Quanta

Quanta (ISSN 1053-8496) is the electronically distributed journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy. As such, each issue contains fiction by amateur authors. Quanta is published in two formats, ASCII and PostScript (for PostScript compatible laser-printers). Submissions should be sent to **quanta@andrew.cmu.edu**. Requests to be added to the distribution list should be sent to one of the following depending on which version of the magazine you'd like to receive.

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Other Net Magazines

In addition to *InterText* and *Quanta,* there are lots of other net-distributed magazines out there. Here are a few we know about. If you know about more, feel free to drop us a line!

CORE is an electronic fiction journal edited by the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Rita Rouvalis, award-winning editor of *EFFector Online.* It appears in ASCII format. For more information, mail **rita@eff.org**.

DARGONZINE is an electronic magazine printing stories written for the Dargon Project, a shared-world anthology created by David "Orny" Liscomb in his now-retired magazine, *FSFNet*. The Dargon Project contains stories with a fantasy fiction/sword and sorcery flavor. DargonZine is available ASCII format. For a subscription, please send a request to the editor, Dafydd, at **white@duvm.BITNET**. This request should contain your full user ID, as well as your full name. Internet subscribers will receive their issues in mail format.

THE GUILDSMAN is devoted to role-playing games and amateur fantasy/SF fiction. At this time, the Guildsman is available in LATEX source and PostScript formats via both email and anonymous ftp without charge to the reader. For more information, email **jimv@ucrmath.ucr.edu** (internet) or **ucsd!ucrmath!jimv** (uucp).

Anthology Seeks Poetry Submissions

Published or unpublished poems, written between 1963 and 1992, are needed for a new anthology, tentatively titled *The Hearts of Parents and Children: Poems, 1963-1993.* Poems addressing any aspect of the parent/child relationship are welcome, but submissions must be limited to a maximum of three typed poems. Poems must be in English (no translations).

For more information or to send submissions, mail Eric Crump, University of Missouri, **C509379@mizzou1.bitnet** or **C509379@mizzou1.missouri.edu**. Please be sure to sign your name and include your e-mail address. Deadline for submissions: January 15, 1993. Royalties accruing from the sale of this anthology will go to a charity that assists victims of child abuse.

This anthology is being developed and will be edited by a group of writers from throughout the U.S. and Canada who are employing electronic mail to work on the project, using a Listserv List to communicate with each other.

Back Issues: They're Everywhere

Back issues of *InterText, Quanta, CORE,* and other network-distributed journals have a catch-all FTP site, thanks to the good people at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. The site is the **/pub/journals** directory on **ftp.eff.org**. The **ftp.eff.org** site does *not* replace *Quanta*'s other FTP sites, which are listed above. Likewise, issues of *InterText* and every issue of our predecessor, *Athene*, are available in both ASCII and PostScript via ftp from **network.ucsd.edu** (IP 128.54.16.3) in the **/intertext** directory. Issues are also available on CompuServe. Type GO EFFSIG to get to the EFF's "Zines from the Net" section. If you know of any other electronic magazines/journals (not mailing lists) that specialize in prose, poetry, or non-fiction work, let us know — we might be able to put them here on the page o' ads!

CONTRIBUTE TO INTERTEXT!

*Help us! W*e're just trying to put out issues every two months, and we can't without submissions from people out there in the net. Write to **jsnell@ocf.Berkeley.edu** for guidelines, if you want them. Any genre is fine and length is rarely, if ever, a concern. We like it if you haven't posted the story to a network newsgroup, and we won't allow the use of copyrighted (i.e., stolen) characters. Submissions can be in ASCII or, for those with the ability, RTF (Interchange) format. Macintosh users can send binhexed word processor files of about any type (Microsoft Word is best, however).

InterText is not responsible for much of anything, including the veracity of our page o' ads. What, did you expect a clever joke here or something?

The Tired Man And The Hoop

JASON SNELL

(With slight apologies to Ernest Hemingway)

The man drove to the baseline, allowing sweat to drip into his eyes.

"Nice try," he said. "You can try to defend against me, but I will keep driving until I can take a clear shot." He began to bounce the ball with his other hand and jerked his head to the left. The defender took his bait. He dribbled the ball past the defender. The ball dropped through the net.

"You make it, you take it," the defender said.

"I do," the man said.

This time won't be as easy, he thought, because that trick won't work again. I need a new trick, he thought. But what kind of trick? A kind he has never seen before. But he has been playing this game for a long time. I will have to be resourceful.

The man put the ball between his legs, his tired legs wrapped in flimsy sweat pants. He wiped the sweat off his hands onto the pants, and then retrieved the ball. I will have a better grip on the ball now, he thought. Such a grip may serve me well.

He stared into the eyes of the defender and knew how difficult his task was. He could not pass the ball to teammates because he had none. Being alone was what made one-on-one the challenge it was. The defender was also sweating, not only because he was tired, but because he was losing by two baskets.

The man started dribbling; he worked his feet back and forth in false drives to the basket and switched the ball between his hands. He moved to the far right of the court, the cracked high school court he had always used for these challenges. It had been a long time since he had lost. He did not like to lose.

"You're bad luck for me," he said to the right side of the court. "I can't ever make a good shot from this side."

The left side would be better, he thought. I can get past my opponent there.

He kept his dribble and moved to the left. It was a better side, less cracked than the right. Just then a wave of fatigue washed into every crack of his body. It had been a long game, and there was only so much his body could take.

"I will defeat you," he told his opponent.

If I don't collapse first, he thought.

He turned to look at the basket and saw it hanging in the sky behind his opponent, beckoning like a comfortably rickety front porch in someone's hometown.

"I am coming for you," he told the basket. He shook his fist at it.

He became angry when he realized that shaking his fist had caused him to stop dribbling the ball.

In a moment, the opponent was close. He jostled the man repeatedly, knowing that the man's only recourse was to shoot the ball. Such a shot would certainly miss. The opponent had the man covered too closely.

You have me in a bad situation, the man thought. But your situation is even worse than mine. You are four points behind me. How did I allow myself to be trapped in this corner, without my dribble? I must be getting very tired. Or I was looking at the basket and was distracted by my thoughts. Now I will perform my trick and then I will score the basket. He will be defeated.

"Look up in the sky," he said nonchalantly. "It's the space shuttle."

The opponent looked up, not because he was stupid, but because their basketball court was not too far from where the space shuttle lands.

Astronomy was the opponent's pastime, other than one-on-one basketball. And the man knew it.

The man turned as his opponent was looking, and hurled the ball through the air. The ball a high arc and bounced off the backboard. They watched the ball drop through the soft net and onto the hard pavement below.

"That was a dirty trick," the opponent said.

"I know," the man said.

He picked up the ball, and knew that he was now leading by six points. I will win, he thought. He will not score eight points in a row.

"You make it, you take it," the opponent said.

"Yes," the man said.

JASON SNELL jsnell@ocf.Berkeley.edu

Is a first-year graduate student at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. This is the last in a series of seemingly pointless imitations of famous authors he wrote for the final writing class he took as an undergraduate. (Previous victims were Virginia Woolf ("A Reality of One's Own") and Hunter S. Thompson ("Gnomes in the Garden of the Damned"), both of which appeared in *Quanta*. Now, shoo. You don't want to read any more about this guy.

narrow strip of St. Augustine grass between the sidewalk and the building. He lay next to an old buckboard wagon bereft of seat and spring that served as someone's idea of appropriate decor for an all-night redneck diner specializing in greasy breakfasts, club sandwiches and tough steaks.

Riddle regarded Stetson without trace of sympathy. He shook a cigarette out of a crushed pack, lit it and let a cloud of blue smoke waft away to join the grease and smoke hanging above Hill's.

Stetson looked up at the rust-rimmed wheels of wagon with the incomprehension of an infant.

"Well?" said Riddle. Stetson looked up.

"Well, what?"

"You coming?"

"Coming where?" said Stetson.

"You asshole."

Stetson looked puzzled. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you are one."

"I am?"

"Get up," said Riddle.

"Do I have to? It feels so good here."

"Suit yourself," said Riddle and started to move off.

"Wait."

Riddle stopped. Stetson said, "You just gonna leave me here?" He looked up at the wagon. "Here in the goddamn O.K. Corral?" He started giggling like a twelve-year-old at a slumber party.

"Jesus, Stetson, get your ass up off the ground. For chrissake, take a look at yourself. What the hell's wrong with you? Someone might think you had real problems or something."

Stetson looked up at Riddle, wanting to answer, but unable. He loved Riddle like a brother and his disapproval was crippling. He had always appreciated Riddle's honesty, and felt all the worse to find it directed at himself. He wanted more than anything to spring up, to prove himself. To prove Riddle wrong. But the grass was cool and soft and, with the weight of forced merriment lifted, he felt more depleted than he could ever remember.

