ment to recognize the sensation. Salt on his lips. A wrenching synesthesia.

And then it came. Less like a bolt of lightning, more like a hot wet rag being slowly wrapped around his cerebrum. Within his very skull a dull warmth spread, hot and chlorine-rich, his mind wading into the shallow bubbling effervescence of some esoteric whirlpool.

His eyes and thoughts thickly coated in cotton. His head ringing. Sound erupting. And then a black plane behind his eyes began to crack, until the shards were expanding with a muted, slow-motion dissiliency.

The thought came. It was pure:

I'm in the sim.

He tried to pull out. Panic and reaction. He stuffed his fingers into his mouth, feeling around for the mouthpiece. He coughed and spat and flexed his throat. His fingers triggered his gag reflex, and he couldn't stop; suddenly he was vomiting all over the floor, his stomach heaving with vacuous tremors.

There were knives, and forks, and knives, and maybe even an icepick. Supplied with the room. In the cupboards, in the drawers…

He nearly slipped on his own vomit. His mind was buzzing with white light. Distortion. White noise, feverish, high, infinite, vibrating through his skull, focusing in on the backs of his eyeballs.

He bit down on a scream.

Fumbled towards the kitchen. Fumbled through a drawer. Another. A knife. He held it with unsteady fingers.

He walked to the bed with renewed calm. Greased gears within his very flesh seemed to glide into position. All systems go. It was very close to being clear, despite the fog of confusion and pain.

He stabbed through the deck. Three, four, ten times. A single clear drop of battery acid sliding across sheer black plastic, singeing a hole in the bedsheet.

The thought of tears permeating the fog. A tear on immaculate flesh. Memory…

He stabbed the cartridge. Once. Cracked casing. Two thin fragments of dull and finger-worn black plastic. Sudden contrast of gray-black shards against gray-white sheets.

Then silence. An inertia.

Behind him, beyond him, in the darkness, outside his apartment, yet so close that he could taste it. Girl's voice, and the slow, muted sound of crying. Her voice, her tears on his lips, her soft weeping.

Dying.

He screamed then, and threw the knife with every twitching muscle in his body.

A dull crack, a flicker of blue spastic light. The knife collided and stuck in the window-wall. A pained hiss. The slow, lugubrious fall of white sparks, television tears.

Then the sunlight erupted all about him, flooding in through and around the concentric freeze-framed black lightning.

IN A SMALL FOAM-ENCLOSED SLEEP CASKET, FIFTY dollars a night. Nothing but a clothes-filled suitcase to prop his head on.

A receipt for the wall-window repair, seven hundred dollars. An official eviction notice. An Inappropriate Conduct written reprimand. A form to apply for transfer; basically a mandatory move. Another city, new faces, new life. But always the same, inside.

He'd stay. The communes weren't for him. Not anymore.

A street pistol, twenty years old, bought from a kid on a corner, ten blocks from the apartment, twelve dollars.

A fake passport, wholly superfluous, three hundred dollars. He didn't feel like going anywhere. A prosaic street ID, under the name Gregory F. Gardener, two hundred.

No new face.

No new life.

He walked at night, garbaged all the papers. Defied the past to haunt or plague. Dared any of it to reach him.

But it did, slowly, eventually. As he walked at night. As he killed, or stole, or ate, or drank.

Sometimes, beyond him, from the dark, came her voice.

Mollifying, soft and smooth, feminine and voluptuous.

His only comfort. He would smile, or cry. And then, without warning or pause, she would be gone. And for a short while, he could almost convince himself it was as if she had never been.

CRAIG BOYKO

Lives in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, the coolest city 50 kilometers northeast of Moose Jaw. Craig sleeps alone, has no cats, and avoids all direct eye contact. He can be further researched at <http://www.geocities.com/paris/3308/>.

In a previous life, Reginald was a sea cucumber. You can just *tell*.

glossy magazines and baby products and sexual aids. Asked the corporate pharmacist for Demerol. The woman shook her head, launched into the Drug Legality Act speech. He cut her off, asked for morphine. Anything legal. She traded him a small bottle for a hundred-bill, some change, his health card. He paid for it at the front.

Rifling through his wallet, his vision blurring. Peripheral movement. He looked up. Outside, through the caged glass and neon advertising logos. Into the night, the street.

He blinked.

She was gone.

He shook away the image. He hadn't seen her. This was life. She was dream. Fantasy.

He paid the cash and hefted his bag in one hand. He exited finally, out into the street, the bright illicit business of the city and its many emblazoned slogans sizzling against his retinas.

HE LOCKED THE DOOR, TWICE, BEHIND HIM, AND clamped his eyelids down. He could smell himself here. The smell of warmth and bed sheets and carpet and garbage. And something else.

He opened his eyes.

She smiled at him.

The blue static of her eyes soporific and melancholy. Her skin glowed radiantly. Her teeth shining gray despite the darkness. Her hair, fine as sand.

Despite the complete darkness of his room, he could see her. And then, somehow, he could not.

He fumbled feverishly for the lightswitch. Tripping over garbage and his bag of food.

"Fuck!" he screamed. "Lights!"

Apocalyptic white drenched the room. His eyes shuddering against the differential, pupils quickly shrinking.

He finally opened them. She was gone. His apartment, nothing more. As always.

"Wait," he whispered, too late.

INSIDE. SHE BEAMED AT HIM.

"Was that you? Were you out there?"

A quizzical grin. "Out where, love?"

"Out of here, out there, in my goddamn apartment!"

The grin fading behind subtle folds of pale skin. "I don't know what you're saying. I can't be there. You know that."

"I just saw you. In my fucking apartment. On the street, too, by the sidewalk, outside, in front of the drugstore, you were there too. I swear to God I just saw you in my apartment, and I wasn't even stimmed. Were you there? How did you do it?"

A solitary tear slid down her cheek, leaving the faintest pink trace. "I can't leave here. Here is the only place we can be together. I don't exist out there."

He stared. A long moment. Eternity held in a moment. He comforted her.

OUT AGAIN, BEING BORN TO LIGHT. "LIGHTS," HE spoke falteringly. The depth and comfort of dark returned.

He popped morphine tablets, slept.

When he awoke, if he awoke, she stroked his cheek, lovingly, and caressed his arm. Her tongue slipping between his lips.

He was drugged. He took his consolation in that fact. And tired. And sick. Very unhealthy. He was drugged, and he succumbed.

HE AWOKE IN THE SIM. SHE SMILED, PLEASANT, innocent, oblivious.

Still drugged, probably, because her form shifted and shuddered and focused. The walls and the sands and the sky fragmented, focused, melted, reshaped, and petrified.

**"Was that you? Were you out there?"
The grin fading behind
subtle folds of pale skin.
"I don't know what you're saying.
I *can't* be there. You know that."**

The smell of papaya, mango, dish-cleaning liquid, damp socks, fresh air, burning leaves, laundry detergent, sweet feminine perfume. The taste of her tongue and her skin and saltwater.

His actuality was spiraling, refracting, dissolving. He screamed, or dreamt that he did, and pulled out.

IN THE GLOW OF THE TELEVISION SHE STOOD.

"I'll love you forever," she said.

"I know," he said, but his voice was silent.

He stood. His legs nearly collapsed. Stars and cracks of white darting light swept across his vision. The morphine was dying, and maybe his rationality with it.

"You're real," he said, his voice cracking, his throat parched. "Will you stay? Or will I wake up?"

She smiled, reached out to him.

Gone.

Gone.

"Motherfucker!" he screamed, his throat scorching. Through the walls, he knew they could hear him. But they were not real. Not real. Maybe none of them. Maybe not he himself.

"Motherfucker," he whispered. Tears began to stream down his cheeks, and it took him a long desperate mo-

Otherwise, you might just forget it was, after all, a sim. And die from thirst, within a few days.

He dialed down for room service. Next month, for his work term, it might mean working an extra two hours or so, but he didn't much care. Everything cost hours. And there was only so much you could do within a work term. But he knew if you started running up debts they demoted you to less enjoyable tasks, come next term. Like going from short order grill cook to midtown streetsweep, or sewer basin detail.

Fuck it. He could always call in his holiday time.

The knock at the door came, and he called for them to leave it. The bar of light beneath the door flickered briefly, returned. He left the lights off in the room. Too bright. Just wavering blue television light, so easy on the eyes.

He unlatched the door, opened it a foot, and grabbed the warm paper bags. A smell of heated Styrofoam and charred grease and moist dough wafted up to him. He closed and relatched the door.

He sat on the edge of the bed and opened the bags between his legs. He ate the two vegetable burgers, and then the deep-fried chicken sticks. He drank half the Coke. Couldn't stand it without the caffeine. He slotted the paper and plastic into the incinerator tube and fired it.

He fell heavily to the couch and spiked the sim.

I SOMETIMES THINK WE'VE TALKED ABOUT everything.

Everything?

Everything there is to talk about. Everything there is to believe. Everything to feel.

It doesn't matter. Words are inconsequential. We've got each other. We've got our love.

We've got our love.

ON A TUESDAY, A MOVE WAS CALLED. BLACK ON white words blinked complacently on the television screen.

He looked at the words, his body itching, for a long time. His neck so sore. Calling a move. His throat dry.

He drank a liter of warm cola and returned to the television. He scanned through menus. New menu item. He punched it. He called in a suspension.

He took a shower.

LATE ONE NIGHT, TAKING A BRIEF LEAVE OF HER. Necessary for food and drink and hygiene. And sanity, he thought, with a soft giggle.

Outside, beyond his door and behind the walls, people were moving. Shouts and laughter and muted talk and televisions being switched off. Doors shutting. Weak thuds of lightly-packed suitcases hitting hallway carpet. The distant chime of the elevator, the oil-swept hiss of the doors sliding open, then shut. The voices fading away into the darkness around him. All sounds disintegrating until he was alone.

But it was a temporary solitude. More would come. Soon.

HE DISJACKED. HE LEFT HER TO TAKE A PISS. AFTER apologizing to her profusely.

Distant televisions buzzed and voices murmured, to themselves or to others. The sound of feet on linoleum, glass on glass, and springs and hinges creaking. The overwhelming smell of dust, sweat, climate-controlled Freon, frying hamburger, floor wax.

Like they had never left, he thought.

He wondered vaguely if it was Thursday.

LAYING BACK IN BED. THE DECK ON HIS CHEST. EYES closed against the oppressive black. Slow-lapse time freeze, the mouthpiece sliding smooth against his wrist, into his hand, cutting the air, arcing invisibly. His involuntary, primal grin at the aesthetics of it. Down his throat.

Her love and passion and heat consuming him from within.

TIMELESS.

Only when he came out did time exist. Then his body would ache and his stomach would growl. His skin would itch and the electricity humming through the walls would grind at his bones.

