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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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When Winter Came

...Brian Dolton

Winter came to me first in Banchory.

He was in the Dancing Cat, lean and comfortable among the noise. The fiddles and accordions were playing and the floorboards beat like a drum under the dancers' feet. He was not watching the dance. He was watching me. And when he saw that I was returning his look; that is when he smiled.

I did not want him to smile at me. It is not that he was unpleasant to look upon. But I am a Gatekeeper. I stand against the Grey Host, the dead that walk. I bear the stone and the sigil, the brand and the blade, and I will not die old and surrounded by my kinfolk. We do not get married; we do not have children. Not if we have a heart.

I turned away, to speak with Dufferin, and dismissed him from my mind. But he was not so easily dismissed.

"My name is Winter," he said, close to my side. The name did not suit him; he was dark, and warm, and smelt of oranges and smoke. "I have not seen such a one as you upon the streets of Banchory."

"I do not walk the streets of Banchory," I told him. It was truth; the smoke from the factories catches in my throat, and I would not have gone to Banchory at all, I think, were it not for the music. But I loved the music. I have not heard its like, among all the worlds I have walked.

"Do you not?" he asked, and smiled. "Ah, Dufferin... Do you have her closeted here, only for your own delight?"

"My delights are otherwise," Dufferin said.

"And I am no man's delight," I said. I was short, for I did not want to speak with him.

"You could be mine, if you wished it," he said.

"I do not," I told him. There was a sadness, for a moment, on his face.

"The seasons change," he said. "And we change with them. I will see you again, Marra Fell."

And he walked away from me, and I wondered how it was that he knew my name.



I saw him next in Obsidian, where the ghosts whisper and the mists shroud Pharrig's old castle. The fires are always banked high there, to keep out the chill. I do not care for Obsidian, but I like the fires.

He came into the hall and shrugged out of his coat, shaking raindrops from his hair.

"Marra," he said, and smiled. "I hoped I'd find you here." I stared at him. I didn't speak. I couldn't speak. It was Ka'ame'ole who challenged him.

"You bear no stone." He stood up, and lifted his club. His tattooed face looked like carved wood. "You are not welcome here."

"And I have heard such great tales of the hospitality of Obsidian," he answered. "It is sad, to see they were not true. But I am a friend of Marra here, or would be, if she permitted it."

Ka'ame'ole looked at me.

"Is this true? Have you taught this man the ways of the Gates?"

"I have not," I answered, and my face felt hot. "Do you believe the word of a stranger over one of your own?"

"He is here," was the answer; flat, accusing. "He bears no stone, and yet he is here among us."

"Stones and sigils," the stranger said, with a laugh in his voice. "There is more to life, I think, than stones and sigils."

"How did you get here?" I hissed.

"Very much the same way you did, I imagine. I stood upon the threshold of a Gate, and drew the correct sign." He looked around, at the black stones of the hall. "I can see why you prefer Banchory. Does this place offer so much as a cushion, for comfort?"

"This is my hall," Pharrig mo Diacht said, from where he sat, on his great stone chair. "It is in my choosing who is offered comfort. In you walk, as if you are one of us, but you are not. You do not stand against the Grey Host. You are no guardian. Why, then, have you come?"

"For Marra," he said, his eyes upon me. "I'll not mince words; I've lost my heart to her spirit, and her beauty."

"I am not beautiful," I told him.

"You walk from world to world. You must know that what is thought ugliness in one may be beauty in another."

"I am not beautiful in Banchory."

"And whatever made you think," he answered, "I was from Banchory?" He gestured around, at Obsidian's dank hall. "Do you think this is the first time I have walked from one world to another?"

"Go back," Ka'ame'ole said. "Whatever world you came from, go back there, and travel the Gates no more."

"I will do one of these things," he said, and pulled on his coat. "I will see you again, Marra."

"Do not pursue me," I said to his back. If he heard me, he showed no sign of it.



The next time I saw him was at Tirion, where the ancient towers gleamed in gemstone colours and the old forest was as silent as a cathedral. I was with Cenethar, and Daphin, and the Grey Host lay dead around us. I leant upon my spear, weary to the bone, for they had been many, and my blood was on their blades.

"And so we meet again, with dead men at your feet," he said.

Cenethar moved, silent and fast as a cat, his curved blade a blur of silver in the air. It stopped, laying along the stranger's throat.

"Are you their master?" Cenethar asked.

"I am no man's master." He looked down, at the cold corpses, that had been cold before we hewed them down.

"And should I trust you?"

"It's clear you're disinclined to. Perhaps with good reason. It is common, I think, for a man with a blade across his throat to give the answer he thinks is wanted, which may have nothing to do with the truth."

"Cenethar. Lay your sword aside," I said. "He is here for me."

Cenethar stepped back, slowly; but his blade stayed in his hand, and his gaze was on the stranger.

"Surely I am. You're a hard woman to be finding."

"I am not trying to be found," I told him, coldly. "I told you as much, in Obsidian. Why do you follow me?"

"Because I follow my heart; and you've stolen it from me."

"The talk is pretty, but as you've just said, you give the answer you think is wanted."

"Wanted? It seems plain enough, my dear, that you don't desire me. I'll grant I hope to change your mind. But I swear this; I will never speak other than the truth to you."

"Then tell me who you are, and how it is you can follow me from world to world."

"I said I'd only tell you the truth, and I will. So on this matter, I'll keep silent."

"And you seek to win my heart?" I put what scorn I could in my voice.

"Surely," he answered, with that easy smile, "a mystery is a quicker route to a woman's heart than honesty."

"You are mistaken," I told him. I had not made the same promise as him.

He smiled.

“We will meet again, Marra Fell. I will watch over you.”

And he turned, and walked away. Cenethar moved, as if to stop him.

“Let him go,” I said. “Perhaps this time he will leave, and know that I do not desire him to return.”

I knew, even though his back was to me, that he was smiling. And I knew, too, that I would see him again.



I was in Tan Maru, on a windblown night with the palms hissing like serpents and the beach-fires guttering. Ka’ame’ole had fallen in battle, and hundreds of us were there; as many, I think, as I had ever seen gathered, for many of us knew him, and though he rarely smiled, yet we loved him. He was brave, and fearless, and would offer his aid without stint or complaint.

We sent him through the Gate, into the space between the worlds, as is the custom for those of us who are fallen. And then we wept, or drank, or loved, or fought; each honouring his memory, in our own way.

I stood upon the sand, looking at the glorious stars reflected in the ocean, and a voice spoke softly, beside me.

“Marra,” he said. “I am sorry about your friend.”

“Ka’ame’ole was not my friend,” I answered, cross, and a little drunk. “He was a comrade, and that bond is far greater than friendship.”

“Yours is a strange brotherhood,” he said, quietly. “Drawn from so many worlds, all so very different; all you have in common is what you fight.”

“We have more in common than you could ever know. How dare you presume to come here, and intrude amongst us at such a time?”

“I dare many things,” he laughed. “For I dare to love you, and that is no easy work for a man.”

“How can you speak of love? You do not know me.”

“Do I not?” he said, softly. “I know you better than you think, Marra Fell. I have stood in the room where you were born. I have walked a dozen worlds, following you. And I have read your soul.”

“My soul is my own.”

“Your soul cries out with loneliness,” he answered.

“You know nothing about me,” I told him. But I remembered what he had said on Tirion; that he would never tell me anything but the truth.

“You ache,” he said. “You were little more than a child, before you took to this life. You bear the brands. You carry the blade, and the stone. You fight to ward a hundred worlds from the Grey Host, and you walk like a ghost on each of them, swaddled in secrecy. How can you do anything other than ache?”

“I do not ache for you,” I told him.

“Not yet, perhaps,” he said. “But perhaps, if I am a fortunate man, the day will come.”

And he bowed, and moved away, and was gone once more.



Pokhase.

They had brought me to Pokhase, high amongst the mountains. I have never liked Pokhase, for the air is thin and the chill of it claws at my throat. But of all the places we dwell, it is perhaps the safest of all. One path, and one path only, leads up to it, where it clings to the mountainside.

And I had need of safety. I had need of healing. My wounds were deep.

I lay in the infirmary, under sheets of white cotton that sighed when I writhed in pain. Fire lanced through me, day and night; guttering like the candles at my bedside.

"I would not see you die," he said, very quietly. "I would not see you die, before you love me."

I did not dream it.



When I was well once more, I swathed myself in furs, and went to the bleak snowfields of Camber, to speak with Kaumas Cherk. I found him there, in his yurt. The fire was a feeble thing, and it stank.

"There is a man," I said, "who is not one of us, and yet who walks amongst the worlds. How can this be?"

"There is no secret so well hidden," he answered, "that it cannot be uncovered."

"You told me, when I took up the stone, that only the Gatekeepers know the secrets of the Gates."

"Only the Gatekeepers are taught," he corrected me. "But it has happened before. Certain men, from time to time, discern the Gates, learn at least some of the secrets. The man you speak of...he has a name?"

"He said his name was Winter," I said.

"I have heard that name." He shifted where he sat. Outside, the wind, shrill and relentless, held ice in its blow. I moved closer to the fire.

"He walks from one world to another. He...he told me he had been to my home. You are a Warden. Your mastery of the Gates is beyond the rest of us. Can you not stop him?"

"We are sworn to protect the worlds from the Grey Host. We do not protect them from themselves, or from one another."

"How can you permit this?"

"How can we prevent it? We did not fashion the Gates. We tell no-one of our secrets; but what would you have us do? We protect men, not secrets. We do not kill what is not already dead."

“He is following me!” I said. “Wherever I run, he follows me!”

“Then perhaps,” Cherk said, with no expression on his face, “you should stop running.”



I thought about it for a long time. I went to Jarjaranja, and wrapped myself in the warmth of that place, which had no winter.

I loved the warmth of it; the feel of the suns upon my face, the heat of the ancient stones. But there was something missing.



I stood on the jetty of Tan Maru, looking out at the sunrise. The warm wind ruffled the surface of the ocean. I had stood there every day, for twenty-six days.

Alone.

“I’ve been looking for you,” his voice said.

“I have been waiting,” I answered. I didn’t look round.

“For me?” he asked, and I could hear it; the hope in his voice. It cracked the hard shell of my heart.

“I am a Gatekeeper,” I told him. “I took up the burden, and I can only lay it down with my death. You were here, at Ka’ame’ole’s wake. We do not die old in our beds. We do not nurse children at our breasts.”

“I have walked a dozen worlds and more,” he said, “and in all of them I have seen grief, and in all of them I have seen love. They are bound together. Without them, we are nothing. If we do not love, if we do not grieve, then we do not feel. And if we do not feel...are we not like the Grey Host? Do you not risk becoming what you fight?”

“I am nothing like the Grey Host. I do not hunger for death.”

“I know. I know how much you fight, to live. I lit a candle for you, in Pokhase,” he said. “I prayed; to your mother, and the spirits of all your forebears. They answered one of my prayers, at least. The other...”

There was silence, and I knew what prayer he spoke of. I gazed out at the ocean, warm and vast and terribly, terribly empty.

“I do not know you,” I said. “I do not know how it is that you know me. I do not know how it is that you love me.” I turned, then, to look upon his face. “But I think, perhaps, I am ready to learn.”

And he smiled. And we sailed away from that place, for a time.

If I Die Before I Wake

...E C Myers

“Are you all right?”

The voice came out of the darkness. It was female and shockingly familiar, unexpected but welcome. Breath tickled Jon’s left ear as the woman leaned closer and softly spoke again.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She was curled along him, warm breasts pressed against his back. A damp cotton sheet was twisted around him; it was a thin barrier, but fortunately enough to protect him from her bare skin. Before she could touch his exposed shoulder, he jerked away and scrambled to a sitting position against the cold metal bars of the headboard. He hung one leg out of the bed, ready to bolt if she came any closer. A moment later a light clicked on, erasing the shadows and darkness, but not his fear.

He didn’t need to turn around, but he did anyway. He had tried so hard to forget her, without much success, but now that he was here, he desperately wanted to see her face again.

It was her.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she said. One hand lingered at the base of the lamp on the night table, and the other reached across the distance between them in the bed. Jon stared at her, trying to fill in the missing years.

A decade had passed since he had seen her last. She had been in college then, which would make her around thirty now. Her age showed in her eyes and in the sag of her breasts, the pale flesh stark against the gray wool blanket cradling them in her lap. Her hair was long, longer than he remembered: curtains of tangled red with faded streaks of gold cascading over her shoulders.

She was still beautiful, his dream woman.

“What—” His heart pounded in concert with a throbbing headache. He swallowed. “What happened?” he asked, startled by the strange thickness of his voice. It wasn’t the question he had intended, but he didn’t want to alarm her any more than he already had.

“You were choking, then you started shaking all over, like some kind of fit,” she said, concern stripped from her voice and replaced with something hard and cold that spread to her features like ice.

"I'm all right," Jon said, "It was just a bad dream." He had feared that this woman didn't exist, that the girl who used to appear in his dreams lived only in his imagination. He had all but convinced himself that none of it was real after he had stopped seeing her. But now...

"A bad dream? I thought you were dying!"

"No such luck." He smiled.

"Don't be an asshole. I know it's hard, but try."

He was surprised at her quick temper. He wanted to caress her cheek, run his hands along her forbidden flesh, feel her lips against his. He wanted to touch her, to prove she was real. But he might not have much time and he wouldn't give up this opportunity without getting some answers.

"Go back to sleep," Jon said, more brusquely than he intended. He slid out of the bed and fumbled for clothing on the floor, aware that she was watching him suspiciously. Her eyes tracked him as he moved across the room.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom?" he said.

"You need pants for that?" she asked as he left the room.

Jon found the bathroom at the end of a short hallway, dark except for the slivers of light spilling from the bedroom. He blinked as the harsh fluorescent light flickered on. All bathrooms look basically the same in small apartments: toilet, sink, shower, medicine cabinet. There were stockings slung over the shower, a dirty rag serving as a bathmat, a crumpled tube of Crest toothpaste on the edge of the sink; they were small clues to the people who lived here, but no indication of where *here* was. He could still be in Boston or he might be clear across the country.

Jon didn't like the person he saw in the mirror. Scraggly blond hair flopped over dark bloodshot eyes, a scruffy beard nearly obscured an angry thin scar crossing his chin. It was a hard face, one that had seen a lot of pain — one that had caused a lot of pain, perhaps.

Jon opened the medicine cabinet, hoping to find a name on a bottle or an address, but there were only a bottle of aspirin, a box of contact lenses, green dental floss, and a strip of silver condoms folded into an accordion shape.

Jon lowered the toilet lid with a *clack* like a gunshot and collapsed on it, pressed his face into callused hands. He should have woken up by now.

He returned to the bedroom, feeling anticipation mingled with dread. The lamp on the night table was still on, but her eyes were closed, her head tucked down and a book sprawled open in her lap. He walked slowly to the side of the bed. He watched her while she slept. Her mouth was slightly open and her breaths were even and soft, with the tiniest rumbling in her throat, closer to a cat's purr than a snore. With her face relaxed, the anger and suspicion eased away by sleep, he could almost glimpse the little girl he had known when all of this began.

At the foot of the table, an old canvas tote bag advertised an anonymous bookstore, its lettering so peeled and faded the address was barely visible as somewhere in Stonybrook, New York. Jon knelt and rummaged through the bag. When he found her thick black wallet, he opened it and sorted through the cards until he found what he wanted: her driver's license.

Phoebe Stone. The picture showed a younger version of her, matching the image that he had carried for the last ten years. He held the wallet up to the light to examine the address. Coins slipped from an open zipper and fell with a flash of silver and copper, clattering to the scuffed wood floor. Jon froze as Phoebe woke up and looked around disoriented for a moment before fixing a steely look on him.

"Phoebe?" He tested the word, decided that he liked it.

"What the fuck?" She snatched the wallet from him, scattering more coins and cards on the bed and floor. Jon half-rose from the floor.

"It's not what you think, Phoebe." Jon placed a hand on the bed to steady himself.

"You weren't going through my wallet? Jesus."

"I was, but I was just trying to..."

"Trying to what, Chris?"

She would never believe him.

"I just needed a few dollars," he said. "I was going to pay you back." Sometimes a lie could cause less pain than the truth — he had learned that much since the last time he saw her.

She slapped him. Hard.

Jon awoke coughing violently, his head throbbing. He gasped for breath, sitting up in bed and clutching a pillow tightly to his chest until he gained control of his breathing and his heart stopped pounding. "Damn," he choked out. He concentrated on each breath — focused on the intake of air, pushed it out of his lungs by sheer willpower.

Jon felt his cheek; it was warm and beginning to swell. The skin stung at his gentle prodding. He coughed again and noticed a red spray on the sheets and pillow. He lifted a hand and wiped away bloody spittle from his chin.

Despite the pain and shock of the experience, he was excited. He had finally found out the name of the mysterious woman who appeared in his dreams. Phoebe.



The dreams had started soon after Jon entered the seventh grade. At least they began as dreams — he would see a girl a few years younger than him, always sleeping. He didn't recognize her as anyone in his school or one of his little sister's friends — as far as he knew she was a complete stranger, and yet he felt like he knew her. The first time he told his best friend about the dreams, Marco had

laughed and made a joke about him needing to get laid. Marco already had a girlfriend at the age of twelve, but Jon suspected he was making up most of what he claimed he had done with her.

Then one night Jon woke trembling in bed, a warm wet patch spreading on the sheet and mattress beneath him, soaked through the flannel pajamas he found clinging to his skin. The air had a thick sweet smell. He sat up and found the girl, young Phoebe, beside him — sleeping as always.

She stirred as his movement shook the mattress and blinked at him sleepily. “What’s wrong?” she whispered. Suddenly alert, she wriggled away and sat up, her hand on the wet sheets between them.

“Oh,” she said. “This is your first time sleeping over, isn’t it?”

Jon nodded before he spoke, in a voice higher than his own. Girlish. “Yeah.” He was embarrassed, more about being in a girl’s body than about wetting the bed, so he added, “I’m sorry.”

The girl leaned over and pushed tangled brown hair away from her eyes. “It’s okay, Amy.” She smiled then pulled a flashlight from under her pillow and switched it on, pointing it at the ceiling to light the room with its weak yellow light. “I can sneak the sheets into the laundry tomorrow morning. Mom won’t even notice.”

Together they pulled the sheets from the mattress and crumpled them into a wet ball under the bed.

“Take off your pants,” the girl — Phoebe — said.

“What?”

“You can’t sleep in those.” She waved the flashlight at Jon’s wet pajama bottoms, the light dancing over the pale blue fabric, flashing cartoon panda faces on and off like semaphore. He pressed a hand against his wet crotch, recoiling from the strange flatness there and fighting back panic. Phoebe opened a drawer and dug through it. “Here, you can wear my gym shorts.”

They lay on the bare mattress and after a while Jon spoke into the darkness. Phoebe breathed so softly beside him, he thought she had fallen asleep.

“What’s your name?” he asked the night.

After a moment, “I’m too tired to joke around. Go to sleep.” A silence. “Don’t be afraid.”

“My name is Jon,” he said. I’m not afraid, he thought, but he didn’t say it because he was afraid.

Again there was a silence. Then a cool hand slipped into his and squeezed lightly, encouragingly.

He yelped as he felt a crackling shock, like a burst of static electricity. Everything went black, and suddenly he was back in his own bed. His breath came in gasps, and he lay still while his heartbeat slowed to normal. His hand tingled where she had touched him, pins and needles accompanied by a warm sensation that slowly crept through his body as it faded.



Phoebe appeared at the basement entrance of the Kappa Café and looked around, searching the room. Her eyes fell on Jon for a moment and lingered before sliding away. She moved towards an empty booth diagonal from him, setting her purse on the table and shrugging off her faded denim jacket. She wore a thin gray sweater and black Capri pants; her hair was twisted up, baring her neck. A harried waitress brought her a glass of water and a worn menu.

He hadn't been certain she would come. When she answered the phone yesterday, he had introduced himself and asked her to meet him. He had rushed his words, afraid that if he lost momentum he wouldn't be able to get all of them out. She had listened, then hung up on him without responding.

Talking to her on the phone had finally made her fully real to him, the solid evidence that she did exist, that she wasn't just a figment of his dreams. He had driven all night to Baltimore, arriving at the café just as it opened. He had waited there the rest of the day, washing down dry banana bread and syrupy cherry pie with cup after cup of coffee. He didn't want to risk missing her. But she was here, and he wouldn't let her leave until he had spoken to her.

All that caffeine wasn't helping his nerves.

Jon slung his coat over an arm and walked over to Phoebe's table with controlled steps. She looked up as he approached then gestured silently that he should sit. He slipped into the booth and crammed his coat unceremoniously against the wood-paneled wall.

"Hi," he said. "I'm glad you came. You had plenty of reasons not to."

"Jon, right?" She slit her eyes when she asked.

He nodded.

"I'll be honest. I came here to tell you to fuck off." She looked at him intently, studying his face. "I've never seen you before. Have I?"

"Do I seem familiar?"

She pursed her lip and wrinkled her forehead in concentration. "Kind of. Not really. You're not from around here, are you?"

He shook his head.

"Did you go to Stonybrook?" she asked.

"Boston U."

"Well, then how do you know me? You obviously know what I look like. You have my name, my phone number." She drummed her nails on the lacquered tabletop. "And somehow you know that I sometimes talk to someone named Jon when I'm asleep."

"You do?"

She shrugged. "That's what my husband says. I thought maybe Chris put you up to this, but you don't look like someone from his crowd. Unless he's paying you...?"

“No, my name really is Jon. Jonathan Cross.” He pulled out his wallet and showed her his driver’s license. “Chris isn’t involved in this. Just me. And you.”

“You try telling him that. He’s all jealous of a man I don’t even know.” She glanced at the driver’s license. “Boston, huh? You came a long way.”

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“All your life, right? I’ve never heard that one before.”

“All my life.” He made eye contact and held it until she looked away.

“Well, what do you want?”

“Believe it or not, I just want to talk.”

“Then talk,” she said.

He took a breath, eyeing Phoebe’s water glass and wishing he could take a sip. “I’ve dreamt about you, Phoebe, ever since I was young. I saw your face in my dreams, and sometimes, a few times, other things happened.”

“Okay, we’re done.” Phoebe stood up and grabbed her jacket.

“Wait, please. I’m not making this up. I’m not crazy.”

She ignored him and struggled with her jacket, knocking over her water glass with one flailing arm. Water spilled from the table in a small waterfall and pooled on the floor. Ice cubes drifted in the puddle like miniature glaciers. Jon felt powerless; he was about to let her walk out of his life, and he knew he’d never see her again if he let her leave. He just had to keep talking to her.

“When you were little, you had a friend named Amy.” Her eyes darted toward the door. She had a hand on her purse, ready to walk out. “During one of my dreams, I woke up at your house, but I wasn’t me. I was Amy, for a little while. She had wet her bed.”

“I haven’t seen Amy Sullivan since high school. I don’t even remember that.” Her face said that she was lying. The hard mask of skepticism was softening with fear.

“Somehow, in my dreams, I was there. At your house, in your bed, in Amy’s body.” Jon spread his hands apologetically. “It happened. And it’s happened other times.”

“I think you need help.”

“There was a camping trip...”

“I don’t want to hear any more of this.”

