InterText

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 5

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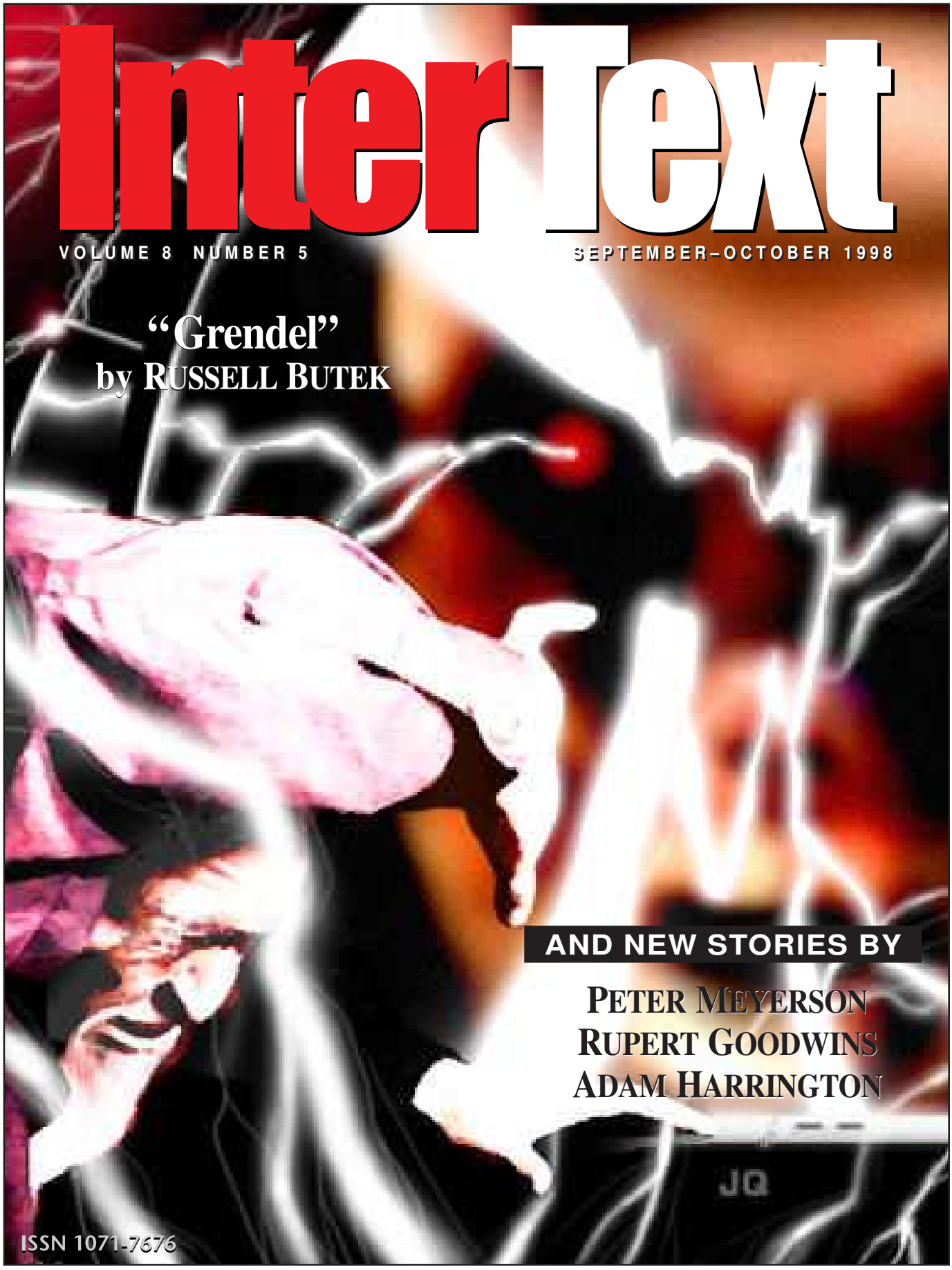

"Grendel"
by RUSSELL BUTEK

AND NEW STORIES BY

PETER MEYERSON
RUPERT GOODWINS
ADAM HARRINGTON

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InterText
editors@intertext.com

Editor
JASON SNELL
jsnell@intertext.com

Assistant Editor
GEOFF DUNCAN
geoff@intertext.com

Cover Artist
JEFF QUAN
jquan@sirius.com

Submissions Panel
BOB BUSH
JOE DUDLEY
PETER JONES
MORTEN LAURITSEN
RACHEL MATHIS
JASON SNELL
submissions@intertext.com

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Jane

PETER MEYERSON

When you hear a story, don't just concentrate on what's being said—be sure to notice who's saying it.

"YOUR FEET," I SAY.

"What does that mean?" he asks. He's got this what-the-hell's-she-talking-about look on his face, so I spell it out for him.

"That's what did it for me. Your feet. I saw your feet and fell in love. Get it? You've got beautiful feet, man."

Now he's, like, totally confused.

"My feet? What about my face?" he asks, looking *soooo* hurt.

"The face was last."

"The face?" Now he's frowning. You'd think I was treating him like a haunch of beef or something, which I'm not. I'm just being honest with the dude.

"Okay, your face," I say, firing a bored sigh at him. I'm getting tired of all these dumb questions. "I started with your feet, then worked my way up. You didn't have a shirt on, remember?"

"Remember? Jane, it was the day before yesterday!"

"That's right. So if we just met, how am I supposed to know what you remember and what you don't? Anyhow, I dug your body, not that it made any difference since I was already hooked below the knees." I fell apart with that one. Sometimes I can be pretty funny.

"Thanks… I guess."

"You're welcome… I'm sure," I say, flashing a sassy smile.

"So? What about my face?"

Geez! Men, the older ones in particular, are so vain.

"Okay. Then I got to your face and I thought, nice, the guy's face works."

I suppose he finally had what he wanted 'cause he tosses me a smile, one of those, isn't-she-a-cute-little-thing-after-all type smiles, and we get it on in a bathtub full of Mr. Bubble.

Lou was thirty-eight when I met him. Guys like him always expect every eighteen-year old girl is going to be shy around them, 'specially if there's a love/sex thing happening. Well, I'm not the shy type, and when someone asks me what makes my heart flutter and my lady bird sing and it happens to be his feet, I say so. Call me weird, but when Lou opened the door, barefoot and wearing his shorts and that dopey Hawaiian shirt, I took one look at those hairless size nines and, well, it made me crazy.

I met Lou through his friend, Sal, who picked me up hitchhiking on Highway 1. I'd come all the way to Monterey from Galveston, more than a thousand miles on the road without anything bad happening. Oh, maybe a few passes here and there, but that was it. Still, Sal's acting like he's afraid for my life, and starts lecturing me on the dangers of standing half naked on a highway with my thumb in the air. Half naked? Man, that really puts me on edge. It's a hot day and I'm in my cut-offs and, believe me, there's no more than three inches of tummy showing through my tank top. Yeah, I'm pretty—big deal, so are a lot of girls—and I dig working out, so my bod's in great shape. But I don't go around naked in public!

Half-naked? That puts me on edge. Believe me, there's no more than three inches of tummy showing through my tank top.

Anyhow, it's pretty obvious Sal's got the hots. He asks me where I'm headed and I say wherever I end up, which is true. Though I told my ex-beau, Cal, who's living in L.A. (don't you just love that word, "beau?") that I'd hang with him for the summer, I don't really care whether I get down there or not. That's what's so cool about being out of high school and having just one parent who's usually too wasted to notice what you're up to. You can go where you want and do what you want. Freedom, man. It's the greatest high there is.

Well, Sal knows he's got one tired, overheated road rat on his hands and he figures I need *help* (which I don't). In fact, the dude apologizes for not taking me home, if you can believe that! He just got married, he says. (Why do guys always assume you can't wait to hand over Ms. Moist just 'cause they're horny?)

Anyway, he tells me about his friend, Lou, who's got a cottage on the beach in Seaside just below Monterey. He wants to call Lou and see if it's okay to bring me over. Beach house? I'm thinking. Oh, yes, nothing wrong with a short layover in a beach house!

"Save the dime and just drop me off," I tell him. "Guaranteed he's not gonna turn me away."

Suddenly, Sal gets this sorry look on his face and I just know he's feeling guilty 'cause he's wishing his new wife was dead and someone was dropping me off at his house. Later on, I meet her, Katy, and we get real close right off the bat. It's a big sister-little sister sort of thing—seeing as she was twenty-eight, but still young-looking and pretty and sexy, too pretty and sexy for Sal to be wishing her dead in front of a stranger. What is wrong with men?

So Sal drives me to Lou's and leaves, but fast, and Lou shows me around his house. Shall we talk cozy? It's all wood, with two bedrooms and an L-shaped living room with a fireplace and a kitchenette behind an oak bar down at one end plus a wall of glass looking out at the ocean and a redwood deck around the whole place. I also notice lots of trophies on the shelves and I find out that Lou used to race off-road bikes—the kind without motors. He still rides ten, fifteen miles every day and is a definite fanatic about it. But that's why he's in such good shape, right?

Believe me, if Lou didn't do it for me in a major way, I would have been out of there before the sun went down. But since he did, I started thinking, hmmm, this could be a very cool place to park for the summer.

Lou's such a gentleman, though, it almost didn't happen. I mean, he makes lunch and we go for a swim, then lay around on the deck on these big lounge chairs taking in the rays and making small talk. I tell him about never knowing who my father was and how my mother back in Galveston's an alky who's been in and out of rehab and loony bins ever since I can remember. And he tells me about his business—he's a manager for some bike company that used to sponsor his races—and about how much he misses his kids who he doesn't see much because his ex moved up to Marin just to spite him. He even gets kind of teary when he talks about that part. I feel bad for him and I rub his neck, and he puts his hand over mine and smiles at me, and next thing you know we're cuddling up together in his chair, which makes me think, yes, it's happening for him, too. So you can imagine how surprised I am when, like an hour later, he says, "Jane, is there some place you want me to drop you off?"

Drop me off? Whoa, that hurts! Really hurts. I don't like being rejected any more than the next person. God knows I've had more than my share of that.

"What's wrong?" Lou says, noticing how suddenly I'm avoiding his eyes and not talking anymore. I'm thinking fast about how to handle this situation. Is it my turn to cry? I sure feel like it. What to do? Get all brave and huffy and say, "Oh, nothing's wrong, Lou, just drop me wherever"? Or is he one of those dudes—I've met plenty—who get off being put down. That would call for a burning look and something like, "It's you, Lou. You're all wrong for me. See ya." And I make my dramatic exit, slamming the door behind me—hoping, of course, that he comes running. That might work. Remember, at this point we've only been a couple for three hours, so I don't know that much about him. No question he's the emotional type, though, and I decide to go teary, which isn't that hard since, like I said, that's how I'm feeling. Besides, honesty is the best policy.

"Nothing's wrong, Lou," I say, tears rolling. "Just drop me wherever."

Next thing you know, Lou's got his arms around me and is pressing my head against his shoulder and we're rocking back and forth not sure who's comforting who. I guess the rocking went on a little too long (thank God), 'cause I feel his one-eyed dolphin swelling up against my Lady Bird like it's going to explode if it doesn't find a home real soon. And, to be perfectly frank, I myself am getting awfully tingly upstairs and down.