And the pasts of this darkness, this life, this apartment and the many before, would consolidate into a silver line, tangible and intense. His childhood and his adulthood and all the times of pain and disgust would coalesce into a tight hot lump in his stomach. Bile rose in his throat. His anger flared through dry fingertips.

He came out, raging at the irreverence of leaving her.

He almost put his fist through the wall that day.

Instead, he showered, put on clean clothes. Ate all the food left in his fridge, which amounted to a couple of shrink-wrapped pickles and a rigid crust of cinnamon bread. Combed his hair neatly. Looked for a long time into the mirror, the rage threatening softly to resurface. He left the apartment, locking the door twice, and left the building.

IT WAS NIGHT AND HE WAS GLAD. INSTEAD OF A BUSY, overcrowded deli or supermarket, he turned into the first twenty-four hour neon-encased superdrugstore.

They had little for food. So he bought fifty dollars worth of the junk food that so brightly lined the front counter. Six more liters of Coke. More aspirin. His nerves were singing. From exhaustion, lack of sleep, or lack of activity. He didn't care. Walked back through stacks of

touch. Already gathering a film of dust across its sleek surface. Tossed the jack and the wire across his shoulder.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. He listened to his own breathing for a long moment. His body began to shiver. The back of his throat trembled a little.

He plugged the wire into the deck by touch. He sat the icy box on his lap. He stuffed the jack into his mouth quickly, defying hesitation. The instinctive motion of a hungry child.

SHE LAY SUPINE ON THE BED, GAZING UP AT HIM. HER perfect white body listless, her eyes gray and demure, resplendent with carnal diffidence. He felt his own body shudder, the muscles in his neck rigid with delightful tension.

It was where he had left her. Only slightly different. If he remembered. Her leg seemed healed, if it had ever in fact been injured, not just a game or a trick. But it was all a game, all a trick. He knew that. He knew that. If he accepted that, he could pull out at any time.

Yet how was it possible that she lay here, convalescing or otherwise, in the same position he had left her? And he could sense, could *feel* that she remembered him, too. It was all a trick. A fancy memory bank filtered through a gracious smile and waves of near-tangible desire. Coming from her.

Stupid, he told himself. So what? It had a resident memory in the chip, to save progress, and maybe an individual DNA scan, or something, because surely there had been others before him, others who had used it. Used her. And he hadn't left off where they had gotten. The wear on the label of the cart. Previous ownership. Indubitable.

She whispered his name.

It was a cheap trick. Cheap. He knew she wasn't actually speaking his name, knew she wasn't a she at all but a complex personality structure hardwired into a visual illusion. The drug rampaging through his body merely made him believe she spoke his name. Direct brain plant, using existing information. A cheap trick. Effective. Uncommon. Frightening.

She spoke his name and he tingled.

A distant, recessive part of his brain pondered if he was really responding so strongly to her words, to her body and her lips and her voice, or if it wasn't just the sim telling him he was. If it wasn't another cheap trick.

A dominant, longing part of his brain ultimately decided it didn't matter. His body joined hers on the bed.

HER MORE PALPABLE FEATURES SLOWLY ACCRETED under his touch. The only thing that could possibly make her more beautiful was detail. Her voice become more personal, filled with warmth and character. Maybe even love, and that wasn't so impossible; it was easier to accept love when it was behind the guise of a cheap street sim.

Her body and face solidified. Her body supernal, eliciting a simple cellular rush within him. Her hair now blond, soft, smelling of honey and fresh rain. Her eyes dark gray, glimmering with the intricacy of reflected sunlight on deep coagulating puddles. Her voice like water. Thick red wine, her white cheeks flush with blood. Her face not completely unblemished, which added to the amalgam of depth and realism.

She whispered his name. It was a cheap trick. He knew she wasn't actually speaking his name, knew she wasn't a she at all. She spoke his name and he tingled.

Her body warm on his skin. Naked or not, it didn't matter. The mystery of her body nearly insufferable in its proximity. Her love in her lips, brushing his neck and chin. His love in his fingertips, brushing infinitely fine strands of blond from her cheek.

They made love. Or they did not.

It transcended the sexual.

"DO YOU LOVE ME?" SHE ASKED OF HIM, PROPPED UP on one elbow, studying his face meticulously as the air conditioning kicked in across the hotel room.

"I love you, unconditionally."

"Will you ever leave me?" she asked, fixing a drink for him from the small cooler set in the sand, her naked body sprawled on a bamboo-twine lawn chair, the tropical sun heating and lightly tanning her soft skin.

"I may part, but not for long. I will never leave you. Not intentionally."

Walking through a thunderstorm in a deserted European bazaar at night, holding hands.

"Do you remember anyone before me?" he asked her.

"I have never known anyone but you. Through you, I think, I am complete."

Lying together in thick green grass, a canopy of verdant foliage overhead masking the sun.

"Do you feel?" he asked.

The corner of her mouth faltered. She kissed him.

"I know that I love you," she said.

WHEN HE PULLED OUT, IT WAS BECAUSE OF A voracity that even a sim couldn't hide. Not legally, anyway. It was against the law to make a sim where you could consume food or drink that actually seemed to replenish you.

Holy fuck, what the hell are you saying?

Back out, slide out, retreat, deny.

HE YANKED THE TRODE FROM HIS MOUTH AND SPAT. He looked at the sleek deck accusingly, horrified.

"Those weren't my words," he said quietly to the still air.

He could smell his own stale sweat. His back was still arched over, his knees and lower legs were completely numb. He tried to shift his weight and fell to the floor.

"Not my words," he whispered, grimacing through two simultaneous muscle spasms in his legs. "I wasn't in there that fucking long, maybe an hour, but I hate those fucking cheap-shit wares that place fucking dialogue in your own goddamn mouth, makes you start to wonder if you're losing your mind, godammit, stupid shit, falling in love with a goddamn personality construct."

He furiously kneaded the constricted knots of muscle in his legs. One, then the other. His feet and legs began to tingle, ghosts of nerves promising to return.

He lay on the floor then, for a long time.

The woman next door was either having sex or watching it. Moans and flesh-muted screams buzzed through the wall.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

A FLARE OF PAIN IN HIS BACK AWOKE HIM TO DARK silence. The hardwood against his cheek was cold and confusing. Where was his bed?

Then he got up, clenching his teeth against the pain in his back and neck, and started limping slowly towards his best guess at the location of the bed. He kicked the sim deck with his left foot, sending it skidding across linoleum. It clacked hard against some table leg or counter base. His knee collided with his nightstand and sparks jolted up his leg. He swore. He fell to the bed, cursing at the darkness. He near-screamed for the window. Hypnagogic, light-red sunrise flickered in and stung his eyes. Night gone, already.

"Window," he said softly. Then louder. Then again. Finally, darkness returned.

A warm, electric, pleasantly distorted image flashed behind his eyes. Of a beach, and a woman, and beauty.

He didn't sleep.

A WEEK PASSED. SPENT IN HIS APARTMENT. AVOIDING the people in the building. Going out only at night. Then sitting for long hours in bars, narrowly avoiding drunkenness. Watching the subtle organic dance of the frequents, the unspoken gestalt of business and professionalism, manifesting itself in twenty-dollar cloned hookers, fresh from the flesh tank. Silence and laughter intertwined; the smell of alcohol and perfume and sweat.

Avoiding meaningful glances from heavily blushed faces, avoiding surreptitious nods from hustlers on the street, druggies procuring their wares from under brittle skeletons of storefront awnings.

The night sucked him up without distinction, giving him anonymity and peace of body.

Peace of mind, another matter.

THURSDAY CAME. THROUGH EQUIVOCATION, HE pretty much managed to avoid thinking about fuck night at all.

He woke up at three, yawning stiffly. Gray sunlight stinging his eyes. He offed the windows and stumbled to the kitchen. Gulped warm orange juice that he had left out on the counter. Walked to the television.

He didn't even bother with the headset. Just flicked through menus. The screen buzzed, the bluish light cloaked his naked legs.

He called in a wildcard.

Then he dialed downstairs for movie listings. Instantaneous text appeared on the screen. He scrolled down through it and finally ordered a year-old Playboy-funded pseudo-porno.

He sat on his bed and watched. He fell asleep ten minutes into it.

HE AWOKE WITH A THOUGHT: *TIME.*

He looked at the clock. A bad feeling already growing in his stomach. Because sometimes he awoke, like this, just knowing he was late, knowing he had slept too long. 9:37, flashed the numbers. Too fucking late.

A disastrous scenario pounding around in his skull. His match for tonight, whoever she might have turned out to be, had come up to his room. Or maybe she'd sat at home, on the edge of her bed, a chill glass of champagne going flat between her thighs, waiting for him. Yearning. Or knocking on his door. Or phoning. Letting it ring fifteen times. And he hadn't awoken. And she had either been stood up, screwed out of a date for tonight by his lassitude, or had submitted for a rematch.

He jumped out of bed and ran to the television. His heart thudding and reverberating within his ribcage.

An amorphous cube of dusty floor and blank wall flickered somnolently with red and white television light.

He didn't bother reading the words. Knew what they'd say.

No matches.

He stood there a long time before turning off the television, and a long time afterward.

WALKING THROUGH BLACKNESS, REVELING IN HIS stealth, his blind dexterity. He stepped into the closet. Pulled the deck from the shelf. Cool and hard to his heated

fringement and illicit exhibition. It didn't really, nothing was ever foolproof, but usually it made the dealer breathe easier. Even the pushers downloaded, unless they wanted to distribute and make it surreptitious, untraceable. Then they used standard coin. You didn't see a sim in cart format like this anywhere, ever, not anymore.

He found the deck wrapped in an old sweater on the top shelf in the closet. He knew it'd be there. The deck had both cart and coin slots, so it was pretty old, but when he'd bought it, it had been edge-biting. He hadn't used it in over a year, when he had given up sims, leaving them to the masses, because at the time, he considered himself better than all that. Getting the old deck out felt natural, though, and the old cellular fear resurfaced. The fear of losing identity.

And another fear began to rise, more potent than the other. Even as he unpackaged the deck and its gear, as he uncoiled the fiber optic, as he cleaned off the tongue-piece with a paper towel, as he blew dust off the new-found cart, as he plugged it in and prepared to jack.

Fear like bile, rising in his throat, but he pushed it down and ignored it.

You didn't punch deck on some cheap-ass cartridge sim that you found out in the street. Bad enough that rainwater and engine oil and dog piss could corrode the goddamn contacts. That was bad enough, because serious corrosion made a bad connection and could fuck you up, plain and simple.

Not only that, but you *never* punched deck on a sim you just found. That was insanity. 'Specially a goddamn cart that was just lying on the street. No doubt it was probably heavily laced with bugs, if it wasn't a downright snuff job. The deck itself had viral screens, but they were just rudimentary. They didn't pick out the new stuff, the street breed of any virus.

