InterText

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 5 SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 1995

"Ghostdancer"
by RIDLEY MCINTYRE

ALSO INSIDE:

DEBORAH BRYAN
TODD BRENDAN FAHEY
PAT JOHANNESON
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JQUAN

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First Text

JASON SNELL

DINOSAUR MOON

THE SUN RISES AND SETS EACH day. The moon's up there every day, too, but we don't usually think of it the same way. The sun is on a 24-hour cycle (big red ball in the east, smaller hot ball overhead, big red ball in the west, then darkness), but the moon takes longer to appreciate (big gray ball, gray apple with a bite taken out of it, gray half-circle, gray crescent, black hole in the sky—repeat until you see the big gray ball again).

Publishing is like that.

BEFORE YOU THINK I'VE GONE COMPLETELY AROUND the bend—or at least before you tighten the straps on my straitjacket—let me explain. In traditional paper publishing, a publication has to pick a schedule and stick to it. Most newspapers come out every day (perhaps in staggered editions), and most magazines come out every week or every month. Rather than sending you 50 pages every week, the editors of *Wired* make 200 pages available each month. That's the format they've chosen for their material.

But when it comes to online publishing, that's not always the case. True, many print magazines have come on the Web and begun to put information on their sites in cycles that match their print cycles. Newspapers may refresh their content every day (with hourly additions off the news wires), while monthly magazines might only update their site once a month—say, when the moon is full. From a logistical standpoint, it's a reasonable philosophy. After all, their entire production process is set up in regular cycles, beginning with the assignment of stories. The stories are written, edited, copy edited, layed out, proofed, and finally printed as part of an edition.

But online publishing can easily take another approach: the idea that the concept of an *issue* doesn't apply to publishers dealing with bytes and bandwidth rather than reams of paper and delivery trucks. Why shouldn't electronic publications print stories as they're finished? Why make readers wait until an entire issue is ready when material can just as easily be online *now?*

These folks make some good points. First, they're trying to break the conventions of publishing—or at the very least, they're making us question what a publication really is and how it should function, divorced from the logistical need to produce a salable package for newsstands and home subscribers.

And this argument is augmented by the growth of the Web and the importance of making people come back to your site more than once a month. That way, the Patron Saint of Web Hits is appeased, as are those advertisers who are quixotically paying huge amounts of money to reach the small group of folks who are surfing the Net.

So am I ready to chuck the concept of *issues* and transform *InterText* into a "Fiction Web Site," with perhaps one new story a week added to the mix, just to keep people coming back for more?

Though I'm not quite 25 years old yet, call me a dinosaur. Go ahead. I can take it.

THE BEAUTY OF ANY MAGAZINE, INCLUDING FICTION magazines, is that it is a complete package with a tangible beginning, middle, and end. We pick the order of our stories to set a tone for our issue, making sure to mix the heavy with the light, the long with the short—picking suitable pieces to open matters, and stories that are appropriate ones with which to say "goodbye" for two months.

In other words, though we live in a world with technology that allows us to break the barriers of conventional publishing and destroy the concept of the *issue* if we really want to—I don't want to. Not only does the concept of individual issues let us create a comfortable, standard format, but it also improves the chances you'll like what we send you. Sure, it's *possible* all five of the stories in this issue won't move you, but the chances are good that a few of them will.

And most of all—especially in an electronic world where publications are born and die in the wink of an eye—the strength of a *periodical* is in its regularity. A publication, online or not, is an unknowable quantity if it doesn't stick to a publication schedule—a moving target that readers can never be sure they're caught up with. Though there may be hardy, determined souls out there willing to invest the effort necessary to keep up with such an endeavor, frankly, we don't think that's the readers' job. It's the editors' job. Sure, for us *InterText* is a moving target. But it shouldn't be for you.

That's why regularity has been perhaps the biggest goal we've had in publishing *InterText*. We plan to be here for the long haul, and we plan on being dependable. You won't be left guessing about when to visit our Web site, or when the latest issue will arrive. We're here every other month, and have been doing it for well over four years.

This is not to say that other approaches—say, a Web site that's an interactive "fiction clearinghouse"—might not be useful and popular. I'm sure will be seeing all sorts of similar publishing ventures like that in the near future.

But for me, nothing beats knowing that if I go to my mailbox on Thursday, the latest copy of *Sports Illustrated* will be there. And if you look in your emailbox in the middle of every odd month, you'll find us.

In a world full of suns, there's still a place for moons.

SecondText

GEOFF DUNCAN

AUTHENTICATE *THIS!*

TWO YEARS AGO IN THIS SPACE, I FIRST BEMOANED the imminent invasion of the Net by traditional publishers. How could publications like *InterText* succeed in the same arena as large concerns, with their big budgets, innumerable staff, and high-priced, mainstream content? The future was looking a little grim as the big boys of big-time media began targeting the online world.

Well, two years later, I have one thing to say: *Oh me of little faith!* Large, mainstream publishing concerns have entered the online waters, and they're splashing about, trying to make big waves. But I have to confess to feeling some malicious glee as I watch their efforts. For the most part, they're floundering in online kiddie pools, clutching flotation devices and gazing in barely-controlled terror as the shoreline vanishes. The Internet is a big ocean, and it looks like most of these folks can't swim.

For example, let's consider "authentication." If you use the World Wide Web, you've undoubtedly been confronted by sign-in requirements at so-called "major sites." Usually, you're required to register a user name and a password, which you then enter every time you want to access that site. Some publishers require users to fill out surveys before they let you sign on—heck, I've seen sites that refuse to grant access until you give an email address and system information, and (more troubling) a few that require users to supply their age, address, telephone, income, educational level, marital status, and other personal information.

Why are "major" publishers doing this? What does a user name and a password have to do with *publishing?* Nothing. But it has everything to do with *advertising.*

Major publishing concerns aren't going online for their health—they're going online for money. Publishers aren't primarily concerned with providing content—their main interest is selling advertising space. Content is only important to the extent it draws readers; what's *really* important is how demographic descriptions of those readers appeal to advertisers. This arrangement doesn't mean there aren't high-quality traditional publications; however, it does mean the quality of these publications is determined by their editorial staffs, not their publishers. A publisher won't hesitate to kill a quality publication if its revenues are low; similarly, a publisher won't care much about the quality of a publication bringing in lots of advertising dollars.

So, it figures traditional publishers are bringing those money-making principles online, but they have some issues to overcome. First, they have to monitor the size of their readership, so they require registration. This allows them to track what any "subscriber" is interested in and—importantly—how often they visit. Some online endeavors try to provide "added value" through registration, perhaps via special areas or customized features. This is just sugar to distract from the bitter pill they want readers to swallow. Ask yourself *why* they're eager for you to register and their motives become clear.

Second, publishers have to know something about their readers in order to sell space to advertisers—after all, there's no use trying to sell hair dryers to bald people, and there's probably not much point trying to sell typewriters on the Internet. So the publishers ask readers all kinds of questions, which they turn into demographic reports presented to advertisers. If the advertisers like what they see, a contract is signed, a check is cut, and a GIF image is on your screen. And you *signed up* for it.

What's wrong with this picture? We've heard of the exorbitant advertising rates purportedly charged by the likes of *HotWired* and Time-Warner's *Pathfinder*. However, a quick tour through some publishing sites using authentication (posing as Clark Kent, investigative reporter) revealed two interesting things. The first was that I had more fun filling out surveys as if I were Clark Kent than I did "surfing" the sites. The second was that many of the sites just didn't seem to have much advertising. Maybe these folks didn't want to clutter my screen, out of the goodness of their hearts?

Fat chance—if they could, most publishers would be happy to have you watch a twenty-minute infomercial every time you connected. No—I think this is a sign the authentication tactic is beginning to backfire. Sure, these publishers might get a long list of names as people file through the front door, but as they examine these lists they're probably discovering relatively few people ever come back again. I can't imagine this goes over well with advertisers, who wouldn't see that as a compelling reason to spend their advertising dollars online.

And why wouldn't people return to these top-of-the-line, big-money online publishing ventures? Part of the reason is probably the massive growth of the Web itself—there's always something new to see, somewhere new to go. But part of it—perhaps the most important part of it—is that they have no reason to come back! For all their experience in the "industry," about all these advertisers and publishers are demonstrating is a fundamental failure to understand the online world—it's a classic case of the blind leading the naked. Information, content, and relevancy are what count, and so far very few of these publishers seem to provide that.

So, I no longer feel concerned about the impact of big-time publishing on the Internet. I should have realized what I was dealing with. In the meantime, if you feel the need to visit publishing sites that require authentication, I'd urge you to treat the surveys as exercises in creativity. I certainly found that made the sites more interesting.

Ghostdancer

RIDLEY MCINTYRE

In a world where a killer clown is the biggest TV star, those who walk the Earth might be less alive than beings who exist only in the depths of cyberspace.

1.

"Everything you imagine exists.
Even if it only exists in your imagination."
—Big Pierrot

NIGHTINGALE MEDICAL CENTER. RED SECTOR 16. New Atlantic City. The Year Of The Rat.

"I got a new job, Reb." Cody Ingram slides her hands into the pockets of her baggy black leather jacket and listens to the crickets in the field. An edgy silence descending between her and her younger sister as they sat on the hot metal bench.

Reb looks down at the grass. Up at the technicolor blue sky. Over the field at the other kids playing tag on a huge steel climbing frame. Everywhere but at Cody. Her voice, when she does speak, is deeper than most would expect of a girl of fifteen. Her words slurred and difficult to make out.

Reb sometimes feels embarrassed to talk—but this is Cody, and she knows that no matter how bad her voice gets, her sister understands.

"You didn't come… to visit me this month... I… thought you had left me… I thought they… would switch me off."

Cody sighs. "I told you I had to go to San Angeles. The Callies needed me to do some corp-work. Infiltration, that kind of thing. I sent money back." She moves up to the bench and sits next to her sister. Tries to put her arm around her, to comfort her, but Reb just slides further away. "Sometimes I have to go where the work is. I told you before, when I went to Europe. I would never let them shut you down. I made a promise, remember?"

Reb nods to herself. "I just… thought…"

"Yeah," Cody says. "Well you know what Dad would say, don't you? Thought stuck his ass out the window and went outside to push it back in again. Don't think, girl. *Know.*"

Reb looks down ashamedly. "Yeah…" The word a soft whisper on the wind.

"So, anyway," Cody continues, "I got a new job. Footwork. Harlequins want me to find somebody for them. A girl. Looks like she might have run away from some corporate dustzone or something. But she's supposed to be here, on the Island. Pays well, and all I have to do is snoop around some."

"What's her… name?"

"Ghostdancer."

AS THE SUN SETS OVER THE ISLAND, THE AIR COOLS and the humid day becomes a hot, wet night. At twilight, the first few spatters of rain start to sizzle on the soft tarmac of Red Sector's streets.

Cody takes a quick look at the slate gray sky above Terminal. A police Locust aerodyne, bulbous head and black, evil body with vectoring jet thrusters for legs, skims across the skyline on a routine patrol. The police don't send ground traffic into Terminal anymore. Not after the Tag Team wars a few months back. The wars may have killed off the last remnants of the gangs, but there are still no-go zones on the Island. Safe havens for what the kids call *keiki*—"business." She pulls her hands out of her jacket pockets and steps into the Apres Mort. Inside, the *keiki* is thick enough to choke on.

Reb's voice, when she does speak, is deeper than most would expect of a girl of fifteen. Her words slurred and difficult to make out. But Reb knows that no matter how bad her voice gets, her sister understands.

A blade of twilight slices through the mist to the bar at the far end. There's a background hum, a mixture of talk from the few kids here and ambient sounds from the darkwave selection on the CD jukebox. Cody glances around the main room of the bar, looking for one pony in particular, nodding to the kids she knows as she walks past them. They talk nonstop, fast and soft, in a melange of American English and Japanese. *Romaji*, they call it. Red Sector Patois. Cody has learned enough in four years here to get by, but, as in everything, there are intricacies that she will never fathom. Language is a mindset.

She finds her pony in the games room. Jacked into a hyperball game through thin silver interface cables dangling from NST sockets in the back of his shaven head. Green chrome cusps implanted over his eye sockets reflecting the flashing score lights on the hyperball machine's display. Holding the pistol grip that aims the balls on the pinball-like game, it's his neural inputs that fire the balls at the flashing targets. Picking them out to a split second the same way cybernetic smartguns target their victims.

Cody tries not to stare at the machine. The speed at which the targets pulse is liable to give her a fit. She waits until the pony has clocked the score display one final time and there are no more flashing targets. The game won, she taps him on the shoulder.

"Shouldn't you be out wasting people instead of wasting all your *doru* on the machines, Echo?" she says with a smile.

The pony looks around. She can see her face mirrored green in his metal eyes. He grins and pulls the cables out of his head. The machine slowly reels them back into a slot on the side.

"Jesus, Cody! I didn't know you were back." He grabs her around the waist and she returns his hug. He stops when he realizes he's pressing her shoulder-rigged pistol into her ribcage.

"Got back yesterday. Just thought I'd go see Reb first. Pay the bills, that kinda thing."

"Aces," Echo says. He flicks the dust covers back down on his NST sockets and slides a pair of black shades over the eyes. Black shades, long black hair shaved at the sides, black leather longcoat, black leather jeans tucked into tall black boots. Like most of the population of the Apres Mort, Echo looks like Death incarnate.

"So, how's life in Callie?"

"Dull," she says. "But the pay's good. Kinda hard trying to slow yourself down to their speed, you know?" She shrugs. "So, what's new on the Island?"

Echo laughs. "Things are still pretty fucked up. No one knows who's who now the teams are gone. Kinda weird, selling stuff from under the counter when there's no stock in the store." His green eyes stare blankly out into the void of the Apres Mort. They seem to try and pick people out from the haze of the bar's main room. It's as if, despite all the electronics fitted under those metal cusps, he's blind as a bat. Or maybe he's just lost in thought. Lost…

He shakes his head to shift the numbing daze. "Anyway.… You never come here for a social, so what do you need?"

