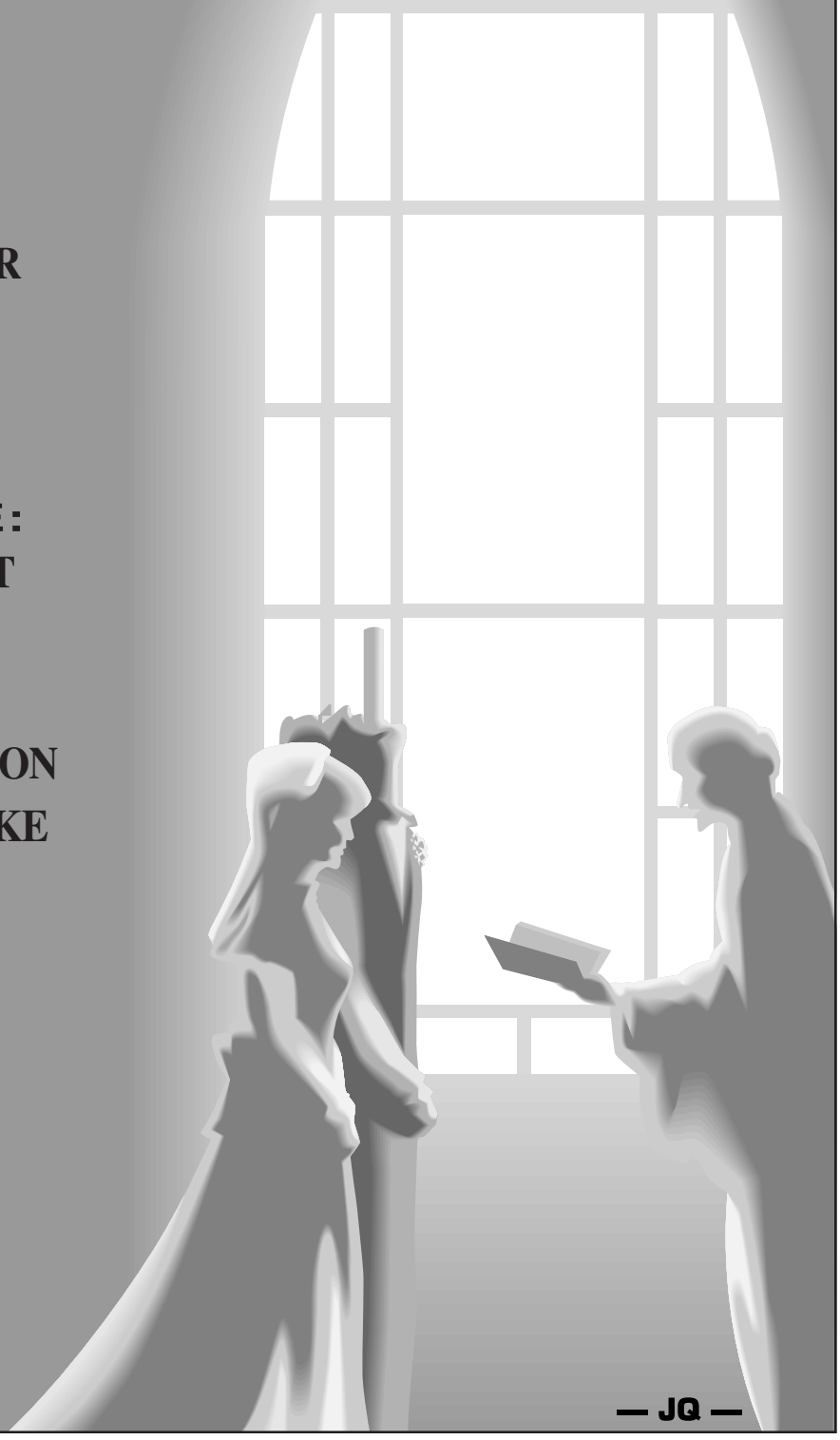
InterText

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 1 JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1994

"Home" by
ELLEN BRENNER

ALSO INSIDE:
ADAM C. ENGST
SUNG J. WOO
SUSAN STERN
STEPHEN KINGSTON
CAROLYN L BURKE



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

Jason Snell

How the Other Half Writes

I've been working in this world of "on-line" computers for a long time, relatively speaking. In the early '80s, before the movie *WarGames* made a whole generation of moviegoers wonder if computer hackers with modems could destroy the world (or their credit rating), I was the proud owner of a 300 baud modem attached to a Commodore Pet computer. About all I could do with it was call CompuServe (which cost an arm and a leg, even then) and connect to the billing system of the local hospital. Trying to hack into that system had its appeal, but after a few weeks I grew bored and the modem went back into the box.

After I saw *WarGames,* I pulled out the modem and started trying to use it again. This time I began connecting to the world of local computer bulletin boards—one local (run by my best friend), a few long-distance. In high school, I ran my own bulletin board on an Apple //e computer. And in college, I became interested in the Internet. Then, in 1990, *InterText* was born.

I've made a lot of good friends—and uncountable casual acquaintances—over the years, here in this other-world of computer communication. Most of them, both the good friends and casual acquaintances, were males. *Of course,* you say to yourself, *because most of the people on-line are men and boys.*

It's true. In all the time I've been on-line, the ratio of men to women has been more or less what I'd expect it is in Alaska: maybe 9:1, if you're lucky. The most common reason I hear for this disparity (women *are* slightly over half the population, you know) is that women aren't as interested in computers. Why *that's* the case is open to question—some would say that women are discouraged from scientific and technically-oriented subjects from the time they're born. Others would say it's just a natural difference.

Maybe using computers as communication would turn off women who prefer intimate, person-to-person interaction. (Though if they knew what sort of conversations happen to people on-line, perhaps they would think twice about the quality of "computer talk.")

Whatever the reason, a fact's a fact. Women are in short supply when it comes to the on-line world—though things are changing, slowly. (There are plenty more women around these days than in the old days…)

I'm sorry to say that for most of *InterText*'s life, we've been part of this disparity. During our first three volumes, only four of the 46 writers we've had have been women. This issue, however, half of our stories—a full three of six—are by women, including our cover story, "Home," by Ellen Brenner.

No, 1994 hasn't brought a mandated gender quota to the pages of *InterText.* It just so happens that of the stories we chose for this issue, half happened to be by women. There are no promises that such a thing will happen again next issue—for all I know, 42 of our next 46 writers will be men.

But I'd like to think that this issue is part of a trend—for both *InterText* and the Net in general. Women writers aren't any better or worse than men, really—that's a terrible generalization to make. But if I must generalize, I'll do it in saying this: women writers offer a *different* perspective. It's good to have them represented in these pages.

On a radically different subject, I thought I'd mention that as 1994 opens, I begin a new chapter in my life. In addition to editing *InterText* and putting the final touches on my graduate journalism degree at UC Berkeley, I am now an assistant editor at *MacUser* magazine. It'll be a busy few months, but hopefully I'll be able to balance work, school, *InterText,* and my home life.

What does this mean for *InterText?* Probably nothing, really, though the address subscribers receive this magazine from may change as I gain Internet access at work. But Geoff Duncan and I hope to bring you *InterText* into the foreseeable future, just as we've been doing for the past three years.

And on that note—a sentence which foreshadows the fact that our next regular issue (Vol. 4, No. 2) will mark our third anniversary—I wish you good reading.

Enjoy the issue.

HOME

BY ELLEN BRENNER

• Especially in a small town, people who are at all unusual draw attention whether they like it or not. And someone who is incredibly *different… •*

I AWAKE FROM A NIGHT MADE RESTLESS BY MY USUAL stew of fragmented dreams to an early morning full of fog and the effortless song of birds. Some people hate foggy days, but I adore them. There's something about the acoustics of fog that make bird-song, and all outdoor sounds, more intimate—held close by all that opacity instead of flying away into the unobstructed air. One tends to notice things like that when one is held as still as I am.

I lie there awhile, enjoying the birds and the patch of sky I can see through the window without moving. I'm not quite ready yet for the ordeal of getting my outlandish body out of bed. In some ways this is the hardest part of my day. Not that any part of my day is exactly easy, but every morning tempts me with the appeal of just staying in bed and evading all my little daily struggles. I do love life enough, despite my problems, that getting up wins out most of the time. There is, however, that occasional morning when I go ahead and let temptation win. And I don't feel any too guilty about it either—even though every single time I do stay in, someone inevitably comes looking for me, worried that I've had one of my mishaps.

Millie came looking for me when I was an hour late for work, to find me nearly in hysterics, having spent that hour methodically feeling every horizontal surface in the house without success.

That's life in small-town New England for you, everyone minding your business as well as their own, especially when one happens to stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. *Heh.* But I don't mind. In fact I find it rather comforting because, truth to tell, I really do just barely manage on my own. I mean, I try not to make a habit of falling down or getting stuck somewhere or otherwise getting myself in a fix, but it has been known to happen, and it's not a whit less terrifying to me each time it does. It's really only the confidence that somebody *will* come looking for me that allows me to go about my doings with any semblance of serenity. So I bless every one of those beloved busybodies, even the ones who would make me laugh out loud if I were capable of it.

Despite the hangover from my bad dreams, this is not a day from which I really desire to play hooky. So I steel myself and commence with the maneuvers required to get me off my stomach and onto my feet. Glasses next—the usual moment of frustrated groping, wondering if I have undone myself by putting them someplace dumb, until finally my hand connects with them and I nearly explode with relief. Like most visually impaired people I'm perforce a creature of habit, so my glasses are nearly always on the dresser where they're supposed to be. Well I remember, though, one particularly ghastly morning that I simply could not find them anywhere. Eventually Millie came looking for me when I was an hour late for work, to find me nearly in hysterics, having spent that hour methodically feeling every horizontal surface in the house without success. Why I didn't just break down and call her, I'll never know; I can get pigheaded sometimes. We never did find that pair of glasses, incidentally—it's still a mystery where they went. Joel made me another set that very day, while Millie sat with me the whole time, reassuring me that I was not being a silly ninny for having worked myself into such a state. I just love Millie. And Joel, too, of course.

Glasses found and strapped on so that I can at least somewhat see where I'm going—now into the shower, and on with my robe. My cane and my vocoder are right by the door where I usually leave them, thank God. I grab the cane, sling the vocoder's carrying strap over my shoulder, and carefully head out the door.

The village of Mumford is a tiny thing. The business district, such as it is, comprises six blocks worth of Main Street. Its storefronts maintain a balance between the utilitarian and the picturesque: Joel's True Value and Rodding's Feed & Grain coexist with Millie's rambling bookstore and a gaggle of antique emporia. The cross streets are lined with wood frame houses under elderly maples. Most of the structures are plain little cottages, but a sprinkling are grand Victorian wedding cakes festooned with verandas and cupolas, though their grandeur is nearly all broken into flats these days. I live in one of the plain cottages, though a room in one of the wedding-cakes would have been more aesthetically pleasing. I just couldn't have borne facing all those diabolical steps every single day.

The fog has nearly all burned off by now. I make my slow progression down the block to Main Street.

"Hey! Pole!" a cheerful voice greets me just as I round the corner. Since I can neither speak nor turn my head nor acknowledge a greeting in any other normal way, I simply come to a halt and wait until the person accosting me swims into my field of vision.

Of course I've already recognized the voice long before I set eyes on the fellow. It's Crandell, one of my "biggest fans," as I often joke to Millie—one of those people who seem especially to enjoy my company because I offer the least resistance to their desire to talk. Crandell's a dear, and mostly harmless, but the volume of his outpourings never matches the import of their content, so I don't even bother to power up my vocoder (just as well—it's a real chore to walk and type at the same time). I proceed on my slow way once he's caught up to me, and let him blather on at my side, reflecting yet again on how I'm saved from constant social disgrace by my inability to laugh out loud.

Thankfully, he has no business he can think of in the bookstore, so he leaves me in peace at the entrance, heading off to the cafe in search of more victims to harangue. The bell jingles and the comforting book-smell wafts out at me as I negotiate my way through the door, and Millie yells a hello from somewhere in the back. This is my real home, even more so than the cottage that serves as my domicile. Here I feel enfolded and supported; here I can more than hold my own.

Millie comes over and leans convivially over the top of my computer hutch as I get myself settled. I can see her out of one of the mirror-lenses of my glasses; she's giving me her "concerned mother" look. "You seem a little tired," she observes. "Didn't you sleep okay?"

I have the vocoder on at this point, and stop to type in my reply. The voice that flows out of the little notebook-sized machine lacks something in inflection and nuance, but it is more natural-sounding and beautiful than I ever would have expected of a bunch of microchips. Emory worked really hard to get it that way—one reason why he is another one of the people I love.

"Frankly, no," I type. "I had another one of my patented nights of surrealistic dreams. Definitely fueled by this upcoming interview foolishness—at one point there was a bright green lizard in a pink business suit shoving a microphone in my face, asking how it felt to go through life with a pole up my butt."

"You know you can always back out of it," says Millie. She's now making her endearingly wry face—lips compressed, eyebrows up into her bangs, head cocked to one side. She's forty-five, an independent divorcée, and this bookstore is her baby of ten years. She moved from Boston to this village just to birth it. She takes great pride in being considered almost a local now after a mere decade's residence.

"Just because my unconscious is throwing temper tantrums does not mean I don't want to go through with it," I type back. "And it's hardly as if it's my first time. Though I sure hope it gets easier with repetition. Hang on a bit."

I have to stop typing because I need my hands free to carefully lower myself into my chair. Another one of Joel's handyman fixes for the peculiarities of my body. With Millie's blessing, he cut a circular hole in the floor just in front of my computer workstation, and affixed a cushioned bench equipped with sturdy armrests above it. The bench has a slot cut into its seat, perfectly aligned with the floor hole. This arrangement provides me one of the few places in the world where I can sit on a chair like a normal human being, for which I'm profoundly grateful. But actually getting myself into that seat requires a few tricky moves, to get that pole of mine properly inserted into that hole and slot.

Yes. A pole. Really.

It's nearly impossible to explain myself to anyone who has not yet heard the tale, without sooner or later hitting something so ludicrous that the hearer bursts into laughter, insisting he or she is being put on—it's a joke, right? Nothing so ridiculous could ever exist. Hell, I *live* with it, and *I* often want to laugh—when I don't feel like screaming, that is. (I wish I could do either.) Even my unconscious seems to find it funny—"a pole up my butt" indeed.

