

# PROBE

176





**PROBE 176****June 2018**

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# PROBE 176

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# Editorial

# Gail

I need to apologise to our cover artist, Gary Kuyper. I made an error in PROBE 174 with a story titled “Dark Reflections”, that he entered into the Nova 2016 short story competition and that I chose to publish and then incorrectly credited to the wrong author. So to put the record right “Dark Reflections” was written by Gary Kuyper. “Mea culpa” Sorry.



In a similar vein Nova 2018 is now open so please download an entry form at [www.sffsa.org.za](http://www.sffsa.org.za) and send us your stories.

With reference to our new meeting venue, “The Nexus” in Randburg, we have tried a meeting on a Saturday evening and a Sunday afternoon. Both were more or less equally attended and when I sent out a mail asking which members preferred we got more requests for the Saturday so we will continue with that format and see how it goes.

We have received another kind donation of books for the SFFSA library. Thanks go out to Linda at “The Book Shop” at Tulip Garden centre. We really have a fairly comprehensive SF and Fantasy library and I would suggest again that you go to [www.sffsa.org.za](http://www.sffsa.org.za) and download the list to see what we have on offer.

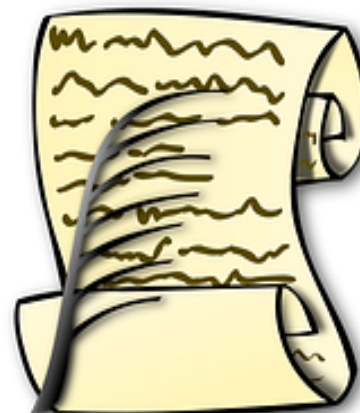
I’ve had a suggestion from our chairman that we reach out to members, both long and short term to send their recollections of their membership of SFFSA to me to include in the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of PROBE. I can remember some very entertaining things that have happened over the years and I think that there must be many other people who have good memories of their membership of our club. So please start thinking about this and send me your thoughts. Don’t have to be long essays, just anything that you would like to share with other members.

## Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

Ah, another Probe, and another Chairman's Note. I see that I have been regularly providing this note for the past two years of Probe (and a couple before that when I was less diligent). It is amazing how time flies, and no, not like in a time travel sort of way like I wrote about in my previous Chairman's Note. As usual, I have to try come up with something to write about, which is sometimes very easy, and other times... not so much.

Anyway, I was realising that in general, my notes are pretty much just about what I find interesting, and what I feel the readers might find interesting as well don't really talk much about the club, perhaps because I



kind of think most of the readers already have an idea of what is going. However, this is unlikely to be true for the country or overseas members. As such, I thought I would talk a bit about the club this time. My apologies to those readers who know all of this.

So we have been running the club for... a very long time now, almost 50 years I believe (but I think you have to ask Ian or Gail Jamieson if you want more specific details, after all, they have been members of the club for most of that!). I myself have basically been a member since I was a baby since Ian is my father. Things have changed a lot in those 50 years, from a membership of hundreds to the 24 local members we currently have. I do not believe this has anything to do with the club being any "worse" than it used to be, simply a matter of the times. In the past, science fiction and fantasy was much more of a niche genre, where being able to view movies and talk about books was much scarcer. Nowadays, half the movies and TV series that come out have some sort of science fiction or fantasy theme to them. Basically they have become "mainstream". What this means is that members no longer need to come to a club to get their fix, they can just switch on their TV. Also, modern society is far more rushed than it used to be, with people having less time to give to more leisurely pursuits like spending a Saturday afternoon at a club. As such, over time, our numbers have steadily declined to the levels they are now. I feel we have a small, but very strong and dedicated bunch of members who really enjoy the vibe we go for at our meetings. For those few country members we have, perhaps a visit to our club, once a year

or something, is an idea to consider to see what I am talking about?

Otherwise, our Short Story Competition is nearing its 50th anniversary as well, another milestone for the club. We have to thank Arthur Goldstuck for his contributions to the competition, which have been going on for many, many years now, despite, like our membership, an unfortunate decline in the number of entries we receive each year. It still amazes the committee just how much interest we see from people about the competition, and yet just about never see that come to fruition in actual stories. It really does baffle us, perhaps people like the idea of writing a short story, but actually getting down to it, not so easy.

My dad considers us a literary club, but I would say we are more of a general all-purpose club, with a main feature being literature, but nowadays movies and TV series are also often talked about. So perhaps we are more of a social club, where just about anything goes depending on what everyone wants to talk about. Perhaps I base this partly on our library. The club has had a library, again, as far back as I can remember, and I feel a lot of the members do like having this as part of the club. The problem is making use of it. Any of our members can make use of the library at any time, we will even send books to country members, and yet... the library is sorely neglected. Perhaps this is because everyone has already read all the old books? Or perhaps they are more interested in new books rather than old? Whatever the reason, and whether or not the members make use of the library, I feel it will remain a strong point of being a part of the club.

Obviously, all of this socialising means we have meetings. Every month we organise something for our members, most often a talk followed by a movie. This format has worked quite well for a number of years, but any member who comes regularly to our meetings will have seen that this year things have changed quite a lot. We used to have a very nice venue at the Wits Medical School, but times change and so we had to move to Cesco's in Kelvin. Again, things changed (and quite suddenly) so this year our venue has been a bit rocky. We do have to give a big thank you to Grant Charlton who has made our current venue at Nexus possible. Grant has been around a very long time as well running Outer Limits, and he has moved recently to Nexus. With his kind permission we have been able to make use of this venue, but of course, things never stay the same, so we have had to change things around a bit, and are still ironing out how things will work. Do not fear, the committee will always keep the best interests of the members at heart for their socialising.

I could write more, but the editor limits what I can write (and usually I don't fill up this much space, but this time it was quite easy), so let me just say that I believe the club will still be going for some time, despite the ups and downs of members, venues and life.

# Magazines Received

**Stapledon Sphere** (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee  
**Science Fiction Society** [aka the Nashville SF club]

**Reece Moorhead** [reecebm@gmail.com](mailto:reecebm@gmail.com)

Issue #12 March 2018

Issue #13 April 2018

Issue #14 May 2018

**Ansible** David Langford

March 2018 368 <http://news.ansible.uk/a368.html>

April 2018 369 <http://news.ansible.uk/a369.html>

May 2018 370 <http://news.ansible.uk/a370.html>

# Books Received

**JonathanBallPublishers**

Ben Kane Clash of Empires Orion UK Trade Paperback 285.00

Antonia Fraser The King and the Catholics Orion UK Trade Paperback R325.00

Victoria Aveyard War Storm Orion UK Trade Paperback R225.00

Tristan Gooley Wild Signs and Star Paths Hodder UK Hardback R395.00

Andrzej Sapkowski. Season of Storms Gollancz Trade Paperback

# **Nova 2017 Finalist**

## **Sigma Howard and Delta Jade**

### **By Peter Charter**

Hi, my name is, or rather was, Nicole, Lola, Lulu, Portia or Jade, depending on which Escort Agency website you looked at. The name on my birth certificate is . . . well, I am not going to tell you. My parents took bits of their own names and stuck them together with snot and sticky-tape and, like the South African National Anthem, the whole thing is a bit of a cock-up.

The story starts when I was working at Trudy's Sauna and Massage Salon in Johannesburg, and there my name was, and still is, Jade.

How did I get there? That bit is not unique, so let me list a few key words and you can fill in the gaps so that I can get to the interesting parts. Here goes: Mine Girl, Only Child, Alcoholic Parents, Violent Father, Foster Homes.

And some good bits. Krugersdorp High, High Jump Champion, Sub-prefect. Matric with two distinctions.

But there is one thing I have to thank my parents for, and that is reasonable good looks. Even in their wedding photo, my mother looked like an overgrown pink jelly bean, and my father looked like a piece of biltong, but I was lucky. I got my father's



height - I am 1,85m tall, 6ft 3 in the old numbers - and my mother's face from before she started to expand in all directions. If I had got my father's face and mother's build? No! Let's not go there!

I was teased about my height at school, but it never bothered me much. Success in athletics and swimming made up for the teasing and the fragile egos of stupid boys who did not want to hang out with a girl taller than them. A shortage of boys wanting to get into my pants was never a problem.

So that's me – Howzit?

So back to Trudy's Sauna and Massage, and how did I get there? I have a girl called Lena to thank for that. You probably read a bit of sarkiness in that, but it is not intended. The mines can be brutal places, and at school there were quite a few girls with messed-up home lives. This drew us together in a kind of sisterhood of comfort and protection, and Lena was our leader. She was a wild child; a bit of a toughie; not someone to mess with, but beneath this was the big heart of a really nice person.

