InterText

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 4 JULY–AUGUST 1994

"Monkeytrick" by
RIDLEY MCINTYRE

ALSO INSIDE:
G.L. EIKENBERRY
RICHARD MCGOWAN
MARCUS EUBANKS
JOHN DIFONZO
CARL STEADMAN

ISSN 1071-7676

—JQ—

InterText

JULY–AUGUST 1994 VOLUME 4, NUMBER 4

Contents

Departments

First*Text:* *Big Mistakes*
JASON SNELL 3

Short Fiction

Monkeytrick
RIDLEY MCINTYRE *(mcintyre@cck.coventry.ac.uk)* 4

Mr. McKenna Is Dying
MARCUS EUBANKS *(eubanks@astro.ocis.temple.edu)* 16

The World Is Held Together By Duct Tape
CARL STEADMAN *(carl@cdtl.umn.edu)* 19

Georgia's Loose Tooth
RICHARD MCGOWAN *(rick@jg.cso.uiuc.edu)* 21

The Loneliness of the Late-Night Donut Shop
G.L. EIKENBERRY *(aa353@freenet.carleton.ca)* 26

Wampanoag
JOHN DIFONZO *(jdifonzo@powerhouse.com)* 28

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

***InterText* Vol. 4, No. 4.** *InterText* (ISSN 1071-7676) is published electronically on a bi-monthly basis. Reproduction of this magazine is permitted as long as the magazine is not sold (either by itself or as part of a collection) and the entire text of the issue remains unchanged. Copyright © 1994, Jason Snell. All stories copyright © 1994 by their respective authors. *InterText* is produced using Aldus PageMaker, Microsoft Word and Adobe Illustrator software on Apple Macintosh computers and is converted into PostScript format for distribution. For information about back issues of *InterText,* see our back page.

Send all submissions and subscription requests to intertext@etext.org

***InterText*'s next issue will be released September 15, 1994.**

Jason Snell

BIG MISTAKES

"THERE ARE SOME BIG MISTAKES in your latest issue," wrote one reader upon receiving the May-June 1994 issue of *InterText.* "The table of contents, your column, and your page of ads are all missing. All the "about the author" blurbs are missing from the ends of stories."

That letter writer was right and wrong at the same time. Without much warning, the last issue of *InterText* appeared in a completely different format from any of our previous 18 issues. But there was a method to our madness, and in the end, we think everything worked out.

Let's start where we should: at the beginning of this story. In either late 1992 or early 1993 (I can't remember quite when), I had a good idea in the place where I generally have my good ideas—the shower. This idea was for an issue of *InterText* that was more than just a collection of good stories from the batch of submissions we received over a given two-month period. The issue would, instead, be modeled on a unifying theme, and all the stories would be related.

Since *InterText* has no budget and can't pay its writers, *assigning* a story to people who would be writing it for free wasn't the easiest thing in the world to do. In order to make it easier for the writers to say yes, I tried to keep the theme vague. Rather than planning an issue with a single plot thread weaving through different stories (like the *Wild Cards* series of books edited by George R. R. Martin), or even a series of unrelated stories in a clearly-defined world (like the Harlan Ellison-edited *Medea: Harlan's World* anthology), we'd pick a single event and ask writers to write stories involving that single event.

I picked an event with lots of possibilities for both "mainstream" and science fiction stories — the appearance of a nova or supernova in the sky on a certain date (to be set later as the date the issue first hit the Internet). That way, writers could set stories on planets surrounding the dying star, on Earth at the time the star was exploding a hundred light-years away, on Earth at the time the star became visible, and even on Earth in the future, when the appearance of the Nova is just a memory. (In fact, one story in *this* issue—Ridley McIntyre's "Monkeytrick"—includes a reference to a supernova appearing at some point in the past. Because Ridley's story appeared late in the editing process and only peripherally involved a nova, we decided to let the story stand on its own rather than try to shoehorn it into an already-packed issue.)

I bounced my "theme issue" idea off of Assistant Editor Geoff Duncan, who seemed positive about the whole thing and suggested that he knew some astronomers who might be able to make sure our story (exploding star and all) was scientifically accurate. That turned out to be a lot of work—probably more than Geoff had expected. But, then, the whole thing turned out to be a lot more work than we expected.

We sent out several mailings to writers whose work had previously appeared in *InterText,* asking if they wanted to be a part of the issue. Many didn't respond, some responded but said they were too busy writing other stories to participate in our project… and a few said they'd try and come up with something.

Our deadlines for story ideas kept sliding back. Eventually, ideas began coming in. Then, miraculously, at the end of 1993, stories began appearing. By the end of 1993, we had nearly enough stories to make an issue.

But in the meantime, we still had *InterText* to put out. And so the theme issue had to wait as we put out our January-February 1994 issue. Then we tried to begin work on the theme issue, but realized we couldn't get it done by March 15. In mid-March, with our writers wondering if their stories would ever see the light of day, we began assembling the theme issue.

There were plenty of problems along the way: stories based on only a vague description ("a supernova appears in the sky") ended up being filled with conflicting information that we had to shoehorn into our universe. Many stories needed only minor alterations, but one required a Herculean editing job (performed by Geoff) to make it fit in our format. To make the issue run together better, we also decided to split some stories into several sections, interlacing them with other stories by placing them in a rough chronological order.

The production of that issue took more out of us than probably any issue we've done to this point. But the resulting issue is one we're very proud of. So much so that maybe, once we've rested and recovered from the trauma we inflicted on ourselves during the first go-round, we'll do another "theme issue." In the meantime, we'll continue to work on issues the old-fashioned way—even without the concern about the placement of the nova in the sky at certain times of day in certain locations, it's still a lot of work to make *InterText* happen.

"There are some big mistakes in your latest issue." That's how the letter, which I received no more than a day after the issue first appeared, began. Mistakes? There are probably a few, here and there. But the theme issue itself—even with all the work (and ensuing insanity) than went into it—surely wasn't a mistake. We'd do it all over again today.

Well, not today.

But sometime.

After we've rested.

MONKEYTRICK

BY RIDLEY MCINTYRE

• Which is worse: a dead soul inhabiting a rebuilt body, or a living soul without any body at all? What's more, how about being both? •

1

"What does hell look like?
Me. It looks just like me."
—Big Pierrot

THEY SIT OUTSIDE AND THEY WAIT, THE NIGHT'S RAIN falling like wet steel needles over the Manhattan outzone, bouncing off the roof of the car with a loud, tinny static noise. Three muscleboys sit in the car with the lights off and wait. They watch the two Asahi Tag Teamsters on the corner, the protectors of La Guardia Towers on East 10th Street, while the huge block of artificial stone slowly erodes in the rain. Ten seconds. That's how long it will take.

And when the teamsters check out a noise from around the corner and leave as planned, the three in the car go into action.

The flash is the last thing Dex remembers. Kitty's last memory is seeing her boyfriend ripped apart by a bright orange blast and scraped across the walls, just a microsecond before she feels the blast's claws herself.

"LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT HIS NEW EYES, SHALL WE?" A Russian voice.

The alley is bathed in angelic white light of the purest kind. Dex has a vision of God. When it goes as suddenly as it came, the kids begin to taunt him, too, about the visions.

"Didn't you see it?" he screams. "It came through the windows. The light."

"Didn't see a light. Did you see a light?"

"What light? Has he had a revelation? Has he seen… God?"

"That's what happens when you have girls' eyes. You think you see God."

"Maybe he thinks he *is* God."

Darkness now. The sound of crying. The lost echoes of gunshots. The wet warm smell of running blood. The pistol makes a sharp crack as he drops it to the concrete.

"YOU OKAY?" HE SAYS TO THE GIRL IN THE DARKNESS.

"I've felt better. They would have killed me if you hadn't arrived, you know."

"Yeah."

"Take me home, please?" she pleads.

The cold shaky touch of her hand in his. Her body set in a weak crouch. Her free hand holding her torn silk blouse together.

The kids are dead now. But in his dream, in her house, their voices still mock him like mind-ghosts.

Dex hides in the dark warmth of an antique MFI wardrobe and sobs. He wishes someone older was here to tell them all to shut up. He can't seem to do it himself.

He slowly spends his second childhood in a London house filled with the voices of the children who taunt him. But the girl, whose name is Pain, always protects him.

A whisper from the shadows behind him. Soothing, but so unexpected and shocking that it nearly unlocks his bowels.

"Don't be afraid."

That simple. Dex searches the wardrobe frantically, throwing furs and leather coats and company uniforms to each side to find the voice, but it isn't there.

"Look down."

There she is. A young Asian girl about nine years old with long black hair and beautiful white eyes. He quickly climbs into a fur coat and wraps himself in its luxury.

"My name's Dexter. Who are you?"

Pain enters his tiny body and splits the skin envelope in a thousand places, crying out for mercy under the explosive sensation.

Then darkness again.

"SHIT, HE'S DREAMING." THAT RUSSIAN VOICE AGAIN.

And the pain is gone and he is new again, and he slowly spends his second childhood in a London house filled with the voices of the children who taunt him. But the girl, whose name is Pain, always protects him. When she's there, the other children go away. She seems to have this power, this command over them all. And when they reach puberty, Dex and Pain play games in the darkness of the wardrobe in her father's house, and no matter what the game, Pain always wins.

Every time.

"IS HE DONE?" A NEW VOICE, ENGLISH. FEMALE.

"This is about as good as he gets." The Russian voice.

"Is he still dreaming?"

"Yes, Miss Fairchild."

"Well, I suppose he can't do much else. Keep him going for a couple of days, then wake him up. Call me. I'll have to brief him when he comes round."

"You're the boss."

"Damned right."

SOHO. THE LONDON OUTZONE. THE YEAR OF THE RAT.

There is a burned-out shell of a pub called The Blue Cross that lies in the underworld of one of the outzone's huge tower blocks. Inside things are busy, but running on candlelight thanks to one of the frequent brownouts the place suffers whenever Metropol finds a cable tapping the monorail lines high above.

DIs are common. Almost every Federal Metropolitan Council has one as a member, and most companies keep one on the executive board. But AIs are just status symbols.

The Cross is the main Sodha slicers hangout. Sardine-canned with long-haired Asians in leather jackets and molded kevlar impact armor suits sprayed in a variety of bright neon colors. Dex told her to dress down, so she wears a white lace blouse and black silk jeans. She feels like sushi in a chip shop.

She follows him through the dark crowd and attracts a couple of glances here and there from the men, but not enough to make her feel any smaller than she already is. Out of her depth here, she needs someone like Dex to keep her from drowning. And he needs her if he wants to stay alive.

Dex is pushing through this crowd looking for one person, and when he finds the young man, the poor kid can't recognize him.

The young man is dressed as a slicer, with a baseball jersey, black Big Pierrot T-shirt, leather jeans and kevlar-plated, knee-high boots, but his black raja hair is too short and the chrome of the NST interface sockets in his skull behind his ear flickers in the dull orange of the candles. He fits, but he doesn't fit; a person Dex, the eternal Stranger in a Strange Land, can completely identify with.

"Long time, no see, Mo."

Motorhead is drunk as usual and strains his memory to name the face. Dex finds it impossible to believe that this seventeen-year-old has taken his place with the Sodha slicers.

Finally, Motorhead makes a noise. "Who the fuck are you?"

Dex's face is expressionless. "What, don't you remember the Boy? I used to run with you back in the Year of the Dog."

Motorhead returns to his drink. "Wrong. Try another one, matey. The Boy's dead. The Americans got him. Blew him and his girlfriend up in Manhattan."

Dex remained where he was. "Remember in Seven Stars? That night in the Dog's summer when we got wankered? You dared me to ask that woman to dance with me and it turned out she was FDI? We nearly ended up publicly hanged for that one. Or that time in the Grid when you got caught in a BFP shell and I had to rig some speedy softs to bail you out? Damn you, look at me! It's me, Mo. It's the Boy."

Motorhead looks up at the mention of the BFP. Someone could have found out about the Seven Stars incident—the two of them were real legends in that place—but no one except the Boy knows about the incident at the *Banque Federal de Paris.* Bad business. As the shock of recognition hits him, a smile widens across his face.

"Jesus, Boy! What the fuck are you doing here?"

Dex looks at the blonde woman behind him, a furtive gaze in her gray-green eyes. She gives a hint of a shrug and hides her thumbs in the back pockets of her jeans. Behind them all, next to the door, a fast fistfight breaks out.

"I'm in trouble, Mo. Real trouble."

Motorhead cocks his head to the left. "Yeah," he says. "When have you ever been out of trouble?"

DEX SAYS THEY NEED A PLACE TO TALK. SOMEWHERE private. Motorhead picks one of the hologram lions around a hologram Nelson in Trafalgar Square, the one that faces north toward the foggy outline of the four huge cylinders of Tottenham Court Points that thrust into the clouds above the outzone.

They sit around the red hologram lion. Motorhead takes out a small yo-yo and starts to run tricks with it.

"Where did you go? I mean, after you left Sodha, Dev Lung went apeshit. I nearly died because of you. He thought I'd tried to cut you out or something."

"I went to Texas City," Dex says. "Forged my way into the Tank Corps and lamped around with them for a while. I figured their security would keep you and all the rest off my back for a while. But… things happened there. We were running missions against the nomads who were smuggling food and drugs and anything else worth a cent between Texas and the U.S. One day my gunner flipped out. Started shooting up a bus full of kids. So I took out my nine and shot him. Lucky bastard survived. He got a Purple Heart, and I was facing a court-martial.

"So I joined the opposition. Hooked in with one of the nomad groups. I helped drive, surfed the Grid every now and then to launder finances—the usual stuff. Stayed about a year with them before I left for New Atlantic City.

Manhattan. Met up with this smartgirl called Kitty, who ran a little business selling neurosofts and skips to the Asahi Tag Teamsters. So I was a pony there for a while. Then I got into some mess that hooked me back into running the Grid again. I was just ready to return. Camden Town Boy's big comeback. Then… well, everything else is future history."

He slides a small blue laminated business card across the stone to Motorhead. Centered words embossed on the plastic next to a patchy videostat. Dexter Eastman. Information Services Division. Vijayanta Pharmaceuticals IG. The face in the videostat is subdued. Shameful. The face of someone press-ganged into the company.

Motorhead nods, then slides the card back to his old spar. "I don't get it. Why kill you?"

The blonde girl steps in. "Vijayanta taketh, and Vijayanta giveth back. He's more use to us dead than alive, if you know what I mean."

Motorhead switches confused glances between Dex and Sarah. Finally, he settles on the girl. "No."

"You can't get more expendable than dead," says Dex.

"But why you?"

Dex nods to Sarah. She stares at him coldly, then eventually gives in. "Ever heard of Rhea?" she asks Motorhead.

The young decker frowns in thought. "Sounds like an Artificial Intelligence code."

Sarah nods. "Vijayanta IG's," she says with some pride in her voice. AIs are few and far between in the Year of the Rat. It costs a lot of money to program one. Far cheaper to get the donated braintapes of some company executives and edit them into a single Digital Intelligence. DIs are far more common. Almost every Federal Metropolitan Council has one as a member, and most companies keep one on the executive board. AIs are corporate status symbols. An advertisement of their multinational wealth.

"So, it's your AI. So what?"

"It's gone rogue. We've lost it."

Motorhead breaks into laughter. The sound echoes around the antiquated post-Storm War buildings. A confusing collage of cruel ambience.

Dex and Sarah aren't laughing. They each watch Motorhead in their own way: Sarah through the scared eyes of someone whose job is on the line, and Dex through eyes that once belonged to a girl. When Motorhead looks up at them, he calms down.

"I'm sorry. But that's pretty funny."

Dex and Sarah's serious looks give the game away. He slowly realizes exactly why they have come to see him. And the joke isn't funny anymore.

2

"Peace through superior mindpower."
—Big Pierrot

THE SUITE ON FLOOR 113 AT THE MIRAMAR HOTEL IN the center of the St. James Secure Zone has a dry, air-conditioned taste to it. Motorhead finds himself pulling his stuck tongue from the roof of his mouth as he waits with Dex for Sarah to get dressed down again. Sarah doesn't have any street clothes. She's all gray company suits and maroon Vijayanta ties. More used to this kind of life, up here in the sky, where you can't even see the outzone thanks to the dirty gray clouds that blanket the entire view from the window. Motorhead almost feels like he could jump on top of them and they'd take his weight.

Piercing the clouds far away are the columnar towers of various other Secure Zones. Battle Bridge Points, Tottenham Court Points, Bowling Green Points, Camden Points, Canbury Points, the tip of the Smallpox Hospital spire and the various billowing stacks of the dustzone workhouses. Underneath, he knows, are the countless crumbling, uncompleted towers of the outzone, none of which stand more than 100 stories high.

Piercing the clouds are the columnar towers of other Secure Zones. Battle Bridge Points, Tottenham Court Points, Bowling Green Points, Camden Points, Canbury Points, the tip of the Smallpox Hospital and the billowing stacks of dustzone workhouses.

Unlike Motorhead, Dex has tasted rooms like this before. Nothing new. But they call up a certain brand of feeling that he doesn't want to have running around his guts just now. He distracts himself by checking out the Disney channels on the color TV, then, realizing that they only make the feeling worse, he switches off the set. To utter silence.

