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"Neon Sea Dreams"
by RUPERT GOODWINS

NEW STORIES BY

PETER MEYERSON
JOHN SZAMOZI
LARRY LYNCH

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FirstText

JASON SNELL

TRIUMPH AND TURMOIL

IT USED TO BE THAT I WROTE A column to open every issue of *InterText,* whether I had anything to say or not. After six years and 34 of those columns, I decided I wasn't going to write a column unless I had something to say. It's been four issues since I broke the string of obligatory editorials, but now I'm back with both good news and bad news, as well a few general comments about the state of *InterText.*

Let me start the bad news by turning this column into something that's been common over the years as electronic magazines like *Athene, Quanta,* and *InterText* have missed their self-imposed deadlines: An apology for lateness. I've been very fortunate in that *InterText* has never appreciably strayed from its every-other-month schedule since our second issue appeared six years ago. But this issue you're now perusing, whether it's on paper, in e-mail, or on the Web, is the *latest* one we've ever produced. By all rights, this issue should've been in your hands in July, and it's October. For blowing our regular schedule (perhaps the thing about *InterText's* six-plus years I'm most proud of), I can only offer an apology.

Well, not *only.* I can also offer an explanation.

One of the reasons I stopped writing a regular *InterText* column was because every issue's column seemed to be a complaint-fest, a chance for me to explain just how much time *InterText* takes to create and how much the pressures of real life have intruded into work which seemed easy and free when Geoff Duncan and I were still writing e-mail with addresses ending in `.edu`.

I had *no* idea.

In addition to all those pressures, the time between issues has seen Geoff birth a new member of the *TidBITS* family, namely the new *NetBITS* weekly e-mail publication. For me, the change has been even more radical—my employer of four years, *MacUser* magazine, merged with our competitor, *Macworld.* I've kept my job though all the turmoil, but saying that the merging of two competitors into a seamless whole that's supposed to work in complete harmony is a difficult task doesn't begin to explain how hard it's been for all of us to put out a magazine.

On top of that, my wife has recently switched jobs, and we're in the process of looking for a new place to live in a different corner of the San Francisco area.

So it's been a busy time. After all that's happened, it was only fair to let you all know the story.

ON TO HAPPIER NEWS. I'M HAPPY TO REPORT THAT IN the past month, a couple different publishing events have mentioned *InterText* and supported this whole online publishing concept we've been riding for years.

First, the small (but still exciting) potatoes. In his introduction to *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fourteenth Annual Collection* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), editor Gardner Dozois singles out only a handful of online magazines, and *InterText* makes the cut. "There are some longer-established sites that are worth keeping an eye on, though, such as *InterText,*" Dozois writes, singling out two excellent stories from Jim Cowan, "The Gardener" *(InterText v4n5)* and "Genetic Moonshine" *(InterText v5n3).* To be mentioned favorably in a volume containing two dozen of the best Science Fiction stories of the past year is quite an honor, and I thank Gardner Dozois for recognizing the work we do.

More exciting is the new book *Coffeehouse: Writings from the Web* (Manning Publications, 1997), edited by *Enterzone* editor Christian Crumlish and longtime *InterText* contributor Levi Asher. This anthology is an excellent cross-section of different kinds of Web-based writing, and includes works from four *InterText* contributors, including two stories previously published here. In addition to Asher, the collection features Carl Steadman, Greg Knauss ("The Damnation of Richard Gillman," from *InterText* v1n3), and my own "Gravity" (*InterText v2n1).* If you're interested in seeing a handsome, well-thought-out collection of Net fiction, I highly recommend you buy *Coffeehouse* and visit the related Website at `www.coffeehousebook.com`.

(For your convenience, we've posted both of these books on the *InterText* Website, linked to online bookstore Amazon.com, if you're interested in purchasing them via the Net.)

MAYBE I'M JUST A SUCKER FOR FREE PUBLICITY, but the double-whammy of the Dozois anthology and the beautiful *Coffeehouse* book have energized me with regard to *InterText.* In addition, I've got a great team of story readers who are poring over all the story submissions we receive, a system that will be bearing fruit with the next issue. With any luck, I'll be able to squeeze two more issues into 1997, keeping us on our six-per-year track. But no promises. If the past year has taught me anything, it's that anything can happen—and probably will.

Until we meet again.

This week Jason Snell is the senior associate features editor at Macworld *magazine. In what passes for his spare time, he edits* InterText *and the TV criticism-and-comedy Website TeeVee (`www.teevee.org`).*

Closed Circuit

PETER MEYERSON

No matter how many years go by, the relationships between family members are a constantly changing equation.

ALTHOUGH THEY EXCHANGED RITUAL NEWS OF the weather and the family on the phone regularly, Martin hadn't visited Sarah for nearly three years. Now, standing at the foot of her bed, he wondered if she was pleased to see him. Her expression or, more accurately, the lack of it, revealed nothing.

Sarah was almost ninety. Her parched, furrowed little face was framed by a halo of thin dead wheat, punctuated with clots of lipstick, spiky mascara and long fake eyelashes; a grotesque face which, without its dentures, curled back into itself like a burnt match. His mother's face.

He couldn't quite take in this painted Jazz Age doll all at once, couldn't, for more than an instant, consider her tiny red-speck eyes (a wounded mongoose squinting at the sun, he thought), eyes which in the past had never missed a trick.

Nor did Sarah, gazing at the mute TV set planted in the corner, look at her son. Martin turned toward the set. Displayed was a shadowy black and white image of the lobby's glass-door entrance where, from time to time, some weary, hunched ancient shuffled slowly through the portal.

"What's that on the tube?" he asked.

"The lobby. I watch them come and go," she replied.

"This is how you spend your days?"

"You got something better for me to do?" she said, her eyes never leaving the set.

Definitely an edge there, Martin thought. For three years she had made his excuses for him, embraced the ruse of the loving son. It was, "Darling, I know you want to come, but what can you do? You're so busy." But now that he was here, there was an unmistakable hint of *How could you have stayed away so long?*

Martin's father had died fourteen years earlier, and Sarah memorialized her husband's death by taking to her bed with a variety of largely imagined ailments which, over time, became real. Her occasional dizziness and light-headedness due, the doctors said, to wildly fluctuating blood pressure eventually became firmly rooted in budding emphysema. Which didn't erode her dedication to unfiltered Camels. Between each cigarette Sarah took deep swills from an oxygen tank.

"Don't worry," she assured her son. "I stub them out good. I won't explode."

"This is no way to live to a hundred, ma," Martin said.

"*A hundred?* Ninety's ten years too old already. I wish I'd gone at eighty," She meant it.

Martin was sixty-five, an age at which most people have lost their mothers, may already be dead themselves; yet, suddenly, he felt like a child abandoned in a dream, wandering through an unfamiliar landscape aching to find his way home.

MARTIN AND MELINDA WERE TALKING IN THE LIVING room while Sarah, pretending to nap, strained to catch her children's words. A futile endeavor; her erratic hearing demanded less distance and more volume.