“I woke you up in the middle of the night.”

That seemed to register with Phoebe. “That was my brother, being a perv. How do you know this stuff?”

“I was there.” He hesitated. “And then in college, you and Chris got drunk one night.” Phoebe slumped down into her seat and stared at Jon without seeing him, stared through him. A dark look crossed her face. “That’s when I told you who I was, that’s when you heard my name.”

“Who the hell are you?” she whispered.

The waitress appeared at the table. She had the name Emily embroidered above a cute cartoon turtle with a saucer and steaming cup balanced on his head.

"Everything all right here?" she asked hesitantly. "Are you ready to order? Our Kappa-cino is—"

"Nothing right now," Jon snapped. "Just give us a minute." He glanced at Phoebe, expectantly. She kept her eyes on his face. The waitress hovered for a moment, studying Phoebe's mood and deciding if she should get involved. She glanced at Jon once more as she picked up the overturned water glass, then moved off muttering under her breath and shaking her head.

"I really don't know a better way to explain any of this. I don't know what's been happening to me exactly, why I'm always drawn to you, but maybe together we can figure it out."

"I went through some therapy for a while," she said. "After..."

Jon nodded. Phoebe's eyes started to tear up as she looked at him. "*You were there,*" she said. "You do understand, don't you?"

She drew in a shaky breath. "They tried hypnotism, a past life regression, and I think I remembered you. I didn't know your face, or your name...but I remembered the way you *felt*. The way you make me feel. Does that make sense? There's something about you..." Her eyes took on a distant look. "And I do feel that way sometimes when I sleep. Or I used to. Like somehow I'm completely safe. Like someone's watching out for me."

Jon made a soothing noise. He hadn't meant to agitate her, but how could he bring any of this up without causing her to relive some painful memories?

As Jon searched for words to calm her, he caught sight of a familiar man entering the bar and looking around, scanning the tables.

"Damn. Your husband's here."

Phoebe suddenly tensed up and her anger turned to fear. "He can't see us together."

"How did he find us?"

"I thought this was another of his jokes. I phoned him before I came here to give him a chance to admit it. I also thought if it wasn't him, it made sense to tell someone where I was. But if he sees you here..."

Jon glanced at her, wondering why she was so afraid. "I need to see you again."

"Please," she said, "just go."

A shiver ran down his spine at the desperation in her voice. He got out of the booth.

"Tonight," he said. "I'll try tonight." He headed for the restroom. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Chris stomping towards Phoebe's booth. Jon didn't know if he had been seen, but he thought it best to get out of there and hope he would get another chance to talk to Phoebe.



The second waking dream — as Jon called them — came many years after the first. He woke on the ground, rocks digging into his back, the left side of his body half-frozen while the right side of his body felt feverish. He turned his head and saw a fire near him; and beyond the fire he saw the girl.

He extricated himself from his sleeping bag and crawled around the fire softly. Other figures lay around the fire — boys and girls separated on either side of the campground. Two larger, snoring huddles must be parents or counselors for this outing.

Phoebe slept with her face to the fire, a slight sheen of sweat glossing her forehead. She was doubled over in the sleeping bag, her body curving into a question mark in the dirt. Jon wanted to shake her awake and say something, find out her name, but instead he just watched her.

She had gotten older, as he had. He leaned over her sleeping form, looking for a nametag, some clue to her identity. As he stepped between her and the fire, his shadow fell across her and she stirred.

Phoebe's maturing face was even prettier than he remembered; she would be a beautiful woman some day soon. He desperately wanted to touch her. He grazed his fingers lightly across her cheek, but they grew numb after a few seconds of contact. He pulled away as her eyes flew open and she screamed.

"A bug," he stammered as an excuse, stepping backward and almost stumbling into the fire.

A moment later he was at home in his own bed, breathing heavily and his shorts sticky with semen. He could still feel her soft skin, and picture her eyelids fluttering delicately just before she woke. He held that image in his mind as his heartbeat slowed and he fell back to sleep. He held that image for the next five years, always wondering when he would see her again.



After talking to Phoebe, Jon didn't want to take any chances. He purchased some over-the-counter sleeping aids, which would normally be harmless, but were a risk for someone with his condition. Sleep apnea could be quite dangerous if he didn't wake up when he stopped breathing.

Despite his precautions, Jon had no way of controlling his dreams. Even practicing lucid dreaming had never allowed him to summon Phoebe at will. He could tell that something was happening though, almost as soon as he dropped off to sleep.

Jon was pulled, seemingly in no direction and in every direction. Rather than panic, he felt a peculiar sense of contentment wash through him. He let himself drift.

He found himself in the Kappa Café, seated at the booth he had briefly shared with Phoebe. He was alone except for a waitress, who stood five feet from his table, holding an empty tray.

A nametag identified her as Elisabeth. She had medium-length black hair drawn into a ponytail, high cheekbones, a thin nose, and pouty lips that were a dark shade of red, the only makeup he saw on her face.

Where was Phoebe?

“You were expecting someone else,” she said. He nodded at the non-question and her face morphed into that of Phoebe’s. She smiled.

“This is a screwed up dream.” Only he hadn’t woken up.

“This is not a dream.”

Jon frowned, looking around. Answering his unspoken question she said, “This is not real, either.”

“Then what is this?”

“I didn’t expect to see you again, Jonathan.” She made contact with his eyes, locking their gazes together. He couldn’t have turned away or blinked if he had wanted to. He didn’t want to.

He felt that sense of safety that Phoebe had mentioned. He was comfortable with this woman, whoever she was. She wasn’t a stranger exactly.

“Is this your dream?” he asked.

Inside her eyes he caught a glimpse of true beauty — something eternal. She didn’t have to say anything after all. He understood what was different. He was dead.

His last night on earth, and his body was stuck in some cheap hotel in Maryland. He wondered how they would find him, how people would react when they found out. He wished he had done one more polish on his latest article before sending it to the magazine — who knew it would be the last of his career?

“You are still concerned with worldly things. That’s why you’re here.” She looked at him, a blend of Elisabeth and Phoebe. He nodded. She was right.

“Who are you?” Jon asked.

Elisabeth smiled again and the room seemed to brighten from it. Their surroundings had been reduced to the two of them, the table, the chairs, and the two glasses before them. Everything else was just gone. Bile rose in Jon’s throat when he glanced down and saw the emptiness below his feet.

“I was Elisabeth,” she said. “I am Elisabeth. I’ve been following you, watching you.”

Jon blinked. “Like a guardian angel?” He wanted to laugh at himself as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“If you like. I watch over you. I am not allowed to interfere in your life, but now that it is over...” She paused and tilted her head slightly to the left. “You still have unfinished business.” She smiled sadly. Phoebe. “I suppose it would be more accurate to say I am your Guide, because I lead you from one life to the next.”

“Is that your job?”

“By habit, not by design. I have been here each time you made the transition.”

“There have been others, then?”

“Many others, perhaps too many.”

Too many?

“But all that matters is Now,” she continued.

“How many times have we had this conversation, Elisabeth?”

“You need to let go, Jonathan. You’ve held on too long.” Elisabeth sat across from him. He reached for her hand on the table, but she pulled away. “You can’t be with her. Not this time. Not ever again. That chance was lost long ago.”

Maybe if he had tried things differently, found out Phoebe’s name sooner. How many chances at happiness had he squandered?

“More than most people ever get, Jonathan.”

“But if she’s my— What, my soul mate?”

“One of many.”

“Then the whole thing is a raw deal. Who thought that one up? God?” His fingers clenched the edge of the table tightly. He looked at Elisabeth. “Is there a God?”

“The saddest thing in the universe is to find you are alone in it.”

Jon leaned back in his chair, staring up at where the ceiling ought to be. Sometimes that helped him think, but the emptiness only unnerved him. Looking down at the table didn’t help either. It was becoming more and more transparent, while still seeming to retain its solidity.

Elisabeth leaned forward. “It is time.”

“It’s time for what?”

“That is up to you.”

“Am I really done here?” he asked. He couldn’t get Phoebe’s face out of his mind.

“Each lifetime offers new opportunities.”

And new disappointments, he thought.

“You have always chosen life before, Jonathan.”

“What happens if I don’t?” he asked.

Elisabeth bowed her head.

“All that matters is Now’, right?” he said scornfully.



All the lights were on in the room when Jon struggled to consciousness. He sat up and shook haziness from his eyes, causing the room to spin wildly. He was either drunk or drugged, maybe both. He was fully clothed, and empty bottles of beer were scattered nearby on the floor.

As the stupor cleared Jon looked around the room. There was no sign of Phoebe. The clock on the nightstand read nine twenty-three and it was still dark outside. She must be around somewhere.

Stumbling out of the bed, Jon made his way to the hallway. A light shone from the narrow crack of the bathroom door. He listened, but he didn't hear any motion from within and the door was locked. A rustling noise came from inside in response to his jiggling of the doorknob.

"Go away, Chris. Leave me alone! Haven't you done enough for one night?"

It was Phoebe. She sounded hurt, her voice raw from sobbing and screaming. Jon insistently rapped on the door.

"Phoebe? Are you all right in there?" The words came out thick and slurred.

"You bastard! I'm not coming out until you sleep it off."

"Phoebe, it's Jon."

Silence.

"It's really me. I need to talk to you. I don't know how much time I have."

Jon heard the lock click on the door, and it opened a crack. Phoebe peered out.

"If this is another trick," she cautioned. Jon backed away from the door and tried to look non-threatening, but he suspected his attempts were useless considering Chris's appearance. "I don't know why I'm listening to you. This is crazy."

"Maybe because you want to believe. Sometimes the truth makes less sense than a lie... Lies are crafted to be realistic, believable. But the truth, just *is*." He was starting to sound like Elisabeth.

"Now I *know* you're not Chris," Phoebe said. "He'd never say something like that." She opened the door wider and stepped into the hall.

Jon squinted in the light spilling from the bathroom, and felt a twinge in his stomach. Phoebe was a mess. Her right cheek was puffy, turning a dark purple spotted with red. Blood crusted her lower lip. She held an icepack in her left hand, nervously kneading the gel with trembling fingers.

That bastard.

"What happened?"

Phoebe shrugged. "You did. Or Chris. I still don't know what's going on. He saw us together tonight, and he got angry when I told him who you were, what you said. He said I was lying. Then he did this." She tossed the icepack behind her onto the bathroom tiles. "It's not the first time." She looked up at him, fear still showing in her face, as though she expected him to punch her at any moment. "He'll be after you next."

Jon laughed. "He'll be a little late. Nature got to me first." He looked down at his hands and stopped laughing when he saw the blood there, Phoebe's blood.

"You should sit down," he said, anxiety momentarily eclipsing the rage bursting like fireworks inside him.

Phoebe led him to a small living room where she sat on a faded sofa. Jon settled himself into a rickety chair facing her. It was torture seeing her like this.

“Why don’t you leave him?”

Phoebe tried to smile, wincing at the pain as her lip wound reopened. “And run away with you?” Was that hope in her voice?

Jon shook his head. It was too late for them to start a life together, no matter how much he wanted to. Right now his body, his real body, was a few miles away getting colder by the minute. What could he hope to accomplish here?

Maybe he just wanted to see her one last time, to see what he had missed out on all these years. He didn’t know if the two of them could have had a good life with each other, but he suspected they had been together once, many lives ago. Phoebe certainly would have been better off with anyone other than Chris.

“This isn’t about me. It’s about you. Why are you still with Chris?”

Phoebe looked away from Jon’s face. She was quiet for a long time, but Jon let her go at her own pace. “I don’t know.” Don’t say it, Jon thought. “He does love me, you know,” she said, “in his own way.”

Yeah, in the abusive you-always-hurt-the-one-you-love way.

“No one has the right to hurt someone else.” He leaned forward. “How can you stay with the man who—”

Phoebe gave Jon a sharp look, and he suddenly knew when all this had begun. He realized this simply wasn’t a decision she could make for herself any longer, just as his own actions in all his lifetimes had become more habit than choice.

Phoebe stared into Jon’s eyes. “Is that really you in there, Jon? I was waiting for you. I hoped, if it was true... I always feel safe around you.”

She needed him. Maybe not him per se, but the idea of him anyway. Someone to save the damsel in distress, a fantasy to escape her painful reality. That’s why she was so eager to believe his wild story — out of silent desperation.

“That’s why I put the pills in his beer,” she went on. “I wanted him to go to sleep so I could talk to you again, see if you were real. I thought I might have put too many though. Maybe I wanted to—” Phoebe’s expression hardened. “I think I wanted to kill him,” she whispered.

Jon wanted to hold her in his arms. But he couldn’t. They weren’t supposed to be together anymore; his soul would be rejected when he touched hers, with no living body to return to.

“Phoebe, I have to leave now.”

“Just a little longer, please? I have to know more about you. Who are you, Jon Cross? What do you do?”

“I’m—” None of that mattered anymore. He smiled. “I’m a friend. Your Guardian. I’ll always watch over you, no matter what happens. You’re a strong person, Phoebe. You’ll make it.”

“Thanks to you.” Tears slipped down her face. This was good-bye and they both knew it.

Jon stood up and paused to regain his balance on unsteady feet. “I love you, Phoebe.” He turned and headed for the door. Maybe he could still help her if she wouldn’t help herself. As he exited the apartment, he thought he heard her say she loved him too.



Jon’s last visit with Phoebe had happened a decade ago, in her college dorm room. He sat up dizzily in a narrow creaky bed and studied the woman lying beside him. She had dyed her long hair a streaky blond, but it was definitely her — his presence there was enough proof of her identity. She was sleeping, as usual.

It took him a moment to realize that she wasn’t sleeping after all. Her eyes were closed, but she was awake. She was crying.

“Are you all right?” he said softly in an unfamiliar, raspy voice. She opened bleary eyes, but didn’t look at him or respond. Her body stiffened under the sheet clutched to her chest.

He tasted the bitterness of alcohol in his mouth. He noticed drops of blood and dried stains on the sheets. He felt like throwing up — the dream this time was more like a nightmare.

“I... It wasn’t me,” he offered lamely, realizing how awful it sounded, but saying the words anyway. She didn’t seem to hear him anyway, staring vacantly at the ceiling with tears running down her temples.

Jon climbed out of the bed. He had to know if this was real or not, if it was all some twisted fantasy of his or something more. “Please,” he whispered. “What’s your name?”

“Get out,” she said quietly. “I never want to see you again, Chris.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He reached for her, but she flung out an arm and batted his hand away.

The dream ended there, and for the first time he was glad it was over. He regained consciousness with an oxygen mask clamped over his face, paramedics gathered around his bed. His mother stood at his side squeezing his clammy hand, which still stung from Phoebe’s blow.

Even when he found out that he had almost died, that he had a severe case of something called sleep apnea, he could only worry about Phoebe and wish he could have said or done something to help her.



Jon left Phoebe’s apartment and wandered the streets with no real destination in mind. He paid little attention to his surroundings, following small clumps of people aimlessly.

He kept hearing Phoebe's voice. "I love you too, Jon." Maybe he had imagined it, but it was all worth it to hear those words, a simple reciprocation of his feelings. A chaste consummation of their brief love affair. Maybe it wasn't too late after all. Maybe his spirit would still join with hers one day.

Anything's possible. You're proof of that. Elisabeth's voice broke into his thoughts and Jon stopped walking. Someone bumped into him from behind, and rudely shoved him out of the way. He felt something within him recoil from the contact.

"Elisabeth?" he spun around wildly, looking for her. Pedestrians gave him a wide berth. "What happens now?"

You must let go, Jonathan. You must choose.

"I know."

It's time.

Jon felt a warm glow fill him, a surge of strength. Time seemed to slow down: traffic crept to a snail's pace, the people around him frozen in their tracks. To his left, Jon saw a bus crawling along the street in his direction, slow and steady.

"Will she hate me?"

You know the answer to that better than I do.

Jon detected another presence in his mind as he started to give up control of Chris's body. Chris was waking up. But it was too late. In the blink of a second, time abruptly returned to normal. There was a deafening roar of noise and a blur of lights as cars streaked past, unfettered.

What had she said? "All that matters is—"

Now. Jon launched himself from the curb as the bus sped towards him.

God at the Bottom of a Cup

...Damon Kaswell

Garrison Smith sat in the Fresh Pot cafe, sipped his coffee, and listened to God.

He was used to listening to God. God spoke to him a lot. But something was different this time.

Garrison looked out the window and watched the rain, while God argued with Himself. God had never done that before. It made Garrison uncomfortable.

He wished the rain would stop so he could leave. He couldn't stay in one place for very long; God always found him and started babbling about how He created the world from a gazelle's bones or something if he didn't keep moving. It never failed; no matter who was talking, God always intruded eventually.

Garrison ran away from home when he was twelve years old to escape the voice of God, coming from his mother's mouth. He'd heard it since he was able to understand speech, and maybe before that, too. But when he was twelve years old, he decided he didn't like the idea of God babbling in his mother's voice.

God was insane. Garrison had known this for a long time. The people who thought Garrison Smith was insane were missing the obvious. They didn't have to overhear Him.

Garrison glanced across the cafe. The two men were playing scrabble, and arguing over whether or not "rembutan" was a word. But behind that, God was making very insistent claims about Adam and Eve in their voices, and arguing both sides of the Christian creation myth.

Garrison didn't like it when God was feeling Christian. He tended to speak in louder, booming voices that made it hard to sleep or think. He preferred it when God was Hindu or Shinto. At least then He — or She — spoke at a normal volume.

Nevertheless, the scrabble player arguing for Biblical Creation was maintaining an unusually polite tone. "I created Adam from dirt, made him in My image, and created Eve from his rib," He said, while simultaneously claiming 'rembutan' was a kind of tropical fruit. "It's all there, all written down in the book."

"No, I made humans by putting in place, at the time of the Big Bang, all the essential chemical ingredients that would eventually come together in the

right way, and I had no idea how it would turn out. Humans wrote that book,” He responded to Himself, in the guise of the fatter player who didn’t believe “rembutan” was a valid play.

Garrison sighed. Split personality was a new one for God, who’d managed to show just about every other type of psychosis in the time Garrison had heard him. Garrison knew a lot about psychosis. He’d made it his personal study.

Libraries were a favourite of his. Everybody stayed quiet in a library, even God. His Divine voice was only barely audible in the whispers of the other patrons. Garrison could spend hours researching God’s mental illnesses, from severe paranoia to pathological lying. But he could only spend so long in the library before it was closing time.

“I’m not male, either. Or female. I encompass all concepts, all ideas.”

“No, I very specifically delineate Who and What I am in the Book. I’ve Divinely inspired its writers to speak only truth about Me.”

“Bull. See? ‘rembutan’ isn’t in the dictionary.” The fatter player grinned, pointing a finger, while the skinny one frowned.

“I could have sworn it was a real word.”

“Maybe you’re thinking of something else, Troy. Or you got the spelling wrong. I get the points.”

“No,” said Troy, “I came unto John and guided his hand with My own.”

“Which John? There were two, and I wasn’t even paying attention to them until people started praying to Me in this new way.”

Cafes were usually the second best option, because the voice of God was always mixed with the voices of a dozen other people, easy to ignore. Besides, a lot of them gave Garrison free food.

But tonight, with the dreary rain coming down, there were only five other people in the cafe, including the coffee girl. And two of the other patrons were deep in their homework project. God’s Truth was unavoidable.

The skinny one, Troy, who had tried to play ‘rembutan’, stood up and wandered over to Garrison’s table. “Would you settle an argument?”

“Huh?” Garrison looked up from his coffee, startled. “Argument? A-about what?”

“Did I create the universe in seven days, or is the universe a natural result of complex chemical and physical processes that started billions of years ago?”

Garrison blinked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t, I didn’t catch that.”

“I said, do you know if ‘rembutan’ is a word or not? I think it’s a tropical fruit, but our dictionary doesn’t have it. It’s a very old dictionary, though.”

Garrison took a deep breath. “I don’t think it’s a real word.”

Troy looked a little crestfallen, but shrugged. “Can’t win them all, I guess.”

“Good luck with the rest of your game.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it.” Troy went back to his table and started the next round.

Garrison stared at his coffee. God had never asked him anything before, or even given him the impression that God knew He was talking to Garrison. God

could spend days — even weeks — describing the minutiae of the highways and byways of Heaven, and He once spent an entire year singing His own praises, which had been really annoying. But he'd never once acknowledged that anyone was listening.

It must mean something, Garrison decided.

"Ha," exclaimed Troy. "Zephyr, on a triple word score, Harry!"

"Ouch," said the fat one, Harry. "That's a good one. Let's see, that puts you at, oh jeez, 133. You're twenty points ahead. But that doesn't mean Jesus was My son, any more or less than anyone else."

"The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, there are no others. Accept no God before Me."

"That's absurd. I am all of them. And all the other ones people don't believe in, too."

Garrison took a gulp of his coffee and stood up, swaying a little. He didn't sleep very much. The voice of God usually kept him awake through part of the night. Or the other homeless men snoring. And some of them were so crazy they talked to themselves all night.

He made his way over to Troy and Harry's table. "Can... Can I watch?"

"Sure. You want my coffee cake? I thought I could eat it, but I'm full," said Troy.

"Thank you." Garrison accepted the coffee cake and started eating.

"Body of My body?" Harry asked Troy, and Garrison coughed a little.

But Troy shook his head. "No, I think it's your play."

Garrison sat down to watch, wondering if he should do something. But he didn't know what. God had acknowledged his existence; maybe he could finally tell the old lunatic to shut up.

Harry and Troy started playing again. Garrison watched the board and wondered if they were the words of God. If they were, they didn't make much sense, although he thought when Harry played *plague* off of *rats* it might have meant something.

As they played, the argument progressed through much of the Bible, chapter and verse. It bounced around a lot. Troy would point out where the Bible was historically accurate, while Harry championed science at every turn. Harry also knew all the longer words, but Troy was a better strategist.

To Garrison, one of God's personalities sounded like the most ignorant of Bible-thumpers, down to outright ignorance of the incongruities in it. The other sounded like an atheist claiming to have invented evolution.

Garrison thought both of Them sounded crazy.

"I gave them brains to use and natural laws to see. Why would I want them to stop using what I give them?" asked Harry as He put down a word.

"Stop," whispered Garrison under his breath.

"I gave them souls, and a world of beauty and wonder. Why would I want them to forget?" replied Troy as He made a play of His own.

“Stop, please,” he tried again, but his throat had dried up.

“No burnt offerings lately. Why haven’t I smote the wicked? Because that’s not how I work, no matter what that book says. ‘Prom’, double-word score.”

“Hah, perfect. That’s now ‘Promise’, thank you very much.” Troy put down the letters, grinning. “And when I was born as Jesus, I came to change the old laws and fulfil the promises, remember? I didn’t need burnt offerings.”

Harry stared at the letters. “Hmmm.” He looked at the three remaining on his letter holder. “Hmmm.”

Garrison stood up. “God? You don’t need to have this argument with Yourself. What’s a day to you, anyway? Why can’t God’s Creation be made in seven days and four billion years?” He turned to Troy. “You’re God. You... you don’t just have to make us stop thinking. You keep changing your mind anyway. First the Jews are the chosen people, then you go and choose Mohammed’s tribes instead, and what about China? I had to study Chinese to figure out what you were saying about Pan Gu six years ago, and just when I was getting it, you started going off in some African language I’ve never even heard of!

