

A Crowd of Possibilities

By
Eric Del Carlo

Ric Rivarde's favorite rum was distributed, here, in an hourglass bottle. Luck had it that the brand and contents matched what he remembered from home. Quite a number of those vaguely feminine-shaped bottles had passed through the seedy room he'd been renting these past seventy-seven days.

Some of the rum sloshed inside him as he journeyed through the city's night, as uneasy an excursion as he'd anticipated, full of starts and startles, strange sounds and sights that made him cower deeper into his coat. The many reflective surfaces - storefronts, bus windows, damp pavements - showed Ric the cringing, slovenly, precarious creature he had become.

Why had he come here? He'd had such a cocksure and absolute answer for that before leaving home. The reality of this venture had struck almost immediately upon arrival, a devastating blow, a crippling one. All his uninformed certainties had been canceled. He just hadn't known - *how could any person truly know?* - what he was getting into.

The pamphlet he had received in the mail was in his coat pocket, warped and worn by a week of sweaty handling. It was still a great curiosity to him, one which had brought him out on this misty night in this forbidding foreign city.

do you want to go home again? That was the staggering question the pamphlet asked. Inside were the details of where and when he should go if the possibility of going home interested him. Of course it must be some commercial shtick selling him God or transcendence or real estate or whatever traps this strange culture laid for the unwary consumer.

And yet the envelope which contained the pamphlet had arrived with his name and address rendered in careful penmanship. No computer printout. Ric had made a few skittish inquiries of his neighbors and had learned that no, nobody addressed junk mail by hand. That, at least, was one aspect of this crazy world that corresponded with home.

Actually, there were many matches between here and home, and a near-infinity of similarities. But the differences bit with fangs and slashed with claws. They so undermined his trust in reality that abject fear was the only reasonable reaction, and rum, for his part, the most sensible means of accommodating that nagging terror.

Ric Rivarde reached his stop near the end of the bus line. He had been living -

and could continue to do so for years to come, by his calculations - on the money from the pocketful of diamonds he had brought with him to this world. Even so, frugality was prudent, and so he'd taken the bus, not a cab, to this mysterious meeting which promised to show him the way back home.

Street addresses followed the familiar pattern here, and so he kept to the odd-numbered side and found, after two reversals, that *here* was the place. It was a dispiriting discovery.

Squinting, red-veined eyes saw several people smoking just outside the basement door. All had Styrofoam cups steaming in hand.

Night meetings held in church basements meant one thing in the world Ric Rivarde called home. Having learned through disappointment, disillusionment, and mental trauma not to take such things for granted, however, he paused on the stairs, observing. The smokers were engaged in spirited conversation, though Ric couldn't make out the words. They were a range of ages, dressed according to random fashion sensibilities. One man, silver-haired and dark-browed, glanced up, saw Ric and offered a smile that might have indicated anything. The middle-aged woman with him looked at her wristwatch, and the group migrated as one inside. With the area now cleared, Ric saw a sheet of pastel paper with a black marker taped to the door. It said: a.a.

Nonetheless, crossing the fog-wet city with all its attendant frights and disorientations had drained him. His head felt light in a way that had nothing to do with the rum. Perhaps he ought to go inside anyway, just to catch his breath. His hand shook and found the damp metal handrail. A head with dark eyebrows poked back out the door.

"Time to start," the middle-aged man said to Ric in a friendly tone. "You're coming in?"

It almost wasn't a question. Ric straightened and, resisting the wooziness, entered the basement. He hoped the rum couldn't be smelled on him, realized it was probably a forlorn hope if this man was a onetime professional drinker.

So, this was what do you want to go home again? was all about.

There were folding chairs and collapsible tables, apparently standard equipment in both his world and this one. There were two gigantic prehistoric urns at one end of the basement, along with powdered doughnuts. Some forty or fifty people had gathered. The setting wasn't formal, though the chairs were laid out in rows facing the tables. There was a great deal of last minute chatter and seat-finding. The members of the larger assembly were as diverse as the ones he'd already observed.

Ric took the first chair that presented itself, in the rear row. His body ached with misery and fear, and the rum buzz was starting to lift, leaving behind twitchy discomfort. Stubble on his jaw itched, and his clothing oozed with odor. He wished he'd showered more recently than he had. What a state to be in for his first A.A. meeting, he thought with wry glumness. And he not even a bona fide alcoholic.

Someone took the chair next to his and proffered a cup of hot, dark coffee. "Here you go, kiddo. This'll keep you in it."

Ric took the Styrofoam cup, nodding his thanks. His seatmate was the middle-aged man with silver hair.

A woman in her early thirties, wearing an orange head-wrap and roomy blouse, presided over the meeting. Her manner was relaxed, almost mischievous. She had a worldliness about her, however, that hinted at past times which hadn't been so merry.

"So," she was saying, her voice carrying easily, "let's get to our featured speaker for tonight. Most of you know him already, a longtime friend of this association. Freddy, it's all yours."

Up stood Freddy, a rugged, hardy male of the type that might have been sixty as easily as forty. Enthusiastic applause ensued. Ric's new companion somehow managed a few claps with a coffee cup of his own in one hand.

Freddy wore a sport coat over an immaculate white T-shirt. Like every other person in this broad low-ceilinged basement, he was somebody you could pass on the street any day. Well, so went alcoholics, as Ric recalled from his unofficial, mostly TV-inspired education in the matter. Addiction could claim anyone.

Freddy presented a charming and self-effacing smile. He waved off the applause good-naturedly. When the room had quieted, he said, "Thanks, thank you, good evening, everybody. Yes, I'm Freddy, and Shondrel's right in that many of you know me. But I'm going to tell my story anyway, because, well, it's just so *fascinating*, you know? So *unique*. I promise--you'll get chills."

It was a laugh line, and he got a hearty knowing one. Ric recognized it as an insider's joke and felt an outsider's pang. He would have left that moment if he could have slipped out unseen.

"Today was a good day for me," Freddy said. "I woke up this morning, and I knew where I was. Not just the bed I was sleeping in, or the room the bed was in, or the apartment that contained them both--I knew it *all*. Right from the minute the alarm clock went off. And that, my friends, is a good day."

A wavelet of applause agreed with the sentiment. Again Freddy dispersed it. He wasn't up there just milking it, Ric noted. Freddy leaned forward, knuckles on the tabletop. His gaze, more somber now, swept the assemblage.

"But there were lots of bad days, once upon a time. And there are *still* bad days--and not just when I'm opening my eyes in the morning. Pressing an elevator button and not knowing what it's supposed to do. The car horn from a block away that makes you jump out of your skin. Freezing up when you're paying a store clerk for a can of soda because you don't recognize the president on the dollar bill."

Someone nearby murmured, "Oh, God," in agreement. But Ric was puzzling over that last comment by Freddy. Was he talking about losing one's bearings due to chronic drinking...?

"It's not possible, I don't think," Freddy said, tone positively grave now, "to feel more alone than we here in this room have felt. You could drop your typical person on an ice floe with nothing to read but the ingredients on a tube of tooth paste and nothing to eat but what they could fish out of the water, and that person would *still* feel more connected to his world. He'd know what was going on, even if he didn't like it much. There are certain guarantees that would never be reneged on. He would have basic assurances. Even if he never saw another human being again, he would still be home."

Ric started slightly at the last word. Home. *Home*. It was an infinitely lovely word, one emanating promise and an end to fear. It was the sole word which had enticed

him from his room tonight.

"But," Freddy said. "That isn't license for any of us to feel sorry for ourselves. It's a luxury we just can't afford. Our cases are too extreme. We start down the pity-me-pity-me road, and chances are none of us will be back. We all understand in our hearts just how fragile we are."

Freddy finished up with a great gushing of gratitude for this fellowship, for the opportunity to share his own experiences and thus help to heal and blah-blah-blah. More robust applause erupted at the conclusion, while the woman named Shondrel in the orange head-wrap resumed informal authority over the meeting. She was spouting further palaver that Ric wasn't listening to. Far from inspired by Freddy's lecture, Ric was feeling fearful, sullen, angry, miserable. What good was this doing him? When he woke in the morning, he might very well not know where he was - but it wouldn't be because he'd gotten plastered the night before. No. His disassociation with reality was something far more profound.

This was how it was going to be, no denying it, for the remainder of his days in this horrifying world.

Shondrel, consulting a note, called his name. "Ric Rivarde, is Ric here tonight?" Ric blinked. Once. Slowly.

Then the middle-aged man in the adjacent seat turned with his friendly smile and asked softly, "Hey, kiddo, that's you, isn't it?"

And that, simply, was the limit. He had had *enough*. These people, with their smug camaraderie and smarmy affability, were just asking for it.

"I'm Ric Rivarde," he announced to the room, bypassing warning impulses and barely registering surprise at the booming quality of his normally soft voice. "Here I am. That brochure you sent duped me, and I hope you're proud of yourselves. You asked if I wanted to go home again. You bet I do! I can't tell you how sick I am of this place. How strange it is. How every day I discover a dozen, two dozen, a hundred things that don't make sense. And every one is a new betrayal. I thought I was ready for this. I embraced the possibilities! Doesn't that make you laugh? I wanted adventure. I wanted to be a pilgrim from my world. I wanted to touch another facet of existence. And, well, I did just that. And this world stinks."

This last he shouted so loudly that pain cinched around his skull. He reeled but kept his feet, sweat flushing his face. The outburst, while draining, had also been liberating.

Now, of course, he had to get out of this basement as quickly as possible. These past seventy-seven days he had observed strict cautions. He had been prepared for this journey in that respect at least, if no other. He'd known enough to hide his identity.

But his seat neighbor, standing, cupped a firm hand over Ric's shoulder. A hard heartbeat of reasonless panic shot through him, and he thought, *I am found out, I am caught!*

At that same skittering instant a fresh wave of applause broke out.

"Yes, yes," the woman named Shondrel called happily. "It is indeed Mr. Ric Rivarde, who we all hope will become our latest member. Let's give him a big hello and welcome him to Alternates Anonymous!"

"The shape butter comes in, from the grocery store--that was the tweak for me."

"The color of the mailboxes here."

"When I learned that actual atomic weapons had been used in this World War II..."

"Well, if we're talking the big stuff, I *still* can't believe the bad rap Judas Iscariot gets in this world."

That provoked appreciative chuckling, but this time Ric Rivarde didn't feel quite so excluded by it. Laughter was a defense mechanism for these people, and a useful one. He was starting to understand.

The meeting had broken up. This discussion was taking place around the last of the coffee and doughnuts, among the half dozen members who hadn't yet departed into the night. Among them were Shondrel, Freddy and Ric's erstwhile seatmate, whose name was Markus Mahaffy. Alternates Anonymous was a facetious name, another inside joke. This group was indeed posing as the sort of A.A. meeting familiar to Ric's -and evidently numerous other - worlds. But it was just a front, a means of hiding in plain sight.

Ric was glad it was down to just this small clutch of people. He wasn't at all sure he could have heard too many more stories. A Confederate victory in the Civil War; a Mob-dominated world, where Prohibition had never been repealed; John Kennedy surviving his assassination attempt; Malcolm X as the first black U.S. president; a Roman empire that was the planet's only modern superpower; wars that had never happened, plagues that had killed off continental populations, historical figures who had never been born or had died in obscurity, unknowns who had left their marks, both sublime and terrible, on the many worlds, so very many...

Markus had it right, though, about the packaging of the butter. It was the little things, those constant confounding flusters that had been working on Ric's mental stability since his arrival. Those were the *tweaks* - as these people said - that had pushed him nearly to insanity.

But here, among this exceptionally diverse group, was commonality. Each person who had come to the meeting this night had experienced the same kind of traveling. The reasons varied. Ric was startled to learn that some had been sent into the dimensional swirl as punishment, a penal exiling. But the methods were the same. On all these members' home worlds, the means of traveling had been discovered, and on all those worlds it was a one-way process.

It was the dimensional signature which the procedure left behind that allowed travelers to be tracked in this world. The founding members of Alternates Anonymous had created the detection system and had set about gathering their fellows.

"Why was I contacted so obliquely?" Ric asked. "A brochure in the mail. Why not knock on my door?"

Shondrel explained. "Because you have to *want* our help. You must want the company of others like yourself, for the comfort, for the healing it offers. Not everybody does want it, and it can't be forced on an individual."

Markus Mahaffy had offered to sponsor Ric in the program. The meetings were weekly, but Ric could call Markus anytime he liked, day or night. Markus even offered Ric a ride back to his lodgings.

He felt no trace of the rum in his bloodstream. Markus drove through the city night, which now somehow didn't seem quite so awful and foreign. Georgia, Markus'

wife, made pleasant chitchat. The pair had come from different worlds, had met through the association. With the various connections of the fellow members, Ric could get himself a better place to live, a job if he wanted one. These people had acclimated to their situations, and they were eager to help. Helping him would help them.

Ric scratched at the stubble on his face, ran fingers through his tangled hair. Whatever else, his first act would be tidying himself up. Then he could set about ordering his new life.

When they were just a block or two from his stop, a question occurred to Ric. He voiced it: "Why did that pamphlet you people sent ask if I wanted to go home again? I mean, I can't. None of us can, right?"

Markus quirked a knowing smile at him as he eased the auto to the curb in front of Ric's building.

"Kiddo," he said, "you *are* home."

The Boogie-Woogie, Time-Traveling, Cyborg Blues

By

Barton Paul Levenson

June 10th, 1938. The smells of cigarette smoke and beer filled Louie's Bar and Grill as I banged out *Seventeenth Street Boogie* on the piano. I love that tune—jaunty, happy. It might be my favorite.

Seventeenth Street Boogie ended and the patrons applauded. I slid into *Pinetop's Boogie*, with its frequent, teasing stops. Also a fun one. Few Americans were having fun in these Depression days. Especially black Americans. But at a place like Louie's people could forget their troubles for a while.

I didn't envy the guys who were good enough to wind up playing in white nightclubs in the more enlightened cities. I would happily go on playing boogie-woogie in Pittsburgh's all-black Hill District for the rest of my life.

Some white folks will come to the Hill just to hear the music. A white guy came up to me from one of the tables. "You, sir, play a mean boogie," he said. Just a very slight slur of drunkenness.

"Thank you, my friend," I said.

"I think even Hosin Tau would like that one," he said softly, and with no thick speech at all this time.

I almost lost the rhythm. Almost. I kept playing as if he hadn't said the thing I most feared.

Hosin Tau was Minister of Internal Security in the Silver Republic, a nation-state carved out of the Grand Union of the American South in World War VIII. A nation-state that would not exist for almost 2,000 years yet.

"Why go back to the 1930s?" he said quietly. "The South was *segregated* back then. Even here in Pittsburgh it was no picnic for folks who looked like you."

"Easier to hide," I said, just as quietly. "No genome prints, no world net, no tracker nanobots." *Pinetop's Boogie* was going faster than usual; I slowed down. "Plus, I studied this period in school."

"Still, I would've tried a hundred years later."

"Nope. In 2038 global warming was out of control and people were starving. I'm just where I want to be." I added, very calmly, "So what's your plan?"

"You can finish out your set," he said.

"Thanks."

"It's an aesthetic thing," he said. "An arrest must not only be efficient, it must be beautiful. I am not just a police officer. I am an artist."

"Ah," I said.

"Some time between tomorrow and ten days from now I will come for you. You see, I warn you in advance. You can't ask for more than that."

I said, "Can I know your name?"

"Call me Ulysses."

I couldn't tell if he was enhanced like me or not. *Of course he is*, I told myself. *You think they'd send a normal human to arrest a rogue cyborg? Get real!*

Philly Phil, the bouncer, drifted up to the piano. "Hey, Cliff," he said quietly. "Is

this guy givin' you a hard time?"

"Not a bit of it, Phil. Thanks for asking."

"You're sweating, Cliff. The lights ain't that bright, is they?"

"No, Phil, I'm fine, really. Could use a drink, though."

"Lemme pull you off a cool one." He went away again.

"Thanks," said Ulysses.

"I don't want you hurting Phil," I said. "Or anyone else."

"I won't have to if you come quietly."

I finished *Pinetop's Boogie* and started *Honky Tonk Train Blues*. I love that steady, rocking rhythm, like a train on tracks. I needed steadiness just then.

"How about 'The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B'?" asked Ulysses.

"That's from 1940," I said.

"Ah. My mistake."

Phil was back with my draft. I did a left-hand solo for a few seconds while I took the big frosty mug in my right hand and gulped down some beer. *Oh, man, I needed that.*

"You did a bad thing, Cliff," said Ulysses. "You deserted. And you deserted when we really needed you. Do you know what we do to deserters?"

"Roughly what I'm going to do to you," I said. "Only it won't be under sterile conditions."

"Ah, bravado," said Ulysses.

"Piss off," I said.

