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DREAMSTOCK

BY DOROTHY WESTPHAL

•When you drop down that money for a haircut, you're paying for a lot more than scissors and shampoo.

"A STOCK OF DREAMS?"

I watched his practiced hands deftly strop the razor a few more times before he turned his attention to my foam-drenched stubble. "Yeah, that's right; if you really want to know what my most important piece of equipment here is, that would be it."

I had asked the question idly, just because I wasn't in the mood to listen to this guy chatter about TV or yesterday's Giants' fiasco. It was the first time I'd come into the shop; I was starting to wonder if it had been a mistake.

"All right, I guess I'd better explain that." The chill on my cheek told me the blade was starting its first run.

"You see, everybody's got something they'd like to talk about, but they don't know how to get started. Say, some old geezer comes in here, looking worried and sick. You wonder if he just went to his doc or something, got real bad news. Well, if he did, he might wanna talk about it; but I can't say, 'Well, how's about it? Do you think there's life after death?' "

"I just make up something; you can say you dream about anything. Nobody thinks anything about it."

I started to grin, then caught myself before the blade could catch the fold of my cheek.

"What I do is, I have a stock of dreams. I mean, I just make up something; you can say you dream about anything. Nobody thinks anything about it. And who's to say if you really did dream it? Just to break the ice. So I might say to this guy: 'Had a real strange dream last night — thought I saw my father. And you know, he's been gone near ten years now.' Then I'd go on with this line about seeing a light, meeting old friends and so on. Then I say 'Whaddya think of that? Do you think it could really happen?'"

He flipped a bladeful of suds into the sink. I was getting interested.

"Young kid came in yesterday, maybe 13, 14 years old. Looked nervous. Told me he wanted something really special. Kept looking in the mirror. Know what I finally told him? I said I had a dream the night before about somethin' happened over 40 years ago. I was dreaming about my first date!" He chuckled. "Well, I hit the nail on the head, all right. I told him I was so scared I was going to do somethin' stupid, then it ended up the girl was the one knocked over her Coke! Gave me a chance to be grown-up and mature; I jumped up and gave her my napkin. Said, 'Don't worry; I do that all the time!' Well, that gave the kid something to think about. He finally said, 'Well, I'm taking this girl out tonight, and she's real popular. I was really worried about it. But I think it's going to be OK!' "

By this time my face was enveloped by a steaming towel. I thought I'd heard the last of the Stock of Dreams, but he had one more.

"Woman came in the other day with her little boy; said it was his first time in a real barbershop. I believe it. It's a real shame what some people do to their kids with a pair of old scissors, just to save a buck. Or maybe she thought a real male barbershop would be an unsavory influence on the kid. Anyway, I could see the kid was scared stiff. What am I, a dentist? So this time I did it different. I said, 'You know, I had a funny dream last night. There was this little boy looked kinda like you, but he was magical. He could talk to all the dogs and cats in his neighborhood, and he could fly!' Well, right away the kid's eyes bugged out, and he looked up at me with his face shining, ready for more. We were off!"

I left a good tip; he earned it. I hadn't been entertained like that in years.

I didn't go back to that neighborhood for several years, but one day I had to call on a customer nearby and thought I ought to spruce up a bit first. The shop was still there, and walking in, I saw the same guy, working on some young dude's blow-dry cut. He nodded at me without any recognition as I sat down with a *Life* magazine.

"With you in a minute!"

As he clipped the cloth around my neck and reached for his beaver-bristled brush, he looked at me close, then started: "Had a real strange dream last night — thought I saw my father."

DOROTHY WESTPHAL westphal@iscnvx.lmsc.lockheed.com

Is a technical writer by trade. This is her first published work of fiction.

"That is correct. They had to be hospitalized. They were very lucky to have survived at all. You do not cross the union in Japan. And the union does nothing for the workers. That is just the way it is."

YUKI OCCUPIED THE DRIVER'S SEAT OF THEIR RENTED CAR on the return trip back to the hotel. He was tired, but like many of the Japanese white-collars, he had a strange knack for remaining awake and attentive whatever the situation. Tom, meanwhile, consoled himself with watching the specks of rain form on the windshield. He would schedule their flight before fading off to sleep. Better to leave in the morning than have to face Kawamata with only an ideological explanation.

"So did we find the truth?"

"What do you think?"

Yuki shrugged, "I think it's bad. I never really knew how much is secret."

"Yeah, well, you learn something new every day."

"What are you going to put in your report?"

Tom shook his head and sighed. "If we do this partnership, it's going to mean copying Nissan's labor policies in the States."

"It will lift the company's profits, yes?"

He said it with a smirk, and Tom grinned, "Yeah. If it actually works, it'll lift profits quite a bit, but it'll also drop working standards right down the cess pit."

"Drop and lift," mused his Japanese friend. "Just like that machine. But what do you care about working standards? You're an executive, not a laborer." And then he laughed. It was his teasing laugh, as if inviting the American to say something stupid. But it contained a hidden edge, just barely discernible, as though lurking somewhere within the folds of that laughter there was someone crying, someone pleading to be let out.

"I may be an executive, Yuki, but I'm also an American."

"An American?"

"Yes... a fat, lazy, stupid American. And we stick up for our own."

Yuki laughed again, this time high-pitched and merry, and Tom imagined that Yuki understood what he meant. Perhaps he could understand because he'd seen both sides, the good and bad of each culture. It afforded him an interesting choice, to decide where his destiny would lay.

Unfortunately for Ada, not all people had that choice. And look how he'd ended up.

JIM VASSILAKOS jimv@ucrengr.ucr.edu

Is an MBA graduate of the University of California, Riverside campus. He drives a tan Nissan pickup and writes in his spare time. This story is based on an article by John Junkerman titled "We Are Driven," published in the August 1982 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine.

"Tell Suji that we are very grateful for his hospitality and that what we have seen so far will please our directors back home... that we can look forward to an era of prosperity between our two companies."

The Japanese executive smiled and nodded, drinking his glass of sake in one gulp. Tom did likewise.

"There is one small matter, however. I will need some statistical details for the report. Personnel department records."

"He says to send your request through the headquarters."

"No... it's important that the research be conducted first-hand. If he could tell me the password to the personnel database, that should suffice. We could conclude our work here tonight and make the morning flight."

Yuki translated, and Kawamata listened intently, a slight furrow forming between his eyes.

"Tell him that if we're going to be partners, we might as well start trusting each other."

Armed with the password, written on a small restaurant napkin, Tom entered Nissan's personnel database from back at his hotel room. Yuki just sat on the sofa chair, watching the television with a tired yawn.

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"The truth. You think you can get us to 1-11-15 Kita?"

THE PLACE WAS DARK AND RUN DOWN, THE DIM LIGHT OF tall actinic lamps shimmering in icy circles along the rain-spotted street. The flat they were looking for was situated on the third floor of the building, its entrance nestled between the stairwell and the door to a corner suite. Tom knocked lightly, stepping back as the door opened. The woman on the other side seemed surprised, which was natural enough, and Tom let Yuki do the talking until the man came. He was in his sixties, sparse white hair covering most of his scalp, and he drooped his head in a manner which suggested that he was more than a little saddened that his evening was being disturbed by a pair of suits.

"Tell him that we only want to ask a few questions."

The man kept shaking his head, muttering a fluid stream of gibberish.

"He says he knows nothing."

"He sure talks a lot for a guy who knows nothing."

"Ah... let me rephrase. He says he knows who we are and that he has nothing to say."

"Look, Mr. Kayama. Either you answer my questions, or I'll tell your employer you were rude to me. Your choice."

The old man shut up, detecting from the tone of the American's voice that he'd better listen close to the translation. Then he shuffled to the side, directing one arm toward the flat's interior.

Like many Japanese homes, his place was about the size of a studio apartment. It had a small kitchen and bath tacked on, white, wall plaster peeling in the cold, moist air, and only one window for ventilation.

Tom made himself a seat on the wood floor, directing his polished leather shoes to the corner of the room where Mr. Kayama's grease-stained, work boots wearily resided.

"I read your personnel file. You've been working at Oppama for a long time."

He nodded, then shrugged as if to ask, "What of it?"

"Sit down, Mr. Kayama. This won't take long."

The man complied, bending his brittle knees with considerable strain.

"You were there during the strike. According to your file, your salary dropped about three months later. You have missed every opportunity for promotion since, and you are now making less than workers with comparable seniority. Considerably less. I want to know why."

"He says to ask his union."

"I'm asking you."

Kayama shrugged again, his deep gray eyes finding some corner of the room and hitching to it. Then he began to talk, and despite the ready translation, all Tom could hear in his head was the old man's coarse and tired voice.

"There was a shop-floor meeting... a union meeting. I spoke out... told Shioji, our local boss, that the strike had accomplished nothing. The rules keeping the machines on regardless of circumstance had not changed. Wages had not improved. Work hours, the speed of the assembly line, demands for overtime... all the same. After the meeting, I was taken aside by several of Shioji's men. They told me that I was a fool, that the strike was not because of Ada. It was because of an internal power struggle. Shioji's boss had to flex his muscles to command personal respect from management. The strike had nothing to do with Ada except that his death was a suitable pretense."

He was more than a little saddened that his evening was being disturbed by a pair of suits.

