A REAL-LIFE MOVIE MURDER MYSTERY: *Taylorology*

AT THE AGE OF 49, WILLIAM DESMOND Taylor was at the top. It was 1922, and Taylor was one of Paramount Pictures' best directors. He had been president of the Motion Picture Directors Association for three years. And then, one night in February, Taylor was dead—shot to death in his home.

The killers were never found, though the newspapers of the time were certainly filled with possible suspects, from Irish nationalists to drug gangsters to the Ku Klux Klan. But even though the case was never solved, Taylor's murder and the resulting spotlight that was shined on Hollywood changed the image of the film industry forever.

The Director Himself: William Desmond Taylor

Seventy-two years later, the mystery of Taylor's death isn't a dead issue. The study of Taylor's life and death is alive and well on the Internet, through a year-old electronic newsletter appropriately titled *Taylorology.*

The creator and editor of *Taylorology,* Bruce Long, isn't a motion picture historian. In fact, he's not a historian at all—he's a computer programmer at Arizona State University. Long became interested in Taylor by watching silent films on his 8mm movie camera. Fascinated by the films produced by early Hollywood, he began reading about the history of the film industry.

Looming large was the Taylor murder, a crime that rocked Hollywood. Anti-Hollywood sentiment was never higher than in the months after the Taylor murder, as the papers exposed the private lives of the stars, directors and producers who brought entertainment to the world.

Long's research into Taylor's murder resulted in a book, *William Desmond Taylor: A Dossier* (Scarecrow Press, 1991). He also wrote another book-length manuscript on the world of Taylor, *The Humor of a Hollywood Murder,* but couldn't find a publisher. Enter the Internet and *Taylorology.*

"Serializing that book in *Taylorology* was a way for me to publish that book for free," Long says. "Of course I get no money from it, but the main thing is to put the information out there and make it available to the public."

Long's goal is to provide as much material about the case as possible, so that when a future historian is researching the Taylor case, that person won't just have the conventionally-published books on the subject as resources. They'll also have *Taylorology.*

Taylorology doesn't spend much time on the fundamentals of the Taylor case, a *must* for new readers who are interested in the material. Within the first 11 issues of the e-zine (894K of ASCII text), there should've been room for a brief primer on Taylor and the basics of the case. But even without such a primer, *Taylorology* is both a history lesson and a fun read. The serialized *Humor of a Hollywood Murder,* which takes up issues 4–11 of *Taylorology* (issues 1–3 were printed by Long a decade ago), is a funny collection of press accounts of the Taylor case and of '20s Hollywood. ("The leprous colony at Hollywood will not be reformed and consequently will have to be destroyed," wrote one paper.) It's a fascinating look at early 20th century film and journalism, and sometimes it's painfully obvious that we haven't changed very much in all this time.

—Jason Snell

The electronic issues of Taylorology *can be accesed via FTP or Gopher at* ***ftp.etext.org*** *in* ***/pub/Zines/Taylorology****. New issues also appear on the newsgroup* ***alt.true-crime****. Bruce Long can be reached at* ***bruce@asu.edu****.*

INTERTEXT

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- **CompuServe:** Access the Electronic Frontier Foundation Forum (GO EFFSIG), and enter the " 'Zines from the Net" library section.
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Keep in mind: this is our 21ST anniversary in dog years.

door that led out back, where there was a lean-to with a buncha wood in it, which was surprising since there wasn't that much wood in these parts anytime, but I guess Fred the Hermit had found some somewhere around.

The rain went on for a long time, but we had plenty of food in that house and when we looked around some more we even found a bin of oats which the horse refused to eat at first but after a few days started to like. I was worried at first that the mud bricks in the walls would fall apart in all the rain, but Fred musta been better at building houses than he was at canning food since the walls were fine and there was only one leak in the roof. That leak worked out pretty well since we just put a pot under it and got clean water whenever we wanted it.

We didn't do too much since neither of us were real big on doing things all the time but we did spend a lot time rolling around that little house and after a while Kari said that she was probably expecting sometime. It made sense that she would be and I was pretty fond of her by now so we were both happy and she still wanted to roll around all day even if she was expecting so we didn't bother with much else. The rain was getting kind of boring, but there wasn't much we could do about it and Kari said that she had a sister who lived in Seattle where it was like this all the time but people there didn't even notice it but just put on waterproof clothes and just walked about as though there was nothing happening at all. I couldn't really see how anyone could not notice rain like this all the time but I figured that Kari ought to know since it was her sister and all.

One day we woke up and got out of bed, if you could call it that since all it really was was a pile of blankets we'd put on the floor on the other side of the house from the horse, who snorted in his sleep and would keep us awake if we were next to him. The sun was shining in real bright and since we hadn't seen that in a long time we immediately went outside to see what had changed. We hadn't been outside for quite a while 'cause there was an outhouse attached to the back of the house next to the lean-to and there just hadn't been any other reason to bother. But anyway it was sure a sight to see and smell 'cause there was water as far as we could see. Kari said that it smelled like the sea and then she tasted it and said that it tasted just like the sea and then I knew she had to be from California, but it didn't matter any more I guess our house was on about the highest point around and our town was pretty high too, so everything else around had filled up with water.

Kari muttered something that sounded like *baucis* and said that she thought it was salty 'cause of the salt mines nearby and she was glad we had stopped to check the mail 'cause otherwise we might have made it to the salt mines and drowned with the rest of 'em. I said it was probably the horse that had saved us by acting like a mule and that drowning in the desert had to be a bad way to go. She said that Fred the Hermit might've gotten picked up by Christ but he sure was wrong about the fire since there weren't too many fires that lasted through that kinda rain.

Then she threw off her clothes since she'd gotten better at getting the leather thing off and it had loosed up too and she jumped right in before I could grab her and started swimming around. She tried to get me in but I never did learn how to swim from lack of water and wasn't gonna just jump in without getting at least a couple of pointers. She came back out and we rolled around for a while until we were tired and then we just sat for a bit and looked out over the sea we'd suddenly gotten.

I said that I thought everything was gonna turn out just fine since we had each other and the horse and a hell of a lot of oats left over, and it probably wasn't salt water everywhere and everyone was being weird anyway, and Kari said that she always knew it was gonna be all right.

ADAM C. ENGST ace@tidbits.com

Is the editor of *TidBITS,* a free weekly newsletter focusing on the Macintosh and electronic communications. He lives in Renton, Washington, with his wife Tonya and cats Tasha and Cubbins. Not content to be mildy busy, he writes books about the Internet, including *Internet Starter Kit for Macintosh* (Hayden Books, 1993).

the country. It was also starting to get a little dark and we thought that it was probably getting late.

The house was kinda cozy, actually, and had been set up real nice by someone, maybe Fred the Hermit. He was something of a tall tale that you heard about a lot around midnight on Friday nights down at the saloon when the boys had calmed down from the week and were starting the serious drinking. Someone always brought up Fred the Hermit and though no one really knew much of anything about the man, he sure did get a lot of air time. Some said he was a rich eccentric, down from the city 'cause his relatives were trying to gouge him outa his money. Relatives were always trying to do that in the stories in the saloon, so I never gave that theory much in the way of thought.

The one I liked was the one some guy who never showed up again told us. He was a sorry looking man, with long hair and a long beard who mighta been Fred the Hermit for all we knew. He said that Fred the Hermit was a normal guy who had been rejected by the gal he loved and it had broken his heart so completely that he decided to just go out into the desert and live out the rest of his days alone and miserable. He would have killed himself, this guy said, but he was a member of the Church of the Holy Lady of the Sorrows of the Second Coming of Christ or something like that so he just moved out in the middle of the desert to live alone for the rest of his life. I never could keep those churches straight and once Miller quit, I gave up even trying since he was the only one who ever knew the difference between them.

We all sat and listened to the guy and when he finished he paid his tab and just up and left without another word. It were pretty late by that time so I decided to head out and ask Miller about the Church of the Holy Lady of the Sorrows of the Second Coming of Christ, since it sounded a bit weird to me and I was in a questioning sort of mood anyway. I ambled on up to Miller's place and, knocking on the door, went right in 'cause it's that sorta town where we don't worry about it much.

There was some thumping coming from upstairs, so I set my hat down on a tall pile of garbage and sat for a while, figuring that Miller heard me and would come down any second now. A few little whimpers and final thumps came, which meant that Miller had Sexy Sally over for company since she always sounded like that at the end. And sure enough, a few seconds later Miller clumped down the stairs, sat down on a broken dresser and asked me what was happening.

I said that I wanted his expertise on a certain matter and he said that it was probably too late for me to convert and I replied that that was all right because all I wanted to know was what was the deal with the Church of the Holy Lady of the Sorrows of the Second Coming of Christ or something like that. He thought a minute and then said, "Oh yeah, them. They's crazy types who thinks that the world's gonna burn up soon but Christ is gonna come down from Heaven or somewhere in a spaceship and save all of them while everyone else burns to a crisp."

I said that they sounded pretty weird, but was there any reason that they couldn't kill themselves like everyone else who could get away from the law long enough since it's actually illegal to try to kill yourself 'round here and you can be arrested for trying it.

Miller said, "Yeah, 'cause if you kill yourself then you can't be around when Christ comes to save everyone and he"—Miller didn't much capitalize correctly late at night, especially after Hell froze over and there wasn't any reason to worry about it—"also might not be real pleased if his chosen ones were going and killing themselves over women."

Right about then Sally stuck her head downstairs and told Miller to get back to bed so he said goodnight and went back upstairs.

NO MATTER WHOSE HOUSE IT WERE, THEY WEREN'T there. I suppose that did kinda point the finger of suspicion at Fred the Hermit. Kari started to get out of her bodysuit 'cause she said that there wasn't much that was more uncomfortable than wet leather but since it was wet leather it was real hard to pull off so I tried to help and with a lot of pulling we finally got it off. Since it seemed like a better place than out in the desert we rolled around for a while and fell asleep from all the exercise we'd gotten during the day. It musta been pretty late when we fell asleep, because by the time we woke up and Kari explained some of the things in the schoolmarm's letter to me it was light again out even though it was still raining rats and frogs out there so we stayed in for the whole day and the rain never let up.

Sometime in the afternoon there was a knocking on the door and we went to open it, half expecting Fred the Hermit. But it was only the horse with no name who had decided that he wanted to come with us and stay dry rather than stand out in the middle of nowhere pretending to be an ass. We let him in and made him stand in the corner and behave himself. There was only one room in the little house, but it was big enough for the horse to stand on one side of the fireplace and for us to spread out some blankets we found on shelves on the other side. There were a lot of shelves with provisions on them, as if Fred the Hermit had been expecting something to prevent him from getting more food any time soon. I could see why he left when we had some of the food he'd canned and dried since it wasn't very tasty but Kari managed to make it into something funny sounding that was downright good. After we had explored everything inside we found a little

because she sent 'em to herself, it being in her contract that she had to prove her reading and writing skills to the rest of the town by sending and receiving mail and since she didn't know nobody out of town, like the rest of the people who live here, she had to send letters to herself. I didn't believe him, so he said to go look for myself since she just got a letter without no return address on it, just like hers always were.

I went back the mailboxes and found the one marked *Schoolmarm* in the *S* section, since Crazy Cat was pretty proud of the fact that he knew the entire alphabet and could usually get the letters in the right order so he put a lot of time into alphabetizing all the mailboxes one year. The only problem was that most of the people in the town were a bit like cows—they could always find their box, but once it moved they were completely confused and needed Crazy Cat's expert help and since he didn't know the alphabet quite as well on some days as he did on others he wasn't always much help.

He was right this time, and there was a letter in the schoolmarm's box. Kari put down whatever she'd been messing with and came back to look at the letter. It wasn't even in a envelope, but was just a folded sheet of paper, so when I picked it up it opened right up. We looked at it since no one much cares about things like that in our town anyway, and we were sure that if anyone had gotten a real letter they would've read it to the whole town at the town meeting which we had on the first Tuesday of March whether or not there was outstanding business to take care of.

It looked as though the letter had to do with messing around, but Kari said we should go and that she would explain everything in it to me later. She read faster than I do, though I'm one of the faster readers in this town, not that that says too much about me. We walked back up front where Crazy Cat was still complaining, so we told him to go pretend he was a real Indian and do a rain dance or something. He liked the idea, and disappeared behind the counter to look for something he needed for a good rain dance, or so he said. He didn't come out for a while, so we decided to head south for the salt mines and see what was happening out there.

WE GOT ON DOC'S HORSE AGAIN AND STARTED OUT OF town, leaving Crazy Cat whooping it up and jumping up and down in a circle. We hadn't gotten more than a mile or two out when Doc's horse just stopped. Plain and simple. Stopped dead in his tracks and refused to move.

"Horse," I said, "you got some mule in you?" Then I asked Kari if she knew what the horse's name was, 'cause horses don't respond to being called *Horse* too often. She said that Doc had never given it a name since he wasn't much into talking to animals anyhow.

"Great," I said. "We're stuck in the middle of the desert and this horse isn't going nowhere."

We got off the horse and started walking, since there didn't seem to be much else to do given the particular circumstances that we were in at the moment. The sand and dust was real hot and sorta mushy that far out in the desert and Kari started to look a little green, but she said that she was far too cool to possibly take off some of her clothes. Well, she only stayed that cool for about another ten minutes and then off came the top of that leather thingamabob and she perked right up when the wind hit her skin. I perked right up too, but managed to convince myself that the desert wasn't really a very good place to roll around for a while.

We hadn't gotten more than a mile or two out when Doc's horse just stopped. Plain and simple. Stopped dead in his tracks and refused to move.