Motorhead shuffles a bit, his hands sliding nervously in and out of the pockets of his orange Sodhaboy baseball jersey. Then he slumps down on the couch and runs his fingers over ultravelvet smoother than the skin on a 20-rupee kitten. He succumbs to the urge to take off the blue pilot's cap he's wearing and spins it around on a finger. Finally, bored, he jerks himself back to his feet.

"Have they got room service here?" he says. "I always wanted to call for room service."

Dex points him to a box in the corner. There's a long menu stuck next to it claiming to return the order within fifteen seconds. He reads the instructions. You put your

order in a small cylinder and the tube sucks it up. He figures the box underneath must be where the stuff comes out. Motorhead orders a plastic bottle of cider.

"Want anything?" he offers to Dex. His old friend shakes his head. "Fair enough."

When the cider arrives—Motorhead times it at 12.48 seconds on his collector's Seiko digital—he opens it and downs it all at once. A lot of flavor, no bubbles. He wonders if it's flat or that's the way it's meant to be.

He stands in awe of the room, scared yet admiring. "Like the places in the TV soaps, innit, Boy? One of those posh places Big Pierrot stays in when he's busting down a suit. Only in color."

Dex sits down with his hands in his lap and tries to think of nothing. But that uncomfortable feeling keeps coming back, and it's tied to his dream. That dream he had in London with the children and the girl called Pain. Somewhere there is a link in all this. He had to be here for some other reason than Vijayanta's threat, but his mind is averting it; every time he tries to think about her, tries to remember her face, he thinks of something else. Remembering is the key to the pain he is feeling, but remembering what?

He looks at Motorhead, but Mo's trying to find a pocket in his jacket that will fit the bottle. Real petroleum plastic, worth a lot on the streets of the outzone.

No. Mo wouldn't know. He wouldn't remember.

The sun is starting to break through on this side of the Miramar building and its tiny arc pours red-purple light into the room through large circular windows. The light brings out the contours and some of the unhealable scars on Dex's face. Motorhead notices for the first time that his black hair is all implanted and bald patches show through it. Worn much longer than Dex ever used to allow. Something's wrong here. Vijayanta put his body back together, but his soul is dead. Dex has lost his old self, and it sends a stealthy shiver crawling down Motorhead's thin neck.

IT TAKES THEM TWO HOURS TO REACH COVENT GARDEN in the back of a cycle-rickshaw ordered by cellphone. Dex spends most of the ride watching the beggars and street vendors and turning down offers from the kittens—prepubescent prostitutes—plying trade in the darkness under the city's towers. Hiding his face in amused shame as Motorhead sharks Sarah. She takes it calmly. Answers his questions. Gives him just enough to seem interesting, but not enough to seem interested.

Motorhead himself talks but doesn't really listen. Catching tiny squalls of information in her life story. Born in Milton Keynes, the center of Thames Midland. Followed her father into computers at Logica, a Vijayanta subsidiary. Contracted by Vijayanta and, after only three years, taken on as staff. Being team leader of the Rhea Rogue Hunt is just another step up the corporate ladder for her.

"I nearly cried when Rhea disappeared. We looked for it everywhere within the system. But it was nowhere. No trace."

Sarah's running a Gabriel on him and it's worked. Her persona reveals one of the flavors of nonlife that must exist in the world of the Secure Zone. Sarah is Too Much Work To Party flavor.

"How come we're doing it this way? I mean, you lose something that big and it's a Fed problem, innit? Fednet should be doing this."

"Let's just say that Rhea knows some things that we don't really want to go public. Understand? Best to keep your trap shut about this." Her voice is stern, but calm. Dex feels her temperature bunny-hop a degree.

"So just tell me one more time why I should help you and the Boy find it," he asks her with a frown.

"Do you enjoy life?" she replies.

He nods.

"Then you do as I tell you."

COVENT GARDEN MARKET IS A TECHNICAL BAZAAR. Rusting corrugated iron and sheets of gas-planet PVC shrouding a maze of tiny tables, stalls and open cases. The surrounding towers cast a grim shadow over the square, and though the far-off sky is blue, twinkling with the new stars of low-orbit workstations, down here the air is cold and thick with sweaty dampness.

"Who did you say we could find here again?" Sarah asks.

Motorhead barges his way through the slow-moving crowds. Jostles with scores of people who seem intent to just stand and look at the merchandise, rather than buy or move on. The ponies sell laserdisks, microsofts for those who like plugging things straight into their neural systems, stolen Fednet PCs, valve amps, monochrome TVs and even headset radios at their stalls. None seem to want to undercut the others' prices.

"Nukie. He's one of the best teks this side of the river. He's the only guy I know who could scratch-build you a deck in the time you want. He did mine in two days."

Nukie is a white-boy steamer. His hair trails lank and greasy around his broad shoulders. Eyes wide open and wild, with pinprick pupils. Standing taller than anyone Sarah has ever seen, at least two meters high. Sarah concludes that Nukie is the biggest, ugliest man this side of Milton Keynes.

" 'lo, Mo. Who're they?" Nukie's dialect has slowly tempered in the London outzone. A product of growing up in one place and having to work in another. South Shields, the small industrial complex where he was born,

was abandoned by Nissan, the whole workforce now dotted around Thames Midland trying to find new jobs. Nukie's father worked on computer components for Nissan aerodynes. His son believes his technical flair is hereditary.

"This is Sarah. And this is the Camden Town Boy."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," he says to them. His face blank to Dex's old handle. The Boy must have been before his time, even though when Nukie smiles, his scarred face makes him look old enough to be their grandfather.

"So what're you after?"

Dex steps in before Motorhead can make any compromises or deals. "I need a cyberdeck. As fast as you can build it, with military-level signature masking. It'll need to run about five cartridges. And a unlicensed Fednet PC for the software design."

The twisted smile becomes a toothy grin. "Not after much, are we? I'll have you one by tomorrow morning, if you're willing to pay for it."

"Depends on how much you're willing to charge."

Sarah tries to follow the deal as it goes down, but three slicers by the stall behind them have started a scuffle over the price of a microsoft. Just like the slicers in the Blue Cross, they wear insect-like kevlar armor suits, spray-painted in wild day-glo colors. One of them wears a jersey like Motorhead's: orange leather baseball-style, with a patch on the breast shaped into a circular letter S. Sodhaboys.

Sarah stands back and watches everything. In a place like this, it's all she knows how to.

"HOW DOES IT WORK?"

"Eh?"

"The Sodha slicers. How do they keep going?"

Night in the outzone. Sitting in a corner of the Blue Cross, Dex and Sarah watch the slicers dance. If she didn't know better, Sarah would have thought it was a brawl. A living pincushion of flailing fists and boots. She looks away from the floor and catches a glimpse of Motorhead at the bar, joking with some of the other long-haired rajas. As soon as he looks over, she turns back to Dex, who gulps down a mouthful of cheap fizzy cider.

"Dev Lung… He's the bossman, right? He has these contacts in most of the companies. Siphons stuff from them and gets our ponies to spread it around in the outzone. Just simple merchandising, really. Everything from powdered milk to neurosofts. The ponies get it all for free and pay back what they sell. Some of them have stalls in the markets, some have real shops under our protection, but a lot just go out on their slices and sell stuff on the streets. If they don't sell something, they give it back so someone else can. Anything gets lost or damaged and the pony has to pay for it."

He necks the last of the cider from a reusable plastic bottle. "It sounds complicated, but it's a pretty simple way of giving people out here what they need. The slicergangs live or die on the merchandise they can push."

Sarah notices herself fidgeting with her hands and slides them into the pockets of a pair of black leather jeans Motorhead had loaned her. "You're right. It sounds complicated."

"No more complicated than running the Grid."

"I've never done that either." Looking back to the dance floor, she unwittingly catches Motorhead's attention again.

Dex and Sarah watch the slicers dance. If she didn't know better, Sarah would have thought it was a brawl. A living pincushion of flailing fists and boots.

"Shit, you had a deprived childhood."

"Yes. I suppose I did."

Sarah jumps when Motorhead slides in behind her. She didn't notice him creep around the dance floor. "You dancing?" he asks. He wraps his arms around her waist and shakes her a little.

She laughs in shock, squirming. Then escapes by grabbing the crotch of his jeans and squeezing short and hard.

"I'll take that as a yes then," he says after a long breath. "You coming, Boy?" And she drags him away into the flailing crowd in the pit.

Dex watches them for a time. Watching Sarah. Only two days in the outzone and already she's sinking in. The outzone has claws. It grabs and sticks and never lets go. And if you do escape, it'll scar you forever. He snorts a laugh at them, picks his bottle and takes it to the bar for a refill.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, DEX IS WOKEN FROM THE now-nightly Pain dream by a tickling sensation on his cheek.

Unconsciously, he shifts to scratch his face. His fingers knock an unfazed roach to the dusty carpet in front of his nose. The roach scuttles off towards the safety of the skirting board. Dex opens his other eye and remembers how Motorhead convinced him to sleep on the floor at his place after a night at the Blue Cross.

"Drink, Boy?" Motorhead is standing at the door to the kitchen. Just like Kitty in Manhattan, only she used to lean against the door frame; Motorhead has his arms stretched across the entrance, and peers in.

Dex has a dry mouth, filled with carpet dust, so he answers with a nod. He feels like telling him about the

dreams, but he decides to leave that in case of emergency. He doesn't want the younger decker to know too much.

"Can I ask you something, Boy?" Sounds of Motorhead shuffling around the tiny kitchen. "How much thumb has she got on you, eh? How badly do you belong to her?"

He rubs his eyes and yawns. "Well, I can't say she *saved* my life, but…" A deep sigh. He sits up. "Look, if I find this thing then they might leave me alone. They gave me a Vijayanta card, but I'm still only an outhouser. Contracted work. Baksheesh. They might just let me go again." He almost feels like he's convinced himself.

"Must be weird, being officially dead. Means you have to really lay low."

Dex agrees to himself. Yeah. Really weird.

The atmosphere from the kitchen seems to lift. Elevator doors opening to let out a claustrophobe. Motorhead changes the subject. "Heard this joke the other day. Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?"

Dex stands and pulls sleep from his girl's eyes. "No idea," he says.

"Because it was dead."

He shakes his head. Gazes around the living room properly for the first time. It's too cluttered. Empty keyboards, hollow shells of bright green Fednet PCs, laser-prints of the latest shareware copies of *Kafig-Zucht, Girls Lieben Dicke Schwarze* and other skinmags. Holoposters of Kerry Swaine and lesser known ASP stars taped to the walls.

All shit and no shine. Dex laughs to himself. He used to have a room just like it. Courtesy of Dev Lung, the man at the top of the Sodha slicers.

The younger decker finally comes back in with coffee made from a Federal welfare pack and scalding water. "You'd better get ready. It's nearly eight. Sarah'll be here soon, and I've got a date with Mister Lung."

"Say 'Hi' to him for me, will you?"

Motorhead gives Dex a wary look. "You're kidding, aren't you? After what you did?"

Dex shrugs. "I somehow get the feeling I'm going to stay here. I figure I'll need some friends if I want to stay alive."

Motorhead nods, understanding the motive.

"Anyway, where to today?" Dex asks. He burns the roof of his mouth with the coffee. At last some sensation there.

Clapping rough brown hands, Motorhead replies. "Gridland, matey. Your toys have arrived."

It's too cluttered. Empty keyboards, hollow shells of bright green Fednet PCs, prints of the latest shareware copies of *Kafig-Zucht, Girls Lieben Dicke Schwarze* and other skinmags.

3

"I aim to please. I shoot to kill."
—Big Pierrot

"SO YOU SAY HE WANTS TO PATCH THINGS UP?"

Dev Lung is a short, stocky man in his mid-twenties who sits behind his steel desk in the Paddington warehouse and looks down at everyone through thick, square-framed glasses. His hands rest on the blotting pad on the desk, stubby fingers interlocked and thumbs habitually dancing around each other while he thinks. Motorhead sees him as one of those small people with a lot of power.

Motorhead is squeezing a soft squash ball. Left hand first. Then right. Then back again. Tension release. Everyone knows that Dev Lung has an evil spirit in him. A spirit that waits for the one time when no one will expect it to take control.

Motorhead has seen the spirit and survived. Albeit by the skin of his teeth. Mastered a way of getting around the man by being brutally honest with him. One of the Camden Town Boy's old tricks of the trade. Before the Boy left for Texas, he was Lung's decker, on call to the man whenever he needed to know things. Dev Lung is a man who needs to know everything.

Now Motorhead holds that position. The young decker nods to the man and throws the squash ball at the wall, catching it in one hand. Listening to the metal echo.

"He says he's making a start again in London and he doesn't want any enemies."

"Is that how he really feels? I mean, I don't know, I want us to be friends again, but I can't take him on with Sodha because you're here now. I'd rather he was on my side than Kistna, or, even worse, December Flowers. You know? What do you think? Is he for real?"

Motorhead screws his face up and sighs.

"Dunno," he says. "He's changed a lot, but I don't know if that's him, or something that Vijayanta did to him. He's become kinda cold and single-minded. I took him out to the Blue Cross last night and he just stood there and watched us all charging, slowly getting wankered. I know he ain't a steamer, but that man never used to miss a party, no matter what the style. His whole story was that he could fit in anywhere. Now it seems like he doesn't fit in anywhere. I've never seen him looking so lost."

Dev Lung shrugs. "If he's making an effort to patch it up, then I can't really say no to him. But if he tries to go

against me again, he's street furniture. You can quote me on that."

"Hate to say it, boss, but he's been killed once already. I really don't think he cares what happens to him now."

Dev Lung puts his thinking face on and Motorhead waits, bouncing the ball against the wall. He knows that the Boy is back at his place waiting for the Recon program to map out Vijayanta Core 274, Rhea's home. They are both being extra careful about this affair. Neither of them has ever done this kind of job before. Rogue Hunting. Hard enough job finding something that exists. When it breaks out and could be anywhere in the world? Motorhead finds himself hiding his face behind a bony hand.

"Get him to see me. Tell him I'm prepared to forget the whole thing as long as he does. How does that sound?"

Six Sodhaboys escort him to his flat on their slices—fast electric bikes. Their long hair drags in the wind. This is what he joined for, Motorhead remembers, the feel of the wind on his face. Now the Grid has hold of him and refuses to let go. It's a similar feeling, a powered rush through empty space, but riding a slice is a damn sight safer. Even with all the other slicer teams around.

Saying *namaste* to his escort, his gives the plastic fairings on his slice a quick wipe over with his jacket cuff and forces himself up thirty flights of concrete stairs in pitch darkness.

"HOW'S IT LOOKING?" MOTORHEAD ASKS.

"None too good."

Dex is slumped in a fluffy brown armchair with a collection of broken pistachio shells around his feet. A fly buzzes around the shells, feeding on the detritus of half a day's studying.

"So what happened? You can tell me. I'm a doctor." Motorhead takes the jacket off and hangs it on the handle of his bedroom door. He clears a space for himself by kicking a few cider bottles to the walls of the room and sits down on a battered copy of *Lolita* magazine.

"Recon program mapped the core, and there's a huge hole in the node where Rhea should be. Want to see?"

Motorhead switches on the Fednet PC and calls up the image. In two dimensions it's like the crystal topography of an electron microscope picture. Silver edges and thin blue strands stretching across the image. And in the center, a tiny neon hole in the core's edge.

"Well, that's a surprise."

Dex snorts a cynical laugh. "What's strange is that it is a surprise. Look at the shape of the hole."

Motorhead looks carefully, then fiddles with the perspective to get a better look. The hole in the core's opaque neon glow is giant and empty, but there seems to be more missing, some kind of shadow within the hole that disappears in the fog of the core.

"Rhea destroyed some of the system when it went. I called Sarah and she said that checks out, they're running a diagnostic now, and they'll make some repairs. But it all means that it wasn't stolen. See that shadow there? I've been wracking my head for hours trying to think what it could be. Unless the stories about witch-holes are true."

Motorhead shakes his head at the screen. "A witch-hole… But that would mean it burned its way out."

Dex looks closer at the screen. "Yeah. Or maybe it didn't escape outward. Maybe it escaped inward. My dad once told me about a star that went nova just before I was born. Burned like a bastard for about ten days so the whole world had daylight 24-7…" He trails off. Examining the scan closer and closer, lost in his own growing hypothesis. "Yeah. Like a star going nova. That would explain the shadow."

A frown of awestruck confusion pulls at Motorhead's lean face. "How the fuck did it do that?"

Dex breaks away from the thoughts he's riding and shrugs. "Beats the shit out of me."

THEY DREW WIRES AND THE BOY LOST. NOW HE'S HERE, a floating decimal point in the Grid. A meaningful nothing in a vast sensorium that doesn't really exist.

A ghost in the machine.

He pushes himself through the Grid. A simulated sense that rushes through his nervous system. His body feels like he's swimming through a sea of powdered milk. Some sort of electronic hyper-rush. The Grid is still, yet he can feel its constant data flow all around him. Vijayanta Core 274 is alive with paradox and irony. The Boy's senses are having no trouble getting the joke.