But that's exactly what I have. Not just up my butt, but clear through my body. About four inches in diameter, about six and a half feet long, straight as the proverbial ramrod, made of an amazingly hard organic material that has been shown by analysis to be at least somewhat related to normal human cartilage; spitting me clean through the long axis of my body so that it issues from my mouth at one end and my anus at the other, completely occluding thereby my throat, my esophagus, large portions of my GI tract—

Totally revolted yet? Nobody can figure out how this could have happened, and nobody can say how it is that I am alive. The scientific types have unhelpfully concluded that, technically speaking, I'm *not* really alive—not, at least, in any regular sense of that word. I don't breathe, nor take in nourishment, nor seem to especially need either. And a good thing too, as I couldn't have managed either in the normal way; and thinking about how I would have handled elimination only invites more of the nervous laughter my predicament breeds like toadstools.

Suffice it to say that I do keep functioning, sustained by some mechanism and energy that cannot be determined by the white coat brigade. They've poked and they've prodded, they've taken pictures and scans and God knows what else, and all they come up with is a great

big nothing. A mystery of science and a prisoner of absurdity, sibling to Kafka's cockroach but with nowhere near the dignity or pathos—*heh.* That's what I am.

Living or not, I have to put up with some pretty gruesome realities. That unforgiving pole rules my body, forcing it into a painfully undeviating alignment. My head it jams back at a grotesque angle; my face it crams into a eternal gaping grimace. My eyes wind up permanently fixed upon a spot on the ceiling behind me—in other words, I am functionally as good as blind. The upper end of the pole juts out a good eight inches before my face, just long enough to make it a challenge to go through doorways without fetching it a teeth-rattling whack. The nether end extends to about two inches above my ankles, so that I can walk, however awkwardly; but if the ground is any less that perfectly flat I get completely tangled. Stairs become an obstacle course. Sitting is completely out of the question, except through Joel's exotic arrangements. And now you see why lying down, or more accurately getting up from lying down, is such a production. What else? I've already mentioned I can't speak, can't make any kind of sound; I can barely move either—it's astonishing how much one's range of movement is limited if one's torso is rendered completely rigid.

Is this horrifying enough? How about the fact that they can't remove it? Turns out it's sensate, an integral part of my body. It has the weirdest sensitivity to knocks and pings, like a huge exposed funny-bone, as I've discovered to my agony from the thousands of times I've smashed one end or the other against something. Some bright-eyed whitecoat tried digging at it early on, and I went into such deep shock that the whole brigade feared for a bit that they had lost me—not that I felt they had any qualms about my well-being, mind you, but they surely didn't relish the embarrassment of killing such a promising subject before they'd figured out how he was alive.

Oh, and how about the fact that I have no more idea of where I come from than anybody else? I have no memory at all of my life prior to that night three years ago when I woke up—naked, disoriented, transfixed—in the woods outside Mumford, and dear old Janeen Colver, seeing some strange commotion out in her back woodlot, threw a coat over her nightgown and went out with a flashlight to investigate.

It was pretty easy to determine that I was not from Mumford. But so far, I don't seem to be from anywhere else, either. My fingerprints have been sent around the world and have produced no match. Nobody has come forward with as much as a missing-persons report. My traces of memory would seem to point to the life of a typical middle-class American—but I must have been a loner, and too nondescript to have had my fingerprints recorded anywhere. I might as well have been dropped from the sky—punted out of the heavens by a renegade deity with a particularly sadistic sense of humor.

I found myself a man without a past, and with the most laughable excuse for a present, and with a future that would have been very grim indeed, had I not been adopted by the inimitable residents of Mumford. Dedicated eccentrics all, closely bound and yet self-reliant, they felt an instant, unanimous pang of compassion for this changeling that Fate had dropped into their backyard. Without a moment's hesitation, they took me into their hearts.

The upper end of the pole juts out a good eight inches before my face. The nether end extends to about two inches above my ankles.

A moment I shall never forget: caught in Janeen's flashlight beam, unable to see whether I had found friend or foe, vainly clutching at my distended silenced throat as this unseen other swore under her breath in astonishment; and then her surprisingly strong arm around my shoulders, her gruff voice in my ear: "Lord bless you, son, I think you've been run through with a—well, I don't know what—but just you take it easy and lean on me, my house is just a few yards away."

And then lying there in a daze across her big old four-poster, shivering hard against this unyielding spear through my flesh, listening to Janeen on the phone to old Dr. Harvey: "Harv, you better come on out here. I've just found this young man in my woods and he… well, I don't think I can do it justice, but it's the closest thing you've ever seen to a feller swallowing a telephone pole… I'm sorry, Harv, I can't explain it any better than that… Well, then I suppose you'll just have to get out of bed and come see the poor feller for yourself, then, won't you?"

And then the strange procession of days that followed, in which, by degrees, the entire cast of characters in this little family theater called Mumford passed through Janeen's house, come to see this poor stranger to whom such a dreadful thing had happened—some wise, some foolish, some sensitive and some less so, but all uniformly possessed of the most astonishing sense of empathy. *Empathy?* How could one possibly empathize with something so bizarre? But that's the only word for it. Maybe after years of living together in a small town, sharing each other's tragedies and coping with each other's foibles, the spectacle of this man with something like a telephone

pole through his body was not all that much stranger to them than their own existences. Just another poor devil with his particular cross to bear. Or so they seemed to be taking it.

Further, since I had materialized in their woods, they as one assumed that I was now their responsibility, and my predicament their task to alleviate. They took me in hand with characteristic country ingenuity. It was Janeen who first noticed my vision problem and called in Joel, who took some wire and some convex mirrors and rigged up the first, rough edition of my now ever-present "glasses." Joel, in turn, called in Emory, his nephew with the "fancy-pants technical-institute degree," who turned an obsolete notebook computer and some off-the-shelf voice-synthesis chips into a serviceable vocoder in an afternoon. And Janeen herself, pragmatically realizing that trousers were out of the question for me, sewed up some warm flannel into a kind of loose-fitting caftan-like robe. She's made my clothes ever since.

But it was Millie who did me the most beneficial service of all, if the least tangible. She sat by my side as I discovered (rediscovered?) my voice, talking me down from my initial shock into some semblance of sanity. How I remember lying there, typing on that little makeshift vocoder, venting all my anguish at this reality into which I'd been thrown: adrift in a freak's body, with no memory of who I was, and no name except that ghastly epithet "the telephone-pole man." "Well, then, what do you want to be called?" I remember her asking me. "I don't know," I typed back, and then I couldn't type any more because I was crying too hard to see. And she held my hand and stroked my head until I stopped crying, and we talked no more about my name that day. By the time I was in any state to think clearly about a name the nickname "Pole" had grown up around me and I simply accepted it. Somehow the sting had gone out of it by then, because the people who had planted that handle on me were no longer strangers.

Meanwhile, Dr. Harvey—after many persistent attempts to persuade various specialists they were not being handed a hoax—finally convinced some big-name city doctor to come down and look at me, and suddenly I was in a whole new kind of trouble. I was now up to my eyebrows in authorities, and under their callous ministrations I began to get in touch with the destiny of a freak. That was the period in which I nearly died from some damned fool of a specialist trying to take a sample from my "chondralloplasia," as they were pleased to call it. With no name and no concerned next-of-kin to fight for me, I was terrified I was about to be hauled off to some sort of dismal facility, where I would be the subject of endless research papers and most likely never see the light of day again.

But I reckoned without the good people of Mumford, who got their dander up at this treatment of their ward. Harv, chagrined at what he had unleashed, talked to the town elders, and they called a town meeting, and the town voted that the specialists couldn't have me. Bang. Just like that. New England town meeting style at its best. I have another indelible memory, this of a scene somewhere on the edge of farce, played out in Janeen's front parlor. All the specialists on one side, nervously perched on Janeen's old horsehair settee in their proper conservative suits; all the town elders on the other side, in their flannels and denims, grim looks all around; and me propped up in a corner, Millie and Janeen standing guard over me like a pair of possessive she-bears. The specialists left without me. I now belonged to the town.

And I have belonged here ever since.

I finish settling myself into my seat without any major upheavals. I boot the computer, plug my vocoder into it, and log into the net—by these actions I now can communicate with the entire globe of computer networks. This is what I live for, these days. It started out as a simple thing, just trying to be useful and taking a stab at earning my keep, getting the bookshop's finances on the machine and plugging into a few of the basic news services. But then, with Emory's help, I began to play around on the various networks. And then I discovered my gift.

At first all I did was talk—it was a pleasure to communicate on bulletin boards, where nobody needs to know who you are or gives a damn what you look like. Then, I began to play some of the on-line games of chance, and was startled to find I had an uncanny ability to second-guess the games. I would just look at a poker hand—remember, we're talking video images here, not even the paper cards favored by psychics—and I'd know what the next draw cards would be, I would know the whole draw pile and the dealer's hand. I was beating the odds to splinters; if I'd been doing this in Vegas they'd have sent the bruisers after me for card-counting.

Emory could barely contain himself as he tried me out on stock-market predictions. Soon, I was taking my modest little paycheck from the bookstore and turning it into some astonishing amounts of money. These days, I'm earning so much money that it's a significant effort to keep it quiet. Only a very few people know yet: Emory, of course, and also Millie, both of whom I trust implicitly. But the venture is just about ready to go public. And then there's that little interviewing gambit, which will also prove to be most usefully lucrative....

"Pole?" Millie is now favoring me with her penetrating look. "Why are you doing this interview? I mean, the real reason. You hardly need the money, right? Or have you had a change of luck that you haven't wanted to worry me with?"

"Don't be silly. If I did have a problem, you'd be the first person I'd be blubbering all over—you know that. I just need that one last hunk of cash for—well, I'll tell you, but only on condition that you keep it a secret until the meeting tonight."

"You're aiming to buy out Lowry."

"Damned right I am. I am not having any slick bastard of a developer come along and mess with my town. Not if I can help it. And I think I can help it. For a change."

"Va-va-voom! I just love it when you talk tough!" She gives my shoulder a playful squeeze. Her voice is teasing but her smile is full of admiration.

"Hey, last of the true macho men, that's me," I banter back. I love that smile of hers so much, sometimes I can barely look at it.

We're interrupted by the jingling of the doorbell. She goes to greet the customer; I return my attention to the computer with a certain sense of relief. I scroll through the various networks on which I have membership. Several of my transactions from yesterday have completed, all quite gainfully indeed. I sit and sense the way of things, changing some of the orders still outstanding, rescinding others and putting in new ones. In a dozen brokerage firms around the world, transaction codes for a "T. Pole" flash in. The yields add up in my head as I scroll along—definitely enough, with the fee for the exclusive, to run Lowry right out of town. And good riddance. I derive a deep satisfaction out of this one power I can manifest over my environment.

Some key phrase from Millie's customer pulls me out of my reverie—I think it was the standard, "Say, isn't that the guy I heard about on TV…?" This, of course, is the downside of my giving interviews, however infrequently; I become the modern Elephant Man, the stuff of tabloid sensationalism. Millie dutifully offers to introduce me. I know she hates these gawkers, but I've forbidden her to be rude to her customers on my account. The gawker swings into view: a typical tourist in a lurid green windbreaker. His frank desire to gape is barely concealed beneath a layer of gee-whiz reverence. His name is something like Dobbs or Bobs—it goes through my head without a trace.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," I type. He gets really excited by my use of the vocoder.

"Boy, I just have to hand it to you, your courage…" he gushes on. All the while he stares and stares. No amount of simpering he can muster can disguise the voyeuristic tension in that gaze. Eventually he runs out of platitudes and takes his polyestered self out of the store.

"Auugggh!" Millie groans theatrically as soon as the door clatters shut after him.

"Actually, I'm thinking of charging these guys ten bucks a pop to touch the pole," I type. "Or do you think that's just so completely Freudian that even the polyester set would catch wise?"

Millie groans even louder.

Eventually we both get back to work. The day passes uneventfully. I finish my stroll through the gardens of high finance and turn to my "real work." Millie does all the mobile things—caring for the stock, waiting on customers. This is Saturday, so there's a fairly steady stream of bodies through the door. There's one more obnoxious-gawker type; the rest, for the most part, are manageable, the kind who pride themselves on being too liberal and sophisticated to patronize someone with a deformity. These try their damnedest to look like they're taking me completely in stride, but still steal discreet glimpses when they think nobody is looking. It's a testament to how badly they conceal their curiosity that even I can catch them doing it.

Joel keeps threatening to haul my unwieldy carcass to the "sacred ground" of Fenway Park. Frankly, I'm not sure who would get more stares: him or me.

Six o'clock, and we close up. Millie and I walk on down to the cafe. A chorus of familiar voices greets us as we enter. I love the smells of old Ciro's cooking—I have told him many times how deeply I regret that I can't experience his food firsthand. He simply laughs, and promises to see if I can be driven crazy by the smell of his best avgolimono soup. (It really does drive me crazy, but what a pleasant torment it is.)

Joel has made a seat for me here, too, so that I can better enjoy this hub of the village's social network. People make way for me, teasing me cheerfully as I lower myself into place and lay out my vocoder. Joel himself arrives, a mountain of rumpled flannel crowned with a wild forest of hair. "Ah, Pole, my friend," he rumbles at me, "the faith of the pious is being sorely tested today."

"Look, that's what you get for being a Red Sox fan," I retort. "Now if you'd only see reason and switch to a truly worthy object of worship like the Yankees—"

"Sacrilege! Don't you go forgetting that this is a family restaurant, you heathen!" Joel keeps threatening to load me in his pickup someday and haul my unwieldy carcass to the "sacred ground" of Fenway Park. Frankly, I'm not sure who would get more stares: him or me.

More people roll in. The TV's on to the middle of the second game of the doubleheader, and the Sox by a miracle are not snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. People argue baseball, people fret about the growing season, people share the latest gossip over a cold beer or a hot coffee. I luxuriate in the combined sound of their voices. Each and every one of them makes a point of coming over to me to say hello.

