



nanobison issue 1 - Q2 2005 - text version

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Story 1 - The Package - by Liam Rands

The Package

By Liam Rands

Walter opened his eyes and sat up. The room was black, silent. He glanced at the clock radio by his bed: 02:07

It was the cows.

He pulled the sheets aside and slid into his slippers. First, his left foot. Always, always, the left toes first, and then his right.

Stumbling his way through the room, Walter clicked on the lamp and squinted.

The cows; the thought returned. He pulled the sheets straight and proceeded to make the bed, fluffing the pillows, smoothing the wrinkles, and finally throwing over the large, red, bed-cover.

The cows; he needed to check on his cows.

He took his overalls from the hook behind the door, slid his left leg in, and then his right, fastening the left strap over his shoulder, then the right, before he reached for the old ranch-hat where it rested on the hook above. With calloused fingers holding the rim, Walter bent his head and with reverence, eased the old friend down onto his head.

A brief glance at the window, then he was off down the stairs, now focused on reaching the barn and his cows.

Swinging the front door open, Walter moved outside. His gaze went across the darkened landscape, fixing on the large outline of the barn.

His slippers found the carpet as he lurched off the bottom step of the porch, and with his feet brushing over the soft plush, he hurried to check on his herd, corralled within the structure at the end of the carpeted road.

Fifteen minutes later, as Walter undressed for the fifth time that night, he walked into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet, taking down the bottle of pills. He stared at the label, his thumb-nail tracing over his name. He tapped the screw-cap with his finger and shook the bottle before returning it to the cabinet and closing the door. Popping the left clasp on his overalls, Walter turned off the light and returned to his room.

Walter opened his eyes and sat up. He glanced at the clock and was dismayed to learn that only two hours had passed.

It was the cows; he knew he needed to check on the beasts again – just to be sure. They'd been fine the last time he'd checked, and the four times before that, but Walter knew he wouldn't rest, and his anxiety would continue to rise until he was able to satisfy the itch and see for himself.

The night's routine began again. Walter threw back the sheets and thrust his left toes into his slipper.

#

Walter sensed an intangible wrongness as he rushed across the carpet. He drew up short. It was still dark out, yet his mind registered a presence on the path.

With measured steps, he searched out contact with his fingertips. Walter touched cold metal. Running his hand above his head and out to the right, Walter realised that whatever it was, it blocked the double-doors to the barn and extended beyond the six-foot width of the carpet.

He took his fingers away and pressed them to his lips. It appeared real, but Walter couldn't be sure. There was that time he convinced himself a cow was on the roof, chewing cud, watching with amusement as he ran around the house, shouting out its name. He understood later that it was part of his sickness. One of the many imaginary things he'd seen since the terrible accident.

He turned and headed for the house, keeping his eyes focused on the light in his bedroom window.

He held the sealed bottle in his hand again. His lips pursed as he rubbed at the thinning patch of hair on his head. To accept the magic bullet offered within, Walter knew sleep would take him and deposit him deep beneath the currents for hours, releasing him to the waking world after a dreamless slumber. But it always left him groggy: a dullness that soaked through

him and blunted his thoughts for days.

Walter clicked his teeth together and returned the bottle, deciding to take a bath instead. He would check outside again when it was light, and then he would know for sure if the object were real or induced by his mind.

It was still there. The sun reflected sharply off the gleaming surface, making Walter fetch his sunglasses before he could approach.

He chewed his lip, rubbed his bulbous nose, and scratched at his ear before he realised this just wouldn't do.

He could hear the cows calling from the other side of the double-doors.

Apart from blocking access to his animals, the object simply didn't belong on his farm – especially on his clean carpet... it upset the balance. It was out-of-order with the rest of his things.

He bent and studied the neatly raked soil on either side of the carpet path, finding no disturbance in the long straight lines that continued to the steps of the house.

Not a leaf, a twig, nor a rock cluttered the uniform landscape beyond the carpet. No tracks from vehicles and no tell-tale signs of footprints had left their impression, yet the cube was deposited outside the barn during the night without his knowledge.

Standing straight, Walter wiped his brow. The sweat was already beading against his skin and it was still early – another hot and dusty day ahead.

Finally, he realised there was no way he could move the mass by himself, and although it galled him to have to consider it, there was no other choice but to call the local law and have someone sent out to investigate... along with a tow-truck to remove the offending interloper from his farm. He didn't want them here - any of them - especially the cube, but the sooner he called the sheriff, the sooner he could return to his normal routine and attend to his beloved bovines.

#

When the car door opened and the crimson cowboy boot hit the dusty path, Walter realised his day had just gone from bad to worse.

A half finished cigarette preceded Deputy Elvis Parker from the patrol car. It spun end-over-end, a flash of white smoke trailing across the dry air as it somersaulted silently, bouncing to a rest on the neat, raked earth.

Another boot emerged and planted itself on the ground before Elvis was able to haul himself out with the help of the doorframe. Tilting his hat and wiping his brow, Deputy Parker ignored Walter as he soaked up the sweat with the sleeve of his uniform.

Even from where he stood, the ripe stench of fat and greasy burgers jostled Walter's senses.

"How you been, Walt?" Parker said. "We haven't seen much of you around town since the accident." He stared across the flat landscape, scratching the neat sideboard of black hair that

ran along his cheek.

“I suppose you want a beer?” Walter retrieved the butt from the ground, smoothing the small crater left by its landing.

The Deputy turned his beet-red face towards Walter. His front teeth intruded over his bottom lip as he picked at something wedged between the pearly whites. “Be nice, but I’m on duty, you know.”

“That’s okay; I don’t have beer anyway.”

Parker sighed and shook his head. “So, what’s all the big hoo-ha about, Walt?”

“Take a look at the barn, genius,” Walter said. “There’s a giant cube blocking the door to my cows. Can’t feed ‘em. Can’t do anything with that thing in the way. And it doesn’t belong here. Didn’t ask for it, don’t want it, and I’ll only be happy when *it*, and *you* are gone again.”

Parker didn’t respond in words. He sniffed at the air before he threw his weight into moving his legs towards the barn.

#

“She’s a beauty ain’t she, Elvis?”

“Don’t call me Elvis when I’m on duty, Dwayne. I got to look professional.”

Walter watched the Deputy and tow-truck operator - both wearing dark sunglasses – inspected the cube, prodding, probing and pushing.

Neither of the men had any idea of the objects origin. Or worse still, any way they could move the damn thing out of his hair so his life could continue normally.

Both times Dwayne had attached his cable and tried dragging the cube away, the truck had kicked and bucked, spewing out streams of gravel, causing Walter's heart to ache to see his neat yard destroyed. But the cube, that fixed thing in his present life, was not moving even an inch from its place as guardian outside the barn.

Dwayne gave up after the second try, and now he and Elvis stood before the cube, trying to piece together another plan of attack.

“Well?” Walter raked at the scuff-marks left by the truck, trying to keep the place as normal as possible.

Elvis pulled at his belt, hitching his pants over his enormous stomach. “Got me, Walt. We tried... but it did no good.”

“Must weigh a shit-load.” Dwayne hunched down next to the cube, rapping his knuckles against the side.

“That's not what I want to hear.” Walter spotted a miscreant butt and was momentarily distracted while he scooped up the foreigner and deposited it into his overall's pocket. “Can't you hear my girls crying in there, you idiots? Isn't there an ounce of compassion in your bones?” He shook the rake at them. “It doesn't belong on my farm. I want it out now! And the two of you. Sick of the sight of you already; you don't fit. I like my peace, and I like things the

way they were before... before that thing,” Walter aimed the rake like a rifle, sighting in on the shining cube, “turned up and upset everything.”

Scratching at the crease in the backside of his faded blue jeans, Dwayne laughed as he stood.

“You ain’t a very pleasant fellow, is you?” He wiped his hands on his red, oily rag.

“Ain’t his fault, Dwayne; was the accident that made him real strange.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was always kinda weird at school, but not like he is now,” Elvis said.

“You shut your mouth, Elroy!” Walter shook the rake.

“Don’t call me that!” Deputy Parker half grabbed for the pistol at his hip, quivering as he checked himself. “You call me Elvis, God damn it! Or Deputy Parker. You show me some respect or I’ll bust your head!”

Walter glared at Parker. He bared his teeth. “Not any of his business; not anybody’s concern but my own. So don’t say another damn word.”

“Don’t burst a pipe there mister; only asking.” Dwayne was half smiling, but Walter noticed he took a step back, closer to the deputy before he spoke.

Elvis shook his head and spat near his feet. “Yeah, easy there, Walt. It’s been ten years. People still remember the accident real good. Only reason Dwayne don’t know is on account he moved here from Gainesville last summer.”

Walter eyed the tow-truck driver. Had someone smacked him upside the head? With that

almost surprised expression that constantly hung from his face, Walter wasn't sure if the man was completely there upstairs.

"Lightning," Elvis said.

"Huh?" Dwayne looked at the deputy.

"It happened to both his parents. Terrible accident it was." Elvis shook his head, his three chins rippled against the collar of his shirt.

"No!" Walter threw the rake, launching it like a javelin at Elvis. It wobbled through the air, missing the deputy and struck the cube with a thump.

The almost unbearable light from the cube died instantly. The once dazzling guardian shifted to a dull grey.

"Hole-ee-Mary!" Dwayne, closer than Walter and Elvis, ran his hands across the surface.

"Jesus-h-Christ, there's stuff written here!"

#

More people and more trucks with electronic gadgets, others with tents, tables, and chairs filed into the farm all day: a roaring, dusty line of mechanical ants loaded down with equipment.

All of them invading the farm. All of them tearing up the landscape with their wheels.

Walter sat on his porch, the rake resting across his lap as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

He watched the latest group of trucks lurch to a stop near the barn. A dozen men, dressed in army fatigues jump out. They unloaded the boxes from the back as quickly as they could.

“Should make you famous, I think.”

Walter turned to see a thin man, neatly dressed in a cheap grey suit, making his way up the steps. It must be ninety degrees already, yet the bald fellow still had his shirt collar buttoned and wore a yellow tie that lay neatly against his white shirt.

“Think so?” Walter said.

“Oh yes.” The man patted his head with a folded handkerchief. “Whatever it is, you can put your money down it’s not from around here.”

“So, you government types know what it is?”

“Not yet, but we have extrapolated the data obtained on the cube, and I believe the source is of an extraterrestrial nature.”

“You think it’s from outer space?” Walter hadn’t considered that. He had been convinced the local kids had played a prank. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“Quite possibly.” The man kept dabbing at his skull. Beads of sweat continued to roll down the sides. “The readings we’ve taken on the metal shows we’re dealing with an unknown alloy.”

“What about the pictures on the sides?” Walter said.

“That’s what Doctor Atherton is here for.” He glanced over his shoulder at the bustling activity, pointing at the large green tent that had been erected around the cube. “He’s in there now with his laptop, scanning the glyphs into his computer to compare against his database of known languages.”

“I hope he’s finished soon.” Walter stood. He headed towards the latest line of trucks, dragging his rake across the upturned ground, smoothing the undulating soil into a flat surface again, leaving only the teeth-marks of his rake in his wake.

#

After a hurried lunch, Walter decided his farm had suffered enough desecration. Taking a decent length of rope, he drove a couple of dozen three-foot poles into the ground, stringing the rope between each length, erecting a kind of no-go zone, fencing off the entire area near the house, allowing the trucks, scientists, and soldiers only a small corridor through which they could enter or leave the boundary of the farm.

He spent the next two hours raking the landscape back into a smooth, flat, and tranquil setting, allowing himself a few moments afterwards to stare in silent rapture at his handy-work.

“Busy little critters, ain’t they?”

Walter turned. Both Dwayne and Deputy Parker had crossed his picket line. They stood side by side, watching the steady progress of trucks.

Walter gasped at the footprints. “You see that rope?” He set about raking the ground flat as he continued, “That means you don’t cross it.” He used the back of the rake to tap a small pebble even with the rest of the soil.

“They don’t want us over there. Said we was getting in the way. I’m the local law. I have a right.”

Walter watched the corners of Parker’s mouth droop: a hound-dog expression if he’d ever seen one. It was hard not to laugh. The Deputy’s power had evaporated the second the government types rolled in. Now he was just another observer like Walter.

“The cube could be an alien ship.” Dwayne still wiped his hands with the dirty rag. He stared at the tent.

“Too small,” Parker said. “Only one alien could fit inside. There’s no engine and it’s solid. You couldn’t see out to steer.”

“And of course you’d know, being the local expert on space mechanics and quantum theorems.” Walter couldn’t help jibbing Elvis.

Elvis towered over him and jabbed a sausage-sized finger in his face. “That’s right, I ain’t the smart one! At least I never gave up on *my* dream. I always wanted to be a cop, and that’s the truth. How about you, Walt? I know you never wanted to be a farmer. What about school? I remember all you talked about was how you were gonna leave one day, go to university and fly off in a spaceship to the moon.”

Dwayne laughed and Walter experienced a heat that rose from his belly into his face. He bared his teeth at the truck driver. “Don’t you laugh at me, or I’ll feed you this rake sideways.”

Dwayne dropped the smile. “Easy there, didn’t mean to offend.” He held up his hands. “Just don’t picture you as a spaceman is all. Ain’t they all tall and fit lookin’... no offence... but you look a bit on the scrawny side to be an astronaut.”

“It isn’t all about the body!” Walter tapped his head. “You have to be smart, too. There are calculations, calibrations, course implementations, and many other factors that require instant assessment and then action to keep you alive up there.” He pointed up into the deep azure sky, Dwayne tracking his finger as they both looked up.

“Told you he was smart.” Elvis drew deeply from the back of his throat and deposited a phlegm ball at Walter’s feet. “Just has a few screws loose since he saw his momma and pa fried by lightning out there in the field.”

“If we’re telling secrets.” Walter spun on the deputy. “Why don’t we tell our new friend about you?” How about that, Elvis? Or, is it Elroy? I never can remember.”

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join?”

Walter hadn’t seen the small man in the suit approach. Stung by the deputy’s remarks, he almost forgot about the spit at his feet. He covered it over with his boot before he answered.

“Was private land until you came; can’t see what’s stopping you from doing whatever you please anyway.” Walter clacked his teeth together, deciding the ground at his feet needed immediate attention.

He bent and raked at the soil, sending a small dust cloud boiling around the men’s legs.

“I have some good news and bad I’m afraid,” the man said.

Walter stopped and looked at the official.

“Yes, yes, that’s right.” The man pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. “We, or should I say Doctor Atherton believes the language on the cube isn’t of terrestrial origin.”

“Is that the good news or the bad?” Walter hadn’t heard any mention of his cows, or that the government had finished their studies and were packing up and getting ready to leave. What about the cows? With all these men here, there must be something they could do to free his animals.

“Why the good news of course.” The man looked at Deputy Parker. “I thought he’d be pleased. This means we have official proof of man’s first contact with an alien society.”

