



# *PROBE 161*

*SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA*

## **PROBE 161**

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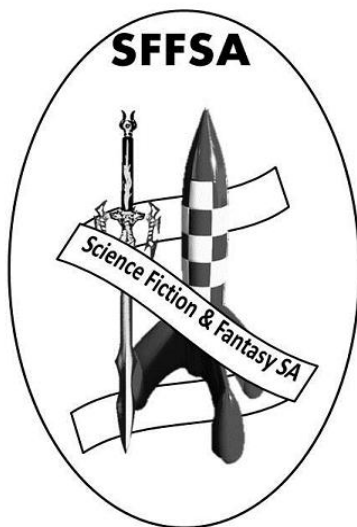
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# PROBE 161

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# Editorial

In this issue I have reprinted from the New York times web site an article written by Isaac Asimov after he visited the World's Fair in Manhattan in 1964 .He gave his ideas of what the World might look like in 50 years' time .He was correct about some things such as video conferences and even phone calls and frozen dinners but wrong about a lot more. We have no isotopic batteries or Moon colonies; no regular automated houses; far fewer robotic resources and no generally obtainable vehicles with robotic brains. And we are well short of an automated world where people have to deal with boredom as all work is done in automated factories.



.Sadly he is correct about world population. He also, rather tongue in cheek, I hope, mentions 2 methods of dealing with this problem. One is to increase the death rate and we are doing that in many ways. But he suggests the for the second idea, that population growth will need to be curbed. And we have seen China, not too successfully, attempt this. Interesting reading.

Jonathan Ball contacted us and told that Raymond E. Feist would be in south Africa for a short time and asked if SFFSA would like to host him. By the time you read this s some of us will have had the great experience of sitting down to dinner with him and being able to discuss his novels and generally getting to know the author a little better. I will do a write up of the evening for the last PROBE of this year.

We have also heard that Grant Kruger, who has been in the USA for a good few years now, will be here to visit. I will try to twist his arm and get him to do an article on his WorldCon experiences and other science fiction adventures. We tend to be rather isolated here in South Africa and there is a whole world of Science fiction and fantasy that we know very little about that I am sure he can enlighten us on.

We tried an experiment in Gauteng and had an advertisement for SFFSA aired on a local radio station(MIXFM) in the month of July. So far as we can see it had had little effect, except for an upswing of hits on our website on the day that Ian Jamieson was interviewed at the start of the campaign. If any of our members have any ideas on how to reach out to those people with similar interests to ours, we would be very pleased to hear your suggestions.

Gail Jamieson

## Nova 2013 –general section - Editors choice

### Unreal city - Kerry Anderson

On the first Monday of every month Mat finds himself in a room like this one: a cement cube with guttering at the edges, running towards a drain. Perhaps it is always the same room. Hard to know within the clinically identical hallways and doors of the building. The chair is always of the same hard, cold metal, leaving red stripes like a branding on his naked flesh. The neuro-tick is plugged into the base of his neck, its metallic claws digging into the soft skin, spewing its perfectly composed combination of neurochemicals directly into his central nervous system. He is here voluntarily of course for his monthly (re)assessment so nothing ties him to the chair. Other than the inconvenience of the cold electrodes positioned strategically around his naked body. There is no discernible reason for this nudity. He suspects it is a further humiliation for the Geologist's son. The tangle of wires reach from the intimate electrodes like lovesick leeches to a metallic desk a meter from where he sits. The city-corps assessor sits at this desk monitoring the responses transmitted from the electrodes. She has not looked up since he was escorted into the room. One hour, he tells himself, it will be about one hour, and he lifts his eyes to the mechanical clock above the head of the assessor. The second hand moves with the slow grace of a three-legged tortoise.

'Where did you travel this month,' she directs the question to the monitor.

'Cube, lab, rat-stop,' he sighs.

'You spent 2 hours and 14 minutes at the ration stop,' this last pronounced deliberately – they hate contractions, 'what were you doing there?'

'By the time I reached the front of the queue there was a shortage of GoodFood(tm). So I had to wait for the next delivery.' He is a model of patient, good, neuro-ticked citizenry.

'Have you heard news of or had any contact with the Geologist?'

He breathes slowly: 'No'.

'Have you heard news of or had any contact with any other member of your family?'

She continues her conversation with the monitor.

'N-n-no,' he stammers, breathing a little heavily.

The assessor notes the readings and waits.

'Dreams .. I dream about her ...', he can't help himself. Breathe in, breathe out .... dreams are evidently not considered a threat according to whatever decision tree she is following. She continues:

'Do you know where the miners are?'

That's easy: 'No'.

'Do you know how the mines were sealed?'

'No'.

'Do you have any knowledge of the substance used to seal the mines?'

'No.' Like everyone else he is partly in awe of and partly afraid of the strange dark rock that engulfs all attempts at further mining activities.

'Do you swear your allegiance to city-corps and renounce all associations with subversive elements?'

'I do,' he croons. Perhaps the neurochem mix was a little strong this time because he is by now ready to swear allegiance to the assessor's city-corps standard issue brown lace-ups. For her part she has not looked up once.

After the assessment, clothed again, and with his cns crashing from the withdrawal of the neuro-tick, he leans against the bland greyness of the city-corps assessment and rehabilitation centre. For a moment, before security comes to shoo him along, he looks up, over the heights of the city-corps walls. His memory of the original city comes in postcard flashes: a dark skyline against a fluorescent sky; lines of colourful washing hanging from balconies; men sprawled under trees in unkempt parks; red roses dropped in the middle of a busy street; a woman leaning over a balcony, waving at them. After the authorities began to accept the end of the mines and all mining activities, the city-corps in its original form was conceived and constructed in months. The corporations had stepped in with strategic plans, PowerPoint presentations and research data to show how civilization and all that entailed could survive without fossil fuel, precious metal and stones. Not all, unfortunately of

course, the numbers showed that populations had to be drastically controlled in order to be able to match supply with demand. And so, the city-corps elected itself, the walls went up and now the supply is managed with the blind efficiency of those who measure success in numbers. News from outside the city-corps – assuming it exists – is not a part of the services provided by the city-corps to its citizens. Outside the city-corps are the heavily protected farms, the WindWaterSolar production facilities, and wasteland. And people. Maybe.

The city-corps security guard positioned outside the entrance to the center sidles up to Mat in an almost comradely fashion. He must be new.

'Hey, look, you can't hang around here. It doesn't look good. Don't you have a job?'

Mat sighs, 'Yes. Scitech intern.'

'Impressive ...' he looks unimpressed, 'I tried to get into the programme. Psych assessment came back with a warning grade.' He smirks, 'better suited to moving people along, I guess.'

Mat forces a half-smile and drags himself off to find his bicycle.

Mat's four colleagues look up as he enters the Lab of Apathy, as he has dubbed it in his mind. His colleagues' disinterest returns as quickly to the compounds on which they are working. They are WindWaterSolartech, intern-grade. He is here because in spite of stellar exam results, his status as son of the Geologist precludes him from the more interesting work on the sealed tunnels. His colleagues are here because they performed poorly or failed some tests. They are passed data from the secured WWStech farms out in the wasteland. They analyse the data, project a few results and pass them along to the WWStech coordinators. Repeat ad infinitum/nauseum. He has been doing this for 7 years. He completes his tasks in the allotted time and heads home.

"Brother, where you been?'

Mat startles awake as Tepo's voice seems to come from the walls. Rubbing his head and yawning, it takes him a few minutes of Tepo's variations on wake up songs to

realise that his friend must have hacked one of the audio-ticks in his cube. He creakily swings his legs over the side of the bed and shuffles to the cube door. 'Tep, what the hell ...it's ... wait let me see ... after 2am ... what are you doing?' asks Mat blearily.

'C'mon buddy! There's live music at the center, let's go, let's go!!!'

In the dim hallway outside Mat's cube, Tepo is still in full geolab gear. He lopes into the room with the ease of familiarity. The reason for his excitement becomes evident as he pulls Mat close as if to embrace him but silently opens his clenched fist between their two bodies. At first Mat thinks he is looking at insects. But their unnatural symmetry alerts him. Mat looks at his friend in alarm. Controlling his voice though he says:

'Give me 5 minutes ...'

The streets are slick and steaming from the nightly wash down. It is the best time to walk as the streets are passably cool. Mat and Tepo slip into the flow of others also heading towards the music. Amid the subdued chatter, it is the most private their conversation will ever get. The city-corps av-ticks are abundantly embedded in all structures.

'I thought you weren't going to mess with the hack-ticks anymore?' In fact, Mat is wondering how Tepo has not yet been crimed.

'I picked up signals from out there, Mat. I have to keep trying. If anyone looks I'm sending data to the remote geo teams.'

Under the glare of the solar street lights, Tepo's face appears more drawn, tense. He was one of the lottery winners. Owing to the necessity for population control, the letter informed him, his family of mother, father and two brothers would not be automatically included in his relocation to the city-corps. However they would be welcome to apply individually in further lotteries until the cutoff date. Tepo survived the city-corps fostering system and they found each other at the technology college, two discordant notes in the city-corps symphony.

'I have a plan, Mats my brother,' but this time the enthusiasm in his voice feels forced.



'Tepo, we should not be talking about this ... you know they always listen ...' Mat begins, but Tepo cuts him off:

'No, this is legit, my friend. I can get a transfer to one of the geolab facilities out there.'

Mat is silent. The facilities out in the wasteland are under frequent attack – they are told. City-corps staff are rotated regularly to prevent security breaches. And for their own sanity. It is said that for every month spent in the wasteland, those returning spend six months in medically-induced comas being pumped full of blisschems. But Tepo desperately wants to find his family. He has never said this to Mat. But Mat was the one who would sit with him when the extrovert, joker Tepo lay on his bed for days paralysed with grief.

Mat changes the subject by telling Tepo about the (re)assessment.

'So what do you do if you get an itch, man ... you know ...' Tepo asks mock-seriously, raising his eyebrows and miming the rest.

'Thanks for planting the thought, dude. Next time I'm going to be obsessing about not itching!' Mat rolls his eyes.

The music center is located in one of the innermost rings of the city-corps. It is an open air space designed to provide light entertainment to the good citizens of the city-corps. The shows are gaudy, ostentatious, the music always sounds about the same. Mat and Tepo ease into the familiar and somewhat reassuring superficiality of the show.

Later they walk back to their cube complexes. More relaxed, Mat feels he can ask: 'Tepo, what if there isn't anything out there?'

Tepo is silent for a few moments, then laughs: 'Are you sure there is anything in here?'

But something hangs between them, a shadow. They embrace before Tepo heads off to the geotech housing and Mat to his scitech intern complex. Tepo sees his friend's melancholy and tries to reassure him:

'Chill, brother. We'll stick together somehow.'

Mat remains unsettled though as he opens the door to his cube. In these early hours of the morning there is only a dim glow from the emergency lights. Not much but it's home, he tells himself as he enters yet another windowless cube. This one is his. Or he has tried to make it so. Next to his bed a pile of abandoned novels: yellowed pages describing squared jawed private eyes and swooning dames, he is allowed them because no one understands why he likes them. On the desk opposite the bed he has carefully laid a few of the more beautiful rocks Tepo has found for him through his work in the geolabs: the gentle pink quartz, the murky amber, the perfect black of the obsidian, the shifting sky of lapis lazuli, bold tigers-eye. As he does every night, he strokes each of them, wondering when or if they will speak to him too. He lies down on the bed and feels sleep curl itself like smoke around his tired limbs.

Beneath his restless eyes are his dreams. He dreams of lying wrapped in blankets around a fire. Next to him, the fingers of her small hand twining themselves around his, Tok, his sister. On either side of them are his mother and father, their bodies warm against the night, gently spooned around him and his sister. They murmur soft words to each other over the heads of their children. He shifts in his sleep and dreams on.

His mother had been an exceptional geologist. Not least because she always accompanied the miners down to the depths she had mapped. She would never send a man where she herself would not go. The miners, sent down every day at the mercy of both men and nature, were superstitious. It was said that if the Geologist was with you, you would be safe, that she could hear the rocks and knew when there was danger. Until the dark rocks. It was a particularly deep dig. Just the Geologist and a few men who trusted her. This time it seems the rocks were silent. The tremor buried them, holding them tight in a terrifying dark for three days before they were found. Only the Geologist heard the story the dark rocks told her and this was the one she passed along to her children.

Mat sleepwalks his way through the next day. That his colleagues make no remarks is depressing evidence that this is no different from any other day. The withdrawal from the neuro-tick, his fear for his friend. Perhaps these make the yearning for his family, ever under the surface, more acute. Perhaps this is why he is uncharacteristically receptive to Tepo's suggestion that evening.