"What about his family? Did they get any compensation?"

The old man smiled, then began to chuckle quietly.

"I guess that's a no."

"They said to go talk to the mutual aid society."

"That's supposed to be a joke?"

"It has no money. Nobody pays into it because nobody trusts it. People trust only in themselves. We work in a desert, here. We are all bits of dust and sand."

"Why don't you leave?"

"He says that one does not job hop in Japan. Even if there were jobs for old men, he says he could be blacklisted. A few years ago, seven anti-unionists were fired from the Atsugi plant... fired by the union, not by management. They were later attacked by two hundred union members."

"Attacked? Two hundred against seven?"

"The unsung harmony of man and machine. He says to look around. This is a community full of vitality."

"All I see is a bunch of laborers working their butts off."

"Not laborers. He says they don't use that term. They are employees as he is... like members of a family... the Nissan family. Mr. Kawamata asks if it is okay for him to... ah... make an inquiry?"

"Go ahead."

"How much production do you lose in the States due to strike?"

"A lot."

"He wonders if you would believe that in the twenty-seven year history of this plant, there has been only one strike."

"How long did it last?"

"A week."

"*How* many weeks?"

"One."

Tom shook his head even though the figure didn't faze him. He'd learned from the literature he'd read to expect such "obedience" from the Japanese work force. It was one of the things that made cross-planting Japanese management methods a problematic proposition at best. No Americans really seemed to know what made these people tick.

"What caused it?"

"Eh?"

"The strike. What was it over?"

Kawamata nodded and pointed to a large crane-like device at the corner of the room. It was colored yellow, except for the powerful arm which was accented by a row of black diagonal stripes. Tom watched as it moved cars from one line to another, yanking them up, turning them in mid-air, and placing them along a new conveyor belt as though they were no heavier then papier- mache.

"He says that there was a tragedy here some years back. One of the employees climbed over the safety barrier and was fooling around. The machine mistook him for a car, and he was killed."

Tom coughed, "Killed?"

"It was his own fault. He was violating a safety clause clearly stated in his contract."

"So the union shut you guys down for a week. A week for a man's life. Uh... don't translate that last part."

Yuki smiled.

"Say, did you notice any rest room signs anywhere?"

"Eh?"

"Y'know Yuki. Lavatory? Some place where I can piss?"

"It's over there," he pointed.

"I'll be right back."

Tom made his way across the floor, amidst the clinking and clamoring of machines — only machines. The assembly line was moving so fast, the workers barely had time to breathe, much less talk with each other. Inside the rest room, the noises of automotive production seemed to recede against the beige, porcelain walls. Yuki walked in while Tom was still relieving himself. His young Japanese friend carried a clipboard and a Japanese-English dictionary, looking somewhat apologetic about his intrusion.

"I need to go, too."

"No, really? I figured you just wanted to stand there and watch me."

Yuki looked at him wide-eyed.

"It's a joke, Yuki."

"Ah... American humor is still strange for me sometimes."

"You just think we're all too fat, lazy, and stupid to have humor." It was an ongoing joke between them, and Yuki laughed out loud when he heard the comment. Tom ambled over to the sink, checking on Yuki's progress. His interpreter seemed more interested by some Japanese graffiti than with where he was urinating. He finally laughed again.

"What's it say?"

"Beware the revenge of those who eat."

"A commentary on the cafeteria food?"

Yuki nodded, "I think so."

"What's that one say?"

Tom pointed to a particularly large scrawl on the far wall. Yuki peered at it for a moment, then began reading out loud.

"This isn't a beer company. Why are we increasing production at the height of summer? Hire more workers."

Tom raised an eyebrow, "You're making that up, right?"

"It's exactly what it says."

"Sounds like things aren't quite as harmonious as Mr. Kawamata would have us believe."

Yuki shrugged, zipping himself back up with studious delicacy. Kawamata was waiting patiently as they exited the rest room. He wore a tired smile, as though the heat were penetrating even his luxurious cotton.

"Yasu... he just asks if we find the facilities adequate."

"More than adequate. Don't tell him about the graffiti."

Yuki nodded. "Don't worry."

IT WAS AFTER A GENEROUS DINNER OF SASHIMI AND octopus that Kawamata posed the question. The food had been so fresh that Tom had been forced to forfeit one of his chopsticks to a quarrelsome purple tentacle, and the scene made Suji (as he preferred to be called) laugh out loud, a great belly laugh with all the trimmings. Then he burped and apologized, saying something about the finest entertainers in all Japan having nothing on his American guest. He paused for precisely one heartbeat after Yuki had finished translating, dark eyes becoming suddenly serious.

"So what do you think about our set-up here? Can we do business?"

Such directness was so far from the norm that Tom found himself taken aback by the question. Of course, his host had every right to ask it. Still, even after being wined and dined to excess, the idea of jumping into bed with the man and his company grated on Tom. There were still a few nooks and crannies which warranted closer examination.

DROP-LIFTER

BY JIM VASSILAKOS

• Morality may not translate across cultures, but these days competition does. What happens when the two come face to face?

IT WAS A BIG MACHINE, ALL YELLOW LIKE SUMMER DAFFODILS except for the black diagonal stripes along its tow arm. To the younger workers, it must have looked entirely benign, but Ada had recognized its true nature from the moment he'd first laid eyes on it. They'd used a similar device in the mines for hauling around big sacks of gravel. This one had relatively lax duty by comparison. It just picked up the naked auto bodies after they'd been painted, transferring them up to assembly line C. Then it would sit still like a big lump of slag, idling until its dim-witted logic circuits queued it back to action.

He made his sign with the remains of a big cardboard box, writing the Japanese characters for "dangerous" in long, bold strokes with a red marker. His supervisor would no doubt remember his initiative, perhaps making a notation in his personnel file. All he had to do was find a good place to hang the sign, someplace where it would stand out, someplace where people would notice it and pay heed.

Ada climbed over the safety barrier. The trick was not in approaching the machine, but it waiting for the right moment. It stood still so long, sometimes there was no telling when it would lumber back to life. That was its real danger. You had to be some sort of psychic just to figure out when it would decide to move. Like now, for instance.

It wasn't until some hours later that they found the sign, so soaked through with Ada's blood that his long, bold strokes with the magic marker were no longer discernible.

Ada screamed, but only for a moment. Then the blood came spurting from his chest and underneath his armpits. He stood there, before the other workers, legs flailing back and forth as the machine picked him up, its scissor-like claws pushing on his old, splintering ribs like it thought they were solid metal. It wasn't until some hours later that they found the sign, so soaked through with Ada's blood that his long, bold strokes with the magic marker were no longer discernible. They had to ask one of his friends what the sign had said. Then they all nodded and agreed in hushed murmurs.

The old man was right. It was dangerous.

STARK STREAMS OF CRIMSON LIGHT FELL ACROSS THE Oppama Valley, cutting through the late afternoon clouds and dancing along the smooth white cement outside Nissan's Assembly Center #13. Something about the design of the building (perhaps the coal-black roofing) seemed remarkably efficient at attracting and retaining heat. Thomas Randell wiped the thin veil of perspiration from his forehead, returning his arm to the task of carrying his blue suit jacket. It had been a warm day, even by local standards. Now, as his white polyester dress shirt stuck to his chest and back, making a conspicuous splotching noise every time he turned his torso, he found himself thinking more about his weak bladder than about the words of his interpreter.

"...reducing productivity ten percentage points and reducing defective parts by twenty percent after last year."

Tom suppressed a yawn. He'd heard the spiel before in various others plants. Despite their quiet nature, the Japanese liked to brag as much as any people, particularly when they thought they had something to gain from it.

"Well, Mr. Kawamata, your workers may be smarter, better-educated, and even more efficient than ours. But there's one thing they can't do."

For a moment, the Japanese executive seemed as affected by the heat as his American counterpart. Tom smiled and motioned to his watch. "They can't tell time. It's only a quarter until quitting, and nobody is servicing their stations."

Kawamata just smiled, sputtering forth another intelligible stream of Japanese.

"They know the time," Yukihiko translated. "They wait until after work to clean up."

Tom lifted his eyebrows, "After work? In other words they work overtime without pay?"

"It is a strictly volunteer practice."

"How many?"

"Eh?"

"What percentage of them volunteer?"

"Ah... all of them."

Tom nodded. "All of 'em. Sheesh. If only we could get the UAW to volunteer for something like that."

Yuki laughed, and Kawamata chimed in as if on queue even before he'd heard the translation. He must have known the American's sentiments from the look on his face.

"Mr. Kawamata says that his people love the company. They believe in quality through harmony."

"Harmony?"

sound you here is *shhhhhh,* like just the air and shit, and it's completely silent and all you can feel is the plane moving up and down in the air, like it's catching you like your mother and holding you like it loves you, and that's nothing:—flying is *nothing* — the real feeling is when you land on the ground and you step out and there's just grass under your feet and you're back on the planet and you know that it loves you and that you're part of it. You know?"

Then suddenly, with a crash, the door swings open, banging up against the side of the house, and Kristin pours out like a wave of determined uncertainty. She is crying and there are tears deluging down her face, making it shimmer wetly in the moonlight.

