

In This Issue

Welcome to the 7th issue of *nanobison*. We migrated to a monthly format back in November with our previous issue. Yet it is now December 31 of 2006 as the next issue is out. Going forward, our focus will be on simply delivering new numbered issues as they are completed.

We have nine stories for you in this, our biggest issue yet. I hope you enjoy these great stories.

	Starting off, we have a story called <i>"To Protect and Sissonne"</i> from Ryan Thomas . This is one for all those who love to hate mimes. And yet it is NOT a mime story. If death can be light-hearted, then this is a light-hearted story.
	Next, from Rafael Chandler we have a dark tale of devotion to duty called <i>"The Disciples"</i> , where on the job training takes on a whole new intensity.
	Following is a rousing road story from Russell Lutz called <i>"Car Service"</i> , where our main character finds out that you really do get what you pay for.
	Then comes Robyn A Hay's <i>"Homecoming"</i> , a touching glimpse into the nature and the depth of true devotion.
	In his story <i>"Air"</i> , Jefferson Ross takes us along for a ride through the angry hallways of teen angst, powered by more than routine energies.
	Next is R. W. Day's <i>"The Price of Electrum"</i> , a jaunting tale of treasure hunting and discovery, where royalty is more than skin deep.



["Clown-Killer's Orders"](#) , our most recent story from returning author **T. Bilgen**, is a quietly disturbing look at social decay, as expressed by a youthful executioner.



Manfred Gabriel's ["Dress Up"](#) is a delicately told story of empty nests and the all too fleeting nature of childhood.



And finally, we have **Lawrence M. Schoen's** ["Texas Fold'em"](#) , a highly imaginative and engaging story about beating the odds ... and getting beat by them.

Next Issue

Story selection is completed for Issue 8, our next issue, which should be out within roughly 30 days. Included are stories from returning *nanobison* contributors Justin Stanchfield and James Targett, plus new stories from John McMullen, Rob Hunter, Thomas Keller, Miranda Warren, and Jay Litwicki. Plus we'll include a review of Eric Shapiro's new book, "Days of Allison".

Later in 2007

In the coming year, we will be working to deliver two new speculative animation films under the *nanobison* banner. Storyboarding for these two pieces is already underway. While *nanobison* does not publish stories by the editor and staff, these movie projects will include work of the editor and staff. More news on these projects as they near completion.

- Doug Helbling, editor



To Protect and Sissonne
- by Ryan Thomas

Chief Logan made his way to the interrogation room and looked through the glass. Inside, officer Johnson, his uniform coated in a mass of blood and gore, danced over to the wall, punched himself in the nose, and spun himself into a leaping split like a world class ballerina.

Officers Burke and Nocks sidled up next to Lawson, waiting for instructions. The rest of the precinct was crowded closely around.

"What the hell was that?" Lawson asked.

Burke pointed at Johnson. "That was a plié, Chief."

"Not the dance. Why's he punching himself in the head?"

"Don't know. The perp was doing the same thing before his head blew up."

"We're sure of that? Johnson didn't shoot him?"

"I checked his weapon when we got him back here. Hasn't been fired."

"How long has he been like this?" Inside the room, Johnson twirled around with his arms splayed out.

"About an hour. Wasn't easy getting him back in the car. Oh, that was a chassé."

Chief Lawson glared at Burke; he was not amused by any of this.

"Sorry," Burke said, "my sister was a dancer, I had to go to all her recitals."

"Tell me about the perp again?"

"Call came in to 911 about 11:30. Guy said he was possessed and couldn't stop dancing. Then he said he'd blow his head off if we didn't bring him an extra large pair of tights."

"This is nuts. If it was somebody's birthday I'd think you were playing a trick on me."

"It's my birthday, chief."

"Shut up, Nocks."

"Shutting up, sir."

Lawson winced as Johnson slammed his fist into his face again before gracefully kicking the air. "Can we get in there and tie his hands down? He's gonna break his own nose."

"No way," Burke replied. "We already tried. It's like he's got super human strength. He grabbed McCallister and fox-trotted him into the filing cabinet. Knocked him clean out."

"I don't think it was a foxtrot," Nocks said, "looked more like a straight waltz to me."

"No, a waltz goes like this."

Lawson spun around. "Enough! What is this the Pansy Precinct? Jesus Christ. This perp, the one's whose head exploded, was he on any drugs or anything? Maybe Johnson got a dose?"

"Nope," Burke said. "We never got that close. The perp was dancing all over like Fred Astaire. Kept yelling for us to help him."

Said his head hurt. Then it just burst. Boom. Brains everywhere. If he'd gotten drugs into Johnson I'd have seen it."

"So then explain ... this ... to me." Lawson turned back and watched Johnson leaping about like a gazelle.

"Don't know. Soon as the guy's head blew off, Johnson says he feels funny. The next thing you know he's moonwalking around. He was fighting it though, so it was a bad moonwalk. Got him in the car, but by the time I got him here he couldn't withstand it anymore. He's been dancing nonstop since."

"Tell him about the Ouija board." Nocks said to Burke.

"What Ouija board?" Lawson asked

Burke nodded. "The perp had a Ouija board out at his house, like he was playing with contacting spirits."

"Bullshit."

"That's what I said, but when I saw—oh, that was a poisson, that's a hard move."

"Burke!"

"Sorry, Chief. The Ouija board. I think the guy was trying to contact a ghost or something. You don't think he's really possessed by a ghost or demon?"

"No such thing as Demons and ghosts, Buffy. This has to be drugs. That would explain the strength. His adrenaline must be through the roof."

"But does adrenaline make your head explode?"

"I've seen drugs do some fucked up shit. Could be."

"I dunno. Some of the things the guy was saying ... every once in a while he changed voices. This was a big slob of a guy and he

knew all about ballet and well, he was pretty graceful, Chief. I don't think a guy that big should have been that graceful. My sister's fat, and she never could do half of what this guy was doing. She's on a diet now though, so I bet if she got back into it--

"The perp, Burke."

"Right. I don't think drugs make you dance like that. I mean, this guy could have been on Dance Fever or something... 'cept for the part where his head exploded."

"So the guy was a good dancer. Doesn't mean anything."

"Well, like I said, he was speaking in two voices. One was a regular guy like you'd expect, and the other was a French accent. I think. And then when Johnson was in the car he started speaking in a French accent, too. Johnson speaks a little Spanish but no French. My sister took French growing up and—"

"Mention your sister again and I'm shooting you in the face."

"Point is, Chief, I think he's really possessed."

"Burke, you'll never make detective if you don't get your head out of your ass." Lawson went over to the door to the interrogation room and grabbed the handle. "Okay, I'm gonna go in and try to subdue him. Nocks, you come with me. Burke, you stay here in case he gets by us. You, over there, go get a doctor."

"But I don't work here," responded the delivery boy from Smitty's Sandwich Shop.

"You're here now so do it before I arrest you."

"You think a doctor can fix this?" Burke asked.

"If he's on drugs I want his system pumped."

Lawson opened the door and stepped into the room. His uniform slick with the perp's brains, Johnson saw the Chief and danced over to him, smiled and kept spinning. "Johnson, stop moving."

Johnson spun away, punched himself in the face again. "Oh God, Chief. I can't! My head hurts so bad! It feels like—" And suddenly Johnson's voice slid into a high pitched nasally accent. "Bon jour, Monsieur. Come to challenge me for a position in the Royal Dance Company? I dare say you are out of your league. Can you do this?" Johnson leapt though the air and made himself straight as an arrow. From outside the room, Lawson heard Burke remark about the quality of the move.

"Johnson, I need you to stop moving. Can you do that?"

Johnson's voice came back as he twirled on one leg. "Chief. I can't control anything. I can't—You're friend is mine, Mr. Gendarme. But no worries, I am almost done with him. So quickly the body tires. And this one has been a fighter."

Seeing this was going nowhere, Lawson signaled for Nocks to move around the back of the dancing officer. Cautiously, Nocks followed the instructions, fear visibly wrinkled into his face.

"Nocks, when I say go, we grab him. Ready...go!"

Together, Lawson and Nocks lunged for Officer Johnson, but the cop gracefully spun and kicked Nocks in the head, sending him to the floor. Without stopping the spin, the officer then grabbed Lawson and pulled him close like a dance partner. Lawson fought to pull free of the grip but the cop was too strong. They danced around the perimeter of the room like two highschoolers at a sock hop.

"You cannot stop the dance, Mr. Gendarme," Johnson said in the French accent again. "It is forever in our lives, like the spinning of the earth itself. But alas, this body is exhausted, and so I bid you a brief adieu." Without warning, Johnson stopped dancing, his eyes slowly focusing on the crowd watching him. Was he back to normal? Lawson wondered.

"Johnson? You okay? You just kicked Nocks in the face. I called for a doctor so just sit down for a second and--"

Johnson threw his arms to his head and screamed. "Oh God, Chief! My head! My—"

There was a loud pop and Lawson froze as Johnson's head exploded all over him.

The other officers rushed in to the room, some with their guns drawn.

Lawson, his face dripping with bits of Johnson's skull, shouted to his men. "Put your guns down, you idiots! I didn't shoot him! Burke, where's the doctor?"

"On his way, Chief."

"Jesus! Someone get a HAZMAT team out to the perp's house! This has got to be a bio-weapon. I want...all units...all units...I feel kind of..."

Burke put a hand on his boss' shoulder, winced when he realized he was touching his former partner's brains. "Chief, are you all right?"

"Get off me. I'm fine. I ... I ... kind of feel like dancing, actually."

"Chief?"

"My head feels woozy. I ... I ..." Lawson could feel the urge to spin welling up inside him, a power that bordered on the insatiable. Oh God, it was killing him, he needed to move, to leap and twirl. In his mind's eye he saw a thin man dressed in a black leotard, waving at him, laughing. The man grew larger and larger. He wanted to shout at the man but found his voice was not his own. He spoke aloud to the room. "I am the greatest dancer to ever grace the stages of Paris. Do not fight me you stinky gendarmes, or I will clout this man's jaw as such."

Lawson punched himself in the nose.

The officers backed off.

With a graceful arch, Lawson said, "And now, we dance." He broke into a sissonne and it felt oh so good.

###



bio: Ryan C Thomas' first novel, "The Summer I Died", was published by Coscom Entertainment in January 06. He has or will have stories appearing in markets such as **Space Squid**, **Morbid Fantastic**, **Twisted Cat Tales**, **Undead 2**, **Wicked Karnival**, and more. He is the executive editor for **Ranch & Coast Magazine** in San Diego. His novella, "Water", was published by Permuted Press in October 2006.



The Disciples
by Rafael Chandler

A dead doll, head lolling on a broken neck. Busted beer bottles, jagged brown glass, sour reek of old alcohol. Crumpled napkins, inkless black pens, gum wrappers. Crammed into paper bags, stuffed into black plastic, hauled out to the street, left for dead.

Troy reached down, grabbed another bag by its neck. He tossed it into the truck. Arc, descent, crash of shattered glass and rattling aluminum cans. Punctured condoms, ruined fabric, pregnancy kits indicating negative.

He shook his head, tried to clear it. Noise, the screams of the despondent, the howls of the mistreated. Troy scratched the grey stubble on his chin. He took off his baseball cap and sighed. Lots of trash today, lots of noise.

The street was empty. There were no cars, no children playing, just silence and shuttered windows. It was nearly eleven. Troy's partner, Jimmy, hopped up on the back of the truck. Troy waved the truck on and he walked behind it, wiping sweat off his brow with the sleeve of his overalls. Horrible heat this summer, and mosquitoes feasted on his wrists and throat.

"So how much longer am I going to be in training?" Jimmy asked. Troy squinted at him and thought about it.

"I think you can maybe start working today," Troy said at last, then leaned over and dragged a black trash bag up off the sidewalk and hurled it into the truck. He waved up at the driver,

who pulled the lever that started the garbage-crushing mechanism.

"So what do I do?" Jimmy asked. He rubbed his face, nervous.

Troy removed his baseball cap and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

"Well, now, you can just watch me work, and pay attention. Later on, today, maybe I'll find something for you to do. Meantime, you just pick up cans and bags, same as usual."

Jimmy nodded. "Okay, man." Troy studied him. He was a white boy, maybe twenty-one years old, and he looked very serious. Dark eyes, a close shave, and he'd shown up for work this morning in a well-ironed shirt. Jimmy was for real. He wanted to clean up this town. Troy was impressed by that. Lot of trash-men, they were just looking for a paycheck. But for Troy, this wasn't just some day job, some way to take care of the bills. This was a calling, a higher calling. It was a labor of love.

It took a certain kind of man to walk after a truck in this heat and pick up garbage. The sun beat down on you pretty hard, particularly between ten and two. The smell was pretty heavy, and a lot of people quit because the smell just made them gag and retch all day, and they couldn't get anything done.

The people didn't help. They never followed the instructions. Lawn clippings go in clear plastic bags. Recyclables go in the blue plastic tubs. Regular trash goes in opaque trash bags. There, simple. But people, even educated and ostensibly smart people, couldn't get it right, and men like Troy had to pick up their slack.

Furthermore, very few people showed them any respect at all. It was as though you weren't really a person, because you wore blue overalls and lugged bags and boxes full of soiled diapers and gravy-stained paper plates. It was like your work made you less of a man, even though it was the type of work that most men

were too weak to handle day after day. Troy was used to this, and used to the way that people didn't make eye contact with him. He was used to waving at motorists who didn't wave back. He was used to saying hello to people working in their yards, and he was used to their pursed lips and nervous appraisals. It didn't bother him. He knew who he was, and he knew that the overalls were just gear, and the job was just a way to get by. Neither one defined him.

The truck slowed down in front of a one-story brick house with a red tricycle in the front yard. Number 216. Troy puzzled over the number for a second, trying to decide why it made the hair on his arms and neck stand up. Then he realized that six times six times six equals 216. He shook his head, laughing, and beckoned to Jimmy. "Now get them bags, and leave the recyclables," he said. Troy felt sheepish, for being so superstitious (even subconsciously). The devil was a joke, an old and forgotten man in a place even hotter than this street. His works were all for naught, and no one cared for him. No, the real troublemakers were alive and well right here on planet earth, Troy thought. Causing trouble, making trash, and sinning like it was going out of style.

He smiled as Jimmy hauled black Hefty bags up and tossed them in the back of the truck. Well, that was okay. The wages of sin were Death, and Troy was comfortable with that equation. One the one side, sin, and on the other, Death. Very simple, like all good things. Like Jimmy. He wasn't an educated boy. Strong, sincere, and ready to do the right thing. He wanted to clean. That still mattered to some people, and that gave Troy hope.

Jimmy followed the truck to the next house, and Troy walked after him. Jimmy started hauling bags, then hesitated as he picked up the last bag. He looked at Troy, and he opened his mouth as if to speak. After a minute, he closed his mouth, and he looked at the bag in his hands.

"Troy," he said. "Troy, I think I have something."

Troy took his hands out of his pockets. Well, it was part of the job. Had to happen, though it pained him every time. No help for it, though. The calling was the calling, and only a fool ignored his calling. He knelt on the ground, folded a blade out of his Swiss army knife, and slit the bag open. He reached in gingerly. Pushed aside wadded-up tissues, cellophane wrappers, crumpled receipts. Lint, cardboard toilet paper tubes, orange rind.

A folded piece of duct tape. A cloth dishrag that smelled of chloroform. Troy picked it up out of the bag, closed his eyes. He saw a young blonde woman, trying to scream with an oily rag stuffed into her mouth. Lacerated skin on her back, bruised wrists, bite marks on her neck.

Troy opened his eyes. Lord Jesus. "Good work, son," he said, rising to his feet. "I guess we have to get the tools out."

Jimmy nodded nervously. He swallowed with some effort. He headed up to the truck, and rapped on the driver's-side door. The driver lowered the window, and Jimmy spoke with him for a minute. Then he walked over to the other side of the truck, opened the passenger door, and took out a battered red tool chest. He lugged it back to Troy.

Troy lit a Winston and looked around. No cars, no people out today. Good.

Jimmy dropped the toolbox on the sidewalk. It clanged, and the tools inside rattled. "You need to watch that," Troy said mildly. "These are expensive tools." Jimmy stammered an apology. Troy studied him for a minute.

"Okay," he said. "Why don't you pick out some tools, and then we'll head in."

Jimmy nodded. His eyes were wide, and he was staring down at the metal toolbox like he'd never seen on before. Eventually, he squatted down, fumbled the clasp open, and began to rummage through the tools. Troy didn't bother. He had his Swiss army

knife, and that had been enough for him for many years now. Better part of a decade, if memory served. Finally, Jimmy made up his mind, and stood up. In his left hand, he clutched a black claw hammer with a wooden handle, and in his right hand, he carried a handful of bungee cords. "Okay?" he asked.

Troy chuckled. "Don't ask me. You'll be the one using them." He appraised Jimmy one last time. "They feel good? The tools, they feel good in your hands?"

Jimmy nodded. "I'm ready," he said.

"Well, okay," Troy said. "Then let's get this done."

He waved up to the driver, who stuck a hand out the window and waved as the truck rolled on. It would circle the block until the clean-up was over.

Troy walked up to the front door. "Maybe you can walk around back, take a look around. Just remember that you have to move quick when the time comes. Alright?"

Jimmy nodded. "Troy, I won't let you down."

Troy nodded. "No, I guess you won't. Just be careful with yourself." Jimmy headed across the driveway, past some azalea bushes, and then he was gone around the corner. Troy looked around one more time, then walked up to the front door. The plan was simple. Ring the doorbell, ask to use the phone, and then take it from there. Most times, it was over in seconds. He sent Jimmy around the back to get him out of the way. Most likely, the boy would creep around back, careful to make no sound. By the time he worked up the nerve to put his hand on the doorknob, Troy would be finished.

Troy headed up the walkway towards the front door. Beneath the bay window at the front of the house, a seething burst of color: azaleas, gardenias, petunias. The garden was well-tended. Troy reached into his pocket and withdrew the Swiss

army knife. He unfolded the longest blade, which was about an inch and a half long. After he palmed it in his left hand, he rapped on the door twice. There was a distant crash, and muffled cries. Two heavy impacts, and a man screaming. Jimmy.

Troy grabbed the doorknob and twisted. Locked. He briefly considered trying to ram the door down with his shoulder, then thought better of it. He jogged around the house, and called Jimmy's name a few times. No answer.