Philly Phil has the best hearing of any man I know, and he has only what he was born with—none of the augmented senses I had as a cyborg. He came back to the piano. "Say, fella," he told Ulysses. "Don't you think it's time you were movin' along?"

"We all have to move on sooner or later," said Ulysses. "See if you can find my waiter." He went back to his seat.

"It's on the house, man," said Phil, following him to his table. "Now, why don't you go gaze at the stars."

Ulysses left. I waited until I couldn't hear him any more. Then, I finished *Honky Tonk Train Blues*. I drank the rest of my beer.

"Thanks, Phil," I said as he passed the piano. I couldn't let him know how close he had come to dying.

"Any time, Cliff," said Phil.

I passed a sleepless night—or early morning, to be honest—and then finally fell asleep in the middle of the day. And I dreamed.

"You're special, Cliff," said the lieutenant. "The government has paid more for your enhancement than for anyone else in history. You can split time better than any previous model. It gives you a big advantage.

"We're going to shoot you right into the control center in Delta Five. To overcome those defenses, you'll have to move faster than the AI-controlled laser chopper the rebels have defending the place. It's a crucial place, Cliff. They don't set up a defense like that to guard just anything."

"What do I do once I'm in?" I said.

"Kill everyone inside."

"Yikes. What are they, Party leaders? Strategists?"

"Just kill everyone in there."

Again I stepped into the teleportal. Again I found myself deep in the abandoned arcology under Silver Spring. Lasers aimed at me from twelve directions at once, and I had to move, really move, dance, judge from how the lasers moved where I had to be to avoid them. HQ knew there had to be a way to survive it, because the rebels had to pass someone in or out every so often. I had to figure it out just from watching the lasers, turning, moving my eyes, stepping, jumping. Finally they stopped. I crouched where I was, sweating, trying to catch my breath.

Again I walked into the room beyond. Again I saw the targets.

"Robinson to Fieldcom. There's been a mistake. They're just kids in here. It's a crèche. They're about four, five, six years old. There are a couple of robot caretakers."

"Robinson, proceed as ordered."

"Fieldcom, are you listening to me? I'm in the wrong place."

"Robinson, proceed as ordered."

"You want me to shoot a bunch of little kids? Are you crazy?"

"Robinson, I don't have to explain your orders to you. But I will because you're a valuable man and maybe you have a need to know at this point. This is a demoralization strike. Our strategic AIs say there's a better than 30% chance the rebellion will collapse completely if you wipe out that crèche, and a 70% chance that it will at least splinter. It will save a lot of innocent lives in the long run, Robinson. So do your goddamn job, okay?"

Again I unholstered my side-arm. The kids seated at low tables, coloring on touch plates, all looked at me. They didn't look afraid. "You want me to burn a bunch of kids? Those are my orders?"

"Negative. Use a blade. Really mess them up. Demoralization, Robinson."

"You're crazy. You're fucking crazy."

"I didn't say you had to torture them. Slit their throats first, make it quick, I don't care. But mess them up afterward. We want any rebel officer going into that crèche to throw up or faint. Make it good."

In real life I had bailed out and run.

In the dream, the little blonde girl in the closest seat looked up at me and said, "I want to watch The Princess Diaries!"

And I hauled her out of her seat with one hand and with the other I drew my vibro knife and sliced her throat open.

I woke up gasping.

I took a shower in the bathroom at the end of the hall I shared with five other tenants. When I got back I called Mary.

"Hello?" came a hearty voice on the line. Damn, it was her father, Reverend Ellis.

"Hey, Rev," I said. "Sorry to bother you on a Sunday."

"Boy, we could do with you bothering us on Sunday a lot more. How come we didn't see you in church this morning?"

"I had trouble sleeping, then fell asleep during the day."

"Is it the booze?"

"I only had one or two beers, Rev, that's the honest truth."

"It can start with one or two beers, but it rarely ends there. Alcohol has been the ruination of more lives than you could count."

"I don't doubt that at all, sir. Sir, could I possibly speak with Mary?"

"Well, now, do I want Mary speaking with a young man who missed church because he was hung over?"

"I was not hung over, sir. I was afraid."

"Afraid? What do you mean?"

"I ran into some trouble at Louie's last night."

Reverend Ellis sighed. "Do you owe somebody money? Or you been foolin' with another man's wife?"

"Neither, sir. He's... Well, it's a long story. He's an enemy from way back." *Or way forward, really.*

"The Bible says, if you come to the altar with an offering, and remember that you have aught against a brother, first go and be reconciled with your brother, and only then return to the altar."

"I'm not sure it would be a good idea to meet with him alone. I might not come back from such a meeting."

"Well then, young man, you tell him to meet you *here*, at my house, or at the church, and I'll talk to both of you."

It was the kindest offer I had had in a long time.

"Boy? You there still?"

"I'm there, sir. Thank you. You're a good guy. But I have to handle this myself. Sir, may I speak to Mary?"

"I guess so. But no taking her to that bar of yours, mind. I do not approve of such an establishment."

"I understand that, sir."

A clunk as he put the receiver down. I waited. "Mary!" I heard in the background. "Your young man is on the line!"

No more than twenty seconds later I heard Mary's sweet voice. "Hello, Clifford. I missed you at church today."

"Sorry, babe. I had a bad night; slept most of the day."

A pause. "Hangover?"

"No, believe it or not. I ran into somebody I was afraid of."

"What? Who? Who is it?"

"It's no one you know, hon."

"You might be surprised, Clifford. Daddy knows an awful lot of people around the Hill."

"He's not from Pittsburgh."

"So where is he from?"

"It's a long story. We'll have more time to talk if I can take you to dinner and a movie Friday."

"I'll have to check with Daddy. But that's probably a yes."

We paid for tickets, entered the Warner Theater through the colored entrance and took the stairs up to "Nigger Heaven," the balcony reserved for black people. An

old lady was having trouble climbing the stairs.

"Ma'am, may I help you?" I said.

"No, now that's all right, I can manage," she said.

"It would be my honor to carry you upstairs, ma'am."

She looked at me quizzically. "And the two of us not even engaged? No, sir, I will manage on my own. I've been in this theater every Friday night since the talkies came out. I'll make it just fine."

"Very well. Good evening, ma'am."

"And to you, sir."

I hadn't forgotten that I had a time cop after me. But Ulysses wasn't going to come up here. He'd stick out like a second moon in the sky.

We found seats a few rows back from the edge— Mary had a thing about heights. She said, "Clifford, that was a very nice thing you did back there."

"Thank you, sweetie."

Mary was considerably shorter than me—160 centimeters, compared to 185 for me. She had had her hair "conked"—straightened by a process involving lye. She had taken her hat off in the theater, and so had I. Eyes: brown. Lips: red, due to the horrible 20th-century custom of having every adult female wear cosmetic wax on their lips. Mary worked as a typist at The Pittsburgh Courier, Pittsburgh's one black-owned newspaper.

The lights went down and people cheered.

The cartoon showed an animated rabbit bedeviling a red-nosed human caricature who was just trying to do some nature photography. "That's one nasty rabbit," I said at the end.

"I must agree with you there," said Mary.

Then came the newsreels. Nazis confiscated "degenerate art," including Max Ernst, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso. A Bishop Valencia had died in Mexico City on the 6th—apparently he had done some kind of heroic medical work during the revolution. Eddie Allen piloted the first flight of the Boeing 134 Clipper flying boat, a plane that could take off from the water and land on it. "I think I'll get me one of those," I said.

"Oh, sure," said Mary.

Then came a short subject: Robert Benchley on dieting. Low-key humor, rather nice after the slapstick cartoon.

Finally, the film came. "Happy Go Lucky" was a bizarre film even for the 1930s. A man flying an experimental plane disappears in the Pacific. His wife, traveling in Asia, spots him singing at a nightclub. But he doesn't recognize her. Intrigue, suspense. And—here's the weird part—it was a *musical*, though the tunes were eminently forgettable.

I helped Mary on with her jacket. We were at the end of spring, and had had some hot days, but the night was cool. "That was a truly bizarre film," I said.

"I adore a happy ending," said Mary.

Down stairs and out, cool night air, streetlights, a coating of steel-mill soot on the parked cars. We waited for the bus. Again, I wasn't worried about Ulysses. He wouldn't come for me in a public place.

The doors opened, and several white people got on. We waited at the back of

the line. But when we got to the door, the bus driver, a fattish guy who looked like an angry W.C. Fields but didn't sound like him, said, "I ain't carryin' any niggers tonight." The door closed and the bus pulled away.

I stood there for a moment, stunned. I had met racism before—I had been here in the past for over a month—but it still stupefied me when it happened. "What a *charming* gentleman!" I said.

"Easy, Clifford," said Mary. "We must react in a Christian manner. The man may have had his hours cut, or he may have had a fight with his wife."

"Yeah, but that's no excuse for turning around and treating other people like shi— like he did. I swear, if we weren't in the U.S., I'd catch up with the bus and punch his lights out."

"That is not a Christian thought, Clifford."

"Honey, the guy was acting like a complete asshole!"

"I do *not* want to hear such language from you, Clifford!"

I sputtered for a moment, then calmed down. "I'm sorry," I said.

She took my hand. "I know how you feel. Let's just wait for the next one."

"The next one isn't due for an hour."

"Then let's walk. It's a pleasant night, and it will give us more time to talk."

"Honey, it's more than a kilometer from here to your house—"

"Kilometer?"

"Sorry. It's almost a mile. And you've got that—" I almost said God-awful, but I managed to suppress it—"—that awful hill to climb."

"I'm young and strong," she said. "A little exercise never hurt anybody."

"You amaze me, Mary."

"Why is that?"

"Because you can take things like this so calmly. You're so focused on what's important. You're completely in touch with your center."

"With my *what*?"

"Sorry. A term from eastern religion."

"Oh, dear."

How could I tell her practicing Christians were a tiny minority in my time, outnumbered not only by the materialists, but by a dozen religions that hadn't existed in her time? *Why* tell her? I couldn't tell her about the 39th century anyway.

We walked through downtown. The streetlights were electromechanical. A board flipped into position to tell you to go, slow, or stop; if not for the streetlights they would have been impossible to read. Roadsters with wide running boards and trucks with spoke-wheeled tires moved through the dark streets. A trolley rumbled by on its rail line, the antenna at the top sparking wherever the overhead cables intersected.

We held hands and walked down sidewalk after sidewalk, occasionally unclasping and going single-file to let someone pass by.

We turned left at Troy Street and headed gamely uphill. For me it was easy, but Mary was soon breathing hard. "Let's rest," I told her.

"Another few minutes," she said. She drove herself hard, Mary did.

Finally we passed a low concrete wall and sat for a minute. "What are your plans for your life, my darling?" I asked her.

"Well, I plan to continue in my profession, though I may take time off to raise

children once I get married."

"Any likely prospects?"

"Just one. A young jazz musician. Plays boogie-woogie piano in a nightclub."

"Ah. Your father might have a problem with that."

"I think if my father gets to talk with this young man more, he might see what a decent sort he is. The young man could help the process along by showing up in church more often."

I sighed. "The young man hasn't quite sorted out where his beliefs on the subject fall."

"Doubts?" she said.

"Everyone has doubts."

"If you have Jesus Christ in your heart, you know he's there." She paused. "Do you know when I am most sure of the reality of Jesus?"

"Um... No."

"When I want to do something I know I shouldn't."

That's just early conditioning. "I can't imagine you doing wrong," I said.

"Don't make some kind of angel out of me," she said. "I have all the usual sins."

I leaned close to her. "Care to add a few unusual sins?"

She swiped a finger across the bridge of my nose. "Ow," I said, leaning back.

"Now, if you want to ask me for a kiss, you'll have to approach it a bit more romantically than *that*," she said.

I got off the stone wall and knelt on one knee. "Mary my dearest love, you are the sun and the moon and the stars to me. Your lips are like cherries, your eyes like limpid pools, whatever those are, and you have a figure to die for."

"Close enough," she said. I got back onto the wall, leaned over and kissed her.

"Love! Romance! Always nice to see," said a new voice.

I jumped off the wall. Ulysses! He must have been quieter than a cat for me not to have heard him with my augmented hearing. Stupid, stupid, to carry on like I didn't have a time cop on my trail! Yes, he wouldn't jump me in a public place, but the street was deserted.

"Mary," I said. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up later."

"Have you told her what you are yet?" asked Ulysses pleasantly. "Does she know what she's getting? Or are you enjoying passing for human so much you've just forgotten about your origins?"

Mary said, "Sir, please, I don't know what quarrel you have with Clifford, but he is a very honorable and honest man."

"He's not a man, as you understand it, at all," said Ulysses with a grin.

"Shut up!" I told him.

"Why?"

"What are you doing babbling about cyborgs to this girl?"

"I didn't say 'cyborgs.' You did."

"You know what I mean. Leave her alone!"

"Why?" he said. "She's deluded. She thinks you're honorable and honest, and we both know you're neither. You betrayed everything you stood for, you betrayed the flag you fought for and the buddies who depended on you, because you didn't want to bloody your own little pink patty-paws. You were willing to let the war go on and on,

people dying every day, day after day after day, because we had a chance to end it quickly and you felt disturbed about how we wanted to do it. Your little moral sense was outraged. Your fine and noble feelings were hurt."

"You bastard," I said. "How fine do my feelings have to be before I object to cutting up little kids?"

"Finer than mine, I guess." He turned to Mary. "Want to see what kind of creature you've been stepping out with, little darling?"

If he revealed what he was to her, he'd have to kill her—

"Run," I told Mary.

"Clifford, what is this man talking—"

"Run!" I screamed.

She froze. I swept her up and sprinted uphill, looking for a place to make a stand. A fire escape. I leaped onto the platform, bringing a shriek from Mary. "Sorry, babe. Bear with me," I said.

I went up fast—third floor, fourth floor, fifth floor. Then Ulysses grabbed my ankle.

I let go of Mary as I fell. *"Run!"* I told her. *"Run, run, run!"*

Mary scrambled upright and ran up the stairs. Ulysses climbed over me and cornered her on the top platform. He almost had her; her terrified eyes shone in moonlight as he reached for her, then I had his shoulder and tried to throw him off the fire escape. He resisted and bashed me a good one in the face. I turned the pain off so I could fight without distraction. We pounded each other, raising instant bruises. We grappled, I tried to throw him off the platform, and then we both fell over the edge. Mary screamed in despair and horror.

I hate that rush of wind. We hit the sidewalk six stories below, me on my right side, Ulysses on his left. We got up, raining blows on each other. I grabbed him and threw him into the wall of the tenement, breaking bricks and sending mortar dust everywhere. He grabbed me and threw me across the street, into another wall. I had just gotten back on my feet when he was on me, his hands squeezing my throat. *"Clifford!"* screamed Mary, far above.

I started to black out. My bones were armored, but the only bones in your throat, aside from the hyoid, are the vertebrae. My muscles were composite, but there aren't that many muscles in the throat, not enough to withstand a good choking. The only reason you don't hear about more combat cyborgs being choked to death is because in battle we wear armor.

Jesus, he was going to kill me! And then kill Mary!

No. *No! Not Mary!*

What could I do? What advantage could I come up with?

You can split time better than any previous model.

I started time splitting. Events slowed down. I was about one second away from losing consciousness, but I was experiencing that second 125 times slower than normal.

I pulled my right elbow back, stuck out a finger, and poked Ulysses in the eye as hard as I could, bursting the eye and going through into his brain. I wiggled the finger around. Couldn't break the occipital bone, but I could mess up his brain pretty well, give him multiple strokes. His hands squeezed my throat convulsively. I pulled away

middle fingers and got his hands off my neck. Then I threw him on the ground and stamped as hard as I could on his throat, breaking cartilage and crushing his windpipe. He drowned on blood, thrashing. The thrashing diminished. He started to relax.

Mary had descended the fire escape again. "Clifford—. How—. What—?"

I grabbed her and sped down the street. I didn't have to go far. I set her down, turned and watched.

Under the doctrine of denial of resources to the enemy, a combat cyborg whose heart or brain stops, self-destructs. Ulysses's body burst into noiseless, white-hot flame, pouring black and gray smoke into the air. Even his metal-coated skeleton melted. In a minute all that was left was a pile of ashes and molten slag, still glowing red.

Mary was crying. "My God, Clifford, what was he? What was he? Was he a devil? Was he a devil?" She looked at me. "Are *you* a devil?"

"No," I said. I looked at my forearm, where I had received a bad scrape hitting the wall. As I watched, it healed, my nanos already hard at work repairing my injuries.

"You're not human," she breathed.

"In all the ways that matter, yes, I am."

"What are you? Where do you come from?"

"It's hard to explain," I said.

"Clifford, I think you'd better try. You fell six stories and got up to fight. You got thrown into a wall, and not only got up but beat the other man. What are you? Where do you come from?"