And hanky panky with the boys? Sure. But it was on our terms, not theirs. On invitation. The West Rand is hardly a haven of purity, and there is a reason Randfontein was called Randyfontein, and Fochville was called, well, something else.

Lena, who was a year ahead of me, left for the big smoke after matric, and I missed her terribly. The city was not good for the mine-girl and she got into all sorts of trouble before she ended up at Trudy's Sauna and Massage. You are probably thinking you can't sink any lower than that, but it's not like that. If anything, Trudy got her back on her feet. She got her off the coke, ecstasy, brown and green tobacco,

and got her to take more care of her health and appearance, sent her for regular check-ups at the clinic, and even set up a savings account for her. It is ironic to me that our respective parents were always accusing Lena and I of being whores when we weren't, and yet the boss-lady of a massage parlour was the closest thing to a mother that Lena and I ever knew.

After matric I had no idea what to do. My matric was good enough to go to college or university, and I would have loved that, but that little obstacle of big fees put paid to that dream. I also had no idea what to study even if I could afford it. My strongest subjects were Maths and Science. I nailed the distinction I expected in Maths, was pissed off with a "B" in Science, but ended up getting one I didn't expect for English. The others were either "B" or "C".

Lena suggested I take a gap-year and join her in the city. She was staying in a small flat in Orange Grove above a fish and chips cafe, and a shop that sold stolen cell phones and hideous plastic covers. The flat had only one bedroom, but it had an enclosed balcony that was my room. Lena had scored some second-hand furniture and some kitchen stuff. It wasn't much, but to me it was a home and paradise.

As you can imagine I had reservations towards what Lena was doing for a living and although I never voiced them, she knew and suggested that I visit Trudy's take a look for myself.

So, I did. I am not sure what I expected, but I do remember the surprise. The parlour operated from a house in Orange Grove at the end of a panhandle between a legal practice and chiropractor's rooms. Inside it felt like an up-market guest house with fresh flowers and framed pictures on the walls. To me it was all quite tasteful,



although I wasn't so sure about a life-sized statue of a naked Greek goddess in the hallway.

Trudy was somewhere in her fifties, short, well-rounded and with a great smile. She greeted me with a huge hug – the top of her head level with my shoulders.

"Wow!" she said. "Lena told me about you, but she never told me you were an Amazon goddess. You are magnificent! Come, let me show you around."

So, feeling a little magnificent, I did the tour - Trudy striding ahead with her chiffon dress and scarf flowing behind her like the tail of Haley's Comet. The rooms were also guest-housish; flowers, towels on the beds and gentle lighting. Each room had a massage bed, a double bed and a tiny cubicle with a shower and toilet. At the end of the passage was the lounge where about five girls of all colours and shapes, and a couple of men were just hanging about. There was a small bar, behind which an older guy wearing a big fluffy dressing gown was peering at papers with one of the black girls seated at the bar.

He smiled. "Hi Trudy. New girl?"

Trudy smiled and smacked his hand softly. "No Warren! Don't even think of it. This is Jade, a friend of Lena's coming to check us out, so behave. Jade meet Warren and Thembi. Warren, stop grinning and offer our guest some coffee!"

Warren did not stop grinning, but he did offer me a cappuccino and headed off to the espresso machine to make it.

I glanced at the papers on the bar. "What is all this heavy stuff?" I asked Thembi.

"Warren has been helping me with an assignment. Second year LLB at UNISA."

“She doesn’t need my help,” he called from the machine. “It’s just an excuse to get me to call ‘cos she enjoys my company.”

She smiled and winked at me. “Mea culpa counsel. I am so bust.”

The cheerful banter continued for a while, and I drifted off with Trudy to chat to the other girls and continue the tour.

So how did I feel about this introduction? I can’t speak for other places but what I saw was far from sleazy, and if you didn’t know what was going on behind the doors you could easily have thought you were in a manicure or hairdressing salon. And the girls? Four of the girls were single moms, and to them it was a way to survive. Three of the girl were part-time students. The job provided them their fees, and the time to study.

Trudy and I hit it off immediately. I was still four months from my eighteenth birthday, so even if I had wanted to join the business, Trudy would not have allowed it, but she did need a bit of admin help, and I was happy to have a little job. There was a lot to do; arranging the laundry, flowers, condoms, taxis for the out-bookings and photographers for the web profile pics.

One of the girls, Constance, was doing a degree in maths and stats at UNISA and I spent a lot of time with my nose in her study notes and working through her assignments with her.

By the time my eighteenth birthday came I started to see a speck of light down the tunnel to a future. I had browsed the UNISA website and calculated that I could get the fees together if I supplemented my earnings with a few visits to the back rooms.



My first booking (and the fifth and . . . I can't remember the rest) was with, you guessed it, Senior Advocate Warren. I learned why the other girls liked him. He was a widower with grown up kids overseas, and to him Trudy's was the family he lost. I believe he was a demon in court, but in the bedroom, he didn't take things seriously at all.

To this day I can't see much wrong in what we did. Who were the losers? Not me. I made a living. Wives? They are the reason most men visit! Not Trudy, and not the clients. The only loser is the taxman, and if he doesn't want to accept the reality of the business then he is do.

And bad experiences? Surprisingly few. The odd drunk guy, and one or two guys who wanted to do things I didn't, but nothing I couldn't handle.

A few weeks short of my nineteenth birthday Trudy called me to her office. She looked slightly confused, but also amused – almost like someone had shown her one of those WTF pictures.

She said, "I got a call from a guy who says he has 'very limited experience', and would like to 'very discretely experience intimacy' and could I help him?"

"Is this for real? You don't think this was a prank call or some kind of weirdo?" I asked.

"I don't think so. He sounded genuine enough. I told him the rates and he wants to come for a couple of hours this afternoon at three. It may be a joke, but could you put your sweet and loving self on standby? We are going to have to keep this one between the two of us."

It sounded strange, but not threatening. “I can do this.” I said, closing a zip on my lips.

We hate no-shows, but this wasn’t one. Just after three Trudy ushered me into the room where this guy was sitting on the bed, hands on knees. My first impression was that someone had taken all the world’s nerds, averaged them out and made this guy. I placed his age somewhere in the late-twenties, and even now I can’t remember what he was wearing.

So, first impressions were no impressions, but I do remember his manners. He took my hand quite formally. “Hello Jade. I am Howard. It’s nice to meet you,” and as Trudy left he called after her, “thank you Trudy. Much appreciated.” Wow! He was the paying client, and you don’t often get that courtesy, especially with the distraction of sex only moments away.

“Nice to meet you too Howard,” I said, echoing his formal tone.

He looked at me with a smile. “Did Trudy mention that I had limited experience?” There was no embarrassment in his voice. He said it as casually as if he was saying he had never been to Krugersdorp.

“Yes,” I said. “She did. But I find it a little hard to believe. You seem a really nice guy. How is this possible?”

He smiled again. “Thank you. Could I just say I haven’t had opportunities? And it hasn’t really been possible until now.”

“ . . . and you are looking to me to help?”

“Yes. If you could. ”



I giggled. “I have never been a teacher, but I am happy to try.”

So we tried. I am not the kind of girl who kisses and tells, but let’s just say he was a straight A student. He may have skipped the practicals, but he knew the theory. It was if he had got hold of Sex for Dummies and Teach Yourself Sex, and memorized them from cover to cover.

But there were two things that were strange.

The first was his skin. His body was in most ways just ordinary. He was neither muscular nor skinny, but to the touch he felt like a bull-terrier puppy; almost like there was too much soft skin covering hard muscles. Not unpleasant, just unusual.

The second thing was his fitness. He didn’t look like a gym-boy, but he could have put a dozen Duracell bunnies to shame. I suppose a lifetime of celibacy can do that to you, and I found myself wondering if he had been locked away in a Kung Fu Buddhist monastery with Jean-Claude van Damme or something.

When the two hours were up I couldn’t believe it. At about thirteen I had an operation to try, unsuccessfully, to sort out some screwed-up girly plumbing. I remember the doc putting a mask on my face, and then suddenly I was waking up with a strange nurse. This was like that. I remember the lessons, a whole lot of talking about a whole lot of things, but much of that last hour is a pleasant blur.

He was courteous right to the end. Before he left he said, “Thank you so much for the experience Jade. I may visit again in a few weeks if that is okay?” I remember threatening him that if he didn’t, or if he asked for another girl, he would lose some recently experienced body-parts.

But then a big mango hit my fan. Lena, who had survived so many hazards in her life, went and electrocuted herself with a bloody hair-dryer. Our dear landlord hadn't replaced a faulty circuit breaker, just bypassed it, and then Lena tried to get the dryer working by stuffing its bare wires into the plug. One flash at 220 volts had taken away my best friend, protector, room-mate and co-worker.