The game ends with the Sox modestly triumphant. Someone says, "It's getting on toward time for the meeting, isn't it?" I pry myself up, and we all troop on over to the Congregational meeting house. I manage to get on up the time-warped wooden steps without seriously banging myself more than once. Here is the third and last place in the world outside of my cottage that is equipped to let me sit—sixth pew back on the left, just in the right place to give me a full view of Pastor Bob in the pulpit on Sunday morning.

Tonight it is not Pastor but old Cummings, the senior town elder, who is in the pulpit. Pastor is down in the pew area, working the crowd and pressing the flesh. When Cummings gavels us to order, Pastor slips in next to me, on the side not already occupied by Millie.

I hear a surly growl go up from the crowd. "Lowry's lawyer just came in," murmurs Pastor in my ear like a gently purring old tiger-tabby.

"What, he couldn't be bothered to come himself?" hisses Millie in my other ear, sounding more like an offended Siamese.

The lawyer's way out of my line of vision, but I know him well from prior sightings—polite, cosmopolitan, and completely underwhelmed by any Main Street that has a grain and feed store where there should in his opinion be an espresso bar. Lowry never deigns to grace us with his own company, but he always receives a detailed summary of every nuance of these meetings from his dog's-body and his ever-present microrecorder. I know; I have rifled the lawyer's reports via my computer. (Don't go thinking I'm that pure. All's fair in love and land wars.)

There is considerable fussing and fretting at this meeting. Lowry has offered a significant sum of money for a large portion of the town's common land. In this lousy economy, with tourism flat and farming more a picturesque holdover from a bygone century than a significant source of livelihood, such a sum cannot be treated lightly. People are coming thick and fast up to the podium in front of the chancel, working themselves and each other into an uncomfortable state of anxiety. But I'm not ready to plunge in with my offer just yet. I know if I do it too early, before everyone has had time to get their feelings aired, they just won't be able to hear or accept it.

Finally, every last avenue has been explored, and there is a pause. A distressing whiff of gloom wafts through the room. It hurts me to see these people I've come to love in such pain, but I'm also pleased. It means I have a chance of making these proud folk accept my gift.

I raise my hand to be called on, and a murmur goes up as I laboriously get to my feet. I suppose nobody would take it amiss if I chose to speak from my seat, but I feel this matter is too important for half-measures. I can sense all eyes upon me as I make my way forward and place my vocoder on the podium. And I commence to address my people.

"I would like to offer a modest counterproposal to that set forth by Lowry Development Associates," I type.

"Most of you are no doubt aware that I have found a rewarding livelihood in my computer work. However, you may be surprised to learn just how rewarding that work has been. I've been making some investments, and they've been doing pretty well. In fact, I am happy to report that I currently have some five million in solid income from current investments alone." A gasp runs around the room. "Further, I have just negotiated an exclusive contract with a publisher who wishes to put out a book about me, with an anticipated income from that project of another five million in the next two years." More gasps.

"Friends…"

My hands are shaking. I have to stop a moment. I continue.

"Friends, this town is home to all of us, and none of us wants it to change. But I have an especially strong and admittedly selfish interest in preserving it as it is. I simply don't think I could exist anywhere else. I think you all know what I mean by that. If Mumford stopped being the town I now know, and turned into a fancy condo development full of strangers with big cars, I just don't know how I could manage…"

I have to stop again. The hall is completely silent, waiting for me.

"It is obvious to me that the funds I have just described are far more than I could ever possibly need to support myself. I would thus like to propose, with your consent, to donate a sufficiently large proportion of these funds to set up a perpetual trust, dedicated to the preservation of our town as it is. That way, we will never have cause to regret turning down any offer from any outsider, who, however well-intentioned, can't possibly know what our town is really about. We can keep our home the way it is, the way we need it to be…"

Now I really can't go on any further. I am shaking so hard I have to clutch at the podium to keep my balance. Someone has leapt to their feet and started applauding wildly. In a flash everyone is standing and applauding; they are pounding on the pews with their fists and on the floor with their feet, it sounds like a thunderstorm and it

won't let up. Pastor is suddenly at my side holding me up, and Millie's doing the same at my other side. "I'm so proud of you," Millie whispers fiercely in my ear. I shake and shake, I can't seem to stop shaking.

Cummings gavels the crowd to silence eventually. "Our friend Pole has just made an exceedingly generous offer," she says portentously. "I will assume that Pole knows exactly what he is doing, and thus will not insult his intelligence with silly questions about whether he really means it. I am now open to entertaining a motion from the floor."

"Move to accept Pole's offer!" Joel's roar shakes the rafters.

"Second!" cry several voices simultaneously.

"Move we vote to accept by acclamation!" cries old Janeen.

"Second!" Another chorus of voices.

"Do we have acclamation?" cries Cummings. The hall thunders back uproariously.

"Three cheers for Pole!" roars a stentorian voice. I soak myself with tears as they commence an old-fashioned hip-hip *et cetera*. I wonder distractedly what Lowry's lawyer is doing during all this tumult. Probably coolly buffing his nails as his microrecorder spools on and on. No skin off his nose. Development corporations like the one he works for never put all their eggs in one basket. I know for a fact they're working on at least six other village buy-outs; that Mumford fought them off will not bother them in the least, as long as they get a handsome yield from their other projects. Which is exactly why they need to have their greedy paws kept off our town; to them, we're not a skein of tightly woven lives but a convenient framework for a resort concept.

But they're gone now, they're gone, they're gone, the battle has been won; the Huns have been beaten back from our gates, and I the one who did the beating.

Much later—after many hugs and back-poundings that jar my body no end but do wonders for my soul; after an impromptu party back at the cafe, where I am toasted with champagne Ciro unearths from God-knows-where, the look and smell of which makes me glad I can't taste it; after more hugs, and some tears, and many goodnights from friends not yet finished with savoring this moment with me—I find myself before my own front door, having been walked home by an ebullient Millie.

We pause there a moment, silent. The crickets sound abnormally loud. "I really am proud of you, you know," she says. Of all the many looks she wears, the one she has on now makes me feel the most awkward by far. I decide to turn partly away from her in order to balance the vocoder on a railing for a reply. I feel a little less vulnerable that way.

"I'm rather proud of myself, to tell the truth," I respond. God, did that sound fatuous or what? "I really wasn't sure I had it in me." Better.

"You have so much in you, I wish you could really believe that." She comes around to my front and hugs me. My face goes hot. My hands sweat. Not all of the rigidity in the hug I return can be blamed on the pole in my flesh.

She releases me eventually. I can't make out whether I am relieved or regretful. "Thanks, Millie," I type, grateful for the cheerfully neutral voice of the vocoder. "You know I love you very much, don't you?"

"And I love you too," she replies, a warm smile in her voice. But I'm at the wrong angle to see her face.

We part and I let myself into the house. I suddenly realize I'm emotionally drained, even less equipped than usual to handle confused feelings towards my dearest friend in the world. I get all my props returned to their rightful places only by a massive effort of will, and fall into bed exhausted.

For some unknown period my sleep is deep and undisturbed. And then I dream, and for perhaps the first time in three whole years the dream is full, lucid, and unfragmented.

A beam of light stabs down at me from the ceiling, trapping me in a column that shoots through my body and up my spine and out my mouth. My head is thrown back and I am screaming—

I am in a dimly-lit, cavernous room. In the air is the faint hum of power pumping through sophisticated machinery. I am standing on some sort of a platform that looks a bit like a hangman's scaffold, and the impending sense of doom I feel suits it perfectly.

A figure with brilliant emerald skin and a flowing crimson robe stands by a control panel, hand poised on a great lever. Two other figures stand by; they are too deep in shadow for me to make out. "This is it, Cory," says one of the shadows. "Last chance to reconsider."

"You know I've got to go through with it," I say. "Do it. Get it over with. Before I lose my nerve."

A shadowy figure makes a sign to the emerald being, who nods solemnly and throws the lever. A beam of light stabs down at me from the ceiling and another stabs up at me from the platform, trapping me in a column of light that shoots through my body and up my spine and out my mouth. My head is thrown back and I am screaming—a beam of light—

I come awake to the pale dawn fog and the unconcerned songs of the birds.

The dream was so very real. My waking surroundings almost seem like a dream in contrast. And there was a damn-fool alligator in a pink suit, and what did the other one call me? Cory? Why does that name ring such a clamorous bell within me, as if…

And I didn't have the pole.

But then came the beam.

I am not handling this dream very well, nor the rush of strange thoughts that it has set loose, swirling the more frantically around in my head the more I focus on them. I don't think I want to handle any of this. I think I need some help, and fast.

Millie?

Oh, dear. No. Not this time. I think, now, I need some help with that situation too, and I've been putting it off for far too long.

I know who.

The meetinghouse bell is just beginning to toll as I approach those trying wooden steps. Millie never comes here for services; she's a hardened atheist. But I'm here every Sunday, and I need it today more than ever. So distracted am I that, when the first person who spots me comes up and starts thanking me profusely, I need a minute to remember what it is I'm being thanked for. God, I can't believe I'm that rattled! Once again I'm glad I am possessed of the literal poker-face. More people approach me as I make my way to my pew. I'm a bit more composed now, so I am able to give them such acknowledgment as I can. It's soothing to talk with them about my recent triumph, it takes my mind away from its new discoveries.

Once the service starts, though, I'm back alone with my thoughts, troubling companions with which to try to worship. This is an old Puritan church, so there are no florid pictures of Biblical scenes, and the simple wooden cross has no martyred figure upon it. But how to be at Sunday service and avoid the mental picture of the Teacher on his sacrificial tree? And how, once it manifests, to keep that image from getting all tangled with my dream of getting nailed by a beam of light?

I sit and hear, and sit and hear, convinced that either I'm beginning to remember a past that is far more disturbing than I could ever have imagined, or else that I am finally cracking up.

The soothing voice of Pastor Bob's preaching calms me somewhat, and by the end of the final hymn I've got myself partway convinced that I was overreacting. Yet when I finally speak to Pastor at the door, having waited until almost everyone else has left, there must be something in my manner that suggests I'm not quite right. Pastor gives me a sharp look, has me wait until the last few others have left, and then marches me immediately right back to his study.

"I regret I don't have a good place for you to sit in here," he says as he closes the big oak door to the outside world, "but at least here we can have some privacy."

"I appreciate that," I type. I have placed the vocoder on top of one of the more stable piles of books on his desk, and am resting my weight on my feet and the pole in the manner of a three-legged stool. It's not my favorite position, as the pressure and shifts of weight on the pole send some truly weird vibrations through my body; but it's better than nothing, especially when I'm feeling so unsteady on my feet, so to speak.

"Pastor," I type, "do you think I have been acting… peculiar lately?"

Another sharp look. "Peculiar? Not any more so than usual, that I've noticed. Unless you count giving away ten million dollars peculiar—which I of all people don't. Why—were you looking for some suggestions?" His ribbing is softened with a just-kidding smile. He is no simple country parson, our Pastor. He'd put in a long illustrious career serving several urban, social-action-oriented churches, and then taught social ethics at a prestigious seminary; he took this call upon his retirement "just to keep his hand in," as he put it. So this town has not only a most joyful servant, but a particularly brilliant and worldly one.

"Thanks, no," I answer him. "I'm feeling quite peculiar enough already. I just—how do I explain…?" I describe my dream in detail. He listens carefully, rubbing his chin, occasionally emitting a "uh-hum." He sits for some time after I finish, still rubbing his chin and emitting a few more "uh-hums."

"Why do you think this dream you had means you're getting 'peculiar'?" he asks at last.

I hesitate. "Because," I respond, my hands trembling slightly on the keys, "the only interpretation that suggests itself so smacks of hubris, it makes me fear for my sanity just to contemplate it."

"And that interpretation is…?" He's not going to let me get away without saying it in so many words.

"That—if the dream is not just a dream, but a true memory of my prior life—that I somehow volunteered for this… existence. In order to save the world or some such nonsense."

"Why does it trouble you so to contemplate being a savior? After all, you just saved Mumford last night." He's smiling at me very faintly.

I come to a complete halt. Why, indeed? "It strikes me," I type, thinking carefully, "that saviorhood is something much more sensibly proclaimed by others than proclaimed of oneself. Otherwise it smacks of hubris. Or of delusional thought patterns."

"Perhaps. To a certain extent. But one can also err in the direction of keeping one's light stowed under a

bushel, you know. Strikes me you've always bent so far over backward to deny your considerable gifts and graces that it's a wonder to me you haven't snapped that pole of yours in two."

I feel uncomfortably found out. "I wasn't expecting the conversation to go in this direction."

"I'm sure you weren't. And I'm not ready to let you change the subject yet. Now I have to admit, I have never in my life had the experience of looking anything other than unrelentingly average, so I can't know how it must feel to carry the burden you do every day. But I've been meaning to say this to you for years, and you've finally given me the opportunity: you have got to be one of the bravest, gentlest souls I have met in all my long years of ministry, and it breaks my heart to see how you won't let yourself accept what a wonderful person you are. Why do you have to drive yourself crazy the way you do? Don't you know there are people all around you who absolutely love you? Not because they pity you, for God's sake—because they genuinely love you and need you. Millie, just to name one prominent example."

I feel even more deeply found out. "What about Millie?"

"What about Millie?" He laughs uproariously. "Son, a man of the cloth doesn't gamble, but if I wanted to I could join any number of pools in town taking bets on the day you'll finally wake up and take that woman to the altar. What—you think people don't have eyes? It's been the talk of the town for over two years. And I'll tell you something else—though it may seem I'm taking a considerable liberty with my ministerial privilege—not two weeks ago, Millie was standing almost exactly where you're standing now, all at wit's end over you, because she's loved you desperately since almost the first time she laid eyes on you! And you, you're so terrified at the very idea of getting involved that she hasn't dared to as much as breathe a word of it to you, for fear of scaring you out of eight years' growth!"

"Millie came to church?" Somehow that just adds the final, perfect touch of improbability to the matter.

"I know; doesn't that suggest what lengths she's willing to go to for you? Seriously, she thought I might have some in with you that she wouldn't have, her being the source of the threat, so to speak. So—what is it, son? What's the big holdup? Do you want me to say that out loud for you, too? Or can I get you to say it for yourself?"

