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### Carousel Cowboys

- by Marshall Payne

As the Carousel turned, puffs of wispy clouds passing behind his friends' heads, Avery Odams listened to their conversation:

" . . . and that's why the Divine Requirements are, well, required," Our Popular Lady finally concluded, folding her bejeweled hands on the table in front of her.

"To impose moralistic governors for the sake of society's well-being," concurred Bomagic, who was sitting to her right.

"It's the only way we could have achieved our forty-second-century tranquillity that has proven so popular."

Bomagic raised his long-stemmed crystal chalice. "A tranquillity that could never become as popular or as lovely as you, Opal, my Lady Favorite."

Our Popular Lady (or Opal, as her friends called her) yielded to the cloud's owner with a smile (it was his Carousel after all) before saying: "Your graciousness is appreciated, Bomagic, but you're missing the point."

"Could we change the subject?" An Original put in, tinting his avatar to a bright cerise.

Finally, thought Avery sardonically. An Original had finally said something that was actually original. Dark irony may have been this fellow's bedfellow, but that didn't mean Avery had to like it. An Original was a metahuman who had started out as The Original, but self-replication had undermined his uniqueness. Somewhere out there were scores of the guy, but as of late Bomagic had limited him to one avatar on the Carousel at a time. Currently he was styling himself nondescript: middle-aged, middle-height, middle-everything, his variable coloration being his only novelty. He was the only one of the four not natching it, but then again there was nothing natural about him in the first place.

Turning to An Original, Bomagic said, "And what would you have us change it to, O Least Sui Generis One?" He chuckled. The owner of the stratocumulus skyferry, and the carousel-style nightclub that revolved upon it, he had forgone his usual sound-bite-laden motley today, and was instead attired in black velvet smoking jacket with heliotrope cravat. Centuries out of fashion, but since it was his soirée (as it was everyday), he could dress any damned way he pleased.

"I don't know," An Original whined. "I've just wearied of Opal's discourse on the Divine Requirements. I find them neither divine nor required."

Avery had wearied of them as well, Opal having gone on and on about them for twenty-two minutes nonstop. As if it were the only topic worthy of consideration. And it wasn't even lunchtime yet. Though it should be, he thought, looking up at the midday sun muted by the Carousel's solar shield. Nice thing about the sun was that no matter where in the world you were, at noon, the sun would be directly overhead. This was about the extent of Avery Odams' technical prowess. It was enough, however, for he had the World to look out for him.

Our Popular Lady, who was wearing nothing but ferrets today (snuggling at breasts, ankles, and loins), shot the nondescript

avatar a wrathful scowl, but then brightened. Possibly realizing she had been the cynosure of the table long enough, and that her popularity might (*heaven forbid*) be waning. "How about we muse on Avery's coming time-task?" she suggested. She pulled back the ferret's head on her right breast and glanced at its ocular chronometer. The creature hissed and snipped at her corpulent paper-white hand before snuggling back into position. "I mean, my, in mere minutes our sainted friend here will be making History."

An Original groaned. "Not another debate on temporal mechanics." And went teal. "I mean, the fact that we're all here enjoying this skyscape, drifting across the Americas, proves that he was successful in saving humankind from such a barbarous past, doesn't it?" Mundane impudence not dark irony was this fellow's bedfellow, Avery decided.

Bomagic ignored the ill-mannered avatar by signaling the bartender. Then, "Avery, you've been exceedingly quiet. Have you been eagerly contemplating your time-task?"

Avery merely shrugged.

Opal, stroking her ferret to calm it, said, "Avery, aren't you excited about your upcoming adventure?"

But before he could reply the bartender arrived, and Bomagic began the drawn-out affair of relaying their order to the linguistically challenged barkeep. His name was Ambrose Bierce, and he was new to the Carousel. A writer from the twentieth century, he had been a gift to Bomagic from a temporal magistrate who owed a rather hefty bar tab. If memory served Avery, supposedly a temporal courier had rescued the then half-alive fictionist from a shallow grave in 1914 Mexico shortly after banditos had robbed and beaten him.

Consequently, he spoke only Old-Modern English, which was why he was so reticent. Avery wondered why Bomagic hadn't given him any linguistic implants, thereby allowing him access to one

or more of the metalanguages, but it was really none of his business. Though later in the day, when the Carousel began filling up with Bomagic's colorful clientele (photonic avatars, diversiform constructs, rent-a-wights, as well as a few actual womb-born human beings), service could get awfully backed up.

"Ah, where were we?" Bomagic said after the bartender departed.

Opal patted her swirling, multi-layered, multihued coiffure. "We were discussing Avery's time-task."

An Original, fluctuating restively between teal and chartreuse, shook his head. "I don't see what the big fucking deal is, anyway," he said snidely. "He jumps back to some rustic day of yore, recruits the lawman, and returns. In fact, he's already done it -- twenty-two hundred and fifty-three years ago to be exact."

"No," said Opal, glaring at the avatar, "he *will* do it twenty-two hundred and fifty-three years ago. And I thought you were the one who didn't want to discuss temporal mechanics. Personally, I think the fascinating thing is that the lawman wasn't a lawman at the instant of recruitment."

"And there, Opal," Bomagic said, "lies the crux of the matter. Meaning, he *will* be! And thanks to our good friend here, this lawman will go on to save us all from humanity's atavistic, decadent ways." He turned to Avery, then frowned. "Avery, you certainly don't seem to be getting into the spirit of this thing. I mean, after all, you are the one destined for this big adventure."

Avery Odams yawned. "My only concern is whether I'll be back in time for happy hour," he said. "Hopefully, this won't take too terribly long."

"Yes, I contacted the Temporal Bureau to ask when you might be finished with your appointed task," Bomagic said, "but they were

most evasive. Rather inconsiderate of them, I must say. We were planning a small celebration upon your return, but . . ."

"I think what you're doing is admirable, Avery," Opal said. "What that Frunk fiend did to that poor little girl." She shuddered and white flab and ferrets jiggled.

"Could we not discuss that," Avery said. He'd read in the Histories all about the Event, but he could never bring himself to explore it further. He knew what had happened; he didn't need a visual reenactment.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Avery," she said. "So, is that what you're wearing?"

"Why not?" he replied. He had adopted the silver soutane and slippers a few weeks back, deliberately going for the patron-saint look, but had only tonsured his long blond locks a couple of days ago. Had they already forgotten his elaborate beadware that had been his sartorial trademark for so many months?

"I think it's a grand choice," Bomagic said. He looked up-- Ambrose Bierce had just returned with three smoking beverages and an avatar of one. "Let's stand, shall we?"

When everyone had a chalice of bubbling green evanescence in hand, Bomagic proposed a toast. "To Avery Odams, our good friend. To his famous voyage that we all know will be a smashing success. As sure as I am standing here now!"

An Original let out a slight moan, but saluted with simulated chalice, then simulated drinking.

"Fate and fortune, Avery," Opal said, smiling. "May your journey be as fruitful as I am socially esteemed and cherished." No conceit on her part, merely statement of indisputable fact.

Avery nodded his thanks, then quaffed his drink, its mint vapors suffusing his sinuses and seemingly lifting him off the Carousel's

floor. When his vision cleared, he looked around the Carousel inquiringly, then frowned. Bomagic, realizing his predicament, said, "Please, Avery, take one of my stallions."

He nodded again. "Thank you, Bomagic. I'll return it as soon as I'm finished." He went to one of the many multicolored wooden horses rising and falling on a striped pole around the edge of the Carousel, this one with a purple mane, and mounted it.

"Success! Success!" his friends cried in unison.

Avery pressed the GO button between the stallion's ears and sucked in a deep breath. The floor irised open beneath him, and the wooden stallion slid from its pole into the open sky below.