I have to say Trudy was amazing. She took control, and made all the plans. There was a small funeral for friends and family at a Braamfontein chapel, and then a wake at the house. Trudy shut the place except for our 'regulars', and it was very touching. Warren, brought the snacks and wine, and did the eulogy. Now I don't know what he is like in court, but he had us in tears, in stitches, laughing, happy and sad all at the same time. We all loved him before, but we loved him twice as much later.

Trudy suggested I take a couple of days off, and I was packing cardboard boxes when she called.

"Hi Jade. How are you doing?"

"Okay I suppose. Just packing the last of her things and having a good blub. What's up that end?"

"Fine. Back to normal, but Howard called for you. I am not sure if you want me to postpone, or if I should book another girl."

My reaction was instant. "Don't you dare! I can be there this afternoon."

Trudy giggled. "It seems you like our Mr Limited Experience."

Our second session was very different. Trudy had told him about Lena, and he was very understanding. He had booked two hours, but the lessons were over in a couple

of minutes. I remember just lying there with my head on that soft chest talking. The topic was mainly Lena, and I suspect I did most of the talking. If ever I asked him questions about his family, age, education or ethnicity he skilfully sidestepped the questions, but he did share a few things. He lived in Waverley with three men. He was a social scientist working in research that was generously funded by an off-shore organization. He had never been in an intimate relationship with a woman – or man. He did not do Kung Fu, or any other martial art, and he did not grow up in a Buddhist monastery. He was a vegetarian and non-drinker, not for ethical reasons, but because his system preferred it.

All very strange, but we did have a number of things in common. We both loved mathematics, poetry, reading, and we both loved music, although different genres.

Even with this strangeness I found myself wanting to spend time with him, and hoping he would come back.

Now I am going to tell you something gross, so skip this bit if you are squeamish. Trudy was asked to help a PhD student with her research project, and being Trudy, she was happy to help. The research needed samples of male seminal fluid, and we had plenty of that to spare. When I was Trudy's admin girl I used to do this, and it involved lots of little numbered sample bottles, latex gloves and liquid nitrogen. The samples went to the local clinic labs, and so I got to know the clinic sisters quite well.

The samples were collected, and a few days later I got a call from the sister at the clinic.

“Jade?”



“Yes it is.”

“Sister Botha from the clinic here. Are you trying to be funny with sample 921?”

I checked in the book. It was Howard’s sample. “No.” I said. “Is there something wrong?”

“Yes. The results came back. No bacteria. No viruses. No sperm. Nothing. The technician said the closest match he could make was hair conditioner. Now these tests cost money, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t play stupid games.”

“I am sorry Sister,” I said. “I don’t know how this happened. I will ask the girls.”

The Sister eased up a bit. “Sorry to snap, and we appreciate your help. I have to admit it caused a few laughs. You weren’t really shooting a group-sex porn movie were you?”

“No, of course not.” I said, laughing.

“Then send us human stuff next time okay?” She said, giggled, and then disconnected.

Human stuff? What the hell was she talking about? I transferred from condom to sample bottle. I sealed the bottle and filled in the register. I watched the messenger load his scooter. There was no mistake.

That night at home I struggled to sleep, and the loneliness of the flat just made it worse. What kind of guy has a skin like a puppy, but the fitness of a Crossfit champion? Is a virgin, but makes love like Casanova with nuts full of hair

conditioner? My mind was taking a strange direction, and I was starting to feel very uncomfortable.

But the words that Warren spoke at Lena's memorial came back to me.

"It does not matter who you are," he had said. "It does not matter where you come from, or what you do. There are only two things that really matter, and they are whether you have empathy for all the living things on this little blue planet, and whether you have passion, and Lena had both in abundance."

I loved those words. I still do, and when I thought about it, those things applied to Howard.

But what worried me most was the way I felt. Why was I so intrigued by this strange man? Would I see him again, and what would I do?

Things normalized a bit when I got back to work. A new member of the team, a coloured girl from the Cape, needed a room for a while and I was happy to put her up. We got on well, and that quirky sense of humour typical of her tribe made it very hard to be glum.

On Howard's third visit I was not aware of it, but when we were lying together he must have sensed something. He gently turned my head towards him.

"You seem tense Jade. Is something wrong?"

It was crunch time. "I have been trying to pluck up the courage to ask you a question."

"Ask away."

“Where did you come from?”

He smiled. “Same place as before. Just down the road in Waverley”

“That was not what I meant. What I meant was if you were born the same way I was?”

He was silent for what felt like an eternity, and then very calmly said, “This complicates things. I did not expect this at all. I have no prepared answer.”

“Maybe some truth, or am I in danger, like in, ‘if I tell you, I will have to shoot you’?”

He burst out laughing. I realized I had never heard him laugh, and I found myself grinning at the strangeness of it.

“No Jade,” he said. “You are in no danger. I have become very fond of you, and promise I will not harm you in any way. We are the ones who may be at risk.”

“And I have become very fond of you as well. How can I put you at risk? Who are we? I am really confused here.”

“Do you remember at our first meeting I asked for confidence and discretion? I suppose it may be a little late to remind you of that now?”

For much of my life the speed of my tongue has caused problems, but also got me out of trouble. I think what I said was something like, ‘If you can’t # trust your # hooker, then who the # can you trust?’ but with f-words at the placeholders.

For the second time he burst out laughing, but then he became serious. “Jade, I think I have to offer you a few choices but with ‘terms and conditions’? Did you see the movie ‘The Matrix’?”



“Yes. Loved it.”

“Do you remember the blue pill red pill scene?”

“Yes. Red pill please Morpheus.”

“You have already taken a bite out of it, so it is a bit late for blue. I am not so sure how to tell you.”

I am no shrink, so I can't explain why I reacted the way I did at that point in time, but suddenly I saw the humour in this whole weird situation and started laughing. This took Howard by surprise.

“Why are you laughing?” he asked, perplexed.

“Howard, this situation is ridiculous. I am here naked, in the arms of a naked man, nothing unusual in that, but the man may not even be a member of my species, and you know what? My biggest fear is that he will leave for good. Shouldn't I be scared shitless? What the hell is going on here? You asked for discretion. Can you imagine me chatting to the other girls? ‘How was the booking Jade?’ ‘Great thanks. Oh. By the way he was almost a virgin, and he is not human.’ ‘Oh. How could you tell?’ ‘Easy. His skin is soft, but his willy isn't.’ ‘That's nice. Want some coffee?’ Even if I were to tell everyone I know they would think me crazy, if I am not crazy already. Please just a couple of questions. “

He smiled. “Okay. Let's try a few. But you may not believe the answers. Ask away.”

I asked. He answered. Twice Trudy gave the little knock, and twice he paid for extensions. She went home telling Noni, the night shift manager to just let us be. She knew an all-nighter when she saw it.

You want to hear about the big world out there, then listen up and I will tell you.

We are not alone in the universe – not by a long way. Even our home galaxy, the Milky Way, is teeming with life. Life is diverse. It is like us, different from us, plants, animals, carbon based, silicon based, the whole kaboodle.

What is rare is the different life forms hooking up with each other, and the reason is distance and time. The galaxy is just too bloody big, and things, even at light speed, just travel too slowly. But a hook up did happen. It was a long time ago in earth terms; early days of the dinosaurs; but a small club of really smart beings formed, and it exists to this day. The membership has grown over the millennia with new members. The strange thing is that almost none of the members have ever met face to tentacle, tentacle to claw or whatever, so how do they communicate?

Einstein and the other smart dudes were right. Wormholes over distances measured in thousands of light-years can be opened. The bad news is that even the smart club founders are unable to send any solid matter through these holes, but they can send data and have a good old interstellar chinwag.

So, what do these old-toppie alien dudes do in the clubhouse, apart from smoke Sagittarian cigars and drink Piscean port? It may seem strange to use the word 'Humanitarian' in the context of non-humans, but that is what they are, and their main concern is the collection and conservation of intelligent life forms - especially those that are at risk of extinction. Apart from this they don't do much, except keep a low profile, carry on with their merry lives and let the rest of the galaxy do the same in ignorance.

It was in about 2010 a member of the club in our neighbourhood heard radio transmissions that had left earth about eighty years earlier. They decided to look a bit more closely and opened up a wormhole and eavesdropped for a while before deciding we were almost smart.

And extinction was a concern. Our part of the galaxy has a large number of comets, asteroids and all sorts of other shit floating about that could knock us out of existence, as well as self-created threats like nuclear bombs, climate change and environment destruction. It's a risky and fragile place we live in, and the club was concerned.

