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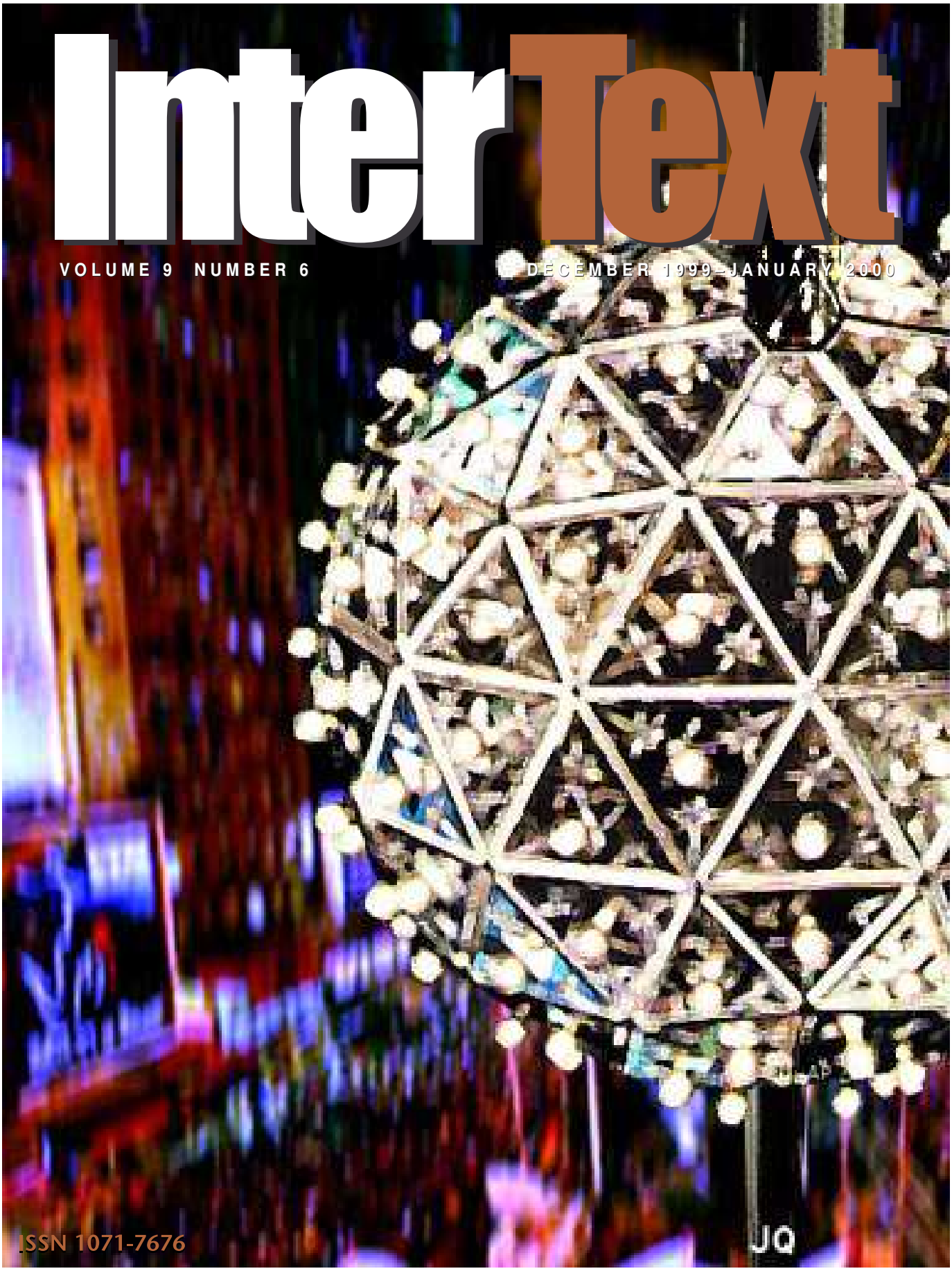

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What Millie Would Choose

ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN

She chose fame for herself and child.
But someone important didn't get a choice.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" SAID LYNDA'S husband.

Lynda—who was lying in bed on her back with her legs thrown over her head, her toes touching the headboard and her privates four inches away from her face—replied, "Yoga?"

"Now?"

Lynda stared at herself and winced. She knew she'd have to tell Dave at some point. But this was not the appropriate time. So she stammered, "It feels wonderful to do this after sex. It retains the sensation. I read about it in *Cosmo.*"

"Can men do it too?"

"Sure."

She then watched her naked husband thrust his muscular, hairy ass in the air, grunting and groaning and bending his knees as he tried to kiss the headboard with the balls of his feet. "This doesn't feel good at all," Dave said. He sounded as if he were being politely strangled.

"Well, maybe it only works for women."

"Guess so." He eased his legs back down and placed his feet on the floor. Before he got up to use the bathroom, Dave gave his wife a quick look and wondered what she was thinking.

On this morning and in this position, there were only two words in Lynda's mind: *retain sperm.* Lynda wanted a Millennium Baby. A baby, born on January 1, 2000, the closer to midnight the better. A baby who would be famous from the moment she took air into her brand new lungs; a baby who would land on the cover of the *New York Post* before she so much as opened her eyes forthe first time. How could this baby not be a success in life? How could she not be eternally grateful to her mother, the woman who screamed in agony while the rest of the world set off fireworks and popped champagne corks and partied for the last time ever like it was 1999—the woman who literally made her a star?

Lynda thought it was a fabulous idea, but she'd only mentioned it once to her husband. He'd been in the midst of fixing the kitchen sink. "Wouldn't it be fun to have a baby on New Year's, Y2K?" she'd asked casually.

"Fun?" he'd replied, his voice bouncing off the pipes, the wrench dropping on his knee and clattering to the floor. "Ouch…"

"Well, maybe not fun," she'd said quickly. "More like… important. Don't you think it would be important to have a baby on New Year's, Y2K?"

"I guess so, honey," he'd said, as if the question and babies and the year 2000 were all things from a distant, inhospitable planet. "Can you grab that wrench for me?"

Lynda had sighed, squeezed Dave's foot, and handed him his unreachable tool. "Well," she'd muttered. "That's that, I suppose."

Of course, that wasn't *that* at all. Lynda checked out five fertility books from the library, calculated her ideal conception week and got to work.

Lynda wanted a Millennium Baby. A baby, born on January 1, 2000, the closer to midnight the better.

Dave was smart, but not terribly perceptive, especially when it came to Lynda. In the past four years, she'd had many private plans in which Dave had been an unwitting co-conspirator—getting engaged, marrying, quitting her PR job and becoming a homemaker, buying the house in Forrest Hills. With a mysterious silence here, a feigned disinterest in sex there, the seemingly unintentional rearranging of schedules and, occasionally, the carefully timed utilization of the Big Guns (tears), Lynda could get Dave to do practically anything.

She never felt guilty about her spousal adjustments because, whether he knew it or not, Dave more or less shared her feelings. This one, though. The Millennium Baby. (She'd already named her Millie.) This one was beginning to get to her. After all, Dave had repeatedly told her he wasn't ready to have children. She'd repeatedly assured him she was taking her pills. He'd repeatedly responded, "Okay, honey. I trust you."

Would he honestly believe this pregnancy was an accident? Would he honestly catch Lynda's case of Millennium Fever? Would he honestly learn to accept fatherhood, or would he just pack up his golf clubs and his Aerosmith tapes and leave his sensitive young wife and famous little Millie forever and ever and ever?

Now, *that* would be some *Post* headline, Lynda thought ruefully. Y2KISS OFF: MILLENNIUM BABY DITCHED IN DELIVERY ROOM!

Lynda lowered her legs and stared at the ceiling. She could actually *feel* Dave's life-makers swimming toward their destination. She'd worked so hard at this, monitoring her temperature, reading up on tantric, sperm-welcoming exercises, sneaking vitamin E extract, zinc and dong quai into Dave's morning coffee like slow-working

poisons. She couldn't afford second thoughts now. It was exactly nine months before the dawn of a new millennium, and the future bucked and roiled before her like a sharp current from which there was no turning back. Lynda Tompkins was fertilized. She knew it.

FOR LACK OF A PROPER WAY TO TELL HIM, LYNDA managed to hide the early pregnancy symptoms from her husband. Morning sickness was a no-brainer, as it typically accosted her after Dave left for work. The only other noticeable symptom, heightened emotional fragility, she tried her best to keep a lid on.

When she finally erupted in tears one night during Letterman's monologue, Lynda managed to gasp "PMS!" before he grew too curious.

All the while, she kept thinking of Millie—thoroughly modern Millie—still only cell-sized, but growing larger every second. Funny how few people knew of her now—just Lynda and her gynecologist—but how many would know of her in the future.