A thin, middle-aged, weathered man in western clothes stalked down the sidewalk, pausing when he came to where Riddle stood. The cowboy cast a cold eye down at Stetson, then up at Riddle, his face pinched into a squint under the brim of his hat.

"Drunk," he said, summing up the scene.

"Adjective as accurate as noun," said Riddle, nodding grimly.

The cowboy looked suspiciously at Riddle and went on his way, shaking his head.

Stetson knew that standing would not absolve him of the crimes of the evening, but along with a big breakfast and pots of coffee, it might break the spell of self-absorption under which he had languished for what seemed like years.

He rose and stepped over the hedge back onto the sidewalk. Riddle nodded at him much as he had nodded at the cowboy a moment before.

Standing at last, and with sober voice, Stetson looked at Riddle and said, "I think I'm finally ready." They stalked into Hill's Cafe, where Stetson ate like a plague of locusts or a man returned from the dead.

MARK SMITH mlsmith@tenet.edu

Has been writing fiction and non-fiction for over ten years. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Window, Spectrum, Malcontent, Epiphany, The Lone Star Literary Quarterly*, and *Elements.* "Reality Check" is from Mark's collection of stories, *Riddle,* which won the 1992 Austin Book Award. Mark lives in Austin, Texas.

"Trust me."

"Never," she laughed, dropping onto the grass beside him, her leg touching his. He laughed too and helped himself to a great glug from the bottle.

From the crest of the high lawn where they sat, they could see the downtown spread before them with its motley assortment of bank towers, church steeples, and older stone and brick buildings. Light from the street lamp broke through the trees to dapple the shade with medallions of counterfeit moonlight that spilled down the lawn, across the sidewalk, and into the street.

"It seems so perfect," said Joni, reaching across Stetson for the bottle, her arm draped lazily across his chest. He caught her elbow and pulled her toward him. She smiled slightly and allowed him to brush his lips to hers. She laughed nervously and pulled away against the light pressure of his hold.

"We should behave," said Joni.

"Why?"

"Olivia."

Stetson sighed. "Yes. Olivia." He let go of her completely. She wrapped a languid arm around him and patted his shoulder as a mother would a child.

"I'm done with Olivia."

"But you're still together."

"Barely."

"Does she think so, too?"

"Hard to say what she thinks."

He drank but the wine tasted like mud. He offered the bottle to Joni. She shook her head.

He said, "We've been friends for a long time."

"Yup."

"How come we never…?" He paused. "You know."

"I don't know. Maybe we thought it might ruin something special."

"Did I ruin something just now?"

"I don't know," said Joni. "I'll have to think about it."

At once all the booze and drugs of the evening came crashing down on Stetson. His head began to swim and he felt nauseous and faint.

"Better go," he croaked, staggering to his feet. He felt ten years old again and stepping off the merry-go-round, at the motionless, dizzying vortex of a madly spinning cosmos that stretched away from him out to the edges of the Milky Way, tilting dangerously with each slight movement of his head.

He managed to walk down off the lawn, but the face of the night had changed. He became mortified at the thought of puking in front of his old friend, worsening a situation he already found intensely embarrassing. He felt the old reliable emotion of self-disgust returning and all he could think of was getting drunker, partying more. They walked the short blocks to Joni's apartment, a tiny carriage house, the manor which it once served having long since been torn down for parking.

"See you soon," said Joni, planting a tiny kiss on his hot cheek. She bounded into the house and Stetson started back.

The sidewalk rose up too quickly and he felt as though he were running. Maybe he did run, because his own house appeared before him almost at once. The urge to retch had passed and his thoughts returned to revelry. He regretted the episode with Joni, but he had a drunk's confidence that come tomorrow he could put things right again.

The house was dark and still but for an orange glow floating on the front porch. Riddle sat in the swing where he had been sitting when Stetson left with Joni. Stetson stopped on the sidewalk, weaving visibly.

"Well, asshole," said Riddle, "you manage to get your dick wet?"

"Shut up, you swine. Where is everyone?"

"They went home. I should, too."

"No," said Stetson. "Let's do something."

"Fun's over, partyboy," said Riddle. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know,"

"Of course you don't. You've killed more brain cells tonight than most folks are born with." He rocked for a few moments, then flipped his cigarette butt so forcefully that it cleared the yard and bounced into the empty street, where it burst apart in a shower of orange sparks. "How about breakfast?"

"Now you're talking!" yelped Stetson. He reeled a broad step backward into the grass. "Lemme hit the head first."

In the bathroom, Stetson leaned on the sink and tried to square his shoulders for a reality check, but he kept slipping from side to side. He looked into the mirror where his disembodied face floated like a conjured visitor at a seance. Every pore seemed a crater and his eyes had narrowed to bloody slits. His lips stretched over his yellow teeth like the mouth of a corpse.

The dawn wind blowing through the windows of Riddle's pickup truck began to cool Stetson's fevered brain. Riddle's truck was a mess. Coke bottles rolled across the floor over piles of yellowed newspapers. Empty cigarette packages and fast-food trash littered the seat. Reams of papers were folded and rubber-banded behind the sun visor. Stetson didn't notice a thing.

Riddle listened unsympathetically to the whole story of his walk with Joni Ricketts, occasionally shaking his head and grunting.

"Do you think I really fucked up this time?"

"Would serve you right."

"I guess it would."

They pulled into the parking lot of Hill's Cafe. Even though it was not yet six, the lot was jammed with cars and trucks most in worse repair than Riddle's. Riddle and Stetson piled out of the truck and started toward the front door along the sidewalk that ran the width of the building.

Suddenly, without warning even to himself, Stetson tumbled over a scraggly box shrub and fell in a heap onto a

Reality Check

MARK SMITH

Stetson had careened like a cue ball through the whole raucous evening of his party. Host extraordinaire, he had obliged all comers. Asked to dance, he danced. If the music needed changing, he manned the platters. When someone suggested martinis, Stetson fished the olives from the door of the refrigerator.

Because he had been partaking liberally of various intoxicants, he periodically performed what he thought of as "reality checks."

He would slip into the bathroom, lean over the antique, chipped sink and peer into the mirror. If he didn't find a scarecrow-faced stranger leering back at him, he considered himself to have passed the reality check.

Leaving the bathroom after the latest check, Stetson found that the crowd had begun to thin noticeably. The party had hit its zenith of noise and confusion and was now obviously downshifting. Soon the only ones left would be insomniac keg-draining diehards and hangers-on.

No matter — it had been a great party complete with all the requisite elements of fun: deafening music, a dazzling smorgasbord of mainly illegal drugs, general intoxication, and enough athletic dancing to require days of muscle recuperation. But Stetson was no more ready for the evening to end than a bulimic is to leave the Thanksgiving table: his eight-ball had yet to find its pocket.

About this time, Joni Ricketts came to say good-bye. She floated out of the darkened living room, where several rollerball, spike-haired couples were bouncing to a Bow Wow Wow record popular that weekend, onto the wide, generous front porch to where Stetson stood with several keg-hangers, sipping beer, passing a fifth of Beam and cursing punk rockers.

Joni put a bony hand on Stetson's arm. "Going now, super party, had a great time," she said as she wafted diaphanously down the steps and half the distance of sidewalk out to the street.

"How're you getting home?" Stetson asked.

"Walking."

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to do that. You still have guests."

"I'm coming with you," he repeated.

"Okay."

"Hold on a sec."

Stetson turned back into the house, shooting a glance at Riddle where he sat rocking silently on the porch swing. A homicidal grin spread like a rash across Riddle's face.

Inside he grabbed a half-empty jug of California red, noticing as he did that his girlfriend Olivia, forgotten early in the evening, lay sprawled fully-clothed across their bed, snoring.

He dashed back out the front door before anyone could ask him where he was going or delay him with their good-byes. He met Joni at the curb. They walked along a broad avenue that led from Stetson's neighborhood downtown along which stately Victorian houses, once dominant, now stood cheek-to-jowl with convenience stores, daycare centers, and laundromats.

It was very late, nearly four, and a cool, light breeze had sprung up and lifted their hair behind them as they walked in silence. Strolling with Joni through this quiet, slumbering city filled Stetson with a dreamy weightlessness. He stopped walking, swigged deeply from the bottle, and passed it to Joni who took an equally hearty pull. He watched appreciatively as the muscles of her throat moved rhythmically up and down.

She handed the bottle back and they resumed walking.

"Good party," she said.

"You thought so?"

"Lotsa people."

"That's all that counts," said Stetson facetiously. Joni chuckled politely.

"How's Olivia?"

"She's there."

"Everything okay with you guys?"

"I guess. We fight a lot," said Stetson, telling a marginal truth. In fact, they fought only occasionally. The rest of the time, they ignored one another, but Stetson felt the need to cast the relationship in a harsher light.

"And you? Any prospects?"

