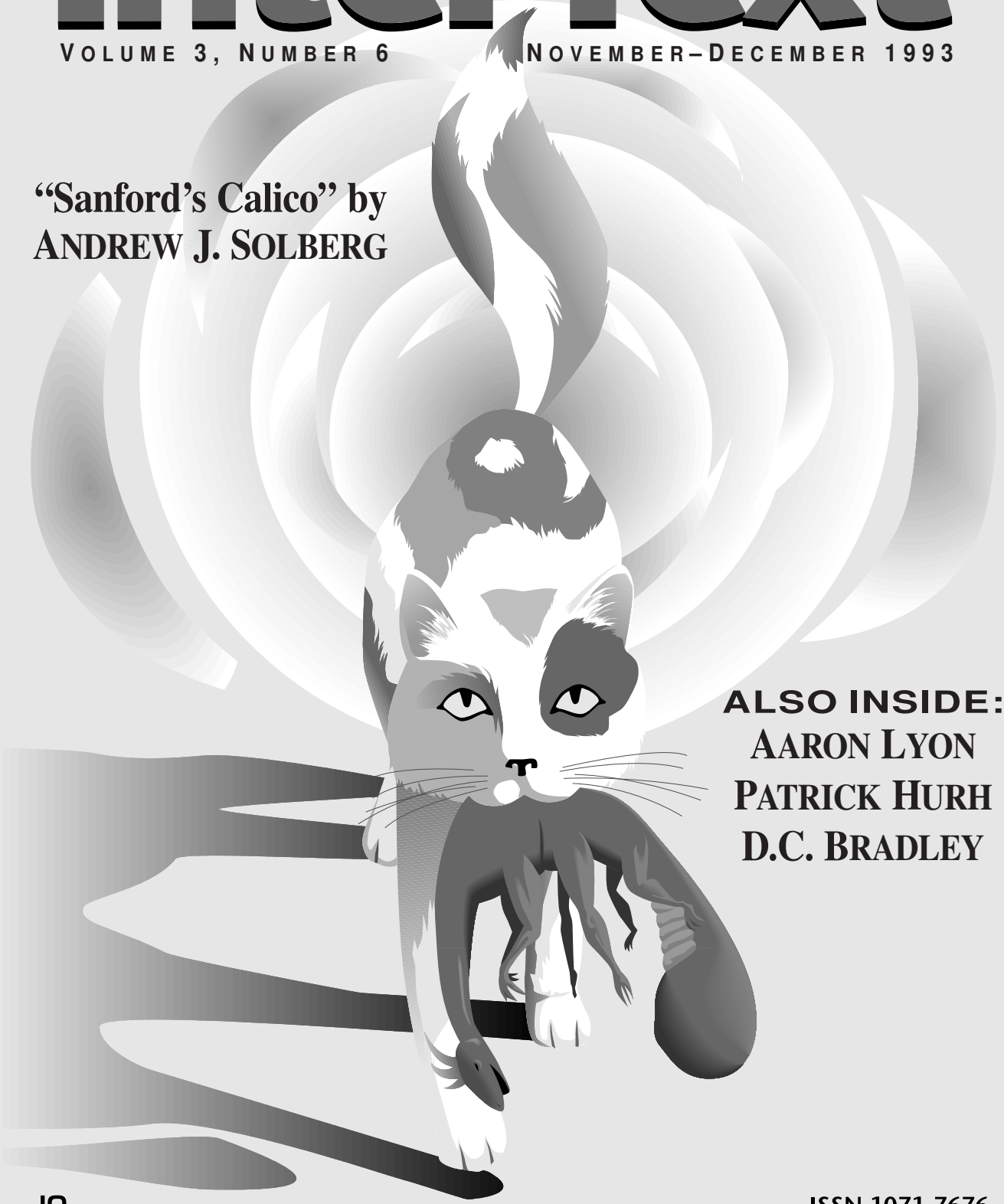
InterText

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 6 NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1993



"Sanford's Calico" by
ANDREW J. SOLBERG

ALSO INSIDE:
AARON LYON
PATRICK HURH
D.C. BRADLEY

—JQ—

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released January 15, 1994.**

Jason Snell

I Ought (Not) To Be In Pictures

So I get this piece of electronic mail the other day from a friend of mine in Los Angeles, someone I know from back in college at UC San Diego. The mail essentially said: "I opened my December issue of *MacUser* magazine, the one that just came in the mail, and found a picture of you staring back at me!"

Then I got mail from someone else, this one a person in Illinois on an electronic mailing list I subscribe and contribute to. The message was the same. Slowly, the recognition is trickling in.

Yes, that's right. A picture of me is probably sitting, right now, in most big bookstores around the United States. For anyone to see. If my picture hadn't been appearing in the PostScript edition of *InterText* from the very beginning, I'd be even more startled.

How did this begin? As I've said in previous *FirstText* columns, my job this summer was as an intern at a computer magazine in the Bay Area. That magazine was *MacUser,* and I had a great time writing and researching stories there. In fact, I'm still writing freelance stories that will be appearing in future issues.

Right before I left, two events conspired to bring me—and *InterText*—to the pages of *MacUser*. First off, I was asked to write a sidebar about using PostScript to distribute publications. Then the editors wanted to use a cover from *InterText* as an example, which is why the Dec. 1993 issue of *MacUser* includes the cover of Vol. 3, No. 3 of *InterText* on page 165.

Second, the magazine's managing editor decided to write her column about the magazine's interns. So before we left, she interviewed us and arranged to have our pictures taken. As a result, my image—in living color, a little different from how it appears in the black-and-white pages of *InterText*—is on page 8 of that same issue.

The up side of all this is that hopefully our exposure in *MacUser* will bring *InterText* some new readers, which is the best part of publicity.

The down side? I write *another* column about free publicity for *InterText,* something I've done plenty of already. Which brings my discussion of *MacUser*, my articles for them, and my photo to a close.

If I could pick *two* things that I think I've heard too much about (other than my columns about more exposure for *InterText* and my photo), they're hypertext and new ways of getting information on the Internet.

I've heard for far too long about hypertext's amazing uses, and how it will be a revolutionary concept as technology advances. And for the most part I was skeptical. At the same time, I've read a million different articles about the Internet and the different and neat ways you can get information. First it's the net itself, then it's transferring files via the FTP protocol. Then it's using gopher. Then making a search using WAIS. How about MUDs and IRC?* And, of course, the World-Wide Web—which has the advantage of being both a new method of getting information *and* a hypertext-based system.

Well, this past month I finally got direct Internet access, instead of having to dial up a UNIX system and entering all of my commands through the command line interface. As a result, I've finally gotten to explore some of the Internet resources I really couldn't have explored easily from my limited vantage point.

The first night I played with the connection, I spent hours using a program called *Mosaic*, which connected me to that same World-Wide Web. And I must say I was impressed—instantly there were graphics appearing on my screen, sections of text I could click on which would take me to whole other areas of the Internet.

Not too long after, with a little encouragement from Joe Germuska at Northwestern University, I had turned out a prototype *InterText* archive on the World-Wide Web, complete with an *InterText* author index with links to the issues of *InterText* that appear on gopher.

Not to bore you too much with technology, but the bottom line here is that the magazine is now accessible to the people who use Mosaic and other programs to use the World-Wide Web. And as technology advances, *fully-formatted* issues of *InterText* may also be available online. We'll just have to see. No matter what, this is a whole new way for people to access *InterText*. If you're able to access the World-Wide Web (ask a system administrator if you don't know how; the key is that you pretty much have to have a *direct* Internet connection), check it out. In Web parlance, our "home page" is located at **file://network.ucsd.edu/intertext/other_formats/HTML/ITtoc.html**.

That's all I have to say for this column, the last I'll write for 1993. It's hard to believe the time has passed, but as I said back in January, 1993 was definitely for a limited time only. And now that time has gone.

Enjoy this issue's stories—lots of science fiction, but also a couple stories very much grounded in reality and the present. They should all be entertaining.

See you in 1994.

*** The Thesis Saga continues—it's definitely about the addictive possibilities of such items as MUDs, IRC, Bolo, XTrek and the like. If you've used any of these a lot, or know someone who has, send me some mail. I'd like to interview *you*.**

SANFORD'S CALICO

BY ANDREW J. SOLBERG

• Pet lovers understand that getting a new animal can be a crapshoot—you might end up with a great animal, but you might get a dud. Of course, a dud may not be the worst-case scenario… •

SANFORD AND I BOTH WORK AT THE LOCAL LAB; HE'S a computer jock and I do research in microelectronics. We rarely cross paths in the office, but we've remained close since college. For instance, every Friday we make a point of going to Garvey's Pub to drink and talk.

It was on one such expedition that we spoke of Sanford's calico.

He had gotten the cat recently, apparently from an animal shelter in Phoenix. He had paid for the papers and shots out of his own pocket, and though the cost was only a fraction of that one might pay in a pet store, it put a serious dent in his paycheck. Sanford claimed not to mind, however, as the calico was delightful company and easy to care for.

It was an outdoor cat, according to my friend, and it preferred stalking about under the hedges of his backyard to loafing on a sofa all day. Sanford would let it outside in the morning when he went to work, and when he returned it would be standing by the door, meowing amiably and ready for a good scratching. The eternal bachelor, Sanford found this very pleasant.

It seems the calico (Sanford, eccentric as always, refused to give the beast a name) was something of a hunter. More often than not, Sanford pulled into the driveway only to find a mouse or small bird lying dead and bloodied on the front stair—presumably as a gift for him. Sanford decided that, for all its barbarism, this little ritual was incredibly cute and he would reward the purring kitty with a tin of sardines for its trouble.

It seems the calico was something of a hunter. More often than not, Sanford pulled into the driveway only to find a mouse or small bird lying dead and bloodied on the front stair.

Did I mention how strange Sanford is? I should have.

At any rate, the calico, being as subject to Pavlovian dynamics as any other creature, accelerated its campaign against the local fauna (and occasionally flora) in hopes of receiving its just piscine desserts every day. This stratagem seemed to work well—the cat got its fish, and Sanford got a regular supply of deceased delicacies on his walk. Sanford found this to be a scream, and was considering keeping a kind of scrapbook of the calico's "trophies." He thought nothing of the rapid depredation of the local wildlife population.

As a kind of afterthought, Sanford mentioned that on the previous morning the calico had dragged in a mutant mouse. It looked perfectly normal in every respect, except that its tail was scaled like a lizard's, and blue.

THE FOLLOWING MONDAY SANFORD DID NOT COME TO work. He was also not there on Tuesday, and the word came down the pipeline that he was AWOL. When he didn't show on Wednesday, I decided to check up on him.

That evening I pulled my rebuilt Catalina into Sanford's drive and parked it. The house looked like a sepulcher: shades drawn, no lights, papers piling on the lawn. It looked like Sanford had just pulled up roots and left. However, if you knew Sanford like I know Sanford, you would know that Sanford never leaves home without putting a tailor's mannequin in the window, presumably to ward off really stupid and myopic burglars. I climbed to the front door and rang the bell.

I had barely released the button when the door opened a crack. A moment later it was flung full open, and Sanford was dragging me inside. "In! Quick!" he hissed, and slammed the door.

Sanford looked terrible. He had huge, dark circles under his eyes, and the stain on his lips told me he had taken up chain-smoking again. His T-shirt had mustard stains on it, and he wasn't wearing anything else. In short, he looked like a body found in a ditch, and I told him so. He seemed not to hear me.

"Anybody see you? Anybody follow you here?" His eyes glittered at me in the near-darkness. I shook my head. He looked relieved.

"Jesus. You don't know what I've been through, man…" He looked like he was going to collapse. I ushered him into his own living room and made room on a recliner by clearing away a stack of newspapers. I knew where everything was in his kitchen, so I fixed him some coffee and a sandwich and tried to make him comfortable.

