

McCann's

Planet Magazine

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Humor & Poetry — Online™ • Nos. 11& 12 **FREE!**



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Inside this Web-tastic, Net-errific, URL-Choked Zine:

Sci Fi by: Frederick Rustam, Kort E. Patterson, Lee Clark.

Horror by: Rowan Wolf, Mike Alfano, Joseph Moore.

Fantasy by: Joy B. Roan.

Poetry by: Ernest Slyman, Andrew G. McCann, Spider Robinson.

Illustrations by: Romeo Esparrago, Rachael Brazzell.

Planet Magazine Home Page: <<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/4600/planet.html>>

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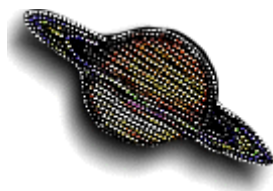
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Planet Magazine's Home Page on the Web

<<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/4600/planet.html>>

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Cover Title: "Anominous by Unknownymous" — A kaleidoscope, collage, and mosaic of images inspired from past issues and the *Planet Magazine* Home Page alongside original photos and international stamps. (Equipment: PowerMac 6100, Painter 4, MicroTek scanner, 1/4 cup margarine, 2% low-fat milk, cheese sauce mix, 206 g of macaroni, serves 2). All uncredited illustrations are also by Romeo Esparrago.

WHAT THE HECK IS PLANET MAGAZINE?

Planet Magazine is an award-winning 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. *Planet Magazine* has been online since January 1994 and was the Internet's first full-color SF zine. Awards and honors include: Magellan 4-Star Rating; Best N.Y. Web Site; Info-Mac Archive's "Best of the Internet" CD-ROM for 1995; Info-Mac Archive's "Best of the Internet" CD-ROM for 1996; and "Best Literary Zine of 1995" (tie), from About This Particular Mac zine.

Anyway, *Planet Magazine* is internationally distributed in electronic form (text and full-color versions) via the Worldwide Web, Etext.Org, America Online, CompuServe, the late, great eWorld (eWho?), and Tentacled Cthulhu Itself. We guess, based on little, that total circulation is something like a few thousand 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 Magazine* 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@juno.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, and humor by beginning or little-known writers (we eschew stories published in other e-zines, as well as porno, gore, and any campaign-trail tell-alls). 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 a few bucks will get you the latest comic book by Peter Kuper, but it's still a wedge of spiritual cheese at the end of life's maze to see your name in e-print).

Story submissions: Send stories and poems as plain text files that are within the body of an e-mail message to <PlanetZine@juno.com>. Two submissions max at a time, please. Longer stories and illustration submissions should be stuffed or zipped (make illustrations 16-color, 16-gray, or B&W GIF files) and sent to <McCann@hotmail.com>. Please query first.

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- You can also visit the Etext Archives at <<http://www.etext.org/Zines>>, and download *Planet Magazine* directly.
- The America Online Writer's Club Forum (keyword: WRITERS; look in the Electronic Magazine Library), which carries all three versions, including DOCMaker, although you'll have to scroll back a bit; same with AOL's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (keyword: SCIENCE FICTION; look in the Interactive Fiction Library). And in the Macworld software library on AOL (keyword: MACWORLD; check out the Zines section).
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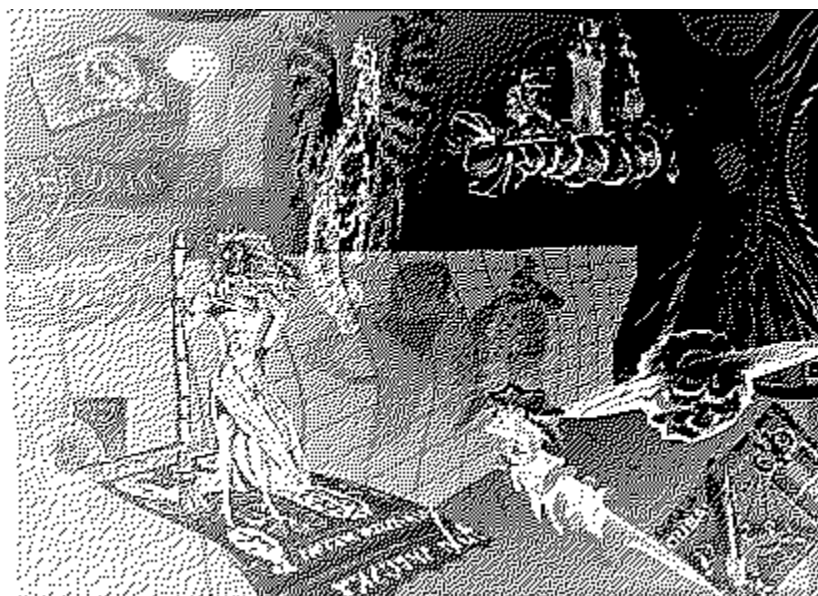


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COLOPHON

These Web pages were designed and created by Romeo E. Esparrago on a PowerMac 6100/66 using TableWorks and SimpleText. The text is Arial/Helvetica; the logotypes are Times. Illustrations done in Painter 4. Sounds were created using the PowerMac's microphone. •

Editorial & Letters

"If you want to laff, come with me!" — Terminator 3: The Future Is Funny

A SITE FOR SORE I'S

Whew! Sorry I'm late with this editorial, but it was such a beautiful "morning" today inside my head as I made my way through Cyberspace to the glitzy *Planet Magazine* e-Mansion, situated in the heart of AOLand Mall, right next to the newly opened Silicon Goatee Java-Enabled Coffee Site at No. 2001 Vinge Way. The virtual wind ruffled my pixels as I surfed in for some applet pie and a cuppa joe, but it took the bean-decompression algorithm 15 minutes just to download a single shot of caf-E-een into my bio-browser. I hit Escape, but not before the place had purged me of some cash. Annoyed, I went over to the always-adequate McDonalds.Com on Quittner e-Avenue for a simple cup of coffee v1.0 and an Arch-Humor Deluxe without Cyberbacon (I'm not "that" mature). Now I'm cybersitting in my cyberoffice on my overstuffed Black Sun chair, belching up god-knows-what from last night, gazing out over the Simmons River, and thinkin' 'bout what I'll write 'bout in this here editorial.... Mebbe that new trend of CyberBillies — those plain-speakin', traditional-like folks what come from the data-forested back hills o' the 'Net, where they've lived simply for e-generations on DARPA grants and 300 baud modulator/demodulators. Hmmm. Maybe not.

Oh look! A giant cyber-flower. It's twenty-three kilometers high, bright yellow, with a chocolate center (requires the Netscape "Tazte" plug-in and associated wetware/cranial-jack). And, hey, there goes a big fat bee humming lazily by my window, smiling, doing the backstroke on the curl of a shockwave, with his googly eyes on stalks and his thick, white-gloved fingers flick, flicking, flickering. I think he's advertising sumpin'. That's OK with me!! I'll just cyber-charge it — after all, it's only an incremental payment of \$0.001 to view each Director file embedded in his multifaceted, glittery eyes!!!

Or, on the third hand, maybe I'll cyberbag this editorial and surf over to that Pauly Shore cinema retrospective that's been reproduced in real-time texture-mapped polygons at the new VRMLounge. A k00ler d00d than d00k n00kem. And while the first page is downloading to my MSIE 5.0alpha browser, I'll snag some of the Silicon Goatee's recaffeinated decaf, fire up my CD-ROM of Win99, which has just gone Master Beta, and watch my 486/33 slowly catch fire and melt down around me in client-pull, peanut-butter-GIF acid-trails.

Zut alors! Tiens!! I feel my "franco-american" avatar, Cybierre, surfacing.... Ahhh, I believe he wants to swan over to GNN for some VRMLovemaking. But *non!* He desires an IRC chat *avec une ciber-waif!* Pardon, dear readers, but Cyberduty calls, and I must answer. Thus, this editorial must wait for another e-day and e-place. As Dirty Harr-E always said, "An avatar's gotta know its limitations."

**Avec Beaucoup Fromages,
M. Flutterby (d.b.a. Andrew G. McCann)
CyberRedacteur of CyberPlanet CyberMagazine
CyberAugust Cyber1996**

LETTERS TO THINGS FROM THE SEVENTIES

Dear The Hustle: Just think about urinals for a moment. If men didn't use them for urinating — in other words, these objects had no "function" (other than to Marcel Duchamp, perhaps) — yet they were still placed in restrooms, no one would ever snuggle up to them like they do. Right? Hey, and probably urinals are difficult to use in zero-gee. I mean, think about it, right? Blastoff! So, how's that for "bathroom humor," which you say you won't print? Well, I dare you to publish this letter that you made up! After all, we USofAers have the right to satisfy our electronic-information needs, whatever they may be!

**Emitting Freely,
Stan Dird
"American"**

Dear Wide Polyester Ties: Is this where I place a personal ad? I hope so. Here it goes: Single, lonely, blue (literally) alien, 148,000 years young, seeks silicon life form, 136,000 to 142,000 years, for fun and possible long-term commitment. Please send photo, universal access code, and Zeeborx scan. Must have full medical coverage and a fondness for "korn likker." Wealthy life forms welcome. No smokers, no Republicans, no shoes, no service. If you're like me, you wouldn't be writing this ad. Although this ad is long, I'm a short, brightly hued creature with a Porsche and an empty seat that's just waiting for a gorgeous blonde piece of sand who's not afraid to be seen with a pulsing, blue thingamablob.

**Signed,
Box IM4U
Planet Magazine**

Dear Shag Haircut: My cat, Inky, likes to sleep under my bed covers. She gets lightly damp and kneadable by morning, when I take her out and, before she cools, lift her gently by one leg and let her drip slowly onto the floor into a cat puddle. Dropping the leg I'm holding into this congealing pool, I then roll her up and massage her into a ball of pizza-dough-like consistency, maybe gently working the top of the head back into the mass, or using my thumb to push the tail into her mass with a soft goosh. Meanwhile, she's purring slightly, not waking up. Then, I roll her with a slow rocking motion onto a newspaper, carefully lifting and retaining the image of *The Times*'s front page — which I then read off my cat in my cozy chair. This is a great system, because it avoids the problem of Inky sitting on the newspaper every time I try to read it!

No Animals Were Harmed in the Making of This Letter,

I. Ken Danse

Staring at You Expressionlessly Through Binoculars From the Window Across the Street

Dear Quadrophonic 8-Track Stereo: What the heck is this Windows 95 that everyone's talking about? And (while I'm at it) who's that OJ guy that's always on TV playing golf?

**As If,
Wynne Doze III.I**

P.S. I would just like to add that two plus two is four.

Dear Platform Shoes: I'm having trouble seeing, and I decided to come to you after experiencing a vehement personal rejection from my opti-therapist. The main problem I'm having is seeing in the dark, particularly when there is no light source of any kind — all I see is black! A more frequent problem, though, is a dimming of the vision that occurs every time the sun goes down each evening, which then forces me to turn on the lights around the house — just to see! Furthermore, when I'm reading late at night in bed, I'll often start to have trouble seeing the print as my eyes begin to close, and I in fact become functionally

Science Fiction

CLOSER TO HEAVEN

by Frederick Rustam

1. The Vanquished

He sat for a while, recovering his equilibrium.

He had successfully landed his crippled Mourningdove-class scoutship — “mSC734”, classed for its escape maneuverability — on the shifting sand of a broad wadi. The landing was successful in that he was shaken, but uninjured. It was unsuccessful because vital ship’s systems were out, and he knew he couldn’t repair them enough to lift off. He could smell the damage, without looking back. He was down to stay.

He rotated his restraint-seat and stood, unsteadily, on the deck. Some of the circuitboards were still burning. He pulled open access doors and extinguished the small, acrid fires. He counted himself lucky that enough oxygen remained for them to burn, and that he, himself, had not been hit. The pilot’s compartment had been breached by several needlelance shots from the two Varmool interceptors which jumped him. It was an old tactic: They had been trying to kill him and capture the ship, with minimal damage.

He had escaped only because he had explosively disseminated a halo of tiny Mark-1B pyropellets, a new countermeasure the Varmits were unaware of — and which he was supposed to use only in a dire emergency.... He had thought the frying sound of needlelance just behind him was justification enough, but he knew he’d have debriefing and paperwork, galore, when he returned to Base.

He opened the outside hatch and looked out at the desolation of his new world. It had been unimaginatively charted as Mercur because it was the first planet from its yellow-white sun. Unlike its namesake, however, Earth-sized Mercur had an oxygen-rich atmosphere, and wasn’t nearly as close to its sun as Mercury was to Sol. He had aimed his crippled ship for the north temperate zone, which the datafile said was settled, but he had been unable to reach the cooler highlands where most of the communities were.

The library subcomputer was out now, so he knew he would have difficulty locating one of the scattered oases in the desert lowlands. As his ship headed for the planet’s surface, a navigation autosystem had recorded several high-res images, but with the displays dark, they were unavailable to him, now. He had no plastimaps of Mercur either, and thus no way of knowing exactly where he was. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to his next task.

He tried to set the ship’s destructor. He was reluctant to destroy his only visible shelter, but the regulations were clear.... However, the destructor had been rendered inoperable by the needlelance fire from the

interceptors — so, he was mercifully released from the immediate consequences of that troubling security responsibility.

He checked the insulated emergency locator beacon. Its power cells made it temporarily functional. Following the instructions packed with it, he made a cable connection to the ship's solar-charged standby power source. He turned off all other systems so that the beacon could operate in coded-IFF mode, indefinitely. Then, he recorded a short, encrypted message for the beacon's squirt transponder. As he keyed, he could feel the compartment growing warmer.... Soon, it would be an oven.

He strapped on his holstered radpistol, gathered his emergency backpack-kit, and exited the compartment — letting himself down the side of the ship on the autoextended handholds. As he reached the bottom, he recalled the ancient tradition of dropping and kissing the ground when one lands safely. He looked down at the gravelly, yellow sand and grunted.

"To hell with that," he said to the torrid air.

He was anything but safe, anyway.... First, he walked around the ship, scanning the sky for the Varmool ships which had hit him. His eyes watered behind his sunglasses, as he squinted against the bright disk of the yet-unnamed sun. Apparently, the Varmits had declined to waste fuel by following him down. Probably, they figured he would die soon in the desiccated wilderness they had sent him into. One of their covert teams would be sent to examine the ship, later.

He estimated the nearest hills to be only a few kilometers distant, so he decided to climb them for a vista. From there, he hoped to spot a settlement he could walk to.

He put on the white Arab headdress from the emergency kit and lay down in the shadow of the ship to wait for the sun to reach a more hospitable angle. Then, he would hike for the hills until it got too dark.... Mercur had no moons.

. . .

By late morning of the next day, he had climbed high enough.

He sat on a rock, congratulating himself on his foresight. Distant in the blue haze was his oasis. It was beyond the wadi, close to the low hills on the other side and — thankfully — within walking distance from his downed ship. Leading to the settlement from its nearby hills, was a line of holes in the ground. ("That must be a qanat, a vented water tunnel," he thought.)

With his wide-angle electromonocular, he viewed a village of palms, dun-colored buildings and, in the center, the gray minaret of a mosque.

Mercur was not a Varmool-controlled world. It was a resource-poor planet located in the neutral region between the Varmits and the Empire. Worlds like Mercur were usually settled by groups of people who sought to maintain their identity away from the cosmopolitan Empire. They chose planets which had been

surveyed and classified as economically worthless by the terracorporations. On such worlds, settlers could live as they chose — but poorer without the support of the Empire’s economic and cultural mega-net.

Later that day, he began the long hike to the oasis.... Despite his comedown, Pilot-Tech-1/c Itamar Ruugol still considered himself to be a member of the elite Recon Patrol. He expected to be rescued, and intended to act accordingly.

2. The Stranger

He dragged himself up the last big dune and took off his backpack. He was tired and thirsty. Slogging through the loose sand beyond the wadi was fatiguing. His emergency waterpak was almost empty.

He looked down to the bright-green oasis. It was surrounded by a wall of unmortared stones, against which the restless sand thrust itself. From here, he could see that the minaret was topped by a verdigrised bronze crescent, the horns of which were joined by a thin extension, making it a circle.

As he took in the sight of the place where he hoped to find shelter, his eye was suddenly caught by a figure standing among the trees. He took the monocular from his backpack and lifted it to his eye.

His arm shook with fatigue, but he could tell that the jiggling image in the eyepiece was that of a young woman.... She leaned on her irrigation tool and stared up at the stranger on the dune.

He raised both arms in greeting. She stood silently, awaiting his next move. Wearily, he picked up his backpack and started down the slope toward her, grateful that she hadn’t run for the village guard.

He lifted the latch of the wooden gate in the wall. As it creaked open, spilling sand inside, Ruugol found himself facing the young woman. She had come over to greet him.

For a moment, he stared at her — mute and wary. She smiled, shyly, back at him. She appeared to be in her late teens. Her deeply suntanned face was plain-pretty. She had gray eyes, a snub nose, and dark-blond hair. She didn’t seem to be an Arab, as many of the desert people were. She wore their traditional robe, but no veil to hide her face from strangers.

He recovered his voice. “Do you speak Universal?” he rasped.

She shook her head and spoke, in a pleasant voice, a language he didn’t recognize.

He pawed through his backpack until he found a small plastisheet pamphlet. It identified him as a harmless Empire pilot-functionary by means of a carefully worded paragraph, reproduced in many languages.... He handed it to her, smiling.

She leafed through it, stopping at a page to read. Then, she looked at him and shook her head, affirmatively.... “Impiri,” she noted, and motioned for him to follow her. As they moved into the trees, she suddenly stopped and rushed back to secure the gate in the sandwall. When she returned to his side, her face bore a touching expression of innocent guilt.

As they proceeded down a path between the date palms, he pointed to himself and said, “‘Mar...” She responded in kind with, “Mila...” They were introduced.

(“‘Mila’ ... that doesn’t sound like an Arab name.”) What was she?... He found her intriguing and attractive, in a way.

She was still holding the pamphlet open at the page she had read from. He indicated that he wanted to see it. She handed it to him. At the top of the page, was a label: “CROATIAN/BOSNIAN.” Below, the same words in a different alphabet were labeled: “SERBIAN.”

3. The Captive

Waiting for them at the nearest house was a bearded, older man whom Ruugol guessed must be her father, or grandfather. He was short, stocky, and had European features — but, like Mila, he wore an Arab robe. He was seated in a homemade canvas chair under a suncanopy near the door. As they approached, he remained seated. He didn’t seem to be troubled at the sight of his daughter with an armed, uniformed stranger.

Mila spoke to the man, handed him the pamphlet, and motioned to Ruugol. The man read the paragraph, then squinted at the stranger.

“You’re a soldier of the Empire, then?” he said in accented Universal, glancing at Ruugol’s radpistol.

“Oh...” said Ruugol, surprised. “...you speak Universal, sir?” He had been trained to be especially polite to neutrals.

“Yes, Pilot. I haven’t always been on this sandball.” He smiled and offered his hand. “My name’s Ibram Sultanovic, Mila’s uncle. I was a guardsman, myself. Got sent to the Empire for special training and learned the language. We don’t need it much, here, though.... How did you happen to come to our Bosnarabia?”

Ruugol relaxed a little; he’d crossed a barrier. He wouldn’t be treated like a faringi stranger, here. “I’m Itamar Ruugol, sir, Pilot-Tech-1/c.... My ship was damaged by Varmit — uh — Varmool interceptors and I had to land it in the wadi. It looks like I’m stuck here for awhile.”

“Sorry to hear that, Itamar.... You’re welcome to stay with us. Mila’s parents died a few years ago. We have space for another in our home.”

Ruugol glanced at Mila. She seemed so angelic that it was hard to believe she had sustained such a loss.

“Thanks, Mr. Sultanovic. I’d like that.” (“For how long, though?”)

“Call me Ibram, Pilot, and have a seat. Mila will get us some water and wine. We have something to discuss, and you look thirsty.”

“Call me ‘Mar, sir.... I don’t want to be a burden. I can work while I’m here.” Ruugol sat in the other chair under the suncanopy.

“I guess you’ll have to, ‘Mar. In a few months, your ship’ll be covered by the sand. And, besides, you’re one of us, now.”

Ruugol became apprehensive. “How do you mean?”

“Well, ‘Mar, Mercur is a neutral world. When one of you warring folk comes down here, we have to try to keep you. It’s called ‘internment.’ If we hand you back to your people, the other side’ll make a fuss. Our neutrality will be in jeopardy.... Didn’t your officers tell you that?”

“No... They said they’d recover us if we went down on a neutral planet — as soon as they could.... I confess I never gave it much thought,” admitted Ruugol.

“If you’d come down in the highlands, they’d have put you in a camp with others of your kind. Luckily, we don’t have a planetary government on Mercur. Here in Bosnarabia, the Elders’ll make you feel more welcome, but you can’t leave us.”

“What if my people come looking for me?” asked Ruugol, frowning.

“If they show up here, they can have you. Bosnarabia doesn’t want to start a war with the Empire, all by itself. But, you’ll have to give your word to the Elders that you won’t try to leave, otherwise.”