I went over to the nearest wall and sat down on the sidewalk. I motioned to her and she sat down beside me.

"Have you read any science fiction?" I asked her.

"Science fiction, what do you mean?"

"Buck Rogers? Flash Gordon? The work of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells?"

"I... I've read Buck Rogers... in the paper."

I said, "Buck Rogers traveled from the 20th century to the 25th. I traveled from the 39th century to the 20th. I'm from the year 3875. I'm a military cyborg. When I joined the army, they did extensive surgery on me to mold me into a more efficient killing machine. All my bones are coated with metal, with ports to allow blood to circulate and cells to be replaced."

She shook her head. "Clifford, this sounds like... I don't know what this sounds like."

"They replaced my muscles, too. The ones I've got now are far stronger and can take far more punishment than normal human muscles. I'm many times stronger than a normal human being. I can run faster, survive terrible falls and terrible beatings, and in addition I have enhanced senses. I can see, hear, touch, taste and smell better than any normal person."

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God."

"But what matters," I said, "Is that I have a human brain. I'm the same Clifford L. Robinson who was born to Kevin Robinson and Sharla McConnell in the year 3847. I grew up, went to school, got la... had learning experiences. I feel normal human

emotions and human desires."

"You're from the future? How can you be from the future?"

I almost told her *Because general relativity allows time travel given the right metric*. But I caught myself and made it, "It's possible to travel in time. Difficult, expensive, dangerous. But it can be done."

"Why here?" she said. "Why did you come here?"

"Because I majored in history and music and this was the heyday of boogie-woogie piano, my favorite kind of music."

"You traveled across... nearly two thousand years of time, so you could play boogie-woogie piano?"

"No. That's just why I came *here*. I left my time and my people because the government I served wanted me to do things to innocent people which I didn't think I should do."

She shook her head again. "Are you a Christian?"

"No," I said. "I don't know what I am. Agnostic, maybe."

"But you took a moral stand." She put a hand up against my cheek. "You refused to do evil."

"Don't make me into some kind of angel," I said, throwing her words back at her. "A real hero would have stayed and fought the system. I gave up."

We sat there for a long time. People began to come out of the tenement and the one across the street from it. "What the Sam Hill is that?" asked one man, looking at what was left of Ulysses.

"Look what they did to my wall!" said a woman. "You think the landlord's gonna fix that? He don't even give heat in the winter!"

"Hey, you two," a man said, walking up to us from the tenement. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," I said. "Two guys had a fight and nearly wrecked the place. One of them burned up. Spontaneous combustion."

"Oh, you don't know what the hell you talkin' about."

"And on that note..." I got up and helped Mary up. We walked uphill, toward Clarissa Street and her home.

For a long while neither of us talked. Then I said, "If you want to stop seeing me, I'll understand. I represented myself as a person of your era. I lied left and right."

"But you saved me," she said. "That man would have hurt me, maybe killed me. You fought him off."

"I couldn't bear to see you hurt," I said.

She put a hand on my cheek again. "I'll call you." Then she walked away.

I wondered whether she would.

RepFix

By

K.P. Graham

Mackey Dooley sent me to this web page, all deep purples and manja-eyed girls that played some low resolution techno music with a subsonic thump to it. *RepFix*, it said in a grunge font so whacked out you had to squint to read it. The contact information resolved to an old fashioned 32 bit IP address, the kind they used to use back when people still used ugly homemade web pages like this.

I ran back the IP address to a physical location. Mackey was right - it was local. I tapped the link and a second later was walking down a sidewalk in a nasty block far from the subway, looking for number 17B. I had to walk sideways down the entryway to get by a stack of old hard drives plugged into a web of yellow cable. I was surprised to hear them humming. A thousand red LEDs blinked in complex patterns in the shadows under the tarps.

The door was painted red with the name Eric Selvaggio written in sharpie. A water-stained banner read "RepFix - Open." The door was sticky and made a noise when I opened it, I could almost smell the mildew.

"Weinstein?" a voice called from the darkness.

I was going to ask him how he knew it was me, but there had to be fifty ways he could have googled me as I walked up the path to his door.

"Selvaggio?" I countered. The door closed behind me. The only illumination was a small flat screen on the far wall. I could see my face through cobwebs of hanging cable.

"It will cost you \$20,000 cash and take at week at most," Selvaggio said. I still couldn't see him. "Lucky that Monica bitch got tired of you, or it might have cost more and taken longer."

I could see an image of me on the flat screen behind a bunch of program windows. One had a Linux command prompt. My image shifted, but a dirty finger pressed Esc on a keyboard, and the image shifted back to me. A glint of reflected light revealed a dark shape in the corner.

"What do I get for the 20K?" I asked, trying to see in the murk.

A red spot appeared and glowed brighter. It was a cigarette. The guy was wearing a large headset over the top half of his face. I couldn't make him out in the gloom, and I had to try hard not to watch my reactions in the screen.

"Your bad news gets erased from the search engines. All pages with unpleasant references to you and your alleged activities are erased. Monica's personal pages get trashed and her password scrambled. Anyone who linked to any of her pages gets the same treatment."

"What if the nets heal?" I had heard this theory that broken links eventually heal.

"Forget it. A broken link is a broken link. It can't heal unless the data is reposted."

"But what if she pulls this crap again?"

"That's up to you. Don't mess with her and she has no reason to continue with this. Don't screw with her and she'll forget you. Don't think about her and she'll go away. It's all up to you. Don't give her a reason to scratch the itch. Let it heal by itself."

"But she's a vindictive bitch."

"And you are an asshole. You will have to change your behavior or keep me on retainer."

There was a glow as Selvaggio sucked on his cigarette. The image on the flat screen altered to a dirty hand setting the cigarette into a filthy ashtray next to the keyboard. The screen zoomed in as the hand moved to the mouse. The magnified head of an orange cat blocked the view at that point. A paw tentatively touched the end of the cigarette and it fell out of the ashtray. The screen abruptly shifted back to my face as the cat hissed. Selvaggio tossed it to the floor.

"Speaking of which, how will you be paying? Cash money I hope. That was what your agent agreed to."

I opened my hand and showed him my public key, tattooed in red script.

"I see it. There will be a surcharge of 10%. I have to hide the transaction and it costs a little. I did say cash."

"Cash?" I said. "I never deal in cash. It's too much trouble. What would you do with it, anyway?"

"I would put it under my pillow and sleep well." There was a rustling and I could see the man getting up. He was large and very overweight. He danced through the piles of obsolete debris without touching any of it. "Here's an anonymous link that you can use to contact me by voice." He flashed a tinyurl, and my pod recorded it.

"It's a deal then," he said and stuck out his hand. It was covered with small crawling things in pixel primary colors. They looked like small spider mites in magenta, cyan, yellow and black - IP sprites, small programs that could be programmed to deflect pings and other intrusive access. I could almost feel the bugs crawling up my arm as we made virtual contact.

"Well begun is half the job done," he said.

I tried to brush a bug off my arm.

"You like my little cellular automata?" Selvaggio asked. "They're my own special recipe: very smart, very cool."

He laughed, the cat hissed, and the room went black.

I was back in my office and the familiar Freedom Tree logo flashed as my pod booted. My glasses cleared to a pale blue, revealing the room. I took the pod out from my pocket. The LEDs were flashing in spasmodic codes. A long list of error messages in yellow courier font scrolled across the glasses. The data flow paused and then the room booted again. The dirty curtains disappeared. The brick wall outside my window folded into a more appealing view of the harbor. The room virtualized, and I was back in my usual place.

Selvaggio had crashed my link. It was something you weren't supposed to be able to do. Maybe the IP sprites had followed the datagram back to my pod, or maybe he had ways of sniffing his way back to my office. It had to have been those damn cellular automata.

In the corner of my vision I saw a small magenta dot. It might have been a pixel

sprite, but it disappeared when I tried to focus on it.

A ringtone clashed with a message gnome as they started at nearly the same time. It sounded like Fur Elise blown by a hippie harmonica player.

"What?" I asked, answering the incoming call while I read the popup. My account had just paid \$22,000 to an offshore betting site. That was quick.

"You're back. Good," Mackey Dooley said. He looked cheerful. "How did it go?"

"22k is what it cost me. I just got paypaled on it."

"Cheap at half the price."

"Yeah, so you say."

"I thought you'd have been able to handle this stuff on your own. I was surprised that you asked me to find a hired gun."

"Hey, this guy was your idea."

"Then why did I wind up doing all the legwork?" Mackey asked.

"I wanted an extra layer of protection. I have to have plausible deniability."

Mackey had made the contact and my persona had gone through a dozen anonymous routers. And yet Selvaggio had managed to burn my link and crash my pod. I thought I saw a cyan dot swimming at the edge of my vision.

"It's too easy," Mackey said. "If he can repair your rep that easy and that cheap, everyone would be doing it."

"He's got my 22K as of two minutes ago. I'll give him a day or two and see what happens."

Mackey hung up.

The next day I googled my name along with a few key phrases. There were no hits. Just one day ago the nets were full of the most terrible lies, and now there was nothing. I tried the bitch's home page and it was gone. Her email was even gone from my address book. She wasn't listed at any of the big directories. She wasn't in any of the reverse listings, and her address would not map at any of the GPS sites.

This guy Selvaggio was good. She was unlisted. It took less than 24 hours to kill off her completely.

But, of course, she still breathed.

A week later, the bitch, my former wife, Monica Weinstein nee Yeager stood at my doorstep. She was a wreck. I tried not to smile.

"You did this," she said.

She didn't seem angry, just tired. If she had shown more signs of suffering, I would have been happier. Her hair was dirty, and she looked like she had slept in the park, but for all that she only seemed tired.

"Monica, darling. I would never do anything to harm you."

"May I use your bathroom?" she asked, but I held firmly on the door and did not let her in.

"After the terrible things you said and did, I don't see how I could let you in."

"Pervert," she said. "I did nothing more than tell the truth."

"You were my wife, my better half. You are supposed to stand by your man."

"My man is a criminal and a pervert and a disgusting..." She sputtered and could not finish.

"They were lies and yet people believed them," I said calmly. "I have tastes and I have preferences. Perhaps they are little out of the ordinary. Some might call them

strange. Perhaps they are not in the mainstream, but they are hardly perversions. I am not that much different than the average man who hides his secret thoughts. I just have the money and the means to act on my secret thoughts. You were indiscrete and you caused me pain and now you want to use my bathroom?"

"I need a shower. I'm locked out of my apartment." Damn, that Selvaggio was good. "My credit cards don't work. I have no cash. All I want is a shower and then I'll be gone."

"Afraid not, darling."

I can't repeat what she said next, but you can imagine. I still feel good at the memory of her venting her spleen. I felt then, for the first time, that I had gotten some of my own back. I felt that she was hurting almost as much as she had hurt me.

As she walked down the hall, she turned and said, "You can't erase what's up here." She pointed to her darling little head. "You can erase me from the nets, creep, but you can't erase what I saw and what I know. You will always be a pervert and a monster to me. As long as I live, you will have to live a lie that everyone knows. Everyone I meet will know your story. Everyone I talk to will remember you. People on the street will stop as you pass by and point at you and call you a pervert because they'll know the truth."

She was gone before I could think of what to say.

There was a small article on Craigslist the next day. I received 50 calls before coffee from the vilest sort of people. A service request to the site killed the posting by noon, but I had to take my phones off the hook and filter email with a certain unpleasant phrase.

Similar things happened that afternoon. I began to receive anonymous email, some warning me about hell, and some asking some deeply personal questions. When I went out to dinner, the doorman refused to make eye contact.

"Selvaggio. This is Weinstein," I said.

"I told you to leave her alone. 120K this time." His video was off. It sounded like he was talking through an ancient black AT&T telephone handset.

"I want her dead for good, dead for real."

"I don't do reality. 120k to fix her latest antics. I can promise to keep you squeaky clean for a week, but unless you modify your behavior towards her and convince her to keep quiet, I can't guarantee that she won't go commando on you again."

I cut the connection after expressing myself in language that I seldom use. I opened up a meta search page. Unfortunately, there seemed to be precious few links for reputation repair.

I called again, but before I could speak the idiot said, "250K for the fix."

"I need to fix this permanently."

"That would be up to you. You have to change who you are and you have to change how she sees you. Since I don't see that happening..."

"I need the data fix, but I need to see her alone in the real world."

"I don't do..."

"Yeah, I know you don't do reality. All I need is a minute and an alibi."

There was quiet on the line for a moment.

"Ten million in my account, and I can get you both in a room," he said. "You can talk to her. Convince her to lay off. You never call me again."

Ten million was almost exactly the amount that I had in legitimate banks. I had twice that in hidden reserves, but it would be hard to get quickly. Selvaggio must have known. Well, you get what you pay for.

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

I went out that night. I needed some relief. My contacts hooked me up with a particular flavor, a particular texture. I won't go into it, but it cost me plenty. I didn't mind. I would be spending much more in a few hours, and a fellow needs some sweet release from time to time.

When I got back to my place, the door wouldn't unlock. I found a token in my pocket and made a call from the corner data kiosk. My data glasses were full of Selvaggio's buglets.

"Mackey," I said. "The bitch has me by the short hairs. I'm locked out of my house."

"I guess she figures it's good for the gander. Wait where you are. I've had a message from Selvaggio to pick you up."

"What is that bastard's game?" I muttered.

It took Mackey over an hour to find me. I didn't have cash for cigarettes, and he doesn't smoke.

"Oh no," he said when I asked him to buy me a pack. "I don't want any tobacco in this car."

I called him a few names, but it wasn't very satisfying. I had to hold back, in case he refused to take me. It wasn't long before we got to 17B, but this time it was for real, not virtual. This time I could feel the warmth radiating from the array of disk drives, and this time I could smell the mildew.

I pushed open the door. Mackey made an after-you gesture, so I went in and he followed. The walls were crawling with bugs in deep saturated colors. They did not go away when I took off the data glasses.

"Where the hell are you?" I yelled.

"I'm in here, darling," Monica the Bitch called from another room. I could see light coming from the crack under a door.

Selvaggio had left a pistol on the table, and I picked it up.

"Your hacker said you wanted to talk," she said.

As I walked towards the door a message gnome popped up. I opened it with a gesture. My account had been debited \$11 million dollars. I shrugged it off. I would deal with Selvaggio another time. He couldn't hide the money, and there were ways to get it back. Yeah, Selvaggio was probably making a vid of this, but there were still ways to get to him.

I pushed the door open.

Monica stood in the middle of the room. Multi-color bugs crawled all over the walls and floors and the covered her completely up to her knees.

Mackey went over to her and kissed her hard on the lips. He turned to me and put his arm around her. They smiled sweetly.

"Just so you know," he said. "This is entirely your own fault. You pushed us into this."

She didn't even look at me. She just smiled up at Mackey. The yellow cat walked into the room from behind me. It rubbed against my leg, making me jump. It

was so covered with the colored bugs that you could hardly tell it was the same cat.

I wiped a bug off of my face and saw my hand was covered with them. It was the hand that held the gun. I remembered why I was there and started shooting.

As soon as I pulled the trigger the lights went out. I kept pulling the trigger and I could see them at every flash, like an old movie. *Bang*, she was holding him tight. *Bang*, he turned to face me, pushing the bitch behind him. *Bang*, he was walking towards me. *Bang*, he was too close to miss. *Bang*, he was raising his hand, clutching something dark.

I woke up downtown with no shoes and a bottle in my hand. My head hurt.

My pod and my glasses are gone, but the bugs follow me everywhere. None of my passwords work in the data kiosks. I am told my soshsec is not on file. Goddamn bugs are everywhere. They run all over me and won't let me sleep. I can't find Mackey and I can't find Selvaggio. 17B doesn't even exist. I don't know how they did it, but they scammed me and skipped town.

So, please, can you spare a token? Can you give me a fiver until the soup kitchen opens? Hey, don't walk away from me. I'm talking to you. Can you spare me butt? I haven't had a smoke in three days. Hey you. Hey!

Bastard. Somebody's got to have a cigarette. Goddamn bugs.

Hey, you. Look, mister. Hey, just a minute. Listen to what I've got to say. This is how it started. Mackey Dooley sent me to this web page...

Kitsune-tsuki
by
Justin A. Williams

Hashito shone his flashlight back and forth amid the shadowed trees. "Where is it now?"

Tommy stood behind him, reaching out with his senses. He tried to feel the *oni*, searching for its breath, the disturbances in the air as it moved. "It's right behind you, Hashi!"

Hashito spun, flinging a glowing paper talisman in the same motion. It struck something unseen in midair. There was a white flash, and a hulking human-shaped figure appeared. A tiger hide was draped about its blue-skinned body. The talisman stuck to the creature's head between two small white horns that protruded from its forehead. A pair of huge glaring eyes and a leering mouth with dripping tusks dominated its face. It carried a massive wooden club.

"Release me!" the creature boomed.

