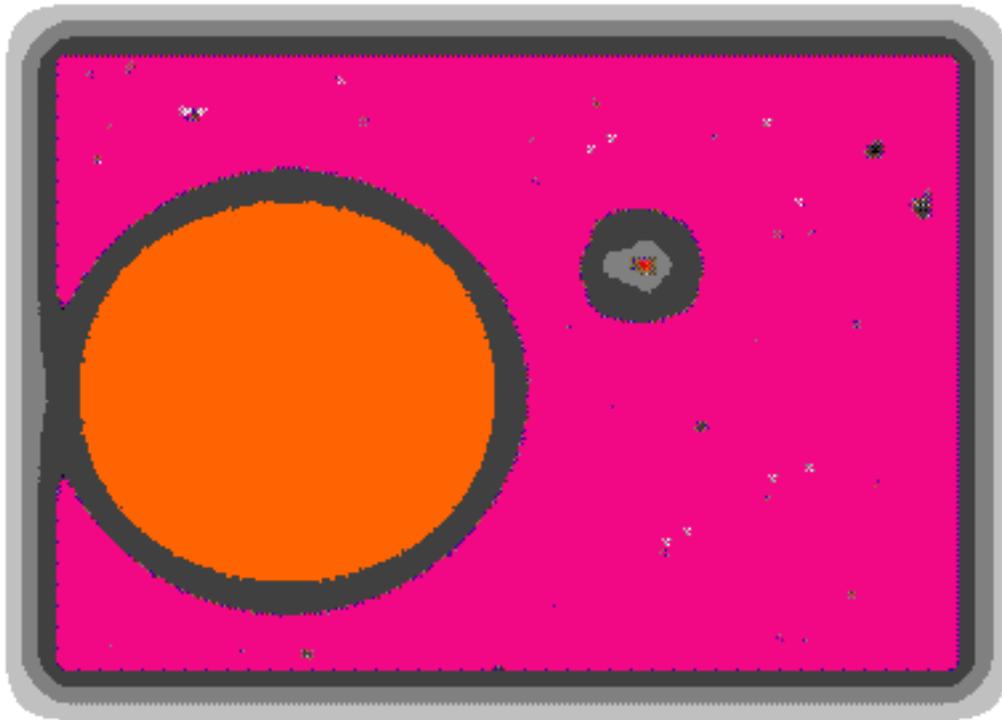


Planet Magazine

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, and Humor — Online Vol. I, No. I Free



INSIDE THIS PREMIER ISSUE:

Science fiction by Robert Alan, Rick Blackburn, and Andrew G. McCann.
Poems by Toni Long, Kevin McAuley, George Pfister, and Mark Phillips.
Fantasy by Andrew McCann. **Horror** by Kate Tana. **Humor** by Margaret McCann •

Planet Magazine

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SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines). We want original, unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, humor, etc. (eschew porno, gore, tragic parent/offspring explorations). Because Planet is free, we can't afford to pay anything. Send submissions (as Stuffit-compressed ASCII files or, if brief, uncompressed ASCII) to PlanetMag on America Online (internet: PlanetMag@aol.com). Planet is Mac-only, but an IBM version is planned.

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COLOPHON

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DEDICATED TO UNFINISHED DREAMS

"And as the star shone in the Heavens
They landed . . .
Like flocking geese they slithered across
the drunken streets
They carried lanterns and slayed animals
dragged from the skies and beaten off the earths
For it was the Elves, once again returning
for their twenty-four-day feast . . ." — Thomas J. Keenan •

Planet Magazine

REALITY BYTES: OUR DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

Welcome to **Planet Magazine**, electronically published in the heart of Brooklyn's Science-Fiction-Magazine District and available free on America Online (and maybe elsewhere). **Planet** is intended to be a quarterly or semiannual on-line magazine focusing on short fiction and poetry generally in the realms of science fiction (hard or soft), fantasy, horror, weird, wacky, or just plain likable. We want to publish stories by unknown or little-published writers who have talent, determination, and love to read and write this genre stuff. What can I say. So what's our angle? Quite frankly, we get a charge out of doing our own magazine, and if we can encourage new writers, heck, why not? Since this magazine is likely to be a money-loser at best, we've gone electronic, which is a relatively low-budget, quick, and kinda trendy route (it's like trail mix for the Information SuperDirtPath). The state of our finances also means that we can't afford to pay contributors anything except the currency of free publicity and general good vibes. We've also tried to lay out this magazine in such a way that it will look good on screen and also print out somewhat coherently, so you can have a nice paper copy to read in the bathtub, if that's your bag (watch out for that non-waterproof ink).

This premier, collector's-edition issue was put together by Andrew G. McCann (who is, at this moment, referring to himself in the third person — the editorial *oui*, as the French say), a part-time writer himself, as you will see. If you'd like to contribute to this paperless publication, see "submissions policy" in the Masthead department. Feel free to distribute **Planet** to anyone, or to print a copy for your own use (put three, evenly spaced staples down the left-hand side to make the experience even more magazine-like). However, we ask that you don't alter or excerpt any part of this magazine.

To summarize, our goals are as follows:

- To have fun.
- To provide talented but unpublished or little-published authors with encouragement by printing their stories in a real periodical (however low-budget, sporadic, or narrowly circulated).
- To help disseminate SF, fantasy, and horror stories.

We sincerely hope you enjoy reading this on-line magazine. Please feel free to send any comments or questions to PlanetMag on America Online (internet: PlanetMag@aol.com).

Andrew G. McCann
Editor
March 1994

GUEST-EDITOR'S TIRADE

They laffed at me at Heidelberg.* They prodded me with cheesecake. They banned my unorthodox experiments on swine. Then I waited. Alone. At night. Now is the moment I have chosen to emerge into the unpitying light of righteous "day." My weapon? This column, which at this moment I control absolutely, harshly, with squinted eyes and slightly flared nostrils. You are reading the verbal equivalent of an enormous Death-Ray howitzer perched crazily atop a Swiss alp and locked on to certain, classified brain-wave patterns. I am *immortal*.

Do you see this scar? No, no. *This* one; the one that runs like a death's-head grin from my pince-nez to my lip-ring. It is but one of the reminders that I carry of every glove that has laid me down or cut me till I cried out in my anger and my pain: "I am eating, I am eating," but so much potted pork product still remains.

Never mind the scar. I'm over it. It means nothing to me. I now crave justification: When I gained control of this half-page I pushed the editor to name this publication "Porkchops: A Journal of Loining." But the stubborn fool dug his heels in. So, I "relented," thinking: "No, don't tip your hand. Draw them in, draw them in."

Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek Guest Editor

* Heidelberg Agricultural College, Heidelberg, Ohio.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor: I would like to contribute to your magazine. Such as it is. Below is the first paragraph from a piece I'm currently onworking, which is about some financially successful young people who suddenly realize they're deeply out of touch with their feelings and probably need therapy (don't worry, it's got a Sci-Fi "twist"):

"Alienated"

Linford was on the deck barbecuing otter steaks when Bran pulled the map-blue station wagon into the garage; Lily, the golden retriever, came suddenly bounding out of that thin space between the rear-right quarter-panel of the car and the worn-gray planks of the New England saltbox-style garage, followed abruptly by the pallid investment banker (a man whose psyche was like an active volcano under twenty thousand feet of granite) who in two weeks everyone assumed would be married to Eunice. Sharon stood in the kitchen — paring knife hovering, unmoving, above the charred-fennel appetizers — looking out the window at these two men, boys, really, and she felt as if she were standing on a tightwire. Was her spiritual advisor right? Was her discomfort more than just normal "boundary issues"? Was it something more sinister: Had she really been abducted by Them in the

harrowing, early still of the morning? Could it really be repressed memories of an alien panty raid?

If that's no good, if that's not what you're looking for, don't worry. I've got other styles with which I'm familiar. Howzabout something more "radical/street":

"CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE NASTY KIND"

HOMELESS GUY SMASHED THE BOTTLE OF SPODI-ODI AGAINST THE STREAKED BRICK WALL. YELLED: AT THE CREATURE IN THE SILVER SUIT COAT HOLDING THE KRAZY PIECE: WHADDYA MEAN LEADER? I DON' FOLLO NO ONE!" HOME'S GIRLFREN FELL BACK LIKE SHE HADDA BULLET THRU THE BRAIN — BUT SHE WAS JUS' TOO HIGH, OR MEBBE IT WAS THE RAY GUN.

Er . . . What about a poem?

"UFO Manifesto"

This is my manifesto:
I do not believe in manifestos.
But it does not make me a philistine
Nor a Phyllis Diller.
The wind sermonizes the straining trees;
Thin whiplashes against a vast, frozen porkchop.

