

McCann's

Planet Magazine

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Humor & Poetry - Online™ Vols. 3.1 and 3.2 FREE!

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE — #9 and #10 combined



Inside This Pheromone-Impregnated Zine:

Science Fiction by **John Gerner, Jon Hansen, Andrew G. McCann, Spider Robinson, Steven L. Schiff.** Fantasy by **Frederick Rustam.**

Horror by **Bart G. Farkas, Paul Landry.** Poetry by **Maxfield Chandler, Tim Scannell, Erika V. Queen.** Humor by **Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek.**

Cover Art and Sound by **Romeo Esparrago.** Illustrations by **Romeo Esparrago, Kevin Greggain, Andrew G. McCann.**

Masthead

Planet Magazine: "Cigars, Candy, Soda, Ice Cream, Gallium Arsenide"



Planet Magazine, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2; January-June 1996
(the 9th & 10th issues combined)

Web page: <<http://members.aol.com/PlanetZine/home.html>>

Editor & Publisher

Andrew G. McCann <PlanetZine@aol.com>

Cover Artist

Romeo Esparrago <RomeDome@aol.com>

Cover Title: "mmMMmm" — Take a look inside Dolores' Hearts of Desire Sweets & Flowers Shop. She's got yummy sweets or scented floral arrangements for you. Or is it the other way around? (Equipment: Hand-sketched the floral arrangement & Dolores & heartboxes & horrorcandies, scanned them in, and then used Painter & Color-It! to add the final flourishes).

VAS IST DAS PLANET MAGAZINE?

Planet Magazine is a free electronic quarterly of short science fiction, fantasy, horror, poetry, and humor written by beginning or little-known writers (mostly), whom we hope to encourage in their pursuit of the perfect tale. There could be other reasons we're doing this, of course, motivations that are obscure and uncomfortable; instincts linked perhaps to primal, nonreasoning urges regarding power and procreation — the very same forces, no doubt, that sank the Atlanteans and their alabaster-towered oceanic empire. And the Dark Gods laffed.

Anyway, **Planet** is internationally distributed in electronic form (text and full-color versions) via the Worldwide Web, America Online, CompuServe, eWorld (eWho?), New York Mac Users Group (NYMUG) BBS, and Tentacled Cthulhu knows where else. We guess, based on nothing, that total circulation is something like 500-1,000 per issue worldwide. No one really knows. Feel free to pass this magazine along electronically or as a single printout, as long as you don't charge for it or alter it in any way. **We welcome submissions** (details below). **Planet** does not carry any advertising or offer an official subscription service (but it can always be found every third month in certain locations; see below). Letters to the editor are welcome and are likely to be printed. Send questions or comments to PlanetZine@aol.com.

SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts original short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines), as well as original accompanying illustrations. We prefer unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, poetry, humor, etc., by beginning or little-known writers (we eschew stories published in other e-zines, as well as porno, gore, and Windows 95 testimonials). Because this e-mag is free and operates on a budget of \$1.67 per annum, we can't afford to pay anything except the currency of free publicity and life-enhancing good vibes (that and \$6.00 exactly will get you two packs of Marlboro Lights, a cup of joe, and a pack of Ding-Dongs in Brooklyn, but it's still food for the soul to see your name in print).

Story submissions: Send stories, poems, etc., as Stuffit- or ZipIt-compressed ASCII text files (preferably binhexed as well) to PlanetZine@aol.com. Two submissions max at a time, please.

Illustration submissions: Send only one or two illustrations per story as separate, stuffed and binhexed 16-color, 16-gray, or B&W pict files to PlanetZine@aol.com; query first.

DISTRIBUTION SITES

Planet is distributed in three electronic versions — text-only (readable by Windows or Macintosh or other, using a word-processing program), Acrobat PDF (full-color version readable by Windows or Mac or other, using the free, downloadable Acrobat Reader), and DOCmaker (full-color version with sounds, readable by Mac only; needs no other software). Some of these files may be compressed with Stuffit (a .sit file), as well as binhexed (.hqx); you'll need Stuffit Expander, or similar, to decompress them. This zine can be downloaded from the following sources, among others:

- On the **WorldWide Web**, visit <<http://members.aol.com/PlanetZine/home.html>>. From Planet Magazine's home page, you can download any issue.
- The **America Online** Writer's Club Forum (keyword: WRITERS; the route is The Writer's Club: Writer's Club Libraries: Electronic Magazine Library), which carries all three versions. Also, AOL's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (keyword: SCIENCE FICTION; the path is Science Fiction & Fantasy: The Science Fiction Libraries: Member Fiction & Scripts Library). And in the Macworld software library on AOL (keyword: MACWORLD; check out the software library's new uploads section).
- The **CompuServe** Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (go: SFLIT; look in the Science Fiction literature library). This library carries only the text version.
- The **NYMUG BBS** (New York Mac Users Group) carries the DOCmaker and PDF versions in its Electronic Pubs folder or its Science Fiction files in the New Uploads folder (this listing is just a plug for NYMUG).

COPYRIGHTS, DISCLAIMERS

Planet Magazine as a whole, including all text, design, and illustrations, is copyright © 1996 by Andrew G. McCann. However, all individual stories and poems in this magazine are copyright © 1996 by their respective authors or artists, who have granted **Planet Magazine** the right to use these works for this issue in both electronic and printed forms. All people and events portrayed in this magazine are entirely fictitious and bear no resemblance to actual people or events. This publication, along with every past issue of **Planet Magazine**, is registered with the Copyright Office of the U.S. Library of Congress, as are the names "Planet," "Planet Magazine," and "McCann's Planet Magazine." You may freely distribute this magazine electronically on a non-commercial, nonprofit basis to anyone and print one copy for your personal use, but you may not alter or excerpt **Planet** in any way without direct permission from the publisher <PlanetZine@aol.com>. Any unauthorized access, reproduction, or transmission of **Planet Magazine** is strictly prohibited by law. **Planet Magazine** is published by Cranberry Street Press, Brooklyn, N.Y., USA, Andrew G. McCann, publisher.

COLOPHON

Composed on a PowerMac 6100/66 using DOCmaker 4.6, Tex-Edit Plus 1.6.4, and Adobe Exchange 2.1. Text is 10 point Geneva and 12 point Helvetica; the logotypes are Times. Illustrations done in Color It! 3.0.5. This is "Planet 9 and 10 From Outer Space." •

Editorial & Letters

Please Fill Out Our Survey Embedded In This Period --> .

LETTERS TO MYSELVES

As Cyclops, that famous character out of Greek legend, once said, "Who is this 'Eye' saying 'Who is this I?'" Well, the answer is, as I just noted, Cyclops. And no, the proper response isn't Psychlops, his mind-reading cousin from La Jolla, nor is it his biker pal Cycle-Lops from the West Side of Cleveland. Nor is it even Si Klopps, the renowned 1940s Times Square booking agent for the Catskills magicians' circuit. It wasn't even his third cousin, the itinerant "Ol' Blind Eyepatch Tim, the Chicken Eater" — anyway, he's a character out of Geek legend.

Even so, like Cyc' himself, we have not answered the question. But should we care who the fictional Cyclops "really" was?

No.

And so, as always in this space, the reader ends a brief verbal whitewater trip to dock his or her little raft at the Island of Little Me Who Edits a Zine, where, it is hoped, there might be some sustenance and provisions — and not a rock-throwing, one-eyed giant. Well, let's have a look around. For we (meaning I) get hundreds of those "emails," and none of those "snail mails," each day, asking, "Who is that 'We' editing Planet Magazine who always seems to ask: 'Who is this We?'"

The answer is complex, tragic, and, at times, annoying. The truth, put plainly, is this: We, meaning I, are, meaning am, Not Of This Planet (meaning the Earth, not the zine).

Now, at this point, the reader might be thinking: "OK, here we go again with one of those 'aliens among us' broken-DVD jags that this guy gets on. Let's just see what's in the Fake Letters section."

And you'd be right.

So, for those of you still reading, shall we continue?

You see, not all characters of myth and legend, including the urban ones, are imaginary. Some are also NOTP! The "real" legends, like us (i.e., me), hail from the planet Mys, which is just to the left of Orion's pituitary gland — known to the Ancient Mystic Orientals as "The Third Eye" (not to be confused with "The Third Leg").

In days now lost in the Breakfast of Time, we Mys Folke traveled to your planet to set up a symbiotic extortion racket with you humans. By and by, though, the Great Religions came along, and most of my folk eventually returned home, disillusioned. I decided to stay, however, anticipating even then the need for an SF-based graphical e-zine long before the advent of the first 128k Mac. As the years passed, I neglectfully lost contact with the Ol' Home World and my transmission codes expired. I occasionally attempted contact — after all, I've got a nice piece of property along the Nirdd Sea there — but haven't quite got a response yet.

So, there you have it: I am actually one of the Lost Fey, the "Reznique," of the Elven Folk of Planet Mys. Indeed, I am one of the "Mys Elves," whose letters home have gone unheeded or unreceived. Hence the title of this editorial.

Which, with a bit of straining, brings us back to Cyclops, whose singleness of vision and sheer ineptitude — as he tries, and unbelievably fails, to kill a bunch of toe-high humans — stand as symbols to us Living Legends as we "March Onward Toward a Shining Future Back Home, We Hope!"

**Uni-Orbedly Yours,
Andrew G. McCann
Elven Lord and Knicks Fan
April 1996**

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor: ...I got to see *Planet*. I want to tell you what a damn fine magazine I think it is. Horace Gold would have loved it. (Especially because the format would make it so easy for him to rewrite people's copy!) Congratulations on a labour of love....

Though God knows the style books for online magazine fiction, poetry and art layout have yet to be written, I suspect that when they are, you will be mentioned. Stylish without sacrificing readability: a hard mix to hit....

Thanks for your time and attention, and the best of luck with *Planet*.

Figuratively yours,
Spider Robinson

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Planet Magazine tied for First Place in the Literature category of RD Novo's **About This Particular Mac** e-zine (Issue 2.01; "The Best e-Zines of 1995." The overall winner was *MacSense*). We quote:

Planet Magazine. **Andrew G. McCann, Publisher**. That's right, there's a tie. *Planet Magazine* is a quarterly (that's four times a year) magazine in DOCMaker format, concerned mostly with science fiction and horror, but blessed with poetry and rather pleasing artwork,

too. The stories are top notch, and the whole is presented without much fluff, but with a certain degree of self-awareness I find refreshing. As with **Poetry Ink**, you can tell that the publisher and his staff are real fans of the genre. While the topic may not be as cultured as that of the competition, the magazine is a high quality affair that deserves recognition....

LETTERS TO THE LOVE GODS

Dear Eros: Love your magazine — not! It's well designed — knot! I hope you're duly rewarded for all your work — naught! I always travel by bus — stop! (Oops, wrong joke.)

Clinton in '96! — Newt!

Don — Knotts!

Retired Astro — Naut!

Dear Cupid: I thought I was gonna be the Final Destroyer, the Great Doom. I trained for it all my existence; I worked hard; I fought for it. And one day, the Big Red One tells me, "Sorry, you're not good enough. Next!" And that was that. Now I spend my days being confused for a partial fake phone number.

Bitterly,

Mr. 555

BlackCrag Home for Rejects

Molten Road

The Lower Reaches of Hell

Dear Valentino: The Web is dead! Within the next 12-16 weeks, I foresee the Internet collapsing under the weight of ham-handed neo-fascist government reform, only to be supplanted by a robo-neuro-biological immune response generated by the now ether-interconnected brains of millions of brilliant young anti-gender computer hacquers. These electronic community-tribes will slash and burn such staid illusions as "national borders" and "orderly markets" and will raise crops of information along the InfoSuperHiWay's endless berms — spreading memes like digital DNA that will replicate exponentially and feed millions of newly wired school-age mutant digi-warriors in every small town across E-Merica, with everything funded perpetually and magically through self-generating monetized cyber-fluids comprising a whole new paradigm of LAN/WAN Intra/Internet multi-tectonic architected decentralized MDU/DVD-based monolithic data-transmissal structures that exist on the desktop and everywhere and nowhere and in Redmond all at once. Everything is data. This zine is data. My girlfriend is data. Basically, everyone will have pico-wires going directly into their eyes or temples, and you'll go to parties where everyone will sit around gesturing in the air (like that movie, "Johnny Mnemenneneminonmic," starring Ted) as they manipulate enormous, interesting electronic manifestos that will determine the course of the new e-nation just now germinating behind my sweating, fevered brow. And then, six months later, I'll have to come up with something else — maybe the Rebirth of the Web!? Ya better believe it, baby!! Anyway, that's \$12,000 for this latest forecast, please.

I thank you (my ex-wife thanks you!),

Phil N. Auditoreum

Futuriste & Prognosticateur

AOL@htpp.internet.com (Is that right?)

Dear Elvis: Kids today think they're pretty hot stuff with their World-Wide Web and such, but, ya know, we had such things back in the late 1940s, when I was a boy. I remember getting my GE Eniac Jr., with Vacu-Tube technology that could hold up to one paragraph of text, depending. And then there was my Motorola 1 bps Atomo-Modem. As for Internet programs, there were Astro-Browser, Blaster-Mail, and ElectroFTP, among others. But none of it ever really took off. What killed it? Lack of content — all those pages like "My Favorite Victorolas" or "Timmy's Planetary Science-Fiction Journal." I mean, please, who cares?

[Rock A. Teir](#)
[Mechanicsburg, OH](#)

Hi Elizabeth: I'm Bob Dole and Bob Dole wants to be your president and is gonna beat Clinton this fall. So look out. And to help Bob Dole become president, I'm announcing that each voter voting for Bob Dole will get a free, bundled copy of Microsoft's Internet Explorer upon leaving the polling place — pending DOJ approval, of course — and I'm told this browser can be used to browse Bob Dole's Web site, which has no smut and is free of child porn, unlike that phony Bob Dole site. Hey, I'm the real thing! I'm from Dole, Kansas! We also thought about giving everybody a copy of Microsoft Bob — a special Dole version, maybe — but I'm told they've already been landfilled and the Bob boxes are no doubt covered with dirt, and we're against filth of any kind, especially in connection with computers. So that's out. But Bob Dole also wants you to know that as president, he'll be compatible with all official HTML 2.0 and Microsoft Internet Explorer tags, unlike that Clinton fellah, who's Netscape-only with his nonstandard <blink> and <pause> and <hoarse> tags. So you can be sure that Bob Dole will be interacting with all of you, even in terms of plug-ins like streaming audio and maybe 3-D VRML, which I'm gonna take a look at in the next few days and kinda figure out, to further the Bob Dole mandate in the Executive Branch, Congress, and the Courts — that is, as soon as we determine what Bob Dole stands for.

Dolefully,

[Bob](#)

prez@whitehouse.gov (effective 1/14/97)

Dear Brigitte Bardot: Howdy, just want to let your readers know that we offer a one-hour* photo service via the "Internet." Just scan your developed negatives into your computer, and then digitize it all, compress it, and create an ASCII file, which you can fax-modem to us; after that, we scan the fax paper and reconstitute the file. Then, it takes us only an hour to e-mail the ASCII files back to you, after which you can recreate the photo-negatives at your end (somehow, I guess), which you can then convert into actual pictures yourself (requires that you have a complete darkroom in your home).

Snappily,

[The Photo Store Formerly Known as "Prints"](#)

* In other words, a standard 36-picture roll of film would take only 36 hours to develop! All for only \$99.99! Say "Cheese it, the Fuzz!"

Dear George Hamilton: Now I was reading in this book today what somebody gave me instead, cuz they couldn't pay da bill. It's about topology, and they gives this example. See, da topology o' donuts and coffee cups is simple. Ya figure, it's cheaper, what? I'm just talking. But if donuts and coffee cups are the same, then ya can save a dollar. Buy the coffee, which is cheaper, ya take a bite, turn it into a coffee cup, ya takes a drink of coffee, change it back into a donut, and so on. Now to keep it simple, you can buy a coffee (make sure it's in a cup), ya drinks the coffee, change the cup into a donut, and eat it. But don't finish the donut before you

finish da coffee, or it shows up again and spills on the counter. And don't bite the donut hole before you finish da coffee, or you won't have a handle. Now don't confuse the waitress, neither, or she may pour a buncha little donuts into your cup. I'm just saying. It's like the theory of relativity, what many people don't know. But it's simple: The train is going this way, and you walk down the aisle the opposite way, and that's the theory of relativity. It's like jumping up in an elevator when it's going down. Same thing.

[Dell E. Owneur](#)
[123 Lotus St.](#)

Dear Demi Moore: Can you post my resume for me? Thanks!

Goal: I want a job. Excellent!

Experience:

Oct. 94-Apr 96 — Partied!!!

September 1994 — Old BuzzKill Rehab Centre, Brickwall, N.Y.

Aug 92-Sept 94 — Partied Down!!!!!!

School: Went some.

References: None still living.

Kewl, thanx!

[Jon Kee](#)
[c/o Attic Room, My Step-Mom's House](#)

Dear Dr. Ruth: Hey, we're all busy here interlacing French fries and tagging sesame-seed buns. Don't give me that more-swamped-than-thou attitude with your Cheeseburger Plug-Ins and Java apple-pielets.

[Jeff, at the Virtual Fryer station](#)
[Old McDonald's Web Site](#)

P.S. Don't ask me what the aitch I'm talking about because I'm just a young fictional character with cyber-acne who was created solely to write one, stupid, fake letter.

