knew that he could remain operational for centuries by being trickle charged from the available solar arrays. He even had the power packs of the assault units to help pull him through.

And as he watched the sail billow with the output from some distant solar flare, Aegis realigned the mounting device to point them on a vector toward a distant red giant, knowing that it would be the first tack of a very long voyage.

Then as he prepared for the first shutdown period, he contemplated what he was about to do and the rightness of it. Earth was a dream that no longer existed. But that didn't matter. Earth was home — the first home — and nothing was more powerful than the homing instinct. Besides, even now there was the possibility that other Aegises were doing exactly what he was doing; sailing, flying, hitch-hiking or walking their way toward an identical past. Yet no matter what happened in the end, no matter what reality dictated, he knew that he had to chase the dream. After all, that was what being human was all about.

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Quanta

Quanta (ISSN 1053-8496) is the electronically distributed journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy. As such, each issue contains fiction by amateur authors. Quanta is published in two formats, ASCII and PostScript (for PostScript compatible laser-printers). Submissions should be sent to **quanta@andrew.cmu.edu**. Requests to be added to the distribution list should be sent to one of the following depending on which version of the magazine you'd like to receive.

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Anthology Seeks Poetry Submissions

Published or unpublished poems, written between 1963 and 1992, are needed for a new anthology, tentatively titled *The Hearts of Parents and Children: Poems, 1963-1993.* Poems addressing any aspect of the parent/child relationship are welcome, but submissions must be limited to a maximum of three typed poems. Poems must be in English (no translations).

For more information or to send submissions, mail Eric Crump, University of Missouri, **C509379@mizzou1.bitnet** or **C509379@mizzou1.missouri.edu**. Please be sure to sign your name and include your e-mail address. Deadline for submissions: January 15, 1993. Royalties accruing from the sale of this anthology will go to a charity that assists victims of child abuse.

This anthology is being developed and will be edited by a group of writers from throughout the U.S. and Canada who are employing electronic mail to work on the project, using a Listserv List hosted by the University of Missouri's mainframe computer to communicate with each other.

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And behind all of this were the defense laboratories that constantly devised new forms of death so that everything that crawled, walked, flew, slid or even thought in ways that were different from man's, was simply vaporized, diseased or obliterated to extinction.

Aegis' mind chuckled to itself. It was ironic that for a hundred millennia, man had sat under the stars and stared at them in fear and trepidation, yet it was the rest of the Galaxy that had most to fear from the malignancy that festered on the blue-green planet.

Notwithstanding these successes, the search for the ultimate tactical unit had continued. Although the droids were extremely capable, they lacked the intuitiveness of humans, their deviousness and the ability to lie and deceive. The clones on the other hand, although possessing these qualities, were physically unsuited to the heaviest engagements. The obvious solution of course was to unite the best features of man and machine — the subtlety, deception, courage and survival instincts of man, and the power, toughness and durability of machine. Aegis and others like him were the result.

Eventually, the engineers had stumbled onto a technique that allowed them to mind graft onto non-organic systems. The possibilities for mating a good tactical mind with an android body were only too apparent. But the early prototypes had been disappointing. For whatever reason, it appeared that most minds had an innate desire to define their own origin and that once this was revealed to them, the reality of their death and rebirth in silicon was often unacceptable and led to madness or suicide. They had tried blocking memories at various levels, but once more, it seemed that a vital component of mind function involved a sense of identity and self concept. Although these units did not go insane, they did not perform very well. It became obvious that intuition and "humanness" was a property that emerged from the whole system and not its components. And although technology had made the copying of minds possible, their manipulation of course, was still beyond the engineers. Long ago, they had discovered that fundamental breakthroughs in neuronal calculus were needed before the meaningful alteration of the synaptic matrix was possible. Those breakthroughs had never happened.

In desperation, they looked for minds that were able to at least tolerate the reality of rebirth and the loss of flesh, pulsing blood and sexuality. They found one stored on a very old holographic plate from the first century of expansion. Captain David Boyd — a former tactician with the Assault Corps had been a volunteer for an early experiment in mind printing, and although the medium was very crude, the engineers had finally managed to recover the print.

Fortunately for the engineers, Boyd had quickly come to terms with rebirth and what it meant. And as the synaptic matrix meshed with the motor integration and sensor circuits of his droid body, the true power of the man-machine synergy was evidenced. One hundred Aegis units were now operating in Earth's Armed Forces, all of them on combat evaluation before the big production runs began and all of them possessing the mind of David Boyd.

Of course, Aegis had been told all of this and more. He knew that the Earth he had inhabited was now little more than a blackened cinder of pollution and scrap metal. He could recall his own death off the spiral arm of Orion, wounded and adrift in a suit that was slowly depressurizing. He knew that his family, the children he had watched come into the world, had been dead for centuries. Their colony no longer even existed. He even thought and communicated in a language form that was unintelligible to the bulk of living humans.

And yet despite all of this, he had managed to define a purpose for his continuing existence. He still felt a sense of duty, a responsibility. He was after all, a soldier.

But now, as Aegis watched the Galaxy spin slowly beneath his dangling feet, the sense of isolation was overpowering and a feeling of horror rushed through him. He was a man, he thought. A man who longed for other men, yet he was unlike any other man that had ever existed. His mind stretched to the green forests of an Earth that was long dead and he began to ache for it. He wanted to feel the cool freshness of wind on his face, and not the datalink from his armored exterior. He wanted another human being to look into his eyes and fathom the depths they found there. He wanted to view reality as humans saw it, not through the infrared and ultraviolet intensifiers scattered about his head. But above all, the dread of what he had become — a pathetic caricature of a human being — wracked him with emotion. The image of his dead wife twisted itself through his consciousness and he felt his heart shift with anguish. He asked himself how he could feel all of this when he didn't have a heart, didn't have hormones or a nervous system. Then, as a sob racked his mind, his body flinched and he touched his face where he thought he could feel the tears welling up. He had known of course that it was simply a mirage from an older, now nonexistent body.

For some time he held his head in his hands and rocked back and forth under the waves of grief, then attempted to gather his thoughts as they ebbed from consciousness. It didn't take him long to settle on his course of action. With a sudden resolve he got to his feet and searched the survival pack for what he wanted, flourishing it in triumph when his hand came upon it. It was a solar sail. He knew that the thing had never been designed for the purpose he intended, but he also knew that the only thing he had plenty of, was time.

The sail was an ingenious invention. Although barely two molecules thick, a standard pack would spread out to make a sail with an area of hundreds of square kilometers. And this vast area of composite material when filled with the solar wind — the particles that emanated from the fusion hearts of all stars — could pull the remains of the assault craft from one star to the next. It would take decades for the small acceleration to build to an acceptable velocity, but Aegis

second later, Tyler's abdomen disappeared as a microgrenade from a sniper's rifle punched through his body.

Pam walked over to the body, and felt for a pulse, always the professional.

Then she pressed her fingers against her lips and placed them on Tyler's cheek. She looked up and engaged me with those empty, crystal blue eyes.

"And how is your memory, Mr. Kinkade?" she asked. "They said that your involvement would bring him to us. All I had to do was stick with you. They said it always seemed to happen that way. 'Screwball logic' was the term."

I blushed and stammered as I recalled the dismemberment of Jim Tyler and observed the closeness of her hand to the two-way transceiver in her earring.

"Frankly, I… I've had trouble with my memory lately… Miss… Miss…?"

She smiled at me, crocodile-like, then got up and began to walk away.

"Hey!" I yelled in sudden realization. "What about my creds? You owe me."

She turned around, slowly reaching up to her neck, then chuckled as she looked where I'd been standing.

When pressed, my impersonation of thin air is totally amazing.

The Long Way Home

P.R. Morrison

Aegis propped himself up on one elbow and shook his head. He looked out through the shattered remains of the assault craft at the spinning emptiness of space and began to piece together the most recent fragments of his memory. It was obvious: they had been hit during the run-in and what remained of their ship — barely a platform of jagged metal now — was careening away from the battle totally out of control. He checked himself for damage and glanced around for the remainder of the squad. As he spotted them amongst the debris and crushed metal, he emitted a status request. It was a short blast of high intensity, high frequency radiation that was able to overcome the most powerful of tactical jammers. If any of the units remained functional they would respond.

One by one, they stirred and gave their systats. The point unit, a heavily armored cannon of limited intelligence had emerged unscathed and steadied itself on its hydraulic legs. The three utility weapon units were completely functional, but the two flank units, agile and hence lightly protected, both reported mobility problems. Aegis winced to himself as he traced the communications unit's transponder to a mash of melted armor and carbon composites. Without it, they were on their own.

Of course there was no question of what had to be done. Earth had been expanding its frontiers for more than five centuries now, and he had available to him the data from every engagement, and every maneuver of all of the units that had survived those encounters. It was one of the reasons that the cosmos had yielded so totally before the forces of Man. But of course it wasn't the only reason.

