a hunter. I don't enjoy that side of my work. That doesn't mean I get to stop doing it.

The manananggal seemed to realize that her tactics weren't getting her anywhere. With a ringing scream, she hit the wall again, and then turned to fly straight at me, her arms held out in front of her as she went for a choke-hold. I ducked. Not fast enough. Her claws raked across the top of my left bicep, slicing through the fabric of my shirt and down into my flesh. I couldn't bite back my yelp of pain, which seemed to delight the manananggal; her scream became a cackle as she flew past me, flipped around, and came back for another strike.

I put two bullets into her throat. That barely slowed her

down . . . but it slowed her enough for me to get out of her path. She slammed into the wall, hard. I tensed, expecting another pass. It never came. Instead, her wings thrashed once, twice, and she sank to the floor in a glassy-eyed heap, brackish blood oozing from the gunshot wounds peppering her body.

Breathing shallowly, I moved toward the body. She didn't move. I prodded her with the toe of my shoe. She didn't move. I shot her three more times, just to be sure. (Saving ammunition is for other people. People who aren't bleeding.) She didn't move.

"I hate you," announced Sarah from the doorway behind me.

I turned. She held up the canister of garlic salt I'd ordered her to bring, turning it upside-down to show that it was empty.

"Legs are toast," she said. "As soon as I poured this stuff down her feeding tube, the lower body collapsed."

"Oh. Good. That's a note for the field guide." I touched my wounded arm gingerly. "This stings. Do you remember anything about manananggal being venomous?"

Sarah grimaced. "How about we ask the nurse?"

"Good idea," I said, and let her take my arm and lead me away from the fallen manananggal, and the remains of the last infants she would ever slaughter.

This is how I spend my Saturday nights. And sadly, these are the nights I feel are most successful.

“Treat your weapons like you treat your children. That means cleaning them, caring for them, counting on them to do the best they can for you, and forgiving them when they can’t.”—
Enid Healy

Two:

*The Freakshow, a highly specialized nightclub
somewhere in Manhattan*

A week had passed since the manananggal incident, giving me sufficient time to file my reports, update the family field guide (this just in: manananggal *are* venomous), and pay two follow-up visits to St. Giles’s Hospital, where Dr. Morrow and the Caladrius nurse (whose name turned out to be Lauren) were happy to patch me up free of charge. The manananggal’s claws didn’t even leave a scar. I had resolved a threat, and saved a bunch of babies—and their mothers—from being eaten. Not bad for a ballroom dancer from Portland.

I hit the stairs leading down from the nightclub roof almost five whole minutes before my shift was scheduled to start. For me, that’s practically getting to work early, especially these days. We had a little snake cult incident last year, and the city’s cryptids are still all worked up about it. That’s meant more mediation, more hand-holding through interactions with the human world, and, unfortunately, more hunting, since some of the more predatory types of cryptid took the destabilization of Manhattan as an invitation to move in and start chowing down on the locals. It seems like I’m out

on the streets every other night, teaching some idiot that you don't act like that in my city.

Candy was standing by the base of the stairs, eating a ham and gold leaf sandwich. (It's a house special. Angel calls it "the Adam Lambert," and serves it with a pickle and a shot of Goldschläger. Bartenders are weird.) "You're late," she called, as I went blowing past her like my shoes were on fire.

"I have five minutes!" I shouted back, and kept on running until I hit the dressing room, and dove into chaos.

Picture a medium-sized room, maybe twenty feet by twenty feet square. Now add standing lockers cannibalized from a high school gym, with the requisite long wooden benches stretching between the rows. Great. Now add half a dozen women, all of them jockeying for position at the single long mirror lining one wall, and you'll have some idea of what I was walking into.

Sometimes I think I'd rather deal with a herd of angry unicorns than a bunch of women trying to get themselves ready for work. "I'm here," I announced to no one in particular as I walked past the throng and made my way between two racks of lockers to my assigned spot. The "real world skills" I've learned from my years of struggling to launch a dance career are mostly limited to things like putting on mascara on a moving bus, but I definitely know better than to come between an amateur kick-line and their own reflections.

I opened my locker and tossed in my bag before starting

to squirm out of my street clothes. Five minutes was cutting it close for getting into my uniform and putting on my makeup. I'd done it before, but that didn't mean I could waste time watching the clown car antics unfolding in front of the mirror.

The dancers and cocktail waitresses fighting for space squabbled like wet hens as they applied lip gloss, fixed their eye makeup, and tried to keep from being bitten by Carol's hair, which was making its usual attempt to escape from her elaborate beehive wig. Carol stuffed the tiny serpents back into the weave as quickly as they slithered free, but it was a hopeless fight—like all lesser gorgons, she was seriously outnumbered by her own hair.

Under normal circumstances, Carol would have had at least three feet on either side of her, since only Marcy was willing to sit any closer. Marcy's an Oread, and her skin is way too thick to be punctured by anything as plebeian as a snake bite. That was under normal circumstances, not during shift change. During shift change—especially shift change to the night shift—real estate at the mirror was too valuable to leave open just because you might wind up getting chomped on by a cocktail waitress's hairdo.

Distraction makes you careless. One of the new girls squealed and jerked away from Carol, clutching her hand to her chest. I sighed as I fastened the last few snaps on my uniform bodice and pulled on my ruffled can-can skirt. Once that was done, I grabbed the at-work first aid kit from my locker and walked over to the mirror.

“I’m *so* sorry, tomorrow’s feeding day, they’re all cranky,” Carol was saying to the girl her hair had taken a chunk out of—a wide-eyed human whose normally coppery complexion was underscored with a sudden, sickly pallor. Carol kept stuffing as she spoke, trying to get the snakes back into her wig. They weren’t cooperating. Her agitation was transmitting itself to them, and they were beginning to writhe and snap wildly, making her blonde beehive wig pulse like a prop from a bad horror movie.

“Here, Carol.” I pressed my emergency can of Mom’s gorgon hair treatment into Carol’s hand. She shot me a grateful look. Neither of us really understands why a mix of concrete dust, eggshells, and powdered antivenin has a sedative effect on the snakes, but it doesn’t hurt them, and it keeps them calmer than anything else we’ve been able to come up with. Carol gets three cans a month. I get one in the same shipment, for emergencies just like this one.

The new girl was still sitting there, looking terrified. I tried to remember who’d recommended that we hire her. Humans are great dancers, but most of them really aren’t all that comfortable with the cryptid world—and there’s good reason for that. You need to worry about a lot in a normal chorus line; being bitten by the other girls’ hair isn’t on the list.

“You.” I pointed to another of the new girls, a green-haired siren with eyes only a few shades lighter than her heavily hairsprayed curls. “Take her to the manager’s office. There’s antivenin in the fridge there.”

“Okay,” said the siren, the whistling sweetness of her voice betraying her anxiety. She took the bitten girl by the elbow, pulling her away from the mirror. “Come on, Nye. Let’s get that taken care of.”

The bubble of silence that followed their departure held for only a few seconds before the room exploded back into its previous level of chaos. The hole at the mirror left by the siren and the new girl was almost instantly filled. That’s show business for you.

Marcy dusted Carol’s hair with sedative powder as Carol shoved the suddenly-passive little snakes back into her wig.

A quarter of the mirror had been claimed by four of the gorgeous blondes we spent centuries calling “dragon princesses” before we learned that no, they were just the female of the dragon species. Three equally gorgeous Chinese girls were crammed in there with them, all of them doing their makeup with grim precision. They were visiting representatives of another dragon subspecies. They were in town to grill William—the dragon who lives under downtown Manhattan, and yeah, I’m still pretty flipped out about that—about whether any of *their* males might have survived, and, like all dragons, they were happy to spend their off hours making a few extra bucks by waiting tables.

(Dragons take avarice to a religious level, but they have good reason; their health and reproduction depend on the presence of certain precious materials. European dragons need gold. Their Chinese counterparts seemed to have a

similar affection for jade and pearls, although some of what I'd been able to overhear implied that they actually *created* pearls somehow, which definitely gave them a financial leg up. What can I say? I'm a cryptozoologist, and we didn't write our books on cryptid biology by being too polite to eavesdrop.)

“Are we good?” I asked.

“We're good,” said Marcy, shoving the last of the sedated snakes under Carol's wig. “Thanks for the save.”

“It's no big deal,” I said, although a quick glance at the clock told me that it was actually a very big deal indeed. I was due on stage, with the rest of the chorus, in less than three minutes. I stuck two fingers in my mouth and whistled sharply before shouting, “This is not a drill, people! Hairspray down, high heels on, and anyone who breaks a leg before intermission is going to answer to me!”

The already hectic dressing room exploded into motion as everyone scrambled, double-time, to get ready for the cue that was about to crash down on us. I dashed back to my locker, grabbing the few pieces of costume still in need of application, and took off for the stage. Anything I couldn't put on while I was running was just going to have to wait until I got a break.

There's no business like show business. And thank God for that.

A little background, in case it's still needed: My name is Verity Price, and I'm a journeyman cryptozoologist, currently

studying the sentient cryptid population of New York City and the surrounding area. This turns out to pay surprisingly poorly, since most people don't believe cryptids exist, and those who *do* believe in them usually fall into one of two camps—either “kill it with fire” or “I wonder how I can use that freak of nature to make myself buckets and buckets of money.” Neither of these is helpful when what you're trying to do is observe and assist a cryptid population, and so I, like every other member of my family, make do with whatever jobs my admittedly non-standard skill set can help me hold onto. That brought me, in a roundabout way, to Dave's Fish and Strips, a tits-and-ass bar that was billed as a “nightclub for discerning gentlemen.”

Dave was a bogeyman. He probably still is, since no one's managed to kill him yet—at least as far as I know, and given how we parted ways, I would expect his killers to send me a nice “you're welcome” card. Anyway, when I came to town looking for gainful employment, serving cocktails in a cryptid-owned establishment seemed like the best of all possible worlds. I could study the urban cryptid population both in and out of the workplace, allowing me an unparalleled view of their social structure, and I could make a little money at the same time.

I mean, really, it was all going pretty great until Dave decided to sell me to a snake cult before skipping town. They say nobody's perfect, but there's having a few flaws, and then there's selling your employees as human sacrifices. That sort

of thing is just uncool.

The whole “human sacrifice” thing didn’t pan out, and I returned to find Dave gone and the strip club abandoned. Since he wasn’t technically dead—not until I get my hands on him, anyway, and who knows when that might be?—the rest of the city’s bogeymen got to decide what would be done with his property, and they settled for turning it over to his niece, Kitty. She’d been touring with her boyfriend’s band when things really got nasty, and didn’t find out that her uncle was missing until she came to ask for her old job back. Maybe Dave left the deed in her name, or else her boyfriend was really good at fabricating paperwork, but either way, talk about your welcome home presents.

None of us had expected too much of Kitty, but she proved to have a good head for business and, better still, a good sense of showmanship. Dave operated the club on a sort of “if we put hot naked girls on stage, they will come” theory. Kitty looked at that and said, “well, yes, but how are we going to get them to come *back*?” Dave’s Fish and Strips closed its doors for good a week after Kitty took it over. Two months after that, the Freakshow was born.

Have a prehensile tail? Wear a miniskirt and use it to carry an extra tray when you’re serving drinks. Got wings? How do you feel about swinging on a perch suspended from the ceiling? Cryptids of every race and creed were invited to come and show off the things that divided them from the human race—and every one of them who did just helped to

raise the Freakshow's cred a little higher. There was even a review in the *New Yorker*, calling it a "cunning use of smoke and mirrors," and "a fantastic example of the misuses one can manage with a degree in theatrical makeup and costuming." In short, it was so in-your-face that everyone assumed it had to be fake, and the human populace of the city was all but busting down the doors for the chance to dance with the monsters they still didn't believe in.

Still, every gimmick has its shelf life, and Kitty knew that if she wanted to keep the Freakshow running, she would need to have more than just a few strange but pretty faces on staff. She'd need actual *entertainment*. Well, that, and some of the stiffest drinks in the city, courtesy of our bartenders, Ryan and Angel.

All of which goes to explain why I scrambled to the middle of the stage less than a minute before curtain, wearing a corset, a ruffled black and red can-can skirt, high heels, and enough glitter to start my own David Bowie tribute band. In the end, no matter how tight the timing, the show must always go on.

From *Midnight Blue-Light Special* by Seanan McGuire.

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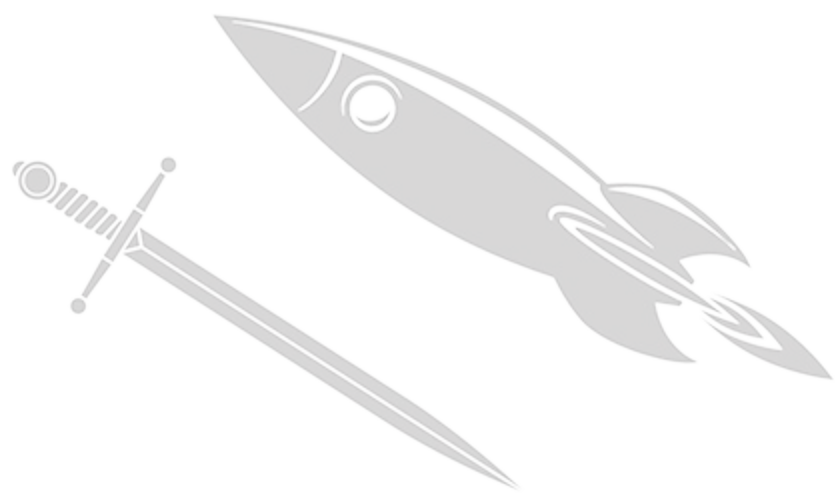
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Seanan McGuire was born and raised in Northern California, resulting in a love of rattlesnakes and an absolute terror of weather. She shares a crumbling old farmhouse with a variety of cats, far too many books, and enough horror movies to be considered a problem. Seanan publishes about three books a year, and is widely rumored not to actually sleep. When bored, Seanan tends to wander into swamps and cornfields, which has not yet managed to get her killed (although not for lack of trying). She also writes as Mira Grant, filling the role of her own evil twin, and tends to talk about horrible diseases at the dinner table.

NONFICTION



Interview: Angélica Gorodischer

Amalia Gladhart

Angélica Gorodischer, daughter of the writer Angélica de Arcal, was born in 1929 in Buenos Aires and has lived most of her life in Rosario, Argentina. From her first book of stories, she has displayed a mastery of science fiction themes, handled with her own personal slant, and exemplary of the South American fantasy tradition. Oral narrative techniques are a strong influence in her work, most notably in *Kalpa Imperial*, which since its publication has been considered a major work of modern fantasy narrative. She has received many awards for her work, including most recently the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award.

(Note: This interview was both conducted and translated from the Spanish by Amalia Gladhart. Also be sure to check out our Author Spotlight with Ms. Gorodischer, which focuses on her story appearing in this month's issue. —*ed.*)

**How did you become interested in science fiction/fantasy?
Were there particular authors that influenced you?**

Once at a friend's house I saw a book called *The Martian Chronicles*. How odd, I thought. I opened it and I was trapped. I want to clarify that Ray Bradbury was never one of my favorite authors: He's a little soft, kind of romantic, and,

worst of all, moralizing. But *The Martian Chronicles* is a great book. And looking for similar things, I found the great writers of the 1950s and later.

How would you describe the role or position of science fiction in Argentina, or in Latin America more generally? Has it changed since you wrote *Trafalgar*?

In Argentina there were two or three writers who wrote SF: Pablo Capanna, the theory; and Eduardo Goligorsky, and others that I don't remember, in narrative. In Latin America, no one save Daína Chaviano in Cuba.

Would you say there are fewer writers working in SF/fantasy in Argentina and Latin America now than when you wrote *Trafalgar*? If so, would you speculate as to the reasons for that shift?

I think you can safely say plainly that there are no writers of SF in Argentina or in Latin America at this time. I don't know the reasons for that. I am not a narrative theorist. I am not an academic, nor a teacher, nor a B.A., nor a doctor, nothing. I am a writer of narrative and that's how I hope and like to be thought of. So it's impossible for me to speculate as to the reasons for the lack of SF writers today.

Is there, or has there been, a greater freedom from censorship (formal or implicit) in genre fiction?

Censorship is fatal . . . and stupid. SF always passed the censorship filter because the censors considered it minor literature, like comic books or fantasy or humor (so long as it wasn't political humor).

Do you think of yourself as an SF writer? A writer, period? Has that changed over time? Is the distinction important?

No. I am not a writer of science fiction. I am a writer and that is how I want to be thought of. I wrote SF for a time, three or four books. And that was all.

Is there a stigma attached to SF? An extension of the censors' view of SF as minor literature and so beneath concern? If, as you say, there are very few writers of SF in Argentina, is the genre marker in some way simply unhelpful to readers, inaccurate?

Of course! The high priests of the academy or the fashionable writers always thought SF was insignificant, something like detective novels or comic books. They imagined SF books as sagas starring the little green men with antennae who were

coming to invade the Earth. By the time they discovered Philip Dick, Ursula Le Guin, Lafferty—the greats—it was already too late.

Tell us something about publishing in Argentina. Has there been a consolidation of publishers similar to what we've seen in the U.S.?

In Argentina, we are always in crisis. It is hard to publish. There was a time when publishers could take a risk and publish something by someone unknown. That's how I found generous publishers who thought, "Well, very good, she is not, but one day, probably, she will write something good." And they published my first books. I want to include their names here: Daniel Divinsky, Paco Porrúa, Jorge Sánchez. My thanks to them, always thanks.

How did you come to publish your first books? How were you and your work able to find those receptive, risk-taking publishers?

I won—I no longer remember the year, but it was in the early '60s—a prize from the magazine *Veá y Lea* for a detective story. And shortly afterward, the Club del Orden Prize for a book of stories, which included the publication of the book, which was *Cuentos con soldados* [Stories with Soldiers]. I

had not yet discovered SF but I was on the edge of it and while most of the stories in that book are “realistic,” the fantastic is already starting to appear in them. Once I was involved in that, in SF, I wrote to Paco Porrúa, who at that time was publishing *Minotauro*, a magazine of SF stories. I asked him why he published only North Americans and I sent him one of my stories, one that was SF. He replied, explaining that *Minotauro* was a faithful translation of a North American SF magazine whose title I have forgotten and he asked me if the story I had sent him was part of a book. I told him yes, but that was a lie, there was no such book. He asked me to send it to him and I set to writing it and finished in record time: It was my second book, *Opus Dos*. And we became great friends. Afterwards he published my *Las Pelucas* [The Wigs] and Daniel Divinsky took an interest in me and as we had friends in common, in conversation he offered to publish my next book, which was *Bajo las jubeas en flor* [Under the jubeas in bloom], decidedly SF.

Trafalgar Medrano is an inter-galactic traveler, yet absolutely down to earth, a pillar of Rosario society. Where did the character come from—any specific inspiration?

He didn't come from anywhere. One day he appeared, he came in through that door and he spoke to me. As Borges, the Master, said: “When I heard Funes speak, then I had the

story.” One has to let the character speak.

That combination of space travel on the one hand and daily life in Argentina on the other—is that typical of Argentine science fiction? Does it reflect a special genre of SF?

No, not at all. There is no SF in Argentina. There were two or three writers and nothing too special that might be studied from that point of view.

One of the things that interests me in your work, in particular in *Trafalgar*, is the emphasis on storytelling—on the way stories are put together, traded among friends, doled out like treats or presents. Could you tell us something about how you see the function of stories?

People are the same everywhere, in Buenos Aires, in Ulan Bator, in Paris, in Roldán, in Toronto, etc. People always want the same things, to have food, a house, warmth in the winter, cool in the summer, to go to the movies on Saturdays, to go on vacation . . . and to be told stories. To listen to stories is a basic necessity. And everything is a big story: journalism, television, radio, religion, film, everything. We are all readers, active or potential. “Tell me a story,” the reader says. “I am going to tell you a story,” says the author, “but

you have to believe me.” “I will believe you,” says the reader. And thus, on the basis of this agreement, those of us who write set ourselves to tell a story. Which can be a novel, or theater, poetry, but that will always be a story. And so we fulfill one of people’s basic needs. As important as food and shelter.

Returning to the question of Trafalgar’s language, I have to ask a translation question. Trafalgar acts as an interpreter—translator—of the distant worlds he visits for his listeners at home. Have you written about other characters who have a similar intermediary or interpretive role?

No, never. Trafalgar is one-of-a-kind.

Has your experience translating other kinds of texts influenced your fiction writing?

Yes, of course. For thirty years, I translated medical texts. I worked in a medical center as a librarian and a translator from English, French, and Italian. But I don’t think that influenced me. Medicine doesn’t interest me. I have a son who’s a surgeon, and a grandson who’s a surgeon, and from time to time I get sick, and that is my entire relationship to the science of medicine.

I was thinking more of the act of translating, that particular sensitivity to or awareness of language. But maybe writing and translating are just different facets of the same activity, so that the attention to language isn't so different?

Yes, of course, I am convinced of that: Writing and translating are part of the same miracle that is language—that which made us human.

What are you reading now? What are you writing?

I'm reading a lot of astrophysics (of which I understand about half but that's enough for me) and narrative as always: the classics as always and a few new things that interest me.

This year that's just ending [2012] I published three novels: *Tirabuzón* [Corkscrew], *Cruce de caminos* [Crossroads], and *Las señoras de la calle Brenner* [The ladies of Brenner Street]. I have just finished another: *Palito de narajo* [Orangewood] that will be published next year. A collection of stories will also be published next year: *Confin. Trece Cuentos Atroces* [Limit. Thirteen Atrocious Tales]. That's everything. For now.

Thank you!



Amalia Gladhart is the translator of two novels by Ecuadorian novelist Alicia

Yánez Cossío, *The Potbellied Virgin* (2006) and *Beyond the Islands* (2011). Her chapbook *Detours* won the 2011 Burnside Review Fiction Chapbook Contest. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in *Iowa Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Stone Canoe*, and elsewhere. She is Professor of Spanish at the University of Oregon.

Interview: Philip Pullman

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy

Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy (*The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*) has sold more than fifteen million copies and been published in more than forty countries. The first volume, *The Golden Compass*, was made into a major motion picture starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig. Pullman is at work on a companion His Dark Materials novel, *The Book of Dust*. He lives in Oxford, England.

This interview first appeared on Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, which is hosted by John Joseph Adams and David Barr Kirtley. Visit geeksguideshow.com to listen to the entire interview and the rest of the show, in which the hosts discuss various geeky topics.

Your new book is called *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm: A New English Version*. Now, most people know these fairy tale stories from the Disney movies, but the original stories are really a lot darker. What are some of the most horrifying things that happen in this book?

Oh, brutal punishments—eyes being pecked out by birds, people being put in barrels full of nails and rolled downhill, or

sent out into the stormy sea in a ship where it's going to sink. Things like that. But there's always a principle of justice underneath it. It's always the bad people who get punished, and it's always the good people who get rewarded. So it's not gratuitous, it's not horror for the sake of horror.

There's this idea that some people have that dark stories are somehow harmful to children. Do you agree with that at all?

Well, it depends on the circumstances. If you give a story like "The Juniper Tree"—which is one of the best of all the stories, but it has a pretty horrific episode early in the story—if you give that to a child and say, "Okay, goodnight, dear, here's a story," and leave them to read it by themselves, well, that's a little bit irresponsible. I think that these stories are really for sharing with children—if you're going to show them to a child at all, and they're not necessarily children's stories—but if you're going to give them to a child, I think it helps to be there with the child, to read it to the child. If necessary—if you think the child is particularly nervous—then edit it a bit. But don't be irresponsible about it, don't just thrust the book into the hands of a child and go off and do something else.

Did you read the original Grimm's stories your students

when you were a teacher?

No, the stories I used for those children were Greek mythology. And I didn't read them, I told them. I thought that was important because if you read them, the book is a sort of barrier between you and the class. I would make a point of knowing the story well enough to tell it without the book. And actually what happened was that I loved the stories so much, I wanted to tell them again and again and again, next year and next year and next year. And I know the kids remember the stories, because when I bump into a grownup now with children of their own, and they say that I used to teach them, they will say that they remember the stories. Children will forget most things you teach them, but they never forget a story.

But this was over twenty-five years ago. Now in Britain we have this thing called a "national curriculum," and every teacher has to obey this curriculum and on the thirteenth Tuesday of the term they've got to do the semicolon or something like that. It's ridiculous, and it's obstructive, and it's narrowing, and it's restrictive, and it's very hard to teach anything humane under that system, or so it seems to me. But that didn't exist in my time. I was teaching at a time before that came in, so I had a pretty free hand, and I think it was better like that.

One thing that really struck me reading these fairy tales is

how short they are, and I kind of feel in general that all books and movies are just way too long and bloated these days.

I couldn't agree more, you're absolutely right! But these stories are the length they were in the original Grimm, I didn't see any need to extend them or enlarge them, nor to bring them up to date, actually. I wanted to give the story as it appeared to its original readers, but to put it into a modern kind of English. That was the brief I gave myself.

So why do you think people went from telling these really short stories to telling five-hundred-page-long stories?

Well, the word "franchise" might come into it, mightn't it? You know, if you've got "Cinderella 2" and "Cinderella 3," you can make three movies for the imaginative investment of one, and supposedly get more money for it.

To a modern reader, a lot of the Grimm stories seem broken—the second half has nothing to do with the first half, things like that. Did people at the time not really realize that, or did they just see stories differently than we do?

Well, that's a very good question, because some of the stories

in the book I did have to kind of join together or improve in that very way. There's a story called "Thousandfurs," for example, which is a notable example of a story falling into two parts. It begins very dramatically with a king falling in love with his own daughter and wanting to marry her, and she escapes and runs away, at which point we forget about the king and his incestuous lust for his daughter, and it turns into a sort of version of Cinderella. So that's an example of a story that has two halves that ought to join up better. Did people notice this? That's a good question. I don't know. But it's certainly like that in the original Grimm, so perhaps they didn't.

You also recently produced another retelling of a well-known hero in your book, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. Having done both that book and the fairy tale book, what similarities or differences do you see between fairy tales and Bible stories?

The difference between the Grimm stories and the stories in the Bible, the stories in the Gospels, is the Gospel stories were written for a particular religious purpose. They were written in order to tell us what to believe, to say to us "This is true, you must believe it." That's not the case with the fairy tales of Grimm. They were just told for fun, basically. So when I was rearranging the story of Jesus, I did it with that sort of purpose in mind as well. I was arguing with the beliefs that led

to the development of the Christian Church, but I wasn't arguing with anything when I did my retellings of Grimm. I was just trying to make them read more easily than they would otherwise have done.

Do you think there's something special about the kind of story that can become a religious story versus not? Do you think it would be possible, for example, to have people raised to be Brothers Grimm fundamentalists or Golden Compass fundamentalists?

[Laughs] I sincerely hope not. Because the last thing I want to do is start a new religion.

So given the controversy surrounding *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, I was actually surprised at how generous it is to Jesus. Do you think people imagine that the book will be more hostile than it actually is?

Oh yes, they do. I'm constantly referred to as a "militant atheist," for example. There's nothing militant about me whatsoever. People do have these assumptions, where atheism and religion are concerned, and they have them in richly colored forms. I do call myself an atheist, but I do treat religion respectfully because I find it an extraordinarily

interesting phenomenon. That's one way in which I differ from Richard Dawkins, for example. His argument with religion is that it isn't true, and therefore it's wrong. That's not my argument with it at all. My argument with religion is that it gets ahold of power and uses power for the wrong purpose, and it becomes corrupted. And I'm very interested in how people believe things that I think are unlikely to be true, such as the Resurrection and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and things like that. And again, someone like Dawkins or Sam Harris or Daniel Dennett would think those things are not interesting. Well, I think they're very interesting. My favorite book on the subject of religion is William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is a very respectful text. Fascinating book, and he approaches religion from a psychological point of view. What does it feel like to believe it? Which I think is the most fruitful and interesting way to do so.

Actually, speaking of some of the New Atheist writers you were mentioning, I don't know if you read Christopher Hitchens' review in *The New York Times* of your book?

I don't think I saw that one. What does he say?

He basically characterizes your approach as being "I don't believe in any of the supernatural elements, but Jesus was

a wise teacher.” But he says that he doesn’t really feel that Jesus was a wise teacher, because Jesus was essentially preaching “Give up your family and your possessions because the world’s about to end.” And if the world’s not actually about to end, that’s not really wise teaching.

Well, yeah, he’s right there, I agree with him about that. That’s an aspect that I did try to bring out toward the end of my book. Jesus was one of those prophets who believed that the world was going to end very soon, in his lifetime. And like all the various prophets we’ve seen in recent years, they tell all their followers to go up onto the mountaintop because flying saucers are going to come on Tuesday, and they’re going to take them up to the planet Venus, and they’re all going to go to heaven. And they get up on the mountaintop and Tuesday comes, and those flying saucers don’t come, and they come down looking rather disconsolate on Wednesday and say, “Well, we got the date wrong. It’s next October.” That’s the usual way it happens.

And Jesus was one of these people, and if it weren’t for the Crucifixion, he would have been completely forgotten, or if he were remembered at all he’d be remembered like that. The Crucifixion did his reputation a great favor, because it allowed this new story to come in, that he was resurrected and he was actually God and so on. But the other complicating factor in the story of Jesus is that, unlike these people who say, “Come up to the mountaintop, the flying saucers are

going to come on Tuesday,” unlike the rest of those people, he happened to be a storyteller of genius. The Parable of The Good Samaritan, for example, or The Parable of the Prodigal Son—you hear them once and you never forget them, and you can understand the moral point in the flick of an eye. It’s just brilliant storytelling. And that is so unusual a gift that, whatever his religious convictions, he would be remembered for that alone.

But you do think he was a wise moral teacher?

Some of his moral teaching was utterly remarkable and for its time practically reaches the stage of genius. You know, forgive your enemies. Who else had ever said that? Look to the flowers, they’re more beautiful than jewels. Who else had ever said that? But of course we do have to remember that this was all given in the light of his belief that the world was going to end very soon. You cannot give all your possessions away and wander around like a hobo. The world wouldn’t last like that. We can’t do that, because we know the world is not going to end on Tuesday.

When people say that Jesus was a revolutionary moral teacher, it just seems to me that ancient Greek philosophers had probably already said anything wise that Jesus said, in terms of pacifism or things like that.

Yeah, I guess so, but few people have said them with such force and clarity, and illustrated them with such brilliant stories. His parables are unforgettable.

One of our friends asked us to tell you that His Dark Materials was very important to her as a kid when atheism was much more stigmatized than it is today. Have you gotten a lot of feedback like that from young atheists?

Yes, I have, and that's very encouraging, that's very cheering to find young people writing to me and saying that my story helped them realize some things about themselves, some things about the way they view the world. That's a very flattering thing to hear.

Was that in your mind at all when you wrote the books, that this would be something that would provide encouragement to nonbelievers?

No, not at all. Not for one single second. I just wanted to tell the story. That's all I wanted to do, and I wanted to tell it as well as possible, and I thought I'd reached a stage in my life, in my storytelling, when I knew how to do it. Having got hold of this big story, I knew I could tell it, but I didn't think it would have that sort of effect, no, not for a single second. I didn't think many people would read it, actually. I thought it

would sell maybe a thousand copies and then would be forgotten. That's what had happened to all my other books. [Laughs] So I saw no reason why that should be different. But it seemed to attract a lot of attention, and that was something very unexpected and very, very welcome.

During the publication process at any point, did anyone sort of raise a red flag and say, “Uh, I don't know if we should expose this to children”?

No, not at all, because it was published in the UK first. I mean, we don't go for that sort of thing over here. And my American publishers were very strong-minded, or open-minded. They supported it fully. Maybe there were a few objections—there were a few school boards that banned it from the libraries, there were a few teachers who refused to let it into the classroom, that sort of thing, but not very many. And these people who do this never learn, they don't realize that if you ban a book, it's the most powerful incentive for kids to go and read it.

But when it came to *The Golden Compass* movie, it really did seem that the boycott campaign against it in the United States hurt it at the box office.

In the United States, but not in the rest of the world. It was a

big, big hit in the rest of the world. Made over \$300 million. It made a loss in the States, but that was because the studio had pre-sold all the foreign rights. If they had kept the foreign distribution rights, it would have made a healthy profit. So in the rest of the world, there was no problem with it. I do agree, yes, the religious boycott probably did hurt it at the US box office, but there's another big world out there outside of the United States.

But why do you think that that boycott in particular was successful when, as you're saying, the general pattern is that boycotts don't work?

Well, movies are different, aren't they? You can buy a book yourself and conceal it at home and read it by yourself, but whether you see a movie or not depends on whether the big movie theaters will distribute it.

I've heard people who worked on the film say that the studio was really tampering with it, and that a director's cut would be much longer and much better?

Yes, I think that's probably the case. They did shoot the whole of the story of the first book, so it's there somewhere . . . if they haven't thrown it away. And one day there might be a cut, whether it's a director's cut or another sort of a cut, I

don't know, where the whole story would be available. But the problem is that, even if they put the whole of the first book there, they didn't film the second book and the third book, and it is, of course, not three separate books, but one long story. There was no urgent desire on the part of the studio to make the second movie or the third one, and now it would be impossible, at least with the same cast. The little girl, Dakota Blue Richards, who played Lyra, is now eighteen or nineteen years old. And Daniel Craig, who played Lord Asriel, is much more expensive, being the new James Bond. So a continuation of that first movie in parts two and three is no longer possible. So if it is going to be seen on the screen again, it will have to be in another form altogether.

Speaking of movies, after our interview with you we're going to be talking about Peter Jackson's new *Hobbit* movie. Have you seen that or are you planning to?

No, I haven't seen that, and I'm not sure that I will. I'm not very keen on Tolkien. I saw the first of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, and I thought it was impressive, but I wasn't sufficiently interested in the story. I read it, of course, when I was a teenager, and I've tried to read it since, but unsuccessfully, because it doesn't seem to me similar enough to real life. Maybe that's a silly thing to say about a fantasy, but the most successful fantasies, in my view, are those where some aspect of real life is dealt with, is examined or talked

about or looked at. My favorite example here, as far as *The Lord of the Rings* is concerned, is to look at Wagner's *Ring*, the four operas that make up his Ring Cycle. Now there you do get lots of real human life, principally in the field of sexuality and love. There ain't none of that in *The Lord of the Rings*, it just doesn't happen. And for a book of that length to leave out that entire aspect of human life, to me seems like cheating, seems like being chicken. He didn't want to look at it, so he ran away, didn't face it.

Have you read *The Hobbit*? What do you think about that one in particular? Since it's a children's book, you wouldn't expect it to have a lot of sexuality in it.

No, it's not just that I want everything steaming with sexuality, I just want to feel that the people in it are sufficiently like me to be interesting. The only interesting character in the whole of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, really, is Gollum. The rest of them are just made of cardboard.

I've heard you say that you're generally not a fan of fantasy because of the lack of moral ambiguity, but in recent decades there's been this big trend toward gritty, morally ambiguous fantasy novels—George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* would be a notable example of that. Have you read any of those kind of novels in the last

ten or twenty years?

No, I haven't. People tell me I should read that, so maybe I should.

In 2010 you publicly left the Liberal Democratic Party. Why was that and how do you identify politically these days?

Somebody's been reading Wikipedia.

Is that not true?

No, I was never a member of the Liberal Democratic Party.

That's interesting, because it's not just on Wikipedia. There are actual newspaper articles that say that.

Well, they're all quoting Wikipedia. [Laughs] This is self-reinforcing. I don't correct it, I don't write to Wikipedia and say, "You've got this wrong," because frankly I can't be bothered. And also I like a little bit of ambiguity and untruthfulness trailing in my wake. However, I am telling you The Truth. I was never a member of the Liberal Democratic Party. Although I was briefly a member of the Labor Party. I have voted Liberal Democrat, but I was never a member of

the Liberal Democrat Party. And now that the Liberal Democrats have blotted their copybook by entering into a coalition with the Conservatives, I shall probably not vote for them in the next election. I might vote Labor, I might vote Green.

You've also recently been quoted in the press on causes ranging from the teaching of phonics to the closing of public libraries. How much of an effect do you think those comments have had?

It's very hard to measure. I think my intervention on the libraries issue did have some effect, because the speech I made was quoted—and quoted, for the most part, accurately—in a number of places, and referred to in a number of places. And because the Prime Minister—then Gordon Brown—wrote me and sent me a copy of a book he'd written and said, “Thank you very much for making that speech. It was very impressive.” Or something. So somebody must have listened to it and passed it on to him. So I know that intervention did have a bit of an effect. But the other things I've spoken about, human rights and so on? Probably very little effect.