The back door was hanging from its hinges. Troy entered cautiously, knife in hand. The living room was dark and musty, and there were cardboard boxes stacked along one wall. Greasy pizza boxes, old newspapers in piles, hundreds of empty beer cans, and a fat man in a tank top, squealing face down on the ground. Jimmy had the man by the wrists, and was kneeling on the small of his back.

Troy nodded at him and looked around the home. No family photos, no toys. Spartan furnishings: a simple wooden desk with a computer, a brown folding chair, a small television atop a stack of cardboard boxes.

On the floor, the man whimpered and groaned. Jimmy shook him viciously. "Shut up, you lousy bastard," he hissed. He leaned forward, intensifying the pressure on the fat man's back. The sobbing intensified.

Troy moved into the corridor at the end of the room. A closet, thick with boxes, unused sports equipment, and old suitcases. A bathroom, reeking of mildew. Black hairs in the sink, peeling wallpaper, spots on the mirror. In the bedroom, Troy checked the closet and under the bed. No one, nothing. Old books, LPs, threadbare suits, worn shoes, dust and spider webs.

He returned to the living room, where Jimmy had made short work of the man. He'd strapped him to the chair with bungee

cords, sealed his mouth with duct tape, and had propped the broken door closed with boxes.

"Good job, son," Troy said. "I'll take it from here."

He leaned forward and waved the Swiss army knife in front of the man's eyes. "Do I have your attention? Are you going to listen to what I tell you?"

The man nodded violently. Sweat dripped from his brow and slid down his chin. The droplets trickled between the coarse black hairs on his chest, darkening his tank top. Troy could smell the man's sweat, could see the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin.

"Let's say that I am psychic," Troy said. "And that I want to talk to you about something I've seen in a vision. So, I am interested in a woman. She's blonde, young, and tied to a bed. She's being sodomized with something. I'm not sure what. She's got a tattoo on her forearm. It looks like an eight-pointed star. Does this mean something to you?"

The man let out a muffled grunt and shook his head. There were tears in his eyes.

Troy felt his heart sink. The man was lying. He knew about the girl. Damn.

"Well," he said, and he put the tip of the knife to the corner of the man's left eye. "I don't believe you."

The man groaned and yanked his head back. Without being told, Jimmy lunged forward and held the man's head still. Troy nodded at Jimmy. The boy was serious. He meant what he was doing. It made Troy feel better.

"If you lie to me again, I'm going to put out your eye," he said. He looked at the man, for several seconds. He stared into the man's eyes. At first, the eyes refused to hold still. They rolled in their

sockets, wildly, glancing from Troy to Jimmy's hand, to the telephone, to the door, to one of the boxes on the floor.

Troy turned and looked at the box. A cardboard box, labeled "XMAS LIGHTS". He turned back to the man.

"I need to ask you a question or two," he said. He tugged a corner of duct tape away from the man's skin. "If you scream, or if you lie, I'll kill you."

He yanked the strip of tape away, and the man yelped. He tried to put a hand to his mouth, but his hands were tied to the arms of the chair. He looked up at Troy, and as he spoke, tears spilled down his flabby red cheeks. "Please, mister, don't kill me, you can have my money--"

Troy slapped him once, hard. "Shut your mouth. You don't talk to me about money. Tell me about the girl. Now."

"I don't know--"

Troy slapped him again, then backhanded him for good measure. "You do know. I can see it in your eyes. Don't you lie to me, damn you. Tell me about her."

"I don't--I mean, what you think I did, I didn't do it," the man gasped. He gulped a lungful of air, and suddenly the room seemed very silent. For a few seconds, there was only the sound of the man's ragged breathing as he collected his thoughts.

"I, she, she's just in a movie. I never met her, I swear to Jesus--"

When Troy slapped the man a third time, he began to sob hoarsely. Troy watched impassively. Jimmy loosened his grip on the man's head.

"Please, mister, I never touched--"

Troy made as if to slap the man again, and he cringed. Troy pointed a finger at him. "You know what you did, and you need to tell me about it."

The man wept silently, then raised his head. "I like to watch girls in bondage, that's all. It's fake, it's not real. It's just acting, all fake. I never hurt anyone, and I'd never--I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt, that's all, I swear to Jesus--"

"You need to stop using His name in vain," Troy said mildly. The man winced as if struck.

"You gotta believe me," the man said between sobs. "I don't know what you think you saw, but that girl, she's not real, and I never even met her or put a hand on her. It's just a video I watch, you gotta believe me."

After some time, Troy nodded. "I believe you," he said.

He drove the blade of the knife into the man's chest, just below his left nipple. The man jerked silently for a few seconds, face frozen in a grimace of agony, then coughed a great quantity of blood onto Troy's wrist. He gasped in a great shuddering breath, then screamed thinly until Jimmy got his hand over the man's mouth.

"This neighborhood is clean," Troy said, and twisted the knife. It was short, and wouldn't hit any vital organs, but the man needed to suffer a little before the killing blow. "We can't have a pervert in our midst," he said. "You watch your dirty little videos, revel in the cruelty, and then you satisfy yourself. But one day, you get tired of watching, and you get tired of sniffing cloth dipped in chloroform, and you get tired of tearing off and fondling lengths of duct tape. One day, maybe, you snatch a girl on her way home from school."

He punctuated his diatribe with short sharp jabs from the knife. The fat man got one arm free from the bungee cords, and flailed around, trying to grab Troy's wrist. Finally, Troy tired of it, and

he reached down and picked up the claw hammer. He stepped away from the chair, and gestured at Jimmy. Jimmy leaned over and accepted the hammer from Troy.

"Go on," Troy said. Jimmy nodded.

The man howled as he got the cords off his other hand, and then his feet. Spitting up blood, he slid out of the chair and flopped on the floor. Jimmy leaned down and swung the hammer, but the man wriggled aside, and the hammer bounced off the carpeted floor. Jimmy hurled himself atop the man and clutched his chin in one hand, then brought the claw end down on the man's temple with the other hand. The sound was wet and brittle, and after that, the room fell into silence again. There was a trickling sound as the fat man's bowels emptied themselves, and a final exhalation as Jimmy got up off of him.

Jimmy turned to Troy. "Yeah?"

Troy smiled at him and nodded. He bent down and opened the flaps of the cardboard box that the man had stared at. Inside, all manner of pornography. Bondage, fellatio, lesbian encounters, foot fetishism, and every permutation of carnal knowledge that one might imagine.

It was all consensual, and all perfectly legal, but that meant nothing to Troy's employers. Cleanliness was divinity, and this man's filth was an infernal condition. Troy and Jimmy had saved the man, saved him from a live of iniquity and trash.

He dug around in the box, and found the VHS cassette that he'd seen in his vision. The young blonde on the cover grimaced in pain, or perhaps ecstasy. It was hard to say. It didn't really matter.

Jimmy's lip curled in revulsion as he studied the box. He looked up at Troy. "What do we do with this? Burn it?"

Troy laughed. "Good lord, no. Just bag it up, son. It's trash, and we dispose of trash."

Jimmy nodded. It made sense. He nudged the body. "And him? We bag him up?"

"Well," Troy said, wiping his bloody hands on his overalls. "He's actually recyclable, so you'll want to separate him from the other garbage."

Jimmy laughed. "Can't let good meat go to waste, can we?"

Troy smiled at him. "That's right, son. That's right."

###



bio: Rafael Chandler is a freelance video game writer. He's contributed to over 20 games, including *BattleTech 3025*, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, and *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*. His horror fiction and poetry have appeared in magazines like **Lullaby Hearse** and **Night to Dawn**. Visit him at www.rafaelchandler.com.



Car Service
by Russel Lutz

Waxing gibbous.

I love that term. North Dakota State University (Fargo) let me breeze through an Astronomy course for my one science requirement, and that is the only thing that took. *Waxing gibbous*. At first, it just sounded dirty to me. "I'm waxing gibbous in here! Give me a minute!" Dirty and silly both. Even better.

Then I learned what it actually means. It's the phase where the moon is almost full and getting fuller. It's that time when the nights are bright and will remain bright for days to come. In my line of work, waxing gibbous is a good thing. It means I'll be doing well. The night is my friend.

That's the phase the moon was in as I stepped out of the little America West puddle jumper that flew me from Vegas to Reno. It was one of those planes that isn't big enough to attach to an umbilical from the terminal. I had to walk down a narrow flight of jittery steps to the asphalt of the airport and walk into the building through what looked suspiciously like a fire exit.

In case you've never been there, Reno isn't that much of a place. It's got a sort of cowboy charm, I suppose, but it's nothing to write home about, particularly compared to Vegas. I slung my

carry-on over my shoulder and made my way through the sleepy airport as fast as I could to meet my driver.

You might think it's pretentious to have a *driver*. In my line of work, though, with the strange hours and the unfamiliar locations, it's a blessing. A *blessing* I say! I hadn't ever been to Reno before, and this guy was supposed to be the best. I like having the best.

Believe it or not, I'm a professional gambler. That finance degree from USD wouldn't have paid for itself in ten years if I had become an accountant. No, I needed to take a bolder path. I've got a head for figures. I can read people. I can control my emotions. Those three things add up to "professional gambler."

A lot of people think that I must be some kind of con artist. If that were true, I'd be making a lot more money than I am. If I clear \$60,000 a year, I'm doing really well. I even pay my taxes. Well, I pay *most* of my taxes. But I don't cheat, not in the game. Really, I don't.

There are some casinos that would disagree. They actually call counting cards at Blackjack cheating. I don't understand that at all. It's not like I bring a PDA to the table and keep track of the cards in a little program that spits out the optimal plays for me. I just remember what I see on the table. What they call "cheating" I call "not playing stupid."

Some people think that walking into a poker game and playing dumb for an hour and then playing smart for an hour is cheating - that it's a con. I'm not marking the cards or working with a partner or reading the numbers off the other players' glasses or anything. I'm actually giving the other guy a chance to *win* money before I take it all back. If *he* was smart, he'd quit while he was ahead. What they call "cheating" I call "playing poker."

What with all the terrorist stuff going on now, in airports no one can meet you at the gate anymore. I had to go out to the street to find my driver. A tall man stood by the curb, thick bodied but

not fat, with an intense crew-cut and a frowning face plastered on a square of a head. He had on a dark suit, only a year out of style. He held up a sign that read "Joe K____"

"I'm Joe."

"Handy." He held out a hand in the most disinterested way possible. I shook it heartily. I like people to like me. And not just because it's good for business. Though it is.

"This yours?" I asked, gesturing towards the silver Audi A6. Handy nodded, taking my shoulder bag and dropping it in the trunk. "I figured you for a Beemer or a 'Cedes man." I said it light and airy, waiting for him to shoot back some smart ass comment, let him feel like we're friends.

Handy didn't answer. He got in on the driver's side. He didn't even offer to open the door for me. He was starting to annoy me. I climbed into the rear.

"So, what do I get for \$500 a day?" I asked. I was being a little childish, but this guy wasn't really making my day, and it had been a *long* day.

"I drive you."

"That's it?"

He didn't turn to look at me. He didn't even try to make eye contact through his rear view mirror.

"If you would rather not retain my services, please feel free to get your bag." He punched a button and the trunk lid bounced up.

"No. That's fine."

"Would you mind closing the trunk?" He asked it so simply that I was halfway out the door before I realized what I was doing. I closed the trunk with a loud slam and got back into the Audi.

"You don't have to slam the trunk."

"Whatever," I said.

I slid down in my seat, enjoying the feel of the leather, if not the silvery color. I figured I'd get a little shut-eye while we drove to the hotel.

"Here are the rules," he said.

"Rules?"

"I'll drive you whenever you want, wherever you want. If we leave the United States, my rates will double for the days we're away. Please take note of the dial."

In between the front seats was a little pedestal. Mounted on it was a two-inch wide metal dial. The numbers from 1 to 10 were etched onto it. The numbers 1 through 3 were painted red, 4 through 7 were in yellow, 8 through 10 were green.

"Okay. What's that for? Some kind of meter?"

"Whenever I am driving, you will determine my style on this scale. Do you watch movies?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

"1 is *Driving Miss Daisy*. 9 is *Ronin*."

"Huh. Cute. What's 10 then?"

"10 is higher than 9. In addition, notice the color coding. If I am in a red part of the scale, I will drive in a style that guarantees no interference from police. In the yellow, I do not guarantee we will not be stopped though I will attempt, if possible, to minimize that risk. If indicated by a patrol car that we stop, I will stop. You will reimburse me for any traffic tickets at a rate of 150% of the fine. In the green--"

"What? 150%. You're trying to con *me*?"

"No. That is the rate. If you don't want to pay for any tickets, keep the dial in the red."

"Fine. What about the green?"

"In the green, I will attempt to evade capture by the police. I am generally effective at that, but if we are stopped, the fine will likely be higher."

"Yeah, you expect me to believe all this? You're not even driving an A8."

"This is an RS6, with a 4.2 liter, 450 horsepower engine. I know what it can do."

"Okay, fine." I turned the dial up to 3. "Go nuts. Take me to Harrah's."

Handy pulled away from the curb and made his way out of the airport.

It was about 1:30 in the morning. I don't usually take flights this late, but things in Vegas were getting a little... tense, let's say. There are a lot of casinos in Vegas. And even though their security is top notch, it's not like you can't do a few different things in different places and not really tip your hand as a serious player.

Unfortunately I got a little greedy, and I got noticed, and the manager of the Mirage had a little talk with me in his office... with a handful of goons backing him up. He made it very clear that I needed to make myself scarce, not just in his casino, but in Vegas in general.

I plan on keeping an eye on the trades to find out when he moves on. Then it'll be okay for me to come back.

Since I wasn't welcome in Sin City for the time being, my plan for the next few weeks was to make a run through the Pacific Northwest. I'd start in Eugene and make my way up I-5 through Portland and Seattle, up to Vancouver. There are dozens of little casinos in that corridor. I wouldn't be making great money, but it'd pay the bills. And Vancouver is a nice enough town to take a few days off. Maybe I could brush up on my French there, too. Someday I'd like to go to Monte Carlo, but without the language skills, no thanks.

Reno was really just a way station, someplace I could get to quickly from Vegas. Someplace I could do a little business, too.

I noticed there was music playing as I dozed off. I couldn't tell who it was, because it was one of those New Age guys, like Vangelis or Tangerine Whoever. Some time must have passed because the car stopping woke me up. Handy popped the trunk and got my bag for me. He gave me his cell number and told me to call when I wanted my next ride. I mumbled something at him and went into the hotel. In a fog I booked my room, went up and crashed on the bed.

#

The Harrah's in Reno is a pretty nifty casino. I don't generally spring for the suites, but this time I was feeling low and I wanted a little pick-me-up. The bedroom was what you'd expect from any Holiday Inn in a major city. Presentable, but boring. The sitting room was a little nicer. I could get five guys around the table comfortably if I wanted to host a game. I don't like to host games myself, but I'll do it in a pinch.

I washed with the little bottle of shampoo and the too-small bar of "deodorant soap" and dried with the scratchy towels. The suite had a balcony, so I went to the curtains and pulled them back...

The sun was in the wrong place. It was much too low in the sky. I knew I had slept longer than, what, only six hours? My Movado was on the bedside table in the other room. It was seven.

I realized it was seven *p.m.* I was late. I threw on some clothes, grabbed my key card and my money clip, and ran to the elevator.

While I descended with a couple who looked about a million years old, I fumbled through my card holder for Handy's number. I hoped he wasn't yacking with friends in a bar someplace. I needed to get going.

His phone rang only once.

"Handy."

"We've got to get going."

"When?"

"A-sap."

He hung up on me. I almost called him back, but I figured if he's the best, it must be for a reason. If he could have the car around front in fifteen minutes, I could still make my appointment. Of course, the last thing I want when I've got a big game lined up is to show up late and out of breath. Bad mojo.

I checked my hair in the dull-gold reflection of the elevator doors, gave the little old couple a winning smile, then zipped out onto the casino floor.

If there's one thing I know how to do, it's navigate a casino. The seemingly haphazard layout that dazes and befuddles your average visitor is all too clear to me. Taller slot machines ring the main floor areas, subtly shepherding people toward the lower, more pleasing spaces of the table games, where the real money gets lost. Walls are gently curved to send people in circles. Here's a tip if you ever want to *leave* a casino: watch

which direction most of the people are walking, and go the other way. You'll be at an exit in no time.

It couldn't have taken me five minutes to get to the front driveway. I stood there for half a minute before I heard a honk. Handy's silver Audi wasn't pulling up. It was parked by the curb and ready to go. I hopped in the back seat.

"Peppermill." I turned the little dial up to 5. I wanted to see what "yellow" driving looked like. As Handy pulled the car into traffic on Virginia Street, it felt about like I normally drive. Aggressive, but not ridiculous, you know? The music was different, too. One of those 70's singers who's a little bit country and a little bit rock and roll. I can never remember if the guy's name is Pete Seeger or Bob Seger. The one from the pick-up truck commercial. That guy.

"You sleep in here?" I asked. Handy spared me a brief glance in the rear-view, then returned to his driving.

The Peppermill is a run of the mill - no pun intended - casino on the south side of downtown Reno. Normally a place like that isn't worth rushing to get to, but I had a reason.

When I first started gambling for a living, I tried not to spread myself too thin. Whenever I got into a game, I went. If I had a conflict, I begged off. This was a big mistake. The thing is, these games, particularly the informal private ones, get cancelled all the time. If I scheduled six hours of poker for one night and I got half that to actually happen, I considered myself lucky.

I was starving.

Then I realized, the trick is, like the airlines, to *overbook*. One game falls apart? No problem. I've got a back up. I'm covered with a fuzzy, warm blanket of fiscal security... if I win. Which I do.

So, while I was in Vegas this last time, I was making connections - as always - and this rich kid named Trent invited me down to Reno where he was *persona grata* at the Peppermill VIP Lounge because his dad owned five percent of the place. The "VIP Lounge" in *any* casino is where the rubber meets the road. I could - if I didn't get too greedy again and get myself thrown out of *another* city - make a killing. But when you're the "+1" on a guest list, you've got to walk in with the one who brung ya. And that was Trent. And he was going to be there at 7:30. And I didn't want to be late.

Handy pulled up in front of the Peppermill at 7:13. I started to think maybe this guy *was* the best after all.

