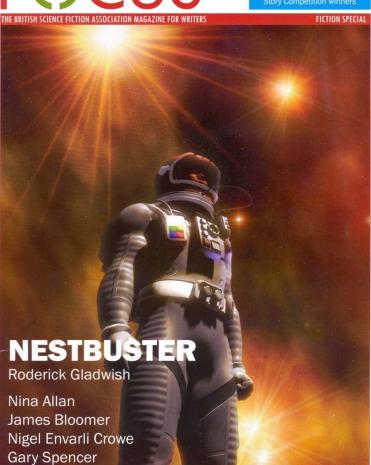


**Andy West** 

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he BSFA 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition winners



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Anniversary Short Story Competition.

The winners of the BSFA's 50th

As a general rule the BSFA no longer publishes new science fiction. There are a couple of reasons for that - but mostly it's because there are plenty of other people out there able to do it much better than we can.

That said, when we came to consider ways of marking the Association's fiftieth anniversary, the idea of running a short story competition seemed both apt and exciting. After all, one of the BSFA's stated aims is to promote the creation of good science fiction as well as it's dissemination. There were plenty of people, however, who had their doubts. Competitions, especially competitions with entry fees, have not always been a success.

So thanks, first, to all those who entered the competition and made it a big hit. Over 100 of you submitted your stories and many were very, very good. Judging entrants was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Thanks to our panel of judges - Stephen Baxter, Alistair Reynolds and Justina Robson - who gave their time freely, took their duties seriously and approached their task with admirably open minds. They were an absolute pleasure to work with.

Thanks also to my fellow members of the BSFA committee for

backing this harebrained scheme.

And finally, thanks to our winners. To Roderick Gladwish for his top-placing story and to all the others who made the final shortlist. We print their stories here - Roderick's first, the rest in alphabetical order - so you can decide whether you agree with the judges, but also because we believe they are good stories, worthy of your time and your attention. I hope you enjoy them

**Martin McGrath** 

Editor Martin McGrath 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St. Albans, AL2 2HL

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## NESTBUSTER by Roderick Gladwish

The double-decker car, with its tear-drop shape and slug-skin sheen crossed from dirt road between grazing cattle to the gravel in front of the farmstead. It drew along side Abraham who continued to groom Barber, his old hork. Patiently sitting on its haunches the giant horse-bat hybrid stretched out its leathery wings so the man could tend to its short flank fur. Barber's muscles were not what they once were; its thin skin clung to the weight-relieving holes in its equine skull. Soon there would be only Abraham to remember what they had done together.

"I'm Doctor Chanti, Department of Health," the driver announced cheerfully stepping out of his transport. He was a broad man, powerfully built. City suit and shoes didn't weather well on the rough land and the heat of late afternoon made Chanti perspire minutes out of his chilled vehicle. The doctor didn't seem to mind, ambling around the creature to proffer his hand.

Patting the beast, Abraham sent it to rejoin the herd. Folding its wings to use as forelegs, it walked slowly from him. It would never take to the sky again.

"It's an honour to meet you Mr Abraham."

Abraham pushed the vac-brush into a pouch on the back of his overalls.

"If you say so."

Abraham shook Chanti's large hand. There was no contest of strength. No point: the smaller Abraham would win.

"I didn't think they'd let those on this planet," Chanti observed nodding in the direction of Barber. "Not one of God's creatures."

"What we create is by the grace of God; so it is God's own."

"I think that's sophistry by the Elders."

"They allow machines, so why not horks."

"I'm glad they do. It takes two weeks to get here from Resolve Garrison by horse and cart. You do hide yourself away Mr Abraham."

"I'm registered."

"So you are, so you definitely are indeed," Chanti flashed a smile. "A figure of speech that's all. I would hate to get off on the wrong foot by offending a Nestbuster. We all owe you."

"No, you don't." Abraham couldn't read Chanti. He could hear no change in heart rhythm. There were no eye motion betrayers. There was no respect, nor was there fear, the other response to finding out what he had

been: what he forever was.

"That's not strictly true, but I respect your modesty. I also truly, honestly respect your willingness to help the Colony Section of the Department of Health. This survey is vital. It will help us improve colony health and cure resurgent ailments. Research on far worlds is vital. Testing on a man like yourself is especially vital. You are like the ultimate Control subject, resistance to so much that would make ordinary colonists wilt."

Abraham felt Chanti was irritating enough to be genuine, but knew different.

"What do you want?"

"I'm sure you've read my missive. I need to do a full medical on you, your wife -" consulting his palm, he continued"- and son. Oh, is wife OK? This is a mono world isn't it? Wife's the right term. I don't want to cause offence.

"She is my wife."

"Wife it is," he answered setting something right in his hand. "I visit so many places. It can change from town to town let alone from world to world. The postwar boon I guess. You can have partner, significant other, mother of my children, current sexual attractor, mature financial dependant, on and on."

"Mrs Abraham to you."

"Mrs Abraham it is," Chanti agreed.

"We agreed to this only if it takes up no more than an afternoon. I want you gone by shallow night."

"By shallow night I shall be gone," Chanti looked up. Two thirds of the sky was occupied by a gas giant, Dutiful Father, half in shadow. Its sunlight side raged in storm caused by the permanent heating by its star. "Weird place, this," he shrugged. "I'm surprised you chose it."

"You have about five hours."

"Plenty of time. Plenty of time indeed. Shall we?"
Chanti waved to the farmstead where Rebecca Abraham
watched from a window. "I feel I should introduce
myself properly before we get down to the intrusive
tests."

Together they walked up to the front door. The sand coloured building was a complex of living space, sheds, barns and workshops, three storeys in places it appeared low as it spread across the land. Designed to house a dynasty it was home to three. Pushing through the front door Chanti didn't wait for Abraham to open it.

In the reception area were coats on a rack and a long

table. A bright vase with carnations took up centre spot on its surface. Rebecca Abraham was resting against it. She wore an ankle length dress of the same material as Abraham's overalls. A bonnet failed to restrain long hair spilling from the back. She flicked a glance to the room from where she had watched.

"Mrs Abraham," Chanti advanced shaking her hand.
"I am Dr Chanti, Department of Health, you can call me
Jad," he smiled. "Ah," he breathed deeply, "I miss the
smell of wood you know. Anyway, I'm here to do some
tests on your little family."

"I know."

"I'm so glad you agreed to helping us in these tests."
"We don't have much choice."

"Don't be so defensive," Chanti said with mock hurt.

"This is all for the greater good."

"That's what they said to my husband in the war, Dr

Chanti."
"It was for the greater good, wasn't it?"

.

"Thank you Mrs Abraham, you have been very patient. I apologise for any discomfort."

Rebecca didn't answer as she ran her thumb up the open central seam of her dress which sealed right up to the neck.

Chanti had brought his examination system into a spare bedroom. It sat in an irregular ring about a high single bed, dark boxes with articulated sensor booms rising from them. These retracted on his command. Consulting his palm, he pursed his liso.

"Is that it?" she asked retying her bonnet.

"Oh yes, you are as fit as can be expected. More worn than standard, but that's to be expected labouring out here. I must say you bear discomfort well."

"There is no discomfort."

"Come now, Mrs Abraham, this is not the easiest life, especially for you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A city girl like yourself moving so far from the Motherworld and its pleasant environs. Resolve isn't much of a town, not that you're close to it."

"I like it here."

"That statement doesn't fit with your profile. I don't see you submitting to be a farmer's wife."

"The war changed my *profile*. After the war I decided my family needed to get away from the Motherworld. We all needed peace."

"Quite so, quite so, Mrs Abraham, although I would have thought it was your husband dragging you out here."

"It was my choice."

"That I find surprising. You really selected this isolation?"

"Yes."

"You have certainly changed. There are many farm worlds with a cosmopolitan outlook and yet you committed yourself to this one, the furthest from home, so to speak. I also note you have no religious tendencies at all, unless that has changed too, and yet you have had to submit to the codes and mores of a rather strict faith. It's noticeable at the garrison, not a single woman serves here and few female spouses would put up with

the restrictions."

"I have not found them restrictive."

"Of course not, of course not, mind you, you do have number advantages over most women."

"What do mean by that?" Rebecca bristled.

"Merely that some of the rules don't apply to you and of course, you are far from most population centres so you can do more or less what you like."

"I respect and follow the Elders' creed always. We are not as isolated as you keep implying. It's only an hour from Bulwark by hork and I keep in touch with the rest of our community daily. And you found us easily enough."

"Of course, of course," Chanti made a small bow.
"Forgive me. Shall we move on to check your delightful son?"

Abraham lay on the rafters in the ceiling above, one eye to a pin hole. His breathing was slower than a coma patient, while his surface temperature mimicked the surroundings. Already Abraham had checked out Chanti's vehicle discovering nothing untoward. It was a garrison car, but had no protection against a man like Abraham.

Rebecca stayed with Chanti as he examined Isaac Junior. The doctor gave him a wooden toy train. When the child pressed the right spot it changed into a horse, another spot a car, a starship and so on. Sitting on the bed the three year old quietly explored the surprises. Gently and respectfully Chanti completed his tests.

"A fine, fit healthy young man," he pronounced. "You should be very proud."

"I am."

"It says he's three, born soon after...do you know I never know what to call it. It was all rather strange don't you think? The government call it 'victory'. Do you know that never sits well with me? Did we win? It all kind of just stopped didn't it? Of course men like your husband helped. What would you call it?"

"The Faithful call it 'deliverance', I won't disagree ith that."

"Deliverance, deliverance...no, doesn't feel right. I shall have to ask your husband."

"Try it."

"I shall Mrs Abraham, I shall."

"Let us return to young junior here. My predictions are that he's going to be big, if I didn't know he was three, I would have said five."

"Runs in my family."

"Yes, it does. He'll be some athlete; he should be closer to the Motherworld. He has potential."

"He will be a farmer."

"Yes," Chanti said. "You'll have to send him to the schools here. He'll become one of them."

"We are one of 'them'."

"What I was trying to say, is that the people of this world will indoctrinate your boy with their beliefs. That is perhaps not the best for any of you."

"It's a good religion, it teaches love and peace and olerance."

"Unless vou're female."

"Dr Chanti, women here are respected. Where I used to live -- on the Motherworld -- there were places and times I wouldn't have been safe. Not here. Here, I can go anywhere at any time."

"Still, I note you were wise enough not to give birth to him here. All the usual damage has been repaired to the extent even I couldn't tell whether you bore Junior or not. That's not how they do it here. Apart from some pain control, a woman experiences child birth to the full with the accompanying stretches and tears. Of course that's something you're never going to have to suffer."

"You might not believe it, but I wish I could."

"I don't, let's move on shall we?"

"You are a very rude man."

"I have to ask questions," he shrugged, "it's my job. Please forgive me if I cause offence. It's not intentional. I have one about your boy."

Chanti felt along Isaac junior's left leg. The boy fascinated by the metamorphosing toy hardly bothered. "I noticed a repair for talipes equinovarus."

"His club foot? Yes, it was fixed last year."

"That was late. It would have been done in vivo anywhere but here."

"We wanted to make sure he was strong enough." After a pause she added, "He is our only child. It was the last Isaac's genetic reserve. He was our last chance." "Ah ves, I understand."

"No, you don't. No, you don't understand. You keep needling me and you don't understand. You don't understand how much we wanted a family. You don't understand how screwing around with my husband's genetics took that away. You don't understand we couldn't take any more samples from Isaac as his own body is classified. You don't understand we can't adopt because of what he did for people like you, because you asked him to do it and he did it. You don't understand how much...how special our son is."

Abraham willed his wife not to get angry.

"I don't like your games! What are you after?" Rebecca drew a breath. Her son had stopped playing and attentively watched her.

"This is just research, scientific research, that's all." "After all your scientists' promises we had one son, not with your help. By the grace of God, we had one precious child--" Rebecca collected her son resting him on her hip. "--now you come here insulting me and questioning our actions. If I could take my family any further from the Motherworld I would. My husband has paid. I have paid now leave us alone.'

"I'm sorry to have offended you, Mrs Abraham." Chanti raised his hands defensively. "I care about people's health, both physical and mental. You and your husband are so out of place here, it's a puzzle I must probe. For your own well being that is."

"Hell is waiting for men like you, Dr Chanti." Rebecca stormed from the room.

Abraham sat naked on the bed whilst the tips of

Chanti's sensor booms followed the topology of his form. Reacting to the hovering probes his skin rippled with unnatural colours.

"Fascinating, Mr Abraham," Chanti referenced his palm. "There are so few of you. It is such an honour and, if I must confess, professionally exciting to be given the chance to examine a nestbuster."

Sighing, Abraham felt tired, it had been four years since his last systems check. The memory drained him as much as Chanti's questions.

"Defence said this would be reversed. They promised."

"You might be needed again, you know that."

"They could at least fix the poison flusher. I can't get drunk, at least fix that."

The last examination had been after his squadron had decided to drink themselves to death. A bar near the base always welcomed Infiltrators, when the bar owner spotted the Nestbuster insignia, it was free jugs of whatever, for twenty-four hours straight. They'd chosen vodka. End results: the Nestbuster legend grew bigger and bladder cramps. After that they picked the option the other Nestbusters did -- they wouldn't be coming back from the next mission.

"Way beyond me, Mr Abraham, anyway you should be pleased. The enhancements give you full resistance to the heightened radiation on this planet. You son too has the same resistance. Sadly your wife does not and will die at best twenty years earlier than if she were back on her Motherworld."

"We all die."

"Yes, Mr Abraham, yes, that is true." Chanti summoned a stream of data into the air. "The mystery Mr Abraham, is that you are still alive."

Abraham studied Chanti deeply. His heartbeat remained that same regular rhythm from his arrival, heat patterns normal, the hot cybernetic strands between palms and brain were typical for a medico.

Abraham said nothing.

Sensors swung into his view to explore his eyes like the rest of him, a hundred percent natural, not necessarily human.

"Your squad is a mystery too."

"Not my squad."

"The squadron of Captain Waynes is a mystery. It's members don't die. You should be following the statistics like I do. Suicides, disappearances, succumbing to infections, cancers, insanity are ten times the average for Infiltrator-Penetrators. Nestbusters seem to loose that life spirit except all your squad have none of these issues. It's a mystery."

"Your mystery."

Waynes had warned him this man would be coming. He had visited, testing, toyed with all the squad. It was his turn for silence

"Mr Abraham, it is a mystery for all of us. If you could tell me anything, I could use it to save the lives of so many other squads. What secret is it that keeps you going? My estimate is that before this decade is out only your colleagues will remain. You could save yet more lives."

"They don't want to be saved."

"Think of their families, think of their potential lives." "Think of the military assets lost."

"No, Mr Abraham, these are people. People with lives, with futures, people who need your help."

"To be used again," Abraham stated swiping away the arm blocking his view.

At a silent command the devices retracted and folded ready for transportation.

"You can dress," Chanti said. Turning from Abraham he walked to the window and pulled away the blinds. Dutiful Father fixed in the sky had changed phase as the moon he stood on, Faithful Son, swung around its sunlight side. As the giant was tidally locked to the sun, its moon was locked to it.

"This is an unbelievable world," Chanti mused. "Near standard gravity, comfortable fixed season, surface liquid water – survivable radiation levels – and, on top of it all, a twenty-four hour day of sorts."

"Forty-nine," Abraham corrected pulling on his overalls.

"This hemisphere sees night in its own shadow and haffway round again - twenty-four hours later - night in Dutiful Father's shadow. A natural outcome of orbital dynamics and yet, seemingly designed. Do you know there is an increasing movement on the Motherworld that these places were artificially created specially for us?"

"Find a hundred thousand planetary bodies and a few of them are going to be habitable."

"There's a growing theory, that the War wasn't a war at all, but a test. They, whoever 'they' are, sent us against us and we proved ourselves worthy. Our reward was these worlds. Many are waiting for an invitation to join some kind of galactic club."

"It was a war." Last button engaged with finality.

"Hear a theory enough times and it gets you thinking? After almost four years of silence, of no hint of the enemy, I ask myself was it all a test?"

"It was war."

"Strange way to fight us don't you think? Sending millions of psychopathic superhumans to exterminate us face to face."

"Big guns destroyed too much. Best way for minimal damage to the real estate, send 'fellas after fellows."

"Oh yes, badfellas; not heard that nickname for a while. Ferrets after rabbits, a general once put it. We captured a lot of their technology afterwards and that has helped the colonization programme. Or did we earn it?"

"By being more ruthless than their manufactured killers?"

"Perhaps." Chanti returned to his kit, lifting units into self-propelled crates. "Forgive me, Mr Abraham, I'm sure it must have been asked before, but I have to ask: did you see anything of our real foe? You know, the creatures behind their army? You went deeper into their hives than anyone else, surely there must have been some clue."

Abraham slowly raised his head, hyper-perceptive eyes blank, enhanced memory replaying the day he was planned to die...

...fifty levels down in an iron asteroid the explosions on the surface still reached them rumbling through the structure they clung to. Another decoy ship. Ten in a crew. Abraham had counted five hundred and thirty deaths so far, he had learnt on his four missions to identify the difference between the notes of high-yield surface detonations and a pressurised war machine bursting. A fair cost was two thousand lives to cover the infiltrator-penetrator entry, sometimes it was ten

Big Pac, Corporal Pec, Captain Waynes, Sergeant Chen and Abraham had been selected for the final phase. Positioned like relay runners through the construct were the rest of the squad ready to draw fire if necessary to see the mission succeed. The deepest penetrators held station by a vaulted entrance, blending with clean rock melted into a wall. To be seen was to die. Every badfella was a giant, lightening fast and very hard to kill. If bested, but not dead, they would detonate a bomb all of them wore killing anyone surrounding them. Attrition of their own didn't matter thanks to the nests.

Patrols swept the nest. It was clear that the enemy had a good idea of how soldier production was being stopped. Whatever minds ruled the enemy, they hadn't worked out how ordinary humans could enter their bases.

Abraham counted deaths pressed against a wall. He wore a suit made of his own skin, thickened and layered, densely loaded with ossciles to form pressure-suit armour. It sympathetically changed with his natural camouflage beneath. On his back under stretched flesh was his part of the bomb heavier than three ordinary men could carry. Although it made him look like a turtle it hardly hindered his agility.

Pulsing magnetic and electric fields neutered any kind of sophisticated electrical technology. Infiltratorpenetrators were one hundred percent biological and as natural as cyanide. Their bomb was mechanics and chemistry.

Over a thousand had died in the assault to provoke a counter-attack, when Waynes signalled the move.

His men slithered through the entrance and into the birthing chamber.

What everyone called a nest, Abraham's commanders labelled this as: Biological Production Facility XPS95. Abraham had no name for the place. Those who thought they understood called it Hell. Hell was later when the chemicals that wound up his senses, enhanced his speed and subdued his fears ebbed leaving him with picture perfect memories his military-gifted infallible brain cursed him with. Nest and Production Facility were comfort words to hide what was necessary.

Every production facility was identical: a circular bowl six stores high, broad enough for the slope to appear slight. The floor above curved in on the one below. Light streamed though a central circular opening. Across the whole surface were thousands of shallow pits the size of double beds with only enough room to crawl between them. Domes of distended flesh sat in the pits. These were the mothers of the enemy.

Slick tubes of living tissue laced the volume. Waynes lead the way threading through them with his men following attentive to threats.

Babies were being born faster than the ships died. Out would slide mucus coated packages struggling free as a womb-dome collapsed. Ten, twelve, fourteen at a time would appear.

Distorted hands, on the ends of stretched human arms fused to the mothers would gather each new-born and hand it on to the next dome's limbs. On would travel the child, dripping, like a bucket in chain battling a fire.

Mewing and crying was worse than explosions. There was choking too.

Stopping, eyes screwed shut, Abraham's received a punch from Pec to keep moving. Pec was lucky, the only psycho on the team, he never lost focus. Funny, Abraham thought, as they carried on, how he'd agreed to die with the rest of them. Pec wasn't supposed to feel

There were clearly two baby-chains. How they were sorted so early was beyond Abraham. Healthy products travelled to the central opening to be handed above for a life in the ranks of the enemy. He guessed they were accelerated to adulthood because with each nestbuster success fewer raids would be reported.

Abraham obsessed about baby-chain number two. Always in his head, it tore at his heart from mission one onwards.

Captain Waynes arrived at the centre with heaven's grace glowing directly above. Upwards could be seen the seven other birthing chambers. In the central void spidery limbs handed cherubs upwards into the light where they vanished. Fluids dripping off them glowed like a golden rain.

There was no space for the bomb.

Pec drew a ceramic knife from this forearm and sprang onto the nearest dome.

Abraham looked away.

