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Richard's brow furrowed for a moment and his mouth hung slightly opened. "But..." he started, stopping with his mouth further open.

"Hmm?" said the demon.

"But I never really gave it all that much thought."

"So?"

Richard began to speak again, launching into words and then pulling up short. He paused for a moment, concentrating. Occasionally, he would let out an exasperated breath and tilt his head to the side.

"I'll wait," said the demon, his eyes wandering away from Richard and around the bus station.

Richard sat silently for three or four more minutes. Occasionally, he would grab hold of a concept only to have it skitter away when he tried to hold it too tightly. It was like trying to carry a dozen really big trout.

"But —" Richard finally offered. "But that's not fair!"

The demon suddenly turned towards Richard. "What?"

"That's not fair," Richard said.

A small smile broke across on the demon's face. "Not fair?" he asked.

"Yeah," Richard said. "Not fair. Not fair at all."

The demon was leaning eagerly towards Richard. "Why?" he asked. "Tell me why."

"Well, I led a good life. You even said so yourself. I was a good person."

"Let's not go overboard here."

"No, no. I was a *good* person. A decent, caring person. People loved me!"

"So?"

"Well," Richard said, counting off his fingers. "I was a good person. People loved me. And now I'm in Hell."

"So?" the demon said again.

"That's not fair!"

"But *why*?" The demon strained even further forward.

Richard paused. "Well. Well, I'm only here because I didn't believe in God. I followed all the rules. Even if I didn't know they were the rules, I followed them. I ended up losing anyway. That doesn't seem very fair."

The demon looked at him with a pained expression. "'Seem very fair?'" he said.

Richard gathered himself and shook his dead vigorously. "No. No. In fact, it's not fair at all. It's not even a little fair."

"So what you're saying," said the demon, "is that you're a political prisoner."

"What?"

"A political prisoner. You're here simply because of your beliefs. Because you didn't think what the powers-that-be wanted you to think."

Richard's eyes opened wide and he nodded his head. "Yeah!" he blurted. "Yeah. Exactly. That's exactly what I mean. That's not fair."

The demon crossed his arms across his chest and leaned comfortably back. "Bummer," he said.

Richard looked confused for a brief moment. "What do you mean, 'Bummer'?"

"Bummer," said the demon again.

Richard's shoulders slumped and he let out a sputtering breath. "Well, this sucks!" he said. "This really sucks!"

The demon smiled. "Good enough," he said to himself.

Greg Knauss bboychuk@ucsd.edu

Is loopy as a loon, and has a Political Science degree from UC San Diego. He has no job, no life, and nothing to do. In the meantime, he has written two *Star Trek: The Next Generation* scripts, one of which has been roasting in the fires of the *ST:TNG* production office for four months with no response. Greg has also written for numerous Atari computer magazines, all of which have since been driven out of business. A connection? You be the judge.

"It's a little late for that. Anyway. Are you in metaphysical torment?"

Richard looked up at the demon and raised his eyebrows. He pulled a corner of his mouth back and made a small clicking noise by separating his lips. "Actually," he said, "I don't think so."

The demon looked at him sternly. "Are you sure?"

Richard considered for a moment longer, then said, "Well, yeah."

The demon stood and paced across the room. "You're right," he said. "Something is screwed up."

"Told you."

The demon began stride quickly back and forth in front of Richard. Occasionally, he would pause, shake his head, and move on. This guy, he thought, is an idiot. Why do I always get assigned to the idiots? Why can't I ever get a pope? *They've* done all the reading. Where should I start? First principles.

He stopped and looked down at Richard. "Here," he said. "Do you find this place unpleasant at all?"

"Well, yeah," Richard said. "I mean, it's pretty filthy. I went to Union Station once and it was much nicer than this. They have that wonderful old archi—"

"No, no! You're missing the point. Think about it for a minute. This is *Hell*."

Richard leaned back on the bench, and stuck his lower lip out slightly. "So?"

The demon scowled. "You're here forever! For all eternity! With absolutely no hope for escape. You simply *can't* get out."

The thought apparently hadn't occurred to Richard before. "Oh," he said.

The demon pointed to the chalkboards along the wall. "Those buses will never come," he said. "And even if they did, you can't get outside to meet them. And even if you could, you can't get the tickets to get on them! Don't you see?"

Richard hesitate for a moment then said firmly, "Um."

"They offer futile hope, you geek! You're supposed to get down here and have a tiny suspicion that if only you were smart enough, if only you were clever enough, you could figure out how to get out!" The demon whirled towards Richard. "But you can't! There is no hope! You are trapped here forever! Don't you get it?"

"Trapped?" Richard asked.

"Trapped," the demon said firmly.

"Forever?"

"Forever."

Richard considered the concept for a moment. "Oh," he said.

The demon grit his teeth and sat down heavily on the bench. He sighed and looked at Richard.

"Look," he said, "do you even know *why* you're here?"

Richard thought hard for a moment. He shook his head. "I hadn't really considered it."

"You hadn't considered why you were sent to Hell?"

"Well... No."

"OK," said the demon. "Maybe that's what we're missing."

"I committed adultery," Richard offered. "That was supposed to be bad, wasn't it?"

The demon waved his hand dismissively. "God doesn't really care about that much any more."

"Oh. Well. I, uh, I disrespected my elders."

The demon grimaced. "This is the nineties."

"I used the Lord's name in vain."

The demon only gave him a sour look.

"What then?"

"You don't know how the Ten Commandments start, do you?"

Richard shook his head.

"No."

"'I am the Lord, thy God,'" said the demon. "That's how they start."

"I thought it was, 'In the beginning...'"

"That's the Bible. The Ten Commandments are a different thing."

"Oh."

"You didn't believe in God, see? That's pretty much the only major no-no left. God doesn't like killing all that much and stealing isn't considered a GOOD thing, but he's really mellowed out lately. You can do pretty much all you want in the previous life and get away with it. But he still has a HUGE ego."

"God has an ego?"

"Wouldn't you? I mean, he's the Creator. He's omnipotent. You'd feel pretty damn proud of yourself if you could make a rock that even you couldn't pick up."

"Well... I suppose."

"Suppose? Of course you would." He demon turned towards Richard on the bench. "Here, look. You led a pretty morally upright life. You never killed anybody. You didn't steal much. You were a pretty good neighbor. You did unto others once in a while. You even turned the other cheek occasionally. Remember Harvey Wellman? You lent him your coat once."

Richard blinked slowly. "So why am I in Hell?"

"Because you didn't believe in God! That's the big thing. You're in Hell because you're an atheist."

concrete curb that jut out from the bus station. Or Hell. Whichever.

He pushed on the door, but it didn't open.

"You can't get out that way," said the bum.

Richard spun to find the battered man now sitting up on the bench. He had deeply lined, suntanned face, and a few days of beard covered his chin and crawled up his cheeks. His clothes were beaten and dirty, and a greasy tangle of hair fell into his eyes and over his ears.

"What?" Richard said.

"You can't get out that way. Trust me."

"Who're you?"

The man rose and ambled towards Richard, a lose sole of his shoe flopping as he walked. "I'm your demon."

"My demon?"

The man reached Richard and leaned towards him, poking his nose forward. "Your demon. Sent here to torment you."

Richard grimaced and pulled back. "With your smell?"

The old man scowled. "Look, buddy. This isn't MY doing. I just work here. You're the one who's damned."

"Oh." Richard wasn't quite sure how to deal with this.

"This is your Hell. Your own private Hell. I'm your own private demon."

"Oh."

The demon nodded curtly. "OK."

Richard nodded back. "OK."

"OK."

"OK."

There was silence for a moment.

"Not what you imagined, is it?" asked the demon.

Richard scanned the bus station. "To be honest, no," he said. "I hadn't really imagined anything."

The demon eyed him, pushing his chin against his chest and looking up. "Uncomfortable yet?"

"Well, yeah," Richard said.

"Good," the demon replied. He spun on his heel and walked back to the bench — flop, flop, flop — where he had been sleeping before and lay down. He pulled the newspapers over him again and, apparently, fell asleep.

Richard stood unevenly for a moment. He blinked.

"Hey."

The demon stirred, then rolled so his back was facing Richard.

"Hey," Richard said. He walked to the demon and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, get up."

With a groan, the demon slowly sat up. He looked at Richard from the bench and said, "What?"

"There's a few things I don't understand," Richard said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I think there must have been some kind of screw-up. I don't quite get what's going on."

The demon looked surprised. He leaned back against the bench and scratched his cheek. "You don't get Hell?"

"Well, yeah," Richard admitted sheepishly. "I don't see that there's much *to* get."

The demon narrowed his eyes at Richard and ran his tongue over his front teeth. "You're not writhing in metaphysical torment?" the demon asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Richard said. "I don't really know what it is."

The demon slid to the side and pushed the scattered sheets of newspaper to the floor. "Have a seat," he said. "This is going to take a while."

Richard sat, slightly away from the demon.

The demon pushed his hair back and took a deep breath. "OK," he said. "Now:

"Metaphysics deals with realms beyond the physical. It is philosophy of the senses, and of interpretation of the senses. It deals with things that are not here, but *here*. It deals with the soul instead of the body, with the mind instead of the brain. Metaphysics is everything that you cannot touch, but that you can feel. Your 'sixth sense' is metaphysical in nature. *Deja vu* is metaphysical in nature. God, Heaven, me, Hell and now you are all metaphysical in nature. Metaphysics is everything that not only *is*, but *just is*. Got it?"

"Oh," Richard said, slightly stunned. "I thought it had to do with aerobics."

The demon continued, ignoring him. "To be in metaphysical torment is to go beyond the simple pain of the body, to the pain of the soul. If God were to try to make you atone for your sins by, say, poking out your eyeballs" — Richard made a face — "there would be a limit to how much you would suffer. If he made you atone by having worms eat through your flesh, there would be a limit to how much you would suffer. If he—"

"All right! All right! No need for the theatrics."

The demon looked impatiently at Richard for a moment, then continued. "Metaphysical torment is unending. It's like constant pain that never moves you towards your death. It's like everything that's ever made you feel bad, all remembered simultaneously, all magnified by a thousand. It's—"

"You're doing it again."

"Stop interrupting me!" the demon shouted. "You're ruining the effect!"

Richard looked down at his hands as they pulled at each other in his lap. "Sorry," he said.

"Can you tell me where I am?" Richard asked. He glanced down at his watch.

Peter looked up from his book in surprise. "You don't know where you are?" he said.

"Well," Richard said. "I... Uh... Well, no, actually."

Peter rechecked the listing in his book. Occasionally he wished that they had a little more to work with than just a petitioners religion. The line still said, "atheist," and Peter narrowed his eyes at Richard. The demons weren't going to like this at all. "You're at the Gates of Heaven."

"Oh?" Richard asked. "I am?"

Peter nodded. "Yes."

"Oh." Richard glanced at his watch again.

Saint Peter knit his brow, pulling his eyebrows together. This wasn't good. The guy was obviously an atheist — the book said so — and so he was going to Hell. But Peter would be damned if he could figure out how the demons were going to work with him. He, apparently, didn't have much of a reaction to anything. There was a sort of glaze over his eyes.

"You're going to Hell," Peter offered.

"I am?" Richard asked.

"Yes."

"Oh."

Peter shook his head in amazement. Absolutely no reaction at all.

"That's bad, isn't it?"

"Yes," Peter said. "That's bad."

"OK," Richard said. "Just checking." He looked at his shoes for a moment, then said, "I'm going to miss my meeting, aren't I?"

Peter muttered, "Geez," and Richard Gillman was dropped into Hell.

• • •

Hell wasn't what Richard Gillman had expected at all. First off, there were no flames anywhere. Growing up in the United States in the late twentieth century, it would have been impossible for him to NOT have an image of Hell, even if he didn't believe in it, which he didn't. He had pictured it pretty much like he thought everybody else pictured it: Like the inside of a cavern, with flames leaping everywhere and large boiling craters of lava and demons jumping out of hiding places and stabbing you with pitchforks and stuff. Like Mr. Boffo.

That's what Hell was supposed to be like. Not at all like this.

He remembered reading, somewhere — the reference understandably slipped his mind at the moment — that flames were a more recent invention for Hell. That Hell had been originally been conceived of as metaphysical suffering, not physical discomfort. Or something like that. He didn't have a head for those kinds of details. Plus he never really understood what the word "metaphysical" meant. He had misused it in paper in a general education philosophy class several years ago and had never gotten around to looking it up.

Dante, he recalled, had pictured Hell with ice. On the lowest plane of Hell, people were supposed to be frozen in a lake of ice, trapped forever, with just the top half of their heads peaking out. He had seen a picture of Dante's description at a show that some girl had dragged him to. He had made a what he thought was a clever remark and she had stopped returning his calls.

But not in all his life — he was college-educated after all, he should have heard about things like this — could he recall having been told that Hell was a bus station.

Oh, he supposed, a bus station is probably its own little kind of Hell — he noticed with distaste a bum sleeping under newspaper on a bench — but this certainly isn't as bad as it could be. Both fire and ice seemed as if they had the potential to be a lot worse than this.

Hell was a particularly drab bus station. It was small, just an annex, with five or six rows of wooden benches. A ticket window was centered in one wall, half way between a cigarette machine and a drinking fountain. The other wall listed schedules for when buses would be departing. Or not departing, he noticed:

Heaven ..... ***Delayed***
Valhalla ..... ***Delayed***
Satori ..... ***Delayed***
The Happy Hunting Ground ..... ***Delayed***

The list continued along, hand-chalked for two decaying blackboards, with the names of dozens of places followed by the word "Delayed."