"No," Tommy said. The *oni* roared, and its muscles strained, as if it were trying to attack. But the power of Hashito's *ofuda* held its rage in check.

"Thanks for locating the thing," Hashito said. "Now let's see if I can dispatch it." He pulled another talisman from his long white coat and began to intone words Tommy couldn't fully understand.

Hashito's chanting neared a climax. As he raised the *ofuda*, the *oni* released a tremendous roar. The talisman upon its head burst asunder and it charged Hashito, interrupting the spell and crushing Hashito to the ground. The beast raised its club.

Before the monster could deal a blow, Tommy stretched out his hands, and the earth beneath the ogre erupted. Stone and dirt, moving like liquid, snaked upward, entangling and restraining the *oni*.

Hashito stood and brushed himself off. "Now, where was I?" He began the spell again while the *oni* hurled what Tommy assumed were insults in Japanese.

Tommy gestured, and the earthen prison covered the creature's mouth.

Hashito completed the spell and hurled the glowing talisman. It struck the creature squarely between the horns. There was another flash. Where the *oni* had stood, there was now an intricately carved wooden figurine of the ogre.

Hashito picked up the figurine. "Thanks for the save, partner."

"That's what friends are for: saving you from giant marauding ogres," Tommy said.

"Exactly," Hashito said. "Let's head home. I want to give this thing a magical once-over before we return it to the client."

"Right. I definitely don't want to have to chase that thing down again. Or have to save you from it again."

The duo walked through the trees and finally emerged from Central Park onto the busy streets of New York City. They made their way to the unassuming office they called home. Its window read, "T and H General Services."

Tommy looked at the figurine thoughtfully. "I guess it's lucky the *oni* became invisible and decided to head for the Park. Imagine the panic it would've caused running around Manhattan."

"It's even luckier we found it again as quick as we did." Hashito headed downstairs to his spell casting sanctum. "I'll slap a warding on this thing and require the client to put it in a safe."

"I'll watch the shop while you do your thing." Tommy settled down at his desk and began playing with his paddle ball. He could sense Hashito working below him.

Tommy was pounding away at the paddle ball, on the verge of a new personal record, when the doorbell rang. A middle-aged couple stood at the door. The man was tall, white-haired and square-jawed, the woman slight, her blond hair barely touched with gray.

Tommy gasped. "Mr. and Mrs. Hancock?"

"Hello, Tommy," the man said.

Tommy hadn't seen the Hancocks in several years. "What are you folks doing here?"

Mr. Hancock shifted from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable. "We came to hire your services. We need your help."

"It's about Linda," Mrs. Hancock said. Her face looked drawn, with dark patches under the eyes. "There's something...wrong with her."

"You mean something supernatural?" Tommy asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Hancock said.

The prospect of seeing Linda again made Tommy's heart race, but that didn't keep him from appreciating the irony of her parents coming to him now. "Last I checked, neither of you believed in the supernatural. You put Linda in an institution because my 'strange notions' about having supernatural powers 'unhinged her mind', and you wouldn't even allow me to speak to her. Or did you forget about that?"

Mr. Hancock went red. "It was your fault she came apart!"

Hashito came into the room and stopped in his tracks. He turned toward Tommy, holding up the *oni* figurine. "I'm going to run this back to our client while you and these nice folks talk, okay?"

Tommy nodded, eyes fixed on Mr. Hancock.

Hashito made a break for the door and stepped out into the night.

Tommy took a deep breath. If something was happening to Linda, then all that mattered was helping her. "Mrs. Hancock, tell me what's wrong, please."

"It started two weeks ago," Mrs. Hancock said. "You remember our son, David?"

Tommy nodded. "He was going to become an archaeologist or an anthropologist or something, right?"

"Yes. He was studying a shrine in the mountains of Japan. We, along with Linda, decided to go and spend some time there. It was a beautiful place, and Linda was fascinated by the shrine. One day Linda was visiting her brother at the site and she caused an accident that destroyed a carved stone in the shrine."

"Do you know what the shrine was dedicated to?" Tommy asked.

"The writing on the stone said that the people of a nearby village had been plagued by an evil fox-spirit, but a man with great powers had come into the village, fought the fox, and imprisoned it within the stone."

"And Linda destroyed the stone?" Tommy asked.

Mrs. Hancock nodded.

Tommy put a hand to his head and sighed. "Oh, boy. This is not good."

"What is it?" Mr. Hancock asked. "Do you know what's wrong?"

Tommy nodded. "I think so. My partner, Hashito, is half Japanese, and an *onmyoji* - a wizard. So I've learned a bit about Japanese magic and creatures. Let me guess: Linda started acting strange, like an animal, eating weird food, stuff like that?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Hancock said, tears now streaming down her face. "That's it exactly! She even looks different - her face has narrowed, her eyes are closer together. Please, what's happening to our daughter?"

"It sounds like the fox possessed Linda's body," Tommy said.

Mr. Hancock suppressed a snorting noise.

Tommy turned on him. "You think it's funny?"

"No," Mr. Hancock said. "I don't think what's happening to my daughter is humorous at all. But the idea of someone being possessed by a fox is preposterous."

"Please, Edward," his wife said.

Tommy leaned forward and crossed gazes with the older man. "If you think these things are so absurd, why did you come to me?"

Mrs. Hancock stepped in before he could answer. "We've tried everything. Doctors, psychologists, hospitals. None of them can do anything for Linda. You are our only hope now."

Tommy took a deep breath. It didn't matter if her father was a fool. He had to help Linda. "Don't worry, Mrs. Hancock. Hashito and I will do everything we can."

"Thank you, Tommy."

"I can't believe you volunteered me to perform an exorcism - for free," Hashito said as he drove them down the rural roads of upstate New York.

"I'm sorry, Hashi," Tommy said, "but they're paying for all our expenses, for as long as it takes to help Linda." He hung his head. "I know I should have talked to you first, Hashito, but when they told me Linda was in trouble -"

Hashito glanced over at his partner. "You really care about this girl, don't you?"

"I was in love with her."

"Are you still in love with her?"

Tommy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. I guess we'll find out."

The Hancocks' vacation home was a small mansion, the driveway longer than some of the back roads they had taken to get there. The Hancocks came to greet them before Tommy and Hashi reached the door.

"Tommy, Hashito, thank you for coming out so quickly," Mrs. Hancock said. "I'll take you to Linda."

Hashito shook his head. "If you don't mind, ma'am, I'd like to see the pictures you mentioned, the inscription from the stone, first."

"Of course." She led them into the well-appointed house. Mr. Hancock followed silently, looking as if he wanted to boot both of them right back out the door.

Mrs. Hancock took them to a small study, a room lined with books, containing a desk and a few chairs. On the desk was a sheaf of paper. "Here are the pictures."

Hashi pored over the images. Finally he looked up, shaking his head. "This shrine was definitely the prison of a *nogitsune*, a wild-fox. According to the inscriptions, it was a five-tailed fox that terrorized the area for years."

Mr. Hancock smirked. "A fox with five tails? I've never seen one with more than two, myself."

"Then consider yourself lucky," Hashito said. "As a fox grows older, it becomes more powerful, and gains more tails. A nine-tailed fox is an incredibly dangerous force."

"But you can handle a five-tailed one, right, Hashi?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know about 'handling' it, but I think I should be able to exorcise it," he said.

Mrs. Hancock grabbed Tommy by the arm. "It won't hurt Linda, will it?"

"Not if I can help it," Hashito said. "Exorcism is the only option that *doesn't* involve hurting her to drive it out."

Tommy nodded. "I think you're right. The big question is, what will you do with the fox once you kick it out of her body?"

"I'll have to prepare a new prison. It'll be harder without a shrine but -" He turned toward the Hancocks. "Is there a large tree or some rock formations on your property?"

"Yes, there's a huge old oak tree in the backyard," Mrs. Hancock said.

Hashito smiled. "That should be perfect. Now, I just need a little time to prepare -"

"Don't you want to actually see our daughter?" Mr. Hancock asked, voice impatient.

Hashito shook his head. "If we're right about what's going on, and I get too close to her, the *nogitsune* will recognize me for what I am, and it'll know what I'm trying to do. Foxes are unpredictable. Who knows how it might react? I want to be ready first." He turned to Mrs. Hancock. "Would you take me to the tree you mentioned, please?"

Tommy watched as Hashito laid the final talisman in the large ballroom he had prepared for the exorcism. They had placed a bed in the center of the room, after Hashito finished the main pentagram. Tommy was amazed, as always, by the precision and perfection of Hashito's diagrams and talismans. He had never been more glad of his partner's skill, since now Linda's safety depended on it.

"There, it's finished," said Hashito

"So," Tommy said, "how are you going to get the fox to come out of Linda?"

"There's a particular ritual and specific talismans for exorcising a *nogitsune*."

"Have you done it before?"

Hashito shook his head. "No, but my mother taught it to me. I'm going to have them sedate Linda first so the fox can't get the drop on me. Once I get it out of her, the sacred barrier will trap it temporarily. Then I can perform the spell that will bind it into that tree, just as it was bound to the stone back at the shrine."

Tommy had watched Hashito prepare the tree as well, painting it with an intricate array of *kanji* and performing various chants. It made him feel helpless - his elemental powers weren't of any use in this situation. Unless, of course, the fox somehow broke free. If that happened, he and Hashito would have to fight the creature. He hoped, for all their sakes, the exorcism went smoothly, even if he would have to simply stand and watch.

Tommy found his way to Linda's room. She was lying in bed, her fair hair tangled and damp with sweat. Her eyes, filled with a savage gleam, fell upon him. She

sat up with a jerk, growling and barking in his direction. A small lump appeared under the skin of her face, and Tommy watched in horror as it moved downward toward her chest.

He wanted to go to her, try to make her understand who he was, that he was here to help her, but he knew Linda - the real Linda - couldn't hear him now or respond to him even if she could.

Her parents sat nearby, Mrs. Hancock nearly in tears as she watched her daughter writhing on the bed.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hancock," Tommy said.

Mrs. Hancock shook her head and raised a hand, interrupting him. "Please, call us Mary and Edward."

Tommy nodded, unable to take his eyes off the girl he had once loved. And probably still did. He wanted to cry as he looked at her face, changed by the fox almost beyond recognition. "All right. Give Linda the sedative, and I'll take her to him."

With Tommy's help, Edward restrained Linda long enough to inject her. In moments, she was unconscious.

Asleep, Linda almost looked like herself again. Tommy had never forgotten her beauty, but seeing her again stirred up feelings. He tried to put those thoughts out of his mind as he carried her into the ballroom.

"Perfect," Hashito said as Tommy laid her on the bed. "I wasn't sure the sedative would keep the fox down too, but it looks like it worked. Stand back."

Tommy stood against the far wall and watched as his partner ran through a series of complex gestures. He wondered how Hashito managed to perform them without dislocating a finger now and then. A word or a string of words accompanied each gesture. They came faster and faster, until he spoke the final word. The *ofudas* situated at each point of the pentagram flashed, and a barrier of blue-white light appeared. Its walls matched the pattern of the pentagram, reaching from floor to ceiling.

As soon as the barrier closed, Linda's eyes sprang open. Tommy gasped. Her eyes had turned orange like a fox's. As they watched, her face grew sharp and feral. Snarling, she charged at Hashito but collided with the sacred barrier. She glared at them both, and, once again, a moving lump appeared beneath her skin, moving fast and erratically.

She screamed, flinging words at Hashito. Tommy didn't understand the words, but the intentions were clear.

Hashito shook his head. "She doesn't like me much." He held out his hand, the first two fingers extended, and spoke a series of words.

Linda - or the creature controlling her - fell back, hissing. She climbed backwards up onto the bed, hate-filled eyes fixed on the young *onmyoji*. Finally, she settled back, chest heaving, with a gaze full of malice.

Hashito lowered his hand, but kept his eyes locked on the being before him. He pulled a talisman from his coat, but before he could begin an incantation, the *nogitsune* opened Linda's mouth, and a burst of shimmering green fire rushed forth.

"Hashi!" Tommy cried.

The blast lifted Hashito off the ground and slammed him into the far wall. He slid down to the floor, scorched and moaning.

The fox-creature stood on all fours upon the bed smiling, orange eyes alight. Tommy rushed to his partner's side. He was breathing and conscious, but there were burns on his chest and arms. "Are you okay, Hashi?"

Hashito sat up; smoke still rising from his clothes. "I guess that depends how you define 'okay'."

"How did it get through the?"

"The barrier only keeps it from physically leaving the area. It doesn't block the thing's powers."

Hashito stood "Okay," he said, "no more Mister Nice Exorcist." Moving faster than Tommy could follow, Hashito pulled five *ofudas* from his trench coat and flung them at the *nogitsune*.

The force of the attack knocked Linda's body backward. She lay with the talisman's adhering to each hand and foot, the fifth squarely between her eyes.

Fingers intricately laced together, Hashito began chanting.

The creature writhed, yelped and growled as the talismans upon her body glowed with white light. Her head suddenly snapped forward, and she vomited another blast of green fire, but Tommy gestured, and a white-gray shield of hardened air appeared in front of them, deflecting the flames.

Hashito continued the ritual, until at last something erupted from Linda's chest as the five *ofudas* burst into blinding light.

When it was over, a large fox with five bushy tails lay upon the bed beside Linda, seemingly asleep.

Tommy saw Hashito slump and quickly grabbed him before he could hit the floor. "Are you all right?"

"Not really, but I will be. That thing is strong; it almost broke me at the last. Go take Linda to her parents."

He let Hashito slide to the ground, and then went to the bed.

Linda stirred as he lifted her, and slowly she opened her eyes. Her own blue human eyes. They grew wide in surprise. "Tommy? Is that you?" her voice was faint, groggy from the sedative, but her face had returned to normal.

"Yeah, Linda it's me."

"What's going on?"

"Go back to sleep, Linda, I'll explain everything when you wake up again, okay?"

She drifted off again as he carried her back to the bedroom.

"Linda!" Mary cried as he walked in. "Is it over? Is Linda all right?"

Tommy nodded. He laid her gently on the bed, and, hesitating for a moment, kissed her on the forehead.

Edward offered his hand. "I still find all of this hard to believe, but it looks like you and your friend have saved my daughter. I owe you my thanks, at least."

Tommy took his hand. "I appreciate that, Edward. I hope that maybe -"

A loud crash, followed by a bellow, interrupted his words.

"Hashito!" Tommy ran into the ballroom.

His partner lay on the marble floor.

The fox stood atop him, its five tails held high, jaws stretched wide for a throat-bite.

Tommy screamed and launched a huge bolt of flame and rushing air at the creature. It struck home, flinging the fox backward and slamming it into a pillar. The pillar splintered and broke upon impact.

I never should have left him; I should have carried him, too, Tommy thought, as he knelt at Hashito's side.

"Stupid," Hashito breathed. "I let down the barrier - thought it was asleep."

"You rest here, Hashito, I'll take care of everything." Tommy looked up and saw five narrow bolts of green flame hurtling toward him. They slammed into his body, knocking him flat.

"All right, um - Fido! Let's dance!" Tommy swept his arms through the air and a spinning wave of wind sped toward the *nogitsune*.

The fox spun about, tails whirling, and shattered the wind-wave. Making a sound like a laugh, the fox leapt at Tommy.

Tommy cast about with his senses and felt a large water pipe directly below the room. He gestured, and the floor in front of him burst apart. A high-pressure gout of water struck the fox from below and bore it upward. It nearly hit the ceiling, and then fell dripping to the floor as Tommy sealed the pipe.

He lashed out with another blast of wind. This one struck home, and bore the *nogitsune* back.

Then, it vanished.

Great. Another invisible Japanese monster.

Tommy could sense the fox, but it was moving so fast.

He cried out in pain. It felt like knives slicing into his flesh. He felt the wind of the fox's passing, but its speed, and the pain -

Something struck him, and he fell to the ground. He felt the fox on top of him, smelled its scent of musk and forest. He felt its jaws clamp down on his neck, and he screamed. Its teeth were like needles, sliding deeper into his flesh. Tommy felt blood flow down his neck onto his shoulders.

Suddenly, the fox let go and staggered backward.

Tommy sat up, his hands pressing the wounds at his neck. He turned, and there was Hashito, shoulders slumped, barely standing. Nevertheless, his hands were woven together, and the words of an incantation tumbled from his lips.

Tommy wasted no time. He extended one hand, and the marble at the *nogitsune's* feet rose up, moving like liquid. In a moment, a set of marble manacles encased the creature's forelegs. It whined and whimpered while Hashito continued to chant.

Tommy got to his feet, tore a strip from his shirt and wrapped it around his neck-wound. He placed a hand on Hashito's shoulder, lending his support. As the young *onmyoji* cried out the final word, the five-tailed fox screamed with an almost human sound. There was a bright flash of green, and the fox was gone.