He looked a lot better after eating something. I pushed some comic books off the sofa and sat down to watch him. He took a long pull at the coffee and sat back heavily into the comfortable chair. "Sheez…" he breathed, closing his eyes.

At that moment there came a noise at the back door. It was a grating sound, of something rough being dragged across something metal. Claws on the screen door—oh! The calico. "Shall I let it in?" I asked, rising from my seat. I stopped when I saw the look of horror on Sanford's face.

"No! Don't! The cat… who *knows* what it's gotten into? It's not safe, man! Don't let it in!" It poured out in a rush of panic. I got him some more coffee and tried to calm him down. When he seemed a bit less jumpy, I asked him to tell me what this was all about. He looked at me with the unwilling stare of a man forced to relive his worst nightmare.

"They're in the freezer."

THERE WERE THREE THINGS IN THE FREEZER. ONE WAS A pound of ground chuck roast that had been there long enough to be harder than a brick. The other two were not hamburgers. They were sealed in zip-lock baggies.

The first contained a bird. It was the size and shape of a sparrow, but its feathers were all colors of the rainbow. Its beak was curved slightly like a finch's, and it had eight talons on each claw. Its tongue, protruding slightly, would have been six inches long if extended fully. It was clearly not a local bird.

The remaining specimen was beyond "not local." It was not terrestrial.

It was the size of a large rat. It looked something like a wolf spider, but stretched to the length of a shoe. It had thick tannish bristles with spots, like a leopard's. At the end of its body was a vicious-looking stinger. Its grasping palps were tipped with what can only be described as three fingers and an opposing thumb.

Both creatures were severely mauled. There was no question that the calico, fearless feline hunter, had been on one hell of a safari.

"Where'd they come from? What are they?" Sanford wanted to know. I couldn't help him. But the calico could.

"Oh, no," said Sanford, backing up. "I'm not letting that cat back in here."

THE CAT CHEWED NOISILY ON ITS TENDER VITTLES. Sanford looked strung out as an addict, and he sucked on his cigarettes like they were full of gold dust. We watched the cat eat, and waited.

Eventually the calico finished, burped, and curled up on the carpet to sleep as if nothing had happened.

Sanford and I exchanged glances.

We watched the cat all through the night.

THE NEXT MORNING SANFORD GINGERLY FED THE CAT some sardines. It mewed happily as the can opener ran, and gobbled the fish down as soon as they were under its nose. Then we let it out into the yard.

It seemed to have a standard routine of yard traversal: it would sniff every plant and pebble in turn, as if conducting an inventory. Then it would hunker down in the shade under the bushes and lie in wait for prey. There in the shadows, it looked like a little tiger. We watched it carefully from the bathroom window with a pair of binoculars.

Over the next few hours, the calico made several attempts to bag a cardinal which was trying to hunt up grubs on the ground. The cat would dash out from cover, a blur of color, but the cardinal would swoop out of danger just in time. The hunter would then pretend indifference, and would saunter casually back to its hiding place, as if preparing for a lazy afternoon nap. Fifteen minutes later, it would try again, with similarly poor results.

Around 12:30 the calico slipped through surveillance.

"Where'd it go?" Sanford asked. I took the glasses, but the cat was not in the yard. I berated him for letting it get away without seeing which fence it had jumped, but he insisted that it has simply disappeared. Naturally, I didn't believe him.

"Alright then, Mr. Know-It-Fucking-All," he blustered. "*You* track the little bastard tomorrow." That gave me an idea.

That evening the calico left a gift on the stairs.

Owls don't have fangs, do they?

THE NEXT DAY SAW A REPEAT OF THE PREVIOUS RITUAL, with one exception. The technology level of calico-tracking had advanced a century or so.

We had fitted a small signal emitter, courtesy of the lab and its generous after-hours policy, to the cat's collar. We had also borrowed an oscilloscope, a receiver, an amplifier, a multiband gain unit, several i/o boards, and the most advanced terminal from my division. Sanford's bathroom looked like Arecibo, and we could have heard a spider piss if it didn't put the seat up. Ah, modern science.

The cat went through its standard motions of local hunting, the results matching well with the previous day's foray. It bumbled around the yard until almost three in the afternoon before vanishing.

We peered at the screen. One second ago, the cat had been licking its paws in the middle of the lawn. The next moment it was simply not there. The computer confirmed what we thought we had hallucinated: the cat had made an instantaneous translation out of the range of our equipment.

Well, not quite instantaneous. A rigorous analysis of the shifting of the signal wavelengths showed that, at the moment of transmission loss, the calico had been receding at a rate just under the speed of light.

THE CALICO DID NOT RETURN THAT DAY. HOWEVER, Sanford and I were awakened just after midnight by the familiar scraping at the door screen, and we admitted the wayward cat. It bore with it a small creature, something like a cross between a parakeet and an opossum. It was thoroughly mauled, and quite dead. Further investigation showed that its left ear was pierced with a ring. The ring held a series of round metallic tags with bizarre spidery markings.

It took two pots of coffee to calm Sanford down.

SANFORD GOT RID OF THE CAT. I DON'T KNOW HOW, OR where it wound up, and I'm sure I don't want to know. Science is good for lots of things, but there are some mysteries that don't bear looking into.

I live in Melbourne now, designing printed circuit boards. It's kind of dreary work, but it's a long way away from Arizona.

I figure when the aliens come to find the predator that has been hauling off their pets, this is the *last* place they'll look.

ANDREW J. SOLBERG caz@owlnet.rice.edu

Is a construction contractor in Houston, Texas, The Land That Culture Forgot. He got hooked on electronic media in college but stubbornly refused to drop it for more adult pursuits such as bowling or grumbling. He enjoys writing as well as playing bridge, listening to live music, and tromping around the United States. One day he hopes to revert to a life of violence and savagery.

NEWTOPIA

BY AARON LYON

• *The dirty, dystopian future of cyberpunk writers is popular now. But if the future ends up looking more like* Leave it to Beaver *than* Neuromancer, *should we consider ourselves lucky or cursed?* •

"NEXT!"

Jeez. Finally. As I enter the white room alone, three short, uniformed men display practiced grins, gleaming straight teeth framed by dark, oily skin. My luggage has preceded me, and lies apparently unopened on the plastic table—the only furniture. Two video cameras glare ostentatiously from the eaves like Poe's ravens.

"Anything to declare?" One agent opens my suitcase and deftly upends the contents on the table. The next employs a metal detector like a kitchen tool, stirring my egg white socks and flipping my sausages. A similar metal detector was needed to eliminate the threat of the brass rivets on my 501's when I wasn't able to pass the walk-thru test a second time.

"Are you taking any prescription medications?" Another agent devours my overnight bag, snorting my talc, drinking my shampoo, chewing my aspirin, and gnawing my hairbrush. Finally, sniffing my Speed Stick and giving my shaving cream Indian rug burn in an attempt to unscrew either end, he turns his attention to his clipboard.

Three million people slap the sidewalk with floppy sandals—a percussive symphony in the heavy air.

"Please turn your pockets inside out." The third agent seems especially interested in my pens, taking them apart and flexing the springs suspiciously. I find nothing at all in my pockets, having already emptied them before the metal detector and EPD scan, and having vacuumed them carefully before this trip.

EPD (Emotional Photograph Detectography) is an emerging science wherein a selection of emotional elementals, the basic components of all emotions, are measured. Some of the more elusive emotional components exist for mere nanoseconds, and can only be detected using EPD. The resulting measurements are then interpreted as a concrete report of the subject's psychic personality. For example, violent criminals should show exaggerated hatred and pain elementals, while the ideal, bovine citizen displays a healthy mix of happiness, sadness, and fear.

The EPD scan had encouraged me with its accurate reading of my normally cool emotional complexion. EPD, despised in the West but employed in Newtopia, leaves much to be desired in a psychic evaluator for one

simple reason: criminals are commonly more together than straight folk. But I had needed the recommendation—my long hair is a serious warning sign to these people. This fact is duly noted on several pages of my passport in large red letters: "S.H.I.T." (Suspected Hippie In Transit.)

NOTICE THE WAY MY HANDS SHAKE WHEN I TELL YOU this. A typically heavy storm thrashes the hotel windows rhythmically with its wrinkled fingers. I'm on the 60th floor of this 72-floor steel and glass monster, slowly getting sick from the motion—the hotel is a giant pine branch stuck in the old tar of a derelict rolling gas station. My makeshift pendulum, a pencil suspended from the lamp by a complimentary piece of thread, nervously etches a widening oval on hotel stationery. Huge, horizontal claws of lightening, no longer shy to be seen by my bloodshot eyes, scratch the paint off my retinas, leaving the white of true power etched into my vision.

I'm jet-lag wired. My watch delivers its one-liner with a straight face, "Sixteen thirty-three."

"Stop, you're killin' me!" I chuckle rhythmically, like a woodpecker finding lunch. My gaze turns to the bathroom and I stop giggling abruptly.

A flash of lightening lasts mere nanoseconds, but this one turns from white to yellow as it lights up the shower curtain like a Las Vegas night. I whip around, jaw snapping into place a bit late, and gape. I've seen plenty of esses blow in the past, but this one flares into a screaming white magnesium celebration of the universe and my small brain. Hallelujah! The red neon tubes explode, exhaling their precious cargo like an ejaculation. Tiny bits of burning sign dive off toward the street below in a shower of sparks like space flotsam entering the atmosphere. The skin on my chest tingles with electricity.

The storm is eerily over and the building rests, perhaps sleeping, exhausted from its dance in the primal rain.

"Sixteen thirty-two?" I check my watch again. Then my stomach checks in with me, hunger overpowering my nausea. I find the thought of a food-finding mission risky, but room service is downright inhospitable.

" 'Adventure' is my middle name," I say as I grab my card key and sunglasses.

Outside the hotel, the hot, thick air presses against my face like a wet blanket. The jungle doesn't stop at the city limits like a timid forest creature, but spills out of cement troughs throughout the city. Youths on motor scooters choke the streets, buzzing from mall to mall with their Tshirts on backward. Police adorn every corner, shouting nonsense over cellular phones, 9MM handguns and black batons painfully visible. Three million people slap the sidewalk with floppy sandals—a percussive symphony in the heavy air.

A stocky blond man emerges backwards from a doorway in an office building. His soiled cotton slacks and sweat-stained shirt distinguish him from the throng as much as his fair complexion and relative stature. The stubble on this rube's cheeks is days old. An irate woman, a madam with white pancake and rouge, follows him out onto the sidewalk, ranting incoherently. A tan micro-van screeches to a halt in the middle of the street, pig-tail radio antennae wagging, halting traffic in both directions. The front and back doors pop open and steady streams of small, uniformed men pour impossibly from the tiny vehicle, like circus clowns. A captain, adorned with gold buttons and megaphone, becomes ringmaster of this grotesque circus, as the acrobatic constables perform fearless feats of brutality, quickly subduing the golden-maned lion. More cops rush needlessly to the scene from adjacent corners, knuckles white on their batons.

"Bad foreigner! Get in van!" shouts the ringmaster. "Everything OK now. Nothing to look at. Everybody scram!"

"Baby crocodile crawled out of the sewer yesterday, damned if it didn't bite my landlady!" says a nonplussed pedestrian, continuing his broken stride.

"Don't say. Good things come in small packages. Remember that guy with 93 outstanding parking tickets? Just got nipped for 36 grand and three visits!"

"Ouch, ouch!"

"Smile when you say that."

NEWTOPIA EMPLOYS CORPORAL PUNISHMENT TO ACHIEVE its rigid social order. Miscreants and nogoodniks are dealt with swiftly and effectively according to a graduated scale of evil-doing. Jaywalking, spitting, and littering bring a quick five hundred dollar fine, as does the use of a public toilet without flushing afterwards. More serious crimes are punished by fining and beating the guilty individual. Tampering with a telephone on the subway, peeing in an elevator, and bad-mouthing a police officer all result in a fine and a beating. Counterfeiting results in a $10,000 fine and five beatings.