The wall that the benches faced was divided into two glass doors, labeled "To Buses," and the opposite wall was blank, save for smudged and aged institution-green paint.

Richard walked to the ticket window and tapped on the glass with his finger. There was no one in the small office beyond, but long rolls of tickets were laid out on a desk. He could see the names on the wall also printed on the tickets.

"Hello?" he called.

There was no answer. The bum on the bench rustled slightly and a page of a newspaper fell off of him.

Well, Richard thought, this is pretty dumb.

He turned from the window and walked quickly to the glass doors. He peered out into what looked to be a starless night, but he really couldn't see much beyond the

the his Fiat's gas tank caught fire.

The resulting explosion was so large that it caused a good dozen periphery accidents, mostly shattering windows that faced the collision, and closed the 405 for almost ten hours.

It took fire fighters and rescue personnel half that time just to remove what they could identify as the remains of Richard Gillman from the wreckage. As his rear license plate was thrown clear during the explosion — it was found later embedded in the empty passenger seat of another man's car — the identity of Richard Gillman was quickly known, but withheld from the media pending the notification of his family.

• • •

Saint Peter knew what to expect when people arrived; he'd been at this job for quite a while.

Usually, Christians were the most passive. This, after all, was what they had been told to expect. They would normally stagger up to Peter, their faces blank and shiny with bliss, and mutter their names. He would check his list, make a small mark, and send them off, either up or down. Most people didn't like to get the news that they were going down, but they never had much time to complain before they were whisked off.

Sometimes, they were worried when they showed up. They would drop to their knees and begin to cry and wail and screech for atonement as soon as they appeared at the Gates. Usually Peter would delicately pry their name out of them and then send them off in the appropriate direction. They really didn't have all that much to worry about. God had become pretty calm lately; he'd mellowed as he'd gotten older. How could he blame humans for being nasty when they were created in his own image?

Occasionally, however, Peter liked to have a little fun. The crying petitioner would be kneeling at the base of his podium, tears streaming down his face, and Peter would look at him gravely. He would scan down the long pages of his book, stop suddenly and then shake his head. Once in a while, he would gasp in horrified astonishment — the petitioner would collapse into a heap, sobbing helplessly — and he would have to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

Yes, the Christians were the easiest, and easily the most fun.

Next came Jews. Jews took it pretty well, the concept of a Christian God, usually with much more stoicism than Christians themselves. Peter himself was a Jew and Judaism, really, just amounted to Christianity one-point-oh. They didn't have much trouble with the concept of a Christian Heaven, though as Peter understood it, they tended to avoid Christ for their first few decades here.

The non-Judeo-Christian religions produced people who varied in degree. Buddhists were even more stoic than the Jews and simply nodded as Peter let them pass or turned them down. Hindus didn't like the idea of heavenly burger palaces, but seemed to cope with the rest all right. Moslems often took it badly at first — Peter smiled at the concept of a jihad against God — but then settled down. Monotheistic religions are all basically compatible and anybody who showed up at the Gates believing in A god could usually cope with believing in THE God.

But woe to the atheists. Atheists were the worst. Far and away the worst.

When atheists arrived, they would blink a few times in confusion and begin to jerk their head around, trying to take it all in. Peter would beckon them over and the atheists would walk slowly towards him, often stumbling over their own feet.

When they arrived at the podium, the fifty feet or so often taking them upwards of five minutes to cross, their brow would wrinkle and they would say something stupid like, "Saint Peter?"

Peter would smile softly and say, "Yes?"

Atheists couldn't stand that, all the calmness and regularity of it. At that point they often exploded, backing away from the podium, saying "Oh, no. Oh, no. I don't believe this."

Peter would say, "I know."

The atheists would usually ignore him and start to stamp around, shouting curses, screaming "This is not happening! This is not happening!" when it obviously was.

But, Peter thought, this guy here is different. Outright odd, even. He had appeared in the flash of white light like normal, but he hadn't reacted to what he saw at all. Not the the towering clouds, the huge gate, nothing. He looked around for a moment, blinking occasionally, and finally wandered over to Peter.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," Peter replied, slightly startled. This person had the first neutral expression he had ever seen on anybody who appeared at the Gates. "Your name?"

"Oh, Richard Gillman," said Richard.

Peter glanced down at the book on the podium in front of him, half expecting to find some indication that this guy was a Zen master. He started. No, not a Zen master. "Richard Gillman," the line read. "Atheist." And like all the atheist listings, it had a little down arrow after it.

An atheist. But an atheist who apparently didn't care that he was in the after-life. Weird. The demons weren't going to like this.

The Damnation of Richard Gillman

Greg Knauss

When Richard Gillman was killed, he was driving north through Los Angeles on the Santa Monica-bound 405.

Downtown Los Angeles is a confusing place, with twisting and interlocking expressways, and a moment's hesitation will send you sailing off in a direction you never intended, depositing you in Pasadena or Torrance or Century City or just about anyplace else.

This, of course, costs time. The delay, depending on a number of factors, can be anywhere from five minutes to several hours.

Richard Gillman did not have that kind of time. He was on his way to a meeting at Chiat/Day and could not afford to be late.

Los Angeles is a low-lying city, spread out instead of up. Though there are several very tall buildings in the center of downtown, including one comically-shaped like an empty roll of paper towels, the city is mostly a huge expanse of structures below four or five stories. Unlike San Francisco or New York, the sky is clearly visible straight ahead, even out of a car window.

This is what Richard Gillman was looking at when he missed his exit. While Los Angeles is largely reputed to have unhealthful air quality the majority of the year, there are certain times, after a rare rainstorm for instance, where the sky is simply an expanse of beautiful, majestic blue. The mountains to the east are crystal clear, and in the winter their peaks are capped with brilliant white snow. If Los Angeles had been built a little further up the coast, instead of in a natural geographic basin — if Los Angeles could ever get a decent public transportation system together — if Los Angeles wasn't the destination of half the people in the Midwest who leave their dying home towns, it would be like this every day. Beautiful blue sky, shiny clean buildings, the best city in the world.

It was at this point, and with these thoughts, that Richard Gillman realized he was going to miss his exit. He was leaning just slightly forward, staring just slightly up, looking at an oblong white cloud, when a huge green rectangle blocked his vision. It said:

Sixth Street 1/4

"Damn!" Richard Gillman cursed. He craned his neck wildly to the right, checking for a clear space next to him. If he missed this exit, he would miss his meeting.

Cars were packed tightly, half a length apart, up and down the 405 as far as he could see.

Richard Gillman was still looking back, over his right shoulder, twenty-five seconds later when his car plowed into the truck in front of him. He was only going forty miles an hour when he hit it and might not have been injured at all had he been wearing a seat belt.

Seat belts are required by law in California, and you can get a fifteen dollar ticket if you're caught not wearing one. But Richard Gillman found that they left large diagonal wrinkles across his chest and lap whenever he wore certain types of fabric. There was nothing more embarrassing that arriving at a lunch or a meeting with large diagonal wrinkles across your chest and lap.

Anyway, Richard Gillman's car caught most of the force of the collision. If you launch a small object, say a Fiat, into a larger one, say a Vons produce eighteen-wheeler, the Fiat will sustain most of the damage. In fact, what will happen is something like this:

At the moment of contact, even before any metal bends, the driver of the Fiat will be shot forward. Normally in this situation, his seat belt will snap tight and hold him back against his seat. If the driver is not wearing a seat belt — and this happens to be the case in this particular instance — he will continue forward as the front end of the Fiat crushes against the back of the truck.

After about a tenth of a second, the unseat-belted driver's chest will impact against the steering wheel and a short moment later, his face will shatter the windshield.

As the front of the car continues to collapse, the engine block will transmit most of the shock wave past itself further back into the car. The driver, by now, has left a crude impression of himself in the dashboard. His pelvis has likely bent the lower part of the steering wheel forward, as his rib cage has done for the upper part. Because of the small amount of leg room in a Fiat, his knees have likely found the underside of the dash, and bones in either is thigh or lower leg have shattered, shards pushing their way through the skin.

As the initial push forward into the truck comes to an end, it seems likely that both the hypothetical Fiat and the hypothetical driver are both pretty much a total loss. But Richard Gillman, however, lived not only through the initial impact, but the reflection as well, as the Fiat pushed away from the truck, glass and metal flying all about.

It seems that Richard Gillman was a particularly healthy individual, and he managed to continue living for a good two or three minutes after the crash, right up until

"Hey," Jack said, "you're kind of pretty. Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

They invariably said yes. Maybe it was the hair.

About eleven o'clock, Jack was over in the corner of the store, trying to sell a printer to a woman who had already agreed to go out with him. A blonde walked in. Not a *blonde*, the kind you see in movies or on television. Just a blonde woman, sort of plain, but not ugly by any means.

She wanted to see dust covers. Larry took her over to the dust covers, and showed her a few different kinds.

"Hey," Larry said, "you're kind of pretty. Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

She said no. But she did buy a lovely gray dust cover, to match her computer.

It must be the hair, Larry thought.

"Nice try, stud," Jack said, and slapped him on the back. His date with the expensive printer giggled a little.

Larry began to re-think the under-the-carpet idea.

When it came time for lunch, Larry darted out the door before anyone could ask him where he was going. He knew where he wanted to eat lunch, and it wasn't the Stage Wheel. He wanted to eat by himself, away from Jack. And he didn't really feel like French Dip *au jus*.

He went to Burger King. He ordered a chicken club sandwich, something he had never had before, and a vanilla shake. He ate the chicken, and liked it. And the vanilla was a refreshing change of pace from the chocolate shake he normally had.

He ate his fast-food feast at an outside table, next to a little children's playground that Burger King had set up. It had statues of different little hamburger and french fry characters set up in between plastic swings and slides. A few kids were squealing as they slid down something that resembled a giant pickle.

The food tasted better outside, Larry thought, with a warm breeze blowing in the fresh air.

Much better than the stuffy air in the Stage Wheel.

He went back in and ordered a Hot Fudge Sundae. The hot fudge tasted like plastic, and so did the ice cream. Larry loved it.

By the time he finished the sundae, lunch hour was over. He went back to the store, and nobody asked where he had gone.

One of the first customers after lunch was a fairly attractive woman. Jack saw her coming, and began to make his way from the back of the store. Larry, who was standing at the front of the store, got to her first.

"Hi there!" Larry said. "Welcome to Computer Central!"

"Thanks," the woman said.

Jack tapped Larry on the shoulder.

"Don't you think I should handle this one, stud?" Jack asked.

"That's all right, Jack. I've got it." He turned back to the woman. "Can I help you with something?"

"I'm looking for a computer for under fifteen hundred dollars," she said.

Larry led her into the corner and showed her around the different units. He tried to impress her with his sense of humor, and he tried to be creative with his sales approach. She laughed at all the right places, and then bought one of the computers — with a disk drive.

When Larry went up to the front of the store to get a sales slip, he couldn't help smiling at Jack.

Made a sale, slimeball, Larry thought.

After the sales slip was signed and the woman had written her check, Larry decided to try a different sales approach. Again, he was going to avoid the Jack method.

"You know, miss, I think you're very attractive and intelligent, and I'd like to take you out to dinner sometime," Larry said.

She looked up at him with her gorgeous blue eyes, and smiled.

YES!, he shouted in his mind. *Take that, Jackie-boy!*

"I'm sorry," she said. "That's very nice of you, but I've got a boyfriend." She paused for a second.

Larry eyed the carpet anxiously, hoping to find a place to slide under.

"Thanks for all your help. I appreciate it," she said.

After she had left with her new computer, Jack came up to him and slapped him on the back.

"Nice try, stud," he said. "At least you sold something."

Larry smiled back at him, and said nothing.

That night, the gray people ran at him from down the street, just as before. Still holding his water hose, he ran out into the street.

They came closer, and he could hear them shouting *Come on, Larry* at him.

He pointed his hose at the gray wave of people, and they all began to melt away, becoming nothing but a gray wave of water.

Larry dropped the hose, turned around, and began whistling a crazy tune. He started to skip, like a child might skip. He skipped off into the distance. Behind him, the wave began to break.

Larry woke up with a slight smile on his face. It had been a good dream.

JASON SNELL IS EDITOR OF *INTERTEXT*.

made a spinning motion with one finger. His hand was shaking.

"The hard drive? Hey, good job!" Jack said, and slapped Larry on the back. "Still, if you had just sold 'em the computer without any disk drive at all, I doubt that geek girl and her old man would've known the difference."

Without any disk drive at all, their computer would be completely useless.

Gulp.

"Something wrong, Larry?" asked Kim, another one of his co-workers. They were never friends. Just co-workers. Larry never seemed to find friends at work.

"Nothing," Larry said. "Nothing at all."

He frowned, moaned quietly to himself, and considered hiding under the carpet. He decided that he'd be too noticable, and made his way to the back of the store to cry.

By lunchtime, Larry felt a little better. It wasn't as if it was his first mistake, and it wasn't as if the others had never goofed before.

I didn't mean to do it was the phrase that always consoled him. That, and lunch with the gang from work.

They weren't a family, the workers at Computer Central, but they ate together and tried to be civil to one another. They ate together not out of any close ties but because there was only one restaurant in the shopping center and all of them were too lazy to drive somewhere else for lunch. The only other place for food anywhere nearby was Burger King, so the gang usually spent their time eating at the Stage Wheel Restaurant.