"Bout time," Hashito said and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Tommy eased him to the floor.

"Oh my God," Mary cried as she ran into the ballroom. "Tommy, are you all right?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"But your neck, I'm calling an ambulance!" She pulled out a cell phone and

began to dial.

"Yeah, that's a - good idea -" His vision blurred, and he didn't bother fighting it as he lost consciousness.

"I'm just happy you're all right, Tommy," Linda said while they all sat around the table.

"Yeah, I'm okay. But only just barely." He fingered the stitches in his neck. A few more millimeters and the fox's fangs would have severed his jugular.

"Hey, what about me, people?" Hashito asked.

Linda laughed. "I'm grateful to both of you."

"You have to protect that tree," said Hashito. "If it gets cut down, the *nogitsune* would be free again."

"Don't worry," Edward said. "I'll be sure someone is here to look after it."

"Good," Hashito said. "Then we'll be heading home."

"Why don't I walk you two to the car?" Linda said, rising from her chair.

"I'll go get the car started," Hashito said as they came out onto the drive.

When his partner was in the car, Tommy turned to Linda.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," she said.

"Sorry, for what?" he asked.

Linda looked at her feet. "I'm sorry I didn't contact you for so long. I was confused, and my parents..."

Tommy smiled. "I understand."

Linda looked up. "What they did was wrong, but they're my parents. I had to forgive them."

"Of course." He paused. "So does that mean that we can be together again? I still love you."

Linda sighed. "It's been a long time; I'd like to talk more first, find out what you've been doing. Is that all right?"

"That's more than all right. Linda, it's wonderful."

Hair and Hearts

By

Alison J. Littlewood

I paused in the street, distracted by something I had seen from the corner of my eye. Then I realised it was my own reflection, caught in a shop window, squeezed into a narrow gap between the dry cleaner's and the bakery.

For a moment, it had looked as though I was already wearing my monkey suit. Jackie had insisted on full top hat and tails, the works. I could have sworn I'd even seen the white rosebud in my buttonhole, all ready for the big day.

Then it was gone. Just a guy on the street in a jumper, well - worn it's true, but my favourite. Narrow, wire framed glasses. And the hair.

Maybe she was right. It was a bit long.

Jackie was always saying it. Actually, the last time she mentioned it, she'd also told me I should grow up. Act my age. Be responsible.

I grinned at my reflection. I was getting married, for God's sake. What did she want, blood? But still, I supposed I should get it cut for the wedding, at least. Just this once. I looked up. The shop was a hairdresser's called Hair and Hearts. I pushed open the door.

It was dark inside, and smelled of shampoo and hair lotion, some old fashioned kind. Pictures hung everywhere: not your usual fashion models in frames, but little snapshots of men and women that didn't look like models at all. Some of the photos were creased, some torn. Happy customers, maybe. The personal touch. I liked that.

"Cut and dry, sir?"

The hairdresser, tall and spindly, held out one of those black gowns to put over my shoulders. He looked like your traditional barber, ready to give me a close shave while making cheeky comments about something for the weekend.

But still. I couldn't walk out now.

The hairdresser put a hand on each side of my head, just above my ears, and straightened it. He caught my eye in the mirror, or I think he did; it was hard to tell without my glasses. He'd slipped them off when he washed my hair.

"Put your head in my hands," he said.

It seemed a strange way of putting it, but I nodded anyway.

He didn't talk. There was no polite chit - chat about holidays or weekends or whether I was getting a new look for anything special. He just tipped my head this way and that, teasing sections out, droplets and cut - off hair flicking into my lap. I couldn't see how it looked, and in the absence of conversation my mind wandered.

I drifted back to the first woman I thought I might marry. Sarah, she was called. She had a loud laugh and wore her hair big. Although, to be fair, it was the eighties. It was probably different now.

The hairdresser took strands of wet hair between his thumb and forefinger, as though musing on what he'd done so far, pulling them out smooth.

The bottom drawer had scared me off. She showed it to me once, the way she

was filling it with tea towels, tablecloths, even curtains for God's sake. So she'd be ready when she found the one, the perfect man, and the perfect house to go with him. I could hardly look at her after that. I could hardly...

Then it was gone.

One moment, she was there. The next, I couldn't remember her face, her hair. Her hair had been... I shook my head, confused. Whose hair?

"Still, please," the hairdresser said, steadying me with a hand to the back of my head. Then he rocked it to one side, his own tilted, although I couldn't see his expression.

"No," he said. "Not that one."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing, sir. It just needs a little more off. I can see it now." And he returned to combing out my hair, snipping off a little here, a little there.

After - I don't know, the first one - I played the field. There was a string of girls, fun, parties, music. Who had been first? Amanda, that was it. Then Natalie, although she was a one - off, just a one night kind of thing. She had been taller than me, and - or was she the little one with the brown hair? Or red. And her name. No, it wasn't Natalie, it was -

But I couldn't remember. It was as though each face, rising to the surface of my memory, popped there like a bubble. One moment there, the next gone. Vanished. Erased.

Wedding nerves, I thought. And it was good, it was right, that I should forget the others, wasn't it? So I could concentrate on loving Jackie.

The hairdresser had stopped snipping and was pulling out lengths of my hair again, as though thinking. I wished he'd get on with it. But still, it would be worth it: Jackie would be happy.

Gorgeous, slender, athletic Jackie, with the laughter in her eyes. Her eyes. Green? Grey? Hazel? With a start of guilt, I realised I couldn't remember.

But her figure; that, I thought, I could practically trace in the air with my hands. She was slim from running a couple of miles each morning. My hands on her waist felt like they'd stretch all the way around her body.

I think.

And she was so careful about her looks, always drawing people's gaze when she walked into a room. I loved the way men would glance, sidelong, pretending that they weren't really watching. But they were. And so was I.

"That's it," said the hairdresser, in triumph. "I think we've got it, sir." He took out the dryer.

About time, I thought. Was he just learning the job, or what?

Anyway, I was thinking of Jackie, the way she'd walk into a room, swinging her hips. She was thin, wasn't she? Or shapely. Anyway, whichever, she'd draw stares from everybody. And the way her blonde hair hung down her back.

Or did it? Hadn't she had it cut?

Maybe she'd dyed it, too. Red? Brown? Reddy - brown?

Jesus. I put up a hand and rubbed my eyes. It must be the fumes in here, the lotion he was working into my scalp, right into each strand, hard now so that my head rocked back and forth.

"Everything all right, sir?"

I realised I'd buried my fingers in the hair over my forehead. I removed them and the kneading continued.

At least I'd look good for the wedding. I wouldn't look stupid when I stood next to

-

Oh for God's sake, now I couldn't picture her at all.

Her voice though, that was clear to me as my own. The slight huskiness, when she said the vows, that would be - no. That had gone, too.

But her smile.

Crooked? Wide? Toothy?

Jesus.

Her, though, her personality. She was so much fun, always making me laugh.

Or was that someone else?

The way she touched me.

The way she made love.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

I felt -

I felt weird.

The hairdresser worked like a madman, now, attacking me with the brush, grabbing sections of hair and pulling them, waving his dryer in the air. His antics drew my eye, although the detail of him was lost; there was just this manic movement, wild limbs, a tall, spidery shape dancing in the mirror.

Then he was still.

Slowly, he put down the hairdryer. And the brush. He locked his hands, pushed his fingers outward, and popped his knuckles. Then he picked up a mirror and held it behind me.

"Just a sec."

I grabbed my glasses from the counter and slipped them on. Blinked.

There was a man in front of me with a short, smart cut. He looked older somehow, more mature. Someone who might work in accountancy or banking. Responsible. But with a blank look in his eyes, like someone a bit lost. I blinked. The man in the mirror blinked back.

I realised the hairdresser was waiting for a comment.

"Great," I said. "Just the job. Thanks."

I stood. He slipped the cover off my shoulders and swiped at me with a brush. The frayed jumper didn't look right with the new cut. Perhaps it was time for a new one. Or something better, maybe. A suit. Should I buy a suit?

"Was it for a special occasion, sir?"

Ah, here it was at last. The hairdresserly chit - chat.

"No," I said. "No, I don't think so."

"Very good, sir."

I opened my wallet. That looked a bit scruffy too; a white line snaked through the leather at the fold. I tsked.

I flipped it open, looking for notes. In the inner compartment was a picture of a girl, smiling. Blonde. Glamorous. I had never seen her before in my life.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

I looked around. Snapshots of women and men covered the walls. Some were creased, some torn. Some were bent a little at the corners, like this one.

I looked from the picture in my wallet to the walls and back again. "I think perhaps this picture..."

No. It was ridiculous. But how else had it got into my wallet? "...I think it must have fallen in," I finished lamely. I slipped the photo out and showed it to him.

"Ah. Yes, I see, sir. I think it probably has."

"But how..." I looked up at the walls again. Perhaps it had fallen off, and I'd picked it up without thinking. But put it in my wallet? I mean, that was just weird.

Anyway, the hairdresser didn't seem to think so. He put out his hand and took it from me, smiling.

"It happens, sir," he said. "Believe me. It happens all the time."

The Girl Door

By

Jennifer Linnaea

After the long night ended, Nylop wrapped the straw braid of his wand in a bit of fluff and tucked it away. He was late dispelling the illumination along the Grand Promenade. The sky was already deep blue over the twinkling lights of the palace, and the clouds in the east flared up pink on their way to gold.

Exhausted, he shoved his fists deep into his trouser pockets and trudged towards the alleyways. Behind him, the High Mage's army marched to war down the streets he had tended.

"Come in and eat," his wife called when he arrived home.

Nylop took off his boots and put his wand in its box, making obeisance to the High Mage's image before he stepped over the threshold into his wife's domain, where magic was forbidden.

And stopped short.

His wife, ladle in hand, stood by the kettle with her back to the table. Neela sat in her chair, raised up by a stack of clay tiles. Her tiny feet dangled above the floor. She wasn't running to greet him, as she always did, shrieking, "Da! Da!" Instead, her eyes were screwed shut and a look of complete concentration consumed her face. A grainy white trail led across the table to the salt dish, which hovered near Neela's outstretched hands.

"I need you to get lamp oil," his wife said, "and flour, and fat, and a bag of parsnips. And make sure the butcher doesn't cheat you on the bones."

But Nylop ran to Neela and held her in his arms.

"What is it?" his wife said, half-turning. She had not seen.

Nylop's heart beat with a catching, staggered rhythm. "I'll be back by high sun for dinner." He tried to hide his face in Neela's hair, though she had already seen his stricken eyes. "I must leave now or I'll miss the oilsmith." Nylop put Neela down and brushed the salt from the table.

"But your breakfast," his wife said.

He was already out the door. If he hurried, he could bring the healer before he had to work again in the evening.

In the market, crowded with men and boys, everything took too much time. The hired boys of the noble houses blocked his way imperiously with their carts. He waited for them to move with his eyes cast down and his head bowed, but they did not on that account make haste. The weavers had ensorcelled their street so that he had to pass down it three times before he heard the calling of the scribes and saw their work laid out on the cobbles. The food vendors' lines were so long that those who were able

were giving advance orders. And the oilsmith, as he had feared, was nowhere to be seen.

“Girls,” he said too softly for anyone to overhear, “don’t have magic.” He repeated it to himself as he went. Girls didn’t have magic. Girls who did have magic didn’t live to be women.

“Dispeller!” bellowed a voice over the crowd.

Nylop tried to make the panic drain from his eyes.

“You’re needed here!”

He left the line for the parsnips and stood at the feet of an enormous man in the robe of a low alchemist. He pointed at his sandals. “Dispel that.” The laces were knotted and snarled. Nylop waved his wand and clearly said the words of the spell, but the leather remained as it had been. There was no magic on it, only carelessness. To show respect he tried again, but the man had a hold on his shoulder and the magic went awry, untying a sack of carrots on a porter’s back and spilling them onto the cobbles.

“Useless fool,” the alchemist said. “Use your damnable hands.”

Nylop did.

When he finished, he went to the back of the parsnip line, his hands balled into fists of anxiety. He kept imagining the Mage’s men arriving at his door for his child.

“My daughter—” Nylop began just past the healer’s glass curtain, but Sheero grabbed his cheeks between his huge palms and greeted him loudly.

“The Mage’s Grace upon you, Nylop,” he said. “It’s been long since you crossed my threshold.”

He placed his palms upon the healer’s cheeks. But instead of the customary grace he heard himself say, “Neela—” and his voice was strained to breaking.

Sheero seemed tense, but to Nylop his voice was smooth. “She’s sick, is she? You look awful. Have tea with me, and tell me the signs.” He pushed Nylop on to a cushion and sat facing him. With a flourish of his wand, an earthen pot appeared steaming in midair. Sheero poured the tea. “I’ll bet I know what she’s got, though. All the children have it. Don’t worry, it won’t kill her.”

Nylop shrugged off the fact that the healer was not listening to him and took the tea with as much appreciation as he could manage.

Sheero produced a book and flipped through it. “Let me see... fever, trembling in the extremities, orange tint to the eyes. Loss of appetite. It’s the Yellow Fit, if I’m half the healer I think I am. Your daughter needs treatment, but she’ll be fine.” He reached across the table and patted Nylop’s knee.

“No,” Nylop said.

“The Yellow Fit sometimes seems like something worse at first. You’re right to be scared, like the good father you are.” He rested his hands on his shelf of a belly. “Let me give you some plain sleeping draught. Will that ease your mind? Give her that and she’ll rest until twilight, when I can come tend to her.”

Did Sheero open his eyes a little wider when he said that? Did he give an almost imperceptible nod? Sheero had not given sleeping draught to Nylop’s neighbor when his boy suffered Yellow Fit.

Nylop reached out a trembling hand and accepted the vial.

“At twilight I dispel the shutters on the lights in the Augur’s Crescent,” Nylop said.

“Then I’ll come late.” Sheero rose and gestured Nylop to the door.

“Where is she?” Sheero hissed as Nylop ushered him into the house. Sheero looked decidedly uneasy, and he glanced too briefly at the High Mage’s image gazing down on them.

“She sleeps with her mother,” Nylop said.

“Bring her to your chamber.” The healer’s voice sounded tired, burdened.

“But she’s  forbidden, he was going to say, but he surprised himself by realizing he didn’t care. She had magic, after all. She *should* be in his part of the house.

He crossed his wife’s threshold and held his breath as he walked through the kitchen and pushed aside the cloth before her doorway. He thanked the Mage his wife was not easily woken.

He knelt before the pallet and gathered Neela in his arms. Neela’s blond head rested on his shoulder, and her body was limp and warm. He went into his chamber and set Neela down on the table.

She stretched and opened her eyes. “Da.”

“This child doesn’t have Yellow Fit,” Sheero said.

“I tried to tell you,” said Nylop, “this morning.”

Sheero’s gaze was cold. “And well you failed, fool. My chambers have more spies than the throne room.”

Neela began to wail. Nylop reached for her, but Sheero’s hand enveloped his arm and held him.

“Your wife can’t hear her,” said Sheero. “I’ve dropped a deep silence here. If you came to me this morning for the reason I believe, then we must wait and see what happens.”

Goosebumps rose on Neela’s bare skin in the chill air, and she wailed all the louder when she saw her father standing impervious to her cries. “Da, da, da.” Her wailing turned to shrieks, and her outstretched fists trembled. “Wait,” said Sheero. He was trying to make her Show. If withholding her father’s care failed, he would try more drastic measures. Parents had killed their sons trying.

But Neela had Showed over the salt. The salt. It would have been funny. He imagined what he would have said to his jealous neighbors if Neela had been a boy child.

Nylop’s free arm trembled. Suddenly, it lifted towards his child, but it was not he who lifted it.

“Don’t!” said Sheero, but the arm cupped Neela’s cheek in its palm and clumsily wiped her tears.

Sheero held his stone wand in the air. It glowed from within.

“She’s Showing,” he whispered with wonder in his voice.

Nylop’s throat wrenched out a hopeless cry.

“How old were you when you showed?” Sheero asked.

“Ten.”

“I was five. Your daughter’s a better sorcerer than either of us.”

Nylop's arm shuddered and itched under Neela's spell. He used his other arm to gather her to his chest, where she clung and gulped air. "It's all right now," he said.

Neela's eyes closed. With her head cradled against him, he fell into his chair and stared at the lamp flame. The dull aching in his arm told him that it had regained its will.

Sheero came and knelt before him. "Nylop," he said.

"I want to keep her," Nylop said, softly. "She's my only child."

"You can't."

Fury and indignation swept through Nylop in a wave. "You knew all along. You knew she had Shown. Why are you dragging this out? Why did you come in secret, in the night, if you weren't going to comfort me—" He put his head against Neela's and squeezed his eyes shut. "Don't tell my wife. Please, say she died of the Yellow Fit. Don't tell her that you sent for the Wise Men. She couldn't...."