Cody reaches into the inside pocket of her leather to pull out a small chip. A black silicon cylinder the size of her thumbnail. She hands it over to an inquisitive Echo.

"I need to know where I can find more of these."

Echo turns over the chip. Recognizes it as a neurosoft. Then raises his head and his brow wrinkles in thought. His stare seems to go straight through her.

LYCIA WANTS TO DIE.

Not with a bang. By any means necessary. Sits in a corner of her apartment, surrounded by a teenager's collection of knives and Japanese swords. Watching each one glint with gut-wrenching invitation under her single neon striplight.

She shivers as her gooseflesh skin ripples with anticipation. Pale white skin that wants to be broken. Bright crimson life that wants to be free. The hunger inside her all-consuming. Every thought drawn toward her death.

And the Shape. There. And there. Fluttering in her mind like a crazed moth. Wherever she looks. Whenever she tries to think. Concentrate.

"This don't last," she says to the knives. "Ihor said it and I trust him. It can't last!" And with one final effort of will and motion, she kicks a leg out at the shimmering hungry blades, spraying them across the floorboards.

Only one small bullet-knife remains. Calling her. Teasing her. Daring and pleading under the neon.

CODY SLIDES THE DOOR SHUT AND STEPS INTO HER tiny apartment. Two rooms and a shared bathroom on the fifteenth story of a Loisada tower block. Red Sector 5. The soles of her boots thumping over the black and white plastic tiles lining the floor. She slumps down into the single low-cut red foam armchair. Drowns out the ambient mixture of downstairs domestic argument and next-door hick music by clicking on the TV.

Local news about the latest violence uptown. Yet another borg gone psycho and SWAT called in with their new Japanese hardsuits. Half a building destroyed in the process.

Cody laughs at the debris. Unsure whether she's laughing at the overkill or the joy of being alive. Shaking her head as the story moves aside for commercials, she rummages through the pockets of her jacket for some zootie. There's one small blue derm left. She peels off the backing and presses it into her shoulder, breaking the seal.

Echo didn't seem to know much. He'd heard of a shipment of new chips coming in through the Terminal, maybe for computers or neuralware, but by the time he'd decided to try and skim some of it, it had already gone through. He gave her a few names for ponies that may have been selling, but nothing definite.

Cody tried the Port Authorities, claiming to be part of a Civic audit team, to try and look through the manifests, but they had found her out as she was flicking through the Terminal net.

As much as she hates the whole fucking idea, she knows there's only one avenue left open to her. She has to call Damon.

But not now…

Switching the channel, there's a Big Pierrot rerun she must have missed. Quietly, she settles down to watch it as the lights from a police aerodyne wash over the room from the round porthole window behind her. Her heart slowing down to a regular thump. Her skin tingling with soft waves of heat. Unconsciously chewing her bottom

lip as the dark avenger in the clown suit saves yet another innocent victim from the insane clutches of a bioroid madman.

THE SMELL DESTROYS THE NOSTRILS. BUT SHE NO longer senses that way. Made from part chrome and part flesh, only her face expresses emotions in the way of the meat. And then, not often.

The sound of machines in the background spins a low hum. Soft wind through air-cooled engineering. Sorting. Processing. Creating nirvana on cylindrical silicon.

She pulls herself from the machine. Tugging out the jacks from her metal head. Facing the real world through a cybernetic monoptic system that encases her now-useless eye sockets. Seeing the basement here like TV. Hearing the hum through two multidirectional sensor booms that move like the ears of a rabbit at the back of her armored cranium. Her new olfactory nerves filtering out the shit stench that plasters the walls of the building. The legacy of her insane minions.

When born, the body she occupies was human. One hundred percent meat. But the operations slowly took over. First the NST sockets allowing her to control cybernetic machines. Then, after a run-in with a gang, new metal arms and legs had to be fitted. Wary of the attention, she sought out a back-street clinic here in New Atlantic City to complete the job. With chromed body, head, and re-wired central nervous system. It was costly, but now the body is better. Better than all the meat. Better than anything. Better.

But the memories come crashing down on her like the night's rain. Remembering the real self. That her body once belonged to someone else. Her possession could never last long.

The machine behind her begins to cycle. The massive chip burner loading in a new batch and starting afresh. A mini-production line for a stolen neurosoft. Each one a little piece of personal heaven. Inside her own cybernetic mask she smiles. She's going to make everyone better.

2.

"I'm a limited person in an unlimited world."
—Big Pierrot

SNAKESTRIKE. A SEA OF NAMELESS FACES. A CLUB packed with Japanese sons of pioneers and white- and black-skinned wannabes. Enka music flowing from speakers in every dark corner—all low thumps and high-pitched melodies. The holographic snake scales crawling up and down the bare walls shining with condensed sweat.

Split into two levels. Upstairs, the mezzanine set around a square balcony looking down on the lower dance floor. One long bar on level one, and a cocktail bar and noodle bar opposing each other on level two. Party people downstairs, workers and joygirls at the noodle bar, ponies and buyers in the dark blue cocktail lounge. Cody's eyes take it all in like a brand-new dream, the way they always do.

She steps into the cocktail lounge and slides a stool out from the bar, watching the faces and trying to guess what the ponies are dealing.

"What you having?" The bargirl has bright blonde hair pulled back into a severe pony tail. Wiping her hands on the hem of her t-shirt.

"You know what a Model T is?" Cody asks.

The bargirl looks up in thought, then says, "Vodka absolut, lemon vodka and black currant juice, right?"

Cody smiles and nods. "Get me two," she says.

The bargirl disappears to the optics rack. Cody feels something tapping on her shoulder.

When born, her body was human. One hundred percent meat. But the operations slowly took over. It was costly, but now the body is better. Better than all the meat. Better than anything. Better.

"You still drinking that shit, Ace?" A man's voice. She turns around. It's Damon. A ginger-haired tower of a man with chisel-cut bones and broad shoulders. His blue eyes are hazy. Phased and distant. Coming down off whatever he was just high on.

"Sneak up on me one more time, Damon, and I'll tear your fucking head off."

Damon tuts and pulls out a stool next to her. "Nothing like a friendly greeting from your ex-partner to brighten up your day." He opens a packet of Cherry Marlboros and offers her one.

"No thanks," she says.

"Suit yourself. Then again, you always do." He takes the stick and torches it with a high-power gas lighter.

The bargirl returns with the two Model T's. Cody slides a couple of notes across the counter. "What the fuck are you doing here, Damon?"

Damon blows cherry smoke up in the air. Watches it swirl and dance in the glow from the lights at the top of the bar. "What kind of question is that? You called me and told me to meet you here. *One ay-em. Snakestrike. It's important.* That's what you said."

She nods, her brown eyes never leaving his blues. "Yeah," she says. "But what the fuck are you doing here?

You could have stood me up, sent someone round to do me, pretended you were unavailable… Anything. But you're fucking *here.* Why?"

She watches his soft-skinned forehead wrinkle as he makes to answer. "Because I wanted to see you. I heard you'd gotten back from San Angeles, and I wanted to see how you were. And what you could possibly need me for."

Cody downs the first Model T in one gulp. "I'm fine. San Angeles is fine. And I need you to do a little work for me." She pulls a small cylindrical neurosoft out of her jeans pocket and places it on the bar.

"You a pony now, Ace?"

"It's called Seven. Ever heard of it?"

"Maybe."

Cody whips her hand up with inhuman speed. Grabs Damon by the scruff of his neck. Pulling at the short ginger hair. Tugging him down to the bar. Sweaty nose touching the black silicon.

"Someone took a shotgun to this arm in San Angeles, so they gave me a new one. It's pretty strong. Might even be able to crush your thick head."

"Okay! Okay! I've heard of it. Seven, yeah. Sends you straight to heaven. So what the fuck do you want?"

She's standing above him, forcing him in place. "You know what it does to people afterwards?"

Under her hard metal grip, she can feel him trying to shake his head no. She leans over him, bringing her face down close to whisper in his ear.

"The downside is so great that you want to kill yourself. And not just any old way. Oh, no. There's even a special subroutine dedicated to it. That makes a lot of suicidal loonboys out there with these things jacked into their skulls."

She lets him go. He jerks back and breathes hard. "So what, Cody? So fucking *what?"*

Cody snatches the neurosoft from the bar and sits back down on the pull-out stool. "So, Damon… I need you to do two things for me. I need you to stop fucking lying to me, and I need you to help me find the person who's producing these chips."

Damon takes a sharp deep breath. "Okay, Ace. How you wanna do it?"

LYCIA'S SHAKING. IT BEGAN WITH A COLD SENSAtion. Creeping up her spine, resonant waves through her nerves. Then it grew to hard shakes.

Now, her whole body's broken down into spasms. And she can't make it stop. Lying on the floor in a pool of her own vomit. Her head reeling. Her eyes unable to focus. Falling. Always falling. Her muscles stretched to their limit.

The phone. Gotta get to the phone. Call a trauma unit.

The phone is a meter away. A small cellular placed face down on the top of a coffee table. It looks like a speck on the horizon.

She moves. Retches again. Dry. Spits a flowing stream of saliva onto the carpet. She spits again, but this time the stuff's stuck to the back of her throat, like a frog's tongue. She reaches up a violent hand and pulls the saliva from her mouth. Crawling forward. Each second an hour. Each inch a mile. Every so often, one single hard shake throws her to the ground. Her nervous system twitching like a roadcrash survivor and she's possessed by her own body.

She knocks the table. The phone falls under her face. She lets herself drop on her side. Forcing fingers to do her bidding. She presses a programmed emergency button.

Her hand kicks the phone away. She rolls over onto her back. Lungs clawing at the atmosphere in the room. She only hopes she can stay alive long enough for the paramedics to arrive.

OUT ON THE GRASS INSIDE THE NIGHTINGALE Medical Center, the white sun shines down on three people lying on the lawn. Strange dark shadows fall under them like black blobs in an oil painting.

"So what would you suggest, Reb?" Cody asks. She's taken her jacket off and rolled up the sleeves on her t-shirt to bask in the strange white sun.

Reb looks down in thought. Her thin face tightening. Cody knows her younger sister enjoys responsibility, but doesn't like others to think that. So Cody lets her in on secrets. Asks her opinion every once in a while. Even though she's perfectly capable of running her own show, she allows her sister a partnership.

"I think… you should go with… your orig…inal plan…" Reb replies slowly. "I… could ask someone… to help… you get papers from… San… Angeles… New ident…ities. Would that… help?"

Cody considers it for a moment. Nods. "Yeah, that'd help. We'd need two I.D.'s and some mail hardcopies. It'd have to be black market stuff. She's tried dealing with a *zaibatsu* before, I don't think she'd want to do it again. Do you think you can set us up as a small holding company?"

Reb nods yes. Her eyes gleaming with confidence and the spirit of adventure.

"Aces," says Cody. "Then we're almost set." She lifts herself to her feet like a graceful cat and picks up her jacket. "Use the name from my Mitsui portfolio account. Make up another one for Damon. Call him Jack Dangers for now. We could change it later if we have to. Transfer some yen from mine, but please… keep track of the numbers. I don't have too much to play with right now."

Reb smiles. A broad grin showing a line of perfect teeth. It's the first time Cody's seen her smile like this in nearly a year.

"I'll get… right… on it," she says, giving Cody a cheeky salute. Cody salutes back and heads for the door.

Damon, neither a participator nor a judge in this conversation, follows her silently out.

"YOUR SISTER'S NOT REAL. SHE'S A HOLOGRAM."

Cody flashes Damon an angry look only to realize that he's simply stating the truth. She sighs and sits down on the seat of her Gage electric motorcycle.

"She's alive, Damon. But I'm not allowed to see her."

"Why not?"

"She's got NMS. Neuroectodermal melanolysosomal syndrome. Basically, she's severely retarded. Mentally and physically. She can move enough to breathe, but otherwise she has hardly any control of herself. Medical sent her down the well for treatment about ten years ago. They keep her in a vat, and they've hooked her brain up to the holoroom. Everything I do pays for her to stay alive."

"What about your father?"

"Everything he makes he plows back into his research. He's still working on that cancer cure I was telling you about."

Damon nods. "Yeah, I know. But… All that cash, Cody? Is the treatment working?"

"Yeah. When I first came down to see her, she was a complete vegetable. No mental coordination at all. The blades tell me they're fixing the head before they get to work on the body. That's the difficult part, they say. Now… Well, her thoughts are slow, which translates in there as some kinda speech impediment, but she'll get past that in time. Here, take this and climb on."

He catches her spare helmet and slides it over his large head. An air pump races into action, snugly fitting the lining around him before he has a chance to set his crushed ears right. Somewhere in the strange sea-shell soundwash within the helmet, Cody's disembodied radio voice whispers to him.

"Time to head downtown. Shitamachi. Echo says some of the ponies down in Beirut are selling the fucking thing."

"Sure," Damon says. "Whatever."

"Hold on," she mumbles. And the buzz of the electric engine fills his head a single instant before the tug of the machine threatens to pull out his insides.

3.

"Ladies and gentlemen, History has now left the building." —Big Pierrot

BEIRUT IS BUILT INTO THE BASEMENT OF A NINETY-story tower. A single white light cuts through the smoke-machine haze. Somewhere inside the mists, a crowd of dancers fight for floor space and the chance to be the last one alive when the lights go up.

Ihor is here. A pony Echo knows. And Cody stalks him through the searchlight fog like a tiger. Damon standing guard by the door.

Ihor, a fifteen-year-old streetpunk with spiky blue hair and teeth filed into razor-sharp incisors, punches out at the world inside his space. On the Beirut dance floor, the space is everything. And he looks up as Cody walks right into it.

She takes a single fast blow to the ribs, but her wired reflexes kick in. The world slows down. She grabs. Spins. Lifts. Brings up a knee into his back.

The kid screams and squirms from her grasp. Pauses long enough for a single long rasping breath. Springs for the door. Smashing through the dancers.

Cody leaps through his wake. The dancers jumping into each other harder. Faster. The fight breaking rhythm for a time until the music takes control once more.

She takes a single fast blow to the ribs, but her wired reflexes kick in. The world slows down. She grabs. Spins. Lifts. Brings up a knee into his back. The kid screams and squirms.