Crude as it sounded, she and Dave could cash in big time on Millie's fame. Diaper and baby food companies would surely want to put her face on their labels. Pampers: *The Official Diaper of the Millennium Baby.* It didn't sound too far-fetched to Lynda, who had seen many farther fetched things during her years in public relations.

If Millie made them enough money, then Dave could quit his job at the insurance firm and do what he always wanted to do. Alone in the house, poring over her secret copy of "What to Expect when You're Expecting," Lynda tried to remember what Dave always wanted to do.

Oh, yes, she recalled dismally. Sail around the world.

Still, *Dave will understand.* She said it aloud for emphasis, repeated it three times, like a mantra. Then she ran to the bathroom and threw up.

AT A LITTLE OVER FOUR MONTHS, LYNDA'S MORNING sickness abated, but there was another symptom she couldn't hide. Dave noticed it, but hoped it would go away before he actually had to bring it up. It wasn't something you wanted to bring up with any woman—especially a woman as sensitive as his wife. But facts were facts, and this fact was alarming. Lynda—a firm twenty-nine-year-old with a trim waist and thighs as smooth as glass—was beginning to develop a gut. Her heart-shaped face was growing rounder and her large breasts were bordering on pendulous.

Three nights in a row, he'd come home from work and found her sitting on the couch, finishing a pint of Ben & Jerry's in front of *Live and Let Live.* He'd discovered two—*two*—empty containers of chocolate sauce in the trash—not to mention all those wrappers. His wife had always liked cheese, but this was unnatural. She was inhaling cheddar and Monterey jack.

Dave didn't know much about psychology, but the weight gain, the chocolate sauce, the sudden obsession with dairy products—it all had to mean something.

I'll bet it's my fault, he thought guiltily. Maybe she's bored in the suburbs. Maybe I'm taking her for granted. Maybe the sex isn't good. Maybe she's substituting cheese for love.

He waited until after Letterman's monologue, because he knew how it tended to upset her. (And what exactly was *that* about?) A commercial came on, and Lynda jumped out of bed to fix herself a snack.

That's my cue, Dave thought, and grabbed her wrist.

"Honey," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

Lynda's face flushed. "What do you mean?"

Dave took a deep breath. "Well, I've noticed a… a change in you."

"What?"

"Lynda. You're still beautiful. The most beautiful girl I know. But… I mean… You're really packing on the pounds, honey."

Lynda stared at her husband. The powerful warring forces of guilt and vanity played tug of war with her soul until she felt like crying out in agony. But that would only make matters worse. She needed to get a grip. This situation was, after all, quite simple. It all came down to two questions, which Lynda quickly spelled out for herself: Do I want him to know that I lied to him about getting pregnant, or do I want him to think I'm a blimp?

Liar or blimp? she thought. Liar or blimp?

The words chased each other around inside Lynda's skull, until she finally cornered them, grabbed them and weighed them, one at a time. *Liar… Blimp.*

"Oh, for God's sake," she exploded. "Dave, I'm not fat. I'm pregnant. I know you didn't want to have a baby yet, but this baby is going to be so incredibly special. A Millennium Baby, Dave. Do you know what that means? A once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity. Our baby will be *born* famous. And you'll be famous too. You're going to be the father of a baby born on New Year's 2000, Dave. You're going to be in all the papers. You're going to be on the *Today* show. And don't you worry, honey. If I can't push this baby out by midnight sharp, I'm getting a caesarian. You know how, when I set my mind to things, I get them? Well, this is one of those times. I'm getting it, honey. I'm getting it for you, for me, for us. After our Millennium Baby is born, you won't have to worry about anything ever again."

During this entire monologue, Lynda had kept her eyes shut tight, as if she were in prayer. It wasn't until she'd finished speaking and opened them that she realized her husband had left the bedroom.

SO DAVE COULD TOLERATE A BLIMP, BUT NOT A LIAR. Lynda should have known this. It was one of the many ways in which they differed. "It's easier to lose weight than to gain trust," Dave had said to her, after she'd chased him into the living room, begging his forgiveness. He'd delivered the sentence in an infuriatingly patient monotone. And, since it had been one of the last things he'd ever said to her, it still rang in her ears nearly five months later as she sat, huge and alone, in her den, with her sorry white aluminum Christmas tree (at least she'd been able to carry it) standing rigidly in front of the fireplace and "It's A Wonderful Life" playing on the VCR for the fifth time that day.

"George Bailey lassoes stork!" whispered Donna Reed again. Lynda mouthed the words along with her.

This had to be Lynda's loneliest Christmas ever, and yet her mantle was covered in cards. There was one from nearly every print and electronic news outlet in New York—editors, TV producers, on-air personalities, radio talk show hosts. All it had taken was a cleverly written one-sheet on baby pink paper, a handful of confetti and an 8-by-10 glossy of Lynda's cherubic, still-pretty face to make them all want to ride shotgun on the Millie Bandwagon. "Merry Christmas!" the cards shouted out in fresh red, green and gold ink. "Can we get an exclusive?"

Several articles had already been written about Lynda's quest to be The Millennium Mom of New York City. By the time the Christmas season shifted into high gear, she'd appeared on several local news shows and *Entertainment Tonight;* she'd turned down a phoner with Howard Stern; and she'd received parenting tips, live, from both Regis and Kathie Lee. Unemployed or not, separated or not, friendless or not, fat or not, Lynda remained a superb publicist.

An envelope with Dave's clumsy handwriting on it lay in the center of the coffee table. Though she'd found it in the mailbox the previous day, she still hadn't opened it. After all, she knew what was inside. Dave had been sending her checks every month since he left. He never sent a note, or a description of his whereabouts, or anything other than the check itself, with "child support" written on the short memo line in the lower left hand corner. Lynda justifiably took this as a dig. Since Millie hadn't been born yet, the only child Dave was supporting was his estranged wife. Though she always deposited the checks, Lynda didn't take much pleasure in opening the envelopes.

On the TV screen, Donna Reed was painting the walls of her drafty old house, which was quickly filling up with children. Lynda reached for the tub of Heath Bar Crunch and discovered it empty. For a few moments, she contemplated making a grilled cheese sandwich, but she didn't feel so much like getting up to do it.

Lynda picked up the envelope and slowly opened it. The check fell out. So did a handwritten note on plain white paper:

Dear Lynda,

I hope you are doing well. I haven't written you all these months because I have been too angry to do so. But I want you to know I still care for you and have been thinking about you a whole lot. I would like to see you, but only under one condition: Please call off the publicity, and make the birth of our child private. I guess I'm ready to be a dad, but not Dad of the Millennium Baby. I don't think it's right to make money off of a baby, and I hope you understand my feelings.

I've saved up enough money to take a three-month hiatus from work. If you have the baby privately (and as far from midnight on January 1 as possible), I will move back in and spend the three months caring for you both. But if I see the kid on the Today *show, we're through. I will continue to send child support, but I will spend my hiatus where I'll know I belong: on a sailboat.*

With love and hope,

Dave

After rereading the note several times, Lynda found herself smiling, and realized it was the first time she'd smiled with no TV cameras rolling since Dave had left.

"Well," she whispered. "Well, well, well…"

She shifted her weight on the couch, and let her eyes wander from the letter to the television screen. Uncle Billie was misplacing the deposit money again, and Lynda knew she had a lot to think about.

HE WOULDN'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER. THIS WILL be Lynda's excuse. *I tried to beg out of it, but he wouldn't let me be.*

Of course, this is not an excuse; it is the truth. But everything sounds like an excuse to Lynda now. She's sitting at Le Cirque 2000, eating a huge goat cheese omelet, formulating true excuses in her head at one in the afternoon on December 27, 1999, as she stares into the chlorine blue eyes of the man who wouldn't take no for an answer: Jeff Jeffreys, *Action News* anchor and prime pursuer of Lynda's self-generated Y2K baby story. He wants to be the only reporter in the delivery room with Lynda. It'll be very tasteful, he's repeatedly assured her—soft lighting, one hand-held camera, one stationary camera, placed unobtrusively in the corner for "visual variety," and Jeff. With admirable tact, he's extolled the potential ratings of such a once-in-a-lifetime TV event, remarking that little Millie could easily rake in more viewers than the Times Square Ball. Though she still has major reservations, Lynda is admittedly thrilled at the

prospect of beating the Ball. And Jeff, who senses her enthusiasm all too acutely, is preparing to drop a shiny, new ball of his own.

"Lynda," the tousle-haired anchorman whispers seductively as he leans over his untouched mesculin salad. "Think of your baby. Think of her future." He reminds Lynda of Dr. Mike from *Live and Let Live.*

"But Jeff," Lynda replies, sounding not unlike Dr. Mike's terminally ill love interest, Carrington. "My baby needs a father."