Larry went because everyone else did. He ate a French Dip sandwich, every day. It was the only thing on the menu that he liked. He was a picky eater. He would eat a French Dip, and the little crackers that come with the soup of the day.

And it came to pass that, in the middle of a fascinating conversation on something that Larry knew nothing about, he managed to spill all of the *au jus* into his lap.

The conversation stopped. They all looked at Larry.

"You okay, Larry?" Kim asked.

He tried to act as if it were nothing, speaking in the nonchalant way that Jack always used.

"Oh, I'm fine. Not too much of a mess. Just a little wet."

Larry be nimble.

"Maybe you want to clean yourself up in the bathroom?"

It was a good idea. Larry nodded.

"Sure. I'll be back in a second." He was completely businesslike, not embarrassed in the least.

Larry be quick.

He stood up, and *au jus* that had pooled in his lap trickled down his legs. Some of it fell on the floor, making a sound quite similar to what a body might sound like when it hit the ground after falling from a skyscraper.

Little pieces of roast beef were stuck to the large wet area on Larry's pants. The rest of the Lunch Bunch chuckled softly.

Larry fall face-down on the candlestick, giving himself second-degree burns over a good percentage of his body.

He spent the rest of lunch hour standing in front of the hand dryer in the bathroom, feeling hot air blow down his pants. It felt kind of good, and almost offset his embarrassment and shame.

That night, he was watering his lawn again, still wearing his hawaiian shirt. *Au jus* flowed from out of the hose.

The whole town, wearing gray, ran up the street toward him. They were yelling again.

Larry turned off the hose and began to walk into the street. As the people approached, he noticed that *au jus* was still flowing out of the hose.

The wave of people hit him, and became an actual wave, a roast beef *au jus* wave. The *au jus* washed over him, drowning him, filling his lungs. Little pieces of roast beef stuck in his throat and attached themselves to his pants.

I didn't mean to do it, he thought to himself, and swallowed a soggy soup cracker.

The wave kept rolling, leaving Larry behind, dying, in its wake.

When he woke up, the sheets were damp with sweat. Another bad dream.

That morning at work was just like any other morning. Larry sold printer ribbons to skinny adolescent boys with bowl haircuts and glasses, boxes of disks to fat, pimply teenage girls, and dust covers to blue-haired old ladies.

All morning, Jack kept trying to pick up on women customers. Larry was tired of it.

Jack was slimier than Wayne Newton. He called all women "chicks" when they weren't around, and called them "babes" when they were. He wore a little skinny tie that looked more like a wide shoelace, and kept his black hair slicked back — very hip. He was a combination of Pat Riley and a lizard.

Larry hadn't had a date in months. His outfit was plain, and his tie was a little bit too wide. His hair was straight as a board, and mousy brown in color.

Jack kept getting these women to go out with him. Almost every *babe* he tried it on said *yes* to him.

Peoplesurfing

Jason Snell

They were coming up Larry's street, shouting, moving closer to his home with every passing second. The whole town was wearing gray.

Larry was watering the little patch of lawn in front of his little ground-level apartment. When he saw the town coming, he dropped the hose.

Larry, they were screaming.

The water from the hose trickled under his feet. He wiggled his toes in the wet grass.

Come on, Larry! they shouted.

He ran out into the street in his bare feet. He was wearing a bright yellow shirt with floral patterns on it— one of his weekend shirts. He always wore one when he watered his lawn, or mowed it, or sat in his rusty lawn chair on it. In the summer, he'd come out there with a portable radio and listen to Mariners games in the afternoons— American League baseball, with designated hitters and astroturf— that was how he loved to spend his summer afternoons.

Larry stood in the middle of his street, wearing his summer shirt. The town came closer, all in gray. A cold wind began to blow, and the wave of people overwhelmed him.

For a moment, he was even with them, one flowery shirt in a sea of gray. *Buzz.* Then he was smothered by them.

I left the hose running, Larry thought.

The gray wave continued on.

Buzz. His buzzer was buzzing, of all things.

Larry slapped at it, as if it were a bee, and it stopped.

He had dreamed the dream again, the one where everyone wore gray except for him. He didn't like the dream at all— in fact, he hated it. Especially the fact that he never remembered to turn off the water hose.

Larry tried to put it out of his mind. It was time to get ready to work. He couldn't worry about a stupid dream. He had to sell computers.

They were gray computers, and they sat on gray tables in a gray store. Almost all of the employees wore gray or black and white.

Larry wore gray, too. The same gray as the computers, the same gray as the walls. The gray of his dream.

His first customer wore a wide plaid tie with a polyester suit. His daughter wore thick black glasses, small pearl earrings, and a bored look.

"Now, listen," the man was saying. "Marsha here's gonna need a computer when she goes off to college in the fall. What kind should we get?"

Great, Larry thought. He loved people who knew what they wanted.

"Well, you could start off by using the—"

"Daddy, I don't need a computer."

It was the lovely and perky Marsha. Evidently she hadn't told dad about her college wish list.

"Of course you need a computer, pumpkin," he said. "You've got to have a computer if you go to *college!*" He said it as if *college* was a mystical place.

"Don't call me pumpkin."

Larry wanted to step back, flee from the father-daughter confrontation that was ready to break out in the middle of the store, and he was ashamed of it. None of the other guys ever did things like that— they just... well, charmed them.

"Let me show you, uh, our finest model," Larry said, attempting to sound convincing, like Jack always did. "And it's moderately priced at about 2,000 dollars, too!"

"Daddy, we could buy a used car for that much money," pumpkin whined.

Shut up, kid, Larry thought. *You're killing me.*

"Why the hell would you need a car?" dear old daddy yelled. "Where you're going, everyone lives at school. What you're gonna need is some *computerizin' power!*" He said the last two words as if he was referring to some sort of magical force.

Marsha kicked and screamed for a few more minutes, but dear old dad had made up his mind. Larry had a sale, an honest to god whole computer system sale. No more printer ribbons and dust covers for this guy, no sir— it was the big time. Larry got to write four digits (plus cents) on the carbon-papered sales slip. He made sure to press extra hard, so the numbers would be sure to go through.

By the time Marsha and Plaid Dad had pulled out of the store parking lot, all the other store employees were asking Larry about his accomplishment.

"Which system did they buy, Larry?" his co-worker Jack asked him.

"Oh... the BR-714," Larry said, trying to sound nonchalant about selling the store's top-of-the-line system.

"Wow! Not bad, Larry my man. What disk drives did they get?"

Disk drives?

Larry swallowed.

"Disk drives?"

"Yeah," Jack said.

"Um — the, uh, you know, the kind with the —" he

It missed.

He scrambled back to the piano. He couldn't think of anything else to do. The only thing he could think of was The Stripper.

It worked.

The distant look came back to her big eyes, and she returned to her dance. Now the baton was a baton, and she was a majorette, twirling it. Now it was a broomstick horse, and she rode upon it.

Around and around the room she danced.

And Jeremy Stoner played on...

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Currently out of print, an ASCII version of *The Lowball Book* is available on request (by e-mail) from Will.

delightful, and the firelight sparkling in those big blue eyes was intoxicating. When she smiled at the Headwaiter and then thanked him for the excellent service, it did more for him than did Jeremy's twenty-dollar tip (of course, a part of that may have been because the Headwaiter had been on duty the night the deputy cut down the three lumberjacks and overhauled the mechanic).

By the time dinner was finished, Jeremy was sure he had the incredible Charlene's number. She wasn't so tough — it was just that she took herself and her job very seriously. By the time dinner was over and they were chatting like old friends, a stranger would have thought they were lovers, or newlyweds. And Jeremy's confidence had returned.

"Now let's go to my place," he said, when she laid down her fork for the last time. "I have a piano," he added, when she raised her eyebrows at the suggestion.

Jeremy's apartment was back the way they had come; it was a mile beyond the Sheriff's office, so the drive took nearly six minutes. Six long minutes, but this time Jeremy felt more like he was being escorted than followed by the prowl car. He felt like she was with him now; he was sure he had reached her, although he still had not touched her. He had been only the perfect gentleman, so far.

So far. But now came the moment of truth.

"This is called Sonata to a Fair Maiden," he said, when he sat down to his piano. She was settled on the couch with a cup of coffee — she wouldn't accept anything stronger than a cup of coffee.

"It'll sound familiar at first, but that's just to warm up the fingers," he said.

He played a few bars of a sad tune, to see if it would reach her. It did. Her big eyes grew moist. He played a few bars of a happy tune, to see if she would lighten up. She did. The big blue eyes grew bright, and then she smiled at him.

That did it. He couldn't hold it back any longer — he launched into The Stripper, with all the feeling he could muster.

He didn't think it was going to work at first, but after a long moment she got that distanced look in her eyes; and soon even the incredible Electric Bitch began to dance to Jeremy Stoner's music. She tossed the cap with the badge onto the couch, then she took the little ribbon from her hair and let it fall. It tumbled down over her shoulders in glorious golden waves.

She took off the cartridge belt as if it were the first of the seven veils. She held it in both hands for a turn, then dropped it on the floor; it hit the floor with the heavy thud of gun and baton, the handcuffs rattled. She danced around it a couple of times, as if it were a sombrero and this was a Mexican Hat Dance. And then, slowly, carefully, starting at the top, one button at a time, she opened her shirt.

She wore no bra.

She dropped the shirt on the floor with the other stuff, and pirouetted around the growing pile like a ballerina, her hands together above her head. Her breasts were not large, but they were exquisite. They jiggled just a little with her movements, but the jiggle was a firm one. Her nipples were erect.

Jeremy too, was erect, flushed with prickly heat; he was sweating and his hands were moist, but he played on.

And the incredible Electric Bitch continued to dance.

She kicked off her shoes, both with a saucy little flip of her dancing toes. First upon one foot and then on the other, she went up onto her toes and into a delicate spin, a figure skater now... and while she was turning, the foot that was not on the floor worked the sock off the one that was.

Could the incredible Charlene dance? Did Moses throw holy writ around? She went into a swinging motion with her hips and belly that would have sent Salome home, and began toying with the buttons of her pants.

And then...

...then the incredible Electric Bitch showed Jeremy Stoner exactly how incredible she really was.

She took off the pants.

She wore no panties.

"Sweet Lord," he said. And then it hit him! He was seized. He was frozen. He was aflame. He was entranced, enraptured. He was enthralled. Out of focus, out of control. His ears rang. His eyes watered, mouth did not.

His breathing stopped and his heartbeat paused; he quit playing and dropped to his knees. He started toward her, walking on his knees, unbuckling his belt. It wasn't a thought on his mind, it was a vision — and he meant to kiss it. You could have hit him with a club, and he wouldn't have noticed.

Which she did. And he didn't.

The first time she hit him with her baton it was an off-balance swing and a glancing blow, and he didn't even feel it.... But the second time she hit him she rang his bell with a head shot. His vision cleared and his hearing came back.

"You Bastard!" She screamed, pulling back to give him another one. "You Bastard!" She screamed again. "I'll turn your lights out!" She screamed. "I'll hand you your head!" Then she fired again, a long looping swing that might have taken his head off.

out of three lumberjacks and a mechanic, who'd had the drunken bad taste to have said: "And what's a sweet little thing like you gonna do about it...?" It seems they got a little rowdy at the Golden Inn, and the bartender had to call the Sheriff. Two of them went directly to jail, and the other two went to intensive care.

None of which had anything much to do with Jeremy Stoner's lust for the Deputy. Jeremy had been in love with the incredible Charlene for two years and thirteen days — that's how long it had been since she came to town and he saw her for the first time.

The first time Jeremy Stoner saw the deputy, he was a goner. He teetered on the brink for fifteen seconds, and then he fell — Head-over-heels, ass-over-teakettle, libido-over-logic, and I-don't-care-if-the-sun-don't-shine in love he fell — Hopelessly, helplessly, irretrievably in love he fell. He thought about her by day, and dreamed about her at night, but he kept his thoughts and dreams to himself. He didn't have the balls to approach her. He was afraid. He was afraid she would shoot him down, because she could have anybody, and he was just a honky-tonk piano player. With no balls.

She was indeed intimidating... but that was before. Now he had the power of the piano, and it filled him with confidence.

"I've written a sonata for you, my lovely," he told her on the telephone. "It's called Sonata to a Fair Maiden," he was sure she would like that. "And I want to play it for you, one time, before the world hears it." He presented himself as an admirer who only wanted to admire her, a simple artist who had written a masterpiece, not because of his talent, but because of his inspiration. He was grateful to her, for her beauty, because it had moved him to magnificence; it had moved him to writing Sonata to a Fair Maiden.

His approach must have been a good one, because she went for it. She said she had heard his music in church — *and had been moved by it!*

She said he could pick her up at sundown, when she got off duty; she said he could take her to dinner, and then she would be pleased (pleased!) to listen to his masterpiece. She said she loved the piano, but she warned him that he would be in big trouble if he got out of line.

Jeremy sat in his car for more than an hour, outside the Sheriff's office, just waiting for the sun to go down. It seemed it never would. It seemed to Jeremy that the Earth had stopped its turning, just as the sun reached the tops of the mountains west of Goldenrod. But of course it had not, the sun did go down; and the moment it did, the incredible Charlene came out.