Every child drifting slowly upwards would become a man it could take twenty to kill. He had seen towns empty of life, slaughter delivered mercilessly. He had fought them too, until he had no friends left, but that was their potential. Here, womb-fresh there was only innocence.

Butchery done the team unpacked their device climbing onto bloody leftovers.

The bomb was simple: diamond springs, released by chemical erosion to ram segments into critical mass: fission then fusion.

Once he had delivered his part for Waynes and Big Pac to assemble Abraham pulled his pump-action crossbow from its holster.

If discovered they would hold off the badfellas until Waynes detonated. There would be no fighting their way out. Orders were to set the bomb and then exit.

Agreed in a pointless drinking session, they would prepare the bomb, defend it if necessary, but if all was quiet sit around and vaporise.

Until then Abraham decided to followed baby-stream two...

"No, just humans," Abraham said.

"I've always hoped there'd be some clue to who they are. You'd think we'd find them in at least one resource

"Resource centre? Is that what they're called now?" "Weapons plants, ship yards, farms and other production facilities. Yes, yes, I would call them

resource centres." "Have we finished?" Abraham put on his boots.

"I suppose we are," Chanti smiled. "You couldn't think of why your squad has such a...one should say zest, let us say, attachment to life."

"No."

"What do you have to live for Mr Abraham?"

"Why do you breed your horks, till the soil, breath the next breath? What makes you live Mr Abraham? "My family."

Abraham saw Chanti to his car.

The herd of horks had drifted in their unbalanced gait to graze on a distant hill.

Looking over to them Chanti observed:

"I've always wondered why those creatures never escape. They can fly anywhere they want and yet never hear of escaping and eating some neighbour's crop."

"They are bred to dislike flying without a human on their back."

"Ah yes programming, programming is everything. Anyway, thank you Mr Abraham and thank your wife. I have learnt much. You have a fine son, he is special, see he grows up true. Good-" Chanti glanced up. "- see its not yet shallow night."

While the vehicle turned and silently raced away, Abraham walked back to the house.

Rebecca came out.

Around her ears and wrists were hot lines from where Rebecca's body was reacting against new implants. Abraham put a finger to his lips.

She closed her mouth.

Leading Rebecca back into the house, he found a slate from Issac's scatter of toys. Switching on at his touch, rainbow ink tracked his finger:

Say nothing. Monitors have been seeded everywhere. Nodding she took the slate from her husband and wrote:

He knows.

Silently Abraham agreed.

Above was the eternal turmoil of the storm on Dutiful Father, bright in the full glare of its sun. The dot cast by Faithful Son was visible.

Below, in strange hues from reflected light, were vast fields of grain in all states of growth.

Between was Abraham riding Courier, Barber's clone. He lay against its thick neck. Cold air excited his bare skin, which had blended into the twilight of shallow night. Courier's skin obeyed its rider's and matched it. He had always had a talent for stealth, Barber had been his favourite military transport when life was simply hunting badfellas infiltrating the Motherworld.

Chanti's car was travelling at speed surging by kilometre long land-trains.

A hork was fast, but not enough to overhaul the bullet of a car with a head start on a laser straight highway. Abraham only needed to keep line of sight. Over the pumping shoulder joint of Courier he watched the vehicle, waiting for it to arrive at the bright arch of concrete spanning the shear-sided rift valley where the first colony used to be. Not all the enemy's weapons had been biological.

Applying pressure with his knees made Courier still its ribbed aerofoils. Aiming a thin cup at the car, It was heavily screened against interference, but Abraham's device was within its main shield and placed to circumvent the rest of its protection.

Captain Waynes had given him a fist full of pulse scramblers and a few weapons no one cared about counting when the war ended. Waynes had made sure all his people were prepared after what they had done.

Navigation lights winked out. All electrics died including the brakes and the automatic systems that kept the vehicle safe. Although slowing it was still travelling too quickly and spun off the span.

Trained to be thorough Ábraham circled the bridge gauging the best way to approach the crash site and ensure Chanti was dead and his records erased. Once he had sighted the wreckage Abraham guided his mount to the valley floor, a couple of kilometres away from his destination.

3

...what the hell are you doing!" Pec hissed, ripping off his blood speckled mask-face. Underneath his boyish face was puzzled.

"I can't do this."

Pec crawled up beside Abraham who cradled a child. "This is insane," Pec said softly. He maintained a scan of the surroundings.

"I can't do this."

"Abe, we're ending it here. No more of this."
"No. I'm taking him."

"Abe, we've had this talk too many times."

"Do you know how long Becca and me have tried for a baby? Years before I signed up for this."

"I know Abe, I know, it just wasn't your luck mate."

"Look!"
At Abraham's shout all the adults in the chamber

froze; hands on weapons. Pec signalled the all clear.

The construction of the bomb continued.

"They're throwing them away!" Abraham moaned.

"I've tried so hard and they're throwing them away!" In stream two were all the stillborns and the

imperfect. Handed to a corner of the room and dropped into a giant greasy funnel.

Abraham rested against its lip.

Playing with the weak grip of the boy clutching at his finger, Abraham could see nothing else.

"Look at him, only his foot is a little bent. There's nothing else wrong with him and they were going to throw him away."

"One in billions, not worth the effort."

"We could take him home."

"We're not going anywhere, Abe."

"Can you hear what happens to them at the bottom of that chute. They don't want him, they'll not notice him. We could slip way. It's just one."

"Yeah, but you're not going to are you?" Pec asked palming his knife.

"No, not without the rest of you, we're mates."

"Yeah mates," Pec agreed. "You sit there, Abe. Keep him quiet...

It was an easy jog through shattered rocks, blending with wild and mutated former house plants. Patches of grain from seed carried by the wind grew where soil had collected against barren stone. Saplings and tree stumps were rare, but enough for breaking up his outline in the poor light. Approaching from the high ground built up from rubble Abraham saw a trick of the light.

Corpse cold sat a human figure atop the mangled car. Internal organs, blood vessels and nerves began to warm, the glowing infrared tracery becoming complex as the different levels of cybernetic introductions came to life far more than Abraham had registered before.

"Do you think they'll try again?" Chanti asked of the shadows. "To exterminate us. that is."

No sound.

"Four years of silence," he said. "They are planning, we're sure of it, trying to understand how we stopped them. We plan too. We scout, we think, we experiment. The trick is never to fight the next war like the last, but still use what you have learnt. We're trying all sorts of things, like me for instance."

No clue to the threat closing

"We know what you did. It was one off discard stream wasn't it? It always is. You're not the only one you know. We estimate most of the lost Nestbusters were trying to smuggle out children. And there you are, trying for years for a family, surrounded by thousands of them. It's always an imperfect one. It's that little feeling of humanity you saved someone no one — no thing — cared for. It's why your squad live on like the others we know of and well done to you. Perhaps that's why we won the first round. Perhaps they can't kill each other and thought we couldn't either. But of course we have been slaughtering each other since pre-history and yet will die trying so save a child we know nothing about."

Death could come unseen.

"Trust me, we don't want to hurt you or your son. Not you, not your wife, not your, sorry, Captain Waynes's squad are in trouble."

Chanti looked behind him - nothing.

"We want you to live and be bountiful. Like you said, you are an asset and you may be called upon again or, if you look at it another way, you are the perfect person to raise your son. We want him to love you, to love this planet, to love his fellows. It may be him or his grandchildren we call upon to defend us."

Abraham rose out of the ground not a metre in front of Chanti.

"You're good," Chanti admitted.

"You'll leave us alone?"

"If you let us watch, yes."

Chanti stood up and began to walk away, turning he said:

"Enjoy your family Mr Abraham, it's what we are all fighting for." ③

# TIME'S CHARIOT by Nina Allan

y first time machine was a Longines. It was given to me for my eighteenth birthday by my mother's brother, Henry Pullinger. I suppose we should have called him uncle but we never did. With my sister Dora it was because she disliked ranks or titles of any kind. With me it was just that I never thought of him that way. The word uncle always conjured up images of sinister good humour shading to idiocy. Henry Pullinger was a kind but serious man who was always trying to make up for Dora and me not having a father. He was central to both our lives, although not for the reasons he seemed to think he ought to be. His nervous attempts at discipline, the pep talks relating to school or sex or what we ought to aim for in the future - these things made us laugh behind his back when we were children and feel embarrassed as we grew older. What we loved about Henry were precisely those things he tried to hide from us: his shyness in the company of strangers, his taste for foreign food and expensive clothes, most of all his outlaw status, his indifference to social norms.

He looked very like my mother, the same dark colouring and frowning expression. People often mistook them for twins. Dora was the spit of Henry. I was the odd one out. With my fair hair and pale skin I was given to understand from an early age that I took after my father.

Henry lived alone in a flat in West Kensington. He hated clutter and dust, and kept the place scrupulously clean. For some years during my early teens he shared the flat with a young architect called Thomas Byrne. who designed metro systems and sewer complexes, anything involving tunnels. I loathed Thom because I didn't like having to compete for Henry's attention. Dora claimed to be in love with him. There was a game we played in which Dora would concoct all kinds of lurid fantasies about Thom and I would pretend to get angry. Thom went away in the end. He got involved with some minor film director but it turned out to be his wife he was interested in, a lanky Yemeni girl with slim hips and bitten nails. Henry seemed to take it philosophically, as he seemed to take everything. He had his books and his students after all. At the time of Thom's departure he had just started work on what he jokingly called his magnum opus, a biography of Rimbaud that took him ten years to write. It was a strange book, mixing conventional biography with passages of fabricated reportage and Henry's own

personal diary during those years. It left the critics divided.

Henry dedicated the book to my mother. Her name was Violet. When my father left she went back to her maiden name and became Violet Pullinger once more. I always liked the name. It suited her long pale hands and bony writss, her frizz of dark hair. Dorothy and I were left stranded with our father's name, which was Newland. It seemed right for us, Dora and I. We were a new land after all, a country of two.

I never set much store by birthdays. I disliked the fuss and bother on account of something you had no say in. I paid my eighteenth birthday even less attention than usual because I was in the thick of mid-term exams. On the day itself I had a difficult History paper and wanted nothing more than to get the day over with. In the evening Dora and I had been planning to sneak up to town and see the new Brian de Palma movie but Henry had other ideas. When I arrived back at the house after finishing the exam I found my mother looking put upon and Henry looking portentous. He had dug out some crystal glasses from the box under the stairs where my mother kept the tableware and china that had been given to her as wedding presents. There was a silver toast rack, I remember, some horn napkin rings, a sherry decanter. Henry was filling the glasses with champagne.

"Happy birthday, Martin!" he said as soon as he saw me, "Did the paper go well?"

I took a glass of champagne and in the business of clinking glasses with Henry managed to avoid answering the question about the History exam. As far as Henry was concerned this was an important day for me and he wanted to celebrate it accordingly. I glanced at Dora. She was wearing a green velvet dress that was too tight for her. She shrugged and said nothing. Our plans were ruined but neither of us could bear to disappoint Henry. He was all set on going up to town but I suggested we try somewhere local instead.

"It's beautiful out," I said. "Let's walk across the park."

I didn't want us to end up at one of Henry's usual haunts because I knew my mother didn't like them. She never much enjoyed eating out because she felt uncomfortable being on show. In the smart Soho restaurants Henry favoured she would eat even less than usual.

"Do you know anywhere suitable?" asked Henry

doubtfully. He was always mystified by South London, which he thought of as a repository of knife crime, grubby takeaways and discount supermarkets. I told him there was a good Chinese restaurant in Blackheath. Dora and I loved Chinese food and so did Henry. I took Dora's hand. The sky had the colour and translucency of amethyst.

Henry ordered the food. He loved to take charge in these situations and we were happy to leave him to it. Dora and Henry and I made short work of the meal while my mother picked at a small bowl of chicken satay. When Henry ordered another bottle of champagne she perked up a little.

"I'd like to propose a toast," said Henry. He tapped the end of his knife on the rim of his glass. "To Martin, who today makes the transition from boy to man."

My mother giggled. With her fuzzy hair slightly awry and her open-necked white silk shirt she looked like a recalcitrant schoolgirl. I thanked Henry for the meal. I was relieved it would soon be over, even though I had enjoyed the food.

"I wanted to give you this," said Henry, "Just something to remember the day." He took something from his jacket pocket and pushed it towards me across the tablecloth, a small oblong package wrapped in a dull gold paper. I hated to think what was in it, some fancy pair of cufflinks or one of the expensive fountain pens he was so fond of. Henry was always giving me pens. He liked to think of me as a scholar in the making. He, far more than my mother, had been distraught when I failed half my mock 'O' Levels. He offered to pay for a private tutor to help get me through the exams but my mother had turned him down flat.

"There's no point in you wasting your money," she said. "Martin's just lazy, that's all."

She was right of course. I'm sure the only reason I managed to scrape into university was because I didn't want to see the look on Henry's face if I failed my 'A' Levels.

Dora was different. She passed everything in sight, although much of what she was taught held little of real interest for her.

I tore off the paper, revealing a flat leather box. I liked the box at once. It had the patina of age, and a wonderful workmanlike quality that reminded me of the plain but elegant décor of Henry's flat. I opened it quickly, preparing for disappointment at the sight of the cufflinks or a tiepin and wanting to put the moment behind me. When I first saw the watch the first thing I felt was surprise at being wrong.

It was the simplest and loveliest of objects: steel case, black strap, white face. The hands had been set to the correct time, and the long, needle-like second hand was sweeping around the dial with a graceful gliding motion that tugged at my heart. I realised I wanted it. I smiled, in amazement at myself.

"It's a Longines," said Henry. He leaned over and pointed at the dial, where the unfamiliar name was printed in black. "Longines were one of the finest Swiss firms in their heyday. Lindberg wore a Longines to fly the Atlantic. This one is a military model. It was made just after the war."

"I'm sure it was too expensive," said my mother. "He'll only go and lose it, you know."

That was unfair of her. We both knew I didn't lose things. I think she felt uncomfortable sometimes, being dependent on Henry for so much.

"Henry," I said. "Thank you."

I passed the box to Dora. She held it between her hands and looked down at the watch inside. With her long green dress and dark hair pulled back from her face she looked like a mediaeval astronomer consulting an astrolabe. Henry beamed, the kind of pure, untroubled smile that was rare with him. He could tell how pleased I was and no further words were necessary. We understood each other perfectly. It was a rare moment between us.

Henry paid the bill. We walked with him to the station, where he insisted on calling a taxi to take us home. My mother sat in the front seat beside the driver, Dora and I sat close together in the back. It was still not quite dark. I could see my mother's face in the rear view mirror. Her hands were folded in her lap and her eyes were closed. She seemed to be asleep but I knew that she was not, that she was pretending because she didn't want the taxi man to talk to her. She had a dislike of casual conversation. My mother and I were alike in this, as I suppose we were alike in so much.

Dora stared straight ahead, her face bathed in the orange light from the oncoming traffic. She smelled of nettles, or pine needles, some new shampoo she was using. I wanted to kiss her mouth hard, so our teeth would grind together and perhaps draw blood.

When we got home we went straight upstairs. We went to my room, where the bed was still unmade from the morning. I pulled the cover up over the duvet and we lay down. I held her for some minutes in silence, relishing her closeness and warmth. She was seventeen then, just eleven months younger than me. That morning she had given me her own present, a recent biography of Brunel and a silver bookmark shaped like a rose.

Dora's presents were often bizarre but I always enjoyed them. They led me into territory I might never have explored otherwise. And while I was no scholar in the way Henry would have liked me to be I had an appetite for books of any kind.

"You like it a lot, don't you?" said Dora. "The watch Henry gave you, I mean." Her voice was muffled against my shoulder but I had no trouble understanding her. I stroked her head, feeling the bumpy fragile contours of her skull.

"I think it's beautiful," I said. "It's such a perfect thing."

"Clocks make me nervous sometimes," she said. "They remind me of how little time we have left."

It was a strange thing for her to say. I had never known Dora to be morbid. She had a steady pragmatic mind and was too absorbed in the life she was living to worry unduly about the future. I put it down to the champagne and forgot all about it. In later years when I remembered her words I always had to push them away.

"Does it bother you then?" I said. "My having it?"
"I love you having it. It reminds me of your mind, all

ordered and silver and neat." She giggled and I rolled her on her back. She always saw me as orderly and painstaking, even though I saw myself as obdurate and chaotic. It was strange, how right she was. It was as if she instinctively recognised that in the luminous dial and the intricate mechanism behind it I had found everything I was looking for, an ideal of perfection and constructive order I had been striving towards without even realising it.

She squirmed away from me and got up from the bed. "Tm tired," she said. "Goodnight." She kissed me on the forehead and left the room. A moment later I heard her in the bathroom, the toilet flushing and then the sound of running water. Dora's baths were so hot they drained the immersion tank. It drove our mother crazy.

It had been some years since Dora and I had shared a bed. We had often spent nights together before that, crammed side by side into either my bed or hers, but the older we grew the more difficult and dangerous this became. It was Dora who put a stop to it, although I had the sense that this physical separation was a temporary thing, a measure she had introduced while she, in her pragmatic way, considered the implications of doing otherwise.

I could stand it, be resigned to it even, so long as there was nobody else.

I lay back on the bed. It had grown dark while we were talking, but I didn't turn on the light. I took the leather box from my jacket pocket and laid the watch gently on my pillow. It came to me that time itself had no material presence, that it did not truly exist until it had been taken up by the watch and passed through its mechanism like thread through the eve of a needle. In becoming the owner of the Longines my relationship to time had changed. I felt I had acquired rights over it. The idea had a strange power. With extreme care I raised the crown of the watch and moved the hands backwards by a quarter of an hour. I wished Dora were still with me in the room, as she had been fifteen minutes ago. I waited but she did not come. The watch's ticking was measured and patient, like the beating of a tiny mechanical heart. I had never considered what made a watch tick before, any more than I really understood how the human heart pumped blood around the body that contained it. On that evening it was enough simply to listen. The sound was infinitely consoling. I moved the watch closer to my ear and felt my breathing become more even, my eyes begin to close.

A college friend once told me how large parts of his childhood had been shaped by his father's phobia of clocks. It wasn't clocks so much, he said, as the sound they made. He could never wear a mechanical watch next to his skin because he could feel its vibrations. If there was a clock in the room he would almost instantly become aware of it to the exclusion of all other things, even much louder sounds such as voices or music.

"Chiming clocks were the worst," he said. "We once went on holiday to a small village in the Spanish Pyrenees. It was one of those places you read about, where the cafes stay open past midnight and the old men play boules in the street. We rented a villa near the village centre. It had slate floors and a massive step-down bath made of marble. My mother and sister thought they'd died and gone to heaven. But we were only able to stay there one night.

"There was a town clock in the square that chimed the hours, and not just the hours but the quarters and the half hours, too. I remember my father's face when he heard it, when he first realised it was there. He went rigid all over, as if he had been injected with some paralysing drug. He didn't sleep a wink all night. The next day we returned the keys of the villa to the agency and drove to the nearest big town. We found a good hotel and had a good holiday. But there was always this tension, this wondering if my dad would be all right. You hear about some people having the same thing with aeroplanes, or spiders. My father was never afraid of spiders, though. In fact he quite liked them."

When I asked him what his father had been afraid freactly the man just shrugged. "Time getting away from him, I suppose," he said. "He once told me that lying there in the dark listening to the bells chiming off the hours was like hearing the four horsemen of the apocalypse thundering towards him across the desert."

In theory I could understand it but never in fact. I found the ticking of my watch to be the most soothing, the most companionable of sounds. I finally got undressed and into bed. I slipped the watch under my pillow. I went to sleep then quickly, and slept well.

I have no memories of my father. He left us when I was less than a year old and before Dora had even been born. For many years I didn't even know what he looked like. Later I found a whole cache of photographs. They were in a shoebox in the airing cupboard, wedged in behind an old duvet and the spare blankets. The pictures showed a young man with dark blond, combedback hair and thin cheeks. Some showed him with my mother, his arm around her shoulders, his hand on her knee. I suppose he was good looking in his way. I knew I was supposed to resemble him but I just couldn't see it. I don't know if this was because I didn't want to see it or if my mother had been mistaken. In any case it seemed not to matter. I had been curious to see the photographs but I wanted nothing to do with my father and was never tempted to seek him out. He after all had wanted nothing to do with me.

His name was Peter Newland. He had been a sales rep for one of the first computer software companies. My mother never talked about him and apart from those bare essentials she made it clear she didn't want to answer any questions. I once asked Henry why Peter Newland had walked out on her.

"He claimed he never wanted children," he said.
"When he found out Violet was pregnant with Dora that was it."