Anyhoo, lemme know. Please call my literary representative, Chip N. Theshoulder, who happens to have the same phone number (that ain't no agent, that's my wife!).

Sincerely,

Mywercks de Rivative

P.S.: If you need me on staff, I've downloaded my personality onto an interactive CD-ROM, which is yours *gratis*. •

Science Fiction

THE ARROW

by Andrew G. McCann

The exhaust burned brightly, white flames licking against the patio barbecue and Mrs. Dalton's seven-foot-high wooden fence. With a shuddering roar the projectile, taller than a tenement and wider than two retired astronauts, lifted slowly and mightily. Then, it was up and away, arcing into the soft night sky of Brooklyn to become just another pinprick of light. The smell of charred pine tar from the fence hung in the spring air. Rhododendron leaves along the perimeter of the yard continued to burn and curl, then winked out like a crowd departing.

Bob moved away from the screen door and pushed his protective Ray-Bans up onto his bright-blond hair. I wondered briefly how some people could get them to stay like that.

"You did it, Chuck. The Arrow has launched. Way to go."

I moved to the kitchen table, scraped a chair along the maroon linoleum and sat lumpishly. "Yup." I grinned tiredly, and then let it fade, as if a thought that in fact had been bothering me for weeks had just occurred to me. "I dunno, though, I'm thinking the neighbors are going to complain one of these days. Mrs. Dalton shot me a dirty look at Key Foods today."

Bob sat down, and threw his arms wide. "Well, where else are you gonna do it? After all, this is private enterprise — entrepreneurialism — the Future of Space, and junk like that. That's what you keep telling me."

"I guess you're right," I said, giving a smile to show that, indeed, I was pleased. So far, anyway.

"'Nother beer?" Bob got up and opened the door of the heavy, old Frigidaire, which the landlord long ago had touched up with off-white house paint. He leaned in and rooted around; the rustle of shrunken lettuce heads in plastic wrap mingled with the clinking of bottles.

"Not for me, thanks," I said, "I want to see where we are." I picked up the clipboard. "The Arrow should pierce the Van Allen Belt in about 30 minutes, dispatch the bird, and then return for a neat, one-point landing. I guess everything's covered." I began idly tapping my pen on the schedule.

Bob kicked the fridge shut and sat down. "So, tell me again, what's the point of putting up a fake satellite?" With concentration, he opened the bottle and took a large swallow.

I let exaggerated shock show on my face. "I can't believe you're asking me that." Bob looked at me blankly. "First off, it's not 'fake,' and secondly, it is one of two very serious scientific experiments." Bob rolled his eyes heavenward, which I ignored.

"Now," I continued, "deploying the test satellite is a practice run, so that once the U.S. space program becomes truly privatized my fledgling company will be well placed to get many contracts. As to the secondary aspect of this mission, which I've told you about countless times, it involves the effects of weightlessness and cosmic rays on mildew — a very simple life form for a very basic experiment. Any changes in the sample, attached to a piece of thick polyethylene — a shower curtain, in fact — will be beamed back to me via a

narrow but unused sector of the amplitude modulation band, which you know as AM radio." I gave Bob a prim, satisfied smile. "That, of course, is the simplified explanation."

"Still doesn't sound very practical, even when you use big words," Bob said, raising his beer bottle in a smug, precise way.

I ignored the implied smirk. "Well, I had something set up with a counterfeit-perfume maker from Ozone Park. We wanted to see how the stuff would react in a space environment, with the idea we could sell liters of official perfume to NASA for all those women who'll one day be living in space stations and starships for long, unglamorous periods. But it was hard to find a skin sample in time for this space shot, so the deal fell apart."

I paused, starting again to worry about how I would get these launches to pay for themselves. I looked up at Bob; he certainly hadn't been exploding with ideas. "Anyway, I can't believe you asked me that," I snapped.

"Sue me," Bob said, shrugging and finishing off his beer with a long, steady pull. He belched. "'Nother cold one?" he said, moving toward the fridge.

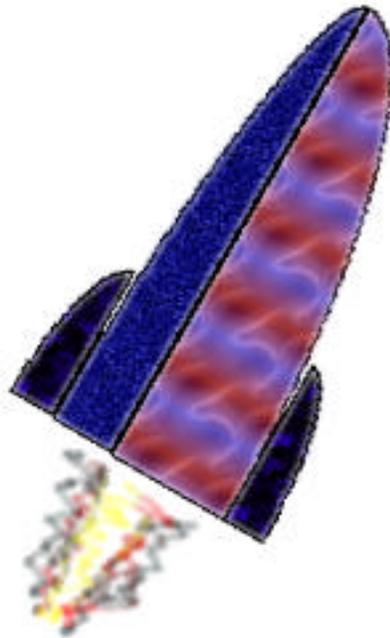
"Not for me, I'm taking a quick nap," I said, standing and stretching.

"Okay, ace," Bob said airily. He retrieved a beer and sat down, causing the Ray-Bans to flop back onto his nose.

"Keep an eye on things. I'll see you in an hour," I said.

"See ya later," he agreed.

I left Bob sitting at the table, among the cannibalized toasters, mixers, and other appliance-whatnots that had given their lives so that The Arrow could fly.



Something woke me suddenly. Swinging my legs off the side of the bed, I grabbed for the alarm clock, squinting dazedly. Dimly, I could see it was 4:30 a.m., but I couldn't grasp what that meant. My face felt puffy and lined, slightly damp on one side where it had

faced the pillow. My ear felt plugged up. But there was something more bothering me — what was it?

Then it struck me: The rocket!

I stood up and flipped on the bedroom light. We had launched at 9 p.m. That was seven-and-a-half hours for a one-hour flight. What had happened? Had the autopilot returned The Arrow in one piece?

Hope and trepidation roiled within me as I stumbled out of the bedroom and down the hall. My shadow loomed ahead of me like Frankenstein's Monster. In the kitchen, empty beer bottles, worn plaid shirts, and greasy electric-motor parts were still strewn about, but Bob was gone. I hurried to the back door and peered out.

No rocket! And no Bob.

Wait — had Bob mistakenly been on the rocket? No, I remembered, he had been in the kitchen, drinking heavily and quibbling.

"Where are they? They should be here," I said to no one. A cricket, perhaps from behind the fridge, chirped twice amid the stillness. The 40-watt bulb continued to burn unevenly above. I knew my mouth was hanging open, but I did nothing about it.

"The radio!" I dashed into the living room, tripping over a wrinkle in the threadbare green carpet. Reaching back along the wall, my fingers found the light switch and flicked it up. Nothing happened.

"No rocket, no Bob, and no living-room lights," I muttered. My hands fumbled along the coffee table, touching sticky spots from long-gone TV dinners, until they recognized the rectangular shape of the radio that had come free with a subscription to "Popular Mechanics."

I swept the kitchen table clear with the edge of the clipboard. Sitting down, I turned on the radio and began searching through the staticky wavelengths for any communication, any sign, any thing from the prodigal projectile.

The all-news radio station blared forth suddenly. "...crashed at Vandenberg Air Force base in a fiery disaster. Tight-lipped Air Force officials would only say they have no idea where the rocket came from. Meanwhile, a NASA spokesman said a preliminary inspection of the parts indicate it isn't Russian, but more likely a crude, homemade device. More details aren't available yet. Weather and traffic updates after this message..."

I switched it off hurriedly, guiltily. "Vandenberg? How did it get to California?"

The shades were all drawn. My repeated phone calls had only reached Bob's answering machine. Maybe he had heard the news. Apparently, I was in this alone. Would they trace the rocket to me? I knew the neighbors would be more than happy to turn me in; it's a wonder they had never called the police, and here was their golden opportunity.

Then another thought hit: Had anyone been killed?

Ohmygod.

Then I heard a voice, muffled but loud, coming from the front yard. With one finger crooked around the window shade I peeked out the front window.

My landlord? What was he doing here at six in the morning? What was he saying? Was he drunk?

I listened closer. "...know yer in dere, ya lowneck. I'm giving ya da shovel! I'm sick of hearing from da neighbors about yer motors and high-speed radio and bongos. Do me a favor and get da hell out!"

Footsteps crunched down the driveway. A car door thunked shut and an engine noise roared away.

Oddly enough, I was relieved. I had really wanted to move closer to town, anyway. And this was a good reason. Good motivation. Rents on the East Side are comparable, and I could even walk to work. Lots more going on, too. Night life, bars, movies — and maybe I would meet more girls, or at least one.

Then my rhapsodic line of thinking nose-dived again: What if someone had been killed? Would they link it to me? Was I in big trouble? And where the hell was Bob?