He met her on the sidewalk and introduced himself, like a peasant to the Queen, although it was not necessary. She had a file on every one of Goldenrod's citizens, and she knew who everybody was. She was as efficient as she was beautiful. And beautiful she was, even in her uniform. The hat with the badge did nothing to dull the golden shine of her hair, which now she wore loosely tied at the back of her neck. Her eyes were a startling blue, they seemed larger than life, like a child's. And her body...

God! her body took his breath away, he was breathing through his mouth. Even in uniform, with the cartridge belt and gun, the handcuffs riding behind, and that nasty black club they called a baton, she didn't look like a cop. And anyway, she was off duty now.

"Do you want to change first?" was the only thing he could think of to say to her, and that was hard because his tongue was dry.

"No," she said. "I'm off-duty, but I am the only law in town." And she didn't want to ride with him for the same reason. "I'll follow you," she said.

She looked at him as if he were nuts, when he opened the door of her prowl car for her; but then she smiled at him — and he was destroyed. He had difficulty just getting into his own car, and when he did the seat was too far back. He had difficulty getting the key into the ignition, and when he did the car wouldn't start because it was in gear. But these things work out, and he was determined.

It was barely a mile from the Sheriff's office to Flower County's one truly elegant restaurant, the Golden Inn, but the drive took a full three minutes. The speed limit on Goldenrod's only paved street was twenty-five, and he was being followed by the town's only police car. It was weird. he felt like the spider leading the fly — but this fly had a stinger!

Dinner at the Golden Inn was weird too. Jeremy had never been treated like a Superstar before, but when he walked in with the Electric Bitch, he was. The Headwaiter, usually as staid and stiff as an undertaker, was as fawning and eager to please as a puppy — if he'd had a tail he would have wagged it. He led them to the best table in the room; in the back, by the fireplace, where he would have seated the President. He snatched up the *Reserved* sign, and then waved the approaching waiters away — he meant to serve this table himself.

And serve them he did. He brought, with the compliments of the house, a small bottle of white wine that was so good Jeremy would have taken it home in a doggy bag, had the deputy not been drinking... but she was, one glass. On the Headwaiter's recommendation, they had the wild duck breasts and fresh mountain trout.

In all, the dinner was a huge success. the meal was

The Piano Player

Will Hyde

Jeremy Stoner was a honky-tonk piano player who had never really had a significant moment in his life, until he went out in that terrible storm and got hit by lightning.

It was a Miracle.

Jeremy Stoner was a honky-tonk piano player who got hit by lightning, and survived it. But that wasn't the miracle. He woke up with a dry feeling in his mouth and an electric tingling in his hands — and the most incredible talent in a century. His music grew another dimension.

It became electrifyingly emotional, shockingly stirring. When he played a sad song, everybody who could hear it would be touched — no, seized — by a raging case of melancholia; strong men grew tight of throat and wet of cheek, and the ladies wept like newlyweds or new widows.

It was awesome, but it was nothing compared to what a happy tune would do. When Jeremy played an upbeat tune, every ear it touched would tingle with pleasure; joyous laughter would fill the air, and everybody would love, *love*, everybody else. Everybody got high when Jeremy played a happy tune — enraptured, like the Pied Piper's mice.

But the action didn't really get good until Jeremy played his own favorite number, The Stripper.

When Jeremy played that one, The Stripper, every woman who could hear it was immediately overcome by the impulse to take off her clothes, to do the dance of the seven veils and strip off every stitch.

That was the Miracle.

And it only worked on the ladies.

Too bad there was so little market for such a talent in Goldenrod, Idaho. Life was simple in Goldenrod; working the farm in the daytime, a big meal at home, a little television to end the evening ... and church on Sundays. There were only nine hundred souls in Goldenrod, and every one of them went to the same church.

Everybody lived the same life in Goldenrod, and everybody went to church every Sunday, including Jeremy Stoner. In fact, it was in church that Jeremy discovered his incredible new talent. He found it in church, but he knew immediately, of course, where it had come from; he knew he had been a little different ever since his great electric moment in the storm.

The parishioners though, were sure they had experienced a miracle when Jeremy played a sad song and everybody cried until tears ran down their cheeks. He took them to the bottoms of their emotions with a sad tune, and then he took them soaring to the heights with a happy one.

Of course Jeremy didn't perform his favorite number in church. He saved The Stripper for the amateur show tryouts in Pocatello. He was planning to explode into Show Business, via the amateur show route. This big event was held at the college in Pocatello; the tryouts were on Friday afternoon and the show was on Saturday night. The tryouts were shown by closed circuit television to the college music class.

If Jeremy had known what he could do, he probably would not have bothered with the amateur show. When Jeremy played The Stripper for his tryout, every girl in the auditorium and eleven more in the music class, stripped off every stitch — and each one did so with another version of the lewd dance. It was sensational. The eleven in the music class got caught by the dean of girls and were suspended from classes, pending an investigation… but nobody snitched on the happenings in the auditorium.

And what's the first thing you would expect Jeremy Stoner to do, after he discovered he had this incredible new talent?

You'll never guess.

The first thing Jeremy did was call the Sheriff.

Actually, the Sheriff himself never came anywhere near Goldenrod; but the only police force Goldenrod had was the Flower County Sheriff's Department. The Flower County Sheriff had a deputy on duty in Goldenrod. Just one, and she was only on duty during the daylight hours.

She. The incredible Charlene. Charlene Whatzername. Nobody seemed to know her last name, she was just Charlene.

Deputy Charlene, the Electric Bitch! That's what they called her.

Perfect.

She was a fooler. She could pass for a small-town college girl, or the farmer's innocent daughter, if she wanted to; even in uniform, she didn't appear very threatening. On Sundays, when she shucked the uniform for Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes — usually a simple skirt and sweater — you would want to walk along with her, protect her. That's what she looked like, but she was something else. She was a dedicated student of some obscure oriental philosophy. She had moves that could break every bone or rupture every organ in your body. She could, and she would, if you got out of line with her.

She was not all that big, and she looked like sugar and spice, but the incredible Charlene was one bad broad! The same day Jeremy Stoner ended up struck by lightning, Deputy Charlene finished her day by kung fu-ing the shit

Lucien nodded. "Are you yourself here with a tour group?" he asked.

"Me and my sister, we're just kind of traveling independently," Marlaina replied. "But we're planning to hit all the important places."

Lucien chuckled slightly. "One thing I have noticed about many people, Americans especially, is that they visit the Eiffel Tower, they see the Mona Lisa, then they talk as if they have seen everything there is to see in Paris." He led Marlaina out onto the sidewalk. "If you really want to see the city, go where the crowds do not. Then you will discover the things that cannot be seen from the window of a tour bus."

Marlaina looked around at the gray buildings and dusty streets. "They never mentioned this part of the city in the brochures," she said.

Lucien smiled. "Walk around a while, you may find it interesting. For this, too, is Paris." He turned and strode away.

"Did you get everything straightened out?" Kay asked, meeting Marlaina at the hotel entrance. Marlaina nodded and showed her the purse. "Everything's here. Let's go."

They started off down the street. "By the way," Kay said, "Who were those people you were talking to on the train—that guy and those girls?"

Marlaina shrugged. "Tourists," she said.

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Is 23 years old, and recently graduated from college with a B.S. in Computer Information Systems. He employed by a software development company, and has been writing fantasy/adventure for the Dargon Project (in both *FSFNet* and *DargonZine*) for the past five years. "Parisian Pursuit" is his first non-fantasy short story. Carlo plans to visit Europe again next year, and will hopefully come back with inspiration for more stories about Marlaina & Kay.

pointing out the door to the apartments. After a few moments of exploration Marlaina found it and made her way up a dimly lit flight of stairs. Strange odors wafted down; the stairs creaked with nearly every step she took.

She reached the second floor and went to the third door from the far end of the hallway. She raised her hand to knock, but then lowered it. What was she going to say, anyway? More importantly, would she be able to say it? Her phrasebook French probably wouldn't be sufficient.

The impulse to just leave and forget the whole thing suddenly gripped her. She fought it down. If you go at all, it may as well be all the way, she thought. Steeling herself, she knocked on the door.

A dark-haired man in his early thirties answered. "*Bonjour, monsieur,*" Marlaina said quickly. "I, uh—"

"What can I help you with, miss?" he said in accented English.

"Oh — uh, sorry to disturb you, sir," said Marlaina, relieved that he spoke her language. "I have to tell you something — about your kids."

The man nodded slowly. "Come in, mademoiselle," he said, holding the door open for her.

Marlaina entered the apartment. It was sparsely furnished: a couch here, a couple of chairs there, a televison flickering in the corner. The wallpaper was faded and coming off in places.

She turned to the man and introduced herself. He told her his name was Lucien. At that moment the woman in the maid's outfit entered the room. Upon seeing Marlaina, she put her hand to her mouth and ducked back into the room she had come from. "My sister Jeanne," said Lucien.

Marlaina gave a little cough. "I don't know how to tell you this," she began, "but —"

Lucien held up a hand. "I know why are you are here." He turned and called out, "Jean-Michel! Isabella!"

There was the soft sound of a woman's voice. A few long minutes later, the two children crept into the room. They stood along the wall farthest from Marlaina.

Lucien motioned for her to sit on the couch. He sat next to her. "My sister's children did not mean to steal from you," he said. "They are not thieves." Turning his attention to the children he said, "Explain to her."

By turns, Jean-Michel and Isabella spoke in French. Lucien translated.

"They say they are sorry. Jean-Michel only wanted to sell you a flower. Isabella says you spoke rudely to them when you did not want to buy the flower. That made her angry, and so she stole your purse. They were sorry afterwards, but too afraid to go back and return it. They decided to first sell the rest of the flowers, then come home and ask my advice. When they saw you in the restaurant you looked very angry, so they ran. They were going to return your purse to you in the metro, but you had said you were going to call the police."

Marlaina winced.

Lucien continued. "Jean-Michel says that when you were almost run over in the street, he felt very bad. He was about to give your purse back but then he heard the police siren and again became afraid. Isabella says that they never stole anything before, and that they will give you all the money they have if you will not call the police."

Marlaina looked at the children huddled in the corner, and her heart melted. Jean-Michel stood very still; Isabella looked as if she was about to cry. Marlaina felt a wetness brimming in her own eyes. She looked away and blinked.

"I didn't realize," she said. "I'm sorry if I frightened them. I just...." She shrugged and looked down. A moment later she felt a small touch on her shoulder. She raised her head and saw Jean-Michel and Isabella standing before her. "Je regrette," the boy said. His sister echoed his words. Jean-Michel brought Marlaina's purse out from behind his back; his sister took hold of the strap and together they offered it to her.

"Everything is there. Nothing has been taken," Lucien said gravely.

Marlaina accepted the purse. She looked into Isabella's eyes. "*Merci*," she said. "Sorry about your coat, though." She gently patted the girl's shoulder. A faint smile touched the child's lips.

"*Merci*," Marlaina said to Jean-Michel. She took hold of his hand. "Ever think about becoming a track star?"

Lucien translated this; Jean-Michel looked back at Marlaina and grinned. For some reason, Marlaina felt like putting her hat on the boy's head.

"May I see you out?" Lucien said. "I have to go to work now."

"Of course." Marlaina stood up and drew the purse strap over her shoulder. She took one final look at the kids before she and Lucien left the apartment.

"I feel I must explain," said Lucien as they made their way down the stairs. "After my brother-in-law died in an auto accident, my sister had to move in with me. I was living by myself, and my income as a tour guide was just enough. But it became insufficient to support my sister and her children, so she works now as a maid in the hotel. Isabella and Jean-Michel, they also wanted to help. That is why they sell flowers."

They walked out into the courtyard. "You must meet a lot of interesting people, being a tour guide and all," Marlaina said.

feet away.

Marlaina froze, wondering why the boy hadn't taken the opportunity to flee. He simply stared at her, his large brown eyes unblinking. Marlaina slowly lowered her arms to her sides, knowing that any sudden movement could frighten him off.

"I'm not going to harm you," she said in a soft voice. The boy just stared at her, uncomprehending. Marlaina wished she could speak the language; even though she had nearly memorized the French phrasebook she'd bought before the trip, there was nothing in it that was applicable to this situation.

"Comment vous appelez-vous?" she tried. No response. Okay, so he didn't want to tell her his name. *"Venez ici, s'il vous plait.* I just want my stuff back." She slowly reached out her hand. The boy looked at it for a long time. Finally, he took a tentative step forward. Then another. He put his hand to his jacket pocket.

At that moment, the undulating wail of a police siren shattered the momentary peace. The boy's head jerked at the sound and he jumped back as if bitten. "Wait!" Marlaina cried, lunging forward to grasp him. The boy spun away and sped off down a side street.

The wail reached a crescendo as the police car roared by. Marlaina sprinted after the child. She wished she hadn't tried to grab him.

The boy made it to the end of the street and cut left. Marlaina rounded the corner a few seconds later, but it was too late. The intersection was empty — the boy was gone.

Marlaina sighed and slumped against the wall. She pushed herself away and started walking back the way she had come. For the first time she took notice of her surroundings. Cars were parked on either side of the narrow street, leaving barely enough space for a single car to pass down the middle. The apartment buildings looked old. Marlaina spotted a small brown pile on the pavement and looked away. What had Ryan's guidebook called this part of the city? No man's land. Aptly put.

Someone called her name. She looked up and saw Kay hurrying toward her. "Don't tell me you lost him, Lainie," she said.

Marlaina shrugged. "And I suppose the girl gave you the slip, too," she said.

"Au contraire, ma soeur," said Kay. "I found out where they live. Come on."