Carefully, he jury-rigged a controller to the remaining power unit and with short bursts managed to slow the ship's spin to a lazy roll. He looked wistfully for a moment at the fusion weapons that flared occasionally from the battle more than a million kilometers away. It would be a long wait.

And as he sat there for the moment, slowly contemplating the enormity of space, it occurred to him that the correctness of what he had planned was not immediately self-evident. He was alone, apart from a mindless collection of assault units; alone without power or communications. It could be decades before they were found and already the loneliness had begun to eat at him.

He was an AEGIS — Assault Engineer Grafted Intellect-on-Silicon. He knew what he was and who he was because they had been forced to tell him. The prototypes had all gone insane until their identity had been established for them.

It had started during the initial expansion from Earth when first contact was made and the casualties were without rival in the history of human conflict. And so the clone factories were initiated, each producing exact copies of military archetypes — copies by the million. Pilots, gunners, commandos... whatever was needed. The gene pool was scoured for the best of each and their DNA was simply replicated ad nauseam. And it had worked for a while... until the radiation levels of combat became so unbearable that nothing evolved on Earth could tolerate them, even with the best of protection. That was when the droids were developed. Although they lacked the instincts of humans, their artificial form of intelligence was sufficient for most engagements and in their thousands, their sheer weight of numbers was usually more than adequate.

For two centuries the droids had proved sufficient to push the frontiers further from Earth. Yet it was not merely force of arms that had determined the success of humanity. As the alien breeds fled before it, it became clear to all observers that no other species could match humanity for sheer destructive ingenuity. One by one, the telepathic worlds fell after the development of the mind insulator. The warrior races of Orion, so proud, so filled with honor, were easily enslaved after their king was captured, deprogrammed by the mind engineers of Earth and instructed to capitulate. Even the spawn species of the outer systems... creatures who bred in billions from hermaphroditic spores, were destroyed in minutes as their suns were extinguished by neutron inhibitors.

some wariness. "But I have often found that flatterers are no match for karate."

"Yes, I noticed," I said, raising my hands in mock surrender. "I'll keep it in mind."

She responded with a fleeting smile. "The most important thing right now is to find Jim. Have you made any progress yet? The FBDI said they'd engaged you yesterday."

I hated to disappoint her, but after rescuing me she deserved the truth.

"Unfortunately… no." I said flatly. "But somebody else is interested in this case. That guy could have killed me, but didn't. He was more interested in what I was doing with the systemlink."

She thought about that for a while, then helped me into her car — a gas turbined pink Maretta. I tried not to notice the curvature of her legs as we tore down the high velocity lane of the expressway, exchanging what little information we had.

"Jim was in the Global Division," she began, the past tense bothering me at first. "He was involved in negotiations with foreign governments… you know, installations, software capabilities. It was tricky stuff. These days, no government can afford not to be part of the system. Their commerce and trade would suffer enormously. But at the same time, they've always been concerned about who has the information and what they do with it. Of course, anybody with any brains knows that the Company has it all and it's probably just a matter of time before governments cease to exist. Jim's job was to placate them while it all happened."

"Hmmm," I replied as I patched into her car's mobilelink.

"What are you doing?" she asked, unable to take her eyes off the road and focus on the dim display.

"Oh, just checking my creds," I replied, trying to suppress my shock as I read the system output. "Where are we going anyway?"

"To my place."

I grinned. She scowled.

"Jim may have left a message there," she explained. "He can beat the security monitors. The system told me where you'd left the hover rail, so, while I waited for him to contact me, I thought we could team up. OK?" she smiled, turning to me briefly.

It was an engaging smile, but one that didn't last. As I looked down some text slowly assembled on the systemlink.

"It's for both of us." I said. "Tyler wants us to meet him at the Stratopark. 82nd level in half an hour."

We left 50 meters of rubber as we did a 180 on the expressway, the injectors shrieking with power. Pam knew how to drive. My mind considered what else she was good at.

The Stratopark was windswept and although swirling with smog we left our respirators off to help our visibility. It didn't take us long to find Tyler. He was sitting on the bonnet of a Blue Maretta. Blue for boys, pink for girls.

"Darling!" Pam exclaimed as she ran with open arms toward him.

"Not so fast!" Tyler said as he pulled out a pocket blaster.

Pam stopped short, the smile sliding off her face and falling onto the concrete.

"So, you know," she said.

Tyler chuckled wryly to himself. "I had an idea. But I had to be sure. Kinkade got the information I needed."

"You mean about Pam?" I said, starting to piece it together.

"Yes. You see, I was working in Moscow, placating what's left of the government. You know, reassuring them about the system, but at the same time, buying certain individuals, eliminating others. The problem is, New Russia is a closed society. The central executive is aged and almost inseparable in its new-found hatred for the West. Buying them wasn't easy, hitting them impossible. The Company was unhappy. So, sensing failure, I allowed the executive to buy me. In exchange for a comfortable mansion near the Baltic, I'll tell them how to use the system and avoid being subjugated by it. Pam was to go with me. It was all arranged. We were to meet a Russian operative at the Purple Lizard and make good our escape. But both of them didn't show and the local yokels took out their frustration on me."

"That much I can see," I said, noticing his bruises.

"Yes, but you also found out that Pam is really my boss and the Company's best eliminator. She blew away my contact. I had suspicions, of course. Pam was the only one who knew of our rendezvous at the Lizard. And when the Russian agent who had tailed you managed to get a glimpse of the systemlink you'd used and saw it storing files on Pam in your area, I decided to have a look for myself. I am a level seven, you know. I read them just before I came here."

I screwed up my face at the thought of Tyler rummaging through my love letters and other desiderata.

"Those files revealed the truth. You see, the Company has a nice policy these days. It arranges for top executives to meet and become involved with their best eliminators. It makes it neater if the exec goes renegade. Lovers are much cleaner killers."

"True," Pamela said coldly. "And it would have been much cleaner, Darling, if not for your contact. I had to garrote him, but obviously I couldn't meet you covered in blood. You can thank Russian training for your life."

"And I'm afraid that your life, my lover, has just about run out," Tyler said with a smile.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Jim," she replied, unperturbed. "You see, the Russians aren't here. Your backups are gone. Ten minutes ago, we sold them an operations exec. A level nine man. We sold him for you and a few million credits."

"You're lying! You couldn't risk the information."

"Unfortunately, I'm not. He's been erased. Of course, the Russians don't know that. It was a very nice job. Bye-bye, Jim," she said, as she pressed one of her earrings. A

"Sure, he got that one. But you see, my left hand hasn't been the same since the assault on Petrograd. A fragmentation grenade blew it off and I thought it might be handy — excuse the pun — to have a miniblaster installed in the cyber replacement. Got the picture?"

The bartender clasped and unclasped his fists in suppressed rage.

"You better not stay too long, mister," he said. "You can't guard your back forever."

"Tsk, tsk," I said, knowing that I shouldn't push my advantage if I was to get what I wanted. "Look, all I'm after is a little information. See this guy?" I showed him a visifacsimile of Tyler. "He was here a week ago. The system says at 6:30 on the tenth. I just want to know what happened to him."

"Never seen him before," the bartender said. "We don't give information to the Company anyhow."

"I'm not from the Company. I'm a private DI and the system says he was here. I just want to know why."

I pulled out a gold Krugerrand and tossed it onto the bar.

"Trading in gold is outside the system and illegal," the barman said, perhaps surprised that an upper level would be carrying it.

"Well, I won't tell if you won't" I said.

"OK. He was here," the barman blurted out as he seized the coin.

"What happened to him?" I said, placing my hand on the man's closed fist.

"We beat him up, same as we were gonna do to you. We threw him out and that was the last we saw of him. That's it."

He had no reason to lie, so I decided to cut my losses and do some thinking outside the confines of the Purple Lizard.

"OK… thanks," I said as I stood away from the bar and pointed my hand at the barman's belly. I found the back door and as I weaved through the garbage cans, I spared a thought for Joey and his coming chastisement. The cyberarm was always a good con.

As I strolled up the street, donning my respirator, I thought about what I had. Tyler was beaten up in a bar he wouldn't be seen dead in. Why? He must have been meeting someone. Someone, who could've protected him, but didn't show up.

But who was the someone? It looked like a dead end, so I took a chair at a nearby diner and ordered a cup of coffee. Well, they said it was coffee. It was black anyway. As I slowly sipped, I wondered if I might be able to get a better angle with some database interrogation.

Now, as all truly great systems men know, databases are very fallible, capricious and unpredictable. Sometimes they go down for no reason or function perfectly when they shouldn't, or perform differently on tasks that are completely routine. The true art of systems use is to regard them as very delicate beasties. That was the secret of Sam Kinkade, plus a few tricks I'd kept from the Company. I felt capable of working a little magic, so I had the coffee credited and found the nearest systemlink.