"We will compensate you… generously," Jeff says, breaking the soap opera spell. "You won't get that from *20/20."*

Lynda shoves a forkful of omelet into her mouth and chews slowly. She thinks about Dave's offer, then the potentially huge offer from Jeff Jeffreys' employers, then Dave's offer again. "What would Millie choose?" she wonders, but only briefly. After all, Millie couldn't *choose* anything. Millie can't even breathe on her own.

Wordlessly, Jeff pulls a Mont Blanc pen out of the jacket pocket of his Calvin Klein suit. He plucks Lynda's pink one-sheet out of another pocket, folds it in half, and writes a dollar amount on the back. Staring deeply into Lynda's eyes, he slides the folded press release across the table to her like a boxed engagement ring.

Lynda reads the dollar amount and gasps. Her eyes moisten and grow wide. She wants to give Jeff the go-ahead immediately, but she can't. In her mind, she sees Dave, turning his back to her like he did when he packed his small suitcase five months ago. *He's going to divorce me if I say yes to this,* she thinks. But, then again, Dave has never seen such a fat sum, written so clearly on a pink piece of paper. *I bet he was just bluffing in the letter,* she tries to tell herself. *He wouldn't really divorce me.* Of course, she never thought he'd leave her either.

Lynda looks at Jeff's handwriting again. She can feel the anchor's bright eyes on her, their minds intertwining as they both envision the money, which could pay at least half of Millie's Ivy League tuition. *I'll be able to change Dave's mind,* Lynda finally decides, one way or another…. She opens her mouth; but before she can say anything, a wave of pain overtakes her and she cries out. "Oooh, she's kicking," Lynda sputters.

Jeff's teeth sparkle. "She's trying to tell you something, Lynda," he says softly.

Lynda readjusts herself in her chair, thinking he may indeed be right. She takes a deep breath and again begins to accept Jeff's offer, but then another, fiercer cramp detonates deep within her womb. *What are you doing, Millie?* Lynda thinks.

She clears her throat, envisions Dave on a small sailboat in the Caribbean. Then, she pictures Millie and herself flying high above him in a private jet. She wishes she could transfer this image into the mind of her thrashing child. And, when the pain subsides, she thinks maybe she's succeeded.

"Jeff," she says firmly. "I would be glad to… aaah!" Another, horrific cramp barrels through her. Lynda's eyes begin to well up with tears. *Stop it, stop it, stop it,* she thinks—or says. She isn't sure.

Unemployed or not, separated or not, friendless or not, fat or not, Lynda remained a superb publicist.

"Stop what?"

"Nothing, Jeff!" Lynda nearly screams. She crosses her legs hard, seizes the arms of her chair and braces herself against the pain. "Oh no you don't!" she hisses. "Get back up there."

"What?!"

"Oh, Jeff. I… This offer is so generous. And it really is for my *baby's own good!"* Lynda grits her teeth. As her face turns a deep, purplish red, she tries to ignore the older couple, staring at her from the neighboring table.

"Is she okay?" the matron stage-whispers to Jeff.

If Lynda could only separate her thighs enough to do so, she'd get up from her seat and pop the interloping old broad right in the mouth. But of course she can't. The only one asserting herself here is Millie. And she's doing it with greater and greater resolve.

"Lynda," says Jeff. "I'm waiting for your decision."

Lynda squeaks, "I just don't know how I could possibly say no… No! *No! Noooooooo!"*

Her water has broken.

"Goddammit!" Lynda yells. It is the first time that anyone's voice has attained such a high decibel level in Le Cirque 2000.

She watches the waiter call for an ambulance, watches Jeff grab the one-sheet and run away, watches customers and wait staff she's never seen before help her out of her chair and carry her to the door.

"It's okay," says the young, goateed busboy who supports her as the ambulance pulls up. "It's okay."

"No it's not!" Lynda shrieks. "It's only December 27th!"

WHEREVER DAVE TOMPKINS HAS BEEN STAYING ALL these months, it must be close to Lenox Hospital, because despite the near-record speed of Lynda's labor, Dave arrives early enough to hold her hand throughout most of the contractions.

"It's gonna be okay, honey," he keeps saying. It's the first time Lynda has heard Dave's voice in nearly half a year. She'd forgotten how soothing it could be.

Labor is like nothing Lynda has ever experienced. It's truly and absolutely overwhelming. When you're in labor, there is no room in your thought process for plotting or fantasy or pretense or goal-setting, or anything even remotely related to the future. Your brain, like your body, is filled to capacity with the present business—the labor—that literally cries out for completion. That said, Lynda is still unexpectedly grateful for her husband's hand in hers, for his voice telling her that it's gonna be okay.

As Millie takes her first, hollering breath, there are no reporters, no satellite feeds, no cameras capturing images of her tiny hands grasping gently at the air around her. Millie's only audience consists of a doctor, three nurses and the two people in the world who will always want to watch her.*Thank God,* Lynda thinks.

Lynda feels the weight of little Millie in her arms and the weight of Dave's hand on her shoulder.She looks deep into her husband's eyes and sees the kindness that's always been there and the tears, which are new, and realizes now, on this fifth-to-last afternoon of our second millennium, that in the future, she may be wise to let Millie make all the important decisions.

ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN

is a freelance writer in upstate New York and a graduate of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She previously wrote "Getting Rid of January" (v8n2) and "Rules for Breathing" (v9n1) for InterText.

Blame It on the Pigeons

RUSSELL BUTEK

Who you callin' a birdbrain?

HE WAS YANKED AWAKE BY A CHORUS AND A storm. At least that's what his subconscious served up for him. When he opened his eyes—slowly, for fear of daylight and its effects—he found himself laying on his side, staring across a dim, dusty, lumpy floor. At the far end, lightly dusted by slatted moonlight, a flutter of pigeons were landing, puffing themselves up with a stiff, formal dignity, looking about pretentiously as if to say *they* had never done anything so ungainly as actually fly.

Pigeons. That must have been where the storm came from. What a letdown. He much preferred the missing memories that his shredded bit of dream suggested over this filthy floor.

He remembered planning to go to the Carnival, but he couldn't remember whether he had gone. He imagined so. He hoped he had a good time, for all the pain he was in. What a pity he couldn't remember.

A particularly pertinent recollection would have been his reason for being here. He guessed that *here* was some church tower. There were enough hints: the pigeons, the slatted windows, and a rope dangling from the darkness and sinking through a hole in the encrusted floor near his head. *Here* he could deal with. *How* didn't much bother him, either. But *why* was the serious question. What inebriated streams of consciousness had led him to this place?

Yet his frail mind wasn't ready to tackle a question of such weight for fear of breakage. So thinking was out. He was no longer sleepy, so he felt obligated to do something—but under the circumstances disobeying the laws of inertia did not seem like a good idea. In fact, he suspected that physical exertion was to be feared even above mental. Yet he had managed to open his eyes without any serious permanent injury—as long as he had blinked slowly—so he opted for the only activity left: staring where his head pointed, which was toward the silly critters at the other end of the bell tower, blustering and prancing about as if at an Elizabethan ball.

"The Event is progressing as planned, and the point of no return is upon us. Do we halt The Event or do we do nothing?"

Stupid birds.

SOMBULUS BEGAN, "WE *MUST* DECIDE TONIGHT! The Event is progressing as planned, and the point of no return is upon us. Do we halt The Event or do we do nothing?"

From Bombusterbuss, "I say do nothing. Let The Event occur. There is some risk, as I've shown before, but we have plenty of time to prepare ourselves for the crossing of Their millennium to find shelter for the short duration of the crisis. Afterward, Their menace will be greatly diminished and our evolutionary research will no longer be faced with the impossible burden of time."

Fillibut and Penniloe were terrified of The Event. They echoed each other in a chorus pitched to heights of alarmed fright, though they did their best to keep panic from their arguments, "Their menace will be greatly diminished, you say. How greatly? Your projections show that Their destructiveness will probably not escalate to dangerous levels, but your philosophy's projections have been wrong before. The medieval plagues were projected to evenly distribute Their reduction. But you remember what happened. Entire communities vanished. For the short term, those of us living in those communities prospered—Their stores were freely open to us. But they were also open to others. The fox. The wolf. The weasel. Where the plague had destroyed Them, the carnivores soon destroyed us. Are the risks suitably minimized this time?"

Phulphertibig was adamantly against The Event as well. "And what of the individual? Their higher societies are breaking down. We agreed to that half a century ago and more. But a side-effect of that breakdown is greater individual influence. None of your philosophies, old or new, has yet managed to adequately codify the individual."

HE HAD NEVER SEEN PIGEONS ACT SO STRANGELY before. They were supposed to be mindless, chaos-driven creatures, twitching at everything.

But tonight their prancing about didn't look at all random. They were still twitching, but it all seemed more… uniform. And their cooing—that heavenly chorus—seemed quite odd.

Forget it. He was thinking too much. It still hurt.