He wasn't thinking any of this, not consciously, but he was, too. It sparked in his mind, somewhere deep down, ever so dimly, in a fraction of a second, before he could choke it off. There was fear underlying what he was about to do, but the determination overrode it.

Kneeling on the floor, the deck between his legs. He lifted the cable, eyeing it cautiously. It was clean. He attached the mouth-mod. A clean, wholesome, use-me-I'm-sterilized type click. He opened his mouth.

Placed the jack softly on the back of his tongue. Closed his mouth.

Bent over. Flipped it on.

Synthesized endorphins released at the speed of light, down his throat, into his stomach, his lungs, his bloodstream. Metastasis.

NO INTRO SCREEN. JUST THE SUDDEN BRIGHTNESS OF importunate sunlight, clean and brisk air, crisp and wet, working through his lungs.

A beach.

Or maybe this was the intro. Didn't feel like it, though. Nothing was happening. This was response-based, and all the intro clips he'd ever seen were fast-paced, sharp, colorful, extreme and inexorable. Totally stand-by-and-watch, and try not to piss your pants. They were put in to grab your attention and give you heart palpitations off the tip, so you stayed jacked, so you played it out.

There was a woman down the beach. Waving. Beckoning. The crystal-blue water lapping at her legs, licking her knees.

He ran toward her.

She needed his help. Her leg was broken, or something. She said no words; it didn't matter. The message was relayed directly to his brain in dreamspeak.

Help me.

She was beautiful. He tried to focus on her body, but none of it mattered. He tried to memorize her face, her beautiful features. He tried, but it wouldn't come.

She was beautiful. He tried to focus on her body, but none of it mattered. He tried to memorize her face, her beautiful immaculate features. He tried, but it wouldn't come. It was strange, not being able to really truly see her, but all he could focus on was the knowledge of her consummate beauty. She was more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen, ever known, ever dreamt of. Yet he couldn't even discern the color of her eyes, the tint of her hair.

He lifted her in two bulging, capable arms. Her gratitude emanated from her in a cogent, nearly overpowering radiance. His heart swelled and his blood ran warm. He smiled benevolently down at her and carried her away.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Whether he spoke the words or merely felt them was immaterial. She answered.

"Yes, I think, could you just…" Her voice slightly strained, perfect pink lips pulled taut through the pain. He quickly dashed across the room to her. He made a swift motion with his hands across her knee. Her face softened and her eyes fluttered. He wasn't sure what he had done, but it had been the right thing. She would be all right, if he was here, to watch over her.

"Oh, God, thank you. That's so much better." She smiled at him.

"I love you," he whispered.

God, it was bright. But the sun was receding. 5:15. P.M.? It felt late. Too much sun. The woman next door had her television way up again, some pre-evening soap. Cheesy instrumental music and overly dramatic monologues. He hated the fucking soaps.

Thursday today, he thought. Fuck night.

He gargled salt water from the tap and spit it down the suck-drain. He turned on the disposal and heard it whoosh away.

He put on yesterday's clothes and ate some cheese. On a sudden yet oddly demanding whim, he walked over to the deck. He punched through menus, watching the words morph and scroll on the screen. He entered the number. The woman from the bar.

He didn't feel any better, but it was almost six, and the cut-off was at six, every Thursday. Still, hardly gave you much time. Results would be uploaded by seven. Dates were arranged for eight, always, unless one of the parties needed a half-hour extension, or needed to get started earlier, or whatever. It didn't matter. He wouldn't wait around, holding his breath.

He went out to get breakfast.

THE TELEVISION BLINKED WHEN HE RETURNED. HE walked inside, locked the door, and looked.

Blue on red was a match: A date has been arranged for you this evening. Please dial this room number and confirm the arrangement. Have fun.

Red on white was failure. He'd seen it enough. But usually it was okay; it wasn't cause for any underlying psychological insecurity or anything. No inferiority complex. He could always blame it on himself, or on the bitches he chose, or something else. Usually himself. Better to blame himself, his personal choice, his unsociability, whatever. Sometimes he didn't even enter any applications at all. Then the screen didn't blink at all. It remained silent and black and unassuming. Peaceful.

But tonight it blinked green on black.

```
  Good evening, Holden M. Decker.
  A confirmative match has been found for
you this Thursday evening.
  However, due to scheduling conflictions,
the following potential matches for you
were rescheduled or aborted.
  Match one(1): Rita Ess, (F), at room
number 1734. Status: Aborted. Explanation
forwarded: Not found.
  Match two(2): Not found.
  Try rescheduling!
  Have a nice day!
```

He felt tired, suddenly. Nearly twelve hours of sleep and he was still tired. He decided he didn't care. He turned off the box and walked around it, past the kitchen alcove, and around the poorly-positioned clothes chute, which was little more than a trap door over a hole in the floor. You dropped something down there, it would be gone forever. Unless, of course, it was clothing, and properly bagged and tagged. Then it came back the next business day, right to your door, in the fleshy hands of a semilegal alien, working under strict visa for the right to stay in this wonderful land of opportunity.

He fell to the bed and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

"Lights," he called to the gently and precisely oscillating air. "Window," he yelled, and all light from the city and the sun was cut off, without a millisecond of pause. The light trapped within the apartment flickered and burned slowly away, dancing across his retinas, until all that remained was a shifting void of blackness and the undulating electric voices from next door.

HE DIDN'T SLEEP. SOME TIME LATER HE SAT UP IN BED, staring at the cartridge.

He didn't realize he was staring at it. He wasn't even fully aware of being awake. It was sheer coincidence that he found himself looking at it.

He'd taken it out of his pocket last night, and tossed it onto the overturned stacking crate that served as a coffee table. His jacket lay nearby, on the floor. He stared at it for some time, not seeing it, not seeing anything. But then he did see it, suddenly, and his mind strained to find significance and meaning in it. For long blank minutes he could not recall what it was.

Then, finally, something clicked, and his thoughts turned sour. He frowned in the half-darkness, feeling vaguely nauseated. He had been searching for its identity for long minutes, minutes that mutated within him into hours, hours filled to the rim with longing and hope and need. So much time spent pondering that little object, which he was almost undoubtedly *positive* was something important, something supernal. But then he remembered it was just junk from the street, and he wanted to spit.

He got out of bed and walked to the wall panel. Turned on the lights. Extreme white light. He turned them off again. But it was too late, he was blinded, his night vision obliterated. He turned the lights back on, squinting painfully. He sat down on the desiccated old couch and picked the object up. He rotated it slowly in his hands, pensively. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the light, he realized what it was. A sim.

Like from his childhood. There were still sims around, everywhere, in abundance. But usually you wanted a sim these days, you downloaded it. That was the only legal way, anymore, since it ensured against copyright in-

er. He avoided their glances. None said a word. They all got off on different floors than he did.

He stopped in front of his door, searching his pocket for his key. He found it, punched it through, then jerked it back. The box bleeped INCORRECT READING—TRY AGAIN.

He stared at his door number for a minute. Then he returned to the elevator, silvery threads of thoughts straining his mind.

THE LOBBY WAS EMPTY.

He walked across the vastness of marble-patterned linoleum to the pictures. There was no one around, except for the receptionist/security guard, who was watching local baseball on a plain cathode screen behind the front desk.

The pictures were lined up on the wall by floor, with the room number stapled below the face. The photos were just cheap security-pass duplicates, as there had been a move just a couple weeks ago and they hadn't gotten around to the professional treatment yet.

He found the face of the woman in the bar and committed her room number to memory. She'd told him in the bar, but he hadn't really been listening. She wasn't all that pretty. Her body wasn't ideal, not magazine-cutout perfect. Her eyes were a little too large, much like a cartoon, and she was a little too short.

There was the woman who was from floor four, the blond who had ridden down in the elevator with him. She'd said only a word or two to him, but she wasn't ugly, and they *had* ridden in the elevator together, so maybe he had a shot.

He found the face of the woman who lived on his floor—right next door, in fact. The one who listened to that terrible music and watched a lot of pornography. He was often torn, late at night, between punching his hand through the wall and masturbating. Most nights, he did neither.

Well, he hardly needed her number, but he made a mental note of it anyway. Three numbers. It would surely do. Then, as a final safeguard, he memorized the number of a pretty brunette from floor twenty. It was completely random and probably utterly futile, but she *was* beautiful. Then he turned and walked towards the front doors.

THE NIGHT WAS WARM AND BLACK. AS HE STEPPED from the shadow of his building, he was born, a blind fetus emerging into the stinging putrescence of neon and graffiti, the undead commercial night. He almost turned back.

He passed by numerous receding doorways, all washing the sidewalk with voices, synthetic music, boisterous rainbow light. Hot stumbling bodies entering and exiting, narrowly avoiding tripping over their own feet. He followed none of them, and eventually their laughter dissipated somewhere behind him.

The tumult of bastardized daylight slowly receded to true night, the streets fading away to the warmth and desuetude that he longed for. Cracking pavement, shallow streetlight.

He held it for awhile, not looking at it, not looking at much at all. He liked the feel of it in his hand, smooth and one. Hard, complete, old.

But he couldn't escape it. Not even here in the slums. The distant hum of engines, music, electricity, even voices. He felt small, all of a sudden, like a toy in a box.

He kicked something. He stopped walking, enraptured by its movement as it skidded across blacktop. He sat down on a nearby bench, leaned over, and picked it up.

He held it for awhile, not looking at it, not looking at much at all. He liked the feel of it in his hand, smooth and one. Hard, complete, old. He slipped it into his jacket pocket without a thought and sat there for a little while longer before getting up. The night was cooling, and he zippered his jacket up to his neck.

LATE AT NIGHT, WITH DAWN ENCROACHING BEYOND a rosy pavement horizon.

Unable to sleep, he rolled over and kicked the covers from the bed. He got up and walked over to the generic building-supplied deck, which was mounted on the television. He goggled.

He tried to remember the names and the numbers. No, the names didn't matter. The woman in the bar, however, was Rita Ess, something like that, and the woman next door he knew as Jennifer Rourque. But the numbers. The numbers were eluding him.

A cartoon dwarf with egregious cartoon breasts stood in the bottom right hand corner of his vision, patiently tapping one foot. "Need any help?" she breathed.

He goggled out and entered the numbers manually. He remembered all four, finally, but left out the woman at the bar. She was a bit strange. That whole test thing. Some kind of joke. A game. He could do without.

She wasn't that pretty, anyway. Not really. Not really.

He fell asleep minutes before the sun began to filter past soot-stained building tops.

AWOKE THE NEXT DAY. HE RUBBED HIS EYES WITH dry, peeling hands. He hated the soap here. He blinked through the sleep in his eyes and focused on the clock.