"Pastor, consider me laughing uproariously right now. No, I'll say it myself. It's the obvious, of course. I mean—me? In love? Me, inviting a person whose opinion matters more to me than anything in the world, to enjoy physical intimacies with *this* body? I'm not even quite sure if my body is capable of such intimacies, if you catch my drift. The very idea of risking this friendship—risking the rejection, the confused feelings, maybe the very friendship itself—of course I'm terrified! I just haven't been able to do it, though don't think I haven't agonized over it. But now, if what you say is true—"

"Would I lie to you? So now you'll get out there and go after her?"

"I will. I'm still scared out of my wits, mind you, but I will. Now about my dream—"

"Your dream, if the truth be known, I'm rather less concerned about. Knowing where you come from can be empowering, but not nearly so much as knowing where you're going."

"But do you think the dream was true?"

"How should I know? For what it's worth, by the evidence of your own body you are a unique occurrence on the face of this earth. It is thus safe to assume that your origin is also unique. And maybe someday we'd know the truth of where you come from—and maybe not—but in either case you still have a life you need to live. Perhaps your dream is true. But what does it matter? Does your life become any more sensible by discovering you fell off a flying saucer or whatever? You still have to live.

"Perhaps your dream is true. But what does it matter? Does your life become more sensible by discovering you fell off a flying saucer?"

"Now—does that help you at all?"

"Well, it does lessen my fears for my sanity."

"If your sanity is dependent on my word, son, you're in trouble deep." He laughs again, and stands. "Go to her, son. She's a good woman. She loves you. And I'll tell you a secret: I think she needs you every bit as much as you need her, if not more. Now get out of here, and God bless."

I ponder Pastor's words all the way down Main Street. I don't feel any less unsettled, but somehow I feel a little more at peace with being unsettled, if that makes any sense. Actually, the only thing that is making sense, and is gradually forcing its way through the miasma of my conflicted thoughts, is Pastor's message about Millie: "Go to her, she loves you."

I begin to feel a wild strange euphoria pulsing through my usually-placid veins. If I were capable of running, I would break into a sprint right now. But I do speed up as much as I am able, and commence to make a beeline for Millie's place.

She lives about two streets over from me, in a flat on the second floor of one of the most charming wedding-cakes. I can see its stately roofline peeping out from behind the maples—the elaborately tiled mansard roof, the cupola with the stained-glass mullions. A faint wind stirs the trees, and a wind chime tinkles unseen on the wraparound veranda.

I am getting closer. My normally sluggish heart is beating madly. I actually feel alive, for the first time in the three years of my known life. Here I am, I feel like singing, the ill-made knight proven at last, fresh from securing my homeland from the Huns, returning now in triumph to ask for the hand of the lady who has always believed in me. The air in fact does seem to be singing, humming with the sound of thousands of bees.

There is something like a crack of thunder, and it is only as I am falling to the ground that I realize that the corresponding bolt of lightning has just struck me. It has shot right down the pole as if I were a living lightning rod.

I hit the ground with a crash, and lie there a moment, stunned. The world has darkened—have I suffered a concussion? All my insides, the length of my body, are cramping uncontrollably. They are trying to knot themselves around something that no longer seems to be there. I find myself writhing on the ground and groaning aloud with the pain of it—

Wait a minute.

"Thank the gods. And not a moment too soon. Come on, Cory, snap out of it. We haven't a minute to spare."

"Sabin—won't you back off a bit? The man's obviously shaken up. Give him a moment to compose himself."

"Look, Lucas—you're the one's been making all the noise about how unstable this hiatus is, you're the one's been ragging on about how difficult it's going to be to keep it open long enough for us to do the intervention—"

"Sabin. Leave Lucas alone. We're all under a lot of stress, but just please try to stay focused. Cory, do you understand me? Do you remember me? Please—speak."

"My voice," I croak. My face feels like sprung elastic, my jaw as if it has rust in its hinges. I am helped into a sitting position. I am in the cavernous room of my dream, sprawled upon the scaffold-like platform. The column of light juts down from the ceiling, but comes to an abrupt halt about ten feet above my head, like a piston poised and waiting to come crashing down again. Two figures are leaning over me; I'm having trouble getting my eyes to focus on them. A third stands over by the control panel; I see a glint of brilliant green in the low light.

"The pain you feel is from the removal of the physical distortion you suffered when you were projected out onto your target plane," says the owner of the last voice to speak. "It will lessen somewhat with time. Though I fear time is not something we have a lot of."

My head wobbles on the pivot of my neck as I turn to face the speaker. "Dana?" I say wonderingly, my memories fluttering in and out like shuffled cards. "What—I don't understand—"

Dana smiles, visibly relieved; there are more lines in the wise old face than I remembered. "Good. Your memory is beginning to return. I'm sorry, Cory. We had a disaster during your transmission. An interference from the inter-dimensional void. The carrier beam went through, but we lost all communications contact with your mind. Your memory went into stasis. We've spent three years trying to reestablish contact."

"Three years." My memories are now sliding back into place so fast that it's making me dizzy. I shake my head to clear it—bad move; my much-abused spine screams in protest. "Of course. Three years of fighting it. Fighting assimilation into the milieu. Fighting that ghastly physical manifestation. Until just this past twenty-four hours, when I finally began to relax and accept it all."

"Congratulations," Dana replies. "That will go down in the training manuals—adaptation to milieu under extraordinary stressors of physical distortion and amnesia."

"Look, this is all very warm and fuzzy, but may I point out that the clock is ticking away?" Sabin. How could I have possibly forgotten that abrasive tone of voice?

"How much time do we have, Lucas?" asks Dana calmly.

The glittering emerald cyborg consults its screens and readouts before replying in its golden voice. "I can give you about five more minutes before the connection begins to degrade dangerously, ma'am."

"It will have to do. Cory, listen. It's all well and good that you established the linkage even under such harsh conditions, but I can't in good faith let you go back there unless you completely understand what the situation is. There was, as I said, catastrophic interference with your original transmission. It took three years for us to find you—for awhile, we weren't even sure if your mind was still functioning. It was all we could do to pull you back in, even for this brief hiatus. If we send you out to the same target once more, I can't but wonder if the same thing will happen to you all over again. Not only is that a hell of a way to run an inter-dimensional mission, but I'm not one bit happy with the idea of submitting one of my best operatives to that kind of punishment—"

"You realize," I croak, "that the interference is probably symptomatic of the larger problem."

"Don't I ever. The inter-dimensional stress has accelerated since you've been gone. At this rate, we're going to have to add at least a dozen more linkages to this one sector alone to prevent it shearing off from the Continuum completely."

"Which means you can't very well abandon this link of mine right here."

Dana looks at me, silent. What goes unspoken is the underlying enormity of this mission, this generations-long project that all of us have pledged our very souls to. With all the powerful technology and knowledge possessed by this, our home dimension, we have yet to find a more effective way to stave off the fragmentation of the Continuum than to throw our very bodies into the breach. We serve as the living linkages between worlds. We are the only hope.

Hubris? Perhaps. But what other society is in any position to make this kind of sacrifice? Most of the other dimensions, like the one in which I have just spent three years of pain and confusion, are Pre-Contact; they don't even possess the technology to detect the Trans-Dimensional Continuum, let alone deal with the growing fissures in their realities. All they know is that their civilizations suffer from a subtle but increasing malaise, which is nothing less than the fragmentation syndrome's manifestation on the level of the communal psyche. A few other dimensions possess at least the basic technology to have achieved Contact, but their cultures are either not yet mature enough to produce more than the occasional true altruist, or else they are already so infected with the malaise that they can barely summon up the will to keep their worlds from self-destructing. And a few dimensions, both pre- and post-Contact, have already self-destructed, having sunk into any of the all-too-numerous forms of cultural suicide.

No, it's up to us, hurling ourselves bodily across the void, anchoring all the dimensions to Continuum Core with the very fibre of our beings. What is it one of the subcultures in my target milieu calls that? A Kamikaze mission. *Banzai*—live ten thousand years. But, actually, we do. Only, there are certain risks to that kind of lifestyle.

"I'm going back." I rise unsteadily to my feet, aware that this may be the last time in a long, long time that I'll have an unencumbered body.

"Cory." Dana's eyes are glistening. Even Sabin is respectfully silent.

"I didn't say I'm looking forward to it," I continue. "But I'm doing it. Besides, I'm pretty sure I might actually keep my mind intact this time. I made a very powerful link back there, you see. Very deep on the emotional level. I think I have a chance." Millie. I feel the smile grow on my face.

Dana nods, smiling faintly. "Yes. I sense you have. The gods go with you, then, Cory." She and Sabin get clear of the platform. She nods to Lucas. The emerald-green gatekeeper gives me a deep bow of honor. And then it pulls the switch—

The beam snaps back through my body so hard and fast that I don't even have time to scream. And then, I no longer can.

I hit the ground with a crash, and lie there, stunned.

This hitting the deck is getting very old very fast.

I am lying in dappled sunlight on a concrete sidewalk. Birds are singing with blithe unconcern. The pole is still vibrating, like a cold-sensitive tooth stung by ice-water, only this tooth is shooting its displeasure the entire length of my body.

I understand now. The transmission beam, the linkage, of which I am the living anchor on this plane—somehow, because of the interference, it is concretely manifesting as an organic part of my body, instead of an intangible thread back to my home dimension as it's supposed to do. No wonder it's so damned sensitive. And all I've been using its power for is to second-guess the stock-market and other intuitional parlor-tricks. That's so funny, I truly wish I could laugh out loud.

"Pole! Oh my God! Are you all right?"

Good lord, it's Millie. What did she see? Did she catch any glimpse of my retrieval and retransmission? God knows it was noisy enough—thunder and lightning indeed! But these are the kinds of unfortunate glimpses that can really screw up a pre-Contact milieu—

I hear feet pounding down the steps of the veranda, and then she is upon me in a flash, picking me up off the sidewalk, brushing me off, gathering up my cane and glasses and vocoder from where they've scattered in my fall. She gets me up onto the veranda and stretched out on my stomach across her landlady's chaise lounge, and sits on the floor near my head, where I can actually look her right in the eye without resorting to my mirror glasses. I have a weary headache from all the energy and emotions that have coursed through me this momentous day, and the feel of a few places on my body suggests I'm going to have some spectacular bruises.

She ruffles my hair playfully, smiles her relief into my eyes. "There. None the worse for wear, once again. I think maybe you should take some of that ten million and install rubber matting on all the town's sidewalks, for all the times you take a header on a stretch of perfectly flat concrete."

"Forget about it," I type—thank God I didn't bust the poor little vocoder in the fall. "Can you just see me taking a bounce off something like that?" Apparently, she has seen nothing more than me taking a splat. Good. I don't need to muck up this situation with any complex explanations that will just sound like B-grade science fiction—even if they are all true. I just want, for now, to be a normal, run-of-the-mill village oddity.

"No, I'll live," I type. "I was just in too much of a hurry is all. I was just down to the meetinghouse speaking to

Pastor, and… I'm really sorry, Millie, that it's taken me all this time for reality to come and hit me over the head, but—Millie, will you marry me?"

She gasps, and just sits there a moment, stunned. I'm seized with panic—oh God no, I can't have been wrong, Pastor assured me.... But then she bursts into tears, and throws her arms around my head, babbling on and on and on about how I have just made her the happiest woman in the entire world.

I hug her back as best I can, feeling the tears welling up out of my own eyes. The afternoon sun is slanting down in golden shafts onto the veranda. A warm and beautiful woman is in my arms, her flesh soft and inviting under my hands. The living antenna in the heart of my being is singing to full life at last, singing a song of healing across all the dimensions, a song that enfolds little Mumford and its world in its protection, a song that is echoed by the birds in the maples.

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AUTO PLAZA RAG

BY ADAM C. ENGST

• Ever feel as if you were in a different time zone from the rest of the world? Some people are like that all the time... •

I TOOK MY CHEVY NOVA IN TO BE FIXED LAST FRIDAY. I drove it up to the BMW/Mazda/Subaru/Chevrolet/Volvo Auto Plaza and the door opened and I drove it in. Ed edited my name on the computer, adding a comma. "It won't be long," he smiled.

Waiting room. Blue-gray concrete block walls with charcoal trim outlining the doors. In case you can't find them. Lots of glass and chrome. Window in front of me reminds me of the Swedish flag except it is clear. Sign: "Your satisfaction is extremely important to us!" Double line. "If you have any concerns or suggestions please ask to speak with our customer assistance manager Wendy Wallenbeck or if you prefer please call: 272-9292." Triple line. Couldn't Ed add some commas to the sign too? I want to sleep with Wendy Wallenbeck. I want customer assistance.

I want to sleep with Wendy Wallenbeck. I want customer assistance.

Proctor-Silex coffee pot three-quarters full for customers only. Windows stare at me. I stare back. Anderson Rent-All across the street. "Hi, I'd like to rent Wendy Wallenbeck." Matter of fact tone. Sign on the window. Mazda, "We surround you with satisfaction." Snow flakes like cotton balls, like bunnies hopping down the bunny trail.

Blue-gray concrete block walls and clear windows. Grey seats. Tasteful post-modern garage decor. Gold oval clock near the door. On time. Four minutes slower than my watch because my watch is four minutes fast in this time zone. Sign on the door. "PUSH." Second sign on the door. "Notice of liquidation." Curling at the corners. Van pulls up outside the windows. Federal Express man wearing Federal Express coveralls and a Federal Express knit hat unloads long, fat, oblong, thin, short packages. Chiasmus. Slowly. One at a time.

Snow slows to motes in the whites of god's Eye. "Don't shoot until you see the whites of his Eye." Tall blonde on tall heels clicks past four minutes fast. Wendy

Wallenbeck? Styrofoam cups—the cockroaches will build houses with Styrofoam cups curling at the corners and en-spaces or is it em-spaces when the world blows up. Short woman from PartsPlus wearing a PartsPlus coat pulls up outside the windows. Carries in a small cardboard box labeled in big letters "Air Filter." Blonde shoulder length hair shorter than Wendy Wallenbeck's. I want to sleep with Wendy Wallenbeck.

Two men next to me. "Fifty cents on the TomTran to work. Fifty cents back. You gotta keep a truck out of the salt and slush to keep it nice." Gold clock sticks out. Wendy Wallenbeck couldn't have picked it out? She looks pained when I mention it. Second short woman from PartsPlus pulls up outside the windows. Dirty brown hair crawling on the last legs of a perm. Wears PartsPlus overalls under a brown PartsPlus jacket. Two men, "One dollar a day. Thanksgiving Day I went over every inch my truck. Not a speck of dirt on it."

