Contents

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COLUMNS

FirstText: *Thank You, Thank You Very Much*
JASON SNELL **3**

Their Turn: *Past InterText Contributors*
..... **4**

SHORT FICTION

Gone
ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER *(e.brenner1@genie.geis.com)* **6**

The Hard Edge of Things
MARK SMITH *(mlsmith@tenet.edu)* **7**

Danielle
EDWARD ASHTON *(ashton@recce.nrl.navy.mil)* **7**

Other Flesh
PAT JOHANNESON *(johannes@austin.brandonu.ca)* **10**

Business
SUNG J. WOO *(sjwoo@castle.net)* **14**

Oak, Ax and Raven
G.L. EIKENBERRY *(garyeik@synapse.net)* **19**

Wave
CRAIG BOYKO *(chlorine@microcity.com)* **21**

CURRENT & BACK ISSUES

Via FTP:
<ftp://ftp.etext.org/pub/Zines/InterText/>
Also:*<ftp://network.ucsd.edu/intertext/>*

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<http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/>

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First Text

JASON SNELL

THANK YOU, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

FIVE YEARS AGO I WAS NEWS editor of the *UCSD Guardian,* and apparently I had too much time on my hands, because in addition to taking a full load of upper-division courses, I was busy writing fiction and getting it published on the Internet. The end of 1990 was one of the busiest times of my life, because for 10 weeks the powers-that-be at the *Guardian* decreed that we'd publish the paper three times a week, instead of the traditional two. It didn't last very long—we managed to pull it off, tired though we were, but the advertising wasn't there to support the paper costs of that extra edition.

But in the midst of that, I got word that Jim McCabe's *Athene* was closing up shop, and I was crazy enough to take it upon myself to start a new online magazine on this thing that was sucking up more and more of my spare time: the Internet. Even when prompted with the news that two other people, Geoff Duncan and Phil Nolte, had also offered to take over *Athene* from Jim, I didn't drop it. Instead, I contacted Geoff and Phil and we proceeded to start working on what would become *InterText.*

I can honestly say I didn't know what I was getting myself into. When I do something, I do it until it's done—but I really never considered that since publishing a magazine is an endeavor with no logical ending, there would never be an end. So now five years have passed since that day in late March where I mailed out Vol. 1 No. 1 of *InterText* from my Macintosh SE (complete with 2400 baud modem) in my on-campus apartment. The day I graduated from UCSD and lost my free college Internet account came and went, but that artificial "end" to *InterText* passed without any change. By then, I had decided to go to graduate school at UC Berkeley, and by the time my access from San Diego would expire, I'd have a new account in Berkeley. *InterText* lived on.

And before I graduated from Berkeley, I had already taken a full-time job at *MacUser* magazine, a publication that obviously provided Net access. *InterText* lived on. Now the Internet is a common concept—a word familiar to people born before there was such a thing as an *airplane*. Bookstores are overflowing with Internet books, but when I started *InterText* I had to learn how to mail the magazine and transfer files through word-of-mouth.

I'm glad to say that in addition to the Net getting bigger over the years, the stories we've printed in *InterText* have improved greatly. Though there are some stories from that first year of *InterText* I still enjoy, they can't hold a candle to the ones we printed just two years later. Because we're not in a position to pay our writers (I hope that changes sometime in the next five years—preferably sooner, not later), there are many who have stopped appearing in our pages because they've moved on to greener pastures. But there are always new writers who appear and manage to amaze us with their ability.

In the last five years I've had the pleasure to work with a lot of remarkable people. First and foremost, I have to thank Geoff Duncan. Geoff and I worked together on *InterText* more than three years before we met in person. Without him, this magazine wouldn't be half of what it is now. Any time I've gotten complacent, stuck in a rut, or lost sight of what we should be doing, Geoff's been there to nudge me in the right direction. His good taste in stories has drastically improved the stories we've printed. He's our Editor With An Art Degree, our renaissance hacker, and he is so integral to so many steps in our editorial process that I can't envision doing *InterText* without him.

The two other people involved in *InterText* editorially also deserve a lot of credit. Phil Nolte was there at the start to offer advice, support, and material. And a while ago Geoff Duncan brought in one of his colleagues, Susan Grossman, as an assistant editor. Her skill as an editor has vastly elevated the quality of every single story that has appeared in this magazine since her arrival.

I'd also like to give my appreciation to Jeff Quan—the former graphics editor of that selfsame *UCSD Guardian*—for illustrating our very first cover and for illustrating countless covers since then, up to this very issue. Jeff's the very best. Without him we'd be running pictures of stick figures on our cover. (You think I'm kidding? You haven't see me draw.)

And finally, I'd like to thank the thousands of *InterText* readers, especially those who have written stories for us. You've helped make *InterText* what it is today.

Who knows what the future holds? The Internet will be unrecognizable five years from now. But no matter how much full-motion video and interactive adventure games flood the Net, there will still be a place for stories, for simple scratchings on a cave wall or tales told in hushed voices around a campfire. And so there will always be a place for something like this magazine.

InterText lives on.

Their Turn

A few past InterText *writers contribute their thoughts on the occasion of our fifth anniversary.*

GREG KNAUSS

IT WAS IN THE OFFICES OF THE *GUARDIAN*, UC SAN Diego's one stab at a semi-legitimate campus newspaper, that Jason Snell first approached me about contributing to this fiction magazine he had an idea for. He was an editor with far too much time on his hands and I was a hanger-on who had found the one place on campus inhabited by people with even fewer social skills than myself.

InterText, he was going to call it, because it would only be distributed over the Internet. This was actually a fairly radical idea at the time, as the Internet in 1990 wasn't much more than a way for college nerds to play elaborate pranks on each other. The idea of writing stories—original, unique stories—for such a medium was something only a lonely Communication major could conceive. At the time, I was editing a small pamphlet of short stories called *The Erratically,* and it was from back issues that I gathered up some stories that packed—packed, I tell you!—two or three pages in the first *InterText.*

Truthfully, I didn't think *InterText* would go anywhere, or much of anywhere. I was having a hell of a time keeping *The Erratically* coming out on any sort of schedule and it was only two eight-and-a-half by eleven pages, folded over. A full thirty pages or so of fiction, every other month? *I* certainly couldn't do it.

But Jason could, and the Internet could. And still are. Amazing.

InterText, near as I can tell, is the best, most consistent source for fiction available online. Five years is a lifetime on the Internet and a lot has happened. Now deep pockets are being emptied in countless attempts to recreate what really only takes a mailing list and a good idea. *InterText* may have more competition now, but the quality, the originality, and the simple fortitude of the magazine is as strong as it ever was. I, as a reader, owe Jason, Geoff, and Susan a huge debt.

Oh, and just for the record, that goofy line in a teensy-tiny font at the end of every issue? Jason stole that from *The Erratically.*

Greg Knauss (knauss@netcom.com) *wrote "The Talisman" and "Schrödinger's Monkey" (Vol. 1, No. 1), "New Orleans Wins the War" and "The Explosion that Killed Ben Lippencott" (Vol. 1, No. 2), "The Damnation of Richard Gillman" (Vol. 1, No. 3), and "Novalight" (Vol. 4, No. 3). His collection of observations,* An Entirely Other Day*, is available on the Web at <http://www.etext.org/Zines/EOD/>. After five years, he's still loopy as a loon.*

LEVI ASHER

IF YOU WALK INTO THE COMPUTER SECTION OF A bookstore these days, you'll probably find entire shelves devoted to books about the Internet. Well, I remember when there was exactly *one* book about the Internet, and at the time one seemed like plenty.

The book was Ed Krol's *The Whole Internet Catalog* (published by O'Reilly & Associates). I bought it in late 1993 after becoming an early victim of what would soon become a common malady: total senseless addiction to email and newsgroups. I figured I'd try to learn more about the Internet to lessen my devotion to the newsgroups I was spending all my time in (at the time, `rec.music.gdead`, `rec.music.dylan`, `alt.tv.twin-peaks` and `alt.barney.dinosaur.die.die.die`).

The book listed a few notable sites in an appendix, and I noticed it had exactly one entry for literary fiction: a magazine called *InterText.* An FTP address was listed, and I proceeded to spend the next several weeks trying to retrieve an issue of InterText. Things were not so easy in late '93. The major problem was that I had no FTP access at my job, but it took me a while to realize that. I finally found a friend who knew how these things worked, and he snuck an ASCII copy of *InterText* into my directory. I then lurked in the vicinity of the company printer for a few hours waiting for a moment when I could print 30 pages of text without being noticed. I thought I found a time, ran back to my cube to print, and two minutes later received an angry phone call from an assistant vice-president: "What is this crap you're printing?"

The moral of this part of the story is: the World Wide Web really did need to be invented. But the reason I'm writing this is to thank Jason Snell, Geoff Duncan and the other folks at *InterText* for pioneering the medium of contemporary online fiction. The important fact is not so much that they did it, but that they did it with such a sense of quality. The work published in *InterText* is good—very good. There's a quirky intelligence behind almost every piece, and a pleasant focus on down-to-earth human experience and "regular folks" that's a nice break from the dark, nasty, cyber-heavy stuff that is often thought of as the only kind of writing "computer people" like.

Most of all, there's solid editorial attention behind *InterText.* It takes nerve, sometimes, to do a good job at something, and I bet there were moments, back in the early days of *InterText,* when Jason and Geoff wondered why they was working so hard at a project this uncertain, this time-intensive, this devoid of profit motive. By forging ahead and producing a high-quality online magazine, Jason and company set a standard that is still being

followed. Now there are countless venues offering fiction, poetry and literary experimentation on the Internet and the Web, and if all the purveyors of these venues were not directly inspired by *InterText* (as I was), they were probably inspired by somebody who was.

A final note: by the time *InterText* published my first story, I had my own FTP access and endeavored to retrieve the PostScript edition instead of plain vanilla ASCII. Only then did I discover what *InterText* was supposed to look like, and only then did I realize how much work obviously went into producing it. I wrote to Jason that if I'd known how serious this thing was I wouldn't have had the nerve to submit anything to it. Luckily for me, I didn't know.

Jason, Susan and Geoff: Keep up the great work! Happy anniversary, and let there be many more.

Levi Asher (brooklyn@netcom.com) *wrote "Jeannie Might Know" (Vol. 4, No. 2) and "The Thieves" (Vol. 4, No. 5). He is the creator of* Literary Kicks*, the Beat literature web site <http://www.charm.net/~brooklyn/> and* Queensboro Ballads*, a fantasy folk-rock album in text form <http://www.levity.com/brooklyn/>. He lives in New York City.*

COLIN MORTON

THE OTHER DAY ONE OF MY MANUSCRIPTS CAME back in the mail from a print anthology—a well-known publication that doesn't need a plug from me.

In a familiar tone, the editors thanked me for contributing to their anthology, explained that they had received an overabundance of good work, far more than they had room to print, apologized for holding my story so long before returning it, and encouraged me to send something new for their next annual volume.

The only thing extraordinary about this latest rejection letter was that I sent them the manuscript two years ago. More than a year ago, after giving those tardy editors up for dead, I decided to send the story to *InterText,* where it appeared a month or two later.

No doubt many writers can tell similar stories. As publishing in print becomes a more expensive and more perilous enterprise, both writers and readers are rapidly discovering in cyberspace a wide open frontier for exploration and innovation.

"Crown Jewels," a science fiction story, was a bit of a departure for me. I usually write mainstream and literary fiction and poetry. But in those fields, too, the Internet has both expanded the shelves of my personal library and put my work within reach of many more potential readers.