Tepo is inside Mat's cube after choosing to get his attention in a more conventional way, by hammering at his door. He is clear. Mat is going with him to the yolo.

'Mat! You are in danger of becoming the most boring person in city! There was a chick at work who told me she once met someone more boring. She used to work at the morgue,' Tepo cracks himself up, then:

'I'm your friend. I am staging an intervention', he states confidently.

'Sure, Tep. I'll come.' Mat finds himself agreeing.

'You won't regret this ...' says Tepo, grinning.

When Tepo returns later to Mat's cube, he is dressed like an yolo-freak. Power sweats tapering down to sneaks teamed with a hoodie and a non-standard issue T-shirt. Mat, unfamiliar with the requirements of a yolo, has on his faded lab pants, boots, standard issue sweatshirt. Tepo looks at him but evidently decides to leave this battle for another time.

'I brought your ac-tick 'cause I knew you wouldn't have one, dude', he laughs.

Mat has never tried an audiochem-tick but has heard on numerous occasions from Tepo about the intense experience of a self-learning, personalized music system tapped directly into your own auditory system, simultaneously dripping customized chemical happiness directly into the CNS. He takes it from him and tries to look grateful if not happy.

'Thanks, Tep. One day I will be the one to take you somewhere new.'

'Man, you did already. You took me to the land of passed exams!'

That is probably true. That Tepo managed to pass any exam at all was testimony to an incredible capacity to imbibe masses of information the night before an exam. He was consistently on warning for missing classes, tutorials, workshops, whatever the city-corps had dreamed up to keep them going.

The yolo is pretty much exactly as Mat has pictured it. A heaving mass of silent yolo-freaks in the pale yellow gloom of the sodium vapor lit basement. The ac-ticks at the base of the dancers' skulls give off faint and shifting glows like mescaline fireflies. The smell is intense, organic. Mat's first instinct is to leave immediately but Tepo drags him forward to where a group of girls with shaven, dayglo'ed heads are moving in time with their own rhythms, eyes closed with the ecstasy of acolytes. Tepo taps one of them on the shoulder. She opens her eyes and smiles lazily at him. She grabs his hand and they pair off. Mat is left with the other girls, apparently oblivious to his presence. He is not used to the ac-tick. The chemicals are making him anxious and paranoid and the music is a bass guitar-cello combo that he loves for its nihilistic beauty. But which does not make for a party vibe. He turns to leave when she speaks:

'Hi.'

It's fairly mundane as greetings go but he doesn't expect to hear her through the ac-tick. He scans the basement around him and it is still silently heaving with blissed-out yolo-freaks. His playlist resumes but he feels a hand on his shoulder. Spinning around he sees her:

'Follow me,' she transmits, her metallic lensed eyes flicking to the edge of the room. She turns and walks, clearly not anticipating a refusal from him. And she is not wrong. He finds himself pushing and shoving his way clumsily in pursuit of her petite form. She looks like some sort of gothic guerilla. Guerilla-goth girl is evidently well connected to get away with such a marked deviation from standard issue attire. She moves gracefully through the crowd to a graffiti'ed door at the edge of the room. She pushes the door open. The room is an abandoned black hole. Windowless, airless and devoid of any attempt at furnishing, it has been painted a number of colours over the years, the last of which is a metallic black – some time back. Two enormous beanbags dominate the room. Romantic. From her pocket she produces a tick-clip and smoothly removes first Mat's ac-tick and then her own. Hers is an impressive example with two extra curling tendrils from the head. Mat assumes this is the new tech which allowed her to communicate with him. He is curious in spite of the fear

now edging its way into his sightline. Producing a lighter from her combat pants she burns them both. He cannot tell if the gesture is meant to reassure or intimidate him. 'I know who you are Mat. I've been passing your friend, Tepo, hack-ticks for about a year now.'

Straight to the point.

'He's not what you think', she adds, thoughtfully.

'What do you mean?' he asks eventually, unsure. She continues:

'Tepo sold out the first time he was caught trying to leave the city-corps. We've been trying to figure you out, Mat. And Tepo was our link. But he has not been quite as forthcoming as we had hoped.'

Her delivery is calm but something is bothering her because her middle finger flicks against her thumb in a gesture that is partway between irritability and anxiety.

'What could you possibly want with me that has not already been reviewed, reported on, analyzed and assessed over the past 10 years?' the slight tremor in his voice betrays his anger. He pushes the thoughts of Tepo to the back of his head. Later.

The door opens and closes behind him but before he can turn the blow catches the back of his head. His last thought is that he has just become the hero in one of his battered noir fictions.

Later, there is a voice whispering urgently in his ear.

'Mat, come on we gotta shift.'

Mat groggily identifies Tepo's voice. He lifts his head but the excruciating pain of the lump at the back of his head pulses angrily.

'Tepo ...what? ...' he tries to ask but Tepo cuts him off:

'Mat. I'm sorry I had to hit you man. It was the only way. She's gone to fetch her security. She had to think I was with her. We can talk later but now you **MUST COME** with me!'

Shakily Mat stands and grab Tepo's proffered arm for support. They make for the metallic spiral staircase just ahead. The stairs are dingy and dark but they lead upward and are unmanned. Snakelike, through the dancers they sense rather than see the movement towards them. But they are up and out, running in the thick heat

of the night air. The words of the guerilla-goth girl bounce around Mat's throbbing head: 'he is not what you think ...'

They briefly stop to orient themselves. They are at the back of the worker-grade cube blocks in an outer ring of the city-corps. They can either continue through the back streets into the illegal night markets or move towards the better lit main thorough-fares which will lead them towards the centre. Without speaking they both decide to take their chances with the seedier side of the city-corps.

They slow as they reach the first of the paraffin-lit stalls. The vendors eye them warily at first, ready to fold up the makeshift stalls and disappear into one of the narrow streets leading to the service lines that run around the city-corps walls. Apparently low-risk, Mat and Tepo are then ignored. Mat eyes some of the strange artefacts on display with inadvertent curiosity. Mostly non-technological, they represent the small luxuries of the life before the city-corps: a soft woolen jumper, a cotton baby blanket, a paper-printed book of some ancient philosophy, the light-blue blown glass of ornately sculpted wine glasses, a small wooden dog on wheels. The city-corps world is the one that survived. The world of these artefacts is the one of chaos and unexpected beauty, of emotion and injustice and tragedy and loss and hope.

In the gloom are the shapes of other market goers. Eyes downcast, the conversations are muted. Mat and Tepo have the sense of moving in a silent shadow puppet show.

'Tepo...'

'Mat...'

Their voices collide as they each try to regain a sense of the other.

'You first, Mats. I guess the ...' he trails off, at a loss for how to describe recent events.

'Tepo, why did that girl tell me you are not what I think?'

Tepo looks at him, alarmed.

'Mats, that is crazy! You know me better than anyone!'

'Tepo, she told me a story about you being blackmailed into feeding them information about me.' Mat cannot look at Tepo as he recounts the conversation with the guerilla-goth girl.

Tepo does not deny the truth of what she says but he seems relieved as he offers his side of the story: 'It is true that they caught me. Come let's sit here.'

They are at a fragrant stall with large soft cushions positioned on the ground around an ornate metal container resting on a small wood fire. The walnut-faced stall-keeper shifts his robes to the side as he kneels to open the lid of the container to stir the tea within. Silently and deliberately he pours them each a cup. Tepo says something to him in a language Mat does not recognise and the man moves away.

'I had just started working as a geotech,' Tepo begins, 'The more I agitated for a position on a remote geolab, the more they clamped down on my movements. Until one day I decided to stow away in one of the shipments to a geolab about 200km outside of the city-corps. I didn't even make the cable car before they found me. It was stupid. But I was desperate!'

Mat nods but does not interrupt. He knows this desperation well.

'I was given a choice: chemical mind-wipe or inform on you. I said I would inform on you thinking I could just feed them irrelevant stuff and they would leave me alone. And frankly it was easy because you don't know anything. Exactly what you have always told them! But somehow that wasn't enough. I think they are also desperate and you are one of their last hopes for figuring out the dark rock ...'

He pauses and now his voice is choked and tight:

'But there is more, Mat. I know where Tok is. That girl was working for her.'

Through the lingering pain in his head, Tepo's words hit Mat like a second blow.

Mat has leaned forward to grab Tepo's arm, his voice is a hiss as he asks: 'Why? What is Tok doing? Where is she?'

'Ow man,' complains Tepo, 'I don't know exactly what she's doing. I just overheard a conversation once .... Mat maybe we should just hand ourselves in? She's your sister surely she ....'

But Mat has not seen or heard from his sister in more than a decade. How could he possibly know what the grown up Tok is like? Or what she has been through?

Mat finishes his tea then stands, offering his hand to his friend.

'Come, take me to her.'

'I ... I ... I can only get you in the building. That's all ... ' Tepo stammers, still afraid but relieved that Mat still appears to accept him.

Mat and Tepo make their way back to the lit streets of the inner city-corps rings. That they are not stopped at any point by the city-corps security they pass is not reassuring. They simply have an increased sense of moving through a spider's web, lured in a direction and to a fate they probably cannot control.

When they eventually reach the building Tepo indicates as Tok's, it is dawn. The building has the well-constructed look and location of ranking officialdom. Mat wonders again how he could have been living all along in the same city as his sister, her moving up the ranks at a pace in stark contrast to his own.

Both Tepo and Mat know they do not have much time. They will be stopped, the question is simply how soon. As they walk, Tepo reaches into his pocket, swiftly before Mat can object, he passes the hack-tick to his friend. .

'Keep this on you. If ... if I can get to a remote posting ... if you can get out. I can find you with this. I still have something for them,' he shakes his head as Mat tries to question him, 'I can't tell you now. But it may also keep you safe. Trust me my friend. Please.'

Mat is shaking with sorrow. With anger. But not towards his friend. Today he knows that his life will change again and he is scraped raw from all the goodbyes unsaid. Taking the hack-tick, he nods towards his friend, turns and walks towards the building.

At the entrance he says her name. Easily, far too easily, he knows, they allow him entry and accompany him to a waiting area while they fetch her.

What he remembers about his sister is this: when he looked at her, she became point and center point; the noise and chaos around them would recede until there



was only her. It is the same now. But her eyes are still. They do not reach out to him. Instead she sits down heavily next to him.

'You were always stubborn, Mat,' she says quietly, looking straight ahead.

Her voice offers no clues to the little girl that he remembers.

'.... what? Tok. Have you known all along where I was?' He knows the answer but must nonetheless ask the question.

'Yes, I knew. It was part of my training. Shedding attachments.'

At this last statement, she looks at him. His twin. He sees anew the perfection of her skull, the long thin limbs that mirror his own, but with some indefinable quality of grace. Mat feels weary.

'How could you Tok? They tore our family, other families, apart? The interrogations, the camps and then the disappearances? How could you just forget all that?'

'Because it was HER fault! She did this to us! When all mining activity was forced to such an abrupt end, with no one left around to provide any explanation, the ability of governments to provide services for their people was severely compromised.'

Mat's look apparently says enough.

'Yes, so the provision of services was always imperfect. At best. But the capacity was there. Without the fossil fuels, we had to rely on wind-water-solar power.

Without the precious metals, currencies became meaningless. The city-corps was a solution that could save some. We would never have been able to save all ...'

'Tok. Are you saying they were justified?' Mat interrupts her, 'It was not just the mining families that suffered. There were forced removals, sterilisations, maybe even exterminations ... there were horrors and atrocities committed by the same people who now say they protect us!'

Mat is aware that he is crossing a line, that by finally admitting his feelings, he can never go back.

'Mat, it was a crisis. In a crisis the needs of the individual must be outweighed by the needs of the collective. Every act was an act of survival. There were too many. They had to find ways of figuring out how many people could be supported and then ensuring that only that number were accommodated. What was the alternative?'

She has regained her control, her calm.

'Tok, there are always alternatives. The problem is that the alternatives required a devolution of power. And where power is devolved it is diluted. That didn't suit the corporations. And that was always the problem with the city-corps solution: it created a society in which the rich and powerful could feel comfortable. You know that is exactly what our mother hated the most.'

'Yes it is true,' sighs Tok, 'But her solution was just as brutal. Families left behind to face the music in the interests of some greater principle? The miners and our mother must have known what was happening! And they let it happen.'

They are both silent.

'What is it that you ... they ... want from me?' he asks.

'You have the key. They thought that I would know what you know. But they misjudged the perfection of the twin connection. There is something that she told us that holds the answer. I need you to think, to tell me what it is.'

'Why would I do that ... assuming I even know anything?' asks Mat.

'Come with me ...' she says by way of response.