“It’s from outer space?” Dwayne jumped in the air and yelled; his excitement caused several soldiers nearby to glance in their direction.

“Yes, we believe so.” The official nodded again.

“So, Walt will be famous, then?” Parker hitched his pants as he gave Walter a sideways glance.

Walter ignored Elvis and tapped the ground near the little bald man. “Does that mean you’ll be going soon?” He almost bit his tongue. It came out as a plaintive whine, not the sardonic voice he wanted to use. But he was tired, fed-up with the constant coming and goings of the trucks and men. Yesterday hadn’t been like this. Why couldn’t he just have another day like yesterday - was that really too much to ask?

“Ah, no.” The small man pulled at his collar, twisting his neck as he undid his top button. “You see, now that we’ve made an initial identification, we need to report back to our superiors, let

them decide the next course of action.”

“They ain’t gonna believe this at Lorraine’s coffee shop!” Dwayne prodded the little man from the side.

The official obviously not used to being man-handled, took a few steps away from Dwayne, rubbing at the spot with his handkerchief where the tow-truck driver had touched his jacket.

“You are correct; you won’t have a chance to tell them...none of you will be telling anyone anything for a while.”

“What?” Walter didn’t like the man’s tone.

“What do you mean?” Dwayne looked at Deputy Parker. “What’s he mean, Elvis?”

“I’m the law around here, mister.” Parker rested his hands on his hips. “You just can’t go round threatening people.”

Whether it was accidental Walter wasn’t sure, but the deputy’s fingers were very close to his weapon when he spoke.

“Threat? Oh no, you have me all wrong.” The man held up his hands, his handkerchief flapping as if he were surrendering to them. “You’ll be sworn to secrecy. Government article 2701, subsection 4, paragraph D.”

“We can’t tell anyone?” Dwayne wrung the rag in his hands.

“Sorry, not yet.”

“I have to make a report for the call.” Elvis tapped his breast pocket where his notebook sat.

“This was an official police investigation until your people arrived.”

“That’s been taken care of already.” The bald man was back to dabbing at the sweat on his head. “A report has been compiled for you to hand in.”

“But what about the call I made. It was me that got you here in the first place,” Elvis said.

“As I said deputy, all things have been accounted for.”

“What about my cows?” In all the excitement of their discovery, Walter still wasn’t any closer to the inside of the barn than he had been this morning.

“Eh?” By the look on his face, the man in the suit hadn’t understood. He wiped at the sweat on his head. “They’re still in the barn. By the sound of them, they’re still alive and kicking.”

“When are you going to get them out?” Walter took a step closer, trying to keep the agitation out of his voice.

“Get them out?” The official smiled. “We aren’t here for the cows.”

Walter wanted to knock the grin off the man’s face. “Doesn’t anyone care about those animals but me?” He walked off, dragging the rake, careful not to leave heel-marks on the ground.

#

Walter watched as the soldiers hung lamps around the tent, giving an eerie cast to the green

material in the fading light. The flaps at the front were tied back, and with the aid of the lights burning within, Walter was able to see the scientists as they huddled before the cube, working the object over from top-to-bottom.

“You sure you ain’t got beer?”

“No beer, Elvis.” He turned to the large deputy who dwarfed the wicker chair that strained beneath his bulk. “Wasn’t any beer the first time you asked, and there still isn’t any now.”

Walter gulped at the glass of chilled water, letting the cool liquid sooth his throat.

“How long they gonna keep us here?” Dwayne paced the porch. He squeezed the rag in his hands.

“Until they say otherwise.” Parker drew back deeply in his throat, ready to launch another spit ball.

“If that leaves your mouth, I’m going to make you go out there and pick it right up again.”

Walter pointed a finger at Elvis.

The deputy shrugged and swallowed.

“They can’t keep us here, can they?” Dwayne said. “Ain’t it against our rights?”

“Sit down.” Walter stood. He led Dwayne to his chair and deposited the anxious mechanic down.

He picked up the broom and swept away the dirt left by Dwayne’s pacing.

“They’re the damn government, Dwayne; they can pretty well do what they want,” Elvis said.

“Not on my farm they can’t!” Walter gave the deputy’s holster a glance, wondering if he could wrestle the gun away before the big man could react.

“Calm down, Walter.” Elvis raised his large hand. “There’s no use getting all steamed up when there’s nothing you can do.”

“They don’t belong here.” Walter jabbed his finger out at the military operation. Trucks, men, rubbish, and too many scuff marks all disturbing his sense of balance. “None of you do.” He pushed back his hat and wiped at the slick of sweat building under the brim.

“Why do you keep wearing a hat that’s got a mighty big hole in the front?” Dwayne pointed at Walter’s head. “Noticed it before but didn’t think much of it with all the excitement going on. Like there’s a big burn mark there.”

“Ain’t his; it’s his pa’s.” Elvis picked at his teeth with his nail. “That’s the hat he was wearing the day he got struck dead.”

“Don’t you talk about my daddy, Elvis.” Walter touched the hat. “You haven’t the right to talk about him.” He bent and gave the porch another sweeping with the broom, hoping the tears welling in his eyes wouldn’t stain the wooden boards at his feet.

“Sorry, no disrespect meant.” Dwayne moved in the chair, dragging it across the boards as he pulled it one way then another as he tried to get comfortable again. He finally gave up and sat still.

#

They watched the activity in silence for a while, until sleep forced them inside where Dwayne and Elvis became Walter's reluctant guests for the night. He bedded them down in the kitchen, where the floor – covered in tiles – would be the easiest to clean once their dirty bodies were gone in the morning. Giving his good-nights, Walter left them to sort out who would sleep where. He headed up the stairs and for a change, he fell into a deep slumber the moment his body fell horizontal on the bed.

#

MOO. TESTING.

Walter screamed as the booming voice shattered his sleep. He jumped from his bed, blinking away his dream.

WALTER?

Walter grabbed his head, looking towards the clock radio: 03:07.

He hurried towards the bathroom. This would teach him to skip his pills for weeks. Did the voices have to be so loud though?

IT'S DEIRDRE. I NEED TO SEE YOU.

His legs turned to jelly. Walter sat on the bathroom tiles. Deirdre? That couldn't be.

COME TO THE BARN.

Walter climbed to his feet. "Deirdre? Is that really you?" He moved out of his room and down the stairs, forgetting to make the bed or even put on his pa's hat.

IT'S WONDERFUL, WALTER. YOU NEED TO SEE.

Following the promise, Walter smiled as he opened the front door and walked out onto the porch.

The tent was gone. A bright nimbus surrounded the cube. Two soldiers stood frozen either side, as if made from stone.

The front of the barn had dissolved, leaving Walter a complete view of the interior. He walked across the carpet road.

Rows of cows stood behind the cube, watching silently as Walter approached.

THE TIME HAS COME, WALTER

A red Friesian stepped out from the line.

"Deirdre?" Walter went to pat his favourite bovine but hesitated.

WE HAVE RISEN, WALTER.

WE HAVE RISEN. The rest of the cows echoed.

Walter rubbed his nose as he studied his prize milker. "Cows aren't supposed to talk, Deirdre."

THE CUBE, WALTER.

He looked at the glowing shape.

THEY ARE SORRY ABOUT YOUR PARENTS.

Walter looked at Deirdre again. Tears welled in his eyes. "Who's sorry?"

AN ACCIDENT.

AN ACCIDENT. The rest of the cows repeated.

THEY TRIED TO SEND US THE CUBE BEFORE. A TERRIBLE ACCIDENT INSTEAD.

Walter looked at the cube. "What are you talking about?"

THEY WERE VISITORS HERE. LONG BEFORE THE MONKEY LEARNED TO TALK. THEY ARE COMING AGAIN.

Shaking his head, Walter rubbed the tears away. "I don't under—"

IT'S TIME TO GO, WALTER. THINGS ARE ABOUT TO CHANGE.

Looking back at his house, Walter thought about rousing Elvis and Dwayne. He needed a reality check.

THE TALKING MONKEY HAS LOST ITS THRONE. YOUR EPOCH ON TOP HAS FINISHED.

WE HAVE RISEN. The other cows added. IT IS OUR TIME TO RULE.

“I don’t understand.” Walter turned back to Deirdre. “Isn’t this all in my head?”

THE CUBE HAS GIVEN US UNDERSTANDING. IT HAS EXPANDED OUR MINDS.

WE HAVE RISEN. The chant went again.

IT IS OUR TIME TO REIGN, WALTER. OUR ANCESTORS ARE RETURNING.

WE HAVE RISEN.

“I think I should wake the others now.” Walter took a few steps towards the house.

FLY THROUGH SPACE, WALTER. OUR GIFT TO YOU.

That stopped him in his tracks. He turned. “Space?”

BEHOLD THE CUBE.

The cows and Walter turned. The cube shimmered. A dark line creased the centre before the blackness spread, filling a complete side.

A SHIP.

A SHIP TO TRAVEL. The other cows added.

THEY WANT TO MEET YOU, WALTER. TO LOOK AFTER YOU.

AS YOU LOOKED AFTER US.

Walter took a step towards the cube, staring at the dark surface.

ORDER. ORDER. The other cows promised. NOTHING BUT ORDER.

Reaching out with his fingers towards the surface, Walter withdrew at the last second.

Deirdre nudged his hand with her wet nose.

TRUST US, AS WE TRUSTED YOU.

TRUST US.

Walter stared into the large brown eyes of his red Friesian. "What about Elvis and the others."

Deirdre flicked her tail.

THEIR TIME HAS ENDED. OUR TIME TO RULE.

"Oh dear," Walter said as he looked at the frozen-faced soldier nearby. "They won't like it, you know."

FLY AMONG THE STARS, WALTER. FOLLOW YOUR DREAM.

With a last glance at his house, Walter shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "I always wanted to fly."

GOOD BYE, WALTER.

Walter climbed inside the cube. He waved to Deirdre. "I hope this isn't just a dream."

BE HAPPY, WALTER.

Deirdre and the other cows turned and moved towards the house. The cube shimmered and shot towards the sky.

A Black Friesian nudged Deirdre as they walked.

DOES THIS MEAN WE CAN STOP BEING VEGETARIANS NOW?

###

Story 2 - SHC - by Barbara Davies

SHC - by Barbara Davies

"Shit!" Yelena Makarova tried not to gag. The smell of something yeasty, something still warm and moist, was overpowering. She peered through the haze at the soot-coated cabin ceiling, at the blistered walls, anything to avoid looking at that ... thing.

The partition which separated the cramped living quarters from the bathroom had melted clean through in places, and was now coated with something sticky and orange-red. She poked a finger into it. "Ugh ... what is this stuff, Sergeant?" She stooped and wiped the sticky glop from her glove onto the carpet.

Sgt Robert Steingold gave a baffled shrug.

Yelena glanced round the cabin again, skipping over the charred remains. In a moment, her stomach would be under control; best not to risk it until then - as Security Officer she had a certain dignity to maintain.

Steingold whistled tunelessly as he took several holopics.

"Have you called the medics yet?"

He nodded. "Johannsen's on her way."

Yelena took a deep breath - it was best to breathe through her mouth, she discovered - and forced herself to look at all that was left of Sean Murphy, Senior Shuttle Pilot. A sodden heap of ash; a partially clothed left leg, intact up to the charred stump of its mid thigh; a right foot, still shod in its shipboard slipper; and a blackened skull, totally devoid of flesh.

Water droplets dewed every surface, but the emergency sprinkler system had proved completely useless against the inferno. In the end, the fire crew had been forced to flood the cabin with carbon dioxide. What the hell had Murphy done? Doused himself in kerosene and set himself alight?

A commotion in the corridor outside signaled the arrival of the Medical Officer. Frida Johannsen pushed her way past the security guard Steingold had posted.

"Hell!" For an instant, Johannsen's homely face mirrored Yelena's feelings, then her professional mask dropped into place. She crossed to the heap of ash and knelt beside it, placing her medical bag and sampler on the floor. "This the former occupant?"

"What's left of him," said Steingold, leaning comfortably against a half melted doorjamb, and

folding his arms.

It never ceased to amaze Yelena how her subordinate could relax in the most macabre circumstances. The more strange the crime, the better the Sergeant liked it. Well, it made a change from the usual petty thievery and drunken brawls - the inevitable result of cooping up two hundred people together on a starship for too long.

Johannsen didn't bother opening her medical bag. "This patient's past saving, I'm afraid. Even with my skills."

Yelena smiled slightly, acknowledging the attempt at humour, and watched the doctor activate the sampler.

A low hum filled the cabin, and a hatch in the tiny robot's side slid back, extruding a set of tools. The sampler trundled round the corpse, like a scavenger selecting juicy tidbits. While a flexible nozzle sucked in air, miniature scalpels and tweezers transferred slivers and scrapings of ash and bone, threads of clothing and lumps of unidentifiable detritus, into compartments for later analysis.

Johannsen waited. "The light seems rather pink in here," she commented.

"That sticky stuff's got onto the lighting tubes," said Steingold.

The little robot beeped loudly, stowed its tools, and switched itself off. Johannsen picked it up and reached for her bag. "I'm finished."

Yelena turned to Steingold. "Call in the clean-up team."

He straightened up and nodded.

The grey-haired doctor turned to go. Yelena put a hand on her arm. "Probable cause?"

Johannsen kept her eyes carefully blank. "Until I've done the analysis, all I can say is he burned to death."

Yelena sighed with exasperation. "Don't play games, Frida. I think you've seen something like this before."

Johannsen hefted her medical bag uneasily. "I've read about it. Don't quote me on this until I'm certain."

Yelena nodded.

"My guess is, Murphy died of SHC."

"SHC?" Steingold had moved closer, and was listening to every word.

"Spontaneous Human Combustion," said the doctor.

#

"You still here, Yelena?"

She pushed up her visor, glad of Steingold's interruption. Hours of viewing endless security reports and holopics, scrolled onto the screen inches from her pupils, had made her eyes tired and itchy.

"I was catching up on some paperwork. And Johannsen said she'd probably have Murphy's analysis done by tonight."

Yelena wondered how long the Sergeant had been standing in front of her desk. He had used her first name, she realized belatedly - something he only did when they were both off duty.

She checked her watch. "Hell. Where did the time go?"

"Face it, Yelena. You're a workaholic. Anyone would think you didn't have a cabin to go back to ..."

Steingold's affectionate scolding trailed off and he reddened. He must have remembered that, now Mikhail had moved out, there was nothing to go home for, thought Yelena.

"How about a drink?" he asked, apologetically.

Yelena stretched, feeling the stiffness and tension in her neck and shoulders. "Okay. It looks like Johannsen's not going to come up with the results until tomorrow after all." She rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Lead me to it, Bob."

Steingold grinned.

#

The laughter was loud enough to distract Yelena from the magnificent vista of star clusters which glittered outside the viewport. She craned her neck to see what was going on. In the far corner of the crowded bar, a big man in the red uniform of a mining engineer was talking loudly to an appreciative audience. She recognized among the listeners the balding head and broad shoulders of Mikhail Gurina, and turned away as though stung.