As we walked the sky started to cloud over which was mighty strange since the weather forecaster guy hadn't said nothing about no rain coming any time soon. We started up a pretty steep hill when the rain started. First there were these little drops which hurt when they hit your skin and which made little puffs of steam when they hit the red-hot sand. Kari pulled her top back on and I pushed myself down again as we reached the middle of the hill. Then the big drops started, and while I don't 'specially mind getting wet, I was already wetter than I'd been in a couple a years. It was that sorta rain that just soaks inside of you and keeps soaking in until you feel all juicy like the underside of a rotten tomato. The dust had turned into mud pretty quickly and it was hard going but we figured that we couldn't really go back, since the salt mines were closer than the town and weren't many people left back there anyway. That leather thing had turned out to be sorta waterproof or water resistant anyway, so mainly Kari's hair had gotten soaked by the rain. It musta reached a foot past her rear and mighta been stretching out even more but I couldn't see real well past all those big drops.

We was trudging along, moving slower and slower as the wet sand got worse, when all of a sudden we ran into a brick wall. It was a wall to a little house, and we stumbled inside pretty quickly since the salt mines were still a piece away and we figured we'd try to wait out the rain since it didn't never rain for real long in this part of

she said that it was a nice name but not to worry if she forgot it 'cause she forgot names all the time. While we were doing all this name calling, I still couldn't find my pants, so she lent me a pair of her dead husband's which he had never worn because they were too small for him. I could understand that since I weigh about a hundred and fifty pounds but old man Fultin had been pushing three hundred or so for the last ten years of his life. Borrowing some pants was alright by me since mine were a bit dirty anyway. The pants looked remarkably like my own and when I found a white stone in the pocket I knew something strange was going on, but since Kari was probably from California I decided to let it go for the moment.

We both managed to get dressed after some more rolling on the floor, which was pretty hard, although not too bad considering it wasn't carpeted. Kari put on a leather bodysuit thing and I asked her if she would be hot since she certainly looked hot. She said, "How could I be hot when I look so cool?"

She was definitely from California, I decided, but the logic was too much for me to handle after all that rolling around. We went downstairs and outside but it had gotten so hot out that we had to sit on the porch and help each other breathe for a while, after which we took Doc's horse and trotted back to town.

THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE WAS RIGHT ON THE EDGE OF TOWN, so we stopped in. The sheriff and the deputy were both sitting there playing rummy and the deputy was winning big from what I could tell.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," I said, trying to be friendly like, since our sheriff isn't known for his good humor and here he was losing at cards to our deputy who isn't known for his brains.

"Afternoon," he replied sourly.

"Cheer up, Sheriff," I said, hoping to get him to stop playing cards and talk to us. "It isn't the end of the world."

"Boy," he said, because our sheriff talked like that, "Boy, I've just gone and lost two thousand greenbacks to this nitwit here." I gasped because that was a lot of money in this town, especially since the sheriff wasn't our token rich man and also since he cheated at cards. No one had beaten him for more than two hands in a row since anyone could remember and only our deputy was stupid enough to keep playing, which was a good part of the reason he was the deputy 'cause he didn't know too much about being a deputy.

Our deputy grinned at us and offered to buy us new suits but we declined because Kari was still confused about whether she looked hot or cool and me because I'd just gotten a new pair of pants which fit perfectly and hadn't ever been worn by old man Fultin 'cause they were too small.

Finally the sheriff said that as far as he was concerned, it was the end of the world because that was the money that he'd been putting by for a rainy day.

"Sheriff," I said, not trying to make him look stupid, "we live in the desert and we haven't had a rainy day in a god awful long time and even when we do it's not such a big deal as far as money goes unless you've got a bet on with Crazy Cat." Crazy Cat was the local Indian, shopkeeper, and designated representative of the United States Postal Service.

"Git out and leave me alone with this nitwit until I get my money back," the sheriff said.

I said as we were leaving, "Sheriff, with the kind of luck you've been having you're gonna die before you win that money back."

He drew his gun and put a hole in the door next to us for my advice then he sat down and trained the gun on our deputy. "Deal 'em," he said to our deputy, who was busy trying to shuffle the cards without dropping them on the floor.

"Something's definitely wrong here," I said to Kari as we crossed the street to the store. "Everyone's acting weird and I don't know why but I'll bet that someone from California's got something to do with it, probably some damned politician."

"I'll put twenty bucks on that," said a voice from inside the store. Crazy Cat came out of the store looking like an Indian with feathers and leather and the whole getup.

"What're you all dressed up for?" I asked, since he was normally pretty mild as far as clothes go. He just stared at Kari and asked me what I was doing going around in old man Fultin's pants with the Widow Fultin on my arm looking like that.

"Recent Personal Secret," I replied mysteriously and squeezed Kari in a soft spot. "And besides," I said, "she's not the Widow Fultin. Her name's Kari now."

"Oh," he said, and went back inside. We followed him from lack of anything better to do and sat down on musty pickle barrels under a sign that had the Post Office motto on it, or at least as far as Crazy Cat could remember it, and as far as he had changed it to make it more appropriate for the desert because we didn't get much snow in these parts. It read something like: *neither rain nor heat nor dark nights shall make me not deliver the mail.* Kari muttered something that sounded like *herodotus* and *appointed rounds,* but I wrote it off as something you said if you were from California.

All of a sudden Crazy Cat started complaining in this loud voice that he was bored since no one had gotten a real letter since he'd been in charge of this branch of the United States Postal Service. I told him that that wasn't true, since I knew for a fact that the schoolmarm got letters regular-like. Crazy Cat said that she got 'em

That's taking hospitality a tad far even in this town, but I really did want to talk to the Widow and I figured that she didn't have a live husband to want to put some lead in me for my cheek. I tiptoed upstairs, half expecting to see the Doc and the Widow deep in a feather bed, but I know that's got about as much chance as Hell melting. Hell froze over several years ago and it just ain't been the same since. Look at Miller: A perfectly good priest put out of a cushy job just because some damn fool said that something wouldn't happen until Hell froze over and Lucifer just couldn't resist.

I was part right when I thought that the Doc and the Widow might be enjoying themselves in a big feather bed since the Widow was certainly enjoying something in that feather bed. There was a low humming noise coming from the bed, so I coughed so as not to surprise her. I've heard it's bad luck to surprise a widow, sort of like walking under a falling ladder or having a panther cross your path.

The Widow was certainly enjoying something in that feather bed. There was a low humming noise, so I coughed so as not to surprise her.

The Widow was still a little surprised when I walked in on her like that but I'll give her credit 'cause she didn't so much as bat an eyelash but asked me in right polite like. I went over and sat on the bed next to her as she went on enjoying herself. It was a kinda hard to concentrate with the Widow tossing and turning in the bed the way she was, but I managed to say what I'd been planning on saying.

"Widow Fultin," I said, "something strange is happening in town. Most of the people seems to have up and left, mainly for the salt mines, and the rest are drowning their sorrows in the deepest bottle I've ever seen."

The Widow just moaned softly, so I went on after shifting my position to make it a little bit more comfortable and perhaps to improve the view too.

"Widow," I said, "I thought maybe Doc would know what's happening since he's generally a learned man. I saw his horse out front, I said, but I haven't seen him around."

Widow Fultin gasped. "Oh, he's been gone for a while. Went out walking, I think."

I had been sitting down for a while when I first got there, and then I waited for a while longer before coming up here, so Doc had been gone for at least two whiles, and that's a long time.

"Widow," I said, "Doc didn't take his horse so he doesn't have any water with him. Did he say which way he was going?"

"He said he was going to something to do with salt, towers or flowers or bowers, I can't remember."

I was getting pretty uncomfortable by now, because even in this town we have some conventions about what you can do to make yourself comfortable in someone else's house.

"Did he say why he was going there?" I asked, curious to find out what the deal was with Doc, who didn't normally leave the Widow's place until someone had a baby and the Mayor made him go. He slept in the barn since she wouldn't let him come past the entryway in the house unless he took his boots off and he always said that he was going to die with his boots on. I guess he was worried that he was gonna die in his sleep. Everyone in the saloon thought he'd die if he ever really made it with a woman and that was why he wouldn't take his boots off.

I sat and thought about all of this for a while while I was watching the Widow. Suddenly the humming noise stopped and the Widow threw something against the wall.

"Goddammit," she exclaimed. "That thing was supposed to last until the end of the world." I went over and picked it up, taking advantage of the opportunity to adjust my clothing to a looser position.

"No," I said, "it specifically says that it is only guaranteed for life where the life in question is that of the appliance." I put it down and wiped off my hands on my pants.

"Damn," she said. "Well then, will you replace it?"

I've never been much able to resist feminine wiles and let me tell you, she had a lot of them and they were right out there for me to see, every last one of them clamoring for attention. So I didn't resist. I sprang right out of my recently-adjusted pants and jumped into that feather bed and we rolled around for quite some time as I tried to fill the shoes of her broken appliance. After a while, when we were both tired out, I said that I was going to head back to town to see if I could find the sheriff and see if he knew what was going on. The Widow Fultin said she was coming so we rolled around a little more before I got up to go.

"Widow," I said as I got out of the bed and staggered over to where I was sure I'd left my pants, "Widow, let's get going."

"Stop calling me Widow," she said. "It's morbid. Call me Lil."

It didn't fit so I decided to call her Kari, since she was probably from California where they spelt things funny. She liked it and said that no one ever called her Lil anyway and asked what my name was, so I told her, and

But Mayor Dreed said that not many towns our size were so blessed by having a sawbones, and even if he weren't too accurate, he's still better than letting Jones the crazy dentist at the sick people. No one wanted to be put under while he was around, just 'cause you never really knew what he would do with you, like sew your hands together. Through your fingers. Behind your back.

So Doc stayed on, and spent every day trying to get the Widow Fultin to marry him or, barring that, at least to sleep with him, since he knew what the prostitutes had and he was a little too wary of dosing up on the penicillin all the time like Miller had to.

The Doc wasn't real good about sticking to the rules about courting and all that. The Widow was an eyeful, to be sure, what with her long blond hair, and the old wives in the town said that she had been a loose woman in California before she met Fultin on some trip and they got married real quick like.

THE SALOON SEEMED LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO FIND OUT what in tarnation, what in hell that is, was going on around town. I strolled in and the regulars were clustered around the bar grumping about something, and when I went over to ask what was up they clammed right up. That was kind of funny since the barkeep, Little Richard, was giving his stuff out to them like there was no tomorrow.

Normally when those boys have had anywhere near that much in them they'll talk about anything, whether or not they know what they're saying. I remember once when Richard himself was so far gone he started telling us when everyone in his family had birthdays and what size clothes they all wore. This is from a man who can't normally remember what day it is and probably wouldn't tell you anyway, unless he was feeling in a good mood and happened to like you. But today no one was saying anything about anything at all.

THE MAYOR IS THE TYPE OF PERSON WHO OUGHT TO know what kind of things are happening in his town, so I went to visit him. Mayor Dreed was in his office, which was mighty nice seeing as everyone else had been out, worthless, or leaving when I got there. I began to think that perhaps I should've taken a bath last month like I'd planned before the boys in the saloon threw me in the barrel of old wash water outside the store and soaked me to the skin. But the mayor was downright hospitable and offered me some of them oyster crackers which he always had lying around whenever visitors showed up in his office. The crackers were pretty stale, since no one visited the Mayor very often, so he hadn't bought new oyster crackers for a few years or so.

When I asked him about why everyone was either drunker than a skunk or leaving town like a cowardly armadillo, he gave me the lecture for the fifth grade on the executive branch of government which he'd been practicing for weeks. He said the schoolmarm had canceled on him just today, which confused him since he had been working on this speech for so long that he didn't really know what needed to be done governing-wise. I said that I was sorry, but if he didn't find out what was happening he'd be mayor of a town of drunks and ghosts since everyone else was heading out towards the salt mines. He didn't hear me and moved right on to the legislative branch of government, so I left.

I WENT TO LOOK FOR THE WIDOW FULTIN. SHE LIVED A ways out of town, but it wasn't too bad of a walk since I had other things on my mind, trying to figure out where everyone was going and why. When I got out to her place, Doc's horse was there, tied to the fence with a piece of twine since Doc wasn't much for buying saddles and proper ropes and things. I knocked and went in when no one answered the door. It's a nice town like that, where no one much cares if you let yourself in when they're too busy to open the door for you. I did just that, figuring that the Widow Fultin was out back messing with the livestock or something.

She wasn't much with the animals, but she did try, and once every couple of days Doc paid a man to come over late at night and take care of them so they didn't die. The Widow Fultin had said a bunch of times that she was going to live on old man Fultin's farm as long as everything lived and Doc didn't want to lose his chance at her just because she couldn't keep weeds alive long enough to choke the flowers that Doc's man planted late at night. The Widow Fultin sure noticed that everything looked a lot better every few days. Guess she attributed it to cycles or something that she heard about in California.

I don't know too much about California, since the city I went to was in Kansas, but I hear that you have to have your head pretty far gone to get along there what with the men sleeping together and more rich people than you can count. Most towns get along fine with a single rich man around, but from what people have told me there's lots of them all over in California. Gotta be a weird place if you get too many rich people all running around all the time. One's healthy 'cause it gives little kids something to look up to, but what use could you possibly have for more'n that? Some places just aren't worth keeping these days, I tell you.

After I'd caught my breath and sat a while in the Widow's parlor, I started wondering where the Widow was at since it wasn't like her not to show up after a while. I went back out and looked in the barn and out back, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. So I went back in and sat down again for a while. Then I decided to check upstairs.

STILL LIFE

BY ADAM C. ENGST

• When you go to the desert on a horse with no name, be sure to get out of the rain. •

I WAS WALKING THROUGH THE NORTH END OF TOWN THE other day and no one much was about but the tumbleweeds and the whores by Miller's place. I saw a white rock on the road so I picked it up since I've always done that and now I've got quite a collection. My grandfather always used to tell me that they were quartz rocks long after I knew that fact but I never got irritated enough with him to stop picking them up.

As I was bending back up, a shadow of a man whipped across my path, said his name was Jake Snake and that he was a desert rat searching for truth. I gave him a light before he burned himself on the mirror he flashed around, trying to catch the sun on the tip of his mangled cigarette.

"What are you really doing here, Jake?" I asked to find out why a sneak like him was braving the light of day.