Do you ever get people saying that you're a novelist and you should just stick to writing fiction and not poke your

nose into politics?

Well, if anybody did say that to me, I'd say, "Look, you're a bank manager, you keep your mouth shut about other things that don't concern you." [Laughs] I have the right of every citizen to open my mouth on public affairs.

How about the teaching of phonics. What's the story with that?

Phonics? Oh yes, well, that's the most extraordinary thing. I don't know quite how that worked. It's a way of teaching reading which depends on making sounds, so instead of looking at whole words you look at the sounds that the word is made up of. Now, for some reason—and this is the extraordinary thing—the teaching of phonics came to be a right-wing thing, came to be a conservative thing. There's nothing intrinsically about it that would make it conservative or liberal or anything else. But for some reason the Conservative Party picked it out and said, "This is the way to do it, this is the way to teach reading. We shall only teach Phonics, shan't use anything else," and from then on it became a right-wing thing, and if you wanted to teach children using whole books and the enjoyment of stories and all that sort of thing, you were left-wing, you were liberal, and so on. And of course the sensible way to teach reading is to use phonics as well as other things, but the problem was,

when phonics came in, it wasn't used with anything else. You just had to go, "Buh, ah, puh, fff, aat, kuh, att, cat." A better way of deadening the whole reading experience I can't imagine.

I've heard you say that as a writer that you make use of imaginary beings like angels and demons in the same way that a mathematician might make use of imaginary numbers. Could you talk about that?

Well, the square root of minus one doesn't really exist. I mean, you can't see the square root of minus one, but you can use it in a lot of different contexts to give meaning and expression to all sorts of ideas that do have very rich consequences, such as chaos theory, for example. So the comparison I was making was between the square root of minus one and things like angels and demons that don't exist, but which—if you use them in a story—again, you can do certain things that you couldn't do without them. John Milton, when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, could not have done it without the use of angels and devils, couldn't have told that story. So if some censor were to come to him and say, "You can't use these things in a story, they don't really exist, you must only write stories about human beings that do exist," well, we'd be without that great work of literature. It's important that we should be able to write about devils and angels and so on, even though, as an atheist, I don't really think that they do

exist. But I strongly defend my right to use them in stories.

Are there any upcoming projects you'd like to mention?

Yes, having cleared Grimm and Jesus out of the way, and all the other things I was doing, I'm now able to concentrate on *The Book of Dust*, which is the sequel to *His Dark Materials*. I'm going to clear the whole of next year, and most of the year after, and I'm not going to accept any invitations or do anything, make speeches, go anywhere, do anything at all. I'm staying at home at my desk, and I'm going to write *The Book of Dust* until it's completed. From now on, nothing more at all. Silence will descend. I'll be in my room, with my pen and my paper, writing *The Book of Dust*.



The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is a science fiction/fantasy talk show podcast. It is hosted by:

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Lightspeed* (and its sister magazine, *Nightmare*), is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Oz Reimagined*, *Epic: Legends of Fantasy*, *Other Worlds Than These*, *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

David Barr Kirtley has published fiction in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *Lightspeed*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *On Spec*, and

Cicada, and in anthologies such as *New Voices in Science Fiction, Fantasy: The Best of the Year*, and *The Dragon Done It*. Recently he's contributed stories to several of John Joseph Adams's anthologies, including *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He's attended numerous writing workshops, including Clarion, Odyssey, Viable Paradise, James Gunn's Center for the Study of Science Fiction, and Orson Scott Card's Writers Bootcamp, and he holds an MFA in screenwriting and fiction from the University of Southern California. He also teaches regularly at Alpha, a Pittsburgh-area science fiction workshop for young writers. He lives in New York.

Artist Gallery: Matt Tkocz











Artist Showcase: Matt Tkocz

Galen Dara

Matt Tkocz (mattmatters.com) is a concept designer and film illustrator working in the film industry in Los Angeles, California. He was born in Rybnik, Poland in 1986. At the age of two, his family moved to Germany where he grew up and eventually ended up studying Graphic Design. In 2008 he moved to California to attend Art Center College of Design in Pasadena where he graduated with honors with a B.S. degree in Entertainment Design in April 2012. Since then he's dabbled in all sorts of fields in the entertainment industry.

'At A Boy is our cover image for this month; it has the nostalgic feel of an old photograph, a lone individual on a rocky beach with their faithful . . . cyborg? Beautifully painted, subtly humorous, a bit melancholy, where did the idea for this painting come from?

I'm very much into paintings that feel like there is a little bit of story or a greater context behind them. I'm always fascinated by ordinary scenes with an element of the extraordinary—or vice versa. And that's what I tried to do with this painting. A peaceful moment as it could appear on a postcard, with a dash of badassness!

Your style is an awesome mix of painterly strokes, stunning atmospheric effect, and touches of photo-realistic detail. It also looks like you drew several of the architectural pieces traditionally first, pencil on paper, is that correct? What is your typical working method, how does a piece evolve from start to finish?

Yes, most of the architectural drawings were done in pencil on 17x14 sheets of tracing paper. They were part of a school assignment and our instructors made us stick to a certain process. And even though working traditionally can be frustrating and painful, the lessons you take away are invaluable and I highly recommend it to anyone. That being said, I'd rather die than go through that nightmare again!

These days I work almost exclusively digitally. A while ago I got myself a fancy, overpriced Wacom Cintiq which makes sketching on the computer almost as intuitive as on paper, but gives you the infinite flexibility you can't get with any traditional medium.

As for my process, it is probably very similar to everyone else's. I start out with research and rough sketches, which become more defined and detailed as I get closer to what I like, until I eventually end up with a final color illustration of the design.

You have amazing drafting skills, creating incredible building and vehicle designs. Was that always a

fascination of yours? How do you go about creating these futuristic structures?

When I attempt to come up with any design (be it vehicle, character, or environment), I mostly try to figure out what the subject's purpose in the context of the story is. Darth Vader's dressing room has to fulfill different requirements than—let's say—Hannah Montana's interrogation chamber. (Everybody taking notes, yes?) Every design has its own set of attributes: Time period, form language, function, color scheme, and so forth.

Once I get a better idea of the basic needs of the design, I sketch out thoughts until I find a solution I can live with. From there, it's mostly a matter of tweaking, detailing, and making it pretty. Along the way I always refer back to as much reference as I can, because it makes life way easier.

You are quite the storyteller, taking us to a pretty diverse array of otherworldly (and off-word) locations. Creeping around giant strawberries in *Nano*, traveling down into the gullet of a gigantic alien organism in *Fantastic Voyage*, you even delve into the realm of fantasy with *Dragon Slayer*. I was delighted to discover *Rotation:81* and *Style and Moves*; two wordless illustrated collections you have put together. Can you tell us more about these books? What are your aspirations for your own storytelling?

Rotation:81 is a rough story I wrote back in college to give some context to my senior project. I didn't want people to think that my portfolio was just a huge dump of unrelated images (which it was, to be perfectly honest). I tried to string my artwork together into a cohesive plot.

I guess my ultimate goal is to write and direct my own properties some day, be it for film or games. I don't want to be other people's design-bitch forever, after all. Like most, I'd rather make a living creating my own stuff.

It seems like much of your work history is connected to visual storytelling; working in the game and film industry. What have been some of the highlights you've experienced? Are there individuals or situations that have been pivotal to who you are as an artist?

The truth is, I graduated college less than a year ago, so I have to admit the list of my accomplishments is not very long so far. But I promise to get back to you on that as soon as I become a Design Rockstar.

Where do you usually find your inspirations? If you happen to get stuck on a project, what are some things you do to get through that?

I usually steal ideas wherever I can. The true challenge lies in

covering your tracks! TED talks and documentaries are usually a great source to inspire sick thoughts, which sometimes lead to interesting imagery. When I get stuck, I ask my design pals for a second opinion. They always figure something out. Also, screenwriter Blake Snyder described a little technique in one of his infamous *Save the Cat!* books that stuck with me. He said, when stuck with a certain problem, to think of “a bad way to solve it.” That usually takes the pressure off and clears the road for fresh thought.

What does a normal work day look like for you? What are you doing when you are not working on an art piece? (Do you have any non-art related hobbies?)

When I work in-house at a studio, my work day is pretty much the same as everyone else’s with an office job. Laid back studios usually have an old fashioned 9-6 work day. Others make you work 12 hours or more. When I work from home on freelance jobs, the work pace is usually more relaxed so I end up having to make up for it by working longer hours. Hobbies? I sort of had to give those up when I started this concept design thing. But I do like to write and shoot short films whenever I get the chance.

Who are some of the artists who have inspired you?

My favorite artists change frequently, it always depends on my mood. Growing up, I was a big fan of Greg Capullo, whose work absolutely blew my mind. Back then I wanted to become a comic book artist but eventually stumbled upon this whole concept design thing. The artist whose work introduced me to concept art was the great Alan Tew (who, in my opinion, doesn't get nearly as much appreciation as he deserves). Since then I've drooled over many, many different artists and designers who had a big influence on my taste and style. Amongst those were rockstars like John Berkey, Neil Campbell Ross, Niklas Jansson, Paul Lasaine, to only mention a few. At this point it's probably appropriate to apologize to all the greats out there if I happened to plagiarize their work in a too obvious manner. I'm sorry, guys, but I could not resist!

What are you working on now?

All the interesting projects have not been announced yet so I have to keep quiet for a little while longer. But on my own time I am working on an epic short film called *The Time Rapist*, if anyone cares.

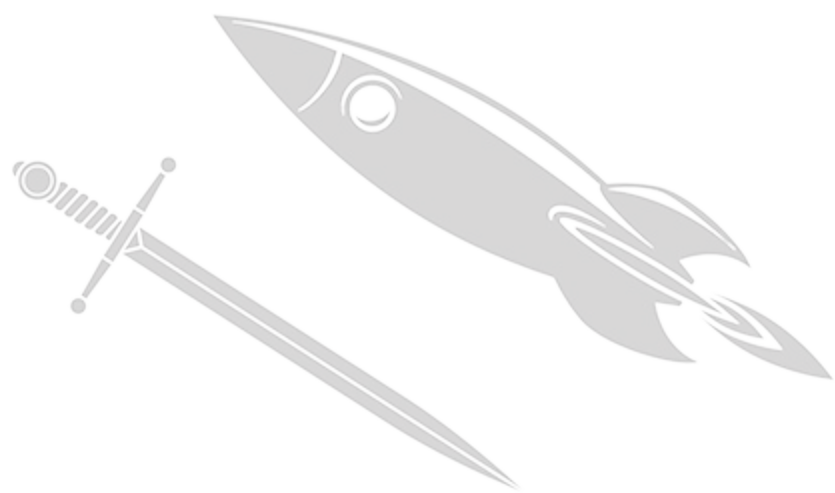
Matt, it's been a pleasure talking to you, Thank you!

The pleasure is all mine!



Galen Dara likes to sit in the dark with her sketchbook, but sometimes she emerges to illustrate for books and magazines, dabble in comics, and hatch wild collaborations with friends and associates. Galen has done art for Edge Publishing, Dagan Books, *Apex*, *Scapezine*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Peculiar Pages*, *Sunstone*, and the *LovecraftZine*, not to mention *Lightspeed*, where she serves as house illustrator. She is also on the staff of BookLifeNow, blogs for the Inkpunks, and writes the Art Nerd column at the Functional Nerds. When Galen is not online you can find her on the edge of the Sonoran Desert, climbing mountains or hanging out with a loving assortment of human and animal companions. Follow her on Twitter @galendara.

FANTASY



Lily Red

Karen Joy Fowler

One day Lily decided to be someone else. Someone with a past. It was an affliction of hers, wanting this. The desire was seldom triggered by any actual incident or complaint but seemed instead to be related to the act or prospect of lateral movement. She felt it every time a train passed. She would have traded places instantly with any person on any train. She felt it often in the car. She drove onto the freeway that ran between her job and her house, and she thought about driving right past her exit and stopping in some small town wherever she happened to run out of gas, and the next thing she knew, that was exactly what she had done.

Except that she was stopped by the police instead. She was well beyond the city; she had been through several cities, and the sky had darkened. The landscape flattened and she fell into a drowsy rhythm in which she and the car were both passengers in a small, impellent world defined by her headlights. It was something of a shock to have to stop. She sat in her car while the police light rotated behind her, and at regular intervals she watched her hands turn red on the steering wheel. She had never been stopped by the police before. In the rearview mirror she could see the policeman talking to his radio. His door was slightly open; the light was on inside his car. He got out and came to talk to her. She

turned her motor off. “Lady,” he said, and she wondered if policemen on television always called women *lady* because that was what real policemen did, or if he had learned this watching television just as she had. “Lady, you were flying. I clocked you at eighty.”

Eighty. Lily couldn’t help but be slightly impressed. She had been twenty-five miles per hour over the limit without even realizing she was speeding. It suggested she could handle even faster speeds. “Eighty,” she said contritely. “You know what I think I should do? I think I’ve been driving too long, and I think I should just find a place to stay tonight. I think that would be best. I mean, eighty. That’s too fast. Don’t you think?”

“I really do.” The policeman removed a pen from the pocket inside his jacket.

“I won’t do it again,” Lily told him. “Please don’t give me a ticket.”

“I could spare you the ticket,” the policeman said, “and I could read in the paper tomorrow that you smashed yourself into a retaining wall not fifteen miles from here. I don’t think I could live with myself. Give me your license. Just take it out of the wallet, please. Mattie Drake runs a little bed-and-breakfast place in Two Trees. You want the next exit and bear left. First right, first right again. Street dead-ends in Mattie’s driveway. There’s a sign on the lawn: MATTIE’S. Should be all lit up this time of night. It’s a nice place and doesn’t cost too much in the off season.” He handed Lily back her license

and the ticket for her to sign. He took his copy. “Get a good night’s sleep,” he said, and in the silence she heard his boots scattering gravel from the shoulder of the road as he walked away.

She crumpled the ticket into the glove compartment and waited for him to leave. He shut off the rotating light, turned on the headlights, and outwaited her. He followed all the way to the next exit. So Lily had to take it.

She parked her car on the edge of Mattie’s lawn. Moths circled the lights on the sign and on the porch. A large white owl slid through the dusky air, transformed by the lights beneath it into something angelic. A cricket landed on the sleeve of her linen suit. The sprinklers went on suddenly; the watery hiss erased the hum of insects, but the pathway to the door remained dry. Lily stood on the lighted porch and rang the bell.

The woman who answered wore blue jeans and a flannel shirt. She had the angular hips of an older woman, but her hair showed very little gray, just a small patch right at the forehead. “Come in, darling,” she said. There was a faint southern softness in her voice. “You look tired. Do you want a room? Have you come to see the caves? I’m Mattie.”

“Yes, of course,” Lily told her. “I need a room. I met some people who were here last year. You really *have* to see these caves, they told me.”

“I’ll have Katherine pack you a lunch if you like,” Mattie offered. “It’s beautiful hiking weather. You won’t get nearly so

hot as in the summer. You can go tomorrow.”

Lily borrowed the phone in the living room to call David. It sat on a small table between a glass ball with a single red rosebud frozen inside and a picture of the Virgin praying. The Virgin wore a blue mantilla and appeared to be suspended in a cloudless sky. The phone had a dial, which Lily spun. She was so used to the tune their number made on the touch phone at work that she missed hearing it. She listened to the answering machine, heard her voice, which sounded nothing like her voice, suggesting that she leave a message. “I’m in Two Trees at Mattie’s bed-and-breakfast,” she said. “I had this sudden impulse to see the caves. I may stay a couple of days. Will you call Harriet and tell her I won’t be in tomorrow? It’s real slow. There won’t be a problem.” She would have told David she missed him, but she ran out of time. She would have only said it out of politeness anyway. They had been married nine years. She would miss him later. She would begin to miss him when she began to miss herself. He might be missing her, too, just about then. It would be nice if all these things happened at the same time.

She took the key from Mattie, went upstairs, used the bathroom at the end of the hall, used someone else’s toothbrush, rinsing it out repeatedly afterward, unlocked her door, removed all her clothes, and cried until she fell asleep.

In the morning Lily lay in bed and watched the sun stretch over the quilt and onto the skin of her arms and her hands. She looked around the room. The bed was narrow and had a

headpiece made of iron. A pattern of small pink flowers papered the walls. On the bookcase next to the bed a china lady held a china umbrella with one hand and extended the other, palm up, to see if the rain had stopped. There were books. *Beauty's Secret*, one of them said on the spine. Lily opened it, but it turned out to be about horses.

A full-length mirror hung on the back of the bedroom door. Lily didn't notice until the sunlight touched its surface, doubling in brightness. She rose and stood in front of it, backlit by the sunny window, frontlit by the mirror so that she could hardly see. She leaned in closer. Last night's crying had left her eyes red and the lids swollen. She looked at herself for a long time, squinting and changing the angle. Who was she? There was absolutely no way to tell.

The smell of coffee came up the stairs and through the shut door. Lily found her clothes on the desk chair where she had left them. She put them on: stockings, a fuchsia blouse, an eggshell business suit, heels. She used the bathroom, someone else's hairbrush as well as someone else's toothbrush, and came downstairs.

"You can't go hiking dressed like that," Mattie told her, and of course Lily couldn't. "You have nothing else? What size shoe do you wear? A six and a half? Six? Tiny little thing, aren't you? Katherine might have something that will do." She raised her voice. "Katherine? Katherine!"

Katherine came through the doorway at the bottom of the stairs, drying her hands on a dish towel. She was somewhat

younger than Mattie though older than Lily, middle forties, perhaps, and heavier, a dark-skinned woman with straight black hair. On request she produced jeans for Lily, a sleeveless T-shirt, a red sweatshirt, gray socks, and sneakers. Everything was too big for Lily. Everything was wearable.

Mattie took her through the screen door and out the back porch after breakfast. Beyond the edge of Mattie's sprinklers, the lawn stopped abruptly at a hill of sand and manzanita. Mattie had stowed a lunch and a canteen in a yellow day pack. She began to help Lily into it. "You go up," Mattie said. "All the way up. And then down. You can see the trail from the other side of the fence. Watch for rattlers. You hiked much?" Lily was having trouble slipping her left arm under the second strap. It caught at the elbow, her arm pinned behind her. Mattie eased the pack off and began again.

"Oh, yes," Lily assured her. "I've hiked a lot." Mattie looked unconvinced. "I'm a rock climber," said Lily. "That's the kind of hiking I'm used to. Crampons and ropes and mallets. I don't usually wear them on my back. I wear them on my belt. I take groups out. Librarians and schoolteachers and beauticians. You know."

"Well, there's just a trail here," said Mattie doubtfully. "I don't suppose you can get into trouble as long as you stay on the trail. Your shoes don't really fit well. I'm afraid you'll blister."

"I once spent three days alone in the woods without food or shelter and it snowed. I was getting a merit badge." The

day pack was finally in place. “Thank you,” Lily said.

“Wait here. I’m going to get some moleskin for your feet. And I’m going to send Jep along with you. Jep has a lot of common sense. And Jep knows the way. You’ll be glad of the company,” Mattie told her. She disappeared back into the house.

“It was in Borneo,” Lily said softly, so that Mattie wouldn’t hear. “You want to talk about blisters. You try walking in the snows of Borneo.”

Jep turned out to be a young collie. One ear flopped over in proper collie fashion. One pointed up like a shepherd’s. “I’ve heard some nice things about you,” Lily told him. He followed Lily out to the gate and then took the lead, his tail and hindquarters moving from side to side with every step. He set an easy pace. The trail was unambiguous. The weather was cool when they started. In an hour or so, Lily removed her sweatshirt and Jep’s tongue drooped from his mouth. Everyone felt good.

The sun was not yet overhead when Lily stopped for lunch. “Eleven twenty-two,” she told Jep. “Judging solely by the sun.” Katherine had packed apple juice and cold chicken and an orange with a seam cut into the peel and a chocolate Hostess cupcake with a cream center for dessert. Lily had not seen a cupcake like that since she had stopped taking a lunch to school. She sat with her back against a rock overhang and shared it with Jep, giving him none of the cream filling. There was a red place on her left heel, and she covered it with

moleskin. Jep lay on his side. Lily felt drowsy. “You want to rest awhile?” she asked Jep. “I don’t really care if we make the caves, and you’ve seen them before. I could give a damn about the caves, if you want to know the truth.” She yawned. Somewhere to her left a small animal scuttled in the brush. Jep hardly lifted his head. Lily made a pillow out of Katherine’s red sweatshirt and went to sleep, leaning against the overhang.

When she woke, the sun was behind her. Jep was on his feet, looking at something above her head. His tail wagged slowly and he whined once. On the ground, stretching over him and extending several more feet, lay the shadow of a man, elongated legs, one arm up as though he were waving. When Lily moved away from the overhang and turned to look, he was gone.

It unsettled her. She supposed that a seasoned hiker would have known better than to sleep on the trail. She turned to go back to Mattie’s and had only walked a short way, less than a city block, when she saw something she had missed coming from the other direction. A woman was painted onto the flat face of a rock, which jutted up beside the trail. The perspective was somewhat flattened, and the image had been simplified, which made it extraordinarily compelling somehow. Especially for a painting on a rock. When had Lily ever seen anything painted on a rock other than KELLY LOVES ERIC or ANGELA PUTS OUT? The woman’s long black hair fell straight down both sides of her face. Her dark

eyes were half closed; her skin was brown. She was looking down at her hands, which she held cupped together, and she was dressed all in red. Wherever the surface of the rock was the roughest, the paint had cracked, and one whole sleeve had flaked off entirely. Lily leaned down to touch the missing arm. There was a silence as if the birds and the snakes and the insects had all suddenly run out of breath. Lily straightened and the ordinary noises began again. She followed Jep back down the trail.

“I didn’t get to the caves,” she admitted to Mattie. “I’ll go again tomorrow. But I did see something intriguing: the painting. The woman painted on the rock. I’m used to graffiti, but not this kind. Who painted her?”

“I don’t know,” said Mattie. “She’s been here longer than I have. We get a lot of farm labor through, seasonal labor, you know. I always thought she looked Mexican. And you see paintings like that a lot in Mexico. Rock Madonnas. I read somewhere that the artists usually use their own mother’s faces for inspiration. The writer said you see these paintings by the roadside all the time and that those cultures in which men idolize their mothers are the most sexist cultures in the world. Interesting article. She’s faded a lot over the years.”

“You don’t often see a Madonna dressed in red,” Lily said.

“No, you don’t,” Mattie agreed. “Blue usually, isn’t it?” She helped Lily out of the pack. “Did you get blisters?” she asked. “I worried about you.”

“No,” said Lily, although the spot on her heel had never stopped bothering her. “I was fine.”

“You know who might be able to tell you about the painting? Allison Beale. Runs the county library but lives here in Two Trees. She’s been here forever. You could run over tonight and ask her if you like. I’ll give you the address. She likes company.”

So Lily got back in her car with Allison Beale’s address in her pocket and a map to Allison’s house. She was supposed to go there first and then pick up some dinner at a little restaurant called the Italian Kitchen, but she turned left instead of right and then left again to a bar she’d noticed on her way into Two Trees, with a neon martini glass tipping in the window. The only other customer, a man, stood with his back to her, studying the jukebox selections but choosing nothing. Lily sat at the counter and ordered a margarita. It came without salt and the ice floated inside it uncrushed. “You’re the lady staying with Mattie,” the bartender informed her. “My name is Egan. Been to the caves?”

“Lily,” Lily said. “I don’t like caves. I can get lost in the supermarket. Wander for days without a sweater in the frozen foods. I’m afraid to think what would happen to me in a cave.”

“These caves aren’t deep,” the bartender said, wiping the counter in front of her with the side of his hand. “Be a shame to come all the way to Two Trees and not even see the caves.”

“Take a native guide,” the other man suggested. He had come up behind her while she ordered.

She slid around on the bar stool.

“Henry,” he told her. He wore a long black braid and a turquoise necklace. The last time Lily had seen him he had been dressed as a policeman. She’d had no sense of his hair being long like this.

“You’re an Indian,” Lily said.

“Can’t put anything past you.” He sat down on the stool next to hers. Lily guessed he was somewhere in his thirties, just about her own age. “Take off your wedding ring and I’ll buy you a drink.”

She slid the ring off her finger. Her hands were cold and it didn’t even catch at the knuckle. She laid it on the napkin. “It’s off,” she said. “But that’s all I’m taking off. I hope we understand each other.”

The bartender brought her a second margarita. “The first one was on the house,” he said. “Because you’re a guest in Two Trees. The second one is on Henry. We’ll worry about the third when you get to it.”

Lily got to it about an hour later. She could easily have done without it. She was already quite drunk. She and Henry and the bartender were still the only people in the bar.

“It just intrigued me, you know?” she said. The bartender stood draped across the counter next to her. Henry leaned on one elbow. Lily could hear that she was slurring her words. She tried to sharpen them. “It seemed old. I thought it

intrigued me enough to go talk to the librarian about it, but I was wrong about that.” She laughed and started on her third drink. “It should be restored,” she added. “Like the Sistine Chapel.”

“I can tell you something about it,” the bartender said. “I can’t swear any of it’s true, but I know what people say. It’s a picture of a miracle.” He glanced at Henry. “Happened more than a hundred years ago. It was painted by a man, a local man, I don’t think anyone remembers who. And this woman appeared to him one day, by the rock. She held out her hands, cupped, just the way he drew them, like she was offering him something, but her hands were empty. And then she disappeared again.”

“Well?” said Lily.

“Well, what?” Henry answered her. She turned back to him. Henry was drinking something clear from a shot glass. Egan kept it filled; Henry never asked him, but emptied the glass several times without appearing to be affected. Lily wondered if it might even be water.

“What was the miracle? What happened?”

There was a pause. Henry looked down into his drink. Egan finally spoke. “Nothing happened that I know of.” He looked at Henry. Henry shrugged. “The miracle was that she appeared. The miracle was that he turned out to be the kind of person something like this happened to.”

Lily shook her head in dissatisfaction.

“It’s kind of a miracle the painting has lasted so long,

don't you think?" Egan suggested. "Out there in the wind and the sand for all those years?"

Lily shook her head again.

"You are a hard woman," Henry told her. He leaned closer. "And a beautiful one."

It made Lily laugh at him for being so unoriginal. "Right." She stirred her drink with her finger. "How do Indians feel about their mothers?"

"I loved mine. Is that the right answer?"

"I'll tell you what I've always heard about Indians." Lily put her elbows on the counter between them, her chin in her hands.

"I bet I know this." Henry's voice dropped to a whisper. "I bet I know exactly what you've always heard."

"I've heard that sexual technique is passed on from father to son." Lily took a drink. "And you know what I've always thought? I've always thought a lot of mistakes must be perpetuated this way. A culture that passed on sexual technique from *mother* to son would impress me."

"So there's a middleman," said Henry. "Give it a chance. It still could work." The phone rang at the end of the bar. Egan went to answer it. Henry leaned forward, staring at her intently. "You have incredible eyes," he said, and she looked away from him immediately. "I can't decide what color they are."

Lily laughed again, this time at herself. She didn't want to respond to such a transparent approach, but she couldn't help

it. The laugh had a hysterical edge. She got to her feet. “Take off your pants and I’ll buy you a drink,” she said and enjoyed the startled look on Henry’s face. She held on to the counter, brushing against him by accident on her way to the back of the bar.

“End of the counter and left,” the bartender told her, hanging up the phone. She gripped each stool and spun it as she went by, hand over hand, for as long as they lasted. She made it the last few steps to the bathroom on her own. The door was marked with the silhouette of a figure wearing a skirt. Lily fell through it and into the stall. On one side of her *Brian is a fox* was scratched into the wall. On the other were the words *Chastity chews*. A picture accompanied the text, another picture of a woman, presumably chewing chastity. She had many arms like Kali and a great many teeth. A balloon rose from her mouth. *Hi*, she said simply.

Lily spent some time at the mirror, fixing her hair. She blew a breath into her hand and tried to smell it, but all she could smell was the lavatory soap. She supposed this was good. “I’m going home,” she announced, back in the bar. “I’ve enjoyed myself.”

She felt around in her purse for her keys. Henry held them up and rang them together. “I can’t let you drive home. You hardly made it to the bathroom.”

“I can’t let you take me. I don’t know you well enough.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that. Looks like you have to walk.”

Lily reached for the keys and Henry closed his fist about them. “It’s only about six blocks,” he said.

“It’s dark. I could be assaulted.”

“Not in Two Trees.”

“Anywhere. Are you kidding?” Lily smiled at him. “Give me the keys. I already have a blister.”

“I could give you the keys and you could hit a tree not two blocks from here. I don’t think I could live with myself. Egan will back me up on this.” Henry gestured with his closed fist toward the bartender.

“Damn straight,” said Egan. “There’s no way you’re driving home. You’ll be fine walking. And, anyway, Jep’s come for you.” Lily could see a vague doggy shape through the screen door out of the bar.

“Hello, Jep,” Lily said. The figure through the screen wagged from side to side. “All right.” Lily turned back to the men at the bar. “All right,” she conceded. “I’m walking. The men in this town are pitiless, but the dogs are fine. You’ve got to love the dogs.”

She swung the screen door open. Jep backed out of the way. “Tomorrow,” Egan called out behind her, “you go see those caves.”

Jep walked beside her on the curbside, between her and the street. Most of the houses were closed and dark. In the front of one a woman sat on a porch swing, holding a baby and humming to it. Some heartbreak song. By the time Lily reached Mattie’s she felt sober again.

Mattie was sitting in the living room. “Egan called,” she said. “I made you some tea. I know it’s not what you think you want, but it has some herbs in it, very effective against hangover. You won’t be sorry you drank it. It’s a long hike to the caves. You want to be rested.”

Lily sat on the couch beside her. “Thank you. You’re being very good to me, Mattie. I don’t deserve it. I’ve been behaving very badly.”

“Maybe it’s just my turn to be good,” said Mattie. “Maybe you just finished your turn. Did you ever get any dinner?”

“I think I may have had some pretzels.” Lily looked across the room to the phone, wondering if she were going to call David. She looked at the picture of the Madonna. It was not a very interesting one. Too sweet. Too much sweetness. “I should call my husband,” she told Mattie and didn’t move.

“Would you like me to leave you alone?”

“No,” said Lily. “It wouldn’t be that sort of call. David and I, we don’t have personal conversations.” She realized suddenly that she had left her wedding ring back at the bar on the cocktail napkin beside her empty glass.

“Is the marriage a happy one?” Mattie asked. “Forgive me if I’m prying. It’s just—well, here you are.”

“I don’t know,” said Lily.

Mattie put her arm around Lily and Lily leaned against her. “Loving is a lot harder for some people than for others,” she said. “And being loved can be hardest of all. Not for you, though. Not for a loving woman like you.”

Lily sat up and reached for her tea. It smelled of chamomile. “Mattie,” she said. She didn’t know how to explain. Lily felt that she often appeared to be a better person than she was. It was another affliction. In many ways Mattie’s analysis was true. Lily knew that her family and friends wondered how she lived with such a cold, methodical man. But there was another truth, too. Often, Lily set up little tests for David, tests of his sensitivity, tests of his commitment. She was always pleased when he failed them, because it proved the problems between them were still his fault. Not a loving thing to do. “Don’t make me out to be some saint,” she said.

She slept very deeply that night, dreaming on alcohol and tea, and woke up late in the morning. It was almost ten before she and Jep hit the trail. She watched for the painting on her way up this time, stopping to eat an identical lunch in a spot where she could look at it. Jep sat beside her, panting. They passed the rock overhang where she had eaten lunch the day before, finished the climb uphill, and started down. The drop-off was sharp; the terrain was dusty and uninviting, and Lily, who was tired of walking uphill, found it even harder to descend. When the trail stopped at a small hollow in the side of a rock, she decided she would rest and then go back. Everyone else might be excessively concerned that she see the caves, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She dropped the day pack on the ground and sat beside it. Jep raised his collie ear and wagged his tail. Turning, Lily was not at all surprised to see Henry coming down the hill, his hair loose and hanging

to his shoulders.

“So,” he said. “You found the caves without me.”

“You’re kidding.” Lily stood up. “This little scrape in the rock? This can’t be the famous Two Trees caves. I won’t believe it. Tell me there are real caves just around the next bend.”

“You need something more?” Henry asked. “This isn’t enough? You are a hard woman.”

“Oh, come on.” Lily flicked her hair out of her eyes. “Are you telling me people come from all over to see this?”

“It’s not the caves.” Henry was staring at her. She felt her face reddening. “It’s what happens in the caves.” He moved closer to her. “It’s what happens when a beautiful woman comes to the caves.” Lily let herself look right at his eyes. Inside his pupils, a tiny Lily looked back out.

“Stay away from me,” said Lily. Was she the kind of woman who would allow a strange man in a strange place to kiss her? Apparently so. Apparently she was the kind of woman who said no to nothing now. She reached out to Henry; she put one hand on the sleeve of his shirt, one hand on his neck, moved the first hand to his back. “I gave you my car and my wedding ring,” she told him. “What do you want now? What will satisfy you?” She kissed him first. They dropped to their knees on the hard floor of the cave. He kissed her back.

“We could go somewhere more comfortable,” said Lily. “No,” said Henry. “It has to be here.”

They removed their clothes and spread them about as padding. The shadow of the rock lengthened over them. Jep whined once or twice and then went to sleep at a safe distance. Lily couldn't relax. She let Henry work at it. She touched his face and kissed his hand. "Your father did a nice job," she told him, moving as close to his side as she could, holding herself against him. "You do that wonderfully." Henry's arm lay underneath her back. He lifted her with it, turning her so that she was on top of him, facing down. He took hold of her hair and pulled her face to his own, put his mouth on her mouth. Then he let her go, staring at her, holding the bits of hair about her face in his hands. "You are so beautiful," he said, and something broke inside her.

"Am I?" She was frightened because she suddenly needed to believe him, needed to believe that he might love her, whoever she was.

"Incredibly beautiful."

"Am I?" Don't say it if you don't mean it, she told him silently, too afraid to talk and almost crying. Don't make me want it if it's not there. Please. Be careful what you say.

"Incredibly beautiful." He began to move again inside her. "So beautiful." He watched her face. "So beautiful." He touched her breasts and then his eyes closed and his mouth rounded. She thought he might fly apart, his body shook so, and she held him together with her hands, kissed him until he stopped, and then kissed him again.

"I don't want to hurt you," Henry said.

It hurt Lily immediately, like a slap. So now she was the sort of woman men said this to. Well, she had no right to expect anything different from a man she didn't even know. She could have said it to him first if she'd thought of it. That would have been the smart thing to do. Nothing would have been stupider than needing him. What had she been thinking of? "But you will if you have to," she finished. "Right? Don't worry. I'm not making anything of this. I know what this is." She sat up and reached for Katherine's sweatshirt. She was cold and afraid to move closer to Henry. She was cold and she didn't want to be naked anymore.

"You sound angry," Henry said. "It's not that I couldn't love you. It's not that I don't already love you. Men always disappoint women. I'm not sure we can escape it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lily told him sharply. She put her head into the red tent of the sweatshirt and pulled it through. "I should have gotten your sexual history first," she added. "I haven't done this since the rules changed."

"I haven't been with a woman in ten years," Henry said. Lily looked at his face in surprise.

"Before that it was five years," he said. "And before that three, but that was two at once. That was the sixties. Before that it was fifteen years. And twenty before that. And two. And two. And before that almost a hundred."

Lily stood up, pulling on Katherine's jeans. "I should have gotten your psychiatric history first," she said. The faster she tried to dress, the more difficulties she had. She couldn't find

one of Katherine's socks. She was too angry and frightened to look among Henry's clothes. She put on Katherine's shoes without it. "Come on, Jep," she said.

"It can't mean anything," Henry told her.

"It didn't. Forget it." Lily left without the day pack. She hurried up the trail. Jep followed somewhat reluctantly. They made the crest of the hill; Lily looked behind her often to see if Henry was following. He wasn't. She went past the painting without stopping. Jep preceded her through the gate into Mattie's backyard.

Mattie and Katherine were waiting in the house. Katherine put her arms around her. "You went to the caves," Katherine said. "Didn't you? I can tell."

"Of course she did," said Mattie. She stroked Lily's hair. "Of course she did."

Lily stood stiffly inside Katherine's arms. "What the hell is going on?" she asked. She pushed away and looked at the two women. "You sent me up there, didn't you? You did! You and Egan and probably Allison Beale, too. Go to the caves, go to the caves. That's all I've heard since I got here. You dress me like some virginal sacrifice, fatten me up with Hostess cupcakes, and send me to him. But why?"

"It's a miracle," said Mattie. "You were chosen. Can't you feel it?"