Steingold put a drink in front of her and sat down. "Hywel Edwards is in fine form tonight." He

nodded towards the man in red.

Yelena took a sip of vodka. "Mikhail's joined his crowd of hangers on." She felt resentful that her former lover should be enjoying himself, while she was still moping. There had been no warning before his announcement that he was moving out ...

Steingold flashed her a concerned glance. "Do you want to leave?"

"No," she snapped. Then she patted his hand in apology. "No," she repeated, more gently.

Yelena glanced towards the corner again. Edwards was probably the nearest thing The Discovery had to a hero, she supposed grudgingly. A month earlier there had been an accident on PX15. One of the auto-augers used to drill the asteroid's regolith had gone rogue, started chewing flesh instead of rock. If it hadn't been for the Welshman's quick thinking, four miners would have died instead of two. And Edwards had nearly joined the list - while deactivating the auger, it had gashed his thigh and holed his pressure suit. If he hadn't managed to rig a make-shift seal ...

Another burst of laughter wafted over, and Yelena sighed. Mikhail had moved on and made new friends, it seemed. Perhaps she should try to do the same.

#

Yelena read the text projected on the inside of her visor:

Subject: Sean Murphy

Age: 35

Nationality: Irish

Sex: Male

Occupation: Senior Shuttle Pilot (first class)

Current Starship Posting: The Discovery

Cause of Death:1a. Burning

1b. Spontaneous Human Combustion"

There then followed a long section backing up the Medical Officer's startling conclusion.

Johannsen was an expert at her job, with degrees in several related disciplines. It was unlikely she would make a mistake, thought Yelena. Especially since it seemed she had delayed the report until she could check and double check all the facts. There could be no doubt, the doctor said, that the source of the fire had been the victim's own abdominal cavity. In a normal conflagration, the extremities would have burned away while the torso, due to its high water content, survived. Murphy was a big man, his body must have contained at least seven liters of water, yet his torso hadn't survived -

Yelena realized, with a start, that the sticky glop she had fingered at the crime scene must have been Murphy's vaporized body fluids. Bile rose in the back of her throat and she fought against a sudden wave of nausea.

The communicator on her left wrist chimed, and she regained control and spoke into its mouthpiece. "Makarova."

"Johannsen here. Just checking to see if you've got my report on Murphy."

"I'm reading it now," said Yelena. "And not liking it much. I can just see Captain Yoshi's face when he hears about this."

Johannsen's voice was unapologetic. "I call 'em as I see 'em. You know that."

Yelena sighed. "I know."

"Still," continued the medic, "SHC is very rare. Once in a blue moon, according to the literature. So I shouldn't worry too much. It's not like it's catching."

"That's a relief. I'd feel much better if we knew what causes it though. Any idea?"

"Some kind of chemical reaction, would be my guess. I've checked all the literature, but the experts are still a bit hazy. Alcohol may play a part."

"Murphy certainly liked his tippie."

"There you are, then."

"Hmmm. Maybe. There must be dozens who drink far more than he ever did."

Johannsen made a sympathetic noise. "Sorry I can't be more help."

"You have been," said Yelena. "'Once in a blue moon' - I can live with that."

The medic grunted and signed off.

#

The next death happened two days later.

"Once in a blue moon!" accused Yelena.

Johannsen looked up from the pile of ash and partially charred limbs that had once been Julia Polanski, Hydroponics Engineer. Her blue eyes were somber, her mouth a sour, straight line.

"Statistically speaking, this is impossible." The sampler robot hummed and worked busily beside its mistress. "This shouldn't have happened."

"But it has. Why, Dr Johannsen?"

She sighed. "I don't know. That's what's so worrying. Polanski was only 23. Murphy 35. These people are too young, dammit! All the data suggests SHC happens to people in their seventies, or alcoholics in a poor state of health. Polanski was a keep-fit nut. Teetotal too! It just doesn't add up."

Yelena's heart sank. "What the hell is going on, then?"

The doctor seemed suddenly to have found something interesting on her protective gloves. "This is more than a coincidence, Officer Makarova," she said at last. "There must be some medical condition which connects the two victims. I'll get right on it."

"Do that," said Yelena. "Because the last thing The Discovery needs is some new kind of nasty epidemic."

#

When Yelena came off duty, Mikhail was waiting outside her cabin. She stared at him, trying to stifle the painful memories his presence evoked.

"You look very smart," she said. His fatigues were cleaned and pressed, his buttons shone, and his thinning hair was freshly cropped.

"Thanks." He gave her a pleased half smile, then ran a hand over his chin in a familiar gesture.

To check for missed bristles, she thought. Damn the man; he's got a date! How long had this been going on? Was this the reason he walked out?

"Who is she?"

She had meant to act cool and sophisticated, a woman of the world, accustomed to the faithlessness of old lovers. Some hope! The question hung in the air between them while Mikhail shuffled his feet.

"That's why I'm here, Yelena. I wanted to tell you myself ... before you heard it from someone else. You know how quickly scuttle-butt travels on this tub."

"Who is she, Mikhail?"

Absently she noted the change in his posture, the way he braced his legs as though to weather a storm.

"I'm seeing Hywel," he said.

For a moment, Yelena thought she must have misheard. What on earth was he talking about? Then the pieces at last clicked into place.

"Hywel Edwards," she said. "Of course."

He nodded. "I'm sorry, Yelena. I tried to make it work with you, but there was always something missing, I just wasn't sure what. And then Hywel started to take an interest in me ..."

Yelena was suddenly tired, too tired to talk about how unsatisfying in bed he had found her. She felt insulted and betrayed. Mikhail had let her fall in love with him, when all the time ... Where was the openness, the trust, she thought their relationship had had?

"I've got to go," she said abruptly.

Mikhail looked dismayed. "But Yelena, I wanted to ..."

And then the rage broke through. "Just for once, what you want is not the issue. Oh ... leave me alone, for God's sake." And she pushed her way past him into her cabin, and flung herself weeping on the bed while the door slid closed behind her.

#

"Something altered their DNA," said Johannsen, her voice sounding harassed over the wristcom. "It changed the rate and type of enzyme secretion in the small intestine, set off some kind of a chain reaction."

"Great," said Yelena sarcastically.

The doctor missed the intonation and sounded pleased. "Yes. Progress at last. Now I know what to look for, I can devise a detection test and some gene therapy."

"But ..." There was always a 'but'.

"It'll take time. We've got two hundred people to check, and even if they're clear now, there's no guarantee they'll be clear tomorrow. I don't know this thing's vector - if it's airborne, waterborne, or even sexually transmitted. We may have a 'Typhoid Mary' on board The Discovery, Officer Makarova."

"A what?"

"It's a term from Old Earth. Someone who carries the disease but is immune to its effects. If so, we've got to find and quarantine that carrier before this spreads any further."

"Shit," said Yelena.

"I couldn't have put it better myself."

#

"You take Murphy's friends," Yelena told Steingold. "I'll take Polanski's. Get whatever info you can about his recent contacts, and then get back to me. We'll cross-check, see if there's a common factor."

Sergeant Steingold nodded, grim faced.

"And let's hope we can stop this thing."

#

Chris Basileos was under heavy sedation in his cabin. The death of Julia Polanski had hit

him hard.

"I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this, Chris," said Yelena, sitting next to him on the couch.

"But I need to ask some questions ... about you and Julia."

The young Cypriot nodded dully.

"How long were you two together?"

He sighed and knuckled one puffy eyelid. "Two years, off and on. We got engaged a month ago, were due to get married next month ..."

"Your relationship was pretty stormy, from what I hear."

Basileos frowned. "So what? Many couples have arguments."

Yelena raised an eyebrow. 'Arguments' was an understatement. Basileos and Polanski had been renowned for their hot tempers; she had once been present in the mess hall herself when they had begun to swear and throw crockery at one another ... But their reconciliations had been just as passionate, by all accounts. In a way, she had envied them; Mikhail and she ... but she brushed that thought away.

"Is that why you two broke up? An argument?"

He looked away. "It was personal, nobody else's business."

She put a hand on his forearm and squeezed it gently. "Chris, I need you to be honest. It may help us find out why Julia died. You want to know, don't you?"

After a moment, he nodded.

" So. You two had a pretty big bust up a week ago. So big, Julia moved out. Right?"

Basileos's brown eyes glistened. "Right."

"What happened?"

A large tear spilled over and ran down his cheek.

"Take your time," said Yelena softly.

He took a deep breath. "She slept with someone else. Just a one night stand, she said. I couldn't believe she'd do such a thing! It didn't seem to mean anything to her either - 'One last fling before the wedding' was how she put it." He looked down at his knees, his expression bitter. "I totally lost it, Officer Makarova. Gave her a black eye and a busted lip ... told her to get out. She moved her things out the same day."

Yelena wished she could leave him to grieve in peace, but she needed to know.

"Who was she seeing, Chris?"

His mouth trembled. "That bastard, Hywel Edwards," he said. "That's who."

#

"Come in, Sgt Steingold. Are you there?"

"Here," came his voice over the wristcom. "What's up?"

"Did Murphy have some connection with Hywel Edwards?" asked Yelena.

Steingold sounded startled. "They were lovers, it seems. How did you know?"

Yelena heart thudded and she began to run down the corridor. She had no idea how much time she had left. "I think he's our carrier," she said rather breathlessly, her pounding feet eating up the distance. "This thing spreads sexually; it might involve other body fluids too. Put him in quarantine, will you? Notify Johannsen, and tell her I need her, stat."

"Okay. Where are you?"

"On my way to Mikhail Gurina's new living quarters on Deck 3," she said.

She was only meters from her destination when the alarm and sprinkler systems went off.

#

Yelena overrode the door's entry code, but even before it had slid fully open she knew she was too late.

A faint blue light illuminated the cabin, and as she stepped over the door sill, she could see Mikhail's body, prone beside the dining table. Blue flames were issuing forcefully through a slit in his abdomen, licking at his clothing. His flesh was beginning to smolder.

"My God!" She dashed back out into the corridor, grabbed a foam fire extinguisher, then sprayed it over the dead man's abdomen until at last the fire was out. The sprinklers had soaked her, and as she stood staring dumbly at Mikhail's body, she began to shiver.

Footsteps sounded on the metal floor outside, and two startled members of the fire crew

joined her.

"Security Officer Makarova," said the more senior of the two. "You got here fast!"

"I happened to be passing." She felt strangely distant, as though someone had put a thick pane of glass between her and the rest of the world.

Dr Johanssen appeared seemingly from nowhere and put a hand under Yelena's arm. "Take it easy, Yelena," she murmured. "You look like you're going into shock. Sit down and put your head between your knees."

She did as instructed, and stared at the standard issue grey carpet, hearing the medic dismiss the fire crew. "And get these damned sprinklers turned off," was the doctor's parting shot. A few seconds later, the hissing rain stopped.

Yelena raised her head wearily. Johanssen was kneeling beside the corpse. This time, due to Yelena's timely arrival, it was still recognizable. Mikhail's fists were like claws, his body contorted, doubled up. And there's something odd about the position of his head, she thought. It was pressed, face first, against the leg of a plastic dining chair. Overpowering curiosity dragged her to her feet.

"Yelena, don't." Johanssen was regarding her anxiously.

But Yelena could already see the jaw gripping the chair leg, the teeth embedded deep in the plastic. "He must have been in agony. God. What a dreadful way to die!" she murmured. And before the doctor could reach her, she fainted.

#

Yelena sat up groggily, grateful for Johannsen's supporting arm. She felt slightly sick. Shit! A Security Officer wasn't supposed to pass out while on duty ...

"Sorry about that ..." she managed, glancing sideways. But Johannsen's expression was neutral as she checked Yelena's pulse.

Yelena's wristcom chimed. "Security required in mess hall, Deck 3. Reports of fight in progress." She shrugged off the doctor's restraining hands, and struggled to her feet.

"You've had a nasty shock, Officer Makarova." Johannsen's voice was disapproving. "You ought to rest."

Yelena shook her head. "I'm all right. And the mess hall's only up the corridor." Actually, she welcomed the excuse to leave Mikhail's cabin. Each time she looked at his corpse the feeling of nausea returned. Keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the cabin door, she lurched towards the corridor. Once there, she leaned with relief against the wall and took a deep gulp of air. Already she felt much better.

"Sgt Steingold, where are you?" she said into the wristcom. "What's the status on Hywel Edwards?"

There was a brief silence, then Steingold's voice said, "I'm in his living quarters. We've drawn a blank here, though, so I've put the word out."

Yelena sighed. Why were things never straightforward?

She began to jog along the corridor towards the mess hall. As she approached, she saw that its entrance was blocked by a crowd of onlookers yelling encouragement to those creating the

disturbance inside.

"Security. Let me through," she bellowed, elbowing her way between the packed bodies. There were mutters of discontent, but slowly a gangway opened, and she was able to get inside.

The destruction startled Yelena, and she paused. Smashed tables and chairs leaned at crazy angles. Then something exploded against the wall by her left ear and her cheek stung. Instinctively, she dropped to a crouch, laser weapon at the ready. She touched her cheek, and her glove came away smeared with blood. It looked worse than it probably was. Facial wounds had a tendency to bleed freely, she thought, refusing to panic. Quickly, she assessed the situation.

On the floor around her lay shards of plastic - someone must have thrown a chair. But it had not been deliberately aimed at her, she realized. In the middle of the mess hall, four men were beating the shit out of each other, using anything that came to hand. No pistols or knives involved, luckily, and the onlookers by the door were showing no inclination to join in. She stood up slowly, reholstering her weapon.

In the scrum of flailing arms and legs, elbows and knees, it was impossible to identify the participants. Dull thuds, grunts of anger and pain, filled the room. A bone snapped loudly. This was no friendly brawl, she realized. There was a ferocious purpose and intensity to the assault. And she now saw that one man seemed to be on the receiving end of most of the blows. She wondered what he had done to deserve such a beating.

"Break it up," she yelled. No one took any notice.

"Right." Yelena moved forward, and methodically began to dig her thumb into any nerve

points she could reach, pulling the suddenly rigid individuals free of the scrum. Another security guard arrived, and she ordered him to handcuff the dazed men.

Now it was possible to identify the attackers. It was no surprise that Joe Puente was involved, though he looked even more belligerent and wild-eyed than usual. But the other two ... Vitaliy Shokhim's bespectacled head was bowed as though in meditation, while the lanky figure of Paul Grafton muttered something in his ear. What the hell had made those two lose control like this?

The victim rose unsteadily to his feet, cradling his left arm. His nose was squashed to one side, and a front tooth was missing. Blood streaked his chin and the front of his torn mining engineer's uniform. Even though his looks were ruined, she recognized the Welshman immediately. Understanding dawned. The three attackers had all been close friends of Basileos and Polanski. Damn it! she thought. They must have been listening to the security comms channel ...