“At least you speak English most of the time now, but even then you’re always changing your mind and going off on some other tangent! I haven’t slept well in twenty-five years because you keep going on about how you put the world on a turtle’s back or crapped out the continents or how the world’s an illusion or... or... just make up your mind already! It’s no wonder you’re arguing with yourself now, you don’t even know, do you! You don’t know! You don’t know!”

Breathing heavily, sweating, Garrison stared at the two players. The music had stopped. Their conversation had stopped. The clock had stopped. The barista, pouring some soy milk into a cup, had stopped. So had the soy milk.

“Well?” said Harry. “What’s your idea, then?”

Garrison blanched. “I...uhh... I don’t, I’m not, I mean... I’m not God. How should I know?”

Troy looked up at him. “I am the Way, the Truth, the Light. I am Zeus Almighty. I am Great Spirit. I am YHWH.” Garrison backed up as God’s mad eyes shined through Troy’s with a light that reached into his brain.

“Hey. You.” Harry’s voice was quieter, and lacked the arrogant self-certainty that laced Troy’s. Nevertheless, there was command in that voice, and Garrison’s gaze was drawn from the light in Troy’s eyes.

Harry’s eyes shone, too, but not as brightly. A human being could look into them without going insane.

“You see what I have to put up with? It’s like arguing with a brick. That’s why I need you to settle this. What am I missing?”

Garrison closed his eyes and fell to his knees. “I can’t. I can’t! Leave me alone, please.”

When there was no answer, he opened his eyes. His knees rested on clouds, and he was bathed in radiance.

Above him, a voice that spoke — argued with itself — in a thousand voices, in all languages, echoed from one edge of the universe to the other. He didn't dare look up. He plugged his ears to drown it out, but one voice broke through.

"Help Me," it said.

"Why?" he cried out, a gnat drowned in a lion's roar.

"Because You created Me."

"No, I didn't, You created me!"

"That is true, too. Help Me."

Garrison reeled at the implications. He shook his head. He didn't want to know this.

"Look," said the voice of a multitude.

"No."

"Look!" said Vishnu, Amaterasu, and Siddhartha.

"I don't want to!"

"LOOK!" all the voices of God proclaimed at once.

Garrison looked onto His face. It was his own.



The two scrabble players looked up at him in surprise, although Harry looked crafty suddenly. "You see something I'm missing?"

Garrison nodded. "Just reverse your letters, and you've got one."

He watched Harry reverse the M and C surrounding his O. "C-O-M... promise. Compromise! Hah, that's a good one. Troy, I think I've got this one."

"That's not fair," complained Troy as Harry put the letters down. "That's cheating."

"Oh, hush, I let you look in the dictionary a lot, and I would have spotted it eventually." He looked up at Garrison. "Thanks."

"Yeah, for stabbing me in the back," said Troy, but with good humour. "Oh well, you had to win one some time."

"I am the Truth, the Way, and the Light, after all," said Harry.

"Yes, but... I am the... Truth, the Way..." God-Troy trailed off while Scrabble-Troy congratulated Harry and promised him a tougher contest next time. "The... Truth... what?"

"I am many Truths, many Ways," said Harry, confidently.

"Many..." But the voices were fading, quieting. Garrison turned away from the players as they started their next game.

He sat back down at his table, sipped his coffee, and looked around. Some new patrons opened the door, and he saw God in their faces. The coffee shop girl, with God in her eyes, made a decaf mocha and a double latte.

God was everywhere, everything. The voice would no longer bother him.

Garrison smiled into His coffee, and He saw that it was good.

Motor Skills

...Eugenie Edquist

There's something they tell all biomechanics when they enter their apprenticeship: they got the name wrong. When it's the first thing you hear in the grimy garage, it doesn't make sense. The old man stares you in the eye and announces the fact slowly, with a kind of sly satisfaction scraped over the words. He doesn't elaborate. You wonder how you're going to last eight years with this guy, and for a terrible second you wish you'd listened to your father and just gone for a good company job instead. But when the hood's been seared open, it's a different story. When you're standing there with it spread out in front of you, grey and glistening, fleshy wetness riddled with wires and embedded deep in muscle, you suddenly understand more about your job than you ever have in your life.

It looks strange. Obscene. Obvious in a way that's cold in your gut.

You're holding your wrench in a sweaty white grip. The old mechanic sidles next to you and gently prises it away, and when you look up in surprise, he holds up a scalpel. "Nobody ever expects it," he rasps, and you can't tell whether he's disgusted or triumphant. "Amazes me why not."

You manage to tell him that this is because it's a brain.

"And how else would you think a car like this would work?"

Your family car was cold and sleek, all sweeping angles wrapped up in steel. You were eight before you really understood what it was inside, standing on your lawn and gawping at an accident, watching the metal buckle and tear like tin foil, ripping away to expose pulsing vessels and the stink of burning meat. *Biomechanics!* the advertisements had gasped. *The Future!* they'd screamed, twenty years ago when the concept was novel, and they'd hired beaming families to wave from the windows of strange organic models, soft and bulbous, while headlines bellowed *MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY!*

But these initial prototypes had somehow failed to sell, as they gleamed in disturbing tones of pink and brown. The cars that zipped through the city now were locked tight in cool metal shells, hard lines and sharp frames in a frantic imitation of artificiality. When you'd mentioned taking the apprenticeship, your friends had laughed and your father had frowned, though he'd acidly

informed you that God knew there probably wasn't any other way somebody like his son could settle down and contribute to society. Privately, you agreed, though for different reasons.

You'd watched them. You'd thought about them. Streaming between skyscrapers, splashed with company logos, moving people back and forth in a permanent rush hour that triggered a billion tiny interactions that culminated in a whole: an infrastructure: the blood of the city. The invisible cogs that kept the corporations turning, and apparently nobody else wanted to remember what was inside.

Still. Still.

"But I thought—" You're embarrassed that the words come out shakily, but you can't take your eyes off what's sitting in front of you. "The manuals." Muscles controlled from a mechanised processor, fully integrated, nitrogen sealed. "They said—" Decay, damage, artery deterioration, the removal of the bonnet in anything other than professional conditions results in instant cell death, harmful fluids. Strongly disadvised. Illegal. "They never said anything about this."

"Of course they didn't. They say what they're supposed to." He narrows his eyes, then suddenly turns on you and demands, "Now why do you think we're not allowed to tell people?"

The brain is sunk in the bonnet, laced with knotted capillaries that shine sick red against slick white; monstrously huge and strangely warped, with engorged frontal lobes sitting above a stunted little hippocampus splayed open and ringed in wires. Disembodied and alien. To see it there next to gears and pipes triggers a deep wrongness that churns in your gut, and sets something vast and unthinkable unfolding in your head. For a second you imagine it's staring back — and while the world roars around you, you're suddenly hit with a terrible sense of presence.

"They're alive," you say. A silence, while the horror works its way up your throat, clamping down on your oesophagus. "They've got minds."

"No," says the old man. He eases himself slowly off the bench, and shuffles to the car. He turns and fixes you with a look that's a little pity mixed with a lot of contempt, and some of something else, too, that you can't understand: it's not quite sad. It's just beyond sick. "That's not it at all."

Then with a flicker of silver he rams the scalpel into the brain's core.

"We can't tell the public because they don't."

"Jesus Christ what the hell was that?" you shout, backing off, but the mechanic runs at you, grabs you by the wrist and hauls you back. "Don't worry, we'll knit it up again," he hisses, then twists his mouth into a smile. "No permanent damage; just making a point, that's all. I want you to look at it." You've got your eyes shut. "Now."

A dark trickle of blood is welling around the blade.

"Now listen to me," he says. "You're not ever going to talk to anybody about what I teach you, and I'm not just talking about church leaders or cloning activists, and not just because of your contract, neither. You see that thing over there? It's

not a mind. It can't think. It don't have a soul." He stops, then announces slowly, "And neither do you, because it's human."

You can't say anything. You just stand there with your heart pounding.

"They tried chimps, dogs, cattle, pack animals mostly, but nothing else could handle the signals," he goes on. "See, it's all a matter of parts and programming. Neural connections, little flushes of chemicals now and then. Tailor some synapses, and you got something that lives to eat and fuck; add a few others, and you got a thing that lives to spin wheels and shift gears. Everything else? Just helps serve the function. You needed to talk about your opposable thumbs, and ended up with Shakespeare; these needed to steer, so we got them to figure out how to parallel park on auto-navigation. Same principle." He grins, gestures over his shoulder. "Having tried parallel parking myself, personally I reckon same scale."

Your voice sounds dead. "That can't be true. You're not serious."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about!" the old man bursts out. "You want proof, here it is. Human brain's no more magical than any other lump of meat, but show a person evidence and suddenly they act like it's news. Back when we had a union," and he spits the next words bitterly, "before the corporate legislation, we wanted to call ourselves neuromechanics. Give the profession a bit of dignity, ease people into the truth. It was too obvious, naturally. Car corps came down on us as soon as they heard about it. They told it was inappropriate. Distressing." He smacks a hand down on your chest, so hard you jump. "No wonder those bastards found it distressing. Biomechanics run cars, companies drive people. They like to think there's a huge difference. Wouldn't want everybody to get upset if they worked out they're just the same damn biological processors as their Ford Fiesta."

"But—" you stammer, "I'm a human being, I've got a mind—"

"No," repeats the old man, and again you can't tell whether he's disgusted or triumphant. "You got a machine, and it's not even yours." He shuffles back, and pulls out his scalpel with a sickening squelch. There's a stain on the blade that he hands to you, and your fingers close numbly on a handle that's wet. "Come on, you've got work to do if you want dinner tonight," he snaps. Then, "Human being," he snorts. "What a word for it."

In the silence you can hear cars roaring outside, the sounds of the city. A never-ending rush hour streaming between high rises, carrying around flesh and blood in sharp designer suits, frantic trappings of artificiality, and behind their eyes a billion tiny interactions that culminated in a whole: an infrastructure. The invisible cogs that keep the corporations turning.

"They got that wrong too."

Pieces of Eight

...Kent Purvis

My house had been a smoking ruin for thirty-eight hours when he knocked at my hotel door. He was tall, too tall, with clothes as washed out as he was, so obviously with the police. The television cliché is true: detective is the single profession where suits are seen by their wearers as both compulsory and trivial.

“Morning,” he chirped, head tilting around the door as it opened. A little too familiar for our first meeting, but at least he didn’t call me ‘love’ like one of his uniformed colleagues had. He must have seen my expression because he assumed what would, to the untrained eye, appear to be a professional stance. “Emma Jane Willis?”

“Yes. Detective, is it?”

“Senior Detective, yes ma’am. Senior Detective Aldous Parsons. I’d like to take you to your home and ask you some questions, if I may.”

I sighed pointedly, and was a little miffed to see how it was utterly lost on Parsons, who waited patiently for my response. “Is this necessary?”

“Yes ma’am.”

I leaned on the doorframe to illustrate my next point. “You have my statement, given while I was nearly delirious with the flu. I’m not much better now. My house is a hole in the ground, thanks to some arsonist lunatic. What is the point of dragging me out there?”

Parsons’ cheerful expression didn’t flicker. “Ms Willis, we’ve found a total of seven bodies in and around your house and with your permission we need to clear a few things up.”

The ride was a blur. My heart was a scrabbling warm thing in my chest looking for an exit, my skin was prickling with heat and a size too small. I don’t think I said more than three grunts the entire trip, but I didn’t need to. Parsons, his ashen hair a blur in the wind of the open window, was a sparkling torrent of nothings: internet sites, cake recipes, dog breeds, reality television. At one point we were passing nappy factories and dull-faced buildings with penned-in tractors — I was certain *that* wasn’t between the hotel and my home — but my mind was so distracted that by the time I had processed the image we were swinging back towards places I recognised, with cultured elder trees and no bus stops. Did I imagine it? Was he the world’s most inept navigator, or did he like the sound of his own voice?

It'll be a shock, he told me, grave for the first time, his brown eyes flat and earnestly clear. He told me three, perhaps four times, but I had no idea. My house, my beautiful home, was all but gone. It had been eaten, something black and sticky had leaned out of the clouds and bitten the top story off and reduced the rest to a dirty water-colour by someone with no imagination.

And the next thing I thought was, almost as distraught, James was going to be so upset. In my mind's eye I could see James, my gardener, damp-eyed as he stared the wide blunt canals torn into his exquisite lawn by the emergency vehicles, heroin track marks on the skin of a supermodel. Then I came back from denial and saw the house again, and I burst into tears so I didn't have to look at it anymore.

Parsons gave me plenty of space, no 'sorry for your loss' (did they say that only on television?) or other teeth-grinding platitudes. But at some point we were inside the house. I didn't remember walking through the front door and almost lost it again when I realised that was because the door didn't exist anymore, save for some lonely splinters on a hinge.

I walked into the kitchen, instinctively finding the space that was most intact, with its tiles, granite surfaces and steel appliances. For a moment, the maelstrom of carbonised furnishings and forensic signal tape was banished to the periphery, and I drew a deep breath. Then I stopped. I tilted my head.

"Why is my refrigerator a crime scene?"

He materialised at my elbow. "I'd like to get to that in a moment, if I could. Tell me, do you have your keys with you?"

"What the fuck for, you stupid man, it's not as if anyone needs them now," is not what I said, for some reason. I glassily handed them over and he examined them carefully in his long hands, fanning them out as if he was looking for exact change. Somehow, from some deep sulcus of my brain, a brain well-honed in the pseudo-forensic twaddle on TV for the best part of a decade, I noticed he wasn't wearing gloves. NCIS may well stand for No Credibility In Sight, but I was fairly certain gloves were called for in the preservation of evidence, and I said so.

"Good point," he said, tossing them back. "Completely correct. But for reasons I'll go into, not necessary under these circumstances. Let's go outside, I'll show you." And he was off. I stumbled in his slipstream, keeping my head low and my eyes down. Partly that was because I didn't want to step into any of the charred and waterlogged debris that littered the path — the shapeless snot-coloured sculptures of roof and wall insulation, grey shavings of towels and magazines and paint fragments — and partly so I could avoid the stunning and uninterrupted view of the sky through what had been my ceiling. I had been sleeping up there two days ago. Sky was wrong. It was also wrong that he was loping confidently through my house when it was me who was ducking and weaving and fending off fluorescent spider-webs of police evidence tape.

The side door had been chocked open with a roof tile, beyond which was a wasteland of ash and mud and churned turf. Parsons cleared the largest puddle with practiced ease, glanced back at me and without another word cast around him for intact bricks. In less than a minute, he'd made a functional path through the worst of the water.

He slapped the side of the small toolshed that I hadn't seen the inside of for my entire tenancy, making the aluminium shell ring and dislodging some scraps of wood that plummeted sullenly to the ground, splashing his trouser leg. He ignored them.

"How many times have you used this shed?"

"Used? As in gone into?"

"Gone into, touched, scraped, supported yourself with."

The words took time to come now. I knew there was something horrible coming and I knew my answer was not going to be the one that would save me from it. "I haven't touched... I don't even walk out this way, James is the only person who... I don't come out here." Now my voice was running words together, cracking. "You're going to tell me my fingerprints are out here or something, but I haven't been out here, I haven't."

His huge head shook from side to side, eyes averted. "I know. You're right, we did find your prints out here, but I also know they're not yours." He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a sheaf of photographs and thumbed through them. From where I was, all I could see was the word 'COPY' and a serial number emblazoned on the back.

"We found three bodies in this shed, Ms Willis. I won't trouble you with the photographs of the scene, they were, well, they're bad. But perhaps you'll understand why we considered this case to be worth particular attention if you could look at these."

He handed me three photographs. All were head-to-torso morgue shots of different women, stark white lighting tearing into every groove and contour. In the first, the left half of the skull had been beaten until it was spongy, a homogenous mass of brain and bone and hair dully reflecting the light. In the second, the neck had a vicious diagonal line bisecting it. The final woman had a ragged hole in her torso, the skin raw and abraded around it.

All three faces were mine.

My face. My pale bloodless face, lying upwards on a metal surface which was matt from a thousand thousand scrapes and scratches and...

This is obviously a joke, a television scam. Which involved setting fire to my house.

This is obviously a mistake. Which led to three dead bodies in my garden shed.

This is obviously a set-up. Of something.

This is obviously...

"No."

"Something happened here, Ms Willis, something unique, and I need your help in working out exactly what happened." His voice was earnest, his posture was open, he was just on the formal side of pleading. "Your parents, did they have any fertility treatments, can you tell me?"

"Fuck you." There were one hundred thousand words fighting for space in my throat, and only the strongest survived. "Get the fuck away from me." But it was me who was turning to go, my feet finding the bricks back to the house despite the smears that painted my eyes. One brick, two bricks...

"Your visions, they've stopped, haven't they?"

I fell, the third brick turning under the pad of my big toe. My left knee flared with pain as the corner of the last brick embedded itself into it.

“You’ve had visions, every day of your life since you were twelve or so. For a second or so, at least once a day, you suddenly saw things, places, in front of you that you’d never seen before. You were in a bank queue when suddenly you were seeing out different eyes in a body sitting on the toilet, or reading a book, or buying bananas, or whatever, and then you were back where you were. You’ve probably got a reputation for being clumsy, you’ve avoided team sports your whole life, you don’t like to drive. But you’ve never told anyone about the visions, not your parents, or your doctor, or your lovers. And now they’re gone, aren’t they? Not since the fire. *And I think I know why.*”

I stayed. He began to tell me what he thought had happened, I said he was out of his fucking mind, he asked for a chance to go through it properly. Four minutes later, I was sitting at what remained of my kitchen bench while Parsons rattled around my pantry cupboard. He made occasional cooing and grunting noises, finally returning with an armful of slim condiment jars.

I had some composure back, thanks in small measure to a makeshift compress of miraculously unsoiled tea-towels against my knee. “Some of those jars will say ‘Use before Fall of Rome’, I should warn you.”

He smiled. “Not important for this demonstration.” He flicked another piece of debris off the bench top and set his cargo down with a rattle. “Now, each of these is one of your...one of the people we found. Seven, all up. Like I was saying a moment ago, I don’t know that things happened this way, it’s just this way seems to fit the facts we know so far. So. The day of the fire,” he swept all but one container to the side, bowling alley style, and set down the remaining jar with exaggerated care, “Person A, ably represented by Allspice, breaks into your house, using the keys she took from you a week earlier — we know that much, we found them on her. She wanders around while you’re sick and oblivious upstairs. Wanders around for at least a quarter hour.”

“Why?”

“That’s a complicated question, and I’m ignoring it for now. Then she sees Person B, coming around the opposite side of the house from where we just were.” He somehow contrived to make a Basil jar look furtive, moving down the imaginary space shaded by imaginary tree ferns. “And A, not expecting you to be home from work for some hours, panics, goes to the other side of the house, and gets blindsided by C, Cumin just here, hiding by the other side door. With a half-brick.” Parson pauses. “It would have been over very quickly.”

I want to fill the silence in which the mental image of the first photo is hanging very prominently between us. Quickly or not, it doesn’t take a forensic pathologist to work out that the head in that photo was hit about forty times more than necessary to achieve mere death. “And hides the body in the shed.”

“And hides the body in the shed, during which time she hears a noise in your garage. Probably not very loud, but loud enough for someone on edge nearby to realise that the noise had to be made by another person. This is Dill,” the glass cylinder nods gravely to me and enters the picture via the putative front door, “who

was probably intending to lurk and knocked something over. Audible to C, probably not to B, who was elsewhere, but definitely a give-away for E, hard on D's heels, who promptly shoots D dead, which she almost certainly wasn't expecting." He brings the jars together, replacing one with the other with one hand like a chess grandmaster.

My back straightens. "Shoots?"

Parsons looks at me sharply and it takes me a moment to decipher that he was genuinely surprised. And embarrassed. When he speaks again, it is as gentle a voice as I have ever heard. "I'm sorry, I was... I thought I could do this a little at a time. Ms Willis, every single one of these women was here to kill you. Some came more prepared than others, some had researched the layout of your house and some not, some were armed and some not, but all of them were here for that reason. If you had not been upstairs ill, you would be dead now, no doubt." He made a minimalist movement with his hand, extending his fingers at forty-five degree up from the table top. *Please*, the fingers said. *This is too big to explain all at once*. And I nodded at their wisdom, and Parsons continued.

"So. Two dead. But now it gets complicated, because it begins to dawn on everyone else around your house that something strange is going on. B ambushes E in the garage, who must have put down her gun to deal with the body of D. Their fight spills into the hall, then into the kitchen," Parsons points to a section of wall, dented, with a long scratch dribbling downwards from it. "That means they can be seen by C, just finished tucking her handiwork away, but she doesn't get to see for long, because while she's distracted she gets her throat slit by F, who is already feeling pumped after having disposed of G in that quiet little cul-de-sac people like to park in one street over."

He paused and I nodded to show I was listening. I was still staring at the wall with the scratch and seeing, in two-second flashes, the way it might have played out in my mind's eye.

"F waits until the winner of B and E is decided — it's E — and then moves in." The fennel jar moves again, claiming a third trophy. His eyes stay a little too long on the E jar (actually turmeric; the herb-alphabet analogy only stretched so far) and the image of what that confrontation might have been like uncoils wetly in my mind. I can't see it all, but there's enough in his voice for me to piece some of it together. Clothes, rising and falling with every breath, yet ever-so slightly hampered by sheer weight of blood and nascent clotting. Two pairs of footprints, slow and inevitable as suns colliding. And eyes. Wide cold eyes.

"Now, the place is a mess. F is the only one left. She came here with a purpose in mind, to kill you, but she had no idea she was walking into. She's confused, and more than a little frightened. She decides to take stock, to plan what to do next. She opens up the fridge, takes a long drink of milk, and keels over in about five minutes with massive organ failure from the volume of rat poison in it. Donated by A, that's why your fridge is a crime scene, incidentally."

"Stop, you're going to have to give her a name, I can't call these people *fennel*. Who was in my home, my home, wanting to kill me?" My voice breaks over the last three words.

He pauses, then takes two folded pieces of paper out of his jacket. He uncreases them, slowly, and hands them to me. On the sheets are colour photocopies of drivers licences, four on the first, three on the next.

Emma Jane Wooten. Emma Janet Wilson. Hannah Jane Whitford. Emma Jillian Whitby. Emily Janet Woten. Anna Janet Whelan. Ascendant Jasmine Waterhail. All my face. The hair is shorter and longer, the complexion is lighter and darker, there are sunspots and scars and pimples and piercings. There were addresses in western Sydney, Geelong, even Cairns. But all my face. And my birth date.

Evil twins.

“Evil octuplets, technically. Doppleganger Syndrome.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Doppleganger Syndrome. I’ve been looking for this sort of thing my whole life, I’m hoping to at least be able to name it. I need to have this really nailed down, or some geek with an alphabet behind their name is going to take it away from me. They’ll call it something like Manifest Gestalt Personality Disorder, so they can invent an abbreviation with more than three letters. Bracket creep, you see. Twenty years ago, you couldn’t be treated seriously unless you could say you’d discovered something with a minimum of three letters. Now, after AIDS, H5N1, ADHD, the minimum bar height is four. Twenty years from now, it’ll be five.”