"Who knows what's she's doing? She's practicing to die." Melinda's bitterness hissed through a narrow slit that echoed with cracking crowns. That tiny mouth, Martin thought, the ruin of her pretty face. Martin—lucky male—tucked his own genetic legacy behind a full beard and moustache.

"This is no way to live to a hundred, ma," Martin said. "*A hundred?* Ninety's ten years too old already. I wish I'd gone at eighty." She meant it.

"She go out?"

"Never," Melinda replied. "Or not any more, not even to my house for holiday dinners."

"Anybody visit?"

"Who? They're all sick… or worse. Besides, she doesn't want anyone to see she's grown old."

"You don't like her very much, do you?"

"Oh, *please!* What do you know?" Melinda said, welcoming the chance to unburden herself. "You breeze in once every three or four years… to what? Pass judgments? *You* try taking her phone calls ten times a day. *You* take a turn coming up here twice a week to fill the fridge—not that she eats what I bring—and put on her eyelashes. Her *eyelashes!* Can you believe that? And what does she do for entertainment? Every other month, like clockwork, she falls down and goes to the hospital."

"She wants to be taken care of."

"A stunning insight."

"What about a home?"

"Oh, sure," Melinda said cynically. "She says she'll jump off the balcony if I even think about it." Then, faltering: "I… couldn't do that to her."

After his sister left, Martin mused about his parents' generation. The last of their kind, he thought, children of immigrants, people of the boroughs drawn in the end to the damp heat and thick, mnemonic air of Florida. What better place to grow old and die? Here is where their youth has fled. Here, just staring at the sea, they conjure up the lost beaches of August—Edgemere or Long Beach or the Jersey shore, the courts of stucco cottages filled with chattering families where, for a few months at least, they escaped the Depression and the war which followed.

Here, sitting on the terrace issuing wheezy tropical sighs, a long-retired grandfather recalls his exuberant six-year-old guiding him home from the train station, watching proudly as he launders his city-soiled body in the sea. An ancient grandmother, briefly alone at poolside before the bridge game begins, remembers herself as a girl lugging unwieldy jugs of juice and sandwich baskets to woolen islands on the sand, weekend picnics at the cool water's edge. Brothers-in-law took pictures. Where are they now, the Harrys, Sams and Daves? Most are dead. And the photographs? Gone. No matter. For the survivors, the images are fixed forever in coils of Florida surf. Theirs for the reminiscence. But access to these memories was not for Sarah, not anymore. Having cut herself off from past and present alike, she lies in bed and watches the lobby.

Martin had always deplored his mother's lies and manipulations, her appalling vanity, the pathetic facade of abundance and culture she constructed for the benefit of others, and maybe, above all, the way she'd always denigrated his father. As a child, he hated her; as an adult, after years of therapy taught him to forgive, he simply didn't like her.

But there was one event, a childhood incident, which he had never forgotten and never forgiven her for. When Martin was five years old, a few months after Melinda was born, Sarah had announced that it was time for his first visit to the dentist. Just a checkup. After a short taxi ride to the office of the family pediatrician, Dr. Shaw drove them to a private hospital on the Grand Concourse not far from their Bronx apartment. Here they were seated in a waiting room. The doctor murmured a few words to Sarah, chucked Martin under the chin, grinned reassuringly, and disappeared through a pair of swinging doors. Uneasy, Martin asked whether Dr. Shaw was a dentist, too.

"Of course he is, darling," Sarah said. "You're not worried, are you? Don't be worried. We'll be home in half an hour."

Fifteen minutes later, two attendants entered the waiting room and approached Martin from either side. Without a word, they closed in on the frightened boy like a pair of giant claws and, suddenly, grabbed him, pulling the child, flailing and screaming, through an open door. From the depths of his terror, Martin caught a momentary glimpse of his mother's face. But, strangely, for the rest of his life, even after years of intensive psychotherapy, he'd never been able to recall her expression at that instant.

In a small operating room, the attendants strapped him to a table. Immobilized, surrounded by masked adults, Martin watched as they placed a noxious, cotton-filled ether strainer over his face; someone told him to count to ten. Martin knew with profound certainty that he was about to die. His last thought before passing into unconsciousness was why his mother wanted him dead. What had he done?

When he awoke, he learned that he'd had his tonsils removed. From that moment on, Martin earned his reputation as a difficult child.

"I THINK SHE'S WAITING FOR POP TO COME HOME from the hospital," Martin said.

"Well, she's in for a big surprise."

The floor-to-ceiling doors of the boardwalk restaurant had been removed, giving diners a view of passersby, the beach, and an enormous orange moon inching slowly out of the sea.

"I don't mean consciously, for God's sake."

"Well, excuse me," Melinda said, studying her menu. Martin's confident psychologizing had been irritating her for fifty years.

"She's filled with remorse."

"Uh huh. About what?"

"Pop, obviously. How she couldn't handle being with him at the end. She couldn't even go to the hospital that last week."

"That was a long time ago."

"So what? Guilt doesn't heal itself. She's waiting for him to come back and forgive her, tell her he understands."

"What do you say we order?" Melinda said.

"I'll have the pompano."

"Fish? You're a meat eater."

"I was. Before I leaked."

"What're you talking about?"

"My aortic valve. It sprung a leak."

"Since when?" Melinda was alarmed.

"I don't know. I found out a couple of weeks ago," Martin said matter-of-factly. "Is the pompano any good here?"

"Martin. What…what does it mean?"

"Not much. It's a slow leak. Congenital. Completely benign. There aren't any real symptoms…except for a slight arrhythmia. I just have to make sure my blood pressure stays normal. The cardiologist says there's a

good chance the condition will remain stable. If it doesn't, then it's…*Take my heart—please take my heart."*

"A transplant?" Melinda's hands began to tremble. She put the menu down.

"Valve replacement. At my age they'd probably give me a porcine valve. Imagine. A pork chop in my chest." Then, noticing her distress: "Melinda, it's a routine operation. The survival rate is ninety something percent. And I'm in excellent health. Honest, sis. Nothing to be upset about."

"Well…" Melinda said, somewhat reassured. "You don't seem very worried."

"I'm scared shitless."

AFTER MELINDA DROPPED HIM OFF AT SARAH'S apartment building, Martin stopped at the security desk and waved at the closed circuit TV camera.

"That for your mother?" the guard asked.

"Yeah."

"She's not home."

"She's always home," Martin said.

"Uh-uh. They took her away."

"Who took her away?"

The guard shrugged. "The ambulance people. We got an ambulance in the building on twenty-four hour call," he said.

"What happened?" Martin could feel his balky valve refusing to seal, flooding his heart with regurgitated blood.

"I dunno. She looked alive…. But I'm not a doctor."

"I GOT A LITTLE DIZZY. I FELL DOWN. THAT'S ALL. I'M fine." Nurtured around the clock, Sarah was happy, the reigning queen of the cardiac unit at Humana Biscayne Hospital. She smiled at everyone, made jokes, ate whatever they put in front of her, asked the doctors about their families, the nurses about their boyfriends. "No boyfriend? What about my son here? He likes them young. His last wife was half his age."

"Ma, please," Martin said, embarrassed.