So, if you want to play Noah and conserve a few humans, and all you have are wormholes that can't transfer matter what do you do? Pay attention. What you do is extract VCs from some humans, sigma-delta split them, and put the sigma and the deltas through the wormhole. Then you learn how to make human PS's and send this info through the wormhole. On the other side you build PS's, apply the deltas to the sigma, load the VCs to the PSs you made and voila – a bunch of humans safely backed up across the galaxy.

Easy Peasy.

Did I hear you say 'huh'? I sure as hell did when Howard first tried to explain this to me. I am not that scientific, but let me give it a go. In human terms a PS is our body, or 'Physical Structure' and the VC is the stuff in our brain, our thoughts, memories, emotions, experiences, shopping lists and dreams. VC stands for Variable Content, the stuff that changes from day to day, and from person to person. Sigma refers to



that stuff in the VC that is the same between two individuals or groups, and Delta the part that differs.

So, knowing this, who or what is Howard? His Variable Content was custom made for testing a prototype Physical Structure. At the time of his creation they had about thirty or so VCs from humans to cut and paste from. It may be strange, but to the club guys, extracting VC from the brain is far simpler than making a PS. It just takes a cluster of electrodes on the head, some fancy electronics and plenty of computer power. But there is bad news, it is fatal to humans and animals. Where did they get the VCs? I didn't ask and Howard didn't tell. Imagine you check granny into a hospice, and then you discover she is kind-of alive and watching you from across the galaxy. Best not to know that.

To make a PS is a whole lot more complex. In simple terms it works like this:- You start with a bath of nutrient water. Above and on the sides of the bath there are robot arms that squish out stuff that looks a bit like KY Jelly from tiny nozzles. They call this 'tagged paste' and it jellifies in the water into a porous form of the cartilage in your nose and ears. After about ten days you have a crude 3D printed framework of the PS.

Then comes the fun bit about which I understand absolutely zip. You circulate a grey sludge through a machine and the bath. This sludge contains a mix of smart little nanobots, synthesised DNA, 'smart proteins', and other stuff. Then some kind of bio-magic happens over the next few weeks and the framework of the PS is converted into a functional body. You then press Ctrl-Alt-Del, boot it up, load a VC

and, in a Frankensteinian accent you shout, “GIFF MY KREASHUN LI-EEEEF”. I made up the last bit, but you get the drift.

So, what is it like to discover there is a really big world out there? And what's it like to learn that your client was constructed from bits of dead people uploaded, and then downloaded into an experimental prototype body, 3d printed in Waverley, Johannesburg?

Tough question, and I am not sure I have the language skills to tell you. Was it scary? No. Not at all. Was I amazed? Yes and No. I have never believed we were alone in the universe, and I never had strong religious convictions to shatter, but to face the reality of it is at another whole level of amazement, and to realize that you are one of just a handful of people who know it is, well, more than a little weird. As agent ‘J’ in *Men in Black* put it, ‘it ranks a ten on the weird-shit-o-meter’.

And Howard? Knowing the truth about him was not nearly as scary as not knowing. I had come to know him, I had come to like him, and discovering that his body was made in a bath-tub and less than a month old made very little difference. He may not have been physically human, but there was a whole lot of human niceness in him.

I had hardly noticed the first rays of sunshine poking through the curtains, and I suddenly realized how hungry and tired I was. I also knew that the doorbell would soon start to chime with the Morning Glory Guys visiting for what they didn’t get the night before, and all the rooms would be needed.

“Howard, we are going to have to leave the room. Don’t you ever get tired or hungry?” I asked.

He smiled. "Yes, to both."

"Where do we go from here?" I asked.

"I will need to tell the team in Waverley what happened here, and I don't know how they will react. I suspect they will want to meet you. Would you do that?"

"Yebo. Should I be scared?"

"A little. André, the doctor, can be a bit short-tempered, but I don't think the other two will be a problem."

"How do we contact each other?"

"I will call you."

". . . as in 'I love you' 'I am not married' 'My wife does not understand me' and 'I'll respect you in the morning?'"

He smiled. "Okay. I will give you the team number. If you don't hear from me in three days, call. "

We got dressed in silence. He was quicker than I was, so I kissed him goodbye at the door, tidied up the room, and Ubered home, stopping at Woolies on the way before tumbling into bed.

Looking back the next couple of days were a dream. Things were not the same, and Trudy knew it. She called me into her office, and closed the door.

"Jade, I have seen this a million times. You meet a man on the job, he is different, and you start to see a future with him. We all dream of being whisked out of this life,



but be careful. I stopped work for men about five times, and each time it was a disaster. Then I met Kevin, and it did work – wonderfully. From a stats point of view, I say don't do it girl, but as a woman I say go for it. I will be here if things don't work and I am a good picker-er-up-erer."

"Are you suggesting that I test a relationship with Howard?"

"Yes I am. Never fight chemistry. She delved into a drawer and handed me an envelope. "This will pay the rent for a few weeks. Take some time off. Give it a go."

I found nothing to say. I remember the warmth of the hug and the saltiness of our combined tears, and I remember getting home and just thinking, and thinking.

The call came on the second day.

"Is that Jade?" The voice was very private school.

"Yes, it is."

"I am on the team with Howard. We would like you to come and meet us. Would this evening suit?"

"Sure. How is he?"

"He is fine. A bit shaken, as we all are."

"Okay. Where are you?"

"We'll come and fetch you. Macdonald's at 6:30 okay?"

"How will I know you?"

"Look for a van with 'Northern Medical Supplies' on the side. That's us."

“Okay. See you.”

I arrived a few minutes early, but the van was already in the parking lot with two guys sitting in it drinking coffee. Steve was shortish, slightly overweight with round gold-rimmed glasses and short-cropped hair. The guy with him, Lukas, was a bit taller, and quite good looking. Both looked in their late twenties

Steve and I sat in the back. There were no windows, just a padded bench, a small light and a few cardboard boxes for company.

The drive was short – no more than ten minutes – and I had no idea where we were. When Lukas opened the back, we were in a garage, with tins of paint on shelves and a bicycle hanging on the wall. I was ushered into a room that had once been a kitchen but had become a crazy electronics lab. What I initially took to be a microwave had a rack of flashing lights inside it, and there was a whole array of weird instruments against the wall. The only kitcheny things were a fridge, an espresso machine, a genuine microwave and a stove. It seemed the guys did a lot of fast-food and the rubbish bin was overflowing with Debonairs, Macdonald and KFC boxes; the sink overflowing with dirty mugs. The next room was still recognizable as a dining room, except for a large whiteboard down the one wall.

“Where is Howard?” I asked.

“He will join us later when André is here,” said Lukas. “Doc is delayed in surgery and will be here in an hour or two. Sorry about that.”

“No problem,” I said.

There are times when things just click together, and it's fun when they do. The whiteboard had a whole lot of maths on it, and I recognised the transformations from an exercise that I had worked through with Constance.

"Kinematics?" I asked.

Both Lukas and Steve looked stunned, and I felt a tad smug. "Yes. How do you know?" asked Lukas.

"A friend's UNISA maths assignment we were working on last week."

"At the massage parlour?" Asked Steve. I nodded.

I have to admit I enjoyed the look of surprise and respect on the guy's faces, and most importantly it seemed to break down the reservations I felt when we first met. An hour of maths and coffee and I started to like these guys, and I think it was mutual.

André was not what I expected. He was short, heavily muscled with no more than a black shadow of hair on his head and a scary, rough looking face. He looked more like a bouncer than a doctor. The smile was friendly enough, but he looked exhausted and in serious need of sleep.

"Hi Jade. Sorry I wasn't here. Guys looking after you?"

"Yes," I said. "I was expecting Howard to be with you. Is he okay?"

André smiled and flicked a switch on a box in the middle of the table. "You there Howard? Jade is here and she is worried about you."

"Yes, I am here André. Hi Jade."

“Where are you Howard?” I asked, relieved to hear his voice.

“Off-planet. “

“What you mean ‘off-planet’?” I asked, shocked.

“My VC has been backed up – that’s me speaking to you – and the PS needs more work, so we scavenged it to fix faults and make a revised one.”

I found myself smiling. “You guys really know how to screw with a girl’s views of life, death, space and time don’t you? You should be ashamed of yourselves!” There were smiles all around.

Andre became serious. “Jade, you have given us a problem. This team was formed in secret, and we need it to stay that way. I was not too keen on this experiment, but the team needed to test sexual function in the PS so I went along with it. We planned one visit followed by evaluation, but something happened. Ole Horny Howard here persuaded us to allow a second, and then a third, and then you bust us. This could put our whole project at risk. You haven’t told anyone about this?”

