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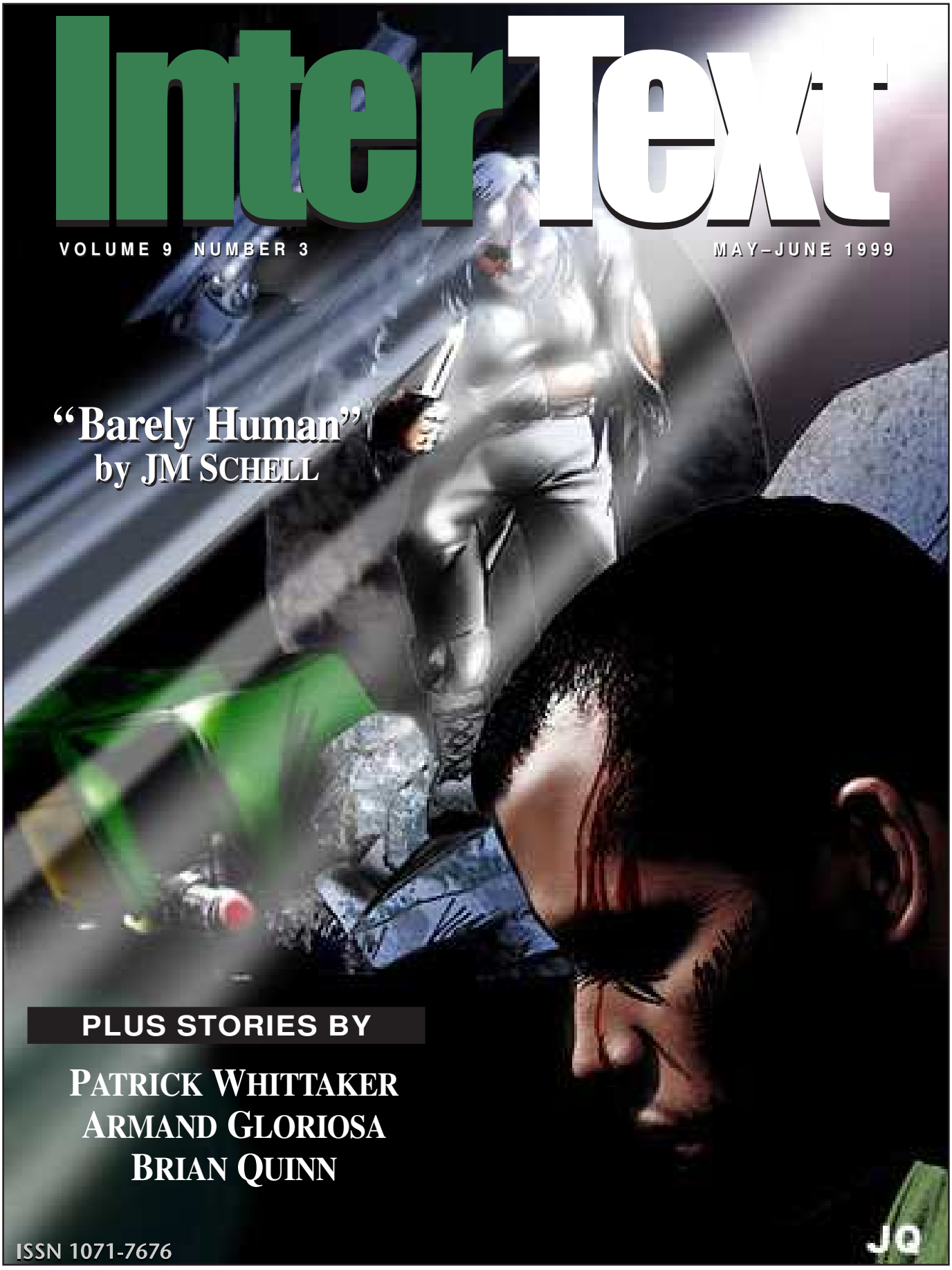

"Barely Human"
by JM SCHELL

PLUS STORIES BY

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Kaptain Komfort's Misdemeanor

PATRICK WHITTAKER

What happens when the land of dreams becomes infested by nightmares?

WHAT HOPE IS THERE FOR US NOW? WITH OUR cities in ruins and our armies in retreat, this must surely be the end. Hypermorphia has become an occupied territory, a kingdom without a king.

We will, of course, surrender to our enemies. There is no alternative. But first they will crush what remains of our spirit and trample our national identity in the dust. For these are ruthless people, aggressors from another world who do not understand ours.

My fellow countrymen blame Kaptain Komfort, and with some justification. But what they cannot bring themselves to do is to examine their own part in this perdition. For one individual alone cannot bring about the ruin of a great nation.

The truth is this: We are all culpable. We became complacent and arrogant, and we failed in our duty to the children of Mundania.

No, Kaptain Komfort—villain that he is—should not have to carry the burden of our collective guilt. Nonetheless, if ever I see him again, I will kill him.

THE AIR IN THIS CAVE IS DAMP AND CHILLY. I SPEND my days in misery, tormented by hunger and the thought that I will probably not live long enough to wreak revenge upon Kaptain Komfort. My only escape from this despair are the brief snatches of sleep which grow ever rarer. At night, I forage for berries, careful to avert my eyes from the sky, which has now taken on a greenish hue. If I had the strength, I would attempt to reach the border. If I had the courage, I would seek the remnants of our army and prepare to die in battle.

All I can do now is hope for a peaceful, if ignominious, end.

A DINGY CAVE, FULL OF BAT DROPPINGS AND THE smell of dank decay. Maybe Kaptain Komfort is holed up in such a place—perhaps even one of the caves that litter these desolate hills. I know there are others hiding hereabouts. I have seen them at night, foraging for food, fighting amongst each other for sour berries and stagnant water. Sometimes, the temptation to show myself, to seek their friendship and company, has been almost overwhelming. But that would be folly, for the Mundanes have put a price on my head and I am hated by my own people, many of whom hold me in some part responsible for our collective ruin.

Yesterday, I stumbled across a dying man. He had no hair, no eyebrows. The slight breeze peeled flakes of skin from his body. I gave him water and he told me I was the last Senior Minister to remain at liberty. Many of my colleagues had surrendered to the enemy, only to be summarily executed. The rest had taken their own lives or been murdered by lynch mobs.

The dying man had no news of Kaptain Komfort. It is likely that the villain has fled this land and will be seen no more.

I asked after Princess Aurora; the man sighed and died in my arms. I envied him.

PRINCESS AURORA. SHE, AS MUCH AS KAPTAIN Komfort, was the agent of our catastrophe. If she had kept her vow of chastity, if she had not soiled herself and her family's name by taking Kaptain Komfort to her bed, then perhaps none of the subsequent events would have happened.

How could he? How could he befriend and console the lonely and lost children? How many of those poor innocents did he corrupt?

And if the King had listened to me when I begged him to keep the Princess and the Kaptain apart…

So many ifs. So many mistakes and missed chances.

Yes, I do partly blame myself for not persuading the King that the old ways were best. Indeed, I was sometimes instrumental in laying the foundations for his more liberal policies. But how was I to know it would come to this?

I think I was among the first to sense that something was amiss. It was just a feeling, nothing I could have expressed in words or placed a finger on. The citizens went about their business as ever they did and Kaptain Komfort himself bore no outward sign of the guilt that must have been gnawing at his soul.

Again I ask myself, how could he? How could he still befriend and console the lonely and lost children of Mundania when all the time he was carrying such a dreadful secret? How many of those poor innocents did he corrupt?

I STILL RECALL THE CHILL THAT CREPT INTO MY heart that morning when Rufus, Minister for Chocolate, announced that the nation's honey had soured. It was at

a special cabinet meeting to which I was summoned at a moment's notice. "We've had to close off the vats," he proclaimed with tears streaming down his face. "I— I— I—"

Poor Rufus could not bring himself to say any more. He ran from the Cabinet Room as fast as his corpulent frame could carry him. The rest of us were too stunned to block his flight. He was then only hours away from hanging himself.

It was Herman, President of the Board of Toys, who finally broke the silence. He slapped his hands on the Round Table and said, "Well, I for one am not prepared to put up with this."

We looked at him in amazement. His oft-used phrase seemed singularly inappropriate. It was not a case of putting up or not putting up with anything. The honey was soured and that was that. Now we could do little more than minimize the harm that would no doubt ensue.

"The honey must be destroyed," I said, realizing no one else was about to come forward with a plan of action. "And the vats. And the warehouses that hold them."

The Prime Minister cleared his throat. He seemed to have aged considerably. "The Grand Vizier is, of course, right. We must destroy this contamination before it spreads. A simple matter, of course, but then we must go much, much further. There is the question of the children."

Now the true import of Rufus' announcement came home to me. The children who had taken the soured honey would also be tainted.

"Do we have any means," asked the Heritage Secretary, "of knowing which children took the honey?"

The Prime Minister shook his head. "We cannot risk missing a single one of them; the consequences would be too awful to contemplate."

"Well, I for one am not prepared to put up with this," Herman reiterated.

"We have no choice. I don't have to remind you what happened not so many years ago when some fool put salt instead of sugar in a batch of ice cream."

I flinched inwardly, aware of the gaze of my colleagues upon me. My grandfather had been Prime Minister at the time and had reacted to the crisis by expelling all non-native children. No one had thought any more about it until a generation later when the mundane world was engulfed in global war.

"Do we have the right," asked the Prime Minister gravely, "to once again equip the Mundanes with so many potential tyrants?"

"Well, I for one—"

"Shut up, Herman."

The debate went on for some hours, but the outcome was inevitable. By a unanimous decision, it was decreed that all mundane children currently visiting Hypermorphia should, without exception, be hanged.

THERE WERE MORE SUICIDES IN THE DAYS THAT followed—not just within the cabinet, but throughout the populace as a whole. Riots swept our cities. In the Northern Province, a full-scale insurrection had to be crushed by the army. The ringleaders were burned in public.

Oh, dark days indeed. But worse was to come.

WE HAD BARELY HUNG THE LAST OF THE CHILDREN when cracks in the Sugar Mountain were discovered, forcing us to evacuate several villages for fear of avalanches. A day later, the cinnamon mines had to be closed when the spice elves complained of severe headaches and stomach cramps. A detachment of alchemists was sent to investigate; they reported that the mines were filled with noxious gases.

It was grim, but even then I was certain that we would somehow pull through.

My optimism evaporated, however, when word reached me that the animals in the Garden of Fabulous Creatures had begun to die. I went at once to the Garden, which was now closed to the public, and spoke to Ozymandias in his office.

Needless to say, Ozzy was distraught. "It started with the kraken," he said, pacing in front of a cabinet filled with stuffed birds. "The stupid creature leapt out of his enclosure right on top of three members of the public, one of whom was killed instantly."

"Did it eat any of them?"

"No. When we tried to entice it back to the water with freshly slaughtered seals, it just ignored them. It took a whole platoon of the King's Engineers to drag the serpent back to the water. And then—and then—"

Ozzy suddenly let out a great wracking sob. He was clearly close to breaking point.

I waited some moments until he had regained something like his composure, then prompted him. "What happened?"

"It leapt out of the water again. No matter how many times we returned it to the water, it just kept doing it. It was as if it wanted to die. Finally— Finally, we had no choice but to destroy the damn beast. In all my years as Keeper of the Garden, I had never seen such a thing."

"It must have been very distressing."

"Heartbreaking. It was my great grandfather, you know, who captured the beast barely a day after it hatched. All its life was spent in this zoo. We have no idea why it was so hell-bent on its own destruction. Every veterinarian in this city—or so it seems—has examined the corpse. They all say the kraken was in fine health."

"I'm terribly sorry."

"Sorry? I was sorry at first, but now I'm beyond sorry. The centaurs were next to die. They all passed away one night. So far as we can tell, they just went to sleep and then expired. There's no rational reason for it. We've lost our snark, our jubjub bird and even the sphinxes. What animals we have left are in very poor shape. I don't expect a single one to survive the week. Except, of course, the unicorn. He seems totally unaffected by whatever is happening here." Ozzy put his face in his hands and asked in a coarse whisper, "What *is* happening here?"

I had no more answer to that than he did. "Perhaps Wizard Serrc knows."

AS I LEFT OZYMANDIAS' OFFICE, I WAS ALMOST forced back in by the stench of putrid flesh. Placing a scented kerchief to my face, I hurried past enclosures of dead animals. At the gate, a detachment of the King's Men were digging lime pits.

When I reached my coach, the horses were agitated. I leapt into the cab and my driver did not wait for my command. Halfway back to the Palace, I remembered the Wizard Serrc and gave orders to proceed to his grotto at once.

THANKFULLY, THE WIZARD WAS AT HOME, HAVING just returned from a pilgrimage to some shrine or another. He was preparing a potion in a large cauldron when I burst in without ceremony.

"Well, well," he said, emptying a jar of eyes into the boiling mixture, "the Grand Vizier. No need to knock."

"My apologies. I would have knocked if you had a door knocker. Or a door, come to that."

"Judging from the sweat on your brow and the rapidity of your breathing, I would guess that you are here with regards to a matter of great urgency."

"You have not heard, then?"

Wizard Serrc ladled some of his mixture with a wooden spoon and blew upon it until it was cool enough for him to taste. He smacked his lips. "Quite delicious. Would you like to try some? It's a wonderful laxative."

"The Kingdom is in great peril."

"You don't say? What is it this time? Another rise in unemployment?"

As briefly as I could, I related the events of recent days and watched with some satisfaction as the flippancy drained steadily from Serrc's manner. He had never had much respect for authority, but then wizard' never do.

"I see," he said, when I had finished my tale. "That would explain the mirror."

"The mirror?"

"Hm, yes." Serrc pulled aside a small, square curtain on the cave wall to reveal an ornate looking glass. "Just watch and you'll see what I mean."

He cleared his throat, then, in a very wizardly voice, intoned "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the greatest wiz of all?"

The mirror clouded, then replied, "Not you, dog-breath. I've seen elves do better magic than you."

Serrc looked at me with a see-what-I-mean expression on his face. "It's been like that ever since I got back. I just took it to be teenage rebellion—magic mirrors have certain human qualities, you know—but after what you've just told me, I realize that that probably isn't the case."

"Judging from what's happened so far, I would guess we're in deep doo-doo. I doubt anything can save us now."

"So what's going on?"

"Great evil, obviously. Someone, somewhere has performed a deed so foul, so disgusting that dark forces have been able to manifest themselves in the Kingdom."

"Can anything be done?"

"That would depend on the nature of the misdemeanor. However, judging from what's happened so far, I would guess we're in deep doo-doo. I doubt anything can save us now."

WIZARD SERRC WAS RIGHT. WITH NO CHILDREN allowed to come to us in their dreams, the Kingdom had no purpose. Reports of civil unrest reached us daily. Rioting became commonplace. The workers refused to work. The peasants gave up toiling in their fields. Drunkenness, crime, disrespect toward authority—all these became endemic.

Cabinet meetings were held daily. When we weren't despondent, we were angry. Angry at each other, angry at ourselves, angry at the whole sorry state in which we found ourselves.

There was talk of bringing the children back, even though there was no end to the crisis in sight. It was felt, by a few, that having the children around would restore normality. Fortunately, common sense prevailed and it was accepted that such a course could only compound our problems.

We grew wearier by the day. The King aged visibly. There were suicides. And through it all, only two people seemed untouched by the growing tragedy.