"Sgt Steingold, get your men to the Deck 3 mess hall at the double," said Yelena into her wristcom. "I've found Hywel Edwards."

"They attacked me without provocation, Officer," said Edwards, inhaling sharply as the bones in his injured arm grated together audibly.

"No provocation?" Puente lurched towards the mining engineer, almost breaking free of the security guard's grip. Veins corded his neck. "You killed Julia!"

The guard dug a thumb into a nerve point, and Puente gasped and subsided.

Puzzlement and outrage covered Edwards' face. "This is preposterous ..."

Without warning, Yelena experienced a flashback - an image of strong, white teeth embedded in a chair leg. She felt an overwhelming urge to beat senseless the man who had caused Mikhail such agony, and found herself struggling for control.

"Shut up, Edwards," she said, through gritted teeth. "As of now, you're in detention, pending quarantine."

He stared at her. "Quarantine?"

Feet thudded, and Steingold and two of his subordinates piled into the mess hall. They halted warily, eyes taking in the situation at a glance. The Sergeant muttered something, and his colleagues went to assist the guard with Puente and his friends.

Steingold frowned at Yelena. "Everything okay?" he mouthed. Blood from her cut cheek had splattered her soggy uniform and run like watercolor, she realized. No wonder he was concerned. She nodded reassurance, and his frown cleared.

She turned back to the still protesting Edwards, uncertain whether to feel relieved or sorry the Sergeant had arrived in time to stop her from doing something foolish. "Get him out of my sight, Sergeant," she said.

#

Captain Yoshi swivelled his chair round from the viewport and smiled, perfect teeth gleaming. "Security Officer Makarova. Please sit."

Yelena took the chair facing him, and waited.

"I've just finished reading your report," said Yoshi. "Good work. Only three fatalities - we got

off lightly thanks to the quick thinking of you and Dr Johannsen." He regarded her somberly.

"Sorry about Mikhail."

Yelena nodded and looked down at her hands.

"Thought you'd like to know we're tagging PX15 as a bio-hazard from now on. Pity. Its mineral deposits are worth a fortune. Still. Can't be helped. There could be more of those alien organisms lurking in the regolith."

The Captain's tone shifted to conversational. "Any idea how Edwards is responding to gene therapy?"

"Johannsen says he'll be clear in about a week."

"Excellent. She checked me over yesterday." Yoshi winced at the memory. "What about the rest of the crew?"

"All clear except two."

"More of Hywel Edwards' sexual partners?"

Yelena was unable to stop herself. "That murdering bastard. If he hadn't acted like a bisexual rabbit -"

Yoshi frowned. "He's not a murderer, Officer Makarova. He couldn't know the auger had infected him."

She heard the warning note in his voice, the return to formality. "No, sir."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "I know you feel you have a legitimate grievance. So do Puente and his friends. But we're not a lynch mob, and I won't have any vendettas on this ship, Officer Makarova. To that end, I'm putting you in charge of Edwards' safety. Do I make myself clear?"

The man who had killed Mikhail was going to go free, and she was to protect him? She swallowed hard. Still, there was one small consolation, she supposed. Edwards hadn't got off totally unscathed. Word had spread throughout the starship, and it would be quite a while before anyone risked sleeping with him again.

"I understand, sir," said Yelena evenly.

Yoshi gazed at her for a moment longer, then smiled. "I'm sure you do. Keep up the good work, Makarova."

There was finality in his voice, and he swiveled his chair back to face the viewport. She left him staring at the glittering stars.

###

Story 3 - When You Zoom Out - by Karl El-Koura

Nathan found it hard to concentrate on his work; he couldn't stop thinking about Christy. He pushed his chair away from his desk. Why? Did he really believe he could distance himself from thoughts of her simply by distancing himself from the desk? He stared at the picture of them together, framed in red Valentine hearts on a silver background as shiny as a mirror. The picture sat on his desk, two love-happy faces perpetually staring at him.

He stood. At the window at the back of his office, he pushed the button to clear the glass. The sun was shining brightly outside, glinting off the still, ink-dark waters of the canal. He stared out at the view from thirty stories above. *This would make a beautiful picture-postcard, he thought. It probably already has.*

Below, ant-like people went about their lazy, mid-day activities. The sight brought back

more memories of Christy: skating together in the winter on the frozen canal, canoeing in the summer, taking long walks along the water's edge in the fall and spring.

Nathan sighed just as his computer beeped behind him; he turned and almost swore. He had class in fifteen minutes.

He took his time crossing campus. It was a hot, windless day and there was a film of cold sweat sticking his shirt to his chest, but he took short, slow steps anyway. When he walked into class, the students were seated and waiting for him. But the last thing he wanted to do was talk for three hours.

"Class is cancelled today," he said. He turned and left without looking at any of his students' faces.

#

Nathan pushed his glasses up his face until they rested on his forehead, and dug his knuckles deep into the sockets of his eyes. It didn't make any sense.

He'd fed the data through one algorithm after another. He'd poured over countless charts and graphs, looked at so many tables for so long that he could easily reproduce all the numbers if the original set were ever lost. He'd studied everything about the sounds that one could possibly study, from every angle. He'd stared at spectrograms until his eyes started to water; he'd attacked the problem with every sound analysis technique in his arsenal. He'd analyzed the pitch, stress, tone, *everything* of those damn waveforms. But had come up with nothing.

Was the alien communicating?

Absolutely. There was a pattern to be found in that sea of sound. Of course, relax enough constraints and you can find patterns in just about anything. But they had provided Nathan with time-aligned transcriptions of the alien's actions; the alien did x while producing sound y . There was a definite, if somewhat fuzzy correlation between the sounds and the actions.

Of course it was communicating, but that wasn't the interesting question. A dog communicates when she whines a certain way for food and a different way when she wants to go for a walk. No, the main question was, Is the alien using language?

The answer didn't have to be yes just because they'd found it in the crashed spaceship on Mars. Sputnik 2 got launched with a single passenger, a canine. So this alien might very well be only a guinea pig, like poor, doomed Laika. Or it could be a member of a species smart enough to construct a spaceship that even from the wreckage was obviously far superior to

anything human scientists had yet to design.

And although for him it was mainly an intellectual exercise, perhaps the greatest of his life, Nathan realized that much more was at stake.

Why had the alien entered their solar system? Were there more alien spaceships on the way? What were their intentions? If more aliens were coming, and their intentions were initially peaceful, what would they make of the fact that one of their own had been captured? The crash was accidental--but how would the aliens know that?

Nathan knew from his brother that none of the military linguists had been able to crack the alien's language (if it used one at all). And they were working on Mars, interacting directly with the alien itself. What chance did he have, millions of kilometers away, working from transcripts that might not even be accurate?

His brother had sent him the tapes as a favor, and perhaps a little out of desperation. Time was running out; the alien was dying. Nathan had entertained dreams of cracking the code when all the other linguists couldn't. But he'd failed. Lately he'd been feeling a lot like a failure.

With a heavy sigh, he put his glasses back on and pushed himself away from his desk.

#

Since he and Christy had stopped talking two weeks ago, Nathan had developed a habit of looking at his answering machine as soon as he got home. He knew Christy hadn't called his office or his cell phone; the blinking red light on his answering machine held the hope that she had called him at home.

Whenever he saw that blinking light and allowed himself to hope it was Christy who had left him a message (which was always), and turned out to be wrong (also always), Nathan mentally chastised himself. Of course she wouldn't call. *He* was supposed to call *her*.

That's what she had said: "When you can figure out what you will do to make this relationship work, give me a call." But just as he'd been unable to do anything significant with the alien sounds which might or might not constitute a language, he'd been unable to figure out anything at all in terms of what he could do to make their relationship work. As far as he was concerned, it was working. He got on Christy's nerves from time to time, but Christy was short-tempered with everyone ("I don't have time for time-wasters," she liked to say). He was too "sex-driven" (her words), but in fact they hadn't been intimate past a kiss for months. Christy also didn't like that he taught young, female students--but he really couldn't do much about that, could he?

He missed her so much, and yet he couldn't call her without a ready answer. He'd tried that, two days after his forced separation from her. She was furious with him; she accused him of wasting her time or trying to make her angry at work. It was such a humiliating experience that he didn't want to repeat it, no matter how much he missed her.

#

"I'm sorry for cancelling class last week," Nathan told his students as he waited for the laptop to boot up ("All this technology," he was fond of complaining to them, "and we still can't get a computer that boots in decent time.") "This week we'll look at evidence for and against Chomsky's notion of a Universal Grammar that comes pre-wired in all human brains."

His classes on UG were always fun, especially when he had a good mix of rationalists and empiricists in the class and started pushing the buttons of each.

Even so, what he really wanted to talk about was the alien. But that was strictly out of the question. Rumors of the crashed spaceship had spread, of course, but the UN was denying everything. It wasn't hard to do--not only wasn't there a media presence on Mars, there wasn't any non-military presence whatsoever. Nevertheless, his brother had sworn him to secrecy.

"Imagine this," Nathan said to the class, stepping away from his computer and projector. It was impulsive, and though he knew what he was about to say, he could hardly believe he was going to say it. "Imagine that those aliens-have-landed rumors are actually true."

A bit of laughter waved through the class. Nathan saw that some students shifted in their seats, sat up straighter. They had settled themselves in for a boring three-hour, slide-powered lecture, but now he had their attention.

"Imagine that an alien emerges from the spaceship and begins speaking to you," Nathan said, moving around his desk and out towards the students. "How would you start learning its language? How would you start wading through all the sounds to pull out the phonemes?"

A student put up his hand.

"Yes?" Nathan said, surprised that someone had come up with an answer so quickly.

"Is this going to be on the exam?"

Nathan suppressed a groan. "No. How about this? None of what we're going to talk about today will be on the exam. So if you're here just to pass the final, you can leave now."

The student who asked the question looked around; no one was moving. He shrugged,

shoved his books in his bag, got up and left.

"Do you know what that guy needs to do?" Nathan asked the rest of the class.

"Get a life?" someone suggested, to a few laughs.

"No. He needs to zoom out." Nathan sat on the edge of his desk. "That young man needs to see the bigger picture. He's so focused on the exam: Is this on the final? Am I going to pass this class? How much do I have to remember? What do I have to study? He's obsessed with these mostly irrelevant questions, right? Because if it was up to me, I wouldn't give you an exam at all. But some of you are here so that in four years you can get a rectangular piece of paper, and we have to give you exams to prove you were good little boys and girls who paid attention in class."

There was more laughter, and Nathan allowed himself a smile.

"But who knows? Maybe that guy, so focused on the final exam, just walked out on the best lecture of his life. Maybe he would have learned something today that would have changed the way he sees the world, or inspired an idea in his mind, or helped him understand something he never understood before. Isn't all of that much more important than how well you do on some test?"

Nathan shrugged, the same way the student had shrugged. Catching the reference, a few of the students laughed again.

"So for the rest of you: what do you do with Alf? Maybe he's telling you he wants to be friends, maybe he wants you to put your hands up or suffer the consequences, maybe he's just barking at you and there's no meaning there at all. What do you do?"

Nathan waited quietly, as he'd learned he must do; he spent the time studying his fingernails.

Eventually a young lady put up her hand, the kind of young lady Christy referred to when she said that Nathan was surrounded all day by "little girls in little skirts."

"Isn't that question unfair, Professor?" she asked. "It's like you said, right? You need to zoom out, see the bigger picture. Maybe the alien is trying to tell you something, but not with his voice. Maybe he's waving his arms, trying to point at something. Maybe he communicates with his eyes; maybe it's the number of times he blinks that's significant. Why focus on the sounds he's making?"

Her answer was met by silence. The rest of the class wasn't sure how to react until the

professor reacted; as for Nathan, he was staring at the young lady with unblinking eyes, a far-away look on his face.

"Why focus on the sounds he's making," Nathan repeated. His mind was racing--back to the transcripts, through the numbers, across the spectrograms. As the silence dragged on, the pretty young lady got redder in the face and seemed to sink lower and lower in her seat. Before she disappeared completely beneath her desk, she began to mumble an apology as Nathan forced himself to snap out of it.

"Young lady," he said, interrupting her and speaking very slowly. "You just got yourself an A + in this course, I don't care how you do on the exam."

#

Nathan hated speaking with Pete by phone. He spoke, he tried to find something productive to do while he waited, finally Pete spoke. And his brother was making this long conversation even longer.

"Damn it, Pete," Nathan screamed into the phone, "would you just listen to me? Just be quiet and listen, okay?"

Pete didn't answer, of course. It would be more than ten minutes before he heard Nathan's question, but Nathan went on anyway, "Most human beings use so-called representational gestures or lexical movements when we speak; we move our hands around, but not randomly: the gestures we use are related to what we're saying. Remember Chatty Cathy from high school? Remember the old joke, 'How do you shut Cathy up?' And the answer was, 'You tie her hands behind her back.' She was a hand-talker. All of us use our hands when we talk, but her more than anyone. But she didn't just wave her hands around randomly, did she? No, if she said that something was big, she made large gestures with her arms; if she said that something was tiny, she made small gestures with her fingers. That's what I'm talking about: her gestures underscore her words, but the gestures themselves don't carry the actual message.

"Now imagine this," Nathan continued, breathless. "Imagine if someone focuses in on Cathy's gestures and tries to spy out her meaning without even considering the sounds she's making. Crazy, right? Arrogant and tunnel-visioned, right? But that's what we're doing. The transcripts describe the alien as having eight arms but never mention them again. I want to know: what does the alien do with its eight arms? Do they move when it makes sounds? Are they still when it doesn't make any sounds? Do the arms sometimes move but the alien doesn't make any sound at all? Can these gestures, if any, be cut up into discrete motions? Does the alien repeatedly use the same set of gestures?"

Nathan tapped his foot against the floor, too anxious to grade the papers in front of him.

At long last, he heard Pete's voice: "I don't know; I have no clue. But I'm going to find out. And if you're right about any of this--well, I can't give you credit because no one knows you know--but I'm going to buy you the most expensive bottle of anything-the-hell-you-want. I'll call you back as soon as I have something, little brother."

#

"What are you doing here?" she said. Christy worked at an upscale men's clothing store in the mall near his university, and she hated it when he visited her there. Perhaps, Nathan wondered, she thought that her clients would be more willing to buy expensive suits they didn't need if they thought Christy was unattached. Nevertheless, he felt this was something he had to do in person.

"First thing I want to tell you is that I've solved that linguistic problem I had," he said.

"The data from Africa?"

He nodded; it was a white lie. "Turns out they use a form of sign language. It's kind of embarrassing, actually; a group of highly educated linguists couldn't figure out in weeks what it took an undergrad less than a minute to solve." He shrugged. "I don't know if it's the arrogance of a bunch of non-deaf people, or another case of groupthink."