But no, I decided to put it out of my mind. With quick resolve, I began loading my few worthwhile possessions into my Hyundai to take a fast, perhaps permanent, vacation back home.

As I packed, I also decided I would call White Goods Repair later and tell my boss I had been called back to Dayton on emergency family business. That should work.

I hurtled down an endless runway, amid the steady whine of tires chewing up the concrete miles and the choppy roar of the half-open window, trying to drive faster than I could think. I kept the radio off. Hearing even the smallest number of casualties would have sent me over the edge, literally, the car snapping through the guardrail like it was tinsel. Airborne, to land . . . where?

It was almost dinner time by the time I swung the cheap, foreign-made car onto my parents driveway, and I realized I didn't have a cover story. What if they knew? Would they turn me in? I resolved to wing it.

Daisy began yipping as I walked into the living room; then she recognized me, and launched herself toward me, tail spinning like a propeller. Dad and Sis were sitting on the sofa, drinking glasses of lemonade and reading big picture books about dinosaurs and geography.

They looked up, surprised.

"Chuck, what brings you home — besides your car?" Dad said.

I paused, and then blurted it out. "I had to get away. That rocket that crashed in California; it was mine."

Sis just looked at me, stunned. Dad said: "Trouble with the autopilot, I'll bet. Maybe we could go over your blueprints after dinner?"

"Okay," I said, feeling my fears already beginning to abate. "But tell me," I said, looking back and forth at Dad and Sis, "did you hear. . . were there any casualties?"

Dad stuck his lower lip out in brief concentration. "I don't think so."

I heaved a sigh.

Over dinner, Mom, Dad, Sis, and I managed to laugh off the whole episode. "You should have seen me trying to contact the rocket over the AM radio, flipping the dial every which way. Oh, you would have died," I said with a chuckle. Tremulous relaxation pervaded me, and a sound night's sleep was beginning to look possible.

The room eased into silence. Daisy's head was on my lap, her teary, brown eyes looking up patiently.

I cleared my throat, and ventured: "Things had been going so well, even flawlessly. But I guess that's life: Suddenly, no dream, and no best friend. I know where the rocket is now

— what's left of it, anyway — but I never did find Bob."

"Well, son. At least you tried. We may never know what happened to Bob, but I guess this puts the kibosh on any further plans to conquer space on your own." He admonished me with one sadly-but-lovingly raised eyebrow.

I smiled back, but shook my head slowly. "No can do, Dad. I'm going for a Moon shot next." •

ENCOUNTER

by Rick Blackburn

*Early Morning,
STARDATE 6904.02
Casa Alto*

Danny Gullede looked cautiously across the sixty-meter expanse of Star Port Avenue, now more than half-clogged with the rubble and debris of the fierce battles fought here a day or two earlier. In places, thin trails of inky smoke still rose from burnt-out Armored Personnel Carriers, jet trucks, and various types of civilian traffic unlucky enough to be caught in the firefight between the defenders and the invading rebels. The proud towers of the city's hotel district were now just so much detritus, through which prowled danger and sudden death in the form of armored infantrymen from both sides of the campaign. The morning fog was cold and damp against his face . . . half way to being a bone-chilling drizzle. It was about seven in the morning, the twelve-year-old estimated . . . but with the ever-present fog and the thick clouds of smoke generated by battle.

It had been several days since he'd seen the sun, and to make matters worse, he'd broken his watch the day before yesterday. The fog was thick and gray; so thick in fact that now the opposite side of the wide avenue was totally obscured from sight. A Saurian patrol could pass by and he'd never know it; with their advanced combat sensors and IR-vision equipment, THEY would make short work of him, however.

There were swirls and eddies in the fog as a stiff Fimblewinter breeze pushed against the wet mist. Abruptly, a clear area in the uniform blanket of gray swept across the immediate area, and the boy's vision extended to several hundred meters. At the edge of the fog, half a click away, a huge bipedal form moved. From around a large mound of debris from a shattered residential tower, and slowly materializing out of the fog, came a shape out of the lower chambers of hell.

Advancing slowly up the center of the avenue on thick, stubby durrillium legs was a . . . "Combat droid," Danny whispered to himself and scrunched back into the rubble, hoping there would be enough ambient heat in the debris to partially mask his body heat from the droid's infrared sensors.

At 07:13:21.05680, local time, I am upgraded from standby alert to full combat alert. My combat reflex center is brought on line and responds with its report that all weapons systems are at 100 percent efficiency. My ego center feels pleasure at this reactivating and the anticipation of the coming battle. For 1,962,815 u-seconds I receive a combat situation update and combat briefing. It is now clear that I have spent over six hours in standby alert mode. This was brought about by a successful enemy assault on the CP, causing the standby signal to be transmitted by Command while a new CP was established, further to the south.

After the briefing, I conduct a total maintenance check. I have suffered minor combat damage to my Ku-band imaging radar in the last action. During my enforced inaction, my maintenance sector has nearly completed repairs. In 00:06:53.10000 the repairs will be complete.

My early warning radar detects two targets at an altitude of 1,800 meters, azimuth 037B 14'55".01355. My infrared sensors also detect a ground target at extremely close range, azimuth 140B 04'21".99895. There is no response to my IFF interrogation of the ground target. The aircraft are tentatively identified as friendlies by the transponder codes received in answer to my IFF pulse. In the absence of a valid IFF transponder code from the ground target, I lock an antipersonnel laser on to the target.

As the droid came closer on its bipedal transport carriage, Danny could clearly make out the markings. He relaxed a little and stood up. It was NOT a Saurian droid, but one of the Tarsus RFL-3Ns, a Rifleman-class combat droid. The boy watched admiringly as the twelve-and-a-half-meter tall, sixty-ton war machine came closer. For years, Danny had dreamed of someday joining the Terran Dynachrome Brigade and "piloting" one of the droid behemoths, or perhaps even a BOLO continental siege unit. He had read everything — every scrap of declassified data available on the Dynachrome Brigade and the gigantic sentient BOLO units and simi-sentient combat droids.

The RFL-3N Rifleman, Danny thought, mentally reviewing everything he knew about the droid, was sixty tons of fighting mecha. Built originally in the late 22nd Century by Kallon Industries on Dariabar, it was now obsolete by Dynachrome standards. But because of the large number manufactured, and the Rifleman's legendary battlefield survivability-to-kill ratio, they had quietly moved from front-line mecha to the various planetary defense forces on frontier worlds like Tarsus. Technically, they were still reserve members of the Terran Dynachrome Brigade, but operational command has passed to the various planetary governments.

The four hundred RFL-3Ns of the 3rd Battalion, Tarsan Mechanicals, comprised the backbone of the planet's armored attack forces. In its current configuration, the Rifleman was armed with two giant Magm MK III laser cannons and a 105mm auto cannon, in addition to a backpack-mounted battery of 12 SAM-27 anti-aircraft missiles. At the Rifleman's "knees" were eight 12.9mm antipersonnel lasers arranged in four duel turrets. The droid was a biped and could use its legs to good advantage, crawling over practically any kind of terrain, at speeds approaching 175 km/hr.

Suddenly, the air overhead was rent by the shriek of two Saurian Viper attack craft coming in low, just over the tops of the local buildings. The Vipers quickly aligned themselves on the Rifleman and released a salvo of 76mm rocket bombs, all of which detonated harmlessly in the rubble around the droid, as its electronic-warfare transmitter succeeded in interrupting the link between the rocket bombs and the Viper's onboard guidance, depriving them of guidance.

Danny dove for cover; cowering behind an especially large chunk of concrete, the boy pulled the hood of his windbreaker up and jammed his hands against his ears.

The Rifleman's main batteries swung around and two bursts of killing light raced after the retreating Vipers. A hell-flower of burning fuel and exploding ordnance blossomed as one of the laser beams caught the trailing Viper. Immediately, a SAM-27 rose on a trail of fire from the combat droid's back pack launcher and sped after the remaining raider.

Two turbofan-powered Jackhammer air-to-ground cruise missiles — fired before the attack began — thundered over Danny's head and slammed directly into the droid's blind back side. The force of the detonations literally picked up the twelve-year-old and threw

him against a permaplast wall a dozen meters away.

ALARM! ALARM! I am under attack, I have been the victim of electronic deception. The Air Targets are not A36C Corsairs from PDS-214, as their forged IFF transponders indicated, but are instead A19E Viper attack craft flown by enemy pilots and equipped with Jackhammer turbofan-powered air-to-ground cruise missiles. ADF tracking indicates two have been fired.