She got off on ground level, but he rode it further, down to the first sub-basement. He stepped from the elevator into cool temperature control. It was hot, very hot, and very loud, but it was also very crisp and cool down here. One thing he could say about this building was that they had a hell of an environment simulator. Like walking through a cool breeze on a warm summer day, or relishing the first soft telltale caresses of distant summer on a late winter day, with the snow melting beneath your feet, puddles everywhere, the effervescent purl of water dripping hollowly through rusting eave troughs.

Seasons, he thought. Were those a dream?

He walked past the burly bouncers who were almost undoubtedly there just for ornamentation, as he'd seen girls thirteen, fourteen, maybe younger, in the club numerous times. But when he asked them they all said they were nineteen, sometimes twenty, and the bouncers didn't care, and neither did the management, nor the tenants, so why should he?

The music was too loud. The lights were too dim. The flashball hanging from the ceiling and the numerous spasm bulbs that lined the walls almost made up for the darkness, but it was an uneven, convulsive light they shed.

He sat at the bar and ordered a drink, the special they had advertised on a chalkboard out beside the elevator. Something called Hedonist Frenzy, and he wasn't sure what that meant, but he ordered it anyway. He signed his name on the magnetic strip that the bartender handed him after he said he would be charging the tab to his room. The bartender took it back, frowned at him, and frowned at his signature, as if trying to discern if it was a fake, as if he could tell by powers of vision alone. Then it beeped, and he could hear it beep, even over the deafening, ubiquitous thud of the music. A little corner of the slab lit up green, and the bartender handed him his drink.

He sipped it, liked it, and spun around slowly on his stool, all charm and boredom and scintillating indifference. Half imagining he was being watched, or maybe filmed. He smiled apathetically at the dance floor, at all the people, and imagined they smiled back.

A woman sat down next to him and his heart shuddered. He caught a glimpse of her left breast, a sidelong glance, as she talked to the bartender. He couldn't hear her words. Then she was looking at him. He forced his eyes to meet hers. She was smiling. A complex smile. She said something to him.

"What?" he said, too quiet.

"What?" she said.

He shook his head. She shrugged and smiled. She followed his glance, out to the dance floor and the thrash of the crowd. Then she looked back at him.

"What are you doing this weekend?" she asked.

So blunt. Just like that. His face flushed.

"No plans yet," he said, too loud.

She smiled. "Want to have sex?"

He choked on his tongue a little, trying to swallow what was in his mouth. It burned his throat and coated his stomach with heat.

"Do you go around asking everyone like that? Just up front? Do you just—"

He stopped himself. Jesus, what was he saying?

But she kept smiling, although the smile faded somehow, if only in her eyes.

"It's just a test," she said, and looked away.

"What?"

She looked back. Her eyes were black, he thought. Like the leather she was wearing. But it wasn't leather either, some sort of plastic, which was pretty bold, both because it was revealing as hell and because it was, after all, real plastic. No, he thought, he didn't know that for sure. But he liked the idea.

"It's a test. I just say that to guys, sometimes, you know, to see their reaction. If I don't like their reaction then I laugh in their face and tell them to fuck off."

He sipped some more of his drink and tried to avoid looking at her cleavage, but the drink was gone. He placed the glass on the bar. His hand shook slightly. Looked at her breasts. Then her face.

"Why?"

She laughed, but the smile faded further. "Fuck, I don't know." She was yelling, enough to be heard, he supposed, but he was afraid everyone in the club could hear. Before long, they'd all be looking at him, watching his reaction, and it would become a global test, an initiation, a joke. "A lot of people are assholes. I think it's good to start with a really blunt question that's on everyone's mind anyway, but they're usually too chickenshit to say it or even hint at it, right? And it's a theory, sort of, that people will act most like themselves under pressure, and that's probably all wrong, way off, but I at least know what they're like under pressure, how they can cope, what they can take, and sometimes, you know," she said with a sly smile, "I need to know that."

She turned toward him and moved closer, sliding one black—plastic-clad leg over the edge of her stool.

"So, I ask you, you wanna fuck?" She smiled.

He asked for her room number and promised to call her. She shrugged indifferently and let her chest fall a little as he walked away.

Walked past the people, around the people, through the people, out the door, into the elevator. Finally, the doors slid shut with a pneumatic purr and he was alone with the pounding of his heart.

HE MET THREE PEOPLE ON HIS WAY BACK TO HIS apartment. Two women and a man. None of them togeth-

G o n e

CRAIG BOYKO

People have different ways of dealing with loneliness: some seek comfort outward, and some retreat inward. And sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

HE WALKED IN WITH A BAG OF GROCERIES, locking the door behind him—an ingrained habit. There was really nothing here worth stealing, and no one with so much as an intention to steal got in the building anyway. But it was habit, and habits rarely die; they can only be repressed.

He walked through the darkness, avoiding the light switch. They had voice rec here, not like the last place he had been, and for the first week or so he had found it handy. "Light," light. "Light," no light. "Television," television. Handy. But the lights here were harsh, and there was no dimmer option, so in that sense he faintly missed the old place.

A string of old places, like faded photographs, only more potent: photographs of the mind. Images he didn't want to recall but that came unbidden. The past did that. Plagued you. Even if it was just a past of vacancies and nothingness. You had to look back. Too simple to live obliviously in the present. At night, and at quiet times, whenever the world burned around him, it turned into six o'clock attack-mode drama-news. The crackling newsreel of his life, coated with sugar-candy sweetness so the present would do an even harsher fade-over.

He realized he was standing a few feet inside the door of his apartment, in darkness, thinking about nothing at all, except maybe the past. He shut that down, hard, and walked to the kitchen nook.

Put the paper bag down on the counter. Paper bags, like from his past. When that had been so much vogue. Use paper, use paper, recycle, recycle, make the world free and clean and beautiful again. Something people in general didn't much understand was the phrase *Point of No Return.*

He emptied the contents of the bag. A six-pack of Coke. Piña Colada-flavored Crest. Condoms. Kleenex.

He stared past the darkness of his apartment and out to the dust-filtered flickering twilight that was setting down on the city.

What city was this? he wondered. Something with a *C,* he thought, and midwestern. Maybe Cleveland, or Chicago, but in the end it didn't really matter.

He didn't really need to go shopping. In this building, all you had to do was make a list through the idiot-proof television menus and your order would appear magically the next day at nine in your food tube. Unless you were paranoid, afraid of technology—which usually meant *old*. Then you could get someone to bring it up to your door every morning. He didn't think there were any old people in this building, anyway. They had other buildings for them.

He put the Cokes in the fridge and left the rest scattered on the counter. He folded the paper bag carefully and dropped it into the incinerator tube. Latched it, fired it. Listened to the whir of the interior vacuum as it sucked the bag away through walls and floors, past pipes and wires, into an implicit fire that burned perpetually, miles below ground.

He'd seen girls thirteen, fourteen, maybe younger, in the club. They all said they were nineteen, and the bouncers didn't care, and neither did the tenants, so why should he?

He sat down on the couch with a Coke and looked out the wall-window, out at the cityscape, the world. His little corner of it, anyway.

Not really seeing anything, but knowing there were people out there, behind the steel and the smog and beneath the cement and streetlights, hidden away behind reflectorized glass. People loving, people thinking, people watching TV.

But the image was distant to him, forlorn, and he abandoned it.

HE LEFT THE APARTMENT. IN THE HALLWAY, HE STOLE a furtive glance around. No one to ask him about the weather, or the pollution index this week, or television, or the illicit poodle that was pissing in the hallway and seemed to belong to no one.

He locked his door with the key they gave out mostly because it was a reference point, a symbol of false security, a hallmark from the past that was also ingrained. The keybox on the door beeped sonorously and lit up red. He turned and walked down the hall, hands in his pockets.

The elevator, empty. Until it reached level four, and then a woman of about his age got on. They were all his age. All heterosexual, too. The communes made sure of that. He nodded at her solemnly. After she asked if the elevator was going down, he nodded and looked away.

The Web

RUSSELL BUTEK

One person's lifestyle is another one's crime.
It's all a matter of perspective.

MY MEALS OFTEN TALK WITH ME, THOUGH rarely with such clarity as your conversation possesses. Typically, if they talk at all, it's with whining entreaties. They lack intelligence, and I do them a favor by consuming them quickly. But even these I shouldn't fault. They weren't designed for depth, and they do often impart some bits of information.

I'll devour anything that comes my way, but your kind are rare gems, so full of thought. My great desire in life is to pass my time in endless idle discourse such as this, but, alas, as no doubt even you feel at this moment, my livelihood incessantly intrudes. You'll pardon me while I go and tie down my next meal before it shreds that quadrant of my web.

IT IS ONE OF THE NEARLY SILENT ONES; AN OCCASIONAL whimper is all that it passes on to me. But it may serve to extend my time with you; a bit of lucky sustenance will prolong our idle discourse. I only hope the breezes stay as quiet as they've been, else I will be called off to mending. When the winds arise, I have no time for idleness, and since the work takes a furious amount of my energy, I must consume whatever is about without consideration of my finer desires.

One of your kind once asked me why I don't build my web lower, out of the wind. The suggestion seemed a wonderful idea at the time, so I tried it. The anticipation of a more leisurely life was quite exciting. I built an elaborate lattice in a corner near the floor far from any draft. It had as much beauty as function. I almost starved. Very few meals wandered into my new corner. It was a terribly naive experiment, but it taught me many things. One of which is a distrust of your kind. I still hunger for your ideas, but I treat them with more caution.

Oh, dear, I feel a storm approaching. Can you not feel the sway as the wind nibbles at the anchor points? I'm afraid I'll have to desert you for a few moments. The web needs reinforcing… perhaps a snack…

THE CLOVER IS NOW BLOSSOMING. MY SNACK HAD partaken of its nectar.

Yes, I've strengthened the web in the past. Don't think me a fool for living in such a precarious condition. I've strengthened the web: I've doubled the thickness of the lines, doubled again and tripled the primary threads and increased the number of anchor points. It took a much stronger draft to shake the web then, and the usual fare took longer to fray it, but then more than the usual fare came my way. Meals I couldn't handle began to threaten me before they escaped, and they would completely shred the web in the process. Today's web wouldn't even slow one of them down. They would destroy a couple of threads in passing, but I would still have a home.

I was slowly dying in those days, trying to keep my Great Web intact. I talked not at all. I still don't have time for the conversations I desire, but at least now a greeting passes between my meals and myself.

You ask why, if I enjoy your conversation so, why I

I'll devour anything that comes my way, but your kind are rare gems, so full of thought.

catch you and poison you and consume you. First I must say that I take offense at you calling it poison—stop twitching so, all you'll do is tear the web and I'll have no time to chat; hold still, I'll tie your errant wing down—poison implies pain, but what I do takes away all pain. In time I will simply fade away. That is all.