"Terre Haute!" he cried.

#

They were still a day's ride from Wichita when Ray Palmer, the trail boss, told Jess to spread the word. "We'll make camp here tonight." That was fine with Jess. They'd been pushing hard all day, for the last six weeks actually. Abilene to Wichita, herding five hundred plus steers to market. Forty-two days in the saddle and Jess Turner was beyond tired. Tired of the dust and the heat and the occasional rain that was really no relief at all. Tired of riding in the saddle all day and sleeping on the cold, hard ground at night.

*I'm getting too old for this,* he thought. Not that he hadn't enjoyed the life of being a cowpuncher--it was all he'd ever done--but there came a time when a man had to think about the future. It was time to settle down, put a down payment down on a small ranch, buy a herd of his own, and become somebody. Others had done it, why not him? A wife--that's what he needed. A hard-working frontier woman who would bear him several young'uns. Three boys and two girls, that seemed about right. A cattleman's dynasty, yes, that was what he wanted to build, with maybe a dozen or so ranch hands to tend his herd, mend his fences, and

make *him* money for a change. Then, someday, he and his little missus could ride into town in a black, canopied buggy, dressed in expensive finery they'd purchased on their last trip to Kansas City, or maybe even Chicago.

Jess chuckled in spite of himself. The dream kept him going, but that's all it was. After delivering the cattle to market tomorrow, he knew he'd have only enough money for a few days in a hotel, a few nights in a saloon--maybe a couple of nights with a woman or two. And then it would be back to cowpunching, and the dirt and the wind and the hard saddle.

Jess grimaced. I'm getting too old for this, he thought, but spurred his horse and went to spread the word.

#

Spewing blue plasma from its metal-sheathed wooden anus, the fusion-powered stallion carried Avery toward his task. Now that he was underway, he was feeling less lethargic about his rendezvous with destiny, and was actually enjoying the scenery. Though he was still perturbed by the inconvenience of it all. Unfortunately, modern society often called upon many of its citizens to perform some special duty, though he had never met any of them personally. Opal, who was far too busy with her social-butterflying, had never been asked to perform such a task. Obviously, An Original was too busy replicating himself to even consider taking time for civic functions. Bomagic did have his Carousel, but Avery doubted if that qualified.

So why should he? But then again it would only take five, ten minutes at the outside from his life, so he figured he could rise to the occasion. Besides, the World had taken care of him all these lo! many, many years. Given him his mansion in New Zealand (he had the entire fifteen-mile-long island of D'Urville for his amusement), free transportation to and from the Carousel, and his Maxicube to purchase whatever he fancied. Certainly he could do this small task in recompense. And according to the

Histories, he didn't have any choice in the matter. His retrieval of the lawman was a fact. Or soon would be.

When he'd left Bomagic's Carousel, it was somewhere over the Caribbean. Upon crying out his destination, the stallion's navcomp set course for Terre Haute, leaving the soirée and Avery's friends quickly behind. Due to the stallion's invisible windscreen, Mach 5 was barely perceptible now, and soon the North American continent was a vast rug being pulled underneath him, replacing the expanse of off-blue. And a few minutes after that he was closing in on Terre Haute, the capital of the People's Technocracy of Indiana, one of the many Americas.

Avery didn't know why this small city had become the home of the Bureau of Temporal Management, but that was where the Time Lords had chosen to locate it. Just east of downtown, in a park whose verdancy leapt out at him, stood a domed marble edifice that appeared as if it had been plucked from some ancient era. And for all he knew, maybe it had.

Once he had landed his noble steed upon the aerodrome atop the south wing, a photonic greeter appeared as he dismounted. A thing of no words, it gestured avidly with a series of follow-me's that eventually brought him to Op-Room #1 where he was shown inside.

"Avery Odams," the time-tech said. "Greetings. I am Mr. Mixturo." He was a short man in a bright red lab coat. Between that and his ruddy skin and frizzy red hair, he appeared to be ablaze--at least with vitality--and it was the shade of red that went with absolutely nothing. Despite the time-tech's short stature, Avery might have been frightened by him, except that the man was a chronic giggler. "You're right on time."

"How did you know I'd even come at all?" Avery asked.

Mr. Mixturo let out another of his irksome giggles. Dumb question, Avery thought. The man was in temporal management.

Avery took the opportunity to look around. Where he had expected a big laboratory full of temporal displacement equipment (flashing and beeping and humming) with a large transportation stage, instead he found a medium-sized room with a single control panel linked to a small throw-rug-sized platform. Though the chamber was plainly furnished, the beige walls were covered with portraits of temporal physicists dating back to the twenty-ninth century. Like the current time-tech, they were all an eccentric, wild-eyed lot.

"So, what would you like me to do first?" Avery asked, anxious to get this over with.

Mr. Mixturo reached up to place his hand on Avery's shoulder.  
"I'd like to discuss the future with you, my boy."

"Oh, I thought I was heading toward the past."

"No, no, I want to discuss your future with the Bureau of Temporal Management. Your becoming one of us."

"I've never expressed any such interest," Avery said flatly. When Mr. Mixturo did nothing but giggle, Avery furthered, "Listen, I'm here to do this one task that I've been asked to do. Nothing more. So, can we get on with it?" Actually, he didn't even remember being asked. It was just something he had been told all his life--that on this day he would perform an errand that would be instrumental to maintaining life as everyone knew it. There was no arguing with fate, or so he'd been told.

"Certainly. Certainly." Placing a hand on Avery's back, Mr. Mixturo began escorting him around the room. "You see, my boy, temporal management is a growing field. It's growing into the future one second at a time. Minute by minute. Hour by hour. But don't for one moment think that the skein of time is a fixed manifestation, a permanent phenomenon. Mutability lurks behind every chronological corner, down every temporal alleyway. And that's why we need young men such as yourself who have a vision for the future."

Still being impelled around the room, Avery said, "I can appreciate that, Mr. Mixture--"

"Mixturo. Mr. Mixturo."

"Yes, I'm sorry. Mr. Mixturo. But as I said, I am only here for this one task. I have a life, I hope you know."

"I understand, yes, truly I do. But consider: Any one-time, short-term incident can be multiplexed many, many times through various techniques of trans-temporal compression. Then, any such event can be recompressed again and again until perfection--or at least what we here at the Bureau like to call perfection--is achieved. Imagine if you will, being able to correct any decision in life that you have ever been faced with. Isn't there some particular mistake you've made in the past that if you could relive or alter, you most certainly would?"

Avery nodded. The mistake of coming to the Bureau of Temporal Management was quickly climbing to the top of the heap.

"Well, that is why we need young men like yourself. Those who can readily admit their mistakes, and then act properly to rectify them. Do you understand?"

Before he could nod one way or the other, Avery realized that they had stopped moving and that he was now standing on the transport platform he had been manipulated upon. "No," he said emphatically, "I don't understand."

"Ah, but you will. Have an eventful trip, Mr. Odams," the time-tech said, then giggled. And then, giddiness playing about Avery's head, his equilibrium weakening, he found himself heading somewhere, somewhen else.

#

"Well, tomorrow night you boys won't be eatin' any of Muskrat's cookin', that's for sure," Ray Palmer said. "No offense, Muskrat."

"Offense taken," said the scrawny old man who actually did mirror his nickname. He scowled, but that was all part of his charm. If he were truly angry, all the men would know it.

Gus Whorley, one of the cowpunchers, said, "You make a fine beef stew, Muskrat, it's just . . ."

"That's all you ever make," put in another.

"Hey, sometimes we have beef and beans," Muskrat countered. "Which is more than good enough for the likes of you mangy cowboys."