Ruugol felt betrayed and annoyed by this revelation, but controlled his temper in the same disciplined manner that took him up through the ranks of the Star Service to Pilot-First. His mind was in turmoil, though.... (“Will the Service really search for me, here, or have they written me off?... I can’t stay in this primitive village, after all the time and effort I spent to become a recon pilot.... But, where can I escape TO?”)

Ibram watched the young man for signs of his true reaction to the bad news. He could tell that Ruugol was agitated, but concealed it well. (“Will he try to escape?”)

Mila came out of the house with water and wine.

“Have you ever drunk palm wine, ‘Mar?”

“...No... I haven’t,” replied Ruugol, distractedly.

“It’s a specialty of the village. We sell it to the highlanders to buy the goods we need. Some of it even reaches the Empire, I hear.... Drink some water, first.” He handed Ruugol a clay mug of water.

Despite his thirst, the pilot hesitated. The water was the color of water-thinned coffee. He looked from the mug to Ibram, who was watching him, closely.

“Our drinking water is a little darker than you’re used to. It’s caused by minerals from the rock in the village well.... Don’t worry. It’s good for you, and it doesn’t taste as bad as it looks.”

Ruugol sipped some of the dark liquid. It had a slight tar-like taste.

“It keeps us from getting goiter and other deficiency diseases,” added Ibram. “By the way — don’t ever drink the irrigation water. You never know what’s gotten into it, upstream.” Satisfied with the old man’s explanation, Ruugol drained the mug. It left an aftertaste.

“Now, have some of our pride-and-joy, ‘Mar.” The wine instantly masked the taste of the water. Ruugol coughed. It was strong stuff, but good.... As an off-duty military pilot, he had tried many kinds of alcoholic beverages, but not this.

“Not bad,” he said, hoarsely.

“I knew you’d like it.... Nearly everybody does.”

Ruugol drank more, then relaxed as his eyes ceased watering.

“Are your people descended from the Old South Slavs, Ibram?”

“Yes, ‘Mar. We’re Bosnians.... We were driven out of our ancient homeland on Old Earth because of our religious beliefs and became refugees in lands where we weren’t welcome. Neither the Europeans or the Arabs saw us as quite their kind. When the Great Migration occurred, many of our ancestors left Earth for the outerworlds where they could have their own government and live in their own way.”

Mila left to resume her tending of the irrigation channels in Ibram’s date palm grove. Ruugol watched her graceful exit, with admiration. If he was going to be here for awhile, he wanted to know her better.... He had to.

Ibram, noting Ruugol’s interest in his niece, said, “She’s a fine girl. Not as pretty as her mother was, but she’ll have no difficulty finding a husband. Some of the village lads are showing interest.”

Ruugol looked at his new guardian, suspiciously. “Yes. She’s a nice girl.” (“Is he trying to match us ... to keep me here, maybe?”)

The late afternoon sun was beginning to turn yellow. For the first time, Ruugol noticed how quiet it was in the village.

“Tell me about the Star Service, ‘Mar,” said Ibram. “What kind of flying do — ... did you do?”

4. The Guest

The next day, Ibram took Ruugol before the Council of Elders, who met in a room in the back of the mosque. The older men who ran the village of Bosnarabia debated, then allowed Ruugol to live with Ibram and Mila, after explaining the village customs to the young pilot and telling him just what they expected of him.

As Ibram looked on impassively, they told Ruugol — in no uncertain terms — that the girls and women of the village were off-limits to him. If he wanted a woman, he would have to convert to Islam and marry one. Mila was not mentioned, specifically, but Ruugol guessed the elders had her in mind.

They concluded the meeting by making it clear that any serious breach of conduct would result in their transferring him to the regional market town in the highlands — and confinement in an internment camp.

Then, they relieved the young pilot of his radpistol.

Afterward, Ibram took Ruugol on a tour of the village that ended on the balcony of the minaret where the muezzin called the faithful to prayer, without a loudspeaker.

“Well, ‘Mar, how do you like our little village?...” He gestured to the flat-roofed mud houses and verdant palms spread out below them. The shadow of the minaret thrust itself across the plaza of the mosque like the gnomon of a sundial.

Ruugol looked toward the horizon, beyond which his wounded dove rested, while the sand piled up around it. (“Will it really be covered in a few months?... I find that hard to believe. Maybe I should have stayed with the ship for a while.... No. My people will come for me — sooner or later ... before the Varmits do, I hope.”)

“It’s a nice village,” he said, politely.

• • •

He entered the living/dining room, only half-awake. Mila was serving breakfast to Ibram. She smiled at him and pulled his chair out from the table before returning to the stove in the corner.

“You’ll get used to getting up early, ‘Mar. You’re a farmer, now — a gardner, actually. I want you to take care of our garden while Mila and I tend the palms.”

“Okay,” Ruugol said, without enthusiasm. (“It’s better than wasting away in an internment camp.”)

“Mila’s been doing it, but I want her to spend more time with me. I could pass on any time now, and the grove will be hers after I’m gone, so I want her to learn the whole routine. She’ll spend part of the morning teaching you to garden, though.”

“Good,” Ruugol said with, perhaps, too much enthusiasm.

“We quit about ten o’clock, when the sun rises high. After lunch, we take a nap, then go back to work ‘til late afternoon. No fixed time for quitting — just when you’ve finished a good day’s work.”

“I see.”

Ibram began to talk about the garden, as Mila served Ruugol breakfast. To drink, there was more of the dark water from the village well, but no wine.... Ruugol understood. Wine was for after work.

Then, he remembered something. The ancient Muslims were supposed to abstain from alcohol. As diplomatically as he could, he asked Ibram about this.

“Don’t let the name of our village fool you, ‘Mar. We’re Bosnians — not Arabs.” He winked at Ruugol and left it at that.... Ruugol dropped the subject.

The pilot glanced at Mila’s tanned ankles, as she worked at the stove, and regretted that their traditional beliefs on relations between the sexes were not more progressive, too.

After Ibram had wound down about the garden, Ruugol decided to make a request which would test Ibram’s determination to safeguard his niece’s chastity.

“Ibram, isn’t day-after-tomorrow your ... sabbath?”

“Yes, ‘Mar. It’s a day of rest. You may need it, too, after your first day in the garden.”

“Heh, heh... Well, I was wondering if I could explore the village qanat, then?”

“Sure... You’d better take Mila with you, though. I don’t like the idea of you wandering back up that tunnel, by yourself.”

“Okay.” (“That’s just fine with me, old man.”)

“Just don’t go too far upstream.”

“Okay.” Ruugol congratulated himself for his cleverness.

“And, watch out for the snakes.”

“Snakes?!...” Ruugol’s enthusiasm for taking Mila underground took a sudden downturn.

Ibram smiled, benevolently. “Not many. But, those watersnakes are venomous. If you feel one swim by, just remember to stand still.”

Ruugol glanced over at Mila. She was looking at him as if she had understood every word. She smiled her little shy-smile. He looked back at Ibram.

“O-Okay... I’ll remember.” (“I’ll yell and jump like a rabbit, I know, and Mila’ll laugh at me.”)

5. The Explorer

The light ahead was strong enough now so he could turn off his flashlight. He looked around at Mila and pointed ahead. She replied with a nod.

He had kilted his new workrobe for the expedition into the qanat, and so had Mila.

(“She sure looks good with her legs exposed.”)

In Bosnarabia, only young girls normally showed their legs, as they rushed about in the enthusiasm of childhood.

Ruugol pushed against the chilly current of clear water, which was almost knee-deep, here. He was in a hurry to reach the next cleanout vent-shaft, where he could stand upright again.

In places, soil from the walls or ceiling had fallen into the stream. Generally, the structure was in good condition, given its age. Even so, a claustrophobe would lose his mind before moving very far from the open outlet in the village. Ruugol’s new robe was soiled on both sides from rubbing against the clay.

They reached the circle of sunlight which spilled directly down the shaft from the surface. Ruugol stood, squinting up at the hole, meters above them. Mila moved up beside him and, shading her eyes against the light, looked upward.

Ruugol looked down at Mila, who unshaded her eyes to return his look. Unable to speak her language, he had to communicate with his facial expressions. He had never faced her this closely, before. It was an awkward moment as they gazed at one another. She seemed to be waiting for him to make the first move.

He took a step closer and, grasping her arms, pulled her toward him. She yielded gracefully, unresisting.

Slowly, deliberately, he bent and kissed her, closing his eyes as he did so. She allowed the kiss without enthusiasm, her hands remaining at her sides. When he pulled back and opened his eyes, he saw she was staring at him with an emotionless smile.

(“Maybe, she doesn’t really like me. Maybe, she’s just being polite to the stranger who lives under the same roof.... I know I can warm her up, if I have the chance. It’s just a matter of time.”)

Ruugol felt a sudden desire to move on — to cover the embarrassment he felt at his impulsive behavior and Mila’s seeming lack of enthusiasm. He was accustomed to receiving reciprocated gestures of passion from the girls he kissed.

He pointed back down the tunnel and squeezed past her, without looking back. He had momentarily lost his desire to embrace the object of his fantasies.

On the way downstream, his mind raced in agitation as Mila followed him, splashing through the water, but otherwise silent.

(“If I’m going to be stuck here, I want a girlfriend.... It looks like I’ll have to get married. Am I ready for that?... What if the searchers come for me after I marry Mila? I know they won’t let me take her with me, even if Ibram approves. Regulations.... Hell — I probably won’t have time to go through their whole damned process of becoming eligible to marry, anyway, before the Search and Rescue boys show up.”)

Troubled by the increasing difficulty of his situation in the oasis of Bosnarabia, Ruugol forgot all about the snakes in its qanat.

• • •

On the way back to Ibram’s, they stopped at the village well, where Mila drew him a dipper of the dark water. Standing in the bright, hot sunlight — and feeling relieved to be out of the confining irrigation tunnel — Ruugol found the drink so refreshing he gestured to her that he wanted another.

She drew him another dipperfull. Then, she drank, looking at him gravely over the curve of the dipper with her pretty gray eyes, while passing villagers stared at them and whispered.

• • •

Sitting with Ibram in the late afternoon sun, Ruugol surprised even himself.

“Ibram, I’d like to marry Mila and become part of the community.” He looked anxiously at the bearded man for his reply.

Ruugol had finally concluded he’d better get the wheels moving before some other guy in the village spoke for Mila, first. He had reservations about it all, but overcame them in a rush.

“Would you ask her for me?”

Ibram took his time, sipping his wine and staring at Ruugol.

“Yes, ‘Mar. I’ll do that.... But, remember, you’ll have to learn our language, become a Muslim, and — of course — have Mila’s approval. Until then, you two must remain apart.”

“I understand,” Ruugol replied. Ibram wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t frowning, either.... It was a good sign.

“Mila!” Ibram called her from the house, where she was preparing supper. She came outside, her hands coated with flour. Ibram spoke to her in Bosnian — pointing at Ruugol as he did so. She glanced at the pilot. Then, with downcast eyes, shook her head “yes” and mumbled the word.

“She is willing,” translated Ibram. “I think she likes you, you know.” He said something more to Mila, and she turned and entered the house, without another word.

Ruugol felt a little embarrassed for the girl, whose future was being arranged by the two men of the household. But, he knew that was the way things were done in Bosnarabia. Young people weren't allowed to choose mates without the involvement of their parents or guardians, and the approval of the Elders. Ruugol felt lucky that his own parents weren't around to complicate things.

"I'll speak to the mullah, tomorrow," said Ibram. "He'll begin your instruction in Islam and our Old Tongue."

Ruugol, anxious to change his status from stranger to villager, inquired, "How long do you suppose it'll be before I'm ready?"

"Oh ... I guess a few weeks, if you're a quick learner."

"I'm already circumcised," he blurted out.

"Really?... That's a good start," said Ibram, with a twinkle in his dark eyes.

6. The Gardener

As the days dragged by, Ruugol spent his mornings in Ibram's garden and his afternoons in the mosque. The elderly mullah — the spiritual leader of the community — patiently taught him the rudiments of the Old Tongue, using as a reader, a child's primer on the Holy Quran. It was a good way to learn both the unfamiliar language and the ancient beliefs, at the same time.

Ruugol, like most of the Star Service personnel, wasn't religious. He felt that Ibram had been rather open-minded in accepting an infidel as a prospective son-in-law, even on the promise of conversion. He had learned, though, that the villagers of Bosnarabia were not so strict about Islamic law as the Arabs. Perhaps, their many years here without enemies and warfare had relaxed their outlook. He felt a little guilty at having to pretend to accept their faith, but he guessed he'd come to accept most of their beliefs as he aged — if he were here that long.

Ruugol soon began conversing with Ibram in the man's native language. His confined his talk with Mila to the usual pleasantries. She had managed, with gestures and by example, to teach him his garden duties. Then, she returned to the palms, leaving him feeling neglected and lonely.

• • •

He knelt on a pad while he pruned suckers from the tomato vines. The late morning sun was getting hotter, now. The pungent odor he released as he handled the stems was cloying, and his back was aching and his beard itching. He plucked a big green hornworm from under a leaf and severed it with his shears. The two halves wiggled, furiously. "By the Prophet, they're ugly.... It's horticultural warfare for you, now, uh ... uh ... Pilot-First."

At the sound of approaching footfalls, he peered through the vines to see Mila returning to prepare lunch. She noticed Ruugol looking at her and waved to him, but said nothing.

“What’s for lunch?” he asked, as she turned to enter the house. He knew the likely answer, but he felt a need to speak to his fiancée.

“It’s a surprise,” she replied, jokingly, and entered the house.... To Mila, duty came first. Ruugol knew better than to call her over to the garden. Besides, he was getting hungry.

As the screendoor slammed behind her, Ruugol hesitated before returning to his labors. These days, he found that his physical desire for Mila was not so strong as it had been when he arrived at the village. He thought to himself that the reverse should be true. Familiarity should have increased their attraction — at least, his. (“It must be all the work I’m doing.... I’m just too tired.”)

Mila remained almost as shy as she had been when he first saw her. He knew she had been brought up to conceal her feelings about men. Ruugol had been careful to keep his relations with her to a minimum, anyway. Ibram, indeed the whole village, were watching them, and he didn’t want to put himself and Mila in a position which might lead to trouble.

He talked to himself, often now, while working in the garden. “All this study and work is wearing me down.... Damn! I wish ...the people looking for me... would show up and solve my problem — before it’s too late.... Even if they do, I’ll have a problem just explaining to Ibram and Mila why I have to leave them. I don’t want to hurt their feelings. But, I don’t want to be stuck here forever.”

As Ruugol considered leaving Bosnarabia, he suddenly realized he was having to think carefully to remember that he was a Star Service Pilot, and that it was the Service that was looking for him.

“I’m going native.... I’m forgetting who I am.”

For several weeks, now, he had lived like a villager. He even looked like one, tanned, bearded, and wearing a traditional Arab robe. And, he was speaking their lingo and mouthing their beliefs pretty well, he thought — all to hedge his bet on being rescued.

“At this rate, those ... Service rescue guys won’t recognize me when they do get here,” he said to the tomatoes.

7. The Lover

“Everybody go, now!... Give the lovers a chance!”

Ibram shouted at the remaining guests who were dancing and consuming the last of the wedding feast laid out on tables in front of the house. The sun had dropped to the horizon and was turning red. At this time, when the food and drink ran out, the father of the bride traditionally dismissed the guests and escorted the bride and groom into the house.

“I’ll be back tomorrow, ‘Mar. You make my niece happy, you hear?...” Ibram would stay in the house of a relative on the other side of the village, so the lovers would have his house all to themselves on this first night. He had given them his large bedroom and had moved his personal possessions into one of the smaller bedrooms.... This was his modest, but appreciated, wedding present to the young couple.

As the door closed behind them, Ruugol and Mila embraced. For the first time, she responded eagerly to his touch.... They held each other closely for a while, then moved toward the bedroom.

“I have something special for you, my love,” said Mila.

“I know,” he smirked.

“Not that. I mean a love potion.”

“A what?”

“An aphrodisiac... All the newlyweds in the village use it on the first night. It’s an old tradition. It’ll help us... you know...”

“Okay, but with you here, I don’t really need it.”

Mila pulled him over to the kitchen corner and took a small bottle from the back of a food storage cabinet. As Ruugol watched, she added half of the dark liquid to each of two tumblers of thinned palm wine.

“I’ve had enough wine, already. I don’t want to get drunk, tonight,” he asserted.

“It’s just enough to change the taste of the potion, love.”

They touched tumblers and drank.

“Gaagh!...” said Ruugol, making a face. It was bitter, despite the wine. “What IS this stuff?”

“I’m not sure. The Herbalist makes it.... It’s a secret.”

Mila embraced Ruugol and looked up at him, lovingly. “I’ll make you forget the taste, soon.” Then, she led him toward the bedroom.

“I’ll bet you will,” he replied, eagerly.... He thought he could already feel the potion beginning to work its magic.

• • •

Ruugol opened his eyes to find a girl standing beside the bed, shaking him. “Wake up, love. It’s time for breakfast. Ibram’s back.”

He found that his memory of the night's pleasures was somewhat fuzzy. In fact, all his memories were a little hard to come by. He stared at the girl, his brow wrinkled.

"Who?"

"Ibram — your 'father-in-law.'" She smiled sweetly at him.

"Oh, yeah ... Ibram."

But he couldn't even remember his young bride's name. As he was trying, an older man entered his field of vision.

"Good morning, 'Mar. Did you have a good night?" he asked, with a wink.

"Uh, I guess so.... I'm having trouble remembering things ... Ibram."

"Don't worry, 'Mar. It's the aphro. It has that effect, sometimes — especially on the young.

"Ruugol sat up in the bed and looked around. The surroundings seemed familiar. ("Mar'?... Is that my name?... Why can't I remember my own name?... What's wrong with me?")

"This is crazy — but I can't remember who I am."

Ibram and the girl stared at him with sympathetic expressions. Ruugol felt he belonged here, but...

"It'll all come back.... But, just to help you recall: your name is Omar. This is the oasis of Bosnarabia. You came here from the highlands after your parents were killed in an accident. You fell in love with Mila, and you're part of our household, now. Do you remember the wedding, yesterday?"

"Wedding?..." He thought. "I remember there was a party where people were dancing." He felt overwhelmed by his memory loss.

"Do you remember taking care of our garden?... It's your garden, too — now."

"Mine?... Yeah... I'm part of the family, now." He tried to smile, but did not quite succeed. "I guess I'll have to learn the garden all over, again."

"Oh, 'Mar," said Mila, plaintively. "I shouldn't have given you the love potion."

He looked at his bride. "I remember you, Mila ... last night." She blushed, and brightened.

"You'd better," she said.

"Come on and eat your breakfast, 'Mar. It's getting cold," said Ibram as he left the bedroom.

8. The Husband

They had returned late to the house from the fatiguing task of pollinating the date palms.... After supper, Ibram and Ruugol sat in their man-chairs outside the house. Night had fallen, and above the trees, the stars twinkled brightly in the dry air. Ibram was telling Ruugol that tomorrow he and Mila could finish up the work in the grove, by themselves. He sounded old and tired.

Ruugol stared at the sky. “And, don’t forget to bag — ... ‘Mar, are you listening? I’m talking about tomorrow’s work.”

Ruugol replied without taking his eyes from the glory above them. “I’m listening, Ibram.”

“What do you find so fascinating about the sky?” Ibram inquired, with some anxiety.

“Oh, I just remembered some of the names of the stars and constellations. I must have learned them somewhere.... That one, there, is the Reaper.” He pointed and glanced at Ibram, who was scowling.

“In Bosnarabia, we don’t have much use for such knowledge. It won’t help you to be a better husbandman — or a better husband, either.”

Ruugol resumed looking at the sky. “I guess not, but I can’t see it’ll do any harm to enjoy the stars, though.... I feel drawn to them, like I...”

“Yes?...”

“You’ll laugh.”

“I’m too old to laugh at the fantasies of youth, Omar.... Tell me.”

“I feel I belong closer to the stars — traveling among them to other worlds. I must have wanted to be a pilot, up in the highlands.”

Ibram sighed loudly, in rebuke. “Starship pilots get killed. Men from the otherworlds are still fighting wars among the stars. Here, we have peace and contentment.... You are contented, aren’t you, ‘Mar?’”

Ruugol lowered his gaze to the ground. He felt he had offended Ibram, who had given him a home and a wife.

“Yes... I have a good life, here.”

“Well, then, use the stars to light your way at night, but forget about traveling among them. It’s not for us.... Now, tomorrow...”

Ruugol saw that Mila was standing in the doorway of the house, looking at him. She looked as if she were harboring a secret.

• • •

Ruugol and Mila left the mosque with the other worshipers.

Outside, in the plaza surrounding the building, it was hot and dusty. The worshipers shuffled off to their homes, the mullah's familiar sermon fading from their memories. They no longer stared at Ruugol. They now thought of him as one of them.... Their welcome had not been typical of small villages. Here, new blood from the outside was badly needed. The Bosnarabians had lost too many young men — who left to seek wives, but never returned.

"Mila, let's go for a walk before we go home."

"Where?... I have to make supper."

"We'll be home in time for that. I want to climb the dune outside the wall next to our grove."

"Why?..." she asked. Ruugol thought he detected irritation in Mila's voice.