Tok stands, taking Mat by the elbow, she leads him towards the bank of hydraulic lifts at the back of the building. He notes the appearance of two burly city-corps security guards who, obeying silent commands, follow them. They travel in the lifts to the skydome at the top of the building. In front of them now lies one of the skywalks used by city-corps officials to move around the city. This one is heavily guarded and it becomes clear why as they are driven to the city-corps wall, to the site of one of the cable cars.

Emerging from the small solar-vehicle, Mat walks towards the clear glass of the cable car station. He is at the very edge of the world he now knows. The drop from the walls is dizzying and Mat find that he has reached out to his twin to steady himself. What he sees is a chemically seared wasteland, the first line of defence of the city-corps. Stretching in parallel lines to the horizon are the cable cars that are the only link from the city-corps to wasteland.

'Look. Look at what she left us. This is the legacy of her dark rock.'

Tok gestures towards the seared landscape.

'Actually that is what city-corps did. Under whatever justification.' says Mat, without malice. They both recognise the impasse.

'Tok, do you remember the story of the dark rocks? The story that she told us in the days after she and the other miners had been found, when she began speaking again?' asks Mat, softly touching his twin's arm.

She turns to him, her eyes haunted:

'I remember. She sat with her hands on her knees as she spoke. Her eyes looked sunken in her skull. I was afraid of her. She looked like a dead woman.'

'She said she had been cradled by the rock, terrified at first by the narrowness of the space in which she found herself. Listening for the others but only hearing her own breath.' Mat continues. 'Sbe said she found herself weeping. She spoke to the rocks and told them about all the things she longed for: his heart beating next to hers, our small bodies in her arms, ...'

He falls silent.

'Do you remember what happened next, Tok?'

'She fell asleep and she dreamed.' she responds, softly.

'Well, maybe she fell asleep and dreamed. Maybe the dark rock really did speak to her. She said it showed her the memories of all the men and boys who had died in the dark, weeping for the soft kiss of lovers, weeping for the smell of baby skin, weeping for the companionship of friends, all lost to the world of humankind. But not to the world of the dark rock ... ', Mat trails off, then:

'Tell me about the dark rock. What you know?'

Tok sighs.

'We will go there now. Come see for yourself.'

The ever present security help them both into the cable car. Only space for two. Mat realises that she is risking a lot. Either she trusts him or she has no reason to fear him. Or she is desperate.

With a lurch, the cable car leaves the station, into the desolation.

When finally they disembark, they are in a spot lit cave, alone. Judging from the condensation on the cave walls, Mat assumes they are many meters underground. The two of them stand facing the dark rock. Mercurial black, the wall appears to ripple and shift, a deep sea scape. He has heard it said that geolab technicians spending many weeks underground in these locations claim to see shapes moving in the rock. Their symptoms are soon remedied when they arrive back in the city-corps. Fascinated, he moves closer, only to find the rock harden into dark mirror. The wave and the particle. Never had the human grasp of science been so dramatically confronted with its limitations: before him lay a portion of the perfect large-scale quantum object. It should not exist.

Tok is standing slightly behind him, she says:

'They tried blasting, drilling, chemical treatments. All with the same effect ... nothing.'

She approaches the rock and touches it, gently. And again, and again, in different places. In each instance the area under her hand glistens like obsidian. Solid.

'The rest of the time it ripples and flows like water, sometimes mirroring movement, sometimes with its own rhythms. It is quite beautiful really.'

Tok speaks with the frustrated obsession of an unrequited love.

Mat bows his head. How could he not have seen it? The infinite worlds that lie within the dark rock. Created from the dreams of men trapped and lost far underground. Every dream a strand creating its own set of consequences, its own world. One of the strands led here, to this world, the disappearance of the miners, the abrupt end of all mining, the city-corps, his own half life, the estrangement of his twin.

He turns now to look at his twin. In her eyes he sees her struggle against the understanding. His sigh echoes hers as he takes her hand. They both need a new plan now. As they set off, he finds himself hoping that there is some other world within all of these possible worlds where humankind has acted with compassion and hope. Perhaps creating something better.

# Visit to the World's Fair of 2014 By ISAAC ASIMOV

## August 16, 1964

Reprinted from New York Times On theWeb

The New York World's Fair of 1964 is dedicated to "Peace Through Understanding." Its glimpses of the world of tomorrow rule out thermonuclear warfare. And why not? If a thermonuclear war takes place, the future will not be worth discussing. So let the missiles slumber eternally on their pads and let us observe what may come in the non-atomized world of the future.

What is to come, through the fair's eyes at least, is wonderful. The direction in which man is traveling is viewed with buoyant hope, nowhere more so than at the General Electric pavilion. There the audience whirls through four scenes, each populated by cheerful, lifelike dummies that move and talk with a facility that, inside of a minute and a half, convinces you they are alive.

The scenes set in or about 1900, 1920, 1940 and 1960, show the advances of electrical appliances and the changes they are bringing to living. I enjoyed it hugely and only regretted that they had not carried the scenes into the future. What will life be like, say, in 2014 A.D., 50 years from now? What will the World's Fair of 2014 be like?

I don't know, but I can guess.



One thought that occurs to me is that men will continue to withdraw from nature in order to create an environment that will suit them better. By 2014, electroluminescent

panels will be in common use. Ceilings and walls will glow softly, and in a variety of colors that will change at the touch of a push button.

Windows need be no more than an archaic touch, and even when present will be polarized to block out the harsh sunlight. The degree of opacity of the glass may even be made to alter automatically in accordance with the intensity of the light falling upon it.

There is an underground house at the fair which is a sign of the future. If its windows are not polarized, they can nevertheless alter the "scenery" by changes in lighting. Suburban houses underground, with easily controlled temperature, free from the vicissitudes of weather, with air cleaned and light controlled, should be fairly common. At the New York World's Fair of 1939, General Motors' "Futurama" may well display vistas of underground cities complete with light- forced vegetable gardens. The surface, G.M. will argue, will be given over to large-scale agriculture, grazing and parklands, with less space wasted on actual human occupancy.

Gadgetry will continue to relieve mankind of tedious jobs. Kitchen units will be devised that will prepare "automeals," heating water and converting it to coffee; toasting bread; frying, poaching or scrambling eggs, grilling bacon, and so on. Breakfasts will be "ordered" the night before to be ready by a specified hour the next morning. Complete lunches and dinners, with the food semi prepared, will be stored in the freezer until ready for processing. I suspect, though, that even in 1939 it will still be advisable to have a small corner in the kitchen unit where the more individual meals can be prepared by hand, especially when company is coming.

Robots will neither be common nor very good in 1939, but they will be in existence. The I.B.M. exhibit at the present fair has no robots but it is dedicated to computers, which are shown in all their amazing complexity, notably in the task of translating Russian into English. If machines are that smart today, what may not be in the works 50 years hence? It will be such computers, much miniaturized, that will serve as the "brains" of robots. In fact, the I.B.M. building at the 1939 World's Fair may have, as one of its prime exhibits, a robot housemaid\*large, clumsy, slow- moving but capable of general picking-up, arranging, cleaning and manipulation of various appliances. It will undoubtedly amuse the fairgoers to scatter debris over the floor in order to see the robot lumberingly remove it and classify it into "throw away" and "set aside." (Robots for gardening work will also have made their appearance.)

General Electric at the 1939 World's Fair will be showing 3-D movies of its "Robot of the Future," neat and streamlined, its cleaning appliances built in and performing all tasks briskly. (There will be a three-hour wait in line to see the film, for some things never change.)

The appliances of 1939 will have no electric cords, of course, for they will be powered by long- lived batteries running on radioisotopes. The isotopes will not be expensive for they will be by- products of the fission-power plants which, by 1939, will be supplying well over half the power needs of humanity. But once the isotope

batteries are used up they will be disposed of only through authorized agents of the manufacturer.

And experimental fusion-power plant or two will already exist in 2014. (Even today, a small but genuine fusion explosion is demonstrated at frequent intervals in the G.E. exhibit at the 1964 fair.) Large solar-power stations will also be in operation in a number of desert and semi-desert areas -- Arizona, the Negev, Kazakhstan. In the more crowded, but cloudy and smoggy areas, solar power will be less practical. An exhibit at the 2014 fair will show models of power stations in space, collecting sunlight by means of huge parabolic focusing devices and radiating the energy thus collected down to earth.

The world of 50 years hence will have shrunk further. At the 1964 fair, the G.M. exhibit depicts, among other things, "road-building factories" in the tropics and, closer to home, crowded highways along which long buses move on special central lanes. There is every likelihood that highways at least in the more advanced sections of the world\*will have passed their peak in 2014; there will be increasing emphasis on transportation that makes the least possible contact with the surface. There will be aircraft, of course, but even ground travel will increasingly take to the air\*a foot or two off the ground. Visitors to the 1964 fair can travel there in an "aquafoil," which lifts itself on four stilts and skims over the water with a minimum of friction. This is surely a stop-gap. By 2014 the four stilts will have been replaced by four jets of compressed air so that the vehicle will make no contact with either liquid or solid surfaces.

Jets of compressed air will also lift land vehicles off the highways, which, among other things, will minimize paving problems. Smooth earth or level lawns will do as well as pavements. Bridges will also be of less importance, since cars will be capable of crossing water on their jets, though local ordinances will discourage the practice.

Much effort will be put into the designing of vehicles with "Robot-brains"\*vehicles that can be set for particular destinations and that will then proceed there without interference by the slow reflexes of a human driver. I suspect one of the major attractions of the 2014 fair will be rides on small roboticized cars which will maneuver in crowds at the two-foot level, neatly and automatically avoiding each other.

For short-range travel, moving sidewalks (with benches on either side, standing room in the center) will be making their appearance in downtown sections. They will be raised above the traffic. Traffic will continue (on several levels in some places) only because all parking will be off-street and because at least 80 per cent of truck deliveries will be to certain fixed centers at the city's rim. Compressed air tubes will carry goods and materials over local stretches, and the switching devices that will place specific shipments in specific destinations will be one of the city's marvels.

Communications will become sight-sound and you will see as well as hear the person you telephone. The screen can be used not only to see the people you call but also for studying documents and photographs and reading passages from books.

Synchronous satellites, hovering in space will make it possible for you to direct-dial any spot on earth, including the weather stations in Antarctica (shown in chill splendor as part of the '64 General Motors exhibit).

For that matter, you will be able to reach someone at the moon colonies, concerning which General Motors puts on a display of impressive vehicles (in model form) with large soft tires\*intended to negotiate the uneven terrain that may exist on our natural satellite.

Any number of simultaneous conversations between earth and moon can be handled by modulated laser beams, which are easy to manipulate in space. On earth, however, laser beams will have to be led through plastic pipes, to avoid material and atmospheric interference. Engineers will still be playing with that problem in 2014.

Conversations with the moon will be a trifle uncomfortable, but the way, in that 2.5 seconds must elapse between statement and answer (it takes light that long to make the round trip). Similar conversations with Mars will experience a 3.5-minute delay even when Mars is at its closest. However, by 2014, only unmanned ships will have landed on Mars, though a manned expedition will be in the works and in the 2014 Futurama will show a model of an elaborate Martian colony.

As for television, wall screens will have replaced the ordinary set; but transparent cubes will be making their appearance in which three-dimensional viewing will be possible. In fact, one popular exhibit at the 2014 World's Fair will be such a 3-D TV, built life-size, in which ballet performances will be seen. The cube will slowly revolve for viewing from all angles.

One can go on indefinitely in this happy extrapolation, but all is not rosy.

As I stood in line waiting to get into the General Electric exhibit at the 1964 fair, I found myself staring at Equitable Life's grim sign blinking out the population of the United States, with the number (over 191,000,000) increasing by 1 every 11 seconds. During the interval which I spent inside the G.E. pavilion, the American population had increased by nearly 300 and the world's population by 6,000.

In 2014, there is every likelihood that the world population will be 6,500,000,000 and the population of the United States will be 350,000,000. Boston-to-Washington, the most crowded area of its size on the earth, will have become a single city with a population of over 40,000,000.

Population pressure will force increasing penetration of desert and polar areas. Most surprising and, in some ways, heartening, 2014 will see a good beginning made in the colonization of the continental shelves. Underwater housing will have its attractions to those who like water sports, and will undoubtedly encourage the more efficient exploitation of ocean resources, both food and mineral. General Motors shows, in its 1964 exhibit, the model of an underwater hotel of what might be called mouth-watering luxury. The 2014 World's Fair will have exhibits showing cities in the



deep sea with bathyscaphe liners carrying men and supplies across and into the abyss.

Ordinary agriculture will keep up with great difficulty and there will be "farms" turning to the more efficient micro-organisms. Processed yeast and algae products will be available in a variety of flavors. The 2014 fair will feature an Algae Bar at which "mock-turkey" and "pseudosteak" will be served. It won't be bad at all (if you can dig up those premium prices), but there will be considerable psychological resistance to such an innovation.