There. The hole. He moves around the outside of it. Utterly scared of its intention. Five years he's run the Grid. Witch-holes are myths. Monsters in the dataspace. He never imagined he'd see one. Never imagined he'd have to go near one. And he knows of no one else who has ever dared.

"DON'T TAKE YOUR EYES OFF THAT SCREEN. IF I LOSE IT, pull me out immediately," he said.

Motorhead watches the screen. His own Demon program sits in the Grid, holding the stringy end of a Trace strand that follows the Boy through the core. The short-haired slicer can see Dex's position on the 3-D vector mapper connected to the PC screen. The shadow is there, and the Boy circles it slow. An observant hawk.

Motorhead takes a quick glance to see if the real-life Boy, attached to the cyberdeck by a primitive cyber helmet that trails a score of microthin leads between the two, is still breathing steady. Satisfied, he returns his vision to the monochrome Fednet PC screen.

Dex slides into the shadow. Motorhead panics.

NO FEELING. THAT'S WHAT HE NOTICES AT FIRST. LIKE the sensory-deprivation tanks his father used to make showers out of in the Pancras Wells Dustzone. He said floating in one of those took away all feeling, so you could reach a perfect thoughtlessness for meditation. The concept is prehistoric, and the Boy doesn't know if he likes it at all.

He soon comes to realize that this isn't the same. He can feel something. A rushing sensation. A dream of falling that he used to have as a kid on continuous playback. And no way to wake up. Falling further. Spinning madly and flailing. All notion of orientation completely lost.

Then he stops. Landing on his feet in a living room in Paddington, with Japanese cartoons on the color TV and his hand passing through the hand of a beautiful, small Bangladeshi woman with long dark hair. A woman he knows by the name of Pain.

4

"Never let something as petty as death
get in the way of a good romance."
—Big Pierrot

THE LIVING ROOM SMELLS OF PLASTIC ROSES. IT INVADES Dex's nostrils and forces his overworked breathing to calm down.

"I thought you were dead, Dex. Then it told me you were still alive. It knew you'd come here." Her voice is sweet. Carried by the warm rose air. A strange tinny quality to it that never used to be there, but it's her voice. Her tones.

She walks about the room with a resigned comfort. A prisoner walking around the cell. "I'd give you a hug, Dex, but I can't touch you."

He sits on the right arm of a black leather sofa and rubs his face. "This is going to sound shitty, I know. I know you as Pain, but that's not your name, is it? I mean, whenever I became close to you in the dream, I…"

She moves away from him. "You went into convulsions. It was part of the program. While Vijayanta's blades patched you up, they tried to run some coma loop program on you. But somehow you kept dragging me in."

Dex shakes his head as she takes an apple from a fruit bowl on the black plastic sideboard and nips a small bite from it. He looks back at the bowl. Another has appeared to take its place.

"Like this one?" Dex asks finally. "I mean, that's what this is, right? A construct. Your father's Sony apartment with you in it."

She talks through gritted teeth. "Don't you get it, Dex, you idiot? Jesus, I knew you could be slow at times, but…" She puffs a heavy sigh and sits next to him on the sofa. "This isn't a construct, Dex. This is me. Rhea has stolen my body. This is all it left behind."

"SO YOU SAY HE'LL LEAD US TO IT?"

Sarah squirms nervously in a brown leather office chair. Her face contorted into a squint as the sun's light diffuses across the tower's windows. She nods to her skinny superior.

"I think of him more as bait, Mister Shelley. He'll lure Rhea to where we can find it," she says.

The skinny man in the tan-brown suit takes a drag from a slender Havana cigar; as he exhales, every swirl of the gray smoke seems to tumble through the hard rays of light through that large window.

"Too simple," he says. "Rhea would see it a mile away. This is no simple Rogue Hunt, Miss Fairchild. Rhea became too hungry for us and broke the rules. Did they brief you on Rhea's actions at Milton Keynes before it broke free?"

She shakes her head. Cheeks flushed in embarrassment. "No, they didn't. I was simply given the project of retrieving Eastman, making sure he was stable enough to work with us and then giving him the job. I guess they just didn't trust me enough, Mister Shelley."

"It's not a question of trust, Miss Fairchild. It's a question of loyalty. All you were told was that we can't go to Fednet because it holds secret company data. Well, that's true, but beside the point. Rhea has stolen a program from another company. It wouldn't tell me which, nor what kind of program. But it's obviously commercial enough for Rhea to want to distribute it, because when I threatened to have its financial control revoked, it ran. Mister Eastman has been called in not only to find Rhea, but to get me that data when he does. Eastman is a most valuable commodity in respect to his expendability."

"A monkeytrick," she says softly to herself. "Using an outhouser so we don't lose one of our own."

"You're learning at last, Fairchild."

He touches a screen on the long, brown trapezoid desk and the screen comes alive with the chubby face of his secretary. "Bring in Mister Hix," he says to the screen and the face fizzes to black. Then he looks up to Sarah. "What of the other boy? Motorhead."

She shrugs. "Motorhead was Dex's idea. Apparently we needed a contact on the streets in order to get the equipment. I didn't have any plans for him."

The man in the tan-brown suit pouts and rocks back and forth slightly on his booted heels. "I'll leave him be for now, then. Until he makes a mistake. Then I'll hammer him down with the rest. You've done a good job, Sarah, but I think it's possibly more prudent if I were to take over from now on. Go back to Milton Keynes and do some real work."

Alone in the Executive Elevator, she looks out over the zones she's growing accustomed to. Realizing how much she hates her position. So much power, so little knowledge. That's what counts in the Dustzone. Out there, in the outzone, it's courage. In that office, she's just like Dex. Bait. Thinking of Shelley's words. *Leave her be for now. Until she makes a mistake.* And that's all she is. Another monkey waiting to be tricked.

DEX TAPS A BEAT ON THE BACK OF THE SOFA WITH HIS fingers. "Why don't I remember your name?"

"You don't want to," she answers. She takes another small bite from the apple. "Oh, it's not your fault. Your memory brought me into the program, and I shouldn't have been there. So the program tried to erase me. I asked Rhea while it was destroying me."

"It's insane. I hated you and loved you all in one go. I just wish I knew who the fuck you are."

She walks over with silent footsteps. "You saved my life once. And in return, I showed you another world. I'm Kayjay."

SARAH AVOIDS THE MONORAIL SYSTEM AND CALLS A cycle-rickshaw to pick her up from outside the gates of Vijayanta's Mile End dustzone. It takes her on a mystery tour through areas that she'd only seen on TV, and even then only on crime reports. The rickshaw driver, a gawky young Asian kid named Vikram, played tour guide as they went past them. The Swanfields projects, two square miles of uncompleted gray concrete; Hoxton, home of the December Flowers slicer gang. Through the back streets of Holbourn to avoid static from the Kistnaboys and out into Long Acre. Sodha territory. He drops her off outside the Blue Cross and she pays him in freshly-bought rupees. Something tells her she's starting to learn a little about this place.

Inside things are quiet. The daytime in the Blue Cross is reserved almost solely for dealing and drinking. She buys herself a bottle of homebrew cider and sits in a dark corner, away from the glaring sun.

She barely gets to open it when a Sodhagirl with short black hair joins her at the table.

"You're Sarah the Suit, aren't you?" she says.

Sarah's triangle face breaks into a shy smile. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Saw you last night with Mo and the others. You can't dance for shit, but you're learning. I'm Cody." She extends an oily hand. Sarah shakes it tentatively. "So I hear Mo's helping you out with some *keiki?"*

"Some what?"

Cody's expression blanks as she tries to find the English meaning of the Japanese term. "Business," she says finally.

"Oh, yes. News travels fast around here." Sarah gulps down some of the cider.

"Faster than television. So, when are you going back to the comfy life?"

Sarah the Suit lets her eyes drift around the bar. Shards of hot sunlight cut through the dusty air, leaving the dozen or so ponies and kittens only the broken shadows in which to ply their trade. Then she loses focus, lost in the thought of leaving a place like this. Realizing how quickly she's grown to like it.

"Today," she replies. "I have to go back today."

WHY DID THE MONKEY FALL OUT OF THE TREE?

"You have to go, Dex. You weren't meant to be here."

"But I can't go back until I know what happened."

She points a slender finger at Dex's chest. "You're dying up there. The witch-hole's got you."

"I mean what happened to *you.* What happened with you and Rhea?"

"Rhea used me. It copied me into the system and unloaded itself into my brain. Right now, it's in an intensive care ward in the Smallpox Hospital, using my body to escape. It just broke free of its position, found me attached to all those 'trodes and got started. But there's one thing it did first."

"What?"

"It told me why Vijayanta want it so badly."

BACK IN MOTORHEAD'S LIVING ROOM, THE CONVULsions finally stop. The screen of the Fednet PC sprays white-noise static across the room. Motorhead, having spent almost three minutes trying to keep the Boy from smashing his head on the floor or swallowing his tongue or drowning in his own vomit, finally gives up.

A pounding thunder in his skull. He searches the flat for some painkillers or anything, but he is fresh out of luck and drugs. He needs some air. Grabbing his baseball jersey, he runs out of the flat.

5

"There's what's legal. There's what's right.
And there's what I do best."
—Big Pierrot

AN APARTMENT LIKE ANY OTHER. LIFELESS. DEAD. Then Sarah presses her palm against the lock and the door slides open. The hall lights flicker on and bathe the place in sea green splendor. It sends a warm shiver through Sarah's spine. She's home.

Each room is a different color. Designed to enhance her moods and to keep her sane; a constant reminder of variegation in such a monochrome place as Milton Keynes.

The living room is a subtle contrast of turquoise walls and aquamarine Bauhaus furniture. She places herself at her petroleum-plastic desk and flicks on the blue-screen Sony. She logs in. Lets the machine cycle through the message box, filled with faces from the Information Services department asking about her whereabouts. She absentmindedly skims through them. The last face shocks her tapered finger, and she can't press a single key while he plays.

"Sarah," he says. "I know about Shelley's deal. Now, I can tell the Feds or I can talk to you. So reply to Vja274-BOY. Okay?"

HIS OWN DECK AND HE LOVES THE MACHINE LIKE A CHILD loves his mother. He powers it up, plugs the lead from the two neurosensory transfer plugs into the back of the machine, and hits the start switch, shuddering into the Grid.

Using copies of the Boy's homemade Trojan, Motorhead follows a strand through the hardened shell. The shell accepts him gladly. Boy's recon map was erased. Motorhead has a hard time orienting himself inside the shell, relying on memory and the practice of sending Find slaves in likely directions. Hoping one will run into the witch-hole. When he receives a positive message from one of the slave strands, he follows its path and then stops dead in his tracks.

The cube is filled with another program of some sort. Tentatively, he calls in the other Find slaves and sends an Identifier slave to the opaque area ahead of him. The thin blue thread touches the skin of the cube. He registers the name in his mind and tears the wires from his head.

Plunging back into his own body. He reels from the chair, makes a run for the window. Sense-shock pulsing through him. But he's too slow. He can almost feel the inner walls of his stomach meet as he retches into a convenient plastic box.

He wipes his mouth with his shirt sleeve and allows himself time to take it in. Dex is dead. His body, at least. Somehow, the Grid had pulled his soul through to the other side when he entered that witch-hole. Motorhead had taken some pretty drastic action that day. Dev Lung wanted to burn the body, to erase his existence permanently. Motorhead had to fight against the devil in him a second time before he allowed the young decker to freeze the body instead. Just in case.

For a full, painful hour, Motorhead cannot close his eyes without that Artificial Intelligence address code filling up his sensorium.

Vja274-BOY.

SHELLEY'S THIN FACE, THE FACE OF THE SKINNY MAN IN the tan-brown suit, fills the blue monitor screen. Eyes looking out of shot to his own screen in an office in London.

Sarah regards closely the bony features of the man on the screen. The blank, poker-face expression and cold, dark blue eyes piercing the screen's corner the way an insect sits perfectly still and watches its prey.

"What's wrong, Sarah?"

She shrugs, off-camera. "I got a message from Dex. Something's happened. He seems to be caught in the core. I think he's dead."

The expression doesn't change. "What was the message about, Sarah?"

"Something about a deal you've made. He says he'll take it to the FDI, whatever it is."

Shelley's lips pout in thought. He shakes his head. His voice turns stern, yet sincerely concerned. "You could be in considerable danger, Sarah, so I'll have you moved. Put into a safehouse, I mean, just until this blows over. Stay in your flat, and I'll send someone to pick you up. Just stay where you are, okay?"

She hangs her head. "Okay." The screen flickers and then returns to normal blue fuzz.

Sarah stays in her flat for a full minute. The time it takes her to pack a small black sports bag with Motorhead's leather jeans and a tiny hold-out pistol so she can head back to London.

WHEN SARAH'S TRIANGLE FACE APPEARS AT THE DOOR, he slams it shut.

"Mo," he hears her pleading. "This wasn't supposed to happen. It was a simple monkeytrick. I used Dex as bait to lure Rhea into the open. I didn't know about the witch-hole. Look, you have to let me in. They're after me, too. He left a message for me in Milton Keynes and I need to talk to him."

"You can't talk to him, you stupid bitch. He's dead." Motorhead leans against the steel front door, his face in his hands. In the bedroom, on the other side of the apartment, the cellular phone buzzes, waiting to be answered.

"I know that, Mo. But he's in my system somehow. He can talk to me, so I must be able to talk to him."

The phone in the bedroom still buzzing impatiently.

"He's dead. D-E-A-D. He's not in your system, he's not a ghost, he's just dead. Just fuck off and leave me alone." He leaves the door to answer the phone. He can just make out her words as she calls through the steel.

"You don't understand. Something happened. He went into the witch-hole and something happened, didn't it? I need to know what happened!"

Motorhead pulls the aerial up on the phone and presses a button, wiping sweat from his brow. "Yes," he manages to say.

"Open the door and let her in, Mo. And keep the line open." Dex's voice. Motorhead rushes for the door.

HE JACKS THE CELLULAR INTO AN OLD TAPE RECORDER. With a condenser mike and a crackling speaker, it's the closest they can get to Conference Mode. Dex explains everything. Rhea's escape into the mind of Kayjay and Kayjay's whereabouts, and he tells them about the deal.

"Shelley has his hands on something that could change the face of Vijayanta and he's dealt some out to the street. A microsoft. Serious stuff. Rhea stole the source code from some other system while still in the experimental stage. It's killing people on the street. Sodha and Kistnaboys and fuck knows who else. Rhea was using Shelley to distribute it. When the shit hit the fan, Rhea bugged out, leaving Shelley with all these lethal chips. That's why he wants it back so much. All our ponies are going to go apeshit when they find out."

"What can we do?" Motorhead asks.

"It won't take long before Shelley discovers the Rhea-Kayjay switch. We're not the only department working on this. So the best thing would be for you to get Kayjay and for me to detain Shelley. Once we've got her, we might be able to reverse the switch. Even if we can't, then we'll have some bargaining power."

"I can still get us into the Mile End Dustzone. But we'll need an army to get past the security," Sarah suggests.

Dex's voice provides the answer. "No need for an army. I'll get you in. It's settled, then. Get Kayjay and I'll sort it out. You have to be quick, though, Dustzone curfew hours and all that stuff."

Sarah finds herself nodding unconsciously to the phone. Motorhead unjacks the thing from the tape machine.

"So there it is," he says. "Dex is your new DI. So tell me, what the hell are we supposed to do with Rhea when we get to Mile End?"

She looks at the young decker and sighs. "I don't know. I really don't know."

6

"Earth is 98 percent full.
Please delete anyone you can."
—Big Pierrot

THE MISTY SKIES OVER THE LONDON OUTZONE HAVE turned red in the hot spring afternoon. Solar satellites and workstations form spiny constellations twinkling above. Sarah turns her attention back to the street as they roll through the sparse traffic in a wooden cycle-rickshaw.

"Who is this Kayjay, anyway?" she asks Motorhead, wary of hitting any raw nerves in his already tender mind.

"She was a Sodhagirl that the Boy had a shine on. She was the daughter of a Sony shaker, but she was one of those young rich rebels. Ran away from home when she was 11 and ended up in the outzone getting attacked by a gang of New Churchers and raped. Dead, too, if the Boy hadn't stepped in. Her father rewarded him with access to the Sony flat in the Camden Secure Zone and him and Kayjay became best friends. That's where the Boy was born, with her father's Sony cyberdeck, so the legend goes."

Motorhead, having spent almost three minutes trying to keep the Boy from smashing his head on the floor or swallowing his tongue or drowning in vomit, finally gives up.

He watches her as she looks out at the streets of the outzone. Feels her taking in the life here.

"Anyway, Kayjay and him were an item for a while, and then one day she tells him she can't love him anymore. No reason, just says, 'I don't love you, Dex.' So he left for Texas. He told us the rest. Two months ago, Dev Lung sends her on an errand into Kistna territory. He's been trying to cut some sort of deal with them. A truce, like. Well, they gave her a trial by ordeal for being with Sodha. Hot rodded her. That's why she's in the hospital. Getting new limbs."

"Hot rodded?"