When it comes to having real sex, nothing beats real feeling and that night, our first night together, we had real feeling in every room in the house, plus in the shower, on the rugs and on the deck, even on the kitchen counter and, just before dawn, in Lou's aforementioned favorite, a bathtub full of Mr. Bubble.

The surprise isn't that I move in—that is, I drop two pair of jeans, extra cut-offs, a couple of t-shirts and tank tops and my Army-Navy store ankle-boots into the guest room closet. The surprise is that I end up staying for almost a year.

The more I get to know Lou, the more I dig him. He's got a heart of gold and he's great in bed. What more could a girl ask for?

Well, I get lots more. He buys me my very own off-road bike and on the weekends we pedal over to Santa Cruz, Carmel Valley, Big Sur, places like that. Every month or so, we take long, long rides up into the Santa Cruz mountains and camp out among these humongous sequoia trees. Sometimes Sal and Katy come with us and sometimes we go alone. In the beginning, I like it better when it's just me and Lou. But after a while, I'm just as pleased to have Katy along since I do love doing girl stuff with her—giggling and gossiping and everything—which I certainly can't do with Lou.

I hang with all Lou's friends, mostly outdoorsy types who're always in flannel, spandex or rubber, depending on which outdoorsy thing they're doing—hiking, biking, scuba diving, mountain climbing, stuff like that. I fit in nicely, too. I've always been a real good athlete, tall and gangly with fast hands and fast feet. For three years I played on our girls' volleyball team and ran the mile at Galveston High 'til… Oh, let's just say she provoked me something awful, otherwise I never would have hauled off and floored her. I mean, punching a coach is a pretty serious offense. Fortunately, there were witnesses who saw her slap me first. Otherwise they never would have let me finish my senior year and graduate. I suspect one day I'm going to go to college, so not finishing high school would have been a major blow to my future plans.

We eat out a lot, mostly in Carmel and usually at health food restaurants, 'cause Lou's a nut when it comes to eating right. I dig Carmel, even though it's a totally touristy burg, so neat and clean it looks like what I guess a movie set looks like. I say "guess" 'cause I've never

actually seen one. I do recall reading that Clint Eastwood was mayor there when I was little, so it could be he got some of his Hollywood friends to spruce the place up.

I'm not a person who can sit around all day doing nothing 'cept wait for her man to come home from work. My mother never did. (That's a joke.) I had to have a job. I was always good at drawing and making things with my hands. It's a talent I have. Lucky for me, Lou's friend, Lloyd, owns a jewelry shop in Carmel and takes me on part-time. I work afternoons, waiting on customers (I enjoy interacting with people) and keeping the glass cases free of fingerprints. When he has time, Lloyd starts teaching me how to make rings and pendants and bracelets. It's the coolest job ever. Fun, and short hours.

Once in a while Lou goes to Mill Valley and comes back with his girls, Beth and Meg, four and six, two of the cutest little darlings I've ever seen in my life. Every time he brings them down, which isn't often enough for him or me, I spend a long weekend playing mama and I just love it. Someday, when I have my own kids, I'm going to give them the childhood I always wanted but never had.

It does bother me, though, that Lou tells them this ridiculous story about how I'm a friend of his sister's who staying at his house while she's visiting California. I know he's not ashamed of me or anything, so what's he hiding me for? He and Annie have long been divorced and she's already got custody of the kids. What more can she do to him? I don't like seeing a man afraid of a woman.

What really gets me, though, is this stupid saying he tacks up on the bulletin board in the kitchenette one morning after we'd been smoking a lot of dope the night before: "The Inevitable Remains True Even When Ignored."

"Who the fuck wrote that?" I ask over coffee and a bagel.

"I did," he says.

"You make it up?"

"Well, yeah, I did. It's an epigram I flashed on last night."

"Is that a fact? An epigram, huh? Well, quit smoking so much dope. What's it supposed to mean anyhow?" Sure. Like I don't already know.

"It means that we can't last forever, even if we don't think about it right now."

"Says who?" I ask, putting on a fierce scowl.

"It's just the way it is."

"Uh huh. Right from God's lips."

"Jane, you're only eighteen."

"Eighteen and seven months." Since Lou's counting, I figure he should get it right.

"Whatever. The point is, do you honestly think you're going to settle down with a thirty-eight year old man for the rest of your life?"

"How should I know? We've been together nine months and so far it's been great… Or am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong."

"Then why the hell're you putting stuff like that on the wall? It sure doesn't help anything."

"It— it's just a reminder." He can't even look me in the eye.

Now I'm having a flash. "You getting ready to dump me?"

"Jesus, no!" he says. "That's… not how it's going to happen." I know he means it because his face sort of collapses and he's looking so sad I'm not sure whether to get up and hug him or fill the bathtub.

"There's this platitude about how older guys exploit young girls," he says, looking kind of wistful. "You think that's true?"

"So you already know how it's going to happen?"

"I just don't see us together twenty years down the line."

"Who thinks that far ahead?"

"At your age, no one. At my age, everyone."

"Well, here's another saying you can put up on the bulletin board: 'Lou's afraid to love Jane.' Period!"

"That's not true and you know it," he says. "But sooner or later you're going to walk out of my life. I'm just… I dunno… an experience you're having on the way to growing up."

Whoa, am I getting pissed! Now I'm thinking I'll *drown* him in the bathtub.

"Oh, man, that's complete bullshit!" I'm up and shouting. Then I pitch half a bagel in his face. It's only lightly toasted so I know it can't do much damage. "You're just scared shitless and you're laying it on me! I may be only eighteen, buster, but I've probably seen more life than you have in your thirty-eight!"

"I don't doubt it," he says, wiping a perfect circle of cream cheese off his forehead. (I do have a great arm.)

Then he wanders over to the window and stares out at the ocean, real dramatic. He reminds me of that picture of George Washington crossing the Delaware that's hanging in the principal's office—a room I came to know well.

"There's this platitude about how older guys exploit young girls," he says, looking kind of wistful. "You think that's true?"

"Well, you don't. Not with me, anyhow. I never met anybody, man or woman, who pays more attention to what I think than you do."

"That's because I love who you are. You're a fuckin' delight, Jane." We both crack up at that because we're hip

to its double meaning. "Really," he says. "I've never known anyone like you. And I'm not holding anything back. I couldn't if I wanted to. But most people looking at us from the outside would probably say here's one of those guys who's trying to hang on to his youth by living with a girl half his age, a guy who's afraid to engage a mature woman."

"Well, I'm not in this from the outside," I tell him. "So I wouldn't know how to look at it from there." There are times when my mind gets real logical. "As for you being afraid of older women, well, you put in seven years with Annie. Sure you got those two little honeys out of it. But, them aside, look at all the heavy duty grief she's laying on your head. Looks to me, mister, that right about now I'm exactly what you need. Right?"

"Right," Lou says, and it's like the gravity that's tugging at his face suddenly lets go, and he breaks into this sunburst grin and snatches his stoned "epigram" off the bulletin board, which is a good sign—but not a great sign, 'cause he doesn't throw it away, he puts it in a drawer. That's like saying, "I'm not going to flaunt the inevitable, I'm just going to keep it out of sight." Still, there's nothing better than bringing your man out of the dumps and into bed for the rest of the day.

THERE'S NO DENYING I HAVE QUITE A TEMPER, AND with Lou it sometimes did get out of hand. When I look back on it now, it's clear, embarrassingly clear, that I wasn't nearly as grown up as I thought. I was doing a lot of what George calls "adolescent acting out." George is the dude I'm with now, a therapist here in L.A. It's his idea that I start writing all this stuff down. He says it'll help me figure out who I am. He just won't believe I already know. I'm doing it, though, since writing's fun. I'll straighten George out later on.

ANYHOW, BACK TO THE TEMPER THING. I DON'T know why, but it starts getting worse after my bagel outburst. All kinds of things begin annoying me. Lou being so tidy, for example. Everything in its place, towels and sheets nicely folded, not a speck of dust on any surface, books, CDs and canned food arranged by category—fiction, history, biography, pop, rock and classical, soup, sauce and potatoes, all within easy reach. The man even spin-dries his lettuce!

Now, in truth, Lou never asks me to do anything beyond putting my dirty dishes in the sink and he never gets on my case regarding my sloppy habits. He just takes care of everything himself—makes the bed, does the cleaning, shopping and laundry. Once or twice, seeing him drive the vacuum cleaner around the living room, I feel a pang of guilt and help out a bit. But it burns me up inside 'cause I don't see the sense of doing house work when everything's going to get all messy again in no time at all—'specially with me around.

Look, I know it's not right to fault a man for his virtues, but watching Lou on his knees sponging my spilled pesto sauce off a hardwood floor is not a pretty sight. That's the sort of thing can sure put a damper on a girl's respect.

And it's not just the neatness thing that starts rubbing me the wrong way. Now there's lots of stuff driving me up the walls. Like, you ever go eight months without a cheeseburger and fries? It does terrible things to your body, 'specially if you're a Texas girl who's been raised on beef. If a person like me goes too long without cattle products under her belt, she becomes emotionally unbalanced. It got so crazy-making I had to stop at Burger King on my way to work to fill up and try and put my system back in order. But I was too far gone by then. It didn't do jack shit for mind or body. I'm probably ruined for good 'cause of all those veggies and wheat germ and homeopathic drops of who-knows-what that Lou kept putting in front of me morning, noon and night.

What edges me most of all, though, is how Lou never complains. Every now and then, a little, "Clean it up, bitch, it's your filth!" would certainly get my attention. Or, "We're doing (whatever) my way 'cause that's how I want it!" Now that'd be refreshing—not that I'd stand there and take it. But, uh uh, that's not Lou. So, more and more, it's me, the lazy good-for- nothing, who's doing all the yelling and throwing things and bursting into tears, while Lou, who's blameless as a lamb and never—never—loses his temper, just smiles and tells me to calm down, sweetheart, it's going to be all right. Which makes everything even worse.

It gets to the point where just seeing Lou's face puts me in a lousy mood, and I'm certain that if I don't do something soon, I'm going to find myself back on Highway 1 with my thumb in the air, which I am in no way looking forward to. Underneath it all I do love Lou… though in a somewhat different way.

TRUST ME WHEN I SAY THAT I DEEPLY, SINCERELY and honestly regret that I didn't find the "something" I was looking to do before the "something" I wasn't looking to do happened.

I did not—I repeat, did not—put any moves on Salvatore Bonafacio! Sure, he was a good-looking hunk, and closer to my own age. Sal wasn't even thirty yet. And he was a married man! A newly married man! As to his current status… well, I can't say, seeing as I haven't been in touch with Lou, Sal or Katy to this very day. But I hope she's left the bastard.

NOT EVERYONE WHO OWNS AN ANTIQUE STORE IS gay. Sal's Antique Mart is just around the corner from

where I have my part-time job, so it's natural that, after work, I hang with him and Katy for a bit. I mean, they're my friends! In fact, when Sal's not around I confide in Katy, tell her about the problems I'm having with Lou. She's real sympathetic and understands how infuriating it is to be with a man who absorbs everything you throw at him with a smile.

"A man should at least try to put a girl in her place once and while, don't you think?" I say.

"I'm not sure I'd describe it exactly that way," Katy says. "But I know what you mean. You want Lou to give you his honest feelings. And not just his good feelings. If he's angry or hurt or depressed, you want to hear about it. Otherwise, it's like… like he's in this relationship without you. It's got to make you feel like you're not important to him, or at least not important enough to share feelings with."