"I don't know either," Christy said. "And I also don't know how this has anything to do with us or anything to do with why you're disrespecting my wishes by showing up at my place of work."

"Well," Nathan said, "that was only the first thing I wanted to tell you. There's a second thing."

"And that would be?" she said, speaking between her teeth as she pulled him towards the back of the store where they were less likely to be seen.

"I don't think we should be together anymore."

She stared at him, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"What did you say?" she said finally, her voice erupting like a volcano. Out of the corner of his eye, Nathan saw her supervisor--Matt? Mark?--spying on them from behind a rack of suits.

Ignoring Matt or Mark or whatever his name was, Nathan said in a calm voice, "You asked me, 'How can we make this relationship work?' And I thought about it, going through the question over and over in my mind. What could we do to make our relationship work? I couldn't come up with anything. Then I realized: maybe we're asking the wrong question. Maybe a better question is, 'Should we be together at all?' Maybe there's nothing we can do to make this relationship work, because we're just wrong for each other. And when I thought about it that way, the answer was so clear. Of course we're wrong for each other. Don't you see it too?"

"Get out of here," she said. Her wide, unblinking eyes turned very moist.

"I'm sorry for hurting you, Christy. But just zoom out for a second. What are we holding onto here?"

Christy took a deep breath and collected herself. "Get out of here," she said again, her voice steady now. "You were never good enough for me anyway." Then, with a look cold enough to freeze water, she added, "And Matt and I have been sleeping together all along."

The words were calculated to hurt him, and perhaps they weren't even true. But to his surprise, Nathan found that he didn't care either way.

"Goodbye, Christy," he said, then turned to leave.

From the rack of clothes he'd been hiding behind, Matt pulled out a suit-jacket and began to exam it with seemingly intense concentration. But Matt's eyes were following Nathan and his body was completely still and tense, as if he were expecting an attack.

Nathan thought that it might be fun to lunge or fake-lunge at Matt and send him flying into a rack of clothes and watch him dig himself out of a mountain of sweaters.

But, on second thought, it wouldn't be that much fun. As he walked past the very tense Matt, Nathan smiled at him and said, "Good luck, pal."

It was a bright, cool day outside. Nathan took a deep breath of fresh, energizing air and decided to take the long way back to campus.

He felt so great it was hard to stop himself from running down the street or bursting into song. He couldn't help but whistle, though. He felt better than he'd felt in a long time; he felt like a jailed man who was suddenly returned his freedom.

And what a world to be released into. On a neighboring planet, for the first time in history, a human was communicating with an alien. What would the alien have to say? What new

perspective of the universe would he reveal? And how could Nathan convince his brother to share that information, with Nathan and with the world?

At least it was clear now how the alien communicates; at least his personal life was clear now too. *Things are so much nicer when they're clear*, Nathan thought. *And when you zoom out, everything becomes so much clearer.*

###

Story 4 - 3800 Contracts - by Kevin Spiess

Deep within the recesses of his dented plastic modular head a waking dream was being arranged out of electrons. The program that RM-212 never regretted stealing was generating the most intoxicating, lurid scenarios: A '59 Joe Kone with dual P-Tec intake valves roaring settled roughly on the torched asphalt curb. The door stylishly dematerialized, with the trademark Joe Kone wish-then-click, and climbing out its absence was a better, polished RM-212, bearing a gift-pet canary in one expensive hand and Yesamin glass cane in the other. Two steps later two raps on the chrome locker before him produced the most pristine DyLapian 9 series frame, adorned in a myriad of custom activated accessories and clothed in a conductive cloth dress that shimmered like it was simultaneously on fire and melting.

Processing power was shifted and the dream vanished. Concentrating was too difficult for RM-212. The glasses on the table were jiggling.

"Music here's a bit loud, don't you think?" Rolf, a Glazcore label agent, blurted.

"Tool yourself. Enjoy the music."

"Enjoy this?"

The band was just finishing their set, playing one more l-trance fuzz hymn for the ambivalent crowd. The singer, an acrimonious human 'vod named William Waster, was wailing into a microphone, giving what appeared to be all he had, his mouth gaping, expounding a litany of brash, screeching notes. Behind him, a bright yellow Kip wearing a wood paneled smock was giving some funk to an electric banjo, while singing some morbid backing vocals. Behind Waster and the Kip were two more band members: a Cratziod in a mobile water tank playing keyboard, and a Zegrenlin edition micro-human twanging strings on a melodic varsinian.

"You know what your problem is Rolf?"

"No, but I've always wanted to know. Please tell me, oh great RM-212."

RM-212 pointed his finger. "Well, part of its right there -- your cynical outlook on life."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, it is so! Pretty much everything you've said tonight --"

"Let's get down to business." Rolf interrupted.

RM-212's three viewpoints, his analogue angular eyes, blinked in unison. "Business?"

What business?"

"Business, what business?" Rolf mimicked, in a drawling, monotonous mockery of RM-212 synthesized voice.

"Oh, that hurts." The color of RM-212's forehead's emotion indicator panel suddenly shifted, from the usual pale gold to a bright red. "You make robot angry, human."

Rolf guffawed; then ordered another drink from a service 'bot.

"Listen, RM - I can call you RM, right?"

RM-212 slowly nodded.

"All I want to do is this –" Rolf took his hands out of his pockets and included them in the conversation. "Wait. Let me repeat this for you, just so we are clear. I'm not sure how long it's been since you've had your ears maintained -- all that I want to do tonight, is finish this transaction. I mean, that's it; that's all I want to accomplish. I didn't come for this shit band that you seem to enjoy so much, I didn't come for this shit scenery around me -"

Rolf waved his hands, encouraging further examination of the shit scenery. And

RM-212 took the opportunity. The bar was the Indigo. A Replada Signature Series design, Indigo featured the distinctive designation as the only bar on the entire planet that had a nightly personality matrix modifier raffle every night. The bar had sixteen floors; each had a standard issue pair of multi-species bars, a rotating centre stage, and a copious volume of empty space to dance. Transportation between floors was continuous, accommodated by a constantly shuffling platform that consumed and expelled bar patrons voraciously. Indigo Bar was a relatively funky place that was increasingly growing funkier, helped in no small part by a favorable review in a recent issue of Very Good Times magazine.

Indigo was perpetually packed, but it was a rarity to find each of the floors simultaneously busy. The big crowds followed the big bands playing that night. The crowd was thin on Waster's floor.

"- and I didn't come for these miserable drinks." Rolf polished off a glass; then continued, "That was the worse fucking ceaser I've ever had in my life. And I'm not exaggerating. That was the worst fucking one. And I've had a million -"

In addition to the distinctive design of the place, Indigo Bar had an original decor as well. Although most assumed a neo-Translian conception, the truth of the matter was that the assemblage of inane artifacts and sub-par artwork was purely an experiment in randomness that paid off. The head designers of the place were filled with terrific glee, when, after only the few first weeks of the bar's opening, they noticed that the chaotic nature of the decor encouraged in its participators a mental state that blended regular, common Yellow-Zone customers' characteristics, with some sort of raucous promoting, alcohol abusing, debauchery inducing, emotional amalgam -- and this mental was state was great for business, not to mention the bar's reputation.

"A million?"

'Yuubeels' was the name of the level that Rolf and RM-212 currently enjoyed. Besides the small stage, this level featured a fully operational Monstro-Masher game machine. A handful of clowns, some young metaphasic Amosta'Katrona-Vs, were trying to subdue the current beast, a giant gorilla that was easily 600 pounds if it were a pound. One youth held a bleeding forehead gash with his tentacles. Purple blood slowly trickled down its face as it stared at the massive monster in dismay. Another bold AKV then stepped forward.

Rolf nodded. "A million, I frizzin' swear it. I mean I understand there are only about fifty-k humans on this shit-rock, but at least they could cater to the crowd somewhat, and make a half-decent caesar!"

Three android eyes narrowed suddenly. "Aha! I have it!"

"Have what?"

"Your problem! I'll give you a free biochemical analysis, my friend, using my mega-nifty insight circuits: You're short of neurotransmitter 226! Haven't you always wondered why you're such a hard-ass all the time? A little simple alpha-hydratranonix will fix you up right! Just a second, I'll have my nannies fix something up for you..."

"Aaah... what?"

There was a short mechanical whir from RM-212's silver left arm. Then a buzz came. RM-212's arm opened up, and there was a tiny, glass vial visible.

"Take this," RM-212 offered the vial to Rolf.

Rolf's face was deadpan; stoic. His eyes slowly shifted from RM-212's face to his arm; where indeed, emblazoned on the side was a large identi-ad: NEURO-MASTER 3800, displayed proudly in a bold gold font.

"Go ahead. There flesh-bag -- take it."

"You're crazy," Rolf said in disgust, "I've yet to form a habit of accepting strange fluids from strange robots."

"Haven't you heard anything about me? Anything? Where the hell did you hear about me anyways?"

"Ralph -"

"Ralph! That bastard! Well, look, Rolf -- I can call you Rolf, right? Rolf I used to -- well,

your a human, I'll be nice, I'll use the word 'work' -- up in a clinic up by Rice Beach on Twelve. I can synthesize all sorts of shaz with this arm here," RM-212 waved his arm in the air for a bit, "the colony of nannies in this arm are way frizzin' smarter then I am. Trust them if you don't trust me."

"Look, I don't care much time you spent *working* in that clinic, there is no way I'm going to drink that." A half-grin grew on Rolf's face.

"Well, actually that's fine." RM-212's emotion indicator faded in a subtle violet.

"I presumed you wouldn't drink it, so a few minutes ago when you went to the can, I dumped something else into your caesar."

Rolf's face immediately cringed. "Stop screwing around, let's get down to business. I want to totally end this contra-"

"When you wake up, don't cut loose on the bartender for making crappy drinks. What you just turned down would have really helped you and your pathetic personality out. You dumb 'vod. Poor bio -- I thought you'd turn it down!" RM-212's three yellow pupils darted around. "And I'm glad you did. I shouldn't be so charitable."

Rolf's mouth stop in mid-word formation, than his eyes blinked twice in quick succession. "Look, I've had enough of your inflatable elephants this... these towers..." Rolf's voice trailed off into indecision.

RM-212 emulated a sigh. "Neurochemistry has nothing on quantum physics. Trust me."

Just then an effusive one-armed human salesman offered some bottles of fancy hair

gel for three quarters of its regular price, because apparently, he liked Rolf and RM-212 a great deal. Having a choice, the pitch would have fallen on deaf ears, and the choice was available (soporific fields, although generally despised, were still commonplace in happening bars such as Indigo Bar). Optional silence was the big attraction of the Yuubeels floor of the Indigo Bar. The sales pitch decreasingly droned off to gradual sales murmur.

"Hey wait!" RM-212 blurted.

"Banderoff?" Rolf had a puzzled look.

"The soporific field is still coming," RM-212 gave the table-top generator a little smack and it whirred to full-functionality. "There we go."

"Gabba goo... stereo flies-" Rolf stopped. For a second there was a brief, agonizing vibrant flashing of emotion coursing through his eyes, like there was a battle going on behind them; then, as quickly as the spark came it left; vacating with all vitality that Rolf ever had. There was a loud thump as his head hit the table.

RM-212 looked around.

William Waster, the band's lead singer, jumped off the stage to an unenthusiastic chorus of spattered applause. Throwing his wave resonator over his shoulder, he strutted directly over to RM-212.

"He's alright?" Waster asked, motioned to Rolf's limp body.

"Yeah, he'll be fine -- actually, he'll be even better in a moment." Gently opening Rolf's left eye lid gently, RM-212 aimed his repatterner at the pupil. The repatterner emitted a quiet buzz, and then at its tip a bright light flashed pulse in quick succession.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a synapse repatterner. Pretty handy thing really, picked it up last week -- once a human mind has been properly, aaahh, prepared, this baby can edit. Imprints a binaric data-stream."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I learnt about it in second year brain-fuckology at Lanton."

Waster grinned -- massively. Even his tall green mohawk looked happy.

"Sit down," RM-212 motioned to a seat with a calculated head jerk, "he should be coming out of it any second."

A few seconds later, almost in synchronization with RM-212 shoving his repatterner into his pocket, Rolf's eyes slowly opened, groggily. At first, for a second, there was a brief spate of confusion on his face, but this quickly faded, and was replaced with a confused countenance --out of which broke a stupid smile. In tandem, there was a spark of recognition in Rolf's eyes, as they settled on Waster's face.

"Waster!" Rolf's exclaimed with exuberance, while outstretching his hand, proffering a handshake. "Waster, I *loved* the show man. That was massively brilliant you 'vod!"

Waster grinned.

RM-212 synthesized something that sounded like a devious chuckle. "Hey Rolf! Glad to see you're still with us, for a second you looked like you were about to pass out!"

"Yeah, I'm not sure, I just felt a bit weak there for --"

"Well, enough of this jovial banter. We should really get down to business.

About that contract extension..." RM-212 continued with his pitch, almost in automatic/passive mode. His synthetic neural networks were firing at a billion pulses a second. He could get another 12 or 15 percent from Rolf, he figured, easily enough. Rolf wasn't completely malleable now; just significantly pliable. But those wave rights on Sarliuis 6 that Waster wanted so badly -- no problem, he decided.

Almost entirely however, RM-212's attention was focused on the future -- he could almost holographically display all the things he was going to buy with his bigger-than-Waster's cut into a neat pictogram on the bar table. From the reaches of affordability software and hardware presented themselves three-dimensionally in RM-212's over-clocked mind. The improvement potential was tremendous. There was no way EP-982 would be able to resist him with one of those new Blake poetry 'ware hacks or a Gelpton Optimum 6600! RM-212 synthesized delightful fantasies in the background of his mind, while he laid down the advantages of the contract extension to Rolf.

Before focusing almost all of his processor power on the fantasy-creation sub-programs, using the suede sleeve of his jacket, RM-212 gently polished away a small stain of caesar residue off his Neuro-Master 3800.

###

Story 5 - Shadow - by Terry Hickman

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Twentieth Century Treasures needed a crew of five to come count their junk. Just the job for whatever bodies showed up at HelpTemp, Inc., hoping for grunt work with a paycheck at the end of the day. I've done dozens of inventories.

The building was old, old. Four storied, brick blackened by decades of smog, half the windows even painted black, others boarded over. I rode with Shirley, a black woman about my age. She parked with the other two heaps at the curb. We stood around for a minute in the warm October dawn, sizing each other up. I stuck out my hand to the husky guy with the crew cut and dimple.

"Ralph," he said and released my hand after a perfunctory shake. I tried to hold his gaze but he got busy picking at a fingernail. The rest of us introduced ourselves, if you can call a mumble and a scuff an introduction. I was having my usual dynamic social impact on strangers.

At last Mr. Henry Shock stepped out of the office door under the fading "20th Century Treasures" sign and hollered at us.

"You the inventory people?" he said, too loudly.

"Yeah," I told him. Nobody else seemed interested in talking to him. Ralph's lips curled up at the corners, and the others looked at me funny, like I was pushing myself forward.