"Oh. One or two," said Joni, effecting a coy, eye-batting gesture.

"I'm not surprised," said Stetson. He felt his face flush as Joni turned to look at him. He caught her eyes briefly, then turned away. They met in a college class several years before, found they had friends in common, and had been good friends ever since. During that time, each had served as collaborator, confessor and commiserator to the other's unsettled love life. Tonight he saw her differently.

They turned the corner and walked past a grand colonnaded mansion that sat atop a crest down from which an obsessively manicured lawn declined on each side toward retaining walls that ran along the sidewalk. Stetson stopped and looked up toward the house.

Joni said, "Well?"

"Come on," he said, vaulting to the top of the wall and reaching for her hand. Stetson pulled her up onto the top of the wall and, still holding her hand, ran up the lawn until they almost reached the porch. He plopped down onto the grass under a spreading live oak tree.

"I don't know, Stetson," said Joni, biting her lip and looking reluctantly at the house.

"It's okay. They're lawyers' offices."

"Really?"

When we get back to the house I put the Pearl Jam tape in the player and we go out on the porch.

"Dance," she commands, taking my hand. We dance on the soft wet boards. I am drunken and graceless; she thrashes without abandon like Siva and things are born out of her and I am so glad to be with her. My hair tangles and sticks to my face.

Finally we sit down on a long, white, plastic sun chair. The barbecue grill is still glowing faintly in the yard. Daphnie has an ounce and a half of marijuana in her purse, which she pulls out and begins meticulously picking through, rolling a joint. It's the dope she got in Ecuador while working for the Peace Corps and smuggled back in a tin of tea bags. It is wrapped in an old sock.

I hold the bag in my hands, amazed — I've never seen this much at one time before and I've never known anyone with the audacity to carry so much of it on her person. Daphnie's father though is a state trooper, and I've always suspected that she is trying to attract some modicum of lost attention from him. Daphnie proceeds to get stoned and I comb her hair softly with a brush I find in her purse. She sighs while I do this. I rub her neck and slowly lean forward and kiss her shoulder where it meets her neck. She leans back against me the way she did at the shore, and I know that everything will be all right. I feel warm and very happy and acutely aware. I think all my sensory neurons are firing at once.

"How were things after you left?" I ask.

"Left where? Ecuador or here?"

"After you left here, last summer."

"Okay, I guess." I can tell by the tone of her voice that they were not. "I got fired from my job, the one I had last summer, and I just went away to Ecuador."

"That was the best way to leave that job." I mean this as a joke; it wasn't a very good job. Suddenly I realize that there is a good deal more to her than I had ever thought. There was so much that I didn't know about her.

"Seeing anybody? I mean, do you have a boyfriend?"

"No." She says this quietly. "Not since January."

"Oh. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she says again, than adds, "I always get damaged."

"Even with me?" I ask.

"Even with you," she whispers, and I am ashamed. We are silent for a long time and I am thinking about how I could have hurt her and wondering why she stopped calling me. What nameless, unseen thing had taken place between us at the height of my happiness? In my euphoria, was I blind to her pain? And what had she suffered in January?

"Are you tired?" I ask, kissing the tips of her fingers.

"You bet," she says, shaking the gloom, reaching down and putting a hand on my leg. "Wanna lie down?"

"Yeah, I do."

We go upstairs, into the spare bedroom and undress, lying down on top of the sheets. The window is open and we can still hear the tape playing quietly downstairs. She lies frail and trusting in my arms and I hold her tightly. We are silent and I am stroking her hair and later I feel her tears on my chest.

I roll over and hold her fragile face between my hands and feel that she is breaking apart and that I have to hold her together, tenaciously, lest all things abandon her. I kiss the tears on her cheeks and they are salty on my lips.

"I want to hold you forever," I say, "and kiss your tears away. I don't want to be apart from you again. It took me a year to find you and I want to make you stop hurting." She kisses me hard on the mouth and I tangle my fingers in her smooth hair.

Before I close my eyes, I see the red LED of the clock. It says 1:35.

Bernie has somehow, and somewhere, during the course of the night, met and brought home the Beast From 40,000 Fathoms, who jiggles lugubriously around the house the next morning in her gruesome underwear, chanting the mantra "Bernie-Bernie-Bernie-food." She is as white as a sheet of erasable bond, alternately scowling and laughing shrilly at everybody in the house like one of Perseus' blind hags. In a deep pan of sputtering lard she prepares and consumes — to the stupefaction of all — a dozen runny eggs. Bernie in the corner holds his head, looking miserable and hung-over.

I kiss Daphnie on the mouth and her lips fit mine in a hermetic seal and there are things that have passed between us in the night which we will not mention again — words spoken on the loose fortune of wine — yet we are closer for them.

I put my arms around her and kiss her again, this time on the forehead. I let go of her, knowing that now it will work for us, at least for a time, and that nothing is important but today. She promises that she will call me and she goes out the door, taking with her the corpulent glob of chins she'll drop off at home, or work, or the swamp, or whatever. Cthulhu blows multitudinous kisses at Bernie before oozing into the front seat of Daphnie's tiny car.

The windows are tinted black, so I cannot tell if Daphnie looks back as the car drives down the road, past the mailbox, past the lawn gnome, and past the tree that Bernie's kitten was stranded in for three long days and two frigid nights.

KYLE CASSIDY cass8806@elan.glassboro.edu

Kyle Cassidy is 26 years old and a senior at Rowan University, where he is majoring in English and Political Science. His mother wishes that he would get a haircut.

though I am wrong. Her hair is a little shorter than when I last saw her, but it is still in the same style, admitting and closely framing the oval of her face which, frankly, looks very egg-like when her hair is wet.

"Hey," she says, taking her feet down from the stool next to her so that I can sit down.

"I was saving a seat for you," she says to Bernie, "but somebody took it." He's pretty hammered. His mouth is open and he is looking right through her head like a bullet. Daphnie is drinking something pink from a plastic cup. In the cup there is also a coffee stirrer and a lot of crushed ice.

I straddle the stool and look at her — aware that I am so nervous that I'm liable to do something stupid, like knock her drink over, and aware that after all this time, I can't think of what to say to her.

"You look great," I end up saying, and it's the truth. The words come out of my mouth with a surprising calmness and clarity and this makes me feel at least a little confident.

"Oh, your hair," she says, leaning over to me and stroking it. "I love your hair."

"I just got it cut," I interject. "It was down to my navel, but it kept getting under my arm when I tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep."

"You took all the blond out," she remarks, still petting it. I swivel on the stool to give her a better look.

"Yeah, well, I can't stand being the same person for too long at a stretch. Hey, look, is there someplace we can go to talk? Someplace quiet? There's a lot…" Things have been weighing on me for a long time.

"Sure," she says. "We can go to the game room." Bernie has vanished to somewhere, like bigfoot into the trees. Daphnie tosses back the last of her drink, straining it through the ice, and then sets the cup back down on the bar. I follow her back up the stairs, but all the stools are taken. My vision is narrowing.

"We can go outside," she says, and I notice that there is a door leading out side on the far wall. It's open, and two bouncers are leaning back up against the outer wall. We walk past them and into the parking lot, sitting down on the curb. I lay down my jacket so that she can sit on it.

"It's been a long time," I say. "I've… It's good to see you, really good. I've been looking for you."

"Yeah, that's what Bernie said."

"You just vanished and I didn't know what happened to you. You stopped returning my calls."

"I did?" she asks.

"Yeah, you don't remember?"

"I don't know. I don't remember why."

"Oh, God, Daphnie… There's things I wanna tell you. I've been trying to find you. Every second I spent with you was magic — you're the best. I've never had more fun with anybody else. That time at the beach was so, I don't know, so real. Larger than life. Everything we did, the way you'd melt almost when I held you—"

"That's my weakness."

"I have pictures of you hanging up all over my room."

"From the beach?"

"I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, but you're beautiful."

I'm drunk and the words flow quickly and easily now. I'm worried that I'm coming on too strong, that I'll scare her away, but either I can't control myself or I no longer care. I just need for her to know how I feel about her. She looks first down at the ground and then into my eyes.

"No one has."

I lean down and start flicking pebbles with my finger. They skitter across the parking lot. I want very much to reach over with both my hands and lay my palms against her cheeks and feel their smooth warmth and say over and over again. "You're beautiful," until she believes it and believes that I believe it.

"I think about you all the time. There's nothing that I've been able to do which has given me one-tenth of the magic that I felt with you, just that short time that we were together. You're fun to be with, there's so much to you, and you were my best friend, too.

"I mean, it wasn't always sexual — really. I thought you were a lesbian the first time that I met you, but I just wanted to be around you because… Daphnie, I think I may be in love with you."