Trent was easy to spot: one of those young punks with too much cash who thinks looking like you're from Italy equals looking good. He was sipping a cosmopolitan by the Lounge entrance chatting up a girl in a short top and a long skirt. I couldn't tell which of them was wearing more silk, but I suspected Trent had the bimbo beat. Someone with less experience with this kind of scene might think the girl was a pro. She wasn't, at least not really. When a sixty-year-old guy in black slacks and a white shirt strolled by and entered the Lounge, her gaze followed him like a puma stalking a squirrel. She was in the game for the big prize: a husband who was old and rich. She was slumming with Trent, probably trying to make herself look good.

"Hey."

Trent turned to me and smiled his big, dumb smile. He actually flipped his hair at me. As a professed heterosexual, he was not making the grade.

"Dude, you made it. Let's go in." He said goodbye to the girl and we made our way past a sizeable bouncer into the inner sanctum.

It's all about red in these private gambling rooms. Red red red. It must work for them, but it seems dumb to me. Red means

danger. Red means stop. Apparently red also means gamble many thousands of dollars.

Trent was the youngest guy in the room, and the only one who bothered trying to look rich. A table to the left was filled with older guys - including the man in the black pants - playing a fast paced game of - get this - Spades. I saw ten thousand dollars change hands after the final trick. People will gamble on anything. I hoped there were some poker players in the back.

Trent paid homage to his old man, a red-haired, sweaty guy who was losing money at the Spades table. Then we moved farther into the back. The path was obvious; move to where the smoke is the thickest.

The table was set for six. Four men were already there, smoking: three with cigarettes, and one with a monster stogie. The guy with the cigar was the leader of this little pack. They might have been brothers, as similar as they all looked. Dark hair and beards, Slavic features, the kind of faces that appear to be transmitting the emotion of anger when completely at rest.

The leader, with the cigar, looked even angrier and hairier than the rest, wearing an open-throated red shirt that in any other room would have been way too loud. His name was Cedric. I guess his parents didn't know he was going to end up needing a better name than that. Cedric introduced his brothers/partners/friends, whatever they were, but I didn't really take note of them. There were going to be at most two winners at this table: me and Cedric. And maybe only one.

We sat and started the game. Cedric wanted to keep it simple. "Five card draw," he growled in a voice that, even though it wasn't really accented, you tended to hear some vaguely Southern European accent in your head. "A man's game."

So I stifled the coughing I so desperately wanted to do - from the melodrama and the smoke equally - and settled into Phase 1: *wherein the tells of the players are made known to Joe at the*

cost of about half his bankroll. I couldn't lay it on too thick, or Cedric would have caught on, I knew. No fool he.

Trent was easy pickings. He seemed as unconcerned with maintaining a poker face as he did with losing his money hand over hand. Cataloguing his tells was an exercise in the obvious. Smile = good hand. Frown = bad hand. Honest to God, when he had a great hand he would giggle. Good job, Trent.

But the others, the hairy Slavs, were another matter entirely. I just couldn't get a read on them. It was a little bit creepy. The three underlings weren't good players. They could bluff better than most professionals I'd played with for sure, but they didn't understand the probabilities of the game. They went for inside straights too often. They avoided possible flushes when they should have broken a low pair. I let them win a few, just for form's sake, but I didn't need tells with these guys. They weren't a concern.

Cedric, on the other hand, was like a lion on the hunt. Cool as a vodka gimlet, he worked the angles like a pro - better than a pro. After he had doubled his money I decided playtime was over, and moved to Phase 2: *wherein Joe develops an amazing "lucky streak" and recovers his losses.*

For an hour almost every hand went to either Cedric or me. I recouped my losses... and Cedric's pile of chips grew larger still. It was grueling playing against him when he was such a mental blank to me. Trent eventually bowed out, claiming he had a "lady friend" waiting. That left just me, Cedric, and the boys.

Time for Phase 3: *wherein Joe schools the table.*

If I thought I could use my poker skills to turn the tide of this game, I was fooling myself. I played my little heart out, but Cedric changed his tactic. He started to *guard* his brothers/partners/friends with tactical bluffing. It was astounding the amount of money he lost just so it wouldn't go to me. I almost called him on it, but after each strategic loss he

would bare his teeth in a hideous grin and I'd think about him as a lion again and think to myself, "next time..."

And then something happened that I don't like to have happen because it really throws off my timing. I actually *did* have an amazing lucky streak.

I drew two threes-of-a-kind in a row.

I pulled to a straight.

A full house, King high.

Another three of a kind. I was on fire. And then, the unthinkable happened: here are the cards I got - Ace of Diamonds, King of Diamonds, Jack of Diamonds, Ten of Diamonds, Ace of Clubs.

Now, in all of the games of poker I have ever played I have never gotten an honest-to-goodness Royal Flush. I've pulled, right out of the deck, a Straight Flush to the Queen once. Once. I've gotten four Aces twice in my life. But never the Granddaddy of them All, the Royal Flush.

With the cards I had, the right play is to hold onto the Aces. They're high enough of a pair that I shouldn't break them... but I really wanted that Flush. And if I could get the Royal Flush...

"One."

"One?" Cedric asked. As luck would have it, he was dealing.

"One." I carefully slid my Ace of Clubs, face down, toward him. He slapped a new card onto the red felt. I put one index finger on the card, and slid it to my side of the table, ever so gently. Then I did something really, *really* dumb.

I took my other four cards and set them down on the table, still face down. I very methodically moved the new card into the middle of the little pile, then I picked them back up again. The

four Slavs were watching me like hyenas peering at a wounded wildebeest.

I don't suppose I have to explain which card I got.

Cedric was angered by my little show. I suppose. He kept that freakin' emotional mask up almost to the end. He took no cards, satisfied with the five he had. We wagered. And wagered. And wagered. If his voice or mannerisms didn't allow him to vent his frustration, the size of his bets certainly did. The others had folded long ago, but we kept upping the pot, the chips clattering on the table until a very tall pile waited for the winner of this hand.

He could have bought the pot. He had more than I did. He could have slid the rest of his chips into the center of the table and dared me to take out an IOU or sell him a kidney or something. I really respected him for not doing that. Instead, he bet just enough to make me put everything on this hand.

I had a weird moment when I realized that we might have to split the pot. He might have had the Royal Flush in Spades or Hearts. So much work expended just to split that massive pile of chips in half again and keep going? It would have broken my heart!

But then, what else could this guy have? He wasn't betting just to call my bluff. He must have had something good. I wanted to see it. I *needed* to see it. I shoved the rest of my chips into the middle of the table. There was a serious amount of cash laying there.

"Call," I said.

As the callee, Cedric had to show me his cards first. That son-of-a-bitch had a Straight Flush to the King... in Spades. He was only one card away from the best hand in Poker. Finally, the mask came down, and a look of feral triumph beamed from his face... for about three seconds. I dropped my cards on the table.

It was so quiet, I now know what a cigar sounds like as it burns. Cedric nearly burned that stogie down to nothing on one pull. I hadn't realized it 'til then, but a big crowd had gathered behind my back to watch the hand and they all held their breath.

"That... isn't... possible," Cedric coughed, smoke spilling out of his mouth.

"My lucky night, huh?"

The old guys started patting me on the back, making old guy noises about how that was the second best hand of Poker they had ever seen, except for this one time, back in '75, when...

I smiled and nodded and gathered the chips - the many, many chips. A conscientious steward in a red jacket who had been completely invisible all night appeared with a chip tray. He methodically lined the chips up in the tray. I caught sight of Cedric, who was seething with rage. I could see it right there on the edge of his trembling lips, on the tip of his slobbering tongue: "cheater". But he couldn't say it, not in this room full of important men who were lauding me.

The steward took the tray away. I grasped his arm, throwing a brief sour note into the proceedings. The man did not take offense. "I will return with a check." I nodded, and let his arm go. Everyone was quick to excuse me, since I clearly had never gambled at this level. Or at least, never gambled *and won* at this level.

That was the longest fifteen hours of my life, waiting ten minutes for the steward to come back with that sweet, sweet slip of paper. I had a dozen sexagenarians - and that's not nearly as good as it sounds - on one side, being really nice to me, and four menacing Slavs on the other side, glaring at me.

I finally got my check, tipped the steward handsomely with a handful of leftover chips that hadn't fit in the tray, said my

goodbyes, and left the room as casually as I could. Cedric & Company followed.

I stopped at the bar and had a beer. Cedric & Company waited for me ten feet away.

I strolled through the casino, dropping the occasional coin into the occasional slot machine. Cedric & Company... you get the idea.

I pulled my cell from my jacket pocket and dialed.

"Handy."

"You ready?"

"Yes."

As I hung up, I noticed that Cedric was also on the phone. He was *good*.

I sauntered - as cool as you please - out the front door. Then I sprinted across the sidewalk for the Audi and hopped in. The wolves ran for their car, a black BMW 7-series - natch.

"Lake Tahoe. And step on it."

He pulled out into traffic, with the BMW right on our tail. Left here, right there. Cedric stuck like glue. Soon we'd be on the highway, on our way out of town, and we still hadn't lost them. Eventually, we'd be out of the sight of witnesses, and the gross injustice I had committed would be redressed by Cedric and his brothers/partners/friends.

And now we were coming up behind an eighteen-wheeler, loaded down with lumber, stopped at a light. Things did not look rosy. "Do you think we can loose these guys?" I asked.

"Not on 5," Handy said without a bit of emotion. Cedric might have been good, but Handy was *really* good.

I dialed up to 8, the first number in the green section. The music changed from Bob (or Pete) Seeger to Metallica. Handy immediately pulled the oldest trick in the book: he slipped into the right lane, slalomed around the truck which was just now lumbering into the intersection, then turned *left*, in front of the truck and across four lanes of traffic. Yeah, we almost got crunched between the semi and a Lincoln Navigator coming from the other way, but the operative word is *almost*. It's the oldest trick in the book for a reason. It tends to work. The Beemer was stuck, unable to get around the truck.

In my mind's ear I could hear Cedric howling in anger.

#

Lake Tahoe is one of those places that you hear people rave about, but you think it just can't be as good as they say. Like Paris, or San Francisco. Did you ever hear anyone dis San Francisco? No. And they never dis Tahoe either.

After my brain calmed down from the adrenaline-fueled high of the chase, which made me feel like an eight-year-old after his first ride on a rollercoaster, I ticked the dial back down into the yellow and settled in for the ride to Tahoe. The road was narrow as it slipped through the hills, up and up, reminding you that you're not going to just any old lake, you're headed to a *mountain* lake.

The moon was really bright, almost full now. That drive was just the best of my life. Really. You might think that sneaking out of a strange place with a small fortune and evading a troupe of goons intent on doing bad things to you might have altered my perceptions a bit. Trust me. Reno to Tahoe is a great ride at night bathed in moonlight.

The desert hills don't look bleak, they look magical. You can't see your destination; it's always just around the next bend. Or maybe the next. Even telephone poles take on a mystical

quality. I saw a hawk soaring just below a canopy of brilliant stars.

Too soon, it ended, and we got to Caesar's. It's the first casino you hit on the road into Stateline, the town on the edge of the lake where one can gamble, if one is so inclined. Don't go to the Tahoe Caesar's expecting a high-country version of the ultra-glitzy one in Vegas. You won't get it. But it's a good place anyway.

All I had on me was my wallet and the check from the Peppermill. I thought about asking Handy to drive back to Reno to get my things from the room at Harrah's. His stoic glare through the driver's side window told me that would be a bad idea. While I was here, I'd buy what I needed: clothes and toiletries... and a suitcase.

#

Now, you're probably thinking that my whole life is just a series of shady gambling adventures that involve running out of town. It really isn't. Two nights in a row, that was basically a record for me. Now it was time for a vacation. Going to Caesar's wasn't because I wanted to make another killing. It was more out of habit. That and comfort. I feel comfortable in a casino, even if I'm not gambling.

Another late night check-in, another suite, wonk, wonk, wonk. You've read this part already. But the next morning, I didn't wake up late. I woke up early - if you can accept nine o'clock as early. I slipped down to the lobby and sniffed out a shop where I could buy a swim suit. Today was about lying in the sun. Today was about *not* gambling, except maybe with skin cancer. I even called Handy and told him I wouldn't need him until dinner.

I picked up a paperback to not read out by the pool as I worked on my tan. Just me and the sun. It was glorious.

I wasn't looking for a woman. Really, I wasn't. Not that I have a problem with women. A couple of girlfriends have told me I look a little like Sting, with my short, blond hair and my sharp nose. On the other hand, a couple of guys have told me I look like Rick Ocasek. I guess I should be glad it wasn't the other way around.

"You mind?"

I slid one eye open to see this blonde hovering over me, pointing to the lounge next to mine.

"G'head."

I closed my eyes because the last thing I needed was to have this leggy, flawless-skinned, tan and lovely beauty wrecking my restful and much needed vacation time. Let her and her perfect 34-C breasts enjoy the sun. Let her apply special sunscreen to those red, pouty lips without any interference from me. What did I care that she had a little button nose that made her look like Cameron Diaz's cuter sister?

I didn't care. Not one bit.

"I haven't seen you around," she said in a voice like honey harvested in the wild straight from the hive. I didn't open my eyes.

"Just got in," I mumbled. She meant nothing to me. Soon she would realize that and leave.

I heard her rustling around on her lounge. She wasn't leaving but maybe she'd doze in the sun and I could get back to not caring whether she lived or died or had any tan lines.

"Do my back?"

As I opened my eyes and looked over at this woman lying prone on the lounge, holding out a bottle of suntan oil to me, with her hair pulled up into a clip and her top untied to reveal a back that

did not, in fact, have any tan lines I learned a very important life-lesson:

- If a woman has designs on you, playing it cool just fans her flames.

Having, through past experience, already learned that *pursuing* a woman who has designs on you will *also* fan her flames, today's lesson leads me to the corollary:

- If a woman has designs on you, you might as well give up. You're screwed. Literally.

Being the gentleman that I am, I cannot in good conscience describe in detail the extraordinary quality - and, if I may be so bold, quantity - of sexual exploits that this stunning woman and I enjoyed during that very long and enjoyable day. Suffice to say that we learned a little something about the limits we were willing to exceed in the furtherance of pleasure, and exceed them we did. Oh, my, yes.

In fact, I didn't see the sun again until late in the afternoon of the *next* day, when I strolled down to the casino with this goddess on my arm. She complained that she needed to meet some friends for dinner and promised she would make it up to me later. I was - and am - completely unaware of anything she could have done to top the night before... but I was more than willing to find out.

Ten minutes later, I saw Trent again. Actually, he saw me first; otherwise I would have hotfooted it out of there, and fast. But he smiled and sauntered over, smelling of expensive cologne and wearing a shirt that I really couldn't believe was designed to be worn by a man.

"Hey there, Friend!" I hate it when people use the word "friend" as an honorific. But I smiled. I still didn't know what - if any - connection Trent had to Cedric and the Boys from the other night. "Heard you had a little trouble with Cedric," he offered.

"Yeah."

"That guy..." Trent shook his head in commiseration, and then carefully repositioned his hair for maximum effect. "I should have warned you about him. But he never loses, so I didn't think it'd be a problem." Trent laughed off my near-death experience, then invited me to an early dinner. He had that look like maybe he was thinking I reminded him a little of Sting. I made sure there were going to be other people with us. When he explained it was a party, I agreed to join him.

The table in the back of the posh restaurant was ringed with men, only men. Manly men. From the wet-behind-the-ears variety like Trent, all the way up to the one-foot-in-the-grave variety. Introductions were made and I remember at least one of them was named Cornelius but all the rest flew past me. I remember faces, not names.

There were drinks before dinner, then there were drinks with dinner; finally after dinner, there were brandies and cigars. I couldn't quite piece together who was related to whom, or who worked for whom, or what the connections were. It was one of those parties that just seems to form by spontaneous combustion. And as is so often the case when a bunch of well-to-do guys are drinking and smoking sans wives, the bawdy stories came out.

One man claimed to have bedded a set of triplets. The punch line to his lengthy and graphic story was that only two of the triplets were women. I didn't know whether I was supposed to laugh or be horrified. The crowd laughed, so I joined in.

Another man, in his sixties, claimed to have done it with a different woman every hour, on the hour, during Woodstock. While most people marked their time at Woodstock by the bands they saw playing, this guy marked it by the women: Clarice the long-limbed redhead, Chyoko the demure yet kinky Japanese, Randi the tall and muscular black woman.

Not one to be outdone, I told them about the blonde. My tale wasn't one of multiple partners, but it had an immediacy theirs lacked because it had all happened in the past thirty hours or so. In fact, this dinner was merely a rest stop on the Train of Love. They loved it. It was great. I felt like one of the boys, and for once I didn't have to toss a rolled stack of twenties onto a felt-topped table to get that feeling.

The dinner long gone, the crowd of guys took their cigars out to the bar to continue the festivities. There was talk of football and stock markets and politics. I explained to Trent how the Electoral College works. Well, I tried to. I was pretty drunk. But so was Trent, so it didn't matter. That's when the blonde snuck up behind me and started to nibble on my ear.

Through the delicious tingling she caused in my entire body, I couldn't help but notice Trent's smile vanished. Then a coldness completely unrelated to the girl ran up my spine. She was Trent's girl. Or maybe his sister. That would be bad.

"Oh, man. Dude. I'm sorry," I stammered at him.

"Don't apologize to me," Trent said. Now I saw his face was white. He wasn't angry, he was scared. The man *behind* him was glowing beet-red with anger. The Woodstock guy. The guy, who, I now remembered, was named Cornelius. What an extremely *valuable* piece of information, I thought to myself.

"Daphne," Cornelius said. I prayed to God above that she wouldn't say in return—

"Daddy! This is Joe!"

"We've met."

It wasn't silent, of course. We were in a bar on the fringe of a bustling casino at rush hour. The murmur of ten-thousand patrons was the bedrock upon which was built the siren song of slot machines paying their jackpots, the buzz of automatic card

shufflers, the blare of dance music from the club across the way. But there was no sound within ten feet of me and Daphne. We were in a kind of inverse blast zone. A sphere of total, inimical silence.