"There you fucking are," she says, looking violently down at Visconti. "Here's the fucking *asshole."* She turns her head and addresses these words loosely to Nora, who is standing behind her with her top still off and the swell of her breasts only hinted at in the dark air.

"What's up, hon?" he says.

"You know what's up, you fucking *bastard,"* she slurs. She mumbles something and drops the beer that she is carrying. It crashes to the patio beside me and there is a white spider growing across the concrete, foam hissing.

"Careful of your feet! Stay right there!" Visconti warns, getting up and stepping over me. He puts his arms around her and goes to lift her up, to carry her back into the house.

"Get off me, you fucking *bastard,"* she shrieks, swatting him on the shoulders. She wriggles from his grasp like a greased sausage and comes down hard on a shard of glass. Then she is screaming. Visconti picks her up and carries her to the car and sets her down on the front seat. With the door open I can see that there is blood on her foot, not much, but a thin red trickle slicing down from the ball toward the heel. Kristin is laying back on the front seat and crying as Visconti pulls the sliver out. He gets up and is headed to the house when Alden comes out.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"Kristin stepped on some glass," I say.

"Wow."

"I'm gonna get a towel and wash it off," says Visconti. "She's done this before."

"I have to go to work tomorrow," says Alden, and I nod. Visconti nods too.

"Thanks for coming over, guys," he says, and shakes hands with both of us. His hand is dry and cold. "Don't be strangers."

Alden and I walk over to the car, where Kristin's legs are dangling askew from the driver side door, looking white and false, like Marilyn's protruding from the vault. She is passed out and Nora is sitting in the passenger seat with Kristin's head cradled into her lap, slowly brushing her bare breast across Kristin's mouth and face.

"Good night," says Alden, leaning down and looking into the car, "It was nice meeting you, Kristin. Good to see you again, Nora."

Neither of them make a sound. As nothing more than a formality, I twist my hand in an insincere wave to these people who don't really care anyway.

"What are you looking for?" I say as we are walking down the driveway towards the car.

"Huh?" asks Alden.

But I am not talking to him.

KYLE CASSIDY cass806@elan.rowan.edu

Is still 26 and still at Rowan University. He tries to divide his time evenly between his girlfriend, his Macintosh, and his motorcycle. Currently, however, he has no girlfriend, which gives him more time to ride and type.

covers her nakedness entirely. Kristin is still grinning like an idiot and leaning up against the stereo now.

"Why don't you put some music on?" says Visconti from the kitchen and I push Kristin gently aside and kneel down in front of the CD player and shove something in. And when it starts Nora jumps up and starts thrashing her head around. I notice for the first time that she's wearing a pair of jean shorts and that her hair is so long that it hangs down below the ragged cut of the denim, swinging.

"What's this?" asks Kristin.

"It's Pearl Jam," I say. "Pearl Jam. Where do you live? Under a rock?"

"Huh?" she groans quizzically and I rap on her forehead with my knuckles a few times, like I want to get in and she laughs and goes to push me away but she's so drunk that when she pushes me, she loses her balance and falls down onto the sofa.

I travelled across this country from New York to California maybe five times and I always said: *New Jersey sucks, I hate New Jersey. I Don't want to live in New Jersey.*

"I'm laying down now," she giggles.

I follow Nora out into the kitchen and the last thing I see in the living room is Alden and Kristin sitting down together on the sofa, watching the porno movie. Kristin is leaning across Alden's lap, touching his hair.

"We should wake this guy up," says Visconti, poking at the Lobster with the toe of his sandal. The Lobster, beet red and two hundred and twenty pounds, is laying in front of the speaker, arms folded across his chest and a smile on his face. "He's been asleep since *noon,"* invokes Visconti disdainfully, poking him again. The Lobster, however, remains inert and oblivious.

I finish my beer and fish another one from the box on the table. For a moment, as I am opening the bottle I think that there is a Marine Corps emblem on it and I wonder if it is some Desert Storm commemorative beer or something, but then I read the label and it only says "America's Quality Beer," so I guess that it's only a coincidence.

"Doesn't that look like the Marine Corps logo?" I say, holding the bottle out to Nora, like she's really going to be able to tell. She takes the bottle from my hand, and instead of looking at it, she shoves it slowly into her mouth, bobbing her head up and down suggestively a few times, taking almost the entire length of the bottle down her neck before tilting her head back and drinking from it, maybe an inch of glass rising vertically out of her mouth. She hands the bottle back to me and squats over the Lobster, allowing beer to dribble from her lips onto his face. He grunts, rolls over, and looks up disgustedly.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" he demands, wiping beer from his face.

"Waking you up," says Nora.

"When the hell did you get naked?" he remarks, observing her dangling breasts.

"When you fell asleep and I knew that I'd have to satisfy myself, sailor."

"I'm going outside," I say, setting the half-filled beer down on the window sill and getting a fresh one from the box. "Things are getting entirely too weird in here for me."

And somehow I'm sitting outside on a lawn chair and Visconti is sitting on the grass next to me, and there is a six-pack between us and I've a broken, unlit cigarette shoved between my teeth, drunk, and trying to look like Franklin Roosevelt.

Visconti is saying: "The only way I can deal with it is to pretend that it isn't happening. I mean, I know that she's beautiful and I know that guys look at her all the time."

"But she's drunk," I say, "she doesn't know what she's doing and she won't remember it in the morning."

"But tell me I'm not feeling it now," he says, "I know that she's in there, making out with your roommate — I mean, it's hardly fair to say that since she's going to get drunk and fuck other guys I might as well get used to it. I mean, this sort of shit happens four or five times a week, every time she goes out, she gets fucked up and she gets fucked. You know? And the next morning she doesn't remember any of it, but it hurts me man, you know? It hurts me right here." He thumps his chest.

"But you know," he goes on, "the only thing that matters is this, is the air, is walking outside and being able to breathe the fucking *air.* I mean, some people just don't know what they've got. I travelled the world, I travelled this country. I used to be in the Navy. I travelled across this country from New York to California maybe five times and I always said: *New Jersey sucks, I hate New Jersey. I don't want to live in New Jersey.* And you know what? It's taken me a long time to realize this, but it's not New Jersey. I mean, look at this place. It's beautiful. That tree over there, just look at that fucking tree. People who say that they hate New Jersey just aren't paying any fucking attention to what's going on around them. You know? This place is *beautiful,* and the Pine Barrens, they're *amazing,* but you've just got to go outside and *look* at them, you've just got to see them for what they are. And that's the only thing that matters, fucking *living.* It's not about you, or me, or her, it's only about *this.* This fucking world that's out here, and if you can live at peace with this fucking *world*, then nothing else matters and it doesn't matter who the fuck Kristin is fucking. It's the grass between your toes. I used to be a glider pilot; for five years I was a glider pilot; and I'd sail around and the only

their pockets and steal their secrets and that no one would be the wiser.

"Grab yourselves a beer," says Visconti, suspiciously eyeing Alden. "Help yourselves." I take a Miller ten-ounce from the open case on the table and set my coat down on a chair. Maybe two hundred empty bottles are growing like a forest over the table, leaving no space for anything else. A slice of pizza stands there, wedged between bottles. I pick up the slice and start to shove it into my mouth, making loud smacking noises — trying urgently to appear as deranged and careless as the others.

"Who else is here?" I say, loudly again so that they can hear me. I imagine them deaf as well as blind. I walk into the living room where I see Nora Laura — a beaming, flirtatious, and vexatiously annoying woman of 27 who, during one summer, Alden and I had both briefly dated. Neither one of us ever expected to see her again in our lives.

She was a petulant and disarming artist with a round face and almond eyes. Someone had once enigmatically described her to me as a "moist and anal person with a sort of long underwear quality about her humor." At one time she possessed in her shabby and dark apartment, draped in scarves and smelling of cabalistic Egyptian love oils, a cat named Calamity Bitch as well as a crucified mannequin nailed to her living room wall which she surreptitiously referred to only as "The Guy."

But I haven't been to her apartment lately. In my head I catalogue the list of words that come to me when I see her: charming, winsome, provocative, perilous, obnoxious, ostentatious and blaring. I also tick off her various crimes against culture, mostly fashion-related, though many of them have to do with singing. She is sitting on the sofa, naked from the waist up, watching an X-rated videotape on Visconti's huge color television.

"Hey," she says, looking up and pointing the remote control at me and pressing a button, as though to increase my volume or perhaps contrast. "What's up?"

I shrug. "We just got here. I came with Alden. You seem to be all set."

"I'm just trying to cool off," she says, briefly fanning herself. Then coquettishly lifting one of her large, round breasts in one hand she proceeds to lick it while looking salaciously at me out of the corner of her large, dark eyes.

"My nipples are hard," she points out needlessly.

"I can see," I reply. Then, turning into the kitchen, I say loudly: "Hey Alden, you'll never guess who's naked in the living room."

Alden extracts himself from the kitchen delicately, as though he is in a maze of razor blades constructed by the glances of Visconti and his obfuscated girlfriend.

"It's Nora Laura," I say, pointing as he steps carefully in his worn boat shoes down the two stairs into the darkened room. On the screen Samantha Strong is giving a decidedly uninspired blow job to some short hairy guy wearing only tall, white sweat socks. Alden's eyes flit first to the television and then down to Nora. He seems startled at first and I watch his eyes change size.