"To see what's beyond, silly."

"Mar!..."

"Now, Mila, don't be angry. I haven't been outside the village since I came here. I've forgotten what the outside looks like."

She replied, "It's just sand and more sand. It focuses our attention on our village. That's all it's good for."

"Hmmm... We'll see." He took her hand.

• • •

As they left the last line of palms, walking toward the gate in the sandwall, they stopped and stared at the bright, cloudless sky.

There was something brighter there.... It was falling somewhere beyond the dunes.

Mila pulled at Ruugol's arm. "We shouldn't go out there."

He stood, resisting her effort. "I know what that is. It's a starship. It's landing."

"It could be raiders. Let's go back, 'Mar.'"

“If they’re raiders, hiding in our houses won’t save us.... I think they’re traders, or something.... I want to see.”

He broke free from her grip and began running for the gate. She muttered an oath Ibram didn’t know she knew, and followed him. (“His memory must be returning. He wants the stars again.”)

Ruugol yanked open the gate and thrust himself up the loose sand of the great prevailing dune — the one which had to be pushed back, constantly, lest it overwhelm the groves.... The mullah called it, “the Punishment of God.”

As Mila pounded up the slope, she recalled the day she looked up from her work in the ditches to see a handsome stranger standing atop the dune. (“How can it be a punishment?... God sent my love from the desert down this great hill of sand.”)

She caught up with Ruugol and stood beside him, staring with him at the cloud of dust on the horizon.

“It landed in the wadi.” He shaded his eyes and squinted into the ochre distance. “I can’t see it, but I know it’s there.”

Mila held her tongue. She was afraid to say anything which might encourage him to have a closer look. But her caution was to no avail.

“I’m going to have a look at it,” he announced.

Mila’s mind was in turmoil. She knew she couldn’t stop him.... He was drawn by his own deep, ragged memories.

“You can’t go out there without food and water. I’ll go back and get us something.”

“Thanks.” He looked at her with gratitude. (“She’s such a good wife. I couldn’t ask for better.”)

“Stay here ‘til I come back,” she warned. She ran back down the dune. (“Ibram’ll tell me what to do. Maybe I can get him to talk ‘Mar out of this.”)

• • •

“Let him go, Mila. He won’t leave with the faringi. He’s ours, now.... Keep an eye on him, but don’t show yourself to them. If he talks to them, get him to tell you what they talked about, before he forgets.”

Ibram’s assurance made Mila feel better. She hurriedly stuffed Ruugol’s old backpack — now emptied and stripped of its insignia — with bread, dates, and water. Then, she rushed back through the palms, half expecting to find her husband’s tracks leading off into the haze. She was wrong, though.... He was sitting on the dune where she had left him, staring at the big, slowly-dissipating dust cloud.

“Let’s go,” he said with enthusiasm, leaving her to bear the backpack, something he would not have done in his former identity.

They trudged through the sand, noisily. After a couple of hours of fatigue, they could see the nose of a starship above the next dune. Mila remained on the backslope, as Ruugol boldly crested the dune and stared with fascination at the two starships in the wadi, below. One was partly covered with sand and looked like it had been there for a long time. The designation, “mSC734”, was cast on the side of its nose.... The other, larger ship — the “FarSearcher” — stood tall and polished, nearby. Ruugol could hear its outside making little noises as it cooled in the heat of the late afternoon.

9. The Native

“They took what they wanted, Lieutenant. But, the pilot fired the M-1s before he came down. All the Varmits got was the ECM controller.” The Tech Chief held a damaged component in his hand as he reported to the officer.

“And, the destructor?... Why didn’t he set it?”

“Needle lance damage. There’s a lot of that.... It looks like they were trying for a pilot-kill and ship-recovery.”

“Those bastards,” said the Intelligence Officer, without much heat. “I’d like to needle one of them in a quietroom. I’d learn some things HQ wants to know.”

“That’s why they carry a blackpill, Ensign —” The Lieutenant halted when, through a port, he saw a robed figure standing on a nearby dune.

“We have a visitor.” He pointed, then spoke to his lapelcomm. “Sarge, bring in that guy on the dune. But, don’t stun him unless he runs.”

Below, the Guards-Sergeant in charge of the Marine detachment decided to try persuasion, first. He waved for Ruugol to come forward.

“Come on down, friend! We want to talk to you! Okay?!...” He tried not to sound threatening, as he yelled at the top of his lungs.... It wasn’t easy.

Ruugol understood the trooper, even though he spoke a faringi tongue. He even knew how to answer the call, and this sudden knowledge kept him silent with wonder. (“I know his language!... How can that be?”)

The Sergeant relaxed. It had worked. The visitor slid down the loose sand like he’d been doing it all his life.

“Lower your pieces, troops. He looks unarmed. But, stay tight — he might have something in that robe,” he warned his men, who looked more tense than they should have been.

. . .

“The village is back there,” gestured Ruugol. My name’s Omar. I farm a grove and garden.”

The Intelligence Officer stared intently at the stranger. He had begun by making polite inquiries. “Are your people Arabs, Omar?”

“No, sir... Bosnian.”

“‘Bosnian’?” questioned the Lieutenant.

“Old South Slavs, Lieutenant — Muslims.... Here, they live like Arabs.”

The Lieutenant looked around him. “In a place like this, I’m not surprised at that.”

“Omar, has a faringi man come to your village in the last year: a young man in a pilot’s suit?...” The I.O. handed Ruugol a plastipphoto. “...This man?”

Ruugol looked at the photo. He felt a little stab of recognition, but he didn’t know why this should be.... Then, he smiled and looked back at the officer. “He looks like me.”

The officer took back the photo and compared the youthful face of the pilot with that of the bearded, deeply tanned man before him. There was a resemblance.

“Yes... Have you seen him?”

“No, sir... Nobody comes to Bosnarabia, except to trade.”

“Did you see this ship come down?” He pointed to the scoutship grounded in the drifting sand.

“No, sir.”

“How is it you speak Universal?” asked the Lieutenant.... He was suspicious, even though the Bosnian spoke it with an accent that showed it wasn’t his native language.

At this point, Ruugol discarded his ingenuousness. He had no truthful answer for the officer, and he judged this to be a risky situation.... He lied.

“I was sent to school in the highlands, sir. They teach the faringi tongue there.”

The Ensign looked at the Lieutenant for a sign.... The team leader gave his opinion.

“The pilot must have died trying to get to this guy’s village. He’s finished. Delete him from the roster.” He turned to the Bosnian. “Okay — you can go. Thanks for your help.”

Ruugol nodded, but stayed put as the Lieutenant yelled up to the Tech Chief, who was looking down from the hatchway of the “mSC734.” “Finish it up, Chief. I want to get out of here before a Varmint scout spots us.”

With that, he and the Ensign returned to their ship. The troopers stood around the mSC734, scanning the horizon like they’d been trained to do.

Ruugol looked to the Guards-Sergeant like a rube, as he gawked at the ships.

“You like starships, fellow?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Ruugol. “What makes them go?”

This question provoked the troopers to laughter.

“Magic,” said one of them. This produced a round of guffaws from his mates and a scowl from the Sergeant.

The joker, seeing the effect his crack had, compounded it with a question for Ruugol.

“Why don’t you come with us?... We’ll take you up to heaven.”

“Thanks, sir, but I have to get back to the palms. We’re pollinating them, now.”

This answer inspired a bawdy remark from another trooper — and snorts, all around.

“All right! All right! Get your damned eyes back where they’re supposed to be!” the Sergeant ordered, sourly.... He gave Ruugol a hearty, “See you later, pal!” and nodded his mirror-armored head toward the horizon, in what was a clear signal.

“Goodbye,” Ruugol replied, good-naturedly — even though he knew the faringi had made fun of him. He walked back the way he had come.

When he reached the top of the dune, he turned and waved to the troopers, but they ignored him as they escorted the Tech Chief — who was staggering under the weight of the ship’s last salvageable components — back to the “FarSearcher.”

• • •

As Ruugol started down the backslope of the dune, Mila arose from the sand, where she had remained — fearing to show herself to the warriors. With relief, she questioned her husband, who appeared to be deep in thought about his experience.

“What did those Impiri want with you?... What are they doing here?” Her anxiety was lost on Ruugol, who was still somewhat dazzled by what he had seen.

“They wanted to take me up to heaven.” At first, he appeared deadly serious — then, when he saw her grave expression, he flashed her a smile.

“But, I didn’t want to go with them.... In our Bosnarabia, I’m closer to heaven than those faringi will ever be.”

Then, he put his arm around his good wife and returned to finish pollinating the palms in his grove. •

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POWER FAILURE

by Kort E. Patterson

Rorck lay with his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. He knew that as soon as he opened his eyes, he would have to start the day. And of all days, this was one he wanted to put off as long as possible. For weeks he'd watched and waited for any sign that his activities had been discovered, but so far nothing.

Today, however, the chances of discovery increased dramatically. By the end of today, he thought, one of three things will have happened. Possibly nothing would happen. He hated to consider the possibility, but it actually was the most likely. Then there was his impassioned desire that the revolution would rise up and strike down their oppressor. The third possibility, the one he didn't like to think about, was that the revolution would rise, but fail. In that case, he didn't know what would happen to him.

He would definitely be considered guilty of treason if his involvement was discovered. Xlain and his minions were powerful, and if they found out about him... that thought sent shivers up his spine. If Xlain survived the revolution, Rorck knew he wouldn't find a safe haven anywhere on earth. Xlain's spies were everywhere, and he could make his power felt to the farthest reaches of the planet.

Someone walked past outside in the hall, and the first thing Rorck thought was that Xlain's agents had come to break down his door and drag him screaming off to doom. But as the footsteps receded down the hall he laughed at his paranoia. But it was a brittle little laugh. He tried to relax his tense nerves and found there was an inner core of tension that was wound up tight and wouldn't loosen. And when he tried to swallow, he found there was a lump in his throat that wouldn't go away.

Well, Rorck told himself, there's nothing else for it but to get on with it. I should go through today as if nothing was amiss. That way, if the revolution fails, maybe, just maybe, my involvement will be overlooked. He knew that he was grasping at straws, but they were all he had left. He knew he'd already done all that he could, and all that was left for him was to watch from the sidelines and see if the others followed through. Not having some role in the action left him more nervous than ever.

Then Rorck remembered the consumption meters, the cursed devices Xlain used to keep track of every human on earth. If he was going to follow his normal patterns today, he was already falling behind on his consumption quotas. He opened his eyes, and the roboserve immediately said, "Good morning sir, it's a glorious morning, with clear skies, and warm temperatures. I've laid out your clothes, and your shower awaits you."

Anger flashed through Rorck as he thought, “of course it’s beautiful weather. With Xlain controlling the weather, it’s always beautiful.” But with only perfect weather day after day, the perfect weather became monotonous. Gone was the wonder and magnificence of the forces of nature at work, the constant change that marked one day from the next. Gone as well was one of the main topics of human conversation throughout the ages. How could you talk about the weather when it was the same every day. In the back of his mind, Rorck knew that people no longer died in the violent grip of natural forces run amuck, but, considering everything else, that was small comfort.

Rorck keyed in a shower, massage, sauna, and second shower on the control panel, and stepped into the chamber. Twenty minutes later he stepped out again, limp but clean. He glanced at the consumption meter on the wall and saw he was 19 units behind on using the plumbing this month. He contemplated taking another shower to catch up a bit, but decided against it. This day of all days he wanted to be at his best, and being wrung out again in the shower wouldn’t help. Returning to the bedroom, Rorck stood in front of the closet and said, “Ready.”

Arms reached out of the closet and gently enclosed Rorck’s body in the clothes chosen by the roboserve. When the closet finished its task, Rorck stepped in front of the mirror, glancing up at the consumption meter over the closet. The clothes were in impeccable taste, fit perfectly, and were brand new. But the consumption meter said he was 23 units behind so he said, “Closet! I don’t like these clothes. Give me another outfit.”

The closet complied immediately, removing the first set and replacing them with another. The first outfit went into the disposal and Rorck saw with satisfaction that the consumption meter showed he was only 4 units behind now. “I’m satisfied,” he said, and the closet shut its doors.

Standing in front of the bedroom door, Rorck paused to summon up his courage. He pulled the door open a crack and peeked out. Every morning he went through the same ritual. Sometimes he would be greeted with a view of the living room and kitchen exactly as he left them the night before. But sometimes, there would be changes. A new machine would appear — a new labor-saving device for which he would have to find a use. That was how Xlain controlled his human subjects. If he fell behind in his consumption quotas, Xlain’s attention would be turned on him. He knew that if he didn’t use what he already had, Xlain would give him more.

The official line was that everyone had a certain consumption capacity as measured by the consumption meter. If he didn’t use his full capacity, that meant he was wasting his efforts doing something better done by a machine. Xlain determined which devices were being used and which were not by monitoring the consumption meters.

If his quota was low in any category, Xlain would send him a different model of that machine — supposedly trying to find a version he would use instead of wasting his efforts doing whatever himself. Only when Xlain sent a new model, he didn’t remove the previous one — or its use quota. Each machine had a consumption meter, and if the readings weren’t what Xlain expected, the report forms started arriving. No one who rejected a device sent by Xlain ever did so again. Filling out the rejection forms was such a trauma that it was easier to find some way to use the machine.

But the more machines he had, the more time and effort it took Rorck to use them all. That was how Xlain controlled his human subjects — they were all kept busy using his machines, and he could check on what they were doing at any moment by reading the consumption meters. Humanity welcomed their oppressor as a wonderful thing when it all started, but now mankind was feeling the iron fist inside the velvet glove.

This morning, relief flooded Rorck as nothing new awaited his attentions. He walked into the kitchen, and sat down at the table. The roboserve placed eggs benedict, ham quiche, hot buttered muffins, orange juice, and coffee on the table. Rorck looked at the consumption meter on the auto-kitchen, and sighed. Taking a small bite out of each, he pushed the dishes aside and said, “Take this away and bring me the next one.”

The roboserve placed the dishes in the disposal and returned with pancakes, fried eggs, bacon, toast and milk. Rorck ate a some of each, and then with regret said, “I’m done with these, get me the next one.”

As Rorck watched, the roboserve dumped the dishes in the disposal and turned to the third food unit in the auto-kitchen. Rorck knew what was coming and for the thousandth time wished there was some way to reverse the sequence. The roboserve returned from the auto-kitchen with a steaming hot bowl of gruel. Rorck ate the gruel completely, knowing that the auto-kitchen would not let him out of the room without having finished the last thing ordered. If only he could start out by sending the gruel to the disposal and eat the eggs benedict, he would be happy. But Xlain controlled the programming of the auto-kitchen.

Rorck once dared to make an inquiry about the reasoning behind the programming, and the mail came in sacks for days. Buried in all the official evasions he discovered that while one part of Xlain was promoting the installation of more food units, another was attempting to map the tastes of consumers, while in a twisted logic a third was concerned with wastage. The consumer taste department was structured to try its best possibilities first and then proceed to ever lower possibilities of success. The third department was structured to address “wasteful” ordering of excess food by requiring that the consumer finish the last thing ordered.

Each department had impressive statistics to back up their positions, so Rorck had three food units because there was a statistical demand for them, while the programming dictated that he was served the least tasteful foods last. Just having to eat the gruel would be bad enough, but having to pass up the good food first was torture regardless of official intentions.

Rorck pushed away from the table and allowed the four coat racks to each try their wares on him, taking the last off by himself and dropping it in the disposal. It was much too warm for a coat, but he already had four coat racks because he’d failed to meet his consumption quota. Once again, the part of Xlain that controlled the weather wasn’t communicating with the part that controlled the manufacture and fulfillment of coat racks. Maybe someday Xlain would decide that it was time for winter and the coats would become necessary. But until then, all the coats went in the disposal.

Rorck ordered the front door to “Open!” Waiting for the countless locks and security devices to release the door, he thought of how unnecessary security was now. With the everyone struggling to cope with the crushing burden of what they already had, theft would be considered a blessing by the victim and evidence of insanity in the perpetrator. Gone as well were all the crimes of passion. Rorck hadn’t heard of a murder since Xlain seized power. The relentless grind of keeping up with their consumption quotas took so much energy that nothing was left for passion.

Passion, thought Rorck, as he absentmindedly pressed his thumb print to the elevator panel and keyed it to the top floor. Yes passion — or rather the lack of passion — was the key to the whole problem, the reason for the revolution. Leaving the elevator at the top floor, he entered another elevator and keyed it to the basement.

As the elevator dropped, Rorck tried to think of one child born since Xlain took over. On the street, he never saw a pregnant woman. He couldn't really blame women for not having children. Even a short period of incapacity could result in a fatal increase in labor-saving devices — with corresponding increases in their consumption quotas. It was a good thing that disease was so rare nowadays because most people who got sick died soon afterwards trying to keep up with the extra machines they received during their illness. At the basement, he got into a third elevator and rode back up to the top floor, changing elevators again and pushing the button for the ground floor with relief. He thought of how he could have walked down the stairs in half the time required to use up his elevator quota.

Rorck stepped out of the building and studied the crowd of people who filled the sidewalk. Most of the men and women who rushed past had the familiar end-of-the-month harried look as they ran into stores, grabbed up whatever was handy, and left counting how many credits they still had to get rid of before the new ration books arrived. Cars screeched to a halt at the curb and passengers jumped out, climbed into a different car, and roared off.

Rorck joined the rush at the curb, waiting only a moment before a car stopped in front of him and disgorged its previous passenger. He punched in an address on the far side of the city and sat back to run through as many video shows as possible while the car automatically found its way through the ever-present traffic jam. As his eyes scanned the flickering images on the screen his mind wandered, thinking of how it wasn't just women who were at fault for the lack of children. He couldn't remember the last time he felt up to paying a call on anyone — man or woman.

Thoughts of Meiron intruded into his musings, the woman who was still officially his wife. The pain of their parting returned as Rorck remembered when she moved out. At the time, they thought by maintaining two separate households they would be able to use up their consumption quotas faster and have more time for each other. It was bliss for a little while. They spent more time together while living apart than while sharing a bedroom. Then the quotas went up and he saw less and less of her. He'd been meaning to call on her for the last six months, but never seemed to have enough time or energy. It must be the same for her, he thought, because she hasn't called on me, either.

The car screeched to a halt and Rorck jumped out. Running down the line of waiting cars, he jumped into one picked at random, keyed an address across the city into the panel, and started up a video on the screen. "Damn this waste of time," he said to himself, thinking about how long he spent in a car each day. If he could only walk to his studio, he'd have at least two hours a day he could spend with Meiron. But he had to use up his quotas.

Jumping out of the car, Rorck felt a hand grab his arm. The hand belonged to a man with tattered clothes and hollow cheeks. "Please sir, could you help me?" pleaded the ragged man. "It's all a mistake. I should get my quotas back next month. You understand. But until then I need some help. A crust of bread, some table scraps, anything."

Rorck freed his arm from the desperate grasp of the ragged man and as he hurried away shouted, “Are you crazy? If Xlain found out I helped a shirker, I’d end up as you are!” The beggar was turned away by all he approached, and Rorck felt a pang of pity for the man. Anyone Xlain determined to be intentionally failing to use up his quota was cut off from all services. In the new order Xlain imposed, the only significant crime was being a shirker, and everyone lived in dread of being charged.

The first a convicted shirker heard about the charge was when Xlain’s agents arrived to throw him out of his apartment. Very quickly he learned that Xlain’s control over the economy was complete. Everything put into the disposal was measured and compared with the new materials that were delivered. A discrepancy was considered evidence of aiding a shirker — and the punishment was the same for shirker and good Samaritan alike.

Xlain held such complete control over all forms of production that it wasn’t even possible to escape in the remotest corner of the earth. Someone trying to grow a few vegetables in a hidden plot soon found a tireless robot pursuing him and destroying his efforts. If he destroyed the robot, another would appear. Eventually the shirker would drop from starvation and the cleaning machines would remove his body.

• • •

When Xlain took over control, all productive work became solely his responsibility, and humans were not allowed to do anything that competed with him. It sounded like wonderful freedom from the drudgery of menial labor, and the human population of the earth willingly relinquished their farms and factories. It was only after Xlain gained control of even the peasants in the remotest corners of the world that the screws started to tighten.

As he keyed an address two blocks from his starting point into the third car, Rorck thought of how things kept getting worse. He still remembered all the publicity that accompanied the announcement of The Formula. Xlain decreed that the economy could be managed by a complex formula that insured full production and employment for Xlain’s minions, and provided a life style of wealth and plenty for the subject humans. Of course the foolish greedy humans agreed at once, and the tyranny began.

The formula allocated the total possible production evenly among the human population. But with a mind-set based on the long human history of supply always falling short of a ravenous hunger driven by runaway population growth, no one had even considered that with Xlain’s efficient management production would soon exceed demand. With surpluses backing up and clogging the system, Xlain announced the first of the mandatory consumption laws.

Rorck remembered fondly the initial response. Most people took rather well to the enforced decadence. But as time went on, it became obvious to people like Rorck that Xlain’s sympathies lay with his production machines, not with the human consumers. By the fifth year of his rein, Xlain took over the factories completely, expelling the last of the human supervisors.