The thing I focused on wasn't the way Trent moved gracefully out of the line of fire, or the way the other older guys lined up behind Cornelius like an aging football squad, or the way the bartender picked up a house phone to call security, or even the way Daphne pulled her hands off of me like I was burning with a highly contagious fever. I focused on the fact that I didn't believe that I could have gotten into a situation where I had to run out of casinos *three nights in a row!*

Then I remembered that last night I hadn't run anywhere; I was with Daphne. I smiled briefly.

Then I ran.

Cornelius and his buddies didn't bother to chase me. It would have been *undignified*. It would also have been useless. I could take any of them in a steeplechase, which is what I had to run. Remember, this was a casino at *rush hour*.

No sedate walking tour with my pursuers following calmly at a judicious distance this time. I had to beat the clock, the clock that said "this is how many seconds you have before they've notified all the guards at every exit that *you must be stopped.*"

You see, I managed to partake of Forbidden Fruit. Was she the daughter of the owner of the casino? No. Was she the daughter of the Mayor, or the Town Councilman, or the Governor? No, sir. Daphne was the daughter of the Director of *Security* for Caesar's Tahoe. Security, of all the departments that run a successful - or even unsuccessful - gambling establishment is not to be fooled around with. I wasn't going to get a stern talking to or a black eye. I was going to get six pallbearers and a eulogy.

When I ran, I ran with a purpose.

I ploughed right through a densely packed family of Vietnamese, knocking them down like bowling pins. I literally *vaulted* a child of three who was holding one hand of each of her parents - what was she doing in a casino anyway? When I came up to a row of elderly women pushing walkers, I laughed out loud at my luck and backtracked around an archipelago of Pai Gow Poker tables. It wasn't some sense of decency that made me avoid the women. I just figured I'd break a leg trying to get through those walkers.

I pulled my cell phone from my pants pocket and hit the speed dial.

"Handy."

"Be out front, ready to go, with the rear window down."

Handy hung up. No question. No argument. This guy was getting a *monster* tip.

The first actual guard appeared in my way. He looked like a Fed, with his black suit and tie. He wasn't wearing shades, but you could tell he wanted to be. I had to juke my way around him, almost slamming sideways into a bank of video poker machines. He started chasing me while talking into his lapel mic. Now it was getting interesting.

The next guard - this one in the same outfit but built like a linebacker - tried to tackle me from the side. I caught him in my peripheral vision quickly enough to brake to a halt so he could tumble to the ground right in front of me. I leapt over him. He was about to get up when the first guard yelled, "Stay down!" and he hurdled the fallen linebacker, too.

The wide bank of glass doors at the entrance, with the sun sinking below the horizon in the distance, was like the lost city of El Dorado: golden, beautiful... and unobtainable. I was, at this pace, only three seconds away from the exit. It was guarded by five new guards, all in the same black suits, ready for me. Guard

Number One and the linebacker were right behind me. I was trapped. It was the end. Buh-bye, Joe.

The cliché is for your life to pass before your eyes in a situation like this. I didn't get that. I did ponder that I had made a killing in Vegas, then a bigger killing in Reno, then had fantastic sex in Tahoe. All in all, I was ending on a high note. But there was one, little, nagging, incomplete detail that I just *had* to attend to. I *had* to see what Handy driving at level 10 looked like.

A bellboy - or whatever they call them now - came trundling past with an empty luggage trolley, one of those big brass ones that can hold a month's worth of luggage. Well, a month's worth of luggage for a guy, anyway. I ripped the thing out of his hands and hopped on. But I didn't just ride it like a surfboard or something. I set it spinning, too.

The guards behind me were now out of the running. The floor was marble, so I got the thing going pretty fast. The guards ahead of me tried to grab me, but their hands kept getting swatted away by the brass uprights as the trolley swirled past them. One brave guy in the middle tried to hold his ground, but the combined weight of me and the cart knocked him to the floor. I scrambled over him, fighting some serious dizziness, and straight-armed my way through the front entrance.

The A6 waited, engine purring like a wild beast, the window down, as requested.

I'd love to say I did a Superman through that open window, but at the last second I chickened out and used the door instead. I had a couple of seconds to spare because I'd caused a fair amount of chaos in the lobby.

Handy pulled out immediately. I just managed to turn up the dial to 9 before I slipped on the leather and got wedged behind Handy's seat on the floor. Handy sped out of that driveway faster than a car should be allowed to go.

"I think we're gonna have company soon," I yelled, still trying to get myself up off the floor so I could put on my safety belt. The way Handy pulled onto Highway 50 at about 50 convinced me I didn't need to see 10 driving. 9 would do me just fine. The first time Handy pulled into on-coming traffic to pass a camper, I almost fainted. The second time, I just said a little prayer and hung on for dear life.

Behind us came a fire-engine-red Cadillac Escalade. This thing was a monster. If any vehicle that could carry a half dozen armed thugs had a chance of catching Handy's A6, this was the one. And since Highway 50 wasn't anything like a straight stretch of road for more than fifty yards between here and Carson City, their chances were just that much better.

The sun was down. Twilight had descended. Handy weaved through evening traffic, on a twisting mountain highway in the most difficult light conditions imaginable. Just a couple of miles outside of Stateline, there's this short tunnel through the mountainside. Handy shot into that tunnel while changing lanes and came within inches of a motorcyclist who, stupidly, didn't have his headlamp on. The cyclist saved his own life by pulling to the shoulder before the Escalade barreled through the tunnel.

Those TV shows where the bad guys shoot at the hero hanging out of their car windows? That didn't happen. They knew better than to waste the bullets. They also knew that a lucky shot could have caused a relatively fatal accident for *everyone* involved. Score one for the instinct of self-preservation.

I glanced at the speedometer, but looked away when I saw three digits glowing brightly behind the steering wheel. I turned my attention back to the road. Some jerk with xenon headlights came at us very quickly down the mountain. In the millisecond that the on-coming car was along side us, with the relative speed of the two cars about 180, I saw Cedric in the driver's seat. He was driving the black BMW from the other night. He had his posse with him. I saw him... and he saw me.

I laughed out loud.

"What is it?" Handy asked. He still hadn't broken a sweat, but he was clearly more tuned in than I'd seen yet.

"More company."

I watched with stunned fascination as the BMW skidded to nearly a halt in the middle of the highway. It spun around like a top, the white smoke of the burning tires quite visible in the gathering starlight. Now Cedric was on the chase as well. I hoped that the two competing pursuers might just collide and save us the trouble of fleeing.

Handy continued to accelerate when and where possible, but the twists and turns of the highway came fast and furious here. We were climbing up and out of the bowl of Tahoe. There wasn't anywhere to turn off. It was simply run away or get caught.

The Beemer caught up to the Escalade in record time. Cedric tried to pass the Cadillac on the left. He almost collided with a VW coming down the mountain from the other way. When the path cleared again, he tried to pass, but the Escalade edged over the center line. Those guys in the SUV didn't want any interference. In a weird way, being that valuable a quarry made me proud.

A serious squeal of brakes and my head snapping back reminded me I wasn't just an observer of this chase. I looked ahead and saw that Handy had swerved around a deer. I watched as the others kept coming with no indication of swerving. The deer ran out of their way. The deer was okay but we had lost some ground.

We reached something like the plateau of the trip, and the moon, now full, peeked over the horizon to the east. I could see the Escalade so clearly now that I could make out the driver. He looked like the same kind of soulless mercenary as the guards in the casino. His goal was to bring my head back to Cornelius.

The BMW pulled around on the right, kicking up dust on the shoulder. The Escalade swept right a little, but he didn't want to lose any speed on the dirt. The Beemer had a *much* better engine, and it seemed Cedric didn't mind dorking up his alignment for his revenge. He stayed on the shoulder, inches away from the mountain itself.

In the moonlight that peeked over the trees, I thought I saw something strange about Cedric. He seemed to be pursing his lips at me. Odd thing to do. Then he yawned. Why would someone yawn in the middle of a high-speed chase?

The others in the BMW yawned, too. Except, it didn't really look like they were yawning...

"Turn down the music," I said to Handy. We were listening to some sort of god-awful goth crap. Nine Inch Nails or Marilyn Manson or someone. That's what level 9 music sounded like. He turned it down - though not off. Now I could hear what was going on in the BMW.

"Yeah, they're howling."

"Who are?" Handy asked, trying to get a peek at them in his side-view mirror.

"The werewolves."

The moonlight splashed fitfully on the black car through gaps in the trees above. It was like a trick in a cheesy old horror picture, flashing the lights on and off like that, so they could show the transformation from man to beast in quick snapshots instead of one seamless cut. Look, the actor has some extra hair! Oh, now he's got big teeth! Hey, that looks like a puppet!

Hollywood never got werewolves right. Now I could see why. How do you simulate *that*?

Even with his snarling, slobbering snout and fur spouting everywhere, I could still recognize Cedric at the wheel of the BMW. He looked right at me and roared. He hit a button to open the sun roof - or moon roof, as it were - so that one of the others could climb onto the roof of the car.

The driver of the Escalade was still watching us, but the guard riding shotgun saw what was about to happen, and yelled. The werewolf perched on the BMW, his fur flying in the wind under his flapping silk shirt, then leapt across, claws puncturing the door and roof of the SUV. The guard in the passenger seat tried to pull a gun, but got brutally mauled through the window before he could get off a shot.

Flashes from guns in the back merely made the werewolf angry. I assumed these guys weren't packing bullets made of silver. The creature roared as he climbed through the side window and disappeared into the interior of the Cadillac. I could see the SUV bounce slightly on its suspension as the guys in the back were taken care of.

Meanwhile, the BMW had pulled back onto the highway, ahead of the Escalade and right behind our Audi. Cedric remained behind the wheel, and another werewolf climbed out of the moon roof, facing the SUV. I watched as the driver pulled his pistol and fired through his windshield at the crouching beast. One bullet went astray and passed through the Audi's rear window three inches from my head. Pebbles of safety glass showered down on me. Two other bullets went completely wild. Three went right into the werewolf. Those bullets were enough to make it take a single step back.

Or maybe that step back was simply preparation to jump, and jump he did, clutching the top of the SUV with his forepaws, resting rear paws that sprouted from the bottom of his black slacks on the bumper, completely obscuring the driver from view.

Finally, the Escalade slowed. It didn't look like there would be much left of those guards.

The BMW continued to follow, right on our tail. Cedric growled something unintelligible to the one in the backseat, who bounded into the front. Cedric climbed out the driver's side window as the other one took over the controls. During the switchover they lost a little distance. They gained it again quickly.

We were headed towards a vicious curve. That meant we would have to slow down.

"Handy."

"I see them."

"You have a plan?"

"Depends."

Cedric, his long tongue lolling out of a muzzle smiling with glee, pounced onto the back of the Audi.

I clicked the dial up to 10.

The music switched over to Vivaldi. The Four Seasons. Summer.

Handy pulled the wheel over hard to the right and pulled on the parking break.

The Audi spun 90 degrees, sliding sideways off the pavement and toward the cliff.

Cedric clung to the car with one set of claws embedded in the roof. He raised his other paw to strike at me through the destroyed window.

Handy popped the trunk.

Cedric's hindquarters flipped up. He lost his grip and rolled off the Audi.

The BMW closed fast.

Handy released the brake, righted the wheel and punched the gas. The Audi regained traction inches from the drop off and accelerated out of the way so fast the trunk closed on its own.

The BMW ran Cedric down before shooting off of the edge of the road into the darkness below.

I looked out the back of the Audi at the empty road behind us. I took several deep breaths before I clicked the dial back down to 2.

I listened to James Taylor the whole way back to Reno as I attempted to calculate Handy's tip.

#

Handy picked me up early the next morning at Harrah's. I had a seat on an Alaska Air flight to Eugene at 10:04. During our lovely level 4 drive to the airport, I leaned forward between the front seats to talk to him. I kind of wanted to understand things a little better.

Like what the hell happened last night.

I was careful not to nudge the dial. I enjoyed listening to Peter Cetera squeak his way through some of Chicago's greatest hits.

Handy didn't acknowledge my presence at all. I should have said something like, "So, nice job with the werewolves, dude!" Just to see what he'd do. I didn't have the guts. How lame am I?

I had to break the silence somehow.

"You take plastic?"

"Visa, MasterCard, or Discover."

At the arrivals curb, he ran my Discover card through his machine - one of the old ones that take a carbon imprint - then handed me the slip. "Car Service - 4 days - \$2,000" it said in

neat printing. I added the tip – even robots like Handy must have some way of having fun, I hoped – and signed it. After I handed it back to him, he immediately went back around to the driver's side of the car.

No "Thanks for the tip!" No goodbye. No manly, back-slapping hug. Not even a nod. He was just going to drive away. Amazing.

I turned to enter the terminal and heard him behind me.

"Sir?"

He was standing there, as if at attention. It was the first time he had called me anything, the first time he'd done more than give me orders.

"Yeah?"

He was wearing shades, so I can't be sure. His mouth didn't move a millimeter, but I kind of got the feeling that his eyes might be smiling, just the tiniest bit.

"Recommend me to your friends."

To show him – again – that I wasn't stingy, I gave him a big smile in return.

"Sure thing, Handy."

###



bio: Russell Lutz made his novel publishing debut with *Iota Cycle* in June of 2006. His short stories have previously appeared in several webzines and magazines, including **Byzarium**, **The SiNK**, **scifantastic**, **anotherrealm**, **silverthought** and **AlienSkin**. He won the 2005 SFFWorld First Place prize for short fiction. His story "Athens 3004" appeared in the short fiction anthology

Silverthought: Ignition. He lives, works, reads, writes, watches movies and ponders the imponderable in Seattle.



Homecoming
by Robyn A Hay

The neighbours never complain, never enquire why strange stone parodies of household pets litter the front lawn. They enjoy the spectacle; amaze at the craftsmanship in each piece. To this, he simply smiles and gushes about his wife's extraordinary talent. Though he hesitates when they ask about her directly, claims she spends most of her free time with their two children.

It's late when he pulls into the driveway after a long days work spent amidst the drudgery of clients and their never ending requests. The car's headlights reveal a lone newspaper resting on the sidewalk. He takes a deep breath before leaving the car, aware of how strangely alive the statues appear. At that moment, he's glad she keeps her human-size projects in the back garden, hidden amid the overgrown mugo pines and willow trees.

He enters the house through the side door, lets his briefcase drop to the floor, not caring about its creak of protest. The thump ricochets off the walls, yet there are no small feet bounding down the stairs to welcome father home. Even if they wake, the risk is too high when this house involves surprise.

He goes to the fridge, pulls out a jug of milk and takes a drink. Rivulets drip down his chin, soaking the front of his shirt. When he places the empty carton on the counter, he knocks over something small that crashes to the tile floor. A strange realization fills his soul as he stares at the shattered remnants of what was a gift to his son. He knows he's home but feels strangely out of place. Sometimes he wonders if his children only

see him as the man who supplies food and board. Would they even recognize him in a room full of middle-aged men?

Plush carpet presses against his feet as he climbs the stairs. The air on the upper floors is stale, like in a museum. But when he sees the door to the master bedroom is open, it's a welcome sight. He knows she is awake and waiting for him.

He quickly undresses and washes his face, acutely aware of the empty space on the wall where a mirror should be. The soap feels rough, but smells strongly of apricot and honey.

He climbs into bed, careful to keep his eyes averted.

A cold hand painstakingly pulls the covers up over his shoulder. A gentle murmur of welcome from behind as a tail wraps around his thigh, warm and slick to the touch.

"Jonah killed his hamster today," she says. "Will you bring him another? Perhaps something exotic would be fun. The children rarely experience much beyond what they see on the television."

He shivers, enjoying the gentle hiss and flick of her tongue as she speaks. "Anything you want," he whispers. "You have but to ask."

She shifts closer; kisses where neck joins shoulder. He smiles as her hair slithers across her pillow and onto his neck. He wonders about the day he might look above her archaic smile and see the eyes of the creature he married. But until she tires of him, it's always good to come home.

###

bio: As a graduate in the field of Earth Sciences, Robyn A Hay has always been interested in understanding the dynamics of the world and thus, took the next logical step to create and explore her own realities. Her short fiction has appeared the anthology **Wicked Little Girls** and the ezine **Deep Magic**. She has other work forthcoming in the anthology **Fantastical Visions IV** and the magazine **ShadowSword**.



Air
by Jefferson Ross

Brian and Ben and Ellen, they all show up at my door and want me to go to this concert with them. Manny was supposed to go but his girlfriend just dumped him or something like that so now they have an extra ticket.

"But last time-" I say, and Ben's just like, "It's cool."

"But you know I can't," I protest, and Ellen is grabbing my hand and dragging me out of my apartment.

"Just get out for one night," she says. "Just to get some air."

"Dude, she's right," Ben chimes in, "And get this: I have some theories for you. Two theories. You like theories."

We trot down the stairs and I continue protesting but not very hard so maybe some part of me wants to go after all?

"My theories," Ben says, "Are about music. You talked so much about it after the, uh, the incident." He turns around and stares at me, walking backwards. "So, I figure it this way: you're into this heavy shit... deep, layered, repetitive. Structured stuff."

"Uh-huh," I say, not sure if he's going crazy or just high.

"Me, and the rest of the world while we're at it, we like lighter stuff. Poppy stuff. Music more interested in kicking a good tune around than denouncing society."

"Yeah," I say. "Junk."

Ellen stops and turns to me. "So, this show we're going to, it won't have an effect on you. That thing that happened... it's like, it won't happen again. You'll be fine tonight."

"Do you know," Brian says, jumping in, "That some alcoholics can drink wine but not beer and vice-versa?"

I look at him, waiting.

"It's like, the same thing for you!"

Ellen giggles and jumps up and down, the swell of her chest almost enough to dispel any argument on my behalf. She throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tight: "It's just that we never see you anymore!"

I look at them all. "What's the second theory?"

Ben smiles. "The statute of limitations on craziness is just a couple of months. And you've been cooped up in that hole for what... almost a year now? I mean, fuck, you're long overdue for some down time."

So we go. As we walk, I realize Ben is wrong, I've only been cooped up for six months. That's when my girlfriend left me. It was too much, that's what she told me.

I'm moodier, she said. I changed.

She said I no longer have sex the way she likes to have sex.

I don't think those were the real reasons.

Take Manny, he has a new girl every week. He doesn't know real loss, he doesn't know the gaping hole that lives inside your heart, he doesn't know what it's like to slam into that brick wall.

Frustration. With me, with life.