Ah, Kaptain Komfort, if you only hknew ow many times I saw you leaving Princess Aurora's apartments with that stupid, self-satisfied grin on your face. On each occasion, my hatred for you grew stronger. While the Kingdom went to ruin, you indulged your carnal desires with our beloved princess. You cared not one jot for

the lonely children of Mundania whom you could no longer befriend.

Many was the time I had to stay my hand upon the halberd of my sword. I dreamt of murdering you on so many nights in so many ways.

And now, there can scarce be a soul in the Kingdom who does not do the same.

OZYMANDIAS TOOK HIS LIFE THE DAY THE BONG died. Aside from the unicorn, it was the last of his fabulous beasts. He covered himself in lamp oil and went out of this world in a blaze of despair.

The unicorn was moved to the Royal Stables, where the King's own vet kept a watch on it night and day. It was he who gave us our first clue as to the cause of our catastrophe.

During yet another interminable cabinet meeting, he was called for by Herman who said he had some information that might or might not throw some light on the situation.

The fellow stood before us, cap in hand, trembling at being suddenly thrust before the most powerful men in the land. He asked for—and was granted—a tot of whisky to steady his nerves.

"Speak," said Herman, in that grand manner he adopts when addressing social inferiors. "What you say in this room is privileged information. You need fear no retribution for telling us what you saw—or think you saw."

The vet wrung his cap as if to dry it. "I'm not sure I saw anything."

"You seemed sure enough when you spoke to my Private Secretary this morning. Now, in your own time, just tell us what you told him."

"Well, it was about midnight, I think. I was asleep in the stables on a bed of hay as His Majesty commanded, when I suddenly awoke, certain I was not alone in the building. Of course, there were the horses and the unicorn, but I felt the presence of another person and I knew whoever it was had no right being there. So, fearing someone was up to no good, I lay still with my eyes open.

"There was—as you might recall—a full moon last night, so it wasn't as dark in that stable as you might think. I looked to where the unicorn had been bedded, and there the beast stood, bathed in moonlight. And— and—"

"Yes. Go on."

"There was a man on the unicorn. Not exactly sitting on it—more like lying on its hindquarters. Surmising that the creature was in some sort of danger—of being purloined, if nothing else—I got to my feet and made slowly toward the door."

"Away from the unicorn?"

"I was going to fetch the guard. Only I never made it to the door on account of there being a bucket I didn't see and which I walked right into. Needless to say it made an awful clutter. I thought for sure that the man on the unicorn would attack me, but when I looked round, he was gone."

"Did you recognize this phantom rider?"

"I might have dreamt the whole thing. Maybe it was a trick of the light."

"Did you recognize him?"

"He looked like Kaptain Komfort."

I WAS PUZZLED AS TO WHY HERMAN SHOULD BRING the matter to our attention. If Kaptain Komfort had been in the stables without permission, then what of it? Far worse misdemeanors were occurring throughout the Kingdom.

Once the vet had been dismissed, I turned to Herman. "I'm afraid I can see no significance in that fellow's story. As he said himself, it was probably just a dream."

Herman gave me that old look of his, the one that said "I know something you don't." It was just one more move in the constant power game he was always playing. "I believe every word the vet says. It tallies with a report I received from a source I decline to name the night before the honey turned sour. It seems my man was in the zoo around midnight. What he was doing there need not concern us now. According to his account, he was in the vicinity of the unicorn's enclosure when his attention was caught by what he describes as a wild braying.

"Again there was a full moon, just as there was last night. He crept stealthily toward the source of the sound, and there, in the unicorn's enclosure, neatly framed by the silhouette of two oaks, he saw a bizarre sight. There was a man lying on the unicorn, his trousers round his ankles, his buttocks heaving up and down. I need not relay all the details that were imparted to me.

"Suffice to say, my informant was able to get close enough to the unicorn to positively identify the rider. It was Kaptain Komfort."

There was uproar in the Cabinet Room. Shrill voices demanded to know why the President of the Board of Toys had not brought this matter to our attention before now. There were calls for proof of the allegation. The Minister for Lullabies demanded that Kaptain Komfort be arrested at once.

Finally, the Prime Minister restored order by banging his shoe—first on the table, then on the heads of those nearest to him. "Gentlemen," he said, "we must be sure of our facts before we proceed against Kaptain Komfort. Perhaps Herman would care to explain why he did not enlighten us previously?"

"Because, Prime Minister, until the vet came to me, I dismissed the tale as a flight of fancy. In retrospect, I can see that was a mistake for which I now apologize."

"Oh bollocks," exclaimed the Minister for Lullabies. "You, Mister President, have again been playing games with us. The reason you kept this to yourself was because you thought you could gain some advantage by it."

Herman was on his feet. "How dare you! In all my years in government—"

"Sit down!" yelled the Prime Minister. "I will not have my cabinet behaving like willful schoolchildren! If you two have your differences, you can settle them somewhere else. In the meantime, I want the Chief Constable to apprehend Kaptain Komfort in person."

This was too good a chance to miss. I flicked my hanky to gain the PM's attention. "I rather fancy I know where Komfort is to be found. May I suggest I take a detachment of my men and bring him here forthwith? It will take no more than a few minutes."

The Prime Minister beamed at me. "It is good to know, Grand Vizier, that there is still one amongst us able to show initiative. Yes. Fetch me Kaptain Komfort if you can. I would be most grateful."

ALAS, KAPTAIN KOMFORT HAD FLED. HE WAS neither with the Princess nor in his own apartments. Orders were issued throughout the land for his immediate arrest, but the cowardly rogue was nowhere to be found. By his own unwillingness to surrender to the authorities, he admitted his guilt.

At a stroke, Kaptain Komfort had made himself the most despised person in the Kingdom. He became the bogeyman. Mothers kept their children in order by promising them a visit from that vile villain should they misbehave.

THERE WAS A FEELING ABROAD THAT WE WERE AT last nearing the end of our misfortunes, that the deep well of our misery was running dry. The lawlessness which had threatened to break up our society began to abate as communities united in their determination to find Kaptain Komfort and bring him to book.

There were no suicides in high places over the next few days. Cabinet meetings reverted to their usual format of quiet debate and sly power mongering, punctuated of course by Herman's frequent declaration that he was not prepared to put up with one thing or another.

By contrast, all was not well with Princess Aurora, who was convinced of her paramour's innocence. She became a recluse, never venturing from her apartments.

I visited her often, always on pretense of official business. She no longer ate and refused to wash. Her face bore a wild expression, like a trapped animal. At my insistence, a team of physicians stood by her every hour of every day, but they were powerless to bring her around. Poor, besotted wench. It distressed me to see her decline.

REPORTS OF ALLEGED SIGHTINGS OF THE FUGITIVE became a daily, if not hourly, event. He was seen in every corner of the Kingdom, often in several places at once. Armies of peasants spent their days scouring mountains and plains. My spies followed every slim lead, every wild rumour, only to come up against one dead end after another.

It seemed Kaptain Komfort was everywhere and yet nowhere at all.

WHEN WIZARD SERRC ARRIVED AT MY APARTMENTS declaring he bore news of great import, I was momentarily gladdened, for I was certain he had found Kaptain Komfort. With his wizardly powers, he could roam the Kingdom at will without even leaving his grotto. If anyone could track down our quarry, it was surely he.

It took him but one sentence to demolish my hope. "We are being invaded," he said.

"The Mundanes have entered our territory to the north. Already they have laid to waste the City of Light."

I slumped into an armchair. Under other circumstances I would have been inclined to disbelief, but I was by now conditioned to accept bad news at face value. "Who by?" was the only question my addled and weary mind could formulate.

The wizard paced from one side of my desk to the other and back again. "The Mundanes have entered our territory to the north. Already they have laid to waste the City of Light."

"When did this happen?"

"This very morning. They have war machines beyond our comprehension. It took them less than an hour to reduce the city to rubble. No doubt messengers will arrive here bearing this awful news before the day is out."

"How big a force…?"

"The Mundane Army is perhaps thirty thousand strong. We have superior numbers, but they have tanks and aircraft and all their other paraphernalia of war. We cannot hope to defeat them."

"The Dragon Squadrons…"

"Are no more. The Mundane flying machines shot them down almost the moment they became airborne. Grand Vizier, we can mount no defense against such machines. We must offer our surrender immediately."

"Never!"

"Surely that is a matter for the cabinet."

"Cabinet be damned. Besides, I know they will take the same view as I. Giving up the Kingdom to the Mundanes is unthinkable."

"If we don't give it to them, they will take it anyway. Our only hope is to reach an armistice."

I rose to my feet. "I would rather see the entire Kingdom in ruins than surrender to these barbarians. We have a duty to the children—"

"The Mundane children? The very children whose parents are burning our villages with napalm? We no longer have any duty except to ourselves."

"I will speak to the King and recommend we muster every force at our disposal."

"To what end? We cannot hope to resist."

"Thank you, Wizard Serrc. That will be all."

AS I PREDICTED, THE CABINET SHARED MY VIEWS on the matter. It was agreed that we should fight to the end. No mercy, no surrender. As Herman so predictably put it, we were not prepared to put up with it.

After all we had done for the Mundanes…

THAT EVENING, THE KING SUMMONED ME TO THE Palace Dungeons. We had, by great luck, brought down a mundane aircraft and taken captive its pilot.

I was all for hanging the prisoner in a public place, but the King insisted that we should not descend to the level of the enemy. He did, however, accede to my request to interview the Mundane.

Four armed men stood guard outside the prisoner's cell when I was shown in, a needless precaution in light of the Mundane being manacled. Despite his predicament, the pilot seemed wholly unbowed. He looked at me with an unwavering gaze that was part insolence, part arrogance. I judged he could not have long attained his majority and wondered that the Mundanes could send their children to war.

His uniform consisted of a leather jacket and khaki trousers, scarcely a uniform at all. More the garb of a barbarian. On the back of the jacket was emblazoned USAF.

I introduced myself, then leant against the damp wall, not caring that I was soiling my robe. "Why?" I asked.

The airman shrugged his shoulders. "You were asking for it."

"How did you manage to find our borders? Adult Mundanes should not know of this place. They should forget it even exists."

"Yeah. That's what you were counting on, wasn't it? You take our children here in their sleep and brainwash them. Then you wipe their memories. You fucking commie!"

"We help the lonely and the lost. We give them an escape from the harsh realities of their waking lives."

"Says you."

"Were you ever here when you were young?"

The airman laughed. "What would I want to do in a crummy place like this? When I was a boy, I went to Disneyland. We don't need your dreams."

"How did you find us?"

"I'm only supposed to give my name, rank and number. However, I can't see that it can do any harm to tell you. It was our President who remembered you. He's a very old man. His mind's going. You know how old men get. They revert to their childhood."

"I see." It had happened before. Senile Mundanes often managed to find their way back to the Kingdom of Dreams. We always welcomed them on the grounds that in their twilight they needed us as much as they did in their dawn.

"Why did you kill the children? The President saw it all, you know. And he saw that pervert ride the unicorn."

"Kaptain Komfort? If ever I see him again, I will kill him."

I LEFT THE CELL FEELING MORE DESPONDENT THAN ever. So the Mundanes were taking revenge for their lost children? I couldn't blame them for that. How could they know that we did it for their sake? If we had taken any other course, we could have been inflicting their future with another Hitler, another Stalin, another Pol Pot…

I could not sleep that night. The curfew had brought with it an eerie silence that was alien to the city.

I sat in my library, trying to read various volumes, but always thinking of our brave soldiers marching off to take on an invincible foe. Wizard Serrc had been right. Our only choice was surrender. But then what would be left for us? Our entire existence revolved around the Mundane children. Without them for us to give our dreams to, would any of us care to carry on? Would life be worth living under foreign occupation?

The answer to that last question was clearly no. Shortly before dawn, I determined to flee the Palace. Perhaps I could cross over the border to the Mundane world.

Dressed as a peasant and carrying little more than some food and a handful of gold coins, I sneaked out of my apartment and up to the ramparts where I knew I would encounter no more than an occasional guard. My plan was to take a horse from the stables and shelter in Bilau-Nor until the following night when I would make my way to the border.

I was halfway across the roof when a brilliant light washed away the night and its shadows. Dazzled, I instinctively fell to my knees, wondering what had happened to all the colors in the world. There was only whiteness.

A wave of heat hit the back of my head. This was followed by a wind that drew the breath from my lungs. Then came the roaring and rumbling; a terrible sound that

filled my head and seemed to drill into my bones. Dirt rained from the sky.

After a time—and I know not whether it was seconds or minutes—the air became wondrously still. I was aware that my hair and eyebrows were singed; my back felt as if it had been burnt by a ferocious sun.

Shakily, I rose to my feet and turned. On the far horizon, where the city of Bil-au-Nor had once stood, there rose a pillar of fire and smoke.

All at once, the silence was broken by a great clamour. Windows were thrown open; heads poked out. People ran into the courtyard crying in disbelief. We stood gazing in awe at this nebulous mushroom which more than anything signaled the end of all hope.

WITH BIL-AU-NOR REDUCED TO RUINS, I HAD LITTLE chance of reaching the Mundane world. I realised my only sensible option was to seek refuge in the Velvet Mountains. On such a journey, a horse would be a hindrance, so I set off on foot. Along the way, I encountered many refugees from Bil-au-Nor.

The tales they told of the aftermath of the Bomb will haunt me to the end of my life.

THE AIR IN THIS CAVE IS DAMP AND CHILLY. I AM hungry. My hair is falling out; my gums bleed; my teeth are coming loose.

If ever I see Kaptain Komfort again, I will kill him.

PATRICK WHITTAKER

Is an independent filmmaker with two short films to his name ("The Red Car" and "Nevermore"). To keep the wolf from his door, he works as a freelance software analyst in the airline industry. He is currently working on a novel called *Trash* and is planning on having a midlife crisis as soon as he can find the time.

Amanuensis

ARMAND GLORIOSA

Often, one life can't begin until another one ends.

TINA STILL DIDN'T WANT TO ROLL HER WINDOWS down, even though the view from the winding road was spectacular: little waterfalls cascading hundreds of feet down jagged mountain sides. She didn't want to consider herself "there" until she saw the famous stone lion at the side of Kennon Road, and when she did, she shut off the air conditioner, opened the old-fashioned quarter-windows of her 1973 Dodge Colt, and the cool air immediately swirled into the car, tousling her dark, wavy hair. So, she was almost there: Baguio City, elevation 4,900 feet.

Professor Louie Coronel had hinted in his last letter that, in these his final days, he would finally allow her to see his unpublished manuscripts. Tina thought it quite a privilege: Professor Coronel had not shown his fiction, poetry and plays to anyone in, how many, fifteen years? No one, that is, except Bando, his fair-haired boy—fair-haired only in the figurative sense, of course, this being the Philippines. She knew from Professor Coronel's lyrical letters that Bando had brown eyes ("that twinkle in faintest candle's light") and brown hair ("that only sighs silkily through my fingers as I touch it"); and his description in a relatively recent letter of Bando's "deeply-muscled, brown buttocks" could still make her ears burn red. That last phrase was memorable for its indelicacy; it was with some surprise and dismay that she read these very words not much later in Salman Rushdie. Still and all, Tina had no reason to doubt the accuracy of the description. What was more, she was quite willing to take Professor Coronel's word for it.