"They're so good to me here," Sarah said pointedly.

DURING THE WEEK SARAH WAS IN THE HOSPITAL, THE family—Martin, Melinda, her husband, Art, and their two grown children—explored their options and reached an agreement. On the day Sarah returned to the apartment, they gathered to tell her what her future held. Since she could no longer take care of herself and since the family couldn't afford a live-in companion, Sarah would have to enter a nursing home.

"I'd rather die!" Sarah said.

"Ma, it's the nicest place in Florida. There's a waiting list a mile long," Melinda said.

"Good. I'll wait."

Melinda unfolded a colorful brochure depicting the ivy-covered, Spanish colonial buildings and exquisitely manicured grounds of the Miami Home for the Aged and laid it out on Sarah's lap. Sarah swept it to the floor with a rancorous sneer.

"How could you do this to me?"

"If it weren't for the judge—he's on the board—we couldn't even get you in." Melinda worked in the law office of a retired Superior Court judge.

"A home! You want to put me in a goddamn home!" On Sarah's lips the word, usually a synonym for 'safety' and 'love,' became an obscenity.

"Don't think of it as a home, Ma," Martin said. "Think of it as a fancy hotel with round-the-clock service."

"It's a home!" she shouted. "Old people in wheelchairs and walkers. Droolers staring at the walls…I have nothing to say to these people. It's not for me."

"Melinda, it's a routine operation. Nothing to be upset about." "Well…" Melinda said, "You don't seem very worried." "I'm scared shitless."

"Well, what *is?* Huh? Besides driving your daughter crazy, lying here like a half-dead fish and staring at the lobby all day and all night!" Martin said, shocked by the vehemence of his outburst. "*Nothing's* for you! No one! You're just too good for *everyone,* for all of mankind! I mean, Jesus, what the hell do you want?"

"I told you. I want to be dead."

"Well, it won't be long."

Sarah raised her eyes and looked at Melinda. "Look at how he talks to his mother."

"I'm speaking for all of us, Ma."

MARTIN WOKE IN A SWEAT AT FOUR-THIRTY IN THE morning, pursued by echoes of a nightmare the substance of which was just beyond his grasp. His chest was pounding violently, like some atonal madman turned loose upon a kettle drum. It was too early for his dose of Toprol, but he took a tab anyhow and, gradually, his heart returned to something resembling a regular beat. After his panic subsided, he began rethinking the events of the afternoon, bewildered not so much by the anger behind his eruption, but by his failure to control it, to conceal it not only from Sarah, but from the rest of the family as well.

As the sky began to lighten, Martin got up, went into the kitchen, and made a pot of decaf. Sarah's bedroom

door was slightly ajar and he peeked in to see if she was awake and wanted a cup of coffee.

Martin knew instantly—almost as though he had been expecting it—that she was dead. Propped up on some pillows staring at the mute, flickering TV image of an empty lobby, it appeared as though her entire being had issued a giant sigh and collapsed. She seemed years younger; her skin was smoother, her hair fuller, less patchy, her face, bereft of makeup, almost pretty. She might have looked peaceful were it not for her eyes. Her eyes were filled with limitless pity, as though Sarah were witnessing an event too painful to bear. He had seen this expression before. But…where? When, suddenly, the recollection surfaced, Martin realized with a shudder that this was the expression he had so briefly glimpsed on that horrendous morning sixty years earlier, the profoundly anguished expression of a woman utterly incapable of confronting her son's terror.

He lifted the bedsheet and covered his mother's face, then went to turn off the TV. The lobby was no longer empty. Martin could see a small, graceful figure, who he could have sworn was Sarah, wafting through the open doors. He had an urgent impulse to call out to her. But it was too late, a lifetime too late, to start all over.

PETER MEYERSON

Began writing short stories about two years ago after careers as an editor in book and magazine publishing and writing plays, half-hour sitcoms and screenplays.

Mobike Rumblings

JOHN SZAMOSI

How do you give a friend unvarnished advice and still keep him as a friend?

"PLEASE, TELL HIM TO GET RID OF THE MOTORcycle," Lorie asked me on the phone. "Gary listens to you." Lorie and Gary are in their mid-thirties. They've been married for nine years, and are expecting their first child. It's going to be a girl.

"Good show, man," I greet Gary next time we meet.

His face goes into a wide grin. "What a relief! I was at the point of giving up totally on the family issue. I thought I was shooting blanks."

"No, not you," I shake my head. It's so stupid, though; I'm his fishing buddy, not a sperm counter.

He takes out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

Silence. I have to say something. "I hear it's going to be a girl."

"Yeah, Lorie and I have decided to have another kid after this."

I lift my hand to a military salute to show I admire their dedication. "Good idea, Gary. What a great idea."

"You don't think we gonna have a second child just because I always wanted a boy?" He looks deep into my eyes. "That's the reason, you think, don't you?"

What else, you son of a bitch? "No, of course not. Why would I think that?"

"I always wanted a boy and a girl. There are advantages to both. Little boys are funny; you can play baseball with them, teach them poker, show them how to fish for bass, catfish, trout. And little girls, they're so cute…."

Silence again. I clear my throat. "They tend to gravitate to their father."

"Lots of advantages to having a daughter." I nod. "You think she's gonna be good looking?"

Gary smiles. "Lots of advantages to having a daughter."

I nod. "Lots of advantages."

Gary pulls out a cigarette from the pack. "You think she's gonna be good looking?"

How on earth would I know, you moron? "Yes, Gary, she's going to be beautiful."

"Looks is genetic, ain't it?"

"Pretty much."

Gary is relatively handsome, just a little bald on the forehead, and Lorie is a French woman who looks five years younger than her age. Or at least she did before she got so huge. Now she looks fifty.

Gary continues talking, "I've got lots of different genes. I'm a real mutt: Irish, Hungarian, Italian, English. Even some Eskimo."

"Inuit," I correct him. By the time his daughter grows up, people will receive ten-year prison sentences for uttering ethnic slurs like Eskimo.

Gary waves his hand; he always says what he thinks. It's different only when he gets shitfaced on booze: then he uses the two-dozen words he can still recall from his vacuous memory.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "She'll have French charm, Irish ingenuity, Hungarian intelligence, Italian warmth, and the pride and nobility of her Inuit ancestors."

"What about English?"

Nothing comes to mind. For evasion, I fill my mug with seltzer.

Now Gary is talking about life's complexities, how the next generation is going to be exactly like us, but still totally different. He even throws in an Oriental proverb: "You can't step in the same river twice."

While drinking the club soda, I study his face.

Gary looks away. First he mumbles unintelligibly, then he speaks up, "Lorie wants me to sell the motorbike. She's afraid I might have an accident and get hurt or die."

I sigh; it's so much easier that he's brought it up. "Lorie is right. Sell that stupid motorcycle. It's got the speed of a car, but gives as little protection as a regular bike."

Gary takes a deep breath, and his eyes sparkle as he makes a solemn announcement, "I'm gonna get rid of the mobike on the day my daughter is born."