Although technology will still keep up with population through 2014, it will be only through a supreme effort and with but partial success. Not all the world's population will enjoy the gadgetry world of the future to the full. A larger portion than today will be deprived and although they may be better off, materially, than today, they will be further behind when compared with the advanced portions of the world. They will have moved backward, relatively.

Nor can technology continue to match population growth if that remains unchecked. Consider Manhattan of 1964, which has a population density of 80,000 per square mile at night and of over 100,000 per square mile during the working day. If the whole earth, including the Sahara, the Himalayan Mountain peaks, Greenland, Antarctica and every square mile of the ocean bottom, to the deepest abyss, were as packed as Manhattan at noon, surely you would agree that no way to support such a population (let alone make it comfortable) was conceivable. In fact, support would fail long before the World-Manhattan was reached.

Well, the earth's population is now about 3,000,000,000 and is doubling every 40 years. If this rate of doubling goes unchecked, then a World-Manhattan is coming in just 500 years. All earth will be a single choked Manhattan by A.D. 2450 and society will collapse long before that!

There are only two general ways of preventing this: (1) raise the death rate; (2) lower the birth rate. Undoubtedly, the world of A>D. 2014 will have agreed on the latter method. Indeed, the increasing use of mechanical devices to replace failing hearts and kidneys, and repair stiffening arteries and breaking nerves will have cut the death rate still further and have lifted the life expectancy in some parts of the world to age 85.

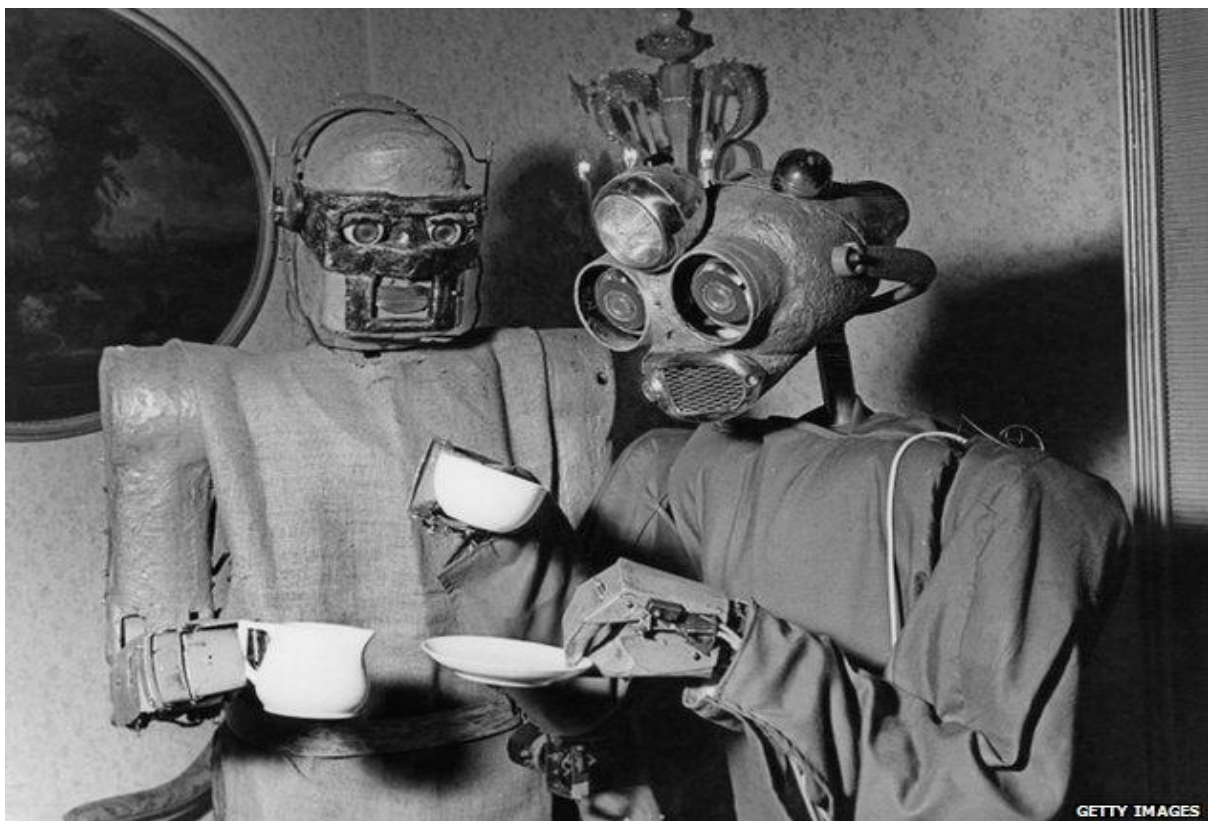
There will, therefore, be a worldwide propaganda drive in favor of birth control by rational and humane methods and, by 2014, it will undoubtedly have taken serious effect. The rate of increase of population will have slackened\*but, I suspect, not sufficiently.

One of the more serious exhibits at the 2014 World's Fair, accordingly, will be a series of lectures, movies and documentary material at the World Population Control Center (adults only; special showings for teen-agers).

The situation will have been made the more serious by the advances of automation. The world of A.D. 2014 will have few routine jobs that cannot be done better by some machine than by any human being. Mankind will therefore have become largely a race of machine tenders. Schools will have to be oriented in this direction. Part of the General Electric exhibit today consists of a school of the future in which such present realities as closed-circuit TV and programmed tapes aid the teaching process. It is not only the techniques of teaching that will advance, however, but also the subject matter that will change. All the high-school students will be taught the fundamentals of computer technology will become proficient in binary arithmetic and will be trained to perfection in the use of the computer languages that will have developed out of those like the contemporary "Fortran" (from "formula translation").

Even so, mankind will suffer badly from the disease of boredom, a disease spreading more widely each year and growing in intensity. This will have serious mental, emotional and sociological consequences, and I dare say that psychiatry will be far and away the most important medical specialty in 2014. The lucky few who can be involved in creative work of any sort will be the true elite of mankind, for they alone will do more than serve a machine.

Indeed, the most somber speculation I can make about A.D. 2014 is that in a society of enforced leisure, the most glorious single word in the vocabulary will have become work!



## Nova 2013 Finalist SA Section

### The Last Dreamseer - Andre Clarke

It sat upon the nexus of worlds, that old hotel.

It had been built in the thirties, yet looked as if it had simply been there forever; like a pockmark on the earth since its birth. Even though abandoned for decades, time hadn't dimmed its grandeur nor its majesty, and certainly not the unease the old structure inspired.

Even during its heyday as one of the premiere hotels of the Eastern Cape (way back before the Eastern Cape was officially even recognised as its own province), the hotel had an alarming and palpable sense of sentience - and an unpleasant sentience at that; as if it had simply endured its guests and the people who worked there such as a dog might endure the fleas invading its flesh.

And that was before the incidents. The sightings. The strange things at night, things half glimpsed in mirrors, dark corridors, and in the once lush and well-manicured gardens.

Sightings of things that were not human.

The building had long since fallen into disrepair and had been condemned (there never was a more appropriate word for a building) for ages, but its sinister reputation was hardly diminished. Quite the contrary in fact; empty and desolate the hotel gained even more notoriety. Occasionally the odd fool would spend a night alone in one of its decayed rooms or cold corridors on a dare or a gamble, and usually most would claim not much more than a simple good night's sleep. And vivid dreams.

There were always the dreams.

And unexplained marks upon their bodies, which could sometimes be reasoned away by the discomfort of sleeping rough. . . but not always.

Now, creepers and vines and weeds of all kinds caressed its stern walls and weathered edges, but even the wilderness reclaiming the old building couldn't erase the sense of the hotel allowing the plants to encroach. It sat there in that deep and

twisted valley, framed by the aloe strewn hills surrounding it; endlessly patient and endlessly watchful, like a spider waiting in its web. Waiting for people to come; for someone to draw near riverbanks upon which it sat. For someone to reawaken the ancient thing that dwelled within its dusty corridors and grand old rooms like a tumour, spreading its darkness like a disease throughout the entire structure. For there are older things in Africa and the world than just man and her beasts.

\*

It had been allowed to lie, stagnant and empty in the disquieting silence of the valley like a monolithic tombstone in an untended graveyard. Even squatters stayed well clear of the building and the shadows of its old statues.

The hotel had three stories and was almost a solid rectangular slab in shape. It was now a dirty white in colour, like the hue of maggots. It had never been renovated nor demolished.

Although there were many reasons for that; several bankruptcies, municipal bungling, red tape bureaucracy and confusion over ownership, but through it all the hotel simply sat there intact, decaying at a uncannily slow rate. Currently nobody owned the hotel. Nobody had ever owned the hotel. From the first bricks laid for its foundation the hotel had owned itself, sitting as it did upon the nexus of worlds; the Gate.

\*

Andile Nomnganga coughed violently, sending wracking spasms through his entire body. The cancer that had started in his stomach had spread so rapidly it had shocked even his doctors, although he was already an old man when it had begun. He was grateful he had been spared so far; that he had enough life for one last quest. The elderly man leaned heavily on his old walking cane, once merely a dignified prop but now an essential item for his advanced age. He drew in great breaths of chilly air and immediately felt invigorated.

Andile Nomnganga turned to face his adversary.

The hotel sat squat and pale, half hidden by the trees that had been allowed to grow

unchecked. There was no sense of malice nor hostility from the hotel, but Andile knew it was inside he'd have to face the thing that didn't belong in this world. 'Oupa Andy' he was often called, and he rather enjoyed the nickname, but he had another title too, making him something of a local legend.

Sangoma. A name which earned him both respect and scorn, often in equal measures.

White people regarded him as a curiosity, while some of the younger black kids with their love of hip hop and hazy dreams of future prosperity regarded him as a throwback to more superstitious times. He didn't really mind either, because he had his master's degree in sociology to negate being a one dimensional rural cliché. In fact, he had been Rhodes University's first black professor, decades ago now and the sangoma reputation had only really gained credence after his retirement. Still, it was the other thing he was, the thing nobody knew, not even his sons nor his daughter - not even his beloved Miriam, his wife of almost fifty years that had only recently passed away. Only the Crazy Old Lady knew Andile's great secret, and she wasn't human. Andile Nomnganga was something far more than a sangoma and certainly something far more than a mere retired professor.

Oupa Andy was something like the Crazy Old Lady, in that he was more than simply human.

Andile Nomnganga was a Dreamseer, and as far as he knew - he was the last one. He who crosses without the Gate.

Now, Oupa Andy was standing in front of the old hotel with all of its macabre history and unpleasant reputation, to stop an evil he himself didn't entirely understand.

\*

Oh, he had thrown the Bones over and over but had only achieved frustrating results.

Whether these Omens were rendered vague because of the cancer or from some other reason, Oupa Andy was unsure and he had even approached the Crazy Old Lady. The unnerving old creature had warned him not to interfere directly with the hotel and the secrets it harboured. The Crazy Old Lady gave him the creeps, and he hated looking at the little saucer that sat on the tattered stool nearby her fireplace.

However, he had still seen enough to know evil was approaching tonight just as winter itself was approaching.

Just as the storm is approaching, Oupa thought to himself as he stared at the clouds lying pendulous and heavy in the evening sky.

The evil would no doubt use the hotel as its means to cross over; through the Gate that had festered and rotted within its filth caked walls, weakening enough for anything to force its way through.

\*

Oupa Andy shuffled as fast as he could over the weed polluted and rubble strewn tarmac.

He found it darkly funny that even as the cancer was killing him quicker than medicine could understand, he felt just fine as long as he wasn't in the throttling grip of coughing fits. Nevertheless, the doctors remained perplexed by the aggression of the tumours and had reassured him as best as they could in their spluttering, jargon-littered manner.

But Oupa knew best. The disease had come so quickly and had spread so rapidly because the cancer didn't want him to succeed tonight.

But Oupa Andy was determined to succeed, no matter what was about to cross the Gate.

He had already accepted that it might not only be the last night he used his powers, it might also be the last night of his long life.

He entered what was once the hotel's lobby, ancient rotted wood still in place in parts of the doorway.

The once plush lobby was filthy, as decayed and diseased as Oupa Andy's own innards.

Oupa remembered well how it had once looked, as he had worked in the hotel as a teenager in the forties, barely more than a boy before his own country's laws became ever more oppressive.

The hotel had been lovely, but even then it had harboured something peculiar. The

Gateway was wrong, unnatural, and it had been originally opened by something with dark intent, millennia ago. Evil had seeped unchecked into every part of the hotel like an oil spill.