Tina had never quite mastered her discomfiture at Professor Coronel's relationship with Bando despite the years. This, of course, had nothing to do with her Catholicism; like everyone else in her circle, she was lapsed, anyway. The old scandal still echoed gleefully in the memory of the oldtimers in the English Department, but the new teachers, those who came in after Tina, expressed little interest in discussing it. Professor Coronel's reputation as a lion of literature and drama went into decline rapidly after he left, thanks in no small part to the veterans who were left behind, who did a thorough hatchet job on the pedestal on which he had stood. There is nothing professional about professional jealousy. Tina mused on whether, in the end, Professor Coronel's reputation would someday be revived. Who knows? Perhaps, one day, his poems would be read again, his plays, adaptations and translations performed again for their own sake, without interest in his work being initially prodded by the prurient, extra-literary aspects of his life. Tina thought highly enough of the man that she honestly believed that the scandal would, in the future, be a mere footnote, a non-issue.

For her own part, Tina still could not gloss over the corporeality of that relationship, for she had had a ringside seat to the whole thing all these years, although she stayed in Quezon City all this time, and Professor Coronel and Bando in self-exile in Baguio. Eventually she had quite a bundle of letters from Professor Coronel, to each of which she dutifully replied. She did look forward to his letters, for his wry comments on the teaching life helped her regain perspective after a factional spat with another teacher in the Department, or another night spent checking occasionally cringingly incompetent student essays. She knew the letters for her were special, in that the remarks and observations he made therein were only for her, and were not replicated for general consumption in the clippings of his weekly column that he sent her faithfully. Tina had effectively become a stand-in for the daughter that Professor Coronel would never have, receiving bits of his motherly wisdom which came to her dipped at turns in metaphorical brandied sugar, and in wormwood and gall—and sometimes, more often than she would like, in likewise strictly metaphorical body fluids.

Professor Coronel's reputation as a lion of literature and drama went into decline rapidly after he left.

In one of his letters, after she complained of the younger instructors intriguing against her, he had given her this piece of advice: "*Noli Permittere Illegitimi Carborundum.*" She wrote back asking what it meant, but he ignored the question. She tried looking the phrase up in the back of her Merriam-Webster, but it wasn't listed under "Foreign words and phrases." Finally, she had to go to a European Languages instructor who could translate.

"I'm just a garden variety English Lit graduate," Tina said humbly. "I can't read Latin."

The instructor was likewise puzzled. "It's certainly like no Roman author *I've* ever read: it's cod-Latin for 'Don't let the bastards grind you down.' "

SHE ARRIVED IN BAGUIO, WITH HER RADIO PICKING up the local FM stations. They seemed to play an awful lot of country music here, which she hardly ever heard on

Manila stations. She guessed it was the influence of the Americans in Camp John Hay, but the Americans were now long gone. Several times she passed the occasional Igorot walking on the street in ethnic costume, but regretfully there was a jeepney tailgating her, and she couldn't slow down to goggle at them. She inhaled the smell of the Benguet pine trees, savoring them: the trees never grew in the hot lowlands. The fragrance, unexpectedly, made her remember something about Baguio that she thought she had long put out of her mind.

Professor Coronel's house was in a shabby neighborhood, small and off the beaten track, chosen, she surmised, for its low rents. His house, like the others flanking it, was made of wood, with doors and windows that needed no mesh screens. Each house boasted a small lawn overgrown with crabgrass. A hand-woven doormat, now shabby, bade her welcome to "Baguio—City of Pines." Professor Coronel opened the door to her knock, and each of them volubly and expansively expressed unfeigned surprise at the other's appearance. They had long neglected to send each other the occasional snapshot, she out of inertia despite her diligence in letter-writing itself; he, out of vanity.

If it were possible at all for an aging queen to have *gravitas*, then he had it. He still had all his hair, but it had been white for years; and in his old age he was only making himself older, with the chain smoking and nightly vodka that gave his voice an even deeper, raspy resonance. She noticed that he had slowed down considerably, speaking more slowly and circumspectly, and when he gestured with his hands it was with less of his former vivacity, and with more dignity. He still held his head steady in the old way, while the rest of his body swayed underneath it, although now there was less of that, too. "My God," he said, "I barely recognize you! Come in!" and they kissed each other, *mmmmwah*, on the cheek. He was unshaven, and his grizzled stubble grittily grazed her face.

Professor Coronel, for his part, now saw before him a mature young woman that he had first met so long ago as a fresh-faced, naïve English Lit graduate, intimidated by the thought of facing typically *pilosopo*—smart-ass—U.P. students. They had known each other for six months before the scandal broke, and during that time theirs had become the fastest of cross-generational friendships. "Call me Mommy," he had said back then. "Everybody on the faculty does. Yes, dear, I'm not too vain to admit I'm old enough to have earned it."

She came in. The house had a low ceiling, but there were no electric fans, because Baguio was blessedly free of jungle-like lowland humidity. There were no computers in the house, either, not even an Apple II or an XT, but there was a big old office-model Underwood at least 30 years old that might have dated back from Professor Coronel's U.P. days. Second-hand books, hardcover and paperback, lined the flimsy shelves which creaked under their weight. The air inside the house was close, for the cold climate, the envy of the rest of the country, now disagreed with the old man, who kept most of the windows shut. The house might have been an underpaid U.P. professor's cubbyhole of the 1960s, rather than a writer's home and office at the close of the 1990s.

The room in which she was to stay was a claustrophobically small one, and by fiction belonged to Bando. Professor and protégé kept up the pretence of separate beds in deference to the feelings of the old housekeeper who, under the Professor's wonted arrangement, did not live in the house. This room had a window that had no view at all, looking straight out into the neighbor's shuttered window.

Later, she sat on the tattered leatherette sofa in the living room, while he settled down on the mismatched club chair to one side of her. The old housekeeper served them weak coffee in chipped china cups.

"So," he said to her as he lounged back in the club chair, his bermuda shorts displaying his wrinkled knobby knees to Tina, "are you still keeping *your* knees together? *Not* a good idea. Nowadays Mr. Right is *definitely* going to want to rehearse the catalog of marital prerogatives before he lets a plain gold band around his finger cut off his circulation *forever*."

Tina flushed in embarrassment, and that unwelcome memory came up again, but there seemed to be no one else who would have heard. The housekeeper in the kitchen probably didn't understand English, for Professor Coronel had addressed her in Ilocano, which, old man that he was, he had nevertheless managed to learn in the time he had been in Baguio. And Bando, whom she felt she almost knew intimately without ever having set eyes on him except in fuzzy photographs, was not in sight. But there was evidence of his habitation: a set of weights and an exercise bench to the other side of the sofa, in the direct line of sight of the club chair. Beside them, leaning against the corner of the walls, was a spiffy, weird-looking electric guitar. A small black amplifier with the word "Marshall" in white cursive script on it peeked from behind the guitar.

"*Dear* child," Professor Coronel was saying, "I really don't want to go on about this, but time *is* running out for you. If you don't mind my saying so, you're well past the calendar"—meaning she was over thirty-one—"and it's dangerous to have a child after thirty-five. Tell you what: When I'm gone, you can have Bando. I *bequeath* him to you. He's quite a handful, but worth it."

And this time Tina flushed even more redly, face and ears. "I wish you'd stop talking so morbidly, Mommy,"

she said. "You're still all right—all things considered," meaning the cigarettes and the vodka.

"My dear," he said, "it may be any time now. I feel it. My first heart attack might just be my last."

Then their talk wound down to a going-over of the things they had recently written to each other. After a while, Professor Coronel spoke inconsequentially about Kafka, and about how it was the gloomy novelist's wish to have his papers destroyed upon his death, and if not for Max Brod's disobedience, the world would not even have heard of Joseph K. and Karl Rossman and Gregor Samsa and the rest of the anomie-ridden lot.

Then, he remembered something that made him perk up. "Just after my last letter to you, I found out something. Bando's nearly finished with something *really* big, something that quite surprised me when I found out after he left his drawer unlocked. He's actually written *an opera*—mind you, not some middlebrow musical or pretentious rock opera—a full-blown *opera*, libretto *and* music, the boy is a veritable Wagner writ small. And he never *told* me. He's still polishing it. Self-taught genius, he is. Taught himself to read music, like that Zappa fellow, whatsisname, the one who posed on the toilet bowl. Bando based it on one of Nick Joaquin's short stories. Of course the devil of the thing is that we haven't actually talked to Nick about it. But he'll give us permission, he'll give us permission. Nick's an old friend."

"I was wondering about the guitar," she said, indicating the Gibson Flying V.

"Dearie, if I could play an instrument," the Professor said airily, "it would have to be the violin. You certainly cannot touch the souls of hearers with such a *grotesque* implement as *that*." And he sank into recollection. Finally, he said, "God knows where he got the money to buy that thing."

IN HIS DAYS AS A U.P. PROFESSOR, PROFESSOR Coronel had run a boarding house for several male students, in a separate building at the back of his own little house, which U.P. provided its senior professors. The arrangement was that his house had to be given up upon retirement, to make way for another U.P. prof with lower seniority, and the waiting list was decades long. Two maids took care of the needs of both Professor Coronel's house and the boarding house, cooking, cleaning, washing.

Then Professor Coronel took in a small, dark, handsome boy of eleven or thereabouts as a houseboy. The boy was from one of the poor families living in nearby Barrio Cruz na Ligas. When the summer vacation came around, Professor Coronel dismissed the stay-in maids and ejected the boarders by not renewing their contracts. Now a new housekeeper from another neighborhood came in in the morning to cook and clean, and left, like any office worker, at the end of the day. It was not long until the boy's father found out about it and went wild. The father went to Professor Coronel's house with a machete with a blade three feet long, and hacked away at the doors and windows, screaming abuse until the University Police Force arrived to take him away.

Professor Coronel chose to brazen it out, but the Chairwoman of the English Department was an old enemy, and she bayed for his blood. The *Philippine Collegian* ran the story of the spat and its causes but uncharacteristically treaded carefully; after all, the dignity and name of the University were at stake. On the other hand, the national papers, which picked up on it, gleefully named names. Professor Coronel had to leave U.P., and a young rising star in the faculty happily moved into his house.

Professor Coronel turned to writing under a pseudonym, and built a local reputation as a respected critic.

He went to Baguio, bringing the boy with him. Luckily for him, the father, after the scandal, didn't want his son back, and didn't press charges over his abducting the boy. But when he arrived in Baguio, St. Louis University and the University of Baguio turned him down; his notoriety had preceded him, thanks to the newspapers. So Professor Coronel turned to writing under a pseudonym, and over time built a local reputation as a respected critic and reviewer of plays, musical performances, and the art of the thriving colony of bohemians performing and/or painting in the clement weather of Baguio. In addition, he did commissioned work—writing the occasional coffee-table book on the history of some small parish or other, or glorifying some self-regarding family's patriarch. He wrote much, all of it hammered out on the Underwood, with insight at a furious pace. It's wasn't much of a living, but it paid for the roof over his—and Bando's—head.

BANDO CAME IN, BRINGING A BAG OF GROCERIES, wafting the scent of after-shave into the house with him. The last photograph of him that she had seen was of him at age nineteen. Now Bando looked younger than his twenty-six years, while Tina was sure she looked every year of her own thirty-five. More than the fact that he was tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a strong jaw and high cheekbones, there was something else entirely that intimidated Tina. It was his eyes, which burned with anger even when the rest of his face was calm and impassive; *that* was something that never came across in the snapshots, or in Professor Coronel's letters.

They were introduced, and Bando was coldly civil. He spoke softly to Professor Coronel, as if he were used mostly to speaking confidences not meant to be overheard: a report of his expedition to the grocery, what in the shopping list was and was not available. He disappeared into the kitchen, and Tina didn't see him again until he came out an hour and a half later to announce lunch.

THAT AFTERNOON, WHILE GOING OVER THE BOOKS on the shelves with keen interest, Tina noticed a small hole in the jamb of the main door. As Bando came in from the kitchen, she asked him what the hole was.

"Nothing, really. Some months ago a gun accidentally went off while he was cleaning it."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No. But the neighbors heard the shot, and the police came to investigate. Bit of a problem there, because the gun was unlicensed." Bando's Taglish—Tagalog and English—was as idiomatic as any *burgis* graduate of the country's best schools, although she knew Bando's formal schooling to have been limited to the woefully substandard public schools.

"So what happened?" Tina asked, afraid that she was getting on Bando's nerves. Bando, however, showed no sign of irritation, just the apparent composure that hid untold reserves of anger. "Was a criminal case filed for illegal possession, or anything?"

"No. The policemen said something about the gun being an unlicensed firearm, and what a fine one it was too: a teeny weeny Walther PMS or P-P-something. In return for not reporting the incident, the policemen," and at the word Bando mimed a policeman's characteristic beer belly, "got to keep the gun. End of story."

Tina grew uneasy at this. Professor Coronel, wildly indiscreet at the best of times, had said nothing about this in his letters. But the gun was gone, and that was good enough to set her mind at ease. Turbulent relationships were always good breeding grounds for plenty of melodrama.

THAT NIGHT, BEFORE GOING TO BED, TINA STEPPED out of the house to enjoy the air. She thought she had long put behind her that episode, that one time she had come to Baguio when she was seventeen. It had been with her boyfriend, a Bio major about her age whom she had met in a GE course. They had secretly driven from Quezon City to Baguio one Friday afternoon, when their classes had ended for the week, and had taken a room in the Hyatt. But when the big moment came, she discovered that he had no intention of using protection—in honor, he said, of the occasion, it being her first time. Tina freaked. All along she had had misgivings about the whole trip—her boyfriend (*"Jerry, Jerry, damn it, that was his name, I didn't want to remember it, his name was Jerry"*) had always hemmed and hawed when she talked about marriage in general, even if she made it clear she meant it to be several years down the road. She was going to be compromised, for worse than nothing—disgraced, unwed, and a mother before her debut had even come around. Luckily for her, she still had her clothes on (*"blue jeans and denim jacket buttoned up"*), and when her boyfriend, already stripped bare, wrestled with her on the bed, she was able to fend him off. She locked herself in the bathroom and stayed there all night, crying. In the morning, she yelled through the door that she was going home, alone, by bus. He could drive home by himself. She tried so hard to forget it ("*Forget Friday, July 18, 1980*") but then, like it or not, being assaulted by a naked man is always memorable. So over the years she tried to look at it positively, and thought of fending off an attacker as—an *achievement*.

The following year she tried a little self-cure psychotherapy, and organized an all-girls trip to Baguio for a weekend. Someone had once told her that, if she ever got into a car accident, the first thing she had to do right afterwards was to drive a car again; otherwise, the trauma of the accident would mean that she would never drive again. So for this outing, Tina deliberately suggested the Hyatt, and the trip passed remarkably well. The group did all the things that tourists were supposed to do in the Honeymoon Capital of the Philippines: horse rides, boat rowing in Burnham Park, trips to the Crystal Cave, pictures taken with an Igorot in ethnic costume (G-string despite the cold, feathers in headdress, iron-tipped spear). The girls had a field day at the market stalls, giggling over and buying up the kitschy, risqué handicrafts for which Baguio was famous: like a wooden ashtray, decorated with a phallus obtruding from the rim over the ashtray at a forty-five degree angle, so that the whole object looked for all the world like a sundial with the queerest of gnomons; and a seven-inch high figure of a smiling man in a barrel—lifting the barrel revealed the man's huge, spring-loaded, fabulously out of scale weapon. For herself Tina drew the line at an ordinary wooden key chain with "Baguio" etched on it. There was no need to go overboard with the therapy.

Despite that, since that incident she had distrusted all the boys and men who had made passes at her. The thought of voluntarily submitting to an attack was simply beyond comprehension. Eventually they stopped coming around with their protestations of honorable intentions.