Motorhead sighs. "It's Kistna law. To prove your innocence, you have to carry a piece of red-hot iron ten meters and drop it in a vat of water. If your hands show no blisters after three days, God has smiled on you."

"And if the blisters are still there?"

"They cut your arms and legs off and leave you to die."

The conversation stops there. The cycle-rickshaw turns quietly onto the New Road and the nine-year-old boy at the front pedals steadily through the Battle Bridge Secure Zone, the brown spires of the Smallpox Hospital disappearing into the red mist thickening at the road's horizon. To each side, the crumbling towers form a canyon of granite gray. It makes Sarah sink a little further into her rickshaw seat.

"Better keep a look out," the driver says quietly. "We're moving into Kistnaville."

THE RECEPTION OFFICE IS A WIDE TRANSPARENT PLASTIC fish tank filled with tiny Sikh women sitting behind Fednet terminals typing in administration details. They all ignore Motorhead and Sarah as they enter the cavernous foyer. There is one open window in the fish tank. Sarah tries it.

"Is it possible to see a girl called Kayjay? She was admitted here two months ago."

Motorhead steps in when he sees the confused look on the Sikh woman's tiny face. He switches languages to Punjabi. Says three sentences. Her face lights up.

The woman flicks lightning-fast fingers across the terminal's touchpad, thin blue light dances over her face. Then the screen changes to bright white and Sarah guesses that a videostat of the girl must be on the record. The receptionist tries to find the English words to convey what is written in Punjabi on the screen.

"She is gone today," the woman says proudly.

Motorhead's face drops. "What do you mean, gone?"

"She is discharged today, you see? Gone home. She's better now. Metal arms and legs. Better."

The screen changes back to blue. The Sikh woman reels her hands back as if she's touched a wrong button. Her hands were by her face all the time. Punjabi characters scrawl themselves across the screen faster than her typing could ever write. Repeating themselves over and over. She turns the screen around to face Motorhead and Sarah, who look inquisitively at her.

"It says, 'Turn screen around,' " the woman says.

The screen blanks into dark blue again. The words this time come up in English:

DON'T ASK HOW NO TIME KAYJAY HAS GONE COME BACK TO THE DUSTZONE YOU MIGHT WANT TO SEE THIS BOY

Motorhead spends a second taking it in. Nodding to the receptionist in thanks just as Sarah grabs his arm and drags him out of the hospital.

SHELLEY HAS SET THE HOLOROOM FOR A SNOW-COVERED winter's noon on Capitol Hill. He closes the door behind him and steps up to the bench by the black steel railings that surround the grounds of the New American Museum, green astroturf leading up to the white building.

Boy sits at the corner of the bench wearing a black pilot's jacket and baggy red jeans. As he was before Vijayanta killed him, with his hands spread along the arm and back of the bench and his right foot tucked in by his buttocks on the seat. Dex is dead forever now. Only the Boy remains. Shelley sits down next to him.

"Thought about my offer yet?" the shaker asks.

"Thought?" Boy laughs. "Jesus, you must really be desperate."

"Well, have you?" Shelley puckers up his lips in frustration.

Boy looks at a hypothetical watch. "Now I have, yes. You can kiss my ass." He raises his eyebrows a touch.

Shelley looks away toward the view of Washington. Far away to the south he can just make out a section of green land that lies beyond the walls of the Plex. "Fine. Then I'll call in some Fednet boys and have you shut down."

Boy shakes his head, the smirk still on his face. "Sorry, matey, but I've been kind of busy. If you shut me down here, I'll pop up in two other cores. And if I'm shut down there I replicate again, to an exponential. When I die the whole of the Grid will crash because it can't handle all my processes."

"I just told him that the best way out of his situation was suicide. He didn't have the guts to do it himself, so he waited for you to arrive instead."

He smiles. "I made it a principle a long time ago never to work for smart-ass companies. Now I'm dead, I figure I've all the more reason to stick to my principles, seeing as they're about all I've got."

Shelley doesn't hide his annoyance. His lips are pursed tighter than ever. He stands and walks a few steps across the sidewalk. "You seem to have me in a stranglehold, Mister Eastman. What do you want from me?"

When Boy gives him the answer, Shelley just laughs in disbelief.

THE LIFT STOPS RATHER SUDDENLY. WHEN THE DOOR slides open, Motorhead and Sarah instinctively edge to the sides of the lift, expecting the stutter of heavy rifle fire. But there's only the low hum of the neon strip lights that lead to his office. The corridor's empty. No security guards here. No Shelley. No autocannons she'd suspected would be lurking in the corner.

Nothing.

They make their way along the edges of the corridor. Shelley's office at the far end is a closed door. When they reach it, just about to hit the switch, it opens. The two drop instinctively, sensing the danger.

In front of Shelley's desk, a motion-controlled device sets off about five pounds of plastic explosive. Windows disintegrate, spraying out into the evening air. Flames lick the backs of Sarah's legs. Then it's all over.

They stand and survey the scene. There are a few pieces of Shelley left by the remains of the desk, but most of him has been blown out the window. Motorhead catches the smell of charred flesh and retches in the corner. Sarah kicks part of what could have been a leg under the debris.

THE HOLOROOM IS SET FOR PARIS, THE BASE OF *LA TOUR Eiffel.* Sarah steps up to Boy's apparition and folds her arms.

"Okay, you've got your revenge. Now what did you have to do with it?"

Boy puts on a mock-innocent face and shrugs. "I just told him that the best way out of his situation was suicide.

He didn't have the guts to do it himself, so he waited for you to arrive instead."

Sarah unfolds her arms and gasps. "There's so much more behind this that you haven't told us, isn't there?"

Boy nods.

"Fancy parting with some of this information?"

"Nope. I told you what you needed to know to get the job done. I mean, you stopped him, right? No one knows what happened. Metropol was distracted at the time. The world's a safer place. Just like Big Pierrot."

"Vijayanta are still after me, though, aren't they?" She shrugs, not knowing what to do next.

"Go back to the outzone. It's more exciting than Milton Keynes." He laughs. "Anywhere's more exciting than Milton Keynes."

With her eyes low, she nods and takes the suggestion into her head. "Okay, I guess I can put up with Mo for a bit. And I seemed to be making a few friends of my own."

"Good." Boy turns away, walking north.

"Where are you going?" she calls after him.

He wheels around to face her a final time. His eyes are alive with loss. "I'm a Digital Intelligence now. Pretty soon the management will want to shut me down or make me work for a living. I'd better see as much as I can before I get collared. Besides, Rhea's still running 'round with my friend's body. Can't let it get away, can we?" His arms stretch out to each side. He laughs hard and spins himself dizzy, heading north until he disappears into the wall.

Sarah turns and laughs as she walks out of the room. Behind her in a hologram Paris, rain begins to fall.

RIDLEY McINTYRE mcintyre@cck.coventry.ac.uk

Was born in London, but has moved to the smaller city of Coventry to work on a Communications degree. Between assignments he calms himself by watching *anime,* drinking naval-strength coffee and writing short stories that should really be novels. *Monkeytrick* is a sequel to *Boy,* which appeared in *InterText* Vol. 2 No. 2 (March–April 1992).

MR. MCKENNA IS DYING

BY MARCUS EUBANKS

• The slice of time that is one person's ordinary day can just as easily contain the momentous or the tragic. •

IT REALLY DOES HAVE A SMELL ALL ITS OWN. YOU DON'T really know what it is at first, or even the second or third time. You don't even realize that it's there. Eventually though, it dawns on you that this particular crisp odor can be one thing, and one thing only. It is the smell of blood.

Today it hit me before I even got inside the room. Slapped the wall switch outside the O.R. suite, strode through the doors even as they folded away before me, and there it was. Like burnt orange peels. Or hot metal filings on the floor of a machine shop. Even the smell of the machine oil is there. It's not the same smell, but you'll recognize it if you ever chance across it. It will dawn on you then, but only after the scent has crept around your subconscious for a while, sneaking down into your hippocampus and setting off strange primitive reactions in your thalamus. You'll remember my words, and think, "Ah. I know exactly what he meant now."

MR. MCKENNA HAD BEEN OUT FOR AN EARLY-MORNING ride on his motorcycle. Or maybe it was a late, late night ride. Coming home from a party perhaps, or sneaking away from his girlfriend's place. Or maybe just out for a spin on the gray and drizzly streets, having gotten up early to have coffee with his wife and kids. You know, just to tool around the town a bit, get out on the road with the damp air wrapped around him, and marvel at the beginning of what would turn into an absolutely beautiful April day.

Then for some reason we are not privy to, Mr. McKenna drove his motorcycle right into a parked car. This was not a good way for him to start his day. For that matter, it wasn't a terribly good way to start ours either, but I guess that wasn't really his fault.

The ER attending paged Neuro down for a consult. The Neuro resident was not terribly pleased by what he saw. One pupil refused to respond to light. Blown. A wide-open portal to the soul. Or in this case more like a barn door flapping in the breeze, after the horse has already run off. I was seriously reconsidering the fantasies I'd been having about getting myself another motorcycle someday when I had a cash flow.

He coded on us then, right there in the ER. The ol' ticker just heaved once, massively, and gave up. "What's the point?" it figured, and decided to take a little breather. We zapped it. Lots of nice clean DC volts. A big bunch of amps. The heart reconsidered and must have figured that if this was the kind of treatment it was going to receive while on break, well, fuck it, it would just go back to work where no one had bothered it.

Crunch. Pop. That's the sound of a really nice set of stainless-steel wire-cutters parting bone. *Crunch.* It's a visceral sound. You'll remember that sound too, like the smell. I promise. *Crunch.* There they are, the stars of the show for the moment, Mr. Heart and his two bodyguards, Mr. Two-lobes and Mr. Three-lobes. They're beautiful. There's the heart, excursing away in its warm little pericardial wrapper rather like a stuck pig. The lungs are pink and healthy, mottled with black. Your lungs are mottled with black too. You may think to yourself, with a bit of righteous pride, "Nay, not mine, for I have never breathed the sweet airs of the demon tobacco, nor have I partaken of the subtle Mary-J-Wana. I have taken Dr. Koop's earnest warnings to heart, and I have seen *Reefer Madness.* I am a believer." You are wrong. Your lungs look just like Mr. McKenna's. Just crap from this modern air we breathe. It's okay though, 'cause it's harmless. More or less.

Mr. McKenna will have over 55 units of blood poured into him. That's 55 of those bags that you fill while you lie on the table praying the Red Cross nurses aren't going to blow your vein with those godawful huge needles.

Actually, your lungs don't really look like his. His have holes in them. Blood bubbles out each time the diaphragm relaxes and Mr. McKenna exhales. There are also holes in the diaphragm. These are in addition to the normal ones that the aorta and other things pass through. As you might imagine, we are chagrined. They are not supposed to be there, these holes.

Mr. McKenna goes on a little elevator ride up to O.R. We have made this huge gaping hole in his chest, you see, and that in itself is reason enough to take him there. There are other reasons too. We want to make another gaping hole in him, this time in his abdomen. Actually, it's not really *we.* It's *they.* Surgeons. They *like* to cut big holes in people. I'm Anesthesia. We like to stand around and make significant little noises at each other, crack dark jokes, and make fun of surgeons. We think we are very funny. We're right to think that.

Now Mr. McKenna has two very big holes in him, in addition to all of the little ones he made inside when he drove his motorcycle into that car. The floor of the O.R. is a mess. There is blood everywhere. Some of it is there because I accidentally poked a hole in one of the bags of blood that we intended to put into Mr. McKenna. That particular blood is now all over me as well. Oops. "You shouldn't do that," says the anesthesiologist who is more or less coordinating our part of the job. I agree with him. Folks just don't like to sit down to dine with someone who has blood all over himself. I can't imagine why.

"You," says one anesthesiologist to me, "are going to stand there and blow blood in through the pressure infuser. You are going to do this again and again, as quickly as you can."

"Yes," I say, "I am." This is called "massive volume resuscitation protocol." Mr. McKenna will, over the course of his surgery, have over 55 units of blood poured into him. That's 55 of those bags that you fill up while you lie on the table praying that the Red Cross nurses are not going to blow your vein with those godawful huge needles they stick into you. It is rather more blood than is in your entire body. Maybe five times as much. The rest of the blood on the floor, far in excess of the 20 or 30 cc's I spilled when I cleverly wasted that nice bag of the stuff, is coming from Mr. McKenna. I put it into him, and then it leaks out of various holes in his vasculature and spills onto the floor.

It will take Housekeeping the better part of three hours to get all of the blood off the floor, the operating table, and various other pieces of medical paraphernalia. There is also blood tracked all through the hallway outside the O.R. This is because it sticks to my shoes, or rather to the little blue booties that cover them, when I go to fetch more drugs or run arterial blood gas studies. It sticks to other folks' shoes too, so I'm secure in the knowledge that I'm not the sole culprit.

THE SURGEONS HAVE MR. MCKENNA CROSS CLAMPED. That is to say that the whole bottom half of his body is getting no blood. Not that it really matters at this point, because there wasn't really much blood getting there before, as it was running out through various holes before it could get too far anyhow. Mr. McKenna's lower half was getting *some* blood, however. Now it has none. The cells down there wonder just what the hell is going on up in headquarters, and do their best to respire anaerobically. The cross clamp comes off, and it is discovered that there is also a hole in Mr. McKenna's aorta. Maybe it was there before, maybe not. We call injuries that result from therapy iatrogenic. This is a nice way to say that the damage was caused by the folks trying to fix the patient.

Sew sew sew. Staple. Crunch. Mr. McKenna has two incredibly big holes in him. A good-sized cat could easily cuddle up quite comfortably in either one.

Some time later, he has only one very big hole and a 25-centimeter line of black sutures to mark where the other hole was. The problem with the remaining opening is that every time the surgeons try to close it, Mr. McKenna's heart gets depressed. Perhaps it is disturbed by the thought that, having seen the bright compelling lights of our O.R., it will soon be shrouded in claustrophobic darkness again. It rebels at this notion and goes on a work slowdown. Not exactly a strike, not yet, but still this recalcitrance is enough to frustrate both surgeons and anesthesiologists.

About twenty minutes later, Mr. McKenna's heart *does* stop. Rather, it doesn't stop, exactly, but sits there in V-fib and quivers like an irate child. We give it a taste of our amps and volts again, and it reluctantly remembers why it started up after we did that the first time.

One of the surgeons suggests that perhaps this exercise is becoming futile. "Pretend he's your dad," says another, "and do your best to save him. As long as the heart is going, he might pull out of it." Unfortunately, now *both* of Mr. McKenna's pupils are blown. The brain, apparently, is beginning to side with the heart and is growing tired of the whole affair.

Mr. McKenna's heart is still piqued by the surgeons' attempts to deprive it of the rich light of day. "To hell with it," reckon the surgeons, and offer the heart a window instead. Yes, they actually slice open a one-liter saline bag and commence to sewing it in place over the big hole. For our part, we Anesthesia types are trying to offer the heart other incentives. We are infusing Mr. McKenna with mind-boggling quantities of epinephrine. His heart is not pleased with our offering, however. Where your heart or mine would be galloping like a derby thoroughbred which has just been shot in the ass by a malicious kid with a BB gun, this particular heart is creeping along at about 58 beats per minute. This would be a good pace for a young athlete at rest, but it's not for Mr. McKenna, who isn't terribly young and, frankly, doesn't look like he was too athletic even before he drove his motorcycle into a parked car.

Mr. McKenna is dying. In all truth, he has been dying ever since that collision. Now, however, he is doing it in earnest. At two o'clock, one of the surgeons says, "Okay, folks. You've done a good job. We did our best." Seven hours after his disagreement with that car, Mr. McKenna is pronounced.

Later, when all us Anesthesia types are going over the case, writing up the mortality report and such, one comments, "Oh wow. I'm gonna have to figure out the Kevorkian points for this and decide who gets 'em." Something snaps. I start to giggle uncontrollably. Kevorkian points. I think it's hilarious. One of our administrators actually keeps a database for it.

Just another day at work, I guess. There was a heart transplant going on across the corridor from us. Right after we finished the trauma, they started a kidney transplant down the hall. I'm exhausted. Though it was only eight hours, it felt like a lifetime. For Mr. McKenna, I guess it was. I ask one of the anesthesiologists, before I leave, if he thinks Mr. McKenna ever really had a chance.

"No," he says. "Not really."

"I dunno," cracks one of the others. "I figure his chances were real close to 100 percent until he got on that motorcycle this morning."

MARCUS EUBANKS eubanks@astro.ocis.temple.edu

Is an angry young medical student at Temple University who continues to be astounded at his consuming passion for medicine. He is currently waiting (with much trepidation) to find out if he passed the first part of National Boards.

THE WORLD IS HELD TOGETHER BY DUCT TAPE

BY CARL STEADMAN

• Everyone's got an obsession. Some, however, are stickier than others. •

"THE WORLD IS HELD TOGETHER BY DUCT TAPE." You can see it, there, in his eyes, he's at it again. He's thinking those thoughts: "The world is held together by duct tape." And on and on: all those thoughts he thinks when he thinks "The world is held together by duct tape." He told me once he played a game and someone whispered in his ear "Buckingham Palace is made of cardboard." He has never forgotten that, because he told me. And he thinks like that, I can tell. It's in his eyes, looking at me: "The world is held together by duct tape."