"Cowmen," Gus corrected.

Jess Turner laughed, along with the other drovers sitting around the campfire. He'd eaten all the beef, potatoes, and carrots out of his bowl, and was now sopping up the remaining juice with a corn muffin, a muffin so hard it was the only way to get it down. Stew was good though.

Since it was late October, the sun had already set and the stars were coming out. Just one more night of sleeping on the hard ground, Jess thought. Tomorrow: a hot bath and a warm bed. Maybe even a warm woman. Last time he was in Wichita, two bits would buy all three. Make it three bits and a man could get drunk to boot. Which was where the conversation soon led as they all worked on their stew, his fellow cowpunchers talking with relish about how they'd be spending their hard-earned money. Though Jess had ridden with these men for the past six weeks, he wouldn't necessarily call any of them friends. Half of them he'd been on drives with before, one time or another. The other half he'd never seen before and would probably never see again. It was the nature of the business.

After sopping up all the juice in his bowl, Jess stood. Oh, how his back ached, from a dull pain that ran through his shoulders, to a sharp, stabbing one in his upper pelvis, and all points in between. He took his bowl and spoon over to the cook, laid them

in the tub for dirty dishes, and said, "Thanks, Muskrat. Though I reckon I'm gettin' a mite tired of beef stew, too, you certainly do make the best." Then he began walking away from the camp.

"Thanks, Jess," Muskrat said. "Hey, where you headed in such an all-fire hurry?"

"To get rid of them beefsteaks you served up for breakfast."

Gus Whorley said, "Let us know if'n everything comes out aw'right."

"Or don't," said another.

More laughed around the campfire.

#

Just outside the ring of cowboys, the Carousel stallion bobbed slowly up and down. Stealthed, Avery and his steed were invisible to the drovers, although the campfire smoke would occasionally limn their floating form when the wind came up. Avery wasn't very worried about it, though; work-worn cowboys probably too fatigued to perceive uncanny phenomena, was how he saw it. So, he watched the drovers, somewhat curious.

He had been following them for most of the day, since he'd found himself translated back to the year 1872 along with his augmented steed. Mr. Mixturo, or his associates, had certainly modified the wooden stallion that Avery found under him upon his arrival. But then he didn't even question how they'd found the time to make such extensive modifications. Time manipulation was their business. And clearly, business was superb.

In addition to the stealthing field, the stallion had been outfitted with other high-tech gadgetry: a time/space readout and actuator (hence how he knew he was in 1872) and a translation sequencer that he was currently using to convert the rustics' arcane speech (Old-Modern English, he believed it was) to his

accustomed metalanguage, Diphthong-Universal-nonRefractive A, the lingua franca of his forty-second-century beau monde. The tiny control panel behind the decorative saddle horn showed other functions and options, but outside of using the food and beverage selector, he had yet to explore any of them. Observation mode had seized his mood.

Which front-burnered his prime contention. This task should involve only a few minutes of his time, right? But shadowing and reconnoitering had consumed almost an entire day. What was the purpose of all this? This wasn't the point of retrieval where he was supposed to make History. Had the world gone widdershins? And to add further misery to that, he was having to endure firsthand the dreary lives of these miserable cowboys. He couldn't see how they coped day in, day out. The strenuous manual labor, struggling against the elements, each day advancing these bovine creatures only a few miles closer toward their ultimate goal, the slaughtering market. Even with his soft, nano-contoured saddle (thank Bomagic for that) and the selector's ability to provide food and refreshment (thank the Bureau for that), he was becoming quite fatigued himself, and all he had done was causally follow these drovers and observe. And he was developing what the translation sequencer informed him were "saddle sores." And they were beginning to sting. Bad.

While sipping Plumerian Nectarade (a trademarked juice concoction of seven fragrant fruits, unfortunately sans ethanol), he looked down on the cowpunchers as they devoured something called "beef stew," gulped hot black coffee (a crude form of demitasse), and bandied about oblong tales in their rustic patois. A mangy lot, if ever there was one. Encrusted with dirt and grime, they were now close enough for Avery to sample their full fetor. They were all in need of a bath, to say the least. And then he realized that he'd traveled back to an era before the eradication of disease. How many of these cowboys carried a lethal contagion? he wondered. Did his stealthing provide suitable aegis against now-time bacteria? He looked upon the tainted cowboys, these viral rustics, in a new, even more

unpleasant light. Did they? Would they? Could they? He shuddered.

Then Jess Turner, the focal point of his time-task, stood, walked away from the campfire, and began talking with the diminutive, decrepit-looking man who rode in the wagon. (When Avery had first seen the cowboy, he couldn't really fathom him as the guardian of the future. Though not quite as abominable as his fellow drovers, he was still a crude, unkempt man with greasy hair and filthy clothing. Not at all what Avery had expected. Where was the rustic charm? That Wild West allure? The iconic symbolism passed down through the generations through media and memes? Still, the cowboy, this Jess Turner fellow, had a strength about him. A presence.)

And then, after exchanging a bit of amusing banter with his coarse associates, the chosen cowboy strolled off into the woods. Avery glided after him.

#

After passing through a small copse, Jess found himself in a clearing. The stars were a million pinpoints of light in the cloudless sky, a gibbous moon rising. Except for the distant lowing of the cattle and the occasional faint laughter from the camp, all was quiet. He looked north, imagining he could see Wichita, though of course he couldn't. Well, tomorrow.

Taking care of business, he pulled down his trousers and squatted. The last time he had been in Wichita, he remembered, they'd had real porcelain bowls. And paper. He chuckled. Damnedest things cross one's mind at the damnedest times, he thought.

He was just finishing up when he suddenly, embarrassingly, realized that he wasn't alone. Three strange figures stood in front of him, forming a horseshoe blocking his path. His reflexes to confront danger kicked in and he tried to stand, but found he

couldn't move. Somehow, someway, he was stuck in this humiliating squatting position.

*Da da da dingleberry cowboy!* came a lilting falsetto.

*The one? The one?*

*Indubitably pos-a-pos. Aye, our target marketus sincere.*

*Be sure, so sure . . .*

*Affirmed. Our vector. Our vessel.*

*Da da da dingleberry cowboy!*

Though their lips never moved, he could hear their voices. Hear them in his head. He looked at the three men, if men they were. The one on his right was partly clad in metal, the rest of him bare skin, and the top third of his head was glowing a vivid, brilliant blue. Was that a cap he was wearing? Strangest thing Jess had ever seen. Like he could see into his head or something.

*Da da dum da da dangle dangle dangle,* the singing came again. Although he couldn't be sure, Jess believed that this lilting voice belonged to the blue-domed one.

*Aye, our uno and onliest. The bovineboy.* This voice seemed to come from the man on the left, who was more ordinary (or at least the least weird) than the other two. Short blond hair, tall, thin, he was dressed in some sort of silver skintight suit. Though it was too dark to see the man's eyes, Jess knew he was staring directly at him. He also knew on some intuitive level that this one was the leader. He talked and carried himself with authority, and was equally capable of retribution when that authority was disobeyed or challenged.

*The one? Be sure. So sure.* This came from the third man, the one in the middle, his speech tapering off into a sick growl. He was bigger than the other two put together. A huge hulking mass of a man with dark hair, a bristly beard, and wearing dark togs.

He was holding, no dragging something in his right, meaty hand. An animal? No, it was . . . a child.

*Aye, said the leader again. Enougha already, Frunk. He sighed. Albeit I anticipated more. He made a gesture toward Jess. Just witness him. So crude. So so slovenesque. Still, sodomation per discussion per schemata.*

Jess tried again to stand, to will himself to pull up his trousers, but still he couldn't move. His muscles were locked, frozen. He could feel himself trembling, his entire body conducting spasms of sheer dread, but it was a sensation that ran through him without finding physical release. Like an electrical current circuiting along his nervous system, but unable to locate a ground or outlet. All he could do was squat there and watch and listen to the strange, strange men.