My mainstream novel *Oceans Apart* was published last May by Quarry Press, a small literary publisher that doesn't have the profile to get its books stocked by Barnes and Noble. Most of the bookstores that did order *Oceans Apart* have already taken it off the shelves to make room for the new season's titles.

But for as long as the Internet lasts, readers and browsers will be able to sample the excerpts from my book that appeared last summer in the e-zine *Gruene Street.* Or the poems included in *Tender is the Net,* an anthology put together by CREWRT-L, the creative writing mailing list I belong to. Or any of the other works I've collected on my home page.

The Internet has changed the way I look at my computer and the way I look at my world. For that reason it has probably changed my writing too—not that I've yet tried to create in hypertext.

The stimulating friends I've made here have changed my life in ways even more profound than the fact that one of them offered me my current job. And I know those changes are permanent and accelerating. Thanks to the Net, I travel more, meet more people face-to-face, and see into the lives of a greater range of my fellow humans than ever before.

InterText has been a part of those changes. Congratulations on being one of the first settlements on this limitless frontier.

Colin Morton (morton@gloria.cord.edu) *wrote "Crown Jewels" (Vol. 5, No. 1). He is a Canadian writer and poet currently teaching at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. He co-produced the animated film* Primiti Too Taa. *His home on the Web is at <http://www.cord.edu/faculty/morton/>.*

CAROLYN BURKE

INTERTEXT PUBLISHED A SHORT STORY OF MINE TWO years ago. That experience changed my attitude about both writing and publishing. After that story ran in *InterText,* I learned that writing and allowing others to read what I wrote could be incredibly fun and exciting. I took it up full time as a consequence of that one story.

Just over a year ago, I started a Web site called "Carolyn's Diary" and have been writing an electronic diary since then. This is not a simple travelogue of my life, but rather the philosophical and psychological reflections on life as seen and experienced by me.

"Carolyn's Diary" has been quite well received, leading to positive reviews from Web site-rating services, mentions in Internet books, and even mentions on television programs about the Internet.

My experience with *InterText* was crucial in making this project happen. Thanks, all of you!

Carolyn Burke (clburke@passport.ca) *wrote "Timebugs" (Vol. 4, No. 1). Her Web site,* Carolyn's Diary, *can be found at <http://carolyn.org/~clburke/Diary.html>.*

G o n e

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

The adults, with their need for steadfast solids
Have to resort to vast built structures
To pull off the trick, to contain the chaos.
And that's not bad, in its own narrow way.
The trip that brought me here, with Papa,
Was on such a ship, and it was a wonder:
A star-Leviathan with a sun in its belly,
Bearing a thousand soft souls in its cells
As it swam the dimensional seas.

They fear to let you too near to the chaos.
But I stood, girl-face pressed to the viewscreen,
As we made the jump to the higher regions
And I saw not chaos, but order.
The cosmos revealed its weft to young eyes,
Each thing twined through every other.
I swung out in that net in a widening arc.
I could have jumped, myself, into hyperspace then
And been gone.

Two years later, it's Papa who's gone,
Borne to some business by another starship
While I wait for him on this planet of grasses,
Rank coarse grass that, if it were Terra,
You'd expect near an ocean; but no ocean appears.
Two years is a long time marooned.

I remember the trick that was played that day,
The order-in-chaos I saw in that screen.
So simple a dance; shall I do it now?
There are none here to hold me, much else that calls me.
I look around at the sealess sea of grasses
And they appear to nod their assent.

Turning my face and my heart to the sky, I begin.

A dance of four steps, with prelude.
Step zero: the point, dimensionless virtue.
Step one: the point draws out to a line.
Step two: the line broadens into a plane.
Step three: the plane rises into the solid.
And then, the release of step four . . .

I look around at the sea of grasses.
I look up to the empty sky.
Somewhere up there, a Leviathan swims
Bellyful of stars, my papa in tow.

Papa, I am leaving now.

Step four . . . and I am gone.

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

Wrote "Home" (Vol. 4, No. 1). She is a writer of science fiction and fantasy, a Unitarian Universalist minister, a sometime activist in the gay/lesbian/bisexual community, a resident of Seattle, and an alumna of the 1994 Clarion West Writers Workshop. Her latest work, "The Book of Permissions," will appear this year in the speculative fiction anthology New Altars, *from Angelus Press <http://www.greyware.com/angelus/>.*

The Hard Edge of Things

MARK SMITH

Going home or leaving home—sometimes there's no difference.

I THOUGHT HOW STRANGE IT WAS TO FIND MYSELF after all these years back in downtown Temple, Texas, with no money on a Saturday afternoon, facing the hard edge of things and no choice about it. I'd hit the limit of what a body could do without a car. The public library closed half an hour ago, and they didn't allow sleeping anyway. I'd been to the park and watched clean-cut guys in shorts pushing their kids in the swings. I walked up one street and down another looking at the empty stores, whitewashed, boarded up. I remembered them when people still shopped there and air-conditioning was new and smelled funny and my mama would buy me a Coke at Mackey's Drug Store. I cupped my hand against the sun and looked through the plate glass where there used to be a department store. A single high-heeled shoe lay sideways on the carpet. I never felt so low.

I made up my mind that minute to walk out to the highway and get out of town, no matter how long it took or how hot it was. But I got stopped after a block by a big freight train passing through, slow as a dream. It had about a hundred cars, so I sat on the high curb to watch it go by. A guy on the other side of the street had the same idea, except he had a flask of peach brandy. He belched and I could smell it and hear it even over the rumble of the train. I read the contents on the sides of the cars: methanol, corn syrup, liquid petroleum gas, gravel. I looked away, up to the big grain silos, and thought how much it looked like Kansas or North Dakota. A black woman came up on the other side of the train, waiting to cross to my side. She wore shorts and a halter top and she had a baby in a stroller. Seeing her flash between the cars as they passed gave an effect like a series of still photos. She looked as hot as me standing there in the sun.

I thought about turning around and heading out South First Street to see the spot where my grandmother's house used to be, that big old house with stained-glass windows and a wide front porch. But just then the last car went by, and I decided I'd head out to the highway like I first planned. There wasn't any point in going to South First anyway, since they'd torn the house down to put in a Diamond Shamrock station and I knew that would only make me feel worse.

So I walked on, down the dusty streets, wondering when they stopped having cabooses on the ends of trains.

MARK SMITH

Wrote "Back From the West" (Vol. 2, No. 5), "Reality Check" (Vol. 2, No. 6), "Slime" (Vol. 3, No. 1), "Doing Lunch" (Vol. 3, No. 1), "Snapper" (Vol. 3, No. 2), "Innocent Bystander" (Vol. 3, No. 3), and "Sue and Frank" (Vol. 3, No. 5). He lives in Austin, Texas. His first book of short stories, Riddle *(Argo Press) won the 1992 Austin Book Award. His first children's book,* Slosh, *will be published in 1997.*

D a n i e l l e

EDWARD ASHTON

The dividing line between love and obsession can be as thin as a pane of glass.

SHE WORKS IN MY BUILDING. I SEE HER SOMETIMES in the stairwell and sometimes in the halls. She's taller than I am, over six feet, with long black hair and pale blue eyes and a neck that curves up from her collar like a swan's. Her name is Danielle, and if I'm feeling brave I might say "Hello, Danielle," or "Good morning, Danielle," or even something about her jacket or dress, how she wears it very well. She often says thank you if I say something nice, but she never says anything unless I speak first. In fact, I don't believe she knows my name, though we've been working in the same building for almost two years.

My wife's name is Laura. When I get home from work she says, "How were things at work today? How's Danielle?" She knows about Danielle because I talk in my sleep. I tell her things are the same as always, that she doesn't know I'm alive. She says I should let her know if things change, because she has a bag packed and ready. I've looked for this bag and have never actually found it, but because we have no children I consider it a credible threat.

Danielle lives alone in a one-story cottage on Herkimer Street. I know this because a year ago I found her address in the telephone book, and since then I've occasionally

driven past her house on my way to somewhere else. The neighborhood is quiet and clean. In the daytime children play kickball in the street, and at night I've seen couples and old people walking up and down the block. I have never seen Danielle out walking, either alone or with others. Once, in a moment of weakness, I parked across the street from her house and sat watching her through an open window as she ate her dinner and worked a crossword puzzle in an easy chair. She was wearing glasses, which she never does at work, and she was dressed in an old rumpled sweatshirt and torn denim jeans. You'd think this might tarnish my image of her, but in fact I found her more attractive then than I had before. When she set aside her puzzle, stood, stretched, and went off to bed, I had a terrible urge to slink around to the back of her house, to try to find her bedroom window, to watch her as she slept. But I haven't sunk to quite that level yet.

Laura was waiting when I got home that night, demanding to know where I'd been. I told her I'd been drinking at a bar, but there was no alcohol on my breath, so she knew that was a lie. She said that if I'd smelled of perfume she would have left me on the spot, but since I didn't I'd probably only been hanging around outside her window masturbating, which she supposed was all right if that was as far as it went. I wanted to explain to her that in fact there was nothing sexual in the incident at all, but I could see that this wasn't something she could discuss rationally. In the end I just nodded and left it at that.

I have a friend at work named Brian. He has an office across the hall from mine. He's just turned forty and has been married and divorced three times in the past ten years. He advises me to leave Laura—or, more likely, to coerce her into leaving me—and then to pursue and win over Danielle. I haven't done this for two reasons: I don't believe that Danielle would have me, and I truly would miss my wife, who is an excellent cook and a good conversationalist. Brian has said more than once that if he ever caught himself thinking of his wife in those terms he'd either divorce her immediately or throw himself off the roof. I think this attitude goes a long way toward explaining his utter failure as a husband. Physical attraction is transitory. The pleasures of the intellect are the only ones that last.

I have a recurring dream in which I'm hiding in the bushes behind Danielle's cottage, peering in her window as she undresses for bed. She peels off layer after layer, but no matter how much clothing she removes, she still has more on underneath, until finally I begin to beat my head against the glass in frustration. She comes to the window then and opens it, but just as she's about to speak I always wake. I've tried many times to fall back asleep and into the dream, but somehow it always comes out twisted—I end up staring in the window at my wife getting undressed. Or, worse yet, it's me in the bedroom and Laura on the outside looking in.

Over lunch I tell Brian about the dream. He laughs and says that if I want to get over my frustration I should come to his apartment that evening, and that I should bring along a twelve-pack of beer. When I get there we sit at his kitchen table for a while, drinking and talking about work and women and whether the Pirates still have a chance at the pennant. I don't drink very often, and by the time we've gone through four or five beers each I'm feeling light-headed and giddy. Brian asks if I want to see something and I say yes, mostly because I feel a need to get up and move around, so we go into his front room and he puts in a black-and-white videotape of himself having sex with a woman who looks like Danielle. She's on top of him, straddling his hips, rocking forward and backward and grunting each time. Brian on the tape turns and winks at the camera. Brian sitting beside me bursts out laughing. I lean forward, put my head between my knees, and squeeze my eyes shut. The room is spinning and my pulse is racing and I'm afraid I'm having some sort of attack. Brian tells me to sit up, that I'm missing the best part. My stomach is heaving and Danielle is crying out to God and Jesus and Brian is laughing and fluid is pouring out of my mouth and splashing onto the carpet. I press my hands to my ears and wait for the screaming to stop.

He puts in a black-and-white videotape of himself having sex with a woman who looks like Danielle. She's on top of him, straddling his hips, rocking forward and backward and grunting each time.