There is a derailed silence between us and, stumbling, I continue, lost now somewhere in the past. "I'm so nervous right now. I had to drink ten beers before we came here. We split a case, Bernie and I. Do you want to come over to his house with me and just talk or something? It's right across the street. I don't want to sleep with you. I mean, I do, but I don't. I want to have something with you that lasts." I haven't touched her and I want to reach out and take her hand, but I don't, purposefully leaning further away from her, making the space between us real.

"Sure, I'll come," she says. "I'd like to have a beer."

Walking back through the bar we see Bernie, beer in hand. He leers at me, eyes like pencil-points, sweat pasting hair to his forehead.

"If only my students could see me now!"

Bernie teaches history at Millard Fillmore High School. Often he causes me to reevaluate my own teachers and my conceptions of them.

"We're going back, okay?" I say.

"The two of you? Hot damn!" he replies bawdily, slapping me one the back. A cloud of dust dislodges itself from his jacket and wafts around us. Then to Daphnie he says: "He *really* likes you."

"I really like him," she says and takes hold of my arm, pulling herself close. It is the first time we have touched in a year.

We walk back to Bernie's house. On the way, I hold her hand and we talk about incidentals: where she's living, working, people she sees. She's graduated from the university; her degree is in engineering.

Circles: A Romance

KYLE CASSIDY

"That's where my kitten got stuck," says Bernie, pointing up the thick, blank trunk of a limbless tree, which rises straight like a dowel perhaps eighty feet into the air.

"The fire department doesn't get cats out of trees — that's a myth. Our neighbor finally got him down. He worked for the phone company and he had one of those belts, those climbing belts, and he went up the tree and dropped the kitten down. I was seven or eight and my friend and I were standing at the base of the tree, holding a stretched-out blanket. Prometheus — the kitten was maybe twelve weeks old — hit that blanket screaming and going so fast that it tore the corner of the blanket out of my hands. He was on fire, running across the ground and up onto the porch and into this box, this cardboard box that he lived in. He hit the back of the box so hard he knocked it across the porch. He'd been up in that tree, meowing, for three days, and for three days I'd been outside watching him up there and crying.

"My neighbor said it was no problem, but my dad gave him a case of beer for it — good beer — and the guy got drunk and ran into our car in the driveway. My dad had to take him to court to finally get him to pay for the damage."

We were walking around his house and into the backyard, where we were barbecuing tofu dogs and corn on the cob in the surprisingly cool June evening. In a few hours it would be dark and the only light would come from the glowing coals and from the illuminated sign at The Hat Trick. To get there you follow the long dirt driveway (or short dirt road) and cross 202 — it's about 300 yards away.

Bernie had called and said that he'd seen Daphnie in that bar near his house and that she had spoken fondly of me. Remembering only the good things, my thoughts flew instantly back to that time at the beach and the music that she had played over and over again on her stereo, knowing that we were too young to die and too old to ever make a mistake. They came back to me with the catchphrases she always used: "you bet," and "false," meaning "no." I thought of the way her smile curved back from her teeth and the way she trembled when we were together in bed.

He'd begged her to meet us there the following week, then called me. I was thrilled and frightened. I'd been trying to find Daphnie for a year, ever since she had vanished from my life one evening and left no forwarding address, phone number, or reason. And now, to have her suddenly there again, once more with no reason, left me weak and agitated.

We sat on Bernie's porch and watched the sun go down through the trees, drinking the cheapest beer we had been able to find (Igor's Yellow Belly, $4.98 a case) and cooking dinner, waiting for 10:30 — the time when Daphnie would show up at The Hat Trick. I fretted, chewing my cuticles, and Bernie languished over the woes of his own life, which I couldn't remember as he listed them.

We drank beer.

"Agg. God," says Bernie as it starts to creep into his brain. "I haven't been laid in three months. I lost 120 pounds and I still can't get laid." Bernie used to be huge, though he's looking pretty good these days. I noticed a sign on his fridge that says "nothing tastes as good as thin feels."

"It'll happen," I reassure him, laying low in my seat and belching. "Don't sweat it."

"Easy for you to say," he moans. "You always get laid." He flings his empty bottle into the yard.

From there the evening begins to degenerate into a festival of masculinity, and by beer number seven we're laughing like maniacs and pissing gleefully into the yard from the second story bathroom window.

It's quarter after ten. Bernie is drunk and depressed about his two-week-old leather jacket: it's shiny and new and flawless. He drags it forlornly behind him in the dirt by one sleeve. As we approach the bar, he puts it on and a cloud of dust rises from him like some desert rat out of a Clint Eastwood film.

"You'll have to take the lids off," says the bouncer and I say "Lids?" "Hats," he says, motioning towards my head. "No hats in here." We take our hats off and I shove mine in my back pocket, thinking that it will look better if it's rumpled. Although he doesn't ask, I shove about twelve forms of I.D. at him, managing to drop them on the pavement. He picks them up and hands them back to me without really looking at them.

I notice that my hands are shaking.

Bernie has already walked in and is waiting for me. He says something drunkenly that I don't hear and stumbles a step backwards with a blank look on his face. I follow him up the stairs.

We enter a quiet and brightly lit game room where somebody calls out Bernie's name, rushes over, and pumps his hand. Bernie mumbles something incoherently and slides away.

"High school," he says to me, taking his leather jacket off and dragging it on the floor behind him.

Florid pink-eyed people stand like robots before the video machines, engrossed cyborgs. I can still hear the music from downstairs, though it might just be in my head.

Bernie leads me quickly through a maze of small rooms where people are playing pool or sitting on wooden stools, drinking. There are well-groomed men with surfer haircuts and women in huge shorts with banana clips on their heads. If I was sober I would probably hate this place.

Bernie goes down another flight of stairs, which opens up into a wide and loud room with a very low ceiling. Immediately I see Daphnie sitting at the bar. She's smiling (I have never known her not to), wearing gaudy multicolored shorts/white legs/cowboy boots/sports jacket. *And probably nothing on underneath the sports jacket,* I think,

from there down the wrist to the hand.

Dropping the knife into his lap, I run home. But Lyle's gone.

Her face, cupped in the lines of that bobbed hair, looks so angelic now. She gives me the last half of the speech. "Nukie just said it was a dialect from Rio. That the only subliminal in there was the number seven. It's like something you know in a dream, but it doesn't actually manifest itself. It's extraordinary. I jacked it in and I understand the whole thing now. There was no L-Razor. Just a feeling of utter uselessness. So you have only one more useful thing you can do with your life after you've jacked seven. And that's to end it."

But I don't feel like ending it. So Lyle had an out-of-body experience that revealed the final truth to her. My experience is doing the same. Only the truth is that I'm a loader for Lambs Conduit that's guilty of murder, even if the bastard did deserve it, I didn't need to do it. And so I really deserve to die, too.

But not tonight.

I'm walking calmly back to my gasping body and I know I have to somehow climb back in to take it over. So I lie down on the sofa where Lyle and I could have made love, and I enter myself. Once there I force my fingers into my throat, and my gut spasms, retching onto the carpet.

"So that's it, Tommy," she says for the second time this night. "That's the end."

And her face disappears as I suffer my third blackout of the night.

I'm waking up to the sound of the door buzzing. The smell of vomit hits my nostrils, forcing me to dry-retch until I can make it to the door.

It's another suited guy from the FDI. Guilt may have left me to live last night, but the FDI won't.

The penalty for Chowdhury's murder would be death, even for an Outzoner — we were in the Dustzone when it happened. And they know it was me. Someone must have seen me do it. Someone must have.

I'm looking for something with a sharp edge. I'm in the kitchen, looking for a knife. Where did I put them? The door still buzzes. There, in one of the cupboards, and I'm out of my head again, watching myself, thinking, this'll fuck their theory...

This time I can see that light Lyle talked about. It's there. It's waiting for me. But it's gray, like a fading light. Like a dimming light all around me.

I sit on the tiles on the floor of the kitchen; the knife edge slides across the skin. At first the wound is clean, white, shining in the reflection of the knife.

Then the blood comes, flowing steady like the emergency water pump out in the square. And I make the second cut. A single, bloody seven down my arm. Fading like the pump as the flow slowly runs dry.

And stops.

RIDLEY MCINTYRE gdg019@cch.coventry.ac.uk

Was born in 1971 in London, England and now studies Communications at Coventry University. He has been playing in his own worlds since 1985, when inspiration hit him to put on paper the weird stuff often seen flying around in his head. His ambitions are to escape to Canada before he gets conscripted and to make some sense of the Real World.

hits me. It's something flat and hard, like the business-end of a cricket bat right across the back of my skull.

The last thing I remember is the sensation of being turned over and over. I can tell he's looking for my money, checking the pockets of my blue plastic rain jacket and my gray canvas jeans. Then he feels around in my socks and I can feel him sliding his hand in my trainers, checking under the arch of my feet for the stash.

Then I can't seem to fight it anymore. The feeling that my brain's going to expand out of my head and that my eyes are going to pop out onto the cracked concrete wash over, and I'm out.