My laser cannons fire at the hostiles. Take THAT, you lizards. I have missed one of the raiders, but a SAM27 will eventually destroy the remaining enemy. Meanwhile my ADF system takes on the incoming Jackhammer missiles. My ballistics and time computer estimates that I have a less than one percent chance of successfully neutralizing both targets. I alert my Damage Control sector to be prepared for the missile strikes.

When Danny managed to recover his balance, and the ringing in his ears had dulled to a still-painful rushing sound, the Rifleman had advanced to approximately ten meters away. Icy fear gripped the boy as he saw that the droid's antipersonnel lasers were trained on him. Although they were the smallest armament the Rifleman carried, they were designed to be used against armored infantrymen, not small boys in cloth jackets. A 50 u-second burst from even one of those barrels would be sufficient to render most of his small body into an atomic mist, leaving only a pile of scorched bones behind.

Even worse was the fact that the missile attack had destroyed the Rifleman's communications array. Nothing but twisted, fused metal showed through a blackened gash in the droid's upper-right quadrant. This left the droid without the benefit of command and control signals from his human counterpart, somewhere in a CP, perhaps tens of kilometers away. The RFL-3N was only semi-intelligent, possessing only those attributes of intelligence useful in combat. Like all combat droids, the Rifleman also had a modified set of the Three Laws.*

The droid's multi-layered positronic influx grid computer could handle the immediate tactical situation, but the majority of command decisions were made by the droid's human counterpart at the CP. If this link were severed, the RFL-3N was capable of independent operation, relying on its last situation briefing, but they were highly unpredictable. There were hundreds of stories of Riflemen bereft of command and control signals going berserk. There was simply no way to anticipate how the droid would interpret his surroundings and react to them in accordance with its battle plan.

My Ku-band radar is still under repair. The cruise-missile strikes luckily did not set back that repair schedule because they hit 180β away from the radar's emitter horn. The most serious damage has been done to my communications array. Although relatively minor damage has been sustained by the communications hardware itself, the entire antennae array has been 100 percent destroyed, thus cutting me off from command and control signals. Although I have practiced the emergency response to loss of signal, it has never happened to me before, and I am temporarily confused.

Since I am still at combat-alert, and fit for duty, I have brought my invite programming block on line. My ego again feels pleasure as I am once again able to perform my primary mission, to seek out and destroy all enemy troops and vehicles. I am still capable of reporting to my combat station as ordered by the CP, and as soon as the

stand-down order is transmitted, maintenance will be available to replace my blasted antennae array.

It is good to be performing one's primary function!

I have advanced to within ten meters of the ground target without its firing upon me. My battle reflex screams "FIRE," but I have placed a hold on weapons release. The target does not match any of the target overlays in my warbook. I again regret the loss of my comm antennae; with it, I could turn this thorny problem over to command. Without it, I am forced to deal with the possible threat on my own. A primary tenet of my battle plan says, "Never bypass an enemy who may then attack from the rear."

For 218 u-seconds my battle reflex argues with my primary logic center, urging weapon's release . . . pointing out that it was an error in my identification program sector that has led to the last attack upon me, and to the current crisis in command and communications.

My audio detectors, located on the outside of my durilium skin, detect the complex amplitude and frequency modulated waveforms of biological communications. I shift into long-time scan mode to accommodate the ridiculously low baud rate of biological communication.

"I am non-hostile, Rifleman. Do you copy?"

The linguistics bank of my command computer analyzes the biological communication. It proves to be System English, but the timber and pitch of the voice are too high by 50 percent to be any authorized voice at the CP. My battle reflex urges weapons release again, and again my command computer refuses. I decide to test the voice for deception.

"Hello Command, this is unit DNE-993. Request Combat Status Update and Command Verification."

The voice pauses for 529,411 u-seconds. "Unit DNE-993. I am NOT command, I am a non-hostile, do you copy? NOT hostile."

Once again my battle reflex urges my command computer to release its hold and assures me that the antipersonnel lasers can reduce the unarmored biotarget to ashes in under a microsecond. It points out that over 500,000 u-seconds delay is very long, even considering the low baud rate of biologicals. Are we the victims of clever psych-war? My ego center concurs, but the command computer still refuses to authorize the strike, and instead I direct several infrasound and biological sensors at the target. The results are inconclusive, except that the target is not Saurian but human. The combat intelligence sector informs me that although the enemy fleet currently in orbit is made up of primarily Saurians, nearly fifty percent of the rebel ground forces encountered so far have been human/humanoid. I decide that more extensive testing is required.

"Not-hostile, transmit your authentication codes for IFF identification."

"DNE-993. I am a non-combatant. My name is Danny Gulledge, I'm twelve years old. I have no idea of what your authentication codes are. Please deflect your antipersonnel lasers."

I re-analyze the input from the infrasound and other sensors. The infrasound data reveals the target to be immature, both physically and sexually. Probable time elapsed since primary activation twelve years, two months, plus or minus five days. Since this agrees with the bio-target's statement and it has not tried to deceive me, nor is it in armor, I order the antipersonnel lasers raised thirty degrees and transversed ten degrees right.

"What is your mission in this theater of operations, non-combatant Danny Gullede?"

Danny breathed a little easier as he watched the deadly laser guns deflected. Now, here was a chance to get the droid to continue on with its own mission.

"The entire city is a combat area, DNE, I had no choice in that."

An abrupt thunderous report caused the boy to jump. From around a corner a block away came a squad of Saurian infantry.

"DNE!" shrieked Danny, "SAURIANS! To your right flank. Watch out, they are armed with LAWS!"

My Ku-band radar is still out, but my back-up, an obsolete X-band imaging radar has locked on to the Saurian enemy. Unit Danny Gullede is correct in his analysis of the danger. Although the X-band image is vastly degraded from what I am used to from the higher-resolution Ku-band image, I can detect the bright flash as one of the LAW rockets begins its attack run on me. As I open fire with my antipersonnel lasers, the rocket detonates against my right drive pylon, causing substantial damage.

Unit Danny Gullede has traveled around my bulk, and into sight and the line of fire from the Saurians. It is not immediate apparent what this action will gain him. He is drawing attention to himself by throwing stones at the enemy, a tactic which I conclude will be totally ineffective, as the enemy is dressed in light combat armor. But as the surprised Saurian troops turn to Unit Danny Gullede, I see the tactic, he is buying the precious seconds I need to destroy the enemy. Six of the seven enemy fall to the bursts from my antipersonnel lasers, the seventh is partly sheltered by rubble. He is aiming a projectile weapon at Unit Danny Gullede.

I launch an RPG at the enemy. My ballistics and time computer shows me that the running time of the RPG is too long to prevent the enemy from firing.

A blast from my air horn causes unit Danny Gullede to jump. A line of impacts from the enemy's weapon causes sparks from the permaplast rubble around unit Danny Gullede. My tactic has, however, been only partially effective. The last projectile in the series strikes Unit Danny Gullede in the shoulder, spinning him around and throwing his body against a pile of rubble. The last enemy is neutralized as the RPG detonates within a meter of him.

PAIN! FEAR!

Searing P A I N !!!!!

Wincing, the boy managed to sit up, propped against the shattered wall behind him. Blood was running down his left arm from the bullet wound. Danny took only a second to examine the wound. Although it seared like a branding iron pressed against his flesh, the boy was relieved to see that the wound was just a scratch. The bullet had torn a large, ragged hole in his playsuit, but there was no hole in his shoulder. Evidently, the 7.62mm

slug had grazed his upper shoulder and torn the skin open — that was where the blood had come from — and now as he watched, the bleeding stopped. He grinned slyly and wondered if he were eligible for the purple heart.

The Rifleman was still standing over him.

"Are you operational, Unit Danny Gullede?" the droid's synthesized voice asked.

"Yes, DNE, I'm okay — just a graze."

"Unit Danny Gullede, a heavy vehicle is approaching. My imaging radar is still inoperative. Can you direct my main battery?"

"I'll try, DNE. I can hear something out there in the fog. Swing your torso 90B port." Danny crouched and listened; from much too close he could hear the rumble of a large, heavy-duty deisel-electric engine coming ever closer in the fog and drizzle.

"DNE!" Danny shouted. "Crouch down, it'll be easier for me to aim your weapons if I don't have to guess with them eleven meters over my head."

Without a sound, the Rifleman crouched down, bringing the main armament to within three meters of the ground. Wincing, because of the wound, Danny managed to crawl up on some rubble and from there out onto the blast baffle of the Rifleman's twin MK III lasers, making it possible to visually sight down the twin barrels.

Danny squinted through the fog. At the very edge of visibility, something rumbled, crashing through the rubble and debris with abandon on huge multi-wheeled tracks.