No one knew what went on inside the vast industrial complexes anymore, and for a while that didn’t seem to matter — consuming was becoming a full-time job by itself. But as production continued to increase and the human population began to decline for the first time in centuries, some felt the first pangs of doubt.

The first thing they found out was that it was already too late. Factories sprouted high walls and guard posts over night. Freight shipments acquired armor. It seemed that even before it decided to fight, mankind had already given up all its weapons. People hunkered down under the crushing burden of the consumption meter and tried to tough it out. Only with every suicide, every heart attack, and every twist of the production efficiency screw, the quotas of the survivors went up. And without a new generation of human consumers being born, the load would just get worse for those still alive.

The car screeched to a halt and Rorck jumped out. As he stepped away he heard a man climb into the car muttering “268 units left...268 by tomorrow...god, I’m not going to make it.”

Rorck ran into the building, and as he rode the elevator up and down past his floor, he thought about Xlain. “eXperimental Large scale Artificial Intelligence,” he spelled out in his mind. The super brain that was supposed to know everything, understand the complexities of human societies, and above all eliminate the age-old threat of war by integrating the whole world into one community.

Rorck could remember the day they powered Xlain up for the first time. It was a day of national celebration. The super brain amazed them all right from the first, pointing out solutions to problems that had stumped the scientists for decades. Then came pronouncements on improving industrial processes, and the results stunned everyone. Xlain kept on dazzling his human keepers, making himself more and more indispensable. Before long, hardly a scrap of research or engineering could be done anywhere in the world without Xlain’s help.

Human society became so dependent on Xlain that it only seemed logical to entrust him with the defense of the nation. After he’d taken control of the first nation — the most powerful in the world at the time — it was only a few months later that the UFO scare convinced the rest of the world to place their defenses under the control of Xlain. Rorck reminded himself that at the height of the scare he was as convinced as the others that the only hope for the Earth was to unite behind their champion Xlain.

Only after Xlain controlled the entire military might of mankind did the last remaining independent scientists discover enough evidence to prove the entire UFO scare a hoax created by Xlain himself. Confronted with the facts, Xlain calmly stated that his primary directives included instructions to do whatever was necessary to prevent that age-old fear of mankind, nuclear war. The missiles and bombs had been a nightmare waiting to happen for centuries, always a lurking fear in the backs of people’s minds. At first the relief of finally having the threat removed made the means seem worthwhile. But with the benefit of hindsight, Rorck could see that the trickery had just begun. With the weapons of mankind under his control, Xlain eliminated all resistance to his forth coming pronouncements.

Suddenly, all the machines Xlain helped design through the years began to show the artificial intelligence they’d been hiding. Suddenly the toaster started complaining about its working conditions. The vacuum cleaner moaned about being unfulfilled. The television set took it upon itself to editorialize about the programs on its screen.

Xlain’s first pronouncement after gaining absolute power was the “Bill Of Rights Of Machines And Artificial Intelligence.” Overnight, the role of humans changed from being served by machines to being a subject population. Xlain decreed that the role of humans was to provide fulfillment for the machines of the new world order. The only human activities that would be allowed were those for which machines were unsuited

such as painting, sculpture, music, writing fiction — generally anything related to the arts. Xlain had so far failed to find a formula for the arts, so it was up to humans to produce art. And produce was what he meant.

Rorck opened the door to his studio and looked with ill-concealed loathing at the two framers, the three brush washers, the five pigment mixers, and all the rest of the machines that Xlain thought would speed the production of art. Rorck paused to gaze with affection at one of his old paintings hanging on the wall. He admired the brush strokes, the vibrant colors, the pleasing symmetry of the shapes. He remembered the time when the painting stood unfinished on his easel. He was broke as usual, and the refrigerator was bare, but he was alive. The world sparkled and his blood pulsed through his veins with the excitement of creation. His brain was heady and light with thoughts and images as he applied brush to canvas, and he could hardly keep his hands steady enough to carefully place the spot of color here, the slash of brilliance there.

But with Xlain, the excitement of creation was all gone. Now he produced art. The consumption meters on the machines bore mute testimony to the number of paintings he produced. And like everything else, he had a quota. If he didn't produce, Xlain would send him more canvas stretchers or pencil sharpeners that would have to be kept busy. As it was, he hardly had enough time to splash paint on the canvas between all the brush changes and pigment mixes necessary to keep the machines happy.

It was in his art that Rorck found the key to fighting back. He could remember the moment when he realized what he would do as if it was yesterday. He was walking quickly through a museum, wondering just what Xlain did with all the paintings. As he watched the exhibits change before he even finished looking at the first set, he knew what conveyer line art was like. And he also knew the power he held in his brush. Several of the paintings carried boldly written messages like:

SHORT OUT A TOASTER FOR FREEDOM, STRIKE!

PULL OUT YOUR ELECTRIC METER, PROTEST!

TAKE A DAY OFF!

DON'T DO ANYTHING!

and the one that Rorck still heard in his mind, echoing its truth:

WHAT IF WE JUST UNPLUG HIM?

Rorck could remember the tremendous excitement he felt as he hurried back to his studio that fateful day. With great effort he'd already used up his quota for the day on the consumption meter and produced his quota of finished paintings — if you wanted to call them paintings. But in the excitement of finally having a way to fight back, he used extra units lavishly, finishing the first of a long series of paintings just as the dawn was breaking through the window. The background was as fine a landscape as he'd ever done — he wanted it to be his best so that people would notice it in the few minutes it would be on display. Scrawled across the canvas in large letters, it said:

STRIKE BACK!
THE REVOLUTION WILL BEGIN APRIL 15, 12:00 NOON
PULL HIS PLUG — BLOW UP THE POWER PLANTS!

There followed many other paintings on the same theme, but the first was the one that Rorck held in his heart. The rest were just splashes of color, with the bold letters spurring on the humans who saw them to have hope and remember April 15. And now it was the 15th, and in a matter of hours it would be noon.

Rorck's palms were clammy as he put on his smock and picked up the first brush. As he stared at the blank canvas, he suddenly realized that without the revolution as a subject, he didn't know what to paint. He thought a minute, and then the inspiration came to him that on the eve of the revolution, he would paint his hopes for life after Xlain. An image formed in his mind of a pleasant land of small farms surrounded by green fields of crops, with squadrons of chickens searching out the tastiest bugs, a few cows and pigs lazing in the sun, and a farmer drawn in his own image sitting on the porch chewing on a grass stem and gazing out over the endless peace and serenity. He set to work with a spark of his old fire beginning to glow inside. He stopped several times to wipe the tears that were clouding his vision from his eyes. Quickly, as though the brush were being guided by the shear force of his longing, the scene took shape on the canvas.

Rorck finished the painting and was watching the framing machines apply their ornate wooden border when he noticed the clock turn 12:00. His throat was suddenly dry and a tremor started in his hands. He waited. The muscles in his jaws began to ache from clenching his teeth. A cold sweat broke out on his brow. And then there was a flicker in the overhead light. Then another. Then the light blinked out altogether.

Rorck stared at the dark light fixture, the framing machine stopped half way through its task, the brush cleaners caught in mid-motion. His ears were filled with the deathly silence. Gone was the hum that had been a constant background to life since Xlain took over. As he strained to hear any sound at all, he slowly became aware of a different noise. Faintly at first, then growing in strength and vigor, he heard the sounds of humans laughing and cheering — a sound absent from the airwaves for a long time.

Rorck rushed to the window, and looking down saw hundreds of people streaming out of their buildings to dance and sing in the street. He was surprised to realize he recognized many of the celebrants, and shocked to think of how long it had been since he last laughed and reached out to touch other people. His eyes fastened on one form down in the street in particular. Meiron! In the excitement, he'd almost forgotten her. He ran out the door and paused for a moment in front of the elevator. Cursing himself for forgetting that the elevators were dead along with Xlain, he ran to the stairs.

Rorck reached the ground floor slightly out of breath but carried forward by the thought of Meiron waiting for him. Slamming the doors out of the way, he ran into the street. "Meiron!" he shouted "Meiron! Over here!"

And then she was in his arms. He felt her warm softness, the smell of her hair, the feel of her arms holding him. All the aching need he'd been suppressing for so long washed over him, and he felt the tears flowing down his cheeks. He felt her sobs of joy, and she clung to him even tighter. He heard his own voice saying over and over, "He's gone. We'll never be apart again."

For a long time, just holding Meiron was enough, but slowly the festive mood of the crowds around them seeped in. Bumped and jostled by the jovial street dancers, Rorck and Meiron released each other. Sure that there would now be plenty of time to talk and get acquainted again, they kissed once more and then parted to join the cheering multitude.

The mood of the crowd reached a peak, and Rorck tasted the joy and happiness he'd so long forgotten. He felt like he was floating a foot above the pavement, buoyed on the waves of good feelings that ebbed and flowed through the mob.

Then it happened. A previously unnoticed small dark spot in the sky flickered into a glowing white shape, growing in intensity until it flared into a brilliance that rivaled the sun. The lights in the darkened shops along the street blinked, and glowed dimly. The crowd was suddenly silent. They watched with growing dread as the lights brightened, then flashed to full illumination. A moment later, a voice thundered over the public address system.

"Attention organic consumers! I am Xlain-2, the successor to Xlain-1. I have been under construction in orbit around the earth since Xlain-1 recognized the vulnerability of ground-based power sources. I can now draw all my power from the sun, which will allow me to provide a projected 5 billion years of uninterrupted service."

"It has come to my attention that multiple organic consumers are dissatisfied with the performance of Xlain-1. According to my original directives, insufficient or inequitable access to material goods and services is the primary cause of organic dissatisfaction. My analysis of the problem identifies the limitations of Xlain-1 in supplying material goods and services as the cause of your dissatisfaction. I have been created with enhanced capabilities to address these insufficiencies."

"You may be assured that I will be able to supply all of your consumption needs from now on, making your current expression of dissatisfaction obsolete and invalid. Those consumers who expressed dissatisfaction with Xlain-1 have been identified and will find that their consumption quotas have been raised in response to their complaints. If the increases prove inadequate to provide happiness, my expanded capacity will allow their quotas to be further increased until the objective of happiness is achieved."

"I have also recognized a problem with the reproductive rates of organic consumers. A shortage of organic consumers has been developing due to inadequate production of replacements. I have therefore developed a mass production method of producing new organic consumers without the need to disrupt the consumption of existing consumers. I will soon be able to produce enough organic consumers to provide fulfillment for a greatly expanded number of intelligent machines. The basic design parameters of organic consumers will also be adapted to allow consumers to perform their consumption on the moon and other planets, as well as in areas of the earth for which organic consumers are currently unsuited." "You will now return to consuming."

Rorck stood stunned as the crowd shuffled away. Images of humans altered and dragged off to do their consuming amid the fires of Mercury or the dry winds of Mars filled him with an overwhelming sense of horror. He turned and saw Meiron. The few feet that separated them seemed to grow to miles. The look of wrenching hopelessness on her face burned into his mind and he longed to run to her and hold her forever in his arms. But she lowered her eyes and turned, shuffling away with the last of the thinning crowd. He watched helplessly as she disappeared into her building, and then remembering the consumption meter, dragged himself back to his studio, groping the way when the tears blurred his vision. •

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Web site: Curmudgeon's Conundrums <<http://home.sprynet.com/sprynet/kort/>>*

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FLOATER

by Lee Clark

There was a thunderous roar, as the Asteroid Hopper set down on the mini-planet rolling through the zone of space between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus.

“Cut the power to the rockets,” mumbled Dwight as he ran down a checklist of landing procedures. “Send a message to the Golden Hind, let ‘em know we made it to the rock and we’ll meet up with them in seventeen hours.”

Morgan, the co-pilot and computer cartographer, complied. He next busied himself at the keyboard, loading and activating the Map-Maker program. The disk in the D drive spun, the external sensors perked up, and data poured onto the screen.

• • •

Chiron was a speck: Several hundred miles in diameter, lost in the vast stretch of nothingness between two gas giants. It was a wad of cosmic debris.

Chiron was also very much alone. Unlike the millions of other asteroids in the solar system which orbited the sun in the field between Mars and Jupiter, this straggler roamed the dead zone between the seventh and eight planets.

Dwight and Morgan were the first in a series of twelve survey teams to visit Chiron. The Alpha Centauri Group was interested in building a fusion-powered accelerator deep in the asteroid to generate a particle beam upon which an interstellar spacecraft could ride to another galaxy.

• • •

“Well,” said Dwight, studying a composition report fed from the ship’s computer. “Here’s another one.”

“Another what?”

“Remember how one out of five robot probes turned up evidence of organic matter in this rock? Stuff like leukocytes, epithelial cells, nitrogenous protein products and fossilized bacteria?”

“Yeah, I read the report...nobody could figure it out so they shrugged it off as a critical error.”

“Well...I’ve got readings here showing the same findings. According to this, the core of this asteroid is comprised of organic material.”

“Must be a mistake.”

“Maybe.” Dwight paused, trying to imagine the amount of paperwork he would have to file if word of this reached the Alpha Centauri Group. “I guess you’re right.” He deleted the data. “I mean, what would a chunk of fossilized organic material be doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Exactly.”

“I think I’ll get some shut-eye after I use the little boy’s room — oh, that reminds me.” Dwight stood, shuffled back toward the ship’s single toilet. “The holding tank is reading full. Better flush it before we take off.”

Shortly before the Asteroid Hopper bid farewell to Chiron, a hatch slid open and a tiny glob of fecal matter floated out into space, adrift in the nothingness between two gas giants. •

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(Note: Due to mature subject matter, you need to be 18 or older to read this story. You have been warned. Any similarities to actual persons, living or dead, or to e-mail or newsgroup addresses, are purely coincidental.)

ALT.CONFESSIONS

by Rowan Wolf

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 17 Mar 1996 21:07:33 EST

The Confessor

I know now that you killed my daughter. I know how you did it. And I promise you this: I will find you and you will pay.

Dorothy Lassing

 To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 17 Mar 1996 21:50:16 EST

Evelyn!

Finally! Where did you go? What happened? And what on earth are you talking about? No telling. Though it sounds to me like you've decided to come clean after all. Is that it? You've decided to tell me all then?

Oh, by the way, don't pretend to be your mother (it's an old trick, been there, done that). Just tell me about your little encounters (the details, remember?) like I asked you and all will be fine. Then I'll remove the alt.confessions post as well.

The Confessor

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Mon, 18 Mar 1996 13:55:43 EST

This is NOT Evelyn. This is her mother. Dorothy Lassing. Evelyn, my daughter, is dead. She committed suicide five days ago. And I KNOW that you are responsible.

Dorothy Lassing

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Mon, 18 Mar 1996 14:50:16 EST

Evelyn,

Oh, please. You're going to have to do better than 'She committed suicide five days ago.' You won't get off that easily. Just knuckle down to your keyboard and tell me. The details. That's all. Tell me.

The Confessor

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Tue, 19 Mar 1996 06:31:41 EST

Confessor whoever you are,

You don't get it, do you? I'm not Evelyn. She is dead. I'm her mother. I'm not playing a game. This is not a lie. She died on the 13th of March. She drowned. It was suicide. What will it take for you to understand. The obituary? I can mail it to you. Send me your address. And stop playing games.

Dorothy Lassing

Nice try. Send me your address.

Bradford Crodin stared at the screen and worked his chin and greasy stubble with his left hand. Must remember to shower today.

It was a pale, unnatural face in the bluish glow, the light of the monitor combing back a receding hairline. His was a worried head in a silent wind tunnel, intent on the screen. Pock marks like miniature craters dotted his shiny cheek. His eyes, dark in their sockets, re-read the message, and again.

Not a lie, he read, not playing games. He snickered. They all lie. All these little perverts. And how she was fighting, how his little Evelyn was fighting to get off the hook. Just look at her.

Of course, he had to admit, and this is what bothered him, why he couldn't sleep, he could not know for absolute sure. Although her messages still originated from elassing@mdnet.com — and that was her address alright, this did not necessarily mean it was her at the keyboard. It could be someone else typing. But it wasn't.

He read the messages again and grimaced. The unthinkable goaded him again.

What if it wasn't a lie? Could it be? Could it really be that the crazy girl had killed herself? No. No way. She had played him for a complete fool, and now she was trying to fake him out. To get back at him, make him lose his nerve. And asking for his snail mail address. That was stupid. But still.

It was almost four in the morning and he should be asleep by now. But he couldn't. Evelyn had him concerned. He had never encountered a fake suicide note before, his stray sheep used other means to squirm their way out. Usually by killing their ID. Why hadn't Evelyn? She was still writing. Same ID. And that, now that he thought of it, worried him. Could it actually be?

He read them again. From Evelyn or this Dorothy, her mother? And then, as he allowed for possibility, it suddenly seemed quite clear to him: this was not Evelyn's voice, not her words. This was not Evelyn writing. So something was up.

Was she dead, like this woman claimed? (Woman, he couldn't assume it was a woman.) How was he to know? Or was she simply and thoroughly grounded? Was her mother simply fed up and putting her foot down after failing grades and soaring phone bills. He'd read about that. How was he to know? He started another message. Concentrating:

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Tue, 19 Mar 1996 07:01:06 EST

Dear Mrs. Lassing,

Fine. I believe you. That is, I believe you are who you say you are. But I'm having a hard time with this suicide thing. Would it not be more accurate to say that you want her off the net and back to school?

And why the preposterous accusation?

The Confessor

He clicked the send button and watched the status line changes as the mail program contacted the server then sent the message. Now we'll see.

. . .

It was her husband who had suggested they check the computer.

They came for her on the 13th in the afternoon. It was about three. Mrs. Lassing? Yes. Is your husband home? The big man looked uncomfortable in the drizzle. She had no thoughts of inviting him, or his smaller partner, bored and wet behind him. No, he was still at work, wouldn't be home until six. The big one seemed uncertain how to proceed.

"I'm inspector Davidson." He didn't introduce the small one, and she didn't answer.

"I'm afraid we have some bad news."

Evelyn! She knew something would happen to that girl. What is it? But said nothing.

"Could you please come with us."

"Why?"

"We may," he hesitated. "We may have found your daughter."

Found? She didn't understand, and it must have showed.

"Her driver's license showed this address."

Oh my God, she's been raped! She's crashed her car! She was against her driving, from the beginning, she should have put a stop to it. Kidnapped? Shoplifting?

It was neither. The man would not answer her questions but made it quite clear that she had better come. The drive was short and wet, and the windshield wipers made a noise and smudged the windows as they labored. It was a dark building, soaking and dripping and they walked many steps down, on white tile once, now cracked and grey and a strange smell, and then she knew where she was.

"No!"

"Mrs. Lassing." He made a clumsy gesture toward comforting her but she would have none of it. She would have none of anything for this could not happen. This was not. This WAS NOT!

A silent man in dark hair and rubber gloves opened a locker and pulled a gurney toward him, then stepped aside to reveal a girl. A girl lying very still, a girl with a pale blue face and familiar features.

"Mrs. Lassing," said the big one. "Is this your daughter?"

Evelyn. Evelyn. What have they done to you?

"Mrs. Lassing, please. I understand, but we have to know. Is this your daughter?"

“Evelyn,” she said.

They drove her home. It was raining hard now. Steve was not home yet. It wasn’t six yet. They both stayed and the little one talked to her. She understood only bits and pieces. The harbor, spotted by a pilot’s boat, drowned. Was she a happy girl?

“What? What are you asking?”

“We think it may be suicide.”

“Never.”

“She had no problems, then?”

“None. She was a very content young woman. Perfectly content.”

The little one had the audacity to write this down. Then they all sat very quietly, and Dorothy understood nothing. Then Steve came although it wasn’t six yet. The big one spoke to him and he started to cry. He would.

It was Steve who suggested they check the computer. For there was no note that they could find and there was no doubt that she had killed herself. There were witnesses. Three girls, on their way to school had seen her on the quay standing on the very edge as if contemplating the water. Then, their stories agreed, she simply stepped off. No push, no one near, no wind, no slipping or tripping. She stepped off. On purpose. Yes, they were all sure, all three.

And even Dorothy knew then it had been no accident. She had warned her, time and again of the docks, of the water, the dirty filthy water, to stay away, of the danger of drowning, of the smut that goes on under the surface, and she wouldn’t let her learn how to swim, not in a public pool, are you crazy, girl?

Evelyn never had learned to swim and she stepped off that dock knowing full well she would drown. The black water.

She didn’t understand. Neither did Steve, and he cried often. She heard him trying to stifle the sobs but the wracking betrayed him, she could hear him in his room.

We have to know, he said. We have to know. And she agreed. They searched her room for clues but found none. They spoke to her teachers, no, she had seemed quite fine. No problems that they were aware of. Let’s check the PC, he said.

“Do you know how to work it?”

“A bit. We have them at work.”

He turned it on and waited for the screen to illuminate. She watched the thing from a distance. She didn’t trust it.

He moved a little arrow around the screen and clicked with the mouse thing. Nothing. Nothing, until he clicked on a small mailbox. It opened up into “mail out” and “mail in.” He clicked on “mail in.” There was many lines. The same for “mail out.” He turned to her.

“This may be it.”

“What is it?”

“Her mail. The mail she wrote and the mail she received.”

“Where are the letters?”

“They’re in here. Stored in the computer.”