It was an old model; no voice recognition, just a battered old keyboard. Still, it would do. I placed my wrist identifier over the reader, logged in and looked at the systats. There was a lot of activity and that would make tracing the system failure a lot harder. I punched in the node and vector code of a program that had cost me two thousand credits from an old, alcoholic systems designer whose only memory after erasure was the location of a very special, hidden program. That remarkable piece of code caused the system to crash and in the last few moments of sentience while the protection was failing, it copied the files of anyone up to level eight. That should be high enough to get what I wanted — the files of Tyler's immediate boss; somebody that even Tyler had probably never met.

I placed in a wildcard identifier for Tyler's superior. Then, with trembling fingers (crashing systems still gives a thrill) I executed the program and watched as the network with its thousands of mainframes slowly died, wracked by the cancerous spread of confusion that the program unleashed. Finally, on the bitmapped image of the world map that showed the operational status of the various nodes, the last pixel faded out.

Of course it would be restarted within minutes, with much head scratching. But the fault would never be traced. The system was too complex. It could never know which of the millions of programs active at that moment, or what combination of them, actually caused the crash. Meanwhile, I knew that the information I needed would be safely in my disk area to peruse at my leisure. All I had to do was wait for the inevitable return of the system.

At that moment, I sensed something behind me and had half turned around when the butt of a blaster smashed into my temple, sending me crashing to the ground. As I lay there dazed, I was vaguely aware of someone stepping over me and manipulating the systemlink.

Suddenly, a blur of red hit him squarely in the back and he fell heavily, rolling for some distance before getting to his feet and running off. I was still pretty much out of it, but managed to stand and lean on the wall. Next to the systemlink I noticed an ice cool blonde in a red jumpsuit regarding me with some concern.

"Are you OK?" she said in a very husky voice.

"So you're my savior," I said feeling like the cat who got the cream. "What have I done to deserve this?"

"You're looking for a friend of mine I believe" she said. It all made some sense now.

"So you're 1139 Catalonia Boulevard," I said, noting to myself that James Tyler was a man of good taste.

"Yes. Pamela Aldiss is my name. Although you probably know that."

"No, I didn't, actually," I said. "Although if I'd known you could wear a jumpsuit like that, I would have made it my business to find out."

"You're very flattering Mr. Kinkade," she said with

Although the rest of my body wanted to secede from my stomach, I was beginning to get interested in this case. My only reservation was that experience had taught me to avoid Company business if at all possible.

"Look, McLusky," I said to the Bureau man, hoping to ease myself out of this one, "You know me. I have the wrong psychprofile for Company business and they know it. In fact, that's the reason I left it in the first place. I can't tolerate their linearity. Come to think of it… why can't they handle it themselves? Internal investigations are always much neater. Hell, why doesn't the Bureau handle it? Giving it to a private DI is a risky business."

McLusky appeared as if he wanted to reach through the phone and rip out my tonsils.

"Kinkade!" he roared. "You know damned well the Company threw you out and you were lucky they didn't erase you at the same time! The only reason they didn't was because they knew you were the best DI they ever had — screwy, but good. You've still got your memories because they wanted to keep you as a resource — to use whenever they needed some different kind of help."

Having got that out, McLusky began to settle down and his nose looked less like an old Soviet distress beacon.

"Listen," he said in a subdued tone, "this guy is good… very, very good. They can't trace him. You know how they think over there — in straight lines. But they think that your screwball logic might be able to find him. And apart from that, it isn't a request. You know your position. Your privacy level could be lowered like that," he said, snapping his fingers sharply. "You can only be monitored by level sevens right now, but in five seconds you could be a level one again. You won't be able to scratch your ass without the whole system knowing it."

McLusky was right of course. He knew it and I knew it. If they busted me to that level, every toilet cubicle had to be opened with my universal identifier, every food purchase involved it, every Ukrainian slammer… all of it on the system and available to anyone who wanted to look at it. It made me shudder.

"And remember this…" McLusky continued, "Tracking has been on the increase lately."

That was the final straw. Tracking had become the pastime for the modern pervert, invading lives and destroying them by denying the most basic elements of privacy. If a tracker selected me as his target, following me on the system wherever I went… It would be a nightmare. Some of them even took delight in predicting your movements and leaving obscene messages on the systemlink they thought you would use next. I knew I couldn't take that. Never again!

I rubbed my eyes, feeling very beaten all of a sudden.

"OK… I'll do it. Gimme his identifier and I'll see what I can do. No guarantees, though. If this guy is as good as you say, he might have already beaten the system."

McLusky nodded, apparently satisfied. As he tapped out the guy's code I headed for some coffee and decided that tomorrow would be a good time to start. In the meantime I had to rediscover what it was like to be human.

The next morning I logged into my systemlink and entered the identifier. He was a level six called James Tyler and he was Snow White. A traffic camera had caught him six months ago running a red light, but other than that there was nothing. The map of his auto use showed that he hadn't visited any known illegal establishments, but it did indicate a frequently visited apartment north of the stratoport. Probably his girlfriend, I reasoned. But then, who knew these days? DNA work regularly transformed men into women or vice versa, or things in between.

I made a note of the address and traced the last transaction he'd made. Two double scotches at a bar called the Purple Lizard in the rundown part of the Southside. And had he been ripped off! 20 credits each!

I grabbed my respirator, strapped on my blaster and headed for the hover-rail station. The smell of hydrocarbons would do me good.

To say that the Purple Lizard was a dive was like saying the sewer treatment plant had an odor. It was the basement of a rundown apartment building and it made you wonder where you left your lice repellent. It was a strange place for a Company man to visit.

As I descended the stairs a gigantic guy of Italian descent came out of the shadows and blocked my path. From the way the guy talked it was clear that he hadn't been behind the door when the brains were handed out. It sounded as if he wasn't even *near* the room.

"Sorry, mister," he said "but ain't nobody allowed ta have blasters in the Lizard. So gimme it or else I gotta bust ya."

I briefly thought about blasting the guy, but I knew that dinosaurs had small brains and you had to be a great shot or very lucky.

I handed over my piece and brushed aside a piece of black curtain, revealing the Lizard in all its glory. A couple of guys — probably unidentifieds — were playing magnetopool and drinking martian red. The bartender was an old guy with a lot of facial scars and big hamfists. All of them stared at me as I took my place at the bar.

"You got guts, anyway," said the bartender as I grabbed a stool.

"How's that?" I asked as I tapped a Cosmic Camel out of its pack and placed it on my lips.

"Well, we don't like upper levels in here. And in a minute, when me and those two guys feel like it, we're gonna bust your head open just for the fun of it," he said, looking very happy as he finished.

"Is that so?" I replied, taking a long drag on the Camel. "In that case, I just hope you guys are wearing blaster jackets."

"What blaster? Joey got it outside. I watched him!"

green check face down on the table and says, "Will they be anything else for ya'll tonight?" We grunt no and she says, "Well, ya'll have a good one now, y'hear."

Bobalouie pays for all of us without a second thought.

As we walk back out to the car, Riddle says: "You see there? My brother just bought three steaks at Hill's. Over forty dollars and he shrugged it off like you never would. That's why you owe it to yourself to go down to the bank in the morning and get your hands on every penny you have in the world and put it on Tampa—"

Bobalouie interrupts Riddle, saying: "Can't you understand? He's not going to bet on the game. He doesn't even like football."

"Like football?" says Riddle. "Who said anything about liking football? I'm talking about a business proposition. You don't think the people who own McDonald's eat there do you?"

The sun is coming up and I am very tired. I feel like lying in the back seat, but Bob beats me to it, so I decide to drive. Bob belches once and says, "What did you mean when you said I should be a biker? I resent the hell out of that." Then he is asleep. We climb out onto Congress Avenue on our way back to nowhere.

The cursor is blinking at me, waiting for me to add something. What can I? All I remember of that night is what is written there, which is to say that what I remember has become what I wrote, whether that was really what happened or not. It wasn't even that long ago, but it feels like another lifetime.

Why isn't Riddle here to remember for me? He could've remembered — he was good at little details. I should've asked when I had the chance; now it's too late.

Riddle says: "Don't mind him, he's crazy. Did I tell you that he just about got us into a fight? We stopped in this little town called Sanderson and…"

He stops and looks at me. "Did I tell you this already?"

I look at him and say, "Yeah, don't you remember?"

"No. In fact, I don't remember a lot of this. Maybe I'm losing my mind."

"It's just sleep deprivation," I say.

"Jesus, that's a relief, Stetson."

"Anyway, it was a long time ago," I say.

Riddle nods. "It sure as hell was."

We drive. After a few minutes, we are downtown and the sun is rising on our right, big and orange. I remember suddenly that there are things I wanted to know more about. I say, "Tell me more about the hawks."