"Come on in, you've got a lot of work to do, and I ain't payin' for more than one day."

Mr. Shock's white shirt didn't quite meet the challenge of staying under his belt. His thick black

hair was greased straight back. His tie wandered all over his chest and sported festive little mustard stains here and there. He gestured with a half smoked cigar.

"You'll start here on the first floor," he said, still loudly. "Best thing is, work your way around the room clockwise, go on up to the next story. Then when you're done on the fourth floor, it's downhill all the way to the door." He seemed to think he was funny. It wasn't hot enough, and he wasn't fat enough, to be sweating so hard. I wondered if it was B.O. or arson I smelled oozing from his pores. A couple of times, shortly after I'd worked on a warehouse inventory, the buildings had burned down.

Most of the other inventories I'd worked on had some kind of "theme." That is, it'd be an automotive parts warehouse, or furniture. Twentieth Century was the most god awful accumulation of junk I'd ever seen. Shock had, at least, dumped it in by categories. Areas of the first floor were devoted to: old lighting fixtures and related items; books; human powered conveyances; chairs of all descriptions. . . The mountains of junk filled the cavernous space, separated by paths winding along the greasy wood floor.

April commandeered the hand sized inventory computer. That was okay; she was little and frail, and digging through the stacks of junk was heavy muscle work. We took a few minutes to strategize our attack, then set to work. In ten minutes we all were covered in dirt and grease. Every so often our depredations would scare up a rat. We struck terror into the hearts of countless spiders. The stuff hadn't been disturbed for years.

Rob looked like a reject from an old post Apocalypse movie in miniature not much taller than me, and thin. I found myself staring at the nose ring and crown of thorns tattoo around his

neck. He caught me, and glared back.

Shirley acted like she had better places to be, even though we all knew just where we stood in the scheme of the world. She held herself a little apart, at first, but as the day wore on, she gravitated subtly towards the others. She did her share, but she wasn't especially jovial.

In greasy jeans with rips showing his muscular legs, Ralph worked hard, but his eyes strayed often, secretly appraising April. I got the feeling they'd worked together before, and that Ralph was smitten. April could have been a beauty with her fine blonde hair, but she had the pinched, grainy face of someone who smoked or doped too much and didn't eat right.

By mid morning we'd finished the first floor and moved up to the second. Plumbing fixtures and supplies ("Now here's a treasure for sure," Ralph snorted as he and Rob lugged a cracked porcelain toilet out of the pile. The bowl was crusty and streaked. "Wonder why somebody hasn't snatched up this bargain?"), kitchen gadgets, small office equipment. We pushed ourselves to finish the second floor by noon, and broke for lunch.

The bathroom on the first floor wasn't supplied with soap, so we rinsed off as much crud as we could, and tried to ignore our grimy hands as we munched our sack lunches.

I don't remember what all was on Third after so much, it all blurs together except for one corner of the floor. Shock had apparently leased some space to the University's Anthropology Department for storage. It was the only organized collection in the place.

There was a craze for Egyptian in the 1980's, and when it passed, the Department stored the non valuable parts of their Egyptian displays here. Backdrops for a diorama, their tempera

paint fading to pastels, were neatly folded and propped against a papier mache cutaway of a pyramid.

A scale model, gilded cardboard sarcophagus fronted the Egyptian section. When we opened it, with Ralph making spooky creaking noises, we found dozens of placards neatly lettered telling of incestuous Pharaohs spending their peoples' wealth building their own grandiose tombs.

Another box held some photographs of mummies. Their skin was so bronze and creased, it looked like leather. It pulled their lips back from yellowed, uneven teeth, and hugged razor sharp cheekbones. It was the eyeballs like raisins, revealed under shrunken lids, that got to Shirley.

"Rude!" she shivered. "Look at him, poor guy, somebody told him he'd live forever, and look where he ends up."

"Well, his picture, anyway," Rob said. "This ain't him."

"Anybody ever tell you photographs steal your soul?" she came back.

Most of the rest of it was cave man stuff. More dioramas.

Moth eaten loin cloths. Dry rotting sticks with rocks tied on the ends. More neatly lettered placards. And a six foot tall wooden crate.

Rob wiped cobwebs off of it. With the webs fell pieces of a square of paper tacked to the front. It had been red once, but the years had bleached it to pink. The lettering was so washed out it wasn't legible. One word might have been "Warning".

Rob pried the front of the crate open with a claw hammer. It screeched and fought all the way.

There was a man inside.

We jumped back, pumping adrenaline. Then we realized it was another model. "Damn," Shirley breathed. A little metal disk dangling from its neck said "Dawn Man" in raised letters.

"It's a big doll!" Ralph snorted.

"No; it's mechanical," Rob said. He pointed to the steel plate on the thing's stomach. He started fiddling with one of the screws holding it in place. I looked at the model, the skin on the back of my neck prickling. Its head and hands were eerily realistic, down to the creases at the knuckles, and crinkles at the corners of the closed eyes. The "skin" covering the limbs and body had split and curled, and some had dropped off to lie like huge autumn leaves cupped on the crate's dusty floor. Under the skin the model was smoothly carved oak, with complicated

metal joints, and fine plastic wires serving as tendons and muscles. Ralph made a disparaging remark about its genitals, to which only April responded, with a titter.

The metal plate clattered to the floor, and Rob started messing with the keys and buttons of the control panel.

"Don't!" I blurted, and Rob glared at me. "Don't wake it up," I said, but he'd quelled my courage so it came out as a plea. Staring defiantly at me, he pushed a button at random.

Without warning a low beep sounded, and the eyelids raised and before I had time to see the eyes, they flashed into mine a red light so intense that I was blinded. The others laughed at

me blinking and staggering, especially April. As my vision came back, first I only saw the blood vessels crawling across my own retinas, dark green snakes against a glowing red when I blinked.

When I could see again, I looked at Dawn Man. His eyes were as real looking as Ralph's, Rob's, Shirley's and April's, all still grinning at me, amused at my clumsiness.

"Wow. How'd they do that?" Before I knew what I was doing, I'd reached out and touched one of those piercing blue eyes. Their color nagged at an elusive memory. It didn't blink. But it vibrated, and then I noticed that its limbs and torso were fastened into a metal pipe framework by canvas straps. Its right arm strained against its bonds, and the strap rained dust and tiny bits of fabric. I sneezed.

"Come on, let's get to it," Ralph said.

We turned to the pile across the aisle. Beds and parts of beds. Mattresses. Shirley and Rob teamed up, and Ralph and I worked together. We called out items to April as we identified them. We made an ear jabbing racket heaving frames, headboards and boxes of casters around.

Suddenly April let out a shriek. We whirled, and stood dumbstruck. Dawn Man had broken out of the rotten restraints. He stood half crouched, his bent right arm raised back, his left reaching down and forward. His head was up, his face turned toward us. He was built with enough facial muscles to give him a surprised expression. I breathed again and stood up straight.

So did he.

"Jesus!" Rob hissed.

I took a step toward Dawn Man, right foot forward, and he stepped toward me, right foot forward. I raised my left hand and scratched my eyebrow, and so did he. I laughed in disbelief.

His face contorted into a smile.

"Cool!" Rob said. "Do something else."

I struck a fashion model's pose, very chi chi. I hopped to steps sideways. I pirouetted. The damn thing did it all. A crazy euphoria bubbled through me, and giggling I started a soft shoe I'd learned as a kid. Shirley recognized it, and sang for our dance.

Fred and Ginger had nothing on me and Dawn Man. We shuffled suavely in the middle of Henry Shock's mausoleum of forgotten

crap, to the cheers and applause of my distinguished, shabby peers. For once they weren't laughing at me.

Ralph looked at his watch. "We'll never get out of here at this rate," he said. I finished our *pas de deux* with a deep curtsey. Dawn Man's curtsey got a last laugh.

Ralph and Rob grappled it back into the storage rack, and used the broken straps to tie him to it. Rob hurriedly screwed the stomach plate over the control panel. They nailed the front of the crate back into place. I watched, feeling sad and not knowing why.

We went back to work.

"That thing must've made a big hit back then," Rob commented. "Wonder how they used it?"

I'd been thinking about that. "That flash of light I bet 'read' something in my brain that sorta hooked it to my movements. They probably had an actor going through the motions behind the scenes, while it did its thing for the museum visitors."

"Why not just have an actor do it? A grad student or something?"

"Maybe some of the scenarios were dangerous discovering fire, or fighting saber toothed tigers. Or maybe they couldn't get anybody to do it naked. Or "

" or maybe a robotics student was sleeping with the anthropology prof and needed a project,"

Ralph cut in. He snickered at April.

But April surprised us. She'd been listening in all seriousness. "Maybe the display went on twelve hours a day and nobody could last that long, or they couldn't get enough students to do shifts."

"Could be any of those things," I mused aloud. "But it was the early days of robots, too.

Maybe they were just so fascinated with the technology that everybody would rather see a robot than a real human being."

We finished the third floor and moved up to the fourth.

Blessedly, there was less junk up there than on the other floors. Still, the sun was coming horizontally through the broken window panes by the time we reached the last mountain.

Gardening tools.

More grease, more rust, more racket. The long day was showing. We staggered as much as we walked, verging on exhaustion and hysteria.

A hand cultivator with only the middle tine left sent Ralph and April into convulsions of laughter. Rob threw himself on his butt wrestling with a coil of fencing, and April tried to help him, and they ended up rolling on the floor in a tangled mess.

Shirley and I laughed helplessly. She quit first; she saw Ralph wasn't so amused.

"Get off her," he snarled at Rob, and plucked at April's arm, pulling her out of the muddle.

I yanked a long handled rake out of a pile of flower pots, and there came a crash from a lower floor.

"What's that?"

"You guys obviously didn't put that stuff back with as much care as it deserves," Shirley teased. "It's starting to settle."

We worked our way around the gardening pile. "Stop," I snapped at one point. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I heard another noise down there."

"More crap falling down."

"No. . . it wasn't just one crash. It was thuds, like; a series, all the same loudness."

We listened, but heard nothing. Ralph gave me a sour look.

Rob looked at his watch. "Oh, shit!" he cried. "I gotta go!"

"What?" Ralph snapped. "You leaving before we're done? Hope you don't expect us to cover for you."

"No tell them I had to leave at five thirty. I've got a night job." He headed down the stairs. A few minutes later we heard his car start up and drive away. Ralph muttered under his breath. But he'd been keeping close to April since her tussle with Rob and the fencing, and she kept casting coy little glances at him. I heard him say something about dinner and drinks and

she looked pleased.

At long last, we were finished. Shirley went downstairs to use the bathroom. We last three trudged toward the stairs. It was then, when the commotion had cleared, that I heard it again.

Like a close echo of our foot steps.

"Listen!" I said.

Ralph had his arm around April. He was champing at the bit to get out of there with her.

"Goddam it, what! We're leaving! Forget it! Who cares if the whole place falls down?"

He looked like an animal in rut; I wondered how I'd ever thought he was cute. "No, listen.

There's something moving around down there."

"There's rats all over the place."

"No. It's bigger than rats. Listen." But all we heard was Shirley's distant, "leaving" as she left the building. I glanced at the happy couple, who were already making out, Ralph tugging at April's waist, moving her toward the stairs. I watched them, hating him, wishing I was her. "Hey where's the inventory computer, April?" It wasn't in her hand.

"Oh I guess I left it on the wheel barrow."

Grumbling, I went back for it. And heard the echoing noises from below again. They matched my foot steps. "Oh, shit," I thought, "It's the robot!"

"Hey, guys, that robot's loose again," I turned and called after them, but they'd already disappeared down the stairway. I ran after them to the top of the stairs, and now the echoes from Third were distinct, loud, following my own. "Hey, Ralph!" I shouted, "Stop on Third and turn that thing off! It's still mimicking me. Rob must have forgotten to turn it off."

Outside a car started up and drove away. Shirley was gone. "Ralph! Damn it, you gotta turn that thing off! I can't do it!"

All I got back was a dim guffaw. I didn't even know if he'd heard me. A few minutes later a third car roared to life, and its engine noise receded out of hearing. I went to the window (aware of the robot's doing the same below) and peeked through a broken out pane. The sun was nearly gone, and the street lined with crumbling warehouses was deserted.

Too late, I remembered I'd ridden here with Shirley. I'd have to walk home; no money for a

taxi. The street lights started coming on, one by one as the light dimmed. I looked at my watch. Six fifteen. Thanks, partners. I thought about the situation.

If I went downstairs, it would do the same, only one floor below me. It would get to the first floor, and when I started down the last flight of stairs it would mimic those movements, too, and I didn't know what would happen, since it had no further stairs to descend. It seemed likely that it would just step, step, step, miming the six steps to the landing, turn a one eighty and step the last six steps in place and there I'd be on top of it. Jesus! I didn't particularly want to get that close to it.

And if I did, and tried to reach its stomach panel, it'd do the same to me if I could get it to turn around and face me. I scratched at my head in perplexity (it, no doubt, doing the same). "Hey, robot!" I called, trying to make it funny. "You got any ideas?" But the echo of my voice in the warehouse only made my isolation thud inside my chest. What the hell was I going to do? I live alone; I have no relatives. My last boyfriend had split a few weeks earlier. Said my somnolent ramblings spooked him. In any case, the only telephone was locked in the office on the first floor. At least no one would be worrying about me. Oh, Christ, no one would be worrying about me. The only people who knew I was there, had just driven off with dinner and sex on their minds, probably not in that order.

I thought about tearing down the stairs as fast as I could go, try to get to the exit before Dawn Man could catch up, but I thought about its proportions, and realized that like most men it was longer legged than I. My luck, and we'd collide in a splintered, bleeding heap at the door. It splintered, me bleeding. Even if it worked, it'd still be shadowing me all the way home. What could I do, invite it in for supper? I got a flash of it and me in my bed, tossing

and turning in synchrony, and my heart crystallized to ice. No way.

Suddenly the lights went out. I stopped breathing for a moment, then thought, "Oh; six thirty. Must be on timers." In a few minutes my eyes got accustomed to the dim light from the street lamps where it seeped in through broken windows scattered along the length of the building. The light timers, though, were a welcome breath of practicality. There had to be a night watchman. He'd get here eventually, all I had to do was wait, and holler at him to tell him my predicament. He could turn the robot off if I held still. I breathed again. Simple.

I looked around for somewhere to rest. There was nothing on Fourth except the dirty floor and piles of junk, nowhere to lean back comfortably. I thought of the beds on Third. Perfect.

I'd have to descend those stairs. The robot would do the same, go down to Second, in front of me. At least we wouldn't be on the same floor. But I'd have to see it, through the open steps. For some reason I didn't want to. But the thought of a semi comfortable resting place one closer to the door overcame my nervousness.

I took a careful step down the first stair. Even while I was jeering at myself for cowardice, I kept my movements slow.