Now she was standing on the little lawn in front of Professor Coronel's house, wrapped in a jacket (she hadn't worn one in years) and taking in the cold air to which she was unaccustomed. She kicked at a few pine

cones on the ground, and made a mental note to collect as many of them as she could to take home to her mother, who enjoyed making Christmas wreaths out of them. She turned around to look at the house. The lights in Professor Coronel's—and Bando's—bedroom were on, and the shades were up. They seemed to be burning sheafs of paper in a metal wastebasket. The smoke was pumped out of the room by the overhead ventilation fan that was used to clear out cigarette smoke. There seemed to be the air of solemn ritual about it, rather than the mere disposal of garbage. Sheet after typewritten sheet they fed into the flame, as Tina watched, worrying about fire catching in the room, puzzled as to what was going on. When they finished, she went to bed, and later did not mention it to either of them.

DAYS PASSED, AND PROFESSOR CORONEL HAD NOT so much as given her a peek at his work, or even mentioned it. Out of *delicadeza*—since Professor Coronel's reason for wanting to show it to her was the fear of his coming death—she did not bring it up, either.

Just as Tina began to worry about almost using up all her vacation time, the Professor passed into glory in the wee hours of the morning. Bando was with him when it happened. Just as the Professor himself had feared, it was his heart that did him in. Tina, normally squeamish about death, had loved the old man enough to bid him goodbye with a kiss to the corpse's clammy forehead. Later the funeral parlor took him away, and she felt an irrational fear that he might still be alive, just in a coma, and would wake up on the mortuary slab. She felt numb and hollow, as if it were her mother or father who had died. What it would be like to lose to death a husband, or a lover, she had no idea; she thought it would be something like this, too. Bando, she noticed with something like disgust, seemed to be taking it all very well.

Bando left all the arrangements to the funeral parlor, telling the staff that a little mass should be said over the old man, if only because Bando was comfortable with the ritual. He told Tina that it made his skin crawl to think of a nondenominational ceremony with a professional funeral orator going on and on about a man he had never even met; he thought it far better to hear the familiar platitudes about bringing nothing into this world, and bringing nothing out of it. In the event, only Bando, Tina, and Professor Coronel's editor from the local newspaper—sent by the paper only as a matter of courtesy—were at the funeral, held in one of the marmoreally grim chapels of the funeral parlor.

"SO WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO NOW?" TINA ASKED Bando. It was the evening after the funeral. They were sitting acrossea from ch other at the kitchen table, with the bare light bulb burning yellowly overhead, although there was still enough daylight by which to see.

Right now the fire in Bando's eyes was gone. In its place was something else, something that ever so faintly suggested the mischievous twinkle that Professor Coronel once wrote about so rhapsodically. With an equanimity that annoyed Tina, who was being hammered by waves of grief, he ticked off his options. He could move to smaller quarters, a boarding house, maybe. He could probably take over the professor's column in the local daily; heaven knew he had already been writing much of his stuff for him for the past year and a half. "I'd like to erase Louie—Professor Coronel—from my life, but I can't. If anything, the most I can do is step straight into his shoes, in everything that the man used to do, theatrical reviews, column, coffee-table books, and all."

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"But you can't just do that, step up and admit to being his ghost-writer and expect to be taken in," Tina pointed out.

"I'll trot out my credentials: 'Sir, I was the man's protégé and, incidentally, his catamite.' Otherwise, I'm unemployable. I can make you obscene propositions in four different languages. I can discourse exhaustively on all three books of Dante's Comedy—infernal, purgative and celestial. I can set *The 120 Days of Sodom* to music. Or perhaps you'd care to discuss the technological anachronisms in *Paradise Lost*? But I don't have a high school diploma. Who'd hire me as a clerk?"

He held a letter from the landlord, a formal one demanding that the lessee pay six months' arrears in rent.

"What are you going to do about his things?" Tina asked.

"I'm just leaving everything behind, and good riddance."

Tina was too scared to bring up the topic of the manuscripts. She didn't want to think that what she had seen them burning was the work of the past fifteen years. Images flashed through her mind: images of the Sibylline Books, the Lost Sonnets, the vanished Sapphic poems. But she was running out of time. She would have to go back to U.P. soon to prepare for the new school year.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, TINA TOLD BANDO THAT SHE would be leaving. She waited for him to volunteer infor-

mation on the manuscripts, but he received the news passively.

Bando was gone all that day. Tina left a thank-you card for Bando, and, secretly, some grocery money with the housekeeper. Sometime around three in the afternoon, with her clothes packed into her bag and flung into the back seat, and still hating her own pusillanimity over the manuscripts, Tina tried to start her car. To her horror, a flat click was all she heard from the starter. She would have to have the car sent to a repair shop, and heaven knew how long that would take. But at the back of her mind, she was relieved at this little bit of bad luck. Somebody—Terpsichore, or Melpomene, perhaps—was trying to tell her to do her duty.

Bando came home at around one the following morning, surprised to find Tina's car still parked in front of the house. He had his young friends with him, two women, and three men with long hair, all carrying luggage. One of the women clung to his arm possessively, as an apologetic Tina came out of her room, still in her day clothes, to explain that she would have left already but for her car. Bando was in high spirits, and not put out at all by this little hitch in his arrangements—for he had changed his mind about leaving, and had asked his entire *barkada*, his gang, to move in with him to share the rent while he figured out what to do about a job. From the guitar cases that some of the men were carrying, she guessed at how they made their living.

Bando spoke loudly, his words coming out rapid-fire. And not just Bando, but the whole group seemed to be bustling about with frenzied activity. *Shabu*, Tina guessed: methamphetamine hydrochloride.

"No problem." Bando was saying. "Dindo here is a good hand at engines," and here he waved a hand to indicate one of the long-haired musicians. "He'll look at it in the morning."

"I think I'll just go to a hotel for the night. I'm crowding you out." Tina was beginning to feel frightened.

"No, no, don't go. You're quite welcome to stay on." Bando's voice boomed out over the sound of activity. Tina worried about the noise they were making, the slamming of the doors of the taxi in which they had arrived, the thud of luggage and guitars on the floor, people laughing and hollering at each other in the dead of night.

"I'll just go to the Hyatt," she said.

Bando's girlfriend started laughing. So did Bando. Tina thought that they had gone temporarily insane. But then Bando started to explain.

"Tina," he said, using her name for the first time since they had met, "don't you remember? The Hyatt collapsed in the earthquake ten years ago. It was in all the newspapers. Look, it's really all right. You can stay." And he introduced her to his friends. He was speaking too fast for her to catch all the names. The only ones she retained were Dindo's, and that of his girlfriend, an emaciated, sunken eyed waif named Iza.

Bando left the two of them to talk. Tina, curious about the girl, managed to have something of a conversation with girl, who couldn't keep still. A fidgety Iza explained that she was an architecture graduate, but never took the board exam. She painted still-lifes instead, and her work was hung in the local cafés. She had managed to sell several of her works, but it was no way to make a decent living. Tina figured that Professor Coronel had known about her all along, and, perhaps grudgingly, had given Bando some liberty in the matter. Now she had made her home in the house of which Bando was now master.

After a decent interval, Tina retired to her room, but the *barkada* carried on in the rest of the house. She could hear their voices clearly. Occasionally from the neighbors' houses there would be hisses of annoyance, which would be ignored.

"Admit it," Iza was saying in English, "you think she's pretty."

Bando laughed, and made a reply in Ilocano. The tone was mocking. She caught the words, in English, "fag hag."

MORNING CAME, AND AFTER A QUICK CHILLY SHOWER that left her blue all over, Tina had a slice of buttered toast and tea by herself. Dindo was awake, and returned her timid "good morning" with a gruff wiggle of the eyebrows. Dindo and one of the men had spent the night in the living room; that other one was still asleep on a blanket next to the sofa, still fully dressed in last night's clothes, down to his thick-soled sneakers. Which meant, Tina realized, that the four others were sharing the master's bedroom. Two couples, sleeping together in the same room.

The old housekeeper arrived, and was appalled when she learned that the house now had seven people in it, counting Tina. Tina tried to explain to her, in Tagalog, that she, Tina, wasn't going to stay. This somehow failed to mollify the housekeeper.

The noise of the complaining housekeeper brought Bando out of his room. As he closed the door behind him, Tina got a glimpse of the bare flesh of somebody, male or female Tina couldn't tell, padding about naked inside the room.

Bando greeted Tina and the housekeeper. He didn't seem to notice that the housekeeper was in a dudgeon over something. He spoke to Dindo, and came back to Tina. He told her, "Dindo's fixed your car. All it needed was a cleaning of battery terminals."

"How much do I owe him?"

"Nothing. He's not a mechanic. He's a musician. Don't insult him by tipping him." Bando had gotten over the *shabu*, it seemed, but he was still cheerful in a way that she had not seen when Professor Coronel was still alive.

Tina went over to thank Dindo personally. She got the same sullen wiggle of the eyebrows in response. She resolved to leave some more money for the groceries with the housekeeper. That is, unless the housekeeper resigned in a huff that very morning.

And still she could not bring herself to ask Bando about the manuscripts.

IT WAS GETTING CLOSE TO NOONTIME WHEN TINA started her car. She had already said her goodbyes to everyone in that strange household of indecorous bohemians, and Bando continued to say nothing about any manuscripts. They've been destroyed, Tina thought. Everything has been lost.

Just as she was about to put the car into gear, Bando came out of the house. He had a thick folder of loose papers in his hands. Tina's windows were open, and Bando reverently placed the folder onto the front passenger seat. Putting his head through her passenger-side window, he said, "That's pretty much everything he wrote. Plays, poems, essays."

Tina took this in. Then she said, "But I saw you two burning manuscripts."

He rested his arms on the window sill. "You were meant to see that. These are copies I made—preliminary drafts, photocopies, some stuff he didn't even remember writing. Frankly, you're not missing much. By and large he just reprised all his old stuff over and over again, even though he did it better the first time around. I suppose he went on and on with you about 'the beatniks who left their poetry pinned to toilet stalls as they traveled the highways of 1960s America'—he didn't? Then he probably lectured you on Kafka. Ah, yes. If you ask me, he was more like D.H. Lawrence, endlessly rewriting that dirty book of his, not knowing when to quit."

"But he told me about one new play. He said it was autobiographical."

Bando snorted. "I was afraid he would. Yes, it was autobiographical. It was all about himself. And me. All the filthy details of the things that he made me do. Even used my real name, made such a big thing about the irony of my being named Servando. He liked to flatter himself and me over it. He said he was Verlaine to my Rimbaud, and he kept saying that he was only portraying honestly my cruelty to him. He wrote it after that little matter of his firing his gun at me when I tried to leave. I'm sorry he missed. He was drunk at the time, and so was I. The man had no shame whatsoever. Oh, pardon me, I'm speaking ill of the dead."

Tina waited.

Bando said, "You don't expect me to let you have *that* one, do you? That, I've since burned, too, all the notes and drafts down to the final version, along with my whole musical *oeuvre*. In front of his eyes. It was the last thing he ever saw in this life. He's diddled me enough in life, I'm not going to let him do it to me after he's dead." Bando hesitated, and then gave voice to something to which he seemed to have given much thought: "At best, biographical entries dealing with him will gloss over that little contretemps that forced him to leave U.P. At worst, people will read about it but they won't remember my name. I'll be a blind item in literary history, like the boor who interrupted Coleridge at his writing."

Tina had one question: "Was the play any good?"

Bando said, "Something the old man didn't realize until recently: he did his best work only when he was horny. Like the early Jean Genet, he used to say."

"Was it any good?" Tina repeated.

Bando appeared to be turning something over in his mind. Shortly, he said, "Yes. It was the best thing he ever wrote in his life."

The front door of the house opened, and Iza stood in the doorway. Bando turned away and began to walk towards Iza. Tina was keeping the engine on idle, and Bando, as if to close a door on the whole thing, turned around and called out in the distance between them, "I'd like to say I'm sorry, but I'm not. Goodbye."

Tina saw the haggard Iza chuck Bando under the chin affectionately. In reply, Bando jammed his hand between Iza's legs. There was a shriek of laughter, and the couple disappeared into the house.

ARMAND GLORIOSA

Is a Philippines-based lawyer who has stopped trying to make a living, and has instead tried to get a life. Some of his other stories can be found on his Web site, <http://members.wbs.net/homepages/a/r/m/armandgloriosa.html>.

Prospero's Rock

BRIAN QUINN

Classical drama is played out on the stage.
It also happens in real life.

FOR A BIRTHDAY SURPRISE LAST MONTH, MY WIFE took me to see Shakespeare's "The Tempest." I take it as a sign of enormous mental health that I enjoyed the performance so much, and only thought of Holly once or twice during the show. Of course, I've thought of her a dozen times a day since then.

I have always loved the idea of live theater. It seems so daring, so intense, so seemingly real yet so full of unreality. It is somehow subversive, somehow liberating. Who is the self on stage? Live theater is (to me, anyway) the submersion of one's identity on stage, a make-believe, while at the same time it is a very carefully crafted walk on a high wire. Is there a net below? Only the actors can decide. We in the audience can only watch the artists above us.

Considering my history with Holly, my love of live theater is, in itself, a sign of mental health. A weaker mind would avoid anything to do with actors or acting, but I don't. Holly was deep into acting, and all that entails — indeed, she still is. If you watch soap operas, you know Holly. She's been the designated bad-word woman on a long-running series since the late 1970s. I'm told she's convincing. I've never watched. Mental health, as I say.

I have been on stage myself, however, exactly twice in my life. Both times I did violence to my fellow actors. And both times I felt like an idiot, but the second time had far longer lasting consequences. Falling in love with a woman already in love will do that.

In first grade I was the woodsman in the West Lee Street School production of "Little Red Riding Hood," and I rescued Red with such energy that the wolf ran howling into the audience and burrowed his head into his mother's shoulder all through the final curtain and bows. Mrs. Aldritch (the mother), Miss Sherman (my teacher), and Mr. Hinden (the principal) all had something to say about my technique. I gave up my part as the troll in "Billy Goats Gruff," the next play scheduled, and vowed not to tread before the footlights ever again.

"Ever again" lasted 13 years, which isn't a bad record for such vows. But when I was a freshman at college a track team friend of mine asked me to be an extra in his mime show. "I have a spot you're perfect for," said Robin, who, aside from being the Big 10 1,500 meters record-holder, was also famous on campus for having studied in Paris with Marcel Marceau. I was a hurdler—shorter, thicker, faster than Robin, but with none of his reserves of energy. I said, "No." He asked again. I said, "No." Robin asked again, and again, and finally I said, "All right," thinking that the show's five performances would just be like five jumps to get over and forget. What the hell, I figured, it wasn't a speaking part.

I don't really care much for pantomime, I should tell you. I'm too noisy. But Robin promised there was going to be background music, and that I wouldn't feel amazingly naked on stage when the time came. That should have been a warning to me. The program Robin had devised was based upon Moussagorsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" (not my taste, but it was noise) and it consisted of seven or eight scenes. I was only in one. When I showed up at the first rehearsal, I knew exactly why Robin had wanted me in particular.

I confess that I was somewhat shocked to be asked to nail Christ to the cross.