*Dingleberries till dawn, da da da!* the blue-domed one sang.

The silver-suited one shook his head. *Vamoose-bound long before cocking crow, Danitron. But for now, a cocking I shall go.* A smile broke his smooth, perfect face.

#

Yes, thought Avery, the Event.

He was hovering behind the derrière-exposed cowboy, trying not to look at the little girl Frunk had dragged from 1816 England. The Histories had been quite graphic about how the huge ghoul had chased her around the field of grain, instilling as much terror in her as pleasure in himself. Until he'd wearied of the game and used his dirk. Avery refrained from even a glimpse of the nine-year-old girl's throat. There was nothing he could do for her. Now she was Frunk's prize.

Even ten paces away, Avery was getting a good wash from their SOI. Quaint device, rather popular in the twenty-ninth century. Though he wondered why they had included the cowboy in the

sphere of influence. Did they really care about his take on this bizarre situation? And though Avery was privy to all their thoughts (the cowboy's as well), were any of them aware of his presence? Obviously not, he decided, and patted the stealthing panel. The thought conveyance was definitely one-way.

They called themselves Drama Club. Thespians they weren't, though high drama was their advocation. A religious sect of sorts, albeit a malfeasant one. One they practiced to perfection, from a time even more savage than Jess Turner's Old West. And they were supposedly the "good guys." At least their leader Jony-X thought they were. Everything would have been fine if they hadn't gotten their hands on the time displacement technology, thereupon playing havoc with the future, Avery's past. Avery adjusted the sequencer to translate their twenty-ninth-century vernacular to his own Diphthong-Universal-nonRefractive A.

*Shall we proceed, gentlemen,* Danitron advised. From the mental wash, Avery found the cowboy's bemusement interesting. Of course, it wasn't a blue glowing cap the cyborg was wearing. But where would someone like Jess Turner ever have seen a human brain before? The cowboy was right about being able to see inside the cyborg's head, though. The top third of Danitron's skull was encased in transparency, as though he were showing off his cerebrum, all the various furrowed sulci, proving himself to be at least partially human. Small micro-illuminators (but then again Jess wouldn't know a lightbulb from a light-year) cast a sapphire glow on his gray matter as well as his surroundings.  
*Dingleboy's pants are conveniently down.*

*Go on, Jony, have your fun,* Frunk said, his deep voice booming through Avery's mind.

Jony-X, the silver-suited one who controlled the temporal displacement unit, said, *Must I remind you that we are not here to engage in pleasure or pleasantries? We have an important mission to accomplish.*

Danitron raised a half-metal, half-flesh finger. *If pleasure isn't your intended purpose, then why do you insist upon fornicating with this, this foul-smelling cowboy? Hypodermic delivery would be so much easier.*

Avery felt Jony-X's consternation. The cyborg had a point. *Because it's the Drama Club way, he insisted. Because it's my way. Soon humanity will be extinct--our age will never have occurred--we will never have occurred--so let me have my last hurrah. Besides, I've already introduced the contagion into my system. I'm already a carrier.*

*It won't work, said Frunk. It didn't work last time with that hive thing you took to the 1780s.*

*1980s, Danitron correct. And it wasn't "that hive thing." When they isolated it, they named it HIV.*

Frunk gave a thick mental shrug. The huge ghoul was the feeble-minded member of the group, and one era seemed much the same to him as another.

*No, it didn't work, Jony-X admitted, but the AIDS epidemic was a valiant attempt. Consider it a dress rehearsal. This time, it will work. We've gone further back in time this time. Medical technology barely exists here, and this lentivirus is much more virulent. This cowboy will start the contagion on its worldwide vector, and one hundred years from now there will be no humanity. No more wretched society. No more us. This time we will get it right!*

The wash Avery was getting from Jony-X now was so laden with messianic beatitude that he nearly fell off his wooden horse. No doubt about it, he definitely saw himself as the savior of the future, risking everything to spare the human race from its decadent twenty-ninth-century ways. And one look--a look that Avery still couldn't make himself take--at the body of the young girl Frunk had butchered, said that maybe the well-groomed leader was onto something. Still, there were better ways of

dealing with the era of techno-barbarism, as the twenty-ninth century would eventually be named.

*I still don't think it'll work,* Frunk grumbled.

*Then why did you come along?* Jony-X asked, his irritation flowing freely through the thought conduit.

Frunk pulled up the dead child until she was almost standing on limp legs. *To slay a famous personage.* He held the child higher, pointing. *See, Jane Austen. Miss Goody-goody.* He grinned.

Danitron said, *Oh, is that who you think you murdered?* He let out a metallic chuckle. *My dear friend, I am sorry to inform you that in 1816, the year we went back to, Jane Austen, the author of those dreary priggish romances, was forty-one years of age. This can't possibly be her.*

*You mean we took that side excursion for nothing,* Jony-X said, peeved.

*No, not for nothin'*, the thick-lipped ghoul growled. With the flip of a mental switch, fond reminiscences filled Frunk's feeble though determined mind as he shared the experience with his friends again. How he had chased the nine-year-old in and around the grain field, dirk in hand, the SOI set at max so he could experience her horror fully. He'd even practiced the chilling lines he'd uttered to her in her own native Old-Modern British. "Better run, lassie. Frunk is here to slit your pretty little throat."

At this point Avery was receiving a strong wave of terror from the cowboy, who hadn't understood any of what had been going on so far, but he certainly understood this. He would have crapped his pants if he hadn't been restrained by Drama Club's kinetic inhibitor, and if his pants weren't down and he hadn't already voided himself.

Jony-X sighed mentally. *We were there, Frunk. We were there.*

The ghoul fell out of remembrance mode and returned to his angry blue funk. *It was good, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough!* He turned and began lumbering away.

*Where are you going?* Jony-X demanded.

*If you wanna wipe out our ancestors, you do it your way, and I'll do it mine. One screaming brat at a time.* He headed north, leaving the little girl's corpse in his wake.

Jony-X called after him, *But you're just one man, Frunk--even you can't slit a billion throats*, but the ghoul was already out of the SOI.

*Let him go,* Danitron said. *If this works, his actions won't matter one way or the other.*

Jony-X agreed, then looked at the cowboy. *Will you be able to erase his memory as you claim?*

Danitron's sapphire dome flashed azure. *Absolutely.*

*So far, nothing has gone absolutely as we've planned. But-* Jony-X kicked the cowboy prone--*turn off the kineticator and get ready to hold him down. I want him to have a little fight in him while I do this.*

Then Jony-X slid out of his silver suit. Not wanting to watch him perform his wicked deed, Avery finally turned to take a glimpse of the little girl's corpse just beyond the SOI. Even when Frunk had held her up, he had managed not to cast eyes upon her. But now, he felt like he owed it to her, the poor, nameless innocent the Histories spoke so solemnly of. And as he did, the remembrance Frunk had shared with everyone, his chasing after the girl, dirk in hand, her flight to stay alive, her unadulterated terror, became all too real to Avery. Suddenly something inside

him snapped. It was at that moment that Avery Odams decided to stop being a mere observer of events and do something.

#

"What happened, Jess, ya get lost out there?" a voice came.

He found himself reeling, struggling to stand, to walk, unsure of where he was. Slowly, darkness was replaced by the light of the campfire, his fellow cowboys, a few of them looking at him curiously.

"You okay, Jess?" came another voice. Gus Whorley? No, Ray Palmer, trail boss. "You certainly were gone a spell."