Now a dying old man was going to do his best to close the befouled Gate once and for all.

Oupa had been inside the hotel countless times before, when the building was still in the glamorous throes of its former glory as well as after it had fallen into its current state of disrepair and abandonment; but he particularly hated coming here after it had closed.

There were always other beings here, in the hotel where the walls between worlds was thin. Still, Oupa was always alone. His friends occasionally visited, the people that lived just below our own mundane perception of reality, but when inside the hotel Oupa was on his own. Oupa Andy sure could use their help now; those strange friends of his that had found

their way into so much of Earth's folklore and myths and legends; the immortal, beautiful Sidhe, the proud Monengai, the mighty Dingwe and the crafty, sneaky Mbulu, whose tails never changed shape regardless of the forms they transformed into. All of them servants of the One, all Trueborn.

But there were other things too, dark things that used the decayed Gate. Things like the hairy, gibbering things with their long tails like whips, and the magic stones that rendered them almost invisible as they clawed the throats of their victims. Other things also, like the evil horrors known the world over as goblins and trolls. All soulless, all evil. All these things existed, Elsewhere.

And so did the darkest of all the soulless ones.

The tikdoshe.

And tonight, something was about to cross the Gate, the Dreamgate, and seed its evil plan as the storm clouds gathered above the twisted old hotel.

\*

Oupa Andy mused over the lack of signs of recent human presence and shuffled his way to the stairwell. Despite being so close to Rhodes University and the beach being a mere fifteen minutes' walk away, people avoided the place. Even the

shattered Castle and Black Label bottles and suspicious-looking stompies were minimal considering the abandoned building was an ideal party venue, especially with the huge summer events launched annually elsewhere in the little resort town. There was likewise no evidence of fire, but there may as well have been considering how black and filthy the interior of the hotel was.

Oupa Andy had to stop once more, as a milder fit of coughing overcame his thin body.

He noticed an ancient used condom lying near the foot of the stairs like the discarded cocoon of some large and loathsome insect. He shook his head. Indulging in human pleasures which required the use of such items was a bad idea here. Something could have been inadvertently alerted.

Likewise, the lack of signs of animal habitation was equally strange; no furtive rustling, no bird or bat guano, unusually few dead insects, and significantly - no spider webs. In Africa the One was often symbolised by the spider, and of course all servants of the One were the ultimate enemy of the soulless.

The hotel occupied the space between worlds, and the Gate had been left open far too long. Now that the hotel no longer needed to tolerate the servants and guests who once crept through its rooms and halls like parasites in its bowels, the old building ensured invading its darkened interior was somehow uncomfortable for all living things.

\*

Oupa was feeling sicker than ever. As he clutched his chest, a sharp pain like broken glass in his intestines made him double up and yelp in pain.

I have walked the entire hotel, checked almost every room. I sense nothing.

Had he been wrong?

He had walked the hotel for almost two hours, armed with nothing more than his cane

and a battered old torch. Had his own senses failed him, had the disease finally claimed his Dreamseer abilities? Had he misinterpreted the Bones? It wouldn't have been the first time, but tonight he didn't have the luxury of mistakes. Andile



Nomnganga, who once could manipulate the winds and elements of Magick as easily as a skilled potter could clay, could barely See tonight.

He was the last Dreamseer and he was dying and weak - but he had to use Magick one more time. He its powers rise up within him like a wave before it crashes upon the shore. A blue glow surrounded him as he shed his human skin momentarily, his beautiful,translucent Dreamseer flesh visible for the briefest of moments.

Nonetheless, the effort made him cough and choke. Still, Oupa Andy Saw.

Evil was coming, and it was coming from the Gate in the cellar.

So he had to go down to the cellar again. But what is going to be there?

Almost as if in answer, the storm finally began pounding on the exterior of the hotel, and he knew.

There is a tikdoshe coming.

\*

The woman in the dim and cozy little room was severe looking, thin and very tall. Her charcoal hair was done up in a no nonsense bun. She wore a dress that may have been fashionable a century previously but now only looked creepy as hell. It was as if she were a specter from a previous age, which she was in a way; but she was far older than a mere century or two.

However, far creepier than her attire and stiff manner was the fact that she had no eyes, only plain skin where the organs should have been. The missing pair of eyes sat in an antique tea saucer nearby, an incongruous item of crockery for the gruesome objects it held.

The woman gasped and held her long fingered hand theatrically to her throat. She smelled lavender, and the eyes in their little saucer saw flies.

Her premonitions had been correct.

Evil had crossed the Gate once more and good old Oupa Andy wasn't properly prepared.

The thing crossing over was bad enough, but more significantly terrible was its frightful task. The evil creature had to be stopped tonight, before it could accomplish its horrid mission.

Innocents will die.

It was too late for the woman to do anything and if Andile failed, evil would echo across all the worlds. Especially the worlds which resided only in our minds.

\*

Oupa had been down the cellar only once previously, to fetch drink crates when he had worked there as a young man. What he had seen there that time had scared him so much he had never returned. He had heard of those giant monsters; the nameless ones.

Only a glimpse of one of those massive terrors had been enough to ensure Oupa Andy had never returned to the hotel's cellar.

This despicable thing was worse.

\*

The awful creature smiled with thin black lips through the gaps in its filthy bandages. It wasn't really wounded, but its bandages were stained with old blood and dirt and things which spoke of fetid disease. Its long matted black hair cascaded down the sides of its bandaged face like rivulets of pure darkness. The horrid being's single visible claw clutched the armrest of its ancient rusted wheelchair as if it were a throne.

On the left side of its face, its only eye was watery and pale and burned with menace. The few bits of skin visible beneath its old bandages were as unhealthily white and dirty as the exterior of the hotel. This creature liked to appear weak, when in fact it was truly powerful and entirely evil.

A tikdoshe, half shadow, Magick-Stealer.

It spoke to Oupa in the Old Tongue, in a voice dry and cracked as a the husk of a desiccated beetle.

"Begone old man. My task has nothing to do with you."

Andile made to answer, but another cough rendered him speechless. He covered his mouth and when he drew his gnarled old hand away, it was speckled with bright red blood.

The horrible thing in the spiky, rusted old wheelchair made a sound like vomiting. It was laughing.

“Old fool!” the tikdoshe chuckled. “You are here to stop me, yet you can barely talk through your sickness. You are terrified of me, as well you should be, I am the half shadow, I walk in both worlds and I drain all of Magick. You, whose very soul is the Essence of Magick, will suffer terribly if you impair my task. You are right to tremble before me.”

Despite its horrific appearance, the dreadful, half-finished thing in the wheelchair stank of lavender. However, this incongruous reek simply masked the rotten stench beneath.

Nevertheless, Andile knew what he smelled and saw in that horrible and rusted old wheelchair wasn't the creature's true form, merely the only form it could project into our world.

“I know your task, tikdoshe,” Oupa choked out with all the confidence he could muster.

“Now that I see you, I finally understand. I understand the vision I have seen all my life. I understand your task, the reason you have kept the Gate open all these long years to stain this place with its unnatural presence. You have wanted to come for a long time. You seek the blood of a mother, loved by her child.”

The tikdoshe's hideous chuckle stopped short.

“What is it to you why I am here?” it demanded, its mocking tones replaced by slow anger. “This is not even your preferred world! Nobody here will ever even understand what you are! Here you are just a sangoma.” The tikdoshe spat the word out, as if the mere sound of it in its mouth offended the evil creature. “You alone - of all the Dreamseers – have escaped us and you should now just be happy enough to be left in peace in this pathetic little realm. Leave now, and die elsewhere in a manner comfortable to you.”

Andile nodded, stifling a cough that felt as if he were swallowing blood.

“I am not long for this world and will soon pass into the Everlands,” Oupa Andy managed to splutter. “Yes, perhaps it is true I have been too comfortable in this place despite the long years of prejudice levelled against those who wear the dark skin. But I am here to make amends for all that. I am a Dreamseer and I will not let

you leave, tikdoshe. I am closing the Gate once and for all and restoring this place to the One. You will not siphon my Magick, soulless one - in this world you lack that power. You can try fight me, but I will not allow you to find the mother and her child.” The bandaged demon’s solitary pale eye shone with hatred.

“This is not your world old man.”

“I protect all worlds. Make your storm come. This is the land in which men were first born into this world and it is sacred. It is Africa - and my blood, if it is to be shed, will purify this place and the Gate.”

Andile raised his walking cane. He began to chant an incantation as a brightly glowing blue gem suddenly appeared at the head of his cane.

\*

“So he was sick?” said Captain Booyens, a short wiry man with tight curls for hair, skin the colour of toffee and intelligent pale green eyes.

“Yes,” said the old teacher. “He had stage four cancer, and it had advanced more rapidly than anyone could have predicted. It was uncanny actually.”

Sergeant Meyer grunted a soft response. He was a large, red faced and slightly overweight man, and his considerable belly tested the limits of his blue uniform. The fireplace was

making him strangely hot, and at the best of times he was uncomfortable in the heat.

“But,” Sergeant Meyer said, glancing at the notes he had scrawled, “he had a pleasant little flatlet in the retirement home. So,” he cleared his throat, “what on earth was he doing in that old hotel?”

The old teacher pursed her lips. What on earth indeed.

“He used to work there,” she answered carefully. “Decades ago. Perhaps he felt the urge to reconnect with his past. His wife had recently passed away you see, and even his children wouldn’t have made the trip back from Gauteng in time for his passing. It is all rather sad.”

Captain Booyens stared into the fire, rather touched by the tale of the old man who had died alone in the infamous old hotel’s cellar. He had been dead for almost a week when they had found him, and by a strange fate early decomposition had twisted his face into a smile.

Or perhaps that is how he died - with a last cheerful grin.

Also, there had been a strange lingering scent of lavender in the air.

Nonetheless, foul play had long been ruled out.

Still, for Sergeant Meyer the whole odd tale had a whiff of kak about it. No old man walks almost three miles to die alone in a hotel that had a reputation for being haunted.

According to the doctors he and Captain Booyens had interviewed, Andile 'Oupa Andy' Nomnganga had been lucid days before the date of his death, when his oncologist had last seen to him. Mister Nomnganga had apparently been entirely clearheaded even with the strongest medication, although the coughing fits and severe pain that racked his fragile old body had troubled him greatly when they occurred.

Nevertheless, despite Sergeant Meyer's instincts the case looked shut. The autopsy revealed nothing but the cancer, and apart from the old teacher the deceased had had few friends. His surviving family lived in Jo'burg and had sadly just missed his passing, and had returned home shortly after the funeral. His sons and daughters had fondly described their father as "distinctly eccentric" when speaking of his passing in the bowels of the old hotel.

"Well Madame," said Captain Booyens, replacing his cap as he headed towards the front door, "thanks again for the tea and thanks for your time. We will be in contact if there is anything further we need."

"It was a pleasure officers," said the old teacher. "I am more than happy to help in any way."

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She waved goodbye and closed the door.

She really was going to miss the old skelm, with his twinkling eyes and mischievous smile. But then again, you didn't get to her age without losing a few friends. She felt the tears coming, a human weakness she had always hated.

"Oh Oupa," she thought, putting her eyes back in their saucer where they immediately swam in their own miniature lake of tears, "I just hope you managed to stop that tikdoshe.

I just hope that terrible car accident that same night. . . with that poor young lady and her boy. . . had nothing to do with you losing your final fight.”

The Crazy Old Lady sat down heavily in her old armchair, wishing she was a millennium or two younger.

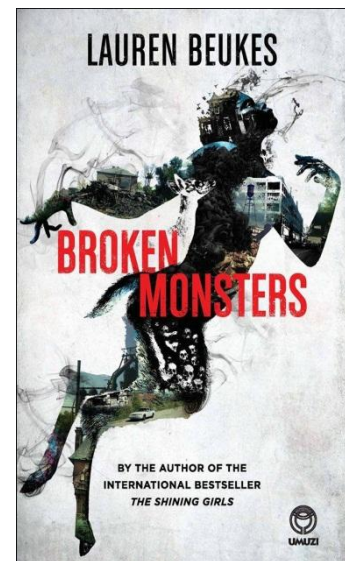
## Book Reviews

Ian and Gail Jamieson

### Broken Monsters – Lauren Beukes

Detroit has seen its fair share of odd and disturbing murder victims, but Detective Gabriella Versado has never seen anything quite like this; half boy, half deer, somehow fused or glued together. And this is only the start.