"Nora," he says in a deep voice, *"hey, hey."*

"Show him that trick you just showed me," I say.

"What? This?" She takes her breast into her hand again and sucks hungrily on the small, brown nipple.

"What does she need us for?" I say.

"I need a *cock*," she croaks, and her mouth gapes in a screaming laugh. Her huge white teeth are like prophetic tombstones. "I'm *hungry* for it."

She laughs again, opening her mouth wide enough for me to lob a grapefruit down, if I had one. I realize suddenly that everybody is speaking in boldface.

"Hey *Kristin*," shouts Nora without turning her head. "Hey Kristin, come in here darling, come in here."

Drunkenly Kristin responds from the kitchen like a herd of clumsy rhinos, leaving a piqued Visconti with his back up against the fridge, sipping from a beer and flapping a sandal against his otherwise bare heel. Kristin staggers down the steps and Nora says: "Isn't Kristin *beautiful?* Aren't you, Kristin?"

"Sure," says Kristin, and her eyes are like heavy slits. Her mascara is running as though she's either been crying or sweating.

"Show them your tits," commands Nora. She reaches out and puts her hand on Kristin's leg, "Kristin has beautiful tits." Kristin grins and her eyes disappear while she pulls at her top with both hands until her breasts fall out like fruit from a grocery bag. They bounce and come to a stop.

"Oh, Christ," says Alden, covering his eyes.

Kristin smashes her breasts together and rubs them.

"Kristin is so beautiful," says Nora.

"We're sisters," adds Kristin, pulling her top back down and smiling a perfect orange-wedge of a smile, "we're going to be sisters because we're the same."

"We have the same breasts," Nora points out, and it is true that their breasts are very similar.

"I'll lick you to make you mine," Laura goes on, projecting her face at Alden and me, "because love is like a squeegee and sweat will make you shine."

"What are you doing?" I shout quickly, directing my comment at Visconti, who looks forlorn and abandoned. "Is this a party? What the hell kind of party is this? I thought you said there was a party! Naked women and pornos?"

Visconti shrugs.

"You should have been here earlier," says Nora. "Kristin and I were dancing on the hood of the car and we were naked and all the little neighborhood boys were standing in the street watching us and we kept going like this."

Here she illustratively grabs her breasts and aims them at me like a pair of crazy bazookas.

"And their little peckers were getting hard and they were saying, 'Ooh, what's this in my pants?' And I said, 'Do you like it?' They won't be getting any sleep tonight!" She cackles again and shakes her head so that her long brown hair

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR, CHINA WHITE?

BY KYLE CASSIDY

• Sure, as a general rule it's good to get out of the house, leave behind the mundanity of those four walls you're so accustomed to. But sometimes, it just might be best to stay at home…

SHE LOOKS LIKE SHE'S DEAD OR MAYBE NOW SHE'S singing for The Cure. Her hair is orange and knotted like she's been buffing it with a carpet remnant, or more likely using it to stick balloons to the ceiling. Her eyes are long and flat and black, curved downward at the ends, cloaking her beauty with an absurd mask of drunkenness.

"Oh... my... *god*," she says, lurching to her feet and careening towards us, falling into me, her arms wrapping around me awkwardly like parts of broken candles still held together by the wick. "I can't believe you came, oh my *god.* Let me look at you!" She reels back and starts plucking at my hair. "You're *beautiful*. You're fucking *beautiful."* She tries to kiss me on the lips, but I turn my head because I can see her boyfriend, Visconti, sitting despondently behind her, a worried look on his scruffy face. He's seen this before. He stands up, holding onto the back of the chair.

"You guys sure took your *time*," he slurs. "I called you at *one*. What time is it now? It's like *nine* or *ten* or something."

"It's five-thirty," I say. He turns his wrist to look at his watch and beer spills from the bottle out onto his feet. He doesn't notice.

"We're all fucked up," he says. Kristin is still holding onto me, or more precisely, I am holding her up.

"Where were you last night? For the party?" asks Visconti, his voice viscous. "We've been up for forty-eight hours, straight, and we're the only ones here. Everyone else *left* — they couldn't take it, and they went *home* — but there's still *beer*. There's still a *party*. There's *us*. Right?"

"Right," I say. Then, pointing: "Everybody, this is Alden. Alden, this is everybody. This is Kristin and her boyfriend Visconti. And that's the Lobster asleep on the floor over there." Kristin takes a step back from me and inspects my roommate drunkenly, with a squinting, uncertain, sneer on her face.

"They call me *China White*," she says.

"That's right," I assure him, "they do."

"Because I look like an oriental *princess*." She hic-coughs, snorts, and laughs.

"That's beautiful," Alden is assuring her. Kristin *does* look remotely Asian, although she's far too tall. She takes several stuttering half steps toward him, her eyes riveted on his left shoulder. He looks uncertain of what to do, as though he is being introduced to some slavering monster of a relative — drooling, senile and a million years old, smelling of piss — that he is expected to hug. She holds her arms raised limply in the air like a murderous puppeteer, and finally she embraces him indelicately, crashing around his neck like a tumbling house of Lincoln Logs.

"Oh, do I get a hug?" he asks.

I have always wanted to introduce Alden to Kristin. She is the girl of his dirty dreams; six foot one, smooth pale skin, blond (most of the time) hair, centerfold body, and most importantly, she is irresponsibly and irrepressibly insane.

I have always wanted to introduce Alden to Kristin. She is the girl of his dirty dreams; six foot one, smooth pale skin, blond (most of the time) hair, centerfold body, and most importantly, she is irresponsibly and irrepressibly insane.

But now that I look at his face peering over her shoulder, his hair plastered down by her grip and the evening humidity, his features reveal none of the enchantment and instant, staggering devotion which I had expected. Instead he looks befuddled and amused, some crazy simian grin on his face. She releases him and steps back, then paws at his hair.

"Oh *god*," she moans, "you're beautiful *too*. You're so *fucking* beautiful. You're so fucking *beautiful* and you don't even know it. You don't even know how beautiful you are."

She looks down at the floor now and I come to the realization that for perhaps the first time in my life I am completely sober in a room filled with people so drunk that they probably don't even know that I'm there.

I look at them and feel that I might now move about among them as a ghost, surrealistically, or ectoplasmically, and they would not see my actions. That I could pick

model of her mother — like those dolls from the Ukraine, or some damned place, that fit one inside the other.

"Takin' it home," snarled the boy, shooting daggers at this woman who must have been his mother, too, since he also looked like her. *Probably his mother and his aunt, too,* I thought. *That way he gets those genes from both sides.*

"You let go of that thang rat this minute, you hear me, boy!"

"I ain't," yelled the boy, still holding the turtle's jagged tail. The other children — only two that I could count, though I could have sworn there had been more — nervously shifted their eyes from the woman to the boy. They seemed to be trying to figure out which one of the two was the least likely to get crazy enough to hurt someone.

The turtle seemed oblivious to the whole controversy. It sat on the ground as solid as a fire hydrant, a mass of twigs, dry leaves and dirt lodged behind its claws from being dragged along the ground up from the creek. Occasionally, it would snap its beaked mouth suddenly and erratically from side to side or over its huge back shell. I understood completely. Why fucking bother? Easier to get dragged along by the tail by someone else than to put up a fight. What good did it get you anyway? Bide your time and look for your chance to make a getaway.

So I stood there at the edge of the parking lot, siding with the turtle against all odds, until my wife pulled on the towel draped over my shoulder and said, "Come on, let's go."

I glanced at the turtle once more. I felt like I ought to make some kind of stand. Go down into the creek bed and stage a heroic rescue. Intimidate the kids and their mother until they fled. But who would really do that, except for an animal rights activist or something? And I'll bet even the most hardcore Earth Firsters might back off if they got a load of this charming family.

"Fuck it," I muttered under my breath and fell in step behind my wife.

As we walked away, mama yelled, "You put that dayum thang back in the crick or I ain't never buyin' you another goddamn toy ever. You hear me?" Jesus, I thought, remembering all those touchy-feely classes in parenting techniques my wife had ever dragged me to. But I chuckled to myself, certain that her crude logic (was it a bribe or a threat?) would work its magic on these kids and they would give up the fight and let this old creature lumber back into the murky waters of Stacy Creek where it belonged. The other children started back toward the pool, bored with this business.

A few minutes later, beside the pool, the fat girl was telling the lifeguard about the turtle. The lifeguard looked bored. Later, with my family happily bobbing in the water, swim ring, beach ball and all, I gave into an urge to brave the fire ants on the grassy slope beside the pool and peer through the chain link fence to check on the turtle.

I got to the fence just in time to see the boy, alone now, single-minded in his resolve, hoist the turtle into the shopping cart. Then, like Sisyphus pushing his rock, he leaned into the handle of the cart and off they went, jingling slowly across the rutted parking lot and out onto the blacktop leading uphill toward their mutual fate.

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SNAPPER

BY MARK SMITH

• If the kids want to mess with Mother Nature and her creations, fine. But leave me *out of it.*

AS IF IT WEREN'T WEIRD ENOUGH TO BE TRYING TO PUT a snapping turtle the size of a manhole cover into a flimsy plastic dry-cleaning bag, the plan after that seemed to involve transferring the beast to a shopping cart they had dragged from the supermarket several blocks away.