I wipe my forehead with a paper tissue. "Good decision, Gary, I'm telling you. It must've been painful, but we all have to make sacrifices." I stop, but his body language indicates he wants to hear more of it. "You know, John Irving, the writer, did the same thing when his first child was born."

"John Irving, huh?" Gary squints his eyes. "*Garp* and *Hotel New Hampshire?"*

"That's the one."

"All right!" he yells. Then he adds in a lower tone, "Never read his books. Seen the movies, though. Pretty good. So, what was his first child, boy or girl?"

Oh, shit! "If I remember right, he has three boys from two marriages."

"How many girls?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's got only boys."

Gary makes a slight guttural sound, then stares in front of himself.

Absolutely nothing to say, so I speak again, "Look at the sunny side, Gary—you'll get a beautiful daughter, and lose a clunky motorcycle." I hesitate. Should I shake his hand? I decide to show him a thumb-up instead.

He forms a V between his fingers and nods. I sigh again; it's over, finally.

Gary scratches his chin. "What if my daughter's not that beautiful?"

It's not over yet. I shrug. What if she *is* ugly? Plastic surgery? Sell her to a rich childless couple? Let the Indians steal her? Euthanasia? All good ideas; fortunately I am still focused enough to keep my mouth shut.

"What if the baby is totally unattractive?" Gary repeats the question louder, and moves so close to me that my eyes are burning. I make a mental note that next time I have a serious conversation with the man I'll put on reading glasses.

"What I mean is, should I get rid of my mobike even if the baby is repulsive? Because I don't think I should!"

I turn away. This will never end.

Gary grabs my arm. "You know what? If she's gruesome like hell, I refuse to sell the motorbike. Better yet, I'm gonna ride it without a helmet!"

I resist the urge to ask the dingbat if he's already been riding without a helmet.

Both of us have to get underway. In three months, Gary will be the proud father of the youngest American. I sure hope the kid is good looking.

JOHN SZAMOSI

Is an R&D scientist who lives in the sticks of northwestern New Jersey. He is a fitness-and-fiber fanatic: He has run four marathons, including the 1995 New York Marathon. He has been writing humor, satire and fantasy fiction since college.

Apple-Scented Dream

LARRY LYNCH

Blood defines family–but not always in the way you think.

"OK?" CAMI'S FATHER STOOD IN THE DOORway of her room. She rolled over and faced the wall. "Is it the babysitter? I've arranged for a new one," he explained. Cami lay still. "Is it school?" he asked. No answer. "Cami?"

"It's everything," she said to the wall.

It was moving. It was leaving her friends. It was her father's stupid job. It was having to tell people, tell them all over again, that it was only the two of them—Cami and her father.

Her full name, Camilla, was her mother's legacy to her. That, and the burden of trying to explain being motherless everywhere they went. It was easier to say "divorce" or "plane crash" than to tell people what her father had told her: "She was young , Cami. And you were so little. She found being a mother harder than anything in the world." Her father's explanation to her would be unbelievable to others. She thought it seemed unbelievable to him.

On a day in that reluctant spring, on her first day at another new school, Cami's fourth grade teacher introduced her. "Class, this is Camilla," she announced to snickers. "It's Cami," Cami corrected, but the horrid utterance had already begun to circulate like a fart in church, and it swirled above her head. She felt like an oddity—a weird one-parented girl in a land of judgmental, perfect pre-teens.

He sat on her bed and rubbed the back of her neck. She liked it, resented it, wished she was older, wished he would leave her alone, wished she could lie in bed with him like she did when she was younger.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "Give it some time." Her father smelled good, like the cologne samples in magazines. She could not stay mad at him.

"There's someone new coming over tomorrow after school." He stroked her hair and she lay still, facing the wall. "I'm leaving work early to pick you up so we can meet her when she gets here. OK?" She didn't answer.

"OK?" he said into the back of her neck, leaning on her and tickling her ribs. She squirmed and rolled over facing him, and as hard as she tried, she could not keep from smiling.

"Good," he said.

"Can I stay after school by myself when I'm thirteen?" she called to him as he left.

"We'll see," he answered.

"Fourteen?"

"We'll see."

Every babysitter Cami's father hired was met with Cami's extreme disapproval. She hated them, she told him. They smoked, they stank, they talked on the phone for hours, they snooped through the house; she could be very convincing.

But this time, when the new babysitter arrived, Cami did not have to roll her eyes, pinch her nose, stick her finger down her throat or do any of the other things that brought that panicked look to her father's face; it happened as soon as he opened the door. He stood there, looking nervous and incompetent, while the new girl stared down at him.

"She was young , Cami. And you were so little. She found being a mother harder than anything in the world."

Perhaps it was because she was taller. Perhaps it was the shirt she wore that exposed the gold hoop that pierced her belly button. Perhaps it was her extra-wide pant legs and the psychedelic, crocheted bag that hung over her shoulder. The new girl smiled broadly, and Cami's father stuck out his hand.

"You're *Kate,"* he said. Not a question, or an exclamation, but more a bewildered statement—the way you might react if you caught your grandmother smoking pot. The face did not match the name.

"That's me," she said and turned to Cami.

"This is Cami," her father said.

"Cool name." Kate nodded in approval at them both.

Cami could see her father's apprehension abating then, and knew he would be going back to work, leaving her with this '70s girl. Good reasons to hate her were starting to congeal in her mind.

"OK," he said, like he was about to divulge a big secret. "I'm leaving." He scanned their faces for comprehension. "Any problems, my number is on the fridge." This was standard; the number hung there under a banana-shaped magnet as it did for all the other babysitters. "Gotta go." He leaned down and kissed Cami, who stood rigid, unreciprocating.

As was her practice, she went directly to her room. She said she was going to do homework, which meant "don't bother me." Normally, she would lie in her bed, doodling in her text books, listening to the noise of the TV coming

from the living room, and the cupboard doors opening and closing in the kitchen. Cami felt babysitters had an innate ability to find potato chips in any house and always helped themselves. Having someone strange in the house, watching her TV, eating her chips, talking on her phone, and ignoring her just like she wanted—these things bothered her. She was thankful it was only for a few hours after school, and that her father felt enough guilty about it not to venture far in the evenings or on the weekends without her.

When Cami and her father watched television at night, he sat on the couch, and she would sometimes sit on the floor with her back resting against his legs. He flipped through catalogs and asked her which curtains matched which bedspreads, holding the catalog in front of her face and blocking her view of the TV. (The furniture they moved from their apartment looked almost like doll house furniture in the house's large rooms.) "I don't know," she would say, and change channels indiscriminately.

Sometimes she would catch him staring at her, then say to him: "What?"

"Nothing," would be his surprised answer, snapping from his gaze. "Just looking at a monkey," and chase her with his tickle-ready fingers.

Sometimes he just sat there looking defeated and lonely. In those instances, Cami could say or do nothing that would help, for if she could, she would have done so for herself. When he was not home she took the catalog to her room; not to look at the furniture and drapes and towels that her father struggled to choose, but at the women, deciding which were the prettiest, and which, if any, looked like her, had her round cheeks and wide, dark eyes.