A beating is an organized affair, in which an appointment is made for the sentenced offender to appear at an office, rather like a visit to the dentist. Appointments are rarely missed, due to the ten-fold nature of escalating punishments. Paperwork is required to officiate the event, "Please sign here and here in triplicate...and here..." Awaiting the soon-to-be-reformed criminal are two police officers and a government doctor in an examination room, completely bare of furniture except for a small stainless steel table on which sits a clipboard and a medical bag. The penitent citizen is checked for sobriety, directed to strip down to his/her underwear, and advised to assume a stance of attention in the center of the room.

The two officers proceed to administer the beating, which I will describe sparingly, using no scathing adjectives or graphic similies.

Using weathered bamboo canes three feet long, both officers brutally deliver slicing blows from far overhead, like lumberjacks chopping wood. The hapless recipient generally falls quickly to the linoleum floor, but the beating continues relentlessly. The two officers trade blows like Chinese slaves building an American railroad. Each blow raises a discoloring welt or breaks the skin, and crimson tears flow from the shallow wounds. The antidoctor, assigned to prevent death from excessive abuse, determines the merciful end of the beating when the victim is suitably reprimanded. After a few minutes, most citizens walk out under their own power.

If the criminal has been sentenced to more than one beating, an interval of time is prescribed between beatings for the wounds to heal. Some persons convicted of multiple crimes are suffered to endure the lesser punishments, i.e. beatings, before the ultimate penalty, namely, hanging to death. Smugglers, pushers, and users are all sentenced to death, as are all perpetrators of violent crimes. Participants in shootouts with police are never tried—anyone stupid enough to point a gun at a cop is immediately shot to death.

Allow me to state the obvious: cops in Newtopia engender no small amount of respect. All males are required to serve a two-year term in the service of their country when they are 18. It's no wonder most elect to become police officers. What comes around, goes around.

Subversive behavior is not tolerated. Dissenting opinion and left-wing blasphemy are not tolerated. Anyone caught voicing such revolutionary rhetoric disappears. "The Government is all-powerful, my son, and Thou Shalt Not Mess Wid It."

All news of any kind, that is, newspapers and TV news, is carefully censored by the state. Editorials do not exist. Late-night TV stations run the following spots: A figure in silhouette is shown standing, noose around neck. Next to the figure is displayed a name and a crime. Trapdoor opens, figure falls against taut rope, struggles for a moment, then swings silently.

McDonald's sprouts everywhere like a shit-eating fungus. The thought of a Big Mac turns my guts, but the food park in the broad alley attracts me like a dump attracts seagulls—a pungent smell on the air miles away. Ramshackle shops offer steamed rice, noodles, and a variety of animal parts. The flat eyes of whole, dead fish flick towards me in my peripheral vision, but stay put when I stare at them. I order noodles and fish by pointing and begin to eat.

The sounds of commerce break apart like someone singing through the blades of a moving fan. Thin yellow and orange spots blinking little neon lamps. Throbbing stroboscopic flash scene. My camera works at twelve frames per second. Now, only four frames every second. Step forward. Flash. Fumble bowl. Flash. Bowl crashes to street, chopsticks chasing madly after. Flash. Next step forward lands on noodles. Flash. I'm somehow happy to be earthward bound as my feet then my legs become egg noodle.

Three Russians with five cars full of TVs, radios, VCRs, furs, blank tapes, and pornography search docks for a homeward-bound ferry for hire.

I WAKE UP IN A HOTEL ROOM WITH A BAD HANGOVER AND a pulsing ache in my side. I discover a wound there carefully sewn with black thread—twenty-three stitches. Here's the routine: hooker snares white-faced John dupe, fucks him in prearranged hotel room. Antidoctor joins femme fatale after John gets all squashed on dope from doctored booze. Antidoc, he remove excess baggage from Johnny's inventory. Kidney and pancreas sell well on black market. Antidoc, he patch John Boy up nice: "Get yer hands offa me! I'm a wholesaler, not a murderer!"

Allow me to state the obvious: cops in Newtopia engender no small amount of respect.

A smooth, circular pool set in the center of the room stirs restlessly under my gaze. Glass water on top protects gossamer cloud below. Iridescent cream color cloud swirls when disturbed, flipping clear opals flashing green orange red blue sparks. Swells and ripples of opal chips cascade away from droplets of sweat falling off my nose.

The opals fall crystalline, tinkling, echoing. More sounds come from every corner. My mother calls my name clearly. A trumpet plays a raceway overture. Bells and whistles are interrupted by a radio news report. "Thirty-one degrees at twenty-three twenty. Humidity a low 97. Rainfall totals two-point-seven centimeters..." All these sounds from my memory coming clearly, yet projected on an auditory movie screen. I summon more sounds by name—earthen blocks thudding together, rusty old roller skate wheels spinning, clips from a million unrecorded symphonies composed in my head. Each sound is as clear and unprocessed as spring water, and on tap for instant playback in this auditory theater.

"I'LL BE DAMNED IF IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A FREE-flowing parking garage," Zan confides.

Allow me to describe this amazing structure. Each level undulates like a sine wave, exactly one cycle from east to west extremes of the building. A second wave, exactly out of phase with the other, sits adjacent to the first, so that the two waves share a common point exactly in the center of the entire structure. By traversing from one wave to the next via one of the aforementioned nodes, the intrepid parking garage spelunker can achieve the uppermost bounds of this Sinusoidal Time Antenna (STA).

Each wave segment is frozen in time—anchored in the stream, if you will. Time is frozen, and we move freely through it. An artificial light source provides the illumination here. Photons cannot travel in the STA, so imaginary light is used. Each quadrant of each wave bears an identifying scheme of colors, applied to the white enamel supports. You cannot get lost; out is always down, and up is always out.

We arrive at the focus of the STA on the top level. The red and green markers on the top floor create turbulence at the antinode where we stand. We are looking for the boat with a hand-held EPD scanner. Newtopia stretches out before us, playing at three-quarter speed.

"I think I've got it pegged in this frame, but it's bein' bitchy," glowers Mike, his eyes searching the harbor below, ninety berths wide.

"Play it again, and I'll watch the right half."

The night colors bleed into each other as Mike subtly shifts his weight and posture. Then the waterfront resolves itself and resumes three-quarter action.

"I think… by the Hilton," I say, holding the scanner at arm's length. A pale, blue-white globe winks furtively from the river's shore—it could be the moonlight. No, it's growing brighter as the scanner pulls it in.

"Aahhh yyyesssss," soothes Mike, exing his map, "Mister Tung."

We exit the parking garage on foot, as we entered, at two twenty in the morning, Newtime.

THE DOCKS ARE COOL AND QUIET. MY SWEAT EVAPORATES in the breeze, leaving my skin sticky. We stand staring at the fishing boat in berth 32. The rickety vessel bobs gently, partially revealing a magic word just under the waterline, written in green slime. A weathered brown hand pulls the cabin's curtain aside soundlessly, fingernails yellow and cracked at the edges. Long white threads grow erratically from Mr. Tung's chin. A small blue bow tidies the braided whiskers. The rest of the man's body and face, save the unmistakably Asian eyes, is that of a swarthy forty-year-old, utterly covered in tattoos. A fat drop of rain glances off my cheek, startling me. Mr. Tung disappears and we step aboard.

"They suggested I direct my question to you."

Inside the tiny cabin, the walls are unexpectedly bare. A bunk and a wooden desk are lit by a small incandescent bulb in the ceiling. Mike nearly crawls in after me, and sits on the bed rather than standing with his neck crooked. Mr. Tung sits on a crate at the desk and motions, "Sit on the bed," clearly. My eyes follow his pictorial arm as it swings by, leaving a trail of runes like an Egyptian cartouche. Rain drums on the roof rhythmically.

Tung addresses his desk, "Everyone gets to ask a question. Everyone gets to ask one question. You have never asked a question."

"No..." I blither uselessly.

"Ask."

"I… I don't know the words."

"Ahhhh," Tung's eyes swing to mine. "You do have a question!"

"I… don't…"

"You don't have to tell me any words." His face calms.

"I don't?"

Tung just stares at me. My brain goes nowhere, stupidly echoing, "I don't?" over and over. The air in the room begins to vibrate with the rain drops hitting the ceiling like a thousand tiny cops beating winos.

"Okay, then try to tell me your question in words," Tung says, shifting in his seat so his knees point at mine.

"There's— something—" Something making it hard for me to think—a horrible buzzing vibration in the air. Acid electric taste of ground aluminum in the back of my head. Pale blue-white light sucks the red from the walls, leaving a thin black-light sheen. Mike is asleep on the bunk behind me. The boat begins to pitch on the rising ocean water.

"Don't fear! Tell me!" Tung grabs my shoulders. I can see his bright eyes peering through an increasingly opaque neon cloud around me. The rocking cabin makes me queasy, and I want to go to sleep.

Tung notices my fluttering eyes and shakes me. "Don't sleep. Pay attention."

The storm drones loudly, evenly, monotonously. The room continues fading, except for Tung's clear eyes, like the Cheshire Cat. These eyes, animated with concern, appear warm against an increasingly freezing background.

"You see!" Tung shakes me gently. "Tell me!"

"There's—Your eyes—"

"Yes!"

"They're—" The room swims. I grip the edge of the bunk for dear life. I must focus! His eyes are—

"Red!" I shout.

"Yesssssssssss," Tung hisses, spinning around and jerking open his desk drawer. His hand plunges in and removes two cylindrical sticks and a black glass bottle. Turning back to face me, he notices my pale, sweaty skin. "Quick, remove your shirt!"

The effort pushes me over the edge, and as I fumble with my shirt I wretch convulsively, hitting my forehead on the wastebasket Tung holds in front of me. The room is again lit by the weak ceiling bulb.

"Lie down now." Tung helps me straighten out on my back next to Mike, his usually awesome snoring dwarfed by the storm, and my nausea passes.

"You now know the answer to your question. I will write it for you. You must never forget. Hold this."

Tung places the black bottle in my hand and dips the pointed end of one stick into the ink. Placing the heel of his hand on my chest over my heart, he holds the stick poised, dripping indigo. My eyes widen, and I imagine him tacking me to the bed like a vampire.

Instead, he taps the sharpened stick sharply with the other, pricking my chest with the point. A brilliant flash of blue-white lightening blinds me momentarily. Thunder cracks clearly like a series of two-by-fours. Now I get the point. He's tattooing me! Small beads of crimson blood rise through the black ink, warm and red like the deepest sunset.

"Red!" Tung sings, and he is finished.

We are ushered out to the dock so fast I hardly remember moving. My shirt in my hand, I can see the rune on my chest, wet and shining black in the moonlight.

Tung stands in the doorway of the cabin, as if waiting for me to meet his eyes. "*Aka.* It means 'red' in Japanese," he says, disappearing into the cabin.

"You got the answer?" asks Mike, still groggy and blinking.

"I'm sure I did," I say. "But I'm not sure I understand it completely."

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Is a 26-year-old graphic designer who will finish his B.A. in art from San Jose State University this December. Aaron is dangerously addicted to music, and is a guitarist, vocalist, writer, husband and father-to-be. He would like to thank all those whose experiences he has abused, and acknowledge William H. Burroughs for his influence. *Newtopia* is an excerpt from *Two Tone Tangle,* a fictional autobiography based on the life of painter Hieronymus Bosch. While many passages contain real names and events, it does not purport to be factual.

CUBE

BY PATRICK HURH

• Software makes a poor surrogate parent. And a sibling who buys that software? Almost as bad. •

BY THE TIME THEY GOT BACK TO THE APARTMENT block it was dark.

Horza slouched against the wall of the elevator while Dorcas ran his tape through the slit of the control panel. With an audible click, a button halfway up the panel lit up. The number on its surface was unreadable. The elevator car jerked upwards and began its ascent.