"Well, I's just out for a breath of air before it becomes too hot to breathe," he said, nice and polite like. The thermometer was at a hundred and eight that day and breathing wasn't none too easy as it was, so I pressed him a bit.

"Jake, you're full of shit," I said, and slowly walked away, waiting for him to follow like he always done before. Well, he didn't follow me, but ambled off into the distance muttering about fireballs and salvation in the salt mines. That in itself wasn't too strange, but when I saw a whole line of people heading south in front of Jake it certainly seemed that something was up. They were already too far away for me to catch them and ask them, though I could see the fire engines being driven that way, too. That explained why no one much was about, since they all seemed to be heading south.

I figured that there had to be someone left in town who knew what was happening, so I looked around a bit for someone to talk to. I wasn't really the sort to just follow a mass of people for no real reason, and even if there is a reason I don't much like to do it just for the principles involved. I've found that it usually pays off to avoid the crowds, something I learned when I was visiting the city, where there were and probably still are a lot of crowds and not all that much else, except a few doormen who live outside the biggest buildings. I think the doormen were a kind of crowd parasite, since they always lived outside the largest buildings, and the biggest crowds come out of the biggest buildings.

I DECIDED THAT THE FIRST PLACE TO ASK WAS BY Miller's, since the whores didn't ever leave town and usually knew more about current events than anyone else. I guess they were usually in a good position to find out about that sorta thing. The whores didn't know nothing, but told me to go talk to Miller.

Miller was the priest, and found living next to the whores fit his temperament just fine. He saved them and they him, though I think personally that they came out ahead in the deal—messing with a priest probably helped their case when they came before a judge that made Kenesaw Mountain Landis look like a two-bit DA with diarrhea. Miller lived what used to be the church. He wasn't real neat, and had taken to throwing his garbage downstairs rather than take it to the town dump. The garbage didn't smell since it dried out real quickly, our town being smack-dab in the middle of the desert.

The Doc's over fishing for the Widow Fultin just like he been since her old man died having his appendix out. Mighty fishy, dying while having your appendix out.

Miller weren't of much comfort. He was moving around kinda nervous-like, but it wasn't because Canyon Carol was there. One of 'em was usually there. All he'd say was that something big was going down, far as he could tell, and he was going to get his living in while it were still much of a possibility.

"Thanks anyway," I said, and left. A few minutes later he and Carol disappeared in the direction that Jake Snake had gone.

DOC WAS OUT, AND HIS SIGN SAID THAT HE'D GONE fishing. I hate it when he puts up that sign, because there ain't much running water within a hundred miles of here, let alone fish. That sign just means the Doc's over fishing for the Widow Fultin just like he been since her old man died having his appendix out. Mighty fishy, dying while having your appendix out. A few people complained that they didn't want no doctor who might blow a simple appendix operation, especially if he were interested in the patient's wife. They was all for true love and that stuff, but puncturing a man's appendix was certainly close to the belt and perhaps a little bit below it, despite what that saying says about everything being fair in love and war.

on her threat to turn him in. Talk about a self-righteous bitch. She never had any problem spending the money when she thought he was the best paid assistant pharmacist in the Western World. What about the Mediterranean holiday they almost took? He was supposed to pick up the tickets the day the phone rang.

It's pouring now. He ought to get to the plant before he's completely soaked. He lengthens out his stride. Left foot lifts, swings forward on the double fulcrum of knee and hip—a miracle of practical physics propels him a short distance through immediate space, suspended from his center of gravity—a momentary, subconscious defiance of the laws of gravity, but a minor infraction—a mere misdemeanor—levitation—they'll never catch him—strobing through space—through time—long, floating steps—minor miracles—strung together—propelling him towards warmth.

One last try with the old magic thumb. Hell, it always used to work in his student days. Black Volvo. Snob car number 43. It brakes, departs from its planned, more disciplined trajectory, skids, lurches, insinuates mastery over its driver, sweeps broadside toward the impenetrable collection of molecules that never quite worked out as Brian—that aren't doing a hell of a lot better as Rio.

A longer step—a wider, more radical swing—more than a simple mid-course adjustment along a space/time continuum. A bona fide felony. This is no minor deviation from the laws of physics. This is the real thing. Violations of this magnitude can carry a heavy penalty.

BRIAN BASKS IN THE SUN'S WARMTH. WHEN HE FIRST becomes aware of the sound, he is tugging absentmindedly at the hair in his left ear, trying to discern meaningful patterns in the waves of the receding tide.

Margaret rolls over, wrapping herself tightly in her robe. "Did you hear that? It sounded like something ripping." She searches up and down the beach. "Brian, it's getting chilly. Let's go back to the hotel."

"Aw, this is our last day. We can sit inside back home."

The sound again. It snags on the sculpted sandstone above them. Margaret looks towards the cliff, but sees nothing to explain it. She looks back over to Brian, but he doesn't seem to notice.

To him it sounds more like a muffled pop followed by sand shifting with preordained precision, perhaps under carefully placed feet. He sends his gaze up and down the beach, but there is nothing out of the ordinary to see.

The improbable beast approaches with surprising stealth for a minotaur. It studies the man carefully. He is tall and thin, not particularly muscular even by modern standards—not likely to pose any threat to a mythical beast. The man's otherwise evenly tanned skin glows slightly red from too much sun. His face is not visible.

The woman is not so easy to discern. She is wrapped in a white robe. Her hair shimmers, long and dark. The sun has given it an enticing sheen. And the backs of her calves and the soles of her feet are precisely and delicately rounded, cast from a mold tracing back to another age.

A great aching swells in the beast's groin. Although it sees nothing to suggest significant resistance, something more visceral than sight or smell tells him the ache will grow before it can be relieved.

The creature positions itself a short distance behind them. It announces its presence with a contemptuous snort.

The skinny male scrambles to his feet. He motions backwards with his left hand as if to push his mate back, away from whatever is about to happen.

She either doesn't notice or chooses to ignore him. She rises, with one arm extended, to face the creature squarely. The white robe falls open, but as she feels the eyes of the beast upon her she gathers it in tightly and clutches her arms across her breasts.

The minotaur grows in stature. The man would probably surrender the woman without a struggle but it's better if she is won.

Three quick steps take the minotaur to the flimsy male. It stoops and thrashes its head, lifts him on its horns with ease. It flings him far out into the surf.

The man hurts, gasps for air—but he refuses to cry out. He swims—forever he swims against the receding tide until he heaves his exhausted body onto the beach.

His heart lurches against his rib cage, plotting frantic escape. The sun pours molten rays over him, joining forces with his fatigue, bakes fate into a hard, impenetrable ceramic shell.

And yet he must coalesce the vestiges of his will, he must defy the fatigue, the sun, the pain, the impossibility. He must rise to accept the truth of this monstrosity just long enough to vanquish it.

`REALITY ERROR: Abort, Retry, Fail? *Abort*`

"FORGET IT, RAY. THERE ARE SOME THINGS I JUST can't—just *won't* do—"

"You got a better idea, Schrödinger? No way out, Rio, my man—if you don't mend the tear in the continuum, who will?"

G.L. EIKENBERRY aa353@freenet.carleton.ca

On a bad day he's unemployed. On a good one he's a self-employed consultant. On almost every day he's a freelance writer and martial arts instructor in Gloucester, Ontario, just down the road from Ottawa.

REALITY ERROR: Abort, Retry, Fail? *Fail*

"FORGET IT, RAY. I DON'T DO MALLS, AND I DON'T BEG."

"Yeah, sure. You got a better idea, Rockefeller? In case you hadn't noticed, we're fresh out of blue-chip stocks and bearer bonds, so we either troll the mall for spare change or we go to bed hungry."

"It's just a thing I have, okay? I happen to be a little down-and-out, but I'll have to be a whole lot worse off before I beg. Maybe I'll go down to Dorchester Street and see if I can scrounge some bottles or something. I'll catch you later at Mercy House." The familiar beast is gnawing at his stomach again. A couple dozen beer bottles almost buys a burger.

It's getting dark. It looks like it could rain. Typical. He's been bashing around yuppie territory for two or three hours and all he has to show for it is one small pop bottle and a couple of beer bottles. Nothing. He'll have to hitch back downtown if he's going to have any chance to make the Mercy House soup line before they shut down for the night.

This is getting to be a real drag. Maroon Trans-Am goes by. Snob car number 38. Nobody stops for abandoned, drummed-out-of-business pharmacists cleverly disguised as middle-aged hippies. He might as well write off Mercy House for the night. At this rate he won't even make the ten o'clock curfew for a cot in the old convent school gym. A fluid, racking cough erupts from the depths of his chest. He'll hike to the dry-cleaning plant. It's only a few blocks. Sleeping under the dryer vents can't be too bad. It might even beat the human bacterial culture medium that is the hostel.

He walks. The rain has started. He quickens his pace. One foot lifted, swung forward on the double fulcrum of knee and hip a short distance through immediate space—a momentary, subconscious defiance of the laws of gravity, but a minor one—a mere misdemeanor—levitation—a strobing through space and perhaps even time—steps—miracles—strung together—propelling him toward warmth.

Black Volvo. Snob car number 39. It brakes out of its more disciplined trajectory, skids, lurches, insinuates mastery over its driver's intentions, sweeps broadside toward the shell that has relabelled itself Rio.

A somewhat longer step—a wider swing—a full fledged felony against the laws of space and time. Oblivious to how he may or may not have arrived there, he gathers himself into the hot air blowing down from the dryer vent. There are worse ways to spend a night.

REALITY ERROR: Abort, Retry, Fail? *Retry*

"FORGET IT, RAY. I REALIZE THAT—AT LEAST ACCORDing to the self-righteous bitch that threw me out on the street—I am the lowest of the low, but there are two things I refuse to do. I don't beg, and I don't set foot inside shopping malls."

"Yeah, sure, Socrates—you've got a more fulfilling idea? Check your pockets. I don't know about you, but I'm fresh out of oil wells, yachts and VCRs, so it's either troll the mall or learn to live with hunger."

"Suit yourself. It's a thing I have, okay? I may be in a low-liquidity mode right now, but I'll have to be a whole lot worse off before I resort to begging. I think I'll head down to Dorchester Street to see if I can scare up a few empties I can cash in for some edibles. Mercy House gruel is beginning to wear a little thin. I'll catch you later in the bedtime lineup."

What he really wants is a pizza, but he'll be lucky if scrounging bottles turns up enough for a greasy burger.

It's getting dark. It looks and feels like the rain's going to start any minute. Just his luck. He's been bashing around yuppie-land for half an eternity and all he has to show for it is a beat-up grocery bag with a couple of dirty pop bottles rattling around inside. They might earn a bag of chips, but that won't feed the beast in his belly. Better hitch back downtown and try to make the Mercy House soup line before they shut down for the night.

Okay—42nd time lucky, right? Brown Jaguar. Face full of exhaust number 42. Nobody stops for an involuntarily-retired designer-drug entrepreneur, declared persona non grata by any friends once worth knowing. Must be the clever over-the-hill hippie disguise. At this rate he won't even make the 10 o'clock curfew for a pissy cot in Mercy House's old convent school gym. A fluid, racking cough erupts from the depths of his chest, asserting his vulnerability. He'll hike to the dry-cleaning plant. It's not far—maybe four or five blocks. Those with more experience in this sort of thing claimed that sleeping under a dryer vent was almost tolerable on a chilly, wet night. It might even be a welcome change from the human compost-heap of the Mercy House hostel.

Black Volvo: snob car number 39. It brakes out of its disciplined trajectory, skids, lurches, insinuates mastery over its driver's intentions, sweeps broadside towards the shell that has relabelled itself Rio.

He walks. The rain has started. The shock waves from another spasm of coughing reach his brain. He's not dressed for this. He's going to have to do something pretty fast—some money, some clothes, a place to go. She wouldn't let him in even if he did go back. But he won't go back. Anyway, she'd probably follow through

"Wait!" he begged, struggling. "You can't do this!"

"It's the only way, Professor Hawthorn. We simply can't afford to lose you. Unfortunately, we can't afford to support you either."

"But this is completely unnecessary," he said trying to sound reasonable though his voice was growing shrill with fear. "I could just leave. I'll never tell. I promise."

"Too risky," said the president as she left the room shaking her head. "If the resignation became public, it would raise all kinds of questions. We might be accused of violating your tenure. Besides, you're better off this way. Where in the world would you go?"

"Help!" One of the president's expressionless goons produced a large syringe filled with a pinkish liquid. "My God! Somebody help me!"

"Don't bother," the president's voice echoed in the hallway. "There isn't anybody left in the building. You're the last. We're closing it up to save on maintenance."

She turned to give him one last sad and lonely look.

"It's too bad you don't know anything about biochemistry," she said with a sigh. "We can always afford a few more scientists."

JOHN SLOAN jsloan@julian.uwo.ca

Writes for *Western News,* a campus newspaper published by the University of Western Ontario. He also contributes a weekly newspaper column on microcomputers to the *London Free Press.* John lives with his wife and daughter in neither a cozy flat nor a rambling old house. He does not own a cat.

REALITY ERROR

BY G.L. EIKENBERRY

• If we're not responsible for our own reality, who is? •

"FORGET IT, RAY. YOU KNOW I DON'T BEG."

"Yeah, sure. You got a better idea, Einstein? We happen to be fresh out of mutual funds to sell off, so we either go hungry or we troll the mall for spare change."

"It's just a thing I have, okay? I'm kind of down-and-out right now, but I don't beg. Maybe I'll go down to Dorchester Street and see if I can scrounge some bottles I can cash in or something. I'll catch you later at Mercy House, okay?"

It's getting dark. The familiar beast is gnawing at his stomach again. Kind of looks like rain. Rotten luck. He's been bashing around for a long time and has just one small pop bottle and three beer bottles to show for it. He'll have to hitch back downtown if he's going to make the Mercy House soup line before they shut down for the night.