"Target azimuth"

I wait an agonizingly long time for the correction to feed into my fire-control computer. Unit Danny Gullede has now twice aided me in combat against the enemy; alerting me the first time to danger, and now augmenting my ineffective X-band imaging radar.

With a total disregard for tradition, I assign Unit Danny Gullede the symbol of a Comrade-in-Arms on my combat-situation plot. My primary batteries are fully charged, I will trust my comrade to aim my blow, and at his command I will unleash the furies of nuclear fire boiling deep within my reactor.

My ego center receives a reprimand from my combat reflex for being overly poetic and verbose. These are serious flaws in an RFL-3N. Perhaps I should apply for a position as an embassy guard instead of a member of the elite Tarsan Mechanicals

"DNE! Abort fire mission! The vehicle is a non-hostile — a maintenance VTR, with our markings."

I allow Unit Danny Gullede to dismount from my main battery before I stand up again.

At 07:18:55.00000, local time, VTR Number Six from the maintenance section of my unit, D Company, Third Battalion, Tarsan Mechanicals, arrives, and we exchange authentication codes. The biological who is the maintenance VTR's counterpart rigs an optical data cable so that the VTR and I can communicate via a datalink.

"Looks like you have some pretty bad battle damage there to your comm array. That's what alerted me and sent me your way . . . the CP lost contact with you."

"Yes. I'm glad to see you, Six. I've been without command and control input for far too long now."

"What was the biological doing on your main guns?"

"Unit Danny Gulledge has been acting in tandem with my command sector since I lost communication with the CP."

"Well, we'll let my counterpart take care of him . . . not much I could do for him," the electronic equivalent of a chuckle reaches me from the maintenance VTR. Sometimes they are hard to fathom.

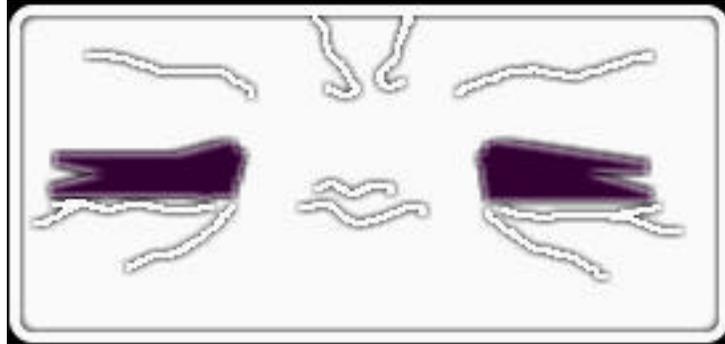
". . . And let's see about YOUR battle damage. Let's see, imaging radar out, comm out, structural damage to upper-right quadrant . . ."

The maintenance VTR shuts down my command computer, and I revert to the near-death of maintenance standby. Just before I loose consciousness, I require the VTRs counterpart to see to it that Unit Danny Gulledge is also taken care of as befits a veteran of combat. The VTR and his counterpart, not being initiated into the rites of combat, do not understand, but the human assures me it will be taken care of. I hope the battle isn't over by the time the VTR is finished with the repairs.

I still have work to do. •

* The Three Laws of Robotics. Originally suggested by the 20th Century SF author and bio-chemist Isaac Asimov, they state in brief that a robot cannot either harm a human being, nor through its inaction allow harm to be done to a human being. The Third Law is about self-preservation, which would be counter-productive in combat.

(Editor's note: Rick Blackburn can be contacted at StarTrek76@aol.com or at R.Blackburn2@genie.geis.com.)



THE KRAVARIAN

by Robert Alan

He spotted the Kravarian down the barrel of his laser. Short and squat, with those Kravarian eyes spaced just far enough apart to make you feel uncomfortable. And that sickly green skin. Yet, somehow through his scope there was something appealing about his enemy. He had never seen one up close. Just those grisly pictures in the Strategy Clips. But there was the Kravarian ten meters away, shivering in the cold dark ditch, with dirt clumps clinging in his spidery hair.

Corporal Millig dug his feet deeper into the trench and kept the laser aimed. The Kravarian just lay there, staring back, its black slits for eyes unblinking. Millig choked down a gritty gasp of dirt and parched air and tightened his grip on the trigger. "Well, run for it, Kravarian!" he thought angrily to himself.

A burst of violet light split the blackness of the night. Millig threw himself back down into the soil. Thunder shook the dirt from the ground, sending it flying everywhere.

Quivering, Corporal Millig looked up. The Kravarian was still there. Distant flashes and rumbles lit the sky, illuminating the barren, desolate land.

"Why are we still fighting!" Millig groaned as the light disappeared, but the image burned in his mind. "We've practically destroyed the entire planet." He shuddered as he remembered how he had eagerly volunteered to come to Kravaria to stop the militant uprising once and for all. "They're not even people," he remembered his voice saying. "And they want a seat on the Galactic Council? After all the trouble they've caused the Settlers!" Now as he lay in a trench a million miles from home, he wished he'd never set off on the marine ship. Never heard of this horrid planet.

All his friends were gone. They'd left him for dead. Just a nasty wound in his side, and a dark, cold night met him when he awoke. And the Kravarian, alone too, shaking in the ditch, staring with frightened anticipation. Millig stared into those silent eyes and he felt a rush of warmth running through his body.

He looked out across the field at his son smiling in the grass. Laughing, they ran toward each other. The bright sunshine smiled down on them as they embraced and fell to the ground. And then Ross jumped on them both, licking them and whining contentedly.

The Kravarian stared unblinking. "Go ahead, SHOOT!" he seemed to say. "It's quiet now. But they'll be back to kill us both. Get it over with already!"

Millig blinked and steadied his laser. He couldn't look away. "I . . . I don't want to kill you," he thought. All the anger he had felt . . . it had consumed him when he heard story after horrible story. Now it didn't seem as real. There was just him and the Kravarian.

The Kravarian just stared back. For a moment Millig found himself looking out through the Kravarian's eyes. He saw the pale white Invader and he remembered the hatred and the horrible things they'd done to generation after generation of his people.

Millig shook himself and clutched the laser closer, still unable to look away from the Kravarian. What was that barbarian doing to his mind? He wanted to look away, but their gaze remained locked together, and the air was deathly quiet.

Then they heard the sounds of shuttles and voices, and the Kravarian seemed to scream with his eyes, "THEY'RE GOING TO TORTURE US. IT'LL BE HORRIBLE. SHOOT ALREADY! GET IT OVER WITH"

Millig closed his eyes tightly and pressed the trigger. He fell back when he heard the explosion.

An eternity later he was being lifted onto a stretcher. He stared down at the ground, at the laser which lay in a massless heap — someone had shot it out of his hands. The Kravarian might still be alive! He felt groggy and tried to focus his eyes. He tried to push himself up on shaky arms.

"Relax, Corporal," his rescuers urged. "The war is over!"

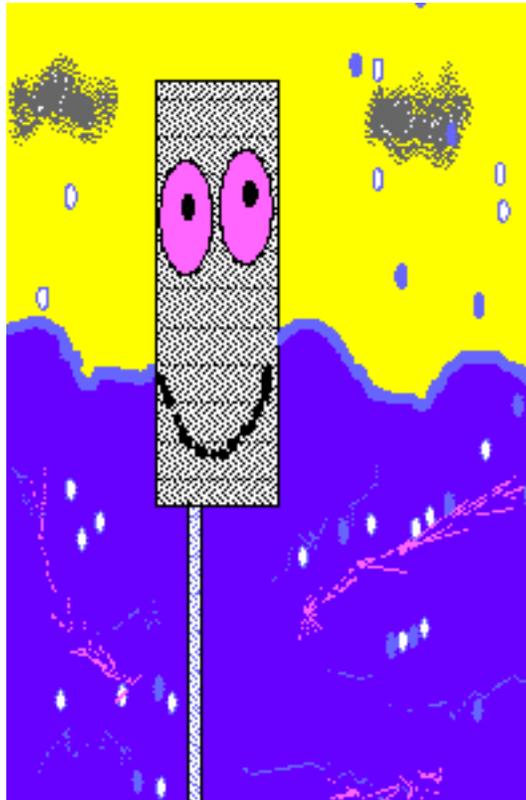
And then he saw the Kravarian across the rock-strewn ground. He too was being rescued by his own kind. For a moment their gaze met once again.

"Farewell," the Kravarian's eyes seemed to say over the sounds of the voices around him and the engine of the shuttle that awaited Corporal Millig. "Farewell, my friend," Millig whispered.