Strangely enough, their odd strains didn't seem to add to his addlement. He might even be convinced that their voices were soothing, though maybe he was just plain feeling better. No matter. If it meant his hangover would evaporate, he could lay here watching and listening for hours.

PHULPHERTIBIG WAS STILL DRONING ON. "THEIR individual has freer access to Their mass-destruction capabilities than they have ever had in the past. If only a single significant bomb or biological agent…"

Idle Feather couldn't stand the Phlutter Beak any longer. He had to interrupt.

"We cannot tolerate the collateral damage to ourselves from even one such act. We recommend stopping The Event." He wasn't quite sure who the *we* was, but it stopped the incessant fluttering of his compatriot.

Phasogordo, who had worked hard for The Event, squeaked out a frustrated rebuttal, "But this is a chance of a millennium! We will not have Their entire population quaking over a single event again for centuries. We cannot afford to waste such a global trigger!"

Hux cooed back, "Why not? We have many smaller, safer triggers in place. True, we could accomplish much with this one trigger, but there's a chance—however small, it is still a chance—that this trigger would result, not in reduction, but in complete elimination."

Fillibut and Penniloe babbled again, losing control over their panic, "Elimination! You hear her? Elimination! That doesn't mean just Them. It also means us!"

HE WAS DEFINITELY FEELING BETTER NOW. ALTHOUGH he wasn't supposed to be thinking, his mind must have been doing a bit covertly, because he suddenly had an idea for some fun. It required a little movement, but it was stealthy movement, and he was particularly attuned to perform such at the moment. Since any motion painfully reminded him of the good time he must have had during the Carnival, the slower he moved, the less he hurt. And that kept him slow enough that the pigeons certainly weren't going to notice.

HUX STILL HAD THE FLOOR. "MANY OF THE CONTROLS we have used in the past are still available to us. Why use something untested and drastic when plagues and other diseases have done quite well, despite the opinions of some of us here? Famine and disaster have been equally useful. And we can always find another Luther or Lenin. And while an Attila or a Hitler is no longer safe since Their destructive engines have become so effective in the last few centuries that Their wars now take us with Them, we're still a long way from breeding violence out of Them. We can still use war on a small scale. We've been quite successful on that point even in our own times, in Africa and the Balkans, for instance."

Ufus the Brown pipped in dreamily, "Yes, Luther! We mustn't forget our old friend religion. One of our best controls. It has done wonders to keep Them in check with all the crusades and jihads and pogroms and whatnot. And don't forget these wonderful community halls Their religions have built for us. Yes, let's not forget religion."

HE NEVER SAW A PIGEON IN THE COUNTRY, THOUGH he imagined they must be there. They had to be much more virtuous than their city cousins. He could respect the noble, hardworking, country folk. He even considered himself charitable enough to go so far as to offer a bit of bread in admiration to such a noble savage.

But their city cousins? They deserved nothing but contempt. Life was too easy in the city, with all the attics and churches and abandoned buildings for them to live in, and with all the garbage heaps for them to live on and all the gullible people that actually fed them.

He took a certain pleasure in harassing every pigeon he encountered—mitigating circumstances such as Carnival revelries aside. And as for the fools who fed them, they made the pigeons' lives easy beyond reason. They deserved special scorn.

GAVRILLIAC RETORTED, "BUT OUR CONTROLS ARE weakening! We thought we were breaking down their civilizations, but it's taking so long! They've become so complacent that they have begun to make war, not on themselves, but on us. On us!"

HE HAD A THEORY ABOUT PIGEONS. IS IT PURE CHANCE that cities have been good for them? Of course not! They designed the cities, you see. We *built* them, but it's the pigeons that made us build. We toss out all this garbage, but it's the pigeons that make us wasteful. We do all the work, and the pigeons live off our leavings. Their dumber-than-a-rock image is all just an act.

Why haven't we chased them out of the cities? We got rid of the rats, didn't we? (He didn't really know for sure, but he couldn't imagine a modern city with such an archaic pestilence as rats.) No sensible city allows livestock within its limits, does it? No tigers or wolves or bears. Then why do we allow pigeons? Simple. Because we don't have any say in the matter. It's the other way around. Pigeons allow us.

BY THIS TIME, PECKELSCOT WAS WHOLLY DISGUSTED. "Enough of this nonsense! We're approaching a crisis and we have an opportunity to forestall this crisis. From the beginning we bred Them to be prolific, and we induced cultural constraints to enforce that breeding. They died off so easily during most of Their existence that we had no choice. But now They are exceeding Their bounds, and They will continue to do so. In the last few centuries we have begun a new breeding program, giving Them reasons other than procreation to exist. This program is finally beginning to take hold in Their more advanced countries, and the corresponding societal pressures are becoming mainstay—women's rights, environmental consciousness, and the like. But things like this take time, and we have had almost no success at all with most of Their populations. It will take centuries—centuries we do not have. If gone unchecked, They will choke this world, and us with it, in a matter of decades, a century or two at the outside."

Bombusterbuss finally heard someone he could coo with. "Yes! Their populations are ballooning. They're living longer. They are outpacing our controls. Do you know how long some analysts give until all our controls are useless? Two or three lifetimes. That's all! We don't even have the two centuries that my esteemed colleague optimistically opines. We *must* take drastic action, despite the risks." He unconsciously lifted a claw and flexed it. "We *must* weaken Them now!"

"They've become so complacent that they have begun to make war, not on themselves, but on us. On us!"

IF HIS THEORY WERE CORRECT, THEN PERHAPS THIS very gaggle—no, that was geese; what's a flock of pigeons? a clutch? a coop? make it a belfry—perhaps this belfry is a conclave of their leaders. He had never seen pigeons act as strangely as these. Perhaps the fate of the world lay in the hands, er, beaks, of this bedraggled toss of feathers.

SOMEONE PONDERED ALOUD WISTFULLY, "IF WE ONLY had another millennium without the risk of Their chaos, another millennium to breed Them to our liking, there we might find Utopia."

HIS THEORY WAS GRAND FOR ALL ITS POSSIBILITIES. But he really didn't believe in it. Pigeons were just stupid, brainless birds.

SOMBULUS QUIETLY INTERCEDED, AND A HUSH SWEPT through the room, "We did not come here to argue. We've all heard each other before. We came here to vote. All in favor of letting The Event run its cour…"

HE WAS FINALLY IN POSITION. FOR THE LOVE OF a lark he threw his agonies to the wind and yanked the rope, and the pigeons were scattered in a frenzy by the spirited bells.

RUSSELL BUTEK

Is a nomadic software type who has lived all over, including with a brief stint in Munich—a city, like all of Europe, firmly in the grip of the pigeons. He currently lives in Austin, Texas. He previously wrote "The Web" (v6n6) and "Grendel" (v8n5) for InterText.

Just a Little Y2K Problem

VINCENT MISKELL

Of course chaos can be your enemy.
But sometimes it can be your ally.

AS LONG AS ENOUGH THINGS GO WRONG, Jay thinks his plan will be perfect.

Running shoes, blond-gray wig, makeup and mirror, black tennis shoes, water bottle, tool kit, firecrackers, and C4—almost everything for the job is neatly packed into a woman's black leather mini-backpack. The solid green-glass fake champagne bottle he picked up in St. Louis (by bribing the clerk in the liquor store $30) can be carried by its gold foil-covered neck and won't look too out of place on New Millennium's Eve. But he's created a leather sling to hold it for when he needs both hands free.

Under a security guard's gray-and-black uniform (two sizes too large for him), he wears an expensive-looking black evening dress with the lower portion rolled up around his waist, giving him the "spare-tire" bulge of a sedentary middle-aged man. The recently sprayed silver streaks through the hair around his temples and the lightly yellow-tinted glasses with the thick black frames reinforce the image. The "Sgt. Makowski" name flap on his shirt pocket might also help if the police catch him, but he plans to avoid that.

Without bothering to check out of his motel room, he grabs the mini-backpack and steps out into the mild Central Florida night, his nose drinking in the rich perfume of semi-tropical plants and moist earth. His newly shaven legs itch terribly under black starched pants as he hurries to the distant space where he's parked a twenty-year-old oil-leaking, gas-guzzling junker. Unless someone spots him now, no one should associate him with the faded dark-blue '79 Chevy. Before touching the car, he slips on some beige-colored latex gloves.

As he pumps the gas pedal and turns over the ignition, he half sings, half hums "It's Now or Never" in his best Elvis. By the time he gets to a dramatically drawn-out "Tomorrow may be too late," he's heading east on Colonial Drive.

"Tomorrow *will* be too late," he says to himself, grinning like a young man on his way to a lovely date. Several camouflage-painted army vehicles full of helmeted National Guard soldiers pass, heading in the opposite direction, toward downtown Orlando. If there's trouble, it's expected to be around the tourist area of Church Street Station—not this part of the city.