IT'S IN HIS THOUGHTS.

HE TALKS ABOUT DUCT TAPE IN HIS SLEEP. ON PREVIOUS nights, nights not much unlike this one, he has recited lists of things he has seen held together by duct tape: purses, umbrellas, Rubbermaid garbage cans, broom handles, range tops, picture frames, hockey sticks, garden hoses, radio antennas, car bumpers, old Converse high-tops. He has never once mentioned ducts. Tonight, he talks of smashing things, to put them together again better with duct tape. I stay awake next to him and take notes. I also write a reminder for myself: send the cat to a kennel. Tell him Snookums was bitten by the Marsoleks' youngest boy, Georgie, and it's just to be on the safe side.

He has recited lists of things held together by duct tape: purses, umbrellas, garbage cans, range tops, picture frames, hockey sticks, garden hoses, radio antennas, car bumpers, old Converse hi-tops. He has never mentioned ducts.

HE'S THINKING ABOUT IT.

SOMETIMES I FALL ASLEEP, TAKING THE NOTES I TAKE OF him talking in his sleep about duct tape. At first, I was worried that he might find my notes at my side when he woke in the morning and accuse me of taking what was his. But I found a solution—I went out and bought a fabric blank book from B. Dalton, covered in vulgar pastels and paisleys. (I have the receipt, in case anyone might accuse me of stealing it. I have the receipt, in case anyone might accuse me of being a kleptomaniac. I have the receipt. $5.99, taxable.) I told him I was going to record my dreams. I told him that each night before I go to bed I would say three times, "I will remember my dreams," like this: "I will remember my dreams. I will remember my dreams. I will remember my dreams." Then I told him that each morning right when I got up I would write down the dreams that I would, without fail, remember. I told him I had to write them down then because it would do no good to remember them in the shower, when I was washing my hair, because I couldn't write them down then, and, undoubtedly, I would forget them when I dried off. I told him that's the way dreams are. I told him I learned about all this on cable TV. I told him the pastel-and-paisley covered book was my "dream book" where I did my writing in the morning. I showed it to him and put it in its place, right there out there in the open, on my night stand. Each night, I mumble—loudly enough so he can hear—"I will remember my dreams. I will remember my dreams. I will remember my dreams." Each morning when I get up, I write in my dream book. He sees me write in my dream book. I write about rabbit holes, swimming pools with dirt embankments around, and trash cans brimming with filthy-smelling refuse. It is in my dream book that I hide the notes I take of what he says in his sleep at night. I am not worried of his finding out about my notes—they are well-hidden, in the dream book, in between the snakes and garden hoses. The one thing he is least interested in is my dreams.

HE EATS, SLEEPS, AND BREATHES DUCT TAPE.

I MIGHT BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND HIM BETTER IF HE SOLD duct tape, or if he owned shares in a duct tape manufacturer, or if he was even writing a book on the everyday use of duct tape. He could call it *Doing It Better With Duct Tape* or *The Duct Tape Way*. Maybe a duct tape consulting service. Anything. It all causes me to question his motives.

GOD. WHAT IF HE GETS HIS HANDS ON THE CD collection?

HE HAS NOW STOPPED EATING GRAPE NUTS, WHICH HE has eaten faithfully every morning I have known him, except for the one Sunday I made French toast for the both of us, and the one Sunday he made pancakes for the both of us. Instead, he eats Cheerios. I know what he sees in those little O's of toasted oat goodness. I know what significance he makes of them.

LAST NIGHT, WE WENT TO ORCHESTRA HALL TO WITNESS the performance of a great work of art. This is what happened: the second movement followed the first, and the third movement followed the second. It wasn't until after the intermission, though, that we got, in my opinion, the full value of our ticket prices. There, in the middle of the fourth movement, was an almost imperceptible—I wasn't sure of it at first, but I listened more closely, and became more sure—an almost imperceptible high whistling sound, which failed to complement the music.

I looked across at John, but he seemed, oddly enough, unaffected by the noise—he sat there, away from himself, away from me, intent on what he heard. I nudged his arm.

"Do you hear that?" I asked. He turned towards me.

"Yes," he said. "Isn't it beautiful?" He smiled. He lightly touched the back of my hand and returned his attention to the performance.

I focused on the sound again, and, yes, sure enough, it was there. I looked again at John. The smile was still on his lips. He scratched his nose. His eyes remained fixed on the stage. I followed his gaze.

It wasn't apparent at first, but then, there, you could see it, it was what he was looking at, there, you could see it, even from our third-tier obstructed-view seats—there, in the flute section, a small—ever-so-small, as difficult to notice as the whistling noise, but undeniably there—there in the flute section, a small patch of dull silver—almost gray—among all the bright, shiny, polished surfaces. There, you could see it: probably a valve wouldn't close, or maybe a joint between two pieces no longer made a proper fit, but, whatever the case, it was there. A small, irregular piece of duct tape, holding the instrument together, making a high-pitched hiss as the smallest jet of air whistled out the patch.

JOHN AND I ARGUED LAST NIGHT, AFTER THE CONCERT. We had an argument. But it's OK tonight, because tonight I realize—he has his fantasies.

HE HAS HIS FANTASIES. OH BOY DOES HE HAVE HIS fantasies. Ooh ooh baby does he have his fantasies. And I will make them all come true.

Tonight, he will come home, as he usually does. He will come home. He will come home, and walk into our home, and say "Honey? You home?" Oh boy will I be home. Ooh ooh baby will I be home.

HE HAS HIS WAY OF SEEING THINGS. HE SEES THINGS HIS way, through his gray, duct-tape eyes. Really, it was stupid of me to think it would be any different with John. It was stupid of me to think it would be any different. But then, that wouldn't surprise John. Except for the fact that it was him. Because, after all, he can only be expected to have his fantasies.

He can only be expected to have his fantasies.

TONIGHT, HE WILL COME HOME, AND YELL "HONEY? You home?" And I will say nothing back. I will say nothing back.

Tonight he will come home. He will walk into the entryway, and through the entryway. He will walk into the living room, and through the living room. He will walk into the hallway, and through the hallway. He will come to the bedroom, and come into the bedroom, and he will see me there, laid out for him, splayed out for him. My arms, spread crucifixion-like, bound to the bedposts with duct tape. My legs, spread-eagled, bound to the posts with duct tape. My nipples, red and taut, bursting out of the teeny holes cut out for them from my bra of duct tape. Before my own waiting, yearning opening, duct-taped to my thighs, the yawning, gaping, center of a fresh, new, unused, never-opened roll of duct tape.

And he will be my fifth limb.

CARL STEADMAN carl@cdtl.umn.edu

Is an associate editor for CTHEORY *<http://english-server.hss.cmu.edu/ctheory/ctheory.html>*, and works for the University of Minnesota's Center for the Development of Technological Leadership, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

GEORGIA'S LOOSE TOOTH

BY RICHARD MCGOWAN

• *This transplanted fairy tale gives new meaning to the word* vegetable. •

OF ALL THE TEETH—A GOOD TWENTY OF THEM AT least—in Georgia's six-year-old mouth, the first one to come loose was the rearmost lower molar on the left-hand side.

"How very unusual," Dr. Benoxious exclaimed when he finally prised open her mouth far enough to see the molar. "Indeed, this is passing strange." He was a frustrated actor who had taken to dentistry only as a last resort and always spoke dramatically.

Georgia wrinkled her nose and opened wider to receive the fat, nimble hands of her dentist. They were clammy and cold, as if he had soaked them in ice water and then shelled a few oysters. She did not like them at all—they smelled rather like her granny's compost heap.

"Nrmph grmnp kmpt hhp," Georgia mumbled, pushing her tongue between his fleshy fingers, trying to dislodge them from her mouth.

Dr. Benoxious finally, after much prodding and probing, withdrew his hands. He methodically removed his surgical gloves and inquired, "Did you brush your teeth this morning?" He knew, of course, that she had not, for her youthful mouth smelled uncannily like his old uncle Wilfred's compost heap. Over the rims of his wire-frame bifocal spectacles, he peered at her knowingly.

"No," Georgia mumbled.

"How serious is it, Doctor?" asked Hilda, leaning over to look. She wrapped her fingers around her daughter's tiny hand and squeezed it consolingly.

"Oh, pish-posh," Dr. Benoxious exclaimed, throwing one massive hand to his forehead. "Unusual it is—but ends well—for this is nothing to be alarmed over. 'Tis naught but a loose tooth." Adjusting his spectacles, he added seriously, "Happens frequently to children of her age." He waved his arms in the air, then pulled Georgia up from the dentist chair and set her on her feet.

After receiving a heavily-padded check to cover expenses, Dr. Benoxious brought out his jar of sweets and let them each choose a nice lollipop. Hilda took a small red one; Georgia chose green with milky swirls and popped it joyfully into her mouth.

"Do have her brush more often," the dentist sighed, gazing over the tops of his spectacles. He bade Georgia and her mother good-bye and shooed them out of the office.

"Can I have some ice cream now?" Georgia asked as they walked down the steps to their car.

"All right. I promised, didn't I?" Hilda said, smiling. She tousled Georgia's hair. Hilda had hated to have her own hair tousled when she was a little girl, but she did it to Georgia on the presumption that her daughter would get used to it as she never had.

They stopped at the Luscious Ice Cream Emporium on the nearest corner and had one strawberry sundae with two flimsy spoons. Georgia ate all of the strawberries while her mother was stuck with the ice cream, which did not take well to being plastically spooned. The spoon finally broke, and Hilda returned both pieces perfunctorily to their waitress, who brought a sturdier one to replace it. She attacked her portion with renewed vigor.

Georgia's father George, many years older than his wife, was a stamp licker in the small post office near the corner of Potrero and Wichita and had attained notable seniority in the position, obliging him to work long hours supervising his apprentices. That evening, however, he returned from work somewhat early, looking unusually haggard. The children were in their accustomed spots in front of the TV, surrounded by their towering collection of video tapes.

"Machinery and gadgets!" George bawled, slamming the front door and unbuttoning his uniform shirt. "Balderdash!" His mood was foul and he did not stop even to pinch Georgia's cheek or pat Henry's head. Henry was Georgia's little brother, only four years old, and he stood dejectedly for a moment with downcast eyes. Then he remembered the news and followed his father eagerly into the kitchen. Georgia jumped up to follow them.

"Daddy," Georgia said, opening her mouth wide. "Looky here! I have a loose tooth!" Georgia dragged his hand into her mouth to feel the tooth wiggle. "So you do," he agreed. "Loose as a goose."

"Daddy! Daddy!" Henry yelled, leaping around.

"Hey!" Georgia yelled, shoving Henry aside. "I get to tell him. Daddy?" She gouged Henry in the ribs and twisted his ear while her father was looking into the cookie jar. There were no cookies—only a few crumbs and a stray chunk of pecan.

"Yes, Georgia?" George threw himself heavily into a chair in the breakfast nook and scooped off his wig. He

hated the thing and wore it only to hide the shiny bald spot in the center of his scalp. The moment he took it off, he felt years younger and pounds lighter. After tossing away his sweaty uniform shirt, he scratched his chest without even washing the glue from beneath his fingernails. The sounds of animated mayhem on the TV drifted in from the living-room.

"Daddy," Georgia said, opening her mouth wide. "Look! I have a loose tooth!" She jumped into her father's lap and pushed her face right up to his eyes. George had to lean back to focus on her teeth.

Georgia dragged his hand into her mouth to feel the tooth wiggle. "So you do," he agreed. "Loose as a goose. Well, it looks like the Tooth Fairy will soon be here."

"Hurray!" Georgia yelled.

Henry was sulking near the garbage can, holding his ribs with one hand and looking for scraps of aluminum foil to add to his already burgeoning collection. "Phooey!" he yelled, and made a face. "She always gets the good stuff."

"Now, Henry," their mother said, walking into the kitchen. "Georgia's older. When you get to be six, you'll have loose teeth, too." Hilda cast a faint smile at her husband and adjusted her skirt. She had been on a frugality binge for some time, and her bargain-basement panty hose did not fit very well. "How was your day, dear?" she asked, opening the cupboard to bring down plates and bowls. "Here, Georgia, put these on the table, dear."

George mumbled a ritual answer to his wife's ritual question and helped Georgia to set the table.

All through dinner, over the din of the evening news, between polite cries of "please pass the sauerkraut" and "more grapefruit juice, please," the family discussed Georgia's tooth. Afterward they sat around the table and looked up "tooth" in the encyclopedia.

In Georgia's room they had a bedtime story about the Tooth Fairy, but little Henry fell asleep before the end. George closed the book, declaring, "To be continued, tomorrow."

"How much money will the Tooth Fairy leave?" Georgia inquired.

"Oh, I don't know these days," answered George, setting the book aside. "But she doesn't always leave money."

"No?"

"Oh, no," he replied, as he tucked Georgia's blankets in around her. "Sometimes, she'll bring another surprise. Now sleep tight." He kissed her on the cheek and turned out the light, then gently carried little Henry off to his own bed.

After the children were soundly asleep, Hilda and George retired to their bedroom and had a long bath. The cheap bath beads with which Hilda scented the water left a horrid ring in the tub, and as it was her fault for being overly frugal, she was obliged to rinse the tub. George brushed his teeth, then flossed while Hilda brushed hers.

"Hilda," said George as they settled into bed. "I cannot tell a lie. I got laid off today. The whole department." He whisked one hand through the air. "Ousted by an infernal machine."

"Oh, George!" Hilda crooned soothingly, patting his shoulder. "That's really too bad—and so near retirement, too. You'll find something better next week." She flipped out the light on her side of the bed, then rolled over and turned up the red NO side of her pillow.

George read a few chapters of a pulp Western before he got tired enough to sleep. He would certainly have to look for new employment in the morning, and that was an unwelcome chore—even the excitement of a fictional gunfight could not keep his mind fully occupied. With a deep, bed-shaking sigh, he finally curled up against Hilda's back and went to sleep.

The tooth made a little clicking sound whenever it popped up and flopped on its side, and she could stick her tongue down into the soft depression beneath it.

Georgia, snug in her own bed among flannel sheets, was so excited she could hardly sleep that night. Long after her parents thought her safely in the arms of Morpheus, she lay awake with pounding heart and kept sucking on the loose tooth at the back of her mouth. The tooth made a little clicking sound whenever it popped up and flopped on its side, and she could stick her tongue down into the soft depression beneath it. She kept wiggling the tooth with her tongue. It got looser and looser, until it was held to her gums by a thin thread of tissue—but it would not come out. The last thing she remembered was wiggling it, wiggling it…

Georgia jumped out of bed in the morning as soon as she awoke, not waiting for her mother to roust her. Something strange had happened inside her mouth! Her loose tooth was nowhere to be found, neither among the disarrayed bedclothes nor under her pillow—but there was something new in her mouth. A little, bumpy, soft thing had sprung up right where her loose tooth had been. But there was no sign of any present from the Tooth Fairy. Georgia's spirit was crushed. Her first lost tooth—and no present!

Hilda consoled her with a bowl of cinnamon oatmeal and told her gently that the Tooth Fairy would certainly find her that night—for the fairy never missed a lost tooth. Georgia pointed out the soft patch in her gum, and Hilda, thinking that a piece of broccoli had probably

lodged in her daughter's teeth, brushed them all extra carefully, with individual attention. Afterward, she took a toothpick to the spot.

"Owie!" Georgia yelled as soon as the toothpick plunged into the pulpy, green mass.

"Does it hurt, dear?" her mother asked, probing again.

"It feels icky," Georgia replied. "Tastes funny, too."

Georgia spent the rest of the day in front of the TV, uncomfortably poking her tongue at the soft extrusion and looking in the mirror during every commercial break. She believed the mass was growing larger.

Late that night, George slipped quietly into Georgia's room and left a shiny Susan B. Anthony dollar under her pillow. Satisfied that he had done well, he looked down at her sentimentally for a few moments, then retired for the night.

The sight that greeted Georgia and her entire family early the following morning was truly astounding.

"Mommy!" Georgia yelled from the bathroom. She wailed again. "Mommy! Mommy!"

Hilda, snapping to maternal attention, tromped over her sleeping husband and went running—to find Georgia sitting cross-legged on top of the sink, staring into the mirror. A long green tendril drooped limply from her open mouth.

"Well, pull it out!" Hilda said angrily. She was not a morning person and resented being awakened on a Sunday when she should have been able to sleep until noon. It was the family's custom for George to attend to the Sunday morning chores while the children watched cartoons and Hilda slept.

"It won't come out!" Georgia wailed. She fingered the tendril. Little tears bunched up at the corners of her eyes, threatening to leap away and roll down her cheeks.

Hilda reached over and gave the green tendril a firm yank.

"Yeow!" Georgia's tears burst forth.

"Here, turn around," said Hilda, holding the girl's shoulders. "Now open your mouth," she insisted, pulling down on Georgia's lower lip.