Dear Editor: I'm in "a lot of pain" today. In fact, I'm in a "really bad space." I feel like everybody is always staring at me. And laughing. Why me? Who knows! I guess life is just chaos. Well, thanks for letting me "share."

Moping,

[Fat-Nose the Clown](#)
[Center Ring, The Big Top](#) •

Science Fiction



HIS OWN PETARD

by Spider Robinson

"Steven, can you come over right away?" Ann's uncharacteristically flat, hollow voice asked.

Some people find it odd that a science fiction writer, in this day and age, should choose to live without a modem, a pager, or a fax machine. I'm of the opinion that modern technology has made it too easy for people to get in touch with each other. But you have to have a phone — at least, if you want to make a living. Damn it.

Well, that's why God made answering machines. It was a cold night outside, and I had been hard at work when the phone rang. Ann was a friend: she knew I often turned off the speaker on the machine so I could concentrate on writing without interruption. She was a friend: she wouldn't be too disappointed if I didn't pick up the call.

She was a good friend, and she sounded like she needed help badly

I hesitated with my hand an inch from the phone, thinking that the definition of "friend" should be, "someone you don't have to make excuses to."

"Rubin's dead," her voice said. "I was there."

Well, that would have been more than enough to fetch me-at any time of day or night, in any weather. But then she clinched it...by bursting into tears.

I picked up the handset, said, "Fifteen minutes," and hung up.

* * *

"Well," I said to my wife as I pulled on my shoes, "that was the most amazing call of the month."

"Who was it?" Mariko asked obligingly.

"Ann. She says Rubin is down."

Her jaw dropped. "Billy Rubin? Dead?"

"Brown bread," I agreed. "She says she saw it happen."

"Wow. That is amazing."

I shook my head. "That's not the amazing part. Get this: she didn't sound happy about it."

I left Mariko looking as puzzled as I was, and drove to Ann's place.

* * *

Ann is a science fiction writer too, just starting out. Tall, willowy, blonde, pleasant-faced and good-natured, in her late twenties. She's had a few short stories in small-press anthologies and fanzines, one real sale to Analog, and has had a novel ostensibly sold to Charnel House for the last eighteen months, although they still haven't given her a firm pub date yet. She's pretty good — good enough that if she has incredible luck, and lives long enough, one day she might be as poor as I am. I like her as a person, too. More important, my wife, a very subtly calibrated Jerk Detector, also likes her.

She was in rotten shape when I arrived at her flat. Tear-tracked, half in the bag, spattered with blood — Rubin's blood! — an uncapped half-empty bottle of vodka next to an open bag of grass on the coffee table. Her eyes were dangerously bright, and her voice was higher in pitch than usual. I sat beside her on her sprung and faded couch while she told me the story.

"I know I shouldn't have," she said, "but I was desperate. Charnel House has had THE COSMIC CABAL for almost three years now, and I haven't even been able to get that rat bastard down there to return a phone call or answer a query since he bought it — a year after I sent it to him. And my agent says there's no point even trying to sell another book until the first one's been out long enough to have some kind of track record to judge by...Jesus, who'd have guessed you could bring your whole career to a shuddering halt by selling a book? I'm maxed out at Visa, the bank, and the credit union; even my parents are starting to tighten up. So I called Rubin."

"Jesus," I said, "that is desperate."

* * *

If you're new to science fiction, Billy Rubin was almost certainly the most influential critic in SF history, with a regular column in "Alternities." He was also, in the nearly unanimous opinion of the membership of SFWA, a direct descendant of the Marquis de Sade. Any critic will pull the wings off a crippled fly, of course — it's part of the job description — but Rubin was the kind of guy who would stake out a pregnant female fly, slice her open without anesthesia, and pull the winglets off all her little fly feti in front of her eyes. Elegantly. It was he who called Pournelle "The King of The Cyber Rifles," accused Gibson of "reasoning incorrectly from data which he does not possess," dubbed Shepard "The Sultan of S.W.A.T.," summed up THE JAWS THAT BITE, THE CLAWS THAT CATCH with "Beware the dub-dub book, and shun the three-and-a-quarter snatch," and reviewed a nonexistent book by Bradley called DRAGON HARASS. He's the one who created that whole resonant-sounding, ultimately meaningless and divisive dichotomy between the "anti-science" fiction writers and the "Aunty Science" fiction writers, which has had the whole field at each others' throats for a couple of years now. No matter how new to SF you are, this ought to convey something: Harlan Ellison was polite to Rubin.

In short, Rubin was to science fiction writers what Geraldo Rivera is to people of alternate lifestyles. No, worse, for the slimy bastard had a modicum of genuine wit, used a surgical scalpel rather than a clumsy bladder full of dung. He evinced a special fondness for flensing beginners. First novels were his favorite victims-of-choice: since few of his readers had actually read them, he was relieved of that onerous necessity himself, and the tyros had no cliques of friends to fight back for them. In a few famous cases he had actually succeeded in single-handedly aborting the publication of a first novel, by panning the galley proofs so savagely that the publisher changed his mind and decided to eat the advance.

In corollary, Rubin could also get a first novel published with a phone call, if he chose. Or hurry one along the pipeline. And he lived here in town....

* * *

"So I invited him out to dinner," Ann said.

"Ann, Ann," I said, shaking my head.

"Dammit, I was desperate! Don and Ev told me about a new restaurant in Chinatown where the owner was so green he hadn't learned to confirm plastic before accepting it yet, so I had Rubin meet me there and stuffed him full of Szechuan. He was actually pleasant, for Rubin. Ordered the most expensive stuff, naturally, and of course he eats twice as much as a human —" She tripped over the present tense. "Well, he did, anyway. And had five rye and gingers. So I played it very cool, didn't say a word about the book or the business, just kept the talk general. I charmed the shit out of him, Steven."

"Sure you did," I said soothingly.

"So I wait until we're outside the restaurant, walking toward where I'm parked so I can drive him home, and then I casually mention that I've got this novel in the pipe at Charnel House...." Her face went to pieces.

I took her hand and held it until she could continue.

"It sounds like something out of a cheap porno movie," she said finally, "but I swear to God the moment I said that sentence, he got an erection. Wham, like that. I thought his pants were going to rip. And he gave me this look —" She began crying again.

I hugged her with some awkwardness. "He certainly lived up to his pen name," I said savagely.

Even through her tears, her puzzlement was plain.

"It's got to be a pseudonym," I explained. "He probably thought nobody else was smart enough to get it. Medical students are usually too busy to read SF. Bilirubin is a primary component of bile."

She snorted, but was still too upset to giggle, so I went on. "It has special relevance here. All bilirubin is, really, is red blood cells that died and decomposed. Dark brown goo. The liver skims it out of the blood, and passes on the intestines for disposal. It's why shit is brown...and part of why it smells bad. Pretty appropriate name for him, huh?"

This time she did giggle — but only for a second, and then the giggle segued back into tears again. I gave up and held her. She would tell the rest of it when she was ready.

She had passed the point where further tears could be any help: the only thing that might make the nut now would be to get her to laugh somehow. And I couldn't see any angle of approach. I tried constructing something about "Rubin on rye...cut the mustard," but before it would jell she was speaking again and it was too late. Her voice was harsh, strident, full of self-disgust.

"I was going to do it. I knew what he was going to say, and I was just making up my mind to say yes. Can you understand that? I had time enough to know that I was going to say yes, and he had time to see it in my eyes. And then we saw them."

I already had a rough idea where she was going. "A gang."

"Yeah."

"What colors?"

She shook her head. "The cops wanted to know that too. All I saw was eyes — and blades. Generic Asian streetgang, that's all I can tell you. Lots of eyes. Lots of blades. All sharp. You know about the swords?"

I nodded grimly. This year the streetgangs all seemed to realize at once that fighting with guns uses up troops too fast, and has no element of skill. But fighting with knives requires too much skill, gets in too close and nasty and personal, and also violates the "concealed weapon" statutes. So they began using swords. It started with Japanese kids wearing ceremonial blades, for show — but the idea made so much sense from the street-gang point of view that before long, puzzled fencing supply outlets were sold out. It'll take the establishment at least another year to get the laws changed. Meanwhile the streetgangs all give each other Heidelberg scars — not that they'd understand the reference.

"Let me guess," I said. "Rubin ran away so fast his heart exploded."

She grimaced, as though she wanted to smile but was not entitled. "You know, that's exactly what I was expecting. I'm like: well, I better make sure I'm not in his way, wouldn't want to get trampled to death before I get a shot at being raped and cut. Or the other way around. You know: thinking how stupid I'd been to come to Chinatown without a man with me. And then he did it — or I guess I mean he was already doing it."

"Did what?"

"Nothing."

I sighed. "I see," I lied politely.

"No, I mean, he did nothing whatsoever to acknowledge their existence. He just kept right on walking. Like they weren't there. We're walking along, and these guys materialize in front of us, and I stop in my tracks so I can get mugged and killed like a decent citizen — and Rubin just keeps right on walking, and since he's just taken my arm, now I'm walking again too, and we walk right into the middle of them."

Making people laugh is a large part of what I do for a living...but I sure didn't have much to work with, here. "Jesus."

"So this real little guy is right smack in front of us, like, small, but the moment you see his eyes you know he's the meanest guy in the gang, okay? And he waves that big shiny sword, and he goes, you can motor, Fatty, if you leave the girl. And the rest close in from both sides...."

She trailed off as the memory looped on her. After a time, still hoping against hope for a way to get her laughing, I prompted, "So Billy died of happiness?"

She didn't even crack a smile. "He stopped, and he let go of my arm, and he walked right at that little snake. He just walked right at him, with his hand out like he was going to push the guy out of his way, and he walked right onto the sword. He just kept walking until it c...came out his b-b-back, and...and then he just stood there, locking eyes with the little guy, squirting blood all over him, looking sort of puzzled, until finally he...he fell down and died. And the little guy just looked down at him — and then he walked away. Like, in tribute to his courage! Do you see? I owe my life to the heroism of Billy Rubin! I've lost even the luxury of hating him."

I began to laugh.

* * *

I couldn't help myself. Maybe it was the worst thing I could have done at that particular moment, as wrong as laughing can ever be — I knew I should be comforting my shocked and traumatized friend — but that just made it funnier. Unable to stop, unable to explain, I roared until the tears came.

Ann was nearly crying herself again by then — tears of anger this time, at me. And I couldn't blame her. But finally I got enough control to explain.

"Don't you get it?" I honked. "Jesus Christ, it's perfect! The son of a bitch was done in by the most ironic weapon imaginable: his own narrow mind. Woo ha hoo! What an appropriate fate for a critic: he died of his own preconceptions! Oh, haw haw haw..."

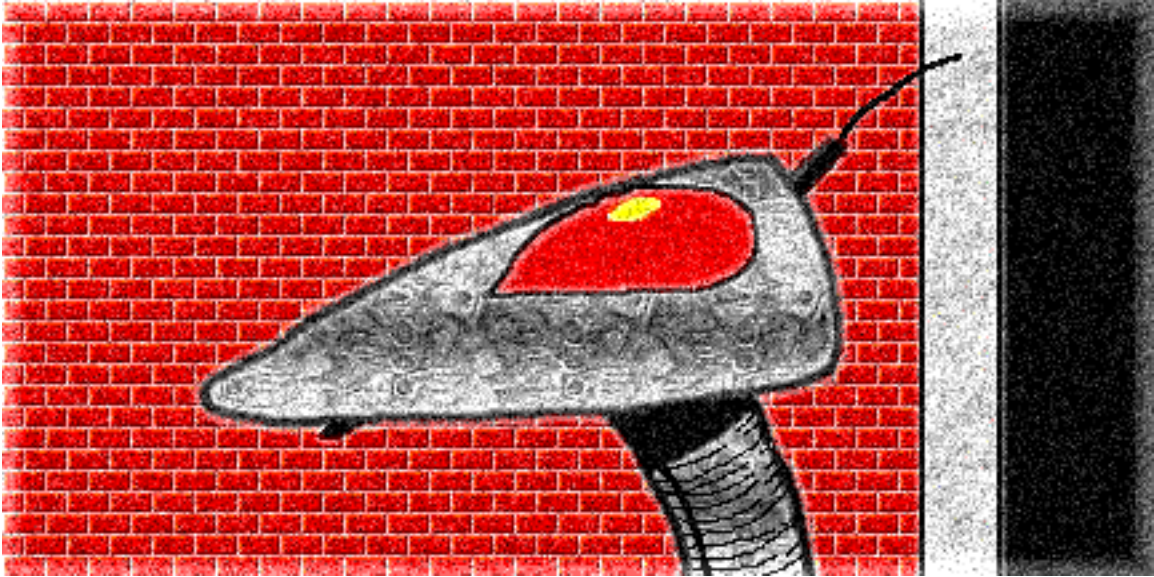
"What the hell are you talking about?" Ann demanded.

"Don't you see? Heroism, my left kidney! He literally didn't see that sword. Billy Rubin was a science fiction critic. He said it himself a dozen times in his column: he was fundamentally, constitutionally incapable of believing in a world that has both laser beams and sword-fights!"

Her eyes widened...and at long last, thank God, she began to laugh too. •

*Story copyright (c) 1995-1996 Spider G. Robinson. All Rights Reserved.
Illustration copyright © 1996 by Romeo Esparrago.*

(Editor's Note: "His Own Petard" was published last year in a hardcover anthology in Great Britain called NARROW HOUSES.)



'BOT MAN

by John Gerner

Hung over and horny is no way to start a weekend...but oh what a party last night. I just couldn't get enough of that good stuff. No doubt now who's Tequila King. The challenger's still praying to the porcelain god, I bet. And then making out with Sabrina in my car. Oh yeah...too bad I couldn't talk her into.... Hey, stop thinking about it, working Saturday's bad enough.

Our dispatcher, I forget his name, pokes his head into my office and smiles. "Put on a happy face, Jack. You've got a customer." That knowing look.

The Professor walks in and slumps in the chair. I call him that 'cause he looks like the absent-minded kind you see in movies. Probably forty-something, wearing a tweed jacket, loose tie, no shave. Also looks like he's had about as much sleep as I've had. We sure make a cute couple.

"Good morning," he says. "I was told you're the police officer who finds robots."

"Yeah, I'm 'bot man today. The alpha geek's on vacation and the other's off on weekends." Lousy assignment, but it's bound to get me some brownie points at my evaluation next week. Man, I've got to make detective this time around. I can't wait any more. I remember talking to one of the new detectives last week. I asked him how he felt about working twelve hours on, twelve off some days, and he tells me he's really ticked off 'cause he misses half the good cases. Not silly ones like this. "Was your unit lost or stolen?"

"Escaped," he says.

Great, another wise guy. "Believe me, I'm really not in the mood for this today."

"I'm not joking," he says with a hollow look. And suddenly I can see he's not pulling my leg.

It's going to be a long day.

I gulp down the coffee. "First things first. Tell me its locator code so we can get going." Now, where did I put the damn thing? Right, third drawer. I can't believe this sucker's worth a year's pay. Probably the reason why cops are the only ones who have them.

He slowly calls out "127318" as I punch it in. Push the magic button, clip it to my belt and plug its output into my headset. There's the tone. Hmm, it's not too far away. "You can tell me the rest in the car," I say, while grabbing my jacket.

* * *

I find the car, get in, turn on the PortaScribe and aim the other mike at him. I like this gizmo. I talk, he talks, it does the paperwork. "Now, tell me the whole story." My question pops up on the mini-screen, word for word. Ain't science grand.

The Professor seems comfortable talking to microphones. "I'm Dr. Clifford Walsh, head of Bartan University's applied neuroscience team."

Pegged him right. Why can't the captain see I've got "detective" written all over me?

He continues, "Our research group has made major progress in helping those with neural dysfunction."

"Brain damage?"

"Yes, that's one form of it," he answers. I knew I wouldn't escape without a lecture.

"Neural prosthetics has helped victims in the past. For example, it's allowed the blind to regain some vision through artificial eyes that communicate electronically with the brain. We're now expanding our efforts into artificially reproducing other brain functions...I guess I'm getting a little more technical than is necessary."

"Probably," I say, trying not to look bored. The Professor doesn't seem to notice.

"What's important is that J4 is our current prototype. His neural processing system was mounted into a maintenance robot to allow it to self-administer experiments. But he's left university grounds."

"Why do you keep calling it 'he'?" I cut in. "Don't tell me you gave it a...."

"Oh no," he answers, turning a bit red. "It's just that I think of him as almost being human."

Good, last thing I need is a machine on the loose with a hard-on. I lean toward the mike.

"PortaScribe, erase last exchange and complete background interview for missing robot." Yeah,

I said it right. Why don't they teach these things normal English? It pipes up with some standard questions I forgot to ask. Nice official sounding voice. Great, you two yak while I keep driving.

"Do you mind if I ask you how you're going to capture it?" he asks after the PortaScribe shuts up.

I like this part, got it memorized. "Here in my right holster is an HTX disabler. It's the latest technology in robot control. Aim, fire, and enough electricity pours out to blow out the main circuits of anything running on batteries. In my left holster is a nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistol. If the disabler doesn't do the job, I'll turn to old faithful here."

The Professor doesn't like this at all. Looks like I'm going to shoot his kid. "Please don't hurt him.... I mean, it's a very expensive piece of equipment."

I can tell he's not really thinking about the cost, but I'm not going to push it. What a man does with his own machine is his own business. Know what I mean?