That fucking concert. That's why she left me. She couldn't "deal" with it. And now my friends want me to go to another one? I'm done, I should tell them no. But they'll give me a hard time. And if I keep turning them down... well, I'm not that crazy. They might not be so eager to see me next time.

'My friends'--it makes me smile. So fuck it, I have nothing to lose this time. But when we get there I stop anyway and ask: "Do you think I'll be recognized?"

Ben laughs. "Dude," he says, "It's history."

And we throw down our tickets and shuffle through the double doors and we're inside, just like that, and I'm standing there in front of the music. It's not my music but it bears the unmistakable prick of live music, that extra dimension recordings just don't capture.

I'm disappointed. Everything is still here, but that's it, that's all. I thought I would have some revelation, but all I feel is the slight urge to piss. Maybe I'll be all right after all.

Brian slaps me on the back, hard. "See, dude, it's not too bad! No freaking out this time!" He leans back, gives me a quizzical, examining look, stroking his goatee. "Naw, you'll be fine." I open my mouth but I don't know what to say and he's already walking away, hitting some stranger up for a smoke.

Ellen grabs me by the shoulders and steers me off to the side. "We should keep you away from the crowds!" she yells over the music. Is she being sarcastic? I mean, they're the ones who fucking brought me here. We stand there for several minutes,

watching the band, listening to the music. When they finish, Ellen turns to me and asks if I'm all right.

"I'm OK," I tell her, and I mean it; I'm not feeling that bad. "Last time... I think it had a lot to do with where I was life-wise."

"And that guy?" she asks. "The one that you punched?"

I crinkle my nose at the memory. "Look," I say, "You know that feeling when someone is watching you? That sensation of another? That..." I show her the distance with my hands, that guy and me, two hands far apart and then close together. "That feeling," I say, "But one-hundred times stronger."

She shrugs. "But it hasn't happened since."

"I didn't cause it, Ellen! He did it to me."

"It just doesn't make sense," she interrupts.

I sigh. "Ellen, is this why you guys brought me out here? To psychoanalyze me?" I look away. "I know what I felt," I mumble.

"Fine," she says, and walks away. What the hell is her problem? She always bugs me along those lines, trying to get me to admit I was wrong. She thinks that will solve all my problems. I clench my fists in anger; fuck her! I didn't want to come to this goddamn place anyway!

I should leave, but I don't. I lean against the wall with my hands in my pockets. At some point Ben bounces by offering a cigarette. When he is gone, I flick it to the ground; fuck him too.

God, what is wrong with me? I just get so angry some times, so bottled up. I know I'm not a people-person, but why do I get this way? Ellen wants to help me and I get pissed off. I do feel like I should be talking, I should be opening up. But maybe there is nothing wrong with keeping it all inside.

Yeah, until you punch someone, a voice in my head says. Until you knock them out cold, break their nose, get kicked out of the show, threatened that you better not come back. I shake my head. But that's not how I normally am, I tell myself. That only happened once.

You're not normal, the voice taunts. Normal people don't snap, it says before fading into the background din.

But he was going to stab me. I know he was. I saw it in my head, I heard him thinking about it. He was going to stab me and steal my girlfriend.

I'm not psychic, but that one time... I knew I had to act first. Does that make sense? My whole life is relatively normal and then I have visions of some guy pulling a knife on me, putting it in my gut.

And the music! It was such a good show, but for some reason... the music got to me. It kept building and building and would not stop. When he bumped into me, I could have sworn electricity crackled. And that's when I saw it.

My reverie is interrupted by the lights dimming and the main event emerging. They launch right into their beat-frenzied happy music and I try to dig for the memory but nothing's coming back. It hovers on the tip of my brain, and every time I grab a hold of it, the memory slides off, back into the pile.

So, a guy who stands too close to me almost ruins my life and all I have is a memory of the memory? What's wrong with me? I mean, look at the results:

No girlfriend.

No rest.

No sanity.

And now this, I stop going to all shows, I give up one of my favorite things to do in this world. Why can't I remember? Should I settle for this then, the shitty flavor-of-the-month, wannabe rock-stars who simply go through the motions without ever really playing true Music?

Maybe my friends are right. I mean, look at me, I'm not feeling a thing, that electric tingle that runs my spine is simply not here. Ben thinks this kind of music won't set me off and maybe he is on to something.

But Ben's not here anymore, is he? He walked away. They all did. The band continues to play, and maybe I get distracted, but then they switch to some sell-out love ballad shit and I'm back in reality, all alone in a room full of people.

In front of me is a hot little brunette with a tiny red shirt clinging to her tits and an ass that just begs for attention. Less appealing is the jerk-off of a boyfriend with an arm around her, a walking cock who deserves a good kick to the head. His slimy hands are all over that highly-desirable ass. And those tits... they just bounce and jiggle and move around of their own accord, and I can only imagine what she's saying:

"Fuck me," I whisper for her.

"Shut up, bitch," I grunt back at her.

"Take me from behind," I mouth in reply.

"You whore," I say back, probably louder than I should have. When they disengage, those hands run up her body, over her breasts, to her face, and she just melts, this hot little perfect piece of ass in front of me.

It's more than I can take. Here is this fucking goddess of a woman who wouldn't even give me the time of day and this asshole gets to molest her slutty little body right in front of me and everyone else. The one girl who ever showed me the

slightest bit of interest dumps me because of one fucking concert gone bad, and people like this get to screw their brains out every goddamn night. Ellen will flirt with me left and right, but only when the others are around, and never lets it go anywhere. And this bitch in front of me... god! It just isn't right.

I shut my eyes and hold my breath; I shove my fists into my pockets.

I should...

go over there...

and...

And they break away. The girl smiles and flips her head around, sending her dark brown hair flying, and she looks my way, a quick glance thrown over the shoulder, and she sees me.

Is she reading my mind?

I can't help it, I smile back at her, the same dorky fat-cheeked smile I might give anyone who looks my way. Just a small, "Hey, hello!" type of smile, lips pulled upwards and no teeth. She doesn't deserve my innocent little smile, but I can't stop it in time.

She snorts. I see it, a small puff of air out of her nose, just the briefest action but one that doesn't go unnoticed. Her eyes, they almost bug out of her head and I doubt anyone not standing exactly where I am would have seen it. Just a small, "Oh my god," expression, with a "Can you believe him?" chaser thrown in to boot.

That's all: a glance over her shoulder, a quick escape of air, and a fractional widening of her eyes. And then she turns back to the jerk-off.

I'm sure that slutty puff of breath has not even dispersed and I'm right behind her, fists clenched and muscles tense. My arm is

back even though my fist is low. I put my shoulder into it but it is like pressing into a wall and I can barely move against the invisible force and all I want to do is push her over and pull her apart and wave the pieces around and maybe just annihilate what's left, I'll forget about the dude, just push him aside because he's a nothing and who is this slut who can reduce me so, lay me out with nothing but a glance, she's nothing but another fucking whore, a useless, ordinary, fucking whore.

I can't even lift my leg, it weighs too much, it feels like the entire concert hall is attached to my boot. The girl is inches from my face and still unaware of her pending doom, she has no idea about my clenched teeth and shaking fists and the pounding pain in my head. My vision swims and all I can think about is Ellen, another hot little flirt who keeps me at arms length all the time.

Ben, with all the fucking answers, whose shit-eating grin needs to be punched in daily.

Brian, an empty, drug-filled husk who hovers through his wasted, pointless life.

And me: nothing more than a dead, worthless little boy.

Last time, I punched a man. I attacked him. He stood too close and I freaked out. Visions danced in my head and I ruined him for it. Do I want to do the same to this girl?

My god, I can barely breathe, and the pressure behind my eyes, it's out of control. Dangerous levels. If I can just hold this, not move for a few seconds, maybe it will all subside.

Just... stay... still.

The girl, the slut, she turns ever so slightly, not enough to see me, but enough to poke her right tit out, enough to show me the delicious curve of red fabric riding down and over her soft, tender breast. Right in front of me, she allows her perfect breast to float around, this perfect specimen of feminine beauty.

It's too much, too much I can't have and too much I lost.

My headache, it just explodes.

The people around me, they fall in rows, the shockwave from my head flattening them out, sending them to the ground, the only sound in the room their surprised gasps and grunts, the crashing as the band's instruments tumble to the ground, their bodies quickly following.

I'm standing alone in a room full of stunned, prostrate people.

The speakers broadcast static and feedback and then go silent.

I take a deep breath and let it out.

The girl, she looks up at me and there is fear in her eyes, of course there is fear, I just leveled an entire room, didn't I? God, I'm exhausted. The girl, her shirt has ridden up a little, and I can see her belly and her increasingly pale skin half-way up her torso. It's not as far as her tits though and what must she think of me now?

This girl is not my girlfriend, and maybe all of this, the last six months, maybe it had nothing to do with her after all.

Next to me, Ben sits up, and he runs a hand through his ruffled hair. "Dude?" he asks, but I'm already half-way turned around, walking towards the exit.

I have to get some air.

###



bio: Jefferson Ross has only a small handful of publications to his name thus far. He feels most at home with science-fiction and horror but likes experimenting with dark-fiction pieces like "Air".



The Price of Electrum
by R. W. Day

It wasn't the deadly venomous insects, nor the snakes, hanging from the trees like false and fatal vines, waiting to choke the life out of you. It wasn't the great cats lurking in the shadows, nor even the hostile tribes silently stalking them, dart guns at the ready. No, Quentin Cavanaugh sighed. The only true danger on this expedition was his employer. Ridiculous. He'd spent twenty-five years mucking about the inner reaches of the Eighth Continent; surely he could manage one petulant aristocrat?

"Really, Mr. Cavanaugh, I've been studying the maps and I think it best if we abandon your idea of following the river and strike out overland." Lord Plotney pushed a stubby finger into the dead center of his well-creased map. "The land route seems much more direct. The river meanders for miles out of our way."

They had banked the boats on a mud-slicked slope for a rest break. Quentin hadn't wanted to stop; it was hard enough making decent time with Lord Plotney's luggage and Lord Plotney's haut-cuisine meals and Lord Plotney's daughter and her hapless maid, but the bearers were growing more mutinous by the day. If frequent breaks would keep them from bolting, then frequent breaks they'd get.

Unfortunately, a break gave his exasperating employer yet another opportunity to demonstrate how completely unfit he was for an expedition of this type.

"My Lord, that 'direct route' goes through some rather difficult terrain. There aren't roads, you understand."

"I *understand* that Horatius used the land route when he reached the Necropolis. We would be following in the footsteps of the great Horatius, how much safer could we be?"

Amateurs. A bit of reading, a few speeches before Explorer's Club banquets and they think they're bloody Stanley in bleeding Africa. Africa was a walk in the park compared to Lesser Gondwana. "If you have read Horatius' diaries, you will remember that he was captured and almost eaten whilst attempting the overland route. I would prefer not to be eaten." At least not till I've been paid, Quentin thought.

"And I would prefer not to have my authority challenged in front of the help. I am in charge of this expedition. If I say we are going by land..." He let the words drop away, his meaning clear.

"Well at least let me send your daughter and her servant back upstream. Jani could escort them back to Nabutu safely."

The petty lordling's eyebrows came together in a caterpillar-like line. "You forget - my daughter is the Silver Princess reborn. We need her, Mr. Cavanaugh."

Quentin looked askance at Lady Delanna, the copper-green tinge to her skin giving proof of her native blood, reclining on a rock under a parasol held by her long-suffering maid. "What?" she asked. "What did I do this time?"

"You breathed," Quentin muttered, but he knew when he was finished. A few quick orders and they'd secured the boats for the (likely mythical) trip home, collected their belongings and started in a single file line into the heart of the jungle.

Not only were there no roads, there was no real trail, and the great Horatius, while undoubtedly a brilliant explorer, was an inadequate map maker, tending to pepper his cartography with

'Heere be Dragons' and 'Heere we yncountred six large Serpents' rather than with references to more practical landmarks that might have a chance of remaining in place for five hundred years. One could hardly expect six large serpents to stay still so long. At least Quentin sincerely hoped not.

They forced their way through the jungle by arduous inches sun while the mosquitoes swarmed under the tropical sun. Quentin's arm ached from the strain of plunging his machete into the heavy vegetation again and again; it was a bit like playing tennis with a lead racket. This was the worst job he'd ever had, and if he'd just ignored his greed and followed his instincts, he'd be sitting back in Nabutu drinking iced rum and reading his foreign papers.

But Lord Plotney had turned up in Hanrahan's the morning after Quentin had taken some pretty substantial losses at the tables, and Plotney had quite intelligently begun their discussion with the money. Quentin had already as much as agreed to take the commission before he even heard the destination.

"... and so I believe we can make the Necropolis in ten days, possibly less."

"Excuse me, My Lord, did you say the *Necropolis*?" The silly sod might as well mount an expedition to lost Atlantis or the dark side of the moon.

"Yes, haven't you been listening?"

"My Lord," Quentin took a deep breath. "I certainly understand the appeal of an expedition to the Necropolis - its wealth is fabled, after all, and the first men to visit it since Horatius would be heralded in newspapers from here to London and beyond. But Horatius' maps are lost, and his memoirs give insufficient details for the modern explorer to trace the land route, and nothing is known of the water route beyond the mere fact of its existence."

"Ahem." The aristocrat had withdrawn a folded parchment from his waistcoat. "There's where you are wrong, sir. I have the last copy of Horatius' map to the Necropolis."

The map had unfortunately been quite legible, showing both routes that would lead, allegedly lead, Quentin had reminded himself, to the Necropolis. But lack of a route hadn't been the only potential stumbling block.

"Assuming we find the Necropolis, then what? If the legends are correct, only someone of the royal blood of Char can open the inner sanctum."

And that was how Quentin had come to be saddled not only with Lord Plotney but with his annoying, part-native daughter - their ticket into the depths of the Necropolis. He suspected the man had married the girl's mother with that goal firmly in mind - it wasn't in the nature of aristocrats to marry native women for love. They might make for exotic bed partners, but hardly played well in the ballrooms of the Empire. The silly bint was damn lucky. His half-native grandmother had been abandoned by her British father without a backwards glance

"Father," whined the girl. "I'm hot. Can we stop for a rest, please?"

"Yes," Quentin hurried to say before Plotney could even get his mouth open. "The bearers need another break."

There wasn't anything resembling a clearing in this part of the jungle, but it was amazing how the possibility of a rest energized the men, who made short work of the vegetation and in no time had a decent patch of ground cleared and a meat roasting on a spit over a roaring fire.

"This water is hot!" Lady Delanna emptied the contents of her canteen onto the ground. "I want some ice."

A sullen ring of men glared silently at her. Water, potable water, was in short supply.

"And my hair is a fright. Aldis, come do my hair."

The poor put-upon maid, unlike her mistress obviously of pure European ancestry, took up her brush before her like a mythic Valkyrie wielding her iron spear.

"Quite a piece of work, eh, boss?" Jani had slipped up beside him unnoticed.

"I'm surprised the maid hasn't strangled her in her sleep. For that matter, I'm surprised he hasn't got a butler or footman or two following after, wiping his arse for him." Quentin gestured back to their employer, sitting on a folding chair that some hapless bearer had dragged for the last fifty miles, fanning his florid face with Horatius' map. "That map ought to be in a museum instead of aerating a fat git who'd be better off in the clubs of Deepest Darkest London, not looking for the Necropolis."

Jani kept casting glances around the pseudo-clearing they'd made. "This place, it's on the outskirts of the Ngobo Confederation lands. I'd suggest not going further today, camping here - we don't want to sleep in their territory."

"We may have to - I have no idea how long this trek is going to take. That map is singularly lacking in anything resembling a scale."

Lord Plotney took the news that they were stopping for the night with better grace than Quentin would have expected. Of course, it wasn't as though he had to do anything to make camp, just sit on his supercilious backside while the bearers set up his tents, made his meals, cleaned his dishes.

Lady Delanna's needs were seen to solely by Aldis, as her father seemed to think that if any native came within two feet of her, he'd be overcome with an irresistible desire to ravish her. Since

most of the bearers had wives of their own, Quentin thought this fear a bit silly. He felt sorry for Aldis, so joined her to help with the lady's dishes.

"Have you been in their service long?"

"Long enough. My mother was her mother's lady's maid. We grew up together. It was fairly embarrassing, really, as most people...white people, that is...tended to assume I was the lady and she was the maid. She's not so bad when you get to know her."

"I'll take your word for that," Quentin said, handing her a plate.

She scraped at the plate with a rough cloth in a poor attempt at hygiene. "I'll be glad when we get to decent water again. We're going to die here, aren't we?"

She seemed a commonsense sort of girl, so he resorted to honesty. "Yes, likely. Either we'll be murdered in our sleep by hostile natives, or the protective spells surrounding the Necropolis will turn us into crumbs. Sorry about that."

She shrugged. "I'm sure you're doing the best you can."

Quentin watched her go, approvingly. He hated hysterical women, which explained his lifelong bachelorhood. Native women were down-to-earth sorts, but they generally came attached to half a hundred clanbrothers who'd move into your house and drink your whiskey all in the name of brotherhood. Not for him the joy of connubial bliss.

The bearers were crouched down on their haunches, talking in low voices to Jani. Quentin yawned. Jani was a decent bloke - good at keeping them from being snuck up on, so he could leave the setting of watches in his partner's capable hands and rest his machete-weary arms till the next day's toil. It would be an early morning and a long day's march.

#

He woke from an extremely unpleasant dream, probably prophetic, involving capture by the Ngobo and being tied up and covered in honey. A burly warrior with Jani's voice was shaking his shoulders so hard his teeth rattled.

"Boss, Boss. Wake up. The bearers are gone."

"I'm awake, leave off. Gone? Gone as in, off searching fresh meat, or gone as in bogged off back to Nabutu?"

"Bogged off in the night, with all their water and food."

Quentin pulled himself out of his bedroll, groaning. "I thought you set watches."

"Well, I did, Boss, but after all, who watches the watchers? Left on their own after I'd gone down for the night."

"That tears it, we're done."

Lord Plotney emerged from his tent, a portly leviathan erupting from a sea of green canvas. "Here now, Cavanaugh. What's this I hear about the bearers doing a runner?"

"My guess is they weren't anxious to end their lives as entrees. We'll have to go back now."

"Nonsense. We go forward."

And since Quentin wasn't likely to see a shilling if his employer snuffed it all alone in the jungle, he nodded morosely. "But we travel light."