As a freezing winter closes in several more strange and disturbing corpses turn up in different places. The killer is inadvertently drawing several people into his sphere of influence. As a single mother Detective Versado has a very disturbed teenaged daughter who is playing a very dangerous game with an online predator. Near the end of the book the author brings in a small but significant

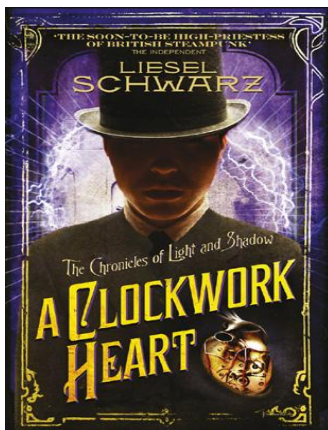


supernatural element (which is never fully explained) and this is the only part of the novel that leans towards SF or fantasy.

Lauren Beukes is a very good and interesting writer, and it is unfortunate that I found the story less than enthralling. There are just too many separate bits that take too long to come together.

3/5 Ian

### A Clockwork Heart – Liesel Schwarz



This is volume 2 of the Chronicles of Light and Shadow. I have not read volume 1 but was able to pick up the gist as I read this novel. Elle has become the Oracle, who alone has the power to keep the dark designs of Shadow at bay and she has to devote herself to her duties. But she still longs for and sometime gives in to the desire to fly her dirigible, leaving her new husband Marsh to fend for himself.

Marsh finds himself missing the excitement of his former life as a Warlock. So when Commissioner Willoughby of the

London Metropolitan police seeks his help in solving a magical mystery, Marsh is only too happy to oblige. But in doing so, Marsh loses his heart ... literally. Elle returns to find that he has joined the leagues of missing Londoners who have been turned into clockwork zombies who will form the basis of an army to take over the world.

She has to enlist the help of an old friend of her husband, Nightwalker Loisa Beladodia and the book turns into a race against time to find and return Hugh Marsh's heart to his chest before it is too late.

But things do not turn out as expected and even though they succeed we are going to need volume 3 to for a, presumably, happy ending.

There is nothing earth-shakingly new in this second chapter but it is very well written and I found myself enjoying it. I will certainly read volume 3.

Gail

## Book Review Kyle Brunette

### The Long Mars - Terry Pratchett & Stephen Baxter



The Long Mars is the third entry in Terry Pratchett and Stephen Baxter's "The Long Earth" series in which humanity has learned how to easily "step" into parallel dimensions. At this point in the story, the Yellowstone supervolcano has erupted, doing untold damage and altering the Earth's climate to the point where much of the population is forced to move permanently into these parallel dimensions (known as the "Long Earth"). However, this is not the focus of the story. Instead, we concentrate on three seemingly separate stories: an expedition into the far reaches of the "Long Earth", an exploration of the "next" step in human evolution, and finally, a trip through the parallel dimensions of Mars.

The narrative seems to skip over (and around) quite a lot, as if the author(s) weren't quite sure what story they wanted to tell. One moment we're exploring distant parallel Earths, the next, we're having discussions about human evolution in a downtown cafe. The parallel Earths (and Marses, there's a plural form I thought I'd never need) showcase some interesting concepts, but for the most part these are glossed over in no more than a paragraph or two as the expedition drives to reach a distant target of over two hundred million "steps" away from the "primary" Earth.

All in all, The Long Mars is worth reading, and is well written, as we've come to expect from these two authors. However, it tries to do too much at once, and loses something in the process.

## Blast from the past.... From PROBE 70 November 1987

S.F.S.A MONTHLY MEETING HELD ON 19/9/87

As I was the one who made the most noise at this meeting, I have been given the task of writing the review.

What a lark "Godzilla" was. I thoroughly enjoyed it from beginning to end, possibly because it was a really bad movie! Not mediocre, but really bad. Godzilla himself took so long to arrive that there seemed to be very little of Japan to save from the enemy monsters. Buildings, cars, dams, the airport, the army, and air force were decimated, and a great deal of the countryside was trampled, and by the time Godzilla arrived, one wondered if it was worth the effort. He had to swim from his island somewhere at the ends of the Earth, and swim and swim and swim. I must add that Godzilla added to the devastation on his way to do battle.

The home-made robot was marvellous – literally rising to the occasion in more ways than one. He was able to take off and fly, and he also increased his size so that he was a match for the enemy. At the end of the movie, he obligingly shrank to normal size again.

Incredible!

One of the things I found so enjoyable was Godzilla's fighting style. He warmed up with a few Tai Chi exercises and in a no-holds barred battle, proceeded to knock the wind out of the Megalon monster by tasking a short run, and then sliding in on his large tail, and kicking the monster with his back feet. ( this while the robot held the monster to prevent it running away). This was glorious slapstick.

In contrast to these fun and games, the second movie of the evening "Cyborg 2087" was rather dull. Michael Rennie went through the whole movie, and having done what he set out to do, which was to change the future, he disappeared. He will not be missed.

I look forward to seeing Godzilla again soon.

Felicity Gentle

### Best of SFSA Volume III

The Best stories from the Nova short story competitions in the 1990's.

If you don't yet have a copy contact the secretary and we will send you one.  
[secretary@sffsa.org.za](mailto:secretary@sffsa.org.za)



## Nova 2013 Finalist SA Section

### There but for the Grace... by Jeannie McKeown

Gershwin felt a little doubtful calling attention to himself, but quelled the feeling. It was his dream after all. "Hello? Anybody there?"

There was a rustle from inside the tent, and then it went still. He called again, "Hello!" "If you come any closer I'll shoot you." Out of the entrance of the tent came a long cylinder, glinting in the starlight, and Gershwin stumbled back so fast he fell on his arse, scrambling backwards not noticing the sharp rocks and thorny, stunted bushes. This was certainly a more frightening dream than the last one he had found himself awake inside.

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He'd gone to bed early, and had fallen deeply asleep, only to wake up on the side of a road, in bright unrelenting sun. Gershwin, gasping, thought that he couldn't remember ever being so hot. He was aware that he was dreaming, still dressed in his sleep shorts and Sharks t-shirt. It was a strange sensation, knowing that you were in a dream.

He was on Grahamstown's High Street. There was the Spur, just a little down the road – he often went with the other boarders, supervising the younger kids. At the school on a scholarship, Gershwin had a limited amount to spend, but the Spur didn't mind if you ordered a plate of chips and a Coke.

Something about the restaurant didn't look right, and he made his way down the road, shielding his eyes. It soon became apparent that the big plate glass windows had been smashed, and the restaurant tables were filthy with dust and what looked like animal droppings. Gershwin stepped back, stumbling on the rough paving and righting himself with a foot on the road, feeling his slipslop slide as it met the surface. He lifted his foot, but the slop stayed behind. Even the concrete was too hot to stand on barefoot, however, so he pried it off the tar and walked away, leaving a single tacky black footprint behind him. At the top of the High Street he paused. He could see well enough that the lawns of the Rhodes University campus, green and dotted with healthy trees in his waking life, were gone. The area was a flat dusty field, broken only by a series of tunnels covered in thick canvas. The roof of the famous

clock tower had fallen in, and the clock was missing both of its hands. Parked haphazardly across the intersection was a faded blue sedan, doors open, and tyres melted into thick puddles of rubber on the tar; the car stood on bare wheels.

Gershwin's face was burning, and his nose was clogged with fine dust. He sneezed violently, then blinked, startled by the sudden darkness before realising, to his immense relief, that he was awake, and in his own bedroom on the Matric corridor at school. Grabbing the bottle of water on his bedside table he drained almost all of it in one long swallow, shook off his slops, and fell asleep again almost immediately, his dreams this time being only the usual mishmash of confused stories and recollections.

In the morning when he woke and saw the empty water bottle, he remembered. His face and hands felt sunburnt, and when he picked up his slops to wear to the shower the sole of one had melted and hardened again into bumps and whorls.

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It was over a week later that Gershwin woke again inside a dream, this time clutching a bottle of drinking water. It was night, and the Milky Way lay flung across the sky, stars hanging so close to earth that he ducked instinctively, wishing suddenly that he had fallen asleep with his torch in his hand, rather than the water bottle.

When his eyes had grown accustomed, Gershwin was able to pick out the shapes of rocks, the occasional stunted bush and a faint glow, no brighter than a candle. Wincing as he stubbed his toe, he set off towards it, thinking a little sourly that he wouldn't mind dreaming these dreams in proper shoes. Stepping more carefully, he soon reached the source of the light, a small tent covered in the thick canvas he had seen in his previous dream.

Which is when he called out, and when the situation escalated suddenly to him being on the wrong side of a mean-looking gun, and flat on his arse in the scrubby desert. "Jesus! Don't shoot," he croaked his throat dry. Unthinkingly he put the water bottle to his lips and took a swallow, the water slopping inside it. The gun muzzle wavered and then dropped towards the earth, and a head and shoulders appeared through the small opening.

“Do you have water?” a hoarse voice asked, urgently, and Gershwin nodded, then, feeling foolish in the dark, called, “Yes, I have water. Please don’t shoot.”

“Why shouldn’t I shoot you?” the voice retorted. “You’ve just admitted you have water! And I have none and no hope of reaching the next well before I die of thirst.” The muzzle rose again, and Gershwin swallowed compulsively. “Stop! Look, shit, I’ll give you the water. Here, you can have it,” and he flipped the lid closed and stretched his arm out to its full length. “Look, here it is.”

“You’ll give it to me?” The tone was scornful. “I’m not going to fall for that!”

In desperation Gershwin tossed the bottle across the short distance between them, hoping that it wouldn’t burst. This time it was the other who was startled – she reared back from it as if it would explode. (It was a she, Gershwin was sure, despite the hoarse voice).

“What’s in it,” she demanded, pointing the gun away to poke suspiciously at the bottle with the barrel. “What are you hoping to get by poisoning me?”

“Poisoning you?” Gershwin felt the first stirrings of exasperation. “Why would I poison you? It’s water! You heard me drinking it just now.”

There was another pause. “I thought I did,” the girl admitted, in a lower voice. He heard her exhale, heard the air catch on the dryness of her mouth, and heard her cough. “It’s water,” he said again. “Please take it.”

The girl was reluctant, but finally reached out and grabbed the bottle. Gershwin flinched as she casually dropped the gun, but it didn’t go off and he realised she must have had the safety clip on. He rose to his feet, brushing bits of grit from his backside. The girl wasn’t gulping the water, as he had expected her to. She was dripping it slowly into her mouth, in a tiny trickle. Long before he thought she could possibly have quenched her thirst, she stopped and carefully pressed the mouthpiece down.

“You can have all of it,” Gershwin couldn’t help but say. “It’s yours, really.” He risked coming closer, but she did not pick up her gun again, so he came to within a couple of metres, then carefully sat down, cross legged, across from her. She eyed him warily, a wild creature in this crazy landscape.

It was she who broke the silence first, looking over his clean, if dusty, Bafana Bafana t-shirt before focusing on his face, eyes narrowed. Her own skin was prematurely

lined, which he knew immediately to be from dehydration, a lack of water so deep that his litre bottle with the school logo on it wasn't going to do more than keep her alive. She was dry at the bone level, he suddenly understood, and shivered.

"Where do you come from, that you can give away water?" she asked, eyes on his. "I've never heard of anywhere with enough to just give it away to strangers."

"Grahamstown," Gershwin replied, making sure to keep his hands palm up and visible, the way he had been taught as a child by his game ranger father. "I go to a boarding school there." Made bold by her silence, he added, "I'm not sure how I'm here at all. I should be asleep in my room," and the girl's eyebrows shot up.

"You're walking in a dream," she said, and her voice, now that she had had water, was less harsh, less hoarse. "This isn't real for you at all. That's how you can give your water away."

"Maybe," Gershwin acknowledged. "There's always water to drink, and we shower every day."

The girl uttered a word he didn't recognise but which sounded like a curse. She was looking at him hungrily, but there was anger there too. She shook her head. "It isn't possible, to have that much water. I must be dreaming you."

"I'm pretty sure I'm dreaming you," he protested, shifting slightly as the jagged gravel grew uncomfortable beneath him. "Why is there so little water here?"

This time the look she gave him was all anger. "Wherever you're from, you're stupid," she said coldly, and made to withdraw back into her tent. "Wait," Gershwin called, "I really don't know. Remember I'm not from here. This is a dream to me."

She halted, head turned away from him, voice low. "Then you are doubly lucky," she said bitterly. "If the place you are from hasn't had the climates changing, and the rivers turning to salt from the rising sea, you're living in a paradise." She was reaching for something inside her tent and, finding what she wanted, she turned back and handed it to him.

It was a roughly drawn map, with the coastline marked in a thick pen. Dark dots, about 5 of them, were scattered over the landscape. It was, he realised, a map of the Eastern Cape, but the coastline was wrong, and the interior blank. "What are the dots?"

“Wells,” the girl said, shifting closer to him, and touching each of the dots lightly. She smelled pungent, but not unpleasant, a scent of sand and heat and dry grasses. “The only wells we know of.” She traced the coastline next. “This is the sea – when it crept inland the coastline changed.”