I thought it was a cowardly action but I didn't want to dwell on it. I knew nothing of my father, of what factors might have influenced his decisions, and had no wish to know. I did not want to be defined by someone else's actions, least of all by the actions of someone I had never known. I put the photographs back in the shoebox and stuffed them to the back of my wardrobe. I knew that I would keep them, but I didn't think I would look at them very often.

My mother went to school locally in Greenwich, but that was not where she met my father. It was Peter Newland though who put down the deposit on the house in Calvert Road, and perhaps it said something about him that when he left he relinquished all claim to the house and the equity that was in it. I think Henry helped with the mortgage payments at first. Later on, when Dora and I had started going to school, my mother worked part-time as a medical receptionist.

My first memories are of the house: the long downstairs hallway with its black and white tiles, the sour and brackish odour of the small galley kitchen, the fake William Morris wallpaper on the upstairs landing. There was a concrete vard out the back and a scrappy lawn where my mother had the rotary clothes dryer. On one side lived an old man who wore a tweed cap and bred budgerigars. On the other there was a smartly dressed young woman of a similar age to my mother, although as far as I knew the two never exchanged a word. On the wall of my bedroom was a large coloured map of the world, an early and beloved present from Henry. I learned most of it by heart and would often send myself to sleep by mentally reciting the names of all the countries in Africa or the capital cities of South America. For some reason none of this ever did me much good in my geography classes. It was a private thing, and had no connection with schoolwork.

I remember my mother's hands, long and slightly rough, the opal ring on the middle finger of her right. I remember how she talked on the telephone, sometimes for hours, after I had gone to bed at night.

I have no memories of Dorothy from before the age of four but from that moment on my memories are continuous, conscious, what you might call adult.

It is true to say I loved her at first sight, though I had no understanding of her as a sister. From the first days of my awareness of her I was thrilled by her otherness, her identity as a separate person. Until then I had lived a child's solipsistic view of the world. If If thought about other people at all it was mostly to calculate how their actions might impact upon me. With Dora I was struck almost mute by the idea that she could be herself and yet love me, that she could ally her will with mine and yet remain intact, inviolable, gloriously private.

Perhaps it was because we were so close in age. Perhaps it was because our mother was distant, lost in her world of troubles, and we fell back on one another. I believe none of these things. They explain closeness and sympathy but they do not explain Dora and me.

She was a sturdy, unsmiling child who would sometimes think for a long time before speaking. Some might have said she was prone to moods. She had my mother's coarse dark hair, Henry's bottle-green eyes. When she was very young she would come into my arms whenever I came near her, laying her face against my chest and locking her small square hands behind my back. As she grew older she became physically less demonstrative but even so we were never apart for long.

I never experienced a moment's guilt over what we felt for one another and so long as there had been no question of children we might easily have flouted the law. Our mother saw what went on and ignored it. Her experience with Peter Newland had left her with little time for social conventions and she preferred to keep herself to herself.

As a family we were peculiar. As three people sharing a house we got along surprisingly well.

I loved Dora so completely that the feeling was

inseparable from being alive, but I was envious of her too. What I envied was her sense of herself, her pragmatism, her ablitly to concentrate her mind on something and succeed at it. She was interested in so many things and was good at all of them. She could have taken her life in any one of a dozen directions.

Compared with her I felt like a fraud, a dilettante, someone kicking around on the sidelines while the game went on.

I think Henry might have realised how I felt and he diverything he could to encourage me in my interests, but the fault wasn't in my family or teachers, it was in me. My mind was a closed room from which I looked out at the world with a sense of incredulity that was almost entirely passive. I watched, but I took no action. Nothing affected me strongly enough to make me want to grab it and not let go.

Henry had an old-fashioned slide-viewer, an oblong plastic box with a slit in the top. When you put in a slide a light came on, projecting the transparency against a white background. The photographs showed groups of people: at the seaside or on board an aeroplane, seated around a table in paper hats. They seemed frozen in time. I had no idea who any of them were but that didn't matter to me. Their world seemed magical, softly-lit and private, poised somehow between our own world and the past.

I used to imagine that in a world like that anything would become possible. I would lie on my back in the middle of Henry's living room floor, one eye pressed to the viewfinder of the slide projector and wondering how I could arrange to be transported inside it. I wanted to be like those strangers, moving through the half-light at one remove.

When I told Dora this she was angry. "That's horrible," she said. "What if you got in and then couldn't get out?"

She was seven years old then. I imagined her snatching up the plastic box and staring through the viewfinder, searching the unknown faces in the old photographs, desperately looking for the one she recognised.

When Henry gave me the Longines everything changed. It was like a light going on inside me. Everything in the world seemed to gather focus, to become a function of this new passion, and finally I began to make sense of my life. I discovered in the Longines's mechanics all the perfection and idiosyncrasy of a world in miniature. In apprehending that world I also became a part of it. I had discovered what I wanted to do: I wanted to become a connoisseur of time.

Dorothy and my mother didn't get on. My mother thought Dora was cold. Dora thought my mother had let her life drown in indecision. They never fought or argued but they were uneasy in each other's company. They sometimes went several days without speaking, though this was never the result of any particular grievance.

When Dora became ill my mother had no idea how to cope with it. The practical things she left to Henry, and when it was all over she made her escape as quickly as she could. She had a friend, Leonie Sutton, someone she had known since school. Leonie Sutton had married an Australian, a medical student, and had gone to join him in Melbourne as soon as she graduated from college. She and my mother had kept in touch though. Their friendship was remarkable in that Leonie remained my mother's only real friend and the only person apart from Henry that had known her before she married my father. When Dora and I were children we always saw the arrival of Leonie's Christmas card as the signal for the start of the holiday. The cards themselves were always of the same type: small and highly-coloured on a stiff, slightly waxy white paper. Sometimes they contained a photograph of Leonie, by herself or with her husband and three children. There was always a letter, too, but those we were forbidden to look at.

I have no idea what my mother wrote in her letters to Leonie Sutton, but the fact that they existed were proof to me of something mysterious: that my mother had a private inner life that had nothing to do with me and Dora and perhaps was even keot secret from Henry.

Dora had been dead less than three months when my mother told me she was going to visit Leonie Sutton in Australia. She said she would be gone for six weeks.

Australia. She said she would be gone for six weeks.
"You don't mind, do you?" she said. "Leonie has
always wanted me to go."

I couldn't remember the last time she had asked me how I felt about something. Since Dora's death we had lived side by side in the Greenwich house as usual but more than ever we had communicated through Henry. There was no hatred, no blame, no dislike, even —just nothing, and nowhere to go. I looked at her, this strange, scrawny woman, with the fuzz of dark hair so like Dora's and thought suddenly how pitiless her life had been. I still knew almost nothing about her.

"Of course I don't mind," I said. I gazed at her hands, the still beautiful tapering fingers, the opal ring. "Opals come from Australia, don't they?"

She smiled, and her eyes were bright. "Yes," she said. "They do."

It was Henry, of course, that helped her with the form-filling, but she showed me the visa when it came, the crested document in its plastic folder with her photograph, and Violet Jane Pullinger blocked out in inky black capitals. There was something different about her, a nervous excitement. There were points of colour in her cheeks and I realised with a shock that she was happy.

Henry and I went with her to Heathrow. I kissed her on the cheek and watched her walk towards the barrier. Henry caught her by the wrist, whispered briefly into her ear then let her go. The next time he saw her she was an Australian citizen.

She turned back once and waved to us. She had her hand luggage with her, a new flight bag in red leather with gold zips and a turtle motif. She had never owned anything like it, and I felt startled each time I saw it, thinking she had picked up someone else's luggage by mistake.

She looked dauntingly young, as if the whole of the last twenty years had been wiped out. My heart turned over. Dora's absence struck me like a physical blow.

Dora had set her heart on going to Cambridge. She was going to read physics and maths. She had exchanged a couple of letters with one of the fellows of Clare College, a Dr Rosine Gerstheimer who had done work with Schelling and Auel. She seemed nervous about the interview. I told her she would walk it. The idea that they might turn her down was laughable.

I didn't really want her to go. We had never been separated for more than a couple of hours and I knew that if she went to Cambridge all that would change. I dreaded change. I equated it with destruction.

She showed me a photograph of Rosine Gerstheimer in the Clare College yearbook, a surprisingly younglooking, tall woman with her hair gathered softly at the nape of her neck.

"She worked in engineering for ten years before she went into teaching," said Dora. "I really want to meet her. She won a prize for her book on Sophie Germain."

The name rang a bell, but I couldn't place it. I leafed through the rest of the yearbook, looking at photographs of the chapel and the Backs and the frontage of Heffer's bookshop and the Fitzwilliam Museum. I knew the museum had a small but interesting collection of clocks and watches, including a key-wound London pocket watch that had supposedly belonged to Beethoven.

I went to Liverpool Street and picked up a railway timetable. I kept telling myself that Cambridge was less than two hours away by train.

The weather over 'Christmas was mild but January was icy and three girls in Dora's class went down with glandular fever. Dora looked tired and pale. Sometimes when I went to her room after supper I would find her already in bed.

With her eyes closed she looked barely alive. My mother wrote a note to her form tutor, saying that Dorothy was unwell and would not be attending classes for the rest of the week. It was so unlike my mother to interfere in anything Dora or I did that when I saw the letter in its long white envelope I felt a stab of anxiety. The fact that Dora made no objection worried me even more.

"Hw do you feel?" I said. It was a question I had rarely had to ask.

"Like stone," she said. "Like I'm wading through treacle."

I sat on the bed and read aloud to her from the crime thriller we had both been reading, Arkady Solovey's Muczinski Boulevard. It was set in a future Warsaw, a convoluted epic about a stolen necklace and the series of murders that resulted from the theft. It was over a thousand pages long and we had been racing each other to the finish, but now I had to ration it out at one or two chapters each night. Sometimes she would fall asleep without me noticing, and I would have to do a recap next day.

She returned to school the following week and seemed a little better for a while. In the evenings she worked on her maths problems, copying down equations from a thin red pamphlet Dr Gerstheimer had sent her from Cambridge. She seemed closed in on herself, almost frightened. She liked to have me sit beside her but often hours would go by without either one of us speaking. Before this had seemed natural, a kind of telepathy, but now it was as if each of us were hiding something.

At the end of a month Henry and my mother took her to the doctor. I stayed at home in my room, feeling terror for the first time in my life. There was a sour taste in

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my mouth. The air felt sharp at the edges, too painful to breathe. I didn't know why I hadn't gone with them. I didn't know what to do.

It was a rare form of leukaemia. They tried giving her a transfusion but it didn't work. The doctors said afterwards that there was no point in trying again, because the new cells were being killed off almost from the moment they entered her bloodstream.

"Virulent," they called it. I couldn't get the word out of my head. When I offered my own blood the surgeon shook his head, a quick, embarrassed gesture, a dismissal of a suggestion that had already been considered and found to be useless.

"You have a different blood group from Dorothy," he said. "Didn't you know that?"

I hadn't known. I had never thought about it. He might as well have told me my blood was soiled.

There was a noise in my head, white noise, as if somebody had clipped me hard around the ear. I walked home, cutting through the self-generating miasma of wharfside developments, industrial estates and sports centres that rimes the south bank of the Thames. Amidst the welter of glass and concrete the inns and terraces of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe hung on regardless, like a time-stream in a different universe. An old man walked his dog, a grey and grizzled Jack Russell terrier. Three children, two boys and a girl, chased a leather football across the street. The girl had long red plaits and a t-shirt that said cannon fodder in white letters on a black background. I had always felt at home in this corner of London. There was an unbending spirit in the place, a filthy-cheeked defiance that I found both subversive and consoling. But that morning it seemed as if the city itself had abandoned me, had turned its back in embarrassment at such naked emotion. The walk back took me more than three hours. By the time I got home there were huge blisters on both my heels and another on the sole of my foot, a long isthmus of red-tinged transparency that visibly distorted the curve of my right instep. I went to the bathroom and burst the blisters with the edge of my fingernail, rinsing off the pus under the tap. The outermost layer of skin came away, leaving ragged patches of red too tender to touch. I felt giddy with vertigo. It came to me that I had been out of the house for hours; hours in a sequence of days and weeks that now by some hideous accident appeared to be finite.

I went to her in her room. I slammed the door hard. The reverberations ran down through the walls and into the floor, spreading beneath my feet like ripples on water. She was wearing a loose grey shirt dress with a cardigan over. Her hair had been brushed down smooth. I clung to her, digging my fingers into the flesh of her shoulders. I felt that so long as I held her fast she could not leave.

This is how you stop it from happening, I thought. You have to stay awake, stay on guard. I pulled her down onto the bed and tugged the cover over our heads. I touched her face in the dark. The rim of her cheek was damp with perspiration or tears.

I kissed her breasts and belly, stroked the curves of her buttocks and thighs. I had never touched her like this before but I had imagined it so many times that her body felt familiar under my hands. "It's all right," said Dora. "I want us to do it. I want you to try and make it last for hours."

I pressed my palm against her pelvis and slid my hand between her legs. Then I kissed her, biting her lips, grinding my mouth against hers and tasting blood. She was breathing heavily through her mouth, as if she had a cold. Her odour was stronger than usual, acrid as seaweed. I began to tug at her clothing, hitching up her dress around her waist. I pulled down her knickers and slipped two fingers inside her. She was slippery with mucous. When I finally entered her it was over in seconds. I shouted and pulled at her hair.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's all right." She tightened her arms around my waist and pulled me up hard against her where we were joined. Her body gave a brief, tight hitch, as if she were stifling a sneeze. Then she lay still. I had a sudden, painful sense that I had injured her in some way. Then I remembered she was dving.

I got up and went to the bathroom. I splashed water on my face and wet back my hair. The face in the glass seemed not to belong to me. I put out my fingers to touch it, half expecting it to ripple and dissolve.

In the final two months of her life she became fragile, brittle-boned, with a translucent pallor that made her beautiful in a way she had not been when she was well. She was always tired, even from the moment she woke up. She semed not to know the difference between night and day; sometimes she was asleep and sometimes she was awake and that was all. It was high summer by then. The morning light was painful, bright as a spear.

"I feel so angry," she said. "I feel like setting fire to things."

I remembered her on the beach in Brighton, a sturdy girl in a blue sailor dress with sun-reddened dimpled knees. Henry had friends in Brighton, a female couple, both teachers, who lived in one of the post-war prefabricated bungalows not far from the sea front. Their names were Judith and Myra. We had jokingly called them the Aunts. Judith had given Dora a red plastic bucket and spade to make sandcastles with. I remembered how Dora had applied herself to the task, diligent and careful as a stone mason. When the tide came in and drowned the castles she had looked away.

"Do you remember the Aunts?" I said.
"Judith and Myra," she said. "Myra had golden eyes,
like a cat. I remember the Circus Man."

The Circus Man had been Dora's name for the middle-aged beach bum who went up and down the promenade dressed always in the same shabby pinstripe suit and straw boater. His trousers were so tight they made him move with a stiff wooden gait. He carried a cane with a silver handle in the shape of a horse's head. The Circus Man would sometimes flap the cane about and swear at the tourists, but apart from these occasional outbursts he seemed harmless enough.

The sight of him had always unnerved me a little but to Dora he was an object of endless fascination.

"I don't believe he's real," she said. Once she went right up to him, gazing in wonder as if he were an exhibit in a museum. Then she put out her hand and touched his knee. At first he seemed not to notice, then he leaned down very slowly and stared into her face. His expression was sly and knowing, as if he were marking her out. For some hours afterwards I felt cold inside.

somehow tainted. My sense of him had faded with the years, but I remembered him now,

In the end Dora stopped eating completely. I told her I had sent a letter to Rosine Gerstheimer, explaining that she had been unwell. "I told her you would write to her again once you were

feeling stronger," I said. I tried to get her to drink, but she would only let the water moisten her lips.

"I don't want us to tell each other lies," she said. "We're stronger than that."

"It's not a lie," I said. "We can beat this." I put my face close to hers. A fine down had begun to grow on her upper lip. The hairs were silky and almost colourless, shading to a silvery grey at the very tip.

"Don't leave me," she said. "I know I won't be frightened if you're here."

Her final days were spent in hospital. She was semiconscious most of the time, her lovely mind made dull and heavy with morphine. I don't know how much she was aware of. The drugs made her unable to speak. When she died I was in the hospital cafeteria getting myself a coffee. My mother was on the phone. Only Henry was actually with her. He tried to speak to me afterwards but I refused to look at him.

We came back to Calvert Road. I still felt no real pain. She was still too close, too present. I dreaded what I knew was to come. I held on to the dusk, exhausted but afraid to sleep because I knew that when I woke afterwards the separation from her would have become somehow more ingrained in reality. That the barrier would have been made permanent, like the makeshift, shoddy constructions thrown up by council workers to hide the aftermath of some minor disaster: a broken gas pipe perhaps, or a collapsed water main.

The sheets still smelled of her. I lay down on the bed, watching as the sky turned from Prussian blue to the faded, sequined black that passes for night in the city. The extruded beams of car headlights criss-crossed the ceiling. I heard a door slam further along the street. I took off my watch and held it by its strap in front of my eyes. Its slender luminous hands stood at eleven o'clock. It was such a graceful thing, so lovely. I held it next to my ear, trying to soothe my heart with its familiar tick.

I lay there for what seemed like a long time, but the hands of my watch scarcely moved. My thoughts ran unchecked through channels and intersections that remained obscure to me. Sleep seemed impossible. I wondered if my watch had developed a fault, some kind of irregularity, a heart murmur, Tachycardia, that was called. From the Greek, meaning swift, or fast.

I remembered a physics class I had been in where the class brain Lindsay Ballantine had asked Mr Gibbon about tachyon particles. Lindsay Ballantine was so good at science that a lot of the teachers were scared of him. Gibbon had gibbered something about tachyons being particles that travelled faster than light but even I could see that he didn't really know what he was talking

"Is it true that tachyons are time particles?" asked Lindsay Ballantine. "That they're too unstable to exist in the known universe?"

"We haven't got time for this," said Mr Gibbon. "It isn't part of the syllabus."

I wondered what such particles might look like,

whether they drifted about in a shapeless mass like some temporal fog, or whether they were fiery and glistening, streaking across the sky fast enough to smash a hole in the side of one universe and right through the wall of another.

I remembered a painting I had seen in the National Gallery, Liss's Fall of Phaeton, It was a large painting and rich in colour. It told the simple story of a boy who borrowed his father's car and wound up dead.

What would happen if the sun fell out of the sky? I thought. What would happen if I forgot how to sleep?

Time was a treacherous thing. It moved on when you least expected it. But it came to me that in the strange hinterland between one day and another it was possible to bend the rules. I raised the crown of my watch and turned the hands backward eight hours. It was late in the afternoon and Dora had still been alive. Tomorrow she would be a memory. I closed my eyes and listened. At the far end of the street I heard the crash and rattle of a metal dustbin lid falling onto concrete. There was a burst of stifled laughter, the rapid sound of running feet.

"That's it now. We're in deep excrement."

"You dorkus." There was more laughter. The voices were hushed to stage whispers but I could hear them quite clearly, as if the exchange had taken place in the hallway outside my room. The footsteps disappeared along the street. For some moments afterwards there was silence, and then I heard the sound of someone calling my name.

I knew it was her at once. She spoke in an undertone. as if she were afraid of waking the neighbours. I went to the window and looked out. I could see her quite plainly. She was wearing her old parka. It was zipped right up to the neck, and I thought how she didn't really need it, that it was warm outside. Then I remembered how ill she had been and decided that it must be that.

Tve lost my key," she said. "Can you come down and let me in?" Her face was upturned towards the window. The light from the streetlamp opposite smoothed her features, making her look like a ghost girl, some alien spirit with Dora's familiar face.

She folded her arms across her chest and jigged around a little on the spot. "Hurry up," she said. "I'm getting cold."

Dorothy means gift of God. In that moment of seeing her again I loved her more fiercely and tenderly than in all the years leading up to it. I understood completely what love meant.

I ran downstairs and opened the door. The night air brushed against my face, warm and soft and redolent with the perfumes of dried nettles and frying onions. There was a car at the kerb, a blue Citroen. The street was empty.

I went back upstairs and closed the curtains. Then I undressed and got into bed. I put the Longines under my pillow and closed my eyes. In the silence of the morning I could hear the watch ticking. Its sweet voice soothed and caressed me, taking me down.