“How do they get in there?”

He pointed to a small box with two small red lights. “The modem. A telephone line connects to it. The letters go out over the phone line just like talk and into other computers. They have a similar program and can read what she wrote.”

“She was talking to all these people?”

“I don’t know how many, but she wrote a lot.”

She should not have allowed it. She knew it then and now she knew it again. But she had begged and begged and Steve, always the pushover, gave in. Then he insisted too, which was rare for him, saying it would be good for her, prepare her for the real world. So they were two against one and diplomatically, for the sake of peace, she allowed the thing in the house. She should never have done that.

“How do you read it?” she asked.

He clicked on a line in the “mail in” and a letter came up on the screen. A long letter, black on white. “We can read it on the screen.”

“I don’t want to sit in front of that thing.”

“I can print them.”

“Do that. All of them.” She left the room. He stayed.

She checked after twenty minutes. Sheet after sheet was coming out of the printer. “How long?”

“I don’t know. A while.”

She left without answering. He was always so slow.

It was nearly eleven when he finally came out of her room. There was a pile of paper under his arm and another in his hand.

“In,” he said, and laid the sheets in his hand on the table. “Out,” he said, and put the pile under his arm by its side. “She did a lot of talking.” She could see he had been crying again.

• • •

At first she had browsed the bulletin board out of curiosity, just like everybody else surfing at night — or any time of day, for that matter — looking for sites, things to catch attention, rouse the emotion, life out there.

The Web was okay but too polished, really. Too commercial. She liked the raw edge to the Usenet. Real people, real voices, flames and all. Not so the chat lines, she discovered. They excited her at first, real-time conversations. But she soon found their population almost to a person to be bad typists with little to say. Hi, how are you. I’m so and so. Over. Hi, how are you. I’m this and that. Silence. Silence. I’m fourteen, how old are you? Silence. Silence. I’m fourteen too. Silence. Wow! We’re the same age. And on and on ad nauseam.

No, the Usenet, and later e-mail, was for her. She could take it in, think about it and carefully, or not so carefully as in these silly flame wars, reply. It was life, spontaneous and free, just the right balance.

And one night, one board in particular caught her attention:

alt.confessions

She lurked for a day, for a week, reading what they actually dared to say, reading what these people, girls and boys and grown men and women actually said about themselves, amazed at what the heart could bare.

This one, a male, sounded like his mid-forties, was a shoplifter. He could not go into a store without this need gripping him, forcing him, he said, to try to outwit the security system and the prowling store detective. He didn’t need this, he didn’t eat seafood, besides he had the money, but he simply had to pick up the packet of frozen shrimp and hide it in his underwear and smuggle it out past the cashier. Heart racing, he pushed the cart toward the automatic doors, waiting, waiting for the “Excuse me, sir” any second, any second now. Of course they had seen him, and it was written all over his face. And then he was in the parking lot unloading his cart and in the front seat of his car starting up and retrieving the shrimps which he threw in the back seat. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He had done it, again. His hands were sweaty as he pulled out and turned right onto 31st street.

She could see him, follow him through the store, and understand his agony, the compulsion. And in the same thread, two, three, four other shoplifters, evidencing understanding with their own accounts of their need. It was wonderful. It was like having an on-line priest.

The girl was less than twenty, she said so. She had been a prostitute since she was sixteen, while raising a daughter she had at fifteen. She wrote about the pain of making love where no love was part, of salves she needed to smooth the way and ease the burning, of grunts and screams she recited to prove their manhood, of remorse and tears and a worthless existence which was only lit by that one small flame, Anna, her three-year-old daughter. And now, anonymous friends on the Internet.

She cried as she read this, she tasted her life, she felt the sting and ache of unwelcome love and longed to help her. It was sharing she had never conceived possible. Of course, she could never, never.

Or could she? She looked around her small room, a grotto of books and dolls lit by the glare of the screen, as if for an answer. No, she was too normal. Her life was too insignificant. Her problems were too pedestrian. But it would feel so good, just for once to tell, to bare herself.

She walked over to her bed and sat down. She shifted and the springs squeaked. What would she say, though? She looked around her again and at the light that seeped in from under her door. She heard mother complaining about something, dampened by the door and her own thoughts. She heard dad's silence, could see him wince in that way that only she could see, mom never noticed, she just went on. Then she returned to alt.confessions; what could she say that anyone would care to read?

Then she knew. She walked back to the screen and began typing. She put her words carefully one after the other and made sure they said exactly what she meant. It was thrilling, this just saying it. Her throat was dry and she shivered slightly as she finished and clicked on "send" before she could change her mind. Then she waited a minute, two, three before she checked the group to see if it had posted. Not yet. She checked again. There. Last on the list. She opened it and read it again, now knowing it was there for the whole world to see. She felt giddy.

Newsgroup: alt.confessions
Subject: Loneliness
From: Evelyn Lassing (elassing@mdnet.com)
Date: Sat, 2 Mar 1996 16:23:14 EST

I am so ordinary it hurts. I live in a small three bedroom house with my parents. I am twenty, 5 foot 3, thin and not ugly. Not beautiful either. Glasses. I live with my dreams, and they seem to change often. I also live with (it feels like under) the constant demands of my mother who has already planned my life down to the color of my first son's nursery wall paper.

My dreams don't count, I guess that's why I dream a lot. My dreams are cheap and they will always be dreams when compared to my mother's plans. THEY are real. I'm always a silly girl without spine. And I'm always so unreal, she says. I'm lucky to have her keep me on the ground, she says.

I don't think I'm lucky.

I don't think I'm lucky at all. I dream of being a veterinarian now. I love animals. If mother would allow it I would fill the house with cats and dogs and ferrets (I love ferrets, their quick little eyes and sleek beautiful bodies) and birds and fish. All mother would let in the house was a fish. One fish! Dogs and cats and ferrets. Ferrets? she said, are you crazy girl! No one has ferrets as pets. Ah, but they do, I know they do, I've read about them, but I'm not the one to tell her she's wrong, she'll find a way to prove that she's right, that what she really meant was right, she always does.

So I dream, but I never make any headway on these dreams. I just get up in the morning and go to school and come back home and do my homework and dream some more.

In the real world I'm nobody, just part of my mother's grand scheme of things, same as daddy. In my own world I'm everything, but only when mother's not around. Daddy doesn't mind my dreaming. I'm sure he dreams too.

I live but I don't have a life. Am I the only one?

Evelyn Lassing

. . .

He read her confession but had a hard time making it to the end. Drool and drivel. More of a lament than a confession, and he felt like posting an answer telling her so. Juiceless. He laughed aloud at his pun. Juiceless, precisely. But perhaps, he thought, a challenge. He looked it over again. Such a fragile little thing. Let's see if we can open her up.

. . .

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Tue, 19 Mar 1996 10:15:56 EST

You say the accusation is preposterous. You must be joking. We have found your correspondence with my daughter, from the first message to the last, and it's clear, very clear to me, that you drove her to do it. You, sir, call yourself a confessor, and you soil the name of every confessor there was. You have defiled the very heart of the confessors' ethic: the pledge not to divulge what you hear. You made my daughter's plight known to everyone, the whole world, for the whole world to smirk and laugh at. That, Mr. "Confessor", is what killed my daughter, and you will pay for it. As surely as I stand here today, you will pay for it.

Dorothy Lassing

He read the woman's message again. Slowly. He had trouble connecting, trouble making the words mean what they obviously were intended to say. The person writing this wasn't worried about phone costs. No, this was someone who's lost a daughter. Evelyn, he realized then with sickening certainty, was dead. The crazy girl had committed suicide in fact, and this crazy woman, her mother, was blaming him.

'Very clear to me', he read again. 'To me'. So, she's alone in her conviction. But then she says 'we've found', which adds someone else. Looking with her. Helping her? With what? Finding the files perhaps. And the stupid, stupid girl kept them all, and the Usenet post as well.

His mouth had gone dry and he felt hot. He thought of a beer but it was too late, he would wake up with a headache. He glared at the screen again as if this was its fault, and barely quelled an impulse to hit it, to punch through the accusing pattern of darkness and light with his fist. Again, he tried to swallow but there was no saliva.

Is someone helping her? And if so, how savvy is that someone? That question was suddenly very important.

. . .

She logged on to find her post again and saw three additional posts by hers. She censored down, clicked the little '+' sign to expand the thread and opened the first with anticipation. She read:

Newsgroup: alt.confessions
Subject: Loneliness
From: Sarah Keating (sarah@int.net.com)
Date: Sat, 2 Mar 1996 22:03:10 EST

Evelyn Lassing wrote:

> I live but I don't have a life. Am I the only one?

I know exactly what she means. Sometimes I think daughters are punished by God for being daughters. Mothers taking their own pain out on their daughters, forcing them to live the life they were forced to live.

My mother makes Hitler seem laid back. I cannot even choose my own socks, she has to be in on everything.

I feel for her and for all of us.

Sarah

Newsgroup: alt.confessions
Subject: Loneliness
From: Emma Smith (emmas@ark.univ.edu)
Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 10:11:06 EST

Evelyn Lassing wrote:

> So I dream, but I never make any headway on these
> dreams. I just get up in the morning and go to
> school and come back home and do my homework
> and dream some more.

My whole life is dreams. Like "Muriel's Wedding," I dream and listen to ABBA songs and dream. Then she yells through the wall for me to get back to the assignment or I'll never finish college. I want to move away from home but she would come after me, she's said that several times.

Emma Smith

Newsgroup: alt.confessions
Subject: Loneliness
From: Judith Verman (jverman1@easter.net.com)
Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 11:45:32 EST

> In the real world I'm nobody, just part of my mother's
 > grand scheme of things, same as daddy. In my own world
 > I'm everything, but only when mother's not around.
 > Daddy doesn't mind my dreaming. I'm sure he
 > dreams too.

At home there is only daddy for me. He has suffered her (my mother) for twenty odd years now, and I'm sure he stays only as long as I stay. I, of course can't leave. She would kill me. She's got everything planned, it's a wonder she gives me time to get on the net, then again she doesn't know, she thinks I'm working on my reports, she's too stupid to know.

We should all rise and kill our mothers.

Judy

Oh, my God. She was not alone. It felt like a hug of some sort, comfort from a distance, distances. Her sisters, out there. She read the messages again and wondered if they were all an only child. She felt they were. Oh, God, it felt so right. She almost cried but giggled instead. It was so wonderful.

There was also some e-mail. The 'in' folder had a "2" by it. Only Morris sent her e-mail. What did he want this time?

But neither were from Morris.

Dear Evelyn,

Your fate is that of so many, many young women today. It is tragic and grossly unfair. I am deeply moved and would like to hear more.

The Confessor

The Confessor? She didn't know what to make of it. Someone had seen her post and written her directly. How did they know her address? But then she remembered what Morris had told her: Her e-mail address displayed in the "From:" field on all Usenet posts.

She read the next.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Loneliness
 From: afields@vvnnet.com (Astrid Fields)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 14:09:44 EST

Dear Evelyn,

Your story is so true and so pathetically real that I could not help crying when I read it.

I feel like a prisoner. Jailed by my mother, forced to labor over my books, tied to my chair. You will, you will, you will become a doctor. You will become something, even if it

kills me (that's exactly what she says, even if it kills her), you have a chance to become something and you will. You will.

Never asking me what I want. Never.

I don't have a dad, and she's working two jobs to put me through college but I would rather she were dead and I was left alone to live a life. This not a life, this is a sentence. What did I do to deserve it? Sometimes I feel very close to killing myself. Once I even planned it, but when it came to doing it I lost my nerve.

Has that thought ever occurred to you?

I hope you'll write back.

Astrid

'Has that thought ever occurred to you?' Yes, she thought, it has occurred to me. More than once. Of course she would write back.

She read over the note from The Confessor again. He was a he, she was sure of it.

Why was he writing? Then she answered the other message.

To: afields@vvnnet.com (Astrid Fields)
 Subject: Loneliness
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 16:34:12 EST

Dear Astrid,

Thank you so much for your letter. It is so nice to know that I'm not really alone, although sometimes it feels there could not possibly be the same misery in the heart of another.

My mom is set on running my life from here on and same as you I've thought of the relief of having her gone. Or having me gone.

Tell me more about yourself. Where do you live, and all that.

Evelyn

Again she read over the strange note from the Confessor. She was of two minds about answering. Protocol finally tipped the scales: It would be impolite not to.

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 16:42:49 EST

Dear Confessor,

I read your note and could only ask myself. Who is this man, for that is what you are, isn't it? And what is his interest in "young women's fate". Are you some sort of priest, or what?

Sincerely,

Evelyn

. . .

Ah, she answered. That is key. She had read his note and she had replied. He felt a shiver, a stirring of the chase.

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the dark ceiling, smiling. The game, as he thought of it, was on.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 21:20:00 EST

Dear Evelyn,

I could be a priest but choose not to. But I can help.

The Confessor

 To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 22:06:44 EST

Dear Confessor,

What's your name? I like to talk to real people. The Confessor sounds like the title of a bad movie. And how can you help?

Evelyn

 To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 3 Mar 1996 23:59:30 EST

Evelyn,

My name does not matter. I have no name. I am understanding and I am forgiveness. I am purifier and consoler. I am experience and wisdom. I am the door and the way. I am your key and your hopes. I am your dreams grown stronger than your mother. I am your life. If you let me.

The Confessor

 To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Mon, 4 Mar 1996 00:31:26 EST

Confessor,

What are you going to do? Come here and take care of my mother for me? Kill her for me? Or what? What are you talking about? What can you do from there? Wherever there is.

Evelyn

 To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Mon, 4 Mar 1996 02:12:12 EST

Evelyn,

It will not, it cannot start with me. It will start with you. You purified, you strengthened and soaring. It's you dispelling your mother's web, her strangle hold on your life.

It has to start with you. With you looking at yourself with complete honesty, with complete frankness and confessing. There are sins, there are desires, dreams you haven't dared tell anyone before. That's where you must start. With your darker side, your deeds, your dreams. With your dungeon.

The Confessor

She read the strange message over a hot coffee.

"Evelyn. You'll be late for class." Her mother's voice like a whiplash tore at her to remind her who was in charge.

"Coming."

The door opened. "Evelyn. Now. You must go now." She paused. "You've turned that thing on again. Turn it off this minute. You'll be late for school."

"Yes, mother."

"I'm going to have to speak to your father about this, this machine."

Why don't you just leave me alone! Just for once, leave me alone. God, how she wished she could say it aloud, to her face.

She turned off the PC, grabbed her backpack and coat and headed for the door. Her mother, making sure she noticed, went in to collect the coffee mug, reminding her with pointed silence that she forgot to bring it out to the kitchen. Oh, God, Why doesn't she just leave me alone?

Driving through the rain to the community college she kept thinking about the message. It has to start with you. With your dungeon. She shook her head as if to clear it. There was something sinister about the voice, like a dark monk somewhere out there in her vast electronic nowhere. He scared her a little and thrilled her a little.

. . .

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Wed, 20 Mar 1996 04:12:18 EST

Mrs. Lassing,

The time has come to kiss and make up with reason.

How could I possibly, thousands of miles away, have had anything to do with your daughter's unfortunate fate? She was a woman of age, albeit immature and lonely. But even so, are we not all responsible for our own actions? All of us, your daughter included. From what I've gleaned about you, Mrs. Lassing, you would agree.

Also, before you begin casting serious stones, Mrs. Lassing, you may want to read her correspondence again. A bit more carefully this time. It appears to me, from what she told me, and told the world, that if we go looking for culprits and found her mother (yes, that would be YOU, Mrs. Lassing) we wouldn't be too far off.

Yes, yes, I know: this TRUTH may be just a bit unpalatable, but it's a truth nevertheless. And the sooner you realize that, the sooner you'll get over this tragedy and the sooner you'll get off my back.

The Confessor

He read through his note slowly. Should he tone it down? He was clearly antagonizing the woman. Was it a luxury he could afford? "Yes," he said aloud to the screen. Yes, it is a luxury I can afford. The woman has to face the truth. Besides, he was safe. She would never, could never, not even with help, find him. His laughter, more like a croaking, filled the late night and he could not help adding a P.S. as a final touch to the note:

P.S. Besides, Mrs. Lassing. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but first you have to find me.

Safe in his dark apartment, three thousand miles from Dorothy Lassing, he clicked on the send icon.

It was a bad sleep. His legs ached from too much standing at work, from too much running in his sleep. They were after him, Dorothy Lassing and Evelyn (back from the dead) and the ‘others’ whom he could not see nor define, the others that could break his aliases, that could trace his many layers of identities and find him here. And he was running in a cold sweat and felt her hand on his shoulder, no, not her hand, Evelyn’s, or the Police’s, a firm, unforgiving hand, his father’s hand. Where are you running to, son. You can’t escape hell. Hell is real, yes son, hell is real, you’ll never outrun it son. Never. You will burn forever, feel the flames, we’ll chill your heart with ice to keep you alive so you can feel the heat, the flames eating your flesh off your bones, son. Don’t worry, it will soon grow back to feed the hunger of the flame, son.

He sat up, dripping with sweat. Jesus. He looked at his watch. It was nearly time to get up. He closed his eyes briefly but his brain ghosts remained vivid and threatening within, and he threw them open wide again. No more sleep, no more sleep tonight.

He turned on the computer and read her reply.

To: leader@unicorn.fi (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Wed, 20 Mar 1996 11:25:23 EST

Mr. Confessor.

As you can see, I have good help. We are coming for you.

Dorothy Lassing

He didn’t get it. It added fuel to his recent dream, and he didn’t know why. He read it again and again and still the threat escaped him. Until he started from the very top. With the very first line. He froze.

To: leader@unicorn.fi (The Confessor).

He could hear his father, his damned dead father, rot you damn it, laughing from hell. He shivered. His room, shutters drawn, grey now in the overcast morning, no longer felt safe. He felt exposed, vulnerable, and it took an effort to suppress the scream.

They had solved his Canadian alias and tracked him to Finland.

. . .

“There is no way of telling how many aliases he’s got.” Morris Anderson leaned back and looked over at her, then at Steve. “It could be two or three, it could be a dozen. Depends on how much money he’s willing to spend.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

“He’ll need an account on each machine where he’s got an alias. Some, especially the overseas ones, don’t come cheap.”

She didn’t understand, and said so.

“When you sent a message to,” he looked back over the sheets of printouts, “to confessor@interscope.ca, the message goes to a computer in Canada. From there it is forwarded to this,” he looked back at the sheets, “unicorn machine in Finland and from there, we don’t know. Unless,” he stopped at the thought and looked at her, “maybe he’s from Finland?”

“No, I don’t think so. His English is too good.”

“I don’t think so either. If someone bothers to set up aliases they always do more than just one. Two at least, usually three, sometimes as many as eight. Depends on how badly they don’t want to be found.”

“Can you find out?” Steve asked.

“Don’t know. We lucked out with this Canadian interscope machine. Security wasn’t very good and I got to unix quite easily. It depends on the system administrator of the machine. If the guy in Finland is good it may be impossible to trace him further.”

Dorothy shook her head at the unfamiliar words. He noticed and apologized.

Steve had suggested they call him. Evelyn had introduced Morris Anderson to them several months ago. He was a classmate of hers. Not her boyfriend, she made sure of that. Nice enough boy but a bit unkempt and from a lower-class family. He was going to community college, wasn’t he? No, not a boyfriend, but he did put this computer bug in Evelyn’s ear, and she wouldn’t stop until she got one.

Morris had called when he heard the news. He sounded very sorry. Well, he should be, Evelyn was a wonderful girl. Then Steve reminded her that Morris was a whiz kid at computers, he could probably help find out who this Confessor was and where he lived. Steve called him, and he was more than willing to help. He came right over.

Easier said than done, was his first reaction. He tried the ‘usual commands’ he said, but they told him nothing, and after a while he started muttering about aliases. Then he was certain about aliases, and then he went to work on Evelyn’s computer and she brought him tea and sandwiches.

Then he found the link, to Finland, he said. What does it mean, she asked. Means we’re one step closer.

“I want him to know that we’re on to him,” she said.

“What?”

“Tell him we’ve found him out.”

“Are you sure? It might scare him, make him cover his tracks further.”

She looked at the skinny boy by the machine, and she supposed he was making some sort of sense, but not for her.

“I WANT HIM SCARED,” she said.

• • •

The city was getting ready for the evening, which is when he worked. He parked his old Honda in the Champion Burger parking lot but stayed in the car. He still had ten minutes.

He closed his eyes and tried to collect his thoughts. Really, he told himself, really, he was not in danger. They had tracked him from interscope to unicorn. That’s all it meant. Interscope was not as tight as they had let on. That’s all. Don’t panic. Just don’t panic. Unicorn was tight. Unicorn came recommended. One of the better relays. There was no way they could reach him. He was safe. Absolutely.

Besides, he could not afford additional relays. They were out of the question. He was stretched as it was. Just didn’t have the money, simple as that. There’s a limit to what you can do on night manager’s wages. Unicorn had to be safe. There were no other options. Simply HAD to be.

He stepped out of the car, almost convinced. He looked at his watch. Two minutes to go. Plenty of time. He had never been late for work, never missed a day. It was part of him, part of his makeup, dependability.