Sign on the window. Volvo, "We are ready to service you." Are Volvos from Sweden? Can't hold it longer. Bathroom. Two switches. One light, one fan. I turn off the fan. Blue-gray decor except for the charcoal outline of the door, should I be unable to find it. Sit down. Elliptical toilet paper dispenser. Gives more torque, prevents more than five sheets of bathroom tissue from coming off at once. Frustrated, I pull at it again and again, generating lots of torque. Someone tries the door, which I've locked in a fit of paranoia. I cough unconvincingly so they don't use their keys or simply break the door down and drag me off for interrogation. "How do you know Wendy Wallenbeck?" It's a very effective technique, you know, abducting suspects from the toilet.

Plump blonde woman from United Parcel Service pulls up outside the window. She has short curly hair and is wearing a UPS nylon jacket. "Artificial milk or artificial sugar for your coffee, sir?" asks Wendy Wallenbeck. The fake sugar is in a blue-topped plastic dispenser and the fake milk is in a white-topped plastic dispenser. "Mr. Slite. We've finished the alignment." That may or may not be my name. It isn't a good idea to give out your name to strangers. Some Indian tribes used to think if someone knew your name, that person could control you. Now if they know your name, they can call you and send you private offerings in the mail and ogle your credit rating. It's all the same thing, I suppose.

"You don't have to call me sir," I tell Wendy Wallenbeck. "You can call me" Drowned out by "Carl Franks. Please dial five hundred. Carl Franks. Five hundred." Two men, "Fifty cents to and from work. Three months of this and I figure my truck will stay nice." Hundreds of millions of years pass. "Mr. Slite. We've finished the alignment on your Nova." "Ed, is it now a super nova?" Yes, he replied and I thought I saw the motes in his eyes glinting as it exploded.

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BLEEDING HEARTS

BY SUNG J. WOO

• Good friends support each other in times of need. But as you're comforting your friends, ask yourself: how well do you really know them? •

"DOES IT REALLY MATTER?" DENISE SAYS. "IT'S only Jim. He's always like this after he gets the heave-ho."

"I've known him since fourth grade," I say, looking at the yellow mums, "in Mrs. McKimson's class." The flowers smell wonderful; they smell like summer.

Denise points to the back of the store with her right foot. "We haven't even checked the cactus section."

"You're funny."

"Oh Cliff, you know, it's like he *likes* it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, louder than I wanted to. Some people look in our direction.

"Maybe we should discuss this at the studios of WLJK, you know, where only half the town will hear it."

I just look at her, then look back at the mums.

She puts her hand on my arm. We walk away from the mums. "Look, I know Jim's your friend and all, but he's a sad case. No, don't look at me that way. You know that it's true."

We're now in the fern aisle, nothing but green, flowing leaves. "I've known Jim for a long time," I say, touching a fern leaf.

"Yes, since fourth grade, in Mrs. McKimson's class."

"He's been there for me, over and over again."

She shrugs and walks over to the roses. There are some things Denise will never be, and I have come to accept that. Growing up, I call it—realizing that everyone has limitations, yourself included. I have faults, she has faults, we all have faults, and it's dealing with those faults that counts.

When I turn the corner, I have it. Lilies, white ones. I call Denise over, and she comes along with a long-stemmed rose. "Is this like totally sexy or what?" she says, and bites the middle of the stem like some exotic dancer.

"It's, like, totally you," I say, and kiss her. I had never kissed anyone biting a rose before.

"So—lilies, huh? Do you know what color?"

"I like the white ones."

"Me too."

At the register I pay for a pot of lilies and a long-stemmed rose, complete with tooth and lipstick marks.

WHAT DENISE SAID ABOUT JIM WAS NOT TOTALLY TRUE. He doesn't like to be dumped—nobody does, although I do get the feeling he does like some caring from friends in the aftermath. Is that so wrong? And he isn't a sad case, either, it's just rotten luck. As he often tells me, "Cliff, there are two things I'll never have any luck with—cars and women." To my knowledge, he's had more accidents and flats than anyone else, and almost always there's a woman in the car when it happens. Two birds with one stone.

"Cliff, there are two things I'll never have any luck with—cars and women." He's had more accidents and flats than anyone else, and almost always there's a woman in the car when it happens. Two birds with one stone.

The potted lilies sit in the passenger side, the bulbs bobbing in rhythm with the car. Lilies are very pretty flowers, and a bit sad, too, in the way they seem to have a permanent slouch. Perfect for this occasion.

Times like these I wonder about Jim. He's not a bad-looking guy at all—better looking than me, in fact, with fine red hair and a bunch of freckles. Denise once told me how youthful Jim looked with those freckles. "He's always going to be a high school senior, you know. Age and cuteness do not go together well in men." Denise, the Goddess of Men.

That may be true in the long run, but Jim's my age, just turned 25 a month ago. That's when things were still good, when Jim and Sandy were still together. Things couldn't have been better at the party. Sandy seemed very happy, and I saw them smooching at every chance they got, like a couple of junior high school kids.

But something had gone wrong, and now it's all over. Holding the flower pot in one hand, I ring Jim's doorbell. Nothing. I ring it again, and this time I hear footsteps.

"Cliff," he says. "I was dozing." He looks like hell, like he hasn't shaved for a couple of days, complete with a phenomenal bedhead. He waves me in.

"Just wanted to see how you were doing," I say, closing the door behind me.

"What's the deal with the potted plant?" he asks.

I shove it in his chest. "For you, my friend."

"Lilies."

"You got it. Denise helped me pick it out, sort of."

He puts it down on the coffee table, plops down on the couch, and stares at it. "Is this supposed to cheer me up?"

"Not really," I say. "I just thought them appropriate."

"Appropriate. They're droopy and sad-looking."

"Like I said."

"Thank you," he says, and manages to smile.

"I haven't been around much," I say. "I thought I was leaving you and Sandy alone, for you two to spend some quality time together."

"Another one gone, into the scrapbooks."

"You could've called me, you know. You have a bad way of just letting things fall apart around you once something happens. You have friends."

"I didn't want to bother you, I guess. Hey, pass me the ashtray."

He takes out a pack of Marlboro Mediums and lights up a cigarette. "They went down in price, you know that? They're starting a big price war with the other brands." He offers one for me, and I take it. It had been a couple of months since I last had my smoke, since Jim's last breakup, with the fiery blonde Joleen. Have to remember to brush my teeth before I see Denise.

"So you want to talk about it?" I say.

He shrugs. "Not much to say, really. It's the same old shit. Jim meets nice girl, they date for a while, Jim gets dumped for the usual reasons."

"What, old boyfriend?"

He shakes his head. "No, nothing so simple, I'm afraid," he says, feeling the texture of one of the lilies. "She told me that she just didn't feel right with me."

"That's not much of an excuse."

"She's not the type of person who would lie, though. That isn't Ms. Bernstein at all." Jim never refers to one of his ex-girlfriends by their first name.

"I talked to her, you know, at your birthday party. She said you were very nice."

"Well, Cliff, you know what they say about nice guys."

"Yeah, but you guys were messing around the whole time!"

"That was a month ago. Things went sour. I just didn't notice, I guess."

I shake my head in confusion. " 'I don't feel right with you' is not an excuse, Jim. Didn't you even bother to ask her to be more specific?"

He gets up and goes to the kitchen. "Want a beer? I just bought some Sam Adams. And I have some leftover Domino's."

"Sure," I say, exasperated. He sometimes seems so laid back that it frightens me.

"The first time you hear it," Jim says from the kitchen, "you ask. You ask why, you ask why not, the works. Then the second time you hear it, you ask again, wondering if the reasons match the first one. Then the third time you also ask because coincidences do happen." He comes back with two bottles of Sam Adams and a greasy box of pepperoni pizza. "After that, you don't ask, because you are sick of hearing the same shit over and over again."

"You never told me this."

"Sorry," he says, "it just wasn't worth talking about, I guess. I've never had a relationship for longer than three months, Cliff."

"What about Susanne Perkins?" I say, picking at a pepperoni.

"I don't exactly count passing notes in gym in seventh grade to be a fulfilling relationship."

We eat for a bit, and suck on our bottles of beer. Maybe Jim's just too nice of a guy, I think. Some women, and men, too, will just walk all over you if you give them the chance. It's like they see a crack in the dam, and they'll chip away at it until the whole thing breaks.

"Are you happy with Denise?" Jim asks me, catching me off guard.

I pause and meet his eyes for a moment. Jim returns my gaze, raising his eyebrows.

"I guess I really don't think about it all that much," I say, looking at the lilies. One of the buds has a small droplet at its end, catching the sun that shines through the bay window. "We live together, have lived without killing each other for a couple of years."

"Maybe I should do the same, this thinking business."

"Jim, this is kind of weird," I say, smiling. "I always thought you were really a laid-back kind of guy, you know, not really thinking about a lot of things so much."

"Well, let me tell you something else, Cliff." I'm still surprised that Jim and I have been friends for so long, and how little we really talk about real things, about each other.

What he says next he says slowly, matter-of-factly, undramatically. "I've never been happy with a girl."

"MAYBE HE'S GAY," DENISE SAYS, CHOPPING THE onions.

"What?" I say, sitting on top of the kitchen table. How the hell does she come up with these things?

She wipes her eyes. "God, these onions are nasty."

"Care to repeat what you said, Denise?"

"Don't get so defensive. God, you homophobic men, I tell you. I just said that it's a possibility that he's gay from what you've told me. I always did think of him as a bit flowery."

"Flowery? Jim?"

She puts the onions in the ground beef and starts kneading them all together. She looks at me and says, "Goodness, isn't this just getting under your skin? Is this

because you knew this to be true but you just couldn't face it yourself?"

I laugh. "My, haven't we been remembering our Psych 101 lately? Do you have any Sigmund Freud quotes for me now?"

"Ve must relax," Denise says with an accent that couldn't sound less German, "oont learn to use our sense of judgement."

"You don't know Jim."

"Do you?" she asks.

"I certainly know him better than you."

"You're not answering my question." Sometimes it sucks to be with a girl who's studying to be a lawyer. I shake my head and look at the salt and pepper shakers, a little farm-boy in overalls and his girl in pigtails. The good old days.

She comes over and lays a kiss on my forehead. "Can we stop fighting about Jim, Cliff? I was just saying what I felt, okay? I'm sorry if it hurts you." She goes back to the kneading. "I may not know Jim, that's true," she continues, "but whenever I see you guys or hear you guys talking on the phone, you guys talk about nothing but sports or camping. And I know you, you're not the type to gab."

"Like girls."

"Yes, if you want to put it that way, like girls. You may think we talk about stupid stuff, but we at least know our friends."

"God, why is it that whenever we talk about any kinds of relationships that you blow it out of proportion and have to include the entire female race?"

She smiles at me. "Well, Clifford Johnston, if I can defend the entire female race, I must be able to defend a person in a court of law, huh?"

Was that meant to be funny, a joke? Her becoming a lawyer—sometimes I think that's all that matters to her.

At dinner, Denise tries to make conversation, but I put a dead stop to it every time. Eventually, she stops trying, and we finish eating in silence.

I watch the Mets on SportsChannel while Denise reads John Grisham novels. She's read all of them in the last two days. Even if it's fluffy garbage, I'm amazed at her speed. I'm waiting for the movies. She tells me she's going to bed, and I nod curtly.

When the Mets finish losing, I turn off the television and go to our bedroom. After brushing my teeth and changing, I slip between the covers, next to Denise.

"I'm sorry," she says, turning to face me, her voice sounding hollow in the darkness. She puts her hand on my chest. I put my hand on top of hers.

"It's okay," I say, not knowing ifI mean it or not.

"I'll tell you what," she says, "I'll set up Jim with Laurie."

"Laurie," I repeat, the name unfamiliar.

"She's in my Industrial Labor and Relations class. She's awfully cute, and single. I remember her telling me at lunch the other day that she has never really been happy with a man, in not so many words."

"Is she a lesbian?" I say, half-jokingly.

"Very funny. Maybe they can both be unhappy with each other."

"Or maybe they can both be happy," I say. "Thank you. I'll ask Jim if it's okay."

"I love you," she says.

"I guess I love you, too," I want to say, but I don't.

"SO HER NAME IS LAURIE CRAVEN," I SAY INTO THE telephone. There's silence in the line. "Hello? You still there, Jim?"

"Yeah," he says. "Thanks again for the potted lilies, Cliff. They're really starting to grow on me. I never had my own plant before."

"You're welcome. Anyway, I had Denise talk to Laurie, and she said she was free this coming Saturday. How about it?"

"I guess so." His voice sounds tired. "I'm still getting over Sandy, though, Laurie does know that, right?"

"It's just a date, it's not like you're getting married."

"I just want to make sure."

"Yes, she knows, she's getting over a guy, too, I think, so you two may have plenty to talk about."

"Thanks."

"Her number is 364-7247. You can take it from here?"

"Of course. Okay, Cliff, gotta go. Thanks again."

As I put the phone down, Denise walks in the room. She's looking very pretty in black stockings, a modest navy blue skirt, a loose burgundy blouse, and a matching navy blue blazer, complete with shoulder pads, of course. With her auburn hair flowing in thick, luscious curls, she couldn't look any finer, and I tell her so.

"Hello? You still there, Jim?" "Yeah," he says. "Thanks for the potted lilies. They're really starting to grow on me. I never had my own plant before."

"I know," she says nonchalantly. She throws down the briefcase and lies down on the couch, resting her head on my lap.

"Tough day at class?" I ask.

"Had an oral exam today."

I split her lips with my fingers. "Your mouth looks fine to me."

She smiles. "I talked to Laurie today. Told her that Jim was going to call her. He is, isn't he?"

"Yeah," I tell her, a bit annoyed that she didn't bother to wait for Jim's go-ahead, but that's Denise. "I talked to him today. Said it was fine."

"Good. Let's hope they'll have some fun."

"Let's hope that we'll have some fun," I say, cradling her in my hands and getting up from the couch. She's too thin for her own good, I think. It's what you get for being an overachiever. I walk to the bedroom, holding her in my arms, her wriggling and laughter driving me on.