Red Firebird. Snob car number 37. Nobody stops for a bum. He might as well give up on Mercy House for tonight. At this rate he won't even make the 10 o'clock curfew for a cot in the old convent school gym. He's better off hiking over to the dry-cleaning plant. It's only a few blocks. He can sleep under a dryer vent if he can stand the smell.

One more car. Maybe he'll get lucky. Black Volvo. Hey, it's stopping!

"Rio. Come on, man. Get in."

"Ray? Hey, wait—no way I'm getting into a hot car."

"Aw, come on, man. I'll give you a lift down to the House. Come on. It's not hot, I swear to God. Honest, man, I didn't steal nothing. I was hanging around the mall, right? The rent-a-cop gave me the boot for loitering or soliciting or something. Jeez, I scored all of 85 cents, right? Come on, asshole, get in. It's starting to rain. So anyway—are you getting in or what? So anyway, I was hanging around outside the mall—like they kicked me out, so I figured I'd try the sidewalk. So I put the humble lean on this guy in trendy threads, and he says, 'Fresh out of change, pal, do you think you could settle for this?' So he hands me a bill, right? I mean Jesus Christ, it's a goddam twenty! Blow me right away, eh? So I go to stuff it in my pocket and get scarce before he realizes he's made a mistake and tries to take it back, and what do I find rolled up in the bill? A key, right? A goddam car key. I swear to God, Rio, a key to a Volvo. I checked it out—there was a Volvo parked right there in the handicap space, so I try the key and, hey, here I am. I mean, did this guy win the lottery or what?"

"He probably ripped it off. Or did you look in the trunk? It's probably full of dope or something."

"Where were you heading, anyway?"

"I was going over to the dry-cleaning plant. I figured a spot under a vent—"

"So we'll go together. I picked up a six of beer with the twenty."

"It was. But not as terrible as what followed," she said in a distant voice. Her gaze shifted from the window to the floor. "We couldn't lose Smithers."

"He was good."

"No, I mean he really was irreplaceable. We had several thousand students in his class. Nobody to replace him, nobody we could afford anyway. So..."

"Yes?"

"So we didn't replace him." She looked hard into his eyes. What Hawthorn saw there made him go cold inside. "He's still teaching, at least on vidi. All his lectures were on vidi. Nobody ever found out he's dead, nobody that matters anyway. His salary has been rolled back into the general operating budget."

"What? That's preposterous. What about the body?"

"Well, you may recall that we completed the new medical incinerator that year."

"My God!" Hawthorn cried. He started to say something and then pull up short when a thought stopped him like a baseball bat to the kneecaps.

Smithers was the first.

It suddenly occurred to him that the Faculty Club had become decidedly less populated in recent years. Hawthorn's mouth dropped open and his eyes slowly widened with realization.

"There were others?" he asked with dawning horror. "Johnson? Willoughby? Stevenson? The entire old guard?"

"Up the stack, every one. Of course, they were all in the arts, the humanities, and the softer social sciences. Technological research and development must carry on for the good of society, not to mention the directed research grants we get out of it. Fortunately, there isn't nearly the teaching load in the sciences since we have consistently failed to interest undergraduate students in hard science for the past thirty years."

"It's diabolical! You're speaking about respected faculty! They deserved a better end than that."

"But they were already dead," said the president. "They just would have gone into the ground."

"So they ended their illustrious careers as alternate energy sources for the university!"

"Please, you have to understand." She leaned further forward on her cane. "We couldn't just cut their courses. That would be a violation of the government's student accessibility policy. We couldn't just write them off. There was nobody to replace them. Many of them were in externally-funded chairs."

"No, I don't understand," said Hawthorn sternly, forgetting all pretense of honoring the old hag. A whiff of panic was also beginning to enter his voice. "How could they not be missed?" he asked, casting his eyes furtively around the room as if to check that some of them weren't hiding under the dusty furniture. "Certainly we are more than an automated, degree-granting factory. My God, woman! The interaction between professor and student, the challenging of young minds with new ideas and old wisdom, is what sparks critical thought. How can we have progress? How can we have civilization without—"

The president closed her eyes and was still for so long that Hawthorn was beginning to suspect she might have blown a cerebral artery. But then she took a deep breath, held it, and let it out slowly. She shook her head and regarded him sympathetically.

"The essay component in all courses was cut in '98, the students see you only through a holo-projector, and nobody has office time for inquiries any more," she said softly. "Where is this critical interaction?"

Triumphantly, he pointed at his computer. "There! I still have an important interactive link with my students through net."

"Ah, that was a tricky problem," she admitted. "But our programmers were able to construct expert systems based on thousands of the deceased professors' previous answers. We are quite sure the students can't tell the difference. I don't even know if they would care."

Again Hawthorn started to say something but was brought up short by the recollection of the answers that had mysteriously appeared on his own computer screen.

"Cheers . . . TBH," he muttered and gave the president a quizzical look. As his eyes began to widen with realization and horror she looked away in embarrassment and fumbled with her shawl. There was a knock at his door, stronger and more insistent this time. "Come!" called the president. Two brawny Campus Security officers burst into the office. One of the guards held a great black bag, made of a rugged plastic material, with a long zipper down the front.

It suddenly occurred to him that the Faculty Club had become decidedly less populated in recent years. Hawthorn's mouth dropped open and his eyes slowly widened with realization.

"In order to maintain the quality of education at this institution we have had to institute another series of resource modifications," the president was saying in formal monotone. "Unfortunately, we have had to move to a new more active phase in our budget curtailment strategy. You may proceed, gentlemen."

As the two burly men lunged forward, Hawthorn could clearly see the words "Medical Waste" emblazoned on the big black bag. Before he could even think of reacting they had grabbed him by the arms. The President rose slowly and turned to leave the room.

"Hey! I remember you!" she said. "History 257. Great course. I always liked the stories about back when people had stuff, y'know."

"Yes, yes, good to see you again," Hawthorn said hurriedly. He pressed what coins he had found into her chubby, dirt-crusted hand and fled.

Beyond the Student Services Building was the B. G. Dingle Animal Medical Research Building. Its great brick smokestack was belching the remains of that day's batch of animal research subjects. A single activist had deposited himself resolutely in the doorway. Two campus security guards were beating him with their crowd control bars.

"Murder is not progress!" the young man shouted just before a club came down and obliged him to choke on his own teeth. Nobody in the rushing crowds seemed to notice.

Hawthorn came to the century-old Hampstead Humanities Building. Bless its narrow windows, hardwood paneling, and gray stone heart! Unlike the gray behemoths built on university campuses in the final quarter of the previous century, old Hampstead was what a university building should be. It even smelled right: chalk dust, old wood, and stone. Stone has a smell completely unlike concrete. His office, a tiny island of peace and solitude away from the throng, was in Hampstead's basement level. It had one high window through which one could see the constant shuffling of thousands of feet.

"Lights on, computer on," Hawthorn said wearily as he peeled off his overcoat. The computer sprang to life with a list of questions distilled from a thousand student queries filed through University net. As Hawthorn sat down, he noticed that the questions had already been answered. He scrolled through the answers on the screen. Each ended with his trademark closing "Cheers! TBH."

"Funny," he muttered to himself. "I don't remember doing those."

There was a knock at the door. This made him jump because nobody ever knocked on his door. It was a feeble knock and for a moment Hawthorn even suspected that a student had found his office. He shivered. Others had been trapped for days bereft of food or facilities when the student hordes had found their hiding places. Reluctantly, Hawthorn cracked open the door. What he saw on the other side outdid even the wild possibility that a student had found his refuge.

"President Throckmorton!" The president of the university was an ancient woman, probably in her nineties. Hawthorn hadn't seen Throckmorton in years. He had never seen her outside the administration building. Tiny and frail, with frizzy gray hair and a heavy knit shawl, she was leaning on a simple wooden cane. When she spoke there was still authority and assurance in her voice.

"Professor Hawthorn," she stated. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Hawthorn stumbled backward to get out of her way. "Can I get you anything? There is a coffee machine down the hall. I think it still works."

"Do you have tea?"

"I think it just has coffee. It's just down the hall. I can—"

"Sit down, Professor Hawthorn."

"Yes, Madam President."

She eased herself into a chair that nobody had sat in for at least a decade. The leather and wood groaned a little but, thankfully, the chair did not collapse under the president. Even while seated she stooped forward on her cane as if the enormous weight of responsibility for the university never left her shoulders. The president examined him for a long time with a curiously sad expression.

"I am assuming you have tenure here at the university," she said in a weary tone.

"Yes, of course, Madam President. As you know, there were no non-tenured positions left in the department after the last budget cut," he said.

"I just wanted to be sure. It's important that I am sure on that," she said shaking her head and casting about as if she was looking for something. Then her eyes came back to Hawthorn's. "It's important because of what I have to tell you."

It was all quite unreal. The president of all the university in his little office, apparently about to confide some great secret.

"Have you ever wondered what it was like to be President of all of this for the past dozen years?"

"Not really, Madam President. I suppose it has been a remarkable challenge—"

"It's been hell!" she interjected. "Funding perpetually cut back, mandated admissions increased, and most years tuition has been frozen or cut. No qualified university professors since the shortage began in '96."

"Well, you did institute some very creative measures to deal with *that."*

"Yes, you could say that." For some reason she seemed to almost smile.

"Yes, I remember," he said eagerly. "Cut mandatory retirement. Bloody bold move."

The president looked morose again and gazed at the passing feet outside the window. "That's how it started."

"I don't understand."

"Smithers was the first. Do you remember Smithers?"

"Oh yes, French literature. Fine old fellow."

"It was weeks before anybody noticed him missing. They found him at his desk, just down the hall from here, all stiff and dried up. Quite a mess with all the dust and cobwebs."

"Good Lord! It must have been terrible."

Now I sometimes go to T.J.'s alone and eat Thai Chicken with mozzarella or some similarly ghastly concoction. Sometimes I even think I might learn to ski. Racing toward the bottom of a hill, going down, down, down, trying to keep your balance… somehow it strikes me this is a skill that it might be smart to practice.

LEVI ASHER ek938@cleveland.freenet.edu

Works as a consultant to Wall Street banks eerily similar to the one depicted in this story. He is married and lives in Queens. He spends his time eating Mexican food and teaching his eight year old daughter and three year old son how to do *Beavis and Butt-head* impressions.

UP IN SMOKE

BY JOHN SLOAN

• Wait a second—doesn't our editor have a degree from this university? •

"THAT WILL BE ALL FOR TODAY." Professor Thomas Bentley Hawthorn's digitally-enhanced voice boomed from the speakers like a battery of heavy field artillery. His towering high-resolution features hung before the audience in the jammed lecture hall. The Professor's every grease-pot pore and bristling nose hair were faithfully rendered in Olympian 3-D by the holoprojector. At the back of the huge hall, a much smaller and positively ungodlike Thomas Bentley Hawthorn shuddered. He was particularly unnerved by the nose hairs.

"Have a pleasant weekend," thundered Hawthorn's virtual self.

Row upon row of blank faces took in the final remark. As the image faded, the class began the ritual of closing their portacomps and packing up their things. Like a massive herd of fresh-faced zombies they would stumble to the next class, the library, the lunch hall, or wherever fresh-faced zombies went at the end of the day. Hawthorn beat a hasty retreat. It was foolish of him to be there in the first place. Professors never attended their own lectures anymore. One cry of recognition, perhaps a desperately-shouted question, had the potential of shaking the other 13,000 shuffling undergraduates out of their daze. The thought made Hawthorn shiver: 13,000 students with their inquiring minds suddenly awakened and a real-life professor in their midst. That was how poor Kitsworth had met his end, trampled and crushed by his own Early American History class shortly before the midterm examination.

The thought made Hawthorn shiver—13,000 students with their inquiring minds awakened and a real-life professor in their midst. That was how poor Kitsworth had met his end.

A rushing torrent of student bodies poured into the university's great underground concourse. Hawthorn ducked through a side exit and bounded up a short flight of stairs into the melanoma-causing overlight of day. There were crowds here too, trampling over the trash-strewn waste that had once been a rather pleasantly green university commons. At least outside there was more air to breathe, though its freshness was questionable.

"Hey, watch it!" a bag lady said, giving Hawthorn a little shove. She was fat and filthy, with a round flabby face lacerated with sores from being outside too long. The route to Hawthorn's office made it necessary to cut through the throng lined up outside the Student Services Building. The tired and bedraggled line of students and tramps snaked for half a mile. The woman was one of those who subsisted around campus in a great parasitic hobo camp. If anybody ever wondered why so many students would cram the university to receive so little in the way of an education, they only had to look beyond its gates at what was simply called the Camp. The Camp was populated by those left in the dust by the economic shift of the 1990's. The well-off students had taken to paying residents of the Camp to stand in line for them.

"I am very sorry, Madam," Hawthorn said with a guilty little bow.

"How sorry?" She crossed arms that would be thick even without the battered old winter coat she was wearing. Hawthorn began to fish in his pockets. Suddenly, a huge broken-toothed smile spread across her face.

I ate spaghetti for dinner and watched cable TV because I couldn't afford to go out. There was never any movie I'd heard of on cable, and I was starting to suspect that Jeannie had something to do with that, too.

Since my raise request had been turned down, my mood at work had been getting worse and worse. I worked on the 18th floor, and it was starting to drive me crazy the way the elevator stopped on every floor before mine and all the people who came in were friendly and happy. Sometimes they stopped the door for each other, or held it open while they chatted brainlessly about their plans for the weekend. It had also been driving me insane that people called pastries 'Danish' in our coffee boutique. Danish what? It's a nationality, not a fucking food.

Everything made me feel poisonous. Xeroxing some papers, I saw one of my co-workers had left his phone bill, sealed and stamped, in the box for outgoing mail. It made me so mad I didn't know what to do. It scared me that things like this brought me close to boiling. I was afraid I'd boil over and do something I didn't want to do.

One morning I read in the *Times* business section that Jeannie's consulting firm had been bought by another consulting firm. That day Jeannie appeared slightly disoriented. She blinked more often than usual, and spilled her coffee at a meeting. A few weeks later she arrived in the morning with the tails of her blouse sticking out from the hem of her skirt.