Global warming, Gershwin thought, remembering a discussion in Geography class. Climate change, and the arctic ice melting. He hadn’t realised that higher sea levels would pollute the freshwater rivers with salt.

“I’m trying to get here,” the girl said, placing her finger, its nail bitten away to nothing, somewhere in the centre of the map. “If you hadn’t given me water, I would not make it to the oasis here,” and she touched a dot on the route to her destination.

“What’s there?” he asked, curious. “What are you looking for?”

“Computers,” she answered immediately, and he was surprised; the word seemed completely out of place here in a desert with no water, and no electric light. “In a village called Bethesda there’s a building with computers,” she explained further, seeing his confusion. “I’ve read manuals, and I’m sure I can get them working again. There should be solar panels to supply power. I need to get linked up to the satellite network.”

“Wow,” Gershwin said, then, feeling the response inadequate, “wow, that’s a big goal.” He cleared his throat. “Have you ever worked on a computer before?”

She sat back on her heels and glared at him. “I told you. I’ve read about it in books. I need to find spare parts and take them back home to fix the computers left there. I know what I’m looking for.”

“I’ve worked on actual computers,” Gershwin said, trying not to sound smug. “I’m quite good at it. Perhaps I could help.” He realised how silly that was even as he said it, and the girl didn’t give him a chance to retract.

“You’re a dream,” she said flatly. “Once you wake up, or I wake up, we’ll be alone again. How could you possibly help?”

“I might dream myself here again,” he argued. She snorted. Changing the subject to hide his embarrassment, he thought to ask her name and the girl cocked her head, considering him, before answering. “It’s Gen,” she said. “What’s yours?”

“Gershwin,” he replied, and her face twisted into a grin. “What? It’s a perfectly good name,” he began to protest, grinning anyway, but he was overtaken by a desperate

tickle in his nose, an unstoppable sneeze. He turned his head into his shoulder to stifle it and found himself in his bed, duvet on the floor and his water bottle gone, left somewhere between two dreams.

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Gershwin, acting on an impulse he didn't want to explain, spent a number of afternoons in the computer lab. After a couple of weeks he could build a computer from a heap of parts and had figured out the best ways to connect to the internet using the satellites which circled ceaselessly above the earth. He'd also begun to take a far greater interest in Geography and in current affairs, becoming something of an armchair expert in theories on climate change, and water and food scarcity. He read that the next big wars were predicted to be over water rights. It sounded very familiar to Gershwin, who could recall clearly Gen's oddly-accented, hoarse voice talking about the reality she lived in.

He went to sleep every night with a multi-tool and his torch stuffed uncomfortably into his pocket, and a water bottle in his hand, but it was over a month before he found himself awake in the dream again.

It was night, and Gershwin was glad. He remembered too well the fierce heat of his first visit, and wasn't keen to re-live the experience. He found himself on what remained of a road, now rutted and overgrown with desert scrub and thorn bushes, opposite a small building with an electric lamp burning in the room facing the road. Gen had obviously managed to get the electricity on, he thought, glancing upwards. Sure enough, the roof had a number of solar panels fastened to it. Gaps showed where others had been, lost now to wind or theft.

Gershwin picked his way carefully across the road, and up the few stairs to the stoep of the house. The front door was ajar; the light, even from a single lamp, jarringly bright in the otherwise black night. The sky was hazy, and only a few stars shone through the curtain of high cloud. They were not rainclouds, he thought grimly, and pushed the door open into what must have been a sitting room once but which was now a dusty and disused computer lab.

"Hey, Gen," he said, as he stepped inside, and she whirled around, screwdriver outstretched in her hand, instantly in defensive position. In a mirroring of their first

meeting, Gershwin held up his hands, stepping backwards. At least, he thought, he didn't end up on his backside this time.

"It's you." Gen lowered the screwdriver, and set it on the desk. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," Gershwin said, although he wasn't sure what else he could have done to announce his presence. "I'm glad you're still here," he offered, and Gen turned a curious gaze on to him. "Where else would I be?" she asked. "It's only been a week, if that, since I last saw you. Traveling for half the night and hiding out in the day doesn't make for quick travel you know."

"It's been a month for me," he said, looking around the room. The computers were similar to the ones he'd been working on; in a glad rush he thought, I can fix these. He set the bottle of water on the floor. "Let me see what you've managed to do so far."

For someone who had never worked on a computer before, Gen had done well. She had managed to take apart the boxes, and remove many of the larger components. On one box, with an intact screen, she had obviously been trying to connect to the satellites she knew were circling overhead, but here her self-taught skills had faltered.

"I can help you," he said, smiling, and Gen waved him towards the bank of computers. "Just don't mess up anything I've already done," she said, but it was half-hearted. He thought she might even be a little bit happy he was there.

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It was around three hours later that Gershwin rose and dusted off his knees. The power supply was hooked in, the computer was rewired and booted up, and the little light on the keyboard was flashing intermittently, indicating that it was searching for a connection. Gen was gripping the edge of the desk, her knuckles white, her eyes glued to the flickering screen. For long minutes nothing happened, then with one last flash the light held steady – it had found a link.

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It was almost an anti-climax. Gen, typing laboriously with one finger, wrote a message saying simply "I'm in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Anybody there?" and pressed the Enter key. The message remained on the screen, which was otherwise blank. Gershwin drank some of the water he had brought, careful not to take too

much. He'd seen a windmill at the back of the house, but had no idea if it drew water or was simply a reminder of where a well had once been.

"If we can make contact with other people," Gen said unexpectedly, breaking the silence, "we can ask about how to find more water. Perhaps they'll be able to direct the satellite to scan for us, and tell us where the water is." Gershwin wasn't sure that the technology existed to scan for water underground, but he wasn't about to say so. Surely a scan from space could recognize features on the land which might at least predict where underground wells might be found.

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It had been over an hour since Gen had typed in her terse call. Gershwin was fighting sleep, which was crazy. He didn't want to fall asleep, or wake up, or whatever it was he did which took him away from the dream he and Gen shared, and he was fighting hard against the need to drift off. Gen sat hunched in a corner of the room, her head on her knees.

There was a sudden beep from the computer, and then, a second later, another one. Gen leapt to her feet in one lithe movement, the light from the electric lamp accentuating the lines etched into her face. Gershwin followed her more slowly, suddenly unwilling to see all her hopes dashed, if the beeps were the computer dying.

On the screen a single line had appeared under Gen's message. It read "South Africa! We've been hoping you'd get back online. This is Cairo" and Gen buckled, her breathing harsh and her fingers trembling too much to respond. "Wow," Gershwin breathed, leaning forward. "It worked. It actually worked!"

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There was a quad bike in the shed behind the house, and they were in luck – its petrol tank was full. Gershwin helped Gen load the spare parts carefully into the hollow area below the seat, with his scrawled instructions on how to replicate the computer connections, while Gen filled her water bottles from the well behind the house. Her canvas tent she folded tight and wore as a rucksack. As in the trip to Bethesda, she would camp from the early hours of the morning to the evening, while the sun was too fierce to travel. They worked in silence, both exhausted, but Gen's eyes shone. His last sight of her, as he sneezed convulsively, was of her going back



in to the house, to wait out the heat of the day and to speak to the contact she had found on the other side of the continent. He didn't have time to call out before he was groaning into his pillow, feeling as if he'd been run over by a bus.

He spent over a week in the San with a flu bug which ran through the entire school, causing an early closing for the September holidays. It was almost a month before he returned to school, and Matric exams began almost immediately. The realities of Gen's world had formed his goals, given him ambitions he'd not considered before; he'd received his acceptance letter to Rhodes, and had picked his majors.

When he opened his dreaming eyes in the stultifying evening heat, the cracked and broken windows of the Spur behind him and the wreck of the university's clock tower glowing redly in the sunset, it took Gershwin a moment to understand that he was back. Then he was running towards the Drostdy Arch, dashing over the syrupy tarmac as fast as he could, feeling the pull against his soles, the heat coming up through them.

There were changes, he saw – a windmill had been constructed on the far side of the dusty space, and the canvas on one of the tunnels had been rolled back, revealing a thriving hydroponic installation. From the top of the old clock a long metal rod stretched into the sky, four rusty satellite dishes backing on to each other at its tip. Satellite communications had been established then, he thought, and grinned.

"Gershwin."

He turned, and Gen was there on the other side of the Arch, eyes wary but posture open, hands with her palms up. "No gun?" he joked, and she laughed; it made her look almost as young as he assumed she was.

"I think this is my last chance to dream with you," he said, and she nodded. They looked at each other for a while, silent, before Gen cleared her throat and gestured to the aerial, and to the windmill.

"There was a well right here," she said, "and a number of others close by. We've got more water than we ever dreamed of now."

"That's good," he said, inadequately, searching for something else to say. "Do you speak often to others through the satellites?"

“Yeah,” Gen said, and smiled properly. “People from all over the world. It’s good not to be alone anymore.”

“I’ll bet,” he said, then “Hey, I’m going to be studying here soon,” and he pointed to the long line of university buildings. “It looks very different back where I’m from.”

“I’ll bet,” she echoed him wistfully. “What will you be studying, Gershwin?”

“Ecological Science and Geography,” he replied promptly. “Computer Science too. I’m quite good at it, you see,” and he winked. Gen laughed. “You’re lucky,” she said and he nodded. He knew he was.

The sky was flaming red, and the air was full of a fine dust. He felt the beginnings of a sneeze building, and swallowed hard. “I’m going to wake up,” he said impatiently, and Gen leaned over and grasped his hand, smiling at him as she squeezed it. That pungent, earthy scent was in his nostrils and he couldn’t hold back the sneeze, finding himself, inevitably, back in his bedroom.

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Gershwin didn’t dream again of Gen’s world, although he caught glimpses of her in his ordinary dreams. He found himself turning, heart beating fast, at lectures or campus parties when he caught a glimpse of a dark, cropped head, but it was always someone unknown.

Sometimes, when he walked along the leafy pathways between the university’s stone-clad buildings, Gershwin thought he caught a hint of the scent he associated so strongly with his waking dreams and the reality he believed existed right alongside his own. Every time he caught the trail he hoped it would let him glimpse Gen’s world, but the scent was maddeningly elusive, vanishing almost immediately even as he tried to hold on to it, and follow it back.

## Magazines Received

Opuntia. Dale Speirs P.O. Box 6830 Calgary, Alberta Canada, TP2 #ET

Opuntia has gone electronic, mainly due to the increases in tariff by Canada mail.

From issue #274 now be posted online at [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) and any other

Websites that will archive zines that Dale Speirs is able to find. His email is [opuntia57@hotmail.com](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com)

Via email:-

Newsletter of the Middle Tennessee SF Society (aka The Nashville SF Club)

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue 140 June 2014

Issue 141 July 2014

Issue 142 August 2014

David Langford news@ansible.co.uk

Ansible 323 June 2014

Ansible 324 July 2014

Ansible 315 August 2014

## Books Received

### **Random House Struik**

Broken Monsters Lauren Beukes

A Clockwork Heart Liesel Schwarz

The Long Mars Terry Pratchett and Stephen Baxter

The Queen of the Tearling Erika Johansen

## Nova 2013 Finalist SA Section

### Unconditional Love - Ken Cockcroft

Schalk. Schalk. I like the name. Schalk, or Schalkie, perhaps, or even Schalla... for those special occasions. Schalk's my hero, even when he gives away penalties and advertises Vaseline skin crème on TV. I think I look a lot like him actually, especially now that his hair is shorter. I miss him.... I hope he recovers soon. But Boela calls me Wagter. Wagter: a really original name, a real thinking man's name or a dog, hey? So everyone calls me Wagter. All day, Wagter this, Wagter that. I really wish my name was Schalk.

Boela. Ja well, not exactly a thinking man, if you know what I mean, but I'll tell you more about him later. Boela – and I really, really wish I could find another word for this – is my owner. But there's no other word for it: I'm a dog, he's a man, so he's my owner.

Here we go... I can already see you thinking, "Ag, bliksem! A story told by a dog! What the f\_\_\_?" Ja well, no fine. You're a typical human... the rest of us are just flippen animals, right? What can I say? No use trying to convince you otherwise, is there? But hang on! If dogs and horses can't talk, this must be just a fantasy, right? You know what fantasy is, don't you Gert? All that time you spend on Redtube.com?

Let me tell you a little story: This dog, walking down a street, comes across a pub. He's really thirsty so he goes inside, sits at the bar and orders a draught. On his left there're a couple of horses, also drinking beer. Dog glances at them a couple of times; he doesn't want to be rude but he thinks he recognizes one of them. Half way through his beer he decides to talk to them so he picks up his glass and moves down the counter.