Only minutes later, Jay takes a left on McGuire Boulevard and pulls into one of the Koger Center parking lots that border each of the dozens of two-story office buildings a half-block from Fashion Square Mall. Parked under a large tree still thick with leaves, the car is completely enveloped in shadows, making it almost invisible. Popping the trunk, he checks the firm tires of a well-used girl's bike one last time. Then he uses a looped piece of wire to hold the trunk almost shut, but not completely. Even if it flies open, the light won't go on because he's removed the bulb.

At midnight there will be failures. Whether they're just a few blips or the equivalent of a nuclear missile attack, Jay plans to cash in.

Slowly lowering himself down on one knee, Jay uses finger tension alone to unscrew the already loose license plate. Throwing the minipack over his shoulder and securing the solid champagne bottle in its sling, he walks several yards away and buries the plate face down under some mulch and wood chips.

Straightening up, he reads his unisex Atomic Watch, for which he paid $199 cash at The Sharper Image. At 1 a.m. every day, the watch tunes into the U.S. Atomic Clock's broadcast, resetting itself to the exact second. Now, in the bright moonlight, its black hands clearly show 10:24. A slightly cool breeze tugs at Jay's streaked hair as he saunters toward the mall.

He knows he should be rehearsing his plan step by step, but involuntarily he thinks back a year to when all the Y2K warnings began to hit the media. Predictions began to snowball into an outright apocalypse: power outages; ATMs and phone service down; banking, government, and airline computers going berserk; alarms disabled and police powerless. Maybe this, maybe that. Because two digits are changing from 99 to 00 at midnight on December 31, 1999, computer chips embedded in all sorts of machines and computerized systems are going to create failures. Nobody can say just which kinds, where, or how bad. But whether they're a few blips or the equivalent of a nuclear missile attack, Jay plans to cash in.

He heads left around the north end of the mall to a rear entrance of Dillard's. If any store's got its alarm system primed, it has to be the big department store. They have the most to lose. Removing the heavy champagne bottle from its sling, Jay slams it against the glass of an outer door. Nothing happens. He pounds twice more before the high-pitched ringing alarm sounds. Then he jogs back

across the street and hides behind some bushes in a parking lot, two over from where shadows hide the huge junker.

Almost 12 minutes later, a white Orlando patrol car shows up with a single officer slowly sweeping his searchlight around the door and parking area. The mall's alarm company must have some sort of reset switch, because several minutes after the officer reports that he can't see anything, the ringing stops. A second white patrol car appears, and the two cops confer for another several minutes. Then they drive away in different directions.

Jay's watch shows 10:56. He waits until 11:10 and then returns to the same door and pounds it until the alarm begins its piercing rings again. Then he runs and hides.

Both patrol cars appear within minutes of each other. They are much faster this time; in less than nine minutes they are at the entrance. Now, while one officer beams a flashlight through the glass door, the other rapidly drives around the entire mall, flashing the powerful searchlight erratically, as if to catch a band of thieves as they bob and weave, scattering like insects through the deep shadows.

Jay covers his mouth as he smiles, suppressing an anxious laugh.

The cops confer again until some radio call gets them to scream away, with blue and red lights strobing and sirens blaring, toward Colonial Drive. It is now 11:46—just fourteen minutes before all the millennium bugs will hit Orlando and the rest of the east coast.

Jay stands in the shadow of a tree at the edge of a parking lot, waiting several more minutes. Almost twitching from adrenaline, he can no longer resist bending down to scratch his itchy legs. Every few seconds his eyes dart nervously to his watch.

Then suddenly it is 11:57—time to move! Jay tries not to run, but his pounding heart and hard rapid breathing slam intensifying energy into his stride as he heads back to Dillard's rear doors. As he half-jogs, he almost doesn't hear the distant fireworks explosions. "They're early," he says aloud as he glances at his watch.

It is 11:59.

At exactly midnight, four blows from the heavy glass bottle make the alarm sound. But there is noise everywhere now.

It is the New Millennium.

He deliberately sprints around Dillard's to another entrance, as though driven by the incessant ringing of the alarm.

At 12:01, he fishes some C4 and two firecrackers from the black bag and pushes a small clump of the plastique explosive between two of the locked doors. The strong plastic smell makes him a little nauseous, but he swallows the feeling away. Carefully, he inserts a firecracker in the C4 clump and lights it. As he runs like crazy around to the safety of the building's edge, the ringing spookily stops, making him almost tumble as he loses a step.

Boom.

The deafening shock wave rattles the building and shakes the ground below him so much that he almost falls to the pavement. He swears.

He's used too much.

He waits a few seconds and peeks around the corner. A rain of smoky debris gently pelts the ground like misty hail and the powerful smell of burnt plastic and charred dust is everywhere. With weeping eyes, Jay holds his breath and gingerly steps through the destroyed entrance. All six doors lay twisted aside as though some powerful tornado decided to go shopping. The inner set of doors are punched through too, so a second blast won't be needed here.

Jay grabs the flashlight from the black minipack and heads toward the back of the jewelry department, where they keep the safe.

It is 12:08. He is on schedule.

More C4 blasts follow, but Jay uses much smaller clumps and ducks behind the escalator each time. Except for two strings of pearls, he limits his take to necklaces, bracelets, and large carat rings—all white diamonds, slipping them into an inner pouch of the minipack.

Jay has a choice of almost a dozen jewelry stores, but he knows that he only has time for a few more: Marks, Mayor, Elegant, and Lundstrom are the closest. Each has an outer glass or plastic barrier and a small closet at the back with a safe full of diamonds. So, it's blast, blast, tinker with the tools, hide, blast, and pick up the diamonds. Only the Mayor safe fails to open.

12:48.

With his bag heavy with jewels, he shoulders his way out an emergency fire exit door that gives a feeble two rings. Except for some moonlight intermittently obscured by thick clouds, it is almost as dark outside as inside the mall. A dozen distant sirens make it sound like Orlando's panicking about its first ever air raid.

All the street lamps are dark now, and there's no glow of electric lights in any direction he looks. Y2K has fully kicked in as promised.

Jay sprints across McGuire and rapidly strips off the uniform, slips on the black tennis shoes, and fixes the wig firmly on his head. Rapidly, he applies makeup and lipstick and takes a big slug from the water bottle, which removes half of the lipstick he just put on. Then he dumps the uniform and everything in his minipack except the jewelry behind some bushes. The fake champagne bottle is now his only weapon.

From the Chevy trunk, he pulls out the girl's bike, and with the jewelry-laden minipack tight against his back

and the champagne bottle in the bike's basket, he hikes up his dress and pedals through several Koger Center parking lots, north toward Executive Drive. He tosses the latex gloves over his shoulder. By weaving through back streets, Jay can circle around to Bumby Avenue and Colonial Drive and make it back to his real car, which is still parked at the hotel. Just an innocent old woman, ready to drive to New Orleans.

Though he is pumping hard to keep the old bicycle wheeling along on the sidewalk, his bare arms and legs feel chilly. Most of the apartment houses he passes are silent and dark, but whenever he hears any noise or sees candles or flashlights through windows, he crosses to the opposite sidewalk. Almost crashing into some bushes on Plaza Terrace, he stops to rub his arms and scratch his insanely itching legs as he straddles the bike. From some shadows on the other side of the street, he catches the end of a low whistle and some muted laughter.

Before he can start pumping the pedals again, five or six college-aged youths are blocking his path. Pitching his voice up, he yells, "Excuse me. I'm meeting some friends, and I'm very late. I need to get by."

All the youths giggle as though this is the funniest thing they have ever heard. As they crowd toward him, they sway and nudge each other and laugh hysterically. Jay can't see them clearly, but he's sure they're all high.

"Well, you know, lady," the largest one of the group slurs as he grabs the handlebars, "this is a private street and you got to pay a toll to ride through here."

"Yeah, a toll!" another one shouts. The others laugh uproariously.

"Come on, fellas," Jay says as sweetly as he can. "It's New Year's. Have a heart and let an old woman through. I don't have any money on me anyway."

"Oh yeah," a smaller one says reaching for the champagne bottle, which Jay quickly snatches up, "where'd you get the big bucks for the champagne then?"

"Leave me alone!" Jay shrieks.

"No need to get so twitchy, lady!" the big one says. "Jus' let us look in your bag. We'll jus' take a five, maybe a ten, an' you can get on to your party."

"Party!" another shouts and starts singing something.

Shaking his head and almost rolling up his eyes, Jay pulls off his watch and offers it. "Here, take this and let me through," he says. "It's worth two hundred dollars. One of those Atomic Watches from The Shaper Image." But even he can see that the watch is going berserk. It should be almost 1:30 by now, but like tiny black scissors, the hands keep swinging back and forth between 12 and 12:15. The National Institute of Standards and Technology and its Atomic Clock have been bitten by the millennium bug.