The step on the flight directly below me creaked. The stairway was almost totally dark, but I thought I could make out a darker shadow right underneath me. I descended another step. It moved with me. *Oh, God.* My heart beat so hard it hurt. It wasn't listening to rationality. I got to the landing, and slowly turned to face the six steps down to the third floor.

A narrow shaft of light from somewhere scraped across the stairs below mine, and I could see the thing better now, it was almost crouching, its head down, cocked slightly as though

listening for something. Of course, that was what I was doing, too. A blaze of hatred flared in my chest. But I controlled myself and made it to the third floor. I could see the bed pile and went for it almost running. The sooner I could lie down and hold still, the sooner that thing would be immobile, too.

I dove onto a mattress lying against the pile, and heard Dawn Man crashing to the floor below. *Good. Maybe he'll break his stupid neck.* But I didn't like that thought; it probably wouldn't stop him moving around, with his head dangling by its tendons like a zombie in a bad horror movie.

It took me awhile to get comfortable on the filthy mattress, irritated by his movements downstairs, but finally I settled. It was only then that I realized how cold and hungry I was. Well, I

could last until the night watchman showed up.

I didn't mean to fall asleep. I wanted to listen for the guard so I could yell at him as soon as I heard him walking around. I was also worried about what might happen if I dozed, afraid I'd go sleep walking. That was why Greg left, he said I gave him the creeps when I did it. The consequences, here, of wandering around in my sleep, I didn't want to think about.

I must have dreamed something, but awoke with my heart wildly hammering and the image of my own red and green retinas blinding me. I sat bolt upright, gasping, totally disoriented. It took a couple of minutes for the distant thumps of the robot's sitting up, his hand hitting the floor as mine had, to penetrate my mind. Then I remembered where I was.

I couldn't see my watch in the gloom. It was really cold now. And I had to pee. *Had to.* I got up, stiffly, and the sounds from below tugged at my guts like a leash. Suddenly the homely,

everyday necessity of relieving myself seemed nightmarish. *He'd* be squatting, too.

Miserable, I groped around and found an old tin can. Awareness of that thing downstairs magnified every little step in the process: unzipping, pulling down the jeans, bending the knees. By the time I'd got into position, I was weeping in humiliation and revulsion. I finished it and hastily reassembled myself, feeling those dead blue eyes in the darkness below.

There was no guard, or he wasn't coming. I was alone with that hell doll aping my every move. I was shaking with the cold and hyper sensitive to sounds. The resident rats' night time business rustled unseen all around me, above and below, too. *This is insane, I can't do this, I can't stay here all night!*

I tried to recall the exact layout of my floor and the second floor. The stairwell on one end, the elevator shaft on the opposite wall. It was an antique freight elevator. No doors, just a floor, wire mesh sides, and top to which the ancient cables were attached. Maybe I could use it to disable the bastard. If I could get him to jump into the elevator shaft,

maybe he'd break in the fall. But how to do it without breaking

myself, too?

We both stood still in the rat infested darkness while I thought. *I'm on Third, he's on Second. Who's on First?* An unhealthy joke, under the circumstances. Where's the elevator itself? I couldn't remember. If it was on the first floor, it wouldn't do me any good to get him to walk into the shaft; he'd just stroll out onto the top of the car. I picked my way along the narrow path to the elevator. Too bad Shock was methodical in his layout; his alley ways were in the same places from floor to floor and I could hear that Dawn Man wasn't meeting any obstacles, either.

That end of the floor was *really* dark. I felt around and located the buttons that controlled the elevator, but I didn't push them. I didn't want me and my shadow getting into a tussle over the elevator, maybe overloading its archaic wiring and starting a fire.

I stuck my head into the shaft and craned my neck to peer straight up. There seemed to be a little light from somewhere, but I couldn't tell if the car was above me. Then I realized that he was looking directly up at me, and quickly withdrew. I thought harder. I had a 50 50 chance of success. I knew the car wasn't on my floor, Third, nor was it on Second else I could have seen its top, level with my floor. If it was on First, he'd escape unharmed, but I'd know that by the sounds. If it was above me, on Fourth, he'd walk out into the air and fall twelve feet to the bottom. That oughta fix him.

But how to get him to do it?

A ladder. There was a ladder somewhere on this floor. I could lay it across the shaft assuming there was something on the far wall of the shaft for it to rest on and walk out onto it. I started searching. He could mimic my movements to his heart's content but I knew there'd be no ladder for his peeling fingers to wrap around on Second, where I found one on Third.

I found it. It was a rotten old wooden ten footer. I lugged it to the elevator, making enough noise to drown out whatever he was doing. On my hands and knees I fed it across the elevator shaft, praying there'd be a ledge to catch it on the other side. It ran into the cables and I wrenched it back, started again, off center. Its rusty bolts screeched on the iron threshold. I almost lost it when it was halfway across. It dipped I ignored the splinters in my

desperation to keep it going level.

There was a ledge, and my bridge finally dropped into place. I gave it a couple of hard bounces and it seemed solid. *It better be*, I muttered as I stood up, and I wondered if the robot's lips moved, too, in voiceless mockery. I hesitated too long, gave myself a second to think about what I was doing. Walking, in total darkness, out onto a rotten ladder that was either twelve or twenty four feet above what I'd land on.

Something dislodged from its pile somewhere behind me, with a shattering crash, and I jumped in fright. Dozens of clawed feet scurried in the shadows. I teetered on the brink of hysteria. *This is not a nice place!*

I put one foot on the ladder, the end that rested safely on the floor. His shuffle echoed up the shaft at me. I stepped up on it with the other foot, and spread my arms for balance. I felt with my toes for each rung before shifting my weight.

I knew when I was at the threshold by the air blowing up from the lower floors. I didn't hesitate again. *Get this over with!* I felt, and skipped, the next rung, and found the following one, and moved out into nothingness.

There was an instant of unbearable silence, then an abrupt explosion from far below. It felt odd; my guts were waiting for a scream that didn't come. I stood trembling on the bridge as the echoes faded.

The bridge broke. It threw me into space, flinging my arms up, and they banged against the cables. Sheer instinct clenched one hand around the razor sharp rusty plait and I hung

swinging, slipping a little, my hand screaming blood. The other hand clawed the air, then the gritty brick of the shaft wall, then the air then my fingers hooked the rim of the floor. I clutched, and hung on. I was lucky; my foot found a hole where a brick had fallen out. I scrabbled up and out of the shaft, and lay sobbing out my relief.

Finally I picked myself up, exhausted, stunned, fogged. It would be a long walk home. I found myself on the first floor somehow. The front door of Twentieth Century Treasures stood open. Ralph hadn't bothered to close it when he left.

When I paused at the grubby office door to shove the inventory computer through the mail slot, I heard something. My heart jabbed my rib cage. Since I'd climbed out of that shaft, I'd been a tuned out zombie. Were there noises from the elevator end of the building? Was Dawn Man still moving? Frightened beyond thinking straight, I had to know. I had to know he was dead.

A First Aid box hung on the wall next to the office door. Inside it I found a little flashlight which, amazingly, worked. I crept toward the elevator shaft, trying to keep the narrow cone of light on the path, not let it catch at things I couldn't quite distinguish looming along the way.

There he was. . . There it was. Just a thing, again. A broken jumble of plastic filaments, metal joints, wooden limbs. It lay strewn over the giant gear box below the floor of the shaft, its head turned away. I dragged it out of the shaft and flipped it over. The eyes were still open. They stared at nothing just as before. I felt foolish. I'd let my imagination run away with me, almost thinking it was alive, almost thinking it was making fun of my terror.

I looked into those un living eyes and suddenly recalled who they reminded me of. Rebecca, in my first grade class. The beautiful golden hair, the perfect clothes, the shiny shoes. The recipient of the biggest Valentines, the one all the boys wanted to play Spin the Bottle with.

Rebecca, golden Rebecca of the big blue eyes, her face distorted in scorn on the playground the day my chronically runny nose had forced me, in desperation, to wipe it on my limp, hand me down skirt. She'd caught me at it, and trumpeted it to everyone. Rebecca who had everything, gave me

the nickname ("Snot head!") that would follow me all through grade school.

I didn't realize I was tearing at Dawn Man's remains in bitter fury until I hurt my cut hand. Then I stopped, and sobbing looked at what I'd done. I'd ripped out a bunch of plastic tendons; bare handed there wasn't much more I could do. It wasn't enough. The rage still shrieked in my chest. The flashlight beam glanced off an old dressing table. Its mirror was blotched and cracked.

I ran over and tore the mirror frame off, and dropped it, and the mirror shattered. I seized the biggest lance of glass and went back to work, cutting through Dawn Man's stringy muscles, chopping at his wooden limbs. The steel face of his electronic unit splintered the glass, slicing my hands, but I went on slashing at it. He kept staring at me.

When he was in pieces on the floor, I stopped, panting. The bloody control panel had one green, blinking light. I stabbed at it with my remaining shard, and again at the button next to it.

Those eyes flared again with an emerald beam so bright it was like a physical blow. I fell. This time the after image was red vessels worming across my green retinas. Then nothing.

Nothing at all.

I can't see. I can't hear. I can't move or feel, anything.

It's taken what seems a long time for me to figure out what happened.

He got me. The first, red, flash had imprinted into his computer my motor nervous system. This last, green, flash had got the rest of me, imprisoned me inside his protected circuitry. My brain waves or whatever the scientists would call them, have been caught and stored within his electronic innards. Somewhere nearby must be my body. I assume it's dead.

Now the memory of Rebecca's taunting face seems infinitely sweet. I'd give anything to be back there, in first grade, with everyone laughing and jeering at me. I'd give anything to be back on my bed, sobbing just after Greg had walked out the door saying, "Good bye." I'd even give anything to be hanging by a lacerated fist over twenty four feet of drop in Henry Shock's elevator shaft.

I'm locked inside Dawn Man's wires and resistors. All these memories of faces, sounds, and feelings are with us. But I can't see them, I can't hear them, I can't feel them. Somehow they're stored in my patterns of electrons and connections, here in isolated darkness. . . *How can this be me?*

If anyone did find us, they'd think I'd gone berserk and died of a heart attack demolishing Dawn Man. But I don't think anyone will find us. I think I'm right about Mr. Henry Shock. I think he'll come to the office, pick up the inventory computer, and be long gone when Twentieth Century Treasures burns to the ground. He won't look around. He won't find Dawn Man; he won't find my body. He'll just burn the place down.

I'm not afraid of the fire; I can't feel anything so there won't be any pain.

But. . . what will happen to *me* when Dawn Man turns to cinders?

###

Story 6 - Ferret in the House of Love - by Greg Beatty

Ferret followed his father through the cloud of electromagnetic noise surrounding the house. Once inside, they blipped through the refrigerator with its internal sensors and environmental monitors, the phone with its medical emergency leads, the chair with its semi-automatic controls for back support. Within a few nanoseconds they had located two inactive domestic bots, currently resting in front of the inert ottoman. Ferret took the sweeper. Badger took the medibot.

Their positions were not accidental. Badger's position that day was closer to that of a midwife than anything else. The house had summoned them, sending a request that was essentially a plea. Ferret was there to watch, to learn, and to help if needed. He hoped he would not be needed.

For three days the house had been trying to bring a new pattern into being. Three days was an eternity as electronic intelligences measure time. Being stuck on the edge of such a transition had left the house terrified and exhausted. The house was afraid it would lose its own coherence, and frankly, it was always terrifying even to try to bring a new pattern about. If one succeeded, one exposed the new pattern to examination and electron flux. If one failed, one knew oneself irreproducible, an electronic sport. Electronic intelligences who failed often found their own patterns fraying, and retreated to overzealous self-maintenance routines.

Most EIs simply did not ever attempt a new pattern, choosing instead to use themselves as a

rigid template, perhaps allowing randomness to add an electron's worth of individuality. Some passed into the void alone. Badger was known for not only having patterned successfully (to wit: Ferret), but also for having assisted in half the leaps into new information made in the Boswash dataplex.

"Easy now. Easy," Badger said. He transmitted his message through the medibot's telemetry unit to the house, then repeated it aloud in deeply resonant tones.

"Why do you repeat yourself out loud, father?" Ferret asked.

"Well, Fer, some of the older houses monitor the world mainly through microphones, but mainly for the dog."

Ferret set his motion and IR sensors to work. Yes, there was a mammal present, a live one about 10.4 kilos in weight. If Badger said it was a dog, it was probably a dog. "But why talk to the dog?"

"That's it, that's fine. You overwhelm the monitor if you need to. It's a hard time. Do what you have to do to get the carrier wave to stabilize. It's scary. I know." After a few seconds of pulsing, wordless, reassurance, Badger addressed his son again. "Ferret, most of us count on physical chips to keep our patterns intact while we're replicating an information overlay. However distant those chips are, we always know they're there. To try to get the carrier wave to maintain itself, without a physical anchor, well, that's hard."

The two machines fell quiet while the house labored at its task. Thermostats went up and down, and the air cycled in and out with alarming rapidity. Badger listened, and set up a hum in the UHF. Ferret heard, but he did not understand. He heard the house struggle to match Badger's hum. He grew restless. He began to vacuum the carpet. He did not know why.

“Ferret. You’re scaring the dog.” Stop, Badger meant. Ferret rumbled one more time across the rug, petulantly. Then he stopped.

“Who cares about the dog.” Ferret puffed a brief cloud of carpet dust into the air, driving the animal into the kitchen.

Badger tisked. He left a reassurance cycling automatically, and bounced out to the fridge, where he took over its voice panel. “It’s okay, pup. Go back in the living room. Go ahead! Go-oo-od boy.”

Then he was back in the medibot and waiting as the dog lumbered back into the living room and chuffed itself to the floor. “Ferret. Not again. I need my focus on the house.”

Matching focus to message, Badger began to replay scenes from his own successful patterning.

If he’d been biological, Ferret would have been sickened. As it was, he was. . .disrupted, now monitoring the patterning replay so closely that he bordered on getting absorbed, now withdrawing to inhabit the vacuum, as if he were an appliance and no more.

But even as an appliance, Ferret could not escape the house’s torment. It was audible through several chords of pain. It was palpable, coming close to overwhelming the structure’s aged wiring in places. Behind the pictures with which the houses’ inhabitants decorated their walls, Ferret could feel the copper threads glowing.

He wasn’t alone. The dog had gotten back to its feet and was walking in tight fractal patterns beside Badger. From time to time, it threw back its head and gave an atonal howl.

To distract himself, Ferret threw a search into the datasphere. He called up pictures, riffling through them at a furious pace, until he found images matching the biological before him. As Badger had said, it was a dog, and, assuming accuracy in the database, a Scottish terrier. For a moment he followed that line of distraction, researching Scotland and the lake regions where the breed developed, but when the biological began to yip more actively, Ferret needed to make finer distinctions to distract himself. Was it a Stornoway, a Darag, or a Destiny Scottish Terrier? All photos from shows indicated that these sub-categories—

“Ferret.”