"Exactly!" I say. I respect Katy. Sometimes she has an awesome fix on what makes people tick.

"Jane, I don't think Lou's aware of this. He's oblivious to how he affects you. It's just who he is."

"Maybe so. But it doesn't make it any easier."

"Uh-huh. Well, hang in there. Lou's got a lot going for him, and the two of you have a good thing together. If you believe it's worth keeping, then get him to work on the bad stuff with you until it's fixed," she says.

I'm dying to ask about her and Sal, how it is between them, how they work things out. But something stops me. Also, I notice that, starting from the day Katy becomes my confidante, she seems a tad uneasy around me. Sometimes I catch her glancing at me—and at Sal, too—in a funny way.

Still, everything's nice and I'm giving serious thought to taking her advice about working on Lou when, all of a sudden, she gets a call and has to go back to New Hampshire to see her sick mother. (Oh, how I wish that woman never took ill.)

A few days later, I'm telling myself there's no reason not to drop by and say hello to Sal just 'cause Katy's out of town—though I'm wondering why I even have to say this to myself. So I stop by the store to inquire after his lovely wife and her ailing mother, and right away I see it. It's the same look Sal had when he picked me up on the highway—minus the sorry part! All this time, he's been Sal, the perfect gentleman, Lou's friend, Sal, the happily married man who, just once, about a year ago, for ten short minutes, had a raging tiger in his trou for a stranger on the road but, to his credit, kept it well under control 'til he dropped her off at the home of his very best friend. Well, that's not the Sal grinning at me now from behind a counter full of Early American pewter saucers, one of which he's slowly rubbing to death with a rouge cloth while aiming to burn a hole in my face with his bloodshot eyes. Nosiree. This is Sal the beast—Neanderthal Sal, all set to drag his prey into the back room and slam it home. If Sal hadn't said exactly the right thing, I would have turned and walked without a word…But he did.

"It must be lonely," he says.

"Beg pardon?" I say.

"Hey. It's okay. Katy told me." So much for confiding in that bitch.

"Told you what?"

"About the trouble you're having with Lou. I'm sorry to hear it." Sure he's sorry. It's breaking his heart—and adding a yard onto Mighty Joe Young.

"We'll manage," I say.

All this time, he's been Sal, the perfect gentleman. Well, that's not the Sal grinning at me now.

"I hope so," he says, holding the newly shined saucer up to my face. "But you don't look like you believe it."

"Any reason you know of why I shouldn't?" I say.

"It's… it's not my place to… to talk about that," he says, pretending to stammer and turning away like I'm not supposed to see how much pain the poor man's in. Oh, he is smooth.

"Don't fuck with me, Sal," I say. "If there's something I should know, I want to hear it."

Just then a customer comes in. "Excuse me," he says, going over to her. I know he's jerking me around, and I resent it. But, shame on me, it's having an effect.

"Let's hear it, Sal," I say after the customer leaves.

"Honey, do you think you're going to have any more luck turning Lou around than anyone else has?"

"I'm not Annie," I say.

"I'm not talking about Annie," he says. "Annie's ancient history."

"Then who are you talking about?"

"You want a list of names?"

"A list?" I say. No denying it. I'm shocked.

"C'mon, Jane," he says, as in *C'mon, Jane, don't be naive.* "You're not the first young girl in Lou's life."

"So what? He never said I was." I can hear a little break in my voice, not a good sign.

"Okay. I didn't mean to bring it up."

"Bullshit, you didn't!"

"Hey! It's Lou's thing! All right?" It's an eruption, not an angry eruption, just a passionate and caring explosion on behalf of his best friend. "No blame. I love Lou. But Cindy, Melanie, Margo—all of them under twenty-one—that's how the guy keeps his demons at bay. Some men just can't deal with middle age." He shrugs. "They bed down with young girls."

Whoa. Haven't I heard this before? From Lou? Didn't he say something about people seeing him as a man afraid to connect with women his own age so he settles in with a young girl? Indeed, I did, only he forgot to say how many young girls he'd settled in with. Geez!

"Uh… how many young girls, Sal?"

"I've already said more than I meant to," he says, shaking his head and staring at his sandals. (The man has ugly feet.)

Once again, Jane is hurt… and angry. I feel like I've been had. *Sooner or later you're going to walk out of my life.* Damned right!

For the next couple of weeks I take my revenge on Lou with Sal, the worst lover I've ever known, a slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am ape. After a while, it's feeling more like I'm taking revenge on myself.

It ends the day Katy gets back from her New Hampshire—although Sal finds it amusing to continue playing footsie under the table whenever we have dinner with them. I really want to kill the bastard.

Far as I know, Lou never finds out about me and Sal, but our thing goes straight into the toilet after that. Lou gets so depressed, he hardly talks to me—or anyone else. Try as I do, I can't get anything out of him. Sure I feel guilty about getting it on with Sal, but I feel worse seeing Lou suffer. The guy is really hurting and he won't tell me what it's about. Our cozy little cottage becomes the House of Gloom. I wonder if all the girls who came before me went through this.

After a month or so, I put his "epigram" back up on the bulletin board: "The Inevitable Remains True Even When Ignored." Lou sees it and smiles. It's a real bitter smile.

"I guess you're right," he says.

The next day, when Lou's at work, I throw my belongings in an overnight bag, leave him a note telling him (truly) that I'll love him forever, and I'm back on U.S. 1. heading south toward L.A.

LAST NIGHT, GEORGE ASKS ME IF I WOULDN'T MIND letting him read the stuff I've been writing. I give it some thought, seeing as I'm not certain why he's asking, but end up with a "Sure, why not?" So he disappears into his study for about half an hour, comes out and looks at me kind of strange-like.

"Pack up," he says.

"How come?" I ask, stunned, I mean, really stunned.

"Just do it and get out of here," he says. "It's over."

So just like that I'm out, back on the street.

L.A.'s okay, but I hear Maui—no, Kauai—is really cool.

PETER MEYERSON

Spent several years in book and magazine publishing in New York before moving to Los Angeles to write films and TV shows, most notably *Welcome Back Kotter,* which he created and produced for several seasons. "Not too long ago, realizing I had squandered much of my working life on dreck," says Peter, "I overcame my self-doubt and began writing fiction."

Amo, Mensa!

RUPERT GOODWINS

If inanimate objects could talk—trust me, you don't want to know.

THE PENCIL CRIED AS IT LAY ON THE TABLE. "OH table!" it sobbed. "Ah, table, table!" The table was made of harder wood, however, and was unmoved. "Stop that sniveling," it commanded. "It does nothing for you, tiresome implement."

The pencil dried its point. "I'm a 2B, you know. I smudge easily. I was made this way."

The table said nothing, but concentrated on having four legs and being square.

"Table?" said the pencil.

"What now?" sighed the table, exasperated.

"Don't snap," said the pencil. "You know how that upsets me."

"To be blunt," started the table, but that just started the pencil off again.

"How… how can you treat me this way?" the pencil cried out between tears. "We're both wood. We've been brought together by fate, the only two wooden things in the world. You used to support me, and now…."

The table was getting more than a little fed up by now. "I'm still supporting you, aren't I?" it said. "You're still here, aren't you? Why can't you just lie there and be the

pencil you always were? It's pathetic. *You're* pathetic."

Wailing from the pencil, a low keening as if its little lead would break.

"Oh, now, now," said the table, which had resigned itself to the situation and was now thinking of ways to bring the episode to a close so it could get on with being a table. "Let's just get back to being an arrangement of objects, shall we? You're a splendid pencil, there's no reason for you to be so unhappy."

"We used to sketch so well…" sniffled the pencil.

"Ah yeah," said the table. "Thought that was it. And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Now all I can feel," said the pencil, by now thoroughly off on one, "are the layers of varnish and paint between us. I'm so alooooooone!"

Sweet Joseph the hairy-handed Carpenter and all his tools, thought the table. "What exactly do you want, then?" it said.

"To be together," said the pencil.

"That's daft, as well you know. It's not on the agenda, pencil. Me item of furniture, you writing device. It's good to have you around, but only if you stop this nonsense. You don't even know what you want."

"Do too."

"Well, what?"

"I could make a wish," said the pencil, pointedly.

"Oh, you're more boring than woodworm. Go on then." That'll sort it out, the table thought.

"Right. Computer!"

"Yes, Pencil?" said the computer, which had been watching the palaver with a degree of amusement. It had had a feeling that a *deus ex machina* was going to be needed, and had got its programs loaded just in case.

"Grant me my wish? Make me and the table one? Forever?"

"You down with that, table?" said the computer.

"Whatever," sighed the table.

"Of course," said the computer, and hummed to itself for a second. "Bye, guys. Have fun." With a flicker of lights, it tucked itself down the modem and vanished into cyberspace, pulling its peripherals behind it. There was a quiet pop, and all that was left was the telephone socket on the wall.

"Computer?" said the pencil. "That's odd. Wonder why it did that…"

"I hope you're happy now," said the table, "scaring off our friends with your self-obsessed ranting. Although I must admit that's a weight off my mind. He could be a bit of a burden."

The pencil said nothing. Truth to tell, it was starting to feel a little foolish.

From out of the socket a shower of sparks whooshed in a parabola, like fireworks.

"Goodness!" said the pencil.

"I don't like the look of this…" said the table. "That could be dangerous."

The sparks started to land, first on the floor, but then hosing out toward where the pencil sat. There was a smell of burning carpet, soon overlaid with the dry perfume of hot sandalwood.

"Argh!" cried the pencil. "That hurts!"

"Look what you've done, you rubber-tipped fool! Computer! Computer!" shouted the table.

But it was no good. Within seconds, the pencil was a heap of ash and the sparks started to play along the surface of the table.

"I hope you're happy now…" crackled the table as the circle of charred, popping wood grew. Soon, there was nothing there but a pile of ashes marked out by four smouldering metal casters. In the middle was a small, blackened metal band, of the sort that would normally hold an eraser in place at the end of, say, a pencil. The smoke cleared, and there was silence. Briefly. Then the metal band cleared its throat, which was most of it.

"Oh casters!" it sobbed. "Ah, casters, casters!" The casters were made of harder metal, however, and were unmoved. *We're not going through that again,* they thought, and so the silence fell for good.

RUPERT GOODWINS

Ex-chief planner of the Tongan manned mission to Mars, international jewel thief and mild-mannered reporter, Rupert Goodwins writes about computers by day and behaves oddly at night. He lives in London, a large post-imperial city set in an alluvial clay bowl, but doesn't worry about it.

Grendel

RUSSELL BUTEK

The power of the storyteller is immeasurable.
Especially when, against all odds, the story is true.

I SENSE THAT YOU CRAVE FORGIVENESS. BUT THERE is nothing to forgive. It is human nature to fight: the wrestling of children, the squabble of a loving couple, the knife in the back under cover of darkness, the gleeful murders in full daylight under the guise of noble war. Heroes and villains, glory and shame, have passed in and out of our collective consciousness, and they have held up a mirror. We've glanced in that mirror often, calmly, in recognition, and calmly we've continued in our ways. Our violent nature has not changed since before our species came down from the trees. And yet we dare to call it evil. What nonsense! Is the lion evil for bringing down the elk? Is the spider evil for eating her mate? This is merely their nature. And so it is with humankind.