Soon I heard that her stay at the bank was ending and that she'd be moving on to her next client. She wasn't allowed to tell us who her next client was, but she seemed to be very upset about something. She'd always worn her hair moussed up high in front, but one morning she showed up with a big thick clump of hair pointing straight out of her scalp like an asparagus stalk, dried white mousse caked between the hairs. There was clearly something wrong. One day she was in my cubicle because she needed to write a summary document about her work with us, and I had to describe to her the Commercial Trading Interface, which was the program I'd been writing. The word 'commercial' referred to commercial loans, but we just called them 'commercials' as a bit of trading systems jargon. When Jeannie tried to come up with an example to help her understand what I was explaining, she said, "Okay, so like somebody would enter 'Star-Kist Tuna' here and somebody else would ask for 'Energizer Bunny' here…"

"Wait a minute," I said. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She looked at me, frightened.

"Jeannie," I said. "We're not talking about TV commercials here. It's commercial *loans*."

"I know," she said, her face red. "I was just trying to give a different kind of example."

"That wasn't a different kind of example. That was a stupid kind of example. Goddammit, you've been here for six months—don't you know what we do?"

Suddenly she burst out in tears. "Okay!" she yelled. "Everybody hates me here!"

My phone rang. I moved to pick it up. "I don't want to go to Azerbaijan!" Jeannie cried, apropos of nothing.

It was my mother on the phone. She was upset because she'd just gotten a letter from the hospital where my father had recently had heart surgery. Their insurance company had recently been bought by another insurance company. They hadn't read the fine print on the new policy, and now they owed the hospital four million dollars. My father was in a state of shock and had been watching SportsChannel for the past seven hours.

I was about to say something to my mother when the mail boy rolled his cart into my office and I looked up and saw that it was Lew Parker. I'd heard a rumor about more management shuffles, and now I knew it was true.

"Hi," I said weakly.

"Hi," he said.

What with Jeannie crying next to me, my mother waiting for me to talk on the phone and Lew Parker trying to hand me my mail, I suddenly saw a horrific vision. I can't exactly describe it except to say that I suddenly realized that human existence is spinning crazily out of control, that everything is worse than it seems, that we go to work each day and eat Danish and pay phone bills because we don't want to face the truth that is closing in on us, the truth that all mankind is heading for a disaster like none that has ever been seen before.

It was starting to drive me crazy the way the elevator stopped on every floor before mine. Sometimes they stopped the door while they chatted brainlessly about their plans for the weekend.

The vision ended. I told my mother I'd call her back, I thanked my former boss for my mail, and I told Jeannie I was sorry for calling her stupid. After that day I tried to mellow out a bit. Now Jeannie's gone and I realize we were better off with her here. I hated her when she was around, but after she was gone I realized that she symbolized something important, something we all need.

"No," he said. "I don't want you walking through the halls announcing that Lew Parker is a technical moron. I'm supposed to be the manager here."

"I'll be discreet," I said. "Please. I'll find someone quick." I escaped and walked down the halls asking who could help Lew Parker with the desktop software—in effect, announcing that he was a technical moron, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him. The problem was, everybody I asked suggested I talk to Jeannie Barish. All I heard was, "Jeannie might know," "Jeannie's great with that stuff," "The only one who knows is Jeannie."

Who was this Jeannie, anyway? I knew she worked incredible hours, until eight or nine o'clock at night on a typical day, Saturdays and Sundays a few times a month. But she wasn't assigned to any project and nobody knew exactly what she did with her time. She was no older than the rest of us, but she wore expensive clothes, which made me think she was making more money than I was. She always had a smile on her face, and kept asking people to go on ski trips or join the 'group' for Friday lunches at T.J.'s. For all these reasons I always tried to steer clear of her, but now but I had no choice but to go to her cubicle and ask for help.

I hadn't seen her cubicle before. It was bigger than mine and had real oak furniture. In terms of decoration, it was a veritable shrine to skiing. I'd had no idea she was so ski-obsessed. There were ski calendars, ski posters, ski trail diagrams. "Hi!" she said. "How's it going?"

"Okay," I said. "Can you help Lew Parker figure out the new desktop software?"

"Sure! Hey, I've been meaning to ask you, how come you didn't answer my e-mail about the ski trip?"

"I don't like skiing."

"It was just a questionnaire. I wrote that it was for everybody to answer, whether you like skiing or not. I was thinking that if some other winter sports are popular we might try to put together a different kind of trip. Like bobsledding, maybe."

"I don't like winter sports," I said. "Winter sports are the opiate of the masses."

She didn't seem to understand what I'd said, but clearly didn't like it. "Now why would you say something like that?" she asked, knitting her eyebrows with concern and disapproval.

I shrugged. "Can you please go help Lew Parker before he has a nervous breakdown?"

Two hours later, Lew Parker called me into his office. He was sitting at his desk with Jeannie at his side and a broad, idiotic smile on his face. He looked deeply relaxed, happier than he'd appeared in months. "This woman is a gem!" he told me. He turned to her. "Jeannie, I only wish we had three of you. No, ten of you. Thank you so much."

"No problem!" she said. "Glad I could be of help."

She began to leave. "Hey," Lew Parker called after her. "Maybe I'll even put together one of those Solution-Meeting things soon!"

"Great!" she said.

She left the office and a serious look came over his face. "Jim," he said, folding his arms. "Jeannie tells me you seem troubled."

"What?"

"Something or other about you not going on ski trips or joining the group for lunch at T.J.'s."

"I'm not required to go to T.J.'s!" I said. "I hate places like that. The last time I went I ordered the pepper steak and they put cheese on it!"

"Jim, relax," he said. "You've been nervous lately. A ski trip or a nice leisurely lunch would do you good. Get with the crowd a little more."

I left his office in a state of shock. Now I really hated Jeannie. I started asking around about what she did. Nobody knew. I saw a pamphlet for her consulting firm, and it said that their mission was to help companies provide solutions. What did that mean? It's like saying your job is to go around doing good things. What the hell did she do? I kept asking around, but nobody had ever worked with her on a project. And yet she was famous for working incredible hours, sixty to seventy a week.

One morning I found a piece of e-mail waiting for me:

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To: jimg
From: jeannieb
Subject: :^)
Have a great day !!! :^) :^) :^)
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Perhaps figuring that we were now friends, she stuck her head over my cubicle wall that afternoon and asked if I wanted to join the crowd for lunch at T.J.'s.

"I'd like to," I said. "But I just heard a rumor that the original T.J. was a Satan worshipper, so I can't."

She frowned and left me alone. Three days later I found a troll with blue hair and a sign reading "Thanks for all your hard work" sitting on my keyboard. The cute little imp found a nice home at the bottom of my garbage receptacle.

All this coincided with some other problems I'd been having. I'd applied for a raise a few months ago, because my bank had been reporting record profits since being acquired by the larger bank, and yet whenever I talked to the head of Human Resources about my salary I was made to feel that the immense burden of my measly paycheck was already so devestating to the Board of Directors that the bank was hardly able to continue to do business and pay me at the same time. I lived in a slum apartment in one of the worst areas of Manhattan, where

JEANNIE MIGHT KNOW

BY LEVI ASHER

• When you start to think "business culture" may not be all bad, you know you're in real trouble... •

I HATED JEANNIE BARISH THE FIRST TIME I MET HER. SHE was a consultant with a productivity-management firm, and at first I tried to avoid her. But then my boss, Lew Parker, made me attend her presentation on how to conduct solution-oriented meetings. This was a new methodology wherein a sheet about twice as complicated as a dental insurance form had to be filled out before, during and after every meeting. It actually had a beneficial effect on our department, because for about three weeks after Jeannie's presentation everybody was afraid to have meetings, and we got a lot of work done.

But Lew Parker lived for meetings, and finally he couldn't stand it anymore. He called us into Room C and said, "Did anybody tell Jeannie we were here? No? Good, let's just talk quick before somebody catches us."

He was there to tell us about the transition. Recently our bank had been bought by another, larger bank, and departments were being shuffled. As of today, Lew Parker told us, the head of Management Information Systems would report to the Vice President of Commercial Markets Quality Assurance, whose boss, the head of Global Systems Development, was being transferred to Network Integration, where he would report to the Director of System Administration's next door neighbor's piano teacher. Or something like that. Whatever it was, none of us knew what it meant, except that Lew Parker was clearly upset about it.

Some people get real mean and scary when they're upset. Other people just get cool, and sinister looks creep onto their faces, and you know they're plotting revenge and it's going to be great when it happens. But Lew Parker didn't get upset in either of these two ways. He just started coming unglued. His collar button would pop open, he'd sweat, his eyes would bulge, and we'd all sit there feeling sorry for him.

Some people get mean and scary when they're upset. Other people just get cool, and sinister looks creep onto their faces. But Lew Parker didn't get upset in either of these two ways. He just started coming unglued.

Two days after the meeting Lew called me into his office, shut the door and said, "Jim, I can't figure out how to get the new word processor program working."

All of the programs we'd been using had just been replaced, because the company that had created our desktop software had recently merged with another company. Now instead of MaxWord and MegaSpread and WonderGraph we had SuperWord and CalcPad and PresentStar. Everybody was a bit on edge about this. "I guess I can help you figure it out," I said, reaching for the keyboard.

He blocked my path. "Well, it wouldn't help me very much if you did figure it out. Because I also need to import a graph from PresentStar into CalcPad, and I can't even get CalcPad to come up on my screen."

"Okay, I'll take a look at it," I said.

"How is that going to help me?"

"Well, it's what you asked for."

"That may be so, but it isn't going to help me, is it? Because the fact is, all our goddam software is completely incomprehensible to me now, and Chuck Harrison has been expecting me to hand in my Third Quarter Strategic Direction document for three days now and I don't have a damned thing to show him, because I can't get PresentShit to talk to fucking MaxiPad, and so I can't do a goddamned thing at all now, can I?"

At least I knew now why he'd been so upset lately. He was terrified of his desktop software. This was ironic because he'd always been very proud, almost to the point of bragging, about his proficiency with the old programs. But he'd never even developed more than a superficial understanding of them. He was like somebody who learns how to play "Three Blind Mice" on the piano really fast, but can't play anything else.

"If you want," I said, "I can look through your manuals—"

"No, no. It's beyond that, Jim." He started to get a misty look and I got a scared feeling that he was about to pour his heart out to me. "It's just that, sometimes… it's like we run and run just to keep up, and we're running faster and faster, but are we producing any more? Why are we going faster? Who does it help? I mean… sometimes I just don't understand what's going on."

Nobody wants to hear his boss blubbering like a drunk on a bar stool. It's demoralizing. "Wait," I said. "I'll find someone who can teach you this stuff. Let me ask around. I'll be right back."

The last time he felt like this was when he met her guru. But then he had the presence of mind to spend a few minutes, before stepping into the room, setting aside his defenses and lowering his guard. It was a gesture of devotion, to the teacher and to the student. A way of saying, *If he is a true teacher, he will see me for what I am.*

At the end of the meeting, as they stood to leave, the guru made the effort, despite the brace on his leg, to rise to his feet as well. Limping across the room, he reached out, embraced him, declaring in an oddly high-pitched voice, "So, it seems you are a true gentleman."

TICK, TOCK, TICK, TOCK. THE DOCTOR SAYS NOTHING AT first, sits quietly for a long moment, gazing into the middle distance, then asks if it seems that inanimate objects are speaking to him.

"You mean, literally? Literally talking to me, asking me things, literally?"

"Yes," replies the doctor, easing back in his chair, crossing his legs. "That's what I mean."

THAT NIGHT HE IS AWAKENED OUT OF A PROFOUND SLEEP by the angry screech of tires and bang of metal on metal from the highway. Then there is nothing but ominous silence, followed, at length, by the wailing of sirens. He gets up and goes to the window, but can see nothing.

Slipping back into the bed, pulling up the sheets, he falls deeply asleep again and finds himself lying on the hard blacktop, unable to move, blood running from his mouth and nose, terribly, terribly cold. Both of his shoes and a sock have come off. The exposed foot is freezing. The rain is turning to snow. Moving his head to one side, he sees something moving in the distance, but has lost his glasses and can't tell what it is.

Slowly the image swims into focus. Several figures stand silently on the shoulder, watching him, saying nothing, doing nothing. He tries to wave, to gesture, but fails and can only lie helplessly on the rough wet surface.

Then he recognizes one of them. It is his wife. Again he struggles to wave. She sees him, but does nothing, just stands there, mute, unmoving, staring in silence. Trying once again to raise his hand, he can see his own blood freezing on his fingertips.

THE DAY IS WARM AND BRIGHT. WHEN HE WALKS INTO the room, she is sitting up in bed, nursing the baby.

"Oh, sweetie," she says.

"What, sweetheart?"

"I just feel so scared."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I feel like I've been caught up in this whole big thing. And all that's going to come out of it is going to reveal me to be a worm. And all that resolving it will do is show how deluded I've been, how much I've hurt everybody."

HE HELPS HER GIVE THE BABY A SHOWER. PLACING A folded towel on the floor of the bathroom, he puts the infant down on it and quickly undresses him. Then he undresses himself and steps into the shower. First making sure his footing is secure and the water is warm but not too hot and the flow not too strong, he calls out to her, tells her he was ready. She gently hands him the curious baby. Holding the child carefully, he moves him under the stream of water, a little at a time. First his back and legs, then his chest and belly, then the back and top of his head. Then, very, very gently, his face, letting the water wash over it, making sure it doesn't get in his eyes.

The infant is alert and excited. He doesn't cry or struggle. He seems to enjoy the experience, though he's slightly uncertain about it. It must be comforting to feel the warmth of his body and the water, he thinks, but a little disconcerting too. In any event, the baby handles it well, with an endearing sense of wonder and openness. After five, ten minutes, he hands the clean little body back to her, and she dries him off and dresses him.