Georgia opened wide, and Hilda gazed into the pink, cavernous recesses of her daughter's mouth. Plain as the winged lady on the bonnet of a Rolls Royce was the green tendril, its whitish roots sunk deeply into the depression left by the lost molar. "I'll get your father," she announced, tousling Georgia's hair. "He can take the pliers to it."

George had already been awakened by the unexpected tromp of his wife's foot across the inside of his right thigh and was sitting up in bed. Alarmed at the news, he put on his wig, which perched nearby on his nightstand, and ran to the bathroom. Try as he might to dislodge the extrusion, however, his pliers had no effect on the tenacious green tendril and he finally gave up.

The tendril grew longer, almost visibly, and by evening was a good two feet in length. Its girth was about that of a pencil, and the stem was spongy to the touch. Leaves had begun to sprout from the end just after lunch—poor Georgia had to choke the first bite of her liverwurst sandwich past the tendril and could hardly chew. Hilda made her a nice, hearty bowl of chicken soup instead and gave the rest of the sandwich to Henry. Late in the evening, George and Hilda decided it was time to call upon Dr. Benoxious again.

The following morning shortly before nine, George set out to beat the pavement looking for work—he did not have high hopes and really would have taken any sort of labor. He was just that short of retirement and worked as a hobby, for his family had all the necessities of suburban life and a swimming pool besides. Immediately after her husband left, Hilda deposited the children in front of the TV and walked the five blocks to Dr. Benoxious's office, where she managed to slip in before the first customer of the day.

Plain as the winged lady on the bonnet of a Rolls Royce was the green tendril, sunk deeply into the depression that the day before had housed a small, loose molar.

Dr. Benoxious was not in the habit of making house calls, for that silly pastime had gone out of fashion before his heyday—but Hilda's extraordinary story, rendered in breathless excitement, soon had him cowed. He could find nothing, however, upon the subject of house calls in his dog-eared copy of Eichler's *Etiquette.* Baffled and unable to decide how long his errand might take, he finally sent his receptionist home for the day, closed up the office, and accompanied Hilda, assured of a good solid fee.

"Extraordinary," he agreed once he had examined Georgia's mouth. "This will go down in the annals of American dentistry, sure as I'm John Benoxious, DDS." He swished his surgical gloves in the air and tossed them into the wastebasket.

After they had eaten lunch, Dr. Benoxious called in a photographer friend, for the little girl patently refused a ride in his shiny new Jaguar, even though it was painted the color of her favorite fruit—strawberry. The dentist and his camera-toting chum took close-up and wide-

angle shots with various lenses and filters, along with a few photographic views of the tendril's root system. Hilda declined an invitation to have her daughter's mouth X-rayed, having recently read a lengthy magazine article which cited the deleterious effects of X-rays upon youthful bone tissue.

The plant—for what could it be called but a plant?—had grown by strident leaps and springy bounds. Georgia was, by mid-afternoon, having severe trouble swallowing even chicken soup without a straw. The girth of the tendril was that of a broom handle.

Dr. Benoxious took Hilda aside while the photographer adjusted his tripod and prepared for another series of macro shots. "We'll have to put her on an IV," he said seriously, looking down Hilda's blouse.

"Oh, heavens, no!" screamed Hilda, throwing a hand to her chest. "Not my baby!"

"I'm afraid—what with the way this phenomenon is growing," the dentist continued, shaking his head, "we are left with little mortal choice. It's either that—" and here his eyes shot sternly toward Hilda—"or amputate."

Hilda swooned into his arms and he lowered her gently to the floor. After she recovered and took a few tranquilizers with a cup of coffee, she saw the sense of what the good dentist proposed. Along with a number of oral-surgical acquaintances of Dr. Benoxious, a reporter and a local news camera-being were called in for further opinions. George and Hilda's humble two-story home was soon a rip-roaring madhouse stuffed with thrill-seekers. The camera crews pulled the front door off its hinges and knocked out a sidewall for better lighting and access. They soon had portable cinematographic lamps installed in all the corners. Multicolored cables draped across the front garden from their vans, wound along the front hedge, and into the front picture windows. They snaked across the living room, leapt atop the furniture, sprawled upon the end tables, coiled threateningly in the corners. More and more cables were pulled in until the living room resembled the set for a bad Hollywood production of a Tarzan epic. A steady stream of gawking neighbors filed in through the front door to glimpse the goings-on and then filed out through the rent in the sidewall. Central Precinct later sent down a rookie police officer to keep traffic moving along the normally quiet, elm-lined suburban street.

When George arrived home in the evening, having woven carefully between the vans that littered the sidewalk and pulled his car into the driveway, he was at first not sure that he had come to the right house. Through the gaping hole in the sidewall, however, he glimpsed Hilda meandering around the living room among tropically-hued cables and suddenly realized that the hounds of the press had ferreted them out.

George shouted an obscenity and went berserk. He ripped the cables from the vans and fetched his heaviest sledgehammer to bash out their windows. With a stout pair of garden shears, he cut all of the cables into tiny pieces no longer than Havana cigars, after which he tossed the unctuous press people and swarms of goggle-eyed photographers into the street. This was not done without token opposition, and he softened a few heads and broke an arm or two in the process of clearing his living room.

Quite late in the evening, George was arrested for assault and vandalism. He promptly filed suit against seven newspapers and four television stations charging vandalism, littering, and trespassing, along with several small-print pages of minor offenses suggested by his astute attorney—who had taken the case *pro bono.*

Georgia was a one-day wonder and might have been more, but the press—except for a few paparazzi—abandoned the incident under George's legal onslaught. The tendril, however, did not stop growing. Poor Georgia was unable to walk at all after Tuesday morning and had succumbed to lethargy. By the previous evening, in fact, Hilda had been obliged to tote the mass of growing vines behind in a sturdy plastic container whenever her daughter went to the powder room. On Wednesday, Hilda, exhausted from carrying bedpans, had the family physician install a catheter. The IV soon followed, for Georgia's lethargy had reached such a state that she could no longer walk and certainly could consume no nutrition orally. The tendril's girth was that of a baseball bat and it showed no sign of imminent wilting.

By Thursday, the vine had spread over the entire living room and was heavily, inexorably in flower. The flowers—in great variety—were intriguing—even to Georgia, who giggled delightedly (through her nose, to be sure, as her mouth was completely stoppered by the tendril) every time Hilda brought her an exotic new sample found springing up somewhere. Attached as she was to catheters and gadgets, she settled into immobility. The resplendent vines cascaded about the room, climbing vividly up the walls, and hung down like thin, wavering stalactites—slowly dripping onto the plush carpets, where many of them began to take root. In that cozy environment, filled with colorful blossoms and hanging vines, Georgia sat in a tall wicker chair before the family's best television set and watched a number of Henry's jungle films: the room was perfectly suited to that form of entertainment, and Henry did so love Tarzan. He was frankly glad to have the final word, for once, as to the programs they would view—for Georgia could utter not a word of protest.

Sensing her daughter's frustration with the situation, Hilda appealed to her husband. "Don't you think we

should let Georgia watch what she wants?" she inquired. "She is ill, after all."

"You're right, as usual," replied George. "It won't hurt to indulge her, I suppose." He moved the video player and a stack of tapes to a table where Georgia could reach them and left her happily in command of the remote control. The family's other television wound up in Henry's room.

Saturday morning brought unexpected delights: The vines, which had been in glorious blossom all week, had begun to bear fruit. By that time the vines had completely subdued the living room, vanquished the formal dining room, catapulted across the family room and the stairwell leading to the upper floor, and spilled lavishly across the back verandah. At first the fruits were small things—kumquats and strawberries and such. But by Sunday afternoon—cabbages! Great succulent watermelons and apples! Zucchinis larger than their neighbor's Great Dane! Passion fruits! Cantaloupes! Rambutans and jackfruits! Breadfruit, coconuts, pineapples! Pomegranates! Oranges! Crook-necked squashes and pumpkins and tomatoes! Seven species of beans!

Inundated with far more variety and quantity of edibles than they could possibly consume in a year of unbridled gastronomy, George and Hilda deliberated at length and finally decided to go into business. They promptly applied for a business license, packed George's car to the brim with all manner of exquisite produce, and sallied downtown. No sooner had they set out their sumptuous array than they were cited for illegal parking. They moved further down the block, out of the red zone, and lay out their blankets again.

Atop the blankets, Hilda and George piled their vast store of treasures. At first there were few customers, so they lowered their prices and took to waving vine-ripened pineapples at passing motorists. The next day, they attracted a few more customers—for their produce was truly world class, and the word had spread. Within the week, the shocking news had leaked that all of this gorgeous fruit—out of season, every piece—was positively dripping from the bounteous vines growing out of little Georgia's mouth. The tabloids had the story within the fortnight, complete with illicit photographs of the catheterized, open-mouthed youngster—and a somewhat distorted botanical analysis contributed by an anonymous gardener.

By the end of the month, the family members were wading in cash and invitations from various media moguls—most of which they refused, for the sake of domestic privacy. Even little Henry was finally able to purchase the enormous jungle gym he had so long coveted. The family was able to knock out the living-room walls and refurbish the entire ground floor of their home to accommodate Georgia's handicap, simultaneously ensuring good ventilation and lighting for the vines.

George and Hilda continued to sell their magnificent produce, even elevating the rates in recognition of its extraordinary nature—and they began to charge admission to the newly-constructed atrium where all of their produce was gently, organically grown.

Snug in the atrium's heart, amid the splash of jungle foliage, her eyes glued to the TV, sat Georgia—happy as a vegetable.

RICHARD MCGOWAN rick@jg.cso.uiuc.edu

Is a software engineer in Silicon Valley. His two young children are losing their teeth.

THE LONELINESS OF THE LATE-NIGHT DONUT SHOP

BY G.L. EIKENBERRY

• As the Chinese proverb says, be careful about what you wish for—you may get it. •

THE SOLITARY DRUNK TRIES THE PHONE ONE MORE time. His thinning hair is plastered to his scalp in greasy random clumps. His suit looks like it hasn't seen a dry cleaner for the better part of a decade. The smell isn't all that great, either. Even over the incense of freshly-brewed coffee and the sweet fragrance of donuts and muffins, his aura abrades the inside of her nose. Nobody answers his call. Tanya's pretty sure she wouldn't answer either if she knew it was him calling.

She's working the counter alone. She's the only person in the shop other than the drunk and, of course, Ev back in the kitchen frying donuts. They wouldn't ordinarily put someone so young on the late shift alone, but she traded with Beverly so she could get last Saturday off, and then Nicole called in sick. Beverly wouldn't feel vulnerable in a situation like this. She's older and kind of overweight.

But for Tanya the same cute features and trim bounciness that make her popular with the boys and busy, if she wants to be, almost every Saturday night make her feel even more exposed here, now, in the creepy, hollow, formative hours of a Wednesday morning. She wants the drunk to leave. She knows he's harmless enough, but his sloppy attempts at conversation make her very uncomfortable. That's the thing about working in a donut shop—you can get pretty tired of people. Especially the kind of people that show up in the small, tense hours of the graveyard shift. Sure, Beverly says she likes the graveyard shift, but it's different for her.

She looks up and down the street. No one. Nothing. Absolutely nothing moves. So what's so unusual about the street being empty at three in the morning?

He doesn't leave.

No one else comes in.

She doesn't offer to warm up his coffee. She usually feels more lonely when she has to be around people she doesn't know. She scrubs down the back counter one more time. Being really alone—with absolutely nobody else around—has never been hard for her.

The jerk just won't leave. Any other time of day, on the street or someplace else, with a shave and a shower, he'd probably be just a regular boring guy in a boring eraser-smudge gray business suit, but she rearranges the cups in the dishwasher one more time so that she doesn't have to turn to face him.

He's getting up. Maybe he'll finally leave.

She watches the drunk's reflection in the window as he tries the phone again. Someone has finally answered. Maybe he'll go home now.

"Yeah? Well—hey, where's Cheryl? Yeah, with that kind of attitude I can see why. I wouldn't want to live there either. Tell time? Of course I can tell time, you—yeah, well, whoever the hell put you in charge of etiquette for this planet made a hell of a big mistake—that's the guy that oughta lose his job. Disappeared, huh? Well I sure as hell didn't do anything with your wife. Yeah, well, she probably walked out on you, you asshole—who wouldn't? Yeah, well, you're so full of—" He smashes the receiver down and then darts his eyes over to Tanya. She has her back to him, scraping at a spot on her apron with her lilac fingernail. The polish is chipped already, which is okay since she's decided she doesn't like the color.

"So maybe I got a wrong number. I guess the guy was on drugs or crazy or something. I mean, he could've just said I had the wrong number, right? A real basket case, eh? First he gives me hell for calling so late, then he starts whimpering about how I gotta help him on account of his wife's disappeared or something. Er, hey, listen, sorry about the bad language—"

"I didn't hear any."

"Huh? What'dya say, there, cutie? What's it say on your badge there? Come on over here so I can read what it says. I like to know a person's name…" He just sort of trails off, looking down at his shoes.

"I said I didn't hear any bad language." She doesn't turn around. She wishes Ev would come out with another tray of donuts.

"Yeah, well, I guess I, uh, better get moving." He actually seems embarrassed. Maybe he really will leave. "You shoulda heard that creep on the phone—I mean, you talk about your wrong numbers—I must've got another planet or something."

"It takes all kinds, I guess."

"Huh? Hey, let me give you a little advice from someone who's been—well, *was,* anyway—in the business for a long time. If you're gonna make a career out of dealing with the public, you gotta learn to speak up. Aw hell, never mind. Guess I'd better hit the road before it hits me—take care, eh?"

She turns away for just long enough to grab the cloth so she can clear the counter where he was sitting.

He's gone. She didn't hear the door—but then she wasn't particularly listening for it. At least he's gone. She can relax and read her magazine.

"It takes all kinds, eh, Ev?" It takes all kinds—Beverly says that a lot. No answer from the kitchen. Probably he just didn't hear.

"You want some coffee or something back there, Ev?" Still no answer. She isn't supposed to leave the front empty, but what if something's happened to Ev?

"Hey, Ev, you okay back there? Ev?"

The kitchen is empty. Ev only works for the place, but from the pride he shows, always cleaning and polishing everything, you'd think he owned it. He hardly ever takes a break. Even if he did slip out for cigarettes or something, he'd never leave, even for a couple of minutes, without letting her know.

She checks the back door—the kitchen gets pretty hot with the fryers and the oven going full tilt. He could have stepped out back for a minute to cool off or have a smoke.

No sign of him. The parking lot is empty. The street is totally deserted.

Somewhere deep inside her something begins to boil over. Her skin goes all clammy. She's beginning to feel bees buzzing around inside her head, the way she did one time when she was little and she got lost, making a wrong turn on the way home from the library. Everything looked kind of familiar, but she didn't know how to get back to where she belonged. Lost. Abandoned.

She looks up and down the street. No one. Nothing. Absolutely nothing moves.

So what's so unusual about the street being empty at three in the morning? She squeezes the anxiety down into a little knot deep in her throat and forces herself to go back into the shop.

The fears, the stories her mother worries her with, always have to do with people—burglars, perverts, motorcycle gangs. Evil, sleazy, twisted people—never the lack of people—never emptiness—never loneliness. How can nobody hurt you? What can nothing do to you?

She waits. The time is marked by the sound of her breathing. Nothing—absolutely nothing else. One, two, five, ten minutes. No one comes. She moves to the big plate-glass window to stare out at the empty sidewalk. It might as well be a painting.

Nothing moves. After an eternity a little puff of wind stirs up an eddy of candy wrappers and dust, but after a few quick heartbeats it's gone. It never happened. The silence, the emptiness, seeps into the shop like a syrup. Breathing becomes difficult.

Movement of any sort is now nearly impossible. It's 3:38—the bus will be along in another three minutes. It's always on time this hour of the night. The next time through the route at 4:38, the driver will come inside just long enough to get his coffee—two creams, no sugar.

Or maybe he won't. Maybe she'll lose her job, but she has to do it. She has to do it while she can still move. She struggles against the suffocating entropy to pull on her sweater. She has to leave. It's not really her fault—she could at least lock up if they'd trust her with a key. She peeks into the back. Still no sign of Ev.

She waits. Three, four, five minutes. Ten. She can see the big clock in the shop even from across the street at the bus stop.

3:52—still no bus. Nothing. No one. She could go back inside and call a cab, but it won't do any good. Nobody will answer.

There won't be anyone. No one on the phone. No one on the street. No one to make real her fears of attack along the two interminable blocks from her own bus stop to her house. No one to offer comfort. No one to speak the words that might relieve the pressure building against her chest—her lungs, her heart.

The world has emptied itself—

—shaking off the people like so many fleas.

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

Has, after more than 20 years and more than 30 published pieces of fiction and poetry, finally realized that he can't be in this for fame or fortune. The jobs that have paid the rent have ranged from underground mining with United Keno Hill Mines in the Yukon to being Vice President of Communications and Information Services for the Canadian College of Health Service Executives. He says it's hard to imagine writing without the fodder his strange mix of jobs and experiences have supplied.