“Part of the service, and who could I tell anyway? No. I have told no-one.”

“Thank you, “said André. “Jade, what do you think we should do?”

“When all this works, what will you do with Howard?”

“His VC will be merged to the human sigma off-planet. His delta will be retained, and will be used in the start-up population when we get the PS process sorted.”

“What do you still have to get right?”

“Quite a lot. Reproductive system, and a lot of fine tuning.”

“Will you make women?”

“Of course.”

“Will they be able to have kids?”

“Yes. They have to be able to. Why do you ask?”

I didn’t answer. Some strange thoughts found their way into my head, and I suspect Andre saw a small smile.

“Would you share your thoughts Jade?”

“They aren’t thoughts, they are dreams.”

He smiled. “Would you share your dreams?”

I thought for a while. “I can’t have children,” I said. “I would love to, but my tubes are screwed up. Before I became a sports model at about thirteen it’s all I wanted. Kids that I could love and never send to school covered in bruises; never be in foster homes because their folks were too pissed to look after them; wouldn’t spend their school holidays at the boarding house. For that I would gladly give up this body. You know what I want? I want to join you guys. I can wash mugs. I can take out garbage. I can test your PSs and when we get that female PS right, you can use this body as spare parts for people who need them. I want to be part of the off-planet team, and it would be really good if Howard was there.” I smiled. “Howard, I think I may be kind-of proposing here.”



There was a chuckle from the speaker. “Jade, thank you. I think I may be kind-of accepting here, but the team needs to talk. We need to talk.”

André took a tissue and gently wiped the tears from my cheeks. He took my hand. “Whew. I don’t know what to say. You are what? Nineteen? And you are prepared to give up the rest of your life?

“Yes,” I said.

He thought for a while. “We don’t have to make any decisions now, but having you here enables us to maintain the secrecy that was my concern. We can see how it works out, and then take it further.”

We went with that. I moved into a small outside granny flat. The single guys, Steve and Lukas were in the main house. André was a few streets away with his wife and two small kids. Looking back, it was the most intense, exciting, and exhausting time of my life. I took over most of the housekeeping and admin stuff, and even helped a bit with some maths. We made five male PSs and six females before handing that side over to the off-planet team. In the meantime, André extracted about fifty more VCs from the hospital and hospices to ship off. We knew that there were other teams at other places on Earth, but for security reasons we weren’t told where they were, or given contact details. One thing they would not tell me was how the team formed in the first place.

You wondering about my sex-life? For the first time in my life I was a one-man-woman, although the man changed body a few times. And our relationship? Lukas once described us as the youngest old non-married married couple he knew. I know

what he meant. I just liked to be with Howard, and when he was off-planet we would chat through the speaker for hours.

A few months after my 21<sup>st</sup> we heard that the first babies had been born off-planet, and were doing well. The bad news for me was that our work was done, and the Waverley team was to split, equipment, software and all. Why didn't we use all this amazing technology for the benefit of humankind? The old-toppie club don't work that way. They discovered that injecting advanced technology and knowledge into a more primitive society is not always a good thing, so they don't do it.

I had already made the decision to go, but the reality was still scary. All the other VCs had been harvested from terminally ill humans with the box 'upon death donate body to science' ticked, but I was not terminally ill. Eventually we staged a fake hush-hush suicide – complete with suicide note and last will and testament. They are still there somewhere, but I don't think it will ever be needed.

So what is it like to die? Sorry, but I don't remember much. I do remember waking in the off-planet clinic where I spent the first week getting used to my new body and the new world. That part was not easy, but Howard had been through it four times before and was there to help me along.

And what is this new world like? That was five Earth years ago and if you think we live in a strange and wonderful world then, as the song says, 'B-B-B-Baby, you ain't seen nothing yet.' I could write a book, it would be huge, and it would still only touch the surface of what we have seen.

I may do that one day, but let me click the fast forward button five years and try and give you a glimpse of this life.

This solar system is ginormous, but from earth it is a little speck in the smudge that is the Milky Way. Wed have two suns, a big orange one and a smaller yellow one. There are over fifty planets and almost all have multiple moons. We are on Habitat 14-6 (the sixth moon of the fourteenth planet) which was lifeless but developed for oxygen breathing species. The gravity is only three quarters of Earth's, which is quite nice. The day is about 35 Earth hours long, and as we have almost no inclination, we have no seasons. The moon has ice-caps top and bottom and hot deserts around the equator; a home for everyone. Many of the species are nitrogen intolerant, so much of the nitrogen has been replaced by inert gases, causing our sky to have a pinky colour like a permanent sunrise. The oxygen level is lower, almost like the top of Kilimanjaro.

We stay in a small house on a plot near a very pretty stream. Our neighbours on the one side are humans whose VCs were Finnish. On the other side are a group of Shri'ik. One of their son/daughters (they are hermaphrodite) Schalk is my daughter Trudie's best buddy. His real name is unpronounceable to humans; their speech consists of a series of hisses, clicks and whistles. Schalk is about the size of a small donkey. Imagine the back third of a shongololo stuck onto the front half of a praying mantis and then covered with fine soft fur that is Schalk. He is incredibly smart and learned English (and Finnish) in just a week, although he speaks a bit like the snake in the Jungle Book movie. To watch him run is one of the most beautiful things you could ever see. With Trudy on his back it is terrifying for her parents, but great fun for her.

As I sit here on the stoep dictating this to our robot assistant, Howard, Schalk and Trudy are tending to our patch of Zitfruit – Howard as labourer, Schalk as consultant

and Trudy, well, just getting in the way and having fun with the hose. Zitfruit is native to the Shri'ik home planet, and it's all they eat. It looks a bit like a brinjal with bad acne, but it is truly amazing. There are hundreds of varieties with different flavours and textures, and we humans, and many other species, love it. The Shri'ik are busy tailoring varieties they hope will provide all a human's daily nutritional needs. Nice people these Shri'ik!

So, what do we do? It is almost embarrassing how the old-toppies go out of their way to make us comfortable. We have all we could possibly need, schools, community centres, clinics, power and water. We have read-only access to the Earth internet, but the funny thing is we seldom watch Earth movies or tune in to Earth news. There seems to be enough to keep us busy here. Howard is a self-appointed handyman and loves helping those species who are not as dextrous as we are.

As a South African from an environment where the tribes don't trust each other, and where people from different political factions often kill each other, it is mind-blowing how well the different species here get along. There are occasional niggles, but the old-toppies have millions of years' experience in resolving conflict. Would you be surprised if I said there is no record of any major interstellar war? Sorry to break that to you George Lucas!

So, we are effectively the animals in a moon-wide Kruger Park. There are over a thousand species on the planet, and I have a dream of meeting most of them. I see some traveling when the kids are older and I cut back on my reproduction.

And, talking about reproduction our son, William, will be waking soon and demanding access to my very productive breasts.

But I want to leave you with some scary numbers. I had a chat with one of the scientists from the old-toppie club, and they were doing simulation of the probability of humanity surviving on Earth. They say the probability is at 40% by 2100 and drops to 10% in 2200.

So, the Waverley project may prove to be well worth it. There are a few guys, Doc André, Steve, Lukas and a few others who may one day prove to be responsible for saving the human race, and nobody has even heard of them.

But Howard, Trudy Jnr, Michael, our children yet to be born, and I will never forget them. Thanks guys.

## **NOVA 2017      FINALIST**

### **Suicide Mission by Sharon Angus**

“No!” the Commander thundered, thumping his fist down hard on the rickety table and causing his cup of wine to topple over. He glared at Jillian as though it were her fault as he mopped up the spilt wine quickly before it ruined the precious maps.

Jillian stood her ground. “It’s the only chance we have, Sir” she stated flatly, giving voice to the truth that all of them knew but none of them had wanted to acknowledge. “The Witch cannot be destroyed any normal way – her magics protect her.” “The Commander is right.” A quiet voice spoke from behind Jillian. She turned in surprise,



not having realised that the Prince was there in her haste to speak to the Commander. Belatedly, she bowed.

“You saw what happened to the other agents we sent,” the Prince went on in his quiet, tired voice. “We cannot afford to lose you as well.”

He shifted in his chair, turned to face the Commander. “But Jillian is also right, Commander. It is our last and only chance.”

There was a long pause. Jillian stared at the fire, mentally urging the two men to hurry up and give her their permission. The night was waning, the gibbous moon almost set.

The Prince spoke again. “It’s a desperate gamble, Jillian. If you choose not to sacrifice yourself in this terrible way, no shame attaches to you. If you choose to go ... all I can say is that our blessings and thanks go with you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Jillian said formally, bowing to him. “I think you already know my decision.”