"Tim Donahue has the face of an altar boy." I've heard that line my entire life. I suppose there are worse things to have someone say about me, but because of this fact people usually relate to me in one of two ways: either I am treated as a complete innocent, or I am suspected of being a Dorian Gray-type hypocrite and sinner. Robin had not come down on either side of the question, one of the reasons I liked him. But as the director of his own show, I think he saw so much potential for irony or humor or just plain ambiguity in my fair skin, blue eyes, reddish-blond hair, and regular features that he just couldn't resist assigning me the role of a Roman soldier who helped nail Christ (to be played by Robin) to the cross.

I confess that I was somewhat shocked to be asked to nail Christ to the cross. Part of me wanted the role, of course — after all, I was a freshman in college and wanted to rebel as much as the next 18-year-old Catholic boy away from home for the first time; and part of me was horrified by the very idea.

But when I said something to Robin, he just smiled and introduced me to the woman playing Mary, whose role it was to stand off to the side and weep. This was Holly Austin, a petite blond woman whose ironic smile and forthright eyes pierced me like an arrow. "Listen, if I can be the mother of that big baby," she said, pointing to Robin, whose height of six foot two or so dwarfed her five foot nothing slenderness, "then you can certainly string him up. I mean, Christ, he's asking for it!"

I smiled wanly. "You'll look good in the soldier suit, too," she added.

I was hooked. If I was going to get to rehearse a scene with Holly Austin every night for three weeks, well, then, the chance of going to hell would be worth it, I thought.

But the first four days of rehearsing, I found, were enormously hard work. This was no longer first grade—at Northwestern University liv,e theater was taken very seriously indeed.

Robin spent nearly every minute blocking out each scene, telling us exactly where to stand and when to move. The first thing I learned was that a stage, although it looks large from the audience's point of view, and maybe is large when it's empty, is a very small place when a scene is being acted. The trick is to get the appearance of spontaneity, of real life in real time, without the messy freedom of reality. People have to stay in their places, or else they smash into each other and cause chain reactions of comic chaos all across the proscenium.

I had trouble with that. I either moved too slow to the right place, or too fast to the wrong place — when I wasn't moving too slow to the wrong place, or moving out of the right place at the wrong time. Robin called me a moron more times than I would usually allow, but I accepted his censure as the price of being near Holly. I kept promising to get it right just as soon as I could.

Holly, of course, got it right the first time, and stayed right every time through. It was as if she had a bat's sonic measuring skills and a ballerina's timing.

"Watch her," Robin said to me. "She's got it down pat. It's not just fun, Tim," he said to me with a look that meant, I thought, that if it hadn't been for my altar boy's face he would have found another centurion.

"I'll get better, Robin," I answered. "Maybe Holly can give me some advice."

"You don't need advice from Holly," he answered. "You just need to hit your marks." That was Friday, the fourth day of rehearsals. Holly and I had not, as a matter of fact, exchanged a single word since the first night. But I could see that to her, like to Robin, this was serious work, not a lark in costume. She spoke to no one. She listened to Robin, nodded gravely, and then just did her part perfectly.

I truly marveled at it, and wondered how they did their magic. It was the strangest thing, but while I stayed a thick-set, angelic-looking Irishman, the straw-blond Holly and the tall thin Robin instantly turned themselves into ancient suffering Jews carrying the woes of humanity on their shoulders. When they were on stage they even looked alike, as if they could be mother and child, and Robin looked half Holly's age.

As we left the theater that night I heard Holly say to a friend that she would not be going out that weekend. The junior she was seeing was going to Ann Arbor with the football team.

I walked over to the dining hall and got some dinner. I remember the choices were fish cakes or chicken, and I took the fish cakes. I might have been nailing Jesus to the cross, thought I, but there I was six years after Vatican II still abstaining from meat on Fridays. While I ate, I thought about Holly. There was no reason in the world why she would talk to me, I thought, except that there was no reason why she wouldn't. I was going to call her, I decided, except that I knew I wasn't. Well, I wanted to call her—probably, at any rate, except I wasn't sure. I went round and round in my mind and actually ate the red Jell-O, which shows you how preoccupied I was.

Back in my room I grabbed the phone and dialed Holly's number (which I had already written on the pad on my desk) too quickly to change my mind. She answered on the first ring, saying "Hello?" in a way that made it seem she was open for whatever adventure the world might offer her. That her "hello" was so welcoming made me enormously confident.

"Hi," I said, "You know me, except that you don't really. I mean, we've spoken, except not very much. Damn, listen, I'm Tim Donahue, the guy who's supposed to nail Jesus to the cross..."

"Except that you don't, most of the time."

"Yeah, true," I said, "I suppose I'll get it right someday, except maybe not quite by the time the show starts."

"You want my advice, Tim?" she asked.

"You heard me," I said, "Which is all right, except Robin said I wasn't supposed to ask for your advice..."

"Except that my advice is the same as Robin's advice, which is: hit your marks."

"Well, yeah, I guess, except that's not easy for me."

"It's always easy," she said, "except when it's hard."

"Are you making fun of me? I take exception to that," I replied.

"Except that you love it," she said.

"Well, at least you're talking to me," I said. "I expected almost anything except that."

"Why shouldn't I talk to you, except for the obvious?"

"If I were smart, except that I'm stupid, I'd know what the obvious was, except that I do, so maybe I am smart," I said.

"I followed that, except for the parts about you being stupid," she said. "The obvious reason I wouldn't talk to you is that we're in a mime show, which is totally silent, except for the parts when it's mute or dumb."

"It's not dumb at all," I protested, "except for the parts I'm in."

"Well, then, it's not dumb at all, from what I can see, because you're not really *in* it at all, except for your body lurching all over the stage."

"Wow, you really know how to make a guy feel good, except for when you make him feel lousy."

"Well, I would worry about your feelings, except that you're not my guy…"

"Oh, yes," I said, "That's right, I could be your guy, except I'm not on the football team."

"That's interesting, except neither is Dean. He's just the manager."

"Oh," I said, smiling.

"What does 'Oh' mean?" she asked.

"It means, 'Oh,'" I said.

"Except when it doesn't," she said.

"Except when it doesn't," I agreed. "Listen, do you drink coffee?"

"All the time," Holly said, "except when I'm not, like right now."

Well, we spoke more drivel like that for a while, until I finally asked Holly if she would meet me in the campus coffee shop and let me buy her a cup of coffee and we could maybe talk.

We seemed to like each other, and Holly told me that Dean was nothing serious, just an old friend from home (which was a suburb of Milwaukee), and that if I wanted to make a play for her, I was welcome to try.

"You have such a beautiful face," she said (I winced), "That it would improve my reputation just to be seen with you."

"Is your reputation that bad?" I asked.

"Oh, Tim, I'm an actress! Don't you know what that means? Why, in the old Queen's day, we wouldn't be invited to reputable people's houses. If you were a married man," she said.

"Except that I'm not," I interrupted.

"Don't start," she warned. "If you were a married man, why, just having this cup of coffee with me would be grounds for divorce."

"Except I'm having Coke," I said.

"You see? One date with me and I've driven you to drugs! But no one would believe it of you, not with that altar boy's face."

"I actually was an altar boy," I said.

"My mother is going to hate you," Holly said. "She hates all the boys I date, but especially Catholics and Irish guys. This is going to be fun."

"Irish and Catholics? What are you?"

"We're DAR. My mother can trace her lineage all the way back to the first settlers in New England. She's still trying to make her way onto the *Mayflower,"* Holly said in all seriousness, though with a touch of amused and tolerant disdain, "but she hasn't made it yet. I don't suppose you can claim ancestors like that."

"Nope," I said. "My folks came over at the turn of the century. My great-grandmother still has a brogue."

"Oh, Christ," said Holly, "introducing you to Mummy is going to be such fun!"

That was October, 30 years ago now. Holly and I became a couple, one of many pairs on campus. We rehearsed together until I actually was able to passably pretend to be a soldier of ancient Rome, stationed in far Judea, following orders to execute another troublemaker. I thought about that role, and the man I was playing. There must have been such a soldier, nearly 2,000 years ago,

"My mother can trace her lineage all the way back to the first settlers in New England. She's still trying to make her way onto the *Mayflower."*

whose name is lost through time and inattention, whose deed had far more life than he had, and whose thoughts can only be guessed at. "What was he like?" I asked Holly one night at dinner (we had taken to having dinner together, arriving at 5:30 and taking a table in the middle of the dining room, where we would sit, the center of a circle of friends who came and ate and went—while we acted as the host and hostess of a dining hall salon).

"What was who like?" she asked.

"The centurion I play, the poor shouted-at, ordered-about, probably uneducated, underpaid, maybe unfeeling soldier who really did drive the nails through Christ's arms."

She made a face and a clicking noise at me. "Don't go getting all method on me, Tim."

I laughed. "Unlikely. But don't you ever wonder? Don't you think about what Mary really thought as she watched her son dying?"

"You're so Catholic," she said. "I never think that stuff, because it just doesn't matter. What matters, dear Tim, is what the playwright and the director think the character thinks. There's no relationship between reality and art."

"And no relationship between art and acting," said Robin, who was eating with us.

Holly made a face at Robin, too, but one with more tolerance than she'd shown me. "Especially not when Tim is the actor," she said.

"Which reminds me, Tim," Robin said to me, "when you're using that mallet, go easy. I have bruises from where you hit me last night."

"Sorry," I said, "I've always been dangerous to my fellow actors." I told them the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," and the table convulsed in laughter. It made me feel so alive, to be the center of this group of talented, happy people, and to be envied because I sat with Holly and walked her back to her dorm each night after dinner.

Holly, ah, Holly. I have a picture of her somewhere, but I don't need to find it. I remember it clearly. She was wearing a dark turtleneck and a single string of beads—possibly pearls, possibly plastic. Her head is tilted upward, not much, but enough to indicate that her family came over (probably) on the *Mayflower.* She's looking off to one side, "stage right," I'd guess, with a serene, somewhat arrogant smile on her lips. She was not, I have to admit, beautiful. Certainly my wife, whose classic bone structure and dark laughing eyes still take my breath away, is far lovelier. But Holly had a certain presence, a fire in her yellowish eyes, a bearing that made her noticeable everywhere.

"Pictures at an Exhibition" went off well, as such things go. Robin got rave reviews in the college newspaper, and the drama department chairman noticed Holly. I hit Robin too hard on his left arm on the first night, drawing a wince (though no sound—Marceau would have been proud of his mute pupil), but I pulled my blows sufficiently through the other performances. Nonetheless, I was so wooden that even my altar boy looks never got me another role, not even as an extra.

I felt like an idiot again, this time because of my costume, which I had only found out about the night before in dress rehearsal. I was given a cardboard breastplate and backpiece, both painted silver, a helmet with a plume, and a short skirt. "Your sprinter's legs will look good in that," Robin told me. He, himself, for this scene, would be wearing a loincloth and nothing else. On the day of our opening, Holly gave me a pair of light brown dancer's pants, the kind that go under cheerleader's skirts. "What's this?" I asked.

"Well, you can't wear boxer shorts on stage, Tim. Everyone will notice. I suppose the ancients wore nothing under their skirts, but I don't think my altar boy could go that far for accuracy, so wear these."

Actually, I wore briefs, not boxers, but Holly didn't know that. I was thinking that my white underwear would be noticeable, so I took Holly's advice.

We did the five performances, Friday, Saturday, a Sunday matinee, and then the following Friday and Saturday again. Perhaps a thousand people saw my legs and maybe got a brief flash of my dancer's panties. Mother Mary wept on cue. Robin clung to the stout nails we had driven into the heavy wooden cross, and I and another athlete lifted the cross to the vertical position where Robin as Christ hung for thirty seconds while Moussagorsky played a dirge for him. Then the lights came down, Robin leapt off his martyr's perch and scurried to change into another costume, and I was done. Holly had parts in two other scenes.

I liked being in Robin's show. My parents even drove up and saw it, but Holly, somehow, disappeared before I could introduce her. I was proud of my girlfriend, and wanted them to like her, but all they could say was that she was pretty.

Holly and I were a settled couple by then, well known to all in the freshman class. Dean had faded away, and there was no other girl in my life. I had decided already—though I kept this to myself—that I would marry Holly and we would live happily ever after.

When I look back now on the end of that October, I am amazed at how little I really knew about life and love and sex—all of which seemed inseparable and simple to me then. But, in fact, they were three distinct things, and though I was undoubtedly living, and I thought I was both loving and the object of love, sex was still a shadowy unreality. As I said, Holly didn't know that I wore briefs instead of boxers because we had not made love. Not that we had all that many opportunities. Evanston, in 1967, was still a relatively conservative place, where men were allowed only in the lounges of the women's dorms, and women were allowed to visit the men's dorms only for an hour on Sundays, and the door to the room must stay open at all times for those 60 minutes.

Holly and I were both virgins, but she obviously knew much more than I did. We found places to be left alone to kiss and grope, but no place comfortable or private enough to do much more than that. I, however, felt we were making enormous progress. I timed our kisses, and felt that the longer we were locked mouth to mouth the closer we were getting to the happily ever after.

There were strange and radical things happening, protests against the Vietnam War and intensely fierce struggles for personal freedom by the college kids of the day. In France (which seems far from Evanston, I know—but I was a French major, so I paid attention), the students were preparing to rebel again, and before my freshman year was out I would see on TV the barricades going up around the Sorbonne. But Holly, who went to Paris that Christmas, never noticed. She was in a world of her own, and she drew me completely into it.

We developed a routine with each other. Holly, never an early riser, skipped breakfast, while I worked in the cafeteria during those hours. Then we both had classes, but we would catch up at lunch, sitting together in the dining room, chattering with friends and each other. Afternoons we would sit near each other in the library, studying, catching up on our work. Usually around three, Holly would yawn and stretch, and come over to me and kiss me on the forehead and tell me she was heading back to her dorm. That meant, in our code, that she was taking a nap. I let her go, and then I would either go to my room to nap as well, or continue studying. If it was a fair day outside (and that season, I seem to recall, had many fair days) I would join the touch

football games on the lawn. If it was rainy, I'd stay snug in the library.

At 5:30 she and I would meet once more by the dining hall, and then hold court at our table until the workers chased us out at 7:30. Holly, I noticed, was a fastidious eater, taking small bites and chewing them carefully, swallowing with hardly a movement of her throat. I tried my poor best to imitate her, to change my shanty Irish manners to fit her *Mayflower* form. After dinner we would again study together, and then, around 10, we would walk to her dorm slowly, hand-in-hand, stopping frequently beneath trees or in the shadow of buildings to kiss and caress each other through the layers of clothing an Evanston night required.

For me that next month, November 1967, was one of the best I had ever lived. I've had better months, years, decades since—but then I was very young, and I had been sheltered and lonely, thinking that by reading Sartre and Zola in French I was somehow worldly. Holly, I realized, truly was sophisticated. If I knew French, well, she knew French kissing, which (for a while, at least) seemed much more useful. Holly seemed to me to have come from an entirely different world than I had, even if we had grown up less than 50 miles apart.

My family lived in Beloit, a small town on the border of Illinois, halfway across the state. Beloit was the kind of place where the one Chinese restaurant served white bread with every meal, and the local paper (The Beloit Daily News, which I delivered every day from the time I was 12 until I left for Northwestern) reported as front page news the building of a new dentist's office. The small house I grew up in on Grant Street was noisy and crowded and untidy. My father worked across the state line in Rockford as a journeyman printer, and moonlighted on the weekends in a bar. I never saw Dad drunk, but I never saw him in a suit, either, except when someone in the family got married or died.

Holly's father was a vice-chairman (or something) of the Wausau Insurance Company, a CPA and an attorney. "Wallace Stevens was vice president of Hartford Insurance," I said one day, having learned this bit of literary trivia in a freshman lit course that week.