"This watch ain't no good!" shouts one of the group. "We don't want no broken old lady's watch." The watch is tossed into the shadows.

Automatically Jay swings and catches the youth in the head with the bottle, savagely striking him to the pavement.

Jay swears under his breath. If only the watch had been working, he knows this crew would have taken it and let him go. Stepping away from the bike and snatching off the wig, he holds the bottle in front of him with both hands. "Okay, guys," he says using his regular voice, "enough is enough. I was playing a little joke on my friends. That's why I'm dressed like this. I really don't have any money on me. But come with me to my car, and I'll give each of you ten bucks. What do you say?"

Before anyone can speak, the small one circles around and grabs onto the minipack. Automatically Jay swings and catches the youth in the head with the bottle, savagely striking him to the pavement.

The big one roars and flings the bike down toward Jay's feet. "Tune! Tune!" he shouts. One of the others bends down over the sprawled body. "I think Tune's dead, Jeffy," he whispers.

Somebody shouts, "Let's get him!" Jay is tackled and beaten unconscious with his own fake champagne bottle. The loose minipack spills diamonds and pearls over the sidewalk.

SOON AFTER ONE AMBULANCE TAKES TUNE'S CORPSE away, Jay wakes up in another. A National Guard soldier stares down at the beaten and heavily bandaged body and asks, "What happened?"

Jay can barely see through his swollen eyes, but murmurs over battered teeth, "Just a little Y2K problem."

VINCENT MISKELL

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S h i f t

G.L. EIKENBERRY

Reality is tenuous on New Year's Eve even in the best of situations.

IN THE BEGINNING—EVERY BEGINNING—THERE IS only awareness. This is pure consciousness that is not differentiated into sensation—no sight, sound, touch, taste or smell, but direct experience of the flow of energy. For at one level, the only level in the beginning, everything is energy. Energy: the wave form of the most minute particle, the tallest mountain, the most immensely imaginable proto-stellar mass.

That, of course, is in the beginning. With awareness comes identity, and with identity comes alienation from the cosmic whole.

Only the most highly evolved beings experience both identity (the I) and oneness (the I am) in a single self—a single eternal breath.

Jack Lee, at least at the moment that concerns our tale, is not among the community of most highly evolved beings. Jack Lee is just an accidental savant in a world that has escaped from the rigid predictability of high school Judeo-Christian science, with its addiction to linear causality.

THE BROWN BAG SHROUDED BOTTLE OF CHATEAU-whatever-was-cheapest nudges Jack's shoulder. He isn't really paying attention. Nothing new about that. Dark. Cold. Pain like heavy, dense fog, permeating joints, stomach and head. Not really paying attention is a survival skill.

"Hey shitface! You drinking?"

Jack is not wasted. Jack is not schizo. Not that you can tell from the blank look on his face as he slowly turns his head to face Monk.

"Planet Earth calling Cap'n Jack. We got a job to do here, Jackie, and we're gonna get it done. We got us three bottles of this recycled piss. That's two for this milli-whatever, and two for the next. Now according to that clock on the Scotiabank over there, we only got us 11 minutes. I can't do this by myself, so drink up, bucko."

The clock on the Scotiabank has been stopped at 11:44 for weeks.

"Two and two is four. What did you do with the other bottle? And it's *sixteen* minutes. Sixteen minutes now and sixteen minutes three hours from now. This particular spot appears to be millennium-proof."

"Aw, fuck you! How's about I just take however the fuck many bottles I got and just fuck right off and find somebody else to party with?"

No answer. Jack has turned his head back now.

"I don't wanna do this, Jacko, but don't matter who scored the coin for the booze, you don't leave me much choice."

No answer.

"When I get up to go, I'm gone."

No answer. No Jack.

"Goddammit, man don't go fucking disappearing on me like that! Shit, man, I hate it when you go slipping in and out of reality like that. If I didn't know I was a fucking drunked up, schizoid bum I'd think I was fucking nuts!…" And on and on—Monk goes lurching and muttering his way along the sidewalk. He almost falls off into the street twice before he turns on to Cumberland and walks into a parking meter.

The clock on the Scotabank has been stopped at 11:44 for weeks. This particular spot appears to be millennium-proof.

He rebounds off the meter and sits down hard, clutching the bag to his chest to protect its precious cargo. Damn! Two bottles crack against each other and at least one breaks inside the bag. Cheap wine is leaking through the paper onto his pants. Looks like he's pissed himself.

He'll get back up as soon as he formulates a plan for doing it without losing the rest of his supply through the now soaked worthless bag.

"Gonna miss the goddam fucking milli-nen-i-mum and have to wait another hundred fucking years…"

"Thousand," somebody says and grabs him by the collar and drags him to his feet. Before he can figure out what's happening, Monk is inside sitting on a threadbare sofa. His crotch is still soaked, but he must have dropped the bag.

"Fuck you, Jack! Where the fuck's my party supplies?"

For a second Jack just glares, hoping that will be enough, but as Monk's jaw starts to flap again he knows that even a third-degree stare won't suffice on someone with the attention span of a meson. "Just shut up and listen."

"Listen to what? Goddammit, Jack, I ain't half drunk enough for this shit!"

"Forget the millennium, Monk; it's just another cold night. *This* is important."

"Nothing's important anymore. Just leave me the fuck—"

"Shut up! Just hear me out for a few minutes and then I'll give you another ten bucks and disappear."

"Where'd you get another ten bucks? You some kind of fucking space alien or something?"

"You ready to listen?" Monk will probably never be ready to listen. There's too much noise inside his head. But at least he can stop talking and sulk. He can probably even maintain a silent sulk for a full five minutes if there's ten bucks in it.

"This millennium thing is just some arbitrary hash mark on some arbitrary timeline. Time doesn't really exist. You don't exist. I don't exist. Nothing exists except energy and consciousness. Okay?

"Listen, the only thing special about this night is that the consensual reality is a little fuzzy around the edges right now. I figure there might be a chance to sort of cut things loose and rearrange them a bit, but I need more minds working at it than just mine. The thing is, once you know that time and space are just images in the cosmic hologram, you aren't constrained by them. I've got as long as I need to collect as many recruits as I need. But I need minds like yours, Monk, minds that are already outside the box. So how about it, Monk, are you with me?"

"What, quiet time's over? I can talk? This better not be a trick."

"Are you with me?"

"Where's the ten bucks?"

"Okay, listen, just close your eyes and repeat after me: I am energy. The universe flows through me—just say it, dammit!"

"The ten?"

"I am energy. The universe flows through me."

"Whatever. I'm energy. The universe—whatever.

"I am energy. The universe flows through me."

"Okay, okay! I am energy. The universe flows through me."

"Again."

"I am energy. The universe flows through me."

"Again."

"I am energy. The universe flows through me."

"Okay, good. Now just keep saying it. I'll be right back."

AT LEAST IT'S WARM. ALL THE CHURCHES IN TOWN are doing the jubilee thing, with free flops and food.

"Hey, Jacko, what're you doing here? Come on, have a seat. You got turkey? Better go back and get more gravy—the white meat's drier than—whatever. She's dry, though."

"Hi, Monk. Do you remember anything from last night?"

"You mean the 'universal flowers in me' shit? What the fuck was you on, man?"

"Watch your language. You're in a church. Anyway, I pretty much gave it up. You know, we could have entirely reshaped reality. But what happens? For you it's a bottle of rum. For others it was a car, a house, a different job, a sweepstakes, a bar exam—I don't know if it has to do with chaos or entropy or differentiation or what, but apparently it's totally self-sustaining. I'm just dropping in to say so long. You had your chance. I tried."

"Yeah, well, whatever. Better eat your turkey. Can't be travelling on an empty stomach—God, I hate it when he does that! You'd think he could at least say goodbye before he disappears like that!"

G.L. EIKENBERRY

Works as a freelance information systems and communications consultant. He's been writing fiction for more than twenty years. His work has been published in a wide (often obscure and mostly Canadian) variety of hard-copy publications as well as in electronic media. He lives, works and writes in Ottawa, Canada with his wife and three sons. He has written "Eddie's Blues" (v3n5), "Reality Error" (v4n2), "The Loneliness of the Late-Night Donut Shop" (v4n4), "River" (v5n1), "Oak, Ax and Raven" (v6n2), and "Schrödinger's Keys" (v7n1) for InterText.

Amateur Night

MARCUS EUBANKS

For some, even the most remarkable of nights is just another night.

SOME NIGHTS I FEEL LIKE I'M THE FUCKING GRIM Reaper. It varies. I don't know why, 'cause when I go back over the numbers, they're about the same either way. Tonight seems like it's going to be weird though, even though it probably won't.

I stroll in from the parking lot, safely ensconced in my totally illegal parking space. It's clearly labeled *Ambulance Parking Only*, and my beat-up little Saturn in no way resembles an ambulance. Still, the security folks like me, so I get away with it.