AND SATURDAY PASSES BY, AND SO DOES SUNDAY, AND not a call from Jim. When I call him, I get his machine. He's got one of those messages that just say the phone number, leave your name and your phone number and the date, please wait for the tone. I wonder where he is, if things went okay, if they went fantastic, if the two of them eloped together and are splashing in the clear, blue waters of Cancún.

I call him again on Monday, but again, I get the machine. Denise gets back from the University half past six. By that time, the barbecued chicken is ready. I tell her that I was thinking of visiting Jim after dinner.

"I talked with Laurie today," she says, ripping into a drumstick.

"I thought you only had class with her on Thursdays."

"Yeah, but I saw her on campus today. I wanted to know what happened between her and Jim."

"So?"

"She seemed sort of miffed at me. I asked her about Jim, and she said that they weren't right for each other. A chemistry thing, she told me. Bad vibes. I didn't ask further. Didn't look like she wanted me to."

"I'm definitely going to go see Jim tonight," I say.

I drive up to Jim's condo after dinner, leaving Denise with the dishes and Scott Turow's *The Burden of Proof.* Now that she's finished with Grisham, she's on to her next victim.

I ring his doorbell, and again, but there's nobody home, although the living room lights are on. In fact, the lights are a lot brighter than they used to be. Looks like he got another lamp or something. Curious, I go into his balcony and peer inside, through the blinds.

And I see potted plants everywhere. Lilies. Daffodils. Violets. Mums. Everywhere a pot can sit, it sits. The living room has been transformed into a flower shop.

I walk around to get to his bedroom window, which has its blinds shut, but I can see three fern branches sticking between the blades. There must be a plant, and probably more than one plant, sitting on the ledge of the window.

Going around the rest of the condo, I see a pile of lumber, a few two by fours near the side of his garage, bags of concrete, and some other various building material. Jim's car isn't here, so he must be out.

When I get back home, all I tell Denise is that Jim wasn't there. It's not really any of her business, and she would only shake her head and say, "That Jim, I told you he was flowery."

I give him a ring the next evening, but all I get is the machine.

STANDING IN LINE, I LOOK AT THE GIRL IN FRONT OF ME. From the back, she's cute, short blond hair, wonderfully cut calves, and just the cutest little butt you've ever seen. She's wearing a white button-down shirt and a pair of denim shorts. I look at what she's buying. She has in her hand Grisham's latest book, *The Client.* Denise read that a week ago. I'm here to get Stephen King's newest book on cassette. It passes the time in long car trips.

"Are you a part of Waldenbooks' Book Club?" the skinny, pimple-faced kid behind the register asks her.

"I think so," she says, her voice soft and shy, "but I don't have a card or anything." She digs through her purse for a second, then shakes a slow no.

"I just need your name," he says, his eyes on her cleavage. Who wouldn't?

"Craven," she says and spells it out, "and first name Laurie. That's spelled with an A and a U, if it helps."

I hear the guy behind me repeat the name softly, as if to memorize it. Smart man.

Sure enough, the cashier finds her in the database. She pays for her book and is about to leave, but I stop her.

"Excuse me?" I say. She turns to face me. Like a doll, I think. She's not someone you would call beautiful, but she would be someone you'd call cute. Big, huge green eyes, button nose, small yet full mouth, and this good-looking with virtually no makeup.

"Do I know you?" she asks.

"Not directly, no," I say, getting out of the line. "You can go in front of me," I tell the guy behind me.

"Wanna switch?" he jokes. I smile and lead Laurie away from the crowd.

"I think you know Denise Beckwith?"

"Yeah," she says, a little careful.

"She's my significant other," I say.

"You're… Cliff?" I nod. She puts out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Would you like to get some lunch with me? I'll buy."

She looks a bit hesitant, but says, "Okay. I have to be at aerobics class in about an hour, so I can't eat too much."

AT FRIENDLY'S, I ORDER THE TUNA MELT WITH FRIES, and she the same. It had been a long time since I'd met

anyone new, especially a woman. Being in a relationship sometimes does that to you. Laurie Elizabeth Craven was born in Rome, not the one in Italy but the one in Upstate New York. "Quite different," she said, and although she told me that she had never been to the capital of Italy, she assured me that she had seen pictures. I liked her sense of humor, the way she seemed so free with herself.

When I look at my watch, it's a quarter before three. "Didn't you say you had to go to aerobics class in an hour? That was at one o'clock." I call the waitress. "I don't want you to miss your class."

She looks at her watch, too, and slowly nods at me with a contemplative smile. "It's okay," she says.

The waitress comes over and asks, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, everything was fine, thank you" I say.

"No, everything wasn't fine," Laurie says, and the waitress looks at her with some apprehension. "But everything will be after dessert. I'd like to have the Heath Bar Crunch Sundae. How about you, Cliff?"

"Make that two," I say, smiling.

"THERE WAS A REASON BEHIND THIS LUNCH," I SAY, digging into the remains of my sundae with the long-necked spoon.

"You mean it wasn't just to get to know lil' ol' me?" she says with a Southern belle twang.

"You went out on a date with a guy named Jim last Saturday."

She scrunches her eyebrows and says, "I sure did, and boy, was that an experience. The guy was just…" She stops. "He's a friend of yours, I bet. And a good friend."

I nod.

"In fact, I bet you're the reason why Denise fixed me up with him."

I nod again.

"And you want to know what happened."

My neck was getting tired.

"Okay. It's like this. He sounded a little odd on the phone, but we were both a little nervous. He asked me for dinner on Saturday and a concert afterwards, a Chopin recital that was given by a twelve year-old at the JCC. Sounded great—I think he knew him, too."

"Probably Jason, his cousin. The kid is a prodigy, a genius."

"So he picks me up in his Maxima, nice car ride, small talk. We go to the Hasbrouk Inn. I love that place. He was cute in there, under that soft, yellow light, I'll give you that, but he seemed sort of distant. I didn't know whether that was just the way he was or something had happened." She sips her glass of water and continues. "Then, the concert. Wonderful. You're right, the kid is a genius. I loved it, but again, Jim seemed sort of distant, like he didn't care. I mean he clapped and he even whispered in my ear a few times during the performance about this part and that, but there was something unreal about it, like he was just going through the motions." Then she stops and scrapes inside her ice cream cup for some sweet stuff she may have missed.

"So that's why you weren't right for each other. I don't understand women. It's okay to say exactly what the problem is, you know, just comie right out and saying it."

She looks at me and says, "I'm not finished."

Suddenly, I'm not sure if I want to hear it. I think back to his living room, all those potted plants.

"I would have given him a few more chances, had the night ended like that. You don't meet good people that often in this world, and up to that point, I thought Jim was a good person." She pauses. "Then it happened."

"What?" I say, although I think I know what she's about to say.

"We went into a flower shop," she says.

What else?

"It seemed like a weird thing to do. It was a little before ten, and the shop was about to close. When I asked him why we're going in there, he told me that he wanted to get a pot of tulips. Taking your date to a flower shop and buying a pot of tulips? I thought maybe he wanted to get me some roses or something, which would have been fun and very nice, but tulips?"

I give her a small shrug. I would have felt weird, too.

"But that's not all. We go in there and look at some of the pots of flowers, but the next thing I hear is Jim arguing with the cashier. He says something like 'Let me see the manager,' so the girl goes and gets the woman in charge. At this point, I'm hiding behind the display of mums, trying to figure out how to strangle Denise for setting me up with this weirdo. 'You're not taking care of your tulips,' I hear him saying to her. 'And those daylilies need some more shade during the afternoons. They don't like too much sun.' Something like that, and eventually, the manager just agrees to everything, sells him the tulips for half price, and kicks us both out."

I'm hiding behind the display of mums, trying to figure out how to strangle Denise for setting me up with this weirdo. 'You're not taking care of your tulips,' I hear him saying to her.

"Strange," I say.

"He wasn't always like this, I gather."

"No, not at all."

"Anyway, on the ride back, I didn't say much. I think he knew that I saw what happened at the flower shop, and he realized that I thought he was weird. We pulled into my driveway, and he said, 'You must think I'm strange.' 'Frankly, yes,' I said. 'I guess people just don't understand,' he said, and he was really sad about this, like I was missing out on something. 'I guess not,' I said, and didn't know what to do next, the silence was really awkward and weird, so I said good night, thanks for a nice evening, and got out of the car."

I PAY FOR THE CHECK. "MY TREAT," I SAY.

"Then it will be my treat next time," she says.

"You got it."

"Do you and Denise get along?" she asks me as we walk out of the mall and into the bright, cloudless afternoon. We both put on our sunglasses.

"Why do you ask?" I say.

"You guys don't seem to be the types who would live together. You guys do live together, right?"

I nod. "We're different," I say.

She stops at a red Volkswagon Cabriolet and gets in. Her roof is down. Perfect, I think, as if the car was custom built around her.

"Something that just occurred to me," she says.

"What's that?"

"About your friend Jim. It wasn't that he was distant. No, distant was definitely the wrong word to use."

"What would be the right word, then?"

"Love," she says. "He looked as if he was in love, and not with me."

We look at each other for a moment. I can do this for hours, I think, maybe years.

"I'm in the book," she says.

"Craven, Laurie Elizabeth, Laurie with an A and a U," I say.

FROM THE MALL, I GO DIRECTLY TO JIM'S HOUSE. IT'S A Saturday, he's off from work, there's a good chance that he's home.

His car is in the driveway, but when I ring the doorbell, nobody answers. Then I hear some noise in the back. I go around to look, and sure enough, it's Jim.

"Hey Cliff!" he says. "Is this beautiful or what?" It's a slab of concrete, held in place by four wooden dams on each side. "I called you today but no one was in. I'm sorry I haven't returned your calls last week," he says.

"It's okay. You've been busy, I see." I see some aluminum frames lying against the wall.

"To say the least." He goes back to what he was doing, pouring a bag of sand into a big container.

"You're building a greenhouse," I say.

"You always were smart," he says, laughing.

"What are you doing now?"

"Well, I'm done laying down a foundation. The concrete slab is essentially finished, just have to damp-proof it with polyethylene and then lay down the screed."

"Screed."

"One part cement, three parts sharp sand. It's like fine-tuning your foundation, to make it nice and smooth. You want a beer? Got a case of Killians yesterday. Need it for this kind of hard work, you know."

"Jim, what the hell is going on?"

He pours some water and mixes the sand. "What do you mean?"

"Don't give me that shit. What's the deal with all the friggin' flowers in the living room, and this," I say, pointing and gesturing with my hands. "You with this sudden flower fetish, all this shit?"

"Cliff," he says calmly.

"Yes?"

"Are you still my friend?"

"I don't know. Yes. I guess so."

"Then do me a favor. Leave me alone for about two weeks. By that time this greenhouse will be done."

"So what's next for you, Jim? Your own TV show?"

"Go into my fridge, have a beer."

"I can't find your fridge in the jungle."

"If you care about me," Jim says evenly, "you are going to leave me alone."

I stick my hands in my pockets and shake my head.

"I'll call you," he says.

TWO WEEKS PASS BY, AND NOTHING.

Three weeks. I think about calling him and asking him if he wants to go out, but I'm afraid he may say, "Sorry, Cliff, but I'm watering my plants tonight. You know, I've planned it for weeks now." So I don't.

Four weeks. Then he calls me.

"Cliff." He sounds tired.

"Jim."

"I'm a bit late, I know. Delays. Took longer than I thought."

"It's okay."

"Can you come over?"

"IT'S A LEAN-TO GREENHOUSE," JIM SAYS, PASSING ME a bottle of Sam Adams.

"It's beautiful," I say, and it is. Standing against the south wall, the greenhouse glistens in the sunlight, every windowpane perfectly fitted, not a single sign that says an amateur built it.

And inside the greenhouse are flowers of every kind and color—I've never seen so much variety.

"That one," Jim points, at a pink ball of tiny flowers, like a big, fluffy dandelion, "is a flowering onion. Also called allium." Then he points at a bunch of violet colored flowers.

"Irises," I say, and he nods.

"Bearded irises. And next to those are tigridias, speckled in the middle?" Red, shaped like a fan blade. Next to those are tulips. Taking your date to a flower shop and buying a pot of tulips?

"Let's go inside," he says. I wrinkle my nose at the smell of the interior, which is good in some respects but also a bit mildewy. "It's like a girl," Jim says with a wry smile, "perfect and beautiful from the outside, not so blemish-free on the inside."

"There are those who are quite beautiful in both. Snapdragons!" I say, looking at the pink flowers. "Do you remember…"

"My mother's garden, and we used to take off the bulbs and make them into little monster jaws."

"Chasing Susanne and Kimmy with those jaws. That was a long time ago," I say, again reminded of the fact that I've known Jim all my life.

"But I remember. I also remember my mother's passion for those flowers of hers."

"Is that where you get it from?"

"Maybe. Doesn't really matter."

"Where is that music coming from?" I ask, suddenly aware of Mozart playing softly in the background.

"Wired up a little system."

"For the flowers."

"I plan to work here a lot, and a little music doesn't hurt," he says. I want to tell him *you're not answering my question,* but that's what Denise would say, so I don't.

"I met Laurie Craven," I say to him.

"That's the girl I went out on the date with, right? Denise's friend?" I nod. "You like her?"

"Yeah," I say.

"More than Denise," he says, more of a statement than a question.

"Denise and I have been together for three years."

It was a perfect opening for The Denise Line, but Jim doesn't say it. Instead he just smiles. "She reminded me a lot of you."

"Of me?"

"Yeah. Both of you are on the same level of reality, on the same wavelength, if you know what I mean."

I nod slowly, sort of understanding what he's saying. "I asked her about your date," I say.

"Didn't go so hot," Jim says, "God, it seems like so long ago." We are silent for a second, Mozart's melody hanging in the air. I think about asking him what's going on with his life, why he's become Mr. Green Thumb USA after Sandy dumped him, why he suddenly cares more about flowers than anything else, but I don't even know where to start, so I blurt out something that I had been thinking about.

"Jim, you're not gay, are you?"

He looks at me, then laughs. "I don't think so, and I should know, I think."

"I'm serious," I say.

"Until I start wearing flower-patterned dresses, I think I'm safe."

I feel stupid for asking him, but I also feel a lot better.

"I'm going to water those dicentras over there," he says with a grin. "The pump doesn't do a very good job towards the end of the greenhouse, I'm afraid." He gets a small plant waterer from the corner and tends to his flowers.