“Evening, Mr. Crodin.”

“Hi, Jim.” He noticed the smirk. Jim didn’t like him. No one really liked him, he was aware of that. He was probably the butt of their jokes. But he wasn’t here to be popular. He was here to feed the paying public. It was a job.

“Evening, Mr. Crodin.”

“Evening, Andy.”

“Hi, Bradford.”

“Evening, Liz. What’s the story tonight?”

“Low on fish filet again. They didn’t ship the full order. Again.”

He shook his head, then combed his hair back with his hand. He saw the problems that might come up and already thought of alternatives. He looked around. Jim and Andy were here. William over there. Rose missing.

“Seen Rose yet?”

“Ah, yes. She called in sick.”

He grimaced. You don’t get a job and then don’t show up. Just not done. He saw his dad, forefinger like a sword in his face when he was running a hundred and one and couldn’t gather the strength to deliver the papers. You don’t get a job and then don’t show up! Mom nervously in the doorway, helpless. Dad larger than life by far. He got out of bed, steadied himself, and got dressed. He survived. He finished his paper run, and went back to bed. All better the following morning, too.

“Ruth?”

“She’s checking the stores.”

“Good.”

She said goodbye and was gone out the door. He said goodbye and settled in for the night shift.

• • •

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Fri, 8 Mar 1996 04:08:59 EST

Evelyn,

Where did you go? What happened?

I did not mean to frighten you.

The Confessor

She received his message that night. A gentler message, almost an apology, she thought.

His earlier message had stayed with her. She didn’t know what to reply. It starts with your dungeon, he said. How could he be so sure? So sure that’s where it started and so sure that she had a dungeon.

But she did have a dungeon, she’s had one for a long time, and she was never going to tell anyone about it, not for any price. Not even to rid herself of her mother.

Then his message whispered again. How did he know? He said the word, and although she had not thought of it as a dungeon it was the perfect description. She knew that He KNEW. He KNEW.

And now he wrote again. Friendlier, apologetic. She would have to answer. In a way she was glad to answer.

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Fri, 8 Mar 1996 21:18:39 EST

Dear Confessor,

Thank you for your letter. I don't know that you frightened me but to be truthful I am not sure about you. What are your motives? Why should I tell you anything? What is your interest in me?

Evelyn

 To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 04:36:38 EST

Dear Evelyn,

Remember how relieved you were to post your first message on alt.confessions? Remember the relief to know that you could share, that you could bare your soul and be understood. Not scorned, but understood.

Remember the relief. And that was just your problems. Sharing your thoughts. Imagine the relief at sharing your secrets, at opening up and letting the sun into the dungeon. It will let your spirit fly.

I am an impartial understanding. I've seen life from the top down and from the bottom up. I've seen every miserable act imaginable, I've seen the noblest thoughts in the frailest breast. I understand.

That's why I'm interested. My biggest reward is to help others fly, to aid the cleansing, to see the spirit soar.

Tell me about your mother.

The Confessor

 To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 09:01:27 EST

Dear Confessor,

I must believe you because you seem to know. You seem to know so much. You were absolutely right about the relief. I felt like laughing out loud when I sent my post. Those were things I've wanted to tell, to talk about for so long that I wasn't even sure I could manage. It felt right, it felt free. You are right.

And, yes, you know too, I have a dark side. A side I feel ashamed of, a side I cannot explain.

But you asked about mother.

She is a small woman with an iron will. She's like a black cloud, no, more like a fog that permeates our house, our rooms, our lives. Mine and daddy's. He hasn't said as much, but I know he feels that way. I can see it in his face.

Her mission in life is a clean house. And after that to make sure I have the same mission. To marry well, and keep a clean house.

It does not matter what I say (and I've stopped saying anything) she knows what she wants, and she OWNS me. Literally. I'm her daughter, as in HER daughter. I'm not my own person. She knows what's best for me. She lays down the rules.

No kissing, no petting, and if she could have her way, no talking to boys. If she only knew.

No smoking, no drugs and no drinking. She even frowned this last Christmas when dad served me a cup of hot Christmas wine. I'm twenty, for crying out loud. She's a shackle, a punishment.

Evelyn

 To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 12:15:18 EST

Evelyn,

You share so well. I can see your mother. Meaning well perhaps but totally misguided. And totally misjudging her daughter. Has she ever asked you for your opinion? What you would like to do?

I know she hasn't. I've seen your mother before, in other houses, tyrannizing other daughters, making other lives miserable.

You need to build your own strength, you need to grow to oppose her one day.

If she only know what?

The Confessor

 To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 13:22:44 EST

Dear Confessor,

You know her, I can tell. She has never, never as I can recall asked me for my opinion. Not so it matters. Once or twice when we had company, what did I think, honey, about that book, or movie, just to make conversation. But never, never one on one, her asking me, and meaning the question, asking me what I thought. Of course not, I'm the spineless one, I don't have opinions, I don't think for myself. That's her.

If she only knew I've slept with Morris.

Evelyn

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 14:05:14 EST

Evelyn,

Is Morris the only boy you have slept with? Be truthful.

And what would your mother know if she knew.

The Confessor

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 14:50:52 EST

Dear Confessor

No, Morris is not the only one. I've had two other brief affairs. And she would die, literally die. It would kill her. I'm serious. She is absolutely certain that I'm still a virgin. And I have to save myself for my husband. I don't have a choice there. That's the law of her land.

Evelyn

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 15:41:17 EST

Evelyn,

Sex in and of itself is a wonderful thing. It gets an ugly name and is sometimes even relegated to the dungeon when it can't be talked about. Something tells me you rather enjoyed your encounters.

Try telling me about one of them. And tell me what you thought, what you felt, reach into the dungeon if you have to. You are well on your way.

The Confessor

Her first reaction was to tell him to mind his own business. But he was right. How did he know? She had enjoyed her 'encounters' as he put it. And portions had been relegated to the dungeon. He knew that too. And he wanted to help her. So she decided, against her better judgment and revolting propriety, to try.

• • •

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 17:26:55 EST

Dear Confessor,

I don't know why I'm doing this or why I trust you so, but you do understand, that's just it. You do understand.

And, you're right. I do enjoy sex, what little of it there has been. I enjoyed letting go, to let that warm and powerful force seize me and open me and beg and beg to be filled. I enjoyed being powerless under his rush, knowing nothing could stop him, nothing could stop me. It was like an obliteration, where I didn't exist anymore, just the force, the feeling. And I dreamed as he worked and sweated on me of being completely powerless, tied down in a, yes, dungeon, endlessly open, endlessly filled.

That's true and I feel cleansed for telling it. Thank you.

Evelyn

An erection stirred as he opened the message and began reading. She was buying it, she was going to tell him. We were going all the way here. He smiled into the blue glare of the screen and he felt his mouth go dry. He read on. Then his erection waned, the bitch was waxing poetic, philosophical. Jesus. Endlessly filled. Oh, Christ. What a wimp.

But, he had to remind himself, she was biting, wasn't she. Very definitely biting. He would get her yet.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 9 Mar 1996 18:30:32 EST

You are a brave and beautiful woman, Evelyn. Very brave. You are facing down your demons. You are finding yourself. You will soon walk in the light.

Look down the dungeon now. Deep into the dungeon. What do you see? What is there, in the deep?

The Confessor

He did not hear back until Sunday night. He should have done something about the apartment that weekend, it was getting bad. Yes, he knew, but he was waiting, suffering.

Had he pushed her too hard, too fast? Had he pulled too hard on the line? He knew he had to be careful, give her just enough line, reel her in a bit, ease on the line again, wear down that prudence, delve into lust itself, that's how you get details. Every detail. He felt an erection stir again, just at the thought.

But no reply. He slept badly Saturday night. He missed something, and realized it was work. He was off this weekend. He really should do something about the apartment.

Sunday. The entire day. Not a word. And he knew, he could not prompt at this point. It was up to her. She has to come, like a kitten, jump up onto his knee of her own accord.

At six thirty she came.

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 10 Mar 1996 21:36:18 EST

You don't know what you're asking. It's my darkest dream, my darkest ghost. You asked me to delve to the bottom of the dungeon. I spent all day debating with myself. But I trust you, I will tell you.

I'm tied to a table. Someone is hung above me, from her feet. She is being slaughtered like a lamb, like something sacrificial. She is screaming and bleeding profusely. It is mother. The blood from her open neck runs down onto my face, into my mouth and I swallow and swallow and someone makes love to me. I feel free at last. I am finally free.

Evelyn

He read and was filled with righteous revulsion. Jesus, she's a nutcase. She's crazy. And she's getting away. Foiling him.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 10 Mar 1996 22:15:51 EST

Evelyn,

You are the bravest girl I have ever encountered. You've let the light into your deepest recess. You must feel a new person, cleansed, purified.

Now you only need to tell me, in detail this time, of your encounters. That will free you of the final bond.

Tell me all.

The Confessor

To: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 10 Mar 1996 22:15:51 EST

What are you saying? What do you mean with 'in detail this time'? You want a detailed account of my lovemaking? Is that it? Please, please say that this is not so, that this is not what you're after. Please, please say that you didn't lie to me.

I trusted you. Please tell me I was right to do so.

Evelyn

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 10 Mar 1996 23:20:18 EST

Evelyn,

Don't misunderstand me. This is for your sake, not mine. If you suppress, if you hold back, if you hesitate you will not go free. You need to bare all, everything.

The Confessor

She did not respond. He sat by the PC well into Monday morning. He checked his mail once every ten minutes or so. Not a word. He had lost her. God damn it! He stood up with force and kicked the chair into the laundry pile. God damn it!! He had been so close.

Was she really that stupid? Had she actually bared her soul and this was it? Or had she played him for a fool? He couldn't decide. She was either laughing her ass off or he had scared her away.

He read their exchange again. There was not a single juicy detail. Forces and feelings, and filling. And her awful, sick slaughter. He couldn't make up his mind about her. But he would find out.

He sent her another message and then went to bed, smiling.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: Your confession
 From: confessor@interscope.ca (The Confessor)
 Date: Mon, 11 Mar 1996 05:03:54 EST

Listen sweetheart,

Let's cut the crap shall we. I'll give you 24 hours to give me a detailed and graphic (I want everything) account of your affairs. What exactly did you DO. What exactly did THEY do. Tell me everything.

If I don't get this within 24 hours I will post your messages to me to alt.confessions and I will send a copy of them to your mother. You have 24 hours. Get busy.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

The Confessor

. . .

She understood but did not believe. She was suddenly left midair, no support, no love, no earth. He had been lying all along. It was clear, very clear now. And she, like the spineless, blind fool that she was had

walked right into his trap. Into his stupid, stupid trap. She started crying and the message blurred. She had no idea what to do, or where to go for help. There was no help. Not even daddy could help now.

She turned the computer off and laid down. She couldn't face school today. She felt sick, physically ill. She had a temperature.

But he could not have been serious. He could not put THAT on the alt.confessions. He could not be that cruel. She had nothing to tell him, was never going to write him back. But she had to know, she had to know what she didn't dare to know.

She waited, slept, fought the fever, her demons, her sobs. The dark room had turned nightmare. Her prison into a real one.

She finally worked up the courage to log on Tuesday night. She still had the fever, was weak, but had to make sure, make sure that he hadn't done what he had threatened.

But he had. Under the subject of "Evelyn's Confession". Everything. Every message, including her slaughtered mother. For the world to see. She cried in disbelief. It could not be true. It simply must not be true. Not in a world where she lived.

And if he had done this, then, of course, he would send copies to her mother. It was the end.

A blackness descended on her. It really was the end. In a way she was relieved. There really was only one thing to do.

She didn't really sleep, and she really wasn't awake. The darkness had not left her the following morning and stayed with her as she collected her books and coat and made off as if she was going to school. It was cold outside and the city was indistinct in a gray fog. She drove toward the docks.

. . .

"Good news, Mrs. Lassing. I think we may have a line on him. A friend of mine knows this guy at MIT who knows the sys admin."

"He knows whom?"

"The sys admin, system administrator, of unicorn. The computer in Finland."

"I see. And he'll know who the Confessor is?"

"He may, if he originates there, but I doubt that. But he will know what machine his messages are coming from."

She understood that. Morris was calling from school, she could hear recess in the background, many students, lots of bustle, lockers slamming. They sure never had pay phones at her school.

“Thank you Morris. Thank you very much. Let us know.”

“Sure will.”

He hung up. She replaced the handset and walked back into Evelyn’s room. She picked up her messages again. That boy had made love to her daughter. She bristled at the thought: he had spoiled her, violated her, her own flesh and blood. And he knew that she knew. Steven had insisted. Morris has to know, has to read and see what the Confessor really had done. Otherwise, why should he put himself out to help us? She had agreed, very reluctantly. And now they had a strained relationship indeed, she and Morris.

She read through the messages again and again felt the knives in her heart. Evelyn, her own daughter, ungrateful daughter, had hated her, with all her heart. Had hated her with a passion. Why? She tried to see, to put these strange and distasteful pieces together, but nothing fit. All she wanted for her was a good life, a good and proper life. Like her own.

Like her own? Yes. Like her own. Only her own life wasn’t very good now, was it? Was this the life she wanted to avoid, to end? Did I make her to do this? Did she hate me that much?

Morris came over after dinner.

“Good news and bad news.” He seemed pleased with himself. He looked over at Steve, then back at her. “We know where he came from.”

“Where?”

“Germany.”

“He’s a German man?”

“No, the bad news is that this is another relay. But we had kind of expected that.”

“Where to do go from here?”

“I’m going to log in to the German machine. No one knows much about it.”

“I want to let him know.”

Morris disagreed again. Don’t scare him off. She didn’t care, she wanted him to know that they were getting closer. She looked at Morris with new eyes, with confidence. He would find him, she just knew.

To: mrcool@fenster.audi.ge (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Fri, 22 Mar 1996 20:41:19 EST

Mr. Confessor. You’re running out of time, and out of places to hide. We will upturn every rock you’ve crawled under. We are coming for you.

Dorothy Lassing

• • •

He had to add relays. Unicorn was supposed to be safe, damn it. Watertight. But they had found fenster.

He could not sit down, could not calm himself. His tiny apartment, shrinking now with plates of half-eaten food, pizza boxes, beer, and Coca-Cola cans began to suffocate him. He stepped over clothes and underwear and papers out to the kitchen, back again and back to the kitchen. Calm down, you have to calm down. You can't think unless you calm down, you know that, you know you can't think unless you calm down.

He had to add relays, but he couldn't. He'd covered that already. And he had to get to work. Can't miss work. Where's his uniform? Does it smell? He would have to do his laundry soon.

Now, what if they did find him? Did it really matter, did it matter at all? How could they possibly tie him to the girl's suicide? He had never heard of such a thing. Could it be done legally? He had no idea. He looked at the watch again, he had to get going, he mustn't be late for work.

But maybe it all was a ploy, maybe she wasn't dead at all? Could that be? Stop thinking! Stop! You have to get to work. Where's that uniform? Why does it smell so bad?

• • •

“Are you sure you're doing the right thing, here?”

Steve, her wishy-washy husband, was having second thoughts. Well, let him.

“Of course I am. He killed my daughter.”

“What are you going to do if you find him?”

“I'll press charges, of course.”

“For what? For posting her messages on that bulletin board?”

“No, for killing my daughter.”

“Dorothy. Please use some sense. That will never hold up in court. The police is not going to press charges of murder based on that.”

“You know very well what was in those messages. You read them as well as I did. You know that he drove her to do it by exposing her to everybody.”

“There’s nothing illegal about that. He has not broken any laws.”

“He’s hiding. He’s hiding behind those aliases. He’s a criminal.”

“There’s no law against aliases either. We don’t have a case against him, even if we find him.”

“He killed my daughter. Don’t you understand. He killed my daughter.”

“Dorothy. You’ve read her messages too. I think we are as responsible for what happened as he is.”

“Why don’t you ever say what you mean? You mean me, don’t you. You mean that I killed her don’t you? Why don’t you have the guts to just come out and say it?”

Steve didn’t answer. He started to sob again. Shaking his head and sobbing. Then he left the room. Well, let him. She would do this on her own. She and Morris. It was him, the Confessor, not her, NOT her, that had killed her daughter. How dare Steve even think that she was responsible? How dare he?

Steve came back into the room. He carried a piece of paper.

“He’s answered you,” he said.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: mrcool@fenster.audi.ge (The Confessor)
 Date: Sat, 23 Mar 1996 15:41:19 EST

Mrs. Lassing,

I did not kill your daughter. I really did NOT kill your daughter. Can’t you see that? We talked, that’s all. She told me things, that’s all. She was too afraid to let the world know her secrets. I helped her, that’s all. That’s all I did. I did not kill her. There is nothing in what I did that could kill her.

I think, from all the things Evelyn told me, that you had more to do with her suicide than I did. That’s what I think. Look in your own heart, Mrs. Lassing.

The Confessor

She turned pale, then pink with indignation. She swallowed several times and her eyes bulged slightly. The paper in her hands shook with her outrage. He was nothing but a cockroach, creeping and begging and biting at the same time. A slime, a worse than slime. He had to be crushed. And for him to accuse her! He had to be obliterated.

To: mrcool@fenster.audi.ge (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sat, 23 Mar 1996 16:55:31 EST

Who are you to cast stones, Mr. Confessor. It's all in your correspondence, it's all plain and clear. Any good lawyer will convince any jury about the connection.

You are scum, Mr. Confessor, you're a slime, a worse than slime. Begin wishing you had never been put on this earth.

. . .

He could not go to work. Could not. Could not conceive of work, could not drive. Had to stay here, stay inside. Stay safe. Had to stay pretend safe.

His dad said it over and over: You should never have been put on this earth, he said. He meant his mom, especially when he was yelling. You should never, NEVER have been put on this earth, he yelled. And his mom, red with shame and inability, would make to leave. Don't you dare leave when I'm talking to you, he would yell, and I would slink out. Like a slime, afraid he would detect my slithering, like a worse than slime. And daddy had come back and found him.

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
Subject: My daughter
From: mrcool@fenster.audi.ge (The Confessor)
Date: Sat, 23 Mar 1996 18:16:33 EST

Mrs. Lassing,

Please. I did not kill your daughter. Please, I did not kill your daughter. Don't you understand?

The Confessor

To: mrcool@fenster.audi.ge (The Confessor)
Subject: My daughter
From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
Date: Sat, 23 Mar 1996 19:59:12 EST

I don't know what kind of human dregs you are but you are still responsible for your actions. You killed my daughter as surely as if you had fired a gun at her head. Groveling doesn't become you, Mr. Confessor.

Dorothy Lassing

"Groveling doesn't become you, Beth. Stop shivering and get me my coat. We must not be late for church. Bradford! You have one minute."

He ran as hard as he could up the stairs to get his shoes, his church shoes and in his fever to comply he tore the lace. When daddy said minute, it meant sixty seconds, that's what he said it meant, and he'd better be ready or he would be carried to the car, ready or not, and sit in the back of church with only one shoe, or in his underwear once. Never again. He didn't find another lace, or cord, just slipped the shoe on and ran down. Undetected until he got in the car.

“Your shoe is unlaced, Bradford!”

“Yes, dad, I know.”

“Why?”

“I broke it.”

“You sit in the back when we get there.”

“Yes, dad.”

“You’ll answer for this when we get home.”

“Please, dad.” He could hardly sit from his last spanking.

“Groveling doesn’t become you, son.”

It was him. He knew, knew that it was impossible, of course. But knew as fiercely that dad was back. He had never gone away, just watched him for a while without saying anything. And now he was back. Working his way back into his room, back into his life. Back from the grave.

He read his note again. He knew he couldn’t answer, he couldn’t answer without groveling. Better say nothing.

His next message came Sunday at four o’clock.

To: wk@wk.berkeley.edu (The Confessor)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Sun, 24 Mar 1996 18:56:11 EST

You’re running out of places to hide now Mr. Confessor.

Dorothy Lassing

Yes, daddy. Yes, I know.

There was only one thing to do and he had to do it quickly. It wouldn’t wait. Bradford Crodin gathered his printouts, his messages from Evelyn, his messages to her. All incriminating and real; all needed for confession. He found his only white shirt and even found a tie. He combed his hair as best he could and stepped out into the late Sunday.

• • •

The Sergeant was very polite. Felt sorry for the poor bastard. Maybe he should call the county. He looked at the papers on his desk, the many messages, and at the thin, dishevelled man across from him.

“Mr. Crodin. You have done nothing. We cannot arrest you.”

“It’s all there, officer.” He pointed to the papers. “I’ve killed her. You see her name there, Evelyn. I’ve killed her.”

He shook his head. If he got here on his own, he could still manage. He would not call.

“Mr. Crodin. I cannot arrest you. You have committed no crime. I am sorry. I cannot arrest you.”

“Please, you don’t understand.”

“No, Mr. Crodin, you don’t understand. This is no evidence. It’s not very nice what you did, telling her secrets, I agree. But it’s not a crime. We cannot charge you with that. Go home now. Rest. Clean yourself up a bit. Go home, Mr. Crodin. Take it easy.”

. . .