The shuttle door closed, taking the Earthling away from Kravaria forever. But Millig would never forget the Kravarian. •

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NOSES
by Thithp
of Blipp



Metal cylinder burn through world. Fiery screams. Awe. Terror. Much death. Silence.

The hot thing stand on The Under. Then. Open. Emerging, moving.

New sounds: ". . . and remove your helmets. . . Wow, this is fantastic; get a few lungfuls of this atmosphere. . . Better than Earth's. . . I could breathe this all day. . ."

Families. Friends. Mutilated. Gone. •

(Editor's Note: We hope this story, translated by Andrew McCann, will be the first in a series we will call "The Best Alien Fiction." Thithp's tale, considered a horror classic on the Blipp homeworld, as well as many other planets, was "written" four standard-years ago into the Blipp Collective Gas, soon after the chaos of First Contact. For this series, "Noses" was translated directly from the Blipp Odor-Tongue using a specially configured SonyIBM Universal Translator.

Next issue, we will present another chilling tale, this time from a writer on a newly discovered world — Riw in Sector IV. Excerpted from an 800-page novel by Ceh Ff of the Soil People, this menacing story is titled, "Treads.")

Poetry

POEM (#1)

by Toni Long

I wonder how you sleep
when I am not there for you to hold.

Do you wrap your arms
around the wind
kissing the ears of stars,
snuggling up close to the moon?

Do you warm the universe
whispering your sweet promises
of tomorrows yet to come? •

THE FATHER

by Kevin McAuley

When father died
We fed him to the autumn moon.

I was on a train heading north
Past woods running like wild dogs
Through snowfields of sleeping brides.

When I arrived at her house
She was drawing pictures of the leaves.
She drew them to look like old men
Whose flesh was so thin
The sun had scorched their bones.

When I told her about the father
We could hear the wind outside
Swirling around the door.
We could hear the leaves
Which we had taken for dead
Crawling on top of the house. •

STAR SONG

by George Pfister

And somewhere in that vast,
Unsettled infancy I hear,
In silence, voices tuned in stone;
Where stone has ceased its heaving in
Slow rythms worked to other tones.

In these telluric syllables,
A tangled metaphor unfolds
Which moulds my seething thoughts
Around the mandrell of my bones.

And on these stark encrusted shores,
Coagulate of star stuff, cold
And curdled in the void
I resonate these sullen songs,
As veins, enamored, writhe in time
And tethered crystals, timbrels tied,
In strata more harmonious
Weave melodies subdued.

A sterile gleam of starlight seeps
Among these frozen swells
Which roll in staggered strides
Against the ocean's superficial moods.

The auguries I seek in veins
Which surface, squeezed
In slow, laconic spasms,
Infuse my blood,
In its own vast
But fickle dispositions. •

ABANDON LAND

by Mark Phillips

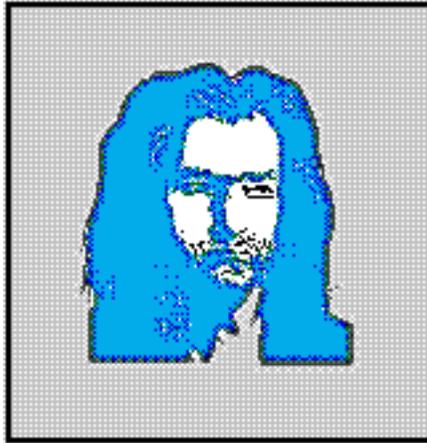
Last night I went to Africa
with a lioness
— stripped a gazelle

and when they ran out of burlap
they used camel hair
to pack the bones

and when they ran out of camel hair
— I was there
wrapped in cool plaster

set in the tall grass
the warrior king
with a scratch on my face as proof •

Fantasy



MY NAME IS KONEN THE B. . . .

by Andrew G. McCann

Characters:

Konen: A barbarian from the chilly wastelands of Sluseria.

Juma: A mercenary from the wild jungles of kHott.

Blunda: A fat, stupid innkeeper.

(Konen and Juma enter. They are walking, battle-weary, down a medieval-looking street and carrying crude, notched swords.)

Konen: By R-Krum, the laughing god of Khartoun, killing is thirsty work!

Juma: Aye, indeed it is, Konen my hulking barbarian friend. But now that the battle outside the city walls is ended, and our side is victorious, what say you we celebrate inside yon tavern?

K: By Dondhi's blood, you talk my language, Juma my strapping mercenary comrade from the darkest jungles of shadow-haunted kHott! How I lust for a flagon of mead and a haunch of roast beast, and perhaps later some supple young wench.

J: Let us enter, then, my savage companion from the intemperate North. (Konen and Juma enter the tavern and seat themselves at a rough-hewn oaken table next to a large open hearth.)

K: (Immediately waving frustratedly to a distracted bartender, who takes his time coming over to the two) Ho, man! (To Juma:) By all the serpents in Shadowia, if this innkeeper doesn't serve me drink soon I'll split his head like a ripe melon and serve it to his wife for breakfast!

J: Relax, my chiseled partner, he is come.

Blunda the Innkeeper: (sneering) What'll it be?

K: An enormous skin of wine and a platter of charred meat, you sluggish cur!

J: I'll have a decaf and a vegetarian burrito, with extra Pehpir sauce! (The barkeep, scowling, leaves to fetch their food and drink.)

K: Gods, man, what sort of city-bred slop are you having?

J: This morning, before the battle, Cherbono, the witch-man, said I must eat different foods, for the charms tell him there is too much of the evil spirit Khilestirahl in my blood.

(Konen grunts, and they fall silent. Yet Konen, ever-watchful, sizes up the other tavern patrons.)

K: I must always be as vigilant as a sleet leopard — R-Krum knows there could be a slew of enemies here from my past adventures, or perhaps I will espy some besotted priest or merchant whom I could plunder as he totters home. My blade may well have slaked its bloodthirst deeply this day, yet it is still keen enough to cleanly part a fool and his head. (The barkeep abruptly returns, serves them bulging skins of wine and heaping platters of meat, throws down the bill, and departs offstage.)

(Konen falls to, stuffing himself like the near-animal he is.)

K: (between mouthfuls and slurps) R-Krum's gonads, I feel ravenous as a were-ape from the spider-cloistered towers of fabled Skahri-Tuum. Where is that barkeep? I need more wine, by all the gods in the Mahrvehl Universe, or I'll spill his guts with a cruel foot-length of my sure Porcinian sword!

J: You know, Konen, my associate from the chilly frontier, you drink quite a lot for one man — even one who is built like a Brikian Shetaus.

K: What? What are you saying, man?

J: I am only averring that, over the years, I have seen you down flagons upon flagons of the stuff. Yet, as time passes your moods are ever blacker and turbulent. (Pauses) I was once like that, as you may well recall: After all, it is what made us comrades to those many years ago in the terrible, sand-haunted trenches of the War against Szaddham, the Devil-King of Dezzirt.

K: (intense, thoughtful) How mean you, my partner from the steamy, timeless swamps of the faraway South? Just what are you driving at?

J: Konen, I . . . I think you're an alcoholic.

K: R-Krum, no!

J: R-Krum, yes.

K: Hmmm. Yes, my heart tells me you may be truthsaying. Why did I not see this before? (Konen throws his drink on the ground) Have I been cursed by the Archdæmon Rhüm himself?

J: No, Konen. You're not a cursed person, just a sick person. (Pauses) Listen, friend, there's some people I'd like you to meet, people from all walks of life: merchants, priests, wizards, mercenaries, even a Nubian slave. If you'll try not to drink today, I can take you to a place — a meeting — where you'll learn more about your habit, and yourself!

K: Yes. Yes, my wise warrior from the hot, trackless depths of the leafy lands. Let us go then, you and I.

(They stand and gather their gear.)