But there is the catching and consuming. The catching is pure serendipity. If I could control it, I would catch more of your kind and less of the others. And the consuming? Well, that is my nature. Just as it is your nature not to be neighborly to my kind. Would you greet me cheerfully if I would wander from my web and discover your nest? You see? You wouldn't tolerate my presence, so I must take what conversation I can, however I can, whenever my tangled web permits. I would much prefer that my nature were other than it is, perhaps that I were one of your kind. My time would be much freer of toil and fuller in thought. But my nature merely allows me to chat momentarily before feeding.

I see that you are fading. I will tire you no longer. Your kind is full of wisdom, but it is also full of the most delectable of juices.

RUSSELL BUTEK

Has B.S. and M.S. degrees in Computer Science from the University of Wisconsin, but finds computers dull enough to have taken up writing in his spare time in an attempt to avoid geekhood. (His wife doesn't think it's working.) He currently lives in Minnesota. His home on the World Wide Web is <http://homepage.rconnect.com/butek/>.

Chuck's China Town used a steam line set up cafeteria-style, where the customers pointed at what they wanted and could see the employees prepare their plates. Becky didn't like it. Several times each day, she'd hear: "Put some more meat in there; I'm not a vegetarian!," "Is that all you get for a dollar?" and "You're going to give me more than that or I'm not coming back."

The idea of not coming back appealed to her. She liked most of the customers, but the mean ones reminded her of Skydown, where everyone made her feel wrong, abnormal, unacceptable. Chuck, a self-proclaimed cowboy, said to her from behind the cash register, "Hey, Becky, wanna quit giving everyone double servings?" Just before time to clock out, someone dropped a glass of papaya juice, in keeping with the secret rule that something must spill before Becky's shift could end.

WHEN BECKY GOT HOME, SHE FOUND KYLE WEARING his traditional black T-shirt and blue jeans combination and smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

"What have you been up to, Kyle Blake?" she asked, pointing at him.

"Good news."

"Your job?"

He nodded. "Not full-time yet, but it's a start."

"Honey, that's great." She hugged him; instead of the expected smell of Kyle's sweat from all his work around the house, she smelled the cologne he wore whenever they went out.

"I wanted to do something special, since this is Good News Day *aannnndd*… it's also March the fifth. You remember what March the fifth is, don't you?"

"The day I dropped the phone in the blender?"

Kyle laughed. "You're joking."

"Never mind. Could it be my birthday?" Becky never mentioned her birthday, because her family never really celebrated birthdays or anniversaries.

"Could be. I caught a ride uptown with one of the guys from work to pick up some things. Come with me." He grabbed her hand and pulled her forward, as if he were ready to lead her through Wonderland.

She found newspapers spread out on the kitchen table, with a stack of paints and canvases in the middle, and she touched the paint tubes as if touching the charred remains of some treasure lost in an invader's arson. "Why did you buy all this?"

"For you. It's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. I don't have time."

"Becky, I think your artwork could make you happy, just like having my job back makes me happy. When I saw your work at your parents' house, I felt like I was seeing inside you. And when you left all your paintings and supplies there, you left a part of yourself."

She shook her head. "I'm not an artist, Kyle. That was just something I did when I was bored."

He tossed up his hands. "Whatever. Why don't you go change? We can at least go out and eat."

"Kyle…"

"Let's not talk about it. If you don't change your mind, I'll take it all back tomorrow. God knows we could use the money."

Becky stared at the supplies for a second, then went to the bedroom and changed clothes. She could see how much it hurt Kyle for her to refuse his gift, but why bring back something that made people call her crazy?

AT 3 A.M., BECKY GREW TIRED OF LAYING AWAKE, SO she got out of bed, slipping from the accepted weight of Kyle's encircling arm. She couldn't stop thinking about the blank canvases.

Pulling the paints and a canvas closer, she sat down at the table. She would work on a painting, only for Kyle and for herself. He would keep her secret, that she had to paint. No one would see her work and call it cute or dumb or psychotic. She would sit at her kitchen table every night. If Regina called, Becky would continue working while listening to Regina rave, continue creating worlds that only Kyle would see.

Her hands moved, unbound, across the page, releasing an image she held captive in her mind.

DUANE SIMOLKE

Has had his work published in Midwest Poetry Review, Mesquite, the New Voice of Nebraska, International Journal On World Peace, *and others. His electronic publications include* Ydrasil, The Bridge*, and* Poetry Exchange. *An English major, he received his B.A. at Belmont University, M.A. at Hardin-Simmons University, and Ph.D. at Texas Tech University.*

The all-blue shirt and slacks of Sam's Shoe Store cried out for a patch, a stain, anything to break the monotony—anything but orange polka dots. *Poor guy,* she thought, eating the over-spiced eggs and smiling contentedly.

"When are you going to get all your paintings from your parents' house?" he asked, again examining the earrings. She had asked him one night if he daydreamed like she did, though she feared bringing up the subject, letting him see the side of herself that everyone despised and wanted to destroy. He replied, "Of course," then rolled over and began snoring, as if the subject held no controversy.

"One day. Maybe the next time we visit."

"When will that be?"

"I'm not sure." She never told anyone the next thing she had heard Regina saying to her parents, as she leaned against the door, losing all hope of entering the contest. Regina said they should take the paintings to that horrid family therapist they visited every month. Becky left the paintings in Louisiana, left them to rot like Skydown.

She could just hear his likely reactions: "Yes, yes, very special—unhealthy repressions—what's wrong with her?" But he never said anything about the paintings. Instead, after two years of sessions, he read them part of an article and said, "Becky has Attention Deficit Disorder." Becky got up and walked out, saying, "You're the one with the disorder." They never went back to counseling.

"Well," said Kyle, yanking her from her thoughts and pointing at his five-dollar watch. "You'd better go if you're going to be early."

"Kyle, am I crazy?"

"No more than the rest of us." He kept staring at her earrings. "You shouldn't listen to Regina, especially not after that speech she gave us last week about the hazards of ADD. She sounded like a public service announcement."

"You hate that robe," said Becky. "Why don't you go right out and say it?" Her voice became louder as the words leapt from her mouth.

"I've gotten used to it. Weren't we talking about Regina?"

"I don't wanna talk about Regina." She saw that annoyed look, when his eyes get big. "I'm sorry, honey. Having two jobs is wearing me out."

"Having no job isn't exactly a thrill for me."

She took one of his rough hands between hers, squeezed gently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I have to go."

BECKY SPENT MOST OF THE NEXT FIVE HOURS staring at feet: thin feet, fat feet, feet shaped like dog bones. With the attention of an artist, she noticed every detail. Even the toes varied in width and length. Some people's small toes surpassed their big toes. She liked the children and college students who wore no socks, allowing her to see every scar, wrinkle, callus, or whatever else socks might conceal.

One young man asked her if she'd even seen a foot before. "Not yours," she replied. He shook his head, put his shoe back on, and marched to the manager's desk. Becky worried about customer complaints, afraid of losing one of her jobs before Kyle got his job back. He needed her. Someone actually needed her!

The manager, an older woman with hair like white cotton candy, called her aside during their lunch in the break room to warn her about this latest complaint.

"I know you've been working too hard. You can take a few days off if you need to."

"I can't quit. My—"

"Becky, honey, I don't want you to quit. You're too popular with the children who try on shoes just so you'll tell them a story. Besides, who would make all the posters? I'd have to go back to those generic ones we get in the mail, with square letters and a white background."

Becky smiled. "I'm all right. I'll get some extra rest this weekend."

"That's a great idea. Still, I'd rather you cut back to twenty hours a week for the rest of March. We'll be slow anyway."

"No. I can't do that. I mean, I don't wanna do that."

"You're a special girl, Becky."

Becky went back to work, trying to convince herself that her boss knew nothing about her past. Special, after all, usually meant something good.

Becky spent the next five hours starting at feet. She liked children and college students who wore no socks, letting her see every scar, wrinkle, and callus. With the attention of an artist, she noticed every detail.

Clock-out time soon came, and Becky walked three doors away, to Chuck's China Town, a building painted with green and red stripes. Regina called it Chuck's Culture Shock Express and said just looking at the place could make Santa Claus hate Christmas. "Regina. I hope she isn't planning a visit," said Becky.

A chubby man with a cigar, walking out as she walked in, asked, "Who's Regina?"

Becky felt her cheeks redden as she realized she was talking to herself. "Regina's my big sister."

He blew cigar smoke in her face and said, "Well, if she wants a decent serving for lunch, she won't come here." He walked away as Becky walked inside.

list of simplistic classes that bored her even more than her old classes. She tried to improve, but none of the work interested her, until the school hired a special-ed teacher who used creativity in her teaching style and the assignments.

At thirteen, Becky "assimilated" (a word mostly said with pride) into lower-level classes with the "normal" kids. She soon missed her special-ed teacher, a sweet woman who loved her students without ever calling them "wrong." She even told Becky, "there's nothing wrong with you. If anything, you're exceptionally gifted." Later, she moved into honors classes, where she made straight A's. Nothing wrong.

"WHAT'S WRONG?" ASKED KYLE, WEARING THE polka-dotted bathrobe she had bought him as a wedding gift. He wore it every morning, never voicing the repulsion his face had revealed when he first unwrapped it.

"Regina was on the phone, being… herself." Becky touched the top of his long, thick brown hair, after noticing how it stood up on one side and lay flat on the other. "I like your new hairstyle."

"Hey, some people pay fifty bucks to get their hair to look like mine does in the morning."

"I can't imagine you spending fifty dollars for a haircut."

"No way. You didn't make breakfast, did you? I wanted to take you out for breakfast."

"That's sweet," she said, rubbing one of the orange polka-dots on his chest. She wondered if she had ordered the wrong robe, but she couldn't remember what the others looked like. Why would she buy him something so frightening? "But I don't have time. We're marking all the men's shoes down for a sale, so I'm supposed to be in early."

"You should've told me. I would've made breakfast."

"I'm sorry. I thought I told you. I know I told someone. Anyway, you don't have to make me breakfast. If you don't stop being so nice to me, I'm never going to run off with the mailman."

"Oh well." He kissed her.

"I have to get ready." Becky lightly pushed away from her husband, like the way she reluctantly put down a novel when she would rather read all night than sleep.

"I'll scramble some eggs real quick, while you're in the shower," he said. "Too bad we don't have a microwave. Then I could cook up a big breakfast in just a few seconds."

"Maybe when we get our tax refunds."

"We already spent those."