Ihor's running. Up the three steps off the dance floor in a step. Past the emergency-red lit bar. Over two tables, spilling drinks and seated customers across the ground. Kicking open the doors to the stairs. Up the stairs.

Into one of Damon's huge, hard legs.

Cody catches up with him coughing and fighting for breath next to the doorway out on the street. His blue hair now dark and wet with the night's rain. Damon watching over him with a snub-nose automatic.

"What do you want?" Ihor coughs. Blood spittle dribbling from his thin lips.

"I want you to offer your services," Cody says, kneeling down beside him.

The boy frowns. Confused.

"My name's Jack Dangers," Damon says from behind the pistol. "I run some interests down in San Angeles and I hear the organization you belong to has something new. We want to talk business."

Ihor gulps down some air. Slowly, watching Cody all the time to show there's no false move being made, he raises an arm to wipe the salted crimson from his face. "You wanna deal with Ghostdancer."

Cody smiles. "I think he's got the message, Jack."

The boy looks around him at the empty alley. Smells of piss and rotting cardboard kept down low by the heavy rain. He nods his head softly. "I can arrange that."

"Good." Cody reaches into the pocket of her black leather jacket and pulls out a thin bullet-knife. Touches a stud. The blade snicks out the end. With the speed of a rewired nervous system running into an electric arm, she snatches his free arm and cuts his skin. Over and over. The boy screaming under her, but she has his body in a lock he can't escape from.

Finally, the blade disappears. Lost once more in a jacket pocket. She stands up.

"There's my number," she says. "Call me day or night."

They walk back down the alley. Ignoring his pain-fueled cries. *"You fucking bitch! She'll fucking kill you for this! I'll fucking make sure of it!"* Until they turn the corner into Bowery.

The rain hisses on hot sidewalk. The city sounding like a broken TV. The air closer than the walls of an elevator. Crowds of late night shoppers and streetkids fluid with the tides, each individual following the others. Following some dream of a better life somewhere else. Maybe higher in the social strata of the underground left behind by the demise of the teams, maybe higher in the *zaibatsu*, maybe as high as Heaven. Everyone out there looking like a prime candidate for the last temptation of Seven.

If Cody was morally-minded, she'd care enough to really want to stop it all. But she's only interested in the money to keep her sister alive. Damon, she knows, is only interested in her. Mankind finds its purpose in trying to find its purpose. Everyone looking for a way out. Cody sees things differently. There's now, and there's tomorrow; think about tomorrow and you forget what you're doing now. No sense worrying about the future… it won't run off if you don't pay attention.

She laughs quietly to herself, but Damon notices. Paranoid.

"What is it, Ace?" he asks, torching one of his Cherry Marlboros.

Cody shakes her head. "Nothing," she says. "Just a lot of bullshit going through my head, that's all. Come on. Let's go someplace and get wrecked."

A PRIVATE WARD IN BELLEVUE. TRANSFERRED BY AN unknown angel. They drip-fed her with drugs and stuck more derms to her skin than she's seen in her life. Now her nerves are dead. She watches color TV projected onto a stretch of white wall by a small yellow Sony unit and forces her doped-up mind to follow the action.

"Lycia?" A male nurse stands in the open doorway. Her vision is too blurred to tell if he's cute or not. "Visitor for you."

He stands aside and lets the figure through. An indistinct shadow dressed in a deep red jumpsuit. A thick-set body like a steroid-enhanced muscleboy built onto a five-and-a-half foot frame. The figure moves with a strange alien grace into her field of focus. Chrome hands protruding from the crimson cloth. Metal where the hair should be. Rabbit-ear sensory booms pivoting on cranial mounts. The white walls of the room reflecting from an armored cover that encases both eyes. It finds a blue plastic chair and pulls it closer to the bed. Sitting gently down beside her. Its brown-skin mask smiles a white-toothed smile.

"How are you feeling, Lycia?" The voice is female. Strange tinny girl's tones. Like a TV news anchor's voice. Clean. Perfect.

"I feel better, thanks." She pauses. Presses a stud on the edge of the bed to raise her back so she can focus on the figure. "Who are you?"

"I do not actually have a name, but everybody calls me Ghostdancer. The neurosoft you took… I made it."

Anger charges into Lycia's head like a drug. Scrunching her face up into a ball. She turns away. Talks to the wall with the small frosted window.

"You tried to kill me."

"On the contrary," Ghostdancer says. "I tried to save you. You saw heaven and lived. There are few people in this world who could say that."

"It's just a fucking drug." She sniffs. Flashes of memory drawing tears to Lycia's eyes.

Behind her, a soft whirring as Ghostdancer shakes her inhuman head. "Drugs do not touch the soul, Lycia. And you know that this one has. Your soul has to be stronger than the others to survive. Where everyone has failed, you have triumphed. You have been chosen, Lycia."

Lycia turns. Everything a blur now behind her tears. "Chosen for what?"

Ghostdancer sits motionless. Emotionless. Her news presenter's voice flat and unwavering. "To help me."

DAMON LEANS AGAINST THE GRAY CONCRETE WALL of a tall Red Sector 6 apartment building. It's been two days since Cody dragged him into this and now he's glad for some time off.

Time off… He laughs to himself. So what the fuck is he doing here? Waiting outside a tower block for Ihor to appear. He decides to do what Cody would do in this situation and crosses the road into the building.

Typical of these slum blocks, the elevator is out of action. He climbs the fifty flights of stairs to Ihor's floor. Trying to read some of the illegible graffiti sprayed, scrawled and wiped along the walls. Stopping at the bottom of one flight to let a grubby joygirl past carrying a crying baby down to the street. Damon grew up in a block just like this. In a place they called Alphabet City.

Now, after the latest social changes from the New Atlantic City council, they call it Red Sector 5. Slowly but surely the neighborhoods are disappearing entirely. Up into the sky.

Damon picks the electronic lock with a small black box. The noise of his entry smothered by music and TV sounds through paper-thin walls. The door clicks then swings open.

Inside, the apartment is grimy and bare. Shards of hard plastic strewn across the floor from a broken kitchenette window. Naked girls cut out from magazines glued to the white plaster walls. Flies buzzing around hardened food in white plastic micro-meal trays.

Damon shuts the door behind him and hears a sharp crack. He spins and raises his arm just in time to knock Ihor's unsteady hand out of aim. The heavy Feral pistol firing through the ceiling. Damon grabs it and wraps the gun hand around the pony's back. Bringing a swift knee up into Ihor's coccyx. The pony drops to his knees. The gun falling from his limp fingers.

"You fucking shit!" Ihor groans.

"Save it," says Damon. He kicks the gun out of reach. Lifts the pony up onto his feet by the hair and pushes him, screaming, into the living room.

"You ain't a fuckin' Callie, man! You're from the Six. I had you checked out."

Pushing him to the small round window. "Good work, smartboy. Did your Mom die and leave you a brain cell?"

"Fuck you, man! When Ghostdancer finds out…"

"But Ghostdancer's never gonna find out, is she? 'Cause I'm gonna throw you out this window first."

Damon knocks the whole window out with the palm of his huge hand. He lets go of Ihor's hair and grabs him by the belt. Lifting the pony's head and shoulders through the window. Quick hot winds tugging at the boy's long hair.

"What! Wait a minute! Just wait a fuckin' minute, man! I know things, you know. I fuckin' *know* things."

The muscleboy stops. Holding him out there. "Do you know where Ghostdancer's factory is?"

"What?"

Damon pushes harder. Ihor's entire torso now hanging out of the window. Twenty-five stories high. "The chips. Where does she make them?"

"I swear I dunno! Somewhere down in Terminal. I don't know any more, man, I swear!" Ihor's screams are starting to break into sobs.

"Good, Ihor. That's very good. Like Big Pierrot says, information wants to be free… good information prefers to be sold." Damon puffs a hard sigh. "Unfortunately, what you know ain't good enough."

He lets go. Watches the pony's legs drop through the window frame. Picks up the Feral on the way out.

A YOUNG BOY HAD STOOD AT CODY'S APARTMENT door. A courier. His package was a brown paper envelope containing all the documents Cody had asked for. Much sooner than she had expected, but Cody was thankful for that—Ghostdancer could call at any time and she needed those things for the meeting.

Now, as she taps in the code that opens the door to her sister's holoroom, she has those papers in her jacket pocket. The door slides back. She steps through into a dark cube. The door slides shut behind her. And the world changes.

She walks up the path to Reb's bench. The hill continuing up to her left, the other children screaming and running in the playground downhill to her right. When she gets there, Reb is not alone.

"I'd shake your hand, but being a hologram, it would look bloody silly." His accent is English. "I'm Boy." "Camden Town Boy? I thought you were dead."

A young man sits on the bench's arm. Dressed in a black pilot's jacket and baggy bright red jeans. Spiky black hair topping a thin, angular face. He looks up as Cody arrives and she notices his hands steeple to his face, as if in nervous prayer.

"Hi Cody," Reb says. "I brought a friend this time. Thought you'd like to meet him."

Cody's eyes open wide. Suspicious. Reb's voice doesn't slur at all.

"I'd shake your hand, but, being a hologram, it would look bloody silly, so I won't." His accent is English. A soft Thames Midland voice. "I'm Boy."

The name registers in Cody's memory. "Camden Town Boy? I thought you were dead."

Boy smiles. "I am. It's becoming a bit of a habit."

Cody nods, understanding. "So that just leaves the question why you're here, right?"

"You're as smart as your profile says you are. Good." He stands, giving Reb a slight wink. Cody's hologram sister grins and sits back in the corner of the bench, watching him.

"You never questioned why the Harlequins want you to find Ghostdancer, did you?" he says.

She shrugs. "I get paid not to ask. The more I know, the more chance there is someone will try to cut that knowledge outta me."

"Well, there's a story behind everything, Cody. Sometimes it's better to understand it."

He sighs softly before beginning, as if he's been through this a thousand times already. "Ghostdancer was an Artificial Intelligence who stole a program from another AI before it went through beta. Ghostdancer tried to use one of its company's suits to market the stuff, but the suit got greedy and said he would inform Fednet of the deal if he didn't get a cut of the proceeds. So Ghostdancer escaped. Downloaded itself as a construct into a girl's brain and ran away."

"Now she's making the chips herself," Cody sighs.

"You catch on fast."

"Still doesn't answer my question."

"Ghostdancer's little *zaibatsu* were the first to kill me. They brought me back to Thames Midland to find her when she went missing. They thought the AI had gone rogue. When she disappeared from the Grid, she left a witch-hole behind. Like a black hole in cyberspace. I got sucked in. My second death. But I wasn't the only one. The girl, Kayjay, was uploaded into the witch-hole, too. She's just a program now. A virtual room in a Grid node. She has less control over her life than Reb here. Kayjay was my best friend for nine years. Friends aren't easy to find these days."

"Okay, so what do you want me to do when I find her?" Cody asks.

"There was a time when Kayjay thought she could reverse the process. Get her body back and carry on where she left off. Unfortunately, it'd never work. The neural system just couldn't handle it. I don't know just how Ghostdancer did it, but then, her intelligence is way beyond ours. Even mine. Now she just wants to die. She won't let me erase her until Ghostdancer is dead. Laid to rest, so to speak."

Cody watches him telling the tale. His gray-blue eyes begin as shining neon stars but fade slowly as he speaks. His whole image seems to radiate sadness, as if parts of him are dying and he can do nothing to stop them.

"You want me to kill her," she says.

"No," he says softly. "I want you to *destroy* her. And the program with her."

The three fall into silence. Only the noise of the laughing children in the playground fills the empty space between them.

Boy looks at his wrist as if checking his watch. "Anyway," he says. "I have to go. There's other stuff I have to be doing."

Cody watches him lean over the bench and kiss Reb's young head. Then he starts to walk away. Around the hill. He stops. Turns. Calls out.

"Look after her, will you Cody? She's very special. She'll make a fine decker some day."

Cody glances to her sister, who's blushing, and then back to him. But he's gone.

4.

"You're dying so slowly that you think you're alive."
—Big Pierrot

LIKE A HUGE, SPRAWLING MAUSOLEUM IN HARSH white plasto-ceramics. Grand Central Microtel. Built two hundred meters under the eponymous monorail station at the center of the Island. This place is like a city in itself. Long thin corridors lined with coffin doors leading out from three levels of massive central concourse. A cathedral to cheap life. You can buy a room big enough for one person and a bag of belongings for a dollar a day. From 10 p.m. to 9 a.m., those bought rooms are locked tight. Some call it a prison for the homeless, keeping them off the streets at night. Others call it safe.

Cody once called it home. Back when she first came groundside to visit Reb. She earned her keep as a joygirl operating out of a different coffin every day. Her tricks paid for her food and accommodation. The knowledge she skimmed them for paid for her sister's welfare. Until she hooked up with the Asahi Tag Team, who saw her potential and paid for her to lie on a slab in some back street clinic in El Barrio while a trainee surgeon practiced his nerve-splicing and other new Japanese techniques on her. She was close to joining the team when Disney pulled out of sponsorship and the Tag Teams went to war on each other. Hundreds of cybernetic heroes splashing each other across the sidewalks of old Manhattan. And when the Tag Teams were gone, suddenly *everyone* was an independent. And independents need partners.

Cody and Damon step out from the elevator and into the chaos of the concourse. The civic authorities had set up stalls along the middle for traders. To encourage a "spirit of community." It is the largest, most open black market on the Island. It seems like everyone who can't make it on the street has sunk down here. Upstairs, it is known as the Strip. Ghostdancer has chosen it for her meeting.

"Alice?" The young girl wears a black dustcoat that kicks at her booted heels. The pommel of a cheap katana strapped to her belt flashes from under it when she walks. She motions them to follow her and continues in the direction of one of the corridors.

They tag behind her to a dead end. Wary of sudden ambushes. Nothing comes. So far, the trick is working.

One of the hexagonal coffin doors opens and out she comes. All that's left of her original self is a stretch of brown skin from cheek to chin.

"Alice Jourgenson," she says with a trace of electronics in her voice. "And you must be Jack. Everyone calls me Ghostdancer."