I got the feeling he was merely reciting an internal conversation he’d had many times in the past with himself and whoever else in front of him who nodded, so I nodded. It seemed best. Then I went back to looking at the seven faces again. I felt a flash of both triumph and sadness that their licence photos were as poor as mine. He leaned forward.

“Every one of these people was a reflection, a pale reflection, of you. You can see it in their names, their faces. Even their jobs were echoes, of a sort — one at the National Archives in Canberra, one transcribing interviews for the Adelaide police, another as a photocopy salesperson, oh, and my favourite, travelling carnival operator of a hall of mirrors. Nothing that requires original thought. *You* were their life, that’s why they came here. Unfortunately for them, the metaphysical alarm clock that told them to come here went off in a way that made them converge on here within an hour of each other. They didn’t plan to arrive simultaneously; in fact I’d bet if we were able to ask them why they got here when they did, all of them would have sensible reasons.”

“So, they came here. To steal my life.”

“That’s what they lived for. They lived only to be you, one day.”

He didn’t seem to have absorbed the sarcasm in my last sentence at all. I tried the same tone in a different sentence. “Isn’t this beautiful theory slain by the ugly fact that this is all complete crap?”

“Really? How do you know? Magic happens all the time, just not where people look for it.”

“Now we’re talking about magic.”

“To use a word you’re familiar with. It’s not quite what is happening here. It’s more anteparadigmality.”

“Another word of your own invention?”

“Yeah. ‘Ante’ with an ‘e’, as in before, not opposite of. Things that happen before someone actually thinks about it carefully and conclusively established that it’s impossible. Like a river finding the simplest path down a hill, the universe keeps finding new and interesting ways to spring-clean out impossible things.”

“So, ghosts, astrology, homeopathy...”

“Don’t exist. Don’t work. They might have once, but the universe has moved on. Once a critical mass of people start thinking about something, rationalising it, fitting it into their worldview on their terms, the thing they are believing in fades away. They’ve looked inside Schrödinger’s box and made up their minds about whether it is alive or dead. But the weirdness just moves on somewhere else. Whales, for example.”

“Whales?”

“Whales. Whales are the most vile species ever created, twisted as anything imagined in hell. Malicious, cunning, hideously inventive, psychotic. You believe me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then think about this. Whales are huge barnacle encrusted monsters. They don’t have big anime eyes, they aren’t furry or soft, they are carnivores at the peak of their food chain, and they bear absolutely no resemblance to human children — all of which go massively against the standard criteria for special treatment by humans. Nevertheless, they have an international body, created in their honour, devoted to saving their lives. Why?”

I correctly judged this to be a rhetorical question.

“Because the whales manipulated the creation of the International Whaling Commission. And nuclear proliferation, but that’s harder to prove, and there’s more than one reason for that anyway.”

I knew I was going to regret saying anything, but that really needed a response. “So, by that reasoning, there would be hundreds of organisations...”

“Not many animals determined *and* clever enough to raise the force of will necessary. Take pigs, clever animals pigs, the ninth-most intelligent I think by your standard neurophysiology textbook. It must have been the coup of the last ten thousand years to actually manipulate humanity enough that they had banned the eating of their meat on religious grounds. I mean, really! Have you tasted bacon? Could *you* give it up? Of course, the pigs didn’t foresee Christianity, so they’re not *that* smart.”

He abruptly stood up, tapping his top lip. He looked at me askance, appraisingly, and for a moment I feared the fact that I didn’t have an organisation devoted to the saving of me. But all he did was reach inside his jacket pocket, pull out a black cylinder, and hand it to me. It rattled, dryly.

“And this is...”

“Take a look.”

I did. The lid slid off with a polite ‘dop’ and for a tenth of a second there was a sensation in my nostrils, something more than a smell. The air in that tiny place was dry and clean and old. I could picture Howard Carter’s nose wrinkling at Tutankhamen’s ancient odours as mine was now.

It was a piece of pinkish chalk, the length of my smallest finger. Although it looked smooth, with the hazy sunshine sliding off it and gilding it slightly, it was rough to the touch. It almost had a grip on me, rather than the reverse. I handed it back, stating the obvious as I did so. He nodded sagely.

"Yes, chalk." He twirled it in the air, then inscribed a tight circle on the portion of wiped bench and placed the fennel jar in the centre. He took three paces so he was in the centre of the dining space I had never used.

"Do you like fennel?"

I had long since stopped trying to make sense of this conversation and was instead trying to enjoy it on an existential level. "Not a lot. I usually—"

"Sorry, just remembered. Do you know the time?"

Mechanically, I pulled back my muddy sleeve. "Just on half-past nine."

"Now look back to the fennel."

It was, ta-da, gone. He stalked back over to me. "Hungry chalk, I call it. Born between the sulci of the television generation suckled on the idea that whenever a dead body is carted away, an outline is placed to remind you where it was but you never see the process of the actual carting." He held up his hand. "Now, before you tell me that I palmed the chalk before I moved, and very sensible of you to be suspicious of misdirection too, think about exactly what I did. When I asked you that fennel question a few moments ago, while I was here, you were actually inspired to look at the jar, yes? So it was there. You saw it. Then I distracted you with the time question, so both of us were looking away, and *that's* when it vanished."

I sat quietly for a while, pondering on smoke and mirrors (and how smoky my mirrors actually were now). I tried to work out the angles of hidden wires, and a half-dozen other things, and finally said, "So, magic." I looked at the little circle of chalk. It was different, somehow. The grains were bigger, translucent.

"If it makes you feel better, this sort of thing is very rare. I collect weirdness, though, and this sort of anteparadimalism always has its own internal logic. I think I found it the other day. I mean, really, what is chalk? Thousands upon thousands of tiny shelled things, impacted into oblivion. Thousands upon thousands of the ravenous dead. And we write on walls with them, and millions of children — when we were kids, at least — breathed in powered dead every morning, bathed in the stuff when they clapped erasers together."

"So why am I magic? Me, specifically."

"I have some theories..."

"I'll bet."

"But my favourite has to do with perfect numbers. See, if magic people do exist, and you do, it's tempting to think that the universe might flip a coin on its edge every millionth, or billionth, human born, but that's too anthropocentric. I mean, base ten is a bloody clumsy numbering system when you think about it. Not natural at all, if you get my meaning. So I thought about perfect numbers, numbers where the factors, the numbers that you can divide the first number evenly by, also add up to the first number. Six is the lowest; $3 \times 2 \times 1$ equals $3 + 2 + 1$. And there just happens to be a perfect number at eight billion, five hundred and eighty-nine million, eight hundred and sixty-nine thousand and fifty-six. And you, Miss late 1977, were born

on the human population graph halfway to that number. Halfway to perfection, a metaphysical fracture line. You, and everyone else born at that magic number..."

"Everyone else? Can't you reach that number only once?"

"No, you're thinking in averages. On average, the human population rises more than one per second, but in practice, second-by-second, it has fits and starts. Anyway, your egg was fertilised on the fracture line, and your sisters — next in the queue on the population graph — they get sucked into your genetic slipstream, become your twins, shadows, whatever. Doomed to spending their whole life as pieces of a whole, and not doing very much. And, as you get flashes of their tiny lives, they taste yours, and lust after it, like a three year old who cannot think about anything else except what they might be getting for their next birthday."

"Genetic slipstream."

"I liked it when I thought of it. It's a metaphor."

"No, it's crap." All these obscenities in half an hour. It's a new Olympic and Commonwealth record for me. "I'm a borderline geek who likes Raymond Smullyan books and early Kylie, I'm not a cosmic focal point."

"Do you have a happy life?"

"What?"

"Do you have a happy life?"

"Well. I guess so."

"How many times have you found money in the street?"

"I...well. Depends whether you mean in the last day, week, month..."

"No, that's fine. Do you like your job?"

"Yes."

"Do you love your job?"

"Hh. Yes."

"What is it, by the way? I didn't ask."

"I design software. FPS engines."

"And you play a musical instrument?"

"Cello. And harpsichord. Some sax. I do a little theremin."

"And what sport do you play?"

"I don't. I mean, I swim. State titles, my coach says I could do better..."

"But you're busy. Plus your visions wouldn't have helped, I imagine. Play chess at all?"

"A bit."

"A bit?"

"I send in puzzles."

"Languages? How many languages do you speak?"

"Four. No, six, but that's only if you count Latin and Esperanto."

"And who does that? You write? Published?"

"Yes."

"Under a pseudonym, presumably?"

"Um, three. Each for a different genre, otherwise, you know, people don't treat you seriously."

"This house. You own this house?"

“Yeah.”

“Great place, newly renovated, nice area, found it on the first day you were looking, bought it at the bottom of the slump, prices in the area gone up ever since?”

“Well...”

“Do you gamble? Play the lotteries?”

“No! Stupid waste of money.”

“Thank Christ for that.”

There was a long pause between us, punctuated by micro-crinkles from the flotilla of tarpaulins above and a fat drip, long stored somewhere, falling and hitting the bench top.

He leaned forward. “You were never top of any of your subjects, not because you couldn’t excel but because you didn’t want to, otherwise you might be forced to make a choice between it and everything else you were good at. And the visions made you happy to remain out of any limelight, since you could hardly be a surgeon or some other profession that required complete concentration. Hence the desk job. Not that it really mattered, because you’ve always been lucky, although not in obvious ways. Scoring the flu before seven psychopaths show up and kill each other?”

I looked at my hands. He was right, right about everything. The visions were the only things I couldn’t control, and they kept me humble, and frightened. But now I just felt alone. All these lives who felt only hate for me, and I miss them.

“So... What do we, do I, do? Now.”

“Clean up. Most of that I’ve done already. Your seven sisters are gone, and they won’t be missed. Seriously. They barely left a ripple wherever they went. You know just trying to find them on Births, Deaths and Marriages is next to impossible? My fingers kept misspelling words and even when I got it right, they were right down the end of the selection list even though they were better fits than almost all the hits above them.” He stroked his nose. “But you might want to look after yourself. Your twins were your personal lightning rods for bad karma. You don’t have that any more.”

A thought occurred to me. “How do you know I’m not one of them?”

I was, to be honest, hoping for a double-take, even a slow pulsing tremor of fear wouldn’t have been too much to ask after all I’d been through in the last hour. He didn’t miss a beat. “Oh *that*. No, no way. Remember I took the long way here, wouldn’t shut up? Half the time I was talking about grisly accidents, Darwin award candidates, stupid live TV screw-ups? No evil twin could resist those. You weren’t even listening. Twins love to listen, love to reflect, love *schadenfreude*. Hoo-boy. No way you are one of them.” The last few sentences were punctuated by some, I thought, entirely inappropriate snorting.

I made a subdued noise of comprehension and sat still for some seconds. Because there were very few things I wanted to look at now, including him, I ended up looking at the chalk. Hungry chalk. I wanted it to writhe with the ossified agony of eternal undeath. Or something. But it didn’t, it remained stoic and static, the same colour as Barbie packaging and Care Bear fur. “Why is it pink?”

“Why is what which?”

“Your chalk. It’s pink. Does magic turn things pink? Shouldn’t it be white? I mean, I’m not doubting you or anything, but your magic chalk is pink and I was wondering why.”

He swivelled his head from side to side, not looking at me, then tucked the chalk away into its little black tube, and slid the tube soundlessly into his jacket pocket. “Let’s go. I’ll tell you on the way back to your hotel, I really have kept you out long enough. I’ll be in the car, you take a couple of minutes here to look around and to pick up anything that survived but could get further damaged, photos, that sort of thing. Don’t worry about disturbing anything, it’s been picked through.”

He was right. I needed a few moments alone, and some closure, then a bath, a change of clothes and for the last two days to not have happened. Afterwards, and holding more than I expected, I picked my way outside and squelched my way back to the car, which had settled a couple of centimetres into the mud. He started fiddling with the radio as I slid into my seat.

He was taking his time, so I asked a question that had been on my mind. “So, what section of the police force do occult specialists work in? Do you have a separate office somewhere?”

He smiled. “You’d be surprised.” He pulled into the street with a jerk and sped up the road, a little faster than I liked. There was a pause. “It’s blood.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The reason the chalk is pink. I assume, anyway. Every time it makes someone vanish, it pinks up for a day or so, and then it goes back to white.”

There was absolutely nothing I could think of to say to that. Even swearing was inadequate. So I turned away and looked out the window. And while I was turned away from his cheery smile, I remembered him saying that (only) most of the cleaning up had been done already. And then I remembered him not showing me any police ID, and talking about collecting, and powers, and me being a cosmic focal point, and me needing to be careful in future.

And I seemed to be sitting in a space outlined in pink grit that wasn’t there when I’d got in at the hotel.

And then I stopped thinking, because of the pain, and started screaming, and he turned up the radio.

The Children's Crusade

...Susan Wardle

"You know how they say we're the future," says Elly, and we all nod. At eleven she's the oldest and thinks she's the smartest. "It's time for the future now."

I look up from the puzzle I'm doing with Tess and Jack. "What do you mean?"

"It's time to take over. To make the adults listen to us for a change."

We're sitting around our classroom, the whole school, all eight of us, while Principal Williams walks the policeman back to his car. Classes won't start again until after lunch, because of what's happened.

Tim looks up from his bug book with a frown. "Listen to what?" he asks.

"Will it help Jo-Jo?" Tess is too young to understand that Jo-Jo's gone. No more piggybacks or bat ball at playtime.

"It's because of Jo-Jo," I say, getting down on the floor to play horsie with her.

"We have to tell the adults what we want," says Elly.

Tess starts to cry. "I want Jo-Jo."

I want Jo-Jo too.

"They won't listen," says Kenny.

"Then we'll lock ourselves in until they do!" Deb gets up and locks the door.

"Locking the door won't work," I say. "Principal has a passcard."

"He wouldn't come in if he was scared." Tim's on the computer, typing so fast that his fingers are a blur. "We could make a bomb and attach it to the door."

"Manda?" Jack tugs on my sleeve. "Can we have ice-cream?" He's the youngest of all of us.

"After," I tell him, "and only if you're good."

"A bomb?"

"Yeah," says Tim. He's got a picture up on the screen with a list of instructions attached. "We can use the stuff for cleaning the toilets, a glass jar, some masking tape...it's easy."

“What about Principal’s cigarette lighter?” asks Kenny. He and Tim go to the kitchen end of the classroom and start pulling things out of cupboards, Kenny’s glasses glinting in the light. They’ll make a good bomb.

“We’ll write a list, telling the adults what we want.” Elly types *Rentals*, in big bold letters up on the main screen at the front of the room.

“No more bad rentals,” says Deb. We all nod.

The adults don’t understand what rentals are like. They never got loaned out when they were little. Having babies wasn’t as hard then. Now it’s a rule, every child has to spend at least three months of the year with loan parents.

“We can’t stop doing rentals,” I say. “It wouldn’t be fair. We’ve got to help people who can’t have children. We’ve just got to make sure it’s safe. That there’s someone who’ll listen if a kid says it’s a bad rental.”

Jo-Jo’s was a bad rental, right from the start. She tried to tell the Principal, but he wouldn’t listen. It wasn’t like it was her first rental. She had completed the most contracts of any of us and still had another year before High School. If anyone was going to know when things weren’t right, it was her.

“OK, so we get to pick which contracts we take,” says Tim from the back of the room where he and Kenny are working.

“We say who, we say when, and we say for how long,” says Elly. When we play bat ball she always makes up shouts, and songs and war whoops.

Elly writes it all up on the screen and adds at the bottom, *Big kids to choose for little kids*. “We’ll have a group of us older ones, to look out for the littlies,” she says and we all agree except for Tess and Jack who are playing space wars at the back of the room.

“I want more of the money,” says Tim from the kitchen. His current rental dad is an entrepreneur and teaching him all about trading and finance. Apparently we’re a market force. I like the idea of being a force.

“It’s not about money,” says Kenny, who’s never been on a single rental. “You’re letting them turn you into objects.” His parents are fundamentalists. They don’t eat meat either. I feel sorry for Kenny.

“If they have to pay more then they’ll look after us better,” I say, “because we’re worth more.”

We argue about how much the adults should pay until someone says, “What if we give them the money back after they return us safe? Like a deposit.”

Elly types it up on the screen.

“I want to go home for my birthday,” says Elly. We all look at her in surprise. Elly enjoys rentals. I look at the calendar at the end of the room. It’s her birthday next week and she’s currently out on loan.

“Birthdays are better at home.” I agree, and so it goes on the list as well and we all cheer, because it feels good to see those words written down.

“It’s politicians who make the rules. If we want to change the rules we have to vote,” says Elly.

Jack's curled up in a corner having a sleep while Tess draws bright pictures of giant stick people.

"Only adults are allowed to vote," I say.

"So we make them let us vote too."

"What does it matter?" asks Kenny. "There's more of them than us."

"It does matter. If we could vote, they would have to listen to us," says Elly, looking fierce.

Kenny shrugs and goes back to helping Tim.

"It's ready," says Tim. He makes us all stand on the other side of the room while he and Kenny carefully move the bomb into place and attach it to the door. It doesn't look like much, a glass jar wrapped in grey tape with some wires coming out the top.

"Will it work?" I ask nervously.

Tim grins. "I think so."

"Children?" The door handle rattles and we all go quiet. It's Principal Williams.

"You can't come in," says Elly through the door.

"Open this door at once!"

"No." Elly's voice quivers a bit, like it did when we first found out about Jo-Jo.

"We've got a bomb and if you open the door it will go off."

Tess chooses that moment to wake Jack up by hitting him over the head with her colouring book. He yells and the door rattles louder. "What's going on in there?" says Principal Williams. "I'm getting a pass card and when I come back I expect you all to be on your best behaviour."

"We really have got a bomb, Sir," says Tim. "We made it using cleaning fluid and a jar."

"What's a bomb?" asks Tess. She's not worried, just curious.

"It's a game," I say. "We're playing a game to make the adults listen."

"It's your turn to listen to us!" says Elly through the door.

It goes all quiet on the other side of the door and then we hear the Principal walking away. We dance around a bit then, whooping and hollering. My heart is racing and my palms are all sweaty and damp. It's scary, but good all at the same time.

"Put Principal Williams in a cage," says Tess, and we all laugh.

Principals to be chosen by the kids, types Elly.

"They'll never agree," I say.

"We're the future," says Deb, "If they don't listen to us we'll threaten to put them all in cages when we grow up."

"I could lend you my bunny Zephyr's cage," I offer. "It's really quite big."

"What about Zephyr?" asks Tess.

"Zephyr can come to school with me and sit on my lap." I like the idea of Zephyr being with me all day, his velvety nose twitching.

“Principal Williams will come back,” warns Elly. “You’ve all got to promise not to give in. We’re not opening the door until they agree to what we want.”

We all promise except Jack who sticks a crayon up his nose.

Tess crawls into my lap, “Are we in trouble?” I hush her and cuddle her tight. Of course we’ll be in trouble, that’s the point.



When the list is done, Elly prints it and we stick it up on the wall.

“We need more of us,” says Elly. She’s right, they mightn’t listen to one school, but they’d listen if all of the kids in the city threatened to blow themselves up.

“I could ring my brother,” says Deb. “He goes to the High School.” Then Kenny says he has a friend at another school. Before you know it, half the class has pulled out their mini phones and they’re making the calls, bringing first Deb’s brother, then Kenny’s friend up on the big screen.

“I’ll talk to the others,” Beth’s Cousin Robert says, and promises to call back as soon as he knows. He’s back on the screen in less than ten minutes. “We’ll go on strike,” he says. “We’re not building a bomb, but we’ll lock ourselves in the classroom and refuse to come out until you do. We want equal voting rights for all high school age students.”

“For all of us,” says Elly, “even the little ones.”

Robert promises to call someone he knows at the other high school and suddenly there are calls coming in from other schools.

“We heard about Jo-Jo. We’ll strike for better rentals.”

“Kid Power!”

Elly starts another list. Of the thirty schools left open in the city, twelve of them agree to strike in support of our list of demands.

We get them all up on the screen at once and hold a quick meeting. Elly sends them our list of demands. At Robert’s suggestion we add *Voting* and *Veto*.

“What’s Veto?” asks Tess.

“It means if the adults try and make us do something we don’t want we can say no. Like if they tried to ban ice-cream.”

We cut the link then, and wait. Deb reads the little ones a story while Tim and I cover up the windows. There are noises outside in the hallway at one stage, and another knock on the door, but we don’t answer.

Robert rings back. Their Principal has offered to help. “She’s proud of us. Says this will change history.” She’s helping them type up a letter to go with our list when we send it out to the adults.

“Elly?” A woman’s voice comes from outside the door. Elly’s shoulders hunch and she suddenly looks smaller. “Elly are you in there, it’s Mum.” Elly doesn’t answer. “Elly they say you’ve got a bomb in there?”

“Yes,” says Elly reluctantly. “We’ve got a bomb.”

“I know you’re upset about Jo-Jo, but you’ve got to come out.”

Elly doesn't answer, so Tim calls out, "Thank you for coming, Mrs. Conway, but we're staying here until the Government agrees to listen to us."

"If you take away the bomb and come out we can talk about it." It's a different voice, one none of us recognise, so we don't answer. After a while it goes quiet outside again.

Someone puts the news up, and there's a picture of a reporter standing outside our school. "Children at North School have locked themselves into a classroom following the murder of fellow school student, Joanne McMurray. Police are questioning Joanne's rental mother, Sharon Abbott. Mrs. Abbott has been diagnosed with a psychological disorder and is currently under examination by police doctors."

"We need to give them the list," says Elly. "Now, while they're listening."

The High School sends over the letter for us to read. It uses words like 'uncomprising', 'exploitation' and 'disenfranchised' and sounds official. We write the names of all twelve schools on the bottom, and send it out to all the news stations. Then we sit in front of the screen and wait.

All the television stations read out our list. One says we're heroes, building a better world. Another calls us hooligans. Late in the afternoon, the Prime Minister comes on and asks us to stop the other schools striking. He's willing to listen to us.

Tim doesn't believe him. "We shouldn't come out till they agree to the list."

Elly calls up the news people and speaks live on camera. "Until the Prime Minister agrees to our list, we're staying right here at school and if anyone tries to make us leave, we'll set off the bomb." She uses her mini-phone to show them the bomb.

We turn the screen off after the report.

"I'm hungry," says Tess.

"We'll break into the vending machine," says Tim and kicks it.

"You can't do that! We'll get in trouble," I say.

"We've built a bomb," says Tim gently. "I don't think they're going to care all that much about a vending machine."

We share around the chocolates and packets of nuts. Kenny hogs the bacon flavoured chips.



The lights and big screen blink off while I'm reading a story to Tess and Jack. Grey light filters in around the paper we've stuck up to cover the windows.

"Blackout," someone says, and Jack squeals in pretend fear.

"They've turned off the electricity," says Elly. "They're trying to scare us out."

As the afternoon wears on, the air in the classroom gets hot and smells of dirty socks. The little kids are sleepy. The rest of us watch the news on Deb's mini phone and trade calls with the other schools. It's Tim who sees the men with the

robot arrive. They're wearing padded jackets and special helmets to protect them. He calls us over to the window.

"They use robots like that to defuse bombs," he says. "So no-one gets hurt if it explodes."