"I let some man pick me up in a bar. He turns out to be a nut." Lily's voice rose higher. "Where's the miracle?"

"You slept with Henry," said Mattie. "Henry chose *you*."

That's the miracle."

Lily ran up the stairs. She stripped Katherine's clothes off and put her own on. Mattie came and stood in the doorway. Lily walked around her and out of the room.

"Listen to me, Lily," Mattie said. "You don't understand. He gave you as much as he can give anyone. That's why in the painting the woman's hands are empty. But that's *his* trap. *His* curse. Not yours. When you see that, you'll forgive him. Katherine and Allison and I all forgave him. I know you will too, a loving woman like you." Mattie reached out, grabbing Lily's sleeve. "Stay here with us. You can't go back to your old life. You won't be able to. You've been chosen."

"Look," said Lily. She took a deep breath and wiped at her eyes with her hands. "I wasn't chosen. Quite the opposite. I was picked up and discarded. By a man in his thirties and not the same man you slept with. Maybe you slept with a god. You go ahead and tell yourself that. What difference does it make? You were still picked up and discarded." She shook loose of Mattie and edged down the stairs. She expected to be stopped, but she wasn't. At the front door, she turned. Mattie stood on the landing behind her. Mattie held out her hands. Lily shook her head. "I think you're pretty pathetic, if you want to know the truth. I'm not going to tell myself a lot of lies or listen to yours. I know who I am. I'm going. I won't be back. Don't expect me."

Her car waited at the front of the house, just where she had parked it the first night. She ran from the porch. The keys

were inside. Left and left again, past the bar where the martini glass tipped darkly in the window, and onto the freeway. Lily accelerated way past eighty and no one stopped her. The foothills sped by and became cities. When she felt that she was far enough away to be safe from small-town Madonnas and immortals who were cursed to endure centuries of casual sex with as many loving women as possible—which was damn few, in fact, if you believed the numbers they gave you—she slowed down. She arrived home in the early evening. As she was walking in the door, she noticed she was wearing her wedding ring.

David was sitting on the couch reading a book. “Here I am, David,” Lily said. “I’m here. I got a speeding ticket. I never looked to see how much it was for. I lost my ring playing poker, but I mortgaged the house and won it back. I lost a lot more, though. I lost my head. I’m halfhearted now. In fact, I’m not at all the woman I was. I’ve got to be honest with you.”

“I’m glad you’re home,” said David. He went back to his book.

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Karen Joy Fowler is the author of five novels and three short story collections. Her first novel, *Sarah Canary*, won the Commonwealth medal for best first novel by a Californian; her third, *Sister Noon*, was a finalist for the

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The Bolt Tightener

Sarena Ulibarri

“There are one thousand eight hundred bolts total,” the old man said. “You’ll work every night until sunrise. Always go in order. Never skip a bolt.”

“Is that all?” Chaun asked.

They treaded water on the inside of the seawall, the old man twisting one of the giant bolts with sharp, seasoned movements.

“That’s enough, believe me. At first, mark where you left off for the next day, but a few times around and you’ll get to know them like your own family.”

Chaun looked at the line of cold metal bolts, doubting he could ever look on them the same way he did his young wife Lin or their baby, just born and brown as a chestnut. He had accepted this strange job to support them.

The seawall had been there for as long as Chaun or his parents or grandparents could remember. It created a u-shape around the bay, closing the city off from the ocean. Legend said that years ago the lock would open now and then to admit a ship full of ghostly white men who brought fabric and exotic meats and traded with the people of the city for rice and sweet fruits. But even the lock had been closed for a century or more.

When the sky lightened, Chaun and the old man pulled

themselves onto the floating walkway that ran along the inside perimeter of the seawall. Chaun's skin felt puckered from the water. The old man's was wrinkled leather; a web of thick scars covered his legs.

"What will you do now?" Chaun asked.

They followed the floating walkway to a small office at the edge of the beach.

"I'm going up to the mountains," the old man said, "to get as far away from the sea as I can."

"Is there anything dangerous in the water?"

The old man was silent for a moment.

"Just—be cautious around bolt number 841."

Before Chaun could ask what had made him so bitter, the old man handed him an envelope full of money. "Every morning, this will be waiting here."

"So much, every day?"

"Every day," the old man said. "No one knows what you do, but it's the most important job in the city."

The next night Chaun slid quietly out of bed, kissed Lin's sleeping face and slipped on the wet suit he'd bought for his new job. It had cost most of his first payment, but he was young and afraid Lin would shy away from his touch if his skin became tough like the old man's.

He started at bolt number one. It was difficult to swim with the tool, a heavy metal octagon that fitted over the bolts. A lever extended from one side and it took his full body weight to pull the lever and tighten the bolt. Each bolt was far

enough apart that he had to swim several strokes between them.

By bolt twenty-nine, Chaun had developed a rhythm to his work. What began as tedium dissolved into meditation. He found peace in the repetition and the cold water that lapped around his body. When the rays of sun peeked over the top of the seawall he pulled himself back onto the walkway, marked his place on his waterproof map and went home to have breakfast with his family.

On the second night, he was jarred from his peaceful groove by a sudden boom: something crashing against the outside of the seawall. The reverberations knocked him backward. The water on his side of the seawall sloshed over the floating walkway. The boom happened once more and then stopped, and Chaun waited for the vibrations to fade away before he returned to his work.

“The ocean,” he whispered to the bolts. “The ocean waves.”

The water in the bay was always dull and steady, so he had never seen real ocean waves. He pictured the tiny waves in his child’s bathwater, imagined them magnified to a size that would require this metal seawall to protect the city.

During subsequent nights, he searched for a pattern to the crashes against the outer seawall, but found none. They came whether it was clear or raining, windy or calm. Some nights they did not come at all. The crashes bothered him less the more he heard them.

Chaun found he was getting stronger. He swam with more ease than he had since he was a child, and it took less effort to hoist the tool up to the bolts. With the money he earned, he bought a new bassinet from the mountain traders and Lin bought richer foods from the market.

One day he made it nearly to dawn in his peace. The sky was a deep purple-blue; he almost didn't need his headlamp. He pulled the lever of his tool and was about to remove it to swim to the next one when he felt something move around his legs. He stopped and looked down. Yellow tendrils swam in the water. At first he thought it was the reflection of his headlamp, but then they solidified. Two bulbous eyes and sharp teeth appeared.

Chaun yanked the tool off the bolt and swam for the walkway. He pulled himself up, watching the water. The yellow tentacles disappeared back into the depths.

Chaun waited for the sun to brighten the sky a bit more. He checked his waterproof map. Bolt 841. He slid as slowly as he could back into the water and tightened the next several bolts.

He should have asked the old man more questions.

Lin nursed the baby in their kitchen and Chaun looked out the window. He could see the strip of calm beach with the seawall standing guard. There was nowhere in the city where one could see over top of it. Even if one climbed the mountains that bordered the other side of the city, the seawall would still dominate the horizon.

“I never noticed the seawall, really,” Chaun said, “It was always there, but I never cared.”

“Do you know what’s on the other side?” Lin asked. “Did they tell you when you were hired?”

“They told me nothing except how to tighten the bolts.”

“I think it would be exciting to go over to the other side. See the ocean, without any walls, just reaching out to infinity.” She stroked the baby’s dark hair. “I’d never go, of course, even if I had the chance. But I’m sure it would be sublime.”

Finally, Chaun reached the end of the seawall. Had he done in a few weeks what the old man had failed to do in forty years? He went to the office where he picked up his check to ask what he was supposed to do next.

“Start again at number one,” the guard said.

Chaun jumped in the water at the start of the seawall and checked the bolt. It was as loose as it had been on his first night. Looser, even. He tightened, swam, and tightened some more.

His meditation dissolved back into tedium. He slept more during the day, annoyed when the baby’s cry would wake him. His irritation grew the closer his nightly rounds brought him to bolt 841.

Nervously, he approached number 841 for the second time, pointing the beam of his headlamp into the water. No writhing, no teeth or eyes—not yet. He hefted the tool up to the bolt and began to turn.

A single spiny tentacle rose silently from the water and curled around the lever of his tool. Chaun froze. Another tentacle brushed the leg of his wet suit but he resisted the urge to kick. He waited, barely breathing, using his grip on the handle to keep his head above water. The tentacle slithered off the tool and slipped away.

Weeks later when he encountered 841, he nearly escaped with no encounter, but just as he turned the last rotation, he felt the prickly tentacles wrap around his ankle. He panicked, kicked, and swam for the walkway. He pulled his leg out of the water—and the thing with it. The yellow head dangled upside down. Its mouth stretched open to an unnatural size, showing jagged vampiric teeth. Chaun kicked again and the tentacle squeezed tighter; another snaked toward his other leg.

He hit the thing's bulbous head with his tool, but the flesh gave and it seemed unharmed. He jerked his free leg away from the approaching tentacle and clawed at the one around his other leg. The fabric of his wet suit tore, his foot exposed. But then the thing suddenly slipped back into the water.

From then on, Chaun skipped bolt 841. With each rotation, he finished bolt 840, then swam to the walkway and walked to 842, giving the creature a wide berth.

It was after he had passed over it twice that the problems began.

Each time he restarted his cycle, the bolts were just as loose as when he'd last seen them, but this time, when he reached bolt 800, he had less to tighten. By 825, he noticed

that the metal seemed strained, as if something were pushing on it from the outside. At 830, water trickled in. A tiny stream oozed from the seam in the metal, the gap not wide enough for a finger. It took him twice as long to tighten these bolts. He used all his strength to lever the tool and by the time the sun rose, he was as exhausted as he had been his first few nights.

The next evening he dreamt of water gushing through the seawall and flooding the city. He woke earlier than normal and came down to the seawall to find that his dream was not far from reality. Water dripped through the seam, and the gap around bolt 835 was almost large enough to fit his hand. He attacked the bolts with renewed vigor, determined not to let the water win. Had he really allowed in a few months what the old man had prevented for forty years?

“Never skip a bolt,” the old man had said.

It was all because of that damned octopus, Chaun thought. He remembered the scars on the old man’s legs, the shredded ankle of his own wet suit. Why should such a thing be allowed to live? Chaun reached bolt 839 that night, managing to seal the gap enough that the water barely trickled through. He would deal with the monster at 841 the next night.

Lin’s best kitchen knife was his weapon of choice. He lifted it from the drawer while Lin and the baby slept, broke the broom handle and tied the knife to the end of it. He held it above his head in the moonlight and felt a primitive power

surge through his body. Chaun had never wielded a weapon before.

There were ancient pictures in the city museum of men in boats, in the time before the seawall, using weapons like this against massive sea animals. Chaun lowered his blade and began his trek to the seawall, resisting the urge to yell a primitive war cry to the sleeping city.

He went directly to bolt 841 and left his tool on the walkway. He would tighten nothing until the monster was dead. From the walkway he gazed down, his headlamp illuminating his own reflection on the surface of the calm water. How deep was the water here? At least as deep as the seawall was high, he guessed. He dipped the weapon, cutting the water with the knife. His reflection faded into ripples.

Nothing happened at first. Chaun made a few more splashes. He would jump in if he had to, but if he could summon the creature and stay on the walkway, he had the advantage.

His legs went out from under him before he realized the tentacle had snaked around his ankle. He hit the walkway with a painful thump and the weapon rolled out of his hands. Just before the tentacles pulled him into the water, he grasped the weapon and pulled it with him.

He thrashed in the water, stabbing blindly. Water poured into his nose; salt stung his eyes. The tentacle released. Chaun swam back to the walkway.

Chaun had just placed his hands to pull himself up when

the tentacle resurfaced, wrapping around the handle of his homemade harpoon. He twisted the knife down on it. The dismembered tentacle flopped on the walkway like a grotesque fish and the stump slithered back into the water. He pulled himself onto the walkway and crouched there, hugging his arms around his knees, his chin on the harpoon handle. He saw the creature's face beneath the water, the horrible human-like eyes, the menacing razor-teeth, but Chaun couldn't move his limbs to deliver a blow. He shivered, and the creature disappeared.

He sat there until he stopped shivering. A steady waterfall poured through the gap at bolt 841. The neglected bolt stuck out nearly a foot away from the wall.

Once more, Chaun thought. He stirred the water with the tip of the knife again, watching more closely this time.

He saw the teeth first, the mouth stretched unnaturally wide. The teeth drew closer and then the mass of tentacles undulated around the face. Chaun aimed at its center and stabbed. He felt the weapon strike, and he pulled back and stabbed again. Tentacle tips rose out of the water in an obscene dance of surrender and he stabbed one more time. The water was cloudy and he could see no face or teeth. The tentacles sunk under the surface and Chaun sat back, gripping the weapon to his chest.

Then the crashes began. Just as he'd heard so many nights before, the violent crashing of a massive body against the outside of the seawall. The seawall shook and the volume

of water from the gap increased. Chaun watched as the next crash jarred bolt 841 to a diagonal. It hung precariously from its last threads.

“No!” Chaun yelled.

The next crash dislodged the bolt. It splashed into the water.

He dove after the bolt, but the heavy metal sank and he couldn't dive fast enough to save it. Another crash reverberated underwater and he felt dizzy with the shock of it.

Chaun resurfaced and swam for the walkway. He hefted the tool and frantically swam back to the nearest bolt to try to tighten it. Each new crash threatened to jar the tool out of his hands, send it to the depths like the lost bolt.

It was too much. The crashes came faster now, and stronger. The bolt he was working on slipped out, nearly knocking him on the head. Chaun swam for the walkway. There was a horrible creaking sound as the gap widened beyond repair. He looked back.

A single yellow tentacle protruded through the gap. Rough, spiny, and a hundred times bigger than the one that had wrapped around his ankle.

Chaun turned and dove off the walkway, swimming as fast as he could toward the beach.

The sky lightened with the first hint of dawn, and Chaun imagined Lin rising to the baby's morning cries and looking out to see the city being consumed. The crashes continued and another metallic creak betrayed his failure. Maybe, Chaun

thought, maybe he could get there fast enough to take Lin and the baby to the safety of the mountains.

He swam, and the seawall creaked again.

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Ash Minette

Felicity Savage

My dress for the baron of Helmany's ball was violet sateen, off the shoulders, with frothy lace cuffs to conceal my cracked fingers. It was the best I could manage in a week, sewing late at night after I finished the work I brought home from Madame Carolla's. Libby had found ten yards of pink silk, very cheap, but unflattering to her complexion. Never mind, she said, and I whipped it up into a gown in the latest mode. She modeled it for me after her last client of the night had departed. Ella was asleep in her boxroom, safe from the improprieties of her elder sisters; shutters rattled belowstairs as the landlord closed up his tavern. The candlelight in our attic erased the imperfections from Libby's round, heavy features: She seemed time-smoothened, a madonna of golden stone. But when she posed for me in the dress, her over-ripeness—the way she thrust out her chest, the coy glances—spoil the illusion, corrupted it with indecent knowledge.

“Well,” I said tentatively.

“Oh, don't bother.” She waved my judgment aside. “I know it doesn't suit me. But that really isn't important, as long as it doesn't gape open down the back. It'll be such fun. The other girls standing outside the gates, shivering in their bare shoulders and their openwork slippers, and me *inside*. For once, inside.” She twirled, ducking to avoid the sloping

rafters. “I think I’ve got enough put by for us to hire a carriage. I’ll wave to Francine and Sharon and Marie as they flutter their eyelashes at the fine gentlemen.”

I shook out my skirts and ran my fingers through my golden hair. It is my one beauty. “What about me? Am I alluring?” Please tell me so, I prayed. Even if it’s not true.

“It’s a beautiful dress, Minette, as good as anything Madame Carolla can make.”

“But how do I look?” I lifted up the hair off the back of my neck and tried to imitate her come-hither smile. “I want to be *wanted*, like you . . .”

She let out a giggle, and gathered me in her arms. Her hot breath tickled my neck, smelling faintly of codfish. “You don’t want to be like me, Minette darling. You want to be beautiful. And that’s your problem.” Disappointment hit me hard in the stomach. Libby went on, “You’re nineteen. Isn’t it time to live instead of dreaming? You don’t have to be a mousy little seamstress all your life.”

“I’m so tired of being despised,” I said passionately. “I’m jostled in the street, my purse is stolen, jokes are made about me in my hearing, because I’m a plain, poor woman, worthy of nothing but contempt. If I looked like Ella I would be happy. She has everything, and doesn’t know it.”

Libby laughed. “Darling Ella hasn’t got a grain of sense in her head. No, Minette, you know who my favorite sister is.”

“That doesn’t help. I want to be loved, Libby. And not just by you.”

Ashamed that I had confessed my secret longings, I fell silent, running my fingers over the low-quality sateen of my gown. A ray of pink dawn came through the window and made a mockery of our candle, showing up the cracks of age in Libby's face.

We Ingles sisters were all born blanks. As we grew, we developed certain differences. I believe that these started with the differences in our faces. I remember Libby five years old, wriggling while Nanny dressed her in a small replica of a lady's attire; I, three, tumbling determinedly toward the nursery grate; Ella cooing, pink-faced, in the midwife's arms. The day she was born, it became clear to our parents that their three *tabulae rasae* were not crafted with equal workmanship. "I have given birth to an angel," my mother sighed (so Father told us), and curled up in the great bed, its linen all bloodstained from her birthing, and went to sleep.

I crept upstairs with Libby, after the relatives in their sweeping dresses of black had come and gone. We didn't understand what had happened. We pushed open the oaken door. Far away across the carpet, Mother lay between rumped white sheets, stiff as a clothespeg doll, unmoving, her lips slathered with scarlet to make her look alive. Her hands lay like milky glass on the sheet. Nanny in her high cap came and hustled us away. I remember the hot smell of her starch. She murmured to newborn Ella in her arms, as she swept us toward the nursery: "Poor thing, poor love-a-dove. Growing up all alone, your father a clever man, but unfit to care for so

much as a mouse . . .” She turned on us, her meaty face fierce. “Look after Baby. You two great lumps of girls, you must promise you’ll love her in place of the mother she doesn’t have.”

We stumbled over our tongues to promise. We were three and five years old.

And though I may complain, though I may envy her her face, I love Ella as if she were my own child. I feel a swell of pride when she walks ahead of me into the market, singing a little tune, her step jaunty, a wicker basket swinging on her arm. And the stallkeepers and matrons and beggar-boys fall silent.

Nanny must have known she would be dismissed. It seemed to us as if Mother’s death pulled a brick out from the bottom of Father’s elaborate financial pyramid. And indeed it was Mother who had the noble title; Father was merely a clever man. We moved to a smaller house, skimmed meals, darned clothes, heated cow’s milk for Ella. In the vague way children do, we came to realize just how slender a base (like that of a gyroscope) our luxurious lifestyle had balanced on. When I was ten, Father ceased to work, even as a solicitor, by which means he had kept up our dignity. We moved to the city. His sole comforts now were the kindness which comes in brown glass bottles—and Ella, who had grown into a spritely child, with hair like golden mist and eyes like summer skies.

When I was sixteen, the brown bottles got the better of him. We, the bereaved, leased this apartment. With every

move, we had sunk lower in society, and this district is in the center of the city: riddled with vice and illicit pleasures, but possessing a veneer of patched respectability. The apartment has only three rooms, and the kitchen is no wider than an armspan, but Ella still complains how much work it is to keep house. This whining is the way, I believe, in which she works out her grief for Father. I work fourteen hours a day, in the recesses of Madame Carolla's Dress Shop. Libby works at night, in this very attic, or sometimes in alleys. She gave up hope of marrying because she had no dowry, and now she says she wouldn't if she were given the choice.

We have been here three years.

The Baron is a foreigner. His country lies east of here, ringed by mountains, the hills furry with trees. I have heard that his hair is the color of black earth and his eyes like sapphires. His list of ladies and gentlemen in Society must be sadly out of date, for when he prepared to hold a winter ball in our city, he sent an invitation to Father "and his lovely wife Marguerite." It found us just a week ago, grimy and tattered. I had to give tuppence to the urchin who brought it.

"We deserve to go," Libby and I told each other. "We work hard. We should give ourselves a treat." (Although the preparations so far have been more a misery than a treat.) "We are going."

But Ella is not. All these years we have striven to preserve her innocence, and we will not have it shattered now. From our life here in Riverbank, we know the rich are more

perverted than the poor, or maybe they're just less ashamed of showing it: Libby says the lord or two she has had wanted things of her that no Riverbank man would dream of. We refuse to expose Ella to such sordidity. I may be timid, but I understand what is happening around me, I wear no rose-tinted spectacles. *She* knows what goes on upstairs when she is asleep, but I don't think she envisions the act. Like a child, she romanticizes it.

But she was Father's favorite, and ever since babyhood he filled her head with tales of the old life, when full-bearded gentlemen escorted tinkling ladies to dinner, and music flowed out of the windows of our mansion. This, she says, is the greatest disappointment of her existence. She sulks in the kitchen, pressing her face against the grimy glass, so that the prentices passing in the street gawp up at her; and then, diverted, she flirts with them through the window. She does not understand. "I want to go," she whines over and over.

We stand in the doorway with our ugly old wraps over our dresses, watching for the carriage through the gusting snow. Libby's patience is worn to a thread. "Absolutely not," she snaps. "Now get back upstairs, you'll catch your death."

"Minette . . . ?" Ella begged. "Pleeeeeease take me with you! I want to meet a handsome noble, and marry him, and live in a mansion . . ."

"Good Lord, child," I said, my voice high with excitement. "Where did you get *that* idea?"

"I'm not as stupid as you think." Ella glowered, beautiful

even in the lanternlight of the entryway, her lower lip stuck out, her brown dress cinched around the waist with Father's old belt. "I listen to people talking. Sharon Cooke told me nobles are kinder and handsomer than Riverbank men. She said if you look pretty and can dance well, you stand a chance of netting one, no matter what your birth." She outstretched her arms and broke into a waltz, there in the cramped passage. She would have made a brilliant *danseuse*, among many other things. "And anyway, I *am* born to it, even if our fortunes have fallen."

"Oh, will you stop your capering." Libby's teeth chattered. She gave Ella a push. "I've worked with Sharon many a night. She likes to believe birth doesn't count, but it does. Birth and breeding. The lords might fuck her, but they wouldn't marry her if she was the most ravishing beauty in the city."

Ella's eyes widened. "Sharon would never work with you." Libby winced involuntarily. Ella said with unintentional, adolescent cruelty, "She's got real employment. She knows things. And she's right! Nothing else counts, as long as you're pretty enough!"

She fled upstairs, crying.

After a silence, "We *do* deserve it," I repeated, trying to convince myself. "We work our hands to the bone to buy bread, while she sits at home, dusting the mantelpiece. We *do* deserve to go."

"Yes." Libby wiped one eye, careful not to smudge her

powder. “We do. But that was hard. Here—here’s the carriage.” She stepped into the street and hailed it. Pulled up sharp, the horses pranced, tossing their heads, as if they considered it beneath their dignity to venture this deep into the bowels of the city.

Inside the carriage, I gazed up through the leaded panes. Ella sat with her chin on her hands in the boxroom window, silhouetted against the amber glow of a candle. Now and again she dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. “She’s crying,” I said. “But she knows we’re watching. Don’t fret.” My excitement was returning. Tonight, I thought, I would enjoy myself—and just maybe I would change my life. I did not know how or where, but perhaps I would find love.

Here is the story of what happened while we were at the ball, as I had it from Ella the next day:

After we had clattered away, she being no longer observed, she started to leave the window. But the snow stopped, and she became fascinated with the shadow she cast on the white street. She got out her little treasures—a fan, a pair of drop earrings that had been Mother’s, a comb Father had bought her—and experimented with her image, piling her hair on top of her head, half-hiding her face, glancing ingenuously over her bare shoulder. It was thus Duchess Chiliver saw her. The foreign Duchess was trotting along the street in her eggshell carriage, badly out of temper, late for the Baron’s ball, not even sure whether she wanted to go. (You must understand that here I am using my imagination.) Her

coachman was new to the city, and had lost his way in the slums. “What is that enchanting little picture in the window?” the Duchess said to her maid-in-waiting. “Stop the carriage! Marianne, dear, go and knock on the door.”

“Madame, the ground is wet. I will spoil these lovely slippers you gave me.”

“Nonsense. It’s only snow. See what that girl really looks like—if she is as lovely as her silhouette. If she’s only a courtesan whiling away time between customers, at least you can ask her which way it is out of these awful slums.”

When the maid was gone, the Duchess sat back, fanning her plump, bepowdered face. “These locals,” she muttered to herself. “They can’t tell a leper from a Marquise. I do hope . . .” Her entrepreneurial eye had seen a wealth of possibilities. Also an excuse for being late to the ball. She was renowned for her shrewd choice of protégées: They had become, among others, a famous ballerina and a politician’s mistress.

The carriage door swung open, letting in a blast of icy air. The maid’s face was bright pink, but not from the cold. “Madame,” she gasped, “you must come and see—”

Behind her, an angel hovered in the entryway, her golden hair haloed in the light.

The baron’s mansion was outside the city, on the edge of a frozen lake. Lanterns on flower-stem-like wooden poles illuminated the lawns, which sloped down to the ice. Candles garlanded the trees. The French windows stood wide open,

but the house was heated so efficiently by its many fires that, coming inside, one passed from cold to hot as if walking into a sweat-lodge. A buffet supper was spread in the dining room. In the ballroom, an orchestra played on and on and on. I thought I should never escape the strains of those minuets and fandangoes. I hear them in my head still.

The flounced, ruffled dresses of the Ladies and Marquises and Baronesses floated on the streams of sound, like miniature sailing ships. Supported by their upright black counterparts, they bobbed into every corner, gathered in backwaters talking animatedly, spilled out over the frost-tinged lawns. Bare arms glowed pale in the shadows where perversions were already being practiced. The faces of the women were no more extraordinary than ours: but they had the courtesan's art of disguise. What we saw were elaborate, laughing contrivances. The men embraced them lustfully, but this seduction was itself contrived. I believe that this is why Ella was such a success. She was not contrived at all.

Until about eleven o'clock, Libby stayed by my side. She was as shy as I, not because her gown was inferior to the ladies' (I keep that tiny scrap of pride), but because she had no one else to talk to. From the moment we came in the door, and the haughty doorman made us produce the tattered parchment to prove our identities, we were out of place, like daisies in a prize flower arrangement. The ladies embraced, the lords shook hands and exchanged glasses of champagne; we caught snatches of conversation by which we knew they

had all been to the same parties last night, last week, last year. Perfumes washed over us like an aromatic rainbow. We had thought it indelicate to wear any, because Libby and the girls outside the gates doused themselves with scent of a night, to disguise other smells. We had been wrong.

Every move we made seemed wrong.

When the Baron stretched out his hand to us, Libby grinned and kissed him on both cheeks as if they were old friends. Her smile was almost silly. Mortified, I slid away from behind her. But my head was spinning; I do not know if I should have had the strength to touch him. The inside of my chest prickled slowly, in waves. My eyes were dazzled.

He was the most suave of all the nobles; the most elegant of the gentlemen; he had the most delightful foreign accent. Neat teeth, violet eyes, dark curls of hair on the backs of his hands. I had not touched him, not spoken to him nor made eye contact. I watched as he turned and bowed and kissed hands, jousting good-humoredly with his friends. I wanted to wrap myself around him. I wanted—I wanted—my stomach was hollow with wanting.

I was in no condition to talk. Libby's attempts at chatter produced raised eyebrows and silences like clear puddles. Blushing, we withdrew to a dimly lit alcove behind the orchestra. Libby was subdued. I trembled gently, my mind pulsing.

At last Libby said, "Damn it if I'm not going out there, Minette. I know how to do one thing well, and I'm going to

do it.”

I clutched at her. She was my flotsam in a sea of helplessness, of melting dreams. “Don’t leave me alone!”

“Don’t be so shy, Minette. If you don’t talk to the gentlemen, how are you ever going to make one love you?”

“I’ve given up *that* hope,” I said wretchedly. “I only want one, and I can never have him.”

“Not the Baron. Not even you are so silly.”

I looked up at her with guilty eagerness. She knew about men and women; perhaps she could help me . . .

She blew out breath in exasperation. “Oh yes, you look just like a fine lady of Helmany,” she said, and turned and strode away.

The group of young gentlemen she joined looked as nervous as I. Perhaps it was their first dance, too. I had not a jot of compassion to spare for them. In the golden light of the chandeliers, I saw that Libby was presenting herself as a whore, her body language advertising it clearly in the delicate atmosphere of the ball. She captured one of the boys with ease. Heads turned as he took her arm, and I heard murmurs of surprise, but neither noble nor servant moved to throw her out. I do not think they connected her with the gauche lady who had shaken the Baron’s hand. The gap between guest and courtesan, through in private it might not exist, was publicly impossible for them to bridge.

The Baron stood not twenty feet from me, talking to a pretty, red-haired woman seated on a couch. She looked up

into his face, her body angled toward him: At first they seemed intimate, and I could have sworn I saw them brush lips, but then one corner of his mouth developed a sardonic twist, so it seemed that he mocked her with every word. My heart lightened. Eventually he chucked the woman under the chin, quite hard, so that her head snapped back, and strolled away. The red-haired woman sat very still for a minute, then dropped her forehead to the back of the couch.

Libby reappeared and began to work the edges of the dance floor. From my hiding place, I saw that her lip rouge was smeared.

A murmur arose by the doors. I looked that way wearily, my eyes blurred with other people's perfume and unshed tears. The guests parted to let her step onto the dance floor. Floating in a mist of naïve awe, in a gown the color of her eyes, with pearls around her throat, she waved to them all, a proud little flutter of fingers.

“Baron,” trilled a woman's voice, “look here at what I found, in the city, not an hour's drive away. Doesn't she remind you of my little goose girl, and the others?”

She danced without stopping all evening. If the plump, white-gowned Duchess had not early on taken charge of her schedule, I think she would have given a dance to every gentleman who asked. Now and again she stopped to accept champagne from the servants, who practically crawled at her feet, grinning like pet dogs. The Marquises and Countesses watched her hostilely. Unaware that she was envied, she

smiled at them all—and then, captivated by her sweetness, they had to smile back. She waved at Libby, and would have dashed to meet her, bubbling with excitement, but Libby ducked under people’s arms and out of the ballroom. She knew *that* would have been the end of Ella’s popularity.

“Who was that, my lady?” a gentleman asked her.

Ella looked as if she were about to tell the truth, then she tittered. “Someone I thought I knew. Nobody, my lord.”

Later, of course, she and the Baron danced. They drifted past my hiding place, twined in each other’s arms. Their blue eyes were locked. His hand trembled, splayed like a hairy starfish on her back. Ella chewed her lip. Both of them looked as if they were in pain: bruises in sensitive places, perhaps, that hurt when they moved. The orchestra played slower and slower for them, violins wailing like grasshoppers in the forests. I put my knuckles to my eyes and wept.

Libby appeared at my side, breathing hard. “We’re going home.”

“What, aren’t you making as much here as you would in the Golden Hog?” I said viciously through my tears.

She indicated her bosom. Five or six strands of jewels dripped into her cleavage. “They keep them in their pockets just for gifts to courtesans. No, it’s that I can’t stand to think of you here in the shadows, crying your heart out over that ugly little Baron. Will you fetch Ella or shall I?”

“How can you talk of him like that?” I sobbed. “He’s the

most beautiful man in the room!”

“He’s cruel and stupid. If I didn’t love Ella so much, I’d say they suit each other nicely. But she doesn’t understand what she’d be getting into, she doesn’t *see*. I wouldn’t leave her with this lot for a minute. Look at their teeth. The minute they get her alone, they’ll tear her to pieces.” She shuddered. Her words were so heartfelt that I scrutinized the ballroom again. Everyone was watching Ella, yes. Could I possibly have misread their indulgence and admiration?

“I want to watch him.” I followed the Baron with a yearning gaze. “Just a little longer . . .”

“Ella! Ella!” Libby shouted, flinging away from me. “We’re going home!” Our sister posed on the far side of the dance floor, surrounded by a worshipful court of young gentlemen. She was refusing their offers of drinks because the Baron had just slipped away for a minute to get her something. Her cheeks were flushed, her teeth flashed. “Come on, Ella!” Libby grabbed her and started pulling her straight across the floor.

“No! Don’t! Libby—”

“We’re leaving.”

Ella twisted in Libby’s grasp. “Come for me, Baron!” she cried out to the crowd. “Please! Soon!”

A bitter taste came up into my mouth. The gaudily colored dresses swam before my eyes. My head spun with the mixture of perfumes as I stumbled along in Libby’s wake. Before I knew it, we were hurrying down the broad steps, snow

whirling around us. Icy cold knifed into me. “Goddamn it, where’s the carriage?” Libby squinted left and right through the snow, gripping our hands tightly. Ella was crying, and I suspect I was too. “Coachman!” Libby screamed. “There he is!” She dragged us across the drive, practically under the feet of the blowing, stamping horses, and pushed us bodily into the snug interior just as a party of gentlemen burst out of the mansion. The door slammed.

Ella huddled small, crying uncontrollably.

“Whatever’s wrong? Go, coachman! To Riverbank! Ella, darling, what is it?”

“Leave me—alone! I’ve lost—my shoe—” Ella gasped. “I love him so much—I didn’t tell him—goodbye—”

We knew she was not crying for want of the shoe. But one of her feet *was* bleeding, peeking out from under the pearl-trimmed hem, her toes cut by the gravel under the snow.

Madame Carolla’s shop buzzed with customers spreading gossip. The Baron of Helmany had mounted a search throughout the city. He swore he would find the girl who had dropped the slipper on the steps of his mansion, or die trying. Every golden-haired woman who aspired to a barony was queueing up to try to force her foot into the shoe. “It is ridiculous,” sniffed Madame Carolla. “All nobles are crazy, and those females trying on the shoe are worse.”

“Oh, but it’s so romantic,” said one of the girls stitching beside me. “Do you know, he says that if she doesn’t come to him, he will search all the houses in the city until he finds

her?”

When I got home, I found Ella singing and sighing in turns over the housework. Having been starved for an audience, she immediately fell to prattling about the ball; it drove me away from her, to the attic. Crushing my face into the pillow, I writhed on my bed, hating myself, hating the face that had not given me a chance to win the Baron. I would have chopped my nose off if I thought it would do any good. His face hung before me, so close I could see the wide-spaced pores in his skin, could smell his dusky, slightly acrid perfume.

Libby came home at ten o'clock, unusually early. The poverty and squalor of Riverbank must have hit her especially hard after last night. I could imagine Ella's fervid babble about the Duchess and the Baron did not go down well. "If you want the bastard so much," I heard Libby shout, "why don't you go and find him? Nobody would refuse to give you a lift out of the city! Not with that pretty face!"

"But that wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be womanly. The Duchess told me all about being womanly," Ella said—seriously, I believe. "You don't know anything."

"I try so hard to protect you and Minette." Libby sounded as if she were almost crying. "And you never make it easy for me! You never give me the least bit of thanks—"

Then I heard Ella's footsteps running upstairs. She burst into the room, giggling desperately, bounded across my bed. "Hide me, Minette—hide me—"

A few moments passed. "It's all right," I said sourly.

“She’s not coming after you.”

She poked her head up, squatting under the slope of the roof, resting her elbows on the bed. Cobwebs clung like silver hairnets to the golden mass. “That’s good, I was scared she’d —Minette? What’s wrong?”

I hid my face in my arms. I could not speak.

She touched my shoulder. “Minette, I love you.”

Bitterness welled up inside me.

“The Baron is coming to fetch me. I can feel it in my bones. Isn’t that wonderful? Do you know what he said to me? I love you because you are real. Mmmm . . . If he takes me to live in Helmany, you can come too. *And Libby.*”

Little sister. Oh little sister, how easily I could come to hate you.

Riverbank folks are eager to help anyone who wants to poke his nose into other people’s business. The matter of the glass slipper and the vanished girl must have captured their imaginations. They quickly made the connection between the tattered invitation the Ingles sisters received a week ago, and the Baron’s search. He arrived at dawn, a few days later. A muffled cavalcade of horses and men stamped down the new-fallen snow. The Baron himself bestrode a dappled stallion. The gold thread on his riding costume glinted in the sunlight, and his handsome, cruel face was lit brightly. Looking down through the window, I knew I would have him if it killed me. He was everything I was not. I had sense enough to realize this, but I believed it meant that we would complement each

other perfectly. The resolution hardened in my heart, blocking out all else.

Just because Ella was beautiful . . . ! Our faces weigh too much in the balance of our destinies, I thought, and I ran upstairs to wake Libby.

“He’s here,” she said, instantly awake.

“Yes.”

“Has he seen Ella?”

“No. I’m going to pretend I’m her. Please help me, Libby.”