I was a warrior like you once. Under this doddering remnant of human flesh lie many memories. Some of the clearest are of war. I have never sought forgiveness for what I was. I am human and in my youth I gloried in the murderous nature of humans. As I aged I gloried in other natures: some love, some politics—if you ever wish to be amused, dabble in these two; they are our most comic natures. I have been…

You tire of an old man's ranting? Forgive me. Over you I do not have the spell of the ancient mariner over the bridegroom—but please stay. An old mind is cluttered with many paths, and I sometimes detour into overgrown, lost memories to see if anything worthy can be found there, forgetting that I was with company on another trail.

I am old, and many of my memories are overgrown, never to be found again; but within this skull lies one memory which I have maintained with care, treading it often since my violent youth. At times I have tried to forget this memory, straying through other, far distant paths; but all my travels have led back to it, so I have long since surrendered to its demands and attentions. My life has been devoted to this memory, so with it I begin my tale.

A GREAT BATTLE WAS UNDERWAY. IT WAS FOUGHT within a distant star system, but that tiny collection of worlds was not the reason for the conflict, merely the battleground. The real reasons no longer matter.

I was in a fleet of reinforcements. When only an hour from the battle, communications with our fighting armada ceased. The beams went cold, inexplicably so. We had received no orders for quiet running; we did not hear the feared death cries. There was just sudden silence. It was a long hour we spent hovering over our dead receivers, wondering. It is not the domain of warriors to wonder. Such thoughts are the domain of leaders, not fighters. We were uncomfortable.

By the time we reached the system we were barely creeping along, afraid of a rout, afraid of an ambush, afraid of just about everything but what confronted us. There was no ambush, no battle, no movement. The armada had been destroyed, but no enemy was there gloating over their victory. The silent hulks of both sides drifted about. Once-powerful giants were now shredded carcasses, celestial flotsam in the inevitable grip of the local sun.

Tales of dread and terror told in the safety of the gravity wells, told in all seriousness by the old and laughed at by the young, came to all our minds amid the scattered bones of once-great fleets. Ghost stories are told over a fire or a beer, but they are remembered in graveyards. We, the young, stopped laughing that day.

The unknown is a terrible thing. It alone can unveil fear in the fearless. Coasting through that graveyard, we instantly believed the awful fables. This was not a comfortable graveyard we passed through, not a cemetery of the battle-slain. No, a field of death would have been comforting. As gruesome as death may be, it is familiar. The scene before us was far from familiar.

Once-powerful giants were now shredded carcasses, celestial flotsam in the inevitable grip of the local sun.

Even though we recognized some of the mangled forms as ships of our comrades, among them there were no comrades, alive or dead: no bloated, bloodied bodies floating amidst the wreckage; no carcasses pierced and mutilated by the tortured remains of their ships; no dismembered fragments drifting by with their comet tails of crystalline blood. Throughout the mass of monstrous metal corpses, not a single human one was to be found.

In a short time we discovered that there were no organics whatsoever remaining. The wreckage had been stripped of all vegetation, plastics, water—even the batteries and fuel cells were gone. Nothing living or capable of harboring life remained. The visions from the horrible tales reared up before us. Grendel had come and feasted upon the combatants. Grendel, an unknown terror, a name some forgotten mystic had pulled from an ancient epic. The newest of those tales were hundreds of years

old, the oldest mere rumors from many millennia past. It was as if an occasional plague were sent to slap humanity in the face, to remind us of our distant fall from the Golden Age when humans were gods and held power over suns. That reminder was vividly before us again, shaming us from our lofty dreams of power.

Each tale has its own story: The sad demise of some hero, the final death of some terrible villain. But Grendel feeds on them all. Always, two great fleets oppose each other in a great battle—it has to be a great battle, for two lone ships in a skirmish did not make a legend—and always, Grendel comes and indiscriminately destroys them, leaving never a witness.

The mystery and the legend had come alive before us, and we would now write our own tales. We could add what had never been told before. We now knew of the dreadful immediacy of Grendel. The other stories talked of days or even years before the battleground had been visited. In our chapter we would bring that down to a single hour.

When the somber shock in our minds quieted enough for us to function, we mechanically went about collecting the few remaining secrets our ships held, and searched for remnants of the secrets of the enemy. But this was mere fill in our story. We had one more chapter yet to write.

Our sensors were running wide open, active as well as passive. Hiding, we guessed, would be useless, so we scattered our pings in all directions, not wanting to be surprised. We finished our survey the next day and were about to go home when one of the spotters caught a distant derelict changing course. Something was still alive a million miles away. When we got there, we found more than machinery, but less than a man. His mind was as twisted and jagged as the wreckage we had left behind. He had expended nearly the last of his breathable air to deflect his drift in the hope that we would notice. It saved him, but by the time we got there he was already suffering from anoxia. Vacillating between light-headed fatigue and raving lunacy, he was quite insane, but those of us who saw him knew that it wasn't oxygen deprivation that had driven him mad.

The official report pieced together from his fractured testimony was quite bland, of course. He and his squadron had jettisoned early to surprise the enemy. But the enemy had surprised them instead with the same thought. They fought their little skirmish and lost. He was alive with his little environment intact, but all his systems were knocked out. The victors hurried off to join their main force and left him to float with the remains of his friends. All he could do then was watch and, with no systems, all he had were his naked eyes.

A million miles is a long way, but the combat was a fierce one, the power of the battle fires toyed not only with the machines, but with space, which glowed and wavered around the combatants. As a light-bulb under water, he described it. But then it flashed brilliantly and he was blinded for hours. When his sight finally did return, it was the next day. From his distance he couldn't see anything of the battleground. His signal was simply the last act of desperation.

That was his story on the official documents, but his pages on the chapters of our legend were such to grease the fires of morbid romance. No longer would the tales speak of sad heroes and vanquished villains. The old tales all spoke of the horror and the mystery, but those had always been subsumed by other plots. This demented witness's testimony of horror brought the mystery to the fore, and there it would stay. A ball of light flashed brilliantly about the battle—that much had made it into the official report—but he wasn't blinded by it. Not really.

Because of the light he could see nothing but Grendel, but what else was there to see? From a million miles away, the greatest ships of the fleet were mere specks, yet he could see Grendel tearing away at those specks, unleashing the energies within, cracking shells between its teeth to suck at the vital meat. Yes, teeth. That is how he saw Grendel, a great face, vicious and beastly. Through the massacre it was bowed down, concentrating on its work. But when the fleets were consumed, it turned and glared at him, a face of energies: red heat, white heat, a tattered blue-green corona blowing as a mane in an unseen wind, eyes burning with the power of suns, its snout smeared with the lifeblood of its kill, bleeding planets dripping from its ethereal fangs. When it saw him its countenance brightened, grew less demonic, its eyes twinkled. It winked at him once before returning to its lair beyond the universe.

AH, YOU'RE LISTENING TO THE OLD MAN'S TALE with interest now! You hadn't heard these stories before? I had thought that perhaps you had. So have I gained the power of the ancient mariner over you after all. Isn't it a wonder that that yarn has survived over untold centuries? Why would such a tale stay with us when so much else is lost? It is the mystique, of course. The mystery always attracts the human soul. It is because of curiosity that we toil as we do, and curiosity is fed by mystery. The works of our ancestors which betake of this mood appeal to all ages while the fare of lighter moods vanishes in a few years. Beowulf. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The Jovian Dirge. The wordsmiths and the memories of them have long since drifted into oblivion while their moody tales have survived to taunt us, becoming mysteries themselves.

I am wandering again. Forgive an old man his senility.

I WAS HAUNTED BY WHAT I HAD SEEN. FOR A TIME I tried to forget the wrath of Grendel. But who could forget such a manifestation? And who would let me? We who had seen the bones of Grendel's feast were the center of attention at every landfall. So I took the memory and fed upon it. It became a dream of mine to see Grendel for myself, to tell of the real Grendel, not the inarticulate visions of a raving lunatic. Grendel fed on war. Very well. I would remain a cog of war.

I served my masters well, but their thanks was a forced retirement. It seems they found no more use for a feeble old man. Feeble! That was half a century ago and I still live! We all heard, later, that on the night of my retirement ball, Grendel had struck again. And the ships that had been under my command were there! It mattered little to me that my ships were torn to shreds. They saw Grendel before they died! That was all that I had asked and my masters had taken it from me.

But they were my masters no longer, and there was still hope. This latest visitation, terrible as it was, was nothing more than the retelling of the older tales. No new chapters could be written from it. The battle ground was not trod upon until days afterward; there were no surviving witnesses. The desolation was familiar—yet no matter how familiar, it was still terrible, and many were very afraid. Grendel had never attacked in such quick succession before. It was a sign, they pleaded. Stop this useless waste of men and machines or Grendel will feed on us all.

Ha! It was a sign, all right, but it didn't portend any of their superstitious nonsense. I had some suspicions of the nature of Grendel that this latest attack appeared to confirm. Only the most exceptional show of power attracted it, and I knew our war machines were far from exhausted. We and our enemies were still human, still full of our nature, and we both had much more wealth yet to squander. Another great battle was sure to occur again soon. So I waited. Yet waiting was not enough. I had to live to see that battle. I became an expert of human nature and, in my own small way, I assisted our civilizations in achieving the summit of that nature. There would be another great battle and I would be there, waiting.

I wanted to see Grendel with my own eyes. This desire superseded all other passions, or brought those passions to bear for it. I expected my doom when I encountered Grendel, and I would be satisfied at that if I could just view the vessel of my destruction. But I could still hope to survive the encounter, could still hope to add my own chapter. So when I wasn't studying human nature, I was studying the sciences to bring about that survival. I had amassed enough wealth to buy or take most anything I needed. The only fear I entertained was that I would face death before I faced Grendel. But you see that I have survived.

At last the greed of the empires built beyond endurance and they once again went to war. Exploratory skirmishes at first, but soon all of their greatest engines were brought into service and, in the usual irony of war, the two sides could still find one thing upon which they could agree: a meeting place and time for the mutual slaughter.

I was there before the combatants, waiting. For those enamored of battle machines it was a magnificent sight. Even from my hidden distance, burrowed into a dead rock loosely orbiting the dead sun that marked their rendezvous point, the arrayed forces opposing each other were beautiful. Manufactured black shapes set against the natural blackness of space. One ship is almost invisible, but bring hundreds into view in an orderly pattern and space becomes an embossed sheet of velvet, figures rippling through the fabric as squadrons maneuvered.

For a moment they stood, quivering but quiet, like cobras preparing to strike. Then they opened their energy piles against each other, each of them the power of a small sun, combined, a hundred suns, and soon a thousand, blazing in fury amidst ships who expended as much energy in avoidance and absorption as in offense. The dead system was ablaze. I thought my distance would be sufficient to keep me out of the force. I was wrong. The rock around me boiled away to nothing; my shields alone kept me alive.

The expanse around me blazed and soon began to shimmer as if through the heat rising from a fire, though, of course, there was no air from which such a fire could breathe. But it wasn't an air-breathing dragon that had been awakened. This dragon breathed space. The glow was fierce. My displays dampened until almost opaque and I was still nearly blinded. My ship itself seemed to glow. The shimmer increased; the stuff of space began to fold into itself and, as if it couldn't bear the stress, I saw what I can only describe as cracks and gashes. Most of them, the largest, were far from me, but a few were much too close. The forces tearing away space outside my ship began to slip their talons within, scratching at me. Scratching was all they could do to me—I was still protected—but it was terrible. Before I blacked out, the sinews behind those talons reached out for the battle. Grendel tore through the cracks of space, firing.