They walked out onto the main street. Kay said, "When we were at the top of the Eiffel Tower, I noticed that most of the buildings on each block didn't take up the entire space — they were built around the edges, leaving a sort of courtyard in the center."

"That's nice," said Marlaina. "Get to the point."

"I am," Kay said. "Anyway, I was chasing the girl down the street when she suddenly turned off into an archway that led into this block's courtyard. I followed the girl in, but she was gone.

So I looked behind me and saw that this side of the block was all apartments. I went back and found the door to the apartments — I didn't notice that I'd run past it."

"So did you go in?"

"Well...no. I didn't want to go knocking around blindly. But get this: right across from the apartments is a hotel. I went around to it and got on one of the upper floors. From the hallway windows you can get a perfect view of those same apartments."

"Uh-huh. So?"

"You'll see when we get there."

A few minutes later they were in the lobby of the hotel; they took the elevator to the fourth floor. Kay led Marlaina down the hallway to the window at the end. Marlaina turned the handle and pushed it open.

She looked out over the courtyard and saw the apartments Kay described. They had a dark and run-down appearance. Directly below her, a man rummaged through a garbage dumpster. Off to the right was a ruined shack.

No man's land, she thought.

"I was thinking that I might see the girl in one of the windows," Kay said. "And my hypothesis was correct. I saw her in that window there — second floor, third one from the right."

Marlaina looked to the one she indicated. The lights were on in the room, and there were no curtains. As they stood there watching, a woman dressed in a maid's uniform came into view. She held out her arms, and the boy Marlaina had been chasing ran to her. The woman knelt and embraced him.

"That's where they live, all right," Marlaina said, turning from the window. "Good thinking, Kay."

"You're not going to go over there, are you?" Kay asked. "I mean, what are you going to say — 'excuse me, but your kids are thieves?' "

"We came all this way," said Marlaina. "You yourself said how important it was to get our passports back. That's what I'm going to do." She started off down the hall.

"Lainie," Kay called softly. Marlaina turned. "Take it easy on them. They're just kids."

"Wait for me here," Marlaina said.

The courtyard was silent as Marlaina made her way through the archway. Her bootsteps echoed across the rough cobblestone. She saw her sister waving from the hotel window; after a moment it came to her that Kay was

and tried discreetly to shift her position to get a better view of the kids.

"Guess what happened," Ryan said. "Heather's dad forgot the spare battery for his video camera!" He explained that they had an hour and a half for lunch before the next part of the tour, and that it would be just enough time for them to return to the hotel to get it and get back to the meeting place on time.

Marlaina nodded, only half-listening.

"Is your hotel out this way?" Ryan asked. Marlaina shook her head. "You're a bit far from all the sights then," he continued. "This is the 13th arrondissement — no man's land, if you believe the guidebook. For some reason the tour operators booked our hotel in this district — the rates must be lower here or something."

"I take it you're all on the same tour?" Marlaina said, craning her neck slightly.

"It's the wildest thing," said Heather, the petite redhead. "All throughout Brussels we didn't notice each other, even though we were at the same hotel. Then yesterday, our first day here in Paris, we were on the bus tour and we stopped for pictures at" — she looked at Ryan — "what was that place with the fountains and the obelisk thing?"

"The Place de la Concorde," he supplied.

"That's it," Heather said. "Anyway, I had gotten away from my parents for a moment, and Val had gotten away from her dad, and we kind of bumped into each other as we were taking pictures of the statues..." She continued on to tell how Ryan then came up to them and asked if it was their first day in Paris. From that point on they'd decided to see the sights together.

"Have you been to the Louvre yet?" asked Val in an Australian-accented voice. "We saw the actual Mona Lisa. It was major brilliant!"

"Notre Dame was totally awesome," added Heather. "I mean, it's absolutely humungous! You've got to see it."

"What wing of the Louvre was the Mona Lisa in?" asked Marlaina. Val looked uncertain. "Somewhere past the statue of the headless winged woman, I think," she said.

"Exactly how big was the cathedral?" Marlaina asked Heather. "That is, how many people could it accomodate?"

Heather's brow furrowed in thought. "The guide told us, but I can't remember. A lot, though."

The train suddenly lurched into a hard left turn, throwing everyone to the right. "Almost to the next stop," Ryan said.

Marlaina stood on tiptoe and signalled to Kay as the train began slowing down.

"Say, why don't you have a drink with us tonight, after the tour's over?" said Ryan. "There's this brasserie on Montparnasse that we've heard is nice."

"Uh, yeah. Right," said Marlaina. "Could you excuse me?"

At that moment the train came to a stop. The children leaped up and dashed straight for Marlaina's end of the car.

"Was that a yes?" asked Ryan. The doors opened and the children bolted out. Marlaina shoved him aside and raced after them.

"I think that's a no, mate," Val said as the doors closed again.

Marlaina and Kay pursued the children through the exit gates and up the steps into the afternoon sunlight. They were now on a busy street at the outskirts of the city. The buildings here were mainly residential and of the same general appearance. Kay grimaced and looked away as she brushed past an advertising stand papered over with sex-magazine covers.

They crossed the Peripherique overpass and came to an intersection. At this point the girl continued straight on ahead while the boy detoured right. "Get the girl!" Marlaina called to Kay. "Meet you back here later." They split up.

The sidewalks seemed almost deserted. Cars whizzed by on the road. Marlaina was several seconds behind the boy. "Arretez!" she shouted. To her surprise, the boy came to a stop. He paused on the edge of the curb. Marlaina thought he was at last giving himself up, but to her horror he darted out into the street.

Marlaina stopped in her tracks. "You crazy-ass kid! Get back here!" she screamed. The boy threaded his way through the stream of oncoming cars and miraculously made it to a traffic island. Marlaina breathed a sigh of relief. "Stay right there!" she ordered him. She waited impatiently for a break in the traffic and when it came, hurried across. The boy saw her coming and took off.

Marlaina made it to the traffic island. A car passed, then the street was momentarily empty. She was almost halfway across when her foot came down into a pothole. She lost her balance and slammed forward into the asphalt. "Ow!" she yelped.

As she pushed herself to her knees she heard the approaching growl of an engine. Looking up, she saw a taxi rocketing straight for her! Fear shot through her body; she quickly sprang to her feet and scrambled out of the way. The taxi sped on past, its horn blaring.

Marlaina yelled a curse at the back of the departing vehicle. She picked up her fallen hat and hurried to the other side of the street. As she placed the fedora back on her head she saw the boy standing motionless only a few

"What?" Marlaina said, not looking at her.

"Those kids. They can't be more than seven or eight." Kay rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "It's so sad that they have to make a living on the street. They ought to be in school, having fun."

"Yeah. Stealing from tourists is a lot of fun."

"They wouldn't if they didn't have to," Kay replied. The kids had now taken seats next to the large woman. The boy chatted amiably with her, while his sister kept an eye trained on Marlaina.

"Maybe you should have bought a flower from him," said Kay.

"I told you. It was just a diversion."

"I just think that maybe if you had..." At this Marlaina frowned. "Like, I'm not responsible for the economic condition of this country," she said. Kay looked away and shrugged, leaving the thought unfinished.

For nearly half an hour the train rumbled on, and still the kids made no attempt to leave. Marlaina glanced up at the metro system map and saw that they were a little over half way to the end of the line. The large woman had left, and two leather-jacketed youths in ripped jeans had taken the seats next to the kids. Eventually, Marlaina's patience broke. She made her way over to where the kids sat.

"Excusez-moi," she said to the youth in the aisle seat nearest her. "I have to speak to the children — *les enfants, s'il vous plait."* The youth looked up at her. He was blonde and a tiny gold cross dangled from his ear. The boy quickly whispered something to him. The blonde youth smiled and said something to his companion across from him. They laughed. He looked up at Marlaina again and put his hand on her arm. *"Bonjour, ma petit,"* he grinned.

Marlaina withdrew her arm and went back to join her sister.

"The City of Love, eh Lainie?" Kay said, smiling.

"Shut up, sis," said Marlaina.

Station signs flashed by the window: St. Jacques; Glaciere; Corvisart. Finally, at Place d'Italie, the children made their move.

As the train screeched to a stop, the children scrambled over the laps of the leather-jackets and dashed for the doors.

Marlaina's heart leaped. "After them!" she said, pushing Kay down the aisle. "Make sure they don't double back on us."

The doors whooshed open, and Marlaina sprang to the platform. She shoved her way through the crowd, and caught a fleeting glimpse of the children as they darted into a side corridor marked CORRESPONDANCE. "I'm over here, Kay! Come on!" she yelled over her shoulder as she began the chase anew.

The corridor led out onto another platform, somewhat less crowded than the one they had just left. A train was pulling up as Marlaina and Kay rounded the corner. The kids were once again heading to the car at the far end of the tunnel. Marlaina yelled for them to stop, and in her haste collided with a man bearing an armful of packages. Marlaina quickly apologized as she scooped up a few boxes and tossed them at the man. Kay bent down to collect the others, but Marlaina yanked her up and pulled her along.

The warning tone sounded. "Mairie d'Ivry," came a voice over the loudspeaker. Marlaina saw the kids hop aboard the train. Her first impulse was to board that same car, but the warning had already sounded and there wasn't enough time. She had no choice but to get aboard the car behind them.

Kay spun around to prevent the doors from closing on the camcorder bag. "Aren't you getting tired of this?" she panted.

"I'm not going to let those little spuds get away with our stuff," Marlaina said determinedly.

"But they're in the car ahead of us," Kay said. "They'll have a head start when they get off."

"So hit the ground running," Marlaina replied.

At the next stop, the two sisters were the first ones off the train. They dashed along the platform to the car ahead of them, dodging the exiting passengers. Inexplicably, the children were not among them. A coldness formed in the pit of Marlaina's stomach at the thought that the kids might have eluded her, but she saw them sitting in the middle of the car, chatting with an elderly gentleman.

An idea struck her. She instructed Kay to board the car through the doors near the rear end, while she herself entered through the doors near the front. As the train staggered into motion Marlaina allowed herself to smile. The children were trapped between herself and her sister; there was no escaping this time.

The girl suddenly ceased speaking and tugged at her brother's sleeve. She whispered a few urgent words and pointed to either end of the car. The boy's eyes went wide, but he continued talking as if nothing was wrong.

At Maison Blanche, the young man whom Marlaina met at the Eiffel Tower boarded the train. He was accompanied by the two girls who had called him away.

"Hey, it's the girl with hat! Small world, isn't it?" he said when he saw Marlaina. "I didn't catch your name back there."

Marlaina frowned slightly. He and the girls were blocking her view of the children; she told him her name anyway. He introduced himself as Ryan, and his two companions as Heather and Val. Marlaina nodded to them

"We'll have to break it." Marlaina glanced around and spotted a McDonald's across the street. "How about we get something to eat first?" she suggested. Kay agreed.

They entered the restaurant and placed their orders.

"Everything's so expensive in Paris," Kay said as they headed into the dining room and sat down at a corner table. "Almost nine francs for a cheeseburger. That's—" she did a rapid mental calculation " — about two dollars American! Unbelievable."

Marlaina had her cheeseburger halfway to her mouth. She froze and let it drop to the table.

"Shocking, isn't it?" Kay said.

"That's them!" Marlaina exclaimed. "Those kids who stole my purse — there they are!" Kay turned and saw the boy and girl coming down the stairs from the upper floor of the restaurant.

The boy held out a single plastic-wrapped rose to the couple at the nearest table.

"Hey you kids! Come here!" Marlaina said loudly. The children spun around. A look of surprise and fear crossed their faces; the boy flung down the rose and bolted out the door, his sister not a moment behind.

"Blast!" Marlaina spat. She dashed out after them.

"Wait! What about..." Kay made a sound of frustration and swept the cheeseburgers into the camcorder bag. She got up and took off after her sister.

"Come back here, you little spuds!" Marlaina shouted as she pursued the children down the crowded sidewalk. Several people shot her annoyed looks as she shoved past them in her haste. She heard Kay's voice behind her and slowed momentarily to allow her to catch up.

The children ran like frightened rabbits, Marlaina a wolf on their trail. They came to a metro entrance and flew down the stairs. "Ha! We've got them now!" Marlaina said.

The sisters reached the bottom and saw the kids huddled near the entrance gates, which consisted of a series of vertical metal panels which could only be pushed open after inserting a metro ticket into the validation machine. Marlaina slowly approached the children.

"We don't want to hurt you," she said sternly. "All we want is our stuff back." They remained silent. "I don't think they understand," said Kay. "Let me try."

"No — I've got it," Marlaina said. "*Je vais appeler un agent*," she said to the children. At this, their eyes went wide. The boy said something to his sister, who seemed to agree.

At that moment, a man came down the stairs and walked up to an entrance gate. He inserted a metro ticket into a slot on the front side of the validation machine. The ticket popped out of a slot at the top; the man reclaimed it and pushed open the panels. Before Marlaina could react, the boy had swung around and shot through the panels a split second before they closed. He collided with the man on the other side, but quickly recovered and ran. The girl started to imitate her brother's maneuver as another person came down and went through the gates. Marlaina lunged and managed to grab the back of the girl's coat; the child violently jerked forward and a fistful of fur tore loose, allowing her to slip free.

"Why did you have to threaten them with the police?" Kay said. "They looked like they were going to give up."

"Well they're getting away now!" Marlaina snapped. She grabbed her sister by the shoulders. "Where are the rest of the train tickets!"