"Oh yeah." Becky wandered into the bathroom, trying to remember what they had bought, but she soon lost herself in the pressure and coolness of the shower. She always loved cold showers—they reminded her of a fall rain. She saw herself dancing on a stage with the children from her special-ed classes. And they sang, perfectly. Neither the dancing nor the singing embarrassed them, though they sang before hundreds of people.

Then one of them spoke, his tongue barely moving as he mumbled his lines. No one could understand; everyone left. "No," said Becky. "It shouldn't end that way." She used to control her fantasies, always granting happy endings.

"Breakfast is served." Kyle's fake Cajun accent rang through the bathroom door. Becky had met him when he went to visit his relatives in her Louisiana hometown. Her parents loved him and kept saying what a good man she had finally found, but Regina never liked him at all. Regina never liked anyone Becky liked, and she made sure everyone knew it. But Regina still followed them to West Texas and kept checking up on them.

Becky dried off and dressed, omitting the sparse lipstick and eye shadow she usually wore. She stopped at the mirror only to brush her wavy blonde hair and to put on the earrings she had made in twelfth-grade art class, tiny replicas of the elflike creatures she created for one of her fantasy paintings, *Come With Me*. Her art teacher wanted her to enter the painting in a state-wide contest, but Becky convinced herself she couldn't win. Still, she showed it to her parents, who said "How cute," and pointed out that she shouldn't travel to Baton Rouge or anywhere else without them.

She had gone into the living room but stood outside the door to hear what they really thought. Instead of their voices, she heard Regina's: "Most of those modern artists take drugs to get their ideas. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if they tried to get Becky to take drugs. And you know how naive she is." When Becky heard that, she knew they wouldn't change their minds about letting her go. Regina had spoken.

Becky opened the door to see Kyle reaching for the doorknob.

"Hey, you're wearing the earrings," he said, pushing her hair behind her eyes so he could admire the intricate details she had also stopped to see: olive-like eyes, flat noses, harmless smiles, star-shaped buttons. Kyle always showed interest in her art, unlike anyone else—other than her high school art teacher. "Aren't those from the painting I like?" he asked, stroking her hair.

"*Come With Me*. Yes." She smiled. He always knew what to remember, what to say.

"Well, then, come with me." He threw his muscular arms outward, then lifted his hands, motioning toward the kitchen. "I think I've perfected the scrambled egg."

Staring at the Bathrobe from Hell and the man inside it, she walked into the kitchen, buttoning her work clothes.

Come With Me

DUANE SIMOLKE

What one person sees as a cross to bear, another can see as a tremendous gift.

FASTER, LOUDER, FASTER, LOUDER, THE ALARM clock beeped. Becky, again regretting her New Year's resolution to never leave the alarm clock close enough to reach without getting out of bed, grabbed the lamp stand by its closest leg and pulled it towards herself. After stopping the lamp stand from tipping over, she turned off the tiny siren.

The bed's other occupant remained undisturbed. Becky looked at the man she had eloped with four months earlier; a hint of a smile creased his face into dimples, making him look even more boyish than usual. Seeing this twenty-year-old as a child made her think of her own childhood, staring out the school bus window, into her dreams. The other children, who rarely talked to her but often talked about her, thought she stared only at the dismal houses and roadsides of their tiny Louisiana town, as if nothing else could exist there.

"Is everything the same as yesterday?" one of the children once asked her. "Are there any new blades of grass?"

As Becky got out of bed, Kyle rolled over and mumbled something about his pickup. "Okay, honey," Becky whispered, in case he wasn't just talking in his sleep. Kyle kept fixing everything—her car, his truck, the broken refrigerator shelf, the bathtub faucets with *hot* and *cold* on the wrong knobs. He even tried to fix the washing machine, which kept stashing their socks in some secret hiding place.

She told him they could both use her car if they set up carpooling schedules with their co-workers, but what he mostly needed was for the three-month lay-off to end so he and the other newer workers could go back to the factory.

The older workers cherished the same job they had complained about for years, from what Kyle told her, cherished it as deeply as Becky's sister had cherished her status as the only child for the eight years before Becky's birth, then cherished her position as "the older one." Becky couldn't see why the factory managers wouldn't want to hire Kyle back; he always worked so hard and got so excited about his projects.

The phone rang. She ran into the living room to get it before it could wake Kyle.

"Good morning, Rebecca Wilma."

Becky cringed at the sound of her middle name.

"Good morning, Regina." She tried not to yawn while she spoke, but her sister's name came out as *Ruuuhjeeennnuh.*

"I know it's early, but I've been with Dirk every night, and I just haven't had a chance to see how your little job is doing."

"Which one?" Becky wanted to point out how much Regina's big mouth got on her *little* nerves, but she resisted, as always. She just thanked God that Regina and Dirk had gotten back together, so Dirk could keep Regina occupied.

"The new one, at the Japanese restaurant."

"Chinese."

Regina grunted. "Who can tell the difference? Those places get closed down all the time. I hope your husband's planning to go back to work soon."

"Becky's unable to concentrate," her teacher told the principal. "Unwilling." Then came tests, teasing, and her parents telling her they loved her, no matter what was wrong. *Wrong?* She never felt wrong.

"Yes, he is," said Becky, stressing each word to the point of sounding like a bad typist, speaking while hitting one key at a time. "I have to get ready for work. Did you need something?"

"No. Just seeing how my little sister is doing."

"Your little sister is doing just fine and dandy. I have to get my shower. Bye." She hung up the phone before Regina could remind her to take her medicine; she hated the way Regina always brought up her condition.

Her mind drifted into the past, where a ten-year-old girl with blonde pony tails stared at a basic skills exam. "Becky's unable to concentrate," she heard one of her teachers tell the principal. "Unwilling." Her teachers never understood how a bluejay's song from outside the window could ignite her imagination, sending her dreaming away while still awake. Then came test after test and Regina's teasing and her parents telling her they loved her, no matter what was wrong with her.

Wrong? She never felt wrong. Why would her parents call her wrong? She stayed out of trouble and never hurt anyone.

Then she went to special education classes, in her principal's words, "for a little while, to see how you do." A little while became a semester and a year and an endless

"I'm going to bed. Coming?"

"Yes," I barely say, standing. My knees are a little shaky.

LYING IN BED, ANNIE'S ARM ACROSS MY STOMACH, her head on my shoulder, I stare out the window of my room. This is the same window I have looked out for years. I've seen the seasons change here enough times to know exactly what they look like. I know the way the backyards look under the blue streetlight in winter, when everything is asleep. I know that our yard gets more leaves on it than Brodie's. I know it perfectly.

"I think we should try dating first," she says into my neck. I can feel her breath on me.

"You sure?" I can hear Sam's legs move; she's dreaming.

"More than I was when I left." I feel her kiss my shoulder.

"You'll have to get used to a dog," I laugh.

"Okay."

Twin beds are too small for two people, but for right now, it's fine.

MOM IS SHAKING ME. "YOU'RE WASTING THE DAY," she whispers into my ear. I hunch my shoulders and giggle, pulling the covers up around me. I know the blankets are untucked at the bottom of the bed but my feet don't reach down there yet, anyway. "Do you want to go to the store with me?"

"Yeah." I sit up.

"Then get cleaned up quick. I'm going in ten minutes."

At the grocery, she pushes the cart. "Get a cantaloupe," she directs me and I go over and begin to pick them up, one by one, until I find the heaviest.

I hand it to her. "This one?"

"Well, it's pretty good, but it's not ready. You see the little veins on it?" she says, tracing one with her pinkie.

"Yeah." I trace one too.

"When the color between the little veins is orange, then it's ripe. Otherwise they're still green, and you have to wait."

"Okay," and I start to look for another one. When I find it we buy both; the other one will be ripe in a few days.

WHEN I WAKE UP, ANNIE IS GONE AND I SMELL THE air outside through the open window. The Satorys are mowing their lawn. I look out the window at the two of them. Jerry pushes the mower in diagonal stripes over the yard while Alice works along the edge of the sidewalk. The lawn is different colors of green depending on which way the mower went over it, like velour. I'm nine blocks away from my mother's body, but she is still in this house. Out back by the gate fertilizing her hollies, tying Sam to the run, or digging grass out from between the bricks of the patio like Alice is doing. Today, I put my mother in the ground that she loves, that I love, so much. I wish we could bury her in her own garden or back under the evergreens and strawberries across the street. That's where she belongs.

"WE'RE GOING TO TRY TO WORK THINGS OUT," I SAY to Sarah, sitting together while people come by to shake my hand and say, "Hello. Your mother was…" Annie is talking to Pastor Lucas. I can see them.

"I know."

"Mom would be happy, don't you think?"

"Mom's happy regardless of what you do."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think this is the place," Sarah says, leaning forward to hug Mrs. Paterson, whom she doesn't know. Then she leans over to me and hugs me tight, just for a moment, and I know she's happy from the hitch in her throat. She protects me because she loves me.

WHEN WE GET BACK TO THE HOUSE, THERE IS A SORT of reception. People come by. I know almost all of them, Sarah knows less, Anne knows most of the ones I do. In the afternoon, I go out in the backyard. I sit down next to the garden and let the tears come up. Mom's flowers are better than the ones at the church, I decide, and somehow this stops the crying. Then I see the steak knife in the dirt. I pick it up and go over to cut a bachelor button to put it in my lapel, but then I think better of it and cut an azalea instead. I put the knife in my pocket. I need to tell Sarah that, more than anything, I want this.

NEAL GORDON

Studied writing at the University of Iowa and completed his graduate work at Temple University, during which time he published several stories, including an excerpt from his unpublished novel. He currently teaches at the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia and works with the Working Writers Group, a long-running critical group.

condescending. She is much older than Anne in some ways.

"I left him. It wasn't right." Annie's voice cracks. Someone sits down on the big bed. I can hear it.

"Well, good. I hope it was awful," Sarah says quickly.

"I don't have to listen to this." The begonias in the living room are blooming, I notice.

"What makes you think you can come here after you've pulled all this crap?" One of them moves across the room and I look up again.

"He called."

"Of course he called. He loves you. And you'd better understand the responsibility of that." A shoe steps on the grate. It's Sarah's shoe, and I step out of view.

"I do."

There is some quiet talk that I can't hear, as I think about who is responsible for what. She had said that I'd lost myself in the restaurant. That I'd let go of the things she wanted from me. I didn't let go; I just got too busy to live.

"He's going to be very successful, now that the restaurant is getting good reviews," Sarah says, after some time. She sounds a little softer. I think Annie's been crying. I go out to the front porch.

AT DINNER TIME, I'M IN THE KITCHEN WITH ANNE. She's taking the peeled sections out of oranges for a salad. I showed her how to take the peel off and then the individual sections out of their skins.

"I hear you're dating," I say. I don't think she knows that I listened earlier.

"No, I'm not," she says, picking up another orange.