I see Danielle in the stairwell at work the next day, coming up to the fourth floor as I'm going down. I don't say hello. She looks up with a half-smile when she sees me, but as we come closer she glances away, and she turns to avoid brushing against me as we pass.

A MONTH OR SO AFTER THAT, LAURA SHAKES ME OUT of a sound sleep at five in the morning and asks me if something is wrong.

"Is there trouble in paradise?" she says. "You haven't mentioned your girlfriend in weeks."

I close my eyes and say I don't have a girlfriend. I only have a wife. I feel Laura lean closer then, feel her breath warm in my ear.

"That's right," she whispers. "You do have a wife." She kisses my ear, kisses my cheek, kisses my mouth. She pulls her nightgown off over her head and climbs on top of me, and we make love for the first time in the better part

of a year. And it's fine, it's good, until Laura began to shake and cry out and I think of Danielle and the video and I just can't do it. I can't quite get there. I pretend, but I think Laura knows, because she doesn't say anything to me when we're finished. She just pulls on her nightgown and goes into the bathroom, and I fall asleep listening to the water running and dream that I'm in Danielle's bed and it's her in the shower and not my wife. When I wake the next morning, there's a note taped to the headboard. "I'll be at my sister's," it says. "Get this out of your system. Then give me a call."

Two days later I'm drinking at the bar in a Mexican restaurant after work when Danielle walks in. She looks once around the place, and I half-expect her to leave when she sees me. But she has no idea that there's anything between us, of course, and in fact she comes over to the bar and sits down two stools away from me. She orders a strawberry Margarita. I'm hardly aware that I'm staring at her until she turns and sees me.

"Oh, hello," she says. "Don't I know you from work?"

"Not really," I say. "I have an office on the fourth floor."

"Right, but—" She hesitates, looks confused for a moment. "You used to say hello to me almost every day, didn't you? But you don't anymore. Did I do something rotten to you?"

"Well," I say, "my wife just left me because of you. But I don't suppose that's entirely your fault."

"Oh." She's confused again, not sure if I'm trying to be funny. I smile and shake my head, and she takes that as her cue to laugh. The bartender brings her drink. She pays him, leaves a quarter on the bar as a tip.

"So really," she says. "Did I take your parking space or something? If I did, I'm sorry, because you really used to brighten up my day."

"No," I say. "You didn't do anything. I've just had a lot of things on my mind lately. I'm sure I'll be back to my old self soon."

"That's good," she says. The hostess calls my name. Danielle nods and smiles. I wish her good night.

I drive up and down Herkimer street six times that night before I work up the courage to park. I leave my car two blocks away from Danielle's, for fear that she might look out the window and recognize it. When I get to her cottage the street is deserted. Danielle is in the front room, half asleep in front of the television. I walk up the driveway and around the side of the house, trying not to look like a burglar until I'm out of view of the street. The first window around back is her bedroom. Light from the hallway falls across her pillows and onto the floor. She has a dozen stuffed animals at the foot of her bed. I wait for five minutes, then ten. At least her neighbors haven't called the police. I lean my forehead against the glass and close my eyes. It's a warm, clear night, with just a hint of a breeze, and crickets are singing in the backyard...

And then there is light. My eyes snap open and she's standing there, her hand still on the light switch, only ten feet and a pane of glass between us. A bathrobe hangs around her shoulders, but it's open in the front and she's wearing nothing underneath. Her breasts are sagging heavily and she needs to shave her legs. She's looking straight into my eyes.

I jerk back from the window, turn and bolt around the side of the house and across the front lawn. No casual pretenses now, I'm running flat-out down the middle of the street, expecting every moment to hear her screaming behind me. But I never do, and when I get home there are no policemen waiting at my door, and the next morning when I pass Danielle in the stairwell at work she smiles and nods.

THAT NIGHT I HAVE A NEW DREAM. I'M STANDING outside Danielle's window again, but when the light comes on it's not her bedroom I'm looking into, but my own. Laura slides the window up for me. She offers me her hand.

EDWARD ASHTON

Wrote "The Rock" (Vol. 5, No. 3). He is a research engineer by necessity and a fiction writer by choice. His work has appeared in a number of online and print magazines, including Blue Penny Quarterly, Painted Hills Review, Brownstone Quarterly, *and* The Pearl. *He currently lives and works in Washington, D.C.*

Other Flesh

PAT JOHANNESON

Today criminals can change identities with a fake passport or driver's license. But tomorrow…

THE OLD GUY ON THE TABLE DIDN'T LOOK CAPABLE of hurting anyone, much less killing them. That was good. My rep depended on it.

The wires retracted into their housing in the wall, which melted back into its Dali camo. *Disintegration of the Persistence of Vision*, this time. Last time it'd been the *Last Supper*, making the lapsed Catholic in me feel kind of creepy. Jesus' eyes in my back, staring me down as I checked the hotline to find her voice there. "Help me." It always started like that. I decided I should probably edit the *Last Supper* out of the playback loop when I got the chance.

I glanced at the guy's brain and the worms were busy doing their thing, crawling on the contacts, converting the metal to gray tissue. In about ten minutes there would be nothing on a medical scan of this guy's head to show that he'd been plugged into a dumper, nothing abnormal in his head at all—just a few patches of dead tissue. Normal for a senior citizen.

I zipped him up, glued the rug down—standard old-man–white-with-a-touch-of-yellow hair—and wheeled him into the wake-up room, full of doctor-esque toys. I even had a salt shaker dressed up to look like a medical instrument. Sarcasm is my middle name. John Sarcasm Smith, you'll understand if I don't shake hands, but I've gotta wash the blood off first. Which I did, at a stainless-steel basin.

He woke up in about an hour and I told him not to drive for at least four days—you just can't force-learn everything when you get a brand new body. I told him to walk six blocks west and catch a cab.

Four hours ago he'd been a devastatingly gorgeous redhead with three corpses on her conscience and the bad fortune to have left blood on the last victim, enough for a tight-scope genotype. Watching him walk away, I wondered if he'd notice the absence of breasts and how it made his back hurt less. At least he didn't have the swaying hips of the last female-to-male I'd done.

I watched my work walk away, then I went into the house and called Cardinal Points, telling them to send a cab to the twelve-hundred block of Parkwest.

I USED TO WORK FOR LOCKHEED, AND IF THAT MEANS nothing to you, then you haven't been keeping up with USASF declassification.

I was on the team working on the interhook, the biomechanical interface between pilot and craft. I was one of the middle-level techs on the bio side of things, with a high enough security clearance to have more than a faint idea what I might be doing. My specialty was biological memory storage. The sky over White Sands was full of warbirds, mainly old-stock F/A-23 Bloodhawks and EA-91 Eagle Eyes. The planes weren't the experimental part of the project; the pilots were.

Four hours ago he'd been a devastatingly gorgeous redhead with three corpses on her conscience and the bad fortune to have left blood on the last victim.

Yeah, you say, I read about it in *Popular Whatever,* so what? But this was sixteen years ago, long before anyone outside of a tight circle of Aerospace Force brass knew what was going on. I didn't really know; I guessed at some of it but I told no one. The death penalty was in effect; it was wartime, remember?

What war? The Big Fizzle. The one where we were gonna kick some serious Second Soviet ass, except they crumbled. Hard to believe we took 'em seriously again, ain't it? But there you go again, forgetting historical context.

Anyway, the pilots were the experiment.

MY PHONE RANG.

My phone *never* rings. No one has the number. I've got a device over the output on it that prevents my name and number from ever leaving my house.

So my phone rang and I thought, *Shit*.

I answered it, though. What else am I gonna do? If it's cops they've got a lot of nerve, warning me, and if it's anyone else I wanna know where they got the number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Philip."

"Sorry, I don't know any—"

"Cut it," he said. "Don't bother ducking. It's Genera."

Genera? Vaguely familiar— "Hi." Nobody's called me Philip since I quit answering to it. Fourteen years ago.

"I understand that you've got a business going. Profitable."

"From who?"

"Never mind that. I need your services."

"Go through the usual channels."

"Wait on a—"

I unplugged the phone. Ten minutes later I plugged it back in and it was, of course, ringing.

"*What*, goddamn it?"

"Philip, that was rude. I've never had to use the redial on this phone, you know that?"

"I care."

"It works. Regardless, I need your services. A friend of mine requires a body."

"This better be secure. The phone."

"Of course it is." Genera—now I remembered. Cop, ex-cop. Couldn't remember his real name, not right now. I'd done bodywork for him once. But how'd he get my number? It didn't matter. Not right now, anyway.

"All right," I said, "I'll bite."

"New body."

"Well, duh. Male, female? I need an age, height—"

"I've got a blueprint for you. How much?"

"Remember last time?"

"Yeah."

"Add four hundred percent."

"All right." My price had actually only gone up three hundred, but I figured he owed me for the phone call. The personal touch, you know?

THE SKY WAS GRAY AND I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN something was going on just from that. I'm omen-driven; things that look wrong sometimes have special significance for me. Red sky at night, sparrows take flight. I'm still kicking myself.

But I don't wanna give too much away.

I met Genera—turns out William Carlyle is his real name—in a small restaurant that served Szechuan food. I had something green with too much curry. Soy sauce on it didn't help.

"So where'd you get my phone number? And where'd you get my name?" Genera looked pretty much like I remembered him. The hair had gone gray, the stomach had expanded, but hey, same deal with me. I allow myself to look middle-aged. It helps me blend into my 'hood.

"Your name was easy. They've got a file at the PD."

"You're cop again? I have a gun, you know."

"Yeah, but you didn't bring it."

Damn, he was slick. I hadn't even seen him scan me. Unless he had a cohort, which was unlikely.

"And no, I'm not cop. They just have, um, unimaginative passcodes."

"Oh." I shoveled green-black rice into my mouth; tried to, but I'm bad with chopsticks. "The blueprint."

"Yeah. Actually, you should already have it."

"Huh?"

"In your computer."

"Fuck that. You couldn't have hacked it, it's not connected." Quite deliberately, I might add.

"No, but it *is* powered on."

"Uh-huh," trying to see his point.

"That's all my hackboy needs."

"Bullshit."

"Check it and see."

At least he paid for lunch.

IT WAS RAINING WHEN I PULLED IN BACK AT MY house, and that was just another omen. The weatherman, lying bastard, had called for clear and sunny the rest of the week. There was a niggling feeling in my hindbrain that told me that something was off here, but I sat down at my computer anyway. The words floated in front of my eyes:

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Warning — New File in Tree:
"genera/gotcha ashole." Disposition?
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"Get a hackboy who can spell," I said out loud.

Disposition? it repeated. I wished I'd bought voice chips that didn't sound like Majel Barrett.

"Clear it and then run it," I said.

A pause. *File is clean.* Not viral, at least not in any way that Majel could find. *Running. File is a standard image file with text attachment.*

Deep breath. "Go," I said.

THE IMAGE WAS A 3V OF A MALE, 172CM TALL, AGE about thirty-nine. Everything was pretty average in size and shape; the text said that he was to have green eyes and thinning brown hair. You'd pass him on the street and never know he'd been someone else days ago.

The body was easy enough. I went into the back, through the hidden door, and grabbed a beer and a blue-labeled test tube. Then I went and sat on my veranda, the rain drumming on the green corrugated plastic above me, and watched the slanting gray as it obliterated any visibility out there, musing over the last time I'd been given a really *hard* one.

Green eyes, brown hair, that was easy. Thinning brown hair, I'd have to work in a gene for male pattern baldness. Fine, easy. The challenge was gone. But it was still big goddamn money, you betcha. That was why I was still doing it, I think.