"Uh, I'm tired's all," he said sluggishly. "Gonna turn in."

"Turn in to what?" one of them asked. Yeah, this time Gus Whorley. Chuckles around the campfire.

Woodenly, he staggered and found his bedroll, stretched it out near a log, and lay down. Something wasn't right--he could feel it. He felt a strange draining sensation swirling through his body. And on top of that his rectum hurt. Really hurt. Had he had a bad case of the runs? No, this felt different. Like he'd shat a stone or something. Maybe that's what it was, he'd passed a stone. But still something wasn't right. Something had happened to him out there. And for the life of him, he couldn't remember what.

He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep. Somewhere an owl hooted.

#

Translating into 1816 Bath, England once again, Avery was only a few seconds behind Drama Club this time. It was his fourth attempt. Somewhere close by were (or would be) three other versions of himself, stealthed as he was, invisible to himself as

well as anyone else. And the stealthing technology was what was turning out to be the problem.

As before, Jony-X and Danitron were leaning casually against the backside of the barn as Frunk chased the nine-year-old around and around. Apparently there were no other humans indigenous to this period anywhere nearby. Drama Club had obviously planned this. Though the girl was screaming quite frantically now, no one was coming out of the main house on the other side of the barn to help.

For some reason, Avery couldn't bring himself out of stealth mode. And if the girl couldn't see him, how was he to help her? He felt so helpless. He'd done everything he could think of on the three attempts before. He had flown directly in Frunk's path, putting himself between the ghoul and his prey several times, but on every attempt Frunk passed right through him. What was wrong? Did it have something to do with the stealthing system? (He'd even tried shutting it off on the last attempt, but it hadn't made any difference.) Or had he translated into the past improperly? As a ghost? An apparition? Frunk wasn't going to have any problem connecting with the little girl and murdering her, so why was he unable to translate into a substantial form?

And then he had an idea. Maybe if he used the translation sequencer, he could broadcast an audio message that might get through. Yes, that might work. But who was he to warn? The little girl? Obviously she was so terrified already that it wouldn't make any difference. And then it occurred to him that he didn't need to warn the girl, he needed to warn Frunk.

After fiddling with the panel, he finally adjusted the controls to what he thought might have the proper effect. "Frunk!" he hollered. "She's not Jane Austen! Do you understand, she's *not* Jane Austen? She's nobody! Just a little girl! She won't grow up to be a famous personage!"

But it didn't work. Even Jony-X and Danitron didn't turn his direction. All he could do was watch in horror as Frunk closed in

on the little girl who wouldn't grow up to be anyone, famous or otherwise.

It wasn't fair, he told himself. Now she'd never have the chance to experience so many, many things. Things he himself had always taken for granted. Once again his mind was seething with abhorrence, at the injustice of it all. Still, he could not accept defeat. After pounding his fists against his saddle, he reset the time/space coordinates to try yet again.

#

"Over here!"

It was Gus Whorley who'd found the body. Soon Jess, Ray Palmer, and several of the other drovers were towering over the corpse.

"What do you suppose she was doin' out here?" Gus Whorley asked.

"I don't know," Ray Palmer said, then turned in his saddle and scanned the horizon. Though for what, Jess had no idea; there had never been any settlements in the immediate vicinity.

"Somebody went and slit her throat," said one of the younger cowpunchers, stating the obvious. His name was Billy and he had a look of complete aversion on his acne-ripe face, the little girl's dried, red smile grinning back at all of them so horribly. Jess finally had to look away, but gazing upon Billy's grimace was almost as bad.

"She certainly don't look like she's from 'round here," another drover said. "What's that she's wearin'?"

"I believe it's called a pinafore," Ray Palmer said. "She must've been from back East or somethin'."

Jess, sitting silently in his saddle, turned once again to look. The little girl couldn't have been more than eight, maybe nine

years old. She was dressed in a pink dress with white lace, with an elegant cream-colored apron--this thing Palmer called a pinafore--in the front. Her shoulder-length blond hair was stained a dark red in places, almost purple near the ends. She had on patent-leather shoes and dainty little embroidered anklet socks like none he'd ever seen before. No, she definitely wasn't from around here.

"What should we do?" Jess asked the trail boss.

"Do?" Palmer said. "Bury her of course. Not much else we can do."

#

It was after seventeen failed attempts that Avery decided he needed assistance. He had materialized in just about every location around the murder scene, attempted multiple adjustments of his time/space actuator, ridden at Frunk from every possible angle, but nothing he'd done had had any effect whatsoever. (He'd even gone back a day before the slaying, and though he had been able to speak with the little girl--she said her name was Abigail--she had only giggled at his warning, calling him Mr. Baldy in her cute little Old-Modern British accent, before scampering back inside.) Now it was time to see if he could enlist the help of her parents, wherever they might be. Surely they cared. Who would go to all the trouble to dress such a lovely little girl so primly, if they didn't love her?

But now, floating through their manor house (they were an English family of some affluence), he quickly discovered the problem. Drama Club had used its kineticator on the entire manor house so Frunk's foul deed would go undisturbed. It must be Sunday, Avery determined, as he sailed though the front room, briefly wondering what the occupants would think if they could see him in his silver soutane and full tonsure, floating through their home astride his candy-colored wooden horse. There were several adults present and a handful of children, as well, all

dressed in their Sunday finery, either sitting or standing, one bent over in the act of tying or untying his shoelace.

Ah, they had just returned from church. He'd heard of the ancient practice where people of various faiths would assemble for weekly absolution. How quaint, he thought. So unlike his own era where both salvation and eternal life were only an upload away. Immortality had become such a routine affair that few nowadays (in the forty-second century, that is) worried about it anymore. The standard seven score and ten being enough for most, before having to consider all the soul-sampling and download construct options.

As he cruised the room, he wondered what these ancients were thinking. Or had been thinking before inertia raised its technological head. Did these god-fearing people have any idea what evil lay ahead in the next millennium? Or that it was about to be visited upon them any minute? Of course not. Theirs, despite the low life expectancy and the lack of technology (or maybe because of it), was an age of innocence.

He sailed closer to a lady he thought to be Abigail's mother, a prim-looking, stately woman in the process of instructing one of her servants, making sure her guests were being attended to properly. Or so he imagined. Did she know where Abigail was? Did she even care? But that was probably being unfair, he decided. It was a big manor estate on a quiet Sunday afternoon, and none of them could be blamed for not being prepared for the horror about to occur. And then he heard the first of Abigail's cries, and that familiar feeling of dread and complete helplessness gutted him, once again, like a dirk.

#

It was around dusk when the drovers finally arrived in Wichita. For Jess, it hadn't been a pleasant ride. Usually the last few miles of a drive were filled with such anticipation of the creature comforts to come, that a heady exhilaration filled him. But all along the trail, those last dusty eight miles or so, the late-

October wind nagging at him, he couldn't get the image of the little girl they'd buried that morning out of his mind.

It was full dark when all the cattle had been corralled at the stockyard, and Jess headed into Wichita proper. Accounts had yet to be settled, but Ray Palmer had given each drover a couple of dollars and advised them not to spend it all in one place. Jess respectfully declined the advance, saying he'd collect his full pay tomorrow when everyone was paid out. He had enough on him for a room and a bath and a meal and a drink. Probably even enough for a little female companionship, if he decided to go that route.

So after a hot bath and a shave, he found himself at one of the three local saloons. Not the riches, and not the rowdiest, but hopefully the quietest. Now, all he wanted was a hot meal at another's hand besides Muskrat's, and a shot of whisky. Then it would be off to that comfortable bed they'd raised a half-bit since his last time here.