"Oh." I start to pick the cooked chicken meat from the bone for the chicken-walnut sandwiches. There are lots of tendons and small bones that you have to watch out for. I throw a piece of the chicken meat to Sam, who snaps it out of the air. Her thick tail slaps the ground.

"Are you?"

"No," I say without looking up. This is a very complicated task that requires attention.

"I did see someone for awhile," she says. "What else do you want in this?"

"Do some of those pears. What happened?" I say, looking over at her. I have to stop what I'm doing to do this.

She looks straight at me. "I had to tell him everything. We didn't have anything between us."

"Oh."

"He didn't know me."

AFTER DARK, THE THREE OF US ARE SITTING ON THE back patio. It is so dark that I can see only outlines, shadows. The crickets have replaced the cicadas' rhythmic whir. I feel much better than last night.

"This was a lot worse for me when Dad died," Sarah says.

"I was just there with Mom, mostly. I couldn't break down until it was over."

"What was he really like?" Annie asks Sarah.

I hear Sarah's ice cubes clink in her glass as she sits back. "Firm but very fair. Like when I got hit by a car—"

"When did you get hit by a car?" I've never heard about it.

"Way before you were born. A lot happened before you were born, Newt. Dad spanked me the next day. I know he didn't want to, but I think he really felt like he was supposed to. I think he did a lot of things because he thought he was supposed to." She takes a small sip of her drink. She hasn't called me Newt in ten years or so. It was Dad's name for me.

"That's not the way I remember him. I remember that he always knew exactly what he was doing." I look at Annie; she's heard my side.

"He just acted that way around you. He used to call me in college and ask me how he should handle things with you."

"You're kidding."

"No, he really worried about how you and he were. Everyone knew you were Mom's. I used to be mad at you that he died first. Isn't that stupid?" I shift a bit in my seat and so does Anne. It's funny to think of my family talking about me. And Sarah getting upset. We all sit still for a minute.

"He used to wash his feet in the bathroom sink," I say, more for myself than for anyone.

"With Ivory soap. I used to sit there, talking, while he stood on one foot, washing the other," Sarah adds. Anne laughs.

"Why did he do that?"

"I never thought to ask at the time, but I found out from Mom that when he was in the war he didn't want to catch anything and he really didn't get a chance to bathe too often so he washed his feet in his helmet instead," Sarah says and sets her empty drink on the ground.

"I tried to wash my feet like that a few times, but I had to sit on the sink ledge because I was too short, and Mom had a fit."

"I'm going up to bed." Sarah says and stands. The crickets stop chirping and I hear Sam stretch and get up.

When the back porch screen bangs closed, Anne puts a hand out to me. "I've really missed you," she says. The top of my chest feels tight. I can't say anything. The crickets start their chorus again, reassured by my silence.

"I'm not going through with the divorce, unless you want me to because of what I did," she says.

"It's history. I never wanted you to leave in the first place."

here when we were kids and watch the fireworks. They always mowed the lawn just before, and you could smell the freshly cut grass, feel it poking the back of your legs through the blanket. The sky would be full with exploding stars and M-80s that you felt in your chest a split second before you heard them in your ears. When it was over, the sky looked out-of-proportion big and the stars were dull as you waited for one more volley. The sky was huge. I lean back in the grass.

"So you want the silver and the china?" I say, feeling like a game-show host instead of a grieving son. And the rest of that on a Spiegel gift certificate, Ron. I chuckle at the thought, and Sarah looks at me.

"I think we should keep them together." She spreads her skirt over her knees.

"I'll take the round table, and the chairs." I feel a little queasy.

"Do you want the sideboard?"

"Not particularly," I say, getting up. "Let's go back."

FROM A BLOCK AWAY I SEE THE CAR IN THE STREET and stop dead. I helped her pick it out a year ago; I should recognize it. Anne's here. It takes a moment for Sarah to figure it out. "What's she doing here?" she asks.

The front door is still open when we get there. "Annie?" I yell out. No answer. Her stuff is on the stairs, though. She brought an overnight and there is a clothing bag hanging from the railing. I go upstairs, expecting the bathroom to be closed. It's not. "Check the back patio," I yell down to Sarah. I turn into my room and there are American Beauties on my neatly made little bed.

I walk back downstairs just in time to see Anne coming out of Alice Satory's backyard, azaleas in hand, still talking and waving back. I'm struck by how good she looks, her strawberry blond hair loose and a yellow skirt flowing around her legs. Alice's yard is lined with dark evergreens along the back and Anne seems highlighted against them. Alice and my mom would take a wheelbarrow out there with buckets and gardening tools and pick the raspberries and strawberries and huckleberries that grew between the trunks of the trees. I can remember seeing Mom's backside sticking out between the trees.

Anne gives me a hug and a small kiss and I squeeze her a moment, remembering how nice she feels. It's been a couple of months since we've seen each other. The only real separation since we met nine years ago. "Where's Sarah?"

"Out back," I say, starting to let go, but she pulls me closer. Into her neck, I mumble, "Thanks for—"

"Sssshhhh. You're still my husband." Sarah comes back in and she and Anne exchange nods. They used to be close, like sisters maybe. Sarah's my lawyer now, though, and she turns up the stairs.

"Can you give me a hand a moment, Anne?" she says over her shoulder.

"Sure," Annie says, backing away from me without looking away. Her free hand catches the banister perfectly, and she slowly turns up the stairs. The azaleas are for Sarah's bed, I guess.

I stand under the grate, listening upstairs. "I don't think it's decent of you to come here, knowing he's upset about the divorce," Sarah says. "We're not divorced," Anne says.

I stand, listening at the bottom of the stairs as they walk down the hall. "I didn't think you'd be coming," Sarah says.

"I thought I should."

"For him or for Mom?" I hear Sarah as she closes the door to Mom's room. Without really thinking, I walk into the living room, losing the conversation for a moment. The house used to have steam heat and there are these round grates between all of the floors. We're not a very private family. I stand under the one to the bedroom, looking out the front window at the street and listening to them upstairs.

"Well, I don't think it's very decent of you to come here, knowing he's upset about the divorce," Sarah says.

"We're not divorced," Anne says. A green pick-up truck passes. Looks like Moraine's.

"Then what are all of those letters I keep getting from your lawyer about?"

"I'm not sure about the whole thing." I look up, wanting to read Annie's face. There are silver cobwebs in the grate.

"This is a damn good time to be unsure, after you've screwed him."

"Why are you suddenly acting like you care about him?" I hear Anne's voice rise like when we fought about having children and when she told me she'd slept with my ex-friend Dodge.

"Because he's my brother and my client, and I won't have you come here and upset him any more." I feel sick with the memory of Sarah protecting me. When I was ten she pulled two boys off of me in a fight. I started crying, not because I was hurt but because I was so mad.

"He called me and wanted me to come."

"When?" She couldn't understand that it was okay to be mad and fighting and ten years old, and I was too mad to speak.

"Last night, late." There is a long silence.

"I hear you've got another lover." Sarah can be very

left, so she's handling everything. It's not her fault that it won't, didn't, work out.

I close my eyes and lean back, soaking. Mom would tell me to get out of the tub—it's thundering outside. "Water is a great conductor," she'd say, leaning in the door, rolling her eyes. I'd be embarrassed that I was talking to her from the bath, and she'd laugh and come in and sit down on the toilet and keep talking. Mom never saw me as anything but her youngest child. None of us was very private. It's one of the things Anne had a hard time adjusting to. I listen to the rain for a minute.

I can remember standing on Sarah's balcony atop the back porch, one night when I was fourteen. It was summer and Sarah was in law school and I had taken over her room. I was wearing headphones at about two-thirty in the morning, listening to a radio station that doesn't come in during the day. There aren't many good stations up here, but at night you get more of them. It helps that we live on top of a hill.

I was looking out over the backyard, past the fence and over neighbors' backyards down our block and up the hill of the next. All the yards were laid out under the moon. At first I could barely see the heat lightning way off north. It grew slowly, and I could only see the effect of the black clouds overtaking the bright stars. It was like the stars were being turned off. When I could hear the thunder over the music, I counted, under my breath, between the sight and the sound. The storm came in and I went back inside and lay in my bed watching the lightning, hearing the storm's voice and thinking about Sarah's being gone.

IT'S ALMOST MIDNIGHT WHEN I CALL ANNIE.

"Hello, Anne?"

"Mmmm… Tyler?" I woke her up.

"I shouldn't have called."

"It's late. What's the matter?" Her sound is thick, syrup.

"My mother died."

"Where are you?" I know her eyes open in the dark, wide.

"At Mom's house. Home."

"Are you alone?"

"Just me and the house. Even Sam's at the kennel."

"You shouldn't be alone." Her voice is gentle.

"It's okay. I just thought you should know."

"You should have called me, I'd have gone with you."

"Would you?"

"Yes," she says, but it's a very quiet yes. A hard-to-admit yes, a late-at-night-only yes. Like something that's covered with tissue paper but you can still tell what it is. We both hear it.

I CLIMB INTO MY OLD BED, THE BED I GREW UP IN. Twin beds are big enough if there's only one person in them. I'm used to a queen-sized, but the only queen-sized is Mom's. I'm okay in here.

WHEN I GET BACK WITH SAM FROM THE KENNEL, Sarah is sitting in the living room. Sam looks at her and turns towards the kitchen. The dog never did like her. I start for a second realizing just how much Sarah looks like Mom: thick black hair and deep laugh lines. Mom was more relaxed, though; Sarah is stiffer. Mom would be sitting back in the chair, but Sarah sits on the lip, with a print cotton skirt over her knees. "The front door was open, so I just came in," she says, getting up to hug me.

"It's your house as much as mine." It feels nice to be hugged.

"We need to talk about the house and everything, don't we?" She pulls back some, like Dad always did when it was time for a talk.

"Yeah, I guess so. Mom wanted us to divide things ourselves if we could. If not, she left a list."

"Well, you're in charge, she never talked to me about it." She begins to guide me toward the front door. "Let's go for a walk," she says. "I don't want to be in here." Outside, she takes hold of my arm and we cut across the yard, heading up the hill toward the Presbyterian Church. We don't say anything for a few minutes.

"Do you want the house?" she begins.

"Do you?"

"No, but I thought we could sell it." We're walking past the Dean's house. Its blue Victorian trim looks freshly painted. It's a fine house.

"I don't want to," I say without looking at her. There's been some work done around the eaves.

"What are you going to do with it? I mean, especially now that you're divorced?" I wince and my eyes move down the house.

"I'm not divorced…" The basement windows haven't been painted.

"And I know you could use the money." A green hose snakes away from the water spigot.

"It's my house…" It moves through the grass, coiling around the Japanese maple.