For the first time in the long weeks of campaign, she saw a faint smile on the Prince’s face. “I also know it would be useless forbidding you. You’d go anyway.”

Jillian bowed again, and turned to leave. But as she stooped to exit the pavilion, two voices spoke behind her. One was rough, the other quiet, but both were kind. “Go with God,” they said together, and Jillian felt the tears spring to her eyes. But the flicker of desperate hope she had seen in the Prince’s dark eyes, and the knowledge of what she was saving, was enough to give her courage. She looked up at the beautiful, silent stars, and said her farewells.

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The ancient map had been a lucky find, Jillian thought, carefully unrolling its fragile, age-darkened parchment. She traced with one finger the route from the long-forgotten culvert to the Castle, once the centre of the Kingdom, the heart of the people. Now the Kingdom was destroyed, the people scattered, and the Witch lurked there like a spider in her web, spinning evil threads of magic while mindless slaves scurried like rats to do her bidding.

Jillian looked up at the Castle. It had been built centuries before and had never been taken in war. It had only fallen now to the Witch through her sorceries, her magical undying armies and evil spells. Once it had been a symbol of unity and fair rule; now it loomed against the night sky, dark and menacing. No light shone from the windows and not a soul stirred on the ramparts or at the gate, by day or by night – all was eerily silent and apparently deserted. Only twice had there been signs of life – from the tallest tower, someone or something had thrown the lifeless bodies of Jillian's predecessors, the assassins sent before her.

Jillian pushed the memory of their pale bodies, the gaping wounds in their throats, to the back of her mind. She took a deep breath, wiped her damp hands on her breeches, and began to wriggle into the small tunnel. It stank of mildew and rot, and icy stagnant water seeped through Jillian's clothing as she slithered along. Cobwebs reached out to lay ghostly fingers on her face and hair. Blind in the darkness, she reached out to feel the way ahead, and something cold and many-legged ran across her outstretched hand. Startled, Jillian instinctively drew back and hit her head on the low roof. She bit back a curse, and squirmed onwards like a sightless mole.

However, those long-ago builders of the Castle had not left any entrance, even such a small and insignificant one, unprotected. Deep in the tunnel, Jillian's cautious, questing fingers found wood and metal - a portcullis. But this tunnel had lain forgotten for centuries, and the wood was rotten, the iron rusted. Both crumbled in her hands and she was able to squeeze through. She felt a spike of iron tear through her shirt and the skin below, and reflected grimly that at least there were no rats.

Although that thought wasn't exactly comforting – a tunnel like this should have dozens of rats. What was so bad that even the rats stayed away? She pushed that thought away, but it refused to go, hovering in the back of her mind like an unpleasant visitor.

After what seemed like miles of crawling, wriggling and squirming, the tunnel disgorged into a dark cellar, empty but for a pile of rotting straw. Jillian moved cautiously, examining her surroundings. It appeared that the cellar was as forgotten and undisturbed as the tunnel that had led her to it. There was a small door that led into another cellar, and another, the rooms looking steadily more occupied. Jillian moved silent-footed through them until she came to a staircase leading upwards to a trapdoor.

Beyond the door she could hear the thick voices of the Witch's guards. Once they had been the murdered King's prized hunting hounds and his loyal soldiers – now they were distorted and deformed, combined by sorcery into grotesque half-human, half-beast monsters. Fear shot through Jillian like an arrow, and for a moment she almost ran back to the tunnel. Sternly she reminded herself why she was here, and what she had come to do. She clenched her fists and took a deep breath.

The guards hauled her before the Witch, seated on her throne of bleached human bones that had replaced the elegantly simple chair of the late King. The two women studied each other for a long moment – the Witch in her satin gown and rich jewels, her face a carefully painted mask of cruel beauty; Jillian unremarkable, her dark hair braided tightly against her head, her plain clothes torn and stained with water, dirt and blood.

“So,” the Witch said at last, “They have sent another assassin against me. Will the poor fools never learn?” She smiled cruelly. “Do you know what happened to the others? Or did they keep that interesting information from you?”

Jillian was silent. She did know – she had seen their bodies, throats slit, drained of blood. She had heard the rumour that the Witch had drunk their blood in dark rituals, and thereby gained her evil power. It had not stopped her.

“You got further than the others,” the Witch said musingly, tapping one elegantly manicured fingernail on the arm of the throne. “It’s almost a pity you have to die. But one must perform these little tasks.”

She stood up, shaking out her rustling, gold-embroidered and jewel-encrusted skirts. “Take her to the Room!” she ordered the guards standing on either side of Jillian.

Jillian avoided looking at the twisted faces of the guards as they escorted her through a maze of corridors and down several flights of stairs. Their hands gripped Jillian so tightly that she could feel bruises forming, and she felt a moment of pity for the creatures, having to deal with the abhorrence of the Witch every day. She wondered if they knew what had happened to them – it would be typical of the Witch’s cruelty to leave them human awareness in their bestial bodies.

The hallways grew colder and darker as they descended into the far depths of the Castle, into areas never used by the previous inhabitants of the Castle. Mould on the rough-hewn stone walls and uneven floors replaced the tapestries and smooth tiles of the lived-in areas. As they went deeper and deeper, Jillian began to wonder whether these corridors had even existed before or had been carved by the Witch's slaves. She did not fight the guards, concentrating on staying upright and preventing her legs from collapsing under her. She hoped the Witch attributed her trembling to fear. Nothing must be suspected, or it was all in vain.

At last they came to a heavy door of black wood, bound with a dull substance that seemed to suck all the light from the guards' torches into itself. The room beyond was dark, so densely dark that flashes of light danced before Jillian's eyes, and filled with a sweet metallic smell. Jillian closed her eyes for a moment – she knew that smell.

"Now, my dear," the Witch said almost pleasantly, turning to Jillian, "you shall see. You people are like little mice, running around and never knowing that the cat is watching. It is time you learnt what true power is!"

She shouted something thick and guttural, in a language Jillian had never heard before, and the room flared with light from no apparent source. At the same time the guards' torches blew out as if in a strong wind. Jillian could now see that the room was strangely shaped, five-sided, and starkly bare. The floor was of plain flagstones and the walls were of roughly-hewn stone. The only feature was a huge slab of smooth shadowy rock positioned in the centre of the room. And the sickly rotten stench was explained – for the rock was covered in dried blood.



Jillian shivered, for she was suddenly cold. Now she knew what kept even the rats away from this place.

The Witch, having had her moment of triumph and conceit, turned to the guards who had gathered by the door, reluctant to come any further into the evil-drenched room.

“Put her on the stone,” the Witch said matter-of-factly, as though ordering a cup of tea.

Jillian offered only token resistance as the guards half-dragged, half-carried her to the dense black rock and shackled her to it, among the stains of old blood. The cuffs were made of the same dark substance that had bound the heavy door, and Jillian felt that they were icy cold, so cold they seemed to burn her skin. “Go!” the Witch commanded, and the guards hurriedly left the room, their shuffling steps echoing in the silent corridors as they attempted to run away. The door swung shut behind them with an ominous hollow thud, although no hand had pushed it closed.

Jillian lay still, listening to the sound of the Witch’s footsteps, her high-heeled shoes clicking on the flagstoned floor as she moved about. Jillian closed her eyes, but she still knew when the Witch approached by the smell of her rich, heavy perfume that reminded Jillian of rotten fruit and animal musk. She heard the Witch speak in the same strange, guttural language she had used earlier, her voice rising and falling in a wild chant, and felt the cold touch of metal against her throat. In her mind’s eye, she saw again the slit throats of her predecessors. She waited.

The Witch’s voice reached a screeched crescendo, and Jillian felt the sharp, slicing, hot/cold pain as her throat was cut. Coldness seeped into her bones and her senses

began to fail as the blood drained from her body, and she knew she was dying. But that, after all, was what she had come to do.

The Witch was silent now as she caught Jillian's blood in a strangely-shaped cup carved from human bone, black with age and stained with blood. When the last drop of ruby-red fluid had drained from Jillian's pale corpse, she laughed in triumph and lifted the cup to her painted lips, as she had done many a time before. She drank – and drank Jillian's lethal blood, poisonous with the deadly, slow-acting toxin she had taken before entering the cold, dark tunnel.

**L.O.C.**

**Lloyd Penny**

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March 25, 2018

Dear SFFSA members:

Thank you for sending me two more issues of Probe. I have issues 173 and 174, so it is a matter of catching up with what's arrived. I am sure 175 is on the go, so I will try to hurry.