"Yes," Holly replied, "Daddy has met him at industry conventions and so on. He's a nice man, Daddy says, but his poems are foolish muddle."

"Is that what you think?" I asked. I had always had trouble with Stevens's imagery myself.

"That's what Daddy thinks. We have an autographed copy of one of his books at home, but I've never read it." What Daddy thought was much more important to Holly. She was his youngest, his special pet. He gave her an allowance of $200 a week—which was possibly equal to what my father was making in those days.

Holly's mother was a different story. She worried about Holly constantly. It was a source of irritation, if not shame, that Holly loved acting so much. To Mrs. Austin (to this day I do not know that woman's first name—Bob Austin called his wife "Mother") appearance and conduct were everything.

I got to meet the Austins at the end of Christmas vacation freshman year. Holly, as I said, had so much money from her allowance that she decided to go to Paris for Christmas, to visit her older sister, who was married to an American diplomat stationed there. (Claudia, the oldest of the Austin children, had her mother's full approval, as did Bob, Jr., their only son, who was a senior at Yale that year.)

Holly truly was sophisticated. If I knew French, well, she knew French kissing, which seemed much more useful.

But she wrote me to come visit her when she returned. I made an adventure of the trip. Since I had no car of my own, and neither my father nor my mother could spare their cars, I took a train from Rockford down into Chicago, where I spent the morning at the Art Institute and looking at the Picasso sculpture in front of the courthouse. It was December 29th and very cold. Finally, I went back to the Chicago and Northwestern station on Evanston Street, and took one of their double-decker green-and-yellow trains north along Lake Michigan through the wealthy towns of Glencoe and Winnetka and Lake Forest and on into Wisconsin to Whitefish Bay.

Holly met me at the train station. She had on a Loden coat and a brand new Parisian beret. She had brought me leather-bound French editions of Hugo and Dumas, the only two French authors she had ever heard of, I believe.

Holly drove us down to Milwaukee's art museum, and we wandered hand-in-hand looking at 18th and 19th century Americana. Then we drove back to her house. Her parents were out for the evening, so we made our own dinner—fondue, believe it or not—and we necked in her den until 10, when her dog, a very ugly little dachshund, began whining at the front door.

"They're home," Holly said, pushing my hand off her breast and straightening her hair. We both stood up and went to the living room, where I discovered that her parents were small, very well-groomed people (no surprise there), and that they called Holly "Buttons." That was a revelation.

"Buttons?" I said softly, and Holly kicked me in the ankle.

"Daddy, Mummy, this is Tim Donahue, the boy I've told you so much about."

I gravely shook hands, aware that the hand I extended had just been under this man's daughter's blouse, and tried to say "How do you do," as clearly and sincerely as I could. My mouth was dry.

Bob Austin said, "Welcome, I hope your drive was not too bad in this cold weather."

"Um," I said, "I took the train."

"From Beloit? Well, that's a surprise. I didn't know anything ran from those parts to here."

"No," I replied, "I had some business to do in Chicago this morning, so I left from there." I felt very sophisticated saying I had had business in Chicago.

"I see," he answered. "Well, welcome, welcome. Buttons always has the run of our garage, so I'm sure you'll be able to get around just fine while you're here."

There had been a new Buick along with the Oldsmobile station wagon we had used in the three car garage, and now they were home, so I expected that what he said was true.

Mrs. Austin just looked me over from head to toe while I had that car chat with Bob Sr.

Holly said, "Doesn't he just look like an altar boy, Mummy? You should have seen him nailing Christ to the cross!"

Mrs. Austin's eyes, already an icy blue, became absolutely glacial. "Are you an actor, also?" she asked in a tone as distant as 1620.

"No," I denied. "They just picked me for my looks."

An eyebrow raised a millimeter. Evidently one didn't boast in the Austin household, nor did one make jokes.

"I am glad to meet you," she lied. "Holly, put Tim in the blue lake room. I'm sure if he was in Chicago on business this morning he must be tired by now. I know we are," she said.

"Yes, Mummy," Holly replied meekly. But when Mrs. Austin turned to go up the stairs, Holly stuck her tongue out at her mother's back. Bob Austin saw this, and winked at his daughter. "Good night, Buttons. Good night, Tim," he said, following his wife.

The blue lake room turned out to be a guest room on the third floor, under the eaves of the big Victorian house. The ceiling was high, but slanted. Out a wide double window I could see the dark mass of Lake Michigan disappearing toward the east. The furnishings were polished oak, and included a chest of drawers, a desk and chair, and a wide double bed.

"Are you staying here with me?" I asked with a grin.

"Calm down, young altar boy. I'm sure Mummy is just at the bottom of the stairs waiting, oh, so innocently for me."

"I think you were right," I said. "She does hate me."

"Not yet," said Holly. "But I'm sure she will." She kissed the air between us and was gone. I sighed and unpacked my small suitcase. Although I had gotten it new before heading off to Evanston in September, the thing looked shabby and cheap to me. That was, of course, in comparison. As I looked around the room all I saw was wealth and what I took for good taste. The colors were muted blues and light grays, with blond wood and a multicolored quilt. On the walls hung framed photographs of ducks, eagles, wood grouse, and a sunset over a wide lake. I looked closely at that one, it could have been a sunrise, I supposed. It was peaceful and beautiful, either way.

Looking for a closet, I opened a door and discovered an entire bathroom at my disposal. This was wealth, I thought; in my house there were two bathrooms for the eight of us. The tub was an old-fashioned monster on legs with lion's paws. Although it was already 10:15, I filled the tub, took a paperback book from my jacket pocket *(The Spy Who Came in from the Cold),* and settled into the hot water.

While I was offstage (and in the bath, how's that for irony?), the high water mark of my relationship took place. Holly tiptoed up the stairs and turned down the quilt for me. She left a single poinsettia on my pillow. Finding that there when I came out of the bathroom half an hour later practically brought tears to my eyes. I vowed that Mrs. Austin would not hate me, but would, rather, embrace me far tighter than her diplomat son-in-law. I don't think I had ever wanted anything more before that moment, not even a bicycle when I was eight.

Looking back now, however, I think Holly was hoping for just the opposite. She desperately wanted her mother to loathe me, mistrust me, and hold me in contempt. I was part of Holly's rebellion, her break with Mummy. But it had to be on Holly's terms, which meant that Mummy must be the one to fire the first salvo. As I lay beneath the quilt in that attic bedroom that night, I never realized it, but I was the tethered goat, the sacrifice to flush out the lioness for a clean shot.

I did my best over the next two days. I spoke softly and respectfully to Mrs. Austin. I listened to Bob Austin's Pete Fountain records and heard about his experiences in the quartermaster corps during the war, when he had been based at Fort Sheridan just down the road in Illinois for all four years. (I despised him a bit for his smugness over that cushy post—my father had flown P-38s over the Pacific and had been shot down once. His war, I felt, gave him a right to boast—but Dad never spoke of his experiences. The only comment he ever made was that he joined the air corps in the hopes the war would end before he finished his training.)

We watched the Packers win the famous Ice Bowl game against the Dallas Cowboys on television, and the Austins took us out to a steakhouse to celebrate. The next day we took the bus to Evanston.

In January 1968, the drama department announced open auditions for the winter play, Shakespeare's "The Tempest." Holly told me she was going to try out for a part, and I kissed her and wished her great good luck.

"This doesn't take good luck," she said. "An audition takes preparation. Let's read the play together, all right?"

So for a week every night we read aloud in a corner of the coffeehouse. Our friends came by and chatted. People played "The Crystal Ship" and "How Can I Be Sure?" on the jukebox. A quartet of stuffy seniors played bridge every night from 8 until 10. Gossip flew past us. We read Shakespeare. I took the male parts one by one, while Holly read every line of the only female parts Miranda and Ariel ("sometimes played by a boy, but most often by a woman, and a really great role," she told me). But it was Miranda she wanted.

Four hours a night we read, and often at dinner or lunch Holly would dig into her bag and drag out the battered paperback to go over a line or two. I remember thinking that we were using time that could have been used for kissing and fondling, but I dismissed the thought as unworthy of undying love. I would walk her back to her dorm, but we no longer held hands. Holly was practicing gestures. Now and then I would see her with Robin and they would be blocking out a scene or two. I was not jealous—I was glad someone else (and someone who was an actor, at that) was involved with her passion. But I was left out.

The night of the audition came, and Holly asked me not to accompany her. "I'm afraid I'll be worried about you, if you're there," she said. "I love you. I'll call you later."

Robin came by before she called. "It was a cakewalk," he said, "A triumph. She blew them away. Poor Trisha, who used to get all the good roles.... She's history now. Holly was a revelation."

"She got the part of Miranda?" I asked.

"She had them eating out of her hand," Robin said.

Holly called just after, and I listened to her tell me all about it, pretending I hadn't heard it before. She gushed, she preened, she was overflowing.

Rehearsals began soon after. Holly worked every night at her part—a part I thought she already knew inside out, upside down, and backwards. But she dove into it. When I reminded her she had other work to do, she frowned. "Tim, this is my work. This is what I want to do. This isn't just fun."

I could see that. She was visibly dragging from the effort. But I could see she was also loving every minute of it. "I hope you'll have time for me, at least," I joked.

"I'll always have time for you," she said.

But she lied. She didn't have time for me. One day I said that to her and she blew up. We were standing on the darkened stage after the end of another long rehearsal. Everyone else had left already. Holly was swaying on her feet, ready to pass out. It seemed like torture to me, and she was suffering. But she came to life and snapped at me. "What is wrong with you, Tim? Don't you get it? I want to be somebody. This is my talent. This is what I can do, and do well. This is the me I love. You can't take that away from me."

"I wouldn't want to, Holly," I said. "I just want to be part of your life."

"I've seen you on this very stage, Tim. This isn't part of your life."

"But you are," I said.

She shook her head fiercely. "This is my life," she repeated. "I am an actress. This is what I do. I don't do fantasies of being the French teacher's little wife back home. I'm bigger than that."

"Tim, this is my work. This is what I want to do. This isn't just fun."

She stared at me with such anger, such passion, such vehemence that I almost believed she was bigger than that, bigger than I was. I recoiled.

"Tim..." she paused, and I waited for her to say what I knew she was going to say, what I would have said to her, to say she was sorry and that she was overwrought and tired and she didn't mean it.

"Tim," she repeated, "I don't think we should see each other any more. It's no good. You're not for me. You deserve something else." She turned and exited, stage left.

I was mute, stranded without a line. After standing stock still for a while, I left also, leaping down from the stage and walking through the empty seats. I can't believe it, I thought. I went back to my room and lay awake all night.

I actually made Dean's List that term. Each night, I ate quickly and returned to my carrel in the language library. I read all of Proust and Gide and Balzac. I tried Robbe-Grillet and Malraux. I read Moliere and Racine, but I avoided Shakespeare. I didn't go see "The Tempest," though I read in the college paper that Holly was superb.

When spring came and the year ended, I took the bus back to Beloit and found a job driving a truck for a bakery. Holly, I learned later, went to New York where she and her brother shared an apartment. He started a job as an investment banker. She made the rounds of auditions for off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway shows.

Sophomore year she was gone, off in the road company of "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds." Robin occasionally heard from her, and now

and then he'd tell me something. I got better, though less trusting. Time went on, and so on and so on.

I used to think that Holly broke my heart. But it has kept right on beating, hasn't it? I don't really have any scars—just a tender spot or two, like a bruise, maybe. But the whole episode lasted perhaps 20 weeks from start to finish. A Broadway play with so short a run would be a flop, even if not a disaster. To be realistic, "Romeo and Juliet" it wasn't. I can't even be certain that I learned any lesson at all from loving Holly, except to stop, which I did more than 30 years ago. Have the years since been kind to her? I don't know. I don't care. She is really not my concern anymore.

And so now I've seen "The Tempest," a play I had never before seen staged. It was like an old friend. I recognized the lines as they came. I noticed that Ariel was played by a woman, a slender girl of 18 or so, with hope in her eyes and a lightness to her step. Miranda seemed starchy to me, too tall and dark.

My wife clapped and clapped when it was over, as did my sons. And so did I. I'm sorry I've avoided that play for so many years. My quarrel wasn't with Shakespeare; he did nothing to me. And did Holly? I remember a conversation with Robin, just after Holly had pushed me away. "I miss her," I said.

"Go find another girl," Robin said. "You need to be more cynical; right now you're an incurable romantic."

Well, Robin was wrong. I was very curable, after all. I'm happy and in love with a beautiful, happy woman. I do teach French, and my students like me. My sons are happy and smart. Maybe it really is a matter of mental health. My oldest son turns 18 soon. He's gotten his driver's license. He's trying to choose a college. He's tall and handsome—he doesn't have the face of an altar boy. He's more Byronic, though he also seems clueless. Should I tell him the real facts of life? That there's a Holly Austin out there for everyone? Will he believe me if I say a broken heart is only a flesh wound?

MIRANDA: *I am a fool to weep at what I am glad of....*

BRIAN QUINN

Is the chief writer and an instructor of writing at Molloy College in Rockville Centre, New York. He has been a public relations writer, a speechwriter, an advertising copywriter and television commercial script writer. He has ghostwritten two books, is a member of the National Association of Science Writers, and is a consultant to the National Hockey League and the American Lung Association. Besides writing short stories, he is currently at work on a novel of the Civil War.

Barely Human

JM SCHELL

In a world gone mad, our humanity can be our greatest asset—and greatest weapon.

THE JAPANESE OFFICER'S HEAD EXPLODED IN A spray of fine particles that looked gray-green through Sayla's scope.

As the headless corpse toppled to the pavement, the rest of the patrol—PacRim conscripts who tended to lose unit cohesion rapidly—scattered wildly into the darkness and rubble on either side of the street. They disappeared into the ruins before Sayla had a chance to draw a bead on another. One of the drawbacks of a magcoil-rifle was that it fired slowly. The battery-powered sniper rifles used magnetic rails rather than a chemical charge to propel a round. It was silent, flashless, and it threw slugs through a magnetized tube with a muzzle velocity over 1,700 meters per second. At that speed, the simple, cold-cracked iron balls exploded like small bombs on impact. A perfect sniper weapon, virtually useless for anything else.

Which was unfortunate, Sayla thought, because one of the Japs' big dogs had been with the patrol below. Bagging the dog would have been good, she told herself. Usually, if a dog was with a Japanese patrol, the officer led it. Oddly, another led this dog. A Rimmer? Had to be. Patrols never had more than one officer.

With a perfunctory wave at the surface-to-air missile unit perched on top of the building across the street, Sayla slung the coil-rifle over one shoulder and peered expectantly at the western horizon. A chopper was almost certainly already on its way from one of the helicopter carriers offshore. The SAM crew would wait until the chopper showed and then knock it down. Hopefully. Meanwhile, Patriot ground forces would move in and mop up the rest of the patrol.

Standard Japanese tactics were to send a patrol to draw fire and when the Patriots struck, send in a chopper to put rockets and mini-gun rounds into everything within a square block. It had worked, once. The Northern California Patriots had been losing the war. The Japs had been slowly pushing the Patriot lines back from the beaches. Then Patriot tactics changed, they stopped fighting the way the Japanese wanted, stopped engaging patrols head-on and heads up and figured out a better way.

It was simple math: There were millions of Rimmer conscripts but there were only so many Japanese officers.

Attrition was what officers called it. Snipers called it capping Japs. When the call went out for more snipers, Sayla left changing bedpans in field hospitals and volunteered.