Her hair a dark, frowsy mat, her face still thick with paint, she knelt up in bed and looked out the window. “Let me think . . . your hair’s the right color . . .” She chewed her lip. “But that’s not enough, is it? You have to fit into the shoe. And she has such tiny feet.”

“I have to have him, Libby. I know I’ve been ungrateful to you before—” I was nearly weeping with tension—“but please help me . . .”

“Oh, *gladly*,” she said with an inflection I could not identify, and fumbled under her mattress. “I always keep this. Just in case.” I gasped. She produced a long, wicked knife. “Give me your foot.”

“No, Libby. You can’t mean that.”

“Do you want him as much as I think you do?” Her voice was bitter, and even vindictive, as if she were repaying me for all the injustices I had done her. “I thought you couldn’t be as silly as Ella. But I was wrong. Wasn’t I. Wrong about you,

Minette. Give me your foot.”

Bang! Bang! “Open up!”

It would not be long before they woke the street. I moaned. Libby said, “Women chop off bits of themselves, push themselves apart, squeeze themselves together, singe and tease their hair, make holes in their ears, tie their feet up so they will be smaller . . . all for beauty. You saw it last night. And this is a better cause than mere looks. *Isn't it?*” She sounded almost gloating as she said, “Are you afraid of the pain?”

No, I wasn't! Pain was no object!

I held out my foot, gritting my teeth, turning my head aside as if I feared Libby was going to take the knife to my face, uglifying me even more in exchange for my heart's desire.

I stood up in the little glass slippers, turned a circle, swaying on my feet. “It fits!” the Baron breathed. “It is she! My lady!”

He swept me into his arms, spun me around, my head nearly bumping the ceiling of our tiny parlor. My golden hair flew loose around the veil that covered my face. Smelling him so close, I nearly fainted, and not from blood loss alone. “My love,” I whispered.

He made to lift the veil and kiss me, but I stopped him. Libby said swiftly, “My lord, surely you would not be so improper as to kiss your bride before the wedding.”

He looked over at where she sat, ankles primly crossed, on the couch. He sounded as if he were mocking her as he

said, “Oh, no, mademoiselle. Of course not.”

But his thick, strong fingers curled mine with a suggestive pressure. One of the sentries muttered to the other, and they both snorted with laughter.

The mixture of pain and happiness made me so giddy I could hardly stand.

“Do you know what you have been concealing here?” the Baron said to Libby. “She is a real treasure, she is nothing like the other ladies of the court. That is why I have to have her. Let us be on our way, darling.”

Libby embraced me at the door. She smelt of sweat, so pungent that I, rendered nauseous by my ordeal, had to hold my breath. I tasted strands of her hair. “He’s going to try to get it on in the carriage,” she hissed. “Don’t let him. He *mustn’t* see you before you’re married. He’s stupid enough not to feel the difference between your and Ella’s figures, but he can’t miss it if he sees your face. Once the priest has his say, though, there’s not a damn thing he can do.” The carriage bells jingled impatiently. She released me; then thought of something else and caught me back. “I love you.” She kissed my cheek, leaving a greasy lip-print. “Be happy.”

“Why were you goading me?” I whispered, at the end of my strength. “You were trying to make me angry.”

She laughed humorlessly. “Let me tell you a secret. I wanted him too. Why did you think I kissed him in the receiving line, like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush? But I’m too coarse for the likes of him. It could never have

happened.”

“Libby,” I breathed, stunned, and fell away from her, stumbling independently of gravity, as if I were sinking backward into deep water. The Baron caught me and made a step with his hands, boosting me into the carriage. “Such a little foot,” he gloated.

As we neared the end of the street, I heard a faint scream and looked back. A golden-haired figure pelted after the carriage, a scrap of nightgown fluttering around her thighs. The Baron asked me disinterestedly whether I knew who that might be.

“Oh—” I strove to keep my voice light—“just my little sister. I didn’t have time to say goodbye to her. No doubt she is upset.”

“I thought you only had one sister. No, no, love, don’t bother with explanations.” His voice was lazy. His arm went around me, his fingers kneading the soft flesh under my dress, just above my corset. I lost myself in the ecstasy of contact with him.

The dawn glanced red off the river. Once we crossed over, the light seemed to weaken, beating ineffectively on the filthy snow. The ground was already trampled, kicked up into slush by local urchins and their parents on their way to work. This was the worst part of Riverbank, too miserable to be even a little glamorous, too poverty-stricken to be respectable.

On the broadest thoroughfare, another carriage approached us, and halted. In the interests of courtesy we had

to stop too. The Baron muttered a curse and lifted his face: He had been kissing my hair. “Probably some doddering Marquis who wants to pass the time of day, darling. But it doesn’t do to be discourteous.” He opened the window, letting in a rush of air so cold it froze my nostrils.

A plump yet drawn-looking woman leaned out of the window. “Baron! What a relief! I have been wandering around these slums ever since I left the mansion! This coachman does not know the river from a blind alley.” The man sitting on the box looked weary, resigned to being dismissed as soon as the Duchess got home. “Can you beat the directions into his head, perhaps?”

“But of course, Duchess.” The Baron beckoned me. “But first let me present my bride-to-be, Ella Laide.”

“You found her! My dear!” the Duchess squealed. But then she looked at me suspiciously, and my heart thudded. “Ella? Is it you? It is not. Baron, this isn’t my protégée.”

The Baron held me away and looked at me. “Of course it is. She is wearing the slipper, and what’s more, her sister had the match to it.”

The Duchess gave a social laugh that had not a grain of tolerance in it. “Baron, I sometimes think you are quite empty-headed. Or are all men the same in that respect? Of course it isn’t Ella. Any fool could see that. Her sister has tricked you.”

The Baron’s eyebrows drew together.

I sobbed. I could not help myself. Far away, church bells

rang.

“We shall find out just who it is, then,” my husband-to-be said, and flicked the veil from my face.

The snow burned my feet like hot coals. But it was worse torture to wear the slippers. The snow soaked through my dress, numbing my body where I leaned against the cold brick wall of a tenement. My tears froze on my cheeks. I did not think they would ever come off.

I smelt my own blood. Libby’s expert bandages had not stood up to my tottering on them through the crowds of workers; they unwound and the blood flowed. I sank down among the beggars at the side of the road. The poor, truncated stumps stuck out in front of me. I could see the ends of whitish bone where my toes should be, filmed over by bright blood. The sides of my feet quivered, raw, where Libby had lopped off excess flesh.

A carriage went past in the street, kicking sheets of slush up from the wheels. Wearily I looked up. I knew how infrequent nobles’ carriages were here; and from this low vantage, I understood the starved Riverbanker’s desire to pounce on it and rape it of all it contained.

Hers golden, his dark brown, their heads rested side by side in the window. His arm lay along her shoulders, puffing up her hair. Her hand flew up as if in protest; he took her wrist and pulled it down.

They passed out of sight. The angry grumble of the thoroughfare resumed.

Little sister, how easy it is to hate you. I ought to feel sorry for you, because I know what you are destined for: a life of high-class abuse at the Baron's hands in the name of love, and eventually, transformation into one of the painted ladies, those who flutter frustrated on the edge of aristocracy.

Your beauty won't protect you. But I can only covet your fate. Bleeding from the feet, weeping, I am uglier than ever I was before, but I cannot accept my condition, as Libby did years ago, even though I am unable even to stand up. The cold sun stings my bare, tear-swollen face.

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The Dream Detective

Lisa Tuttle

In the beginning, I was not attracted to her at all. Quite the opposite.

I don't know if it was intentional on her part, and honestly, I'm not the sort of dick who always judges women on how hot they are, but if there's *any* situation in which a person's attractiveness matters, I think everybody would agree it's a blind date.

Hannes and Mardi, my so-called friends, so worried about my single state, had once more stepped into the breach and invited me to dinner to meet someone "very special." They had introduced me to several very nice, lovely, smart, sexy women in the past, and all had been good company even though there'd never been the necessary, mutual spark that would ignite a love affair—but not this time.

My first sight of Mardi's old house-mate Grace was of a lumpy little figure in drab, ill-fitting clothes. Her hair probably hadn't been brushed since she'd rolled out of bed, her eyebrows looked like hairy caterpillars, and apart from a slash of bright red lipstick, she hadn't bothered with makeup. "Couldn't be bothered" was a good description of her in general, and from her sullen look, she was equally unimpressed by me.

As it was only the four of us for dinner, I couldn't ignore

her without being rude. But my first few attempts to engage her attention fell flat.

Hannes kept the ball rolling with some stories I hadn't heard before—he's very funny, especially considering English isn't his first language—until Mardi shrieked for his help in the kitchen, and we were left alone together.

“So what do you do?” I asked.

I could have kicked myself as soon as the words were out. I didn't want to talk about my own tedious job, so why put her on the spot?

She stared at me for a long moment while I tried to figure out a way of withdrawing the question that wouldn't make things worse, and finally she said, “I'm a dream detective.”

I thought I'd heard wrong. “Dream?”

She nodded. “Detective,” she added, helpfully.

If it was a joke I didn't get it. “You mean you solve dreams?”

“What does that mean?”

“I don't know. You said it.”

“I didn't say I solved *dreams*. I solve *crimes*, and other mysteries, in dreams.”

“What's your success rate?”

“Quite good, actually.” She made a modest face.

“Although, I shouldn't brag; I have to admit I haven't done much of anything lately . . .”

She was playing it straight, so I had to do the same. “But you've solved a few, over the years?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How long have you been helping the police with their enquiries?”

She looked as if she was about to laugh, but stopped herself, and simply shook her head. “The police aren’t interested in dreams.”

“But—I mean, if you are solving crimes—”

“Dream crimes.”

“What’s a dream crime?”

She sighed, as if I were deliberately obtuse. “A crime committed in a dream.”

“In a dream.”

“That’s what I said.”

This fey game of hers was really getting up my nose. It wasn’t funny, and it wasn’t clever—if it *was* a game. Just checking, I said, “But not in the real world.”

I was reminded of one of my least favourite teachers by the snooty look she gave me and her retort: “In your opinion, dreams aren’t part of the real world?”

“I don’t know. *You’re* the one who—”

“You don’t dream?”

“Everybody dreams.”

“You’d be surprised how many people say they don’t. Or that they can’t remember. It’s not for me to say they’re lying, but forgetfulness can be a cover for things people find too painful to think about.”

“I dream a lot.” Since childhood, I’d enjoyed my dreams

and enjoyed thinking about them; if I rarely told them to anyone, it was out of the fear that my descriptions would be inadequate, and they'd sound boring or nonsensical, instead of the fascinating adventures they were to me.

She leaned across the table, fixing me with eyes that were larger, darker and more eloquent than I'd realized. "Have you committed a crime? In your dreams?"

I felt a sudden surge of adrenaline, as if she'd come too close to a deeply guarded secret. My heart was racing, and I felt a powerful urge to run, the need to hide—and what an admission that would be!

I faced her down, smiling, although maybe it looked more like a snarl. "Is that how you solve your mysteries? You ask everyone you meet to confess to an imaginary crime? No wonder if your success rate is high! Who would dare to say no?"

"I'll take that as a yes," she said, staring at me so hard her twin caterpillars became one. Her eyes no longer held the slightest allure; they were like laser-beams, science fictional weapons able to bore right through the bones of my skull, into my brain, where her unnatural vision would find the image of something I had done that was so shameful, so deeply buried, that even *I* couldn't remember it.

Hannes came through the door then, thank God, carrying a platter, announcing dinner was served, followed by his wife carrying a covered bowl.

Over the meal, conversation was general, on the subjects

of food, travel, movies and then food again when Mardi brought out cheesecake and fruit salad for dessert. It was not the most scintillating conversation; in fact, it was one of the most restrained and boring I could remember ever having around that table, as if we were four random strangers forced to share in a crowded restaurant.

When Hannes left the room to make coffee there was a silence until Mardi turned to speak to Grace as if I wasn't there: "How's the job-hunting? Any luck?"

Grace shook her head.

"Still at the charity shop?"

"Two days. They'd have me for more hours, which would be great if I was getting paid, but, you know, I need to make some money."

"So your dream detecting doesn't pay?" I don't know what possessed me to jump in with that.

Mardi stared hard at the other woman. "You *told* him?"

The chair creaked as Grace leaned back and crossed her arms. Her face was flushed. She spoke flatly. "I had a feeling he might need my help."

"What?" Mardi's voice rose almost to a wail. "You're still doing that? You never told me!"

Hannes poked his head through the door. "Stop it; no fair having fun without me."

Mardi's hair was messy, her lipstick eaten away, her face as red as Grace's—but on her it looked good. "Oh, honey, you won't believe it, but Gracie—she's still—you know,

remember that dream thing she did?” She groped with her hand in the air above her head.

Grace looked at me and said earnestly, “I don’t do it for money. I would never—it would be wrong; it’s a *gift*. It would be wrong for me to try to exploit it.”

“Exactly!” Mardi exclaimed. “Like me and the tarot. I’ll read the cards if someone asks, but I’d never, ever charge money.”

“I’m astonished,” said Hannes, deadpan. “I thought they only talked about these things in private, when all three witches got together.”

“We’re not witches.”

“Who’s the third?” I asked.

“Remember little Holly?”

“From your wedding? Ah, yes.” I recalled the tiny yet perfectly formed maid of honour everyone had wanted to dance with.

He nodded. “The three weird sisters. Or former flat-sharers—but that doesn’t sound so good, does it?”

I wondered if Grace had been at the wedding, too, and sneaked a look at her. I saw a frumpy, shapeless lump who didn’t know how to make herself interesting. I wondered if the idea of the dream-investigation had been her own, or borrowed from one of her smarter roommates. She did not notice me looking, just went on staring at nothing, seemingly undisturbed by the queasy excitement roiling around the room even when Mardi shouted:

“We’re not *witches*.”

“Sorry, darling, how silly of me. You predict the future, and Holly heals people by stroking their auras, and Grace goes into people’s minds to affect their dreams, and all that is completely ordinary and normal and not at all witch-like or weird.”

“You’re horrible.”

“Horribly irresistible.” She scowled at him, then giggled; he invited me to help him get the coffee, and I jumped up, happy for any excuse to leave.

In the kitchen, I asked: “Fortune-telling?”

“I’m surprised she’s never dealt the cards for you. She still has them in a velvet bag. True, she doesn’t often get them out these days, hardly ever since we were married, but back then, when she was living with Holly and Grace . . . they scared me sometimes, I don’t mind telling you, those three women in the same room together, looking like they could read your mind and tell your future from the way you sipped your coffee.” He shuddered melodramatically. “But each girl on her own . . . a different proposition.”

“I wouldn’t want to proposition Grace,” I said sourly. “Is that what you thought? She’s *really* my type. ”

He gave me a sheepish smile and pressed the plunger down on the cafetiere. “Sorry, man. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. We had invited two other people, and at the last minute they couldn’t make it.”

“Two? A couple?”

“Sister and brother. Both single. One for each of you. I swear.”

“Well, better luck next time,” I sighed, and lifting the tray of mugs, followed him out of the room.

After I went home that night I did not give Grace a second thought. But she wasn't done with me.

I was a turkey-farmer, somewhere in the country, rounding up my herd and then driving them, on foot, down a dirt road until I reached London, which was like the set for a low-budget TV version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. I sold the big birds to an East Ender in a patched coat and shabby top hat (“Aow! God bless you, Guvnor!”) and took my little velvet bag of gold coins to buy myself a drink, but at this point wintry London morphed into Paris in the spring, so I walked into a sidewalk café and ordered *un cafe, s'il vous plait*. It was as I was sitting there, waiting for my coffee, that I realized, from the nervous clenching in my gut, that I'd been followed.

She was sitting at another table, pretending to read a newspaper, and although she looked nothing like the woman I'd met over dinner—she looked like Edith Piaf, or, rather, like Marion Cotillard playing Piaf in *La Vie en Rose*—I knew her. I knew she was on to me. But she couldn't follow me into the men's toilet, so I was able to get away from her quite easily, although there was still some running and dodging down narrow alleys and in and out of shops before I woke up,

heart pounding, feeling I'd had a narrow escape, but with no idea why. Was she police, or a foreign agent? Was I the good-guy spy, or an innocent who knew too much? Dreams feel like stories, but they leave out a lot of the information we'd need to make sense of a movie or a book.

Another night, another dream: I was in a theatre, up in the gods, where the rows of seats kept morphing into chutes and ladders, and every time I tried to get out, I ran into a little blonde girl in a blue dress, blocking the exit. She looked like Disney's Alice, but when she trained her eyes on me like a twin-bore shotgun, I knew who she really was, and knew I was in trouble.

Another time, in the midst of a ripping yarn featuring neo-Nazi conspirators and a fabled treasure hidden at the heart of an Egyptian pyramid, I became aware of her again. I never saw her, but felt the disturbing presence of an outsider; someone female who did not belong, an uninvited visitor who was spying on me. Only afterwards, awake, thinking it over as I showered and dressed for work, I became convinced that it was Grace; and I began to wonder what she was after, and how to get rid of her.

On my way home that night—I'd been working late, required to be on hand for a conference call with partners in other time zones—I stopped to buy a few things. It wasn't the store where I usually shopped, but I'd just remembered there was almost nothing in my fridge when I spotted a sign for

Morrison's, and nipped in.

I found Grace in the wine aisle, inspecting the bottles. At the sight of her I felt disoriented, almost dizzy; that may have been the first time in my life when I genuinely wondered if I was really awake or only dreaming.

But maybe it wasn't her. The woman shopping for wine was dressed up and looked quite sexy. Had I become obsessed, was I starting to see the detective of dreams everywhere I went?

She turned her head and the recognition on her face told me I wasn't fantasizing. "Oh, hi! How are you? Do you live around here?"

"Sort of, not too far—but I don't usually shop here; how about you?"

She shook her head. "I'm on my way to . . . a party. Thought I'd better bring a bottle."

She wore a snug, scoop-necked top and short skirt, clothes that revealed that she wasn't fat at all, perhaps a little thick-waisted, but she did have a pair of enormous breasts. Maybe she hadn't wanted to show them off to me, but, clearly, she didn't feel obliged to keep them hidden all the time; I wondered what made the party she was on her way to now so very different from the dinner at Mardi and Hannes'. She was still far from beautiful, but just then she had a glow about her that made up for any small deficiencies in her appearance.

I saw her look in my basket, recognize the pathetic

shopping of the single man (frozen chips, pizza, bacon, eggs, and a loaf of bread) and felt suddenly defensive, almost angry are her presumption in judging me, spying on me.

Without pausing to think, I asked her, “How do you do it?”

She looked honestly bewildered.

“The dreams . . .” Before I got it out, I’d realized how utterly idiotic my question was. She hadn’t done anything. This meeting was coincidence; my dreams were my own. I stalled and fumbled and finally managed: “I was just wondering . . . You said you were a dream detective . . . I guess you were joking?”

“Oh. No, it wasn’t a joke.” She looked apprehensive. “It was true, but . . . I really don’t know why I said it. I don’t usually tell people. Mardi knows, because I used to do it when we lived together. But not anymore.”

I know that’s not true. I kept my accusation to myself, though, and only said, “Yeah? It’s odd. I’d never heard of a dream detective before.”

She cleared her throat and glanced around at the ranks of wine bottles. “No . . . that’s not surprising. Neither had I. I guess I made it up. I was sharing a house with two friends, one read cards and the other read auras; they did it to help people and it was kind of cool and I wanted something I could do, so . . .” She shrugged and moved away from me to read a price-label.

“But how did it work? Did people invite you into their

dreams, or did you just kind of dream your way inside their heads, or—”

“What?” Now she was staring at me.

“How—how did you do it? The dream-detecting?”

“People told me about their dreams and I interpreted them. What did you think?” Her eyes had widened, and I could see that she knew perfectly well what I had thought, and I realized how crazy it was. Why had I imagined for a moment that this less-than-ordinary woman could see inside my brain, even enter my dreams to spy on me?

To distract her from my idiocy, I asked another question. “And it worked?”

She shrugged. “People seemed to think so. They liked it, anyway. It was something I could do, it seemed vaguely useful, I had a lot of free time and no money—”

“So why did you stop? I mean, you must still have a lot of free time and no money, and since you’re looking for a job—why not create your own employment? You’d have it to yourself, you’d be the expert, the only dream detective in England—”

“Oh, shut up. What did I ever do to you?”

I was surprised to realize she was angry. I hadn’t meant to offend her, but she wouldn’t let me explain.

“You don’t know anything about it! You think it’s a joke, but it’s *not*.”

“No, I don’t think that—I really do take you seriously, that’s why—”

“I *told* you, I couldn’t charge money for using this gift—it would be wrong. It’s not a job, it’s a calling. Have you ever seen a rich and famous so-called psychic? What they’re like? Do you think I’d ever be one of those media-whores?”

“Sorry,” I said, holding up my hands as if her shiny eyes were loaded guns. “Sorry, I didn’t understand; I didn’t mean anything . . .”

She grabbed a bottle off the shelf without looking. “Forget it.”

My dream that night began like a road trip, a pleasurable sort of dream I’ve enjoyed for years. As usual, it was set in the American west, a place I’ve never seen except in movies, out on a flat, open highway, Route 66, maybe. I was in one of those big old-fashioned sedan cars from the 1950s, white and shiny, with fins. Inside, the front seat was like a big leather couch, and the gear-shift was stuck out the side of the steering wheel. No seat-belts, no air-bags, just a cigarette lighter and an AM radio tuned to a station belting out songs by Buddy Holly, the Everley Brothers, Elvis Presley.

I myself had more than a touch of Elvis about me, my hair in a quiff with long sideburns, wearing tight jeans, cowboy boots, and a black shirt with pearl-covered snaps, a packet of Camels squashed into the breast pocket. Sitting behind the wheel of that automotive behemoth, singing along to “Jailhouse Rock,” driving through the desert towards somewhere unknown, I was free, and as purely happy as I’ve

ever been. Everything was fine, better than fine, it was *perfect* until, glancing in the rear view mirror, I spotted a little black dot in the distance. Just in case, I checked my speed.

I was right; it was a cop. As the motorcycle drew closer, I told myself not to worry. I was going just under the speed limit, my tax disc was valid, the exhaust and tires were good, there was absolutely no reason for him to pull me over . . . but he did.

Even as I was slowing to obey his peremptory command I was no more than annoyed. It was only when I was stopped, watching the cop dismount, that I remembered there was a dead body in the trunk of the car.

I knew I must not panic, that I had to stay calm and convince the cop I was a good, law-abiding citizen he could have no interest in detaining. He came over to my window, asked to see my driver's license, told me to get out of the car and step away, keeping my hands where he could see them. I obeyed, but perhaps not quickly enough, or maybe there was something in my attitude he didn't like, because he became more aggressively authoritarian with every passing second. He sneered at my hairstyle, asked where I went to church, and about my political affiliations, and when I reminded him that this was America, the land of the free, he said I sounded like a limey bastard, and demanded my passport.

The tedious, threatening argument went on and on, and I was relieved to wake up before my guilty secret was revealed.

I found that dream unusually disturbing. I had no idea

whose body was in the boot, or how it had come to be there. I didn't even know if I was a killer. In the dream there had been no guilt or shame attached to the knowledge that I was driving around with a dead body, only anxiety about the consequences if it was found. Did that mean I wasn't a murderer? Or did it indicate the opposite, that my dream persona was a cold-blooded psychopath?

Over the next few weeks, the dream continued to haunt me. I'd had recurring dreams before, anxiety dreams in which I was forever doomed to miss my flight, getting lost on my way to take an exam, or finding I had to give a speech wearing nothing but a skimpy bathrobe. Now, my pleasurable dream of driving across America had been spoiled, turned into another variant of angst.

After the first time, as soon as it began I was obsessed with the problem of how to dispose of the body. My every attempt to find a hiding place was foiled: There were fishermen on the lake, a family having a picnic in the woodland glade, kids playing in the old quarry, people with their prying eyes everywhere I went.

Gradually I came to understand that the body was that of my former girlfriend, but what had actually happened, and why I was burdened with her corpse remained unclear. I knew that my past connection with her would make me the prime suspect if her body was discovered, but I didn't actually know how she had died, and I didn't feel guilty.

In my waking hours I thought more and more about this

dream, although I wished I could forget it. I wondered if talking to someone might help, and I thought of Grace.

Another coincidental meeting would have been perfect, but of course that wasn't going to happen. If I knew where she lived, though, I could make it happen, so in the end I phoned Mardi.

“Her *address*?” She made my simple request sound outrageous.

“I thought I might send her a card.”

“Oh, really.” Her scepticism was palpable.

“All right, then, phone number.”

“I don't think so.”

“Why not? You try to match us up, and then—”

“I did *not*. Anyway, that was a month ago, and you clearly didn't get on. In fact—”

“That's not fair. She was quite interesting, actually. Not my type, but—I'd like to talk to her again. I've been thinking about her.”

“Well, don't.”

I wished we were speaking face to face instead of on the phone. “Why do you say that? Did she say something about me?”

“Of course not.”

But there had been a pause before she answered. “Did she tell you we ran into each other about a week after dinner at yours?”

She made a noise and I winced, remembering how Grace

had suddenly taken flight. What had she said about me to Mardi? How bad was it?

“I want to apologize. Please, Mardi.”

“I’ll tell her.” When I said nothing more, she sighed. “I promise. I’ll call her tonight and give her your number, and then, if she wants, she can call you.”

Grace did not phone me, but about a week later, she returned to me in a dream.

I was on the road again, and had pulled into a service station to fill the tank. When I came back from paying, there she was, in the front seat. She was a prettier, idealized version of Grace in a tight-fitting cashmere sweater beneath a trenchcoat. Her hair-style was long, old-fashioned, hanging down in waves, one dipping across an eye like Veronica Lake’s in an old black and white movie. I think the dream was in black and white, too.

“Drive,” she said.

It was night now, and raining, but there was enough traffic on the road for the passing headlights to reveal her to me in occasional, strobe-like glimpses.

“I hear you’ve got a case for me,” she said.

An enormous wave of relief washed over me, and between the pulsing beats of the windshield wipers I told her my story: brief, laconic, just the facts, ma’am. When I had finished, she continued to gaze straight ahead for a while before saying, her voice low, “Pull over.”

“Where?”

“Doesn’t matter. Wherever you can.”

There was an exit just ahead, sign-posting a roadside picnic area, so I pulled off the highway and drove even deeper into darkness, away from the lights and the traffic, to a secluded spot, utterly deserted on this dark and rainy night.

When I had parked, I turned to face the detective. Light from an unknown source gently illuminated her features. She looked wise and gentle and I was suddenly certain she was the one person who could save me from this nightmare.

“Do you know who killed her?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Will you help me?”

“Yes.” She touched my hand. “I’ll take you in.”

“What?”

“To the police. You have to turn yourself in.”

“No.”

“It’s the only way.”

“I can’t. I won’t. They’ll think I’m the killer.”

“You *are* the killer.”

I looked into her eyes (one half-obscured by a silky fall of hair) and knew she told the truth.

“Give me the keys,” she said. “I’ll drive. They may not go so hard on you if you confess, if you can explain . . .”

But how could I explain something I could not remember?

As in a montage of scenes from an old black and white movie I saw my future: the grim faces of the jury, the old judge banging his gavel, the bleak and lonely cell, the walk—

shuffling in ankle chains—to the electric chair, the hood coming down over my face, the soft voice of the priest exhorting me to confess and repent before I died . . .

It wasn't fair! I wanted to live!

Driven by desperate need, I reached for Grace. My hands closed around her slender neck and squeezed. My reaction took her by surprise, and my thumbs must have been in just the right spot to inflict maximum damage, for she scarcely even struggled; when she could not draw another breath she went limp. I continued to squeeze, making sure, venting my terror and rage on her frail and vulnerable neck, and by the time I let go, she was dead.

There was no one around to see, but I did not want to take the risk that some tired motorist might decide to drive in next to me, and considered simply pushing the detective's body out of the car and driving away. Then I had an idea: why not get rid of both bodies at once? I discovered a shovel in the trunk, and with it I dug a single grave, deep enough to hold them both. I drove away feeling satisfied, certain the evidence of both my crimes was now hidden so well they would never be found. Even if in future years someone found the bones, there would be nothing to link them to me.

I woke filled with regret and sorrow and a sense of terrible loss, but also with the cooler, steadying awareness that I'd done what I had to do, and it was over. I never had that dream again. Case closed. I would have liked to see Grace's reaction if I told her about it—but not enough to make any effort to

find her. More than a year went by, actually closer to two, before I found out what had happened to her.

Hannes had asked me to meet him in Waterstone's at around six—I thought we were going for a drink, and had no idea why he'd suggested the bookshop rather than the pub across the street, not even when I saw him standing, grinning, beside the sign announcing a book-signing. He pointed at the author's photograph, and still I didn't twig, didn't recognize her until the title of the book—*Dream Detective*—gave me a clue.

“Grace Kearney—that's your Grace?”

“Not mine, mate!”

The woman in the photo looked ordinary: was blandly pretty, smiling, heavily made-up, the eyebrows plucked into anorexia. “Really? That's her? Mardi's old friend? She wrote a book?”

“And sold it for a bundle, and that's the least of it. Have you never seen her on TV? First it was guest appearances, but now I've heard she's going to have her own show.”

I looked at the picture again, trying to summon up a mental image of the woman I'd met to compare it to, and failing. All I could think of was Veronica Lake struggling feebly in my murderous grasp.

“Are we meeting Mardi?” I hadn't seen her in months; although I tried to keep in touch, the two of them no longer entertained the way they'd used to, and rarely went out, since their baby had been born.

“No way! She doesn’t approve.”

“Of what, the book?”

“The book, the TV show, the celebrity clients, the publicity, glitz, bling, dosh . . .”

I recalled how badly Mardi had responded to Grace’s telling me what she did. “Grace charges people money to investigate their dreams?”

“You sound like Mardi! Yeah, well, everybody’s got to make a living. But my dear, idealistic wife does not approve. She thinks her old friend has gone over to the dark side. They don’t speak anymore.”

The long-ago dinner party conversation came back to me. “Grace said she didn’t believe in taking money for her gift.”

“That was the *old* Grace. She changed. Even before all this—” he gestured at the sign and the bookstore beyond. “Something happened. I have no idea what it was, but it changed her, like, overnight.”

I felt a chill, an unwanted memory intruding, and repressed it.

“Does Mardi know what happened?”

He shook his head. “I told you, they don’t talk. ‘She’s dead to me,’ says my lovely wife. Or was it ‘She’s dead inside’—maybe both those things.” He shrugged it off. “Want to go for a drink?”

“Maybe I’ll just get a book signed, first. Since we’re here.” I felt no nervousness about seeing her again, and I was curious. That mousey little girl, a celebrity! Recalling her

vehemence about how wrong it would be to take money for using her gift, I realized I had met her at a moment of crisis, sounding out other people and arguing with herself over the decision she had to make. What I found harder to understand was how her imaginary profession could be taken seriously by so many. A TV show!

Picking up a book, taking it to the counter to pay, I reflected that people were eager to believe in all sorts of nonsense. And there was the “entertainment” argument—that justified the regular publication of horoscopes in newspapers, and psychics making their predictions on television. Just a bit of slightly spooky fun. Grace had simply tapped into that. Why not? It might upset someone like Mardi, who believed she could see the future in her special deck of cards, but a realist like me ought to applaud her initiative.

There was a small, orderly queue near the back of the shop. I joined the end of it by myself—Hannes said he’d meet me in the pub across the road—and while I waited my turn I wondered if Grace would recognize me, and decided she would not.

But I was wrong. When I reached the front of the queue and put the book down, open, before her, she raised her eyes to mine, and at once, although there was no change in her mild, professionally pleasant smile, greeted me by name.

I looked into her eyes and saw nothing there. The emptiness was unsettling. “I’m surprised—I didn’t think you’d remember me,” I said, stammering a little.

“How could I forget? After what you did . . . If not for you, I wouldn’t be here now. In a way, I owe my whole career to you.”

A woman standing near the wall behind her took notice and stepped forward. “Really? That’s *very* interesting! I don’t recall this from your book . . . Will you introduce us, Grace?”

Grace went on smiling mildly at me and staring at me with her dead eyes; without turning she said, “Not now”—and although there was nothing threatening or even unpleasant in her tone, it was enough to make the other woman fall back.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“I think you do.”

If I said Grace was dead, that the woman signing books was only a simulacrum, or some kind of zombie, who would believe me? Yet I knew, and so did she, that it was true. Mardi had sensed it as well. She was physically still alive, but dead inside—and it was my fault.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. While I had stood there speechless, she had finished writing in my book and now she handed it back to me. “Thank you. Next!”

At her command, I stumbled away. I’d forgotten everything else in the horror of my discovery, forgot I was supposed to meet Hannes, and made my way home, alone, across the city. There was no one I could talk to about it, and I could think of nothing else. What had I done to that poor girl?

Poor? I could just imagine what Hannes might have said:

“Are you kidding? She used to be poor, and now she’s not. She’s a success! I can’t see how it’s anything to do with you, but she thanked you, right? She’s changed, sure, and maybe her old friends don’t like it, but that’s life.”

Mardi alone might have understood—but if I told her what I’d done to the dream-Grace, she would have hated me, and however much I deserved it, I couldn’t bear the thought.

When I got home, I took a cursory look at *Dream Detective*, reading a few pages, wondering if it would give me any answers, but there was something smug and flat and false about the paragraphs I skimmed that killed that hope. I turned back to the title page where I found what I later learned to be the author’s standard inscription: My name, and *Dream well!*
Sincerely yours, Grace Kearney.

Her signature was a florid scribble, which I imagined she had worked up as an impressively individual, if nearly illegible, autograph. Yet there seemed to be something wrong with it. A closer look revealed that something had been written in the same space *before* she signed; two words in tiny letters, hand-printed, almost obliterated by the signature. I knew they had not been there when I bought the book, were not on the page when I opened it before her, and they were written with the same pen—Grace herself was the only possible author. Had she started to write a more personal message, then changed her mind?

Under the brightest light I had, with the aid of a magnifying glass, I examined the page until the half-hidden

words became clear:

save me

Those words have changed my life. I've been asked to do something, and although I don't know how, I will find a way.

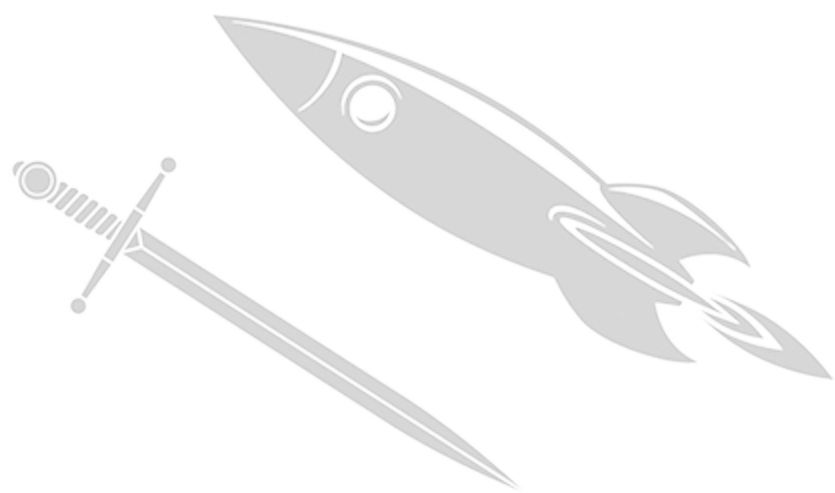
Some things, once broken, can never be mended. Murder, no matter how deeply the killer repents, can't be undone—except, of course, in dreams.

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Lisa Tuttle was born and raised in the United States, spent ten years in London, and now lives in a remote part of the Scottish highlands. She began writing while still at school, sold her first stories at university, and won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Science Fiction Writer of the year in 1974. Her first novel, *Windhaven*, was a collaboration with George R. R. Martin published in 1981; her most recent is the contemporary fantasy *The Silver Bough*, and she has written at least a hundred short stories, as well as essays, reviews, non-fiction, and books for children.

SCIENCE FICTION



Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince

Jake Kerr

Julian Prince

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Julian Samuel Prince (March 18, 1989 – August 20, 2057) was an American novelist, essayist, journalist, and political activist. His best works are widely considered to be the **post-Impact** novels *The Grey Sunset (2027)* and *Rhythms of Decline (2029)*, both of which won the **Pulitzer Prize**. He was awarded the **Nobel Prize for Literature** in 2031.