"Are you hungry?" Kate said and came into and Cami's room. Cami sat up. *"No,"* she said. She scrutinized Kate as she wandered about the room browsing through Cami's things. Kate's hair was straight and hung down her back. She parted it somewhat in the middle, but really in no particular place, and kept sweeping errant strands behind her ears. Her ears were pierced in several places, and earrings hung around them like seats on a Ferris wheel, dangling hypnotically.

Cami could see that her "no" had not registered. Kate moved over to her bureau and picked up a magazine. "You like these guys?" she asked and turned the picture of the band on the cover in Cami's direction. They were Cami's favorite. "They're OK," Cami said.

Kate put the magazine back and surveyed the room. "Where's your mom?" she asked. "Working too?"

If Cami had been a cat, she would have scratched her, would have run up her leg and clawed her belly, and maybe hooked a claw into that bellybutton ring. Cami's eyes narrowed to slits and her lips were thin and pale. But, as she always did when she was asked, she said, "It's only my dad and me."

"That's cool," Kate said and looked neither surprised nor sympathetic. Everything was *cool.* Cami was getting a little tired of *cool.* Kate sat on her bed, and Cami pulled her knees in to her chest. "So, what do you want to do?" Kate asked her.

Cami shrugged and inched back toward the wall, bracing her knees with her arms.

"Do you want to listen to some music? Do you have any CDs?"

"A few," Cami said reluctantly, "in the living room."

Her cat arched against the wall near the door. Cami watched Kate bend down and pick up the cat on her way out of the room. "What's her name?" she asked.

"It's Tiger, and it's a *he,"* she snapped. "He'll scratch you," she said, more hopeful than cautionary, and watched her hold up the surprised cat under the front legs like a baby, rubbing noses with it. "Pretty Tiger," Kate cooed, then tucked the cat under her arm and rubbed its head. The cat's tail flicked wildly against her exposed lower back as she carried it down the hall.

Babysitters should eat chips, lie on the couch, talk on the phone, and not bug her. That is what they should do, Cami decided. Not come into her room, ask a bunch of nosy questions and pick up her cat. And why did she have so many earrings? What, two weren't enough?

Cami thought about how many times she asked her father to allow her to get her ears pierced. "Someday," he would say, not really trying to put her off, she thought, just not knowing that it was important to her; a girl thing, a growing up thing. He frowned when they went shopping, and smiled helplessly at the clerks as Cami coaxed and pleaded him to buy her what she wanted; not the cute sweaters with the animals or cartoon characters on them, but clothes like other girls wore—girls like the ones in her school, the girls with earrings, the girls who talked to boys, the ones who turned and giggled when "Camilla" spread through the room like a gas.

And like a strange, nauseous gas itself, music spread from down the hall into her room. It wasn't one of her CDs—it was something new. Cami went to see what her new and nonconforming babysitter was doing.

"Your dad has some really old ones here," Kate said as she pulsed in front of the record player, holding an album up for Cami to see. The cover had three men with hair as long as a woman's and neatly cut beards—The Bee Gees, it said. Her cat stood in the middle of the room looking defensive.

"I didn't know that worked," Cami said, nodding toward the record player. Kate's shoulders dipped with the music and her hips moved back and forth, and Cami

watched the ring wriggle as her bellybutton puckered and winked in rhythm. Kate's head bobbed as she read the words on the album cover.

Cami moved closer to see exactly how many records her father had. She knelt and pulled some from the drawer below the turntable. They were light and flimsy with faded pictures of strange looking groups on the front. She was kneeling close to Kate and watched her pant legs billow and her painted toes tap on the floor. She smelled faintly of cigarette smoke, and of fruit. It was her hair, Cami thought. Apples.

"Do you smoke?" Cami asked.

Kate said "No," and Cami stared at her in disbelief.

The records were of little curiosity to Cami; only their number and that they were probably older than she was. She stuffed them back into their slots. When she stood, she was looking directly into Kate's skewered navel. Kate caught her staring.

"Do you like it?" Kate asked, and flipped the ring up and down with a casual finger.

She did not know what to say, and remembered the time she saw a woman breast-feeding her baby on a bench at the mall, and how uncomfortable she looked.

"Did it hurt?" she asked

"A little," Kate answered and smiled and put on another record.

"Does it come out?"

"Yeah," she said, "do you want to see?"

Cami shook her head to say no, but "Yes" came from her mouth.

Kate undid the clasp on the ring and slid it from the tiny holes in her navel. The little wounds looked neither sore nor grotesque as Cami had expected. Kate slid the ring back in with ease; first in one tiny hole, then out the other, then fastened it. "See," she said.

Kate played records and cooked some fries and fish sticks in the oven—her specialty, she joked. Cami followed her in and out of the kitchen and living room, keeping her distance, acting nonchalant, and stifling the questions that filled her mind. She sat on the couch eating (she was hungry after all), and watched Kate reel to the music, alive in it. The couch felt new and the room felt different to Cami. In the waning light of the afternoon, in the odd scratchy beat of another era, being that close to a babysitter for that long, it felt like a different house.

HER FATHER LOOKED TOO SURPRISED TO SMILE WHEN she told him that things went OK. "So it's OK that she comes back?" he asked her. Cami shrugged. She brushed her teeth while her father leaned against the bathroom door, staring at her with his glassed-over gaze.

Toothpaste frothed down her chin. "She was playing your records," she said, expecting somehow it might be a bad thing, since the records were obviously something sacred, something she had never seen or heard. "And I think she smokes." Her habitual resentment resurfaced.

"My records?" he said and wiped her face with a towel. "Did you like them?" he asked her, smiling. "No," she said, "they were weird." This was to be his punishment for not being upset with Kate.

"Do you want to see?" Cami shook her head to say no, but "Yes" came out.

He kissed her on the forehead and swept her hair back when she got into bed. She could see his face soften. And as she lay there for a long time, unable to fall asleep, she pinched her bellybutton and her earlobes as hard as she could, just to see how much it hurt. She heard scratchy music coming from the living room, records and a life she never knew her father had. She fell asleep trying to picture her father when his records were new, when he was younger, happier, dancing to that music, holding a woman and whispering into her round cheeks.

In the morning she asked again.

No. Please? Cami. Please? No. Why not? You're too young. But… Cami. Please? No. Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please? Cami, you don't need your ears pierced. Wait 'til you're older. When will that be? Soon.

IN THE HEAT OF THE SPRING SUN, THE TULIPS THAT had kept themselves a secret under the snow since Cami and her father moved there pressed through the warming soil and basked next to the front of their house. Thanks to the spring rain and spring sun, things grew.

Cami's curiosity grew.

How old are you? Does your father let you stay out late? How late? Do you keep a diary? I think I'll keep a diary. Do you have a lot of friends? What are their names? Are they all seventeen too? Do you like school? How old were you when you started wearing a bra? I think I should get one. My dad gets weird when I ask him. Do you have a phone in your room? Really? Cool! Do you think I should let my hair grow? When people kiss on TV are they doing it for real? I think it would be cool to be on TV. Do you? Cool.

Cami told her father: "Kate knows lots of stuff."