"Afternoon," he says to the horse nearer to him, "I don't want to intrude, but I'm sure I know you from somewhere."

Both horses turn and look at him; they don't say anything. The dog is not surprised. Horses are not exactly quick thinkers. Seems like the faster you can run the slower you can think. Applies to dogs as well: Afghans, Borzois, Salukis, greyhounds... all a bit dof, really. He tries again.

"I know! You're a racehorse, aren't you? Aren't you...? I've got it! You're Captain Kool, aren't you? Hey, I've seen you on TV, man!"

The horses are chuffed. The dog is right. Both of them are ex-racehorses, quite famous in their day. Captain Kool had won the Met and a lot of other big races and the other horse, Turboprop, had once been placed third in the July. They chat for a while and the dog buys them another beer. The dog is a big racing fan and he really knows his stuff.

Eventually the dog says, "I'd like to talk some more but I've got to go; bitch is expecting me. "It's been great meeting you guys. Everything of the best. Cheers, hey." He picks up his change and leaves.

The horses watch him go and turn towards each other. "Well fuck me!" says Kaptain Kool. "Can you believe it? A talking dog!"

Ja well, you humans would be freaked out if you knew just half of what was going on, right under your noses. But, you tell yourself, this is just a fantasy, isn't it? Probably written by some bored oke for a competition or something. Okay, okay... suit yourself. But hey! Next time you think you're so superior, Gert, you just try licking your balls, okay?

Two things before I go on. Firstly, I'm glad we've broken the ice with the f-word. I'm actually a bit self-conscious when I use it, but it's one of Boela's favourites. The second thing is the language I use. A lot comes from Boela and his mates, of course, as well as Bella and the kids. Boela is Afrikaans, Bella is English, and the kids speak a short of mengeltaal. Ja, I really miss Bella. I even miss the bliksemse kids a little. I'll tell you more about them later. Most of my other language has come from the TV, but I also check out the front and back page of the paper while Bella is reading it. The only thing I have ever seen Boela read is Hustler and other kak like that.

Anyway, time to tell you more about Boela. Where do I begin? Well, to start with, he's fat; he's got a kaksak that hangs below his belt like an apron. I don't think he's been able to see his dick in years. Sex? I don't even want to go there. Boela's got no neck and his face is fat and red and his eyes are small and close together. He sweats a lot and his personal hygiene is really sleg, man.

He farts all the time: in the lounge, at the table, in bed; he even farts at a braai with people standing around. Thinks it's a moer of a joke. Proud of himself. He stinks to high heaven: all the wors and steak and chops he's forever stuffing into his face. He eats like a blerry vark; his moustache gets so encrusted with fat and cheese and sous and stuff you could tear it off and put it on a pizza and nobody would notice. So he's always got food stains on his chest and boep. He srips Castles and Klippies and coke nonstop and most nights he passes out in the lounge and snores with his mouth open, drooling down his chin. He hasn't taken Bella out for years. His idea of a night out is going to Teazers with his mates. He watches WWW Smackdown. He's been living in the Western Province for twenty years and still supports the Bulls! Are you starting to get the picture or what?

Boela is lazy and inconsiderate and rude. He thinks he's quite clever but he's really pretty thick. I heard him on the telephone the other day arguing with someone or another. "You think I know bugger nothing, hey?" he said, "but let me tell you, pellie, I know bugger all!" Ja well, no fine, English is not his first language, is it?

He is also nasty – a real bully – and he treats Bella like shit. Verbal abuse. Every day. Bella, hoe kan jy so fokken dom wees? Is jy fokken mal, Bella? Waar kom jy aan sulke stront? Ag, Bella, moenie fokken kak praat nie! Ag fok, kan jy nie vir jousef dink nie, vrou? No wonder she took the kids and left.

Ja, and after she'd gone, did he remember to feed me? Did he buy more dog food when the last bag ran out? You know the answer already, hey? And then, he's so lazy and so pissed, what did he do? Every now and then? When he remembered? He took a pack of frozen mince or wors or something out of the deep freeze and threw it out of the back door for me. Didn't even bother to take the plastic off. The doos. What am I supposed to do? Wait for it to thaw? I'm hungry, man, I'm flippen starving, so I have to gnaw bits off like a bliksemse rat or something! Have you got any idea how much it hurts your front teeth, hey?

Ja well, there's no doubt about it: Boela is more than a poephol, he's a real moegoe. Poephols... bliksems... moegoes... moerskonte... with a few sub-species in between. And because I'm a dog; because I'm his dog, I'm supposed to love him, right? Unconditional love, isn't that what you call it? Yeah right! Unconditional love my hairy arse! Still, I must say, these last four or five days things have changed. You can almost say I'm beginning to like Boela... to enjoy him even, but maybe that's stretching things too far.

And another thing: has Boela has never taken me for a walk? Take a guess! But if he ever did (and I know he never will) he would have me on a leash, with a bliksemse choke chain. So, apart from all the other things, on my scale, Boela is right up there man: top of the range; full house. Still, as I said a little earlier, he has his uses. Ja nee, Boela has finally come through for me, believe it or not. But more about that later.

It was always Bella who took me out. Okay, so most of the times it was just to get out of the house; to get away from blerry Boela. I'd be sitting in the back seat of the car and I could see her crying, all the way to the beach. She'd walk a bit, throwing

my ball for me, but then she would just sit and stare at the sea and cry. Shame. I miss her so much, and not just because she fed me every day. Bella is sweet and kind, she's more than that: she's a genuinely good person. A lot like your average dog, actually. Die God weet, I don't know what she saw in Boela... why she married him; she deserved a helluva lot better, that's for sure.

The kids? Marietjie is alright most of the time but she can be nasty. Klaps me for no reason at all. Snoep with her biscuits and goeters as well. Barend? Ja well, he's just a smaller version of his father, isn't he? Comes back from his Under 13 rugby practice walking wydsbeen like he's kakked himself. Thighs are chafed. Chubby little shit. Mommy has to rub on Ingram's camphor crème. Ag shame. Already bullies his sister; swears at her. Ja well, he's had a good role model, hasn't he? Abuses me too: crackers, sticks, stones, klaps, kicks. You get the idea. A real mini-moegoe.

Anyway, on a Friday about six weeks ago, Bella finally packed her bags, took the kids and walked out. I don't blame her; she's put up with more than enough kak. Left Boela a note on the kitchen table, saying that she had left for good; telling him not to try and find her.

Boela came back from work and went ballistic, throwing things around, smashing stuff, screaming and shouting. Then he did some serious drink-thinking. It was only the next morning when he woke up on the lounge floor with a mother of a babbelas that he actually realised what had happened. The house was quiet, no noise; no smell of bacon frying in the kitchen. Jissis! Waar's my fokken brekvis!

Of course that's when he started to feel sorry for himself. How could Bella do this to him? What had he done to deserve it? Tried to phone her but she wouldn't answer. Left a voicemail telling her how much he loved her, how much he missed her already. Kom terug Bella, asseblief, ek smEEK jou! Doos. Sat on the couch (with a fat Klippies and coke) and blubbered like a flippen kid. Not a pretty sight, I can tell you. And then it just got worse, but I'll spare you the details.

Ja well. It wasn't good. The first week I will call "Self Pity Week" and Boela was a snivelling wreck. My dog food ran out and I started feeling sorry for myself as well. Then came "Righteous Anger Week" and of course everything was Bella's fault. The maid got angry too, and rightly so, because Boela was so rude; she demanded her

money and walked out. I was righteously the moer in because I was hungry most of the time! The third week was “Hey, I’m a Bachelor Again Week” when Boela started feeling frisky again. Life would go on. There were lots of other women out there. Yeah right, Boela. He went online and started looking at those dating websites. He even started to think about losing some flab; turning himself into a stud again. Meanwhile it was me who had already lost about five flippen kilo’s! It was at the end of week three that Boela got his great idea: he would take three weeks’ leave and go to Thailand!

Ja well, no fine. His boss thought it was a good idea; Boela had been useless for the past three weeks, anyway. His mates thought it was a great idea; they were all totally gatvol with all his whining and gaaning aan. Boela should go to Bangkok, pomp his heart out and come back a new man.

So Boela did a bit of research: hotels, packages, Patpong Road and other lekker plekke in Bangkok and Pattaya, made his bookings, got some traveller’s cheques and did all the other goeters. Even went to Big and Tall and bought some new shirts and stuff. He was really, and I mean really, excited about his big adventure.

The night before his departure Boela had a moer of a farewell braai with his chommies. They all got really drunk and stupid, but what’s new, hey? Some of his mates wanted to drive him to the airport in the morning but he said they would still be drunk or have killer hangovers; he would get a taxi, no problem.

Of course Boela woke up late the next morning, on the couch in the lounge, feeling like shit. He rushed upstairs to the bathroom and showered. Cut himself trying to shave. Rushed into the bedroom; he hadn’t finished his packing! Threw his stuff into his suitcase and rushed downstairs, still in his vest and underrods. Kitchen and braai lapa a complete mess. Too bad, he had to eat something, quickly. He was standing at the sink stuffing cold wors and chops into his mouth when the thought hit him: Ag fokkit! I haven’t phoned for a taxi!

That was about two weeks ago. Fortunately one of the taps in the bathroom leaks quite badly, so I’ve had enough water to drink. I ate all the leftovers in the kitchen on the first day. Ja well, I was already flippen hungry, wasn’t I? Nothing else to eat; I’ve looked everywhere. All the doors and windows are locked and I can’t get outside. The phone has rung a couple of times but there’s nothing I can do about it. Bella



knows about Boela's trip to Thailand: he sent her an sms boasting about it. Typical, hey? At least a week to go before someone comes to the house – if I'm lucky, that is. It might be a lot longer. I've been crapping on the tiled floor in the bathroom. I can't help feeling guilty when I do it. Geez, I am so glad Bella can't see this. The TV is off. I sleep a lot, and I dream of Bella, sweet, loving Bella. When this is all over she will come and fetch me and I will go and live with her. We'll send that little shit Barend to Boela's old boarding school in Potchefstroom and life will be good.

Ja nee, ou Boela. Who would have thought it, hey? I don't bear any grudges against you. Maybe you weren't such a bad bliksem after all, when all is said and done. But I still can't say I like you. Not like that, anyway. Still, I held out for a helluva long time, didn't I? Nine or ten days, man! Not every dog would do that, Boela, I can tell you.

Bliksem, I got a moer of a fright when you fell down on the kitchen floor. I wanted to help you, but what could I do? I licked your face a few times, but now I'm not sure if that wasn't because of the mutton fat on your mouth and snor, hey? Of course, after an hour or so I knew you were dead and I must admit I got a bit a bit panicky. But after a while it was okay again and I went into the lounge and lay down on the couch where Bella always used to sit. I could still smell her and it made me feel better.

As I said, ou Boela, I held out for a moer of a long time. It nearly killed me, man! Ja nee, of course the thought crossed my mind, often, especially after five or six days. I wanted to, but I just couldn't. And by then you were really bloated, man, smelling a bit vrot and leaking fluids onto the floor. Not lekker.

Anyway, once I got started it wasn't so bad. It's amazing what you can get used to when you're so flippen hungry, hey? So what can I say, ou Boela? Sorry? No. Guilty? No ways! I never loved you; you never deserved it.

But I have to say this, Boela, and I mean every word: I just can't live without you, man!

## "The Great Silence" -Are Supernovas Destroyers of Life in the Universe?

The physicist Enrico Fermi once asked, referring to visits to Earth by extra-terrestrial civilizations: Where are they? The accurate answer might well be: destroyed by radiation from supernova explosions.

A massive white dwarf star in our galaxy may become a supernova several million years from now, and could possibly destroy life on Earth.

Most astronomers today believe that one of the plausible reasons we have yet to detect intelligent life in the universe is due to the deadly effects of local supernova explosions that wipe out all life in a given region of a galaxy.

While there is, on average, only one supernova per galaxy per century, there is something on the order of 100 billion galaxies in the observable Universe. Taking 10 billion years for the age of the Universe (it's actually 13.7 billion, but stars didn't form for the first few hundred million), Dr. Richard Mushotzky of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, derived a figure of 1 billion supernovae per year, or 30 supernovae per second in the observable Universe!

Astronomers think supernova explosions closer than 100 light years from Earth would be catastrophic, but the effects of events further away are unclear and would depend on how powerful the supernova is. The research team postulate it could be close enough and powerful enough to damage Earth, possibly severely, although other researchers, such as Professor Filipenko of the Berkeley Astronomy Department, disagree with the calculations and believe the supernova, if it occurred, would be unlikely to damage the planet.

Who ever said science is boring!