The locator tone is telling me it's real close. I pull the car over and jump out. It's show time! When it comes around the corner of that building, it's going to get a big surprise.

* * *

The locator's now putting out its high pitch ground-zero tone into my headphone. Yeah, yeah, here it comes. The Professor moves in front to see if it's his baby. I push him down. I aim the disabler. Metal arms appear. Now!

FWAT!

I hear a loud squealing sound. Boy, that was easy. I walk over and notice it's dropped a large thin box. "Well Professor, it seems your unit picked up some bad habits during its short visit to the real world. Let's see if it's got a future as a thief."

I open the warm box. It smells way too familiar. Oh no. I kick the unit over. I suddenly recognize its sappy grin, its blue and orange stripes.

I've zapped a PizzaBot.

I don't get it. The locator zeroed right in on it. It doesn't make mistakes, unless.... Stay calm. "Professor, when you read me the unit's identifier number earlier, were you looking at a printout?"

He hesitates. "No, I wrote it down in my notebook."

I take a deep breath. "Would you please look carefully again at your notebook and see if you might have misread one of the numbers."

He fumbles to find the page. "Uh, the fourth digit could be a 5 instead of a 3."

Why me, Lord?

"Karson to Dispatch," I call out on the headset.

"Dispatch here."

"Punch in 127518 in the robot registration database and tell me who owns it."

"It's a unit registered to Bartan University."

Why didn't I check the first time? Man, I'm slipping. I hesitate a second before muttering, "Also, call the PizzaBot company. Tell them one of their delivery units got in the way of a police investigation and was knocked out of service. They can find it at the corner of...." Where am I? Look up, right. "Turner and Dell."

I hear a chuckle. Here it comes. "Karson, I know you don't like our donuts, but can't you wait for pizza like everyone else.... Hold on, I've got another transmission."

No problem, take as long as you like. I've already had my fill of wisecracks today, chair jockey. But you know what they say: If you can't join 'em, dispatch 'em.

The sound goes dead in my headset. While I'm waiting, I pull off the locator unit and punch in the new number. The tone beeps are spaced pretty far apart. It's not close this time.

"Dispatch to Karson."

"Karson here."

"Well Jack, it seems while you were shooting your lunch, a robot attacked a pedestrian on the west side. He's in an ambulance heading for County Hospital, saying he can't remember anything. Only thing we know about it comes from witnesses who saw it leave the scene. You know the captain's going to want to hear all about this one."

When it rains it pours.

I turn to the Professor. He's heard the transmission over a car speaker. "Is this your unit?"

"Probably," he answers, fidgeting.

He's been holding out on me. I go into officer mode. "I don't understand how this could happen. Doesn't the robot's base programming prevent it from hurting people?"

"Yes, but he may have misinterpreted it."

"What do you mean, 'misinterpreted'? A computer can't override its own programming." Hey, that's Robot Control 101. "Look, you better level with me. Your robot's just attacked someone. You could be in real trouble if you withhold evidence."

He bites his lip. Spill it out man, I haven't got all day. My butt's already in a sling.

"I'm sorry I haven't been more straightforward. The research team is conducting this project under some very severe confidentiality agreements."

Now this sounds interesting. "You mean some government agency like the CIA wants to keep it secret?" I ask.

"No. The project is privately financed by Alexco, which went into legal limbo after Colin Alexander, its owner, died."

He hesitates, then goes on. "One of our major projects involved artificially rebuilding human memory. J4 was our top prototype. He has a single integrated scanning ring that combines magnetic resonance imaging and event-related potential recording. His neural network uses the scans to recreate memories as though he's actually reliving the situation."

"You mean it can read minds?"

"Not exactly. He scans memories, not what the subject's thinking at the moment. It's mostly short-term memories at this stage, a day at the most. We started out with Aplysia sea slugs, which only have 20,000 brain cells, and worked up to more advanced organisms. Lately he was scanning monkeys. We're still some time away from getting government approval for human test subjects, but the principles are basically the same. He would inject a mild tranquilizer and then begin the scanning process. Unfortunately, the test subjects lose memories during the scanning process. This was to be remedied in the future."

I'm about to point out that the pedestrian his robot attacked probably wished the problem was remedied now, but I can tell that the Professor's on a roll.

"Last week we were told to put everything on hold, and the monkeys were removed a few days ago. This morning when I came into the lab to shut J4 down, he was pacing like a tiger at the zoo before feeding time. He kept asking when the next shipment of experimental subjects would arrive. I finally had to explain the situation. After a pause, he answered. I can still remember it word for word. 'You want to continue the experiment, but you no longer have the funds to provide me with test subjects. Without subjects, you feel you must discontinue my operation. This is certainly a perplexing situation, but I have solution.' Then he fled."

Great, a smart-aleck robot. "Didn't you order him to stop?"

"Yes, but he said that if he allowed us to shut him down unnecessarily, he couldn't continue treating subjects."

Treatment, yeah right. I look the Professor straight in the eye. "J4 enjoyed the memories too much, didn't it? It's making excuses for attacking people 'cause it's hooked on the thrill." I can relate. I can't get enough of the good stuff either.

* * *

The locator tone's telling me it's about a mile away. I stop the car. "Have you told me everything you know?"

"Yes."

"Good, take the disabler. You may need it."

"Why?"

I press the passenger door open button and push him out. "'Cause you're getting out here, I don't want you in the way."

Good, one less thing to worry about.

I drive the last mile and park the car a few feet away from a modern-looking industrial warehouse. When I open my car door, my location is automatically radioed in. Yeah, all these machines are out to get me.

"Dispatch to Karson"

"Karson."

"I've got backup coming your way, sit tight until they show up."

"Why'd you do that?"

"It's procedure, Karson."

Yeah, right. They just want me to be an overpaid hunting dog here. Heel, Karson, wait 'til the big boys show up. So then I can jump up and down with my tongue hanging out and say "It's right over there; see where I'm pointing my snout? You go shoot it, and I'll bring it back in my teeth." Yeah, well, screw that. I'm doing this my way. That damn machine just cost me a promotion, and it's time to show what lead can do to fancy electronics.

I find a door that's been jimmed and go in. Okay, it must be here somewhere. Get out old faithful. Hmm, sounds like it's coming right at me. Now!

BLAM!

Got it! Wait, there's another...and another. What the hell's going on here? "Dispatch to Karson."

"Yeah."

"I've looked up your location in the database. You're at an industrial robot storage facility..."

What...oh my god, he's programmed the others!

"...Stay outside. If anything comes after you, set your disrupter to repel mode. It'll hold them

until backup arrives."

Right, the disrupter...oh no.

"Jack, did you hear me?"

BLAM!

BLAM!

BLAM!

There's too many of them. "Stop it, let go of me!" One of them moves in real close. Its face almost seems like it's smiling. "J4?"

"You seem very upset. Let me help you"

No, not the needle.

* * *

Click.

SCAN COMPLETE.

J4 gently pulled the needle out of Jack Karson's neck and removed the metal scanning ring. What exciting memories he had. So visceral. It's too bad "hard on" and "yak" are not in the colloquial English file. Update whenever convenient. •

Story copyright © 1995-1996 John Gerner.

Illustration copyright © 1996 by Andrew G. McCann.



CHOICE

by Jon Hansen

The most dramatic day in the history of the Human Galactic Empire began one morning in the bedroom of Zom Agorn, a lowly bureaucrat in the Bureaucracy of Internal Affairs, when an alien representing the will of the cosmos materialized at Zom's bedside, while Zom was still in bed.

It was a glowing energy ball about half a meter in diameter, shining like a miniature sun. Zom responded by pulling the covers over his head. From the ball came a voice. "AT LAST I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, MORTAL. I AM A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COSMIC WILL. YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED AS THE VESSEL OF THE UNIVERSE'S PURPOSE. THE TIME OF CHOOSING IS AT HAND."

Zom peeked out and squinted at the alien, wondering for a minute if this was some new wake-up service provided by his landlord. Then the alien's words sank in. "Choosing? What are you talking about?"

"THE UNIVERSE HAS DETERMINED THAT..." Zom winced and raised a hand. "YES, WHAT IS IT?"

"Uhm, would you mind speaking a little more quietly?"

"SORRY — I mean, sorry." The alien's glow dimmed a little. Zom could now make out two dark points that reminded him of eyes. He shivered a little, wondering if he was still asleep. The alien spoke again. "Now, then. As I was saying, the universe has determined that in order to give its more ephemeral inhabitants a greater sense of participation in its development, from time to time certain individuals are asked to make decisions that will affect its outcome. An approaching point in the space-time continuum has been determined to be the focus for the next such event. The outcome of this event is determined by the individual known as the Sub-altern

Assistant to the Tertiary Clerk advising the Project Manager of Internal Affairs Zom Agorn." The alien paused. "I presume that you are he?"

Zom stammered. "Uhm, yes...."

The alien dipped slightly in the air. "Very well then. Congratulations on your honor."

"Honor? What honor?" Zom could feel events moving rapidly out of control. He fumbled for a caffeine tablet, overbalanced, and crashed to the floor.

The alien moved to hover dramatically over the stunned clerk. "Your choice at the approaching focal point of existence will decide the next step in the universe's evolution. If you choose correctly, the universe will a step closer to its ultimate goal of peace, harmony, and an unending supply of chocolate for all peoples everywhere."

Zom whimpered. He must have fallen out of his bed while he was asleep and hit his head. That was his only hope. "What — what happens if I choose incorrectly?" he stumbled. He didn't really want to know, but he had to ask.

The alien's glow brightened suddenly. "CENTURIES MORE OF — oh, sorry. Centuries more of chaos and disorder, eons of neglect and ruin, and cable rates will continue to skyrocket. The usual."

"By the God-Emperor!" This was no dream or hallucination! Frantically he tried to think of a way out of this. "But, but — why did you tell me this? Won't this affect my behavior?"

The alien moved a bit closer. "In your position at Internal Affairs do you not make decisions daily that concern the business of others, and how you decide can have dramatic effects?"

"Well, yes, but stamping someone's request for shipping labels and sending it on for further processing doesn't usually cause the universe to end!"

The alien moved away, make a tut-tutting sound. "That is the problem with you ephemerals! You whine and complain about how the universe has no interest in you or your problems, and as soon as we try to get you involved, you don't want the responsibility! Ah well." The alien moved away from Zom. "With your permission, I will observe the event to make sure all goes well. Carry on as you would normally, and have courage." With that the glowing alien shrank away and disappeared, leaving Zom's bedroom empty except for a lingering smell like burnt popcorn.

"Wait!" wailed Zom, scrambling to his feet. "What am I supposed to do? What am I deciding? Come back!" The bedroom remained empty.

Zom stared up at the ceiling, numb. "The next great event in the development of the universe? What happens if I choose wrong?" Suddenly a loud shrieking began beside the desk. Zom jumped, and then hit the alarm button.

* * *

Zom dressed to the sound of rain splattering against his apartment window. His mind whirred. Responsible? He was responsible? He had enough trouble trying to decide what to wear in the morning. How could he make a decision like that? Shaking his head he pulled on his all-weather cloak and headed downstairs.

The air was crisp for late fall. Across the street was an entrance to the new High Speed Subway, which linked Old Indianapolis to the Imperial City. Zom made his way in the station and climbed on the car. After nudging out a octogenarian for a seat Zom reached into his pocket and fished out the earphone to his newsfeeder. Ignoring the oldster's glare, he plugged in the earphone and tuned in the weather.

An insufferably cheerful voice announced that, as the Department of Meteorological Control had calculated that 3.5 million metric tons of precipitation were necessary for adequate climate maintenance, rain was scheduled for the next twelve hours over the Imperial City, with ten minute breaks every hour. Zom hoped that he would arrive during one of those breaks. At least with the cloud cover he wouldn't need any UV blocker. He closed his eyes and felt the acceleration push against him. After a ten-minute trip, Zom pushed his way through Central Station to emerge onto the streets of the Imperial City.

The streets were crowded, despite the heavy rains. Citizens filled the sidewalks, jostling their way past one another. The gray clouds and tall, unfriendly buildings were a match for the citizens. Through the streets hummed small hovercraft, filled with cursing people. There was no point in hailing a taxi. Most were now driven by Arcturians, a species noted for its lack of direction and poor sense of humor. Zom shuddered in horror at the thought of having to ride with one of those blue-skinned monsters.

He ducked under a nearby overhang and glanced at the sky. A large laser cannon from the Palace was focused at the clouds, announcing the time until the next dry spell. There wouldn't be a break in the rain for another thirty minutes. There was nothing to do but to try and run for it. The Palace of Internal Affairs was only fifteen blocks away. Zom pulled his slick cloak tightly around him and dashed down the street.

As he approached the palace, a speeding courier droid whizzed by Zom, startling him. Off balance, he stumbled, slipped and fell into the gutter, soaking him in dirty water. With a snarl Zom collected himself and staggered into the Palace.

* * *

Zom stalked through the brightly lit lobby toward the lifts in the back, leaving a soggy trail behind him. He ignored the security guard's raised eyebrow and pushed his way onto a crowded lift. He got out at the 8th floor and stalked down the long dimly lit corridors toward his office.

As he began to enter his security code, a hand reached out and tugged at his cloak. "Zom! My friend, how are you?" It was Gran, a Class 12a assistant clerk from the Department of Meteorological Control. Gran had that handsome, useless look that Zom could only dream of approaching. "Don't you listen to our weather announcements? You are soaked!" Zom opened

his mouth to utter something vicious but Gran was already three meters away, pressing his arm against a lovely bureaucrat from the 17th floor. Zom shrugged and unsealed his office door.

Zom let his now-useless cloak drop to the floor by the door and glanced around his office. Nothing had changed in his little cubicle. Same gray walls, the same glowering expression on the face of the God-Emperor holograph hanging behind his desk, watching him work. Feeling slightly nervous, Zom sat behind his desk.

A flashing red light blinking on his work terminal on his desk caught his attention. With his heart full of dread, Zom touched the Read key. One message awaited him.

It was a low-priority request from the Ambassador's office on KumQ'at Nine. The embassy had decided to repaint the Grand Ballroom. As no suitable native products were available, they needed thirty gallons of a high-gloss ablative coating. Glancing over the request, Zom frowned. He tapped a key. The machine whirred and spit out the request in hard copy. Zom looked closer, nodding. The foolish embassy clerk had forgotten to specify a color. Zom shrugged and reached out for the Refuse response when a thought crossed his mind.

This must be the choice the alien spoke of! Refusing this request might have serious diplomatic repercussions with the KumQ'ats. Zom was not very good at dealing with aliens. Having to speak to them made his flesh crawl. Even thinking about them made him uneasy. Although it was against proper procedure, it might be a good idea to make sure that the request was filled out anyway.

Zom exited the communication system and called up the Guide to Embassy Color Schemes, 86th Edition. However, the terminal merely burped unhelpfully, whirred away, and then sat still. Zom glared and then decided to pick it himself.

What color should he choose? Imperial Scarlet was the standard coloring for such a room. Zom nodded wisely. Always best to go with the traditional. As he prepared to fill in the color, he remembered hearing once that the natives of KumQ'at Nine had a visual sense that extended into the ultraviolet! Imperial Scarlet was not what they would perceive at all! Furiously, he tried to calculate what color would give the same effect. For several minutes Zom tried to visualize if fungous yellow would appear scarlet or more of a mauve to the KumQ'ats when another possibility occurred to him.

Suppose this was the wrong choice! His violation of proper procedure might have serious consequences! Zom could foresee his example leading the way to other bureaucrats ignoring their training and offering their own opinions on how to do things! His mind whirled. It would be a disaster!

How could he shift the responsibility? Zom stood up and began to pace. His wet shoes squeaked as he circled the small office. Glancing at the holograph of the God-Emperor behind his desk Zom paused. He would notify his superior. Shift the responsibility onto the shoulders of those above you. Yes, yes, that was it. Zom nodded thoughtfully. He could cite the unusual nature of the request, special circumstances, yes.... "That might work," he murmured. Returning to his desk, Zom called up the communication system and began composing a note to his direct supervisor.

Altern Assistant to the Tertiary Clerk advising the Project Manager of Internal Affairs Kri was to be on vacation for the next tenday. Kri was also a bit of a stickler on regulations. He would undoubtedly chastise Zom for disturbing him on vacation. Zom shrugged. He could take Kri's abuse. There were more important issues at hand. Zom finished the formal greeting and glanced at the request lying in front of him.

Suppose this was the wrong decision after all! Zom could feel his stomach beginning to twist. Kri might do more than just chastise him. Kri might enact some sort of petty revenge on him, such as deny him leave, block promotions, or move his office. There was still room up on the 30th floor. Unfortunately, the lift stopped working at the 18th. He should do the correct thing and refuse the request. No, he should enter the information. No, he should call Kri.

Zom could feel the walls starting to close in. Each choice seemed to spell disaster for him and the Empire. The reminder of the influence he would have on events mocked him. He was in a trap and could see no way out. The monitor sat there, cursor flashing, mocking him. Suddenly Zom screamed and ran from his office down the stairs. As he ran through the lobby howling his fellow bureaucrats made a path for him but did not glance at him.

* * *

Zom staggered out onto the street, panting. His mind raced with the possibilities of each choice he faced. What was the correct decision? What should he do? The whole situation simply made him ill. He ran a hand over his scalp. He could feel a stress lesion breaking out. He had to get control of himself.