Prince was a pioneer of **Impact Nihilism**, a genre that embraced themes of helplessness and inevitable death in the aftermath of the **Meyer Impact**. His travelogue, *Journey Into Hopelessness (2026)* outlined Prince's return to North America, ostensibly to survey the damage to his home state of Texas. The book's bleak and powerful language of loss and devastation influenced musicians, artists, and writers worldwide, giving voice to the genre as a counter to the rising wave of **New Optimism**, which sprang out of the European Union as a response to the Meyer Impact and the enormous loss of life.^{[1][2]}

Early Life

Not much is known of Prince's early life. He spoke rarely of his childhood, and with the loss of life and destruction of records during the Meyer Impact, little source material remains. What is known is that Prince was an only child, the son of Margaret Prince (maiden name unknown) and Samuel Prince. He was born in Lawton, Oklahoma, but moved to Dallas, Texas, when he was eight years old.^[3] In an interview before his death, Prince noted:

I was a good kid, a boring kid. I didn't cause trouble, and trouble didn't find me. I studied hard and planned on being a journalist, figuring that I was better at observing the world than shaping it. I graduated high school, and continued with my journalism classes via the net. Up until the Impact, I was thoroughly and utterly average.^[4]

Upon earning a bachelor's degree from [Khan University](#) in journalism, Prince embarked on a career as a web reporter.^[5]

Excerpt from Julian Prince's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 2031

So it is that life, to which we all cling with desperation and joy, prevails. Yet I cannot let go of the memories, the experiences, and the physical reality of those that have passed

away. The ghosts are all around us, even as we squint to see through them. It has been said that I deny optimism and ignore our future, but that is not true. It is just that I refuse to let the difficult questions remain unasked. I refuse to conveniently ignore the graveyard that is now half our planet. And I refuse to feel joy that so many have lived when so many—so many—have died.

It is with humility that I accept this award, not for myself, but for the hundreds of millions who are not here with us today. I did my best to tell their story, but they deserve so much more than I can possibly give. If I achieved even a small part in doing so, I am glad.

Pre-Impact Career

Prince spent the decade before the Meyer Impact crossing the globe courtesy of a series of freelance journalism jobs. His first writing job was with [AOL Local/Patch](#) in 2010, where he aggregated [citizen journalism](#) stories from North Texas and rewrote them for syndicated release to the net. He continued to work for AOL Local for seven years, until he quit in 2017. ^[6] He wrote about this transition in an essay on the carefree lives of the pre-Impact world in 2031:

I quit because I wasn't excited. Can you imagine such a thing today? To leave security and stability because your life just isn't dangerous or crazy or exciting enough? Such

was the innocence before the Impact. So I left the boring to move to Africa, where the excitement was, and where I could write about things that shed light on life and death, not ennui or entertainment.^[7]

Prince took a job with European news agency [Star News](#) in 2017. His writing up until the Impact in 2023 was spare and fact-driven, although flashes of Prince’s eye for emotion could occasionally be seen. Prince would say of those years, “Everything I wrote back then was worthless, but it was also worth everything—because it was the mind-numbing limitation of facts and cold description that allowed me to view the Impact in its true light.”^{[8][9]}

Excerpt from “Maldives’ Last Grain of Sand,” reported by Julian Prince (*Star News*, 2018)

Ahmed Manik sits in a rickety wooden boat, watching as a wave crests over a strip of sand. Manik is the grandson of Maldives’ last President, Mohammed Manik, and the strip of sand is all that’s left of the island country of Maldives, a country wiped away by global warming, rising water levels, and decades of mismanagement. Scientists don’t even bother estimating how long this last remnant of the former island nation will remain before it is washed away. It may be weeks, perhaps even days.

Manik shrugs when asked about the lost legacy of his family and former country. “We are all grains of sand, just waiting to be washed away,” he says and smiles, which accentuates the heavy creases around his eyes and mouth. He may have accepted the inevitable force of the rising waters, but it has taken a toll.

Impact Year

Prince was already in Africa during the six-month preparation for the Impact and thus didn’t have to take part in the [Expatriation Lottery](#). He wrote many news articles during this time, but no fiction or essays. There is no record of Prince’s life for the 18 months following the Impact and the immediate global environmental catastrophe it caused. Prince would write about this time often, but never about his own life—only what he had seen. ^[citation needed]

Excerpt from “Immigration Concerns Dominate South African Presidential Debate,” reported by Julian Prince (*Star News*, 2023)

Cheers followed South African presidential candidate Maxwell Mahlangu on each stop of his tour of the country, despite deep concerns that his endorsement of the United Nations Emergency Emigration Plan for North America would upset the entire framework of the country. “Our

country's motto is 'Unity in Diversity,'" Mahlangu said at a rally in Port Elizabeth. "How can we let these people die simply because we refuse to accept more diversity?"

Later in his speech, Mahlangu touched upon a common theme expressed by leaders across the globe as countries prepared to take in refugees from North America—no one really knows what the Meyer Asteroid will do to the world. With a massive death toll a certainty, the real economic unit of the future may be people, so taking in immigrants is a good idea: "No one knows what God has in store for us and what life will be like. In the future, with more people, South Africa will be stronger!"

Sitting president Jacob Zuma rejected Mahlangu's moral and economic argument. He continued to object to the UN's current plan for South Africa to accept up to a million expatriates from the United States. "Such a wave of people would severely stress every part of our country," Zuma explained during a press conference in Pretoria. "They will starve! China or Russia or Europe should take them!"

"Coming Home"

In 2005, Prince's essay "[Coming Home](#)" was published in *Der Spiegel*.^[10] It became a worldwide sensation and ironically helped create the New Optimism movement that Prince's later work would reject. In the essay, Prince

described the unloading of thousands of North American refugees in various cities along the African Coast, using the metaphor of humanity leaving its doomed colonial past to come home to Africa.

Literary critic [Gerald King](#) described the essay as the perfect origin point for both Impact Nihilism and New Optimism, and its publication immediately marked Prince as the leading light of [post-Impact literature](#):

The central concept of “Coming Home” is warm and welcoming. Africa, the cradle of civilization, is welcoming home its wayward sons and daughters, even after their many sins. The deep themes of forgiveness and generosity fed directly into the New Optimism being loudly voiced in Europe. But many overlook that Prince did not flinch in describing the gaunt, guilty looks of those that exited the boats—a few million survivors while hundreds of millions of their friends and family members were doomed to die back home. The language that Prince uses in describing those left behind is very stark and makes it clear to the close reader that one should mourn, as well as celebrate.^[11]

The reception of “Coming Home” led directly to Prince tackling the difficult subjects of the Impact and “[the Lost](#),” a term for those who died in the Impact that Prince coined himself in *Journey Into Hopelessness*.^[citation needed]

Excerpt from “Coming Home” by Julian Prince (*Der Spiegel*, 2025)

Not one person who landed in Africa looked over his or her shoulder. It was as if the direction labeled “West” no longer existed. Sunsets were no longer a thing of beauty but a painful reminder of those doomed across the ocean, a literal dying light. Thoughts stopped at the ocean. It was overwhelming to consider friends and family alive yet suffering with the knowledge of their impending deaths.

Denial was the coping mechanism of choice. No one that landed in Africa could remember having any family or friends remaining in North America. I asked dozens of refugees, and none would admit to having left anyone behind. Friends, neighbors, colleagues, family—they all somehow made it into the expatriation program.

In Mogadishu I met a man I used to work with. I asked him about several of our former colleagues and whether he knew if they had been chosen to expatriate. He denied ever having known them. I was shocked for a moment, but recovered and asked about his family. He smiled and said that they all made it and were settling across various cities in Europe. He didn't know anyone that had been left behind.

No one knew of anyone left behind.

To know was to be a participant in their death sentence, and that was too painful, too sad, too horrific. But the guilt existed, nonetheless. So they did what they could to avoid it.

They didn't look West. They didn't watch sunsets. They never called or messaged North America, even as it still lived. They cut off their former lives and looked ahead to their new ones.

And thankfully, mercifully, Africa was there with open arms. A return to home and hearth, as it had for time immemorial, made everything better.

“The Conscience of a Generation”

Prince traveled back to North America to survey the damage from the impact in early 2026. He spent six months traveling across the continent with a [United Nations Blue Team](#), observing and sometimes helping as they assessed the damage. This experience was the basis for his worldwide best-selling travelogue, *Journey Into Hopelessness*. His stark and often graphic descriptions of a barren landscape, littered with dead flora and fauna, were described by critics as “poetic,” “beautiful,” “poignant,” and “chilling.” Prince himself described the trip as the “hardest six months of my life. It was like performing an autopsy on your own parent.”^{[12][13][14]}

After returning from North America, Prince spent the next six months working on his first piece of fiction, the novel *The Grey Sunset*. The novel follows the life of [Phil Gumm](#), who is a working class truck driver from Kansas and a winner of the Expatriation Lottery. The novel is highly introspective, and the narrative follows Gumm's descent from exhilaration at being

one of the lucky few to the depths of guilt over those he left behind. The bulk of the novel takes place on the journey from Galveston, Texas to Capetown, South Africa, and the physical journey is an extended metaphor for the emotional and spiritual journey that Gumm also takes. As Gumm physically gets closer to safety and a new life in Africa, he emotionally and spiritually gets closer to guilt, despair, and, eventually, suicide.^[15]

The book was released at the height of the New Optimism movement and was immediately heralded as a compelling counter. The phrase Impact Nihilism had already been in use since the publication of *Journey Into Hopelessness* and similar works, but it was *The Grey Sunset* that defined the genre and helped propel its popularity.^[citation needed] *The Grey Sunset* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2027, which had been re-established by the [Expatriation Heritage Foundation](#) the year before.^[16]

Prince shied from publicity, and spent the bulk of the next two years working on what many consider his masterpiece, *Rhythms of Decline*. The novel is a complicated narrative of five families, each of whom lives on a different continent. The centerpiece is the impending impact of the Meyer Asteroid, and how each family deals with an uncertain future. Only one family survives the Impact, although their future is full of doubt as the novel ends.

Literary critic [Malcolm Spencer](#) described the book as “the work of unparalleled genius.” He described the American Smith family, as “the definitive representation of our times. They face impending death with a kind of sad and yet warm acceptance. They live one day at a time, knowing that days are all they have left.” Spencer described Prince as “the conscience of a generation” for his unflinching look at the tragedy of the Impact and the guilt and pain it left behind.^[17]

Some critics saw the book as a complete repudiation of New Optimism, and this led to significant criticism of Prince. London web daily [The Beacon](#) called Prince “The Prince of Doom and Gloom.”^[18] [The Paris Review](#) printed a scathing review of *Rhythms of Decline*, describing it as “one man’s self-absorbed journal of guilt over surviving the Impact.”^[19]

Prince did a series of interviews in the wake of the criticism. His most famous appearance was on the popular holo [The New Day](#), broadcast out of Berlin. When asked about his critics, his reply became one of the most quoted lines of the post-Impact era: “I’ll listen to them when they’ve walked among the three hundred million ghosts that I have.”^[20]

Despite the controversy, *Rhythms of Decline* won the Pulitzer Prize and led directly to Prince being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature two years later.^[21]

**Excerpt from *Journey Into Hopelessness* by Julian Prince
(Vintage/Anchor, 2026)**

Finally we landed in Texas.

When I was young my parents took me to Palo Duro Canyon in northwest Texas. It was a massive rift in the Earth that my mother told me God himself had carved out of the Texas plains. I didn't see it that way. I saw it as a broken land born of violence, something left behind when the plains and hills had collided. But broken as it was, I saw it as natural and beautiful. The sharp angles and the bare rock acted as a balance to the plains that spread into the distance. And despite the wound in the land, life continued to thrive around it.

There is nothing natural or beautiful in the tortured land that now covers North Texas. The force of the impact stripped away everything. There are no trees, no plants, no grass. There is nothing but scarred land, windburnt ridges, and fetid water. Everywhere there is decay, death, and the certainty that this is a barren land with no future.

**Excerpt from an interview on *The New Tonight Show*
(Canal+, January 18, 2030)**

Phil Preston: Speaking of your trip, there are rumors that you didn't get along with the UN team during your visit to North America.

Julian Prince: Well, we spent six months together, so there were the normal conflicts, but I wouldn't say that I didn't get along with the team. I actually have a funny story about it.

Preston: *You* have a funny story? This I've got to hear.

Prince: Since this was officially a military mission for some idiotic reason, the scientists and I—all the civilians—had to take part in an orientation. The orientation was basically our team leader, Colonel Cooper, telling us over and over again that he was in charge and we had to listen to him. He was this husky bald guy with a kind of soft voice, but he had an intensity that made it clear he was used to people doing what he told them to do. His look and demeanor reminded me of Marlon Brando's character of Kurtz from the movie *Apocalypse Now*, so when he finished I said something like, "Sure thing, Kurtz."

[Audience laughter]

Prince: I thought it was funny, too, but he didn't seem to get it, and he marched over to me, put his nose right up to mine, and said, "The name is Cooper, and you can call me Colonel or Colonel Cooper." Of course I called him Kurtz for the entire six months.

[Audience cheers and laughter]

Preston: I'm surprised he didn't do anything.

Prince: I just assumed that he had no idea who Kurtz was, but during the last few days of the mission I said to him "I'm going to miss you, Kurtz." No one else was around, so I hoped he realized that I meant it. He then shook his head and said—and I remember every word to this day—"You have been calling me Kurtz this entire trip, and I had hoped by now that you would have realized how foolish that has been." He then leaned in and whispered in my ear, "You can't go native when there *are* no natives."

Preston: Wow. That's intense.

Prince: I know. And people call *me* the Prince of Doom and Gloom!

[Scattered audience laughter]

Preston: Actually, do you mind that—when people call you the Prince of Doom and Gloom?

Prince: [Pause] Yes.

Preston: Well, you've dated Janet Skillings, so I'm guessing that being the Prince of Doom and Gloom hasn't interfered much with your love life.

[Audience laughter]

Prince: Well, being rich and famous helps.

[Audience laughter]

Preston: So is there anyone in your life right now?

Prince: I'm afraid not. I live life one day at a time.

Preston: So what you're saying is you're only up for one-night stands.

[Audience laughter]

Prince: Life is a one-night stand.

[Uncomfortable silence]

Political Activism

The next ten years of Prince's life were marked by political activism. Violence in Africa and Asia led to the rise of the [Repatriation Movement](#), which fought for the return of former North Americans to their home continent. While most countered the movement on practical grounds—North America simply wasn't habitable yet—Prince saw the movement as something deeper and darker. He felt the

movement was about rejecting Africa and Asia and the expatriates' hosts more than a desire to return to their devastated homeland. ^{[21][22]}

In a widely quoted speech in 2034, Prince said:

This is not a movement about returning home. This is a movement about rejecting friends. This is not a movement about finding comfort in familiar lands. This is a movement about fearing those who wish to help. This is not about repatriation. This is about rejection. ^[23]

Prince was a prolific essay writer during this period, but nothing ever approached the popularity and power of his earlier work. His essay “[Rejecting Home](#)” (*Der Spiegel*, 2035) an acerbic and politically pointed update of his essay “Coming Home,” was described by critic Gerald King as “a sad attempt by Prince to leverage his earlier brilliance to make a point about what many are starting to see in him as a naïve perception of unity in people who want no such thing.”^[24]

Prince ceased his anti-repatriation activism when parts of North America were re-opened for settlements in 2038. ^[citation needed]

Excerpt from *Rhythms of Decline* by Julian Prince (Knopf, 2029)

Simon had hoped that all would be normal in the end. He would tuck Annie into bed, pat Arthur on the head, and then kiss them both goodnight. Jason would wander off, falling asleep to the dull glow of some video game or another. Later, Simon would poke his head in, mutter a goodnight, and then turn the electronics off. Finally, he and Annie would hold each other and let the night take them. That was his dream—that they would fall asleep as a family and never wake up.

Yet, somehow, this seemed better. Their tears, their grief, and their fear tapped into a well deeper than family ritual. They were together in a moment when being alone seemed profane and wrong.

Jason joined Simon and began to cry as they all held each other. No one said anything. They breathed the air that gave them life. They shared the love that made them family. They cried the tears that made them human.

And then they died.

Later Life and Novels

Prince lived the rest of his life in Capetown, South Africa. He only published three more novels; all were well-received but garnered far less praise than *The Grey Sunset* and *Rhythms of Decline*. ^[citation needed]

Countdown (Knopf, 2040) told the story of a young man named Franklin Proudman who had decided to repatriate to

North America. Proudman lands and finds life a lot different than he expected. Much of the book is a rambling series of anecdotes around the hopeless efforts of Proudman to build a life. He eventually dies from starvation, the ground still too damaged to produce crops.

Lost in North America (Knopf, 2045) is Prince's only foray into the [science fiction](#) genre.^[25] The novel tells the story of the Winkler family, who hide in a fallout shelter in Rapid City, South Dakota. Despite Rapid City being ground zero for the Meyer Impact, the family survives and exit the shelter a year later to rebuild their lives. When it becomes clear that there is no food or wildlife, the family begins a journey, foraging for food across North America. The book has clear allusions to [Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*](#), but the emptiness of the landscape provides for a uniquely Princean view. The book generated significant positive critical press.^{[26][27]}

Prince's final novel, *Crater* (Knopf, 2056), was released the year before his death. The book continued his exploration of the dark aspects of repatriation.^[28] The novel follows a scientist, William Ho, and his assistant Wendy Singh, as they attempt to descend to the bottom of the Meyer Crater. Like Prince's other novels, *Crater* is rife with introspection. As Ho and his assistant get closer to the bottom, they realize they are in love. It is when they have reached ground zero of the Meyer Impact when the two realize they have found their future together. The novel's ending is ambiguous, as the two

are attempting to climb out of the crater but are uncertain if they will ever escape. While thematically similar to his earlier novels, *Crater* employs a denser prose style, with long paragraphs that often include a stream-of-consciousness technique. Despite its ambiguity and often dark scenes, the novel was marked by some as a return to the optimism of “Coming Home.” *Crater* was a bestseller and re-established Prince as a popular figure in post-Impact literature.^{[29][30]}

Personal Life

Prince was romantically connected to several celebrities during his life, including actresses [Renee Diaz](#)^[citation needed] and [Janet Skillings](#).^[31] None of these relationships lasted more than a few weeks, however. In 2050, unofficial Prince biographer [Susan Nillson](#) announced that she had uncovered proof that Prince had left a girlfriend and child behind in North America. The document, a digitized copy of a Texas State birth certificate backed up on a European server, showed that Prince fathered a child named Samuel to a mother named Wendy Reynolds. Prince never acknowledged Nillson’s allegations, although most contemporary historians consider the claim accurate.^[32]

Excerpt from Julian Prince’s final interview (*Paris Live!*,

2056)

Aliette Rameau: You've achieved so much, Monsieur Prince. Do you have any regrets?

[Pause]

Rameau: Monsieur Prince?

Julian Prince: I'm sorry. Your question is a bit overwhelming. My life is full of regrets.

Rameau: Is there anything specific you could share with us?

Prince: No. [Takes drink of water] I'm sorry. Could we change the subject, please?

Death and Legacy

Prince died on August 20, 2057 in Capetown, South Africa, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He left no suicide note. Having died without any heirs, Prince bequeathed his literary estate and assets to [The 300 Million Ghosts Foundation](#), which was founded to record, research, and archive the stories of those who died during the Meyer Impact.^{[33][34]}

Prince's legacy continues to define and influence artists to this

day. While Impact Nihilism has fallen out of fashion, Prince's stark images and deep themes can be seen in everything from the paintings of [Ellen Winslow](#) to the music of the [Bluefins](#). His use of introspection and stream-of-consciousness has influenced writers as diverse as [Joe Lguyen](#) and [Isabel Shoeford](#).^[citation needed]

The play “[Coming Home](#)” debuted on the anniversary of Prince's death in 2058 at the [Globe Theater](#) in London. Adapted by Nobel-winning playwright [Andrew Hillsborough](#), the play was an unabashedly optimistic look at a world that survived an extinction event and came away smiling. Hillsborough noted on [BBC](#), “Oh, I'm sure old Prince would have hated it. But the words are all his. Somewhere along the way he changed. Just because he decided that facing the abyss meant that we were all doomed to fall in, doesn't mean we have to agree with him.”^[35]

Epitaph on Julian Prince's gravestone

“Finally home.”

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Jake Kerr began writing short fiction in 2010 after fifteen years as a music and radio industry columnist and journalist. His first published story, “The Old

Equations,” appeared in *Lightspeed* and went on to be named a finalist for the Nebula Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. He has subsequently been published in *Fireside Magazine*, *Escape Pod*, and the *Unidentified Funny Objects* anthology of humorous SF. A graduate of Kenyon College with degrees in English and Psychology, Kerr studied under writer-in-residence Ursula K. Le Guin and Peruvian playwright Alonso Alegria. He lives in Dallas, Texas, with his wife and three daughters.

Three Days of Rain

Holly Phillips

They came down out of the buildings' shade into the glare of the lakeside afternoon. Seen through the sting of sun-tears, the bridge between Asuada and Maldino Islands wavered in the heat, white cement floating over white dust, its shadow a black sword-cut against the ground. Santiago groped in the breast of his doublet for his sunglasses and the world regained its edges: the background of red-roofed tenements stacked up Maldino's hill, the foreground of the esplanade's railings marking the hour with abbreviated shadows, the bridge, the empty air, lying in between. The not-so-empty air. Even through dark lenses Santiago could see the mirage rippling above the lakebed, fluid as water, tempting as a lie, as the heat raised its ghosts above the plain. Beyond stood the dark hills that were the shore once, in the days when the city was islanded in a living lake; hills that were the shore still, the desert's shore. They looked like the shards of a broken pot, like paper torn and pasted against the sun-bleached sky. The esplanade was deserted and the siesta silence was intense.

“There's Bernal,” Luz murmured in Santiago's ear.
“Thirsty for blood.”

She sounded, Santiago thought, more sardonic than a lady should in her circumstances. He had been too shy to look at her as she walked beside him down from Asuada Island's

crown, but he glanced at her now from behind his sunglasses. She had rare pale eyes that were, in the glare, narrow and edged in incipient creases. A dimple showed by her mouth: She knew he was looking. He glanced away and saw Bernal and his seconds waiting in the shadow of the bridge. Ahead, Sandoval and Orlando and Ruy burst out laughing, as if the sight of Bernal were hilarious, but their tension rang like a cracked bell in the quiet. Santiago wished he were sophisticated enough to share Luz's ironic mood, but he was too excited, and he had the notion that he would do this hour an injustice if he pretended a disinterest he did not feel.

Sandoval vaulted over the low gate at the end of the esplanade, dropping down to the steps that led to the bridge's foot. Orlando followed more clumsily, the hilt of his rapier ringing off the gate's ironwork, and Ruy climbed sedately over, waiting for Luz and Santiago to catch up. Luz hitched up the skirt of her lace coat to show athletic legs in grimy hose, but allowed Ruy and Santiago to help her over the gate. The gate's sun-worn sign still bore a memory of its old warning—deep water, drowning, death—but it could not be deciphered beneath the pale motley of handbills. One had to know it was there, and to know, one had to care.

An intangible breeze stirred the ghost lake into gentle waves.

Bernal and Sandoval bowed. Their seconds bowed. To Santiago the observer, who still trailed behind with Luz, they looked like players rehearsing on an empty stage, the strong

colors of their doublets false against the pallor of the dust. Bernal drew his rapier with a flourish and presented it to Ruy to inspect. The bridge's shade gave no relief from the heat; sweat tickled the skin of Santiago's throat. Sandoval also drew, with a prosaic gesture that seemed more honest, and therefore more threatening than Bernal's theatricality, and Santiago felt a burst of excitement, thinking that Sandoval would surely win. Wouldn't he? He glanced at Luz and was glad to see that the sardonic smile had given way to an intent look. Belatedly he took off his sunglasses and her profile leapt out in sharp relief against the blazing lakebed beyond the shade.

The blades were inspected and returned to their owners. The seconds marked out their corners. The duelists saluted each other, or the duel, and their blades met in the first tentative kiss. Steel touching steel made a cold sound that hissed back down at them from the bridge's underside. The men's feet in their soft boots scuffed and patted and stirred up dust that stank like dry bones.

Santiago was there to watch and he did, but his excitement fragmented his attention, as if several Santiagos were crowded behind a single pair of eyes, watching everything. The fighters' feet like dancers', making a music of their own. The men's faces, intent, unselfconscious, reflecting the give and take of the duel. The haze of dust, the sharp edge of shade, the watery mirage. The rapiers hissed and shrieked and sang, and in the bridge's echoes Santiago heard water

birds, children on a beach, rain falling into the lake. For an instant his attention broke quite asunder, and he felt blowing through that divide a cool breeze, a wind rich with impossible smells, water and weeds and rust. The duelists fell apart and Santiago heard himself blurt out, “Blood! First blood!” for scarlet drops spattered from the tip of Sandoval’s sword to lay in the dust. Bernal grimaced and put his hand to his breast above his heart.

“It’s not deep?” said Sandoval worriedly.

“No, no,” Bernal said, pressing the heel of his hand to the wound.

“Fairly dealt,” Santiago said. He felt he was still catching up to events, that he had nearly been left behind, but no one seemed to notice. A grinning Ruy clapped his shoulder.

“A good fight, eh? They’ll be talking about this one for a season or two!”

“Talking about me for a season or two,” Luz said.

Ruy laughed. “She wants you to think she’s too modest to take pleasure in it, but her tongue would be sharper if we talked only about the fight, and never her.”

Luz gave Santiago an exasperated look, but when Sandoval came to kiss her hand she let him. But then, she let Bernal do the same, and Bernal’s bow was deeper, despite the pain that lined his face. There was not much blood on the ground, and what there was was already dulled by dust.

“Does it make you want to fight, Santiago?” Ruy asked.

Yes? No? Santiago said the one thing he knew was true.

“It makes me want to feel the rain on my face before I die.”

“Ay, my friend! Well said!” Ruy slung his arm around Santiago’s neck, and Santiago laughed, glad to be alive.

He held the crucible steady with aching arms as the molten glass ran over the ceramic lip and into the mold. The heat from the glass scorched his arms, his bare chest, his face, drying him out like a pot in a kiln. He eased the crucible away from the mold and set it on the brick apron of the furnace, glass cooling from a glowing yellow to a dirty gray on its lip, and dropped the tongs in their rack with suddenly trembling hands. The glassmaker Ernesto leaned over the mold, watching for flaws as the small plate began to cool.

“It will do,” he said, and he helped Santiago shift the mold into the annealing oven where the glass could cool slowly enough that it would not shatter. Santiago fished a bottle of water from the cooler and stepped out into the forecourt where the glassmaker’s two-story house cast a triangle of shade. It was only the day after Sandoval’s duel and Santiago did not expect to see any of that crowd again, not so soon. Yet there Ruy was, perched on the courtyard’s low northern wall, perfectly at ease, as if he meant to make a habit of the place.

“I was starting to think he would keep you working through siesta.”

Santiago shrugged, refusing to make excuses for either his employer or his employment. Ruy was dressed with the slapdash elegance of his class, his doublet and shirt open at

the neck, his light boots tied with mismatched laces. Santiago was half-naked, his bare skin feathered with thin white scars, like a duelist's scars, but not, emphatically not. Still, Ruy had come to him. He propped his elbows on the wall and scratched his heat-tightened skin without apology.

“What do you have planned?” he asked Ruy, and guessed, safely, “Not sleep.”

Santiago expected—he hoped—that Ruy would grin and propose another adventure like yesterday's, but no. Ruy looked out at the northern view and said soberly, “Sandoval was going to spend the morning in the Assembly watching the debates. We're to meet him at the observatory when they break before the evening session.”

The debates. Santiago swallowed the last of his water, taking pleasure from the cool liquid in his mouth and throat, and then toyed with the bottle, his gaze drawn into the same distance as Ruy's. Because of the fire hazard, Ernesto's workshop had an islet to itself, a low crumb of land off Asuada's northern rim. From here there was nothing to see but the white lakebed, the blue hills, the pale sky. Nothing except the long-necked pumps rocking out there in the middle distance, floating on the heat mirage like dusty metal geese, drawing up the water that kept the city alive. For now. Perhaps for not much longer, depending on the vote, the wells, the vanished rains. The empty bottle spun out of Santiago's tired hands and clattered to the baked earth beyond the wall. Ruy slipped down, one hand on his rapier's

scabbard, to retrieve it. One drop clung to its mouth, bright as liquid glass in the sunlight, and Santiago had a glancing vision, a waking siesta dream of an earthenware pitcher heavy with water, round-bellied, sweating, cool in his hands. The plastic bottle was light as eggshells, an airy nothing after the crucible and glass.

“Thanks,” he said, and shaking off the lure of sleep, he dropped the bottle in the re-use box and gathered up his clothes.

The observatory crowned the higher of Orroco’s two peaks, gazing down in academic tolerance at the Assembly buildings on the other height. More convenient for Sandoval than for his friends, but such was the privilege of leadership. Santiago felt no resentment as he made the long, hot walk with Ruy. He was glad of the company, glad of the summons, glad of the excuse to visit the observatory grounds. Too glad, perhaps, but he was old enough to know that he could have refused, hung up his hammock for a well-earned sleep—and it was that feeling of choice, of acting out of desire rather than need, that let him walk as Ruy’s equal. Their voices woke small echoes from the buildings that shaded the streets, the faint sounds falling about them like the dust kicked up by their feet. Even the short bridge between Asuada and Orroco was built up, and in the evenings the street was a small fiesta, a promenade complete with music, paper flowers, colored lanterns, laughing girls, but now even the shady balconies were abandoned. These days the city’s inhabitants withdrew

into their rooms like bats into their caves, hiding from the sun. There was an odd, stubborn, nonsensical freedom to being one of the fools who walked abroad, dizzy and too dry to sweat, as if the heat of afternoon were a minor thing, trivial beside the important business of living.

“Why does Sandoval attend the debates? I didn’t think . . .”

“That he cared?” Ruy gave Santiago a slanting look. “That we cared? About the Assembly, we don’t. Or at least, I don’t. They talk; I’d rather live. No, but Sandoval’s family holds one of the observer’s seats and he goes sometimes to . . . well, he says it’s to gather ammunition for his lampoons, but sometimes I wonder if it’s the lampoons that are the excuse.”

“Excuse?”

“For doing his duty. That’s the sort of family they are. Duty! Duty!” Ruy thumped his hand to his chest and laughed. Santiago was—not quite disappointed—he decided he was intrigued. He had not thought that was the kind of man Sandoval was. Sandoval himself, as if he knew he had to prove Ruy wrong, had gathered an audience in the shady precincts of the observatory’s eastern colonnade. He mimicked a fat councilor, whose speech was all mournful pauses, a fussy woman who interrupted herself at every turn, one of the famous party leaders who declaimed like an actor, one hand clutching his furrowed brow. Santiago, having arrived in the middle of this impromptu play, couldn’t guess how the debate was progressing, but he was struck more

forcibly than ever by the great wellspring of spirit inside Sandoval that gave life to one character after another and made people weep with laughter.

“And where is he in all of this?”

Santiago turned, almost shocked. He would never have asked that question, yet it followed so naturally on his own thought that he felt transparent, as if he had been thinking aloud. But Luz, who had spoken, was watching Sandoval, and by her manner might have been speaking to herself. Santiago hesitated over a greeting. Luz looked up at him, her face tense with a challenge he did not really understand.

“Isn’t that what actors do?” he said. “Bury themselves in their roles?”

“Oh, surely,” she said. “Surely. Here we see Sandoval the great actor, and in a minute more we’ll see Sandoval the great actor playing the role of Sandoval the great actor not playing a role. And when do we see Sandoval, just Sandoval? Where is he? Buried and—”

Luz broke off, but her thought was so clear to Santiago that she might as well have said it: dead. Worried, confused, Santiago looked over her head to Ruy, who shrugged, his face mirroring the eternal puzzlement of men faced with a woman’s moods. Sandoval’s admirers laughed at something he said and Luz gripped Santiago’s arm.

“It’s too hot, I can’t stand this noise. Let’s find somewhere quiet.”

She began to pull Santiago down the colonnade. Ruy

pursed his lips and shook his finger behind her back. Santiago flashed back a wide-eyed look of panic, only half-feigned, and Ruy, silently laughing, came along.

The observatory was one of the oldest compounds in the city, built during the Rational Age when philosophers and their followers wanted to base an entire civilization on the mysterious perfection of the circle and the square. Life was too asymmetrical, too messy, to let the age last for long, but its remnants were peaceful. There really was a kind of perfection in the golden domes, the marble colonnades, the long white buildings with their shady arcades that fenced the observatory in, a box for a precious orb. Perfection, but an irrelevant perfection: The place was already a ruin, even if the roofs and walls were sound. As they left Sandoval and his admirers behind, the laughter only made the silence deeper, like the fragments of shade whose contrast only whitened the sunlight on the stone.

Luz led them across the plaza where dead pepper trees cracked the flagstones with their shadows, through an arched passage that was black to sun-dazzled eyes, and out onto the southern terrace. Even under the arcade there was little shade. The three of them sat on a bench with their backs to the wall and looked out over the islands with their packed geometry of courtyards and plazas and roofs, islands of order, of life, scattered across the dry white face of death. Ruy and Luz began to play the game of high places, arguing over which dark cleft on Asuada was Mendoza Street, which faded tile

roof was Corredo's atelier, which church it was that had the iron devils climbing its brass-crowned steeple. Santiago, tired from his work, the walk, the heat, rested his head against the wall and let his eyes stray to the lake and its mirage of water, the blue ripples that were only a color stolen from the merciless sky. Suddenly he found the city's quiet dreadful. It was like a graveyard's, a ruin's.

"Why do they bother with a debate?" he said. "Everyone already knows how they're going to vote. Everyone knows . . ."

Luz and Ruy were silent and Santiago felt the embarrassment of having broken a half-perceived taboo. He was the outsider again, the stranger.

But then Luz said, "Everyone knows that when they vote, however they vote, they will have voted wrong. To stay, to go: There is no right way to choose. They argue because when they are angry enough they can blame the other side instead of themselves." She paused. "Or God, or the world."

"Fate," Ruy said.

"Fate is tomorrow," Luz said.

"And there is no tomorrow," Ruy said. "Only today. Only now." Santiago said nothing, knowing he had heard their creed, knowing he could only understand it in his bones. The lake's ghost washed around the islands' feet, blue and serene, touching with soft waves against the shore. A dust devil spun up a tall white pillar that Santiago's sleep-stung eyes turned into a cloud trailing a sleeve of rain. Rain rustled against the

roof of the arcade. White birds dropped down from the high arches and drifted away on the still air, their wings shedding sun-bright droplets of molten gold. Sleep drew near and was startled away by Luz's cry. Some scholar, despairing over his work or his world, had set his papers alight and was casting them out his window. The white pages danced on the rising heat, their flames invisible in the sunlight, burning themselves to ash before they touched the ground.

The day of the vote was an undeclared holiday. Even the news station played music, waiting for something to report, and every open window poured dance songs and ballads into the streets. Neighbors put aside their feuds, strangers were treated to glasses of beer, talk swelled and died away on the hour and rose again when there was no news, no news.

Sandoval, trying as always to be extraordinary, had declared that today was an ordinary day, and had gone with Ruy and Orlando and some others to the swordsman Corredo's atelier for their morning practice. Santiago, summoned by Ruy, entered those doors for the first time that day, and he was not sure what to feel. While Sandoval strove to triumph over the day's great events by cleaving to routine, Santiago found it was impossible not to let his first entry into the duelists' privileged realm be colored by the tension of the day. And why shouldn't it be? He looked around him at the young men's faces, watched them try to mirror Sandoval's mask of ennui, and wondered if their fight to free themselves from the common experience only meant they failed to

immerse themselves in the moment they craved. This was the moment, this day, the day of decision. And yet, Santiago thought, Sandoval was right in one thing: However the vote went, whatever the decision, life would go on. They would go on breathing, pumping blood, making piss. They would still be here, in the world, swimming in time.

“You’re thinking,” Ruy said cheerfully. “Master Corredo! What say you to the young man who thinks?”

“Thinking will kill you,” said the swordsman Corredo. He was a lean, dry man, all sinew and leather, and he meant what he said.

“There, you see? Here, take this in your hand.” Ruy presented Santiago with the hilt of a rapier. Santiago took it in his burn-scarred hand, felt the grip find its place against his palm. The sword was absurdly light after the iron weight of the glassmaker’s tongs; it took no more than a touch of his fingers to hold it steady.

“Ah, you’ve done this before,” Ruy said. He sounded suspicious, as if he thought Santiago had lied.

“No, never.” Santiago was tempted to laugh. He loved it, this place, this sword in his hand.