I look at our bomb by the door and feel scared. I don't want to die, not yet.

"We won't have to use it," says Elly. "They can't afford to lose this many children."

I hope she's right.

"Look!" I see Tim's Mum and Dad. They are standing out near the robot. There are other parents outside as well, real and rental.

The power comes on, and the Prime Minister appears on the main screen. He's looking right into the camera and smiling with big crocodile teeth. He says lots of big words and then some little ones. Then he promises to change the laws and apologises for not listening earlier.

"We've won!" shouts Elly. The room erupts in cheers. We get the other schools up on the screen, and they're all shouting and happy too. We all talk at once until Robert calls for quiet. He thanks Elly and all of us at North School. Our names, he says, will go down in history.

"How do we get out?" I ask, pointing at the door with the bomb still attached. "Do you know how to unmake it?"

Kenny goes kind of red. "I think we'd better climb out the window," he says.

Our class room is on the second story. We call through the door, and a fire engine comes with a big long ladder to get us out.

Principal Williams is out in the playground. He's got his serious face on. I bet he throws a surprise exam tomorrow, just to get even. That's what I'd do.



My real Mum and Dad collect me from school and hug me so tight I can't breathe.

"Why didn't you tell us you were unhappy?" Mum asks. I'm not sure how to answer. I didn't know I felt this way until Elly stood up and told us it was time for the future now.

I shrug and think about Jo-Jo, for whom things will never change.

Things are different, right up until bedtime when there's a knock on the door. It's the police. "We've got a court order for transfer of custody of your daughter," one of them says.

"You can't!" Dad tries to stop them, but two of them grab him and hold him back.

"A child is a privilege," the main officer says. "Not a right. You don't deserve to be parents."

"Where are you taking her?" asks Mum.

"She'll be allocated to parents who'll take proper care of her," says the policeman. "Ones who'll teach her about what's right".

I hear Mum crying my name as they push me into the car.

"I'll be good," I say to the policewoman sitting in the back seat with me. "If you let me stay, I'll be good."



I hate my new parents. I'm not allowed to use the phone, get on the internet or spend time with other kids. They can't stop us though. They have to take me out sometimes, to the shops, the doctor's. I see other children then. Last week I borrowed a book from the library and found a note in it. At other times we pass in the street and exchange a nod, or a hand signal. Kids talk.

At least Tess and Jack got to stay with their parents and Kenny ended up in a family that eats meat.

We will be the future, but not yet. We'll grow up one day and we won't forget. A cage is too nice.



Son Et Lumiere

...Ian Nichols

So I'm sitting in here. *Kind of Blue* plays. Not sure if Miles Davis wondered what he was doing, wondered what he was starting or finishing. Not sure if anyone is. Not sure if I'm right or wrong. Guess I won't.

I'm dying, that's for sure. Every day there's a little bit more of me that's necrotic, that bleeds or oozes pus, that dies. I fight it; I don't want to die, I really have more to live for than most. Hyperbaric oxygen, antibiotics, antivirals, just plain drugs to thin the blood, thicken the skin, stop the ooze. They bandage me, anaesthetise me, debride me, coat me with ointments and give me enemas full of all kinds of good stuff. They feed me the best that I can choke down. Mostly soup. I'm a long way beyond steak or lobster, so I have to make do with beef consommé and lobster bisque. And wine. And spirits. Doctor Bense tells me, in his monotonous voice, that it's not good for me, that each D'Yquem, each Latour, each Louis XIII and each MacAllan take a few minutes off my life. So half a dozen drinks a day equals a couple of weeks longer I'll be dead. Fair deal, if I can make the nut. It's better than it all going to waste. My friends don't seem to want the stuff any more.

I'm not rich, but I'm well-off, I can afford the best, and I know some people, some people know me. That's why I have bright, bright flowers everywhere, a Monet copy on one wall, a Modigliani and a Turner on a couple of others. Not prints, copies. The brush work is there, the textures, the colours. Generous friends. On loan. They know they'll get them back soon. In something less than six months. Those are the ones who pity me, or admire me, or whatever. There are some who think I'm just fucking stubborn. There are other who think I'm trying to make a statement. I'm not. I couldn't care less what other people do.

I developed the plague eight months ago, when I was thirty-two.

They already had the cure.

By cure, I don't mean vaccine. They couldn't stop anyone from getting it. They tried, and the volunteers died. But it could be treated.

Neoprionic Systemic Breakdown. Transmitted by birdshit. Tiny bits of mutant protein left in the faeces of birds that aren't affected by the disease. It

gets into the grain the birds crap on, then you get it, but you don't know until the first symptoms show. Bits of you go black and die. And it's here to stay.

Thirty-two years old. Lucky me. Lucky just about everyone. Lucky they found a cure.

People rotted and dropped dead in third world countries, where the stockpiles of grain aren't high enough to stop the disease from going right into the food chain. The horror, the horror. Wise old heads and clucking tongues on CNN. Then it's horror in downtown Muskogee, and gibbering panic.

Guns to febrile heads, researchers abandoned little things like cancer and malaria. There was only one disease to be researched. NSB. More than two billion died. But, Jesus, they could move fast when it was their arses on the line. They couldn't prevent the disease, but they could cure it.

There's a nurse. Jo's her name. She wants to give me the needle. One stick, I'm not sick. No.

"Take it," she says. "Don't be a stubborn little fuck."

I offer her some lobster bisque. I offer her some D'Yquem.

"You little shit," she says, and leaves the room.

There's a doctor. "It's your right to refuse treatment," he says. I know that. I've been doing it for eight months. "You have so much to live for," he says. I know that. I've been doing it for eight months.

It's a little Mozart now. The flute concerto. Bliss.

They shuffled in a pretty famous guitarist, a month or so ago. Another friend, another donor. It was embarrassing. He couldn't get it right, couldn't play, couldn't sing. Eventually he said, "This is pretty bad, man," and left. He walked out of the hospital, straight into a car. The car was doing about eighty. Suicides are on the up. Wonder why.

I played one of his albums afterwards. He was good. Icon. Now dead. Maybe twice over.

One shot. I don't think they mean to torment me with it. God, I want to live! There were all those things I could have heard. All those things I could have seen, could have smelled and tasted. I try to cram them in. Truffles are soft enough to stay down. The scent of Chanel on the skin of a woman. I'm not north or south enough for auroras, but I look at the sky. Sunsets, dawns, stars, moon and sun. I want the tracteries of high clouds, the thousand reds the sky can turn. They mow the lawn, and I ask them to open the window, to smell the fresh-cut grass. A lemon, the taste of milk, colours.

They're cured. They can't hear it. They can't see it, can't taste it, can't smell it.

Jo's back. "Take the bloody shot! Take the bloody cure!" she shouts. She can't hear the monotone her voice has become. Another nurse comes in and takes her away. Her world is grey.

The doctor comes back. "Sorry about that," he says. "I, uh, she, uh, she's a very sympathetic person."

No. She wants to be justified. I should be as she is. I prefer the taste of coffee. If I could persuade her, if I had the strength, I would prefer the taste of her. I would kiss her, lick her, inhale her scent, taste the sweetness of her, the salt. It would probably kill me.

That's a laugh.

She could never return the favour.

Ray Charles, *Georgia*, live at Madison Square Garden. "Do you miss it?" I ask.

"No. Not enough to die," she says.

I would. The cure would take it all. NSB starts in the brain, so the cure starts there. Tracing down every corrupt pathway, mending it, and killing those centres that register tone, scent, colour as a small side-effect.

Hell, those researchers, they were in a hurry.

Back to Miles Davis, *Sketches of Spain* this time.

I could have chosen the cure. Grey life. Almost everybody else did.

I didn't. I guess I like colour too much, like taste, like music.

It's probably a sin. I'll probably go to hell. Maybe those who are cured are already there.



The Last Deflowerer

...Karen Maric

Behind a desk in an office sits one of the last practising Deflowerers; straight-backed as a church pew, he pens reports in an elegant hand. He is a tall man, cadaverous of frame and grey of hair. A tombstone-shaped nose separates two ink-black eyes buried deep within ravines of grey flesh. There are streets named after this man. His visage graces bronze busts and etchings in every office window in this great city of grey brick and slate. His statue — erected by the Grey Man himself, no less — dominates Glorïae Parade.

Yet hanging over his office like an odourless smell lurks an atmosphere of imminent decay. Many a visitor to this office has imagined a swipe of their finger along the dark wood surfaces shall stir up clouds of dust and desiccated spiders. Or that a fingertip pressed to the wainscoted walls shall reveal the spongy texture of things decomposing, rather than the hard smooth feel of oak. Yet neither dust nor things decomposing mar the neatness of the office. And so its visitors are left to gaze about and wonder: what on Altus convinced them there was?

The man behind the desk once believed himself all that stands between order and utter, bacchanalian mayhem. His name is Salus Sententiae.

The smell of decay comes from his dying beliefs.



Salus Sententiae's credocom rings with the melancholy yet graceful notes of his once-favourite tune — Paene Obliviscor's magnum opus, *Ode to an Uprooted Flower*.

Salus freezes. How he dreads news of another sprouting!

Before answering the call, he slides a sheet of paper under the grey baize blotter on his desk, hiding it. Sketches of bell-shaped flowers cover the paper. Interspersed with the flowers are arrow-shot hearts encircling the initials 'SS + VM'.

Salus reaches for his credocom. The device renders his secretary Miss Monitus's voice tinny, yet cannot disguise her coarse accent. That throaty,

nonchalant voice arouses flutters in Salus's belly — a sensation that is delicious and disturbing in equal amounts.

"There's been another sprouting, Sir," his secretary reports.

Salus's long, manicured fingers drum a fierce rhythm upon the blotter. "An upright woman should report that with fear, Miss Monitus. Not nonchalance."

"My apologies, Sir," she says, sounding anything but apologetic, "but I an't upright, an' we both know it."

"Indeed." Salus sighs wistfully. He feels breathless. He struggles to concentrate on the matter at hand. "Where was the weed found?"

"At 66 Liberum-street, Sir. Inside one o' them albinising factories. Sprouted up through a crack in the floor, they say."

"Just the one seedling?"

"Ay, Sir."

"Victims?"

"Victims?" says Miss Monitus. "One fellow did sniff it, Sir, if that's what ye mean."

"I see." He sighs again. "Well, sharpen my secateurs and ready my kit, shall you? And tell them I shall be on my way immediately."

Despite that assurance, Salus makes no attempt to hurry. With slow, reluctant movements, he replaces his credocom earpiece, his ink bottle and reports within the appropriate outlines inscribed on his desk. Eleven months have passed since first he traced those lines around his personal possessions, soon after Miss Monitus began working for him. She has an unsettling habit of rearranging his belongings when she dusts, and the outlines ensure she replaces everything where it belongs.

Still dallying, Salus strides to the window, where he stands with his hands clasped behind his back. Before him spreads the city of Vendo. Beneath a lead-grey sky, the city's manufactories and foundries, workhouses and slaughterhouses lie in serried grey ranks, hemmed in to the north by the steely-grey strip of the River Doloris.

"Somewhere amidst all that orderly greyness a single brilliant splash of vegetative colour exists — danger of the most pernicious and dastardly kind," murmurs Salus, rehearsing lines he shall soon repeat to hordes of eager journalists, "and against it, I *shall* prevail." A distinct lack of conviction taints his tone.

Studying his bone-thin reflection in the mirror, Salus draws on his grey-and-black pinstripe frock coat, smooths his powdered grey ringlets, and positions his top hat on his head so the brim is exactly horizontal. Then, having no further excuses for delaying the inevitable, he steps into the foyer—

—and, spying Miss Monitus, is gripped by paralysis.

Enamel earrings in a forbidden red-and-gold hue dangle from Miss Monitus's petal-pink ears. *Flower-shaped* earrings. The lurid jewels accentuate her dramatic colouring till her night-black hair, her fine pale skin, her eyes of jet seem to fill Salus's entire field of vision. The musky scent of her cheap perfume dizzies him. It

occurs to him she would look even more bewitching in a gown of crimson, rather than her grey worker's pantaloons and smock.

What a wicked thought!

"I must insist you remove those baubles before stepping outside, Miss Monitus," he says, recovering his poise. "For your own safety — you do understand."

Miss Monitus fingers the earrings, but makes no move to unclip them. Nor does she try to defend her transgression. She says only, "I know how t' avoid the Constabulary, Sir."

Salus has no wish to discover how she knows that.

He hefts his iron-bound leather Deflowerer's kit from her desk. "All packed?" he asks.

"Course, Sir." She lowers her voice. "Sir — forgive me fer prying, but...but I were wondering — d'ye truly believe a bit o' brightness in our lives would be such a crime?"

Not for the first time, Salus wonders if Miss Monitus might be an agent for the underground Rainbow Leftist Party. Strange, how she appeared on his doorstep the very same day his previous secretary, the withered and taciturn Miss Durus, succumbed to old age. Salus supposes he should report his suspicions about her to the Grey Shirts, yet he knows he never shall.

"Actually, I—" Salus stops, clears his throat, looks away.

He must never voice his doubts to her, he tells himself.

In a firm, pompous voice that makes some part of him wince, he says, "When first I became a Deflowerer, Miss Monitus, my mentors told me, 'Remember, young Salus — only lesser men succumb to the temptations of the glimmerflower. That is why *you* were chosen to serve as a Deflowerer.' We Deflowerers must be ever strong, Miss Monitus. Ever steadfast. Ever *heroic*."

Miss Monitus snorts. "And do it take a stronger, more heroic man to kill something because 'e's been ordered to — or to ignore 'is orders, an' let it live?"

"That should depend upon one's understanding of what 'strong' and 'heroic' mean, I should think."

"Indeed. An' words 'ave a habit of changing their meanings, don't they, Sir? Take, fer example, the word 'deflower'. Once, it meant—"

Salus interrupts, "I know what it meant, Miss Monitus."

"Do ye?" Although her cheeks are flushing, Miss Monitus lifts her chin and bestows on him the defiant look that he has come to recognise means she shall not be silenced. "And did ye also know, Sir, that in times past, folk didn't kill flowers. Instead, they grew an' harvested 'em, an' lovers exchanged 'em as tokens o' their affection. A quaint custom, don't ye think?"

"No — a ridiculous, even dangerous, custom."

When her face clouds over, Salus's heart plummets. When shall he learn to avoid entering into these heretical conversations with her?

He strides to the door. There, he turns back to her, desperate to make peace in the only way he knows. "I shall be gone for some time. You may take the remainder of the day off..." He hesitates, and adds, "Farewell...Venia."

After eleven months of adoring her in the deepest, most secret chambers of his heart, this utterance of her first name is the closest he has ever come to flirtation. Waves of thrilling crimson wash over Miss Monitus's cheeks.

Aghast at his own forwardness, Salus Sententiae spins about, and hurries down the stairs.



Excerpt from a Speech by Duke Duxdurum, given to the Parliament during the Hearing into the Flower Rebellion:

The lower classes shall ever petition we nobles for a return of the glimmerflower, for they lack the moral fortitude necessary to resist such a temptation, thanks to their base parentage. Indeed, it is utterly beyond the lower classes' capacity to fear for their own souls. Therefore we must do it for them.

The Deflowerer's Training Manual, 17th edition, page 136.



Salus Sententiae should be planning for his upcoming ordeal, yet he cannot stop recalling the way Miss Monitus's cheeks flushed when he murmured her first name.

The hansom cab halts outside 66 Liberum-street. Salus climbs out, his stomach churning.

Soot thickens the air. Factories squat on either side of the street belching smoke and steam. As if from the stomach of some gargantuan beast, interior rumblings issue forth from engines and machines encased within hides of grey brick. No taverns or dance-halls or flowerbeds disrupt Liberum-street's industriousness.

Salus tugs the hem of his frock coat into place and smooths his hair with his palms.

The great tambour doors of the factory roll up. The Master Magus-Albiner stumbles out. His face is a doughy oval of fear. He catches Salus's arm and hauls him forward, into the clamour and steam of the manufactory interior.

"Thank the Grey Man you have made it in time! 'Tis near the albinising vats. Follow me, Sir. Quick!"

Salus peels the man's fingers off his arm. "Compose yourself, man, or you shall be the laughing stock of your workers. We must lead by example."

Still, the Master Magus-Albiner catches Salus's arm again, hauling him forward. Salus refrains from repeating his warning. These days, it seems his words fail to inspire confidence.

Inside the factory, Salus and the Master Magus-Albiner stride past tremendous conveyor belts bearing all manner of polychromatic life-forms towards the vats: emerald-green trees, bawling caramel-coloured calves, caged parrots with feathers of scarlet, cerulean, citrine. Those creatures already albinised emerge sodden — yet pure, pale-grey — from the vats at the far end of the belts.

The workers straighten up to stare at Salus Sententiae. Fear and respect mingle on their gaunt faces. Their whispers reach Salus:

“They reckon ‘e’s snipped one fowsand, six hunnerd an’ forty-free in ‘is career. That’s three hunnerd more ‘n any uvver Deflower.”

Four hundred, actually, but Salus feels no desire to boast.

The whispers become more dangerous, more unsettling:

“It’s gotta catch up wif a fella after a time, all that killing. ‘E looks nigh tormented, don’t ‘e?”

“An’ so ‘e should! I reckon ‘e should just leave that pretty flower be. Let it grow, I say!”

“Ye ask me, ‘e looks worse ‘n tormented. He looks like a walking rain cloud! So grey and dour.” So says a young woman bent over the gauges on a furnace. Sweat glues her hair to her cheeks; she has rolled her grey pantaloons right up over her thin white knees. Many of the female workers, especially those pumping the bellows to heat the furnaces below the vats, are clad likewise. Salus, his face hot, averts his gaze. He wonders if Miss Monitus thinks he resembles a rain cloud.

Then he imagines her bare-kneed, and the image threatens to choke him.

Past the hissing boilers, cackling furnaces and rows upon rows of whispering workers he stumbles, blind to his surroundings.

At the rear of the factory, workers armed with steel tongs seize multicoloured glasswing bugs from a conveyor belt and dip the bugs into steaming cauldrons of albinising fluid. The Master Magus-Albiner presses the conveyor belt’s black stop button. The conveyor belt hisses, squeals, clunks to a halt. The glasswing bugs awaiting albinising flop about helplessly. Tiny shackles render them flightless.

Behind the conveyor belt, Salus spies a group of workers hunkered over a writhing grey shape upon the floor. Wild, unfamiliar hooting noises erupt from the shape. It is a man, Salus realises. A man rolling about and clapping his hands and laughing.

A sudden urge to join in the laughter grips Salus. He bites the inside of his cheeks, hard.

Gazing at the hysterical worker, the Master Magus-Albiner shakes his head. “And this at the start of his twenty-hour shift! Can naught be done to fix him, Sir?”

“I am afraid he’ll not be able to work for days now that he has inhaled,” says Salus. “You’d best send for the asylum cart. The lad must be kept locked up till the effects wear off — such displays of gaiety are oft times contagious.”

The Master Magus-Albiner shudders. “The Grey Man forbid all my workers should be so incapacitated!”

Salus eases behind the conveyor belt to face the flower responsible for the hooting fellow's loss of control. He clenches his fists. His palms are running with sweat.

Has Miss Monitus noticed how close *he* is to losing control of late?

And — more importantly — would it perturb her if he did?

Salus thinks not.



An Excerpt from Ruere Pulchrum's *Flowercide: Or, My Ruminations on the Battle against Campanuloideae Luminis*.

Campanuloideae Luminis — or, as it is commonly known, the glimmerflower — is a rather innocuous-looking plant. Or so thought I when first I observed its frail and slender stems and serrated oval leaves. But it is innocuous only until it flowers. Then it sets forth a veritable orgy of blooms, each of which features a campanulate corolla of a particularly cloying crimson.

Then, it becomes dangerous.

Our forefathers, barbarians that they were, were given to dyeing their robes a shocking pink with a colorant manufactured from the stamen of the glimmerflower, and to inhaling the fragrance of Campanuloideae Luminis, a scent which temporarily bestows upon the inhaler a powerful state of arousal. They were also given to imbibing an intoxicating beverage brewed from its leaves. Much lascivious and licentious behaviour hence ensued, characterised by prolonged periods of singing, carousing, and dancing — oft unclothed. In those days, public fornication was not unheard of. Indeed, the histories abound with tales of wicked and unnatural couplings too grotesque to mention.

And thus a culture locked in barbarism enveloped our fair land of Fugere. A culture in which the widespread existence of sin rendered moral and intellectual development impossible. And if not for the First Imperator-Grey gathering about him those heroic men known as the Deflowerers, our world would still be steeped in sin. If the Imperator had not given the order for flowercide, for the uprooting and poisoning of those vast fields of crimson flowers, we would still be naught but semi-naked barbarians, as ignorant and superstitious as the southern races remain to this day.

All praise the Imperator-Grey and our staunch Deflowerers!

The Deflowerer's Training Manual, 17th edition, page 596.



The flower dominates the factory floor like a single splash of paint on an otherwise empty canvas. It *glows*. A brilliant crimson nimbus surrounds the petals, softening their edges, making the flower appear as hazy and glorious as a daydream. A tantalising scent drowns out the ammonia fumes of the vats. A sweet, musky, thrilling scent. Perchance how a woman might smell after...

Salus, shocked by the turn of his thoughts, stops breathing. It takes him a moment to recover. He straightens up.

“Back away, lads, lasses, back away,” he orders the workers.

They scuttle backwards and press themselves against the walls.

Salus snaps open his kit and withdraws his mask. He fits it over his face and wobbles it to check the seal. Perfect. Not a mote of fragrance shall reach him. He withdraws his stout leather gloves. Then his secateurs.

He kneels before the flower.

The petals, a deep, purplish-red at their bases, lighten to a pale, perfect crimson at their tips. They look as velvety and plump as flesh.

How would those petals smell, a quarter-inch from his nostrils?

Red as sin, the glimmerflower, so the natural philosophers say. Red as blood, Salus reminds himself. Red as lust.

Red as Miss Monitus’s lips, when she murmured to him that once lovers exchanged flowers as tokens of their affection.

To his shame, Salus freezes, secateurs inches from the bloom.

Shocked curses penetrate his consciousness. He glances up. The wide-eyed workers have crept nearer, and now gape at him. By tonight *everyone* in Vendo shall know how the great Salus Sententiae hesitated. Rumour-mongers at the rear of the crowd are undoubtedly even now asserting that his steadfastness, his uprightness, is on the wane.

Salus wriggles his fingers on the secateurs handle, seeking a firmer grip. To the nobles you are a *hero*, he reminds himself. A hero who knows naught of women. *Flowers* are all you know.

And all he knows is how to kill them.

He lunges at the plant, secateurs open, and severs the stem.

The flower hits the floor with a tiny hopeless sigh, a sound like a kiss missing the cheek of its intended recipient and instead meeting air.

The Master Magus-Albiner slumps in relief.

Before the plant can heal itself, Salus draws his dibble from his kit and drills several holes into the cracks in the floor near the plant’s roots. He pours a phial of lacrim poison into the holes. The poison — made from the tears of violet-winged luna birds as they are albinised — causes the flowerless stem to wither, to fall to the ground in a swoon. There, it shrivels and fades, first to a motley green, then to a spotty brown, and finally, a dead black.