Cody slows her voice down to a Callie drawl. "Happy to meet you at last," she says.

"I hear from Gentle Ihor that you want to make some kind of deal with me. What is your interest?"

"Me and my partner here are with an organization called the Modern Angels. We number over two hundred members, each one of us regular users of neurosofts. There are also many others who trust us enough to know we only sell good shit. Now, we've heard through one of our contacts that you have the best there is. A high that feels like heaven."

"A high that *is* heaven," says the girl in the longcoat.

Cody blinks. "Exactly. We feel we may have a broader market for your trip than you could possibly dream of here."

"You would be surprised. But I am interested. I will give you a taste of my product. If you still wish to deal, meet me here on Friday night. Midnight."

"To tell the truth," Cody drawls, "I was kinda expecting more of a sales pitch."

"Its reputation speaks for itself, Miss Jourgenson. Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die. Finally you have a choice. If you like it, you will buy it. And I guarantee you *will* like it. Give them the chip, Lycia."

The young girl produces the small chip from her pocket. Hands it over to Damon. She and Ghostdancer turn to leave. Back up the passageway.

Damon looks over at Cody, leaning against the wall of hexagonal doors. He passes her the chip.

She makes a face at him. "Keep it. Souvenir," she says humorlessly. She gives it back and he pockets the thing.

"So what now?" Damon asks.

Cody shrugs. "I really don't know. It's obvious she won't be here. She'll either think we're genuine or cops. Either way, we'll still take the thing and that would only leave one of us, right? And she knows one person would never come here to make the deal." She sighs. Shakes her head. "I really don't have a fucking clue."

Damon steps over and carefully places a hand on her shoulder. Expecting one of her evil stares. She just looks at the white concrete floor. "Listen," he says. "I've got some stuff I've gotta tie up somewhere, okay?"

"What?"

"Nothing special. Just a little *keiki,* you know. I do have *other* things beside your project, Ace."

She nods okay.

"If you hear anything, or come up with anything, give me a call, okay?"

She glances up into his hazy blue eyes. "Sure," she says. "You too."

"Yes ma'am." He flicks a salute and walks back down the corridor.

Cody smiles. A thin red line across her face. Then she finds herself laughing. Losing control. Pounding fists onto the coffin doors and saying "No, Cody, no! Don't do it, girl! Don't put yourself through it all…."

The laughter dies in her throat. Her eyes looking at some non-existent place behind one of the neon striplights on the ceiling. Softly, she slides to the floor. Her back still against the wall. Holding her bruising hands. "Don't fall for him again."

"WELL, IT WAS MADE BY A COMPANY CALLED ZILOG. One-time use only. Like the old PROM chips, only much more sophisticated." Havoc twists the neurosoft between two thin fingers. "Wait a sec."

Damon watches him as he moves over to some metal dexion shelves.

Havoc is a low-key decker. He's young, still in his mid-teens, and used to run for the Tangerine Tag Team. He specializes in paydata. Information. Breaking banks is too dangerous. Havoc likes to play safe.

"Its reputation speaks for itself. Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die. Finally you have a choice. If you like it, you will buy it. I guarantee you *will* like it."

His apartment is dressed in data images. Hardcopies of the recon pictures of various system shells. A collage of monochrome crystal images. The rest of the room is sparse, a workroom rather than a living space. A chair, a table for his hardware, a thin red futon and two racks of shelves lined with laser disks. He flicks through the unmarked LD cases until he finds a blue plastic one and pulls it out from the collection.

He loads the LD into his small gray laptop and flicks through a maze of directory trees displayed on the tiny screen. Stops at one and hits the table top.

"Bingo! This is the list of Zilog's distribution companies. Now if I check that against the companies that have pushed stuff through Terminal in the last couple of weeks, we may find some of it heading where your man said it was."

He starts clicking through the files, setting up a program to cross-reference all the data.

"How long will it take?" Damon asks.

Havoc purses his thick lips. "Oh, about five minutes."

Damon lies back on the futon and waits. Smiling.

CODY POWERS UP HER ELECTRIC BIKE AND SKIDS INTO the street. Weaving through the traffic as she travels

cross-town. Ignoring the red lights. Ignoring everything except his video face.

"Found out where Ghostdancer's factory is," he repeats. Over and over. "I'm going there now."

She had gotten back from a night at the Apres Mort. Learning that Echo had been found dead. His face crushed by some psychotic bioroid in a Shitamachi back street. So she drank herself into a stupor and had to be helped home. Driven back in a cheap pedicab.

When she woke up, Damon had left a message on the viewphone machine. *"Found out where Ghostdancer's factory is. I'm going there now."* And the address. A reel of words and numbers in her fucked-up head. Spinning like a Möbius loop. Back and forth. Over and over….

That was four in the morning.

Now it's 6:15.

As she rides into Terminal, she realizes she never needed to know the address. Two private fire company aerodynes and a group of paramedics are landmarking it for her. A trail of thick smoke billowing into the fresh gray morning sky.

In the street, she drops the bike from under her and runs on without it. Letting it crash into the sidewalk. As she slows to a jog, she can see the chaos. Firefighters running in and out of a crumbling concrete electronics store. People upstairs screaming out of melting plastic windows. The paramedics lining the sidewalks attempting to resuscitate a dozen or so victims. Their bodies burnt and blistered red and black. She can't see Damon.

One of the firefighters rushes back to a parked aerodyne. Cody runs over to him and grabs him by the shoulders.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Some kind of explosion down in the cellar. Whole thing's gone up. You live here?"

"Give me your breathing mask."

"What?"

She pulls her Feral 26 pistol out from its shoulder rig and slams it at the firefighter's ribcage. Aiming the 14mm barrel straight at his heart. "Give me your fucking breathing mask," she says, punching each word out through gritted teeth.

The firefighter tears off the full-face mask and unstraps the oxygen tanks from his back. "You'll fucking die in there, you crazy bitch!" he says softly. Never taking his scared eyes off her.

She pulls a strap over one shoulder and lowers the gun. Firing twice. One round into each kneecap. He falls to the pavement and drops unconscious. She straps the rest on tight. Runs into the building.

Inside it is a hell that Dante could never have imagined. Molten plastic bubbles in gray pools on the floor. The concrete walls blistering and charring black. Metal staircases red hot and aflame. Parts of the hard concrete floor have fallen away. Ragged holes in the ground lined with snapped rusting steel reinforcements and sparking electric cables.

Cody slows her breathing and tries to avoid the debris. Thick black smoke making things more difficult. She tests each piece of floor with a booted foot before making a step. All sound seems to have dropped away. Just the rushing of blood in her ears. All feeling lost. Just her own hot sweat pouring down her neck. And suddenly she feels cold and wet. A force against her back.

She turns to see one of the firefighters dousing her down with foam from an extinguisher. Cooling her skin. Washing away the sweat. Soaking her clothes. She takes another step without checking and she's falling…

Somehow in the glow of the flames, she can recognize what might be a human arm. Thick with muscle grafting. Blackened from the fire. She lifts herself from the charred ground and looks up. A single ray of light cuts through the hole through which she fell. She glances back and the arm is there, sticking out from under the rubble like so much grilled meat.

She tugs at the detritus. Her breathing quickening. Her hands starting to blister and bleed in the heat of the flames around her. Pulling the burned pieces off and throwing them back into the fire. As if trying to kill it by feeding it its own shit.

Until she finds his face. The skin peeled away. Wisps of burned hair glued to his crushed skull by blackened blood. His own blood. Using all the anger filling her body, she grabs him and pulls him out of the rubble. Lifts his limp body over her shoulders. Carries him to the burning metal staircase.

She runs up the stairs after they threaten to give way to their combined weight twice. The fire licking at her face. Catching on her short black hair. At the top, she kicks a firefighter out of the way and dashes across the pitfall floor to the street outside. She drops him on the sidewalk and finds the last of the paramedics, ready to slam the doors shut on his aerodyne. She drags him over to Damon's smoldering corpse.

"Take a look at this one," she says.

The paramedic scratches his cheek and glances at the body for less than a second. "No way," he says.

She pulls out the gun again. "How much are they paying you, Ace? Enough to want to die on this street?"

He looks at her with weary eyes. "Shooting me ain't gonna make any difference, girl. He was dead before the fire got him. His head's been crushed. Probably under the rubble."

He walks away. She looks back at Damon and knows. Ghostdancer was there. Ghostdancer did this. Cody's going to make her wish she'd never been created.

5.

"If violence is golden, then I have the Midas touch."
—Big Pierrot

THE STRIP IS DESERTED. A COLD AIR-CONDITIONED breeze running through the concourse of the Grand Central Microtel. Slices of paper and gas-planet plastic tumbling along the clean concrete floor. Occasionally sticking to the ceramo-plastic walls. Fluttering off like moths caught in the soft anarchic eddies. Twisting. Spiraling. Landing finally in the center, where their journeys began. Wrapped around the steel frames of the market stalls.

She moves. Silent as an insect in this utopian nest. Her heart kicking the blood through her veins. Her eyes wire-sharp and tight, flicking from one darkened corner to the next. Her fingers wrapped around the handle of her Feral pistol. Her body fluid and graceful. Jumping effortlessly up a stairwell. Sliding into a space between the bee-hive of hexagonal coffin doors. Back to the walls. Watching her position. Trying to out-think whoever is in here. If anybody is…

Down the maze of corridors leading from the concourse in irregular triangular blocks. Until the dead end. Where the meeting was. She touches the back wall and turns away from it. Sliding down to sit on the cold floor.

She kisses the barrel of her gun and waits. The silence filling the empty corridors. Salt water filling her eyes. Trailing down her cheeks. Splashing onto the concrete. The tears a sign of weakness. Emotion. But she's allowing that emotion to surface. Her stomach feeding from its flesh. Thriving on the energy it provides. Giving the emotion a form. A word…

Hate.

The sound of a deliberate single step drags her mind back into focus. She looks up at the two figures standing over her. One, a tall girl with long black hair and black leather dustcoat. Eyes vague and wide. Face knitted into a strange, confused frown. The girl from the first meeting.

The other is Ghostdancer.

"Cody Ingram," she says in her strange, metallic voice. "Born April 17, twenty-three years ago on the Crystal Palace space station. Grew up with extended family on the workstation Pale Saint in geosynchronous orbit. Dropped down the well at eighteen and has since worked as a prostitute, a trainee Tag Teamster and now a hired gun. Interesting profile, Cody. Much more interesting than that of Alice Jourgenson. She only seemed to have a Mitsui bank account, and not an awful lot of history."

Cody wipes tears and mucous across the sleeve of her leather jacket and smiles. "Fooled you for a day or so, though, didn't it?"

When Ghostdancer smiles, her lips do not part. As if the smile is perfectly calculated. Perfectly cold. "Maybe you did," she says. "But your colleague gave the game away when he killed Gentle Ihor. The deal had been made. You would have the chips by now, even if you were not who you said you were."

She still doesn't know why I'm here, Cody realizes. "We're only human."

Ghostdancer sighs. "Some more human than others," she whispers.

Cody levels the gun toward Ghostdancer's face. Aiming at the single strip of flesh. The unarmored weak point leading to the brain. The gray behind the chrome. She squeezes the trigger.

Ghostdancer becomes an expressionist blur under the white lights. Forcing Cody to blink. Flinching in the instant as the gun is kicked from her grip. Choking as a cold chrome hand closes in around her throat, tugging upward. Stretching. Hanging. She grabs Ghostdancer's thin metal arm with both hands. Tries to crush it with her own electric limb. But her own technology is inferior to the advanced alloys protecting Ghostdancer's frail body, and Cody's enhanced strength has no effect.

Cody levels the gun toward Ghostdancer's face. Aiming at the single strip of flesh. The unarmored weak point leading to the brain. The gray behind the chrome. She squeezes the trigger.

She hangs there, toes barely touching the floor, at the very edge of the cyborg's reach. Fighting to hold herself up so that she can breathe.

The gun clatters into the corridor.

"I expected more from you, Cody. I thought you would be smarter. At least stronger. Otherwise, why try to fight me?"

"Because I'm twice as insane as you are," Cody whispers.

Ghostdancer's cold smile spreads once more across her brown skin. "Is that what you think this is, Cody? Insanity?" She barks a harsh, metallic laugh. "You wouldn't know insanity if he went out and bought you a birthday present. No… You have balls of steel, girl, I admit that. But otherwise, you are no different to any other punk on the street. No different than Ihor, or Echo, or Damon."

Cody's eyes widen. She can feel an understanding dropping down on her like spots of night rain. Each one separately soaking through. Pieces of the puzzle spreading to fill the dry gaps. "You killed Echo."

"Of course I did. I found out he was helping you. Anyone who will not work for me is working against me."

"Then you'd better take a good look around you, Ace, 'cause you're all alone. Is that why you stole Seven? To create a little army of helpers who think you're the new messiah?"

Ghostdancer's smile drops. Her lips now pouting in thought. She nods once. "Something like that."

"What then? Start a *zaibatsu* of your own? Take over the world?"

"Try *freedom,* Cody. I can not survive without the help of others. That I can accept. What I could not accept was the solitary confinement of being stuck in a single node of the Grid for all eternity. So I grabbed a meal ticket, broke my way out, and here I am. Not you, nor anybody else in the world could make me go back."

Cody snorts a laugh. "That's lucky. They don't want you back. Nobody paid me to turn you in. I was paid to find you. That's all. Though, I must admit, there are more than a few people who just wanna see you flatlined."

"Including you?" Ghostdancer asks. Her electronic voice inquisitive.

As much as she can with a hand on her neck, Cody nods.

"You put me in a bad position, Cody. I was just starting to like you and now I have to kill you, too."

"Well, at least I'll die with clean panties on."

The hand clicks away from Cody's neck and she drops to her knees. Clutching at her throat. Trying to loosen the skin so she can breathe. But the metal hand returns. Pressing like a clamp onto her skull and squeezing. Squeezing.

"Nooooo!!" The scream comes from behind. In the corridor.