"I bet she does," he said.

"She said she was nine when she got her ears pierced."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And she says that people on TV really *are* kissing, but they don't mean it. And she said she was ten when she got a bra. Do you think I should get one?"

"I don't know. Isn't it almost time for bed?"

"Don't you think Kate is cool?"

"Cool?"

"Yeah. She said she would take me to get my ears pierced if you said it was OK. So, can I?"

"Cami…"

"Please." She said it only once.

"We'll see."

"Great," she squealed and scampered to her room, picking up the cat in the hall before it had time to get away.

CAMI WAS NOT NERVOUS. SHE TRUSTED KATE AND felt the feeling was mutual, since she promised not tell her dad that they spent the money he had given them on a bra and not on ear piercing. Cami held the tiny blue box in her hand as she twisted in front of the mirror to see if the outline of her new bra was noticeable through each and every shirt she owned. She held the little gold studs up to her ears to see how they looked—studs Kate had given her, ones Kate had worn when *she* was ten. Cami was not nervous. She reassured herself aloud. She trusted Kate. Not nervous at all. Kate promised that it would not hurt much. Kate said she pierced her own once. Cami pinched her lobes. "I'm almost ready," she could hear Kate calling from the kitchen. She pinched them harder and her fingernails left her earlobes red and with crescent shaped indentations. Her cat was nowhere to be seen.

"Are you sure you want me to do this?" Kate appeared in the doorway of Cami's room and caught her by surprise. Cami was wearing the tie-dyed shirt Kate made for her. She turned in the mirror, examining her newly accentuated physique. "You can hardly see it," Kate said and grinned uncontrollably.

"Really?" Cami said. She was disappointed.

"Things are ready," Kate said. "Why are your ears so red?"

"Uhm…because…this isn't going to hurt, right? You said it wouldn't." Cami covered her ears.

"I said it will a little," Kate said. "You don't have to do it…"

"I want to. Will it bleed?"

"A little. Are you sure?"

Cami nodded.

"And you'll have to take care of them so they don't get infected."

Cami nodded again.

Water boiled in a pot on the stove, and some alcohol and a bar of soap were on the counter. Cami sat on a stool near the sink. Kate took the earrings from the box and put them in the boiling water along with a pin she took from her bag. She gave Cami two ice cubes and told her to squeeze her earlobe between them. Cami did, the ice melted, and water ran down her arm. She watched Kate intensely and began to sweat and itch in her new bra. The ice burned her fingers and ear, and she was sure it was going to be painful.

"Keep holding it," Kate said and fished the needle and earrings out of the pot with a spoon and doused them with the alcohol. Kate took the ice cubes from Cami and swabbed her ear with the alcohol. She held a bar of soap behind Cami's ear and stretched the lobe over it and held it in place with her thumb. "Hold still," was all the warning she gave before Cami felt the pinch of the needle and the little gold studs sliding into place.

"Go and have a look," Kate said, and Cami scampered to the bathroom mirror. She lightly touched the stud, and waggled her earlobe with her finger, and was impressed at her own durability and pluck. A speck of blood formed behind the gold, but she didn't mind. She ran back to the kitchen where Kate returned the needle to the boiling water.

"It looks good, doesn't it?" She pulled back her hair and cocked her head.

"Very nice," Kate said, "now let's do the other."

"It did hurt some," Cami said, "but not too bad." Her face glowed. "You're good at this."

"Thanks. You did great too. Hold these," and she pressed ice to Cami's other ear.

It was like Christmas, and Kate was like Santa. That was how Cami felt. She was getting exactly what she wanted and she could not wait for her father to get home. She did not mind the cold water dripping down her arm.

The phone rang. "Tell Dad that I can't come to the phone. Tell him I'm doing homework. No. Tell him I'm in the bathroom." Water pooled on the floor.

Kate answered. "Hello? Oh, hi. Not much. Piercing Cami's ears. Yes, *really."* Cami's face plummeted. "I'll ask her. OK. Tomorrow. OK. I'm sure he won't mind—he seems really nice. OK. Me too. Bye."

"Why did you tell him?" Cami accused her, "I thought…"

"That was Derrick, not your father."

"Derrick? Who's Derrick?"

"My boyfriend. Are you ready?"

Boyfriend, Cami thought. Kate took the ice from her ears. Cami had questions to ask. How old was he? What does he look like? How long had they been dating? Does he call her all the time? Why hadn't she mentioned it before? "Ouch!" And with the prick of the pin, the questions stopped swirling, and her ears had matching holes.

Cami went from the mirror in her room to the mirror in the bathroom, back and forth, twisting and changing clothes, looking at her ears and her bra, and how it all looked together while Kate put everything away. Cami

sat on the couch and tried to think of something more mature to talk about with Kate; after all, they did have things in common now, she thought—two anyway, or four, depending on how you counted them. But Kate was practicing lines for a play and was not chatty. Cami paced and modeled and fidgeted and touched her ears until her father came home.

When he arrived, she pranced before him, holding her hair back and turning her head from side to side, showing him both shining studs with a speck of dried blood behind each.

"They're beautiful," he said, "very mature." He looked relieved.

"And…" Cami said, twisting on the balls of her feet and thrusting out her chest.

"And what?" he said.

When Cami turned her back (she hoped her bra was more noticeable from that angle), Kate plucked at her own strap for him to notice.

His relieved look deserted him. "Oh, yes… a new… ah, a bra… it's very… ah… new."

THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR DREW NEARER; THE sun stayed longer after supper and etched long shadows across the lawn. The tulips, spring's first adornment, withered next to the house. The cat slept in the picture window, absorbing the sun in its orange fur. Cami's ears were almost completely healed. Kate studied a lot and rehearsed lines for her play. Derrick watched wrestling on TV.

Derrick was cool, too, Cami thought, or at least he acted that way in spite of the pimples on his forehead and cheeks. He would arrive at the house after school, and although Cami's father had given unenthusiastic consent, Derrick always left before Cami's father got home from work. Cami liked the flag Derrick had sewn over a hole in the seat of his ripped jeans. And she was beginning to consider his very faint mustache to be not as hilarious as she did the first time she saw it. The first thing Kate did was advise him not to smoke in the house.

The first day he was there, Cami walked into the room and they separated quickly and Kate's face turned crimson.

"Were you guys kissing?" Cami asked, trying to act like she'd seen it all before and that nothing surprised her.

"I was just smelling her hair," Derrick said and grinned foolishly.

"Yeah, right," Cami said and tilted her head giving him her how-dumb-do-you-think-I-am look. "Kiss her all you want. I don't care." She tried to act indifferent, but, in reality, was never far from them while he was there.

She felt older just being around them, sublimely absorbing the intricacies of courtship. Kate laughed differently at the things Derrick did and said, different from the way she laughed at Cami. When she laughed at Derrick, she would lean into him and he would put a casual arm around her or a hand on her bare lower back. Cami thought that was why he tried to act funny more often, especially if Kate was standing close to him. Cami noticed that Kate sat sideways on the couch to study, and tucked her feet under Derrick's legs as he watched TV, as if her painted toes were cold. To Cami, that closeness seemed effortless and natural and a lifetime away.