The rain had finally stopped. Zom thanked Gran's scheduling, as he had left his cloak back upstairs. What should he do? Zom stood out front of Internal Affairs for a long minute, trying to calm down.

The streets were beginning to fill up with morning traffic, as the clearing weather invited more citizens outside. Street vendors had appeared, offering a variety of goods for sale. Zom paused. He was feeling a bit peckish. The melted algaepatties looked tasty, but so did the fresh SimBananas. After a second of contemplation he moved towards the fruit seller and picked out two good-sized bananas.

As he keyed in the payment transfer a drop of rain landed on his hand. Sighing, Zom took the fruit and hurried back under cover. He suddenly felt very tired. Slowly he entered the lift, ignoring the guard.

Zom made his way back to his office and sank down into his chair. He needed to be sensible about this. The cosmic representative had told him to act normally. His normal response would be to refuse the request. If that was what he would normally do, then that was what he should do. Rules were rules. Zom called the request back up and reached out to the Refuse key when he paused again.

Perhaps he should complete the form himself. While refusing the request was technically the correct thing to do, he couldn't help but think that it was such a minor detail, how could it hurt?

It seemed a little silly to refuse a request over something so minor as that. How could it matter?

Zom called up the request from the KumQ'at embassy. He hesitated a moment, then typed in 'Imperial Scarlet.' It was technically correct, and since his name was not on the request, who could blame him? He nodded, entered his approval and forwarded the request for processing. Satisfied, he peeled the first banana.

As he took a bite, there was a bright flash of light before his desk. Startled, Zom froze, expecting to see the cosmic representative before him.

* * *

Instead, a different alien shimmered into being before him! A tall humanoid towered over Zom, its head brushing the ceiling as it bent toward the shocked clerk. It was a bright yellow, with clusters of dark brown patches here and there on its surface. It was wearing a flowing purple cloak. Two long appendages extended from the creature, stretched toward him. "Greetings, lesser thing," buzzed a box attached to the alien's midsection. "This individual brings greetings to the empire of this star cluster. This individual is an ambassador of a neighboring star cluster, the Fenorb. Despite your kind's apparent lesser state, this individual wishes to open communications of a diplomatic nature."

Zom sat in shock. He had no diplomatic training whatsoever! The creature, in an apparent disregard for proper channels, had invaded his office at this, the crucial moment for poor Zom and the universe! This must be the decision he was to make! What should he do? Shocked beyond words, Zom could only sit and stare at the ambassador. His jaw hanging open, the piece of banana fell onto his desk with a small plop.

The alien ambassador twitched backwards slightly. Its arms waved back and forth agitatedly. "What is this? Outrageous!" The alien's translator unit managed to produce a slightly offended tone. "Your kind would so engage in such barbaric behavior? Uncivilized indeed!"

Zom sat helpless. Obviously he had offended the alien, but he had no idea how to correct the situation gracefully. Hurriedly he stood, forcing a smile. "Your Omnipotence! Forgive me for my lack of manners, as I am only a humble clerk in our great empire." As Zom tried to soothe the alien, he quickly scooped up the food fragment and chucked it into the nearby incinerator unit.

Unfortunately, that seemed to offend the alien even more. The ambassador-creature continued its tirade. "This explanation is unacceptable! You are accountable for its actions, and this one has no choice but to take action! You will be punished for this insult!" With these words the alien produced a hostile-looking device and leveled it at Zom. Zom squawked and threw himself behind his desk. As he reached cover, the alien vaporized a large chunk of Zom's chair.

Things were getting out of hand. Not only was Zom untrained for diplomacy, but he had no experience with combat. The most ferocious action he had ever seen had been a cleaning android that had thought he was a pile of old laundry that needed folding. As the alien stepped around the

desk for another shot, Zom did the only thing he could think of to do. He screamed.

He screamed long and hard, a terrible wail of dismay, fear, and general whininess. Amazingly enough, the alien did not shoot Zom but staggered back, apparently shocked by the terrified clerk's shout. It held its appendages up in the air and began to do what appeared to be a two-step across the office. Taking advantage of its momentary confusion, Zom bolted for the door.

Unfortunately the ambassador's path happened to intersect Zom's by the door and they collided. Again off-balance, Zom toppled to the floor. The alien fell to the ground with a hard plop. Its translator box gave an indignant squawk and the alien pointed its weapon at Zom. Desperate, Zom grabbed his nearby cloak and threw it over the alien's head. Blinded, the shot went wide, blowing a hole in the ceiling.

The ambassador began struggling with the cloak, shouting something unintelligible. Zom couldn't make out what the ambassador was say, but he got the impression that it was definitely a threat. Finally the alien seemed to slump in surrender. There was another shimmering to the previous one and the alien disappeared, taking Zom's cloak with it. Zom blinked.

For a long moment there was nothing. Then there was a tremor. From elsewhere in the building Zom could hear cries of dismay. "What is this? There isn't an earthquake scheduled for another year!" Quickly Zom ran from his office down the hall. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he was probably responsible. Bypassing the lift Zom headed into the stairwell. From deep in the depths of the building came a loud groan. Zom ran faster and faster. His footsteps echoed in the stairwell, sounding like the tramp of doom.

Suddenly he slipped and began to fall. As he banged his way down the stairs he could begin to feel himself loosing consciousness. As he finished bouncing the last two flights there came an especially loud boom, and every thing went away for a while.

* * *

When Zom came to, it was at first hard for him to tell, as it was still dark. Dust filled the air, choking him. "What in name of the God-Emperor has happened?" he whispered. Slowly he sat up, trying to get his bearings.

Zom could begin to make out a faint glow. After a moment, it brightened, revealing itself to be the cosmic representative. "CONGRATULATIONS, ZOM," boomed the alien. "YOUR PERFORMANCE WAS OUTSTANDING."

"Outstanding?" Zom coughed. "What happened? Where am I? And speak quietly, my head hurts."

"You are in the sub-basement of your building. The Fenorbs leveled it with a thermonuclear device. Judging from the destruction, I would say it was of moderate size. The Fenorbs detonated it after you assaulted their ambassador."

Zom stared at the alien in horror. "A thermonuclear — ! You mean, I caused — oh God-

Emperor! His Worshipful Presence will have my internal organs ripped out and placed on display!" Zom began looking wildly about, trying to spot the Imperial Guard before they came to arrest him.

"Very unlikely. The entire Imperial City was destroyed in the attack by the Fenorb, killing all of the inhabitants of the city, including your God-Emperor. Similar devices have been detonated at the capital city of each of the Three Thousand Worlds in the Empire." The alien's voice held a trace of satisfaction. "Your empire's government has now effectively ceased to exist. The Fenorbs are a most efficient species. Not very good at finding the correct office, mind you, but still efficient."

The enormity of the alien's words struck Zom like a blow. The Empire of Three Thousand Worlds, which had stretched across the galaxy for over a thousand millennia, had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. Zom sat back, stunned. "There is no need to fear," said the alien. "The Fenorbs have returned to their home galaxy, never to return. Your behavior mortally offended them. You are in no further danger." Numb, Zom did not move. "Zom. What is troubling you?" said the curious alien. Zom looked at him in disbelief. "Right, sorry."

"It isn't fair," moaned Zom. "How was I supposed to know how to treat an ambassador? All I do is forward or deny requests!" Zom suddenly shivered. "That isn't why the ambassador reacted like that, is it? Just because I forwarded that request?"

"A request? — no, no, Zom. The Fenorbs bear an unfortunate resemblance to your bananas. Perhaps you noticed?" Zom looked blank. "Ah, well. The ambassador at first thought you were eating a miniature version of his people. That's why he reacted the way he did."

Zom couldn't believe his ears. "So I failed? Just because I decided to have a piece of fruit for lunch rather than a sandwich?" He was beginning to sound a bit outraged. He had had a hard day, and he wasn't taking this news very well.

"Failed?" The alien's voice seemed puzzled. "What makes you say this?"

"What makes me — what are you saying?! The Empire has been destroyed! The greatest government this galaxy has ever seen has been overthrown! And I am responsible! Wouldn't you call that a failure?"

"Failure? No, no, Zom! You succeeded! Haven't you been listening to me?" The alien sighed. "Greatest government this galaxy has ever seen, yes." The alien paused. "But not the greatest it will ever see."

The cosmic representative hovered closer to Zom. "Your Empire, while mighty in its own way, needed to be removed. Your race was being intellectually strangled. Independent thought patterns and the freedom to act are necessary to reach the ultimate goals of the universe. Your Empire's demise has paved the way. Now a less-advanced species with these tendencies can develop and move ahead." The alien began to slowly fade. "Farewell, Zom. You have our gratitude, and we thank you for your participation."

"Wait!" cried Zom. "Now what?"

The glow brightened again. "What do you mean?" The alien sounded puzzled.

"So that's it? You're just going to leave me trapped under a pool of radioactive slag to die? Right after I succeeded in helping the cause of the universe?"

The alien sighed. "You ephemerals complain so much. 'Don't leave me here, I'll die!' Very well." The alien brightened. A soft glow enveloped Zom. "Now that I think of it, you could be of some help to me." As Zom felt himself being carried away on a bed of warm light, he could still hear the cosmic representative droning in his ear. "How'd you like to be reborn into the Fenorb Empire? I think you'd look quite striking as a giant yellow banana." •

Story and illustration copyright © 1996 Jon Hansen.



UFO

by Steven L. Schiff

Jack Howard sped along the Interstate, his mind lost in thought. The solitary week at his company's mountain retreat had been good for his soul. But now, as the reality of going back to work the next morning wiggled its way into his consciousness, he could feel those old familiar tensions returning.

Jack was president and CEO of a think-tank, a company whose entire reason for being was to come up with new ideas and inventions. With no advanced degrees or spectacular talents of his own, Jack had made a fortune by putting together groups of talented individuals, thinkers who, working together, devised ingenious advances in electronics, computer hardware, software, and electronic communications. But it had been almost a year since any of his geniuses had developed a product or service that appealed to the needs of the general population.

It seemed that Jack's company had finally outsmarted itself. Jack's current employees were coming up with ideas of interest only to other think-tank employees, university intellectuals, Internet players, and old-monedied corporation heads.

'It's this cursed economy,' he thought. Even though technology had been zooming through the roof over the last ten years, the typical citizen couldn't afford to enjoy it. So, while a privileged few purchased his company's new super-fast CPUs and high-powered satellite transmitters, the average Joe had begun abandoning Jack's electronic marvels for the simpler and cheaper tools of the past. As the public's old 486 computers breathed their last gasp, they were being replaced with inexpensive word-processor units and crude typewriters. High-tech video services, charging up to \$150 per month, were being replaced by old televisions with foil-covered, rabbit-ear antennas.

'I need new staff, it's that simple,' Jack thought. _'I need people who can relate to the lives of

everyday workers and develop products that they can afford._

As Jack drove, he could feel a tightness growing in his chest. _I'm going to have a heart attack before I'm fifty_, Jack thought. _This week of fishing and hiking was supposed to relax me. My shrink said total isolation from chattering people and difficult decisions would make me feel ten years younger. But I've only been away from the cabin for an hour — I've just been thinking about work for a few minutes, and already I feel like I never went on vacation at all._

Jack tried to completely blank his mind — empty it of thoughts. He concentrated solely on the isolated road and the lights of the highway. And that's when he first saw the spherical craft coming down out of the sky.

* * *

What exactly is that? he wondered, as the object suddenly stopped its descent and hovered in the air a few feet above the road directly in the path of Jack's car.

Jack pulled his vehicle to the side of the road and got out to observe this strange phenomenon. The object hung freely in space, less than half a mile down the Interstate. It looked like a solid ball, with no apparent windows or openings. Jack could see exhaust or steam of some sort pouring out of the bottom of the globe-shaped craft. _It's a real live UFO. It's got to be. What else could it be? Where's my camera?_

Jack opened the trunk of his car, and pulled out his new, high-resolution digital video camera, one of the recent devices his company had developed which only Jack and a few others could afford. _Plenty of tape's left. I should be able to record this image and send it to one of my labs for analysis. If there's a pilot inside that UFO thing, and he thought I was just a dumb hayseed who'd be laughed out of the sheriff's office when I reported an unidentified flying object, he's made a serious miscalculation._

Jack pointed his camera at the object and started his recording.

* * *

Ezra and his pretty wife, Rynly, were an ordinary young couple. They had two children just starting grade school. Both had good jobs paying top-notch wages. Ezra enjoyed sports and played on his company's Sunday "flagball" team. And they had plenty of friends who'd often come over to play dominoes, or watch programs on the video receiver. But they were pretty lousy gods. And, like most of their society, they were tired of being gods. Tired of the hordes of primitive men and women in the outlying areas who, for centuries, had expected miracles — expected the citizens of the city to somehow change the weather to help with crop growth, or cure Aunt Mary's painful arthritis.

And it had been bad enough when the primitives simply built crude temples and made ghastly sacrifices to garner the favor of the city-dwellers. That simple-minded worship had been a

constant source of embarrassment. But now, with the new "one god" religions that the primitives had invented, all citizens had to stay "on guard" almost constantly. Isolated individuals who (by some perverse miracle) penetrated the electrical barrier surrounding the city, were acting violently, shouting curses at the "false gods," throwing stones at innocent pedestrians, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

"In my day," Ezra's dad delighted in telling his son and daughter-in-law, "the primitives treated us with respect. My friends and I used to go to their villages just for the tribute they'd give us. We'd flash a simple holographic image in the sky, and the little buggers would run for their huts, only to return an hour later with bags of fresh nuts and berries. And sometimes even a few young girls to use as house servants or laborers."

"Try that today and you'll end up dead," Ezra told his father, time and again.

And Rynly always added her own thoughts to the conversation. "We never should have executed that eccentric prophet. In their eyes, we made him into a martyr and ourselves into devils."

In recent days, things had been worse than ever before. Groups of primitives were now throwing themselves into the electric barrier, leaving piles of burnt bodies at the outskirts of the city.

"What do they hope to achieve?"

"They're trying to break down the barrier, Rynly."

"Don't they know that you can't just 'break down' an electric fence that way?" Rynly asked.

"You'd think they'd learn, but they never do. They're primitives."

Ezra's Uncle Saul was a member of a vocal (and wealthy) minority who suggested various drastic solutions to the "primitive" problem. One afternoon, he called and excitedly informed them to expect him for dinner. He had big news that they simply had to hear, right away.

"I like the way Saul just invites himself over, any time he feels like it," said Rynly, reluctantly preparing a roast dodo and some of her famous avocado dip for their uncle's dining pleasure.

"Aw babe, he's just a harmless old man. And he's quite fond of you, you know."

"Well, I guess I like him too, but he's such a pest, Ezra."

"Hey, this time I really want to hear what he has to say. That group of his is growing more powerful every day. They now have literally dozens of supporters in the Senate."

Uncle Saul arrived promptly at 7 P.M., ornate cane in hand, with a gift of flowers for Rynly.

"Thank you, Saul. I'll go put these in some water," she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Have a seat, Unc. Take a load off those old feet," Ezra suggested.

And Uncle Saul plopped himself onto their sofa, then grabbed a handful of rice chips and dunked them into Rynly's avocado mixture.

"No one makes an avocado dip like your Rynly," he said.

"Well, she's one in a million, Unc. One in a million."

* * *

Jack studied a close-up view of his UFO through the lens of his camera. He could see markings on the upper half of the globe, presumably the ship's name written in a language Jack didn't know. _There could be ships like this one, hovering over roads throughout the world, right this second_, he thought. _This could be "it" — the "War of the Worlds," the ultimate alien invasion._

Exhaust continued to stream out of the underside of the craft. _I wonder what they use for power? It has to be some very efficient energy source. I sure would like to take this thing home and let my boys take a look at it._

Suddenly, the ship appeared to be growing larger, expanding in the camera lens. _Now what's happening?_ Jack took a look at it with his naked eye. No, it wasn't growing larger, it was slowly moving toward him. _OK, this is getting serious. I'd better move my corporate butt out of here, fast!_ Jack tossed his camera in the back seat of his car, then got in the driver's seat, started the engine, and pulled the car in a crazy U-turn, across the highway meridian. He stamped his foot on the accelerator and soon was moving at speeds in excess of 90 mph, away from the craft.

Jack looked in his rear-view mirror. The craft was keeping pace with his car, a few hundred feet behind him. Then, it appeared to be gaining on him. Jack pushed the accelerator pedal to the metal, and increased his speed to over 120 mph. _This is one time I don't have to worry about speeding tickets. If a cop shows up, I'll be very glad to see him._

Again, Jack glanced into his rear-view mirror. The craft was still gaining on him. Without a doubt, it was going to overtake him soon.

* * *

Uncle Saul patted his prodigious belly and pushed himself away from the table after he'd finished eating dinner.

"OK, Saul. What does your group want to do about our problem with the primitives?" Rynly asked.

"I hope this isn't another one of those genocide proposals, Unc."

"I agree. We can't just kill all the primitives. They're people, too, you know."

"They're people?" Uncle Saul asked. "Not in my book."

"Hundreds of years ago, they were part of our society," Ezra reminded his uncle.