I decided I'd give him a mole, too. On the left foot, just above the heel. Gotta sign it somehow.

The sky was clearing later on when I came back up out of my fugue. I do that sometimes, get lost inside my head, thinking about the engineering. My beer was warm and flat and still half there, and the sun was setting. I finished the beer and went down to the lab.

IN FOUR DAYS HE WAS BORN, A *TABULA RASA* FOR ME to imprint Genera's friend into. The new genotype is

precisely that, a *brand new* genotype, not in the police records or anyone else's, for that matter. They're all grown from clones, but I tinker with them enough to make them all unique.

And the cloning is only the least illegal part of the whole deal.

I DIALED MY HOTLINE AND LISTENED TO GENERA saying he was ready when I was. At least he hadn't called me again.

We met at a Greek place up the street and around the corner from the curry-intensive Szechuan place. I ate something I could pronounce and Genera ate something I couldn't.

Halfway through I told him I was ready. He said his hackboy was fourteen and so it was no wonder he couldn't spell. I told him that was pathetic and he handed me the rest of my money, cash, in the time-honored black briefcase. I named a place for the pickup and told him I didn't want to see his ugly face again. He grinned and told me that wasn't what his women said. I left.

I should have killed him, but there was no quiet way to do it. Plus all I had was my taser.

Besides, I didn't *know*.

THE BODY WAS LYING ON THE TABLE. THE GUY I WAS transferring told me he'd never heard of this shit before, if it wasn't for Genera it'd just be a matter of time before the rape-murder cops got him on the genotyping. I hate hearing shit like that. I'd as soon not know about what a client did. Guaranteed it's gonna be bad.

So I told him to lie down and attached the electrodes to his forehead, the sleep inducers.

When he was asleep I wheeled him to the real lab, opened up his skull, shoved the metal transfer contacts in, and told the Dali to dissolve and gimme the wires.

The actual transfer is computer-controlled; once I connect the wires, I might as well have a beer. I never do. I feel like I should at least supervise, even though if anything goes wrong I still have to depend on the computer. My reflexes are nowhere near fast enough, and neither is my mind.

So I hit the switch and watched the green lights flicker. Nothing went red, or even yellow. That only happened once, a red, and the computer caught it in time. No troubles.

I BUILT THIS STUFF AFTER THE INTERHOOK PROJECT, ten years ago. I've used it nineteen times since then. I know it intimately.

The electronics are cobbled together from the flight system interface, the place where the plane dumps itself into the pilot. In the interhook, the pilot's senses are replaced. Taste, for instance, becomes fuel mix; a sweet taste is ideal, bitter is too lean, salty is too rich. Sight is suddenly the cartographic outlay of the terrain, the targeting system. The plane's skin becomes the pilot's flesh. Pain, depending on the type and location and intensity, can indicate a hull breach or a failing engine or a low fuel tank.

You don't want a bomber pilot to freeze up just because he's going to drop an H or three. So you say some words to him and he's yours, wide open, do anything you say. Drop them bombs, soldier.

My use of this technology, as far as I'm concerned, is simply the next logical step. Dumping the personality of one body into another is actually a two-step process: first the original's mind is transferred to a buffer, a truly vast buffer, made up of a generally-inert cloned brain, and then the buffer is dumped to the new body. Two dumps for the price of one.

This is the most illegal part of my work; most of the technology I deal with is still technically classified. Don't ask me to tell you how I got it. I have no intention of giving a friend the death penalty.

WHEN HIS GREEN EYES TWITCHED OPEN HE SAID, "Philip Cabrierre, you are under arrest. You have the right—"

"Genera, you shit," I said.

"—to remain silent, anything you say—"

"Dollhouse," I said.

"—can and will be used against you in a court—"

"Mambo," I said.

"—of law, you have the right to an—"

"Shitheel," I said.

"—attorney or an attorney program, if you cannot afford one—"

"F-stop," I said.

"—one will be…" He sort of trailed off there. First time I'd ever had to use the shutdown phrase.

In the interhook there is provision for a hypnotic trigger sequence. In the military it's generally used to induce a pilot to carry out his mission. You don't want a bomber pilot, say, to freeze up just because he's going to drop an H or three on a city full of innocents. So you say some words to him and he's yours, wide open, do anything you say. Drop them bombs, soldier. Then repeat the phrase to close him up again.

"Whose fucking idea was this?" I said, evenly.

"Captain Carlyle," he said.

Captain, huh? Genera, you *shit*.

THEY'D BEEN AFTER ME FOR SEVEN YEARS, HE SAID. Genera—Carlyle—had been a cop all along. They'd bought a bunch of people, not the least of which was that damned redhead I told you about earlier. They had me. This guy's voice wasn't smug, just matter-of-fact. I told him to quit breathing. When he turned that blue color I told him to start again.

Then I sat down and looked into his blank eyes. "You are now under my power," I said. "Your mission"—*should you choose to accept it*, as if he had a choice, wide open like that—"is to find and kill Genera. William Carlyle. You will go to your station house or wherever it is that you came from. You will act normally until you have the opportunity to kill Captain William Carlyle. You will take the first opportunity you see. Do you understand that?"

"Yes." His voice was flat and dull.

"State your name, rank, serial number, and mission for me."

"Sigvaldursson, Davis Anthony. Corporal. Zero one four three three one two eight dash seven B. I am to take the first opportunity I see to kill Captain William Carlyle."

"Good. Now give me a hand here, will you?"

I WATCHED THE WIRES RETRACT AND *CYGNES réfléchis en éléphants* come up. It was weird, lying there on the table while he did all the work.

"Okay," I instructed him, "now seal the scalp and kill the cutout switch." I heard the seal—it never sounded quite so wet before—as my forehead closed back up. Then all sensation was back and I had one hell of a headache.

I stood up anyway. "The blonde wig." I looked down at my new bustline and was impressed. He'd done a good job. Too bad I couldn't hire him on as permanent help. But he had other uses. "Yeah, that one." I'd have to get a hair graft later. The wig would do for now.

"DOLLHOUSE," I MURMURED TO HIM, "MAMBO, shitheel, f-stop," and then I walked away. I glanced back over my shoulder at him and he was rubbing his eyes, then eyeing my butt in the snug shorts I'd picked. Yeah, look real hard, boy. Just another drop-dead-gorgeous girl you'll never get to know.

That was two weeks ago. I've been watching the news, but I still haven't seen anything about Genera. Maybe the hypnotic suggestion doesn't work after the second code phrase.

Maybe I'll have to do it myself. I'll give Sigvaldursson another week, and then I think I'll buy a gun. Genera won't even see it coming.

I'm almost looking forward to it.

PAT JOHANNESON

Wrote "Chronicler" (Vol. 5, No. 4) and "Watching You" (Vol. 5, No. 5). He has lived most of his life in Manitoba, and has been the computer operator at Brandon University for over two years now. His home on the Web is at <http://www.brandonu.ca/~johannes/>.

Business

SUNG J. WOO

Whoever said there's no honor among thieves was right. Trust, friendship, and loyalty, sure—but mostly there's just policy.

THERE WERE FIVE OF US IN THE BATHROOM—NOT including Chuckie—Eduardo, Two-Tone, Grease, Tony, and of course, me. I tiptoed and stretched, but I still couldn't see over Two-Tone's huge head. Two-Tone smelled of something awful, a cross between garlic, rotten cheese, and the locker room at the Y.

"Why the fuck do all you guys have to be here?" Chuckie said, his pants down, his face red, sitting on the toilet.

"Because we don't trust you, that's why, Chuckie," Eduardo said. "Who knows, maybe you'll swallow it, you know?"

"Give me a fucking break," Chuckie said. "Is it my fault I got constipated? It's all that garlic shit pizza we ate."

"Hey, I liked that stuff," Two-Tone said. "My mother used to make it all the time."

"Shut up," Eduardo said, "you guys are giving me a headache." He sat down on the edge of the bathtub.

"Oh shit," Chuckie said, "it's ripping. I can't do this, Eduardo." I crouched down and looked at his bright red face between Two-Tone's legs.

"You get your asshole ripped," Eduardo said, "we can sew it up. Grease's real good at that, right?"

"I ain't touching nowhere nohow," Grease said. "I ain't going near his hole."

And everyone laughed, even Eduardo, even Chuckie.

"Oh shit!" Chuckie screamed. "Oh shit oh shit oh shit it's coming out, oh shit!" His face turned purple and he was shaking all over.

"Holy shit," Grease said, running out of the bathroom. Then Two-Tone, Tony, and finally me. I slammed the door behind me.

"What the fuck was that he ate that stinks so bad?" Two-Tone asked us, laughing.

"And Eduardo's still with him," Tony said. "I guess he really doesn't trust him."

Me and Grease and Two-Tone exchanged looks. Eduardo trusted Chuckie; Eduardo trusted all of us. Tony had been with us for the last couple of months and he still didn't understand. He was a bit slow but pretty good at busting into safes.

"It's okay, Chuckie," Eduardo was saying in the bathroom. We all leaned closer to the door to listen. "You're doing fine."

Then silence—then a whole bunch of grunts—then a final, whopping yell of pain and relief. After a couple minutes of waiting, Eduardo came out.

"Pee-yoo, man," Grease said, clamping his nose shut with his fingers. "Now you smell like shit."

"Shit or not, he's done, and it's out," Eduardo said. Chuckie followed him out, still adjusting his belt and tucking in his black Ozzy Osbourne t-shirt, which had big dark spots under his armpits.

The bathroom still stunk, but we all had to look. After all, it was ours.

The log was green and brown and really thick, almost the girth of a Coke can. And it looked really hard, not the usual smoothness of regular shit. It had cracks and dimples and had a shiny surface, like it was glazed. A few droplets of blood were dissolving into the water, wavering like cigarette smoke in still air.

"Where the fuck is it?" Grease asked.

A bamboo chopstick in hand, Eduardo slowly spun the log around. And when we saw the other side, it was there, a bright red ruby ring stuck smack in the middle.

"Oh shit," Chuckie said, "it's ripping. I can't do this, Eduardo." I crouched down and looked at his bright red face between Two-Tone's legs.

We all left the bathroom and went into the kitchen. I was starving for some strange reason, and we still had some roast chicken left over from the night before.

"So who's gonna take it out?" I said, picking at the chicken.

"Ain't me," Grease said. "I say whoever shat the fucking thing go get it."

Chuckie waved him off. "You want it, you get it yourself. I've done my tour of duty today." Feeling his butt, he added, "Maybe forever."

So we were arguing, horsing around, having some fun now because the worst was over. We got away from customs and we made it back here and Chuckie had shat and we didn't even see Tony leaving the kitchen and going into the bathroom, no, none of us saw it.

"You hear that?" Eduardo said.

"No," I said, unable to break free from his surprised gray eyes. It was the sound of someone taking a leak.

"Oh my fucking God," Grease and Two-Tone said at the same time, and we all ran to the bathroom.

Tony was there flicking his dick and pulling down the flush at the same time. There was only one chance, and

Eduardo dropped to the floor and shoved his hand into the toilet as the water swirled and swirled into the tunnel.

We all held our breath. Tony held onto his penis, wondering what all the problem was. Then he realized suddenly and left his dick hanging out of his fly. "Oh shit, oh shit," he said jumping up and down, looking like some kid needing to go to the bathroom. "I'm so fucking stupid," he said.

All eyes were on Eduardo and his right hand shoved deep into the toilet. "Got something," he said, and pulled his hand out of the water. His hand had a part of the log, only about half of it.