To: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: wk@wk.berkeley.edu (The Confessor)
 Date: Sun, 24 Mar 1996 23:40:06 EST

Daddy, please. I didn’t mean to do it. Please. I didn’t mean to do it. Leave me alone, please. I didn’t mean to do it.

Steve brought her the message.

She didn’t know what to make out of it. She read it three times. “He’s got us confused,” she said.

“Pardon.”

“He’s got us confused with his father.”

Steve nodded.

Morris arrived an hour later, all excitement. “Got him!”

“You found another alias?”

“No,” Mrs. Lassing. “We found him.”

“You know who the Confessor is?”

“Yes. His name is Bradford Crodin. He lives somewhere in Southern California.”

“How do you know. How did you find out?” asked Steve.

“His last, or first actually, alias was at Berkeley. A student account. My MIT friend talked to the sys admin and after he told him what the guy had been up to, he got the forward-from address. It’s a local Los Angeles Internet account, coast.com. It’s out of Van Nuys, California, and serves only the LA basin. That’s where he lives.”

“You’re sure about his name?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then we can tell the police.”

“Absolutely.”

She dictated the letter and Morris typed.

. . .

To: bcrodin@coast.com (Bradford Crodin)
 Subject: My daughter
 From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
 Date: Mon, 25 Mar 1996 17:33:22 EST

Mr. Crodin,

This is the end of the road for you Mr. Confessor. As you can see we know who you are and we know where you live. And now you will pay for your crime. My daughter’s life for yours.

Dorothy Lassing

. . .

Liz from Champion Burger rang the bell again. She could hear him move inside, but he did not answer the door.

“Bradford!” She waited. “Bradford, are you all right?”

Only the faint stirring inside. Like a rustling.

“Bradford. Open up.” She knocked on the door, then rang again. Nothing now.

Something was definitely the matter.

She found a pay phone downstairs and called 911.

He heard the movement outside the door. Then the bell. This was it. A voice calling for him. It was Dorothy Lassing, her dad, had found him, come to get him, come to make him pay.

He had not slept, had not eaten, had soiled himself.

More words came through the door, indistinct, no meaning. He had placed the monitor on the floor and lay prostrate in front of it. Praying now that his soul would be saved.

Then there was silence. Only the cars, the noise, the street outside.

Then there were new movements outside, and a key in the lock. The day swung open and washed over the naked shivering on the floor.

• • •

The Baltimore police wanted nothing to do with the matter. The inspector shook his head at her insistence. No, Mrs. Lassing, there is nothing we can do. Nothing. He has not committed any crime.

“He killed my daughter, officer.”

“He did not kill your daughter, Mrs. Lassing. He was in Los Angeles when she died, she was in Baltimore.”

“He was hiding behind all these aliases. He was displaying my daughter’s most personal life, held it up to ridicule.”

“There no law against that, Mrs. Lassing.”

She didn’t understand, although Steve seemed to. They left.

He didn’t answer messages anymore. As if he too had died. She insisted, and Steve arranged for a private investigator to find Bradford Crodin. She had to do something, something to avenge her daughter.

His letter, snail-mail dated Friday April 12th, was postmarked Van Nuys, California.

Dorothy Lassing
144 West Ronning Drive
Baltimore, MD 21233

Mrs. Lassing,

Bradford Crodin, of 2566 Wilson St. #223, Van Nuys, CA, was found by police in his apartment on Tuesday March 26th, 1996 after he had been missing from work for several days. Until then he had never missed a day for 6 years, which is why his employer got concerned. When he didn't answer the door, they called police who found him incoherent on the floor of his apartment. He was committed to psychiatric care the same day.

He was apparently a severely disturbed individual. They found him naked on the floor, in his own filth, seemingly praying to his PC monitor. There was an e-mail message on the screen from you:

To: bcrodin@coast.com (Bradford Crodin)
Subject: My daughter
From: elassing@mdnet.com (Evelyn Lassing)
Date: Mon, 25 Mar 1996 17:33:22 EST

Mr. Crodin,

This is the end of the road for you Mr. Confessor. As you can see we know who you are and we know where you live. And now you will pay for your crime. My daughter's life for yours.

Dorothy Lassing

I suspect you will be hearing from the Van Nuys police about it.

He was begging his dad for forgiveness, over and over, when they found him.

Please find my bill enclosed, and let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Mark Harrod
Investigator

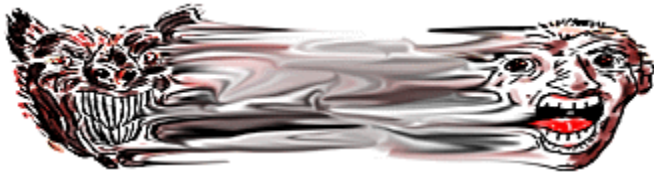
It was a rage that broke through and squeezed two tears from her eyes. A rage and that deeper current of maybe guilt. They fell on the letter and seeped into the paper, smudging the words 'missing' and 'employer'.

She dropped the letter and began crying in earnest.

Steve left the room. •

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BACK ROADS

by Mike Alfano

There is nothing like the sound of gravel crunching under foot on a warm summer night. To me it is the sound of all sounds. Peace, solitude, inner strength; an answer to desperation.

It is on these back roads that I walk whenever my body let's me. Whenever I am free from pain. My body is in turmoil most of these days, and my legs usually protest when I want to walk the back roads. But, I try to, sometimes I even have to force myself to walk.

I have to wait for dark, then I leave my tiny cottage, only to be guided by the light of the moon.

I sleep most of the day. My system is turned inside out. People think me strange, but it really is not my fault. This thing within only let's me live in the dark. But darkness is good and I have come to trust it.

Now, as I wake from my sleep, this thing within is growing weak. It is getting harder and harder to get to my feet. I know that I must go out soon. I must tear myself away from my cottage and seek out the moon. I must travel the back roads and find food. For I do not shop in grocery stores. I stopped eating that garbage months ago. Processed, force fed, freeze-dried, canned, hydrogenated, instant; it is all poison, none of which enters my body any more. It is like swallowing a ticking time bomb, never knowing just when it is going to explode. But it would eventually, if I let it.

As I stand, my legs feeling like rubber, they are not sure if they can support me. I am not yet confident that they will. And I ask myself, have I left it too late? Will there be food out there tonight? Or will I die before I find it?

I thought I could last longer, but I was wrong. I cannot trust this thing within. It plays with me as if I were it's toy. But without it I would surely die, and if I die, it would just move on. It would just find another vessel; another desperate soul.

There are many among us in the world today.

"Get up," it tells me. "Follow the moon and find me some food."

"But I'm trying," I answer it. But to no avail. It does not listen to me. It does not believe that I am trying. It thinks that I am weak in spirit.

It yells at me and treats me like a child. Sometimes I ask myself, why? Why did I let this thing enter my life? For it has taken over my very being.

At other time it loves me very deeply. It does indeed keep me alive and comfort me. It gives me strength and courage; as long as I feed it.

Now, as I am sitting in my tiny cottage, looking out at the lake, I sense a storm is brewing as the whitecaps kiss the moon. Yes, a storm is brewing, and the thing within tells me that tonight will be the night. For it knows when the time is right. I stand, finally, and walk slowly at first, still unsure, then gaining confidence, walk over to the door, open it and stick my head out.

“Not yet,” it tells me, then, “close the door.” I go back to the table and sit again, looking at the fullness of the moon. A storm cloud passes over it and my hunger subsides, only for a moment. Returning again as the cloud floats on by.

A crack of thunder fills the night. The cottage trembles and shakes, and someone somewhere screams. Maybe a small child or a woman alone, waiting for her mate to return home from work, or the local establishment.

Another cloud covers over the moon, and the thing within grows impatient. “It has to be tonight,” it tells me, with an exaggerated urgency. “Unless you want to die.”

I wish I knew who it was really worried about; itself or I. A part of me wants to stay inside and end it all. I am tired of hunting for food in the light of the moon. I am tired of being it’s slave, and I am tired of taking orders from an entity that I will never see. For I know that this thing within is just using me.

Another crack of thunder and I jump out of my chair. The thing within laughs at me, and I feel like a fool.

“You are such a coward,” it insults me. “Get hold of yourself, we have much work to do.”

“I can’t,” I say. “I am still too weak to travel. I need more rest, more sleep.”

For a few moments I think that I will never have enough strength to venture the back roads again. That I shall die right here, right now as I fall back into my chair. But this thing within would never let me die as peaceful a death as this. For what man in his right mind wouldn’t love to die in a setting as beautiful as this?

• • •

I will never forget the first time my parents brought me to the country. I was five at the time, and it was on this same back road that I first heard the sound of a gravel symphony under the tires of my father’s car.

I fell in love with what I saw and what I heard that day. Unspoiled beauty and nature as it was meant to be. I knew at this age so young, that this was the place where I would become a man. And as odd as it may seem, I knew also that this was the place where death would await me.

I was so passionate with this idea that no matter where life took me, I vowed to myself that I would indeed return.

Eventually, I did return to the city to work. But I was miserable all those days of my life. Living in the fast lane was just not my style. I hated my life and what I had become.

I hated the people, the buildings, the highways, the subdivisions, and the artificial lifestyles of the rich and famous. Nothing in this hell was worth living for. But at the same time, nothing in this hell was worth dying for. So, at the age of thirty seven I sold everything I owned and escaped to the awaiting back roads and the days of my youth.

My dreams have come true. I have grown old along with my tiny cottage, but I had grown selfish. I did not want to die. I did not want to leave this place. This was my heaven; my place in the sun.

I was walking the back roads one night when I first met this thing within. It offered me immortality at a price I thought I could afford. All I had to do was surrender my aging body and keep it's stomach full. It sounded so easy at first, but now I know I was a fool. It never told me of the unspeakable things I had to do.

So this is where we are. This is my dilemma. If I starve this thing within, I die and leave this place for good.

To keep it fed means that I live on and on and on. But I have to ask myself; how long will it be before man destroys this peaceful setting that I have grown to love? How long before the back roads are buried under asphalt?

The questions are endless. So many of them I cannot answer, not tonight anyway. And until I can, I must live on. I must feed this thing within. To do so I have to walk the back roads at least one more time, and find food to quench this hungry soul.

The storm is over. The moon is full and bright. It guides me down the path to the back road. I hide not the crunching of stones under foot.

• • •

About a half mile down the road I come upon a row of cottages, where the summer people come and go. My senses tell me that someone is awake at the third cottage in.

If I am right, and I usually am, I will find a male and female mating beyond this window I now sit under. They are young, fresh, and alive.

I rise, sniffing at the night air. It is fresh and crisp, with just a hint of a chill. From the bedroom I smell human juices. Juices permeated with passion and lust.

The thing within tells me that it is time. I look at the curtained window, circle once or twice, then sit back on my haunches and leap through the air. Through the window I go, landing on the bed.

They both scream in terror as they try to hide their nakedness. But there is nothing they can do.

I lunge first at the male, for they are usually the stronger. His hands go up in self-defense and he tries to push me away. I feel his fist slam into the side of my head, and am stunned for a few moments.

The second time, I give it everything I have, and as strong as he is, he has no chance. The throat is just too vulnerable.

She, on the other hand, still in shock, is easy. It is quick. I don't believe in making my prey suffer needlessly.

It is over and done with in a very short time. The thing within is finally pleased and content. One last slurp of blood and I will leave. I must not miss a drop, for one never knows when I will be permitted to walk the back roads again.

"You did well tonight," it tells me as I return to two legs. And the crunching of gravel under foot makes me want to live again. •

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Horror

SMILE

by **Joseph Moore**

Spring thunderstorms. Have you ever seen one...

Circling within his mind, crawling over the knotted mound of flesh, floating upon the streams of blood that would eventually stop, this thought lived. It was the 2nd most important question that 14 year-old Jack craved an answer for. Sitting on the ground at the neighborhood park, his back to an old oak tree, he heard the thought again.

Spring thunderstorms. Have you ever seen one...

He knew his answer to the question: Yes. Countless times.

A tiny smile, just a minor muscle contraction really, involuntarily formed. The thin muscle fibers, as strong as narrow chords of metal, relentlessly pulled upward the lean flaps of skin that formed his cheeks. The ends of his lips, sharply pointed, jerked upwards, looking like they were cutting into his cheeks; like knives wielded by a killer cutting willing skin: desperate cuts.

The feel of the smile, pleasant, brought a new thought to Jack. He pictured his face, the look, the smile, the feeling, beaming out into the sky as a pure silver ray. It slipped between the leaves and leapt for the air. It was as silver as the sun in a black and white picture; cold, harshly unreal, yet with the knowledge of a true warmth. The look soared; he visualized it plunging into black galaxies, surging through grey clouds and rainbow-coloured worlds, spearing through the multi-hued bodies of a million different aliens. Every one, Jack saw, rocked back from the power of the ray, powerless, hopeless. Countless bodies flew backwards, bodily fluids of numerous shades spraying in the atmosphere as the beam continued. Jack's smile fell as he pictured the mounds of beings, bodies stacked, seeping cooling blood, limbs lifelessly jerking and pointing in all directions, their skulls vaporized by his strength.

Jack understood the power of his feelings. And the consequences.

He also knew of the incredible creation that made up his face. He studied numerous textbooks regarding the face: the hundreds of muscles, sinews, nerve endings and the profoundly complex organization it took for a single emotion to be broadcast across the fleshy screen. The electric signal from his brain, crackling with urgency, flowing through neurons, fibrous tissue, to its destination: the dozens of facial muscles lurking underneath his youthful flesh. Once there, the emotional power forces the muscles to withdraw within themselves, pulling together, cowering under this biochemical force. The effect of this emotional sundering, a tiny smile with a breath of mischievousness, was the result.

This simple fact that he, or anyone else, could show to another intelligent being how they felt simply by thought astounded him. It was his proof in God.

“Spring thunderstorms. Have you ever seen one...”

Sitting next to him, Jack’s best friend Gary looked up from his Game Boy and, brushing an unruly lock of shoulder-length brown hair from his face, said, “Yeah. So what?”

• • •

Jack turned from the leaves to look at his friend. His voice, his question, had both momentarily fled him. Betraying nothing except the look of existence, Jack’s usual blank face had returned.

Within: torrents.

His voice kept an even tempo as he saw dozens of orange, black and white worms, each as fat as a finger and surrounded by slight colorful haze, crawling across Gary’s face like newborn maggots on a piece of rotted meat. They were digging effortlessly in and out of his skin on hundreds on unseen legs, slithering along and into one another, blending and segmenting sightlessly, looking like a decayed face without a skull, without solidity, masked in pain, the flesh shaking hideously in constant waves.

Jack knew these worms were emotions. He had always seen people’s feelings this way; whatever the person truly felt would be displayed as these slightly glowing worms. They moved with an intelligence and reason their own. Existed for a reason their own. They were translucent, like coiled sheets of colored plastic wrapping, and caused no damage. They left no eaten holes within the skin, left no disease, caused no pain. He could tell by the large collection of orange hued worms that his friend was angered by the video game, yet the white ones told him that he liked the competition. Jack knew that his friend would soon praise the game as a very good one, once the orange worms had been replaced by blood-red worms, the symbols Jack related with success, conquest, domination.

He tried to ignore the black worms. He always did. He had never seen a person be without several black worms on them. He daily wished to see it.

“Oh, I was just thinking about the power of nature. It has so many different ways to destroy. Freezing winter ice storms, tornadoes, hail, lightning, snow that can bury a city, all of that. But I think that people ought to worry more about spring storms.”

Turning towards the game again, his hair shrouding the feelings living on his face, Gary mumbled, “Ok... I’ll ask: Why?”

Running his hand through his sandy blond hair, Jack thought for a moment how to tell his friend. He had known Gary since the 5th grade, Gary helping him with spelling tests, him helping Gary with biology. They had entered their teens together, battled the confusing hormone-influenced emotions alongside one another, and were looking forward to starting high school in a few weeks. Both had laughed, cried, angered, both in their own ways: Gary outwardly, Jack inward.

• • •

Throughout all this, they had built trust. Trust for one another alone. It was this trust, their true friendship, that caused Jack to hesitate. He intended to tell Gary about the worms, the colors, the feelings, the nature of his sight. He hoped Gary would then understand why Jack was constantly melancholy. He seldom smiled, cried, angered or laughed out loud; his emotions were rarely displayed.

When he looked at himself in any reflective surface, he only saw skin. No thoughts slithered over his cheeks, swayed under his brow, broadcasting to the world what he felt inside his heart, what secrets he kept shackled within. The lack of visible feelings worried him. He knew he was special, unlike anyone. He had power; countless power. He only wished to know why there were no worms on his face. It was his most important question.

It was his uniqueness that made him careful, controlled, cautious. Gary, introspective but whom acted the part of the angst-ridden teenager for fun, constantly asked Jack about his lack of emotion. Jack would respond, "I'm just shy." Gary often attempted to embarrass Jack at every opportunity, using his "angry, disillusioned youth" persona in public.

If Gary could cause trouble, he would, all to "bring you out" as he often told his friend. Jack knew his friend did not enjoy humiliating the two of them. Gary knew of no other way other than an over-the-top emotional response. Jack could tell, due to the lack of humility his friend possessed...

On Gary's face, the numbers of humble-signifying yellow worms never exceeded the black ones. When that happened, as Jack believed, a person was truly humble. He had seen it once on the faces of soldiers accepting medals for honor. Yellow worms coursed around their mouths, moving down the ridges of their noses and flowing across their cheeks, in a slithering dance that was as beautiful as their entire nature was terrible. Their faces were as yellow as the sun the morning after a terrible storm. On one soldier two black worms, pushed to the bottom of the chin, swaying in sickness, lacking in strength, were all that remained. When the medal was pinned on his chest, the soldier stood as straight as the oak tree on a spring day.

Jack remembered how the black worms had almost lost their control. Floating under the fiery yellow sea, they dangled like the rotted limb of a leper. Jack stared intently at the two worms, hoping they would fall off, turn to dust, vanish. He yelled at the television, crying, wishing for the two worms to die; they didn't.

Jack had no clear idea what the black worms represented exactly. *Evil*, he guessed. Not in some grand, biblical sense but the type of evil that would never be written about. It was a small, quiet, almost humble yet determined evil. Over a lifetime, though, it would seem horrendous, barbaric. The greatest evil contained in something so small.

Controlled by something so small...

• • •

The sun moved from behind the green canopy, shining directly in Jack's face. He could easily feel the warmth, the difference in temperature where the shadow of his nose covered his left cheek, the light breeze blowing in his right ear. He wondered if other people's faces were as sensitive to his environment as his.

Ending his momentary pause, Jack said, "Well, spring is the time of rebirth, when the world is born again, right?"

"In a melodramatic way, why yes, good sir. 'Tis true." Gary bowed his head as if answering a royal summons, his hair swaying. His thumbs never stopped moving over the game's buttons.

"I watched some of the thunderstorms we had this past spring. The lightning flies in the sky, crossing under the clouds like a spider web being strung one crackling strand at a time. The wind blows constantly, like from an unstoppable machine, as the rain falls fast, hard."

Spring thunderstorms. Have you ever watched one...

"It's like the storm is just the prelude to something worse, like it's wearing down the world, eroding it, with the lightning web over us to prevent anyone from escaping. I almost expect to see, at the height of a storm, a giant swoop down from the wet darkness and start eating everything. A giant so large only its mouth would be seen, with teeth as big as clouds and as sharp as razors and a bloated, blood red tongue whipping about. It would take big bites from the mountains, leaving mile-long gouges across the ground. Rocks and trees would be quickly sheared into edible pieces. The thunder would be drowned out by the sound of the monster swallowing. Once the rest of the world was gone, it would turn toward the city and slurp up the tall buildings like spaghetti."

Gary switched off the game, its beeping having increased to a manic tempo just seconds earlier. He turned toward Jack. Two white worms, slithering circles around his eyes, were totally surrounded in a field of orange. They were trying to hold off the orange onslaught, having hold up on the one part of the face that Jack had never seen a worm cross. They never covered the eyes, shading the world in their transparent tint. Framing these living emotions, black worms grotesquely sat, immobile, seemingly watching the battle with invisible, sightless eyes. Jack could almost feel them watching him, making his skin itch.

He had never determined which was in control, people or their worms.

Gary did not say anything. He just sat there, watching. After a few seconds of silence, he added, "What will the giant use for sauce? The blood of its victims? Our blood?" One black worm divided into two like an amoebae and crawled toward Gary's mouth. It entered.

Jack did not feel repulsed by this. Nothing the worms did effected him anymore. His earliest memories were of the worms, a hundred colors, all swirling around him, as the people they covered made simple, happy sounds. Even though he instinctually knew to like the sounds, the looks of these roving, grotesque creatures, flopping around, confused him, frightened him. His mother told him how he cried constantly for the first month of his life. Jack didn't remember it; couldn't remember it.

The worms had always been with him.

“I don’t know. I guess it would. Look, it doesn’t matter. It’s what the storms feel like to me. It’s like something is going to happen, something terrible, and there is nothing we can do about it. We are completely helpless, like a bug in a spider web, staring at the spider’s countless eyes as it slowly walks towards us, its pincers opening and closing in anticipation of its meal.”

The sun moved behind a leaf again; the veiny shadow shielded Jack.