# **SURF TOWN James Bloomer**

Lacanau-Océan was an old skool surfer town, all RipCurl and Billabong, Sex Wax and camper vans. The Mesh Surf Pro Tour arrived on a perfect late summer day, pure blue sky, bright sunshine, strong wind. Riotous surf. Bodie sat on the promenade wall that ran along the back of the beach, a swirling dread in his stomach, front of him lay a deep stretch of sand and then the sea, waves crashing in endlessly. The beach ran dead straight for as far as he could see in either direction, the town perched in the middle of a wilderness paradise. Beyond the town sand dunes rose up from the back of the beach, vast mountains held loosely together by coarse tufts of grass. The dunes served as a natural protective wall for the pine forests beyond. which stretched across the Gironde before giving way to vinevards.

The car parks behind the promenade wall were filling up slowly with the entourage attached to the tour. Super size RVs for the stars, rugged jeeps for the officials, shiny cabriolets for the media. On the beach however, everyone was equal. Clusters of figures gathered at the shoreline, heads lost in hoods, hands deep in pockets. Bodie sighed. The town hadn't seen that many people for years. After the accident only the surfers had stayed. The real hardcore surfers. Like Bodie.

"It's only good for kite surfing this morning," said a voice behind Bodie. He knew the voice more intimately than any other, a soft, harmonious symphony to his ears. It was Lori. He forced himself to keep his gaze on the waves, fearing the feelings that would overwhelm him if he turned to face her.

"The wind will turn offshore this afternoon," he said. She climbed onto the wall beside him, their arms and legs a fraction away from touching.

"How are you?" she said. He could feel her gaze upon him. He didn't turn to face her until he had mustered up enough anger to shield him from the worst spike of longing. Or so he thought. The sight of her sent his stomach into a dive. She was the pinup girl of the tour, long black hair tied into spiky topknots, classically beautiful face with strong cheekbones and vitality radiating from her eyes. And a body that still took his breath away, her tight T-Shirt emblazoned with sponsor logos clung to her toned, curvaceous, athletic frame. Bodie shut off the spiral of thought before the lust overwhelmed him.

"I'm fine," replied Bodie, managing to meet her eyes for a moment.

"Except for the tour coming to town?" "Of course."

"Oh Bodie-

"Let's not have that argument again," said Bodie. Lori sighed and Bodie jumped down off the wall, turning away from her into the car park and towards the long beach-front street.

"Come and watch me surf tomorrow Bodie!" shouted Lori after him.

Bodie didn't acknowledge her shout, continuing to walk towards the centre of the town. He still called it a town despite the population having dwindled to that of the smallest village. Until the tour arrived.

He passed a man and a woman who were ripping into one of the boarded-up shops that sat on the street. Another liberation from life as a forgotten place. Several other buildings along the street had been converted back into functioning shops, traders arriving from out in the country to try to make the most of the tour. A couple of successful weeks might feed them for a year.

Bodie passed L'Assiette, the only café that had remained open throughout the town's decline. The usual crowd was in, sipping red wine and eating pizzas. They were old for surfers, but each of them looked like they belonged in Lacanau-Océan, smoothed by the wind and the waves, in harmony with nature. Part of the place. There were no women. A few had staved initially after the accident, but as their biological clocks stuttered against the residue polymers, they left, one by one, for a cleaner, safer place. One of the clientele saluted him and Bodie returned a brief nod before slipping past. Then he put his head down and walked out of the far side of town, to hide on the remote southern beaches.

Troy sat slumped motionless on the sofa as the Mesh Surf Pro Tour logo span on his television. The logo's rotation slowed and the music reached its crescendo.

"Live! For the first time from Lacanau-Océan," said the announcer.

Troy jolted upright, out of the daze, his attention captured by the programme, now focussing on the content rather than it acting as droning monotonous background to his snoozing. The camera's viewpoint scanned across a deep, endless beach. Crowds collected on the sand, the density increasing towards the rear of the beach, where the clusters merged into a wall of neonle.

As the camera flew over, the crowd waved, grasping a second on television to say hello to the world. Troy scanned the faces as he always did, longing for a brief glimpse of a mega-babe, another dream to lust over.

But the face that burned itself in to his memory was not that of a woman but a man. Troy blinked forcefully and shook his head. Then he reached for the remote and rewound the last few seconds, watching the camera fly by again.

Yes, there! The same face, the same intense eyes. He was sure it was him.

He hit rewind again, this time advancing through the shot frame by frame. Slowly, slowly. Until he saw the face. He was standing alone, a perimeter of space around him, staring intensely into the camera. Troy felt as if the eyes were reading his soul. The poise was unmistakable.

"Call Zack," said Troy and his phone sprang to life.
"Hey dude, what's happening?" Zack's voice was

"Hey dude, what's happening?" Zack's voice was projected into Troy's room.

"You watching the tour, dude?"

"Of course. Awesome beach there in France, they cleaned it up nicely. It's cranking."

"I've got some epic news," said Troy.

"You sound truly amped bro," said Zack.

"Did you see the intro beach fly by?"

"Yeah man! I'm stoked, I got a snap of a righteous bikini babe."

"I saw something better," said Troy.

"No way," said Zack, "this girl's a Betty."

"Shut up Zack! This one is way beyond the babe scale."

Zack returned a confused silence.

"I saw someone on the beach," said Troy.

"The beach is a zoo, dude."

"No. Someone," said Troy. "Check this." Troy thumbed his remote and sent the still frame snatch to Zack. For a moment Zack was absolutely silent.

"Zack?"

"Whoahhhh!"

"Precisely."

"No way!"

"Way, my friend," said Troy, "that there is the one and only long lost legend of the surf that is Bodie Miller."

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Bodie stood on the beach letting the carnival that was the surf tour continue around him. Just like the old times: the crowds on the beach, the cameras pointed at the breaks, the music blaring out. All the same as it had ever been, except for the thick cluster of cables snaking from the control trailer, down the beach and into the sea. And the thought that beneath the waves lay the mesh, spread along the sea floor, reaching up to pull and twist and shape the waves above. A shiver ran through Bodie. Even the thought of the artificial waves made him feel sick.

A camera performed a flyby of the beach, its lens black and soulless, sucking in the images of the crowd. Bodie watched it pass, the old media reflexes kicking in, a pose for the folks at home, a moment to enhance his status. It had been so long since he had been in front of a camera. Another life.

He shook himself out of the trance and trudged up the beach, weaving through the crowds. He wanted to leave, hide away until the tour had left and normality restored itself. But he also wanted to watch Lori, to see her on a board, fluid and graceful, riding the surf in a perfect combination of beauty and epic skill. The longing for her had subsided over the years, but now it had opened up like a fresh wound, raw and stinging.

A handful of the tour's surfers stood on the wooden ramp that led up off the beach. It was obvious that they were not part of the audience simply by the sheer number of sponsor logos stamped over their clothes. Bodie sighed, he would have to walk past them to leave the beach. He pulled his hood up, let his eyes drop to the sand and moved purposefully.

"Well if isn't the legend himself." The voice in front of him was loud, brash and Australian. Bodie looked up to see the man. He was tall, muscular and tanned, nothing remarkable in that, but his arrogance radiated outwards like a nuclear blast.

"Bradley," said Bodie nodding his head in acknowledgment.

"Come to see some real surfing, mate?" said Bradley. The gaggle of surfers around him laughed.

Bodie stared in stony silence.

"Oh come on, mate," said Bradley, "come out with us and ride some proper waves."

Bodie remained unresponsive.

"What's the matter, mate? Gutless? Getting too old?" Another round of laughter, this time more forced, more nervous.

"If you would excuse me," said Bodie attempting to move past Bradley.

"You think you're still the one, don't you?" said Bradley with a sneer. "Old school hero? Hall of fame beckoning? Clutching your kook title like it means something. It's expired, Bodie. Just like you. I'm the champion now."

Bodie smiled, "Oh yes, congratulations on that." He could see Bradley's rising frustration at his calmness. That was why Bradley would never be a true surfing master. He lacked the inner calm, the oneness with the surf. He was a product of the new tour, all flash moves and crazy tricks.

"Too scared that I'll show you up, Bodie? Too scared to come out on the mesh waves with me?"

"I'm retired, Bradley."

"You mean you ran away. Hiding like a scared child. Not even prepared to defend that old tour joke of a title. Weak."

Bradley took a step closer to Bodie so that their chests touched.

"You're nothing, mate," said Bradley with a sneer.
"Apparently so," said Bodie. "And now I'm leaving."
Bodie slipped around Bradley, headed up the ramp and
off the beach.

"Bodie Miller is gutless!" shouted Bradlev at his back. Bodie winced at his name, shouted across the beach. Heads turned. Whispers spread. Eyes followed him. Now everyone knew that he was here, even though he had never left. They had forgotten about him, as he had wanted them to. Now the new tour was here and everything grated on him. He slunk off to L'Assiette hoping for an anonymous table at the rear.

Troy and Zack sat on Troy's sofa, leaning forward towards the screen. They searched every shot of the crowd, then rewound it and searched again.

"He's vanished, dude," said Zack, "a ghost on the

"No," said Troy, "he's there." Troy glanced at his feed reader, where his search for Bodie Miller citations was ticking upwards like a clock. "The net is buzzing on

"And we started it, dude!" said Zack laughing. "Our bandwidth is through the roof since we posted. We are the ones! We own!"

"We have got to see him surf dude. It's like a once in a lifetime moment," said Troy.

"But he's not listed as an entrant dude," said Zack, "he's just an eveballer."

"No way," said Troy, "we got to get to see him surf." "Yeah, I gotta be part of that mesh dude," said Zack. The Mesh Surf Pro Tour anthem rang out as the camera panned down to the rolling surf.

"Time to join the mesh!" said the announcer in strident tones.

"Let's jack in dude!" said Zack. "Time to crank some waves!

"But Bodie Miller?"

"Come on man! We'll miss the first ride."

Zack reached for the cables, as Troy reluctantly threw down the remote.

"Hey don't worry dude," said Zack. "Surf's up!"

Bodie sat at the rear of L'Assiette, picking at his tomato and mozzarella salad, sipping a glass of wine. There was a sprinkling of customers but most of them were near the street, watching the surfing with binoculars and cameras. Meanwhile, screens that dotted the inside of the restaurant relayed the action.

Bodie glanced up now and then but the images made him feel sick. The waves were large and unnatural, they rose and fell at a whim, creating unpredictable, dangerous breaks. Bodie sighed and returned his gaze to his wine. He felt so old, so out of place in his home of many years. Was this progress? Was this what it had been like when the old long boards were replaced? A stagnant pool of oldies moaning that those new pointy things would never catch on?

"Lori Tyler!" The screens spoke her name. He glanced up to see her paddling out into the swell.

"I'll be back Marie-Ann," said Bodie to the woman who stood cleaning glasses behind the nearby bar. She nodded with a smile. He stood and walked out of the restaurant, across the road, into the car park and up

against the wall at the back of the beach.

She was almost beyond the break, out into the swell. Then suddenly the sea rose up, unexpectedly, unnaturally, a giant white foaming mass leaping towards the shore. But Lori was ready, leaping to her feet and riding the board down the steep wave. Into the barrel. And out. Twisting, turning, fighting to stay on top. All the way into the shore. The crowd cheered and clapped. Bodie felt a surge of longing, watching her move like that was pure ecstasy. But Lori didn't pause, she had turned around and was heading back out for another run.

It was then that Bodie noticed the heads turned towards him. His name swept across the beach in a rustling whisper. All eves on him.

"Bodie! Bodie! Bodie!" a chant began, rising in strength and volume until it was all Bodie could hear. his own name ringing in his ears.

Zack was no longer Zack. Trov was no longer Trov. They were together, joined with others around the world. Their bodies lay prone on Troy's sofa whilst their minds merged and ranged over the surf. The surf was everything. They were The Mesh.

The Mesh caressed the sea, pulling and pushing, sucking and swirling. Creating waves that hung high before they broke. Creating barrels that stood large and inviting. Creating swells that begged for a ride. The Mesh made the waves. Whilst the surfers of the Mesh Surf Pro Tour surfed those waves. The world against the surfer, taking everything that the collective mesh mind could throw at them. Radness or wipeout. Fame or disaster. The Mesh Surf Pro Tour was life.

Then a vibration, rising from the beach, Sound, A repetitive wall of sound. Translating back to language, back into the box that was human. A word. Bodie. It was

The Mesh felt a sudden surge of awareness beyond its usual boundaries, out of the surf and onto the beach. The Mesh had eyes and ears and feeds and knowledge. Knowledge that there on the edge of the beach stood Bodie Miller, last great champion of the old tour.

The Mesh wanted one thing. To see Bodie Miller surf its waves.

It took Bodie a few seconds before he registered the gasps from the crowd. The ginormo-screen that relaved the action to the spectators had updated and Bodie turned to look at it. Large words flashed vellow and white, strobing out over the crowds. They said "Next surfer: Bodie Miller". Once again the centre of attention. The chants rose in volume, "Bodie! Bodie!" Bodie shook his head and turned back towards

L'Assiette. No way was he going to surf those waves, no way would he let an unappreciative audience create the swell and breaks. He would never surf the mesh waves.

He walked over the road, heading for his table in the restaurant. A bottle of red wine called him towards intoxication, and the irresistible idea of sleeping until the circus had left town felt.

The chanting stopped suddenly in a stunned silence. There was a quick moment of silence as the masses inhaled and then a smattering of hesitant, confused cheers. Bodie span in a quick fluid movement, eyes focussing on the surf. Beyond the break, where there should have been a mounting swell, was a raging whirlpool, spinning impossibly. Bodie blinked to be sure that he wasn't imagining the sight. It was completely unnatural. But that was the mesh, twisting nature into doing things it ought not. Spinning around the raging edge of the whirlpool was Lori, struggling hard, arms over her board, fighting to stay above water.

Bodie scanned the shoreline for the coastguard, expecting their yellow zodiac to launch itself ou into the waves. It did not arrive. The crowd remained static on the beach, enthralled by the grisly sight. The Tour safety team were absent, absorbed and anonymous in the massed ranks.

No one was going to save Lori.

The world span for an instant around Bodie as he tried to assimilate the choices. But in the end there was no choice. A long-held principle or the life of a loved one. A hesitant step forward. A pause. Then a decision. Bodie strode away from the restaurant, over the road, into the ear park. The chants returned, swirling louder and louder, his own name ringing in his ears. He pressed a switch in his pocket and the alarm of his orange neo-VW camper van flicked off.

Ducking inside it could have been like a normal day, changing steadily into his wetsuit, thoughts on the next wave. Except for the noise. The cheering. His days on the old tour came rushing back, the adrenaline surging through him. The days when winning had meant everything. He had learnt a lot since then. Learned to let go of the competition, to return to the source, the waves and him, the only battle that counted.

He stepped outside the camper to a rapturous cheer. The screen flashed, "Go Bodie go!" in three metre high letters. He shivered suddenly and sharply, forcing his concentration into the details of his preparation. He extracted his board from the rear of the van, running his hand slowly over its curves. Then he tucked the board under his arm and walked steadily down the wooden walkway to the beach.

The crowd parted for him, a mass of bodies opening a channel to the surf. Then, as he passed, they closed behind him. No way back.

Being inside the mesh felt like treacle under the immense load of users. Yet no one logged out. The participation counter ticked steadily upward, thousands upon thousands of minds tugging at the water to form the waves. The waves that Bodie would surf. The need to feel his board on their waves, feel his fluid moves part the water.

The participation counter surged upward.

Bodie stood at the edge of the sea and the water flattened itself glass smooth in front of him. The ferocious whirlpool that had threatened Lori

disappeared, the swell tamed, the white breaking waves

His stomach lurched, he was nervous; it had been so long since he had surfed in front of a crowd. He'd forgotten how hard it was to focus. But he knew that he could, that's why he was the champion.

So out into the water until its coldness reached up to his waist. Then the board down, onto it and paddling. The easiest paddle out he'd ever had, no waves to get in his way, no swell, just a super smooth surface. He wondered how far he should go out, with no indication as to where the break would start, so he relaxed and let his instinct guide him.

Soon he was besides Lori, who was sitting exhausted on top of her board. "What's going on?" said Lori, her voice scratchy with

exhaustion.

"They want me to surf," replied Bodie.

He drifted around until he was facing the shoreline. The crowd swarmed over the beach, a mob high on expectation. They were still chanting his name.

"The crowd? They're crazy."

"And everyone else it would appear," said Bodie. "The mesh?"

Bodie nodded, "I'm expected to perform for my public."

Lori shook her head. "No Bodie, don't do it."

"They won't harm you if I gurf," said Redie with a god.

"They won't harm you if I surf," said Bodie with a sad smile.

Lori returned the smile and reached out for him, pulling their boards together and enveloping him in a long embrace. Bodie felt a rush of love surge throughout his body.

"I've missed you," said Bodie.

"I know," said Lori. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to bow to audience pressure."

Bodie looked to the beach, watching the crazy crush of people. Such excitement, and all for one surfer. For him. He turned back to Lori and let his heart run free as he gazed into her eyes.

"I do," he said.

"Okay," said Lori with a soft smile, "well show them how it's done then."

Bodie nodded. Then he leaned over his board and gazed into the blue depths of the ocean.

"Come on then," said Bodie. "Let me show you what I can do."

One hundred thousand minds sculpted perfect sets out of the ocean and still Bodie sat beyond them, riding the huge swells up and down. Waiting. The mesh buzzed on a high like none had ever felt before. Excitement. Anticipation. The weight of the world's expectations.

Then, in one swift movement he was paddling, onto a swell, over into a break and away.

The mesh felt Bodie's board cut elegant patterns in its waves with smooth precision. Materialising before the world were moves only seen in mesh-dreams. Natural and fluid. Nothing that the mesh could create for him posed a challenge, and in a stark moment of realisation the mesh knew that it could not test Bodie Miller, only provide the opportunity to show what he could do.

Out of a pure, long barrel. Twisting, turning, surfing. The seabed rising to meet the crowds on the beach. the water squeezed and pushed into a raging torrent. Crucial flips from the master, carving through the dangerous shallow waters.

He made it look so easy.

Epic beyond belief.

Bodie didn't pause when he reached the beach. Instead, he calmly picked up his board, slung it under his arm and began to walk back to the car park. The roar of the surf ceased, as did the roar of the crowd. A moment's silence. Then, as the crowd parted for him the clapping began. It started as gentle, refined clapping, but soon roused itself to a thunderous cheer. Bodie ignored the compliments and slid into his camper van. He looked back once, to see Lori on her board, floating on the glassy calm sea, and fought the rush of sadness.

Without changing out of his wetsuit he started the engine and drove away from the insanity that was the central beach. He drove without thinking, a homing instinct guiding his actions. When he stopped he was at the southern beaches, far from the crowds and tourists. He left his vehicle and climbed the enormous sand dunes. Beyond the dunes the beach stretched wild and empty as far as the eye could see. The surf crashed onto the beach in big frothy waves. Natural waves.

Bodie sat at the peak of the dune and watched the swell, watched it loll and roll. It was building, the wind was rising. He knew that the waves would soon be good. so he sat with patience, hypnotised by the sea, knowing that soon he would be out there again. Surfing.

Troy and Zack leapt off the sofa as the Mesh Surf Pro Tour logo shrank to a blip on their TV screen.

"Rad! Rad! Rad!" shouted Zack.

"Oh dude! Bodie Miller rode my wave!" said Troy. They danced around the room as if loud rock music were playing.

"Yeah dude! Awesome!" said Zack.

"The mesh was totally crammed, like crazily," said Trov, "but we were there!"

"I'm gonna get me one of those boards he uses dude, they turn like they're on rails."

"And the height! Those sets were jacked up high. Did you see the drop-in he pulled off that reverse deathbringer? Fully sick," said Troy. "Indeed."

They both grabbed for their cans of beer and swigged the remainders down in one gulp.

"And we made him do it dude," said Zack, "Made, Him."

"That's like so gnarly dude," said Troy,

They threw their cans towards a plastic waste paper bin, failing to hit but not responding to the miss. "Shall we celebrate with a feast tonight?" said Troy.

"Pizza kebabs?"

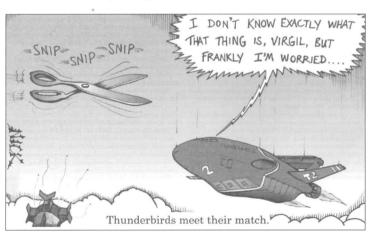
"No dude, I have to get home," "Home?"

"Yeah didn't you hear? Some dude has tracked Tony Hawk to a skate park in China."

"No way!"

"Way! They're gonna configure a mesh park for him to ride "

"Whoah dude, that's awesome." "Truly."®



# THE MARK by Nigel Envarli Crowe

#### 1. Lena

You hunt. You get food.

You make big hole. I make wood sharp. Put wood in hole. Wood to cut pig.

You make path for pig. Make side high. I help. You get rock.