"I know, but let's try to be reasonable. You need to think about what you want." She tugs on my arm, but I can't seem to pull my eyes from the garden hose. It ends in the flower bed. The water is running over johnny-jump-ups and peonies and mums. You shouldn't water flowers in direct sunlight. It can kill them. You've got to be careful with things like that. "Now that the restaurant is popular, you can't live here, and you can't keep the place up otherwise."

WE SIT ON THE HILL OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. It's the highest point on our end of town. We used to come

When Something Goes

NEAL GORDON

People always talk about family being important.
When a part of it goes away, you realize what that really means.

A SPIDER'S WEB FLOATING IN THE AIR LANDS, EAR-cheek-nose, across my face. Instinctively, I close my eyes and reach for it. My mother told me when I was seven that spiders put out the little filaments like parachutes, lots of them, until the wind catches them and the spider is picked up and transported. She called the strands gossamers. "Angels collect the little strings and sew them into wings," she said. "They're the thread of angels." We were in the garden looking at her roses and azaleas and a silk thread had drifted into us.

She reached out with the steak knife and cut off a bachelor's button for me. "Now you don't ever have to get married," she said, calming my fears about being asked to a girl's birthday party.

I'm the first one home. Sarah won't get in until tomorrow. Funeral's day after. I grew up in this house. Sarah grew up in the old one in Des Moines. I still have a room here, somehow, even after nine years. The front door's not even locked. Who's got Sam? The place seems odd without her barking.

I drop my bags inside the door, leaving it open to air the house, turn and go back out. I should go by and see Mrs. John, thank her for calling me. Ask about Sam. I walk out and across the street, past Jerry and Alice Satory's big yard to the tiny green house. I knock, loudly.

"That you, Ty?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Come in, come in," Mrs. John calls from behind the front door screen.

"Nice to see you again," I say, walking into the living room, touching her arm slightly as I pass. Her flesh is very soft. She points to the wingback chair and I sit in it. The radio plays the baseball game.

She is a big German woman. Her vision is getting worse every year—I know from the writing in the birthday cards she still sends me with two dollars in them. The same two dollars I've gotten every year since we moved here when I was six. Now, at twenty-nine, I wonder how many more years she'll be sending them.

"I wanted to say thanks for calling," I start, but she puts up a hand to me. She was my mother's best friend.

"I baked a pie for you. Don't let me forget it."

"Thank you," I say, looking at the threadbare gray carpet of her living room. This heat, without air conditioning, and she baked something. I look up slightly, seeing her knee-high stockings over those big legs that aren't very sturdy. "Would you like to ride with us to the funeral?" I ask.

"No, that's for you kids. Family, you know, just family," she says leaning forward, her hand on her knee. She blushes a bit, the old rose growing back into her cheeks as the fan sweeps the air past her, moving her hair. She tucks the loose hair behind her ear as delicately as if she were a girl of sixteen.

"You're family," I say, quietly.

"I'll go with Tom Brodie," she says. For a moment, no one speaks and I'm struck with a memory of sitting on her back porch, listening to her tell me about her late husband and how he used to play baseball for the St. Louis Browns. Third base. She showed me his old glove and let me put my hand inside. It was hard and stiff, but it felt like baseball, and all my ideas of it. He had big hands.

"Would you like to ride with us to the funeral?" I ask.
"No, that's for you kids. Family, you know, just family."
"You're family," I say, quietly.

She taught me how to throw a spitball. How to line up the seams and scuff 'em with your glove and work spit into that place so the ball would just sail.

"Sarah's coming in tomorrow. It's just a drive for me, so I came on right away after making arrangements."

She settles back into her chair with a sigh. "I've been sitting here all day, listening to the game and remembering. Pat had the most beautiful hollyhocks in town, you know. We used to sit on that little patio back there and have a drink and listen to the locusts." I can remember leaning out the back door and asking Mom if it was okay for me to go to the movies, or to the park, or downtown. Watching the two of them split a beer. And that electric noise of the cicadas in the trees.

LATER, I'M SITTING IN THE BATHTUB. IT'S AN OLD iron one, with curled feet under it and a body about three feet deep. Full of hot water. I'm reading the latest letter from Anne's lawyer. Sarah's acting as mine. It's about division of marital property. There are two lists; things she thinks are hers and things she thinks are mine. Everything has a dollar amount next to it. The rest of the stuff is up for grabs, I guess. I'm supposed to decide what I want. I really haven't had much say in things so far. She

First Text

JASON SNELL

DOUBLE SIXES… AND LUCKY NUMBER SEVEN?

THIS ISSUE MARKS THE END OF our sixth year publishing *InterText,* dating back to a time when nobody had heard of the Web, let alone had enough time to get sick of the phrase `www.something.com`.

In many ways, this has been the toughest year of *InterText* since the first one. Everyone involved with the magazine has been pulled in countless directions at once, and it's been a minor miracle that we've managed to release our requisite six issues during the calendar year of 1996 — to which this issue, which is being turned loose on the Internet on the penultimate day of 1996, can attest. We made it, but it's been a tougher struggle than it's ever been before.

That said, I also need to recognize that we couldn't have done this without the help of our new volunteers, who have assisted in evaluating story submissions and even proofreading advance copies of issues. Without them, we might not have put out those six issues, and even if we had, the quality level wouldn't have been as high as it has been.

In the coming year, it's still my intention to put out six issues of *InterText,* and have them appear every two months as we've been doing since 1991. But depending on how it all goes, we may be forced to shift gears and look at a different production schedule. In past years, each *InterText* issue has provided five or six short stories, but this year we've been hitting the bare minimum of four stories with regularity. If it would make our jobs easier and improve the quality of *InterText* to start putting out issues on a quarterly basis, that may be what we have to do. I hope it doesn't come to that—after all, I used to dream of putting out eight or 12 issues of *InterText* in a year, and never considered cutting back to four.

But times have changed. I only have to look at the state of *Quanta,* the fine Science Fiction magazine that in many ways led to the creation of *InterText.* Dan Appelquist, *Quanta*'s creator, is still working on his magazine, but we haven't seen an issue of *Quanta* since July of 1995. I sympathize with Dan, because I know just how hard things have been for me. It was easier for us all when the Internet was younger and we were all college students.

As I write this, 1996 is about to end. I know that 1997 will bring more wonderful stories that *InterText* will be able to bring to thousands of readers on the Internet. I don't know if 1997 will also mark a rebirth for the magazine, if we'll keep plugging along like we have been, or if we may have to scale back some. But we'll be here. And I'm glad that you're along for the ride.

Jason Snell created InterText *in 1991. He's currently Senior Editor, Online, at* MacUser *magazine, where he serves as* MacUser*'s monthly Net.cetera columnist. He also edits the websites* TeeVee, An Entirely Other Site, *and* These Friends of Mine.

If you're interested in lending a hand with InterText *— whether as a story evaluator or proofer — drop a note to* **jsnell@intertext.com**.

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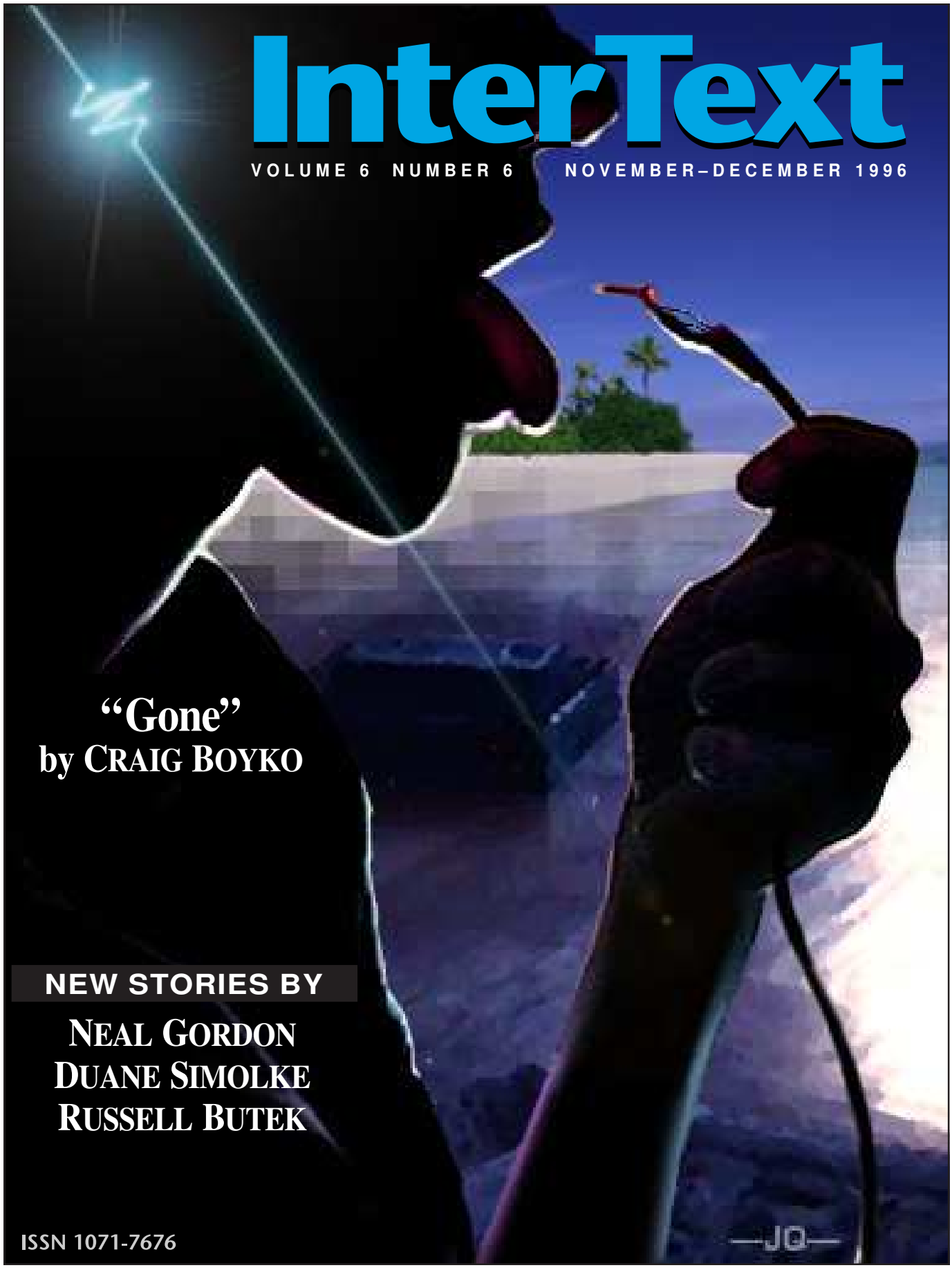

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"Gone"
by CRAIG BOYKO

NEW STORIES BY
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