Riddle's face brightens and he says: "What I might not have told you is that the most common raptor in the Chihuahuan desert is the Marsh Hawk. Did I tell you that?"

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Just a Company Man

P.R. MORRISON

The name's Kinkade… Sam Kinkade, Database Investigator. It began on a summer day in '26… April, I think. I remember it reasonably well because it was the first time in six years that the solar diffusion index had fallen below 5.1 and allowed the sun to be seen by the populace of L.A. Caused a lot of confusion, as I recall, and a few cases of retinal scarring amongst younger kids.

I'd stumbled into my office the night before with a dozen Ukrainian slammers under my belt and tried to catch a few hours sleep on the couch. It took all my willpower to prevent those little dissidents from staging a counter-revolution when the visiphone rang in the morning, raising me from semiconsciousness.

I crawled to the visiphone, noting before I hit the accept button that the call was being scrambled by the Federal Bureau of Database Investigation. Sure enough, the craggy face of Rick McLusky, the regional head of the FBDI sprang into view and pierced my eardrums with its opening remark.

"Kinkade," he said, "we've got another job for you. A big one this time."

"Great," I moaned in reply.

"What's wrong?" McLusky asked, clearly taken aback by my lack of enthusiasm. "You sick or something?"

"Sort of. What is it anyway? I've got no time for damned FBDI cases. You guys think it's big when some kid pisses on the vidiscanner in the john at the hover-rail center!"

"No, Kinkade… this time it's different. This time we got a renegade."

"So? Who hasn't? If I had 10 credits for every guy who had his universal identifier cut out of his wrist I'd be sitting in the Seychelles, lounging about on my gravity yacht. Look, can't you see I'm having trouble mapping onto reality at the moment?" I said, starting to look longingly at the vacuum sink in the corner of my office.

"Cut the crap, Kinkade," McLusky said suddenly. "This is no ordinary case. The guy was a dyed-in-the-wool Company man. Bluer than a laser blast and twice as straight… until now that is. The system hasn't recorded a transaction from him in over a week and the Board want him found. They don't like unerased Company men going renegade. It doesn't look good."

once. It is a canvas, about three feet tall and two feet wide, on which is painted a picture of a slatternly, sullen Latina in a red, low-cut, sleeveless dress with shoulder straps. She is barefoot and very brown. But what is very peculiar about this painting is that the canvas has been extravagantly bowed outward like a sail blown by a stiff wind from behind. The effect is obviously meant to suggest an advanced pregnancy not only of the woman but of the painting itself. I had seen the painting in a student art exhibit a year before and I even remembered the title: "The Holy Virgin."

"Do you like it?" Aurora says to me. "Steve painted it." She indicates a quiet, lanky man in his early thirties sitting cross-legged on the floor.

After a few minutes, Riddle glances at Bob, hulking larger than life here in this close room and obviously out of place, and decides it is time to go before something gets broken.

Before I know it, we're back in the car and on our way out to Hill's Cafe on South Congress.

I get up and go check the phone book. I haven't thought about Hill's for years. Still there. By then we were flagging. Deep, deep tiredness was really beginning to set in, but in spite of it, I remember Riddle was still geared up. I remember him like he was still here, leaning over the back of the front seat ranting about football.

I watch out the window as we roll lazily past the junk shops and neighborhood bars that line the lonely streets east of downtown. I notice an occasional straggler winding his way home from a party, but otherwise the streets are quiet and the only cars are the ones parked along the curb.

In the front seat, Riddle continues to rave at me, showing no signs of tiring. He's onto football now, he says:

"I'm starting the eighties with absolutely no money in the world. Do you hear me? *No money!* So you've got to do this. Go down in the morning and get as much money as you can out of the bank and put every penny on Tampa Bay in the NFC playoffs. I'm golden on this, believe me. I've been predicting it since the start of the season."

Something seems to flash by in the air between us.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Never mind. Finish what you were saying."

I'm not at all sure what this last part means, but that's what it says.

"I would stake my reputation and my tattered copy of *Tom Jones* on it if I'm not right."

"You mean that if I win this thing, I collect all of this money and if I lose I lose my hard-earned cash and get some nasty old doorstop of a book you want to get rid of anyway? Do I have that right?"

Riddle shrugs hopelessly and says to Bobalouie: "What can I say? No way he's going to take this deal. Can you believe it?" His eyes trace the air in the car and he says to me: "Tell me what you saw a minute ago. I think I just saw it again."

It's not here, but I remember saying to Bobalouie earlier in the evening: "I really see you as a biker. A bad-ass biker bouncer in some killer club on the eastside." And he got really mad. He was downright indignant and mentioned it several times during the evening. I think he thought he was a gentle, mellow type in spite of his appearance. I meant it as kind of a joke, but he took it entirely seriously. That might be why he doesn't say a damn word until we get to Hill's.

Five in the morning in Hill's Cafe. . .

This is where I lose the thread. It all runs together. I wonder when I typed this part. That night or later. Maybe I slept and woke up and typed it the next day with noon coffee and loud music. Or maybe I even had the damn typewriter with us in the car that night. We did things like that then, fictionalizing as we went along.

Five in the morning in Hill's Cafe, we are carefully attended by a wizened old waitress in classic rhinestone cat's-eye glasses. She seems to know Bob. We all order the same thing, down to the dressing on our salads.

"You boys been camping, have you?" she says.

"Yes ma'am," says Riddle. "Big Bend National Park."

"Well, that's real nice. I love the desert, myself. Do a little thing where I grow little cactuses and moss and things in little logs I collect and hollow out."

We all nod at her and she smiles and goes off. We grin at each other, but before we can even start talking again, she's back with our salads.

"So what were you boys doin' out there? Just sightseein'?"

I say: "They were collecting material for a book."

"You don't say," she says. "What kinda book would that be?"

Bob is staring at her with a distant, stoned look. I wonder if he is awake. Riddle's digging into his salad. I say, "It's a naturalist book about the birds and animals of the Trans Pecos region."

"Izzat so?" says the old woman, visibly impressed. "I'll gitchall some more ice tea."

Bobalouie points his fork at me and suddenly rumbles into speech for the first time in hours: "Don't think you can bullshit that old toadfrog. I'm tellin' you because I know. She don't hear a damn word you're sayin." He spears a fork full of salad and pokes it into his craw. "An she don't never change her underwear neither."

Riddle laughs so hard he starts to choke on his salad. Bobalouie has receded back into a Delphic silence, but he's watching his brother choke with an amused grin, obviously pleased to be the cause of such happiness.

The steaks arrive sizzling and they are just like we ordered them: Bob's is well done, mine is rare and Riddle slices off a piece of his, impales it on his fork and holds it out to me, "Ahhh, medium rare. Just like a steak should be."

We devour the food without further talk and I'm wondering how I'm going to pay for this twelve-dollar meal with three dollars in my pocket. The waitress leaves the lime-

way across the whole fuckin' — oh, excuse me — the whole damn state. All the way back from Big Bend. Ever been out there? Oh, it's beautiful country, sir. And we've been drinking all day. I guess I shouldn't tell you that, but it's true. Christ, you have to drink when you drive out there in West Texas, you can't survive any other way. Anyway, well, we've been looking around for our friend's house. . ."

I tune Riddle out, I figure he's sealed our fate now. I stare into the hypnotic spin of the red and blue flashers on top of the cop car. For a minute I forget how cold I am. I figure if I can keep still for a minute and not say anything, maybe the cop'll throw Riddle in the can for standing there on the street corner and trying to be honest and Bobalouie and I can go on home.

Then, son-of-a-bitch if the cop hasn't cracked a smile. A *smile!* And he's telling Riddle, "Well, I can see you fellas have had a little too much to drink. Are you sure you can find your way home now?"

I break for the car, my only hunch all night paid off. I had followed my mind and kept quiet and not said one single thing. Neither had Bobalouie, but then he hasn't said a word all night. Now I'm piling back into the car hoping my beer isn't cold.

Yes. That part is exactly as I remember it. Just the same way. They had driven all day from Big Bend, unhinged by the combined forces of drinking, drugs and the long road through the vast Trans Pecos. But I don't remember feeling nervous with the cop there. Just cold. Cold as freaking hell.

"Brrr. I'm cold. Aren't you cold?"

"It'll be warm in a minute."

Bobalouie fiddles with the heater controls. We're still looking for this woman Aurora's house. Some crazy artist friends that Riddle says are the only people he knows who never go to sleep.

"But are you cold?"

"Naw, not really. Maybe a little in my toes. It was ten degrees in the desert last night."

"What did you learn on your trip that you can use in your book?"

Book? I vaguely remember Riddle had it in his head to write a book. A book about bird watching. He rambled about it for months. He had written the first chapter, even: a whole chapter on binoculars, how to pick them out, what the different lens numbers meant. All that stuff that Riddle knew about. That was why we gravitated toward him. He knew about things the rest of us never even thought about. Science and nature and sports and food. Solid, physical things which, at that time, we thought we were too cerebral to think about. Things that I've learned to appreciate more since then. I wish I had asked more about those things when he was here, when I had the chance.