We hide. You near. No move. No make noise. We touch.

I dream you want touch. I ache. Not move. Good ache. Hear pig. Pig run path. Pig pass. You touch me. We jump out. Shout back of pig. Pig frighten. We run

We jump out. Shout back of pig. Pig frighten. We run after. Shout. Clap hand. Pig run. Pig turn. You scream shout. Pig run.

Pig run hole. Fall on wood. Pig twist squeal. You throw rock. Hit pig. Pig cry.

Pig finish. We sit. You smile. I love.

#### 2. Vera

"Why we come here, Mum?" The girl twists her foot crossly.

"This is where I lived, Vera. Before."

"Before the accident?"

Before the

"Yes."

"It so big. Did you live all of it?" "I lived three floors up. Look, count them. 1-2-3. That was my balcony."

Vera squints upwards. "That one?"

"Let's see. No. That one was Anya's. Mine's next to it. That one."

"Did you live on balcony?"

"No, I just went out there to talk to Anya. Or to be by myself and smoke."

"Smoke? Like old Vasyl?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"Where you grow weed?"

"I didn't have to grow it. I bought cigarettes from the

Vera smirks at this nonsense. "What that mean?" "See that building over there? Behind the trees."

"Yes."

"That was the market. If you went there, you could get food and drink and cigarettes."

"In that building?" Vera's mouth hangs open in disbelief.

"Yes."

"Where they grow food?"

"People in other places grew the food and brought it here to sell."

"What 'sell'?"

"We had paper that you could use to buy things."

"What 'buy'?"

The tall woman stands on a paving slab between clumps of tall grass. She points up at a crumbling residential block. The girl is fat. She shuffles. She swings from the woman's hand. She looks at trees, at the ground, at the gap between the buildings through which they recently walked. She does not look where her mother points. Her neck is swollen. She sighs and pulls; a big, round apple weighing down a thin sapling. The woman looks at her. She wants the girl to see why things are as they are.

"Did you have goat?"

"No. I couldn't keep a goat there."

"Why not on balcony?"

"There's nothing to eat."

Vera interrogates with an eyebrow. "Why you live here?"

"I had to. That's where people lived."

"Did Gapa live there?"

"No. Gapa lived in her cottage."

"Why you not live in cottage and have goat?"

"Nobody had a goat."

"Gapa had goat." How can anyone live without a goat?

"I didn't know that until the accident."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know her very well."

"Why not?"

"She lived in the forest and I..." The woman flops a hand at the building.

"You live in right place now."

"Yes."

"I am glad accident happened."

#### 3. Ludmila

"The reactor's exploded!" This was Marla telephoning from across the corridor. "We're going to die!" Her call didn't last long. She had others to alarm. I looked out of my window. There was nothing unusual. Marla could see the plant in the distance from her side of the building. My window looked over the river.

I went onto the balcony. I still couldn't see anything

unusual. The occasional car crept along the riverside road. The cranes at the dock loomed like fossil skeletons over their rusted prev.

"I've always been afraid of this, Ludmila." I turned. Anya was on the next balcony. "Valeri's at the plant."

Sergei was there too. He was better on the day shift. He would get home at about the time I wanted to go to bed. He would come with me for sex. Afterwards he would snore harmlessly. He wouldn't drink. It was

I expressed hasty sympathy and went inside to answer the phone.

"Don't go out on your balcony, dear." It was Marla again. "The fallout will mutate you."

Anya was still there when I went out. "Isn't it awful, Ludmila? They say men have been killed."

"Killed?" I wondered about the possibility of no Sergei.

"They say if a reactor goes up, it'll devastate everything for hundreds of miles." Another car crawled past the docks. Birds tumbled past in springtime courtship.

"Yes." That was the phone again.

"Ludmila, Vitaly just called me from the plant." Now it was Svetlana. Vitaly was her husband, a superior on Sergei's shift. "There's been an accident at station 4." This was the newest of the reactors. "They're checking the damage now. Is Sergei in today?"

"I think so."

"He might be late. There's a lot to do."

This was bad. If Sergei had to do overtime, he'd start on the vodka in his locker. Perhaps I should stay with Marla tonight.

I wondered how to ask. "Do you know how bad it is?"
"Not really. Vitaly was trying not to worry me but

"Not really. Vitaly was trying not to worry me but he would have told me if Sergei was hurt. Don't worry. He'll be fine."

A tiny worm of freedom in my gut died. "Thanks Svetlana. I hope Vitaly gets home soon."

I wondered if Svetlana had these ambiguous feelings. I was never sure whether I wanted Sergei to come home. Sometimes I loved the familiar feeling of someone coming back to me. At other times I would have delighted in the details of his death. What would I do if he was blasted through the roof of the power station? After I had finished mourning appropriately, that is. The phone rang again.

"Ludmila, I just talked to Anya. She saw you on the balcony. I told you not to go out there."

"Yes, sorry Marla." I put the phone down. Perhaps I would stay here tonight. Even a drunk Sergei couldn't be worse than an evening with Marla. I took the phone off the hook and put a cushion over it to muffle the beeping. There was a flurry of knocks at the door.

"Ludmila! Are you there? Are you all right?" I recognised Lenka's voice. "Ludmila, Antoniy's come back from the plant."

I opened the door. "Isn't he on the..."

"Yes. He left early. He didn't tell anyone. We've packed a few things and we're going to Gomyel tonight. Antoniy thinks it's too dangerous to stay. We've got room for one person. Do you want to come with us?" "Do you... does he think it's that dangerous?"

"He must do. We're going right now. Will you come?"
I wanted to feel grateful for Lenka's offer. I recognised
her trust and care. I was just too tired.

"What does Antoniy think will happen?"

"It's the radioactivity." Lanka flapped vaguely. "Are you coming?"

I knew I should. "I can't really. Sergei might come by." That was the worst argument for staying. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"OK." Lenka half turned. "I hope Antoniy's wrong." She smiled and took a step towards her own door. "See you..."

Marla came straight in after Lenka had gone.

"I hope you haven't been out on that balcony again, Ludmila. I just came to see that you weren't doing anything silly. What was Lenka doing here? I don't trust her, you know."

If Marla were to trust someone, an avenue of gossip would be blocked.

"She just dropped in to tell me something."

"What? As if she would know anything."

"Probably nothing."

"Well, what did she say?"
"Antoniv said he wasn't sure what happened."

"Antoniy! I have no time for him." Marla allocated half an hour each day to complaining about Antoniy. "The only thing he would know was when it was time to avoid his responsibilities. Well, what are they doing?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. They're up to something but I don't see why they'd tell you."

"No."

"Well, I'd offer to stay with you but I need to get back to Anya." Thank you, Anya. "You should come as well. It's not good to be alone at a time like this." "I might later but I want to be here if Sergei comes."

"Sergeti" Marla's face shrivelled like a dehydrated bat. She sniffed. She could complain about Sergei to Anya until I came. "You know where I am. We'll be waiting."

I locked the door, turned the lights off and went to bed. I tried to ignore the noises that punctuated the next few hours until I heard my front door being smashed in.

Sergei was snoring as soon as he finished with me. It could have been worse. Sometimes he started on me again.

I wished that I hadn't locked the door. It was Marla—if I hadn't locked it, she would have been in with her ruthless compassion. But it meant that Sergei had to use a metal pipe to break the lock. He still had it when he found me.

He grunted out his grievances as he was doing it. The idiots panicked. They wasted time putting useless suits on. The stupid supervisor wouldn't let him go when the shift finished. Sergei had to stay on the roof for an hour. If it was so dangerous the government would never have built it. Sergei could have told them that. I am sure he did. I was lucky. Normally I didn't get to know the reasons for his onslaughts.

In the morning he was gone. I heard him get up and

move about. I didn't go to him when he vomited. He did not like me to spy on him.

He left money. He felt guilty when he hurt me. Marla and the others never saw his decent side.

This time he wouldn't come back. Now when I looked out of the window, I could see a stream of cars. Full of people and their mobile heritage, they crept away. I never saw them again.

After he had gone, I was frightened. Law had decamped with the population. If Sergei had been drinking, there must be a lot of other unsettled men full of vodka. With Sergei gone, anything could happen.

I got out the toolbox. Sergei had smashed my chairs. I picked up the splintered wood. I battered nails into the wood until my door was sealed and I could sleep in safety.

#### 4. Lena

Pig die. You sleep. I want you strong.

Sun go. You wake. Smile to me.

Pig too heavy. No carry. Cut pig. Take two back leg. Walk to home. Dark. Neck hurt. Pig leg heavy. You fall. Tire from hunt. You neck big. Like me. Stroke neck.

Night cold. Cold good for meat. Bad for sick man.
You no get up. You shake. I think. Hide two pig leg.

You no get up. You shake. I think. Hide two pig leg.
Put in tree. I wake you. Lean on me. Walk to home. You
heavy. Home far.

You sleep. I light fire. You get strong.

I go. Get meat. Dark. I hear wolf. Wolf eat pig leg. I throw rock. Wolf make noise. Wolf come. I scream. Wolf go back. I see meat. I throw rock. Shout jump wave. Wolf no move. I scream. Run meat. Take leg. Wolf come. I scream.

Wolf get one leg. I hold one leg. I run. I stop listen. Wolf no come.

I go home. Pig leg heavy.

You lie still. I fear you die. You breathe. You stay

#### 5. Ludmila

Nobody had knocked at my door for a day and a night. The sirens and shouting were finished. The riverside road was empty.

I listened to the silence. I went onto the balcony. The air had a taste of metal. I looked around the other balconies. There was nobody. The other buildings were empty. The sets of my daily soap operas were abandoned. The security camera on the central pole in the courtyard was motionless. The stilling of its watchful sweep was like seeing a prison gate swing open.

I felt a release, like when I had first been allowed to walk to school by myself. When I had the choice of walking in the fields or through the market; just of not doing what was expected of me. My mother loaded the weapon of my mind with images of rapacious wildlife. I saw none besides grovelling dogs and wincing cats. Groups of big, shouting boys ran past. I crawed insignificance. I learned to skulk. Freedom had a price.

But it was the start of real life. Now I could do, not just wait for things to be done. I had the same feeling now as I surveyed the absence of authority. Maybe now I did not have to be the person who waited until the Supervisor gave me another bundle of filing or until the flawed crystal of Sergei's mind revealed my doom.

I levered the nails, struck in panic days before, out of the door and let the wooden slats clatter. The door swung inwards.

The unfamiliarity of silence pressed me to the corridor wall. In place of the shrill of complaint and babies there was a continuous buzz, like the ignition of Marla's new electric oven refusing to start when she showed it off.

Light came from down the corridor. Anya's door had been broken down. I sidled through the doorway and tried to listen. The crackling buzz in my ears was louder. Silence was dangerous. Anything could be in here. Real power did its evil in silence. Only people like Sergei needed to armour themselves with the bravado of noise.

Anya's living room was a mess. Ornaments had been swept from shelves and the soft furnishings had vanished. The bedroom drawers had been pulled out and emptied. Anya's mundane secrets cluttered the floor.

The kitchen was a miracle. Anya had always been the pick of the neighbours when I needed something. Her cupboards were full. The looters had not been interested in beans and dried fruit. I took a tin of sausages and a can opener onto the balcony. The smell of food roused the grinding emptiness of hunger. I stuffed the dripping morsels into my mouth and luxuriated in the absence of need.

I looked down again at the security camera. It stood as testimony to the death of the city, its stillness as disturbing as a continuous beep in an operating theatre. I was the tiny mammal crawling out after the extinction of the great ruling reptiles. I gulped down my sausages, feeding on the corpse of something that had gone before.

The market smelled of death. The meat was foul but I needed the fruits. I filled a basket with apples, carrots, cabbage, bacon, cheese – things that I could take now but might never have again. I left the tins. They would be here later.

I found bread. It was wrapped in plastic and had not gone hard. I ripped the packet open and filled my mouth. I felt the warmth of life that bread gives.

"Ludmila!"

I was caught. I stopped chewing and edged behind a shelf unit.

"It is us. Gapa and Ivan."

I thought there was nobody else left. I didn't want to be caught stealing.

"Why are you hiding from us, Ludmila? We have stayed here just like you."

I started chewing again. I wanted to get rid of the evidence in my mouth. Tension had dried up my saliva. I shoved the package with the rest of the bread in the shelf display.

"We are looking for food. Is that what you are doing?" It made sense. They would be stealing food as well. But it wasn't stealing any more. How could I steal from the state if the state was absent? Still. I had to finish my stolen mouthful. I stepped out of shelter. Gapa and Ivan were next to the shopping trolleys. They looked even older than the last time I had seen them.

"We didn't know you'd stayed, Ludmila."

"I didn't know..." I tried to think of what I knew enough about to say something meaningful. "I woke up and everyone had gone."

Gapa limped closer to me. "Did you not hear the sirens? Did the policemen not knock at your door?"

"I was sleeping."

"Sleeping!" Ivan cackled, "I was sleeping. They pulled me out of my bed." "The policemen came into our house and told us we

must leave." Gapa shrugged. "We hid."

"We have nowhere else to go," Ivan rasped. "There is no reason for us to go with everyone."

"Was it that bad? Why did everybody go?"

"Who can know these things?" Gapa performed another of her gestures of resignation. "They said that we must all leave. They do not have to give reasons." She spread her arms wide and exposed black teeth. "We went back to our house," said Gapa. "It is in the forest, hidden from the road. They have not found us again."

"I have my hunting gun." Ivan showed his own dental wreckage. "We can look after ourselves."

"Where are you living," asked Gapa.

"Blok 74." I thought they knew where I lived.

"Are you still in your flat?" Gapa looked shocked. "You must not be there when the looters come. You are still attractive."

#### 6. Vera

"Why we must go in, Mum?" Vera pouts and points her toes inwards.

"Don't you want to see where I lived?"

"It dark '

"It won't be dark on the balcony." "Not dark if we not go in."

"You should see how things used to be."

"Why?"

"Come and have a look. I'm going in." "Mum! Could be wolf in there."

"I've been in here lots of times. There aren't any wolves." The woman sulks against Vera's sophism.

"Or bear."

"Come on." Reassertion. "It dark, I not like,"

"It's light up there. Come on, let's go up."

The tall woman looks down into the stairwell. The girl angles her head awkwardly and aims reproach upwards. The woman looks away, down the corridor. The walls are cracked. Plaster has fallen from the ceiling and bare wires coil in serpentine threat. She maps a path through the rubble to her sanctuary. The girl breathes painfully.

"This is where Marla lived."

"Did you like Marla?"

"Not really."

"Why you live close to her?" Vera is genuinely intrigued.

"These were the flats assigned to us."

"What's assigned?"

"The government said we could live there."

"Was our house assigned?"

"No. I just went there."

"That is better."

"Look over there. That's the power plant."

Vera sees nothing to generate words. The woman prompts, "The power plant. Where the

accident happened."

Vera remembers being told that this was important. "It's where I used to work. Thousands of us worked there.

"What means thousands?"

"A lot." The woman thinks of what Vera might

understand. "More people than we know."

"Where are they?" "They went away."

"Were they good people?"

"Mostly." Sergei was mostly good. "Were there bad people?"

"Some."

"I'm glad they went away."

"Me too, Verushka."

"It better now. After accident."

#### 7. Lena

You eat today. You more strong. Must get food.

I go dead place. Mum in ground. Grandma Vera in ground. I take flower. Put Mum cross. Put Grandma Vera cross. God bless.

Mushroom good. Berry good. Fill bag.

I go river. Throw mushroom. Fish come. Hit fish with wood. One two hour get fish. I see horse. Every year more. Winter no mushroom.

No berry. Must get meat. I with child. I feel. Child grow. Three month four

month, Need food for winter, I catch horse pig. I must. You eat. You laugh, I feel good.

You stand. You cough. I see you hurt.

#### 8. Vera

"It smell bad, Mum."

"This is my flat, Vera."

"I go on balcony?" Vera's eyes widen in supplication. "Careful, Verushka."

"There is river, Mum. Where Gapa's house?"

"It's over there. Perhaps in those trees."

"Where?" Vera jumps, lifting her head to see further. "I could see it in winter. There weren't any leaves then."

"Where?"

"See the dead tree sticking up? Just that side of it." The woman's finger pokes out a path through the green maze beneath them.

"We so high."

"It's only the third storey."

"I tired, Mum. Hard to come up here."

"It's not your fault, Verushka."

"Is it my mark?"

The tall woman looks out towards the river. The girl snuggles under her arm like a squirrel in a nest hole. The girl is small and rounded. The woman stares into the past. The girl follows her gaze. The woman looks from comfort to uncertainty. The girl presses hard to the comfort. She touches the hard roundness in her neck.

"Will I have it always, Mum?"
"It will always protect you, Verushka."

#### 9. Ludmila

Gapa has gone on with life. She thrives in our new world. The old skills are needed again. She has taught me how to harvest the seeds of the barley and dry them in the sun. She knows where to find the roots and seeds that have grown here since before people came. She has already planted our beet and potatoes for next year. She has relaxed into a life that she had once before.

We have neighbours. Vasyl and Anastacia live nearby. I did not know them before the accident but they have been here since before I was born. We had a celebration in the middle of summer. I was the youngest. Gapa baked bread from the barley seeds. We had the last of the biscuits from the market. Best of all, Ivan shot one of the wild horses and cooked it by burying the meat with a fire. He died two days after the feast. Gapa and I sat with him. The throat pain was great but he smiled at Gapa as he went.

I will have my child near the end of winter. Gapa was so happy when she knew. She has delivered babies before, when she was younger. She has put away clean cloth and vodka for the birth. She took me back into the old town and we found baby clothes at a shop. The looters had not wanted them.

Gapa looks younger every day. I am fearful about having this baby but it might be the greatest thing in Gapa's life. She made me clear out the cellar in the cottage and has started to store wood and grain and dried mushrooms. She says winter and spring are the worst times. I have always lived in heated flats near shops. Spring has not seemed bad to me.

Gapa has crushed some of the old potatoes and put them in a plastic bin to ferment. She says this is the first step for making vodka. Gapa says that this will be important for our society. Vodka was not good for Sergei. Maybe vodka is the reason I will have my baby.

#### 10. Lena

You not strong. I fear. For me you all thing.

I catch little pig. You smile, Hard for eat. Neck hurt, I

chew then give you. You eat little.

Baby come one week two week. I want you see.

God give. God can take. You god for me.

11. Vera

"Does it hurt, Mum?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt to talk?" Vera needs the succour of her mother's voice

"Yes."

"My neck always hurt."

"It's your mark, Verushka." The woman wants to make the pain special. It is what keeps Vera alive.

"I hate my mark." A spike of resentment pierces Vera's shield of concern. "Vera! It's your mark of God."

"It hurt."

"It's to remind you always to have faith."

"I don't want remind." Vera looks back at her mother. Sees the desperation. "Is your hurt the same as my hurt?"

The tall woman sits, bent over and shifting constantly. Her eyes crouch in the foxholes of a lost battle. The girl seems larger. She spreads herself over the woman, a living skin warming itself on a core of comfort. The girl's hand moves to the woman's throat. Stroking curiously, unbelievingly. The other puts her hand to the girl's. Draws it away from the pain.

#### 12. Ludmila

My little Verushka is everything to me. Sometimes I used to feel hopeless about the new life but Vera makes me think that there is something to live for. She needs constant care. I have no time to worry about things I used to miss from my life before.

I remember things like cigarettes, parties with the girls from the office, weekends with Sergei on his good days. These memories are like images that the devil uses to tempt me away from what is important. I have Vera now – my Verushka is what I have left of Sergei. She gives me the closeness that I sometimes used to feel with him. I am happy that other parts of his character are no longer with me.

Verushka has the thick neck. Gapa calls it the Sign of God. She says it is a protection from the curse. When Ivan's throat got sore, everyone knew he had the curse and was going to die. So many have died that way since the accident.

The ones with the Sign of God do not get the curse. But Gapa says that to be chosen by God means suffering. My Verushka has no energy. I know that she will not be clever. Before the accident, she would have been pitied for her condition. Now Gapa's friends come to touch her and see the miracle.

Vasyl is the priest now. The old beliefs have come back. Only the elderly have come back to their homes. They are too old to care about dangers that they cannot see. Vasyl says that the birth of Vera is a sign from God that he has blessed our settlement. She is our hope for the future. Vasyl says that children have been born in other villages.