Kay reached into her shirt pocket and pulled out a bunch of small yellow slips. Marlaina snatched one and jammed it into the slot of the nearest validation machine.

A moment later, she burst out onto the train platform. Kay emerged a few seconds later. Even though the train hadn't yet arrived, the people on the platform were standing around expectantly. Marlaina quickly scanned the crowd and saw the children at the far end of the platform. She started towards them just as the train roared into the tunnel.

"Stop those kids!" Marlaina shouted, but her words were drowned out by the sound of the train as it slowly ground to a halt. The doors opened, and the two children leaped inside.

"Wait up!" called Kay. Marlaina spun around and took hold of her sister. "They're in this car. Come on!" She pushed Kay ahead of her into the train.

A warning tone sounded, and seconds later the doors closed. The train lurched forward and gathered speed. Marlaina looked around and spotted the children near the doors at the opposite end of the car. "End of the line," she murmured. Once again she started towards them. The children eyed her fearfully. The boy then turned to a large business-suited woman next to him and spoke to her. Something he said made the woman glance over at Marlaina.

"I think you should back off for now," said Kay. "You'd only make a scene."

"You're right," Marlaina said. "They'd scream bloody murder and get the fat lady to sit on us. Just wait 'till they get off."

The train rumbled on through the tunnel. Marlaina watched the children with hawklike intensity. She nearly had them, and didn't intend to let them escape.

"How old do you think they are?" Kay asked, clutching a stanchion wearily.

"Not at all — be my guest," Marlaina said, gesturing to the space beside her. He smiled gratefully and sat down. She watched as he unloaded the camera and put in a new roll of film.

"Nice camera," she said, leaning over to look at it.

"Thanks," he replied, looking up at her. "Nice hat."

Marlaina giggled. "Let me take a wild guess — you're not from around here, are you?"

"No, but neither are you, I take it," he replied, grinning.

"Is this your first time in Paris?"

Marlaina nodded. "Just got in today."

"Traveling by yourself?"

"With my sister. You won't believe how long we saved up for this trip! Almost two years of part-time jobs. But it's been really worth it. We spent about a week in England, we're going to stay another week in France, then we're going to decide whether to hit Spain or Italy. She wants to see Barcelona, but I've always been curious about the Leaning Tower. You ever been to Pisa?"

He admitted he hadn't, and told her that this was his first vacation since he took a job at an insurance firm a year and a half ago. Marlaina told him that she had just graduated from college and had decided to travel before looking for a job.

"How about your sister?" he asked.

"She's a sophomore at Ohio University. What state are you from?"

He didn't answer, as he seemed to be looking past her. Marlaina followed his gaze and saw two shabbily-dressed children, a boy and a girl, standing before her. The boy wore an old blue jacket and clutched a small bouquet of plastic-wrapped roses; the girl, almost certainly his sister, had on a faded lavender dress under her fake-animal-fur coat.

Wordlessly, the boy thrust the roses at Marlaina, obviously intending for her to buy one. She shook her head and turned back to the young man.

"I'll bet you must have met a lot of interesting people in England," he said. Before Marlaina could reply, a pair of casually-dressed young women came up to them. One of them, a petite redhead, said, "There you are! We thought you'd been kidnapped or something. Come on, the bus is leaving."

"Nice meeting you," the young man said to Marlaina as he got up. He waved as he left with the girls.

"Yeah," Marlaina sighed, "a lot of interesting people." She sat back and saw that the boy and girl hadn't left. "I don't want any," she said. "*Non*."

The boy made no move to leave. He offered the roses to her again. "Look, I told you I don't want any," she said, louder this time. *"Allez-vous-en!"*

The girl took the hint and scurried off. Her brother followed a moment later, a sad look on his face.

A few minutes later Kay returned, carrying two styrofoam cups of freshly-squeezed orange juice. "What kept you?" said Marlaina. "There was a line," Kay replied, handing her a cup.

After they had finished the drinks, they decided to take the river cruise since it was closest. As they stood to leave, Kay frowned and said, "Where's your purse, Lainie?"

"Right here." Marlaina looked down at the bench and saw with a shock that the purse was gone. "Oh geez, no!" She frantically searched the area around the bench, with no result. "It was right next to me, I swear! I never left it."

"Gods, Lainie — did anyone come up to you, like one of those old men?"

"No," said Marlaina. She then told her about the young man and the two children. "The guy couldn't have taken it—besides, why would he? It had to have been those kids." She snapped her fingers. "Of course! That was the whole scam. The boy distracted me with the flowers while the girl grabbed my purse. Nice and simple."

Kay threw up her hands. "How could you be so careless, Lainie! There goes our passports, our hotel key, your camera, your credit card, our traveler's checks— what the hell are we going to do now?"

"Hey, come on sis, don't have a conniption," Marlaina said, trying to sound reassuring. "You still have the two hundred dollars in your money belt, right? And there's the five hundred back at the hotel. We can still get along."

"But without our passports, it'll be a major hassle getting into Spain, not to mention back home. You should have let me keep the stuff in my purse."

"You didn't bring your purse. You wanted to carry the camcorder. You said, 'There's no reason for both of us to bring a purse — just put everything into yours.' "

"In retrospect, I should have known better," Kay said, folding her arms.

"Don't get snippy with me," Marlaina said. "Let's just calm down and think."

They eventually decided to call the credit card company and get a refund on the travelers checks, then contact the American consulate and ask what to do about the stolen passports. Kay retrieved the camcorder bag, then the sisters headed off to the nearest public phones.

"Got any coins?" Marlaina asked, picking up the receiver. Kay searched her pockets and came up with a 100-franc note. "Just this. I used all the coins you gave me for the juice."

Parisian Pursuit

Carlo N. Samson

Kay adjusted her red-rimmed glasses and squinted through the viewfinder of the camcorder. She focused in on a patch of red flowers, then panned up and to the left. The image of a young woman dressed in a brightly patterned skirt and a denim jacket appeared. Tawny-auburn curls streamed out from under the wide-brimmed black fedora she wore on her head. Kay gave the thumbs-up sign and hit the record button. Her older sister Marlaina began speaking.

"Welcome to the continuing adventures of Marlaina and Kay in Europe. Mom and Dad, can you guess where we are now?" She paused for a moment. "Don't know? Well, here's a clue." Kay pressed the wide-angle button and the brown metal framework of the Eiffel Tower came into view over Marlaina's shoulder. "Put that encyclopedia away, Dad — we're in Paris!" She flung her arms wide. "Yes, Paris. The City of Lights; the City of Love; the...the, uh, the capital of France!" She smiled weakly and shrugged. "Anyway, we'll be staying here for a couple of days, then heading south toward Monaco. But right now we're going up to the top of *La Tour Eiffel*. See you there!"

Kay stopped recording and lowered the camcorder. "Nicely done, Lainie," she said. "Now how far up do you want to go? I heard it's cheaper to just go to the first stage."

"Come on now, sis, live a little!" Marlaina replied. "If we go up at all, it may as well be to the top." She patted her purse. "I think we'll be able to afford it." Kay shrugged and put the camcorder back into its carrying case. They joined the line for the elevators.

Twenty minutes later they were on the observation deck at the top of the Tower, admiring the magnificent view of the city along with the other tourists. After taking pictures and video in each direction, the girls caught the next elevator back down.

"That was really something," Marlaina said as they walked back out into the square beneath the Tower. "Let's go back up — this time taking the stairs."

Kay looked at her incredulously. "You've got to be kidding! That's—one thousand, six hundred fifty-two steps."

Marlaina laughed and lightly punched her sister in the arm.

"Don't have a conniption, sis." She tousled Kay's ponytail. "Anyway, what do we do next: visit the Louvre? The Arc de Triomphe? Notre Dame Cathedral? We're also right next to the bateaux mouche dock — does a river cruise sound good to you?"

"Why don't we rest for a bit, then decide," Kay replied. Marlaina agreed, and the two of them headed over to the nearest bench. Kay started to sit, but Marlaina stopped her. "What is it?" asked Kay. Marlaina indicated the next bench over; it was occupied by three disheveled-looking old men. From the way they were laughing and slapping each other on the back, it was obvious they had been drinking. Marlaina took hold of her sister and started to lead her away, but one of the old men spotted them and shuffled over. "S'il vous plait," he said, holding out his cap.

Marlaina shook her head and strode away, her sister in tow. The old man stared after them for a few moments, muttered something under his breath and rejoined his companions.

Marlaina warily glanced back. Another man had gotten up and was working his way down the line of tourists that stood waiting for elevator tickets. "You'd think that in a city like this...."

"We might have given him a little something," said Kay.

"It's best not to mess with those types," Marlaina replied.

They sat themselves down on a bench at the opposite side of the square, where the crowd of people milling about obscured their view of the old men. Marlaina took off her purse and set it down beside her. Kay unshouldered the camcorder bag and stowed it under the bench.

"You thirsty?" asked Kay. "I saw a Contact Orange stand a little way down the street. I'll get us some, if you want."

"Sounds great." Marlaina fished a few coins out of her purse and handed it to her sister.

"Be right back," Kay called over her shoulder as she departed.

Marlaina settled back and relaxed. She looked up at the green netting that was strung between the pillars of the Tower and wondered if it was meant to catch anyone unfortunate enough to be blown over the railing. Turning her attention to the people that filled the square, she tried to pick out the foreign tourists from the Parisians. She discovered it was easier to spot the Americans; many of them dressed and acted like they were at Disneyland or something.

A voice over to the left of her said, "Excuse me, is anyone sitting here?" Marlaina turned her head and saw a young man dressed in jeans and a khaki shirt standing there. He had an expensive-looking camera slung over his shoulder.

up. This stuff is thawing."

The floorwalker had decided that she must be some sort of terrorist. Who knew what all those bags contained. He complied with her demands with great deference, and then scampered off to call security as soon as her back was turned. When the Macy's troopers finally arrived, shouldering their way through the growing crowd, they found her standing before the range, slowly stirring a tall silver pot of soup. Juliet glanced up as they came close.

"Want some?" she asked.

Shoppers detoured to other sections of Housewares, "borrowing" silverware and plates. More public-minded spirits also brought back utensils Juliet requested, and several formed a sort of bucket brigade between Housewares and the bathrooms in return for first crack at the food, passing water one way and steaming dishes the other. The manager, finally summoned, took a look at the scene, immediately foresaw an upswing in sales, and loudly ordered his staff to aid and abet Juliet. Anyway, it would have been hard to get security to throw her out when two of their guards were helping carry water. The mingled odors spread slowly but irresistibly through the world's largest department store, bringing shoppers from as far away as two floors down to investigate.

And in the center of it all, Juliet cooked. Broiled lamb chops and baked fish fillets. Carrots Vichy and a Western omelet. Steak au poivre, spaghetti (properly salted) with clam sauce. Chicken roasted and chicken broiled with teriyaki sauce. A chocolate souffle and lemon meringue pie. The staff ran out several times to restock the refrigerator, returning panting under loads of damp paper bags. But eventually all the food was cooked, served, and eaten. Juliet set down a wooden spoon, flexed stiff fingers, and picked up her handbag.

The refrigerator cleared its throat.

"Yes?" Juliet asked.

"Oh," it said brokenly, "I've been such a fool. Oh, Juliet, can you ever forgive me— us?"

"Oh, sure," she said easily.

"You're too good. You're an angel." As she began to walk towards the escalator, a note of hope mixed with fear entered its voice. "Are you going to be taking us home now?"

Juliet shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't need you any more." At the top of the escalator, she turned one last time to look at Housewares, and she smiled a heartbreaker's smile.

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was found under a rock in 1970 and adopted by Japanese Illuminati. He attended college at Gallaudet University where he majored in grade report forgery and game mastering with a minor in torturing anyone who dared call him "Chris."

imagination faltered at this point. The best she could come up with was starting over. She tried not to think about how.

"Hey!" One of the cooks tapped her on the shoulder. "Start this up for me, will you? I have something to take care of." And he was gone before she could protest. Juliet was left alone with two steaks. It would have to be steak, of course. Not something that was, well, expendable.

She fought back panic and looked at the steaks. Strip sirloin. Covered with a fine dust of crushed peppercorns. There were a soft bottle of cooking oil and a stick of butter nearby. All right, Juliet told herself firmly. What does this suggest?

Um... frying? she replied tentatively.

Don't be silly, she snapped. You don't fry steaks. No, he must mean to saute them.

Yes, of course! She applauded her own brilliance, then suddenly sobered. But for how long?

I'll just start and hope he comes back before I totally wreck them, she decided, scooping up the platter the steaks lay on, taking the oil and butter in her other hand and going in search of a frying pan. She found one with dismaying swiftness, and was easily able to get a burner at one of the stoves. Now, she said tentatively, I'll heat up the oil. She dribbled oil into the pan with a sparing hand, terrified of pouring too much in. When the bottom of the pan was covered with a thin film she stopped. And now for the meat—

What about the butter? she reminded herself.

Why, I'll... She stalled. I'll... just throw some in. And she suited action to thought.

You're backsliding, she reproved herself as she twisted the burner control to high heat— the better to get this over with quickly. The butter softened, liquefied, began to sizzle. Suddenly panicking at the thought of burning it, Juliet yanked the dial to a lower setting. She put the steaks in reluctantly, as if they were corpses being lowered into a grave: obviously, indisputably lost.

When they did not immediately blacken and char, some of Juliet's nerve returned. Still, she glanced around anxiously for the man who had dumped this duty on her, shifting the pan back and forth almost absently so the steaks didn't stick.