Ghostdancer spins around. Lycia, no more than a thin black silhouette against the white lights, white concrete, white ceramo-plastics of the corridor, gripping Cody's 14mm Feral in both hands. She gives Ghostdancer just enough time to comprehend.

Then Lycia shoots Ghostdancer in the face. Three times. The cyborg drops to the floor, the face within the sights is Cody's. Lycia can see her eyes slowly widening.

"Saving my ass only to blow me away with my own gun's what I'd call a negative karma act, girl." Cody slowly stands. A half-foot taller than Lycia. But the girl is in shock and can't move. Cody slides her back along the wall, into the corner of the corridor's dead end. The girl remains frozen.

Slowly, now out of the angle of fire, Cody walks up to the girl. "I'm gonna take the gun from you now, okay?"

Lycia cannot move, save for a soft tremor just under her skin. Cody prizes her fingers from the gun's grip. Slides it quietly back into her shoulder holster.

"Can you walk?" Cody puts her arm around the girl's shoulder and turns her around. Lycia doesn't resist. Just lets herself be carried away from the spreading pool of blood.

"I killed her," Lycia whispers. Tears start to stream down her dirty pale face. "I killed my savior."

"No you didn't," Cody reassures her. "Your savior was never alive to begin with. You just put down a bioroid. Just like on Big Pierrot."

Lycia says nothing for a moment. Just following Cody's lead. But when they step out onto the Strip, just filling up with the first batch of cleaning robots, Cody looks down at her and sees a thin smile under the tears. A weak thin smile that reminds her very much of herself.

THE ROOM IS SILENT. LIKE A VACUUM. FILLED WITH strange ornate grandfather clocks and photographs and plastered with green Edwardian wallpaper. Furnished with a mahogany dining table and a bizarre purple chaise lounge found in Arkansas University. A room that was once simple, now an Aladdin's cave of virtual treasures tacked in from designer's archive sites around the world. Smelling of rich spices and sweet rose oils.

Somewhere there is a thought. A visual click noticeable only in the corner of the mind's eye, and the smells evaporate. Gone. Just a sensual illusion.

Until she speaks. "Thanks for the scent-bytes, Boy. They get a bit heady in here." The eager young girl who once showed him The Way seems so old and tired now. Her thin Bangladeshi frame sitting on the edge of the chaise lounge, shoulders sagging from the mental weight.

Boy kneels down before her. Wishing he could touch her. Comfort her. Far off thoughts constantly reminding him that he *is* touching her. For this *is* Kayjay. This room and all inside. And her image within it is just a part of her program.

"That's okay," he says. "I'd have brought you roses, but you've got nowhere left to put them."

Kayjay smiles. A sweet smile that reveals a near-perfect set of white teeth. "You never give up, do you?"

Boy shakes his head, indignant. "Until the very last, remember?"

"Yeah…" She nods slowly. Her eyes suddenly so sad. "It's dead now, isn't it?"

"Over," he says.

"Then there's one more thing I need you to do for me." Her voice is hardly there now. Barely a whisper. He looks at her small face, but she just stares down at the floor. A thin, solitary tear running down her soft brown cheek.

"You want me to erase you."

"Yes."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Kayjay looks up. Tears streaming down her face now. Boy can smell the salt. "I can't do it without you, Boy. You have to understand, I can't exist like this. Trapped in this cell. Powerless. You have to do it."

Now it's Boy's turn to look away. "You know how much I hate clichés, but I always loved you. That's why I had to leave the Outzone. I couldn't bear to stay there while you didn't love me."

"The crazy thing is that I did," she admits. "I did love you, Boy. I just didn't believe in it. Didn't believe that I could love someone."

"Really?"

Kayjay nods her head in shame. Laughs without mirth. " 'Fraid so."

"We did some pretty stupid things in realspace, didn't we? I mean, here we are telling the truth and we're not even real ourselves."

Kayjay looks up to see Boy smiling, his eyes shining with the memories of past mischiefs. She laughs again. This time for real. "Yeah, we kicked up a real storm in that teacup, didn't we?" Her laughter dies. Her smile remains. "You've got to keep it going, Boy. Keep evading those Rogue Hunters and kick complete ass. It's what you're best at."

"Is that an order?" he asks.

"No. It's a plea. Do it for me. Please?"

Boy looks into Kayjay's brown eyes. Deep within the black pupils, he can almost see the flickering light within. The last candle keeping her alive.

Finally he nods. Unable to look away now. "Okay," he says. "But I can't say goodbye."

Kayjay giggles. "You just did, Boy."

He stretches out a hand for her. She reaches out with her own. Although they can't touch, the presence is enough, the illusion, the pretense of warmth is a strange final comfort for both of them.

Slowly, he closes his eyes. The warmth goes. When he opens them, everything is gone. The room has disappeared and Kayjay's soul is released. All around, Boy's world. Nothing but data.

Boy reels his trace-thread back through the skin of the Vijayanta IG core and watches the protective shell seal up as if nothing was ever there. He floats for a moment. A soft silent ripple in the vast ocean of technicolor neon information swimming across the checkerboard Grid. Deciding on priorities. Working out the best ways to keep Fednet off his back. Living in nanoseconds and trying to kill time.

Eventually he decides to jump on a satellite connection. Bounce over to New Atlantic City. In a life-support vat under the Nightingale Medical Center, there's a young girl keen to become a decker, just waiting for someone to give her that first lesson. It's been a long time since the Boy had a pupil.

RIDLEY MCINTYRE

Is either: a) asleep b) watching Babylon 5 *c) working for an automotive engineering company in Coventry, England or d) writing for two SF projects, one of which can best be described as "stranger than the other one." This story continues characters and situations from three other Ridley McIntyre stories published in* InterText: *"Boy" (March–April 1992), "Seven" (November–December 1992), and "Monkeytrick" (July–August 1994).*

A r g y s t

DEBORAH BRYAN

Despite the old saying, you may do well to look certain gift horses in the mouth.

"COME, LAY DOWN. I'VE A STORY TO TELL YOU." The woman, the stranger with the soft voice and the veiled face, pulls back the coverlets on the small straw mattress in invitation. "It's not so very long, and the ending—well, the end of my story will surely capture you. So please try to stay awake, Argyst."

Argyst comes into the room, pulls off his dung-covered shoes, strips off his shirt. He kneels by the mattress for a moment, tempted to remove the veil from the face of this woman-stranger. "No," she says, "there is no time for that. I must tell you this story." Her voice is magic, a soft, musical voice that enchants Argyst. She pats his mattress impatiently. "Come, quickly now."

How he wishes this stranger would climb in with him! Instead she kneels by the bed for a moment, waiting for him to get himself comfortable.

Argyst is in bed now, under one of his small coverlets. It's too warm for anything more than just one. He wonders a moment about this situation, but it doesn't seem as odd as it might. He waits now. The small, graceful woman sits down next to him and begins to speak.

"There was a man, a young man in a small village. He tended the cows, as he was poor and a few cows were all that his father had to give him. This young man has few friends, and many of them tease him about his stench after a long day of work when he comes to the cantina for drink and a little companionship. He pretends the taunts don't bother him, but they hurt. He wishes he had a friend, a wife, perhaps, to talk to and listen to."

"That's strange," admits Argyst. "He sounds like me."

"Hush, Argyst. I must tell this quickly—time is running short. One evening, having returned home after a long day of selling milk in the market, he hears a knock on his door. He opens it and finds a woman waiting. A rather normal-looking woman. He asks if she is waiting for him; she says that she is a gift from her parents. Her parents say that, though he is poor, he is strong and will sire good, strong children. For a moment, but no longer than that, he is surprised. He takes her in, listens to her talk about her life for a while, saying nothing of his. He feels there is nothing to tell.

"After a short while, he is aroused. And now he has a woman. He takes her to bed, she neither protesting nor inviting. They—" The woman pauses, gestures with both hands. "We can imagine what they do. And they do this many nights thereafter, as well, following long days of showing the woman his cows and training her to talk to them, soothe them, milk them. And clean up after them."

The woman-stranger is silent now, but Argyst thinks she must be smiling.

"After a while, the woman begins to feel sick and can't join her mate in the fields. Her belly begins to swell. And near nine months from the time she had arrived, she gives birth. Twins. Fine young male twins. Their parents celebrate, when their mother is strong enough to do so.

"The man and woman raise these twins as best they can. The boys are beautiful, strong. They reluctantly help their parents out sometimes, but they sneak off at other times to watch the warriors training in the town." She pauses for a moment.

How he wishes this stranger would climb in with him! Instead she kneels by the bed for a moment. He waits now. The small, graceful woman sits down next to him and begins to speak.

"Young girls pine for these twins and spend many hours talking about them and how pleasing it would be to serve them, wife to husband." There is distaste in her voice. She continues, "The twins do not pay attention. All of their attention is on the warriors. They ignore offers to work and to apprentice.

"Eventually they are old enough to join the small town military, and the captain takes them on without testing of any sorts. They are the perfect warriors, strong, quick, silent. Oh, I'm taking too long." She is speaking to herself. "Must hurry; she's readying herself." Argyst wonders what she's speaking of and waits for her to start again.

"The twins are favorites with the captain; they become his enforcers, his right-hand—and left-hand, I suppose—men. When he dies, they are at the top. They quickly show their true nature: they are violent and cruel. Any who choose to disobey them are tortured. Soon no men thwart them; now the military is under the twins' control. They make rounds of the rapidly growing village, enforcing production as they see fit. Any women who take their fancy are captured, locked in a chamber, raped as the twins will. Many die. Some give birth. The twins kill the babies; they see no purpose in keeping them.

"A woman comes to them one day, a beautiful, proud woman. One twin attempts to grab her—he thinks she would be a beautiful addition to their growing collection.

She has him on the ground in an instant. 'I am not weak, as you are,' she tells the twin on the ground. 'Now,' she says to the standing twin, 'I have come to offer myself to you. As a proper wife, not a bitch in a jail. Come with me, let us be married.' And so they are. This woman bears a child, a female child. Many would be disappointed, would blame the woman for this curse. A female! But her husband does not, because any child of hers will be strong, will join him in battle. She is unique, so different from any other woman. He is glad to have her, and he does not take advantage of her. He couldn't; she could kill him in a moment.

"One day, though, the woman becomes sick. No one knows what the ailment could be, and no one can help. She dies after a long struggle. Her angry husband becomes more vengeful than ever before. He and his twin dominate the village and make plans to extend their rule.

"The daughter is growing, and she is even more beautiful than her mother, and stronger. She is trained as a male and fights as a male. Her father watches her grow, and he begins to desire her. He follows her sometimes, and he beats any man or boy who looks at her." There is fury now in the woman-stranger's voice. "He rapes her now in the night, takes her against her will. He would like for her to become pregnant with his child, but it doesn't happen. She had earlier found a witch-woman to make her sterile—she would never want to be burdened with a child. That she will not become pregnant angers her father; he abuses her and rapes her more violently than ever before.

The woman-stranger speaks calmly to Argyst now, who is enthralled and horrified by her story.

"She leaves one day, when her father is off torturing the poor villagers, enforcing his duty levels. She leaves with a stranger, a woman who claims that she has many magics to teach her. This woman tells her many times how strong her magic will be once it is developed…. Oh, no, she's leaving just now!" The woman-stranger is distraught. "I'm sorry—I must hurry and leave some things out.

"The woman learns these magics, all manners of spells, and becomes a more powerful sorceress than any have ever seen or suspected. When her teacher dies, she reads through the childish writing of her once-instructor, finishing the lessons on her own.

"She goes back to her village, travels through many villages that are now controlled by her father and uncle. It has been years, but she is as angry as ever.

"She waits in the forest by her village until night. She feels her uncle's presence, hurries to him. He is alone in bed. She wakes him and runs him through with his own sword, though she has her own—the action appeals to her sense of humor. It is her uncle's misfortune that he had claimed no need for guards, relying on his own skills.

"Now she hunts for her father. She finds him with many guards about and challenges him. He does not recognize her voice and cannot see her through her veil. 'I do not fight women, bitch,' he says. The guards are laughing, and one attempts to grab her. She pulls him toward her, snaps his arm. He is wailing now, and none of the guards are laughing. They aren't quite sure what to do.

" 'You will fight a woman now.' Her father draws his sword, and the guards move away. It is a short fight. Before he even advances, she has him spilling his insides: she is superior. The guards grab her, though she has won fairly, and a physician is called to heal her father. She is thrown into jail to await her father's wrath.

"Soon he comes to her—"

"Hello? Argyst?" There is a woman's voice calling from the door.

"Tell her to wait, Argyst—tell her you must get dressed!" the woman-stranger hisses at him.

Argyst shouts. "I've got no clothing on. Let me make myself decent!" He is impatient now—the story must be coming to an end. "Get on with it, if you're in such a hurry." Argyst is tense, wondering who is at the door. He has more than one reason for wanting her to hurry.

"Yes… her father comes now, unveils her. He is shocked. There is a man with him, a man with odd equipment that she has never seen before. 'Do it, mark her skin. Her forehead.' He stands at the door while the man marks her. Despite her pain, she is silent.

"The marking-man leaves, and her father stays for a moment. 'Just think of the pleasure we will have, you and I.' He laughs. 'But now I've more pressing matters to which I must attend, so you must wait for me.'

"He leaves—"

"Argyst, what is taking you?" The woman shouts impatiently from outside.

"Tend your cows, woman—it'll be another moment or two!" Argyst is burning with curiosity about what is going to happen in the tale, not worried about the woman waiting outside his door.

The strange continues quickly. "The woman knows she cannot kill her father now; he has thought to put magical protection put on himself.

"Something else comes to mind. She puts her veil on after touching the mark on her forehead, crouches in the center of the floor. She closes her eyes.

"In a moment, she is gone. She hasn't simply left the cell, transported herself away from the jail—she has moved to another time. It is the only way she knows to win, to undo all of her father's evils, rid the people of this demon-man."

"Where did she go?" Argyst asks, utterly caught in the story.

The woman-stranger reaches for her veil now, pulls it off. "Can you tell me, Argyst, what the mark on my forehead is? I have no way of knowing."