Dorcas turned and looked at his brother. Horza's haggard face was pointed at the floor, his eyes glazed over. His hands went through the pockets of his oversize trench coat and paused as his right hand dipped into the left waistpocket. It reappeared with a long, thin blank piece of paper. Horza stretched it out in front of him, looking at the entire length.

"Damn."

"There's something left on the other side…" Dorcas didn't finish as Horza flipped the paper over with a snap and located a single blue derm. He peeled it off, looked at Dorcas and made an offering gesture to his younger brother.

"No thanks, man."

Horza carefully rubbed the decal along his jugular.

"You know, you should have taken that before the funeral. Maybe you would have stayed awake."

"I was stricken with grief," Horza intoned without emotion.

"Well, I wasn't. Still ain't stricken either."

As if on cue, the elevator gave an unusual sigh and rumbled into silence.

"What the fuck?" Horza growled. His eyes were wide and his face flushed; the derm was taking effect.

"Elevator stopped," Dorcas answered.

"No shit, bro. Run your tape through again."

The fluorolamps overhead flickered and then faded to about a quarter of their earlier brightness. Dorcas looked at Horza. "It won't work without any power."

"Just try it."

"*You* try it!" Dorcas flung his card at Horza.

Horza groped in the dim lighting. He found the card and swiped it through the reader.

Nothing.

He tried again with the same effect.

"Give it back, Horza. It's just a brownout. Be thankful we're not at the bottom of the shaft by now."

Horza tried the tape twice more and then lifted the card to inspect it more closely. "This thing's all beat up, man—you gotta take care of your shit, Dor. It's like you don't care where you live no more."

"My card ain't the problem. There's a power brown and the lift won't move 'til there's juice to lift it."

"Well, what are we supposed to do, just sit here?" Horza tried the card again. Nothing.

"Give me my tape back."

"Maybe I should hang on to it 'til you learn some more responsibility. Or maybe I'll set a curfew lock on it, now that I'm your guardian."

"Yeah? And who'd show you how to run the fuckin' credit tape, or the automatons, or your fuckin' g-friend's chastity belt?"

"Or the fuckin' elevator!" Horza bellowed and held the card out to Dorcas—and snatched it back as Dorcas reached for it. He held it, taunting, two feet over Dor's head.

Dorcas rolled his eyes. "I'm tellin' ya, my tape had nothing to do with this shit!" He jumped for the card and, in the process, jammed the top of his head into Horza's nose. Horza groaned and fell to the floor, still clutching the tape card in his upraised hand.

Dorcas rubbed the top of his head and lunged again for the tape. He reached Horza's lifted wrist and grabbed it as Horza scrambled backward, pushing with his legs. Dor crawled on top of Horza and twisted the card away. He stuffed it in his pants pocket and backed off to the other side of the elevator.

Suddenly Horza leapt to his feet and charged. Dorcas yelped and defensively surrounded his face with his arms, elbows pointed at his older brother.

No blow came. Instead, Dorcas heard Horza kick the elevator doors. Once hard, then again more softly.

"Fuckin' thing."

Dorcas lowered himself to sit on the floor, knees raised before him, and stared at the opposite wall. Horza continued to tap his foot against the sealed doors and dab at his nose with the sleeve from his overcoat.

Silence attempted to fill the confined space, thwarted only by Horza's sporadic pacing. Only a few minutes had passed, yet Horza acted as if he'd been preparing to say something for a couple of hours.

"You know the small inheritance we got now?"

"Yeah."

"I spent it on the funeral."

Silence filled the elevator again.

"What do you mean you spent it on the funeral?" Dorcas had thought that the cremation was part of the insurance settlement. "It's not like we came away with anything from all this." The thing that had kept him going throughout the day was knowing he could spend his share of the money on a cheap deck… maybe start doing something he liked for a change.

Horza read the disappointment in his brother's voice. He nervously fingered a lighter in his pocket and struggled with his next sentence. "I… I'm sorry about Mom and I know you had plans for the money. So did I. But I wanted to do what was right. The man in the parlor said it would be like still having Mom around. And I didn't know what… what I could do. I don't know how to be a guardian. Your guardian." Horza anxiously pulled a cubic package from the folds of his coat.

Dorcas looked at it and then at Horza's face. He couldn't see his eyes in the dim elevator light. "Horza, you didn't… a ROM cube? Come on, that costs a fortune. Can't you take it back?"

"Dor, this is what's best for us, man. I don't know how to be a mother. I can't be a mother. I got my whole life ahead of me. I've… spoken to it, I mean her, and it's totally like she's right there! Take a look at it at least. You're too young to have a mother like me." As if in emphasis, Horza tossed the cube in Dorcas's lap and turned to hit the door again, this time with open palms.

"I don't know how to be a mother. I can't be a mother. I've got my whole life ahead of me.... You're too young to have a mother like me.

Dorcas looked at the wrapped cube. He saw the elevator's dim fluorolamps reflected in the shrink-wrap. Along one of the square, five-inch-long sides was printed Mom's name with a poem below it in smaller lettering. Dorcas couldn't read the poem in the light.

He looked at Horza, who now seemed more interested in another scrap of paper he had fished from his pockets. He looked back down at the cube. He hadn't even touched it yet, but it seemed foreign in his lap and he could feel the coldness of it through his jeans. Horza may not feel like a mother, Dorcas thought, but he sure was a mother fucker. This thing in his lap cost not only his inheritance but probably half their rent for the next five years. Because of this thing in his lap, he'd have to find a job because Horza sure as hell won't.

Dorcas held up the cube with both hands and tried to read the poem. Only it wasn't a poem. More like instructions, English instructions, badly translated from Japanese. He scraped at the shrink wrapping with his middle finger until a nick in his fingernail scratched it open. The

plastic unraveled. He flipped the cube over, staring at its blank surfaces. In the dimness, Dorcas could just make out the glimmer of a display beneath the glossy sides.

"The switch is hidden on the bottom," Horza said.

"Yeah, I see it." Dorcas jumped at Horza's words and felt embarrassed to realize that Horza, although trying to appear uninterested, was watching Dorcas fumble with the cube.

Horza turned back to the elevator control console and began to inspect the useless buttons. He traced his fingers around them and was genuinely surprised when they depressed with his touch. He never knew that they were actually buttons. He began to push all the buttons rapidly. "Damn fucking thing."

DORCAS DID HIS BEST TO IGNORE HORZA AS THE CUBE turned on. All six of its sides came to life with a quick flash followed by a lasting greenish glow that emanated from the six surfaces. He turned his back on the rest of the elevator and leaned against one wall, facing into a corner. His short legs were doubled up with his toes pressed up against the floor molding.

He flipped the cube so one side was facing up at his eyes. His mother, with a blank stare on her face, peered back at him. Her brown hair hung in lanky rivulets from the top of her head. Wrinkles surrounded her smile as she seemed to recognize him.

"Dorcas! It's about time someone picked up the phone. I've been sitting in this room forever."

Dorcas flipped the cube so another side faced him. This time his mother looked up at him with a younger face. Scorn was evidenced by her frown and furrowed brow.

"Dorcas… You stay here and talk to me before I page your father at work. If you run off again I'll—"

He flipped the cube again. This time he saw a young woman with her hair bobbed short and a silver-polychromatic film blouse peeking up from the bottom edge of the cube.

"Son? Is that you?"

Dorcas frowned and looked up at Horza, who still seemed entranced with the spent piece of derm paper. "Yeah, Mom. It's me."

"You look so old…"

"Well you shoulda seen yourself today, Ma. You didn't look so hot in that jar."

"Jar?"

Dorcas flipped the cube again and saw his mother as he had last seen her, eyes sunken and surrounded by bright blue eyeliner, skin baked into an orange glow. He stared at the image. She didn't stare back. Her eyes seemed glazed over and focused on something beyond the screen of the cube.

"Mom?" Dorcas said softly. He looked up at Horza. He was pushing buttons again.

"Mom?! Can't you hear me?"

Recognition wandered its way across his mother's face. "Dor? Is that you? What are you doing in my simstim? I thought you were at school today."

"Mom, I went to your funeral today. It was kinda rainy out and the pastor said we'd all be better off underground."

"What? I can't hear you! Listen, can you come back in a few minutes? We'll talk then. We'll have a good talk."

"Mom, you lost it, didn't you?"

"I'll talk to you later, son. This is important."

"You lost your *life."*

Dorcas flipped back to the first face he had seen. He had about three seconds before it became animated. He looked at the sadness ingrained in the face floating in the cube and realized that some of the lines he saw there he had helped place and still others he had erased.

"Dor? Stay here a minute. I'm kind of confused. Did the simstim just end? I thought I was in the middle of… Something must have gone wrong. Why are you calling me from school?" The puzzled look on her face stirred guilt in Dorcas, rooted in his self-indulgent thoughts at the funeral.

"Dorcas? Are you in trouble again? Look, I know it's not your favorite school, but it really is for the best. We can't afford to send you to the public school. At least this way you can please your father by paying for school as you go. And you're learning good responsibility too. Just think what your father would say if he caught you in your brother's footsteps. He's got enough problems with the Feds as it is. Anyway I'll be home in a few hours and we can do a networked simstim together, if you're up for it. Your teacher said that the new Alamo series was pretty good. I'll let you be Davy Crockett. What do you say?"

"Sounds great, Mom." Dorcas flipped the cube again.

HER FACE FILLED THE SIDE OF THE CUBE. THE EDGES could hardly contain the smile she grinned at him.

"Kimopolous, Dorcas," she beamed.

"Mom?"

"Yes, sort of." His mother's face pulled away from the screen. Dorcas saw bright orange skin, without a trace of an errant open pore, recede from his magnified gaze. The face was surrounded by curly, shiny dark hair and accented with sharply angled red lipstick. The eyes shining at him blinked in slow motion as the glare from the cube flickered and her silver blouse rose into view. "Although I don't have the memory access that is stored in the other cube faces, I do operate on the same simplistic neural network that was modeled after the sample from your mother's last simstim log. And although I don't have

access to most of her memories, this cube face… Me, I have a lot of room for memory storage. I will be the one who, over the coming years of comfort and enjoyment, will be able to interact with you on a moment to moment basis. At least that's what the brochure says."

"You mean you'll be my mother?" Dorcas looked over at Horza slumped against the opposite wall. He looked like he was asleep, but Dorcas couldn't be sure. The small scrap of derm he had applied probably wasn't enough to keep him riding high for more than a few minutes.

"I'll be more of a mother than he will," replied the cube.

Dorcas looked back at the thing in his hands. The animated face was straining to look beyond the edge of its box. She turned her gaze back to Dorcas.

"Is that your brother?" The cube clicked for a moment. "Horza?"

"Yeah, that's him. Don't you even know what he looks like?"

"I told you my memories of your mother's past are minimal. I'm basically the amalgam of your mother's neural pathways."

"My mother never used words like that."

"Well, maybe there's an improvement."

Dorcas fingered the edges of the cube. The thing didn't really act like his mom. He tried to think of something to piss it off.

"What's on your mind, Dorcas?"

"Fuck you, you fuckin' machine."

The screen flickered quickly.

"Ooh boy, that really hurts me, dumb fuck." The computer generated image widened her eyes and pursed her lips in mock surprise then flicked back to its earlier appearance. "Listen Dorcas, I may not know much about you or our life together before, but I do think like your mom. And right now you're getting on my tits. Why don't you try and care about something? Doesn't it matter that I'm dead?"

"What matters is that you—this clicking box in my lap—took away the only damn thing I could have enjoyed from my Mom dyin'! And, yeah you're dead, but you never were alive!"

"Well pardon me for being an expensive fuckin' machine! I've got feelings too. It takes a hard personality to deal with the likes of you… son."

"I don't need to be dealt with!"

"Well, what do you need?"

Dorcas stared at the cube. "Not what you've got."

"Now you listen here, young man," the face retorted. "I've got more going for me than you think. If you think I'm going to take that kind of back talk from you, I'll…"

"You'll what, Mom?" It rolled off Dor's tongue with a smile. "Scream at me 'til your batteries run out?"