My wife and son and I were going for one of our tedious afternoon trips to the local swimming pool. Not exactly my idea of fun, I might quickly add, being dragged into the cold water every day to get shivering wet with a bunch of screaming kids peeing in the pool. Then, to witness the bizarre and cruel spectacle of these kids dicking around with this turtle, and the thing getting obviously more pissed off every minute. I stood there watching, dumbstruck, thinking that it would serve these kids right to have this monster bite off one of their fingers or whatever. My wife and son stepped up beside me.

"Hey!" said my wife. "What are those kids doing?" Though she could see what they were doing as well as I could.

"I think they're trying to put a snapping turtle into a dry-cleaning bag," I said. "Of course, I could be wrong."

"Wow, Dad," said my kid. "That's a big turtle." Which isn't as dumb a comment as it sounds since he's only four. And it *was* a big turtle. Biggest fucking turtle I ever saw. At least a foot across its gnarled shell and weighing, I would guess, twenty, twenty-five pounds. A noble beast, actually, something like a natural treasure. Not that I'd know a natural treasure if it bit me on the dick. Still, I appreciated that turtle. I felt sorry for it being dragged out of its element by this bunch of cretinous kids.

"I think they're trying to put a snapping turtle into a dry-cleaning bag," I said. "Of course, I could be wrong."

I felt like I ought to do something to stop them from terrorizing the thing though by all rights it ought to have been them who was scared. I'm absolutely sure that I would never have gone screwing around with an animal that big and mean when I was their age, which I judged to be around seven or eight. On the other hand, these kids were a bad element. I'd seen them abandoned to their own devices in the park on more than one occasion. Residents, no doubt, of the trailer park down on Congress Avenue by the park at Live Oak where the bums hang out passing quarts of Colt 45. Hell, for all I knew, those bums *were* their parents.

So I finally decided that I had some kind of moral obligation to stop these kids from killing this turtle.

"Hey, kids," I yelled. "Don't do that."

The oldest boy, a lanky, dirty urchin dressed only in dingy swimming trunks, glowered up at me from his crouched position. The other kids turned cold, stupid eyes on me. Obviously they weren't used to having adults telling them what to do.

"Why not?" said the boy.

"That thing'll bite your finger off." Now I didn't really care about those kids or their smudgy fingers and anyway, I could tell that this sluggish old reptile was in little danger of biting anyone. In the first place, they were handling the thing by the tail and shell, which I seem to remember hearing is the way you are supposed to handle snapping turtles if you have to handle them at all. In the second place, the kids seemed to be sure enough of themselves that they couldn't get hurt, though that could have just been street smarts. After all, they were trying to put the thing in a dry-cleaning bag and a grocery cart. What kind of outdoorsmanship is that, for Christ's sake?

"Aw, we ain't been bit yet," sneered the boy. I guess this made some kind of logical sense to him.

"That's why we're holding it by the tail," said another child, a girl I'd often seen hanging around the pool trying to chum up to the life guards.

"What're you going to do with it?" asked my wife.

"Take it home," shrugged one of the kids. Stupid question. Of course, every home ought to have at least one viscious reptile lurking around under the furniture or sleeping under the car.

"Keep it for a pet," said the girl.

"Daddy," my son piped up. "Can we get a turtle like that for a pet?"

I laughed and touseled his hair. Right, I thought, my kid, who's deathly afraid of the neighbors' fox terrier that's about as ferocious as the Pillsbury doughboy, is going to take a snapping turtle, of all damned things, home and feed it — what? Purina Turtle Chow?

"Where are your parents, anyway?" I asked. A question that had been on my mind for weeks. Just then, as if on cue, a woman's voice boomed up behind us: "What the hell are you doing with that thang?" I turned to see the mother stepping carefully across the pebbled parking lot on her bare feet. She was hugely obese and wore a flowered bathing suit. She looked identical to the girl, who seemed only a scale

Above, head snapped back from collarbone loll, God roared in anguish.

Adam took Eve by the hand, smiled, and led her toward the open gates. "The world's our oyster, Eve. What say we have it on the half-shell?"

She held back. "What about God?"

"We're beyond all that now, you and me," he scoffed. "Let our progeny create deities if they must. As for us, I think secular humanism suits us better."

"Ugh, that sounds dreadful," Eve objected. "If we're going to call ourselves something, let it be something we can feel proud of, something with a ring to it."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. Let's see." She thought a moment, then brightened. "How about sacred universalists?"

"Sacred what?"

"Universalists," said Eve, warming to it. "Because absolutely everything we see and know and touch or even think or fantasize about is shot through and through with the awful light of divinity."

Adam smiled bitterly. "Everything but this green mausoleum we've been cooped up in." He gestured, like a man gone mad, about the Earthly Paradise. In this fallen world of ours, dear reader, the life of every human male demands its adamantine core of resentment, its refusal to forgive, the galling pill stuck eternally in its proud male throat. Adam found his in Eden, hung on a tree and suffering clear to the walls. "Come on, Eve. Let's go find our sons and daughters."

Eve nodded, her eyes lowered. But the aftertaste of God hung like temptation upon her tongue.

"Don't leave me," came his agonized whisper.

Pausing at the gates, Adam frowned up at the tree. Then he cocked his head toward the animals, watched them gallop and slither and lope and lumber past him, and slammed the gates of Eden shut with a resounding clang. The echo rang in Eve's ears long after Eden dropped below the horizon, and the vision of her lord's twisted limbs hung tantalizingly before her inner eye.

Much later, when she'd had her fill of Adam, Eve set off on her own to regain Eden. And yet, though she looked ever and anon with a light heart and a hopeful mein, her search, in the end, proved fruitless.

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love augmented. Crucifixion, they discovered, when performed upon scapegoat deities, can often be a powerful aphrodisiac. God's blood beribboned his feet and dripped from his toes. Where it fell, Calvary clover grew.

Stepping back hand in hand with his spouse to admire their craft, Adam watched Eve's breasts rise and fall with excitement. A rampant hunger seemed to seize her as she fixed her eyes on their impaled creator. She relinquished Adam's grasp and moved forward. Then she snaked one hand beneath the simple swatch of cloth and undraped it from God's body, exposing his sex.

Adam gaped in awe at the size of him. Maybe it was the light, he thought. He took a step closer. Nope. No trick of sun or shadow. This was one huge tool, dangling now from a dying deity. A tragic waste, in his opinion, of progenitive flesh.

Eve, however, clearly saw one last use for it. She hefted the organ in her hands, ran her fingers along its underside, got it to grow bigger still. Then she wrapped her jaws around it like a python, gorging her fat face.

Around the clearing, in the center of which grew the now-barren tree, animals made their silent approach. The graceful heads of two gazelles peered round the flanks of an elephant, who stood, grey-eyed and baggy, looking on in puzzlement. Birds of every shape and color perched in the surrounding trees, their songs stilled, their heads cocked to one side. Upon the ground, serpents slithered, insects danced closer, squirrels and ferrets and martens and rats leaped over one another and darted in to freeze and stare. The circle of beasts hung there, dumb and attentive.

In his loins Adam could feel all nature stirring. He watched Eve feast upon her maker. Her swollen arms barely bent at the elbows. Her chubby fingers could hardly close around the cock of the crucified lord. He saw the spread of her legs, the beads of moisture on her pubic hair, the exquisite anus playing hide and seek with him as her buttcheeks writhed.

He'd never had that anus, never particularly wanted it until now. But now it drew his every attention, closed out all other sights, urged his feet forward. Nestling his manhood between her buttocks, he touched his cocktip to the tight centerpoint. Eve, without ceasing her oral ministrations, swiveled her hips to signal her consent to Adam's penetration. Adam spat on his palms, slicked along the length of his erection, and eased into the depths of his beloved wife's derriere.

Eve leaned against God's womanly thighs. She could feel his balls tighten toward orgasm. His pre-ejaculate oozed free and gradual into her mouth, delighting beyond measure her taste buds. Between her cheeks, back where things grew narrow, she could feel her husband fill her full to gasping with his erect flesh.

And now, coiling up her left leg came the Serpent. She supposed he'd stop and speak to her, perhaps egg her on. Instead he parted the pink petals of her womanhood and began to fuck her with his head. Glancing down, she saw the slick, criss-crossed snakeskin move rhythmically in and out of her, coated now with her lovejuice.

Eve felt deliriously stuffed. God's crimped thatch tickled against her forehead like the gentle brush of a breeze. His tool tasted like the cock of all creativity on her tongue. Down below, lesser life forms pulsed out their polyrhythms, readying fecund liquids.

In at her ears now crept the murmurings of nature, until then silent with reverence. Now there was growing excitement in the air. Rising to voracious receptivity, drawing her three seminarians up to a mindless frenzy of seed-spilling, Eve heard all nature twitter and roar and rustle in sympathy.

Almost there now.

Almost home.

Then the floodgates burst on all fronts at once. Her husband bit into her shoulder and juiced her from behind. The Serpent, rippling from tail to head, vomited gobbets of forbidden fruit into her womb. And from the sides of her mouth, gouts of godsperm gushed, so voluminous was the deity's discharge, so impossible the task of swallowing it all.