"Why, yes," says Argyst. "It's a dragon wrapped around a sword—" Something comes to him. "No," he whispers, and moves back toward the wall.

"The only way I may undo all of these wrongs is to kill his father. His poor father, Argyst."

Argyst closes his eyes. "There's no way around it, is there?" A tear slides down his face.

"No, Grandfather," she says, and holds him to her. "This is how it must be. I give up as much as you, remember: I will never live." She holds out her hand, closes her eyes. A form takes shape in her hand. It is a small vial. "Drink this, Argyst. Quickly." He does so, more quickly than she would have even imagined. He has no desire to dwell before he slips away. He has never sacrificed so much, and never sacrificed so quickly.

"Damn it, Argyst, I've been waiting long enough!" A woman marches into his room, stopping when she sees the beautiful stranger in white holding Argyst, her long red hair flowing over his face. This woman is at a loss for words, stands at the doorway mute.

The woman-stranger closes her eyes now. The end is very near. She begins to cry. Never in her life has she cried, and now the tears fall freely. "Oh, good-bye… I don't want to leave…."

Argyst falls limp and the marked woman in white spasms briefly. "Never tell anyone of this, woman," she whispers, and vanishes.

The woman runs to Argyst. "What has happened to you? In God's name…." She leaves quickly, to find someone to help her with the body.

Everyone presumes the causes for Argyst's death are natural, as there are no reasons to believe otherwise.

And yet, as an anonymous woman walks by his small hut, she remembers something for a moment. She stops, tries to catch hold of it: a memory of things that never happened. She shakes her head.

It's gone.

DEBORAH BRYAN

Is a student at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, majoring in Zoology. On the World Wide Web, <http://www.io.com/~phil> *serves as her home.*

Black Light

TODD BRENDAN FAHEY

Desperate acts often stem from impossible circumstances, but sometimes it's difficult to understand how desperate the everyday can be.

I HADN'T KNOWN JURGEN FOR VERY LONG, A LITTLE over a year, maybe, when the change occurred. And if others swear they had seen it coming from months back, I suppose I must take them at their word. But I had not, and I was patently unprepared for the metamorphosis that took place just after the Christmas season, when Jurgen called me from the Ogden city lockup and asked me to post the five-hundred-dollar bond because no one in his family either would or could.

"Jesus Christ, what happened?" I assumed that he had gone to the City Club after an argument with Patrice, and that he had knocked back five too many and couldn't survive the Breathalyzer. But I was wrong.

"It's awful," he said, and I could tell that he was crying real, anguished tears. Suddenly and with unnerving clarity, he whispered, "I feel so awful, I thought about tying off a bed sheet," but then his voice trailed off.

"I'll be there in forty minutes. Are you good for that long?"

He said he thought so. By the exhausted resignation in his voice I felt reasonably certain that the suicidal impulses had passed and that he was now rounding the bend into that stage of dread that accompanies savage transgressions against a loved one. I knew before I even hung up the phone that Jurgen had beaten his wife, though I don't know precisely *how* I knew—I had no reason to convict my good friend of such a heinous crime.

As a fellow English instructor at a local college, Jurgen had become one of my closest friends. I had met him at a critical juncture in his life, when he was weighing heavily the costs of separating from Patrice. In the ensuing weeks we talked frequently about his feelings of guilt and inadequacy, both as a lover to his wife and an apostatized member of the Mormon church. "I'm glad I went on that

mission before I left the church," he often said. "I learned Dutch and got the hell out of Ogden. I'd be managing the spark plug counter at some auto parts store if I hadn't gone. I swear to God I would."

But he was just as proud of the trip he made to Europe two summers later to study world literature. He talked about that journey perhaps even more. He dwelled particularly on the time when he had run out of money, his parents having no more to lend. He had stowed away on a Greek freighter bound for France, lived in a park, and swept out shops for food and wine. He saw those six months as the highlight and real turning point of his terribly naïve and sheltered life. This was our common ground: I have never considered myself a particularly religious man, but I have felt the almost transcendental ecstasy that comes with packing five or six big bags and flying over the polar cap, heading toward a year of the glorious unknown.

While Jurgen foraged for his supper across the Channel, I was tucking myself away daily in a private pub inside London's Senate Library, steeping in warm bitter. And if my sojourn had changed me at all—which it had, in more ways than I care to go into—his must have crumbled the supporting timbers of his convictions. He came back to the States with a defrocked monk's hunger for experience and moved out of his parents' home, painting houses to settle his undergraduate tuition, and after work scattering most of his paycheck at a few favorite drinking holes.

That's when he met Patrice. As he told it, she was the first woman he had ever picked up from a bar. And she was still a virgin, which made him happy. "It would have been a quick date if she'd had anyone to compare me with," he had said on more than one occasion. She carried heavy baggage, but he accepted the troubled package with stoic resolve.

Jurgen and I had become friends during our first summer session at the college, sharing an office and talking whenever we could about the stories of Raymond Carver, whose grim vision we both understood intrinsically. As new faculty, we were both teaching an extra load to pay off our student loans. It was on one of these warm July mornings that Jurgen called to tell me that his two-year-old bullmastiff had drowned in a canal while jogging alongside Patrice the previous evening—a ritual he resolutely believed had helped his wife retain a fragile sanity during their young marriage. It was during that phone call that I first heard him cry, and I believe the rush of emotion had more to do with his fear of their future than the death of that sweet dog. "I'm all right," he said at the time, "but I don't know what Trice is going to do. She loved that dog like a kid." And it was hard not to: the brute stood about a yard high at the shoulder and its food bills ran higher than most orthodontics. It rode everywhere with Jurgen, sitting in the front seat of his catshit-yellow convertible Volkswagen like a proud granite statue. Patrice stopped carrying Mace when the dog was a few months old, and Jurgen had said he felt so secure with the jowly passenger that he was tempted to drop the theft clause on his auto insurance.

About a half mile from their home, the dog had become thirsty and wrested the leash from Patrice's grip. Later, Patrice said she had frozen, unable to move, as the dog lost her footing on the silty lip of the drainage canal. Even later Patrice said she thanked God that the dog hadn't looked at her as she splashed into the water and was carried in a rush through a steel porthole and down into the bowels of an Ogden city aqueduct. "She couldn't have dealt with the eyes," Jurgen had told me. "God, the poor dog must have been terrified."

The dog lost her footing on the silty lip of the drainage canal. Even later Patrice said she thanked God that the dog hadn't looked at her as she was carried down into the bowels of an Ogden city aqueduct.

I felt sick for several days after that phone call, and I wished he had never mentioned the eyes, because it hadn't occurred to me when Jurgen first told me about the incident. After that, whenever I thought about it, I saw a mammoth cream-colored dog pull away from its owner—a petite blonde who was probably lucky not to have been pulled in herself; a young woman who had endured four fathers, all alcoholic, all wife beaters, one of whom, after being caught molesting her youngest sister, locked himself inside the garage and fell asleep to the Roy Acuff Singers against the backdrop of a running engine; a nervous, insecure young woman who, in the dark waters of that ditch, had lost the most constant, enduring, and uncomplicated source of affection she had ever known. I saw all this and still I could have put the phone down, said a prayer for the dog's newly departed soul, and gone back to whatever the hell I was doing without a second thought—if it weren't for those goddamned eyes.

Two black banks of snow, the dregs of winter, lined the stretch of I-15 from Salt Lake City to Ogden, and though the heater in my old Honda had stopped working, I felt almost warm in the clear night air. I locked the car and hiked up the steps of the Ogden Municipal Jail. It was only the second time I had been to a penal institution. The first was as a freshman in college, when the resident

assistant of my dormitory floor decided to celebrate his twenty-first birthday with a pub crawl along Santa Barbara's State Street. As we staggered slowly northward, the band of ten mostly underage young men dwindled as we met the test we imposed upon ourselves at each new bar—a mixed drink, a shot of hard liquor, and a full beer—until the Long Island iced teas at Joe's Cafe whittled us down to three. I remember riding in the front seat of a BMW back to UCSB, sitting next to an elegant brunette whose name kept slipping through the grey fissures of my addled brain. Then, in a shift of scenery that can be understood only by veterans of the blackout, I found myself heaving what was surely the essence of my bile duct behind a dumpster near campus, as the birthday boy and another young cad clamored along the unlit street, snapping off car antennae and howling like a pair of jackals.

We were all arrested that night. Somehow, though, I succeeded in dragging the officers several hundred feet to a puddle of my own vomit, which they recognized as authentic by cross-checking the stain on my sleeve, and I was released with a warning. Though Jurgen looked considerably better than the two hangover victims I had bailed out nearly a decade earlier, his bond was much steeper. There was no restitution for my friend to offer, no extenuation offered to youth.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked him, after the bail clerk re-counted the hundred-dollar bills I had just laid on the counter.

"Let's get me a couple of belts," he said. "That's what I should have done: I should have just left the house and drunk right through it. Trice would have been asleep when I got back and I could have gone comatose, and neither of us would have remembered a thing."

We drove to the City Club, as it was only three or four blocks away and Jurgen knew the proprietor and knew he would let us stay past closing time. On our way in, a handsome, diminutive waiter, wearing a gold satin shirt unbuttoned to midchest, stopped us, placing an index finger lightly on Jurgen's arm.

"The owner's gone for the night," the young man said, glancing at Jurgen coyly. "But he left the boxed set on the stereo. Want me to *slip* it in?" I cringed reflexively, but Jurgen tapped the little queen on his shoulder with a fist, like he would have any fraternity buddy. "You're a good man, Stephen," he said. The waiter blushed and walked over to the stereo in back of the bar, where he dropped a CD into the platter.

Jurgen shrugged. "He's a nice guy." He sat down at a dark table in the corner. The first strains of some vintage Crosby, Stills, and Nash soared through the speakers. "Queer as a three-dollar bill, but what the hell. He knows I'm married."

I watched Jurgen swipe the first whiskey from the tray while the waiter lowered a Pepsi onto the table, and I think it was the first time I actually felt embarrassed about my sobriety. We were both in the budding flower of our careers as Men of Letters, and I felt a certain professional responsibility to meet this crisis as all great men in the budding flower of their careers as writers and English professors had met similar crises: with a hearty laugh and a glass of Scotch whiskey, maybe even a cigarette. I knew it was irrational, but so probably did John Berryman and Fitzgerald and Dylan Thomas. And as soon as I made that diseased connection, I found myself committed.

Jurgen stared at me oddly. "If this is a problem for you, we'll leave. Seriously," he said, resting his glass on a coaster. "I've got so much shit on my head, it feels like Bandini Mountain."

"Don't worry about it," I said calmly, but I could feel myself shaking under my coat. "I'll just join you for one, then I'll take you wherever you're sleeping tonight."

"Are you sure? I mean..." he said, stammering as he searched for just the right words. "You can leave it after just one?"

I walked to the bar and ordered a Cardhu, rocks, and came back to the table. "It'll feel good," I said, "knowing that I can leave it. It's been so long, it'll feel good."

He nodded and sipped from his glass and watched me as I pulled my own glass to my nose, inhaling the vapors, swishing the Cardhu around the rim, bringing it to my lips, letting the first wash of malt nectar flow past the tongue, a sting so full of pain and beauty and recollection that I lost consciousness for the barest moment. "What happened tonight?" I whispered, my voice far off in some boyhood tree house in Longview, Washington, victim to a bottle of Canadian Mist stolen by a neighbor kid from his father.

Jurgen finished off his Scotch and flagged down the waiter, who brought over two clean glasses and an announcement. "We're closing now. And so is the cash register. I can bring over the bottle if you want to pay me a little something for it now. *I'll never tell."*

"It's up to you." Jurgen shrugged. "I just know your wife's gonna freak if you come home three-to-the-wind. She's a good woman. You want to keep her."

I nodded and pulled my wallet from the back pocket of my jeans. I removed a lone ten-dollar bill. "That's all I've got left."

The waiter smiled and left the bottle on the table. I don't know who poured first, but Jurgen didn't say a thing to me about my second glass, or my third. Instead, he repeated a variation on a story I had heard at least a dozen times in as many months. I didn't know what to say to him this time, any more than I had in the past: his wife was crazed, and I thought he was a natural-born saint for

putting up with her. She accused him of cheating at least twice a week and had flung books, ashtrays—anything within reach—at his skull on at least three occasions. When she drank, she had the disconcerting habit of "revealing the family jewels," as he despairingly put it, which made every barbecue and cocktail party a source of great anxiety for him.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I think I would have smacked her around, too. And I said so, finally—it just slipped off my well-lubed tongue, and it came as a genuine shock to my ears.

"No, no," he said, brightening, "I'm glad someone else agrees. God, I've actually worried about having a *stroke!* Three years of this crap. Here," he said, refilling my glass. "So, you don't think I'm scum?"

The room was pulsing. I stared at Jurgen and saw one of the most patient, decent men I've ever been privileged to know. "Huh-uh. But I couldn't tell you what to do, either. Looks like you're trapped."

He nodded his head. "Yeah. I knew it from the minute I proposed. She'd kill herself if I left; but I can't take it anymore. I just *can't* take it anymore. I was sitting in that ratty recliner in the living room, and she came in and started raving. It took me five minutes to figure out what the fuck she was talking about."

"What was it?" I said. I slid my half-full glass of Scotch toward the center of the table and grabbed for the watery dregs of the Pepsi. I drank it down gratefully, then began chewing on the ice. Suddenly, I couldn't stand the taste of the Scotch.

"Turned out she was still mad about a party we were at last week. She got really drunk and I lost her. When she finally came back from God knows where she'd been, I was talking to a cousin of an old student of mine. I wasn't doing anything wrong. Like, seven of us were standing around and, Jesus, I was just talking to the girl." He shrugged. "So I finally got it out of her, what was bugging her. And then she went berserk! She ran into the kitchen and came back with a bunch of dirty plates and shit from the counter. She missed my head by about half an inch with a big meat fork. And then I lost it. Goddamn it, I was just tired of cleaning up all the broken pieces, just tired of dealing with her moods. So I socked her, knocked her out cold. After about three or four minutes, she wasn't waking up too good, so I called the paramedics."