It was breathless. Nobody said anything, we just opened our eyes and hoped. Eduardo slowly opened his hand—he had crushed some of the shit, but it was still together.

But nothing. He was holding the end without the ruby.

I laughed. What else could I do? I laughed and laughed until somebody shoved a hand full of shit into my face. Then everybody else started laughing, so I laughed again, knowing little else to do. What can you do but laugh at something like that?

IT'S THAT FEELING AT THE PIT OF YOUR STOMACH, that empty and hollow churning—butterflies, some people call it. You've done something wrong, and this *man*—this *police man* with his red and white lights and his flashlight—is going to get you.

I'm talking about a speeding ticket here. Since almost everyone has been stopped by a cop once or another, that's a good place to start.

They make you feel like a kid, even if you're past retirement and the cop is just out of high school. I've seen the breakdown, the sweat forming on the brows while the cop adjusts his cap a little bit, like he's annoyed at everything that you do.

So it's that feeling, but multiplied one thousand, ten thousand, a million times. You don't understand the rush, the high. You can only get it when you have a pound of hash stuffed under your seat and the cop is checking out your license, staring at your ugly mug. You can barely keep from laughing because you're free. Until you break yourself away from the law and government and all that stuff, you'll be trapped forever in a mindless maze. Whenever we go on road trips, we stop at a 7-11 and hold one up. Just one, because once you hold up two, you're giving them a line. And lines have a way of pointing.

These guys say they don't have the combination to the safe, who cares? That's what Tony's there for. We just make sure they don't press any buttons or anything like that. We tape them up good with duct tape, which every 7-11 has, and I stick one of the workers in the toilet feet first, threatening to zap him while Grease fucks around with his 12-gauge.

And the whole time we're doing this, I'm thinking *I'm free*. I'm free to do whatever I want, whenever I want, whoever I want.

Just last week I had the stash under my car when the cop pulled me over and the whole time I'm trying really hard not to laugh. Because if I laugh (I have a crazy sounding laugh, "like someone rubbing two balloons together and playing the harmonica at the same time," Grease once told me), it's all over.

So that's what I'm thinking when the cop is looking over my license, that if I slip, I'm finished. It's like thinking about my stinky grandmother when I'm having sex, only a little different. In both cases, it keeps me from laughing, which is the important thing.

I THINK ALL FIVE OF US HAVE DONE TIME AT ONE POINT or another. It happens—it only takes one fuckup to get caught. Then you're in prison and there isn't a whole lot you can do about it. You just start counting the days.

I was in for armed robbery and kidnapping, for holding up one of those fancy clothing stores downtown. They were having their annual One Day Sale and a friend had told me they cleared more than a hundred grand on that day. Of course, security would have been beefed up—so going up to the counter and yelling for money would have been suicide. So I came up with a very smart plan (I thought it was smart, anyway).

I went into the store dressed in my best cloths and took a pair of pants into the dressing room. Inside one of the cubicles, I took out both my guns, sat down on the bench, and waited. Eventually they would come, because they always did. And sure enough, after a half-hour wait, they arrived.

"After Daddy tries this on, you tell me what you think, okay?" a voice said from the cubicle next to me, a pleasant news anchorman's voice.

"Yes, Daddy," a little girl said from outside the cubicle.

"Just wait out there, Maggie, I'll be right out," he said, unzipping his pants. It was time to make my move. I walked out. The girl had beautiful red curls, the dripping kind, like Slinkys. She looked at me and smiled but didn't say anything. Little kids and I usually get along, I think mostly because I'm not much taller than they are.

I walked behind her and put my hand over her mouth, her head shoved tight against my chest. Her eyes were about to pop out of their sockets when I showed her my gun. I thought she would bite my hand, but instead she became completely calm, as if she were glad to see the gun. It's amazing what television has done to these kids.

I dragged the kid back into my dressing cubicle and closed the door, at which point my neighbor finished putting his new pair of pants on.

"Maggie?" he said uncertainly.

"Over here," I said. And I heard the tightening up of every muscle in his body. "Don't even think about it," I said. "Unless you want your little darling to look like Swiss cheese." I love saying that kind of stuff.

"Oh Lord," he said.

I opened the door and let him in. It was a big dressing area, enough to fit two adults and a kid comfortably. I had my gun on Maggie's head, who didn't seem a bit nervous.

"I'm not going to kill your kid," I said.

"Thank God," he said.

"If you do what I want you to do."

"Oh Lord," he said. He was fat and bald and looked early thirty-ish.

"You're a deeply religious man, aren't you?"

"No," he said. "No. Only in emergencies."

I tried hard not to laugh. "Here's what I want you to do," I said, handing him my second pistol. You can always tell when someone is holding a gun for the very first time. They have an awed look about them, as if they were holding something sacred. "I want you to go outside, go up to the counter, and have all the cash taken out of all the drawers and anything else valuable they have stashed in there." I paused. "Announce yourself as 'Squeaky Norman' from the 'Zippadee-Dooda Money Laundry Service.'" At this point I took the gun off of Maggie.

"Zippadee-Dooda, I got it," he said, and pointed his gun at me, quick as a tiger. "Let go of my daughter."

I put my gun back into my belt. "It's not loaded, Norman," I said. Eyes closed, he pulled the trigger—without hesitation—and it went *click*. "Great," I said. "Now I know for sure you can do the job. If you can kill someone as sweet as me, you can certainly rob a store, can't you?" I told him to meet me at the corner of 6th and Brown, in front of the deli, when he was through with his job.

I pushed him out the cubicle and waited with Maggie, who wasn't saying a word. So I listened to the goings on outside. "I'm Squeaky Norma, from the Zippadee-Dooda Money Cleaning Service," he was yelling. Close enough, so he got a couple of words wrong. After all, he was under a lot of pressure. I giggled.

"Hey mister," Maggie said, pointing a gun at my butt. I went for my own, but it was gone. She had somehow taken it out—but how? To this day, I still don't know what happened.

I was going to say something like "You don't know what you're doing," but she didn't even wait for that. She held the gun with both hands, shot it, shot off my left buttcheek, and the gun went flying from the recoil.

I fell down and she ran right past me, not even giving me a passing glance, and while I was wondering whether there was too much violence on TV, the ambulance people and the police officers landed next to me one by one like vultures. They played musical chairs on the bench until a pair of men in white suits carted me away.

SO I WAS SERVING MY FIVE YEAR SENTENCE IN Greenwood and that's where I got to know Eduardo. Although we had both arrived around the same time and were serving out similar sentences (his was also for armed robbery, but with first degree manslaughter instead of kidnap), we didn't actually get to know each other until the last year of our stay. Greenwood was a big place, holding as many as four thousand people. It was divided into two sections, North and West, and each of those sections were subdivided into four more sections, A, B, C, and D. I lived in North C, and Eduardo lived in West D, so that's why we never saw each other.

"I'm going straight," Eduardo said when I asked him what he was going to do. That was a polite way for him to say that he didn't want me to be a part of his business.

But because of some mix-up, both Eduardo and I ended up in the same softball team that last year, me at second and Eduardo at short. We got to know each other pretty well on and off the field. He seemed like a straight arrow to me, someone who you'd never expect to be involved with my kind of business. But once you got to know him, you knew that there was no other kind of life for Eduardo. Like me, he had to be free. Law and order were things to be ignored, not followed.

ALTHOUGH EVERYONE TALKED ABOUT THEIR FUTURE plans, it was a serious subject between someone like me and Eduardo since our time was up in a couple of months. Believe it or not, you get used to prison life. After a couple of months, you get into a groove. People can get used to just about anything.

"I'm going straight," Eduardo said when I asked him what he was going to do. "My brother works in construction, and he can probably get me a job."

"Oh," I said. That was a polite way for him to say that he didn't want me to be a part of his business.

"What are your plans?" he asked me.

"Not sure," I said. "Not straight, that's for sure."

He nodded and smiled. "We better take the field."

The game went smoothly until the sixth inning, when the catcher from the West team ran over Eduardo in order

to prevent a double play. It wasn't a slide—it was a football tackle that knocked Eduardo flat on his back.

A fight broke in almost every single game we played, so this was no big deal. Eduardo got up and kicked the catcher in the stomach. From his stance, it was obvious Eduardo had done some Thai boxing, fists held up next to his head, ready for anything. Every time the catcher came close to him, Eduardo kicked him somewhere and kept him away. After his fifth attempt, the catcher whipped out a knife from his ankle and slashed Eduardo's leg.

It didn't take long for Eduardo, even with one of his legs injured, to take the knife away from the catcher. Eduardo had him down and was about to stick the knife somewhere when I kicked it out of his hand.

He came after me, but I kicked him in the injured leg, which immediately knocked him down to the ground. Then the guards came, and it was over.

EDUARDO AND I DIDN'T TALK FOR THE REST OF THE time at Greenwood, not until the last day anyway. I was afraid he was angry at me, and with so little time left, avoiding him wasn't a very big deal. Softball was over, red and brown leaves were blowing in from somewhere outside, and freedom was a few days away.

I was in the rec room, watching a rerun of *Barnaby Jones*. I was surprised to find myself feeling nostalgic—this was the last time I was going to be in this room, the last time I was going to have to move the chair under the television, step up, and pull on the on-off knob. I was lost deep in my thoughts when Eduardo sat down next to me. It took me a few minutes before I realized he was there. He didn't say anything to me, so I didn't say anything back. Barnaby, a gun ready in his hand, was running after a man in a rabbit suit.

"I've been thinking," Eduardo said.

I didn't say anything.

"I'm not going into construction," he said. And that's all he really had to say. I still didn't say anything. Barnaby had caught up to the man in the rabbit suit. "Put your hands up," he said, and the rabbit-man, complete with painted whiskers and a bright red nose, slowly raised his hands in the air.

"FOR A RETARD, HE GOT US PRETTY GOOD," EDUARDO said. I looked at Chuckie in confusion. "I just got off the phone with Merlo. Tony sold the ruby to Montrose."

"Sold it?" Two-Tone asked, rocking his huge head side to side. It was a habit of his whenever he didn't understand something. Two-Tone and Grease were playing ping-pong. I had winners.

"It couldn't have been all an act, though," I said, looking at Eduardo. I could tell what he was thinking. "Working for somebody else."

"Bingo." Eduardo watched the little white ball go to and fro. "He didn't sell it to just anybody, he sold it to Montrose."

"That ties him with our good friend Columbus," Chuckie said.

"Columbus," Eduardo said.

"Shit!" Two-Tone blew an easy shot.

"What are we gonna do about it?" Chuckie asked.

"Slice slice slice the motherfucker," Grease said, slamming the tiny ball down the line.

"Shit," Two-Tone said, tossing me the paddle. "Your turn." Grease was on a hot streak, and I was worse at this game than Two-Tone.

Eduardo walked over to the balcony, lost in his thoughts. Chuckie and Two-Tone were watching *Mighty Mouse* on TV. And Grease was already trouncing me with his spin serves.

Eduardo walked back in from the balcony and picked up the phone. Pushing a couple of buttons, he went back out to the balcony. It was a brief call, but a few seconds later, the phone rang, and he answered it.

"I do believe some rather unappealing events will soon take flight," Grease said in a completely believable British accent.

I nodded, thinking the same thing.

"Get your stuff," Eduardo said to all of us. "We're taking a little trip." We all looked at him, wondering where we were going. "About a three-and-a-half hour drive up north. We'll take the van."

"You found Tony," Chuckie said.

"At a motel in Upper Wayne," Eduardo said. "Come on, let's get this over with."