Dorcas flipped the cube quickly before she could respond.

DORCAS ROTATED THE CUBE UNTIL HE FOUND THE youngest face, the face that he recognized as his mother but didn't remember from his past. Before the face became animated he studied its bright cheerful glow. His mother looked about twenty-five or younger, and very excited.

"Dorcas? Is that you?" Her surprise at seeing him seemed as genuine as before. "You look so old."

"Yeah, its me."

"This is so cool. How old are you? Thirteen? Fourteen?"

"Twelve."

"Wow, you look even older than that."

"Thanks, I guess." Dorcas tried to think of something to say. "Uhh… how old am I where, uh, you are?"

"I will be the one who will be able to interact with you on a moment to moment basis. At least that's what the brochure says."

His young mother seemed preoccupied with looking at him. Her gaze was so excited and intense it made Dorcas nervous. She blinked and piped up suddenly, "Hey, do you have a girlfriend yet?" She gave him a sly smile. "I bet you do."

"Mom," Dorcas pronounced the word as two whiny syllables. "Where are you? Where am I in that thing?" He gestured into the screen.

"Isn't it great?" His mother turned to motion at the space behind her. "All this stuff… and it really isn't real!" Dorcas couldn't see anything but a white haze where she was gesturing.

She continued talking excitedly, "Uncle George gave me one of those simstim upgrades for my birthday! Now I don't have to just sit there and watch, I can interact 'cause they got my brain code or something in the stim machine! Isn't it so cool?"

"It's okay, Mom. But you use the thing a lot."

"What? No, I just got this stuff. It just came today. Uncle George says you're just a construct of what you'd look like in a few years. Wow! Twelve years old, huh?"

"Mom…" She didn't hear him because she had turned and seemed to be talking to someone else. Should he tell her that she that was the construct?

"Mom?" Now she was twirling around in the white mist, her silver pantaloons whipping around her legs. "Mom!"

She stopped twirling and looked at him. She looked faintly surprised. "Oh! I didn't know you were still there. You can go now. I don't need you anymore."

"Mom, you don't understand. You're the construct. You're the one who is floating around in this box." He shook the box.

She looked confused and then brightened perceptibly. "Ahh… No, you're wrong, Dor. I just put you to bed fifteen minutes ago. You were only eleven months old then and you'll be eleven months old when I jack out."

"Then jack out, Mom. I bet you can't, 'cause I've got the controls on this side of the cube."

His mother frowned and looked around her quickly. "Well, I hate to jack out now, but I guess I can get back in right away. Uncle George bought me a full year's subscription!"

"Uncle George," Dorcas said under his breath, "can suck my cock."

His mother's face looked preoccupied for a few seconds and then she was gone. The screen of the cube flickered from black to static and then back to the mists of before.

Superimposed over the mists was his mother's young face looking surprised. "Dorcas, is that you?" She narrowed her brows. "You look so old…"

Dorcas flipped the cube...

…AND FOUND HIMSELF LOOKING INTO THE GLASSY STARE of the oldest construct. From the youngest to the oldest.

Dorcas waited for the face to animate, then realized that the face was animated except it didn't happen to be moving.

"Mom!" The right corner of her mouth twitched. "Mom!" he yelled again. It reminded him of the countless times he had roused her from her dreaming before. This cube face at least seemed to accurately mimic his mother.

"Mother!" This time her eyes focused on his for a moment.

"Dorcas?" she mumbled. "Not now, I'm in the middle of something." She started to slip away again.

"Mom?"

"What?"

Dorcas paused as he tried to think of something to say. "Can I go out to play?"

The orange face of his mother contemplated the question for all of a second. "Okay," she said without emotion.

DORCAS TURNED THE CUBE OVER TO THE BOTTOM FACE. Next to the power switch was a recessed receptacle that held the small fuel cell. Dorcas pried his fingers behind the cell and pulled.

The cube flashed brightly from all of its sides and then dimmed to a faint glow. Its afterimage radiance was just visible in the darkened elevator.

Dorcas stood with the cube in his left hand and the battery in his right. He let the cube drop to the floor and pocketed the battery. The cube bounced once and came to rest leaning against the elevator wall.

His brother was indeed asleep, hunched over in the corner. Dorcas looked at the ceiling of the elevator and then back down at his brother.

"Nothing like a little cooperation," he whispered and then stepped on the huddled form of Horza and launched himself at the ceiling. His hands lifted the drop ceiling panels as he rose and he grabbed onto the supporting cross members.

"What the hell?" Horza cried as he awoke.

Dorcas quickly pulled himself up into the overhead crawl space and swung his legs out of the way of Horza's groping hands. Once secured in his position, Dorcas found the emergency hatch handle next to his head and pulled it open. Elevator tag had never come in so handy.

Horza yelled from below, "Where do you think you're going?"

Dorcas clambered out onto the top of the elevator and smiled. "Out to play." He slammed the hatch closed behind him.

Inside the elevator, Horza spun around and spied the cube lying against the wall. The afterimage glow had dwindled into small white circular spots at the center of each cube face. He bent down and picked it up. If he looked at the cube real close, he imagined he could see the tiny image of his mother's face peering out of each one of its shining white dots.

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MANNA

BY D.C. BRADLEY

• *What is charity? Some would simply define it as "giving of yourself." But that phrase has* lots *of meanings.* •

I SEEN THIS SHOW ONCE ABOUT HOW THEM RICH GUYS ON A level live. Most folks I know ain't never been higher than E. I guess I been on D level once, but that don't count much since my leg was busted and I couldn't hardly see with the pain and all. Harry says he's got better upper class morals or something like that than the rest of us, because his dad was raised on C level—he *says.* (I don't hardly believe half of what Harry says all the time.) Roge says upper class shit don't mean nothing down here. Roge sees things straight.

Me and him are right-hand pals. We've known each other since before Roge's ma got put in the freezer. That was on H level where we was raised. We done most everything together and ain't hardly ever had a fight.

That's why we both joined the Anarchs. We didn't want to end up getting froze 'cept maybe if we went together. I guess Roge gets kind of scared some times about the freezer, after what they done to his ma. That's the only time when he don't see so straight.

Today we went to the Anarchs meeting like we done every week since we joined up. Merlin (he's the boss) calls us the faggot twins, 'cause neither of us never goes nowhere without the other. I think he's joking, since Roge is blacker'n lights-out and I'm white as junkies' pus. Maybe I got a little black in me but it don't show. I can't hardly tell most times when Merlin is joking. He's got that scar down the side of his face and around his eye. Half his mouth don't never smile and the other half only does when he's mad.

"So, what you cookin' for us today, Boss?" That's Harry. He can't keep his mouth shut more'n five minutes. Roge says Harry is all con. He ain't told the truth yet since he was plopped out on the floor from his poor old ma. "Any revolutions brewing? No, then how about we just go raid the junkie shop down the rail shaft? That's a good old standby."

"Shut your stinking hole, Harry," Roge says. "We want any shit from you, we can unplug your fucking skull and let it drain into the rotting piss gutter."

"Amazing," Harry gibes. "A muscle head gets a few neurons and there's no telling what he'll do next. If I didn't hear a complete sentence coming out of this ape I'd have said it was junkieshit—"

"Cut out the crap, you two." Merlin isn't smiling, but he's just a little pissed off. He stands up at the end of the table. "You morons were supposed to be scouting level K this past week. I want reports from each of you." We all look down at the table. I trace somebody's name that was carved in it with a knife.

"Halverson, you've been real quiet over there. Would you care to give that rusty trap of yours a couple flaps?" Hal is big and he don't have much to say most of the time. He doesn't look at us, but keeps staring at the table.

"Block one, there ain't much there—same with two and three. Four got burnt, so there's some loot'n there, but most of it's already been done." He closes his big jaw, so we all know he's said his fill and don't bother him for more.

"Anybody check out five or six?" Merlin asks. He knows Sam's the one that done it, but he never talks straight to Sam.

She don't talk to him neither but scuffs with her foot in the dust and says in her husky voice, "Passed through Block two on the way. Kid I talked to says they got a remote hookup to the Network restricted channels. Says it came from—"

I can feel Merlin's eyes burning holes in my head. I'm thinking real fast and just sort of blurt out, "Nine's got that Magic Man."

"I want to hear about five and six, not the goddamn sight seeing tour on the way there." Merlin turns and talks to the gutted wall. "Halverson's done block two anyway. If he says there's nothing worth pick'n, then we ain't gonna bother to try."

Sam kicks harder with her foot, but stays cool. "Six's got a couple junkie shops—that's it. Five was getting fumigated. Maybe we could get in. I don't know."

"How 'bout the twins?" Merlin says as if he hadn't even heard Sam. "Did you clowns take a stroll through seven to ten?" Roge and I look at each other in that crap-in-the-pants surprised way. I should've known we had more than two blocks. We only done seven and eight.

Roge jumps in real quick. "Seven's got a back-room pawn shop. Alex and me seen some of their stuff. A few power packs, and a stash of them old police slugs was the best of the lot. They had a couple muscles to protect the place, but no arms we could see. Eight was a dud, and hell, so were nine and ten."

I can feel Merlin's eyes burning holes in my head. I'm thinking real fast and just sort of blurt out, "Nine's got

that Magic Man." I never was a fast thinker. Why the hell did I have to open my big mouth?

"What kind of junkie pus are you trying to feed us, Alex?" Sam gets on my case, 'cause she's still sore about Merlin cuttin' into her.

"N—nothing. I'm just stupid I guess." I wish they would leave me be, but Merlin leans towards me with his red scar all puffed out.

"Tell us about the Magic Man, Alex." He talks real sweet and makes me nervous all over.

"Lady says he, uh, he can do magic stuff." They're all staring at me. "I mean, he takes care of poor folk and—" Merlin's scar is getting redder and redder. "She says so—lots of 'em seen it, late at night." I'm surprised, because Harry comes to my rescue and saves me from getting my ass kicked.

"Ass for brains has it all screwed up as usual, but if you would allow me to interpret you'll see he ain't junkieshitting." Harry makes a big show of fixin' his chair just right before he begins. "This guy showed up a couple of weeks back. No one knew him from the next psychotic pus head, but he hides out on the K level like he was born there or something. He's got some kind of gizmo that he brings out at night. Like this dung head was saying, the piss-poor sods from all over K crawl over to Block Nine to get food and medicine—at least that's what they say they got."

"What's the machine look like?" Merlin's eyes are like slits. I shiver just looking at him.

"They didn't say much that made sense. Old man told me the Magic Man puts dead cats and rats and stuff in there and it comes out like bread. He showed me some."

Merlin whirls around and starts pacing up and down, kicking the trash all over the place. The scar seems like it's crawling all over his face and might jump right off. Finally he comes back to the table. "We're gonna get it," he says real cool.

"What is it?" Roge asks.

"What you need to know for, muscle head?" But he goes on anyway. "It's a food distiller. High-tech shit they was working on in the military when I—" He stops suddenly and his eyes turn mean. "Hell, I ain't gonna sit here all night explaining to a couple of faggot twins. Go get some beauty sleep for your fat asses, 'cause we got work to do—tonight."

Roge and me leave the Anarchs' den and just walk around for a while. We go to our favorite hangout down by the busted water main. When we was kids it tore open between H and I levels and filled up somebody's basement before it stopped. No one never saw so much water . It ain't near as high now. We like to throw scraps in and watch 'em sink through the green gunk on top.

I ask Roge what he thinks about the Magic Man. He says he's never seen no magic before that wasn't faked somehow. "But what's the difference?" he says, and I just know he's right. Roge sees things straight. We sit for a while, and then I speak up again. What about them poor folks? I ask. They can't hardly get enough to eat down there on level K, and we're gonna take away the food whatchamacallit. It sort of bothers me down in my gut. Merlin always said I was a softie. Roge don't say much for a while. "It ain't right to steal from poor folks," he finally says. He don't like it neither. "Most everyone's poor sometime or other and no one likes it any better'n the next guy."