"Are you going to get married someday and have kids?" she asked them one night.

Derrick never looked from the TV. "Not if she's going to college, we're not," he answered.

That night at supper, Derrick drank a beer from the fridge, and Kate got mad. Pretty mad, Cami guessed, since Kate sat on the floor while Derrick sulked on the couch.

Out of allegiance, there was something Cami found not so likable about Derrick. Kate's knitted eyebrows and pursed lips confirmed it. There was something ugly about the ripening pimples on his face, something repulsive and dirty about the way he flicked ashes on the front step. There was something extremely annoying about the way he monopolized the remote control.

Cami broke the silence. "Is that all you like? Stupid wrestling?"

He did not respond immediately. He was sitting there, she thought, trying to come up with something funny to say; something stupid to make Kate laugh and make her want to sit next to him.

"What? You don't like the Hulkster?" he said as he jumped up and put a wriggling Cami in a pretend head lock. His belt buckle hooked her earring. When she tried to pull away, it felt as though the gold stud had ripped off her ear. Cami screamed and clutched the side of her head. Derrick froze.

When Kate rushed to her side, and knelt and took her head in her hands, Cami could smell her—apples and ink. Kate's hands were smooth and gentle as she turned her head to inspect the damage. "It's OK, Cami. It's not ripped. It's OK."

"Hey. It was an accident," he said. "Don't be such a baby."

"Derrick—you're an asshole." Kate's face was hard.

Cami's ear throbbed and her confusion swelled. She did not want to cry in front of them—to be a baby. She wanted to run to her room and cry into her pillow; she knew her sobs were muffled there, and her tears absorbed. She wanted to run over and kick Derrick in the shins, and throw her hissing cat in his face. She wanted Kate to let go of her arm so she could run from them to her room. She wanted Kate to use both arms and hold her—tightly—and

not let her go. Cami stood there, wincing as she touched her bleeding ear with fingers covered in her salty tears.

Derrick left.

With her thumb, Kate swept a tear from Cami's cheek. "Are you OK?" Cami nodded and sniffed. Kate smiled gently and in her soft, even voice said: "With eyes so brown, I was expecting brown tears," and she showed Cami her wet and shining thumb.

How far away was college? Will you come home on weekends? Are you still going to go out with Derrick? Will there be a phone in your room there? How much does it cost to send a letter there? Can you come home for my birthday? Cami wanted to know all these things and more, but did not ask. And she thought she had finished crying; that is, until Kate hugged her and she started again—woeful sobs, and plump, streaming tears. Kate's earrings hung like the seats on a Ferris wheel, jingling in Cami's ear like chimes in a summer's apple-scented breeze.

WHEN THE CURTAIN CAME DOWN ON KATE, THE audience applauded the resurrected unicorn and her chorus of bowing animals. Cami and her father rushed home—Kate was coming from the play to their house to babysit, and Cami wanted to make a card for her before she got there. Cami could still hear the applause as she her father hurried across the parking lot to their car. They passed Derrick. He was leaning against the auditorium, with the glowing ember of his cigarette casting an orange light into his squinting and evasive eyes.

On a piece of colored paper she drew a unicorn: Kate, the unicorn. She drew the white and blue ribbons that were curled into Kate's hair and floated and danced in the air when she leapt around the stage. She drew the flowing white dress Kate wore, and showed its silky layers fluttering behind a prancing and carefree unicorn. She drew the glittering spiral horn that grew from her head, and she drew the audience in front of the stage that stood and applauded the star. She drew herself, applauding among the appreciative, stating proudly to the stranger seated beside her, that the unicorn, the star, was *her* babysitter.

When Kate arrived, Cami was already in her pajamas with the card she made in hand. *Were you nervous? Did you see me clapping? Did you sign any autographs? Can I stay up late? There is no school tomorrow. We can make popcorn. Did you save the horn?*

Kate was still in her costume and glittering makeup sparkled blue and gold across her cheeks. Her horn was missing and she soberly held her bag over her shoulder. Her smile was bright, but brief when Cami gave her the card: *The Best Babysitter.*

Cami's father left a number where he could be reached before he left.

Kate made popcorn and they sat on the couch watching the news. Kate never changed from her flowing white dress, and the blue and white ribbons entwined in her hair hung over her shoulder. She answered Cami's questions with little enthusiasm until eventually Cami struggled to stay awake, and her chatter slowed.

"When are you leaving for college?" Cami asked, leaning her head on Kate's shoulder, preparing to close her eyes.

"Next month," was Kate's answer.

To that, Cami said only, "Oh." Her cat rubbed itself across Kate's legs, then jumped up and curled by the arm rest, purring.

Kate placed a pillow on her lap. Cami laid her head there and looked up, fading from consciousness. The blue and gold sparkles on Kate's cheeks glittered like the heavens, and her earrings hung like the planets in the tails of shooting stars that were the ribbons in her hair. Cami's limp body twitched occasionally in opposition to sleep, but eventually her mouth hung open, drawing in peaceful breaths, and her hand hung limp over the side of the couch.

She started to dream; a dream of a unicorn surrounded by children with their outstretched arms. There were flowers and the smell of apples and a faint unsettling smell of smoke. Fingers ran through her hair. "Do me a favor," she heard, and her body lunged to a half-sleep. "Don't ever go with a guy who will make you choose." And sparkles of blue and gold on streams of mascara ran down to the corners of a trembling mouth. There were many children, and cats chasing balls. The unicorn smiled and whirled around trying to touch all the outstretched hands, but kept missing Cami's. The whirling and spinning obscured the unicorn's face. "Look at me," Cami tried to say above the others. Then she felt herself being carried on a scent and in arms so familiar that she nestled into it, comforted, secure, until she was set down and she awoke.

Her father kissed her on the forehead then turned to leave her room.

"Dad," she said in a fragile and fatigued voice.

"Yes, Cami."

"Where's Kate?"

"She went home, Cami."

"Oh," she said, under the weight of realizing where she was and that she had been dreaming.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Cami?"

"Can I sleep in your bed?" She held out her arms so she could be lifted and carried.

She felt half her age as she clung to his neck as he carried her down the hall, and she wondered how long it took to dream a dream.

"Dad?" she asked.
"Yes, Cami?"
"Do you ever wonder if she can see us?"

He laid her in bed and covered her and brushed her hair back as he always did. "Sometimes," he said. "Sometimes I do."

LARRY LYNCH

Is a 32-year-old single dad from New Brunswick, Canada. He works in a paper mill and writes on night shifts while watching the paper go around and around. His boss hopes Larry will write a best seller and quit. Larry does too.

Neon Sea Dreams

RUPERT GOODWINS

When you win that award and get up on stage, don't forget to thank those who made it all possible.

IT HAD BEEN THE LONGEST SUMMER. A DECADE spent in Atlanta had done nothing to inure her to the heat, the humidity, the people—rather, each passing year had worn her out a little more, made the seasons a little less bearable. This time, she swore, she would leave.