As he was enjoying his meal--chicken and fresh green vegetables, for a welcome change--he reflected on how quiet the town was for once. Well, it was late in the season, with winter hard on autumn's heels. If this were the end of August or early September, the saloon would be chockablock with woolly drovers and other drifters, drinking, carousing, fist fighting, maybe even shooting the place up. (Unlike other frontier towns--Abilene, Dodge City, Forth Worth, to name three--Wichita had yet to adopt a no-firearms ordinance, though it was just a matter of time.) But tonight was relatively calm, only a dozen or so cowpunchers in the place, and half of those from Jess's outfit.

He was just about through with his meal and ready to order that whiskey when one of the local prostitutes approached him. Actually she did more than just approach, she pulled out the chair next to his and made herself at home. Jess couldn't really blame her; she had to make a living and it was a slow evening. And with his bath and fresh face in town, she had every reason to

assume he was just off a cattle drive, with more than a few coins jangling in his pocket.

"Hey, cowboy," she said. "How're ya doin'?" And smiled.

"Fine, ma'am," he said, tipping his hat. Regardless of her profession, she was, after a fashion, a lady.

Playfully she elbowed him, then cast wistful eyes upon him. "Well, that's the first time anyone's called me that in a while," she said. "I like that. A man who knows how to treat a lady. Somehow, you're different, cowboy. Unlike most of these saddle tramps."

He smiled, half-chuckling at that. "Thanks," he said, "but I'm afraid that's 'bout all you're gonna get out of me this evenin', maa--"

"Brandy. Everyone calls me Brandy. But you can call me whatever you like." She winked, then coquettishly began toying with his collar, while stroking his neck with an index finger.

He removed her hand and held it. "Listen, Brandy, nothin' personal, but I just got in and all I wanna do is have a drink or two before callin' it a night. You know, sleepin' in a real bed for a change. Maybe some other time."

She made a moue, fluttering her long, perhaps too heavily mascaraed lashes. Yes, she was attractive, and not just because of her overly made-up face or the fact that he hadn't even seen a woman in over six weeks, let alone had the company of one. But...

"So what's your name, cowboy?"

"Jess, ma'am. Jess Turner." He could at least be polite, he figured.

"Well, Jess Turner, wouldn't you like a little company to keep you warm in that bed of yours tonight? I hear we might be gettin' a

cold snap." She then reached down and put her hand on his leg, the inner part of his thigh where her delicate fingers could easily rub up against his crotch. Suddenly he felt different. And it wasn't the yearnings of a man who had been away from the society of women for as long as he had. He began to tremble, his face becoming flush. Despite the comfort of the room--it was almost on the cool side--a bead of perspiration trickled down his temple. Then both temples.

A vision captured him. Three strange men standing over him, one of whose head was aglow with blue light. Another was wearing a silver suit, while the third, the hulking mass of a man in the middle, was dragging something . . . oh my, it was the little girl they had buried! Who were these men? He could only grasp a small portion of their strange conversation, but that was enough to know that no good would come from them. And then he was kicked to the ground where the blue-headed man held him down while the silver-suited one mounted him from behind.

Hyperventilating, pulling himself back to reality, Jess looked down at his trembling hands.

"Hey, cowboy," the prostitute asked, "you all right?"

But Jess made no reply as he stood and left the saloon through the back way. Something terrible was going to happen, and it would all be his fault. Something too hideous and pervasive to even be described.

#

Avery had jogged back in time so many times now, he had lost count. He'd tried the day-before approach, trying to warn Abigail (funny how it was the only time his stealthing had disengaged), tried to warn Frunk, then the parental-intervention approach, and of course all his multiple crosswise-sideways-attacking-Frunk approaches, but nothing, nothing seemed to work.

And now there were so many translations of himself in the manor house's back lot that he wondered if the continuum could handle anymore. True, they were invisible to all those concerned, including himself and all his plethora of selves, but it was all getting to be a bit overmuch. How many more could the world hold? Was he in danger of triggering a catastrophic temporal event that would result in an exponential replication of himself? Like a growing swarm of gnats buzzing between the barn and the grain field, was he, Avery Odams, the tonsured time-traveler upon his Carousel pony, about to spread himself beyond Bath, even beyond England, covering the entire planet, multiplying himself into infinity? Maybe he should stop now.

Still, a couple of things about it all bothered him. For one, why had he been able to drop out of stealth mode and talk to Abigail? Not that it had done any good, and now he wished he never had. After learning her name, hearing her giggle and watching her scamper away, she'd become a real person to him. Not just a nameless victim of some near-forgotten age he was trying to save. It made the pain of watching her death--her deaths!--all the more agonizing. And if he had been a substantial, perceptible being the day before her murder, then why had he been so ineffectual when he was needed most? It was as though someone had arranged it so he could only beat his head against the wall in one vain attempt after another. To forever ride this temporal carousel of futility, round and round, round and round. But who? And why?

And then he knew. The memory of Abigail's giggling sparked further recollection. Mr. Mixturo! Yes, it was time to finish his task and confront the miserable little time-tech.

#

How he had come to this end so quickly, Jess didn't know. But here he was, kneeling on the ground in back of the saloon with his six-shooter in his mouth, his own finger on the trigger. Something had happened to him last night--of that he was

certain. Jess Turner had never been an overly religious man, but he knew that the agencies of good and evil were struggling for dominion over him, and now, unfortunately, it was more than he could bear. He had always been the type to endure just about anything hurled his direction, but this was much more than just remaining in the saddle day after day, toughing out the blistering hot days and freezing nights, working with rope and cattle until his hands sometimes bled. Something insidious had been planted inside of him by Satan's minions; he remembered them clearly now, especially the one with the blue glowing head. Although he couldn't say how, he now knew himself to be Satan's instrument of destruction, and the only right thing for him to do was to take his own life before bringing ruin upon the world. He knew it intrinsically. Of this he was certain.

And then, looking up through tear-blurred eyes, he saw a figure hovering above him. An angel? Funniest angel he had ever seen, not that he'd ever seen one before. Though the fellow was dressed in a long, silvery robe befitting an entity of seraphic origins, he looked awfully ridiculous on his wooden horse painted in all those wild colors.

The angel was staring down at him with a discerning look on his face. And when he spoke, the words coming from somewhere out of his horse didn't match the movement of his lips. "I assume that you are Jess Turner . . ." was his crisp surmise.

Jess had to remove the gun from his mouth to reply.

#

Having parked his brand-new skyflyer on the cloud, Avery stepped aboard the moving Carousel and went to the bar. Bomagic, who was giving his bartender some much-needed instruction, turned off the translator and looked up. "Avery, you're back!"

"Did you ever doubt it?" he asked.

"Well, no, but it has been a few days. We were wondering what happened to you." Bomagic spread his hands expansively, then let them fall to his side and shrugged. "Sorry, but I'm the only one here. We were planning a celebration . . ." It was early in the day--not even noon yet--and the stratocumulus skyferry was currently over the North Atlantic. "But not to worry. Opal and the others will be along shortly."

Avery nodded curtly. "Actually, Bomagic, I came to talk to you. I need a favor."

"A favor? Anything. Just name it."

"Well, how would you feel about me stealing your bartender away from you?"

"Ambrose Bierce?" Bomagic knitted his brow. "What would you want with him? He can barely tend bar."

"A lot's happened since I've seen you last," Avery told him. "And I'm afraid you won't be seeing me around as much anymore."

"Oh . . . ?" More curiosity than concern.

"I'm going into business with the lawman. We're forming what they call a historical rectification squad. A time-team."

"You, Avery? I never would have believed it." Bomagic's eyes sparkled with amazement. Actually, Avery could hardly believe it himself. "And that's why you need Bierce?"