"I didn't send for them."

Nylop looked up. "What?"

"I didn't send for them. But get up, quickly, because if you're missed at the Grand Promenade this dawn then all of this is for nothing, and I might as well have taken her to them myself. Get up."

Nylop rose. "What are you doing?"

"I'm doing for your daughter what no one did for mine. Put her back to bed."

"Put her back?"

"If you're not there to dispel the lamps, then you will not be able to do what needs be done."

"What needs to be done?" He held Neela so tight that she squirmed in her sleep and cried out.

"I am taking you to the one who can tell you," he said, "for it is a secret I only know the existence of, not the secret itself."

Nylop laid Neela beside his wife. Neither of them stirred. He had always trusted his wife, but his trust had fallen away. What would she do if she understood what happened to Neela?

He made obeisance to the High Mage's image, retrieved his wand, and followed Sheero into the night. By the time Nylop realized where they were, he knew he could not find his way back alone.

"I thought we were seeking a man of power," he said. Where the Wasted lived there could not be power. The Wasted had no magic. They were not even men, for magic was what made a man. They lived at the edge of the city by the High Mage's grace alone. Nylop looked around at the narrow alleyways clogged with refuse. He did not want to be here, but Sheero held tight to his hand.

"No one looks for power here," Sheero said.

They came to a door, and Sheero unlocked it with a long iron key. Inside, a steep stairway led up out of sight. Nylop was gasping by the time it ended at another door, narrow and shadowed. Sheero knocked.

A woman in a long blue cloak opened the door, and Nylop averted his eyes in shame. Then he realized what he was seeing.

"A woman can't be Wasted," he said.

"Hush, man," she told him. "Both of you come in."

Nylop covered his ears to keep from hearing the words of a woman who was not his. His face burned.

"Thiora the Watcher, Nylop the Dispeller," said Sheero. "He must make arrangements for his daughter."

"Bring him this way, then," she said. Nylop knew of no guild called the Watchers. How could there be an unheard-of guild that lived with the Wasted when they had no magic to build guilds upon? With his eyes towards the floor, he let Sheero guide him through the room and down a long hallway. In one day he had lost the city that he thought he knew.

The hallway ended in a low, narrow window, and Sheero and the woman stepped aside to let him look.

"What do you see?" she asked him, but Nylop would not court death and speak to her.

"What do you see?" she asked again, firmly, and touched him. The cold jolt that went through him left him on his knees upon the stone.

"Has she magic?" he asked Sheero.

"I have no magic, or I could not live within the city's walls," she said. "The High Mage would know, and he would find me. Now rise."

Sheero laid his hand upon Nylop's shoulder. "You're wasting time," he said. "For the Mage's sake, pretend she is a guildsman and speak to her now before the sun's rest ends." He pulled Nylop to his feet.

The woman drew near. He smelled the crushed herbs that warded her from harm. "You will not be punished for speaking to me," she said, "nor for hearing my words or seeing my face. Do you believe me?"

He shook his head. She was a fool if she thought it so.

"I will tell you why. A wife's claim on her husband cannot be enforced in blood. Only a man's claim on his wife may be. Do you believe this?"

He nodded.

"Then I cannot make the blood claim. And, as I am the wife of my wife, neither can she."

"It is the truth," Sheero said.

"And my father and brothers are dead," she said. "Now, look out, and tell me what you see."

"I thought you were a fool," Nylop said to the woman, "but now I do not." For one woman to marry another was impossible, but if it was the truth then somehow she had found a way. He had addressed her directly and his breath still came. He put his face to the narrow gap and looked.

It took him a moment to understand what his eyes beheld, for he had never seen outside the city. A moonlit plain stretched away in a sweep of silver. It was tranquil; not a soul stirred on the wide expanse of dust. He looked further. On the horizon, at the very edge of his vision, was a smudge of pure darkness. A cold fear touched his breast; that darkness was the Living Wood.

"What do you see?" Thiora the Watcher asked him.

"The enemy," he said.

He heard the scuff of her slippers as she moved away from him. He looked around for Sheero but he was no longer there.

“Let me tell you what I am offering you,” she said, and at the terrible coldness of her voice Nylop began to wonder if he had done right to come. He could save Neela himself. He did not need this brazen woman who, with a few words and the view out a window, had made him believe that saving his child might be worse than not saving her.

“You can save your daughter from death at the hands of the Mage’s men. She will go to dwell with the others who have escaped this city. She will be protected from harm and free to practice whatever her Showing brings. But she will become an enemy of the Mage forevermore, and his army will ride each morning through the gate to attack her lands. You will never see her again as long as you dwell within these walls, and she will never see you. Do you understand?”

“Neela will...dwell with the enemy?”

“In the Living Wood.”

“But you said she could practice.” In the Living Wood, no spell could exist. It was the enemy that each day tried to overgrow the city and suck all magic dry. His daughter would have no power there, only her life. Her whole unbroken life. He gazed at the shadow of the Living Wood, and a wild surge of hope flared up within him.

“Magic is in the Living Wood,” Thiora said.

“If the Living Wood reaches the gate? Will I see her then?”

“Perhaps, before the city falls beneath it.”

Above the palace, the first light seeped back into the world. Nylop ran towards home. Behind him all the chalices lay empty, their lights dispelled by his shaking hand. All through the long hours towards dawn, a feeling had grown inside him that something was not right. It made his work an unceasing terror. What if something happened? What if he was too late?

He shouldered through his door and threw his wand on the table. His wife sat on the floor, beneath the Mage’s cold eyes.

She had crossed the threshold.

He stepped away from her in horror, but she reached out, clutching the hem of his trousers and staring at him with wide, incoherent eyes.

“Where’s Neela?” he asked. He jerked his leg away and ran through the kitchen to his wife’s chamber. The blankets lay crumpled on the floor, and the room was empty.

“They’re coming,” said his wife. Her face contorted with grief, and she reached out to him, curling her arm around his knee and burying her face against him. “I’m sorry. I had to do it.”

“Tell me where she is!”

His wife shrank against his voice and repeated herself in a hollow chant. Her fingernails dug into the flesh of his thigh.

Nylop pulled from her grasp and ran down the hall to his chamber. “Neela!” he yelled.

She was hiding underneath his table. He wrapped her in a flour sack and carried her from the house. Outside, the streets were filling with market goers, and he found his place among them. The wooden wheels of his cart hit the cobbles and the frame rattled, but Neela did not stir. He put his hand down to touch her but quickly

raised it again. A flour sack lay in the bottom of his cart, not anything else but that. And he was on his way to fill it.

He entered the market and was swept through it in a great press of men and boys, past the potters with their breakless cups, past the astrologers whose streets only an initiate could know the true names of. Ahead was the road that wound around the city to the supplication grounds outside the palace. The road was called *Yzairshayee'o*, the most sacred way in the city, whose tortuous curves and switchbacks purified the soul of the supplicant. He surged toward it with his feet barely touching the street.

And came up short.

A man wended through the crowd towards Nylop. His long pleated robe and silver mask did not disguise the cold assurance of his movements.

"Dispeller Nylop," a voice said. Another man stood before him, his shadow stretched over Nylop, the glare of his wand in Nylop's eyes. His mask occluded his voice to a whisper. "There is a call for your arrest. Come quietly and you shall be dealt with fairly."

"No," he said, and the man paused.

"No?"

"No," he whispered, "I won't." The flour sack lay unmoving in his cart. He reached for his wand but it lay on the table at home, beneath the High Mage's unreadable eyes. Faster than Nylop could pull his hand from his tunic, one warrior ensorcelled him in a field of rigid bondage; the other lifted the sack from his cart's wooden boards and hoisted it above his head.

Nylop screamed. The magic had him in its grip and it made his breath reluctant to return to his lungs; but when it came he shouted again, this time the words of the dispelling chant, the words he lived by and knew the true force of. Even without his wand, they were dangerous, powerful words.

The hold on him cracked. His foot connected with the near warrior's leg. The man grunted and flicked his wand. Nylop spoke the dispelling chant a second time, struggling against the bands of invisible force around him, but they only tightened.

The man with the sack grabbed the pale curls Neela's head and yanked her into the morning light. Nylop strained every muscle in his frame but his limbs were frozen. He shouted, "Neela!" but the warrior added to his spell and Nylop's voice reflected back at him.

A flash of light seared through the marketplace.

With the stones of the avenue digging into his back, Nylop heard his daughter cry. Bright flashes swam in his eyes. He put out his hand and his fingers touched smooth metal, a mask, and it burned him. He drew back and flung off folds of heavy cloth as he rose, untangling himself from the warrior's corpse. The man was dead. The stink of charred flesh assailed him. As the bright spots receded he saw the warrior's corpses on the cobbles. Neela sat on a flour sack, howling.

He lifted Neela to his chest and stumbled through the sea of spectators that parted wordlessly before them. On half the faces was a look of terrified awe, on the other half conspiratorial idiocy. They knew what they had seen a girl-child do.

"Neela don't!" Nylop said. With each step down the *Yzairshayee'o*, he passed fifty supplicants without touching one, for a magic was on his feet that guided him

unerringly along the road's unfamiliar angles. "They'll find us!" And sure enough, down from atop the walls they came, drawn by the magic that spilled off his daughter into him. He ducked beneath a cart as bolt of fire struck where he had been standing. Screams went up all around.

"They're trying to kill us," said Nylop. The cart burned in a spiteful green flame, choking him. There was no place left to hide. He shielded Neela with his body and tensed his legs. The supplication grounds were a stone's throw away.

He ran. Behind him the air thickened and pulsed, slamming them to the ground. Neela disappeared before his eyes.

"No!" he said, "No! You can't have her!"

His hands disappeared, then his arms. Before the span of a breath, his eyes were seeing from a skull that let the light pass through. Blessed child! He gathered Neela and ran onto the supplication ground. A thrill shuddered up his spine and out his hands into the bare dirt court, dispelling the binding enchantments of a hundred men and leaving them free, blinking in the sunlight.

Ahead was the palace, the very center of the city. He was as far from the outer wall as he could possibly be, and a wild exhilaration was upon him. *Here* was the secret way to the Living Wood, directly underneath the High Mage's tower windows. He did exactly as Thiora had told him, passing along the southern wall of the supplication grounds towards the palace wall. He would find a stone, she had said, that was not there, though it appeared to be. He felt for it and his hands plunged into the stone. He stepped through into open space.

Beyond was the cool damp of rock and a steep stairwell leading into the earth. The passage twisted through darkness. The air felt as still as if trapped beneath the earth for a thousand years. Nylop forced his feet to carry them forward until a feeble light shone before them.

"Who's there?" said a woman. She was short like a dwarf, and dark; her eyes were ringed with green circles that led down past her cheek bones.

"Oh," he said and kissed Neela's ear because he could not see where her cheek was. "Neela, it's safe now. Let this woman see us." He wanted instead to tell her to hide them deeper. His daughter had bewildered the most accomplished mages of the palace guard. Surely, for such a child there must be a place in the city, a place of honor and power.

Neela's face was smudged and burned, and her hair hung in damp strings. Nylop brushed it back, let her fall against his shoulder where she panted in little breaths like a bellows.

"She saved us," he told the woman. "We would have died, but she saved us." He put his hand against Neela's cheek; it was dry, hot.

"She would have died even so without you," the woman said. Green lines flowed around her fingers. As Nylop imagined those hands on his child, his heart dried in his chest.

"I want to go with her," he said.

Her eyes lifted from Neela to meet him. "You cannot. The Living Wood would not suffer you to live."

He had expected her to say it, but he had not expected how heavy the weight of it would fall, nor how it would feel to bear it. "But I have nothing left. I will not live until

sunset. My wife..." He bowed his head.

"You will live," she said. In her face was a power he had never seen and wrenched his heart with longing. Here, before his eyes, within the city walls, stood a woman mage who should not have been able to exist but instead had flourished. She stepped forward and put her hands in his. He felt a shock and a release.

His body felt light and empty. "What did you do?"

"I touched you with the Living Wood," she said. "You are now dead to the Mage and beyond his reach. You are a Watcher of the Guild. Your wife has already been taken to them." She stepped away from him and a curled piece of parchment remained in his hands. It was a map. "You have paid a terrible price for it, but take comfort. You will be in the company of friends."

She stepped forward once more. "What is your daughter's name?"

"Neela." He bent his face to her pale hair and whispered it.

"And your wife?"

His wife had a name, had always had one. "Sho," he said.

"And what is yours?"

"I...I was Nylop the Dispeller."

"Nylop the Watcher," she said, and she raised one hand as if in blessing. "Nylop the Watcher, you are now a father of the Women of the Wood, Sho a mother, and Neela a sister. Take heart, your child will be loved as a husband could never love her." Then she held out her arms.

Nylop pressed Neela against his chest.

"Please," he said, but she shook her head. Her eyes were small, deep, and foreign.

"I love you, Neela," he said. Neela opened her eyes and looked at him. "I love you," he said again, and Neela smiled, a small smile that turned into a yawn.

Her face looked older than it had the last time he'd looked. He uncurled her hand from his hair and gently lifted her. Looking up he saw a door. A low, unremarkable door that didn't speak a word of what passed beyond it.

He placed Neela in the woman's tiny hands and stroked her cheek.

"Please live well," he said. The green lines on the sorcerer's fingers curled around his daughter's body.

"Da," she said, rousing from the stupor of her spent power. Her eyes were open wide and she dug her teeth into her lip as she watched him step away. The woman turned and, without a word, they were gone. The girl door, closing, didn't make a sound.

The First Priest of Maat

By

David E. Hughes

They spoke it in the kitchens. They spoke it in the whorehouses. They spoke it the slave pits, the papyrus fields, the embalming tents, and the palace. Everywhere a servant toiled, the refrain echoed: *There is no rest for the servant of a king.*

I refused to believe it. As King Zoser's vizier, I'd ordered concubines quietly killed, abased myself to appease offended dignitaries, designed temples and pyramids, whispered the customs of foreigners into the King's ear, and so much more. The work seemed endless, but my daily toil had been filled with a certainty that one day my rest would come. Now, it was finally here.

Fifty feet beneath the sun-beaten Egyptian desert, I experienced the first moment of rest I'd had since I was a boy. Death was everything I'd imaged it to be. The cold darkness nourished me, and, because my tomb was sealed to keep out robbers, I had no fear of interruption.

"Imhotep!" A voice boomed through the chamber. "Come, Imhotep!"

White light filled the tomb. I couldn't believe it. I'd hardly had the chance to get comfortable, and now I was being summoned. I discarded the idea of just ignoring the voice. Whoever was calling me didn't sound like he'd take disobedience lightly.

I tried to move in the same way as I had before I died. It didn't work. My legs had been emptied of their fluids during the embalming process, along with my vital organs. But there must be some way to obey the summons. I willed myself toward the voice. My *ba* lifted out of my body. Part of me, my *ka*, remained implanted in my mortal remains, but my *ba* was a soul with wings. I flew toward the source of the light, filled with regret about leaving my cold, isolated tomb.

Among the scrolls, toilet articles, cosmetics, oil, perfumes, and wigs strewn about my tomb, I spotted a shabits looking back at me. It looked like Rehu, my most trusted servant, except that it was only eight inches tall and carved of wood. I'd learned long ago that extra hands never hurt.

"Follow, Rehu," I said, and the doll-like servant jumped after me—or rather my *ba*—on its little wooden feet.

I glided through a hallway of white light as fast as a hawk. Rehu kept up, his legs fluttering like a bee's wings. The hall opened into a huge stone chamber lined with polished granite columns reaching higher than I could see. The walls were covered with blue, red, and green hieroglyphics that sparkled like jewels. The work was

impeccable, every character precise yet beautiful. Did Thoth, the ibis-headed god of writing, compose a death poem for every soul that passed through this chamber? Considering the amount of writing that covered the endless walls, I thought it possible.

I discovered the source of the voice calling my name. Near the front of the chamber, a figure held a staff with a weeping eye symbol emblazoned on it. Elaborate gold armbands encircled his muscular biceps, and he wore a pear shaped white crown topped by a boxy red crown: the double crown of upper and lower Egypt. A short, sharp beak served as his mouth. He had brown feathers for hair, and his right eye was obsidian. A black eye patch covered his left eye.

"Ah. There you are, Imhotep," he said. The voice was low and deep.

"Horus?" I asked.

He nodded with his falcon head. The scribes never showed Horus' eye patch in their drawings. Perhaps they were afraid they would offend the god if they showed this flaw.

As a vizier, I was supposed to know all of the protocols for polite greetings of visiting dignitaries, but how was I to address a god? Rehu knelt prostrate on the ground, his face pressed into the marble floor, and I couldn't find fault with the gesture. I began easing myself down, wondering if my *ba* would also have bad knees.

"No need for formalities," said Horus. "Come walk with me for a moment."

"Yes, Great One," I said.