"What did you learn on your trip that you can use in your book?"

Riddle begins, "I learned that the second most abundant large raptor in the desert is the Marsh Hawk. There are four orders of hawkish predators with talons in the desert. They are one, falcons; two, buteos—buzzard hawks like the Red Tail; three, the accipiters. . ."

I think about getting up to find a bird book to check this, but keep reading instead.

". . .the true hawks, they are built like buteos with tails; four, kites, represented by one species, the Marsh Hawk. Doesn't it strike you as odd, Stetson, that the most abundant hawk in the Chihuahua desert is the Marsh Hawk? Yes, I can use all of that in the book. I can make it a parenthetical remark. It was ten degrees in the desert. Did I tell you that?" I nod, and he says, "Well, did I tell you that my brother slept in the car? In the car, that pigfucker."

Bobalouie looks over at Riddle and shakes his big head. Riddle continues to rave at me over the back of the front seat.

"He took a hit of acid this morning before we started back. Ten o'clock in the freaking morning. Do you believe that? We stopped at this place in Sanderson. . ."

Sanderson. I keep a map of Texas tacked to the wall over my desk. I stand up and check the tiny print of the index for Sanderson. K-8. There it is, right where it's suppose to be. Junction of 90 and 285, middle of nowhere.

". . .for coffee and his eyes are little slits. I'm scared to death he's going to freak out and push over a table or something. Nothing but mobile homes out there in the middle of the Trans Pecos, just a water tower with cars all around it and that's the whole damn place and Bob's trying to start a fight."

Bobalouie turns toward Riddle and I actually think he is about to say something, set the record straight, give his side of the story, when Riddle says, "Here's the place. Pull in here."

I flip ahead to find the next part that makes any sense: the part about Aurora. The painting was real. I remember that exactly. And Aurora was her name. But I don't remember any of the rest of it. Jesus. It's all in front of me and I have to say it happened, but damned if I remember it. I especially don't remember Bob being there with us. But he was with us all night so he had to be. I just can't remember. What else have I forgotten?

Riddle barges in without knocking. Nobody seems to mind. Several people are sitting on the floor of the small living room, but the only one I know is Aurora, a skinny woman with baggy jeans, who is an art major at the University. This is a coffee crowd and there are several cups sitting around their knees and ankles and a big crystal ashtray full of butts. There is a cloud of smoke in the air.

"Hi, everybody. Happy New Year! Riddle, I'm glad you came by," says Aurora.

"I thought it might be too late," says Riddle, pulling out a cigarette.

"No, not at all. How was your trip?"

Riddle starts in on his familiar patter we've been listening to all night so I take the tour of the living room. As I turn around, I am facing a peculiar painting which I recognize at

enormous profits on the venture by about a tenth.

Tim Helms picked up a few more credits by designing a live trap to capture the loose cats. Baited with an old-Earth weed called "catnip" (of which the Helms had a small supply), the traps were an immediate success. Recaptured animals were returned to their original owners with a caution and, of course, a somewhat more-than-nominal fee or simply sold as new, on the open market. Profits soared. Tim added catnip to the products that he and his wife would bring on their next trip, mentally rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the credits they would make. The lucky couple were back in business.

Tim and Theresa stood next to the now-released *Jupiter* getting ready to head out on the remainder of their somewhat delayed merchant foray. Hagedorn Twee, with a cat purring on each of his massive shoulders stood before them.

"I almost hate to do this," said Theresa. "But I do have something else you might be interested in, Merchant Twee. With all the ruckus over the cats, we didn't have time to show this to you."

"Yes?" asked Twee, expectantly.

"Okay, Tim," Theresa called out.

Tim released a white and brown-spotted animal with four legs, a short, pointy tail and a pair of droopy ears. To the delight of the two humans, the creature went immediately over and sniffed the big alien's foot. After a brief investigation, the little animal's ears perked up and its tail began to wag. It then put its two front legs up on the big alien's elephantine leg. The alien reached down in wonder to touch the small animal who began to lick the huge hand with a wet, pink tongue.

"What an adorable creature!" said Hagedorn Twee, with obvious Hearder delight. "What is it?"

"It's an Earth-native animal called a 'puppy,'" said Theresa.

Twee picked the dog up and laughed his booming, strangled-horse laugh as the little creature licked his pebbly face. Obviously, the two cats on the Hearder's shoulders weren't nearly as pleased as the Hearder with this most recent turn of events.

As if in anticipation, Theresa answered the Hearder's next question.

"Yes, Merchant Twee, it has been neutered…"

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Back From the West

MARK SMITH

"Go this way, asshole."

"No, you miserable simp."

"That's a one-way street for chrissakes."

For over a decade, through a dozen houses in two states, I have kept these eight pages: double-spaced, typed on the back of scrap paper, fastened together with a rusty staple. Some phrases and even paragraphs repeating like an echo, or like we really lived it more than once even that night. Now here they are again, beside my keyboard, the rambling, incoherent log of the night of January 1, 1980, the first night of a bygone decade. Start again, middle of page three.

"Go this way, asshole."

"No, you miserable simp."

"That's a one-way street, for chrissakes."

The car careens across three lanes of the empty avenue and up a one-way street. Almost immediately, a siren sounds behind us: the same cop that has followed us since we stopped the car in the middle of Guadalupe at three o'clock in the morning.

Bobalouie, huge and imperturbably drunk, has been driving. He pulls over to the curb cautiously. The stop lights at most of the intersections are set to flash at this hour. Guadalupe looks like a carnival with no people. None of us — Riddle in the front seat with his brother Bobalouie and me in the back — say anything.

Black cop, young guy, climbs out of his car and walks up to us, the faint edge of uncertainty or fear showing around his eyes. I'm thinking, this must be a textbook drill in the academy: carload of drunks cruising deserted streets in the middle of the night.

He asks for Bobalouie's license, which is forthcoming without a word. He shines his huge cop flashlight on it. "Let me see yours also, please," he says to Riddle. And then to me: "You too."

I reach for my back pocket.

"*Hold it!*" he says, thinking of guns, I guess, afraid he might already be dead. He says:

"You guys get out of the car. All of you."

He tells us to stand on the curb. It is January 1, 1980, and cold as hell. I'm wearing jeans and a shirt, no sweater or jacket. I start to put my hands in my pockets.

"*Don't* put your hands in your pockets." Then he adds, "Please." His politeness in the face of adversity is admirable. As I pull my hands slowly out of my pockets, I think, I should write to the mayor and commend this officer's damn fine manners. I forget to note his badge number.

Next thing I know, Riddle is jabbering like Lear's fool. He's saying,

"Lissen, sir, this is the way it is. . . We just drove all the

"Well, that explains it," interrupted T'verberg, sensing his opportunity. Finally, the combatants turned their attention to the sibilant tones of the little Lotharian. "These animals were sterilized by having their reproductive glands removed, a process traditionally referred to as 'neutering.' It is a simple and common procedure that renders the animal sterile and halts much of the undesirable behavior associated with reproduction. It must be emphasized, however, that this is a surgical procedure and doesn't change the animal genetically."

"What a barbarous operation,' said Kurr, in disgust.

"Not really," replied T'verberg. "It depends on your viewpoint. On Earth, where these animals originated, the genetic alterations that are practiced elsewhere in the Galaxy, are not only considered immoral, they are highly illegal. Earth's authorities are very strict about the genetic purity of their native animals. I'm not so sure it's such a bad idea."

"I still do not understand," said Hagedorn Twee.

"It's quite simple," said T'verberg. "When you had the felines cloned, the clones were grown from a single cell, usually an epithelial cell taken from the lining of the animal's small intestine." Here the two Hearder's looked at each other. Kurr wrinkled his huge nose in disgust. T'verberg continued. "This technique utilizes the animal's inherent genetic patterns. Simple surgery, such as the amputation of the sex glands, would have absolutely no effect on the animal's genes. If that were so, clones produced from an animal that had accidentally lost a foot or an eye would have the same defects. Such is not the case."

"What does it mean?" asked Hagedorn Twee.

"It means that the clones are all fertile," said the little Lotharian. "Who did this cloning job for you anyway?"

"We went to Jakob's Genetics, on Titus Five. He came highly recommended," said Twee, somewhat defensively. Now it was the Lotharian's turn to show disgust.

"More like he gave you a low, low price!" snorted T'verberg. "Jakob Hochsteter is an amateur, nothing more than a part-time gene hacker!" He shook his round, pink head. "You went to Jake the gene jockey. No wonder you're in such a mess!"

"What are we to do?" asked Twee, intertwining his digits in agitation. One of the objects of his discomfort, a kitten, was even then rubbing affectionately against the Hearder's double chins. He reached over absently, to stroke the little animal. It began to purr audibly.