“A natural, eh? Most of us started out clutching it like—”

“Like their pizzles in the moment of joy,” Master Corredo said. He took Santiago’s strong wrist between his fingers and thumb and shook it so the sword softly held in Santiago’s palm waved in the air. After a moment Santiago firmed the muscles in his arm and the sword was still, despite the

swordsman's pressure.

“Well,” said Corredo. He let Santiago go. “You stand like a lump of stone. Here, beside me. Place your feet so—not so wide—the knees a little bent . . .”

Ruy wandered off, limbered up with a series of long lunges. After a while the soft kiss and whine of steel filled the air.

By noon they were disposed under the awning in Corredo's courtyard, drinking beer and playing cards. Santiago, with a working man's sense of time, was hungry, but no one else seemed to be thinking about food. Also, the stakes were getting higher. Santiago dropped a good hand on the discard pile and excused himself. He would save his money and find a tavern that would sell him a bushel of flautas along with a few bottles of beer. Not that he could afford to feed them any more than he could afford to gamble with them, but he had heard them talk about spongers. He would rather be welcomed when they did see him, even if he could not see them often.

And then again, the holiday atmosphere of the streets made it easy to spend money if you had it to spend. In the masculine quiet of Corredo's atelier he had actually forgotten for a little while what day it was. The vote, the vote. Red and green handbills not yet faded by the angry sun fluttered from every doorjamb and drifted like lazy pigeons from underfoot. Radios squawked and rattled, noise becoming music only when Santiago passed a window or a door, and people were

still abroad in the heat. One did not often see a crowd by daylight and it was strange how the sun seemed to mask faces just as effectively as evening shadows did, shuttering the eyes, gilding brown skin with sweat and dust. Santiago walked farther than he had meant to, sharing the excitement, yet feeling separate from the crowd, as if he were excited about a different thing, or as if he had been marked out by Sandoval, set aside for something other than this. Life, he thought: Sandoval's creed. But wasn't this life out here in the streets, in these conversations between strangers, in this shared fear for the future, for the world? Didn't blood beat through these hearts too?

The heat finally brought Santiago to rest by the shaded window of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Standing with his elbows on the outside counter, waiting for his order, he ate a skewer of spicy pork that made him sweat, and then cooled his mouth with a beer. The restaurant's owner seemed to have filled the long, narrow room with his closest friends. Santiago, peering through the hatch at the interior darkness, heard the same argument that ran everywhere today, a turbulent stream like the flash flood from a sudden rain. Life's no good here anymore, but will it be any better in the crowded hills, by the poisoned sea, down in the south where the mud and rain was all there was?

"But life *is* good." No one heard, though Santiago spoke aloud.

Perhaps they chose not to hear. His order came in a paper

box already half-transparent with oil stains and he carried it carefully in his arms. The smell was so good it made him cheerful. All the same, when he returned to the atelier he found that as impatient as he had been with the worriers outside, he was almost as irritated by the abstainers within. They seemed so much like stubborn children sitting in a corner with folded arms. Like children, however, they greeted the food with extravagant delight, and Santiago found himself laughing at the accolades they heaped on his head, as if he had performed some mighty deed. It was better to eat, he thought, and enjoy the food as long as it was there.

Like normal people, they dozed through the siesta hours, stupefied by heat and food. Santiago slept deeply and woke to the dusky velvet of the evening shadows. With the sun resting on the far hills, the bleached sky regained its color, a blue as deep and calm as a song of the past, a blue that seemed to have been drawn out of Santiago's dreams. They went out together, yawning and still pleasantly numb with sleep, into the streets where a hundred radios stamped out the rhythm of an old salsa band. It was impossible not to sway a little as they walked, to bump their shoulders in thoughtless camaraderie, to spin out lines of poetry at the sight of a pretty face. "Oh, rose of the shadows, flower in bud, bloom for me . . ." It was evening and the long, long shadows promised cool even as the city's plaster and stone radiated the last heat of the day. It was evening, the day's delight.

"So who is going to ask first?" Orlando muttered to Ruy.

Ruy glanced over his shoulder at Santiago, his eyebrows raised. Santiago smiled and shook his head.

“We won’t need to ask,” Ruy said. “We’ll hear, whether we want to or not.”

But who in all the city would have thought they needed to be told? Holiday had given way to carnival, as the radios gave way to guitars in the plazas, singers on the balconies, dancers in the streets. It was a strange sort of carnival where no one needed to drink to be drunk. The people had innocent faces, Santiago thought, washed clean by shock, as if the world had not died so much as vanished, leaving them to stand on air. But was it the shock of being told to abandon their homes? Or was it the shock of being told to abandon themselves to the city’s slow death? Santiago listened to an old man singing on a flat roof high above the street, he listened to a woman sobbing by a window, and he wondered. But no, he didn’t ask.

They wound down to Asuada’s esplanade where the dead trees were hung with lanterns that shone candy colors out into the dark. The sun was gone, the hills a black frieze, the sky a violet vault freckled with stars. The lakebed held onto the light, paler than the city and the sky, and it breathed a breath so hot and dry the lake’s dust might have been the fine white ash covering a barbecue’s coals. There were guitars down here too, and a trumpet that sang out into the darkness. Sandoval took off his sword and began to dance. Sweat drew his black hair across his face as he stamped and whirled and clapped with hollow hands. Ruy began to dance, and Orlando

and the rest, their swords slung down by Santiago's feet. He ached to watch them, wished he with his clumsy feet dared to join them, and was glad he had not when Luz spotted him through the crowd. She came and leaned against his side, muscular and soft, never quite still as the guitars thrummed out their rhythms. Santiago knew she was watching Sandoval, but he did not care. This was his. A paper lantern caught fire, and when no one leapt forward to douse it the whole tree burned, one branch at a time, the pretty lanterns swallowed up by the crueller light of naked flame. It was beautiful, the bare black branches clothed in feathers of molten glass, molten gold. The dance spread, a chain of men stamping and whirling down the lakeshore. In the shuffle of feet and the rustle of flames, in the brush of Luz's hair against his sleeve, in the rush of air into his lungs, Santiago once again heard that phantom rain. It fell around him, bright as sparks in the light of the fire, it rang like music into the memory of the lake. It was sweet, sweet. Luz stirred against his arm.

“Are you going, Santiago? When they stop the pumps, are you going to go?”

He leaned back against the railing, and smiled into the empty sky, and shook his head, no.

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Holly Phillips is the author of the story collection *At the Edge of Waking* and

the novels *The Burning Girl* and *The Engine's Child*. Her first collection, *In the Palace of Repose*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and won the 2006 Sunburst Award. Holly lives in Vancouver with Steven and Savoy. You can visit her at www.hollyphillips.com.

Let's Take This Viral

Rich Larson

Default hadn't been down in the nocturns for some time, probably half an orbit, but he had just dissolved the geneshare contract with his now-ex-lover and needed to get completely fucking perforated to take his mind off things. His lift was full of revelers all laughing and widecasting the same synthesized whalesong from Old Old Earth. Ancient aquatic groans were currently vogue, so Default grudgingly let his aural implants synchronize to it.

The lift plunged down the station's magnetic spine and into artificial night. The nocturns were always dark, but never sleeping. Red splashes of hologram and crude argon signs bloomed in the void below Default's feet and the other passengers pumped their fists in excitement, exchanged surgically-widened smiles.

Default was sort of wishing he'd updated his tattoos. Everyone else had checkerboard swatches on. Worse, it seemed like he was the only unit not nursing a cosmetic virus. He watched a pretty fem succumb to a sneezing fit, spraying mucus to applause and livefeed shares, and sullenly bioscanned his own immune system.

Untouched and utterly boring.

Default triple-checked to be sure Schorr was still meeting him. Schorr had been his most staticky friend for as long as

he remembered. He'd have him party-synched in no time.

When the dilating doors spilled him out on mainstreet, Default resisted cranking up the brightness in his optic implants. To do the nocturns right you had to do them dark. Flyby lights poured grainy orange on streets still wet from a pheromone-laced rainshower. Swirling neon advertisements tugged his gaze in all directions, icy blues, radiation yellows.

If it wasn't for the socialite tag, Default wouldn't have even recognized Schorr upon arrival. For one thing, Schorr had changed sex and was now very much a fem, and an attractive one to boot. She was fashionably naked apart from a flock of flutterdroids that swathed her skin in shifting patterns. Default saw a tentative follow-cam bobbing along in her wake and realized that Schorr had been one busy unit. He could feel his social stock skyrocketing just from being in her proximity.

"Default, you steady satellite," Schorr said aloud, chatting it simultaneously. "How long has it been? What have you been doing up there with the serious folk?" She embraced him and the flutterdroids whirred around them like a cloak.

"Half an orbit?" Default grinned weakly. "Longer. Last time I saw you, you, ah . . ."

"Trying new things," Schorr said, languid. She raised one pale arm and Default saw something bumpy and pink underneath it. Before he could remark, her fingers had encircled his wrist and she was tugging him into the crush. Skin sliding on skin, static starching his hair. Default tried to

enjoy the sensations.

“In a hurry?” he asked.

“Slipping the cam,” Schorr said, wagging a hand back toward the spherical cyclops. It was drifting over the crowd, trying to pinpoint them. “Bit of privacy is better for where we’re heading.”

Default craned his neck. The cam carved a dancing red laserlight through the throng of revelers. Schorr started to run, and Default, fixing the grin to his face, followed.

They pelted through the neon-swatched streets and Default felt lactic acids licking muscles that hadn’t burned in ages. They dashed down a row of flashing dream machines, in and then out of a slick-floored purging booth, past fleshfacs vending extra limbs. Schorr’s laugh danced ahead of them like phantom code. Default’s lungs were tight by the time they slipped into a dopamine bar, but it was a good feeling.

Schorr shed her flutterdroid swarm at the door and, gauging the dresscode, Default pulled off his thermal but kept his footwraps. They made their way to the bar, still laughing, and it wasn’t until they were seated with the plastic plugs snaking into their brain stems that Schorr asked about Memmi, about the break-up. Default exhaled long.

“She joined a fucking polymind,” he said. “Right after things ended. She uploaded to one of those polymind probes so she can spend the next few centuries chasing comets and contemplating entropy.”

“That’s a crippler,” Schorr remarked. A lopsided frown

made her look exactly like his old self for a moment. “But you’ll find someone else,” she said. “You always do.”

“I do,” Default admitted.

Schorr shivered as the next chemical wave hit them, one arm trailing over her head. Default saw the bubbling pink protrusions again, and more he hadn’t noticed spreading across her collarbone, up her neck. He remembered, through the dopamine mist, that he’d meant to ask about it. He pointed his chin. “What’s this, then?”

“This?” Schorr smiled and Default knew she’d been waiting for the question. “Just a little virus.” She leaned forward, conspiratorial. “You know how cosmetic viruses are the big spit now, yeah? Everyone’s got one. Everyone synched, anyway.”

“I noticed,” Default said. “Thanks.”

“Well, there’s this unit down here who makes the absolute rawest bugs,” Schorr continued. “He does viral, bacterial, everything. His stuff is going to go absolute nova. It’s really only a matter of time.” She traced the shiny pink bumps with pride, then looked up slyly. “Do you want to meet him?”

Default thought of thumping underground scenes, a meteoric rise in social stock, roaming the nocturns with Schorr nursing matching infections, and, for just an instant, holding her clammy hand in his own and exchanging chapped smiles.

“What’s he called?” Default asked.

“He has a slew of tags,” Schorr said. “Lately, most

commonly, people call him the Plagueman.” She tugged the dopamine plug free with a soft plop and let it retract back into the bar. “He’s waiting for us in the basement.”

Still reeling from the dopamine, they threaded their way to the back of the bar and down a concrete gullet. Schorr stroked them past a touch-door and Default found himself blinking as his optic implants recalibrated. The lights were bright and antiseptic white.

A sort of bubblefab had been grown, still fresh enough to stick underfoot, and its membrane formed crude walls and a ceiling. Default saw red tubes snaked behind frosty glass, a mix-and-match genekit hijacked from some funlab, a small thinker core that couldn’t be holding more than a semi-sentient AI.

“Plagueman?” Schorr’s breath was a crystallized cloud. “Where are you?”

“Hold on,” came a distorted voice. Someone in a worksuit ducked out from behind a row of growth tubes and set down a spindly instrument. “Is this Default, then? Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Default returned, giving a polite fist bump. The Plagueman pulled off his cowl. Default saw a weave of red muscle over gray bone. Packed yellow in the cheek. Lids with no lashes. Flaying was occasionally chic—every few orbits, denizens enjoyed replacing tiny swathes of moisture-treated skin with transparent polysilicate—but Default had never seen it done to this extent.

“Got sick of it one day,” the unit explained, seeing the

curiosity. “Decided it all had to go.”

“It’s potent,” Default assured him.

Schorr slung an arm around the Plagueman’s shoulders. “Maybe a little gauche,” she said, and Default resisted the urge to run a quick pheromone scan to determine if the two of them were fucking. Schorr would probably detect it, and then she would wonder why he was scanning her, and Default wouldn’t have a good reason.

“I’ve never seen this one,” Default said instead, nodding to Schorr’s infection. “Custom?”

“It’s a recreation, actually,” the Plagueman said, smiling liplessly. “A mild pox. Something from Old Old Earth.”

“Retrovirus,” Schorr joked.

“*Not droll,*” Default chatted her. She stuck out her tongue.

“The blisters should spread soon,” the Plagueman said. “It’s a really eye-snatching effect.” He looked up at Default. “Want to try it before it goes open market?”

Default looked at the frozen virus samples. Memmi wouldn’t have liked this; she hated most bodymods. Not that it had stopped her from uploading into that junky probe for a century of space sailing. Fucking hypocrite.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Absolutely I do.”

The Plagueman beamed, teeth far whiter than the exposed sliver of his jawbone. “Raw.”

“Needle or oral?” Default asked, now determined.

“That’s the best part,” Schorr said. “Our unit here makes

real viruses, not those piddly things that die off an eyeblink after you buy them. They're self-propagating."

"All you have to do is override your immunity buffer," the Plagueman finished.

Default closed his eyes and reached as deep as he could into his hardware/wetware interface, down past the cobwebs, and he found the immunity buffer pulsing in a sequestered corner. As he went to shut it down, an archaic warning message in radioactive yellow scrolled the insides of his eyelids. Default overrode it.

When he opened his eyes, Schorr was in front of him. She breathed a long slink of steam into the chilled air and across his face. His nostrils twitched.

"Feel sick yet?" she asked, then chatted, "*It's a no-pay, by the way. Thank me later.*"

"Not yet."

"It takes a little time," the Plagueman said. "But you won't need a bioscan to know when it hits." Schorr was tracing the pustules with admiring fingers, and Default had to admit it looked potent. It was like her skin was strewn with tiny craters, like some ancient moon, and they glistened raw and wet in the bright light.

"Nova," Schorr said. "So nova. Thanks for the dish, I know he's going to love it."

Default nodded. "Yeah, thanks for the freebie, Plagueman."

"No issue," he said, pulling his cowl back up. "When

people ask, just remember who bug-synched you. I haven't worked in a signature yet."

"Come with us?" Default offered, hoping for a negative. He didn't want to have to compete with a skinless unit who cooked amazing viruses.

"I'm working on a new bacterial," the Plagueman said, muffled again. "Have fun. Get shattered."

"You're not supposed to work in the nocturns," Schorr teased, but she didn't look too upset as she turned back to Default. "Time to party," she said with a grin. "See if we can't wobble that steady fucking satellite of yours."

They partied. Schorr introduced him to a slew of units, some of whom he recognized by tag, and then the whole pack of them speedtapped an amphetamine cocktail and took the freebus to an amphitheatre. Schorr was projecting her bioscan all over the inside of the bus, showing the spiky virus taking root in her body, and with a little prompting Default threw his up beside hers. Everyone cheered when he found the first lump on his neck.

"She always finds the best shit," said a fem beside him, adjusting the static clip in her hair.

"He does," Default agreed, remembering about a hundred orbits worth of Schorr's misadventures, unlicensed hull-walks and clonefucking and all sorts of funtime. If they hadn't come out of the same birthing tank, Default was sure he never would have snagged Schorr as a friend. Default was not vogue the way Schorr was vogue.

“Want to share?” the fem asked, running a finger over his lips.

Not usually, anyway.

The amphitheatre was wall-to-wall like they'd all been poured in through the ceiling. More whalesong, but Default didn't mind that now, not with his head shredded by amphetamine. The crowd was roiling around them, a raspy skin-sea, and every touch felt electric. Schorr was the center of the hurricane, but Default was still soaking up more hits than he ever had in his life. Probes for his tag, probes about Schorr's old sex, and always probes about the virus. They were clamoring.

He found himself with the fem from the freebus, recognized her tag and her bright green eyes and the camber of her bare back. It was too loud for airtalk, but she chatted him: *“I want your bug, handsome.”* The message came with a fleshflash of exactly how she wanted to contract it, and Default only thought of Memmi for a split second before they docked right there on heated floor.

When the party was about to burst, they went to the next one. Schorr chatted him; they wormed their way around the back through naked bodies, sweeping limbs, and they stumbled down the street to a fresh scene. Motion artists were doing a recreation of the Five, widecasting a link to the bird's eye view, and with the drug singing in Default's veins it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Things blurred. They stopped at a dream machine,

downloaded a hallucination that had them sprinting through alleyways to escape a swarm of blue-and-red tetragons. They ate sticky vatmeat until their unprepped stomachs revolted, then vomited in a purging booth and staggered back for more. The AI vendor offered to grow them a cannibal special if they provided a bit of helix; Schorr pretended to gnaw at Default's arm.

Sitting on a curb, counting each others' pox.

Trying to make two follow-cams collide.

Another party, this time underwater. Sleek monitor AIs swam in lazy ribbons and when Schorr caught one by the tail it bubbled emergency oxygen in beautiful wobbling streams.

The nocturns had no light cycles, but by the time they rented a bunk just off the mainstreet Default's internal clock told him it had been days. Schorr was still bouncing from foot to foot, still party-synched. Default was exhausted.

"Wick, wick run," Schorr said, because she was saying wick now instead of raw. The latest of their companions were stumbling off into the dark. Default rubbed his eyes.

"Same pod?" he asked.

"Don't we always?" Schorr's lopsided frown returned.

"Oh. Would it remind you?"

"*It's fine,*" Default chatted, too tired to speak, and slipped inside the sleep pod. The gel rippled a moment later as Schorr climbed in after him. It made Default remember a trip to the nocturns orbits and orbits ago for a Five festival, collapsing spent in a pod with Schorr beside him. There was only one

difference.

“Why’d you change sex again?” he chatted.

“Still trying to find something different,” Schorr replied. Her shrug sent vibrations.

“Is it?”

Schorr shifted in the dark. *“Not so different, no. Still bored.”*

Default slept.

When he woke up, Default had a mass of updates sitting in his skull. Sleeping for a few days could easily take you out of the know, but it looked like Schorr had charitably cut him into her own feed. There was no way he’d already made that many new friends.

“Ready to go?” Schorr asked. Default glanced over and realized that the pockmarks on her skin were slowly healing. He wondered what his own looked like. He combed through the updates and found an invitation from the Plagueman.

“Back to the basement?”

“You scan my mind. He’s been chatting me about something new.”

The pod gave them a send-off in the form of exfoliation and amphetamine injections, and then they were back in the street. It was dark and loud and wild and as if they hadn’t left it. Bands of revelers passed and Default saw runny noses, puffy eyes, but more than anything he saw shiny pink blisters. Schorr was right. It was going nova.

“How long have we been alive, Default?” Schorr asked as they stepped onto a freebus. She had traded her now-unvogue-flutterdroids for swirling fabric and spray-on, but her eyes were still ringed dark and seemed suddenly serious.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, from the instant we were genemixed . . .” Schorr moved her finger in a slow arc. “. . . to this moment here on the freebus. How many orbits have elapsed between?”

“I’ve never calculated that,” Default admitted.

“I did,” Schorr said. “692.3487 orbits. We’re old.”

“*Stars* are old.”

“We’re old,” Schorr said firmly. Then her face broke into a grin as the freebus passed a familiar vendor. “Vatmeat? I’ll buy.”

“I’ll vomit,” Default said, glad the mood had passed.

“Deal,” Schorr said.

Pox was over, bacterial was in. Preferably, in both lungs. Default and Schorr lay side by side while the Plagueman, who was now called Epi, injected them. They clasped clammy hands.

“You’re going to feel this one,” Epi promised. “Really feel this one. It’s like nothing else.”

And Epi was right. Before they even hit the next party, Default and Schorr were coughing at each other and wheezing laughs between alcohol eyedrops, suddenly short of breath. Default’s ear canals felt permanently plugged and the world was surreal, almost soundless. They chatted instead of

airtalk for the whole duration. Default had never felt so curiously detached, so . . . floating. It was intoxicating. They stumbled through the streets in their own personal world, a soundless world where fever crept across their foreheads and every breath was dredged.

Default gave it to a select few, sometimes with Schorr's approval first, sometimes not. Only a small handful of fems and sirs and neuts rode the razor-edge of the bacterial trend. Those without connections were left mimicking the effects, walking bent double and faking coughs between words.

There were more bugs, and Schorr wanted them all. At first Default thought he was following because he'd always followed Schorr, because he'd never had social stock this high or funtime this exclusive, but no: There was something else drawing him to the bright white basement where Epi, now No-Skin, did his work. Default was breaking his body down so thoroughly, so deeply, that he knew himself in ways he never had before. In ways Memmi never had either, but Memmi was distant now, a dim thought on the periphery.

Sometimes the infections hit so quickly Default and Schorr couldn't even leave the basement. They collapsed against each other and No-Skin apologized, talked about reducing potency, but when they were entwined on the floor with entropy swimming their veins they couldn't hear him and didn't care. Sometimes they stayed there with No-Skin for days on end instead of spreading the word, spreading the vogue, but he seemed to enjoy their company. They shivered

and groaned and reveled in pus from a new orifice, an interesting discoloration of the gums, a bone-deep ache.

“How did you learn to make these?” Default chatted on one of these occasions, half inside a fever dream. They had their own closed web at this point, him and Schorr and the newly-christened Bugwright. The Bugwright pulled down his cowl and shrugged.

“Practice, unit,” he said, breath steaming. “Practice in other places.”

“Schorr never told me you were a pilgrim,” Default chatted. He glanced over to where Schorr was lounging, eyes crusted.

“I’m not forthcoming with it,” the Bugwright admitted. “A lot of people don’t like pilgrims. They like to just think their station is the only station, you know?”

“I had an ex who always wanted to hop stations,” Default chatted.

“You see a lot of things,” the Bugwright said. “I’ve seen a lot of things, and all of them end.”

“Tell him about the finale,” Schorr chatted. Default hadn’t known she was lucid.

“When it’s ready,” the Bugwright said. He pulled the cowl back up over his skinless face and returned to work.

Time had passed; the nocturns had changed. Every unit in the universe had a bug to show off, and bioscans were everywhere you looked, sprayed onto walls and tattooed onto

skin. Signature viruses, custom infections. The freebus had divvied into personal transportation pods for units who were no longer walking, or for those pretending they no longer could. The air was swimming with disease.

“We started this, you know,” Schorr said. “How’s that feel? You’re not the steady satellite anymore. You’re nova.”

They were in a corner supshop, squeezed into a booth that was doing its best to massage their back muscles. Default was burning off a mild fever, hair fashionably sweat-slicked. He didn’t know what Schorr was running. Probably something subtle. Discharge was getting too obvious, she thought.

“It feels good,” Default said. Schorr smiled and patted his face. Default caught her hand and held it there. “But I’ve got a lift leaving soon.”

“You want to go back topside?” Schorr asked, incredulous. “Why?”

“It’s time, that’s all,” Default said. He judged his next words. “I want you to come with me.”

“I want you to stay here.” Schorr tugged her hand back and pointed out the wide window. “This is different, unit. This is finally different.”

“You’ve found things like this before. Different things.”

“But this is the last thing, Default.” Schorr looked hurt. “The biggest thing. I was hoping you would do it with me.”

“Do what?” Default asked, heart thumping. They had been docking more often lately, less often with other people,

and if she wanted a contract . . . well, Default wanted one, too. He felt Schorr open up a private line.

“Do you remember the Five?”

Of course he remembered the Five. The memory was entrenched in every brain on the station. There was a hundred orbits’ worth of art, music, and gene-shares dedicated to the Five and their ill-fated hull-walk, to the malfunction that let a micrometeorite slip through the station’s detection system and plow five units into blood and carbon dust.

“What do you think happened to them?” Schorr asked.

Default frowned, unsure where the conversation was headed. *“They ceased.”*

“What do you think it felt like?”

“It’s impossible to know that.”

“Not impossible.” Schorr peeled back the sleeve of her thermal and raised her arm. Default saw something black and bubbling underneath.

“A different thing,” Schorr said in the air. “A new thing.” She looked sad.

“I thought maybe you meant something else.” Default stared at the infection and remembered a conversation with the Bugwright. Bubonic. Old Old Earth. Fatal, whatever that entailed.

“But I wanted it to be me and you, Default,” Schorr said haltingly. Her eyes roved all the way around the supshop, everywhere but on him, then finally landed.

“Why?” Default asked.

Schorr shrugged. She smiled. “Because then you’d never have to find someone else.”

Their hands entangled, and as they kissed Default dropped his immunity buffer all the way down to zero.

Memmi/Others had missed Default, she/they really had. The polymind probe had circled the edge of the galaxy, watched the decay of a red dwarf, catalogued a crude bacterial life-form on a thawing moon. Memmi/Others had marveled at the vastness, the chaos, but she/they had not forgotten the station, either. It was harder to re-locate than expected, no longer buzzing with wave communication. Maybe something new had been developed, some new frequency the outdated probe instruments could no longer detect.

The probe docked and gave Memmi/Others a troubling report: The station was empty. She/they floated through the station like a ghost, jumping from monitor to monitor. The AIs were dormant, running only the most basic maintenance protocols. The lifts were stalled in their berths. The multihouses were derelict. She/they went down to the nocturns.

Nothing. The holos danced on in the dark streets, music was still relooping and evolving, but the revelers had vanished. A lone autocleaner was still wandering, still shoving debris, and Memmi/Others recognized the dull yellow of old bone only by the probe’s logs. She/they retreated to the station’s main thinker, trying to make sense of it, trying to evaluate.

One ship had left the station. Memmi/Others saw the trajectory like a laser, and she/they directed the probe to follow it. She/they slid through black space for a century. For two. The probe arrived at another station, this one slowly orbiting a double sun. Memmi/Others requested docking. No answer.

The probe sailed on to the next station, and the next, and as desperation grew and then ebbed there came a slow realization: She/they had missed the party.

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Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island, and at 20 now lives in Edmonton, Alberta, where he was a recent semifinalist for the Norman Mailer Poetry Prize and recipient of the 2012 Rannu Fund for Writers of Speculative Fiction. In 2011 his novel *Devolution* was a finalist for the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. His short work and poetry have since appeared in *Word Riot*, *>kill author*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review*, *DSF*, and many others, including the anthologies *Here Be Monsters* and *Futuredaze: An Anthology of YA Science Fiction*. He reads for *The Adroit Journal*. His self-published work can be found at Amazon.com/author/richlarson.

The Sense of the Circle
Angélica Gorodischer
translated by Amalia Gladhart

Encore n'y a il chemin
qui n'aye son issuë.
Montaigne

Have you seen those houses on Oroño Boulevard, especially the ones that face east, those dry, cold, serious, heavy houses, with grilles but without gardens, maybe at the most a tile patio paved like the sidewalk? In one of those houses lives *Ciro Vázquez Leiva, Cirito*. Great guy, a little weary, tolerably rich, married to a tiresome and exasperating woman, *Fina Ereñú*. Every time *Fina* goes to *Salta* to visit their daughter and the grandchildren, and fortunately she goes often enough that he does not fall completely silent, *Cirito* stops going to the *Jockey Club* and that is when a few friends of the kind who correctly interpret the signs go to the cold, dry house and play poker in the dining room. Exclusively masculine, even somewhat solemn gatherings at which they drink whiskey in moderation and a coffee or two, or liters of coffee if *Trafalgar Medrano* is there, like last Thursday.

Not that I have ever been there, because as I mentioned, women are just in the way, but *Ciro* often shows up at *Raúl's* with the *Albino Gamen*, who was there. *Cirito* has incredible

luck. At least that's what his friends say who don't want to recognize the truth that, obliged by circumstances, he has developed an infinite sense of opportunity and an infinite ability to distort the truth as necessary, just exactly as much as necessary. And that night, although they play with the same moderation with which they drink whiskey, he won piles of money. Most of all at the expense of the Albino and of Doctor Flynn—the physician, not the lawyer. Trafalgar Medrano, who is more circumspect, came out even. After a catastrophic rematch, the Albino said enough and Flynn said you're an animal Cirito and Trafalgar Medrano said is there no more coffee? There was. The others served themselves whiskey and Cirito put away the cards. The Albino said that the next day he was going to bring a new deck and someone suggested it should be a Spanish one, let's see if playing *truco* Cirito kept sweeping everything before him.

“Bring whatever deck you want,” said Cirito, who was happy, “Spanish or Chinese or whatever else.”

“Playing cards are Chinese,” said the Albino.

“Could be,” said Flynn, who is cultured, “but it was the Arabs who brought them to the West. Viterbo says that at the end of the fourteenth century, the Arabs carried them to Spain and that they were called *naib*.”

“And who is that, Viterbo?” asked the Albino.

“And that,” Flynn continued, “the coins are the bourgeoisie, the cups are the clergy, the swords are the army, and the clubs are the people.”

“As always and everywhere,” said Cirito.

“I met some guys who were all of that and nothing at the same time,” said Trafalgar.

“I know,” said the Albino, “and then who made the revolutions, huh?”

“There were none,” said Trafalgar. “Not revolutions, not anything.”

“Tell,” said Cirito.

A rhetorical request, because when Trafalgar begins to tell something like that very slowly, almost in spite of himself, no one can stop him.

“Were any of you ever on Anandaha-A?”

No one, ever, as was to be expected. It isn't easy to go to the places where he goes.

“It's horrible,” he said. “The most horrible world you can imagine. When it's day, it seems like it's night, and when it's night, you turn on the strongest light you have and you can barely see your hands because the darkness swallows everything. There are no trees, there are no plants, there are no animals, there are no cities, there is nothing. The land is rolling, with stunted little mountains. The air is sticky; there are a few narrow, lazy rivers and the few people that live there, and at first glance one wonders if they can be called people, take some gray leaves or some worms, I don't know, from the bottom of the rivers, they squash them between their fingers, they mix them with water, and they eat them. Disgusting. The ground is cold and damp, like tamped earth.

There is never wind, it never rains, it is never cold, it is never hot. A purplish sun the color of wine sediment always makes the same circuit in the same dirty sky without it mattering to anyone and there are no moons.”

“You must have had a lot of fun,” said the Albino Gamen.

“Quite a bit,” Trafalgar admitted. “A few years ago, I had earned a truckload of dough selling little light bulbs on Prattolva where they have just discovered electricity and as I knew something about the useless sun of Anandaha-A, it occurred to me that I might earn another truckload selling them lamps, lanterns, those things that would eat the darkness. But of course what I did not know was that those people had no intention of buying anything, anything at all. I went to Prattolva with another load and on the way back I set down on Anandaha-A close to what seemed to be a small city and which was not a city, small or large, but rather an encampment, but something is something. The welcome could not have been more effusive: the people in the camp had become as bored as penguins and I was a big novelty. I don’t know why people choose to study such disagreeable things. Unless it’s the usual: the hope of earning something, an attitude to which I adhere and which I consider quite laudable. And that is how there were twelve or fifteen people in the camp, all with ostentatious titles but they luckily also took the trouble to cook, fix a faucet, play the harmonica, or tell dirty stories. And friendly and courteous, all of them. There was that Swedish geologist, Lundgren, who was quite

disappointed when he learned I didn't play chess but whose disappointment lifted when I told him I was going to teach him the three varieties of sintu—the combative, the contemplative, and the fraternal—which are played in the Ldora system, one on each of the three worlds. Next to that, chess looks like tic-tac-toe. And I taught him all three and he beat me in just one match, a combative one. I prefer fraternal. There was Doctor Simónides, a little bald Greek who did everything, even psychoanalysis, and who enjoyed everything. There was a chemist, I don't really know what for, Doctor Carlos Fineschi, specialist in river waters, you tell me. An engineer, Pablo María Dalmas. An anthropologist, Marina Solim. A sociologist, an astrophysicist, mechanical engineers, all that. The League of Nations, enough to try to convince God the Father that we're good and we love one another. And there was Veri Halabi, I don't know what her nationality was but what a beauty, please. Almost as pretty as the matriarchs of Veroboar, but with black hair. Expert in comparative linguistics—there is no justice. After five minutes one realized they were all infatuated with her and Fineschi most of all because, as for Marina Solim, she is efficient and maternal and incredibly nice, but she in no way has a figure to inspire erotic daydreams. But between the fact that Halabi was gorgeous and she didn't make you say it, and that Doctor Simónides could take someone aside and convince them of just about anything, people got along well and were relaxed. And if they had begun to get bored, it was because they had

finished what they had to do, or what remained could be done back here in the university offices and on the kitchen table at home. Save for Veri Halabi, who kept discovering things but who didn't know what they meant, poor girl.”

And Trafalgar plugged in the electric coffeepot again and waited. He's like that: when he told Páez about the affair with the machines for making love, he practically drove him crazy, and Fatty Páez is really pretty unflappable. Afterwards he returned to the table and he drank his coffee and the others didn't make a sound, waiting for the next chapter.

“The first day, they just wanted to get the idea of selling anything out of my head. I didn't pay any attention because the doctors know a lot about science, I'm not saying they don't, but about buying and selling, nothing, old man, nothing. Marina Solim grabbed me and told me the inhabitants of Anandaha-A were practically an extinct species—unfortunately, according to her—although frankly it was hard to understand what she saw in them, but as far as that goes, it was also hard to understand what happened afterward. Marina told me theirs was a primitivism bordering on the bestial. They did not build tools, they lived out in the open, they had forgotten about fire if they ever knew how to light a fire, they didn't even speak. They dressed, men and women alike, in these shabby sacks open at the sides that they took—that's what Marina believed—from the dead, because as for weaving, they didn't weave them. They ate, slept wherever, did their business, and even copulated in sight of

everyone; there were almost no children or pregnant women, and they spent the days lying down without doing anything. And they danced.”

Flynn was surprised about the dancing and the Albino says he tried to give a lecture on the dance as a refined expression, that’s just what he said, refined, of a system of civilization, etcetera, but Trafalgar didn’t let him say much.

“If you want,” he told him, “I’ll give you the address and phone number for Marina Solim. She’s Chilean but she lives in Paris and she works at the Museum of Man. You go and ask her and you’re going to fall flat on your back at what she tells you.”

“The only thing I’m saying is . . .” Flynn began.

“They were like animals, I saw them,” Trafalgar said. “Those in the camp, which wasn’t called a camp but rather an Interdisciplinary Evaluation Unit, said they were ugly, but to me they seemed very beautiful. Of course, I have seen many more things than those good doctors and lady docs and I know what is ugly and what is pretty. There is almost nothing that is ugly, on that Marina and I are in agreement. Very tall and very thin, with white skin and black hair, long, narrow faces, and very big, very open eyes. Toad eyes, said Veri Halabi, who hated them. The others didn’t hate them; worse, they were indifferent, save for Marina Solim. At the beginning, Doctor Simónides told me, they had tried to speak with them, but it was as if they neither saw nor heard them. Afterward they had realized that they had either never had or

had lost the capacity to communicate and they began to treat them like little animals: They took them food and they clicked their tongues and snapped their fingers at them. But the other guys, nothing: didn't look, didn't sniff, didn't turn their heads when they approached, didn't eat—and that even though Dalmas made some crazy good fish stews. Then they decreed they were animals and washed their hands of them. Even Marina Solim was a little disheartened, because the only thing she could do was sit down close to them and pass the hours watching what they did, which was nothing. Live, that's all, if to live is to breathe and eat and shit and copulate and sleep.”

“And dance,” said Flynn.

“And dance. Until one time Lundgren and Dalmas, who sometimes worked together, found something. Do you know what they found? A book, that's what they found.”

“I know,” said the Albino, “the Memoirs of a Russian Princess.”

“What an imagination you have, man. No. Something very different, although of course it wasn't a book, either.”

“So what was it?” said Flynn, who I already told you is cultured, but who is also impatient.