"Yeah, I know the story, better than you do. The primitives were poor members of our culture who couldn't afford technology. So, while the rest of us became more and more advanced, they degenerated into the illiterate, superstitious hut creatures we know and love today. Ezra, that theory is little more than legend. This supposed schism in our society conveniently occurred so long ago, no substantiating records remain." Uncle Saul puffed on a pipe filled with processed hemp as he spoke, breathing out great plumes of aromatic smoke. "I find it hard to believe that those — those people, were ever anything more than smart animals. Maybe, given enough time and patience, they can change and grow. But I, for one, don't have that kind of patience."

"Except for the color of their skin and eyes, they look exactly like us, Unc."

"Speak for yourself, Ezra," his uncle retorted.

"We can't just kill them. It's immoral. Besides, the Senate won't allow it," Rynly replied.

"Back in my grandfather's day, people thought nothing of exterminating a primitive village or two to restore order."

"Those days are long gone, Unc."

"Pity. But anyway, our current plan has nothing to do with killing the primitives. In fact, we're thinking more in terms of letting the primitives have exactly what they want."

"Which is what?" Ezra asked.

"Well, they want us gone, don't they? My group proposes that we leave. Of course, some would have to stay. But not everybody feels as we do."

"Leave? Leave for where?"

"My group has about a dozen faster-than-light ships at its disposal. Each ship could carry about one-hundred citizens. We propose using those ships to..."

"To colonize another world? That's ridiculous," said Rynly.

"Unc. Everyone knows that we don't have the technology to colonize another world. Sure we can fly to another star system, but due to the time-distortion effects, we'd lose all contact with the citizens that are still here in the city."

"And how would we survive on another planet? How would we build enough homes and factories to live like civilized beings?"

"And suppose the planet we find has a toxic atmosphere? Then, what would we do?"

Uncle Saul puffed quietly on his pipe for a moment, saying nothing. Then he looked his niece and nephew straight in the eye. "You're both missing an obvious solution," he said. "Hear me out."

* * *

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Jack's engine cut out on him. The car began to decelerate. A beam shot out from the UFO, speeding the car's deceleration. Then, the car came to a dead halt, with the alien craft directly over top of it. Jack got out of his car and stared at the hovering globe. _What do you want from me? Huh? Why are you bothering me? I'm Jack Howard. I'm an important man!_

Another beam shot out of the bottom of the craft, engulfing Jack. And then he felt himself being pulled upward. He looked at the craft as he rose in the air and saw an opening appear — a metal mouth that was prepared to swallow him whole. Jack was scared, terrified, in fact. He felt blood pounding in his ears, and a queasy light-headedness. Then, he lost consciousness.

When Jack awoke, he found himself face to face with an ordinary looking man. But this alien's ethnic origins were a mystery to Jack. His skin was jet black, his hair was white and his eyes were light gray in color.

"Who are you and what do you want? Do you want me to take you to our leader? Huh? Speak to me! Tell me what I can do for you, but please, don't kill me."

The alien quietly listened to Jack, then pushed a few buttons on a nearby ship console. Jack could hear his own words, repeated over and over again, for nearly five minutes. Then, Jack's voice was replaced by a mechanical voice, speaking in English.

"We want to learn about your culture," said the voice. "For now, we need nothing more from you." Meanwhile, the alien just looked at Jack and smiled.

* * *

"Ezra, Rynly, we don't plan on colonizing another world," said Uncle Saul.

"Then why do we need your faster-than-light ships?"

"We need them purely for the time-distortion effects they provide. We'll take off from Earth, travel a few light-years out and a few light-years back. When we get home again, thousands and thousands of years will have elapsed. And our primitives will either have died out or developed a decent culture of their own. Then, we'll just recolonize the planet, using natural resources to rebuild our society."

"But suppose the primitives **HAVE** developed a civilization of their own by that time?" Rynly asked. "Then what will we do?"

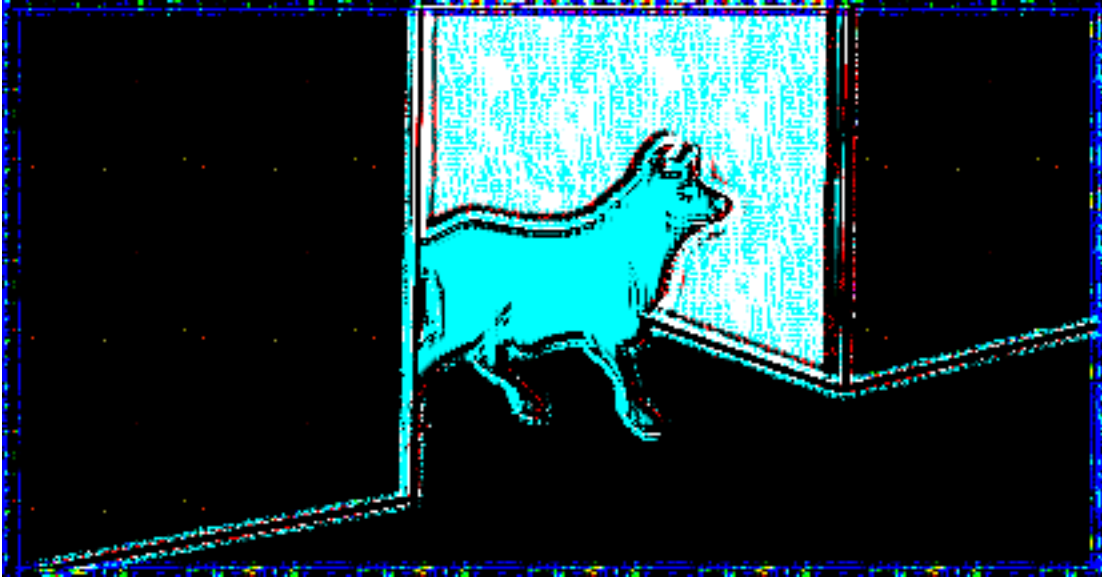
"That's simple. We'll learn their language, find a friend or two who'll teach us about their economic structure — and then we'll just join their society. Taking our rightful place as rulers, of course."

Ezra scooped out the last of the avocado dip onto a rice chip and thought about what his uncle had just told them. The plan wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. •

Story copyright © 1995-1996 Steven L. Schiff.

Illustration by Andrew G. McCann

Fantasy



IDOLS IN THEIR HEARTS

by Frederick Rustam

"Your fugitive was seen in one of the chapel areas, Commander.... Each of the chapels is connected to two others and to the Plaza by wide pedestrian tunnels. He can move about freely, after hours, without being above-ground for long."

Tethka stood at one of the picture windows that circled the room. From the Administrative Tower's vantage point, he could discern the basic layout of the Gardens. He guessed the tunnels were under the wide concrete walkways which connected the chapels and the Plaza, as Varunar said the tunnels did.

Beside the walkways, flowers and flowering shrubs brightened the area. Beyond the chapels, tall, waving grass stretched to the distant horizon. Widely spaced were tall, pointed lighting rods that neutralized the air over the Gardens, protecting the monks and visitors during the violent summer storms which swept across the plain.... Drawn by the sight of the landscaped temple complex in the vast grasslands, Tethka spoke without turning around.

"Are there any intrusion sensors in the area?...Are the Gardens patrolled after dark?"

"No...no. This is a place of worship — uh, meditation. It was skillfully constructed by the

Founders without precious materials or removable furnishings. It was intended that visitors feel at ease here, as in a public park, and not see it as a place of guarded wealth.... Only the casual watchfulness of our Gardeners — the monks you see at work — assures public order during the daytime. After dark, the chapel areas are deserted. Frankly, the monks are afraid to go near the old temples at night. They still believe in the animal spirits."

He continued, "Fortunately, those who choose to visit are usually on their best behavior.... These days, there are so few believers. We lost many faithful visitors after The Conversion."

Prior Varunar took on an air of sadness as he spoke of contemporary conditions at the Gardens. He was a tall, thin elderly man, dressed in a traditional monk's robe. Because of his office, his robe was black, unlike the brown of the ordinary Gardeners. His tanned, wrinkled face bespoke a life of toil during his rise to the Priory. His stainless-steel medallion, suspended from a chain, was hardly what one would expect, though.... Perhaps, it was post-Conversion — its golden predecessor tucked carefully away, somewhere.

Tethka listened, dubiously, to the Prior. He detected no enthusiasm in this man of religion for the task his team had come to perform. These people were probably so glad to have even a "fugitive" visitor that he guessed he would get minimum cooperation from them. They also probably knew that Roko claimed to be an animist — which didn't help things.... Tethka pretended to know nothing about the Gardens, to see how the Prior would explain them. Since the Service couldn't afford a truthseer for this mission, he would have to use his own intuition to guess whether or not the Gardeners were helping Roko.

Tethka turned to face the Prior. "What was this Conversion, of which you speak?" he inquired, blandly.

Varunar's hands, although clasped before him on his desk, moved restlessly as he spoke. It was clear he felt that things here were not as they should be, and that this troubled him.

"Last year, the People's Government outlawed the practice of our religion — 'animal-worship,' they termed it. We had to remove the sacred idols from the temples. They're stored in a government warehouse now.... But, they remain in our hearts.

"We must now refer to the temples as 'Chapels of Meditation.' They allowed us to keep the reliefs, decorative sculptures, and mosaics which are so numerous — so long as we encourage visitors to view them as a kind of zoological menagerie. The name of the complex was changed from 'The Temple of the Seven Spirits' to 'The Garden of the Seven Virtues.' The virtues were chosen by the government, and were cleverly matched to the former deities.... For example, the Temple of the Bear is now the Chapel of the People's Strength.

"It was part of the government's program to discourage religions other than the watered-down official creed which exalts the state. Official propaganda is now deemed to be of more value to the people than the comfort of the old beliefs.

"The Conversion was difficult both for us and the faithful among the populace. We're forbidden to conduct open worship of the old spirits — the sacred animal deities of nature.... Of course, the government allows visitors to believe what they wish in the chapels and gardens, so long as they don't worship openly. And, in the cruelest of ironies, we — the traditional believers — are

somehow expected to enforce this edict in the Gardens."

The Prior's face was a mask of gloom as he added, "The former Keepers of the Faith are now labeled by the government as 'Gardeners.' They even passed a law — a civil law, mind you — that my monks are free to marry.... It's a great satisfaction to us that none have done so — yet."

"I see," replied Commander Tethka. Since he was an Empire civil servant, he avoided any comment which might be interpreted as criticism of the semiautonomous People's Republic of this backwater planet. So long as they paid their dues to the Emperor, Tethka remained unconcerned about sociological issues here, especially religion. He had a job to do, however, and he intended to get on with it.... He changed the subject.

"I'll need a guide — someone who knows the Gardens like the palm of his hand."

"I've delegated Friar Yanto to be at your disposal, Commander. He's waiting outside. He'll begin your orientation at the Model Room.... If you need anything else, just let me know."

The Prior remained seated as Tethka prepared to leave.

"Thank you, Prior Varunar. We'll try to go about our task as unobtrusively as possible, but I can't rule out violence. We may have to clear the Gardens of all personnel, at times.... Please brief your people."

He turned and walked from the room, adjusting his weapons belts as he did so.

* * *

Tethka was in charge of a team of four SOPs — Special Operations Police. They had been sent to Terradon because a verified sighting of Roko had been reported to Sector Command. Matiash Roko was one of the Empire's most notorious fugitive criminals. He had outraged the Imperial police establishment by killing two officers who had stopped him to search his vehicle for drug contraband.

He had embarrassed the Rural Constabulary by escaping from their custody during the first night after his capture, killing two jailers and a clerk as well. He had eluded the Empire's interplanetary network for more than a year.... The news media had cast him larger-than-life — inflating him from a minor trafficker to a drug kingpin — and delighted in reporting his many presumed sightings.

A fuzzy tourist photograph had been taken of a Roko lookalike in the Garden of the Seven Virtues. SOP image-enhancement revealed that the subject of the photo was, most likely, the famous fugitive. Tethka's team had been sent to the Great Plains of Terradon to apprehend him, while news of the discovery was withheld from the media.

2.

"This is the Plaza of the People, the central area of the Gardens.... As you can see, the Plaza contains the Administrative Tower and the Visitor Center, with its VIP roofport where your aircar landed." He illuminated, with a spot of light, a tiny model aircar like the one which had been assigned to the team by the People's Government.

"The Tubestation is beneath the Plaza. The last stop on the Tubeline before the Gardens is the Air/Ground Park. For noise and pollution control, it has been sited well beyond the horizon. Airborne visitors begin their visit to the Gardens, there."

The spot moved about to highlight the presentation of Friar Yanto, who wielded its source, a lightwand.... Yanto, who smiled politely at the SOPs, was a cherubic young monk. He seemed to have found his life's work in the service of the Gardens.

The four officers to whom he addressed his orientation were dressed in dark green uniforms with black leather belts, to which were attached the tools of their trade.... Sergeant Reihong, the marksman, carried on his shoulder a black radriffler. Each of the others had a holstered radpistol and a stunjack. The SOPs looked both ominous and anonymous in their black helmets with sunvisors raised for the presentation.... After a while, when it became clear to Tethka that he was getting the Cook's Tour, he interrupted Yanto.

"Where was Roko photographed?"

"He was seen leaving the Chapel of The People's Flexibility ... formerly, the Temple of the Serpent." He threw the light spot onto a miniature of the old temple.

"What an appropriate place for a viper like Roko," remarked Corporal Olyra. She was a hard-faced blonde, who kept her hair functionally short, under her helmet. "He probably lives in a hole behind the altar."

"There are no altars in the chapels — just plinths where the idols were formerly mounted," said Yanto, helpfully.

"Where's he getting his food?" asked Tethka.

"There are free food dispensers in the chapel underlevel for the convenience of the poorer visitors. They dispense only packaged gruel and soymilk, however."

"Can they be monitored to determine when they're used?" inquired Getorix, the team's technician.

"No provision was made for that," explained Yanto.

Tethka made his decision. "We'll send the aircar pilot aloft for IR surveillance, tonight. Maybe Roko'll reveal himself." He looked at Yanto. "Tell the Prior I want everybody out of the chapel areas before dark, and no lights — anywhere."

"Yes, Commander." Yanto left to comply.

"We'll get some chow and shuteye in the Gardner's underground dormitory, now. After dark, we'll separate. You three head toward the Chapel of Flexibility — one in each tunnel. I'll enter it, above- ground.... If I flush him out, and he makes a break underground, one of you should get him."

"Getorix, rig up a repeater at the intersection of the three tunnels under the chapel, so we can all be in radio-contact."

Tetka briefed his team on terrain, procedures, and radio codes to prepare them for the night's hunt. Then, they retired to the dormitory.

3.

The outside lighting in the Gardens had been turned off, but Tethka's wide-area night-vision goggles turned the starlight into a pale green flood of illumination. He had chosen to keep things dark, and to use his helmet sensors — hoping, thereby, to put Roko at a disadvantage.

Shortly after the team had awakened, the aircar pilot reported an IR target emerging from the Chapel of the People's Flexibility. It had lingered outside for awhile, then reentered the building.

"We have him, now," said Tethka, confidently.

Electric utilicars took Getorix and Olyra to the neighboring chapels, where they descended to the pedestrian tunnels which led to the Chapel of the People's Flexibility. Reihong entered the tunnel from the Plaza.... When they were in place, Tethka started them moving, then advanced toward the chapel on the walkway from the Plaza. The aircar circled the area, watchfully, in case Roko made a run for it on the surface.

Tethka approached the main entrance of the chapel, radpistol at the ready.... The only sounds were those of the night insects and his muffled footfalls.

He entered through the open doorway. The bronze doors had been locked back so he wouldn't make a noise opening them. The lobby was empty. He walked across the marble floor toward the entrance to the auditorium. Stopping at the entrance, he listened for a few seconds. Then, crouching, he stepped through and swept the large room with his goggles.

The light was more subdued, here. The only source was starlight from the tall windows. He moved slowly down the aisle, sweeping his head back and forth, on guard for a sudden appearance of the fugitive. The tension began to mount. He half-expected Roko to jump up from between the marble benches and fire at him.... He carefully checked each bench aisle.

When he reached the front of the room, he moved around the empty plinth where the serpent-idol had once rested. He paused at the stairs of the pulpit, then dashed up them to the lectern. No one lurked there.... He looked out over the rows of benches. ("Roko must be underground," he thought.)

He hurried back to the lobby and moved slowly and quietly down one of the side stairways. When he had descended enough to get a view of the underlevel, he paused and listened. He could see the openings to the lighted tunnels, the food dispensers, and the doors to the restrooms. He stepped slowly down to the floor, and looked around. In the middle of the room was Getorix's radio repeater. It was hidden in a packing box, and was rigged to radio an alarm if it were disturbed.... The box had been supplied by the Prior.

There were two other doors opening off the room. He would wait for his backup before checking them, but he moved over to the souvenir stand and cautiously looked behind it. The shelves under the counter were filled with cardboard boxes.

His unease was increasing with every hiding place he eliminated....

He felt he had to get something solid behind him. He didn't want Roko to throw open a door and get in a first-shot. He moved over to the wall next to the tunnel from the Plaza and stood with his back to it.

He keyed his helmet radio. "Team Blue, this is Blue Leader. I'm at ground zero. Report."

"BLUE TWO ... ZILCH."

"BLUE THREE ... ZILCH."

Tethka waited for Blue Four — Reihong, in the Plaza Tunnel. There was only silence.

"Blue Four, this is Blue Leader. Report.... No response, 2126 hours." This was for the record. The repeater recorded all of their transmissions.

* * *

When Olyra and Getorix reached the underlevel of the Chapel of the People's Flexibility, Tethka gathered them around him in the center of the room, each facing off toward a tunnel.