4. Amber Roy Chowdhury.

Swimming in my own long death, I try to think of a way out. Lyle's broken voice is still stabbing at my mind.

"There's no way out for people like us," she's saying. "We're all on some downward spiral. I know. I was born blind. I've never seen through real eyes. Then I saw myself for the first time as if I was out of my body and looking down on myself and I could see what kind of shit I was in. How stupid everything looked. How stupid and pointless my whole existence had been. It was the greatest feeling in the world, Tommy. I'd never felt that good before."

…out of my body and looking down on myself… That's what I'm doing. I'm having one of those near-death out-of-body experiences. I'm willing myself to live, to do something to save my own life, but I've got no power out here. I'm all spirit.

"The light, Tommy. It shines there like the ultimate high."

But there's no fucking light here. Not even a dark spot to signify where the Devil can get you. And damn it, after I found Amber Roy Chowdhury, the Devil deserved me.

The rain spitting on my face brings me around, and I'm alone on a heat-cracked pavement in Soho, the London Outzone. My head is pounding, there's a pain in my ribs like I've been run over by a robot racehorse, and it takes ages for the dizziness to wear off. I stumble along pipes of streets distorted by tunnel-vision. Falling over the rubble of crumbling buildings. Dodging the threats of local teamsters and streetkids. I don't even know where I'm going, let alone where I am. It's my mad hour. And it finishes in an arc of red neon as my weak and tired legs finally give out under me outside some club, amidst a gaggle of distressed voices.

I wake up in the back of a moving Metropol truck.

"Awake at last," one of the fat officers in the back with me says, his face peering at mine. I can smell chocolate on his breath. "You did well. Trying to crawl into a Tottenham Court club is a neat trick. You nearly made it, too. If someone hadn't accidentally found your Lambs Conduit dog tags, we'd have probably killed you. We don't take well to Outzone scum turning up on our doorstep."

My dry mouth parts to speak. "I was attacked. I got lost and was attacked. Then I woke up and tried to find my way home."

"That's okay," the fat cop says. "We're taking you to the monorail station. You can get home from there, can't you?"

I nod. It seems like the headache's gone now. I still have that pain in my ribs.

They let me off at the monorail station, and I thank them. I can't really thank them enough. It must be a busy night for them. I've heard rumors of Metropol cops shooting on sight anyone who looks remotely like they could come from the Outzone. But these are stories told by the rentacops of Lambs Conduit, and they've built up quite a rivalry with the official Federal police.

I check to see if my cash is still in the pouch in my trainers while waiting for the monorail and it is. Counting what's left, I have about thirty-five marks. It's just enough to feed me for the next week, if I'm at the stores at the right times to get what I want. Otherwise, I'll have to make do with the processed crap they feed us in the canteens at lunchtimes. Seeing the monorail train arriving, I quickly stash it back into the pouch and tighten up the velcro flap to hide it.

The sleek silver bullet takes me back to Lambs Conduit, but I don't want to go home just yet. I somehow need to feel the electricity of some local life. Just one of those whims I occasionally have, like when you want to go for a walk or get some fresh air. I need to be around people. My kind of people. I need to smell the sweat of a workforce, and the nearest place I can think of is the FLC games arcade.

I walk in past a pair of rentacops on their way out and feel a little safer. Only five or ten minutes into watching a raja jacked into the NST *Raid Port Said* game, his arms and legs still, while his mind controls the wild nuances of a fighter simulator flying against some ancient Middle-East threat, and I need to take a piss. So I head to the gents at the back of the arcade.

And there's Chowdhury. A sleek black cylindrical microsoft sticking out from behind his ear, and his hands shaking as he makes the first pain-filled lateral slice across his left forearm with a kitchen knife.

I race over and grab the blade from his hand. His face, uncomprehending, looks up in a fearful gaze. Black eyes staring into me as if I've spoiled his final pleasure.

Rage is swelling through me. I can't believe that he's so stupid to die from his own product, and I don't want to let him have the satisfaction. So I grab the collar of his jacket and throw him into one of the cubicles with all the force I can muster.

I can hear his skull cracking against the pipe leading from the cistern to the bowl, and it nearly knocks him out, and I do it for him.

After making the slices I can finally see it. I'm covered in blood and Amber Roy Chowdhury's sat on a toilet bowl dying. And on his arms I've etched two sevens on his arms. Each one a lateral cut across the forearm and a diagonal cut

ours on my conscience, waiting for the time to enact its own Oedipal desires. It's all my fault. Everything.

The door buzzes angrily for the seventh time as I get there and punch the *lock* stud. Wrenching the thing open, the first thing I see is the blue-chrome image of a sleepy Thomas Morrison in Lyle's Sony Guild eyes. Her cheeks are all puffed up and she makes one last spit into the corridor before I invite her in.

She's crying. I remember watching an old movie on the TV once about someone who had cybernetic eyes and couldn't cry through them. Instead, the tear-ducts are re-routed into saliva glands, and you have to spit.

"Can I use your bathroom?" she asks me.

I point her in the right direction and she follows my finger. Pulling the glue from my eyelids, I head into my cluttered room to pull some gray canvas jeans on. I walk back into the living room and she's there, looking utterly lost.

"Lyle, it's three in the morning."

"I brought you a present." She offers me a plastic coffee cup.

I just look at her straight. I'm trying to use some kind of empathy, to feel her own problem, so she won't have to tell me. But I'm a man, and men aren't so good at that kind of thing.

Her voice is broken, croaking like a misused engine. "Sean's dead, Tommy."

"Your brother?" I can feel a tiny part of her emptiness in her stomach as she nods. There's a few seconds of pure silence, and I'm screwing my eyes up, too, holding the tears back.

"I got back from work and found him in his room. He had his modeling scalpel in his hands. There was blood everywhere. I puked for a while, I couldn't stop puking, then I was able to check the wound. There was no forced entry, and no one had been at the door, I checked with security. But that L was there, Tommy. It was there, on both arms, just like the others. So I checked the jacks on his neck. I found this."

She hands me the smooth black cylinder, hot from the palm of her hand. It's the same microsoft I gave to Nukie two days before. I look up at the suddenly frail figure of Mandy Lyle as she gestures at the thing in deep frustration.

"It killed him, Tommy. Seven killed my little brother."

I can't think of anything to say to her as she spits into the carpet. But somehow, I know that after the police, medics, and probably another FDI agent ransacking her apartment, she could do with a friend. So I move close to her and she grabs me around the waist and my muscles ache in resistance as she squeezes me, forcing me to feel her pain.

I just stand there and take all the pain she wants to give.

Her face flushes red with embarrassment. Eyes are the windows to the soul, and Lyle's eyes are nothing but mirrors. So I have to try and read the other signs that unconsciously emanate from her face. The way she spits, the color of her face (or as close as my vidfone screen can emulate), the shape of her cheeks and lips.

"You held me in your arms and somehow things were right again. We could've made love, there on the sofa, but instead we just talked until we couldn't stay awake, and you left me in the morning with a note to tell me you had to go to work. I hated you that morning. I felt like a twenty rupee kitten in the Outzone. But I was just emotionally wasted after that night. I had died with Sean and you gave me new life. Well, there's more to life than sex and death, Tommy. Much more."

Between each rasping breath I'm trying to form her name with my numb lips. It's grotesque. I can almost look at my self from outside my body and laugh at how stupid and feeble I look. I feel like someone with an elephant sitting on his chest trying to talk after just being anesthetized at the dentist's. Like a flashback of the evening after Sean died.

After work I'm in the Blue Cross again, but Chowdhury isn't.

Trying to get the attention of the barboy, a very tall thirteen-year-old raja with a few whiskers of black hair along his upper lip, I instead manage to attract who I can only assume was one of the rajas around Chowdhury's table the other night. The kind of person who makes you think of where you've kept your cash, and if it's safe. This trip, I've got it rolled into a neat bundle and hidden in the pocket on the tongue of my trainers with the velcro strapped across it. I'm determined not take any chances.

"Looking for Amber Roy, again, chuck?" His voice is like sharp ice in my ear. I turn to face him and he's a massive fat guy, something unusual in the Outzone, where food is nearly legal tender.

My heart pounding in my ears, I emulate a casual nod as much as I can. "Yeah. Seen him around?"

"What do you want him for, chuck?"

I try my best to soothe his violent tone. Chuck isn't really an insult. It's just what the rajas call non-Asians. Same as us chucks call the Asians in Thames Midland rajas. Just a name. But he makes a simple word like *chuck* sound like *shithead*.

"Just seeing if he's got any more deals for me. I liked the last one he did."

He shuffles in his cheap black plimsoles for a few seconds. His fat face seems to light slowly, like someone twisting a dimmer switch behind his eyes.

"No worries, chuck. I'll take you to see him. He's in Paddington. Come on."