IN THE BEGINNING, IT WAS ME, EDUARDO, AND Chuckie. Chuckie was a serious bookie, and for the first couple of months we lived with him and his girlfriend in a little shack overlooking the ocean. Eduardo knew Chuckie from his hometown. According to legend, they've been bad ever since the second grade, when they stole cigarettes from the teacher's lounge.

The first thing we did when we got out of Greenwood was household robbery. We scouted the upper middle class neighborhoods and got them one by one. After the fifth one or so, each town would set up a neighborhood watch—which was a signal for us to move onto the next town. "Then after a couple of months, we can go back for a couple more jobs or so," Eduardo said. He compared it to crop rotation—by not overdoing any of the towns and going back to them after a short wait, we could keep the jobs continuously flowing.

Eduardo was a natural-born leader, one of those types that people helplessly turn to for whatever reason. He was like a wise old man, a father, and a mother—everything.

He was also a visionary, but not a talker. He was a doer. What he wanted he got, but he never got it alone. He needed us like we need him.

Grease was the next to arrive, the blackest man I'd ever seen. At night all you could see were his eyes, and maybe his teeth if he were smiling, which wasn't often. He was from West Virginia, and before we picked him up he owed some serious money. Eduardo lent him thirty grand out of his own pocket, which still has Chuckie and me wondering just what was going through his mind. I mean he made the right call and all—Grease turned out to be an essential part of our business—but at the time, the move seemed completely unlike Eduardo.

Grease's real name was Clement something—something really hard to say. Chuckie told me how he got his nickname. Just after turning sixteen, Grease got a job at a diner as a dishwasher. Somebody pissed him off (something to do with his sister, who was murdered when she was just ten), and this is what Grease does: he goes to the thing that fries chicken parts, the hot thing with boiling oil, and he pours it over the guy, head to toe, covers this guy with grease. "Grease! Grease! Grease!" the guy yelled, falling to the floor and tossing and jerking in pain. Then to top it off, Grease takes a match and lights the guy on fire.

Two-Tone was a much easier going guy. He wasn't much for taking care of serious business, but then again, neither was I. Only Eduardo and Grease have killed people. Two-Tone was his real name, the name that was on his birth certificate (he has a copy of it shrunk down to wallet size so he could show it to people). "Dad had a two-tone Chevy Camaro, and that's where I shot out," he told me. "And by the time I was getting hair on my balls, this started to happen," he said, pointing at a part of his head where the hair wasn't as dark as the rest. It was completely natural, a part of his hair turning silvery-white. So the name Two-Tone made more sense than ever. He'd dyed it regularly since he was identified by a witness as a "guy with skunky hair."

Two-Tone was a big guy, and fast, too. When he became a part of our business, we got real serious, going after larger houses in better neighborhoods. Chateaus and mansions, and when Tony came along we got big.

Tony. We knew very little about him. Maybe he wasn't as stupid as we had thought. He didn't seem like a bad guy. Chuckie had known him a long while back, so we thought if Chuckie knew him he was okay.

But now we were going to have to take care of him.

WE DIDN'T TALK VERY MUCH ON THE ROAD. I-75 IS A calm drive, rows of evergreens standing tall and straight, so thick that you can't see anything but brown and green. Every so often there's a sign for adopting a part of the highway for clean-up, so we talked about doing something like that, but we soon fell back to silence.

I think Grease likes the act of killing, but even he doesn't like the silence that comes before death. It's like we're having a pre-funeral. None of us hate Tony, but what he did was unforgivable. We all risked our lives for that ring.

We got to Upper Wayne by sunset. Our motel is right off the highway, Upper Wayne Motel, not terribly creative. The only neon light that works on the sign is the word "Upper," flickering on and off randomly, as if it can't make up its mind.

We asked the motel guy about Tony, and he shook his head. Grease showed him his gun. He gave us a key and told us to go to B8, which was on the second floor, the fourth room on the right.

We used the key and open the door. Tony was in bed, watching TV while munching on some chips and drinking Budweiser. He looked at us and that's all he has to do, that look. Guilt, sadness, self-pity—and at the end of it all, fear. It all came through so clearly that he didn't have to say a single word.

Eduardo and Grease both pointed their guns, and they each fired two bullets, two to the head and two to the heart.

SUNG J. WOO

Wrote "Bleeding Hearts" (Vol. 4, No. 1) and "Nothing, Not a Thing" (Vol. 5, No. 2). He is an Associate Editor with IEEE Transactions/Journals in Piscataway, New Jersey. He was the editor of Whirlwind *<gopher://gopher.etext.org/11/Zines/Whirlwind>.*

Oak, Ax and Raven

G.L. EIKENBERRY

In olden days, life was simpler. All you had to worry about was providing a home and food for your family, and stocking up enough wood for the winter. Oh, and the occasional sentient tree.

SEE HIM? OVER THERE, A FEW YARDS OFF, approaching the stand of youngish oaks. A young peasant by the look of him. Is he trying to grow a beard or just lax about shaving? He seems dressed well enough—at least, well enough for a peasant—the vest is leather, after all. And look at the ax. You can often tell a great deal about a man from the tools he carries, and that ax is quality.

This is the third time he's come back to that particular oak this morning. I'm willing to bet he truly means to put that fine ax to it this time.

"Yes, Flek, I do say so to myself, this is the tree. It is a *special* tree she wants, and it is a special tree I've picked. If I be any judge of tree-flesh at all, Flek, I do say so to myself, I've picked a fine tree. Just the right portion of wisdom, and of straightness, and of—well, the right portion of all those other things she spoke into my forgetful ears. I have picked a tree 'twill suit our purposes wonderfully.

"The bestest part will suit itself to the crafting of the finest of cradles for the son which my Arda will bear me on the other side of this fast-approaching winter. The other parts will feed the rich warmth of our hearth, proof against the cracks and fissures that corrupt our frail habitation.

"Yes, Flek, I do say so to myself, you have chosen well. There will be no fault for Arda to find with this tree."

This peasant is a talkative one! Although I begin to harbor certain doubts concerning the initial assessment of quality. Perhaps he filched the ax.

And lazy! Laziness fertilized with wanton verbiage to yield a most unbecoming harvest. Look at him as he as he pulls a scrap of rough, unmarketable cowhide from his bag and places it on the ground to sit. The cowhide testifies to the premeditated nature of his sloth. He leans himself against the very oak he intends to fell. He looks over this way as if to say he has done something deserving of either rest or the crusts of bread and curds he is this very instant stuffing into his garlic-reeking maw, already over-full with crooked, yellow teeth. He spent the entire morning meandering about looking at a few trees, and yet I'd not be surprised if he were next to settle himself in for a nap.

There, see! He yawns and stretches. But, wait, I judge him over-harshly. To give credit where credit is due, he stretches to rise, apparently ready to heft that fine ax rather than sleep.

But, wait, he walks off—meaning, perhaps to leave the work for another day—or—

Why does he come *this* way?

The bumpkin means to fell the *wrong* tree!

I have not spent these many seasons spreading my vast and complex network of roots throughout this district—I have not stood this ground for scores of years only to fall victim to an obviously pilfered ax wielded by a prattling, hollow-headed, landless oaf! Such indignities can scarce be—ooommfff!

That will be enough of that, you ignorant, insolent, irreverent young—uuurrrnnk!

Very well. I shall just give—him—a jolt—of—his own—medicine—communicated—down—along—the handle—of that—fine—ax—and see—how he—…—there!

This peasant is a talkative one! I begin to harbor certain doubts concerning the initial assessment of quality. Perhaps he filched the ax.

And perhaps, for good measure, I'll summon up a raven to follow him back to his own rootage. We might even manage to infiltrate a small amount of good sense and, perhaps, even a mote of respect into that igneous head of his.

"…YES, YES, OF COURSE, MY DEAREST ARDA, I FULLY comprehend. I *did*, my dearest, get myself a goodly start on the job, but I must assure you that the finishing of it will make no small feat! I have chosen us the very finest of trees, but, being such, it has its own mind about it. Its very own mind, I assure you, and it very much prefers standing its own ground to being felled for our son's cradle."

"Can it be, Flek of Amber Hill, that you are even more feebleminded than my father warned? Can you truly expect me to believe this cat vomit you spew about trees resisting your ax? You've little enough time left before the harvest to bring down a suitable tree and lay it open to season whilst you busy yourself with our lord's work. You'd best not waste any more precious time with your laziness and your foolish piffle about unwilling trees."

"There are things in this world about which a woman knows nothing—"

"I know a great deal about that sort of mumbling under your breath! It was a form of insolence my father often tried against my mother, and it served him as poorly as it shall serve you."

"Woman, you vex me greatly!"

"Vexing shall be the very least of your worries if you don't get you back to the wood and—what is that racket of rapping and thumping at our door?"

"Oh, dear me. How can it be, my dearest wife, that two so dear to each other can be so constantly a-quarreling? I am certain this boiling of our bloods can be of no benefit to the man-child you have stewing in your belly. We must make our peace—"

"If it's peace you want, do something to silence that infernal commotion outside our door!"

"Of course, my dearest, I shall—aaawk!"

"Get it out!—get that beast out of my house—scat, you demon—scat, you—begone!"

"It's useless, dearest Arda. The beast has taken up a perch in the rafters. Well beyond your reach or mine."

"So what, then do you propose to do about it, dearest numskull? Leave it there day in and day out until it expires by starvation? Or, worse still, leave it there to preside over the birthing of our child? I tell you this, Flek of Amber Hill, and I tell you true: There will be no raven in this house as long as I am here. Or no me in this house as long as it is here."

"But Arda, most dearest—you can't—surely—where?"

"You can fetch me and the child I carry back from the safety of my mother's house after, and only after, you have rid our own house of that hateful beast and its dark and evil stare."

THE MIGHTY AND VENERABLE OAK SENDS UP SPRITES of saplings from the outermost reaches of roots recurving to probe the surface of the earth, which gives itself to her care. The sprites lift free and dance a slow hymn of celebration of their tree, gathering acorns, which, in turn, give rise to ever greater numbers of sprites. The growing congregation of life envelopes the monotony of the drudge's dwelling. Within, the wife of two or possibly three generations since the original insult weeps bitterly as an enormous raven draws one, then another and another withered sapling from the portal of her womb until, at last, mercifully, her consciousness flees, screaming.

Then it is the peasant, himself, who cries out, awakened by the screaming from the crest of the vision carried to him by my raven.

The dim-witted peasant has moved himself out onto his door path to sleep beneath the moon. It appears that he fears moon-madness less than he fears sleeping beneath a roof shared by my messenger.

"Go. Go, damn you. Go back to your oak, you demon-spawned apparition. My need of tree flesh is great, but not so great that I can't take it elsewhere. It's my Arda that needs satisfying, and she's not so demanding as all that when it comes to tree flesh. I had no way of telling I had chosen me an oak so great in spirit. I can be blamed, yes, blamed for—well, I know not precisely what. But surely whatever blame may be due me is not blame beyond forgiveness."

He throws open the door.

"Leave us now. Leave our roof trees. Go back to your oak and communicate my capitulation. Go! Be gone!"

I AM STRONG, BUT NOT HARD. AS HE RETURNS TO MY grove with the next dawn, bearing, of his own volition, offerings of fresh water and well-seasoned manure, my own reward awaits this rather pathetic creature. Perhaps I did not, after all, misjudge him by the quality of his ax.

I watch him now as he struggles to carry off the last of the pieces he has hewn from the plentiful windfall I left him from a failing lower branch.