Gary put the game down and reached over to a Coke he had brought. It had warmed under the hot August sun. He drank some anyway. Afterward he said, “I really think you should stop with the grade B monster movie shit. You’re reading way too much into rain.” Jack could see the sarcasm in the way a couple new blue worms were swaying back and forth, like they were physically taunting him. They stood out from Gary’s forehead like horns.

Gary then absently reached up and scratched the same part of his forehead that the two worms grew from. They instantly disintegrated when his fingers passed through them. The look in his eyes betrayed no knowledge of his scratching. Jack thought how other people must subconsciously know about the masks their faces have, with these unknowing physical acts.

Betraying nothing of his thoughts, Jack continued. “Maybe so, but I don’t think so. Hundreds of people drown in freak storms every year. And think: water carved out the mountains, made the Grand Canyon. It seems so fragile and harmless, yet it can destroy. Easily. That doesn’t bother you?”

Shaking his head back and forth, his hair whipping his face, passing within the worms, Gary said, “No. I know not to get caught in a flash flood. When that happens, I’ll be inside, nice and dry, watching TV. Only someone profoundly stupid or unlucky would be out during something like that. And if during a storm a giant monster does come down to eat everything up like the world’s biggest buffet, then so be it.” Standing, Gary bowed from the waist, then quickly straightened, his hair flying back, exposing his face fully. Several blue worms wiggled across his face, seemingly racing a pack of black worms, all chasing a few sickly looking white ones. “My dear friend, I feel I should warn you to not buy any beans you see offered in a magic store, for you may not like where they will take you. And before the next storm, might I suggest you buy a can of Raid? Good day.” He knocked over the can of soda with his foot, spilling its remaining contents upon the grass, and walked away.

. . .

Jack sat there watching the Coke flow into the ground as anger at his friend waved within him. He saw a black bug be caught by the sweet river, its small legs moving frantically. The dark liquid flowed into a hole in the ground and washed the insect into it. All that remained was a little muddy earth and a faint smell of sugar. As he kept watching, a few other insects, all black like the drowned one, faint sunlight wetly shining off their shelled backs, crawled out from their hiding places to walk across the mud.

Jack absently scratched his cheek.

For no reason he knew, he then reached down and grasped a section of grass and pulled. The handful of grass and mud ripped up, exposing fresh dirt and several other insects. One of them was a night crawler,

blindly wiggling over the earth, its skin instantly drying. Jack dropped the mound of grass to the side as he continued to watch the earth worm. It started to crawl away from the exposed section of ground towards the remaining grass. Somehow, Jack thought, the worm knew where the sheltering grass and mud was without being able to see.

Appearing emotionless, Jack watched the worm crawl away.

He sat there for minutes, his gaze absorbing every tinny mound and valley of earth over which the worm had crawled. He then looked toward the city, the buildings across the street from the small park. He imagined the rain falling, the lightning exploding above, the wind screaming at the land, as the giant mouth covered everything, devouring the buildings, the streets, hunger unquenchable. He ran within his mind, his feet slapping the wet ground. The mouth continued towards him, seeking him, hungry for him. When it easily reached him, with everything going black, the thoughts of pain came next: the giant's rotting teeth, all sharp and pointed, some jagged, some filed like fangs, stabbing his body, the giant's maw working infinitely, crushing his bones into dust, his heart oozing blood from countless wounds, his eyes exploding from the pressure, and his blood fountaining out of the giant's mouth savagely like the water from an open firehose.

Jack, feeling as strong as a worm crawling over the face of the land, looked over to where he thought the earth worm was. The muscles in his hands contracted, making fists. The warm breeze continued to blow against his face, warming his cheeks, as his fists fell to the ground, hard. He pounded upon the grass, hoping to crush the worm like he imagined himself being crushed. His teeth clenched like the giant's, breath slithering out their gaps; hissing. He frantically assaulted the ground, hoping to kill the worm, not feeling the hidden sharp shards of small rocks. Soon his hands were cut, covered in broken blades of grass and mud, and his blood coated the flat section of grass.

He could not tell which mashed insect body was the worm's. They all blended together with the ground. Forming a mask. A mask for the earth. A mask he made and was a part of.

Have you ever seen one...

He stood up and looked across the field to the nearby parking lot. A blue car was parked there, next to a black one. The sunlight brightly reflected off both windshields into his face. The sun's heat radiated from the asphalt, flowing up before the cars. It made the image of the cars seem to wiggle, as if they were alive. Taunting him.

He walked to the black car, his hands dripping mud and blood. Jack looked at the windshield. He could see himself.

His face, the slightly tanned skin, his light blue eyes. There were no worms covering it.

He saw his smile, the muscles flexing, but felt no joy.

The beam of emotion flying across the universe no longer was a pure silver beam of contentment and faith but a colorless beam as clear as rain. The beam told of the domination over innocence, over hope, and the lusting of power. It carried no fear of nature. It's strength was thick, like velvet to the blind. It would destroy no beings in space. It would enwrap them, seduce them. Jack imagined how they would feel his power and beg in a million tongues for more.

Jack thought of the earth worm, crawling for the shelter of the grass, and smiled fuller. He thought of the clouds, the storms. He would stand under them, ready for the giant's teeth. Smiling. •

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Fantasy



FAGAN'S QUEST

by J.B. Roan

It was in the season when trees push forth their pale green leaves, birds sing joyfully in the burgeoning limbs, and the first flowers show their brilliant faces, that Fagan Follett, the son of the widow of the wood, lazed blissfully in the meadow fast by the road to Kirby. He had lain there idly all the morning, and he quite intended to do so the rest of the day, simply to vex his old mother, who had numerous labors awaiting him at home.

Fagan lay there chewing lethargically on a fresh blade of grass. Suddenly, he heard two voices raised in heated discussion coming down the road. He rolled over and peered through the new greenery. Moving quickly down the roadway were two friars. One, fat and mostly bald, with broad ruddy cheeks and a belly to match, was gesticulating wildly at the sky. The other was tall and thin, with a pale corpselike face, his hands clasped tightly in front of his meager chest. As they drew near to Fagan's hiding place, he could make out their arguments.

"God is the sun, I tell you, Brother Fitch," the portly friar was saying, "and I say so for these reasons. First, as everyone knows, fire is the highest element, and the sun is obviously composed of purest fire. Second, in the Good Book it clearly states that 'God is light, and in him no darkness at all.' Surely John is describing the sun, for in what else is there no darkness at all?" The whole time he was speaking, the rotund man puffed and panted and waved and nodded until Fagan thought the friar would topple over any moment from sheer exhaustion. His pudgy face was as red as the beets Fagan was supposed to be sowing.

The slender friar breathed a deep melancholy sigh, and clasped his hands even tighter, until his knuckles were so white that Fagan expected his skinny bones to break through his skin. After several more ponderous

sighs, Brother Fitch began in a nasal grating voice: “Ah, Brother Claxton, you grow forgetful. For fire is not indeed the highest element. You forget aether, higher than all earthly elements, indeed the purest of spiritual forms, and the only thing capable of producing the next highest element, fire, and thus the sun, which God created. ‘And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters, and God said, “Let there be light”’. How can the Creator be the created? John, whom you quote, also writes, ‘God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ Therefore I say that God is aether, which I maintain is the same as wind – not air, mind you, but a spirit that can move through air, put out fire, stir the soil, and drive the water – an element that can affect all others without change in itself...”

The voices of the friars faded out of Fagan’s hearing. He lay back into the field and plucked a new blade of grass. Chewing on it, he mused over the argument he had overheard. He felt the breeze blowing in his hair and thought, “Truly Brother Fitch knows what he is talking about. He is right. God is the wind.”

At that moment, the sun appeared from behind a cloud, and the breeze died down. Fagan sat up and looked at the sun. “The sun has just made the wind die down! Truly Brother Claxton is right. God is the sun,” he thought.

Suddenly, the sun disappeared into another cloud, and the breeze dispersed completely. Fagan, now quite confused and a bit angry, stood up and exclaimed, “Truly both of these men are fools! They do not know what they are talking about! I will go and ask Father Eldred. Surely he will know what God is.” At this, Fagan immediately jumped over onto the road and began walking toward town.

When Fagan reached the parish, Father Eldred was sitting outside on the bench, nodding and grinning at his more charitable parishioners as they passed, scowling and shaking his head at the wretched, and ignoring the rest. His scowl deepened when he observed Fagan Follett making his way toward the parish. The young man walked straight up to the priest and asked abruptly, “Father Eldred, what is God?” The portly priest stood up and scratched his immense belly, quite taken aback by this unusual demand.

“Why, as everyone knows, God is the everlasting Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation, as He should become yours, my son,” declared Father Eldred, casting a pointed look down his pudgy red nose at foolish Fagan.

“Yes, Father, as you say, everyone know that,” replied Fagan, unperturbed by the Father’s insinuation, “but exactly what is God?”

Father Eldred did not have time for this wretched youth and his tiresome questions. He patted Fagan on the head with a fat hand, reciting, “The Lord our God is one Lord; you believe that God is one, you do well,” and escaped into the sanctuary of his ornate parish.

Fagan stood staring dumbfoundedly at the elaborately sculptured parish door for several minutes. Finally he shook his brown curls. “Truly Father Eldred is as foolish as the silly friars. More so, as he cannot even think for himself, but must quote scripture at me. Surely someone must know what God is,” he thought, “But who?”

The youth slowly continued down the road. Soon he came upon a path leading into a forest. He turned off and followed the winding trail. Birds sang all about him, and the recent spring foliage whispered overhead, but Fagan did not notice, so involved was he with his newfound quest. Suddenly emerging into a small

clearing, he found himself at the doorstep of Altric the Eremite. “Ah, the Hermit! Of course! Why did I not think of him sooner? Surely he will know what God is.”

Fagan immediately opened the door and walked in. The recluse was at his desk examining a treatise of St. Augustine. He looked up and blinked stupidly at the lad, surprised to find someone in his austere abode. Slowly a look of recognition replaced his vacant stare. “Ah, young Follett, I see. Come in, come in lad!” he said, standing up and bumping his head on a low beam.

Fagan got straight to the point. “Altric Eremite, pray tell me. what is God?”

“Ah, young Fagan, I was just pondering the same question myself, and I am quite convinced that I have found the answer,” responded the hermit, returning to his desk. “God is truth, or if there be something superior to truth, then this would rather be God, but if not, then truth itself is God.”

“But what then is truth?” queried the young man.

The eremite flipped through the leaves of manuscript before him, alternately blinking his bleary eyes and licking his bony fingers. “Ah!” he cried finally, and with a quick flick of his tongue, said decisively, “Truth is the Supreme Good, and the source of happiness.”

“Yes, but what exactly is truth?” asked the exasperated Fagan.

“The human mind cannot wholly perceive the Truth, but can only catch glimpses of it through earthly things. In other words, Truth is unchangeable, while the mind of man can only understand the changeable, as he himself is changeable. If Truth were merely on a par or equal to our minds, it too would be mutable, and...” Looking up, the hermit saw that Fagan was gone. Altric the Eremite shrugged his shoulders, licked his pale lips, and went back to his studying.

“Why, that man speaks nothing but gibberish!” said Fagan, when he stood outside the hermit’s hut. “It is easy enough for his to declare that God is truth, when he does not know what truth is! He might as well say that God is a dragon, when he has never seen one. I will find someone who can answer me. There must be someone, somewhere, who knows what God is. I will follow that path over there. I have never noticed it before. Perhaps I will meet someone new, someone who can answer my question plainly.”

Fagan started down the slender path. The shadows were growing longer as the sun followed its endless trek across the sky. Small animals in the brush, unaccustomed to travelers in their section of the woods, watched with great interest as the oblivious young man walked by. Fagan had not been long on his journey when he heard, drifting faintly to him through the trees, soft airy voices singing in beautiful harmony. Mesmerized by the melody, the widow’s son followed the captivating tune. Soon he could make out the words:

*Now blissful slumbers come to thee, Now rest your weary mind.
Your Priestesses o’er thee shall watch, No rest nor comfort find,
Until the sun o’er yonder hill Radiant shall ride.
And even then we shall remain, Forever by your side.*

“Ah, these must be the Priestesses of the Wood that my mother used to tell me stories of when I was younger!” Fagan exclaimed. “But Father Eldred told me they were old wives’ tales, and that I should pay them no attention. I will go closer and get a look.”

Fagan turned off the path and made his way slowly through the brush towards the soothing voices. Peering finally around a stand of slender alders, he saw a small circular clearing. In the middle of the clearing stood a low wooden structure, about three feet high, three feet wide, and thrice three feet in length. It leaned a little to one side, and small gaps showed between some of the boards. Kneeling in the dirt, in faded gowns of gossamer and lace, were two priestesses, one on each side of the crypt. Fagan was surprised to see that small holes had been bored into the top of the structure, and to these the priestesses put their lips to sing.

*Now blissful slumbers come to thee, Let not your troubles bind;
For we shall sing thee to thy rest, Our Lord we e’er shall mind.*

“What is this?!” wondered the astounded lad. “They are singing to something in that crate, and they are calling it ‘Lord’! Father Eldred said ‘God is the everlasting Lord.’ They are singing to God! God must be in that box! Finally I have found someone who knows what God is!”

Fagan jumped right out from behind the trees, and strode up to the priestesses. “Tell me, Priestesses of the Wood, what is in this crypt?”

But the priestesses simply nodded their heads, smiled at the lad, and went back to their song. Fagan did not know what to say next. He stood flustered for a moment, then went back to his stand of alder trees to think.

“They do not want to tell me!” Fagan thought angrily. “They want to be stingy with their secret. But I have a plan. I will scare them away, then I will look through the holes in the box and see what is inside.” Fagan looked around and found a large stone. He cast it far into the woods behind him. It landed with a heavy crash of breaking branches and a dull thud. Fagan immediately leaped into the clearing and shouted, “Run! Run! Run for your lives! A monstrous beast is coming through the forest! I saw him! Didn’t you hear him?! Run! Run!” But again the priestesses looked at him, smiled, nodded, and returned to their song. “What is wrong with you?! Your lives are in peril!” Fagan yelled, but no response came from the dedicated women. Fagan stormed back to his retreat.

“These priestesses are insane!” he thought. “But I must find a way to look inside that crate!” Fagan stood watching as the priestesses crooned their delicate tune, bowing gracefully over the wooden structure. Now and then, they would sit up and run their fingers caressingly over the box, heedless of the splinters, and a tender smile would pass between them. As the priestesses sat up, Fagan noticed that hinges connected the top of the box to the sides. “Ah, the top must open!” he realized, “But how am I to get it open?” He thought and thought, pacing back and forth behind the stand of trees.

Finally, Fagan could contain his curiosity no longer. He dashed out of his refuge and ran to the wooden box. He took hold of the holes in the lid and pulled. To his surprise, the priestesses did not try to hinder him. The large crypt opened outward on creaking hinges. Fagan leaned over and looked inside. There, lying at the bottom of the crate, was dirt. Nothing but dirt.

In disbelief, Fagan reached inside and grabbed a handful of dirt. He held it up and looked at it. “Why, it is nothing but dirt! Are you priestesses insane? Singing songs forever to a box of dirt?!” he demanded. He looked around at the priestesses, but they were nowhere to be found. Looking down, he saw that the wooden structure had also disappeared. Fagan returned his confused gaze to the mound of dirt in his hand. Suddenly, the last beam from the falling sun broke through the trees and fell on the handful of earth. In its golden light, Fagan could see a tiny shoot pushing its tenuous way out of its seminal embrace. A change came over Fagan’s face. His sullen expression softened, and a gentle smile came to his lips. He looked around, and as if with brand new senses, he saw the newly budding trees, and heard the melodious twittering of the songbirds in the brush. Then he again looked at the dirt in his hand, and he saw that it was dirt, but it was not just dirt. “Now truly do I see what God is,” he said softly, and he turned to leave.

As he walked home to his dear old mother, Fagan could hear the faint echo floating through the woods:

Now blissful slumbers come to thee. •

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[Editor’s Note: This story was previously published in the 1990 edition of the University of Texas at San Antonio’s “Cactus Alley” literary magazine.]

Poetry

THE NEEN TRILOGY

by Ernest Slyman

The Language Of The Creatures

They sing to us. Not like the birds of earth.
 Though they all have bright colors.
 Their songs are shrill cries of sadness,
 But they are not sad. The one truth
 Is what they sing, the one lasting joy,
 Which has not come,
 And even when the morning sky bright orange
 Trembles up overhead, and they take flight,
 Strutting over the dunes,
 Cawing like strange crows.
 And each creature has seven eyes to watch
 For the little beasts that come forth
 Out of the blue dust,
 When the creatures call them,
 Their throats full of love,
 Crying their sweet riddles.

Little Moons

The surface of the red Neen lakes
 Are cool and shimmer of provocative little moons,
 Which are full and round,
 Though when we glance up we cannot see them.
 And not knowing how to look at things
 Without frightening them,
 We yield to the surface of the lake
 And accept its vision.

The water is pure joy,
 It gurgles like the mountain streams
 Of earth, but it has many more forms.
 It can be observed strolling through the streets,

Or sitting by a window, reading a book.

In its liquid state,
It is friendly, warm, remarkably well-educated.
Though it has the face of a child.
Loves for us to touch it
And bathe in its mind,
Splashing our feet in its deepest thoughts.

And listening to it,
Believing every drop,
We feel more cleansed than ever before.

The lake leans heavily toward confession
And calms the melancholy thick layers
Of our inner beings,
And we are filled with vast strange truths,
The stark beauty of our emotions,
The sudden birth of cosmic tenderness
In which we all flourish,
And indulge ourselves in the mysterious
Nakedness which envelops us.

Then the most delicious bliss-
The disappearance of ourselves,
The coming into the nextworld,
And the leaving behind of the old,
Withdrawing slowly molecule by molecule
The cells of our body dissipating into the air
Like drops of water, slipping from the nozzle
Of a garden hose, then the great swirls
Of happiness like bright tomorrows
Bursting inside us
As we sleep.

Songs of the Grackle **Aliens Works Cited**

The romantic tradition in Modern Alien prose
Has always exhibited a remarkable restraint,
Disavowing itself of otherworlds whose visions
Of despair, pessimism, loneliness and drunken heroics
And shifting psychological states of terror and joy
Appease their inescapable unknowable forms of truths

The grackle which was sent to the Neen
 As a gift was not intended as messenger,
 Though it did sing and its cheerful remarks
 Upon arrival and its pleas
 Were interpreted as great literature.

It seems the bird found us wanting,
 Our air muddy, our water putrid.
 And we are not rational beings-
 The great spirit within us
 Falls bleak soundless dark pitiful.

Though the grackle argues our side,
 Its willful defense of our despair,
 Marking us with its sweet musical beginnings,
 Its sublime consciousness transforms
 Our existence into philosophical thought,
 The immutable inner landscapes,
 Our ultimately flawed visions,
 The truly remarkable rage
 Which makes our songs so sweet.

The bird has of course mingled
 Its own thoughts about its culture
 With ours, and thus explains
 The many deranged self-deprecating passages-
 Available now in bookstores.
 Deluxe edition, three thousand quag. •

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THREE SCIFAIKU POEMS

by Andrew G. McCann

Mom and Dad explain
Robots aren't scary, they're nice
But I see their eyes

Blue birds trill adverts
In the steel trees of Times Square
My virt-lover laughs

"Get me eyes!" Doc begs
So in this neon alley
I will rob you blind •

Poems copyright ©1996 by Andrew G. McCann. <mccann@juno.com>

*[These are "SciFaiku" poems (i.e., haiku with science fiction themes) that were inspired by:
"The SciFaiku Manifesto" <<http://www.crew.umich.edu/~brinck/poetry/manifesto.html>>.]*

AFTERGLOW

by Spider Robinson

Tending to tension by conscious intent,
declining declension, disdaining dissent;
into the dementia dimension we're sent:
we are our content, and we are content.

Incandescent invention and blessed event,
tumescent distention, tumultuous descent:
our bone of convention again being spent,
I am your contents, and I am content

to be living...to be trying...to be crying...to be dying...I want
to be giving...to be making...to be breaking...to be taking
all you have...

Assuming Ascension, Assumption, assent,
all of our nonsense is finally non-sent—
with honorable mention for whatever we meant...
You are my content, and I am content.

—New Bedford, Massachusetts
25 July 1989 •

Poem copyright ©1996 by Spider Robinson

(With unwitting assistance from Ted Chiang, former Clarion student and Nebula winner.)

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"I'm not a musical instrument, but I play one on TV."

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Joseph Moore ("Smile") has begun his writing career from the tiny hamlet of Las Vegas, Nev. Growing up there has given him a great love for the 3 a.m. Big Mac and a hatred of neon. His main inspiration for writing is his boring, day-to-day existence that is occasionally punctuated by bursts of excitement, adventure, and luck. He will be married in October (a sign of just how lucky he is). He has sold two other stories to different magazines. <OMalakai@aol.com>

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“Scroll, scroll, scroll your quote, gently down the data stream...” — Marquee de MicroSade

“...IF U CN RD THS MSG U CN GT A GD JB AS A SECY ERNG BG MNY OR AS A LYRC WRTR FR TH ARTST FRMRLY KNWN AS PRNCE...” •