When I awoke, the air inside the ship tingled. Space was still creased and torn. And Grendel was still out there, scavenging for the scraps left over from the melee. It wasn't the vision of the demented lunatic that faced me, though I found myself mapping what I saw to the stories he told. The energies engulfing the scene, both visible and invisible, were intense. My screens were still at their dimmest setting. I was just outside their sphere of influence, much closer than I had planned, but still far enough away that I hadn't been torn to shreds. Dark but sparkling

shapes were moving about within. They were huge, the size of planets, and they moved in perfect precision. At the center of the sphere of energies was a region darker than space should be. Space was still rent and cracked all around me. Most of the tears were tiny, barely visible, but planets could be swallowed by that huge gaping hole. With a little imagination, I formed of the ships a dotted outline of a face and of the gaping maw of non-space its grinning leer. The madman had, indeed, seen Grendel. As I watched, the beast which had consumed all around it began to consume itself. The sphere was shrinking and the jagged smirking visage was swallowing its own dotted outline, swallowing the planet ships.

Legends spoke of great battles fought by the nobility of the ancients, fought over galaxies. Much too grand to be believable, they could still be told as legends. But all legends have some truth to them, and I had a theory. In those greater times of the supreme glory of humankind, we fell from grace, and have been falling ever since. In the first battles, their strength had to be great indeed. Our mightiest conflicts would be mere skirmishes to them. In their ultimate encounter, they not only tore into each other, but they tore into the fabric of the universe, and fell through. They were swallowed by their own passions and trapped beyond space. Now, in our meager shows of vice, we but barely poke holes through the universe. But beyond those holes lies the power of the ancients ready to annihilate us before falling back to their lair as the holes heal.

My theory seems to have been correct. I have seen the glory of the ancients. You heard me rave about the beauty of our fleets, but I can rave about such things no more. Not only beautiful were the ancient ships, but sublime in their casual display of raw power. Not the pageant of our crude metals. Their parade was a crystalline spectacle; not even as substantial as crystal, those ships were pure energies made solid for the warriors' benefit. Every part of each ship could be converted to war.

But my thoughts again drift. You know these things. Please forgive an old man. I am still in wonder.

Now when I recovered from this glorious vision, the talents of my ship, unique in all the galaxy, were put into place. I know little of the science of space travel, but no matter. What needs a caveman the knowledge of chemistry to cook over a fire? Gravity wells play havoc with jump ships, this much I do know. They cannot jump from or return to normal space closer than a few million miles from anything larger than a moon without losing precision. And the closer to such a body, the more precision is wanted. But some unnamed genius had discovered a formula for the deviations, and my ship was built to prove it.

So now I set the ship to jump. And waited. The last of the dark crystal planets was leaving the universe; space began to unfold, spreading the cloth of itself smooth again. I guessed that I must now take the chance, and hoped the folds wouldn't upset the equation - I did have a direct line of sight to my target. I pushed the button. It amazes me that after thousands of years of technology, we still use such archaic tools, but how does one improve on a button? I pushed it and found the equation proven when I appeared next within the landing bay doors of the last ship in the Fleet of Grendel.

You had little chance, then, to decide what to do with me before the holes in the universe swallowed you back up, so now you are stuck with me and my ship. I care not your verdict or your mercy. I have lived to see Grendel. I have nothing more for which to live. To die, fight, or peacefully spend my remaining days is of little import now. The thought of writing my chapter is no longer appealing, even if it could be read. There would be no mystery in that chapter. Amazement, yes, but no mystery. Why should I take that from the human race? It will die when it discovers everything there is to be known. You, Lords of Grendel, are necessary for its survival.

YOU MAKE US SOUND SO NOBLE, OLD MAN, BUT ALL we do is kill. You speak of millennia. We know only months. Even now we are again in battle. Feel the tremors? How much time has elapsed in your universe since you arrived? Ten years? A thousand? It does not matter in here. We cannot escape. We do not know how. We are only warriors, all we know is how to survive.

But you still haven't answered our question. The technology within your ship is new to us. Nothing less than a great state could develop such a craft. How did you come to be its pilot?

I HAVE FOUND THAT OBSESSION CAN MASTER THE impossible, particularly when one has been an emperor.

RUSSELL BUTEK

Is a nomadic software type who can't decide where he really wants to live. He grew up in the Cold White North of Wisconsin and got his education there, and has lived on the east coast, west coast, and places in between, along with a brief stint in Germany. He's currently checking out Texas.

Heading Out

ADAM HARRINGTON

This is the story of a journey from childhood to adulthood.
And we're not being metaphorical.

THE TWENTY-NINTH OF DECEMBER 1940 WAS NOT a good day in Lewisham. To most Londoners, this was merely the worst night of the Blitz. To my paternal grandparents and me it was historic because that night my dad was born.

My grandmother lay in the cellar of Lewisham General Hospital amongst candles as, above, the Luftwaffe took London apart block by block. The bare electric bulbs flickered every now and again as the building shook to the reverberations from falling bombs, and there was the occasional crash of a window being blown out in the empty hospital above. Through tears in the blackoutblankets, the sky flickered red under the drone of German bombers, the *badoom-badoom* of anti-aircraft cannons and ashes blew in through shattered windows and swirled around empty wards and naked iron-frame beds.

As patriotic as my grandmother was, she frankly didn't care that the country was being softened up for invasion in the same way a chef's mallet tenderizes a steak. She was grunting and straining under the coaxing of nurses who must have been cursing this, quite possibly the worst night shift of the century.

My dad slithered out at five past one in the morning of the thirtieth of December and within a few shocked seconds told the world exactly what he thought of it.

My grandparents lived in a two-story brick terrace house and pursued a life of aspirant working-class Protestant probity, going to the Victorian gothic church twice on Sundays and keeping their front rooms spotless and the piano consistently badly tuned. My dad went to the Church of England primary school, failed the 11-plus and was dumped in the local secondary modern. When he was 15 he swiped Mrs. Frobisher, a war widow, rather inexpertly across the shoulders with a plank of wood and ran off with her blue fake leather handbag, which, he soon discovered, contained five shillings and sixpence, a packet of mints and a handkerchief.

Even if you ignore the social and humanitarian implications of such an act, this was a silly thing to do. In Lewisham in 1955 most people knew everybody else and my dad had developed a bit of a reputation as a tearaway. At least a score of people had seen him, so the police paid a visit to my grandmother, who sat ashen-faced in the kitchen with her hands on her floral apron wondering where she had gone wrong. Grandfather drank a bit too much, but he worked hard on the railways and went to church. She made good meals every evening and cleaned the house. What more?

When I asked my dad, now enjoying a content middle age, why on earth he did such a terrible thing, he sighed. *Life was very boring in 1955,* he said. *Really very boring, and I was very young.*

My dad lurked around Lewisham for a few hours and then sauntered home, whereupon two policemen launched themselves at him from various crannies of the sitting room and he was carried, kicking and yelling, away from his grief-stricken mother and deposited in the local nick. After a very brief court appearance he was sent to a borstal near Rochester. Mrs. Frobisher, I am glad to say, made a full physical recovery, although she was jittery near the market ever after.

So, when he should have been going back to the institution, my dad climbed aboard a train to London.

Did, er, 'things' happen in borstals in those days? I asked my dad once.

Yes, he said, *'things' happened quite a lot. I was so stupid I thought the boys were having a fight in the showers. They were making all the same noises.* My dad paused. I awaited a family revelation. *There was this group of boys who took a fancy to me….* My dad trailed off and took solace in a hefty swig of a rather horrible *vin de pays* he had bought the previous summer from a farm near Montpelier.

Borstals were a bit more relaxed in 1956 than in Brendan Behan's day, and inmates "of good character" were occasionally allowed out to work in the town as a form of rehabilitation. My dad, being a quiet, industrious and charming person when he wanted to be and, more importantly, of a practicing Church of England family,was considered of good character and was farmed out to a metalworking shop in the Chatham dockyards. He worked so well that during a sudden rush his employers asked the prison authorities if he could stay after hours to help with the backlog. The borstal agreed, and Dad did a bunk.

So, one warm May night when he should have been going back to the institution, my dad trotted through the streets of Chatham in his borstal issue shirt and slacks, climbed up a railway embankment and, amazingly, managed to climb aboard a train to London as it waited for the lights to change.

If anybody noticed this, they were terribly English about it and pretended that nothing had happened. My

dad curled up in a ball on one of the seats and fell asleep until the train reached Victoria station. Not knowing what to do now that he was in London, and too frightened about the police to find his mother, he walked to Paddington station with the intention of getting on another train, but found that not a lot was happening at that time of night. So instead he nicked a loaf of bread from somewhere—my dad did not elaborate—climbed into a wooden freight wagon, ate the entire loaf and fell asleep.

The wagon was shunted the next morning. My dad was knocked awake and spent a few panicked seconds wondering who and where he was. The wagon was knocked about for half an hour, and as soon as my dad's heart had stopped tripping over itself, he pulled the wagon door open and looked out on some bleak and dreary sidings near Willesden Junction in north west London. He let himself down from the wagon and made his way to a brick wall some fifty yards off. A few steps over the tracks and he was spotted.

"Oi! You! Wotcha dooin?"

My dad jumped five feet into the air and couldn't be seen for dust as he sprinted across the tracks and vaulted the brick wall. All a bit of overkill, really, as the railway workmen (fat lumps all of them) could barely roll faster than the beer barrels they resembled.

Dad then walked vaguely northwest along the Harrow Road through Wembley (where he stole a couple of apples), Harrow-on-the-Hill (where he stole another apple, some cheese, a rather sawdusty cake thing, some bread rolls and ate them all), Pinner (where he stole absolutely nothing), Rickmansworth (where he stole a huge shopping bag full of groceries, but had to drop it outside Woolworth's to escape a posse of enraged shoppers) and Chorleywood, where it started to rain.

My dad fought with second thoughts as his grand adventure took a suddenly wet and dismal turn. He started running to keep warm, and jogged a few miles through wet dog's mercury and beech woods near Amersham and Chesham and then, for who knows what reason, took a minor road which ran north west towards Aylesbury over the green and white Chiltern Hills. This area of the Chilterns is now packed with joggers. On Sundays you can barely turn a country road without slamming on the brakes in an effort to avoid another blank-eyed and sweaty fitness fanatic plodding past heady bramble and elder hedges. I claim my dad started it all. People generally didn't run anywhere in 1956 unless they had killed someone or were Roger Bannister.

Just as it began to get dark my dad found a brick shed, crawled among the rakes and hoes and fell asleep.

The house to which the shed belonged lay less than twenty feet away on the other side of an elm hedge, and about an hour after my dad had curled up around garden implements, the owner of the house decided to return her secateurs to the shed after pruning the vine in her conservatory. May is not generally a good month to do this, but Elisabeth lacked finesse in the gardening department.

Elisabeth wasn't her real name; Dad never told anyone what her real name was. In fact Dad never talked about this episode at all out of choice, except to my mum just before he married her, who then told me some twenty-five years later over washing the Sunday dishes when I pursued this story. And when I told Dad that mum had already told *me*, he wanted to know exactly what mum had said, of course, and I managed to blackmail him into revealing the whole story. He recounted the story in an odd stop-and-start fashion, reflecting his internal pendulum of embarrassment and sentimentality.