Avery nodded. "Yes. His being a writer and from the past will make him invaluable. You know, someone along who knows the lingo. Translation sequencers are fine, but-- Listen, I'm willing to pay."

Bomagic gave a dismissive wave. "Oh, you can have him. I was going to have to let him go anyway. Still doesn't know a Phanston fizz from a pink omega-ade. The only problem is, who can I get to replace him?"

"How about An Original," Avery suggested. "I know his people skills aren't all that spectacular, but if you upped his rez, he should be more than substantial to serve a few cocktails."

Bomagic struggled with the idea before admitting it had merit. Then he smiled. "Yes, Avery, that's a pretty good idea. It'll certainly keep him out of everybody's hair." His grin broadened. "And if he refuses to go along, then I'll just kick him off the Carousel permanently. Him and all his damned variations. Ah, yes."

So far Ambrose Bierce had been ignoring them, absorbed in washing last night's tumblers. But when Avery spoke to him in his own tongue--one he'd had himself mnemonically inculcated with during last night's sleep, though he'd already picked up some of it from his recent trip--he had the writer's undivided attention. It didn't take much to convince him to join the team. Frankly, Bierce told him, he considered serving cocktails to these modern-day riffraff beneath him. Good thing Bomagic's translator was off. The Carousel's owner did ask about his missing stallion, however, when Avery was finished.

"It should be along shortly," Avery replied, glancing toward the empty pole at the edge of the Carousel, the other painted stallions bobbing faithfully nearby. And true to his word, within a moment a small section of the floor irised open and the purple-maned stallion rose to the empty pole and its rider hopped off.

"And, might I ask, who's this pretty little girl?" Bomagic said as she approached.

"Abigail, meet Bomagic."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Magic," she said through the translator on her collar. She was wearing a spotless pink dress with a cream-colored pinafore.

"No 'misters' around here, sweetie," the owner said. "It's just Bomagic."

Avery had been all set to give Mr. Mixturo a good piece of his mind, but when he arrived back at the Bureau and found Abigail standing alongside the time-tech, it took all the fire from his fury. "But how?" Avery had asked. Finally, he had to stop the time-tech when he found his explanation so convoluted that it gave him a headache. Yes, Abigail had died in the past--many times thanks to Avery's multiple rescue attempts--and yes, this surviving version of her stood before them now. It all boiled down to efficient time management. And now that she was alive and part of the future, it didn't take much for Mr. Mixturo to convince Avery to become one of them. Frankly, after his big temporal adventure, the idea of riding the Carousel night after night with Bomagic, Opal, and the rest seemed like an exercise in tedium.

"Thanks for letting me ride your pony, Mr. Bomagic," Abigail said. Looking up, the huge ear-to-ear scar on her neck was plainly visible.

"Just Bomagic," he reiterated. "And you're welcome." And though the cloud's owner tried to hide it, Avery could see that her scar had disturbed him. For after Avery told Abigail to escort Bierce to the skyflyer and they were out of earshot, Bomagic said, "Avery, she's the little girl that Frunk . . ." He completed the thought with a finger across his throat.

"She's the one." Avery could tell from Bomagic's astute frown that he had the same question Avery had had. Why had they left the wide band of cicatrix where the red smile had been? Something so easy to correct. "A badge of honor," he suggested to the cloud's owner. "Possibly a warning of evil not always averted."

Bomagic nodded thoughtfully.

As Avery made to join his two new friends, Bomagic said, "Hey, what about the lawman? This cowboy fellow you were sent back to retrieve?"

Avery smiled. "I'll bring him in sometime. He's a little busy at the moment."

A moment later, Avery and crew were out over the open Atlantic, heading back to Terre Haute.

#

Crouching in a thicket near the schoolhouse, Frunk looked on in delight. Yes, he was tired--the walk to Wichita had taken him nearly three days because he'd gotten lost--but now he was finally here. Civilization. Fuck Jony-X and Danitron and their stupid mission. It was time to have some fun. To satisfy his inner demons. And he counted twenty-one opportunities to do just that. Ten little boys and eleven little girls. If he spaced them out to two or three a week, then he could make this place last nearly two months before having to move on. Of course after the first two or three, it would become invariability harder to get at the little brats, but that scarcely mattered. That would make it all the more challenging. And besides, he was from the future. What chance did these rustics have against him? He ran his thumb along the blade of his dirk and grinned.

"Hum-humm," came the throat-clearing voice behind him.

"What?" Frunk said, turning. He found himself staring up at a man pointing a pistol in his face. Who did he think he was? And then Frunk recognized him. Difficult at first since he had his pants pulled up and he was towering over Frunk instead of the other way around. The dingleberry cowboy, as Danitron had called him. He looked different, though. The cowboy, though still attired as one, was wearing clean-pressed sparkling duds with a small temporal displacement unit on his gun belt. And his six-shooter had been technologically upgraded, and he now wore a badge.

"Hands behind your head, Frunk," the lawman told him. "You're under arrest."

There was a new sheriff across the timeline.

###



bio: Marshall Payne has led a colorful life. He has worked as a touring musician, music producer, sound technician, a salesman, and a waiter. In 1999 he committed himself to speculative fiction and has never looked back. He has written over sixty short stories and seven novels, the last three he's looking to publish. (The first four were merely for practice.) When not writing, he likes to watch Spurs basketball with his cat C.C. and eat popcorn. His fiction has appeared in print and online in *The Sword Review*, and online on Nanobison. He is also a regular reviewer for *Tangent Short Fiction Review*.

author's note: *This was a rather difficult piece to write, but I had some help from a few online angels. Special thanks to Aliette, Calie, Keir, and Linda. Also to Doug Helbling at Nanobison for believing in this wicked little piece.*



## Pax Pacis Returns

- by Robert Krahf

I have landed, for the second time, on this place called Earth. Where I originate, we call Earth by its Latin name, Terra. It has been over 2,000 years since I last visited. Before I tell you why I returned, I should tell you about myself and where I am from.

Pax Pacis is my name, but it also defines my mission. When last I visited, Latin was one of the dominant languages spoken. It is from Latin that my Earth name was taken. In Latin, Pax Pacis means peace. On my previous journey, my observations were that peace was the goal of many. I believed that until something terrible happened that convinced me to leave. The planet I reside on is known on Earth as Saturn. I brought my planet's flag with me, which you see in the picture.

Temperatures on our planet are colder than anyone here can survive in. Saturn's temperatures drop to -290 Fahrenheit. Our winds can achieve a top speed of 1,100 M.P.H. My people are forced to live underground, but we live in peace. From the time I was created, I have searched for a milder climate where my people can live. My mission and my life will not be finished until

then. We have the ability to sustain life as long as needed, so my journey continues.

When last I visited Terra (Earth), I believed this to be the place to settle. I will now tell you the story I mentioned earlier where I witnessed something terrible that caused me to change my mind. First, you should know that I have the ability to adapt my appearance and language skills to that of the planet I visit. Upon arriving on Earth, I altered my appearance to equal the customs of the day. From there, my travels on Terra began. I traveled many months, walking and conversing with many people. Most of the people I met wanted for nothing but a day's wage to feed their families.

One warm afternoon, I was traveling in a land called Decapolis when I came upon the Jordan River. There was a man there who looked like no other I had seen. His clothes were made of camel's hair. He had a leather belt around his waist. When I came upon him, he was eating locusts and wild honey.

I asked him "Sir, why are you dressed like this and why do you eat locusts? Do you have a mission, as I do?"

When he turned and looked at me, he stared with fierce eyes for a moment. Then he spoke with determination these words; "I am but a voice of one calling in the desert. I prepare the ways and make straight paths."