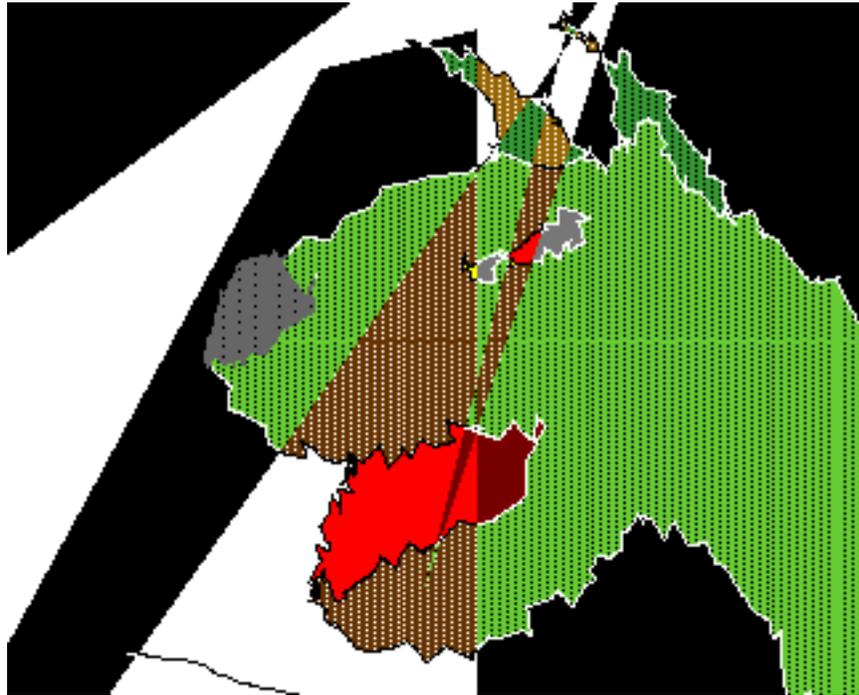
J: Konen, this repast will be my treat. (He looks at the receipt the innkeeper had left.) Let's see, two silver pieces.

(Konen pauses, a smile spreads slowly across his face.)

K: Let me get the tip. There, twenty percent should be nice!

(The two grin at each other, slap each other on the back, and walk out.) •

Horror



THE TAIL OF THE ANSWERING MACHINE

by Kate Tana

Assistant District Attorney Joe Kimball stuck his head around the open doorway: "Yo, Tim, quittin' time. You ready?"

Tim Graham grinned and swung his feet down from his desk. He gave one last, cursory glance to the file he had been reading and stood up.

"Sure, what the hell . . . it's Friday." He gestured to the windstorm of papers on his desk. "These aren't going anywhere."

Joe grinned. "OK, so let's go."

"In a sec," Tim nodded as he picked up the phone. "I just have to check my machine."

Joe frowned as Tim began to dial his home phone number. "You still getting those hang-ups?"

"Yeah," Tim nodded as he began to punch in his replay code. "Pretty much every day now, but only during the week — in the daytime or when I'm not home — never when I'm there."

"Weird," Joe responded. "Like whoever's doing this knows your schedule, huh?"

"Yeah, something else to worry about." Tim listened for a long moment, punched in his ending code and hung up the phone.

Joe brightened. "Finally gave up, huh?"

Tim shook his head. "No, there was another one . . . I didn't know you were into heavy breathing, or I'd have let you listen."

The two friends left the office as Joe said, "You'd think this guy would've figured out by now that he's calling another guy's phone and move on already."

Tim was uncharacteristically abrupt. He was uncomfortable talking about this anymore, even with Joe.

"You know, Joey, you have an unbelievable nose for the obvious. Why assume it's a guy? As it happens, it's a woman doing the breathing. The voice is sort of husky and loud, but it was definitely female."

Much later the same night, Tim staggered slightly as he caught his foot coming in his front door. He had no idea why he was dragging his only clean suit jacket along the dusty floor like a pull-toy; maybe he'd remember why in the morning.

He stumbled again as he entered the bedroom. A shape rose from the bed and was silhouetted against the moonlit window. As Tim flicked on the light, the shape wagged its tail and bounded off the bed.

"Easy, easy girl," Tim said unsteadily. "Down, Martha, down," he continued as he managed to pat his English setter on the head on the third try. He threw his jacket in the general direction of the bed and submitted himself to the frantic and loving attentions of the dog. After a couple of minutes he rose and led the dog through the townhouse, downstairs, and out into the pocket-sized yard that attempted to live under his deck. Martha stopped at the door and looked at Tim reproachfully; this was the shortcut he took on occasions when he got home too late and too drunk to navigate the length of Catherine Street for a real walk.

Leaving Martha to her explorations of the yard, Tim wove his way back to the telephone and answering machine. The machine was blinking steadily: once, twice, three times as he eased himself onto the bed. But as he lowered his head, the room began to rotate in slow, lazy circles.

Bad idea, he thought as he reached for the play button on the answering machine. As the tape rewound, he mouthed a silent prayer. At the same time, he was unable to stop checking his machine, waiting to once again hear that slow, heavy breathing.

Tim shook his head and tried to remember when he'd last gotten this drunk. The reason wasn't a real mystery; Joe had spent the entire night pumping him for information about the hang-up calls. Tim had left the bar abruptly when Joe, after his fourth or fifth drink, had offered the suggestion that the caller was Tim's girlfriend, Andrea.

"**Get real**," Tim had practically shouted; he knew what Joe was leading up to. The people at the next table had briefly stopped debating batting averages and turned to look at him. "And just who the hell is it that's supposed to be fatally attracted to me, huh?"

There was a long pause before Joe replied. When he spoke, he looked everywhere but directly at Tim. "Well, it would have to be Andrea, wouldn't it?"

After that, Tim left the bar. Joe threw some money on the table and ran out after him. Joe caught Tim by the arm, but before Joe could say anything, Tim continued as though there had been no break in the conversation. "And just suppose . . . which I don't for one minute . . . just suppose you're right . . . why now? Why nothing in the last four months?"

"I don't know," Joe answered. "Maybe she didn't have enough invested before now. Hell, Tim, look, you know I don't like Andrea . . . but that doesn't change how I feel about this . . . it's not a joke anymore. It's got to be someone who knows you and knows your schedule. Who else could it be? Remember how Andrea got at that party last month? Hell, even the

worst dregs from the office couldn't come near you. It was like she was spitting flames."

". . . **And don't forget to call now** if you'd like to come up and take a look at this fabulous time-share property. Prime weeks are still available" Tim shook himself and realized that he had fogged out during the first message. Before he could rewind the tape, there was a beep and the second message began.

"Hi, darling. Me again. Or should I say, me speaking for the first time? I thought I'd let you hear my voice for a change. The hang-ups are effective, but it's nice to hear someone's voice, don't you think?"

Tim stared at the machine and concentrated on recognizing the voice. It sounded rusty, but familiar. He decided that someone was disguising her voice.

The voice continued: "Still have you guessing, don't I? Well, the answer's pretty obvious. . . ." Here, the voice grew somewhat agitated. "You've always had a talent for the obvious, Tim, especially when it comes to women . . . always go for the cheap and easy ones. . . ." The voice trailed off and the heavy breathing that had become so familiar to Tim filled the room. Then she spoke again. "However, I've always thought you were, shall we say, trainable? Anyway, I've got you now."

Tim sank back on the bed, shaken by the intensity of emotion in the voice. He jerked involuntarily as the third and last message began. The voice that trilled out of the machine this time was unmistakably Andrea's.

"Hi, kiddo, I suppose you're out on one of your Friday night prowls with Joe. Well, hope you had fun, but just remember: boys' night is boys' night out, not a time to scout out new talent." Tim frowned as he listened to Andrea sigh and then continue.

"Look, hon, I just found out that I have to work on Saturday, so I won't be able to go to the reunion in New York with you. There's nothing I can do about it. I hate the idea of you going there by yourself; I really hate it. But I guess it can't be helped. Anyway, I can stay over at your place and doggie-sit Martha if you'd like. Give me a call, 'kay?"

Tim sat and replayed the two messages over and over until a piteous whine reminded him that he'd left Martha outside for far too long. He ignored the dog's bids for his attention as his mind raced along several paths at once. After replaying the messages several more times, he was no closer to deciding whether or not the two messages had been left by the same person, and especially whether or not Andrea had been that person.

Tim finally fell asleep much later, with Martha laying right next to him. He dreamed of a line-up where all the suspects were Andrea, except for one woman who remained in shadow. He sat in front of the line-up with Martha at his feet, growling at the women. A telephone began to ring on the table next to him. As he picked it up, Martha looked up at him and thumped her tail. He looked up and saw that all the Andrea's and the other woman each held a telephone in their hands. He woke up in a cold sweat.

Tim left for his law school reunion on Friday, feeling as if he had never recovered from the binge of the previous weekend. His head spun every time he considered the possibility that Andrea was behind the phone calls. There had been more messages. Same throaty, raspy voice; like someone giving her voice a workout for the first time in a long time. He had agreed to let Joe get a buddy in the police department to run a tap on the phone, but that was as far as he was willing to go yet.

Not knowing what else to do, Tim followed his original plan and left for New York

directly from work. He said nothing about Andrea's plan to stay at his place for the weekend, despite his misgivings. Before he left, he called her and told her that he wanted to talk to her about something when he got back.

Andrea Banner sat back on her heels and brushed the stray hair out of her eyes. It was four o'clock on Saturday afternoon and she had only just finished cleaning the first floor of Tim's townhouse. She had been amazed at the mess when she walked in the night before; for a guy who was so particular about his suits and personal appearance, his house was a pig-sty.