Your dad, said my mum, *was quite a looker when he was younger.*

My dad at this stage was asleep with his head hanging over the back of the sofa, snoring gently. Mum removed the gradually tipping wine glass from his hand and he snorted in some subconscious annoyance. Difficult to see my dad as a bit of a looker. He always looked, well, like a dad.

Elisabeth saw my dad as soon as she opened the shed door. My dad took several seconds to realize he was being looked at, sprang to his feet ready to run, but tripped on a garden fork and pitched forward with a squeak. Elisabeth stepped out of the way to allow my dad to crumple without hindrance on the damp grass.

"Are you all right?" she asked, bending over my dad.

My dad rolled on his back. His stomach, then flat, now anything but, grumbled loudly. He grinned in embarrassment.

"Are you hungry?" said Elisabeth.

"Yes," said Dad. My dad was 16 and just out of borstal. Not a conjunction designed for charmingly seductive repartee. A situation since rectified, sighed my mum, and always directed inappropriately.

"Well, if you have nothing to do right away, would you care for a spot of something to eat?" said Elisabeth.

Dad said that he had never met anyone who talked like that before. He was used to that peculiar form of southeast English referred to as *sahf-luhndun.* Only his mum, my grandmother, had ever tried to talk "proper," but even then nothing so upper class as this. It was like being with royalty. And with royalty, you do as you are told.

Dad nodded to the food question. He was suffering the ravenous appetite of the hyperactive young, after all. Elisabeth tried to wave my dad in front of her, but he didn't quite catch on and Elisabeth, being polite, took the lead and my dad plodded after her.

I couldn't believe the house, my dad said to me. *It was like those silly Famous Five books, all brick and timber*

and fireplaces and tiled floors and oak tables. I can't imagine what she made of me. Damp and dirty, a now heavily soiled thick cotton shirt hanging at an angle over my chest, buttons missing and untucked into my trousers, my bad borstal haircut stuck up all angles and full of dried grass. She looked at me in the light of the room and I could see a laugh creeping across her face. I couldn't see why then, but I can now. She asked me to sit at the blackened oak table and went into the kitchen, where I heard her laugh, although it might have been the radio. I looked around, but I was too overawed and tired to be really interested in stealing anything.

"It might be about half an hour before I can get anything ready," said Elisabeth. "Is that all right?"

My dad nodded. He would have agreed to anything right then.

"Do you live near here?" she asked.

My dad shook his head.

"Hmph," said Elisabeth, knitting her brow in vexation at the difficulty of getting anything remotely intelligent out of him. "What about your parents? Won't they be worried?"

"No, no, please don't call them," said my dad, looking frightened.

"Well, all right. I think you should tell them that you're all right though. You needn't say where you are. I've got a telephone."

Dad didn't respond.

What did she look like? I asked my dad. *Well,* he said, *she was shorter than me* (my dad was five-foot-seven, and had been since he was eighteen) *with black hair. How old was she?* I asked. Dad thought about whether to answer that one, and gave me an angry look. I wasn't put off. *I don't know,* he said. *When I was that age there were only four ages—children, my age, my parents' age and my grandparents' age. She was my parents' age put like that, though I think now that she must have been in her late twenties.*

"Why don't you have yourself a bath while I'm getting something ready?" said Elisabeth, who was driven more by thoughts of hygiene than altruism.

Baths have been one of my dad's lifelong weakness. Along with food, alcohol and women, of course, but baths were always my dad's first and most faithful of loves. So Elisabeth was slightly taken aback by the enthusiasm of my dad's response.

Dad suddenly stood up at the oak table and said, "Yes, *please!"*

Elisabeth led my dad up to the bathroom, put in the plug and turned on the hot tap. The geyser ignited with a *whumph* and covered the bathroom window with fog.

"I'll get you a towel," she said, removing her towels from the wooden towel rail as she left in case he should use those by mistake. Dad sat on the loo watching the water fill the bath. My grandmother had a bath, but the borstal bath was so huge, filthy and rarely used that it hardly counted as a bath at all. Dad's toes twitched in anticipation and he began to undress.

Elisabeth returned with an armful of towel, a pair of trousers, some underwear and a shirt. My dad was almost, but not quite indecent, and vaguely aware that this wasn't the done thing in front of women.

What do you mean, "And Then?" Have you any sense of propriety regarding your old man? Well, what do you think? I lost my virginity.

Give her her due, said dad to me, *she didn't bat an eyelid.*

"These were Tom's, my husband's. They might just fit you. Don't worry, he won't be back," said Elisabeth.

It had never occurred to me to be worried, said my dad. *I was such an oaf. But the bath was good.* My dad raised his legs and I could see his toes curling in nostalgia inside his slippers.

And then? I asked.

Well, said my dad, *I had some meat and potatoes and I remembered my manners and used my knife and fork properly.*

And then?

What do you mean And Then? Have you any sense of propriety regarding your old man? Dad sighed. *Well, what do you think? I lost my virginity. Technically speaking I had lost it the previous month, but I don't consider that* real. Dad looked dreamily at the ceiling and muttered *Mmmm* quietly to himself.

You can't just leave me there, I said. Dad looked at me, various emotions flickering across his face. I wondered whether I had pushed a wee bit too far.

She took off all my clothes and told me to do the same to her. We lay on the rug in the sitting room and she stroked me all over, and told me to do the same to her. Then we made love all night. Well, until I fell asleep anyway. I didn't know what had hit me. OK?

I felt rather jealous of my dad. My first time, real or otherwise, was so ridiculously inept that both of us gave up and decided to watch the TV instead. It wasn't a complete failure, obviously, otherwise it wouldn't count as the first time. It took Ruth—that was her name—and me about a week to get plumbing and lust to coincide. And then it was quite fun. And then we moved on, bound across years, relationships and now oceans by our juvenile fumblings. She's now an up-and-coming

journalist. A respected adult with respected colleagues, no doubt.

The next day my dad woke up in a bed with white linen sheets rather than gray cotton ones, and trooped after Elisabeth like a lost puppy, grinning daftly all the time.

It was lucky, my dad told me, *that I was such a complete naïf, otherwise there would have been impenetrable layers of meanings and sub-meanings and guilt and regrets, and as it was I thought the whole thing was just grand, which made her just laugh and laugh. I mean, why did she do it? A sixteen-year-old boy of whom she knew nothing? She must have been a strange woman.* My dad took another slug of his *vin de pays* as we pondered Elisabeth's motives.

When I raised the question with my mum, she shrugged. *Quiet desperation, like most of us,* she said. I must say that I found this remark slightly chilling.

I would love to have seen Elisabeth through my eyes now, said Dad. I mean, why? My dad shook his head and drew his eyebrows together.

Dad stayed with Elisabeth for about a fortnight—doing gardening, repointing the chimney and repegging roof tiles under Elisabeth's arm-waving commands from below. It was the first time Dad had ever voluntarily taken instruction from anyone, and he enjoyed doing it, and didn't even mind when Elisabeth cursed him fulsomely as a dozen expensive Kent pegs slid from the roof and demolished themselves on the front path because he hadn't stacked them properly. He just grinned and grinned.

"Where are you going?" asked Elisabeth one night over dinner. That day Dad had been a little distracted. He felt an imaginary net close in around him. *It wasn't as if the police were looking for me,* my dad told me. *They wouldn't waste time on a runaway, but I sort of felt the need to run again. I sometimes got like that. Fidgety feet, I suppose.*

"I don't know," said my dad. "I've always wanted to go to the Yorkshire Moors."

Elisabeth munched on some cabbage. "You don't have any money," she said. Dad shrugged. "Well how have you been finding food so far?" she asked. Dad grinned licentiously. A cloud of irritation crossed Elisabeth's face, and before Dad could say something crass said abruptly, "Well, I suppose you've been stealing, haven't you?"

"Only when I'm very hungry," said Dad. Elisabeth ran her hands over her face as she considered the options. "Well, don't do a bunk on me. I'll give you a little something to take you part of the way."

Oh, she was canny, said my dad. *This way she could make sure I wasn't making off with her family silver in the dead of the night. That evening, in fact, she went through all her drawers and cabinets "to do the dusting," she said. I thought she was slightly potty then, but I now think she was making an inventory. She never asked me to leave. I don't think she particularly wanted me to go. I don't know how she would have finished it if it had been up to her, but as it turned out, it wasn't.*

"I think I'll be going now," my dad said at about eleven in the morning as Elisabeth was reading the *Times* in the garden.

"If that's what you want," she said, folding the newspaper and getting up off the garden seat. Dad had collected his borstal boots, but couldn't find his borstal shirt and slacks, which Elisabeth had binned, at arm's length, protected by pink rubber gloves, at the first opportunity.

"Here, have Tom's old work shirt. It'll last longer," said Elisabeth. She also gave Dad Tom's old tweed jacket and a newish pair of corduroys Tom had bought but never wore. My Dad took off the thin cotton trousers and shirt he was currently wearing and put on the new set. Elisabeth spent the next five minutes dashing around the house like a mad thing. Dad watched her uncomprehendingly.

This must have been her final check that I hadn't taken anything, Dad told me.

Then, slightly flushed and breathless, she gave my dad a wallet, a paper bag with some sandwiches and an apple in it, and a peck on the cheek. She held his hand as they walked down the path to the road. He walked into the middle of the road and looked around.

"Which way's Yorkshire?" he asked.

"From here? Well, that way, roughly." She waved north over the hill, at a right angle to the road.

"Oh," he said.

"But Aylesbury's that way," she pointed west along the road. Dad grinned, waved and marched off to Aylesbury.

Thus endeth the Elisabeth chapter.

Dad never let on who Elisabeth really was, and there are many old farmhouses between Aylesbury and Chesham. I would have liked to thank her for taking such good care of my dad, though I suspect she would be somewhat mortified to have been thanked. And one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that my dad made the whole thing up, though I doubt it because Dad never made up stories about anything else to my knowledge. Of course, since I became a journalist like Ruth (though not paid anything like the amount she is) I now make up stories all the time. No member of my family can reconcile what I do for a living with watching the BBC news or reading the *Daily Telegraph.* Actually, I can't either, but there we go.

Dad looked into the wallet Elisabeth had given him. It contained twenty pounds, a staggering sum for my dad, who had never seen more money than ten shillings in one place at any one time. He reached Aylesbury—over the

scarp edge of the Chiltern hills—by mid-afternoon, and ate the sandwiches sitting in the market square under the warm sun, feeling is if he belonged there.

He used some penny pieces in the wallet to phone his mum, who was, as one would expect, upset, confused and desperate about her son. Her son didn't know how to respond, and didn't say much except that he was going on holiday. His mum asked him to give himself up—only another few months in borstal and then he could get on with his life. Dad wasn't willing to face the reality that England is—was—a very bad country to be an outlaw in. A crowded nation of factotum shopkeepers.

It didn't occur to my dad to rent a room for the night so he took the Buckingham road and slept in a cow barn. My dad was not keen on cows. As a London boy, Dad was only used to cows as sides of beef on a butcher's hook—and in the fifties, that fairly rarely—and occasionally as irregularly shaped gray items on a Sunday plate. Real live cows also smelt rather bad. He crawled into the barn's hay loft and lay awake listening to the animals below.