Nobody seemed to take any notice of her and her dilemma. Well, Juliet told herself with a touch of vanity, she was handling this well so far—

Don't you think you'd better turn them over? she asked. With a tiny gasp, she grabbed a nearby fork, nearly dropping the pan, and flipped the steaks. It was rote after that: wait, flip, wait, flip. But after three flips panic began to slowly insinuate itself into her mind again. Are they done yet? How am I supposed to know? They looked nice and brown, but inside, who knew? Visions of a customer biting into his steak, finding it raw in the middle.

Salvation came in the form of David, passing by. "Oh," Juliet said with forced casualness, lifting the pan clear of the heat and displaying it to him, "who are these for?"

"That's the steak au poivre, isn't it?"

"Uh, yes. I think."

David borrowed the fork and gave the meat a few inscrutable pokes. "Good. Give 'em to Leo."

Juliet marched across the kitchen, handed the pan to Leo wordlessly, and collapsed against a handy wall, sweat draining down her face. Any moment now, she was certain, Leo would come storming up to her demanding to know what horrors she had inflicted on those fine pieces of meat.

But he didn't. And a few minutes later, she saw them — it was hard to tell precisely that they were hers, but somehow she knew — leaving the kitchen atop plates held by a jacketed waiter. Out to be eaten. By customers. Complete strangers. She suddenly felt dizzy.

"Hey!" Perry was waving at her from across the kitchen. "I need some clam sauce. Can you do it?"

For a moment, Juliet was ready to retort, Go away, can't you see I'm about to faint? But she took a deep breath. Pushed herself away from the wall. Set her chin.

"Of course I can."

"Don't look now," the refrigerator muttered to the oven, "but it's her again. Why must she torture herself like this?"

"I heard that," Juliet said cheerfully. People were staring at her, the way she was festooned with shopping bags and pulling a crammed-to-bursting two-wheeled aluminum cart behind her.

"Can I do something for you, madam?" the floor-walker asked.

"You certainly can." Juliet smiled. "Plug in that refrigerator and that electric range over there. And where can I get some water?"

The man backed away as Juliet advanced. "And let's not have any talk about calling the manager," she continued. "Just be a good fellow and do it." The floorwalker turned and fled.

"Juliet," the refrigerator sighed, heavy emphasis on the last syllable, "what do you hope to accomplish? It's over. Can't you see that?"

"Shut up," she said politely, hefting a bag, "and open

"It's about your books." He paused. "Personally, I don't mind, but some of our cooks have said that they're not sure they can trust you. It's the way you seem to have to look everything up, you see."

"I just want to make sure," Juliet said, anguished.

"Yes, I understand that. But this is a business— we can't hold things up every time you need to make sure. You've been here long enough. I think you can handle yourself. Now," David said, "starting tomorrow, please don't bring those books."

And there it was. A direct, no-getting-around-it order. Juliet retreated to the kitchen, but found no solace there. Everyone seemed to have become an enemy: who had complained to David? She found herself watching the other cooks out of the corners of her eyes, trying to judge them and winding up with nothing but a futile parade of wild suspicions. When she got home that night, she was in even more of a frazzle than usual, and slept poorly.

In the morning, it required an almost physical effort to leave the books behind. It didn't help that Cedric, glancing up from his Journal, said almost cheerily, "You forgot your books, honey" — could he be in on it? She had to rush out, pretending that she hadn't heard him.

When she got to New America, David greeted her politely, making no reference to the books. However, this small act of mercy failed to lift Juliet's spirits. She went into the kitchen, avoiding gazes, and proceeded to make mistakes.

Not just any mistakes, too. She got even the most basic things wrong. She beat a bowl of egg whites so long that they lost their necessary buoyancy and turned into a thick grayish sludge. She burned butter while trying to clarify it, the brown stink rising from the pan like an accusation. She forgot to add salt to a pot of boiling pasta, and it came out tasting like glue. She had, she realized, learned something from the books — but not cooking. She had only learned recipes.

After every mistake, Juliet had to pretend that she didn't hear the chorus of mutters that broke out behind her. She was getting a lot of practice doing that. Any minute now, David would come to her, tell her that she was fired.

He did come to her, when she was eating lunch (prepared by someone who could cook better than she could) glumly in a corner of the kitchen. "I hear you're having a rough day," he said.

Juliet nodded.

"Just relax," David offered. "Stick to the easy stuff."

Juliet smiled gratefully. What she had been doing was the easy stuff, but sympathy, however unhelpful, was always welcome. When she finished eating, she rose with an effort of will and, going forth into the kitchen, continued her slow-motion disaster.

When she got home that night, she would have made a beeline for the bedroom (and the books), but Cedric intercepted her. "My gosh, honey, you look beat," he commented in a friendly manner. "Hard day at work?"

Juliet, not wanting to give anything away, bit her lip and nodded, trying to circle around him.

"Well," Cedric said, moving deftly to cut her off, suddenly grave, "you see, I've been thinking, dear. I've been thinking," he moved again, placing himself between her and the bedroom door, "that I've let this go on entirely too long. You're humiliating yourself, you're embarrassing me."

"What do you have to be embarrassed about?" Juliet asked, feinting to the left. Cedric remained undeceived.

"My wife's working in a restaurant. In Brooklyn, too. The word gets around, you know, dear."

Juliet feigned a sudden loss of interest in the bedroom, pacing aimlessly away. "But I'm learning, Cedric."

Cedric continued to block the door. "Can't you just take a class, love? How can you be learning anything when you're like this every night?"

Juliet rounded on her heel, glaring at him. "Out of my way, Cedric."

He stood firm. "I'm telling you this, dear. Don't go there tomorrow."

Juliet marched up to him, jabbing a shoulder into his chest. Startled, Cedric stepped aside, and Juliet, barely slowing, entered the bedroom with a feeling of grim, but unfortunately evanescent, triumph. She slept little that night, spending most of it attempting to memorize the books. Ingredients and techniques ran through her mind like sand through a sieve, and when she woke in the morning, with no memory of having gone to sleep, she retained none of them.

Cedric wasn't around. A note on the dining-room table, propped against the salt-and-pepper shakers, read "Remember what I said." Juliet picked it up, hunted around the townhouse until she found a pen, and wrote "GOODBYE CEDRIC" in slashing, spiky letters along the bottom before flinging the paper back onto the table. As the subway to work crossed under the East River, the enormity of what she'd done suddenly caught up with her, and she began to quiver, feeling suddenly very alone in the midst of the sardinish mass of humanity.

By the time she reached the doors of New America, she was composed of three parts misery to two parts terror. David let her by without a word. One more day like yesterday and he'd have to let her go. And then... her

Cedric chuckled. "To be sure. To be sure. But you haven't answered my question, love. What do you have there?"

Juliet shifted the newspaper away too late. Cedric frowned slowly. "Reading the want ads, dear? I hope you're not going to do anything rash. Aren't you being the tiniest bit obsessive about this?"

"Drop dead, Cedric." Juliet couldn't quite believe she'd said that, and from the expression on Cedric's face he couldn't either.

"What're the books for?" The manager of New America jerked his chin at the books tucked under Juliet's arms, Craig Claiborne on the left, James Beard on the right.

"Oh, just in case," Juliet said, trying to sound nonchalant as possible.

The manager looked her over. "Won't hurt to give you a try." His voice was pure Brooklyn, not surprising considering that the restaurant was in Brooklyn Heights. "Get back there and make yourself useful."

Compared to Jean-Louis', the kitchen of New America was less everything — less crowded, less busy, less state-of-the-art, less clean. The cylindrical dishwasher was the same, though, and Juliet thought that it mumbled a greeting to her around a mouthful of porcelain as she passed. She couldn't be sure, though.

The head cook introduced himself as David and made the expected joke about Romeo upon hearing her name. "Hang up your coat, and —" he peered around the kitchen — "get together some clam sauce to start with. Can you handle that?" Juliet nodded. "Good. Give it to Perry when you're finished."

When David had turned his back, Juliet set down her books, quick-flipping the Beard's index. Clam sauce, page 44. Here it was. She scuttled around the kitchen, collecting ingredients. "1/3 cup olive oil." No problem. "3 garlic cloves, peeled and finely chopped." Within minutes, she had reduced the cloves to a heap of smelly, infinitesmal bits. "2 7-ounce cans minced clams." Easily found. "1/2 cup chopped parsley, preferably Italian." The cook she asked silently handed her a small canister of powdered parsley. She weighed it in her hand uncertainly, then gave it back, continuing her search of the kitchen until she had found fresh parsley. She wondered if it was Italian, but decided it would be better not to ask.

There; what next? Saute the garlic with part of the oil. That was easy, but she turned to the "Sauteing" section of the Claiborne to make sure, darting nervous eyes from the book to the simmering mixture, alert for the slightest change in the oil's color as she shook the pan gently.

There — it was turning yellow. Dump in the rest of the oil quickly, add the liquid from the clams, then the parsley. Then, finally, when the mixture was boiling, add the clams themselves, let it heat up. A minute later, she was bearing the hissing pot of sauce to the man who had been pointed out as Perry.

Perry dipped a spoon into the sauce, blew on it, and tasted. "All right. Do it quicker next time. Keep an eye on these chops for me — they're almost done." Juliet waited until his back was turned before dashing cross-kitchen, nearly upsetting a dish-laden busboy, scooping up her two saviors — Craig and James — from the counter and bearing them back to the stove. What kind of chops were they — pork or lamb? They looked porkish. One of them was surrounded by an ugly ring of bubbling brown grease. Was it supposed to be that way?

Quick, the index: "Pork chops, 409; braised, with sauerkraut, 162-3; browned, and lentil casserole, 295; Nicoise, 196; sauteed, 174." Hopelessly, Juliet turned to page 162, then noticed that the grease-ringed chop had begun to smoke. Dropping the book, she seized the nearest implement — a long-handled fork — and impaled the chop, lifting it free.

"You left it on too long," Perry said from behind her. Juliet was startled; the fork jerked in her hand, and the chop slid off the tines to land with a wet slap on the skillet. Spatters of grease went flying, one alighting on the back of her hand. Perry reached past her, switching off the stove.

"You were just supposed to let them brown," he continued. Juliet, dismayed, back of her hand pressed to her mouth, said nothing. "Don't worry about it," he said in an I'm-trying-to-be-reassuring voice.

Juliet slunk away, eventually finding work putting dabs of whipped cream on top of bowls of strawberries and cream. She decided not to consult the books about that, but she made sure that she knew to the last gram how large a dollop she was supposed to use. Juliet had a new religion, and its name was precision.

She persevered. She bounced around the kitchen like a pinball, never settling at any place or any job for long. She ignored Cedric's poorly-concealed distaste when she returned home in the evenings, tired and smelling of a thousand different dishes. The Claiborne and Beard grew well-thumbed and acquired a panoply of miscellaneous stains.

And then one day, when she came in, David drew her aside. "I'd like to talk with you," he said.

Juliet's heart froze; his demeanor was sober and restrained. Bad-news time.

tively Antarctic after the tumid heat of the kitchen, and rode back to the townhouse.

Needless to say, Cedric was not pleased. "Really, love," he declared, "I can't see why you would do something like that."

Juliet was too tired to argue, only making a limp gesture in reply, but he pressed on. "What's the point? That's what I must know. Certainly they have no shortage of people to do that kind of work for them, do they, dear?"

"I have to do it if I want to learn," Juliet said.

"You're not thinking of going back, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

Cedric threw up his hands. "I could forbid you, but I hope you'll see how foolish you're being for yourself."

"Whatever. Good night, Cedric." Juliet picked herself up and headed for bed.

She was back at Jean-Louis' the next day, to the surprise of most and the disgust of the pastry chef, who had a sizable bet with the head busboy that she wouldn't return. She tried to speak with Robert, but he brushed her aside, snapping orders as the kitchen girded itself to face another day of customers. Silently, she took up her place in the corner of the kitchen where the dishwasher was stored and waited.

It was very much like the previous day had been. The food may have been slightly different, but garbage was garbage. Juliet stacked, soaped, rinsed, worked the dishwasher, until finally the head busboy wandered by and told her to take a break.

She tried to stay out of the way and watched Robert as he moved around the kitchen, trying to understand him. He did very little of the actual cooking, but nevertheless every dish that passed through the kitchen went through his hands, in one way or another. He turned up his nose at a souffle, straightened a garnish, screamed at a vegetable peeler, poked at a slab of uncooked meat, peered into a steaming vat in which a chicken simmered. Juliet yearned to go to him, ask him why the souffle was bad, what his opinion of the chicken was, but was already well-versed enough in the ways of the kitchen to know what the result would be. When her break was over, she returned to the dishes, feeling extremely unenlightened.

Since Robert was inaccessible, Juliet turned to the other kitchen workers, the trainee chefs and specialists. They were surprised, then flattered, by her attention, and gladly showed her what they did. And that, for a few days, was satisfying. She felt at last as if she was learning something, taking the first steps towards being worthy of her appliances. But gradually she became aware that something was bothering her.

"Why so much garnish?" she asked a trainee chef who was putting the final touches on a serving of pate of wild game.

"Because without it, it'd just look like a couple slices of meatloaf."

"Yes, but you're practically putting a forest around it. Why not just take one big fluffy lettuce leaf and put the slices on it?"

The trainee chef glanced at the plate. "I dunno. This is how Robert wants it."