“Something like a book. Some very thin leaves, almost transparent, of a metal that looked like shiny aluminum, perforated on one of the longer sides, the left, and bound there with rings of the same material but thick, filiform, and soldered no one knew how, or possibly cut from a single piece. And covered with something that anyone could see was

writing. They found it while digging at the foot of a hill. They turned things over all around looking for something more but there was nothing. And then it occurred to Lundgren, and he does have imagination because otherwise he would not have been able to learn the three versions of sintu and even beat me in a combative match, the big cretin—and I still wonder how he did it because in sintu there are no coincidences—to dig directly into the hill. All of them practically died: They weren't hills, they were ruins. Covered for thousands and thousands of years by the hard mud of Anandaha-A. Busy taking things out, they didn't even have time to celebrate. Every hill was a house or, better put, a complex of various houses that were connected. There were not only utensils but equipment, machines, furniture, more books, dishes, vehicles, decorations. Everything quite past its prime but recognizable, although not identifiable. They really went to town, especially Marina Solim and that precious Halabi. Dalmas and the mechanical engineers racked their brains studying the machines and the artifacts but they couldn't make sense of anything. They classified everything and they prepared it all to be brought back and Marina began to reconstruct, as she said, a prodigious civilization and the only one who was still stymied was Veri Halabi who, expert in comparative linguistics as she might be, did not understand a thing. She worked morning, noon, and night and she got into a bad mood and Simónides gave her little pats on the back, literally and figuratively. She was only able to decipher the alphabet—

the alphabets, because there were five although all of the books (according to Fineschi, who applied the I-don't-know-who reaction to them) were from the same period. I warn you that this *from the same period* for them meant four or five centuries. Finally, they stopped digging around in the hills except to take out the books Veri Halabi said she needed, because things were repeated more or less in all of them and they couldn't carry any more. The girl kept working, the others did what they could or what they felt like, and then I arrived.”

He seemed to remember the coffee and he offered it to the others, but the only one who accepted was the Albino because Flynn had a glass of whiskey and Cirito drinks little.

“In all this, Marina divided her attention between the prodigious civilization and the skinny monkeys who danced. The day they heard the music for the first time, they almost had heart attacks because they didn't expect it and they went to see what was happening. Armed, just in case. All but Veri Halabi, who from the outset had felt an aversion toward them and who said the music was irritating. And every time she heard it, she shut everything and stayed inside and if she thought she heard something, she covered her ears. Simónides told me that later. By the time I arrived, they were used to the music and the dance and they liked it. Marina told me that now and then, not every day, but once in a while and at irregular intervals, without there being any sign or anything happening, they took out sticks, strings, some very simple

instruments that she described and that I saw but don't even remember, and some played music and all the others danced. They danced for hours and hours without tiring, the stamina they had was incredible, they were so skinny and sickly, nourished on ground up worms and water. But they danced sometimes all day, sometimes all night. Have you ever tried to dance a whole night without stopping? Well, they could. They danced in the most complete darkness, without seeing each other, without pushing each other, without falling. Or they danced during the day, what passed for day under the purple sun. Or they danced partly during the day and partly at night. And suddenly, just because, the music stopped and they threw themselves down anywhere looking at who knows what and they did nothing for hours or days. Impressive. I swear to you, it was impressive.”

At that point in the evening and in the story, no one thought it necessary to keep drinking anything, but Trafalgar did not abandon the electric coffeepot. It was cold and Cirito stood up to turn on the heat while Flynn and the Albino waited and Trafalgar probably thought about the dark days of Anandaha-A.

“I liked the dance, too, as I liked them, although I was unable to sell them anything,” he went on when he saw Cirito come in. “And the people in the camp liked it, too. I'm not just saying Marina Solim, who is disposed to like everything, or Lundgren who learned sintu and already speaks in favor of the good disposition of any individual, nor the sociologist who

accepts what comes and immediately composes a synoptic chart and I don't remember his name but I do recall he passed the hours smoking Craven A's and typing. Everyone liked it and every time they heard music, they went to watch. All save Halabi. The music was sharp, harsh, almost boiling, and with a rhythm that if the rockers heard it, they'd commit suicide from envy. It was. Damn, it is not easy to describe a music. It was not inhuman. Look, I think if someone played it at one of those dance clubs, the kids would start dancing happy as can be. That's it. It was a music that transformed everything into music, although Lundgren said it was tragic and, yes, it was tragic. It seemed as if it were the first time you realized that you were alive and that you had been alive long before and maybe you were going to be again but you were going to die at any moment and you had to dance so your legs and arms and hips and shoulders wouldn't get mixed up in a single rigid body, immobile. I thought that was why they danced. Instead of making things, screws or cities or philosophical systems, they danced to recognize and to say that they were alive. I asked Simónides and he told me that was exactly one of his theories about the dance. The others were that the dance was a language, that it was a rite of worship, that it was the memory of something lost. Following on that last, like the sociologist and like Marina Solim, he had asked himself if the inhabitants of this dark and almost dead world might not be the descendants of those who had built and occupied that which now was in ruins. But Veri Halabi had become furious.

Violently, inexplicably, and disproportionately furious, Simónides told me, and she had said that to think those brutes belonged to the same race as the owners of the alphabets was almost sacrilegious. They left her in peace because they knew she was having a hard time with the tension of a project that could not be resolved. But not Simónides. The little bald doc was never deceived. At that moment, he didn't know what was going on, he couldn't know that, but he did know something more was cooking there than the self-respect of a beautiful, persnickety expert in comparative linguistics."

"She probably liked the guys who were dancing and didn't want to admit it," said the Albino Gamen.

"Albino, you're a genius," said Trafalgar.

"She liked them?" asked Cirito, very alarmed.

"Liked them?" said Trafalgar. "Now I'll tell you how things happened. The thing that had caught Simónides' attention was that Halabi said the music was irritating and she didn't want to go see what it was that very first time. And she had remained alone in the camp darning stockings, I imagine, or memorizing the fourth chapter of some treatise on comparative linguistics because they hadn't yet found the books. The doctor stored the fact away in his little gossipy brain because that was his occupation: to pay attention to what the others said and did, put it all together, draw conclusions, and then have a chat with his victim to explain that they had to work out their frustrations or else another one of the things those guys say. I don't say it's not useful, on the

contrary, and the proof is that everything ran smooth as silk, even poor Fineschi who, apart from drooling on himself when he looked at the little brunette, was reasonably happy. And outside of the work each of them had to do, the dance was the main attraction. The only problem was that there was a performance only seldom. And when there was one, Halabi got nervous and started to close herself in as soon as the music could be heard and the others went to see. And then they found the ruins and all of them set to work like dwarves and she more than any of them. Things were resolving themselves, except for the writing part, and when I arrived the people of Anandaha-A had begun to dance more frequently all the time. When I saw the spectacle, I was left dumbstruck and I think I even dreamt and from then on I didn't miss one. Simónides told me his theories, Marina too, I played sintu with Lundgren (who cheated, if you ask me), I tried my luck like everyone else with a few discreet verbal passes at Halabi who, if one could pull her away from linguistics and her hatred of the natives, was very sociable and smiling, and I resigned myself to not selling anything, but I stayed."

The dining room was warm and full of smoke and the Albino took off his jacket. Cirito had on an old sweater that was worn through at the elbows, which if Fina saw it, she'd die on us. In the room facing the street the clock struck three but they didn't hear it.

"One time," Trafalgar said, "we spent almost the whole day watching them dance. There were only two musicians,

one who blew and another who scraped and beat. All the rest danced. It was an obsession: We could not move from where we were. We went to lunch very late and Marina went to see her and told us Halabi was sleeping shut up in her room. It seemed strange to me, and to Simónides, too, because lately the girl slept very little, crazy as she was with trying to decipher the books. We went back to keep watching the dance and when we were too worn out we went to sleep and they kept dancing and Veri Halabi's room was still closed and the light was off. Simónides peeked in and he told me yes, she was sleeping, but she was very restless. The doctor told me a few things, I don't know why; maybe because doctors also need someone to listen to them sometimes. The next day, in spite of having slept so much, the girl had circles under her eyes down to here and was pale and haggard. I won't say she was ugly, because she had a long way to go for that, but she was less pretty. That day there was no dance. The next day she couldn't take it anymore and she told Simónides that she had dreamed about the texts for hours and hours and Simónides told her of course she did and there was nothing strange about that. He didn't understand her, she said, it was about the texts deciphered and translated. But she said no, it couldn't be, everything was nonsense and she started to become hysterical. Simónides took her to bed, not with libidinous but with therapeutic intent, now that is professional ethics, my God. He talked to her for a while and calmed her down and then she told him that shut up inside and

everything, she kept hearing the music and even if she covered her ears she kept hearing the music and she had almost started to dance. And so as not to dance, she lay down and she had fallen asleep immediately and she had dreamt about, guess what, you got it, about the music and the people dancing. And as happens in dreams, the people dancing had become the unknown letters of the five alphabets, only in the dream she knew them and she could read them. Simónides told her what anyone would have said: Sometimes, not often but it does happen, in dreaming one encounters the solution to a problem about which one has thought so much that one can't even see it clearly while awake. But she told him—*she* told *him*, note—he was crazy and he should open the desk drawer, her drawer. The doctor opened it and he found a pile of papers written by Halabi: It was the translation she had dreamt and that, upon waking, she had rushed to record, though she didn't know why since she was still convinced it was nothing but a nightmare. Simónides didn't manage to read everything, unfortunately. He remembered only a few things. There was, for example, the description of a circle.”

“The description of what?” burst out Flynn.

“Of a circle.”

Flynn tried to pull his leg: “A geometric figure formed by the interior points of a circumference, if I am not mistaken.”

“I am sorry to inform you that you are mistaken. I am going to tell you what a circle is according to the protocol of the sense of Anandaha-A.”

Here all of them interrupted because no one understood that about *protocol of the sense*. But Trafalgar Medrano didn't know what it meant. Simónides didn't either, and at that moment, neither did Veri Halabi. It was in the texts and that was all.

“A circle,” said Trafalgar, “is formed in the kingdom when the oil lamp burns out in the perceptible game.”

“Just a minute, just a minute,” said Flynn. “If in a dark world like that you light a lamp, in a certain way it forms a circle, but it isn't formed when you turn out the light, do we agree?”

“Will you let me finish? I am not explaining anything to you. I am telling you what was in the texts Simónides read, which were the translation Veri Halabi did while dreaming, based on a quintuple alphabet that she did not know.”

“What a mess,” said the Albino.

“A circle,” Trafalgar began again, “is formed in the kingdom when the oil lamp burns out in the perceptible game of every distant precinct. As quartz is unaware of the howl of the wild animal, and if it rains on the high grasslands it is improbable that the roots will know, all precincts come in contact at the rough edges until knowledge erases that which has been constructed. Its measure depends not on the rocks but on the torrent.”

“And what does that mean?” asked Cirito.

Flynn served himself more whiskey.

“I don't know,” Trafalgar said. “Simónides had a theory,

he always had theories for everything and I think sometimes he was not mistaken. Almost triumphantly, he told me that Anandaha-A was a world of symbols. I allowed myself to suggest that all worlds function by symbols the way all tricycles function by pedal, but he told me there is a big difference between *of* symbols and *by* symbols. It seems to me he's right. And he said that to burn out the oil lamp is to leave the mind blank, to not think of anything, and that this is something that is very easily said but is difficult to do because it is nothing less than the elimination of the conscious to leave room for the unconscious, how's that? The kingdom is the quality, the essence of being human, and the perceptible game is consciousness and every distant precinct is each individual. When the oil lamp is lit, the precincts are far from one another, each one is alone. The part about quartz and the wild animal and the rain and the high grasslands and the roots means, according to Simónides, that although the universe apparently functions divided into infinite parts, or not so infinite, depending how you look, it is all unique and one, indivisible and the same in all of its points. Understand?"

"No."

"Nor I. I'll continue. So, as the universe is one and unique in all of its points, if each individual suspends its consciousness and puts out the oil lamp, everyone meets, they are not alone, they unite and they know everything with no need for and in spite of the great intellectual creations. And knowledge is deeper in proportion to how total each

individual's effort is and not how many individuals there are. That would be the part about the measure.”

“Ingenious,” said Flynn.

“Shit,” said Albino, “I don't understand a thing.”

Cirito said nothing.

“And so on like that,” continued Trafalgar. “There was a text about how to project statues, but Simónides didn't know if it was project in the sense of drawing prior to the task of sculpting or project through space. There was also a dialogue between God and man in which of course the only one who spoke was the man. A list of harmful volitions: Don't ask me, Simónides didn't know what that was either and if he had a theory he forgot to tell me. Theorems, a pile of theorems. A travel diary. A method for folding, but I don't know folding what. And stacks of other things. But all of that was lost. Simónides recorded the little he remembered and somewhere I must have a copy he gave me. Because while he was reading, Veri Halabi had some big attack, she stood up and started to shred papers and she even grabbed the papers Simónides had in his hand and ripped them to bits.”

“What a crazy,” said the Albino.

“Uh-huh,” said Trafalgar, “that is what one thinks every time someone does something one does not understand. But wait a little and tell me afterward if she was crazy. The doc put everything aside and took care of her and he gave her something to let her sleep. He told me there had been no such attack, that simply and unfortunately, at that moment the

perceptible game had fully invaded her and she had abandoned the kingdom. I preferred not to ask for explanations, but I asked him if it wasn't possible to reconstruct the texts and he told me no, they were confetti, and anyway they weren't texts in danger of being lost. I also asked him if he thought they were the concrete translation of the metal books and he looked at me as if I had asked him if he believed two plus two makes four and he told me of course they were. And what can I tell you, the next day Halabi gets up fresh as a daisy and devotes herself to continuing her work on the translation.”

“But how?” said the Albino. “Hadn't she already done it and ripped it up? She did it again?”

“No. It was the first time. She didn't want to believe that what she had torn up was the translation and, awake, she worked by putting into operation logic, reasoning, information—which is to say, outside the kingdom, in the perceptible game—now without knowing and without trying to form a circle. Then life goes on as always and nothing's happened here and for two days there are no dances. On the third day, it occurs to Romeo Fineschi Montague to propose that we all go on an outing. An outing on that lousy world, imagine. But of course, if he goes and invites Julieta Halabi Capulet alone, he comes up empty, because she says no. We went. Dalmas, Lundgren, Marina, Simónides, me, Fineschi, Halabi, two other engineers and even the sociologist. Very fun it was not, because as I already told you the natural attractions of

Anandaha-A are pitiful. We talked nonsense and Simónides described imaginary monuments and parks in the voice of a tour guide until he got tired because we weren't paying too much attention. The only one who was having a ball was Fineschi, who was talking to Halabi a mile a minute, I imagine about such romantic topics as the degree of saline saturation in the water of the lower Danube. We were on our way back when the music started and Veri Halabi cried out. It was a cry to stand your hair on end, like a cornered beast, as the science fiction writers say."

"And others who don't write science fiction," Flynn noted.

"I don't doubt it. Apart from science fiction and detective novels, I read nothing but Balzac, Cervantes, and Corto Maltese."

"You'll go a long way with that ridiculous mishmash."

"Ridiculous, how? How? They are among the few that have everything one can ask of literature: Beauty, realism, entertainment, what more do you want?"

"Give it up, guys," said the Albino. "Why'd the girl yell?"

"One cries out from pain or fear or surprise," said Flynn. "Less frequently, from happiness. Although I think that was not the case here."

"It was not. She cried out. A long cry that seemed to come up from her heels and that scraped her throat. She stood there a moment planted like a stake with her jaw dropping down to her knees and her eyes like the two of coins and afterward she

ran off toward the camp. The music sounded very sharp, urgent, but instead of going to see, we followed her, Fineschi at a trot and the rest walking quickly. Simónides went to see her and he found her sitting on the bed, stupefied. This time she hadn't shut herself in nor did she cover her ears. The good doctor kicked out Fineschi, who was just a pain in the neck trying to talk to her, he looked at her for a while, took her pulse, did all the things quacks do, and left her alone. She didn't bat an eyelid. We were all a little overwhelmed and the music continued and a few went to see. The rest of us stayed and ate. Fineschi paced and smoked a pipe that went out every two minutes. The others came back, they ate, and all of us sat down for a kind of dismal after dinner talk. From time to time, Simónides would go to see her and when he came back he said nothing. Then, when we were about to go to bed, she appeared in the doorway. The music continued and the girl started to talk. The catch was we understood nothing. She talked and talked in an unknown language in which there were many more vowels than it would seem there should be. We listened to her without moving and when Fineschi tried to approach her, the good doctor did not let him. She talked the whole night.”

“That can't be,” said Flynn.

“What do you know? She talked the whole night and we listened to her the whole night. Fineschi cried from time to time. Marina Solim was sitting at my side and she grabbed me by the arm and she didn't let go until her hand cramped up.

When it dawned, which is a pretty literary figure to stick into this story because it doesn't dawn there, the little violet sun rises and it is less dark and that's all; when it dawned, the music was still playing and she was still talking. And suddenly she stopped talking but the music did not stop. I was numb and even cold and the others must have been as well, but when Veri Halabi went out, we got up and went after her. She walked as if she had to deposit cash at the bank and it was one minute to four and the rest of us followed behind, toward where the music was. There at the foot of one of the excavated hills, beside the blackish river, the Anandaha-A folk were dancing with so much enthusiasm it seemed as if they had just begun. And Veri Halabi ran and thrust herself among them and danced, and while she danced she tore off her clothes and shook her head until her black hair covered her face like all the rest and we could no longer tell her apart. Another hour passed and, crazy with sleepiness and fatigue and with the sense that something more inevitable than death had happened, we retreated to the camp. Simónides and Dalmas had to drag Fineschi, who did not want to leave. We went to bed and we all slept, Simónides last because he went around handing out pills and he gave Montague an injection. I slept for ten hours and was one of the first to wake up. Marina Solim set to making coffee and the sociologist smoked but did not type. Afterwards, Simónides appeared and little by little the others. We drank coffee and ate sausage sandwiches. And the music that had kept playing—and I don't know how,

because I slept like a log, but I know it had kept playing all day—the music stopped with the last crumb of food. Fineschi announced that he was going to look for the girl and there we all went again, in procession, but it was useless.”

“She wasn’t there?” asked the Albino.

“Yes, she was there. At first we didn’t see her. The natives had sat down or lay down wherever like always, staring fixedly at some point. It was hard to pick her out. Now she was dressed in a sack open at the sides and seated in the mud with her legs crossed, between two women and a man, so similar to them, with her eyes very open, without blinking, mute and more beautiful than before because she had become beautiful like the lords of Anandaha-A. She looked straight ahead but she didn’t see us. We called her and I was sure we were behaving like a bunch of idiots. She didn’t hear us. Simónides grabbed the sociologist and Lundgren and went to get her. I restrained Fineschi. As soon as they put their hands on her, the music started again and everyone stood up and danced, Halabi as well, and dancing they rejected the three men who backed hurriedly out of the whirl and we lost sight of her. In three days we made five more attempts. It was no use. Finally it was Fineschi, and that surprised me, who said we had to admit defeat.”

The Albino said can’t you see she was crazy and Cirito said who knows and Trafalgar drank more coffee.

“She wasn’t crazy,” he said. “She had returned to her home, to the circle. Look, if I think about it a lot, I have no

alternative than to say yes, she went crazy. But if I remember her dancing, telling us by dancing that we should leave her in peace because she had stopped searching, resisting, studying, thinking, writing, reasoning, accumulating, and doing, I recognize with some satisfaction—a sad satisfaction, because I don't carry that marvel in my blood—that she had crossed the kingdom from end to end and she was swimming fresh and lovely in the torrent. Simónides explained it another way and Marina Solim supported him with very concrete data. The people who danced were in fact the descendants of those who had left the ruins. Anandaha-A knew, perhaps, a yellow, hot star and a clean sky and fertile soil and they manufactured things and wrote poems long before we treated ourselves to the stegosaurus and the scaphites. Perhaps they had jewels, concerts, tractors, wars, universities, candies, sports, and plastic material. They must have traveled to other worlds. And they reached so high and so deep that when the star died, it no longer mattered to them at all. After visiting dead worlds, worlds living or to be born, after leaving their seed on a few of them, after exploring everything and knowing everything, they not only stopped caring about the death of the star, but about the rest of the universe and they had enough with the sense of the circle. They preserved nothing but the music that they danced to and that was all Simónides had supposed and much more. We don't know what more, but if someone told us, we wouldn't understand. And Veri Halabi recognized her own, but the light of the perceptible game prevented her from

seeing them and entering the kingdom where there is the possibility of putting out the oil lamp, and torn between the light and the nostalgic urgency of a few of her cells which bore the seal of the Argonauts of Anandaha-A, she hated them. When the light went out by force of the music and she spoke all the words of her race, those she had learned in dreams, she no longer hated them or loved them or anything. It was enough to return.”

The Albino says they were all quiet. Even Flynn, who is argumentative and likes to take the opposing side, found nothing to say. When Cirito remarked that Fina had called on the phone to let him know she was staying in Salta another week and they talked about other things and drank more whiskey and Trafalgar more coffee, Flynn admitted that Trafalgar could be right, that the matter, if you thought about it carefully, seemed preposterous, yet he had the impression that it wasn't all that strange. Cirito said:

“I'd like to go to Anandaha-A.”

“It's all yours,” said the Albino.

“Was Veri Halabi that pretty?” asked Flynn.

“Now she is prettier,” said Trafalgar.

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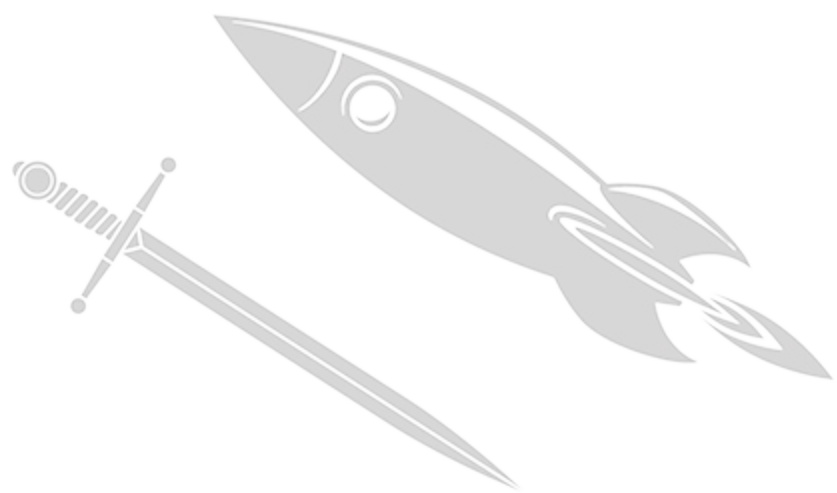


Angélica Gorodischer, daughter of the writer Angélica de Arcal, was born in

1929 in Buenos Aires and has lived most of her life in Rosario, Argentina. From her first book of stories, she has displayed a mastery of science-fiction themes, handled with her own personal slant, and exemplary of the South American fantasy tradition. Oral narrative techniques are a strong influence in her work, most notably in *Kalpa Imperial*, which since its publication has been considered a major work of modern fantasy narrative. She has received many awards for her work including most recently the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award.

Amalia Gladhart is the translator of two novels by Ecuadorian novelist Alicia Yáñez Cossío, *The Potbellied Virgin* (2006) and *Beyond the Islands* (2011). Her chapbook *Detours* won the 2011 Burnside Review Fiction Chapbook Contest. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in *Iowa Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Stone Canoe*, and elsewhere. She is Professor of Spanish at the University of Oregon.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



Author Spotlight: John Barnes

Moshe Siegel

Your Sturgeon Award-nominated novella, “Things Undone,” details a culture that has achieved a high level of scientific and mathematical progress. Consequently, there is much mathematical philosophizing throughout the narrative—though with a balancing amount of literary winks for those of us who, like Horejsi, have more of a head for words than for numbers. As both an author and an analyst, do you find yourself holding either field in higher regard?

I’m not sure about higher or lower regard. I find math more involving; I get lost in it, take fewer breaks, get more excited, because it’s a more interesting and creative set of tools, one where you’re not as sure what it’s saying at any given moment and where a small slip can make a major mess of things. Plain old words and stories are more of a technical job to me; you can find at my book-doctoring blog (thebookdoctorslittleblackbag.blogspot.com) that basically I think of the words, paragraphs, and scenes about the way that a film editor thinks of clips or a stage director thinks of scenes and beats, i.e., there’s something they’re supposed to do, I find the right ones and put them into the right order, shape them to fit it, and bingo, all done.

And yeah, I'm aware that's backwards by most literary people's standards. Partly that's just that I arrived as kind of a perverse, contrarian kind of person, and although I'm probably better at words, they just don't talk about things as interesting as physical experiences or as pure math do. Another part is, maybe, that the conventional literary world is largely made up of people who talk and think about words too much, and don't have enough a verbal experiences.

Was it your intent to align the time-jumper's historical meddling with the (however subconscious) reworking of the past continuously taking place within the confines of our own imperfect memories?

Yes. I wanted to add "of course" but I'm so often surprised by things that readers and critics see in my stories—which nonetheless are there, even though I have no memory of thinking about them at all while creating the work—that I've tried to swear off saying "of course." But in this case, yeah, I meant to do that part. A very old college friend of mine is now a psychoanalyst, and he told me once that he learns a great deal about his patients by cross-examining; apparently most of us both tell and remember an inconsistent version of our own pasts, and being confronted by the inconsistencies blows people's doors open to their past-making process.

The society that has grown around the strictly-policed technology of time travel is a caste system, ranging from the Aryanesque upper class Liejt to the stationless Irish slave race. Beyond the differences in politics and social mores to be expected in an alternate reality/timeline scenario, what influence would you say indexical derivability (and the associated tech) had on the development of such brutal inequality, in this world where Big Brother can remove dissidents from history itself?

Oh, I didn't really think about it in terms of power. Totalitarian societies—which I'd simply define as those with no private spaces, societies in which the overall Marxist-sense ideology or Foucault-sense episteme simply does not allow anyone to assert “none of your damn business” to Power—have existed as ideologies within all the larger cultures since we have any record, and they've always managed to exert large local power against dissent. No special high tech required; murdering helots like the Spartans will achieve the same purpose.

But indexical derivability is actually a stand-in for the Aristotelian idea of science that has never quite died in Western thought, the idea that you could know everything if you just reasoned deductively from an absolutely-true set of premises. It's the world modeled on Euclid, without the saving grace of Gauss, Gödel, Turing, Lorenz, or Mandelbrot. And the idea powerfully attracts many people; you could make a

good case that it's what underlies Asimov's robot stories and his Foundation books, it's there in a lot of right-wing economists, the world you can solve once and for all.

And if the world were soluble, and soluble in a simple enough way to do it with basically paper and pencil methods, then my guess is that someone would have attained perfect knowledge and perfect power back during the many centuries when practically the whole Earth was matter-of-factly xenophobic and genocidal. Get back much before 1500 and you just don't find any empire anywhere having anything like our modern attacks of regret (or so I find by reading people who say they read the source material). Kubla Khan or Montezuma didn't seem to feel a drop of guilt about any nation or culture they completely wiped out, and I don't think Henry VI or his advisors would have either.

Luckily, ain't no such thing as indexical derivability. The universe is overrun with problems that you can't solve with any apparatus less complicated than the universe itself. That's either a really generous gift of the Divine or a really massive stroke of luck.

Anyway, indexical derivability let me plug into a couple of themes that interest me and that I've visited in other fiction. First of all, it's a good thing that the human race didn't get better technology when it was even less morally developed; give Augustus poison gas, clipper ships, and machine guns, and even that supposedly more enlightened Emperor would have Romanized the world, at an unimaginable cost. It's a pity

in some ways that the moral development that started with the Enlightenment in the West and continued as a dialogue with other cultures didn't get 500 years to run before we got hold of railroads and electricity.

Secondly, I'm somewhat fascinated by the problem that Rubenstein was going after in *The Cunning of History*: Because our world's existence is dependent on past atrocities, we end up complicit in them. He was thinking of a simple, direct example, that the Holocaust had made some postwar arrangements of Europe possible and others not, and therefore just to be alive afterward was to be entangled in it. But there are more examples: For an American there's just no imaginable America without the twin monstrosities of slavery and the genocide of the original people of the continent, and however nice we may be compared to our ancestors, there's just no take-backs, apologies, or erasures possible. But you don't even need human wickedness and cruelty; the surviving population in the generations after the Black Death benefited enormously from the sudden opening up of so many social positions, and there was so much land that was easy to steal in the Americas due to the devastating epidemics; no one will ever know how many unique languages or mythologies were erased by measles or smallpox.

Well, that's the world of indexical derivability. Peaceful, prosperous, orderly, and mostly made up of people who are the inheritors, many generations later, of an absolutely monstrous evil.

You can find that in a lot of my other books. At the end of The Century Next Door series, Earth is turning into a pristine paradise and the colonizable solar system is developing into a spectacular, increasingly diverse, materially decent array of societies (with billions of bodies not yet buried); now and then an inhuman intelligence may need to seize a teenage girl's mind and run her till she collapses and requires hospitalization, to save a few lives, but hey, wouldn't we all want to be heroic that way anyway? The fabulously wealthy civilization, with its myriad choices, that Giraut Leones inhabits, features an Earth about a tenth of whose land area was vitrified—i.e. roasted to slick glass—in the last big war. Giraut doesn't want another war, and sometimes it seems kind of sad to him that that one happened, but, you know, neither he nor any of his friends would be there, living the way they do, if somewhere around 2250 large parts of the globe hadn't been roasted. And it's a theme that underlies the Daybreak books (*Directive 51*, *Daybreak Zero*, and the forthcoming *The Last President*); yeah, everyone is thrown back around 100-200 years in technology, and a global population of 8 billion in 2024 is less than a billion in 2026 . . . but, once the generation that remembers computers and recorded music and jetliners is gone, it's going to be an exciting frontier world full of adventure, and the swashbuckling heroes of 2075 won't think about all that any more than Indiana Jones, Sherlock Holmes, Tom Swift, or the Saint ever turned to any other character and said, "Of course every splendid adventure we're

able to have here is because whole continents of people were slaughtered or subjugated.”

I glossed right over “Untitled States of Armorica” before picking up on the incongruity. Similarly, many of the disparities between our reality and that of this novella are just-recognizable-enough to unsettle the reader with their very wrongness: a sensation akin to the ghosting of Time as experienced by “freak-memory social isolates” during casopropagation. At the end of the story, we see Simon, Ruth, Tyrwhitt, and others adjusting to their new lives as polymnemonics (polymnemons?) . . . do you think they succeeded at living with two contradictory sets of memories, without losing their sanity?

Oh, yeah. I think human beings are capable of amazing resilience about inconsistent memories. Consider how many spies in long-term deep cover have managed double biographies for decades.

You have commented that “Things Undone” was “sort of a trial canter” for a few concepts you find intriguing. Have you had the opportunity to flesh out some of these ideas in your other fiction?

Not really yet, at least not since “Things Undone.” Some of

them are technical: If a time traveler changes the past, what's it feel like in the altered present? It's always been assumed that everything just changes instantly; that's why I thought it would be interesting to play with intemporaria, the equivalent of inertia, so that people might actually experience the old event unhappening and the new one taking its place. Similarly, what if timelines converge as well as split—say there are forces that cause timelines to attract each other? Another one is that non-neurotypical characters are getting more interesting to me; I have some peculiarities and odd spots (a freakishly good sense of smell, prosopagnosia, other stuff) and happen to know quite a few people, most of them not in the SF community, who are non-neurotypical in other ways, and it just seems to me that they're more interesting, or at least trying to imagine going through life as them is. Lyle Peripart in *Finity* was an example of that kind of thing; he has mild dissociative syndrome, tends to experience his life as if it didn't quite have anything to do with him. Karl Shoemaker and his friends in *Tales of the Madman Underground* are different enough that some librarians and teachers insisted there were no people like that (though that didn't seem to modify their liking or not liking the book), to which I can only say, well, I knew some.

Do you have any other projects upcoming or in the works that you would like to share with us?

The Last President comes out in September 2013 and finishes off the founding trilogy of Daybreak. After that, the next thing in the Daybreak universe will probably be a series of YA adventure stories, much shorter. Right at the moment I'm making good progress on *Father Lucifer*, which is a hardboiled mystery. Sometime in the next couple of years I'm going to take advantage of the newer, freer, better world where the traditional publishers are losing their grip, and finish a couple of series that were killed for stupid reasons, write some books that nobody was interested in, and so on, but bluntly, I just got here, like all the rest of us, and I don't know where spirit and commerce will move us next.



Moshe Siegel works as a slusher, proofreader, and interviewer at *Lightspeed*, interns at the pleasure of a Random House-published author, freelance edits hither and yon, and is a Publisher's Assistant at Codhill Press. His overlaid bookshelf and smug e-reader glare at each other across his home office in upstate New York, and he isn't quite sure what to think about it all. Follow tweets of varying relevance @moshesiegel.

Author Spotlight: Karen Joy Fowler Jude Griffin

When Lily arrives at Mattie’s bed and breakfast in “Lily Red,” moths circle the lights, a great white owl swoops by like an angel, a cricket lands on her arm like a tiny benediction, the sprinklers comes on yet the path remains dry, but when she leaves for the final time, she just walks down the stairs, gets into her car and drives away. Why are the arrival and departure so different?

Lily is the protagonist in a fairy tale when she arrives. She has a problem—her own dissatisfaction with her life—and so she goes on a journey, a sort of quest. She arrives at a magical place and meets the people who are to help her along the way.

But by the time she returns home, she doesn’t believe in her own story anymore; it’s my version of Alice’s “you are nothing but a pack of cards.” Lily has rejected the fairy tale version of her own life and is returning to the mundane one.

What role does the color red play in this story?

The name is a take on the words “lily white.” Lily is not innocent so she’s not Lily White. She goes out and cheats on her husband and she’s not even too conflicted about that part. She’s not a snow-white maiden; she’s a grown woman. So

she's Lily Red—red representing, as usual, maturity and sexuality and, in this case, her own complicity in her own problems. And it should echo “Rose Red,” which hopefully puts the reader in a fairy tale space as they start to read.

“Lily Red” is a “fairy tale about the fairy tales we tell ourselves to make it through our lives.” What tales does Lily tell herself and are those tales changed by the end of the story?

I guess Lily's fairy tale is that her dissatisfactions can be fixed by leaving them behind—that she can be someone else simply by going somewhere else. She wants a grander adventure than the life she has. When she returns home, she could tell herself, as other women in the story do, that she has had that grand adventure, that she has been chosen for something magical. But she refuses to believe that in the end, and returns thinking that she has merely had an affair and possibly kind of a tawdry one. Certainly she's not lived the plot of the transformational, problem-solving love.

At the end of the story, Lily returns home, and says to her husband, “I lost my head. I'm half-hearted now. In fact, I'm not at all the woman I was.” Has her adventure in Two Trees cured her of wanting to be someone else, “someone with a past”?

Lily is someone else, someone with a past, when she comes home, so that part of the quest has been achieved. But perhaps not in the way she wanted. Who is responsible for the problems in Lily's marriage? I've deliberately provided very little information about her husband so as to leave this question open. When Lily returns home, is it to a tolerant and understanding husband or to an uninterested and uncaring one?

I would not describe Lily as cured. But she has been disenchanted. A lot of fairy tales deal with the breaking of the spell. This is usually within the tale considered to be a very good thing. I guess my own experiments in fairy tales almost always focus on a sense of irrevocable loss over the spell being broken. "Lily Red" is no exception.

The genesis for "Lily Red" was a piece of research left over from your book, *Sarah Canary*—a very powerful story about P.T. Barnum and Native Americans in his show. The final version of "Lily Red," however, retains just a small piece of the original spark, just the painting on the rock—do you feel like there's another story still waiting to be written or has the inspiration served its purpose?

I find that I never end up writing the story I intend to write—the story arises from the pyre of the failed intended story. I'm okay with that, I expect it by now, and I like the process of

finding the story as I write it. The story I found in the *Sarah Canary* research was a profoundly disturbing one and I have had it in my head for years. I've been thinking of writing something about Buffalo Bill and it might perhaps fit into that. It's not part of the plan, but maybe when I'm sifting through the ashes of the plan, I'll realize that it's just the piece I need. Stranger things have happened.

Watch for Karen Joy Fowler's next novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, on May 31, 2013!



Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, photographer, and an expert in learning and knowledge management. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo, was a volunteer EMT and firefighter, accompanied journalists into combat in Central America, lived in a haunted village in Thailand, ran an international amphibian monitoring network, volunteers with the National Park Service habitat restoration program on the Boston Harbor Islands, reads slush for *Nightmare* and *Lightspeed Magazines*, and is working on a novel that might be SF, might be fantasy. She cannot parallel park, lies about how far she runs in the morning, and still has her Gloria Vanderbilt jeans from high school. Folded. In a box.