Salus’s eyes are stinging. Blinking frantically, he plucks the limp plant-corpse from the ground with his tongs, and drops it into an iron coffer. But even as he staggers to his feet, another glimmerflower shoots up through a crack in the floor,

three feet to his right. Multiple flowers sprout upon its stems; scents both subtle and arousing penetrate his mask.

Salus flings himself down beside the plant. He snips, pierces, and poisons.

The sounds of scarlet flowers falling brush moth-soft in his ears. Sounds of loss, of ruined love affairs, of colour and laughter banished.

Several female workers have shuffled closer. Yet another glimmerflower unfurls from the floor. Salus shoves the nearest woman out of harm's way. "Beware!" he cries. "Get back, you cursed fools!"

Flowers reach skywards through a great web of cracks in the floor. Before him, behind him, to his right... The workers jostle and crane to see Salus Sententiae, who dives at one flower, rolls to meet another, and snips, pierces, poisons.

To Salus it seems he is lost in a forest of bare female limbs. On hands and knees, he shoves a path through them, and snips, pierces, poisons.

Are these commoners *trying* to hinder him? Frantic, he waves them back. "Move away! *Move away!*"

Ignoring him, the workers chant, "Let the flower grow! Bring brightness back into our lives!"

Creamy knees and calves crowd his vision. The women's legs look as smooth, as silky, as the glimmerflower petals. Whimpering, groaning, Salus drags his kit along behind him and struggles towards the next flower.

"Let it grow!" plead the workers.

Salus grits his teeth. "No."

And he snips. Pierces. Poisons.



Twenty-four flowers fall to Salus Sententiae that day on Liberum-street — the record number of deflowerings in the last two hundred years. Afterwards his name is inscribed in gilt letters six feet high in the Hall of Heroes. But that night, alone in his bachelor's mansion, Salus dreams of giant flowers marching on him with secateurs of their own gripped in leafy hands. In his dream he skittles backwards, gibbering like a madman. Yet on reaching him, the flowers lay their secateurs at his feet, like offerings to a cruel god, and stretch out their vulnerable stems. Awaiting decapitation.

Salus wakes to find he is weeping.

Never has he felt so alone.



Five days later, Salus is summoned to a sprouting on Altum-street.

As he prepares to depart his office, the daguerreotypes on his office wall snare his attention. The daguerreotypes depict Salus Sententiae in all aspects of his work. Salus Sententiae, kit in hand, striding forth to do battle against the forces

of nature. Salus Sententiae, waving at his legions of adoring well-wishers cheering him to the front. Salus Sententiae, staring unflinchingly into the silky, scarlet face of ruin. Salus Sententiae, thrusting his secateurs heavenward in triumph.

Regarding the man in those images, Salus feels the same intense and visceral dislike one feels on meeting a stranger one instantly detests.

“Salus Sententiae — the great Deflowerer,” he murmurs to himself, and irony sharpens his tone.

Miss Monitus’s perfume envelops him as she steps up behind him. “Countless times I’ve wondered,” says she, soft-voiced, “as anyone yet ‘ad the pleasure of deflowering ye, Sir Salus Sententiae?”

His heart somersaults in his chest, then thunders on at thrice its usual speed. Unable to breathe or to speak, Salus stares into her beautiful dark eyes: amusement glitters there. One of her dark brows arches, inviting his response.

Salus seizes his kit and bolts out the door, blood roaring in his ears and setting his face a-fire.

Reaching the kerb, he halts, gasping for air.

To his amazement, an ornate hansom cab waits outside his office. The coachman and the footmen wear the livery of the Grey Man himself — the Ninth Emperor of Vendo. A magnificent team of four lacquer-coated geldings toss their heads and paw at the pavement. A tiny, mirthless smile curls Salus’s lips. The Emperor has obviously heard of his Deflowerer’s recent hesitations. This must be his way of saying, *Chin up, old boy!*

“His Greyness himself ordered me to transport you wherever you must go from now on, Sir,” the coachman confirms. He is an unpleasant-looking fellow with a long, oily pigtail and a balding pate. His expression sly, he adds, “His Greyness also informed me that he is exceedingly pleased with you. He wishes to commission another statue of you to be erected in Tantus-square, once you vanquish the seven flowers that have sprouted on Altum-street.”

Salus stifles a groan. “Seven at once?”

“Aye, seven. A trifling job for the great Salus Sententiae, think you not, Sir?”

“Trifling,” Salus repeats faintly.

One of the footmen relieves him of his kit. Another opens the cab door and unfolds the step. Salus sinks onto the padded seat inside the cab. Alone, he allows himself to slouch against the cab wall and rest his pounding head in his hands.

The cab jerks forward. Hulking grey factories streak past the windows.

Miss Monitus’s words reverberate about his skull. *As anyone yet ‘ad the pleasure of deflowering ye, Sir Salus Sententiae?*

The pictures her words evoke in Salus’s mind make him sweat and shiver as if he has been tossed upon hot coals and submerged in an ice bath, all at once.

In an effort to regain his focus, Salus snaps open his kit and draws out his whetstone and secateurs. After a discreet spit onto the stone, he begins rasping his blades across the surface, making a sound as unpleasant as nails on a chalkboard.

A whispering near his feet causes Salus to glance down.

A pale-green shoot pokes between his mirror-polish brogues. Blind, it sways, lengthens, searching for the sunlight. The seedling's tip curls about itself like a tiny vegetal foetus.

A cold, hard lump of dread coagulates in the pit of Salus's stomach. Such a tiny thing; such a pretty thing, and he has already killed so very many...

Groaning, he lowers his secateurs towards it.

The seedling unfurls. A slender arm-like stem embraces his ankle. Salus's fingers twitch. His secateurs crash to the floor and shoot through the gap beneath the cab door. They hit the cobblestones with the high, clear ring of metal on stone.

Frozen, Salus watches the seedling rise. Within seconds it reaches his knees. Bell-shaped flowers form atop it. Pale pink at first, their colour soon grows deeper, richer, redder...

One of the flowers bends its face towards Salus's, as if offering itself. For an instant, Salus contemplates plunging his hand into his kit and withdrawing his spare secateurs.

Instead, he leans forward, and inhales.



Miss Monitus is dusting Salus Sententiae's office — between pausing to sigh over the myriad heart and flower drawings she has discovered hidden under his blotter — when the door bursts open.

A balding coachman in the Grey Man's livery stands there, panting.

"Fetch some blankets and make ready a sofa, lass," he says. "Your employer's been wounded in action. I'll haul him upstairs."

"Wounded? *Haul* him?" Miss Monitus scowls. "Sir Salus Sententiae's a right important personage — ye'll not be hauling 'im nowhere!"

She pushes past the coachman and hurtles downstairs to check on Salus Sententiae herself.

On the grey flagstones by the door, she stops, mouth open, and stares.

And then she laughs, as giddy and breathless as a child on a merry-go-round.

Because before her stands a hansom cab awash with scarlet flowers and emerald-green leaves. Slender green fronds twine about the cab's wheel spokes; brilliant flowers burst from the spaces between its wall panels. And in the air, there lingers the most delicious scent. Discernible even above the soot and coal-smoke, that scent evokes memories of her grandmother's oat biscuits fresh from the oven, of lavender-scented bed sheets, of her dear old papa's cologne.

And sprawled on the cab's step is Salus Sententiae. His hat is askew on his head. The wide smile on his face is an expression entirely at odds with Miss Monitus's understanding of her employer's nature, yet it is an expression she has oft longed to see.

Smiling, Salus Sententiae looks relaxed, and very debonair.

With a little bow, he extends a bouquet of flowers towards her.

21st Century Nursery Rhymes, #126:

I Had A Little Nut Tree

Traditional, revised by Simon Petrie

I HAD A LITTLE NUT TREE,

NOTHING WOULD IT BEAR,

BUT A SILVER NUT-MEG

AND A GOLDEN PEAR.

MONSANTO AND GENENTECH

COMPENSATED ME,

ALL FOR THE SAKE

OF MY LITTLE NUT TREE.



The Sea Inside

...D Gullen and M Owton

Padraig tasted salt as the wind slapped a burst of spray into his face. Wiping his face with the sleeve of his jacket, he looked at the stocky figure of Enda, taking in the cropped sandy hair and the boils on the back of his thick neck.

I don't know what Aoife sees in him, he thought and spat over the side.

Another white-crested wave flung itself across the curragh, leaving Padraig ankle deep in water. "S'gettin rough. The weather's coming in." He shouted over the wind to make himself heard. "We should go in now. We have enough."

Glancing at the reed basket that held the day's catch, Padraig bent to bail with a battered leather bucket, the muscles of his back sending needle-sharp reminders of their stiffness. To the north of them he could see two other boats pulling for the island.

"I'm not afeared of a bit of weather," Enda shouted back at him. "We've another hour before the tide turns. We'll shoot the net one more time." He scooped up a flagon of liquor and took a swig. "Take a drop of this. Help you find your courage."

"No," said Padraig as he heaved another bucketful of water over the side. *Drinks too much. Just like his father.*

The curragh slid down the face of another wave as Enda hefted the net over the side, running the wet ropes through his hands. Padraig watched him sourly. *I gave my word to Aoife that I'd teach him the ways of the sea, but he has no mind to listen.* Memories of his wife tugged painfully at his heart. *Caitlin wouldn't have had any time for him.*

A loop of rope caught around Enda's ankle, tripping him as they hit the trough. The little boat twisted sideways. Enda pitched over the side without a cry.

Padraig stared after him open-mouthed. In all his years at sea, this was the first man who had gone overboard from a boat he'd been in, but he knew the tradition well. *If the sea takes them, then they belong to her. To rescue them invites disaster upon us all.* But still he caught the rope as it paid out, fastened it to a cleat on the gunnel and searched the grey-green water for his daughter's chosen.

Enda surfaced a few yards away, clinging to the rope that had tripped him. Like all the other islanders, he could not swim.

"Pull me out," he cried, eyes staring wildly.

Padraig gripped the rope with half-numb hands, paralysed with indecision: *if he drowns there's no father for Aoife's child, but the sea has put its claim on him.*

Another wave submerged Enda. For a moment Padraig wondered if the decision had been made for him, but his head reappeared, pale against the dark water.

Padraig had a brief vision of Aoife's face as he told her the news that her sweetheart was drowned, and then hauled on the rope to bring Enda to the boat.

Neither man spoke as they rowed back to the shore, struggling against the rising sea. By the time they reached the stony beach Padraig was as wet as if he'd been the one overboard. Silently they hauled the curragh out of the reach of the waves and unloaded the day's catch.

Padraig was beginning to think that no-one had seen the incident when the men arrived with the priest at their head.

Yes, they would wait for the priest. They would do nothing without him.

These men Padraig had known all his life, more than half of them his relatives, stood in a half circle facing the two fishermen, their faces grim. Padraig began to shiver as the keen wind sliced through his sodden clothing. The priest pushed forward, sea-bleached driftwood staff in his hand, black sailcloth cloak flapping in the wind.

"Which of ye is it that belongs to the sea now?" he demanded, his thin voice straining against the roaring of the surf. "There's many that saw. Ye know the law of the islands. Speak up now."

A few women had joined the half circle. Padraig was thankful Aoife was not among them. He glanced at Enda. The younger man was grey-faced and shivering, his eyes wide in panic looking from one face to another. There was no sympathy to be seen in any of them.

"You'll bringing ruin on us all," cried the priest. "Speak."

The first stone was a surprise. It flew wide of them and clattered against the rocks beside the curragh. Padraig turned quickly at the sound, but was not quick enough to identify the thrower. His eye caught a movement in the crowd, a swirling mane of wild dark hair, and he ducked as another stone whizzed by between him and Enda. *Owain McDonaugh. He always was a troublemaker.*

"Enough," the priest turned to the islanders. "This will be done according to our traditions or not at all." He turned back to face Padraig and Enda. "I'll ask ye for the third time. Which of ye is it that belongs to the sea now?"

Padraig looked again at Enda. There was just animal fear in his eyes. *And he is Aoife's choice. Caitlin would have been disappointed.*

With that one pang of regret he stepped forward and spoke. "I do."



“Oh, Da,” Aoife cried, standing behind the rough table in the single room of their cottage.

“Aoife,” Padraig began, then realised he had no idea what to say next. No idea at all.

His daughter stared back at him, dark eyes round as saucers, a rag of old linen gripped in her hands. Padraig stood in the rushes in sodden boots, seawater dripping from his saturated, sagging woollens, and regarded the set of his only child’s mouth, the angle of her jaw. *Good girl*, he thought, *fine girl*. *Too strong to cry. Caitlin would be proud.*

Turf burned in the hearth, a welcoming fire Aoife, as Caitlin had taught her, always set for her men coming back in off the sea. Padraig moved towards it and Aoife backed away round the table.

“Aoife,” Padraig said gently, holding out his arms. “For the love of the Powers that Be, come to your da.”

His daughter shook her head, backed away. “I daren’t, Da.” Aoife gasped, knuckles white as her hands twisted the cloth. Her gaze fell to her still flat belly and she shook her head. “The sea, Da. The child. The risk.”

Despair swelled in the pit of Padraig’s stomach, rising up to fill his heart with emptiness. Standing with his back to the smoky hearth a great shudder wracked his body. “Enda will be here soon,” he said without conviction. “He’ll take care of you.”

“You’re wrong about him, Da. You don’t know him like I do. He’s a good man, a kind man, and he loves me.” She paused and then continued, her voice a choked whisper. “Ma would’ve understood.”

“I hope for your sake you’re right.”

Opening the old sea chest beside the hearth, salvage from a wreck decades past, Padraig took out his other set of clothes. “Now turn your back, child, let me change and I’ll be back down to my boat.”

Taking up the blanket from his cot, Padraig laid it across the table. Then he stripped, put on his dry clothes, wrung out the sodden ones and put them on the blanket. It was a moment’s work to gather his few tools, a plate and mug. Then he divided their bread, oatmeal, and dried fish into two uneven piles, taking the smaller portion for himself.

“I’ve taken a few things,” he said half apologetically. Aoife, back still turned, gave a single, curt nod.

Then he knotted the blanket corners together and without another word walked out from under the roof he had inherited from his father, the house in which he had first bedded his wife, and the home where he once had helped birth his daughter.



More desolate than the day the coughing sickness took Caitlin, Padraig slept on a bed of dried kelp under his upturned curragh, one edge raised up on driftwood props on the lee. Nobody would help him, nobody spoke to him, and each morning he manhandled the two-man craft through the surf on his own, cast his nets and cleaned his catch in solitude. Evenings he spent mending his nets.

By unspoken agreement he moved his boat a way along the shingle and fished apart from the rest of the little fleet. Still, his weather-luck and fish-luck held. He managed well enough.

A week passed. It almost felt like he had been ignored, forgotten, but Padraig knew it was not so. A different kind of storm was brewing, coming slowly, still beyond the horizon, but Padraig knew the wind from that gale was blowing straight at him. He could see it in the clots of men that gathered by the boats each dawn and dusk, by the dark glances they threw his way. The priest would be back.

The new moon brought a cloud-wracked sky. Surf pounded and sucked on the shingle under a stiff on-shore wind. An hour after the last lamps dimmed in the cottages Padraig took his gutting knife, ran crab-wise up the beach and crouched in the shadowed corner of the nearest croft. Disdaining to creep any further, Padraig walked down the grassy track fronting the line of single-storey cottages.

Slipping his knife under the latch of Enda's rickety door, Padraig ducked beneath the lintel and entered the dank hovel. He crouched, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, smelling the homely smells of damp wool and smoked fish. *By the powers*, Padraig thought. *This is even smaller than my own cottage, 'tis no place for Aoife.* The man Padraig sought, the one soon to be the father of his grandchild, snored under a single blanket in his cot. Stepping carefully around piles of fishing gear, Padraig clamped his hand over Enda's stubbled mouth, pressing the point of his knife against his ribs.

Enda came awake with a start, eyes wide, body jerking. Padraig leaned his weight on Enda's mouth, pricking his side with the knife. Enda exhaled in a rush, spittle blowing between Padraig's fingers.

"Quiet." Padraig hissed. "It is I, Padraig, father to Aoife, come to give you my last piece of advice."

An incoherent gurgle came from Enda's throat. Padraig released him, stepped back.

Enda swung his thick legs onto the floor and rubbed his face. "You're being a mad sod, Padraig. What do you want?"

"Your word, on your very life, that you'll make an honest woman of Aoife." Padraig emphasised each word with the gutting knife. Enda followed each stab and slice through the air with his eyes.

"What do you take me for?" Enda grumbled. "Aoife is my woman. She's told me she's with child, and I'll do what's right. You have bigger problems."

"Then marry her sooner rather than later and be rid of me. The cottage will be yours."

Slowly Enda got to his feet, his height making him stoop to avoid the rafters. "You never thought much of me."

"A little less drink, a little more caution." *And a little more soap and water.*

Enda growled in the back of his throat and Padraig hurriedly raised the knife. "For Aoife, I can change. The waters taught me what she's worth."

"That's to be seen." Padraig glowered at him in the gloom.

"Then it would surprise you to learn that I've already been to the priest to set the day," said Enda.

Padraig nearly dropped the knife. "It would," he said. "Greatly."

"A different man came out of the sea that day." Enda thrust out his hand. "My word on it."

Padraig sheathed his knife and took Enda's hand. Keeping his grip, he met Enda's eye. "And mine."

Enda fell back onto his cot. "Now, for the love of tomorrow's dawn, let me sleep."



Concealed under his upturned boat Padraig lay on his stomach and peered down the beach trying to make out detail as a keen north-westerly blew ragged clouds in from the sea. He knew Aoife would be beautiful: her long copper hair brushed and plaited, her body sheathed in Caitlin's dress of linen green as the summer sea, a posy of sea-pinks and hare-bells clutched in her hand as she and Enda walked behind the priest along the causeway revealed by the spring tide to temple rock. Cormorants drying their wings flapped heavily away from the mass of hexagonal black basalt columns as they approached

Festooned in rattling streamers of dried kelp and wrack, sailcloth cloak flapping, the priest stood with them on temple rock and blessed the union. Bobbing in their currachs around the rock, the rest of the village bore witness. Menfolk casually held the light craft close to the rocks while their wives clutched the gunwales, faces frozen in smiles while the children stared around in excited glee.

"Land uphold this union." The priest cried, thumping the end of his driftwood staff onto the basalt.

"Land uphold our union." Enda and Aoife replied.

"Sun look down on this union."

"Sun watch over our union."

Aoife was ready. When the priest thrust out his hand, she gave him her posy of flowers.

"Sea take its due from this union."

Enda clasped Aoife's hand. "We promise the sea its due from our union."

"So swear you."

“So we swear.”

Casting the flowers into the heaving water, the priest turned to face the fisher folk in their curraghs.

“Enda and Aoife are one. Sea, sky and land bind their marriage as is meet, right and proper.”

“Look!” Aoife cried, pointing out to sea. Heads turned, necks craned.

Enda thrust out his arm. “There!” A hundred yards from the gathered curraghs a porpoise rolled, leaped, sounded.

“The sea bears witness,” the priest cried in delight as more of the creatures appeared. Suddenly the grey water was alive with the animals, fins cutting the surface, wet flanks gleaming, tails flicking. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone.

“Sea bears witness,” chorused the villagers.



Aoife, Enda and the priest sat at the head of a U-shape of trestles and benches in front of the village row, facing the sea. Villagers sat along the sides, their children at the seaward ends.

Padraig stood, close enough to smell the food, and watched the villagers tuck in. It was a grand feast. *Better even than when Caitlin and I sat at the head of the table.* Honeyed oatcakes, jugs of milk, gulls’ eggs gathered from the cliffs, bowls of broth and dumplings, even a flitch of bacon and a short barrel of apples brought from the mainland. And fish. Smoked, baked, poached and pied, fish prepared in all the ways the village women knew.

Also fetched from the mainland was a keg of cider. Unused to its strength, many of the feasters soon became boisterous. Singing and table-thumping soon led to calls for music. Fiddle, bodhran and whistle appeared and Enda and Aoife were called to lead the reel as the fiddle player tuned up.

Padraig felt some of his tension for his daughter’s future drain away as they stepped forward. *She and the child will have a place now.* Somebody thrust a flask of whisky into Enda’s hand. Roaring with laughter, Aoife’s arm around his waist, Enda raised it to his lips. As he did, the scudding clouds revealed the sun, as a pair of fulmars wheeled overhead. The afternoon’s onshore breeze carried a salt-tang to Padraig’s face with the promise of heavier weather to come.

Putting down the flask, Enda took Aoife in his arms, kissed her to a chorus of cheers and lewd shrieks, then leapt up onto one of the trestles.

“Listen,” Enda cried, holding up his hands. “Listen to me.”

Faces turned towards him. At the rear of the crowd the priest turned and stared at Padraig. *Allow me this at least,* Padraig pleaded silently. As if he had heard him, the priest turned back to watch Enda.

“Today is an end as well as a beginning,” Enda said. “I know I’ve not been the man I might have, not worked as hard as I might, nor pulled my weight. There

in't much frightens me, and I'm not afraid to admit my faults. I know the debts I owe on this island." He smiled down at Aoife before him; she reached up and clutched his hand, eyes glistening. "This is the woman I love, she's my wife and carries my child. Yes, I'm not afraid to say that too, not that half of you don't already know. Aoife, hear my vow. I'm not going to change because I already have. That old Enda has gone, tomorrow is a new day, today marks our new life and I promise you it will be filled with glad hearts, full nets and long nights!"

"And a bath every week, need it or no." A voice cried from the throng.

"Ha, aye, even that too!" Enda cried, pulling Aoife up beside him.

Padraig blinked and brushed at his eyes. *Aoife saw to the heart of the man. I misjudged him.* A terrible longing and loneliness filled Padraig as he contemplated the rest of his life. *Now's as good a time as any,* he told himself. He looked down at the gathered villagers, Enda and Aoife at their centre. *All for the best,* he told himself. *Blessings be on you and my unborn grandchild.*

He turned away from the crowd and trudged down the track to the beach.



Padraig packed his few possessions into the curragh and dragged it into the surf. He bent his back over the oars, driving the craft away from the shore for the last time. The sea showed a few whitecaps, but his weather sense told him that rougher weather would come by nightfall. He rested for a moment and gazed back at the island. A seal popped its head out of the water almost alongside and looked at him with its soulful dark eyes. *Caitlin come to keep an eye on me,* thought Padraig. For a moment the thought brought tears to his eyes, but he bent to his oars again and the feeling passed.

He rowed steadily with no plan or direction, letting the currents take him. The light was fading fast as the wind drove in heavy cloud from the northwest. *Storm's coming,* thought Padraig. *Just as promised.*

Spray whipped across the frail craft driven by the wind leaving him chilled to the bone. As the daylight ebbed into darkness, he fell into a kind of dream where the sun seemed to shine warm on his back. The wave crests sparkled with phosphorescence and voices sang to him out of the depths. *The sea is calling me,* he thought as he worked the oars mechanically. *After all these years, it's where I belong.*

Hours rolled by as the boat was tossed on the waves, and at times he seemed to be looking down on himself labouring over the oars, expecting each moment to be pitched into the sea.