"I'll miss you, though," she said to Fungus the Bogeyman. Fungus rippled the photophores on his skin, waves of iridescence slipping beneath the nest of electrodes that cradled him in his tank. "But will you miss me? You don't care about this weather, do you? You don't have to...." She checked the temperature and salinity, pH and clarity—all was well in the cool seawater that bathed the constantly dreaming squid.

She looked out of the window at the city below, its bright colors beaten flat by the sun. No coolness there, she thought. Nobody watching out for me. And when she published and left? She'd been there: some interest, some conferences, a few offers of collaboration. They could wait. A year off, perhaps. The log cabin in the mountains. The cottage on the edge of Dartmoor. The Cape. Silence and birdsong, dry land and sea, sun and clouds. She needed all of them, and none of this. Even the blandness of the office had begun to disgust her. It was a playpen set up by the grown-ups, a place to keep her quiet while they did their grown-up things elsewhere.

Back to work, or she'd never leave. She sat down at the terminal and typed away, leaving the city behind her as she dropped like a diver into the depths of her private world. No one was here in her silent sea; nobody drifted with her through the suspended motes of numbers, the tangled clumps of equations and thoughts waving slowly. This was her fiefdom—no, more than that, her creation.

Well, it was his—she couldn't think of the Bogeyman as an it—as much as hers, and it seemed unfair to claim all the credit. Perhaps she'd give him co-authorship of the paper. It was the least he deserved for the years trapped in his tiny glass rockpool, she thought, although it'd be a bit difficult for him to give the talks. She had a momentary vision of Fungus in his tank, casting shadows on an overhead projector to a roomful of rapt neuroscientists, and laughed out loud in the empty room.

She worked until one in the morning, then walked out into the stifling night, hailed a cab, out along Peachtree to Dekatur. The apartment was far too good for her, a long-term loan from an absent friend, not really hers at all. She had been glad to accept it, but too worried to make any changes. It was his decor; she placed her books, her music, her clothes in it. They were a portable environment, life support in a welcoming but alien place.

Tired, she couldn't sleep. Lay awake naked on top of the bed, the breeze from the fan an insubstantial touch, background murmur to seaweed thoughts that looped and crossed restlessly in the currents of the night. Eventually, unnoticed, sleep came.

She was in her inland sea again, but this time she wasn't alone. There! A shadow against the sandy floor, mottled by the sunlight. Dash, dart, into the shadows and out. She dipped down, chased after it. She was a sea lion, a dolphin, some playful sea being wanting to catch and be caught. There! She had it now, seen it sneak into a crevice in the jagged limestone, anemone urchin-encrusted stone that darkly, spikily ringed the white pools of sand. No way out for you!

She looked in, held her face inches from the hole in the rock. An eye looked back at her—a flash, a familiar rainbow cascade. Fungus!

"Mate!" she said. "Am I glad to see you! Must be good for you to be free after all this time, eh?" She held out her hand, and Fungus gently wrapped a tentacle around and around, a perfect spiral, covering the finger without a gap. She tugged gently, felt him tug in return. Two tugs. Two tugs back.

"You're in there, aren't you?" she said. "You know."

WHEN SHE WOKE IT WAS 5 A.M. THE AIR IN THE room seemed thin as vacuum, the once-smothering humidity just a ghost of the sea. She reached into herself, found the dream even as it deliquesced in the thin air; remembered the games and the patterns, the cascading patterns played across Fungus' skin as he hung in the pellucid water in front of her, the patterns that slowly began to make sense. And her following him, following to the hole in the rocks, the hole with the steady, cool current that could only come from outside….

"Girl, you have got to get a grip!" she said to herself. "This is no good. Time to wrap up and ship out."

She barely glanced at Fungus when she got in, just running the checks on the water without the normal half-conversation she had with him. Three more weeks, she thought. Three more weeks and she could publish.

Was it time for the title? Why not? It was an act of faith with her that the giving of a title to her work came at the end, not the beginning. Naming something before it existed always seemed wrong, unscientific. Uncover, *then* describe. She played with words... the usual stuff first. Neurophysiology of Squid? Who cared about that? Cognitive Location Precepts? No....

She looked at the title on screen, and knew that it was right. Cognitive Cartography of *Lycoteuthinae Nematolampas.* Cog. Cart. That'd do. She wondered how the abstract would look. By selective stimulation and deep neurophysiological structural and activity-based monitoring, the normal environmental responses of L.N. can be mapped to the point where the animal's expectation of its normal habitat is fulfilled. That habitat may thus be mapped and itself simulated, allowing an exploration of the behavioral and cognitive responses... and so on.

Actually, it was pretty good. She could see a thousand research projects sparking off from this. Multiple animals. Multiple environments. And what could be done with all those other cognitive mapping projects? MIT practically had their artificial squid neural net already. Wouldn't it be good to put it in that environment?

Poor Fungus. He'd given up his life for hers. The work that would set her free had left him dulled and manacled in a box, dreaming his dreams in a world that would die when she stopped bothering about it. She worked on through the day, trying—but never quite managing—to forget the bundle of life in the tank behind her.

THAT NIGHT, THE DREAMS WERE DARKER. SHE revisited the inland sea, but the water was still, cold. No seaweed drifted, and the limestone rocks were dull, skeletal. A faint tang of decay on the air, in the water, was all that was left of life. Overhead, the sun was red, shrunken, dour, and a couple of clouds hung motionless in the still sky. She couldn't find the hole in the rocks. She sat shivering on the shore, waiting to wake up.

THE NEXT DAY WAS SATURDAY. SHOPPING AND movies, friends and late night. Not today. She lay in bed until noon, wide awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking, wondering. Building.

When the idea was finished, she was filled with a burning excitement. It had to be done! It had to be done now! It took an hour, maybe two, to put together the proposal, and five minutes to zap it off to her network of friends email-linked across the world.

It's a world that's more than capable, she thought, of supporting life. That's what it's here for, after all, this little speck of warmth and damp that twirls through the void. That's what we're here for.

It didn't take long for the replies to crystallize. *Yes,* they said. *Be delighted. Have the resources, have the time, would be a wonderful thing. Send the files.* All that remained, she thought, was to get Fungus a safe home in real life—and the marine boys in the aquarium would love him. Quite an attraction, really. A real live cyber-squid. Come see.

She couldn't sleep at all that night. She paced around the apartment, logging on, watching the world of her dream come alive. The cold water channel through the rocks grew wider. Her little Fungus world had been copied, distributed; it lived in Vancouver now, and London, and Bombay, and Amsterdam. Each pool connected, each slightly different, each coming to life in the fertile soil of a thousand processors, a million disks, dead silicon and metal oxide recombining in patterns, in a new world.

And then everything was ready. Fungus would have his world, a world much larger and stranger than his little inland sea. Who knows what might join him there?

Then it was Sunday. She rested.

RUPERT GOODWINS

Lives in London and writes about computers—at least until they get good enough to write about him. Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard reliably float his boat. "Neon Sea Dreams" is dedicated to Deirdre C., for inspiring this and other silliness.

Go ahead: sit with the cool kids at the back of the schoolbus. See what happens.