173...Hello, Gail! Losing your area for club meetings is unfortunately fairly common with many clubs I am in touch with. Some, like the club in Montreal, are lucky enough to have support from a local hotel, and can usually get function space for club meetings. Many meet in church halls or basements, but space like that is becoming

rare. I don't know how clubs do it. The SF club in Toronto went away decades ago. And, Facebook clubs just don't cut it sometimes.

Television has changed a lot. There's not much on local television that we are interested, so we usually scan YouTube for interesting documentaries and series, and then we download. Once it's all downloaded, we load a lot of it onto a USB drive, stick in the side of our television, and watch what we want to see. Netflix, Crave TV...too expensive for our tastes.

We did not get to the Japanese Worldcon, but that's okay. Our last one was the one in Reno, Nevada in 2011, and I suspect that was our last one. Our first one was Chicon IVB in Chicago in 1982, and we literally paid for it out of pocket. Worldcons aren't so cheap now. I also doubt Worldcon will come to Canada any more.

My loc...well, at least SpaceX put a car into space. Elon Musk might be able to find a parking spot for it somewhere out there. We've been going to more events and lectures in Toronto, and we will be going to a lot of events to sell our steampunk jewelry and Hawaiian-style shirts.

174...As long as you are willing to shoulder the cost of sending it overseas to me, I will continue to read each issue and respond to it. Happy upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

Computers and its software become more complex with every passing day. I suspect that soon, we won't want to leave our seats because everything we might want to see will be shown to us, or even created for us upon demand. With all that in mind, yes, the porn industry's future looks bright. Of course, we will see if our consciousness can be up uploaded to the web, and once again, science fiction will

become science fact. If we can imagine it, we can make it actually happen. It's all a long way away, but it is getting closer and closer...

My loc...the job I had since September has come to an abrupt end, mostly because of a near-total lack of work. But, that's okay, for I start a new job with a health company tomorrow morning! Wish me luck on that one, and it is short-term, but it will keep me going until the next one comes around.

Elaine Mommsen's A Little Bach was a simple story and a treat, and that is a great combination. With a little more polish, I would submit this story to be professionally published.

Onto the second page, and I am done. My thanks again for these issues, and I hope you find a new home for club meetings. As spring starts to arrive here, I guess the autumn is coming for you. Take care, and I hope your drought conditions are solved soon

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

## **“READY PLAYER ONE”    A FILM REVIEW BY TERTIUS CARSTENS**

Thirteen years after Steven Spielberg's take on 'War of the Worlds' the filmmaker has finally returned to the Sci-Fi genre. His latest project, 'Ready Player One' has received praise from both fans and film-critiques alike. The film is based on the debut-novel by American author Ernest Cline and follows the main character Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan) and his adventures in the OASIS.



**Tye Sheridan as Wade Watts in 'Ready Player One'.**

In the year 2045 the world is in chaos; Facing an economy crisis the people of Earth finds solitude in a limitless virtual reality world called the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation). The OASIS was the brainchild of James Halliday (played by British actor Mark Rylance) who, after he died, left behind 3 mysterious clues to find an Easter Egg. The person who solves these clues and gets the Easter Egg will not only inherit Halliday's fortune but have complete control of the OASIS itself.

The film is a nostalgic journey through 80's pop-culture. And who better than to direct the film than Steven Spielberg himself who, in fact, produced and directed many classic films of the 80's and early 90's. 'Ready Player One' also has references to 'Back to the Future' which is why Alan Silvestri was hired to score the music of the film.

The writer of the novel Ernest Cline, a writer who co-wrote the screenplay, is a huge fan of 80's pop-culture and films. He is not entirely unfamiliar when it comes to writing for film. Cline also co-wrote 'Fanboys' which can be summed up as a love letter to Star Wars and Science-Fiction. 'Armada', which is Ernest Cline's second Sci-Fi novel is currently in developed for a feature-film treatment by Universal Studios and he is writing a follow up novel called 'Ready Player Two.'



# NOVA 2017 FINALIST

## Creatives by Maria Crossling

CT193 watched her while she slept. He was going to have to kill her soon and he wasn't looking forward to it. He leaned back in his chair letting it slide back into 'Relaxed Mode', the vidsphere dimming around him. He tucked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. This feeling of attachment to his subjects was not unusual, it was an occupational hazard, but in all his years of raising Creatives, CT193 had only been attached to two other Nurturing Units. And even then he had still managed to terminate them with only a twinge of regret at the loss of their personalities. He recalled that he had based her, Nurturing Unit75310, on them, using a combination of their basic algorithms. Maybe he was getting soft.

He shifted forward and his chair went back into 'Active Mode', the vidsphere brightening gently so that his eyes could adjust to the screens that surrounded him. He flicked the roller ball with his thumb, and the vidsphere rotated to the screen that showed Andrew's room. Clothing and books littered the floor, a plate and a glass teetered precariously on his bedside table. The 14 year old lay sprawled on his bed; an arm and a leg jutted out, and a crescent of dark hair peeked from under the covers. Andrew would be the one who would push CT193 into the big leagues. He felt different from the others. His other Creatives had been mostly lucrative; they had become successful entrepreneurs and scientists who created new products and drugs that had made BrandMan, the creative human venture capital company that

CT193 worked for, a lot of money. Andrew Saxon was different; he had the kind of charisma that endeared people to him, created loyalty. He was both intelligent and creative, and he took risks. He just needed the right impetus to become a great man, maybe even a great leader. Another Steve Jobs, who although highly successful had been created with short sighted algorithmic engineering, and had had both emotional and health programming bugs which had never been adequately resolved.

CT193 was conservative in his creations, and he had used tried and tested algorithms in Andrew's genetic makeup. Unlike other Comptrollers who engineered weirdoes who never seemed comfortable within normal social environments, he was a Comptroller who engineered units who could fit within the boundaries of normalcy. CT193 checked the other N.U.'s in Andrew's unit; the adults slept back to back, their breathing and heart rates were slow and calm. 'The quiet before the storm', thought CT193.

He spun the vidsphere till he got to Thomas Nakamura's screen. Despite it being 5am in Tokyo he was already in his lab, working. CT193 had manipulated Thomas' existence to maximise his potential creativity quotient. The subtle and sometimes not so subtle ministrations to Thomas' life had lead him to be an above average performer who had already registered several patents in the orthopaedic medical sector, some profitable and others frivolous. CT193 allowed Thomas to have some distractions and his sense of humour came out in the attachments that he created for amputees. CT193's favourite was the hand with the corkscrew built into the middle finger of the prosthesis; for the wine connoisseur. Apart from this Thomas had no life to speak of, and he had few friends. The ones he did have were introverts like himself and they mostly communicated via text messaging on their mobile devices.

This was exactly how CT193 wanted Thomas, slightly sad and alone, and only receiving satisfaction via his work.

In a boy's life the years from 0-6 are critical, and then 10-16 years old. CT193 had engineered Thomas' mother's death when he was 14, this in his opinion, being the optimal age for a rise in the creativity quotient. Thomas' mother had not wanted to die, she had survived the cancer that he had chemically introduced into her system, and he had had to create a scenario involving a few of his other N.U.s so that she perished in a car accident. He had lost two other N.U.s that day, but his portfolio needed a spring clean anyway, so he had literally killed three birds with one stone.

Disposing of one's N.U.s in this manner was frowned upon by the company, and was actually illegal according to the Time Manipulation Act. The official company directive was for their futures to be "manipulated humanely". Audits of each Comptroller were made by a government linked external body that nit-picked through his feeds and logs looking for anomalies. So far he had managed two such disposals and those Creatives had also been his most successful. Somehow, absent N.U. parents, or N.U. families who abandoned their offspring created the weirdo Creatives, and those were much harder to control because of their unpredictability.

BrandMan's mantra was "From adversity comes creativity." and they urged their Comptrollers to create men and women who would be forward thinkers as well as high earners. The sector took advantage of the loophole in time travel legislation which allowed for manipulation in future events but not historic ones. Comptrollers could only create algorithms, administer suggestion and chemicals, but once something had been done to a Creative and their N.U.'s, modifications were

extremely tricky. Comptrollers had to be skilled at timing and be intuitive; they also had to be precise, calculating and ruthless, taking advantage of every available opportunity. The Creative's value was either monetary, the company invested early and reaped the benefits later on, or sometimes BrandMan bought the patents cheaply or stole the inventions and claimed parallel research as the reason for the uncanny similarities in conclusions. The other was less tangible. Having control of a powerful man was sometimes better than cash in hand. Control meant the ultimate power. A way to sway other powerful men, create sectors to create monopolies, or even run a country from the background. As a Comptroller had been watching the Creative from birth, he or she, knew all the Creative's dirty secrets and both the good and bad habits.