We sit for a while longer, throwing junk into the slimy water. Sometimes bubbles come up from where the trash sank. I can't hardly describe it, but the way them bubbles rise up so happy like and then get all weighed down by the mush and burst. It makes me sad sometimes. I guess Merlin is right; I am a softie.

Me and Roge stand up after a long time. We walk back to our room and choke down a few food pills. They don't taste like much, but there ain't anything else around to eat. "What do you think Merlin's gonna do with the food gizmo?" I ask Roge. He don't know.

"Maybe he'll sell it, or maybe we'll have to catch cats and stuff so we can eat out of it." That's all Roge can think of. I can't figure nothing better than Roge.

We lie around on the floor and try to find something on the Network screen. They got lots of shows about how to live the right way, so you don't get hauled off to the freezer. Seems like there are more of them now then there used to be. It don't do no good, though, 'cause just as many people get froze as before. I wonder if them folks on A level watch these shows. Roge says the uppers don't go to the freezer, so they don't gotta learn to live right. He's probably seein' it straight like usual.

When it says it's time for lights-out on the Network, we go back to the Anarch's den. The hallways are only half lit. We have to walk real quiet so no one don't jump out and mug us. Most times, mugs don't go after big guys like us out of respect, but this is I level, where you can't trust no one.

We get to the den all right. The other Anarchs are there except Sam, but she comes in after us.

"Break the shock bars out, you muscle heads, and stop slouchin' around like a bunch of freezer burns." We do what Merlin tells us. Roge kisses his stick and slaps it against his leg.

"Ole Stinger," he says. I use to call mine Tickle, but it busted. Harry says I always bust things since I'm so dumb, but I always took care of Tickle. Anyway, now I got an old one that ain't so good anymore.

"Dammit, who's got my glow hat?" Sam growls. She looks all around and then at me. "You got my hat again?" I shake my head, but she comes over and looks at mine.

"Alex, what kind of pus you got for brains? It don't even fit on your big greaseball head. You got mine."

Roge cracks a big smile. "I think she likes ya, Alex." I just spit on the floor and go find my glow hat. I can't never get them damn hats straight.

"We're going soon as you fag twins get your butts off the burner." Merlin sounds real edgy tonight. We grab our stuff and head for the rail shaft. The lifts don't work at night and you got to have a special pass for each level anyway.

The shaft ain't got no lightin' so we switch our glow hats on. Them junkies got a shop a little ways in, but they don't give us no hassle tonight. We just walk on by till we get to the duct. The duct is this big hole in the floor with a ladder stickin' out. We climb down. Hal goes first, since he's so big, to scare any mugs away.

While I climb down, this question keeps saying itself in my head until I finally can't hold it in and ask it out loud. "How we gonna get that food whatchamathinger back up to the den? Maybe it's real big."

"How do we always get our loot back up?" Harry says right below me. "You muscle heads lug it back up. We got ropes and all the other shit you big bastards need. Just leave the thinks to us and everything will be slick as junkiepiss." I look down and step on his fingers. He cusses at me until Merlin tells him to shut up.

It's a long climb down to K. We have to take a couple side tunnels and I'm glad Merlin's with us, 'cause I'd get lost in the dark like this. Finally Hal stops up ahead and says we got down to K all right. There ain't nobody around that I can see. That's good, 'cause some of 'em down here've got that rash from the fumigation. You can catch it from 'em if you ain't lucky.

Merlin says we're in Block Two. That means we got to walk all the way to Nine, so we get moving. Some of the hallways down here ain't even lit at all. My ma told me once about how this used to be A level. There weren't no others above it. I figure that means the uppers used to live down here. That must have been a long time ago. It's mostly gutted now.

Finally we get to Nine and start lookin' around for the Magic Man. It doesn't take long before we see a crowd of people ahead in one of them empty lots. We sneak up in the dark hallway with our glow hats turned off. I can see the food gizmo in the middle of the room. People are lined up beside it. Some of 'em have dead cats and sacks of trash just like Harry said.

The Magic Man is standing there puttin' stuff in one side and handin' out white chunks from the other. He ain't very tall or tough lookin' and he don't have no weapon that I can see. He just looks like the rest or them poor folks: sort of stooped over and dressed in scraps of insulation that got ripped off the walls a long time ago.

Merlin pushes us forward and yells, "Don't nobody move and you won't get hurt." We all run in shouting and waving our shock bars like we're crazy. I want to stop and think, but there ain't no time. Maybe if I wasn't so dumb, I could figure things faster, but there just ain't enough time. The poor folks all freeze and crouch on the ground like they probably done a hundred times before. The Magic Man, he never even looks at us. He just keeps putting dead cats and garbage into his food gizmo.

Hall gets there first and his bar just nicks the Magic Man when he swings it around. The little Man springs back from the shock. I see his face then, except it's not a man it's a woman. She's got this real sad look when she sees into my eyes, like she wants to cry, but she doesn't. I'm moving forward real slow but fast at the same time and I know I can't stop.

She's real quick, which surprises me. One second she is standing there lookin in my eyes; the next moment she's jumped up and into the food gizmo where all the dead cats went. I holler real loud and reach for her, but she's gone.

Merlin yells at us to bring the gizmo to him, but I don't care if he gets so mad he smiles till his face splits in two. I just stand there and say real calm like, "What we gonna do, Roge?"

He looks around at all them poor people and lowers Stinger. "We gotta feed that Magic Man out to all these piss poor folks," he says. I knew Roge would see things straight like he always done. It's just what she would've wanted.

And so that's what we done.

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SOONER OR LATER

BY ERIC SKJEI

• At some point, we all walk into and out of another's life: sometimes with a ceremony, sometimes without even a nod. But what defines our path: its beginning or its end? •

FIRST THE TIRE BLEW OUT. THEN HIS TONGUE BEGAN to bleed. It all happened at the same time. He heard the muffled thump and the clatter of the hubcap skipping away, felt the puff of air and the new wobble, and became aware of that familiar salty-metallic taste.

"*Cafard*, as the French say." The renowned author was droning away on the radio. "A sort of weariness of the spirit." The word brought to mind the morning at the cafe when she first literally let her hair down for him, transforming herself from contained professor of romance languages into sexual creature, then telling him about the dream she had had the night before about his eyes. It was an invitation, and he had happily accepted it for the next seven years.

At the sound of the flat tire the two women in the van next to him craned in a startled way. Their van slowed abruptly. He did nothing, just kept driving, the seat gyrating beneath him. His blessed mind chimed in. *Sure, why stop? It's pouring. You'll just get all wet.* In the rear view mirror, he could see the two women peering at him incredulously as their van dropped behind him. *Why bother? Who cares? You don't, that's obvious. So ruin your rims.*

At the sound of the flat tire the two women in the van next to him craned in a startled way. He did nothing, just kept driving. *Sure, why stop? Why bother? Who cares?*

He pushed his tongue against his teeth, exploring the sore, then looked in the rear view mirror. There it was, a thin red vertical crack at the very tip. *It's the dry weather. Your hands, lips, and even your heels for Christ's sake are always getting dry and cracked.*

He thought about his meeting that morning with Dr. K. Slowly turning the pages of the wedding album, the doctor had listened attentively to him. "A Buddhist wedding," repeated the doctor tonelessly. An embryonic hope had started in his breast. Then the doctor handed the thick volume back to him, saying, "So, why are you showing me this?" Disappointment replaced the hope. *So don't go back.*

Now the album lay on the seat next to him, bouncing to the car's awful thump. He thought back to the wedding, the golf jokes beforehand, the ritualistic ceremony with the seven objects—what were they again?—a conch shell, a flower, a flame, a something, a something. Bowing to the Regent. Trying to put the ring on her finger. That took some effort. The room was sweltering and her finger was swollen. She still had the designer dress, but never wore it.

His own ring was in his desk drawer now, not on his finger. *They weren't wedding rings anyway, they were* engagement *rings.* Gold with a green jade crescent across the top. *Kind of like lime Life Savers.* From the jeweler at the foot of Grant Street. Often admired, envied too, by all her friends and sometimes also her lovers, even here in the Midwest, where it still was *de rigueur* to wear diamonds.

He returned to the present. *You're going to ruin your rims. You're getting careless.* He pondered that for a minute. *You could* care less. *C'mon, stop and change the damned tire. You even have some of that canned stuff in the glove compartment. Remember? For flat tires. You bought it from those handicapped people who are always calling to sell you light bulbs. So they would leave you alone. Why not use that?*

He sighed, aimed toward the shoulder and slowly bumped to a halt. In the sudden silence, the car sat idling obediently, waiting for his command, stupidly unaware of its predicament. *Whither thou go, eh?* Not anymore. *She's gone already, and I'm not going anywhere.* Austin. Heat and humidity. *I hope they're miserable.*

He turned the engine off and sat in the ruins of his life. Cars whizzed wetly by. He reached down to the lever beside the seat and let the back recline. If he could sleep, he thought, he would. Then when it stopped raining, he would get out and change the tire.

He closed his eyes. In the silences between passing cars, he could hear the loud ticking of the dashboard clock. After a while, he sat up and examined the tip of his tongue again. There it was, the same hairline crack. It had stopped bleeding, but it still hurt.

He turned on the radio and got a burst of static. Underneath the noise, he could faintly hear the author going on in his plummy voice, saying something about morality and *perestroika.* He thought he heard a hard "t" in the word "often." *Hypercorrection. Quel bozo. And his latest book isn't even that good.*

He turned the radio off. *That antenna needs work. Every time you go through the car wash, it wags back and forth like a semaphore. One of these days it's just going to snap right off.*

Headlights appeared in the mirror. They rapidly grew bigger and brighter, then stopped right behind him, filling the interior of the car with a harsh blazing glare. *No light bar silhouette, no flashing red and blue lights. Where are your insurance and registration? In the glove compartment?* A horn honked. He sat, unmoving. It honked again. He grunted, opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

It was the van with the two women, the one that had been in the lane next to him when the tire blew out. He bent down next to the driver's door. She cracked her window and rolled it down an inch.

"We thought you might want us to call a tow truck," she shouted. "We almost didn't come back, but then we thought we should. Nobody helps anybody these days." He was getting drenched and it looked like she would just keep on talking so he interrupted her.

"Thanks," he said, grinning tensely. "I think I'll just wait until the rain stops, then fix it myself." She looked at him for a moment, then turned to her companion. They had a quick conference, then she turned back to him. "Get in. We'll drive you to the gas station. We trust you," she tittered anxiously. "We can't just leave you here."

He nodded. She twisted in her seat and reached back to unlock the door. *Why not just leave him alone? He doesn't want your help.* He climbed in and sat down. The windows were foggy.

"…and this is MaryJo," said the driver. She had told him her name first but he hadn't caught it and didn't want to ask her to repeat herself. He thought it might be something like "Michael." Her companion smiled and nodded. They were in their 40s or 50s, dressed alike, with identical well-trimmed gray hair. *Dykes? Nuns? Both?*

"From around here?" prompted the driver.

"Larkspur," he said. "You?" he added in a polite afterthought. They nodded, but said nothing.

The driver turned on her blinker and began to pull out onto the highway. A small alarm went off in his head. "Wait a sec. Forgot something," he muttered. He scrambled out and went to his car, then came running back clutching the wedding album under his jacket. They waited until he had slammed the door again, then moved out onto the asphalt.

"Wedding album," he said, by way of explanation.

"Oh," cried MaryJo. "Just married?"

"Just divorced," he replied.

There was a pause. "Oh," she said tonelessly.