Vera lies there, rolling on her back and clutching at my finger. She is not a beautiful baby. Even I, her mother, cannot make this claim. She has a character, a way of accepting everything with wide eyes and a serious expression. Our bit of the world will be her future and to her it will be as it should be.⊙

# MARIA VIA LILY by Gary Spencer

It was not Clayton Wise, the man from Evermore towers, who had lost the ten-year old Lily Meadows, but unfortunately it was now his duty to deal with the complications that had arisen as a result of this incident. This included facing her mother, Maria, face to face across his office desk for the fifth time in that fiscal year. He looked her in the eye as he carefully chose his

The fact is Miss Meadows – and I am very sorry to say this – we have no idea how many illegal copies of your daughters afterlife are currently being exchanged on the black market, and even if we managed to locate and retrieve all of them, we could never be completely sure that a dormant version was not still out there. One is all that is needed for the whole thing to start all over again. Now we are both agreed that this situation has gone on for too long – that is why it is absolutely essential that we have your permission to disconnect her Realmfeed and start again.

For what he hoped would be the last time, he pushed the papers and pen across to her to sign.

Maria, a slight, pale forty three year old woman, grieving for her daughter in strange and unusual ways no one else could ever imagine, and exhausted from being dragged through a scorching media spotlight for months, had no real reply for the Evermore man.

'I want Lily. Not a copy.'

'Miss Meadows – as I said before, they are *all* her. Thought for thought, memory for memory, sensation for sensation, feeling for feeling.'

'Don't patronise me with your advertising slogans.'

'It will be a perfect replacement.'

'There is no such thing. I want the real her.'
'Miss Meadows-'

'She's unique. All the copies in the world can't change

Wise decided against reminding her that being unique meant very little when you had millions of copies that were all exactly as unique as each other. He had explained everything to her, his sales department had explained everything to her. And anyway, it was now popular knowledge that the theft of virtual children was not considered a serious issue by the police any more. Not since the law had changed. The truth of the matter was that nobody with any real authority or resources was ever going to spend their time searching for a tiny piece of hardware that could be insured and replaced by Evermore for a very reasonable sum.

'Miss Meadows, can we go through your options

'No thank you - your options don't include finding

Lily.'

Another pause.

'Miss Meadows – I am willing to triple the original settlement amount.'

'No. Not a billion. Not a trillion. Forget it.'

Wise appeared clearly agitated, despite the professionally trained self-assurance and normally faultless people skills that had helped earn him the position of being one of the Evermore main directors.

He tried being blunt.

'Miss Meadows – we have no option other than to deactivate your daughters Realm.'

'No.'

'It will not make any difference to her.'

'No. No. No.'

Every illegal copy will then be gone and we can restart you daughters' afterlife in a brand new Realm. She will be fully restored and given to you just the way she was on the first day you took her home.'

Maria Meadows had until this moment held back her tears. They now ran down the inside of the palm of the hand she held against her brow and fell upon the polished wooden surface of the man's desk. He handed her a tissue from his top draw. He saw a lot of weeping in his job. He was used to it. What he was not used to was having his companies name so publicly tarnished by someone who actually did read the small print.

He leant forward and put his hand gently on her shoulder.

'It will be Lily again, Miss Meadows - exactly as you remember her. And exactly as she remembers herself.' Maria's voice, feint and cracked, spoke from behind

crumpled tissues.
'No, my Lily is a year older now. She's grown. She's

changed.'
'But those twelve months – we can run them again.

Nothing will be different – absolutely nothing. I guarantee it.'

Maria abruptly stood up and headed for the door,

throwing the tear-soaked paper to the floor. The man tried to follow; wincing inwardly at what now looked like his impending failure to do the job he had been entrusted to do.

'You lost her, you find her!' she howled.

'Please think about my offer, Miss Meadows,' he said, as the door slammed on his latest attempt to resolve the matter.

\*

The street outside Maria's home was packed with people hoping to get a glimpse of her as she returned; curious to see how accurate the simulation of her in Lily's afterlife was. Other than that, they anticipated pushing to the front of the crowd, past the security guards, so they could tell her personally what a wonderful mother she must be to have raised such a perfectly enchanting daughter. They wanted to wax rapturously about how Lily had effected them; how she had captured their hearts and transformed their lives.

But this was all Maria had heard for the last year and she was tired of it. Her confusion and anger had now turned into sadness, and she just wanted to be left alone.

The guards – grudgingly supplied by Evermore to maintain good PA - looked frustrated and tired as she entered, but they still managed to keep the heaving throng at bay. Lily's name was emblazoned across thousands of t-shirts; some had Lily's actual face printed on them. Placards were waved:

DEACTIVISATION IS MURDER!

KEEP THE FEED!

LEGALISE LILY!

Stepping over the piles of unwanted and unwrapped gifts and bouquets of flowers, Maria disappeared indoors.

Lily's sudden, swift and silent demise had been explained by the medics as an extreme allergic reaction to something she had eaten; probably something that Maria herself had lovingly prepared and served her daughter. They never established what this was as in the end as they didn't bother to do any further tests once they knew that Maria was going to invest in an afterlife.

In fact, no one really took any notice of Lily's death except for Maria.

For Maria, the sum total of grief of all the bereaved parents the world had ever seen held no measure against the shock of that cold and lonely pain that she so suddenly and sharply felt. The hole that had begun opening before her that day seemed too deep and too dark to contemplate going into.

Too deep: too dark.

And that's why she listened so intently to the man from Evermore Towers, who said she really didn't have

The Evermore Company – founded over thirty years earlier and the first business of its kind - had a variety of products to suit most people's needs.

The fundamental basis of what they offered was quite simple. When it was clear that someone was experiencing the final moments before their imminent death, a quick scan - only a few picoseconds long but extensive in its recording - would record and copy the exact movements of every electrical and chemical current in the brain and spinal column and reconstruct them within a synthetic core of micro-interfaces. This digital copy of the mind would be kept unconscious until it had undergone a series of necessary therapeutic adjustments.

It would be then be designated a Realm and reawakened.

A Realm was a digitally reconstructed afterlife within which a scanned and reawakened client could continue to exist and fully interact. Information necessary to construct the experience of existing within a Realm was continuously transmitted to a small portable pod called a cask, which also carried the client and was

updated in real time. Standardised Realms were by far the cheapest, and came in many varieties, including thirty traditional versions of Heaven. Most kinds of expectation could be catered for, subject to affordability.

The most popular kind of afterlife by far, however, was the one that merely imitated the original biological life experience - ordinary everyday continuity – and this was the one Maria bought for her beloved Lilv.

. .

Lily came round several times before she finally expired. The inconsolable Maria was there at her bedside each time, witnessing her rapid descent. It was routine for medics to offer a free call to Evermore or a similar company at such times. Within the hour, she had agreed to sell her house, her car, and take out a loan; the contract details, first down payment and scan had all been arranged.

Lily's final episode was not wakeful enough for her to be spoken with, or even enough for her to sense herself being held by her mother; but it was enough to produce

a high quality scan.

Quickly and painlessly: as advertised.

In scanning Lily's nervous system, a small current passed through her every synapse, taking a threedimensional snapshot of every biochemical event in her brain. The unfortunate side effect of this was that every electrical impulse was neutralised, its charge stopped in its tracks: in essence, killing her.

When you opted for an afterlife product, there was no going back.

It was three weeks before Maria was given Lily's

She had found it an unbearable wait, and had not been able to afford the additional luxury of the counselling service offered by Evermore to help her deal with what they called enhanced rematernalisation. With hands trembling, she inserted the cask into her newly-installed Realmviewer and meticulously followed every accompanying instruction. Eventually, up on the wall-screen, appeared Lilv, sleeping.

The relief was palpable.

In the moments that followed, she watched her daughter's full recovery take place upon her hospital bed. Though Lily had been only semi-conscious during her stay there, the technicians had gleaned more sensory data from her scan than she could have ever imagined; enough to reconstruct every detail of the room; the character of every medic; the distant noise that drifted in through the open windows. Everything for a new day that never existed until now.

Sensation for sensation; memory for memory.

From then on Maria hardly left her home, hardly ate, and sometimes hardly slept for fear of missing something. At night she would leave the Realmviewer on for hours at a time so she gaze upon her child's sleeping, gently breathing face. Everything else, the landscape and people that had furnished Lily's life her leachers and school friends, neighbours and regular passer-bys - looked and acted as they always did. So did her padredn. So did her bedroom. So did the view from her bedroom window at night. So did the sun and moon. So did her podlfish.

And so did Maria.

Thought for thought; feeling for feeling.

Without doubt, the reconstruction of herself within Lily's simulated world was the most remarkable thing to behold and the biggest and most profound adjustment of all to make. To begin with it shocked her and broke her heart to see this digitally fabricated impersonator deceiving her daughter with hugs and kisses and the kind of intimate conversations she vividly remembered sharing, but then it dawned on her that she was witnessing something extraordinary.

The techs at Evermore obviously had to work with the material they were given when fleshing out an afterlife, and the material was Lilv's memories. This surrogate Maria had been entirely and meticulously fashioned from the Lilv's own perceptions and inner reflections even her ongoing actions and words improvised from Lily's own expectations. So this woman up on the screen was herself not only seen through her daughter's eyes, but conceived through her mind and animated by her heart: a Maria forged out of qualities perceived through one child's experience. This Maria seemed younger and more beautiful: smiling with extraordinary grace, vividly radiating unconditional warmth and kindness, eternally dependable, promising to be ever present, possibly immortal. This was a rendering of a mother that was transfigured upon the glow of the LCD and her own incomparable and holy ideal.

And she was touched by this, her daughters' creation. This was Maria via Lily.

\*

The man who actually stole Lily never meant to do any harm; he just wanted to make himself and half of the world that bit happier.

Evermore Co. would have loved to inform Maria that he had faked his ID in order to visit her under the auspices of being one of their maintenance men; everything would have been so much easier if he had been a straightforward con-man, unrelated to them. However, as it turned out, he really was an Evermore maintenance man, and an experienced, well-paid and normally reliable one at that, and therefore anything he did was legally their responsibility.

He had arrived at Maria's to give her Realmviewer and cask the one-month free courtesy check-up, just to make sure everything was working as it should. Within seconds of him having left her apartment to abandon his job, change identity and disappear from societies view forever, she was on the phone to the Evermore Help-line, her heart gripped with sudden realisation and panic. But it was already too late; even as a general visiting technician, he knew exactly how to bypass and deactivate all the internal tracking mechanisms within the cask, making her untraceable. Up on her viewing screen, a dog, small and yappy, scampered around in a world of fake rainbows, synthetic gardens and chocolate drops. She was later to find out that the owner of little Toto and his jolly afterlife had been paid off years earlier by Evermore. That was why Toto had never hit

But Lily did, and that made all the difference. Some put it down to sunspot activity; some to pollutants in the food chain; some to an imbalance of the ancient humours; some to God's disapproval of just about everything. Whatever its cause, the still unexplained rise in world infertility — in both men and women — had meant that the market for virtual children had grown and grown. With only half of the world's women able to conceive — and even then only after astronomically expensive private and fatherless treatments – it was evident that a great hunger in the psyche of mankind had arisen that offered the virtual industries a chance to make good money.

The fully interactive designer child was the ultimate work of art, and the absolute test of a digital technicians mastery of the craft of simulation. No product on the planet was scrutinised in such detail; it had to be a facsimile of life that was convincing enough to carry the burden of being loved as if it were real.

But nothing could compare to Lily. She was actual, not virtual: a little girl born not of diagrams and mathematics, but of mothers. She was really in there – a real ghost in the machine with a volition all her own: read-only, non user-interactive, something to simply watch and grow and be in awe of, bearing the weight of a whole generations unfulfilled dreams and expectations.

And on sale for a bargain price almost everywhere. When Clayton Wise asked Maria to come in for what he thought would be the final time, he was prepared to lie to her for the good of the company. Though generally honest, his determination to end the matter with Maria had finally overcome his own conscience, so now, he told himself, they could all move forward. His technicians had been working hard on developing the back-up copy of Lily, fabricating and adding the experiences that would give the impression she was one year older, and now it was ready. This copy would surely stand Maria's scrutiny, and as she had refused to look at any of the bootleg copies in circulation, she had nothing to compare it to.

As she held the cask—an almost featureless, flattened jet-black cylinder - up against the daylight being filtered through from the large glass windows surrounding the office, Maria grimaced. On one end was a tiny gold dot: the contact that fed into the Realmeiweer. On the other was etched a tiny silver circular line, which, when closely observed, revealed itself to be a thirty-digit code—exactly the same as that on Lily's original cask.

'No thanks - I know it's not her,' said Maria abruptly. 'And I suppose you think we forged this apology note from the thief.'

'Whatever - it isn't her. A mother recognises her own child.'

'Really. I suppose that's what your unfailing motherly intuition tells you is it?' 'Sort of.'

The simple fact was, when Maria had first taken Lily's cask home, she had immediately taken a cheap indelible pen and dotted out most of the digits of the circular code, turning XXZQL4578
1889G671ALXX3772YS440 into

Years; something Clayton Wise and his technicians were not aware of.

Not wanting to be defeated again, and suddenly emboldened by a growing anger, he knew that cutting his companies losses had now become the only option.

Take this cask home, Miss Meadows. You will find that it is exactly what I have indicated it is. If you do not come back to us by 1900 hours tomorrow, having made a public announcement to the press that you do not wish to pursue this matter any further - and added an apology to the Evermore Corporation including retraction of key statements – then I will personally make it clear to my stakeholders and superiors that we have no other option other than to deactivate Lily's Realm.'

Maria involuntarily squeezed the cask between her thumb and forefinger - its casing designed to deal with far harsher conditions. A bulldozer would not dent it, the arctic not freeze it, a supernova not melt it.

This will happen at exactly 1900 hours tomorrow. Good-day Miss Meadows.'

Maria ignored him and walked over to the open window. Only two floors down to the high street were the ubiquitous crowds and placards.

LILY - THE PEOPLES DAUGHTER! LILY - THE PEOPLES ANGEL!

The press immediately noticed Maria's head in the window that they had been surveying with their aircams. Dozens hovered about her face, their lenses and zooms focusing and refocusing back and forth, buzzing furiously.

Upon her being recognised at ground level, the huge collective voice of the crowd rose like a tidal wave of sound approaching from all sides. Wise managed to move quickly, but not quick enough to stop Maria.

The Evermore Corporation are going to murder your Lily as seven o'clock tomorrow. What do you say to that?' she roared into the air, lenses and microphones.

She then threw the cask as far she could into a sea of frantically grabbing hands.

'Catch!' she yelled. Then she turned around and made Clayton Wise an offer instead

When 165 million Maria Meadows's opened their eyes in 165 million of Lilv's afterlives for the first time, they each awoke to one daughter standing beside one bed.

I've made you breakfast mum,' she said, 'It's a bit heavy for me to carry so could you come downstairs and get it.

Then Lily walked away, stopped, turned and smiled. 'No. That's not proper service is it - you stay in bed mum - I'll bring it all in bits.'

Maria's heart was pounding.

Tears spilled without warning.

She sat up, disorientated by the violent collision of joy and panic that ran through her as she watched her beautiful daughter cheerfully skip away downstairs and begin struggling with plates of toast and cups of tea. She wiped her tears so she wouldn't have to explain them. Sunlight soaked through the translucent half-open

Oh my god, I'm here - I'm at home. With Lily, she thought.

'Be careful.'

'I will - I always am.'

'I know - sorry Lily - thank you.'

Maria inspected the back of her hands. Digital flesh; it felt comfortable, light, natural. She vaguely remembered the anxiety of preparing for her own death, but such was the seamless ease by which she had awoken in that replicated morning that it was impossible to dwell on such inappropriately morbid thoughts for long. She inwardly thanked the visionaries behind such a technology that had allowed her to live in a time when such things as this were possible.

Maria's idea had been a simple one; she had volunteered to be the first person to be scanned not just for the conventional purpose of being put into a cask, but

to have the contents of her cask transmitted in real time across the Realmfeed. It had never been done. but she was willing to face any risks for the chance of guaranteeing that she would find her way back to Lilv. Her signal would be received in every single copy - one of them had to be the right one.

'Mum,' said Lily as she pushed open the bedroom door with her shoulder and elbows, 'can we go out somewhere today? It's sunny outside.' She put down the teapot. plates, and cups and went off for the rest.

'Yes - of course -where would you like to go?' As the door opened again and Lily burst in with a stack of toast, a jug of milk and a jar of jam, she beamed with pleasure, and Lily, seeing her mother smile so

warmly and openly, simply grinned sheepishly 'I just need the sugar now', she said, 'lots of sugar,'

and vanished again.

And there was money in it of course. There had to be or Evermore would have pulled the plug on Lily just as they said they would. Maria remembered standing outside her apartment, making her offer as public as possible, talking to that huge hushed crowd. According to a new contract that Clayton Wise had drawn up with her, everyone could pay a monthly subscription fee in return for Lily not being withdrawn. When she also explained that she herself would be replacing her own simulation in Lilv's Realmfeed, the reception was hysterical. I was as if all the social commentators of the day had decided that it was possible to glean the meaning of life itself from intimately observing the love that passed between a perfect mother and a perfect daughter.

And so it worked: public trust in Evermore was renewed, profits were made, parental instincts satiated. and Maria given back her daughter with all her love

intact.

Curious, she thought, how I can be reassembled. I'm just a clockwork mouse. But no matter how much the techs know - no matter how clever or insightful they can be - they can never actually be this jigsaw that they have put together.

Only I can be that.

When Lily returned, she had brought far more sugar than was really necessary, but then decided that she needed biscuits, and no matter what Maria said, she could not stop her daughter wandering off vet again.

'We have to have biscuits,' she said, her feet thundering so fast down the stairs that Maria was afraid she might trip and hurt herself, 'we have to.'

'How about hiring a rowing boat? We haven't done that since you were tiny.

'Brilliant idea mum,' shouted Lily from downstairs. 'You could bring a friend.'

'No - Let's just us go. Just me and you.'

Maria couldn't help but look at the walls behind Lilv's head as spoke, checking the arrangement of textures and decorations. A few details on the surface of a carved mirror frame seemed to flicker in and out of existence. This was the occasional pixilation that she had been told to expect when weather interfered with her signal. Dark rainclouds, perhaps; passing through her electromagnetic stream.

So it wasn't perfect, but it would do for now.

# RESCUE STORIES **Andrew West**

For the myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows when it reproduces its traits out of the unconscious.

Thomas Mann (1875-1955), German author, critic.

Each religion, by the help of more or less myth which it takes more or less seriously, proposes some method of fortifying the human soul and enabling it to make its peace with its destiny.

George Santavana (1863 - 1952) US (Spanish-born) philosopher.

lazing white fire streaked across the dome of night, dimming the stars, summoning flickering shadows that wheeled about tangled trees, and spilling innumerable pearls of light over the serried waves of sighing shores.

Hunter-gatherers from northern forests, woken from their shallow sleep under broad leaves, believed that the Great Spirits were battling. Their wise ones comforted. The furious Spirit of Day had sent a warning, they said, a warning that Night would be crushed, unless the dark one finally tamed those demons of fear that stalked between dusk and dawn, making the people sorely afraid.

Sun worshippers from the valley above the great eastern delta, roused by priests who studied the stars, speared the soft dark with a host of ecstatic cries. They believed an emissary of their god had come down to mortal lands. For the time left until dawn and also at many evenings after, they set lines of torches atop all their palaces and megalithic temples, such that the black cloak of midnight reeked of wood-smoke and pitch. Thus, they hoped, the high emissary might be drawn to them, the truest of adherents.

The people of the western lands, just retiring and extinguishing their lamps, spilled into the street from their clay-brick houses and gaped in awe. Yet they viewed the event more symbolically: an omen, a foretelling, not necessarily of good or bad, but certainly of change. Next morning, queues snaked from the doorways of seers and sibyls, and people trailed out of town to sacrifice at the old megaliths, hoping for spiritual peace before the fates changed.

Within the season came the gentle Beez. They looked just like ordinary beez yet were very attracted any place where people congregated, also being less aggressive

even when provoked. They had no hives or sweet-silk, some said, perhaps rearing their young in refuse heaps.

In the south where dense jungle still held sway, old insect deities were resurrected and many worshipped beez there. Even outside this territory, a few claimed to have communed with these kings of insects. Yet most people thought such assertions utter nonsense. Merely dreams, they said, while trying hard not to laugh, brought on by the hypnotic, sleep-inducing drone of the gentle beez.

As living memory of the majestic fire in the nightsky faded away, travellers from far-flung lands, once very rare, gradually became common. Then story and song blossomed as never before. But westerners had preserved pictures of that dramatic night on tablets of baked clay, and a pictogram of the falling star became a symbol in their scripts, meaning change.