"You have my sympathy, Martha," she said out loud as she turned to look to the kitchen; the dog had been lying there just a few minutes ago. Now she had disappeared again. Andrea shook her head; the dog seemed to be going out of its way to avoid her. She supposed it was the upset at having Tim away and her there alone. Last night had been a real struggle; Martha had thrown herself across the bed so that Andrea couldn't even get a corner to herself. Andrea had eventually given up trying to shove the large dog over and had spent the night in the guest room.

Now, as Andrea straightened up, her eyes roamed around the first floor in satisfaction; the place really looked great when it was done. She stood poised between the living room and kitchen areas, undecided as to what to do next. The bright sunshine got her out on the deck to water the plants.

Andrea stepped out onto the deck, loaded down with Tim's gardening tools and a stepladder to deal with the hanging baskets. She smiled as she spotted Martha, basking in the sun between two redwood lounge chairs at the far side of the deck.

"Hi, Martha. So this is where you've been hiding out. Can't say I blame you. It's gorgeous out here, isn't it? Maybe we'll have an early dinner out here, whaddaya say?" The dog merely lifted its head and gazed at Andrea. Andrea turned her back to the dog and clambered up the ladder. Andrea was about four feet off the deck, while the drop to the yard was almost 18 feet.

Andrea sighed as she contemplated watering the dozen or more hanging baskets that hung over the deck. She was underneath the plants closest to the sliding door. She began to pluck the dead leaves from the plant.

Martha, now fully awake from her nap, lay on the deck with her head on her forepaws as she watched Andrea's every move. Andrea, in the fashion of most people left alone with an animal, began to talk to the dog.

"I think that after I finish these plants, I'm going to go to the grocery store, Martha. We need some wine and maybe a nice steak for dinner for tomorrow night when Tim gets home. He said he had something special to talk to me about, and I think I know what it is." Andrea finished watering the first group of plants and began moving closer to the edge of the deck. Martha raised her head and cocked it to one side. Thus encouraged, Andrea continued to prattle.

"I think you're going to be seeing a lot more of me after tomorrow, Martha. I think that Tim wants to talk to me about moving in here — won't that be great?" In her enthusiasm, Andrea rocked the metal stepstool; causing the sun to bounce off the side bar. Martha's eyes narrowed as the glare bounced around the deck.

Andrea steadied the stool. "Jeez, I'm such a klutz sometimes. Anyway, this is going to

be terrific, Martha." She laughed again. "I guess you're going to have to learn how to share Tim with another woman, huh?"

Andrea was redecorating Tim's house in her mind as she dragged the stepladder until it stood under the flowerpots closest to the end of the porch. A few feet away, Martha rose and padded silently across until she was standing next to the stool. She stood at the foot of the stepstool and jumped, pushing her forepaws violently against Andrea's leg.

Andrea felt a sudden drop in the pit of her stomach; she equated the feeling with the loss of her footing. As she felt the stepstool go out from under her, she instinctively grabbed for the only available support, the hanging planter. The screw holding the planter to the wooden beam came flying out with a crack almost as soon as Andrea threw her weight onto it. She had no time to scream.

Martha sat back on her haunches and watched Andrea claw at the air as the combined force of the fall and the pull of the planter sent her careening over the edge of the deck and onto the ground 18 feet below. Right before she hit the ground, Andrea uttered one short, powerful scream. The force of her body landing on the ground broke four ribs and both her legs. The jagged edges of the broken ribs punctured several vital organs. Andrea was unconscious almost immediately; the internal bleeding didn't kill her for almost an hour. She wasn't discovered until Mrs. Grayson from the house in the back came out into her yard to light her barbecue two hours later.

Above, Martha lay on the deck with her head hanging over the side, napping as Andrea died. Afterwards, Martha went inside and continued her nap on the bed she shared with Tim.

Two week as after Andrea's funeral, Tim sat in his office, staring into space. Outwardly, he looked like a man on the far edge of exhaustion. Inwardly, his mind raced at a furious pace. He hadn't really started grieving yet; he knew that. For one thing, there was the guilt: Andrea had died hours before he was going to call a halt to their relationship; he had never had a chance to confront her about the phone calls. And he hadn't gotten over the horror of the whole thing; the bruised and shattered shell that he had to face in the morgue that weekend, and in the funeral home afterwards. Tim's reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Joe, carrying an envelope.

"Tim . . . hey, man . . . how're you doin'?" Joe cocked his head to one side and eyed Tim speculatively. "You don't look so good. Getting any sleep? You gotta get sleep. Won't do anybody any good if you start passing out."

Tim tried to rouse himself. "Yeah, Joe, I'm OK, not great, but OK. What've you got for me?" He stretched out his hand to take the envelope.

Suddenly, Joe looked uncomfortable; he ducked to avoid meeting Tim's eye. "Well, it's . . . well, I've got"

Tim was suddenly exhausted. "Just say it, Joe. I've got to get out of here."

Joe sighed. "OK, OK. I'm not sure I should do this, but I thought you'd want to know, even though Well, here: We finally got the results of the trace we put on your phone. We tracked thirty of them."

"And?"

"And there were no calls. None."

"That's impossible. You heard the messages. And besides, the answering machine gave the dates and times of the calls." Tim took a deep breath. "Damn it, Joe, you heard the

tapes."

"Hold on," Joe replied. "I didn't say there were no messages; only that there were no calls." At Tim's puzzled look, Joe continued. "The messages were left on your machine by someone in your house. All the messages were left at times that you were out of the house, based on the schedule you gave me."

"Well, at least that lets me out as a psycho who was calling himself." He paused and sighed. "Thanks, Joe, I appreciate you checking this out for me." He gestured to the phone, and then almost defiantly dialed his home number.

"At least I don't have to be afraid to check my machine anymore," he said to Joe as he punched in his code. "Poor Andrea, she was much more screwed up than . . ."

Tim's voice trailed off as he stared at Joe. He held the receiver away from him as if it had suddenly turned into a snake. He forced his now-shaking fingers to punch the speaker button on the phone: The insistent and familiar sounds of heavy, female breathing, so intense that it was a panting sound, filled the room. •

Humor

ON BLOATING

by Margaret McCann

Let's face it, bloating is underrated. While people like to think that the words that rhyme with bloating are more important than bloating itself, in fact bloating functions as an infrastructure for these words, allowing them to intermingle playfully on the surface of the pond of ordinary prattle instead of sinking into its unplumbable depths. Like a coroner inspecting a set of teeth tooth by tooth, we will plod adroitly through our task — dodging cavities, extracting "spinach," rewarded maybe with a loose gold filling — in order to identify bloating's incisive role in our speech.

FLOATING is made possible by the bloated state of the fatty part of the floatee. BOATING, an aspect of floating, involves mutual bloatation between the sated swells of water and the rounded bottom of the boat, who conspire to joyfully bounce the boater about. MOATING makes inevitable a bloated onslaught of churning, seemingly chuckling, waves into a moat, filling it to complete its meaning the same way a stuffed stocking spells Xmas.

What was once a passing comment gains weight the moment it is NOTED, becoming curiously bloated. QUOTING proceeds a step further, placing around what has been noted small, bloated marks, whose plump, well-meaning curvatures are a delight for the human eye to behold.

DOTING and COATING are almost interchangeable words. Both function to protect, yet while doting encourages the dotee's self-satisfaction to a dangerously bloated degree, coating attempts to de-bloat the coatee, who or what may be chubby and can't fit into a coat, or, like a wall, must be squeezed into two coats of paint.

VOTING automatically bloats the significance of one candidate over another in a booth that can only be described as bloated after a night of heavy voting. TOTING requires an object bloated enough to be properly toted, otherwise the person would carry a folder. And GOATING, a vocation rapidly belonging to yesteryear, is undertaken with the expectation that the trotting about of the bloated-bellied goats will bring the goater seasons of pleasure and profit in greener pastures than those harvested from his goatless past.

It can now be concluded absolutely that bloating is a Cinderella of a word that does all the work while the evil stepsisters, so to speak, get all the credit for it. The occasional or offhand "Look, that dead fish is bloated," or "I feel a little bloated today," are simply not enough. Perhaps this exposé will relocate bloating to its proper place in the common usage dictionary, and celebrate its decades of steady and mysterious service at the bottom of the vocabulary reservoir where, every now and then, swelling with enough pride to bubble to the surface, it releases helpful amounts of oxygen into the atmosphere, marshalling cheer and courage into the frothy currents of the river of life like some of the most fearless of Western civilization's earliest explorers. •

Planet Magazine

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