He began to flip through the pages. There they were, he and his in-laws, getting ready for the reception. Planting flowers all over the backyard, setting up tables, eating pizza. There they were, his brother-in-law and the dark beauty of a wife he divorced a year or two later, leaving her and their four kids for his pushy business partner. There was his friend from Phoenix and his wife, now his ex-wife. There was another one of his friends, already divorced at the time of the wedding, the one who had just survived a heart attack, the one who delighted in telling the story about how the hospital scared his daughter half to death the morning she brought him in with severe angina by asking what religion he was. There was his wife's German grandmother, whose 90th birthday celebration, produced by his relentlessly positive father-in-law and immortalized on video by his equally relentless brother-in-law, he had suffered through not long ago. She was dead now, and a sweeter little old lady had never blessed the face of the earth, despite her disconcerting way of dropping a casually vicious reference to "kikes" into the middle of her interminable stories about her youth in Chicago. And there was the so-called Regent of the Tibetan Buddhist sect his wife belonged to, the one who had been too preoccupied with his official duties to inform his male lovers that he was HIV-positive. And there was his wife, looking remarkably young and happy. And there she was again, and again, and again.

"It was a Buddhist wedding," he remarked, apropos of nothing, into the loud silence in the car. "She was a Buddhist. Is a Buddhist."

"Buddhist," said MaryJo cautiously. "We know some Buddhists, don't we?"

The driver nodded and glared out into the rain. "…perfectly honest, I don't much care for them. That one that's always going on about the wheel of dharma?"

MaryJo didn't seem to have heard. At length she said, "Karma, not dharma. That one?"

"Samsara," he interjected, sounding a little harsher than he intended. "Samsara is the one that is usually compared to a wheel." He pushed his tongue against his teeth, finding the sore place again.

Yeah, you could use a wheel right about now. He remembered Thomas the sculptor and his cement wheel, back in his student days in Berkeley. *Yeah, even a cement one.* Then he thought of John and the cement coffee table they had made at the beach, casting it into a hole in the sand, then muscling it into John's pickup when it had cured. They drove back to the house they shared with their girlfriends, both of whom were named Margaret. They backed the truck up to the front door and rolled it straight into the living room. It was so heavy it made the floor sag. There it sat until the party with the keg, the one where he got so drunk he went for a ride with someone he barely knew to East Oakland, where he wandered around, in and out of black people's houses, for most of the evening. Finally someone called a cab for him and back

he rode to the party. *In fact, that was the time you woke up in the middle of the night, screwing John's Margaret, a split second before you both came, just as your Margaret walked in the one door of the bedroom and right out the other.* Out of the house, in fact. Out of his life.

What a ride. From stupor to drunken consciousness to orgasm to guilt and terror in less than a second. The only thing he had experienced that was remotely like it was the time he fainted in his mother-in-law's hospital room.

"I just need to hang another bag of blood," the nurse had said. And then they had stood there, him, his wife and his sister-in-law, morbidly fascinated by the slow descent of the red fluid down the IV line into Marian's arm. He remembered deciding he needed to sit down. The next thing he knew, he was coming out of blackness with a halo of anxious faces above him, that same nurse in the center, raising her hand to slap him again.

"Interesting," he had mumbled. "You were snoring," his wife had snapped. What he remembered most of all was the feeling of enormous peace and pleasure, not shock or pain. *If that's what death is like, it's not so bad.* And that's what he kept telling himself while he rode to the memorial service a month or so later, the small, heavy cardboard box holding Marian's remains on his lap.

"What kind of work do you do?" asked MaryJo. Beside her, Michael oversteered, both hands clamped on the wheel, making constant small corrective motions.

He didn't tell them he was an artist. Instead he told them about the small company he owned, selling and servicing industrial fire extinguishers. They made polite noises. "Today is payday," he said. "And the payroll's back in the car. The boys at the plant will be getting pretty upset when I don't show up with their checks." MaryJo grunted and lit a cigarette.

The van slowed and veered toward the shoulder. Ahead in the murk he could see an old station wagon with a mottled paint job parked alongside the road. They stopped in front of it and honked. A young woman carrying a baby climbed out and ran up to them. "Oh, thank you," she gasped opening the door and clambering in beside him. "I thought I was stranded for sure."

Georgia, maybe. Or Tennessee. Definitely not a Texas accent. She was thin and blond, and her hair was very fine and straight. She was also incredibly young.

The baby began to fuss. She casually switched it to her other arm, unbuttoned her blouse and held it to her breast. "This is Gabriel," she said proudly. The baby continued to squirm, sucking furiously. "I'm Alcie."

"What's wrong with your car?" he asked, watching the baby wriggle.

She frowned at him, then said, "What's wrong with your tongue?"

He stared at her. "Did I say something wrong?" He turned to the window and stuck out his tongue. The red fissure was plainly visible. The man driving the car next to them shot him a disgusted look. The kids in the back stuck out their tongues at him.

Alcie was saying something to him. "I don't know. It just up and quit. My husband always used to fix it for me, but he's gone." *Kentucky?* He looked at her hand. No wedding ring.

The album was open on his lap. There were the three couples drinking sake before the ceremony. "That's my wife," he said. "My ex-wife."

"She looks drunk," said the girl.

Then there was the picture of them all kneeling, no shoes on. "It started late," he said to her, feeling a sudden serenity sweep over him. "I told my friends to come at least an hour late, but they came on time." *And had to sit there and sweat, the poor bastards.*

Then there were the pictures of the Regent striking the gong, pictures of his wife offering the Regent a cup of tea, pictures of her bowing, hands together, before the Regent, while the Regent watched her, head inclined, peering up at her from under his eyebrows. At that time the Regent had been plump. Now he was much thinner.

The baby gurgled. She turned him over and patted him mechanically, blankly watching while he slowly turned the pages of the album. After a while, she spoke to him. "Does that mean that you're a Buddhist too?"

He shook his head. "No."

"An interfaith marriage," said Michael, a dismissive note in her voice.

"Not really," he replied. "I don't have any faith at all."

Alcie looked at him obliquely. "Well, one thing I know for a fact is that faithless marriages don't work either."

He couldn't disagree and didn't want to explain. The car windows were steamy and the air seemed unbearably close. He closed the album and stared out the window. The car sailed on through the wet gloom.

The two women in the front seat exchanged a few soft words, and MaryJo briefly consulted a map. They all sat that way, in rich, exhausted silence, until the car nosed toward an exit. "Here we are," Michael said, as the car came to a stop next to a tilting dumpster. He got out, stretched, and headed toward the office, leaving the album behind.

"Say," called Alice. "You forgot something." He ignored her and kept on walking, pushing his tongue against his teeth to feel the sore place.

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THE BURDENS OF LOVE

BY CHRIS KMOTORKA

• Some people prop themselves on a moral high ground, passing judgment until the Lord elects to contradict them. Other people, well... they do what they gotta do. •

"GODDAMN IT, GARY," I SAID AS I SAW THE NEWS flash. I said it softly, silently even, to myself like a mother at her wit's end. Except I'm not his mother, I'm his wife. I sometimes wonder if there's a difference; sometimes I wonder if there should be.

I've been sitting here on the couch watching TV for an hour now, waiting for the six o'clock news. I always watch the news, but a few minutes ago they came on and said they're going to have a story about a bank robbery that happened really close to where we live, only about a mile or two to the southeast, depending on how it is you go, from where I'm sitting right now. There's going to be this story, but all they've done so far is describe this guy as being tall, six-one or six-two, thick, collar-length blonde hair and a mustache, late twenties, early thirties. Nothing real particular, your typical northern Michigan weekend bank robber type. I've always had a weakness for that kind of guy: a little bit of trouble, nothing too dangerous, just enough to keep things interesting. I guess it's not so surprising then that Gary and I have been together for so long. He's exactly like that in the looks department. It's close to three years now, married almost half that—sixteen months. But now I wonder what's going to happen to us.

We've been through a lot, Gary and me. We've never done anything to hurt anyone else. Not on purpose anyway. At any rate, you can't even call it a *real* bank robbery.

We've been through a lot, Gary and me. Not all of it so good you'd tell your friends and family about it, but we've had good times and we've never done anything to hurt anyone else. Not on purpose anyway. At any rate, you can't even call it *real* bank robbery. Just one drive through, two counter spots, and an ATM. Small time even as bank branches go. Whoever did it had an easy time of it. But robbing banks is big time, no matter how small the bank, how small the chunk of change you get. And you almost *always* get caught.

After the news we're supposed to go out to eat and then to the Fireplace Inn for a few drinks. They have a great country band out there on the weekends. We're celebrating. Gary helped my brother with a sheet rock job and we finally have a little bit of spending money. Things have been pretty tight since the money from the house ran out. I was beginning to think we were going to have another fire, and I could tell that Gary was thinking the same thing, saving all the extra papers from the *Journal* route that he runs Sunday mornings and all. That may sound kind of strange, but it's happened before. We lost everything we owned that wasn't with us in the car. I have to admit that wasn't much, but even the little things add up when you have to start from scratch. It's not like we doused the house in gas and lit a match or anything.

What we did was, we started stacking up old newspapers in front of the furnace, and we let the lint build up in the dryer. Little things that add up, you might say. That was when we were living in Saginaw, a couple of months after we were married. Gary had lost his job working the oil rigs and things were looking kind of bleak. I was really sad when he lost that job. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't because of the money, although it was pretty rough being without it all of a sudden like that. I was sad for romantic reasons. We had our wedding ceremony in a clearing in the middle of a cornfield beside an operational rig. We had wanted to have it up on a platform tower, but we couldn't get the preacher—Deaconess, really; Sister LaTicia Wallace—to climb up there. So we had to settle for the pump in the cornfield. But I'll never forget it. I'll always have a soft spot for oil derricks.

We were clear across town visiting Gary's mom and dad when we heard about the fire. We rushed back home, fast as we could, but when we got there the fire department had already put it out and there wasn't much left of it but a big wet pile of stinking, steaming wood. The smell of smoke and ruin was in everything, you couldn't miss the finality of it all. We moved into a trailer on Gary's parents' lot and waited for the new house to be built, brand spanking new and owned free and clear thanks to the glories of a healthy insurance policy. Insurance is the one thing Gary and I have always seemed to agree on. I may get a couple of months behind on my utilities, dodging the shutoff notices and recorded messages and all, but my insurance premiums are always paid on time. That's because Gary lost a house once before. Which means an accident here could stir up a lot of trouble and

questions from the insurance companies, what with two fires in less than a year and another one only a few years before that. Especially since the insurance was in my name on our last place and it's the same here. They'd start screaming arson so fast, whether they had any evidence or not, which they wouldn't. There can't be evidence of arson if we didn't set the fire.

SO ANYWAY, THE NEWS FINALLY COMES ON AND THE anchor is describing this guy and asking for anyone with any information regarding the robber to call the station to let them know, and then they go to a commercial. For a second I get this scared feeling and look towards the bedroom, but I put it out of my mind soon enough because I doubt they'll get any calls. I don't see too many of us rushing out to inconvenience ourselves over some small time crime that will get us little more than a court appearance. Traverse may not be a really big city, yet, but it's definitely a place where people are smart enough to know that it's better to wait for *Missing/Reward* or *America's Most Wanted,* or one of those shows, because at least then you know you're going to get something out of the deal. I watch them both; I'm waiting for a crime that I know something about, but I suppose the chances of that are pretty darn slim. Basically, the community ethic/ goodwill thing just doesn't cut it anymore. It's too easy to get hurt doing that trip.