The fluids roiled inside her, coming together at her very core. Up she swelled, backing off from the tree and squeezing Adam and the Serpent out of her. Inside she was all generation. She could feel the teeming zygotes spring and swirl within, latching onto bone and organ, tapping into spirit, jittering through ontogeny like manic nuns fingering rosaries, like prayer wheels gone wild.

As she blimped up, her lungs drew in air unceasingly. Just when it seemed that inhalation might be Eve's eternal curse, the gates of Eden burst open outward, and screams and infants began to shoot forth from her. Bright balls of every color they were, these kids. Out they flew, slick with vernix and hugging their afterbirths to them. Red ones, green ones, black and brown and orange ones; some as clear as glass, all shades conceivable and many that were not. Through the lips of her quim and out the gates of Eden they spun and tumbled, scattered by the winds of chance hither and yon over the earth to flourish or starve at destiny's whim.

When the grand exodus was over and the last humanoid hopeful — deep purple and no thicker than a thumb — zinged out of Eve and careered off who knew where, she lay there steeped in sweat and panting with exultation. Eve was fat no more, but restored to svelte. So, she noted, was Adam, whose outpouring of spunk had spent in the exertion his store of blubber. He helped her to her feet and gave her a round, resounding hug.

"Time to go, honey," he said.

She nodded, looked down, hesitated. Then, to the Serpent, wrapped round the base of the tree: "You coming with us?"

"No thanks, pretty one," he said. "My place is with him." He slipped into God's fundament, coiled inside his large intestine (whose length he matched perfectly), and fell asleep for all eternity.

though He still dwarfed them, had diminished in stature since His last visit. His big toe, which before had come up to their chests as they knelt, now rose no higher than their prostrate heads.

God rocked upon His heels, hands clenched behind His back. The silence that had fallen between Him and his recalcitrant creatures was broken only by the noise of His incoherent fuming and muttering.

Adam knew their lives hung in the balance.

Abruptly the rocking stopped. "Get up!" He boomed at them. And up they got. Craning his neck, Adam stared into God's index finger, which stabbed like death through the Edenic air. "One more chance," came the raging voice. "One more. That's all you get. If you so much as squint at that tree the wrong way, it's over."

Trembling to the bone, Adam looked into the fiery eyes of God and did not blink, though the blast of divine rage seared his face and threatened blindness. When the Holy of Holies stormed off at last, red and green blotches danced in the sight of Adam.

NOW WHEN THE SERPENT RETURNED, ADAM, WISER THAN his years, brought him into their deliberations. For hours they weighed alternatives, debated issues of freedom and slavery, mapped out and discarded grand strategies.

In the midst of one of Adam's perorations, Eve cut him off with a simple "Husband." She pointed up into the branches of the tree. "I'm hungry. For that."

The Serpent looked at Adam.

Adam raised an eyebrow.

Then, setting all thought aside, they all three did the inevitable. In the blink of an eye, they fell upon that tree like bees on blossoms, like lawyers on mishap, like vultures on dead men's flesh.

The Serpent, having eaten more than his fill, belched and said, "I'll get the tools." With a groan, he slid his great bulk along the ground and was gone.

Adam and Eve, too consumed with gluttony to care what their friend had meant, stuffed themselves with succulent fruit. Breathing became secondary, and for a time, their world consisted of naught but plucking, biting, chewing, swallowing, and plucking again. When they grew weary of feeding themselves, they fed each other. Eve crammed the juicy pulp past Adam's incisors. Adam shoved fruit down Eve's gullet with all the fervor of a cunt-hungry stud pressing home his fuckflesh. They stuffed themselves, our first parents, like there was no tomorrow.

As they gorged and grew great, the tree of knowledge lost its every fruit and leaf. Like the arms of a beggar seeking raiment, it lofted its bare limbs into the perfect air of Eden. But its leaves now blanketed the ground and its fruit ballooned the bellies of the insatiate sinners, bloating their bodies beyond all reasonable bound.

Adam's hand, animate with desire, went organ-hunting among Eve's rolls of flab, and Eve's among Adam's. But finding lust within gluttony proved no easy task and they had to make do with blubbery hugs instead. It was in the midst of one such clumsy clench that Eve heard hoofbeats mild and meek and saw, over her husband's left shoulder, God riding toward them upon a squat, grey, four-legged animal whose name eluded her.

Adam gave a low whistle. "Divine creator," he said, "you seem to have shrunk a good deal. You're just about human-sized, I'd say. If anything, you're quite a bit leaner about the middle than we are."

"What happened to you?" asked Eve, astonished.

God just looked at them, sad-eyed. He slipped off his donkey and sandals, let fall his robes, dug beads of blood from his brow with a crown of thorns. Draped about his waist, falling from hip to hip like a cotton grimace, a simple loincloth concealed his godhood. He leaned back against the barren tree, crossed his legs, stretched out his arms, and rose along the rough bark nearly three feet into the air. Left and right, from shoulder to hand, his arms traced the contours of the tree's bifurcating limbs. His eyes were wet with sorrow.

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Rage filled fat Adam. Each breath became an effort. "Come down from there and punish us, you miserable excuse for divinity! We did it a third time, Eve and I. We ate until there was nothing left. One last binge, that's all we wanted. No remorse, just a final feast and then sweet oblivion. Now get down here and mete out justice!"

But God only fixed his fat son with a simple look of compassion and spoke not a word.

Adam's jowls trembled. His puffy hands flexed and clenched. He became vaguely aware of the Serpent's huge bulk swaying first to one side, then the other, putting heavy objects into his hands. A hammer. A cold fistful of spikes. Beneath his feet he felt the moving green of leaves and then he'd leaped to the lower branches of the tree and was pounding spiteful iron into his maker's left palm, straight through into treelimb. Before God's right hand, Eve's hammer swung wide, broke the deity's pinkie, then drove her spike home in two swift strokes. Good lord, she was fat, thought Adam, seeing her beauty shine forth even through folds of pudge.

Together they pierced the feet. A simple task, this piercing, yet it drew them closer. With each hammer blow, their

Adam, though stunned, seized the moment. Helping his wife up, he said, "Dear sweet Lord, we give Thee bounteous thanks." Eve stammered out her gratitude as well. Her fair face looked blasted as by a great wind, Adam thought, wrapping an arm about her waist and gripping her hand.

And God laughed a rich, fruity laugh that washed away their terror. By the time He dismissed them with a wave of His hand, turned on His heel, and moved away, brushing the treetops with His robes, our first parents too had caught God's laugh in their throats, feeling it reach up into their skulls and down through every limb and organ. Still frantic with laughter, they joined genitals and fucked the storm-clouds, the rest of the day, and much of the evening away. If they paused to feast, it was more often upon each other than upon some luscious piece of fruit freely plucked from one licit tree limb or another.

So at last they sank, stuck flesh to flesh, into the deep sleep of those who have transgressed and somehow, but who can say how, gotten away with it.

MORNING SUN UPON HER BELLY. SLITHER OF AN ERECTION moving up one thigh. Eve winked an eye open and gazed past her golden breasts, fully expecting Adam, finding instead the dry wrinkled skin of the Serpent exciting her. In the distance, Adam gloried in the dawn, his arms raised to a brilliant sky.

"Quite a hunk, your hubby."

She sighed. "Yes, he is." Then, remembering, Eve's face raged: "Listen, snake, you have a little explaining to do. Your smooth-tongued arguments in favor of eating the forbidden fruit nearly got us killed."

"Killed?" The Serpent recoiled and hissed a smile. "You don't look dead to me, my dear. Quite the contrary. You look deliciously alive, good enough to eat, decidedly succulent, something to sink one's teeth into."

"Dream on," she said, and rolled over, tossing her hair behind her. She plucked a tall blade of grass and placed it between her lips.

Insinuating itself onto a rock near her right shoulder, the Serpent coiled, watching warily the first mother's face. "Just as I imagined," it said. "Eating from the tree has given you a thoughtful air you lacked before. It's really quite fetching."

Eve grunted and looked away.

"You may not know this — it's something I didn't tell you yesterday, since, if I may be candid for a moment, I fully expected God to banish you from Eden — but the more fruit you eat from that tree, the wiser you'll grow. And the more lovely you'll become not only in your husband's eyes, but in the eyes of man and beast alike."

She whipped her head around. "Save it. We're wise to you, me and Adam. Yesterday we barely escaped with our lives. But we've learned our lesson. From now on, we'll tend that tree, but we're not going near the fruit."

The Serpent shook its sad head, clucking its tongue. Looking past Eve, it saw Adam turn toward his mate, noted the concern on the first father's face at the sight of her tempter, watched him sprint toward them. "Still, you must admit it's a lovely taste, a taste one really oughtn't to do without. And where once forgiveness comes, my lovely, who's to say it won't come again?"

The Serpent had more on its mind, but Adam's rough hands reached down and fisted its tail, hefted it into the air, swung it like a heavy weight thrice round his head, and let it fly deep into the outlying thickets of Eden.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," said Adam, "to coin a phrase. Whatever coins might be."

Eve gazed thoughtfully up at the tree. "Adam," she said, her eyes coming to light on the tantalizing fruit, "I've been thinking."

THE SECOND TIME, HE WAS ANGRIER THAN THEY'D EVER seen Him. Into the garden He swept, riding upon a whirlwind. His hair was tempest-tossed, His eyes flashed fire. "Down on your knees!" He trumpeted, blasting their ears. "Nay, flat on your bellies, you miserable excuses for humanity!"