We walked between the columns; Rehu's wooden feet clicked on the polished stone floor as he followed.

"In case you haven't surmised," said Horus, "you're in Maat's chamber of souls. All humans come here after they die to participate in the Weighing of the Heart. Look."

He pointed at several *bas* lined up beside a golden scale. I recognized the *ba* at the front of the line. Djadjaemankh had served Zoser well as an attendant in the royal stables. He was a good and loyal servant who had died not long before I did. His serene face indicated he had little to fear. Bronze-limbed and kohl-haired Maat, a goddess more beautiful than any of King Zoser's wives, placed the ostrich feather from her simple crown on one side of the scale and Djadjemankh's heart on the other. The scale dipped, lowering the heart and raising the feather. Maat picked up the poor man's heart and threw it to Ammit the Devourer, a hideous beast with the head of a crocodile, the forequarters of a lion, and the hindquarters of a hippopotamus. As Ammit snapped up the heart and furiously worked its jaws, an awful grinding and slurping sound echoed through the chamber. Djadjemankh's *ba* winked out of existence.

Horus shook his head. "Poor Djadjermankh. His heart was not sufficiently empty of evil and hate to weigh less than Maat's feather. Instead of entering paradise, Djadjermankh went to Ammit."

Ammit finished chewing and eyed me with its crocodilian eyes, almost as if it knew I would be its next meal. I shuddered, imagining its sharp teeth ripping into my soul. Frankly, this was part of the afterlife I had not been counting on. I had thought I'd spend my death in the cool darkness of my mastaba. The idea of Maat weighing my heart had seemed far-fetched. Now I'd have to rethink things.

I turned to Horus. "I understand why I'm here, but I don't understand why you're here, Your Worship."

Horus cocked his head and his eye twinkled. It seemed like his version of a

smile. "I've been watching you, Imhotep. You were an excellent vizier, with a mind sharp enough to solve even the most difficult problems presented to you by your king. I'd like your help."

I tried to smile, but I was burning inside. Horus, of course, was correct. My mind was Zoser's tool, just like the spears of his infantryman, and the old king has used it to his best advantage.

"What kind of help?" I asked.

"In the world of the living, a priest named Mebora resides in my Temple. He recently performed several miracles, but I was not the source of those miracles. I want you to find how he did it."

I had made it a practice to stay away from clerics; I didn't trust them. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I'd lived so long. So, the idea of returning to the world of the living to spy on a priest capable of performing miracles didn't appeal to me. On the other hand, it probably wasn't a good idea to say "no" to a god.

"Almighty Horus, your power and bravery are known throughout Egypt. Why send a humble servant like me rather than undertaking the task yourself?"

"If I returned to the world of the living, certain others may know of it. I need more information before I take a definitive step."

Clearly, I didn't have the whole story, but it wasn't hard to see what was going on. It appeared that no one—not even the gods—could escape politics. "Oh Great One, I'm honored you think me capable of such a mission. Had I not died, I'm sure I could have fulfilled your request with all due speed. Alas, I'm unsure what I can do since I'm no longer of Mebora's world."

"Your *ba* can return to the World of the Living. You can accomplish this task without the use of your corporeal form."

So, the technical argument wasn't going to work. Still, I need to find a way out. What would Horus do to me if I simply returned to my sarcophagus? Would he whip me as Zoser had done when he was displeased? "I am gladdened by your confidence, Magnificent One. However, I am very tired and desire to rest now that I'm in the afterlife. Could I possibly decline?"

"Of course."

Too easy. I sensed a trap. "What would happen if I did?"

Horus shrugged. "Maat will put your heart on the scale."

I was a good servant of my king just as Djadjermankh had been. Was it possible that being a good servant wasn't enough? I suddenly felt as if the King's cold hand had reached out and grabbed me by the throat. What of the poisonings, the secrets that I whispered that had gotten people killed, the letters I'd written that sent men to their deaths? Would those deeds weigh in my heart as if Zoser was standing on Maat's scale with me?

I was beginning to get the picture. If gods acted anything like kings, the game was always fixed in their favor. My choice was really this: help Horus or have my soul devoured by Ammit. No wonder the beast had eyed me with such eager anticipation. But perhaps this was the chance I needed. If I could prove myself by completing Hours' task perhaps Maat's scale would favor me. Or maybe Horus would allow me to stay in my tomb and avoid the scale altogether.

"I've decided to help you," I said.

"Excellent," said Horus. The chamber burst into a flash of white light, and I was back in my tomb, reunited with my *ka*. I wondered if it had all been a dream. Do the dead dream?

"Good sir," someone said.

Now what?

"Good sir!" It was my shabits, Rehu, tapping his little hand on my sarcophagus. Very annoying.

"Yes—what is it?" I asked.

"So sorry to disturb you, but hadn't you better embark on your mission from Horus?"

If Rehu remembered Horus, then I certainly hadn't been dreaming. Good. I would prove myself once and for all and be rewarded with true rest.

I freed my *ba* from my body and took a closer look at my spirit form. My head seemed the same as it was in life: full lips, narrow nose, bald head. But the rest of my body looked like a golden eagle. I had long, bronze colored wings, short, clawed legs, and a beautiful feathered tail.

Experimentally, I touched my wing to the wall of the tomb. It passed through the cold stone and into the surrounding earth, as if I were dipping into water.

"Easy enough," I muttered. Thankfully, I didn't have to walk anymore. I had a terrible case of useba, the old man's disease, and for the last several years of my life, each step had become increasingly painful. I willed my body upwards, passing through the sealed roof of the burial chamber, up the well to the flat-topped mastaba, and into the hot, bright desert air.

My mastaba, like those of the most important nobility of the last few generations, was in Sakkara, a necropolis south of Inbhad. It was not more than a hundred feet from King Zoser's step-pyramid, which rose two hundred feet into the air. Just seeing it filled my heart with pride; no one before had managed such an engineering marvel. I wondered if the old king was having as much difficulty as I was in the afterlife. If Maat were truly just, Zoser's soul would be digesting in Ammit's stomach.

I flew east toward Inbhad and saw the small houses made of mud bricks and thatched roofs that surrounded the city. The dwellings were spread out upon a green patchwork of fields irrigated by canals. A russet line separated the area nurtured by the Nile and the harsh, lifeless desert beyond.

White stone walls surrounded Inbhad. Inside, many squat houses lined narrow, crowded streets. The palace—my old home—occupied the center of the city. Its high stone walls, carved and painted, sent a shiver of nostalgia through me. I was tempted to return to see what Zoser's successor, King Huni, had done with the place since I'd died, but I decided I'd better get to work.

The Temple of Horus was in the western part of the city. It was a white limestone building nearly as big as the palace. Two rows of thirty-foot tall obelisks lined the entryway, their pyramid-shaped tops capped with gold, and their sides carved with hieroglyphics proclaiming the greatness, wisdom, and power of Horus. A long line of people snaked from the doorway, between the obelisks, and down the nearby street. Many in the line appeared sick or disabled. Others quietly wept or stared vacantly in front of them.

Toward the middle of the line, two women in plain linen dresses conversed.

"I've come to ask Horus to bless me with a child. My husband and I have been married for nearly a year and we have nothing to show for it. I've sought the blessings of the gods before, but now . . ."

"Yes, I have heard that Horus is smiling upon us," said the other woman, "that's why I'm here."

Horus had made it clear he wasn't smiling about any of this, but at least I knew why these people were so eager to enter the temple. Word in Inbhad traveled fast when it came to miracles. I guessed everyone could use a miracle now and then.

I flew through the broad double doors of the temple and followed the line of people to another door. An acolyte stood outside, letting miracle seekers in once they had paid the appropriate tribute. A large pile of gold, gems, handiwork, and food lay next to the acolyte's table. I shuddered, thinking about how unhappy King Zoser would have been if he had found so much tribute here. "I have no problem with the gods having their share," he would often say, "so long as theirs is much smaller than mine."

I flew through the wall and into the next room. It was dark, dimly lit by a fire pit in the center. The thick and cloying smoke from the fire smelled of sharp, spicy incense. A priest sat in a large wooden chair in front of the fire. A gold pendant that looked like an long-nosed pig lay against his bare chest. He wore a fine black wig and his eyes were lined with kohl. A white linen kilt was wrapped around his waist. He listened to a young woman who knelt before him. Even in the dim light, I could see that one of her hands was crippled.

". . . and so I ask that Horus grant me use of my hand," said the woman, her voice husky with emotion.

The priest took her hand in his lap and examined it. Other than the crackle of the fire in the room, it was quiet. Then, he looked into a dark corner of the room. A flicker of movement caught my eye.

"Horus, in his benevolence and mercy, shall grant your gift."

The woman's hand unfolded like a blooming flower. She gasped, held it in front of her eyes, and wiggled her fingers. "Oh! Horus! Oh! Oh!" She burst into tears.

The priest smiled half-heartedly. "Use your hand for the greater glory of Horus. Go and be well!" He gestured toward the door.

The woman scrambled to her feet and left the room, tears of joy wetting her face.

I flew to the dark corner where I'd seen the movement, but it was empty. Had I imagined it?

The priest followed the woman out the door. "No more today," he mumbled to the acolyte outside and scurried down a stone hallway. In all likelihood, this priest was Mebora, the man Horus wanted me to investigate. However, I had worked for Zoser long enough to learn an important lesson: follow the tribute.

As the long line of miracle-seekers crowding out of the temple expressed their frustration, I secreted myself in a shadow near the tribute pile. Before long, a group of hooded priests arrived and loaded the goods into several large papyrus baskets. Although each of them wore traditional white linen robes and golden donkey pendants, they looked more like stoneworkers than holy men. The muscles in their arms and shoulders were heavily developed, and the expressions on their faces were more gruff than serene.

I followed as they hefted the baskets down several stone hallways into the deep

recesses of the temple. When they reached a gold-plated door, one of the priests chanted some unrecognizable words and the door glided open.

The men marched through the door and descended steep stone steps beneath the temple. The air became dank and cool, reminding me of my quiet tomb in Sakkara. They reached another door, which opened the same way as the previous one, loaded the loot into the room beyond, and left.

I flew through the door and froze with shock. The chamber was huge, at least ten times as big as the tomb beneath my mastaba. Every corner was stacked with valuables: gold, statues, wigs, fine clothes, and much more. At the far end of the tomb, a finely worked sarcophagus lay on a stone altar. Preening its feathers on top of the sarcophagus was a *ba*, an awfully familiar *ba*. His body looked like a large horned owl, with a white chest and brown wings. He wore a necklace with the pig pendant around his neck. His face was pinched, with small eyes that seemed too close to his nose and a large mouth with thin lips that curled down at the ends. It was a face I had hoped never to see again.

King Zoser.

He looked up and called my name.

I considered flying away as fast as I could--surely I could out wing him, but I then I realized that this was just the opportunity I needed. I would find out how King Zoser's *ba* was connected to the miracles and then report back to Horus. If I betrayed my former king, it would show Horus, Maat, or anyone else who cared that I was simply a servant, and only my master was responsible for my deeds.

"Your Highness." I landed on one of the canopic jars and lowered my head.

Zoser smiled. "Imhotep. I'm so glad you've come. You've proven you are loyal to me even in the afterlife."

I bit my tongue.

"You're probably wondering why I'm not beneath the pyramid you designed for me." Zoser looked deceptively wise with his visage attached to an owl's body. "Not to worry. I found no fault with the pyramid, but Sakkara is too far away. If I'm going to regain my throne, I need to be closer to the palace."

"Regain your . . . throne?" Even with my sharp mind, I couldn't quite comprehend what he was saying.

Zoser waved a wing at me. "I never wanted to die. The afterlife holds no attraction for me. I want to sit on the throne of Egypt where I belong. Plus, Huni's going to ruin everything I've built. He was always a willful child. Never listened to my advice."

"But how could you . . . come back?"

Zoser grinned. "Not an obstacle for a true king."

It didn't make any sense. I was usually the one that had figured out how to execute Zoser's devious ideas. How would he pull this off?

I heard a little tapping sound on the floor and noticed Rehu racing toward me. "Good sir!" he shouted in his little voice.

"Not now, Rehu." I turned to King Zoser. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I'll need my trusted vizier during my new reign."

No! My worst nightmare was coming true. Zoser would not allow me to rest, not even in death.

Rehu pulled on one of my talons. "Good sir!"

"Not *now*!" I looked at Zoser. "I will never be your vizier. I'm done."

Zoser narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

A shiver went through me when I realized I was finally doing what I'd wished I could do my whole life. I could finally tell the old king what was truly on my mind.

"You're a selfish, disgusting old man with no sense of morality or fairness. A ten-year-old child would make a better king than you! But your taint, your stench, your immorality has washed off on me! My heart should be pure, but it is not—all because of you! The only reason I served you was because I had no choice, but now I do. I'm dead, you see. You can't touch me!"

"GOOD, SIR!" shouted Rehu. For a stick figure, he looked perturbed.

"What?" I said.

"Your body has been removed from your tomb."

"My . . . body?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes, it's being carried here, to Horus's temple."

"But why? Who?"

I looked at Zoser, who seemed extremely amused. "Haven't you heard? Miracles are being performed in Horus's Temple."

I froze in shock. "No. You wouldn't."

"The greatest miracle of all will be performed today—resurrection of the dead! What a joyous day it will be when King Zoser will once again rule the world of the living with his trusted vizier, Imhotep, by his side!"

"You're crazy!" I shouted, leaping toward the ceiling and pumping my wings.

"Stop!" yelled Zoser. "I command you!"

I shot through layers of the temple until I was clear. When I got my bearings, I flew toward Sakkara yelling "Horus! Help! Horus!"

Horus listened. Before I made it back to Sakkara, the sky around me turned into a bright white hallway of light. In moments, I was in the giant stone room lined with the sparkling hieroglyphics. Maat's chamber of souls.

In the background, Maat and Ammit went about their business weighing a line of hopeful after-lifers. Ibis-headed Thoth chipped away at the wall with a hammer and chisel. Horus waited for me, his muscular arms crossed and his bird's head cocked to one side. "Back so soon, Imhotep?" he asked.

I landed in front of him, panting. "King Zoser is at the temple. He claims he's going to get resurrected and rule again."

Horus didn't look surprised at all. Then it hit me. Horus had *known* that King Zoser was involved in all this. That's why he'd sent me, not because he needed my great wisdom, but because of my connection with Zoser. Horus had manipulated me, used me as a tool, just as Zoser had in the mortal world. I was furious, but I struggled to keep my voice even when I spoke. "You knew I'd find him there."

Horus nodded. "I thought you would, but who was performing the miracles? Not Zoser."

Who? I was such an idiot. I should have played along with Zoser long enough to discover the truth. Instead, I'd been so terrified of the threatened resurrection that I'd lost sight of my true goal. And now I was in the worst position of all, caught between Horus and Zoser. If I didn't think of an answer quick, I'd be bathing in Ammit's digestive

juices before I could say Zaphnathapaaneah.

"Do you have an answer or don't you?" Horus crossed his muscular arms.

The obvious answer didn't make sense. The temple, the miracle-seekers, even the priest's invocations pointed to Horus being behind the miracles. The strange part was King Zoser's *ba*, standing in that room full of treasure with his owl body and that stupid pendant around his neck. Wait, the pendant. Why had the King worn a pendant? He'd never done so before. He always been too vain to obscure his chest with jewelry. And the priest had worn the same amulet. Could it possibly be a religious symbol? I couldn't remember any of the gods favoring a pig. But maybe it wasn't a pig. Of course! An aardvark, the symbol of Set.

An invisible force tugged at me, as if my *ba* was a Nile hippo being pulled in by a harpoon.

"Where are you going?" asked Horus.

"Something's got me! I think my *ba* is being pulled back into my body!" I shouted. "Help me!"

"You still haven't told me who is behind the miracles."

I cursed under my breath. Horus wasn't going to help me until I helped him. I had to give him the answer he needed, or I would be of no use to him. Gods were no more righteous than kings.

"It's Set!" I yelled. "He's going to resurrect Zoser. He's behind the miracles!" I felt another pull on my *ba*, this time even stronger. "Help!"

Horus raised his staff. The light in the chamber flickered and dimmed. "Set!" intoned Horus. His voice rolled through the chamber like thunder. "Come to me—if you dare!"

The force stopped tugging at me, and Horus stood so still I couldn't see him breathe. The chamber was silent. Even Ammit was quiet.

Then Set materialized in the chamber. His body was toned and muscular like Horus', but his head resembled that of an aardvark, with a long, curved snout, beady little eyes, and high, misshapen ears. He wore an elaborate red headpiece, which matched his silken toga.

"Horus!" Set said. "It's been a long time. Have you grown tired of your one remaining eye? I'd be happy to remove it like I did the first one. Or shall I simply cut you into pieces, like I did your father?"