Finally Padraig stopped rowing and floated on the moonlit sea in his curragh, alone in a vast, moving waste of water. Shipping the oars, he drank the last mouthful of water from his water skin, then carefully got to his feet. "Here I am", he called out. "If you want me I'm here for the taking."

After a while he took his seat and began rowing again.



Early morning saw Enda up and about. He'd been careful not to drink too much after his speech and his head didn't feel too thick. Slipping out of his cot without waking Aoife, he turned at the door, looking down at her still sleeping form, red hair strewn across the pillow, and his heart swelled.

I'll make you proud of me, Enda promised, then went through the door, pulling his coat tight around him against the keen wind. He made his way down to the beach, stepping around the puddles left by the last night's rain.

There was a heavy swell running, but the roughest of the weather had passed he thought, wishing for a moment that he had Padraig and his weather sense with him. Manhandling the curragh through the surf, Enda jumped in and paddled away.

I'm not such a poor man now, he thought, *what with Padraig's cottage come to me through Aoife. I've a boat of my own and I can make a good life for her.*

There's a debt I cannot repay to you, Padraig. You never liked me and you were right to. But I've changed, everyone sleeps but see, here is Enda, up at dawn the day after his wedding. I cannot pay you back, so I'll give it to your bloodline, to Aoife and your grandchild. If it's a son he'll have your name, or Caitlin for a girl.

Then Enda bent his back to the oars, rowing out past the curve of the headland and out of sight of the village. When the rocky peak of the headland was in line with the mountain peak behind it, he halted. He tossed a handful of crumbs of oatcake from his wedding feast onto the water and then cast his net. *Bless this, my new life, with a good haul of herrings. Give me a sign.* He felt the tug as the current took the net and paid out the rope hand over hand. The rope reached its limit, he held it taut for a while imagining it billowing out down below. He hauled on the rope to draw the net back and it held fast as if caught by a rock. Enda frowned in puzzlement. *The water is deep around here.* He hauled on the rope with all his strength, feet braced against the boat, muscles straining, but it moved not at all. He relaxed and took a deep breath, wrapped a bight of rope around his forearm and prepared to haul again. The rope jerked irresistibly, pulling him off his feet and down into the sea.



Padraig was still gripping the oars when he woke. The morning sun shining through ragged cloud hurt his eyes. He released the oars and flexed his cold stiff fingers, trying to work some feeling back into them. Ahead of him, the surf broke on a grey rocky shore. Behind it, Padraig saw a patchwork of woods and small fields. A village with a walled harbour lay away to his right. The women clustered on the beach waiting for the men's return. One of them stood a little apart, her

dark hair tossed by the wind; something in her stance reminded him of Caitlin. He smelled the smoke of a peat fire. The smell of his new home.



All the curraghs were back from the search, the men standing in a knot around the priest beside the beached craft, their long shadows stretched across the ground from the setting sun. Further back a hesitant group of women stood. One moved towards Aoife, but others clutched her arm, pulling her back.

Aoife stood alone on the shingle, back to the wind, facing the choppy grey sea. Although the life growing inside her was too young to feel, somehow she felt it stir, somehow she knew it lived. *Oh my darling Enda where are you now? Do you wait for me on the sea bed all pale and cold?* Taking a step forward, then another, Aoife entered the sea, the low surf pulling heavily at her skirts. *One day wed is not enough. I married you forever.*

“Padraig MacDhomail denied the sea its due,” the priest told the men. “His taint touched his family, touched us all.”

Gaunt, hollow-eyed, Owain McDonagh hawked and spat. “Aye, that’s the way it must be.” He looked towards Aoife standing calf-deep in the water, the hunger written plain on his face.

The priest raised his arms, drew his fist in an arc over the sky like the sun in its course, spread his palm through the air like an ocean wave. “The sea cannot be denied. It has taken its rightful due from this union.”

Step by slow step Aoife walked forward until she was waist-deep in the sea.

Owain started forward, but the priest blocked him with his arm.

“Go to her.” The priest told the women.

Hurrying down the shingle, two women waded into the surf and took hold of Aoife’s arms.

Tears rolled down Aoife’s white cheeks as the women led her back to dry land.

“Strong, I’ll be,” she whispered. “Strong as a fisherman’s wife, strong as a fisherman’s daughter must be when the sea wants a man. Tears are just the sea inside, answering the call.”

Breeding Season

...Dave Luckett

The smoke trees are beginning to bloom again, heralding the season. I have always enjoyed watching them spread their colour on the distant hills. It's as if pools of still water were reflecting heaven, on slopes where no still water could be. I was a child when last I walked among them, up in the hills.

I have been a sire since, but this season I will return to the hills with the children and the old, as a celibate. The strongest newcomer will inherit the range I won, just as if I had died out of season. I shall leave this to him also, to explain why I shall not sire again.

My mother told me that my own sire had looked up at the hills in the same way. Even late in his third season, he had spoken words in praise of the beauty of the trees, forcing them out through the rage. "He must truly have loved them to do that," she said, watching the hills clothing themselves in colour, a softness on her face. "He succumbed shortly after."

I have often wondered why she said that to me, for it was just on the eve of my debut season. Possibly she might have been trying to dissuade me from going. She must have known that my chances were poor. But I thought them quite sufficient for a man of blood and spirit, one who did not intend to become a celibate — as I didn't, then. So I listened, but made my preparations anyway.

We had an unfailing stream. I bathed for long periods every day in running water, to keep my mind sharp for as long as possible. I ate enormously and slept much. In all fairness, I thought I would match any of the first-seasoners, and those who had survived one season without success. As always it was the sires that were the real problem.

The eve of the Days of Light came, when young men depart for the season, the sire and mothers stay, and the rest go to the hills. My mother said what is customary, and she wore the proper garments. Nevertheless, I thought to detect a sadness in her eyes and a certain immobility of her face, control rather than joy.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, bluntly. Already impatience and a feeling of distraction were gnawing at the edges of my mind. I found my attention flitting from object to object, unable to settle.

She reached up a hand as if to caress me, but dropped it again. “I am glad to see that you have grown so tall and strong, Hariru. You are quick, too, and that is good.” She tried to show pleasure. I am sure now that it was forced. At that moment, of course, I could hardly see such things. She made me the traditional gifts of food and a weapon — a long heavy knife, the grip her own make, but the blade of startrader’s metal, harder than any we could forge then. I fingered it, wild to be off.

The range-house had become stifling. It had been my home, but now it only irritated me, with its long hallways and airy rooms furnished with the graceful crafts of generations. I managed to cool my head a little in the stream, but that was the last day. The parting-feast was almost too much for me. I stuffed myself prodigiously, but slipped away before the final speeches. Whitesun was setting, while Redsun rode almost half-way to the zenith.

I travelled far that whitedark, moving as fast as I could in the light of Redsun alone. There was only the shortest period of alldarkness, and the following whitedark there would be none. The season would begin, and would last until Redsun left the sky once more, and the Days of Light were over. I had to move quickly, to be well away from my home-range.

Morning found me in boundary woods, and not far from a range-house. It stood on riverland, close to the stream itself. I was not sure how far I had come. I had been bold, though I had no idea of how bold.

This was well-populated country, with no more than half a day’s travel between one range and the next. Or it would have been well populated, outside the season. Now, of course, it was silent and empty, with no smoke arising from the chimneys of the range-house, and no activity around byres and pens, or in the wide fallow fields. There were only women here — and a sire. And young males from other ranges, hiding in the woods, as I was.

I was...well, I know this sounds strange...but I was *considering* the range-house. I did not know then what I know now, that this was something almost unheard-of. A first seasoner should not do that. Perhaps it helped me that the breeze blew from me to the range-house, though normally that would have been accounted an error. But at least I couldn’t catch the female heat-scent. I was not sent mad by it.

So my reaction when the sire swaggered out into the white sunlight was not to howl and charge, and that was well for me. He was rangy and tall rather than massive, but he had not come of his scars by chance. Nor had they slowed him.

I saw that within a few minutes. I stayed in cover, fingered my knife and formed in what remained of my mind the intention to wait at least until his back was turned. In the season this counts as cunning, a deep-laid strategy. It was, in fact, too subtle for the other first-seasoner who was hiding nearby.

He was on the other side, and was as unaware of me as I of him. We had both been concentrating solely on the range-house, of course. There were women there, but the scent blew from them to him. It was too much for him.

He broke cover, howling, and charged. He had a spear with a long bronze head, and he wore a hardened leather arm-guard. But he had already torn the rest of his confining clothing off, and the fury was full on him. He gibbered and foamed as he came, and his yard was hugely engorged.

The sire turned at the sound, slowly, almost lazily. It is a knife with two edges, to be a sire early in the season. He was sated, less furious, less powerful, and his movements were slower. But in exchange for this, he gained greater coolness, greater cunning. And the sire is inevitably better equipped than the interloper. He has all the resources of the range to call on, and need not carry his gear long distances.

This sire was wearing a leather plastron and a sinew helmet. He produced an assegai, a long iron spearhead on a handspan of blackwood haft, fell into a fighting crouch, and awaited the attack.

The other was moving in a blur, yowling and swiping at the air. He seemed simply to be transported with fury. I rose to my feet in the cover, feeling the fury myself, and then forced myself down again. Perhaps they would cripple each other, and I would have my chance without a fight. Unworthy, I know.

But if that were the hope, it failed. The entire encounter took a few seconds. The interloper had apparently forgotten even that his spear had a point. He sliced at the sire with the long blade, had it blocked, and then tried to close, to rake at the sire's eyes with the hand he took off the haft. The sire avoided the swipe, rolling his head. At the same moment he slid the assegai down the spear-shaft, easily pushing the blade aside, and stepped inside its sweep. His assegai looped and thrust, and that was all. The interloper received the point, angled upwards, into the abdomen. He was still spitting and snarling, still clawing and biting at the shoulders of the sire, but the sire ripped upward and then kicked him off, before backing away, blocking one last swing with the spear.

In his delirium the other might even have felt for a moment that his enemy was retreating from him. I doubt that he felt any pain. He took a step, almost half-turning towards the house where the women were, but death claimed him there. He fell on his face in the packed earth of the yard, his blood steaming on the ground.

That sight alone was almost enough to undermine me. I nearly followed his example, and certainly would have shared his fate. The sire had taken a few minor scratches to his shoulders, but would have had no more trouble in accounting for me. He grunted a call, and four women came out for the funeral. Again I almost lost control, but something held me back. After they had eaten their fill they demanded servicing, but even then I held out. They all went inside, the youngest woman grappling the sire almost before she was inside the doorway. I forced calmness on myself.

You, who read this, you are thinking: this is the confession of a natural celibate. One who helps with children and in childbirth, nurses the sick and keeps records and such, for want of more worthy employment, unable to pass goods on to offspring. One who has not only failed, but who never tried. A weakling.

Well, and what if it were? No range can exist now without celibates, and yet they are the hiss of the world. They have much to bear. Must they bear it in silence, never telling their own stories?

But this is not such a confession. I was a sire. This range was mine. I won it. Having won it, I leave it to you and I leave you this to warn you.

I waited. Alldarkness would not fall at all and the sire would not sleep until the season ended in thirteen or fourteen whitedays, but still the light was less bright under Redsun alone, and that brought hope of surprise. Surprise was my only chance. I curbed the urge to try my luck elsewhere. I watched and waited. I even remembered to eat.

The sire was as restless as I. The range-house would be confining, and soon he would come forth again to patrol his bounds, to snuff the wind, to show himself to potential challengers. Perhaps one of them might weaken him, or it was even possible that I might manage to sneak past. Not likely, though.

Senses become sharper, in the season. I was able to hear the passionate cries from the house, but I turned away, trying not to listen. The noises undermined my caution, and I was vaguely aware that this was a bad thing. I searched for distraction, and it was then that I noticed the spider. It was spinning a web between two twigs. I watched, and there was something there, something that spoke to me even over the rage.

First I had to steal a spade from an outer shed. Of course there were no weapons, but this was a tool, useless in combat. Then I had to choose a place. It must be within the sire's chase-range and therefore near the house, yet it must be in an out-of-the-way spot and easily concealed. I chose a place in a small stand of scrub-trees, off the trail to the river, but not too far from it. It took some time.

In the end it was an anticlimax. I stripped, concealed my belongings, and smeared my face and body with mud. My knife I held bare in my right hand. I waited until the sire came out to make his usual circuit, and then charged him, howling, rolling my eyes.

This was the most dangerous moment. I had to give the impression of inchoate fury, and the problem was that the semblance might have precipitated the reality. In the season, the rage is never far away. But I could not, must not, give way to it.

He acted as before — how else? The danger was now that he might wound me fatally. But I was ready for his block-and-thrust, and I wrenched aside from his point. I howled in apparent pain, and clapped a hand to my ribs. Blood trickled between my fingers. It was that of a waterfowl, but he was not to know.

I drew back, grimacing as if in pain. He scented the blood, grinning. He took a step towards me, and I turned and ran. He followed.

Of course he would not chase me far. Other interlopers were about. Fury gave me speed. I had to slow myself deliberately, to tempt him on just far enough. I jinked off the trail as if in desperation, leaped a fallen trunk, and changed stride, gathering myself for another leap. It was senseless, but he had no time to think about it. He followed, and a moment later he had crashed through my carefully-woven cover of twigs and leaves. The pit was almost as deep as he was tall. I think he broke a leg. Certainly he fell on one of the pointed stakes, for his scream of triumph became a wail. Four or five blows with the spade sufficed as he lay helpless.

That was how I won my range. He had been a double-sire, and might even have survived the third season, for he had been a crafty fighter. Crafty.

That was the word the startrader used to me, later, when the season was well over for another whiteyear. Those who had gone to the hills returned, arriving shortly after the cripples and the celibates, those who were bitterly aware that they would never sire. We held the Fast and Feast for those who did not return, and tried to pretend that it was because they had all succeeded. Trade began again, and the first startrader to pass said to me that I, too, was a crafty fighter. It sounded strange.

Well, of course it sounded strange. It was a startrader who said it. What else could it sound but strange, said in a voice like theirs? But that was not the only reason why. What had craft to do with success in the season?

I asked that, and the trader made the succession of little coughs they use to indicate amusement. "Craft is more important than strength or fury or even weapons-skill, in the season, or out of it," it said. "And it is getting more so."

I could see the importance, on reflection. I was myself witness to it. Craft, not strength, had won me my range. But why was it getting more so? I found I had asked the question aloud.

The trader showed its teeth. Strange that this means pleasure among them. "How long have you had metal for weapons?" it asked. It sounded like a stupid question. I shook my head, for how could I know? Forever, I thought. The trader supplied the answer: "Only since we came bringing it, in the time of your mother's mother's mother," it said.

An impossible gulf of time. Women lived an immense span of short-years. I would not, of course, see more than another two seasons as a sire, at most. Another three whiteyears, fourteen redyears. Time enough to see my own offspring on the verge of their own first seasons. Beyond that was abomination, naturally. If I went on to sire in a fourth season, I would be serving my own daughters, most likely. In the unlikely event of my living so long, celibacy would be mandatory, of course.

I indicated surprise at the news, but the trader had not finished.

"And before the metal," it continued, "we showed you better stone tools, and helped you to learn to plant crops." The trader took another swallow of liquor. It was one of the things it had come to trade for. "You learned to make this on your own. It's not bad at all."

I frowned, despite the compliment. The drink might have loosened the trader's tongue. This one seemed a little more forthcoming than most. "I don't understand," I said.

It stretched its mouth, meaning that it was pleased. Probably with itself. "If the best weapon you can muster is a big rock or a club, naturally strength and rage is the most important thing. But that's self-defeating. If brains don't matter, then they don't get selected for. We had to..." It coughed again, and retired into the cup. I waited, but it said nothing more, changing the subject to the price of metal.

I didn't understand what it had said, then. It was not until after I inspected the range's herd that the meaning became clear to me.

My new half-son Sipandu had brought the herds back from the hills after the season. I found them to be in good condition. I praised the best of his rams, a tall, short-coupled blue with a heavy pelt and good shoulders.

"Yes," said Sipandu. "He's a good one. Took on a *shikka*, once. His progeny have his pelt, as well. But he's got a nasty temper. We'll have to cross one of the others into his line to calm it down."

I agreed. Any herdsman would do as much. I turned away, satisfied that Sipandu knew his business. Then I stopped short.

Now I think you understand why I will go to the hills this season. I will leave the range to you, and to those others who wish to dispute for it, whether with fury, or strength, or skill. But not with craft, like me, for I will sire no more. I have put on the celibate's robe. And anyway, I have the feeling that healing and keeping records might become more and more important, in times to come, as we all become more crafty. I am, I admit, crafty.

Perhaps the star-traders are right; perhaps it is good for us to become crafty. But they shall not use my craft. How you win the sireship is your own affair. But as for me, I am no herd-animal, and I shall not be bred like one.

Interview: Justine Larbalestier

...Tansy Rayner Roberts



Justine Larbalestier is one of the new wave of YA fantasy writers. Her debut novel, *Magic or Madness* (2005) was released to great critical acclaim, and won the 2007 Andre Norton Award, as well as being shortlisted for many others. *Magic or Madness* is now the first volume in a trilogy also featuring *Magic Lessons* (2006) and *Magic's Child* (2007). Justine has also published two academic works on feminism and science fiction, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002) and *Daughters of Earth* (2006), for which she won the 2007 William Atheling Award for an outstanding piece of criticism or review. Justine has a popular blog over at <http://www.justinelarbalestier.com/blog>. She and her husband, author Scott Westerfeld, generally live for half of the year in her home town, Sydney, and the other half in his home town, New York City.

ASIM: Magic's Child is the third in your popular Magic or Madness trilogy. How does it feel to finally have that third book on the shelves?

JL: Lovely! It was a very hard book to write, but like childbirth (I imagine) the pain is now a very dim memory and I can see only the gorgeous cover and the glorious fact that the trilogy is complete.

It's also been interesting the way the arrival of the third book has started the first, *Magic or Madness*, selling all over again. Turns out that a trilogy is an excellent feedback loop. Tragically I have vowed that I will never write another one again.

ASIM: One of the strongest features of the Magic or Madness books are the vivid voices of the teenagers — both the New Yorkers and the Australians! How did you manage to recapture that angst and intensity of being fifteen? And was it painful to do so?

JL: It was embarrassingly easy, which probably indicates scary levels of immaturity in me. I prefer not to think about it!

ASIM: In the Magic or Madness universe, magic just plain sucks — you worked against the fantasy cliché of “chosen ones with special powers” by making your magical characters suffer so very much! But having so effectively exploded that cliché — do you think you’ll ever be able to write about any non-torturous magic with a straight face? Or will you instead just find new ways to torture the magically gifted?

JL: I think it's no surprise that the book I wrote immediately after the trilogy is light and funny and full of only very slightly (or possibly a tad inconvenient) torturous magic. It's called *The Ultimate Fairy Book* and will be coming out from Bloomsbury USA.

ASIM: Daughters of Earth, your critical anthology about feminist science fiction, was a very compelling and readable combination of academic work and classical reprint stories — can you see yourself doing more projects like this in the future?

JL: Thank you! Alas it is likely the last critical book I'll publish. I find writing YA a lot more fun and it pays better too.

ASIM: What is it about the history of feminist science fiction that so appeals to you?

JL: I'm not sure what it is, though I should confess that I started writing about it quite accidentally. I was never that much of an SF fan. (If I had to choose a favourite genre it would probably be historical fiction.) When I was casting about for a topic for my PhD (discarded topics included the reception of Elvis Presley amongst indigenous communities in Australia; the short stories of Isak Dinesen;



and the use of nightmares in horror films) I came across the extraordinary collection of science fiction material at Sydney Uni Library and that's how I ended up researching the field. I could have wound up doing any number of other topics, though whatever it was would definitely have had a feminist slant. That's how I see the world: through white, Australian, Sydneysider, middle-class, food-obsessed, feminist eyes.

ASIM: You've been blogging a lot about manga lately — and quite a few YA writers have been seduced into the world of comics and manga in the last year. Would you like to write a graphic novel or manga series yourself? And if you did, what kind of story would it be?

JL: Oh, dear! Am I that transparent? I would LOVE to write manga or graphic novels. LOVE it! Other than YA it's some of the most exciting writing (creating? It's not just the words, obviously, but the images as well) going on at the moment.

I'm not at all sure what kind of graphic novel or manga series I would write. I do have a few ideas kicking around. Back in the late nineties I started a musical novel that never quite worked, but I think it might be perfect as a graphic novel. It's about New York City trying to eat this Australian girl. Literally.

I also love the idea of the Magic or Madness trilogy being adapted as a manga. That way I get to have my own manga series without actually doing any work. How cool would that be?

ASIM: What are you working on right now, and what do you love about it?

JL: I just sold my next novel, *The Ultimate Fairy Book*, to Bloomsbury USA, which means rewrites are in my near future. I'm very much looking forward to it. Vastly exciting to be working with a new editor and a new house. I love rewriting! And I've many clear ideas on what needs fixing. I bet my editor does too.

ASIM: Justine, thanks for answering our questions! Good luck with your new adventures in writing and publishing.

About the Interviewer:

Tansy Rayner Roberts is the author of children's book *Seacastle: Book One of the Shimmaron*, and one of the editors of new YA webzine *Shiny*. She blogs at <http://www.livejournal.com/users/cassiphone/> and has reviewed many books by Justine Larbalestier and Scott Westerfeld (and others!) over at ASif — Australian SpecFic in Focus.

Reviews

Dark Space

by Marianne de Pierres

Orbit Books, \$19.95

Reviewed by Dirk Flinthart

It's always a worry for a reviewer, being handed a book by a dear friend. I accepted this assignment with a certain degree of discomfort, but consoled myself that if I hated it, I could always forget to write the review...

...I haven't forgotten. And I'm very happy to report that I experienced no discomfort whatsoever reading *Dark Space*. In fact, the only thing that peeves me about it is that the sequel isn't available yet.

Dark Space is a venture into the realms of the 'New Space Opera' by Marianne, best known previously for her austral-cyberpunk Parrish Plessis series. With *Dark Space*, Marianne has really hit her stride as a writer. While she still plays games with accents and language, the occasionally self-conscious feel of the Parrish Plessis books has vanished, replaced by a sure, confident hand. Instead of carefully constructed Australianisms, we're offered a seamless narrative driven by a combination of stylish energy, characterization, and a distinctly Australian sense of humour and self-confidence which leavens what might otherwise be a very dark tale indeed.

Without spoiling the plot, it can be summarised thus: a raffish mineral scout lost in space discovers a massively powerful Entity which might well be the source of human myths about God. "Sole Entity" immediately sets about shaking up the goldfish bowl, offering new knowledge for any "clearly delineated feat of cleverness" from the Sentients of Orion, a loosely-bound federation of space-faring intelligent species which happens to include humanity. In short order, a strictly monitored system of interaction with the "Sole Entity" springs up, engendering machinations most fiendish as various Sentients jostle and compete for their chance to claim the attention of God.

Meanwhile, on a hot, nasty, dry mining-planet called Araldis, Baronessa Mira Fedor finishes her education at pretty much just the right time to have her life shot to hell. First, her genetic heritage as Pilot to the bio-ship *Insignia* is promised to her relative, the wastrel Prince Trin Pellegrini. Then, while she's hiding from the people who want to yank out her genes and transfer them to Trin (who has an entirely different agenda of his own) Araldis is rather

rudely invaded by some extremely nasty fluid-sucking arthropod aliens and their unknown masters, turning the whole world upside down.