"Yeah, what do you want?" the barboy asks, his hand scraping a filthy rag that could once have been a green t-shirt around the inside of a steel tankard.

I look at the barboy, and I look at the big raja, and instead of trusting my instincts and asking the barboy anyway, I follow the raja out into the street.

We must be about two blocks down the street when he

Geordie's voice beckons us in.

Nukie's a tower all by himself, with long scraggly hair and broken teeth set in a thick-lipped maw. Sitting himself down in a big red velour armchair that's been heavily slashed across the back by what could have been a scalpel blade, surrounded by his Aladdin's Cave of electronic circuitry and plasterboard that forms a bizarre silicon/plastic/wire collage around his living room, he assumes his designated role of Rat King. In a way, he kind of reminds me of Falco, and I feel I can get along with him easier that way.

Lyle gets straight to the point, handing over the microsoft. "Can you tell us what this does? I need a full schematic rundown. Any hidden data it may contain, subliminals, anything that'd make anyone want to kill for it."

"Ooh. This is something to do those suicides, isn't it?" He plugs the smooth black cylinder into the side of a small box black box fitted with some sort of pedal switch and jacks a thin blue lead he finds lying on the floor between the box and a Fednet PC so brutally customized that it's barely recognizable. The image on its blue screen is a Guild Profile with my Videostat on it.

Nukie instantly senses my apprehension. "Relax, matey. I ran a go-to on you as soon as my camera could get a good shot of you in the lift. No voodoo here. So, do I call you Tom, Tommy, or Thomas?"

"Tommy," I reply.

The Geordie offers us seats of upturned cardboard boxes set amongst the detrius. He directs most of the conversation at Lyle, but occasionally he gives me a wink to see if I'm still awake.

"I hear you found number thirteen this afternoon. Unlucky number where I come from. Ruth White on Disneynews reckons there's a psychopath on the loose. She's nicknamed him the L-Razor."

Dustzoners labor under the misapprehension that Outzoners use TV's as fireplaces, and I'm about to say something to that effect when Lyle cuts in on me.

"Ruth White's just a computer-generated digitized image, what the fuck would she know about it?"

Before then I was one of the gullible millions who believe that Ruth White and the other Disneynews anchors are actually real people. Now I know better. Television is just living proof that half-truths are more dangerous than lies.

Nukie clears the blue screen and keys in a few more commands before pressing the pedal switch on the black box. The screen lights up with strings of what looks like endless random alphanumerics in a chaotically aesthetic pattern.

"What the hell is that thing?" Lyle asks him.

Nukie strokes the metalwork of the black box proudly. "It's a military squid. A Superconducting Quantum Interference Detector. Used for reading fire-control programs in combat machines. It's good for other stuff, too. I usually use it to check people's viruses for bugs before they run them against anything. The housing's my own, and I've made a few small improvements. I'd sell it back to the MGAF, but I like life. Fella two floors down's gonna finally wake up one of these mornings and find that his octaver effects pedal's missing. Serves him right for letting me look after his guitar in the first place."

He turns and reads the random data on the screen. After scrolling through over twenty screens of symbols his pensive face turns to us.

"I think I'll have to get back to you on this one, Lyle, it's pretty much got me stumped."

"What's wrong with it?" Lyle asks him.

"Nothing wrong with it, per se. It's just different. It's written in MAX, like any normal microsoft, but this seems to be some sort of dialect of the programming language. Like American English for computers. I don't know. It's slick, I can tell you that. It's called Seven. Puts pretty filters through your senses, but beyond that, you'll have to wait. It's imported, no one here could manufacture something this slick."

Lyle and I sit forward on the edges of our boxes. "So what do you want to do?" she asks him.

"Well, I'll put some feelers out, see if anyone knows the dialect. Until then, I can run it through a codebreaker program and try and compile some kind of lexicon for it. I've never done it before, but it's an idea I've been working on for a while. If it works I might be able to translate it myself."

We leave Nukie's flat in silence. Both of us know that we've gone to see him and we've scraped the iceberg. But, try as I might, I just can't make myself believe that Falco was killed over the number seven.

3. Mandy Lyle.

"I saw what happened to all those people, Tommy. It was like a hallucination, completely taking over the senses. Some of them survived, you know that? Some actually carried on beyond that. The ones with the strongest wills. But that's a *high*, Tommy. You can't get higher than that. Never."

My heart's being swallowed by a pit of guilt in my stomach, I can feel it tearing at the flesh of the fast-beating muscle, strangling it into submission. I stumble down into my sofa, throat gasping for air, guilt like a fat demon sitting on my chest. I'm going to die. I know I'm going to die. Just like Falco, and Sean, and Amber Roy Chowdhury.

"Just what the hell happened at that arcade, Tommy? I just can't believe you could do something like that."

The message just keeps playing. In my drunken stupor, I roll from the sofa and try to switch the vidfone answering machine back onto *pause*, like it will save my life or something. It won't. It can't.

I know now, that even if I live through this heart-pounding episode, I won't be able to live long with the events of the last five days sitting there like some mutant fetus of

services, but it's worth it all. With that, you get good bars, nightclubs, shops that sell stuff made in the Outzones — what they call shadow industry — and a semi-decent cycle-rickshaw taxi service. Here in Thames Midland, it's only just starting to pick up. The London Outzone is anarchic, a playground for the roughrider teams, with maybe a dozen or so neutral places scattered around. The Blue Cross, a steamer's bar built in the ground-floor ruins of an unfinished tower of the Outzone, doesn't even have a roof. This is one of the few places left where body armor isn't essential. Anything heavier than a fistfight gets blasted outside by the bar security's riot weaponry. It's one of those places where you feel safe, but scared, like being in a Metropol rehab cell.

I'm here because Falco mentioned it once. Out of the two of us, I'm the one who never leaves the Dustzone. He was always the adventurous one. I stayed home and watched TV or drank at Chevignon or sometimes wasted some ration credit on the *Raid Port Said* game at the FLC games arcade. Never leave the Dustzone. Yet I'm here. Having snuck out of the Dustzone past heavy security after curfew hours and dodged some roughriders, I'm at the Blue Cross.

Striding over to the tiny bar area, past the slampit crowded with long-haired raja steamers and a parade of twenty rupee kittens, I pay for a lukewarm bottle of a local variant of Elephant beer, called Rhino. They make the stuff in the cellar here, the barboy tells me, and bottle it in Paddington, which affiliates the place with the Sodha roughrider team.

"I'm looking for a courier who knows something about microsofts," I say to the barboy.

"What?" The sound system by the slampit is deafening at this end of the bar.

I pass over twenty marks. With that, he can probably buy himself a week's worth of kittens.

"Microsofts," I remind him.

The barboy points at one of the many clustered circular wrought iron tables on the other side of the slampit, populated by rajas in leather roughrider's outfits and Hawaiian shirts with fading prints. "Over there. Ask for Amber Roy Chowdhury."

I thank him and push through the jumping rajas in the slampit. Chowdhury's companions see me coming and vacate the table, moving just far enough to give us some privacy, while keeping close enough to protect their man. My mind is scrambling for the lines I rehearsed to myself on the way out here. I know I can't afford to fluff this one up. Not on their territory.

"Namaste. Remember me from the Lambs Conduit Dustzone? Two nights ago. Dealt a microsoft to my spar."

He nods. I can see sweat breaking out between the lines on his forehead. Could be the heat, I tell myself. Or it could be him.

"I want one, too. Same price."

The look in his eyes as we cut the deal leaves a hard ball in the pit of my stomach. Walking back to Lambs Conduit I wonder which of us looked more scared.

I press *pause* again. Lyle continues in her broken voice.

"Of course, you don't really understand, do you? I went back to see Nukie again. Routine procedure. He told me everything. Now I'd better tell you..."

Pause. I take a swig from the bottle. I've had too much already, but I can't stop now.

"Yeah, yeah. Spit it out, Lyle, you stupid bitch. Run through the whole routine again. You came here and I showed you the microsoft. You said that Falco never had his, but some of the others were well-known microsoft users. So you took me to see Nukie, thinking he could solve everything, but all he did was make you curious. How could you, you stupid bitch?"

We are standing in the burned-out shell of the lift when she notices the sprayderm patch over my hand. It covers a stapled gash that runs along the life line of my left palm.

"Where'd you get the cut?" The concern in her voice is overlaid with suspicion.

"I got stressed out and smashed a cup against the wall of my apartment. It was stupid. The guy a few doors down from me's a doctor friend of mine. He patched it up for me. Only charged me half price."

She takes hold of the hand and runs her clean, soft index finger over the sprayderm. "Not bad."

"Yeah, but it means I can't afford to eat for two weeks."