Then they have go for a walk in the stroller and return to the house, to sit on the front steps in the sun, enjoying the warmth. The phone rings. He picks it up. "Hello," he says. No one answers. He hangs up. A few minutes later, it rings again. She answers it, goes inside to talk. The baby carries on, babbling and crowing in that noisy, nonsensical way babies have, that seems to carry the rhythms of speech. He listens, enchanted. When the baby stops, he responds, making similar noises in a similar way, as a kind of benign echolalia, moving his head around in visual emphasis. The baby watches and listens, plainly fascinated, and waits until he stops. Then he replies, with a good five seconds or more of highly convincing baby talk. Then he stops again and looks up, clearly waiting for a response. They go on like this, back and forth, for some time, 15 minutes or so, just as though they are having a real conversation.

She comes to the door. "You have to leave," she says. He reaches for her, sees something in her eyes, draws back. "He's on his way here. He says he's had it and that I have to choose between you and the baby, once and for all. If I choose you, he'll fight me for custody. I can't let anyone take my baby away."

He stands up, kisses her. The baby watches, eyes wide with hurt and surprise, as he walks away.

ERIC SKJEI 75270.1221@compuserve.com

Is a senior writer at Autodesk in Marin County, California. He lives in Stinson Beach with his laptop and his kayak.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. The voice flows on like a river over smooth, rounded stones, burbling, bubbling, murmuring, babbling. The patient's attention wanders. *Tick, tock, tick, tock.* He thinks about his wife's dying mother, the hawk, his wife. Tuning into the conversation again, he hears the doctor say something with repeated emphasis.

"So that's how it looks to me."

He hasn't been listening, has no idea what the doctor is referring too. Watching him, the doctor realizes this, and elaborates.

"It looks to me like she's got a gun to your head."

He's still not sure what to make of this. Then it comes back to him, becomes clear what the doctor means. "You mean when she says, 'I really love you and want you in my life'? That's the gun?"

Silence. Has he gotten it wrong? He sits up straighter, wanting to make sure he understands. "And you have an idea about what I should say to her then. What I need to say to her then is…" But now he can't remember what he's supposed to say, what the doctor thinks he's supposed to say to her then.

The doctor takes pity, recites the litany. "What you need to say then is, 'I can't stand this anymore. Either put the gun down or pull the trigger.' "

Oh, he thinks. *That's right. Maybe he's right. What's the worst she can do?* he asks himself, then answers his own question. *Exactly what she has been doing.*

"And that is?"

He's been talking out loud again, without knowing it. "Nothing," he says. "Make no decision at all." He wants to change the subject. "What I wonder," he says, "is her doing nothing is deliberate or not? Does she mean it, I mean?" *Does she mean to be abusive?* he wonders. How could she? She loves him. He loves her. They love each other. They are in love. Have been, for years.

"What do you think?"

Rhetorical question? Dizzy, he pulls back and tries again to focus. What was the point? The doctor's question wasn't rhetorical. Anything but. *I desperately want to answer that question.*

"What question is that?"

Damn.

After all their years together, what happened? How could she do this to him? His beloved. Of all humankind, the one he loves most truly, most dearly, trusts without reservation, the one who, without doubt, loves him in return. Always has, always will—so she says—just as dearly. His heart's companion, his life's partner. *She's behaving like some kind of monster. But not savage—*

"That would be easier to comprehend. No, one of those sad, miserable monsters instead, the kind that sobs and snuffles and wails in self-pity as it tears your flesh and cracks your bones."

He doesn't know how to respond to this. *Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

"So, since you understand the dynamic, and since you're choosing this, there must be something you're getting out of it."

"Yes," he agrees.

The doctor blinks, waits. Then, prompting, says, "What?"

"I am getting something out of it."

"What? What is it you're getting?"

"I'm not sure."

"The satisfaction of knowing that you haven't walked away from your commitments, even though they've put you in a terrible bind?" The doctor's face is expressionless. "Is the satisfaction worth the pain?"

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

"The hope that she might change her mind?"

He shrugs. *Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

The doctor shifts in his chair, clears his throat, puts down his notes, looks at the clock and his watch. "We'll have to take that up next time. Our time is up."

Tick, tock, tick, tock. He shifts uneasily in his chair, assailed, obscurely implicated in something that is not his doing, not his fault. Suddenly chilled, he gets to his feet, coat clutched around him, notes the faint tensing of muscles in the doctor's body, slight narrowing of his eyes. Stumbling a little, he steps into the hall and turns up the thermostat. Could it really be 68 degrees in here? *For $80 an hour, I should at least get heat,* he thinks. Then he turns, makes his way back into the room, to the window behind his chair.

The day is dark, overcast. Under a weak sun, grass and trees toss frantically, but there is no rain yet. Behind him the heater groans and ticks in response to the higher setting.

In the reflection he can see the doctor behind him, see him pick up the phone, punch in a number and, after a moment or two, begin to murmur into the mouthpiece. He can also see his own dark eyes, long nose, mustache. Tired, always so tired. Big circles under the eyes. Already graying, gaunt. Tired and getting more so, thin and getting thinner. Behind him, the doctor puts the phone down.

"What you need to say is, 'I can't stand this anymore. Either put the gun down or pull the trigger.' "

It is almost completely dark outside. Only the dim streetlights and the headlights of the occasional passing car can be seen. Looking up, he can faintly make out the stars. For a moment, the chaotic wash of lights forms an almost intelligible pattern, one of those constellations whose name he can never remember.

as big, three times as fast, four times as loud, ten times as threatening. The light and spacious landscape is filled with groaning wind and scudding dark clouds.

He takes the next exit, heads for the truckstop there. They pull in, get out, make their numb way inside. It is a flyblown cafe, filled with men wearing cowboy hats, baseball caps, tractor hats. Two tired waitresses wander up and down, slapping down plates and shouting out orders. From somewhere in the back come the sounds of sizzling and clattering. They sit down, order pancakes and an English muffin, wait for the aftershocks to subside. For the first and last time, the thought crosses his mind that he could put her on a plane and let her fly back without him. But no sooner has the thought occurred to him than he dismisses it. After a while, they get up and leave, without eating a bite. They drive onward into the gathering darkness, stopping only for meals and gas. He hears her say the familiar things, tells him how much he means to her, how much she has missed him these long months. Driving hard, they make it home just after nightfall.

BACK IN THEIR OWN HOUSE, SITTING ON THE COUCH, waiting for her to return from an errand, he has a moment of eerie *déjà vu* when he hears the familiar thump of her step on the porch, the key in the lock, the squeak of the handle as the door opens. She walks into the room and, yes, he feels once again that same immutable ecstasy at the very fact of her existence.

They settle into familiar routines, wash their clothes, fix something to eat, laugh, play, relax, embrace, hold hands, hug, kiss. But then she twists away from him. "I'm not ready yet," she says, tears forming in her eyes.

Hardly knowing how he does it, he says, in a flash of intuition, "Let me guess. You're pregnant," knowing he's right and strangely thrilled by that fact, even as it reveals yet another level of horror to him.

FOUR MONTHS INTO HER PREGNANCY, HE PICKS HER UP outside her therapist's office. For the dozenth time, she has decided to go ahead with the procedure, now more complicated since she is in her second trimester. He drives her to the doctor's office, one that they have been to several times before. She has become strangely proficient at calculating just how much time she has left before a given procedure can no longer be performed safely.

He finds a place to park near the doctor's office, then turns off the car and sits back. He looks over at her, sees she is shaking. Her lover has told her that if she harms this baby, he will hurt her and her family. He can tell she is terrified.

"I still think this is the right thing to do. But I know it's your decision to make, and I will support you no matter what you decide. Whatever you decide, I will support you," he repeats.

She sits, paralyzed.

Finally he says, "Look, you don't have to go through with this."

She looks at him in mute appeal. "In fact," he goes on, "the more I look at you right now, the more I think it's probably a bad idea to do this unless you're really sure about it. Going ahead with it when you're not sure about it could be very painful later. And none of us wants an even unhappier person on our hands."

After a few seconds, staring out at the parked cars, she agrees, her voice almost inaudible, that she isn't quite ready yet. He starts the car and drives away, leaving his life behind on that anonymous street of parked cars and ordinary houses, filled with strangers living normal lives.

FIVE MONTHS INTO THE PREGNANCY, SHE CONTINUES TO put off the need to buy some maternity clothes, instead wearing looser clothing, larger sizes. Eventually, he convinces her to admit the truth and tell her friends and co-workers. She can't quite bring herself to call her family, so he does it for her. "I'm glad you're there," is all his father-in-law can say to him, over and over again. He takes her to several maternity shops. In one, the proprietor, naturally assuming the baby is his, fawns over them, making the usual fuss about new parents. He plays along.

ONE MONTH LATER HE FINDS HIMSELF DRIVING HER TO A clinic in a city a few hours to the north, one of only two in the country where she can get an induced stillbirth at that late stage of pregnancy. And a few weeks after that, he find himself driving her to the airport for a flight to the other clinic. As they approach the offramp, he asks her again if she wants to do this. "Tell me what you want, sweetie," he says, as they drive closer, closer, closer. "Just tell me what you want, what's in your heart, and it will be OK."

ENTERING THE ROOM, HE NOTICES AGAIN THAT THE doctor's office is full of strange junk. Old clocks. Shards of pottery. Random chunks of cypress and pine. A stuffed quail. Ancient, broken-spined books, splayed open from the pressure of the expanding mass within. Fraying oriental carpets. On the wall, a chart of the moon in all her phases. Couch, chairs, in one of which sits the doctor himself, large, round, and bearded. Only the glowing eyes, behind utterly drab glasses, are alive. *Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock,* says one of the ancient clocks.

He sits, describes the dream again, for no particular reason. Then it is the doctor's turn. He says the usual things. As he drones on, his sharp, knowing eyes watch his patient, watch the patient watching him back.

Approaching the halfway point, he can see that a fishing boat has run aground. He joins the small crowd that has gathered to watch, perhaps to lend a hand. There it sits, in the surf, bow inland, surging gently back and forth, small waves breaking over its stern. A small group of Vietnamese, the crew, huddle on the beach nearby. The ship's name is the *Lucky*. His friend Nick is in the crowd.

"Did it spring a leak? Lose its engine, drag its anchor, drift ashore?"

Nick shrugs. "No radio, no one speaks English, four families depending on it for their livelihood."

The next morning, the first thing he does is take his binoculars and go outside. The *Lucky* is still there. Later that day, an orange salvage barge steams up and takes station briefly offshore.

When he checks again, just before sundown, the salvage barge is gone and the *Lucky* is still lolling drunkenly in the surf. Planks have sprung from its sides, water is gushing through them.

Two days later, a frontend loader snorts up the beach. Scuttling back and forth, it unceremoniously smashing the *Lucky* into pieces, scoops them up, and hauls them off to be dropped into a dumpster. He watches until the end, the scene blurring and reforming in his lenses.

Months later he is still finding the odd shoe, jacket, splintered piece of painted timber and metal plate as they surface briefly before sinking back beneath the sand.

SIX WEEKS LATER, SHE FLIES OUT FOR A VISIT. HOLDING her hand, he takes her for a walk on the beach, makes an oblique, gentle allusion to the end of her affair. She does not reply. At the rocks marking the halfway point, they stop to rest. Sitting on the sand, arms on her knees, she looks out to sea, blinking in the late afternoon sun.

"Oh, sweetie," she says, voice hushed, turning her dark up to him. "Actually…"

They stand and slowly continue their walk, tears still running down her cheeks. Back at the house, they sit at the table. Her tears are still falling, making a pattern of small dark dots on the light fabric she is wearing. She sits without speaking, staring at the floor.

"Please don't feel any guiltier than you already do."

"I don't know how to stop all this."

He says nothing. She looks down at her hands, clenched in her lap. "You're in my heart," she says. "I do love you, and I want us to recover from all this. But I don't know how. I need to get some help."

"Sweetheart."

"I can't keep doing this."

"No."

"I can't seem to change it."

TWO DAYS LATER, SHE LEAVES AGAIN. AND AS SHE GETS into the car for the drive to the airport, she begins to weep, wondering aloud if it might not be best for them to get divorced, since she can't seem to make a commitment, but can't stand the pain her ambivalence is causing.

Sadly, he agrees. If that is her choice, so be it. There is nothing he can do about it. It takes two to make a relationship, but only one to end it.

Months later he is finding the odd shoe, jacket, and metal plate as they surface briefly before sinking back beneath the sand.

But then, as she closes the car door, still crying, she says, "This doesn't feel right, this doesn't feel right," over and over again. "I don't want this, I don't want this." And so no more is said about it then, nothing is done to put the process in motion. Instead, she continues to affirm her love for him and her desire to have him back in her life. Again she tells him she will end the affair. Again he believes her.

IN EARLY APRIL, THE SEPARATION ENDS. RELIEVED, ready to go home, he packs his bags and heads for the airport. Pulling into the parking lot, he feels optimistic, excited. Life is beginning to seem worth living again.

After a short wait, he sees her plane settle down onto the runway. It slowly taxies to the gate, begins to discharge its passengers.

Only after everyone else has emerged does she appear. Strained, taut, she is clearly under great pressure and looks miserable. She does not emanate any hint of pleasure at seeing him again after all these weeks.

TWO DAYS LATER, IT IS EASTER SUNDAY. THEY ARE still a long day's drive away from home, traveling fast through open country. The town where they have spent the night is falling rapidly behind. Having gotten up early to hit the road, they are looking for a place to eat.

She breaks the silence, a note of desperation in her voice. "I have to talk to you," she says.

"Whatever it is, it'll be OK. Just tell me the truth." Some dark thing floats at the edge of his vision. The hair on his neck stands up.

Hesitant, fearful, mustering up all her courage and strength, she stammers, "Well, sweetie, the truth is I'm not quite ready to have you come back yet. I wasn't able to stop seeing my lover during our separation." Her voice is small, shaky. "I didn't keep our agreement."

The all-too-familiar familiar emotions rush through him once more. The trucks hurtling by are suddenly twice

safekeeping behind the front desk. They are shown to a small private office, with a desk and a couple of chairs, to wait for another interview.