Author Spotlight: Sarena Ulibarri

Robyn Lupo

Can you tell us about what led you to write “The Bolt Tightener”?

I was taking a class with Stephen Graham Jones where we read Jeff and Ann Vandermeer’s new collection *The Weird* cover to cover. So my head was full of all these stories by authors like H.P. Lovecraft and Francis Stevens and Jean Ray, so many of whom use oceanic imagery and sea monsters to express cosmic horror. While I was taking that class I had a nightmare that I was hired to tighten bolts on a strange moat, and I had to contend with a spiny octopus that lived near my floating desk. The dream stuck with me, so I scrapped the floating desk and shaped it into a story.

Why do you think Chaun’s predecessor couldn’t or wouldn’t kill the octopus?

Maybe he was just tougher. More willing to make sacrifices. Chaun thinks he’s willing to make sacrifices for his family, but he’s not, really. He has a limit. I suspect his predecessor also knew something about what was outside the seawall. The pictures from the city’s museum imply that there are tales about the past that have fallen away. His predecessor grew up

in a time when those tales were still told. Chaun's generation has ignored or forgotten them.

It seems clear that this world is different from ours. Can you tell us more about the setting, and why you chose to use that setting for this story? Do you have other stories set in the same or similar places?

Most of what I write these days is set in our contemporary world, though I occasionally toy with fantasy worlds and dystopias. For some reason I think of Chaun's world as a far future Asian island. The last holdout after everything else has been taken over by monsters.

What do you think led Chaun to this job?

The pressure of his new baby caused him to rethink his life. There aren't a whole lot of opportunities in a city that is shut off from the rest of the world, and he'd been working some easy, meaningless jobs. He was trying to grow up and be responsible. Too bad he destroyed the world instead.

What's next for you, writing-wise?

I'm fortunate to be part of one of the only MFA programs that actively supports speculative writing. I will be starting my

thesis soon. If things go well, maybe you can look for me on the shelves in a few years. Until then, more short stories.



Robyn Lupo has been known to frequent southwestern Ontario with her graduate student husband and elderly dog. She writes, reads, and plays video games. She is personal assistant to three cats.

Author Spotlight: Felicity Savage

Earnie Sotirokos

“Ash Minette” shows a different side of a story we’re all familiar with. Why did you choose to take an alternate look at this particular tale?

There was a vogue in the early and mid-’90s for rewritten fairy tales. I remember being particularly impressed by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling’s series of twisted folktale anthologies, starting with *Snow White, Blood Red*. It was a precursor of mash-up culture and a milestone in the desacralization of childhood. I chose to rewrite “Cinderella” because I was a shy, plain girl who detested and envied the Cinderellas of the world. I wanted to blow their founding myth to smithereens.

Having one of the sisters narrate allowed us to get into the heads of characters that normally spend less time in the spotlight. What effect did choosing this perspective have on the way the story took shape?

Character is plot is story. *Rashomon*, man. Every triumph has cartfuls of defeated Gauls and Visigoths bumping along in its wake. What did Tiberius’s victories look like to your average poor clod from the forests of Mittelnowheria? That’s the

perspective I was trying to capture. At the same time, there's not much point riffing on a classic unless you hit the familiar high notes.

The baron may be the only Prince Charming with hairy hands. How important is differentiating from the same old tropes when dealing with a popular narrative?

As a fantasy author, in one sense I'm *always* dealing with popular narratives. That's not to say that other genres don't, but they do own more of a distance from the "same old tropes." It's an aesthetic distinction. Literary fiction gets to ransack the real world to style its musings, while science fiction can draw on a constantly replenished well of new technological concepts. Fantasy relies for its characters and situations on our cultural heritage, an older and less volatile set of tropes. The magical sword, the boy born to change the world, the girl destined to marry a prince, marauding evil, meddling fey . . . I have a passion for this stuff and so I don't try to differentiate from the "same old tropes" so much as to embrace them. I have been known to hug a trope silly and leave it bleeding, dazed, and unrecognizable. But it's all done in love. I believe in honesty. My hands are feathered, my feet are bare and dung-encrusted, and there's a pea under my bottom.

If you had to give another fairy tale the same treatment, which one would it be?

I have personally moved away from mash-ups and remakes. Everyone's doing it now. However, there's plenty of mileage in the Brothers Grimm yet. The question is not so much which fairy tale I might choose as what I might do with it. Let's take one of my personal favorites, "Drakestail" from the *Red Fairy Book*. "Quack! Quack! Quack! I want my money back!" Need we any further proof that all things old are new again? It's a lot of fun to imagine Drakestail paddling around Lower Manhattan with a Guy Fawkes mask perched skew-whiff on his beak, imbibing the 99% into his gizzard. *Look to thy coffers, spendthrift king!* This could be a kick-ass story, but it needs a bit of refinement before I'd start writing it. "Plus ça change" is not a moral, it's just a one-liner, and when rewriting a fairy tale, the moral is the one thing you cannot dispense with.

What can we expect from you in the future?

I'm working on a fat fantasy trilogy entitled The Godslayer Cycle. Imagine A Song of Ice and Fire . . .with guns, tanks, high finance, and sovereign debt denominated in holy relics. I believe this is going to be the world's first fantasy trilogy to feature a credit crisis. It also features an eponymous magical sword, the boy who was born to wield it, an undercover

magician in a world where magic is a felony, and a female intelligence operator who continues my tradition of strong women protagonists. Actually it may be a quartet at the rate I'm going. The setting is a fantasy world with 1980s-equivalent technology . . . and a few major differences.

For the past twelve years I have lived in Tokyo and one major influence Japan has had on my writing is to open my eyes to the treasures of the past. The Japanese know that tradition is a thing to be cherished and developed accretively by successive generations, and that is what I hope to do with *The Godslayer Cycle*. So this trilogy (quartet? eek) is both inspired by and an homage to the fantasy tradition that runs from Tolkien down through Brooks, Eddings, and Martin, with a few kisses blown to Joe Abercrombie. Watch the blood splatter, boys!

In addition to *The Godslayer Cycle*, which is scheduled for completion in 2013, I've been making a lot of short fiction available in e-book format under the names of Felicity Savage and Felix R. Savage. And in non-fiction, I am blogging weekly at *Amazing Stories*. Drop by, have a read, leave a comment!

Thank you very much for having me, *Lightspeed!*



Earnie Sotirokos grew up in a household where *Star Trek: The Next Generation* marathons were only interrupted for baseball and football games. When he's not writing copy for radio or reading slush, he enjoys penning fiction based on those influences. Follow him on Twitter @sotirokos.

Author Spotlight: Lisa Tuttle

Robyn Lupo

Where did the ideas for “The Dream Detective” come from?

There’s a book, or series of stories, by Sax Rohmer called *The Dream Detective*—I don’t remember anything else about it, but I’ve always loved the title. Years ago I woke up from a dream in which I had suddenly remembered that I’d killed somebody—although I couldn’t remember why, or how I’d managed to get away with it. Of course, it was only a dream, but after I woke up, the disturbing feeling of it haunted me, and naturally (because I’m a writer!) I started writing a story about someone who one day remembers the terrible crime that he’d managed to hide from himself . . . I never got very far with that story; couldn’t figure out where to go with it (that’s often a problem with dream-stories). The idea came back to me recently, only now the fictional murder was back where it started—in a dream. And then I had to ask myself how a dream-murder could affect anyone except the person who dreamed it, and decided to borrow Sax Rohmer’s title, and so it developed.

The ending manages to be both satisfying and causes a want for more. Are there more stories about these

characters?

I will confess that the ending took me by surprise—in the first draft, the ending was different . . . and not quite satisfactory. I had always intended this to be—like most of my stories—self-contained, and even when I rewrote the ending, that’s what I was intending: I only meant to imply that the lives of these characters were continuing off the page, not to return to their story . . . but now I think I will write about them again.

In the story, Grace appears in the narrator’s dream, and that’s just after she admitted that she felt he might need her help. How do you see Grace’s ability? Does she go where she chooses in dreams, or is she drawn to people in need?

Originally I thought of Grace as having more of a fantasy than an actual ability! She has very little conscious control over it . . . the dream-Grace is sort of a “second self.”

What’s next for you?

At the moment I am writing what I hope will be the *final* draft of a novel (I’ve been working on it for a long time). But I’ve also promised to deliver two new short stories in the next month, so somehow I have to fit them in.



Robyn Lupo has been known to frequent southwestern Ontario with her graduate student husband and elderly dog. She writes, reads, and plays video games. She is personal assistant to three cats.

Author Spotlight: Jake Kerr Earnie Sotirokos

“Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince” features a Wikipedia article from the future. What made you want to tell the story this way?

I recently read a soon-to-be-published short story that as part of its structure included an indirect way of telling its story—a eulogy. I thought the way that the story was revealed from a distance was very powerful and actually drew me closer to the subject. A few things entered my mind. Could I use this same technique to tell an entire story about an individual? Without writing any traditional narrative and only illustrating and describing him from a distance, could I get close enough to a person that readers would care about him and, in fact, perhaps care about him more than otherwise? Similarly, could I use a background that we would normally consider a centerpiece of a story—a global catastrophe—and not even focus on it all while also making its horrible nature clear in the reader’s mind?

In short, I wanted to tell a personal story and an epic story without directly telling either one. We would see them both from a distance, in relief.

One of the things that I think is powerful about this is that it requires the reader to fill in so many blanks, that the

experience requires more reader collaboration. The reader is given no guidance as to what Prince looks like or was like as a friend or a significant other or any number of other things. All he or she has is this distant view requiring them to bring to bear their own imagination. This is one of the things that I think can be very powerful about a story told this way. The reader can make the story even more personal because he or she is required to take part. This goes for the catastrophe, as well. We see glimpses of its aftermath, but there is very little detail of what actually happened. The horror can either be provided by the reader or just passed over. Again, the collaboration of the reader is critical.

I liked that a lot.

You stitched together several kinds of sources to put this entry together. I enjoyed seeing Prince's wit come out in the talk show transcript. Was there a specific source that stood out to you?

Of the entire piece, it is a single line quoted in one of the Wikipedia entries that sticks in my mind: When Prince is quoted about his return to North America and says, "It was like performing an autopsy on your own parent." It's a simile that in one line really captures the personality of Prince and the world he lives in.

Do you think an author could start a literary movement and then completely contradict it in today's increasingly polarized social climate?

There are plenty of examples of this at the individual level—Bruce Springsteen's bitter anti-war song "Born In The USA" used as a pro-USA political anthem being just one example—that I don't think it is unrealistic to think that in the uncertain atmosphere of a global catastrophe there will be a whole art movement that becomes popular despite the underlying intent of the artist. One of the reasons for this is that governments and corporations like to co-opt art for their own interests. So to my mind it is not surprising that, post-catastrophe, the governments and relatively untouched populaces of the world are looking to calm the rest and support optimism, while there is this shock and depression from those that barely survived. That stark chasm of differing interest and experience is where Julian Prince's life really begins.

Why is it important to explore telling stories in unconventional ways?

The importance is telling the story the best way, not the unconventional way. So it is important not to limit ourselves as writers and readers to the standard narrative form. Because while that works for a lot of stories, it doesn't work for all of them.

What can we expect from you in the future?

I'm currently working on my first novel, which is an examination of memory. If you could go back and relive the best moment of your life, would you do that? What if it wasn't as great as you imagined? What if something you remembered as being wonderful turned out to actually be awful? How does time change our perceptions of the experiences in our past? I use a science fictional method to follow a number of characters as they experience just these things.

Beyond that, I'm sure I'll write a few stories. I do so love writing them.



Earnie Sotirokos grew up in a household where *Star Trek: The Next Generation* marathons were only interrupted for baseball and football games. When he's not writing copy for radio or reading slush, he enjoys penning fiction based on those influences. Follow him on Twitter @sotirokos.

Author Spotlight: Holly Phillips

Kevin McNeil

Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process and what inspired “Three Days of Rain”?

“Three Days” started with the image of an island city left standing above a waterless lakebed, stranded by drought. I expected it to be a bleak story, but discovered that I found the setting remarkably beautiful. My own response to it is like that slightly painful yearning of nostalgia for a place or a time that never was. Probably it was that feeling of nostalgia that made me feel I was writing a tribute to Ray Bradbury, whose stories I grew up with and loved. But the story is very much built around images.

There are beautiful descriptions throughout this story. It’s obvious you care deeply about the language. I’ve read that most writers fall into one of two categories: storytellers or wordsmiths. Do you agree with this idea? Would you put yourself in the wordsmith camp?

Hmm. I think all writers are storytellers. I certainly feel like a storyteller when I’m writing fiction. But it’s true that, for me, plot, and especially action, can take second place to evoking an emotion. Yet I get incredibly frustrated with literary writers

who don't move beyond the plotless "slice of life" kind of story. I guess it's just that I feel "story" lives in the character's desires and fears, motivations and relationships, at least as much as it lives in what the character does. Some writers grab their readers with suspense. I'd rather grab them with language. So I guess in the end I'd have to say that, yes, I'm in the wordsmith camp.

The environment plays a key role in this story as the complication that drives the choice the characters must make. Is this relationship between the characters and nature something you tend to explore in your fiction?

Very much so. I grew up on the edge of the wilderness in the mountains of western Canada, and my environment, my setting, was always a big part of my awareness. Of course, as an adult, I'm also ethically committed to environmental causes. I don't want to use fiction as a soap box—I don't want to *use* fiction at all, just to write it—but there's no denying that I think the incredible stresses human beings put on their environment has to translate into stresses on individual lives. Those stresses—those conflicts—do come up in my fiction a lot. (Mind you, I think it's also inevitable given my love of description. If there's not some conflict there, it has to go, and where's the fun in that?)

I like how open the ending to this story feels. I was left wondering about the fate of these characters and if Santiago had made the correct choice. Why did you choose to end the story at this point?

I wrote “Three Days” at a time when I was particularly interested in the moment of decision—the moment a character has some dramatic revelation or makes some fundamental, life-changing choice. What drives people to change their lives? What makes them take significant action to disrupt the status quo? What does the build-up to that moment—a moment that I have, in my own life, found both thrilling and terrifying—feel like from the inside? I’ve been told that actions and consequences are more typical story fare, but for an emotional, character-driven story, I still think that moment of choice carries a lot of promise.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Oh, probably the same advice they’ve heard a million times. Write a lot. Read a lot. Read *everything*. One thing I’ve noticed in a lot of aspiring writers, both in and out of the genre world, is that they tend to restrict their reading to what they “like.” Fantasy writers won’t read literary fiction. Literary writers won’t read science fiction. Science fiction writers won’t read popular mainstream. Fiction writers won’t read non-fiction. I think that’s a huge mistake, and the most eager,

active, successful writers I know are amazingly omnivorous. Curiosity is a vital component to imagination, and we should all be actively cultivating it ourselves. The same goes with taking risks: How can I grow as a writer when all I know of the writing world is one tiny neighborhood? Plus, it's amazing what tricks of the craft you can learn from reading people outside your field.

**Is there anything else you'd like to share about this piece?
What's next for you?**

I'm in a major transition phase right now. I've gone back to school, and I'm starting to explore a wider array of writing. Non-fiction? Mainstream? YA? I feel like I've thrown a decade's worth of writing ideas into the air and I'm waiting to see where they all land. But just at the moment, I'm principally writing homework assignments. I'm not sure if I should confess this, but even the homework for this very rigorous professional writing and design program is easier than writing a novel. Wow! I'm working 50-hour weeks and it still feel like a holiday.



Kevin McNeil reads slush and helps out with a few other things for *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare Magazines*. He is a physical therapist, sports fanatic, and volunteer coach for the Special Olympics. He graduated from the Odyssey Writing Workshop in 2012 and Kij Johnson's Novel Writer's Workshop in 2011. Kevin is a New Englander currently living in California.

Find him on Twitter [@kevinmcneil](#).

Author Spotlight: Rich Larson

Kevin McNeil

Can you tell us what inspired “Let’s Take This Viral”?

I’ve got a document loaded with tiny snippets of text and images, titled “idearrhea” because I created it two years ago when I was young and immature, and it was while scrolling through it this October that I rediscovered: “Insomniac society, cosmetic viruses, wet street, fast awake.” That fragment then became “Let’s Take This Viral” over the course of a weekend.

Is that typical for you: Getting excited about an idea and then knocking out the story in a short period of time? Tell us a little about your writing process.

Generally if it rains words, it pours. I'm either stuck on the first paragraph or I bang out an entire story over the course of a day or two. After that, I share it around and try to get some critiques, and usually end up doing edits about a week later. My dropbox is littered with the beginnings of stories that I'd like to finish eventually, but it tends to be a lot easier for me to write the whole thing in one go.

The world for this story is fascinating and well developed, with a great cyberpunk feel. What can you tell us about the creation of this world?

The cyberpunk aesthetic was my first love in speculative fiction, and that shows in a lot of my work, but the idea of the nocturns, a sort of 24/7 downtown party central, came from my own experiences with the party scene. Particularly, from a year I spent in Providence. The cycle of getting drunk, going out, wandering through a dazed half-day of hangover and then starting again, ran me through a meat grinder. Just exhausted me. The nocturns is that, amped to eleven in all respects.

It was interesting to watch the characters develop as they chased new experiences and quickly changing fads. As I read, I found myself wondering what a person would do once they had experienced everything. Is change and the need for new experiences a common theme in your writing?

Absolutely. Change is central to anything worthwhile I've managed to write, and definitely to this story. "Let's Take This Viral" points to the possible pitfalls of immortality, everything becoming so recycled and so stagnant that the only change left is death. I've always been scared of dying, but just as scared of an afterlife, heaven or hell, that never ends.

You've got a background in poetry with several published poems. How do you feel your poetry influences your prose?

I'm a sucker for beautiful prose, occasionally to the point of detriment. I keep trying to sneak this one line into my stories, about a raindrop detonating softly on someone's lips, and people keep telling me to axe it because it's ridiculously purple. The poetic tendency is one I have to rein in.

What's next for you?

One of my New Year's resolutions is to worry less about writing this year, actually, and spend more time living. I'm young and there's no rush. In the meanwhile, I've got publications upcoming in *Futuredaze: An Anthology of YA Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and a few others. I'm still just thrilled to be appearing in *Lightspeed* for the first time, so thanks for having me!



Kevin McNeil reads slush and helps out with a few other things for *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare Magazines*. He is a physical therapist, sports fanatic, and volunteer coach for the Special Olympics. He graduated from the Odyssey Writing Workshop in 2012 and Kij Johnson's Novel Writer's Workshop in 2011. Kevin is a New Englander currently living in California. Find him on Twitter @kevinmneil.

Author Spotlight: Angélica Gorodischer
Jude Griffin
translated by Amalia Gladhart

Trafalgar Medrano describes fantastic galactic journeys in the language of the ordinary, the recognizable:

“... equipment, machines, furniture, more books, dishes, vehicles, decorations.” Was this choice of language used to hint that Trafalgar was drawing on his own knowledge to make up stories about other worlds? Or was something else at work?

What Trafalgar Medrano does is to speak in the Argentine Spanish that he uses every day and for all situations. He *is* that way, he talks the way we all do. He talks the way we all talk when we go to the café and visit with friends. For Trafalgar, none of what he's telling is extraordinary: He simply describes what happened to him. I mean to say: Trafalgar Medrano *lives* as a person, not as a character. He isn't a construction of words. He's someone who functions within our surroundings.

You and Trafalgar seem to share similar tastes in authors. Do you share his opinion on literature: “Apart from science fiction and detective novels, I read nothing but

Balzac, Cervantes, and Corto Maltese . . . they are among the few that have everything one can ask of literature: beauty, realism, entertainment, what more do you want?”

No, no, no. Of course—and fortunately—my tastes and my preferences have changed over time. It is true that I have always read the classics in search of what they have to teach me (or, as Harold Bloom said, “You want novelty? Read the classics.”), but it is also true that when I abandoned SF, I didn’t abandon Balzac or Borges or Cervantes, but I added the people that interest me: the women, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Asa Larsson, Fred Vargas (she’s a women in spite of the “Fred;” her name is Frederica), Clarice Lispector, and so forth, plus feminist theorists. I no longer read SF. I look around to see what’s new and I keep to what interests me: science (astrophysics and paleoanthropology above all), women’s politics.

Trafalgar explains the current condition of the planet’s residents as a result of knowing all there is to know. “After visiting dead worlds, worlds living or to be born, after leaving their seed on a few of them, after exploring everything and knowing everything, they not only stopped caring about the death of the star, but about the rest of the universe and they had enough with the sense of the circle.” Is the recognition of ignorance the only driving force for

humanity?

But no, of course not. Those guys were fed up, that's it. They had spent their lives and their history trying to find the answer to the basic, classic question: What is the meaning of life? And instead of seeking the answer within, they had looked for it outside, something that is exhausting because the universe is—I don't know if it's infinite, but it's at least verrrry big.

How did you come up with the gibberish and its meaning that Veri Halabi translated in her dreams—did the words come first or the meaning?: “A circle . . . is formed in the kingdom when the oil lamp burns out in the perceptible game of every distant precinct. As quartz is unaware of the howl of the wild animal and if it rains on the high grasslands it is improbable that the roots will know, all precincts come in contact at the rough edges until knowledge erases that which has been constructed. Its measure depends not on the rocks but on the torrent.”

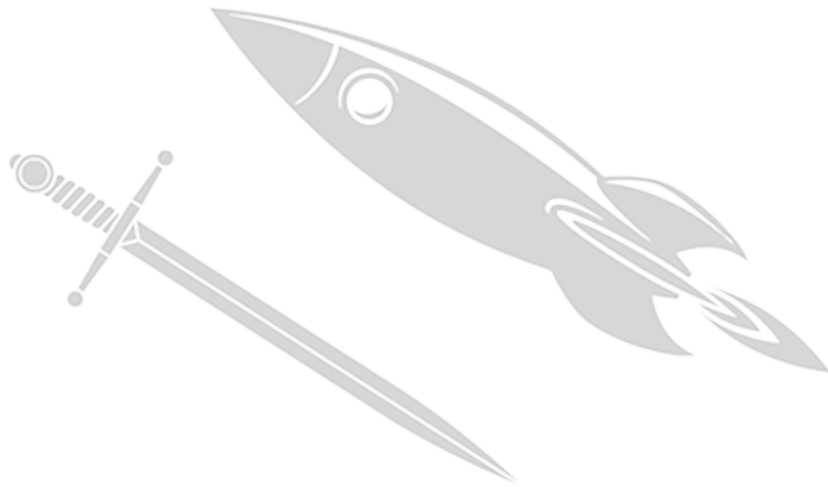
For me, words just come on their own, in a torrent, in a flood. I imagine what the character feels and their words come without my forcing them too much, just a little. The words and their meanings (deep meanings, not the ones in the dictionary) are fused in a single outpouring. But careful, it's not a matter of “inspiration.” Inspiration doesn't exist; what exists is work. As someone said: “Inspiration arrived . . . and

found me working.” There is no other way.



Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, photographer, and an expert in learning and knowledge management. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo, was a volunteer EMT and firefighter, accompanied journalists into combat in Central America, lived in a haunted village in Thailand, ran an international amphibian monitoring network, volunteers with the National Park Service habitat restoration program on the Boston Harbor Islands, reads slush for *Nightmare* and *Lightspeed Magazines*, and is working on a novel that might be SF, might be fantasy. She cannot parallel park, lies about how far she runs in the morning, and still has her Gloria Vanderbilt jeans from high school. Folded. In a box.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions

Coming up in April, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We'll have original science fiction by Desirina Boskovich ("Deus Ex Arca") and acclaimed indie bestseller Hugh Howey ("Deep Blood Kettle"), along with SF reprints by Kathleen Ann Goonan ("A Love Supreme") and the legendary Robert Silverberg ("Schwartz Between the Galaxies").

Plus, we'll have original fantasy by Anaea Lay ("The Visited") and Swedish sensation Karin Tidbeck ("A Fine Show on the Abyssal Plain"), and fantasy reprints by Bruce Sterling ("Dinner in Audoghost") and Christopher Barzak ("Smoke City").

We'll also have our usual assortment of author and artist spotlights, along with feature interviews with bestselling authors Jane Yolen and Brandon Sanderson. And for our ebook readers, our ebook-exclusive novella will be "Bellony" by Nina Allan, and our featured novel excerpt is *The Red: First Light* by Linda Nagata.

It's another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And while you're at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed*. Thanks for reading!

About the Editor

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

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Famine. Death. War. Pestilence. These are the harbingers of the biblical apocalypse, of the End of the World. In science fiction, the end is triggered by less figurative means: nuclear holocaust, biological warfare/pandemic, ecological disaster, or cosmological cataclysm.

But before any catastrophe, there are people who see it coming. During, there are heroes who fight against it. And after, there are the survivors who persevere and try to rebuild. THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH will tell their stories.

Edited by acclaimed anthologist John Joseph Adams and bestselling author Hugh Howey, THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH is a series of three anthologies of apocalyptic fiction. THE END IS NIGH focuses on life before the apocalypse. THE END IS NOW turns its attention to life during the apocalypse. And THE END HAS COME focuses on life after the apocalypse.

Visit johnjosephadams.com/apocalypse-triptych to learn more about THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH or to read interviews with the authors. You can also sign up for our newsletter if you would like to be reminded when the other volumes of the TRIPTYCH become available.



THE GEEK'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY



The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is an interview/talk show hosted by author David Barr Kirtley (*New Voices in Science Fiction, Fantasy: The Best of the Year*) and produced by editor/anthologist John Joseph Adams (*Lightspeed Magazine, The Living Dead*).

The show covers fantasy and science fiction in literature, film, graphic novels, and video games, as well as related topics such as science, technology, and critical thinking. Each

episode runs for approximately one hour. Each episode consists of either (a) a feature interview with a celebrity guest or (b) a panel discussion on a topic of geek-interest.

Guests have included:

- Novelists, such as: George R. R. Martin (*A Game of Thrones*), Dean Koontz (*Innocence*), Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), Philip Pullman (*The Golden Compass*), Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*), Joe Hill (*NOS4A2*), Dan Simmons (*The Terror*), Hugh Howey (*Wool*), Charlaine Harris (the Sookie Stackhouse/*True Blood* series), Lemony Snicket (*A Series of Unfortunate Events*), Junot Diaz (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*), William Gibson (*Neuromancer*), Neal Stephenson (*Anathem*);
- Filmmakers, such as: John Cleese (*Monty Python*), David Cronenberg (*Scanners, A History of Violence*), Chris Williams (*Big Hero Six*), Felicia Day (*The Guild*), Simon Pegg (*Shaun of the Dead*), and Alexandre Philippe (*The People vs. George Lucas*);
- Comics writers, such as: Robert Kirkman (*The Walking Dead*), Mike Mignola (*Hellboy*), Allie Brosh (*Hyperbole and a Half*), Ryan North (*Dinosaur Comics*), David Malki (*Wondermark*),

and Chris Roberson (*Superman*);

- Video Game Designers Ron Gilbert (*The Secret of Monkey Island*), Ted Kosmatka (*Portal 2*), and Chet Faliszek (*Left 4 Dead*);
- Scientists/Nonfiction Writers, such as: Naomi Klein (*This Changes Everything*), P.W. Singer (*Wired for War*), Paul Krugman (*New York Times* columnist/economist), Mary Roach (*Stiff*), Brian Greene (*Fabric of the Cosmos*), Neil deGrasse Tyson (*Nova scienceNOW*), and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*).

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JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

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- *Armored*
- *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy* [Forthcoming, Oct. 2015]
- *Brave New Worlds*
- *By Blood We Live*
- *Dead Man's Hand*
- *Epic: Legends Of Fantasy*
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Visit johnjosephadams.com to learn more about all of the above. Each project also has a mini-site devoted to it specifically, where you'll find free fiction, interviews, and

more.



OTHER APOCALYPTIC BOOKS

BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

In addition to the three books in [THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH](#), editor John Joseph Adams has also edited several other anthologies of a similar thematic nature that you might enjoy:

WASTELANDS: STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, January 2008

From the Book of Revelation to *The Road Warrior*; from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* to *The Road*, storytellers have long imagined the end of the world, weaving eschatological tales of catastrophe, chaos, and calamity. In doing so, these visionary authors have addressed one of the most challenging and enduring themes of imaginative fiction: the nature of life in the aftermath of total societal collapse.

Gathering together the best post-apocalyptic literature of the last two decades from many of today's most renowned authors of speculative fiction — including George R.R. Martin, Gene Wolfe, Orson Scott Card, Carol Emshwiller, Jonathan Lethem, Octavia E. Butler, and Stephen King — *Wastelands* explores the scientific, psychological, and philosophical questions of what it means to remain human in

the wake of Armageddon.

johnjosephadams.com/wastelands

**WASTELANDS 2: MORE STORIES OF THE
APOCALYPSE**

edited by John Joseph Adams

Titan Books, February 2015

For decades, the apocalypse and its aftermath have yielded some of the most exciting short stories of all time. From David Brin’s seminal “The Postman” to Hugh Howey’s “Deep Blood Kettle” and Tananarive Due’s prescient “Patient Zero,” the end of the world continues to thrill. This companion volume to the critically-acclaimed *Wastelands* offers thirty of the finest examples of post-apocalyptic short fiction, including works by George R.R. Martin, Junot Díaz, Seanan McGuire, Paolo Bacigalupi, and more. Award-winning editor John Joseph Adams has once again assembled a who’s who of short fiction, and the result is nothing short of mind-blowing.

johnjosephadams.com/wastelands-2

THE LIVING DEAD

edited by John Joseph Adams

Night Shade Books, September 2008

From *White Zombie* to *Dawn of the Dead*, from *Resident Evil* to *World War Z*, zombies have invaded popular culture, becoming the monsters that best express the fears and anxieties of the modern west. The ultimate consumers, zombies rise from the dead and feed upon the living, their teeming masses ever hungry, ever seeking to devour or convert, like mindless, faceless eating machines. Zombies have been depicted as mind-controlled minions, the shambling infected, the disintegrating dead, the ultimate *lumpenproletariat*, but in all cases, they reflect us, mere mortals afraid of death in a society on the verge of collapse.

Gathering together the best zombie literature of the last three decades from many of today's most renowned authors of fantasy, speculative fiction, and horror, including Stephen King, Harlan Ellison[®], Robert Silverberg, George R. R. Martin, Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Neil Gaiman, Joe Hill, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Joe R. Lansdale, *The Living Dead*, covers the broad spectrum of zombie fiction, ranging from Romero-style zombies to reanimated corpses to voodoo zombies and beyond.

johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead

THE LIVING DEAD 2
edited by John Joseph Adams

Night Shade Books, September 2010

Readers eagerly devoured *The Living Dead*. Now acclaimed editor John Joseph Adams is back for another bite at the apple — the Adam’s apple, that is — with 43 more of the best, most chilling, most thrilling zombie stories anywhere, including virtuoso performances by zombie fiction legends Max Brooks (*World War Z*, *The Zombie Survival Guide*), Robert Kirkman (*The Walking Dead*), and David Wellington (*Monster Island*).

From *Left 4 Dead* to *Zombieland* to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ghoulishness has never been more exciting and relevant. Within these pages samurai warriors face off against the legions of hell, necrotic dinosaurs haunt a mysterious lost world, and eerily clever zombies organize their mindless brethren into a terrifying army.

The Living Dead 2 has more of what zombie fans hunger for — more scares, more action, more. . . brains. Experience the indispensable series that defines the very best in zombie literature.

johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead-2

ROBOT UPRISINGS

edited by Daniel H. Wilson & John Joseph Adams

Vintage Books, April 2014

As real robots creep into our lives, so does a sense of fear — we have all wondered what horrifying scenarios might unfold if our technology were to go awry. The idea of a robot uprising is fascinating precisely because it is possible. This anthology will bring to life the answers to our half-formed questions by providing a collection of meticulously precise, exhilarating trips into a future in which humans survive only by being more clever and tenacious than the machines they have created.

At the helm of this project are Daniel H. Wilson—bestselling novelist and expert in robotics—and John Joseph Adams—bestselling editor of more than a dozen science fiction/fantasy anthologies. Together, they have drawn on their wide-ranging contacts to assemble a talented group of authors eager to attack the topic of robot uprisings from startling and fascinating angles.

Featuring work by Hugh Howey, Seanan McGuire, Scott Sigler, Charles Yu, Anna North, Robin Wasserman, Ernest Cline, Jeff Abbott, Julianna Baggott, and many more, plus a new novella from Daniel H. Wilson.

johnjosephadams.com/robot-uprisings

BRAVE NEW WORLDS
edited by John Joseph Adams
Night Shade Books, January 2011

You are being watched.

When the government wields its power against its own people, every citizen becomes an enemy of the state. Will you fight the system, or be ground to dust beneath the boot of tyranny?

In his smash-hit anthologies *Wastelands* and *The Living Dead*, acclaimed editor John Joseph Adams showed you what happens when society is utterly wiped away. Now he brings you a glimpse into an equally terrifying future — what happens when civilization invades and dictates every aspect of your life?

From *1984* to *The Handmaid's Tale*, from *Children of Men* to *Bioshock*, the dystopian imagination has been a vital and gripping cautionary force. *Brave New Worlds* collects 33 of the best tales of totalitarian menace by some of today's most visionary writers.

johnjosephadams.com/brave-new-worlds

LOOSED UPON THE WORLD

edited by John Joseph Adams

Saga Press, August 2015

An anthology of fiction about climate change, featuring stories by Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, Seanan McGuire, Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert Silverberg, Charlie Jane Anders, Karl Schroeder, Nancy Kress, Tobias S.

Buckell, and many others.

johnjosephadams.com/loosed



OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN

Based on your interest in Humble Bundle, here are two other books by John Joseph Adams you might enjoy:

PRESS START TO PLAY
edited by Daniel H. Wilson & John Joseph Adams
Vintage Books, August 2015

Video games have become a multi-billion dollar a year industry that has outpaced movies and books combined. The humble, pixelated games of the '70s and '80s have evolved into the vivid, realistic, and immersive form of entertainment that now rivals all other forms of media for dominance in the consumer marketplace. For many, video games have become *the* cultural icons around which the entire entertainment industry revolves.

So if exploring video games has become one of the primary ways we create and experience narratives, why not create some narratives that explore the way we create and experience video games?

In this book you will find twenty-five stories that recreate the feel of a video game in prose form, stories that play with the core concepts of video games, and stories about the creation or playing of video games themselves.

Featuring: original fiction from video game industry veterans such as Marc Laidlaw (*Half-Life*), Austin Grossman (*Dishonored*), Micky Neilson (*World of Warcraft*), Rhianna Pratchett (*Tomb Raider*), and Chris Avellone (*Fallout: New Vegas*); original fiction from new and notable writers of science fiction and fantasy, including Hiroshi Sakurazaka (*All You Need is Kill*, basis for the film *Edge of Tomorrow*), Seanan McGuire (*Half-Off Ragnarok*), Charles Yu (*How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*), Robin Wasserman (*The Waking Dark*), Andy Weir (*The Martian*) and Hugh Howey (*Wool*); plus, selected reprints by authors such as T.C. Boyle (*World's End*), Catherynne M. Valente (*Deathless*), Ken Liu (*The Grace of Kings*), Cory Doctorow (*Little Brother*), and others.

johnjosephadams.com/press-start

HELP FUND MY ROBOT ARMY!!! & OTHER IMPROBABLE CROWDFUNDING PROJECTS

edited by John Joseph Adams

Self-Published/Crowdfunded, July 2014

If you're a regular backer of Kickstarters, you've probably seen some unique crowdfunding projects in your time. But one thing all of those campaigns — boringly! — had in common was: They abided by the physical laws of the

universe!

HELP FUND MY ROBOT ARMY!!! is an anthology of science fiction and fantasy stories told in the form of fictional crowdfunding pitches, using the components (and restrictions) of the format to tell the story. This includes but is not limited to: Project Goals, Rewards, User Comments, Project Updates, FAQs, and more. The idea is to replicate the feel of reading a crowdfunding pitch, so that even though the projects may be preposterous in the real world, they will feel like authentic crowdfunding projects as much as possible.

So if what you've always been looking for in a Kickstarter — and couldn't find — was a project that allowed you to protect yourself from spoilers, buy wishes, find lost objects, or support a wildlife preserve for supernatural creatures, then *HELP FUND MY ROBOT ARMY!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects* may be just the thing you've been looking for.

Featuring stories by: Tobias S. Buckell, Chuck Wendig, Tim Pratt, Veronica Belmont, Monte Cook, Michael J. Sullivan, David Malki!, Scott Sigler, Daniel H. Wilson, Seanan McGuire, and others.

johnjosephadams.com/robot-army