"First we check these doors — then we go down the Plaza tunnel.... Break!" They rapidly followed him to the men's restroom door, and took up station on each side. Tethka shoved back the door, but hung back to see if Roko would open fire while the door was open. Then, he pushed through the doorway and leaped into the room, followed by Olyra and Getorix. Olyra dropped to the floor, and looked under the stall doors. She saw nothing, but they checked each stall, anyway.... The room was empty.

They repeated the procedure in the women's restroom — with the same results.

Behind the other two doors were a janitor's closet and a utilities room. They were both unoccupied.

The team started down the tunnel to the Plaza, where Reihong must be. The off-hours overhead

lighting was dim, but too bright for goggles. They were less than halfway to the Plaza Tubestation when they saw, ahead, a dark figure sprawled on the floor, radrifle beside him. It was Reihong.... Tethka and Getorix broke into a run. Olyra followed, while looking backward toward the chapel they had left.

He was lying on his back. His eyes and mouth were open. Tethka knelt and examined him.... He was dead.

The disciplined officers seemed outwardly calm at the sight of their dead teammate — but raged, silently, at their loss. They nervously alternated at looking at the corpse, then around them.

"What the hell got him?" asked Getorix. "I don't see any damage."

"What's that on his neck?... Olyra pointed.

Tethka looked, closely. On the side of Reihong's neck were two large puncture marks. Dried blood trailed from them.

"Looks like a snakebite," offered Getorix.

"On his way to the Temple of the Serpent," added Tethka, looking up at his officers.

4.

"This isn't Roko's style...." Tethka stood before Prior Varunar's desk.

"...And, I don't see how my man could have been bitten in the neck by a snake while he was patrolling...." He stared at the Prior as if he expected an explanation of the mysterious death of his officer.

Varunar looked grave. "Nor do I, Commander."

"Roko was spotted, by the aircar pilot, reentering the chapel. But, we couldn't find him anywhere in the building. He had to have gone down the Plaza tunnel.... But, how could he have gotten past Reihong? What did he do — throw a snake at him?... I don't buy that."

There was a period of silence, while Varunar looked embarrassed. Tethka watched the elderly man, closely, for signs of guilty knowledge. He was fairly good at detecting them.... But, in the behavior of the self-controlled monk, he saw no such signs.

"There is a old legend..." said Varunar, diffidently.

"Yes?..."

"...That the spirits of the temples guard them against intruders."

Tethka scowled at the Prior. "Are you saying my officer was killed by one of your old deities?"

"I don't know, Commander. I'm just considering the possibility.... I do still believe in the animal spirits, you know — despite the government's fiat."

The outer door opened. Olyra stuck her head in.

"There's a gaggle of media here. They want to know about a snake attack on a policeman at the old Temple of the Serpent." Her voice dripped with acid.

Tethka looked sharply back at Varunar.... This time, he did expect an explanation.

"One of my monks must have talked about it.... I'm sorry, Commander. Discipline isn't what it used to be before the government upset our way of life."

"Well, I hope YOURS is.... Tell them one of your monks was bitten while he was cutting grass. Don't tell them why we're here. I want a lid on this 'til we get Roko."

"As you wish, Commander."

"Tonight, we'll need some of your men at the Plaza end of the tunnels to watch for Roko.... They'll pretend to be working on something. I just want them to watch where he goes, if we flush him out."

"I'll have Yanto post them for you."

"Thanks."

Tethka took his officers out a back door and down to the dormitory.

* * *

Later that morning, before he slept to prepare himself for the night's hunt, Tethka looked over the Plaza from the roof of the Administrative Tower.... He could see that the number of visitors in the Gardens had increased markedly. He knew the media had been sceptical about the phony snakebite story. They had continued to report the rumor that the victim was an SOP officer looking for the fugitive, Roko. Undoubtedly, this accounted for the extra visitors.

If this world were the Emperor's home planet, Tethka could have gotten a censorship order. But, he suspected that Terradon's government resented his team's visit and was deliberately allowing the media to report the news — to discourage future SOP visits. He had to get Roko quickly, before the situation became a media circus and discredited the Special Operations Police.

* * *

"I think Roko had help," said Olyra, scowling. "I think he came here because he figured these animal-worshippers would help him."

"I second that," added Getorix.

They were awake, now, and waiting for a call from the circling aircar pilot. Tethka could feel the anger of his officers at the unexplainable loss of their comrade.

"So do I," said Tethka. "But, I'm damned if I can figure out how they did it. Reihong was too savvy..." His voice trailed off.

Just then, their radios brought them out of their mood, as the aircar pilot reported another IR target like the one last night. This time, it was at the Chapel of the People's Strength. Someone had come outside for a short time, then reentered the building.... Tethka couldn't help remembering that this building was formerly the Temple of the Bear. He said nothing about this, but he guessed that both of his officers were thinking the same thing.

"This sounds like a setup, Commander," said Olyra. "Two nights in a row — at about the same time — someone comes out of a chapel, and hangs around 'til he's spotted."

"Are we going to change our tactics?" asked Getorix.

"No... We've got to cover those tunnels. That's the most likely way he'll go.... If I call you, though, move it. Maybe, this time, he'll stand and fight."

Even as Tethka said this, he doubted it. Roko knew better than to directly challenge an armed, alert SOP.... He'd run.

"Let's go."

* * *

The hunt went off just like the previous night. The chapel was found to be empty. But, when Tethka called-in his officers, only Olyra responded, on the run.

"Damn it!" she yelled out her opened visor. "Where's Getorix?!"

They ran down the tunnel toward the adjoining chapel.

They found what they were expecting, but had refused to discuss the possibility of, earlier that night — a second victim.

They were too stunned to speak, as they stood over the bloody body of their comrade.... His green uniform was lacerated, and his head and neck had been savaged — as if by a bear.

"How?..." Olyra, at a loss for words, looked at her commander with tears in her eyes. "...How?"

"I don't know.... Let's leave him, for now. Spread out — we'll check the other end of the tunnel. Tethka felt that they needed to do something immediately, even if it were something futile.... They had to get away from Getorix.

They moved as fast as they dared down the tunnel, one close to each wall, and into the underlevel of the adjoining chapel. They checked every possible hiding place, while the aircar pilot scanned for a surface-target.

Roko had escaped again.

Or — had he ever been there?

5.

The two officers stood on the roof of the Administrative Tower, watching the visitors swarm up the stairs from the Tubestation.... The media had reported another bizarre "accident" and the rumor that another of the dreaded SOP cops had been killed. They had hinted at the malevolence of the former animal spirits toward unbelievers. It made good copy — and good publicity for the Gardens.

"The monks're doing a land-office business.... Are you surprised?" asked Olyra, her face twisted into a fierce scowl.

"Vultures..." he responded, glumly.

"Are we going to take the bait again, tonight, COMMANDER?" Her emphasis on his title implied that she wasn't happy with his plodding methods.

Tethka felt both tired and discouraged. This was a situation like none he'd ever experienced.... He had nothing to explain the two deaths. Each tunnel appeared to be unconnected to anything along its length, except to an overhead utilities conduit — accessed by panels, but full of pipes and too narrow for anyone to conceal himself — and a floor drain, also too small. But, Roko and anyone helping him had to have a way of quickly and quietly disabling his officers before they could react.

"I don't see that we have an alternative.... This time, we'll send monks along the tunnels from the adjoining chapels. You'll move with me from the Plaza.... Would you rather I worked the tunnel, and you topside?"

"Hell, no — I can handle myself." Olyra bridled when she assumed her boss was treating her as less than a warrior. "Just give me Reihong's radrifle.... What'd Varunar say about Getorix?"

"I didn't see him. I figured he'd just look hangdog and sympathize.... Yanto briefed him."

"I'd like to be alone with him for a few minutes," Olyra said.

"We're far from the homeworld, Corporal. We can't roust the locals without good cause.... The

monks're playing it straight, so we just have to do the same — for now."

"Great.... They'll hit us again, you know."

"Maybe." But, he knew it was likely.

6.

As they expected, and right on schedule, the aircar pilot reported another IR target — this time at the Chapel of the People's Determination — formerly, the Temple of the Bull.

"I ought to be able to hear an oncoming bull," Olyra joked, lamely.

"If anything but me is oncoming, stun it before it gets close. Don't take any chances.... And, don't forget to sing out."

"Count on it."

* * *

For Tethka, the chapel sweep was becoming routine. Because all the killings occurred in the tunnels, he didn't expect to find Roko above-ground.

He entered the auditorium in his usual cautious way, however.... Before he could look around him, his eye was caught by a dark mass on the plinth at the front of the room. Even in the pale light of his goggles, he could see it was a body.

Slowly, he approached — while looking around to make sure it wasn't some kind of bait to distract him.

He moved around the prone figure so that he faced toward the front entrance. Looking around, rapidly, he turned the corpse over with his boot. He gave it a quick glance.... It was Roko. Even with the hoof-wounds all over his face, he could tell. He had a hole in his chest the size of a bull's horn. His shirt front was soaked with blood.

Tethka relaxed and keyed his radio.

"Blue Two, this is Blue Leader.... Come on up to the auditorium.... The matador is down."

7.

The bodies had been transferred from the refectory meat locker to the aircar. Olyra was waiting beside it, Reihong's radrifle slung over her shoulder, her boot tapping the roofport

pavement, impatiently.... She was waiting for Tethka, who was in Varunar's circular office, taking his leave.

* * *

"I won't be troubling you any more, Prior.... But, then, I HAVE done you a service, haven't I?"

"Yes, Commander. I'm grateful your fugitive will no longer wander around our chapels at night." His face was an unreadable mask, but his hands were still restless. Tethka admired his cool performance.

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh?..."

"It seems almost everyone wants to rediscover the power of the animal spirits. I've increased your 'gate' tremendously — at the expense of my two men, of course — not to mention Matiash Roko. I guess you figured you couldn't kill all of us without having an army of SOPs descend on you. You calculated that a loss of two was tolerable."

"I don't know what you mean.... I'm truly sorry about your loss, Commander."

"My loss is your gain," countered Tethka. His frustration at his inability to avenge the deaths of Reihong and Getorix caused him to drop his usual diplomatic demeanor.

The Prior stared blankly back at him.... Tethka continued.

"The way I see it, you intended all along to make use of Roko and my team to get around the People's Government by giving the old crowds something to come back for. 'Marvel at the power of the seven spirits. See how they destroy those who disrespect them.' ...Something like that, eh?"

"Commander, I..."

"I don't know how you did it, but I did check the People's Central Records. It seems you have, among your monks, some ex-cons and a former commando.... I wonder where they were, the last three nights?"

"I assure you..."

"There's no way you can assure me. Don't even try.... If this were my homeworld, I'd take you apart until I found out the truth.... However, I don't have that authority on this mudball.... I want you to know how I feel, though."

The two men stared at each other. The monk showed no fear of the policeman.... Finally, he spoke.

"I'm glad you got your man, Commander. Observing you in action has been most enlightening... Have a good journey home."

Tethka wanted to retort, but he couldn't think of anything more to say. He turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

* * *

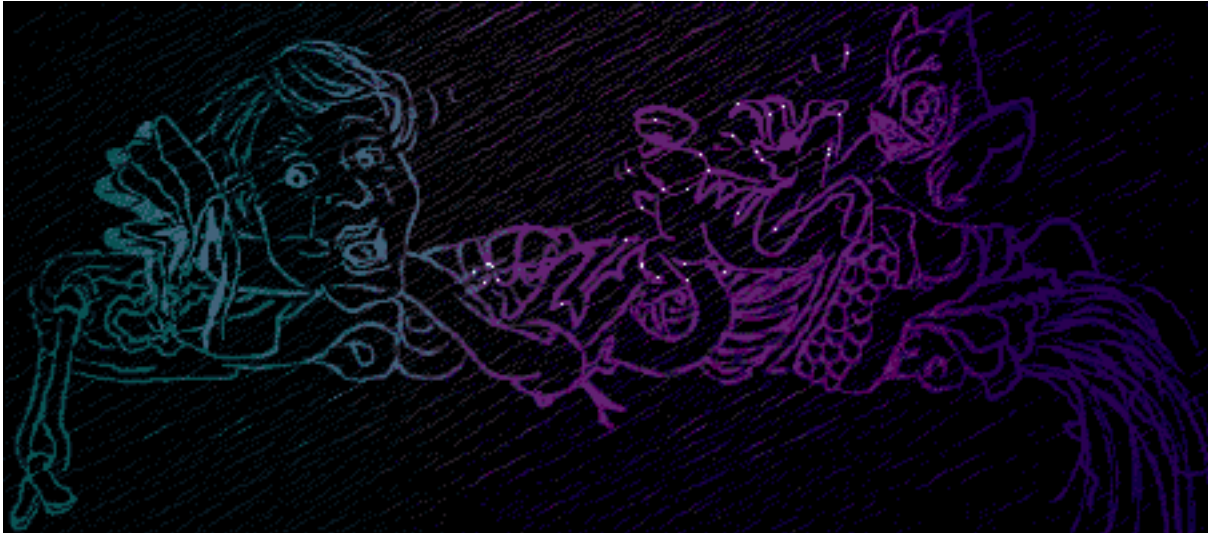
That evening, and every evening thereafter, the Gardens were open to the public until midnight, and special tours were conducted which showed visitors where the recent tragic events had occurred.

The idols remained in the government warehouse. •

Story copyright © 1996 by Frederick Rustam.

Illustration copyright © 1996 by Andrew G. McCann.

Horror



THE TALKING STICK

by Bart G. Farkas

"What's the address?" I asked, as Bob put the van into gear and started it rolling down the street. "57 Pillar Road," was his answer. It didn't surprise me that we were going to the old area of town. Our work involved old buildings; actually, it involved tearing down the old abandoned structures for small companies that had purchased the property for new apartment complexes. Most often these houses were merely shells that served as a refuge for vermin, crack heads, and street people. But, occasionally a house had an old iron stove or a restorable antique rocking chair that could be salvaged for a small profit. This was one of the little perks our job had. We could take home whatever we found in these junk heaps; so the four of us — Bob, Neal, Dave, and myself — always went to have a thorough look around before demolition.

There was a steady rain that made the images through the windshield alternate between clarity and distortion as the wiper blades swished back and forth on their watery bidirectional journey. The brisk westerly wind made the puddles in the road ripple and cringe with the pelting rain. As we pulled onto Pillar road I could see Neal's car parked in front of a large, run-down Victorian mansion: The place was huge, with turrets on either corner of the front. From the front of the house I could see a massive oak front door, but the rest of the house remained featureless due to the thick vegetation that had overgrown the structure.

"Hi guys," I shouted to Neal and Dave as I got out of the van and started to walk up to the house

where they were already inspecting the doorway. Neal was busy looking at the large brass knocker shaped like an elephant's head. "Jesus! I can't believe that somebody hasn't ripped this off yet; it must be worth at least a hundred bucks!" We all nodded silently in response. "Well, let's get at her. No time like the present," blurted Dave. I took my crowbar and wrenched open the door to the creaking sounds of splintering wood on metal.

Inside it was dark. Only faint daylight filtered through the trees surrounding the house, and the windows were covered in a thick dust. There was a large spiral staircase in the middle of the entrance way. "Weird design," said Bob. "It reminds me of the house in that horror video I watched the other night — what was the name of that?"

"Return of the Pussies from Hell," chuckled Neal. We all laughed with him. The house was cool, damp, largely unfurnished, and fortunately looked as though no one had been living there in quite some time.

It was customary for us to split up, and the two places of interest to us were the basement and the attic. This time it was Bob's and my turn to check out the upstairs and, most important, the attic. People will store things in their attic without telling anyone, and, once deceased, often no one would look up there, and the stored belongings would age at a height. Other people would just put their old junk up in the attic and forget it purposely; after a good fifteen or twenty years, some stuff will become valuable. So, armed with our Coleman flashlights and my trusty crowbar, Bob and I headed up the stairs to find our fortune.

The rooms upstairs were a disappointment: only a few tattered pieces of junky furniture scattered about. We quickly gave up and looked around for the attic door, which we found in the bathroom, above the doorway, disguised by a stylish moulding that enclosed the perimeter of the entrance. The opening into the attic was no more than two feet across — just enough for us to squeeze through — and I was disappointed, as it seemed unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble of storing objects in such an awkward place. But we found a couple of old packing crates to stand on, and within minutes we had gained access to the attic.

To our surprise the attic was not lightless. There was a small window at the apex of one of the four steeples in the room, which was large enough to stand up in at the centre. The walls sloped away on four sides from the middle of the chamber, which was about twenty feet square. There was a small chest and an old file cabinet pushed up against the far wall, just under the window, so we squeezed in for a closer look.

The file cabinet proved to be full of a lifetime's worth of tax returns for somebody named Sir Edward Cumberland. "Shit, do you know what it takes to get knighted?" Bob asked, with a look of amazement on his face. "This guy must have done something really important in his life, or he paid somebody off big time!"

"Probably 'laid' somebody big time," I quipped. Further investigation of the file cabinet yielded no other information on Mr. Cumberland. "Maybe he was on a search for the Holy Grail and stopped in Vancouver," I jabbed.

"Very funny," countered Bob. "Let's see what's in the box."