Half an hour later, Quentin had whittled his pack down to bare essentials, water, food, weapons. Jani had done the same. Aldis, who didn't have much to start with, now had even less. Even Lord Plotney had made a stab at shedding the bulkiest of his gear. But Lady Delanna stood staring blankly at Quentin surrounded by her clothes and her tent and her confounded grooming tools.

"No. Not for all the money in the world." They were wasting valuable time.

"My daughter cannot arrive at her kingdom in anything less than her best," her father said.

"Yes, well," Quentin's patience was stretched past all reason. "About that. First off, we're probably not going to get anywhere near the Necropolis before the Ngobo turn us into breakfast. Secondly, if we do manage to get to your daughter's 'kingdom', considering that all her subjects are dead, I doubt they'll be offended if her hair's not curled." And he shouldered his pack, picked up his machete and started forward along the general direction that Horatius' map seemed to suggest. Aldis followed immediately, probably before her lady could demand that she carry the load, with Jani close behind. Quentin could hear his employer jollying his daughter along, then silence. He turned to see them following, most of the gear left abandoned.

"Good."

They were still arguing. "But Father, really, I don't want to be the Silver Princess. Silver's so common. Can't I be the Diamond Princess, or the Gold Princess?"

"Gold would be a prince," Quentin called back, attempting to make peace with conversation. His grandmother had been full of Charian legend and lore. "Gold was male, silver female to the Char people - correlated to the sun and moon, I believe."

"Yes, and I'm the Silver Princess reborn and under my power you'll all be able to walk into the Necropolis unscathed. Blah, blah, blah. Then Father will take all the silly electric and make us rich. Richer."

"Electrum. Electrum, Your Highness," Quentin hacked at a particularly tough stand of vines, punctuating his words with blows of the machete, "is a naturally occurring alloy made of

both gold and silver. I believe electrum symbolized the union of male and female in Charian mythology."

"That's not anywhere in Horatius," Lord Plotney protested.

"Well, considering that the great Horatius made his expedition in fourteen-something with the sole intent of proving that the Royal Line of Char was descended from angels, he was less interested in recording obscure and fantastical mythology and more interested in good old fashioned religion."

"And might one enquire, Cavanaugh, why you didn't see fit to mention any of this esoteric knowledge back in Nabutu?"

Quentin was tired of talking - it caused dehydration, for one thing. "You didn't ask."

They sweated on, for the day was as humid as it was possible to be without actually raining. Quentin thought that it might very well have been raining, considering how drenched he was by the time they stopped for a brief water break. He lifted his face to the sky to catch any stray raindrops and a salty trickle ran down his face into his mouth. No rain, just sweat.

"Boss," Jani sidled up to him. "We're being watched."

"Watched?" Lady Delanna had been listening. "By whom?" She looked around frantically.

"Ngobo war party, probably. Don't worry, Your Highness, we're far too entertaining for them to do us in quite yet. They'll let us get within sight of the Necropolis, assuming the thing even exists, before they attack."

Frankly, Quentin wished they'd just get it bloody well over with and save him three hours' tramping through the jungle, but he couldn't be that lucky. This trip had proven that. So they trudged on, not speaking at all as the sun beat down on them, blistering skin, parching mouths so that their water skins and

canteens were draining into them at an alarming rate. Though on reflection, Quentin supposed it really didn't matter if they ran out of water. The Ngobo would find some convenient local stream to provide the broth in which to cook them.

They'd gone on for another hour or so, when Quentin slammed the machete down through what looked like a perfectly normal stand of vines, then bounced back, arm shaking and teeth jarring as the blade struck stone.

"Hold on." He signaled for the party to stop. The Necropolis was supposed to be ringed by a series of markers in concentric circles. The outer ones were just informational, so legend said, a 'this way to the Necropolis, I'd turn back if I were you' sort of thing, but the inner rings had spells and protections that might still be in force and he'd no idea if this marker was magical or not. Those Char sorcerers had been damned good. He had a Char pottery cup that kept his tea hot all day long but was outwardly cool to the touch. Remarkable thing, and two thousand years old.

"Jani, can you read this?" There were symbols carved on the stone, weathered, but still barely visible.

Jani sank down on his knees, but was pushed aside by Lord Plotney. "I am an expert on the Charian glyphs." He put on a pair of pince nez spectacles and studied the symbols intently. "Hmm. That's the glyph for Necropolis. That other one, the frog one, I'm quite certain that's 'danger.' Or possibly 'carrot'."

Aldis came forward and knelt down. "It says 'This is the second marker of the great Necropolis; danger to he who comes with avarice in his heart.'"

The entire party stared at her as one. "How on earth do you know that?" Quentin pushed back his hat.

"Being a lady's maid isn't exactly intellectually challenging. I get bored and His Lordship has an extensive library."

"Very impressive," Quentin raised his eyebrows and nodded to her. Charian glyphs weren't exactly a walk in the park.

"Thank you." She blushed rather sweetly.

"But the point is, if I might point out, we can safely proceed, yes?" Lord Plotney's foot beat out a frantic tattoo of impatience.

"Yes. But fan out and be alert for the next set of markers." The jungle was still dense, but the growth here seemed newer and would yield to determined hands, not just determined hands wielding machetes.

The next marker was found by Jani. "'Thy final chance, if thee be false, go not ahead'. Or so I think." Aldis looked up and Quentin noticed for the first time how the blue of her eyes was the same shade as the sky of his homeland. "It's very faint."

"Horatius writes of three warning rings before the first magical barrier. He spoke of seeing the outlines of the Necropolis from outside the magical bounds. So I believe we can proceed with safety." Lord Plotney said.

Quentin stared at him. "You willing to bet your life on that? Because that's what you're doing the minute you step beyond this line."

"No, Cavanaugh, I'm willing to bet your life on it. That's what I'm paying you for. Push on, old chap, push on."

Shaking his head in utter disbelief, saying a silent prayer to any gods who might be nearby and in an amicable mood, Quentin Cavanaugh stepped beyond the stone. Nothing happened. "Guess I'm not false, then."

The others followed, and apparently they weren't false either. And then, suddenly, as though by magic, he saw it rising before him, hazy in the mist, but unmistakable - the Necropolis.

It towered into the sky, higher than any modern building, any tenement or curiosity, taller even than the Princess Maude memorial in London which was rumored to be the tallest building yet constructed. Twin spires, one covered in gold, the other silver, bracketed the central dome, symbolizing, undoubtedly, the two main deities of the Char. The dome itself looked gold as well, but was of a lighter hue than the right hand spire, and Quentin knew it must be covered in electrum. Priceless.

Lord Plotney's breath choked off in his throat as he realized what he was seeing. "Go on, man, what are you waiting for?"

Quentin started towards a massive arch that seemed to give entrance to the Necropolis compound, keenly surveying the ground for the magical markers. He'd just stepped over an ekki bush when the ground shook beneath him and he stumbled to his feet. "I'd say that's the first spell." He kicked at the bush and his foot hit stone. Missed the marker. Stupid, stupid. "This is a Very Bad Idea. We should turn around now, while we still can."

In answer, a dart whizzed past Quentin's face, bare inches from his nose.

"Too late," Jani said. Quentin shoved Aldis and the two aristocrats over the boundary as the ground shook and buckled beneath them. They stumbled towards the Necropolis and the earth stabilized as the last of the party passed the marker.

The landscape leading up to the arch was littered with fallen stones, huge boulders crumbled from outbuildings and dilapidated sub-temples. Quentin made for one of the largest, and the tiny party followed crouching behind the stone as darts and arrows rained down around them.

"This is intolerable!" Lord Plotney muttered. Then pitching his voice to carry, he shouted at their unseen adversaries. "My daughter is the Silver Princess, you ignorant savages! How dare you shoot at us?"

Quentin pulled him down. "Shut up," he hissed. "They don't give a tinker's damn if your daughter is the Silver Princess or the Queen of Jutland or the Duchess of Devronia. All they care about is how she tastes with mint." Oh, this was bad. The Ngobo would have seen that crossing the marker resulted only in mild earth tremors, something fairly common here in any case. Though the party had small arms and Jani's rifle, the sheer number of their adversaries would outweigh any technological advantage, and there was no cover beyond these rather inadequate rocks.

Certainly enough rocks, though - not only the boulders they were sheltering behind, but rings of tall standing stones, incredible, really, such things set up by cultures that weren't even blessed with the wheel, let alone proper labor unions and decent mechanics. Of course, the Char had magic, much better than either.

Lord Plotney followed the direction of his gaze. "The second magical barrier - I'm sure of it! If we can get behind it, those savages surely will not be able to follow. Delanna, my darling girl, run and open the barrier for Daddy."

It was their only hope. Quentin drew his pistol and started firing in the general direction of the Ngobo, and Jani did likewise as Aldis started towards the markers, Lady Delanna in tow.

Aldis was back bare minutes later, panting and breathless. "It's good, she's through, and I had no trouble either. Let's go!"

They abandoned the cover of the rock and ran for the marker. Quentin expected to hear the whist-whist of barefooted Ngobo warriors behind them at any moment, but as they burst into the space between the second and final set of markers, it seemed that there was no pursuit.

The temple loomed above them, a great vulture with two wings waiting to pounce and devour. The air was calm, electric, the sort of stillness that comes before a storm, and though Quentin

was almost certain they were going to die here, he couldn't help feeling just a minute's thankfulness that before his death he had been blessed by the sight of such a wonder.

The minute's thankfulness gone and facing cold hard reality again, they approached the third marker, a carved stone in the shape of an interlocking knot. "Might as well get it over with."

Aldis knelt before the marker and puzzled over it for a long time. Quentin wandered back towards the second marker, where he saw the Ngobo, lined up in ranks, waiting, eyeing them hungrily. Jani, who had accompanied him, sighed. "Like all those great restaurants in London you tell me about, Boss, apparently at the Necropolis you got to wait for your dinner."

Aldis called them over. "I can't translate this."

Plotney knelt by the marker as well. "Seems fairly straightforward to me. This symbol is silver, and the dancers, that's people, and this glyph means unite. So the Silver Princess will be united with her people and the Necropolis will open."

Aldis shook her head. "No. First of all, that's not_dancers - it's a beetle, which stands for_gold, not people. And it's poetry, so the imagery isn't literal. At least I hope not." She looked down and blushed.

"Why do you hope not?" Quentin asked, curious. He'd never heard of any Char poetry before.

Not meeting his eyes, she recited, "To seek the electrum as stars have foretold, silver and gilt must together enfold. That's a paraphrase, of course. Their version would be a bit more...earthy."

Quentin swore, kicking at a clod of earth. "Then we're done for. Even if she," he jerked his thumb at the lady, "is the Silver Princess, there's no Golden Prince for her to...um...enfold with."

Aldis stood, brushing dirt and debris from her skirts. "I wonder...I mean, it doesn't make sense really, to have your holy place only accessible by two people. What if the princess died in childbirth? Didn't they ever send in maids to have a tidy once in a while? Mr. Cavanaugh..."

"Quentin."

"Quentin. You said male was gold, silver female, and combined they yield electrum, yes? As a general principle?" She was staring at his face so intently he began to wonder if his nose had fallen off. "High forehead, pronounced nose, the tiniest kink to the hair. Tell me, do you have Charian blood?"

"Yes." A tiny seed deep in his belly was growing to melon sized proportions and he knew with a sudden dread where this was heading. "But so do lots of people. I mean, Jani, here—"

"My people come from Africa, boss."

"Lord Plotney, then—"

"I've no taint of the tar brush, I assure you, sir!"

Aldis smiled grimly. "Quite. I rather doubt if it matters whether the blood is royal or not. For all intents and purposes, Mr. Cavanaugh—"

"Quentin." .

"Quentin. For all intents and purposes, you are the Golden Prince."

Quentin swallowed. The world was draining of color, and the stillness of the air erupted into rolling thunder.

As one, they turned to look at him. Jani was grinning as though his horse had come in at twenty to one. "Your Highness, your princess awaits."

"You!" Plotney's mouth was opening and closing like a big ugly guppy. "You and *my daughter* have to ... outrageous!"

Quentin wasn't exactly a-tremble with delight at the prospect himself. Now if Aldis had been the Silver Princess, that would be something else entirely. The slender strand of native blood that ran in his veins had never seemed so damned inconvenient as it did at that moment. "Believe me, sir; I have no wish to impinge upon your daughter's innocence."

"Well, Boss," Jani said. "It's either that, or we go back."

They all turned to see the Ngobo lined up on the other side of the barrier, waiting. He'd swear they had napkins tied around their necks and the leader held a fondue fork.

"Not really an option, I'd say," Aldis said. "Just close your eyes and think of electrum."

"Excuse me," said the Silver Princess, nee Lady Delanna. "Don't I get any say in this?"

"But my dear," sputtered her father, "don't you want the treasure?"

"Not if I have to touch *him*." She pointed contemptuously at Quentin. "Let Aldis do it. That's the reason I have a maid, to do the nasty things I shouldn't have to, like cleaning chamber pots and washing my clothes and coupling with minions."

"But ... but Delanna, darling ... Aldis hasn't any Charian blood at all."

Lady Delanna marched up to Quentin, snatched the knife from the sheathe on his belt, grabbed her maid's hand and opened a shallow cut in her palm, did the same to her own, then squeezed hands with Aldis, who was, Quentin noticed, smiling broadly. "Now she has."

#

Quentin knew the exact minute the third barrier came down, though he was rather pleasantly occupied at the time, and therefore completely missed the sacking of the Necropolis. This fact did not bother him in the least.

The Ngobo, who looked upon the Char as almost lesser deities, cancelled their dinner plans and attempted to make Quentin their king. He pointed out, in broken Ngoban, that the Char had been matrilineal, so it was really the Lady Delanna who should be invested with the ceremonial snake skin and crown of grubs. He and Aldis and Jani made good their escape while Lord Plotney was attempting to buy passage home from their cannibal captors and the lady whined about how the color of the grubs made her skin look sallow. Which it did.

"It's a shame Plotney got all the goods," he commented to Aldis as they boated serenely down the river towards Nabutu. "If we couldn't have the treasure, it should have been left for scholars."

"Oh, he didn't get anything of value." Aldis' hands dipped in the cool water, then flicked it on his face, laughing.

"What? I saw him, he had rings and brooches and necklaces and crowns piled up in every satchel."

"Paste. He mistranslated an inscription in the hall, got misdirected to a false treasure room. I tried to tell him," she looked up, wide eyed and innocent. She really did blush quite sweetly.

"But he's using that stuff to pay the Ngobo not to eat them!" They might be natives, but they weren't stupid. When they found out...

"We'll send a rescue party," Aldis said. "And some scholars to begin a proper study of the place."

"You know, I was thinking, wouldn't it have been bloody inconvenient for the Char, having to have two people...you know...every time they wanted to get into the Necropolis?"

"Oh, I think a kiss would have sufficed," she replied. "It's sympathetic magic, largely symbolic."

"You think..." Quentin stared. "Then why on earth didn't you say so?"

She arched her brows at him, and he felt his cheeks flush like a schoolboy. "We're going to be famous. How would you like to be the wife of a famous man?"

"Famous and almost a prince. What more could a girl want?"

"A crown of grubs?"

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Clown-Killer's Orders
- by T. Bilgen

Behold the Clown-Killer; viper, ghost, mistress of her art; rubs out painted jesters from here to Timbuktu. With CK on the job, it doesn't matter if the fool's playing a backyard birthday or rain-dancing in the Chihuahuan desert, he's facing the final curtain.

The secret to her lethality? Special Forces and Pentaction training? *Yawn*. Genius IQ and laser-keen single-mindedness? *Ho hum*.

Proud winner of a billion-to-one glandular lottery, CK looks all of nine years old. Give her pigtails, a banana-seat bike, and an iPod, and the clown's down before he knows it.

What's she got against clowns, anyway? Childhood trauma, some clown done her wrong? Could it have been--gasp--her own father?

No.

It's just a day job. Await orders, stalk target, set plan, deliver coup de grâce, then home to a little art moderne house on the lake. Salmon or Thai for dinner tonight?

And she cleans up real nice, a Venus in miniature. Two ex-husbands; imagine their issues. Lovers; men, women, more issues. CK takes it all in stride.

The Lagoon sends her orders encoded in junk-mail; Publishers Clearinghouse sweepstakes, pre-approved Visa applications, IKEA catalogues--a name, a location:

Mister Patches--the Saltspring Apple Festival. Tiggles--the Meernbaum & Sons office picnic.

CK has it all under control.

Until Bink.

#

Bink's a genuine riddle. Mismatched costume fished out of the circus goodwill bin; the bottom half of a bear suit, matted, stained fur, held up with suspenders. Silver lamé shirt on top. His make-up, two white bands, one across the eyes like a mask and the other over his mouth like a gag. Looks like he sat face-first on a park bench with a 'Wet Paint' sign on it.

Even his fellow clowns don't know what to make of him. A typical klatch: "What's he trying to be, anyway? Russian-fish man?" "If only he didn't stink--eeyugh, cigarettes and sweat socks." "And that shirt! Glitter is so over."

His act stumps and enrages the civilians. "What did the embryonic stem cell say to the Monkey-Pope?" he says, setting off a riot the police have to hose down. He stuffs balloons with Scrabble letters, makes loot bags out of old dictionaries, broken Walkmans. Children cry, set fire to furniture. "This is the worst birthday ever," one kid bawls, and he doesn't even live here.

Bink rarely gets return business.

#

How does the Lagoon choose CK's targets? She doesn't know, doesn't particularly care. They pay handsomely and make sure to disguise it as an inheritance, for tax purposes.

Orders in a Sharper Image catalogue, the sonic jewelry-cleaner section: Bink--close surveillance.

Surveillance? That's different, but still a cinch.

She finds him at a carny behind an abandoned K-Mart. Bink climbs a ladder made of razor wire; kids get interested when his hands and feet bleed. He tells a story of a two-headed creationist who winds up frozen in the heart of an iceberg--and now waits for global warming to set him free. The kids want more. Parents drag them away, drive them straight to church in luxury SUVs.

His next gig's the opening of a new Fitness-Gym-World, at a strip-mall off Highway 9. Unfathomable, the corporate mind, hiring a clown for that.

Bink shows up with a rolling all-you-can-eat buffet and the room fills with a rich, spicy smell. Obese civilians waddle forth and chow down, joined by Fitness-Gym-World staff; soon realize they're eating Snickers bars and jelly-beans deep-fried in tempura batter.