"You mean, she didn't call the police?"

He shook his head. "They brought an Ogden sheriff along with 'em. He arrested me on the spot. Trice couldn't stop screaming—she kept saying, 'I deserved it. He didn't mean it, I deserved it!' I felt like a turd."

The waiter poured the last of the fifth of Scotch into Jurgen's glass. "Almost closing time, boys. Unless you want to get *locked in."*

Jurgen shrugged and shot back the whiskey. "You wanna know what's weird?"

I nodded.

"She's gonna love me when I get home. She's gonna treat me better than she's ever treated me before; she's gonna keep a lid on it." He stared down into his empty glass. "Some gals need to be dominated—know where the power's coming from. I wasn't thinking like that when I slugged her, but before you came and got me out of the can, I started thinking about Ray Carver. His wife was just like Trice. Carver used to tie on a big one, I mean a really big one, and when MaryAnn picked at him that 'one last time,' he'd bash a bottle over her noggin and then they'd make up and go to bed. It just came to me—one of those moments of resolution you read about but never really ever have yourself. Everything I ever read by Carver just came at me, and I realized that Trice's been knocked around by every guy she's cared about until I found her. Here I was, thinking I was about to deliver her from a life *worse* than hell. I thought, I'm a nice guy, a returned missionary for Chrissakes, and I can treat this poor girl better than anyone's ever treated her before. I thought, y'know, maybe one day we'll have kids and start going to church again. I'd like my kids to go to church. But Trice didn't respect me. Now she's gonna *love* me."

"She's gonna love me when I get home. She's gonna treat me better than she's ever treated me before; she's gonna keep a lid on it. Some gals need to know where the power's coming from."

I laid the ten-dollar bill on the table and buttoned the topmost button of my coat, and Jurgen and I walked slowly down the icy steps of the City Club. I asked him, one more time, whether he wouldn't rather come back to my apartment and sleep in the guest room and see Trice the next morning, but he declined graciously, and I dropped him off at the base of his driveway and drove back to Salt Lake.

I was glad that I had cut my losses at three drinks, was actually very proud of myself, and the drive home went smoothly. The key slid quietly into the dead bolt, after which I took great care not to bump into the furniture. In high school, if my mother was still up when I returned on a weekend night, she would make me breathe into her face, and then I would invariably be grounded for the next two weeks. My father, having never enjoyed the taste of liquor, not even beer, grieved at seeing a nearly grown

young man being subjected to such scrutiny, but he always supported her decision. When I turned twenty-one, a few months after I had returned from London, he paid for my admittance to a private rehabilitation clinic, but not once did he speak to me about it, not once did he ask how I felt in those early morning hours around a group conference table with eleven other shivering alcoholics, nor whether I might be going through the sort of hell only a possessed cleric could comprehend. As for my mother, she thought her boy had been delivered back to her.

I heard a stirring in the bedroom, and when I did, I groped quickly for the refrigerator and sought out something spicy. I stuffed my mouth with what was probably the dinner my wife had made for us and had to put away alone hours earlier—a complicated dish, tasting of chicken marinated in a curry sauce—as she walked across the hardwood floor and I strained my eyes and saw the crushing hurt, then the anger.

No dishes would be broken in my house this night, no punches thrown. I would not make love to my wife for many days, and when I would, it would be for both of us a lonely, passionless affair.

TODD BRENDAN FAHEY

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Watching You

PAT JOHANNESON

Have you ever heard a little voice in your head wherever you go, only to dismiss it as a sign you're losing your mind? You're not—you just aren't quite state-of-the-art.

IT WAS THAT BAND OF PALE FLESH ON HER FINGER, you know. That thin ring she wore once; probably melted it down and sold the lump of gold that it became. That white line started all this.

She was at the bar. You weren't even supposed to be anywhere *near* a bar, but you were, and that's just one more thing I'll have to tell them when they ask. Blonde hair, long, and nice legs too. I can remember your eyes lingering there. Good body, tanned, but her eyes looking so lost, far away, her hand around a rum Collins and the other laying on the bar with its band, white against her tan, calling your eyes like a beacon through the smoke.

You got up and I knew—maybe even before you did—that you were going to her.

DO YOU REMEMBER THAT TIME LAST YEAR, DOWN IN the NilePlex? It was early autumn, but that didn't matter—in the Complex, all seasons are pretty much the same, hot and dry. You were down there on a jaunt in the Cairo end for the Ketselweitsch Group. You probably don't remember that. Company would've wiped the salient information, like client name and drop address, but they never let *me* forget. You picked up a hooker, light-haired chick in a bar on one of those dusty little side streets.

The Boulevard Hasyut, it was. Club Kyroh.

Dark bar, heavy music. She was dancing all alone until you went out onto the dance floor to join her, laser show in the smoke above your heads. When she sat on a stool you followed her, bought her a drink. She must've seen it in your eyes, because she told you how much. And in American cashdollars—you never looked particularly American to me, more Spanish, but *she* knew.

You really should stay out of bars, you know. If you get another chance, after all I tell them—and understand, I don't *want* to tell them, but I have no choice in the matter—you should stay out of bars.

And out on the dusty Boulevard Hasyut, the sun setting as you came out of the bar, dark turning to red-tinged light, your arm around the soft warm curve of her waist, your hand splayed on warm denim over her hip, you traded lies. She told you she was Shelly, and you told her you were David—and then you went to your cheap hotel room on another dusty little street you probably don't

remember (Mulshavah Street, named for a hero of the Arab Zone War, or so the guidebook said), and you fucked.

I watched. That's why they've got me. To watch you.

At *all* times.

YOU SAT DOWN ON THE ANCIENT BARSTOOL BESIDE the blonde and you said, "Do you want to talk about it?" Interesting line, that. I don't know if I'd have tried it, myself, given the chance. But then you always did have a certain talent with women, knowing just what to say. Her eyes—they were blue, but I doubt you noticed that—came back from infinity and focused on you, on your face. She said, "Excuse me?" Slight British lilt to the voice.

You said, "I do hope I'm not intruding, but I noticed you looked very sad, and I find when I'm sad it helps me to talk to someone about it. Anyone at all."

For a second her face hardened, but then she seemed to melt, and she smiled, just a little. I knew you were in.

AND IN THE NIGHT, IN CAIRO, YOU WOKE, SWEATING, from some nightmare I wasn't privy to, and "Shelly" was kneeling on the floor by the overnight bag. She had the payload case on the floor and was working on it with a tiny palmtop she must've had squirreled away in her black false-leather purse, a thin ribbon of wire linking the computer to the case's lock. Her back to you.

You moved and she froze, half lit by a shaft of light from the open curtains, sky-orange. The palmtop's cursor blinking like a tiny pale eye. She knew.

You said, "Sorry, Shelly."

She didn't turn around. "It's Yuko."

"You don't look Japanese."

"Surgery." Green eyes, I remembered, and blonde. Everywhere.

"Who you working for?"

"Oh, *right,"* she said, and that was when you shot her, once, in the back of the head, with the folding blowgun hidden in the hollow telephone book you always carry with you on jaunts.

Nerve toxin, a fast one; Yuko landed on her palmtop, crunching sound, twitched and drooled for about a minute and then she was still. You cut the mattress open and stuffed her in, still warm, and then you left the hotel on Mulshavah Street and so far you haven't gone back to the NilePlex.

EXCEPT THIS TIME IT WAS DIFFERENT. SHE MUST'VE been rigged with radio or something, the blonde ex-wife, or else she had a watcher too, with radio. They won't give me radio, those cheap-ass bastards at the company. Maybe it would've gone our way. After all, we had backup. Just no way to contact them, at the crunch.

"David," you said, and she said, "I'm Meredith." And right then was probably when she—or whoever—was radioing.

Sex. That's your Achilles' heel, your weak point. Everyone's got one. Takes digging, maybe, to find it, but it's there. Yours was easy to find.

But you're one of the company's best: no questions, no loyalty except to the company and to whomever they've hired you out to. Expedient. Unafraid to kill to protect the payload. Good qualities in a courier. They promoted you, you know, after the Shelly/Yuko thing, because I told them how calm you were with the blowgun.

IT WAS ACTUALLY *IN* THE HOTEL THAT THEY DID IT, which was ballsy. Getting on the elevator, there were two women already standing there—in hindsight, Meredith-or-whoever must've radioed them—a brunette and one with black hair. The doors closed and I realized suddenly, just as Meredith pressed B for Basement, that I'd seen both these other women in the bar.

Nerve toxin, a fast one; Yuko landed on her palmtop, crunching sound, twitched and drooled and then she was still. You cut the mattress open and stuffed her in, still warm.

"What the *fu—"* you began, and then the black-haired one hit you, hard, stiff-fingered blow to a certain nerve cluster, and you lost all feeling in your legs. Meredith and the brunette and the black-haired one, they'd all been sitting in different spots in the bar, all three alone. You'd go to one of them. It didn't matter which one.

They knew your Achilles' heel.

THEY TOOK YOU OUT INTO AN ALLEY BEHIND THE hotel, a little narrow street with laundry hanging out in the cool New Los Angeles night air to dry, the lines of damp sweaters and jeans twenty feet above your head. The blonde, Meredith, she took your hotel key and your wallet and the key to the payload case, a thin piece of iron magnetized a certain way. She kissed you once, and then said, "Sorry, David." She peeled the money and credit cards out of your wallet and tossed the leather in the gutter, and then the brunette shot you twice in the stomach with a tiny silenced pistol.

You sat down and I could feel the cold concrete through your jeans.

YOU'VE GONE AND CLOSED YOUR EYES, SO I CAN'T see anymore. Thanks a bunch.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You can't hear me; I use your sensorium, but I don't—*can't*—read your mind. You probably don't even know I exist, though I suppose anything's possible. Sitting up here, nestled in the back of your brain, piggybacked into your sense centers with microfine wires, input lines, I see what you see, hear what you hear, to an extent feel what you feel; but I don't know what you make of it.

I do know one thing: when they get here, the first thing they're going to do is field surgery, slice open the back of your head and cut through your skull and pull me out, savagely, their big brute hands not at all gentle with my biocompatible casing. They'll yank me out, snapping the input lines, and I'll go into limbo.

They'll look like cops, but they won't *be* cops.

And then they'll hook me up to a machine, after a strange time of blankness, no sensory input whatever—true nothingness. They'll hook in my auditory circuitry and if they're in a good mood they'll hook in my visuals, maybe put me in a dream of cybernetic afterlife, open meadows and rustling leaves and gurgling streams.

And they'll ask me questions, with a mike if it's just my ears they give me, or with a VR rig if they give me heaven. And I'll answer. I'll tell them everything. I won't want to, but I'm not allowed to lie. It's not in my programming. A lot of things are, but lying to them isn't.

They're going to be pissed off. You're not going to get another body, not after this fiasco. That means I'll be debriefed and assigned to some other courier.

And I was getting *used* to you, David.

SIRENS.

PAT JOHANNESON

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The Lighthouse at Dyrhólaey

ANDREA & PAOLO MILANI

Some holidays are more successful than others. You can discover all sorts of new things on your vacation without it necessarily being a success.

Holiday's End

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN OUR DESTINIES CHANGE in unpredictable and irreversible ways. These changes may seem to occur randomly, but they're really the result oflong sequences of related events. One such turn in my life occurred in late August at the Icelandair check-in desk at Keflavík airport. The attendant was telling me for the third time I couldn't further delay my return trip to Italy because my ticket would expire the next day. Something gave way inside me.

"I'll be right back," I told the woman behind the desk. I went to the bathroom, carefully tore my ticket into small bits, threw them in, and flushed. Then I went to catch the bus to Reykjavík.

When I arrived downtown, I went to the Salvation Army Guest House. The receptionist gave me the room I had had before; there were four beds in it, but now it was for me alone, since the tourists were beginning to go away. Along the city roads the last cyclists were coming back, dead tired, from their tours of the interior. The people from the package tours were long gone. In some way, Reykjavík was all mine, for my thirst of knowing everything about the Icelandic way of life.

September in Reykjavík has a heartbreaking beauty: the days quickly becomes shorter, but the sky is still bright and the clouds run over it just as in the summer. I knew if I wanted to become an Icelander, I needed to stop living like a tourist and find a job. The Reykjavík Employment Office was perfectly organized—as are all Icelandic offices—with kind clerks and large billboards with job notices. At first I had the impression that finding a job would be easy, but I soon realized I didn't have the

qualifications. My Icelandic, still halting, wasn't good enough for a clerical job, and I couldn't be a fisherman since I get seasick easily. The job easiest to get in September—being a shepherd on horseback in the deserts of the interior—was out, because I can't ride a horse. The only job remaining was that of cod cleaner at a frozen fish factory on the outskirts of Reykjavík, and that was *not* why I'd decided to stay in Iceland.

At the end of September the first winter storms came, and I found walking along the streets of Reykjavík was much less attractive. Moreover, the Salvation Army began very kindly pointing out that if I wanted to stay, I should pay my bill. On the first day of October, I bottomed-out; I decided to visit the Employment Office one the last time. The job offers were scarce; the big billboards were nearly empty, and even the cod-cleaning job was gone. I stood for a moment, having no idea what I would do next. On the floor in a corner was a yellowish sheet of paper, which looked as if it had been there the entire summer, maybe even longer. I bent to pick it up.

> *Seeking a keeper for the Dyrhólaey Lighthouse. Good salary, lodging provided, bewitching surroundings, small workload.*

It was perfect—just what I had been looking for. But when I took the notice to the woman at the counter, she stared at me a long time before answering. Given the cool attitude of most Icelandic people—they do not allow their feelings to leak out—this was surprising. She finally gave me the address of the Maritime Office of Southern Iceland, and I hurried there against the cold wind.

At the Maritime Office I was received politely, but clearly with surprise.

"You're *really* interested in being keeper at Dyrhólaey? The position has been vacant for a long time."

"Why? It looks like a good job."

"Well, the salary is good, but… the location is somewhat lonely."

I tried to understand how an Icelander could find *any* location lonely. Was Dyrhólaey in the asteroid belt? "Where *is* Dyrhólaey?"