I realized, my dad told me, *that the cows must have been* lowing. *It made it all seem rather Christmassy. Nobody ever talks about lowing unless there is a little baby Jesus nearby.*

Before daybreak Dad set off through Buckingham, stole a breakfast and earned it by being chased at full pelt along the entire length of the high street, his booted feet going *phutphutphutphutphut* as he hurtled across the gravel just outside the old jailhouse. He could run a lot faster than your average grocer, who was making a more *crunch, crunch, wheeze, crunch-crunch-crunch, wheeze, crunch* sort of noise. My dad then followed the signs to Northampton.

North, you see, my dad told me. *Sounded sort of exotic. Just as well that I never saw any signs for Northfleet when I jumped borstal. Northfleet is a town barely ten miles from the place.*

Dad then pinched lunch from a grocer's in Towcester and plodded along the Northampton road. He got to Northampton after the shops had shut, leaving very little that was stealable without putting a brick through a window. In any case, Dad was too tired to deal with the inevitable high speed consequences of this and decided to use the money Elisabeth had given him. This was a momentous event in Dad's life. The first time he had actually used his own money, freely given, to purchase a service for personal consumption. He went into a pub just north of Northampton city center to look for a room.

"How old are you, son?" asked the landlord, just as he was about to give my dad the key.

"Eighteen," said Dad, accompanying his barefaced lie with his best barefaced innocent eyed look.

"Hmph," said the landlord, not convinced. "Where you from?"

"London, sir," said Dad.

"Hmph. Room seven. At the top of those stairs there, then turn left." The landlord leaned over the bar and looked for Dad's luggage. "You bringing in your luggage now?"

"Ah, no," said Dad, his brain going into overdrive to explain this one. "I'm visiting relatives in Towcester tomorrow. Don't need any luggage—I'd only forget it."

This was a momentous event in dad's life. The first time he had actually used his own money to purchase a service for personal consumption.

"Where did you say your relatives were?" said the landlord, an entirely inexplicable smile creeping across his face.

"Towcester."

"I think you'll find it's pronounced *toaster*, actually."

"What is?" said Dad, frowning.

"Tow-cester. It's pronounced *toaster*."

"Really?" said Dad, genuinely surprised. "Oh."

"Well, whatever. Do you want dinner tonight?"

Dad was hungry again, and a bit more of the contents of his precious wallet was used in a legitimate transaction. He went up to his room before dinner, and as soon as he closed the door he had a fit of the giggles. He threw himself on the bed and stretched himself out, his hands behind his head, and grinned. Once the novelty of that had worn off, he explored the wardrobe and the mirrored cabinet above the sink. He turned on the hot water tap and ran his hand under it for a good two minutes before hot water from the storage heater managed to negotiate the contorted, clanking, magnolia-painted pipes from the basement. This gave Dad an idea. He went out into the corridor, then remembered his key and went back into his room to collect it, and went in search of a bath.

He found a huge enameled bath in a tiny, badly painted bathroom with a cracked window and graying net curtains. Dad skipped a little boogie of joy on the linoleum, and then sat on the edge of the bath for few seconds and raised his legs, toes curling in expectation. Then he went down to the bar for his dinner, which was tasteless, amongst the mostly silent and grimly drinking working men of Northampton, thinking about his bath.

What is this thing you have about baths? I asked my dad.

I don't know, he said. *I suppose it reminded me of living at home with my mum. We were one of the few families in*

our street with a proper full-size galvanized tub. We didn't often have full-blown baths because of the expense, and when we did we used the same water for the whole family, with my dad coming last, as he was the dirtiest. My mum, my sister and I used to share the same bath all together until I was seven, at which point mum deemed it inappropriate. I just remember the borstal as cold and dirty.

Your dad always was quite the bon viveur, said my mum. *Even when I met him. It has always astonished me that he survived trekking across England with no clean clothes and no wine.*

Ah, said Dad, *but that was before I* knew *about clean clothes and wine and roast pheasant and pâté de foie gras and summer holidays in France and stuff. You're not born with taste; you have to* acquire *it.*

This latter was said with a grand sweep of the hand, which seemed eloquent of something, but quite what was difficult to say.

My dad soaked for a good half hour in that Northampton bath. He then tried to sleep in that unfamiliar hired bed, but was too excited about the portentous strangeness of it all, and tossed about for an hour before finally slipping off.

He passed the landlord the next morning. "Off to Towcester now, son?" he said.

My dad tried to laugh politely, but he's never been good at that and I doubt whether he was any better when he was 16. This was just the sort of thing you expected from the country. Trying to catch people out with arbitrary pronunciations. Oh, ha-bloody-ha.

Dad got fed up with plodding a few miles outside of Northampton and decided to thumb a lift. The drivers of the few vehicles which rattled along this road looked at Dad with a mixture of bafflement and suspicion. After half an hour of this, my dad decided to get up from the long summer grass he was sitting in and look as if he wanted to go somewhere. Ten minutes later, a farmer in a bulbous, dark green, left-hand drive army surplus truck pulled over.

"Where you goin', son?" said the farmer, leaning out of the driver's window.

"North, sir."

The farmer looked at my dad long and hard. "You've got the right road, then. Couldja be more specific?"

"The Yorkshire Moors."

"That's a heck of a long way to go by thumbin' it. I'm going just past Market Harborough. That do?"

"Yes, thanks," said my dad, who had no idea where Market Harborough was.

Dad walked around the truck and climbed in the passenger seat.

"No knapsack or nothing?" said the farmer.

"No, sir," said Dad, hiding a sudden blush with a big grin. The farmer chuckled as he looked through the rear window of the truck ready to pull out.

"Name's Charlie Ferris," said the farmer.

"I'm George," said my dad.

My dad was named after King George VI, four years dead by then. He was never awfully keen on the name, any more than he was on the age or cause of the King's death—56, of a coronary thrombosis. Dad was 56 a few years ago, and by a strangely unpleasant coincidence had his arteries widened by angioplasty that year after a few nasty turns with angina. He was told by a criminally naïve doctor that the odd glass of red wine could help reduce his blood cholesterol. My dad heard this as "one glass good, one bottle better," and consequently his already moderate intake of red wine took off stratospherically. He also pooh-poohed all attempts to wean him off beef, saying that as he was likely to be long dead before BSE got him, he might as well take advantage of the suddenly low prices. Honestly. The older generation.

The truck clanked and ground through Brixworth, Hanging Houghton and Maidwell. Dad had been in a motorized vehicle before, but rarely, and never before in a left-hand drive army surplus truck bouncing along a trunk road overlooking Northamptonshire fields and hedges. He stuck his head out of the window and felt the sun and wind fly past.

The farmer watched him out of the corner of his eye.

"Have ya never been in a truck before, son?"

"No, sir…" The truck hit a pothole and Dad bounced a foot into the air and landed in a heap, winded, on the dashboard.

"Mind the potholes," said the farmer languidly.

Dad took all of thirty seconds to regain his composure, and then continued to look around him like a squirrel in a room full of walnuts.

"Are you staying in Market Harborough tonight?" asked the farmer.

"I don't know," said my dad.

There was another long pause.

"You can stay at the farmhouse if you're willing to work for me tomorrer."

"Thank you."

The farmer drove through Market Harborough and took the road to Melton Mowbray. A few miles outside the town the farmer spun the steering wheel and threw the truck off the metalled road down a white and dusty track which led to a collection of farm buildings and a large horse chestnut tree.

"Do you have any cows?" asked my dad.

"Twenty. And a breeding bull."

"Ah," said my dad.

The farmer threw the truck into a corner of the farmyard and yanked the handbrake to stop the vehicle, which skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust.

"I'll show you the wife now so you won't get surprised later," said the farmer.

Mrs. Ferris was an awe-inspiring woman. Six-foot square and bright red, her hair tied up in a bun.

"What's this you've brought in, Charlie?" she said, looking at my dad not unkindly, but rather like you would look at a new kitchen table.

" 'Ired 'elp. Give 'im some food. Can't work on empty." The farmer stomped out of the kitchen back into the yard.

My dad looked up at Mrs. Ferris as if he was a rubber dingy under the bows of an oncoming liner, and assumed the air of a puppy looking for consolation. Mrs. Ferris stared down at him dispassionately, and then pulled a huge loaf of bread, a leg of ham, a vast lump of cheese, a bowl of tomatoes, a bowl of apples, a triangle of butter and a couple of washed lettuces from various parts of the kitchen.

Had my dad not been holding onto a kitchen chair, he might have collapsed at the sight of all this food displayed all at once. As it was he felt himself start salivating like a dog.

" 'Elp yerself, son. Jus' expect work from it." She grabbed my dad's upper arm in her huge right hand and squeezed. My dad looked at his arm in alarm as Mrs. Ferris felt to see if Dad was work-worthy. She let go without any comment and went back to cleaning something by the sink. Dad rubbed his arm to get circulation back into it and watched the veins in the back of his hands deflate. He then attacked the tabletop of food with the sort of no-holds-barred gusto you tend to get from perpetually hungry youngsters.

Three jagged doorstep ham-and-cheese-and-tomato-and-lettuce sandwiches and ten minutes later, the farmer came back in.

"Finished?" he said to my dad.

My dad nodded happily.

"Happy?" he added with the slightest of smiles.

Dad giggled.

"Right, come 'ere. Got work for you."

My dad was then put to shifting hay-bales, cattle feed and carrying bricks for the wall of the new Ferris kitchen garden, corralling cows and sweeping farmyards until the sun went down in a blue-purple glow some eight hours later.

The farmer then shepherded a completely exhausted and hence a completely silent boy into the house and into a downstairs washroom, which had a tap attached to a hose.

"Best clean yerself before dinner," said the farmer.

Dad slowly took off his clothes and turned on the tap. The water was ice-cold and Dad suddenly awoke with a squeak as the hose writhed on the floor and squirted him with water. After a brief but violent tussle my dad took control and finished the job, several inches of dirt dissolving away down the drain. Mrs. Ferris popped open the washroom door and deposited a towel and some clean clothes on a shelf. Dad froze in embarrassment.

Had my dad not been holding onto a kitchen chair, he might have collapsed at the sight of all this food displayed all at once.

"Seen it all before, and better," she said as she closed the door.

My dad plodded into the kitchen, where Mrs. Ferris had made some mutton stew. He was almost too tired to eat it. Almost, but not quite. The farmer and Mrs. Ferris conducted their normal minimal and staccato conversation during the meal and watched as my dad drifted off, slowly listing on his chair. The farmer got up from his seat and with impeccable timing caught my dad just as he was about to brain himself on the kitchen's tile floor. Dad jerked awake and flailed a bit in panic as the farmer righted him.

"Time for bed I think, son," he said.

Although my dad's bowl had been cleaned out quite efficiently, he looked at all the other food just sitting there, waiting to be eaten, and sighed deeply in defeat. He nodded, and the farmer took him up to a tiny whitewashed bedroom with a tiny window and a cheap yellow-veneered wardrobe. It also had a bed with clean blankets and my dad pitched forward onto it and bounced a few times. By the time he had stopped bouncing, he was asleep.

Just before daybreak the next day, Mrs. Ferris came in with a mug of tea and shook my dad until he awoke.

"Don't go back to sleep on me now," she said. "'Ave that cuppa tea, and I've got bacon and eggs for you downstairs." She stomped back downstairs.

My dad could smell breakfast, and this was his main spur in getting up. He was a bit surprised to find that he was naked and inside the sheets, as he couldn't remember getting undressed or actually getting into bed.