The lift stops on 57 and we wrench open the concertina doors. The corridor reeks of rotting vomit and the floor, sticky with old piss, tugs at the soles of my trainers. Lyle tries to reassure me by telling me this typical of a block in the Outzone. It makes me feel lucky to be born a Dustzoner.

"At least it still has some electricity," she reminds me.

"Probably tapping it from the monorail lines," I reply to myself.

She agrees with an audible sigh.

"Bet your place ain't like this."

She shakes her head and laughs softly. "No. Tottenham Court Points ain't the greatest Secure Zone in the world, but it's better than this. I couldn't live here. Not on my own, like Nukie. I can't even handle the SZ alone, sometimes. I still live with Sean. My brother."

"Tell me more about this Nukie, then. Where's he from?" My curious side takes over the conversation again.

"He's one of you," she replies. "His father worked for South Shields. And his father's father, and ever was. He'd be there now if Sony Guild hadn't closed the Dustzone down. He freelances for deckers, building cyber decks for them and stuff like that. He's bound to have something that can read your microsoft. Then we can find out if there's a connection, see what it was that made someone want to kill your friend and make it look like suicide."

We get to the old-fashioned door, and it's already open, with a crack of orange sunlight seeping through the gap. The

I stop to ghoul at what looks like a traffic accident. There is a company ambulance, rentacops and a small crowd of local bakery workers all milling around the scene. I get in closer and it's Falco.

His arms have been sliced laterally, across the middle of each forearm, and then down deep in diagonals towards each wrist. With cuts like that he can't have lasted long. A Lambs Conduit medic flashes some snapshots for the local rentacops while another one dodges the blood as it streams out into the road. Flies buzz around his head, competing for the sweetness of his eyes.

"Name's Lyle," she says to me. Her skin is too clean and soft for a Dustzoner; the clothes she wears — black baggy bermuda shorts and a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt with popper buttons down the front — and the attitude she carries are 100 percent pure Outzone. She's been standing next to me all the time, but my mind has been on that corpse.

There's a Federal I.D. tag pinned to the pocket of her shirt with her videostat hardcopied onto it and the name now has meaning. Mandy Lyle, Federal Department of Investigations. Her I.D. tag shows her serious face, knowing that the people she has to spy on must never see it. Lyle is a fake, an applejack in the Dustzone. Trouble. And this fact is kicking me in the face, telling me to stay away. But I'm ignoring it. Fighting it.

I look for some sign of recognition, but all I can see is my own twin reflection in the permanent stare of her Sony Guild cybernetic eyes; blue cusps which fit neatly into the cheek and brow bones over her eye sockets. Lyle has a cold face. Poised, angular and clean.

Those eyes are digging into me. Thermographic vision watching my heart thump, and my stomach churning at the mixed stench of fresh bread and fresh death. I emulate her face, hoping that those eyes can't see what I feel. That I want her like love at first sight and I've only known her for a minute and a half.

"Did you know him?" she asks me.

I turn back to face him and I nod, letting my facade drop, my face scrunches up with memories of Falco. I try to remember him as I knew him, rather than this blood-spattered stiff that's crumpled in the doorway of some Lambs Conduit bakery.

"He was a good friend of mine. Falco Batacini."

High above us all, a monorail Sprinter speeds past, bound for Tottenham Court Points. Four green-jumpsuited medics lift Falco out of the doorway and into the back of an ambulance.

"You don't exactly seem cut up about it."

"I worked with him at the processing plant. Running loaders and stuff. You need NST jacks to manipulate the exoskeletons. You have to be careful how much you lift. People die of sensory feedback all the time. Fact of life. But you're an applejack. You wouldn't know."

I can sense her voice tighten after I call her an applejack. Those born in the Secure Zones take that as a pretty major insult these days. Maybe I meant it that way.

"Looks like suicide, doesn't it?" she says, as if I did it. "What would you say if I told you that's the twelfth body we've found like that in the last three days? All with that L-shaped cut in their wrists. I might need to talk to you again. Have you got a vidfone where I can reach you?"

I look back to her, standing with her back against the wall, my haggard loader's reflection in the blue shine of her enhanced eyes. "Sure," I reply. And she taps it into a Sony hand computer the size of her Federal I.D. tag.

2. Falco Batacini.

"Well, this is the last time I'll use this number. The last time. Life doesn't get any better than last night, Tommy. It just doesn't."

She takes a breath, and as she does so, I reach for the pause button. There's a bottle of tequila hidden inside my brown sofa. It has a hole in the corner where the stitching has come apart and I can keep things like that where no one can find them if my apartment ever gets searched. The rentacops like to do that sometimes. Dawn raids. If they get a tip off that someone's hiding something in one apartment they hit the whole block. Keeps the rest of us on our toes.

As a loader, I'd get canned for possession of alcohol. It dulls the nerves and interferes with the NST jacks. Doesn't stop me from keeping some, though. I only drink when I'm depressed, and I know that alcohol only makes it worse, but that's usually exactly what I want. Right now, I want to be as depressed as I can get. And then some. I want to feel like Lyle.

And Falco.

The London Outzone has the kind of close, rotting atmosphere that scares the shit out of us Dustzoners. I'm in there on some kind of mission, I guess. I need to find out what happened to Falco two days previous. It's like a deranged curiosity I keep inside me that takes over from time to time. Right now, it's in complete control.

Soho. The Year of the Rat. I ask one of the streetkids where the Blue Cross is and they laugh in my face. One of them looks as though he wants to bleed me with the hunting knife he's twiddling between his fingers. He has wild eyes, with those glaring wide pupils that the speed junkies at Lambs Conduit have. I can imagine the slicing edge of that blade, all nine inches of it, running along the skin of my gut, letting my insides spill out for the rest to gawk and laugh at. I must be oozing with fear. But the others must think I'm too stupid to even bother with, and the threat ends when I finally round the corner of the next block.

And there in among the frozen death throes of a decaying building sits the Blue Cross.

Nothing like I imagined it. In the Outzones of New Atlantic City, the local teams police the streets and keep the areas safe from harm. They charge a hefty price for their

Seven

RIDLEY MCINTYRE

1. Thomas Morrison.

"So that's it, Tommy. That's the end."

Her face disappears from the screen, angular features flickering to black. But the trace of her is still there; a two-second imprint on the tube. I feel myself trailing my fingers over the lines of her nose and chin as they fade in front of me; see my blue reflection in those Sony eyes. She's gone now.

The rage erupts in my stomach like a bursting ulcer, burning pain forcing me back from the vidfone screen, and I'm looking for something plastic and unbreakable to throw. The coffee cup she gave me looks the most likely missile, and I scream out *"Stupid Bitch!"* as I hurl it straight through the open rectangle of the living room window.

Looking down from the window, I can just manage to see the white cup turn to a speck as it melts into the dark shadows eighty floors below me, a falling angel in a London Dustzone owned and run by the local company, Lambs Conduit, after which the whole neighborhood is named. The red midday sun burns my wet face and I have to go back inside again.

Through the walls I can hear Jayne's headboard smacking a dull, arrhythmic beat accompanied by the grunts and moans of sexual pleasure. Jesus, I wish she'd stop sometimes. It reminds me how hard it is to find love in this 'plex.

The sun has lifted my brain out of my head and I find I'm just doing things without realizing I'm doing them, with no reason why. I'm going back to the gray vidfone and pressing the *play* button on the answering machine. Hers is the only message I've saved. Her face flickers onto the screen, that rough shag of chestnut hair cut into a bob around her ears.

"Uh, hi, Tommy. I really don't know where to begin."

Tracing the lines of her face again with rough fingers, I can hear the whisper of my own voice talking to that high-definition image.

"Just start at the beginning."

A week earlier I'm in this place called Chevignon in Lambs Conduit. The large worker's bar reeks of bad business. Couriers from the Outzone wearing stolen Lambs Conduit gray-blue worksuits do their best to see as many people as they can, desperately trying to move pills, microsofts, cheap digital watches and whatever else they can fit in their jackets.

I'm drinking Tiger beer with my spar, Falco, when one of the couriers takes the third seat at our wrought iron table. The glow from the fuzzy orange strip lights above us makes his skinny face look almost healthy.

"Namaste. How are you doing?" he says, grinning broadly like he's known us for years. "Amber Roy." A powerful introduction.

"Not so bad," Falco replies. "How do you feel?" Falco's sarcasm is so thick I could almost reach out and touch it.

"No worries," the salesman says. "Listen. I've got this great deal for you. You seen these?"

Like a TV evangelist on one of Disney Guild's religion channels, the Salesman pulls a sleight-of-hand trick, making a clear plastic ziploc bag of brown and yellow lozenge pills appear out of thin air into his moving hand. He throws it instantly to Falco, who catches the bag in his left hand with lightning-fast Italian reflexes. It's as if the salesman was just guiding the bag to the right buyer in one simple, fluid motion.

"What's it called?" Falco says. I sip from my beer bottle.