CT193's peripheral vision caught a sudden movement. NU75310 was sitting up in bed, eyes wide, and her hand to her chest. "Below is calling." she whispered. 'Worrisome', thought CT193. Her husband stirred next to her. "You okay, Honey?" he asked rubbing her back. "I had the weirdest dream," she said, "I dreamt that *Above* was telling me my time was up, and that there wasn't much left. I was so scared. It felt like someone else's voice was speaking in my head. Really loud like through a loudspeaker." Her partner looked at her gently. "Come let me love you, Babe." he said, patting his chest. NU75310 slid herself into his arms and laid her head on his chest. CT193 saw his arms tighten around her and watched as he soothed her. They whispered to each other in the dark until they both dozed off to sleep again.

CT193 bought up the log for NU75310. It showed all the hormones and chemicals that had been administered into her system. There was also a list of the subliminal messages and verbal cues that had been sent to her cortex that introduced very

specific thought patterns into her psyche. He sent a request to the company's SecureTechs asking them to have a look at her code, and if they had encountered a hacker called *Above*. Industrial espionage was rife in the sector. In the previous quarter BrandMan had both gained intellectual capital and lost it. They had infiltrated a Creative's N.U. world in the form of a cleaning lady and managed to pilfer vital information, but had lost one too when a hacker had chemically induced a stroke in one of BrandMan's Creatives just before he published a breakthrough in his research. Their rivals announced a very similar breakthrough a week later.

CT193 did a quick run through of his other Creatives, checking on their progress and looking for anomalies. After his initial work, his job was basically a babysitting service and he often had long periods of inactivity which allowed his mind to wander. CT193's upbringing could not have been more different from those of his Creatives. He was the only child to older parents, who now deceased, had doted on him. He was a wilful, selfish and spoiled child. He went to a private school and had a university degree, but he was not a team player. He had a good life, and he day-dreamed about how he would spend his money once Andrew had reached his perceived potential. The secrecy and security concerns involved in his chosen career did not allow much of a personal life. He regularly visited the 'Brides for Sale' sites, and he had bookmarked several of the younger candidates who would be ripe for marriage by the time Andrew had achieved his peak.

CT193 spent the rest of his work-period planning NU75310's demise. A cerebral aneurism would devastate her faculties, but she would probably linger for a while, leaving the image of his stricken mother in Andrew's psyche as a lasting motivation for his ambition to make his dead mother proud. He looked at Andrew's schedule

and made sure that the micro explosive in NU75310's brain was timed to go off when they were alone together, maximising the guilt of Andrew not being able to save his mother. That image would be used to drive Andrew in the necessary direction if CT193 ever felt that he was straying off course. CT193's fingers slid along the links and pathways as he set the emotive and physical scenes that would need to occur for his plan to happen. This included an unresolved argument, made more volatile when driven by teenage hormones. CT193 smiled to himself. He allowed his mind to go to his future, his prospective brides and his increased status.

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*Above* watched CT193 smile. He had connected his spy software to the exterior auditor's live feed. BrandMan was a suspicious bunch, they had long ago spotted the discrepancies in CT193's logs, but as any company more focused on profit than the wellbeing of their Creatives; they had let him continue with his schemes. *Above* had monitored the emails between the external auditors and BrandMan's security cluster as they built their case against CT193. They planned to charge him with murder and fraud. BrandMan would take no responsibility for CT193's deeds because they had done their due diligence. The fact that the first transgression had taken place, and been noticed, decades before would be hidden in a grammatically incorrect and misspelled paragraph that would be missed by the software Bots looking for incriminating information. BrandMan too, saw Andrew's potential, and with CT193 out of the way, there would be no middleman to keep satisfied. The director himself would handle Andrew. The rest of CT193's Creatives would be shared between the other Comptrollers, using greed to placate those who feared this might happen to them too, while keeping all the profits in-house. CT193 just didn't fit the BrandMan

mould anymore, and this strategy to get rid of him was easier than paying him out. Above was curious, would BrandMan act before or after CT193 had killed NU75310.

Above rubbed the small scar behind his ear, it was one of many that laced his body. Its easy access was a constant reminder of pain, and represented the loss of his status, his company, his reputation, his home and possessions, and almost his life. He had gambled everything he had owned on the software he had created. He had known that it was revolutionary, and would be an improvement on many of the existing platforms and applications that had existed at the time. He had been extremely security conscious, and so he was shocked when a rival company unveiled similar software a week before he did. He had been even more devastated when they went after him legally, claiming he had stolen their work. When they won their case there was nowhere for him to go but down. His reputation was destroyed, no one would hire him, and no one would give him the money to develop other products. He had sold what little he had had left after paying the lawyers costs, bought an old van and driven to the coast. There he had done some things he wasn't proud of, stuff he had justified at the time because he felt the world owed him. His low point came after a long night out binge drinking. He had wrapped his van around a palm tree, and the paramedics had had to resuscitate him twice in the ambulance on the way to the emergency room.

His epiphany had come on the operating table. He was coming out from under anaesthetic and had overheard the two surgeons who had finished operating on him talking. One of them was telling the other about his investment in BrandMan, how it was a company that made and manipulated creative people for profit. It sounded so

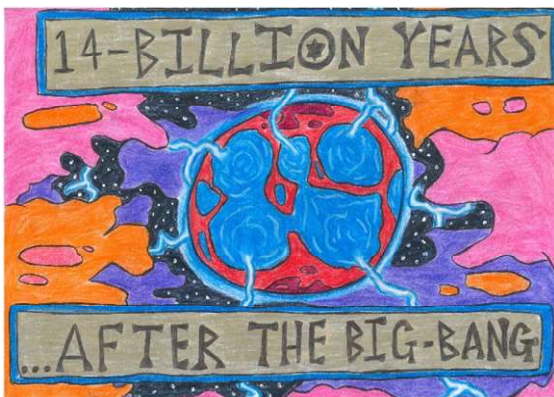
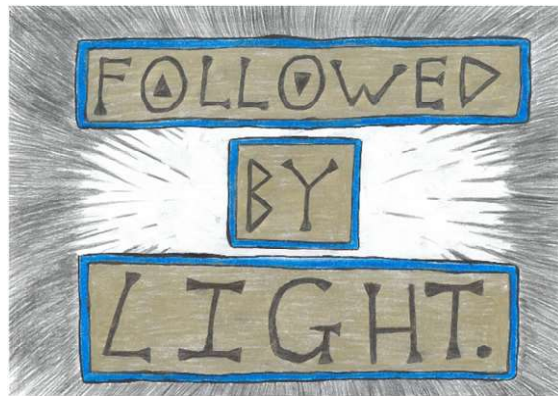
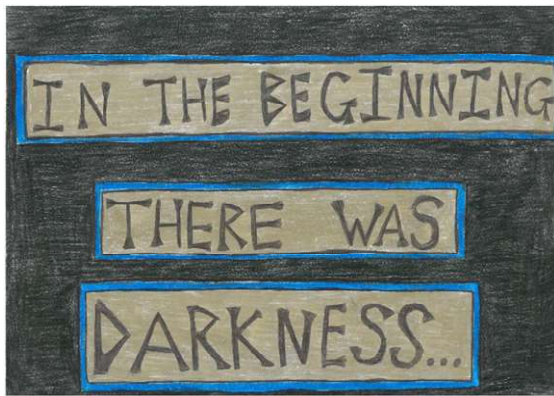


fantastic that he thought he had dreamt the whole thing, but it niggled at the back of his mind.

His rehabilitation had been arduous and painful, but it had also meant many hours of doing nothing. He spent that time searching, following breadcrumb bytes of information. The contacts he had made during his exile served him well, he wound his way till he reached the edges of the dark web and then plunged in. There he found himself – and CT193. BrandMan's security software was based on the one he had created; he slipped into it easily and mined it for information. He was only moderately surprised when he found his own name in the heavily encrypted files, and after reading them, he felt relief. He had always felt watched, been mildly paranoid, and now that those feelings had been justified, his self-confidence grew, and his recovery got easier. The anger at having his life and body manipulated came later, and he used it as fuel for revenge.

Now *Above* watched the auditors watch CT193 as he orchestrated a murder using technology. He saw the security officers and the Comptroller Senior Manager arrive outside CT193's Time Control Zone; watched them breach the seal and stand outside CT193's vidsphere. He watched as CT193's fingers completed the algorithm that would destroy Andrew's life. He saw the awareness on his face as one by one they penetrated his space. *Above* saw CT193 calculate his options. The largest security officer stepped forward just as CT193's fingers touched his rollerball.

O R I G I N S - P R O L O G U E



T O B E C O N T I N U E D . . .