"Can I taste the soup?" she asked another, who grudgingly scooped out a spoonful. She drank the hot liquid carefully, frowning. "How much salt is in there?"

"Do you think it's too salty?"

"Yes."

The trainee looked uncertainly at the pot. "I'll ask Robert what he thinks."

"What are you doing?" she asked the head saucier as he disconsolately poured a bowl of brown sauce down the sink. He grimaced.

"Stupid of me. I put in too much butter and flour. It's too thick."

Juliet dipped a finger into the stream, tasted. "It seems all right. Can't you add more water or something?"

"It's not worth the effort — and Robert wouldn't accept it."

"That's right," Robert said. Juliet and the saucier started, the last of the brown sauce splashing onto the counter. "And you," he said to Juliet, "what are you asking those questions for?"

"I'm here to learn."

"Then why are you telling my chefs how to cook?" Robert all but roared.

"They're only my opinions."

"There is no such thing as 'just an opinion' where food is concerned." Robert was grimly serious. "Next you'll be giving orders. You're more trouble than you're worth. Get out."

The sheer injustice left Juliet all but breathless. "But..." she said weakly. Robert, fists on hips, seemed to be readying himself to destroy any protest she could make. "But you said you'd let me learn from you."

"And I would have— if you'd shown any willingness to learn. I'm not a cooking teacher. I don't have time for your ideas."

"And quite right he was," Cedric said later. "May I assume, dear, that you're giving up this foolish..." he waved a hand aimlessly in the air "... jaunt?"

"I picked the wrong place, that's all," Juliet said defensively.

"Stand aside, Cedric. If you're not man enough to do this, I am. I'm going to get my appliances back." And with that, she was gone.

Outside the townhouse, Juliet hailed a taxi and stewed in the backseat all the way out to Macy's. She undertipped the driver and barely noticed his sulfurous snarl as he took off in a cloud of noxious fumes. Resolutely, she straightened her skirt, looped her handbag's strap over her shoulder, checked her makeup, and sallied forth into the world's largest department store.

It had been a while since she'd been there. A directory told her that the housewares department was two floors up. She rode the escalator, surrounded by the omnipresent rustle of brown paper shopping bags bearing the store's logo. "We're from Macy's, you're from Queens"... bah! As if Macy's didn't have a branch in Queens. A large one, too.

At the top, she stepped off the escalator and immediately spotted her refrigerator. It spotted her, too, and slowly turned away, presenting the mesh of black heating coils on its back to her. Juliet's mouth tightened. She strode over, heels clicking emphatically on the linoleum, and slapped a possessive hand on the broad white side. It tried to inch away, but Juliet was implacable, maintaining the contact while she sought a floorwalker.

"Yes, ma'am?" one said, materializing at her elbow.

"I want this refrigerator," she said.

"Certainly, ma'am. What plan do you intend to pay on?"

"I'll pay in full now. Just give me this refrigerator."

The floorwalker's professional smile congealed. "You mean this particular refrigerator? It's just a display model, ma'am. Rest assured the one you'll get will be of the same high quality."

"I said I want this refrigerator."

The floorwalker made a little gesture of incomprehension. "I don't understand, ma'am. What's so special about this one?"

"None of your business," Juliet said curtly. "It's a personal matter."

The smile had rotted away and disappeared entirely. "Yes, ma'am, I see. I'll have to talk with the manager first."

The manager was duly summoned. "Look, lady, we'd have to pack this refrigerator up and set up a new display model. It'd be easier for both of us if you'd just take another fridge."

"Can't you understand?" Juliet demanded. "I have to show him he can't just run out on me like that. I haven't even had a chance to find the others yet. Time's slipping by."

"I'm sorry. I can't do it. It's just not worth the trouble." The manager spread his hands in resignation.

"I see. You're on his side." Juliet drew herself up to her full height. "You don't think I deserve it either. Well, I'll be back, and I'll show you!" As she spoke the last words, she suddenly realized that she was shouting, and moreover that almost everybody on the floor was staring at her. She jerked on her handbag strap, gave the refrigerator a vicious little kick, turned, and marched towards the escalator, cheeks flaming but shoulders remaining straight. She thought she heard the refrigerator snicker behind her.

Jean-Louis' was a restaurant that prided itself on its quality. Everyone from Robert, the maitre chef d'cuisine, to the lowliest waiter, knew their jobs and did them well. When Juliet presented herself at the back door and requested — well, demanded would be a better word — to be taught to cook, she was nearly turned away. The off-duty pastry chef she spoke to finally brought her in more for the fun of seeing Robert blow up at her as anything else.

He wasn't disappointed. "This is not a school," Robert growled. "Go to one of the universities, or watch the shows on television."

"I told her that," the pastry chef put in.

"But I want to learn in person," Juliet said. "I've watched the shows, I've read the books, I've worked my hardest, and, well, my appliances say I don't deserve them."

"So? In America, few people do," Robert said.

"I'll do anything," Juliet said. "Just teach me. Let me see what real cooking is."

Before you could say, "That was a mistake", Juliet's coat was off, her handbag was on the floor, her sleeves were rolled up, and her hands were filled with dirty dishes. Over the course of the next two hours, she became very familiar with one aspect of food: its remains. The cold sliminess of used salad dressing, the bits and tufts of meat that weren't worth the effort needed to extract them from the bone, the little garnishes no one ever ate (Jean-Louis' did not recycle them, and shame on you for thinking that), lobster shells, dregs of every beverage conceivable, hard greasy gobbets of old sauce. She also became intimately familiar with heat and dampness, china and silverware, and what happened when you dropped a wine glass on a linoleum floor (it wasn't pretty, and neither was the head busboy when he saw it.) She developed a deep and abiding hatred of the slob customers who inflicted this never-ending tide of filth on her, and when her two hours were up she was too tired to even think of finding Robert. Instead, she dragged herself outside, the air feeling posi-

Juliet and the Appliances

Christopher Shea

Juliet's kitchen was an attractive place. At the far end of the long, narrow room two tall windows let generous amounts of light in. A huge refrigerator sat in one corner, its hum so quiet that it was felt rather than heard. Next to it was a broad gas stove and an electric range, and over the stove was a shelf of gleaming cookbooks, new as the day they were bound. Other racks held a dizzying variety of instruments— metal, plastic, and wooden tools for manipulating food in every way imagined by humankind. Along the other wall a row of cabinets concealed inside themselves everything from pedestrian flour and sugar to a spice rack for which a medieval baron would have traded his firstborn son. A formica-topped counter offered a place to roll dough if Juliet was in a bready mood, and the stainless-steel sink was indeed stainless. The garbage disposal was polite and docile, and the dishwasher performed its duties with diligence, efficiency, and a minimum of noise.

One fine afternoon, Juliet had opened the refrigerator and was peering through its well-lit recesses, trying to figure out what to make for dinner, when the refrigerator closed its door gently but firmly and addressed her. "Darling, this can't go on any longer. I wish it could be otherwise, but it's out of my control. It just can't work, do you see?"

"No, I don't see," Juliet said quite honestly, venturing a surreptitous tug on the refrigerator's handle.

"He's right," the stove sighed. "I feel like such a fool — and a cad, too, for leading you on like this. We've had good times together, I admit that, but a lasting relationship is just out of the question."

"But you're all paid for," Juliet said.

"Damn it!" the dishwasher said. "Pardon my language. But do you have to make this so hard? It pains me to spell it out, but I have to: we're from Macy's. You're from Queens. It can't last, do you realize that?"

"We just weren't made for each other," the stove added. "The fault's not yours or ours— it's fate. Someone like you, who's never opened a cookbook in her life, and things like us, the very best in food-preparation technology, were never meant to stay together."

"Are you saying," Juliet said, "I'm not good enough for you?"

"Please don't say that," the refrigerator urged, sidling towards the door. "We'll always think fondly of you. But we can't live this lie any longer. It's tearing our souls out."

"Appliances don't have souls!" Juliet all-but-screeched.

"Goodbye, Juliet."

She argued. She ordered. She blocked the doorway with her body. She wept. She pleaded. She promised. She raged. Nothing worked. They all left her: the dishwasher, the stove (knocking a rather large hole in the wall as it lumbered out), the garbage disposal, the eggbeater and its clattering family of attachments, the knives and forks and spoons, the ladles and measuring cups, whisks and graters, the cheese axe and the fondue forks, the cookbooks. The little metal rings she put around fried eggs so they turned out as neat circles. When Cedric came home, he found her sitting on the floor under the windows, her face in her hands and the kitchen empty of everything save dust.

"Hello, love. What's this hole in the wall doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, Cedric!" Springing to her feet, Juliet crossed the kitchen to bury her damp face in his pinstriped wool shoulder. "Everything's gone away. The horrid things said I wasn't good enough for them, and just up and left."

"There, there, honey." Cedric patted her back. "We'll be eating out tonight, then?"

"Cedric!" Juliet wailed. "Are you listening? My— our appliances have left. How will I be able to cook?"

"Ah, uhm," Cedric said. "It's not the end of the world, dear. Who knows? It might be for the best."

"Whatever can you mean?" Juliet demanded, detaching herself from him. "Cooking is my life, my art."

"Well, dear," Cedric glanced at the floor, "I'm sure you can find some other hobby. Sewing, perhaps? Charity?"

"You don't care about this, do you?"

"To be honest, dear, you were never much of a cook. Oh, I'm not saying you weren't... innovative, but— well, now I suppose I can hire someone to do the work."

"Cedric!" Juliet said in horror. "Not you, too. Oh, how can you be so insensitive?"

"Remember when you thought the pepper pot soup wasn't spicy enough? Or that sticky cake thing that fell apart? Don't be hysterical, dear. I'm sure you'll get over it."

Juliet stalked to the living room, Cedric trailing. She seized her handbag from where it lay. "Now, love," Cedric said anxiously, "you're not going to do anything irrational, are you?"

First*Text*

Jason Snell

This is becoming a habit for me.

I'm sitting here in the offices of the *UCSD Guardian*, staring at the screen of the Macintosh IIfx I use to lay out *InterText.*

Everything else is done… except this grand column thing called First*Text*.

So here I go again.

August's Soviet coup certainly showed the power of computer networks, didn't it? The coup plotters (as David Letterman would remind us, the couplotters lived next door to him growing up in Indiana) didn't think to cut electronic mail links, fax machines, and modems. Boris Yeltsin used a modem to dispatch communiques to locations throughout the Soviet Union. Several major news services ran interviews with Russians that were conducted via e-mail.

Fascinating things. I was hoping to write an article about this subject for this issue, but haven't had the time. Perhaps for next issue. If anyone knows the network address of people in the Soviet Union, please let me know. Also, a friend of mine will be studying in Leningrad (or should I say St. Petersburg?) until December, and will be trying to contact me via e-mail. If we can get her on-line, we may see some Soviet dispatches from her in these pages. We can only hope.

All in all, it's very encouraging to think that George Orwell was wrong, wrong, wrong. Technology is not a tool of totalitarianism, but rather a tool to destroy it. Computers, faxes, and photocopiers enabled people to get the word out even after the broadcasters and newspapers were cut off from the citizens of the country.

I'm sure if Orwell was alive, he'd find the fact that technology helped overturn totalitarianism quite good news. Even if it contradicted *1984*.

Minutae:

I'd like to again encourage as many of the PostScript subscribers as possible to go over to the ftp-notification list. If you can ftp and uncompress files, it's a lot better that you get your issues that way then via these ridiculously long mailings I end up doing every two months.

The notification list receives a small mail message when the issue comes out, letting them know that they can go ahead and ftp the thing.

For those of you who can't ftp, you'll have to stick with the unwieldy process of slapping these PostScript files together. Sorry, but there's really no other way.

One more thing about FTP sites: I've managed to locate *network.ucsd.edu*'s IP number. If you need it, drop me a line and I'll tell you what it is. It should also appear in November's *InterText*. And back issues of *InterText* are also available, at least for the time being, at eff.org, in the */journals* folder.

So, with that out of the way, I thought I'd make mention of the fact that we're finally starting to get some submissions… despite the fact that it's summertime. I expect both circulation and submissions to increase as college students return from their summer break, so we'll see how it goes. But *InterText* #4 already has some potential stories. It's a nice feeling. Keep the submissions coming.

This issue's cover, like the others, is by godlike artist Mel Marcelo, graphics editor of the *Guardian*. It (kind of, sort of, by luck more than anything else) represents our lead story this issue, "Juliet and the Appliances" by Christopher Shea. Assistant editor Geoff Duncan and I were both impressed by this story, submitted for Christopher by one of his friend with Internet access. Chris' connection to the computer world is via CompuServe, where he has an account.

Also making appearances this issue are Carlo Samson, who has written previously for *Dargonzine*, and newcomer Will Hyde. In addition, a story I wrote for the final issue of *Athene* (the one that never appeared) surfaces here, as does yet another story from Greg Knauss, this one a bit longer than his previous efforts.

Hopefully next issue we'll be able to bring you more stories from the "lost" *Athene* — Geoff and I are in the process of tracking down Jim McCabe, *Athene*'s editor. In addition, I hope we'll be able to provide back issues of *Athene* at some point down the line. Also, Phil Nolte, who shared Assistant Editor credits on the first issue of *InterText has* regained net access and should rejoin us next issue.

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"Juliet and the Appliances" by CHRISTOPHER SHEA

PLUS:

CARLO N. SAMSON Takes us to Paris

WILL HYDE Takes us to Idaho

GREG KNAUSS Takes us to Hell

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY MEL MARCELO