G.L. EIKENBERRY

Wrote "Eddie's Blues" (Vol. 3, No. 5), "Reality Error" (Vol. 4, No. 2), "The Loneliness of the Late-Night Donut Shop" (Vol. 4, No. 4), and "River" (Vol. 5, No. 1). These days he earns his living as a freelance informations systems and communications consultant.

W a v e

CRAIG BOYKO

It isn't hard to imagine a world without freedom.
But try to imagine a world without privacy—a commodity
without which there can be no freedom.

YOU CAN'T SEE THE STREET. I SUPPOSE YOU COULD, if you looked directly down, possibly while you were walking, although it would work better if you stood still. But you're not supposed to stop and look at your feet, or the street. You're supposed to keep moving, even if you've got no place to get to. The crowd gets edgy if they're just standing around.

It's the people. You can't walk down the street without running into one; or in ten minutes, a hundred.

I don't know where I'm going. I guess work, so I can save up enough for another room with…

I would slap myself, hard, but I might elbow somebody in the face and instigate a riot. It's impossible to get into a fight with just one person.

And I keep forgetting.

I think that's dangerous, psychologically, when you keep thinking that a part of your life that's now gone is actually still there, and you just take it for granted. Then you feel like hitting yourself, crying, mourning.

I never did mourn. And it's been two months. I've been counting the days on my toes.

I WORKED ONE DAY, AND THE MANAGER, BILL WITH the green hair, he seemed pretty impressed with me. He even told me to come back whenever I could. And that's a rarity. But the problem is I don't think I'll ever see Bill or his little food hut again, because I can't remember what it looked like from the outside or what it was called.

I hear that's what usually happens. Which is why you consider yourself lucky to get one paycheck at the end of the day.

I remember I used that paycheck for an 8-by-8, partitioned with delaminating blue foam, and behind that rusting corrugated steel. There wasn't a lock on the door, and you could hear what was going on in the other rooms, but it was worth it. I'd never been in an empty room before. I had been saving up for a month. Molly chipped in, too, with the watches and wallets she had lifted from the undulating mass of humanity out on the street.

I wonder where Molly—

STOP IT.

MY FEET AND LEGS ARE TURNING NUMB, BECOMING rancid blocks of wood. I have to find a place to sit down, quick. I've heard stories, where the wave just rolls over you.

"Darwinism," Molly used to say, smiling contentedly at my confused expression.

I SEE FLASHING NEON AND TILT MY HEAD UP TO THE emblazoned "Sit 'n' Dry" sign that looks like it's a mile up. Beside the sign is a gilt-framed 3-D cutout of Uncle Luis, set off by seven multi-hued spotlights on the roof of the building. Uncle Luis: saint, supplier, and quasi-legal drug cartel. 'Course, when you own 44 percent of the Drug Op Force, *legal* and *illegal* become hazy concepts.

The Sit 'n' Dry is free, but there's a time limit. Supposedly Uncle Luis supplies the charity to the weary myriad of humanity, in hopes that his benevolence will pay off in other areas of business.

The Sit 'n' Dry is free, but there's a time limit. Supposedly Uncle Luis supplies the charity to the weary myriad of humanity, in hopes that his benevolence will pay off in other areas of business. I guess it's economic acumen: I'd go to a LuisBurger before a Burger-Burger, even though I can currently afford neither. Nor, I'm sure, can any of the people who actually need to use the Sit 'n' Dry.

"PR," Molly would say jauntily, straining over the ubiquitous noise of people, as we stood in a corner of another nameless bar, talking, since sitting always costs extra.

STOP IT…

THE PLACE IS PACKED, AS ALWAYS, BUT THE bouncers at the eight front doors try to limit the inflow to match the outflow. Still, there's always about a hundred people standing around inside, perfectly quiet, just waiting for someone to stand up for the bathroom, or to leave altogether, or even for a bouncer to come over and yank them out of their seat because they've been there over two hours.

There's no sleeping here, but usually you can get away with a good hour if you rest your head on your hand. Uncle Luis also owns Nite-Lite, which is a lot like this

place, but the chairs recline and the time limit is twelve hours, and it costs 100 bucks to get in the door.

I see a bouncer talking to someone down the furthest right aisle, number 59 that is, and I head for it instinctively. About five others circle in on the possibility but stop dead about ten feet away. You can get kicked out for not giving the sitters their space. So you're not even supposed to walk down the three-foot wide aisle unless you're pretty sure you're gonna get a chair.

The woman in the chair stands up, and I keep walking. She steps away from the chair, following the bouncer out to the front, and I'm a good three feet closer than all the others. I get it by two feet, sit down and sneer at the languid guy who was the closest. He backs off quickly, holding his hands up in a gesture of peace, and hurries away, probably heading for the far left aisle. He knows you're not supposed to run for the chairs. You can get kicked out for that.

I sit and just stare at the people walking around like vultures, some of them wincing with each step. I've heard stories where some people just collapse after days of waiting for a chair, and the bouncers pick up their bodies, and nobody ever sees them again.

Of course, nobody ever sees anyone again, unless you're tied together, or holding hands.

Molly and I held hands for almost three weeks straight.

A LOT OF PEOPLE RENT THE ROOMS FOR SEX. MOLLY and I could hear them, in the adjacent rooms, their involuntary bestial grunts.

We didn't. We sat on the bed and held each other for awhile, savoring the space about us, the absolute emptiness of this 8-by-8 that became our world for three hours.

We talked. In soft tones, always vaguely aware of the invisible others behind the walls, who probably couldn't have cared less if we were discussing assassinating Uncle Luis himself.

Molly told me once about books, and she laughed mellifluously at my puzzled stare.

She told me about the encyclopedia she had found in a tiny bathroom cubicle, where it was being torn apart page by page and used as toilet paper. She had taken it, tucked away in her red windbreaker that was her father's, disregarding all posted and implicit laws.

She told me how she carried that encyclopedia around for three days straight, reading as much of what was left as possible. She told me how difficult it was to read while walking, being jabbed and shoved by other faceless and nameless bodies.

I was nonplussed, utterly awed that she could read. Her father taught her, she said, before he had to sell the abandoned pesticide shed that they lived in. Before they got split up, he gave her that red windbreaker she wore everywhere. It had been raining the day Molly was propelled irrevocably into the real world.

MOLLY TALKED ABOUT ROADS. LIKE THE STREET? I asked her. No, she said. Roads. Roads for vehicles, for passengers, for buses, for transportation. Roads that were paved twice a year, cleaned every other month by huge machines with cleaning bristle-brushes set underneath.

She said she read about them in the encyclopedia. The encyclopedia claimed that, at one time, everyone had a car, and everyone had a house and a garage to store their car, and kids who grew up to be 18 before leaving home.

I told her that was impossible. There was no longer room for houses or anything so silly as roads.

She agreed, sadly, nodding her head as her black hair brushed against the green foam that we lay upon.

"But," she said, "suppose there were once. I think the book is right. Suppose there were. Maybe there still are, somewhere."

"But who would use them? There would no be room, with all the people. I mean, look at the street…"

"Maybe," she said. "But maybe, I think, the rich people could afford them. How else would someone like Uncle Luis visit other countries, all the Luis-Pizzas?"

"Helicopters," I explained, matter-of-factly. Once, I heard a guy in a bar talk about helicopters. And he hadn't looked very drunk.

MOLLY TALKED ABOUT BABIES. AFTER A MOMENT OF silence, just holding each other, listening to the sounds around us coming from behind rusted iron and faulty fiberglass doors. She talked about how the explosion was over, and the shrinking was going to begin. Like the Big Bang theory of evolution. How humans would be lucky if there was every a bang again, or even a whimper.

I didn't know what she was talking about. "Babies," she said, staring up at the peeling plaster of the ceiling, where chunks were missing and you could see the mahogany slant of the rusted steel roof.

"There's not going to be any more," she whispered, her soft, warm hand in mine.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there won't be any more babies. There's sex, on this kind of small scale," she said, gesturing at the blue foam walls and beyond. "But even if there are babies, how do they grow up? How do they even get born? Uncle Luis doesn't have a Quick-Stop Baby Hut. Most likely, the mothers die, and the babies with them."

I thought about this in silence.

"Is that why you don't?" I asked finally.

"Don't what?"

"Want to have sex?"

She laughed her melodic laugh and leaned over to kiss my cheek. "No," she said, squeezing my hand.

"Good," I said, not sure if it was.

Silence settled down, comfortable and warm. Above us, erratic drops of rain struck the roof, creating a soothing metallic patter. Molly's hand, dry and soft, brushed my chin.

I GUESS I'VE FALLEN ASLEEP, BECAUSE A BOUNCER IS pulling me up out of my chair. I look back at it longingly, but I don't fight to break the grip. When he sees I'm going quietly and that someone else has already got the chair, he lets go of my shoulder and walks on to find other misdemeanors.

I bump into someone, which is not uncommon, but I turn to look anyway. A woman looks back at me, not moving amongst the chairs like the others, circling in for the kill. Just staring back at me, appraisingly, very calm and quiet, a shadow of a smile on her lips.

"What?" I say, only vaguely aware that I'm speaking out loud to a stranger.

"Sorry," she says, the playful smile more apparent. In her hand, she is holding an old Coke can, and she takes a quick pull from it. A single clear drop of water trails down her cheek. "I just kind of noticed your situation."

"So?"

"You tired?"

"Isn't everybody?"

"I know a place, cheaper than the Nite-Lite, if you're looking."

"How cheap?"

"How cheap you looking for?"

"I'm broke."

"Perfect," she says, taking another sip from the water in her can. I watch her lips closely, enrapt as they conform to the shape of the aluminum. "Follow me."

I STAY CLOSE, TRYING NOT TO TOUCH HER OR GET IN her way, but also trying to stay less than a foot away, lest I get cut off by the crowd and lose her. She doesn't turn around to look at me, even when she turns into the alley.

I've seen alleys before, from the street, but never really entered one. The consensus is that the dangerous people hang out in them, wielding knives and guns and electric prodders. All of which I've heard a lot about, but never actually seen.

Plus, alleys are supposed to be where they dump the bodies. The street is full, and there's no room for those who just can't stand any longer. And since everyone's scared of the alleys anyway…

The alley isn't empty, but it's surprisingly close. A few people seem to be entering warily from either street at any given moment, a few others are hurrying out, and some even sit down with their backs to the faded gray brick, oblivious to the dangers that are ostensibly skulking about behind every corner and every rusted fire escape. No bodies… There's one, lying down in a small dark space beneath an overhang. But he might be just sleeping. Yes, his arm twitches.

Still, it's amazing: there's no more than 30 people dispersed about the entire alley. Which probably amounts to 20 square feet of space per person. Amazing.

The woman stops halfway to the other street, turns right into a small alcove in the brick, below a metal skeleton of steps and rail that looks ready to crash down to the cracked black cement. The orange lamplight and the red neon glow from the streets is nonexistent here. It's a quiet blackness that seems so impossible, so far away from any reality, that it must be a vacuum in the very fabric of sight and sound.

It's amazing: there are no more than 30 people dispersed about the entire alley. Which probably amounts to 20 square feet of space per person. Amazing.

The woman turns to me, a quick smile shooting out at me through the dark. Just making sure I'm still with her, but her look tells me that she wouldn't go searching for me if I wasn't.

She pulls something from her coat; her right hand has mysteriously lost the Coke-can of water. From the looks of it, she is now holding a key. I'm sure of it. I've heard of keys before, I think probably from Molly, because I've never really known anyone else who had ever read through a volume of encyclopedia.