"Options?" asked Procyon after a fraught interval. "Build," responded Omicron eagerly. "If we deployed

all the ship's technology, we're certainly capable of harnessing the local resources and sustaining ourselves indefinitely. After a few years, we'd have enough industrial process going to make anything we wanted for a comfortable life."

This input was forceful and tagged with carriers of optimism. Procyon could feel that the engineer's hands itched for work, itched to make.

"Anything?" queried Hydri. The biologist's thought washed over them like an astringent, cynically sharp but cleansing too, "Not inspiration, Perhaps not even interest. After ten years we'd be desperately bored, unless you were planning to set up as omnipotent gods for the local primitives. I'm sure even worship would

pale after a while though."

Procyon released calming pheromoods.

"An acute situation will not be eased by a cutting manner."

Omicron couldn't quite hide a petulant reaction.

"We could use the southern continent. The natives haven't discovered it. And *some* of us are capable of creating our own interests."

With contritely moderated emotives, Hydri contributed more.

"We can't make something else either. Children. Or not responsibly. We're not a settler ship and don't carry DNA banks."

The terrible dangers of monomorphism, the monstrous consequences of defying the constraints of evolution, flashed through all their minds in cascading visions. Madness, gross deformity, incurable strife, the apocalypse invited by lurking flaws.

"Founding is not an option," Procyon quickly asserted.
"Even if it was, that course would sooner or later
collide with the natives. In the centuries it may take
for our progeny to claw their way back to dimensional
technology, it's likely the settler population would've
grown too large to evacuate and too unwilling to leave
their homes anyhow."

"Can't we search for help to fix the drive?" asked Hydri tentatively.

Eddies of rising frustration escaped Omicron, though the engineer's words remained measured.

"I don't know what happened in that last transit, but there's equipment burnt out all over the place. As I said before, it's way beyond our own capability to fix. We'd need to find a major civilisation, one relatively close to us in technical evolution."

Omicron yielded to temptation and added sardonic emphasis.

"Cephi, just remind us of the odds please."

"It's an absolute miracle the ship found this place! The chance of anything better is infinitesimally low. While we were oblivious in cryo, the emergency procedure achieved a navigational fix just before dimensional closure, but travelling here in standard space still took over two centuries."

Cephi's input was quick and nervous, a stream of information spilling from the senior space-scientist's brimming brain.

"We have no idea which galaxy we're in. Given that we can't open a dimensional window, we've no efficient means of finding out. We're down to star-gazing. But the ship's already done a great deal of that and didn't find a match for the patterns it mapped. Frankly, I don't think we're going to do any better. Dust and reflected light from that nearby nebula is obscuring many sectors."

Cephi paused as if taking breath, though none of this team, the crew's elite, were using voice. Undercurrents of desperation slid beneath the tumbling contribution.

"Even if we did know where we were, it wouldn't help! Without dimensional capability we've got no means to locate an advanced civilisation. Even if, by some incredible chance, there was one in the 'local' vicinity, in standard space our range is probably just one percent of this galaxy's width, at best. Beyond that, we'd have no

energy to adjust our course or decelerate or to keep the cryo running. And we're not in anyone's electromagnetic sphere either, so there's certainly no-one really local.

"I agree with Omicron. We've no choice but to build a retirement home, and settle in."

Cephi's avalanche of facts plunged into their minds and created a downdraught of depression. Procyon struggled for inspiration.

"Perhaps we don't need to find a civilisation," offered Cygni hesitantly. "We've already got one here. How long..."

"What?" exclaimed Omicron.

Not only was this a rude interruption of their cultureofficer, Omicron had dropped from the net of commundathought and used voice, terribly ill-mannered at a formal melding. Yet apparently unabashed, the assertive engineer continued in the same mode.

"Those creatures out there are still stuck in the stoneage! How can they possibly help us?" And then Omicron laughed, loud and contemptuously, a direct attack on Cygni's views and sensibilities.

The culture-officer's mental output was a buzz of shock, which reverberated around the melding. Procyon enacted a two minute suspension and groaned inside. This was exactly what they didn't need in a crisis. Fortunately, the chief engineer's vulgar mouth was now shut. Yet still acting as a hub for the melding, Procyon could already feel magnified hurt and feminine defence swamping Cygni's consciousness. There was a kind of closing in. Barbed comments rose to the surface, ready to prick.

Cygni was full female, FFFF, the only one onboard the Hermes. The full males, Omicron and Barnard, seemed to orbit her in a kind of pheromonic daze. Sometimes they competed aggressively for her attention, at other times they joined forces and ganged up on her. On occasion, she blazed bright and they seemed to circle too close, getting emotionally burnt and then angry. More often they drifted to a cool distance, feigming disinterest yet practicing a studied avoidance of interaction that was detrimental to team efficiency.

The patterns were too rich, too subtle and apparently unstable for Procyon to navigate. It had always seemed ironic to a conscientious captain who struggled to forge the crew into a single, sleek tool, that an MFMF constitution didn't appear to grant deep insight into either of the age-old tribes of gender still persisting among the numwyn.

It was ironic too, that Omicron and Cygni shared an insistence on the use of archaic reference in their presence: he, him, his, for the chief engineer and she, her, hers, for the culture-officer. It was surely the only thing they did share! Procyon had to make a conscious and annoyingly constant effort to adjust from the mainstream se, hem, hes.

It was the captain's privilege to guide or limit the melding. When it resumed, none within the intimate net could possibly mistake Procyon's potent cautions to maintain protocol and respect. Omicron and Cygni composed themselves somewhat, yet the culture-officer leant straight in.

"For the record, they're not creatures, they're

sentients. They... never mind. How long could we last out by using the cryo units?"

Omicron was taken aback by this apparently innocent technical question. He suspected a trick, behind which lurked some kind of ridiculous agenda. Yet with Procyon's directive prickling at his mind, he had to give a straight answer.

"Tve already looked into this with Cephi. We can travel for about a thousand years. The cryo units should still be good by then, but there'd be no energy left to run them on. We'd wake up only to die."

"What if we weren't travelling?" continued Cygni. Packets of clenched determination burst out with her word traffic. She clearly found it difficult to stand against Omicron's bold authority. "How long could we survive right here?"

Omicron's surprise shimmied through the melding, to be echoed by others. Where was she going with this?

"Well, energy isn't a problem in that case. But I guess we'd only push a grim end out to around thirteen hundred years. You see at that point all the repair spiderlets would be dying out, followed soon after by the higher nanobugs. They can't replenish themselves indefinitely in a small and closed system. If we weren't awake by then, the ship might die of old age and take us with it. Also, our ability to build and prosper would be fatally impaired. So why hibernate at all?"

Procyon had detected faint flashes of hope leaking from Cygni, which stuttered under the forceful gusts of Omicron's logic. But suddenly se began to grasp what Cygni must have in mind, and flung a question out to their field specialist.

"Eridani, what's the precise cultural stage of the natives?"

"We can't be precise yet, haven't amassed nearly enough observations. But Omicron's comment about the stone-age is disputable. The highest cultures here are Chalcolithic, not Neolithic, which is to say they've started smelting copper ores and forging or casting products of relatively pure metal. These cultures are all grouped around a shallow sea that's bitten out of the western side of the largest continent.

"Given that they have pictograms and early transitional scripts similar to cuneiform, plus highly organised agricultural practice, religious hierarchies, emerging city-states, tax collection, professional soldiers, sea-going vessels and extensive trade networks, Td put them on a par with Earth societies from around 2500 BC and living in the Middle-East. But there isn't an exact equivalence. If we use metalworking as the invariant standard, their writing and irrigation schemes are quite far ahead, yet their domestication of animals is far behind. Maybe there aren't suitable beasts available to them."

The long tick-list of cultural achievements passed Procyon by. The captain's keen mind plucked out just a single, burning point. "2500 BC! It can't possibly work, Cygni. Not even if Omicron's estimate was stretched into fantasy."

But Cygni still smouldered, too harassed to counterchallenge.

"What won't work?" asked Cephi, who'd temporarily

dropped out of the net to focus on Cygni's last question. Without pausing for a response, hes input continued to stream in. "Actually, we probably can push Omicror's estimate out quite a way. There's still a singularity going in the crucible. We can no longer manipulate it, but if we're not planning to travel, we should be able to use it to create a semi-stasis. This only requires a little controlled amplification, which we can probably manage without risking oblivion."

Hot embarrassment flooded from Omicron. The chief engineer cursed himself for missing this possibility. He accessed data on the damage, then cast his mind over the ship's drive and the dark crucible within.

"It should work," he confirmed. "We might last three millennia, but two point five would leave a decent guard-band. Presumably, we still want stuff to actually work when we wake up! But what in demonic dimensions would we be waiting for anyway?"

A pulse of realisation emanated from Eridani. "I'm sorry Cygni, but Procyon's still right. It can't possibly work. We'd need thousands of years more. Cygni was hoping we could wait it out, until civilisation here was advanced enough to help us," se explained.

Omicron was incredulous. He barely prevented himself from dropping back to voice.

"I suppose iron tools would be better than copper or bronze at that. At least they wouldn't bend when we tried to beat some life out of the drive!" His sarcastic output left a sour taste around the melding, yet wry amusement slipned from Cephi.

"If the natives run on schedule, they'd advance during our long sleep to about the level of Earth societies at zero AD, maybe achieving something like, um... the early Roman empire, or Chinese civilisation of the middle Han dynasty. I don't believe either were well known for their capabilities in dimensional travel!"

Procyon felt Cygni rage within, incensed by Omicron's and Cephi's complete lack of serious consideration. "We can make it work!" The culture-officer's heated delivery scalded the melding.

In an aftermath of shock, dialogue ceased and an emotional scrum ensued instead. Procyon found hemself observing in a curious detachment, instead of breaking the conflict up as a responsible captain should. With a sense of revelation, se perceived that the two opposing sides were split largely along gender lines.

Omicron was robustly backed by Cephi: MMMF, Altair: MMFM and Sirius: MFMF. No doubt Barnard would unquestioningly have adhered to this grouping, if it wasn't for the fact that their other full male was still coldly arrested in cryo, along with the others. A more subtle alliance linked Cygni to Hydri: FFFM, Eridani: FFMF and Payonis: FFMF, while Ceti: FMFM, was torn between sides.

Surely, thought Procyon, it could not be healthy for a gender battle to subvert their council, their melding, their judgement and their purpose. Then, abruptly, se wondered whether the complete opposite was true. Whether the potential energy between gender poles was the inspirational fire of their council, without which there would be no bold ideas and no passionate commitment. Driven by this thought and intrigued by Cygni's determination, Procyon enlisted aid from the ship and doused the melding with irresistible floods of calm.

"We will hear Cygni's ideas," se commanded, "and

give them proper consideration!"

"It's very straightforward," stated the culture-officer, with an edge of self-satisfaction. "If we can't survive long enough for the natives to reach the required level of civilisation naturally, why then we'll simply accelerate their development so they get there much sooner, when we are still alive and wholly capable!"

"What?"

"How?"

"You mean march out there and start teaching them calculus?" A zephyr of dry humour accompanied Cephi's question. Yet now launched into her delivery, Cygni missed the subtlety and treated hem seriously.

"No. You can't do it like that. Advanced artefacts and dramatically revealed theories are no good at all. They create gross instability; swift gains tend to be followed by catastrophic reversions, possibly a darkage that could span millennia. Civilisation around the whole planet has to move broadly in step, and must be self-sustaining. We mustn't let them rely on props they don't really understand, or futuristic concepts not truly embedded within their societies."

"Plus it isn't possible to empower everyone equally and smoothly over time," added Eridani eagerly. "And those temporarily raised beyond their fellows or beyond other societies tend to unleash horrendous revolutions or devastating wars!"

The thought of rifles in New Zealand escaped Procyon.

"Yes," confirmed Cygni. "The Maoris there all but wiped themselves out, with no assistance from more advanced Europeans except only the darkest of gifts.

"And this is a very long game too; millennia long. We simply won't be there to hand out plough-shares or compasses, or teach calculus!"

"So how do we achieve this miracle?" pressed Omicron.

Cygni drew herself up. Tension streaming from Eridani suggested se had guessed. The others were intensely curious.

"Memetic engineering," responded the culture-officer primly.

"Stories!" bellowed Omicron.

Procyon immediately suspended him from the melding for lapsing to voice, yet others swiftly followed his bad example.

"Cultural manipulation," snapped back Cygni. "We're all products of our culture."

"What are we each, but sequins woven into the fabric of story?" The mood of this famous quote was spoiled by Eridani's strident vocalisation as se backed up Cygni.

"Poetic crap!" snarled Omicron.

"Not our autonomous engineer, apparently," hissed the culture-officer.

"Perhaps we could give sequins to the natives." Cephi's cutting sarcasm was also expressed vocally.

"We can't risk the ship, and our lives, on this sheer nonsense," declared Omicron. "Silence!" ordered Procyon.

Se was disappointed with hem crew, disappointed by this destructive bickering.

"You're all dismissed."

10

Hours later, Procyon visited Cygni's quarters.

"So how will it work? How can it work?"

"Like it or not, we're driven by myth, all civilisations are. The natives have reached a critical point of change, at which their myths will rapidly evolve. The onset of the metal-ages, writing, a leap forward in agriculture and warfare; they'll all be catalogued, channelled, ultimately controlled by new myth. But we could sow the seeds of our stories onto this fertile ground, hi-jack the natural threads of their development and weave them into a much more efficient path."

A wall of Cygni's cabin was decorated with ancient masks from Earth: Venetian, African, Indonesian, Chinese and more. The hollow eyes of dozens of cultures stared down at Procyon as se struggled to follow Cygni.

"The Old Testament is just a set of stories arising among Hebrews of the Bronze and early Iron Ages," continued Cygni with an air of desperation, "yet they remained an encoding for life-patterns followed by major populations for millennia! Even in supposedly enlightened times, rule-sets for societies bolster tenuous historical roots with enormous blocks of self-justifying story and creation myth, until some consist of little else. Take communism for instance. Or need I bring up the gender legends, which still condition us now but stretch back to before we were numwyn and called ourselves humans."

Procyon couldn't disagree, yet neither could se grasp how to wield myth as a tool.

"But what kind of intervention would we need, precisely? And how can we accelerate the natives' development?"

"Powerful memes that raised megaliths currently dominate," effused Cygni. We must harness these and adapt them to our purpose. This purpose is efficiency and integration.

"We could start by promoting maritime expansion. The best of the trainable beasts and cultivatable crops need to be exchanged between continents. Nor can any major area be allowed to fall too far behind the leading-edge of development. There must be no future third-world poor here, braking advancement with their dead weight. And Omicron's undiscovered south has rich mineral deposits to exploit too. I think planting tempting myths of paradise-shores would do the trick for us, or maybe rumours of a distant Atlantis-like civilisation."

An inspired smile lit up her features.

"There'll be no Conquistadors or Captain Cook on this world. No astonished aboriginals, who then die in droves! Peoples will trade their goods and diseases far more equally, and far earlier.

"Theistic memes are next. Though we have to preserve valuable polymorphism, we need more hierarchy and more harmony too. Petty gods, with their petty rites and sacrifices, are terribly inefficient for focussing action. Benign monotheism is the necessary step forward, which we must trigger early. This will also strengthen societies by pushing up their altruism index. If we seed knowledge of The Almighty in the westernbite societies, their ships and caravans will radiate The Good Word elsewhere."

"And why will they believe in our fictional Almighty?" interrupted Procyon.

Cygni laughed, and something manic in her tone unsettled the captain.

"Remember, their gods are fictional too. We'll simply present a better and more inclusive package. A better story. Successful religions fortify their adherents against personal insecurities; death-anxiety is the big issue, so I suggest we offer everlasting life. Memes like those in our own Gilgamesh and Enkidu are already on the rise. Remember, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest for immortality."

Procyon had no idea who Gilgamesh was, but didn't let on

"A formula promoting benevolence is easier to swallow regarding promises of salvation, but a stick can be useful as well as a carrot. Um... maybe demotion of unbelievers to a lower life-form, or an eternity in The Void. I've always thought the Christian Hell was far too theatrical."

Procyon swiftly fired off another challenge.

"Even if the natives reach an appropriate level of development in time, why would they help us?"

"We must write ourselves into the religious story.

Perhaps The Almighty's hidden agents, no, angels, in
the physical world. The dispensers of His Wisdom and
His Gifts, to arise at the appointed hour.

"Parasitical elites will be useful to us. You know Masons, Assasseens, Illuminati or whatever. Above a specific level of hierarchical structure, such bodies tend to arise anyway, but we should pre-empt this and crystallise-out our own instead. On Earth their value was dubious, but in our accelerated model they'd be invaluable. Channels for knowledge not yet digestible overall. And of course, they are veritable power-houses of myth! How does Priory of the Hidden Angels grab you?"

"Omicron would say it sounded ridiculous."

"The point is," stressed Cygni, "that everyone on this planet will have worshipped us all their lives, as their ancestors will also have done throughout most of its recorded history. Of course they will help us, they simply wouldn't be able to conceive of refusal!"

Cygni smiled again, a smile feminine and full and with an undertone of maternal power, so that even within the captain some buried remnant of instinct shimmied to its note.

Se was intrigued, and somewhat carried away by Cygni's enthusiasm.

"How would this plan be implemented?" se asked cautiously.

"That's Eridani's department," came back a cov reply. "But I suggest we configure nanobug agglomerations to imitate local insects. The ship could briefly exit stasis at regular intervals and send out a swarm of them, say roughly aligned to each native generation over the first millennium. The memetic process will be largely autonomous after that, though we should plan for plenty of correction points. If we can't figure out the native brain-structure well enough to inject stories directly, our insects could still use hypnosis on key figures. Commanders, priests, princes and so on. Plus of course revolutionaries, would-be prophets and wandering bards.

"Eridani would need help, from Omicron and his team."

"We'll cross that bridge if we ever come to it. I want the results of a full simulation before any further consideration. And you are not the person to set that up, you're too married to this plan."

With eyes cast down, Cygni acquiesced.

Procyon left, carrying some measure of belief. But two issues loomed large in hem mind. Time, and morality.

"Indeed time is not on our side," stated Cephi. "Two centuries have passed already. At least that allows us to be utterly convinced about the lack of a rescue attempt! They probably couldn't trace our particle signature.

The scientist's cabin was full of swirling galaxies, but Procyon didn't know whether these were related to some serious problem se was working on, or were merely artworks. They were certainly pleasing to the eye, and knowing that they represented the orchestration of the universe lent them grandeur and depth.

"Lost crews have been re-integrated before."

after all the confusion and multiple jumps.'

"The Rievaulx came back after 130 years, that's the longest," responded the science officer. Even if we made it back now, we'd have major difficulties fitting into society. But after two millennia and more, we wouldn't even recognies society! If there's anyone still on the home planet by then, they won't be numwyn, that's for sure! Probably bodiless ethereal beings or something."

Procyon sighed.

"I think you're being too objective, too logical. If there was any chance of going back to Earth, at whatever date, I think most of us would seize it, even Omicron. I felt this early in the melding. It's only the unorthodox nature of Cyuni's plan that's caused conflict."

"I'd certainly want to see proof it could work. Even then, I admit it's a tough choice. Stay here and wither, or return to something that's so far ahead it amounts to alien."

"I'll wake the rest of the crew. Whatever plan emerges, we'll have lots of work to do. And we'd need a full vote anyhow."

But Cephi was no longer listening.

"I wonder what they'll know about the super-physics of the universes by then?" se mused.

"It's a question of morality. Settling here risks an eventual clash with the natives, no doubt to their detriment. Yet Cygni's plan is far worse, is it not? A deliberate bending of all sentient life here to our purpose; and a trivial purpose at that! Merely a desire to rescue some personal fulfilment from this situation,

if possible to return home. Is our gentle culture-officer proposing an utter enslavement of civilisation that even Omicron's male dominance would baulk at?" asked Procyon

A rich audio-tapestry of rustles and sighs, birdsong and the buzz of insects, coloured-in the ensuing pause. Indeed such sounds from distant Earth constantly filled Eridani's quarters. Holograms and projections on the walls created a forest clearing, a haven set in the summer of a temperate zone. Bright dragonflies dipped and swerved. Rising wood-smoke split the light into lancing rays.

"Does placing the natives on an optimum curve of coopetition amount to enslavement? Evolution itself would follow the very same path, if it wasn't such a blind and approximate process."

"Assuming the equations we implement via our memes *really are* the same as those that nature would ideally choose." cautioned the captain.

Eridani shrugged. "No doubt there'd be some divergence. But most of the people affected won't be born for centuries, millennia! How could they ever perceive the difference between our stories and natural ones? The hardships of their world would simply be more equalised, less capricious. And surely that's the point, because millions of them who'd otherwise be born into real slavery or cruel war or grinding poverty or terrible affliction, will instead have a good chance of a decent life!"