"There are a number of reputable genetic engineers who may be able to help you," said T'verberg, "but I'm afraid it's going to cost."

The two Hearders looked at each other. After a few moments, Twee's huge shoulders drooped visibly. They looked resignedly at the Lotharian and nodded their huge lopsided heads reluctantly.

Genetic engineers from Cornucopia Genetic Services scratched their heads when confronted with the problem but, after a short consultation, came up with an elegant solution. After a three-week waiting period the head engineer, a middle-aged, uncharacteristically paunchy Lotharian named Stimon P'teragon presented the Hearders and the Helms with the answer.

"This should solve your problem," said the sleek Lotharian as he handed Hagedorn Twee a small neoplex vial.

"What is it?" asked Twee, looking somewhat doubtful. Obviously the solution to such a huge problem as theirs could never come in so small of a package.

"It is a constructed feline rhabdovirus," came the smug reply.

"A what?" asked Tim Helms.

"It is a virus that will only infect a terrestrial cat. We have designed it to infect and destroy the gonads which will render the animals sterile. It is also non-antigenic so the animal's immune system cannot fight off the infection."

"That is all well and good," said Ottobon Kurr, "but what about the attacks on our priceless Nardeezy Dragons?"

"Ahhh," smiled P'teragon, showing his flat, herbivorous teeth, "here is where the extra cost comes in. The virus also affects the olfactory apparatus of the infected animals in a subtle way that makes the Nardeezy dragon smell like something inedible. This is also the method by which the virus is spread, much like the human cold or the Hearder flux."

"The animals must not be killed!" said Kurr adamantly. Hearders were good a being adamant.

"There is no danger to the infected animals. Once the target tissues have been attacked the virus becomes dormant until it encounters fresh, uninfected tissue. This extends your protection indefinitely."

"Will it work?" asked Twee.

"It is guaranteed," said P'teragon.

"Just a minute," said Tim.

"Yes?" said P'teragon.

"What if one of these infected cats somehow gets back to Terra? What's to protect all the cats on my homeworld."

"That is a good question, Mr. Helms," replied P'teragon, "but Cornucopia Genetics has thought of that possibility. It is just another of the reasons that we offer the best service of this kind in the Quadrant. None of our engineered viruses will survive the jump through hyperspace. Once the virus has replicated inside its animal host, it will fall apart in Whitney pseudospace."

Tim nodded his head in approval.

"One more thing," said Stimon P'teragon.

"Yes?" asked Twee.

"Stay away from gene jockeys. They're nothing but trouble."

The Cornucopia people were as good as their word. Within a few months, there were still just as many feral cats on Heard's World, but all of them had a mild case of the sniffles and none of them were reproducing. The treatment had not come cheaply but, still, the costs had only cut Twee's

and carefully locking the door. Ottobon Kurr was already there, looking, if possible, even more upset than his somewhat larger brother-in-law. The two Hearders were both sweating, or something much like it. Fortunately, Hearder biochemistry is somewhat different from human and the atmosphere of the office had taken on a fragrance somewhat reminiscent of nutmeg and basil, which didn't bother the humans in the least.

"Something most unfortunate has happened," said Hagedorn Twee, still obviously upset.

"Just what is the problem?" asked Theresa.

Twee motioned with one of his large, blue three-digited forepaws to Kurr, who was across the room.

Ottobon Kurr reached into a small cargo box that was down on the floor, next to his huge, black hind hoof. There was no mistaking what he pulled out.

"Where in all of space did you get a kitten?" said Theresa, as the little animal climbed up Ottobon Kurr's arm, its sharp, little claws not affecting the thick, scaly hide of the Hearder in the least. The little beast began to purr loudly as it rubbed itself luxuriantly under the big alien's chins.

"There are now at least twenty-four immature sol-system cats like this one on Heard's World," said Twee, mopping his narrow forehead with a large ultravelvet swab. "And it looks like there is the potential for many more."

"We're ruined!" ejaculated Kurr, his eyes raised to the ceiling. "Ruined!"

"How can this be?" asked Theresa, ignoring Kurr's outburst.

Hagedorn Twee couldn't meet her eye. "We had the two original animals cloned. There are now two thousand copies of each. We sold them, as quickly as we got them, for five thousand credits apiece." He gave an embarrassed shrug, an action that almost made the floor move. "We made an enormous profit."

Theresa shook her head in disbelief.

The Hearder brought his triple gaze back to the humans. "But, within a few months some of the clones began behaving strangely—irrationally. We did not suspect that it was reproductive behavior until it was too late. So far, at least four of them have reproduced and many others appear about to."

"You had them cloned?" said Theresa. "That was not a part of our original bargain."

"Check the contract, Captain Helms," said Kurr. "Cloning was not mentioned. As such, it was not strictly forbidden."

"You shouldn't have cloned them, Merchant Twee," said Tim.

"There is more," said Hagedorn Twee.

"We're ruined!" shouted Kurr, again. "Ruined!"

"You mean this gets worse?" asked Theresa.

"Yes," said Ottobon Kurr, somewhat calmed after his latest outburst, "several twelves of the original four thousand clones have escaped and gone into the wild where they may be reproducing even as we speak. You see what I mean? We're ruined! Ruined!"

"That's not so bad," said Theresa, over the wailing. "Your species seems to really get along well with cats." The two Hearders looked nervously at one another.

"They seem to have developed a taste for the flesh of the Nardeezy Dragon," said Twee, miserably. "Nardeezium, even in crude form, has the same effect on the animals sexual performance as it does on yours. Not only are they eating some of the dragons, they are probably reproducing more rapidly as a result.

"Couldn't you just destroy the wild ones?" asked Theresa. Both of the aliens looked horrified. Kurr made a strangled noise.

"Out of the question!" Twee was almost shouting. "Hearders do not take the life of any creature! It is against our most basic principles."

"It appears that we have no choice," said Kurr, "We are not going down to ruin alone. You humans are certainly liable. We shall have to call in the 4th Quadrant authorities. You may consider your ship impounded and quarantined, and yourselves confined to the ship until this situation is resolved! Good day!"

Tim looked at his wife and partner, thinking that it had been nice to own their own ship, even if it was for just a few months. They went back to their grounded, impounded ship and waited nervously for the two and a half days that would be required for the authorities to arrive from Quadrant Headquarters on New Ceylon.

The Quadrant Supervisor for Hazardous Flora and Fauna was a being by the name of Aalber T'verberg, a Lotharian. Lotharians were short, slender, bipeds native to Lothar, a small, neat planet in the first quadrant. Their bodies are covered with short yellowish fur, except for their heads, which are bare and pink. Lotharians are intelligent but not inquisitive and eminently fair, if somewhat boring. They are also very good with numbers. In fact, they are a race of natural certified public accountants.

In the Regional Office for the Importation of Non-indigenous Flora and Fauna an argument was in progress. Again the atmosphere was tinged with the smell of basil and nutmeg.

"I can't believe that you had those animals cloned," Tim Helms, was saying, with some heat. "We never intended for that to happen."

"We have gotten off the subject, Master Helms," replied Ottobon Kurr, with equal heat. "As the Regional Officer for the Importation of Hazardous Flora and Fauna, I wish to know why the cloned animals are reproducing. You swore that the originals were sterilized."

"Is that correct?" lisped Aalber T'verberg, trying without much success to take control of the situation.

"That's right," said Theresa. "They were neutered."

"Why, then, are the clones reproducing?" asked Kurr.

"I'm not sure, honey. Not a lot. Let's see, ten credits for each cat, five credits for immunization tabs and another twenty apiece for neutering—I'd say forty credits each max. Total, about eighty."

Tim thought for a moment. "What do you think about four hundred apiece?"

"The only two animals of their kind in the system? The wealthiest merchant in the sector? Come on, Tim, think big! I say, no less than twenty-five hundred for the pair. Hmmm… I think we should start at five thousand!"

"Five thousand! That's a fourth of what we still owe on this old tub! With what we stand to make on the rest of this trip, we could be in damned good shape!"

"That's kind of what I thought," said his wife, smiling. "The sooner we pay off the *Jupiter*, the sooner we can get down to making some real credits!"

"You're the salesman on this team, Terry. Do your stuff!" said Tim, standing up to embrace her, his injury apparently forgotten.

Hagedorn Twee's first offer took Theresa completely by surprise. It was for ten thousand credits — apiece! Fortunately she recovered her composure in time to haggle the price up a little more. They finally settled on twelve-thousand- five hundred each, but only after Hagedorn Twee extracted the Helms' promise not to bring any other cats into the system. It seemed like a strange request, but the lucky husband-wife team could more than triple their proceeds for the entire voyage and pay off the loan on their old but still-serviceable cargo ship. They agreed.