They clamor for more.

In the gym, Bink tries a treadmill, gazes up at the dreary bank of TVs. He announces each fast-food commercial like a game show host; he sings along to jingles, and accurately quotes National Bureau of Health statistics. Management wants him removed from the premises; civilians link arms to form a human shield, and handcuff themselves to Nautilus machines in protest. Staffers spontaneously confess to torture crimes in the Middle East.

Hidden in the crowd, CK marvels.

#

His home residence is easily found; out by the train tracks, on a street lined with rusted cars, a mossy bungalow. She rigs the house with minicams and microphones.

Bink lives with an old woman, Grace; diabetic, blind. He fixes her meals, reads mystery novels to her, watches lots of Jeopardy

with her, kisses her on the forehead when he tucks her in at night.

He tends the hummingbird feeders outside, describes the birds for Grace, invents stories about their past lives. This one was a real-estate broker, that one used to be a homeless man. They're all birds now.

Background check on Grace: she lost everything to a mail-order credit scam; savings, husband's pension.

Bink never changes into civilian clothes. Never uses a civilian name. At the Seven-Eleven, nobody bats an eye when he walks in to pick up aspirin and laundry detergent. At the local tavern, pool sharks and drunks buy him drinks; Bink prefers bourbon, can hold his liquor, and shoots a decent game when he isn't clowning.

He talks to them, tells them of the time that's coming. He says the oldest trick in the book is the book itself, and it's going up in smoke. "Abracadabra. Labels fall away like autumn leaves. We'll be free."

CK, watching at her monitors, finds herself riveted.

Sunny Saturday afternoon. Boating on the lake with her girlfriend, CK finds herself thinking about him. The things he says.

Just following orders, she insists.

#

She's in his house, his room--he's not home, Grace dozes in front of the TV. CK's got a watery, bubbly feeling inside.

Dresser drawers, closet, empty. No bedside table. The bed; clean, mismatched bedding. No pillow.

She's seen all this through the minicams. Why is she here? Why the schoolgirl giddiness?

She sits on the edge of the bed, stifles a laugh. Bink's harmless, and the Lagoon just wants her to verify that. That must be it. And when this is all over, when she's on a new assignment, she'll attend Bink's performances. She'll applaud. She'll introduce herself. She'll shoot pool with him. She'll buy Grace a condo in the Canal District.

Bubbly feeling turns warm, and she wishes Bink could watch her, the way she watches him.

#

He says his name is Plucker, from the Lagoon, and she believes him; the man's a cross between a Kansas City preacher and an Egyptian mummy; black suit, lipless mouth, hands like scraggy roots.

They have tea in her living room. He takes his black. She keeps cool, but cymbals keep crashing dead center in her brain.

"The Lagoon wants to know why Bink is still active," he drones.

They issued the kill order three days ago, in an Amway flier.

She's never felt so shot through, so caught unawares; she always thought of intelligence as the capacity to avoid surprise, to anticipate circumstances and compensate accordingly.

The Lagoon believes she's been compromised with an atextual scramble. New sublimbic technique. Prevents her from perceiving Lagoon communications.

Plucker: "Clowns have been field-testing for years; it was hoped Bink might lead you to their R&D people."

He sucks his tea. Clink of cup on saucer.

"The Lagoon wants him neutralized. Immediately."

#

Her Beretta weighs a ton, aimed point-blank at Bink's silver lamé chest.

Warm feeling struggles inside. Her hands shake. Maybe some damned technique's dictating her every move, her every thought, even now.

Window in Bink's room lets in the sunset; pink sky between two ramshackle houses across the street.

Bink sits on the bed, relaxed, even sanguine, hands folded in his lap. He answers all her questions.

Yes, the clowns use subcognitive superliminals. Yes, she's been infected with one of the latest. Temporary effect. Yes, his mission had been to lure her out--he sounds apologetic.

"I haven't turned you over," he says. "I want to help you."

Her hand sweats on gunmetal. "Who's your supplier?"

#

Just another neo-colonial in the upscale Canal District, except for the peeling paint, the tangled lawn, and the pervading cheese-smell.

Inside, a repository of newspapers, magazines, pizza boxes, flotsam, neatly stacked to the ceiling, blocking the windows. Leftover floor space is a maze, smelling of dust and musk and cigarettes.

"Careful," Bink says, takes her hand, "whole place is booby trapped."

She thrills at his touch, still doesn't know if the feeling's real or programmed, keeps her gun trained on the small of his back.

And here are the twins. Bink calls them 'resittes'; pale, genderless, dressed in polyester. Obsessive compulsives, they haven't left the house in years. Typical hoarding behavior. Ignoring CK and Bink, they lounge on an old chesterfield and chain-smoke. Standup ashtrays overflow.

They blink lazy amphibian eyes and she suppresses a shudder.

"The clowns and the Lagoon are so *ancien régime*," Bink says, "they're still struggling over power. Predictable control issue, one tyranny replaces another, ad infinitum."

He turns to search through heaps of trash.

Suddenly, orders leap out at her from the newspapers:

Neutralize resittes and Bink--escape trap door, basement.

A flush of silent thanks--the atextual scramble's finally wearing off. Finger steady on trigger. Still, it's just the Lagoon yanking the leash now, isn't it?

Dammit, who makes up her mind?

Bink's revealed a vintage control panel, battleship gray, set into the wall. He flips a switch and oval screens start warming up.

"The resittes started ages ago, in advertising," he says. "Nowadays, they develop all the nontext, want to make it a heritable trait. The mitochondrial genome rejected it, so they're targeting the X chromosome. Rhinovirus and bed lice as vectors. Everyone ought to be immune from birth."

She's heard of hard-core evangelicals inserting the book of Revelations into their greasy DNA. "Immune to what?" she asks.

Screens flicker to life. Bink turns control knobs.

"To the oldest trick in the book," he says. "For tonight though, we'll settle for a quick cleansing regimen." He hefts a can of True-Value spray paint. Bearings rattle inside. "Referential prophylactic. Once deployed, no Lagoon, no clowns, no labels. That's why I sent the distress call. To both sides.

"The house is surrounded."

CK looks into the screens: men sprint between squad cars and armored vehicles, their vests stenciled with block letters: SWAT, FBI, DEA, EPA, CDC, USPS.

#

The assault is a deadly shambles: gunfire crackles, incendiary devices explode, helicopters crash to the ground. Trenches are dug and stocked with vermin. Executions for cowardice keep pace with battlefield promotions.

The resittes flop down from the couch, dig through newspapers like naked mole rats. Adhesive secretion squeezes from every pore as they wrap themselves in paper; in no time twin larvae twitch on the parquet floor.

Bullets shatter windows, punch through newspaper, plunge into Bink's sparkling chest. He collapses, burgundy blood seeping between clutched fingers. She cries out, dives to his side.

His grease paint glistens with sweat. "And there's no trap door in the basement, by the way," he says, pressing the spray can into her hand.

She doesn't know what to do. She needs orders--and she hates herself for it.

Upstairs, crash and stomp of footsteps, shouting; gorillas running riot in the house.

Smoke creeps around a corner--the house is on fire.

The room shudders, plaster dust falls from the ceiling, a landslide of newspaper slams into her.

#

She's halfway up the chimney, squeezed in tight, eyes sting with soot, knees and elbows bleeding, fingernails torn away. One hand crushes an abandoned bird's nest, the other grips the spray can. Lucky she found the fireplace. Reaching the roof should be a cinch.

Sound is magnified in here; cannonshot, lion's roar, hurricanes up above.

Who's giving the orders now?

She might have a concussion, bleeding in the brain. Better get a CT scan, once this is all over.

Getting hard to breathe, no space, no air, smoke fills the chimney.

Now the spray can quivers in her hand, bearings rattling inside. It sprouts a cable, yards long, whipping back and forth, buzzing and whining, a live wire.

Is this thing *on*?

The can wants out, almost slips away. She holds on tight and it pulls her upwards, acceleration peeling her skin.

She remembers now, harsh light and sound; her own birth in an Econoline van, the passenger seat, the slap of hot vinyl against her slippery face.

This must be the roof--if only she could see. Heat and noise, the smell of cordite and gasoline. Men scream below, demanding surrender, reinforcements, stronger narcotics. The spray can shrills, wants to writhe out of her grip, off into orbit.

Yes, but does it *work*?

#

News teams fan out, piranha school of journalism. Neighbors: "The twins? Kept to themselves." "Never thought they had a meth lab up in the attic." "I heard they kept a little girl prisoner." "Child prostitution." "One helluva night. Sheriff's Department had to blow up every house within ten blocks--so long as they get those terrorist bastards, it's okay with me."

#

Days later, residents report graffiti that produces selective amnesiac euphoria. "I forgot all about that celebrity child-molestation scandal," says one witness. "It was bliss." The neighborhood's blockaded, hazmat and psyche squads swoop in for clean-up and reindoctrination.

Police take a girl into custody, approximately ten years of age. She's been loitering around the ruins in the Canal District, spray-painting obscenities on charred rubble. Says she's looking for bear tracks.

###



bio: Returning author T. Bilgen says "There are so many 'missing cat' notices around my neighborhood, stapled or taped onto lamp posts. Here's hoping these felines all belong to a secret poker club, where they spend their time smoking cigars and sipping brandy together. My fiction has seen daylight in **Not One of Us**, and in **Aoife's Kiss**.

T. Bilgen has other works in **Byzarium**, **AlienSkin Magazine**, and **Full Unit Hookup**.



Dress Up
- by Manfred Gabriel

From Celia's window, I watched the wolf pad through the snow, weaving between the trees that grew forest-thick behind our house. His winter coat could not hide its gaunt frame. The cold made for poor hunting. I thought about putting the pork roast I was defrosting for dinner out on the back stoop, but I knew how stubborn he could be. He would not take it. Turning, I leaned against the windowsill to block the view. Celia sat cross legged in the center of the room. Her toy palomino pranced in circles around her.

"What do you want to be for Fasching?" I asked.

Celia's large hazel eyes remained fixed on the horse. "I'm too old to dress up," she said.

I gestured at the palomino. "You're not too old. It will be fun. Treats and games, like always."

"Only little kids will be there."

"One last time?"

The palomino stopped mid-step, its right hoof high in the air. Celia furled her brow, thinking hard, a look that reminded me of Lowell. "I think I'll be a butterfly."

I could feel a draft at my back. "Are you sure? Wouldn't you rather be a princess?"

Celia picked up the palomino, stroked its blond mane. "I want to be a butterfly."

I folded my arms across my chest. "I don't know if we have a butterfly costume."

"We can use the fairy wings I wore when I was six, antennas from Lowell's old bee costume." Celia's rosebud lips were tight, her normally pale skin flushed. "It's either a butterfly or I don't go at all."

I sighed, looked behind me. The wolf had disappeared, paw prints in the snow the only trace that he had ever been more than a figment of my imagination. If Celia refused to go, the child in her would be lost. But dressing up in a costume that could take wing might not be any better. "Let's see what we have."

Celia set the palomino back on the floor. It trotted over to its place next to Celia's overflowing toy box, amongst the dolls, stuffed animals, and board games with half the pieces missing. It planted all four hoofs flat on the carpet, flicked the fine hair of its tail, and went still.

#

Celia's bunny slippers slapped against the narrow staircase as she followed me up to the attic. I turned the glass knob of the paneled door and we entered. Translucent light flooded the space from the small round window at the gable end of the room. The window's storm was cracked, the pane crusted with ice. Dust motes danced in the air. A labyrinth of cardboard boxes were piled haphazardly, small boxes placed on large ones, like blocks stacked by a toddler, ready to fall in a heap with the slightest touch. Some were labeled, "LPs", "textbooks", "taxes '97 - '99", but most were unmarked - Pandora's temptations.

Celia stood near the doorway while I picked through the boxes, carefully lifting them from one precarious pile, stacking them in

another just as precarious. The pine board floor creaked beneath my feet. "Where could that box be?" I asked aloud.

"Where it always is, in the far corner, near the window." Celia sounded annoyed.

I shrugged. I was delaying the inevitable. The attic was cold, but Celia wore only shorts and t-shirt. She always ran hot - my little Yule log. When she was so much smaller, she would fall asleep between me and Grace in our bed, the heat emanating from her keeping away the winter chill.

The box marked "Halloween/Fasching" in Grace's curved script sat exactly where Celia said it was, where we both knew it would be. I brushed away a string of cobwebs. Grace constantly pestered me to sweep them all away, but spiders in a house were good luck.

I opened the box, began pulling out bits and pieces of costumes past - skeleton masks, fairy wands, harlequin pants with ruffled cuffs. Celia came closer to watch, put her hands on a wine crate filled with musty paperbacks. She kicked off her slippers. The bunnies hopped behind an old exercise bike and disappeared. "Sam thinks it's weird, dressing up," she said.

I took out a ballerina's tutu, held it up. It seemed only yesterday Celia was able to fit into it. Now, it was much too small for her. In the past few weeks, I had noticed how her hips had begun to take shape, how her chest had dimpled with the first hint of breasts. "Did you tell Sam that it's like Mardi Gras, or Carnival in Rio?"

"I don't think she understands those, either."

I nodded. Sam's parents didn't even let her celebrate Halloween. Sam was a nice girl, though. She and Celia had been friends since first grade. I recalled the first day of school, waiting for the bus with the two of them and Sam's mother, a skeletal woman with thin lips and over-sprayed hair. Before Celia hoped

on the bus, I gave her a hug and a kiss. She was going out on her own for the first time. I swallowed hard as the bus turned the corner. She would be back in the afternoon, I told myself. I exchanged pleasantries with Sam's mother, but not much more than that. We had been neighbors for years, but never connected. It wasn't because she kept giving me that all too familiar look, the one that said, "Why aren't you working, why isn't Grace staying home instead?" No, even in this day and age, that was all too common. The rift between us started when Lowell was young. She had tried to ban Harry Potter books from the public library. All magic was black magic to people like her. I couldn't help but note that when she put Sam on the bus, her biggest concern was that the bow in her daughter's hair was straight.

Halfway into the box, bits and pieces from a dozen costumes draped on other, surrounding boxes, I found a black cat outfit, white chest, tail stiff, zipper up the back. I held it up for Celia. "You wore this two years ago," I said.

"I'm too big for it now," she said.

I tossed the costume aside, continued rummaging through the box.

"I talk to him sometimes," Celia said.

I knew who she was talking about. "Lowell?" I asked. When we first entered the attic, I tried to avoid the traces of him. But in speaking his name, I suddenly saw him everywhere -- his hockey equipment, his old ten-speed, his baseball card collection stored in Converse shoe boxes.

Celia gestured toward the round window, to the back of the house and the woods. "He's doing okay, really he is. He's the one who suggested I be a butterfly," Celia admitted.

"If it's not your decision--"

"He suggested it. I want it," she said.

I returned my attention to the box. The last time I came up here with Lowell, Celia was a toddler and Lowell was slightly older than Celia was now. We were looking for my old big bad wolf mask. The one I wore to win many a New Year's masquerade contest, Grace in tow in her red riding hood, basket full of Jell-O shots. Half drunk women would come and touch it, pull away. "It feels so real," they would say.

At first, I was anxious for Lowell to have the mask. In past months, he had lost interest in what I had to teach him. We fought constantly - about not doing his chores or his homework, about staying out too late with his friends. "You're both too stubborn for your own good," Grace told me. The mask was something we could share. When he first put it on, he could barely breathe through the tiny air holes. Moments later, his howl shook the rafters.

Unlike Lowell, Celia had never lost her interest in my tricks. Prancing horses, slippers that came to life, stepping into landscapes painted with special watercolors. I was hoping with her it would be different. Grace, ever practical, told me this day was inevitable. I wished she was here instead of at work to help me deal with it.

Rummaging on the boxes' bottom, I found the bee antennae and the pair of fairy wings Celia had mentioned. She snatched the antennae from me, two springs with balls on the ends. She placed them atop her head. They bounced frantically.

The wings were sheer blue and yellow fabric stretched between shaped wire. There was a gap in the wire on one of the wings. The wing was limp, useless.

"Looks like it's busted," I said. I tried not to let my elation creep into my voice. "How about something else?" I held up a princess' tiara.

Celia took the wing from me. She tried to put it back into shape, but it was broken, not bent. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"You're sure this is what you want?"

Celia nodded.

I set down the tiara, took the wing from her. I breathed deep, held it in both hands. I let my fingers run along the wire edges, and as I did, it returned to its original shape.

Celia smiled, the little girl's smile that comes with a puppy's kiss, a new doll at Christmas. She turned her back on me. The wings had safety pins for attaching them to a fairy costume, white tulle that Celia had no need for anymore. My hands shaking, I pinned the wings to the back of her shirt.

Celia spun, arms in the air. "Open the window, Dad."

I shook my head. "It's too cold out."

"Not for me. Open the window, please-"

I unlatched the round window. The hinges creaked, frozen from the ice. A blast of frosty air entered the attic.

A butterfly, wings blue and gold, fluttered by my ear. It weaved around the snare of a spider's web. I held my breath, hoping they would not ensnare her. The butterfly would not be trapped so easily. She flew in a figure eight around the window's opening. For the briefest of moments, I thought she might not leave. But with a sudden zigzag, she changed direction and out she went.

Celia wouldn't be gone long, I told myself. She knew better than to stay out in winter. From below, I saw the wolf watching between trees, its hazel eyes furred, familiar, thoughtful.

A pit formed in my stomach. My mind reeled. What had I done? Was it too late? I stretched my hand out the window, holding my

finger towards the butterfly as if I could catch her. The butterfly fluttered up into the cloudless sky, towards the cold, bright sun.

###



bio: Manfred Gabriel's previous work has appeared in **Writers of the Future**, **Dred**, **Tales of the Unanticipated**, **Tales from a Moonlit Path**, **AlienSkin** and **Not One of Us**.



Texas Fold'em
by Lawrence M. Schoen

Like sensible folk, Left-John Mocker stayed out of Texas. Mostly. He made an exception for Smokin' Sam's card house in Amarillo. The Mocker played cards for a living, and Smokin' Sam's held his luck. Or so he had come to believe.