"Or never be born at all. An efficient curve occupying less time and with far less loss requires far fewer numbers in the first place. Isn't that mass murder?"

"It can't be murder to steer away from anonymous births thousands of years hence. Especially when the vast majority would be cut down in droves by spears or rifles or the local equivalent of smallpox. You could just as easily say it's a kind of salvation. I guess we're just going for quality rather than quantity."

Se smiled, but wryly.

It was Procyon's turn to shrug. Didn't societies have the right to form themselves through devastation and disease?

"What'll happen to these people when their devoted angels leave them?"

"I guess they'll be upset. Then they'll embrace atheism."

"I want you to do a simulation. How long?"
"For 95% predictive, several years. For 75%, maybe six months."

"The latter then."

"I'll need more field information, therefore all the biological shields. It'll be two years at best before we've mapped this milieu and inserted all the matching defences into our own biology."

"They're yours. We'll do defence insertion while back in cryo, less painful that way."

"And major sun-cycle predictions from Cephi, an accurate geological forecast too. Big quakes or climateshifts could skew our plans, unless we know they're coming of course. In which case we can leverage our knowledge for even better control of the populace."

"No problem, it'll give that monster brain of hes

something useful to do.

"And a target from Omicron. A list of easy markers the ship can monitor to know we did it, to know we got the natives up to the appropriate level of technology in time. So it can wake us un."

"Ah."

\*

Omicron was at the end of the long tube, in the engineroom. In truth the place was redundant now, but it was the chief engineer's den, the place where he felt safe.

"It can't work," he stated, before Procyon had even sat down. "How can stories re-engineer a civilisation? The social development of a whole planet?"

"Maybe they can't," se replied.

Omicron looked surprised. No doubt he'd expected argument on that, followed by a stern order to comply. "I'm having Eridani run a simulation," continued

Procyon. "What have you got to lose by helping?"

"You'd have to hugely overdrive," he complained. "Fission reactors when there should be charcoal burning, guided-missiles instead of hoplites!"

"Cygni would be very grateful." Procyon emphasised the very just slightly. "Your boldness and natural authority scare her, overwhelm her. But if you accommodated her, even let her lead for a while, willingly contributed your own skills to check this out, well..."

Se sensed sexual interest doing its work behind Omicron's brow. Sometimes a captain had to use less than ideal methods

than ideal methods.

"She's steelier than she seems," murmured Omicron.

"Who else would dictate the future of a whole planet and

But his tone was one of grudging admiration, and the interest still gleamed from his eyes. "Most markers are straightforward. The ship can easily check on atmospheric CO2 levels. Later on background radioactivity will rise and we'll pick up military radar. After that, there'll be anti-grav pulses and bursts of stray neutrinos."

"Good," replied Procyon.

all its inhabitants?"

\*

To the surprise of many and the triumph of Cygni, the simulation was positive. The plan should work. When the vote went her way too, the crew's only full female was euphoric.

Cephi had switched sides at the last moment. Se was desperate to know the over-arching law of all the universes and all the dimensions, and hoped 2.5 millennia of progress back home would have unravelled this. It didn't occur to hem that such may not be comprehensible by a numwyn brain. The vote had carried on a majority of just one.

After two standard years of hard work, during which they deciphered all the planet's languages and scripts, the crew of the *Hermes* were ready for their long sleep.

"Let's hope we wake again," ventured Omicron into the final meld as they settled down.

"We'll wake to a supreme civilisation, soothed Cygni. To worship, and rescue." The planet prospered. Maritime technology blossomed, and in the warm seasons sailors braved daunting oceans in single-sailed galleys, driven by an unquenchable desire for magical lands that they knew lay veiled just below blue horizons.

Tales of the Hidden Angels appeared, associated with revelation about the One God, amplified by rumours that these His agents in the real world had miraculously resurrected some early prophets, then helped them to places in heaven.

Trade exploded. Exotic beasts and foods were exhapsed. Strange but persistent myths circulated the globe, of triumphant societies hugely aided in peace and war by utterly obedient creatures of all kinds. Rapid domestication of animals thus followed, transforming early agriculture and liberating enormous effort.

Monotheism was achieved in core lands before the end of the abbreviated bronze age. But the godhead featured male and female aspects. The concept of sacred-female, rooted in the ancient nature-goddess and surviving as fertility nymphs, was preserved. Artfully carried forward and blended with real characters somewhat like the original Queen of Sheba, this meme-form was distilled into a pure figure reminiscent of the medieval Madonna, yet marrying and later merging with the male aspect of God-in-the-world, to achieve a single deity. Thus potential millennia of severe inefficiency due to divinely-sanctioned patriarchal dominance, as unfortunately occurred on Earth, were neatly avoided.

The divine sub-plot of twin mortal offspring, the herder / rider and the shepherdess / mistress-of-canines, captured and invigorated the established myths of obedient animals. A perception of sacrifice was added to their later evocations, self-sacrifice to annul sin, thus sealing a religious contract with the people. Guilt is useful glue for social coherence, though levels were kept light to avoid its tendency of gumming-up free intellectual expression.

The price of domestication, those terrible diseases caught from creatures kept at close quarters, swept in waves through the natives like the legends that unleashed them. Yet overall population density was still relatively low, so millions were not reaped in single epidemics and no society was eradicated. The price paid in lives for comparative immunity, was both globally equalised and modest.

The beez droned and many of the natives dreamed strange dreams. Hermes periodically awoke, assessing the course of history and applying memetic fixes, messages from the Hidden Angels, agents of the single God with two faces and two sacrificed children, a God who could grant everlasting life.

Ordered empires arose, extended edifices mirrored by the gilded palace-complexes that held their over-kings. Yet they rarely fell; rather, they faded. And even after a final winter of cultural change, mighty social walls would remain, becoming cornerstones upon which even greater structures were soon founded.

There were long outbreaks of peace, separated by wars that were short, sharp shocks of renewal, never the exhausting, centuries-long conflict resulting from chronic civilisational fault-lines. Clever cross-cultural stories lubricated, greatly reducing friction in social tectonics, and preventing the larger cultural slabs from accumulating that kind of massive inertia which only millennial timescales can overcome.

So, no interminable bouts spanning fifty generations, as when the Greeks were pitched against the Persians. No punishing Hundred Years war. No multi-millennial slugging it out between Ethno-religious heavy-weights, as with Western Christianity versus Eastern Islam. Yet dozens of French and American revolutions.

By the Age of Reason, the One Religion had utterly triumphed. With inspiration and prophetic parable transmitted through its elite bodies, along with occasional warnings about natural disaster, in the longterm it was irresistible. The other competitive gods and spiritual systems withered.

The faithful Illuminati had all served their purpose as power-houses of religious myth: The Holy Stone-crafters, Women of the Sacred Veil, The Order of Light, Mothers of Sanctity, and of course the cream even of the elite, The Priory of the Hidden Angels. Yet as religiously-backed science and modernity mushroomed, Hermes also inspired others: mathematicians and engineers, artists and early democratic leaders.

Soon after though, the aging ship withdrew all influence, which by now was potentially detectable by the natives. It had in any case run out of nanobug Beez.

Though powerful, the Priory remained a secret society well into the industrial age, after which it became more ambitious and went public, rapidly gaining prominence and soon taking over leadership of the entire church. But many muttered against this swift and indelicate change in practice, and some went further, suspecting the motives of the Hidden Angels themselves. It was suggested that they were jealous of the people's success, and so were trying to usurp the people in God's affections. Demoted priests from the mainstream hierarchy amplified this rumour, clutching their purple cloaks defensively about them and harbouring ill-will for the white-robed favourites of the Angels.

The Priory and its supporters responded robustly. They promoted much positive lore about the Angels, some of which was ancient and all but forgotten. One rediscovered legend took seed in the public consciousness; the Angels' power to resurrect the dead. Families began to embalm their deceased relatives, wanting to believe that death was not the end, banking their hone.

Yet controversy still wracked the church, especially as more modern times generated more challenging questions, and guidance from Hermes had ceased. The Hidden Angels, by their other names The Holy Interpreters, The Whisperers, The Veided Ones, had been just a border-pattern in the religious tapestry. Now, as purple did theological battle against white in sacred buildings across the world, they were thrust to centre stage. But just as reality can be inspired by story, then story will also reflect reality; the two are tied. So within a lifetime it was absolute truth in the minds of the masses that there was real disharmony in heaven.

that God and the Angels were no longer joined in single purpose.

Though the Angels were now portrayed as much more powerful, they were no longer gentle, forgiving figures, but stern and heavy-handed. Filled with doubt and desperate for concrete backing from their sponsors, the Priory started a secret search using every available technology, to identify the physical presence or location of the Hidden Angels. Yet whatever people thought of The Veiled Ones, preservation of deceased relatives continued apace, with richer families now using early cryogenic technology.

Then the Priory, long bereft of private inspiration from Hermes, lost its leadership. Triumphant High Priests regained control, easting their defeated competition as straying and manipulative. But the myth of the Hidden Angels was far too powerful to dismantle or even dilute, also the amplifying factors of fear and jealousy were now inextricably bound-up with its memeplex. And thirsting for a route to their God, the High Priests kept up the long search, which became known to the public.

The ancient 'Order of Light' now came to the fore. The black-robed missionaries saw it as their devout duty to introduce constant change and improvement into society. They were pushing the world to achieve the perfect form acceptable to God as soon as possible, hence crafting the optimum route to his everlasting presence. Yet they were not beyond selective assassination or other violence to enforce change, removing perceived blockages in the path to heaven. Embroidered in gold thread upon the shoulder of their midnight-silk vestments, was the symbol of the falling star.

Still controversy continued. Only the common search for the Angels and a guilty fear that God saw all, prevented open religious war across the planet. And a vast new emotional stake was in play, the pool of preserved dead, over which the purple High Priests and white Priors struggled for spiritual ownership.

Meanwhile, the black-garbed missionaries whispered that death was a trap, a blockage, a device to keep them from God. And practical as always, they infiltrated the military.

Cephi's voice reached Procyon as though through water. At least se thought it was Cephi's voice. Se tried to move, but hes limbs felt distant and ghostly, perhaps not even there. Se made a supreme effort to connect to the physical world, and broke into it like a surfacing swimmer, sucking great gulps of life and reality back into hesself. Still barely conscious, se sat up.

"...definitely before the predicted time, but only by about thirty-seven years."

"What about the milestones?" asked Eridani groggily. The field-specialist was slumped against hes pod, looking extremely pale and still wet from the pod fluid. Procyon rose from hes own bath of the stuff, but hes legs wouldn't support hem yet and se had to crawl inelegantly out and onto the floor.

"The plan seems largely to have worked." Cephi could not quite keep surprise out of hes voice, "But there's a couple of milestones still left to go."

Cephi was showered and fully dressed. Procyon remembered that the last time they'd woken too, hes big brain had switched straight back on like a light.

It was time to command again.

"Then why did the ship wake us early?"

"Oh hello Pro. Um, I mean, welcome back Captain!"

"You look terrible," added Eridani.

"It took me a while to figure that," continued Cephi. "The ship had a serious mental breakdown just two years ago, so I had to dig for information. Fortunately most of the underlying systems are sound, though the protection fields died and I suspect the food production units have been junk for centuries."

"Doesn't matter. We're biologically equalised now. We can eat food from outside. But why are we awake?" se persisted.

"The sensors are still good. They picked up the natives trying to bore down to us. Another three days and they'll be coming through the ceiling!"

"It worked!" gasped Cygni. She had just emerged, her mouth working like a fish out of water. "They've... even got... got the skills to... dis... discover us!"

"But not dimensional pre-cursors yet. Omicron won't be disappointed though, I'd say they're only about 30 years away. We can easily bring them up to speed from here."

Triumph transformed Cygni's features. Despite her drenched hair and green-tinged skin, she was radiant. Procyon felt strangely plain beside her.

"We'll emerge with their next local dawn. It'll look more impressive that way. Eridani, get all the others roused. Cephi, send out messages on their communication mediums. May as well save them some drilling."

als:

A vast throng was gathered, though they were kept some distance away by barriers. Religious banners sailed above the sea of their milling colours. Soldiers in dress uniforms clutched gleaming musical instruments. In a still dawn, the rising local star spilled a wash of gold over this epic scene. Criss-cross vapour trails above were picked out in delicate rose.

Cephi was still explaining the natives' technological achievements to Omicron.

"Nuclear fusion has been viable for some decades. They're trying to redesign the bulky reactors for use on spacecraft, but their prototype is pretty much a nonstarter and they know it."

"What about beams, for the crucible?"

"Absolutely! Powerful particle-beams and hyperlasers too. Very handy technology, mostly developed for weapons-systems a while back, replacing an older arsenal of guided-missiles and fission war-heads."

Procyon removed the cloaking field. The crew of the Hermes, standing above their secret portal, became visible. A communal gasp like the sound of surf, rolled past their ears.

A cadre of priests much nearer than the general throng, stepped hesitantly forward.

Omicron rubbed his hands together, eagerly

anticipating the work to come.

"We'll need containment fields," he commented.

"Hey," interjected Eridani. "The priests are all in purple or black. I thought The Priory would surely lead their delegation. Didn't we seed for them to wear white?"

"Still early for field generation," said Cephi. "It's the maths letting them down. Perhaps because the ship eventually had to leave them alone. In recent years it's almost as if they've been waiting for... for revelation maybe."

Gleaming shapes flashed by overhead, followed by a thunderous roar.

"The elite air-force flyers of several nations," supplied Cephi. "Quite a fly-past, top honours, they've never been brought together before. I've been watching their media." se admitted.

"There's some natives in white over there near the barriers," pointed out Hydri. "Behind those guards."

A nervous instinct twitched Procyon's gut, yet a massively amplified fanfare diverted hes attention as the priests approached.

"Honoured Angels, revered Interpreters. We welcome your visible manifestation. I am the High Priest of the Holy Church of the One God."

The lead member of the delegation bowed after making this announcement.

"Wow! They're speaking our language," transmitted Omicron without voice.

Cygni's response was full with harmonics of pride. "I seeded it for use in religious scripts and formal rites."

"Very impressive! I take back everything I said about memetics." Omicron was rarely so forgiving.

The natives had grey skin and long snouts, reminding Procyon of the seals that still survived back on Earth. The irises of their large eyes were golden-yellow, reflecting the dawn. Se gave a long speech supplied by Cygni, then listened politely to their own formalities and answers. After this the High Priest blinked repeatedly and a corner of his mouth twitched. Embarrassment? Nervousness?

"I must present an issue on which the populace has severely pressured us... the priesthood... We wish you to grant us everlasting life, the gift of God you yourselves possess, and that we have been promised throughout history."

Procyon tingled with alarm. These were a proud and properous people, well-used to success, also to change and advance and all the world ordering itself easily to their desires. Indeed more than the world, for they were now spread across the local system. Their High Priest was unlikely to be fobbed off.

"It's utterly impossible to grant that to *ourselves*, how the hell could we do it for *them*?" Eridani's transmission reeked of panic.

"We can't give the slightest hint that we're anything but God's Hidden Angels," warned Hydri.

"We're being broadcast system-wide," added Cephi.

"Fuck!" exclaimed Omicron, fortunately not in voice.

The High Priest didn't know what was going on, but he perceived there was a serious problem. He rephrased his question. "We don't feel that your people are ready for this transition," answered Procyon cautiously. "And there is much to learn. God has not yet empowered us for such leare."

As near as Procyon could tell, the High Priest did not look happy.

"Then, please, show us a token." He waved a hand.
Assistants brought up two large aluminium cases.
They appeared to be complex caskets, cryogenic; vacant
eyes stared through thick portholes.

"Bring forth these good people, saintly priests who once served God well. These two represent the two hillion"

Hysteria started to unravel Procyon's thought. The natives inside were dead! How could se possibly raise them? And there were a staggering two billion more! "Suggestions?" se asked. There were several, but none with any chance of resolving the situation.

After an awkward silence, a black robed priest pushed his way to the front of the delegation.

"Show us the path to God," he demanded.
"The path to God is faith," responded Eridani desperately.

"We've kept millennia of faith! But we are not everlasting like you. Studies have shown that our cells degenerate, they can't be maintained without divine intervention. What happens to us after death? Show us, tell us, give us a glimpse of the after-life! A sign of His presence, if indeed His pity is still in your hearts!

"Don't expect any magic from me," warned Omicron.
"I wasn't told to prepare!"

Procvon was at a loss.

"Do you deny us these things? barked the black priest, his brow furrowed. "The just reward for our faith, the promised salvation for which God's own children endured death!"

A disturbance caught their attention. The white-robed natives were struggling with their guards. The crowd exploded into fights. Soldiers waded in, shots were fired.

The aircraft flew over again, much lower this time.
"Hey," called Cephi, surprised and in voice. "There's targeting beams fingering us!"

"The ship can't defend us," thundered Omicron's input. "It's decrepit!"

A stab of fear unloosed vivid recall in Procyon. A holovid seen in childhood; a version of the Atlantis myth, in which a powerful people rose up to assail their own gods, desiring to wrest immortality from them.

The delegation turned and fled.

Procyon looked desperately to Cygni. Their culture officer blanched. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. The Angels had run out of stories. ❖

## MEET THE AUTHORS

## **RODERICK GLADWISH**

Roderick is a Hampshire based aerospace engineer whose day job is designing spacecraft structures. In his spare time he does the same producing illustrations for print and web magazines; such as: The Zone, Premonitions, SciFantastic and the BSFA's Force:

Yes, he is the same Roderic Gladwish who writes the science stories for the Matrix. His fiction has appeared in verbzines such as Aphelion Scrobal Tales, Penerhang and Cuuntumusus, but also in print with the Green's SF Magazine (Iniverse Pathways, Recently most of his time has been spent finishing a children's adventure novel (agents beware) and hopes to one back to SF short sotries soon.

Apart from winning this competition, his biggest claim to fame has been to appear in a company promotional video.

## NINA ALLAN

Nina Allan's fiction has appeared in Interzone, Black Static, Midnight Street and the World Fantasy Award-winning Strange Tales from Tartarus. She has been shortlisted for the Asham Award, the BSFA Award, and the BFS Short Story Prize. Her story Angelas wor the 2007 Aeon Award and was subsequently published in Albedto One, Ireland's premier magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Her story collection, A Thread of Truth, was recently released by Eibonvale Press. She has new stories forthcoming in Interzone and the themed anthology Catastrophia from PS Publishing. She lives and works in London.



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## **JAMES BLOOMER**

James Bloomer has a PhD in particle physics (he worked at CERN) and has probably forgotten more physics than most people ever learn. He wintles software for a living. Science Fiction for his sanity and has been running the SF blog Big Dumb Object for 2/2 internet years.

## NIGEL ENVARLI CROWI

Nigel Ernard Crowe has been a nightcub singer, sportswriter, Psychology feacher, concrete worker, bass player and Olympic Weightliffing coach, and has trouble with vocational commitment. He has broken ribs in a singing accident in Islanbul, got frostibite in Australia in midsummer and has swum from Europe to Asia and back. He hopes that someone will publish his novel. Sex with an Enormous Fish, and is working on his next, Girls Don't Fart. Nigel lives in Wandsworth with his wife, Define.





## **GARY SPENCER**

Gary Spencer only started writing short stories with any real linent in recent years, but has since found his michight descents into imaginary scenarios increasingly compulsive. He was a runner-up in the James White Award in 2005 and 2006 and is currently contemplating more ambitious and immersive works to escape into the is a college lecturer in art and design, and occasionally manages to scrape a few hours together to include in his other late night passion of painting while listening to discondant rock and electronica. Originally from Virokshire, he now leves in Buckinghamshire with his wife, two sons a discondant rock and electronica. Originally from Virokshire, he now leves in Buckinghamshire with his wife, two sons a discondant rock and electronica. Originally from Virokshire, he now leves in Buckinghamshire with his wife. It would not support the property of the property of

## **ANDY WEST**

Having originally trained in physics. Andy subsequently pursued a career in software and product management He first superimented with short stories in the same milleu as his equi GS Proved The COLON' Flower (for which one day, he'll return to seeking a publisher!) Andy's novella Menne, appeared in serialized form across four issues of the webzine Bevelldering Stories, also featuring in that publication's Q107' best of edition. His short story' Impasse' appeared in the NewCon Press anthology dist.OCATIONS, Newcon Press. Andy is currently tengaged on a collaborative novel with celebrated SF author law Watson. This anticipated techno-thriller, The Waters of Destiny, represents an exciting departure for both of them, and is now almost complete.



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The winner will announced at Eastercon 2010.