"S'okay if I park here for a little bit?"

"How long do you think you'll be?"

"About… all night."

"Yeah sure, whatever. Have a good night, Marcus. Come out and have a smoke with us later, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

WALK INTO THE MAIN NURSING STATION GRINNING like an idiot. "Ah," I announce. "Happy faces. I have entered into a bastion of strength." I clap my hands once and begin to chortle evilly.

The charge nurse looks at me blankly and shakes his head. "I'm going home. Good luck."

The off-going attending grins and blows bubbles into her coffee. "It's a zoo," she says, waving at the board.

"Zoo? What zoo? Just 'cause its Friday night and the idiots are out ? There is no zoo. There is only zen—the zen of the mother ship. We can do anything. We have the power… I don't like the way he said 'Good luck.' "

She contemplates her coffee, which is now starting to dribble over the edge of the cup onto the carpet. "You were dropped too many times as a child."

"As a child I was *blessed*. " I retort. She rolls her eyes, and a nurse wandering by snorts in contempt. I continue, not pausing: "Blessed upside the head with a baseball bat."

She gives me sign-out, and then gathers her stuff. "Party time for this girl tonight," she announces. "Gonna go catch me something big and stupid that I can kick out in the morning."

"Have one for me," I tell her.

"A drink, or something big and stupid?"

"Whatever. Go. Escape while you can."

I SURVEY MY TEAM. I'M LUCKY TONIGHT—GOOD residents, good nurses. I can suffer no harm. I tell them this, and they look at me warily. They're skittish, and I can't really blame them. Tonight is amateur night.

WE SEE LITTLE THINGS. A TWISTED ANKLE. A HEAD cold. Back pain, some real, some weasely.

"How long has your back been hurting you?"

"I injured it at work three years ago. I've been on comp ever since—chronic pain."

"I see. And how can we help you this evening?"

It is demonstrated to us once againthat profoundly drunk rich people are The Worst.

"I ran out of my medicine. I need you to write me a prescription for a refill."

"I don't mean to sound cynical, but are you trying to tell me that in three years of requiring narcotics for your chronic pain, you haven't learned to anticipate when you're going to run out in time to get your doc to write you a refill?"

"Well, you see, he's out of town."

"What's his name–I'll call his answering service."

"Uh–I don't remember."

"You don't remember the name of the guy who writes your pain prescriptions?"

"I just started seeing him."

"Who did you see before him?"

"Um…"

IT IS DEMONSTRATED TO US ONCE AGAIN THAT profoundly drunk rich people are The Worst.

I READ THE LINE ON A WOMAN'S PALM—AN INTERN'S suture job. "Huh. Why did you put in so many stitches?"

"Well you see, the ones I was putting in kept pulling through the skin."

The wound should have five, perhaps six sutures. "Hang on for a sec, before you take down the field," I tell him. Grab myself a pair of sterile gloves and the iris scissors, counting to myself as I cut them out. They're all about a millimeter from the wound margin grabbing only skin, no meat. Of course they were pulling out. I remove twenty-one stitches, and then put one new one right in the middle of the wound, taking a big bite, then tie it while the 'tern watches.

"I would like you to put four more stitches in, just like mine, two on either side, then get one of the nurses to show you the best way to dress it. Better not ask her to dress it and walk away, 'cause she'll just laugh at you."

"But—"

"Four more," I say, holding up four gloved fingers.

"You see, I—"

Now the patient gets into it. "Honey, I think he wants you to put in four more, just like he said." She holds up four fingers of her other hand, grinning at both of us.

WE SEE THAT PEOPLE WHO DON'T TAKE THEIR seizure medicines for various reasons sometimes have seizures at inopportune times.

THE LIGHTS FLICKER AT MIDNIGHT. IT HAPPENS FROM time to time, usually transient. We have hospital-wide backup generators just in case, but…

"Please, not tonight," I think to myself. "We're too damned busy for this." It's New Year's Eve. Dire predictions of millennial wrath have been so pervasive that none of us have really been hearing them. I figure that if New Year's Eve is generally amateur night, this one should reign supreme.

And now the goddamned lights are flickering.

DOWN THE HALL THERE'S A NURSE STANDING AT an open breaker box. "Just kidding," he says.

DUDE COMES IN ALL DRUNK AND STUPID FROM A nasty car crash, oblivious to his unstable open right ankle fracture. Seems that phone pole just jumped right out in front of him. I play games with the trauma team, for the airway belongs to me and my people.

Trauma 'tern says, "pupils are equal and reactive."

His airway is fine, evidenced by his mindless babble. No intubation for my resident, alas.

Trauma wants to scan his head, I'm hip—not that they need my approval.

I take a quick peek in the peepers to confirm Trauma Boy's findings and say, "Er—his pupils *look* equal, but they aren't." I'm trying to be politic. "And how about this penetrating globe injury with the vitreous leaking out of it?" Something has poked a hole in Mister Dude's eye.

Trauma says, "Oops."

Mister Dude is drunk and moaning and generally being a pain in the ass so I suggest sedating the shit out of him, 'cause I reckon every time he hollers, the pressure inside his eye is going up, which causes eyeball goop to slop out onto his face.

But it's "No, no, we want to follow his neuro status." Ouch. I am overruled. Their patient, they win. I am but a lowly consultant.

So then in the CT scanner, he does a fish flop and finds the floor. I can't resist: "Bet that was good for his eye."

Trauma glares at me. Hell, what does he care? His eyeball isn't popped, so he can glare just fine.

"We can fix this for you," I tell him. "Look at my boy here. He wants nothing more than to help you to make Mister Dude more comfortable." I look at my resident; he nods vigorously. "Think of it this way: we'll give him a little something for *your* nerves, okay?"

They acquiesce and Mister Dude gets strong sedatives, paralytic drugs, and a nice plastic tube which connects his throat to the ventilator. My resident gets a procedure. Problem solved. Another blow for freedom.

WE LEARN FOR THE UMPTEENTH TIME THAT unassuming little guys who calmly tell you, "I can't really describe it to you doc… it just hurts real bad," generally have something very badly wrong with them.

ANOTHER TRAUMA COMES IN AROUND ONE IN THE morning, hard on the heels of Mister Dude and his wacky leaking eyeball. It's billed to us as gunshot wound to the neck by our dispatchers, who give us the three-minute advance warning.

THE PATIENT IS DRAWN AND THIN AND APPEARS TO be having rather a hard time breathing. Once again, the show belongs to the surgeons. I stand at the side, next to the trauma attending, with whom I swap witty *sotto voce* wisecracks. "He'll have been standing on a corner, minding his own business," I say. The trauma surgeon grunts his assent—it's uncanny how many folks get assaulted while minding their own business. We reckon that its far safer to be nosy and obnoxious, because those folks never seem to get hurt.

He has a single wound high up where his right shoulder and neck merge. "Breath sounds markedly decreased on the right," the senior trauma resident announces, while asking the patient, "*What happened?*"

"I was just walking up the sidewalk, minding my own business! I don't know," he says, panting. The trauma team rolls its collective eyes.

The chest X-ray demonstrates more or less what we expected: the place where his right lung is supposed to be is filled with a mixture of air and blood, indicating that his right lung is down, and that he's bleeding from somewhere. The bullet is low in his chest, probably sitting on top of his diaphragm. This does not surprise us: any bullet can go *anywhere*. You can deduce nothing on whence it came from where it ends up.

Thirty seconds later, the trauma team has inserted a chest tube while their attending and I watch with half an eye. Blood and air gush out, and his breathing gets better.

His blood pressure is terrible, though. The surgeons cackle quietly in their minds while making frantic prep-

arations to get him to the operating room so they can take a look inside and fix him.

MINUTES LATER, THE TRAUMA TEAM IS GONE, leaving in their wake a puddle of blood from the chest tube and bits of throw-away medical paraphernalia strewn about the room. I'm staring at the mess when I feel a large cold presence at my shoulder. Cold because he just came in from outside, and large because—well, because he's just a damned big cop.

"They're in the O.R.," I tell him. "He's sick, but he'll probably live."

The cop just stands there, surveying the room.

"Uh—what's the story on this one, anyhow?" I ask.

"Witnesses say that he was just walking up the street minding his own business," the cop says. This is where the language of law-enforcement overlaps the language of emergency medicine.

"Aw, come on. What do *you* think happened?"

He swivels to look at me directly. "I think that folks were shooting guns into the air to ring in the millennium. I think he was hit by a falling bullet."

"Well fuck me," I answer. "Go figger."

THREE TEENAGERS ARE BROUGHT IN BY MEDICS, drunk. Too many shots of some alcohol-laden syrup called "Hot Damn."

"How much did you guys drink, anyhow?"