The door is locked, offers the intern, because the patients prefer it that way. They like the security of knowing that the world can't get at them, he claims, can't walk in off the street to accuse, attack, hurt them. But of course what he doesn't say is that it also makes the hospital's job easier. It's harder to hurt yourself when you are in an environment controlled by others who are paid to remove sharp objects from your luggage, paid to regulate your meds, paid to come by every hour on the hour at night and shine a light into your room to make sure you're still alive.

The nurse comes in, sit down, begins the interview. Not long into it, she turns to him. "I'm sorry," she says, not at all apologetically, "but you'll have to leave now." And so he does, walking back out through the main door, hearing the firm click as it closes behind him.

HE'S BEEN HOME FOR LESS THAN AN HOUR WHEN THE phone rings. It's his wife.

"Would you bring me a blanket? It's really cold down here. They went through my suitcase to see if it had anything sharp or dangerous in it."

"Did it?"

"They took away my curling iron," she says. "And my scissors."

LATER SHE INTRODUCES HIM TO HER ROOMMATE, A blond anorexic toothpick. Stepping into the bathroom, he sees that the mirror is festooned with yellow stickers, each with an affirmation written on it in a childish, loopy hand. "The body is a machine and food is its fuel." Every time he visits, the roommate is on the exercycle, matchstick legs pumping furiously. His wife shows him the small kitchen, the main room, the group meeting spaces, the private offices. Then they sit down in one of the offices and she begins to cry.

THE NEXT TIME SHE CALLS, IT IS TO TELL HIM THAT SHE has set up a meeting with the chief psychiatrist. He gets in his car and drives down to meet her. After a brief wait, he is buzzed into the ward. She is standing just inside the door. They go into one of the small conference rooms. Sitting down, he helplessly feels the joy he always feels in her presence. As they talk, the rapport between them is as strong and rich as ever. No matter how bad things get, nothing seems to destroy it. Is that good or bad? He doesn't know, and doesn't care. But it confuses him, because he can't accept that this person would treat him badly.

"Our appointment isn't for a few minutes," she says. "I wanted to talk with you first."

His sinuses begin to ache, and he suddenly knows what's coming. Tears well up in her eyes, roll down her cheeks. "I need to be honest with you," she says, face crumpling, voice breaking. "I haven't ended the affair. It started up again a few months ago, and I haven't been able to break it off."

"You said it was over."

"I know. That's why I've been so depressed the last couple of months. That's why I'm here. I just don't seem to be able to stop."

As she talks, he can tell that she is genuinely horrified by her behavior. There isn't time to say anything else before their appointment. They get up and walk across the ward to the doctor's office.

"SO WE DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT YOU GOING OUT and getting a gun and shooting someone?" The doctor smiles, but the question is serious. At the end of the session, he stands and holds out his hand. "You've stuck it out through a lot more than most couples I see," he says. As they leave, he suggests a trial separation and more counseling.

A WEEK LATER, THE HOSPITAL AGREES THAT SHE IS doing well enough to go out for the evening. She can leave at 6, she tells him, but has to be back by 8:30. He drives down and takes her to dinner at the only four-star restaurant in the state. Two weeks later, she checks herself out and drives home. To him, she seems calmer, less frantic. But she's not so sure. The experience may have been a mistake, she tells him, may have done more harm than good.

THEY CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS AT THE BEACH HOUSE. HE has left his job, and the plan is he will stay there for the three months of their separation, then return home. She will stay only for another day or two, then fly back. When the separation is over, she will return and they will drive back home together.

When it is time for her to leave, he stands in the driveway while friends bundle her into the car. They tell him later that she weeps throughout the entire two-hour drive to the airport.

AT THE HORIZON A TANKER SLIPS HULL DOWN, SHOWING its superstructure, then its stacks, then nothing at all. Rising from the couch, he takes his hat and coat and heads for the door. Far off in the distance, at the opposite horn of the sandy crescent, he can just make out the cluster of rocks that mark his daily destination. Out in the water there are the usual black shapes of the surfers. At the far end of the beach, small sticklike figures are moving in tiny ways.

She enjoys confiding in him, hearing what he thinks, what he has to say.

"There's something I have to tell you," she says again.

He reaches out, turns off the television.

"I have a friend at work," her voice quavers. "We've been friends for several months now. He's interested in Buddhism, and I've been helping him learn about it."

There is a long pause. He can feel a pain begin in his sinuses. "And, um, it's a friendship that has a sexual dimension to it."

"Take your hand off my knee" is the first thing out of his mouth. He stands up, moves away, then turns, forcing himself to look at her. How can he know that the pain will last the rest of his life, will never get better? She is sitting on the couch, stricken, crying.

He goes to the kitchen, soaps his finger, twists off the ring. Taking it to the bedroom, he puts it away in its brocade bag. Then, to his surprise, he finds himself uttering an atavistic oath, one that condemns her to a life of misery and suffering, one in which the pain she is causing will come back to haunt her a thousandfold, nothing she wants ever comes to pass, in which nothing she cares for will flourish, a life of frustration and desperation, barren futility.

SHE DOESN'T NOTICE THE MISSING RING THAT NIGHT. IN fact, she doesn't notice it until some weeks later, when they are having dinner in a Chinese restaurant. They are in the middle of their mu-shu pork and pot stickers and kung pao chicken. He is lifting a glass to his mouth. She is telling him something about her job, her boss. They are imitating life, acting like a normal married couple, posing as people whose hearts are not broken.

He sees her eyes go to his hand, to that finger, then widen in shock. Her face crumples, tears spring to her eyes. Her mascara starts to run, giving her raccoon eyes. He feels his lips draw back from his teeth in an involuntary grimace. She thinks he is smiling, and is hurt. The familiar impulse to soothe, to reassure, rises up in him, but he deliberately puts it aside.

"I took it off because I don't feel married anymore."

He can see how frightened, how guilty she is. Her eyes dart here and there, returning always to that empty place on his hand.

"I can always put it back on, when things are OK again, if we want, when we really feel married again," he says.

IF YOU NEED INPATIENT PSYCHIATRIC CARE IN THAT small midwestern city, you only have two choices. The first is a ward on the top floor of the city's acute care hospital. They start there. They park, go inside, ride up in the elevator. When the doors open, they step out a long straight hallway with doors on either side, some locked, all with small square viewports at eye level. Black and white linoleum, harsh fluorescent light.

In the small, cluttered office near the elevator two staff members look up from their charts and say hello. During the brief conversation, they are friendly, supportive, and professional. But when a third staff member comes in and interrupts to confirm a doctor's order to have a patient put in restraints, she decides it's time to leave.

THE SECOND CHOICE IS MORE INVITING, HAS AN ALMOST residential air about it. Built around a renovated TB ward, it has a cluster of half a dozen, contemporary, one-story, pentagonal buildings, the kind that are filled with brightly painted walls, clean open spaces, carpeted floors, and vaguely modern furniture.

There is a park-like area in the middle of the cluster, a quad of sorts, a pleasant space, one that they will find themselves in more than once over the next few weeks, taking slow walks, sitting, having long talks.

On the appointed day, they pack a bag and drive down to the office for her intake interview. He drives his car; she follows in hers. Having her car there will help her feel less trapped, he thinks. But he doesn't know that, car or no car, she will be in a locked ward, will need permission to leave, something she won't obtain for weeks.

Toward the end there comes the question about her reason for doing this. After a long silence, she answers vaguely. "I just haven't been feeling very well lately."

The intake interview is extensive. Toward the end there comes the inevitable question about her reason for doing this. After a long silence, she answers vaguely. "I just haven't been feeling very well lately." The plump, bearded young intern is plainly nonplussed. He obviously feels her answer isn't adequate, but isn't sure how to say so without seeming clumsy and unprofessional. He fingers his beard.

After a prolonged silence, he speaks for his wife. "Depression. Sleeplessness, lethargy, all the classic symptoms." It seems to help. With obvious relief, the clerk fills in the blank, the scratching of his pen sounding loud in the small, still room.

ACCOMPANIED BY THE INTERN, THEY WALK OVER TO THE adult ward. He is carrying his wife's bags. As they cross the grassy quad, knots of adolescents flow around them, loud, defiant, self-conscious.

The doors are kept locked; visitors must be buzzed in. Once allowed inside, he is asked to hand over her bags for

his dark blue, almost black Givenchy suit, which he still wears now and then.

He sees that she is today still the same slim, sloe-eyed beauty she was then, with the same flowing dark hair, shot now with streaks of gray. The same awkward winsomeness, same crooked jaw, long upper lip.

And here, a picture of the priest who married them. One of the groom toasting her family, his new in-laws. And his second-favorite picture, the one of him and his four closest friends, sitting on the front porch of their house, after the reception, quaffing Dom Perignon out of a paper bag. Tired. Elated. All of them, he realizes, gone. Dead, divorced, or just plain disappeared. Gone from his life, inexplicably lost to him.

And there, finally, is his favorite picture. The newlyweds. Heads together, smiling. Dazed, but happy. Captured at their zenith, twinkling brightly for life's moment, together, before their long, hard fall.

HE STANDS BESIDE THE HOSPITAL BED, ACROSS FROM her, her dying mother between them, emaciated, dwindling. The door to the outer hallway opens. A short brunette in a crisp white nurse's uniform bustles in. "Time to hang a bag of blood," she declares.

With a few brisk motions, she sends the thin red tendril snaking down the tube. He watches against his will, fascinated by its bright, oddly hypnotic and inexorably downward motion. He mumbles something about sitting down, then sags at the knees, feeling for a chair that isn't there. The next thing he remembers he is coming back to consciousness, lying on his back on the cold hard floor, looking up at a ring of bright faces peering down at him, clinically scrutinizing his condition. In the center of the circle, crouching beside him, hand raised to slap him again, is that same nurse. "Can you hear me?" she is saying, over and over again. He feels oddly elated.

A month later that he finds himself sitting in the back seat of her brother's car, holding the cardboard box that contains all that is left of her mother. As they drive to the memorial service, he looks down, reading the label showing her name, date of birth, date of death. Such finality, there on his lap.

What did she feel at her last, long breath, he wonders, as she lay there, alone in the hospital, harried doctor stepping into the room a moment too late to be with her as she slipped away? Was it that same euphoria?

For months afterward, her remains move from drawer to closet to mantel to drawer again as arguments rage about the best way to lay her to rest. Periodically his brother-in-law calls. "Why don't we just go up behind the city, into the mountains, and scatter them up there?" he says to his wife. At that, she invariably panics. "No, no," she replies, sharply, "I don't want that, I don't want that."

Later, she tells him that visions of wild animals rooting around in her mother's bones haunt her for days after those conversations.

Years later, when the phone rings, she will still for a split second think it is her mother, calling to see how she's doing, see if she needs help, make sure she's OK.

THERE IS A FIRE IN THE FIREPLACE THE NIGHT SHE finally confesses. They always had a fire back then, in the evenings, during the winter months. That's one more thing he misses, the primal sense of warmth and comfort, in a life shared with someone else.

Every year, as summer came to an end, he ordered two cords of wood, ponderosa and piñon, for a hundred dollars a cord. It was a good idea to mix the two because the piñon, a harder, fragrant wood, but more expensive, burned longer. The cheaper, softer ponderosa burned hotter but faster.

Delivery day would come, then the appointed hour. The sagging truck would pull into the drive, back up to the garage. Pulling on his gloves, he would climb up and help the driver unload, tossing the split chunks onto the floor in a great heap. Then, after the truck left, he'd spend on hour or two stacking it up along the walls. When he was done he would stand there for a while, relishing the feeling he got from the neatly stacked rows, the feeling of being prepared for the worst that winter could bring.

Because the garage was detached, many yards from the house, they had to haul wood in by hand, dumping it into a large basket near the fireplace. As soon as he got home from work every night, he built a fire. And for the next three or four hours, he would tend it carefully, rearranging it, adding logs and paper as needed to keep it burning and burning well.

So that's where he is when she comes home. He is sitting in front of the fire, watching the news, when he hears the sound of his wife stepping up onto the porch. He hears the the rattle of her keys, then the familiar squeak as she turns the stiff handle. His heart leaps up, and she is there again, in the same room with him. He feels once more, for the millionth time but as though for the first, the joy he always feels, still feels to this day, the simple fact of her existence in the same world with him.

But tonight something is wrong, he sees. Very wrong. Pale, shaking, she says hello. Her voice is faint, hesitant, scared. Setting her briefcase down next to the table, she drops her purse, shrugs out of her coat, ignores the mail. She comes over and sits down beside him, tells him she has something important to tell him. Puts her hand on his knee. Her voice is trembling. Her hand, too.

This, he recalls, is the night of her weekly visit to her therapist. They always talk afterwards, about how it went, what she said, what the therapist said, how she felt.

MOTHERLESS CHILD

BY ERIC SKJEI

• When things are tough, we're supposed to persevere—it builds character. But there comes a point when it's best to cut your losses. •

HE STIRS. THAT NOISE AGAIN. THAT RINGING SOUND. The phone, of course. He sits up; images continue to haunt him. It is not the first time he has had that dream, and it will not be the last, he knows. Not by a long shot. Over the years, it will come back with new and dreadful variations. Never the same, yet always the same.

The damned phone again. His machine clicks on. He hears his voice announce that he isn't able to come to the phone right now. He sounds slightly distracted.

It is a call from his wife. She's at the hospital. Her mother, she says, her voice as strangely calm as his own, has decided to stop fighting and accept that she's dying.

He looks up. Outside, a hawk appears, dropping out of the sky to perch on a light pole at the edge of the freshly mown field next door.

"Do you want to see her?" his wife asks, sounding like she doesn't much care one way or the other.

Yes, he thinks, *I want to see her.* But he doesn't move. The hawk lifts off from the light pole. *I want to see her and I want to tell her that I know how sentimental people get at times like these. But I don't care and I want to tell her how much I admire her courage. How much she means to me.*

As he's heading for the hospital, he notices again that same funny feeling on the finger where his ring used to be. Somewhere, he knows, he still has the receipts.