I had no idea of what he spoke, so decided to stay and observe. Presently another man came. He had a large crowd with him. At this time, the wildly dressed man was in the river with other people. He was taking them lightly by the head and immersing them into the water.

The man in the river stopped what he was doing and gazed upon the man who had brought crowds. He spoke "I need what only you can give, yet you come to me?"

The second man spoke "Let it be so, for it is proper." The first man then did the same to the second as he had the others, submerging him into the deep water. At that moment, the skies opened and I heard a voice from the sky speak fondly of what had just occurred.

This man seemed like the peacemaker and leader of others I had hoped to find in my journey. I learned his name was Jesus and I wanted to speak with him, but he soon left with the multitudes of people following. He seemed to almost disappear into the crowd. I looked for him for over a month, but no one seems to know what happened to him. Finally, after over 40 days of not being able to find this man, I overheard he was seen in a town called Galilee. I transported myself to that location and found him by a lake resting. Upon rising the next day, I saw him walk up to some fishermen, who would seemingly drop everything they were doing and begin walking with him. I saw him healing the sick, and observed him speaking beautiful, peaceful words. My favorite time I saw him speaking was on the side of a mountain.

The words he spoke were these: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

Finally, I thought, here was a place that I could bring my people to live. I was anxious to return and tell them all about this man. But I couldn't leave just yet, because he spoke in such a way that I was mesmerized. So I stayed a little longer. At that time, I had no way of knowing the horror I was soon to witness.

This man Jesus continued on his with his travels, speaking to crowds along the way. He spoke of love for enemies, giving to the needy, not judging others, prayer, and of fasting and of treasures that were stored in a place called Heaven. As he traveled, I noticed a group of older, well-dressed men in fine robes who were beginning to follow him. They stood out from the others following Jesus because of the way they dressed. I fell back to stand near them and listed to what they spoke of. Surprisingly, they were not happy with Jesus. They were

grumbling about Jesus and saying things that were not true. I just thought they were saying these things because they didn't understand or couldn't hear very well from the back of the crowd.

Jesus told many stories as he continued to travel. All of them had a point to them. The point he made seemed to be a guide for peace and love for others. People seemed to worship this man and many fell at his feet in honor. I was now further convinced that Terra was a place to bring my people. I had seen enough. As I readied myself to return to Saturn, it was night time. I was still following this man and was camped a few hundred feet away, near a place called Jerusalem. The peace of the night was suddenly broken by a large uproar. Many soldiers hurried into where Jesus was and a fight broke out. Jesus seemed calm in all this, and quieted the unruly crowd. The soldiers took him away, to where I didn't know.

I didn't see him again until the next morning. When I saw him, I was horribly shocked. This peaceful man had been tortured. Jesus had been beaten to the point that he was almost unrecognizable. He was carrying a large lumber object that was in the shape of a "t" up a mountain. What happened there after that was too horrible to put into words. This man Jesus died that day and I did not understand why he would not stop it. I saw him perform many miracles and surely he could have saved himself. For whatever reason, Jesus chose not to.

I left Terra that day and wanted never to return. Your Earth was surely not a land of peace and my people would not want to live here.

My travels after that were seemingly endless. From planet to planet I went. I saw many solar systems, also. Wondrous sights that one day you here on Terra will know I saw. Yet I still found no place for my people. As I was journeying near Mars, I decided to rest and landed on the planet. I knew there was no life here, but I was weary and also needed to perform some small repairs on my space voyager. As I got out of my vessel, I heard a

peculiar sound unlike one that I had ever heard in my previous journey to Mars. I turned and saw a moving vehicle. It had 6 wheels, an engine, something that looked like radar equipment, a camera and a large wing. It was traveling in a canyon below me. Because it had a camera on it, I cloaked myself to avoid detection and hurried down to see it. There was no sign of life in or around this vehicle. It had a name on it which was "Spirit." It came from this place called NASA, United States. Going back to my space voyager, I entered that information into my database and found that this "Spirit" vehicle had come from Terra. That information stunned me, since I had long ago visited the place and once thought it to be the land my people would live. I had not visited Terra for over 2,000 years.

My thoughts went back to what I discovered on your Earth previously, where I went in my journeys and why I had left. The reason I left caused a sadness to come over me, yet I also found hope. The hope was because these people from Terra were now sending these vehicles to explore other lands. Perhaps they were now more like my people, like me. Perhaps they were also voyagers with a desire to spread peace. If they were in fact exploring for peace, then I quickly decided that I should finish my repairs and return to Terra to see if these people had learned from their past failures. I programmed my on-board research navigator to find a route to travel and also to tell me more about what the area I had left was like now. While this information was compiling, I went back outside my vessel to finish the repairs.

When I came back in, the program was finished. I entered the coordinates and left Mars. As I flew towards Terra, I thought my travels of over 2,000 years could soon be over. My excitement was abundant!

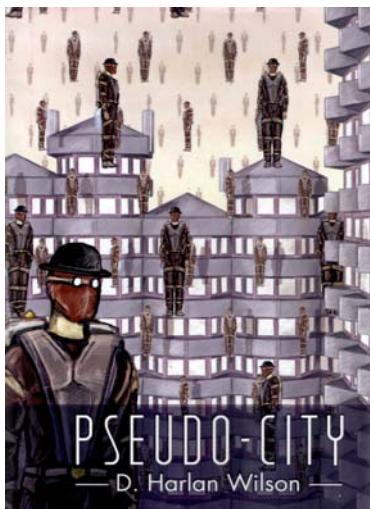
The travel from Mars to Terra soon ended. So now I, Pax Pacis have returned, for the second time to this place called Earth. I couldn't wait to meet the people again and talk with them about their lives. According to my research, the name of this country I left and others surrounding it had changed since I last visited. I

wanted to explore all these lands surrounding, too. So as I left my space vessel, I prepared to meet the citizens of Palestine, Israel, Syria and Iraq feeling hopeful that I would soon find peace.

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**bio:** Robert Krahel lives in the Memphis, TN area. He has a wife and 2 college-age children. Robert has worked in sales management for almost 25 years. He has come to be a fiction writer later in life than most people, but has hopes of pursuing this passion more aggressively in the years to come. Robert's current project is a fictional tale of corporate downsizing and how it affects the families involved. His hobbies include reading, computer gaming, traveling, exercising, watching sports on TV and piddling around in his yard.



Fiction Review: Pseudo-City

Author: D. Harlan Wilson

Publisher: Raw Dog Screaming Press

"Pseudo-City" is a collection of tales set in a follicle-obsessed metropolis that manages to be simultaneously both futuristic and wholly retro.

Many of the scenes and situations in these stories are wildly absurd, as are the behaviors of many of the characters. Yet a certain subtle theme, if you will a "hair" of consistency, winds through all of the tales, tying them together into a bundle of wriggling, sometimes outrageous testimonials of man's attempts to stand out, to conform, or in some cases to simply survive.

Is D. Harlan Wilson the next Camus? Perhaps. He has certainly created an interesting world within the pages of "Pseudo-City".

If you want a pleasant walk down nicely linear story paths, pass on this book. But if you are up for an infusion of mind bending imagery, take a stroll down the twisted and often hairy streets of Pseudo-City. I am glad I did, though I will never look at my comb the same way again.

- Doug Helbling

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***nanobison* Review Rating Guide:**

<b><i>buffalo drop</i></b>	Don't bother. This book is an insult to the pulping of trees.
<b><i>hoof's up</i></b>	Readable diversion.
<b><i>nano nano</i></b>	Somehow fresh, crisp, edgy, or otherwise diverse and thus recommended by one or more of the <b><i>nanostaff</i></b> .
<b><i>golden bison</i></b>	When "WOW" is a word that comes to mind: a remarkable work, inspired and impacting.