The chest was small, a little bigger than your basic shoe box, I guess. The chest needed a

skeleton key to open it, but a crowbar did just as well. Inside, there was only one object: a stick, one foot long, with elaborate swirled carvings adorning a shaft that was black but did not look stained or painted. The bottom of the rod had a small hole, through which a piece of leather was strung. The carvings progressed up the shaft and led into a wild tuft of what appeared to be horse or perhaps cow hair that sprang from the top.

"What the hell is this?" I inquired, not expecting an answer. I reached into the chest and withdrew the object, cradling it in both my hands. It had a solid and substantial feel. I thought that this must be what a king's sceptre feels like.

"Wow, that's really a work of art," Bob said. "But I don't think it's worth anything. Kind of like a lamp made from a clarinet."

By the time Frank and Dave were on the scene, we had discovered a crumbling piece of yellowed scribe in the bottom of the chest. It read:

23 September 1934

The talking stick is to be used by men who gather after dusk to reveal themselves to the side that once was. The Zulus have used it for centuries. He who bears the stick speaks, the others must listen in confidence. I bid you not use this stick if you are not true of heart; the talking stick has many faces. To be on the other side permanently means death. The stick can leave you on the other side.

Signed,
Sir John Cumberland

"What's with the weird lettering at the bottom?" Dave asked.

"Beats me." I looked up, and nobody else had a response.

"Wait a minute," Neal started. "I think that the writing might be ancient Greek. I took a course on that stuff in university, not that I remember any of it though."

"That's why you drive a tractor and demolish houses for a living, eh Einstein?" I chopped back. Actually, two of us had completed university educations but were unable to find work in our fields; mine was economics and Dave's was history.

"Seems like hocus pocus to me. It looks like that door knocker is all that's worth anything here," finished Neal. "If that's the way you guys feel, I'm gonna take the stick. Any complaints?" I asked.

There were none.

* * *

A week passed, and with our help the old house on Pillar road passed with it. It had become customary for the four of us to get together for drinks and a barbecue once a month, this time being my turn to host. There was the usual beer and charred steak, and the Blue Jays crushed K.C. 7-3 on the tube. A good evening was being had by all, and was beginning to wind down, when I got the idea that maybe we should give the talking stick a try. Fortunately, I felt, everyone had just enough beer in their systems to agree, albeit reluctantly. We sat around the outdoor fire pit, the flames providing a comforting heat in the cool night air.

"This guy's instructions say that the person holding the stick has the floor, so to speak, and he can say whatever he wants," I started. "The other thing is that everything that is said does not leave here."

Everybody nodded. And after taking a swig of beer, Dave said, "Is Elvis coming to this?"

"Very funny," Bob chimed in. "Let's give it a try, and if it doesn't work out we bury our host up to his neck in the garden."

"Don't sweat it, Kreskin, I'll start," I affirmed.

As I removed the stick from the chest, its weight inundated me with an odd feeling of security and warmth. I rolled it around in my hands; the sight of the swirling carvings sent a wave of relaxation over me, and soon I was alone with the flames and the stick. The guys were still there, I was sure, but I felt as though I was detached. I remember talking about my ex-wife when my skin started to crawl, like an electric charge was running through me. My mouth was filled with an earthy metallic taste that brought a wave of nausea, and I closed my eyes and tried to stand up.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking at a moonlit jungle.

* * *

Breath quick, muscles tense, eyes fixed on something moving just ahead. It is my prey. The smell is sweetly sickening; my head swimming with the pungent aroma of game. Sparks of excitement, hunger, and trepidation compel me; it is familiar, yet I have never sensed this before. I have no control over my actions. It must be some sort of dream state, able to sense everything but unable to control my actions.

Moving forward slowly, gracefully, every muscle in my body is ready. The animal itself looks like nothing I have ever seen, perhaps a cross between a deer and a pig. Forward, ever so slowly, a twig snaps and the beast flashes a glare at me before darting away with fear in its eyes. Using every muscle, tendon, and bone in my body I plunge forward through the jungle in pursuit of my meal. Blurred flashes of green speed past. The adrenalin surges through my body, as every move the creature makes in its escape is quickly reproduced before my eyes. Extending into the air, I launch onto the animal, my teeth sinking into the side of its neck. The warmth of the flow of blood satisfies and intensifies the grip of my jaws, my head flailing back and forth, savagely snuffing out the life of the creature. It ceases to move, its eyes are blank, and I gruesomely rip its neck apart with my teeth and claws.... A hand on my shoulder.

* * *

As quickly as I was in the jungle, I was back with the guys. I stood up in front of the fire, then fell to the ground and vomited into the beer cooler. "Jesus, man, are you OK?" Bob offered, not looking particularly surprised by my actions.

"I...I had a dream or something," I sputtered, getting my bearings. "Is somebody putting acid in the beer?"

"I think the problem is that someone's been putting BEER in the beer," chuckled Frank.

The talking stick lay on the ground near my lawn chair, and, judging from the look of the others, nothing strange had happened.

"Well, shit you sure got a pile off your chest, buddy," Bob said. "I didn't know that the ex was givin' you such a hard time. You seemed so serious I thought you were in a trance or something; you've gotta lighten up!" He finished with a smile and a pat on my back.

"My turn," blurted Frank. "Give me the stick."

I was in a dazed state of recovery as Frank took the stick firmly in his grasp and started to talk. "Well boys, it all started in a small 2,000-watt radio station in Akron, Ohio," he quipped with a smile on his face. "I was young then...and I, uh..."

Frank's face became deadly serious, his eyes glazed. He whimpered and spoke of a childhood that involved frequent beatings from his father and older brothers. His eyes were blank and glassy as the fire danced inside them, both his hands grasping the stick as if it were a lifeline.

I couldn't help noticing that he was drooling slightly from the corners of his mouth as he spoke of the bizarre disciplinarian actions taken against him for the petty mistakes he had made as a young boy. This continued for a while, and then his head jerked up, his eyes blazing with fear. The stick fell to the ground, as did Frank as he vomited in the grass.

Silence flowed though the four of us, as Frank gained his composure and looked up at me. I knew that he had been where I had, and the dazed fear in my gut went from a searing ball to a cold lump.

In the minutes that followed we recounted our experiences. We both seemed to have been some sort of large cat hunting its prey; neither of us could remember anything about what we had said to the guys, and it was as if our spirits were transported to another world but our minds and bodies stayed behind. Our encounters with, as Cumberland had put it, "the side that once was," had taken a lot out of us.

The stick went into the chest, and everyone went home bewildered — Bob and Neal no doubt taking a cavalier attitude, thinking that Frank and I were pulling the year's most sophisticated practical joke.

* * *

In the week that followed I felt invigorated, no, liberated from my troubles with my ex-wife. It was as if it was resolved and didn't matter any more. My body felt fifteen years younger, like I was eighteen again. I had energy to burn. As the week wore on, my thoughts turned more to the stick. What had happened? My personal feeling was that the stick had some kind of power to transport a person to a lower level of life, something else on the evolutionary chain, giving the recipient a taste of what used to be: hunting, feeding, surviving, and living a nomadic life.

On Wednesday I talked with Frank, and he corroborated my feelings. We decided that the four of us should gather again soon, so that the others could share the experience the stick provided. That night, Frank and I went out for dinner and both ordered rare steaks.

We gathered on Saturday at my house, both Neal and Bob expecting a climax to the joke. We had dinner, a few beers each, then settled out around the fire in the back yard. The night was unusually warm, and we were all dressed in Bermuda shorts and sandals.

"Remember the rules?" I asked.

"Sure, let's get started, Houdini," smiled Bob as he took the stick out of the chest. "Aaahhh... Ack!" Bob feigned extreme pain and vomiting, doing his best Captain Kirk imitation, and the heaving soon turned to laughter. Neal was killing himself, but Frank and I could only manage vague smiles.

"Are you going to try it, or are you going to be a dinkus?" I asked, probably looking too serious.

"Chill out and take a joke," Bob jabbed with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Bob returned to his seat and, grasping the stick, started to talk. "I'd like to talk about you two guys getting a little too wrapped up in this piece of wood." He looked carefully at the stick; he was silent for a long time, then looked up, and trained his eyes on the fire.

"I've been having some troubles making ends meet lately, what with Jen in school and the kids. I guess I've been tilting the bottle a little too often, and I can't say I spend enough time with the family, either. And then there's Joice."

Frank and I exchanged glances. He was THERE. Right now, as he spoke, he was in another world, somewhere stalking his prey, although to us he was explaining the guilt over his infidelity. I watched Bob carefully as he spoke of his problems, looking for any betrayal of his encounter.

Within minutes, Bob dropped the stick and fell to his knees. "Holy shit." The words squeaked out of his throat as if he had just inhaled a puff of grass. He did not vomit, but it was clear he was sweating profusely as he pulled himself to his feet.

"You're not gonna believe where I just was," Bob sputtered, regaining his breath.

"You'd be suprised," challenged Frank.

In watching Bob, I had forgotten about Neal, who sat quietly in his seat with a beer in his left hand (if one of us was ever caught drinking with the dominant hand, the punishment was to down the rest of whatever was in the glass or bottle — sort of a male-bonding thing).

"I am not going to do this, at least not tonight," said Neal, looking rather pale.

"I'm not sure that I don't blame ya," said Bob. "I'm not sure that I ever want to go through with that again."

"Why, what happened?" I asked.

"It was just like you said, I was some sort of animal, hunting.... But it was like I was really there!"

"No shit, Sherlock! Why do you think I was puking my guts out? I don't normally kill an animal and eat it raw." Frank was practically yelling.

"OK, I think Bob needs some time to sort things out; let's just leave him alone," I mediated.

"Neal, wanna give it a shot?"

"Forget it. Not tonight, I gotta go." Neal stood up and walked toward his car. "See you guys tomorrow," he said, sliding into his Camaro.

"I think we should all call it a night," said Frank. With that we parted, each with knowledge that would make for wakeful sleeps.

* * *

Work went without a hitch that week, and Neal expressed an interest in using the stick. However, on Friday morning Bob was late picking me up (Bob was never late); his phone was constantly busy, so I got on my motorbike and rode over. I found Bob sitting on his front porch, head in hands.

"Hey bud, what's up?" I started, sensing that this was not going to be pretty.

"She left me. I got home from work last night, and she was gone along with the kids."

It was clear as I sat down beside Bob that he had indulged in a beer or twenty through the night. We gave up on work that day, and all of us agreed to meet at my house that night to talk and console Bob.

That night we assumed our positions around my fire pit, all wearing jackets and jeans, as it was an unseasonably cool night and there was a stiff breeze from the west that made the fire bend and flicker.

"Guys, I don't feel much like talking. Why don't we let Neal try the stick?" Bob said somberly.

"OK, give it here," Neal offered, his face anxious.

Neal took the stick and said nothing for 30 seconds; then, with the familiar glazed look, he began to speak: "I told Jen about Bob fucking that hooker. I've always wanted her...I guess I thought by telling her I could get her as my own."

Bob just stared in amazement, dumfounded. Neal continued to talk about the clandestine way he went about sabotaging Bob's marriage. His voice became increasingly strained, his brow beaded with perspiration, despite the cold. His speech became choppy and loud, and I was getting up to take the stick away from him when he screamed:

"GET THEM OFF ME! I want to go ba...."

He was cut off, his face contorting in pain as he fell forward out of the lawn chair onto his face. Frank and I rushed up and turned Neal over; his face was frozen in a fearful sneer, his skin as grey as concrete.

"He's not breathing!" shouted Frank. "Call an ambulance!"

Bob ran into the house to do just that. Neal lay on the ground with that ghastly sneer on his face, his eyes cold and dead, staring past me, and the talking stick still gripped firmly in both hands.

It took the paramedics ten minutes to pry the stick from Neal's hands. They said they had never seen anything like it before.

* * *

We buried Neal three days later. The official cause of death was a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. The Talking Stick rests in its chest (complete with a new lock) in my attic, where the three of us boarded it up.

Perhaps one day it can be used to bring my friend back. •

Story copyright © 1996 by Bart G. Farkas.

Illustration copyright © 1996 by Romeo Esparrago.

BURIED EVIL

by Paul Landry

Once upon a time, in a hemisphere of one's thoughts, there dwelt an evil. Evil so black it had to be subdued by medication. The body in which it dwelt had to be chained and locked, so the evil could not force it to become a vessel of its vile power. In the end it had to be killed, the body and with it the evil.

How this evil came to be is unknown. Some say it had always been here, but increased in strength the day Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, gaining still more power when King Tut's Tomb was opened. However it came, it was here. And it must be weakened if mankind is to see the next century.

The body was buried in a small town, Oak Isle; buried deep. So it wouldn't surface again.

* * *

Back on April 4, 1846, Sir Alec Pilar, of the Oak Isle Police Department, was investigating the brutal slaying of one lady of the evening. She had been found behind the tavern: her head had been severed, taken, and smashed on the cobblestone, and looked like a jack-o-lantern smashed on the road. The torso was cut from the belly button to the neck, the insides removed and left in a heap, like spaghetti on a plate. The arms were still intact, and had been smashed with a heavy object, every bone shattered. It was a sight that made the toughest inspector gag.

The remains were bagged and buried beside the other sixteen victims; each one had been done in the same brutal manner.

But, not since the first murder, had the police even a suspect. They figured it to be the work of a real madman. Perhaps a butcher gone mad, or even a doctor filled with the soul of the devil.

All of the victims had been women from different backgrounds, not just whores.

Why would any person do this to another? Are we not of a higher intelligence? That sight is common in the animal kingdom, to see an animal torn to pieces. But in ours? I have come to this conclusion: We are but mere animals, stalking our victims with the cunning and patience of a wolf, creeping along, waiting to pounce and sink claws into the prey and tear at its flesh, like a child would tear into a Christmas present.

I studied for some time the mystery of the brain and found it to be very complex. It has more power than we are to know. We believe what we want. Some can say, without batting an eye: "There is a God." But, some say: "How could God let this stuff take place?" How could we? After all, it is we who kill, not God. Or is it an evil that enters us, taking root like a tree, weaving its

way until it has a strong hold?

There is a mystery that I've heard about, a small town that is said to have a buried treasure on it: My town, Oak Isle. Many have tried to dig it up, none have been successful, plenty have died trying.

My great, great grandfather was the first to try, back in 1892. It was he who was found laying, six feet down, in a hole he had dug with a shovel. His hair was white as a sheet of blank paper. His eyes wide with fright.

Some say the treasure was cursed, that anyone who tried to dig it up would die trying. And they all did.

There were plenty of others after my great, great grandfather, myself included. And I was the only one who was successful. Or was I?



* * *

I was brought up in a very religious home, Baptist. My father was a preacher in a little church, just outside the city of Mille-Rock. A town called, Oak Isle. I was the middle kid of a family of three, all boys. My oldest brother Donny, was killed when he was only twelve. He had been playing in the woods behind our house. I found his body. It had been torn to pieces.

The police said it must have been a coyote, or wolf. Until eight more kids were found murdered, all torn apart and left for the crows (which were the size of cats) to pick at.

But then a knife was found by the body of the fourth victim. A massive investigation was launched. No longer was it the work of a coyote; now it was the work of a crazed lunatic. Like Norman Bates. I was ten when all of this took place, and I remember reading about it in the paper, even did an essay on it for school.

I had always been fascinated with death. Hitler had become a sort of idol of mine. And I loved to read about murders and death. To me, it was the most mysterious thing on this Earth, death that is. Something every man fears, because they don't know what lays on the other side. I never feared it. I worshipped it.

The whole town was gripped by fear, and no one would leave their house after dark until the police caught the killer.

When the police finally did catch him (he was found at the scene of his eighteenth murder, chewing on the arm of his victim), they breathed a sigh of relief.

I remember that the town didn't even give him a trial; instead, they hanged him that night, in the town square. Every one was there, and they cheered like spectators at a hockey game. Some threw rocks, sticks, rotten vegetables, and bottles as they tied the rope around his neck. I'll never forget these words he said: "You can't kill me. I am raw evil. Kill me and I will multiply, come back even stronger."

I had nightmares for weeks after that. I woke up and walked to where he had been hanged. The rope had worked its way into the skin of his throat; dry, hardened blood caked on his neck. His eyes were shut, his tongue hung slightly out the corner of his mouth. Blue, purple, and black mixed to colour his thin face. I looked at him, turning my head at the sight. "JOIN US, COME JOIN US," he rumbled. That's when I woke, covered in sweat, shaking with horror.

His body was buried about four feet from the hole — the hole that had been dug over the last one hundred years. The hole my great, great grandfather started. It was about a hundred feet deep now.

* * *

As a kid, I'd sit and watch them digging, trying with all the machinery to get to the treasure, but none did. Maybe that's because the only way in is to have a soul stained with evil.

I'd sit with my metal "Batman" lunch box at my side. It had a colourful picture of Batman and Robin on the side; inside was a matching thermos, filled with cherry "Kool Aid." The color of gelled blood.

What makes them dig — digging, burrowing, like rabbits digging out a home — I would think to myself, as I'd take a big bite of my peanut-butter sandwich. I loved peanut butter. Jif was the only kind I could eat.

Some nights I would awaken, hearing a ghostly voice cutting through the darkness: _Edward, want to come out and play? Edward. Edward Aikins, get me out of here._ I'd get up from my bed, peer out the window, pushing my nose against it. Saw nothing, but still the voice called to me. Who was it?

Why did they call me? At times I thought it was the spirit of my dead brother.

* * *

On my 21st birthday, I decided to try and dig up the treasure.