The hawk pauses in midair, wings beating, then strikes, swooping down to dance a deliberate, deadly step among the shorn grass and stubble, wings raised, arcing high. Then with slow, easy beats, it takes flight again, flapping heavily back to the same pole, its prey, a long greenish snake, wriggling in its grasp.

I want to tell her she'll live forever in my heart. Tell her I'll never forget her. Tell her I'll always love her, always miss her. Tell her all the things I didn't tell her when I had the chance.

He will have memories of her, he knows. Will be seized, while doing ordinary things, with sudden grief at her absence. While walking along the beach, hiking through the hills. Will have stabbing memories, sharp enough to stop him in his tracks, staring blindly at the earth beneath his feet, remembering her. Then looking up into the infinite blue like a child, he will picture her overhead, in some Sunday school version of heaven, looking down, watching him, watching over him.

In the sunny room, the phone rings again. He listens to his voice declaiming its unchanging message. There is a loud click, a clatter, then the dial tone, followed by the whir of the tape rewinding itself. Someone decided not to leave a message, to comply with his instructions, to speak after the tone.

Speak, he murmurs to himself, staring at the hawk picking daintily at its still-struggling meal. After the tone. Woof.

Abruptly the hawk drops the limp snake and flaps away. He looks at his wrist. Time to go.

AS HE'S HEADING FOR THE HOSPITAL, HE NOTICES AGAIN that feeling on the finger where his ring used to be. Somewhere, he knows he still has the receipts. Just that morning, stiffly, with difficulty, feeling a strange urgency, he got up, threw on his robe and rummaged in the closet, delving into boxes until he found the small, orange and gold brocade sack, buried in a wad of old tax records.

Taking it out to the living room, sitting down on the couch, he is transported back to the day they went to the jeweler's together. He remembers the friendly clerk explaining to them that in China this kind of ring is an engagement ring. "But if you want to use them for wedding rings," she smiled, "that's OK." Her smile, he recalls, felt like a blessing.

Afterward they walked down the street to have lunch in the Garden Court, under the ancient glass dome before it was cleaned and refurbished. During lunch he leaned back and happened to catch a glimpse of ancient dust hanging in long dark strings over the lush buffet and bustling blackclad waiters. A few years later the jade fell out of his ring. He sent it back to the jeweler, who fixed it at no charge, and returned it promptly.

Across the room, the wedding album is sitting on the bookshelf. He gets up, walks over, takes it down. As he flips through it, he sees that the pictures have taken on the sad irony of happiness before disaster.

He stops at a picture of them at the beach house, then moves on. Here is one of the cake, here one of his wife in the wedding dress her aunt bought for her. One of him, in

convenient, easy to use, and it will all come to you over the infobahn. These companies want you to believe this is the greatest thing since squeezable ketchup, and there's no denying the idea is simple and powerful: *anything you might desire comes to you through the wire.*

But think for a second: there's nothing *new* about any of these applications. We've been shopping, we've used phone books, we've dialed long distance, we've been to the bank, we've purchased concert tickets and we've rented movies. That's the point: these are all activities consumers are comfortable with! They're part of our lives now, and the companies lining up to bring you the info-highway understand that. They want to give you things you already know how to do, and they want to charge you for it all over again—in a sense, they're re-inventing the wheel. Why? So they can charge you for roads (cable, connectivity and the highway itself), new tires (upgrades), driver's licenses (training on using your info-appliances), fees (a myriad of small charges for that together add up a *lot* of money), and, of course, taxes (the information highway is not an unalienable right, after all, and government *will* want a piece of the action). And you think commercials are thick on radio and television now? Just wait. The information highway will open up whole new ways to inundate you with advertising.

I'm among the many people who think that a highway is a poor metaphor for the impending digital service networks, so I'm not going stretch it much further. (After all, my oldest, slowest computer is presently directly connected to the Internet: I affectionately refer to it as my "speed bump" on the infobahn.) But the basic point is that these new digital services aren't going to provide much that we can't do already: they're simply going to provide it in a new, slicker, somewhat faster and (at least for the first few years) more costly manner. It's not that there's anything precisely *wrong* with these sorts of commercial applications—they will without a doubt be very successful and popular, thus being "good" for consumers and businesses alike. Without getting into the multitude of privacy and access issues raised by the info-highway, let me make it clear I do not oppose the idea of high-speed access to a myriad of services, as much as I may detest particular applications that are likely to dominate such services. I think most of us would like reliable, high-speed access to the Internet. Who wouldn't?

Instead, let me return to the thoughts that began this column. Simply put, the information highway we have now—a two lane road, if you will, often confusing, cryptic and complicated—is primarily a tool for *communication.* The information superhighway—with all the glittery, attractive, futuristic services to come with it—will be primarily a tool for *consuming.* Instead of promoting active interaction between individuals and groups using the networks, it will instead devote much of its resources to corporate and business concerns and one-way communication from provider to end-user. It's the next generation of television, and no doubt one day there will be studies showing how many hours the typical person spends each day on the information highway. But, like television, it looks like we'll be encouraged to spend most of that time in passive receivership.

So keep those cards and letters coming, folks! Show the engineers and schemers now out there building the onramps, offramps, and twisted exchanges of the infobahn that you want more than *Gilligan's Island* on demand 24 hours a day. *InterText* will do everything it can to make sure the information highway isn't just a one-way street, but it's really up to those of us out here now, in the digital frontier, to make sure that what's special about the Internet now isn't lost in the shuffle.

INTERTEXT
NEEDS YOUR SUBMISSIONS

InterText is always looking for submissions from all over the on-line world. We invite established writers and novices alike to submit stories. *InterText*'s stories currently come *only* from electronic submissions, so we need your help in order to keep publishing! Mail your submissions to **intertext@etext.org**.

Geoff Duncan

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

WELCOME TO THE EIGHTEENTH ISSUE OF *INTERTEXT!* With this issue, we enter our fourth year of publication, and—to our shock and amazement—*InterText* continues to grow beyond expectations, not only in terms of the number of subscribers and the range of our distribution, but also in terms of the quality of the magazine. We're quite proud of what we've been able to accomplish so far and would like to thank everyone—the readers, writers, and everyone involved—for making it possible. Without your interest and generosity, something like *InterText* could never have succeeded, and we deeply appreciate your commitment and support.

Readers of this sporadic column may note that it is often used as a soapbox to espouse this writer's obtuse views on electronic publishing. Responses to these columns have been intriguing. Sometimes personalities from the early days of network publishing—only about ten years ago—send a note out of the ether to agree, disagree, or corroborate certain points. At those times, I feel like an uncouth upstart talking back to my elders. Sometimes I receive letters enthusiastically agreeing with me, which does wonderful things for my ego. And of course, sometimes I receive letters emphatically *dis*agreeing with possibly every word I have written, which—while not as gratifying as praise—causes me to rethink, reconsider, and often revise my positions and opinions.

Since we last spoke, something terrible has happened. I refer to the *information superhighway.* It snuck up on us innocent netters.

Overall, one thing strikes me about this correspondence: almost without exception, it has been civil, considered, and worthwhile. While the opinions and feelings expressed may be strong and deeply personal, the process has been one of *communication* rather than the expression immutable dogma: a surprising fact considering the diversity—geographic, ideological, and cultural—between myself and many of these respondents. Pretty amazing what technology can do.

Which brings me to today's topic: since we last spoke, something terrible has happened.

I refer to the *information superhighway*. It snuck up on us. There we were, innocent netters, minding our own business then suddenly we were being viewed as part of an information culture we didn't know existed. Now, on the front pages of newspapers, in magazine articles, in television commercials and on the evening news, we are being described as the current info-literati—the elite group of technically-hip, wired and inexplicably arcane individuals who represent the pimogenitors of the future *überculture* of "digital convergence." Sure, networks might be cryptic now, they say, but soon computers, televisions, and telephones will merge into new species of "information appliances." Imagine high bandwidth connections to every home, every office, and—through a wireless, satellite-linked cellular network—every vehicle and coat pocket in the world. Imagine video phones, video conferencing, access to limitless on-line information, voice recognition, on-line medical records, wireless financial transactions, and other high bandwidth, information applications *ad infinitum.* "Have you ever tucked your child in from a phone?" asks one AT&T television commercial. "You will." That is the future, they say, and it's only a few years away.

I imagine some folks are quite excited about this. But I'm not. Here's why.

Pause for a moment and think about *who* is going to be provide these services and applications for the information highway and *why* they're going to do it. The *who* are today's media and technology conglomerates: entertainment and publishing empires such as Paramount, Columbia, Time-Warner and Fox; technology companies such as AT&T, IBM, Apple and Microsoft; and service providers like Viacom, Sprint, and (again) AT&T. The *why* is universal: money. The "digital convergence" allows these companies a shot at all the money currently being spent on movie rentals, cable television, telephone service, directory information and all on-line services—and each of these companies wants a cut of your monthly service charge, plus additional per-hour costs for "premium" services. And they have reason to believe even more people will use the information highway than use these services today. They're probably right, and that raises the financial stakes even higher.

They say the video store will be dead in 1998, and I tend to believe that. I also believe telephone books, newspapers, magazines, mail-order catalogs, reference works, the postal system, ATMs and advertising will not survive until the year 2000 in their current forms. You won't have to go to an ATM to conduct transactions with your bank, you won't have to use a library or a reference book to look up information. Similarly, you won't have to consult a thick, unwieldy newsprint tome to get a phone number, or do much shopping since you can order and pay for most things over your television. You won't have to rely on physically acquiring a newspaper or magazine to keep up on news, and you won't have to buy tickets to concerts or sporting events, but can attend them on-line in full stereo and living color. It will be simple,

Jason Snell

THE INFORMATION EXPLOSION

BY JUST ABOUT ANY STANDARD, three years isn't a long time. But as we reach *InterText*'s third anniversary, I can say that a lot has changed in the on-line world in that time. The Internet, for example, was incredibly huge and growing exponentially when *InterText* first appeared in March of 1991. But it's only really been in the last few months that the Internet has become a "hot subject" in the American news media.

NBC Nightly News did a series on the Internet, and included an Internet e-mail address at the end of every broadcast. *Wired* magazine, an Internet-hip technology and lifestyle magazine out of San Francisco, is now one of the hottest magazines in existence. A million books have been written on the Internet, and no doubt a million more will come out by the end of 1994.

Now when we began *InterText* three years ago, there were only a *handful* of regular electronic publications out there. David "Orny" Liscomb's *FSFnet* had led the way, and *DargonZine* picked up where it left off. Jim McCabe's *Athene* appeared, as did Daniel Appelquist's *Quanta.* Adam Engst, one of the contributors to this issue, began his Macintosh newsletter *TidBITS.*

After Jim McCabe decided that he couldn't continue doing *Athene,* I began planning *InterText.* Geoff Duncan also came on board, and away we went. From the start we set out to supplement the entertainment we provide with some useful information for our on-line readership. That information came in the form of our "page of ads," a listing of other on-line publications that we thought our readers might find interesting.

In three years, a lot has changed. There are dozens of electronic resources out there, ranging from the mainstream to the very, very eclectic. Though for a while we tried to keep on top of things, there's just no way to publish a complete listing of on-line publications in *InterText* anymore, if there ever really was.

However, a complete list of such publications does exist, compiled by John Labovitz (*johnl@netcom.com)* and available on the Internet via FTP and on the World Wide Web. Rather than produce a list that's inferior to John's, and inferior to the listings in those many Internet books I mentioned, we've decided to stop publishing our list altogether.

Rather than shirk from that commitment we made with the first issue, the commitment to point our readers toward interesting resources on the Internet, we've decided to fulfill that commitment in a different way. Beginning with this issue, our "page of ads" has been replaced by *Need to Know*, a regular column featuring an interesting on-line information source, or a person doing something different in the on-line world.

In the future, the *Need to Know* profiles will probably be written by people other than the *InterText* editorial staff, but if you've found an interesting resource or person and think we should know about it, please send mail to *intertext@etext.org* with information about it. And as always, we'd love to receive your comments and criticisms of *InterText.* You can send those messages to the above address, as well.

While I'm on the subject of the explosion of on-line resources, I should mention that there is now another electronic publication in much the same "business" as *InterText*. It's a journal named *Whirlwind,* edited by Sung J. Woo (*sw17@cornell.edu)*, whose "Bleeding Hearts" appeared in *InterText* last issue. *Whirlwind* features contemporary fiction, poetry and essays, and publishes in both PostScript and ASCII formats. Those on the Internet can check out *Whirlwind* by looking at *ftp.etext.org* in */pub/Zines/Whirlwind*.

Yes, the on-line world sure is growing at a rapid pace, and the next few years will probably bring us even more change than the last few did. *(For more on that, see Geoff Duncan's column in this issue.)* But we at *InterText* are committed to be in the game for the long haul. Next year, we all intend to be back here again, waxing philosophic on the changes our fourth year of publication has brought.

BEFORE I CONCLUDE, I'D LIKE TO MENTION A FEW changes that have happened to *InterText* in the past few months. First, readers of our ASCII version have no doubt noticed that we changed our ASCII edition's format as of last issue. The new format is known as setext. Setext allows the formatting of documents even though they're in standard ASCII text. With a setext-compatible program (such as Easy View, currently available for the Macintosh), our plain text issues turn out formatted with headers and italics. In addition, users of setext browsers will find it much easier to navigate through issues of *InterText.*

With this issue, we also welcome onboard Susan Grossman as an assistant editor. She'll be helping Geoff and me with the evaluation and editing of *InterText* stories. Not only will her help keep both of us relatively sane, but her talents will no doubt increase the readability of the magazine.

InterText

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The *InterText* Staff

Editor
Jason Snell
jsnell@etext.org

Assistant Editor
Geoff Duncan
gaduncan@halcyon.com

Assistant Editor
Susan Grossman
c/o intertext@etext.org

Cover Artist
Jeff Quan
jquan@west.darkside.com

intertext@etext.org

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