Since there were offworld animals involved, the legal work on transferring ownership of the two cats had to be handled by the Regional Office for the Importation of Non-indigenous Flora and Fauna. Theresa met Hagedorn Twee at the huge Regional Government Complex in downtown Heardhome, the spaceport and capital city of Heard's World. The district rep was another of the big easy-going Hearders, Ottobon Kurr, who, it just so happened, was a relative of Hagedorn Twee. His brother-in-law, or the Hearder equivalent, in fact.

"Do you have the papers, Captain Helms?" said Ottobon Kurr in his deep, booming Hearder's voice.

"I have them right here," said Theresa, putting the documents in front of the official. Kurr read from the documents.

"Let me see… Planet of origin: Earth, Sol system…. Classification: Mammal…. Species: Felius domesticus… Immunizations: okay…. Tests for antibodies to contagious diseases—all negative. Good, good! Have the animals been sterilized? They cannot be allowed to remain here unless they have been sterilized."

"Turn the certificate over, Representative Kurr," said Theresa . "They were neutered before they left earth."

"Everything appears to be in order," said Ottobon Kurr. "Place your palmprint here."

Hagedorn Twee was the proud owner of the only two cats on Heard's World, a planet with five hundred million inhabitants. Theresa and Tim Helm were considerably wealthier than before. Everyone, including the two cats, was deliriously happy.

The *Jupiter* returned to the Heard's World system some ten months later with a fresh cargo of hard-to-get and expensive items for sale and trade. In spite of her age, the old ship shifted smoothly out of Whitney psuedospace, fading easily back into normal space-time some three AU's out from Heard's world. Ten months ship's time, because of the vagaries of the Whitney Overdrive FTL System that powered the old *Jupiter*, translated to about twenty-two months of Heard's World time. Within two weeks, the little trader ship would leave with a load of local products for sale to the planets on *Jupiter*'s route through the inner system stars of the galaxy. These products including Hearder arts and crafts and, most importantly, several hundred small, carefully packed vials of Nardeezium.

Nardeezium was a rare and valuable drug made from the skin excretions of the rare and exotic Nardeezy dragon. "Dragon" was somewhat of a misnomer since the animals were really more like small, slow-moving salamanders than dragons. Not only were the animals sluggish, they were also stupid and slow to reproduce. What's more, they had stubbornly resisted all attempts to get them to thrive in captivity. As a result, the fastidious little beasts were carefully tended in special preserves and their precious sweat was very carefully harvested.

Nardeezium was the most valuable substance on Heard's World, and very important to her economic well-being. The drug was non-addictive and gave a mild high when used sparingly but its most sought-after feature was that it greatly increased the intensity of the mammalian sexual experience. As you might expect, demand far exceeded the supply among the wealthy on the human-settled planets.

Theresa and Tim were hailed by Hagedorn Twee within five minutes of groundfall. It's usually difficult for members of different races to read another's emotions, but even over the videocom, both Theresa and Tim could tell that Merchant Twee was agitated. Maybe it was the nearly painful volume of a voice that was, even normally, too loud. Or maybe it was the fact that Twee was sweating.

"I must talk to you immediately, Captain Helms. It is a matter of the utmost gravity!"

"Please, calm down, Merchant Twee," said Theresa. "We'll meet with you as soon as possible." The Hearder seemed to relax, but only a little. They signed off.

"Tim, he looked really upset," said Theresa, nervously. "He was sweating! Tim, do Hearders sweat?"

The two humans got a groundcab and went directly to Hagedorn Twee's huge merchant complex, where they were immediately ushered into Twee's private office. Twee looked up and down the corridor suspiciously before closing

Neuterality

PHILLIP NOLTE

"Such beautiful animals! So agile, so graceful! What are they?" One of the animals in question was, even then, rubbing its forehead on the rough, pebbly chins of Hagedorn Twee.

"They're called 'cats,' " said Theresa. "They're natives of old Earth, Sol system. They're quite common on Human worlds. You mean you've never seen one before?"

"Perhaps in a holovid, Captain, but never in real life. The body covering is so soft and so subtly colored!" Twee, a big blue-skinned native of Heard's World, was completely taken by the little creature. Apparently the feeling was mutual. Theresa could hear the loud purring of the little cat from clear across the room. The Hearder made an instant decision. "I simply must have them! Both of them."

Captain Theresa Helms of the merchant ship *Jupiter* quickly ran down a mental list of reasons why she shouldn't sell the little animals and found that list to be surprisingly short. Both of the animals — the lovely little female calico currently rubbing up against the formidable chins of Merchant Twee and the long-haired male tabby rubbing affectionately against the alien's scaly, tree-like legs — belonged to her and her husband Tim, who was also her business partner and the only other crew member of the *Jupiter*.

On the plus side, the little animals were a welcome diversion during the long periods of inactivity that were part of FTL travel and they did find and destroy the occasional pest that somehow slipped onboard no matter how rigid the inspections, but Theresa and Tim had found that the cats required a lot of attention and often asked for affection at inopportune times. There had also been a couple of incidents during free-fall regarding their food and litter that had been downright unpleasant. Besides that, about halfway through their current voyage she had begun to suspect that Tim was allergic to the little beasts.

"I'm afraid that you wouldn't like the price, Merchant Twee. We transported them a long distance and both my husband and I have become rather attached to them."

"Attached?" said the big alien, lifting the little calico up and looking it over carefully with all three of his large green eyes. Eyes that, coincidentally, had vertical pupils, just like those of the contented little beast he was examining.

Theresa chuckled, "Sorry, Merchant Twee," she said, shaking her head. "'Attached' means emotionally bound. My apologies." The big blue alien laughed, a sort of booming chortle that sounded quite a bit like a horse in distress.

"Never fear about the price, Captain Helms. Some things are beyond mere credits. These animals are simply wonderful! My offspring will adore them. Name your price!"

"I have to talk it over with my partner. We didn't get them with the intention of selling them," said Theresa. Of course, that was before we knew that someone wanted to buy them at an extravagant price, she thought. "We'll give you an answer tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"That will be fine, Captain Helms. If you do not mind, I would like to keep the small animal with me for a while yet. The rumbling sound it makes is very soothing."

Together, Theresa and the big, blue, amiable Hearder checked off the lists of cargo allotted to the Hearder merchant. All the while the little female cat sat contentedly on the Hearder's broad shoulders, next to his lopsided head, purring loudly.

With the day finally over, the docks quiet, and the ship sealed up for the night, the two humans sat down in *Jupiter*'s small stateroom to discuss the day's business before bed. Theresa flopped her slight frame down in a soft lounger next to the computer station where Tim was checking over the days business. She ran one of her delicate hands through her short black hair. Her husband, by way of contrast, was a large, blond Nordic type, gone a little to fat, who was surprisingly graceful in spite of his size. He typed in a last notation, hit the return and swivelled his chair around to face his wife.

"Not a bad day at all, Hon," he said, as he stretched and yawned. "How're you doin'?"

"Not bad. In fact, I had an interesting conversation with Hagedorn Twee today," she said. "One that could make us a lot of credits."

"Hey, makin' credits is what we're here for!" he said eagerly. "As long as it's not too illegal! What've you got, Terry? I'm all ears."

"He wants to buy our cats."

"Huh? Our cats? I thought you said something about a lot of credits?" Tim's look could only be described as disappointed.

"Let me finish! You wouldn't believe it, Tim. I've never seen anything like it! Those two cats were all over him. I don't know, maybe it's the high body temperature of the Hearders or some subtle scent that humans can't detect, but those cats just adored him!" Somewhat mollified, Tim got to the root of the question.

"How much?"

She tried not to sound too excited. "He said, and I quote, 'Never fear about the price, Captain Helms!'" Tim came halfway out of his chair and winced as he bumped his knee on the computer console.

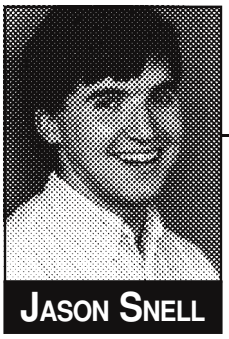
"Say again?" asked Tim, rubbing his wounded knee.

"He said that money was no object."

"Sold!" said Tim. He gave Theresa a calculating look. "How much do you think we can get?"

"Well, considering that we transported them all the way from Earth and that they'd be the only two animals of their kind in this entire planetary system, I think the price should be high. Besides, Hagedorn Twee is one of the wealthiest merchants on the planet."

"What did we pay for the cats, Terry?"



JASON SNELL

First*Text* Changes...

After a long summer filled with plenty of changes for us here at *InterText*, I can honestly say that it's good to be back.

Since I wrote last, it's been quite a ride. I sent out the issue and promptly packed up my stuff in a U-Haul truck and made the long drive from San Diego to my home in Northern California. Once there, I spent a day unpacking and promptly went to work as a reporter for the *Union Democrat* newspaper.