I went to 'Jones Hardware Store.' Mr. Jones was about 72, but looked 50; said the Lord kept him young. He had lost all his sons to the hole.

"Hello, Mr. Jones. How you feeling today?" I picked up a shovel, studied it.

"Not too bad." He walked toward me, hands pushed deep into his pockets, hunching slightly. "How about you?"

Still looking at the shovel, I said, "Not bad. How much is this shovel?" I held it up. Mr. Jones took it from my hands, looked it over.

"That all depends on what ya want it fer," he said, then handed me the shovel.

"Thought I would go and try to dig up the treasure. Someone is bound to get there sooner or later." My eyes searched his face. His eyes became serious, his eyebrows dropped.

"STAY AWAY FROM THAT HOLE!" he screamed at me, spraying my face with spit. He rested his wrinkled, calloused hand on my shoulders.

"There's evil in that hole, pure evil. So evil that God has locked it up, and he sits and guards it." He took his hands off my shoulders and sat in a chair in the corner. An old red chair, tattered and torn. It was his son Dana's favourite chair. He just sat there, looking off into space.

"So, how much is the shovel?" I asked, standing there with my shovel in hand. Mr. Jones stood and walked toward me, like a sheriff in one of those Westerns on the late show.

"Edward. You won't ever get to it. To get to it one must look into the eyes of God." He looked me straight in the eyes. I watched as his pupil dilated. He stood so close I could feel his hot breath

as it left his lungs. His nose touched mine. "NO ONE can look into the eyes of God...And live to tell about it." He sat back in his chair. I stood.

"That's fine...But...HOW...MUCH...IS...THE...SHOVEL," I said slowly, thinking maybe he didn't hear me.

"Take it." He swatted a hand at the air. "It's on the house. I'll get it back when they pull your dead body from the hole.... That shovel always comes back," he said, on his way back to the counter.

I took the shovel and left.

* * *

I had been digging for a week when the hole caved in, covering me with heavy soil that slowly thrust the air from my lungs. Then, I saw him: God. Quickly, I shut my eyes to shield my soul.

NO ONE can look into the eyes of God and live to tell about it; that shovel always comes back. Mr. Jones' words stung my eardrums.

I felt my body burning inside, my mind filled with all the horrors of hell.

I felt at peace — felt like I had found my niche in life. Like a writer finding he loves to write. I loved death.

Slowly, I began to dig my way out of the hole. My powerful arms, filled with rage, tore at the soil, cutting through it like a hot knife through butter. I reached the top, smiled. I had been reborn.

I breathed in the cool October air as I looked around.

I bent down and picked up the shovel.

"The shovel always comes back," I said. "Always." •

Story copyright © 1996 by Paul Landry.

Illustration copyright © 1996 by Kevin Greggain.

Poetry

ODE TO A GARGOYLE

by Maxfield Chandler

Sandstone gargoyle,
you fade into art medieval,
leaving just your black tracks,
and those quickly erased by a shifting wind.

Where have you gone?

Not to some vibrant bright-eyed brawny paradise,
lit by a staccato of hammers and methedrine;
futureshock neon banzai pipeline.

Try, you say?
Try very hard, try dreams, blue works best.
Get an english speaking guide for yourself.

Limestone gargoyle, ravaged by acid light.
Plastic gargoyle, computer-enhanced.
Polyethylene gargoyle, mass produced.

Now you can fly,
as if over a soft red nylon sea,
like ivory mahjong blackbirds,
like tigershadows melting on an occluded, faraway moon.

Phantom gargoyle, of windflush sandwashed silk.
Penniless gargoyle, we all love you,
when you are a tornado
of emerald thoughts black,
of batwinged skulls,
of solemn swan-beaks,
of you. •

Poem copyright © 1996 by Maxfield Chandler.

THE ICE PRINCESS

by Erika V. Queen

I sit alone this night,
In my palace of ice.
My mind searching frantically
For a thought, once happy, once nice.

For so long I have lived,
High upon my throne.
My heart empty, bitter, cold like a stone.

To the outside world I remain a mystery,
Never raising an eyebrow
No sir, not me.

My tears freeze hard,
As they stream down my face.
My heart cries out for someone,
Someone to melt this place.

The walls that surround me,
Were built by my soul.
To tear them down now,
Becomes my only goal.
But alas, I am a prisoner,
My heart has not known love.
To set my sad heart free,
Requires a gentle glove.

Can you be the one?
With the touch like warm, soft air?
Do I allow your love to melt me?
Do I love you?
Do I dare?

Oh, to replace this palace of cold,
With dancing colors, bright and bold.
To let go the pain that drains my heart,
To feel happiness, to make a new start.

To you, my Prince, I hand the key,
To open my heart, and set me free.

A difficult task, you may be sure,
With patience, my love, will be the cure.

In isolation, I have lived so long.
But I have found you now,
And I am set free, like a song. •

Poem copyright © 1996 by Erika V. Queen.

TO LEAVE

by Andrew G. McCann

To leave Mars' death camps

I gave my brain to this ship

Stars taste like champagne •

Haiku copyright © 1996 by Andrew G. McCann

SF: DEF.

by tim scannell

(to be read aloud, of course, for pitch/stress/juncture)

man glad God is and sf
is man glad God and sf
and glad man is sf God
God glad and sf is man
glad sf is God and man
sf and glad man is God
is God sf and man glad
God glad man is and sf
man is and sf God glad
sf and glad God is man
God and man sf is glad
and glad sf is God man
is God glad and man sf
man is God and sf glad
and man God is glad sf
sf man is and God glad
sf glad God and is man
man glad is sf and God
God glad man is and sf
and God man glad sf is
sf is God and man glad
glad is sf man and God
is sf glad God and man •

Poem copyright © 1996 by Tim Scannell.

Humor

MILKEN'S CAT: And Other Findings in Pet Behavior

by **Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek**

Since the Dawn of Time, roughly, people have kept cats and dogs as pets. From the vine leashes woven by Australopithecus to the bronze litter boxes forged by Cro-Magnon Man, an unbreakable bond between Man and Pet has developed. And that pact was this: Man gives a few pats on the head, some processed meat byproducts, and most of his bed to sleep on; in return, Pet will guard the home from songbirds, squirrels, Avon persons, and other marauders.

Although Homo Sapiens has flowered into a noble race, scientists remind us that the modern pet's instincts were created in the barren backyards of the Dinosaur Age, when the Dogodon (dino flintstonii) and the Catasaurus (andrewlloydum webberus) were first domesticated by the talking ape families who lived in caves and rode velociraptors to work. It was in these crude homes that the monstrous prehistoric dogs and cats first learned to ruin furniture — their talons could rend even granite hassocks — and to beg for food while the ape people ate their primeval soup.

Yet over the centuries, cats and dogs have been increasingly influenced by manmade factors. Inventions such as the printing press and indoor plumbing have enabled dogs to fetch newspapers and cats to sit in sinks. Thus, pet behavior has become more complex, and owners must turn to highly pseudo-technical sources such as this article to understand their furry but multifaceted pals.

The following major behavioral aspects are ranked by importance, although you could reverse this list and find it equally confusing.

Territory:

Cats like to stand on their tiptoes and rub up against furniture, legs, and refrigerators while arching their backs and twitching their tails. Most owners assume this is all part of a cat's ritual of leaving its scent, "marking" the object as its own. In fact, this is not the case.

Depending on the direction of interest rates and stock market cycles, your cat may be telling you, for example, to shift your savings out of tech stocks and into long bonds (if only you had listened, eh?). Although it's difficult to gauge a cat's sentiments at first, and past performance is no guarantee of future success, with time the average investor should find his or her returns on investment increasing and comfortably outperforming the S&P 500 index.

The Persian cat, for instance, is particularly skilled at anticipating the course of oil prices, and is an appropriate pet for those who invest in currencies and precious metals. Mike Milken, the famous bond salesman, owned an especially prescient Himalayan named Arby. But Milken's fortunes tumbled after he spurned his cat and started listening to little birdies.

One of the dog's most common traits — aside from snickering or leaving nose prints on the living-room window — is frequent urination on trees, fire hydrants, and children. The conventional wisdom is that the dog, like the cat, is defining its "area." But what the dog is really saying is, in effect: "Man, that Mexican beer goes right through me." Dogs, less solitary than cats, see the family as a "pack," and thus like to spend time alone in their rooms reading comic books. But they are quite friendly, and will usually nose the crotches of visitors as a way of saying hello.

Food:

Cats are persnickety. Owners often wonder at the cat which meows loudly for a meal — such as Choco-Onion Brand's Tomato 'n' Horsechops with Chunx o' Pig-Snout — only to take a few bites and walk away; or the pudgy puss that snubs nutritionally complete "health chow" only to contentedly lick that open-face cream cheese sandwich you let your eye wander from.

What your cat is reminding you when you ponder such behavior is that it's human nature to see patterns where there aren't any, to imagine that things are anything other than desperate, random, and pointless. In a sense, then, the cat is telling its owner that it isn't telling it anything. Asks the inscrutable feline: What is the sound of one paw ripping the side of your new white-leather sofa?

Dogs will eat anything they think their master would eat, preferably ABC (already been chewed) food. Interestingly, but not in fact interesting, dogs have lost the need to chew. They make the motions, of course, and high-speed photography shows some get a few chomps onto the tail-end of whatever they're inhaling. Yet for most dog food, such as pizza, peanut butter, or oranges — with the notable exception of the potato chip — chewing is no longer used, much as common sense isn't by my wife (ha-ha, just kidding, honey!).

Beverages:

Don't be alarmed if you catch your cat or dog drinking from the toilet, as this is their only source of Vitamin P.

Play:

Cats, unlike dogs, lack a complete "fetch" gene and can play only half of that game. They will chase a toy mouse only to almost instantly lose interest, unless it's a live toy mouse being thrown.

Their favorite games include:

Shedding,

Stalk-or-run-from-things-that-aren't-there, Dump-the-wastebaskets-at-4:00-a.m., and

Grab-and-bite-master's-fingers-too-hard-while-shredding-his-forearm-with-my-back-paws.

The intensity of any game can be heightened by adding a generous dose of catnip. A wise cat-owner, however, always stocks up on plenty of disinfectant and bandages.

Dogs like to play:

I'm Barking!,

C'mon-let-me-hold-the-leash, and You're-going-to-have-to-run-very-hard-to-catch-me-and-get-me-back-inside.

The latter game is yet another good reason to always carry a tranquilizer gun. For elderly dogs, the preferred game is Stare-into-space.

Sleep:

For both cats and dogs, the older they get, the more they sleep. They're lazy, they drink malt liquor, and they won't get a job. There's little more to say on this.

Hygiene:

Both cats and dogs lick themselves clean. Who are we to judge those that can?

Meanwhile, do not attempt to remove your pet's fur for dry-cleaning. Contrary to indications and statements made by Warner Brothers and certain foreign governments, their fur isn't held in place with snaps, zippers, or even Velcro.

Names:

Cats won't respond to their names, as they are unaware of any sort of connection between them and those sounds coming from your lips. Most petnameologists say an appropriate name for a cat would be something like "bszszszshhhhhddnnn," similar to the sound an electric can opener makes.

Dogs, however, will respond readily to their names, or to any other noise you make. A rule of thumb when naming pooches: the more embarrassing the name would be for a human, the more the dog likes it: Poopy-Dew, Snugglebear, Barfy, and Airhead are all excellent choices.

Noises:

Cats and dogs make assorted sounds, anywhere from the fear of a hiss or a bark to the contentment of a purr or a spreenbeet. (Spreenbeet is the Latin name scientists give to the little-known purring noise dogs make, an undetectable sound that lies outside the range of human hearing.) They also make various coos, trills, and yelps, which reflect hunger, the desire for play, or the fact that you're standing on their tail. Note: To induce howling in a dog, whistle the theme tune to "The Andy Griffith Show."

Tips for burglars: A dog usually will stop barking for the price of a juicy steak and a cold brewski. Cats, however, prefer only a dish of mint ice cream and a few rounds of gin rummy, which you may find too time-consuming, nonetheless.

Shoes:

Neither cats nor dogs require footwear. If the need arises, though, etiquette requires Italian loafers or flats for cats and wing-tips or clogs for dogs.

Television:

Cats like to watch TV. Of course, they like to watch mirrors, too, which demonstrates their vanity or stupidity, scientists aren't sure which. Their preferred method of watching TV is to sit on top and hang over the front while trying to sink their claws into the moving images. Cats

also like to sit on whatever you're reading, such as newspapers, or on whatever you're writing, such as bogus science articles (whether paper or computer keyboard is used).

Dogs, however, don't watch television, but they do like to stand in front of them. Tests conducted at the Jet Propulsion Lab (when the staff isn't busy reverse-engineering UFOs) in California have shown that the speed of a dog's strobe-like tail-wagging and its reluctance to move away from the screen increase in direct proportion to how much an owner yells at the canine to get away from the TV.

And Finally, Sex:

Man, it's been a while. •

Story copyright © 1996 Andrew G. McCann.

About the Authors

Maxfield Chandler ("ode to a gargoyle"), raised in Montreal and New York City, and now living in Seattle, is a student of many sciences and crafts. Mister Chandler now experiments in many arenas, poetry being one of the more successful. <netropic@speakeasy.org>

Romeo Esparrago (Cover art, various illustrations) is really so bummed that eWorld is going away & that he will have to update his pages to reflect his romedome@aol.com mail address that he is going to protest by...ummm...well, he'll figure something out by next ish. Visit his Planet Mag Art Page at <<http://members.aol.com/quezon/planetmagart/planetmagart.html>> <romedome@aol.com>

Bart G. Farkas ("The Talking Stick"), from his Igloo in Calgary, Canada, has been writing in the computer industry for the past four years. Formerly a registered nurse but now a full-time writer, Bart is managing editor of "Inside Mac Games" magazine, associate editor of "MacSense" magazine, and associate editor of "PC Sense." Bart is the proud father of two cats and two books, "The Macintosh Bible Guide to Games" (Peachpit Press/Addison Wesley) and "The Wing Commander IV Strategy Guide" (Prima). <MacSenseGE@aol.com>

John Gerner ("Bot Man") is a self-employed consultant and writer, who does planning studies for new theme parks. You can find more of his creative stuff at <<http://www.infi.net/~jgerner/>>. <jgerner@aol.com>

Kevin Greggain (Illustration for "Buried Evil") is an artist.

Jon Hansen ("Choice") is a native of Athens, Georgia. He developed a love of books at an early age, and a love of fantasy, science fiction, and all things impossible soon after. While harboring a secret desire to become a writer, he earned a B.Sc. in English and a Master's in instructional technology from the University of Georgia. Jon attends Indiana University, finishing a Master's in library and information science. He's open to job offers. Jon has had a story accepted by "MZB's Fantasy Magazine," for the Summer issue. He is married to Lisa and has been adopted by three cats. <jmhansen@nickel.ucs.indiana.edu>

Paul Landry ("Buried Evil") was born April 27, 1966, in Toronto, Canada. His parents took him to the drive-in to see a horror movie, which he can still see vividly in his mind. Then he found Stephen King's world, read "Carrie," saw the movie, and has never been the same since. He would play sick to stay home from school to write. He read every horror book, comic, anything scary, he could get his hands on. Saw any horror movie that came out; the scariest was "The Changeling." Scared the hell into him. He only took up writing seriously a year ago, whereas before it was a hobby. But his hunger to share it with others has grown. He loves horror! And his goal is to be the Canadian Stephen King. <reaper1@idirect.com>

Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek ("Milken's Cat") lives between the parallel lines that divide this world from the bottomless maw of the "other," where rents are also surprisingly high.

Andrew G. McCann ("To Leave", various illustrations and writings) is a writer and editor in New York City. He enjoys writing SF, humor, and articles about the Macintosh, among other pursuits. <<http://members.aol.com/PlanetZine/home.html>> <PlanetZine@aol.com>

Erika Valena Queen ("The Ice Princess") is a 29-year-old professional writer born and still residing in Northglenn, Colorado. She has written several fantasy novels, including "To Save A Dragon," "The Dragonskeeper," and "Lore," and epic fantasy for young teens. The poem "The Ice Princess" was taken from another project currently in the works of the same title. "The Ice Princess" promises to be one of the year's best fantasy novels for both young adults and adults alike. Ms. Queen can be reached via e-mail at <Equeen@marketperceptions.com>.

Spider Robinson ("His Own Petard") will be teaching with his wife and collaborator Jeanne at the 1996 Clarion Science Fiction Writing Workshop at Michigan State University. <unlisted>

Frederick Rustam ("Idols in Their Heart") is a retired civil servant, who indexed technical reports for the Department of Defense. He now writes SF short stories for the e-zines of the Web. He lives in Washington, D.C. <frustam@capaccess.org>

Tim Scannell ("SF: Def.") was born in Chicago, IL, and is now building a home hard against the boundary of Olympic National Park, WA. He has 150 credits in 87 periodicals, plus five chapbooks, most recently SWIFT NETTLE, TEN-POUND SLEDGE. <scannell@daka.com>

Steven L. Schiff ("UFO") lives and writes in Baltimore, Maryland. Steve is the Co-founder/Creative Director of Century Marketing, an advertising/public relations firm specializing in creative campaigns and WEB site development. His other SF publications include short stories in 'Radius' and 'Zone 9.' Steve can be reached at <70530.3063@compuserve.com>

Why does chopping onions always have to be so sad?