In all other things Left-John was the pinnacle of rationality. He'd cashed in on the stereotypical stoicism of his Comanche heritage and honed a poker face that gave nothing away. Day to day, game to game, and card by card, he didn't believe in superstition. But luck was something else entirely. Every few years he returned to Sam's, like some kind of recurring Hajj, responding to a call that he alone heard.

The Mocker crossed the border from Oklahoma, leaving the United States behind and entered the Standalone Star State. Texas had been expelled from the union after an experimental chrono-schism pulled it out of the normal time flow. Amarillo hadn't been hit too hard; the ratio generally hovered around twenty to one. Left-John had three weeks before he had to be back in Jersey, which -- factoring in a safety buffer -- gave him a full six hours of play.

Despite the slow time, the card house had a fresh selection of regular players every time he visited, as well as a new "Sam" managing the place, a fluke of some house policy. About the only familiar faces he encountered, time after time, were the dealers. They never seemed to move on.

From the outside, Smokin' Sam's looked like a family restaurant abandoned after a fire, which in fact it was. The stuccoed walls were black with soot and char, the windows boarded over with dark wood and urban runes. Inside, every bit of fire damage had been repaired and every indication of family dining removed. The lingering scent of smoke came from locally grown tobacco.

Sam had replaced the burned and blistered booths of the restaurant with half a dozen round tables, each topped with green felt and surrounded by eight captain's chairs. Track lighting gave full illumination to anyone seated at those tables and left the rest of the interior in shadow. An old fashioned bar complete with brass foot rail ran along the back wall. A handful of waitresses wearing engine-red hot pants, matching half tees, and singed fire-fighter helmets roamed the room serving drinks. A cigar store Indian wearing a pair of opaque sunglasses stood just inside the door. Above its head a needlepoint sampler read

HOUSE RULES:

TIES GO TO LONGEST TEXAS RESIDENCY

A fat man stood to the side of the wooden Indian, reeking of cologne that seemed two parts bourbon and one part swamp gas. He wore a flashing name badge that entreated one and all to "Call Me Sam," and he stopped Left-John Mocker almost before his eyes adjusted to the gloom.

"You can't play here," said Flashing Sam. He stood a head and a half shorter than Left-John and had positioned himself so close he had to tilt his head back, revealing that his thick yellow moustache had its source in his nostrils.

"You discriminate against Indians?" said the Mocker, his face as stone cold as when he lay in bed asleep or sat at a high stakes tournament.

"course not, Indians are welcome. Pros are another matter." Sam held up a data padd. An image of the Mocker appeared above his name on its tiny screen, along with his ranking in the Probability Guild. "You've got jazz master status," said Sam, "a double Coltrane rating. If I let you play here you'll clean out my regulars and move on to your next hustle. No thanks."

"I play here all the time," said the Mocker. "You must be new. Where's Sam?"

"I'm Sam," said Flashing Sam, and pointed to his badge like a sheriff's star. "The last Sam ran off to Tierra Del Fuego with the beer distributor's daughter. This is my place now, and I don't allow no guild members to play here." He took a step back and regarded the Mocker with a well rehearsed sneer, then nodded his head toward an obvious security camera. "And don't even think about coming back in disguise when I'm not here, cuz the facial recognition software will pick you out easy as aces. You've been logged and you've been warned. You show up again and there won't be no friendly chat like now. Got it?"

"Got it." Left-John paused, not considering but not leaving. He paused because even without cards this was still a card game, because he was still holding something, and because there was a pot that he wanted and wasn't ready to give up on. He paused because, being who he was, he knew that there are times in any game for quick action and times to suspend all motion. This was one of the latter. He watched Sam tense and fidget a bit. Agreeing with the man had partially disarmed him; following that up with not leaving had further confused him. Left-John Mocker could almost see the man working it all through and just before Sam reached a decision the Mocker asked, "What if I promise not to win."

"Huh?"

"What if I promise not to win. I just want to play here, Sam. I don't need to win."

"Bullshit! You're shiny."

"Shiny." The Mocker repeated the word with an intonation between question and statement, irony and amusement.

"Shiny as a caddy fresh from the carwash with a slow hand carnauba job," said Sam. "You're holding a double Coltrane rating. You can't help but win. Nice joke. I never met a pro with a sense of humor before."

"What if I give you my word that I won't win."

"You can't," said Sam, snorting.

"Excuse me?"

"Even a pro can't control random chance. That's what makes it a card game. A guild member's word is sacrosanct in a licensed card house; you won't promise something you know you can't deliver."

Left-John Mocker nodded. "Ah. That is a point. Well, then I'm down to my last chip."

"If you've got another play I'll hear you out. You've been more amusement than I expected from you."

"What if I cut you in? No risk to you, only profit if I win."

Sam stopped, everything but his badge. He froze like a bull that's been whacked in the head with a hammer and doesn't know it's dead. When movement resumed it started in his hands. One began making a circular stroking motion that started on either side of his moustache and traced the shape of his mouth, which hung partway open. His other hand dug in the front pocket of his jeans and worked at something it found there. The Mocker said nothing, merely catalogued the man's mannerisms with a choreographer's eye and filed them away with a mental note that whatever else he might be, Flashing Sam was no card player.

"What's the cut?" said Sam.

"Fifty percent."

"Ninety."

The Mocker almost smiled; almost. "Why would I bother to play for only ten percent of the winnings while assuming one hundred percent of the risk?"

"Your reasons don't concern me none. A minute ago you were begging to play just so you could lose. What does it matter if instead of losing you only get a tenth of your winnings? Do you want to play here or don't you?"

"I do. Ninety percent it is. We have a deal."

Sam wiped his right hand on his hip and stuck it out in front of the gambler. "Shake on it."

The Mocker looked at the hand and then shifted his gaze to meet Sam's eyes. "You've got my word," he said. "You don't need my hand. Now get out of my way and find me an open table; I've got to get back to Jersey by the end of the month.

#

Two minutes later Left-John Mocker had traded cash for chips and pulled up a chair at one of the high stakes Hold'em tables. Sam hovered over the table's dealer as he introduced the Mocker to the other players, noting both his membership in the Probability Guild and his jazz master status, babbling on about what a rare privilege and opportunity this was for everyone at the table. Left-John Mocker remained silent through all of it. He nodded to the dealer, a tall drink of water whom Left-John remembered as having been the managing Sam on a previous visit, but whose name tag read Buck. The dealer returned the nod and Left-John turned to study his opponents, all the while rolling a thousand dollar chip back and forth over his fingers.

Several of the other players were pensioners, people who popped over the border and out of the chrono-schism just often enough to pick up their monthly retirement checks, cash them, and then blow them in a single day's gaming in slow time. Under more normal circumstances, Left-John Mocker didn't play against pensioners, which was yet another reason he usually stayed out of Texas. Taking their money just left him feeling unclean.

But this was Smokin' Sam's, and he never won here. That was the point. Left-John Mocker had won games and tournaments at every major card house and casino in Human Space. He knew nearly one hundred different card games, and he could win at every one of them. But not at Smokin' Sam's. He kept his luck here. His bad luck.

When it came to luck, Left-John didn't take the good with the bad. He set the bad aside, stored it up near to bursting, like the proverbial camel, one straw short of a chiropractor, saving it for Smokin' Sam's. Left-John had come to lose and lose and lose and lose some more. He intended to keep losing until he drained the bad luck out of him, so that when he sat down at every other gaming table anywhere else, he could win. Whether it was because of the Texas chrono-schism or just something about this particular card house that he'd made holy in his own mind, something impossible happened here and nowhere else. Rationality met superstition here, and the replicated outcome produced faith. The rules of probability and the law of large numbers met anecdotal evidence, and fell like a casualty of some statistical war. Left-John Mocker had come here to lose, no matter how much he might have to work to do it. A lifetime of professional card playing guaranteed it would be difficult.

Think about it. Ask the first chair violinist of a national orchestra to play an entire performance with an out of tune instrument. Demand a poet laureate to spend an evening speaking in ribald limericks only using single syllable words. Insist that a master painter grip a brush between the cheeks of his ass and fill a canvas, knowing it will hang next to his greatest masterpiece in

some museum. Or simply consider these things, and then feel pity for Left-John Mocker, whose talent and gift and reason for living was to play cards and play well.

He worked hard to lose. He bet when he had nothing, checked when he should have raised, and reraised a check-raise when he should have folded. Throughout Human Space he knew five hundred players who could have seized on any one of these patterns and stripped him of his bankroll in short order. Alas, none of them were present. The players seated at his table didn't believe him.

Instead, they clung to the illusion that he operated under some hidden purpose, convincing themselves they'd misread some subtle detail in the pattern of wagers, or that he was setting them up for a hustle. They retreated from his pointless raises, threw away winning hands, surrendered the blinds to him again and again. With the result that instead of losing, the Mocker won hand after hand.

He strove harder. He invented tells, little gestures that he hoped would appear to be subtle but still noticeable. He drummed his fingers whenever he'd been dealt a pair. He rubbed the bridge of his nose when he bluffed. He yawned and stretched like the king of the forest when he held an unbeatable hand.

And still the other players refused to believe, refused to act on a cornucopia of clues and signals and signposts. They ignored his drumming fingers, folded more often than not when he rubbed his nose, and reraised him over and over with every yawn. And most of the time, they lost. Most. Once in a while, perhaps one time in ten, the random nature of the cards would cause one of them to win a hand, and they would all nod with vindication that they had played him right, no matter the evidence of their dwindling stacks of chips.

After two hours at the high stakes table the Mocker was up more than four hundred thousand dollars, which likely elated Flashing Sam, but did nothing to improve his own mood. Left-John's plan

of accruing bad luck had acquired its own exceptional streak of bad luck, which he doubted counted toward the winning outcomes he needed in the gambling halls beyond Texas.

Play continued. A small crowd of onlookers gathered around the table. Most of them had never seen a ranked Guild member, let alone a double Coltrane player. There were a couple locals, not regulars or pensioners, who remembered him from previous trips. They hung back, sharing winks and smirks, making side bets with the onlookers who took their wagers with embarrassed glee. As time wore on and the Mocker continued to win, they started looking worried.

During the third hour, and despite his best efforts to lose, Left-John Mocker cleaned out three of his opponents. And damn him if they didn't come around to his seat to shake his hand and thank him for the pleasure of giving him their money. The tiny throng cheered the losers as each retired from the table. They were ordinary card players who had sat at a table with a Guild member and maybe even won a hand or two, elevating them to celebrity status. Fresh players vied with one another for the privilege of buying into the table each time a seat opened, as if they too longed for the distinction of losing to him. People can be funny like that.

After four hours of play, Left-John Mocker had won more than seven hundred fifty thousand dollars. Only two hours remained, and far from simply losing his initial stake, he had to lose all his winnings as well. It didn't seem to matter what he did, he still won. Realizing this, he resolved to try one last gambit, and do nothing.

When Buck dealt the next hand, the Mocker didn't bother to look at his cards; when play passed to him he simply bet half the value of the pot. His opponents stared, silent and confused, and even their starstruck minds knew this could not be a trick. Two of the players in line after him called his bet; one raised. The Mocker saw the raise. Play progressed and he still left his cards

untouched. After the flop he bet, was raised, reraised himself, was reraised in turn, and called. He bet at the turn, and again at the river, and when he flipped his cards at the showdown he finally saw them at the same time as everyone else: a trey and six, off suit. One of his opponents had a full house, Queens over nines. Another had a straight. The Mocker with only Queen high crap, had managed to put nearly forty thousand dollars into the pot. And he'd lost. Finally, and substantially, he'd lost. His prospects looked brighter.

He played the next several hands the same way, betting his hole cards unseen, raising and reraising until the showdown. He lost over one hundred seventy thousand dollars and began to breathe easier.

The next hand had Left-John on the button and thus last to bet. As play moved around the table several players bet. Left-John reraised and, despite having seen him lose the last five hands, all but one of his opponents folded, and that one reraised him. When it came around to him, but before he could call or re-raise, again without glancing at his cards, the remaining player rapped his knuckles on the table to get Left John Mocker's attention.

"Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Mocker, but you're taking all the pleasure out of the game." The speaker sat halfway around the table from his left, a middle-aged cowboy who'd kept his black Stetson on when he replaced one of the pensioners at the table more than an hour ago. Buck had introduced him as Earl.

"How's that?" said Left-John as he played with his chips, making a series of fifty thousand dollar stacks.

"There's no heart in what you're doing, in the way you're playing. Are you having a go at us? Looking down your nose cuz we're just card players without so much as a jazz rating among the lot of us?"

Left-John stopped stacking his chips. He tipped his chin up a few degrees. "And what if I am?"

Earl put his hands on the table, palms down and said, "if I thought that, if I thought any man here was using me for sport, let alone using all of us that way, well, I think Texas honor would require me to whup that man's ass to remind him where he was."

The Mocker allowed himself an internal smile that never made it to his lips. "Then it'd be pretty stupid of me to be doing that."

"Yep," said Earl. "And a man don't rise to your level in the Probability Guild being stupid, so tell us what you're really doing."

There's a moment that any professional gambler can tell you about, a moment when you can feel Lady Luck behind you, pressing her generous endowments against your shoulder blade and breathing hotly into your ear. Left-John Mocker had felt that moment many times before. He'd known it at gaming tables in Rio and in Belfast. He'd ridden it during a tournament on Brunzibar. He'd grasped it and felt it slip from his fingers during the last round of play at the Clarkeson embassy on Burke's world. He recognized it now, perceiving it as a faint sensitivity in the tips of his fingers and an awareness at the base of his neck. No doubt about it, Luck was with him. But could he trust it? This was Texas and Smokin' Sam's. This was the home of his luck. He'd never felt the Lady here before, and it occurred to him that under the circumstances she could be a real bitch.

The gambler gambled. "I'm looking for you, Earl," he said. "You called my bluff. That's the kind of stones I came here to see. There's just one more test, to know for sure."

"What's that?" said Earl.

"Whether or not you'll call me when I go all in now." Left-John pushed the remainder of his chips forward, more than six hundred thousand dollars worth.

If Left-John had been the game's big winner, Earl had been the little one since he'd joined the game. He'd done well, but he

didn't have that much in front of him, not by a long shot. Earl looked to Sam, and a nod passed between them that told everyone at the table that Earl was good for it.

"If I call you, I clean you out," said Earl.

"If you call and win," corrected the Mocker.

"If I lose, I'd be giving you almost everything I have in the world."

"That happens a lot in poker.

"You still ain't looked at your cards. You're just living up to your name, and mocking us again."

"My bet's in," said Left-John. "There's no mockery in the pot, just a bit of my money, and all the money I've won from everyone here. You've looked at your cards, and all you have to decide is whether you think you can win the hand."

Flashing Sam slipped around the table, midway between Earl and Left-John Mocker. "That's the biggest pot we've ever had since I've been Sam."

"You think that's gonna scare me off?" said Earl.

"It shouldn't," said Left-John. He'd locked his gaze on Earl and held the other man's eyes. "There're only three things that matter, and only two to worry about, when you're in a heads up situation."

No one spoke. It was like none of the other players or the men and women crowded around the table even existed. Earl didn't so much as blink. "You gonna say what they are?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Left-John held up a single finger. "Your cards." He raised a second digit. "And what your opponent's thinking."

"You said three things," said Earl.

"But only two worth worrying over. The third you can't do anything about."

"What is it?" said Earl.

"Luck," said Left-John, "and it's taken down every Guild member more than once."

"I'll call," said Earl. Flashing Sam handed him a data padd. Earl punched the keys and transferred the full amount of his savings into the padd and slid it to the center of the table with the rest of the wager. "What have you got?"

The Mocker turned over his cards, deuce and seven off suit.

"Dead man's hand," said the player to Earl's left.

Earl revealed his own cards, ace king suited. "Big Slick," said another player. "Best and worst hands in the game."

"Doesn't mean anything," said Flashing Sam. "The flop could be three sevens. I've seen it happen."

The dealer nodded to both players and revealed the flop, five, six, and eight, all spades, the one suit neither player had.

"That's no help to any one," said Flashing Sam.

"The Ace is still high card," said Buck.

Earl gave a nervous nod and Left-John allowed himself to smile. "Let's see the turn," he said.

Buck revealed the fourth common card, a four of spades.

"He's got a straight," said Sam, his whole body practically deflating with relief.

Earl frowned. "Your three things was my cards, what the other player's thinking, and luck," he said. "We can see each other's cards. What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about luck," said the Mocker.

Buck looked first to the Mocker and then to Earl before flipping over the river, the final common card. It was a seven of spades.

"It's a draw," said Flashing Sam, blinking in disbelief. "They both have the same straight flush. They split the pot."

Buck shook his head. "Not here. House rules: no draws. Longest Texas residency wins."

"I'm from Oklahoma," said Left-John. "Where are you from, Earl?"

"New Mexico," said Earl. "I ran into some trouble -- a misunderstanding, you know how it is -- and moved here about two years ago."

"Beats me," said Left-John. "I've only been here the past few hours. Congratulations."

Earl looked stunned. "There's close to two million in the pot. I never won that kind of money," he said.

Flashing Sam slammed his hands flat on the table. "What are you talking about? That sign by the entrance? That's just decoration. It's a draw. They split the pot."

Buck shook his head. "Check your contract. It's in the fine print, under binding traditions and customs. I didn't pay any mind to it myself, back when I was Sam."

"You were Sam?" said Earl.

"Yep, until someone won a big game on a draw hand and invoked the house rule. He bought me out with his winnings. That was five or six Sams ago."

Earl's face lit up. "Could I do that? Buy Sam here out?"

"Why would you want to do that?" asked Left-John.

Earl shrugged. "I've just beat a double-Coltrane guild member for the biggest pot of my life. I don't think it's going to get any better. Might as well go out on top. I can't imagine ever getting that lucky again."

Left-John pushed back his chair and stood up. He had just enough money tucked away in his back pocket to get him out of Texas and back to Jersey. "You never know," he said. "Luck can be funny that way."

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bio: Lawrence M. Schoen holds a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology, with a special focus in psycholinguistics. He spent ten years as a college professor, and has done extensive research in the areas of human memory and language. His background in the study of behavior and the mind provide a principal metaphor for his fiction. He currently works as the director of research and chief compliance officer for a series of mental health and addiction treatment facilities. He's also one of the world's foremost authorities on the Klingon language, having championed the exploration of this constructed tongue and lectured on this unique topic throughout the world. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Valerie, who is neither a psychologist nor a speaker of Klingon.