As you might imagine, that pretty much ate up my summer. I still occasionally logged in to my computer account in San Diego from home, updating the *InterText* mailing list and receiving a few story submissions. The relatively slight size of this issue is partially due to my absence from electronic communication for most of this summer. Hopefully now that I'm back in touch, the submission numbers will pick up.

Speaking of being back in touch, let me explain my situation now. I'm beginning my first of two years at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, where I'll end up receiving a Masters of Journalism. In addition to the grind of my classes (including Journalism 200, the core course and supposedly the school's hardest), I'm also working as a Teaching Assistant in Berkeley's Mass Communication program. Undergraduates, now might be a good time to run for your lives.

Oh, and editing *InterText* on top of all of that. We'll see how it goes.

In any event, my new internet mail address is *jsnell@ocf.Berkeley.edu.* You can also still send mail to *intertxt@network.ucsd.edu* for the time being, and that's where the FTP site is still located.

For Geoff Duncan, my assistant editor, this summer marked the end of his job at Oberlin College. He's currently trying to track down a job in the computer-rich realm of Seattle. As it is, he's working in Ohio as a freelance Macintosh consultant. If he ends up in Washington, I might actually even get a chance to meet him, since a friend of mine goes to school at the University of Washington.

So this is the beginning of the second phase of InterText, and the nature of the magazine may change along with the changes going on in our lives. I hope that our readers will be able to help us along, continuing to submit stories and helping out in other ways. (One of those ways would be if there are readers who use Aldus Freehand or Adobe Illustrator to make PostScript illustrations… I've got a few old Mel Marcelo graphics around, including this issue's cover, but they're limited in number and I'd like to have other artists, if at all possible. I know PostScript artists are out there — witness the nice covers that *Quanta* has had recently.)

I've got a few ideas for different ways *InterText* might change in the future, including the possibility of distributing printed editions or disks with the issues on them, both on a cost-recovery basis. I've also got an idea for a "theme issue" of the magazine, which might come to pass by early next year.

Oh, and two proud notes: *InterText* won two awards over the summer. The magazine was named first runner-up for the Disktop Publishing Association's Digital Quill Award for best Literary *(what,* me *literary?)* Publication, and I was named as one of four winners of the San Diego Supercomputer Center's 1992 Creative Computing Awards because of *InterText*.

In the Disktop award race, we were up against tough international competition, including *Quanta* (which earned a second runner-up award), and I'm very proud that we were even given a mention. Congratulations to Del Freeman, Editor of *Ruby's Pearls*, the winner of the award. I've seen a few issues of Del's magazine and will try to get more information about it to include next time.

I should also mention that another Disktop award — this one for first runner-up for Best Computer/Technical Publication — went to our friend Rita Rouvalis, for editing *EFFector.* Rita, of course, also edits *CORE.*

The SDSC award usually goes to high-tech science and math projects, as well as computer music projects; it was nice to see something like this magazine get some recognition. Much thanks to Hassan Aref and the rest of the awards committee at the San Diego Supercomputer Center.

Before I go, I thought I'd share a brief mail message I received over the summer from a professor of mine, Wade Chambers. He's from Deakin University in Australia, but was visiting UCSD when I took a class of his in science writing (Warren Ernst's "One Person's Junk…" was a product of that class.)

```
Hi! Sorry to be so long getting back to you. By
now you've probably gone off surfing for the summer.
My assistant Andre is a happy subscriber to your
electronic magazine, which you mentioned but which I
didn't pay much attention to at the time. However I
was most impressed when he showed me your picture in
his files. And he in turn was impressed when he heard
you were in my class at UCSD. (That is, I think my
status went up a notch or two.)
```

I'm starting to wonder just how small a world this is, and just how many people see *InterText.* I know the magazine's on CompuServe now, but it's also been turning up in the weirdest places. If you get *InterText* by some means other than mail from me, FTP, or CompuServe, I'd appreciate it if you'd drop me a line, either via email or real-live mail, at the address listed in the indicia on page two.

Well, that's enough from me. Until next time, enjoy this somewhat-truncated issue. By next time things should be a bit more settled. They'd *better* be!

InterText

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 1992 VOLUME 2, NUMBER 5

CONTENTS

First *Text:* *Changes*
JASON SNELL **3**

SHORT FICTION

Neuterality
PHILLIP NOLTE *(nolte@idui1.csrv.uidaho.edu)* **4**

Back From the West
MARK SMITH *(mlsmith@tenet.edu)* **8**

Just a Company Man
P.R. MORRISON *(swkmorri@nuscc.nus.sg)* **11**

The Long Way Home
P.R. MORRISON *(swkmorri@nuscc.nus.sg)* **15**

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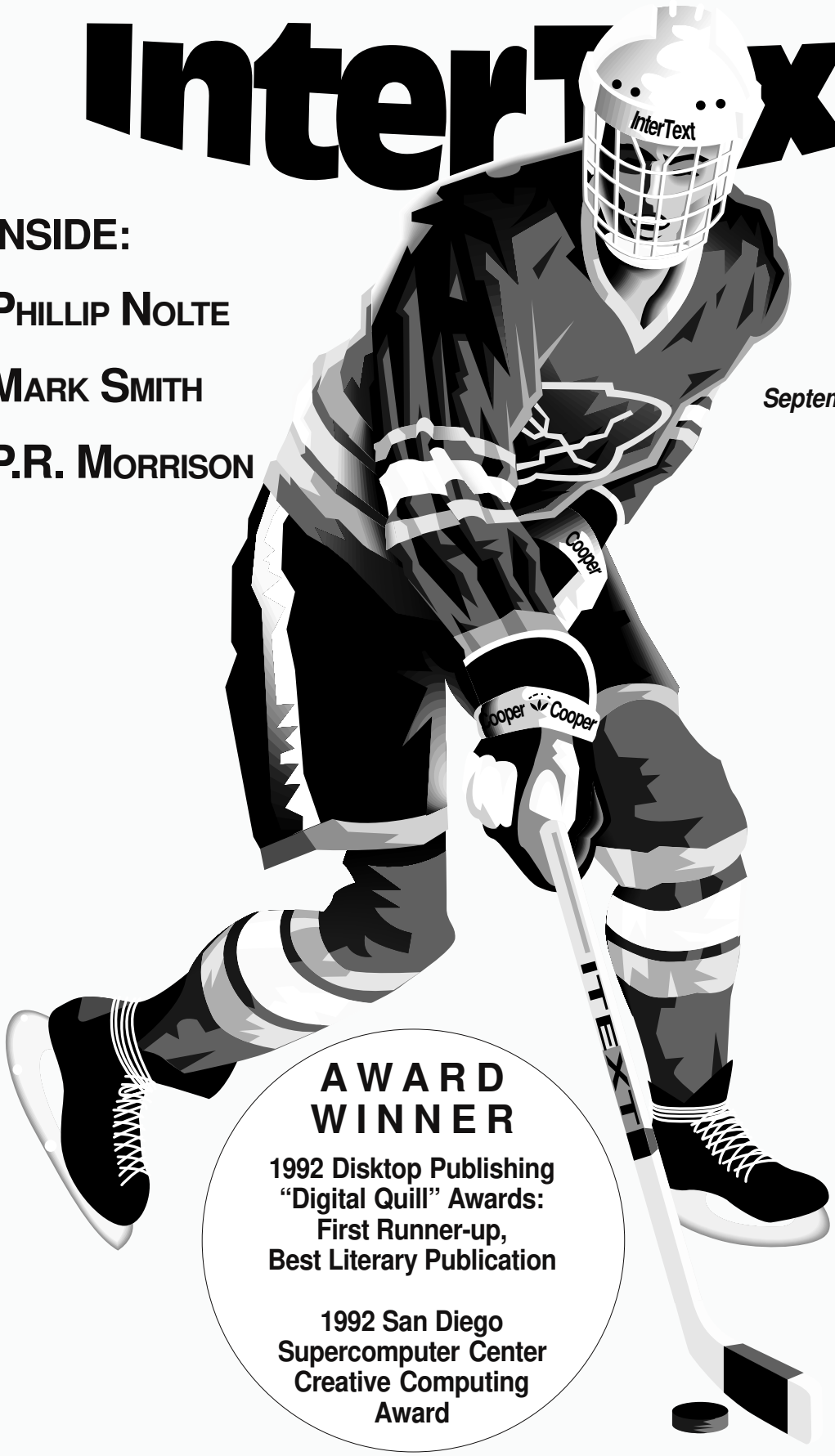
Our next issue is scheduled for November 15, 1992.

InterText



INSIDE:

PHILLIP NOLTE

MARK SMITH

P.R. MORRISON

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September–October 1992

AWARD WINNER

1992 Disktop Publishing "Digital Quill" Awards: First Runner-up, Best Literary Publication

1992 San Diego Supercomputer Center Creative Computing Award