WAMPANOAG

BY JOHN DIFONZO

• If necessity is the mother of invention, some of her children may be orphans. •

ALTHOUGH I WAS AT MY DESK AT 9:04, MY BODY WAS still on Japan time. So when the first call of the morning came in, I could be excused for picking it up instead of letting my secretary field it.

I guess I was out of practice after a week on the road. The high stack of correspondence, the stack of phone messages next to it, my appointment book (open to today's page, which was already nearly full)—these all encouraged me to find something else to do. Plus, I knew a hundred or so e-mail messages were waiting as soon as I turned on my computer. I suppose my sorry circadian state could also explain why, when the unfamiliar, heavily accented voice began its rapid-fire assault, I didn't just kiss him off and get on with the morning. I was looking forward to meeting my wife and daughter for lunch, which would be the first real time I'd spent with them since returning last night.

"I have for you, Mr. Bastin, the opportunity of your lifetime," said the voice. Without giving me a chance to respond, it went on. "You wonder why you are presented this. I will tell you. It is because I have heard of you as an honest man. I have need of honest man."

It was a Slavic accent, probably Russian, spoken very rapidly. I should have hung up. "Uh ," I managed. "Who am I speaking to?"

"Oh, I am so sorry. I am Radik Sergeivich Danilov. I am represent Dr. Mikhail Sergeivich Danilov, the computer scientist, who is also my brother. You are familiar with Dr. Danilov and his work, is this not true?"

His R's were so trilled and the consonants so hard that it seemed to take several seconds to parse his words. "No, actually, I'm not."

"You are not? But people said you are knowledgeable in computers. It is hard to believe that you do not know of my brother."

"I specialize in certain facets of computer technology, but I'm afraid I haven't kept up with Russian science."

"Oh, Mr. Bastin, that is to your loss. Although the problems in recent years have made work in computer science in Russia very difficult, very difficult indeed, some individuals have been able, with great difficulty and even some personal danger, they have been able to make significant breakthrough. For example, in area of complexity theory, which is not my brother's area…."

This fellow was becoming annoying. I held the receiver between my shoulder and neck, half-listening as I started sorting through letters. Julie, my secretary, had already set the prospectuses, journals, magazines and unsolicited inquiries to one side. A thick manila envelope from the patent attorney's office had to be a search, maybe on that new sputtering idea from Sublimation Systems. I glanced at a schedule of lectures on advances in multiprocessing to be held at Stanford. Another thick envelope—

"Mr. Bastin? Do you agree?"

"Uh, yes, of course," I replied, although I couldn't remember what I was agreeing to.

"So if one person would combine these different technologies, which most persons say could not be done, nonetheless one person would find—what is your word?—organism, no, *synergism,* and the most significant breakthrough. Don't you agree?"

"Well…"

"So, I am available soon to show you our CPU. Perhaps this evening?"

"This evening?"

"I'm so sorry. I mean to say this afternoon."

"Uh, I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Of course. You are busy man. Tomorrow then. Is 8 A.M. acceptable?"

"Listen, why don't you call my secretary and let her arrange it, okay?"

"Yes, certainly, I understand. I will do that now. Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Bastin."

"Certainly. Of course." Oh jeez, I was starting to imitate him.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bastin."

I was left holding the dead receiver, wondering what I had agreed to do and how this man had maneuvered me into meeting with him on something—a "CPU"—that he may or may not have described.

HE WAS IN THE LOBBY WHEN I CAME IN THURSDAY morning. It was obvious, even though I'd never seen him before or received a description. Eastern European looks, balding, holding a brown paper bag on his lap, wearing a suit like my grandfather's. Who else could it be?

He recognized me and jumped up to greet me. "Mr. Bastin, so nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you, too." I didn't use his name because I'd temporarily blanked it, which I knew was a personal sign that I didn't want to talk to him. How had I gotten myself into this? He followed me toward the door to my office.

"Please, Mr., um, Danilov," I read from the guest badge the receptionist had stuck on his lapel. "Allow me a few moments to begin my day."

"Of course," he answered with inappropriate enthusiasm and quickly returned to his seat.

One Thursday each month I have "open house," which means I'm willing to meet individuals with ideas who normally wouldn't get to see me. I started my career as a patent lawyer and still have a soft spot for entrepreneur-inventors. The hit rate with them is low, but good enough that I can justify it to the other partners at the firm.

I settled in, grabbed some coffee and reviewed my morning schedule with Julie.

"There's a Mr. Danilov and a Mr. Kelly."

I decided to see Kelly first, just to show Danilov who was boss. I was annoyed with him for having destroyed, at least temporarily, the good mood my wife had put me in—this morning, she'd told me our doctor had confirmed she was pregnant with our second child.

Mr. Kelly appeared to be in his mid-thirties, fair-skinned, growing a bit about the waist. I sized him up as an engineer-with-great-idea—one of my standard types. His résumé confirmed my appraisal. The too-fancy business card said he was president of Preservation Industries, which I thought at first must be some kind of coffin manufacturer.

"We make personal time capsules," he explained, showing me a not-very-fancy brochure. Basically, the company made a line of stainless steel canisters of various shapes and sizes, all with hermetic seals, EMI gaskets, keyed latches, desiccant pouches, and plumbing for flushing with inert gas. They touted the cans as ideal for preserving documents, artworks, antiques, keepsakes, and so on.

"We forgot to say in the brochure, but we nickel-plate the inside."

"You nickel-plate stainless?"

"It improves the magnetic barrier." This fellow was a real engineer.

A new market they were aiming for, he went on to say, was the large and rapidly-growing home video market. People were taking videos of family events that they would want to keep for many years, but the videotape is subject to deterioration from pollution, stray electromagnetic fields, abuse, and so on. He presented a long list of tests he and his partner had done to show how well his "PTC" shielded those precious tapes of Johnny's first birthday and the time Janie spit up on Uncle Henry.

"Looks expensive," I said.

"That's why we need money. We want to tool the big parts and set up a production line. We also need to get a good marketing person and start national distribution."

"Still, most people don't keep bottles of pressurized inert gas around the house."

He produced a small metal container like a CO_2 cartridge, but painted green. "Argon. We'll sell these too. It will give us some aftermarket revenue."

Stuff for the home market has to be dirt cheap to manufacture because any success attracts imitators, and with all the latches and valves, the devices were too complicated—home stuff also has to be dirt simple.

I was skeptical and told him so. Stuff for the home market has to be dirt cheap to manufacture due to distribution and marketing costs, and because any success attracts imitators. I promised I'd look into how his PTC's would work in the high-end videophile market. It brought him down, but I couldn't lie to him. And with all the latches and valves, the devices were much too complicated—home stuff also has to be dirt simple.

Then I had Julie fetch Danilov.

He swept in and shook my hand as I sat, not giving me a chance to stand. "It is so good to be here! So many of your colleagues have refused to see. I thought perhaps was not as we in my country were told. But to be here before you—"

"Please, Mr. Danilov."

"You may call me Radik. That is what my friends—"

"Please, Mr. Danilov!"

He quieted, briefly I was sure. "We don't have much time. I have an important meeting at ten," I lied. Noticing the bag, I said, "Show me what you have."

"Yes, yes, of course, my apologies, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize…"

He went on and on as he opened the bag and placed an object on the desk. It was a weird contraption, a conglomeration only an inventor could love, and proof that artists really did know what they were doing when they put pieces of junk together. At one end was an SLR camera, a fancy Japanese one with electronic control that reminded me of my recent walk through Akihabara. But the camera had been disemboweled and lobotomized: the back had been replaced by an aluminum extrusion maybe ten inches long, crudely RTV'd to the camera body. The top of the camera had been cut open to allow a bundle of high-gauge wire to enter. At the other end of the extrusion was a molded plastic box, also glued, that I eventually identified as some kind of battery holder. Set into a cover screwed on the extrusion were various electrical connectors and a grillwork.

"Tell me what this does."

"It does anything you want." That was not the answer I was looking for. I chalked it up to language difficulties.

"What is its purpose?"

"Its purpose is to help you do things."

"Such as?"

"Whatever you tell it."

"Give me an example."

He pressed something at the rear of the object, then picked it up and turned it so the camera lens faced me. "What do you see?" he asked.

Irritated almost to rudeness, I was about to say something about seeing a glued-together piece of junk when the camera clicked.

"I see a man."

It was not Danilov's voice, though it had a similar accent.

"Describe man," said Danilov.

"He wears a blue suit and multicolored tie. He is a Caucasian male. He has a high forehead and brown eyes. He is—"

"Shut up." From Danilov.

So the voice was coming from the device. I tried to remember how small a current voice-recognition system could be—assuming this wasn't a hoax. With a vision system built in. And integrated. The device before me had to be the smallest one of its kind, even if another such system existed. It had to be a hoax. It would need some kind of advanced AI. How had this twit faked it so well?

The camera clicked again.

"How did you manage this?" I asked, my voice tighter than I intended. I didn't like having my time wasted, but I was intrigued by one of the slickest tricks I'd ever seen.

"The man shows anger," came from the box. Then it clicked again.

Ventriloquism. Of course. So simple, when I had been searching for a high-tech answer. I had to admire the man's craftiness. And the camera was set to snap at some interval, or maybe random intervals.

"The man smiles." Another click.

I paused. Danilov hadn't opened his mouth—in fact, he had walked over to my bookcase and was inspecting the titles.

"The man does not smile." Click.

A two-way radio link sending stills, and a confederate at the other end playing robot? "A very slick hoax," I said.

Danilov returned to the desk, instantly angry. "Hoax? Hoax! You call me a liar?"

"Happens quite often in my business." I explained my hypothesis of how he did it.

He took a Swiss Army knife from a pocket and used it to unscrew the object's cover. Inside was anything but what I had expected. Instead of crammed circuit boards I saw rows of small lenses, interposed with other, less identifiable but obviously optical, components. The only electronics were on a small board attached to the cover, next to a speaker.

No room for a false bottom.

"I'm sorry," was all I could get out. This was unquestionably a breakthrough of some kind. Even if it were a trick, to do it optically was an astounding achievement. "Tell me how this works."

"I cannot tell you very much. This is brother's work. He is genius, don't you think?"

"He may be," I had to admit.

"Device is a synergistic combination, my brother tells me, of optical computer and neural network. Is systolic array. Lenses are Fourier transformers, of course. These are spatial light modulators. You are familiar with such devices?"

"Not really."

"What part of computers are you expert in?" The tone was almost accusatory.

"Microprocessors, mass storage components."

"All soon obsolete," he stated, waving his hand as if to brush them all into a waste basket. "CPU is based on Vander-Lugt correlator, but more sophisticated."

"Can you estimate its specmarks?"

"Please, Mr. Bastin! No specmarks, no MIPS, none of that anymore is relevant! How many specmarks is a horse? This is new horse." He closed the cover. "CPU," he said.

"Awake."

He spoke to it in Russian. It replied in Russian. I thought I heard my name. A bilingual computer? Could this thing really translate human language?

"Good morning, Mr. Bastin."

"Uh, good morning," I replied to the CPU.

"It is very nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you. Tell me, can you translate between Russian and English?"

It said something in Russian. Danilov laughed and replied to it.

"It seems the CPU misunderstood you," came from the box. "It thinks you wanted it to translate your words to me in Russian, and will no doubt translate my words into English."

I thought for a minute as I stared at the CPU, and for once Danilov was silent. "Mr. Danilov." I straightened in my chair and folded my hands on the desktop. "What do you want from me?"

"Of course, to help us in manufacture of CPU."

I gave him my standard mini-lecture on starting a company, how it's speculative, very risky, more work than he could imagine, and so on, though he didn't look like the type that was easily scared off. But when I went on to the phase-one action items, he balked.

"Have you applied yet?" I asked him.

"Applied for what?"

"A patent on this."

"No, no. No patents. This belongs to Misha and me."

"It won't for long if you don't apply soon. Listen, how about if I sit down with you and your brother and talk things over."

"Misha does not like talk."

"Still, I would very much like to meet the man who designed this. He must be brilliant." Flattery, I thought, might oil the gears. "Wouldn't he like to show off some of the new ideas he's working on?"

"I will try."

Well, I thought as I parked in front of the small wood frame house, *at least it's not a garage.* The front yard was a disaster of neglect; the exterior of the house, unpainted for too many winters, looked like bare, weathered wood. Danilov met me at the door and let me in, then guided me down a hall to what he called the lab. It was dark and musty inside the house, as if they never opened a window or drew back some curtains. In passing, Danilov introduced a heavy woman as his wife, then led me to a closed bedroom door. He knocked and shouted something in Russian. The door unlocked and opened to reveal a thin, blond-haired man with a face that would have won him the part of Rasputin in any small-town theater. Without a word he let us in and immediately went back to a table where he was working.

"My brother says the next generation is too difficult for men to build. So he taught a CPU how to do it."

"Misha, this is Mr. Bastin."

Misha gave me a surly glare.

"I'm glad to meet you, Misha. Your brother has told me about what you've done, and shown me one of your devices. I'm very interested in helping you out."

Misha did not respond. The two of them spoke for a few moments in their own language, which gave me a chance to look around. What used to be a small bedroom was now crammed with tables and shelves, covered with all manners of objects: computers, mechanical devices, test instruments, technical books, and boxes of parts. Behind Misha, a small machine with several lamps trained on it was doing something that made scratching sounds.

"My brother does not to speak English very well. He is shy, my brother. He has never married. Only his science—"

"Can he show me what he's working on?" I was learning that interruption was the preferred way to have a conversation with Radik.

After more discussion Misha waved me to his side. On the table was a larger and more elaborate version of the kind of optical linkage I'd seen in the first prototype. "Is this the next generation?" I asked. He shook his head. Then I realized that the musty smell came from Misha. I had to step back.

"What my brother means is that I showed you the old generation. He is making the present generation."

"And the next?"

Radik pointed at the machine making the scratching sounds. I looked more closely at it. It was some kind of small, high-precision milling machine with a tiny glass plate on its XYZ table. Cables ran from it to a control box and then to… another of their CPUs.

"My brother says the next generation is too difficult for men to build. So he taught a CPU how to do it."

Amazing! The CPUs could build more CPUs—better ones! "What is it working on now?"

Radik asked Misha in Russian. Misha replied in Russian, then thought a moment and said, "Optical ROM."

We left Misha and went out to the dark, small living room. I showed Radik some legal papers I wanted him to read, and a confidential disclosure agreement I had written and signed. This was strictly for their comfort. While the wife served sweet tea and cookies I talked Radik into letting Jack Stein, the best patent attorney I knew, start writing up the patent. I left on good terms after what I thought was a very successful visit.

Over the next few months the Danilov project absorbed more and more of my time. First I had to convince them that Stein wasn't going to steal their secrets. I had to have Stein give them references they could talk to, then sign a special agreement that they'd had their own lawyer—some relative, I think—draw up. Stuff I'd never had to do with other clients.

Stein took it all good-naturedly, saying it was because they were used to a government that took whatever it wanted if you didn't make sure you concealed it. They had to learn to trust the institutions. Incorporating was also fun, since they knew even less about business. When I explained that they would all own shares, Radik thought they were already rich. That led to more explanation about seed money, investment rounds, and IPOs.

I also managed to get one of their prototypes so I could try it out. At first they absolutely refused, no doubt afraid I'd steal it. I was at last able to convince them to part with one by saying I wanted to be their first customer and handing them ten hundred-dollar bills. A fortune to them, it got me a brand-new, second-generation Danilov CPU.

It continually astounded me. I never managed to get it to do anything useful, and as the months wore on I found

myself turning it on less and less. (I was very busy on other projects, and the device seemed to have picked up the Danilovs' abrasive personalities.) But just having it around stirred my imagination. It seemed every day I had a new application for it. With the right training, I felt sure, there could be one driving every car and piloting every airplane. Every industrial plant would want several to run their production lines, maybe even accounting, purchasing, and other departments. It was a natural for phone sales, support lines, even as a receptionist. The list of possibilities went on and on.

Within a few years there could be tens of millions of these devices in use.

I admit it—I was stoked on this technology as I'd never been with anything before. And I was also stoked on some personal news: Our new child was a boy. I imagined my son in a world based on these machines, one in which everyone could have optical computers as servants, chauffeurs and secretaries—a world in which everyone was effectively as rich as nobility centuries ago. It was an exhilarating vision.

Finally, I put together a package I could work with. Four major patents had been submitted, Danilov Technology was born, and a prospectus was written. I called a meeting with three of the best and most knowledgeable venture people I worked with. I had picked them carefully because I knew that, in spite of its obvious potential, this was a radically new idea most VCs would not have the temerity to commit to outright. The common perception of a VC is as a banker with imagination, fueling the entrepreneurial spirit; the true situation is quite different. There's a joke in my profession that goes: What do you get when you cross a rabbit with a sheep? Answer: a venture capitalist.

To heighten the drama, instead of the thick stack of information I usually prepared, I supplied my guests only a bare summary of the Danilov device's ability—just enough to whet their appetites. That plus individual calls and their trust in me were enough to get them to the meeting.

I placed the device in the middle of the conference table, covered with a black cloth, just to have something for them to wonder about.