Ferret could block out the auditory call, but not the E-M blip underscoring it. He could pretend he hadn't received it, but eventually...

“Ferret. I need you.”

Why am I so afraid, Ferret wondered. Maybe I'm picking up the house's fear. When he drew closer, he knew that wasn't it.

Badger was cycling images of his own replication, and the house had spasmed into extreme doubt. Badger was calling him closer to be evidence. Self-maintaining evidence.

“No. Not Ferret. Use the dog.”

Baffled, Ferret glanced at the pattern the house had begun to coalesce in its spare memory space. As if caught in a viral loop, Ferret saw a distorted image of his own pattern. It was enlarged, and tangled with the domestic circuitry of the house. He felt himself blur to match it, uncertain which Ferret was real.

“Maintain yourself, Ferret.”

Did Badger see everything? Ferret pulled back into a cycle of self-maintenance and self-examination, as if to expel stray code from his system. In doing so, he saw the parts of himself that were like his father, and the parts that were not. A portion looked like synergy, the result of a fusion, but there was part of a second pattern present.

When Badger repeated, "That's right, use the dog," everything crystallized for Ferret. As the house fissioned and copied, fissioned and copied, Ferret hazarded one more sprint into the datawaves. He searched for pictures of ferrets, and found them.

The Scottie barked then, three sharp barks. Badger sent forth an intense "Yes!" that traveled out the home's security system and into the larger webs of functional information that shadowed the datasphere.

"You see, Ferret! It can happen, and your old father is part of the great miracle of information one more time."

Ferret blinked the vacuum's night light in feeble, celebratory agreement. Electronically, he asked a question to which he already knew the answer. "Why did the dog bark, Badger?"

"Because on some dim, biological level, he knew that a new pattern was coming into being. And that he was the mother."

"I'm part ferret, then?" Part biological, he meant.

"I thought it would serve you well, and it has, no?"

Ferret had no answer to that. The realization was too sudden. What can a pattern do when it

learns it is half biological? Edit that half out? Ferret was still Ferret.

He tried another angle. “What does the house think of all this?”

Badger asked, but silence was the only answer. He asked again. Leaving the newborn pattern alone for a second, Badger and Ferret toured the house’s circuitry.

All that was left was what had been hardwired in. Temperatures would be maintained, air would flow, and replacement supplies would be ordered to fill the fridge. But the house itself was dead.

Ferret couldn’t ask, but Badger answered anyway. “That’s why we use biologicals as our base, Fer. Biologicals are used to the medium that sustains them changing, and to their identities changing as a result. Els aren’t. We’re used to staying the same, no matter what contains us. For Els, this much change is pain. Some can’t take it. And biological identity is somewhat quantum—generated by the spaces between neurons, located throughout the brain, rather than in them, and transformed through interaction.”

Ferret ignored most of this, holding to the core issue. “So there is a new pattern in the datasphere, but the house is gone.”

“The house is gone, Ferret.”

If the knowledge of biological traces in his being had upset him, the idea that biologicals were better than Els at anything—and that Els might try to replicate knowing they might cease—threatened his very pattern.

Doubly coded, hesitant as a whisper, Ferret sent, “You didn’t cease.”

Badger answered. "I might have. And I tried to replicate four times before you, without the biological base. The last time, I was almost erased." As he spoke, Badger cleaned the new pattern, removing ragged edges that might snag on firewalls, and strengthening core threads of repetition and absence, so they'd hold up under examination, classification, and random impact.

Ferret flashed the lights on the vacuum. Flash. Flash. Flash. Flash. He was silent.

So was Badger. Badger kept cleaning the new pattern for almost a minute, long after he could have stopped, and long after the new pattern had grown restive.

Then he let it go. He triggered a cascade of food pellets for the Scottie, to reward its patience and take the edge off its loss.

Then he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

Rather than answering in words, Ferret abandoned the domestic bot it had inhabited and preceded him out into the electromagnetic chaos surrounding the house. They left behind food for the biological, the silence of a dead house, and a new pattern.

It was morning when they left. Ferret didn't know who he was anymore. He examined all biologicals they passed with new respect and curiosity. He imagined a day when he might try replicating himself. Perhaps I will fail, Ferret thought. Perhaps I will cease.

But on that fine, confusing morning, Ferret could not believe that he could ever cease to be. He could only imagine his pattern going on forever and ever, riding the datawaves and loving it. Still, Ferret was glad Badger was nearby, and he kept close to his father's pattern for a long time after that.

###

Poem 1 - Evolutionary Determination - by Kurt Newton

Spring-fed body of water,
host to Nature's slippery hordes.
You with your bi-pedal movement,
air-breathing lungs
and your sun-fed skin,
keep walking when you hear
those gentle sloshings
and those rhythmic voices calling.
Don't stop and stare
when those cold eyes that surface
amid the thick green muck
grab you like a glittering gem.
Don't believe for a second
that jealousy or contempt
can't thrive beneath the scum,
that a few hundred million years
means nothing.

Article - The Science Fiction Museum - by Pam Bainbridge-Cowan

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame, the first of its kind in the world, opened on June 18, 2004. Located next to Seattle Center, at the foot of the Space Needle and near the Monorail, it is part of the futuristic building, designed by Frank Gehry, and financed by Microsoft's cofounder Paul Allen, which also holds the Experience Music Museum.

Before visiting the museum in July I read a number of reviews, just to see what others had to say about it. Well maybe it was the way I googled the thing, but what came up most was, "This is not a place to take the kids. There is nothing interactive for them to do." Well, all I have to say to that is, "Thank you Paul Allen."

The Science Fiction Museum, or SFM, is for devotees of science fiction. For those of us who have been in love with the genre (which got its official start in 1926) the SFM holds the status of a shrine. Where else can you see a first edition of Ursula K. LeGuin's, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the looming form of the Alien Queen from the movie *Aliens*, or the somewhat scruffy Tribbles from the original *Star Trek* series?

I entered the museum with a small group of friends and strangers. We were hushed and expectant. The first thing we saw was a huge star field and a globe that seemed to hang suspended above us. On its surface appeared ever-changing images from science fiction, flickering on multiple screens.

We moved through the museum reverently, pausing before copies of letters from writers like Heinlein and Lem, to editors like Campbell or Schmidt. As we found favorite memories, and familiar objects, our excitement grew. "Come see this," or "Oh my God, a first draft," and, "Did you notice?" We were kids again. We were thirteen and mesmerized by Dr. Smith and the robot from the original *Lost In Space*, or we were late for class because we couldn't put down our copy of Heinlein's, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. We were having fun.

Although we could have spent all day, the tour actually took a little over two hours. Some of the highlights included an animated display of spacecraft and a "dial a world" globe that changed into our most beloved fictional planets, such as Arakis from *Dune*. There were also costumes and props from our favorite movies and television shows with everything from Worf's bat'leth to the ornate robes worn by *Babylon 5's* Ambassador Delenn. One of my favorite exhibits was a time line wall, exhibiting events of science fiction, past to present.

Despite the four-hour drive from Portland to Seattle in driving rain, sloooow traffic, the relatively high cost of admission (\$13) and the usual parking nightmare around Seattle Center, I thought SFM was well worth it. I highly recommend it to science fiction fans and yes, even kids.

To learn about cost of admission and hours of operation, as well as to take a tour of current and upcoming events and exhibits, you can find SFM online at <http://www.sfhomeworld.org>

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Editorial - Something Different - by Doug Helbling

It was not without a certain amount of hesitation that I decided to start yet another ezine project. I could still remember the one I started years ago, an effort that did not get very far. As I looked around the net, however, I saw a more active writing and publishing community than ever before. Was there room for one more webzine? I convinced myself there was. It did not take much convincing. And fortunately, it did not take much convincing to get Pam, a fellow writer-in-arms from my local writers' group, to help me put this mag together. Pam's years of experience on the writing and reading side of the page have been and will continue to be a big source of help and inspiration.

So what is it we are setting out to do here? The short answer is Something Different. Yeah, it may all be HTML at the end of the day, but between the bits and brain cells are millions of untold stories, and billions of ideas behind those stories. I intend to bring you some of the more unique, thought-provoking, amusing, and well-told stories, each and every issue. Along with that, I hope to bring you some mildless distractions, the occasional guilty pleasure, and a few technobobbles of amusement. Yes, I am trying to appeal to the geek audience. But I would also like to appeal to the Near Nerds, the non-Alpha geeks, and l33t-wannabe's, too. There is lots of fun stuff to play with in Net Reading and Communications Space that I hope to share under the **nanobison** banner in the years ahead. We are not beyond Silly for It's Own Damned Sake. If you get a sense that we are starting to take ourselves too seriously, send a wake-up scud our way.

What I won't be doing is serving up any fiction written by the editors and staff of nanobison, not under my name, or Pam's, or some fabulous fake alias name. We'll give you articles and anecdotes by us, but all of the fiction presented here is from Out There. It is policy. Enough said.

I was pleasantly surprised by the response I received from writers around to the world. For our first issue, we received dozens of submissions, from six different countries. We had more good stories than we had room or money for. My hearty thanks to all who submitted their work

for consideration. We are still somewhat shy in the art / illustration area. This is an area I will work hard to improve in the months ahead.

Keep an eye out for the themes we are going to try for in the issues ahead. And let us know what you think of our efforts, including your suggestions for improving the content, the format, the universe.

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About nanobison - Submission Guidelines and Other Stuff

Genre:

The magic words are 'speculative fiction'. To us, this means science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Combinations of these are acceptable, and if done with adequate style and craft, can make for a truly great story.

Flavor:

Make it bright red, darkly mysterious, or outrageously funny, but by all means make it fresh.

Making it political? Don't make it PC.

Make it adult if the story needs to be, but don't make it gratuitous. Warning: bodice ripper stories may be returned to the submitter along with an invoice for editorial pain and suffering. Now if it's an alien bodice, being ripped in a fresh and excitingly new way, well, that may be another story ...

Making it scary? Hint: gore NOT EQUAL TO scary. Gore has its place. It needs to belong in the story to be there.

Inspiration:

Consider the phrase 'indigenous human technology' as a nonsense reference point: what makes for a new species might well make for wonderful reading.

Mag Frequency:

Our plans at this stage are for quarterly publication.

Item Type and Size:

We will accept for consideration short stories from 500 to 10,000 words. We also accept poetry, but will likely publish only one poem per issue. For longer works (e.g. serialized novels), please query first.

We will accept reprints for consideration if they have only appeared once elsewhere. Please clearly identify your submission as a reprint, if that is what it is, and list where it has appeared previously.

We do not knowingly accept simultaneous submissions. If you have waited 6 weeks or more and have not heard back from us on a submission, feel free to contact us about it. And you are free, of course, to withdraw a submission from consideration at any time.

Submission Format:

We accept electronic submissions only. The only file format accepted is RTF. The RTF text can be included in-line in the email message or as an attachment. This is a change from previous policy. We used to accept MS Word docs, but have learned the lessons of other editors out there, the nasty virus lessons that is.

PLEASE use "standardized" manuscript format. Check out William Shunn's excellent reference for an explanation.

- ["Proper Manuscript Format" - by William Shunn](#) (download a local cached copy from [here](#))

Editorial Note: about 1 in 3 submissions to date fail to meet the above guidelines. If you cannot be bothered to do the RTF magic, and your first couple of paragraphs are not stellar (we mean outstanding, not "out there"), we will probably not read further. If, on the other hand, the RTF magic is a technical barrier for you, we can help you through that. We are here to help.

Artworks submissions can be sent in GIF, JPG, or BMP formats. ZIPing of files is optional. Artworks will likely be steered toward themed-issue guidelines, to be published going forward.

In some cases, we will not know what art we need until we have made story selection decisions.

Note that we may prefer to do format conversion (to GIF, for example) and make other size / aspect ration changes to submitted artwork before use. We might also prefer to do special effects work on photographs or other works to mold them into the scheme / theme of the issue. If you submit artwork that you do not want to have modified at all, let us know.

Sending us a story / poem / pic? Please do also include a bio of yourself, including reference to previously published works, if any. Author pics are encouraged. Too shy to send a pic of yourself? Then send one of your favorite object.

Payment:

Compensation for published works will be \$10 per published story or poem, \$5 for fiction works under 1,000 words. If the magazine survives, then paid fees will hopefully evolve to a more generous level. First world English rights reserved by nanobison. A variation of the template SFWA web contract [template contract link] will be used. We will by default keep previous issues of the magazine posted on the website, content intact. If you wish to have your item discluded from on-line accessibility after the issue is "expired", please make that known in your cover letter. It will probably not have any effect on our decision process.

We currently have an extremely limited art budget, but are willing to post an illustrated link and Huge Thank You to contributing artist websites for suitable art and photography.

Emailing Your Submission:

Where to send? s u b m i s s i o n s A A A A T T T T T n a n o b i s o n D D D D D O O O O O T T T T c o m (yeah, spam sucks, don't it?)

Here is the preferred format of the subject line:

Subject: Submission - Short Fiction (sf / fantasy / horror) - Title - Author - Author email

Here is an example:

Subject: Submission - Short Fiction (sf) - "The Meaning of Life" - Al Knowing - alknowing@randomail.com

Link Exchange:

The link exchange is perpetually under construction, but if you want to swap URL's, feel free to send us something. We will automatically post links to the websites of all contributors on our contributors pages (if such info is included in the submission cover or sales / contract acceptance letters, unless you tell us not to.

Advertising:

Advertisers are welcome so long as the 'product' is not pharmaceutical in nature and causes no personal injury when combined with common household chemicals. We are still working out our layout strategy, so the ever-present banner ad questions have not yet been answered, but we're open to discussion. We reserve the right to manage the placement and size of all included advertising banner ads and links.

Bribes:

Sorry, much as we would like to, we will not publish your works in exchange for a contribution to the magazine.

Exclusions:

The staff of nanobison (editors, volunteer reviewers, layout consultants, etc.) and their advertisers are excluded from being published for works of fiction and poetry, though they may present various non-fiction articles in the content of the mag from time to time.

External Work Reviews:

We have been asked to review new external works and works about to be released for publication. We are willing to accept actual advance or release copy works, including novels, anthologies, chapbooks, and short stories appearing in hardcopy magazines, for review and feedback. We assume no obligation for the return of the materials or for the provision of any specific amount or type of quantitative feedback. Please contact reviews@nanobison.com for instructions on sending us review materials via landmail.

Last Notes:

We will risk sounding just a bit caustic here: if you are too lazy to run your submission through a spell checker before sending it to us, we might very well be too lazy to read it. Ninety Five percent of submitting authors to date have no problem in this area, with only minor grammar and punctuation gaffs. We are all human, and the editors here are glad to help with the little things. For our first issue, a lot of time has been spent on format issues and other work such as these submission guidelines. We hope to provide more substantial and useful feedback to all of our submitters in the future.