Horus ignored the barb. "What you were doing in my temple?"

Set twitched his nose. "At Zoser's resurrection, the priests will proclaim you dead and declare all recent miracles in my name. You will be forgotten. Your temple will become mine!"

Horus raised his staff high above his head, and the whole chamber began to tremble. "Your death will be slow and painful!"

"You always were a prideful little runt!" said Set. "It will be a pleasure destroying you!"

I didn't like the way this was going. A fight between two gods couldn't be good for humans—dead or alive. It was just like wars. They always seemed to make the kings richer and the peasants more miserable. As a vizier, I'd managed to stop a few wars with the right words whispered in the right ears. It was time to do my job again.

I looked around the chamber, trying to find someone—anyone—who could

help. My eyes settled on Maat, who seemed mesmerized by the confrontations between Horus and Set. I sidled over to her throne next to the golden scales and whispered, "You'd better step in."

"What?" She took her stunning brown eyes away from Set and Horus and peered down at me.

"I can't imagine it would be good for anyone if those two started fighting," I said.

She frowned. Her face was so beautiful it made me want to melt. "I can't do anything."

"Yes, you can," I said. "Propose a compromise they both can live with."

She smiled at me, and then turned to the two gods. "Stop! Both of you!" She rose from her throne and walked over to stand between Horus and Set, who looked angry about the interruption.

"The two of you have got to stop!" said Maat. "The last time you fought, you were at it for twenty years!"

"But he--" began Horus.

"Hush." Maat held up a long, delicate finger. "I propose that Set be required to build his own temple and Horus' temple will remain. Horus and Set will agree to a truce, leaving each to operate his own temple in peace. And Zoser does not get resurrected."

"And if Horus and I don't agree to this proposal?" said Set.

Maat hesitated and looked at me. I rushed up and whispered in her ear.

"I will feed the loser of your battle to Ammit," said Maat. Ammit looked strangely complacent with his massive jaws not at work.

"But you can't do that," said Horus.

"I can. It's called justice."

Ammit looked eagerly from Set to Horus, as if hoping one or the other would refuse Maat's proposal.

"Agreed," said Horus.

"Agreed," mumbled Set.

Then Maat turned to me. "And what of you? Are you ready for my scale?"

I looked at the golden scale. I'd just averted a war between gods. That had to count for something. The question was, did it make up for a lifetime of serving Zoser's evil wishes? "Could I simply remain in my mastba?"

Maat shook her head, sadly. "All of the dead must face my scale."

"Then what choice do I have?"

"I appreciate what you have done for me, and I am willing to give you another chance. You may return to life and serve as King Huni's vizier."

I frowned. What kind of reward was that? I was looking for rest, not more work. "But then the next time I die I'll be in the same position as I am now."

Maat cocked her beautiful head. "Maybe. Here," she pulled the ostrich feather from her hair, "you, and all future viziers, will be known as 'Priests of Maat.' You will be charged with assuring that justice is served in the world of the living—even if it means defying your king."

As I took the feather in my hand, I knew what I had to do. My next life would be a dangerous one, but it would be worth the risk. I would live a life of justice, and be ready for the scales when I returned.

"I accept," I said.

A burst of light filled the room. It was so bright I had to close my eyes.

When I opened them, the sun was shining. I felt fresh air on my face, smelled loaves baking in brick ovens, and heard the sweet song of a canary. I held an ostrich feather in my hands.

I was alive.

There *would* be rest for the servant of a king. I'd prove it this time.

Special Feature: Interview with Ann Aguirre

By

Betsy Dornbusch

Ann Aguirre is the author of two series: the science fiction Jax Series, urban fantasy Corine Solomon Series, and stand-alone romances written under the pseudonym Ava Gray. Ann has books coming out in April, October, and December of 2009 with more to follow in 2010. She can be found on the web at www.annaguirre.com. She always seems to be giving treats away on her blog, so that's worth a look, too!

Welcome to *Electric Spec*, Ann. Tell us about your series—the inspiration and the plans for future books. They each come from such different places, though they seem to share tough, damaged heroines who aren't plastic beauties.

In the Jax books, I explore the idea of whether second love can be as powerful as the first...when the first was happy and fulfilling. Have you ever noticed the way a heroine's prior love interests are typically demonized? Once she meets the hero, she's supposed to forget she ever loved anyone else. She's supposed to realize that the sex with the new man is better than anything she's ever known before. The new man must be, in all ways, superior to the old. But what if he's not? Is the heroine allowed to miss the love she lost? Can that occur without destroying her current relationship? That's the sort of thing I explore in the Jax series. It's intense and heartbreaking sometimes, but nothing worth having ever comes easy, I think.

With that series, I also explore the idea of an anti-heroine. There have been plenty of anti-heroes over the years, from CS Friedman's Gerald Tarrant to Stephen R. Donaldson's Thomas the Unbeliever, but fiction is underserved in the anti-heroine department. I wanted to write a female character who is best described by one of my readers:

“Jax is a terrifically unique heroine. She has no vanity, no desire for domestic bliss, and she's self-centered as hell. In one scene, she actually leaves the hero to die in order to save herself — and not because he asked her to, either. Another thing that makes Jax unique is her love of jacking into grimspace, which provides her with a source of independent joy that will always keep her from collapsing into the kind of romance heroine who only needs her hero to find happiness, which usually requires gleefully abandoning her every commitment to fit into his world.” —Racy Romance Reviews

In the Corine Solomon books, I explore the idea of two people loving each other desperately, but apart from their shared history, they don't belong together. What happens when you want something that's not good for you? What happens when two people aren't soulmates, destined to be together? What happens when a relationship between them is difficult and raw and every inch gained is a struggle? Is it worth fighting for? Is it worth battling to make the pieces fit? Well, you'll have to read the series to get my take.

On another level, I wanted to write an urban fantasy series devoid of fur, fangs, and fey. Living in Mexico gave me some excellent ideas of what to offer instead, so I began to write. Corine is different from Jax in what drives her. Whereas Jax lives for the thrill, Corine always has been—and always will be—searching for the place she belongs.

The Jax Series in particular intrigues me. You took elements from urban fantasy and applied them to science fiction. The books truly feel cross-genre. Did you do this to broaden appeal?

Yes, I did. I thought that since urban fantasy is a much broader, more robust market that I should be able to bring some of the traits that make it popular to SF and engage more readers. This has been successful so far, as I have a number of readers who read no other science fiction.

I noticed in an excerpt on your website that you switched between male and female points of view. Do you prefer writing from the female or male POV, and do you plan to ever write a book entirely from the male side of things?

When I'm writing romance, I think the reader needs to know both sides, so they can feel what each character is going through. It enriches the book and the reading experience. I've actually spoken with my editor about a possible project wherein I'd write a male protagonist, but that's a long way off, if it ever happens. I have a lot of work to do yet.

You have four books in three genres due in 2009! How do you wrap your head around that in order to meet your deadlines?

Most of the work is already done, actually. I have only three books left in my various contracts, and one of those, KILLBOX, is more than half finished. I take it one step at a time and make sure I stay on schedule by writing Monday through Friday. I treat it like a day job, and I write three thousand words a day. Generally, I complete my work in the mornings, and have the afternoons free for other endeavors. I answer emails, Twitter, chat with friends, or work on revisions / edits / proofs for other books. I'm very conscientious about meeting my deadlines.

And which books are coming out this year?

BLUE DIABLO (Corine Solomon, book 1), April 7, 2009

DOUBLEBLIND (Jax, book 3), October 2009

SKIN GAME by Ava Gray, December 2009

What are the recurring themes in your work? For instance, I've picked up on "learning to love—not only others, but the self." Do you feel any responsibility toward approaching your readership with a message?

While I do think that a positive self-image is vital before anyone can truly love another, no, I'm not a writer with a message. Any themes that come through my books is purely incidental, though I'm happy to be considered profound. My goal as an author is to take readers from this world for a little while and immerse them in mine. I only want to entertain, and if I do that, then I am beyond content.

Plotter or pantzer?

Pantser, though we prefer the term "organic writer" . (grin)

Do you write any short fiction? Why or why not?

So far, you can find any short fiction I produce on the Free Reads page of my website. I'm busy enough writing novels that I don't have time looking for homes for short stories. I did get invited to participate in an anthology, though, so eventually you'll find one of my stories in The Mammoth Book of Vampire Romance. Otherwise, keep watching my Free Reads page.

I've noticed you tend to stick with crisp, short chapters. Is this a deliberate pacing decision or just how you naturally write?

That style is Jax's voice. It fits her narrative and it offers a fine vehicle for the fast-paced plot. I don't write that way in other books. My chapters are dictated by the character in whose POV I'm writing, so you can expect whatever best fits their personality.

What are your favorite books and magazines lately? Do you stick to your genres or read all over?

I get Locus delivered to my home. Otherwise, I don't much like magazines. Too many pictures.

As for books, well... it would take forever if I made this exhaustive because books are my great love. I do read across genres. Some of my favorite authors include:

Mystery: Julia Spencer-Fleming, James Lee Burke, Casey Daniels

Science fiction: David Brin, Neal Stephenson, Jack McDevitt, Connie Willis, CS Friedman, Douglas Adams, Walter Jon Williams

Fantasy: Jeri Smith-Ready, Sharon Shinn, Patricia McKillip, Robin McKinley, Neil Gaiman, George RR Martin, Pauline Alama, Kelley Armstrong, Patricia Briggs, Jim Butcher, Charlaine Harris

Romance: Anya Bast, Lauren Dane, Eileen Wilks, Nalini Singh, Lara Adrian, Eve Kenin, Nora Roberts, Bonnie Dee, Amie Stuart, Connie Brockway, Larissa Ione, Carrie Lofty, Anne Stuart, Linda Howard...

Whew. I have to stop. Just too many to list.

I've got to ask ... you really were a clown?

Yep. I dressed up in the big shoes, put on the makeup, and drove to various gas station grand openings. You should've seen the looks I got from other drivers. Once there, I passed out balloons and hot dogs to children. This was especially traumatic because I'm sort of afraid of clowns.

Your bio claims: *[Ann] grew up in a yellow house across from a cornfield, but now she lives in sunny Mexico.* This corn field was somewhere besides Mexico?

I grew up in the Midwest, so yes, the cornfield was elsewhere.

Are you bilingual, and if so, have you written any fiction in Spanish? Is speculative fiction popular in Mexico?

I'm close to bilingual. I do all my business here in Spanish obviously, from shopping to paying bills, and we speak Spanglish in our house. I might say something in Spanish, and the kids will reply in English, or vice versa. Sometimes we use English adjectives in an otherwise Spanish sentence. It works for us.

No, spec fic is not popular here, apart from the school of magical realism, as written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Isabel Allende. I have read them both—they're very gifted—but I do not write as they do.

Since you're published widely in the US, I assume you like to keep in touch with your American readership. Do you have plans to travel north this year to any conferences or conventions?

Yes, I'll be in the States for three events this year. In April, I'll be in Orland for the Romantic Times Convention. In July, I'll be in Washington DC for the RWA Conference. August will find me in Austin, Texas, enjoying my first ArmadilloCon. Check my website for more info.

Thanks so much for your time. We look forward to reading the next installments in your series!

High Quality, Low Budget Speculative Fiction (In Three Easy Steps)

By

Marty Mapes

I scanned my hometown film festival's schedule for science fiction or fantasy films. There were none. "Of course," I thought; "since my home town is not Cannes, Park City, or Toronto, we only attract the smaller films, and you can't make a good spec-fic flick on a budget."

And then I thought again.

Primer. Cube. Habit. The American Astronaut. Science Fiction. The Navigator. Time Crimes. The Blair Witch Project....

It's possible to write not only a *cheap* science fiction film; it's possible to write a *good*, cheap science fiction film. In hopes of inspiring more spec fic at next year's film festival, here's some advice to screenwriters based on past successes.

1. Keep the Budget in Mind

Necessity is the mother of invention, and poverty is an incubator for creativity. As a writer you can help your director and producers by knowing that talk is cheap-- compared to spaceships and dragons.

Primer (2004) and *Timecrimes* (2008) are time travel movies. But rather than filming ancient Egypt or Blade-Runner L.A., these films keep the time horizon close. Since both have a modern setting, they are easy to shoot. You don't need convincing costumes, special effects, or vintage cars on every street. Both involve loops and Zs scratched into the natural timeline that are only a few hours long. The resulting paradoxes make for engaging plots and mind-blowing revelations without the need for anything more convincing than a homemade time machine and the occasional lookalike stand-in for characters who meet their previous selves.

Another inexpensive time-travel movie is *The Navigator* (1988), which brings a small number of medieval peasants to the present. The production required a half-dozen convincing costumes and one windswept landscape (no power poles or asphalt, please). Instead of a time machine, the characters walk through a tunnel in the earth that emerges into the present day. One of the elders has known of the tunnel and kept it a secret, but a deadly disease sends them through to the Other Place on a quest to appease God and free them from the plague. One of the writer's tricks I liked best is that the medieval characters were able to take our modern technology in stride. They were surprised to see electricity and steel and automobiles, but they took it for granted

that people needed light, building material, and transportation.

A German film called *Science Fiction* (2003) creates a *Groundhog Day*-like situation. After a seminar, two colleagues find themselves trapped in a parallel universe where they are remembered by the locals only as long as they're in the same room. The "science fiction" in the film lives entirely in the writing and acting, and not at all in the sets, costumes, or special effects. And yet the device is rich enough to fill a feature-length plot.

Two more ideas spring to mind: *The Blair Witch Project*'s whole concept is that its characters were making a film with no budget. Thus their footage is completely justified in looking cheap. And you can save money by writing a smaller world.

Timecrimes, for example, could be played on a stage with a small handful of actors. *Cube* (1997), in which unknown futuristic fugitives try to escape a deadly maze, is filmed almost entirely on a single, nondescript set.

2. Focus on the Writing

If you had a gigantic budget, you could make an enjoyable piece of entertainment even if your story were a piece of ... something else. But if you're making a shoestring film, you can't afford a bad story and two-dimensional characters because it'll never get past the screening committee. A good subtext can help a lot.

Habit (1996) plays vampirism as a metaphor for addiction. The need for human blood becomes something like an alcoholic's need for a drink. Perhaps one feels invincible when one become a vampire, as with the first time you try a powerful drug. But each fix gets you less and less high, and the withdrawal symptoms can kill you.

The implications of "out of sight, out of mind" in *Science Fiction* are both exciting and terrifying. Like alcohol, they amplify your natural personality. Having people forget you when you leave the room gives you the perfect opportunity to steal, insult, and abuse people you don't like. On the other hand, if you're naturally insecure, you're going to become a childish wreck when you realize nobody is ever going to love you longer than their next trip to the bathroom. Doing evil becomes incredibly easy; maintaining love becomes almost impossible.

In *Timecrimes*, the characters provide the subtext. The protagonist is a middle-aged Spaniard, well off, who pushes his way through the story like a bull, consequences and bystanders be damned. He's not entirely likeable, but he is entirely believable. Minority- and women's-studies professors could have a field day with the protagonist's recklessness and selfishness. Many time-travel films warn against tinkering with universal forces; this one's protagonist wants to know what the universe has done for him lately.

Primer's strong suit is the dialog. The two young inventors have heated discussions as they try to solve the problems in their almost-working time machine. They talk passionately and intensely in their own shorthand. The dialog is *just* technical enough that we can almost understand what they're saying. The screenwriter's best insight is to use pronouns, gestures, and slang to talk about the pieces that aren't quite working correctly, rather than using technobabble to try to explain the process to the audience.

3. Learn from *The American Astronaut*

A few movies go beyond good writing and a clever idea. Creative special effects, a sense of humor, or quirky characters can spice up your film even further. To incorporate these ideas, you might have to wear more than one hat, as did writer/director/composer Cory McAbee in *The American Astronaut*.

McAbee had a great idea for simulating low gravity on an asteroid. Shooting in slow motion gets you halfway there, but audiences know what slow-mo looks like, and it doesn't look like reduced gravity. McAbee had the idea to take short little skipping steps instead of normal-sized strides. Combined with high contrast night photography, slow motion, and a cheesy space helmet, the effect works unbelievably well.

McAbee is also a musician, and he incorporates several original rockabilly punk songs into the film. Sometimes the music backs a montage. In one scene it backs up a dance contest. There's even a surprisingly memorable theme song given how hard it is to sing. The film also has a dry, ironic sense of humor that puts the science fiction in the background. If *The American Astronaut* were a more earnest movie, the low-budget sci-fi components would be unconvincing and immature. But as a side dish to the humor and the quiriness, the low-budget sci-fi ethos fits exactly right.

Even if you can't write music or film your own special effects, you can still write a good screenplay. Don't let armies of centaurs or bolts of pure energy intimidate you. Good science fiction can fit in any budget.

Now get out there and write some good movies for those of us who don't live in Cannes.