It's small, rectangular, white, and has a black strip on one end she runs through a dead black box set upon the brick. The box comes to life for a second, a green flash of digits and red LED eyes peering out into the blackness, then it's dead and silent again. Beyond the wall, a metallic slide and click, like bolts moving out of position.

She pushes the door open and is inside so fast that I don't have time to look for a doorknob or to figure out how the door opened before I'm following her into deeper darkness.

Slick-chink.

I back up. The door is icy metal on my spine. The cold sends a shiver of fear up my back, into the tensed muscles in my neck.

Here I am, locked indoors, off the street, in an oppressive cage of inky black and piercing cold.

But then the lights come on.

MY BREATH LEAVES MY LUNGS, BUT I'M NOT SURE AT first why. And then it comes to me, inexorable and supernal.

It's the *space.*

This place is huge. There's got to be at least 350 square feet of raw open space, possibly as much as 400. God, yes, the walls are definitely 20 feet…

There's a few chairs, a cupboard sticking out along the far wall, and what looks like a fridge, and some other small square machine that's plugged into the wall…

Christ, *electricity.*

And a bed, enormous, and what could possibly be a television, though much smaller and older than those mounted in the LuisBurgers above the tables while you eat—that is, if you can afford to pay the $300 for a table…

Of course, I've seen rooms this size, and I've seen rooms 200 times larger. But never, never in all my life, have I seen a room this size with only two people in it. And one of them me.

I notice the woman suddenly, as if for the first time. She is standing ten feet away from me, smiling calmly, showing perfect yellow teeth, and she seems to be the only tangible symbol of reality in this surrealistic picture of emptiness.

It scares me and enthralls me, equally and simultaneously.

"Like it?" comes a voice, and it seems an eternity before I match it to this woman standing before me.

My lungs rasp out a choked breath, but speaking still seems an impossible feat.

"I know what you're probably thinking. It's huge, I know. I've never actually brought anybody here before, so I guess I'm used to it, but I can imagine, after the street…"

I find my voice, small and tinny and miles away. "You… you *own* this?"

"Yeah. My dad passed the ownership down to me. Got the deed locked up in that safe over there."

Sure enough, there is a safe over in the corner, sleek black and shiny.

The woman laughs, and the muscles in my neck and shoulders that were pulled tight as arrow strings loosen slightly. I force my hands to open. I uncurl my toes. I blink once, a full second, and breathe deeply.

"This place," I say, my voice no longer shaking and resonating from somewhere near the bottom of a deep well, "must have cost you a fortune." I'm not even sure if there is such a thing as private ownership anymore. It makes my mind race back to Molly, how she used to talk about houses, and how I thought it was insanity.…

The woman smiles wanly, walks a few steps and sits down in a chair. She motions for me to sit. I can't feel my legs, so I just shake my head politely.

"My dad owned a chain of water suppliers. Built it up from the plumbing, and bought out most of that underground shit that nobody wants anyway. I think before he died he was worth close to 500 million. Everybody needs water, right? He sold out 98 percent of his holdings to buy this place, this one room. Gave it to me a week before he died. Guess when you look at it that way, this place cost about ten million per square yard."

"Free parking," is all I can say, sitting down before my legs collapse. (I said that once, in the 8-by-8, must have been. Molly laughed, sweet laughter like champagne over rocks. Brushing a hair back, looking into my eyes, her own lit up deep aquatic blue. Wondered what the hell that was supposed to mean. Just an expression, I guess, I told her. Funny, she said, how the craziest things from the past can mutate into the craziest things in the present, with no discernible transition. Something about idioms, she said, running her hand through my hair, declaring how impossible it would be for anyone else to learn this language if everybody didn't already speak it.… But I wasn't listening, just watching her perfect pink lips forming the intricate shapes of the many words I had never even heard…)

And then I must have collapsed, somehow, because I'm no longer in the fantastical dimension where beautiful women on the street take you back to their impossible rooms, 400 square feet in size…

But then where am I?

I'm comfortable, and warm, and I'm lying down. These facts alone surprise me. I had no money for anything so exorbitant as a bed.

A hand is on my shoulder, light and warm, moving ever so slightly back and forth. Not a waking gesture…

I turn and see the face of the woman on the street, lit up by flashing blue neon light that filters in through a dirty plastic pane above the bed. She smiles, shy yet intimate. Her hand is still on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" she asks, her voice a whisper.

"Yeah… I'm fine. Guess I really was tired."

"It's okay, if you want to rest. Stay as long as you like."

I don't say anything. Just watch her.

After probably five minutes, a private eternity, my hand moves to her cheek. My thumb brushes her skin slowly.

Her smile from the street returns, confident and serene.

"WHY ME?"

The light from the sun is gone now, hidden from the night, lost beyond the horizon. The only light that falls on her face is the continuous blue flare from the street. When it sputters and dies, sometimes minutes at a time, I can only make out the outline of her jaw, her limp blond hair, the white t-shirt that she wears.

"What do you mean, why you?"

"Why am I here?"

"I don't know," she says, very quiet. "It sometimes… gets very lonely."

"I know." (Molly and I talked about this once. Or rather, Molly talked about it, while I half-listened, fully in love with her. She said something about the heavy irony of the situation, the poetic justice. How the street was packed with strangers, millions and millions, and every individual was still so desperately lonely…)

WE LIE LIKE THAT FOR HOURS, BLISSFULLY CONTENT in each other's warmth, miles away from the wave of humanity just beyond that single pane of plastic.

And still, I can't help but think about Molly.

BY THE FIRST GRAY TINT OF MORNING LIGHT, SHE strokes the hair from my eyes. Neither of us has slept but has reached some other form of consciousness. The peace of sleep, the perception of wakefulness.

Her hand runs down my back. Her lips meet mine. Above us, a single drop of rain taps the plastic, immediately followed by many more.

I SIT UP IN GRAY DARKNESS, SUDDENLY COLD AND tired. Outside, the rain pours down. Behind me, on the bed, she reaches for me. I brush her grasp away.

"I can't," I say.

She does not sit up suddenly, does not grab me from behind, does not beg me to explain. She stays silent for a moment. Then, simply, "Why?"

"Molly."

She sits up beside me, does not reach for me. Sits quietly, her hands in her lap, staring at the vast expanse of floor. And in her silence, I sense her understanding.

"What happened to her?" she asks. I stand up, grab my coat from a chair by the bed. I pause, then turn.

"The wave. I was holding her hand, and we got pushed apart by the people, and she just got backed into a corner. The wave just rolled over her."

I turn quickly, head for the door, fumble for the latch. She calls out from behind me. I tear the door open. I hesitate. I turn around.

"What?"

In her face, I see sympathy and deep sorrow. Sorrow not just for me, but for herself, and maybe even for the damned wave. And in her face, somewhere, I see Molly.

That's why I have to leave.

"I don't even know your name," she says.

"I don't know yours."

She smiles hollowly. "Then I guess it's okay." The door closes behind me, *slick-chink.*

THE RAIN IS SOLID GRAY BARS, SOAKING THE GRAY concrete, the gray flow of people. The flood of people, nondescript and cold, could be the result of the rain.

It clears up eventually, amidst the general sigh of relief from the crowd.

No one speaks, and the river flows silently on, branching out occasionally, feeding the neon-framed franchises that line the street, only to be spit back out into the torpid tide.

Sometime, much later, a distant face smiles at me, framed by the ripple of heads and shoulders. It's Molly's face, or the nameless girl's, or maybe a figment dancing on my eyes. The hand belonging to the face waves to me, then disappears altogether. Behind and all around me, the wave goads me on.

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Wrote "Decisions" (Vol. 6, No. 1). He is a senior in high school and lives in Canada.

The editors of* InterText *would like to thank all the past* InterText *contributors who participated in this issue.

Greg Knauss is the Funk King of the Galaxy.

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-THE EDITORS

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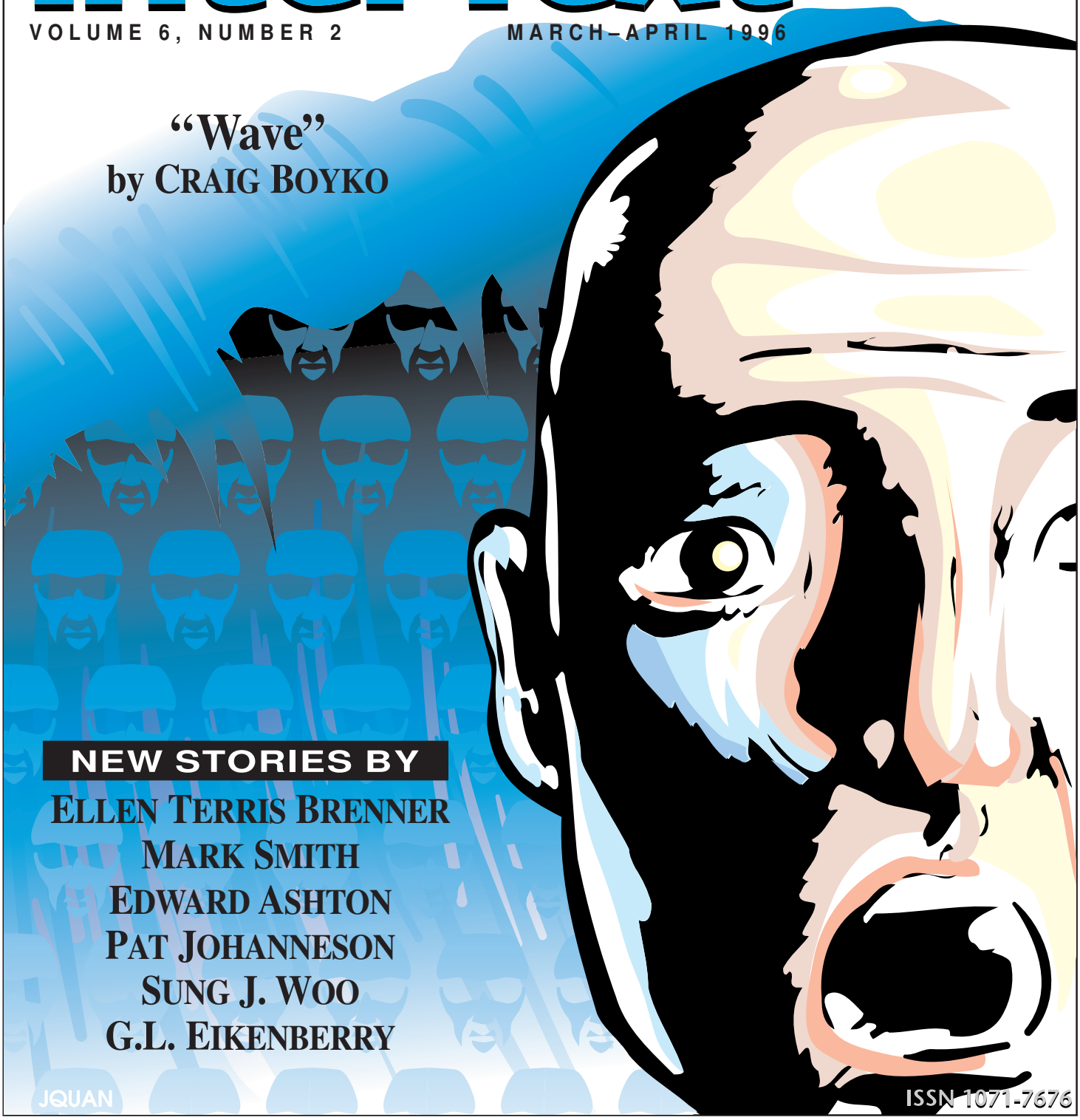
by CRAIG BOYKO



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