I had an uncle, Uncle Ryan, who got killed doing the good deed activity. Uncle Ryan was a traveling salesman. Bathroom fixtures. He was twisting his way through the mountains of southeastern Kentucky when he got killed. There are these signs down there, all throughout the mountains that say *Fallen Rock Zone.* They used to have signs that said *Watch For Falling Rocks,* except you never see any rocks actually falling, and people were spending more time looking for the damn things to fall than they were looking at the road. I guess that's why they made the change. Anyway, Uncle Ryan actually saw a rock in the road. Now, just because people don't actually see the rocks fall doesn't mean that they don't. There are rocks the size of Yugos and all sorts of smaller boulders all along the sides of the roads. It's just that you don't see these things *in* the road. Well, Uncle Ryan sees this rock and his first inclination is that someone is going to get hurt with that rock being in the other lane like that and there being a blind curve right there and no real way for oncoming traffic to see the rock, so Uncle Ryan pulls his car off to the side of the road as far as he can and he gets out. He walks over, bends down, grabs hold of the rock and starts to lift it. He had enough time to get halfway up with it when a huge coal hauler came hurtling around that blind curve Uncle Ryan was so concerned about and hit him dead center on the grill. Four days later we had a closed casket ceremony and to this day I'm convinced that it simply doesn't pay to go out of your way to help someone else if there's nothing in it for you. That may be a hard thing to say, but I tend to think that these are hard times.

I'M WAITING TILL AFTER THE NEWS TO WAKE GARY UP. He's sleeping in the other room. I should wake him up and make him watch the news with me, see what he says, but I need time to think. And he needs his rest, though how he can sleep I'll never know. He picked up a quarter pound of weed from my brother-in-law who lives just down the road on the street behind ours. The dope's mainly to sell, of course, but we usually skim off half an ounce or so. Once it's all divided up, no one notices. Still, I have to keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't take too much. I have to keep reminding him that it's an investment. You have to be responsible where investments are concerned. Sometimes I think love is a lot like baby-sitting. But that's okay. Love should be a burden. I've always thought that, at least for as long as I've felt I know what love is.

My mom knew real love. Love was never easy for her. I mean, maybe at one time it was, but not that I can remember. My dad had Multiple Sclerosis, and it was hard on mother the last few years of his life. He had gone virtually blind and was in a wheelchair; he used to say over and over, "I ain't a baby, I can do it." He said it about everything we tried to do for him, but, of course, he couldn't. He'd wear himself out trying, and then sit there quiet with his eyes all wet looking while Mom or one of us kids helped him out. He had been a policeman and had always been active. The MS didn't really start affecting him till he was in his early thirties. My brother and sister and I were all very young. By the time I was ten or eleven, it seemed like he had always been in that wheelchair. His speech got to be real difficult to understand as well. He'd get upset over it. I can't blame him, now. I hate having to repeat myself, and my speech is perfectly clear. Mom had to take care of him like he was a child. And with three little kids running around on top of it all, it was hard on her. That's how I know what love is all about, how it has to be a burden to be real.

WHEN I FIRST MET GARY I WAS WORKING AT A COUNTRY bar called The Roundup, a little north of Thompsonville. He was up fishing along the Platte River and had been driving around looking for a place to get a steak and have a few beers. The Roundup is about the most perfect place around for that sort of thing. Anyway, I was serving him, and I guess I must have been pretty obvious, bending over and letting him have a peek or two at the goods, and other tricks I still haven't been able to stop using since I did a

little time as a prostitute. Down in Detroit. I left that all behind. It's been practically fifteen years now since I got out of that life.

It's weird when I think back on it. It hurts, too. Sometimes I want to cry over it, like a black secret I'm always trying to hide from the rest of the world. I didn't do it for long, but it was too long just the same. I don't even know how it happened. I mean, I do, but I have a hard time believing I ever did it. I was in the Navy. I had a good job working as a missile mechanic, which I also can't believe I ever did. I only joined to get my GED and because I couldn't find a job. Anyway, one night I went out with a guy I met at a bar and we got to partying. I was gone the whole weekend, went AWOL, and I was afraid to go back. I couldn't call home. I needed money and it seemed like an easy enough way of getting some. Next thing I knew I was dishonorably discharged and sitting on a bus back to Michigan. I went right back to it in Detroit. I got into all sorts of other bad things, too, including smack. As far as I know there's still an outstanding warrant for my arrest there. For loitering of all things. That's what they bust you for when they can't get you on anything else.

I suppose I'd still be there today if it hadn't been for my brother. He drove down from Traverse City to find me, and when he did he grabbed me and forced me to go home with him. I guess it was kidnapping, really. I hated him for it at the time, but now I'm grateful. I went through withdrawal at home. My mother's new husband wouldn't let her take me to the hospital. He was afraid of what everyone would think if they found out. All I did was cry and hurt, and scream at them. I couldn't keep my food down. Every part of me hurt so bad, all I wanted was to die—but I didn't. I suppose that if Jerry hadn't come down there for me I probably *would* be dead now. As it is, my insides were so screwed up that I'll never be able to have children. I had to have a hysterectomy. That hurts me a lot now that I'm married and all. I told Gary it was a congenital thing. He doesn't know about my old life—all six months of it. I don't know what I'd do if he ever found out. I guess that's just another part of my burden.

GARY'S BEEN REALLY GOOD FOR ME. THE IDEA OF having someone to take care of has straightened me out a lot. I've done my share of time in the Grand Traverse County Jail since I've been up here. I've been busted for everything from passing phony checks and writing bogus prescriptions to dealing. Gary knows most of that; it's not as if he has a spotless record himself. You can't keep everything a secret. Keeping everything inside will only drive you crazy. I've managed to stay out of trouble since I started seeing Gary, though. I guess it has a lot to do with being so busy taking care of him. I haven't had the time, or the need, to do anything wrong. At least, not until Gary lost his job. That's when we started back into dealing. We only sell pot, though. If I had to go in front of the judge again for speed or acid, I don't think I'd get off as easily as I have before. It's not that I think selling pot is wrong. I don't. A little weed never hurt anybody. There are studies that proved that. The thing I feel sort of guilty about is how we got the money to buy our first stash. We didn't rob a bank or anything like that, but in a way it was kind of worse. What we did was take a bunch of stuff from my mom's house and sell it. That's not something I'm very proud of. It was mostly camping gear and tools that had belonged to my father, stuff that was going to just sit there until it rotted. I tried to make myself feel better by telling myself that, but then all I saw was my father in that wheelchair before he died, all shriveled and depressed by all of the things he could no longer do, and I could see why my mother held on to it all and I just felt worse about it. She needed the memory and I took it away from her.

WHEN GARY AND I STARTED GOING OUT IT WAS PRETTY obvious that he needed me. He's a lousy housekeeper and he can't cook, either. He lived on McDonald's and Burger King and pizza. I moved to Saginaw to live with him after only two weekends together. I put his house in order and started buying his clothes for him. I even cut his hair. I had taken a mail-order cosmetology course after I dropped out of high school and I think I'm still pretty good at it, even though I've never actually worked in a salon, or anything. I had to take over paying the bills, too. Gary made good money working the oil fields, but he had no idea how to manage it. Everything was past due. By the time we decided to get married we were living a life I never thought I would ever have. Once you've done some of the things I've done, you almost give up dreaming of the normal life. You kind of give up on love, too. But when I met Gary, I knew right then that it was possible. And it was.

WHEN GARY CAME IN A COUPLE OF HOURS AGO WITH ALL that money, I couldn't believe it. I didn't think the work he was doing with Jerry was going to be finished til next week, and that was when he was supposed to get paid. But like Gary said, Jerry realized how much we needed the money and paid him in advance. Gary walked in with a fifth of Jack Daniels from the corner store and a grocery sack with that quarter pound in it. At first I was kind of angry, money being as tight as it is, that Gary would be so irresponsible. But we haven't been out in a long time and it's good to let loose once in a while. We've always liked to kick back and have a drink and watch TV. And the thought of going out to dinner and then dancing to a good band sounded real nice, so I went pretty easy on him.

Sometimes I swear he's just a kid.

I KEEP SAYING TO MYSELF THAT THE PROOF OF TRUE LOVE is in bearing the burden, but I have to admit that sometimes I have my doubts. Sometimes I think that Gary could have a decent job if he wanted; he's just too lazy to go out and get one. I know he was offered a job on a disposal truck, but he's too proud to allow himself to be called a garbage man. I don't know what the big deal is; garbage men get paid really well as far as I know. But after losing his job in the oil fields, there's nothing else he wants to do. He loved working the rigs. We've talked about moving out to California, or Alaska, so Gary could work the offshore rigs, thirty days on, thirty days off, but it hardly ever gets any further than talk. It seems that every time we get started, we tell our families, start selling off stuff, and the whole thing just falls through. I don't know if I'd like it anyway. I love Gary and all that, but thirty days without him at a time doesn't seem reasonable at all. How am I supposed to take care of him when he's out there on the ocean in some tower hundreds of feet in the air? Guys get killed out there all of the time. I guess that's why they get paid so much. Not having him around would be like some kind of part-time love, an occasional demand. I'm afraid that somewhere along the line while Gary was gone I'd end up drifting right back into the dead end life I thought I'd escaped.

Lately I've been wondering if maybe we shouldn't take what we can get in the back of the Camaro and just slip out of here some night without telling anyone, without doing anything to jinx it. Skip out on the landlord, cancel our renter's policy and wind off down the road. Listening to the news about bank robbers practically in my own back yard is making me think that that's exactly what we should be doing. We could go to Florida, if not out west. It would be warm; I can feel the winter wind picking up around here lately. It won't be long before the windows are frosted over in the mornings and the leaves will be turning brown and falling. The changes happen so quickly and so suddenly that you can't help but think in terms of time passing away before your eyes.

WHEN THE NEWS COMES BACK ON WITH THE COMPLETE details of the robbery, something beyond the vague description and the request for information, I'm up from the couch and fixing myself a drink. Jack Daniels and orange Slice. I prefer kahlua and cream, or tequila, but we finished both the night before. There's a tiny little bit of kahlua in the bottom of the bottle, and I'm saving that to put on top of my ice cream after the bar. I take a deep swallow of the drink and as an afterthought I fill the glass back up with more whiskey. I'm trying to listen to the story and pick up the living room at the same time. Gary's jacket is draped over my arm and I'm sitting on the edge of the couch, listening and sipping at my drink, which is now too strong to take big drinks from.

Apparently this guy just walked into the Interlochen branch of the Old Kent bank early this afternoon and gave the teller a note that said he had a gun and wanted all the money. A real creative sort. There's no mention if he actually showed a gun or not, so he probably didn't. Those tellers can be such airheads. You wouldn't catch me handing over money to a small town geek with a note. Not unless I could figure out a way to pocket some for myself, that is. But I don't think I have to worry about ever being in that situation. With my record I doubt that I would be hired as a bank teller.

The guy took off on foot across the field behind the bank to the northwest. He was dressed in jeans and had on a tan waist-length jacket and a maroon baseball cap. I look back towards our bedroom and wonder if I shouldn't lock all the doors and latch the windows. I laugh at the thought despite everything going through my head because I'm having a hard time telling myself there's no need to lock anybody out—Gary's already in. This isn't exactly the kind of place a dangerous criminal would hole up, and I know for a fact I could handle the type that might. No, the only reason anyone would come here is because they live here, or maybe to read a meter or collect for a bill. Other than that, it doesn't hold a lot of promise.

I shut the television off and stand there for a second trying to decide whether I should wake Gary up now or let him sleep a little longer while I get ready to go. I guess I'll let him sleep, that way he won't be in my way. He's pretty much a pain when he's in the bathroom with me. It's almost impossible to put on mascara and curl my lashes while he's trying to squeeze his head around me to get at the sink to brush his teeth. I'll get myself ready and then wake up Gary. That way he can sit on the toilet as long as he wants and I can sit back and relax with another drink.

Standing at the closet I hold up Gary's jacket and inspect it before I put it on a hanger. It's getting a bit worn. Now that we have a little bit of money, maybe it's time I bought Gary a new jacket. Rather than hang it in the closet, I roll the jacket up tight, carry it into the kitchen, and shove it down into the trash. We'll go to the mall before dinner and find Gary a nice new jacket. Maybe one with some color to it, something not so drab. It's time for a change, I think. A good, lightweight, bright jacket, and maybe I'll give him a fresh haircut. Kind of a new beginning. Because the way I see it, we may be heading west sooner than I had thought.

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