Smiling, she made a mental note to carve a sixteenth notch in the rigid polystyrene of her rifle's stock, then she crabbed away from the edge of the building, crossed the rooftop, and dropped through a blast hole into the apartment below. Inside, she crouched still for a moment, listening for any sound in the dark. There wasn't much left of the apartment. There never was. It had been a moneygrubber's apartment. Between the rioting and the fighting, these were the kinds of places hardest hit.

Looking around the empty apartment, she supposed its 'grubber occupants had fled to Oregon. Or maybe not.

It was simple math: There were millions of Rimmer conscripts but there were only so many Japanese officers.

She remembered a carload of 'grubbers her Brigade of Allah had come on. She remembered their car, big and shiny, glittering in the light of torches and fires and stopped by sheer numbers as it smashed into the massed bodies of the Brigade. She remembered the man, shotgunned in the gut, then ripped to shreds by screaming Brothers and Sisters. She remembered the two women. And the girl. The girl had been about Sayla's age with blue eyes and shiny blond hair tied up in a thick braid.

The women and the girl weren't allowed to die as quickly, as easily, as had the man.

Men from the Nation of Islam and the Aztlan Coalition organized the Brigades and the Corps De Hidalgo. These men, who came into the streets after most of Oakland had already burned, called on the mobs to turn on their true enemies. Given specific targets and tasks, the rioting mobs became an army and had moved out of the Projects, out of the poor neighborhoods, the black and brown neighborhoods, into the moneygrubber neighborhoods. Sayla, her mother missing, probably dead, was swept up into a Brigade, made a Sister in the Nation of Islam, put to work in a field hospital.

Overwhelming the police and the National Guard, they fought the others then—the Christian militias, the White Aryan Resistance and the Korean and Chinese neighborhood protective forces. By the time real U.S. soldiers arrived, what TV was calling riots had become a war.

The Brigade leaders, the mullahs, said that many of the soldiers—white, African, Latino, Asian—refused to fire on other Americans, turned their rifles, their tanks, their helicopters instead on their commanders, or one another, then deserted and joined one side or the other.

The army wasn't there long. A week after the American soldiers were gone, the Japanese invaded California.

The mullahs said the war had spread to other parts of the country: New England, Florida, Texas, New York, even Idaho, Montana, and Alaska. They said the Japanese were only part of a U.N. peacekeeping force along with Eurotrash and Imperial Russians. Sayla had never seen anything on the other end of her scope that wasn't either Japanese or a Rimmer, though. Talk was that blue hat Eurotrash were in Florida and New York while the Russians had landed in Texas and Alaska. In California, the Japs were keeping the peace, but their arrival had pulled NoCal's battling factions together. They said the Japs were even worse than the White Aryans and the Californian Asians. The mullahs said NoCal had to solve its own problems and the Japs had no business here.

Sayla started at the unmistakable rip of a chopper's minigun. It must already have been somewhere nearby to have arrived so quickly, she thought.

She sprinted through the apartment and out the shattered doorway into a broad, empty hallway. Seeing no movement in the gloomy hallway, she dashed for the stairs she knew lay at the far end. The Jap chopper would blast everything in a five hundred meter circle. It would try to find the SAM emplacement before it found them.

And they would try to kill the sniper.

At the hiss of rocket fire she dove for the relative safety of the stairwell's reinforced concrete. A flash erupted behind her. The air seemed to crumple inward. A pounding concussion filled the hallway, lifting and pushing her.

She tried to maintain her footing, almost succeeded when the second rocket hit. Her feet slipped from beneath her. She felt herself falling. With a detached calm she noted that her coil-rifle was probably wrecked. Then a blank grayness, like the sky over the ocean before an autumn storm, closed over her.

SAYLA MOVED AND IT FELT AS IF SOMEONE WERE trying to saw her head in half just above her nose. She moved again, sending an even greater pain racing up her left arm.

Clenching her teeth, she levered herself into a sitting position with her right arm. Nothing was visible. It was as if her head was inside a black sack. Feeling around her with her good arm, she realized she wasn't in the stairwell. How much time had passed? She cocked her head and listened. Nothing. No gunfire, no choppers. She examined her aching head with her right hand, found dried blood, and matted hair. She might have a concussion, she thought.

Gingerly, she felt along the length of her injured arm. It was difficult to tell for sure, but she thought the break was just below her elbow. Grinding her teeth against the agony, she gently lifted her left arm with the right and stuffed her swollen hand into a space between two buttons on her fatigue blouse. Snipers wore black fatigues and Sayla was glad she didn't have to wear the aba and chador worn by other women of the Nation of Islam. A chador had no buttons. She sat back, gulping air, and made a quick inventory: She couldn't find her coil-rifle and the holster at her belt was missing its flat, ten-millimeter pistol. Her hand dropped to one boot, found the small dagger still seated in its scabbard. Sayla knew nothing about fighting with a knife, but its presence was comforting nonetheless.

Leaning back again, she decided she'd find her rifle, then make her way down to the street. It wouldn't be easy going, but she couldn't just stay there. No one would risk trying to find one lost sniper who was probably dead anyhow.

"You cannot get out," a man's voice said mildly from somewhere within the gloom.

Sayla's ragged breathing ceased. Her pain seemed to spiral down to a tiny point in her gut. She squinted sharply into the darkness, and her hand shot back to the dagger in her boot. Quickly, she drew the small blade from its spring-held seat.

"It is all right. You need not be… *afraid*," the voice said again.

"W-who's that?" Sayla managed. "You a Scabber?" Scabbers, scavengers who hadn't been able—or willing—to leave the war zone, were mostly harmless. Sometimes, they even helped Patriots.

"No."

She swallowed. "You a Patriot?" she asked, doubtfully.

"No, not that either," the voice answered quietly.

"Jesus Christ," she whispered. "Y-you a fuckin' Rimmer?"

"No," the voice answered just as quietly, but more forcefully.

The breath squeezed from her lungs.

"A Jap." The words escaped with her breath and seemed to push her deeper into the darkness she hoped would swallow her.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "My leg is broken. And I lost my weapons when the rockets struck this place."

I'll kill him.

The thought filled Sayla's head like the flash of a detonating rocket. But how? Her left arm was useless. Her only weapon, the knife, seemed ridiculously tiny. And what if he was lying? Japs lied all the time. Everybody knew that.

"The only door to this place is buried beneath much rubble. The hallway roof has collapsed, I think."

She shouldn't believe him, she knew. But why would he be there if he could escape? Even on a broken leg she

knew *she'd* find some way to keep moving. Wouldn't a Jap? And why was she still alive? Why hadn't he—?

"I wish to surrender," the Japanese said from inside his part of the darkness, almost in answer to Sayla's unspoken questions. "To you."

She stared silently into the empty blackness, unsure of her hearing.

"Do you understand? I wish to surrender."

Surrender? Japs don't surrender, she told herself. Wasn't it a part of their religion, or something? A CIO had spoken to her unit about it one time, had said something about how a Japanese who surrendered would never get into Jap heaven. The mullahs said things like that, too. Dying in battle was a ticket to heaven, they said.

"Japs don't surrender," Sayla croaked.

He laughed. A soft, low, sad sound.

"Is this what they tell you? That we do not surrender?" he finally said.

"Everybody knows."

"Yes," he said and then laughed again. "I suppose they do," he went on. "Everyone knows things about you Americans, too."

"I ain't ever seen a Jap prisoner," she said defiantly. "Plenty o' Rimmers. No Japs, though."

"Why do you think that is?"

What a stupid question, Sayla thought and was about to say so. "'Cause Japs don't surrender," she repeated.

He laughed, again. The sound made her blink as if against a cool gust of wind off the ocean.

By his voice she could tell he was shaking his head. "Others, perhaps. It is the religion of many. They believe to die for the Emperor will guarantee their entry to…" he paused. "…you would know it as heaven. I do not. Believe."

"I used to believe in humanity, in the faith, hope, and glory of being human," he said. "But I have lost my *faith*. I don't know what glory is. We are taught that war is glory. My father says this teaching is new and old at the same time."

Sayla said nothing. How could something be new *and* old? Why was the Jap telling her all this?

"All then that remains is hope, yes? Hope of something beyond…." He did not speak for a long moment. "Can I hope for a place beyond all this horror and sadness?" he finally said, his voice lower and rougher. "I don't know."

Sounds came to Sayla, cutting the darkness, spreading it apart. In the darkness the Jap was sobbing.

Japs didn't surrender. Everybody knew. And Japs sure as hell didn't *cry*.

She didn't cry. Even when loss and fear washed over her like a dual tide, and she longed to have back things she couldn't quite remember and to forget things she could, the tears stayed away.

She sat, listening to the Japanese soldier softly weeping, the two of them separated by the empty wall of darkness.

THE POPPING OF SMALL ARMS FIRE STARTLED SAYLA; she'd fallen asleep. Eyes wide, she peered desperately into the dark. It was difficult to tell for sure, but it sounded as if the firefight outside was moving closer.

"They are moving this way," a voice came out of the dark room before her, echoing her thoughts.

The Japanese soldier. Hadn't she dreamed of him, dreamed his face? She squinted into the dark, backtracing the path of his voice.

"Your friends," the Japanese said. "They will be happy to find you, I think. Happy to find me, too. I think."

"Yeah, man," Sayla said, the words rasping in her dry throat. "Be plenty happy to find me. But you're gonna be one dead—"

"Dog?" She spoke unconsciously, her fingers tightening around the knife again.

The words had come to her almost automatically. So many times she had sat with other Patriots, talking trash about what they would do if they got their hands on a Japanese soldier. But three hundred meters was as close as Sayla ever came to a Japanese. At sniping range, death was a colorless, soundless image. Her fingers loosened on her knife.

"Yes, I suppose they will," he replied quietly. "Surely it is not often you Americans find an Imperial Japanese officer. Alive. Not many come here anymore. Only those who have not pleased their superiors."

What he said made sense. Then another thought occurred to her: She'd killed a Jap officer. This one, the one she'd somehow missed, must have been leading—

The *dog*.

"Dog?" She spoke unconsciously, her fingers tightening around the knife again.

"Yes." He said immediately. "She is with me."

A sharp coldness, like a bullet of ice, seemed to punch a hole right through her chest. The big dogs were new to the war. Everybody knew the animals alerted Jap patrols to the presence of a Patriot ambush. Capping Japs required greater distance, more caution now. But the two hundred pound dogs could kill, too.

If he wanted to kill her, the dog was as good as any rifle or pistol. Maybe better. In the dark, the dog wouldn't miss.

"I'm finding a way outta here," she announced, struggling to her feet, keeping her back to the wall. "You go

ahead 'n sic your dog on me if you want." She stood in a half-crouch, pointing the tiny knife into the dark, preparing for the Jap's command, the animal's attack.

"Yes. I understand. You should not… trust me," the Japanese soldier said after a moment. "The doorway is to your right. This room has no windows. A utility room, I think." He was quiet again, then went on. "I could not kill you. I have lost my weapons, and my dog," he drew a deep, wavering breath. "She is dying."

Sayla paused and considered this. She liked dogs, would often take scraps of food to the feral dogs that lived beyond Company's perimeter. It made her sick when other Patriots would use the pathetic strays for target practice. Was the Jap lying?

"What's wrong with it?"

"Hit. A bullet, I think. In her lower abdomen."

She'd seen gut shot soldiers in hospital. It was bad. Always.

Grunting against the pain, she stuffed her useless arm deeper into the space between the buttons on her shirt. She moved to her right, inching along the wall and feeling for the door with her good arm.

Her fingers found the doorframe and she reached across the cool expanse of steel door to find a heavy round knob. The Jap had said the door was blocked. Japs lied. But the door was where he'd said it would be.

Sayla twisted the doorknob and pushed. Nothing. She put her right shoulder into it and it gave a half-inch, but no more. The Jap hadn't lied. Something was blocking the door from the other side.

"I am ashamed I cannot help you," the Japanese said quietly.

Anger rose in her at his words, pushing the pain aside. "Well, maybe you shoulda thought that before you decided to invade my country," she said. "Things was just fine before—" A quiet, high-pitched sound cut her words short. It took a moment for Sayla to identify the sound. The dog.

Words, Japanese words in a soothing tone followed the dog's whining out of the darkness.

"I got some medic training," Sayla said. "Maybe I can take a look at it. The dog, I mean."

"Could you?" said the voice in the darkness.

She started toward the sound of his voice then stopped. This is crazy, she thought. She had no idea what was really there in the dark. Maybe the Jap had a knife, just wanted her to get close. Why would she help a Jap dog?

"If you can't move," she asked, testing, "how'd you know where the door is?"

"It is the way I came here with you. Before the second rocket barrage collapsed the ceiling."

She grunted again. "You brought me here? How? I mean, if your leg's all busted up?" And *why*?

"I had to do something. The helicopter was coming back. This room is in the center of the building. It is the most safe place."

Gunfire erupted again somewhere outside and Sayla stopped moving. Why was it taking them so long to clean up the Jap patrol? *Why did he help her*?

"I had to do something," the Japanese officer repeated. "I could not let you die."

"What?"

"I could not," he whispered from the darkness.

Why not? That's what she would have done, had she found him unconscious in the rubble.

"Huh," she grunted.

"You were so helpless," he said. "And so beautiful."

Helpless. *Beautiful*?

"Can you tell me your name?"

"What?" She snapped, squinting into the dark. Why would a Jap soldier want to know her name?

Beautiful, the man's word repeated itself in her mind. She forced her eyes to narrow with the suspicion she knew she had to maintain. "Look, I might, *might* look at your dog, but there's *no* way you're gonna know *my* name," she said. "*No* way."

"Yes, of course," he said quietly. "I understand."

She grunted and inched forward. The pain in her arm had subsided. She thought it might not be a break, only a fracture. "Say something so I know where to go," she said.

"Would you like to know my name?" The Japanese called softly from the darkness.

She stopped, peering incredulously into the darkness.

"I don't care what your name is," she barked. *You'll be dead soon*.

"Yes. I suppose it does not matter," he said, as if in realization of the truth she'd almost spoken.

She waited for him to say more. After a moment, when he didn't, she shuffled cautiously across the floor again. She had no idea why she was doing this for this Jap officer. And a Jap dog. Gut shot, the dog would be dead soon. Even if it lived a while, when the Patriots finally found her they'd cap the dog.

"They will kill her. I know."

The words drifted on the darkness and for a moment Sayla again thought she'd spoken her thoughts.

"I know if your people find us first, they will. But she is in such pain," he said again. "She does not show it, of course," he went on, "dogs are that way. I know. I raise dogs where I live with my family. Lived. Before."

His voice emptied into the darkness. Sayla waited a moment, shrugged her annoyance with this talkative Japanese, and with herself for listening.

"They will kill her," the Japanese said again. "And they will kill me."

Yeah, well, everybody dies, Sayla thought. Another dead Jap meant nothing to her.

Sounds from outside diverted her attention. She cocked her head, listening intently.

Relief washed over her. The clean up squad was closing in. But a sound, a high-pitched whine laid over a low rumble, was unfamiliar. She frantically searched her memory trying to make sense of it.

"ACTTs," the Japanese said.

"What?" The term didn't register.

"Air-cushion troop transports," he said. "Hovercraft."

"Hover…?" The word was unfamiliar. "We got nothing like that." Small arms' fire popped outside.

"No," the Japanese said, after a moment. "They are part of a push. It is why a second officer… why *I* was with the patrol. We were a, you would call it a 'point' patrol."