Adam pressed his belly into the dirt, arms thrust out before him. Grovelling washed like balm over his soul. He was amazed how sensuous the earth felt along the length of his body. No wonder the Serpent warped and wriggled from place to place, he thought. He stole a peek at Eve, who was stretched out beside him, her long hair atumble down her shoulders, her breast-mounds bulging out beneath, lovely as all of her. Adam wondered, as his flesh began to weave and grow beneath him, if this would be his last vision before death swallowed them up.

"Cease your vile thoughts, O miserable man, and heed the words of your Maker."

God, He sounded pissed.

"By all rights, I ought to end your lives at once. It's clear that neither of you is capable of obedience to any law I lay down. Set up a barrier, turn My back, and you'll scratch and claw to be the first to o'erleap it!"

Thunder blasted them flat. Lightning rent the earth not six yards from their heads. They cried out in terror. Across their backs, a cold, drenching rain juddered down. "Yes, be fearful, My poor dear creatures. And repentant. For these raindrops are the tears of God, My tears, shed for what I must now most reluctantly do."

"Mercy, dear Father," sobbed Adam. "Mercy upon Your sinning children. Grievously have I sinned, choosing yet again to disobey You and eat of the fruit. Take my life, if You must. But spare the gentle Eve, whom I convinced to taste what she should not have tasted."

Then Eve spoke up, protesting that she alone was at fault, that her husband was blameless in all things save in taking her blame upon himself.

While his wife spoke, Adam raised his chin and peered through the rain at God's sandals. He shut his eyes in disbelief, then reopened them. It was true. The divine Maker,

FRUCTUS IN EDEN

BY ROBERT DEVEREAUX

• In this story, you already know the characters, the setting, and the way things turn out in the end. But this might be a case where history was re-written by the victors…

CRINGING NAKED AND ASHAMED IN THE BUSHES, they could hear above the hammering of their hearts the dread rud and thumble of His footfall. Guilty as sin they were, thought Adam; as guilty as the fruit had been good.

Yet, though in the foulest depths of fear and remorse the first father cowered, even so, half-pendulous with new cravings was he, squatting there thigh to thigh beside the long-tressed Eve, his "beloved lovecunt" as he called her in their moments of dalliance (for in the first days, that word held no pejorative, but partook rather of the sensual beauty inherent in words like "zephyr" or "stream"), those precious moments when they lay together on beds of moss in the full perfection of the sun.

But now the sky roiled with stormclouds, and useless knowledge clouded their brains. The Serpent had done his damnedest, their incisors had wantonly penetrated the taut fruitskin, and they'd torn, tongued, chewed, and swallowed the bitter pulp of divine wisdom. Now had come the moment to pay for their disobedience.

"Where are you?" He boomed from everywhere, feigning ignorance. The swish of His robes against the tall grass struck terror in them. Then, they beheld as though draped over spirit the sandaled feet of God, His holy ankles, the hem of His robes, the towering majesty of Him, and lofted far above the trees His face, a face of patience and love and the terrible indifference of divinity. His beard was full and off-white, like tinged fleece. His eyes shown at once ancient and newborn. Upon His brow, the crown dazzled.

Adam took Eve's hand. Together they rose and quitted the refuge of the underbrush, falling to their knees and humbling themselves before Him. Adam felt his tumescence deferentially shrivel to near nothing.

"My children," came the heart-rending voice of their Maker, "lift up your eyes and look at Me." They did so, feeling their souls cringe within. His eyes brimmed with betrayal. "Did I not leave you free and unfettered in this delightful paradise, free to wander where you would, to give names to My creations, and to conjoin with all the abandon appropriate to creatures in the perfect enjoyment of their carnality?"

"You did, Lord," mumbled the first couple.

"And did I not suffer you to satisfy your natural craving for food with the fruit of any tree in the garden, any of the thousand trees that spill over so profusely with fruit which, until this moment, knew neither how to overripen nor to spoil?"

"All but one, Lord," they said, feeling like specks of shit beneath his sandals.

"Yes, all but one. That one tree in whose shade you now kneel, the tree that bestows the knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit of this tree only did I deny you, and you agreed willingly and with good cheer never to eat of it."

"We did, Lord."

God's words were thick with sorrow: "Why then have you disobeyed Me?"

Adam looked at Eve, Eve looked at Adam.

Then began the recriminations, choking the air like flames in a furnace. Adam blasted Eve; Eve tore into the Serpent; neither thought to blame themselves.

"Save it. We're wise to you, me and Adam. Yesterday we barely escaped with our lives. But we've learned our lesson. From now on, we'll tend that tree, but we're not going near the fruit."

Their guilt gave way to anger, their anger to sorrowful repentance and pleas for clemency, and thence to silence, the silence of a prisoner watching his judge's lips slide, syllable by syllable, along a sentence of death.

Once more their knees sank to the dust and their gaze fell past their genitals. Adam's penis drooped earthward, shedding one sad tear of pre-ejaculate. No more would he bury his mouth in Eve's bush, no more feel her tongue upon his testicles, no more cup her delectable breasts as she straddled him and melted her labia about his manhood.

And God said, "I ought to smite you. I should strike you down where you kneel, take back your heartbeats, suck out your breath, lay waste your limbs, and pulverize your bones even unto the marrow. However. There are times in this universe when justice must yield to mercy. And as I know that, because you truly believed Me full of wrath and all unbending, your repentance was sincere, I shall, this one time, spare your lives."

Doubting his ears, Adam looked up. A beatific smile hung from God's lips. "Let us forget, My children, that this ever came to pass. Promise never again to partake of the fruit of this tree, and I shall wipe the slate clean."

some goods. So much for publicity. I was getting ready to write off the whole experience.

That is until Jason and I were talking one day and he mentioned that Tom Easton, a columnist for the science fiction magazine *Analog,* had confessed to being one of the judges for the Disktop Publishing Awards. "Maybe he'll write it up," I thought. "Then again, maybe not." A few months later, Rita Rouvalis sent us a note saying that Mr. Easton's column in the March 1993 issue of *Analog* contained a section called "Books on Disk," that discussed the winners of the Disktop Publishing Awards. "Hot damn," I thought, and bummed a ride to the nearest magazine stand to get a copy. And there we were: the name *InterText* had finally appeared in a magazine that did not require its readership to be computer-literate. Yes, yes — it was a cursory mention near the end of a column at the end of a magazine. But it still evoked a certain feeling of pride. Mr. Easton's remarks were generally positive, and he gave electronic publications a pat on the back, saying that we were a "young medium" with "a great deal of vigor and promise."

As I read Mr. Easton's remarks, I wondered how electronic magazines are perceived in the world of traditional print publications. On one hand, Mr. Easton seemed impressed that *InterText* and *Ruby's Pearls* don't focus on one genre—although both magazines publish science fiction, neither publish it exclusively. On the other hand, Mr. Easton seemed to consider electronic publications another "small press" format, with an appeal only to those who were "techy" enough to feel comfortable with the medium. Now, I'll be the first to admit there are definite parallels between *InterText* and small press publications: we distribute in a "niche market" and we aren't concerned with procuring the "first North American serial rights" to a piece (as demonstrated by this issue's "Fructus in Eden," we'll consider any work that we may legally publish). But I think Mr. Easton is missing the point when he implies electronic publication is just another "medium" of small press publication.

First, there are obvious technical differences. Unlike traditional small press magazines, *InterText* does not have distributors and resellers stock our material. We have no overhead from bookstores, no buybacks to guarantee. We don't pay printers to produce an issue. We don't have advertising costs. We don't sell advertising space. Furthermore, we can distribute an issue worldwide in a matter of hours, correspond almost instantaneously with authors, proofreaders, and production staff, and make our issues accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

I don't think these technical considerations truly differentiate us from on-paper publications, but I know people who do. Many of my acquaintances in the publishing industry feel threatened by electronic media and the "information revolution" — and I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that most of them don't know the first thing about computers or computer networks. "It's so easy to copy," they say. "There's no way to guarantee that someone won't take your stories, put their own name on it, and send it to me." While this is true, I hardly think this is an overwhelming concern. Photocopiers, scanners, and plain old-fashioned typewriters will make copies of on-paper materials — they only require a little more perseverance. If there's a way to violate a copyright, someone will do it. Every year there's a new story about how a high-school student typed up his or her favorite mystery novel and got it published under an assumed name. It probably happens all the time—it might even be the reason writers say there's no such thing as an original story.

But one aspect of electronic publishing makes something like *InterText* fundamentally different from a traditional magazine: *InterText* makes no pretext of being a "paying publication." This means that *InterText,* and electronic publications like it, are immune to many of the forces that govern the style and content of traditional print publications. We have no publishers to please, no advertising or sales goals to meet: we exist because of our readers' interest.

We receive submissions because writers want to have their stories appear here, not because they hope to receive monetary compensation. In the print industry, good stories — wonderful stories — are routinely glossed over and rejected by editors who don't have the time to read them or simply don't want to take a chance with an unpublished author. This is because traditional publications have no choice but to think about their financial "bottom line." *InterText* doesn't have to worry about any of that — our budget is almost non-existent, and so are our financial concerns. While our slush-pile may not be very large, the material we receive is fundamentally different from that received by commercial magazines *because it is freely given.* While authors may hope for commercial recognition and success, we promise none of that. The "bottom line" is that our authors (and our staff) are freely contributing their work. With few monetary or commercial concerns intruding on the production of the magazine, electronic publications are arguably a "purer" form than traditional publications.