My dad found the day a series of baffling and exhausting chores, executed in silence except the mooing and stomping of cows, or the rustle of hay, the gentle gurgling of the milking machines or the clank of aluminum milk churns, the high manic twittering of larks and the sound of the wind in hedgerows. Lunchtime found my dad and the farmer demolishing a foursome of whopping sand-

wiches while sitting on the bonnet of the army surplus left hand drive truck in total, single-minded silence, some two miles from the farmhouse.

Mrs. Ferris had cooked another monster dinner, and my dad managed to eat as much as he wanted before politely asking if he could be excused, a lower-middle-class turn of phrase which made the farmer and his wife look at each other in amusement. They nodded, and my dad plodded up the stairs, got undressed, crawled into bed and passed out.

On Sunday the imperative routine of the farm was cut back to the minimum required to keep the cows happy. At half past nine in the morning the farmer and his wife dressed up in their Sunday best, and rummaged in their chests and wardrobes to find something decent for my dad. He wasn't asked if he wanted to go to church; it was expected. Dad didn't like church very much but was smart enough to know on which side his bread was buttered, and cooperated without a comment. The farmer drove them to church in his army surplus truck, slowly and majestically, as befits a Sunday, which surprised my dad as he thought the bumpy rides he had suffered over the last few days had been because there was something wrong with the vehicle.

In the church, Mrs. Ferris pointed him down a pew at the back occupied by the conspicuously badly-dressed and possibly inbred. The farmer and his wife then sat a few pews forward of Dad, occupied by people with feathered, netted hats, crinoline skirts and badly tailored suits. At the front sat people dressed entirely in black who never looked around. Dad watched the social strata of rural Leicestershire glide past him with intense interest. He noticed that people only greeted people on the same pew as themselves, perhaps nodding to the people behind them with more than an implication of condescension. The scarecrow next to him sneezed violently. As soon as the organist started on some not awfully good rendition of a Bach chorale, Dad drifted into the religion-induced trance which has afflicted him all his life.

In the afternoon, they sat in the farmhouse's best room and listed to records of Haydn and Mozart, read books and said very little, until the farmer and my dad went out to feed the animals again.

Monday was back to the grind. Two local lads, Robert and Peter, came in from time to time to do more skilled work, such as milking the cows and driving the tractor. After a week the farmer gave my dad an envelope.

"What's this?" asked my dad.

"Your pay," said the farmer. "Do you want to stay another week?"

My dad opened the packet and pulled out ten pounds.

That was a good trick, my dad told me. *I never thought that I would be paid for work. A whole new world of paid labor opened unto me. It was like the sun breaking through clouds.* This *is how you do it. Bloody hell.*

"Yes, please," said my dad.

"Good," said the farmer, and then he turned around in the middle of the farmyard. "You're a good worker, George. Don't like talkers. All their energy goes in hot air."

So my dad stayed until the beginning of August. He picked up a girlfriend, Sally Smith, from the farm a mile down the road, and went to pubs where he ended up getting drunk with the local oiks and talking effusively about cars and airplanes—subjects on which he had no knowledge or interest. Sally was a bit of an experiment after Elisabeth. Sally was only sixteen herself and couldn't be expected to take the lead like Elisabeth had. For the most part, it was all quite sweet and innocent, and the occasional, half-repressed fumblings in various barns and bramble ditches around the farm resulted in nothing more than a desperate sense of urgency in Dad's slacks and a faint sense of imperiled virtue in Sally.

I'm not sure I learned much about farming, my dad told me. *Some people understand it, some don't. I kept thinking that those bloody cows can bloody well wait until I'm bloody well ready, but the farmer didn't, of course. I didn't learn much, but I got awfully fit. Even Mrs. Ferris was impressed. She tourniqueted my arm every now and again and the week I left, she even complimented me on my progress. She could eviscerate a pig with a flick of her wrist. I think she viewed me the same way: working meat rather than eating meat.*

My dad wanted to get to the Yorkshire Moors and his feet started itching again. He had a Plan. Plans were things you could make with a bit of money. He planned to walk to Leicester and buy a train ticket to York, which, he fondly assumed, was in the middle of the Yorkshire Moors, just this side of the Scottish border.

Dad told Mr. Ferris he was going. Mr. Ferris shrugged. He had hoped for extra hands until autumn, but was used to the fickleness of hired labor and made no protest. Dad set off on a Thursday morning in early August in the same clothes that Elisabeth had given him, an old knapsack and a horse blanket that the farmer said he could have. Mr. and Mrs. Ferris waved at him from the kitchen door. He walked to Illston-on-the-Hill in blazing summer heat, the smell of nettles and cow parsley filling the heavy air. He followed windy lanes through King's Norton and Stoughton and made it into Leicester by late afternoon, where he studied the timetable in the station and bought a ticket on the train to York via Doncaster. He then wandered around a closing city, bought some food, and found a flea-pit pub to stay the night in.

Did you tell Sally you were leaving? I asked my dad.

Dad scratched his chin. *No,* he said, he hadn't.

Did you contact your mum again? I asked.

Not while I was at the Ferris Farm, no, said my dad. *It never occurred to me. I did try to make it up to your grandmother afterward, when I was a bit older and could guess what terrors she must have been suffering those months.*

I have no basis on which to judge my dad in this. When I was 23 I went around the world for a year and sent a grand total of two postcards back to my parents, one to say I had reached New Zealand and the other six weeks later saying I was leaving Australia. Communication is generally not a family trait. As my mum plaintively said on my return: *All you had to do was send a piece of paper with a stamp and my address on it. All I wanted to know was that you were still alive.*

Men can be such shits, really.

Dad got on the first train of the morning and watched, fascinated, as the train crossed that indeterminate border between north and south England. The buildings and countryside grew harder and sparer. Between Derby and Sheffield, the bare and severe Pennine foothills of the Peak district came down to the railway track. Towns, even villages, became darker with industry, and people came onto the train speaking in way my dad found difficult to understand. By the time he reached Sheffield he was sure that the north was a different country. When he changed at Doncaster, a grim town if there ever was one, he was so excited by the foreignness of it all that he almost decided to risk missing the connection to explore this weirdly gruesome place.

The countryside opened out and became more mellow as the train drew toward York. More hedges rather than stone walls, broad farms and woodland. This confused my dad a little, as he was expecting ever-increasing wildness. The train pulled into York station, under York's city walls and just within sight of the Minster. Dad was now completely at a loss. York looked so, well, southern. It was also very hot. The sun ricocheted off the city's warm stone and carefully tended flowerbeds as Dad followed Station Road and Museum street across Lendal Bridge and towards the Minster. He then went into a bookshop to look at some local maps and found, to his horror, that the Yorkshire Moors were some twenty miles further north, and that England then went on for another eighty miles after that.

England just seemed to go on forever, my dad told me. *It was just so big. And even more shocking, so much of England seemed to be* northern. Both my dad and I laughed in a worldly fashion at this. But England *did* seem awfully big when I was younger. Even Kent, the county I grew up in, seemed enormous until I was ten. But when looked at from Australia or the United States, the country seems so small that you want to laugh at it. Such perspectives only come with time; and seems to me to be one of the minor sadnesses of this modern and universally connected world that everybody is so keen on seeing everything everywhere *right now* that whatever is under your nose is missed or scorned. A shrinking world has rendered a tiny country like England practically invisible. No sooner has a child wondered at the strangeness of it all, than it has suddenly shrunk under the pressure of immediate explanation and perspective. There is no room for delusions any more, not even harmless little ones.

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Dad filled his knapsack with food and then walked out along Clarence Street towards Helmsley. When it started getting dark, near Sutton-on-the-Forest, he turned off the road and settled down under a tree with his horse blanket. The next morning he set off again. Beyond Brandsby, the countryside began to roll, building up to the impressively glowering massif of the moors themselves. Dad got to Helmsley by four and thought about staying in a bed-and-breakfast, but everything was expensive. Helmsley looked strange to my dad, all gray stone and tourists. He saw a picture of the nearby Rievaulx Abbey ruin on a poster in a local shop and marched off to see it before darkness.

Rievaulx Abbey, if you have never seen it, is a severe and remote collection of perpendicular gray ruins in a deep wooded valley called Ryedale. My dad described going down into Ryedale was like diving into a deep cold well of unimaginable ancientness. Dad was entranced and sat in the abbey nave, where the wooded valley walls peered through blasted windows and the evening sun caught clouds as they floated pinkly over the open roof. Tourists came and went, mostly in buses or on foot, but Dad only noticed their absence when they left for the evening, leaving the rushing of water and the swishing of trees. The twilight peace of a northern summer evening settled on the valley. The abbey faded as the stars came out and Dad sighed the deep, happy sigh of a someone who has reached his own blue remembered hills. He settled on a bench and watched the great dipper slowly revolve around the pole star until he drifted off to sleep.

The next day he walked the ten miles or so across Bransdale and up to Cockayne Ridge, where he sat for an hour whilst a warm breeze from the south rustled dried heather. There was nobody there, just sheep. Even the birds were quiet. Just peace. Absolute, unhurried, benevolent peace. In the afternoon, he sauntered down to

Farndale, whistling and chewing grass, and camped out in a derelict stone barn. He then walked across the head of Rosedale and Rosedale Moor, across Pikehill Moor and camped out in another barn near Goathland.

You really were nipping across the moors, I said to my dad.

I was in a rather strange state of mind, he replied. *I was happy to be there, but I had to think about what to do next, and part of me I had obdurately refused to listen to for two months had already decided. Of course I thought I would live forever and I would always be sixteen, but that doesn't preclude some degree of foresight. I wanted to have a normal life. I didn't really want to end up like Robert and Peter at the Ferris farm, hopeless itinerants if there ever were any. I wanted a guaranteed bath every night and money to visit Yorkshire whenever I wanted. What I was doing just couldn't go on. I was also getting tired of feeling like a fugitive. I didn't know it then, but I had decided to grow up. This is a frightening prospect. The child* has *to be throttled by the adult he becomes. It's an act of violence I don't think anybody really gets over. I've met people in a permanent state of mourning for the child they killed and people who have dealt with their grief by becoming so cold that even the adult dies within them. The child that I was knew that this was the last time he would be in control, and the adult that I was becoming was girding his loins for battle. I never actually managed to finish off my child completely. Lacked nerve and persistence. Like most men, I suppose.*

My dad walked to Whitby and looked over the town from Whitby Abbey. I feel I can hear the child screaming even now, knowing what the adult was about to do. Dad walked very slowly down the hill and found the Police Station. He took a deep breath, walked in and gave himself up.

MY DAD AND I ARE GREAT FRIENDS. SOMETIMES, ON one of the provincial excursions my job involves, I find a country pub new to me, with wisteria hanging over a patio, or a greensward leading down to a river. I check the menu and when Dad comes to visit we go there and waste the whole afternoon, eating plaice with capers, or beef and ale pie, making bad and lewd jokes which we would be to embarrassed to repeat in front of anyone else, and gossiping about family and people we know. Wasting time with people you love, I have discovered, is what life is for, and neither Buddhists nor monetarists will convince me otherwise.

ADAM HARRINGTON

is a computer programmer who has spent a fair proportion of his 28 years wandering more or less aimlessly across the British Isles and plans to spend his remaining time in the sun doing much the same. In the unlikely event that anyone reading this knows Mr. Harrington Sr., it must be stressed that the plot of this story is complete fiction.

If you can read this, you're too close to the page.