"Chloramphenildorphin-5. The Outzoners call it Primer. Great for getting you up in the morning and keeping you there. The best thing about it is that that bag is running at less than half price. I've just cut a big deal with the Sodha roughriders and I've got some left over that I have to get rid of. So I put them in bags of ten and I'm letting you have them at the price I got 'em for. See Phil over there?" He takes a breath to point to some guy at the other end of the bar, past the empty slampit, who may be another courier, but the salesman is trying to make out that he's another buyer. "He just bought five packs off me. Five, man. I mean, this is going great, by the time I get out of here, they'll all be gone."

Falco hands the bag back. He keeps away from chemicals, preferring microsofts if he can afford them.

"Hey, but I can tell you just want to see what else I've got before you make your final decision. I see you both have NST plugs? Excellent. Well, you'll *love* this."

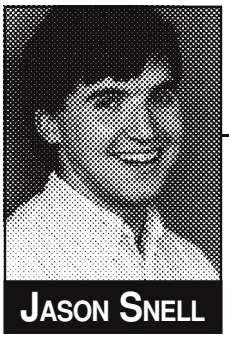
Falco's face shines when he sees the jet black microsoft in the salesman's hand. He looks like his mind's already hooked on the thing, and the two tiny Neuro-Sensory Transfer sockets placed in his skull just behind his right ear are calling to him: "Feed me, feed me." The salesman's grin grows wider as his confidence jumps up another notch. And I watch the two go through the ritual of haggling a good price for the cleanest drug in the world.

Her face is pained. Like something off-camera has pierced her flesh and is slowly twisting a *danse macabre* through her nervous system.

"I felt like I knew you the first time I met you, Tommy. You have this way of opening your eyes so your whole soul pours out of them and touches me. That's what you did outside the bakery. I didn't know what was going on then. I wish I didn't know now."

"Yeah," comes my voice again. It's sort of disconnected, like it isn't *my* voice, but a damn good impressionist's. "I wish I never knew, too."

Outside the bakery. In a back alley not far from the monorail station at the cross where the Paddington to Islington New Road meets the Gray's Inn Road. On my route to the huge fortress building at Euston where I work,



JASON SNELL

First*Text*

Sleepy Greetings

Hi. I'm Jason Snell, and I've been known to sleep all day.

If that statement sounds familiar, it's because that's how Dan Appelquist began the first issue of *Quanta.* And while Dan seems to sleep all day on occasion because he finds it fun and relaxing, I sleep all day long because I've got mononucleosis.

This is a lengthy way of explaining why this issue of *InterText* is a little late, but it's also a fun way of being able to complain to a large, worldwide audience about my personal problems. And, you know, I just can't pass up an opportunity like that.

As I continued my work as a graduate student here at UC Berkeley, I discovered two things: one, I was starting to feel ill, and two, I only had a handful of stories for the next *InterText.* When the sickness got worse and worse and I was forced to retreat to my home in scenic Sonora, California for 10 days, *InterText* suddenly became both scanty on material *and* late.

I brought all of this upon myself, of course. At noon on election day, November 3, I sat down in front of a Macintosh at the School of Journalism and started laying out our special election newspaper, despite a high fever and a sore throat. We got finished at 4 a.m. The next day, I was sicker — there's a shock. The day after, I paid a quick visit to the doctor and then made the two-hour drive home.

But here we are, a bit the worse for wear but up and running nonetheless. I'm slowly getting back into the swing of things, and we've got a decent issue for your reading pleasure.

The centerpiece of this abbreviated issue is Ridley McIntyre's *Seven*, which I think is one of the best stories we've ever run. I'm a sucker for cyberpunk, I'll grant you, but this one's well-written and well-crafted, and I know you'll enjoy it.

Also inside we have another story by Mark Smith, who brought us "Back from the West" last time, and two other stories, "Circles: A Romance," and "The Tired Man and the Hoop."

"Tired Man," I should warn you, is a bit of indulgence on my part. If you're read any Ernest Hemingway, especially *The Old Man and the Sea,* you might enjoy it. If you've read Hemingway and played a game of one-on-one basketball, you're especially qualified.

But, heck, if you haven't done anything of those things, why not try it anyway? Perhaps it will encourage you to do so. Both reading Hemingway and shooting hoops are fun pursuits.

The next issue of *InterText* is scheduled to be released sometime in January, which means that we're going to need to find some stories before the holidays really crash in and take people away from their computers. So once again, I encourage you all to submit stories to *InterText.* We can't pay you, and if you've written a story so good that you think you can sell it to a professional magazine, I encourage you to do so.

But if you'd rather support the idea of electronic publishing and just want to get your story read by our audience (an international audience of over 1,000 at last check, though who knows how many people read *InterText* on CompuServe and other systems), submit your stories to us in e-mail. If you're interested, mail me and ask for a copy of our writers' guidelines.

Well, that's all for now. When next we meet, it will be a new year. I hope your holiday season is a healthy and happy one, and wish you all the best. See you next year.

InterText

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Our next issue is scheduled for January 20, 1993.

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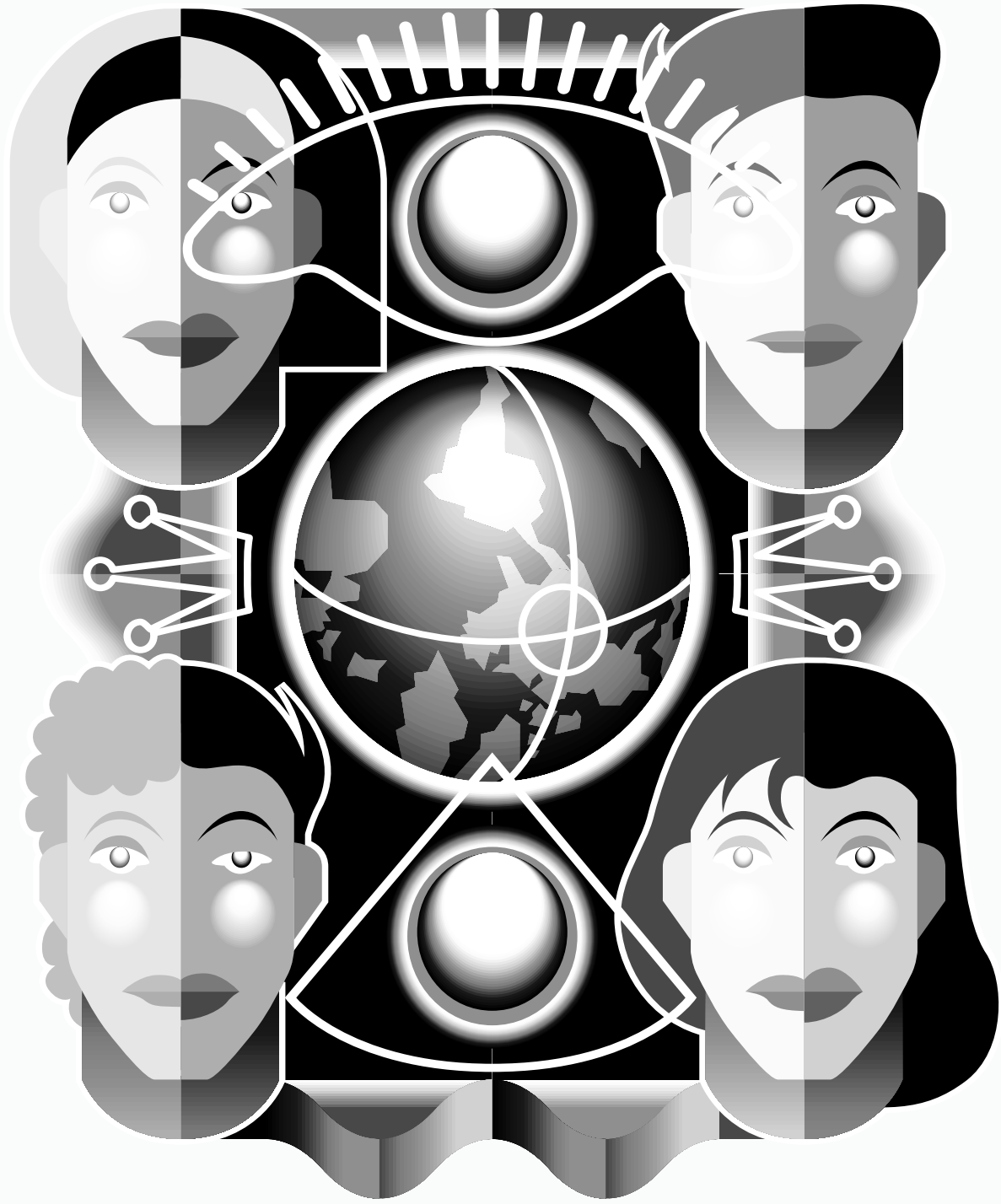

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