Now, I know many of you are thinking that's a fine thing for me to say, but it doesn't *mean* anything in a world dominated by traditional media. I think it does mean something, and I think (in his own way) Mr. Easton recognized it when he noted that electronic publications don't have to conform to a single genre. Traditional publications have spent years building the barricades between genres: they've built them so well that even the most established authors have enormous difficulty crossing them. That electronic publications have been able to sustain themselves — and grow — without regard to genre is proof of the fundamental difference between electronic and printed publications.

As we embark on our third year, *InterText's* possibilities are brighter than ever. I hope you, *InterText's* readers, are proud of what you've helped create — as you can tell, I think it's unlike anything you'll be able to pick up at a magazine stand. I hope you enjoy the journey we've started, and thanks for staying around for the ride.

FIRST TEXT

Jason Snell

ONE DOZEN DOWN...

IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE I TOOK the plunge, made the long walk off the short pier, jumped into the abyss that is electronic publishing. Two years since the first issue of *InterText* got mailed out to the remains of Jim McCabe's *Athene* mailing list and a few hundred other brave souls who heard about the magazine from Usenet news postings or Dan Appelquist's *Quanta.*

Two years, and amazingly enough, I'm still in free-fall. There's no bottom in sight — unlike so many not-for-profit "hobby" enterprises that fall by the wayside after just a few months, *InterText* is still here after two years.

At the time I started the magazine, I thought that we were fairly unique in what we (Dan Appelquist and *Quanta* included, of course) were doing. And I guess we were. But there are plenty of other electronic "artifacts" out there — from the disk-based *Ruby's Pearls* to the e-mail distributed Mac newsletter *TidBITS.*

Speaking of *TidBITS,* I should mention that Assistant Editor Geoff Duncan (whose annual column appears below) spoke with that publication's editor, Adam Engst, just the other day. Adam suggested that we might be underestimating our magazine's audience. He figures that since it's so hard to measure just how far a publication gets disseminated in the net, our confirmed readership of 1,100+ is probably between 8,000 and 12,000.

Well, I'll believe that when I believe it. But *InterText* certainly has been cropping up in some odd places, including random bulletin board system transfer sections all over.

The more readers the better, I say.

Now back to that issue of being a unique enterprise. That may be so, but the "outside world's" knowledge of events here in computer-land seem to be growing. I'm not just talking about our mention in *Analog* magazine (see Geoff's column for more on *that*), but about a general recognition of computer technologies and the way they change us all.

A new entry in the print publishing game is *Wired* magazine, based out of San Francisco. The magazine is concerned with technology and its impact on us all.

The premiere issue of *Wired* included, along with a cover story featuring author Bruce Sterling's voyage into the U.S. military's world of virtual war, a thoughtful piece by John Browning about the future of libraries and publishers. The question Browning asks is essentially this: how will publishers and libraries deal with questions of copyright and royalties when everything that is published is available via computer, instantaneously?

A good question, with few answers — yet. But I think the answer will be coming sooner than one might guess. In any event, here we are, a magazine that's *always* available, in multiple formats, instantaneously. Is this the future? Could be. We'll have to see about that.

One of the heartening things about a magazine like *Wired* is its net connectivity. It has its own Internet node — **wired.com** — and its editors claim that in the next few months, text-only versions of its issues will be available via anonymous FTP and other free net sources.

Now, don't flood *Wired* with questions about this. When they're ready to put their issues up for FTPing, they'll announce it — and so will I. But the idea that a national magazine is considering putting all its stories up on the net to be downloaded (albeit without *Wired*'s unique layout and fascinating graphics) is a breathtaking one.

Compared to *Wired,* we're a little fish in a mighty big pond. But so what? We've been swimming around for twelve issues now. And the water's still fine.

SECOND TEXT

Geoff Duncan

ONE DIGITAL MAGAZINE, SUITABLE FOR FRAMING

READERS OF JASON'S COLUMN MAY RECALL HIM mentioning *InterText's* recent recognition in the first annual "Digital Quill" awards sponsored by the Disktop Publishing Association. For those of you who missed it, *InterText* was judged first runner-up in the "Regular Literary Publication" category — also recognized were Dan Appelquist's *Quanta* and Del Freeman's magazine *Ruby's Pearls* (which took first place). The point of the contest was to focus more attention on electronic publishing — the Disktop Publishing Association recruited outside judges, coordinated press releases, and offered a wide range of contest categories to recognize accomplishment in all areas of electronic publishing. Prizes were awarded for stories and novels, literary publications, software packages, as well as non-fiction publications, articles, and books.

Even though we (unexpectedly) won a prize, I found the results of the competition a little disappointing. We received "a certificate suitable for framing" and some congratulatory messages from readers and from other publications. We sent similar messages to other winners we knew how to contact, and that was the end of it. No checks appeared in our mailboxes, no one called from the *New York Times Literary Review* or *Saturday Night Live*, and, aside from the smattering of letters we received, no one seemed to have noticed that the competition took place, much less that a few upstart network magazines had gotten away with

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Our next issue is scheduled for May 15, 1993.

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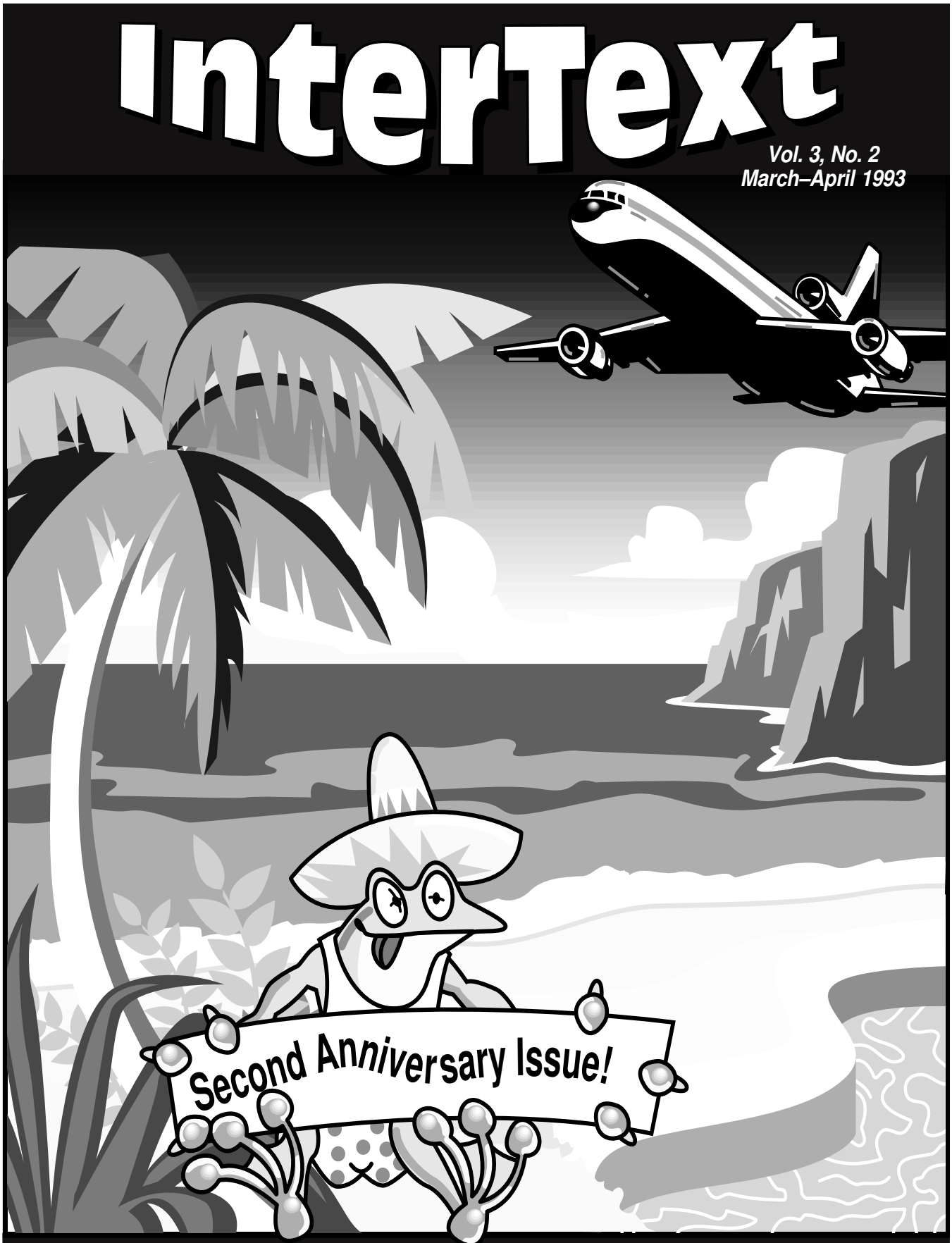

INSIDE: SNAKES, TURTLES, WILD PARTIES, AND MORE!