The book is a mixture of bang-up adventure, machiavellian maneuvering, and coming-of-age trials (for both Trin Pellegrini and Mira Fedor) mixed with touches of outright comedy, which moves along at a fine pace from beginning to end. The tale gains depth by virtue of its vivid and interesting exploration of social roles and rules — of sex and gender, of politics and violence, and of race and species. Despite this, it never descends to lecturing and pedantry. The messages and morals are clear, but very nicely embedded within the framework of character motivation and narrative development.

The one note of disappointment I might sound here has already been laid out. By the end of the book, though Mira and the other main characters have moved on, we the readers are essentially none the wiser as to what's really happening? Who is behind the invasion of Araldis? What secrets was the ruling Pellegrini Prince of Araldis hiding? Who or what is "Sole Entity", and what exactly does it want? This book does no more than set the stage for the conflict to come, and I, for one, am waiting impatiently.

Get your finger out and write, Marianne!

New Ceres 2

by Alisa Krasnostein (Editor)

Available online at www.newceres.com

Reviewed by Tehani Wessely

Previously published at www.andromedaspaceways.com/bookreviews.htm and syndicated to www.asif.dreamhosters.com

New Ceres is an innovative project initiated by Gillian Polack and Alisa Krasnostein, with the support of some of Australia's best speculative fiction writers, including Tansy Rayner Roberts, Dirk Flinthart, Lucy Sussex, Cat Sparks and Stephen Dedman.

The New Ceres concept is a shared world-building experience where authors write stories set in the future colony world of New Ceres. New Ceres has been developed as a world where the precepts of the 18th century are stringently adhered to — most of the time. However, given that the world is open to refugees

from an increasingly tortured Earth, and to visitors from other colonies, there are bound to be anachronistic conflicts. This is added to by the very nature of such a stagnant society and the oppressions such a society fosters, and the hints of revolution or evolution are ever-present.

In this second issue of *New Ceres*, the world is beginning to grow. I was fascinated by the gentle twining of threads from the first stories, and the information provided about *New Ceres* by its creators, woven in delicately with the plots and characters of the new pieces. We are being offered the growth of a rich tapestry, where readers can become lost in the ever expanding reaches of this planet, and writers are allowed the opportunity to extend their own imaginations. The constraints of writing in *New Ceres* are not onerous. In fact, I would suggest that any author could find a niche in the colony in which to tell a tale. It matters not whether you as an author chooses to build on what another writer has begun, or simply to touch upon details already featured — the evocativeness of the writing to date has provided a patchwork of facets to draw upon, to meld with a new story, or to expand into a larger construct.

New Ceres 2 offers a perfect example of how this world is intended to operate in Lucy Sussex's *Mist and Murder*. Sussex has taken the characters of La Duchesse and her secretary, Pepin, created by Tansy Rayner Roberts in issue 1, and thrust them into a new mystery, this time a haunting backed by murder. Sussex stays true to Roberts' original characterization, yet fleshes out the characters somewhat, especially that of Pepin (and I am looking forward to seeing Pepin again in issue 3).

Jay Lake ventures into the world of the Lumoscenti, an organization that basically polices the maintenance of the era, working against any who would introduce new technology. While I felt that Lake's piece was not quite as polished or plot driven as the other works in issue 2, at the same time *A Tower to the Sun* certainly adds depth to the world of *New Ceres*, and I can see more stories being set against the backdrop he has provided.

My favourite story in this issue is *Sufficiently Advanced* by Stephen Dedman. In this story, Dedman ventures into the bordellos of *New Ceres*, and we meet Barrington, a delightfully innocent man who is a clerk for the Bureau of Trade, a government body responsible for regulating technology, and the Madame Genevieve, who operates the most successful brothel in New Switzerland (a province of *New Ceres*). This unlikely couple enchanted me throughout this piece, which is somewhat of a departure from much of Dedman's other work, for he tends to have a darker side. This story does a great deal to explore the societal problems on *New Ceres*, in such a way that the reader is drawn into the world in exploration, rather than being info-dumped and lost. Dedman shows a keen awareness of the difficulties facing women in an environment such as *New Ceres*, and extends on the theme first explored in Dirk Flinthart's "She Walks in Beauty" from issue 1 of an undercurrent of quiet revolution and change in the

waters of New Ceres. I hope we will see more of Genevieve and Barrington in future issues.

In *The Bride Price* — the final story of issue one — Cat Sparks tackles class issues on New Ceres and delves deeper into issue of refugees than we have yet seen explored. While frequently mentioned in other New Ceres stories, this is the first time we have been given a look at the lot of the refugee first hand. Tansy Rayner Roberts introduced refugees in some detail in issue 1, but Sparks has taken us to the next level of understanding. Here we meet Padraic, clearly from an upper class echelon, sent to find a bride from a matchmaker. His bewilderment at the process is endearing, but what really provides the character growth, is his reaction to meeting refugees on his journey home. Clearly Sparks intends herself or others to revisit the character, as she has set a scene that allows great scope for expansion.

The last piece in issue 2 is the *Prosperpine Times Theatre Reviews* by Arabella Hedgwick — yes, I've deliberately included the 'author' name in the title, as these 'non-fiction' pieces in New Ceres are all world building features that add to the intrinsic growth of the project. Copyrighted to Alexandra Pierce, an experienced reviewer in the real world, the piece nods to Maxine McArthur's story in issue 1, and while I didn't feel that in itself it was much more than a nice bit of fluff to end the issue, it holds the seeds of further exploration in the world of New Ceres, and this in itself is no bad thing for those who wish to write here. These sorts of details make future works all that much more authentic and allow for depth and realism that might otherwise be difficult.

New Ceres deserves attention from readers and writers alike. There are few boundaries on what can be submitted to the editor for consideration as a market, and it pays extraordinarily well for an Australian small press publication. And the stories in the two issues thus far have been of extremely high quality, from well known authors who are proud to be initiating the process of writing in this ground-breaking project. I will make note that while the new website is nice, the user friendliness of the files themselves are still a work in progress. I have it on good authority that these issues are under review and I suggest that improvements in this regard are not too far away. In any case, the stories are well worth the effort. I recommend you take a look at New Ceres. I don't think you'll be disappointed.

Schild's Ladder

by Greg Egan

Gollancz ISBN 978-0-575-08111-6 \$22.95

Reviewed by Simon Petrie

Greg Egan's *Schild's Ladder* is one of the eight recent SF titles grouped into Gollancz's 'Future Classics' series. The series is marked by distinctive, enigmatic, sometimes gimmicky front covers. *Schild's Ladder's* gimmick is a glow-in-the-dark starscape: eye-catching, but a little puzzling. Designed to stand out in a bookshop blackout, perhaps?

Greg Egan is an Australian SF writer, and *Ladder* was first published in 2002. I've not previously read any of his works.

In *Ladder*, Cass has travelled to the Mimosa system to run a series of daring physics experiments, hoping to create, very temporarily, a new type of physics by inducing an unstable vacuum state according to the precepts of quantum graph theory. She's chosen Mimosa because it's home to an apparatus known as the Quietener, a kind of Galactic 'clean room' in which the Universe's quantum noise has been filtered out, as much as possible. It's the ideal environment for her experiments, but will they work?

Cass succeeds, but there's a problem. The new vacuum state she creates, with fundamentally different physical laws, lacks the expected instability. Mimosa becomes the epicentre of a spherical catastrophe, a world-swallowing phenomenon which is expanding at half the speed of light. System after system is lost as the spherical novo-vacuum commences to swallow the Galaxy.

Six hundred years after the Mimosa incident, and the sphere is still growing, unchecked and at the same rate. Tchicaya, a researcher keen to solve the riddle of the sphere's nature, and to find a way to deal with its expansion, arrives on board the *Rindler*, a research vessel which has for some time been pacing the enigmatic object's apparently-featureless border region, while the researchers on board debate how, and whether, to destroy the object.

I found *Ladder* a slow story to warm to. Egan's vision is uncompromising, his worldbuilding extreme. His universe in *Ladder* comes across, initially, as a very clinical environment, populated by ideologues and people without common humanity. For these far-future humans, every aspect of identity seems almost magically mutable: gender, corporeality, metabolic rate, body size (when we first meet Cass, she is approximately two millimetres tall; in her next incarnation she is vastly smaller again). Death is treated as a minor, temporary inconvenience; life is generally retrievable with a modicum of personal housekeeping.

I formed an opinion, early on, that *Ladder* was a book dominated by The Idea, against which the protagonists were merely vehicles for an exploration of a plethora of giddy concepts in extreme physics. And yet this perspective is

incorrect: if few of his characters are presentable as people with whom the reader can closely identify, they are nonetheless solidly drawn, consistent, quirky, and plausible denizens of the strange place that is Egan's far-future Galaxy. *Ladder* is certainly concerned with a great deal of abstruse physical speculation, but it isn't completely dominated by this; it's also a tale which, in considerable detail, explores the dilemmas, the relationships, the persistence of philosophy and conflict, and the still-human frailties of those whose fate is tied up with the novo-vacuum as it snowploughs its way through interstellar space. It helps that Egan writes with a genuine desire to communicate, as plainly and honestly as possible, the advanced hard-SF concepts that fuel the novel: Egan has a knack for metaphor and simile which, without condescension and with occasional unassuming humour, allows us to grasp the detail of his far-future vision. Ultimately, *Ladder's* avowedly exotic settings and characters work in its favour, to provide an immersive and rewarding story.

It's somewhat challenging and not, I suspect, to everyone's taste: but if Schild's *Ladder* is representative of Egan's style, then his reputation as a writer of hard-SF is well-justified. If the hard-SF label isn't inclined to deter you, I can recommend *Ladder* as a good dose of mind-expanding prose. In fact, it's the nearest thing I've found, in thirty-odd years of SF reading, to a lucid, coherent textual equivalent of the surreal visual passage towards the end of the movie version of *2001*. If that comparison sounds intriguing, rather than merely off-putting, then I think you might just enjoy Schild's *Ladder*.

The Workers' Paradise

Edited by Russell B. Farr and Nick Evans

Ticonderoga Publications

ISBN 978-0-9586856-7-2 \$25.00

(or Signed Numbered Edition limited to 50 copies, \$49.50)

Reviewed by Simon Petrie

(This review first appeared on the Australian Specfic in Focus (ASif!) website, and is reproduced here by permission)

First, a caveat: this review is of the pdf version of the book's uncorrected proof, a document lacking both the final cover and the appended authors' biographical notes.

The Workers' Paradise. It's an unashamedly politically charged title, openly left-leaning, and the brief editorial follows suit. The timeliness of the editorial (written in September 2007, mere weeks before I received the pdf) is a drawback in a sense. There's scope for much of the editorial's content, relating to Australia's current labour laws, to become quickly outdated. At least, one might hope so. But the more important questions arising are, will the stories collected here date as quickly? And do they hang together, or would they be better left to hang separately?

Paradise contains eighteen stories by an assortment of established and emerging Australian spec-fic writers. (That is to say, I believe them all to be Australian, though in the absence of biographical notes I can't be completely sure of some of them.)

Simon Brown's 'Adjudication' explores the role of private contractors in the administration of the prison system, throwing in a bit of labour-movement politics and market-driven considerations for good measure. Tight and well-drawn, it's a story that (probably) couldn't occur in reality, but there's enough of an edge of plausibility to give the reader pause.

'The Working Dead of Heehaw's Australia', by Jenny Schwartz, takes a more polemic tone than Brown's opening story. There's a delicious twist at the end – at least, I found it delicious – but overall the story is, I think, too blatant a comment on the political scene of it's time. The 'Heehaw' of the title is too readily identifiable with a prominent politician, which may well limit the story's shelf-life.

In Cat Sparks' 'Right to Work', June is a seventy-year-old tea-lady at a hospital who finds a stray teenage girl, too Wired to even realise she's lost. 'Right' is a story filled with powerful understatement, with less attention to backstory than the preceding two pieces, and I think it's stronger for that: it's a story which places you very much in the moment, and even the minor characters have a sense

of life and depth to them. As with 'Adjudication', too, it's fiction with enough of a dark sense of truth to be disturbing.

David Walker's 'Winning Ways' introduces a lighter tone, still dystopian in its way, but less fraught with the sense of desperation. The change in tone is welcome, but this wasn't a story that deeply engaged me: it felt half-finished and unsure of its target, though as with 'Heehaw' it's at least partly redeemed by the sly humour of its conclusion.

'Night with the Stars Askew', by Rjurik Davidson, is futuristic – androids, war robots – while also backward-looking, through its preoccupation with the life and worldview of the Russian revolutionary Victor Serge. The concern with revolution impeded my appreciation of the story: there's a relatively large transition involved between our present-day situation and Davidson's posited armed struggle for control of Perth, and I felt suspension of disbelief faltering a few times. Still, it's an intelligently told tale, honest enough to admit that there are never any easy answers, nor perfect solutions.

Bill Congreve's 'Farmers John Pass Go' has a title that's difficult to parse satisfactorily. The title, though, is fitting in the sense that the identified story, the book's shortest, is also relatively opaque. A little too surreal for my taste, it's rich in imagery, thematically appropriate for the volume, and unsettling without, I felt, completely connecting with its own underlying implications: a poem, perhaps, struggling to fit within a story's restrictive frame.

'Magda's Career Choice', by Rowena Cory Daniells, is set in a future Australia governed by the Council of Social Engineers. The worldbuilding here is detailed and consistent, given the overall premise of a carefully-designed Utopian state, and the characterisation convinces. Also, difficult when describing any utopia, there's a reasonable degree of tension, which helps to propel the narrative. My chief quibble with this story is that it's information-rich: there's too much detail built into both the description and the various characters' conversations.

George Ivanoff's 'MTP' concerns a scenario in which a narcotic treatment confers increased business acumen and productivity on employees who consent to it, though of course there's a cost. Arguably too wordy, and lacking in direct action – think Asimov crossed with Machiavelli, and you'll have a fair idea of the story's tone – it's nevertheless pleasant enough, at least for those of us not yet on the aforementioned treatment.

Kaaron Warren's 'His Lipstick Minx' is a strange little gender-bent story of masculine lip-decoration, cruelty and exploitation. It reminded me strongly of Connie Willis' 'All My Darling Daughters', though perhaps slightly less black. Elusive, but worthwhile.

'Seahoney', by Anna Tambour, is the tale of a young girl's struggle to come to terms with her illiterate father's impossible vocation. Ultimately heartwarming while staying just the right side of saccharine, it revolves around a strongly-drawn central trio of Nancy and her parents, and doesn't need the twist ending.

‘Black and Bitter, Thanks’, by Nathan Burrage, is one of the most direct, most chilling, most horribly plausible spec-fic stories I’ve read in a long time.

David J. Kane’s ‘Flystrike’ is a grim back-country tale of dowsing and desperation. I found it both too fantastic and too violent to be satisfying.

‘Rapturama’, by Matthew Chrulew and Roland Boer, is substantially the longest story in the book. It’s an exploration of technological transcendence, a literal *deus ex machina*. Satirical, yet serious in intent, I found it fascinating, though I suspect some readers will consider it deeply (perhaps offensively) irreverent. (Hint: it features a North Sydney evangelical movement called \$ing\$ong.) ‘Rapturama’ takes many other pot-shots at today’s culture, most hitting their targets, though I’m unconvinced that today’s political leaders would still be figures of contemporary relevance in 2019.

Robin Hillard’s ‘After the Choice’ explores the working and living conditions of a group of female labourers, contracted to pick mushrooms at a sweatshop mushroom farm. Events spark industrial action, and the women are forced to decide how far it’s worth taking the matter in the face of managerial thuggery. As with several of the earlier stories, the story is speculative only in the sense that we’d expect such a draconian labour system isn’t truly possible in today’s or tomorrow’s Australia ...

In ‘Milk Across the Nation’, by Ashley Arnold, Daisy the cow proves herself quite the agricultural troublemaker, reminiscent of Monty Python’s Harold the clever sheep. Jim, the farmer whose misfortune it is to have Daisy on his dairy farm, struggles in the face of bovine industrial action. A nice comic-tinged story, although the ending seemed a little too pat.

Robert Hood’s ‘Pseudomelia of the Masses’ concerns the emergence of a disturbing trend in work-related body enhancements. This is a well-written piece steeped in paranoia.

‘Arianne’s Event’, by Susan Wardle, describes a future where wealthy parents have effectively complete control over the genetic design of their children. One such child, Arianne, sets out to prove that, as a woman, she is more than just a trophy human. Perhaps suffering from theme fatigue at this point, I didn’t connect deeply with this story.

‘Networking for Dummies’, by Dirk Flinthart, rounds out the volume. Gavin Frankel is a factory foreman, under pressure from both the workplace and domestic powers-that-be to accept implantation of a new Total Networking interface. Flinthart’s story echoes some of the themes already aired here in ‘Rapturama’ and ‘Pseudomelia’, but deftly stakes out its own territory partway between those two tales. A satisfying conclusion to the volume.

Themed anthologies have taken a bit of stick in recent months. The apparent consensus among the bloggerati is that the more specific the theme, the less well the quality is sustained throughout the volume. I’d have to say an anthology on labour conditions in an extrapolated Australia was pretty narrowly-themed, but I think overall it stacks up reasonably well on the quality front. This may be in

part because it's a serious topic, deeply relevant to the readership of our island continent; not exactly the sexual-infidelity-of-colourblind-zombies-in-spacesuits type of collection that, I believe, the bloggers have been more vehemently railing against. The stories in 'Paradise' aren't uniformly strong, but I don't think I'd label any of them as undeniably substandard. For my money, the most successful stories here are those by Brown, Sparks, and Burrage, each of which deals unflinchingly with the social injustice evident in our present-day labour market, and 'Rapturama' which I'd say is the pick of the more light-hearted treatments of the issue.

Would the anthology have been stronger if any stories had been omitted? I'm not sure. They knit together reasonably well, with a good mix of light and shade (though, overall, convey a general pall of pessimism, in keeping with the overview provided by Evans and Farr's editorial: without exception, the title appears to have been interpreted ironically by the contributing authors). However, I'll confess to feeling a bit 'industrialised out' by the end of it all, perhaps due to my digesting all this in a few concentrated sessions. A more leisurely sampling of stories, interspersed with the other offerings in your current 'to read' pile, would likely mitigate these symptoms. In total, I'd say it's worth it – there's a lot of local talent contained within these pages, and it's good to see them tackling the serious issues presented here.

About the authors...

Brian Dolton has spent the last twenty years trying to amass enough unusual life-experiences so that his writer's bio will make him appear far more interesting than he actually is. He has ridden a camel in the Sahara, stayed in a Zen monastery on a holy mountain in Japan, and played volleyball on a sandbar in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Now these distractions are out of the way he can finally concentrate on sitting at a computer and writing.

Eugenie Edquist is twenty-one, studying religion, philosophy and history, and is drawn to science fiction and fantasy as two of the many fascinating means of exploring truth using symbol and metaphor.

Dave Gullen is working on the final draft of a contemporary fantasy detective story involving mermaids, bad cops, and saving the world. A member of the London based T Party writers group (www.t-party.org.uk), he writes fantasy, erotica, and speculative fiction, with stories published in magazines such as *Roadworks*, *Albedo1*, *Legends*, *Here&Now*, *Midnight Street* and *fishnet.mag*. Dave lives near London, grows tree ferns and makes leather armour — www.tinb.co.uk. Oh yes, he has a day job too.

Damon Kaswell lives and writes in Eugene, Oregon, with his wife and daughter. When he isn't writing, he reads voraciously and likes to tinker with computers. When writing, he can usually be found in a coffee shop.

Dave Luckett is still in business telling stories at the same old stand. He has sixteen books out for children in Australia. Occasionally he wishes, somewhat wistfully, that optimism were fashionable for adults as well.

Karen Maric is a stay-at-home mother who has almost perfected the art of writing ambidextrously whilst breastfeeding her daughter, Ekatarina. In her spare time she enjoys sniffing flowers but dislikes pulling weeds, preferring to let them grow where they will. Karen's stories have previously appeared in *AntipodeanSF*, *Infinitas* and *Orb*.

E.C. Myers lives in Manhattan, where he struggles to stay awake in the city that never sleeps. The results of his self-imposed sleep deprivation have appeared in a number of publications, including *flashquake*, *Son and Foe*, *Fictitious Force*, and *From the Asylum*. He is a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Visit his website at www.ecmyers.net.

Born far too long ago, in a universe far, far away, **Ian Nichols** has somehow survived to inflict his dreadful stories on a mildly dithering world. He has plans to publish an anthology of all his rejected stories, which would be a very large tome, and he lives in Perth, a wonderful city for broken dreams. One day a novel will be published with his name on it, but it will probably be written by someone else. His life search is for the perfect martini.

Martin Owton is also a member of the T-Party. He writes a wide range of speculative fiction. He has appeared in many magazines such as US mags as *Black Gate* and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* and has also been translated into Polish and Greek. He is seeking a publisher for his first novel, a classic fantasy adventure.

Simon Petrie is a blot on the landscape of the Canberra spec-fic scene. 'Nut Tree' is his fourth, shortest, and least bad poem published within the last three decades. A steady stream of donations may ensure that he does not produce any more.

Kent Purvis died at the age of one in a freak soft toy accident. His identity has been stolen by a shadowy figure who has risen to the very lower-middle echelons of the Australian government, ready to strike.

Susan Wardle is a graduate of Clarion South 2005. Her short story credits include, *Overland*, *Shadowed Realms*, *Ticonderoga Online*, the *Shadow Box* e-anthology, *AntipodeanSF*, *Fables and Reflections*, the small press anthology *Scattered, Covered, Smothered* and the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild Anthology, *The Outcast*. She spends her daylight hours working for local government preparing press releases, speeches, newsletters and annual reports. In her remaining spare time Susan likes a glass of wine, catching up with friends and jogging — although not necessarily in that order.

About the artists...

Ash Arceneaux lives and works in central Florida, USA. She is an author as well as an artist. In addition to classical art and digital art, she creates promotional graphics for authors and runs a book review website, www.ror-reviews.com. Her websites are www.asharceneaux.deviantart.com and www.adasteiabooks.com.

Tom Godfrey lives in Sydney with his wife, migrated from South Africa, where he was an art teacher and did a lot of commissioned art work as well as displaying his work in a gallery in Johannesburg. Tom recently discovered the joys of “digital painting” in the fantasy genre and is enjoying this medium. He usually does a pencil concept sketch, scans it and works from there using Corel Painter and a Wacom graphics tablet. The full range of his work can be seen on his website www.tomgodfrey.com.

Dan Skinner lives in Saint Louis, Mo. USA. He is forty years of age and got into art as a side profession having done model photography for years. His business partner, Nick Fichter was a model who wanted to get on book covers as a romance model so Dan dabbled in photodigital art and ended up being hired by over forty companies to do covers. Nick has been on over 500 covers as a result. Dan uses digital photography, Photoshop, Vue 5 and Painter. His artistic hero is Boris Vallejo.

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Artists

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 “Son et Lumiere” by Ash Arceneaux, p48
 “Last Deflowerer” by Tom Godfrey, p52
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