Bleeding hearts, that's what dicentras are, small red, heart-shaped flowers that hang off a long branch, like a bunch of lockets in a line, ripe for picking.

I watch him pour water into the soil, carefully, like a surgeon. He pats the ground, then adds a little more water. I watch his face, his movements.

He looked as if he was in love, and not with me, Laurie said. Love. How can he love flowers more than girls like Sandy or Laurie? I don't understand, and wonder if I ever will be able to. But who knows, maybe he'll meet a nice woman gardener, they can talk about bees and how they carry pollen, and the next thing you know they're in the sack together and they can grow beautiful flowers together in their own garden of Eden.

"You want to help? These bachelor's buttons," he says, pointing at the blue flowers, "can use some water, too."

"Love to," I say, picking up a pitcher next to the door.

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A Fish Story

BY SUSAN STERN

• Sometimes it is not personal peril, wisdom, great costs or great gains that motivate us: sometimes it is only the inevitability of change… •

Once upon a time there were two cities. The people of the cities were great whales. They lived in a bauble worn around the neck of a child and in the flicker between two breaths. They didn't know this, of course.

The bauble was shaped like a figure-eight laid on its side. A wall of thin crystal separated the two spheres that held the spires of the whales' homes. In one sphere, the whales swam in a clear colorless medium; in the other, the whales flew through blue air. Each group thought its own was much the superior means of getting around, and they quarreled constantly, ranged shouting in tiers before the wall, making the crystal ring and shiver.

One day the king of the winged people was lounging on his throne of clouds when there was a deferential nose-tap at the door. He nodded his ponderous head at his counselor, who opened the door. A young whale tumbled in. He righted himself and balanced upright on his tail in an attitude of respect. The king (for he was a humane king) waved one gray sail, and the young courier settled into a more comfortable position.

"Speak," rumbled the king.

"Sire," began the young courier, "Lord of the High Places, Bringer of the Blue Light, Ruler of the Tall Towers—" The king swished his ailerons (for he was an impatient as well as a humane king). The courier gulped. "Um… *et cetera.* Sire, the Winged People, the Best People, the People Who Do It *Right*, have sent me with a compliant. The complaint is this. This is the complaint. In short. The others, the Inferior People, the People Who Swim in the Colorless Void, Who Are Not the Best—"

"Get to the point," said the king.

"Er… yes. Anyway. The time has come (the citizens say) to do something about those shouters, those swimmers, those high-voiced criers, who make our days and nights tiresome by yelling at the wall that *they* are the ones who move by the correct method. When everyone knows what the truth of the matter is. Sire, it cannot be borne!" And the young courier became so passionate that he spouted a stream of rainbow-colored bubbles, which floated delicately into the turquoise air until they burst with a tinkle like the clinking of cordial glasses. The king politely pretended not to notice.

Now the king had no desire for war, but he knew that his people were getting restless, and a restless people are a dangerous people. So he did not dismiss the sincere young courier immediately.

"Let us think on it," he boomed, and the floor of the palace trembled. The young courier executed a slow-motion back-somersault and exited. It took him quite some time to calm down afterward, too.

At the very same time, surprisingly enough, the queen of the finned people was receiving a representative of *her* subjects. The graceful young messenger was as enthusiastic in espousing her cause as the courier had been in his.

"…I tell you, Majesty, Ruler of the Great Sea, Mistress of the White Waves, Lady of the Hidden Places—" The queen sighed and fanned one great fin. The messenger swallowed.

"To sum it up—yes. I have been sent with a petition. This is the petition. The petition is this. The Others, those fliers, those murky-aired floaters, those low-voiced rumblers—"

"Get on with it," sang the queen.

"Majesty," cried the young whale earnestly, "they believe that they are better than we! And it is well known that we do things the *correct* way. (Ask anyone. Anyone at all.) They pollute our currents with their foul assertions. Majesty, it cannot be borne!" And she flushed in the heat and conviction of her beliefs.

"Majesty," cried the young whale earnestly, "they believe that they are better than we! And it is well known that we do things the *correct* way. (Ask anyone. Anyone at all.)"

Now the queen in her sphere of water did not want a war any more than the king in his sphere of air. But her people were bored, and a bored people is dangerous people.

"We shall think on it," she chimed in a voice like a ringing dulcimer. She rose in the water, and her eyes glittered like garnets. The messenger performed a graceful forward somersault and exited. But she couldn't report the royal verdict directly, because she had hyperventilated and needed to catch her breath.

So in due time, the decision came forth in both spheres: War.

There was a problem, though, with the war concept, for the whales couldn't reach each other through the

crystal wall. The rulers set the counselors (who had never before had an actual task) to working on the dilemma. Privately, they hoped that the whole thing would be forgotten before the old mumblers found a solution.

No such thing happened, of course. Eventually the counselors announced that they had found the answer.

"SONG?" GROWLED THE KING.

"Yes. We have discovered that the low pitch of our voices, while harmless to ourselves and our structures, is damaging to the others when played at high volumes. We have built special amplifiers, and when we all sing into them and aim the sound at the People Who Swim, the vibrations will cause shock waves that will kill the Finned Ones and destroy their city."

"You are sure about this?"

"Yes, Sire, Lord of—*et cetera*. We are sure."

"SONG?" CAROLED THE QUEEN.

"Yes. We have discovered that the high pitch of our voices, while harmless and in fact pleasing to us, is at high volumes lethal to Those Who Fly. We have built special amplifiers, and when we aim our voices at them…" And so forth.

Thus it came to pass that on a certain day the whales of the two cities ranked themselves on either side of the crystal wall—wave upon gray wave of them, giants as far as the eye could see. There was a tight silence as though the very air and water held their breath. And then, as it was agreed by the toss of a clamshell that came up pearl-side-out, the people who flew began to sing.

And the hearts burst in the immense chests of the queen's people; the walls of her city crumbled, and what hearts were not broken by the song itself were broken by the ruin of the shining, miraculous city.

But the wall did not shatter.

Then the people who swam were allowed to sing. And their voices pierced the brains of the others like knife-blades of ice, and the winged people turned upon one another and fought as their city tumbled around them.

But the wall did not break.

This went on for many months. At length, almost all of the people of the two cities were dead.

And still the wall stood.

Finally the king and queen knew that they had to end the destruction. They agreed to send representatives to meet at the wall and pitch their individual voices against each other. The people of the one who survived would be the victors—although they no longer remembered just what they had sought to win.

The king chose as his champion the young courier—who had grown far older with grief and responsibility than his age would have indicated. The queen chose the young messenger, her smooth skin now lined with worry.

The day arrived. The courier and the messenger faced each other, their shattered cities and broken people behind them. He was still handsome in his scarred gravity. She was still beautiful in her grace and pride.

They took a breath.

They aimed their notes.

They sang.

And the two songs together created a song so wonderful, his fundamentals and her harmonics twining like living, flowering vines, that they broke off in astonishment.

At that moment, the child who wore the bauble lost interest in the toy. She dropped it onto the floor and walked away.

The crystal wall exploded.

The worlds were thrown into chaos. The media mixed.

In that winged second, the messenger thought she was swimming through clear air; and the courier thought that he was flying through blue water.

And they both knew, with pain, and grief, and the faint, prickly beginnings of hope, that none of it had really mattered, anyway.

SUSAN STERN (e-mail c/o gaduncan@halcyon.com)

Came to Seattle from New York to attend the 1990 Clarion West Writers' Workshop; she forgot to go home and has been in Washington ever since. When she's not writing multimedia text, she's usually doing theater stuff—in fact, a play based upon "A Fish Story" is in production at this very moment.

PIGGY IN THE MIDDLE

BY STEPHEN KINGSTON

• Justice and revenge are relatively universal concepts… their forms only vary with one's relatives. •

"CAN YOU SMELL SHIT?"

"Yeah, pig shit." Dan Cooper sniffed deeply and wrinkled his nose. He pointed in my direction and gasped for breath. "It's coming from over there."

I pretended to ignore them of course. I had been ignoring them for two weeks now, but things were not blowing over; if anything they were becoming worse.

I walked past feigning a total ignorance of their very existence, although inside my stomach there was a familiar knot of tension that was not founded on groundless fears. Already there had been both threat and innuendo, as well as the kind of practical jokes that just leave you cold. Yesterday I had arrived in school to find my desk and chair arranged neatly beside the bike sheds. They had left the exercise books out and I spent ten minutes picking them up off the playing fields where the wind had blown them. I have no idea what happened to my English exercise book.

The only person in our street who was still speaking to me was Mr. Singh from the newsagent's, and that was probably because it was his shop that Tyler's brother was robbing when I called the police.

John Tyler stepped out in front of me, his excess bulk obscuring my view of the road ahead as well as my path. I attempted to detour casually around him but he was not going to stand for that.

"Where you going then, pig-shit?" he asked. I ignored him. I was not going to answer to anything but my own name.

He grabbed my shirt collar and it felt like he was going to choke me, but Big John was slow—I knew that—so I swung for him. The problem was that Cooper was ready and he caught my arm, deflecting it away so that I seemed to be feebly punching the air like some weedy toad who had never hit anyone in his life.

"I asked you a question."

"Nowhere," I gasped, and now my heart was pounding and I suddenly wanted a pee desperately.

"How about a little walk with your friends, then."

My heart sank. Come on lads, I thought, just get it over with. You've been spoiling for a fight for long enough—no need to prolong your wait. Still, I knew that any fight (here or elsewhere) was going to be a one-sided affair. Maybe I could joke my way out of this. Cooper had a sense of humor.

"You don't want to go for a walk with me. I smell of pig shit." I tried to smile as I spoke, but all I managed was a warped grimace. Dan laughed though, and John smiled a little. Maybe I was in with a chance yet.

"Too right you do. Thanks to you my brother's going to court. Did you hear that? They're gonna charge him."

I had known, of course, and I should have been a little more careful about going out today. Maybe if I kept my head down for a few more weeks, things might have calmed down enough so that life might just have gone back to normal.

The thing was, the whole school knew I was a grass now and not one of them would lift a finger to stop Tyler (or anyone else for that matter) from giving me a kicking.

It was like that in our area. Not just among the kids, mind—the adults too. Some bloke had been shouting abuse at me just the day before, and the woman from next door had been going on at mum about how she would have slung her son out if he didn't know how to keep his mouth shut. As I walked along the street women pointed and stared, then they would ignore me. Except that in doing so they were so theatrical it was as if they had tapped me on the shoulder and said that was what they were doing.

The only person in our street who was still speaking to me at all was Mr. Singh from the newsagent's, and that was probably only because it was his shop that Tyler's brother was robbing when I called the police. Even Mr. Singh broke off his conversation with me when Mary-Ella Edwards came into the shop, turning up her nose at me as if I were something dragged from the gutter and she was the Queen. He just served me then, taking my money and giving me nothing more then a gruff "There's your change."

Oh, I regretted that call. Of all the telephone calls I ever made in my life that had to be the stupidest. Mum had said how I had done the right thing, but I could tell from the way she said it that she would never have done it herself. She was saying I was good and honest but she was thinking I was just plain stupid—a trait inherited from my father no doubt.

Now I had been just as stupid in walking slap-bang into Tyler. I suppose I had thought he would never dare do anything to me in a public street, but that was stupid too, because there was not one person in this street who would admit a thing to the police even if Tyler stabbed me on their doorstep and then knocked on their door to return the knife.

Now Tyler wanted me to come with him, and there was not much choice about it. I could run to the nearest doorway and beg to be let in, but I could guarantee they were going to be out. People in this street would be out to me even if they were in.

So I went with Tyler—and that was stupidest thing of all, because at least if I had waited in the street and been beaten up then eventually someone would give an anonymous call to the ambulance service, or perhaps mum would see what was going on and call the police. I should have just let him do his worst, but instead I allowed myself to be taken to the gasworks.

They were all there waiting too. I don't know how long they must have been waiting, or how they could be so sure that I would turn up, but somehow they knew. There was Matt Tyler, out on bail with three of his skinhead friends and all their current girlfriends. Elaine Cooper and two of her friends stood a little apart with a group of boys from my year in school, and as soon as I arrived they all began to cheer.

They formed a circle around me, and I found myself staring at Elaine. She was tall for her age, with her ginger hair cropped short and a ring through her nose. Dan had once told me how she would pick bogeys from the inside of that nose ring and flick them at him when he managed to annoy her (which was often enough). That was when Dan and I had been friends, which did not seem like all that long ago.

"Take your clothes off."

I looked at her, aghast, but Elaine was not someone you messed with. Still I did not comply—if they wanted the pleasure of seeing me unclothed then they were damned well going to have to take them off themselves, and I said as much.

"Take your fucking clothes of or else I'll kick your genitals into your larynx."

"I bet you've been practicing that expression all day." It seemed like I was never going to learn common sense—at least not before these people prematurely ended my life. Elaine was livid—probably the more so because I was right. She gripped my shirt and tore it open. Several buttons popped off and I heard the tearing of fabric. If I wanted any clothes left I had better comply, so I removed the shirt and my watch, shoes and socks.

As I pulled of my belt there came a tittering from the people behind me, but I was concentrating on Elaine, who had barely calmed herself. Her cheeks were flushed a deep pink and she looked like she was about to bite me or something. I hesitated before undoing the button on my jeans until Elaine moved a step towards me. Then I had them down around my ankles so quickly that Dan roared with laughter. Little runt—just wait. I'd have him for this.

The laughter calmed Elaine a bit, and she stepped back again, enjoying, I'm sure, the feeling of having power over someone. I stepped out of my jeans and stood there in my boxer shorts with their stupid "Roger Rabbit" design printed all over, and my cheeks burned with shame.

"Did I say stop?"

No. But I was not going any further. I shivered—not so much from the cold (although it was cold), but more from fear or hatred—I'm not sure which. They had had their fun now, and I was not going to give them any cheap thrills.

Then one of the skinheads wrapped an arm around me and pulled my head back by the chin while Elaine pulled off my shorts.

I covered myself with my hands as they all laughed at me. Oh, hilarious I thought, but I could not stop the burning in my cheeks or the liquid forming in my eyes.

There was a click and a whir behind me and the crowd laughed louder. Julia Day had a camera and was putting it to good use. I tried to turn my face away from her, as if that made much difference.