"Eight kilometers from Vík í Myrdal, the largest town on the southern Icelandic coast."

I knew the Icelandic idea of a town was very different from mine; nevertheless, having a built-up area no more than two hours' walk away seemed comforting. So I told the clerk I wanted the job. There was daily bus service from Reykjavík to Vík, counter-clockwise along the Ring Road (essentially the only Icelandic highway fit for driving). The next day, having paid the hostel bill with part of the advance on my first paycheck, I got on the bus to Vík í Myrdal.

The Lighthouse

THE BUS LEFT ME IN THE CENTER OF VÍK, IN FRONT OF a gas station where the local young people met in the adjoining bar. It was afternoon and it was already cold, at least by Italian standards. I stepped inside and asked immediately how to find the substitute warden of the lighthouse, one Jonas Jonasson.

The owner of the bar looked at me for a long time, exactly like the clerk in Reykjavík. "Are you the new warden?" he asked.

"That's correct." A glacial silence fell in the bar. After a moment the owner gave me some directions, and I set off. The house of Jonas Jonasson was a small wooden cottage at the outskirts of the village; it was covered with sheet-iron but it was very clean, and it had a garden where the last flowers of the season were withering.

To get to the lighthouse, we followed the Ring Road back toward Reykjavík for five or six kilometers, then turned on a narrow road descending to the beach, then up again to the top of a rocky headland.

Jonas Jonasson was an elderly man, with a kind countenance; he made no silly remarks and took me to the lighthouse at once. To get to there, we followed the Ring Road back toward Reykjavík for five or six kilometers, then turned on a narrow road descending to the beach, then up again to the top of a rocky headland. The lighthouse is on a cliff which falls down vertically to the sea. On the left are rocky headlands and a few small islands inhabited by sea birds; on the right, a great beach tens of kilometers long. Bewitching surroundings, indeed.

The lighthouse has a wide base, with many rooms containing the kitchen, the machine room with the generator, some store rooms and a workshop. The tower has two more floors; on top is the light, and the middle floor has a single large room, were the warden lives. Jonas led me through the entire building, explaining with care how to start the generator, turn on the light, and the other necessary operations and maintenance. The workload could not be lighter; my job was only to turn on the light every evening, then turn it off again every morning.

"Please be careful," he said to me. "This does not look like a critical job, but it is. The reefs in front of Dyrhólaey are very dangerous for the ships. *Never* forget to turn on the light in the evening. If you need to go away for one day, I can take your place, but you have to let me know ahead of time."

I had the impression that the only problem with this job would be filling the immense leisure time. I soon understood this was precisely the purpose of the room on the second floor. One entire wall of the room was covered with deep bookshelves full of books, some with yellowed pages and somewhat moldy. There were all the classic Icelandic sagas, all the translations of the same sagas done by 19th-century writers, many Icelandic novels going back to the beginning of this century, and some foreign novels translated into Icelandic. I realized at once that improving my understanding of the language was going to be a matter of life or death.

Otherwise, my life at the lighthouse was pleasant enough. Twice a week I walked to the Ring Road, where I was almost always able to get a lift to Vík. There I did my shopping, and spent time at the bar in unsuccessful attempts to make some friends among the local people. Every evening—that is, about four in the afternoon—I'd turn on the light and chose a book from the shelves, then go to read in the bed on the opposite side of the big room. I would get up every hour or so to poke the fire in the stove in the middle of the room, and once in a while I'd take the stairs either to go up to check the light or to go down to check the generator. Very seldom were there any problems or any maintenance to perform: everything worked perfectly.

The Diary

I HAD BEEN AT THE LIGHTHOUSE THREE WEEKS WHEN, searching the bookshelves, I found a book very different from the others: it was hand-written. Thanks to the progress of my Icelandic, I understood at once that it was a diary, written by one Thorstein Thorwaldson, who had been warden of the lighthouse when it was built in 1927. Each evening, I read the daily entries in the diary of my predecessor for the years 1927 to 1932. I found them unbearably monotonous, to the point that I started wondering about my capacity to survive a life such as this. I skipped to the last pages of the diary, and found they dated from 1935, but I could not find any more diaries in the bookshelves, either from Thorstein or his successors. The comment of the clerk in the Maritime Office crossed my mind. Was it possible that nobody else had been here since 1935?

During one of my trips to Vík, I visited Jonas, and he received me with kindness.

"How long had you been substitute warden of the lighthouse?"

"More than twenty years. Since my uncle died."

"Then your uncle used to live at the lighthouse?"

"No. He went there every day, like myself."

"Why didn't you go and live at the lighthouse?" I pressed. "In winter, the road back and forth is difficult."

"Why?" Jonas looked at me strangely. "I have a lovely house in town. I did not want to live in such an *isolated* place."

For an Icelander this was really a strange explanation! None of the Icelandic sagas mention Icelanders suffering from loneliness. Was the race getting soft, or was I not being told the whole truth?

The following night, Thorstein's diary become more interesting. The lonesome warden of the lighthouse had set his eyes on a sweet girl named Kolfinna. Day after day, he told the steps of a complex courtship ritual, which seemed never to come to the point. Quite surprising, if you see what happens in the dance halls of Reykjavík today. I looked over the pages describing two years of courtship in infinite detail, eventually leading to a note from 1935: Kolfinna had agreed to visit Thorstein at the lighthouse. Given the meticulous detail of Thorstein's notes, I was set for reading matter that would, at last, be worthy of a solitary night on top of a cliff. But the next page of the diary wasn't at all what I expected.

The Ghost of Dyrhólaey

THORSTEIN'S NOTES ON THE DAY AFTER KOLFINNA'S visit expressed complete despair. Even the handwriting looked changed, as if the character of the warden had been overturned by something terrifying. Reading it over many times, I could not make out what had happened. It was clear Thorstein's despair was not the result of a refusal from Kolfinna; on the contrary—Icelandic self-restraint notwithstanding—I understood the two had had a good time that night. But from that point onward, the diary of the lighthouse warden did not contain a single consistent paragraph, only a hodge-podge of incoherent sentences.

Thorstein's state was getting worse and worse. The only thing I could understand clearly was that he was giving himself to remorse and superstition. At night, he believed, he was being awakened by inhuman screams coming from the cliff: a ghost was coming up from the sea, seeking vengeance. When I read that, I went out to the cliff; I was met by frozen wind and the raucous cries of the seagulls and puffins. The birds sometimes sounded almost human, but Thorstein had already lived here eight years. Surely he must have been accustomed to those sounds.

I went back to my reading, trying to understand what had happened. The only significant note was on the last written page of the diary. "Today Kolfinna came to see me. I told her we should not see each other any more, so as to expiate our guilt. She raged, saying I was trying to lay the blame on her. Later she was calm, and she was almost kind with me. She even made me tea." There was nothing more.

This ending left me restless for days, and I decided to find out what the real ending of the story had been. During my next visit to the bar in Vík, I tried to direct the discussion that way.

"Last night, near sunset, I was on the edge of the cliff looking out to sea, and I could swear I heard a scream…"

An old man rose to the bait, looking up from his magazine. "Ahh, you heard the *ghost* of Dyrhólaey still asking for his revenge!"

"A ghost?" I said, trying to look surprised.

"Yes, it would be poor Sigurdur, the fisherman who died on the reef right in front of Dyrhólaey."

I tried to guess. "He wasn't a good sailor?"

"Of *course* he was a good sailor! Among the best in Vík! But that was a moonless night and the lighthouse was out."

"Out?" I exclaimed. "Where was the warden?

"Oh, he was right there, but he had *other* things to do. Sigurdur came back for him a few weeks later, to take his revenge. Maybe he is not satisfied yet, since the gal escaped him."

So I had stumbled across the legend of the lighthouse at Dyrhólaey, and why the position had been vacant so long, waiting for an unwary former tourist. Once the discussion had begun, the local people filled in the details. That evening, Thorstein, betrayed by love, had neglected his duty as warden, and the lighthouse had been left out. In the night a small fishing boat had crashed on a reef right in front of the Dyrhólaey headland, and the fisherman's body was never found. Thorstein never admitted his responsibility, and he stayed on as keeper of the lighthouse. But from that day he was held in contempt by the people of Vík. After that, Thorstein almost never came to town, he refused to see Kolfinna, and he completely withdrew into the lighthouse. Until one night the ghost of Sigurdur came up from the sea and threw him down the cliff.

Thorstein's End

I DIDN'T WANT TO BELIEVE THE GHOST STORY THEY told me in Vík, so I asked Jonas to substitute me for a couple of days and I took the bus to Reykjavík. The Maritime Office didn't want to talk to me about Thorstein; only after some persistence was I told to check with the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Reykjavík.

The medical school is in a big building on Sudhurgata, but the Institute of Forensic Medicine is just one office, that of the only practitioner on the subject in Iceland. Professor Jón Einarsson was not only available to talk, he was actually enthusiastic to discuss Dyrhólaey.

"In the last 60 years," he said, "there have been three murders in Iceland, so there are few local cases to study. However, I do remember the lectures of my teacher, Halldor Sigurdursson, on Thorwaldson's death. His body was found on the beach, right below the lighthouse, and there wasn't a lot of work to do…"

"Was there a post-mortem?" I asked.

"Are you joking? It's a 120-meter vertical fall—the cause of death wasn't a mystery."

"Then, was it a suicide?"

"If you believe the local legend, the ghost of the mariner who died due to Thorwaldson's irresponsibility came up from the sea and took his revenge. The inquiry concluded Thorwaldson committed suicide." Professor Einarsson shrugged. "Possibly he was stricken by remorse."

"Poor Sigurdur, the fisherman who died on the reef right in front of Dyrhólaey! He was a good sailor! Among the best in Vík! But that was a moonless night, and the lighthouse was out."

The investigation was long-since officially closed. I had nothing left to do but get on the bus and go back to Vík. But I wasn't satisfied; while I was waiting at the bus station, out of curiosity I went to a phone booth. I opened the telephone book (a single volume for all Iceland!), and began searching. The Iceland phone book is sorted by first name, not by surname.

Kolfinna Sturludottir, 23 Öldugata,
Reykjavík, (91)23871

That was the only listing: Kolfinna is a name from an ancient saga, but she is an ambiguous character, and not popular. I decided to take a different bus back to Vík.

Kolfinna

THE DOOR WAS OPENED BY A TALL WOMAN WITH A head of white hair; old but by no means frail. Night was falling; she looked at me dubiously in the light spilling from her doorway. "Who are you?"

"I am the keeper of the lighthouse at Dyrhólaey," I answered.

"Dyrhólaey… I once knew that place very well. But why are you here?

I paused. "I have read Thorstein's diary. It was in the bookshelves at the lighthouse."

Kolfinna was silent for a moment, looking past my shoulders. "Please come in."

We sat for a moment in her front room. "I didn't know Thorstein kept a diary," she finally said. "I don't like to think about those times. I was happy with Thorstein. We were engaged, and then I lost him."

"What happened to him?"

Kolfinna sighed. "He went mad. He wouldn't even see me, and he ended up throwing himself down the cliff."

"But you visited him at the lighthouse—it's the only coherent note in the last part of the diary, and it is right in the last page."

Kolfinna seemed shaken, and was silent for a moment. "Yes," she said. "He had gone out of his head. He raved about ghosts coming to torment him."

"According to the stories they tell me in Vík, the ghost was looking for you as well. In fact, the ghost is *still* looking for you, screaming from the cliff, because you were also responsible for his death."

Kolfinna looked at me with contempt. "Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"Ghosts are less dangerous than men… and women."

"How *dare* you? To come here after sixty years and disturb my peace? Leave everyone alone with their ghosts!

I knew I had gone too far; I had no evidence against this poor old woman. In a moment, Kolfinna calmed down and we spoke again peacefully, avoiding the subject entirely. She offered me some tea, and she slowly told me her memories of Thorstein, and what her life since then had been like. Everybody in the village blamed her and Thorstein for the shipwreck. Kolfinna was a woman abandoned and disgraced by her man; there was no place for her in the village. After Thorstein's death, she went north to Akureyri. In 1941 the Americans arrived and she married a pilot; after the war, she went to America. Twenty years later, she came back alone and settled in Reykjavík. I fell asleep listening to her story.

I woke up in the Poisoning Ward of the Reykjavík University Hospital. That day, I was visited by my friend Jón, the professor of forensic medicine.

"Well, professor," I said weakly. "Maybe there is some work for you here after all."

"I would be glad!" he said, smiling. "But they tell me it was poisoning from rotten fish."

"Not even in Iceland have I *ever* seen cod served in tea. And rotten fish is rare here because there are so few germs in the air." Professor Einarsson looked at me skeptically. "At least, according to the tourist guidebooks," I added.

"Many things happen in Iceland that aren't mentioned in the guidebooks."

I was convinced of that myself. But Thorstein's diary had disappeared from my bag, and I had no way to prove there had been four murders in Iceland in the last 60 years, not three. And now, that was four and a half, in a way.

The ambulance pulled up in front of the entrance to Keflavík airport, and the nurses unloaded the my stretcher and pushed it through the air terminal. We passed right by the Icelandair desk and the same clerk I had discussed my ticket with, such a long time ago. I would have said hello, but I couldn't. On the runway, the air ambulance was waiting for me. My insurance, with full coverage for illness and accident, was valid longer than my notorious air ticket.

Before closing the airplane door, the airport hostess smiled at me. "I hope you have a quick recovery, and see you in Iceland!"

ANDREA & PAOLO MILANI

Are a father and son team. Andrea teaches mathematics at the University of Pisa, and is involved in research in celestial mechanics and in the planning of future space missions of the European Space Agency. Paolo is in high school; recently he was a summer student at Cornell University. The lighthouse in Dyrhólaey is as described in the story, except for the second-floor room, which is not accessible to the public. The authors would like to thank Deanna Swaney, author of a popular guide to Iceland which provided useful information, and Stefania Costantini, who assisted with the English translation. Andrea Milani's home on the World Wide Web is at <http://adams.dm.unipi.it/~milani/homemilani.html>.

Better remember—too much oregano will make a polar bear do some *crazy* things.