"I… los' track after we finished off the tequila," one of them slurs. Another chimes in, "You won'… pump our stomachs will you? Omigod, you won't tell our parents—" He cuts himself off to vomit impressively into his lap.

The nurse in the room wrinkles her nose at the mess. "Honey, you're pumping your own stomach just fine. Your folks are in the waiting room."

I CALL THE RADIO STATION AT FIVE-THIRTY IN THE morning. "Can you please play 'Lunatic Fringe?' Or maybe 'Might as Well Go for a Soda?' "

"Who is this?"

"The ER at AGH. We need it. Bad."

AT SIX-THIRTY IN THE MORNING, I WALK OUTSIDE. Things have calmed down considerably. The drunk kids went home with their folks about an hour ago, only vaguely aware of the parental wrath that will descend upon them when they awaken with horrible hangovers. There are a couple of folks with belly pain which may or may not be from overindulgence, and one person who is about to be whisked off to the cath lab so that his heart-attack can be aborted by the interventional cardiologists. There's a guy who woke up with absolutely no clue how his hand got broken.

Things are Under Control, and I get to go home in about forty minutes. It's cold as hell out, and utterly clear. It's going to be sunny today. One of the helicopters is cranking up on the heli-pad, dispatched to the scene of a car crash about forty miles away. While fishing for a cigarette, I ask myself: Bad luck… or another amateur?

MARCUS EUBANKS

Is an ER doc in a big hospital in Pittsburgh. His stories have twice been selected to appear in eScene, *the Best of Net Fiction anthology. He has written "Mr. McKenna is Dying" (v4n4), "Josie" (v5n2), "Selections From the New World" (v6n3), and "Cinderblock" (v9n2) for* InterText.

These Are From New Year's Eve

CRAIG BOYKO

Why do we sometimes save memories of things we don't truly want to remember?

THESE ARE FROM NEW YEAR'S EVE. THIS IS ME, sitting on the south side of a love seat near the window in Gabriel and Deborah's spacious seventeenth-floor apartment, where I was positioned most of the night. In my hand is a beer bottle, unopened.

This is me drinking from an opened beer bottle. Next to me is Carter, whom I dislike. I am on the right. He is looking in the opposite direction. In his left hand is a tall glass, half filled with red liquid. He is wearing a tie.

This one shows Gabriel next to me on the love seat, asking me about Hellen. "How is Hellen? Where is she tonight?" That's me, listening to his inquiry, preparing my response, which will be, "She wasn't feeling good tonight; she stayed in."

This is Gabriel, with his hand on my knee, looking sympathetic and disappointed but simultaneously optimistic. He's saying "Hey, that's too bad, but tell her I said hi. Tell her I hope she's feeling better."

This is me taking my first piss of the night. I am looking sideways into the mirror, studying a ruptured blood vessel under my right eye. I can not remember if I have ever noticed this particular ruptured blood vessel before.

This is me being intercepted in the hallway by Janice, whom I like. I am on the left. Due to the constraints of the hallway, as you can see, we are standing quite close to one another. She is asking me about my time away from work. She is holding a clear glass with two hands and seems to be quite interested in my answer. "Was it a holiday?" she is asking.

This is me, as above, with my hand in my hair. I am saying, "It wasn't exactly a holiday." I'm saying, "It was time off." That's the sort of thing I am saying to Janice, whom I work with peripherally, and whom I like. I am not making eye contact. I'm saying, "It was good to get away for awhile."

This is me looking in the refrigerator for ice cubes or seltzer. In the background, that's Deborah—our hostess, Gabriel's common-law wife—talking to Kensworth. Kensworth, strictly speaking, is my superior, but we never cross paths. Kensworth is gesturing animatedly with his hands, making some point. Deborah appears engrossed.

This is me, alone on the south side of the love seat, by the window, staring at the television. In the background: blurred, talking faces. The television is off.

This is me, as above. Next to me is Julian, who works my shift, but on weekends. We do not really know each other. He is asking me about my time away; he had to cover most of my shifts. He is being pleasant about it. We've never spoken before. Julian is wearing corduroys and a Hawaiian-style t-shirt. It's warm in here; however, the patio doors are slid half open, so I am wondering if he isn't a little cold. I do not ask him this. I am wearing a green sweater over a dark blue t-shirt. My pants are khaki. My socks are argyle.

I'm sorry. You can see that.

This is me saying, "I had to leave the city for a few weeks. Family emergency." Julian's eyes are not focussed on me, but on something or someone behind me. He is holding a beer bottle, identical to my own.

Here is Kensworth, standing over me. Am I feeling 100 percent again. His expression is *concerned.* I am looking at his shoes and nodding.

This is Deborah trying to organize a friendly game of Balderdash.

This is me taking my second piss of the night. I am looking at the toilet, the splash of the urine. I appear engrossed.

This is me, on the south side of the love seat, twisted around sideways, looking over my shoulder, out the window. From my vantage point, I am able to see half of the layout of downtown. It is lit up quite prettily against the blackening purple of the sky. Sitting next to me is Eunice, whom I work with on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We are not talking. She is looking intensely at her lap, trying to tell if she spilled any of her Beefeater and 7-Up. She is wearing a dull-looking floral-patterned skirt. I am thinking of nothing.

Here is Kensworth, standing over me, asking about my being back at work. Am I glad to be back. How was my time off. Am I feeling better. Am I feeling 100 percent again. You can't see his face, but his facial expression is best described as *concerned.* I am looking at his shoes and nodding.

Here I am peeling the label from my beer bottle. Next to me on the love seat is Janice, talking excitedly, smilingly, to someone on her right. She is leaning toward them, away from me, her elbows on her knees. I am thinking about her perfume. I appear engrossed.

Here is someone I don't know, have never seen before, asking me about Hellen. "Couldn't she make it?" I am about to say "No, she could not make it. She is in

Montana. She is harvesting peyote in Montana." You can see the words forming on my lips, if you look closely.

This is me, watching other people talk.

This is me, in the bathroom, after taking a third piss. After looking through Gabriel and Deborah's medicine cabinet. After purloining an unlabeled pill bottle which looked, to me, promising. I am standing in front of the mirror, my hands wet, tracing streaks across the mirror with my thumbs. I am studying my face with great curiosity and sedulousness. I am thinking, "I should have. I should have."

This is me, out on the balcony, balancing my beer bottle on the railing. This is the same balcony that Gabriel asked all the guests not to go out on tonight, since they had just cleaned it, and building management was supposed to be painting it sometime next week. I am looking down at the street, where one car is passing slowly by the front of the building. The car is a taxi. My brow is perspiring. In the background, some of the guests seem to be looking my way. *Concerned.*

This is me, back on the love seat, looking at my watch. Carter is standing up from the love seat, after just having watched me watch my watch for some minutes. I am thinking, "Thirty-seven minutes. Thirty-seven minutes."

Here is Morton, hand on my shoulder, face red, telling me about an equation that he has discovered but not quite refined. Morton is younger than I am and makes more money than I do by doing the same job that I do. He dresses poorly and has sour breath. He has been drinking nothing but white rum on ice all night. "It has to do with expectations," he is saying. "The closer we get to a long-awaited moment, the less time there is for things to change sufficiently to impress us, or surprise us. The less time there is, the closer we get, the lower our expectations. The greater our disappointment."

This is me, asking him if he could possibly graph such an equation. If he wouldn't mind. Maybe right now.

This is me, making a face at the music, which I find too loud.

This is a young coworker of mine who demands to be called "Elvis," though Elvis is not his real name. He has brought a short blond girl with very significant breasts who follows him around everywhere he goes through Gabriel and Deborah's apartment and who never says anything unless spoken directly to. She smiles a lot. Indiscriminately. At everyone. Elvis is leaning toward me, saying, with great vim and feeling, "That's too bad. Well, tell her I said hi." I have just, moments earlier, responded to his question, "Where's Hellen, man?" with, "She is not here. She is dead. I have not seen her for six months. She's not feeling well. She is in Montana. She is with loved ones and loving ones." Elvis' girl is smiling at me.

This is me, head between my knees. In the background, faces. Faces.

This is Deborah, kneeling next to me, speaking to me in whispers, in serious tones.

This is me wondering if I can take another millennium.

This is the countdown. "Ten, nine." Everyone is wearing cheap-looking paper hats and holding flutes of champagne in one hand and noisemakers in the other. "Eight, seven." Notice the smiles. Many are looking at a clock on the wall. "Six, five." Some are holding hands, some are embracing. "Four." One couple in the background, kissing, arms around each other's necks. "Three." I am saying, "I know what comes next."

Or… wait. Am I in this one?

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Is a sometimes student at the University of Calgary in Alberta. He's constantly being shushed by his next-door neighbor. He has written "Decisions" (v6n1), "Wave" (v6n2), "Gone" (v6n6), and "Ghettoboy and Dos" (v8n2) for InterText.

3... 2... 1... Happy New Year!