Around the polished table with me sat four men, three of them among the most powerful men in the valley. To my left was Holistead of TLV: bearded, graying, impeccably dressed in a custom-tailored, European-cut suit. I'd chosen him not only because of the three funds he controlled, but because of his history. After a long career in the intelligence service, including at least a decade with NSA, he was now TLV's lead in software and artificial intelligence. He was my main man. If I could win him over, the others would follow quickly.

Next to him sat Talliucci of International Ventures. The money he controlled was even greater than Holistead's, but I knew him to be a tightfisted, very bottom-line–oriented professional. (That's why so many wealthy individuals and institutions were willing give him their dough.) He would be the toughest nut to crack, because revenues were not immediately obvious in this project. I had to sell him on the vast potential of the technology.

Last was Magler of Parker & Ames and an assistant of his named Collis. Magler liked me. I figured he would be an easy sell, especially if one of the others bought in; unfortunately, Parker & Ames was a small house that wouldn't be able to carry this project by itself.

I began by reviewing current computer and AI technology, and their promise for the future. Then I moved on to promises from the past that had not been kept, mentioning specifically machine translation of human language and real-time vision systems. Magler, sitting across from me, leaned way forward over the table, a sure sign of interest; Talliucci was writing notes, for him a sign of the same thing. Holistead leaned back, arms crossed, staring at me intently: I suspected that he knew what was coming already and was showing his skepticism.

"So, gentlemen, let me show you the answer to these problems."

With that I removed the cloth to reveal the Danilov CPU. It still didn't look like much, but these were not men easily swayed by appearances. I pressed the power switch and turned it toward Holistead.

"Talk to it," I told him.

"Talk to it?"

"It is possible to talk to me."

Holistead jumped. "What is this?"

"I am an optical neural network implementation."

He was tongue-tied at first, but soon began a series of questions whose point was to find out how well the device could understand and generate human speech. He started with elementary questions such as, "What is your function?" and moved on to open-ended requests such as, "Tell me about yourself." He held a long discussion with it to determine how well it could see and distinguish objects, investigated its knowledge of the world (and how it handled things when it didn't know something), and finally tried a plain old, "Why are you here?" (To which it answered, "I don't know.")

"Very impressive," he said when he was done. "Very impressive." Still, he was sitting again with his arms folded. Something was wrong.

Magler and his buddy slid the device to their side of the table and excitedly talked at it. I was afraid that having two people talking to it simultaneously would confuse it, but the device handled the situation well. While they

talked I observed Holistead. He was frowning, almost scowling, as he watched them. He seemed deep in thought.

When the Parker & Ames pair seemed to run out of questions, I faced the CPU towards Holistead again and said, "Speak to this person in Russian." As the *piece de resistance* I wanted to demonstrate its ability to translate human language, and I knew that Holistead happened to be fluent in the device's other language.

It spoke to him. He spoke back. There followed a short conversation, much shorter than I'd expected. Holistead asked me, "Where did you get this?"

I began to tell him about the Danilovs and their idiosyncrasies. He stopped me.

"What was that name again?"

"Dr. Mikhail Danilov." Without a word Holistead got up and left the room. Uh oh. Suddenly it occurred to me that the Danilovs might have stolen this invention from somewhere, the KGB perhaps, maybe even the NSA. No, they seemed too genuine. Perhaps Misha had developed it at one of the secret labs.

"What's inside it?" Those were Talliucci's first words. I opened up the device and explained the components.

"So there's not much to it, is there?"

"It's remarkably simple, yes." I started to give a little prepared speech on all the wonderful possibilities the device enabled, but he interrupted me.

"I don't see very much that's proprietary."

"We've got patents on the way."

"Patents are too slow. Look at the hassle Rollerblade is going through right now. The fad will be over before the court case. Not to mention Intel and AMD. And, as we all know, patents can be got around. What kind of software does it use?"

"No software. It just learns."

"So no copyright protection, either."

This was getting discouraging. All the device's best points were being turned against it.

"I find it hard to believe there's no software," Collis challenged.

"Nonetheless, that's how it works."

"There must be some basic programming, just to get it started. A boot ROM, as it were."

"There is in this particular unit, but the Danilovs tell me it's a matter of convenience. It would learn the same things anyway, albeit there would be a delay."

"I can't believe it," he said, studying its innards.

"So there's no software, very little hardware, a few common components," Talliucci went on.

"That's correct," I answered, a little pride escaping from the modest front I was trying to keep up.

"And, as we all know, patents can be got around. What kind of software does it use?"
"No software. It just learns."
"So there's no copyright protection, either."

Holistead reentered the conference room.

"So there's nothing to sell," Talliucci said.

That set me back. "Well…"

"This is a common problem. You can't make money selling something someone can make in his garage. Look at how the PC manufacturers have been taking a beating lately. When I look at a new technology, I try to find the magic in it, and I don't mean what it *does*. I mean what it takes to *make* it. If it doesn't need magic to work, then you're not a magician, and if you're not a magician, no one will want to pay money for what you've got." Talliucci crossed his arms. "This looks too easy."

I was crestfallen. I wanted to argue with him, but I knew it would do no good. The best money mind in the room said it wouldn't make money.

Looking over at Holistead made me feel worse. He sat motionless, looking at the device with a thin nonsmile. There would be no help from his corner.

"There's no way this can work," said Collis.

That brought a small smile to my face. Perhaps the amazement of a technical expert could show the others, or at least Magler, what a leap into the future they were being offered. Parker & Ames wouldn't be enough, but it would be a start. There were other VCs in the valley.

"It flies in the face of all the theory I know. You can't just throw some lenses and filters into a box and expect it to do what this thing's supposed to do. No way."

"Then how does it do it?" I asked. I knew that confrontation was the wrong attitude to communicate, but I couldn't help myself.

"I don't know, but I know it can't work."

I swore silently. Collis thought it was a hoax. I became more sympathetic to Radik—this was the sort of thing he'd been through over and over again. The whole presentation was falling apart. Why were they all turning me down?

The meeting ended quickly. Talliucci and Magler said they would consider it, but I knew nothing would come of their considerations. Holistead said not a word while the others were with us, but hung back. When we were alone he said, "I would be very careful with this if I were you, Brad. I couldn't find anything on these brothers of yours, but I wouldn't be surprised if someday someone does."

I COULDN'T WORK FOR THE REST OF THE DAY. I FORGOT about lunch and desultorily nibbled at the sandwich Julie brought me late in the afternoon. How could I have been so wrong? Why couldn't they see what I saw in the Danilov device? Or, what did they see that I was blind to?

My old physics teacher Professor Hart used to say if you're stuck on a problem, turn it upside down, all around, and inside out.

Hart. Yes! He was still teaching at Berkeley and might remember me. In any case, I had to talk to someone, and it might as well be him. I scooped the Danilov device into my briefcase, grabbed my coat, and told Julie to cancel my afternoon appointments as I raced for the elevator.

I HAD THE BEAMER IN THE COMMUTER LANE AND UP TO 85 before I realized I was hurrying for no reason. I slowed a bit and switched to lane two, going over what I wanted to say. I thought of stories I'd heard over the years, the folk tales of technology, about the tire made of a rubber that never wore out, the auto engine that got 100 miles per gallon, how the transistor was invented before the vacuum tube—all suppressed in one way or another by big-business interests. Previously I'd laughed at these stories as paranoid conspiracy delusions, but now I wasn't so sure. And I thought of the documented story of how GM bought all those little streetcar companies in the forties, just to put them out of business and set the mass transit industry back so far it still hasn't recovered. Buildings and industrial parks swept past on both sides of the highway, with multibillion dollar names on the sides. Semiconductors, computers, electronics, software and more, all soon gone if the Danilov CPU went on the market. It would be worse than a major earthquake—tens of thousands of people would be out of work, causing an economic dislocation that could send the economy into a tailspin. Perhaps that's what had been in Talliucci's mind when he posed his questions.

Then I thought of my son-to-be. What kind of world would he find when he went looking for his first job?

On the Berkeley campus, I walked to Hart's building only to discover that it was in the middle of renovation. After some discussion at the library information desk, I went over to the building he'd been relocated too. The secretary for his department told me Professor Hart had used the renovation as an opportunity to take a long-overdue sabbatical and wouldn't be back for another two months.

More discouraged than ever, I wandered out into the bright sun, feeling out of place among students who seemed so young and who looked at my suit as if it were a clown costume. I almost agreed with them. I took off my tie, stuffing it into a pocket, and unbuttoned my collar. I relaxed a bit and realized how tightly wound I'd been. I needed to sit down somewhere and think.

I found my way to the student union and downstairs to a cafe with outdoor tables. As I sat with an iced coffee, I tried to list my options. The only one that made sense was to find more VCs and make the same pitch to them. But that didn't sit well for two reasons: one, they would call their colleagues—today's audience among them—for a second opinion and get the same negative response I'd heard today; two, it didn't seem right to me to have to make the same pitch again. It was like a farmer planting a new crop in one field and, when that crop failed, deciding to plant the same crop in the field across the road. Before I did anything else I had to understand why the first pitch had met with such a dismal response, even hostility.

Something caught my eye. No, someone. Coming towards me was a familiar figure. A small man, bald on top with short white hair, wearing a brown wool suit. A familiar brown wool suit. He saw me also, and stared at me in return.

I went over to him. "Mr. Hoffman?"

"Yes. And you are…?"

"Brad Bastin. Western Civilization."

"Of course." He looked me over. "What brings you back here? I seem to remember you went on to law school, is that right?"

"That's right. I have a consulting practice in the Valley."

"Excellent. I'm glad for you. You have a client here? One of the molecular biologists, no doubt, and you're about to make him fabulously rich?"

"I wish. No, I was looking for an old professor."

"But not me."

Hoffman had been one of my favorite teachers. He had a knack for presenting history that made it seem clear, one grand flow in time, at least while you were in his classroom. His lectures had been packed, attracting kids who weren't taking the course, and he was famous for conducting a lecture class of two hundred as if it were an intimate tutoring session, calling out questions, expecting his students to give quick answers without bothering to raise their hands, and insisting that no one take notes because by definition anyone who was writing wasn't listening. He was also the fastest chalkboard scribbler I'd ever seen. Everyone said he should do a series for PBS.

"Well—" and then I thought, *why not?* "Would you want to hear a sad story?"

He glanced at me, checked his watch and sat down. "I have some time."

And so I told him about the Danilovs, their device, and the disastrous meeting. I opened my briefcase and showed him the prototype. I told him I would be glad to demonstrate it for him, but not in public. He said that wouldn't be necessary, instead questioning me closely about the three VCs' questions and comments.

"You've probably never heard of the *Wampanoag*, have you?"

"Are they an Indian tribe?"

"Yes, but the *Wampanoag* I'm thinking of was a nineteenth-century steamship." Noting my look of ignorance, he went on, "You've heard of the ironclads at least, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac?* There was another steam-powered warship then, called the *Alabama.* It was a Confederate ship that sailed during the Civil War. Wasn't an ironclad, if I remember correctly, but it was fast—did an astounding eight or ten knots and was blasting Union ships out of the water. The Navy decided something had to be done, so they ordered new ships to be designed on the *Alabama* idea. One of these was the *Wampanoag,* and it was an extraordinary piece of work."

"You've heard of the ironclads at least, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac?* There was another steam-powered warship then, called the *Alabama."*

Hoffman was slipping into his inimitable lecture mode. Even sitting down he was dynamic, waving his arms to illustrate the magnificence of the *Wampanoag*'s lines. "The designer—" He thought a moment. "His name won't surface. At any rate, until the *Wampanoag,* the way one designed a steamship was to take an existing sailing ship and shoehorn a steam engine into it. *Wampanoag*'s designer—ah, I hate it when I can't give someone the credit he's due—had the novel idea that he should design the engine and drive mechanism first, then build the rest of the ship around it."

"What a concept."

"Indeed. The result was a ship that was far faster and more maneuverable than anything else afloat. It put the U.S. Navy a generation ahead in warship technology, although of course they didn't call it that back then."

"Those were simpler times."

"Don't be so certain. What grade did I give you, anyway?"

"An A."

"Hmm." He studied me while scratching his cheek, as if wondering whether he should revise my grade. "Why haven't you heard about the *Wampanoag*?"

"Did it sink?"

"The Titanic did and you remember *that* ship. No, the *Wampanoag* performed beautifully during a year of sea trials, in weather fair and foul. It exceeded all expectations." Hoffman watched me expectantly; I felt like a student again. What was I supposed to be getting? What did it have to do with the Danilov device?

"It was suppressed? Why?"

"Very good. Yes, that's exactly what happened. The board of review rejected the ship. As to the why, they said its design was faulty, even though it had been operating for a year and its crew had testified in its favor. The board noted that the country had a surplus of wood—this was now after the war had ended—and that there were many craftsmen whose livelihood depended on the wooden-ship business. Therefore it would be in the best interests of the country if they continued to make ships from wood. This was fine as far as the Navy was concerned, since there were no other ironclads in existence at the time and no wars imminent. Also, the board members stated that they just didn't like the *Wampanoag.* One could even say they hated it. They were all sailors, and back then that meant literally *sail.* For them, just letting a steam engine on board was a big concession."

This was intriguing. Here was an historical case in which others had rejected an obviously superior technology. "So what did they do with the ship?"

"Condemned it as unseaworthy, probably sold it as junk. And in doing so, they set back naval technology forty years."

"How stupid!"

"Was it? Speaking as a historian, I would say the *Wampanoag*'s problem was that while it worked technically, it failed socially. The *Wampanoag* represented not just a change in technology, but a change in the *structure* of military society. Sailors stationed above decks would have nothing to do, their officers little responsibility or influence. On the other hand, sailors and officers involved with the machinery would ascend in power—no pun intended. You can picture how disruptive it would have been. And think of the romance of sailing! Strong, brave men climbing the rigging, hauling in the sheets, and so on. All that would be lost. They weren't just interested in winning wars. They wanted to create good sailors, sailors in their image of what a sailor should be."

"But they set back progress…."

"So what? How would life have been better?"

"Well, with a warship that question is hard to answer, since all a better weapon does is kill people better."

"How is this invention," he asked, tapping a finger on the device, "going to make life better?"

"It… well, in many ways. It could make an automobile that could drive itself. It could make highways safer."

"It could. It could also enable a new generation of very smart missiles. Missiles cheap enough, if what you told me is true, that any small terrorist group could put together any number of nasty weapons."

"You could make a similar argument against any technology."

"Exactly. There are very few polio vaccines in history, and, thank God, very few atom bombs." Hoffman paused a moment, fingers scratching chin and eyes turned away, a pose I recalled from his class. He was thinking. "But

that's not what's really going on. Whether or not an invention is worthy, whether it really constitutes progress, is not the point. It's a free market. People choose what they want. They buy unreliable cars because they're prestigious, they elect politicians they know are lying to them, they eat food they know is bad for them. The world does what it wants to do. Your idea of progress may be right, but it's also irrelevant, or at least not of paramount importance. Perhaps the time…"

He got up. "I have a late class," he said. "Your device is fascinating. Honestly, I hope you succeed with it, although I don't think that I would want to buy one." He shook my hand. "It was a pleasure seeing you again, Mr. Bastin. Drop by my office if you'd like to talk." And he was gone.

I sat a long time at the table, going over what he'd said and what had happened today. At last the sun sank behind the auditorium and the chill bay air began to penetrate my jacket. I drove home, for once not caring about being stuck in traffic, because I could think anywhere.

The next day I called up Preservation Industries and ordered a custom capsule. Mr. Kelly was pleased, thinking I wanted a sample to show around. He offered to give me one from stock, but I insisted on my dimensions and on paying for it. Then I called Radik and told him that I had not been able to interest anyone in the device. He did not take the news well, and after several minutes of increasingly hostile conversation I had to hang up on him.

Next week when the capsule arrived I put the Danilov device inside and sealed it. Then I took it home. Early the next Saturday morning, my wife was surprised to see me through the kitchen window, digging in the back yard. I told her as little about it as I could, explaining only that it was something for our children when they were adults. Monday I stopped by my lawyer's and had my will amended to specify that our house and property could not be sold for at least fifty years, and that at that time the capsule should be opened. Perhaps the world will be different then, and able to accept the device.

I will have to leave that for the next generation.

JOHN DiFONZO jdifonzo@powerhouse.com

Is a long-time denizen of Silicon Valley. He works for a small start-up computer company.

INTERTEXT

CURRENT AND BACK ISSUES

- **FTP:** Access *network.ucsd.edu,* in the */intertext* directory, or *ftp.etext.org,* in */pub/Zines/InterText.*
- **World-Wide Web:** Our issues and a hypertext index with links to every story we've published are at URL: *http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/intertext.html*
- **Gopher:** Access our Gopher location at *ftp.etext.org* in */pub/Zines/InterText* for stories in ASCII format.
- **CompuServe:** Access the Electronic Frontier Foundation Forum (GO EFFSIG), and enter the " 'Zines from the Net" library section.
- **America Online:** Access keyword PDA, then select *Palmtop Paperbacks/Electronic Articles&Newsletters.*
- **GEnie:** Access the library of Science Fiction & Fantasy Roundtable #3 by typing SFRT3 at any prompt.

Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building.