"Stay still and give us a nice pose." There was no damned way I was going to do anything of the sort and I turned away but Matt grabbed me and pulled my right arm behind me in a half-nelson. He was none to gentle and I shouted (or maybe screamed) with the agony. He pulled my left arm back as well; Julia shot off several more pictures before he let me go, and I allowed myself to fall to the ground.

Matt kicked me then—from behind, his foot landing in the back of my knee and I definitely screamed then. I tried to curl up into a little ball, exposing as little of me as possible, but no more blows landed. Instead, the jeering mob moved away, apparently satisfied.

I didn't dare move for a couple of minutes, but then I uncurled myself and surveyed the area through tear-stained eyes. I was blubbering now. (It's not as if I will cry at the slightest provocation, but the shock and the humiliation as well as the pain in my leg was enough to set anyone off and I could not control my sobbing.) I found my clothes, all except the boxer shorts, which they no doubt kept as some kind of trophy. My shirt was ripped around the button holes, and mum was not going to be pleased—that was a fairly new shirt.

I dressed quickly and then started for home when I saw Dan sitting a little way off, not looking entirely happy—

and more then a little guilty. I changed direction, but Dan leaped to his feet and caught up with me.

"Elaine can be such a prat, you know."

Yeah, sure. I thought. Too bad that she has a prat for a brother too, but I just stayed quiet.

"I didn't know about this, you know."

"You're such a fucking liar." I shouted. I didn't really mean to shout, but I didn't seem to have much control over my voice and it was probably a bit squeaky too.

"Yeah—okay, so I knew some of it. But honest, I didn't know they were gonna have a camera, and no one was supposed to hurt you."

So what? Did Dan have any idea of what I had just been through? How could I show myself in school on Monday? By then everyone would know what had happened—and they would have the photos to prove it. It was bad enough having everyone hate me, but now they would all despise me. I could imagine the taunts now, only I decided it was better if I did not.

"Look, Tom, I admit that was a fart-arsed idea. I'm sorry I had anything to do with it. Come on, give me a break, will you?"

And being a total moron, and pretty weak-willed too, I did. In fact, that was inevitable from the moment he started talking to me again. Having no friends at all for a couple of weeks certainly provides plenty of incentive to do whatever you can to restore a previous friendship. We walked home, talking about TV and the latest films at the cinema, and acting for all the world as if the last half hour had never happened.

THINGS WERE BAD ON MONDAY, BUT NOT SO VERY BAD. Dan was talking to me, and he seemed willing to stick by me when the kids from our year were jeering and calling me a fairy. Someone had hung my boxer shorts from one of the netball posts, but Mr. Enright removed them during first period and gave them back to me.

I'm not sure if I would rather that he had held onto them, because when I realized that he knew who they belonged to, I knew that he probably had half an idea about how they had made their way up there, too.

I swallowed my pride and thanked him, stuffing them into my bag, just before Dan came running up to me.

"Tom, I've got some news."

"Yeah?"

"I know where the photos are."

Well, great. So what? I'm sure I'd rather not know.

"Julia got them developed at her chemist's and now she's left them in the shop. I heard her telling Elaine. She's well pissed off, 'cos she hasn't had the chance to show them to anyone yet."

That might just qualify as good news, just so long as the apocalypse happened before next Thursday's late-night shopping, but surely it only postponed the inevitable. Julia worked in the chemist's on weekends only, but she would only have to pop in on Thursday to pick up the photos. Then I really would be the laughingstock of the school.

All we have to do is go get them tonight. Julia won't be able to get them herself. If we do it quick, we can be away with the piccies before anyone sees 'em."

"Don't you see?" Dan was getting so excited now it made me want to punch him—speaking to me as if I were some retard, totally unable to comprehend the simplest of notions. He just wasn't making any sense. "All we have to do is go get them tonight. Julia won't be able to get them herself. Just so long as we do it quick, we can be away with the piccies before anyone sees 'em."

"What makes you so bloody sure she isn't going there tonight?"

Dan gave me such a smug smile that I nearly did hit him, but I restrained myself as he produced a key from his pocket. I raised an eyebrow and he laughed.

"I nicked it out of her school bag. The shop closes at five, so she'd need a key by the time she got there—and I've got hers."

Sometimes Dan could be a deceitful little rat, I decided. And I smiled too.

WE MET UP AFTER SCHOOL BY THE CORNER SHOP AND took the bus into town. It was after seven and there was a drizzly rain falling, but the town was still fairly full of people, even down this end away from the main shopping precincts. We decided to go bowling first and I paid for Dan because he was being such a mate. We had two games and Dan thrashed me in them both, although I certainly wasn't on form—I could not even scrape a hundred in my second game. I guess I was too nervous about what we were going to do later on.

It was not as if we were going to do anything strictly illegal—I mean, obviously we were breaking into the shop—but we were not going to damage anything, nor were we going to steal anything. That is to say, we were not going to steal anything from the shop, at least.

All the same, I was nervous. No, more then nervous—I was scared stiff, and after losing a second game I suggested we go to McDonald's and get something to eat.

I was just trying to postpone the moment when we broke into the shop.

Chewing a Big Mac, I suggested to Dan that maybe the photographs were just not worth the effort. Maybe we should just go home and let Julia do her worst. Dan pulled a face at that suggestion.

"If you think I'm sticking around with you while a bunch of photographs of 'Fairy Tom' do the rounds, you've got another think coming. I've got a reputation to keep, y' know?"

"Oh come on Dan, it's not such a big deal. I mean—breaking into a shop—that's criminal."

"And don't you just know it."

That was below the belt, and I clammed up. Matt Tyler had been thieving. What he had done was just plain wrong, and he was only doing it to pay for dope. No one seemed to appreciate this. I was the guilty party in everyone's eyes because I had reported him—that really pissed me off.

"Oh come on, Tom. Thirty seconds and we'll be in and out, and you can forget the photos ever got taken. It'll be all right… just thirty seconds."

"Yeah, I suppose."

WE EVENTUALLY GOT THROWN OUT OF MCDONALD'S, and now it was half past nine. The town center was still half full of people, especially so near the pubs, but as we walked to the chemist's the crowd thinned out to nothing.

"Here goes nothing." Dan inserted the key and the door swung open. "Behind the counter—by the till. That's what Julia said."

I ran to the counter and reached over by the till. In the half light of the night lighting I could just make out an envelope that could well contain photographs, so I picked it up. I was about to check the contents when Dan whispered frantically from the door.

"Quick. Someone's coming."

I stuffed the envelope into my inside jacket pocket and ran for the door. Dan pulled it shut and removed the key.

"Got them?"

"Yes." I whispered. Why were we whispering? There was no one around. Where was the person that Dan said was coming?

I moved a few meters up the road to look down a side street, but there was no one there at all.

Suddenly there was the sound of breaking glass, and I turned, startled. The glass door of the chemist's shop was broken just by the lock. Suddenly I could hear blood roaring in my ears and my heart was thumping so hard it was painful.

"Run!" Dan shouted and I complied willingly enough. We ran up the high street and down Princess street. Dan rushed into the King's Hall amusements and I followed.

We stopped now in the smoky half-darkness and I held onto a fruit machine as I gasped for breath. The arcade stank of smoke and sweat, although it was nearly empty. I looked around and nearly wet my pants.

"Like a lamb to the slaughter." Matt Tyler jeered. I was speechless. There they all were—John, Matt and Elaine. Dan had at once joined their company, gathered around a machine where John was concentrating on losing all his money. He seemed quite happy to have met them too.

"Took your bloody time. This place closes in twenty minutes." Julia remonstrated with him.

"Not my fault. He wanted to eat first."

"How does it feel to have committed a criminal offence, then, Carter?"

It felt bloody awful, and it was feeling worse every second. What were they doing here waiting for me? "Dan, what have you done?"

Dan looked a bit uneasy, but his answer was all the more cocky for any guilt he might be feeling. "Nothing more then you deserve, pig shit."

"Yeah, that's right." Matt picked up, "You're so ruddy green you never even thought about the security camera did you?"

Shit.

"And the pigs know your face too. Even if it takes 'em a few days, they'll soon recognize your snotty little mug.

"What's more, if they don't put two and two together, you never know who might tip them off. After all, you don't know how to keep your mouth shut, so why shouldn't anyone else grass on you?"

"This ain't fuckin' fair, you bastards. You know I didn't steal nothing."

"Tough shit. And you did steal something, didn't you?"

The question was asked of me, but Matt looked to Dan for confirmation. Dan nodded and the older boy broke into a big grin.

I was about to turn tail and run, but Tyler stirred himself from his machine long enough to grab me by the arms, while Dan reached in and removed the packet from my inside pocket, doing so ever so carefully, as if he were afraid to touch it. He placed it in my hands.

"Open it."

I opened the envelope, and suddenly I wanted to puke. Instead of photographs there was a small wodge of notes held together by an elastic band.

"The notes from tomorrow's float. Probably about thirty pounds." Julia explained.

"Well, that's theft and criminal damage as far as I can see. And I nearly forgot—Dan's been with us since you came out of bowling. You had a bust-up with him, you see, since you're such a bad loser. Then he came with us and went to see a film." And they even produced the tickets to prove it.

"So Danny-boy has a watertight alibi. He isn't on the security camera 'cos he stayed by the door, so you're in deep shit, and no one's gonna dig you out."

With that John let me go. They turned and started walking away; all except Matt. He moved his face close to mine—so close I could smell stale meatballs and beer on his breath.

"Just think of it as a second chance. You take the rap like a man, and we'll forget what a fuckin' scumbag you really are. Don't try dropping any of us in it, 'cos the pigs ain't never going to get enough evidence to bring any charges against us.

"Keep quiet, take what's coming to you, and we leave you alone. Deal?"

I looked at him with utter hatred. They had dug me into a hole and they were right—there was no way out. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. Not yet. I had to wait for him to go away.

Oh, go away Matt. Fuck off and get out of my life. But he wasn't finished yet.

"Deal?" He asked again, a little louder this time.

I loathed the sight of the zitty bastard. What could I do? Take the rap? It would be my first offense; it was not as if I was going to get locked up or anything.

At least then the taunts might stop. Maybe I'd get some street cred too. Maybe I could say that was why I did it.

Maybe everyone would just call me a rat-arsed hypocrite.

Shit. Mum was going to kill me.

"Deal?"

"Deal."

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Is employed as a Technical Consultant for the Institute for Health Informatics in Aberystwyth, Wales. He surfs for fun and climbs mountains when He's worried about his waistline. "Piggy in the Middle" is based on a televised interview with several people in Liverpool who were openly abusive of an old lady who had dared inform the police of a robbery in progress.

TIMEBUGS

BY CAROLYN L BURKE

• In the same way no two people agree on everything, no two clocks march to the same beat. •

ONCE, THE STARS COULD BE SEEN TO BE MOVING farther apart, where the scale of mountain erosion was comparatively slow. Such time had ceased to be meaningful as the world created by watching observers relativistically sped up. Geometric growth had its advantages—as an antidote to the static feeling of progress and change for those jaded by a linear approach to curiosity. But as this velocity became an acceleration, becoming geometric, earning a potential logarithmic future, galactic time slowed. The heavens, once a bright, vibrant and alluring clockwork, were no longer a series of temporal gateposts for the aware. And with contralto echoes of amusement, spideric voices could be heard, if listeners could still have listened, greeting each other out of time.

What did bugs circle around before they had porchlights?

The stars!

What did bugs circle around before they had porchlights? The stars!

I BRUSHED THE BUG AWAY AS IT AIMED FOR THE GLOWING luminescence of the light. My sudden noticing of the digital watch brought to mind a time without such progressive timepieces.

My parents would talk about the days when television was a radio perched high upon the bureau, with all the neighbors gathering each evening to listen. The new mantleclock, state of the art, chattered noisily through all the comedic monologues, hushing only for news.

That clock announced for all to notice that time was present. Its ticking complemented the internal rhythms of the staticy voices, a necessary ingredient for the enthrallment. With the sign off, leaving only the wooden planks of the porch railing and each other, the group would disperse mumbling about what time took away. The clock stoically endured the responsibility for their dimly encroaching awareness of tomorrow's routines, where the radio was a forgotten pleasure dream.

Time is constructed, it seems, of those unaware moments of relaxation and escape, where each moment is strung on an infinite cord in one linear row or column of life, and where each person strives to wrap that cord tightly around their fragile neck as a safety line for when they jump. And for a few, those with the nerve to stare directly into the eyes of their own self-worth, time stands still.

I glimpsed the bug hovering near the crystal again. I shewed it away with a Wittgensteinian flourish.

My mind wandered back to my sister. It had been a hot day and the two of us had hidden in the basement, cooling our imaginations. A spider was crawling up the wall. It was one of those compact tiger spiders that always stuck to the screen door in the summer. They would jump whole inches at a time if you bothered them. And this one had a fascination for the cheap gold-chromed wall clock.

It was climbing right up to the clock's rim, its bumpy edge a remnant of the chromed coronal spiking my mother had disallowed as too tacky. In it went. We giggled as little girls often do, as we created a wonderous magical temple of a spider city occupied once again by its goddess.

Time ticked. And yet, it seemed to us that in no time at all the clock started convulsing, every third tick louder, more staccato. The second hand moved counter to clockwise, sucking back the future, returning the day to its source. The spider never emerged, but the clock's burdens were gone from its twelve humped shoulders. How often will the ghost in the machine be a spider? How often is the future merely yesterday's regurgitation of last year?

Most of my memories in time are of my childhood, my family. In the present, I let the bugs wear my watch, where they beat the milliseconds out with wings, where the nano-ants continue the count with no end. I let the bugs remember.

I remember that back then, amongst the minute men, I used time to look the other way. Always in a hurry to be on time, in time for a scheduled and measured period of interaction, counting the minutes as hours in the glow of impassioned and well-orderd mindlessness—the endless variety of timed wastes continued on, as if suggested to all of us subliminally by a forgotten spirit, tired, subconscious and hungry to consume meaning. Yes, my family knew the value of a second.

In the glow of my watch, I can still hear the radio-static wing-beats of my life.

There was a time when all events happened eternally. They occurred sequentially, I'm sure, and yet no record was kept, no attempt to glean ordering, to create history. I glance at my watch. I glance away again.

Maybe next year I will be able to remember the bugs again.

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