His words made no sense to her. A Jap patrol was just a Jap patrol, she told herself, always the same. He had to be lying.

"Point? For what?" she demanded.

"An amphibious column. The ACTTs. Thousands of U.N. Coalition forces, Rimmers mostly, will have come ashore by now. By air, by ACTT, by amphibious craft.

"The people have grown impatient with fighting you Americans," he went on. "Families grow weary of the funerals. So many dead. We were told it would be easy, that you were so busy fighting one another the… *pacification* would be a matter of months." He was silent again, and she didn't speak. "But it has been three *years* and we are barely off the beaches and there have been so many dead. So many."

His voice had changed, sounding choked and strained. Sayla thought he might be crying again.

"And so we push again, but with no hope for success, nor for an end. Imperial command knows this. Command only wants a good appearance for the U.N. before we abandon this war."

She stood a pace or two from where the darkness separated her from a reality she hadn't even considered. What was this Japanese officer telling her?

From within the dark, a deep sobbing answered her voiceless question, growing stronger until it eroded and crumbled the black wall between them. Memories of nights on the floor of the field hospital sparked behind her eyes. She saw again the maimed and dying, heard the moans and the screams, recalled other sobbing young soldiers.

She blinked in the darkness, wanted to move, to follow the sound of his tears. But she couldn't. She could only stand in the darkness listening to the sounds of war outside coming nearer, nearer, passing by leaving her alone, leaving them alone.

THE DOG WHINED, A HIGH, WATERY SOUND followed by a deep, shuddering breath. Sayla knew the Japanese officer held the animal's broad, flat head in his lap, but even this close she couldn't see him.

She turned her blind attention back to the dog. Jap dogs were—what was the word?—*genealtered*, she recalled from a half-remembered field briefing. Never having been this close to one, she hadn't realized how truly huge they were. Touching the animal's flank she marveled at the thick solidity. The dogs were also much faster than normal dogs, moving with an odd fluidity. Watching them through her night scope, they'd always reminded her more of cats than dogs.

Yeah, well, everybody dies, Sayla thought. Another dead Jap meant nothing to her.

"*Synaptic augmentation*," she remembered the briefing officer telling her unit. "A part of every mammal's nervous system is something called a synapse," the woman had told them in the monotone of one who'd spoken the same words many times before.

"Like an electrical relay, a synapse routes commands from the brain to the body. The brain gives the command; the synapse *relays* the message to the body. This means," she went on, "the time between thought and action has been shortened. Mind you, it was a small amount of time to begin with, but now, with these dogs, it's even less. So they're not like little Fi-Fi and Spot were back home." she'd said, casting dull eyes over the dozen or so young grunts. "They're more like machines. *Remember* that," she'd finished, her voice finally rising with emphasis.

This machine's life, Sayla thought, was escaping through a fist-sized hole in its gut.

The Jap officer held the animal still, whispering in Japanese while she knelt beside it, probed around its wound with her fingers. She could do nothing.

"I—I'm sorry," she found herself saying, surprised at her own words. She truly was sorry about the dog, sorry for the man.

"My family has a farm," he said in answer. "We live by a river in what you call *occupied* western China. We raise fish and corn. And I raise herd dogs. For cattle and sheep. That's why they gave her to me. I know about dogs."

What he was saying meant nothing to Sayla. All she knew of the Japanese was that they were here, in California. She knew nothing of China, nothing of farms and cattle and sheep.

"She is not like my dogs," he said. "But a dog is still a dog, I think. No matter what. *Inside* it cannot be changed from what it really is."

"They ain't much like our dogs, either," Sayla agreed.

"No," he answered.

"I don't even know why you have to have them here," Sayla said. He didn't answer her, was silent a long time.

"Because we are losing this war—*another war*—to you Americans, and dogs do not come home in plastic sacks," he finally said, his voice a low whisper she had to strain to hear. "Because no one mourns a dog's death."

He fell silent again, and Sayla was too stunned by his words to speak. Patriot brass always *said* the Japs were losing, but no one really believed. There were just too many of them, too many Rimmers. Sayla wasn't even sure she knew what winning—or losing—the war meant. Like the ruins and the firebases, the dead and the wounded, the war just *was*.

"I can't do anything for her, for your dog," Sayla said.

"I know," the man said, his voice a bare whisper in the dark. "But it is good, I think, that we are here with her, now. Don't you?"

She said nothing, only nodded in the dark. The dog's short, thick fur was soft on her hand. Beneath her fingers, the dog was warm and breathing and dying. No, not at all like a machine, she decided, not at all like the target viewed in the flat green cast of her night scope.

When the dog drew a final choking breath and its hulking chest fell still, Sayla expected the Jap to cry again. She could hear the man's hand rubbing through the animal's heavy coat, but nothing more. She opened her mouth, then closed it.

Then, as if from far away, she heard the choking sobs she'd been expecting. Only they were coming from the wrong place and a stinging warmth was in her eyes, in her throat. A hand closed over hers across the dog's fur and she didn't pull away.

It was a long time before her tears stopped.

SAYLA CLOSED HER EYES AND LISTENED TO distant thunder. The sound reminded her of the winter storms when she was a kid. She remembered lying awake at night listening to the thunder that dulled the sharp sounds of the seemingly endless slums of Oakland. Images gathered in her mind, images of a little girl rising early after such storms, eating her breakfast cereal on a tenement's front stoop, staring in wonder at the misty, empty streets washed clean of their usual dirtiness.

She opened her eyes. There was no thunder. And the street was littered with the rubble of war. Mocking real thunder, rumbling Japanese naval artillery rounds rhythmically sought their targets somewhere far to the North.

Above, silvery light had begun to push the stars from the night sky. The Japanese officer's heavy warmth pressed into Sayla's right side. Somehow, his closeness didn't bother her.

He was feverish, exhausted, weak. Some rapid infection had entered his body where bone had torn through the flesh of his leg. He was completely weaponless and had even discarded his tactical armor. She could take her small knife and cut his throat.

But she wouldn't kill him, was instead trying to save him.

Unable to stand unaided, he had to drape one arm over her shoulders and use a broom handle cane beneath the other. With her good hand, Sayla grasped his wrist and pushed up against his arm. He was only slightly taller and weighed less than her.

"Shhh," she whispered when the movement caused him to cry out. "You gotta be quiet. They're gonna find us for sure, otherwise. We gotta get to Brigade, can't let a unit find us." The fighting had moved out of their area, but she was sure someone—Japanese or Patriot didn't matter—would still be near.

She'd heard the small command unit was staged somewhere in the hills above Oakland. It wouldn't, she felt sure, be too difficult to find. She couldn't go back to her firebase. They would kill him. But at Brigade, they were smart. That was where Cultural Information Officers and such came from, after all. They'd want this Jap alive.

"Yes. Quiet. I understand." His words came slowly, almost matching the fall of distant artillery rounds.

He's dying. The thought echoed in her head like a ricochet. Before they had, together, pried the door open, and escaped the dark utility room, Sayla had splinted and wrapped his leg. But she could do nothing more. He'd lost his medpack, and she had no meds. But if she could get him to Brigade, they'd take care of him. Once the Japs left, after the war, they'd let him go home, wouldn't they?

Sayla could say nothing for a moment. While she'd worked on his leg, he'd spoken of his home, of the fast river, fields of wild flowers stretching endlessly toward high, snowy mountains. No war, he'd told her, no soldiers, no ruined cities. It was difficult to imagine such a place.

"Let's move," she said, forcing herself back on-task. "We're perfect together, huh," she said, concentrating on her footing. "My busted left arm, your busted right leg? Perfect.

"Now you gotta try and keep that busted leg straight so…" She trailed off when she felt his hand touching her chin, pulling her face up.

"Thank you," he said, so near she felt the heat of his breath across her cheeks, her lips.

"Yeah," she said, pulling back, confused. She moved again to help him. They worked together to lever him upright. She threw her weight forward, then back, pulling as he struggled to his feet.

"My book," he whispered hoarsely.

"What?"

"My book. It has fallen from my pocket. Will you please help me find it?"

"Book? What kinda book?"

"It is…" he said, his voice dropping to a whisper then rising again as he spoke:

"*One moment in Annihilation's waste*,
One moment of the Well of Life to taste—
The Stars are setting, *and the caravan*
Starts for the dawn of Nothing…
For in and out, *above*, *about*, *below*,
'*Tis naught but a magic shadow-show*,
Play'd in a box whose candle is the Sun,
'*Round which we phantom figures come and go*."

He was silent then and she stood swaying slightly in the rhythms of his voice. His words seemed physical things, swirling about her, in the dim light.

"Poetry," he said. "Very old. The book was a gift from my mother. I was to study poetry at university."

Sayla shrugged and helped him to lean against a protruding mass of concrete. She dropped back onto her haunches, peered into the night darkened rubble and moved her hand to and fro until her fingers found the small square. "I got it," she said. "Here." She held it out to him as she stood.

"Would you keep it for me?"

"You just keep it," she said, thrusting the small book away. "I can't even read."

"Yes, but," his voice trailed off again. "You remember," he said, "when we spoke of faith, hope, and glory?"

"Yeah, sure, you were talking about religion—"

"No. I was speaking of humanity."

A feathery lightness brushed one cheek and thinking it a cobweb, she reached to brush it away. Then she realized it was him, his fingers gently stroking her face.

"Please," he said quietly, desperately grasping her hand. "Keep my book. For me."

She could only stare at him, unmoving among the ruins and destruction that rose up around them, swallowed them in the endlessness of this war.

And as if from far away across the flower covered meadow, drifting on cool morning breezes she thought she heard a voice, *his* voice whisper: *Faith, hope, and glory*, he whispered over and over. Faith. Hope. Glory.

"*FREEZE, MOTHERFUCKERS, FREEZE*!" THE VOICE screamed out of a collapsed building blocking the street before them.

It was almost a relief. They'd traveled fewer than a dozen blocks and Sayla was wondering how they'd go much farther. She was okay, but the Jap officer was rough. It was all the two of them could do to slowly edge around every obstruction in their path. This mountain of crumbling brick and concrete looked impassable.

"Hands up, *up*!" the voice screamed.

She closed her eyes briefly, tightly, then opened them, and slowly raised her good arm.

"H— He's not armed," she whispered back. He isn't like the others, she wanted to say. He's different, she wanted to shout.

"I'm a Patriot," she finally called out. "He's my prisoner,"

"Hands up, Patriot," the voice screamed back. "And stand away from your prisoner. Stand. Away!"

"Please," he said quietly, desperately grasping her hand. "Keep my book. For me."

Then a deeper, more measured voice took over for the first. "Do it, Sister. You got no way of knowing what you got there. *No* way, little Sister. Put your hands up. And stand away."

"*Now*, Patriot," the other voice screamed.

Sayla stared into the rubble, her mind racing, wondering if the owner of the second voice might understand as surely the screaming man could not. Beside her, the Jap officer tottered on his makeshift crutch. He stepped a pace or two away from her raising one arm high and the other as high as possible.

"I can only raise my right arm," she called back. "His leg's busted. Neither of us is armed," she added.

"That's fine, little Sister," the second voice called back. "But you still got to step away from your prisoner. That's an *order*, Patriot."

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. They could see he was crippled. Why didn't they just come and get him?

"He's a officer," she shouted. "He *knows* things, he can tell us all about…" Her mind groped in a darkness more suffocating than that in the laundry room and she felt engulfed by a foreign fear.

"Permission to stay with the prisoner back to Brigade!" she called out. But where to, then? Where would he go then? Her visions of a shining river and snowy mountains receded into enveloping blackness.

"Permission denied, Patriot," the first voice called back instantly. "Stand. Away."

"You must do as he commands," he whispered from beside her.

She turned and the fear twisted within, contorting her face with indecision. "I'm afraid. Of what they're going to do."

"Yes. I am afraid, too."

Her jaw worked silently, and her eyes traveled over his features, his eyes. "No," she whispered. "No," she said as the tears came, the still unfamiliar wetness startling her. "I won't. I can't." She whispered and stepped not away, but nearer to him across the few paces separating them.

When his head exploded it was as if she were atop a building again, at night, and viewing things through the gray-green of her scope. A yawning space seemed suddenly to appear between them and his head disappeared in a colorless spray.

Sniper's silence filled her ears and a movement down the street caught her eye. With startling clarity she saw an arm rise and give a single short wave from the top of a building.

The dead Jap crumpled to the ground and she knew she had to move, had to bug out before the chopper came. She feared it might be too late, though. The silence had been replaced by a distant, horrifying scream like that of rockets raining endlessly from the sky.

IT RESTED IN THE PALM OF HER GOOD HAND, A cracked cerocrystaline blob festooned with thousands of fibers. They might wonder what had happened to the implant, wonder what had become of her, but Sayla no longer cared.

On a high point looking west across the empty ocean she stood, thinking over what they had told her. The Company shrink had said she couldn't believe anything the Jap officer had said about himself, his family. Or about her.

The Jap had just wanted to make her believe he was her friend. With one friend he might *infiltrate*, was the word the shrink had used.

Another Jap like this, her sniper commander added, had come in with a girl in a unit down at Monterey. They'd taken the two of them to a comm bunker. The girl was carrying the Jap's med pack. Only it wasn't a med pack. It was—and here he paused, glancing sideways at the shrink. It was a battlefield tactical nuke, he went on finally, not explaining further.

Everything about the Jap officer was unreal, they told her. Like the dogs, they told her, he'd been altered, his synapses enhanced, his adrenal gland enlarged. The rifle butt-shaped bruise on his lower leg was unmistakable, the shrink said. The Jap had broken his own leg. The Patriot psychologist had shaken his head in fascination. Barely human, her commander had muttered. *Barely human*.

"And this device," the shrink had said of the glittering object in his hand, "is similar to devices found inside the dogs' skulls." In a dog, he had explained, it was an active governor. The device would prompt the dog on a huge array of commands and eradicate the animal's resistance, even blunting its survival instinct.

"In a man," the shrink said, speaking more to himself than Sayla, "it's grown in the thalamus and operates on other levels, as well. It analyzes supraliminal data from its host's senses. It's an empathic amplifier. It magnifies the natural human ability to read others' emotions from little cues in voice, movement, expression, even smell.

"The host," the shrink went on, staring in fascination at the thing, "can then act on sensual cues received from his target, magnified a hundred-fold." He'd turned to her then, blinking as if remembering she was present. "With this in his head, that Jap could almost read your mind."

But it wasn't her mind he had read.

And he'd never tried to hurt her; they hadn't found explosives hidden on him.

In one quick motion she cast the device away and watched it fall to the sea, its fibers mimicking the motions of life. She stood staring after it for a long time. Then she reached into her breast pocket and retrieved the book, looked down on the small black space in her hand.

"Faith, hope, and glory," Sayla whispered, remembering a soft touch in the dark. Then she thumbed the brass hasp open and looked west over the water recalling his words. '*One moment of the Well of Life to taste—and the caravan Starts for the dawn of Nothing…*'

She lifted the book's cover.

And looked into an instant of burning brightness that rivaled the sun's. What Sayla had been, what had been Sayla, was gone.

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Is a resident of the Denver area. He currently directs marketing and advertising for his family's successful mortgage company. He is a former professional private investigator and professional gambler. He is a member and past president of the 27 year-old Northern Colorado Writers Workshop, which is home to speculative fiction authors Connie Willis, Ed Bryant, John Stith, Wil McCarthy, P.D. Cacek, and others.

Just pull down your pants and slide on the ice.